

Blackburn, Max

'I get a real kick out of it'

Max loves his

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music

By Dan Hinde

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His hair might be grey now and he doesn't have the energy he once had, but one aspect of Max Blackburn's character remains unchanged — his love for music.

When he's not performing with the Quinte Living Centre Harmonica Band or playing solo at any number of functions, Blackburn is probably in his apartment at the Quinte Living Centre entertaining himself or a friend or two.

Though blind, the 69-year-old Picton native is quite versatile musically; he sings, plays guitar, organ and piano and — although he doesn't own one — french horn, his favorite.

"This is just what I've always done, play music," says Blackburn. "I love to play music. I get a real kick out of it...it seems to be the kind of recreation I like."

Judging from his busy schedule of engagements — sometimes three gigs a week — Blackburn shows no sign of slowing down.

"I might be a senior, but I don't feel like retiring."

He has been playing music since childhood and he credits his father for inspiration to take piano lessons as a boy.

Despite his blindness, he seemed to take to piano naturally.

"My dad, he bought this Heintzman piano and Mrs. Williamson, the music teacher from Picton, she'd come out and give us lessons," he recalls. "As soon as my brothers and sisters would play — and they'd be playing with the notes (music) — I'd sit down and play what they played without the notes."

"The very first tune I picked out with one finger was Old Black Joe."

Blackburn worked on his skills and was later able to study music while attending the former Ontario School for the Blind in Brantford.

"It was a wonderful place for a person like me to go," he says. "They really did teach you a lot about music. If you really want to take up music seriously, then you'll want to learn elementary and primary theory and counterpoint."

"We had pianos, a pipe organ and a 125-piece symphony orchestra. We formed our own dance band."

It was while playing with the orchestra that he acquired a passion for the french horn, an instrument he says "can blend in with any other instrument and sound beautiful."

It was also while attending the school that he learned musical braille, a skill that he says is uncommon today. "I'm one of the few who knows it. Not too many people can use it today."

Blackburn says musical braille might sound difficult because it requires the musician to memorize the music before performing. "But if you have a talent for music then you know when your part comes in automatically."

He continued to play music after graduating from school and, though he has sometimes had to work day jobs to make ends meet, he has always been able to earn a decent living with a vocation he enjoys. "Playing those clubs at night...that's what makes it even more enjoyable."

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