

# Rock 'n' Roll

**Lawrence-based musicians in it for the passion – not the paycheck**

In a Lawrence music scene that is inundated with so many flavor-of-the-week bands, Billy Ebeling and Julia Peterson stand out as something different.

Both simply do what they do because they love it, regardless of pay or crowd-size. Neither aspires to be on the cover of *Rolling Stone* or on MTV's *Total Request Live*. "It's really something I do to keep myself sane," Peterson says. "It's a release."

Ebeling's blues-based stories of life on the road and Peterson's folksy, alt-country ballads of love and loss, recall a time when music was more simple and pure.

For all their efforts though, the mainstream appeal for this type of music is not as high in a college town such as Lawrence as it would be for a more pop-oriented band.

Ebeling realized this and within the last few years began to infuse other styles of music into his songs in an attempt to make his sound more contemporary. He hasn't strayed far from his bluesy sound, but has made the music fresher. "I'm always trying to step it up a notch," Ebeling says. "To take the music to a higher level."

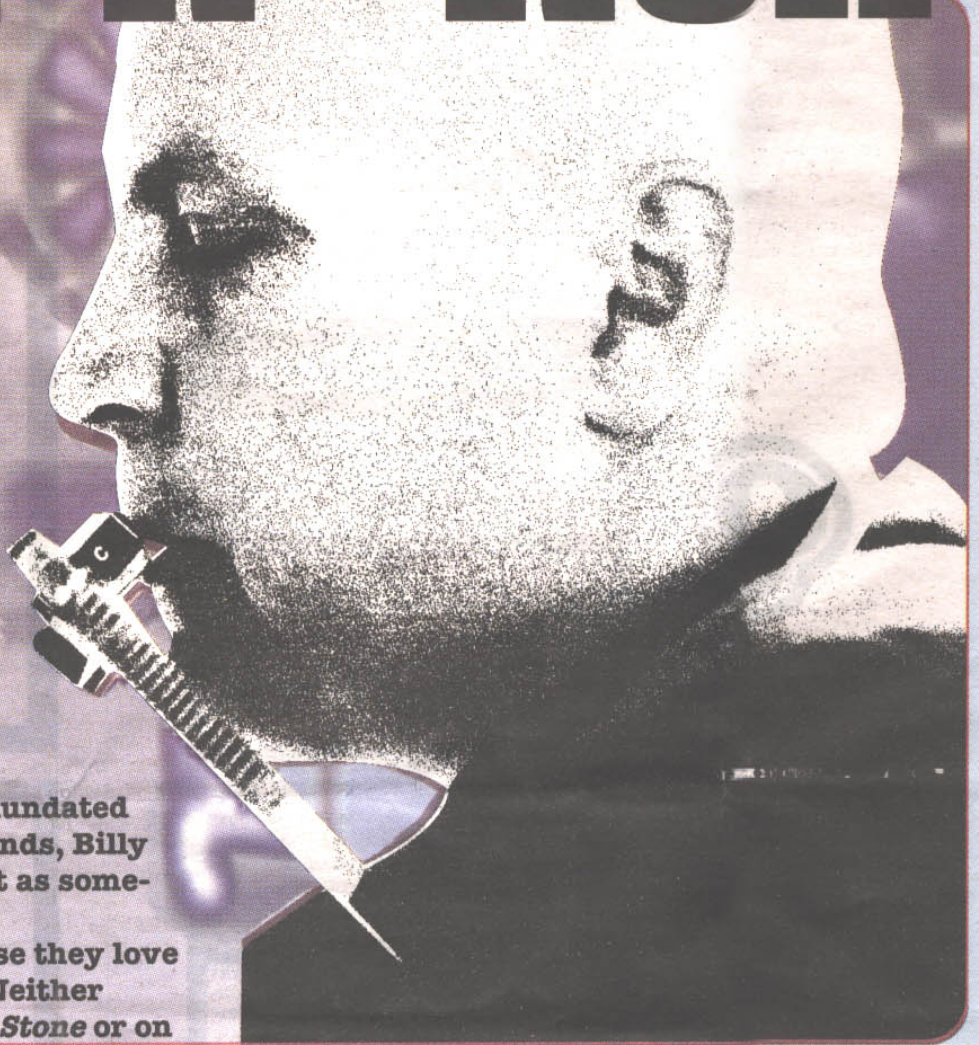


Photo: Sean Smith

**By Kevin Kampwirth**  
*Jayplaywriter*

# Hearts

It's after 10 p.m. on a Sunday night when Billy Ebeling steps on stage at Harbour Lights, 1031 Massachusetts St. The background drone of a jukebox cuts out, emphasizing the hard-plastic crack of pool balls among the lull of about 15 people in the small, dim-lit bar.

He looks out at the scene in front of him as he picks up a six-string acoustic guitar and puts on a harmonica rack. The small crowd applauds, briefly looking away from a football game on TV, as he goes into his first song.

Ebeling's style borrows from blues, rockabilly, funk, zydeco, rock 'n' roll and alt-country, resulting in a unique sound, punctuated by his piercing harmonica and crisp, almost flawless, slide guitar. "It's a long way to the top," Ebeling sings in a smooth, Dylanesque drawl, "if you wanna rock 'n' roll."

Ebeling isn't being prophetic when he says this. He's lived it firsthand for more than 20 years.

Sunday's show would earn Ebeling \$2 for every person who came into the bar that night.

