

THE BUFFALO NEWS

GUSTO SUNDAY

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Photos by Derek Gee/Buffalo News

Eddie Money has some fun posing with the cast of "Two Tickets to Paradise: The Eddie Money Musical," during rehearsal at a Rochester charter school.



Actor Alec Nevin, right, plays Eddie Money in the musical based on the rocker's life that will open Wednesday at Rochester's Kodak Center.

WNY performers take crack at Broadway with Eddie Money's 'Two Tickets to Paradise'

BY COLIN DABKOWSKI
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NEWS STAFF REPORTERS

ROCHESTER — On a frigid night in late January, Edward Joseph Mahoney straggled into a high school gym on the outskirts of this Rust Belt city to take a look at his own life. The rock star, looking slightly bedraggled in jeans and a black hoodie bearing his stage name, settled into a folding chair beneath the basketball net. He nervously tucked his Big Mac under his seat and leaned forward as a cast of eager young Western New Yorkers launched into the first preview performance of "Two Tickets to Paradise: The Eddie Money Musical."

Opening night of the show, which has its

world premiere Wednesday in Rochester's Kodak Center, was less than three weeks away. Money, 68, who will appear as himself alongside a cast of Buffalo and Rochester-based actors and dancers, was a nervous wreck.

That night, under the harsh fluorescent lights of the University Preparatory Charter School gymnasium, Money watched the ups and downs of his life play out on a makeshift stage. After it was all over and Money's nervous expression had melted into a smile, he leaned over to his producer and whispered a hushed reaction.

"I can't believe this," he said, with tears in his eyes. "Wow."

If the story of Eddie Money's life and ca-

See Money on Page D2

CONTINUED FROM THE GUSTO SUNDAY COVER

Choreographer stresses variety, innovation

MONEY • from D1

reer is unlikely – how many ex-cops do you know who have overdosed twice and still managed to sell 40 million records? – so is the story of this musical.

It is unusual for Western New York to be chosen as the proving ground for a musical with national ambitions. It's even more unusual for a group of small-market theater people to be handed so much creative control over an artist's entire body of work.

But that's just what has happened for a group of Rochester and Buffalo performers and creatives, who have spent the last five months working feverishly to infuse Money's 8-year-old script for this project with new life, new songs and legs that could take it to Broadway.

When the show debuts on Valentine's Day, producers from three national musical theater groups will be in attendance to gauge the show's potential for a national tour or even a shot at the Great White Way. For Money and his Western New York collaborators, the pressure is on.

A charmed life

Money's a rock star with millions in album sales to his credit, and he still brings 'em in on the oldies circuit, playing his biggest hits like a man possessed, and taking obvious pleasure in the love showered upon him by his fans. But when you encounter him in the flesh, you'd be forgiven if your first thought is, "He's Rodney Dangerfield in a Beatle wig." The man is, in a word, hilarious.

"Eddie wants you to think he's an average guy, but he isn't," said Buffalo concert promoter Dave Taylor, who has booked Money for several high-profile outdoor shows in our market over the years. "He's a rock star who never fully outgrew his blue-collar past. Eddie is sincere and kind and hilarious. Talk to him long enough and you'll forget he wrote some of rock's biggest anthems, because you'll be laughing your face off."

Money has a comedian's timing, born, perhaps, of years spent capitalizing on being in the right place at the right time. The story that forms the basis of the book for "Two Tickets to Paradise: The Eddie Money Musical" is not without its share of strife and suffering. But that story also suggests Money has led a rather charmed life.

Born into an Irish Catholic family in Brooklyn just as the 1950s commenced, raised on Long Island by a New York City police officer father and a doting mother, Edward Mahoney could have easily fallen into the life prepared for him, becoming a cop like his father and grandfather before him.

In fact, he made overtures toward doing as much, spending two years as an NYPD trainee. But the rock 'n' roll bug had bitten him by then, and as he says today, the strictures of "short hair and a uniform" led him to proclaim, "I can't do this for the next 25 years," and off he went, westward, dreams of rock stardom in his head.

He landed in California in 1968, with tentative plans to avoid the draft by attending UC Berkeley by day and pursuing his music career post-sunset. Then he met rock impresario and legendary promoter Bill Graham. Mahoney became Money. College did not remain on his radar for long.

