

July 12, 2009—

Shel Silverstein was many things to every man.

He was a poet and wrote screenplays with David Mamet. He composed the hits "A Boy Named Sue" for Johnny Cash, "The Cover of the Rolling Stone" for Dr. Hook and "The Unicorn" for the Irish Rovers. He was a prolific cartoonist for Playboy magazine and the author of popular children's books including Falling Up and Where The Sidewalk Ends. Silverstein was an incredible storyteller.

His eclectic energy was wired from his Chicago roots.

Silverstein had a fatal heart attack in 1999 in Key West, Fla., at the age of 69. His hometown pays long-overdue homage with "SHELebration: A Tribute to"ShelSilverstein" this week at the Jay Pritzker Pavilion in Millennium Park.

Headlining are longtime Silverstein pal Bobby Bare and Bobby Bare Jr. with drummer Patrick Hallahan of My Morning Jacket and veteran Nashville guitarist and producer Chip Young. Young, who is Bare Jr.'s father-in-law, played on Elvis Presley's '60s sessions and was a member of the '60s pop band Neon Philharmonic. Other musical acts include Jon Langford, Sally Timms, Ella Jenkins and Silverstein's longtime collaborator Pat Dailey.

Backing vocalists include Nora O'Connor and Bare Jr.'s mother, Jeannie, who has sung with Lawrence Welk and was in Tex Ritter's road band.

The program will also feature spoken-word jazz artist Ken Nordine, Louder than a Bomb youth poetry festival founder Kevin Coval and "Saturday Night Live" alumnus Tim Kazurinsky, who will read from Silverstein books, along with members of the Annoyance Theater Company and Steve Edwards of WBEZ-FM (91.5).

The free, all-ages concert celebrates the fifth Anniversary of Millennium Park.

Silverstein would have fun with that, perhaps penning a song like "Grinnenium & Bare It."

And the Bare family is a fine entry point to Silverstein.

Bare Sr. had hits with Silverstein's "Tequila Sheila," "Sylvia's Mother" (also a 1972 pop hit for Dr. Hook) and the Silverstein co-write "Marie Laveau."

Silverstein's final project was writing the songs for the underrated Old Dogs country supergroup of Bare Sr., Waylon Jennings, Mel Tillis and Jerry Reed. The tunes range from the honky-tonker "Cut The Mustard" ("I ain't too old to cut the mustard / I'm just too tired to spread it around") to the album closer "Time," a gentle waltz where the old gents lament on how the snow falls a bit deeper and newspaper print is getting a bit smaller.

This eye for detail was one of Silverstein's greatest gifts.

"Impeccable detail," Bare Sr. said during a break from a fishing trip on Lake Mille Lacs, Minn. "The first song he sang me was 'The Winner.' I was laughing so hard, and the song is so long I had him stop in the middle so I could catch my breath. The details were about arthritic elbows, dislocated knees ['from pickin' fights with thunderstorms and chargin' into trees.'] I left out a verse about the family jewels."

Bare Sr. met Silverstein in 1973 through Nashville guitarist-producer Chet Atkins.

"Chet had been in Chicago to do something for Playboy," Bare Sr. recalled. "He met Shel there. Shel was a great songwriter. And Chet loved Shel's writing. Shel was the most brilliant person I ever met. I was looking for someone to write a concept album that made sense in the early '70s. The only albums coming out of Nashville at the time revolved around hit singles."

Bare Sr. explained his conceptual dilemma during a Saturday night party at songwriter Harlan Howard's house that featured Kris Kristofferson among the guests. "Shel called me on Monday from Chicago and said I had an album," Bare Jr. recalled. "He hopped on a plane, flew to Nashville and sang me the songs that afternoon. They were so entertaining. So visual. And that's how I sing songs anyway. I don't see words, I see the whole picture like a movie."

The songs morphed into 1973's "Lullabys, Legends and Lies," which delivered the country-voodoo hit "Marie Laveau." Bare had just returned to RCA Records, where Atkins gave him the keys to the candy store.

"It was so much fun," Bare Sr. recalled. "Chet let me produce the album, which was a new thing. Shel and I had total freedom. The lyrics were brilliant and uncomplicated. Shel only knew two melodies so I didn't have to learn melodies. That was the beginning and the best album I ever did."

