

ART+CULTURE+LIFE

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STEEL A MELODY FOR ME

By *Patty Speakman Hamsber* Photos by *Larry Melton*

Until I reached the fifth grade classroom, it seemed like business as usual at Odenton Elementary School. Most classrooms were quietly engaged in seatwork and the hallways were empty. But upstairs, in the fifth grade classroom, students were on their feet, thinking hard, high-fiving, and nearly singing.

Amidst the controlled chaos were two or three teachers, grinning as their carefully planned lessons started to click with each of the small groups of students crowded around and pouring water into a large beaker with hash mark measurements. Kevin Martin, an artist in residence, walked around with his guitar; literally mixing fractions and music, and making a beautiful melody.

Kevin has been building and playing steel drums (or pans) since he fell in love with one about 20 years ago. A graduate of Cornell University, he no longer dons a suit and heads to an office to work with finances. Rather, he applies himself to getting drumsticks into as many hands as he can through teaching, outreach, and sending his handmade instruments all over the world.



On a regular Friday afternoon in April, two fifth grade teachers played a song they had just learned the day before. Their students lit up at the sound and the chance to engage with math in such a new way.

“When you’re an artist, you have to be several different things,” Kevin told the hushed students who began bobbing their heads in anticipation of the song he hinted at with just two plucks on his guitar. He knows this from experience.

Kevin currently travels throughout Maryland, New Jersey, and Eastern Pennsylvania as a roster artist of Young Audiences, a non-profit organization that works with educational systems, the arts community, and private and public sectors to provide arts education to children. He has

taught workshops, conducted teacher trainings, completed residencies, and lead assemblies in nearly one hundred schools. In 2012, he was named “Artist of the Year” by Young Audiences of Maryland.

He has also traveled to Trinidad to see pan yards and steel drum ensembles up close, playing his way there on a cruise ship. This pilgrimage unleashed his ability to master the craft of creating various types of steel drums. He sells them through his business, Rockcreek Steel Drums, and donates them to school groups and churches where he conducts his workshops and lessons.

When he’s not giving lessons or pounding out new pan drums in his studio, Kevin can also be found playing gigs with his bands, Bermuda Blue and The Geckos.



The first drum he and his brother Sean ever made sits in his studio, bearing the breezy light blue color of the calypso band's name. Kevin goes on tour four or five times a year with The Geckos, who play original tunes and covers. Both bands play on drums made in his studio.

Just inside the door of Kevin Martin's backyard studio space is a hand drawn calendar on the wall. Without the help of a fancy app, it organizes the next six to eight months of his life with color-coordinated push pins that visually divide his time between the multiple streams of musically-infused income that make up his life. There is also a color for family time, blocking off a few days or weeks here and there for time to spend with his wife and young son.

The calendar is an unassuming piece of art, a creative symbol of the handcrafted life of this artist. It occupies wall space near crayon-drawn thank-you cards and a photo of two Afghan girls playing a steel tongue drum that Kevin made on the night of President Obama's first State of the Union address. Sitting on the shelf below it is a steel tongue drum he made for his son's most recent birthday. He will make another one for him this year and another the year after that as a way to symbolize the importance of the day.

In the coming year, Kevin plans to head out on the road and reach young audiences in the Midwest and southern states. He will station vans full of his instruments in various locations, making them available to schools and other groups when he is not there. When he flies back, they will be ready for him so he may continue to inspire a whole new group of teachers and their students. ■



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