

MUSICIAN



KEVIN EUBANKS

Leaving the *Tonight Show* behind him, a jazz guitar master looks ahead

By Jeff Tamarkin

WHEN A 30-FOOT HOLE OPENED UP IN THE BASEMENT OF Kevin Eubanks' home in the notoriously unstable terrain of Hollywood, he wasn't sure what to do at first. "It was a massive problem with my house," he says. "I didn't know whether I was going to sell it or rebuild the foundation." A contractor suggested it might be a nice place to build a home studio. "It went in one ear and out the other," he recalls, "but as I started adding up the numbers it stuck in the back of my head and I said, 'He's got a point.'" Now Eubanks is the proud owner of Spirit Studio, a state-of-the-art facility with the most convenient location possible.

But then, Eubanks is a pro at making the most of a difficult situation. When saxophonist Branford Marsalis left his position as leader of the *Tonight Show* band in 1995, guitarist Eubanks was suddenly thrust into the spotlight. But his easy repartee with host Jay Leno proved a crowd-pleaser, and Eubanks guided one of TV's

best house bands for 15 years. Now he is once again at a turning point in his career, having left the *Tonight Show* to pursue his own music full time. His first post-*Tonight* offering is the new *Zen Food*, an instrumental album that showcases his exceptional chops and compositional skills.

Not that Eubanks hadn't been making records during his *Tonight Show* tenure. By the time he became a late-night fixture, the Philadelphia native was already established as an innovative jazz artist with several albums to his name, and he continued to release new music when time permitted. His latest features crackerjack backing from saxophonist Bill Pierce, keyboardist Gerry Etkins (who penned the one track Eubanks didn't, "G.G."), bassist Rene Camacho and drummer Marvin "Smitty" Smith. The easygoing, good-natured manner that audiences loved on the *Tonight Show* was fully evident as Eubanks discussed his life and career with us.



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When did you get into jazz?

Probably when I was about 17. It was a barrage once it hit. I started digging my dad's Jimmy Smith and Kenny Burrell records. It wasn't like it is now, where you just turn on your computer and click on it. We were still going to record stores back then, or I would dig something out of the closet. One thing led to the next. I went to school at Berklee College and everything fell into place after that. I was influenced by Jimi Hendrix, Oscar Peterson, Freddie Hubbard, Art Blakey, Wes Montgomery and Jimmy Smith. They all represent schools of their own. Once you go deeper into them, you go deeper into music. You come out the other side with more than you went in with.

How is it having your own studio?

The only difference for me is that people come to my house instead of me going

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somewhere else. I have a Neve board, the same I've always recorded on. I don't like to call it a "home studio," because it was built, constructed and designed by the same people that do professional studios in L.A. It's not what people think of as a home studio, where you kick it in the side and it'll start working.

Has it changed the way you work?

I still don't like recording in a studio. I thought that would change because it's mine, and I've got pictures of my family in the booth. But as soon as it's time to record there's still this edge of nervousness, this feeling of, "It's got to be perfect this time." I can't seem to shake that unless I'm doing a live gig, and then I don't really care.

What's your guitar setup like?

I use Abe Rivera guitars and a Martin acoustic. They're all made for me. I'm holding one of them on the new album cover. The

amp I use is actually a preamp called the DMS. I had it custom made. It's designed by a guy named Bruce Seifried. And as far as effects, I use a volume and a distortion pedal, that's it.

How did you adapt to backing different artists on the *Tonight Show*?

One day B.B. King is on, the next it's Clint Black. And after a while you think, it's all music. Hopefully with your background or your belief in music and your talent, you can play this and you can play that without the cliché-ness. Over the years I've gotten much closer to different kinds of music, like country, bluegrass and definitely the blues.

How did you learn adaptability?

I've always been that way. A lot of people think I grew up playing jazz. I did not. I grew up playing Grand Funk Railroad, Chicago, Sly and the Family Stone, Kool and the Gang, James Brown and Marvin Gaye. My mom was all gospel and classical, my uncle [jazz pianist Ray Bryant] played, so it was just a matter of time before I started getting into other kinds of music.

Did a guest ever throw you off?

