

Fiddlers, storyteller inspired by elders

by Maria Williams
for the Tundra Times

Bill Stevens, Artie Joseph and Stan Peters recently shared with Anchorage audiences the music of the Athabascan fiddlers along with storyteller/artist Charlotte Douthit at the Anchorage Museum of History and Art.

Stevens, one of the best known fiddlers in Alaska, was born in Fort Yukon and was the grandson of Chief Loola.

"I grew up with this music, since my grandfather had a lot of dances and potlatches at his house," he said.

Stevens began to play the fiddle during his youth in Fort Yukon. He has played in almost every Athabascan village in Alaska and has performed many times in Anchorage and Fairbanks.

Stevens is not only a noted musician, but also a teacher. He has taught music and participated in many workshops through the Alaska Council of the Arts Apprenticeship Program and through the Fairbanks School District.

Stevens has a special gift for both performing and teaching.

"I was inspired by my elders. I enjoy what I'm doing and want to pass it on to the younger people," Stevens said recently. He lives in Fairbanks but travels extensively throughout villages and has made two commercial recordings.

The other musicians Stevens plays with are Joseph, sometimes referred to as the "Yukon Troubadour," and Peters of Holy Cross.

Joseph was born in Tanana and

started playing guitar while he was a teen-ager, then he moved to Fairbanks for work.

After retirement, Joseph began to play frequently, doing more professional performances, including the Athabascan Fiddling Festival, held every year in Fairbanks.

REVIEW

Joseph learned a lot from his mother, who was a singer/guitarist and from his father, who was a fiddler. Growing up in a musical household inspired him to play. Joseph especially enjoys playing for dances and with other musicians. He has taught guitar and travels extensively throughout the lower Yukon area playing for dances and other special events.

Peters began playing guitar in Holy Cross when he was just a boy. He learned to play from other musicians and didn't have formal music lessons.

"My mother played the harmonica and accordion. She still does," he said.

His mother, Axinea Peters, influences his pursuit of music. Peters has participated in all of the annual Athabascan Fiddling Festivals and has recently picked up the violin.

"Artie and Bill have been my biggest influences, and that is why I enjoy playing with them so much," Peters said.

The three musicians entertained many visitors who attended their performances at the museum.

Athabascan Indians initially were introduced to fiddling when the Hudson Bay Co. established Fort Yukon around 1847. This tradition is celebrated each year at the Athabascan Fiddling Festival held in Fairbanks in November.

An added feature to the Anchorage performances was Douthit, an Athabascan artist/storyteller originally from Chalkyitsik, north of Fairbanks. Douthit has lived in the Anchorage area since the early 1960s.

Oral history and storytelling has always been an integral part of all indigenous societies. Douthit is involved with the Johnson-O'Malley Program and goes to many different schools in Southcentral Alaska sharing her stories.

The magic of the storyteller's communication is in the manner of delivery, and Douthit has an innate ability to capture her audiences with facial expressions, the rise and fall of her voice and in the motions of her

hands as she explains Athabascan customs, culture and stories.

When Douthit speaks about her grandfather's lessons to her while she was growing up or about the traditional lifestyle of Athabascans, the audience can experience the importance of education and learning through oral transmission.

"These stories are not for sale," Douthit said, because they are for passing on to her children and future generations. People often do not understand that one of the dynamics of storytelling is in the presentation — many of these stories cannot be put in words or books because they live and breathe in the words and gestures of the storyteller.

Douthit is very quick to acknowledge her teachers, both her parents as well as her grandfather, Charlie Crow. She learned beading, sewing and trapping from her parents and elders, as well as the gift for storytelling.

"I always say I got my degree from my mother, Julia Peters and my father, Abraham Peters."