

At some point, you've likely walked into a local club for a rock show and found on the stage a man who looked much like an elf from the classic stop-motion *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* cartoon. Maybe he was jumping on a pogo stick. Maybe he was playing the theremin while wearing a gigantic marching band hat. Maybe he was performing with multiple video projections of himself, or doing an awkward take on "Shoo Fly, Don't Bother Me" with an acoustic guitar. A real merry-wanderer-of-the-night-type character, you know.

Or maybe you've seen this same guy fronting his long-running rock band, Evil Wiener, or dancing in Brian Risk's 2006 parody rap video, the briefly ubiquitous "It's Carrboro!" Regardless, if you've seen him in any of these settings, there undoubtedly came a moment when you asked yourself, "Who is this guy? And is he serious?"

That was Billy Sugarfix. The band Zen Frisbee gave him the name for his habit of passing out candy at shows. A fixture of the Chapel Hill scene for two decades, he produces a public access video show called *The Sugarfix Mix* while cobbling together a diverse living as a substitute teacher, a caterer and a serenade writer for hire.

So the answer to the first question is easy. But as to whether he's *serious*...

In his Carrboro apartment, in front of a kid-size arts-and-crafts station where he's been stenciling T-shirts, Billy Sugarfix describes a dream from his childhood. It's easy to picture him as a tyke, too—he's rosy-cheeked and round-shouldered, with a gentle Southern drawl.

"I was driving this big truck we had," he remembers, "and it became obvious to me that only the steering wheel was really important. None of the dials or odometers or pedals mattered." That dream came back to Sugarfix when he first played guitar in front of people. He felt wonder, pride. "I could not believe I was doing it."

That fantasy also seems to represent the way that Sugarfix, for most of his 42 years, has lived—as if life were a self-propelled vehicle that you simply had to nudge along the road. "A lot of people live based on pop songs and bumper stickers, and I unfortunately bought into that 'I can't live if living is without you' thing," he says, quoting Badfinger's tragic tune. "I lived like that for years and kept ending up in the same place."

He's talking about the wrong end of break-ups.

On *Summer Tempests*, the first proper Billy Sugarfix album, despite his long musical career, he attempts to exorcise this worldview by indulging it. The aim is to purge himself of pop sentimentality, and attain a more realistic relationship with romance—one where he is in control, not knocked around by his emotions.

"I don't know if this record will sell or get played on the radio," he says, "but I accomplished that goal. Hopefully, the people who hear it will be better adjusted than I was during the writing process."

After years of being a trickster, a Peter Pan-ish figure of innocent mischief, Sugarfix is ready to get real. He's stepping on the pedals now, and minding the gauges.

Billy Sugarfix's room has shelves full of Busby marching band hats in a rainbow of colors, which he loves to wear when he performs. He picks up a red one that looks very broken in. "Ron Liberti and Groves Willer, who plays bass with me in Evil Wiener, gave me this one years ago," says Sugarfix. "It seemed like there was never an occasion where it wouldn't work, and I wore it so much I wore it out." Willer knows they gave Sugarfix the hat because of his marching band history, but remembers the momentous event only vaguely.

The hats, which Sugarfix now collects, are more than just goofy costumes of the sort fans expect at his shows. They date back to his early years.

Sugarfix, who was born William McCormick,

For a long time, Carrboro musician Billy Sugarfix wouldn't do it without his Busby on. PHOTO BY D.L. ANDERSON

grew up on a farm outside the tiny town of Sadieville, Ky., and describes himself as "maybe 80 percent legit hick." But his upbringing wasn't quite as cloistered as that sounds. His father was an art professor, his mother a science teacher. "The farm was kind of a John Denver, quasi-hippie thing," he says. He played drums in his high school's marching band and went on to study percussion for two years at Morehead University, where his father taught.

Sugarfix often describes important life moments in cinematic terms, and his marching band years sound dramatically scripted: His school's uniforms were Michelin T-shirts, since someone's dad owned a repair shop. They'd compete against schools from Lexington and Louisville, which had full-time percussion instructors and real uniforms. Members of Sugarfix's band stood at attention during breaks to show that they were more disciplined.

