

Kevin Dean



Kevin Dean.
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In 1855 my great great grandfather Richard Dean, emigrated from England and bought a farm in Iowa. His eldest son Arthur took over the farm in 1900, as did his eldest son Earl in 1925 and Earl's eldest son Richard in 1950. Richard's eldest son was me and I was allergic to hay, afraid of cows and mostly enjoyed fooling around on the cornet and the neighbour's Hammond organ—or any activity that interfered with farm chores.

It was clear from an early age that I wouldn't be taking over the farm, but I was lucky in that I came from a musical family. My grandfather Earl was a somewhat reluctant farmer himself and spent most of the 1930s as a State Senator (a Democrat, of course). My grandmother got so lonely that she said she would divorce him if he ran for a third term. So he spent the rest of his years involved in philanthropic work, farming and playing music. He played the cello and also sang or whistled as he accompanied himself on the banjo or 'tincanolin,' both instruments he made himself. The tincanolin which everyone else called the tin can, had a neck that was made from an old manure fork handle and a one gallon oil tin can for the resonating body. (Grandpa Dean always said he used a number 10 oil can to help it play easier in the winter.) The tin can was strung with two piano strings and played like a cello with the lower string creating a drone. It actually sounded pretty good and it was loud too! My grandfather would play "Liebestraum" on the tin can stopping numerous times to dry his eyes and blow his nose as my grandmother accompanied him on piano. They had a whole vaudeville comedy thing worked out. He was also a fantastic whistler. I have a tape of a radio show he did in the 1940s playing banjo and whistling "The Whistler and His Dog." He was killing. I mostly remember him singing in church or in the 'Rusty Hinge' barbershop quartet. He had a kind of raw and powerful high tenor voice that gave me goose bumps.

My grandmother was an accomplished pianist, taught piano lessons and was considered the best sight-reader and accompanist in northern Iowa. She was Meredith Wilson's accompanist when they were in junior college together in 1918. Meredith Wilson

who wrote "The Music Man" grew up in Mason City and based the story on the town. Grandma Dean was my accompanist for countless music contests through junior high and high school and followed me like a demon through many an ignored rest, missed repeat or bungled coda. At Christmas my grandmother would play piano and the whole family would divide up the parts and sing Handel's Hallelujah Chorus. I think the last time she did it was in about 1994. When we were done she said "Well I guess I better get out my Hannon." She was 94 at the time and lived to be 100. My grandparents had three sons. The eldest, (my father) played violin in his youth but switched to saxophone and bass when he got interested in jazz. He is now 80 years old and still plays bass in his Dixieland band: The Raiders of the Lost Art. He also plays soprano saxophone in a group he co-leads that specializes in music from the 1920s and 1930s called the "Spats and Flappers Orchestra" and plays alto in the north Iowa "Jazz Coalition" big



Earl Dean, Kevin Dean's grandfather, playing the Tin Can. Kevin's father, Richard, is seated on the left.
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band. He even still sings for the odd funeral. I swear he has more gigs than me. The second son Gerald, who died in the early 1970s, played piano, clarinet and saxophone and was truly an excellent jazz player. He showed me "rootless" piano voicing for a blues in F when I was 12 and it was a revelation. The youngest son Allan is the only professional musician of the three. He plays trumpets of all shapes and sizes as well as cornetto and recorders. He is still an extremely active classical freelance trumpeter with an incredi-



Earl Dean and banjo.
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bly rich career. He teaches trumpet at Yale, and is an excellent jazz player too.

I remember many exciting times when I was young when Dad and Gerald and Allan would have jam sessions. My uncle Allan became my musical hero and because of him I started playing the cornet. He was also quite glamorous, living in New York City and always having a different wife or girlfriend. What a life! Since he grew up in the same family, on the same farm as me, dreaming of being a musician was not all that crazy. He paved the way.

I am the oldest of three boys. My younger brothers play saxophone and trombone and all their (also) kids play or sing. When we were growing up we had a family rule that you could start taking piano lessons around age ten but everyone had to play for two years before we could start another instrument. The belief was that everyone should know a bit about the piano and get a good musical foundation. I showed very little aptitude for piano, an instrument with which I still have a somewhat acrimonious relationship, although I play it all the time. I also didn't like the classical lessons I was obliged to take and the only music I was interested in was my Dad's Count Basie, Mose Allison and Oscar Peterson records. By the time the Beatles arrived on the scene I considered myself too sophisticated to be interested. I referred to them as the Beat-less. When my father accidentally received the Jimmy Smith/Wes Montgomery record *Jimmy & Wes Dynamic Duo* with his renewal to *Down Beat* magazine I think my fate was sealed.

I guess all this is to say that virtually all my early musical influences were from my family and I am eternally grateful for their support and encouragement. e

KEVIN DEAN