



**D**uring the Smithsonian's 2007 Festival of American Folklife, on an evening when Michael and David Doucet, Liz Carroll and John Doyle, and John Cephas and Phil Wiggins were all onstage, the sound crew got a big laugh: a reporter showed up to interview the monitor engineer, Charlie Pilzer. Bearded and bespectacled, with an easygoing look, a cheerful voice, and a preference for Hawaiian shirts, Pilzer doesn't look like a powerhouse. When he's onstage, with any of a number of local bands, Pilzer is usually in the back, behind a big stand-up bass. More often than that, he's offstage, mixing sound. But Pilzer is more than a soundman, more than a musician, more than a producer, and more than the best darn mastering engineer in the mid-Atlantic. He's the focal point at which a lot of the area's best music comes together, a GRAMMY-winning force of nature on the D.C. roots music scene.

Pilzer is a native of the D.C. area and lives in Takoma Park, Maryland, only a few miles from where he grew up. He got his grounding in music through the Maryland public schools, and he is still grateful for the early training he received. "Probably the most influential teacher I ever had was my junior high school band director," he said. "He was a guy by the name of John Bauer. It's probably because of him that

I became a musician. And it's a shame, because he passed away about 10 years ago, and it would have been nice to be able to talk to him given all the recent goings-on." While in junior high, Pilzer tried out several instruments, settling on bass as his primary instrument and piano as his secondary. He focused on music throughout his schooling, participating in the Montgomery County Youth Orchestra (which is still going strong under its new name, the Maryland Classic Youth Orchestras), while also playing jazz and rock. In fact, he played in his first rock band at 12 years old. "Four suburban boys trying to play the Temptations," he said. "That's a taste of what it was like. I'm sure you can just imagine."

Still, music was in the air during his 1960s upbringing, and he was not one to be left behind. "It was a great era to grow up in," he recalled. "I grew up in the era of the Beatles, and from the Beatles I found the Jefferson Airplane, and on to the Doors." But he didn't stop there. He went to the symphony, and some of his best early memories are of acts like the Stan Kenton big band and the Count Basie Orchestra. "I remember when I was a high school kid, they had these concerts on the Potomac in Washington, on a barge," he said. "They'd put the band on a barge, and you could sit on the steps — they'd close the highway

down. And I remember seeing Count Basie down there, and actually meeting Count Basie. Sitting right there in the front, and being blown away by these guys. It was 20 guys, all playing as one!"

Despite the fact that music was his life, Pilzer didn't initially choose to pursue his music studies in college. "Of course, I was doing all this music stuff, so I went to engineering school," he lamented. His career at the University of Michigan engineering school was brief, however. Dropping out after half a year, he knocked around Ann Arbor until a music professor took what he called a "leap of faith," and agreed to take the young Pilzer on as a student in the following year.

Pilzer's second university career, as a music student, was underway. He studied music theory, and also availed himself of the rich culture around Ann Arbor. "Of course, this was the early 70s," he explained. "It was great time to be in Ann Arbor." He described it as a time of "politics, experimentation, altered states of consciousness, and a lot of music...all kinds of different music." By day, he was playing bass concertos and studying music theory, picking apart the counterpoint in a Bach concerto, or trying to come to grips with the tone rows in a Webern symphony or Schoenberg quartet. By night, he was,



Andrea Hoag, Loretta Kelley, and Pilzer



somewhat surreptitiously, learning the equally challenging lessons of international folk music.

“The music school at Ann Arbor was a real conservatory,” he explained, “and the problem with a conservatory is that there’s a certain amount of insularity.” The attitude of most of the school could be summed up in a few succinct words: “Folk music hadn’t been invented.”

But that didn’t stop the young Pilzer from getting his folk on. He described two seminal moments that occurred in Ann Arbor. One was when his friend Sandy Atwood, in his own words, “dragged” him to the weekly international folk dance in Ann Arbor. “This was like nothing I’d ever seen. The dancing was like nothing I’d ever been exposed to before — there’s stuff from the Balkans, and French *bourées*, and Scandinavian dancing. But the most interesting thing was the music, especially the Balkan music. I’d played classical, I’d played jazz, I’d played rock ‘n’ roll. And most of it was in fours. Some jazz was in 5/4 time, like Dave Brubeck’s “Take 5.” But here’s a whole culture where *nothing* was in four. Five, seven, eleven...how do you count this?” In some cases, the scales were also new and exciting to Pilzer. “In Swedish *polskas*, you’d get to the third of the scale, and say, ‘Is that a major or a minor?’ And it’s somewhere in between.”

