For Bob McQuillen, tunesmith and lifter of feet

by David Millstone

Many dancers gathered round in 1989,
to celebrate a birthday — that occasion sure was fine.
But birthdays come and birthdays go,
and when you've had a few,
"There's not much difference 'twixt them all,"
says I to you.
But fifty years, full fifty years, now that's another story.
Playing tunes for fifty years deserves a little glory.
And so we gather once again to eat and talk and play,
To pay a special tribute in a contra dancing way.

He's known by different names to all:
"McQuillen," "Bob," or "Mac,"
His license plate, though, tells the tale —
his nom de truck is "Kwack."
Why do we gather on this night to celebrate this man?
What has he done? Why should we pause?
Who cares about his van?
Is he a cyber-tycoon with technologic skill?
Does he work with flasks and beakers
to create a healing pill?
Is he a politician with a vision bright and bold?
No, he's a dance musician with a story to be told.

Bob grew up outside Boston but then his family moved,
He came to old New Hampshire
and there he found his groove.
'Twas at a dance in Francestown
that he first hit the floor,
He liked to dance, he liked the scene,
and he went back for more.
He was living near New Boston
in the rocky Granite State,
Ralph Page asked him to join his band in 1948.
Or maybe 1947 — do you really, truly care?
Go ask Bob McQuillen. He knows. He was there!
He played for Ralph for forty years,
Duke Miller and the rest,
Those legends of the contra world,
he played for them with zest.
He made friends everywhere he went.
His laugh and steady beat
Encouraged us and welcomed us and lifted up our feet.

Bob's a dance musician, see,
he knows what dancers need,
Rock-solid bass in four/four time —
with him, it's guaranteed.
He favors Johnny Trombly's lick
and teaches it with pride,
At NEFFA and Augusta, all across the countryside.

Bob likes the old New England tunes,

the chestnuts that we know,
But this musician hears things
and his repertoire did grow,
He gets a tune inside his head, then works on it a while,
Then writes it in his notebook, I imagine, with a smile.

His number one was “Scotty O'Neil” way back in ’73,
A simple tune, a keeper. You guessed it — Key of D!
He wrote tunes for his wife and kids,
for April and for Pete,
For Sarah and Deanna at the rate of one a week,
For Jane and all her family, for callers far and wide,
For musicians and for dancers
whom he celebrates with pride,
For Amelia and for Barry, AKA “The Dancing Bear,”
For Dick Nevell and for Dudley; yes, Ted Sannella’s there,
Along with Uncle Ralph, of course, and on and on it goes.
It’s easy to be astonished by all the folks he knows.

Jigs and reels and marches, schottisches and airs,
Waltzes, polkas, hornpipes — his tunes go everywhere.
Ten books of tunes he’s published,
if you’ve been keeping score,
One thousand tunes he’s written, or maybe a few more.

“Being paid to play piano,” said this raconteur supreme,
“Is like...” and here he paused,
“being paid to eat ice cream.”
He’s got a tale for every gig, a joke for every kid,
This doggerel tells only some of the many things he did.

Tunesmith and piano man,
a one-man New England tradition,
We honor you for fifty years of contra erudition,
A legend in your own time! You deserve it, that’s a fact.
Here’s to Bob McQuillen! Congratulations, Mac!

David composed this poem in honor of New England musician and composer Bob McQuillen for a party last year celebrating Bob’s fiftieth season of playing for contra dances. The opening line refers to another party they had ten years ago.

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