"1968 was like the 'Summer of Love,'" he recalled. "I went to UC Berkeley for a couple of years and everybody (there) was very open. I was very hip. You know, I've been a hippie my whole life, to tell you the truth. Once I found out that I had a good lottery number with the draft department, I went, '(Expletive) this, I'm dropping out of school.'

"I wanted to become a rock 'n' roll star. I got signed with Bill Graham, and I did a show called 'Sounds of the City,' which was like amateur night. I had written, already, all these songs (that would end up on his first two albums). Bill Graham was a good guy. He was like a dad to me. He brought Led Zeppelin to the United States – I mean, come on!"

Money started hitting the clubs hard, with Graham's guidance. He honed his particular strain of rock 'n' roll, which married primal '50s sounds with the influence of Motown and a dash



Derek Gee/Buffalo News

Choreographer Terri Filips Vaughan chats with Eddie Money after a showcase of his Two Tickets to Paradise: The Musical at University Preparatory Charter School in Rochester.

of Southern soul – a mélange not unlike that crafted by Southside Johnny and the Asbury Jukes, whose "I Don't Wanna Go Home" was a hit at the time.

This was decidedly NYC-laced rock 'n' soul, but Money's penchant for dramatic and memorable pop hooks was tough to deny. It didn't take him long to grab the attention of Columbia Records. An understanding of rocket science was not necessary for the money men at the label, they simply threw Eddie and his band into the studio and had them record the live set they'd been playing in nightclubs for several years. (Buffalo's own Gary Mallaber, who'd by then already laid down iconic grooves for the Steve Miller Band, lent unflinching solidarity to that debut recording's sessions.)

The hits came quickly. "Two Tickets to Paradise," "Baby Hold On," a cover of Smokey Robinson's "You've Really Got a Hold on Me," and a healthy rock radio infrastructure combined to make the debut a smash. Less than a year later, sophomore effort "Life for the Taking" fared similarly.

Ups and downs of the road

The stardom was relatively instant. Money did what most people who found themselves in such a situation would – he soaked it all in, he toured like a madman, and he partied. Hard.

A little too hard, as it turned out.

"Well, back in the '80s, I did that thing called fentanyl – whatever it is, it just killed Tom Petty, it's a horrible drug," Money recalled. "It killed the sciatic nerve on my left leg and I couldn't walk for about a year."

Actually, the drug that Money inhaled at a party, thinking it was something else, was quite likely phenetol, a cheap barbiturate often cut with cocaine as a money-saving measure at the time. (Though the opioid fentanyl had been in production since the 1960s, it did not become the predominant cutting additive in heroin and cocaine until the 2000s.) Regardless of the drug in question, the result was a serious crash-and-burn for Money. He fell out of commercial favor and into a cycle of alcohol and drug abuse.

"Having the drug overdose was horrible," he recalled with a grimace. "I couldn't walk for 11 months. I remember using a walker to get from my room to the music room to write."

Ten years after leaving home and turning his back on the family business, Money had hit the wall.

"Two Tickets to Paradise: The Eddie Money Musical" would be a serious buzz-kill if it ended with this period of Money's life. Wisely, it doesn't. Money managed to land on his feet yet again. In 1982, he released the biggest-selling album of his career, and partly thanks to MTV, where his video

for "Shakin'" was in heavy (read "all but perpetual") rotation, was granted what so few in America can live to enjoy: a second act.

"I came back with my biggest album, which is the 'No Control' album," said Money. "And we sold like 39, 40 million records. I should have saved the money. Who knew?"

Money hopes to take this autobiographical musical on the road with the Rochester cast and production crew. He seems pretty into the idea. Whether "Two Tickets to Paradise" becomes his own "Jersey Boys" remains to be seen, but on this night in Rochester, Money appears at peace, still vibrant, and still eager to take on new projects.

"I'm on a spiritual program right now," Money says. "I don't get loaded anymore. Everybody (in my family) is happy but me. You know what they say, 'Happy wife, happy life.'"

"But I was lucky to have top-10 singles in the '70s, '80s and the '90s. I got very lucky."

A creative opportunity

If Money's life has been charmed, so, lately, have the lives of the hodge-podge collection of Buffalo and Rochester theater professionals who have converged on this unexpected project.

