

Pert' Near SANDSTONE

Musicians and rivers are a lot alike. They never stay in one place too long, driven endlessly elsewhere by some rudimentary force promising brighter skies and bigger shores to stretch out on just around the bend.

For Kevin Kniebel, and surely the river too, it's the departure that costs the most.

"I've learned after traveling for a decade there are all kinds of things that are hard about being a musician, and probably the hardest part is leaving home." Kniebel says this over the phone a day after Thanksgiving, his voice relaxed, his four-year-old son Del audible through the receiver.

Kniebel is a founding member and banjo player of Pert' Near Sandstone, a modern American string band quintet that has earned the reputation of being one of the nation's premier string bands. They've been together for over a decade, and they've channeled this emotion of departure into their fifth and latest studio release, *The Hardest Part Of Leaving*.

"It's an album full of heartbreak and homecoming," Kniebel says; the result of a decade spent playing and touring the country together, of leaving someone or something behind when the time for leaving came.

Thankfully, their efforts have not gone unnoticed.

The band's particular blend of folk, bluegrass, country, and jugband music has landed them performances with Del McCourey, Steve Martin and

the Steep Canyon Rangers, and the Yonder Mountain String Band, and has secured them appearances at prestigious music festivals such as the Telluride Bluegrass Festival in Telluride, Colorado, and the Northwest String Summit in North Plains, Oregon. The band has been featured on several famed radio programs, with performances on Minnesota's own "A Prairie Home Companion," National Public Radio's "Mountain Stage," and the "Woodsongs Old-Time Radio Hour."

None of these benchmark accomplishments were fathomable to Kniebel a decade ago, though, when he was simply "looking for a hobby." Then, he was living in a house in St. Paul, Minnesota with fellow Pert' Near founding member, guitarist J Lenz. The house was in a neighborhood Kniebel admits was about as far from the idyllic Midwest landscape that the band courts in nearly all of their songs.

"Everybody who lived there had a car broken into and totaled," Kniebel says, reminiscing.

J and Kevin, along with fiddler Ryan Young who now performs with fellow Minnesota contemporary string band *Trampled By Turtles*, began jamming weekly at the house, fueled mainly by folk music and spirits of varying strengths. Shortly thereafter, Nate Sipe, mandolinist and fiddle player, joined, bringing a deep knowledge of traditional and bluegrass tunes, adding depth and tradition to the music's folk beginnings.