

Jami & Dylan cluck, croon their way across Midwest

By David Lias

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Jami Lynn's presence in the folk music world had already been felt in the Great Plains for a couple years when, in what can only be described as the results of a chance meeting, life changed for the better.

She met Dylan James.

The result? The two of them have continued the quest that Jami began shortly after graduating from the University of South Dakota. They are continuing to create and perform their own music while sharing folk standards that appeal to a wide audience.

She credits her upbringing and her studies at USD in playing a part in the development of both her unique vocal style and repertoire of folk music that leaves listeners yearning for more.

"I started out as a vocal performance major," Jami said in a 2011 telephone interview with the Plain Talk. "I studied classical voice for three of my four years, and eventually what I graduated with was a music studies degree because I knew singing classically wasn't what I wanted to do."

During her junior year, she participated in an exchange program at Nashville "and I eventually found out that a lot of what I studied at the time wasn't exactly what I wanted to do, but the Honors Program and my thesis kind of set me in the right direction, fortunately."

In the fall of 2009, Lynn began research for her undergraduate thesis. It involved long afternoons in museums and archives that gave her exposure to a unique collection of South Dakota folk songs and stories.

Lynn graduated from USD in 2010, and a year later, she began work on her second album, *Sodbusters*.

"I did that album with Josh Rieck, my duo partner at the time, and I put that out in 2011," Lynn said shortly after she and Dylan concluded an October 2013 noon performance at the National Music Museum in Vermillion. "After *Sodbusters* came out, I moved, so Josh and I were finished playing together because we were on opposite ends of the state."

For two years, beginning in 2011 when Rapid City became her new home, she was a solo act.

"I played solo for the first two years living in the Hills, and then Dylan and I met in July 2012 on



Jami Lynn and Dylan James perform before a capacity audience Oct. 10 in the National Music Museum, Vermillion.

the streets of Rapid City, busking," Jami said. "It was pretty instantaneous – it was like, 'great, let's play together. You're excellent, let's make something happen.' It is really fun to share it (music) with someone again, especially with all the traveling, you know. Touring is much more fun with two people."

Jami said it's difficult to describe how, by chance, she found the perfect musical partner on the streets of Rapid City.

"It was kind of creepy, because I had heard a lot of people talk about him, but I had never heard him play before, and I hadn't met him," she said. "The first time I saw him play, I was pretty blown away, so after we busked for a couple hours, I invited him to sit in on my gig that night."

"He came and played with me, and a couple days later, we both contacted each other at the same time of morning, and we basically, at the same time, asked each other to be duo partners," Jami said. "It was cool to know that we were both on the same page right away, and we got right to work. That would have been in July 2012."

Jami and Dylan released their first album, *Cluck and Croon*, in early 2013.

Shortly after that, they embarked on their first tour.

"We've played a lot in Colorado, Nebraska, Iowa and South Dakota, and we went on one major tour last spring right after we put out our album together," Jami said. "We toured the southeastern part of the country, and went to North Carolina,

Georgia, Tennessee and Illinois.

"We played across the Midwest, too, through Minnesota and Wisconsin. It was really fun, and we visited some really great places across the country," she said. "It was a great experience, and we'll be doing more of that."

As its title suggests, *Cluck and Croon* contains songs with both folk and jazz influences.

"The title track, 'Cluck Old Hen,' is a straight folk song that we put on there, and we pair that together with croon, for the jazz crooners. A lot of the songs that we've written on that album are influenced heavily by both," Jami said. "Most songs, you can always detect some folk and some jazz, and we recorded some folk traditional tunes on there, and one jazz standard, 'Ain't Misbehavin' by Fats Waller."

Jami's thesis may be written and her studies at USD may be long behind her, but she has discovered that the research never ends as she explores the music that earlier generations brought with them as they settled the Great Plains and other regions of the United States.

For example, "The Colorado Trail," one of the songs on Jami's *Sodbusters* album, is included in John and Alan Lomax's *American Folk Songs and Ballads*, published in 1934. It was collected from a dying Montana cowboy in a hospital in Duluth, MN. The song stays alive today, thanks to Lynn's research and the personal touch she brings to the song.

bit, because we thought maybe we shouldn't play under just our names, and we thought of The Populists, because I am the daughter of a farmer, and Dylan is the son of a miner, which made up the Populist Party in the 1890s. I thought it was pretty clever," she said, laughing.

Today, Jami said, she is exactly where she wants to be in her professional and personal life.

"I was hoping for something like the time I graduated. The whole time I was in college, I didn't know what I'd be doing, but I didn't really think this would be possible until the year after I graduated," she said, "when I said, 'ooh, I need to figure this out.' It was a slow progression that had already begun by that time, of getting regular gigs at places, and turning around and meeting people who wanted to support me and what I was doing."

The summer after she moved to the Black Hills, she was able to do something that not many young musicians can – quit her job.

"That was over two years ago. It's pretty amazing. I feel so blessed that it's worked out for me," Jami said. "It's unlikely for someone to be able to make your living as a musician in South Dakota, but I've had a lot of help from communities such as this (Vermillion) that support my music."

It's a bit more challenging for a musical duo to make a living, but it's also more rewarding, she said.

"It's more fun with two people; it's harder, because you're supporting two people instead of one, so you have to stretch things a little thinner, but it's easier in that you get to sleep half the time that we're

traveling while you drive," Jami said. "It's easier when you have two people carrying in the sound system and setting it up. It's been good."

The two musicians also do all they can to help each other's creativity.

"We pretty much do our own writing separately, but when you bring a song to somebody else and have them hear it, they have different ideas about how it's supposed to sound as a duo than you have and that's where that bouncing (of ideas) process starts for us," Jami said.

Both Jami and Dylan plan to work on their own projects in the coming months.

"I'll start working on a full length solo album, and Dylan is also working on solo material as well," Jami said, "which we will help each other out on, but they'll be solo albums."

This fall, the two found themselves adjusting as their lives continue to change.

"We've made it work.

Going into the winter is a little different for us, because during the summer, we play non-stop together," Jami said, "but this fall, Dylan just started school here at USD; he's taking classes online, and during the school year, I do residencies through the Artists in the Schools program through the South Dakota Arts Council, so that's how my winter is spent here and there for a week at a time across South Dakota."

It is a season they both welcome.

"Winter is a time to slow down, recharge and record," Jami said. "It's a time to do things that don't require you to travel long distances across forlorn, winter landscapes."

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The NMM receives the donation of the Paul and Jean Christian Collection and Archive (St. Paul, MN) in 2006. It includes a collection of 2,381 Western and non-Western musical instruments, including more than 600 zithers, and is accompanied by an extensive archive of supporting material.