

# John Allaire

By James Edwards

photos by Hilary Rose

## Canadian Road Warrior



He comes across as someone who is cautiously confident in what he does. Talk to him about music, not necessarily just his own, and his face lights up with the passion of a seasoned pitcher with a few years left in his arm. **John Allaire**, a 40-year-old singer/songwriter from Ottawa, Ontario, is standing backstage at the *Bluesfest* festival in his home town. He's just finished having a conversation with Americana legend **Alejandro Escovado**.

The two spoke as if they were old friends. In fact, it turns out that they did share a billing back in the late 1980s, Allaire with his seminal alt-roots band **The Town Cryers**, and Escovado then with the **True Believers**. "I don't know if he actually remembered our band, but he kindly admitted to remembering the event" Allaire said with his trademark sarcastic smirk. "I'm just happy he's still rocking. What a show!"

A great show indeed, and I was there to talk to Escovado, not Allaire. I had to admit to never hearing Allaire's music before, although I had caught his name mentioned in other articles. He offered a copy of his latest solo release, *Thank You Waitress* (Flat and Black Records) and I gave it a spin back in the hotel room that night. My first impression was how honest his vocals were. Like Allaire himself, his vocal treatments and instrumental textures evoke a sense of someone who is constantly immersed in the moment.

So the next day we met at a local watering hole for a conversation, where he opened with a frank commentary on the perception of his music, "Yeah, I seem to get two camps of people - those who kind of get what I'm doing and those who won't give it the time of day." He shrugs off the obvious disappointment he has encountered at home with a lack of media attention in his own town, but instead of looking outward to blame, he looks inward and offers some possible explanations.

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"I think there might be quite a few things at play here that tend to cause distractions here at home, and even in the folk and roots music community in general. First, I think coming from a band like The Town Cryers may be a factor. We were a pretty DIY band. We didn't rally around the music community locally much really. Instead, we chose to go our own way and see how far we could get. We did alright I guess, winning a few national awards, touring with some pretty big names and receiving some major label attention, but in the end, I guess our rough-and-tumble wise-crackin' exterior didn't make us too many friends in the media".

The Town Cryers did have an "army" of fans that would follow them from show to show and in many cases city to city, shouting up inside jokes and names of cover songs they knew the band didn't know. Often, Allaire and his writing partner Jeff Tanguay would go into a radio station for an interview and basically take over the show, many times leaving an unexpected DJ to scramble in attempts to get a word in. "I think we were actually banned from a radio station in London. It was pretty funny, someone called the radio station and offered to kick our asses out of the building. We thought our humor was harmless, and for the most part it was. We were jackasses at times, but we were all in our early 20s. It was fun to play the rock-n-roll card when we could get away with it."

Allaire also points to his lack of "folk credibility" within the roots community as a possible reason for his lack of attention at home. "I came from a rock background, playing rock clubs, doing rock things. I look around at people like **Lynn Miles** (a fellow Ottawa singer/songwriter who has enjoyed a certain amount of international acclaim) and she's been doing the folk thing all her life. Even though I'm 40, I'm kind of green at the whole solo thing. So I'm sure people see my name and don't associate it with someone who has been in the songwriting business for about 22 years. It's like starting a fresh page. Frustrating at times, but I'm OK with it."

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However, his problems seem to be limited to his home turf. Allaire has enjoyed a staggering number of sales in the US and Europe by indie standards. "Yeah, I had to re-press copies of my first solo [*Crime and Punishment* - 2003], so I was sure to adjust the numbers when I was manufacturing *Thank You Waitress*. Downloads on iTunes seem to be taking over from CD sales right now. I'm just happy there's interest somewhere."

Allaire will continue with his touring, playing near-capacity shows in Northern and Southern Ontario, and hoping to add dates to a US tour in September. He has been accepted into the **Midpoint Music Festival** in Cincinnati, one of only four Canadian acts to play the 300-band festival, and he's hoping to dot the trip with shows along the way. Asked if he prefers going solo rather than with a backing band, Allaire is quick to point out that both have their advantages and strains. "I've covered thousands of miles with a band, every one of them tells a story. I love touring with a band, but it's just not practical at this point. It's a hard sell - like, 'guys, come and tour with me. We'll make practically no money and our sleeping conditions will be abysmal, but every third day you can sleep in until 11 a.m.!' For some reason, I always end up solo when the train pulls out of the station. Perhaps I need to sell it better..."

