



Chuck Suchy at home on the Suchy farm, 1997. Photo by Tom Isern.

BLUE FLAME DANCE: AN INTERVIEW WITH CHUCK SUCHY

Edited by Thomas D. Isern

Introduction

A Chuck Suchy concert is a remarkable event. The singing farmer from Mandan, with his droll anecdotes, expressive voice, adroit guitar style, and crowd-pleasing accordion, has a devoted constituency across North Dakota. However engaging his performance presence, Suchy's abiding appeal lies in the substance of his original lyrics. These combine striking realism in matters of the physical senses with emotional release in matters of the heart. They are physically and sentimentally evocative of place, a home on the northern plains. Songs such as "Summer Hands," "Estelline," "West Dakota Wind," and "Saturday Night at the Hall" engage a Dakota audience in ways that go beyond the merely literary. When Suchy slows the tempo of "Saturday Night" and sings about going down to the basement for kolaches and buns, people weep.

Without doubt Suchy, through the medium of his songs, is North Dakota's most popular poet, but his literary contribution thus far has received no critical attention. No mere transmitter of folk material, Suchy reflects on farming and family on the plains, keeps a journal, cultivates his craft, and has begun to think about his place in regional expression. This interview is not the place where a literary assessment of Chuck Suchy will take place, but by setting down the grounding, context, and values from which he works, it lays foundation for such assessments when they come.

The editor interviewed Suchy twice—first, in KDSU Radio studios,

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Fargo, on 24 January 1996, for taped broadcast on KDSU, and then again at the Suchy farm on 10 March 1997 (following release of *Same Road Home*). Both tapes have been transcribed and deposited in the collections of the Institute for Regional Studies, North Dakota State University. The manuscript here published is a composite constructed from the two interviews.

Tom: You're not only a folk performer, not only a composer, but also a working farmer. Could you talk a little bit about the family farm?

Chuck: The farm that we operate is 1000 acres, and we rent some additional pasture land, but basically it had its beginnings with my grandfather and grandmother on my father's side who came here from Pilsen, Czechoslovakia. The farm is basically a grain-cattle operation, cow-calf. We have 75 head, and there were 400-pushing-500 acres of cropland at one time. Many years ago Linda and I decided it was more appropriate that most of that land be put to grass, and so consequently our wheat base is way down and we just farm the level best, and then we put up a lot of a hay. We did raise some hogs at one time. With the music career taking on a life of its own, the farm has changed somewhat. We have learned to manage it better so that I can be gone. Actually, it has made the farm a better place unto its own. It has made me become a better manager of the land and the resources there.

Tom: You may say the music career "takes on a life of its own," but it surely feeds on the life of the farm a great deal. That barn, for instance, in the song "Dreams"—the one where the fellow starts to tear it down and then stops. Isn't it on your place?

Chuck: Yes, all the buildings on the farm where we live, outside of the home that Linda and I have built, were built by my Mom and Dad with the help of uncles, with hand tools. And the barn of which the song speaks is still on the place. It's a concrete block building. The concrete blocks were made on the site. The concrete was hand mixed and then poured into these molds that made about a dozen blocks at a time. The top half is all cottonwood that was sawn on my Grandpa's sawmill in the Missouri River bottoms nearby. The whole point of it is that there is more than just a building there: there is blood, sweat, heart and soul

involved in these buildings, and so when you start messing with that, it's not done lightly. That's where the song came from. I was working on the building and I knew my Dad had second thoughts about some of the changes I was making. I really wasn't thinking about tearing it down, but I was messing with his work and his heart, and in the process, I found some words going through my head. I was taking apart a barn built by heart and hand of a man I had not known, that man being the young man of my father.

Tom: You have some sense of preservation, and of restoration, if you are reseeded ground to grass. That is not just an agronomic proposition, there is something more, too. Are you peculiar?

Chuck: I don't think I am all that peculiar. I may be in that I talk openly, and in that I do have an opportunity for off-farm income, so it gives me some license to do some of those things beyond what I would be doing were I just relying on the farm for income. The neighborhood is pretty much in tune with heritage. There are those that seem to be emerging—some of the larger, more aggressive operators—who don't seem to think such things might be important.