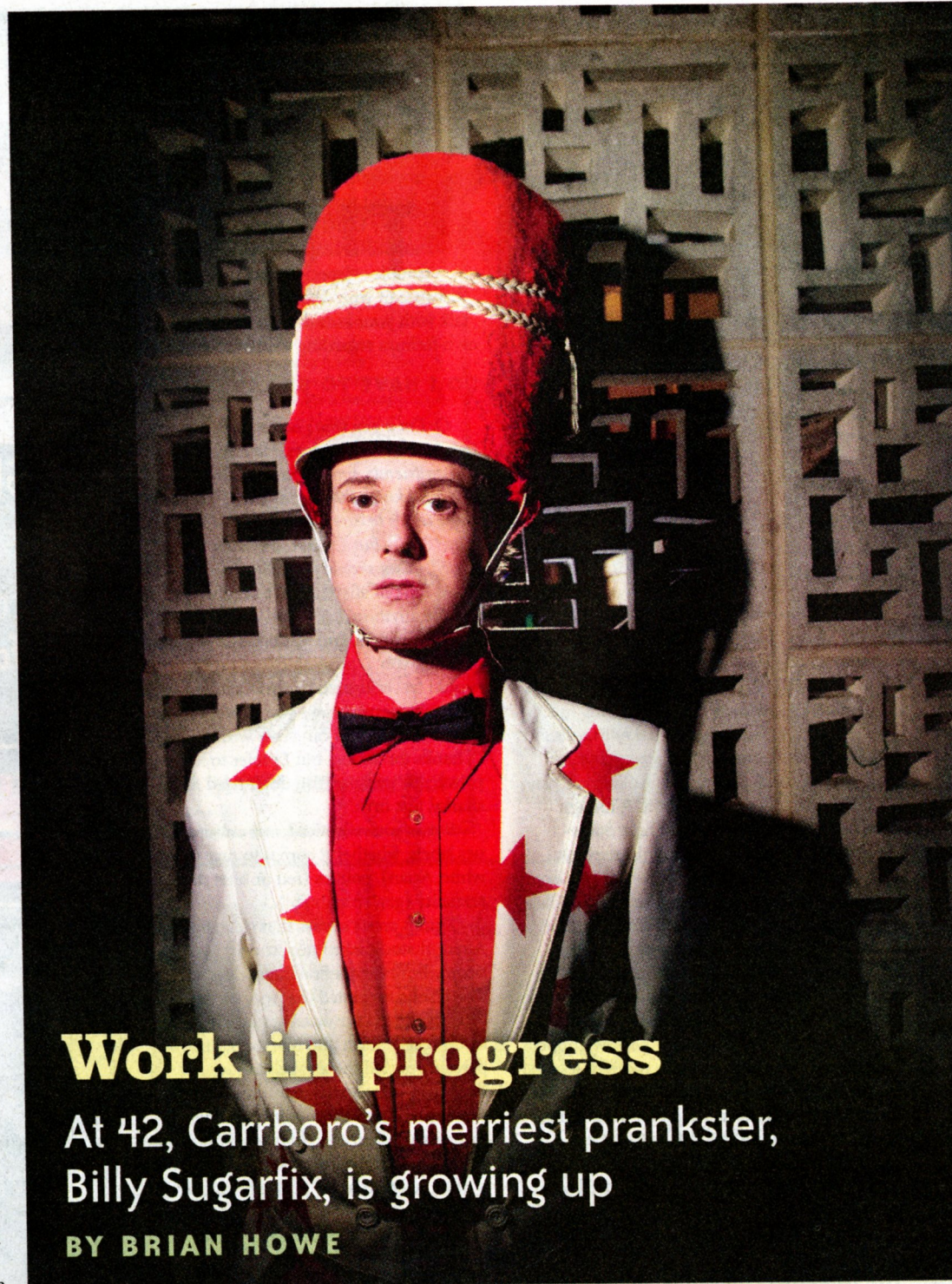
"We wanted to be the badasses of the dorks," he recalls. "We worked really hard at it—kind of cruelly, honestly." Whenever a drummer made a mistake, the others would drop their instruments and pound him with mallets on the foot, one by one. During Sugarfix's senior year, though, they won the first percussion award ever for the school. "One of the movie-scene moments of my life," he recalls. And, perhaps, a template for the pop-informed worldview that Sugarfix would reject decades later.

