



Friends Union. Photo Credit: Skip Murray Photography

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Unconditional Love

BY BENJAMIN POMERANCE

START ROLLING THE FILM in Plattsburgh, inside the friendly confines of a now-departed enterprise on Champlain Street. The name of the place was The Lost Chord. The owner was Rod Driscoll, a college kid whose mother had sent him a Christmas gift that transformed his existence: a kit for building his own dulcimer. He had transformed that project into a personal obsession, building so many instruments that he could open his own shop to sell them. Soon, The Lost Chord was a local haven, a magnet for acoustic musicians throughout the region.

But on this particular day, an out-of-town artist walked through the door. Steve Iachetta hailed from the Albany area, steeped in the family ways of a restoration Christian sect with English roots commonly known as the Shakers. It was this sect that had cared for more veterans, widows and orphans during the Civil War than seemingly anyone else around, part of a ministry focused on selflessness and community. It was this sect that had been among the first religious groups to insist on gender equity, with women and men sharing earthly labors and rewards.

And it was this sect that made music with such an extraordinary fervor that they earned the nickname “Shaking Quakers,” imbuing their worship with hymns that sizzled hotter than the flames in the meeting house’s woodstove in the winter, bouncing off the roofing beams and ascending upward to the ears of a higher power. To an outsider, the scenes of such worship could appear shockingly chaotic. Yet to those inside the meeting house, it was a spirit of blissful surrender, fueled by the presence of a pure spirit that accepted and delivered unconditional love.

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Now, Iachetta and Driscoll stood in The Lost Chord for a few moments, two SUNY Plattsburgh students with musical intuition in their blood meeting for the first time. There was, as both men recall it, precious little conversation. Within a few minutes, Iachetta had a fiddle in his hands, and Driscoll was wailing away on one of his dulcimers, both players swept up in the traditional tunes that each of them sensed the other had to know, improvising, ornamenting and pushing the tempo forward as their mouths began to turn upward into knowing smiles.

It was this moment, they can say with authority now, when the band known as Friends Union was born. The group taking center stage at the Whallonsburg Grange Hall on March 13, accompanied by soup, chili and Irish soda bread to warm stomachs while the sounds of their music warm souls, still share the same essence that filled the air on that fateful day at The Lost Chord. Even now, Driscoll and Iachetta tease each other about playing melodies at a breakneck pace and speak about the music that they play with a zeal to rival any tent meeting preacher.

Yet much like the songs that they play, the tale of Friends Union is considerably less straightforward than what initially seems to meet the eye. The band showcased at the Whallonsburg Grange Hall will be a foursome, not a twosome, with Driscoll and Iachetta alongside Norman Rodham and Pete DeMaio, a quartet that in a single show will play on a variety of musical instruments so great that the stage will resemble the shelves of Driscoll's old store all over again and, in so doing, will tunefully chase away the headache of winter doldrums.

At least that is the promise that Iachetta delivers, beaming a million-watt smile while he does so. "Music is the best medicine," he proclaims, an old cliché that he presents without the slightest hint that anything about this declaration is old or clichéd. "Keep a tune in your head. It will cure what ails you. That's a lesson to remember."

He dispenses this prescription while sitting in his home in the Capital Region, not far from his day job workplace at the Albany International Airport. Driscoll has journeyed down from the North Country to join him there for a rehearsal. Rodham and DeMaio have hopped aboard through Zoom, with Rodham describing to the North Country listeners the weather conditions at his winter quarters in Florida with a wicked grin on his face.

Still, warm or cold, the night will soon be enveloped with music, a prospect that leaves the four artists palpably eager to stop talking and start playing. Amid the global pandemic that hangs on like an out-of-tune pedal tone, the band has encountered more cancellations than concerts, yet has doggedly refused to let a virus stop them from playing entirely. Jam sessions, both in-person and over Zoom, have filled their schedules, seizing any opportunity to get together in some fashion and cling to traditions that now feel more precious than ever before.

"I'm a teacher," Rodham says, "and I go into teaching every day like I'm going off to the front to fight a war due to all of the challenges of the pandemic. When I'm playing music, it's like I can feel all of that weight and stress finally easing off my back."

