

# CDSS Lifetime Contributor—Bob McQuillen

by David Millstone

Bob McQuillen, the dean of New England contra dance musicians, has been playing for dances since 1947, when he joined the Ralph Page Orchestra on accordion. In the 1960s, he started playing piano, his most common instrument today. Born in 1923, he worked as a young man in numerous odd jobs and served in the Marines in World War II in the Pacific and again in the Korean War. He became an industrial arts teacher (and then weightlifting coach) for thirty-five years, with music and dancing playing an important side role in his life.

Bob became part of the group of musicians with Dudley Laufman, eventually forming the Canterbury Country Dance Band. Canterbury released several record albums in the early 1970s that caught the attention of musicians around the country, with Bob's powerful beat supporting those traditional New England dance tunes. In later years, Bob worked in smaller bands, both in New England and in the Northwest (see Discography). Virtually every Monday night when he's in town, Bob plays piano at the weekly dance in Nelson, New Hampshire, not far from his Peterborough home.

Bob has actively taught others his distinctive "boom-chuck" style of piano playing, teaching classes in dance camps around the country. He is an annual visitor to the Northwest at Seattle's Folklife Festival, and for many years he was a staff member of the Augusta music and dance camps in Elkins, West Virginia. Bob has been the recipient of numerous apprenticeship grants from the New Hampshire State Council on the Arts, enabling him to pass on his technique to young musicians. He also established the Johnny Trombly Fund, administered by the Monadnock Folklore Society; to date, the fund has provided financial assistance to nine young musicians for studying traditional music with older established

artists. Trombly was Ralph Page's pianist when Bob first joined the band; he served as Bob's mentor on the piano, passing along specific licks that embellish Mac's steady beat, techniques that he now teaches his own students.

Bob is also a prolific composer of dance tunes, published in a continuing series of *Bob's Notebooks*. He has now completed more than thirteen hundred jigs, reels, hornpipes, marches, and waltzes. Among his best known tunes are "The Dancing Bear," written for a student he coached in weightlifting, and "Amelia," a waltz written for the daughter of fellow musician Deanna Stiles. He initially jots down his ideas in a notebook using solfège notation and then, after determining the correct pitch, transfers the tunes to the more standard dots on a staff.

In 1997, Bob McQuillen received the Governor's Arts Award in Living Folk Heritage from the New Hampshire State Council on the Arts. Two years later, along with his band Old New England, he was part of the delegation representing New Hampshire at the 1999 Smithsonian Folklife Festival. In 2001, he was celebrated at the annual Ralph Page Dance Legacy Weekend in Durham, New Hampshire, where David Millstone's documentary video about him, *Paid To Eat Ice Cream*, received its premiere. In 2002, he received a National Heritage Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts, the nation's highest honor in the folk and traditional arts. He was the first person from the

contra dance world to receive that award. This spring, he was named as a recipient of CDSS's 2009 Lifetime Contribution Award. (Details of the CDSS ceremony will be announced later.)



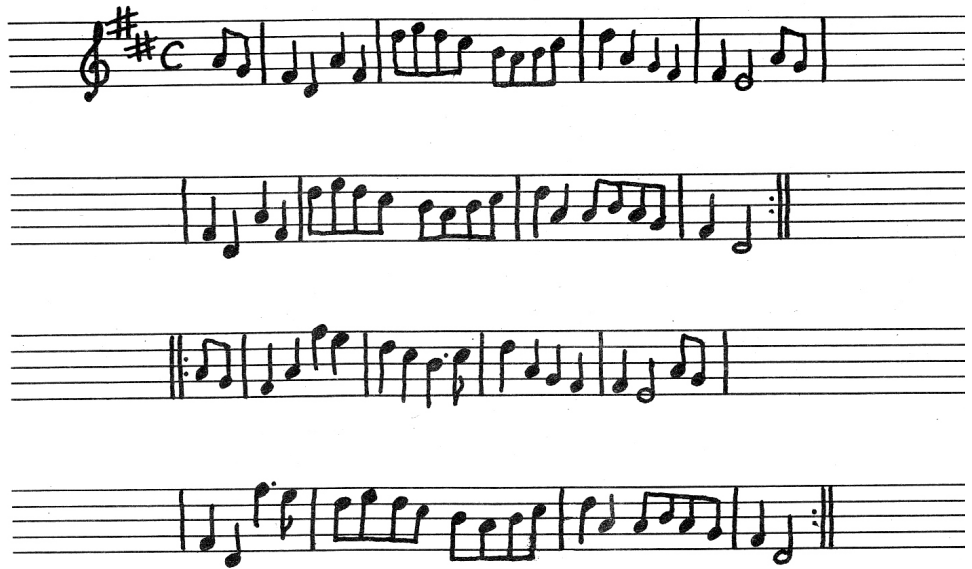
Top: Circa 1960s. Below, Old New England (Jane Orzechowski, Bob, Deanna Stiles); photo by Patrick Stevens

