

**Professional air guitarist Will Hale and Tadpole Parade recognized as a Twin Cities Small Business of the Year!**  
**Presented at the Neighborhood Development Center's 2009 Entrepreneur Recognition Awards.**

**Check out Will's entrepreneur feature in the Pioneer Press**

## **No child's PLAY**

Will Hale has been producing entertainment for kids for 20 years. Now, he needs professionals to help make the business side as successful as the creative.

**By Nicole Garrison-Sprenger**  
**Saint Paul Pioneer Press May 3, 2009**

Will Hale hadn't played many gigs in smoky bars before he realized intoxicated adults weren't the best audience for him.

The crowds weren't necessarily unruly; they just didn't pay much attention to Hale or his music. But after hanging out with several friends who have children, Hale realized kids were much more attentive.

To test the theory, Hale started performing at a few local day care centers. Soon, he was composing his own music and playing for much larger crowds of toddlers and early school-age kids.

Now Hale, 48, and his Roseville company, The Tadpole Parade, perform his original music at more than 150 live shows each year.

"Some people think that kids are a tough audience to play to," he said. "I want people's attention and kids are really good at that. ... It's a good wave of energy."

Those who have seen Hale perform say the energy starts with him, because he connects with kids on their level.

"It's not the canned music that you'd hear from a lot of kids' artists," said Christy Novak, membership and sales manager of the Minnesota Children's Museum. The museum has booked Hale for several events, including its annual New Year's Eve party. "It really gets the kids going. I think even adults enjoy it."

Hale doesn't just perform. He invites kids to participate and hands out 30 to 40 inflatable guitars. It's one of his trademarks, Novak said.

Unlike other children's entertainers, 90 percent of Hale's music is original. So don't come to a show expecting to hear "The Wheels on the Bus." Hale's music isn't goofy or nursery rhyme-esque either. His songs, about real-life experiences kids face, are set to rock and blues music.

"My theme hasn't been so much education," Hale said. "My theme, if I have a theme, is more about personal relations, emotions, personal development and conflict resolutions."

But the songs are still fun. For example, in "Falling Down," Hale sings:

*A brussel sprout getting cold on my plate.  
The only thing between me and ice cream.  
I threw that sprout in my mouth.  
I tried to chew but it made me gag.  
Don't tell me it's easy growing up when I'm falling down.*

Performing is how Hale makes his money, but the time he spends booking shows and marketing takes him away from what he believes to be the real opportunity for growth: creating more original music and selling it online

or in CD format. Hale has produced four albums and a compilation disc of live concert recordings. He's sold about 5,000 CDs, but thinks with better marketing he could sell more.

"I think I've got a great product, but (marketing) is just not my strength and I don't have the time to do that," Hale said. "I need to get beyond being a booking agent, even though scheduling shows is how I make my money," he said. "I need an automated source of income ... so I can focus on writing songs."

Hale has thought about assembling a team of experts — a Web site designer, public relations specialist and social media guru — that would promote The Tadpole Parade and split any profits. With so many talented people out of work these days, it might be a good time to try such an approach, he said.

Marketing is crucial for a children's entertainer, Hale said, because the target audience grows up and moves on.

"I've been doing this for 20 years and there are so many people in the Twin Cities who don't know who I am," he said. "I am constantly having to reintroduce myself."

He's also exploring enlisting corporate sponsors that would help pay for the CDs and programs he passes out at his concerts. "Most of the national touring kids acts have a sponsor," he says.

Hale credits his entrepreneurial spirit to his father, who started Hale's Rocks and Gems when Will was 5 years old. "I've been cutting and polishing gemstones since I was 10," Hale said. Hale's father died when Will was still in high school. Will took over the family business with his mother at age 16.

In 1989, Hale convinced his mother to sell the jewelry store so he could pursue a career in music. The sale of the family business "gave me a year or two of income so I didn't have to make money (right away)," Hale said.

Two years later, he was a full-time children's music entertainer.

Now in his 20th year of business, Hale says he's trying to focus more on school-age kids, rather than toddlers, and invite parents and other family members into the fold.

Last year he launched a rock concert field trip program at the Stepping Stone Theater in St. Paul, as an alternative to traditional zoo or museum field trips.

And this fall, Hale will begin playing monthly family dance concerts at the Cedar Cultural Center in Minneapolis.

"There are a lot of parents who don't get to go out and have fun," Hale said. "There are a lot of grandparents that still listen to AC/DC. Here's a nice clean environment to come together at a reasonable time of the day."

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## COMPANY SPECS

Name: The Tadpole Parade

Business: Children's entertainment company

Location: Roseville, MN

Web site: [www.willhale.com](http://www.willhale.com)

Founded: 1989

Owner: Will Hale 651-307-3849