The Holyoke High School auditorium was filled with the sounds of fantastic fiddlin' last Friday night, Feb. 17 as the Phillips County Arts Council (PCAC) presented an evening with the Scott Woods Band. The five-member ensemble based in Fergus, Ontario, Canada, stirred up a mix of old-time music, virtuosic fiddle playing, step dancing and some jaw-dropping trick fiddling that left an enthusiastic hometown audience laughing, clapping and tapping their feet.

The theme of the show was "Stay Tuned," a reference to the days when radio was king and families would gather around the Philco on a Saturday night and listen to live music broadcasts of their favorite bands. As the lights in the auditorium dimmed, the band launched into "Boil'em Cabbage Down" as Scott Woods came out fiddlin', getting the evening off to a rousing start.

After a creative medley of Jigs and Reels, which included some impressive step dancing by 17-year-old bassist Kyle Waymouth, the band settled into the classic "Tennessee Waltz." Drummer Ben Norris handled the vocals and the combination of his smooth, high, lonesome tenor voice and Woods' warm violin tone transported the audience to a barn dance on a soft summer night when the world was younger and life seemed simpler. When a young girl in a blue gingham dress would rest her head on the shoulder of a handsome young man and waltz the evening away.

The band kicked back into high gear with "Back Up and Push," Bob Wills' "San Antonio Rose" (with Norris on vocals) and "Listen to the Mockingbird," complete with chirps and tweets from Woods' fiddle.

On "Touch of the Master's Hand," Woods took on the role of an auctioneer taking bids on a seemingly worthless antique fiddle until an old gray-bearded man coaxes a beautiful melody from the ancient strings and suddenly its value soars.

To the strains of "Forrester's Clog" and "Black Thorn Stick Jig," Waymouth showed why he has won more than 50 solo step dance competitions. His feet twisted and legs twirled at the knees at almost impossible angles while the clacks from his tap shoes clattered off the walls of the auditorium. The audience broke into spontaneous applause several times during his performance.

On “Donald Where’s Your Trousers?,” Woods marched out from backstage dressed in full kilt regalia and sang the comic Scottish song about a man who wears a kilt instead of pants. Fortunately, the age-old question as to what’s underneath a kilt remains unanswered.

At the end of the first half of the program, guitarist/fiddler Tyler Beckett joined Woods in a twin fiddle duet. Beckett has captured numerous fiddle championships and is a member of the bluegrass group The Chapmans. Beckett and Woods ripped through several up-tempo tunes, fascinating the audience with their synchronized up and down bows.

The band mingled with the talkative crowd at intermission, accepting praise for their performance and autographing CDs that were available.

After intermission, the band continued to lead the audience on a nostalgic journey with the Latin-tinged “Cherry Pink and Apple Blossom White” and an infectious clap-along version of “Alabama Jubilee” that had the crowd doing their best to keep up with the fast and furious tempo.

Beckett, Waymouth and Norris showed their versatility by picking up fiddles and joining Woods in a four-part harmony version of the “Westphalia Waltz.” Anchoring the fiddle quartet on piano was Carolyn Woods. Carolyn is the matriarch of the group, having joined a version of this current band in 1956 when her late husband was at the helm.

Now she is playing with son Scott and grandson Ben Norris—a true musical family legacy.

One of the highlights of the evening was the fiddle quartet’s performance of the classic gospel tune “He.” Many consider the violin the instrument that comes the closest to expressing the sound of the human voice—the joy, sadness and longing. With Woods’ beautiful singing tone on the melody, supported by the other three fiddles in harmony, one could almost hear the reassuring words that “He can calm the tides and the angry sea.”

Using the “Blue Mountain Rag” as his vehicle, Woods displayed some of his trick fiddle techniques that have made him a three-time winner in the Canadian Novelty Fiddle

Championship.

First he bowed the fiddle with a plastic coat hanger, a broom handle and toilet plunger handle. Next, Woods twisted himself into various positions playing the fiddle behind his back, behind his legs, under one leg while balancing on the other foot, and lying on the stage playing the fiddle under his arched back. He capped this amazing exhibition of dexterity by performing a forward somersault from a standing position while playing the fiddle. He didn't miss a beat and the audience roared its approval.

There's an old adage in show business about leaving the audience wanting more. The Scott Woods Band succeeded in this tradition by closing the concert with the quintessential fiddle tune "The Orange Blossom Special." The tune has been called the fiddle player's national anthem, and the band did their patriotic duty, performing a scorching version, complete with train whistle imitations from the fiddle and even a diesel engine drive-by.

A standing ovation from the crowd brought the band out for one more tune "in the Canadian key of 'eh'" as Woods put it, and a wonderful evening of music came to close.

The final PCAC concert is scheduled for Thursday evening, March 8, at 7:30 p.m. and will feature the Street Corner Symphony, a male acapella sextet. The 2012-13 PCAC concert series will begin this fall and will feature another outstanding lineup of entertainment, including The Abbey Road Band, a tribute to the Beatles.

Look for updates on the membership drive this summer, and remember that when a community shows a strong foundation for the arts and an atmosphere where the culture of creativity is encouraged, it simply makes it a better place to live.

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