



Jess Hayden, photo by Art Wachter



Kulu Mele African Dance and Drum, photo by Clay Shawa



Nordic Fiddlers, photo by Karen Hostetter



A6Folk, photo by Randy Flaum

## THAT'S ALL, FOLK!

*After a 20-year run, Jess Hayden passes the Susquehanna Folk Music Society baton to a new generation.* | BY JEFF FALK

“Folk”—now there’s an interesting word. “Folk” can refer to a genre of music. “Folk” can refer to a style of dance. “Folk” can refer to a way of life.

“Folk” means people, but it can also refer to a specific type of people, like “that Jess Hayden sure is some good folk.”

For Hayden, “folk” is a mindset.

On the final day of 2021, Hayden will retire as the executive director of the Susquehanna Folk Music Society. She leaves behind a 20-year legacy of fundraising, event proliferation and, generally, enhancing the folk culture in and around the Harrisburg area.

A self-proclaimed introvert, Hayden’s a people-person who has stepped outside of her comfort zone, all in the name of “folk.”

“The concept of ‘folk music’ is really up for debate,” Hayden said. “It’s the people. What we prize is translated folk music that’s been handed down from person to person. It’s music of the people, but it can be modernized. Folk music tells stories so we can learn about different people in different times.”

Hayden’s successor will have a tough act to follow.

Recently, following an extensive search and hiring process, musician and writer Peter Lee was selected to succeed Hayden. Lee will be charged with taking

SFMS to the next level, much in the same way that Hayden did at the turn of the 21st century.

“Part of the reason I chose this time to retire is that the Susquehanna Folk Music Society is headed in a great direction,” said Hayden, a 65-year-old resident of New Cumberland. “It’s super exciting. We have this influx of new, young people, and it’s very intentional. There’s a ton of interest in folk music by younger people. They are very respectful of the folk music tradition.”

Through Hayden’s guidance, the society has grown its membership to an all-time high of 600 members. SFMS sponsors over 40 programs and events a year, everything from musical and dance performances to jams and coffeehouse concerts to virtual series and educational programs, and, of course, the Susquehanna Folk Festival—all performed by nationally and internationally recognized, as well as local and regional, artists.

Headquartered in New Cumberland, the society does not operate its own venue. Instead, concerts and shows are performed at venues across central Pennsylvania, including locally at Fort Hunter in Harrisburg.

“What makes it unique to me is that the performances are generally very intimate types of experiences,” Hayden said. “There are a lot of conversations from the stage to the audience. It

feels like folk artists like that community aspect. The performances are so relaxed, and I really like to see the interaction between the artists. I love the history and that it’s so connected to the past.”

Like all genres, folk music is unique. However, it differentiates itself with the wide range of instruments used to perform it, as well as its links to traditions and heritages from around the world. Included in the genre are disciplines like the blues, Celtic music, Balkan music, Appalachian music, traditional African music and Hayden’s personal favorite, Jewish klezmer music.

But the true power of folk music may emanate from its ability to connect cultures.

“I think about that all the time,” said Hayden, of music’s role in our society. “I think music just reverberates very profoundly in all of us. We’ve all had the experience of hearing music. It just touches our core like very little else does. It moves us. It activates so many feelings. It transports you.”

### FOLK COMMUNITY

A group of like-minded volunteers founded the nonprofit Susquehanna Folk Music Society in 1985. Initially, Hayden became involved as a volunteer and a board member before becoming the sole employee in 2001.

“Folk music is an unusual genre in that you don’t get to hear it every day,” Hayden said. “Our volunteers are people who are just glad to find it. We feel everyone has a strong commitment to folk music. Through everyone’s support, this works.”

First and foremost, Hayden is a musician—a well-rounded and experienced musician. Her instrument of choice is the clarinet, which she has played as part of the Old World Folk Band and the West Shore Symphony Orchestra.

“Growing up, the question wasn’t whether or not you wanted to play an instrument, but which one,” Hayden said. “My father was a music teacher who could play just about anything, and he was a lover of folk and traditional music.”

