

ARTS

Mega tribute to the Beatles

Working eight days a week gets sounds right



Louisvillian Mark Beyer is the keyboardist for RAIN, the world's foremost Beatles tribute band, which is appearing in New York.

KYLENE LLOYD, THE COURIER-JOURNAL

By Jeffrey Lee Puckett
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Mark Beyer didn't like it when his older sister told him to stay away from her Beatles records. The songs he had heard on the radio had fired his 6-year-old imagination, so it was tough having them just out of reach.

When left with a sitter one night, he slipped his sister's records onto the family console, letting them blast while he began banging on the small

piano in the living room. He had never taken a lesson.

"My babysitter found me playing along by ear with Beatles songs," Beyer said. "I'm not sure what my sister did to me. I can barely remember doing it."

That was ground zero for Beyer's profound obsession with the Beatles, one that 44 years later has taken the Louisvillian to Broadway and a sold-out run as keyboardist for RAIN, the world's foremost Beatles tribute band.

RAIN is big business, with four units that tour internationally. The core unit recently completed three months of shows

at the Neil Simon Theatre in Manhattan and last week began a four-month run at the Brooks Atkinson Theatre there.

Beyer has been on stage for every show, cementing his reputation as the guy you call when you need a one-man Beatles machine capable of handling piano, electronic orchestra and sound effects. Short of actually gigging with surviving Beatles Paul McCartney and Ringo Starr, it's Beyer's ultimate job.

"When you grow up with that music, it puts an imprint on your brain," he said. "I think their music actually changes people's brain chemistry."

Making it RAIN

Beyer has made a living as a musician since forming a cover band, Touch, with buddies at Seneca High School in the late 1970s. He was spoiled from the start as Touch featured three other players who went pro in Nashville — guitarist Greg Foresman, drummer Matt Thompson and bassist Brendan Lewis, who was in Elektra recording artist Shaking Family.

Beyer did well in cover bands for 22 years, rarely playing Beatles music even though his obsession never faltered. He finally tired of “Mustang Sally” and “The Dance” in 2005, when he joined a Beatles tribute band in Louisville called The Rigbys. They had specialized in early Beatles, sans-experimentation, but Beyer brought years of pent-up Beatlemania and a host of tricks.

He literally knew the Beatles music inside-out, having once completed a John Lennon piano demo by writing a band arrangement and piecing it together using individual notes sampled from dozens of Beatles songs. “It took three years,” Beyer said. “I want to give it as a gift to Yoko but don’t know how well it would be accepted. I keep it tight to my chest ... and refuse to give a copy to anyone.”

Beyer’s Beatles profile skyrocketed when Abbey Road on the River moved to Louisville in 2005. A Swedish band called The Repeatables needed a keyboard player and Beyer volunteered, making an impression. He started getting invitations from a number of Beatles bands, and has masterminded several of the festival’s most ambitious events, including live performances of “The Beatles,” “Abbey Road” and “LOVE” albums.

What Beyer brings to the table is the deep catalog of Beatles sounds that he has created and compiled in his St. Matthews studio. By painstakingly studying the band’s recording techniques and scouring the Internet for vintage instruments, Beyer has built an archive of Beatles sounds that he stores on his keyboard.

About 2½ years ago, Mark Lewis took notice. Lewis is a founding member of RAIN and spent 35 years on stage with the band establishing its reputation. Today, only Cirque de Soleil’s production of “LOVE” and RAIN are licensed by Sony, which owns the Beatles catalog. When RAIN was looking to expand into multiple touring units that would rotate performers, Beyer was the first guy Lewis called.



At 9, Mark Beyer celebrates getting the “Revolver” album.

“We talked for 15 or 20 minutes and I felt like we kind of bonded,” said Lewis, who now manages RAIN. “Just the way we conversed keyboard to keyboard player, I knew he was the guy.”

RAIN’s goal is to exactly replicate the Beatles without using samples of the original music. That’s easy enough for “She Loves You” but much tougher with “Strawberry Fields Forever.” That’s where Beyer’s obsession, and expertise with the latest technology, comes in.

For example, there’s a six-second burst of keyboards and sound effects that ends “Strawberry Fields Forever,” and it’s crucial to the illusion. Beyer spent three weeks researching and re-creating those six seconds, which he triggers from his keyboard. For the alarm clock that signals the middle section of “A Day in the Life,” Beyer auditioned clocks until he found one with the identical tone.

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Mark Beyer

When RAIN needed a better sample of the string section on “Eleanor Rigby,” Beyer hired musicians and recorded them, sweetening the sound until he found the right balance. He bought a 1960 Lowery organ, the same model used on “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds,” and used photos from recording sessions to figure out where the organ’s various buttons were set.

“It’s like forensic science trying to figure out how they did certain things,” Beyer said. “The audience will never know, and even my band mates in RAIN

RAIN ON BROADWAY

When: Through May 29.

Where: Brooks Atkinson Theatre, 256 W. 47th St., New York City.

Cost: \$89.75-\$129.75, available at www.ticketmaster.com and by phone, (800) 745-3000.

Info: www.raintribute.com

will never know how all of this happens, but it’s worth it because I want to have the most authentic Beatles sound library in the world.”

“I’ll take it a step further and say he’s already succeeded at that,” Lewis said, “and he’s only getting better.”

Meeting McCartney

In 2006, Beyer realized his dream of meeting McCartney. He slipped into a dinner honoring McCartney’s former wife, Heather Mills, dressed in a black power suit so he’d fit in with the crowd milling around the lobby of the Hyatt Regency Chicago. Beyer managed to speak to McCartney twice, once in the lobby and again after dinner.

“I had thought for my whole life what would I ever say to Paul McCartney if I met him, and five seconds before I saw him I still had no idea,” Beyer said. “So I blurted out, ‘Thank you for teaching me how to play music. I’ve idolized you since I was 6 years old.’”

Beyer managed a little small talk with McCartney after dinner, but was pretty much freaking out by then. “I turned white and became frightened and left before they could throw me out, and went into the lobby and was speechless,” Beyer said. “My girlfriend at the time said: ‘What’s wrong? Was he mean?’”

“I couldn’t speak and broke out in tears. I just started crying. I had to have her phone home so I could tell everybody that I had just talked to Paul McCartney.”

And this was 40 years after discovering the Beatles. Clearly, Beyer’s love affair isn’t cooling.

“I’m infected with an incurable disease. In fact, all I do when I listen to new music is compare it to the Beatles. There’s good, there’s great, and there’s unbelievably phenomenal.”

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