Tom: We better say where we are talking about here.

Chuck: This is south of Mandan about eight miles. I don't mean to sound negative about it, it is just what is, that is the personality type; nonetheless, there is still a strong sense of community.

Tom: Let's stay with family for a minute, because I am thinking about another one of your songs called "Summer Hands." When I first heard that song, it brought certain images to me that had to do with family. Tell me, whose hands are you writing about in that song "Summer Hands"—those hands hard and scarred from work?

Chuck: The song "Summer Hands" had its beginnings with my own hands in that my job throughout my teens was to haul the square bales. Dad and Mom would cut, rake, and bale the hay, and I would be responsible for getting them hauled, whether that was by myself or with help of friends or nieces or nephews. In throwing square bales by hand, after about the fourth day, you realize that your hands are taking a beating, and as the summer wears on they toughen up a bit. After we were married, Linda and I hauled bales together and we would sort of

laughingly talk about our “summer hands” in that they were full of barbwire cuts, hay needles, and calluses from the twine and aches and pains at night. Also, I thought about a sight that had come to me when I was going to do a short program for the residents of Elm Crest Manor in New Salem, which is a retirement or care facility. A very fine one, by the way. As I walked up to the building, it was a sunny afternoon in the fall, and there was a long line of the residents out sitting in the sun on the patio on the south side. As I looked down the line it was just one of those visions that you wish you could hold in a painting or a photograph, and in my case hold in a song: it was all these gnarled, well-used hands, some folded on top of their canes as they leaned forward, and others just cupped over the arms of the wheelchairs, others just folded in their laps. It was something that touched me very much and I wanted to keep it in a song. As the song developed, I thought a lot about my father’s hands, because they were just about as tough-looking hands as you could possibly find—battle-scarred and deep crevices filled with grime and grease that I think never would get cleaned out of there. I remember one time he was playing with a flap of skin or trying to get it sealed down after he had slipped with a wrench, and he said, “Geez, you know, you’d think these hands would be as tough as mule leather by now”—and they looked like they should be but they weren’t, they were still very soft and gentle. So I tried to get that in the song. Another little interesting facet was I used to do a lot of performing at the lounge of the Townhouse Motel in Bismarek, which was the political hangout at the time. It always just amazed me that all of the politicians in North Dakota hung on very dearly to their farming background or always claimed, at least, to be farmers. But in shaking their hands, their hands told a different story. Now, of course, with mechanization there is probably very little difference, but at that time hands told a great deal.

Tom: Maybe you want to talk a little bit more about your folks, mother and father.

Chuck: My father’s passed away five years now. Mom is on the farm with us, she has her own home, she is 85 years old and doing quite well. They were probably your typical stay-on-the-farm people from the time, pretty self-reliant. A lot of do-it-yourself attitude. Very fiscally

conservative. A lot of gardening. A lot of hope and industry in their lives.

Tom: How did you meet your wife, Linda?

Chuck: Linda and I knew of each other probably since second grade. We were both going to country schools, and the country schools had little conventions every once in a while at the county seat, and also through 4-H we knew of each other. Through high school we were friends, and sort of lost touch with one another through college; she went to a different school and did some traveling. Then we re-met after we both returned to the area after graduating from college.

Tom: Speaking of college, don't I recollect that you attended NDSU, majoring in . . . ?

Chuck: Well, I started in agricultural engineering, and then certain realities came to light in the form of differential equations, and so then I switched majors to mechanized agriculture. Most of my credits transferred quite easily, and it was a more general curriculum and much more interesting to me. And so I finished up in that.

Tom: I already know that you have three kids, Andra, 19, Ben, 17, and Eve, 8. Some musicianship among them, too, I understand.

Chuck: Right, they are all involved in music, Andra is trying to get her blues band off the ground and sings very well. She was looking into an academic course in music performance but has decided to go this route for the time being. Give it a try.

Tom: What's that band that Ben has?

