

Joe Birardi- Blue Collar kingpin drops the hammer on garden state musical mythology.

By John Pfeiffer

Having grown up in the badlands of Ocean County, I've always been privy to the secret world of garages and basements. Rock-and-roll players have emerged from these darkened tombs to roam some of the world's largest stages. Starting from simple, sand spattered back roads, and ending in a myriad of both tragic and glorious realities. The Toms River local hero stories are legend. Tales have been told in dingy clubs and seashore pubs ever since I was a teenager. I remember standing in front of long gone legends like Richard Sweat, our version of Robin Trower and a guy who played his heart out. Sweat was untouchable. He was poised on the steps of greatness more than once before leaving us on the overdose train. Other standouts were cover icons such as Eddie McCabe from Borzoi, and one of my top favorites, the Great Eddie Jelly.

I would go see him at the Chatterbox, and he would be on Stage (with Salty Dog) complete with Black Les Paul custom and a black eye won during a pre-set fistfight. Toms River guitarist Vinnie DiCunza blazed like Page, joining Fisher Blvd bassist Steve Carafello in the group Four Play. The rhythm/lead power of Joe Sinopoli held teen visions forever in the band The Imports, an amazing trio that also featured brother Nicki and drummer Damian Cordisco, who is also diseased. Joey continues to be both an amazing songwriter and player in the hard rock scene. And of course we can't forget Rachel Bolan, Scotti Hill and Dave Sabo, three laidback Bay Avenue boys that would become the planets biggest rock stars.

And then we have Jack Ponti. Ponti was a personal mentor of mine, and I learned all my posturing and attitude from the guy. Sporting leather and a 59 Les Paul standard, he was the epitome of cool when we were all budding players, and I studied him down to a T. He is now one of the country's most successful managers and producers.

And then more emerged, constant and voracious, as if there was some strange force (Or something in the water) that just had a master plan of air-dropping six-string gun-slingers all over the world. And that is the world from which my next guest emerges.

Tenacious, hardworking and dedicated to the geographical garage, Guitarist, songwriter extraordinaire Joe Birardi took a few minutes to talk about everything under the hood of the language we call music.

How do you keep multiple bands going and why?

I keep multiple bands going by surrounding myself with competent, honest people who share similar musical visions. If you want to do a big show, you have to do the footwork for that and invest time to make it a success. Same goes for making a CD. You promote and market your project and attempt to make money. You have to spend money, without money there is no art!!!The people who understand that are professional and a pleasure to work with, those relationships are precious to me you don't find them often in a lifetime. As my old bass player Mark Shock Nisski, from the Dirty Ratz said, "You are one proficient SOB Ciid." I would write two to three songs a week and by the end of the month I would have two or three really outstanding songs, so with all that music one band one project is just never enough for me.

Tell me about your involvement and success with the Armed Forces?

My dad, Sgt. Joseph John Birardi came from Jamesburg, New Jersey and went to war with 11 of his childhood friends from the town. Only three came home, and of course, he was one of them. He fought throughout the European theater and continued fighting Nazis for over four years before ending things up at Dachau Poland concentration camp at the end of the war, as well as being there for the signing of the Treaty of Versailles.

Also, I have five uncles that were combat war veterans. 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 downloads of my music go to our troops. I am very humbled and honored by the fact but they have sent me flags that have been flown in the face of the enemy and signed by the troops overseas. Band Member Bill Tuohy (EOS Guitarist) has also been instrumental with his military connections and help on the overall campaign.

What's your outlook on where New Jersey is as far as a brand for music?

I've always rooted for fellow New Jersey talent. Whether it's Brick & Mortar getting signed and taking off or Frankie Edgar in UFC, Zakk Wylde or Todd Frazier playing for the Reds or actor Bruce Willis doing his thing, I'm always proud of our strong representation. In my musical opinion, Springsteen and Bon Jovi are two of the best songwriters in the history of rock and roll.

Personally, I believe they are a bad representation of New Jersey when they start spewing their political views and pretend they're blue collar working class even though we all know they never swung a framing hammer once in their life. As far as the music scene in New Jersey, I find it very disturbing that many radio stations

are so unresponsive to the original music scene in their state. They talk a good game about supporting the local acts, but that's about it. Why is it that to get national notoriety you have to go to go troll in Nashville or California? Maybe because those geographical communication areas support their local music scene. Seriously, when I visit Nashville or California, there are constantly pounding new acts on their airwaves. That's what I call real American opportunity. So, my outlook on New Jersey is dismal as far as branding because of the lack of support. I think New Jersey is filled with diverse, hardworking people, and I'm proud to say I'm from New Jersey! I believe there still is opportunity in music because this is still America the land of opportunity. I believe opportunity is still here, but I believe it's only going to find you through your hard work. Most of us don't have that media bigwig handing us something we didn't earn. I believe you must engage further than our little area to be successful.