Pilzer’s second seminal moment in discovering folk music involved Michigan’s best-known folk venue, the Ark. Managed then, as now, by David Siglin, the Ark was just becoming the Michigan Mecca of folk music. One of Pilzer’s friends — he regrets that he can’t remember who it was — suggested he go

to the Ark to see a fiddler who was coming through town. Pilzer had heard of the Ark, especially through the distinctive posters that were all over campus, but he had never been there. He made his way to the house on Hill Street that was, in his mind, a “little den of hippiedom,” and witnessed an unexpected spectacle.

“Here’s this kind of short guy, in a kind of ill-fitting suit, playing the crap out of the fiddle,” he said. “And there was this piano player, playing the piano as a percussion instrument; he was this incredible driving force. And the piano player couldn’t see very well, and the fiddler it turned out couldn’t hear very well. It was Jean Carignan and Gilles Losier. It was amazing, because here was this guy who was as virtuosic as anyone I’d ever seen at music school. He was playing a version of ‘The Devil’s Dream’ that had all this left-hand pizzicato, all this stuff you’d see in Paganini. And he played James Scott Skinner’s ‘The Banks.’ I kind of started at the back and moved up forward and forward and forward, until I was sitting right at the front, staring at this guy!”

Pilzer became a fixture at the Ark, and a confirmed folk music fan. Years later, at a Folk Alliance meeting in Montreal, Pilzer met

Losier, and was able to tell him how influential he had been. But he never saw Carignan again.

After his four years in music school (“I *think* I graduated,” he said, “but to this day I’m not really sure.”), Pilzer moved briefly to Philadelphia to play in a rock band, then moved back to D.C. and got a job in computers, “because that’s what musicians did.” He continued to go to international folk dance events, and to attend folk dance camps in the summers when he could. At one of these, in 1977, at Buffalo Gap Camp in West Virginia, he had his third seminal folk music encounter. This time, it was with musicians from the Faroe Islands, a group of 17 islands halfway between Iceland and Norway. Sharon Weiss, a friend of Pilzer’s from folk dance circles, had visited the Faroes, and had met a group of musicians there. She brought them back to the camp to play their own brand of Scandinavian dance music, and they needed a bass player. Already part of a loose conglomeration of musicians known as *Spælímenninir í Hóydølum*, the group wanted to form a smaller, more regular ensemble for concert tours. The shortened name was *Spælímenninir*, and Pilzer was in. This year, he celebrates 30 unlikely years as a Faroese folk group’s bass player.

*Spælímenninir*, while based in the Faroes, is really a pan-Scandinavian group, Pilzer explained. It is made up of six people, four Scandinavians and two Americans: Kristian Blak from Denmark plays piano and harmonium, and is the band’s singer; Jan Danielsson (Swedish) and Erling Olsen (Danish) are the group’s fiddlers; Ívar Bærentsen, from the Faroe Islands, plays mandolin and guitar; Weiss, who comes originally from Massachu-

Spælímenninir



setts but has lived in the Faroes since the 1970s, plays recorder; and Pilzer plays bass. With Spælímninnir, he has toured throughout the United States and Europe, and has appeared on many radio shows, especially "A Prairie Home Companion," where the group has been a favorite of Garrison Keillor's for years. Of all the members of Spælímninnir, Pilzer is the only one who has never lived in the Faroes, though he has visited many times over the years. He describes the islands as a "cold and striking place, a thousand miles from everywhere." While the remote location can be somewhat forbidding, he is comforted by the stability of the people and relationships there...even people's relationship to him, a relative outsider. "I can go back after several years, and people will see me and say, 'Oh, you're back.' And we can sit down and pick up where we left off."

Of course, in a band where not everyone lives in the same country, touring is a challenge. "In the 80s, when we were really active, we'd play maybe four times a year," Pilzer recalled. Each tour would last about two weeks. Nowadays, the members play together less often, but they do get together periodically, to tour, record, and just play. Spælímninnir has released nine albums, almost all of which were recorded in the Faroes. The most recent was 2003's *Malargrot*.



Pilzer's time with Spælímninnir led him to continue looking for opportunities to play Scandinavian music. He has recently found a particularly good setting: "I'm in a trio with Andrea Hoag and Loretta Kelley," he said. Hoag, he explained, is a versatile fiddler who plays American and Celtic styles, but who specializes in Swedish fiddle. She graduated in 1984 from the Malungs Folkhögskola in Sweden, with a degree in folk violin pedagogy. Kelley is the foremost American proponent of the Norwegian Hardingfele, or Hardanger fiddle. Like Spælímninnir, the Hoag/Kelley/Pilzer trio performs a pan-Scandinavian repertoire, with an emphasis on dance music. "We've recorded two CDs, and our

most recent one, *Hambo in the Snow* (2006), was nominated for a 2007 GRAMMY Award as Best Traditional World Music Album," he said. "We're pretty proud of that, because here's an independent record, made by three people, and released on a little cooperative record label, but we've got a Grammy nomination just like Tony Bennett or, you know...Britney Spears."