One day, he decided to put together a family folk band called the Dalton Family Singers.

“That was my introduction to music,” Hayden said. “I learned a lot and always had an interest in folk music.”

Certainly, Hayden’s pending retirement will alter her lifestyle. While it will allow her to entertain other interests and pursuits, she cannot imagine an existence that does not include folk music.

“The first thing I want to do is go on a little trip because I think a period of separation would be helpful,” Hayden said. “I want to do some volunteer work and continue my relationship with Susquehanna Folk Music Society.”

After all, SFMS has not only been her work life, but her social life, too.

“We call it ‘the folk community,’” she said. “That sense of finding each other is a very strong motivation. It’s something I’m really passionate about.”

*For more information on the Susquehanna Folk Music Society, visit [www.sfmfolk.org](http://www.sfmfolk.org).*

# CHRISTKINDL, REKINDLED

*Mifflinburg's annual  
German Christmas celebration  
is back, with schnitzel,  
strudel and song.*

BY STEPHANIE KALINA-METZGER

**Y**ou could say that Joannah McGregor is a Teutonophile.

The Mifflinburg resident met her husband on an airplane in India. He was Austrian, working as the export manager of a German company. This twist of fate took her to Germany, where she spent 20 happy years immersed in the culture before returning to her hometown.

"I learned that Mifflinburg was looking for ideas to emphasize the town's German heritage," McGregor said. "A tour bus was going to be in the area, and they needed one more event to keep the bus in the area for an entire day."

McGregor offered up the idea of a market that would replicate outdoor Christmas markets in Germany. The suggestion, she said, was met with skepticism. Town officials asked, "What vendors are going to stand there for three days and freeze?"

Determined, McGregor spent time explaining the popularity of the Christkindl Market in Germany. Eventually, she convinced the powers-that-be to give it a shot.

"It was like pulling teeth," she said.

Ultimately, she was given permission to close one block. "Now we're in our 32nd year and still going strong," she said. "Officials from Bethlehem, Pennsylvania showed up one year to get a few tips from us."

Each year, organizers choose a theme based upon a German or Austrian town. This year's theme is Cologne and the three kings, since the Cathedral of Cologne is said to house the bones of the three kings, she said.

McGregor will be onsite to give a talk about the theme and the traditions and history of Christkindl Market on each day of the three-day event, which is held this month.

"In the beginning, the townspeople would bake items or work on and sell a craft, and they discovered that, if they stood around a church, the people would buy something from them," said McGregor.

Today, the event spans two-and-a-half blocks and attracts 8,000 to 10,000 people each year.

## FOOD & SONG

This year, the event will be comprised of 125 vendors. According to Matthew Wagner, Christkindl Market president, organizers begin planning the previous January.



*Mifflinburg Christkindl Market*

"Half of our vendors will be artists, crafters and gift vendors, and the rest will sell food like strudel and schnitzel," he said.

He added that one church will serve a sauerkraut dinner with pork, mashed potatoes and bratwurst. Local firefighters will offer a new food item this year—German crepes.

Wagner, who is a retired band director, coordinates all the musical performances.

To kick off the event, children will participate in an opening parade on Thursday, Dec. 9, at 5 p.m., which will feature St. Nicholas, a high school band and other participants. On Friday evening, second-graders will participate in a lantern parade.

Wagner said that the children will sing a traditional German lantern song derived from St. Martin's Day. St. Martin's Day is a religious observance in Germany that is popular with children and is dedicated to St. Martin of Tours to celebrate modesty and altruism. At the end of the parade, children will march onto a stage and sing Christmas carols.

Those who can't make it for the first two days needn't worry about missing a parade since a closing parade, featuring jolly old St. Nick, will take place as the event wraps up.

Wagner said that last year's cancellation led to great disappointment, from the children who looked forward to the annual event to the businesses in town.

"I am friends with a statistician who moved back to town, and he gathered the information from the businesses," he said. "He discovered that some make more in these three days than they do in a couple of months."

## WHILE THERE

Attendees may want to explore additional attractions while in the area.

