

# KNIGHT TIME

Sure, an open mic is like a box of chocolates, but Monday night at the Mill is my favorite lime cream-centered, caramel pecan toffee of a weekly free music night in Iowa City.

Since 1981, *Open Mic with J. Knight* has been an Iowa City institution, a place where up-and-coming talent shares the stage with long-established local musicians, where dorm room crooners become seasoned stage performers, and self-conscious songwriters become lyric poets of the night.

The man behind the music is J. Knight, a native of Dayton, Ohio, who planned to stay here for “just a couple of years” while his wife, Marilyn, attended the Writers’ Workshop. In 1985 they decided to stay for good, and J. kept what was quickly becoming the Midwest’s best-known open mic night going “to give people the chance to get onstage and play a real set, and to really get comfortable up there.”

So, what compels a man to host the same gig on the same night for more than 20 years?

He’s not in it for the money, and he’s not in it for the notoriety—only the madness of true love could drive a man out of doors at 10 p.m. on a bone-chilling 13-degree Sunday night, in February, to hang 50 fliers on the ped mall, on the North Side, all throughout the downtown area.

“This thing’s over,” he notes, ripping down a poster for an event two days past. J. is not one to cover another venue’s advertisement, and in the battle for kiosk space in the ped mall’s never-ending poster wars, he is a valiant and courteous, eh-hem, *Knight*. Playing the role of Excalibur is his staple gun, which smacks a dull echo into the cold air as he walks along,

sharing memories of open mics past.

“The style of playing has really changed over the years,” J. explains. “It’s gone from a lot of rockers strumming rock chords on acoustic guitars to now, when we have so many good players playing really great instruments.”

For many years, J. handed every player at his *Open Mic* a cassette tape of their recording.

“It got to the point where I had to ask some of the younger ones, ‘do you know what this is?’” he laughs.

There’s hardly an Iowa City musician who

She always brought a big crowd of her friends and would pass out the lyrics for everyone to sing along. But she was one of these people whose guitar was always out of tune and who wasn’t quite on key...I thought the tape might help her hear some of those things. But later, when I asked her how she liked the tape, she just said ‘Oh, I loved it, it was great!’ Some people just aren’t going to hear those mistakes no matter what!”

Aaron Schaefer has been playing J.’s *Open Mic* once a month for at least 10 years. “For me it is a great way to unwind. I joke that some people play golf...I play at the Mill.”

Aaron has collected over 100 *Open Mic* tapes over the years, and when J.’s tape deck was recently on the fritz, Schaefer was right there to offer another he had squirreled away in his garage.



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Whether he’s got his tape recorder rolling or not, J. is content just to observe the action.

“It’s fun to watch people develop,” he says, “you can tell when they work at it. You get better if you get up and play—you get better at using the mic and playing to the crowd.”

Knowing how to please the crowd is key to a successful open mic—and just being the best singer or guitarist isn’t necessarily the way to win an audience’s heart. “We had one guy come in who played all Hank Williams covers. He had to use a book, he had an out-of-tune guitar, and he was not a great singer, but he *believed* in Hank Williams. He was so honest, the crowd just loved him.”

Whether it’s an original or a cover, playing songs that you believe in—and that you really know—is another way to be an open mic success.

“I open almost every show with *Big River* by

doesn’t have an *Open Mic* tape stashed in some drawer or tucked away on a shelf.

“J. is the man,” notes guitarist and songwriter Tim Krein. “Everybody who plays gets to walk out with this *tape*, with their name *caligraphied* on the spine. It’s unbelievable, and it’s an important thing that he is doing, encouraging people and making them comfortable. He’s even put up with a lot of the crap that I’ve tried to play here!”

In addition to being simple, cool badges of *Open Mic* honor, the tapes give novice players an opportunity to hear where they need improvement, and work on their sound. Though sometimes, this learning opportunity doesn’t have exactly the desired effect.

“We had one girl back in the ‘80s who would come in and play these campfire songs.

