

Mac

NEFFA



NEWS

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**Don't Forget: The
NEFFA Festival is in
Mansfield, MA**

April 25-27, 2014

OUR 70th YEAR!



By Dave Anderson

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Bob McQuillen, a legend in New England contra dance circles known for his rhythmic “Boom-Chuck” piano playing, his corny jokes and his infectious enthusiasm for life, died [on Feb 4th], surrounded by friends, at Catholic Medical Center in Manchester.

A Musical Titan With His Own Beat



Bob McQuillen
1923 – 2014

Photo: Doug Plummer

McQuillen, 90, had been hospitalized after suffering a stroke [the previous Sunday].

McQuillen was awarded a National Heritage Fellowship by the National Endowment for the Arts, in 2002, recognizing him for “having a central position in the New England traditional dance music scene for more than fifty years.” He composed more than 1,300 dance tunes, most of which he named after his many friends both old and new.

McQuillen also taught industrial arts for many years at Peterborough High School and later at ConVal High School, where he was known as “Mr. Mac.”

“He did more for kids in Peterborough than any other teacher,” said Butch Walker, a former student of McQuillen’s who became a good friend. “He wouldn’t let you get away with anything and would always let you know if you did wrong. He was well loved by all.”

McQuillen died [in the] afternoon, after two days in the hospital. During the day, many friends at his bedside played music, and McQuillen, who was unconscious, seemed to respond, according to his friend Don Primrose, a dance caller from Sullivan.

“Bob just brings people together,” said Primrose during the vigil earlier in the day Tuesday. “There have been a series of people coming through. He’s resting comfortably and he seems responsive to music. He’s going exactly as he wanted.”

A life of music

McQuillen was fresh out of the Marines after World War II, living on a farm in New Boston, when he started

attending contra dances in Peterborough and Frankestown. He met his future wife, Priscilla Scribner, at one of the dances. He also latched on as an accordion player with the Ralph Page Orchestra, one of the leading contra dance bands.

"I'm a lousy accordion player as they go, but we had two fiddle players playing melody, so all I really had to do was play texture and accompaniment." McQuillen told a Concord Monitor reporter in 1999.

Influenced by Johnny Trembley, the piano player in Page's band, McQuillen eventually switched to piano, and after serving in the Korean War, he became a mainstay in bands led by Page, Duke Miller and Dudley Laufman during the 1960s and 70s.

And he never stopped playing, working with various smaller bands and callers and pounding the keyboard nearly every Monday night at the weekly dance in Nelson.

"With Bob, you always knew where the beat was. He called it Boom Chuck piano" said David Millstone of Lebanon, who made a documentary film about McQuillen. "He'd say, "It's something the dancers can hook their feet to. I'm an old-time dance piano player. I cannot play melody. I can play the chords."

McQuillen told Millstone that playing contra dances was like being "paid to eat ice cream," a phrase Millstone used as the title for his film.

"He just loved the whole contra dance scene," Millstone said. "At any event where Bob was present, you knew he'd just grab a microphone and talk. He was a living link to our heritage for today's contra dancers."

McQuillen was a mentor and inspiration to many in the contra dance community.

"I'm a caller because of Bob," Primrose said. "One night a caller didn't show, and he said 'Don, you know what to do, why don't you get out there and call.' He created a Johnny Tremblay memorial fund to help young people get started with the music and it's been really exciting to play with those students."

Contra dance caller Mary DesRosiers of Harrisville said her son, Conor Slieth, was one of McQuillen's first students.

"I think Bob's lasting contribution will be teaching," said DesRosiers, who frequently called dances where McQuillen played. "It was obvious the deep love he had for the music. And people always wanted to be around him. They saw how much fun he had."

DesRosiers said McQuillen was a huge presence in the contra dance community.

"It kind of feels like we'll be getting up in the morning and Mount Monadnock is not there," she said.

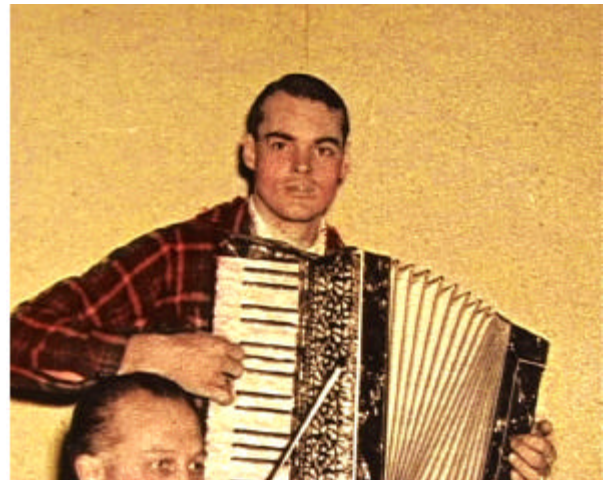
Dave Eisenstadter, a journalist and contra dance caller from Somerville, Mass., said McQuillen was a wonderful, but unique, piano teacher. Eisenstadter took lessons at McQuillen's home on Granite Street in Peterborough, known as the Mac Shack.

"Every inch of the house was packed, with a lifetime collection of music and instruments," Eisenstadter said. "He'd sit beside the piano on a stool with an accordion. He'd tell a joke or two, field a couple of phone calls. Then he'd start to play a tune. My job was to fill in the chords. When we were done, he'd always tell me the name of the tune. They were all named after people he'd known."

Eisenstadter said McQuillen's style of piano playing is not as common as it used to be.

"But everything that's going on now is based on it," he said. "Mac was like everybody's grandfather. He had the mind of a mischievous youth. That attracted younger people."

