



Presents



Midwestern Fiddle Masters:

Michigan's Les Raber and Indiana's Francis Geels

Thirty years ago, a scholar suggested that fiddle tunes and square dancing belonged on a short list of cultural artifacts—along with skyscrapers, comic strips, the grid-town plan, jazz music, Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, and chewing gum—that were distinctively characteristic of America. All off these items are made up endlessly repeatable units, capable of multiple variations, that exhibit a basic duple "beat." Further support for adding fiddling to this list is the fact that it is, and always has been, deeply rooted in every part of the North American continent. However, there are probably not many people that think of such Midwestern states as Michigan or Indiana as hot-beds of old-time fiddling. That is one good reason to bring these two masters of traditional fiddling to the ballroom of the David Adler house for a concert. Another is that both are enjoyable and knowledgeable musicians.

Les Raber was born in 1911 in Allegan County Michigan. His early interest in fiddling was sparked by his paternal grandfather. However, by the time Les was ready to get started—on a \$4.98 fiddle his mother purchased from the Sears and Roebuck catalog—his grandfather had had a stroke and could no longer play. His first help came from a neighbor, John Annis, who was the equal of his grandfather on the fiddle, and also a good square dance caller.

Many of Les' first tunes came from his grandfather, who though no longer able to draw the bow himself, could still give pointers and talk Les through a tune: "he would 'rum a diddle doo' so that I would get the old time tunes right."

During his high school years, Les learned to read music by playing violin in the school orchestra. This skill gave him access to another source of fiddle tunes, early 20th century tune books such as *Gems of the Ballroom* (published by the Root company in Chicago). Though he doesn't play directly from music, he can pick a tune out from a written score, "but I have to learn it before I can play right."

In 1929, after he got out of college, Les moved to Barry County, south of Grand Rapids, and settled on the farm that has been his home ever since. For the last 58 years, he has been married to Rosemary who bore his four children. Though two of his children were musicians, none took up the fiddle; nor have any of his grandchildren shown an interest in Les' instrument of choice. (He has also played the drums in one or another dance orchestra.)

While working his farm, Les moonlighted for many years as a dance musician. For nineteen years straight, starting in the mid-1930s, he played for square and round dancing every Friday night at the Dixie Dance Hall on the south edge of Grand Rapids. The band, led by pianist Lillian Mauchmer, included a sax player, a tenor banjoist, a drummer, and another fiddler, Varsil Fales. Besides their regular Friday night booking, they worked all over the lower Michigan countryside on Saturday nights.

Through the years, Les has played for countless dances with a number of different ensembles, including a year with a group from his hometown of Hastings that played six nights a week in Battle Creek and Grand Rapids. But as the commercial dance halls took over from Grange Hall dances and house parties of Les' youth, square dancing went into decline. As round dances gained importance, Les began to play more jobs on the drums.

Nevertheless, his preference has always been for square dances and the old time tunes: "I'm partial to jigs, waltzes, schottisches and reels." His playing reflects the vigorous, but dignified square dancing popular in his home state, nourished by Henry Ford's efforts in the 1920s to promote the quadrilles and ballroom dances of an earlier day. Like other Michigan fiddlers, Les has preserved the quadrille format of playing a set of three separate tunes (at least one of which is in jig time) identified for the three "changes" or separate figures of a quadrille.

For the last several decades, he has been an ambassador of the Michigan fiddle tradition, little known beyond the borders of the state, having performed at the 1981 Indiana Fiddler's Gathering and the 1987 Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife on the mall in Washington. He also participates regularly in the Michigan Folklife Festival, at the jamborees sponsored by the Michigan Fiddlers Association, and the Original Dulcimer Players Club. In 1992, Les Raber was given a Michigan Heritage Award by Governor Engler and the Michigan Arts Council.

Francis Geels was born in 1925 in Decatur, Indiana, where he still makes his home. His father, John, who could play a little on the fiddle and tenor banjo, played piano in a Geels Family Band that included a sister on mandolin, and a brother on fiddle. When Francis started playing the fiddle at the age of eleven--his father taught him his first tune ("Buffalo Gals")--Francis has many fiddling relatives to model himself after, including both grandfathers, a grandmother, and his Uncle Joe. But he most idolized another young Adams County fiddler, Harold Zimmerman, who for a time courted Francis' older sister.

