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CMT News

Sugarland's Jennifer Nettles Gives Credit to Eddie's Attic

John Mayer, Shawn Mullins Also Got Their Start at Small Songwriter Venue

May 9, 2008; Written by Craig Shelburne



DECATUR, Ga. -- As one of the breakout country bands of the last few years, Sugarland can easily draw thousands of people to their high-energy concerts. But back in the day, Jennifer Nettles would finesse her singer-songwriter skills at a very laidback bar in Decatur, Ga., called Eddie's Attic.

"I love it. I started out there," she says. "I started doing open mikes. They have an open mike competition, and anybody can come and be a part of that. I started out doing that, and got a gig there and started developing a fan base between there and Athens, Ga. I definitely credit it with

much of how I became the performer and musician that I am."

Chasing a dream that would later surface in the band's debut single, "Baby Girl," Nettles slowly moved up in the local music world, fronting Soul Miner's Daughter and the Jennifer Nettles Band. But after eight years, her band was drawing to a close. One night, she was sipping martinis and swapping stories with fellow Atlanta singer-songwriter Kristen Hall. They decided to meet at Starbucks with another local musician, Kristian Bush, to talk about starting a country band. That next morning, Sugarland was born. After writing some songs together, they booked a few gigs at Eddie's Attic.

"Eddie's Attic is a wonderful venue," Nettles says. "It's a listening room, and it has always been a listening room. You can go and hear the artist. The singer-songwriter is the important element in it. It's not necessarily that you're there to pick up a date or whatever you might do in another sort of bar or music venue. It's definitely about the music there."

When you come into the club, posters are tacked along the walls of a long staircase. At the top, you have two options -- check out the show in the listening room or hang out on the deck and watch on a closed-circuit TV. Even a small club like Eddie's Attic can get rowdy people sometimes. However, the club tends to draw the fans of a specific artist, rather than just somebody in town who's craving some live music.

There is no green room in Eddie's Attic, so if you want to meet the artist, you just walk right up. Pop star John Mayer, who paid his dues building his audience at the club, occasionally comes back for a small show. Songwriters like Will Hoge, Josh Joplin and Lori McKenna also draw substantial crowds, but in the words of Sugarland, "There's gotta be somethin' more."

"It's really fundamentally hard with a 200-seat club to make your financial nut anymore," says owner Bob Ephlin. "Rent, utilities, insurance, it's just stupid. I'd love to tell you we are financially successful. I'd be lying, but we're better and better at it every month. And we will get there, and I hope I'm standing when we do."

Ephlin, who bought the club from Nettles and her then-husband in 2005, is striving to rebuild its reputation as a listening room, rather than just a drinking spot with high-quality music, whether it's Celtic, bluegrass, blues, rock or country. He's partnered with local art galleries to freshen up the walls, and he's completely renovated the kitchen and refinished all the wood floors. The sound system is topnotch, too. He's also brought back Eddie Owen, whose name adorns the place, to book the talent.

Surprisingly, Ephlin doesn't ask for a cut of the artists' merchandise, understanding that they need that money to get to the next tour date. Plus, he says, the club takes only "a very small percentage" from the ticket receipts at the door. Most of the revenue comes from food and beverage sales from the renovated kitchen and bar. He says the menu is good enough that he eats there almost every night, and as a courtesy, he feeds the performers, too.

"Even if they are amazingly talented, you know these guys aren't really wealthy if they're playing

a 200-seat club," he says. "We give them a free meal, [along with] everyone in their band when they come here. We give them a couple of drinks. We know most clubs aren't doing that anymore, but this may be their only chance to have a good meal that day, and so that feels like the right thing to do."

In addition to the running the club, Ephlin and his team are shopping a TV pilot, launching a statewide radio program and figuring out how to post their extensive archives on their Web site -- without screwing over the artists, of course. He started a writing space with Bush for area musicians to help develop their career. He's also been visiting similar clubs across the country to pick up tips on how to run Eddie's Attic efficiently.

"I suppose we could be better businessmen," he says. "I'm sure my accountant and banker would agree, but there's gotta be a way to do this and be respectable to the artist."

Singer-songwriter Shawn Mullins, who lives in Decatur, says, "The main thing that makes Eddie's Attic stand out above other venues is its intimate setting and the fact that people come there to listen and not chat. So many listening rooms around the country model themselves after what Eddie Owen has built for the performer and the fan."

With his breakout success of "Lullaby" in 1998, Mullins acquired a large, loyal fan base across the nation and spends nearly the whole year on the road. Thanks to that loyalty, he scored a big hit at adult alternative radio in 2006 with "Beautiful Wreck." For his new album, *Honeydew*, he chose Eddie's Attic to host his record release party.

"Imagine a friendly neighborhood pub with excellent food and service that caters to the music fan and the performing songwriter," says Mullins. "People come to Eddie's to listen to great music, and that environment is the reason that songwriters make Eddie's a stop on the tour. It's the best venue in the South for the performing songwriter."

[Visit Eddie Attic's website.](#)

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