

Senior plans to sing in Nashville after graduation

By Tracy McCarren
The Battalion

At this time of year, when most Texas A&M seniors are writing resumes and interviewing for jobs, Mark Lee has his mind set on Nashville and what it might have in store for him.

Every Thursday night, Lee, a civil engineering major from Alvin, can be found at Kay's Cabaret playing his guitar and singing country music. From 10 p.m. to 1 a.m., Lee takes requests and sings songs by artists such as Hank Williams Sr., Jimmy Buffet, Garth Brooks and Clint Black. At the audience's applause, a smile spreads across his face - he is having fun.

As graduation nears, Lee's plans are to move to Nashville and try his luck at country music.

"I know it's going to take total dedication to make it in music, but I'd never forgive myself if I didn't at least try," he said.

As far back as Lee can remember, he has been listening to country music. From listening to his dad's collection of Hank Williams Sr. albums to "picking and grinning" HeeHaw-style at family gatherings, he has been exposed to country music.

It wasn't until after high school graduation in 1986, that Lee bought a guitar at the urging of his best friend.

While attending Alvin Community College, Lee took guitar lessons and learned the basic

chords. From there, he started playing everything he heard on the radio. Since then, Lee has been playing every chance he gets at family gatherings and parties.

Four years ago, he transferred to Texas A&M, attracted to the rural, down-home atmosphere. This past spring, Lee got the job at Kay's Cabaret, his first "paying gig."

Besides his regular Thursday nights at Kay's Cabaret, he has played at a wedding, at a fraternity party and at University Tower. The most unusual place Lee has played is at the Love Shack in downtown Bryan.

"The crowd was in leather jackets and chains," Lee said.

Lee's guitar is covered with signatures of today's hottest country stars, like Travis Tritt, Doug Stone, Clint Black and Garth Brooks.

In 1990, when Garth Brooks came to Bryan, Brooks not only signed Lee's guitar, but he pulled it out of the case and sang "If Tomorrow Never Comes" from start to finish.

"It was an incredible moment that I will never forget," Lee said.

Things started rolling last summer when Lee played at a big party on Lake Conroe where he met a record producer.

The producer invited him to play at Willie Nelson's Golf Invitational where he met songwriter, Alex Harvey. Harvey



DARRIN HILL/The Battalion

Country singer Mark Lee performs at Kay's Cabaret on Thursday before spring break. Lee hopes to start a country music career in Nashville after graduation.

has written songs such as "Delta Dawn" for Tanya Tucker and "Ruben James" for Kenny Rogers.

Harvey told Lee that he had talent, and if he was "willing to work hard and put all other interests on hold," he might have a shot in Nashville. He advised Lee to finish school to leave op-

tions open if he didn't make it in music. Until then Lee said he was never convinced he was any good.

In May, equipped with Harvey's advice, Lee is going to move out to Nashville.

"I'm going to have to introduce myself to everyone," said Lee. "I'll learn their names, and hope they remember mine."

Course of Empire rocks Stafford Opera House

By Kevin Robinson
The Battalion

Students who left for Spring Break a few days early may have missed one of the best Bryan-College Station shows of the year, when the Stafford Opera House featured the Dallas band, Course of Empire.

Course of Empire has emerged as one of the shining new lights in the Texas music scene. Combining elements of industrial, metal, punk, and seventies art-rock, the band's self-titled debut was released on the Carpe Diem label a few years ago. For an indie release, the recording was remarkably polished and earned accolades from several members of the music press. It's now been picked up for national release by RCA. Although Course of Empire has often been accused of sounding too much like "Love"-era Cult, the band had no trouble proving their own talents in their live set.

The evening began with a short set by Choice of Diction. The group is primarily a cover band concentrating on modern rock standards, particularly dance and pop numbers. If success for a covers band is how close to the original they sound, then Choice of Diction succeeds admirably. They even managed to approximate vocal style fairly well with much of the material. The band seemed slightly awkward when attempting Front 242 and an early Ministry single, but they excelled at covering more mainstream artists such as the Cure and Depeche Mode.

After a short wait, and with two large red flags dragged onto the stage, Course of Empire made their entrance. The band immediately blasted into their set, not letting up until the end of the show an hour and a half later.

The majority of the show consisted of material from the band's first album. These songs may be slightly mellow on the CD, but gained a new intensity when performed live. This hard edge was the most surprising aspect of the night. Many bands put more emotion and power into their songs when they take the stage. Course of Empire however, had a stage presence that was simply explosive.

Vaughn Stevenson, lead singer, made a striking figure with his hands clasped behind his back and his teeth clenched. Stevenson gave a mostly stationary performance for most of the show, in direct contrast to guitarist Mike Graff, whose stage action gave new meaning to the word manic. To simulate the combination of drum machine and live percussion on the band's record, Anthony Headley and Chad Lovell teamed up for a double drum section that provided a ruthless pulse for the entire night.

The heavy slant of the debut's tracks gave the material a fresh quality. Avoiding much of the low key songs such as "Mountains of the Spoken" and "Dawn of the Great Eastern Sun," the band gave an added strength to tracks such as "God's Jig" and "Peace Child."

Course of Empire seem to want their live shows to produce pure energy. None of the intelligence or subtlety in the lyrics was lost, but the band wasn't content to quietly ponder philosophically; there's enough of that on the album itself. Instead, the band seemed to realize that live shows need an added boost to familiar songs. Course of Empire provided that boost with a stage presence and degree of showmanship that not too many young bands possess.

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