If it’s quiet enough, you’ll hear the music from outside, from the balcony just beyond the revolving glass doors of the Memorial Union. This mild September evening — a bright half-moon in a cloudless sky reflecting in shimmering waves off the surface of a lazy Lake Laverne — you can hear it. From here, it’s too faint to make out the words. A step inside and they become distinguishable, and the pounding of the music, rock music, is louder each step taken up the winding staircase. From here, the noise is quite surprising.

I can’t stop thinking about you Lord

I can’t stop thinking about your love
It’s no more than 30 paces from the top step to the door leading into the Great Hall. From here, the sound is consuming.

Oh how I need you Lord
You are my only hope
You are my only prayer

Open the door and a beam of light will follow you into the vast hall, which is completely dimmed but for the brightly lit stage where the Salt Company band is playing to an enthusiastic audience, most singing along, lyrics being projected onto two screens on either side of the stage. From here, the sound is overwhelming.
At 6:30 p.m. this Thursday evening, slightly more than 600 chairs sit empty in the Great Hall. In 10 minutes, the doors will be opened, and dozens filling the hallway outside, here a little early for the weekly Salt Company worship, will begin filling the rows of seats inside. In 20 minutes, dozens will become hundreds. In 30 minutes, those arriving late will be forced to stand in the back, unable to find a seat.

Cornerstone Church, on U.S. Highway 30 east of Ames, is the regular home for the Thursday night worship. This week, however, is the second week of the school year, and Salt Company wanted as many students as possible to attend, so they held it on campus.

There's a draw to Salt Company that is hard to put a finger on. Despite the fact that there are plenty of other campus ministries to choose from, Salt Company continues to be head and shoulders above the rest, at least in terms of numbers.

Those involved with Salt Company say they wouldn't attribute it to anything other than the work of God. Believe that if you may, but students who come to Iowa State freshman year looking for a Christian ministry are instantly turned on to Salt Company, a ministry that prides itself on being welcoming to students, providing a contemporary service that strips away convention and tradition.

Services are full of young people. And they're informal — people wear what they'd wear to a movie. There's no sign-up sheet, no real sense of necessity. You determine your own level of involvement within the church.

Their teachings are conservatively derived from the Bible, something consistent with the group's Southern Baptist roots. Teachings let students know that in order to achieve salvation, it's going to take a personal relationship with Christ. They know that's extra hard on a college campus, where the temptation for sin is strong. But you're going to have to find Jesus. And accept him. Good deeds alone won't cut it.

It's preached that we're all sheep that have strayed from the flock. And we need a little help, no, a lot of help, from Jesus to find our way back. Salt Company says they're there to help.

"We're a little short on seats tonight," says a man alone on stage this Thursday evening. "Which is an awesome problem to have."

A blue, denim button-down shirt hugs his muscular build. He's wearing beige khaki shorts. He's clean-cut, with light brown hair not lengthy enough to get a comb through. On his feet are brown leather sandals. In his left hand, raised shoulder-height, is a Bible.

"I'm Paul Sabino. I have the privilege of directing Salt Company," he says, followed by a few minutes of further introduction for those here for the first time. And then worship begins.
Salt Company worship begins with three or four or five songs. Each is different in style — slow, acoustic-driven folk-rock; harder, rhythm-heavy pop rock; a solo R&B ballad. But all are similar in content. During these songs, a few people will lift their hands in the air, arms extended, palms looking up, as if they're reaching out to touch their God being proclaimed in song.

Those who sing do so in unison, all but drowning out the four vocalists on stage. It is here that the noise is overwhelming. Even the most secular, non-believing atheist must marvel at the perfect harmony of this chorus of slightly more than 600. The hairs on the back of your neck stand to attention, enticed by that thunderous swell of voices in perfect pitch at the perfect point in the song. It's impressive. As much as one hates to admit it, it is.

Salt Company's history is one of humble beginnings. Its roots are in the Grand Avenue Baptist Church, a Southern Baptist church in Ames. Sometime in the 1970s, the Baptist Student Union (BSU) was founded there. BSU was an Iowa State organization of 50 or 60 students.

In 1985, Ames native and 1981 Ames High graduate Troy Nezbit was hired — along with his wife — to work with freshman in BSU. The first thing the two did was change the name. "I felt like denominationalism was dead," Nezbit says. BSU became Salt Company, a reference to Matthew 5:13.

At that time, there was no full-time staff, no computers. A couple of chairs and desks scraped together became a makeshift office. Churches in Ames loaned Salt Company space for the Thursday night worships. They met in First Baptist Church, then in rooms at the Memorial Union, then in the basement of Collegian United Methodist Church.

They moved around because they were growing, and growing fast. Nezbit remembers the fall night in 1986 when a Salt Company service broke 100. He had promised the students he would shave his head if 100 people attended. One hundred and twenty one showed. From that point on, he says, Salt Company never looked back.

