

Saturday, January 19, 2008

Joe Filisko Shines at Friday at the Ford Concert

What a night! Sixty-three people came to the Thomas Ford Memorial Library on a very cold January evening to hear Joe Filisko, a Chicago-based harmonica artist, play the blues. With the meeting room nearly full, he did just that and more. In the end, he got a standing ovation, something rare for our coffeehouse concerts.

Knowing how cold it would be, I wondered before the concert how many people would come. A morning phone call from Ohio (two states away) was a clue that it might be a special night. Word had gotten out among people who love harmonica that Joe was playing a free concert at the library. As soon as I open the front door, people came in, and I was concerned at one point that we might not have enough room. I gave up the seat I had staked out. Luckily for me, the crowd and room balanced with a nice mix of regulars and newcomers.

Joe began his program by humbly explaining the situation. His partner for the night had a family emergency, so he was alone on the stage. This was something that he and I had discussed earlier in the week. He prepared a special program that he had been contemplating for years, highlighting the many ways a harmonica could be played. The program was not a lecture - it was a virtuoso performance.

Joe started with a piece that he had composed himself, which started quietly and had an atmospheric quality, something many people would not associate with harmonica. Then he played "Amazing Grace" to demonstrate many harmonic playing styles. I was really surprised in the third verse by how like a bagpipe that it sounded. Then Joe got down to the blues, folk, C&W, and Cajun songs. I particularly liked a medley of songs by Deford Bailey, one of the early stars of the Grand Ole Opry. He followed with a song by Peg Leg Sam, who Joe described as a snake oil salesman who used the harmonica in his pitches. On this song, Joe sang and performed harmonica gymnasts, playing the instrument from many angles and even without hands. It is hard to describe. You have to see it to believe it. Joe also played blues pieces by Henry Whitter, Sonny Terry (who was featured on a postage stamp), and Big Walter Horton.

For many of the songs that he played, Joe held up old vinyl record albums while he described the artists from whom he learned the songs. Most were from small regional recording companies, and I thought that they lent a nice eclectic touch. I bet the records would all be hard to find now. He also had an over-sized harmonica that he hung behind him and used to explain some techniques.

The Western Springs Library Friends, who underwrote the evening, served refreshments, we all stayed warm, and Joe played for nearly an hour and a half. Lots of people swayed to the music. It was a great night. Joe said that he would like to play other libraries. His contact information is on his website. I recommend him.

Rick, the Librarian