

COMPETING WITH HIS WORDS

A year ago Tyler Stenson sold screen-printed leather wallets with a company he owned with his brother. Now the 27 year old is hoping to have his own wallet just thick enough to support his full-time music career.

A singer-songwriter, Stenson will compete Feb. 19 to become Portland's Songwriter of the Year, a title he's held for the past two consecutive years. The contest – put on by the Portland Songwriters Association – is based on melody, lyrics and song structure – all things this guitarist has been perfecting for 10 years.

"I have yet to write an emotionally generic song. My (songs) are biographical to a fault," said Stenson, a graduate of West Linn High School. "My friends say (that) if you listen to my catalog from start to finish you can tell who I was dating and where I was living. ... My mom even listens to my stuff to keep tabs on me."

Stenson describes his music as lyrically-driven, eloquent Americana.

"I don't claim to be deep or poetic," he said. "I'm just saying simple things in unique ways."

And the local music community has taken note. When performing around Portland, Stenson is known for his uncomplicated yet sophisticated stage presence – himself, a stool, a guitar and large screen displaying his song lyrics.

"It's like reading an album jacket," he said.

His latest mellow CD, "See That Gleam," is appropriately titled after the silver lining that shines from every downpour in life.

"Cause the water looked like cellophane reflecting stars back into space / Your eyes look that way to me," he sings on the melodic lullaby Cellophane. "Look there / See that gleam? / It's the sun and your eyes the beam / All out streams rise off your face and / All I see is all your lace."

More than making people bob their heads to the beat, Stenson said he hopes his music makes people think.

West Linn resident Kelsey Watters went to high school with Stenson and has followed his career for years.

"I was just listening to him last night," she said. "I've been humming all day. I love local music and acoustic talent."

Stenson's tune, "Babysitting the Cowboy," is a throwback to his upbringing Lander, Wyoming: "My memories are a series of backyard cul-de-sacs / That smell of fresh cut grass and juniper / Wyoming sunsets burned and / Crickets sand their hearts as the sky turned orange / And mother called us in from the day."

Stenson says his biggest musical influence is his mom – whose singing and piano playing would wake him up on Saturday mornings as a child – before Garth Brooks gave him "that itch to really be a singer." At WLHS, Stenson volunteered as an outdoor school counselor for the middle schools and sat in awe when "Mr. Costa played guitar around the campfire."

"I looked at him and thought that was really cool," he said.

But he said he doesn't want to emulate anybody else musically. He takes his original music seriously, and that's why he became a full-time musician last October.

"I've achieved more in the past four months than I have in the last eight years," he said. "It's a huge step. It means I finally have time to do everything I should have been doing."

Four of his CDs are for sale at www.CDBaby.com/tylerstenson, also a place for fans to post comments after listening to the album. Someday Stenson hopes to take his live shows to a more personal level, hosting "boutique private performances," or in other words, performing in front of a seated audience in people's living rooms.

"My goal is to not play 300 shows a year," he said. "My goal is not to be on MTV as a superstar. I want to be timeless, endlessly respected – historic." Someone like James Taylor, he said.

"In someone's house they leave shaking my hand with my CD and getting to know me as a person," he said. "It's more intimate."

Stenson shares his soul through his music and hopes those listening can learn something about themselves in the process.

"If you sit down and listen to my songs I sound overly deep, but I am just a guy. I love to laugh with my buddies and drink pitchers of beer and just kind of be a dude," he said smiling.

He continued, "I don't consider myself a musician. My guitar is like fourth on my skill list. I'm not doing anything on guitar that hasn't been done. But it's my lyrics and stories (that are unique)."

To learn more about Tyler Stenson, purchase songs and book him for gigs visit <http://www.tylerstenson.com/>.

