



Band members from Edison after a successful Black Hawk flight through Iraq in 2005.

Edison Rocks Iraq

A red-hot band blazes new trails to reach troops in the Mideast and beyond

By ROBIN EILEEN BERNSTEIN

Ask a band to point to a breakthrough moment that propelled them on the road to success, and they may cite a hit single, a famous concert, a seminal TV appearance. For Edison, that moment, ironically, arrived before the band had even come into existence. On September 11, 2001, singer/songwriter Ethan Isaac—who went on to co-found Edison in 2005 along with guitarist and fellow songwriter, Jonathan Svec—had been living in New York City. After witnessing the terrorist attacks and seeing the twin towers fall that day, he wrote “Gallup into the Sunlight,” which caught the attention of Armed Forces Entertainment when it was released as a single a few years later.

“I got a call from my manager saying AFE wanted us to play for the troops,” Isaac, the band’s



frontman, tells *Salute*. "AFE gave us an opportunity to build a career. It's how we were born."

The five-man band now includes drummer Todd Budich, Anton Kreisl on bass and Joel Kelley on guitar. Kelley also contributes his songwriting talent, as does Edison's producer, Claude Villani. Isaac points out that their name is a "tip of the hat" to that great American inventor whose creation, the phonograph, would one day introduce rock music to the world. Like their namesake, the band strives for invention and passion in their music.

And they succeed. Edison churns out a hard-driving, hard-

core brand of rock with lyrics that celebrate a basic human desire for freedom. From their big commercial hit single, "Ready to Believe," which was featured on ESPN, to their soaring anthem, "Fly," to the testosterone-fueled "To Die For," Edison's music evokes the raw energy and searing emotion that characterize iconic powerhouses like Led Zeppelin and U2.

"They changed the world through their music," Isaac says of U2, a band that inspires him. "For us, it's not just about fun and playing in clubs. It's about contributing to the world. It's about making a difference with music."

Isaac feels fortunate that the Department of Defense has enabled Edison to do just that. Their music has made a huge difference to the morale of troops stationed at far-flung bases in Iraq, Afghanistan and Kuwait—places like FOB Sykes, FOB McKenzie and FOB Warhorse, which were among the many stops on Edison's first major ▶

Edison frontman Ethan Isaac hands out CDs at FOB Sykes in Tal Afar, Iraq.

