Mississippi River is artist's canvas

By TOM STRINI
Journal dance critic

IT WAS almost an idyll on the Mississippi River that July day. Billy Curmano, more than 1,500 miles into his swim of the entire river, placidly rode the current along the Missouri bank, 20 yards ahead of our tandem canoe rig. Great blue herons posed model-slim and still as plastic flamingos on trunks of trees downed in last summer's floods.

Just one barge rig had passed, so far out in the channel that we barely felt its wake. Cries of birds, breezy stirrings of willows, and the constant, muscular rush of current were the sounds of this quiet day.

At Scudder's Towhead, though, the river bends sharply south, narrows, deepens and accelerates. A long, pointed sandbar pinches the channel from the Missouri side. Dave Christenson, the chief of our crew of four, had noted earlier the bend on the US Army Corps of Engineers Navigation Chart. "We'll go around this like crack-the-whip," he predicted.

We did. The current seized Curmano and us with the intention of flinging us around the green channel buoy, into the towboat lanes and toward the Illinois bank. This would have been fine, except for the barge tows that happened to be roaring through the narrows in both directions at this worst possible time.

Curmano took a grab at the big steel buoy, which strained at its chain in the current. Missed. That's when he called out, loudly, calmly, in precise staccato: *"I-think-you-should-pick-me-up."*

Yes, but the current was spinning us as it swept us out, and we were struggling for control. As for the barges, we were no safer than our swimmer — these behemoths would crush us without a bump felt in the pilot house.

That channel buoy was another worry. It was easy to imagine nosing into it, crumpling the aluminum framework connecting the two canoes; the current pushing up the stern and sliding the bows down the chain and

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Journal photo by Tom Strini

PERFORMANCE ARTIST Billy Curmano (left) and his crew, Tom Christenson, Debra Drexler and Dave Christenson, rest at a takeout point during Curmano's swim.

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The Swim

Artist makes his point one stroke at a time

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into the brown soup; and the river dashing off with the four life jackets. (I promised my wife I'd wear mine at all times, but never put it on. It's hot down there).

I put my head down to choke and pull-start the ancient, five-horse Buccaneer outboard rigged on the frame between the canoes. For once, it started on the first try. When I looked up, Billy was clambering over the side of Dave's canoe, but the extra weight and the towboat wake caused his port-side boat to take water over the gunwales.

Dave jumped into my starboard canoe to lighten the port side. Curmano bailed water. Tom Christenson (Dave's 18-year-old son) and Debra Drexler (36, University of Hawaii art professor, Curmano's girlfriend), paddled gamely into the current from the bows.

I tried to use the motor to turn our stern into the wake. The motor is mounted between the canoes in open water; open the throttle fully and water rushes over the engine and shorts out the spark plug. At half-throttle, with Tom and Debra paddling, we couldn't move against the current.

But we could hold steady. Then the barges were gone and enough water was bailed for Dave to resume his station. We were OK. Curmano's attention snapped to his task: swimming every inch of the Mississippi.

He saw that we were still even with the channel buoy. Though tired from cutting across current to get to us, he swung over the side and into the river.

What some people won't do for art.

* * *

Art? Yes, Curmano, 45, considers this swim — begun in the summer of 1987 and scrupulously documented and maniacally pursued each summer since — performance art.

Is it? The question has been debated formally in art schools and informally in riverfront bars from northern Minnesota to Missouri's Bootheel.

Curmano, a Milwaukee native who now lives in Rushford, Minn., has an answer.

"The surrealists tried to paint their fantasies," he said, while immersed in his medium. "I'm living mine. I think of each swimming stroke as a brush stroke that temporarily changes the appearance of the landscape in an aesthetic way. Anyway, I'm a performance artist, so I can *deem* it art."

If some of this sounds like a sendup of art-school b.s., Curmano has the credentials. He's a University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee art school grad, in sculpture. As a student, he once submitted a large moss-covered rock with the words "Please Carve" cut into it. He's since shown, performed and lectured at museums and schools from the University of Hawaii to (this winter) the University of North Carolina.

Curmano's projects have made him a cult figure in Minnesota. In 1983, he was buried outside his Rushford studio in a ventilated coffin for 50 hours. He perpetrated a widespread hoax about space aliens. He has staged art "wrestling matches," in which artists challenged each other to produce art toe-to-toe in the ring (Curmano played a preening villain, heaping abuse on an elderly female enamelist as the crowd booed).

