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At Acoustic Café, her mission is service to music, and to Haiti

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The Record
STAFF WRITER

The lush, quiet Borough of Park Ridge seems an unlikely hub for an upbeat arts and music culture. And soft-spoken Barbara Roehrer, a 30-year resident, seems an unlikely catalyst to develop the suburb's cultural scene.

Then again, things aren't always what they seem.

Five years ago, Roehrer kicked off the Acoustic Café, a monthly music series that takes place in the cafeteria at Our Lady of Mercy Academy on Fremont Avenue, part of the church she's attended for two decades. The venue, which becomes a cozy performance room for show nights, draws mostly folk and acoustic acts, the likes of the Kennedys, Freedy Johnston, Sloan Wainwright, Red Molly and Terence Martin, whom Roehrer manages.

One of a small number of intimate, live music spaces in North Jersey, Acoustic Café was founded partly to raise funds for Our Lady of Mercy's twinning parish in Haiti and partly to satiate Roehrer's longtime personal mission:



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to expose deserving artists who remain under the radar.

"The thing is, there's only a handful of places that bring in these performers to North Jersey," Roehrer said. "There really aren't a lot of places that aren't bars, that are real listening rooms."

Roehrer was never one for bars, anyway. While growing up in the Ironbound section of Newark, she caught bands like the Rolling Stones, the Byrds and Jimi Hendrix at venues like Newark Symphony Hall and the Fillmore East in the East Village. As a child, she would take her transistor radio to bed to listen to the Beatles into the night. In later years, she tuned in to rock music on WNEW.

"So much great music came out in the late '60s," wrote Roehrer in an e-mail. "It was an exciting time for music." She even made it to Woodstock in 1969.

In person, it's hard to miss a glimmer in Roehrer's eyes when the conversation turns to rock-and-roll. "As a teenager, I started going to concerts," she said. "I fell in love with John Lennon."

Roehrer's love of music got her working

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behind the scenes for acts she enjoyed. She was 21 when she managed her first band, P. D.A. ("Petrified Duck Ass, if you must know," she explained.)

Years later — after getting an art degree from Rutgers University, marrying Gordon Roehrer (a bassist whom she met, funnily enough, at a bar), relocating to Park Ridge and giving birth to her daughter, Jessica — Roehrer tried her hand at booking once again. First casually, after befriending the award-winning folk duo Aztec Two-Step in the late '90s. Then, more seriously, with Westchester-based Terence Martin, an independent songwriter she discovered while listening to the Fordham University public radio station WFUV.

"I heard a Terence Martin track and I thought, 'Oh my, he has such a distinctive voice,' " Roehrer said. "So I contacted him and I started doing some work with him."

At the time, she had no connections and very little experience. All she had was faith in the songs.

"I guess the music just moved me," Roehrer said with a slight shrug. "I just kind of fell into it, and I had to really learn everything."

In 2000, the year she began to manage Martin, Roehrer launched a record label, Good Dog Music, which has released four CDs by Martin, and a management company, Acoustic Music Agency, which represents artists Arlon Bennett, Patrick Fitzsimmons, Charlie Jones and Joe McKay. By the time the

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opportunity came to start Acoustic Café, Roehrer had already immersed herself in the local acoustic music scene.

"It just seemed like it would be a great thing to do ... it seemed like it was the right time," she said.

Still a small-scale operation, the Acoustic Café uses a sound system provided by Roehrer's husband; her friends help set up the cafeteria space. Roehrer works solo to promote the shows, finding Park Ridge's location to be her biggest challenge. Attendance varies, from as few as 25 to as many as 135 people for more popular acts.

"It's really hard to get people out, so I really have to work at it," she said. By now, Roehrer's gotten used to cold-calling, promoting and sending out press releases ahead of each show.

Our Lady of Mercy's twinning parish in Vallières, Haiti, receives a portion of ticket sales for its scholarship fund, with the rest going to the featured artist. Roehrer receives no compensation for her work on the series.

"It's funny, because it's so much work, sometimes it can get to be a little stressful,"

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she said. "But when the music is actually going, it's like, OK. I guess that's what loving music is all about."

Next up at Acoustic Café: Terence Martin and Danny Schmidt, 7:30 p.m. Saturday. 2 Fremont Ave., Park Ridge. Tickets are \$18. 201-573-0718 or cafeacoustic.org.

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