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Jonathan Edwards, cloud chaser

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BY ROGER LELIEVRE

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Jonathan Edwards will bring more than just "Sunshine," his million-selling Vietnam War-era protest song, to The Ark for his show Saturday night, his first local appearance since serving as host of the Ann Arbor Folk Festival in January.

For one thing, he's got some new tunes in his repertoire. For another, he's touring with a drummer. Even though he's been mostly out of the spotlight, he never stopped recording (he has 13 CDs to his credit), and he's collaborated with artists like Emmylou Harris, Maura O'Connell, Jimmy Buffett, Christine Lavin and Cheryl Wheeler. He's also getting ready for the 2008 Hippiest (more on that later).

Right now, though, he's content to relax at his vacation getaway in Fremont, near Muskegon, which is where The News reached him by phone last week.

"We'll be here until we come to Ann Arbor," Edwards, who lives in Texas, confirmed.

Edwards found instant fame with "Sunshine" in 1971. His career since then has included theater (he toured as the lead in the hit Broadway musical "Pump Boys and Dinettes"), commercials, record production, a movie soundtrack (and another one coming) and a stint with the great bluegrass band the Seldom Scene. In 2000, he narrated and performed in the travel series "Cruising America's Waterways," which is still being shown on PBS stations.

He's been called "the perfect remedy for depression," a tag coined by a publicist that seems to have caught on, not that he minds.

"I've been called worse," he laughed. "People seem to have a good time when they come to see me."

The truth is, "Sunshine" was a bit of a happy accident, he said.

"Recording was so new in '69 and '70. There was a song on the album called 'Please Find Me,' and for some reason the engineer rolled over it. It got erased. We spent hours looking for

it. We put 'Sunshine' in its place. But it would have come out eventually anyway," he said.

Before he performed "Sunshine" at the Folk Festival, Edwards told the crowd that he "never dreamed 30 years later I would have to sing this song to protest another war brought to us through lies and deception." He said he remains dismayed that the role of the protest song has been overlooked in the Iraq War.

"No one has the guts any more to be tear-gassed, or go to jail ... they have succeeded in getting us to worry about our own personal experience, Edwards said.

"'Sunshine' was an energetic, happy-sounding statement of protest and independence. It was just at the time of the Vietnam War and Nixon ... That song meant a lot to a lot of people during that time - especially me," Edwards recalled.

Obviously, given his jam-packed resume, "Sunshine" and his acoustic music career are just the tip of the iceberg, and Edwards admits to a lot of interests.

"Well, I've got a movie coming out this fall, 'The Golden Boys,' I'm doing the soundtrack for it. I was joking and said I would only do it if I could be in it. They said sure, so I have bit part. I'm a preacher, preaching about the evils of rum.

"I'm also doing a tour this summer called Hippiest featuring Eric Burdon & The Animals, The Turtles, Melanie - with all kinds of crazies. We're going to get on a bus and go out there, and look at all the tie-dyed shirts."

Alas, no dates have been set as yet for Michigan, he said.

Edwards also released the CD "Live in Massachusetts" in 2006 and the DVD "That's What Our Life Is: The Jonathan Edwards Documentary" more recently.

He said he's not worried about getting another chart hit.

"I don't think that's going to happen," he said. "It's a young person's game now. My daughter is 30, she's in Europe opening for James Blunt, and they say she's too old."

Fans should know he's adding percussionist Dan Carlson to his show this time around. "Something new to bring to the party," Edwards said. "We've got some

new songs, everyone will enjoy the show. That's a JE guarantee, or you get your money back."

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