"It's probably the one thing that has kept us sane in all of this mess," Driscoll states. "It's the one thing that you keep on doing that trumps all of the craziness."

"Trump?" Rodham breaks in, grinning mischievously again. "Did you say 'trump?'"

The other three musicians roar with laughter, belly laughs that feel like a form of music in their own right on a dark winter evening with talk of politicians and illnesses still dominating the headlines. "That's 'trump' with a small 't,'" Driscoll responds, nodding his head knowingly.

The banter will continue like this deep into the evening, it seems, with the only melancholy coming from the fact that two members of the group won't be gathering for

whatever is in store for dinner. "Working with Rod has one big advantage for all of us," DeMaio points out. "He always gives us a good meal." He chuckles. "And then you get the music, too, of course. That isn't bad, either."

It is music that — in the truest form of this phrase — has stood the tests of time. From the pubs of the British Isles to the pews of the Shaker meeting houses that Iachetta's ancestors attended, these tunes have arisen and endured, the rare species of art that has found a home with both the waters of baptism and the waters of whiskey. "There's a whole social fabric in this music," Iachetta notes. "It doesn't matter what the venue is. This music has a special way of bringing people from all walks of life together."

In earlier years, Driscoll felt this phenomenon firsthand, traveling to Ireland and carting a homemade dulcimer from pub to pub, a Yank blending with the Emerald Isle regulars. "It was easy," he recalls. "I knew all the tunes. They knew all the tunes. We all had this common language that we shared."

For Rodham, the immersion into that language dove even deeper. For 21 years, he lived in the British Isles, taking his guitars into the pubs and joining in the Guinness-fueled merriment. Amid these harmonies, he learned to play with his guitar tuned in an unconventional manner — D-A-D-G-A-D — recognizable to anyone who ever heard Paul Simon presenting the classic *8 arborough Fair*. To this day, the unique sonic blends made possible by this tuning remain a keystone of his musicianship.

It was this unmistakable sound that caught the ears of Iachetta years later. By this point, Rodham had married a fiddle player, Robin Osgood, and moved to suburban Albany, where they started a contradance duo called "The Stepping Stones." One wintry day, they played together at the Victorian Stroll in the Capital Region city of Troy, and then Rodham went for a stroll

CONTINUED ON PAGE 6

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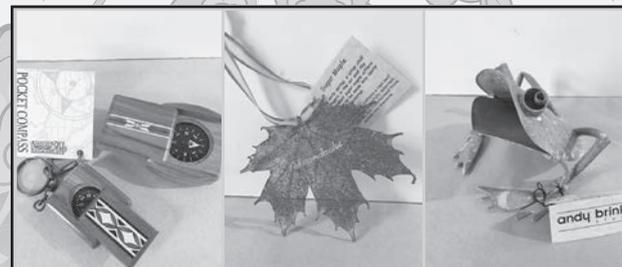
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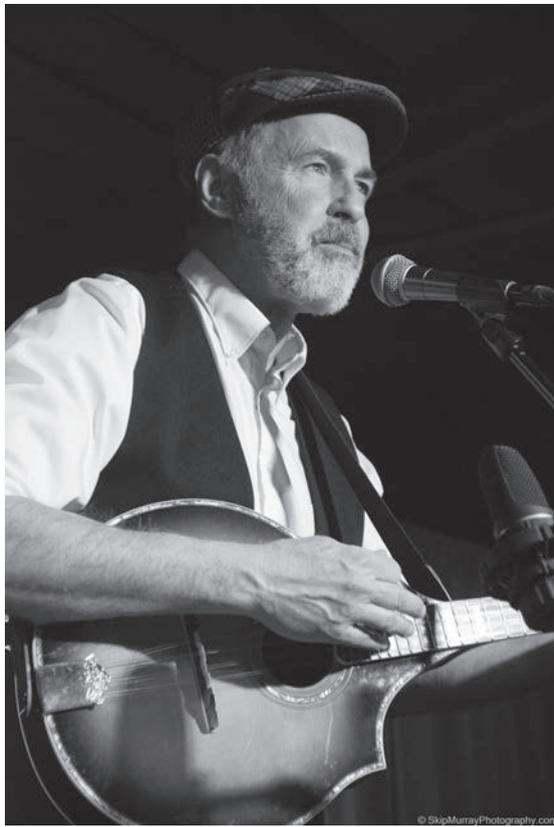
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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 5

of his own, drawn magnetically to the sounds of a violin and a guitar emanating from a shop. It was Iachetta, performing with a guitarist who was about to take a break.

