



In the Spotlight...

Marianna Wright Schaffer

by Andrew Kehe



Marianna Wright Schaffer's musical journey began at age 6 when she joined the Beatles, who were invading America at the time.

She was Ringo.

Her all-girlfriend, make believe band didn't last long. Nor did her desire to be Ringo, or a rocker in general.

And aren't local country, blue grass and blues fans grateful? Not that she wouldn't have made a great Beatle, er . . . rocker.

She would have figured it out.

"Seeing the Beatles on Ed Sullivan had significant on me, and yet I played piano," said Marianna, the bass- and violin-playing Blues Jam regular and Acoustic Stew fiddler and crooner.

"I didn't even know I'd be a musician until I was 21. I went to a blues grass festival and loved it and came home saying, 'I want to play that instrument (fiddle).'"

Ringo was just a memory and Charlie Daniels became the man. Despite no formal training,

Marianna got so good over the 1980s and into the 90s that she found herself opening for Daniels, George Jones, Ricky Skaggs among others as a touring member of Matters of the Heart.

She accepted encouragement and advice and had figured it out.

Skip ahead to the late 90s when she discovers how cool it is to play bass. Her church needing one for its praise band provides the motivation to again reinvent herself.

She then gets talked into signing up for a Blues Society Jam in 2010 and uh-oh, now what? Ringo's drum fills were more familiar to her than the blues.

"I had no blues background and very little training. I was terrified!" Marianna said. "To prep for (the jam), I went to YouTube and looked up 'How to play 12-bar blues.'"

It took her maybe a song or two to get solidly in the pocket. Again, she had figured it out, much to set leader Don Judy's delight.

"When it was finally our turn, I remember he would turn around



while we were playing to keep an eye on me and let me know he was listening," she said. "The first few times a smile started spreading across his lips, and by the end he was in full-blown Don Judy smile."

It got Rocky Rothrock's attention too. When an opening for a fiddle player came up with Acoustic Stew, he knew just who to get.

"Marianna is one of the most



playing blues on the bass."

"When I was a newbie, I received direction from others more experienced than I, and I'm still learning. Now, when I play with less experienced players I try to encourage and guide."

talented musicians it's been my pleasure to work with," he said. "She has a beautiful voice and an amazing ear for vocal harmonies, but most importantly, she is a kind and spiritual lady who is great to work with."

That first jam, which Marianna acknowledged came during a very dark period in her life, provided a spark and triggered a true love affair with the jam and the Blues Society of Central Pennsylvania, of which she became president.

"I'm so grateful for the people at the jam who have really welcomed me and encouraged me," she said. "I felt at home, like I was in a safe environment. As a woman and you go to a place like a jam by yourself, it's an awkward situation. I felt very much like I was with family, protected. I knew for a fact that several people were watching my back."

Because she plays violin at church and with Acoustic Stew, Marianna usually picks up the bass when at the jam, and won't hesitate to pay her knowledge forward to newer players.

"I love playing bass," she says. "I love

Marianna's life now as a newly-married, IT systems technologist at Dickinson College (itself a career reinvention), member of two bands, a violin teacher and blues jammer might have turned out quite different had it not been for a tough decision she reached, along with the rest of Matters at Heart, to disband.

They had it goin' on, with a record label, original songs that were getting lots of play in Europe, including one by Marianna, and a tour of Eastern Europe booked. But a severe flood derailed the tour, and when a country label subsequently said they wanted to bring on only the star of the band, forsaking the rest, they decided together to pass. Eventually, they went their own ways.



"We wanted to go on as a unit. That's not how it works in country music," Marianna said.

No regrets. Her devote faith and simple musical pursuits have served her well, including her now seven-year association with Acoustic Stew. Vocal cord paralysis and vocal cord surgery three years ago severely threatened her future as a singer. But again, she's figured out a way to belt out a tune, even though she says the full range isn't quite there.

Was it ever fully there for Ringo Starr? How many times has he had to reinvent himself? The awkward kid from Liverpool finding his way to enormous success in America.

"It Don't Come Easy," Ringo famously wrote.

Maybe it's not so curious that Marianna was drawn to him.