The show dropped into their lap completely unbidden last August, in the form of a chance connection between two concert promoters Money had worked with during a recent show in Batavia. Those producers then approached Jim Vollertsen, a Rochester theater producer, with an idea from the furthest reaches of theatrical left field: A musical based on the singer's life and career.

"To be honest, I didn't take them seriously," Vollertsen said in January after the first preview of "Two Tickets." "They said, 'Eddie wrote a show, and it was a disaster.' And he quit."

Money admits that first attempt at mounting the show, an abortive production on Long Island, was less than sophisticated.

"I wrote the whole thing myself. But then again, I'm not really a Broadway kind of guy," said Money, who swears every second syllable. "But these people here, they really know their (stuff). They know what they're doing. They know what songs are popular. I just said, you know what? Let 'em go. See what happens. I'm so excited about it."

Vollertsen, the president and CEO of the Rochester Association of Performing Arts, recruited Rochester director Eric Johnson, performer and writer Dresden Engle, music director Yunjin Audrey Kim of the Eastman School of Music and Niagara University professor and choreographer Terri Filips Vaughan.

The hope was to hone the show from a scattershot collection of greatest hits and underbaked dialogue into an energetic, plot-driven production that bears more resemblance to a traditional

Broadway musical than a typical jukebox show. The new version also features about six new musical theater-style songs Money wrote specifically for the production.

Since October, the team has been hard at work on the script. Engle and Johnson spend late nights exchanging ideas, writing new dialogue and adding a patina of realism to a life story so unorthodox as to seem impossible.

Because the show is so dance-heavy, Vaughan, the choreographer, has had to try especially hard to expand on the limited repertoire of moves normally associated with rock music.

Getting it right

"Because it's an original show, you want to do justice to his life and career and the real people who are part of his life," said Vaughan, whose husband, the Buffalo actor and director Steve Vaughan, plays Eddie's authoritarian father. "For me, the challenge is to keep it all different. How many step-touches and ponies and fist bumps can we do before the audience goes, what?"

She achieved this variety by adding innovative numbers featuring movable airplane seats (for "Two Tickets," the Act One closer) and Bob Fosse-inspired moves for a scene that deals with Money's life-changing drug overdose.

Money was particularly impressed with Vaughan's plane scene. "I never would have thought of that in a million years," he said.

For both Vaughans, the rare opportunity to be involved in shaping a new musical was irresistible.

"You show up to work and you really don't know what's going to happen. Because when you walk in, they hand you a new script," said Steve Vaughan, who will be performing a musical theater solo for the first time in his career. "The spirit of collaboration is tremendous, all the way across the board."

The same goes for Buffalo-based dancers and 2017 Niagara University alumnae Heather Casseri and Shelby Ehrenreich, who have been commuting to Rochester for rehearsals.

"We're learning how to be flexible with the production team to collaborate on a workshop," Casseri said. "The energy everyone brings to the table has been phenomenal. Being open to new ideas and new ways of collaborating has been very helpful."

Alec Nevin, a Rochester-area actor who plays young Eddie, has immersed himself in the singer's career, watching dozens of YouTube videos and trying to get the performer's mannerisms down. It didn't hurt that during the lead-up to the show, Money invited Nevin to Boston to watch a performance and tossed the young performer right into the fire.

"Ten minutes before the show started, he said, 'You know 'Two Tickets to Paradise'?' Nevin recalled. "I said, 'Oh yeah, I love that song!' He said, 'You know the second verse? Come in there.' So I went up on stage and sang with him."

Just like his split-second decision to drag Nevin on stage with him, Money's laissez-faire attitude about the show is extremely unorthodox. Unlike "Jersey Boys," "Beautiful: The Carole King Musical" and other jukebox pieces in which the artist or their estate holds more veto power, Money has ceded it to a group of young and in some cases untested talent.

Despite the long odds of making it to Broadway, the musical represents a real opportunity for Money to forge another comeback in a career that has had no shortage of them.

After his drug overdose, Money rather miraculously recovered and conjured a major crossover hit record in the form of the "No Control" album. "But then I went and got high all over again," he said, winching.

For dramatic reasons as well as personal ones, Money and his team left that hiccup out. The result, everyone involved in this production hopes, is yet another career revival for one of the most tenacious rock musicians of his era.

"We don't cover that in the show. We end happy," Engle said. "This is an amazing journey. This is Eddie's dream come true."

