When Patrick Fiore came to Bloomington on a Fulbright fellowship in the summer of 1973, he thought he would stay a couple of years, hone his percussion skills in the School of Music, and return to Paris. Four decades later, he is still in Bloomington, having raised a family here and established a Bloomington institution.

Patrick’s route to Bloomington began in Burkina Faso. He was born in Bobo-Dioulasso, the industrial center of what was, at the time, the French colony of Upper Volta in West Africa. Life there allowed much freedom.

“Because of the tropical climate, school began and ended early. It was done by one o’clock and I would take my little bicycle from the center of town and go fishing every afternoon. I’d stop by the French Administrative Gardens and collect worms and then go to one of the reservoirs the colonial government had set up.”

He’d take the fish to his father who would cook it for dinner.

“One day I went to a pet store in this country, looked at the tropical fish tank, and commented to the owner, ‘I used to eat this fish, and that one.’”

Life in Bobo-Dioulasso had some of the usual colonial tensions. The French exploited the resources of the area, but they also built the infrastructure.

“There was not the opprobrium as in other parts of Africa. We children did notice some slurs, but we were well received by the local population. They showed us stuff they wouldn’t show our parents, and they would take us into their homes.”

When a career in music did not appear promising, Patrick Fiore and Marina Ballor-Fiore found a future on the wrong side of the tracks next to an auto body shop.
The good life ended at age 13 when Patrick was sent to a boarding school near Paris.

“All of a sudden, I was in prison. We slept in a dormitory with 40 beds. My first night there, the resident assistant summoned us to stand at the end of our beds. I turned and said something to my neighbor and the RA comes up and slaps me twice in the face. The whole atmosphere was like a juvenile delinquent camp. I can’t quite blame them. If they had let everything go, it would have been a mess. All boys. No girls to pacify us.”

Although a good student, Patrick didn’t handle the antagonistic discipline well.

“If the resident assistant rubbed me the wrong way, I would go head on.”

He left that school, did much better at a different local school, and finished in the top 10 percent on the national competitive exam that earned him a place at HEC Paris, the top business school in Europe.

While there, he and fellow students formed a rock band. The group called themselves “Dr. Feelgood” and played numerous gigs, including opening for top bands at the time. Patrick played the drums. Although he was working towards a degree in business, when he saw the opportunity to get a fellowship to study music in the U.S., he jumped at it. He was accepted at several U.S. universities, but held out for the one at the top of the list that Fulbright provided.

“Indiana was very slow. I had to ask the American consulate to intervene.”

His initial objective at IU was to work towards a master’s degree in percussion. He had not realized, however, the years of prior training that IU expected, and his schools in France had provided little professional training in that regard. One of the attractions of IU was that George Gaber, head of the percussion department at that time, had been more open in his audition requirements.
“While he was willing to let me play a little bossa nova, other schools wanted a concerto.”

But Patrick remembers the first lesson he had with Professor Gaber.

“He asked me to play a little snare with him and I couldn’t keep up. Then he asked me to go to the marimba. Then he shook his head, ‘You go to the practice pad, you can’t read,’ he said. ‘You go to the marimba, you can’t play. So what?’”

In three weeks, he switched to special student status. After a Christmas break in Paris, he returned to Bloomington with long-time partner Marina Ballor.

Like Patrick, Marina saw the trip to Bloomington as a temporary thing and arrived on a visitor’s visa.

“My childhood in a village near Versailles is boring after Patrick’s; very normal and happy, nice family.”

She had a gift for drawing and interrupted her studies in art to make the trip.

“In the early 1970s,” Marina said, “it was very attractive to come to the United States. I came thinking I would be here a year or two.”

Because of her visa, Marina could not work.

“I had time to do whatever I wanted. I took arts and crafts classes at the Union building and studied English in the new TESOL program in the evening. Bloomington had much to offer.”

The School of Music had recently revised its curriculum and offered a new undergraduate degree program that Patrick decided to follow as a special student. After a rocky start, he proved his determination, and Professor Gaber took him under his wing, prodding him along towards his degree. Patrick and Marina married. These life decisions created a nightmare of visa issues, and the two got to know staff in the international services office very well. Director Leo Dowling, an inveterate Francophile, assisted Patrick in obtaining scholarships to continue study after Fulbright support ended. International Student Advisor Kitty Burkhart guided them through the maze of visa regulations.

Staying after Fulbright support ended was not easy. The Bloomington Community Hospitality Committee provided household items. Patrick worked as a bus boy at the Inn of the Four Winds, later as a wine steward at the Brown County Inn and other well-known restaurants in the area. Marina worked at the Tao restaurant and at Rapp’s Pizza Train.
Because of smaller numbers, life for international students was different in the 1970s, the two explain.

“We were a small lot at the time. You received a lot of attention when you came from a different country. Other students wanted to talk with you.”

Working was important.

“I learned English by working at the pizza place,” Marina said. “When you learn a language in the classroom, it’s not the same as learning it on the job. I had to learn. I had to understand what people were asking.”

Eventually, the couple realized that they could put the skills they learned in the workplace to more permanent use. When the “West Side Café” next to the Monon line tracks came up for sale in 1977, Patrick and Marina bought it, and redubbed it Le Petit Café. It began with 11 tables and 36 seats and a small, ever-changing menu of French provincial cuisine. When they opened an upstairs dining room, passengers on the trains still coming through town at that time could look in at the diners eating, while the diners held on to their wine glasses to protect them from vibrations from the train.

Staying, however, meant an adjustment of status with immigration. They had to prove they had unique skills and got lots of advice from Burkhart at IU.

“We had to do something no one else could do,” Marina explained. “We put an ad in the newspaper for a chef; we had to prove we could not find a chef who could make a béarnaise or prepare other French cuisine.”

In 1981, they returned to France, were delayed another three months while immigration officials processed their application, and returned with their green cards.

In the mid-1980s, they purchased the auto body shop next to the restaurant and expanded. The restaurant today is much the same as it was then, with a base of loyal customers who would frown on Patrick and Marina changing anything—except of course for the menu, which changes just about every day. The railroad has become the B-Line Trail and “the other side of the tracks” is becoming ever more gentrified.

Patrick and Marina found—and helped to make—a community hospitable to people from all over the world. But the imprint of the international experience never quite disappears.

“I’ve always been a stranger,” Patrick commented. “When I was in Africa, I was a stranger because I was white. When I went to France, I was a stranger because I was born in Africa and I came from a different cultural background. When I came to America, I was a stranger because I was raised in France. I’ve been a stranger all my life.”