They kept growing. They rented the basement of Jocko's. That held 300. Soon after, they were forced to hold a second Thursday service.

In 1994, Salt Company split from Grand Avenue Baptist Church, its affiliate church. Cornerstone Church was created, with Troy Nezbit becoming lead pastor, a position he still holds.

Now, Cornerstone Church is the sponsoring church of Salt Company, a strange twist of fate considering that Cornerstone was created from the Salt Company — Nezbit took key leaders raised through Salt Company and made them the nucleus of the Cornerstone Church.

Now Salt Company is not only the largest student ministry at Iowa State, it's also one of the largest student organizations period. Six hundred is a common number for attendance at Thursday night services. An overnight retreat earlier in the semester drew more than 200. Nearly 100 clean up Jack Trice Stadium after home football games, a job Salt Company has had for years. Each year, the group sends missionaries overseas to establish churches.

Its organizational structure is that of a small business. At the top is Paul Sabino, the director. Below him are 10 Salt Company employees — four full-time and six interns. There are also student ministry coordinators in every residence hall, off-campus and in the greek system. Those coordinators are responsible for facilitating progress in the dozens of campus-wide individual Bible study connection groups, each which has a Bible study leader. Anywhere from three or four to a dozen attend each Bible study.

Everything about Salt Company is contemporary. The church is an unassuming contemporary-looking building with a relaxed atmosphere inside. The services are very music-heavy, mostly rock. And speaking of

Even the **most** secular, non-believing atheist must marvel at the perfect harmony of this chorus of slightly more than 600.
music, how many ministries have recording studios? Salt Company does, and it has released several albums.

Years ago, that sort of thing would be looked down upon in certain religious circles, Nezbit says. But now, that's part of the draw. Salt Company captures the spirit of the modern times, and that's part of the reason why so many students show up Thursday nights for worship, as well as Sunday mornings at Cornerstone Church for its service.

A little rock ‘n’ roll never hurt anybody, Nezbit says. As long as the teachings aren't being compromised. “It’s not the method, it’s the message,” he says.

When the band finishes the worship songs, Sabino steps back onto the stage to preach. Each semester Salt Company chooses a book of the Bible and, verse by verse, studies it. This semester, it’s 1 Corinthians.

On stage, it’s clear why Sabino is so popular among the students, who say he’s “just one of us.” He admits his faults. He’s a sinner, too. He’s the preacher, and he’s up on stage teaching from the Bible, but he makes it clear his heart is down with the students sitting in the uncomfortable metal chairs. He was in their shoes five, six, seven years ago. And he’s still struggling with many of the same problems.

It is during this time — his time to share his knowledge of the Scriptures and to connect with the hundreds of people looking for answers — that the Salt Company’s director is at his best. He earned a mechanical engineering degree from Iowa State four years ago, but decided to go into the ministry. People said he was better at this, he says. They were right, he says.

Sabino elicits laughter from the crowd. He tells jokes. He makes wisecracks. He’s very physical, flailing his arms and crouching down, clenching his fists until the whites of his knuckles are visible 20, maybe 30 rows back.

1 Corinthians was written by the apostle Paul to the town of Corinth, a town of rampant sexual immorality, shrouded in sin. Much like your normal college town, Sabino would say later.

Again, tonight’s theme is “An Appeal for Unity,” so just before he finishes, Sabino calls up to the stage several leaders of other campus evangelical ministries.
They pray together. We're working together like never before, Sabino says. God is doing something amazing in Ames, he says. Don't miss it. (Sabino would later clarify that the "unity" he describes isn't an all-encompassing and all-inclusive unity with all ministries.

"Clearly, [some people] believe very different things about the person of Jesus Christ, and there is a place to draw the line," he says.

"There are some things that are truthful, and there are some things that are not." The Scriptures wouldn't allow total unity, he says.)

A final prayer from each of the ministry leaders, followed by a few closing thoughts from Sabino, and he leaves the stage again, replaced by the Salt Company band. It's four more songs. By the chorus of the fourth, nearly all of the slightly more than 600 are standing. And nearly half have their hands in the air, arms extended, palms again looking up.

You are high and exalted
And worthy of praise
You are Alpha, Omega
The Ancient of Days
Lord I lift up my hands
To honor and praise your name

When the last verse of the last song ends, and the lights are turned back on, most of the more than 600 remain. They spill out into the center aisles, maneuver around crowds to reacquaint themselves with familiar faces and introduce themselves to new ones. Fifteen minutes after the last song has ended, the room is still more than three-quarters full. No one wants to leave.

The next afternoon, Paul Sabino is apologizing for his messy desk. An apology entirely unnecessary — a few neat piles of papers and an open folder hardly constitute a filthy workspace. Once he clears away the neat piles, placing them in even neater piles in the corner of his desk, he sits and leans back in his chair. I'm always willing to talk about Salt Company, he says.