In 1936, the same year he started, Francis made his first public appearance as entertainment between acts of a play at the high school in the nearby town of Hoagland. What most sticks in Francis' memory is that he was embarrassed at having to carry his fiddle into the school in a gunny sack. More importantly, this performance marked the beginning of a new generation of Geels Family Band, comprised of John's offspring, including Helen on guitar, Esther on tenor banjo, and Fred on bass. With the first \$1.35 that he earned for playing, Francis bought a real case for his fiddle.

In the years around World War II, fiddle music was readily available. Francis remembers fondly the annual Fiddlers' Reunions held on a summer Sunday afternoon in Payne, Ohio, only one county away. A couple dozen older fiddlers would show up including many who had known such local legends as Adam County's Kenny Roth and Van Wert County, Ohio's Smith McClure. While the fame of these men never travelled far, Francis was also able to soak up a lot of tunes and style from southern fiddlers who were gaining fame over the radio, such as Georgian Clayton McMichen who played for many years WHAS in Louisville, and Howdy Forrester, who appeared on the Grand Ol' Opry with Roy Acuff's Smoky Mountain Boys. One of Francis' early favorites was Slim Miller, a native Hoosier, who played with the Cumberland Ridge Runners on the WLS National Barn Dance in Chicago and then on the Renfro Valley Barn Dance broadcast from Kentucky.

In the late 1940s, after Francis' sisters dropped out of the Geels Family Band to raise their families, Francis started playing on the radio himself: "I played on a dozen different radio stations with different bands." His first radio stint was on WBAT in Marion, Indiana. In 1948 and '50 he made trips to recording studios in Chicago to add his fiddle to songs recorded by Joe Taylor and the Indiana Redbirds. In the 1950s, he was on Fort Wayne television with The Downhomers, who, a decade earlier had starred on WOWO's Hoosier Hop, a coast-to-coast radio barn dance. And in the late 1950s, he played regularly at Buck Lake Ranch, a country music park in the northeast corner of Indiana, where he once received the opportunity to fill in with Pee Wee King and his Golden West Cowboys for a short engagement in Chicago.

In spite of these brushes with fame, Francis never became a full-time professional country musician. His reputation back home as the best hoedown fiddler in the area was gained through the many dances he played at dance halls and lodges through the 1950s and '60s. As public dances began to decline, local dance bands still found regular work playing for wedding receptions and anniversary parties, where square dances was highly favored. However, to Francis' dismay, he found that area callers began to prefer singing calls, which used the melodies of familiar songs, over patter calls, which could be chanted to any hoedown (a fast tune in duple meter).

After playing for dances at the Van Wert Eagles Club every Friday night for fifteen years, Francis felt that he had gotten into a rut. So he started building up a collection of fiddle albums from all parts of North America, and from these greatly expanded his repertoire of tunes. He also started going to fiddle contests and bluegrass and folk festivals. He has performed at the Indiana Fiddlers Gathering a half dozen times over the last three decades.

Since the late-1970s, a new manifestation of the Geels Family Band began to appear more often as a show band than as a dance band. A new generation of the family is represented by Joe Alles (banjo, fiddle, and mandolin), the grandson of Francis' Uncle Joe, and Jason Hart (Helen's grandson), who started performing on fiddle only four years ago at the age of thirteen.

A few years ago, Francis made home recordings of all the tunes he could remember, so that he wouldn't forget them. His list of 116 pieces filled up four one-hour cassettes. He has run off several copies of his personal archives which are available to others interested in preserving his amalgam of old-time fiddling, which connects the currently popular styles of bluegrass and contest fiddling with yesterday's radio heroes and the almost forgotten old masters who enlivened many a Midwestern house party or barn dance at the dawn of this century now drawing to a close.

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This series is supported in part by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and by the Illinois Arts Council, a State Agency.