

My Life As a Rock Star

by Peggy Ehrhart

The set was over and I was dying for a beer. I propped my guitar against my amp, picked my way down the splintery steps at the edge of the stage, and pushed through the crowded, smoky club, a scruffy place a few blocks from the World Trade Center. At the bar, I squeezed between tightly packed bodies till I got close enough to the barmaid to catch her eye. As I waited, my gaze drifted to the painting above the cash register, an image of two naked people, larger than life, having sex.

A heavysset middle-aged man with pock-marked skin was sitting on a barstool nearby. I recognized him as the club owner. He gave me a brief nod, and I nodded back.

“Who handles the booking for your band?” he asked.

“I do,” I said, wondering how to interpret his half-amused, half-skeptical expression.

“Classic rock, huh?”

I nodded. “That’s us.”

“I like it,” he said. “You guys can have a gig here any time you want.”

I would have floated to the ceiling with joy, except the barmaid was about to hand me a bottle of Corona.

That night we made eighteen dollars. Plus beer, of course. The band always drank free at that place.

How did I, a wife, mother, and college professor from the New Jersey suburbs end up ripping power chords out of a red Stratocaster onstage at a grungy bar in lower Manhattan?

It started when my brother-in-law gave my then nine-year-old son a cast-off acoustic guitar. My son took lessons. I eavesdropped and daydreamed, and sometimes secretly fingered the acoustic.

But in my mind, my instrument was sleek, streamlined, *sexy . . . noisy*. It was an electric guitar, a Fender Stratocaster like Jimi Hendrix used to play. It was red.

A few years later, I bought my red Strat and took some lessons of my own. Those were the first steps in a journey that led not only to my realizing my fantasy of becoming a rock star but to writing *Sweet Man Is Gone*, a mystery novel inspired by my adventures.

Soon I played well enough--I thought--to get some band experience. I was browsing through a copy of the *Village Voice* one day when I came upon an ad for the New School Guitar Study Center in New York City. The Guitar Study Center, the ad said, was now enrolling ensemble classes for the fall semester.

I showed up a few nights later to audition for the blues ensemble, limped through a ragged version of “Brown Sugar,” and improvised a few nervous choruses.

The teacher, a middle-aged guy with a graying ponytail, was unimpressed. “I guess you can be in the class,” he said, “but the other guitar player is a lot better than you are.”

So a week later, I showed up at the Drummer’s Collective, a drumming school that rented rehearsal space to the New School. It occupied an upper floor of an old industrial building at Sixth Avenue and Fourteenth Street. The ascent was accomplished in a freight elevator--freight elevators were to become a recurring theme in the many rehearsal studios that I was to become acquainted with.

After a shaky ride with a soundtrack of creaks and squeaks, the elevator lurched to a stop. A heavy steel door shot open, and one of the other passengers shoved aside the scissors gate that still kept us penned

inside. I stepped into a room furnished with decrepit sofas and inhabited by guys tapping madly on everything with drumsticks.

The teacher caught sight of me lurking in the hall that led to the practice rooms. “Coming in?” he said. I nodded, nervousness making my heart pound as fast as those drumming students with their busy sticks.

I had pictured a classroom, desks, a blackboard, handouts--in short, a class. Instead I discovered that I had signed up for a twelve-week jam session.

Five or six people stood in a small, hot room jammed with equipment: amplifiers, microphones, a sound board, an electronic keyboard, a huge drum kit. All the people were male except for the singer--and me.

The chick is always the singer. In fact, I myself might have opted for singing if I had any kind of a voice, and when I created my heroine Maxx Maxwell (my sexier, blonder alter ego), I made her the singer in her band.

“Let’s get started,” the teacher said. “‘Sweet Home Chicago.’ It’s a shuffle in E.”

Everyone started playing except me. The teacher scowled at me. “Play something,” he growled.

I did.

“Did you tune up before we started?” His scowl became more ferocious.

“Yes.”

