

*Don Messer: King of the Ontario Valley Fiddlers*  
by Tim Woodbridge

*May 9th was the 100th anniversary of the birth of Don Messer (1909-1973), the great Canadian fiddler and cultural icon. Measured by popularity, influence and long running success on radio, recordings, and television, Don Messer was arguably the most important Canadian fiddler of his generation, if not the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His instantly recognizable style -- bright, precise, lively and accessible, earned him the loyalty of millions of Canadians (and many in the United States). He and his band, the Islanders, toured extensively throughout Canada, reinforcing an image of just plain folks, which resonated with his largely small town and rural audience.*

*According to Johanna Berton (Messer's most recent biographer) he was the first Maritimes fiddler to perform live on the radio (1929), the first whose band performed live on television (1956) and the first Canadian artist to sell a million records. (Burton does not identify this record, but I suspect it was Messer's 1942 recording of Big John McNeil/The Dusty Miller's Reel, b/w Don Messer's Breakdown/Wagoner's Breakdown.) [We hope to feature that recording in a future article by Tim - the editor]*

*Even today many recall childhood memories of family gathered around the television set to watch "Don Messer's Jubilee" and there are still some fiddlers who can accurately play in his style.*

*Don Messer was born in Tweedside, New Brunswick, the youngest of 11 children, to Scots Presbyterian parents, whose forbears had emigrated to Canada 70 years earlier. His older brother Andrew and other family members played the fiddle, two sisters played the piano and his mother sang Scots songs. As with almost any rural community of the time, fiddle music, dance and song were part of the air everyone breathed. In yet another example of the "forbidden fiddle" story, when Messer was about five, Andrew went west to work the wheat harvest in Saskatchewan leaving his fiddle behind in a locked case. Young Don removed the screws from the brass hinges with a penknife, leaving scratches in the process, immediately noted by Andrew upon his return. Don was eventually forgiven and, according to one account, some of his older siblings then chipped in to buy him a fiddle. He gave his first public performance when he was seven.*

*When he was 16 he went to the "Boston States", a rite of passage for many Maritimes, where he heard Cape Breton and Irish fiddle music on the radio. He was befriended by an elderly violin teacher who, impressed with Messer's raw talent, arranged to have one of his pupils give him his what was to be his only formal training on the violin. He learned to read and write music and the rudiments of harmony. While he chaffed against some of the strictures of his instruction, he accepted the value of learning good technique and the necessity of constant practice to attain the skill that would allow him to play pretty much anything he wanted to.*

*Early in his career, Messer used The Quarterdeck, a Scots reel, as his theme. Starting sometime in the 1940's he switched to Barndance, a lively medley of Fireman's Reel, Lamplighters Hornpipe and Soldier's Joy, sandwiched around Charlie Chamberlain's vocal and square dance calls. The result was a great improvement on a rather lackluster Carson Robison song and the tunes are all traditional classics found in numerous printed collections. Thereafter, Barndance opened virtually every Messer performance for the remainder of his career making it an appropriate introduction to his music.*

*The Islanders never made a studio recording of Barndance, and time constraints on radio and TV meant that they rarely performed the piece in its entirety. This cut, which may be the only extant complete version, comes from a 1945 broadcast on CBC's then newly opened short wave service for the troops and others overseas. This dub comes from a posthumous LP, prepared six years after Messer's death, which purportedly garnered 100,000 pre-release orders*

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*about the author*

*When I was about six, my family moved from New York City to Oak Ridge, Tennessee. In short order I found live hillbilly music on station WNOX in Knoxville and the recorded variety on one of the area's early FM stations in Lenoir City. I was hooked. Starting with a \$10.00 guitar, I tried my hand*

at a variety of stringed instruments over the years, including the fiddle. Back in the 60's I was introduced to the fiddle traditions of Quebec and the Canadian Maritimes, and to their many talented practitioners.

[As a bonus here is a transcription of a version of Lamplighter's Hornpipe from my book "Favorite American Hornpipes for Fiddle". It is taken from the playing of champion New England fiddler Ron West who plays it somewhat in the style of Messer. The latter only plays the first section on his Barndance recording. The (A) in the title refers to the fact that there are two versions in my book, the other from Ruthie Downfield. - The editor]

LAMPLIGHTER'S HORNPIPE (A) (Ron West)

The musical score for "Lamplighter's Hornpipe (A)" by Ron West is presented in four staves of music. The key signature is two sharps (F# and C#), and the time signature is common time. The first staff contains measures 1 through 5, starting with a double bar line and a repeat sign. Chord markings 'A', 'A#°', and 'E7' are placed above the staff. The second staff contains measures 6 through 9, ending with a double bar line and repeat sign. Chord markings 'A', 'E7', and 'A' are present. The third staff contains measures 10 through 14, ending with a double bar line and repeat sign. Chord markings 'D', '(A)', 'D', and 'E7' are present. The fourth staff contains measures 15 through 18, ending with a double bar line and repeat sign. Chord markings 'A', 'D', 'A', 'E7', and 'A' are present.