Up-and-coming performers are well-represented

BPO • from D1

contemporary composer Richard Danielpour. The BPO will be recording the work for Naxos.

Falletta describes Danielpour's work as in the tradition of Bach's "St. Matthew Passion" and "St. John Passion," but with a different slant.

"He wants to make the link between the fact that Jesus was Jewish and his family was Jewish, and the connections that come from that," she said. "I think it's a great project for a city in Buffalo, where people are so aware of religion and spirituality and aware of different backgrounds. It's who we are."

Along the way, the season branches out in a number of directions.

"I think our goal is always to mix it up and try new concert formats, to look at the season in a different way, to shake it up for people," said Hart.

He points to a concert featuring a concerto for rock band, violin and string orchestra, written by Michael Mills of R.E.M. The concerto features concert violinist Robert McDuffie, a friend of Falletta's and a sought-after soloist.

"We always try to do one out-there concerto that's not

typical," Falletta said.

A Chinese New Year concert will involve the University at Buffalo's Confucius Institute, and a concert including a Paderewski concerto honors Poland's 100th anniversary.

"We're trying to connect with a different part of the community," Hart said.

Featuring up-and-coming artists is a long-standing tradition at Kleinhans, going back at least to the 1950s, when the BPO booked pianist Van Cliburn before he was a star.

"The next season shows a real commitment to young artists," Hart said. "I think what we found is there's a level of excitement that they bring. People can expect to follow them in their careers. There's something like four rising stars, right in a row."

Other more established soloists who have been a hit at the BPO will be making encore appearances including violinist Sarah Chang and pianist Fabio Bidini.

The pops series is, for many, the icing on the cake. Cheyenne might be the greatest draw, but she is far from the only one.

Among the highlights are appearances by the Hot Sardines, a cool swing jazz group,

and singer Ann Hampton Callaway, presenting a tribute to Linda Ronstadt. Melinda Doolittle, of "American Idol" fame, will be singing the Great American Soulbook.

The schedule

Here is the rundown of the BPO's 2018-2019 classics and pops seasons. All concerts are in Kleinhans Music Hall. Visit bpo.org or call 885-5000.

Classics season

8 p.m. Sept. 15: Baritone Thomas Hampson stars in the BPO's opening gala, which culminates in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony.

8 p.m. Sept. 29 and 2:30 p.m.

Sept. 30: Pianist Hye-Jin Kim plays Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 1. Also, George Tsontakis' "May the River Be Unbroken," and Prokofiev's Symphony No. 3.

10:30 a.m. Oct. 12 and 8 p.m.

Oct. 13: Violinist Paul Huang is soloist in Barber's Violin Concerto. Also, "Dark Mountains" by Robert Paterson, and Rachmaninoff's Symphony No. 3.

8 p.m. Oct. 27 and 2:30 p.m.

Oct. 28: Piotr Sulkowski conducts a tribute to Poland: Nowowiejski's "Praetorian March" from "Quo Vadis"; Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 3, "Polish"; and Paderewski's Piano Concerto, with soloist Lukasz Krupinski.

8 p.m. Nov. 10 and 2:30 p.m.

Nov. 11: Hans Graf conducts Dvorak's "Carnival Overture" and Symphony No. 6, plus Paganini's Violin Concerto No. 1, with soloist Francisco Fullana.

10:30 a.m. Nov. 16 and 8 p.m.

Nov. 17: Robert McDuffie is the violin soloist in Mike Mills' Concerto for Rock Band, Violin and String Orchestra. Also, "Fanfare for an Uncommon Woman" and "Tambor," both by Joan Tower, and Ravel's orchestration of Mussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition."

8 p.m. Dec. 1 and 2:30 p.m.

Dec. 2: Rossen Milanov conducts Schubert's Symphony No. 9, "the Great," and Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 3, with soloist Sara Buechner.

10:30 a.m. Dec. 7 and 8 p.m.

Dec. 8: JoAnn's Classical Christmas.

8 p.m. Jan. 26 and 2:30 p.m.

Jan. 27, 2019: An all-Mozart program features the Overture to "The Impresario"; the Sinfonia Concertante for oboe, clarinet, horn and bassoon; and the Symphony No. 40.

8 p.m. Feb. 2 and 2:30 p.m.

Feb. 3, 2019: Ken Lam conducts a program that celebrates Chinese New Year: Li Yuan's "Train Toccata"; the "But