McQuillen's contra dance friends all recalled his penchant for introducing a tune by telling a joke. One of his favorites: "Which



side of the chicken has the most feathers?" ... long pause ... "The outside!"

An inspiring teacher

Much as he influenced young musicians, McQuillen also served as a mentor for many students during his years as a teacher.

McQuillen, who was born in Cambridge, Mass., in 1923, grew up in the Boston area before moving to New Boston with his mother as a youngster. He attended the Nobles and Greenough prep

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school and even spent a semester at Harvard University, according to his friend Sarah Bauhan of Hancock.

“He downplayed that background,” Bauhan said. “Harvard didn’t work out well for him.”

But after serving in the Korean War, McQuillen gave school another try.

“When he came back, he went to what he always called Keene Teacher’s College,” Bauhan said.

McQuillen, who had moved with his family to Dublin, was hired to teach industrial arts at Peterborough High School after graduating from Keene State. He founded a weightlifting group at the school and quickly became one of the most popular teachers.

“He had such a positive attitude,” said Walker, his former student. “He never missed our games. He encouraged us all, both honor students and kids like me who’d screwed up.”

Walker said McQuillen was the one person who kept him in school.

“He was the guy who sat me down and said “You’re staying here,”” Walker recalled. “By senior year, I’d made the honor roll. He hunted me down and just hugged me. Now he’s been my best friend for 60 years.”

Jill Lawler of Peterborough got to know McQuillen when she started teaching at Peterborough High School in the late 1960s.

“He was a bigger-than-life personality, this ex-Marine with tattoos before they were fashionable,” Lawler said. “He had this trademark yell to get people’s attention in the cafeteria or the hall. He was the only person I’ve ever seen who could quiet a gym before a basketball game and talk about sportsmanship. And the kids would listen to him.”

McQuillen was incredibly thoughtful, Lawler said.

“After I had my first baby, he drove to my house with a beautiful candle on my first Mother’s Day,” she recalled.

Bob Marshall of Greenfield, a former teacher at ConVal, said his favorite memory is doing cafeteria duty with McQuillen.

“I can still see Mac in that uniform he used to wear, with his little cap and his red bandanna hanging out of his pocket. He looked like one of the kids. And once in a while you’d hear that booming voice calling for quiet. The kids really connected with Mac.”

McQuillen was also a school bus driver in Peterborough.

“He used to speed up when he hit the bump on Main Street,” said Marilyn Weir of Peterborough, who often rode on his bus.

“He knew the kids would love to fly off their seats. He’d be laughing, looking at us in the rear view mirror.”

Life lessons

After he retired from teaching, McQuillen was a regular sight in downtown Peterborough, where he would show up for coffee every morning at Aesop’s Tables.

“This would always be his first stop,” said Aesop’s owner Allison Fredericks. “He’d sit in his favorite chair and he’d talk to everyone. All his students remember him as ‘Mr. Mac’ and they’d all say hello. He always had a joke for the kids and he’d talk to everyone. If people didn’t already know him, they certainly did when he left. He was a very dear man.”

McQuillen’s son, Dan McQuillen, said on Wednesday that his father had been a teacher throughout his life.

“He affected so many people in positive ways,” Dan said. “He taught a lot of people about music and shop, but also life lessons — treat people with respect, the way you want to be treated.”

McQuillen had a real connection to Dublin, where he served as police chief for a number of years before his wife died in 1985 and he moved to Peterborough.

“We had a big house at Bond’s Corner, with lots of backyard,” Dan said. “We had a big archery range out back. My dad loved camping and guns and he had a completely warped sense of humor. And he taught us to work hard.”

McQuillen’s daughter, Rebecca McQuillen, said her father’s death had been expected, but the loss is still hard.

“Toward the end I realized I always looked at him like Superman,” Rebecca said. “He was the funniest person I ever met. He was an imp. There was always some mischief behind that smile.”

McQuillen is survived by his son Dan, who lives in Houston, and his daughter Rebecca McQuillen, who lives in Florida, as well as five grandchildren and two great-grandchildren. Another son, William, died in 2003.



Sara Bauhan writes: The timing has come together on the memorial weekend for Mac. May 3rd is the day. The "service" will be at ConVal High School in Peterborough, NH at 2pm, followed by a reception at the Monadnock Country Club on High St in Pbro from 4-8, followed by the Contra Dance at the Peterborough Town Hall at 7pm dedicated to Mac. At the reception and dance there will be lots of opportunities for playing and dancing and sharing of stories.

Festival Notes

The NEFFA T-Shirt quilt will be on display near the High School Information Table. Come check out the 19 different shirts – Have you ever thought of designing a T-shirt?

Dan Pearl will be given the NEFFA Life Membership Award at this Festival. We have all benefited from the time and effort that Dan has added to NEFFA and we hope you will drop by the High School or Middle School Information Table and add your name and a note of thanks to Dan. If you aren't able to attend the Festival or like me (if you don't do it right now- you won't remember) you can also send best wishes snail mail to NEFFA P.O. Box 2789 Acton, MA 01720 or airmail to Neffainfo@gmail.com and I will get them into the book.

We have photos, photos and more photos from some past events. Help identify folks and performance groups from days gone by. The 1996 - 1998 photos have lots of photos of Ernie Spence. Let's see if we can name all of his dance partners! There are also many pictures of international troupes and hallway jams. Come by the High School and Middle School Information Tables to browse the photos and help us identify people.

What Will You Choose?

Dan Pearl is leading a session at the Festival entitled "People's Choice Contrás", and you get to vote for the dances he'll call. There will be a Chestnut, a Classic, and two Modern dances, and you can vote as many times as you want. So vote early and often at the following URL:

<http://tinyurl.com/Choice14>



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