

Songwriter's Showcase: Ed Becker

by Roger Kratochvil

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On February 28, 1949, a son was born to Maynard and Betty Becker of Mt. Olive. That boy would be named Eddie, a name that had great meaning to the family, as Maynard's brother Eddie was killed in World War II. Eddie would then become at that time the next part of the Becker and Son Funeral Home in Mt. Olive. Their first two children were girls named Judy and Jane. Eddie, the only boy in the family, would then live his early life in Mt. Olive playing sports at the Mt. Olive schools, graduating in 1967, and doing everything that most young boys would do.

As the only son in the family, it was sort of expected that he would eventually become part of the family tradition, and become a mortician too. This would be as in, Becker and Son. So becoming an undertaker became his goal and he got trained and became very good at it. He had a gift of preparing deceased people so that they were presented to their family and friends in the best possible way. Many times he had to prepare people who were victims of horrible accidents or who had suffered terrible health problems. He definitely had a gift of getting these people ready for a wake and burial to look like they were remembered. That is very important to families as I can remember one time an aunt of my wife died of cancer and was buried at a St. Louis funeral home. She had lost all of her hair and the mortician presented her in a turban. That would not have happened at Beckers.

Ed's life can be divided into several parts. There is his family life where he is married to his lifelong partner, Shelly Haller. His children include Tracy, Holly, Betsy, and their only son, Doug. He and Shelly also have many grandchildren. Doug is now the son in Becker and Son Funeral Home. And the great skills of the Becker family have continued with Doug. Of course, Shelly has played a very important role in the operation of the funeral home as she wears many hats.

Another part of Ed's life has been in his involvement with the Mt. Olive community and his donated time and resources to community events. With his contacts in the music industry, he has provided direction for the Mt. Olive Homecoming and Turner Hall in getting musical entertainment for its events. He also serves on three cemetery boards, City, Miners, and Chapman.

Ed has always had a sense of humor and an ability to create activities that would be appealing to the public. His involvement with the Wacky Olympics and street dances were a huge success and as the homecoming chair for many years, he was able to put the best people in positions to help. He has often mentioned that his appointment of friend Junior Friesner as the homecoming food stand chairman for many years was not only one of his best decisions but one of his most interesting ones. He stated that Junior often

got a free sample from those stands to make sure it was acceptable to the public. He thought that his getting these “free” samples was an example of Junior’s dedication to service, and not just getting free food. At the local talent show, he got Junior to join him in singing the song, Ghost Riders in the Sky. They thought they had a Grammy performance, and they had a sure winner there, but they did not win, and it has been a major disappointment in Ed’s life. He thought that Junior was better at singing based on his Zion Lutheran Church Choir experience.

Ed has found fun in many of the social events that he has been part of. He also enjoys laughing at the many antics that he has been a part of, and he has been a part of many. He once told me the story that his dad Maynard, wanted him to get good grades when he attended Southern IL University at Carbondale. As an incentive, Maynard told Eddie he told him he would buy him a new car if he made the Dean’s List. He did and his dad bought him a new Dodge Charger, with the advice to always keep it clean. He had not had it for very long when he decided it was time to take it to a car wash and follow his dad’s advice. While in the car wash, he reached into the back seat and accidentally caused the car to lurch and get off the rails. The car wash now proceeded to destroy the car with irreparable damage. Ed said it looked like” one big soap bubble” when it was over with. It seems the car wash “ate his car.” So much for the good grades incentive!

Ed also enjoyed bowling and for many years sponsored a team at the Turner Hall and Schoppies Bowling Alleys (Pallbearers). He was fortunate to bowl a 300 game. In fact, his good buddy Gary once bragged that he and Ed bowled a 390 together one time. Ed bowled 300 and Gary 90.

For the last 33 years, Ed has hosted the very popular radio show, Songwriter’s Showcase on the FM radio station KDHX in St. Louis. His show is on from 10 a.m to noon on Sundays at the 88.1 frequency. I asked him how that all got started and how his love of music played a major part. He gives credit to his sisters Judy and Jane for that. It seems that they had an old jukebox bought from a local barber, Wally Howard. They would play music and as a young boy he would like to hear the likes of Johnny Horton, Marty Robbins, Pat Boone, Chad Mitchell Trio, John Denver, and the Kingston Trio. They became his favorites and he really admired those who wrote songs that told a story.

As he got older, his sister Judy married Ken Hinckley and he bonded with Kenny. You see Ed is a huge University of Missouri fan and his brother-in-law Ken, graduated from Mt. Olive High School in 1959, and played football for Mizzou under Dan Devine, and played in several major bowl games. Kenny loved to sing too and that was part of the bond between them. Kenny loved to do his Elvis impression and once performed it at the Mt. Olive High School Junior Carnival.

