

# The Edison Project

Augusta rockers look for success in studio with producer Don Dixon

By **Steven Uhles** | *Staff Writer*

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**VIDEO: Watch an interview with The Edison Project and see them perform a song in downtown Augusta. [6 min. 23 sec.]**

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KERNERSVILLE, N.C. - Seated behind his drums, head bowed in concentration, Edison Project drummer Zach Swenson furrows his brow and grimaces as he listens to the playback of tracks recently recorded. Silently, he drums his fingers on his knee and, as the song concludes, lifts and shakes his head.

He's just not feeling it.

Behind the thick wall of studio glass, producer Don Dixon, known for his work with R.E.M., Marshall Crenshaw and The Smithereens, smiles at the hubris of youth, and, pressing the intercom button, lightly chastises the overly critical percussionist.

"What are you doing?" he asks. "Are you trying to bring everyone's vibe down?"

Smiling sheepishly, Mr. Swenson shakes his head and apologizes, and then begins to laugh. Nothing could dampen the spirits of the Augusta four-piece band that, quite unexpectedly, has found itself recording with a rock legend.

Encamped for nearly a week in early December at Mitch Easter's Fidelitorium, the studio sequel to the Drive-In Studio, where R.E.M. recorded its debut with Mr. Dixon, the Augusta-area band acknowledged some awe at the surroundings and the opportunity afforded.

"Making a real record, in a real studio, is such a new thing for all of us," Edison singer Dave Firmin said during a break. "I mean, this is something we'll hopefully be doing a lot of, but right now everything just seems larger than life."

Tucked at the edge of a hardwood forest in the small town of Kernersville, a Mayberry-model bedroom community that serves as an industrial and agricultural annex to nearby Winston-Salem, the studio is a haven for a young band looking for new ways to approach its music.

Comfortable couches line the walls of the front room and control booth, and the main music room bristles with guitars, vintage organs and all manner of auditory possibilities. Edison Project guitarist Rino Mendoza said that although the band's musical immersion has been exciting, the atmosphere has managed to remain relaxed.

"In other studios, I don't think we would have been this comfortable, and Don's a big part of that," he said. "We seriously get to sit in a room together and practice and play. It's an emotional experience, and I think it's going to be an emotional record."

Seated behind the sprawling Fidelitorium soundboard, Mr. Dixon smiles at the enthusiasm and energy of his young charges. Recalling the first time he saw the band, wrapping a set at last year's Rockin' Rib Fest in downtown Augusta, he said it was that enthusiasm, combined with an unusually sophisticated and thoughtful approach to music, that inspired him to take on the project.

"I like to see bands, but I don't like most of them," he said. "But in these guys, I saw a young band that was fresh, used a lot of great harmonies and wasn't emo irritating. It was something that wasn't like modern rock but also wasn't a throwback."

The Edison Project came into the studio ready and rehearsed, Mr. Dixon said. As a result, he has had the luxury to spend real time experimenting with the sound, tones and textures of the songs. Hours are spent with Mr. Mendoza, bent over the studio's extensive collection of amplifiers, making the small adjustments that will ultimately matter.

Mr. Swenson said watching the way he shapes a song's sound has been an unmatched musical education.

"I mean, I've always been the guy who said, 'Oh, an electric guitar and an amp - cool,'" he said. "But Don comes in talking about hooking up amps and pedals, and he and Rino are down there applying the elbow grease. It's, well, it's pretty amazing."

Mr. Dixon said that, oddly enough, all that time and energy are expended chasing songs that sound as though they required no labor at all.

Although The Edison Project prides itself on complex arrangements that sometimes sprawl, Mr. Dixon believes people should find a band with smart, simple songs that are easy to understand and enjoy.

"We could make a big record, a Queen record, with them right now," he said. "But I think that would be wrong. I think it's important, because they are such a vital live band, to give people a record that feels very effortless. Whether it turns out to be effortless is another story, but that's how it should feel."

The producer said the band already possesses what he sees as the three essential ingredients for a righteous rock record: good singing, a great drum sound and loud guitars. Part of what attracted him to the band was the absence of a weak link.

"Most bands have one," he said. "R.E.M., when I first heard them, had no particularly strong link, musically speaking. But they were fantastic, from the very first note I heard them play. Their abilities combined to make something greater as a whole. These guys are the same, except they can play much better than those guys did."

Talk around the shop inevitably turns toward "what if" fantasies - what if the record sells a million copies, what if there's a world tour. Both the producer and the band, however, understand that although the Internet has made it easy to get a band heard, the competitive, complex musical marketplace makes it difficult to establish a new act.

Mr. Dixon said the secret to making a good CD involves understanding that capturing the mood of a young band finding its feet, means leaving suppositions of sales, awards and careers outside.

"You need to get what you like now and not worry about it later," he said. "It's pop music. It's supposed to be disposable, and they, as a band, are supposed to feel like they have invented everything. All that other stuff, the institutionalization of pop and rock, it drives me crazy. It was never supposed to be that way."

The Edison Project has taken that lesson to heart.

"We have put a lot of pressure on this record," bass player Michah Swenson said before returning to the safe haven of the studio floor. "Before we even got here, we were talking about what it was going to do. It became its own entity, the white unicorn we're all chasing.

"But the truth is, when I get to cut the shrink-wrap from my personal copy, when I get the opportunity to listen to it from beginning to end, that's when I'll have lassoed that unicorn. Anything else is a bonus."

## **MEET THE BAND**

### **MICAH SWENSON**

AGE: 25

PLAYS: Bass, vocals

INSPIRATIONAL ALBUM: The Beatles, Revolver

LUCKY PERFORMANCE CHARM: "My little brother. I can't imagine playing with anyone else."

### **ZACH SWENSON**

AGE: 21

PLAYS: Drums, vocals

INSPIRATIONAL ALBUM: Steely Dan, Aja

LUCKY PERFORMANCE CHARM: The lucky jangling empowerment tune the band sings privately before each performance.

### **RINO MENDOZA**

AGE: 20

PLAYS: Guitar, vocals

INSPIRATIONAL ALBUM: Jump, Little Children, Magazine

LUCKY PERFORMANCE CHARM: A tie. "My parents always told me if you perform, do something to make sure the people know you take it seriously. That's why the tie."

**DAVE FIRMIN**

AGE: 21

PLAYS: Guitar, vocals

INSPIRATIONAL ALBUM: Crosby, Stills & Nash, self-titled

LUCKY PERFORMANCE CHARM: A peacock amulet made for him by a monk. "He gave it to me and told me that every peacock loses its feathers and not to be too proud."

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