He grew up outside of any kind of scene. There were only a few local hardcore punk bands, but Sugarfix was more into U2, Modern English and MTV, anyway. He formed a band, The Model Citizens, with Patrick and Alex Williams, the sons of a colleague of Sugarfix's father. "Growing up in rural Kentucky before the Internet," Sugarfix recalls, "we didn't realize there were hundreds, if not thousands, of bands named that already."

They were one of the only bands doing original music in the area, and their audiences were large, even by Sugarfix's current standards. They tapped into stranger sounds via the Xavier University radio

station in Cincinnati, which played new wave and punk rock—everything from the Romantics to D.O.A.—on an all-night show called Night Waves. In order to pick up the station, they wrapped a coat hanger in tin foil, either hanging it on something outside of a window or simply holding it still. The first time Sugarfix ever heard The Replacements, his arm was out the window, the sound fading in and out.

The Model Citizens moved to Chapel Hill in 1988, when Sugarfix was 21. They were drawn to the thriving, slick Southern pop of the time, like that of Let's Active and The dB's; Sugarfix was a huge Dexter Romweber fan. They moved into the Green House on Columbia Street, which instantly plunged them into the scene.



Work in progress

At 42, Carrboro's merriest prankster, Billy Sugarfix, is growing up

BY BRIAN HOWE

"It was like moving to the big city," Sugarfix recalls.

Steve Hill, The Veldt's drummer, lived there, and Glenn Boothe, now the owner of Local 506, was a former resident who was often around, keeping them in the loop about incoming Meat Puppets and Soul Asylum shows. This was just before Merge got started, and Sugarfix's memories of the period are a primer on local music at the dawn of its indie rock era.

"It felt like something was about to pop," he remembers. "Veldt and Pressure Boys were the biggest bands around town. There was all this ska and white funk. Zen Frisbee and Angels of Epistemology were the bands it was OK to dislike; everyone else was on their way to getting big, and you couldn't say anything bad about them. I've always seen those two bands as bridging the gap between the Southern pop thing and the Superchunk thing. They were there and being talked shit about when everything was clean and polished, and then people started following their lead and playing grittier, darker music."

Model Citizens were "much more on the clean end of things." They played with Dillon Fence and Dexter Romweber. Suddenly, Sugarfix's life took another cinematic turn: After only two months in Chapel Hill, he was unceremoniously kicked out of the band. They'd found a new drummer. "One thing I believe in is the karma wheel," says Sugarfix. "It really does turn, and it always seems to favor me. [Model Citizens] were playing shows to three people after they kicked me out and getting in arguments with each other."

The band didn't last. One Williams brother is now a doctor, and the other does freelance film work in Los Angeles. "I'm the one who didn't sell out," says Sugarfix, "and honestly, I get a lot of respect for it."

But does the doctor ever express regret about breaking up the band? "So much," says Sugarfix, "it almost makes me uncomfortable."

After leaving Model Citizens, Sugarfix attended a show at the St. A's fraternity, featuring Teasing the Korean and Other Bright Colors. The latter band fit into the clean Southern mold, but Sugarfix found their sound more organic. After the band's final show, he approached singer Brian Butler. Soon thereafter, they formed Mind Sirens and continued to tread the Other Bright Colors line between the old local music and the new, opening for touring acts like Screaming Trees and Fluid (but passing on a Nirvana gig, to Sugarfix's enduring regret).

He soon began fiddling around with a four-track and recording weird little songs. "My idea of 'experimental' at the time was just being offensive," he says. "My favorite bands were Southern Culture on the Skids and Butthole Surfers. I wanted to be humorous and country-ish and shocking, so I wrote awful songs." But he discovered that it took more to get a rise out of people in Chapel Hill than in Sadieville, where he'd been considered a weird, eccentric guy—an image he cherished. While working at Crook's Corner, he got into the habit of making up band names based on menu items. In putting the words "evil" and "wiener" together, Sugarfix got the sort of reaction he was looking for.