The Buggy Museum, located on 598 Green St., is known as the only intact 19th-century buggy factory. Guests can also tour the buggy-maker's family home, along with a carriage house and showroom filled with buggies and sleighs. Reindeer also will be on hand for children to enjoy.

The Frederick Gutelius House Museum, located on 432 Green St., also will be open during the event. The log house dates back to 1803 and was owned by the first justice of the peace of Union County.

Finally, there's the Rusty Rail Brewing Co., where customers can enjoy food like pasta Alfredo, crab cakes, salads, fish and chips, burgers and more. Rusty Rail's 15-barrel brewhouse turns out some 8,000 barrels of beer per year, in many different styles.

Wagner said that he looks forward to rekindling the spirit of Christkindl Market.

"The Christkindl Market board and community volunteers are excited to again bring the Mifflinburg Christkindl Market to life as an important part of our community's Christmas celebration," he said. **E**

*Mifflinburg's Christkindl Market celebration takes place Dec. 9 to 11. To learn more, visit [www.oldchristkindl.com](http://www.oldchristkindl.com).*

*Photos courtesy of Mifflinburg's Christkindl Market.*



## SOUL'D OUT SHOW

*The Singer's Lounge  
draws crowds, gives  
platform to budding  
R&B artists.*

BY MADDIE GITTENS



**T**here's this moment in the new movie "Respect," about soul queen Aretha Franklin, as she sits around the piano with her sisters.

In the film, Franklin starts singing, and her sisters come in with the background ("just a little bit"), and, all of the sudden, you know exactly which famous song is coming to life in front of you.

I felt all the magic of that moment when members of the Singer's Lounge began rehearsing the backup vocals for that same song, "Respect," in Airis Smallwood's living room on a Monday night. They weren't even singing the lead for the song, but the soft, soulful background notes were enough for me to realize there were some big voices in the room.

But that's something that a lot of people have already discovered, because the Singer's Lounge has been drawing crowds and making fans since 2016, when Smallwood decided it was about time Harrisburg had an R&B music scene.

"I felt like there was nothing for singers to do," Smallwood said. "If you weren't singing in church or karaoke, there was no in between, no real platform to get on stage."

At the time, Smallwood mainly sang in church, accompanying up-and-coming gospel artists. She started pulling together a group including other local singers she knew. Soon, the Singer's Lounge—a collective of local R&B, gospel and soul artists—formed and performed their first show to a packed house at River City Blues Club on Cameron Street.

The seven core members of the Singer's Lounge primarily sing backup for their shows, typically held once a month on Sunday nights at H\*MAC in Harrisburg. For the lead voice, they bring in local singers. The group helps each artist choose a song, rehearse with the band, and they even give lessons on stage presence.



Airis Smallwood

"I like that it gives artists a platform to build an audience," said Phebe West, known to Singer's Lounge members as the "mom" of the group. "So, for somebody who lives on such-and-such street who nobody knows, because they're performing at Singer's Lounge, now there is an audience that gets to know them."

### TIGHT-KNIT TALENT

Smallwood attended college outside of Philadelphia and would often travel into the city for its music scene.

At the time, the Black Lily movement was popular in that city. It was a brand that promoted mainly female neo-soul singers from underrepresented and minority groups. They performed at the entertainment venue, The Five Spot, weekly. Smallwood remembers watching Marsha Ambrosius, who would later become one half of

the R&B duo Floetry, perform. She loved the idea of seeing rising artists on stage.

"That's something major cities had that we didn't," she said.

Smallwood designed the Singer's Lounge off of her inspiration from the Black Lily. And if she learned one thing from those nights spent watching performers in Philly, it was that the crowd went crazy for cover songs.

Turns out, the Singer's Lounge crowd feels the same way about hearing their favorite classics sung live. At their October show, which featured classic soul songs, audience members often cheered, swayed and gave standing ovations for their favorites.

Each Singer's Lounge event is themed, and it's not some loosely tied concept, Smallwood said—they go all out. Performers choose songs that fit with the theme. There's been "Black Broadway," "New