

The folk tradition continues...

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by Art Edelstein

If you want to spend a late afternoon transported into what singer Deb Flanders calls “a peaceful time and a magical place without electricity, like being in someone’s living room listening to music,” then the Old West Church in Calais on Sunday, Aug. 18, is for you.

For the 15th year Flanders, a well-respected singer of traditional New England ballads, is leading and hosting a concert that will feature songs, fiddling and ensemble performances by several of Vermont’s leading folk musicians.



The venue, the Old West Church, built in 1825, is a well-preserved example of a New England meeting house. This historic building has never been electrified so the concert begins at 4 p.m. and will end about 6 p.m. before the light fades.

The performers do not use a PA system or any electrified instruments. The feeling is one of a 19th century gathering with the audience seated in the pews in the 200-seat performance space. The church, set as it is facing rolling hills and fields, presents a rare opportunity to hear authentic music in an authentic setting.

For 15 years, The Calais Concert has been organized by singer Flanders in honor of her great-aunt Helen Hartness Flanders, one of the pioneers of folk music history in the United States. The elder Flanders, a native of Vermont, was an internationally recognized ballad collector and authority on folk music found in New England and in the British Isles. Today, 4,500 of her field recordings are housed at the Flanders Ballad Collection at Middlebury College. Folklorists and musicians consult this collection frequently locally, nationally, and internationally.

Deb Flanders has organized this concert series since the beginning. Her musical background is wide-ranging, singing rock classics with the Burlington-based a cappella group Mixed Company and classical with the Burlington Choral Society. She

is currently is a member of Bella Voce Women’s Chorus of Vermont. However, Deb Flanders’ musical path has been dedicated to performing many of the songs collected by her great-aunt.

“I never in my wildest dreams expected such a long run,” said Flanders of this now annual concert event. “Back in 1999 I thought this would be a one-time event. It continues because people love the music they hear, the setting, the acoustics, the non-electrified presentation and the beauty of the surroundings.”

This year, in addition to Flanders’ songs, concert-goers will be entertained by two up-and-coming traditional folk musicians. Anna Roberts-Gevalt, originally from Hinesburg and now living in Kentucky, is a wonderful Appalachian/Kentucky style fiddler and singer. She’s also a budding musicologist writing about Kentucky’s women musicians. She received a fellowship at Berea College to research the lives of female fiddlers in Kentucky. She is joined by singer-songwriter Eamon O’Leary, an Irish musician.

Vermonters have heard her music before as she played at the Champlain Valley Folk Festival several years ago.

“She’s totally immersed herself in Appalachian and Kentucky music and scholarly pursuits,” said Flanders. “She is a young person that will be carrying on the old traditions. This got me excited in having her perform at the concert.”

Throughout this concert series the musical director has been Pete Sutherland, who is one of the nation’s most respected fiddlers, multi-instrumentalists and producers. He writes the arrangements for the songs that Flanders sings.

The “band” for these concerts includes two classically trained musicians, John Dunlop on cello and Laura Markowitz on violin. Both musicians are also enthusiastic folk performers with Dunlop playing guitar and bouzouki while Markowitz fiddles. This year, Sofia Hirsch, a co-director of the Burlington Ensemble, a chamber music group, joins as an added violin/fiddle performer.

Flanders said the church is a particularly wonderful venue to highlight the next generation of folk musicians. Folk music, she said, “is alive and well in this state and thriving.”

The 15th annual Calais Concert, directed by Deb Flanders, will be presented at the Old West Church (0.8 mile south of Kent’s Corner) in Calais. General admission is \$15 (a portion of of which benefits the Vermont Folklife Center) at the door; for more information, call 802-233-1015.