Chuck: Well, Ben's band is more of, well, every time I try to categorize it--

Tom: You're wincing here now.

Chuck: It's just that I don't quite know where to come down on it, because if I say "grunge" to him, he just looks at me like, "Oh brother." I will just say "alternative" for the time being. But they both do original music, which we are really thrilled about. The thing I like about the music that they are writing is that it is hopeful music, and it is nice to hear young people putting out hopeful lyrics rather than just angst.

Tom: But the question everybody wants to hear the answer to is, "Is

there an accordion player coming up in the family?"

Chuck: Funny you should ask. I started giving Eve, our eight-year-old, accordion lessons this past winter. She is really liking it and it is a joy for us. I wish my Dad was around to see this and hear her play.

Tom: You mentioned you and Linda both went to country schools. You want to say anything about that?

Chuck: I spent eight years at Little Heart #2 of District 4. It was not necessarily the quaint, pastoral experience that a lot of people might want to associate with going to a country school. Certainly a large part of it is thought of warmly, but the country school experience could also be rather brutal in that if there were problems, mainly socially—what I am trying to say is there were bullies in the school—it could be a pretty lonely place, and even though it was plunked down in the middle of wide open prairie, there was not much room for escape. But for the most part, I am very grateful that I had that experience. I guess my warmest memories are of things like the Christmas program every year, and the playground out in the middle of the prairie, the dilapidated horse barn. I don't have real fond memories of the outhouses, but they were part of it as well.

Tom: Surely you were relieved of that at least when you headed for high school, where was that?

Chuck: That was at Mandan. I still recall the first walk on the first day of school up into Mandan Junior High—this was the 9th grade, so I went one year to the junior high. That was a pretty long walk up those steps with all those strange, sophisticated town kids there, you know.

Tom: Oh yeah, Mandan's notorious for that.

Chuck: And being a farm kid, it was pretty intimidating. It was definitely a rite of transition.

Tom: Did you learn anything about writing in school?

Chuck: Oh, very much. I learned probably most from my 9th grade English teacher in junior high. I guess what I learned most that it was O.K. That it was not out of the ordinary and that it was something that I could do and perhaps even did well. It was O.K. to be good at this.

Tom: It's also O.K. to tell her name.

Chuck: Oh, Vivian Hinkemeyer. I've lost touch with her, I have no

idea where she is or if she is still alive, I hope she is. Yes, and also Miss Larson, in either 9th or 10th grade. Equally supportive in the writing craft and writing art.

Tom: Everybody knows you write songs today, but I've seen you pack around something like a journal or ledger or commonplace book. Talk a little bit about writing habits.

Chuck: My writing habits would probably be described as quite sloppy by most. Linda's learned to check the pockets of my coveralls and pants for receipts and to look at the back of them, because on the blank side is probably where a little line or song idea or story idea might be written. Also, and this might sound too quaint to be believed: at times I have scratched things down or written on the fenders of tractors, and before we traded in one of our swathers I had to carefully go out and copy down everything I had written down on the hood of the control panel. I finally realized there are these things going around in your head, and I started carrying around a pad and paper. But I still end up scratching things down here and there at times. There you go. I don't get up every morning and write regularly.

Tom: When do ideas come, in what situations do you start to put down an idea for a song?

Chuck: The most exciting songs are the ones that come almost without my knowing it, without my being aware of it, subconsciously. When I am doing something else, riding the tractor, the swather, driving truck, out fixing fence, all of a sudden I find there is a melody going through my head, or I'm humming something, or I'm repeating some words over and over again in my mind. It's a very pleasant experience. It is kind of tricky to stay in that mode and be aware of it at the same time, and the more conscious I become of what's happening, the more it starts going away. I try to maintain the state and remember or write down a few key things that will give me something tangible to hang on to and be able to recall it at a later time. What I just spoke of, those are the very, very special times. There are other times when I adapt, when I consciously struggle to put words to an idea and to present an idea in song and to find a melody. That's the work of it, and I think even through the work of it there is probably inspiration coming through, but it is just not

that magical kind that we like to think about.