Around 1970 Ed developed a real interest in music on the radio. He also started to attend music festivals like the Kerrville Folk Festival in Texas and the Moccasin Creek Festival in Effingham. They were all festivals where he was able to satisfy his taste for all of this music, especially folk music. Some of the music he liked was from Graham Parsons and his Cosmic American blend music movement. Unfortunately, Parsons died from a drug overdose.

Friend and neighbor, Gary Fyalka and his wife Karen often traveled with Ed and Shelly when they would attend the concerts. Gary, who is also known as Filo, told me that “when you travel with Ed and Shelly you are guaranteed to always have a smile on your face, have a great time, and enjoy outstanding food as well as liquid refreshments”

It was about this time that Ed became friends with international Folk music star, Tom Russell. Ed wrote to him to ask for albums of his music. Tom wrote back to Ed and this started a friendship that has lasted all of these years. About the time of this letter to Tom, Tom was driving a cab in New York to make ends meet. He was just starting and Ed attended the Kerrville Music Festival to meet Tom. In fact, to help Tom get started, Ed hired the Tom Russell band to play at his niece’s wedding in Massachusetts.

In 1987 Tom Russell played in St. Louis and Ed and Shelly attended the concert. Ed called radio stations to encourage them to play Tom’s songs. He got him gigs at neighborhood saloons and concert halls. One of Ed’s favorite concert halls is the Sheldon Theater just off of Grand Blvd in St. Louis, next to the Fox Theater. Many of Ed’s favorite performers have entertained there over the years.



While at one of the radio stations, Ed met a man named Larry Weir. He would turn out to be a man who changed Ed's life. Ed got Tom to appear on Larry's show on KDHX. Larry also was the station manager and he admired Ed's knowledge of music and asked him if he would do his show during weekdays when he could not make it. That was 1987 and it was the start of a musical career hosting a show called, "Songwriter's Showcase." Shortly after, the show changed days to Sunday from 10 a.m. to noon. All of this developed because at the young age of 57, Larry fell and died, and Ed was asked to continue his show. The radio station is located across from the Fox Theater and is called the Larry Weir Center for Independent Media in his honor. Ed would always consider Larry his mentor, and one of his best friends.

In his 33 years doing Songwriter's Showcase, Ed has met many musical celebrities. Of course, Tom Russell is at the top of the list. Tom actually stays at Ed's funeral home house when he is performing nearby. Ed was able to get Tom to perform several concerts at the Turner Hall in Mt. Olive and has written several songs involving the labor movement and especially, Mother Jones. Tom has mentioned several local taverns in one of his songs. Pee Wees House of Knowledge saloon was one of them mentioned. One of my favorite Russell songs is about Hispanic immigration and it is called, "Who's Going to Build them Walls?"

Ed co-produced the movie, Miner's Angel about Mother Jones and got some well-known singers to contribute songs to the presentation. Singers like EmmyLou Harris and Gretchen Peters have contributed with Peters actually appearing with Russell at the Turner Hall. Peters wrote the number one bestseller, Independence Day, taken to number one on the country music charts by superstar recording artist Martina McBride.

Ed has promoted James McMurtry and his band on his program and got to know him well. McMurtry is the son of Larry McMurtry, the author of the outstanding book and television series, Lonesome Dove.

Ed, who has had a few health issues recently, continues to do his show every Sunday, rain or shine. In asking him why he does it, he simply said "I enjoy it and I hope to educate my listeners on folk and bluegrass music." But, he actually likes all kinds of music. He also enjoys the many calls he gets at the station and the challenges that his listeners give to him in finding an artist that is not well known. Listeners test him on finding the music of some obscure artist or new artist that very few know. He is good at finding that person. Recently a caller requested something by Robert Earl King, and Ed found it.

Ed lights up when talking about music. He considers himself very lucky in having a wonderful, supporting family, a radio career that he thought he would never have, and a sense of humor that never ends. He still golfs on the Fab Four For Fun golf team where the members of Junior, Gary, Ed, and yours truly still try to prove that you can be better than the range of fair to poor. He still plays cards (poley) every week with his "best buddy," Junior. He still says that a "good" week is when he is the partner of Junior in poley and golf. Ironically, I was one of Ed's and Gary's teachers and coaches in High School, but I was definitely not their golf coach.

Along the way, Ed has acquired the nickname of "Digger." In the 1940s there was an old-time radio show called, "The Life of Riley." One of the characters on the show was Digger O'Dell, the friendly undertaker. One of his popular lines was, "My...business is dead today." It seems that Ed has added that name to his character.

Ed probably has hundreds of tapes and records accumulated over many years of being a music lover. Along the way, he also has accumulated thousands of facts on music writers and artists. Little did he know he would put that all together and be the host of one of the most popular radio shows on public radio. He has enjoyed the trip and the many friends that he has met along the way. And, oh, what fun it has been!

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