### Scotty O'Neil ►

This is the first tune in *Bob's Notebook #1* (1973) and the first tune in his long history of composing tunes. It was written to commemorate a young student of Bob's who died in a motorcycle accident. Since that time, Bob has written more than thirteen hundred tunes; he is currently preparing *Notebook #14* for publication. Nearly all of Bob's tunes are named for someone he knows, most of them people connected to the world of traditional music and dance, although fiddler Jane Orzechowski points out with a laugh that he has also written tunes for her family's animals.

## Scotty O'Neil

BOB McQUILLEN '73  
With Love To Scott and Becky



### READY ANYTIME

Bob McQuillen Jan '76



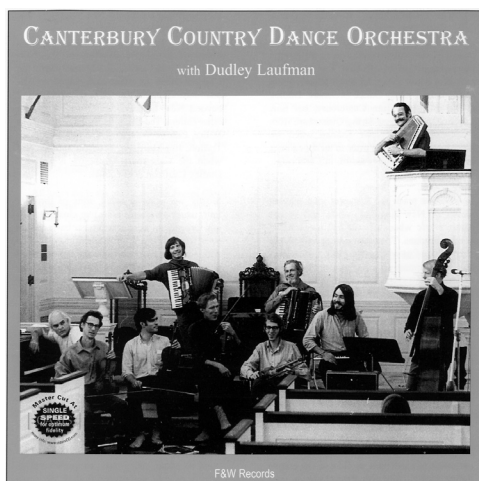
### ◀ Ready Anytime

Bob says, "Back in 1976, I wrote this tune. I was at a point in my life where I figured I was ready to go, so I came up with this, which is based on the old death march tune but played with a different rhythm. I sang it or something to April [Limber], and she shrieked at me, 'Put that thing away!' so I did. I used to think it should be played slow and stately, but I just got it out again and Jane [Orzechowski] and I played it through the other night and I think it should go at a faster tempo. I'm still ready, but Steve [Zakon-Anderson] and I have been talking about putting on a dance in 2023. I'm going to play piano for that, and I'm going to be the only one hundred year old contra dance piano player in the world!"

## Bob McQuillen Discography

- *Canterbury Country Dance Orchestra*, F&W Records, F-72-FW3, LP record, 1972
- *The Canterbury Country Orchestra Meets the F & W String Band*, F&W Records F-72-FW4, LP record, 1972
- *Mistwold*, Canterbury Country Dance Orchestra, F&W Records F74-FW5, LP record, 1974
- *Contra Dances: The Canterbury Country Orchestra*, CDSS records, 45 rpm record, 1974
- *Canterbury Country Dance Orchestra*, F&W Records, CD-01-FW8
- CD compilation (2001) that includes selections from the above four recordings
- *Contra Dance Music New England Style*, Applejack with Bob McQuillen (all tunes were written by McQuillen), with Jill Newton, Laurie Indenbaum, Andy Toepfer, and Michael McKernan, Green Linnet Records SIF 1028, LP record, 1980
- *Farewell to the Hollow*, New England Tradition, Great Meadow Music GMM2014, originally released in 1988; remastered and reissued on CD in 2003
- *Old New England*, Bob McQuillen, Jane Orzechowski, and Deanna Stiles, Old New England CD101, 1996
- *ONE: TWO*, Old New England, CD102, 2002
- *ONE: III*, Old New England, CD103, 2005
- *ONE: IV (forthcoming)*
- *Hand It Down: Contra Dance Tunes by Bob McQuillen*, Bob McQuillen, Laurie Andres, and Cathie Whitesides, Avocet CD 105, 1997
- *Grand Right and Left*, The Rhythm Rollers (Bob McQuillen, Cathie Whitesides, Laurie Andres, WB Reid), Avocet CD 107, 2008
- *Choose Your Partners! Contra Dance & Square Dance Music of New Hampshire*, Smithsonian Folkways SFW CD 40126, 1999. (This compilation features six bands who represented New Hampshire at the 1999 Smithsonian Folklife Festival. Old New England plays on four cuts, including "Amelia," McQuillen's best-known waltz.)
- *Pure Quill*, Rodney Miller and Bob McQuillen, Great Meadow Music CD GMM2004, 2000

