

Minnesota *Bluegrass*



Corpse Reviver

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Cover Story

Corpse Reviver:

Harry Smith's Anthology Lives On in Minnesota

By Carol Roth

Where does Corpse Reviver's story begin?

You could say it starts around 2010, when string players Jillian Rae and Adam Kiesling first got together with percussionist Mikkel Beckmen to play songs from Harry Smith's *Anthology of American Folk Music*. Or was it a year or two before that, when Beckmen and Kiesling first started kicking around the idea for such a band? Maybe the inception could be traced to 1997, when the hard-to-find anthology was reissued as a CD box set, inspiring a new generation of musicians.

Perhaps the necessary spark that ignited into Corpse Reviver was when Folkways Records co-founder Moe Asch asked record collector Smith to curate his eclectic treasure trove of 78s into an album series, released in 1952. It was massively influential in shaping the American folk revival and the styles and careers of artists like Bob Dylan and Joan Baez.

Possibly Corpse Reviver's destiny was set even earlier, in the late 1920s and early 30s, in the primitive recording spaces where countless folk, blues, country and gospel artists allowed their varied talents to be captured on wax for the first (and sometimes last) time.

Or maybe the band was actually born in the fertile blend of instruments and influences that permeated the U.S. from its inception into the early twentieth century, African and European and Native American instruments, folk traditions and voices giving birth to the wide-ranging but indelible sounds of American roots music.

Really, all of these moments had to

happen for Corpse Reviver to exist. And through the layers of time and history and revivals of the *Harry Smith Anthology*, they've somehow tapped into those early beginnings—a truly organic melding



of talents and passions into an effortless experience that has the feeling of comfort and community and tradition, yet is fresh, idiosyncratic and exciting.

Pre-Revival Times

Beckmen, Kiesling and Rae traveled separate musical paths long before coming together as Corpse Reviver. Each brings their own history, training and set of experiences to the final product, adding even more depth to their performances of songs from the already rich cultural amalgamation of the *Anthology*.

Born in North Dakota, Mikkel Beckmen was raised in a musical family, his mother a professional cellist, his father proficient on piano and guitar. "In our

home the piano and the stereo were in the living room," Beckmen says. "We didn't keep the TV in there, so music was our entertainment." Beckmen himself started off learning piano and recorder, later moving to saxophone.

But he was always heading toward percussion: "People used to always ask me if I was a drummer because I was always tapping along to music," he recalls. "In fact, I had a friend in college who played drums, and she gave me a pair of drumsticks and said 'You should really be a drummer.'"

Despite those early signs, Beckmen didn't pick up the washboard until he was in his thirties. "That was in the 90s," he says. "I was self-taught—I don't know how else I could've done it, because I don't know too many people who give washboard lessons. It wasn't offered in the high school curriculum."

Beckmen learned by listening to older recordings—Washboard Sam was a notable influence—and by developing his skills on the fly, playing live first with Charlie Parr and then Lonesome Dan Kase. "I've gravitated mostly to blues, folk and country blues," he says. "When Charlie and I first started playing together regularly, he was so steeped in that genre—he had an amazing repertoire. I think he knew like 400 folk songs, even before he started writing a lot of his own songs. And then I began playing with Lonesome Dan Case, who's a really finely self-taught pre-World War Two blues player. It's a very syncopated, driven style of picking that suits percussive accompaniment, especially with a washboard. So that was the beginning for me."

Like Beckmen, Adam Kiesling started with a completely different instrument

than the stringed ones (guitar, banjo, ukulele, and more) he mainly plays now. “I come from a German town in Southeast Wisconsin where everybody plays brass band type stuff, so I grew up playing trombone,” he says. “Then in high school, they needed a bass player for a percussion ensemble and I could read the music, so I borrowed a bass from the school for the summer and just started figuring it out.”

Kiesling took to the bass and began taking lessons, which continued through high school. He seized any opportunity to play, including accompanying his parents to bluegrass jams. “My mom played guitar and my dad played harmonica, and every second Saturday was always spent at the Imperial Saloon in Jefferson, Wisconsin,” he says. “They’d been going to those all through my childhood, so I started coming along with them, just to play, even though I wasn’t really into the music at the time.”

