STREET SCENE

Better Than Ezra takes its new sounds on tour

CHRISTINA FUOCO

Better Than Ezra has seen some better days.

The New Orleans-based band's bassist Tom Drummond is calling from Tampa, Fla., where he was bracing for Hurricane Georges.

"Right now it's OK but it might be worse tomorrow with the hurricane and all. The last hurricane flooded our studio. Any flooding is bad, but luckily our control room where a lot of our stuff was was upstairs," said Drummond who was surprisingly upbeat.

Things are looking up now for Better Than Ezra, whose tour hits hurricane-free Michigan on Thursday, Oct. 15, when the band will play St. Andrew's Hall in Detroit. Better Than Ezra's "How Does Your Garden Grow?" is its best effort yet.

The first single, "One More Murder," brings a Rhodes organ, drum machines, and electronic blips into the mix. The shimmy-inducing "Like It Like That," mixed by Jack Joseph Puig, who remixed The Verve Pipe's "The Freshman," is the highlight of the album.

"Adding the Rhodes piano brought a whole new dimension to the band. That's the thing about this record. We didn't use new sounds to use new sounds. We used them because they worked," Drummond explained.

"What makes this record different from, say, the last U2 record is a lot of the sounds on the U2 record sounded contrived. Working with Malcolm (Burn, producer, engineer), he was able to give these electronic sounds and gadgets an organic feel."

Better Than Ezra, he explained, tried to stay away from the "tricks of the trade" like distortion pedals.

"We tried to get away from what the status quo was. We sort of just wanted to try new ideas and how to arrange songs and make them lift without using a distortion stomp box or the old tricks of the trade. It really paid off."

The musical experimentation on "How Does Your Garden Grow" was, appropriately enough, the result of a growing period for the band.

"We just needed to do some things to reinspire ourselves. We've been playing for 10 years and that's a long time. The first two records were based on influences we had when the band started in 1988. It's just a natural progression. We had to catch up a little bit on this record," Drummond said.

'80s influenced: *Athenaeum opens for Better Than Ezra on Thursday, Oct. 15. The band is Nic Brown, Mark Kano, Grey Brewster and Alex McKinney.*

Better Than Ezra's first album, "Deluxe," was written from 1988-1990 and was recorded in 1993. Its second release, "Friction, Baby," was written during the "Deluxe" tour.

"We've covered a lot of ground between then and now. This is the first record where we could sit down and start with a clean slate."

Better Than Ezra will be bringing along keyboardist Jim Payne, credited on "How Does Your Garden Grow" as its spiritual adviser.

"He's been playing with us for awhile. He'll play the Rhodes piano, whereas Kevin (Griffin, guitarist/vocalist) did on the album. We've kind of worked it out where Kevin can go back to where the piano's stationed," he explained.

"The band's philosophy is we wouldn't just want to play to a DAT (tape). We've seen other bands do that, and we're just turned off by it. We're playing everything live except for a few drum loops, which is pretty much normal nowadays."

'80s influenced

Opening for Better than Ezra, besides Possum Dixon, is Athenaeum, whose first single, "What I Didn't Know," from its debut, "Radiance," has been compared to Rick Springfield's saccharin-sweet hits.

"I don't think I've ever heard a Rick Springfield song when I read about that (in a national magazine). The guys in the band sang 'Jessie's Girl' for me. Unless it's Led Zeppelin, I don't know it," he said shyly.

"People always said it makes them think of the '80s. I guess we are children of the '80s. It's funny a lot of people say it reminds them of 'Surrender' by Cheap Trick, which I never heard. We have a very small musical resource pool."

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>
> *Tom Drummond*
> *Better Than Ezra*

The band members are children of the '80s but didn't form Athenaeum until the early 1990s.

