

FROM THE SCRAPBOOK
Don Messer Dies at 63 – March 26, 1973
by Rev. Dr. William Randall
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Another NEW YEAR!

From a Scrapbook gathered by Edwin Messer, copied and passed on to me by Ruth Cleghorn Ker is the story of Don Messer who died March 26, 1973. In many ways Don Messer put Harvey on a map of the world.

DON MESSER DIES AT 63

HALIFAX - Don Messer, popular band leader whose way down east music kept Canadian audiences tapping their toes for more than four decades, died here today. He was 63. A native of Tweedside, N.B., Messer organized his first musical group in 1934. Messer, who lived in the Halifax suburb of Rockingham, was pronounced dead on arrival at the Victoria General Hospital at about 9:45 a.m. Hospital officials said he had apparently suffered a coronary attack.

The shy, retiring fiddler, who preferred to have his vocalists and other members of the band take the spotlight first gained prominence with a group of musicians he organized in 1934. Known as the New Brunswick Lumberjacks, the group performed on radio from Saint John.

The original group of 19 went on national radio from CHSJ in 1938. The following year Messer accepted an offer to form a group in Charlottetown, using radio station CFCY as their base. The group, renamed Don Messer and His Islanders, was formed around two of the original members, lumberjack-vocalist Charlie Chamberlain from Bathurst, N.B. and bass player Julius (Duke) Neilson from Woodstock, N.B.

Rae Simmons, a clarinetist from Amherst, N.S. joined the trio in 1940. In 1942 drummer Warren MacRae and guitarist Cecil McEachern, both from Charlottetown, became members of the Islanders and four years later female vocalist Marg Osborne from Moncton became the seventh member. Piano player Waldo Munro from Westville, N.S., was the last to join in 1952.

Chamberlain died in a Bathurst hospital July 16, 1972 at the age of 61. Messer's own career had a period in the classical vein. He studied violin for five years in Boston where he lived with an aunt and uncle. To pay expenses he worked as a busboy in restaurants. Returning to his native New Brunswick in the early depression year of 1930, Messer returned to an old love - old-time music.

Television beckoned in the 1950's after more than two decades of radio popularity. Don Messer's Jubilee, as the group became known on nation-wide television, became an almost instant hit.

The CBC production continued as one of Canada's top 10 television programs for 10 years with choreography and guest artists added in a half-hour package produced weekly in the CBC's Halifax studio.

The CBC dropped the show in April 1969 while it still rated in the top 10. The

network was not specific about its reasons for dropping the country music show. There was mention of a "younger look". Audience reaction was a storm of protest, particularly from the Maritimes and from thousands of Maritimes living in other parts of Canada. One was former Prime Minister John Diefenbaker, a stout fan who demanded that the CBC reverse its decision.

But although the CBC didn't change its mind, the Messer impact on television continued. CHCH-TV in Hamilton made arrangements within a matter of weeks and the Jubilee group began commuting to the Ontario city to tape shows for 21 independent stations in Canada and two in the United States. Funeral services for Mr. Messer will be held here Wednesday at 2 p.m. from Calvin Presbyterian Church.