Bob also plays piano on three albums by Sarah Bauhan: *Chasing the New Moon*, *The Untamed Grasses*, and *Lathrop's Waltz*



## McQuillen

This accordion player is a laughing fellow  
with steel gray hair, bribing the bellows.

He coaxes & listens to the Irish in it,  
falls of water, hills of granite,

weather brown barns, evergreen tree.  
He roars with laughter & slaps his knee,

His music blends with the fiddle man,  
the caller, the piano, the summer dancers

with taps on their shoes, fresh from the farms,  
the woolen mills.

He tattooed his arms.

Looks like he's taking a nap on his box,  
but what he is doing is coaxing talk,

getting it going like a spinning top,  
you can hear it out in the parking lot.

*Dudley Laufman*

*Top: Bob at Folklife 1992; photo by Doug Plummer. Left: Canterbury Country Dance Orchestra (1972): front row, l-r: Bob McQuillen, Allan Block, Jerry Werhner, Nicholas S. Howe, Ted Levin, Larry Delorier, Jack Sloanaker; back row: Dudley Laufman and Dave Fuller (with accordions); in loft above right, Pete Colby; taken at the Middlesex School in Concord, MA where the album was recorded. Photo next page: Bob's hands at the piano 2001; photo by David Millstone.*



## ***What Others Say about Bob.....***

### **Laurie Andres, Seattle, WA ~**



I first heard Bob McQuillen's piano and accordion playing driving around the back roads of Vermont in my friend's Toyota Land Cruiser listening to poor quality cassette dubs of the Canterbury Orchestra records. I was immediately drawn to the solidity and singing bass lines of Bob's playing.

In 1978 I made the pilgrimage from Washington, DC to the Applejack New Year's Eve dawn dance at Chelsea House in Brattleboro, Vermont. In those days it was common for musicians to sit in with the hired band. There were so many of us sitting in that we spilled off the stage and onto the dance floor. Bob's playing led all the disparate musicians into a driving, ecstatic, and irresistible sound. A tune we played that night was the "Star of Munster," a powerful A minor Irish reel. At the end of the dance Bob yelled out in his booming voice a complimentary remark to the unknown accordionist sitting in, me. Boy, did I glow.

A hallmark of Bob is his enthusiastic encouragement of young musicians. He has been the link for many of us to the traditional New England dance music that existed before the great contra dance revival of the 1970s. Over the years I have played with Mac, he has been a source of intense pleasure, camaraderie and inspiration. I have marveled at his inventiveness. He manages to find new twists to fiddle tunes he has played hundreds of times. But whatever Mac does with a tune it is in service to the dance, and it derives from the flesh and bones of the tune.

The term "groove music" is bandied about in contra dance circles these days. Well, for my two cents, Mac plays the original and most mighty groove music to be part of in the band shell or on the dance floor.



### **Peter Barnes, Greenfield, MA ~**



My style of playing piano is different from his now, but when I started out he was my model. And in a lot of ways, in his solidity, he still is my model. As a melody player, you just feel held by it. He's not going to let you go; it's like a bulldog. It's great. It's no frills. It's not fancy stuff. If I'm a melody player, I'd much prefer to play with a solid, straight-ahead player like him than somebody who's doing a lot of wild syncopations and stuff. That's really a rhythm player's job (much as I might hate to feel this way)... to let the melody players relax, knowing that you're taking care of the tempo so they can do whatever they want.

