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FROM INDIE TO ABC

Val Emmich has a new gig to promote his music: a role on "Ugly Betty."



Making Beautiful Music on 'Ugly Betty'

By NISHA GOPALAN

ON a mid-September evening the actor and musician Val Emmich slowly stepped out of a cab in front of Highbar, the trendy new rooftop lounge in Midtown Manhattan. To his left, Mr. Emmich took in a flood of lights creating a glittery mini-Las Vegas skyline. To his right, he spotted a white van parked by the curb. He made a beeline for the van. Ducking behind it, he surveyed the spectacle and steeled himself for the party kicking off Season 3 for "Ugly Betty," on which he plays the klutzy protagonist's latest crush object.

The wariness may seem odd for someone whose main gig consists of getting up on a stage and performing in front of hundreds of clubgoers. (His latest album of introspective pop-rock, "Little Dagers," is his sixth.) But as Mr. Emmich, a baby-faced 29-year-old, later explained, "That was my first real red carpet." And the stint on "Ugly Betty," during which he'll get to perform tracks from the new album as well as newer ones, is his first real big break as both a musician and an actor.

Once inside the party, Mr. Emmich, his brown faux-hawk fluffed to emo perfection, overcame his nerves and chatted up his agents and co-stars, including America Ferrera and Becky Newton. When Lindsay Lohan, a guest star on the series, self-consciously swanned by and guests rubbernecked, Mr. Emmich barely noticed. It's O.K., he said: "We had no interaction on set. And from what I heard, that is pretty common for everyone else."

Unlike Ms. Lohan, who feeds off the hoopla, Mr. Emmich finds it curious and off-putting. "I've been thinking a lot about that party lately," he said a few weeks lat-

er, in his deep, mumbly voice. "Anyone who finds that fun, I just don't get. I don't really understand anyone who doesn't view that as a mere byproduct of their work."

On "Ugly Betty" Mr. Emmich plays Jesse, an impossibly modest, artsy musician whose career advances after he meets the besotted, nurturing heroine. "What was so amazing about his audition was how a different person comes alive in him when he's singing and playing his guitar," Ms. Ferrera said. "He's so confident."

That confidence has helped him cope with the vagaries of the entertainment business for nearly a decade. A native of Manalapan, N.J., he first picked up a guitar out of boredom, while recovering from Lyme disease in high school. Inspired by Nirvana's melodic brand of punk rock (O.K., and maybe by the Bon Jovi oeuvre too), he kept at it through college, at Rutgers, ultimately recording his first full-length album, "Slow Down Kid," for Childlike Records in 2003.

Mr. Emmich's first stab at success, however, came later that year when he signed a deal with Epic to rerelease "Slow Down." The label did just that — but only after pressing him to shoehorn supposedly sure-fire hits into the album by writing new tracks with producers like Butch Walker (American Hi-Fi, Katy Perry). He acquiesced, and then Epic asked him to write more.

"I spent six years of my life doing that

record," he said. "I told them I would not write another note."

Epic released the CD in 2004. It did not sell well. A traumatized Mr. Emmich, meanwhile, left the label, grew a beard and headed to Woodstock, N.Y., where he began writing material for his self-released follow-ups, "Sunlight Searchparty" and "Songs, Volume 1: Woodstock." Meanwhile his forays in acting — while he was at Rutgers he took the odd gig simply because it paid more — were becoming more frequent. (His most memorable role from those early days: playing a sleazy fratboy

For Val Emmich, landing a role on a hit TV show has also meant a chance to promote his new CD.

type who picks a bar fight and dramatically utters the line "This isn't over!" on "As the World Turns.")

Mr. Emmich's growing résumé ultimately won him small spots as the Nonthreatening Hot Guy on "Ed," "Third Watch" and "Cashmere Mafia," culminating in his attention-grabbing guest role as Tina Fey's cougar bait on "30 Rock."

"She's witty, smart, sexy," he said of Ms. Fey. "I was intimidated by her more than anyone else I've acted alongside." What he learned from her, he said, was "that normal people can be in this business."

Those music and acting ambitions have converged with his "Ugly Betty" role. "Last season there was some talk of John Mayer coming around," said Victor Nelli Jr., a producer and director of the show. Mr. Mayer passed (ostensibly because the

role demanded a sizable time commitment), so producers held a casting call. "There was just this quiet storm to Val," Mr. Nelli said. "And this cuteness. America's eyes lit up during the audition. She was just like, 'Oh, he's so cute.'"

Mr. Emmich, meanwhile, saw the promotional possibilities for his singing career, even if it meant fewer touring opportunities for "Little Dagers." "I'm a very cautious, neurotic person," he said. "But I'm weathered enough to know that this is a good opportunity."

He was right. He recently finished filming his first feature film — the drama "Fighting Fish," in which he plays a tormented young man who raises his siblings — when word leaked to the trade papers about his recurring television role. "My MySpace plays doubled in like an hour," he said. "I was like, 'Whoa, this is bigger than I thought.'"

After he performed on the Nov. 6 episode of "Ugly Betty," his daily MySpace plays shot up to more than 12,000 from 500 in just one day. ("Little Dagers" has sold modestly so far: about 3,000 downloads and CDs combined.)

Despite the early signs of fame as his lady-magnet character finally kicks into regular rotation in Betty's life, little has actually changed in his. This delights Mr. Emmich. He's still going on auditions. (The latest was for a small role on "Fringe," J. J. Abrams's new series on Fox, which he didn't get.) He and his wife of a year, Jill, a schoolteacher, still live with one roommate. And they still reside in the less savory part of Jersey City.

"I like stepping in Manhattan, but I like leaving too," Mr. Emmich explained. "I like viewing all this from a distance."

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