His office at the Salt Company headquarters is a modest one. His freakishly tidy desk is empty but for a jet-black computer to his right and those neat piles of paper. The furniture in the office — from the desk to the two chairs facing him in front of his desk to the shelves of neatly stacked religious books and study Bibles that crawl to the ceiling behind him — are a honey-colored wood.

His voice is cordial and soft-spoken in here, that bellowing preaching voice left on the stage the night before.

Students looking to find God need more than the dogmatic traditionalism provided by most churches, he says, when asked what Salt Company has to offer someone. "A lot of churches, you go to them and there is the minister, and everyone else is a pew warmer," he says. "And that's not consistent with the Scriptures."

Sabino says that of the 600-plus students who attended the service the night before, maybe one-quarter to one-half dedicate a substantial time to Salt Company. Thursday nights are just the open door into Salt Company, he says.

Some students step through the door, making Salt Company a high priority in their lives. Others do not. Peter Chen and Aaron Sage don't step through the door — they jump through it.

Both have been involved with Salt Company, on some level, since they first arrived at Iowa State. Peter is a junior; Aaron is a senior.

Both were involved in church youth groups in high school, both were from religious families, and both were looking for a ministry consistent with their beliefs. After a little bit of looking around, both decided Salt Company was best for them.

"I really felt that (Salt Company) is where God wanted me to be," Chen says. Of Salt
addiction, not a disorder." "It comes to be a habit," Melanie says. "It's a habit you have to break, and it's hard to break. I stopped it for a long time, and then I came here [to Iowa State] and started again."

All five insist kicking the addiction for good is not easy. Yet Stephanie has not intentionally injured herself for more than 16 years, though she still vividly remembers the difficulties she had and the steps she ultimately took to win back her freedom. It wasn't easy. She suffered a relapse in which, after nearly two years, she cut the palm of her hand with shards of glass from a broken bottle. But that relapse inspired her to stop self-mutilating permanently.

"The first step was having someone show me what I had done to myself," Stephanie says. "The second step was asking for help. By that I mean coming clean and reaching out to learn skills to change my behavior, learning skills to confront my emotions, and learning new ways to deal with my anger and feelings of inferiority. And I think the final step is just wanting to get away from it."

Sarah has not cut herself since the summer of 2001, but she doesn't believe she's entirely safe. To help herself quit, she actively researched the phenomenon of self-mutilation. "The more I learned," she says, "the more I knew how to stop myself."

"The healing process has to do with yourself," she continues. "It's been well over six months, and it feels like I'm still healing from it."

Jeffrey abstained from cutting for over a year before slipping again last spring. While he has not mutilated since then, he is not sure if he will stumble again. "I can't say that I won't do it again," Jeffrey says. "I'm just hoping I can look at self-mutilation as something in my past, something I did, but have moved on from."

Even when — or if — their habit of self-mutilation is finally kicked, this group will never forget what they went through. The scars that cross their bodies will be physical, ever-present reminders of the struggles they endured. Yet not one would give them up, despite the stares or reactions they may receive from other people. Melanie says the scars remind her of what she's been through, and that's "not something I want to forget in 20 years."

Elissa's grandmother suggested getting a medication that fades scars, but Elissa said no, "they're part of me."

Sarah believes her scars — even the ones that are already faint and barely noticeable — represent a huge part of who she is. "They feel like battle wounds, but at the same time, I feel like they're my greatest weakness," she says. "They define me. They've become a part of me. If you were to force me to draw a picture of myself, I would probably draw twice as many scars as I actually have. I feel like they weren't just on top of the skin, they were inside me."

The actions don't "leave my mind easily," Elissa says, even during periods where she is resisting the temptation. The idea is still there in Stephanie's head as well, even after all these years, looming as a possible solution to all of life's problems. But the urge to act on this idea isn't there. Melanie says she can't honestly promise herself that she won't self-mutilate again, despite her desire to stop. Jeffrey, too, says cutting still pops up as an option, especially when he is feeling stressed.

Making a complete separation between herself and self-mutilation would be impossible for Sarah because it helps define the person she is. "It's who I am, and if I didn't cut, I don't know who I would be," she says. "I'd probably still be depressed. I'd probably be darker. I think I would be someone I didn't like."

"Everyone gets depressed. You have to do something to get out of it. Normal people do something normal, but cutters cut to feel — to breathe, to be who they are, to get back to reality."

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Company's popularity, "A lot of people are just looking for answers, and I think God is drawing people to himself. It's not anything Salt Company does; it's not like we are doing it by ourselves."

Chen is taking a break from some chemical engineering homework. Next to his textbook is his Bible, which he reads daily. He has a schedule that Salt Company handed out that allows people to read through the book in a year.

