

observed

# A lilt of lyric-smiths

Fifteen minutes after all 10 singers had performed at this year's finals of the Portland Songwriters Association Best Songwriter of 2006, the judges (called "mentors" by the songwriters association) were having a major problem. They were split four to four on the winner.

Onstage at Mississippi Pizza, the association's Gil Reynolds and Dan Lowe, in his last moments as reigning songwriter of the year (he won the 2005 contest), sang to fill the time.

The mentors deliberated, argued, even discussed flipping a coin, and then debated whether the coin toss should be a best two out of three. One of the mentors, folk icon and banjoist Dick Weissman, looking like he stepped off the set of "A Mighty Wind," had earlier performed one of the most entertaining songs of the evening, which he described as a "North African slide banjo" tune.

The event was a culmination of five months of earlier rounds. The prizes included a \$1,500 video shoot and \$250 toward a CD design.

Kate Mann led off the

competition with what she called a "sad life story about whiskey and cowboys," which pulled no punches.

Rob Melton pulled out a cigar for emphasis in the middle of one of his two tunes. He did not light up. Beliss followed, with sisters Belinda Underwood on bass and Melissa Underwood on mandolin. They sang two clever songs, one about a mutual trip to Mexico sung sweetly with the unforgettable lines, "Belinda spent her pesos on a beautiful scarf/ and Montezuma came and made Melissa barf."

Others followed with varying degrees of aptitude and inspiration. Sean Garcia appeared to be the youngest of the bunch, sporting an emo 'do and desperately trying to figure out women in his songs.

Last up was an intense Tyler Stenson, accompanied by Jeremy Seitz on harmonica and vocals from Stenson's group, the Lander Band. Stenson describes his music as "Epic folk. Folk-rock with dramatic sincerity and a heavy heart."

Whether by coin toss or

other means, Stenson won and Sean Garcia was second.

Performing last might have had its advantages with the judges, but it was difficult on Stenson, who is 25. "I was sitting with some friends and not talking to them. I had to go take a walk for a while; it was too nerve-racking."

Winning the contest was important to Stenson. "My passion is songwriting. I love the craft. I plan on bragging about it."

*"Lander's 26th Birthday Bash" celebrating Stenson's birthday, 7 p.m. Friday at db clay compound, 55 N.E. Farragut St. All-ages show until 8:30; after that, 21 and older. They also play Friday, March 2, at Macadam's Bar & Grill, 5833 S.W. Macadam Ave.; [www.landerband.com](http://www.landerband.com).*

*On Saturday, March 3, the Portland Songwriters Association will sponsor a seminar with Steve Gillette, who has written songs for Garth Brooks and others, at Macadam's, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.; \$50 members, \$65 nonmembers; [www.portlandsongwriters.org](http://www.portlandsongwriters.org).*

— Tom D'Antoni  
Special to The Oregonian



**Tyler Stenson** Portland's songwriter of the year.

TIM LaBARGE/SPECIAL TO THE OREGONIAN