

CHARLY CHIARELLI

BY MELANIE DUGAN

WITH PHOTOGRAPHY BY BERNARD CLARK

Charly Chiarelli is telling stories. His gravelly voice rises and falls as he slips from English into Sicilian and back to English again.

Occasionally he gestures to emphasize or illustrate a phrase. Then he puts his harmonica to his lips, and a long ribbon of music flows through the room, over the audience gathered to watch *Cu' Fu?*, his one-man show.

In Sicilian, "cu' fu?" means "who did it?" It's an all-purpose phrase, like "what's going on?", that can function as a question or as an editorial comment. "Cu' fu is a Sicilian's response to life's perplexing moments," Charly explains, and his show draws a vivid picture of growing up Italian in Canada, growing up at the crossroads of two cultures.

Born Calogero Chiarelli in Racalmuto, a small town in Sicily, Charly immigrated with his family to Canada as a child. "Sicily has been an entity for thousands of years," Charly says of his native land. "As a political entity, Italy is much younger. Sicily is in the middle, at the intersection of all these influences. It's the largest island in the Mediterranean, and it lies between the east and the west, between Europe and Africa. My uncle told me, 'In Rome they say we're so far south. But we're not south — we're north.' Of Africa," says Charly.

In 1949, Charly, his mother, father and two brothers arrived in Hamilton, Ontario, to join an uncle who had

settled there earlier. Within five years, two more brothers and a sister were born in Hamilton.

Canada, Charly soon discovered, wasn't such a foreign country. "In my neighbourhood in Hamilton there were ten thousand people from Racalmuto. Not just from Sicily — but from this little town of Racalmuto. We dominated the neighbourhood. Times were hard, hard on everybody, but that didn't stop us from having fun.

"There wasn't a safer neighbourhood. And people didn't give us a hard time, because if you give a Sicilian a hard time, he comes back with a gang."

Sicilian culture surrounded Charly in Hamilton. His father and mother spoke Sicilian; they had even brought the branch of a fig tree from Sicily, rooted it, and planted it in their garden, where it grew and produced fresh figs. "That was the culture my brothers and I tried to avoid," Charly says. "We wanted to assimilate, we wanted to be Beaver Cleaver. At that time, there were no role models for us, there was no Fonzi. But my parents were so easy-going we

couldn't rebel against them. So we rebelled against everything else."

In Hamilton, Charly attended Westdale High School, and from there he went on to study psychology at McMaster University. After two years he transferred to the University of Toronto, and graduated from there with an Honours B.A. in psychology. He also attended the University of



Guelph, then returned to the University of Toronto for a diploma in linguistics and adult education. At Carleton University in Ottawa he earned a Master's in social work.

"But my most significant education," he states, "was working for three years at the Clarke Institute of Psychiatry in Toronto. To be there in the mid-1970s when there was such a social revolution going on — Rochdale



together. When he settled here it was a transplantation of my roots."

In the 18 years Charly has lived in Kingston he's seen a lot of changes. "I've learned more about the Italian presence here. And I've watched Kingston grow to accommodate my taste buds. The city has become much more cosmopolitan."

Kingston has offered Charly other communities to explore. A self-described "compulsive

storyteller," Charly is also an accomplished musician. Over the years, he has connected with not one, but two bands: Beats Workin', with David Hurley, which has played Brandees every Tuesday evening for three years, and Roar Shack, which has been part of the annual Buskers Rendezvous.

In 1990, with some assistance from David Hurley, Charly drew on his storytelling talents and his musical experience to create *Ho Ho Hum*, a modern fable that plays with the traditional mythology of Santa Claus. As Charly tells — and sings — it, Santa Claus decides he will no longer deliver war toys.

Response to the cassette Charly produced from the show was gratifying. It was selected by the Canadian Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War to be handed out at an international

symposium; wives of Peacekeepers stationed on the army base tracked Charly down and purchased two or three of the cassettes apiece.

Greg Hunter at CKLC radio station was enthusiastic; for three years running he played *Ho Ho Hum* on the radio on Christmas Eve. The show was featured on Cablenet and was produced at the Baby Grand Theatre.

About two years ago, Dan Yashinsky asked Charly if he'd like to be part of the Festival of the Human Voice at Artword Theatre in Toronto. "I'd been doing these vignettes about my Sicilian background for about ten years. It seemed like a good opportunity to weave them together." And so *Cu' Fu* was born.

