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# Emerson Hart previews pairing of Gin Blossoms, Sugar Ray, Fastball & Tonic

BY JOSHUA MALONI  
GM/Managing Editor

With new TV documentaries and creative concert events, the 1990s are all the rage once more.

Some of the most interesting musical pairings include Everclear with Hoobastank, Living Colour and Wheatus (from 2021); Vanilla Ice with Rob Base, Young MC and C+C Music Factory featuring Freedom Williams (this year); and the upcoming “Summer of ’99 Cruise” (aka “Creed Cruise”) with a reunited Creed, plus 3 Doors Down, Vertical Horizon, Fuel, The Verve Pipe, Tantaric and Dishwalla (2024).

A little closer to home, the OLG Stage at Fallsview Casino welcomes Gin Blossoms, Sugar Ray, Tonic and Fastball at 7 p.m. Thursday, Sept. 7.

“It’s going to be a lot of hits,” Tonic frontman Emerson Hart said in a phone interview Monday. “Those are the kinds of shows I enjoy bringing my friends to, and those are the kind of shows I enjoy seeing. And I guarantee you nobody’s going to walk away being like, ‘Oh, what a bummer. This show was not great.’ That’s not going to happen. I promise you that’s not going to happen.”

Hart has performed solo at Artpark and inside the Hard Rock Café in Niagara Falls, and with his band, Tonic, at the Albright-Knox Art (AKG) Gallery in Buffalo on a bill with Collective Soul and Our Lady Peace. Hart said he’s excited to reunite with some old colleagues.

He’s also looking forward to sharing hit songs including “If You Could Only See,” “You Wanted More,” “Open Up Your Eyes” and “Take Me As I Am” – even though he’s performed these classic cuts a bazillion times.

“I would say look at it this way: Let’s say that you’re driving down the road, and a song from the radio comes on from your youth, right? And you hear that song, and what’s the first thing it does? It takes you back to where you were. And so, it’s no different for me,” Hart said. “Yes. Have I played these songs, hits and album tracks over a million times from creation to now. Absolutely. But it doesn’t matter. Because it’s an even better experience in the



Emerson Hart, center, and Tonic (Photo by Catie Lafoon // provided by Milestone Publicity)

way that, yes, as soon as I start playing the song, I reconnect to the moment where I was in my life when it was written. And I live in that moment.

“And also, I get to look out in front of me, and I see other people reliving that moment that they had with the song. That’s powerful medicine. That, I think, is really the crux of it.

“I told the story before about being in Poland and playing in front of 350,000 people. We played their Woodstock over there. A 19-year-old girl in the front row is singing ‘If You Can Only See’s’ words back, which is not her language; and she’s having that experience. That’s an idea that I had in my head. Like, ‘Hey, that’s insane.’ It’s insane.

“It’s not hard to connect. It’s just not.”

With regard to the show, Hart said, “Well, let’s start with Robin (Wilson) from the Gin Blossoms. I mean, obviously, those guys are still out there crushing it, still doing it, still on every radio station. They made such a huge dent in that timeline, back in the day, and they still sound great. I’ve never seen a bad show from them, and I’ve toured with them off and on for many years.

“Sugar Ray is a great band, but Mark (McGrath) is just – as you know, we do a side project in Ezra Ray Hart with Kevin Griffin from Better Than Ezra, and Mark McGrath and me – and he’s just a consummate showman. He always delivers. You want to talk

about a nostalgia machine. He knows how to drive that thing like nobody’s business. And it’s an exciting, still great, fun band to watch.

“And Fastball, it’s been so many years since I’ve seen Fastball. I’m sure it’s going to be great, because I love Miles (Zuniga), and he’s a super good dude. And I’m looking forward to actually spending some time watching their show. For some reason, we didn’t do a lot of shows together coming up. It just kind of didn’t work out that way, because we were kind of already on our path and then they showed up.

“I just think it’s a really interesting night of music, because we’re covering a lot of genres. A lot of genres.”

When it comes to defining the 1990s, Hart said, “It’s a tricky question, because, obviously, I was in that, and I was in the later part of the ’90s and into the 2000s.

“So, when Mark hosts ‘The Dark Side of the 90s,’ was that a reality of our business? Yes, absolutely.

“When I talk about it being the best decade for music, I don’t know if I’d say that. I mean, I think that we made some unbelievably honest songs, which is great. But who am I to say that? I used to talk about this – let’s go back to hair metal in the ’80s. We won’t go there for a long time. But let’s talk about bands that had unbelievably gifted guitar players, but they will never get their due because of the style of music. That’s a drag, because a lot of those guys were just so, so talented, but they got lumped into this thing, you know?

“And so, hopefully, in the ’90s I think that was kind of a breakout, back to honesty in songwriting, as much as it could be. And then, yeah, the boy bands came along. But you know, we got to give them their due, too, because they made a lot of great pop music. That, certainly, has always been a huge part of our craft, is pop, and that’s OK.

“Those were great songs written (by great writers). Max Martin is not a dummy. He’s written some unbelievable songs. And as a writer, I have to respect that.

“But the ’90s, I personally, if Mark and I sitting down having dinner, yeah, we’re going to put our weight on that bet.”

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