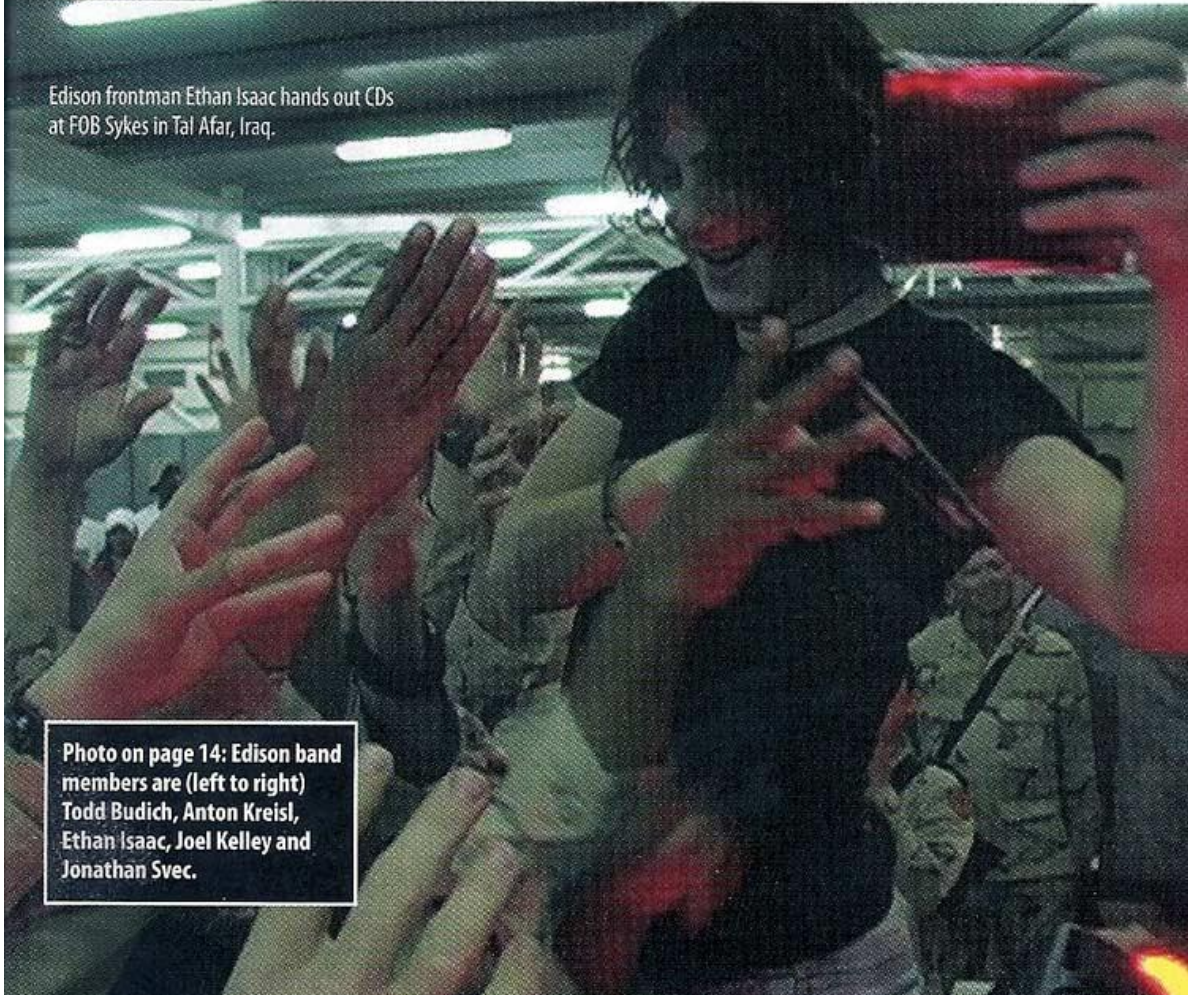


Photo on page 14: Edison band members are (left to right) Todd Budich, Anton Kreisl, Ethan Isaac, Joel Kelley and Jonathan Svec.

coverstory

AFE tour in 2005 and 2006. In the band's video, *Tour of Duty*, which documents those shows, Svec recounts one particularly emotional moment: "There was one individual who came up to me, and he shook my hand and wouldn't let go. He said, 'What you guys are doing—you have no idea how important this is.'"

Isaac thinks of it as bringing a piece of America overseas. "We might play for two hours and then spend another two or three hours after the concert talking with them," he says of the servicemen and women. "It's as important, if not more important, than the show itself." And like some great karmic circle, spending all that time with the troops, including sharing tents and meals, gave the band a valuable gift in return. "It changed how I see the world and how I write music," says Isaac. "It changes how you express yourself creatively."

The tour also meant experiencing the dangers inherent in the Middle East during a war, like the ever-present risk of insurgents and RPGs. Isaac admits that for a bunch of rock-n-roll musicians with no military training, it was scary to head out there and put their lives on the line. They were issued flak jackets and helmets, drove in armored vehicles, and flew in C-130s and Black Hawk choppers. Their sleeping quarters ranged from tents in the desert to rooms in Saddam Hussein's former palace.

Isaac looks back at that time in amazement. "We played not too far from where Saddam was being held prisoner and were told he was able to hear us loud and clear," he recalls.

And there was Mother Nature to contend with. The band was keenly aware of the difficulties of working in a harsh, unforgiving desert. Temperatures soared to more than 120 degrees, which was hard not only on the band members but on their gear as well. What's more, some gigs were slated for outdoors, sometimes on nothing more than a wooden platform. These weren't the sorts of "sizzling hot" shows the band had had in mind.

Fortunately, Edison's sound engineer and tour manager, Dan Monaghan, had researched how much heat their equipment could handle and, if necessary, would delay concerts until temperatures dropped. Other times wicked

sandstorms turned the sky red, resulting in last minute postponements or cancellations. "It gives you a whole new respect for what our troops live through day in and day out," says Isaac.

Back on more temperate American soil, Edison rehearses and records at The Factory Underground in Norwalk, Conn., and will occasionally hunker down at a retreat in upstate New York to write. The band's members hail from a cross-section of the U.S.—from the San Francisco Bay area to Madison, Wisconsin to New York and New England. Their new, as-yet untitled album is due out this August on EMI, a follow-up to last year's *Bullet-Proof Wings* EP. Edison will head back into the studio this spring to finish recording, after wrapping up a national tour that began in January.

It's a nomadic life that has taken Isaac and his band-mates to some 20 countries, averaging a grueling 15 to 20 weeks annually on the road, which includes not just military shows but also club dates domestically and overseas. Edison travels so much that Isaac isn't kidding when he says they'd like to be the first band ever to play all seven continents within a year. And it's not that far-fetched a goal. After all, they're already the first band to shoot a rock video in Iraq. For that matter, they were among the first musical performers to be sent into that dusty war-torn region at all, period. "We were an experiment," Isaac admits.

Despite generating national publicity on ABC's *World News Tonight*, and in such major publications as *Rolling Stone*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *Billboard*, the band members don't let it go to their heads. "The key to our success is that we check our egos at the door," says Isaac. "Plus we enjoy each other's company. We're all friends."

When asked about the future, Isaac hopes Edison will continue to play for the U.S. troops, wherever they are. They've worked with almost every division of the military, yet the bulk of their touring is with AFE, to which they owe their career. "I never imagined the U.S. government would send us all over the world to play music," he says. "We're grateful to AFE for the opportunity." And while he isn't sure when or where their next Department of Defense tour will be, he hopes it's soon.

It's a fair bet that the troops hope so, too. 📞