The first Evil Wiener release was just a cassette of Sugarfix's four-track songs. He remembers begging every musician in town to join the band. Groves Willer, now of Shark Quest, was the first to succumb to his entreaties. Sugarfix says Willer was just "too nice to say no," but Willer's memory of the event is more vivid: "It was one of those unnerving coincidences," he explains. ▶

BILLY SUGARFIX

SUMMER TEMPESTS

(Pox World Empire)

Don't let the cheery flute of "Out Like a Lamb," the resplendent brass of "Bright Was My Sweetheart" or the soulful organ of "Teardrops" deceive: Billy Sugarfix's *Summer Tempests* is a brutal little record. Though these 10 tracks are among the most brightly lit and best-arranged of Sugarfix's long tenure as a Chapel Hill songwriter, they come from the mind of a man who's so lovesick that he's not sure if it's night or day. He can't look in the mirror without hallucinating. He can't drive without spying the heart she once traced on his windshield. He can only eat too much, drink too much and watch too many cartoons. He can't think without thinking about her, and he's losing his mind.

"They say that time will heal all wounds/ In the meantime, what's a boy to do?" Sugarfix sings, reaching for the brightest interpretation of his deadpan on "Ne'er-do-well Web." It's a jangling tune with warm major chords strummed on an acoustic guitar, twinkling notes courtesy of a Rhodes organ. But it's also a sunken-eyed number about booze, drugs, the

Bible and a heartbreak that can't be beat. "I've tried everything I know to get over you."

The great *Summer Tempests* thrives on these moments, when Sugarfix juxtaposes his own dark predilections with music that's buoyant and cheery. He realizes both the lugubrious bent of his lyrics and the barely inflected brooding of his baritone. And these things might turn more than a few away: Like Bill Callahan of Smog or David Berman of Silver Jews, Sugarfix's lyrical goods and their deep bellow of a delivery method aren't for everyone.

But here he uses them only as a core that he supports with a strong cast of female backup singers and a tasteful, proficient backing band. He sings about a seraphim of angels descending to take him away on opener "Out Like a Lamb." The gorgeous vocals and chamber ensemble gliding at his back, however, turn the dour tune into a delight. Or, doing his best David Berman on "Mirror," Sugarfix moans "I'm going downhill/ I'm physically ill." But the guitar and drums won't stop lulling, and he's forced to keep up. They seem to be pushing him to keep singing, and—in his own outlandish way—Sugarfix finally nails it. —Grayson Currin

2FITNESS

THERE ARE A MILLION EXCUSES NOT TO GO TO THE GYM. I'M GOING TO BUY SOME AT-HOME GYM... TOMORROW. I DON'T KNOW WHAT I'M DOING. WHO GOES TO THE GYM ANYWAYS? I HAVE TO GO HOME AND CLEAN THE BASEMENT. I'M SURE THERE'S SOME GAME ON TV. EXERCISE VIDEOS ARE SO MUCH COOLER. I DON'T LIKE OTHER HUMAN BEINGS. OUTDOOR ROLLERBLADING IS GOING TO BE THE NEXT FAD. I'M GOING TO START WHEN I SUCK IN. I HAVE A DECENT FIGURE. I'LL JUST WAIT UNTIL NEW YEAR'S. I DON'T KNOW WHERE IT IS. I'LL JUST RUN UP AND DOWN THE STAIRS A BUNCH OF TIMES. I CAN GO TO THE BAR AND WATCH PEOPLE ON TV EXERCISE. THAT'S THE POINT OF NO RETURN. I NEED TO START WORKING OUT BEFORE I GO TO THE GYM. I'M GOING TO ONLY EAT CELERY FOR TWO WEEKS INSTEAD. I HAVE TO CLEAN THE BATHROOM. THIS IS JUST BABY FAT. EXERCISE IS A MYTH. WHAT IF THERE IS A TORNADO. I ALREADY DO CURLS WITH THE REMOTE CONTROL. I NEED TO GET STARTED ON ORGANIZING MY SOCK DRAWER. I NEED TO STAY HOME AND FIND A NEW FAVORITE TV SHOW. I'LL START EXERCISING TOMORROW. I'M WAITING FOR OUT OF SHAPE TO BE THE NEXT FASHION STYLE. THE TELEVISION ISN'T GOING TO WATCH ITSELF. I'M GOING TO BUY SOME AT-HOME GYM... TOMORROW. I DON'T KNOW WHAT I'M DOING. WHO GOES TO THE GYM ANYWAYS? I HAVE TO GO HOME AND CLEAN THE BASEMENT. I'M SURE THERE'S SOME GAME ON TV. EXERCISE VIDEOS ARE SO MUCH COOLER. I DON'T LIKE OTHER HUMAN BEINGS. OUTDOOR ROLLERBLADING IS GOING TO BE THE NEXT FAD. WHEN I SUCK IN I HAVE A DECENT FIGURE. I'LL JUST WAIT UNTIL NEW YEAR'S. I DON'T KNOW WHERE IT IS. I'LL JUST RUN UP AND DOWN THE STAIRS A BUNCH OF TIMES. I CAN GO TO THE BAR AND WATCH PEOPLE ON TV EXERCISE. THAT'S THE POINT OF NO RETURN. I NEED TO START WORKING OUT BEFORE I GO TO THE GYM. I'M GOING TO ONLY EAT CELERY FOR TWO WEEKS INSTEAD. I HAVE TO CLEAN THE BATHROOM. THIS IS JUST BABY FAT. EXERCISE IS A MYTH. WHAT IF THERE IS A TORNADO. I ALREADY DO CURLS WITH THE REMOTE CONTROL. I NEED TO GET STARTED ON ORGANIZING MY SOCK DRAWER. I NEED TO STAY HOME AND FIND A NEW FAVORITE TV SHOW. I'LL START EXERCISING TOMORROW.

