

*The Rumford Falls Times*

## Musician produces CD from his apartment

by Bruce Farrin

TRENTON — Many talented musicians find themselves scrimping and saving enough money to get into a studio or risk the music sounding tinny and unbalanced.

That direction was carried even further by Ian Marquis, born in Rumford and a 2006 Univ. of Maine graduate with a BA in New Media. His first CD, "The Solomon Project," was recorded and produced entirely out of his apartment.

"My goal was to make it sound like it came out of a studio; to try to push what I had to make something that didn't sound amateur," he said.

Ian said, "Some people think you need to spend a lot of money in order to get a sound that you like. It's about being familiar with what musicians have. I really work well with what I have. You don't need a lot of money. You can make something good with anything."

"Listening to these songs, you would have no idea I produced them in my apartment with literally no budget. I have my gear and my computer, both of which are nothing special," he said, adding, "I only own two microphones and one decent electric guitar. My amplifier and effects pedals are standard. I run everything through a \$50 mixer into the back of my computer."

His first album, *The Solomon Project*, was completed in April 2009. It's a collection of dark, atmospheric and highly-textured tracks. It was completed in April 2009. Since then, he has been quietly promoting it online, through social networking sites.

Ian wrote all of the songs, played all the guitar parts, programmed in all of the drum and bass lines, and spent countless hours massaging the production. He said he decided to work alone when he got tired of trying to piece a band together with full-time job schedules and other responsibilities.

"To me, making music is about using the tools available to me to make the best songs I possibly can. It's also about freedom—the ability to express myself, through my own playing, with my own voice, in a song that others can take something away from. I think music has become very open in the past ten years. There's so much that can be done outside of a record label, without a studio budget, and many artists are doing just that. To me, that's the direction music is meant to go in—a democratic one. There's so much we all have to say—the hard part is finding those who are interested in hearing it," said Ian.

"I don't have the money to do much in the way of marketing, so I'm relying on the internet to create a buzz," said Ian, who admitted that he hasn't really made any money from his songs, which is a side project for him right now. The 25-year-old works as a communications coordinator for Friends of Acadia.

He said the hardest part about recording the album was doing it on his own. While working solo is great for creative control, except when something wasn't working. There also is no second opinion when you're working alone.

"Occasionally I would send a song to a friend to get a fresh perspective, but I had to work it out by myself...I play the guitar, program the drum and bass loops, sing, and everything else you hear on the tracks. I do all the recording and mixing," said Ian, adding if something didn't sound the way it was supposed to, he spent days, sometimes weeks working with it until it did.

He said he's been drawn to music since he was a child.

"When I was very young, the records my parents would play always caught my attention. I didn't understand music—the instruments were all just 'interesting noises' to me—but I felt a connection to it. Even in high school, after I had begun to discover heavy metal, punk, and rock, I still didn't really play any instruments. I would tap out simple tunes on any piano I came across, or bang on the drums in the band room in between working on sets for a musical but at that point I had never really picked up a guitar."

"That doesn't mean I didn't have the desire, though. I always wanted to play, to be better—I just never got around to it until college. I would say I was subtly influenced by classmates (who introduced me to music I later came to love) and family, but

ultimately my decision to become a musician has surprised a lot of people I grew up with because I never showed the kind of inclination towards it that the obviously musically-inclined kids did," he said.

Perhaps a turning point, as far as an inclination to music for Ian occurred when he found himself in front of a piano as a 13 year old at summer camp.

"I didn't know how to play. When I sat down, my first inclination was to make something up. Write my own little song. I never really wanted to take piano lessons, but I immediately loved the act of playing it. I loved that I could make whatever sounds I wanted—or, whatever sounds I knew how to play. Regardless, it was fun. From that point onward, whenever I found a piano, I would tap out a little song. It was never anything advanced, but it made me smile," said Ian, recalling, "People would tell me, 'stop playing that, it's too sad.' And it was. I liked to play melancholy music."

