

At 89, Maine's 'ancient fiddler' proves it's never too late to try something new

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About seven years ago, Southwest Harbor resident Ruth Grierson took a life-changing trip to Newfoundland, Canada, with her daughter, Heather.

After admiring the dramatic landscape of the island, they went to the town of Rocky Harbour to a kitchen party — a traditional social gathering in the Maritime provinces usually held in someone's house with wild, joyous music, dancing and carousing late into the night.

Grierson, a longtime musician, dared to ask the musicians gathered at the party if she could sit in with them and play her fiddle. As a classically trained violinist, she was a bit out of her element in the largely Celtic-influenced Newfoundland music scene, but they let her play all the same.

“They said, ‘Sure, you can play one song. *One* song.’ But once I played they realized ‘Oh, wow, she’s not kidding.’ I’ve been back [to Newfoundland] every year ever since. They call me the ancient fiddler,” said Grierson, with a chuckle. “That’s what really got me hooked.”

The “Ancient Fiddler” is an affectionate nickname for Grierson, who at 89-years-old maintains the playing schedule of a musician half her age.

That experience playing in Newfoundland gave her the confidence to start immersing herself in the music scene of her own island: Mount Desert Island.* Now she’s a fixture at open jams and contra dances all over Hancock County, from playing Celtic jigs and reels at the Monday night jams at Sips Cafe in Southwest Harbor, to accompanying dances in Gouldsboro and Winter Harbor with the Sheep Island Rovers.

But Grierson's age is really just a number for her. She's gregarious, good-humored and active. She walks through the coves and forests of MDI almost every day, paying close attention to the cycles of seasons, and the flora and fauna in her path. She travels every year with family. She maintains a large circle of friends, mostly in person, but also on Facebook.

And two or three nights a week, she plays music, sometimes late into the evening. Not always Celtic, either; sometimes folk or blues, and even occasionally a rock song.

"You're never too old to learn new things. I'm getting to learn some blues. Brian [Kupiec] is my guru when it comes to rock n' roll. It's not really my favorite, but then he gets me playing," said Grierson of Kupiec, host of the Sips open jam. "I'm a pretty open minded person."

Grierson was born in 1927 in New Canaan, Connecticut. Growing up, she learned to play the violin, as well as piano, cello and accordion. She also encountered her other great passion in life, beside music: the study and appreciation of the natural world, a love passed onto her by her mother, who was an amateur naturalist.

It's a passion that's never left her. She's written a newspaper column about nature on MDI for more than 40 years, first for the Bar Harbor Times, and now for the Mount Desert Islander. She has also published four books about natural history, with a fifth, "Living on the Edge," a book written with Tom Vining, about tidepools and life along the seaside in Maine, coming out this summer.

"I'd have gone to college to be a naturalist, but back then, women didn't go to school for that sort of thing. That was a man's field. Women were secretaries, they were nurses, or they were teachers. Maybe a waitress. Those were your options. You couldn't do anything else," she said, bristling a bit. "So I went to teacher's college."

After graduating in 1949, she taught music in schools in upstate New York, and married Stanley O. Grierson, a fellow naturalist, photographer and taxidermist, who passed away in 1992.

Seeking a slower, more rural way of life, the couple moved with their two children to MDI in 1972. There, Stanley Grierson taught at College of the Atlantic, and later co-founded the George B. Dorr Museum of Natural History. Ruth Grierson formed a classical music group, the Teahouse Trio, with pianist Marilyn Dolliver and cellist Mary Abbot, and taught piano and violin to elementary and middle school students across the island. Grierson still has violin students, though they're mostly adults these days.

Before her reinvention as one of the island's most popular musicians, Grierson wasn't entirely a novice when it came to non-classical music. Not long after she moved to Maine, she began to play piano with Ralph Stanley, the renowned Southwest Harbor boat builder, who is also a lifelong country and Appalachian music lover and player. Stanley taught her the basics of those styles, and for more than 25 years they played together intermittently around the island in a group called the Country Strummers.

It's not too big of a leap to go from country music to Celtic music, however, and after that illuminating experience in Newfoundland, Grierson decided that at age 82, she'd start going to open mics. The eclecticism of the music at jams like that was a little intimidating for Grierson, but a friend gave her some good advice.

"I was always afraid to try at first, because I was afraid I'd make a mistake," said Grierson. "But [Ashley Bryan, the great artist out on Islesford](#), told me, 'If you make a mistake, just turn it into something positive.' I do that with music. He does it with art."

Mark Kanter, a guitarist and harmonica player who performs under the name Bluesboy, is one of those musicians who regularly encounters Grierson at gigs all over the island.

"She is everywhere now. She decided to get out and play, and make this a serious part of her life. Everybody knows Ruth. I don't know if I'll get as far in life as she has, but I'd like to have that zest," said Kanter. "Just because you get older doesn't mean you have to act old. I don't think I'm alone in saying that she's one of my heroes."

"I get asked to play all the time. Everybody wants to hear music. The music scene is alive and well here. There's never a shortage of places to play," said Grierson. "I just love the Celtic music. It's great fun, and it's happy music. You don't have to be a great star to get started. You can just slap your hand on your knee and you're part of the group."

Grierson had a heart operation last year, and now has a cow valve pumping blood through her body. She can't climb MDI's many mountains anymore, however, which is something she did right up until her surgery. She still walks as much as possible, though, and returned to playing gigs just a few weeks after she got out of the hospital. She went back to Newfoundland last year, and she'll go again this year.

"One of the songs I play is called 'The Love Song of a Cow,' which is my tribute to my cow," said Grierson. "The doctors say I can't go up mountains anymore, but I can walk flat trails. And I do, regularly ... I live alone. I can do whatever I want, usually."

There is no slowing down for Grierson, as far as she's concerned. The thought hasn't even really crossed her mind.

"I don't intend to slow down. Maybe when I'm 100," said Grierson. "I just hope I live to be 100, because there are a lot of things I want to do."

** [Note: actually, Ruth has been playing for dances on MDI for many decades.]*