

# Walla Walla busker gets attention in unicorn mask

By VICKI HILLHOUSE  
Union-Bulletin

WALLA WALLA, Wash. (AP) — A man walks into a bar carrying a violin in one hand and a unicorn head in the other.

If you're waiting for a punch line, you'd better settle in. This isn't the setup to a joke.

For musician Ben MacSpadden, it's your run-of-the-mill Thursday night as he navigates through a local pub to find his target: a group of people celebrating the holiday at a cluster of tables pushed together for the occasion.

He introduces himself, dons the head that so many have seen him wear during his busking performances at First Avenue and Main Street, and begins a medley of Christmas tunes.

He calls them Uni-Grams. The idea is simple, the 28-year-old said: For \$10, he delivers a message and a song while wearing his unicorn mask. At Christmas, he adds an ugly sweater to the get-up. Additional songs are \$5 each.

Though started as an idea for the holidays, he sees no reason to stop now. This unicorn will be for hire as long as there's demand.

It's another layer to the live performances that kicked off when MacSpadden began playing at Land Title Plaza earlier this year.

A game buyer for Book & Game Co., MacSpadden considers himself a student of busking — street performing for tips.

The son of a music teacher, he's played violin since he was a tot, although he says without a hint of irony he didn't become serious about it until he was 5. That was when his teacher was covering the letter "V" with a depiction of a violin, which MacSpadden announced he could play. The teacher was awestruck, and recommended an instructor. The rest is history.



AP Photo/Walla Walla Union-Bulletin, Greg Lehman

**Violinist Ben McSpadden plays his violin in Walla Walla, Wash., Dec. 24. McSpadden can often be seen in his unicorn mask playing at venues around Walla Walla, or busking downtown. For \$10, he delivers a message and a song while wearing his unicorn mask. At Christmas, he adds an ugly sweater to the get-up. Additional songs are \$5 each.**

It hadn't occurred to him to play on the streets until he unearthed the unicorn mask during a move.

Purchased for a Halloween costume last year, he stumbled upon the mask and wondered to himself if he could play his acoustic violin dubbed "Oskar" while wearing it.

Once confirmed, he decided to take his act on the road. Or, rather, on the street corner.

So excited was MacSpadden to make his downtown debut last summer in a kilt and the mask and with a sign that read "Cursed by a wizard, need money for magic lessons" that he hadn't noticed he'd set up camp on a different day of the week than originally planned. Nevertheless, he decided to play and see what would happen.

The Celtic tunes from MacSpadden and Oskar turned heads. It was

exactly what he was going for.

"The reaction was immediate and amazing," he said. "Folks were taken completely off guard. I could almost see people's thoughts sliding from 'What's going on? Is this really happening?' to 'Hey, this guy's pretty good.'"

And he is. When he was young, MacSpadden set a record for himself of practicing about 3,000 consecutive days. He fell out of that habit once he hit high school and college, but by then he knew what he was doing.

Music education was his career path in college at Central Washington University, though he left early.

With Oskar — a roughly 60-year-old instrument made in Germany — and "Sparky" — his electric violin with the extra low string that gives him depth with chords and noodling around — his passion for performing

has awakened once again.

To describe his motivation for busking, MacSpadden turns to Amanda Palmer who penned "The Art of Asking." He characterizes her description of busking as the best he's read to date: "On the street, artists succeed or fail by virtue of their raw ability to create a show in unexpected circumstances, to thoroughly entertain an audience that did not expect to be one, and to make random people care for a few minutes. The passers-by are trusting you to give them something valuable in exchange for their time and attention, and (possibly) their dollars," MacSpadden quoted.

Those looking for a surprise from MacSpadden — apart from the costume, of course — can find an occasional Pink Floyd song in his set list.

Since that first performance in downtown Walla Walla, MacSpadden



AP Photo/Walla Walla Union-Bulletin, Greg Lehman

**Violinist Ben McSpadden poses for a photo with his violin in Walla Walla, Wash.**

has not only returned to the streets weekend after weekend, he's also attended the Thursday jam nights at Sapoli Cellars, performs at open mics, debuted an original composition during a performance at Mace Mead Works, traveled to Portland to busk (where he surprisingly made fewer tips than in Walla Walla, he said), and has now added his Uni-Grams, complete with dedicated social media page on Facebook.

He's considering adding other heads to his lineup to keep things fresh. But whether he's on a street corner or surprising an unsuspecting guest in a restaurant, the reward is the same.

"I really do love it," he said. "One of the best things — the thing that sort of kicks into my mind every once in a while — it's a disruption. It's a gentle disruption, but it snaps people out of what they're doing."

"It's so easy to end up in autopilot mode and just sort of making your way through the day. I really enjoy that I get to disrupt that cycle for a moment and make people happy."

## Newborn killer whale a good sign for imperiled pod

SEATTLE (AP) — A newborn orca has been spotted in the endangered pod that frequents Puget Sound in Washington state, a good sign after the death of a pregnant killer whale from the same group earlier this month.

The baby orca was discovered Tuesday by Center for Whale Research scientist Ken Balcomb and another scientist monitoring members of J-pod off the Canadian Gulf Islands of British Columbia.

Balcomb says the presumed mother is J-16, a 43-year-old that has had three surviving calves. The baby killer whale is estimated to be a day or two old and appeared healthy. It's been designated J-50.

Howard Garrett of the Orca Network says the birth is encouraging after the loss of the breeding female and its fetus.

The baby brings the Puget Sound orca population to 78.



**A new baby orca whale swims alongside its mother near Vancouver Island in the Canadian Gulf Islands of British Columbia, Dec. 30. The newborn is being called J-50. With the new addition, there are now 78 of the endangered whales in the waters of British Columbia and Washington state.**

AP Photo/Center for Whale Research, Ken Balcomb

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