

Flat Picking Champ

Garry Stevenson plays a wicked bluegrass guitar

Garry Stevenson, P. Eng., principal geotechnical engineer with Klohn Crippen in Vancouver, started playing the accordion when he was only four years old. It was not until he was about 15 that the folk scene came along and he heard Gordon Lightfoot and Doc Watson. And that was it: he had to play guitar.

Today Stevenson plays a wicked hot bluegrass guitar in the band "5 On a String," and through a number of festivals, music camps, and bluegrass camps he brings many more musicians and fans into the bluegrass fold. (Bluegrass has its roots in Kentucky, and is defined as a polyphonic folk music played on unamplified stringed instruments.)

Stevenson reminisces about growing up in Surrey, B.C.: "We always had music lying around the house. Dad played a little guitar, and Mom played piano and sang. One night a month we had a music night at our house; everyone was welcome friends, neighbours. That was right up until I finished high school and left home."

Although Stevenson has belonged to bands and played music for most of his youth, becoming a musician for a living never occurred to him. He wanted to be a chemical engineer until a geology course inspired him to become a geotechnical engineer.

He talks about his earliest exposure to the bluegrass scene. "I always liked the folk side of Doc Watson, and country. While I was working as an engineer in Saskatchewan, I checked out a festival in Manitoba, and by the 1980s I had a real taste for bluegrass music." He started competing at the Chilliwack Bluegrass Festival in the early 1990s where he won the title of Flat Picking Champion three years running.



"I keep the music pretty much separate from work," says the geotechnical engineer, who has taught hundreds of musicians.

Stevenson has been a member (and past board member) of the Pacific Bluegrass and Heritage Society since 1988. The society has jams, holds workshops and promotes bluegrass music. That's how he started teaching. He teaches full-time for a week a year at one of the two B.C. Bluegrass workshops held at Sorrento in the B.C. Interior. They are attended by about 400 aspiring musicians playing instruments of all types: mandolin, fiddle, banjo, bass and dobro. He also teaches a course at the Moveable Music School, a group of workshops held twice yearly in private homes and limited to six participants to keep the costs down. He usually teaches for a weekend at the Georgia Strait Guitar Workshop's annual summer camp weekend. And, believe it or not, he enters his band in three or more music festivals every summer. He gives workshops at the festivals too. In the last 15 years

he has taught hundreds of guitar players but had never given a private lesson until this interview!

"I keep the music pretty much separate from work," he says, "but I have been known to pick up a guitar and play a few tunes at a company function. I like things as they are, though there is never enough time to do what I want to do. I've been learning the mandolin. In fact, I've been coasting a little on my guitar so I need to get more serious and disciplined with that — I'm learning some swing right now for variation. Music is wonderful because there is always something new to learn."

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