

Folk singer favors classic rock 'n' roll

By CATHY McHUGH
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*Here I am, on the road again
Here I am, up on the stage
Here I go, playing the star again
Here I go, turn the page*

Bob Seger's "Turn the Page" is the song musician Mike Edwards is most often asked to perform, and now, with a new job at the ArtsCenter in Carrboro, he may be turning a page in his own life.

With his full beard, dark, curly, shoulder-length hair, leather jacket, cowboy hat and straight-leg jeans combined with his deep voice, he looks and sounds like a traditional folk singer. Which is what he is. Sometimes.

As a soloist, Edwards performs many old classics. He is influenced by many of the popular entertainers he grew up listening to in the '60s: the Beatles, Crosby, Stills and Nash, Creedence Clearwater Revival, Simon and Garfunkel, Neil Young, Harry Chapin, Cat Stevens, Bob Dylan and the Allman Brothers. When he performs with keyboard player Rick Lawson, Edwards has been known to give impressive renditions of material by the Moody Blues, David Bowie and Bruce Springsteen. It's known nowadays as vintage rock 'n' roll. But Edwards' musical tastes and talents run far beyond the scope of classic rock.

A native of southern Alamance County, Edwards began his musical career in high school where he played in bands and also performed as a soloist. "I was into everything that was musical — chorus, any kind of production."

Edwards says that when he started college at East Carolina University he got away from his music for a while, until he met up with some other aspiring musicians and they began playing coffeehouse-type places. He was an English major with a minor in journalism when he left Greenville for Indiana to play with the road band, Sassafra. "I almost majored in music," Edwards says. "All the time I was in school I knew I'd get back to music because it's what I have always wanted to do."

Edwards can play the guitar and harmonica simultaneously — a feat which looks like it requires years of practice and a sharp sense of timing. But Edwards found it easy to learn. "It didn't seem hard — I already had it in my head from listening to Bob Dylan and Neil Young," he says. "The harp holder does cut down on the quality of my playing, but I think it gives my show more depth, especially when I perform alone."

After a few years of playing "lots of ski lodges out west" with Sassafra, Edwards moved back to North Carolina — to Fayetteville this time — and joined up with a former bandmate, Steve Cale, who, like Edwards, also performs solo. For the next several years, Edwards played with a succession of rock 'n' roll bands

including Monarch, Cellar House, Lix, The Movies and The Dead Frogs from Hell cranking out the blues, old Beatles and similar tunes.

In September 1986, Edwards moved back to Greenville where he performed in clubs as a soloist and with Rhythm Method, featuring Lawson on keyboards, Kelly Biggers on drums, Fred Mancino on bass, Edwards on acoustic guitar and harmonica and Kitty West as lead singer. When West moved to Charlottesville, Va., the four called themselves The Mike Edwards Band, now called Mike Edwards and the Banned. He says the band plays a wide variety of music. "We try to play what people want to hear, and I've always liked the blues a lot," he says.

In September 1987, a year after his move to Greenville, he took the offer from an old friend, Burke Stedman, who is the music coordinator and facility manager for the ArtsCenter, to become the center's sound operator. So he moved to Snow Camp, which is about 25 miles from Chapel Hill.

"Now I can pretty much stay in one place," Edwards says. "The ArtsCenter has given me a chance to use what I know."

As sound technician, Edwards sets the stages for shows. He places the mikes, sets up the mixes and runs the show alone from behind the scenes instead of in front of it. He also takes care of any necessary maintenance and handles all the dealings with their sound system supplier, The Music Loft. Edwards says he helps Stedman with his workload, and he has also been helping the promotions department.