The band still played, oblivious to this exchange. My turn came to solo. I grabbed randomly at the strings, my fingers shaking so hard I couldn’t control them.

When the song finally ended, the singer looked over at me. “You get really nervous, don’t you?” she whispered.

I can't remember what the next song was because about halfway into the first chorus, I began to feel simultaneously hot and cold, and very dizzy. My vision grew hazy. The haze was punctuated by little black dots that danced around, then began to spin. I felt myself sway.

I croaked the teacher's name. "I'm fainting," I said. "I can't go on."

"Get yourself some water out in the hall," he said. "You can't quit. You're in the band now."

Indeed I was.

My own band got its start at the National Guitar Workshop in New Milford, Connecticut. Every summer, a campus that, in real life, is an upscale prep school turns into "guitar camp" for a handful of grown-up guitar players, an even smaller handful of *woman* guitar players, and literally hundreds of guitar-crazed teenage boys. For several years, I spent a week there every summer. Those weeks were the most fun I have ever had in my life.

One summer, I befriended two of the other grown-up guitar students, a guy and a woman. We discovered that we all lived in the New York City area, so when our week at guitar camp ended, we started jamming in each other's living rooms. The guy had an electric bass, and we took turns being the bass player. The four strings on a bass are equivalent to the bottom four strings on a guitar, but an octave lower, so any guitar player can easily master a few rudimentary bass lines.

We were all former English majors, and when we took a break for tea and cookies, we would discuss literature. I remember a lively conversation about *Madame Bovary* that ended only when we realized that we were wasting time that we should be devoting to the Rolling Stones.

Eventually we decided that if we were to be a real band, we had to have a drummer. That meant, probably, that we would have to start renting space in a rehearsal studio--unless we lucked into a conveniently located drummer with a drum kit in his basement, which never happened.

Every big city has rehearsal studios if you know where to look. In Manhattan, the whole area from Madison Square Garden down to the West Twenties is honeycombed with them. If you stand on West Thirtieth Street after six p.m. and study the passersby, every second person will be a guy with a gig bag slung over his shoulder.

That part of Manhattan contains blocks and blocks of old multistory factories, each floor once a huge loft. Now many of these lofts are rehearsal studios, broken up into misshapen rooms connected by maze-like hallways and designated by letters of the alphabet. “You’ll be in C tonight,” the shaggy-haired guy at the desk will say with a flourish after he hands back your credit card, imprint taken in advance in case your band decides to sneak away without paying.

There’s usually a waiting area too, featuring a naugahyde sofa and a battered coffee table strewn with dog-eared music magazines. Unisex bathrooms are de rigeur--and women need to forget even hoping that the previous occupant has left the seat down.

Before the smoking ban took effect in the city a few years ago, waiting areas and rooms were so permeated with cigarette smoke that I’d come home from rehearsal smelling like I’d been sitting in a bar all night, even though no one in my band smoked. One place we practiced used the turned over bottoms of mike stands for ashtrays--heavy cast-iron rounds about the size and shape of dinner plates. We’d enter our rehearsal room to find the remains of the previous band’s cigarettes smoldering in these curious receptacles like some kind of incense offered to the gods of rock.

Sometimes the smoke wafting through the studio would smell more like marijuana than tobacco, a fact that I exaggerated in the fictional rehearsal studio, Feedback, that I invented for *Sweet Man Is Gone*.

But the first time we ever played with a drummer--a woman I met in a drumming class I took in an attempt to remedy my woeful lack of rhythm--was at a rehearsal studio in New Jersey.

Outside cities, rehearsal studios tend to be in run-down neighborhoods otherwise devoted to light industry. A typical streetscape might be a

ramshackle warehouse, a few small factories, and a weedlot surrounded by razor wire.

“Drummers have to bring their own cymbals,” the guy who booked the room for me said on the phone. “We’re not puttin’ up with damage to the cymbals no more.”

Indeed, one night at another place our drummer encountered a drum kit whose cymbals had had huge chunks knocked out of them. I was never able to imagine how a drummer armed only with wooden drumsticks could wreak such destruction on a disk of solid brass.

