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SPECIAL SECTION: 1992 MARYLAND TRAVEL GUIDE

MID-ATLANTIC

LEISURE COUNTRY HOME GARDEN

INSPIRATIONS

Hand Jive

"I sing with my hands," says Barry Nickelsberg.

Come again?

"I use sign language as an art form," the animated Virginian explains, describing how he manually interprets musical performances for the deaf.

A buttoned-down Washington area fund-raiser by day, Nickelsberg leads a split life: "When I'm on stage, I become a whole different person . . . a dancer, fluid." Offstage, it's a different story: "I make Gerry Ford look like Baryshnikov."

Nickelsberg first learned sign language on a lark some 20 years ago. Then one day, while still a novice signer, he heard Aretha Franklin on the car radio — "R-E-S-P-E-C-T, don't know what it means to me" — and got inspired. "I thought, 'If I could just sign it as fast as she sings it.'"



Manual labor? Interpretive "singer" Barry Nickelsberg, of Alexandria, Va., doesn't think so.

Hundreds of rehearsals later, he could "sing along" with most of his favorite songs. But another seven years would pass before he would bring his act to the stage, appearing before

10,000 people at a D.C. folk concert with Arlo Guthrie and Pete Seeger. "I was so nervous I thought I'd die," Nickelsberg recalls.

Since then he has signed all kinds of music — even

rap. Deaf concertgoers flock to his shows, the only time many of them get to "hear" music. He is a show unto himself, boogying to the beat, his face and feet interpreting as much as his hands.

Nickelsberg's heavy schedule includes 80 shows a year and four hours of practice daily. He normally makes \$300 to \$1,000 per appearance, but performs for free at charity shows, like next month's Red Cross Waterfront Festival in Alexandria, Va.

A few musicians bristle at Nickelsberg's sometimes upstaging presence, but others "love having me on stage. There is an energy flow. They are inspired and I am inspired." Also inspired is documentary filmmaker Ray Schmitt. Look for Nickelsberg in Schmitt's "Music and the Deaf" on Maryland Public Television later this year.

—Maureen P. Wall