

Edwin McCain

The Austin Sessions

There are many facets to Edwin McCain's career. He's a platinum-plus recording artist whose hits "I'll Be," "Solitude," and "I Could Not Ask for More" have brought him to the attention of millions, and a tireless troubadour whose rapturous concerts regularly sell out. Yet, despite the heights to which his career has taken him, McCain is most grateful for the gift he's been given to write songs that are meaningful to him, but that also resonate with anyone within the sound of his voice.

"Songwriting has always been the main thing," he says. "It's funny - you can dress 'em up however you want to, but it always comes back to the song - to the acoustic guitar and the voice. That's how it all started for me, and that's how it is yet today."

That much is apparent from just one listen to his sixth album, The Austin Sessions, on which McCain, joined by his longtime band mates Larry Chaney (guitar) and Craig Shields (saxophone), presents a selection of new compositions, a few old favorites, and some choice covers in a stripped-down acoustic format that lets the material speak for itself.

"We've had people asking for this record for a long time," McCain says. "The core group of people that like what I do have always said they want an all-acoustic album, so here we go. It's real loose and it's not overproduced. I didn't redo the vocals, they just are what they are."

That sort of honesty and integrity has been the guiding force throughout McCain's career. Starting out in his home state of South Carolina, McCain played solo acoustic shows on the resort island of Hilton Head and gradually expanded his territory from there. He formed the Edwin McCain Band and released Solitude in 1993.

A quartet of albums on Lava/Atlantic Records followed, starting with Honor Among Thieves in 1995. Two years later came the breakthrough album Misguided Roses, featuring the Top 10 smash "I'll Be." In 1999, the band released the Messenger. The Dianne Warren-penned Top 40 hit "I Could Not Ask for More," which was also featured in the film "Message in a Bottle," drove Messenger to Gold Certification. Edwin's last recording for Lava/Atlantic, Far From Over, was released in 2001.

McCain's association with the label ended, but he emphasizes, "I'm very proud of the music I made with Atlantic. It was probably just time for that relationship to come to an end."

Sometimes, it doesn't take much for the wheels of commerce to roll over and crush the art. "The way you have to look at a major-label deal is that it's really just an advertising campaign for you to be able to play for the people that really understand what you're doing. The fans - and I hate to call them fans - the friends of music that survive the advertising campaign long enough to understand what your music is truly about, and who have incorporated your music into their lives to the point where you are part of their memories and emotions - those are the ones you do it all for."

For The Austin Sessions, McCain teamed up with ATC Records, which had the good sense to let the artist simply follow his muse. The label has brought McCain another kind of freedom as well. "It's a lot less of a hassle," he says. "I'm so relieved that I don't have 15 committee members to decide whether or not I'm going to wear black pants on television. All that stuff is over and done with."

In some ways, The Austin Sessions came about as a result of McCain's further adventures in songwriting. Teaming with Nashville songwriters Neil Thrasher and Wendell Mobley, McCain came up with "I Want It All," which has to rank with the best and most engaging songs of his career.

Initially, the writers' collaborations were supposed to be reserved for other artists to sing. "I never intended to use these songs for myself," McCain says. "But as I started playing them I realized how

much I love them, I really do."

Of course, McCain's abilities as a songwriter also helps him recognize brilliant work from others, and The Austin Sessions features an intriguing selection of covers, from Dire Straits' "Romeo & Juliet," Eric Hamilton and Jeff Armstrong's "Popcorn Box," Bruce Creighton's "Island Song" and Buddy Mondlock's "No Choice."

"That song, which is about the heart of what we do as singers and songwriters, that's the crux of the argument right there," McCain says. "I love playing that song for musicians. It crushes 'em. They get it."

The sense of freedom and artistic choice that McCain enjoys these days has led him to experiment in a number of different directions. He's collaborating with songwriters from every genre of music, including writing and co-producing an album for Bart Adam Young with rap-rock star Kid Rock. "You can't just naysay everything without giving it a try," he says.

McCain's no-holds-barred attitude and his natural gift of gab has led him to another kind of opportunity as well. He's the host of a new television pilot currently being shopped to cable networks. "The Acoustic Highway"™ finds Edwin traveling the nation's highways and byways in search of great songs and stories told by a wide range of musical guests.

"The premise of the show is basically me traveling around the country in my '66 Cadillac, picking up different songwriters and musicians, then going into a town and putting on a show," McCain says. "The footage in-between is clips of each songwriter riding around the car with me telling road stories, interacting with people, and going to the attractions in various cities. The idea is that you get to know a little bit about the songwriter and how they wrote the songs, and also lets you hear the songs. It's like 'Austin City Limits' meets Comedy Central's 'Insomniac.'"

McCain's onscreen charm is evident on "Mile Marker: Stories and Songs from The Acoustic Highway"™, a special DVD which compiles material from the span of Edwin's career. The DVD, which will be available in the fall of 2002, contains nearly an hour of music and other features including interview segments, live performance footage, a slide show, and "Edwin's Kountry Krib," a hilarious take-off on MTV's "Cribs" show. There's also a never-before-seen video of "Sorry to a Friend."

Another medium Edwin is broaching is syndicated radio. "Inside Music With Edwin McCain," a "this-day-in-music-history" feature that he narrates, is in production and is being cleared with radio stations around the country. "It's factual and anecdotal stuff about various artists," McCain says, "but basically, it's me cuttin' up on the radio."

With so much happening in so many directions, you'd think McCain would be harried by it all. Quite to the contrary, he's happier now and more artistically satisfied than ever before. "I really feel like I'm in the pocket right now," he says. "I'm doing what I want, the way I want to do it. This is exactly where I want to be."

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