

Folk singer offers pastoral care through music

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

GENESEO — In the 1960s, such folk songs as "Blowing in the Wind" and "If I Had a Hammer" became the anthems of the protest movement.

Meanwhile, such folk singers as Bob Dylan, Joan Baez and Pete Seeger stood at the forefront of efforts to oppose the Vietnam War, racism and pollution.

For folk musician Glenn McClure, activism remains still important. But he believes folk singers of the 1990s play a different role in addressing social issues.

"It seemed like most of the folk singers in the sixties were really in the business of hammering down the walls of evil in the institutions," McClure remarked. "In the 1990s, I believe the folk singer is the guy or gal who supports the people who are making a difference in the world."

For the past four years, McClure has pursued a full-time vocation of providing musical support for those people.

The singer, songwriter, multi-instrument performer has carried his mission to folk festivals, benefit concerts and classrooms across the Northeast.

Along the way, he has found time to record two collections of music, and to perform with such noted folk musicians as Seeger, Holly Near and even Rochester's Mitzi Collins.

Even more remarkable is the fact that McClure has a severe stutter.

Yet McClure actually attributes part of his career success to the speech impediment.

As a child growing up near Geneseo, he experienced physical and emotional exhaustion as a result of the stutter.

"When I sang, that did not happen," McClure observed. "When I spoke, it was something that was very, very ugly, but when I sang, it was something beautiful and it was a chance to communicate with people."

He since has learned to control the stuttering, but McClure said the suffering he experienced as a stutterer helped to make him sensitive to the sufferings of others.

"There's so many people who are seen as ugly and worthless in our world," he explained, "and I could feel that as a stutterer."

It was also through music, in part, that McClure was led to convert from Presbyterianism to Catholicism.

Once when he was around 13, he recalled, he went to Mount Saviour Monastery in Elmira with his brother, Wes Kennison, currently a Catholic chaplain at the State University College at Geneseo.

The lifestyle — and the music — of the monks so impressed McClure that upon his return to the Geneseo area, he began to ride his bicycle to the nearby Abbey of the



Brian Crites/Photo Intern

Folk singer and musician Glenn McClure learned to play the hammered dulcimer eight years ago. He will give a 7 p.m. benefit performance Nov. 9 at Geneseo State College. Proceeds will go to the Brother, Big Sister program.

Geneseo in Piffard for Masses and prayers.

"What impressed me about their lives was no matter what work they were doing, they made certain to come together several times a day to sing and celebrate — and any place that sang so much was all right by me," McClure recalled.

He was confirmed as a Catholic in 1984 in Siena, Italy, where he was spending a semester as a student at SUNY Geneseo.

It was also while he was a student at Geneseo that McClure took part in the Appalachian Service Project during spring break of 1985. He spent his days involved in various construction projects and visiting with people. He returned each night to the place he was staying, and think about the people he had met.

"I'd come home and have all these stories that these old people had told me, and I wrote a song about them," McClure recounted.

Several years later, he received a newspaper clipping from the area in which he had served. The article began with the refrain of the song McClure had written.

"The (text of the) article started with, 'Nobody knows who wrote this traditional Appalachian folk song,'" McClure said with a laugh.

Although McClure had thought of a career in music, that idea did not take shape until after he had graduated from Geneseo with a degree in music history in the Dec., 1986, and had begun pursuing a master's

degree in theology at St. Bernard's Institute.

One day, McClure's sister asked him and Kennison to help an environmental group that was on the verge of breaking up due to internal tensions. After attending a meeting of the group, McClure and Kennison concluded that group members' problem was spending so much time on their cause that they forgot to take care of themselves as people.

Kinneson and McClure organized a concert for the group. As a result of his performance for the group, McClure began to receive invitations to perform for other groups involved in social ministry. The number of requests kept growing, and since 1987 he has been able to make a living as a musician.

"The music I've found myself doing is almost pastoral care for this group of people," McClure said. "I realized with the number of people out there doing back-breaking, heart-wrenching work in the world, they needed a voice to celebrate who they were."

McClure also began to perform in schools, developing several programs for students and children. One of those programs focused on environmental issues and became the basis for McClure's second collection, "The Great Garbage Concert."

Beyond his faith and his social concerns, McClure cited Pete Seeger as an inspiration for his career as a folk singer.

Seeger had dedicated his life to folk music, McClure noted, and to advocating for social justice and the environment.

"Pete has made a living for 50 years, and he's lived a lifestyle I like," said McClure, who has performed with Seeger several times. "He made a living doing what he could do (as a musician), and raised a family."

Both concerns are important to McClure, who is preparing for his Feb. 22, 1992, marriage to Paula Stoph, director of the Volunteer Center at Geneseo. Like Seeger — who lives in a small town on the Hudson River — McClure intends to combine small-town life in Geneseo with his musical career.

And for McClure, that career will remain in folk music.

"I realized that (folk music) is the only place where guys like Pete and Woody Guthrie have been able to use their talents to make their corner of the world a better place," he concluded.

EDITORS' NOTE: McClure is scheduled to perform at SUNY College at Geneseo Nov. 9, beginning at 7 p.m. The concert is a benefit for the Big Brother, Big Sister Program, and tickets cost \$5.



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