Tom: As a song writer, and as a performer, is there anyone whom you have particularly admired or emulated?

Chuck: I started playing the guitar when I was a senior in high school, and it was the late sixties folk era. So there was the Bob Dylan, Gordon Lightfoot; the lyrics of the songs were as important as the music. Later on there was a fellow in particular who lived in Canada and he was brought to my attention rather late--this is when I decided that I could write about where I live and what I do. In the mid-1970s I became aware of the work of Stan Rogers. A friend had given me a pirated tape of his, mostly sea songs, maritime stuff, and then all of sudden this song came on about a guy out on a plow in Saskatchewan wheat fields, and the song was called, "Field Behind the Plow." It was just like this hand reached right through my chest and squeezed my heart, and all of a sudden I realized, it's here and it can be written about.

Tom: I want to go to another one of your songs now because it is natural at this point. It's the song, "Dakota Breezes." This is a tractor song, a plowing song, and what strikes me is it's full of the stuff of the senses. I don't think there is specific mention of smell, but I smell stuff in this song. There are seagulls, you know how seagulls come down for grubs, and a hawk, there is the blue flame off the exhaust, and of course, the Dakota breeze itself. What I'm getting around to here is being a farmer and plowing and having some relationship with nature, which has to be kind of a hot and cold relationship. Even in that song you have a "west Dakota breeze at your back" but a "blue flame at the exhaust stack."

Chuck: Yeah. What I tried to do with "Dakota Breezes," we had real old equipment, so when we started plowing with my Dad, we had a couple of 1929 McCormick-Deering 22/36's. Dad had converted them so they were no longer on steel, at least they were on rubber tires. Dad was pretty conservative, and if something worked and he could keep repairing it, it just stayed that way. There was no real expansion in his being. Those old tractors, it was almost a point of embarrassment, but now I look back with a grateful heart and realize that it was an integral experience being out there in the elements, being part of the organic

process. Blue flame . . .

Tom: I guess petroleum is a fossil fuel.

Chuck: Yeah, right, so you know, just being the organism involved in the stirring of the soil. So in writing I tried to stay out there and get that into the song so that those who have not had that experience could be there.

Tom: You used the word “organic” just a minute ago. A lot of people would take a look at a song that’s about plowing and tractors and implements and say, Well, you know, that can’t be a part of nature. Those two are in conflict. But here you come around to the end of that song, and in the final stanza you’re writing about dying and being buried there yourself. That’s an organic proposition, too, I mean, are you plowing yourself under there?

Chuck: I just see it as a way of saying that it’s a good place to be and not necessarily a place to escape. Even today I use that song and that experience whenever I get into a situation I feel I don’t deserve to be in—gee, you don’t deserve this bright light, or to be on this stage, or singing at a convention in a big city. I lean on that experience of being on the 22/36 and plowing, it puts things in perspective for me. Without any sense of arrogance, I think that most people would want that experience in their background. It gives me some real firm footing. And likewise, if I get thinking too much of myself—hey, I’m pretty hot stuff here you know, I’m on stage singing—I think of that experience, too, and I think you’re just a guy out there on the tractor.

Tom: Speaking of songs that have a lot of the senses in them, another one that is full of sights and sounds and even tastes is “Saturday Night at the Hall.” I have seen people crying because of that song. Talk a little bit about the place, the hall, and the situation you’re trying to capture in that song.

Chuck: The Bohemian Hall was a brotherhood lodge, an association founded by the Bohemian community members in our neighborhood. The hall is about one mile as the crow flies from our place and a big part of the community, especially in the time when I was growing up and the generations previous to mine, the place where weddings were celebrated, anniversaries, birthdays, or maybe just a neighborhood dance. There were

also picnics and baseball or softball games. But most of that had died off by the time I showed up on the scene. In my time it was basically a place to have a dance. The center of the dance was the orchestra, the center of the orchestra was nine times out of ten the accordion, and in writing the song I can still recall my thought process. I started thinking about those dances, and the thing coming through was the sound of the accordion. I remember it bringing shivers of excitement when we would drive up to the hall. If the air was that balmy cool kind of air, the sound could carry quite far, we could hear it from our yard. It was obvious to me that would be the center of the song, the sound of the accordion.

