

Fiddling around earns Arcand great Accolades

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When we think of leadership, we tend to think of politicians and elders. But leadership comes in many forms.

John Arcand is a leader and role model in the world of culture and music. He is the undisputed master of the Metis fiddle.

Whether he is participating in a music camp, conducting a music class, writing music or simply playing at a dance, he is a tireless promoter of the music he loves. "It is music of the heart," he told me.

Jean-Baptiste Arcand was born 65 years ago near Debden, Man., in the Big River area and started to play the fiddle at age five. By age 12 he was playing at dances throughout the area. Over the years he refined his style and became known as the "dancers' choice."

But playing the fiddle was a sideline for him for many years. He made a living as a logger, first in the Big River area and later, in Whitecourt, Alta. It wasn't until later in his life that Arcand was able to devote himself full time to the music he loved.

He has produced 14 albums and written more than 300 original tunes. He wrote the "Saskatchewan Reel" for the centennial and played it throughout the province that year. Arcand has spent a lifetime promoting and preserving Metis fiddle music. Today, much of his work is devoted to reviving the old tunes and holding workshops to promote Metis culture.

This August, he will hold his 10th annual fiddle fest on his acreage southwest of Saskatoon. Arcand sees the fest as unique because it is a stand-alone event. "Back to Batoche" and similar gatherings contain a variety of competitions, sports tournaments and other events, while his festival is devoted to fiddle music only. This year, he will appear with his daughter and possibly granddaughter. He is hoping to see three generations on the stage.

I was able to catch up with Arcand between gigs. He had just returned from music camp at Barrows, Man., and was getting ready for the Back to Batoche Days. As soon as he's done there, it's off to another fiddle camp at St. Paul, Alta. His own fiddle fest takes place on Aug. 9 to Aug. 12, and the next day he has to be at Kenosee Lake for another music camp. This is a pretty heavy schedule for a guy who turns 65 in August.

But for him, it is a labour of love. It is what he loves to do and these days it takes up most of his time.

I was fortunate to see Arcand's latest creation when I visited him. He is an accomplished violin maker or "luthier." He showed me a violin that he had recently completed. Its body is made from maple but the top is spruce -- a piece he retrieved from his woodpile. The

scroll or top of the violin is carved with the head of Chief Big Bear, and the other side reveals a bear.

This is a special piece of artwork and will be raffled off at the fiddle fest. The proceeds will be put in a fund to build a permanent facility to hold the fiddle fest.

Arcand's fiddle fest is growing annually and he expects more than 5,000 people this year. With the growth of his festival, he needs more volunteers. If you want to lend a hand, give Arcand or his wife, Vicki, a call. Their co-ordinates are included on his website.

Arcand has played for, and met, the Queen when she attended the Lieutenant Governor's Centennial Gala in 2005. In 2001, he was part of a Metis Irish cultural exchange and met and played for the president of Ireland. In 1999, he was selected as one of 27 artists worldwide to represent Western Canada at the Fiddles of the World Conference in Halifax.

Arcand also has been recognized recently for his work both within the music community and in the Metis community. He has received a National Aboriginal Achievement Award and has twice received lifetime achievement awards -- by the grand masters in 2003 for his "outstanding contribution to old time fiddling," and in 2004, with a Lieutenant Governor's Saskatchewan Arts Award. He also received a Centennial medal in 2005 and the City of Saskatoon honoured him in 2006 with a cultural diversity and race relations "Living in Harmony" award.

He received word this summer that he's been nominated for an Order of Canada and it will be presented at a ceremony in the fall. But after all is said and done, and the accolades and limelight fade, he's happiest playing the good old tunes at home with his family and friends.

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