

# THE FOUNDER OF FIDDLE






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# Violinist Casey McGrath stepped off the beaten path and blazed the trail to her own brand of music

By Stephanie Jaquins ♦ Photos by Amanda Wilson of Bright Soul Photography

# ROCK!



**C**asey McGrath's genre-spanning violinist show, Fiddlerock!, materialized when she stopped worrying about checking off life's boxes and followed her intuition.

By her late 20s, McGrath had a doctorate degree and was married to her high school sweetheart. While accomplished in her career, the concerto soloist and orchestral musician didn't feel fulfilled.

"For audiences, if you looked at me from the outside you'd be like, 'Man, she's living the dream.' But it was not that," McGrath recalled. "I really started to think about what I really wanted to do and if I wanted to play symphonies for the rest of my life."

Before Fiddlerock!, she also served as a chamber musician, section player, tango violinist and as college music faculty.

When she played her last orchestra job, she remembers looking out at the front row. The audience seemed to be asleep.

"I was like, 'What am I doing with my life?' I didn't go to music school for people to sleep."

On top of that, she found teaching frustrating and unfulfilling. Similar to herself at that age, she said students lacked discipline.

"I felt it was a losing situation to make an impact the way I wanted to," she said. "I always thought I could go into teaching and help other people do what I didn't get the opportunity to do sooner."

In 2014, McGrath got her skydiving license – that was her first step toward Fiddlerock!

SkyDive Chicago in Ottawa hosted a talent show for free jumps, and she performed "Crystallize" by violinist Lindsey Stirling.

"I played it, and everybody liked it and I thought that was really fun. You could react. They could have a drink in their hand and they could vocalize how much they liked what they

were hearing as opposed to just sitting there in silence in this stuffy auditorium," she said.

She played a pop/rock violin show once a year, and performances started to grow. Shortly after her marriage ended, she was rehearsing for a show and met A.J. Johnson, who was running the event. They talked the whole night and have been together since.

He's the reason Fiddlerock! ultimately started. About a year and a half later, McGrath was playing a Christina Perri song and he heard it.

"He was like, 'That's so cool that you can just play that,'" referring to her ability to play by ear, which is how she taught herself. "People would love that."

It occurred to her she didn't have to abandon her technique, because she liked how classical music pushed her to be technically sound and pushed her skill set.

"I wanted the violin to still be a technique, but to still be very on point," she said. "I wanted to keep pushing myself. I just didn't want to use concertos and symphonies to do it."

She started performing pop shows at Shaker's Lounge in Ottawa, playing mostly Stirling's songs and covers as she was also learning to arrange her own music.

McGrath remembered going to a show at Skydive Chicago. On the way there, Johnson stopped to use his tax return to buy a sound system and speakers, and he unpacked them on stage before the show. On the way home, McGrath came up with the name Fiddlerock!

Today, Johnson is her manager and sound and light technician, and he also handles graphic design, video editing, social media and content creation.

McGrath continued to book shows and auditioned for orchestras on the side. She was working with a coach when she realized her heart was no longer in it.

## FIDDLEROCK! SUMMER SHOWS IN STARVED ROCK COUNTRY

- ◆ 7 to 10 p.m. Saturday, June 3, Skoog's Pub & Grill, Utica
- ◆ 7 to 10 p.m. Friday, June 9, Red Dog Grill, Ottawa
- ◆ Saturday, June 10, Family Pride Festival, Ottawa, time to be announced
- ◆ 8 to 11 p.m. Saturday, June 17, Clayton's Tap, Morris
- ◆ 5 to 8 p.m. Wednesday, June 21, Camp Aramoni, Tonica
- ◆ 6 to 9 p.m. Friday, June 30, Grand Bear Resort at Starved Rock, Utica
- ◆ 6:30 to 9:30 p.m. Saturday, July 8, Casa Mia, Ottawa
- ◆ 2 to 5 p.m. Saturday, July 15, Woodsmoke Ranch, Seneca
- ◆ 7:30 to 10:30 p.m. Saturday, July 29, CatsEye Wine Bar, Ottawa
- ◆ 7 to 10 p.m. Saturday, Aug. 5, Lodi Tap House, Utica
- ◆ 5 to 8 p.m. Wednesday, Aug. 16, Camp Aramoni, Tonica
- ◆ 8:30 to 11:30 p.m. Saturday, Aug. 19, Lark & Starling\* at Clayton's Tap, Morris
- ◆ 8 to 11 p.m. Saturday, Aug. 26, Lark & Starling\* at Court Street Pub, Ottawa

For a complete list of shows, visit [fiddle-rock.com](http://fiddle-rock.com).

