

Interview on 6/11/2024 inside the Beth Israel Synagogue. Interviewee is Benjamin McDowell (BMD), a local musician who has a solo band named Johnny Dissent. Interviewer is Cheyenne Antell (CA) from the Portage County Historical Society. The interview was 13 minutes, 57 seconds long.

(00:04) CA: Could you introduce yourself?

(00:06) BMD: Yeah, my name is Benjamin McDowell, I perform on stage as Johnny Dissent. I've been in the DIY music scene around these parts for about 10 years now.

(00:16) CA: Around 10 years, so is that when you started playing music? When did you begin?

(00:20) BMD: So, I started playing music back when I took guitar lessons when I was 16. I got my very first job. I started at a pizza place and took guitar lessons on the same day. I quit the pizza job very quickly after. I stuck with the lessons for a few years. 10 years, I'm 35 now, so I started in my 20s. When I was here for college is when I started actively playing out. I had always been playing music before then, since my lessons.

(00:49) CA: So what pushed you to start lessons?

(00:52) BMD: It was two things. One was my mom, who said if I didn't stop acting like such a moody teenager I had to either go to college or get a job, or do something with my life, and guitar was one of the options. I picked that because music is always something I've loved; I've listened to music on vinyl in my parent's living room for years, and I had all of that, that's where I started playing, and that's why I started playing guitar. The reason I picked up classical guitar, which is where I started, not rock and roll, is because we had, in the small town I grew up in, in Tomahawk, which is up in Lincoln county, there was one guy that taught guitar lessons, and that was classical guitar. He was a Vietnam vet and that's what he did on the side, besides working at the surplus store and hanging out. So that's where I started. Transitioning just slightly to say that, the reason I started playing out and started making music for myself and playing punk rock and roll, I can chalk that up to my sister. When I was in high school, just finishing up and getting ready to go to college, she showed me this album by an artist called Wingnut Dishwashers Union. The album is called Burn the Earth and Leave It Behind. It is not very well recorded. It sounds like it was recorded on a tin can with two pieces of string, and the singing is terrible and out of tune, but he was singing about the kind of things I wanted to sing about. He was singing about his mental health and the state of the world and how he felt about politics and stuff. To me, that was something that was super duper alien. I had never experienced that before in music because I sort of grew up listening to ACDC and those songs are about a couple of things, but not really anything else. So I sort of moved on from that and this sort of struck me. She sent me this album and said "This guy wrote a song about Rhinelander, Wisconsin" and it was about how girls in Rhinelander aren't empowered to be musicians. It changed, it's called "A Song For a Girl in Rhinelander" and it just changed my perspective. Like, if he can do this and he's out of tune and squeaky and his guitar needs to be intonated and sucks, then I can do it too, and anybody can do it. I firmly believe that now. But that was what pushed me to say, "yeah, I can do that, I can sing about what I want to."

(03:08) CA: So that was in high school, when you started learning about this punk / DIY that was out there, did you continue that after high school in Tomahawk? When did you make it to Portage County?

(03:20) BMD: I came to Portage County to go to school at the UW. I chose the area because it had a great program in my field of study, which is very uncool to the punk community. I came and did computer science here, and they had a great program and I had family in the area. That's what brought me to Portage County originally. However, there's DIY scenes everywhere. I had gone to shows in the youth annex of the church in Point, or the school when they would let in kid's bands; wherever there was music to be had. But once I got up

here, I started making friends and finding people, so I would go to shows in Wisconsin Rapids or out by the campus in some of the houses there, don't tell anyone but, you know, there's plenty of shows there to go to. Places like that where you figure out where it's happening, make friends, and get invited.

(04:11) CA: So, is that how you got involved in the local, Stevens Point and Portage County music scene?

(04:18) BMD: Yeah, absolutely. I had been playing guitar for a while and had written some songs and was hanging out but I hadn't performed out much. Basically I got bullied into it by my friends. They just said "hey, we booked you for a show, you have to come and do it". And I was like, "oh, ok! Thank you!" and that's how I got my start; I just started. The way you get shows and the way things come together, you get booked because you're friends with people and they know who you are, and you make more friends by playing shows, and it just compounds and compounds and compounds. As soon as I got to Portage County I started playing shows in the area here in Point, around the campus, in Wausau, and neighboring areas outside of the county. Anywhere you could drive to within a couple hours.

(05:07) CA: So, it's very much not who you are, but who you know?

(05:11) BMD: Absolutely. If you want to get real silly, you could say it's kind of like fiefdoms. Every town has some person who kind of knows what's going on. And they maybe have a house where they put on shows, maybe they work at a bar and the bartender or bar owner lets them book shows there, maybe they work for the Wenzell Plaza in Marshfield and you can be there. There's someone who knows, and once you know those people, it just spiders out. Portage County has a really strong music community and the campus has brought tons of bands here together. What's really interesting is that not only do they come here, start here, and still live here, but they spread out. There are bands that started here that play in Minneapolis and have members spread across the greater Wisconsin area and all kinds of places. It ebbs and flows and goes with the people.

(06:00) CA: If someone was new to Portage County, maybe a new college attendee, what are some of the fiefdoms that they might connect with?

