



# MONROE NEWS

## Huron Township man named to state Fiddlers Hall of Fame



Monroe News photo by TOM HAWLEY  
Jim McKinney of Huron Township was inducted into the Michigan Fiddlers Association Fiddlers Hall of Fame.

by Katie Mullin  
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It started with an email. A woman wrote to inform him that he was a suggested inductee into the Michigan Fiddlers Association Fiddlers Hall of Fame. She asked “Are you willing to accept that?” He immediately answered “Yes!”

“I consider it a great honor,” he said looking back. “That’s kind of the peak for a fiddle player,” the Huron Township resident said about the achievement.

Jim McKinney received the plaque Aug. 10, inducting him into the Hall of Fame at the North Central Regional Fiddlers’ Convention in Hillsdale. Richard Wild, president of the Michigan Fiddlers Association, presented the award. “he keeps the fiddling going. He’s a great candidate for that,” Mr. Wild said.

The inductees are suggested as candidates in the fiddling community. According to the Web site, potential winners must be Michigan residents, advocate the art of old-time fiddle music, have a love for humanity and share their music with others.

Mr. McKinney was a latecomer to his award-winning passion. He began playing the violin at 25, but previously had played the piano and guitar. “Piano lessons at age 10 is where I learned how to read music,” he said. As he

became immersed in the violin, he developed another musical ability. “I learn more and quicker from sitting in groups of people. I always choose to learn by ear,” Mr. McKinney said.

One of the first fiddling genres he learned was Irish. Since then, he has ventured into other musical avenues: French-Canadian, Old-Time and Civil War era tunes.

Mr. McKinney and his wife, Loretta, founded a traditional music band called The Golden Griffon Stringtet in 1992. Mrs. McKinney plays the hammered dulcimer, Renzo Hutchinson plays guitar and flute and Bob Ewald plays upright bass. Mr. McKinney alternates between the violin and guitar, depending on the gig.

Originating in the afterhours playing at fiddling events, the band has gone on to perform at a variety of events from the Ohio Renaissance Festival to Civil War balls.

The group has recorded three CDs, one that includes a set of 19th century tunes.

Outside of the Stringtet, Mr. McKinney also can be found playing at competitive and non-competitive events. Recently he placed third in the Sauder Village contest. He also has performed at various fiddling jamborees and dances and collaborated with other fiddling groups. “It’s a lot of fun,” he said about performing as part of the band for old-time square dancing. “You don’t have to be good or accomplished. Just play,” he said.

Six years ago he went back to college to finish his degree. He attended Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti, and was accepted into its music program. That changed, however, when he had to quit the program so he could work a necessary shift at his job.

Despite his disappointment, he continues to keep the fiddling tradition alive. “I think that builds a lot of community,” he said.

Today, Mr. McKinney said, many music organizations tend to be chart driven and are popularity - seekers. “That kind of music will build a culture, but not a community,” he said.

His chosen repertoire also has an effect on others. “Wherever we play, people are inspired by the music and want to share their own stories of the old-time musical connections in their lives. I’m amazed at the way music touches people,” he said. “It’s not a rare thing for someone to be affected by music.”

In addition, Mr. McKinney brings the fiddling community to others through teaching workshops and giving private lessons. He is also the director of the Michigan State Championship Old-Time Fiddlers Contest that has been recognized by Michigan Govs. John Engler, Jennifer Granholm and Rick Snyder.

Mr. McKinney, too, is a student of his music. When he learns new tunes by ear, he teaches them to others. One aspect he wants to learn while playing tunes is steadiness. “It doesn’t always have to be fast,” he said.

Not only is he a musician and recording artist but an author and composer as well. He and Judy Raber have co-written a biography of old-time Michigan fiddler Les Raber. “Come Dance With Me” is in its fifth edition, which was published this year. Ms. Raber is Mr. Raber’s daughter. “He knew an unusual repertoire that no one else knew,” McKinney said. Mr. Raber preserved the tunes for the old-time quadrilles, a form of square dancing. “They are just some of the neatest tunes to play. You could hear the swing, the lift and the lilt. Nobody else knew those tunes. Nobody else played them,” Mr. McKinney said. Featured in the book are the transcriptions of Mr. Raber’s tunes. “Les’s friends and acquaintances sent me their homemade recordings of Les playing at different jamborees and festivals. I listened to every recording and transcribed every tune by ear,” he said. So far, he has brought 182 of Mr. Raber’s tunes to life, but he and his wife continue to encounter new and unfamiliar melodies.

“We just get thrilled when we find one that’s new to us,” he said.

Mr. McKinney also has transcribed recordings and published books for old-time Michigan fiddlers Stewart Carmichael and Clifford Sparks. He is working on a book about Michigan Civil War veteran, violinist and music publisher Orange Fame (Cub) Berdan.

Outside of playing Mr. Raber’s tunes, Mr. McKinney composes his own music and has won several awards. Among his award winning compositions is “Emptyhead,” which is featured on video.

Mr. McKinney is not the only violinist in his family. He and his wife have a son, Tommy, 17, who has played violin for 13 years and is an occasional member of the family’s Stringtet. He recently performed with them at the Civil War Ball in Marshall and at a private wedding vow renewal ceremony. “He has an amazing ear for hearing arrangements,” Mr. McKinney said.

He also has two other grown children: Melody and Jimmy.

He is employed as a forensic security officer at the Center for Forensic Psychiatry in Saline.

Outside of violin, he is a caller at square dances and enjoys reading.

Mr. McKinney admits he’s not the best fiddler, but his music will always be a lifelong passion. “I can’t imagine not fiddling,” he said. “That’s what I love and enjoy.”