Ebeling often works like this, collecting the bar's cover as payment. As a result, he often finds himself living from gig to gig. "It's not the easiest job in the world," he says. "I find myself doing a lot of shopping at the Salvation Army because of it."

But that's beside the point. He is a career musician, someone whose only source of income is from playing music.

Ebeling has been a full-time musician since 1985, but has been playing in public since 1979. He attended the University of Kansas for a semester in the late 1970s, but dropped out when he realized he was wasting time and money. "It just wasn't for

**"It's a long way to the top...If you wanna rock 'n' roll."**

me," he says. "I knew by that point what I wanted to do."

Even during his time at the University, Ebeling often performed on campus and in downtown Lawrence as a street musician.

In 1981, he moved to Phoenix along with his two brothers and decided to start a blues band. After writing some original songs, the band moved back to Lawrence in 1984 and recorded its first album as Billy Ebeling and the Late for Dinner Band.

For an independently released effort, the album sold fairly well in Lawrence, Ebeling says.

Ebeling embarked on a solo world tour shortly after this and spent the next few years in places such as New Zealand and Mexico. He was playing four to five gigs a week and garnered the attention of the record label EMI who signed him to a short-lived contract based on sales.

Ebeling lived in Australia for seven years before coming back to Lawrence — this time for good.

Julia Peterson sits over coffee in a small cafe. She chain-smokes cigarettes as she theorizes. "The more technical you get about music, the more muddled it gets," she says. "I try to keep it simple."

Peterson, a 26-year-old singer/songwriter, is like Ebeling in that her passion resides in playing music. But, also like Ebeling, she doesn't get

paid much to do it. "Most of the time, I play for the cover the bar collects," she says. "And for free drinks."

Peterson, a Shawnee native, came to Lawrence seven years ago to attend the University as a voice major.

While in school, Peterson played bass in a groove-rock band and decided that she liked it. After learning how to play guitar, she started writing her own songs.

She realized after a short time that college wasn't for her, so she "graduated herself from school," in essence, she dropped out.

Peterson remained in Lawrence and worked as a bartender while continuing to write and play her own music, honing her style.

To get her name out there, Peterson started out by opening for a friend's band. From there, she started to get her own gigs and started to make a name for herself. "It's really just something I fell into," Peterson says. "But it turned into so much more."

Although the love of music is what really drives them, Ebeling and Peterson still need to make enough money a week to live, which is hard, they say, because there are so many bands in Lawrence competing for gigs.

With more than 100 Lawrence-area bands, the competition to get quality stage time is felt by both artists. Nicole Geist is manager of The Bottleneck, 737 New Hampshire St., one of the more sought after venues in town because of its reputation. Geist says that this year The Bottleneck plans to allot more stage time for local acts as compared to the touring acts that it is used to hosting. "If local

bands aren't given a chance perform as readily, the local music scene would die out," she says.

One of Ebeling's newer songs, "\$100 town," describes the challenges he faces regarding this problem. He says that younger bands would play for a lot less, which decreases the amount he'll get paid for a show.

With anywhere from four to five shows a week — he plays with his band on weekends — Ebeling usually finds himself living off about \$500 a week. Peterson bartends at Teller's, 746 Massachusetts St., in addition to performing so she has some extra income. "My bartending job is just so I have some consistent money coming in," Peterson says. "I don't want to be a bartender the rest of my life though."

After more than 20 years and 14 albums, Ebeling truly is a veteran in his line of work. He's seen the ups and downs that life as a musician in a band can entail. The idealism he once had to make it big seems to be waning a bit, but that hasn't slowed him down.

Ebeling admits that he's had to make sacrifices for the life he chose, such as being on the road away from friends and family, but his music has always gotten him through it.

These days, Ebeling mostly performs in

Lawrence and in the Kansas City area. His wife, who he met nine years ago at a show in Lawrence, travels with him and acts as his accountant. They don't have children because, as he puts it, "I'd have to get a different job if I did."

His road-weary, yet enlivened, songs act as a road map of his life. Whether he's playing guitar, harmonica, piano, accordion or organ, every song tells a story, and tells it candidly.

Ten years from now, Peterson says she hopes to have released at least three more albums to follow her 2002 release *Unrequited Love Songs*.

She says she would be happy simply playing music in Lawrence with the support of an underground following similar to that of Lucinda Williams, an artist to which Peterson's sound bears noticeable parallels. "I'm a small-town girl at heart," she says. "I don't think I could handle a big city."

A solo player since the beginning of her career, Peterson recently decided to form a band. The Daveys made its debut in mid-December as one of the featured acts at a benefit show for the Douglas County AIDS Project at Teller's.

The show happened to coincide with the first major snowfall of winter in Lawrence, but still, more than 150 people showed up to watch the concert.

She takes a long draw off a cigarette and chases it with a sip of Boulevard Pale Ale before heading onstage with her band. There's a hint of nervousness in her movements as she picks up a guitar

and slings the strap over her shoulder, slightly anxious, she explains, about the first show with her new band.

Her resignations fade noticeably, however, once the show starts. The band eases through six or seven songs as if it's been playing together for years before Peterson thanks everyone for coming and announces that the next song would be the band's last of the night.

Blizzard-like conditions play out in the large windows behind her, but she doesn't seem to notice, as if existing in a world of her own.

"I've given all I've got to give to this," she howls, almost pleading, as the song ends on a hard G chord. Peterson turns around and notices the weather. It still doesn't bother her. She knows that the storm will remain outside and, for right now, she's right where she wants to be.

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