

MyTown

School of Folk

The Siglins of the Ark

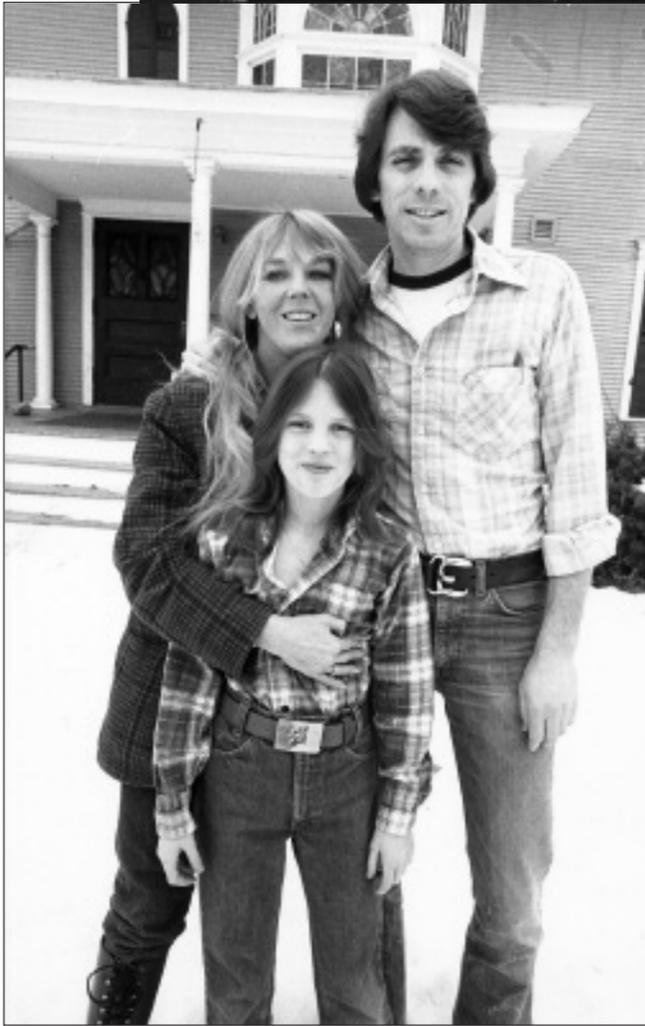
When my brother, Laz, and I moved here thirty-five years ago, we'd heard of only three things about Ann Arbor: the U-M (where my brother's wife-to-be was planning to start grad school), the radical Students for a Democratic Society, and the Ark. Even then it had a reputation as one of the best coffeeshouses in the country.

I still vividly recall the first time we walked into the Ark that summer. It was a Wednesday night Hoot, when anyone who showed up could play (they call it "open stage" now). A few people were strumming guitars on the front porch of the massive gray Victorian, set far back from Hill Street. Inside, in the living room, a small crowd of people sat on cushions on the floor, listening to a performer standing in front of the big fireplace. Off the main hallway, the warm-up room was crammed with more folkies nervously picking guitars, frailing banjos, and sawing away on fiddles.

We signed in with Linda Siglin and told her we were new in town. She greeted us warmly, but she wisely scheduled us for late that evening, when, to put it charitably, the "less experienced" performers played. We were that. We'd played in public exactly once before.

But that was what the Ark was for, on Wednesday nights anyway—a chance to be bad, even very bad, and to learn and get better. It was, and continues to be, a School of Folk, with Linda and her husband, Dave, as principals. We came back week after week to play three songs and to hear other, more experienced musicians: Peter Madcat Ruth, Mustard's Retreat, Dick Siegel, and Cheryl Dawdy, Connie Huber, and Grace Morand, before they were the Chenille Sisters. We knew we'd arrived when one night, a year later, Linda invited us to finish the first set. It was the prize spot at the Hoot, because the audience was the largest then.

Linda emceed all the Hoots, but Dave was the official manager. Though he rarely spoke, he had a deep and encyclopedic knowledge of folk music and performers, and if you hung around late after shows



(Above) Linda, Anya, and Dave Siglin at the first Ark in 1979. (Top) Gemini performs with bones master Percy Danforth and harmonica wizard Madcat Ruth in 1981.

and Hoots, you could learn much from listening to him. It soon became evident that he also listened carefully and paid attention to everyone. After a while he told us, "You've learned to use microphones, and you're also singing more quietly. The first few times you sang here, you'd blast me off the stairs." And then he scheduled us for our first professional show.

It's no exaggeration to say that if not for Dave and Linda, my brother and I might not have wound up playing music for a living—and certainly not performing the kind of music we play now, or the way we now play. Admittedly, if that were all Dave and Linda had accomplished in the past four decades, their

achievement would not be that noteworthy, though unquestionably it has made all the difference in our lives. Truth is, though, I think they have had as profound an influence on the lives of countless other folk musicians and fans of folk music.

In those early years my brother and I came often to the Ark to hear the enormous variety Dave and Linda presented every week. We were particularly drawn to the music of the British Isles. We listened to John Roberts and Tony Bartrand, Martin Carthy, Lou Killen, and the Boys of the Lough, and we started incorporating their songs and tunes into our sets. Then one night Dave said to us, "If you don't sing Hungarian and Israeli folk songs, who will?" He remembered that we had been born in Budapest and had lived in Israel for a few years, and he was gently giving us the same advice many young writers hear: write what you know. His words were transformative. They helped steer us to what was most genuine and authentic in our music.

I recall a number of other key conversations with Dave. Turned out he knew a lot more than just folk music. A few years ago, having sung only folk music before, I was starting to make tentative forays into singing jazz, and Dave booked my trio into the Ark. After the concert he suggested that besides listening to the great jazz vocalists, I should check out a relatively unknown jazz trombonist from the 1940s who he said had very vocal-like phrasing. I am certain Dave did not reserve his insightful comments and advice just for us, and that many other musicians benefited from talking with him.

Dave is retiring this month. The Ark will be in good hands. Anya, Dave and Linda's daughter, whom I remember when she was a little girl playing on the cushions on Hoot nights, will be taking over as program director along with the rest of the fine Ark staff.

The phrase "dedicating one's life" is bandied about frequently, especially in election season, but in the case of the Siglins, it fits. They have given so much to our community, and to the wider folk music community. Thank you, Dave and Linda.

—Sandor Slomovits

Sandor and Laszlo Slomovits perform as the duo Gemini.