"I don't have to read the Bible every day. I want to," he says. "My personal relationship with Christ is the most important thing in my life."

Chen finds himself in a difficult spot, the same spot Paul Sabino was in several years ago. He's close to an engineering degree, but unsure if he should move into ministry. "I try to plan my future sometimes, but sometimes things come up. God changes things," he says. "I'll keep praying for the answer."

Aaron can relate. He's a finance major, and will graduate this year, but his commitment to Salt Company over the last few years has changed him, he says. He says he finds a deep joy in serving other people and being involved in the ministry.
Brian Witthoeft takes off his hooded sweatshirt, revealing a blue navy T-shirt with the words “God is in control” sprawled across the back.

On a muggy Wednesday evening in his average-sized Larch Hall dorm room, Brian and six other men gather for the week’s Bible study — three on chairs, two on a futon and two more on Brian’s neatly-made bed.

Brian, 23, is one of two ministry coordinators in new RCA. He also leads this bible study. He was raised Catholic, but abandoned the faith at age 11. He was searching for a religion from then until age 14. “If (Catholicism) is wrong, there’s got to be something out there that is right,” he thought at the time.

Freshman year of high school, at the age of 14, he was handed a Bible at a non-denominational church group meeting and was told, “Here, read this.”

When he got to college — after three years in the Air Force — he joined Salt Company quickly. It’s where he met his fiancee, Meghan. “I was looking for a woman that would love God more than she would love me,” he says.

Just after 6 p.m., the Bible study starts. All have Bibles of their own, except for one — who is quickly handed one of many spares Brian has on a shelf over his desk.

Dave Gregg, Brian’s co-leader of the study and a guitarist in the Salt Company band, opens the meeting with a prayer.

From there Brian takes over. He’s spent about two hours preparing for this week, when the group will discuss 1 Corinthians: 1-8. He has prepared questions, prepared answers and summaries of the verses he reads. Dave, too, is prepared — he has outlined all the readings — and for the next hour the two answer questions and initiate conversation with the other five guys.

The others don’t say much, but rather listen, a look of yearning on their faces as Brian and Dave dissect the readings verse-by-verse, sometimes word-by-word. Once finished, Brian says it’s time for prayer requests. One by one, each gives a request, something for the others to be thinking about in their daily prayers.

A friend’s father seriously injured in a motorcycle accident. A mother trying to bounce back from a heart attack. A grandfather suffering a heart attack. The possibility of a parent getting a divorce. Time management issues.

Then, just as Dave is beginning the final prayer, he adds a request — a prayer for his neighbors, whom he says are “generally good people.”

“It’s really obvious that the world has consumed them,” he says. “Let’s be praying for their salvation, because I’m pretty confident they’re not saved.” Sounds cold and callous. But Dave’s face suggests neither.

Attend a Salt Company Thursday night worship where it normally is held, at the Cornerstone Church, and you’ll be greeted at the door by a half-dozen smiling faces, open hands extended. Two stand at each glass door. “Welcome to Salt Company.”

“Thanks for coming.” If they know you, the greetings are more personal.

Inside is more coffee shop than church lobby. Couches and black tables and chairs are dispersed throughout the room. There’s a pop machine in the corner. Ten minutes before the service begins, a few hundred people are in the lobby, Bibles in hands, pockets or purses. At 7:35, the beat of a drum and the first note from a guitar call the remaining people into the auditorium, past a few more greeters handing out printouts of the evening’s theme, “Christ — the Wisdom & Power of God.”

The auditorium looks just like, well, an auditorium. The stage is at the bottom of declining rows of movie-theater seats, and is twice as wide as the Great Hall stage. Two giant screens are positioned on the walls on either side, lyrics from the songs scrolling down them as the band plays in front of autumn-colored wall hangings that reflect the light out over the audience.

Paul Sabino isn’t preaching tonight. Tonight it’s Matt Waite, the freshman director who’s a junior in electrical engineering. He, too, is in the same position as Sabino was. Close to an engineering degree, but unsure what the future holds. He’s not as smooth as Sabino is on the stage, fumbling with his readings on more than one occasion, but those in attendance respond almost the same.

When the final prayer is said, and the band returns to the stage, the noise begins again. In here, just like in the Great Hall, it is overwhelming. Hands raised in the air. Arms extended. Palms up.

Leave early — maybe halfway through the third song — and you’ll make your way out through the glass doors and into the parking lot, a half-block or so to the car. And, if it’s quiet enough — tonight it is — you can hear the music. From here, the noise is faint.

When faint turns to silent and the service is over, almost no one will file out. Ten minutes later, the parking lot will be nearly at capacity. Twenty minutes later, a steady stream of brake lights will be visible in the dark night, making their way onto the highway taking them back to Ames. But the parking lot outside this church will still be half full.