

John Arcand

Tansi, Boozhoo, Hello. Welcome to the National Music Centre's Speak Up exhibition, celebrating the voices of Indigenous trailblazers who've brought about social change through their music.

As Europeans brought violins to North America, the Métis embraced the instrument, calling it a fiddle, and began playing and making their own songs, often mixing First Nations, Scottish, and French-Canadian rhythms into their own unique songs. These songs also led to the creation of new dances that included jigging and square dancing.

John Arcand is known as a master of traditional Métis fiddling. He has long dedicated his life towards being an educator, performer, and advocate of Métis culture, to promote and popularize a rich musical tradition.

John Baptiste John Arcand was born in 1942, within the Jackson Lake region of Saskatchewan. A fiddle in his hand by the age of six, John began working in logging camps at the age of sixteen, where he earned enough money to purchase his first fiddle. He learned a catalogue of traditional Red River Métis tunes by ear, and quickly gained respect for his musical knowledge and his impeccable sense of timing, a necessity for Métis square dancing and for jiggers.

For over twenty-two years, the John Arcand Fiddle Fest has been held each August on his acreage, south of Saskatoon. It is attended by fans of Métis fiddle music from around the globe. Incredibly, John has released 17 recordings and has composed 500 original fiddle compositions. He's also inspired an audio archive project of traditional Métis fiddle music, with an accompanying written history and sheet music. Although John is now retired from performing, he remains a busy composer, instrument builder, and fiddle teacher to new generations.

The recognition of his musical legacy has not gone unnoticed. Some of the awards he's received over the years include a national Aboriginal Achievement Award for arts and culture, and a Lifetime Achievement Award for his outstanding contribution to old time fiddling from the Canadian Grand Masters in 2003. In 2004 he was awarded the Lifetime Achievement Award in the inaugural Lieutenant Governors' Saskatchewan Arts Awards. Fittingly, John is also the recipient of the Gabriel Dumont Gold Medal, for lifetime service to the Métis, and he has also received the Order of Canada.

Even with all this recognition, John remains humble. He's quoted as saying, "I knew from childhood I would be a fiddler. I love the constant challenge because you cannot ever master the fiddle." John Arcand is an ambassador for social change through his love and passion of Métis music.

I'm David McLeod, thanks for visiting the Speak Up exhibition at the National Music Centre.