

StepCrew dances into Midland

By Steve Griffin for the Daily News | [0 comments](#)

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The StepCrew will perform at the Midland Center for the Arts as part of MATRIX: MIDLAND.

When traditional Celtic bands and Celtic-inspired rock bands play, step dancers such as Jon Pilatzke and friends often emerge from the wings to add flash and percussion.

"After years of seeing the crowd go crazy over the styles of dance we do," Pilatzke said "we thought: There are so many dance shows, why haven't we explored this?"

The "we" were Jon and his brother Nathan, friend Dan Stacey and champion Irish step dancer Cara Butler.

The "this" became the StepCrew, a dance act with a back-up band, instead of a band with guest dancers. Celebrating three crowd-captivating styles of dance, it will thunder onto the stage of the Midland Center for the Arts Friday, June 10, part of the Matrix festival.

StepCrew features three specialists in distinctive Ottawa Valley step dance, named for the Canadian region in which it originated and known for its flying feet and explosive energy. They're the Pilatzke brothers and their friend Stacey.

Showcasing modern tap are Sarah Uddin and Christine Carr.

Crowning it all is the footwork and stage magic of Butler, a champion of Irish step dance.

The half-dozen, said Pilatzke in a phone interview with the Daily News, tell a story - one you'll have to watch.

"There's practically no speaking," Pilatzke said, "and it's designed that way on purpose. We want our bodies, especially our feet, to tell the story."

The story is how Irish step dance, arms pinned to sides and feet "close to the floor" came to America, splitting off into modern tap in New York City and Ottawa Valley step dancing in Canada's lumber camps.

Providing the music behind the moves is a hard-charging band of world-class musicians Pilatzke says "can create the musical landscapes behind tap dancing on the streets of New York, an Irish session, Old Tyme Canadian step dancing."

Mark Sullivan, six-time Canadian Fiddle Champion, has a masters in education degree and teaches, plays sessions, produces and performs.

Toronto-based guitarist Jeffrey McLarnon is also a singer, songwriter, visual artist and puppeteer. Like several other StepCrew members, he has worked with Quagmyre, Tread, and The Chieftains.

Bassist Ryan MacNeil is also a member of the Cape Breton family band, the Barra MacNeils.

Kirk White earned a bachelor of music degree from the University of Prince Edward Island, and a Masters in Percussion Performance from McGill University in Montreal.

The Chieftains recently added a vocalist, Alyth McCormick, born and raised on the Island of Lewis, one of the Hebrides Islands off Scotland's northwest coast. "We fell in love with her voice, and with her," said Jon. "A year ago she became a fulltime member of StepCrew (too)."

Jon and Nathan Pilatzke grew up in Eganville, two hours north of Ottawa. Nathan, two years older than Jon, started dancing first, at age 5.

"Our mother loved the (Ottawa Valley) dance style," Jon explained. "Nathan was old enough for Cub Scouts or hockey or something, and she wanted something with a cultural influence, so she got Nathan enrolled."

"I would come along, and became infatuated with what my brother was doing, which I guess is what brothers do. At dance/fiddle contests, "We met kids who were doing what we were doing, like Dan (Stacey)." By age 9, Jon was competing in fiddle too.

In the years since, Pilatzke said he, Nathan and Stacey guest-danced and played with countless groups. "You name it, and we probably danced with them." When the chance came about a decade ago to perform with the Chieftains, they faced a new challenge -- blending their Ottawa Valley style with Butler's more purely Irish form of dance. She'd been the Chieftain's principal dancer for 10 years.

"We found the styles really can adapt to each other," Jon said.

So can dancers.

Jon Pilatzke and Butler married in June, in Connamara, the Chieftains playing music for ceremony and reception.

Butler was born on New York's Long Island. "Mother came from Ballyjaunis, County Mayo (Ireland), at 17, married dad, and had three kids. "We happened to live five minutes away from the Irish American Center, and Jean (Cara's sister) started taking ballet and tap (lessons) there. There was a sign on the bulletin board about Irish dancing. To Mom, it was another hour a day the kids would be out of the house."

To Jean and Cara Butler, who each started dancing before they were six, it was the start of world-class careers.

Jean Butler found mainstream fame in her starring role in the original Riverdance production; that's her picture on the cover of the VHS and DVD.

Cara, meanwhile, began winning dance competitions and performing with such established acts as Cherish the Ladies, Greenfields of America, and Solas. With the Chieftains she has appeared on the shows of David Letterman, Jay Leno and Conan O'Brien. She also caught TV eyes with a coffee commercial. (see sidebar)

Nathan Pilatzke, who lives in Ireland and stays busy with several music and dance acts, just finished a tour with Dave Munnelly's band.

Stratford, Ontario-born Stacey, like Jon Pilatzke both a dancer and fiddler, has toured with bands including Seven Nations, Cherish the Ladies, Dervish and Altan.

Uddin has won awards in dance and choreography, and trained in Ottawa Valley step dance, tap, jazz, ballet and hip hop.

Carr graduated from the University of Windsor's BFA Acting Program. She began Ottawa Valley step dancing at age five, later studying ballet, jazz, and tap dancing.

Of him and his brother, his wife and Stacey, Jon Piltazke said, "We're four really good friends who have shared careers in dance and music," quickly expanding that number to include all his StepCrew colleagues.

IF YOU GO:

What: The StepCrew

Where: Midland Center for the Arts

When: 8 p.m., Friday, June 10

Tickets: \$27 and \$30 adults, \$16 and \$20 for students; \$69 for four-ticket family pack

Tickets at: MCFTA Box Office, www.mctfa.org, 631-8250

Act Info: www.stepcrew.com