Most of what Curmano does and says is part joke and publicity stunt. He has a highly developed sense of mischief, and he loves attention. He has charmed river town mayors into proclaiming innumerable Billy Curmano Days, and he's done lots of TV and print interviews.

The jokes and PR, though, usually have barbed points. The Mississippi's role of industrial/agricultural sewer and tow-barge freeway of-

Anyone interested in crewing, financing, or otherwise assisting The Mississippi Swim should contact: Billy Curmano, Route 1 Box 116, Rushford, Minn 55971; (507) 864-2716.

fends Curmano; The Swim proposes a reconsideration. The message gets out in the publicity, in the ingenious, river-themed live shows he puts on during the winter, in the ever-changing "River Rap" (which he recites at the slightest provocation), and in the process of getting people onto the Mississippi.

"People in St. Louis are taught that the river is bad and ugly and dangerous," he said. "But we got crews out from St. Louis and they couldn't get over how beautiful it is. They'd canoe it again.

"I'm not one for conspiracy theories, but wouldn't it serve the interests of the barge companies and industry to make people afraid of it, so they wouldn't want to use it for recreation?"

* * *

Since Minnesota, Curmano has heard of terrors lurking downriver.

"Up north, it was Whirlpools That Can Suck Down a Whole Boat," he said. "Then I met river clammers, who talked about Giant Channel Catfish That Attack People. I'm sure that in Louisiana, it will be alligators."

In Missouri, it's snakes — everyone from Cape Girardeau and Charleston warned darkly of venomous water moccasins. Snakes make Curmano a little nervous, despite himself. He wears a piece of bear-root, a traditional American Indian snake repellent, around his neck.

"I figure it can't hurt," he said.

* * *

The Mississippi is beautiful, epic, ominous and even comic.

Just after we put in on the second day at Commerce, Mo. (population 173, founded 1790), a storm approached from the south. We saw it coming miles away — you can see for miles down a straight stretch of river, because of relative elevation.

As the rain neared, it turned from shadow to haze to lines to fat drops falling through windless air. Each drop raised a lily-shaped recoil of water, each liquid blossom crystalline above the smooth brown surface. The river bloomed around us in millions and billions of ephemeral water-flowers.

On one of our daily backwoods, backwater searches for good take-out points, we came across a 50-yard-wide, runway-straight path of dead trees bent parallel to the ground. We could not see either end of it. The river had tried to cut a new channel there during last summer's flood.

Wing dams — boulders piled in lines extending from the bank — are everywhere. The US Army Corps of Engineers builds them to focus current to scour the nine-foot-deep towboat channel. Behind these dams, the current reverses in whirlpools and spirals, which sometimes backwash Curmano upstream.

Submerged wing dams might have to do with an unsettling phenomenon. Now and then, a patch of quiet river maybe 40 feet in diameter suddenly heaves and bubbles noisily. Then the bubbling stops. We swam and paddled through several of these inexplicable boils without incident, but they always gave me the creeps.

Though dammed, diked and dumped in, the river teems with life. Late one afternoon, I looked up in time to see a fish as long as my arm leap and land smack on backstroking Billy's chest. That sort of thing happens almost daily, but it still scares the daylights out of him.

* * *

Logistics and expense have become increasingly daunting as Curmano has gone south. It now takes more than 12 hours to drive down from Minnesota in his rusty van. That costs money, and so do motels and restaurants. No big donors or grants are behind this project. The money comes from Curmano, from his friends, and from fund-raiser parties he throws in Minnesota.

His main problem is assembling support crews that can stay together for four or five days. It's difficult to organize crews along the route,

and his Minnesota friends are finding it harder and harder to travel so far.

Above Alton, Ill., marinas, parks and towns are common on the river. Below Alton, little but tree-tangled flood plains, boulder rip-rap, farm fields, dikes and barge facilities front the river. It's hard to find places to get in and out safely, and hard to find roads to get support vehicles close to the river.

Each morning, Dave Christenson, 48, a physician in family practice in Winona, Minn., drove miles and miles of two-lane blacktop, red gravel and brown dirt in search of take-out points. The searches took hours. If it weren't for them, we could have doubled the 16, 19 and 12 miles we made during my three-day stint.

Site selection and car shuttling frustrate Curmano, especially if they cause him to wait after he's smeared on the unpleasant cream that protects his skin from water-borne toxins. But at the end of a long first day on the river, over beer, blackened catfish and camaraderie at Broussard's in Cape Girardeau, he felt fine.

"Every winter, the swim scares me, and I'm always nervous the night before the first day back," he said. "But once I get in the water, I'm really happy.

