



## John Eddie proves just who the hell he is

By Brian baker

**When John Eddie is made aware of the presence of a vinyl copy of his first album in a journalist's record collection, he immediately makes an offer.**



**"I'll buy it from you," he says with a laugh. "Just don't play it for anybody."**

**Of course, he's making a thin joke at his own expense. Eddie regained the rights to his first two albums for Columbia - "John Eddie" and "The Hard Cold Truth" - and has repackaged them as a twofer that he's peddling to the faithful at his shows and through his web site at [johneddie.com](http://johneddie.com).**

**"Actually, it's okay," he admits. "I'm still proud of the lyrics. It's just that the production values are so '80s, it's hard for me to hear it. We played a show last night, and I did that song 'Buster,' and that still rings true when I play it stripped down. Even with artists I respect, when I hear their records from the '80s, I don't dig the way the production sounds. Even Dylan records from then were using those big cannon drums that didn't match the songs he was singing. It was a time when we found machines and thought they could make good records."**

**It was also a time when heartland rock made kings of Bruce Springsteen and John Mellencamp and Tom Petty, and there were any number of princes ready to ascend to a higher position in the court. John Eddie was certainly among them. The story of how the crown eluded him is studded with standard subplots of bad luck, industry chicanery and ill-fated timing.**

**And while Eddie doesn't shy away from the topic, he knows that his story isn't substantially different than anyone else who's been shanghaied by the music business.**

**For that reason, he's much more interested in detailing his most recent efforts and his shift from angst-ridden rocker to dusty Americana roots purveyor and the resultant new album, "Who the Hell is John Eddie?" on Lost Highway.**

**"I'm really proud of it," says Eddie. "It's definitely the best record I've ever made. At least I think so. And I'm happy to be on Lost Highway. They're very generous in their support of their artists. They give them enough rope to hang themselves."**

**Eddie laughs when he mentions Lost Highway's long leash and low involvement policy.**

**Under their care (or lack thereof), he's produced arguably his most powerful album to date, certainly an avowed personal best and perhaps even an album that will worm its way onto a few Top 10 lists by year's end.**

**The laugh comes from the knowledge that a great deal of label "assistance" and "guidance"**

doesn't always result in a great album. Sometimes it results in no album at all.

Eddie began his rock and roll ride back in the mid-'80s. The native Virginian parlayed his garage band roots into regular gigs around his adopted home of Asbury Park, N.J. and ultimately scored a showcase gig in New York.

After a ferocious set, Eddie found himself the subject of an infamous major label bidding war, with Columbia coming away with Eddie's signature.

Unfortunately, Eddie's dramatic rock posture and Asbury Park connections gave him the leather worn look of a Springsteen-come-lately. Ironically, Springsteen himself counted Eddie among his favorite local performers, and it wasn't unusual for the Boss to join Eddie onstage at his weekly gig at the Stone Pony, the club where Springsteen honed his craft.

After his first two albums did decent but not blockbuster business, CBS and Eddie parted company, and he was quickly approached by Elektra.

His first recorded effort for the label was a heartfelt and moving cover of the Cure's "In Between Days" for the Elektra 40th Anniversary Tribute album. The track was considered a highlight of the tribute - it was tagged as one of the singles from the set - and everyone had high hopes for the album that Eddie was in the midst of recording for his new label.

"I made the record on Elektra using David Briggs, who was Neil Young's producer," says Eddie. "We just used my road band, and we went into Bearsville (Studios in New York), and we made the record. I learned a lot from David about trying to capture whatever's honest. He did all the Crazy Horse records and all the good Neil Young records. He was a real good teacher."

With constant label supervision and approval, Eddie kept plugging away at what was considered by many at Elektra to be an album with the potential to break Eddie as wide as his angst rock contemporaries. '

But the album's completion brought the confusing and startling news that the label was dropping Eddie, and the album would not be released.

"Bob Krasnow was the president of Elektra and he oversaw our whole record," says Eddie. "Every week, he'd have to be given tapes and okay what was going on. He would come down and say, 'This is exactly what I want you to be doing,' and then out of the blue...Someone at Elektra actually asked if I slept with this wife or something. It was that abrupt."

With his label support gone and his prospects fairly dim, Eddie kept a low profile for a while and then slowly began doing enough gigs to keep himself alive.

As he found himself further from the constraints of labels trying to direct and manipulate every aspect of his sound, Eddie began to notice that he was drifting away from the epic rock feel of his early work and toward a sound that was an amalgam of everything he did, including soul, country and electric folk.

Eventually, Eddie started his own label which he christened Thrill Show and worked up a couple of albums to sell at shows ("Happily Never After" and the live album "Guy Walks Into a Bar") with an ear toward doing things differently on his own.

"When I went into it, I said, 'You know, I'm gonna let the songs speak for themselves and not try to have a hit record,'" says Eddie. "I'd gotten to the age where I knew I wasn't going to get on MTV, and I probably wasn't going to be a big rock star. I started looking at the songwriters who influenced me and how I could more emulate them as opposed to trying to be the next big thing. I said, 'I sit in my bedroom, and I write songs on an acoustic guitar. Try to keep it as close to that as possible.'

