

McDermott brings a poet's heart to Clearwater

By Jim Wormington

SPECIAL TO THE COURIER NEWS

What do you do if you're only 20 when the gates to a glittering utopia of self-indulgence open up before you? You probably swagger in, all smiles, fearless and cocky as an undefeated boxer.

That's what singer/songwriter Michael McDermott did in 1991 when his future in the music world was a shiny promise on the horizon. His debut album, *620 W. Surf*, was getting positive reviews and the single *A Wall I Must Climb* was spinning him a reputation as having the potential to be the next Springsteen or Dylan.

On his first trip to L.A. he said to a friend, "Show me the gutter."

It turned out to be more than a visit — he set up camp there.

"They have streets named for me down there," McDermott said in a recent interview.

For many years he stum-



PHOTO COURTESY OF NIVA BRINGAS

Singer/songwriter Michael McDermott is set to play at Clearwater on Saturday, Oct. 6.

bled about in a melancholic haze of alcohol and drug addiction that shipwrecked a lot of relationships.

The addictions "become your life — the singing and writing become secondary things," he said. "That's a very ugly day."

He hit the gutter jackpot in November 2004, when he was arrested for cocaine possession and sent to Chicago's Cook County Jail.

Sometimes you have to "tear down a temple," he said, before you can build anything in its place.

Incarceration proved to be a wake-up-and-smell-the-jail-cell moment for the artist, a catalyst that helped direct him out of the dark and into the fight for sobriety and sanity ... a fight he wages daily.

Like any driven artist, life's pain (self-inflicted and

otherwise) is a tool he applies to his craft. McDermott chronicles his interior life through songs, bringing a poet's sensibilities to the struggles we all face. His lyrics are full of spiritual tension and imagery, word-collages of his journeys through sadness and hope, despair and redemption.

His recently released CD, *Noise From Words*, is tastefully uncomplicated while remaining musically and lyrically satisfying. The opening of *Mess of Things* is no more than a tapping foot and an acoustic guitar, with McDermott's raspy, wonderfully expressive voice eventually chiming in — as pure as it gets.

Now McDermott is lecturing to young people about reckoning with the allure of trouble and examining some alternatives to trouble-as-a-lifestyle.

"I'm the blueprint for what not to do with your life," he said.

Still, his story is a hope-

ful one and his faith remains the foundation of that hope. He doesn't suggest he is suddenly walking on water or that he is fall-proof. Kids see through that kind of hyperbole, he believes. They think, "Yeah, yeah, yeah — you did your time and now you found Jesus."

McDermott admits he has doubts, jokes that he's been phoning Jesus, emailing him and text messaging him but "he doesn't get back to me."

"It's OK to doubt," he said, "but faith is what pulls you through."

Having seen the ugliness at bottom, he wants to spare others the trip. If telling his story can do that, then he's glad to share it.

McDermott will perform at Clearwater, 96 W. Main St. in West Dundee, Saturday, Oct. 6 with special guest Carol Akers. Doors open at 7 p.m. Tickets are \$10. For more information, call (847) 836-8820.

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