

Max Tillman-South Georgia Fiddler and Bluegrass Ambassador

Growing up as a five year old in rural South Georgia, little did Max imagine that his musical reach would extend to Alabama, let alone Europe, Asia, and Australia. Mention the name Max Tillman in Georgia and Florida and invariably the response is, "He's one of the finest guys and fiddlers I know." In these days and times, people of all stripes unanimously agree that our military veterans should be revered and honored, especially one as patriotic as Max Tillman.

Max Tillman was born in Moultrie, Georgia on January 3, 1930, to Mr. Marion J. Tillman and Rosa Lee Harvey Tillman. Max had five brothers and two sisters. His sister Willie Dora Harbin who lives in Coolidge and Max are still close. Max grew up in a farming family which farmed tobacco, corn, and any kind of vegetables. All brothers were required to help in the family farm life. From the book of the family tree the "Tilghmans" originated from England and their family crest found its way from England to Moultrie, Ga. - SPES ALIT AGRICOLAM., which translated from Latin to English means, "Hope Sustains The Farmer."

Tillman's earliest memories of fiddle music was watching old time fiddle players who played mostly single string square dance tunes around south central Georgia. Max realized the music was prettier when two strings were in harmony. Max's close by cousin L.D. Strickland, was visually impaired and an excellent fiddler., and he helped Max hone his fiddle skills. Uncle Homer Harvey also was a big influence on Max's early fiddling. As a boy Max played his Brother Buddy's fiddle. At age seven Max's Dad gave him his first fiddle and Max recalls, "I became independent to anyone who had other instruments, and I did my thing which was to play good double notes as much as I could learn. I also played a mandolin which made it easy for me to switch to fiddle. At that time I didn't know a quality from a non-quality fiddle, but I knew you had to tune them perfectly and I had the ear for it."

Max played for old time square dances and the events also had round dancing, buck dancing, and early jitterbug. Starting at age five Max was allowed to play rhythm on tenor banjo, guitar, or mandolin. Lead was not permitted until Max turned age seven. He couldn't be denied, as his fiddling prowess blossomed. Max recalls, "Double stops were really appreciated by the dancers because of the beautiful melody from two strings. I became more self-taught cause I payed close attention to traveling fiddlers especially Gene Mills who played with the Twilight Playboys, and he had a barn dance in Moultrie, Ga., and occasionally would have great fiddle players passing through. Max especially recalls Boudalo Bryant and others who were extremely good fiddle players. "I never missed a chance to go to the barn dance and listen to them until the last note. I learned notes and melody and got the chance to improve my music."

At age fifteen Max left home and moved to Haines City, Fla. and his uncle put hhim with a band that he was fiddling for and Max took his spot because of his uncle's business

obligations. Max remembers the first band was with Paul Kersey, in south central Florida. "We played all kinds of dancing music, boogie, and square dancing, round dancing. I played with him for two years, and I moved back to Georgia and joined the Army. This was in 1948. I took my basic training and a supply school and was sent to Sasebo, Japan. After six months General Mac Arthur's special services officer decided to have a far east Hillbilly band contest for the all branches of the Armed Forces. In the 34th Infantry regiment, I had a little band with Charles Newton (Ky.), Clifford Louvin (Az.), Lester Nelson (SD), and Bernard Golding (WV). We entered the contest and played against 23 bands and won third place. A short film of our band was shown in all military installations around the world." The band went on tour in early 1950 and the the Korean War broke out. The 34th Infantry was the first to enter the war. With sadness, Tillman recalled, "Of the 1900 men of the 34th. 184 made it out without being killed, captured, missing, or extremely wounded in action. Max was awarded the Combat Infantryman Badge on July 3, 1950.