Eventually Kiesling bought an upright bass and began finding his own circle of musicians to play with. He moved to Minneapolis in his early twenties and started playing guitar. “I was listening to a lot of different music, and I kept falling more and more backwards,” he says. “When I first started it was bluegrass, but then it got more old-time from there. I think I went to my first MBOTMA festival around 1997, and that’s really when I started playing old-time string band music and meeting a lot of people.”

In fact, he met Beckmen around that time, when a jug band he was in started playing once a week at the Viking Bar in Minneapolis, where Charlie Parr and Beckmen also had a weekly gig. Then in 2002 Kiesling signed up to play guitar with the Wild Goose Chase Cloggers, an Appalachian clogging group based in the Twin Cities that had been around since the late 70s.

Jillian Rae, born in the Iron Range of Minnesota, may be the youngest member of Corpse Reviver, but she wasted no time entering into a life of music. “I came out screaming, which kind of turned into singing, so I’ve always been drawn to music,” she says. At the age of seven, she began playing the violin, trained in the Suzuki method. Her Finnish teacher taught

her how to play Scandinavian fiddle as well as classical violin and brought her into a performance troupe that played a mix of Scandinavian, traditional American, Eastern European, and classical style music. “I started performing when I was eight and I’ve been doing it ever since,” she says.

“I’ve always been drawn to many styles besides orchestral music, although I



Adam Kiesling

played in a lot of orchestras,” Rae adds. “I got my degree in music, with an emphasis on the violin, but I was always playing with country bands, improvising with people when I could.”

She moved to Minneapolis around 2008 and played in orchestras while continuing to play country fiddle, including with the Duluth band Too Many Banjos. “From there, I continued meeting people in the community and playing, improvising and performing with them.” She met Beckmen when he filled in on washboard for Too Many Banjos, and encountered him again when she played fiddle for the

Brass Kings.

The Revival Begins

The 1997 CD reissue of the *Harry Smith Anthology* came out right around the time Beckmen and Kiesling first met. It was the first time either of them had heard the collection in its entirety. “It was really significant for the local folk scene,” Beckmen remembers. “Suddenly it was readily available for the first time since the 50s or 60s, so it ignited a lot of creativity. We just devoured it when it came out on CD, Charlie and Adam and I, and about a zillion other people of course.”

The concept of Corpse Reviver wouldn’t be fully formed for another decade, however, and it happened gradually. “Mikkel and I had been kicking around the idea for years of doing a tribute night—a concert where we’d have different people come up and play,” Kiesling says. “But we always ran into hitches; we couldn’t find a good venue for it, or places weren’t interested, or we couldn’t find the right people to be involved.”

Rae hadn’t listened to the anthology until Beckmen encouraged her to. “I remember Mikkel telling me about it and inviting me to get together with him and his friend Adam to play some of these songs. That’s when I listened to the whole collection, and I was like, ‘How have I not heard this before now?’ I’d heard songs from the anthology, not really knowing that they were from the anthology—in a way it felt like I’d heard it all my life—but hearing it in its put-together format was really, really cool. Now I’m obviously steeped in the anthology due to these guys, and it’s something I love very much.”

Sometime before 2010, the idea for a tribute band (versus just a tribute show) surfaced, and they started playing occasionally as a trio. “We called ourselves the Harry Smith Singers at first,” Mikkel says. An encounter with a bartender while he was on tour gave him the idea for the new band name. “Finally, after I’d done that little tour, I was like, ‘why don’t we just actually do it?’ The 331 Club had opened up, which was such a significant epicenter for the weird music scene we were all part of. They had the Roe Family Singers on Mondays, Crush Collision on Wednesdays and Brass Kings on Thursdays, and

we approached them and got a Sunday afternoon.” Corpse Reviver was officially born.

About That Name...