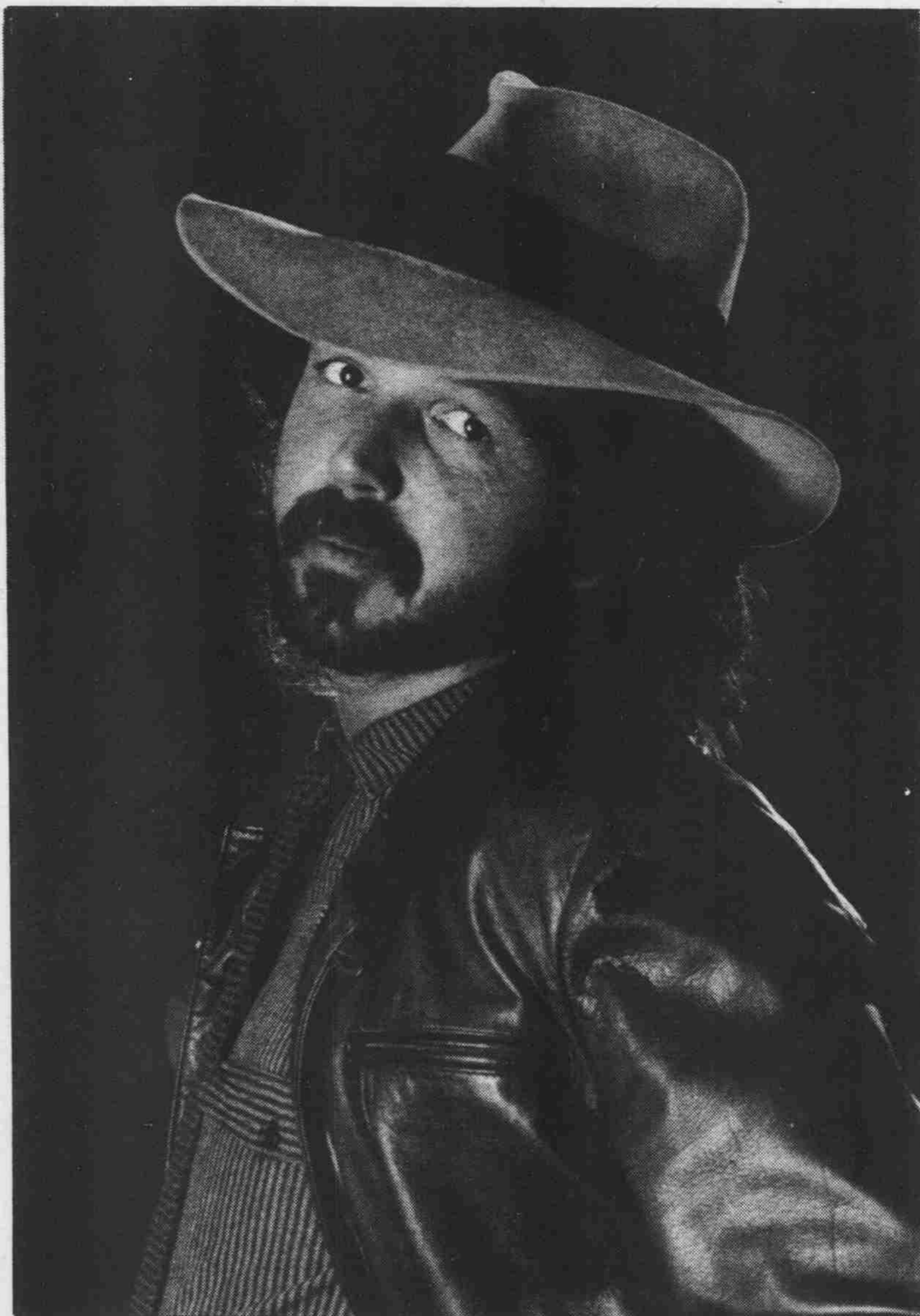
"I'm interested in getting more going in this area," he says. "Most of my stuff has been on the coast — Raleigh is about as far west as I usually play, although I have performed in Greensboro and Winston-Salem."

Recently Edwards has been performing alone and with keyboard player Rick Lawson about seven to 10 dates a month in Raleigh, Chapel Hill, Greenville and Jacksonville. "By working at the center I can still perform about two or three nights a week, but I voluntarily cut back," he says. "I used to play about five or six nights a week. At 20 nights a month, it got crazy."

Edwards has kept his solo career going even while he's with a band because it is more lucrative. "Five or six years ago I started supporting myself being a soloist full-time, and I played with the bands to satisfy that craving," Edwards says.

Although he admits there have been some slow times, he says he has never been unable to support himself through his music. "This past year was pretty slow — around here it is hard to find work on weeknights, but there is lots of weekend work."

Edwards has a mailing list of clubs he frequently plays which he is willing



Musician Mike Edwards works as a sound technician at ArtsCenter

to share with any local bands with original material. He says he enjoys helping out with promotions through the ArtsCenter.

"I've always been interested in all disciplines of music — art, dancing, theatre, writing," he says. "There are some 800 people enrolled for the winter classes here, which is phenomenal. There is a lot of collective energy here. I'm hoping we can reach more people who don't know that we're here."

Edwards says he enjoys working as a sound technician because of the challenges it presents. "We (the center) get so many different types of music in here, it is fun and challenging to change the mixes for

each band," he says. But he has no intention to stop performing anytime soon. "Running sound is less rewarding than performing — when you're on stage, you get the instant gratification from the audience, but no one ever notices the techies."

Edwards has worked in almost every aspect of the music business, including performing, producing, booking and working in a retail music store. "I love all aspects of the business."

Edwards says he doesn't have any particular favorite songs, but he is always requested to play Seger, Young, and the Moody Blues. "Their stuff always goes over real well," he says. But what about recent music?

"When the band is together, we do perform some modern songs; for instance, Bruce Hornsby.

"I've noticed an increasingly younger crowd in the audiences I've been playing to lately, and that's good — they probably picked up on it from older brothers and sisters," he says. "You just can't hear a lot of this music being performed live anymore."

But Edwards plans to make sure it is available from him for a while. "Performing is the best thing for me," he says. "The communication and the sharing that goes on between the audience and myself is a rush I can't find anywhere else."