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# Kates takes on personal project, begins solo tour despite injury

## Broken wrist forced guitarist to learn to play left-handed



Photo: Courtesy/Jesse Kates Guitarist Jesse Kates overcame a wrist injury by learning to play guitar left handed. He will perform at the Vaudeville Mews, 212 4th St., Des Moines, on Friday.

**By Maria Schwamman**  
Daily Staff Writer

Realizing that his wrist wouldn't bend enough to play the guitar because of an old "capture the flag" injury, Jesse Kates could have been discouraged from continuing to learn to play.

Instead, Kates -- who is normally right-handed -- solved the problem by turning the guitar around and playing as a left-hander.

"I kind of stuck to it obsessively," he says. "It was just something I really wanted to do."

Kates first picked up a guitar in 1996 while he was a sophomore in college in Pittsburgh. He says his injured left arm, which he broke while falling off of a wall while playing capture the flag in the seventh or eighth grade, had never caused him problems before, except for when trying to lay his arm flat on the table to donate blood.

"I never noticed until I started playing guitar," he says.

Kates says playing "lefty" has actually been less of a challenge for him than one would expect, because his dominant right hand forms all the notes, which he believes makes more sense than just using it for strumming.

"Actually, I think it's easier for right-handed people to play lefty," he says.

Kates largely taught himself how to play on his stepmother's acoustic guitar by looking up chords on different Web sites. He says he took a few lessons as recently as last year in an attempt to learn how to play jazz.

Learning how to play guitar isn't the only thing that Kates has learned to do alone. His first solo album, "Sleight of Hand," which was released in 2004, was recorded entirely out of his own home in Kansas City, Mo. His show at Vaudeville Mews will be the second show on his first-ever tour.

"I'm using all my vacation time at work," he says. "I booked the whole thing myself."

Kates says he would like to eventually play with a band but hasn't been successful in finding people in the Kansas City area who don't already have projects.

"To be honest, I did this project because I was sick of trying to find people," he says. "I didn't want to wait anymore. I wanted to make something happen."

Kates says he adhered strictly to five rules that he set for himself when he recorded the album, which is entirely instrumental.

The first rule was to use only one instrument per song. Second, he had to record each song live. He also decided that each song had to be half composition, half improvisation. He could not use any overdubs, and everything had to be recorded out of his home.

"I wanted to do something completely live without cheating," Kates says.

Kates says the rules weren't imposed because of ethics but to generate creativity.

"If you limit yourself, you have to be more creative within those rules," he says. "A lot of good art comes from putting boundaries around yourself."

Kates says he uses a looper pedal to get the complex sounds that are heard on his album and live at his shows. He plays one section of the song, and the looper pedal records it and then continues to play it over again while he records a different section. He does a series of up to 32 of these sections to perform a song. He says since all the sections build on one another, one bad note can ruin an entire song.

For this reason, Kates says he starts every performance with a disclaimer.

"Hi, my name's Jesse Kates," he says. "If I mess up, I have to start over."

Kates says he sends out a flow chart that describes the process he used to record the songs when he sends his album to radio stations.

"If I don't say it's one guitar and one person, it's not as cool," he says.

Kates says he doesn't define himself as an artist with this technique. He also writes poetry and is considering including pop songs on his next album.

"This is just one project," he says.

Who: Jesse Kates

Where: Vaudeville Mews, 212 4th St., Des Moines

When: 10 p.m. Friday

Cost: \$5

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