In high school, he said a cousin bought a Casio keyboard. "I visited his house, and I was amazed by it. This thing was a blast. I knew I wanted my own. But it was \$300. My parents didn't think I would use it. I didn't have a job. Still, I saved for months (my allowance, of course) and eventually bought it. It only had enough memory to store two arrangements, so I had to be creative. But immediately, I was writing songs. I felt like a musician."

Ian said he had always wanted to play guitar; he had a broken acoustic with three strings in his closet which he didn't know how to play. So instead, he focused on the keyboard.

But when he went to college, he immediately got a guitar. "Actually, it was a classic Gibson SG (1971) that had belonged to an uncle of mine, and my grandfather gave it to me. I bought a little amp from a friend, and I tried my hardest to learn."

"In the beginning, my hands didn't make the right shapes. I couldn't hold the pick. I couldn't strum, and I didn't know how to get the sounds I heard on my favorite albums. When I tried to play the chords I saw in books or online, my hands hurt. I was clumsy. Basically, I sucked. But even then, I was writing my own riffs. They were simple, but they were my own," said Ian.

"Really, I learned to play through tablature. I would listen to a song I liked (Metallica, Def Leppard, The Offspring – those were some of the bands I was really into back then), try to play the right chords, and usually fail. But I started to pick up little tricks—I started to learn how to apply what I heard to what I played. But it was slow work. I couldn't record anything. I didn't even know how," he said.

Ian had to give back the Gibson, but replaced it with a plywood guitar from a friend of a friend who had found it at the dump.

While he was learning to play guitar, he was also making electronic music. Piano, bass, and strings. Moody, soundtrack-type stuff. "I was really into RPGs and console games at the time, and they have great soundtracks. I wanted to make music like that. I learned a lot about song structure making those tracks. I also learned a lot about mixing and production. But my gear sucked, and I could never tell how my songs would sound on a real stereo. It was discouraging."

In college, though, he said his music-making was really taking off. "And I got a new guitar: an Epiphone Les Paul. I didn't know much about guitars, but I eventually settled on it after a lot of research. I wanted something that looked cool, but that I wouldn't mind playing when I was 30. That ruled out the BC Richs and other gothic guitars – which I really wanted at the time, to be honest. I wanted an NJ Virgin. I'm glad I didn't get one, because I don't play black metal. I went through two broken guitars before I finally got the Les Paul I ended up keeping."

"I was listening to rock, pop, techno, metal - whatever I felt like in any given moment. I learned all the sounds, and how they were made. I learned what production tricks were used where. I couldn't apply any of it, but I knew how to spot them when I heard them. I was still making piano tracks, and they were pretty good. I liked to use them for background music in film projects for my classes," said Ian.

But eventually, he said he hit a wall. "I was completely sick of making piano music, but I couldn't record guitar. It just didn't sound any good. I had a modeling effects pedal, but I didn't use it to record. I just played it through my crappy little amp and pretended it was a huge stack."

After some seriously-flawed attempts at laying down tracks, he said he got into a groove and recorded his first album.

"Looking back, I would call those songs demos, but at the time they sounded like a rock masterpiece to me. Heavy, fuzzy guitars, all tuned to drop C, with basic drum beats and bass lines that were way too loud (I wouldn't overcome that issue until I bought some decent mixing headphones a few years later). But I was happy. I was recording guitar."

Sure, I used the same set of strings for an entire album. Sure, half the songs weren't any good. But try to imagine my enthusiasm. I still couldn't believe I was actually playing the guitar," noted Ian.

At that point, he said he entered into a predictable pattern: a series of demo albums, each one a little more advanced than the one before it. And Ian gave them all names: "Behind Closed Doors;" "Waiting for Daylight;" "Shiver;" "Father of Faces;" "Heather's Last Breath;" "Season Red Eye;" "Bastard Buffet."

"I recorded a lot of music. You've got to remember that I was making piano tracks long before I did anything with guitar, and I had six 'albums' of those. All in all, I had close to a hundred finished songs. Around the time I recorded "Season Red Eye," though, I was really getting burned out. Why was I even making these songs? No one ever heard them. I mean that, too – I had only ever shown, at most, my family and a few friends, and most of the songs didn't even get that much exposure," said Ian.

