

# Fiddler

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Mauno Järvelä & Näppäri

Judy Raber & Jim McKinney:  
Family & Michigan Traditions

Lonnie Robertson: Radio Fiddler



*Shauncey Ali; Andy Reiner; Sam Sweeney; Harald Haugaard;  
Maggie Estes White; Improvisation; Tune History; Scottish;  
Irish; Waltzes & Airs; Old Time; Keys; Reviews; 9 Tunes...*



# Judy Raber and Jim McKinney: *Carrying on the Michigan Dance Fiddling Traditions*

By Mary Larsen

Judy Raber, daughter of acclaimed Michigan dance fiddler Les Raber, took up the fiddle in 2000. Although she'd been hearing the music all her life, she had never attempted to draw a bow across the strings until shortly before her father's death. Over the past 17 years, Judy has become a skilled and graceful musician – a performer and a teacher dedicated to passing on her father's style and repertoire.

At last summer's Festival of American Fiddle Tunes in Port Townsend, Wash., Judy was accompanied by her friend Jim McKinney. An expert on Michigan old time fiddle traditions, he was instrumental in transcribing and publishing *Come Dance With Me: Original Fiddle Compositions and Favorite Tunes of Les Raber*,



Les Raber



Photo: Mary Larsen

Judy Raber and Jim McKinney at the 2016 Festival of American Fiddle Tunes.

as well as the repertoires of old time Michigan fiddlers Stewart Carmichael [born 1899] and Clifford Sparks [born 1891]. He performs in the square and contra dance band Golden Griffon Stringtet and he and his wife Loretta call dances for beginning dancers. Jim also directs the Michigan State Championship Old-Time Fiddlers Contest.

Les and Judy Raber and Jim McKinney have all been honored as members of the Michigan Fiddlers Hall of Fame: Les in 2003, Jim in 2013, and Judy in 2014.

The interview begins with Judy.

*Was there music in your house besides your father's? Did your siblings play?*

*Judy:* They all played in bands, but not at home much. We didn't practice much at home. But there was always fiddle music going on. And radios ... always the appreciation of music, always.

*How did it occur to you that you could learn to play?*

In 2000 my dad passed away and just prior to that I was taking care of him in his home. I took dinner over to him and (spent) some time with him. There was someone there that he was fixing a fiddle for... I thought, "Well, why don't you fix me up with a fiddle?" ... So he fixed me up with a 3/4-sized fiddle, and taught me the first tune he ever learned to play, "Jesus, Lover of My Soul." He played it and sent me home to play it and practice it. I went back the next day ... and I played the tune with no squeaks, nice and smooth, and he said, "Well, Judy, that was really good. Do you want my fiddle when I'm done with it?" ... When he had passed I took that fiddle and a cassette recording of him playing a

*"(The book includes) everything ... that we know of. So unless somebody sends us a new tape with a new tune on it, then these 182 tunes are Les' legacy." – Jim McKinney*

couple of tunes... "Pig Ankle Rag" was one of those tunes. And I just figured out how to find the notes with my fingers and that's how I learned – two or three notes at a time.

*How long did it take for you to really get comfortable, for you to be able to perform?*

I haven't gotten there yet. (laughs)

*You seem pretty comfortable.*

Well, when I went to my first festival in Evert [the Original Dulcimer Players Club Funfest, now in its 45th year; the pairing of hammered dulcimer and fiddle is a tradition in Michigan], I was in one of my first jams – I only knew two or three tunes then. I was introduced as Les Raber's daughter and asked to play a tune – I was very nervous. As I played, I looked across the group of musicians and noticed a man looking at me as though he didn't think I was doing very well. A couple of years passed and I happened to be sitting beside that man in a jam, so I reminded him of the prior incident. I asked him if he remembered what he might have been thinking. He said, "I didn't think you were going to make it." (laughter) He reassured me that now I could play tunes with him any time. It took years (to learn); it didn't take just moments.

*And Jim, were you friends with Les from the Michigan scene – is that how you met Judy?*

*Jim:* From the dulcimer festival. I would go and sit in the very outer circles, where beginners sat, around Les' camper to try and listen to those tunes, because I really liked his unique tunes – they were different. I was playing fiddle. ... A group of friends wanted to get together and do something (for him). And they came up with the idea for a book. I had already transcribed a couple of Les' tunes for my own use, and I decided to go ahead and volunteer to transcribe whatever anybody wanted to send in. We met at Judy's house to talk about that, and that's when I first met Judy.

*How did you go about transcribing those tunes – were they from recordings?*

All from recordings, every bit. Les had done three studio cassette tapes, so I worked through all of those, and then homemade recordings, field recordings – just people at festivals with their tape recorders recording Les. They would send me their tapes, and I would listen through them for things I didn't have from another source, and record the new tunes and the different tunes. Just rewind and play, rewind and play, over and over until I could get it.

