

MUSIC: PREVIEW

John Eddie's making Chicago a second home

East Coast rocker a clubland survivor

By Nicole Pensiero
Special to the Tribune

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New Jersey singer-songwriter John Eddie's career has had so many ups and downs, he's used to the word "comeback" coming back at him, time and time again. But he's quick to point out it doesn't really fit for one simple reason: He has never gone away.

Eddie--whose distinctive roots-rock is a perfect fit for Chicago's ever-growing alt-country scene--plays Joe's on Weed Street Thursday. And as his Chicago fan base grows, so does his live audience and reputation.

"The first time we brought him in here, about five years ago, there were about 50, 60 people who showed up," Joe's co-owner Ed Warm recalls. "John has built his reputation in Chicago strictly through word-of-mouth, no radio at all--and now has an incredible, loyal following." Eddie's current appearances at Joe's can easily draw up to 400 people, according to Warm.

"John's recorded CDs don't do justice to his shows," Warm says. "It seems everyone who hears him perform becomes an immediate fan."

It's the road warrior in Eddie that has kept his career thriving, despite the accompanying commercial roller-coaster ride.

"I haven't had a `real' job since I was 18; music has been it, full time," the affable Virginia-bred Eddie said in a recent interview. "It's the never-ending story; my story is what it's like to be in the music business. It's a hard life, but I've been luckier than some--luckier than most, actually, because I've been able to carve out a decent living playing original music."

It hasn't been easy. When Eddie released the tongue-in-cheek titled "Who The Hell Is John Eddie?" album two years ago, people were asking that very question. Who was this

46-year-old rocker and why should anyone listen?

The record--a dynamo mix of working-class rock, barn-burning rockabilly, and alt-country realism--ended up garnering the strongest reviews of Eddie's nearly 30-year career. The record was released as a joint venture between boutique Americana record label Lost Highway and Eddie's own indie label, Thrill Show Recordings and sold decently, yet Eddie's back to doing his own thing again business-wise. And he's fine with that.

"I'd always looked at the Lost Highway deal as a one-time thing," he says. "Maybe if I'd sold a million records, they'd want me to make another, but for me it was a way to make the best record I could--they're a very cool, artist-oriented label--and get some decent distribution on a national level, which I did."

Pretty realistic talk for a guy who, in the mid-'80s, was being pegged as the Next Big Thing after a star-making turn at a Manhattan nightclub resulted in an intense major-label bidding war. Eddie--who was often visited on stage by Bruce Springsteen--signed a two-album deal with Springsteen's label CBS/Sony. His music then was typical of the big-hair '80s--slick production, pretty-boy songs about fast girls and fast cars. There was even a thundering Gary Glitter-esque semi-hit titled "Jungle Boy."

But sales weren't high enough to keep him on the CBS roster. So he signed with another major, Elektra, and recorded an entire album--produced by David Briggs of Neil Young fame--only to be inexplicably dropped just before the record was to be released in 1991.

The no-explanation rejection was bad enough; the fact it came on the heels of a traumatic experience for Eddie has made it impossible for him to listen to the tapes of the unreleased record. His best friend, a New York cop who had contributed some backing vocals on the record, was shot to death in front of him while attempting off-duty to foil a robbery at a Manhattan ATM.

"That was a bad time--a really rough patch and the closest I came to throwing in the towel," Eddie recalls. "Even now, I can't listen to the tapes. I just associate it with that whole awful time."

Eddie points to the fact that Elektra included him on its 40th anniversary compilation, 1990's "Rubaiyat," as proof that they believed in him as a product they could sell.

"I cut the Cure song 'In Between Days' for that compilation while I was working on the other record," he recalls. "They liked it so much, they released it as a single. But then I got dropped. It was all so weird."

Still smarting, Eddie went back to what he knew best--live shows--then started his own label and put out three independently released albums he says still sell well.

Eddie acknowledges that there's a certain "Bull Durham-keep-plugging-away" quality to

his career, but stresses that it's never been about the number of records he sells, but rather how he connects with his audience.

"My life and my career is based around my live performances," Eddie says. "Of the 40,000 copies sold of the last album, I'd say about 30,000 were because of the live shows. It's when I get in front of people that they really connect with my songs."

And there's plenty to connect with, according to Bruce Warren, assistant general programming manager for WXPB-FM 88.5 in Philadelphia. The commercial-free station has long championed Eddie's career.

"John completely rocks the house and will blow people away with his live performances," Warren says. "There's a lot of reasons why he has always had passionate fans--he's an incredible live performer, has a great relationship with his fans and always delivers a great show."

"Who The Hell Is John Eddie?" was an "instant hit" on WXPB, Warren says, calling it the "best record of his career."

Most critics agreed, praising Eddie for the razor-sharp songwriting that had him wandering down the same troubled, winding (and sometimes dead-end) streets as Springsteen, John Mellencamp and Steve Earle. The songs on the record touch on everything from the price life on the road exacts from relationships (the bittersweet opener, "If You're Here When I Get Back") to hitting middle age (the wry, profane "40").

Though roots-rocker Eddie has long lived with the inevitable comparisons with Bruce Springsteen, the last album was decidedly more Memphis than Jersey shore.

"The people who expect me to be a Springsteen clone don't give my songs the chance they deserve," Eddie says, adding that he's a "huge fan" of Springsteen's work and considers him a major influence. "It's been a help and a hindrance, the comparison. But as a person, Springsteen's been nothing but great to me."

Eddie has had a loyal fan base in the Northeast, but he's finding that the Midwest--Chicago and Madison, Wis., in particular--are becoming his new hub.

"We've played Joe's in Chicago a lot of times; we're there every few months," Eddie says. "We've gotten a lot of support there--we don't make a ton of money, but we don't lose any, either. It's been a blessing for sure."

Interestingly, in recent years, he has become a musician with a side-career--that of a TV producer. Despite the fact he has had "zero training" in production, Eddie says he's a great idea person and, with the help of an L.A.-based pal who works in the video production business, was able to sell the Discovery Channel on his idea about young campaign staffers working for John Kerry. The six-part reality TV series, "Staffers," aired in the fall with Eddie's name listed in the credits as creator and executive producer.

"Staffers" came to me because I thought it would be interesting to follow around these young, idealistic people working on campaigns who were also out having fun, going to bars, having sex and just living their lives." he says. "Ultimately, it's really a way for me to keep doing my music and making records."

John Eddie

When: 10 p.m. Thursday

Where: Joe's, 940 W. Weed St.

Price: \$8; 312-337-3486

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