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The Poet’s Lounge

Photos and profile by Caryn B. Davis

Darin Keech is content. And why wouldn’t he be? His backyard is Fishers Island Sound, and his home is a sailboat. But he didn’t arrive here just by chance; he came to it through hard work, by following his instincts, and trusting “the common itch”.

Keech grew up in Danielson, Connecticut. He spent weekends watching his father race his sunfish on Alexander’s Lake where he eventually learned to sail. When he was in middle school, his father purchased an ocean going San Juan 24 that was comfortable enough for cruising but fast enough for racing.

“I had never been on a larger boat, but I figured it must be the same concept as sailing a smaller one. It’s common knowledge among sailors if you can master a small racing dingy that can easily capsize and instinctually

learn how to get yourself out of trouble, you can sail anything,” Keech says.

At sixteen he got his driver’s license and found freedom. Now he could get to Warwick, RI, where the boat was docked on his own. Keech would secretly skip school, grab the boat keys, and go sailing.



“I was more comfortable trusting my imagination than conventional main-stream approaches. Sailing was something I was good at and felt good doing,” says Keech, who knew then sailing would someday be part of his livelihood.

That was the year the America’s Cup Races were being held off Newport, a four hour sail from Warwick, but Keech just had to see them. One afternoon his engine conked out, and he was late returning. He had never sailed at night before but could see the shoreline, the running lights, and much to his dismay, his father.



“I thought I was in big trouble; but he said, ' If you can take the boat in at night, you can take it anytime.' That began my obsession with salt water,” he recalls.

Keech comes from a musical family. His father sang and played harmonica, and there was always late night dancing in the Keech’s kitchen. After graduating from college and spending literally one day suffocating in a suit and tie, he took off to Stratton Mountain in Vermont. He delivered firewood in exchange for a ski pass, and supported himself playing guitar in bars as a duo.





Through a series of serendipitous circumstances, he met fellow musician Dan Stevens who had a regular stint at a pub in Mystic. Stevens was taking off to crew on musician David Crosby's Schooner Mayan and offered Keech the gig.

Sometimes people and events become catalysts in your life with one experience appearing to seamlessly roll into the next. That's not to say there aren't challenges to overcome along the way, but without taking that initial leap of faith into the unknown, all those doors destined to open, might not. And, if you're not paying attention, you can miss it and find yourself on a completely different path. But if you are, you can recognize when the crossroad is upon you, as Keech did when he accepted Stevens' proposal.

This particular pub was next to Mystic Seaport and frequented by sailors. There he met David and Rosemary Dyché, a couple who had a 58-foot wooden schooner called Nina. They were embarking upon a transatlantic voyage and seeking crew.

Nina was designed by Starling Burgess and built in 1928 specifically to participate in the

Trans-Atlantic Race from New York to Spain. She won that race, along with many others, including several Newport to Bermuda Races. She was the first American yacht to win the 1928 Fastnet Race and was once owned by famed yachtsman DeCoursey Fales.

Nina left Newport for the Azores with Keech onboard. Four hours into the trip he saw his first whale. The next day they hit the Gulf Stream and followed the turquoise waters under the cover of a full moon. On one of these crystal clear evenings, Keech wrote a song in its honor.

"After 15 days we landed at the Azores. You didn't know or care what day it was. It's a different culture being on the water. You feel alive every moment," says Keech.

They spent a month there with Keech playing in bars before sailing nine days to Morocco and then Gibraltar where he jumped ship with only \$20 in his pocket; taking yet another leap of faith.

"I felt confident I was going to be fine. If there was anything that existed in life that was magic, it was going to happen and already was," says

Keech who would explore this inner knowing later in a play he wrote.

He toured Europe for four months earning money by playing in bars and with street musicians. In Portugal he performed with world-class flamenco guitarists furthering his musical education. Returning stateside, he soon welcomed the birth of his son. Faced with a child to raise and a mortgage, he put his adventure life on hold and reflected upon his travels through writing.