Tom: Are you dealing with ghosts or are these dances still going on?

Chuck: To a large degree I'm dealing with ghosts. The hall is still there, the floor is still ready, but the community seems to be too busy to dance with one another. Yet if you go around the neighborhood and just mention the hall it will spring volumes of exuberant story telling and all kinds of excitement, and so why we don't do this or why it is not part of the community I really don't know. But I do think our community is poorer for not having the dances. A few springs ago I was having just a hellava time with calving and getting crops planted, and when you are just within your own boundaries, you start thinking you are the only one, and I start thinking it is my own fault, that I'm doing something wrong here. But see if you go to the wedding dance or talk with your neighbors, that eases the pain to find out you're not alone in the struggle. So I think that in addition to dancing together and having a good time, it was a chance for the community to touch one another physically, emotionally, and supportively and find out that there is more than just self.

Tom: How were the songs passed along? I'll bet most of them were passed along one to another.

Chuck: Very much. One of the key musicians in the neighborhood, I had invited him over for a surprise birthday party for Linda just a few weeks ago. He is an accordion player and has fond memories of the hall, and so Eve was really excited to play her new accordion tunes for Billy. Billy brought his accordion over and we just had a great time, invited a few other neighbors over, and I realized that Billy was playing these old, old tunes. He said, "Here's one that your Dad just loved," and "Here's

one that such and such down the road just whooped it up when the band played this song at the hall.” And so the music was really a passed-on tradition. Also a thing that excited me about the danees at the hall was that it was a family expericnce, the young people, we got to see our parents in a social setting, see how they behaved or misbehaved or the consequences. We realized we were a part of that community, too, and so we would conduct ourselves according to those community guidelines, and realized we were not invisible or isolated unto ourselves, that someone was watching.

Tom: You’ve talked about realizing you were not isolated, but two minutes before you were talking about how often you as an individual now do feel isolated at work. Then think about the music, on the one hand it was community music, but as you describe your own music now, how works come to be in your mind, it is a much more individual proposition. It doesn’t come passed along in a folk tradition, it is much more a poetic invention.

Chuck: Maybe that’s where I’ve had a bit of a struggle in letting my personal music come into some degree of prominence. Because it wasn’t just an accordion player who played the “Blue Skirt Waltz,” there was a little more behind it, and it just kept knocking on the door until the door finally opened. So yeah, I am talking about two different things here, but nonetheless they are both realities. One other point I want to make about the dance at the hall is that the music was live, and young people in particular could see fingers pressed on the keys, the bellows being pumped, the drum being hit, the sweat dripping off the drummer’s forehead, and the underarms of the white shirts getting sopped with sweat as the night wore on. We used to see who could sit longest in front of the base drum. That is why I love to do live performance. I love to pull out the accordion and see these little eyes pop open wide, and they get a chance to see it and feel it and hear it.

Tom: You were named the Centennial Troubadour of North Dakota in 1989. Could you talk a little about how that came to be? And how does this career as a singer take off?

Chuck: The Centennial Troubadour thing, I did not take that lightly. That was very much an honor and I hope I served that out properly. What

a lot of people might not realize was that prior to that I had done a lot of singing. I had put in a lot of miles. This was my family as well, the kids were singing with us, and Linda by the way has a gorgeous voice—the summer prior to the Centennial year there were two weekend days that we were home, and the summer prior to that was almost equally as busy. So it wasn't just the appointment as Centennial Troubadour that spring-boarded me into something beyond, it was a growth process. That designation did get me into other places and allow my music to be heard by people who probably would not have heard it.

Tom: Was there this other fellow named Chuck Suehy whose name might have appeared, “now appearing in the lounge”?

