

# ON THE BOOKS

## A backstage look at some of Eugene's music planners

BY ADRIENNE VAN DER VALK

Long before the guitars are tuned, the amps cranked and the hair ruffled into unintentional-looking waves of hipness, shadowy, nameless figures have been hard at work behind the scenes of any concert. Listening to demos, coordinating dates, negotiating fees, getting the word out on the street — local bookers may be an unsung heroes, but they also play a special role in the community, wielding an enormous amount of power over what live music we get to hear. In the name of celebrating all that is great about local music, *EW* decided to take a closer look at the wizards behind the curtains at four Eugene venues.

### Sam Bond's Garage: Peter Wilde

A beloved staple of local bar life in Eugene, Sam Bond's Garage (voted Best Bar by *EW* readers last fall) invites musicians onto its modest stage up to six nights a week. Peter Wilde, himself a reputable songwriter and musician, has been integral to the myth and mayhem of the folk, bluegrass, alt country and indie rock music scenes supported by Sam Bond's since it opened more than 12 years ago — although Wilde admits he did “take a couple of years off for good behavior!”

Living the life of a bread-and-butter musician seems to have influenced Wilde's priorities as matchmaker between performer and business.

“I toured myself for years before Sam Bond's opened,” he says. “I really try to create a place that could be very beneficial to a touring musician: high percentage at the door, good sound, some free drinks, things that would be good for an independent artist trying to establish a fan base.”

According to Wilde, Sam Bond's has been called “the best place in town to break a band,” a dubious honor for a venue too tiny to host a musician once he or she skyrockets to fame. One of the most memorably crowded shows he booked was the late Elliott Smith, who came to Eugene during an awkward growth period in his career.

“Elliott Smith was booked *before* the Oscars and the *Good Will Hunting* soundtrack. He became a celebrity, and then he played at Sam Bond's. He was a very nervous, self-conscious, typical artist type of person. We've always been nonsmoking, but when he asked if he could smoke the whole room was like ‘Yes!’”

Wilde finds that while some of his riskier booking decisions have bombed, others have paved the way for unex-

Peter Wilde and his “top assistant” Rhowan Dacotah



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pectedly fruitful collaborations.

“It's amazingly hard to tell if a band is any good,” he emphasizes. “I've booked bands I thought were great and then I went down to see them and they were just awful. But the best thing is to be able to give a gig to someone you feel like has a shot. We booked Pete Bernhard as a solo act and hardly anyone came, but now he comes back with The Devil Makes Three and packs us out every time.”

The venue's intimate atmosphere and the freedom he's given to take chances fit well with Wilde's sensibilities as a musical gatekeeper. Since becoming a father, he admits, he's not in the bar too often and relies on the staff to give him feedback about lesser-known acts. And while sold-out shows are nice from the perspective of ticket and beer sales, Wilde acknowledges that a small crowd can sometimes mean an even better experience for the audience.

“If it's a slow night, the music better be good. We have that reputation. I love hearing people say, ‘Hey, I saw this great band at Sam Bond's!’”

### WOW Hall: Mike Hergenreter

If there were an award for “Most Determined to Book Music in Eugene,” Mike Hergenreter would win hands down. A former plumber, Hergenreter and his wife relocated to the Northwest from Colorado after realizing they wanted a simpler lifestyle — one that, for Mike, meant pursuing a dream of working in the arts.

“My wife is a vocational rehab counselor,” he explains. “I was her first client. She counseled me to figure out what I wanted to do with my life, and we figured out I should be in the music industry. The next day I walked into the WOW Hall and asked if they needed any help. Ever since then it was my job to volunteer at the WOW Hall until they hired me.”

After months of answering phones and assisting the former booker unpaid, Hergenreter's persistence paid off. He joined the staff and has been scheduling shows at the nonprofit venue for four years and loving every minute of it.

“I literally have my dream job. There are no ‘least desirable’ parts to my job. I like the nonprofit part, being a community center; I get to take care of my kids in the mornings. It has worked out perfectly for me.”

Being easy to work with is one of the keys to Hergenreter's success.

“This industry is all about building and maintaining relationships,” he says. “It is important to impress people the first time they work with you. Ninety-nine percent of our shows are agents getting ahold of you wanting to put on a show at the WOW Hall. If an agent is in New York and they have one contact in town, they need to know they can rely on you every time they have an artist coming through. And it's important to treat everyone with respect. Even if that artist is in a support role for a show, they might be the headlining act next time.”

Being a friend to artists is good for business, but being a friend to the community is good for everyone, according to Hergenreter.

“I literally think the WOW Hall is unlike any other music venue I've ever heard about,” he says. “I can only imagine being a kid and being able to go volunteer there. Music is really cool at that age, really important. It keeps you out of trouble. A lot of people on staff probably would have gone down a bad row if they didn't have this place. I wish everyone in the world knew how cool the WOW Hall is and how different the community would be if it wasn't here.”

### Luna: Robert Kelsey

When I ask Robert Kelsey what people should know about seeing shows at Luna, he laughs. “The martinis are always full!” he declares with authority. As a friend and supporter of Adam's Place owner Adam Bernstein for nearly 30 years, Kelsey is no stranger to the fine dining establishment that gave birth to the intimate, jazz-inspired venue Luna, nor to its food, drink and music-loving clientele. Since taking over the booking earlier this year, Kelsey has found a way to put his extensive Eugene network to work on behalf of the stylish nightclub next door.

“We have a good reputation and personal relationships with a lot of people in town,” Kelsey says. What started out as a favor to his friend Adam has become an enjoyable part-time venture for Kelsey. “I get to talk to every musician in town and hear all sorts of music I would never have been exposed to otherwise.”

Kelsey appreciates the rare opportunity that Luna's subdued atmosphere — perfect for listening to lyrics or concentrating on languid, improvisational solos — offers Eugene audiences. “It's not that we don't like the hard stuff,” he assures me. “It's just not right for that space.”

What is right is an elite selection of the best local and touring folk, jazz and world music performers appropriate for a small, local listening room. A recent favorite of Kelsey's is Susan Werner, a singer-songwriter who played the nightclub's upright piano that “doesn't get used enough by people who know how to use it!” Kelsey says he gets up to 200 emails every week requesting opportunities to play at Luna, a fact that makes him a little sad.

“I don't like to disappoint,” he says. “There are a lot of really good bands. Some are not right and some just wouldn't draw five people. But I still don't like saying ‘no.’”

Kelsey's favorite show to date was an evening with Sue Miles.

“She used to be a diva of the blues here in town,” he recalls. “Her mom passed away, and for five years she was in a depression. She couldn't play; her mom had been in every gig she's ever played. When I got this gig [at Luna] I thought ‘Why haven't I seen Sue Miles?’ So I tracked her down. We had a riot. It was definitely an amazing night.”

Not every night can be “amazing,” but with a new menu coming out and an impressive lineup of singer-songwriters on the horizon, Kelsey is making sure that Luna continues to grow as a hot spot for those who like to savor each note as they savor their drinks.

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