

## COVER STORY

# After The Pulse: Erie's Bob Burger reaches musical heights by playing among rock royalty

Chip Schell, Special to the Erie Times-News

USA TODAY NETWORK

"I guess I've done a lot of things in my life," Bob Burger said with a chuckle.

That's an understatement, considering the extensive list of Burger's accomplishments — most of which are music-related — that would make even your typical overachiever feel inadequate.

If his name doesn't ring a bell (aside from the unrelated Fox TV show), that's probably because he's been gone from Erie, his hometown, since 1981. When he lived here, he was a staple on the Erie music scene, playing in bands such as Kelly's Cellar, Eddie C & The Bees, The Cows and The Pulse. The latter, which consisted of Burger, his brother Jeff Burger, Marty Lee (who would go on to play with Donnie Iris), and Jeff Klahr, had their song "You Wanna Know Why" and a remake of "Little Bit o' Soul" played in heavy rotation on local radio in 1980 and 1981.

Since moving to New Jersey, he's been busy. First, he earned a degree in electrical engineering and went to work in the field for 11 years before he decided to go to law school in 1992.

"But I continued working full time as an engineer all through law school and afterwards until 2017," he explained. "In fact, from 1997 to 2017 I worked three jobs; engineer, attorney and musician."

But it's that last job that really stands far above the rest when it comes to impressive achievements. After all, it's hard to top playing guitar on stage at a party hosted by Jon Bon Jovi where partygoers like Jimmy Buffett, Billy Joel and Paul McCartney joined Burger and his band for a few songs.

Yes, that really happened.

"Right place at the right time," he said of landing the gig.

That's just one of hundreds of high-profile musical experiences he's had



Erie native Bob Burger, shown in this undated photo, will release his fifth solo album, "The Domino Effect," on July 2. On July 1, he will make a rare appearance in his hometown performing with his old The Cows bandmate Dickie Buckel at The Oasis Pub. PROVIDED BY MITZEN PHOTOGRAPHY

See **BURGER**, Page 7S.



## ENTERTAINMENT

### Burger

Continued from Page 6S

over the past 40 years. The origins of a lot of that success can be traced to the famous Asbury Park, New Jersey, club called The Stone Pony, known for launching the career of Southside Johnny and the Asbury Jukes as well as occasional appearances by Bruce Springsteen. It was there, while playing in a band called Blonde Obsession with his brother, that Burger met musician Glen Burtnik, who later played in Styx.

"He liked my songs and asked me if I would co-write with him for his next album on A&M," Burger said. "The first song we wrote was called 'Spinning My Wheels,' which made it on the album. We've been friends and co-writers ever since."

Some of the highlights of their collaboration include earning a gold record award for co-writing the title cut of Styx's "Edge of the Century" album as well as other songs for the "Styx Greatest Hits - Part 2" and "Cyclorama" collections.

#### Private gigs with Springsteen, Bon Jovi

It was also at the Stone Pony that Burger met Bobby Bandiera, who was the lead guitarist for Southside Johnny and would later play rhythm guitar for Bon Jovi in live performances.

"I played on and off with Bobby for about 25 years and co-wrote his most popular song, 'C'mon Caroline,' which he still plays all the time," Burger said.

It was through Bandiera that Burger met Springsteen and Bon Jovi — which led to the aforementioned star-studded gigs. As part of Bandiera's band, Burger has played private gigs with Springsteen about a dozen times.

"I think the first thing I did was a birthday party for Bruce's mom. He's a cool guy to talk to. I played with Jon (Bon Jovi) at private events, but also at the Count Basie Theatre in a series of benefit concerts and Christmas shows," he said.

#### Staying busy with The Weeklings



In this image graphic, Erie native Bob Burger, right foreground, is shown playing with his Beatles tribute band, The Weeklings. Also shown, clockwise from lower left, are guitarist John Merjave, bassist Glen Burtnik and drummer Joe Bellia.

PROVIDED

#### and Max Weinberg

Burger hasn't played much with Bandiera in recent years, probably because he's focused on the Beatles-inspired band he and Burtnik formed in 2014 called The Weeklings. The band has recorded five albums for JEM Records and regularly plays dozens of high-profile events each year, including many Beatles festivals.

When they aren't playing their own gigs, they're the backing band for Springsteen's drummer, Max Weinberg, who has a touring show called "Max Weinberg's Jukebox." At each show, a screen with more than 100 songs is scrolling behind the band on stage. Weinberg goes into the audience and takes requests based on the list, and The Weeklings have to spontaneously perform the songs.

"I've been playing with Max since 2015, and we probably do 25 to 50 dates a year," Burger said. "We start up with him again on July 15 at Daryl's House Club in Pawling, New York."

As if that wasn't enough, Burger also has his own band called Bob Burger and The Ever-Changing Band, which as you might guess includes a multitude of different musicians.

#### Medical issues can't keep him from the stage

The 68-year-old Burger said before COVID-19, he was playing about 120 dates per year. But the pandemic isn't the only thing that has slowed his gig schedule. On June 5, 2021, Burger suffered a heart attack while performing his "Bob Burger and the Red Shoes: The Music of Elvis Costello" show to a sold-

out crowd at the Vogel Theatre in Red Bank, New Jersey.

About an hour into the show, he could tell something was wrong, so he apologized to the crowd and asked his guitarist to finish the concert. He was whisked away to the hospital where he was operated on within the hour. Less than two months later, though, he returned to performing. Then, in March of this year, he again suffered a medical issue that sidelined him from the stage — he had to have spinal fusion surgery.

"I've never really had health problems, but this last year has been tough on me," he admitted.

Still, he's bouncing back and has a full slate of The Weeklings' shows on tap for the summer in addition to his duties with Weinberg. He says he's "quasi-retired" as an attorney at New Jersey firm McCarter & English, LLP, where he practices technology and entertainment law as special counsel.

#### Live in Erie ... again!

On July 2, his fifth solo album, "The Domino Effect," will be released. The day before, though, he'll make a rare appearance in his hometown performing with his old Cows bandmate Dickie Buckel at The Oasis Pub, 3122 W. Lake Road, from 6 to 9 p.m.

"I'm coming in town for my Strong Vincent 50-year class reunion and to visit friends and family," he said.

Considering he stays in touch with a lot of his old Erie bandmates, it's likely to be a big crowd at Oasis that night. Burger plans to play some songs from The Pulse and from his new album, as well as some Beatles and any other requests from he and Buckel's Cows days.

The passion and drive Burger still has for performing and writing music is evident.

"I have more songs written than I'll ever be able to record in my life," he said.

It's no wonder that the closing track on his new album — a song called "Rock & Roll Band" — includes the line, "I don't know what I'd do if I didn't play in a rock and roll band."

Chip Schell is an Erie-area editor, author, host of the Erie Music History podcast and musician.