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He sways, he rocks, he bops

But colorful sign language
artist rarely makes a sound

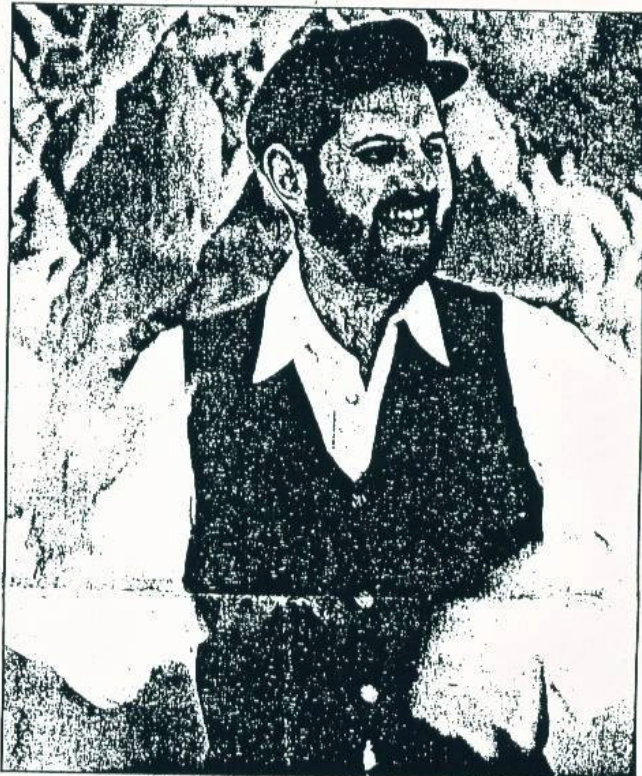
BY KIM CANNON
Times Record Staff

Barry Nickelsberg sings with his fingers. A seasoned stage performer, Nickelsberg uses every other part of his body to mime, dance and gesture so the meaning, the rhythm and the emotion of a song are conveyed to his attentive audience. He sways, he rocks, he bops to the beat, but he rarely makes a sound.

Nickelsberg is a sign language artist for the hearing impaired, a man who can bring both music and lyrics to those who otherwise could not enjoy a live musical performance. He has worked with musicians as diverse as Chuck Berry, Peter, Paul and Mary, Jan & Dean, Gary Lewis and the Playboys and Jonathan Edwards. He has interpreted folk music, blues, rock and roll, country, Big Band, blue grass, gospel and Irish music. He has even interpreted for hearing impaired opera goers in productions of "Sweeney Todd," "The Threepenny Opera" and "Jesus Christ Superstar."

Local concert goers — hearing impaired or not — can enjoy Nickelsberg's elegant art at the Chocolate Church Arts Center on Saturday, April 9, as he interprets for folk singer Fred Small. As one of only about a dozen interpreters who specialize in music and performing arts, Nickelsberg travels frequently to all corners of the country. Fortunately for the Maine audience, he moved his wife and young daughter to Aina last June after 17 years in Washington D.C. Nickelsberg hopes that once Maine concert organizers see how many hearing-impaired individuals attend interpreted performances, he will have plenty of work in his new backyard.

If you've ever tried to fumble through the various configurations of the sign language alphabet, struggling even to spell your name, consider this: Nickelsberg can interpret songs as he hears them for the first time, staying only seconds behind the performer. He also can sign rap, as in rap music, the street smart, rapid-fire spoken/sung genre which has become so popular in recent years. To do so requires that he make about eight signs a second. Can his audi-



TERRY TAYLOR / THE TIMES RECORD

BARRY NICKELSBURG sings with his fingers — his arms, his hands, his facial expression — as he mimes, dances and gestures to convey the rhythm, meaning and emotion of a song to the hearing impaired.

ence understand it? "If you can understand it listening, they can understand it watching it," he says.

Although at speeds this fast, the signs can seem like gibberish to a hearing audience, Nickelsberg has proof that the individual signs are all there. A film crew from a major TV network once taped a rap "session" and played it back in slow motion for sign language experts at Washington D.C.'s Gallaudet College, which was founded in 1817 as the first free school for

the hearing impaired. Nickelsberg passed with flying colors.

After 20 years, he's had plenty of practice. But he also has a natural affinity for this form of communication. "I don't really understand it," he says. "I just think this is what God wants me to do." On a lark, he picked up a book on sign language and memorized it in a day. He eventually attended an interpreter training program

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at Galluadet. The only "trick" of his trade is to have a dedicated audio speaker in front of him with a "full blast, pure vocal mix" so he can hear each of the performer's words. It doesn't matter if he has ever heard the song before, or if the tempo is very fast. The intense concentration required is understandably exhausting.

His first performance was interpreting for Pete Seger and Arlo Guthrie in 1981's Folk Life Festival. Since then he has appeared almost a thousand times.

There is a difference between signing and interpreting, Nickelsberg says. Signing gets the words across. A good interpreter makes the meaning clear. Dressed non-traditionally in colorful attire, he is as much a performer as is the headliner. (Interpreters usually wear all black clothing in order not to draw attention from the main act and so their gestures can better be seen.) In fact, he says, he has a following in the deaf community and is well known in cities like Washington, Philadelphia and New York. Despite his exuberance and natural flair, he is careful not to upstage the headliner. "They wouldn't stand for it," he says.

According to Nickelsberg, there are upwards of 22 million deaf people in the United States, many of whom don't know the joy of attending an interpreted concert. In a sort of catch-22 dilemma, concert organizers often don't provide interpreters because they don't sell a lot of tickets to the hearing impaired. But from experience, Nickelsberg says, "If you provide us, (music interpreters), they will come!"

Nickelsberg is the subject of the 1988 award-winning documentary, "When Sound Is Silent," produced by Ray and Judy Schmitt as well as their 1992 followup, "Sounds Like." His work has been featured in The Associated Press, The Washington Post, Mid-Atlantic Country, Canadian Television, ABC News and National Public Radio.