Yeah, but you learn how to let things roll off your back. There's only so much you'll take from a guest. Sometimes when a guest segment is going bad, you have to protect yourself. You realize that you do have a character and you stay within it, but you still say what you have to say and get your point across without compromising the job you're doing. But it takes time to get the experience to do that properly.

How did you get the *Tonight Show* gig?

I'd never thought about being on TV, but Branford asked me if I wanted to be in the band and I said yes. Then he split and I was asked if I wanted to be the bandleader. I was nervous at first. The first day I was doing it my face broke out in a million bumps. I told the makeup guy, "Don't worry, it will pass."

Does Jay know a lot about music?

I don't think Jay knows that much about music. He would say, "You know music, I know cars. You know broccoli, I know pizza." He knows music up to about 1969. But in a strange way we respected that about each other. And it worked out because we stayed out of each other's way. Every now and then he would say, "Do you know this song? What do you think about doing that with this guest?" That was very seldom, so I always obliged him. We were opposites in

TV ON THE RECORD

A nightly television gig is a heck of a way to get exposure, and all of the major late-night bandleaders have released their own albums. Here are a few.



DOC SEVERINSEN

Rhapsody for Now
(RCA, 1973)

For decades, the *Tonight Show's* Carl "Doc" Severinsen

was the quintessential late-night-TV bandleader. During his *Tonight Show* run he often took the opportunity to record, mostly sticking to light big-band swing and standards. But Severinsen occasionally became more ambitious in the studio, as he did on this curious mélange of pop and jazz hits.



PAUL SHAFFER

The World's Most Dangerous Party
(SBK, 1993)

By the time keyboardist Paul Shaffer went to work for David Letterman in 1982 (first on *Late Night* and later the *Late Show*), he'd played in the *Saturday Night Live* house band and racked up other impressive credits. Yet Shaffer has only recorded two albums under his own name, the most recent being this lackluster all-star set of cover tunes.



THE MAX WEINBERG 7

The Max Weinberg 7
(Hip-O, 2000)

Assembling the house group for *Late Night With Conan O'Brien*, E Street Band drummer Max Weinberg looked to classic small-band swing for inspiration. Weinberg and the 7 released only one album together, this sizzling set from 2000. On tunes ranging from the old jug-band stomper "Walk Right In" to Jackie Wilson's "Baby Workout," the septet threw down some serious boogie.



THE ROOTS

How I Got Over
(Def Jam, 2010)

Long before they signed on at *Late Night With Jimmy Fallon*, the Roots had proven that a live hip-hop group could be as exciting as any rock band. Their latest, *How I Got Over*, is packed with an assortment of guests, potent lyrical statements and never-dull arrangements, proving that rap need not fall back on tired clichés to get over.

MUSICIAN



Justin Lubrin/NBCU Photo Bank

On the Jay Leno Show, 2009

'Over the years I've gotten much closer to different kinds of music'

some ways, but as soon as we hit the stage we were together because we love what we do and we trusted each other.

Who are your audiences?

Whenever I do a gig, the audience is filled with different age groups who want to hear what they hope is good music. And you get a lot of people coming from that television audience into the concert and the club, where they perhaps haven't gone before. They come because they want to see you, they feel like they know you.

What did you learn from the show?

Wow, that's a whole different interview—

there's so much. But one thing for sure is that I've learned a lot about TV and I want to continue with it to some extent. It can be very rewarding, and I feel so comfortable in a TV studio. I really want to develop a cooking show.