Cu' Fu explores what happens when two cultures collide. The show is often funny, and frequently moving. Charly talks about the family he grew up in, about the humorous times and the sorrowful times, and it's clear that he's no longer running away from his Sicilian heritage. At one point, describing his father's "thick, calloused farming fingers," Charly says, "My father cultivated a garden. I cultivate stories."

And the stories bear fruit. These days, when he's not at his day job at OHIP, Charly is on the road with *Cu' Fu*. The show had a run at the Edward Day Gallery on Ontario Street last summer, and he's taken it on the road to Toronto, Hamilton, Guelph, Ottawa and Montreal. In future, he hopes to take *Cu' Fu* to New York, Philadelphia and Chicago. He even hopes to perform it in Italy. "Dr. Donato Santeramo, a professor of Italian at Queen's, has translated *Cu' Fu* into Italian. Now I have to learn it in Italian," Charly grins.

His long-term ambition is clear. "I have every artist's dream," Charly says. "I want to be self-sufficient with my art."

Back in front of the audience again, Charly starts another story — a funny one this time, about whisking a girlfriend out of the house one Sunday morning under his mother's bemused gaze. As Charly talks, people smile. He pulls out his harmonica and plays a riff. Laughter eddies through the room, soft counterpoint to the lonely sound of the harmonica. ■

Market, we weren't going to cafes — and Anne and I asked ourselves, 'What are we doing in this unfriendly, cold city when we can't take advantage of city activities?' So we decided, 'Let's go to a bilingual environment,' and packed up and headed off to Montreal.

"This was in 1981, when a lot of businesses were leaving Quebec because of the language laws. On our way to Montreal we stopped in Kingston to visit Anne's sister. I was beginning to realize there might not be much employment for me in Montreal if I couldn't speak French. So Anne stayed in Kingston, and I went up to Ottawa to study French at Algonquin College."

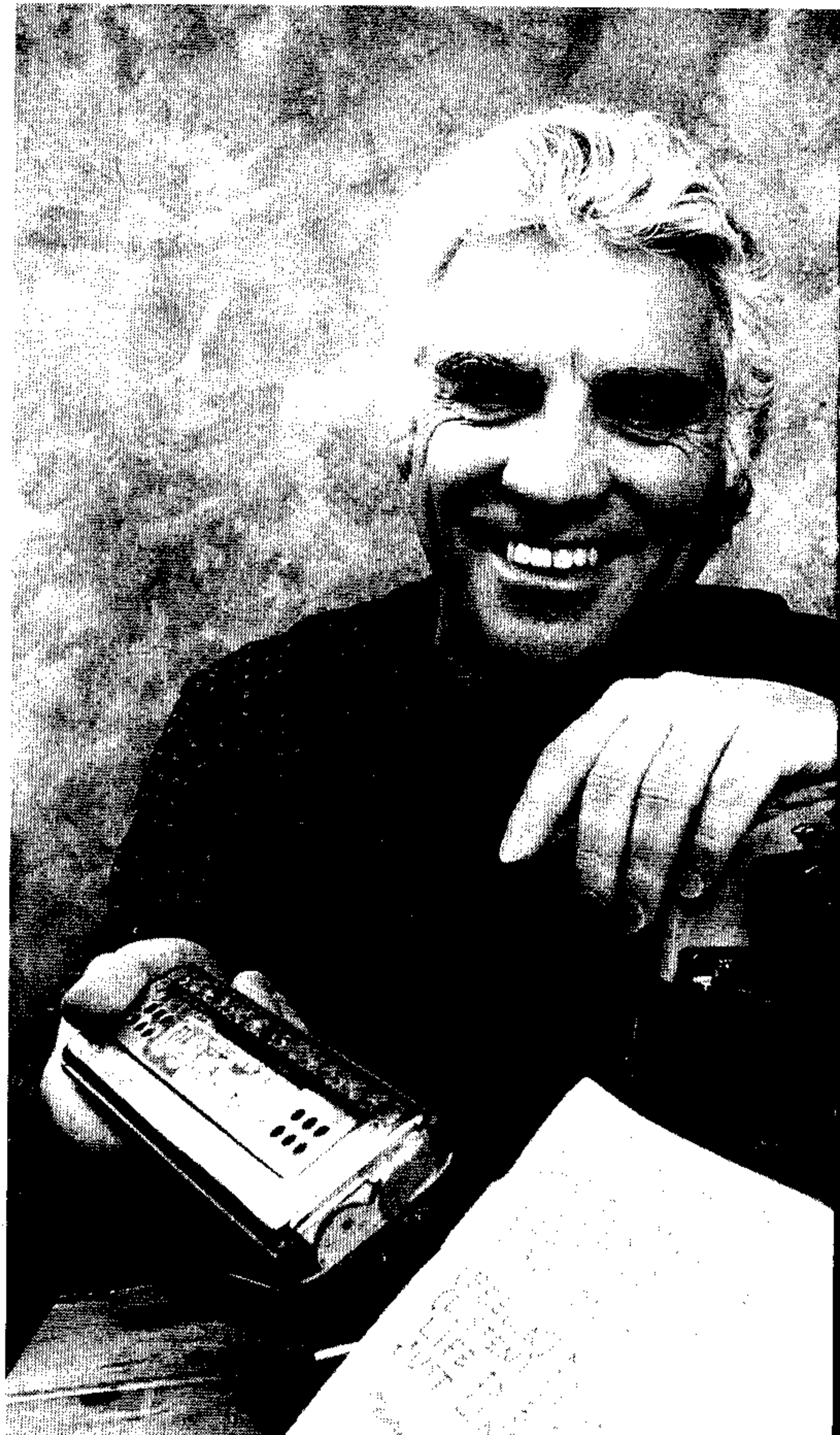
Initially, Charly and Anne weren't planning to make Kingston their home. "But it grew on us. There were family and friends here, and they were tremendously supportive. We met people. And for the first time in my life," Charly says, "I got involved in theatre."

