Written by Mike Schulz
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Describing his latest CD release, musician Pat Willis says its origins began with his song "Rami, "
a composition written, as so many are, about a girl.

"When I first saw her, there was a palpable presence," says the former Burnt McMelba Toast frontman. "You know, she had an energy about her, and you could just *feel* the electricity. And so when she finally came over to me, and slavered all over me, I just *melted* . "

It's probably important to note that Willis isn't being hyperbolic about the slavering.

It's probably also important to note that Rami is a wolf. A *literal* wolf.

"I just puddled," adds Willis (hopefully hyperbolically), remembering his first encounter with Rami at Colorado's Mission Wolf animal refuge. "I fell in love with her, and her beautiful hair, and wrote the song the next day."

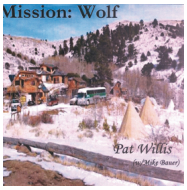
That composition - a tribute to both the refuge and its lupine inhabitants - led to another, titled "Runnin': Fading Footsteps." And those songs led to *Mission: Wolf*, Willis' 12-track, acoustic remembrance of his two years spent among the animals and humans at Mission Wolf, located in Colorado's West Mountains region.

Barring a roughly two-year Quad Cities stint with the band Patio, Willis says he's spent "most of the last 15 years" in Colorado, and discovered the Mission Wolf refuge nine years ago, after receiving his bachelor's degree in English from Boulder's University of Colorado.

"I went for a weekend after I graduated," he says, "and it was such an amazing place. It's wolves that were born in captivity, and they can't be released into the world or they'd die, or be killed, within a couple days, so they take care of them there."

Willis found the weekend so inspirational, he says, that he later returned to Mission Wolf for a month-and-a-half stay, and roughly two years later - given "the proper window" in his schedule - for a two-year tenure.

"I slept on a hillside, watched coyotes chew on entrails, saw their glowing eyes," he says. "And I met these amazing people from all over the world. Because a place like that just sucks in incredible people. People that want to *do* things."



Among the things that Willis most wanted to do was preserve the experience through music, and in attempting to capture the beauty of the refuge and its human and animal denizens, he says, "I started playing and writing and remembering why I liked to play music in the first place. For *myself*, you know? Not because I'm in a band, not because of girls. I just wanted to make strong songs that didn't need a horn section, that didn't need a rhythm section. And that's what I *love* about this disc. It's stripped down."

Calling *Mission: Wolf* "my happiest work since the Dagobah [Willis' former band] CD we put out

in the mid- '90s," Willis hopes the album will give listeners a visceral sense of his years at the Colorado refuge, although he doesn
'
t consider himself artistically exhausted on the subject just yet.

"I was actually starting to write a book, but I just ... . I'm not *slow* enough yet," he says with a laugh. "I can't stop moving long enough to do the book yet. So I settled on a CD.
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Willis will performs songs from *Mission: Wolf* in Davenport on May 15, when the musician plays the patio stage between the Harrison Street venues McButt
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an outdoor locale that Willis refers to as Stick
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And I hope the name sticks,
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The concert also marks Willis' final area gig before returning to Colorado for the summer, and finds him sharing the bill with local band Orangadang! and Willis' newly formed ensemble Pat's Acoustic Disco, a bluegrass/disco hybrid that performs acoustic takes on such genre classics as Donna Summer's "Hot Stuff" and Peaches & Herb's "Shake Your Groove Thing."

"You wouldn't think it'd work," says Willis, "because bluegrass is *absolutely* not funky. But I started liking the juxtaposition of bluegrass and whatever - bluegrass and Black Sabbath, bluegrass and Pink Floyd - and I just came around to disco songs recently.

"And all of a sudden," Willis says with an air of comedic dejection, "I was like, 'Oh, *man* ... it's working
really well
... .
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For more on the Mission Wolf refuge, visit MissionWolf.com .

May 15's outdoor, "Burgers & Bands" concert will be held - rain or shine - between Stickman's and McButt
'
s (at 1514 North Harrison Street in Davenport), and will feature Willis performing with Burnt McMelba Toast's formmer bassist, Rod Shaw. The concert begins at 8:30 p.m., and for more information, call Stickman's at (563)322-7724.