"It also helped me find my voice as a singer. Before I used to way oversing, and I had it in my head that I was singing to a stadium full of people instead of the person I was singing about. It helped me find my true voice, which I think is more conversational than histrionic. I learned that word from my reviews."

After securing new management, Eddie approached Luke Lewis with the thought that "Happily Never After" might come out through a licensing deal with Mercury Nashville.

In the middle of the negotiations, Lewis informed Eddie that Lost Highway was going to be formed and offered him an opportunity with the new venture. Eddie sees a strong correlation between himself and Lost Highway, something he hasn't felt with a label for a very long time.

"I hope they dig it as much as I do," says Eddie. "Everyone on their roster, I'm a fan of, which you can't say about everyone. They're the first label in a long time with a face and an image. We've had a number of people come up to us on the road to say they just came to check us out because we're on Lost Highway. It's like a name brand so you kinda know what you're gonna get when you're on that label. I hope I fit in as much as I think I do."

Rather than use Lost Highway as a licensing tool for either of his homemade albums, Eddie wanted to document some of the songs he'd been writing as a brand new album.

At the top of his wish list for producers, Eddie had jotted down legendary performer/producer Jim Dickinson's name as a possibility since his friend and producer of his independent albums T Bone Wolk was unavailable because of a scheduling conflict.

"Jim Dickinson was the first name I threw out," says Eddie. "Frank Callari at Lost Highway was like, 'Absolutely. I love him.' They were all for it. Then it was just a question of sending him some songs to see if he was interested. We sent him some demos, and he said, 'Come on down.'"

Before heading down to Memphis's Ardent Studios to begin work with Dickinson, Eddie had one hour-long phone conversation with the producer, who wanted to bypass the pre-production process and approach the material in the rawest possible setting.

"After an hour on the phone, I just knew he was the guy," says Eddie. "He's just a magical individual. Whether or not I'd made a record with him, I would have paid to hang out with him. If you can get a sliver of whatever comes off of him and keep it for yourself, you're a lucky person."

With Dickinson's wealth of experience, the soulful vibe at Ardent, and a crack band to capture it all (P.K. Lavengood and Kenny Vaughan on guitars, Kenny Aaronson on bass and Kenny Aronoff on drums), Eddie watched in amazement as his songs bridged the gap between the R&B feel of early Bruce Springsteen ("Let Me Down Hard," "Nobody's Happy") and the electric roadhouse stomp of Steve Earle ("Shithole Bar," "Jesus is Coming").

One of the highlights of "Who the Hell is John Eddie?" is "Play Some Skynyrd," the track that gives the album its name.

As Eddie details the emotional wirewalk that accompanies his kind of confessional songwriting, he's brought back to reality by a drunken bar patron who wants to be entertained not by a flesh and blood singer of real songs but by a human jukebox that will spit out the Skynyrd, Tom Petty, Bob Seger and Grateful Dead material that is comforting and familiar to him.

As he implores the singer to "play some Skynyrd," he wonders in the next breath, "Who the hell is John Eddie?" It's a moment that is too real to have been simply dreamed up in Eddie's mind for the purpose of the song.

This album also stands out for Eddie as one of the rare times when he's written almost everything on an album specifically for the album without having road-tested it first. Except for the show-crafted "Play Some Skynyrd" and the profanely funny "Forty," everything on was relatively new and untested.

Although "Who the Hell is John Eddie?" may seem like a departure to some fans, it feels like coming home to Eddie. And in fact, the material that Eddie is coming up with these days isn't so different than anything he's ever done before; it just gets filtered through Eddie's new sensibilities.

"The older I get, I'm just becoming more honest with myself," says Eddie. "It's back to the whole thing that I'm not trying to get on the radio anymore. I have very realistic expectations about that. It's rare for big stars to get on the radio. You don't hear Dylan on the radio. When he puts out a new album and doesn't get played 25 times a day, my chances are a little bit lower. I've just trying to be more honest with myself. And I write about what I know, and that's why a lot of it's about being in a band and playing in a bar. I don't know how universal a theme that is, but it's what I know."

And with his album positioned somewhere between rock and country camps, Eddie knows that the sell is even tougher, but that hasn't tempted him to compromise how he presents his new material or himself.

"If there's a marketing plan for the record, it's that people have to see us live," says Eddie with a laugh. "That's our thing. Hopefully we'll get some airplay here and there, but there's enough 'fuck's on here that it's not going anywhere. I've decided not to edit myself and that can be either good or bad. Like 'Shithole Bar.' Everyone was like, 'That's a great song, can't you come up with another title?' Everything I came up with sounded fake and stupid, and it didn't describe a shithole bar. If it doesn't get played, fine. I rather that it live or die on that. I'm not making a political statement, I'm just making my little statement."

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**Jeffrey B. Remz, Editor & Publisher**

**E-Mail: [countryst@aol.com](mailto:countryst@aol.com)**

