

BACK TO ROCKVILLE MAY 22, 2016 8:00 AM

Kyle Dahlquist: A one-man orchestra committed to variety

HIGHLIGHTS

Multi-instrumentalist performs with more than six bands

He plays brass, strings and keyboard instruments

Dahlquist will be part of the Westport Roots Festival on May 28



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Kyle Dahlquist taught himself how to play the accordion when the band Alacartoon needed a new player. **Keith Myers**
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In some cases, more isn't just better, it's a necessity. Take Kyle Dahlquist, for example.

These days, Dahlquist is not only a multi-instrumentalist — he plays “pretty much every brass instrument,” accordion, keyboards, pedal steel guitar, theremin — he's also a member of six bands, not counting the occasional special project (like a David Bowie tribute). Call it musical polygamy or an open relationship.

“I really like the variety,” said Dahlquist, a native of Kansas City, Kan., and 1989 graduate of Sumner High School.

“Back in the day, there was this rock ’n’ roll mindset: You were in one band and it was all-for-one and one-for-all and you usually all lived in one house and shared one vehicle, as opposed to the jazz-player mentality: You play with these people and these people and those people. That seems to be the landscape now. Everybody has multiple things going on.”

Saturday night, May 28, Dahlquist will be part of the Westport Roots Festival when he sits in with Freight Train Rabbit Killer & the Legion of Ghosts at the Firefly Lounge.

He talked to The Star recently about being an active utility musician in Kansas City, the trick to mastering the pedal steel and his partnership with his wife, visual artist Chris Jones Dahlquist.

Q: When did you get started in music?

A: I took piano lessons for a number of years as a kid. In middle school, I played French horn and the trombone in orchestra. In high school, I was in marching band until I realized I could drop out and still be in the jazz band. I played trombone. And my senior year, I did kind of the select choir.

Q: What was your first band?

A: The very first live show I did was with a band called Clipped Genius. That was with Jeff Freling, Mark Southerland, Bill Belzer ... I was still in high school. Mark and I were best friends, though he was two years older than me. He met Jeff and all those cats at the conservatory at UMKC.

Q: That band turned into Mongol Beach Party, right?

A: Pretty much, yeah, with Christian Hankel. And then that became Grumpy.

Q: Can you name all the bands you are in now?

A: Oh, boy. I could get in trouble here if I forget somebody. The Hardship Letters, the Liz Finity Affair, Amy Farrand and the Like, Victor & Penny, Freight Train Rabbit Killer when they do the full-production show, Mr. Marco’s V7/Johnny Hamil’s GaV7d band and the occasional Men of Men show.

Q: You were in Alacartoon until they broke up. And to get that gig you had to teach yourself another instrument and not a simple one.

A: I think it was 2007, I took a friend to see them. Coincidentally, it was Steve (Morse’s) last day, their accordion player. I thought, “This looks really fun. I could probably figure it out.”

Basically, I sent them an email saying I’d like to try out. And they said, “You know you’ll have to play the accordion.”

I borrowed one, then bought one about three weeks later. I learned all the songs and came up with a character and a story. Everyone’s name was a highway sign or location. I chose Overton Woolridge, which is Exit 111 on I-70. About five months later, I did my first show with them.

Q: How difficult was learning the accordion?

A: I hadn’t played a keyboard instrument in more than 20 years, and I hadn’t kept up at all. But the mechanics were familiar, which helped a lot.

Q: You also taught yourself pedal steel guitar.

A: That’s the most recent. A friend in North Carolina had this beautiful old lap-steel guitar. He loaned it to me and said, “I want you to play this, and I want to play with you while you do that.” I had a lot of fun with the sound and expressiveness, but I kept wanting to shift things more than I could. So I figured pedals and knee levers were the way to do that.

Q: Did you consult videos or take lessons?

A: I'm mostly self-taught. I watched some YouTube videos, plus there's a really great online steel-guitar forum.

Q: Someone once said playing pedal steel is like operating three sewing machines at once.

A: Yeah. You're using both hands, knees and feet. One thing that really helped me was decades of playing variable-pitch instruments. I had training in that through the trombone, and to some extent, the voice, too.

Q: Do you practice a lot?

A: I'm horrible at it. I sometimes go back and work on stuff, especially if there's something specific I need to work on. But for basic skill building, my solution is to play with people. That's where stuff clicks, playing live. You can tell you're communicating with everyone around you.

Q: Do you have a favorite instrument?

A: It's all fun and different. Each instrument has its own vocabulary.

Q: Does one instrument affect how you play others?

A: It's interesting. I'm playing more keyboards and getting more adept at that and I've noticed it's influencing other things and what I think about.

Q: Your wife, Chris, is a visual artist and you're a big part of her career. How did you meet?

A: We met the summer of 1989 right after we'd both graduated from high school. She grew up in Raytown but Mongol Beach Party needed a new bass player and Scott Easterday came to audition. He was nervous so he brought a couple of friends, and she was one of them. We met on a Tuesday, she came over and hung around again on Wednesday and our first date was that Friday. ... We got married in 1993.

Q: What medium does she work in?

A: She is photo-based but more than just straight prints. She really likes working with different materials and letting that inform the imagery. Her current body of work is really austere landscapes printed on gold-painted steel.

Q: Are you part of the process?

A: She takes everything and figures it out, preps the metal and does the printing, then I take it from there: finish them, trim them, assemble everything into frames. We joke that she's front of the house and I'm back of the house.

Q: You two are on the road a lot. How many art shows and fairs do you go to each year?

A: The most we've ever done is 18 to 20. We are going to slow down this year and do 10 shows, two of which are the Plaza and Brookside shows. One good part of living in Kansas City is being a day's drive from Denver, Chicago, Texas and most everywhere.

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WESTPORT ROOTS FESTIVAL

Kyle Dahlquist performs Friday, May 27, with the Hardship Letters who will open for Dale Watson at the Westport Saloon, 4112 Pennsylvania Ave. He will also perform Saturday, May 28, at the Firefly Lounge with Freight Train Rabbit Killer & the Legion of Ghosts. The show is part of the Westport Roots Festival, a six-stage event that starts at 12:15 p.m. Saturday at the Westport Saloon. Five dozen bands and artists will perform. Info at westportroots.com.

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Real nice interview. Wish I was closer to KC to hear him play. Mr. Dahlquist should drag one of his bands to the Twin Cities for a gig! Lots of music lovers, clubs, and festivals up here.

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