



# SARATOGA TU

SERVING THE GREATER COMMUNITY OF SARATOGA COUNTY

Calendar	2
Property transfers	2
Obituaries	4
Sports	7

SARATOGA BUREAU

581-8438

ALBANY, NEW YORK

THURSDAY, JANUARY 13, 2005

## Folk singer's music back near his roots



*A childhood in the Adirondacks inspires the songs performed by musician Dan Berggren*

**By LEIGH HORNBECK**  
Staff writer

**BALLSTON SPA** — After nearly 30 years outside the mountains, Adirondack folk singer Dan Berggren is closer to home.

Berggren, 55, has been singing mountain songs inspired by his childhood home all of his adult life, but a teaching career took him to the flat land of Chautauqua County. He retired this year after 27 years as a professor of audio and radio studies at the State University College at Fredonia. Berggren and his wife, Nancy, moved east to Ballston Spa last year.

The house is decorated by musical instruments and patrolled by cats Pele and Minerva (named for Berggren's hometown). A ukulele and a ukulele-like tiple that belonged to Berggren's mother, a fiddle and a banjo hang above the piano on one side of the living room and a Berggren family organ sits on the other side.

The move coincided with the 20th anniversary of Sleeping Giant Records, the singer's production company. It was named for an Adirondack mountain and has released 10 of his albums.

"Mountain Air," from Berggren's first album produced by the company, recalls the strength and renewal Berggren finds in the woods.

*"When the leaves are off the trees,  
and the honey from the bees  
sweetens up your morning cup of tea.  
You watch its steam arise  
like the fog into the skies.  
Grab your hat and coat and walk with  
me.  
Mountain air blows away  
all the care that builds up day to day.  
And it lifts your spirit high  
and makes you want to give it one more  
try."*

"The image of the mountain (Sleeping Giant) is etched in my brain," said Berggren.

The third child of a "flatlander Swede" and a daughter of Irish immigrants who grew up on Trout Brook Road in Minerva, Berggren lived the first 12 years of his life in Brooklyn. The family spent summers on the farm in the North Country and moved there for good

**MUSICIAN AND SONGWRITER** Dan Berggren, above, plays a song in his guitar at his home in Ballston Spa. Berggren plays guitar, below at right. He also performs on banjo. Below at left is the music for one of the 100 songs Berggren has written. Many of his tunes are inspired by his family members and the Adirondack woods, valleys and farmland that shaped them.

**Here's To You**

Words & Music by Dan Berggren

Al - gon - quin and the Ir - o - quois, na - tives of our land, They

B7 E



**PHOTOS BY STEVE JACOBS**  
TIMES UNION

Please see **FOLK SINGER F5**





STEVE JACOBS/TIMES UNION

**DAN BERGGREN**, who retired recently from college teaching, reviews some lyrics for a song while working at his house.

## FOLK SINGER: Adirondacks inspire his songs

▼ CONTINUED FROM F1

when Berggren was 12.

He was 3 miles from town; the only place to go was out into the woods.

Berggren was in junior high at Minerva Central School when his brother John came home from college with a guitar and taught his younger brother chords. Songwriting came later, when Berggren was stationed in Germany during the Vietnam War. As a student at St. Lawrence University, he drew number 29 in the draft lottery. Hoping to avoid the infantry, he enlisted after graduation instead of waiting to be drafted and trained in broadcast journalism for the Army. He was a counterpart to Robin Williams' character in the movie "Good Morning, Vietnam."

In 1973, he wrote "Harry," an

ode to his maternal grandfather.

*"Harry twitched his mustache as he walked along,*

*Wearing a wide-brimmed hat and singing a song.*

*He looked at the mountains and he knew he was free.*

*Oh, how I wish that were me.*

*He always did the best that he could.*

*He never forgot the earth was good."*

Berggren has since written about 100 songs. "Here's to You," written on the occasion of the 200th anniversary of the Adirondack Park in 1992, was included in a textbook geared toward the state's fourth-graders. He also writes about topics outside the Adirondacks, most recently "One Human Race," set to the music of "America." It was written in response to the acrimony leading to the November

presidential election.

Singing has taken Berggren to Africa in 1996 and Bulgaria in 1998. In both cases, private radio was just emerging in the countries and Berggren taught classes in radio production and finance with a Fredonia colleague. He brought along a banjo and gave concerts.

Next month, Berggren will travel to Romania with a new band, Common Thread. The musicians will play in hospitals and orphanages, carrying messages from patients at hospitals in Burlington, Vt., in hopes of returning to the states with messages from the people they meet along the way.

The greatest joys in Berggren's career, he said, have been making music with his only child, daughter Jenny, who graduated from college in Fredonia and

plays the flute.

Although many of Berggren's songs are inspired by his family members and the woods, valleys and farmland that shaped them, he said he no longer gives much introduction to his songs. "Life on Earth" is about his mother, but for an audience — especially if it contains listeners acquainted with rural life, a woman "picking strawberries the size of a pea, fingertips all stained red," could be anyone's mother, "giving thanks for the sunshine, the shortcake and the jam."

Dan Berggren will perform locally at Galway Central School at 7 p.m. Jan. 29. His Web site is <http://www.berggrenfolk.com>.

► Leigh Hornbeck can be reached at 581-8438 or by e-mail at [lhornbeck@timesunion.com](mailto:lhornbeck@timesunion.com).