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Toffee Apple Recipe

INGREDIENTS:

10 small tart apples
10 wooden skewers
4 cups brown sugar
1 cup butter
4 tablespoons water
4 tablespoons white vinegar
Red food coloring, optional
Crushed toasted almonds

Wash and dry the apples and skewer them with wooden skewers. Set the aside until ready to use.

Place a piece of waxed paper on a tray and cover with the almonds. Mix the rest of the ingredients together in a heavy-bottomed sauce pan. Stir continuously over medium heat until the sugar has dissolved. Boil for about ten minutes, *without stirring*. To see if your toffee has reached the hard-crack stage, drop a little of it into a glass of cold water. If it hardens immediately, the toffee is ready. Remove from heat and wait until toffee has stopped boiling before you dip your first apple.

Twist the apples in the toffee until coated. Immediately dip the apple into cold water to cool the toffee and keep it from sliding off the apple. Place on the wax paper on top of crushed almonds so the almonds will stick to the cooling toffee.

Willer, a drummer, had just bought a bass guitar on impulse, because it was a good deal, when Sugarfix walked up to him on the street and asked him to join Evil Wiener. Struck by the coincidence, Willer agreed. By then, Sugarfix had left the Green House and moved in with the cantankerous, hilarious band Pipe. He tapped Pipe's Chuck Garrison to play drums.

When Sugarfix describes the early days of Evil Wiener, his childhood driving dream comes back into play. "A guitar has six strings and all these knobs you can turn," he says, "but all you have to remember is D, A, G. At that point, even Zen Frisbee were playing serious, dark music, and of course Polvo and all those bands were really into their guitar playing. We were the only band of unserious goofballs around, and it went over." The band released several beloved records, but Sugarfix sees *I Can't Get That Evil Wiener Song Out of My Head*, a 2004 tribute recorded by bands like Ghost of Rock, Two Dollar Pistols and Work Clothes, as their crowning achievement. "I'll never be more honored than that," he gushes.

When his bandmates were out of town or busy with other bands, Sugarfix beat boredom by playing solo shows as, well, Billy Sugarfix. He performed church songs, 4-H camp songs, "Memories" from *Cats*—anything that might serve as an affront to Chapel Hill's aesthetic sensibilities. The audiences split into two contingents: one up front, trying to figure out what the hell was going on, and one back at the bar, cracking up at the people trying to figure out what the hell was going on.

The linchpin, though, was the discovery of Sugarfix's "secret weapon," the theremin, around the turn of the millennium. He found it at the Music Explorium, which was Carrboro-based at the time, and went in to play it at least twice a week before finally buying it. "I can figure out how to play a perfect fourth on that," he thought. "I can play a scale, even though it sounds like a drunk rhinoceros playing a piccolo." Eventually he stopped bringing his guitar to gigs at all, relying instead on loop pedals and costumes for extra oomph.

