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Dancing By The River

Colin O'Brien's American journey

Colin O'Brien's songs are timeless. Many of the numbers on his new CD, *Dancing by the River*, sound as if they lived in the ether for centuries, only to be channeled finally through his own imagination. "One of the biggest compliments I can get when I play is, 'Did you write that song?'" he says.

O'Brien has played in a variety of settings since the '90s when he studied American finger style guitar at the Wisconsin Conservatory of Music, including with duos and a popular string band, Salt Creek. Lately, he's been making a living as a soloist. Styling himself in the image of folk entertainer John Hartford, he travels with banjo, fiddle, guitar and a plywood floor on which he does a shoe dance to the rhythm. O'Brien has developed a cross-American solo circuit taking him to clubs and children's events, nursing homes and music festivals, libraries and wine bars.

For the kids' shows, he emphasizes traditional material. "The theme is 'Rails & Trails' and I focus on frontier-era songs and stories," he explains. "Even if the kids have never heard 'Oh, Susannah,' they respond. It must be in our gene pool somehow. The success of these events isn't just the music but the rapport I get with the kids by letting them try the instruments and getting them involved."

One consistent icebreaker, whether with children or adults, is the banjo. "The instrument is wide open now," O'Brien insists, pointing to Bela Fleck and others who have taken it outside its associations with folk music, Dixieland and the South. He speaks of his 17-year-old nephew, a musician who has embraced the banjo without a clear sense of its folkloric roots. "For him, I think, it's a non-corporate instrument.

It's almost rebellious playing the banjo. It's about trying not to conform." O'Brien began writing songs at an even younger age than his nephew, when he was just 15. "It's the part of me that's been most consistent through my many incarnations as a musician. I'm drawn to different rivers of music, but I wouldn't be comfortable just playing bluegrass banjo or old-timey fiddle or finger style guitar. I've never rested on one of those styles, but all of them are ingredients that feed into what I'm writing." Dave Luhrssen

Colin O'Brien's CD release party takes place 7 to 9 p.m., Feb. 16, at Linneman's Riverwest Inn. It will be a smoke-free show.

<http://expressmilwaukee.com/article-867-rivers-of-music.html>