That first time, though, was a Saturday afternoon in the fall. We zipped west on Route 80 through torrents of rain as semis thundered past, sending up huge plumes of water from the asphalt. We were all nervous, wondering how we’d sound outside of the living room where we usually practiced--and standing up, like a real band--and whether the drummer, who we were to meet there, would want to join the band.

After a confused journey following route signs that disappeared just when we needed them, with underpasses that turned into overpasses after doubling back on themselves in dizzying curves, we pulled onto a faded patch of asphalt fissured by long cracks, like welts, sporting strips of exhaust-toughened grass. A ramshackle wooden structure loomed out of the mist.

The rehearsal room was huge. Unlike in Manhattan, space isn’t at a premium in New Jersey. At one end was a platform, like a stage, with an impressive drum kit at its apex. The room was also dark and cold. That, combined with the memory of the rain we’d just driven through and our harrowing exposure to New Jersey expressway traffic, had us all shivering--and maybe nervousness was part of it too. But we climbed onto the stage and plugged in our instruments.

I can’t remember what we started with. All I remember about the practice session was that at one point I had to use the restroom. As I wandered through the curious building, I could hear a band. Rehearsal studios usually make some gesture at soundproofing, from sheets of spongy gray foam hung on the walls of each room to the extreme of double doors, like on a

submarine. But even without turning everything up to eleven, like in *Spinal Tap*, an enthusiastic band can frustrate these stratagems.

The band was playing “Lay Down Sally,” a song that my band played.

I stopped and listened. It *was* my band, minus the little figure that my guitar wove through the chords played by the other guitar--and darned if it didn't sound real. Darned if it didn't sound *good*.

The first studio space we ever rented in Manhattan was three floors below street level in what had formerly been a fur vault. The vault door was still in place at the entrance, a heavy steel thing with a rack and pinion lock and a latch activated by a device like the steering wheel on a yacht, but stainless steel.

By this time, our original drummer had deserted us because she had been recruited by a marching band. We saw her on TV a few years later, marching in a parade. But we'd played a few times in New Jersey with a guy I found through my old Guitar Study Center class, so I called him and invited him to join us in the fur vault.

That first rehearsal we waited and waited for him. By now I was the de facto bandleader, simply because I was the most interested in keeping the band together. So whenever there was a glitch, I blamed myself.

We blundered disjointedly through the first several tunes in our by now substantial repertoire. “Listen to the drummer” is the standard mantra for keeping the band together. But who do you listen to if the drummer hasn't shown up yet?

At last he appeared. He told us he had gotten to the address on time but had become terrified by the idea of riding down three floors in a creaky freight elevator and had spent the last forty-five minutes searching for a flight of stairs. He turned out to be a faithful recruit and played with us for a few years. But when it came time to leave the studio at the end of a practice session, he'd wave goodbye and go searching for the stairs as we climbed into the elevator.

We came to suspect that the people who ran the fur vault studio also slept there. We often booked rehearsal space on Sunday afternoons, taking advantage of the bargain rates--no band that was gigging regularly would muster out that early on a weekend to practice. Arriving to find the vault door locked, we would ring the bell and eventually they would admit us, yawning and rubbing their eyes.

There were several of them, all guys but one, a woman who seemed to be the brains of the operation. We dubbed her the Death Metal Queen, after a style of heavy metal music much favored by the other bands that frequented the fur vault place. Imagine Vampira, but with free-form tattoos snaking up and down her arms, jet-black hair arranged in dreadlocks, platform-soled shoes adding at least four inches to her height, an exotic foreign accent, and all-black ensembles featuring deeply plunging v-necks.

She was always the one who answered the phone when I called to book a room. "OK," she would say in that curious accent. "You got it."

One day when I tried to book a room for the coming Sunday, she told me that the studio was going to be closed because the entire staff was going sky-diving.

