

INTERVIEWER: OK, how about something fun right now? You could say our next guest is a professional multitasker. Steve Solkela started playing accordion in high school, and then kept adding instruments, a trumpet here, a bass drum there. He's now touring nationally and sometimes internationally as Steve's Overpopulated One-Man Band. He plays covers and writes original music with a sense of humor, like this song, "Up On Da Range."

STEVE (SINGING) Up on da range, up on da range, up on da range, where the loonies all go, where the loonies all go,
SOLKELA: back on the farm, back on his family farm, strummin' a banjo, strumming his banjo.

And when I do, and when he do, my mother might mutter, Steve's mother might mutter there's a guy driving a tractor with a nuclear reactor up on da range, up on da range, up on da range, where the loonies all go, where the loonies all go, where we jump start cars, where we jump start cars, at 40 below, brrr. And when we do, and when--

INTERVIEWER: Steve Solkela knows all about the iron range. He was born in Palo. He's now based in Virginia, Minnesota. He's on the line right now. Hey, Steve, how are you?

STEVE Hey, hey, not too bad. How are you doing, boss?

SOLKELA:

INTERVIEWER: So far, so good. Thanks for joining us. Well, that song is just packed with all kinds of northern Minnesota jokes. Tell me the story behind it.

STEVE Well, you know, I'm a little bit of a goof. And I found way more fun and being a goofball. I have a hard time being
SOLKELA: serious. But I've made a living being not so serious so I got no shortage of stopping. But yeah I'm from the iron range in northeast Minnesota. I'm real proud of where I come from.

So I wanted to do a song that kind of showcases and spouts out a whole bunch of funny things about all the towns. And yeah, it turned out to be my most viewed video of all time. Sometimes the algorithm gets wind under it, yeah.

INTERVIEWER: And your accent is perfect range, by the way, perfect range.

STEVE I'm a Finlander.

SOLKELA:

INTERVIEWER: No kidding. Sorry about messing up your last name Solkela there at the beginning.

STEVE You aren't the first. You aren't the last.

SOLKELA:

INTERVIEWER: No, probably not. So it seems like you have a lot of fun with your music. How did you get into this?

STEVE Well, it really all started-- I didn't really think I had any reason to do anything in entertainment. In choir, ninth
SOLKELA: grade, a bunch of girls kind of shoehorned me in. They need more bases for the choir, so you got to go. So I ended up joining the choir.

We don't have any boys in theater in the one act play. So I ended up in that. We don't have any boys for the musical. And sure enough, one of the tough ladies, the director, grabbed me by the ear, took me off the football field, and ended up being one of the lead roles in the musical junior, senior year.

And one thing led to another. And I've never been too good at saying no when it came to performing. So found out you can make a living doing it, one thing after another. Opportunities kind of-- sometimes they fall on your lap. And it all depends if you believe in yourself. Took me a long time, but luckily I had a lot of help from a lot of people pushing me into these. And just kind of kept moving forward and now I love what I do.

INTERVIEWER: Where'd you go to high school?

STEVE I went to Mesabi East up in Aurora.

SOLKELA:

INTERVIEWER: Yep. OK, OK. You know, as I mentioned, you sound like my former father-in-law who was 100% Finn. You definitely have a Finnish accent.

STEVE Yes.

SOLKELA:

INTERVIEWER: Did you grow up speaking Finn?

STEVE Well, I got a little bit from grandparents and a lot of the folks in the community in Palo. A lot of people still speak
SOLKELA: a little Finnish at least. A very-- only a handful are fluent.

But it really started when I was about 16, 17 I started playing accordion and learning all those songs and watching a lot of YouTube and consuming a lot of Finnish media. And I'm certainly not fluent fluent, but I have been on some little mini tours slash vacation. I've been to Finland in Germany twice.

INTERVIEWER: You perform songs entirely in Finnish. I'm going to play this one. And you're going to have to go ahead and pronounce it for me. I think is it levan Polka?

STEVE levan Polka, hey, oh.

SOLKELA:

INTERVIEWER: OK, let's play.

STEVE It's an old one. Yeah, let's hear it.

SOLKELA:

[PLAYING ACCORDION]

[SINGING IN FINNISH]

INTERVIEWER: I like this one.

STEVE It's catchy.

SOLKELA:

INTERVIEWER: It is catchy. Yes it is.

STEVE Even if you don't speak the language it's catchy. That's good stuff.

SOLKELA:

INTERVIEWER: It's good stuff. What does the song mean to you?