Michael Catlin encouraged Charly to take a small part in *Whose Life Is It, Anyway?* "The play went on to win the Eastern Ontario Drama Festival Award," Charly recalls. "My second time around I had a harmonica-playing part in *Journey's End*. Both plays were directed by Stuart Payne."

His third — and most significant — role, he almost walked away from. "*American Buffalo*," Charly says, "by David Mamet. Sarah Stanley, who's currently artistic director at the Buddies in Bad Times theatre company in Toronto, auditioned me for the character of Teach. I was the worst person she'd ever auditioned. Three nights before opening night I said, 'I can't do it.'"

"Sarah said, 'Tomorrow, come to the set. You and I will put a bottle of wine on the table. We'll talk.' She was a wizard — she got that performance out of me. And people still remember it, they come up to me and talk about it."

Slightly more than two years after Selina's birth, Charly and Anne's son Liam was born. As Charly's family grew, so did his extended family. "Marjan Mozetich, a renowned composer of classical music, moved here. I've known him since I was five years old — we were altar boys



[College] was just down the street — it was the heyday of insanity and it was wonderful!

"I was so outrageous that people would ask me, 'Are you a patient?' and I'd tell them, 'Not yet!'"

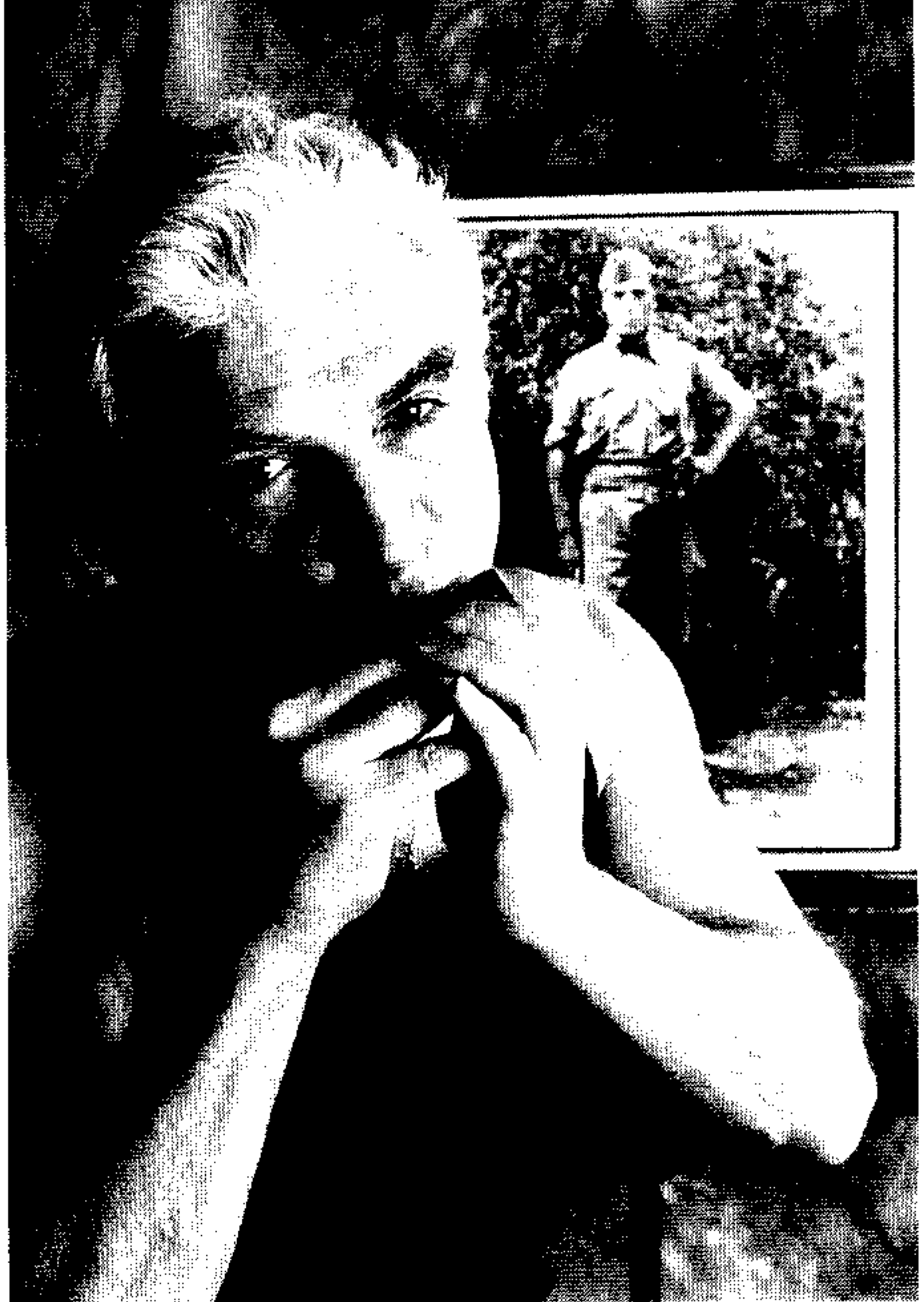
At the Clarke, Charly met Anne Lynch, who was working as a psychiatric nurse. After working there for three years, they both decided to quit and to go to St. Lucia. "We lived an idyllic life. I climbed coconut trees, we swam for an hour and a half every day. I played with a local reggae band, Rebirth 7, and wrote a song for them, Root Vibes, which they recorded on an album."