“People sometimes say the name is kind of a turnoff,” Kiesling says. Beckmen points out the opposite is also true. “In the first season we’d occasionally get a couple of death-metal-dressed dudes coming in, thinking Corpse Reviver was more of a hard rock band!”

Rae jokes, “We like to trick the death metal community into listening to our old-time stuff; that’s really what it’s about.”

In actuality, Beckmen settled on the name in Lincoln, Nebraska, while on tour with Eliza Blue. “We met a bartender who was researching lost drinks of the Americas. He told us about the corpse reviver.” It’s a name that’s been given to several mixed drinks purported to be hangover cures over the years since the late 1800s. “I thought ‘Oh, that would be a great name for a Harry Smith Anthology band!’”

Rae agrees. “I feel like our name is kind of perfect for us, because it’s like we’re reviving the corpses of these old songs. And we’re a bunch of goofballs,” she adds, “so that makes it perfect on another level.”

The Anthology itself was the original corpse reviver, in Beckmen’s eyes. “Most of the songs are very old, some dating back to 14th century Scotland or England, or are about things that happened in the 1800s. But then in the 1920s, technology allowed those songs to be captured on a record and mass produced for the first time.

“Most of those old records were destroyed, and Harry Smith was this avid record collector who really researched a lot of those recordings that had nearly been lost. And thank goodness for him. When he released the anthology in 1952, it spurred this look back, but at the same time, it propelled things forward. So many people were influenced by that release.”

Building Organically

The Sunday afternoon slot at the 331 Club was especially low pressure because it was typically a slow time for a bar. “Dick would sit there at the bar twiddling his thumbs all day long, serving three people,” Beckmen says, “We kind of built a space over the decade.”

Kiesling adds: “It takes a while to build a following. It gradually got more and more busy as it went on.”

Rae agrees. “From my perspective, it seemed to come together really organically. It was just like, ‘Hey, let’s get together and play these songs and see how this feels! Cool, this was fun. Oh, looks like the 331 has Sundays open, should we try a show and see if we like it?’ We liked it and we said, ‘Should we just make this a thing, do it every other Sunday?’ It wasn’t overly planned; it just was a fun thing we liked to do, and enjoyed more and more the longer we did it.

That effortless feeling has continued, Rae says: “We’re so low key; we don’t have a booking agent, and we’re our own managers, so to speak. We’ve played a couple



Jillian Rae

of festivals here and there—Boats and Bluegrass, Blue Ox—but we’re definitely not hustling. Our main priority has been that Sunday gig at the 331. We love playing music together, but we all do other things as well. Honestly, talking about it makes me realize the organic way we came together is kind of how we run the band in general. We never try all that hard; we just let things happen.”

On-Stage Alchemy

That loose style also describes their approach as a tribute band. “Although we consider ourselves an Anthology of American Folk Music tribute band, we definitely use it as a jumping-off point to do other songs from that era,” Rae says. “What is American music? A lot of it is songs from the old country that came here via immigrants. So sometimes we’ll throw in an old Finnish fiddle tune or something.”

And sometimes they stray even farther from the anthology. “By and large it’s all from that era, but we might sneak in a couple other things from time to time, like a John Prine song or something like that,” Kiesling says.

For a band that sounds extremely in sync on stage, their playing style is also surprisingly improvisational, Rae says: “Adam will start playing a song, and I might not know what it is, and we just start playing it, and that’s kind of the magic—you might not get the same thing twice.” Kiesling adds, “We never practice either. I think we’ve probably practiced five times since we started the band.”

“We don’t do a setlist,” Beckmen confirms. “When we play, these two really know how to read a room, a mood and a group of people, and take off on a journey.” Rae agrees: “I feel it’s the people in the room that kind of make the energy what it is, not just those of us who are on stage, so we’re also feeling that.”

“Adam will usually be the one introducing a new song live on stage in front of an audience, and sometimes he’ll tell us,” Beckmen says. “Other times

he’ll just launch into it and I try to hang on and follow along. It’s a privilege to play with them; it’s so exciting each time. Even if we play a song we’ve done before, if somebody’s in a certain mood it’ll sound very different; the tempo, the arrangement, the amount of improvisation that goes on. It’s not repetition and rote—it’s a living incantation.”