As Pilzer recounted, it was the trio that led to the founding of the "little cooperative record label." "In 1996, Andrea, Loretta and I recorded *Hambo in the Barn*," he said. "As we were getting ready to release it, we considered whether to seek a label or to release the CD on our own. It was clear to me that being on a label was much better in terms of marketing and PR. But, working in the recording business, I had seen too many instances where artists lost ownership of their performance and never made any money. Recording companies did what was best for the company, not the artist. So, we said, 'What if we created a company where the artist retained all rights, copyright, business and artistic, and received the income from their recordings? And do the work ourselves? And make the decisions by consensus?'"

On hearing this utopian dream, a skeptic might chuckle knowingly and say, "Yeah, good luck with that." But the label Pilzer and

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his friends founded, Azalea City Recordings, has been very successful in meeting their goals. In its 12 years of existence, it has released over 30 recordings. Members of the coop — who include well-known local artists such as Jon Carroll, Mary Sue Twohy, Ruthie Logsdon, and the Alexandria Klezmet — participate in monthly meetings that include a potluck supper. Members share their experiences, and pitch in to take on roles in marketing, distributing, and other areas. Meetings do involve a lot of discussion (“consensus can be a protracted process,” Pilzer explained), but the member artists are generally happy with the results. “It’s rewarding to me that the label has gained a local and a national reputation,” Pilzer said. “We’ve been awarded a Washington Area Music Award for Best Record Label the last two years. We share in our member artists’ successes, and encourage each other in our endeavors. It’s not just a business arrangement; we’ve become good friends, too. It’s so much more difficult, not to mention isolating, to be a single-artist label.”

In addition to his two Scandinavian ensembles, Pilzer also plays in other formations, mostly for fun. “One of the reasons I got into music when I was young was because it was fun to play,” he recalled. “At one time, I lost that. Music became work, just a job. So, I went away and did other work for a while, and found the music that pulled me in again. I’m serious about my music. I work hard at it. But I also make it a point to do music that’s fun.” In particular, he is proud to be behind a newly formed English ceilidh band in the Washington area, the National Capital Ceilidh Band.

“Scandinavian folk music wasn’t a small enough niche for me,” he joked. “I had to get into English ceilidh music.” In this formation, he mostly lays aside his bass and plays tuba and melodeon instead, enjoying the challenge of the different instruments, and also the feeling of playing just for dancers. The other dance band he plays with is called the Serpentine Band, and consists of Pilzer on piano and accordion, his sister Leigh on saxophone, Andrea Hoag on fiddle, and Will Morrison on drums. (“Hey,” he quipped, “this is an exciting band because it has sax *and* violins!”) Seriously, contradance music has been Pilzer’s home base for many years, and he’s happy to be in a good old American dance band.

In the same vein, Pilzer is an enthusiastic participant in the Glen Echo Open Band, associated with the Friday Night Dance at Glen Echo Park in D.C.’s Maryland suburbs. The dance itself is a large contradance that happens every Friday in the park’s Spanish Ballroom, attracting hundreds of people weekly. The Open Band happens on the second Friday of the month. “The rules of the band are simple — come and play,” Pilzer explained. “More-

experienced performers are in the front and less-experienced sit toward the rear. So the band is a mix of various skill levels. And it’s just a plain good time. It has lots of energy.”

When not onstage or in the bandstand, Pilzer is much in demand as a producer, especially among folk and Celtic musicians. He has produced albums for early music group Hesperus, Celtic musicians Maggie Sansone and Sue Richards, and folksinger Ed Trickett, among many others. As a producer, his philosophy is simple: Try to help the artist realize his or her vision. “I know there are some producers



who come in with their own vision, and a lot of times you can listen to an album and know who produced before you even know who the artist is. That’s one way of doing things, and there’s nothing really wrong with that.” It’s not how Pilzer operates, however. “I already make my own CDs,” he quipped. “I don’t need to make their CDs into my CDs, too.” He offers advice and counsel, but generally listens to the artist’s needs rather than making demands of his own. It’s a style that works well for a lot of folk groups, who know what they want to hear, but don’t necessarily know how to make that happen on a CD.

