

Shauncey Ali:

Sharing a Madness for Fiddling

By Marty Button

I sat at a table during the Minnesota Bluegrass Festival and nudged my son. "Listen! Do you hear that?" My son and I looked around a crowded room full of instruments, people and music. "I think it's him, Mom," he said, pointing to a man who had started jamming with a student. I put my iPhone into my son's hand. "Record them, quick, before they finish."

My son looked at me, longing for a less embarrassing assignment. "Go! Go!" I urged. He dutifully began recording a random, impromptu jam that sounded so marvelous that I had to get a better vantage point. With a growing audience, they finished the tune, smiled, and looked around. "What's your name?" I asked the fiddle player. "Shauncey," he said. "You know, it's great to play with a kid this good."

Thus began my friendship with Shauncey Ali, a performer, teacher, and director of MadFiddle in Madison, Wisconsin. This comment, that deflected the attention off of him and onto another player, is absolutely characteristic of him. He's quiet, unassuming, gracious, and beyond talented. His reluctance to be a big deal is part of what makes him just that.

Shauncey's family includes his wife, two young children, and a group of musicians who may loosely be considered family as well. He created and directs an extremely successful program called MadFiddle, a youth ensemble (ages 6-17) that explores and performs fiddle music from around the world. To complete the concept, they perform with an adult backing band called Highway 151. He describes the inspiration:

"Starting a family shifted my mentality in terms of the role that music could play in our lives. Ever since our kids were infants, we've loaded up the van and traveled cross-country to bluegrass festivals, camping all over, and having all sorts of fun. Then, teaching at camps was a reminder of the sheer gravity of that environment. With MadFiddle I'm trying to capture the magic of these worlds and share it with students and families back home."

To capture that magic, MadFiddle and Highway 151 have appeared at venues ranging from opera houses to saloons to street corners. Through performance, they have helped raise funds for causes such as Mujilla Falls Agricultural Center in Zambia, the United Way, UW-Madison's Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems, and Trinity Church. Last year, the Madison Area Music Association named Shauncey 2016's Teacher of the Year for his excellence in music education within the community.

One of his students shared, "Shauncey encourages me to practice a lot. ... I recently improvised for the first time on stage. Shauncey helped me prepare, encouraged me to stop worrying about what people thought, and just play from my heart." (Luke, age 13)

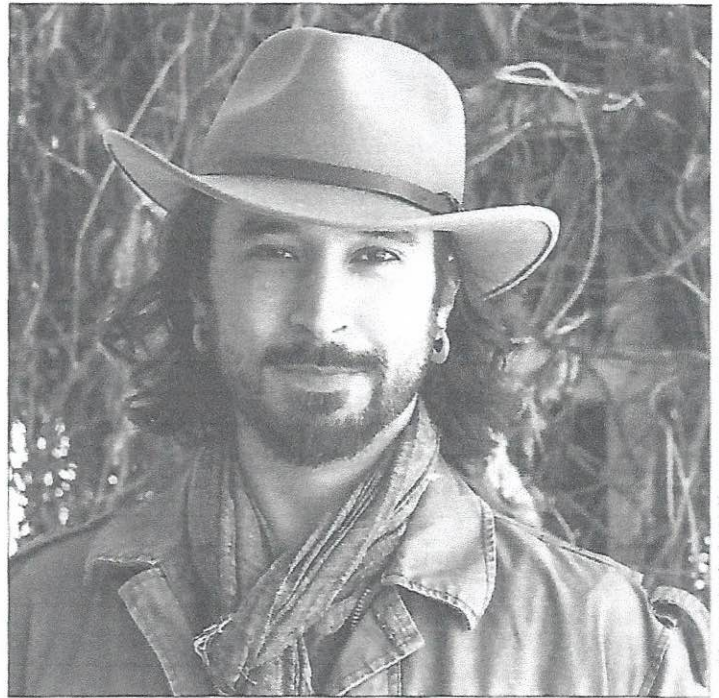


Photo: Andy LaValley

Shauncey began playing the viola in the third grade strings program because he thought carrying an instrument case looked cool. He went on to receive a full viola scholarship at the University of Wisconsin-Madison – opting out of a music degree to major in botany – where he played in the symphony by day and in clubs by night. Just weeks after graduating, Shauncey met his mentor, Bonnie Greene, who shared a wealth of knowledge in violin pedagogy, child psychology, and human nature. "I had spent my college years working at a daycare center and already had a love for music. Putting the two together felt natural."

Soon after, his mother passed away unexpectedly. "In all the grieving I remember wanting to do something spiritual for myself. On a whim, I signed up for a fiddle camp and fell for it so hard, it wasn't even funny. It completely changed the lens through which I identified as a musician."

Currently, Shauncey performs with a number of groups, including the Old Tin Can String Band and Graminy, an eco-acoustic chamber ensemble with two award-winning albums to their name. His latest project is with the Boston-based Katie McNally Trio, a Scottish/Cape Breton-influenced group that is equal parts tradition and innovation. In 2016, the group released *The Boston States*, which was recorded in Cape Breton and produced by Wendy MacIsaac.

The chemistry that Katie (fiddle) and Neil Pearlman (piano) share is prominent. Shauncey says it's a fun challenge to complement this harmonious existence in just the right way, in addition to re-inventing his role as a violist after working so hard to be a fiddle player. It's definitely a collision of worlds in the best way. They live in distant cities, so there's an abundance of audio recordings and texts, then just snippets of time when they're actually in the same room together. The new album "has a freshness that we wouldn't have captured had we been over-rehearsed."

About His Equipment

Shauncey plays a C.M. Woolworth fiddle that was made in Iowa in 1916. Lately he's been enjoying playing through Bartlett and Ear Trumpet microphones. He uses Helicore strings, and never leaves home without a Strapsey case strap.

[Marty and her husband Joel are the parents of seven children, all of whom have played or are learning to play fiddle and/or mandolin. Marty is the coordinator for Brian Wicklund's Fiddle Pal Camp (<https://americanfiddlemethod.com>).]

Shauncey's Strapsey

Shauncey is the creator of Strapsey, a colorful line of case straps for fiddle and other stringed instruments. "I got the idea for Strapsey way back in high school. Many of my friends had decorative straps for guitar and I saw an opportunity for string players to embrace individuality in a similar way. (In my college years) I would tie different-colored bandanas to the D-rings on my case and wear my fiddle backpack-style. When I finally began pursuing a musical career, I scribbled design ideas on post-it notes and scattered them around my apartment in an attempt to stay motivated and make it happen." (strapsey.com)

Lua's Dance

Listen to this tune at <https://graminy.bandcamp.com/track/luas-dance>

Shauncey Ali

A A E A D E

5 A E A D 1. E A E A 2.

B D E F#m E

14 D E F#m D 1. E A E A 2. Fine

C Development/Ad Lib, repeat as needed
E D E D D.S. al Fine

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Photo: Matt Tills

MadFiddle and Highway 151 at the Stoughton Opera House, Stoughton, Wisc., 2016