Rae agrees. “I love when a song turns

into a medley and goes into another song and then you get the little side-eye from Adam like, 'Now we're going to go back.' There are moments of exhilaration because we're on this wavelength together and we don't always know what's going to happen, but it always happens."

Says Kiesling: "John Hartford once said of his band that there had to be one person that knew the songs from start to finish before they play it on stage, and I always kind of liked that idea, that as long as one person could guide everything throughout the entire tune, they could go from there."

"The beauty of live music is it shouldn't just be 'this is how we do it, and this is how we do it every time,'" Beckmen agrees; "it should be eighty percent improv."

The True Meaning of Tradition

Corpse Reviver is a band steeped in tradition, though perhaps not the way many people think about the word. Their intention is not to preserve a song in amber. The real tradition the three are keeping alive is that sense of discovery and invention that gave birth to the songs in the anthology in the first place.

"One of the downsides to a traditional music scene is sometimes people are strict gatekeepers about what they think the tradition should be," Kiesling says. "I've heard people rag on the old-time scene in Duluth because it's smaller and blends more; you might have somebody who plays Irish fiddle with somebody who plays old-time American banjo, and they're going to meet somewhere in the middle and create their own kind of mashed-up style. It's not straight-up old-time American music, it's not straight-up traditional Irish fiddle, but it works, because they're willing to play together. Some traditional music communities forget that it's social music as well."

Rae has felt that downside keenly. "As the least old-time traditional person in the group, I'm usually an outsider in that situation," she says. "I'm a good violinist, I can figure out how to play anything, and I love to play bluegrass and old-time mu-

sic—but I'm not considered an old-time player. In some circles it's kind of like, 'You don't belong here.' With this group I do belong; being in Corpse Reviver gives me an opportunity to be on the inside, where I normally wouldn't be allowed.



Mikkel Beckmen

My fiddling might not sound exactly like that untrained, beautiful, organic old guy on his front porch in the Appalachian mountains, but I still think I have a musical voice to put on these songs."

"We're not a strict traditional band, even though we play all traditional music," Kiesling says. "I think it would be a completely different idea if we had an old-time fiddler rather than somebody like Jillian, who's not really coming from traditional old-time fiddle music. I think that's what makes us unique. And it's been a lot of fun because it lets us open up and try different things, and play around with different formats and rhythms."

Beckmen agrees. "The Twin Cities music scene is like that, where you get people from all over the world ending

up here and then being willing to change their traditional music format. Like Siama Matuzungidi, who lets me play with them sometimes, or Nirmala, who plays the veena but is very open to playing with people from other genres. I love that about Minneapolis and the Twin Cities."

'Accidental Community Builders'

"Spider John Koerner talks about folk musicians as being links in a chain," Beckmen says. "I'm 57 and I was 46 or so when we started, and we're about a decade apart from one another in age. Time is going to pass, so why not take time out as you age to keep that chain going and keep the songs going? It's become such a rich part of my life."

"Same," says Rae. "We were accidental community builders, because Corpse Reviver Sundays kind of became the people's church, if you will. I mean, a lot of the same people will come every time. It was just a really nice familiar comforting thing for me as well. Heading up to the 331 every other Sunday is the thing I'd do."

"Church with beer," says Beckmen, "and better jokes, thanks to Adam." Rae laughs: "Let's be honest, half of them come as much for the jokes as the music, wouldn't you say?"

Of course that Sunday residency was put on hold for the pandemic.

But, on a warm Thursday evening in May, Corpse Reviver took to the stage (well, patio) at the 331 Club, their first gig together since before lockdown began. Their delight was palpable and infectious. True to form, Kiesling cracked a couple off-color but much-appreciated jokes and led the band through an idiosyncratic set—taking a detour in the middle of Anthology staple "Old Lady and the Devil" for a couple verses of George Michael's "Faith," for example. They stayed together, signaling one another with glances and musical cues. The chain was unbroken. The corpse was revived once more.

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