That's saying something, since Bare Sr. received a 1976 Grammy nomination

for "Drop Kick Me Jesus (Through the Goalposts of Life)."

Silverstein grew up on Palmer Street in Logan Square.

He studied at the Chicago College of Performing Arts at Roosevelt University. Today the Shel Silverstein Archives are at Taylor and California and slightly modeled after Nora Guthrie's Woody Guthrie Archives in New York.

Silverstein's nephew, Mitch Myers, oversees the archives and cooperated with Monday's concert. Myers is also the author of "Silverstein Around The World," a hardcover collection of cartoons and anecdotes on Silverstein's travels.

The Silverstein archives -- not open to the public -- contain original artwork, photos, reels of tape, song lyrics, unpublished writings and thousands of drawings. "His amazing book collection includes the most impressive assortment of children's literature that I've ever seen," Myers reported in an e-mail.

According to Myers, after Silverstein returned from military service in 1956 he hung around his parent's Chicago house and the Playboy Mansion. In 1960 he rented an apartment in New York City but made regular visits to Chicago until Playboy founder Hugh Hefner moved to Los Angeles in 1971.

Monday's concert was organized by Bare Jr., who records for Chicago-based Bloodshot Records. He picked up the idea from Brian Keigher, who books Millennium Park. Bare Jr. was nominated for a 1973 Grammy at the age of 5 when he dueted with his father on Silverstein's "Daddy What If," which ranks up with Bobby Goldsboro's "Honey" in the maudlin-o-meter. The father and son duo lost to the Pointer Sisters.

The concert is a prelude to a Silverstein tribute record that Bare Jr. is working on for Sugar Hill Records. That project also includes My Morning Jacket, Kristofferson, Ray Price, John Prine, Todd Snider and Lucinda Williams. Kristofferson is covering "The Winner," complete with the line about the family jewels. The record should be out by early 2010.

On Monday, expect Bare Jr. to cover "The Cover of the Rolling Stone" and "Daddy What If."

Bare Jr. remembers being in RCA's Studio B (Elvis Presley, Chet Atkins, Eddy Arnold) in Nashville at the age of 5 and Silverstein tickling him. "That was so great," Bare Jr. recalled. "Shel critiqued every song I wrote until he died. I've done 'Daddy' with my daughter Isabella, who is 4. Hopefully she will do it [on

Monday]. She could say she doesn't feel like it, but I hope that doesn't happen. I've promised her a Princess Pizza Party if she sings. I don't know what a Princess Pizza Party is, but we're going to have one after the show."

Although Silverstein never lived in Nashville, he was popular in inner circles because of his storytelling technique, not unlike the keen styles of Roger Miller and John Prine. "His good Hebrew storytelling comes through in these hillbilly songs," Bare Jr. explained. "When you were around him you felt anything was possible. He couldn't contain his creativity. If we were having lunch he'd start drawing on napkins. He was very inquisitive. He would have made a great Larry King."

Bare Jr. sang harmonies on the Old Dogs sessions.

"Old Dogs was like a liar's competition," he said. "Jerry Reed, Shel, Dad, Waylon and Tillis all trying to outdo each other with the biggest lie was absolutely hilarious." Bare Sr. added, "We barely made it through that because Waylon was ailing. Shel was there for every session. He died not long after that. And so did Waylon.

"I talked to Shel the night before he died. He said he wasn't feeling too good. He was in bed around 6 at night, which was unbelievable for him. But Shel wouldn't go to a doctor. He hadn't been to a doctor since '51, except for a gallbladder operation in Nashville. I took him to get the stitches out."

Apart from the Silverstein projects, Bare Jr. is finishing up a tribute EP with former Chicagoan David Vandervelde (the late Jay Bennett's studio collaborator) called "American Bread." The seven-song EP honors the timeless pop bands America and Bread.

"There's two 'Sister Golden Hairs,'" Bare Jr. said with a laugh. "There's an Alpha and a Beta. America and Bread is kind of a guilty pleasure but at the same time the songs are so good. It's the best wannabe Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young ever. The arrangements are amazing. I don't think anybody embraces those songs the way they should be."

They could have said that about Shel Silverstein, too, until a concert in a park among the giving trees.