*\*Lark & Starling is a collaborative project between Casey McGrath of Fiddlerock! and Wesley Schmidt, lead singer of the rock band Abbynorral*

"I was burned out on it," she said. "It became more of an obstacle course than an artistic endeavor."

She discovered she would make a better living performing Fiddlerock! and realized if she was going to commit, she needed to give it 100%.

"I was checking the box. I did that when I married my high school

sweetheart. I was doing the adult thing," McGrath said. "But if I was being honest with myself, I didn't want any of that. I wasn't happy."

So, she gave it all up. Her violin students. The orchestra. The college jobs. Instead, she started driving children with special needs to school.

"What was great about it was that I knew I was doing this for me and I had nothing to prove to anybody, and it gave my brain time to think," she said.

Now that she was able to throw herself into this project, she went from booking a show every couple months to more than 10 shows a month. She has 60 shows booked through October, including Chicago Mayfest.

While she was born and raised in Joliet, her musical roots are in Starved Rock Country. McGrath said she wouldn't be where she is today without the local venues and musicians who supported her.

"All because this community accepted and supported and encouraged us even when the show was just taped together," she said,

CatsEye Wine Bar in Ottawa was one of her first venues, and she remembered the staff's patience amidst technical difficulties. CatsEye's Nate Skoflanc says his customers



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regularly request Fiddlerock!

“Casey is an unbelievable musician whose talent is an absolute joy to watch on stage. Her passion and commitment to her craft is evident when she performs,” Skoflanc said. “Her performances are full of energy, and she really engages the crowd at CatsEye every time she performs.”

Some people walk into a show and see her violin and think the show is going to be bad or boring, McGrath said.

“They’re like, ‘What are you going to do?’ They’re so skeptical, and you just throw down Guns N’ Roses and they’re like, ‘What?!’ And then you throw down Metallica or Ed Sheeran or Katy Perry or Taylor Swift. I do a cover of ‘Free Bird’ that just melts. People just don’t expect that.”

She plays every era and every genre of music.

“There’s also a little bit of novelty hearing that music you love so much on violin,” she said. “I go out of my way that the music is always virtuosic, technically brilliant, the kind of stuff you’d hear at a concerto, but it doesn’t detract from the music itself. I always thought the best artists are the ones who become invisible for their audience.”

McGrath recently turned 40 and wondered if she should have followed this path sooner, but realized she lacked the maturity and discipline to do something at a high level when she was younger.

“I also have to believe that maybe this could be a thing that inspires other women to keep cultivating themselves and reinventing themselves, because I took a leap at 38 when I decided to quit everything and just do this.

“I’m doing this all for the right reasons now. I don’t feel like I’m so fragile like I would have been 10 years ago making sure everyone approved,” she said.

Two years ago McGrath met a 9-year-old girl at a show who, after seeing her perform, started receiving violin lessons. Now 11, she recently came to one of McGrath’s shows again. McGrath gave the girl a shoutout during the performance and gave her a Fiddlerock! sweatshirt after.

“Her face ... would make your heart explode, she was so excited,” McGrath said.

After the show, the girl’s mother said her daughter hasn’t stopped talking about McGrath’s performance and practicing violin.

“That’s what I wanted to do when I was teaching. I wanted those things to happen,” McGrath said. “So funny that when I stopped trying to make those moments happen, they happened.

“I have to believe that when I stopped trying to force myself to be a symphony musician because that’s what you’re supposed to do, I stopped trying so hard, it’s amazing the things that are happening because I’m just being true to myself.”



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