From observing the Death Metal Queen, I learned that my method of testing a microphone by gingerly stepping up to it and murmuring "Testing one . . . two . . . three" was hopelessly unhip. The Death Metal Queen would approach the mike as if it was guy who'd been sizing her up in a bar. She'd lean toward it with a scornful expression on her face and bark "Check." Just once, like that. Either it passed the test or it didn't.

As we paid up and prepared to leave early one evening, the guy at the desk said, "You guys busy tonight?"

Cooking dinner for my husband was the thought that ran through my mind.

"We're holding a jam," he said. "Lots of people here. Great players. Starts at midnight. Come on back--you're invited."

The “Midnight Jam” ultimately became a key plot point in *Sweet Man Is Gone*.

Then we lost our bass player. One day she called to tell me she was resigning from the band. She said some people had seen her on the street carrying her bass and had recruited her for *their* band.

I never knew whether that was true or not. I do know that bass players are in short supply, a fact that causes my bandleader heroine in *Sweet Man Is Gone* to suffer her bass player’s moodiness and eccentricity in silence rather than lose him.

A week or so later, the other guitar player called me, very excited, to announce that he’d recruited a bass player from among the other inhabitants of his Brooklyn co-op.

Our new bass player was so enthusiastic he came to the first rehearsal direct from the Sam Ash store on Forty-Eighth Street, price tags still dangling from his new bass. He also played the guitar with tremendous flair, and was happy to sing, his style ranging from James Brown to Little Richard. In real life he was a therapist with a Ph.D. in psychology.

Once he was in the band, we made great strides, strides that eventually led to club gigs in Manhattan and a few years as the house band at the college where I was teaching at the time. But I was now the sole woman in the band, still the bandleader, and coming to realize that being a mom had been good preparation for that role.

The band broke up in the fall of 2002. By that time, we had yet another drummer, a maitre d’ at a fancy restaurant in Manhattan. He was probably the best drummer we’d ever had, but his work schedule kept him busy all weekend, even at night. I was still teaching college then, but I was free on weekends, most evenings, and even weekday afternoons. The other guitar player had a regular nine-to-five office job. The bass player often saw clients on weekday evenings.

It fell to me to juggle people’s schedules, booking and rebooking rehearsal times as this one canceled for this reason, that one for that reason.

The obvious solution would have been to fire someone and find a replacement with a more compatible schedule. I'd lie in bed at night pondering this option. But everything had become so entangled. . . .

If I replaced the other guitar player, he'd take the PA system with him, and he was also the only band member, besides me, with a car. Besides, he was a founding member of the band. If I replaced the bass player, we'd lose his singing too. Bass players were hard enough to find, but *singing* bass players? I could replace the drummer, but he was so good, and other things in his life weren't going so great. Maybe he needed us more than we needed him.

You can't resign from being a mom, but you can resign from being a bandleader, and I did. Without me to keep track of who was available when, book studio space, and rebook when somebody bailed out at the last minute, our practices became few and far between. Everybody still wanted to play gigs, but they didn't want to do the work that would make us sound good.

Eventually I resigned from the band and it ceased to exist.

A few weeks after that event, I saw a cartoon in one of the guitar magazines I subscribed to. A guy was trying to determine the most common cause of band break-ups.

Was it artistic differences? he wondered. Indeed, we'd had our share of those. We gave up on Buddy Holly's "Not Fade Away" because whenever anybody called it, the drummer and the other guitar player would have an argument about whether the groove was or was not the Bo Diddley beat.

Was it personality conflicts? Well, one drummer left because he thought the rest of us were just too inflexible.

But ultimately the joy of playing together smoothes out these fleeting aggravations, the way the romance in a happy marriage smoothes out the day-to-day annoyances.

No, it came down to just what the guy in the cartoon concluded:
Inability to coordinate rehearsal schedules.

Peggy Ehrhart is the author of *Sweet Man Is Gone*, Five Star 2008. Visit her online at www.PeggyEhrhart.com. “My Life as a Rock Star” first appeared in the October 2007 issue of *First Draft*, the online newsletter of the Guppies.