In other words, Billy Sugarfix was at an impasse. Almost despite himself, he'd become a capable musician, and he was tired of hiding the fact behind gimmicks, costumes and willful sloppiness. "In the past," he explains, "I valued spontaneity more than anything in songwriting. If I was out of tune but feeling it, I would just play; I didn't want to sit there and do harmonics for tuning. But now I sit there and do those harmonics. I'm unapologetically serious about *Summer Tempests*."

Of course, "unapologetically serious" is relative. *Summer Tempests* opens with a bittersweet country ditty about junk food and Jesus, and continues with a nursery rhyme pastiche torch song before alighting on the hygiene-obsessed "Take a Shower." Imagine The Frogs making a sweet but odd children's album with some glee club tendencies, and you've got a good idea of the sound.



But it *does* bear a sense of ambition that has been anathema to Sugarfix's music in the past, with professional backing harmonies and oboe parts by Wendy Spitzer, with whom Sugarfix plays in the avant-pop band Felix Obelix. Sugarfix spent over three years working on the album with producer Jesse Olley. The sharp band he rounded up to record it includes drummer Justin Ansley (Choose Your Own Adventure), bassist Jeff Crawford (Roman Candle, Max Indian) and keyboardist Tyson Rogers.

He even brought in three female singers—Katherine Simonsen, Jody Kidney and Shannon O'Neill—to balance out his deep voice. He was so interested in exploring harmony and arrangement with these singers that he delayed recording for a long time.

"It colored how I wanted to finish it," he says, "but it was too late to add more instruments from the classical side of things. Our rehearsals turned into vocal lessons for me."

He now sees *Summer Tempests* simply as a transition into something that is perhaps more sophisticated. He's added a violist to his lineup so he can move in the chamber pop direction he's interested in. The band is now a lean trio—Sugarfix, violist Justin Blatt and singer Sara Zaleta. Now that working intensively with trained singers has raised his standards, he's less than satisfied with his vocal performance.

"Katherine, who sings lead on 'Take a Shower,' never misses a pitch," he says. "Then I come in and it's like a pencil sharpener. But I feel better about my singing than ever before, and I think the vocals will be better on the next record."

But, lately, he's reconsidered.

PHOTO BY D.L. ANDERSON

Mainly, the record is an important first step for Sugarfix as he carves out a mature space for himself. "Sugarfix has a childish, silly connotation," he says. "My hope is for this combo to form an identity of its own, and a name. It'll probably be 'Billy Sugarfix and the somethings,' but I hope to eventually shed the Sugarfix. Then, when I perform under that name, people will know to expect the pogo stick."

At the *Summer Tempests* CD release party, Billy Sugarfix—or is it William McCormick?—takes the stage, dressed modestly in a T-shirt and jeans. He had a hard time deciding what to wear and finally decided on "clean and nice-looking," for him it seems almost like a different kind of dress-up game. His outfit looks crisp, his T-shirt tucked in like a Boy Scout's, and the acoustic guitar he straps on is already tuned. In a concession to fans and to his past, a papier-mâché dummy in a cape lurks at stage right, and a marching band hat rests on a stool.

The crowd is modestly sized—there's plenty of airspace in the Cradle tonight—but people buzz excitedly in the open area in front of the stage, ready to support an old friend trying something new.

"To me, the songs weren't that different," says Willer, "but the way that they did them was really neat. It was really complicated. Much different than Evil Wiener, more nicely arranged." Willer's one of the people who's been too continuously in contact with Sugarfix for the past couple decades to notice him changing. When asked the most important thing to know about his friend, he replies, "He was an award-winning 4-H chicken raiser."

As spectators munch popcorn from gift bags handed out at the door, like something you might receive at a grade-school holiday party, Sugarfix seems at ease, making his rounds through the audience. But he will later describe the show as "kind of nerve-wracking ... People say, 'How do you have the nerve to get up there in those costumes?' But that's easier. My interpretation is that the CD and the show were the beginning of something—an opening shot, not the credits rolling at the end when everyone goes home happy."

Time will tell whether or not Sugarfix's fans will embrace his more adult persona—but the important thing is that he's embraced it. Whether or not people go along is out of his hands. For now, he steps up to the microphone and takes the first step into his new life, with fewer illusions and more focus. "Here we go," he says to the loose but excited constellation of old friends and scenesters with faces tilted expectantly toward the stage. "Wish us luck," he says, and strikes a clear, ringing chord. ☒


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