

AROUND NEW JERSEY

MUSICIAN

A Rocker Who Rocks to His Own Beat (and CD)

By TAMMY LA GORCE

JERSEY CITY

VAL EMMICH may not be the first rock singer-songwriter to see a major-label record deal go sour, but he's one of the few who seems to be getting the last laugh.

To start, there is his still-thriving music career: After being released from a two-CD contract with Epic Records in 2006 — executives struggled to find a hit in the material he delivered to them, he said — Mr. Emmich, 28, bounced back on his own terms late last year with the independent release “Sunlight Searchparty.”

One of the album's energetic but introspective songs, “The Only One Lonely,” is in the running for an Independent Music Award later this month. If it wins, it will dovetail nicely into “Little Daggers,” an album to be released with a new label this spring. (Mr. Emmich will appear at the Stone Pony in Asbury Park on Dec. 22.)

He has also just completed a novel; in 2008, he will try to find a publisher for “A Break in the Weathers,” which owes a stylistic debt to the writer Chuck Klosterman, he said, and features a 20-something with complicated relationships.

Last but probably not least, there is his day job. Lately Mr. Emmich has been drawing a paycheck by smooching with the actresses Tina Fey and Lucy Liu on the sets of the TV shows “30 Rock” and “Cashmere Mafia.”

A lot of showbiz up-and-comers might

coast on that last element of what is shaping up to be a multiplatform reinvention. Though Mr. Emmich was to appear on only a single episode of “30 Rock” alongside Ms. Fey (scheduled to have been broadcast Nov. 29), he has a recurring role on “Cashmere Mafia,” which is set to be shown next month on ABC and on which he plays a male nanny, or “manny.” “Cashmere Mafia” is also the much-anticipated brainchild of Darren Star, creator of “Sex and the City.”

But Mr. Emmich is mostly blasé about it.

“Acting is probably the thing I like to do least,” he said from the kitchen of the well-kept apartment here that he shares with his wife, Jill, an elementary school teacher, and two roommates. “I’m not that comfortable with it because you have the least control. I’d rather be the director, the person who’s guiding it.”

That said, he feels lucky to be acting at all. In 1997, as an 18-year-old freshman at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, Mr. Emmich walked into the profession by chance.

“I was doing a summer job at a bookstore, and the owner’s son was an actor,” he said. The owner, impressed by how much money her son was making, suggested: “You should try acting. You should meet his manager.”

“So I just went,” said Mr. Emmich, who grew up in Manalapan and graduated from Manalapan High School. That introduction led to commercial work — he appeared on a “Got Milk?” spot and one for AT&T Wireless — and eventually to bit parts on TV shows including “Third Watch” and “Ed.”

“When all my friends in college were wait-

ing tables, I was getting residual checks,” he said. “So many people want to do it, I feel almost guilty about it. I never cared about it so much. It’s just been kind of a side job.”

Music, though, has always meant more. When Mr. Emmich graduated from Rutgers with a liberal arts degree in 2001, he was still writing songs as feverishly as he did when he was a 15-year-old, when he first “caught a buzz” off the process, he said. By 2003, Epic had discovered him; a year later he was performing with well-known acts including Dashboard Confessional and Gavin McGraw.

Then came the struggles that led to the break. The label “kept saying: ‘You need a hit. We need to go to radio with a hit,’” he said. (A spokeswoman for Epic said the company did not wish to comment on its contract with Mr. Emmich.)

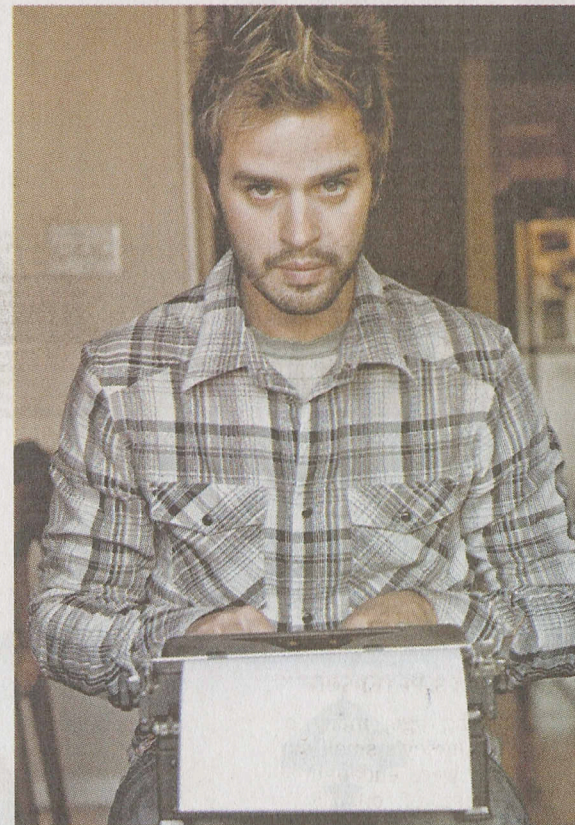
“I felt like a failure in a way,” he said. “I felt like, ‘Why couldn’t it work?’ Now I realize the music industry is like life. It’s completely subjective.”

The good news, he said, is that he has fully rediscovered himself artistically. “Now I purposely don’t have any consideration for what’s commercial. I don’t compromise.”

The challenges of his acting career are more mundane.

“I have this sweaty-hand problem, and I was so nervous about this ‘Cashmere Mafia’ thing with Lucy Liu — we have a big makeout scene — that I kept apologizing,” he said. “I actually went to see a doctor, it’s so bad.”

Ms. Liu “was really nice about it, though,” he said. “She recommended acupuncture.”



ALEX DI SUVERO FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

MULTITASKING Val Emmich, at home in Jersey City, says he has fully rediscovered himself artistically.