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Pam Chickering Wilson

Steve Meisner of Whitewater has been inducted into the International Polka Association Hall of Fame. He is shown above performing at the 2018 Gemuetlichkeit Days in Jefferson.

Prince of polka! Whitewater's Steve Meisner named to Polka Hall of Fame

By Jennifer Eisenbart
Special to the Union

WHITEWATER — The names are pretty famous in the world of polka: Lawrence Welk, Myron Floren, Lawrence Duko ... even Joey Miskulin, a well-known accordion player.

All have been inducted into the International Polka Association Hall of Fame.

But it's one other name — that of Verne Meisner — that inspires Steve Meisner the most, and on Saturday, Steve followed his father, Verne, into the IPA Hall of Fame.

"I grew up watching him," the

Whitewater man said Thursday, before playing the entire weekend at a number of different Wisconsin events, including the Walworth County Fair and the Oak Creek Lions Fest.

"I grew up in that realm first," he added, saying that his father was his biggest hero. "And then when I started learning the music world around me, I started picking up all these great musicians."

It was a poignant weekend for Steve Meisner, who had been slated to perform at the Lions Fest before learning of the award. After

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exploring flight options to Buffalo for the Hall of Fame induction, he chose to stay in Wisconsin for the Oak Creek event.

"Funny story: I had to do my acceptance speech for this via video, because I'm working all weekend," Steve said. "I could not get a flight to Buffalo and back in time to finish my gigs.

"I couldn't disappoint them," he added, referring to his polka fans. "I would not even try to let them down."

The lesson of putting the crowd first, along with the importance of entertainment, is one of many Steve picked up from his father, who was inducted into the IPA 30 years ago this year. Ironically, Steve missed Verne's induction as well, as he was working with his own band that weekend in 1989.

The relationship between the two is what brought Steve into the world of polka, and inspired his long stay in it. Steve's biography reads like a "who's who" of polka, with multiple recordings and other Hall of Fame inductions (www.SteveMeisner.com).

But more than anything else, Steve said, his success is due to his father — and his father's legacy.

"I'm not as talented as he was, or as in tune (with the different styles)," Steve explained. "I haven't had to be, because I grew up under Verne Meisner. I've grown up in this business being established."

Steve explained that his father made his career knowing what he had to play, and how to make that music accessible to the public. Steve called it the "Meisner Magic," and that his father had a gift for taking tunes and turning them into something popular, using the classic polka styles to build his reputation.

"He never believed you can't entertain everyone," Steve said, adding the Verne often would share many different styles of polka to a performance.

"Even my dad, he'd used influences of Mexican style," Steve said. "He never believed you can't entertain everyone."

"My generation, it's a different generation," he added. "We've already melded (musical styles)."

Steve said his father was a "genius" at writing music, writing most of his own. In fact, when Steve was a teenager and working on

his own song, Verne told him, "if they can't whistle it, it's never going to be a hit."

"And yet, some of the songs I'm best known for are the songs you can't whistle," he added with a laugh. "It was the direction the industry was going into."

For Steve, who plays the accordion and is the main vocalist for the Steve Meisner Band, that gave him the opportunity to broaden his own horizons. He said that he sings a lot of American music, "not just polka music," even bringing some Frank Sinatra and Stevie Wonder to the stage.

He plays a MIDI accordion, which has the keyboard as well as the traditional buttons, and uses it to bring a wider variety of sounds to the stage.

"All of your external sounds ... everything is sampled," Steve said. "It's not just a reed instrument. It's also a MIDI keyboard, so I play the bass instead of having a bass player."

**"I've made my living
making people happy."**

— Steve Meisner

It has paid off. In addition to the various Hall of Fame inductions, the Steve Meisner Band has been named the IPA "Band of the Year" and Steve was awarded "Vocalist of the Year."

The Hall of Fame induction, though, has given Steve a chance to put his own career into perspective.

"It's been around for over 50 years, and this particular organization has been doing the Hall of Fame awards for those 50 years, and all of the greats have been inducted.

"All of the greats are in it," he added. "All the big cats that made polka music famous."

"I appreciate the awards, and I'm honored," Steve said. "Awards are very important, but ... I'm not an awards guy."

To Steve, it's about the performance.

"I've made my living making people happy," Steve explained. "I spend my life doing what my father did, which is what I learned from."

"You go to your gig, and you do your best to make everyone happy," he added. "That's more important to me than awards."