"I was bringing my kid to school everyday where they would tell him stories. He loved that. So I got good at story telling. Eventually, I wrote a play about a character named Jude," says Keech who was teaching his son about the Beatles then; hence the protagonist's name.

"It's called 'The Common Itch' because at any given moment the body gets these impulses. With these impulses you can choose to do something constructive or destructive. Whenever Jude felt his own body itch, it was his internal compass saying don't go here, don't do this, choose something else that feels right."

The semi-autobiographical play was shown to





sold out audiences at the Donald Oat Theater in Norwich, the Bradley Playhouse in Putnam, and the Eugene O'Neill Theater in Waterford. It included 13 original songs performed on stage by Keech's band, The Band of Humans, with whom he still gigs, and also solo, with different musicians sitting in. This morphed into other writing opportunities of film scores for regional productions including a song for the award winning film "The Curse of Micha Rood".

But even with these successes, Keech still craved the sea. He got his captain's license and purchased a 39-foot Ericson he charts, with the dream of one day sailing it around the world. He named it Poet's Lounge after a fictitious coffee house Jude visited that was a refuge for artists, poets, and songwriters, much like sailing has been for Keech. He keeps the boat in Noank because of its profound beauty



"It's thrilling to turn people onto sailing for the first time, being there in that moment when the power happens; when we raise the sails, shut down the engine, catch some wind, and go," he says.

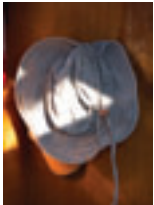
The entire area is filled with one breathtaking view after another whether it's hugging the shore of Fishers Island spying a glass house or a mansion with interesting architecture; or passing one of

and proximity to Fishers Island, which blocks the Atlantic Ocean's swells. The result is calmer seas more like lake sailing where passengers rarely get bounced around or seasick. It's also a good jumping off point for longer voyages to nearby Block Island, Nantucket, Watch Hill, Martha's Vineyard, Stonington, and Montauk, L.I.

five local lighthouses; or throwing the anchor out to swim at an isolated beach or small island; or just relaxing. Sometimes, if the mood is right, Keech may serenade his guests or they may bring their own instruments.

"While it's a sailing paradise, it can be a little tricky. There are lots of rocks around and you have to know where they are," he says.





Unlike other neighboring charter companies, Poet’s Lounge provides an intimate experience with a maximum capacity of six passengers, as opposed to twenty or more. Keech offers overnight charters, weekly charters, day sails, half day sails, and sunset cruises. A lot of his passengers hail from other countries, and recently he had tourists from China onboard and a two week charter with a family from the U.K. Having travelled extensively, he continues to enjoy meeting people from other cultures.

He has also done charters for business meetings, seal watching, poetry readings, writing workshops, wedding parties and proposals, honeymoons, anniversaries, bachelor and bachelorette parties, milestone birthday parties and to spread the ashes of a loved one.

But this lifestyle isn’t for everyone. It takes a unique person to be able to tolerate a variety

of characters and enjoy it and to spend a lot of time alone. It also takes resourcefulness and ingenuity. Keech maintains and repairs everything himself.

“Sailing is a great opportunity to be in tune with nature because there are no motors or electricity. It’s just you and the wind,” says Keech who plans to expand his business to include winter charters in the Virgin Islands.

“I have always been my own person. I have always invented my own life, and I still do. I hope to inspire other people to follow their own dreams or their own common itch,” he says.

SIDE NOTE: In June, Nina was tragically lost at sea after attempting to sail from New Zealand to Australia in inclement weather. David and Rosemary, their son, and other passengers were onboard. As of this writing, a rescue mission has not recovered any survivors.

For more information, to book a charter, or find out where Darin is playing, log onto www.sailpoet-slounge.com or call 860-267-7956.



Photo courtesy Darin Keech



Photo courtesy Darin Keech