Chuck: Sure, I did lounges, like the Townhouse Lounge, some other Bismarck lounges, for twenty-some years working six nights a week. My longest stretch was nineteen weeks of six-nighters. Gradually an audience developed, and there was a subliminal seduction on my part, I did sneak some of my own compositions as that started developing, and gradually it was a pretty nice experience in the lounges, because during the week it was a business-political atmosphere, and on the weekends my audience starting showing up, and it was concert time.

Tom: You've got a song “Home for the Harvest” about somebody who's left the farm and slips back at the appropriate time. Is there a time when you will be home just for the harvest?

Chuck: I just can't see leaving the farm and touring full-time. The longest it seems I can be away is about four or five days, and then the recovery time upon returning seems to be getting longer as I get older. More importantly I think the music needs me to be on the farm and in touch with where I really come from.

Tom: In touch with what? We've talked a little bit about matters religious and spiritual before that are not necessarily matters of organized religion.

Chuck: I frankly believe there is life beyond this world and there is a God and that part of the music is a gift given. I don't take credit for my own creation or being what I hope I am supposed to be. So the writing process and the singing process is deeply entrenched in a spiritual connection, and I often find myself asking God or whoever is that source,

“What’s next?”, or is there something next, is the phone going to ring. Or sometimes it is, “PLEASE let the phone ring.”

Tom: There were about seven years time between your last recording and *Same Road Home*. Why that gap of years?

Chuck: Procrastination is a pretty big part of my life, and some of the songs hadn't quite ripened.

Tom: What do you see as the differences between what you have recorded most recently and what you did earlier?

Chuck: I think a higher degree of self-confidence in the material and in the craft as well. I've learned a lot about music and the music business and writing in the meantime, too. So I feel this one has a lot more maturity to it than the others. I call those others manifestations of grace, but this one I worked at a little more. I still think there is grace involved in it, too.

Tom: One of the most haunting songs in the collection is “Estelline.” It is a simple melody that seems quite right, but the content of piece has to do with decline, or perhaps not even the formation of a community that might have been. Where did the song “Estelline” come from?

Chuck: I fell in love with the name on my first trip down I-29 though South Dakota. The ramp sign said “Estelline” and I just fell in love with it, I thought it was such a beautiful word. I carried that around for a long time thinking about it. Then I met somebody from Estelline, an older fellow, and he told me the story of how the town came to be. It was named after some judge's daughter, he told me how the judge thought this was the place, because he thought the railroad was coming. The railroad took a little swing. Right then I thought that was such a compelling story and it fit so well with the sound of the word. So I had this melody in formation, the song going along quite well, and then I met some other folks from Estelline who gave me a different story, but by then I was so far into it I decided to forge ahead. I did resolve it a little bit by saying that some people did stay and the town did come to be. Maybe it wasn't quite what they thought it was going to be, and so there was a longing for home. But I think that's something that prairie does to people, it stirs a sense of longing.

Tom: Now there's a fairly easy transition, because I'm going to ask

about the importance of place in what you write. This is inspired by the song "Heart River Hills." There have been references to place in past songs, but it always seemed it was for the purpose of drawing sensual things out of it. That's in "Heart River Hills," too, with a lot of things, including taste, in the song. But it also has a more powerful sense of place or commitment to place than any of the other songs do. How important is place to what you write?

Chuck: Oh, very important. This music, I try to keep it as pure as I can. I don't listen to a lot of other music. I sort of feel that the music comes up through the soil, up through my body, and this is the kind of sound that this organism might make when it's squeezed by the various pressures of living out here. There's also the idea in "Heart River Hills" of carrying that place with you or in giving it to somebody through the song, transporting them to the place. "Heart River Hills" is really written for Linda. It's about the place where she grew up, and it's so important to her. It's the idea of having this home within your heart that you can take with you wherever you go. Not everybody is that fortunate to have such a great place and such a great childhood of romping through the coulees and the rattlesnakes and poison ivy of the Heart River Hills and soaking that up and letting it become a part of themselves.

Tom: Nor is every song-writer fortunate enough that that place is named "the Heart."

Chuck: That was pretty lucky, wasn't it?