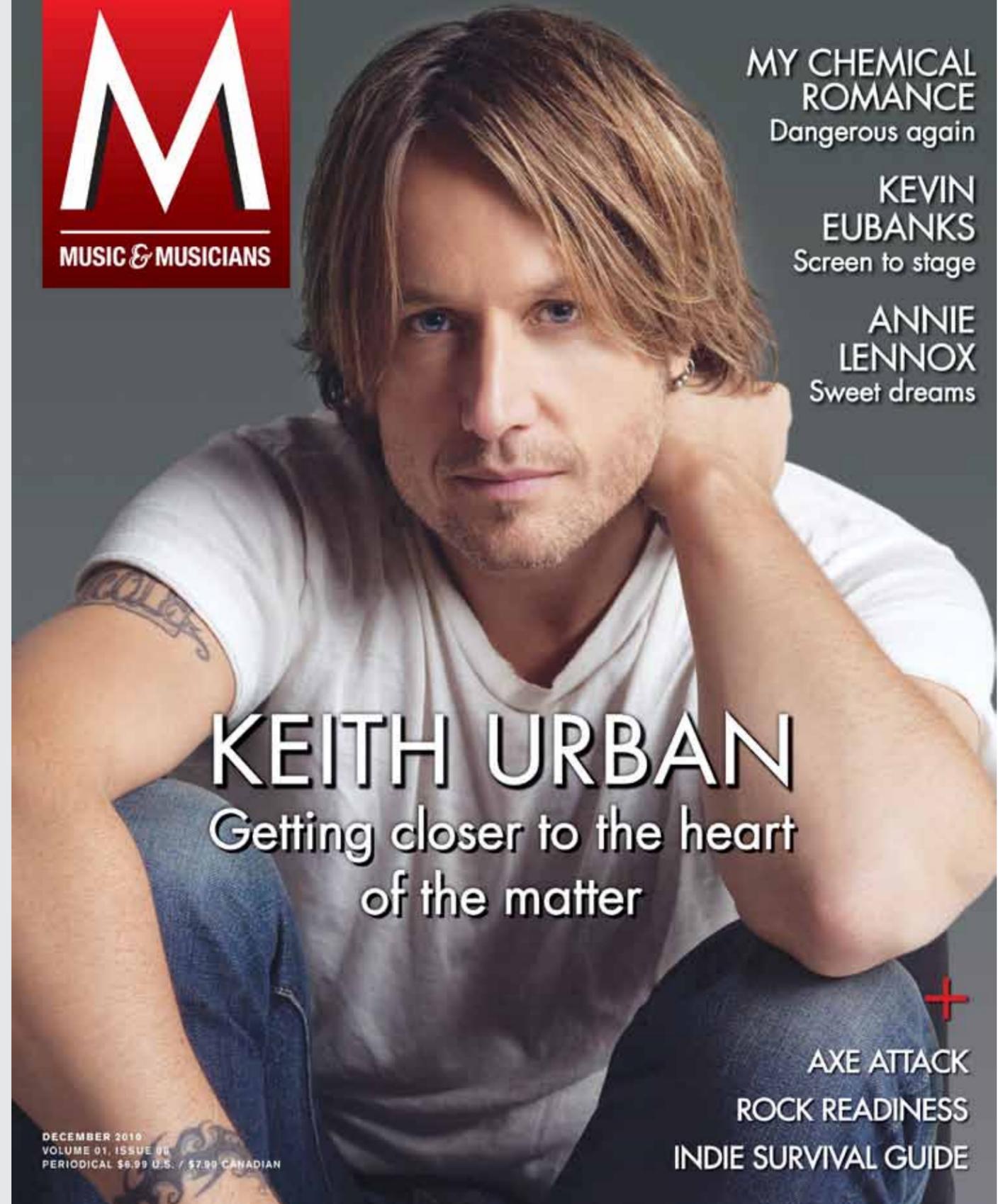
Do you meet people who don't know you had a career before *Tonight*?

There are plenty who don't. They don't watch the *Tonight Show* for music. People would come up to me at the show and say, "Have you ever thought about doing a CD? Because you sound really good." I take that as a compliment.

JAZZ FOR ALL

Kevin Eubanks has occasionally been the target of criticism at times from jazz purists who feel that he compromises his music by appealing to a wide variety of listeners. "Jazz has to be more inclusive," he argues. "You can't be the hippest musician in the room and have nobody know what you're doing. Are they saying Quincy Jones can't play because he produced Michael Jackson, or I can't play because I worked with Jay Leno? We can't expand unless we stay on our own block? That's just weird. People ask me, 'How come you didn't play more jazz on the show?' It was completely inappropriate to play jazz on the show." Eubanks says his audiences now include many non-jazz fans who discovered him through the *Tonight Show*. "People say to me, 'We saw you on the show but we didn't know you made records,'" he observes. "So now they know."

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MY CHEMICAL ROMANCE
Dangerous again

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Screen to stage

ANNIE LENNOX
Sweet dreams

KEITH URBAN
Getting closer to the heart of the matter

AXE ATTACK
ROCK READINESS
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