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page 8

Vol. 129, Issue 92 \$.50


INDEX

Obits ... page 3 Opinions ... page 4
Business ... page 5 Sports ... page 8
Classifieds ... page 9

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Musician receives Brown-Hudson Folklore Award

ERIN C. PERKINS
STAFF REPORTER

A few days after local musician Jim Vipperman discovered he was being presented the Brown-Hudson Folklore Award by the North Carolina Folklore Society, he found out

one of his music students was awarded a competitive apprenticeship from the state.

In a humble fashion, his excitement quickly shifted from himself to his student.

But Tanya Jones, the executive director of the Surry Arts Council, who nominated him for the award, said that's just

Vip, as he is often referred to.

"Jim has given an enormous amount of time in passing on the heritage of music. I've worked with him over 20 years, and there are not as many people committed to teaching or have the gift he has," said Jones about why

See AWARD, page 7



ERIN C. PERKINS/THE NEWS

Local musician Jim Vipperman is being presented the Brown-Hudson Folklore Award by the North Carolina Folklore Society Saturday at Elon University. Here, he plays a violin in his music shop, Vip's Violins and Music Co. on Andy Griffith Parkway.

AWARD:

Continued from page 1

she nominated Vipperman. "It's really his life, he truly cares about music and passing on that tradition."

And Vipperman credits Jones for helping him to unwrap his "gift."

"She's the one that has showed me I had a gift like that. She offered me a job teaching private lessons, I thought golly, that might be a good thing for a musician," Vipperman, 50, said.

That good thing led him to participate in weekly Traditional Arts Programs (TAPS) at the Surry Arts Council, and he eventually opened his own shop, Vip's Violins and Music Co. at 1600 Andy Griffith Parkway, which he has owned for 14 years.

But his journey from musician and musical instructor actually began more than four decades ago.

Born June 12, 1958, in Surry County, Vipperman began playing music when he was 8-years-old at a traditional arts program similar to the one he participates in now at the Surry Arts Council. He started playing the violin in 1966 with classical lessons from Dr. Ralph Gabriel and Lilly Graham.

But before he ever picked up a fiddle to play, it was his fascination seeing his father work on one that drew his interest about the instrument.

The next day, his father had him work on one on his own.

"It was totally by accident I started to play," Vipperman recalled about his musical beginnings. "There was a program (at the arts council) that was affordable because there was no charge to it."

There, his musical talents were unleashed, he said.

"It was the first insight I had that this was going to be something I was going to do," he said. "I've been playing 42 years."

Considered an improvisational musician, Vipperman plays by ear, and said "if I hear it one time, I can play it."

"The North Carolina Folklore Society presents the Brown-Hudson Folklore Awards to persons who have in special ways contributed to the appreciation, continuation, or study of North Carolina folk traditions," said Katherine Robertson, a representative with N.C. Folklore Society.

She said past recipients include playwright Paul Green, African-American quilters Lillie Lee and Jennie Burnett, folk potters Nell Cole Graves and Burlon Craig, teachers Cratis Williams and Charles G. Zug. It also includes musicians Doc and Merle Watson, Etta Baker and Tommy Jarrell, writers Richard Walser and John Parris, and folklife advocates Millie Blankenship and George Holt.

Founded in 1913, the North Carolina Folklore Society promotes the appreciation and

study of North Carolina's folklife.

Through its annual meeting, programs, awards and publications, the North Carolina Folklore Society encourages the study and preservation of local folklife and provides a state folklife information center and resources center, according to its Web site.

The Brown-Hudson Folklore Award was established in 1970 to honor two distinguished folklorists and officers of the North Carolina Folklore Society, Frank C. Brown of Duke University and Arthur Palmer Hudson of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

"It was a big surprise," Vipperman said about receiving the news he was being awarded. "I'm excited."

Darting back to one of his students who is receiving an apprenticeship, he said, "I'm like a proud papa. I'm think I'm more stoked about that than any award I'm about to receive."

Jones, the SAC executive director, said the past recipients of the award are indicative of the significance of the honor.

"I think it's significant, when you see who has received it," she said.

Vipperman's other achievements include the memberships with the McPeak Brothers of Wytheville, Va., and the Shenandoah Cut-Ups of Troutman, Va., and the Sons of Bluegrass of Westfield.

In 1995, the *Galax Gazette* newspaper recorded Jim's placements in the top 10 winners of the individual bluegrass fiddle competition as tied with another local fiddler.

But in 1996, Jim broke that tie, winning more awards in the top 10 than any other fiddle competitor in the history of the Galax Fiddler's Convention with 13 times.

He was third runner up in 1975 at the Union Grove Fiddler's Convention World Championship.

The Mount Airy Fiddler's Convention has bestowed him with the first place honor nine times — he finally stopped entering.

Vipperman said he's from a multi-generational family of musicians, and is very fortunate to be passing on the tradition.

"I started playing when I was 8-years-old, I never thought it would come to me as quickly and effortless as it did. I write music down, I don't read music, if I can hum it, I can play it. Right now I can jump on stage and do a song I don't know, if someone else is playing it," he said. "I try to improve everything and make it my own."

Vipperman will be honored Saturday at Elon University at the annual meeting of the NC Folklore Society.

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