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METTLE MAN

Whether Val Emmich is sinking his chops into a new record, TV show, or book, this retired knife salesman digs deep in all endeavors

By Alexa Weibel • Photo by Dave Sgalambro

There's something intrinsically respectable about a direct approach — I'm certainly not one to swoon over any musician (my Death Cab days are a faint but fond memory), but I certainly appreciate some heart — and some talent doesn't hurt either. Spirited per-former Val Emmich successfully dons many hats and, admirably, claims to favor which-ever hat happens to be on his head at the time, be it that of actor, writer, or musician. Ultimately, "I just like to build things," he says.

Emmich's latest album, *Little Daggers*, is peddled by this Rutgers graduate who, despite a lack of formal training, seems pliable to a number of tasks — look for him on the new season of *Ugly Betty* as Betty's musically inclined potential

love interest. To finance his college education, Emmich stumbled into acting in 1997 with a role in a "Got Milk?" commercial. This modern-day renaissance man has since moved on to TV acting, with delectable cameos in *Ed* and *Cashmere Mafia* and a notable role as fresh meat to Tina Fey's cougar character on *30 Rock*. On tackling acting with a lead role in next year's indie flick *Fighting Fish*, Emmich says, "It's great to tap into another part of yourself and test your limits."

Emmich, now 28, thrives upon challenges. Holed up with Lyme Disease at age 15, he picked up a guitar and started writing songs. Six albums later, Emmich's goal is to make "serious, often depressing tales playful and fun," he says. "First you sing along and tap your foot, then later, after repeated listens, you let the weight of it all sink in." Thankfully, Emmich isn't your average heartbroken crooner — he explores the darker side of love, stripped of that silver lining ubiquitous with pop music, with a catchy pop album of notable depth. Less somber than Bright Eyes, more brooding than Ben Folds, he successfully captures the universality of pop with a love-themed record, even if it's not rose-colored.

His voice is honest and smooth but strong; his lyrics, efficient; his songs, charmingly simple. Aided by his musical prowess on a variety of instruments, Emmich shifts from jaunty to jabby in the standout track "Get On With It" and laments the "inevitable" disappointment of relationships in "Hurt More Later," pairing pessimism with pop. Emmich cites Ben Folds and Nirvana as inspirations — the alternative era's mark is indelible on his tracks, and Rilo Kiley guitarist Blake Sennett is a dually notable guest.

It makes sense that this Jersey native appreciates his perch "on the outside looking in" — in fact, his novel *A Break In the Weathers* will hit shelves this fall. And judging by his career, he's gathered some insight. "My art is my escape and my mode of expression," he says. "I'm just trying to figure out how to navigate this world and find a way to be happy and do that through my art." His next project? "I'm trying to just be — to be OK doing nothing sometimes. That's something that's always been hard for me to do."

