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WILL IT PLAY IN PEORIA? ROGER THAT! • Guy Arseneau



From left to right are Roger Kelch, Tony Shaw on drums, Steve Foster (center) on guitar and Jerry Foley (far right) on bass guitar.

It is a city of countless punch lines and the subject of constant jokes. Yet it is also the heart and center of America. In a culture dominated by high finance on Wall Street and high living on Rodeo Drive, the opinions and sentiments expressed by the folks on the main streets of Peoria, Illinois consume and concern politicians, celebrities and advertising tycoons throughout the United States. "Will it Play in Peoria?" is still

the rhetorical mantra behind almost every new entertainment venue, social trend, advertising campaign and political movement in America.

Founded in 1691 and situated on the banks of the Illinois River, this urban center with a population of 115,000, is the oldest European settlement in the state of Illinois. Peoria's reputation as Middle America's cultural point

of reference continues to be reflected by and flourishing in the city's commitment to country music. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the talent and virtuosity of guitar player/collector Roger Kelch. A well-known figure at Bogie's, Peoria's intimate and down home country music bar, Kelch utilizes his musical skills and collectible guitars to entertain patrons at this 80 seat lounge that caters to those who enjoy, in his words, "The type of music found in the songs of Patsy Kline, Eric Clapton and the musical group Cream."

A one-time employee of Caterpillar, Inc. and currently the owner, along with his wife, Denise, of a flourishing company that designs and installs marine fabrications for luxury boats, Kelch states his commitment to music began in childhood. "When I was in grade school," he recalls, "a neighbor boy and classmate of mine brought a guitar to school and gave a concert, so to speak, in the auditorium. Seeing the way the girls swooned over him, I knew that playing music was going to be a way of life for me." Committed to the allure of stringed instruments,

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ROGER KELCH STORY
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Roger began taking guitar lessons for over four years. Early on, he developed a strong interest in the sound of Ozzy Osbourne, Tammy Wynette, Johnny Cash, Marty Robbins, Black Sabbath and classic ballads of The Beatles. In terms of contemporary country music, Kelch's interests include the lushly romantic lyrics and sing-along tunes of singer/songwriter Billy Joe Conroy. Along with his four-member band, Salty Sam and the Sea Dogs, Roger plays at Bogie's "open mic" sessions every Thursday night. "My audience is usually made up of the over 40 crowd," he notes, "So there's a real sense of appreciation for the music I and my band members play," he states.

In addition to his avocation as a musician, Roger is also a dedicated collector of vintage guitars. "I have a 1970 Memphis guitar I bought in Nashville that is among my favorites. One of my best investments is a 1974 Gibson Les Paul Gold-Top guitar. When I play the blues I

use a Fender Stratocaster." Like many other vintage guitar collectors around the nation, Kelch knows firsthand what a challenge it can be to find good collectible guitars. "I've tried going to numerous pawn shops," he says, "but to tell you the truth, most of the worthwhile guitars just are not there anymore. I try to get to Nashville as often as I can, not only to see the incredible live entertainment they have, but sometimes I get lucky and find someone who is willing to sell a good vintage guitar. Right now, in my home studio, I have eight collectible guitars, including a Gibson 335, but I'm always looking to increase this number, my best bet seems to be garage and estate sales where people are just anxious to get rid of items."

For Roger Kelch, the worth of a guitar has little to do with its monetary value. "Recently," he recalls, "I bought a Fender Jazz bass for \$25.00 that was just one step ahead of being a piece of junk. I replaced the knobs, strings and refurbished the veneer on it. It was a lot of work but that bass now means a lot to me,

simply because I put so much of myself and my time into it."

Much like other collectors across the nation, Roger Kelch is in search for his "Holy Grail" of a guitar. Speaking slowly and with an intense earnestness, he says, "More than anything, the one guitar I'd like to add to my collection is a 1968 Gibson SG guitar. I've wanted this one ever since I was a kid, but with a variety of options on it that can drive the price tag up to over \$5,000, it's still a little bit out of my price range."

As the social and geographical epicenter of the nation, Peoria, Illinois defines the American people. That classic question from the era of Groucho Marx in the days of vaudeville, "Will it play in Peoria?" still intrigues the image-makers and spin-doctors along New York City's famed advertising corridor of Madison Avenue. For music fans in Peoria, that inquiry can be answered in two words: Roger that! ♦

