

the enigma men

by brian lepire



Black Dog Brother, artist at work. Photo by Thary Lim

“What do you think it means?” Dan McGinn shoots back.

We’re standing outside one of Gulu-Gulu Cafe’s Wednesday open mic nights in Salem this past February when I ask him what “Black Dog Brother” means. The moniker is the name of McGinn’s musical persona and, even though I’ve known McGinn for nearly two years, I have never learned the meaning behind the name.

His response, served with a devilish-grin chaser, is the perfect Black Dog answer. It’s fast, precise and veiled in mystery, much like the man and his music.

Both McGinn and Clay Ventre, McGinn’s best friend and leader of local favorite band Clay Ventre & the Bond Girls, have built reputations for closely guarding their origins, even as they emerge as two dynamic and popular North Shore musical acts. Even asking McGinn to describe the Black Dog Brother sound leaves room for interpretation.

“Devil music,” McGinn says. “That’s how I’ve described it before.”

He later explains that when he collaborates with another musician, he describes his sound as “Café Klezmer-Cabaret-Carnival-Desert-Swamp,” or, as he likes to call it, “Black Dog Brother music.”

Ventre’s style is also hard to pinpoint. Hannah Cranton, Ventre’s friend and the Bond Girls’ vocalist, sits quietly when asked to describe the Ventre sound.

“I know he likes Django Reinhardt a lot,” Cranton says. She later described it as a “smooth, Calypso-like jazz.”

What is known about both men is that neither really knew much about playing music before the fall of 2009. It was around that time McGinn, a Danvers native who had recently returned from several years in California, and Ventre (who declined to be interviewed for this article) walked into the Gulu-Gulu Café for the first time and witnessed one of the café’s open mic nights. Both of them were transfixed and wanted to perform as well.

“It was my first open mic,” says McGinn. “I think I was just generally nervous. I had played, maybe, eight times before out in California.”

McGinn wrote some songs in California with his limited guitar playing abilities, but he was far from the performer he is today. Ventre, McGinn points out, had not written a complete song before 2010. But both felt the urge to embrace the scene they had stumbled into that fall and slowly began experimenting with playing and writing styles.

McGinn’s style evolved into an eclectic sound that heavily relied on input from a wide range of local musicians and performers.

“I thought, ‘How can you be better than just a guy strumming a guitar and singing?’ McGinn says. “So I tried to think of ideas that would improve on that, and I thought, get more people.”

Ventre’s sound has become more focused, according to Cranton. Even as he enlisted the aid of Cranton, saxophonist Brian Donnelly and bassist Jeff LaFontant, Ventre always knows what he wants from the performance.

“He is a perfectionist,” says Cranton.

Their hard work has paid off. Both bands have proven to be crowd-pleasers, filling most venues in the area to capacity whenever they have a scheduled show.



Black Dog Brother in his element, among friends, at Gulu-Gulu. Photo by Lauren Donnelly Cloutier, Cloutier-Photography.com

Standing outside of Gulu-Gulu that February night, McGinn is surrounded by friends and fans talking about what’s next for Black Dog Brother. Both McGinn and Ventre have plans to release albums in the near future, but McGinn doesn’t want to seek mainstream stardom. When asked where he wants to take his music, McGinn replies with another devilish grin.

“I’m already there, as far as I’m concerned,” McGinn says. “This is the whole package...This scene has a fun vibe.”

Later on that night, McGinn e-mailed me with the reasons why he chose to call himself and his music “Black Dog Brother.” It was detailed and showed the grace and complexity that McGinn strives for with his music. But it is the last sentence that really explains everything.

“That’s all less interesting than wondering what it means.”