## J'S TIPS FOR OPEN MIC SUCCESS

First time? Don't sweat it, virgins of the stage, J. Knight is here with the guidance you need to get through your 30 minutes with dignity and practically nobody noticing all of those bad mistakes you made.

**TIP #1** Relax. Just do it. Do what you're comfortable with. Make your first song a song that you can play cold, one that you've done so many times you don't have to think.

**TIP #2** Adjust things. After you've played a couple of open mics, the songs become second nature. Then you can work on the presentation. Maybe you are one of those people who should talk between every song. Maybe you are one of those people who shouldn't!

**TIP #3** Don't apologize! It's your gig; it's your time. You're going to make mistakes, so just laugh and go on.

**TIP #4** Play to the audience. Once you've played *Open Mic* a couple of times, you'll start to notice the audience more. Sometime's they're with you, sometimes they're not. After awhile, when you get comfortable, you might adjust your set to keep them more interested.

**TIP #5** Watch the drinking—it doesn't work for everybody!

Johnny Cash. I'm comfortable playing it, and it helps get me warmed up." says J.

Attending the Mill's *Open Mic*, one feels a part of an inclusive community of musicians, where all ages and abilities are welcomed into the fold by this twinkly blue-eyed, soft-spoken man. Performing on the same stage, with the same Oriental rug backdrop, in the same spotlight as the local and touring bands you pay to see at the Mill, adds to the sense that it's a "real" show, and gives the players a feeling of legitimacy. This familiar atmosphere, where so many legendary shows have gone down over the years, connects the amateur with the professional in spirit, and for at least one night, we're all part of your rock-n-roll fantasy.

Nik Strait, a frequent busker on the ped mall and a 15-year veteran of *Open Mic* night, credits J. with encouraging him to continue playing music.

"J. was the only person that would support me constantly," he said. "*Open Mic* offers a

real sense of community, and it's a great way to de-stress."

At no time was this sense of community more apparent than at the Mill's "final" *Open Mic* night back in 2003. With a line-up of notables such as Aaron Schaefer, Laura Kittrell and the band Half Fast, this farewell bash was sad and fun and, well, obviously not the farewell it was expected to be.

"I got word halfway through the show that we were going to be able to stay open," J. remembers, "but I didn't say anything at that point, because I didn't want to interrupt a great show!"

Many an Iowa City legend has swayed upon a lone stool on the *Open Mic* stage, from Greg Brown to Dave Moore to Kelly Pardekooper. But J. doesn't like to drop names. "There are just so many great players in Iowa City, and I wouldn't want anyone to feel left out."

A formidable musician in his own right, with mad picking skills that could flatten a three-chord wannabe in seconds, J. often steps onstage himself throughout the night, joining in on harmonica or guitar. If you really wanna get his feet to tappin'? "Sing harmonies," he says, especially gospel harmonies, like the ones he heard his older sister sing on the radio back in Dayton—but that's another story.

Every thriving music scene has its unsung heroes—be it the booking agent, the sound guy, the promoter, the lighting technician. Or, be it the man who does all of these things, scheduling 30-minute sets for eight performers a week, running sound and lights, distributing promotional material, and reminding us all to "tip our waitresses, they're working hard out there," every Monday night for more than 20 years.

Our grateful city salutes the man who "always likes to play a little something first, and make a couple of mistakes so everyone feels comfortable." Who has made it his business to champion the beginner, the new-in-town, and the just-passing-through. Musicians whose voices may break, whose chords may not always ring true, but who've practiced real hard and need to voice their break-ups, their drunken one-night stands, and their renditions of all-time favorite songs before a live audience.

I tip my hat to the man who's made that happen every Monday since 1981, Iowa City's beloved master of ceremonies and welcoming minstrel. Thanks for never laughing at us, J. Knight. **lv**

*Stephanie Catlett is currently an orange nougat open mic'er, but she strives for dark chocolate caramel. With nuts.*

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