

Knuckle Dusters still going strong after 21 years

by Amy Dulebohn

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The Knuckle Dusters have been performing in the Tri-State area and beyond for more than 20 years. Harmonica player, guitarist and vocalist Scott Speary took some time to answer questions via email to update readers about the band, and preview their Sunday appearance at Thurmont Regional Library.

WN: First of all, for what kind of music are The Knuckle Dusters known?

Speary: I think most of what we do nowadays falls under the genre of Americana. To me, it's all about American roots music. A large chunk of our repertoire comes from old-time fiddle traditions. My dear friends, Paul Mackrell, Richard Pryor and Robbie Caruthers, all Washington County natives more or less, grew up wanting to play old-time music. But we're also fond of Texas swing, boogie-woogie, country, ragtime and acoustic blues and classic rock, too. We've also played many events where Irish music is desired, and Robbie and Rich are masters of melody in this genre, too.

WN: Scott, when you contacted us, you said The Knuckle Dusters are now in their 21st year. What do you think has kept the band together for long?

Speary: We started gigging regularly as a trio back in 1997. Over the years we branched out, sometimes using different fiddle players here and there as needed. A few friends gigged with us as vocalists for a few years in the mid-2000s. I also grew an upright bass player in that time, my son, Matthew Speary, and he has gigged with us since he was in ninth grade.

What has kept us going so long is that we are more than bandmates, we're friends, we love each other, we go to concerts together, go fishing together, camp together, float the river, etc. Beyond that, musically, our diversity in genre has been our strength. When you play just one style of music, sometimes you're suited for only certain venues or events. We're highly adept and adaptable and most of the time our eclectic mix of music is what draws people in. And it's often fun, festive, high energy music. People come up to us between sets and say 'you guys really enjoy yourselves, don't you? You play for each other as much as the crowd.' I think that's entirely true.

WN: What are the names of those who are in the current lineup, in what town do they reside, and what do they play?

Speary: I'm from Mercersburg, Pa., and an educator at James Buchanan High School in Mercersburg. I play harmonica, guitar and provides vocals; Robbie Caruthers, Boonsboro, is a woodworker, specializing in rustic stools and benches. He plays fiddle and sings; Paul Mackrell, Leitersburg, does facilities maintenance/roofing for Washington County Public Schools. He plays banjo and guitar and provides vocals; Richard Pryor, Hagerstown, is a retired postal employee in Frederick County, he plays mandolin and fiddle. Matthew Speary, Mercersburg, is an honors grad of West Virginia University and is pursuing a Ph.D. in political science at Ohio State University. He plays upright bass; Evan Price, formerly of Smithsburg, spent 30 years as an orchestra teacher at Smithsburg schools and recently moved back to his native Louisiana. He was a fill-in fiddler for The Knuckle Dusters.

WN: You will be performing at Thurmont Regional Library as part of the Music on the Deck concert series at 2 p.m. Sunday, Aug. 26. What can we expect from your show?

Speary: We will be playing as a trio and we'll be playing old-time fiddle tunes as well as covering all the genres I mentioned above. The music will be fun, high-energy and family friendly. And it's possible of the librarians might sing a song — Mindy Morris used to gig with us back in the mid-2000s, and she is great vocal talent. We'll see if we can politely twist her arm for a song if she is in attendance.

WN: Do The Knuckle Dusters perform mostly original material or more covers? Where can readers hear your music (online or on CD)?

Speary: As a live band we mostly play traditional pieces and covers that are in the public domain. The best of our music and concert footage can be found at our site <http://www.knuckledusters.com/> and on Youtube.

As far as originals go, I am a longtime songwriter and over the years the guys have lent me a hand with my studio work. My son is a major contributor on these works, too.

I have four independently released albums: 'Low-Country Radio,' 'Far from the Herd,' 'You're a Cancer' and 'Pull the Plug,' which was released in 2017. All of those albums are available through major online retailers and distributors like iTunes, Amazon, Spotify, Youtube, iHeart Radio, etc. I'm working on a new album called 'Walking Dog,' where my son's girlfriend, Shelby Boggs, lends her spirited, fun and totally girly vocals. She's great to work with. She did some fantastic work with me on the 'You're a Cancer' album. She is a Shippensburg, Pa., native, but is also a Ph.D. student at Ohio State.

WN: You told us that your bread and butter is working in the cities these days. How and why did you break away from doing gigs only in the local area?

Spearly: It's not so much that we've totally broken away from local gigs, they're just fewer and further between and plainly there are just more opportunities to perform and do what we love in the D.C. And Baltimore areas. We've really had a good run in those cities, and it keeps us going as a band.

Locally, things have tapered off simply because local taverns and restaurants opt for more economical ways to provide music through DJ's, karaoke, or hosting open mic nights. We get that. We often play at the Leitersburg Tavern because that's sort of a hometown neighborhood bar for my good friend Paul. We also used to play Rue's in Mercersburg, quite a bit, because that was my hometown bar. Sadly Rue's closed its doors last year in April of 2017. Those establishments have always treated us with kindness and we deeply appreciate their support.

WN: Who is your demographic?

Spearly: Interesting. I might have answered baby boomers to this question simply because much of our music comes from the 20th century, but these millennials tend to latch on to our music, they have diverse and eclectic tastes thanks to the internet being at their fingertips 24/7. I'm a high school teacher as well, and if kids aren't playing games on their phones, they're looking up music videos on YouTube.

WN: You mention performing at prestigious venues such as the Smithsonian, the B&O Railroad Museum, and Nationals Park. Do you have a particular venue or gig that sticks out in your mind above all others in your 20-year repertoire?

Spearly: As a band, the ones you've mentioned we are most proud of. Personally for me playing at Nationals Park as a ragtime act was fun, but most recently I really liked our show at The Performing Arts Center in Luray, Va. I think concert formats and venues bring out the best in us. When everybody's got their eyes on you and listening attentively it tends to bring out our 'A Game' collectively and individually.

WN: What is the best way for readers to learn more about The Knuckle Dusters? Your website? Are you on social media?

Spearly: Our website <http://www.knuckledusters.com/> is the best source to see our video and to survey our song samples. YouTube, of course, is another. We hope to have a larger social media footprint in the future. Being a public educator (a cyber educator at that) I'm always cautious about our online presence. That said, our friend and bandmate Paul has been sucked into Facebook (and) his thumbs have grown strong ever since he got a smartphone. If we need to get the word out about a gig on social media, he is our man.

Top photo: The Knuckle Dusters are based in the Tri-State area and have been performing for more than 20 years. Pictured, from left, are Scott Spearly, Richard Pryor, Paul Mackrell, Robbie Caruthers and Matthew Spearly. (Submitted photo)

If you go ...

WHAT: *The Knuckle Dusters*

WHEN: *2 p.m. Sunday, Aug. 26*

WHERE: *Thurmont Regional Library, 76 Moser Road, Thurmont, Md.*

COST: *Admission is free*

CONTACT: *For more information about the library's Music on the Deck concert series, go to <http://www.fcpl.org/>*

MORE: *For more information about The Knuckle Dusters, go to <http://www.knuckledusters.com/>*