

Bluffs singer has stars in his eyes

By CARLA CHANCE
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When John Watt of Council Bluffs looks at things, he sees "black ... purple ... a night sky filled with stars."

"You might say I have stars in my eyes. That's definitely where I am headed," said the 29-year-old musician, wearing his trademark derby.

Although he's being lyrical, Watt is also describing what it's like to be blind.

Watt lost his vision nine years ago when he attempted suicide and the gunshot blast damaged his optic nerve.

But that incident, he said, is light years behind him.

Watt is headed for stardom with his one-man show, he said.

But if it hadn't been for the shooting, Watt said, he would never have discovered music.

The youngest of eight children, Watt said he always felt he had "the emotional power to do great things."

Whether it was life's circumstances or clinical depression, the reasons Watt attempted to take his life are insignificant now, he said.

Afterward, he said, he was no longer depressed and was glad to be alive.

His life took a complete turnaround, he said.

Although he was depressed about losing his vision, he said, blindness has not been that hard to handle.

Of all the people who have been blinded, "there's probably nobody better equipped to deal with it than me," he said.

"The biggest thing that helps me is my intelligence," said Watt, who doesn't believe in false modesty.

Learning Braille came easily to him, he said.

He enrolled at Iowa Western Community College and received degrees in journalism and psychology, he said.

About three or four years ago, Watt decided to teach himself to play the piano. He then learned to play the guitar because "it was easier to carry around," he said.

He also learned to play the banjo and harmonica.

Although no one in his immediate family had musical abilities, Watt said he believed he got his talent from his paternal grandmother.

A natural writer, Watt discovered he was also "a decent song writer."

"If you don't have a song, you don't have nothing if you want to go for the big time," he said.

He calls himself "a pretty good ear," and said someone can "lay down the chords and a melody pops out at me."

Lately, more and more people have gotten to hear his original tunes.

Watt, who began playing in local bars a few months ago, has developed quite a following, according to his Council Bluffs girlfriend, Christine Mahrenholz.

Impressed by a blind man who had learned to surf on a recent trip to California, Mahrenholz said his music was so beautiful that it moved her to tears when she first heard it.

Watt admits to being nervous about his first solo performance,

but that didn't stop him from coming back for more.

Reaction to his acoustical music, which is a combination of rock, country and blues, has snowballed, he said.

When his original songs became more popular than the contemporary tunes he played, Watt began to think, "Maybe I've got something here."

Pleased with the crowd's reaction, Watt said he is looking for a producer. He said he already has a backer to purchase new sound equipment.

Musical influences include the Beatles, Pink Floyd and Neil Young, said Watt, and his songs are reminiscent of John Lennon in lyrics and sound.

But Watt, who said he still dreams in "20/20 vision," is already looking into the future and using other talents.

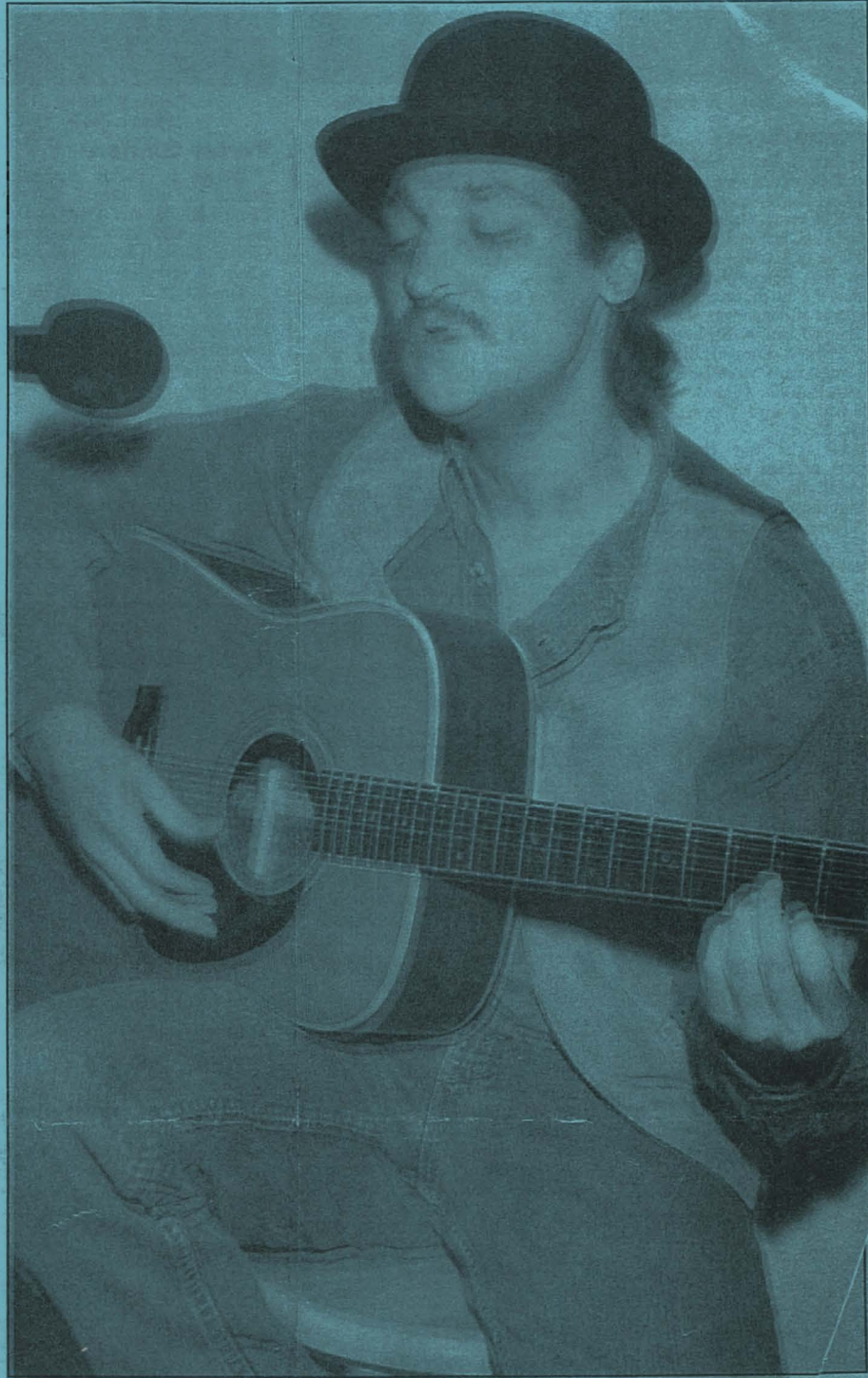
When he gets his first recording contract, Watt said, he wants to finish his first novel.

Entitled "Cabin Fever," the novel is about two men who get stranded in a cabin in the Yukon in 1867. The plot unfolds as isolation and hunger set in, he said.

Watt doesn't regard his blindness as a handicap.

"I can't drive and read print, but other than that, my life is pretty normal," he said.

In fact, Watt seems to handle his blindness with such ease that Mahrenholz didn't discover that he couldn't see until about 45 minutes



Nonpareil/Carla Chance

John Watt, a self-taught musician, hopes to break into show business soon.

after she met him.

Watt even played the role of a sighted man in a performance of "You Can't Take it With You" during college.

The only thing that bothers Watt, he said, is the misconceptions

people have about the blind.

Blind people can take care of themselves, he said. His mother attests to that, saying he makes great omelettes.

He said his other senses haven't become more heightened, but he

uses them more and is more conscious about his surroundings.

Watt said he has learned that no matter how bad it gets, somehow it always gets better. And in order to succeed, he said, "you've got to believe."

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