MINNPOST

Uncategorized

Chairman of the washboard: Mikkel Beckman builds community around music

by **Jim Walsh**
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Mikkel Beckman and Charlie Parr get ready to rock the acoustic blues at the Dubliner Pub in St. Paul. Credit: MinnPost photo by Jim Walsh

Mikkel Bee (whose real last name is Beckman) stood up on the Dubliner Pub stage on a recent Thursday and told the packed bar, “For the last 500 weeks, I’ve been hosting music on this stage. I met [pub owners] Tom

[Scanlon] and Geri [Connelly Scanlon] in 2013, and that's when we launched this series. We started in July, so this July it will be 10 years."

An appreciative cheer went up, Beckman gave shout-outs to the bartenders and tip-jar minders, then he sat back down and picked up his washboard and brushes and nodded at singer/guitarist Charlie Parr, his longtime partner-in-folk-blues and songwriter guest for this edition of the Acoustic Thursday Happy Hour. And off they went, gliding into a slow-burn blues that filled the bar with old-timey music bliss and the sound of Beckman-Parr clacking and picking their way down University Avenue.

After that, at 8 p.m., Parr exited the stage and along came veteran Twin Cities country-folk songwriter Pop Wagner, who joined Beckman for another two hours of free live music, played to yet another grateful folk music audience. For Beckman, it was just another long night of washboard playing and holding down the one-man rhythm slot he's occupied for over a decade with his washboard and drumming chops, and his innate ability to build community and spread good musical cheer wherever he goes.

"The fun of it for me is organizing cultural events, even if they're in a bar," said Beckman, 59, sitting with Parr in the Dubliner's back bar before their gig last Thursday. "It's traditional, but there's a community; there's a culture to it, and it's something worth doing, because it's harder to get people out of their houses with so many other options. It's partly that I want to play music, and nobody wants to go watch this washboard player alone for two hours, but it's also giving players the opportunity to perform locally in a low-key way."

Oppressive times being what they are, the DIY approach used by Beckman and others results in music that keeps humankind both human, and kind.

"I've been reading a lot of, and trying to be inspired by, Latin American writers who struggle against dictatorship in the arts," he said. "A lot of my favorite writers have all experienced denial and harassment under those dictatorships, as we kind of dance on the edge of that here in this country. It's sort of like, what gets people out of the house? What brings people together? Can music be both a place of refuge and a place where people meet each other and come out and do normal things like loving live music and hearing a great song? And is there something in that that helps in that regard? I don't know, but I believe that, and I like to make those opportunities happen."

Armed only with his washboard, and the drumsticks, brushes, finger picks and rings he uses to hit it (and a tambourine that acts as his kick drum), Beckman is an anomaly on the Minnesota music landscape: a one-man rhythm section and big-hearted and genial host who has carved out a distinct scene with his Acoustic Thursday Happy Hour series at the Dubliner and, at the 331 Club in Minneapolis, his Workers' Playtime (Tuesdays) and Queen Mab (Sundays) series.

For all three, Beckman is the one unifying element, with the avid music historian acting as drummer for hundreds of area songwriters and guitarists over the years, including Mary DuShane, Mike Munson, Molly Maher, Robert Wilkinson, John Louis, Pat Donohue, Dan Israel, Erik Koskinen, Paul Bergen, Stephanie Was Was, Dakota Dave Hull, Doug Collins, Becky Kapell, Eric Gardiner, yours truly, and many more. Parr could be speaking for the hundreds of songwriters and players, young and old, men and women, who have been accompanied by Beckman's deft beats when he said, just prior to taking the Dubliner stage last Thursday:

"It's been amazing. Mikkel is a unique, kind of organic musician. He listens carefully to what other people are doing around him. He has no damaging musician's ego; he really just wants to play the music that's being played. He inserts himself into the music in a really organic way, so it's really fun to play with him because he's listening to what you're doing. It feels intuitive to me. Honestly, it's not just because we've known each other for 20-odd years. It felt intuitive right away."



[image_credit]MinnPost photo by Jim Walsh[/image_credit][image_caption]Parr and Beckman in the back bar at the Dubliner Pub. The duo met as social workers in the late '90s and have been playing music together ever since.[/image_caption]

It all started when Beckman and Parr met as social workers.

Beckman: “Late 1995, I was working in a homeless shelter at the Harbor Light Center in downtown Minneapolis. It was a special needs unit for men and women with super extra vulnerabilities either because of age or mental illness or physical problems. It was during AIDS when it was becoming a [rampant] disease with a lot of people with HIV. Seventy-six beds, 24/7.”

Parr: “I got hired as an outreach worker, so I took a converted bread van, or whatever the hell it was, around the city, and we fed people who are living outside who couldn’t get into a shelter because of the lack of room. I met Mikkel during my first year working there, we were helping transport [Salvation Army] bell ringers.”

Beckman: “Harbor Lights is run by the Salvation Army and they would hire people from the shelters to work these bell-ringing jobs, so we were just told, ‘You have to drive people around, drop them off with their kettles at the site.’ There was this fleet of vans we were supposed to be in charge of. I didn’t even know Charlie knew how to play guitar, really, for a couple of years.”

Parr: “We both smoked cigarettes back then. So we would hang out and smoke cigarettes together; Pall Malls with eucalyptus cough drops, a good combo. I think we eventually talked about music. We hung out after work. We were into the same kind of music, we both had a deep affection for bands like The Clash and some of the late ‘70s early ‘80s punk.”

