

Wailin' on a harp and telling tales — Charly takes us home

Blue, white or no collar, we need our roots

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When he was growing up in the '50s in blue-collar Hamilton, Calogero Chiarelli and his pals figured it wasn't cool to be first-generation Italian-Canadians. "The Fonz didn't exist yet," he laughs. "We all wanted to be Wally Cleaver."

The warm, lively, loving Italian families we'd all love to have didn't signify in that era of the melting pot. "We considered our parents aliens ... and now we're trying to find all that again."

When young Calogero came home from school reporting "Ma, Pa, my teacher is calling me Charly," his folks replied firmly, "then you're Charly." Instant re-baptism, Canuck-style — and that's the name that stuck.

"They were Sicilians; they wanted to fit in. They didn't want to rock the boat."

In the unique one-man show about cultural identity, transplantation and schisms that arrives tonight at the Santa Maria Goretti Centre in an Italian-peppered swirl of English, to launch Edmonton's May Week festivities — leading up to May 1, the day officially dedicated to the world's working people — Chiarelli tells his own story.

Cu'Fu? is all about growing up Italian and working-class in Canada. And since the man is a premium blues and chromatic harmonica player in addition to his storyteller's gift of the gab, there's music, too — 12 songs in all.

He calls the show *Cu'Fu?*, an elusive, quintessentially Sicilian throw-away line that doesn't have an equivalent even in Italian, as Chiarelli explains. "It's so laconic, Sicilians spit it out," he says, translating it roughly as "who did it?"

Preview

Cu'Fu

Theatre: Santa Maria Goretti Centre, 11050 90th St.

Starring: Charly Chiarelli

When: tonight and Saturday. Pasta dinner at 6 p.m., performance at 8

Tickets: 474-4747

And it's right at the heart of a culture "renowned for vendettas, right?, and going both ways, for bestowing effusive love on those who show it."

Cu'Fu? is aired on occasions where a Sicilian wants to know *who* has discretion in this matter.

Everything boils down to *somebody*. "Who's the human being responsible? Who gets the credit? Who gets the debit?"

The nebulous, all-encompassing "they" blamed and credited by the anglo vernacular doesn't signify here. If he gets a parking ticket, "a Sicilian wants to know *who*, exactly, is the individual person who had discretion in the matter."

And, says Chiarelli, "it expands to the larger philosophical question of "who put us here, and why?"

Onstage, he populates the north end Hamilton neighbourhood where the Chiarellis arrived — along with 10,000 fellow Sicilians from the same town of Racalmuto — when Charly was a year old.

"No wonder my parents never learned any English."

He conjures his mom and dad, his brothers, their friends and neighbours, doctors, shopkeepers, the nosy Anglo "welfare lady" whose arrival is a family humiliation.

Chiarelli knew he'd scored big-time

when a delighted 80-year-old Sicilian came up to him after a Hamilton performance. In their native tongue she told him "I don't remember you. Who are you?"

"Then you did your mother, and I thought, hey, I *know* that woman."

His brothers were pickier. "Joe told me 'hey, I didn't say that, Sam said that!' Hey, haven't you guys heard of poetic licence?"

A social work, psychology and linguistics grad, Chiarelli has put his policy analyst job at the Ontario ministry of health on hold for a year as he tours *Cu'Fu?*, now a bona fide hit in the East.

Call him the Sicilian Spalding Gray, perhaps, or the Hamilton Mark Twain. He's played an amazingly diverse array of theatres, storyteller or music festivals, exhibitions, psychologists' conventions, and labour halls.

"I haven't done a parking lot. Yet. Or a square in Sicily," but he's slated for a five-week run at Toronto's Limelight Dinner Theatre starting in May.

Voluble, casual, droll, he explains that he taught himself the harmonica at 12, and became a storyteller by chance 20 years ago in Toronto.

"I was a stoned hippie in the Kensington Market, hanging around gaffers and accompanying bad folk singers."

On an inspiration, the manager

turned the cafe into a weekly storyteller's venue, 1001 Friday Nights Storytelling, and "from that grew two-week Toronto festival," one of the biggest in the world, of which Chiarelli says he was "more of a reluctant found-in than a founder."

And he graduated from there, providing the musical accompaniment to telling stories of his own.

The enthusiasm of his unusual audiences — union workers, social activists, veteran theatre-goers, an immigrants of every stripe (and, this country, who isn't?) — persuaded him "hey, I'm on to something."

"I do feel like Adam in Paradise."