In 1951 Max was discharged, went home to Georgia, married and started a family. Max re-enlisted, was stationed in Mobile, Al., and played in local honky tonks. Off to Alaska for a four year stint, Max started another band and they were awarded winner in country music class. Max had his own TV show in Anchorage. Max met Tom Morgan and Paul Mullins. Paul only wanted to play bluegrass so Max and another fiddler played twin fiddles in the geo-popular group which still retained the names Twilight Playboys. Max, Tom, and Paul became good buddies.

In 1969, Max was stationed in Vietnam and started another group this time named *The Country Grunts* and they maintained this band name when returning to the U.S. in 1970. In 1971 Max retired from the military and played all around Florida and Georgia with various combinations of budding bluegrass groups, because the hippie movement liked bluegrass music, and Max played at the earliest festivals including Miller's Landing Festival, where Skaggs and Rice were the headliners.

Max was the fiddler for Bottom Dollar Boys and back-up for Big Bend Ramblers, and often was recruited for local and national gigs, some of which included Spirit of the Suwannee festivals and indoor concerts, playing fiddle as Max Tillman and the BG Boys, at the national square dance championships in Daytona Beach, with Larry Rice and others. Max traveled to Australia at least four times, and was the unofficial U.S. ambassador of bluegrass fiddle. A story by Janice Brown, about the Tillman U.S. and Australia connection was run in the December 1988 issue of BU.

Few South Georgia fiddlers would have people from Australia knocking at their doors, but all who know Max, admire his generous spirit and more than ample southern hospitality. Oftentimes, many famous Australian bluegrass artists visited in the U.S. and would invariably end up at Max's house, on the cove of the beautiful shore of Lake Seminole, Georgia. Max and his fellow friends were often the house band at close friend's Jack Wingate's landing on Lake Seminole. Bass fishing and bluegrass go together like Bill Dance and Martha White. Max remained close friends with the legendary country and bluegrass Grand Old Opry star Curly Fox, who got Max and Tom ,

Morgan's band a gig on the Opry during the Ernest Tubb Record Shop portion of the show. The Osborne Brothers were on the same bill.

Max has always welcomed fellow musicians of all ages and skill levels and treats them like long lost family members. Among his protégés are Owen Saunders who fiddled for Doyle Lawson, James King, and David Davis. Justin Price Reese also grew up hanging with Max at music events. In 2006 Tillman was inducted into the Georgia Country Music Hall of Fame.

Bobby Hicks, world famous fiddler, and his wife met Max at a music event, and they both played fiddle. Bobby recalls, "That's how we became friends. Max is a great fellow and fiddler. We've visited with each other in my home in Marshall, NC, and at his in Bainbridge, Ga." Max always joshes Bobby, "I'm your backup fiddler, just in case you lose your place." Anyone who knows Bobby Hicks, has never seen or heard him lose his time or place. Bobby has made multiple guest appearances at Max and Pat's bi-annual Great Southern Music Festival, in Ochlochnee, Georgia. A number of years ago, Pat bought a large piece of land with a house and fishing pond, and he, Max and friends built a stage, put in RV hookups and started their own festival, which continues to this day. Some of the top bluegrass bands on the circuit have played that festival at Pickers Paradise Park.

Bob Langston, (legendary North Florida fiddler for the Big Bend Ramblers) and Max would twin fiddle many traditional fiddle tunes and the melody combined with harmony would always be true to the original version. Late at night, there might be some letting go of that backwoods fiddling and the tune would be varied with a twist of old southern flavor. To this day, David Langston, Bob's son, carries on that tradition when he and Max play twin fiddles at numerous venues.

While the faces, stylings, instruments and songs of today's best bluegrass groups are to be both admired and enjoyed, bluegrassers know and respect the roots of the music. With an absence of today's high-tech instructional materials, learned the hard way, which back then was the only way. Bluegrass music is so much better off because of people like Max Tillman, because he grew up in bluegrass as it was just getting started. So here's to Max Tillman, a true BG ambassador and American patriot.

Lee Kotick is a retired educational consultant for programs for students with disabilities. He played guitar in Bottom Dollar Boys and the Larry Rice Band.