Solo or not, Allaire still has a strong legion of fans, all of whom purchase his CDs, t-shirts, download his music and hang out on his web site's message board. He has even posted some retro video games on his site [[johnallaire.com](http://johnallaire.com)] that he says keeps the 'geeky contingent' of his fan base coming back and finding out what's new and exciting. His dry and quick sense of humor is evident on his web presence as well. He has posted all the rejection notices he received from major labels when *The Town Cryers* were shopping their music around in the late 80s.



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Watching clips of his live shows, the between-song silences are always filled with some form of sarcasm, or quip. And he is known to field odd requests during his set with Replacement-ese abandon. "I get that comparison a lot, which is great because I am a huge Westerberg fan." To that point, Allaire has been critically compared to the likes of **Paul Westerberg**, as well as **Joe Strummer**, **Neil Young**, **Jeff Tweedy**, and many other of the edgier singer-songwriting ilk. Reading his reviews, one is struck by how few of the comparisons are the same.

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Upon subsequent spins of *Thank You Waitress*, the musicianship begins to shine through. Allaire plays most of the guitars and harmonicas himself, and is backed by a band called the 'Campistas', who are: **Glenn Torresan** on slide guitar, **Tony Dunn** on keys and sax, **Jeff Tanguay** on bass, **Zeke Smyth** and **Tom Simpson** sharing duties on drums, along with a few other session musicians. Songs about dead-end jobs, aging punk rockers, personal relationships and thoughts on hitting the big 4-0 are scattered throughout jangly guitar tunes and out-and-out rockers. "I think once again I've alienated all the genres of music I perform on this one by mixing a bunch of musical styles all on one disc" he laments with a grin.

"My problem is I am rarely content with an album that creates a single mood. The folkies think it's too rocky, and the rock fans think it's too folkie I guess. I just find the arrangement that I think fits the song. Perhaps I'll have to be more directed and narrowly-focused in the future, particularly if I'm touring with minimal back up, but I often whip out an electric guitar in the solo shows and amp it up... much to the shock of some of the newcomers and traditionalists."

Allaire's punk/DIY ethic is well founded. He started in the early 80s playing in punk bands before co-founding The Town Cryers in 1985. The Cryers lasted seven years, supporting three albums along the way and touring with their own brand of pop/punkabilly. Once disbanded, Allaire formed the **Mercy Miners**, a melodic grungy punk band that played locally for nearly five years. His solo efforts started in 2003, when he recorded *Crime and Punishment*, a low-budget disc that was heavy on the doom and gloom, and light on the tight musicianship. "I don't mind a number of songs on the disc, but I occasionally cringe at the production of *Crime*... it was something I had to get out of my system, and it was cheaper than therapy" he laughs. "My wife hates that record, although she's far too kind to actually admit to that."

After about an hour, we shake hands and I am left with a promise that he will send me some 'exclusive' photos and some background material. I ask him not to go to great expense on my account and he just shrugs, "Aw, its OK. My daughter will take them. No worries eh." 📷

### Quick Facts

Allaire is named after John Lennon. His sisters, who are a decade-and-a-half older than him, named him "John" after their favorite Beatle in 1965.

He has won a national songwriting award and wrote the song that was voted "Top Independent Video in Canada" with his earlier group, The Town Cryers.

He was a skilled hockey player who once had NHL aspirations.



**JOHN ALLAIRE**  
and the Campistas  
*Thank You Waitress!*

"...add one part Strummer, one part Westerberg, sprinkle with rootsy guitars and a Canadian accent, eh ... infectious North Americana ..." *CBC Radio*

In stores now and from  
**johnallaire.com, Amazon.ca**  
and **CDBaby.com**

Flat and Black Records 2005