After seven months, Charly and Anne returned to Toronto. Charly got a job as a rehabilitation counselor with the Workmen's Compensation Board. "I worked with people who had sustained a head or spinal cord injury, and as a result they had serious neurological problems. Personality changes, attention problems. It meant helping them realign, helping them adjust so they could fit in again and get a job." While he was working days at Workmen's Compensation, Charly was carving out another life for himself at night, frequenting clubs, and accompanying folk singers on his harmonica.

One night a complete stranger approached Charly and asked him what he was doing. "Accompanying musicians," I told him. Then he said, 'You can accompany me.' That was how I met one of Canada's foremost storytellers, Dan Yashinsky."

Working with Dan was Charly's introduction to the Toronto storytelling community. On February 28, 1978, the Toronto Storytelling Festival premiered at St. Paul's Centre, and Charly was part of it. Recognized as one of the founders of the festival, Charly brought his narrative gifts to *Cloud 9*, which aired on CBC radio. In 1979 he and Anne married, and in 1980, although he was happy in the storytelling milieu ("It's a beautiful community," Charly emphasizes) he and Anne decided to move to Europe, where they planned to live for five years.

On their arrival, Charly made a surprising discovery. "I didn't speak Italian. Not modern Italian. I spoke Sicilian, which is a different language. And there had been a dramatic



Italianization of Sicily between 1949, when my parents left, and 1980, when Anne and I arrived. I was speaking an archaic language.

"So I had to go to university in Italy to learn Italian. I studied at the University of Perugia, and worked at Club Med in Sicily for eight months. Then parenthood called us home."

Anne was pregnant. Rather than stay in Italy, she wanted to return to Canada, where family and friends would provide a sustaining network, to have the baby. Back in Toronto, Charly found another job at the Workmen's Compensation Board.

But he and Anne found that Toronto was changing. "We were living in Scarborough, we had a new baby, and we weren't doing Toronto things — I wasn't going to the Kensington