However, he said "Bastard Buffet" was his best demo set ever, and it's no coincidence that four songs from that album were used on "The Solomon Project" with only minimal changes to the music.

"But that brings me to the real issue: everyone expects a song to have lyrics. I wasn't a singer. I had absolutely no vocal range, and I was too embarrassed to sing in front of anyone. How could I ever practice? I tried being in a band briefly, as one of two guitarists, but it collapsed when the three of us wound up too busy to play," said Ian.

"I settled back into making instrumental tracks. I had dozens of working files. See, that's something I do: I have probably a hundred unfinished tracks, and twice that many riffs lying around on my computer. I have a hard time finishing things. The spark of inspiration fades so quickly," he said.

And really, that's where the story of "The Solomon Project" begins.

Asked if he would ever perform in his hometown, Ian said he would, but first, he would need a band.

"I'm 100 percent solo. I painstakingly craft songs by myself but I don't really collaborate with other musicians much. I have in the past, but we never found the time to really create the polished songs we wanted to. But I can definitely see myself playing live, provided I had the people to play with, and had a tight set planned."

Ian is already working on his next music project, one that will likely be a little lighter and of a different sound than "The Solomon Project."

But what final direction it will take, he said, hasn't really become clear. As for his plans for the future, Ian said, "I don't know for sure, but I'm making new music all the time (I have another album in the works). My immediate goal is to get the word out - get people to listen to my music. I'd love to hear some of my songs on local stations, to give people a chance to listen and see if it catches their ear. Really, I want to attract attention, sell some songs, and develop a following. I'd like an audience. After that? I'd love to make a living from my music."

"Providing for yourself by doing something you love is a wonderful thing. I'd love to have a crack at that. Currently, I'm very limited as far as time is concerned. Recording is a long, complicated (and sometimes very frustrating) process. I'd like to have the time and means to do more of that. And, really, I'd like to move people. That's what music does for me - moves me - and that's what I want to do for others," he said.

## The making of a music "album"

*Ian Marquis talks about his album, "The Solomon Project," released on April 20, 2009.*

### Dead Silence

In the fall of 2008, I was slogging through a musical dry spell. Sure, I had lots of demos—unfinished riffs, pieces of songs, arrangements— but nothing was sticking. Absolutely nothing. I didn't have a single finished song. My next "album" was supposed to be called "Womb." A new beginning, I guess you could say.

But it wasn't anything, and honestly, it was starting to get me down. There are only so many times you can listen to a cool riff or verse before you start thinking "why can't I make this work?"

Mainly, I was feeling stagnant. Sick of what I'd been doing up until that point. I mean, I had songs, but no vocals. I didn't sing. No matter how cool the songs sounded to me, whenever I played them for someone else (and that wasn't very often), they would almost always say something to the tune of "wow man, that's cool—you should join a band or something."

Not helpful. I don't have the time to be in a band. I tried that for a few months, and it was hard enough when the three of us were living in the same city. Now, I was in Trenton, and I didn't really know anybody. And my new job was absolutely destroying me. Not the best time to start a band. Besides, I wanted to be the band. I tend to record joke tracks from time to time. Little experiments, or songs I don't really consider "mine." Sometimes, I'll record vocals for these. Really, those were the only sort of vocals I was comfortable recording. Ridiculous stuff, really—nothing you'd ever want to show anyone else.

But one of those jokes actually turned out kind of decent. I sort of grew attached to the sound of my "singing," if you could call it that. But there were still no real songs for Womb, and I wasn't getting anywhere. Oh, I kept on recording riffs. I made arrangements, fiddled with drum loops, bass lines, and synths. Nothing was gelling. The fall of 2008 was starting to look pretty unfulfilling.

### **She Lives for Chastity**

I had this power chord riff lying around on my hard drive. It wasn't anything special. In fact, it was based on an earlier song I'd written back in 2005, when I first started recording tracks. Every now and then, I'd listen to it for no particular reason. It was kind of catchy, I guess. It wasn't exactly a surprise that I eventually tried to record it. I threw this dissonant pedal riff in as the intro, and I double tracked the chords.

