

Teen Rocks To Oldies

Freshman Richie Lee's pompadour and classic rock 'n' roll sound are a winning combination.

By KATE PAULMAN REGISTER CORRESPONDENT

Fourteen-year-old north Des Moines resident Richie Lee used to idolize country singer and actor Billy Ray Cyrus. "We taped a concert and he had it taped four times on a tape, because he watched it so many times, instead of rewinding it he'd just watch it four times," said Nancy, Lee's mother. "And he did this whole concert, he had it down just perfect."

Then he came to a realization. "He had the whole routine down and he realized Billy Ray Cyrus had long hair and that wasn't normal for him," she said. "And then he was done with it."

He switched to classic rock 'n' roll and a pompadour, a move that's evolved into a career for the North High School freshman. Performing as Richie Lee and the Fabulous 50's, Lee, bassist Chris Hauser and drummer Mary Pawletzki perform cover songs by artists from the 1950s and early '60s. The group appeared in Clear Lake last week and has shows booked into July.

"I don't really tell people what I do at high school," Lee said. "I don't want to boast and brag about it, so I just kind of keep it to myself and let them find out on their own. I think that's the best way to have people find out."

Still, the band has found a loyal fan base. Lee even has some groupies. "It's pretty honorable having people that want to come and hear you play when they can be doing something else instead," Lee said. "It's an honor when you get the fans who have listened to your music before and danced to it. Then they come to another gig that you do and dance to that and it gets more people dancing."

The band's ability to get the crowd dancing can be traced to Lee's drive to stay true to the original songs. He even has the same guitar his favorite artist, Buddy Holly, played: a 1955 Fender Stratocaster. "I like everything perfect," Lee said.

Mary Pawletzki, the drummer, 25, said she shares the same mind-set. "I don't mind having him tell me what to do, even though he's 14 years old, which is kind of humbling," Pawletzki said. "But he knows what he's doing, he knows what he's talking about, he knows what needs to be taken care of in the music."

Lee has been involved in music for years, even though he's only been playing guitar for 3-1/2 years. "Richie, he would sing the songs before he picked up an instrument," Richie's father Richard said. "I just never thought anything about it, that was just his playtime. He's done it all his life."

His parents' tastes drew him to classic rock 'n' roll. "My parents always listened to it, and I kind of adapted to it," Lee said. "I really like the style of music. And it's fun to play, too."

The band's first show was at the 2003 Iowa State Fair. The group has gone on to play throughout the Midwest, and has appeared with the Crickets, Holly's original band. Lee has also performed for the real "Peggy Sue," who inspired Holly's song of the same name.

Pawletzki said the band's success can be tracked back to its sense of family. "I'm really glad to be a part of this," she said. "Bands don't always get along as good as we do. And to be able to come to practice and be playing with your best friends is really a great treat."

Chris Hauser, bass player, 27, agreed. "When they first called me up, I was like, 'A 13-year-old kid? What am I going to do with this?'" Hauser said. "I thought, 'This is going to be risky.' But as a person who enjoys big challenges, this one has turned out to be the best."