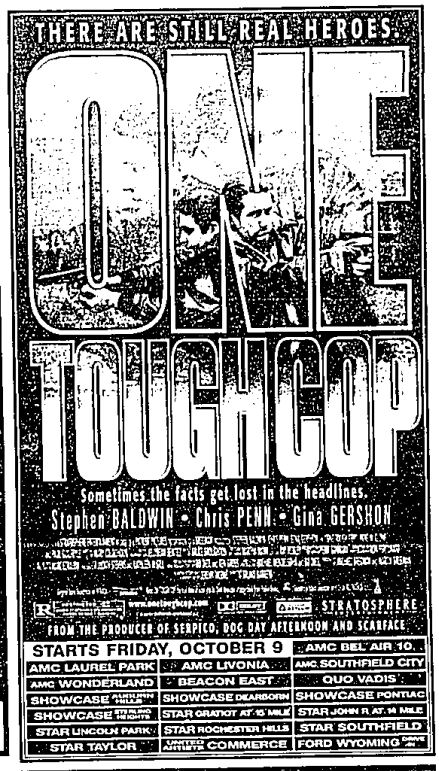
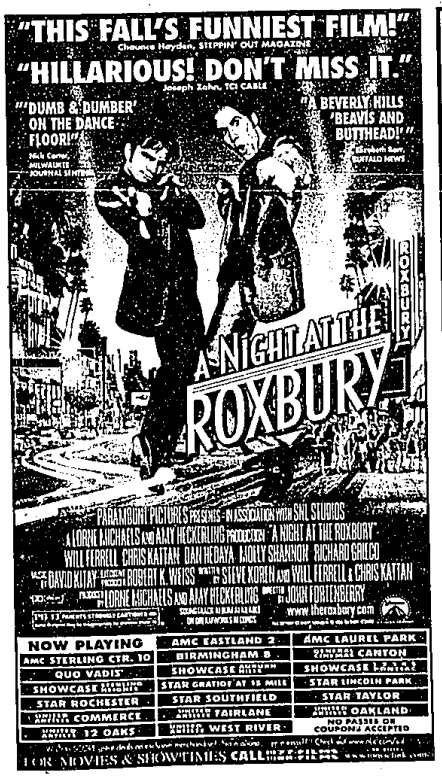
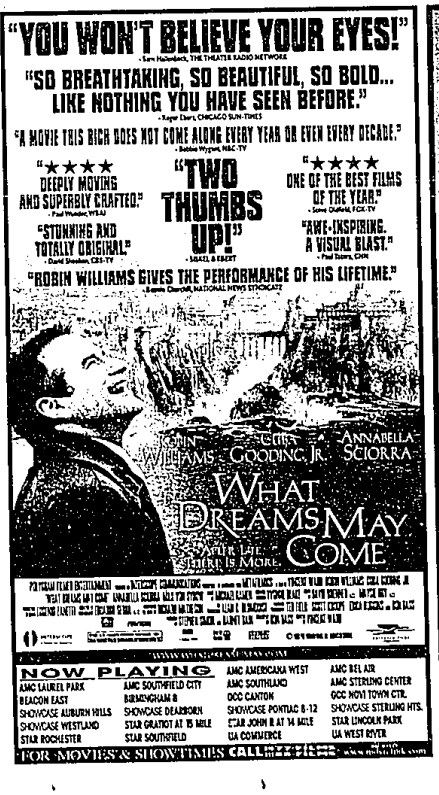
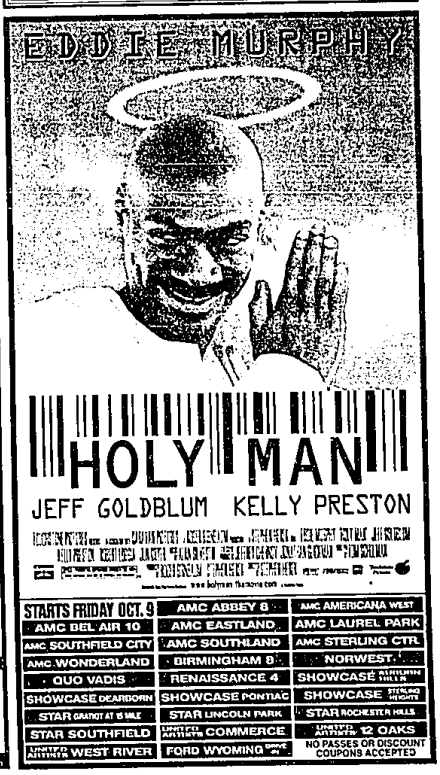
"Mark (Kano, vocalist/guitarist) and I formed the band seven years ago, and we were all pretty young, real young then. We all sort of grew up in the band together. We formed to play my eighth grade Valentine's dance," he said with a laugh.

"Those are our glorious beginnings. It was horrible. We were singing through a karaoke machine. That's all we had to amplify his voice. It was a disaster but pretty cool for eighth grade."

They were also thrilled with the opportunity to work with Gavin MacKillop, who has also worked with Toad the Wet Sprocket.

"He's a great producer. When we first started playing out, they asked us who we wanted to work with. We said Jack Joseph Puig and Gavin. We're all really big fans of Toad the Wet Sprocket. But we were a new band and we didn't know the names of that many producers."

"He was great as far as taking a song that we thought was done and making it a great song. He would tell us that a song can be great but it just needs some work. We'd say, 'The hell it needs work. It's done.' But by rearranging the song and just adding a part of taking a part away here or there, he was right. He made a lot of my stuff better."

Better Than Ezra, Athenaeum and Possum Dixon, perform Thursday, Oct. 15, at St. Andrew's Hall, 431 E. Congress, Detroit. Tickets are $13 in advance and $15 at the door for the all-ages show. Call (313) 961-MELT or visit http://www.961melt.com for more information.

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