

The Capital

NEIGHBORHOODS

77-year-old a genuine voice of the Chesapeake

By WENDI WINTERS, For The Capital

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Some people get up every morning and go for a jog to stay in shape. Tom Wisner, 77, arises and sings outdoors for two or three hours.

Though his voice is deep, mellow and riveting, sounding a bit like Burl Ives', no one hears Mr. Wisner flow through his repertoire of songs that embrace the life and wildlife of the Chesapeake Bay area, except the birds, crickets and woodland animals.

He lives in a small home on 150 acres, at the end of Sollers Warf Road in Lusby, a dirt trail 3/4 mile long.

"Singing brings peace to me," he said, adding his "bible" is the book by scholar Tom Berry, "The Great Work," published by the Sierra Club. "Berry said, 'The universe is not a collection of objects to be exploited. It is a community of subjects to be revered.' That's a powerful mantra for an eco-person like myself."

Like the ancient Liberty Tree, a tulip poplar that, until 1999, shaded the lawn of St. John's College over three centuries, Mr. Wisner is considered a living legend.

Long a songwriter, performer, artist and educator, he's been recognized with a slew of teaching awards.

His album "Chesapeake Borne," a collection of folk songs poetically documenting the passing of the Chesapeake watermen and their skipjacks, was the inspiration for the National Geographic 1986 TV special, "Chesapeake Borne."

With Dr. Sara Ebenreck of St. Mary's College, he cofounded the project "CHESTORY: The Center for the Story of Chesapeake Life and Culture in 2000, designed to encourage



Tom Wisner, bard of the Chesapeake returns to perform an evening concert at 7 p.m. July 9 on the beach of the Annapolis Maritime Museum. By Wendi Winters - For The Capital

artists to get involved in raising awareness of the bay ecology and culture. For more information on that project, visit www.chestory.org.

Three albums of songs he recorded with his son, Mark, and other artists - "Chesapeake Born," "Equilibrium" and "We've Got to Come Full Circle" - are now part of the collection of "people's music" sold by Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, a nonprofit record label of the Smithsonian Institution.

Awarded the World Folk Musicians' 2002 John Denver Award and the first Chesapeake Music Institute Lifetime Achievement Award in December 2007, the iconoclastic Mr. Wisner wriggles uncomfortably regarding the mantle he wears.

"They call me 'the Bard of the Chesapeake'," he protested. "There's lots of bards."

Ah, but none like him.

He is tall and wears an Amish-style, snow-white beard. His hands are the size of oaken paddles, he is known to schoolchildren of several generations throughout the area.

Long before it was chic to worry about the ecosystem of the Chesapeake Bay, or the impact of sewage and chemical wastes poisoning the bay and its rivers, Mr. Wisner was a familiar sight in elementary school classrooms. He'd teach the children about the bay and together they'd sing his songs about life on the Chesapeake waters.

"It's the best thing I ever did in life, working with children," he says.

Brought up in Washington, D.C., the Anacostia High School graduate of enlisted in the Air Force during the Korean War. He distinctly remembers his late father, a World War II vet and a combat photographer and filmmaker for Paramount Pictures, telling him "Tom, I'm doing this (fighting in a war) so you won't have to ... "

Mr. Wisner trained in Ecology and Natural History at Hartwick College and Cornell University and, in the 1960s, was a conservation educator at University of Maryland's Chesapeake Biological Laboratory. He designed programs for citizen groups and southern Maryland schools about conservation of natural resource.

Slowly, shaken by war, the warring of man against nature, family strife and the senseless death of one of his five children, his inner poet emerged.

"I am not a fast-paced entertainer who is capable of lighting fires where there is no tinder," he declares. "I am an 'edu-tainer' for those who take the time to listen and involve with me. My stories are about connection to place. My songs are celebrations encouraging all to join."

Mr. Wisner was the hand - or voice - behind the first wade-ins in the state, begun 21 years ago on the Patuxent River. He wrote a song in 1983, "A Guide to Wading in the

Southern Maryland Waters," that challenged then-Sen. Bernie Fowler to join with others to conduct an annual wade-in on the Patuxent River, and to continue it until the water was as clear and clean as it was in the 1950s. The wade-ins began in 1988 with Mr. Wisner, Sen. Fowler, and 16 other activists or scientists, pulling on waders and walking into the river up to their shoulders. They'd stop and peer down into the water. If they could see their feet, the water would be as clean and clear as Mr. Fowler remembered from his youth.

Clarity hasn't happened yet.

Mr. Wisner hoped the event would occur annually on the summer solstice, but the Maryland House of Representatives chose to declare the second Sunday in June, a date closer to Flag Day, as "Bernie Fowler Wade-In Day."

"Twenty-one years of wade-ins on the Patuxent River and it's still a mess," he sighed.

Jefferson Holland, director of the Annapolis Maritime Museum said "I can remember very clearly soon after arriving here aboard a sailboat with my father in 1981, and there was Tom, white Amish beard, strumming his guitar at City Dock and singing" said Jefferson Holland, director of the Annapolis Maritime Museum. "I knew right then that that's what I wanted to do - write songs about my experiences on the bay to help other people understand what a rare treasure we have in our own back yards."

For the last dozen years or so, he's been working with Kevin Brooks as Them Eastport Oyster Boys. "And we've had the privilege of working with Tom at a number of concerts around the watershed, most notably at the Smithsonian Folk Life Festival on the Mall in 2004 and last year at Maryland Hall for the Grand ole Osprey," reminisced Mr. Holland. "He is truly a hero. He's our own Woody Guthrie, our own Pete Seeger, and those of us who are working to build a whole new genre of music inspired by the bay are standing on his very tall shoulders and singing our hearts out."

Mr. Wisner returns to Annapolis at 7 p.m. July 9 at 7 p.m., on the beach of the Annapolis Maritime Museum for a summer evening concert followed by noon July 10, he will be at City Dock, strumming his banjo and singing his songs of the bay. Both concerts are free and open to the public. Bring a chair, blanket and picnic and have a listen.

Janie Meneely, now with Calico Jack, puts her two bits in.

"Tom grew up sailing skipjacks, crabbing, fishing and working with watermen. His voice is genuine. The rivers and the bay are what flow through his songs. People recognize his authenticity," she said.

In real life, he's his own person, willing to take risks artistically," Ms. Meneely added. "You've got to admire somebody for that. Recently, I made a commitment to learn his music, so it is remembered after he's gone."

She laughed. "But, he'll be here for a long time to come."

For more information about the concerts, call 410-295-0104, email to info@amaritime.org, or log on to www.AnnapolisMaritimeMuseum.org.

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