Beckman: “But then also that was when [Dave] Ray and [Tony] Glover were doing their [residency] at The Times Bar, and we both loved them, and we started going down to Wednesday’s Fat Jug Band at the Viking [Bar] together. And then ‘Harry Smith’s Anthology of American Folk Music’ was re-released on CD, finally after 40 years of being out of print. That was a big deal.”

Parr: “That changed everything.”

Beckman: “And then we started hanging out at [Charlie’s], and my friend Terry would come over and play harmonica.”

Parr: “We’d play and drink beer, Huber Bock, terrible beer, and Mikkel would keep time on the cardboard box, these beer cases that you’d get a deposit for.”

Beckman: “So then there was a washboard hanging in the window of the Steeple People church on Lyndale, and it hung there all summer. It started on sale at $64, and then they drew a line through it and put it for $48; by July it was $24, then $12…”

Parr: “I met him for dinner at the Red Dragon, and I saw it was down to two dollars and I went, ‘That’s good enough,’ and I got it and handed it to him. I bought the washboard.”

Beckman: “He told me to take it home and figure it out.”

Parr: “Well, I can’t haul around these empty boxes. I wanted the deposit back. That’s $1.25, you know?”

Beckman: “At the time, we both listened a lot to Booker White and Washboard Sam recordings from ’36, ’37, and it was just great stuff. It was all this washboard and resonator [guitar], and that’s kind of what we were going to do. Our first show was in the late ‘90s, and nobody was playing the Viking on Tuesday nights, so we moved over there.”

Since then, Parr has become an internationally known songwriter and bluesman, and Beckman has built a scene. Last November, the duo opened for Trampled By Turtles at the Armory in downtown Minneapolis. What was it like playing for 8,000 TBT fans with just a washboard and guitar?

“That was great, it was really fun, but my favorite shows that I’ve gotten to do with Mikkel have always been the little weird ones,” said Parr.

“We played on a garage roof at a pie eating contest once at somebody’s picnic. We toured Europe together. Yeah, those are fun. Paris, Berlin, you know, what’s not to like?,” Beckman said.

“We’ve played around the country together,” said Parr. “It’s still just getting a chance to play the little local free ones; that’s still my favorite thing. And Mikkel makes it easy. I don’t know that I would do this as often if he wasn’t. But when Mikkel calls … I wasn’t even supposed to be here tonight. But someone’s work schedule changed and I got the call and I’m like, ‘Yeah! I’d love to play tonight.’”



[image_credit]MinnPost photo by Jim Walsh[/image_credit][image_caption]Beckman and Parr perform at the Acoustic Thursday Happy Hour at the Dubliner Pub.[/image_caption]

A longtime music fan, Beckman admits to being something of a late bloomer as a musician.

“My mom was a professional cello player and my dad composed on guitar and played jazz and saxophone when he was younger in Chicago in the ‘50s,” he said. “So I grew up in a very musical family. I played saxophone when I was in junior high school, but people always told me I was very [rhythmic], I should be a drummer. I was just the annoying guy in high school who tapped on the dashboard to every song or whenever someone was playing. And I remember once when I was in my early 20s, somebody who was a drummer gave me a pair of drumsticks and said, ‘You should be a drummer.’ I just never got around to it until I was older.”

Now he plays three-to-five times a week and goes through several washboards a year.

“I keep one in the basement of the 331 just because I play there a lot,” he said. “I travel with one, but I wear them out because I play pretty aggressively, and it’s very physical. When I first started playing, I really

wanted a specific sound. I wanted to keep it simple. I'd seen players who did stuff like tape stuff to their fingers, and they had all this extra stuff attached to their washboards and I just wanted to keep it really rudimentary. They're made out of brass, which is a super soft material, and the way I play and how often I play I wear holes in them, so I'm always trying to find vintage washboards to play.

"Internationally, the Ukrainians are great at washboard playing. The first washboards were invented by Scandinavians as a tool; they were made out of wood, and with the industrial age came manufacturing and they fabricated a metal and wood one. Obviously in America, the tradition is pre-World War II, Southern, African-American music traditions of jug band music out of Memphis and all that stuff."

These days, Beckman keeps the washboard tradition alive and puts his own sweet touch on it.

"It's acoustic blues music, and you just put a gentle frame around it without trying to get away with a lot of drum fills or something," he said. "They're pretty rudimentary; there's really only two sounds you can get out of a washboard.

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"And music moves, you know? It's like an incantation. You move molecules around; you move air around for a while, and everybody gets caught up in it, and it's pretty powerful. So for me it's almost a form of moving meditation when I'm doing it. It fills me up and gives me energy. So even though I work all day and thankfully, I've got work that gives me great satisfaction, working with homelessness and housing issues, and then going out in the early evenings, getting to play for a little bit, it's also very satisfying. It's sort of like spinach salad meal or something."

Scott Anderson

02/17/2023 at 12:09 pm

Thanks for another wonderful article Jim. And thanks for highlighting our neighbor Mikkel the neighborhood music man. Mikkel's passion for music is inspiring. I don't think I have ever seen Mikkel not listening to music. When he is riding his bicycle he always has his boom box cranking the tunes. Maybe so his wife can find him…lol Keep up the passion Mikkel! Music IS the international language.

Jonathan Beck

02/17/2023 at 01:57 pm

Thanks for this great article. I saw Charlie Parr and Beckman at the Turf Club this January. I was intrigued by Beckman's playing style. This was the background story that I needed.

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