

Having grown up in the rock and roll badlands of Ocean County, I've always been privy to the bizarre world of rock and roll garages and basements. Power chord marauders have slithered from these darkened tombs to roam some of the world's largest stages. Evolving from beer-drenched woods parties, these bar-chord barristers have seen career destinies soar into a myriad of both tragic and glorious realities.

I remember standing slack-jawed in front of long gone Toms River legends like Richard Sweat, a blazing guitarist who brought powerful recollections of Robin Trower straight to Fischer Blvd., and a guy who played his heart out. Sweat was untouchable in his glory days, and was poised on the steps of greatness more than once before leaving us for good.

Other standouts include Salty Dog guitarist Eddie Jelley. I would go see Eddie at the Chatterbox on the Seaside boardwalk. He would be on stage with black Les Paul Custom and matching black eye from a pre-set fistfight. Jelley was a tumultuous combination of Joe Perry and Peter Green fury. Guitarist Vinnie DiCunza was another visible TR talent that blazed like Jimmy Page. The rhythm/lead power of Joe Sinopoli fueled Mick Ronson/David Bowie visions in bands like The Imports, as did George Voyovich, another exceptional axe man who burned in the psychedelic fields of Hendrix. George was a Strat player who taught many of us the stage presence and pentatonic power of the Pine Barrens. And of course we can't forget Scotti Hill and Dave Sabo, two laidback Hooper Avenue boys that would become the planet's biggest rock stars.

And last, but not least, there is Jack Ponti. Ponti was a personal mentor of mine, and I learned my entire presentation from the guy. Sporting leather and a 1959 Les Paul Standard, he was the epitome of cool when we were all fumbling, "Smoke On The Water," three-chord morons. He is now one of the country's most successful industry kingpins.

As each decade would begin or end, more unsung talent would emerge from the strip mall woodwork. Constant and voracious, it was as if there were some strange cause and effect force that had a master plan of dropping Route 37 gunslingers all over the world's imagination. And that is the grungy, tube-fueled sector from which my next guest emerges.

Tenacious, hardworking and dedicated to the unsung toil of the garage studio and the club stage, guitarist, songwriter and Grammy Award-approved Joe Birardi took a few minutes to talk about everything under the hood of this greasy language we call music.

**Tell me about your involvement with music and our Armed Forces.**

My dad, Sgt. Joseph John Birardi, came from Jamesburg, New Jersey, and went to war with 11 of his



## Toms River's Six-String Successor On The Secrets Of Musical Prosperity

# Joe Birardi

PHOTO BY DAVID HARRILL

childhood friends from the town. Besides my dad, only two others came home. He fought throughout the European theater and battled the Nazis over four years before ending things up at the Dachau Poland concentration camp. He was also there for the signing of the Treaty of Versailles.

So anytime I can help our military I always will. I have done many shows in the past to raise money for the Adopt A Soldier Platoon organization. I have sent guitars and amplifiers to recreation centers in Iraq for our troops, and all iTunes download proceeds go to our troops. I am very humbled and honored by the fact that they have sent me flags flown in the face of the enemy and signed by the platoons. Band member Bill Tuohy [EOS guitarist] has also been instrumental with his military connections and help on the overall campaign.

**What drives you to pick up a guitar and make music?**

Most musicians say that they learn to play music for the girls, but that wasn't me. I always did it for the excitement and the experience. When I was four or five, my large Italian family would have get-togethers every couple of weeks or so.

My uncle Arty was an expert accordionist, and my other uncles were expert drinkers. I say that with the utmost respect, as they were all great, hard-working people. Midway through the get-togethers, the first fights would come, and then the night-ending "I love you's" and "I'm sorry, let's do it again in two weeks," would close out the festivities (laughs). My uncle Arty would play every Dean Martin, Jerry Vale or Vegas crooner song ever recorded, and he could

make his accordion sounds like it was an orchestra.

I took my first guitar lesson during sixth grade. I tried to better myself by taking countless lessons with various instruments, teaching myself through books and studying the theory of what makes great music great. Whatever the genre, a great song can traverse all boundaries. I love to write songs, which I always write for the listener's perspective first. Writing gives me a sense of great accomplishment. Kind of like when I was a kid and I pitched a no-hitter, or bringing home multiple medals from district and regional wrestling championships. Everything is a baseball game or wrestling match to me. The fundamentals are the same. Win or lose, how you deal with it is who you are, and that goes for life, work, and music. That's why I will play music till I die. I guess I'm still that little kid.

**What has been your favorite gig, and why?**

They are all very precious to me, as they are imprints in time and soundtracks to so many lives. I cannot compare the time I shared the stage with Cheap Trick, Thin Lizzy, Skid Row or Leslie West to the time EOS or 9th Infantry headlined The Stone Pony for the benefits that raised money for Toys For Tots, cancer research, and our troops. They have all been everlasting memories and huge honors.

**You have a fanbase that is known to assemble time after time without the same issues that many other bands have. What's the secret for getting them to come out every time?**

I believe there are many things that

create a successful live show scenario. We're beyond just our friends coming to see the live projects that I produce. The "never give up, stick with it" attitude comes through in our approach to everything we do. But it's no secret how we build our base. We make phone calls and follow-up phone calls. We use all social media. We make sure attendees have tickets in hand weeks before the show. The ticket is a guaranteed marketing tool. Every time they open their wallets, they will ask other people, "Hey, I'm going to see my friend's band, wanna check 'em out?"

It's a consistent reminder. We also follow the rule that everyone in the band is a business partner. Time is money as it is in any business. There's nothing more disrespectful than one or two band members handling all the chores while others sit on their ass and reap the benefits of whatever success might come along. That always leads to animosity and the demise of the band.

**What advice would you give to young musicians looking to win this crazy game of music?**

Unless you have a giant record deal with a massive marketing department behind you, it's up to your circle of partners to be successful. One of my old vocal instructors once told me, "Whatever that success is for yourself, never give up, because you are not immortal, but your life's accomplishments may be some day."

For more on Joe Birardi and his ongoing exploits, head over to [www.2btbmusic.com](http://www.2btbmusic.com).