STEVE Well, that song is probably my favorite because it's so fast. And you pick up the tempo the entire song, so every

SOLKELA: verse gets-- it can get a little faster and faster till you're basically speaking so fast it doesn't even seem like finish or anything. And there's a lot of gibberish in that one. So naturally, that's one of the first ones I learned.

INTERVIEWER: But it still sounds like Finn, you know?

STEVE [INAUDIBLE] dialect.

SOLKELA:

INTERVIEWER: I even got that joke. Your one man band includes 17 instruments. Oh, for goodness sakes. How does that work for-- how does that work?

STEVE I think we're up to 21 now. I forgot to update my website bio. But yeah, it all started I shoved a stick through my

SOLKELA: sock. And I was playing a cowbell on the ground while playing accordion just for fun one day. I was bored and had to wait 20 minutes for my ride or something. And someone had a cowbell.

So and then the story, the credit I have to give it to my two best friends from college out in new Jersey, Ian Burgess Linden and of course Jake Nugent is one of my-- he's a shy buddy. But they're both engineering students at the time.

They signed me up for a battle of the bands competition as a joke to see what I'd do because you know I can play things with my feet. So sure enough, we added like a bass drum and a handful of other things. And I think we were only up to 7 or 11 things happening at one time. And it certainly wasn't any good.

But I wrote a couple of songs about Rowan University, my college I graduated from. And freshman year, I won that battle of the bands competition. Would you believe that?

INTERVIEWER: Congratulations. No, actually, I can believe it.

STEVE When I got back to Minnesota that summer, I was like well, sheesh, apparently this is something people enjoy.

SOLKELA: And I decided, you know what, I'm going to get some business cards made and add a few more things to this thing and see what'll happen this summer. I'm sick of shingling roofs all summer anyway. So I shingle in the morning, have gigs at night. And it was good stuff.

INTERVIEWER: Not bad at all. Say, I know you go all around and you play various locations, nursing homes and all kinds of different places. What's the coldest gig you've ever had?

STEVE Oh, yes, negative 10 degrees plus wind chill. I didn't know the wind chill. It was in Eveleth, Minnesota. It was

SOLKELA: during the pandemic. I play organ at a church normally. But during the pandemic, we had an outdoor stage. And we would have-- everybody would drive in and connect to our little radio transmitter thing.

And the pastor told me, I'll leave it up to you. I I'm willing to give a sermon at negative 10 degrees. It's up to you if you're willing to play. And I ah, I'm awake, so let's do it.

INTERVIEWER: And from the range--

STEVE SOLKELA: I think I went into the church and did a bunch of foot fires and old drills and got as warm as I could, ran out there and did the prelude and had my gloves on. And they had a little space heater for us, but it didn't do anything. So it was an exposed stage.

But it was good to put my back up gloves on so I could just-- all right, time to play. Throw my gloves down, play the song, and then grab freshly heated ones. I'm proud of that record. I got a couple records.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, I'm telling you. That is classic. That is classic Minnesota right there, and playing the accordion, which is a hard instrument to play. That is not easy to play.

STEVE SOLKELA: That's a misconception. I disagree. I've taught a handful of students. All you have to do is push a button and you can play a chord. It's the limitations are endless. It's definitely tough to split the left and right hand. If you're a right handed person you might have a real hard time and vice versa.

But I was always a weird duck. I could write with both hands as a child. So I never really realized maybe I have a gift after all. But it's just like everything. You take life one measure at a time. You multitask.

INTERVIEWER: So true, so true. So we're going to go out with a song here. This is a song inspired by your great grandfather called "Iron Ore."

STEVE SOLKELA: Oh, "Iron Ore," yes.

INTERVIEWER: I knew he'd like this one. Steve, all the best to you. Thank you so much for joining us.

STEVE SOLKELA: So good to meet you.

INTERVIEWER: Likewise.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

STEVE SOLKELA: (SINGING) Work hard, young man. Always do your best and make time for family too. And be passionate, protect your own, don't forget who you are. And do what's right even if it's hard. You will it's made of iron ore. Iron ore, iron ore, iron ore iron ore.

INTERVIEWER: Steve Solkela is a musician based in Virginia, Minnesota. He's the sole member of Steve's Overpopulated One Man Band. You can follow him at SteveSolkela.com. That's S-O-L-K-E-L-A. He is definitely Finn. Arts programming on MPR news is made possible in part by the Minnesota Legacy Amendments Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund.