

## Rocking to Emily Dickinson

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# THE BEACON

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The Nanette Perrotte Combo perform Emily Dickinson's poetry through rock music during a performance at the new Boxborough Library Sunday afternoon. In the foreground, Nanette Perrotte sings. Andy Pinkham is on guitar.



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Sarafina Waldron, 2, Caroline Parker, 6, her mom Betsy and sister Emily, 11, watch the performance.

# Rocking out to Dickinson's lyrics

By Nick Pinto

STAFF WRITER

ACTON—Fans of Emily Dickinson could be forgiven if they don't immediately think of the 19th-century poet as a great rock'n'roll lyricist.

But performers Nanette Perrotte and Sebastian Lockwood believe that the belle of Amherst's poems serve quite well as the lyrics for contemporary rock music.

"Her writing has a lightness and an exactness that feels a lot like modern music," Lockwood said. "Nanette and I were just jamming down in the basement one day, and I had a Dickinson poem memorized, and I said, 'Let's try this.' We ended up building a song around her poem 'Snake,' and especially the last line, 'Zero at the bone,' struck us as such a perfect blues line."

Perrotte and Lockwood performed their electric-blues version of the poem for an audience at the Sargent Library in Boxborough May 29, along with the several other Dickinson-inspired songs that compose their show "Zero at the Bone: Emily Dickinson Rock." The performance, sponsored by the Acton-Boxborough Cultural Council, included a rock lineup of backing instrumentalists on drums, bass, keyboard, and electric guitar.

Perrotte, a professional

singer and composer with a degree from the Berklee College of Music, sang Dickinson's lyrics with a dramatic inflection and theatrical physicality that many fans might not associate with Dickinson's spare style. Between songs, Lockwood regaled the audience with equally-dramatic monologues locating the lyrics in their historical and artistic context.

Lockwood said that he considers "Zero at the Bone" to be at least as much education as entertainment.

"The more we worked on this project, the more we realized that it could be a wonderful introduction to Dickinson's work for students who might otherwise have a hard time getting inside of her poetry," he said. "Our dream was to perform the show in schools and to see the kids singing some of these songs as they left the room. It's not easy to understand these poems, but we want to show people that you can know them and own them even if you don't understand them."

The show's punchy and upbeat atmosphere is also no accident, Lockwood said.

"We made a very conscientious effort to get people past the idea that Dickinson was a bipolar recluse who thought of nothing but death," he said.

"She wasn't a recluse because

of fear. Instead, she made a very courageous choice to dedicate herself to her art. A lot of people retreat but then don't do the art. She did, and that's something we want to celebrate with our show."

Since beginning the "Zero at the Bone" project more than a year ago, Lockwood and Perrotte have recorded an album of their Dickinson-inspired songs and performed several times, including at schools.

Lockwood said it is increasingly hard to get the show into schools. Because the group needs \$1,500 to \$2,000 to perform with their six-piece band, many schools can't afford to bring them in.

"We keep trying, though," Lockwood said. "Often a PTA will provide funding for our program so the school doesn't have to."

Lockwood said that bringing Dickinson's work to young audiences is the most rewarding part of the work.

"Performing the song with the lyrics 'it was given to me by the

gods / When I was a little girl / They give us Presents most you know / When we are new and small,' especially at this show with that group of young girls sitting together in the front row, that's very special," he said. "You really feel like you are passing on an important message"

Judging by the number of clapping hands, bobbing heads, and shimmying hips in the Boxborough Library last week, it appeared that the message was getting through.