Tom: The strongest theme that comes out of the new collection of material has to do with family. There are several songs in which a family relationship is the focus. "Same Road Home" is the title song, and that's a song of a child leaving home. There is a love song in the collection, a song about a long and good marriage. There's a song that even goes back an extra generation, "Grandma's Gone." I count four generations in this particular album. What the heck is going on? Are you getting sensitive or something? There is a substantial shift in content going on here.

Chuck: I think it is part of getting to a certain point in life. I mean being a parent for one thing is a major undertaking. Linda and I learned a lot. Also, "Same Road Home," it's my way of giving a rite of passage to the child as well. I think we have taken away a lot of those rites of

passage. Kids think all of a sudden they are supposed to be grown up and they don't really know where they are in that transition stage, they think it just happens, and as adults we tend to take that away from them. And it is also written for myself. "Same Road Home" was when our first child went to the school bus for the first time. That is when I grounded on the idea that the road down to the school bus is the same quarter-mile, no matter how you measure it, but the way the enthusiastic child is bouncing along to the school bus is quite a different measurement from coming home a little less innocent and having experienced the world. One other thing I wanted to mention about the song, "Anger and Rage." That was another song about benchmarks for young people being ushered into adulthood--to let them know that we as adults who have successfully made it into that age had struggles as well. That was written at a pretty difficult time for our two oldest kids; there were I think five suicides in Mandan High in a year and one-half. Many of them pretty close friends of our children. The idea of young people feeling so hopeless they couldn't see any other way out is horrible to me. Now, going on to "The Likes of Me"--I'm glad you think it is a love song. A lot of people seemed confused on that, but it is a love song. That comes from the work of being committed to marriage. It takes a lot of effort and work, and it's worth it. At least it has been for Linda and me. Some fellow last week came up to me out of the blue and he said, "Thank you for writing 'Likes of Me.'" He said it was so reassuring for him to hear someone openly talk about marriage and the work of it and monogamy. "Grandma's Gone"--well, that's more or less a tribute, talking about the experience of going into my grandma's house with my uncle just a couple days before the auction sale for her house in town and shortly after she had died. Uncle Vince said he had to go up to the house to check on the heat or something, so we went up there, and it was the first time I had been in her home since she had died. The sounds of walking across the squeaky porch floor, the screen door opening, and him fumbling with the lock--all those familiar sounds and experiences were suddenly in a whole different context. We walked in, and the house was empty except for all her things. Rugs still on the floor, bags of rags waiting to be braided into rugs, quilt pieces--well, it's all in the song. So this is just my little

attempt at hanging on to some of it and documenting it. A tribute.

Editor's Epilogue

For audiences of farm folk on the plains, one of the most endearing stories in Chuck's recent performances has to do with a visit to the parts department of an implement dealer. He recounts a trip as a boy to the dealership for combine parts—a humiliating experience, because there in front of everyone, he has to admit that he is buying parts for a Massey-Harris No. 21A, a hopelessly out-of-date pile of steel. The parts man at the counter, however, rescues him from the depths of self-disparagement and thereby earns memorialization in the song, "Parts Man."

I'm a Parts Man,
Let your poor heart bleed.

It is possible to read too much into a couplet, but not into this one. On my most recent visit to the Suchy farm I found that Chuck, needing shed space for winter, had managed to start the old Massey and move it outdoors. He was planning next to shrink-wrap it against the elements.

He also was musing about the difficulty and apparent futility of dividing his time between two enterprises—farming and music—neither of which made much money. He and Linda were doing their best to put the farm on a less labor-intensive basis, cutting back some aspects and focusing others, so as to give music the time and attention it required if Chuck's musical career were ever to get to a lucrative level. At the same time, there was the worry that withdrawal from active farming would weaken the grounding of the music. It was a parts problem.

I'm a Parts Man--
May what you want be what you need.

Discography for Chuck Suchy

Much to Share. Flying Fish Records, 1986.

Dakota Breezes. Flying Fish Records, 1988.

Dancing Dakota. Independently produced, 1989.

(with Linda Suchy & family) *The Suchys in Harmony*. Independently produced, 1989.

Same Road Home. Little Blucstem Records, 1996.