Very standard stuff, and I certainly wasn't breaking any new ground with it. Do you ever find yourself doing something, unsure of what inspired it? It happens to me all the time. It happened this time. Listening to the bones of this bland song I was working on, I decided to record a scream. Or maybe it was a wail.

Anyway, I'd never sung it before, and I didn't even know how it would come out. It was at the upper limit of my range, and I didn't even really hit it properly – but I liked it.

The song was "She Lives for Chastity," and that scream is what convinced me to finish it. I wrote the lyrics in a few minutes, and sang them in a few takes. The song was basically finished in an evening. Of course, I changed a lot before it was truly complete. In the beginning, I had spoken word bits mixed in with the final chorus, no solo, no piano in the middle section, and the mixing was all wrong. Even after I'd finished it, I still found myself coming back to it again and again, trying to make it better.

### **The album takes shape**

Now that I had one song under my belt, I started to feel confident. Hey, maybe I can do this. Maybe I can make a really cool album. And while I'm at it, let's make it a concept album! That would be pretty cool. I started to pull my demos together, looking for interesting ideas. I had a lot of demos, so I was pretty sure I'd be able to make a full disc out of everything.

Almost none of the songs I worked on for my initial album idea made the final cut. I just couldn't make them work.

Songs like "Black and Brown," "Serial (Like Some Damned Soap Opera)," "Should Have Listened to Ann," "She's a Revisionist," and "This is Our Last Stand" all fell by the wayside.

That isn't saying I hated those songs. Some of them I still hope to finish some day. But they were all wrong. I couldn't make the vocals work.

Hell, I didn't even know how to write a song I could actually sing. Most of those tracks have vocal takes that are downright embarrassing. No one but me has ever heard them.

And just like that, I was discouraged again. This happens to me all the time. I find a spark of creativity, make something I'm happy with, and then cannot for the life of me replicate that success on future attempts. It's like I can't predict my own creativity – I'm incapable of forcing a good result. Either it works or it doesn't. It wasn't working.

### **Give It Up**

One of the cool riffs that actually made the cut was nicknamed "Craig." That's a bad habit of mine: naming my tracks

random words or phrases that don't have anything to do with anything. This particular song had no lyrics, but the drums were really punchy, crunchy, and had this snap that really made me smile. The guitar was simple and heavy, and the beat was a little off-kilter.

Craig eventually became "Stuck in My Head." But that wasn't until later. See, I was trying to record one song, when another came to me. Just a few words. I played a couple of power chords – nothing special – and, laughing to myself, sang "she says I can't get it up." What the hell kind of song is that? A song about not being able to get it up? Hey, I thought it was funny. But I didn't want to stop recording the first song, lay down a new set of bones (click track, empty channels), and record this new idea.

For some reason, I did. But it kind of sucked. See, the song was so simple it just fell into place, but the second half wasn't working. The vocals were flat, and it sounded like I was bored. I got discouraged, exported the mix, emailed it to a friend, and forgot about it. I burned a CD for my car, and I listened to it a few times throughout the day.

You know what? I wasn't going to leave this one unfinished. That night, I went back into my recording room and redid some of the vocals, tweaked the arrangement and the mix, and the end result was "Give It Up." I sent it to the same friend. He liked it. I liked it too. I wasn't so discouraged anymore. But I still only had two songs.

### **Out With the Old**

At that point, I was still trying to make a concept album. I mean, I had two tracks that kind of fit a "story," if you wanted to call it one. That could make a good album, right? So, I tried to record more songs to establish the narrative. But I've already told you that it didn't work out as planned. These songs just sucked.

One song in particular, "Serial (Like Some Damned Soap Opera)," was terrible. I had loved the arrangement before I tried to sing to it, but my vocals destroyed it.

Eventually, I started to think I might be better served pulling songs from my older collections (demo albums) and recording vocals for them. I didn't even know if it would work. To start things off, I took one of my favorite songs, "Break," and burned it to a CD to listen to in my car. It was from my previous set of demos, and still fresh in my mind.

The trouble was, I had already tried to record vocals for it. I'd written a ton of them, and I was really proud of them. But I couldn't sing them. There were too many syllables, and things refused to gel.