“I said, ‘I have a guitar,’” Rodham remembers. “‘What do you want to play?’ And we just jumped into a tune.” Before the night was over, the two musicians had become newly minted friends, soon to become partners in multiple gigs. Removed from this mix, though, was Driscoll, his dance card filled with work as an educator and his leadership of other North Country bands, most notably the still-beloved Too Tall String Band. Iachetta, working in transportation planning and helping preserve a Shaker site near Albany, likewise had little time to travel northward.

But when he finally did, the fiddle player knew who to call. “I hadn’t seen Steve for at least 20 years,” Driscoll recalls. “Then I get this phone call from him, completely out of the blue, saying that he’s coming up to play at the Keeseville Grange. And he says, ‘Why don’t you sit in with us tonight?’”

Throwing his instruments in his car, he broke speed records in hightailing it over to Keeseville for half an hour of practice with his old friend before the concert. In those 30 minutes, time melted away. It was an instant replay of sorts, harkening back to the first day that they had met one another inside The Lost Chord. Just as it had on that inaugural jam session, words became quickly unnecessary as the music took over, rekindling their friendship.

Since that time, the flame has never dimmed. About five years after their reunion in Keeseville, Iachetta introduced Driscoll to Rodham, and the duo became a trio, performing gigs up and down Interstate 87. And in 2019, when DeMaio and his wife moved to the North Country from New Jersey, the stage was set for the band to expand again. Both DeMaio’s were avid avocational artists, playing in a rhythm-and-blues group for a decade before their northward move. The traditional music played by Friends Union, however, was entirely unknown to them.

Yet when the happily retired couple arrived at their new home, they found a local evangelist eagerly awaiting them. As soon as Driscoll discovered that he had musicians living close to him, he invited them to join him at the traditional music jam sessions that he hosts, leaving the new North Country residents astonished by what they heard. “My wife and I had our mouths hanging open when we first heard this music,” DeMaio recalls. “We were looking at each other like, ‘What is this?’”

Since that first night, neither DeMaio has missed a session, eagerly exploring this old sonic universe that to them felt so new. After a while, Driscoll started inviting Pete to join Friends Union gigs when Rodham made his annual southward migration. At the Whallonsburg Grange Hall, though, all four players will join together on stage, forming a structure that could epitomize Friends Union’s music for a long time to come. “It’s great playing as a four-piece band,” Driscoll says. “You get a solid, substantial sound with that fourth player in the mix.”

And there is, as the conversation draws to a close, no remaining doubt about what this sound means to the artists who make it. With this sound, impromptu meetings can turn to lifelong bonds. A 20-year hiatus can end with the familiarity of yesterday’s conversations. Tradition and innovation can co-exist peacefully, working together to retain sanity during a pandemic and to spin internal chills into warmth.

“Playing with these guys is like a bear hug,” Rodham states, “or maybe like a big, cozy down duvet. It’s very comforting.” A comfort that can come only from a feeling as time-honored as the music itself, a spirit worthy of a spot in the meeting house and the pub and every type of venue in between, filling minds and hearts and the four walls and the space above with the feeling that here, in this place, resounds the music of unconditional love.

Friends Union will perform on March 13 at 3 p.m. in the Whallonsburg Grange Hall in Essex, N.Y. The \$10 admission includes soup, chili and Irish soda bread. A jam session with the artists will follow. For tickets and more information, call 518-963-7777, email admin@thegrangehall.info or visit thegrangehall.info.

Photos top to bottom:
Rod Driscoll
Steve Iachetta
Pete DeMaio