### **Steve Zakon-Anderson, Conway, MA ~**



If asked to sum up Bob McQuillen in just one word, my choice would be "joy." Bob is a great receiver, and giver, of joy. No one enjoys playing for dances more than Bob, even after so many years of doing so. During an evening of sharing great music with friends Bob is as delighted as a little kid. When splitting up the pay for a dance, Bob gets great joy out of secretly making sure the other musicians take home some extra. (Oops, I gave it away!) I have seen many dance evenings end with the fiddler choosing to play Bob's own "Amelia" as the final waltz, and on many of those occasions I have heard Bob telling the fiddler that it was the best he had ever heard that tune played. And he meant it every time!

Countless dancers have had magical times dancing to his music, and when they are drawn to pause at the top of the set to wave hello to Bob at the piano, his response is always heartfelt. I think of the students to whom Bob has passed on his "Johnny Trombly" style of playing, the many people for whom Bob has written and dedicated a tune, the scores of musicians and callers he has played with and encouraged, as well as all of the "kids" he taught and cared deeply about while roaming the halls of ConVal High School (and who still beep their horns at all hours when they drive by his house). I know the great joy my own children feel when they see "Mr. Mac." Bob always makes the two of them feel special.

Last fall when [we] gathered to celebrate Bob's sixty years of playing for dances, he declared to many of us that the next party for him should be planned for fifteen years from then, when we could be celebrating him as the world's first one hundred year old contra dance musician. I've got that one on my calendar, as I can't imagine a more joyous occasion.

*continued on page 22*

*(Bob McQuillen, continued from p. 19)*

**Rodney Miller, Antrim, NH ~**



It is my good fortune to have been in association with Bob McQuillen over the past forty years. Always quick with an appropriate joke, Mac has connected with contradancers and musicians in warmhearted, supportive and humorous ways throughout the years. I know that I, and hundreds if not thousands of people in the contradance community, hold him in special esteem for his kindness, generosity and knock-out musical prowess on piano and accordion. He understands contradance music like no other.

I remember a series of dances in the early 1980s when Mac and I were hired with Ralph Page, the dean of New England callers. The dances were held at the Scout House in Concord, Massachusetts. I would drive from my home in Antrim, New Hampshire to Mac's house in Peterborough. Not wanting to put miles on my car, Mac would insist upon driving his car to Keene to pick up Ralph. We would arrive, go into Ralph's parlor, and then Ralph would expound about his latest dance publication or his recent experiences at a Maine dance camp with Jean Carignan, the extraordinary French Canadian fiddler. Of course, this would take a while. Mac would remind Ralph that if we didn't leave soon, we'd be late to the dance. Ralph would say, "Don't worry. They won't start the dance till we get there." This happened every time we did this gig. As the youngest member of the trio, I admired Mac's role in looking out for Ralph and making sure we would arrive in a timely manner.

Another time, I was hired to play with Mac and the great caller Duke Miller at the Fitzwilliam Town Hall, a summer series that ran for years. I remember Mac's saying to Duke one night, "I want you to know that I've reached my limit on playing 'Life on the Ocean Waves' and will not play that tune tonight, so please don't call it." Duke graciously agreed. Mac's forthright, honest communication was an important dance musician's skill to be learned. Thank you, Mac!

Several years ago, I was lucky enough to be able to record a CD with Mac. We called it "Pure Quill," a phrase Mac knew from his childhood meaning "the real thing." It felt right to use a New England expression as our title because Mac is a master of the local lore and language (some of it not fit to print, by the way). Mac wasn't playing much accordion by the time we made this recording and explained to me that he was getting a little old and it was a challenge to play. Reluctantly, I asked him to play "McQuillen's

Squeezebox," a tune that Ralph Page had written decades earlier for Mac and which we had played at every one of those Scout House dances with Ralph. Ever generous, Mac picked up his accordion, played beautifully, and we included the tune on the CD. My thanks go to Mac for that and for being a mentor, a friend and an invaluable inspiration.