*Have you now transcribed all of Les' known tunes?*

Everything that everybody has sent us, yes. Everything that we know of. So unless somebody sends us a new tape with a new tune on it, then these 182 tunes are Les' legacy.

*Judy:* That's all we have.

*That's a lot.*

*Judy:* I know, and I'm so thankful and grateful because I know there are people that would love to hear their mother or their father, or see them, and don't have that opportunity. And I get to. I get to play along with him in my ear. It's just phenomenal to me.

*Jim, how did you get involved with the Michigan State Championship Old-Time Fiddlers Contest?*

*Jim:* Somebody told me about the contest, so, in I think it was '96, I went to compete for the first time, and just started competing there, not knowing anything about it.

*So it was looser then in terms of what you could play?*

Yeah, it was a lot looser.

*What kind of stuff did you play?*

Stuff that I was learning at the dulcimer clubs – their repertoire, I think, mostly. So probably "Chinese Breakdown," "Soldier's Joy," and you had to have a waltz, so I probably played something like "Westphalia Waltz." That kind of thing.

*How did you come to be the director of it? And are you responsible for the current categories, like schottische and jig?*

Yes. I think it was 2005, the (woman) who was running the fiddle contest decided to retire. When she let me know that she was stepping down, I decided to go to the Applefest committee and volunteer to be the new director. They said sure, that would be great. I didn't tell them that I was going to change the contest.

*How big was it in those days? Was it bigger?*

The most I had ever seen at that point was 18 contestants. The most that ever showed up under my direction was 12. Under previous direction, the fewest I had ever seen was two – that was the year I got second place. (laughter)

*Has anybody ever considered putting it inside? [The early-October Michigan weather can be challenging for contestants and audience alike at the outdoor contest.]*

They used to advertise that the alternate location would be down the road in the elementary school. But even when it's snowed, they have never moved it from the outdoor Applefest stage to the elementary school. So I volunteered to do it and they said yes, and I came up with our rules and categories. Michigan doesn't have a particular bow stroke or a fingered ornament or something that really jumps out and says, "That's Michigan fiddling!" like the way



# Les Raber's Two-Step

From *Come Dance With Me: Original Fiddle Compositions and Favorite Tunes of Les Raber*.

"Les would frequently add an extra beat at the second ending of the A part." – Jim McKinney

you might identify Irish fiddling, or Scottish fiddling. I had tried to find something that would accommodate both the Upper Peninsula Finnish music and the Lower Peninsula dance music, and it just seemed like the only thing that every style in Michigan had in common was that it was used for dancing. So I tried to shape a contest and rules and categories that would fit that, whether you were from the U.P. or the Lower Peninsula.

*How would you describe Judy's father's style in terms of Michigan fiddling?*

He is solid central Michigan square dance fiddling.

*Judy:* That was the main thing that he did – played for dancers. ... He was a stickler about courtesy in a dance, and speed didn't make a beautiful dance – he really stuck to those values. And I appreciate that today. But I know that other styles of fiddlers, they play for dancers as well, so it's not unique for someone to have a style that's for dancing. But he was stern about it – it was very important to him to treat these partners with respect during the dance ... not spin them off the ground when they're spinning them or swinging. It's how a lady would like to be treated.

*Judy, you have four sons – are they musicians, too?*

Not yet. I'm ever hopeful. But at the same time they're all musical – they love music. But they haven't jumped into this thing that their mother's doing. They're happy for me. They've seen me lighten up and be excited again. They're not ready. Just like me – some day it's going to happen and they'll do it.

I think of (my father) every time I open the fiddle case or bring his fiddle to my chin. Dan Levenson once asked me, "Do you know such-and-such a tune?" I said, "maybe." He said, "That fiddle knows it – play it." So I did!

The book *Come Dance With Me: Original Fiddle Compositions and Favorite Tunes of Les Raber* and the related CDs *Come Dance with Me... Again!* and *Come Dance with Me... A Little More* as well as the Stewart Carmichael and Clifford Sparks books are available from Jim McKinney's Golden Griffon Stringtet website at [goldengriffonstringtet.com](http://goldengriffonstringtet.com).

All proceeds from the sale of Les Raber items go to the Les Raber Memorial Foundation for the preservation and continuation of old time Michigan fiddling.

For more information about many of Michigan's early fiddlers and their stories, visit [MichiganFiddle.com](http://MichiganFiddle.com).

## Upcoming Michigan fiddle events:

• **Fiddlers' Convention & Traditional Music Festival**, Aug. 11-12, 2017, Hillsdale County Fairgrounds, Hillsdale, MI. For information, visit [michiganfiddlers.com](http://michiganfiddlers.com).

• **32nd Annual Michigan State Championship Old-Time Fiddlers Contest** at the Huron Township Applefest, Oct. 7, 2017, New Boston, MI. For information, visit [huronapplefest.com/fiddlers-contest](http://huronapplefest.com/fiddlers-contest).