"I'm almost embarrassed to say this, but back in '87, when I was considering all the projects I might do, I decided on this one partly because I like being on the river, I like camping and I like hanging out with my friends. I thought I'd make that my job for a while."

Hours before, soaking wet on a dike above a soybean field at Commerce, he'd said: "Sometimes, we hit our take-out point at 3 p.m. and think, 'That was easy. Should we go another 10 miles or should we just go somewhere and party?' Sometimes party wins out and that's OK. This isn't a race."

* * *

It's not a race. But is it art?

A quarry operation tops a Missouri bluff a few miles south of Cape Girardeau. As Billy swam by, he improvised a rhyming rap on hammering and cutting and grinding, in the hard-rock rhythms of quarrying. His audience of four paddled in amused silence as he concluded gracefully: "And now, the percussion bridge . . ."

Right on cue, the quarriers took it away, the sound of their work suddenly vivid and interesting. Then the grand finale: Some workers noticed us and started waving, and the truck drivers started blowing their horns. They'd probably seen Billy on TV.

Curmano is scrupulous to the point of obsession. He cannot eat or drink while in the river, but he craves hard candies. To supply him, we sidle up very close, and Tom or Debra pops a piece into his mouth. He treads water during these delicate maneuvers — grabbing the canoe for even a second would, in Billy's mind, be cheating.

Curmano jokes about his "water ballet," but The Swim is a kind of dance, complete with moods and phrases and variations. In one fast stretch of water, he somehow planted his feet on a channel buoy and played a jazzy conga solo on it. Then he pushed off and whirled away in the current, hooting and turning and playing on the surface, happy as an otter.

* * *

On July 13, the day of the Scudder's Towhead thrill, Curmano and crew emerged from the river under the I-57 bridge, near Cairo, Ill. A downpour had turned the nearby road to muck. It took us an hour to push Dave's car a mile to the gravel road. Dave then drove me to my car, parked at a too-optimistic take-out point a few miles south.

The beginning of the long drive home took me across the old bridge to US 51 in Illinois. Fort Defiance Park, a triangle of land at the confluence with the Ohio River, is at the eastern foot of the bridge. The blue Ohio and the brown Mississippi meet in a two-toned V eight-tenths of a mile downstream. The Corps of Engineers designates that meeting Mile 0, the beginning of the upper river.

Mile 0 was the end of the upper river for Billy Curmano; he passed it July 14. For him, it was Mile 1,586.

Just 966 miles to go.

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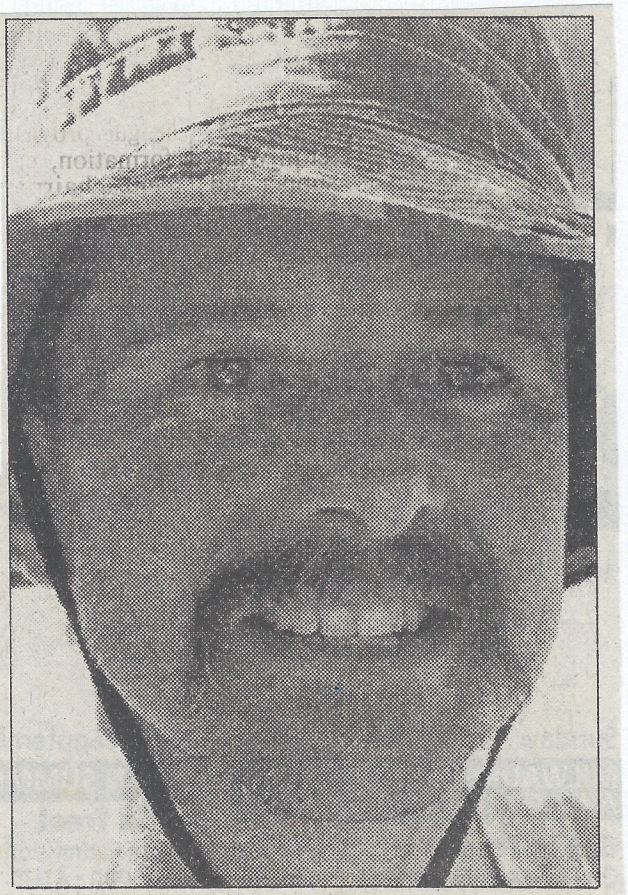

BILLY CURMANO: Milwaukee native, performance artist.

DAVE AND TOM Christenson prepare the boats for the next leg of Billy Curmano's swim downstream.