

# SONGSOFA STORYTELLER

BY ANDY PLANK



Jim Hoehn will be playing at the Foster Cheese Haus on Thursday, March 22.



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A man with words in his head and a guitar in his hands can go a long way.

Jim Hoehn's been all over the place. A writer by all accounts, he's written and worked for newspapers, magazines and wire services throughout his career. He's now the production coordinator for JS Online, the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel's Web site. In the spare time he finds from that endeavor, and from being a father of three, he crafts songs and plays the occasional concert.

"For whatever reason," he said, "there's a nice niche, and people that will listen to my songs."

Hoehn's songs typically offer a blend of upbeat and colorful sounds. Acoustic country twang is infused with tropical stylings and instrumentation likely to be found at a Hawaiian luau.

A songwriting contest in the early 1990s gave him his first opportunity to play to an audience.

"And I didn't mess it up, I guess."

He's released three full-length albums since then, the last of which was 2009's *Royalty Check Hotel*. In 2004, he released *Deadline Penitentiary*, featuring journalism-themed songs like "Bad Rhymes, Worse Puns," and "Yesterday's News."

Some of the lyrics in his songs came from old ideas for articles.

"I'm basically a story-teller," he said. "There's one about this woman from the Chippewa Valley called 'Maggie & the Singin' Cowboy Show.'"

The song is about a woman who played in and around Eau Claire for years. Hoehn wanted to do a story about her, but she passed away before he was able to.

"I went out to her house," he said, "and wrote a poem and stuck it in the door handle. A couple weeks later I got a package from her family. They liked the poem, which became a song."

He sings in the song, "in a cat-hair covered easy chair, a notepad on his knee, he's trying to make some editorial sense from her disjointed history, to balance the lonesome present with the smiles of long ago, so they'll always remember Maggie and the Singin' Cowboy Show."

The music he makes isn't far off from the work he does as a writer, he said. Newspapers, magazines and albums are all ways to share his experiences and craft stories.

"To me," he said, "it's just more writing. I just like to write, and I know just enough guitar to wrap around the songs."

He gets by with a little help from his

friends too. Professional studio musicians have accompanied Hoehn in the studios he's recorded albums in. He said working with them is a learning experience, and it's exciting to hear how they interpret and contribute to his work.

"Every so often," he said, "I get enough songs to go back to the studio, and I need a lot of help, but I like listening to what really good musicians do with my songs."

Previous recordings were done in Texas, but Hoehn is getting ready to release a new collection of songs, which were completed in Milwaukee. They feature artists from that area, including a funk drummer that he said is bringing a few different ideas to the rhythm sections in his songs.

"And you hope it gets a good response," he said. "If you write something for a paper or magazine, your feedback takes a while. Even now, if you work for a Web site and people can comment right away, it's not the same as having a guy in the front row shout at you that you're awful or something. That feedback's immediate."

It's not that that happens to him often, or that that's why he makes music, but it's a common thought for artists. The places he's been and the people he's met likely help quell any worry he has about his reception.

"They are what they are," he said about his songs. "I like doing it. This last year I took my whole family to a spring break gig that was down in the Sea of Cortez in Mexico. ...In 2010, I got to play a Caribbean cruise for eight nights."

Hoehn recently played a sold-out show at the State Theatre in Eau Claire, opening for legendary country singer-songwriter Don Williams. Nadirah Shakoor from Jimmy Buffett's Coral Reefer Band is among artists he's shared the stage with, as is Warren Zevon, Jerry Jeff Walker, and the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band.

"I get to hang out with some pretty cool people," he said. "If you can't sit backstage and learn from people like that, there's something wrong. Those are free songwriting schools if you pay attention."

That's the way good stories are conceived — by observing and absorbing. Hoehn is along for the ride. Pen and paper, guitar and strings are his instruments of choice.

"Anytime I leave the house with a guitar," he said, "it's a good thing. For me, I just enjoy it. It wasn't enjoyable, I wouldn't do it."



To keep up with Jim, be sure to visit his Web site:

[www.jimhoehn.com](http://www.jimhoehn.com)