One day, while driving (and this was over a week later, mind you), I decided to listen to Break. When it got to the chorus, I swallowed (I was still very reluctant to sing at this point, even alone in my own car) and belted out a few words. "Set me free." That sounded kind of cool. But what would go with it? Oh – how about "Father, won't you come and save me?"

Later on that day, I took a stab at recording the lines. With some delay and reverb, they actually fit into the mix. The song still sounded cool, but it had some emotional content. There was a story there, even if only a little one. The rest of the song came together the same evening. When my brain is in lyric mode, I can spit out lines with just the right meter and pace without much effort. But how to sing them?

You know, I've always loved the sound of glottal fry—that gravelly, rachety sound your voice makes when you speak so low the air barely escapes your throat. So, I tried that. It sounded kind of creepy. Unsettling. And very personal. It didn't even sound like me. I think that's why I loved it.

Before it was done, Break went through quite a few revisions. One of the last things I did was change the ending.

Originally, the song ended with a solo and a long fade out. But I wasn't happy with it, and several people who heard it commented that the ending seemed kind of tacked on. So I axed it.

Now, I had three songs.

### **Girls and Candy**

By that time, I had ditched the concept album idea. I just wanted to get a collection of good songs together and make the best album I could. Old songs, new songs—whatever.

"Candy" and "Girls" were both songs from the same demo set as Break. I call them demos, but they really weren't.

Production-wise, they changed very little in the transition to the new album—the vocals were the only new thing. And even then, Girls already had vocals. I really didn't change that song at all. Before this album, Girls was the only song I'd actually sung on, and I wasn't sure I wanted anyone to hear it. For one, the lyrics were very...antagonistic. I've always liked to write stories with an edge—nothing happy. But that song, well, it was downright mean, angry, and unlike me entirely. Listening to it, you get a picture of an artist that simply isn't me.

But I liked it, and in the end, it had to come along. And Candy too. That one was pretty easy to finish. Initially, I tried to redo the arrangement, reorder everything, but it made the song fall apart. I left it the way I had originally written it, and I'm glad I did. Sometimes, in trying to fix things, you just make them worse. At least that's how it is with me and my music.

Incidentally, the song was originally titled "Candy" because of these two, creepy spoken-word bits I'd snuck into the mix. They were so quiet I doubt anyone would have been able to understand them, but they inspired the title. One of them, which came in under the intro, said "Do you remember out back behind the wood-shed? You were five, and he said it would be fun. Well, was it?"

Sick, yes—and there's a reason it never made it into the final version.

### **In With the New**

For some reason, I tend to feel like a slacker and a cheat whenever I add lyrics to older songs for a newer album. I say this as if it's happened a lot, but "The Solomon Project" was my first album with lyrics. So, this is a new problem for me. But anyway, I felt bad about reworking Girls, Candy, and Break for this album— as if I were taking the easy way out. I mean, they're all my songs, and no one has really ever heard any of them before, so the point is moot. But it mattered to me.

For my own peace of mind, I needed to record some new material for the new album. I wrote the lyrics to Ministry when I was bored at work one day. I scribbled them out on a few scraps of paper and jammed it into my pocket, hoping I'd be able to transform them into a song. But I wanted this one to be different.

Mellow, perhaps. Or at least not screamy and loud. I wanted it to be sleazy, metaphoric, and even-tempered. Basically, I wanted the song to float with a light buzz.

The next new song I recorded, "Such a Mess," was something I never thought would make the cut. The riff was simple beyond belief, and not even that interesting. But something made me want to record it, and I did. But it didn't work. It fell flat. I reworked the arrangement for an hour or two before suddenly, it clicked. The result was thick, heavy, and rocked absolutely. I even managed to record some vocals. But no chorus. I just couldn't come up with anything that worked. Finally, I decided it didn't even need a true chorus. I liked the heaviness of the riffs. By itself, the guitar track sounded like a bad recording of a boring riff. But in the mix, with the lead guitar playing octaves all over the place, it just fell into place.