Pilzer is also a sought-after live-sound engineer. Whether for a small venue like a folk club or a big stage at the Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife, Pilzer has a similar, artist-centered attitude: The sound should help the musicians realize their own potential. “One thing that’s good about being a musician, and having a reputation, is that other musicians see you out there at the console, and they know they can relax and just play their best.” He smiled. “If they’re worrying about the sound,

they’re not playing their best. In some ways that’s more important than the sound itself.”

Finally, we get to Pilzer’s “day job”: He is the primary engineer at Airshow Mastering in Springfield, Virginia. With studios in Virginia and Boulder, Colorado (where Pilzer’s partner, Dave Glasser, works), Airshow is one of the country’s most highly esteemed mastering outfits. Pilzer typically forgives people for asking the inevitable question: Just what *is* CD mastering, anyway? “Mastering is the last step in producing a recording, after mixing, and before the CD goes to be pressed,” he explained. “It’s the process of assembling a bunch of tracks into an album. It’s a fine-tuning process, to make one song flow into another. We finalize the dynamics, we can adjust the equalization, and sometimes do some editing. It’s very detailed polishing of the sound. We also help sequence the final tracks into the right order for a pleasing album. All of that can fall to the mastering engineer, after the producer is satisfied with the mixes.”

Pilzer masters not only folk music, but everything across the spectrum, from ethnographic recordings from all over the world on Smithsonian Folkways to gospel from Sweet Honey in the Rock, from the jazz of Harry Watters to the string quartets of David Diamond, and from the early music of Ensemble Galilei to a hard-rocking CD from alternative band Jimmie’s Chicken Shack. “Doing mastering on all these kinds of music is really where all my years of playing everything really come in handy. I feel like I have a pretty good idea what a lot of these CDs should sound like, but I always talk over the details with the artists, too.” He has artists bring in other CDs whose sound approaches what they’re looking for, asks detailed questions — anything to make sure he’s serving their needs.

Pilzer obviously does his job well; over a dozen projects he has mastered have gone on to be nominated for GRAMMY Awards. He won a GRAMMY Award himself in 1997, for mastering and sound restoration on the CD reissue of the *Anthology of American Folk Music* from Smithsonian Folkways.

When not working in the music industry, Pilzer spends his time giving back to the music community. “The community is what we make it,” he said. “Performing opportunities do not exist without a large group of people doing a lot of work. I play mostly for traditional dances — American and Scandinavian — and I owe a lot to the organizers of those events. Many of the concerts produced for our trio are run by folk societies. It seems only right that I contribute back to these organizations.” Pilzer has done so by volunteering his time and skills as a board member for the Folklore Society of Greater Washington, the Washington Chapter of the Recording Academy, and the North



American Folk Music and Dance Alliance. One thing Pilzer has received from his organizational work is recognition, not only for himself, but for the kinds of music he plays. As a member of the board of governors of the Washington Chapter of the Recording Academy, for example, he's had the opportunity to meet and work with people from all genres of music. The next time they hear about some Scandinavian folk music, maybe they'll think of Pilzer, and look at it from a different, more informed perspective.

One of the accomplishments of which Pilzer said he is most proud is the establishment of a family camp week in West Virginia run by the Country Dance and Song Society. The idea came from his own experiences bringing his daughter Sarah to dance camps; today, Sarah herself serves on the board of CDSS. "Having your kid appreciate and value something that is important to you, traditional folk music and dance in my case, is priceless," he said. This is the kind of thing



anyone can do, he explained. "If your interest is in songwriting, help run a songwriters group or sponsor a writing workshop. A fiddler could help to organize a jam or retreat weekend. An engineer could mentor a young-and-upcoming individual. Perhaps take on an intern or assistant. If we, as successful or passionate musicians, don't help, who will?"

One question that might occur to anyone looking at Pilzer's career is: Why occupy so many roles? Pilzer's answer is simple: Why not? "All kinds of things can be fun," he said. "Getting together with some friends to play old-timey music. Or going to a festival in New York City and mixing sound for Balkan brass bands until 4 a.m. Sitting at a song circle and listening to the newest of songs or to songs 200 years old — maybe in a language you don't understand; just absorbing the sound and the emotion of the moment. Or dancing in a room of strangers — no, not strangers, just people you haven't met yet. Or, as I did recently, playing my bass with some musicians from northeast Thailand. I don't know much about Thai music and we didn't have many words to share, but that didn't stop us. We figured things out. We had a whole room of people dancing to our music and then we just sat and shared some beers. That's the kind of thing that got me going in the first place."



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