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Leaping Lizards bush band honoured

The iconic Australian bush band, the Leaping Lizards, has been honoured for more than a quarter century of dedication to the country's heritage roots music with the Golden Fiddle Lifetime Achievement Award.

While the band members might have changed over the years, fiddlers have always featured on the front line. The Lizards are regarded as a leading Australian ambassador band, often being the first Australian music thousands of overseas business leaders and tourists hear at cultural events.

Legendary folk rocker John Schumann recently said of the Lizards "They have a way of singing old and well known songs that bring them to life - effortlessly."

The Leaping Lizards released their first album in 1986, which is today preserved as an historically significant piece of Queensland's musical heritage. A ground breaking album was released in 1989 when they reached the top of their game, having won both the Battle of the Bush Bands and the National Bush Band title in the same year. For years after, the band travelled extensively on the festival circuit and were regulars on TV shows.

Guitar and banjo player and vocalist on that album, Ron Dimmick still holds the Lizards together, with co-players Donna Reynolds and a new fiddler, Hugh Curtis.

The iconic band had nominated in four categories in this year's Golden Fiddle Awards, with Liam Kilpatrick on the fiddle.

They made the finals in three of the categories, but the judging panel agreed unanimously to honour their musical history with the Lifetime Achievement Award.

The Golden Fiddle Award for the best solo fiddler in Australasia was won by Melbourne based classically trained violinist Nigel Maclean.

A double National Bluegrass Champion, Nigel was awarded a scholarship to study jazz at the Berklee College of Music in Boston in 1990 and is now an alumni advisor to the faculty. He has worked with Oscar nominee David Hirschfelder on music assignments on films like Elizabeth, Sliding Doors and Better than Sex.

Phil Rooke, a Sydney music teacher who has developed an innovative string teaching program underpinned by his five-movement Jazz Suite of the Week, took the Golden Fiddle Award for the best fiddle composition.

Equally hotly contested by some of Australia's leading players was the best fiddle teacher category, which resulted in a winning tie for Sydney teacher Andras Racz and Queenslander Emma Nixon. Emma had won the same Golden Fiddle contest last year.

The judges also had difficulty separating two contenders for the Youth Achievement Award, 20-year-old Emma Barlow from Sydney and 17-year-old Ashleigh Dallas from Tamworth. Emma is already a multi-award winning instrumentalist and songwriter, while Ashleigh has recently toured with Kasey Chambers on her Little Bird tour.

An adventurous Bundaberg, Queensland group of four string players whose average age is 14, Quatro, were encouraged with a Highly Commended Award in the youth category.

Best CD by a band featuring a fiddler went to The String Contingent, whose fiddler Chris Stone has travelled widely to explore fiddle music and has played at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival.

Best CD by a fiddler as a soloist was won by previous Golden Fiddle solo winner Marcela Taylor, with her CD 'Move On'.

Popular Gold Coast band of two brothers and two sisters from the same family, The Bostocks, beat a strong group of finalists to take the Golden Fiddle Award for best band featuring a fiddler. They were also nominated this year for two Golden Guitars.

Now in its seventh year, the Golden Fiddle Awards is the only program of its kind in Australasia which showcases both professional and recreational fiddlers across all genres. The awards show, hosted by fiddle legend Pixie Jenkins, has become well entrenched as an alternative feature of the Tamworth Country Music Festival.

Golden Fiddle Chairman, Mark Mitchell, whose company Epoch Musical Instruments helped establish the Awards and is still its major sponsor, said this year's entries proved beyond doubt that fiddle playing was in the very best of hands in this country. "Youth dominates our awards this year, and we also see big innovation from today's fiddle teachers which I feel will lift fiddle playing to new heights, both recreationally and professionally. The judges also note the professional way in which the young musicians have presented themselves and this was taken into account in the selection process," Mark said.

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