### **Cleaning Up the Stragglers**

There were two songs that I fought with for months without getting anywhere. One was "Stuck in My Head"—the song I was working on when I took a break to record Give it Up. The other was a fourth track from my previous demo set, titled "(Shhh) Don't Tell." Both songs were giving me absolute hell, and I had no idea how to bring them into line.

Stuck in My Head bothered me because of the singing. Some days, I would like it, and other days, I felt embarrassed whenever I listened to it. And there were a few lines in it that just weren't working. And the mid-section didn't fit. The lead guitar was all wrong. You get the idea. It was a mess.

The other song, Shhh, was difficult for the same reason as Break before it: I'd written and recorded a different set of vocals for it initially, and they didn't work. The new ones never sat well with me either, and the result was that I never felt comfortable with the way the song came across. I tried recording them again and again, using a different style each time, but whenever I listened to the result, I wound up liking the first set better.

In the end, some pretty big tweaks to the mixes of both songs brought them to a place where I was happy with them.

(Shhh) Don't Tell is one of my favorite arrangements of all time – I seriously love the guitars on that song. It was killing me, hating the vocals, worrying that this great song was going to wind up in the closet, never to be heard by anyone. The final song on the album, "Bleed Dry," is an instrumental I recorded back in 2005. But the mix was downright awful.

Here, I had this epic, heavy song that I wanted to love, but the production sounded bad. Flat, muddy, quiet – nothing a truly rocking song should be. The problem was, I had recorded it so long ago that I didn't even know what to make of my project file. The mixer channels were all wrong (I have a system now, which I stick to: Channel 1 is drums; channel 2 is bass; after that come the guitars; then, the vocals and other sweeteners. All my samples are pattern clips. All my patterns are placed as clips.), and I couldn't make sense of it. I wanted to leave it as-is, but it was seriously flawed. It took me months to finish remixing that track. Honestly, it was painful. I was tempted to abandon it, rather than mess with those files again. But I stuck it out, and I'm glad I did.

### **Final thoughts**

Is this album perfect? Definitely not. Am I happy with it? Absolutely.

The production on "The Solomon Project" is my best work to date. Listening to it, you'd never know I record all my inputs on cheap cables that ultimately run through a crappy sound card in my computer. You'd never know that I've never once been to a studio, or had anyone else work on my tracks. I love to be in control of my creativity, and this album is something I made completely on my own. Very few people even heard it while I was working on the tracks.

The few friends who did gave me some valuable feedback, much of which I at least took into consideration as I worked on finalizing things.

When you listen to this album, you're listening to a set of songs I lived in completely for months. I know these songs better than anything. I've probably heard them more than a hundred times apiece. I've listened to this album so much I'm sick of it.

But you know what? After a week or so, when I put it on in my car, I'm ready to rock again. When you listen to it, I hope you feel that – because I made it for you. "The Solomon Project" is my album, but without other people to listen, it's not worth a thing to me.

So, thanks for listening, guys—I hope you enjoy it.

### **Purchase the music**

Why would you want to buy the album? It's hard to ask someone to spend money. Everyone loves free music—who wouldn't?

So, I guess the question is, why should you pay for mine? I'd love to make a living on my music. That would be amazing. I don't know that I'll ever get to that point, because life is, frankly, way too expensive - but it's still something I'm shooting for.

If you buy my album, you're showing support for my music. Sure, you can listen to it for free on MySpace, but the quality isn't there. If you buy the tracks, or the CD, you'll be getting a quality product. I've put a ton of work into making these songs, and my ultimate goal is to reach people through them. I want my music to move people.

But in order to move people, they need to know about my music. If you enjoy the album, tell your friends. Tell your co-workers. Play the songs for them. Write me a letter, an email, or a profile comment. Send a link around to people you know.

Whatever you like - it's up to you. It may be my music, but really, I would rather that it be your music, and I am grateful for all your support.

The Solomon Project can be purchased online at CD Baby, on iTunes, at Amazon, on Lala, and on Tradebit. Or you can check out his music on his My Space page at [www.myspace.com/ianmarquis](http://www.myspace.com/ianmarquis).