(06:10) BMD: There's a couple of areas you could do it. I'm not going to give away all my secrets, but it depends on the music. If you really like heavier music and you want to go see metal shows and music of that nature, that's a whole crowd to themselves. They play at Coral Lanes in Wausau, they play here at the Annex; that's a great place where the Fox Theater used to be, there's a couple of other bars in the area that do that sort of thing. If you want acoustic shows, Emy J's hosts some of them, people's houses and living rooms are sometimes let up, and you could get in contact with them. You can almost always find posters either on social media or in person, or visit Randy at Radio Khaos; he puts up local band posters. If you're looking for a show and you don't know what you want, start there. We have a couple of different ones. We have the college kids and then the people who have lived here since their college era. Those are our two demographics. We mix, we get along pretty well.

(07:11) CA: That's a good sign. We know what influenced your music when you were starting out. Now that you are Johnny Dissent, you are this new persona. What influences your music today?

(07:24) BMD: I always say this, and I say this during shows. I don't want people to know whether I am being deadly serious or telling a joke. So some of it is the silliest thing I can come up with to talk about. I just recently debuted a song about Kwik Trip hot dogs, stay tuned for that later. The other half is that a lot of DIY music comes from a very personal place. DIY stands for "Do It Yourself", and what that means is not that you have to do everything yourself, you can have friends and have people to help do it, but the point is that you are the creative controlling force. What inspires me now is that I'll go and see someone else play and I'll think "that

was awesome!” and I’ll get my little notebook out and I’ll scribble and write stuff down, but it all comes from the lens of personal experience. It’s all really important to the people that are singing it. It’s almost confessional.

(08:23) CA: If there was someone who is playing in Wisconsin Rapids, or in Waupaca, and they wanted to know what the Stevens Point music community is like, what would draw them here, what would you tell them?

(08:36) BMD: I would say that it’s a fantastic, young, energetic crowd. There’s this old adage that if you talk to a 30 year old punk he will be really grumpy that he has to pay \$5 to get into the show. But I’ve seen, here in town and this area, I’ve seen a terrifying amount of college kids pack themselves into a basement and pay \$10 a head to see bands they haven’t heard of or seen before. The fact that they want to be a part of it makes it a really wonderful place to come play music. If you play at a bar, half the people at the bar are there to drink or talk with their friends or do other stuff, and you are background music. If you play a show here in Point and you play at the bus stop, the 30 people that stop and see you, and it might only be 30 people, they’re all there because they want to hear what you have to say and they want to listen to the music. It’s a really attentive crowd and a very dynamic music scene to be a part of. It’s awesome.

(09:37) CA: For those who don’t know, can you tell us a little bit about your music?

(09:41) BMD: I play acoustic guitar and I sing. I am a solo performer. Sometimes I’ll plug when I need to be louder for bigger shows, but it is often campfire style or just acoustic. It’s a weird combination of if Blink-182 and Bob Dylan got into a fight. I was a part of that generation. I grew up with that pop punk 2000s culture, but my songs aren’t very happy or bouncy. It tends to be a bit of a bummer, but not as slow and sad as the Edmund Fitzgerald or anything like that. It’s kind of hard to describe. I fall under the umbrella term of “folk punk” but that’s kind of a misnomer because folk punk isn’t so much a very specific sound. If you listen to heavy metal that’s very self-describing. Folk punk is just anyone with an acoustic guitar who is doing that instead of something else. It’s a whole new family of music that is all just the modern equivalent to older folk music. It’s people playing music regardless of how they got there.

(10:57) CA: What kind of support would folk punk, punk, and other DIY artists need in Portage County?

(11:06) BMD: The number one thing is places to play. It’s really tough when you’re first starting out. Say you’re young and you want to play all-ages shows. That’s a thing because we have such a heavy drinking culture in Wisconsin that places to play where anyone can come, younger people can come in, and those are the people that are excited, they are the ones that will go buy a guitar and make their own bands, they make this music thing that we are doing self-sustaining; they need places to go. That’s an awesome place. If you have a backyard, I’ll come play it. Or a crawlspace. I’ve played the bus stop downtown. CREATE Portage County scheduled that all out. That’s the biggest thing. The other thing is support. If you want to play music and you’re not doing it, you should just start. There’s nothing stopping you and you will be supported and welcomed with open arms, even if you don’t know how to sing or play guitar. Let me be living proof of that.

(12:08) CA: Do you have any future music plans? Where does Johnny Dissent go from here?

(12:13) BMD: Some day I want to get in a studio and record some more music. I have songs that need to be recorded, I have some stuff to re-record. Part of that DIY ethos is that I did that recording myself, and I am not very good at it. I’d love to bring that stuff up and make a proper chronicle of the stuff I have built. Otherwise, I’m going to keep doing this forever. I’m going to open shows for every touring act that comes into town, I’m going to get recognized at grocery stores by people who heard me playing music on the weekends, and I’m going to just keep going until I burn out.

(12:51) CA: Do you have any advice for new artists in the area?

(12:55) BMD: Yeah, I've touched on this before, but just start a band. Especially if you're someone who doesn't feel empowered to do that, just start. Just do it. Just find people who have like minds to you. If you can't, just play acoustic guitar and sing by yourself. If you don't want to, learn to play an instrument and find other people. It doesn't matter if it's not ACDC. I pick on them a lot but they play sold out arenas and have for 20 years. There's this misnomer that you look at Billie Eilish and any of the modern pop stars and you'll think "wow, I'm never going to be that good" but you don't have to. There's no expectation that your performance will be perfect. You're the only one who can make that performance and tell that story and make those songs. Do it, you'll get better as you go along. If you don't start you'll never get better.

(13:49) CA: Thank you so much for your time, anything else you want to add?

(13:54) BMD: No, thank you for this time.