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. 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 musician, my other uncles Rudy, Tony, Louie, Jimmie, Rocco, and Andy, they were expert drinkers, (I say that with the upmost respect as they were all great hard working people) midway through the get-together's, before the fist fights and the night-ending "I love you's" and "I'm sorry, let's do it again in three weeks promises." (Laughs)

Arty would play every Dean Martin Jerry Vale or Vegas crooner song ever recorded on his accordion, and he could make his accordion sounds like it was an Orchestra. As I got a little older, my Brother Jimmy bought a turntable and a set of Panasonic speakers that were just amazing. I would work with my father (a plumber by trade) so I could buy albums every week. Starting with the Four Seasons, Motown, Beatles, CCR, and Beach Boys progressing to Bowie, Kinks, ELO, Led Zeppelin and more.

I took my first guitar lesson during 6th grade and for the next several years, 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 cross boundaries in many genres. I love to write songs, which I always write for the listener's perspective first. I love to play great songs live, and I love to listen to great music whenever I can. Writing gives me a sense of great accomplishment. Kind of like when I was a kid, and I pitched a no-hitter, or the time I jacked a double in the gap that drove in the winning run, or bringing home multiple medals from district and regional wrestling championships.

I find that similar to when I learned to start shredding through the modes or learned to master blues positions and being able to apply it to a song. I feel that as we get older, we lose touch with the excitement we had in our youth. So I do what I do with music, because I get the same feeling of accomplishment that I did back then. Everything is a baseball game or wrestling match to me. Because the fundamentals are the same. Win or lose, how you deal with them is who you are, and that goes for life work music that's why I will play music till I die. I guess I'm still that little kid

You have some fairly personal views on politics; do they come out in your music?

No, I don't believe politics belongs in the music! First of all, most musicians who shoot off their mouths have no clue of domestic or international problems. They're just repeating what they heard from somebody else who has no clue, and that goes for actors too! Secondly, in my opinion music is supposed to be good, uplifting and positive, or release for those more intense listeners.

I believe music is leisure time for most people, whether it is a mosh pit or a jazz club, it's to each his own. Politics can be very frustrating and create a negative atmosphere counterproductive to having a great time. Also, I believe that speaking out politically to your fan base only decreases your ability to generate income because 50% of the people are not going to agree with your politics being right or wrong. Also, the artists with large fan bases that have lots of influence on their listening public there uneducated political views could be damaging to our country. I would love to see politically loud musicians in a real political debate. They would get their clocks cleaned. Hey, maybe politicians should start writing songs.

When it comes to guitars, do you think just one will do?

Absolutely not, I need more guitars!! I need more guitars! Oh yeah, I need more keyboards too! I almost forgot I need a Manley Slam and that Waves Phase Linear EQ for my Pro Tools system. Those things are fun they are the rewards for my hard work.

What has been your favorite gig and why?

They are all very very precious to me they are imprints in time and soundtracks to so many lives. I cannot compare the time the Dirty Ratz shared the stage with Zebra, Skid Row or Leslie West to the time Trench played with Thin Lizzy, Meatloaf or Eddie Money to the time Blondsense opened for Cheap Trick Smithereens or Bret Michael the time Heat rocked with Fuel or Foreigner at stadiums to the multiple times EOS or 9th Infantry headline the Stone Pony or the benefits that raise money for Toys for Tots, cancer, and our troops they have all been everlasting memories.

You have a fan base that is known to assemble time after time. without the same issues that many other groups have, as far as getting repeat business of the friends what's the secret for getting them to come out every time?

I believe there are a few things that encompass a success in live shows. I also know that as our fan base is growing, we're beyond just our friends coming to see the live projects that I produce. The "Never give up, stick with it" attitude it's starting to pay off, and we see it in ticket sales. But it's no secret how we build our base. We make phone calls and follow-up phone calls. 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. Do you want to go?"

It's a consistent reminder. We also follow the rule that everyone in the band is a business partner of each other. Time is money as it is in any business. But it takes time and work, there's nothing more disrespectful than one or two band members handling all the chores and the other two or three sitting on their ass doing nothing just reaping the benefits of whatever success might come along which usually leads to animosity and the demise of the band.

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 vocals instructors told me, "Whatever that success is for yourself, never give up, because you are not immortal, but your music may be some day."