

This rocker loves to act out

A sober singer distills laughs from his life in a band

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Generally speaking, being an alcoholic isn't exactly funny. Neither is being a drug abuser, a mental patient or a potential suicide.

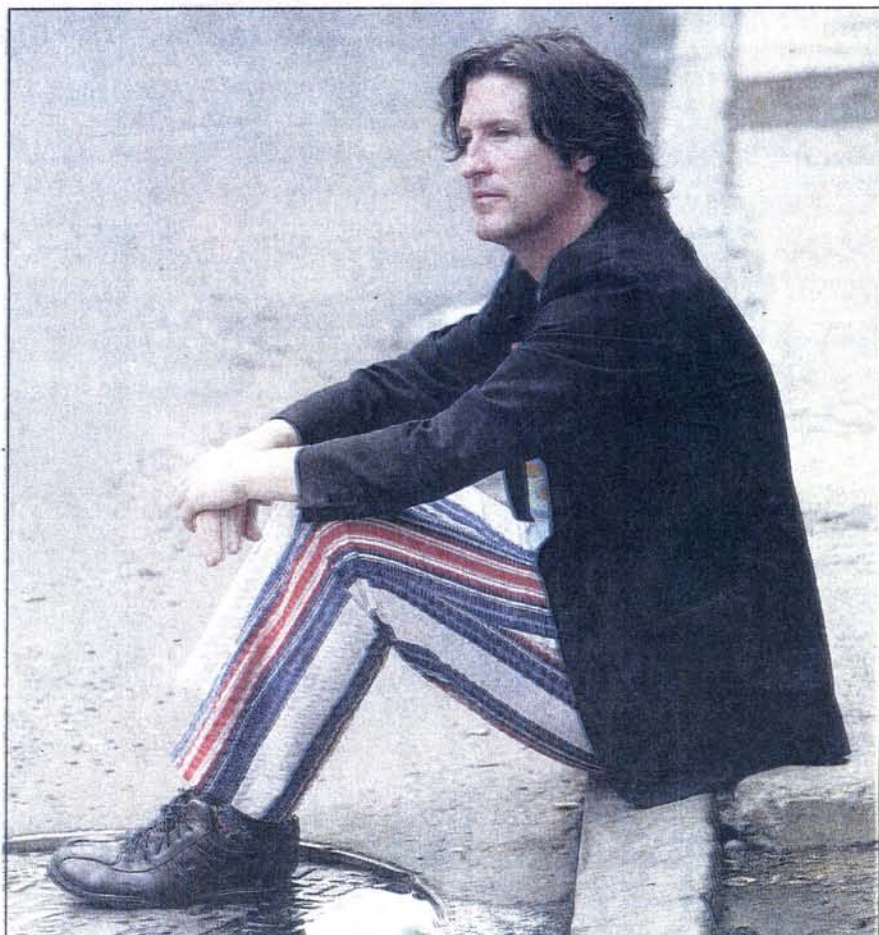
Chris Campion, however, has been all of these things — and he thinks it's hilarious.

Campion, 41, is the writer and star of "Escape From Bellevue," an autobiographical monologue underscored by rock songs from his long-running band, Knockout Drops. It's not the usual story of recovery, mainly because Campion is more interested in provoking laughs than sniffles. His journey from drunken rocker to sober actor is inspirational, but Campion clearly relishes reliving the days when he snorted coke in restrooms, blacked out after binges, mooched from various enablers (read: girlfriends) and busted himself out of Bellevue, the famously grim New York psych ward.

"We're having a really good time," Campion said on a recent weekday after rehearsing a segment about a Bellevue inmate known as Dribbly, so named for his skills at imaginary basketball. "We had to go through that maybe five times because we couldn't get through it. We were doubled over laughing."

This is actually the show's second incarnation. In 2005, Campion put on a homemade version at Manhattan's small Paradise Factory Theater with a low-budget set and a loose script. It opened in the dead of winter, on Dec. 2, but the four-week run built an audience and stretched to an impressive 13 weeks.

One ticket-holder turned out to be the director Des McAnuff, who worked on rock musicals such as "The Who's Tommy," "Good Vibra-



NEWSDAY PHOTO / BRUCE GILBERT

Escape artist: Chris Campion of the Knockout Drops finds humor in overcoming his addictions.

tion" and the current Broadway hit "Jersey Boys." McAnuff suggested Campion meet Alex Timbers, a 28-year-old director who recently won an Obie for his irreverent production, "A Very Merry Unauthorized Children's Scientology Pageant." Timbers watched a DVD of Campion's show and, without any firm plans or funding, the two began rehearsals.

"I found him incredibly charismatic and funny," Timbers said of Campion. Eventually they raised enough money for a bigger theater and an elaborate stage set with illuminated Plexiglas flooring, but Timbers said the show still centers on Campion's natural gift for charming an audience. "At the end of the day, you know that if you just put this guy up on the stage with a mic, you'd be OK."

Campion, a Huntington native with a booming laugh and a smoker's voice, said "Bellevue" grew out of tour-

ing with his band and using true-life anecdotes to fill gaps between songs. "Because it was a rock and roll setting, I would just gloss over the heavier stuff," Campion said. But as he wrote his script (he's also working on a book), he dug deeper into his emotions. The newly revamped monologue goes into even greater detail about his multiple visits to the psych ward.

"In the show, I say it's like a never-ending Fellini movie," Campion said, "but with teeth."

"Bellevue," scheduled for an open-ended run, is produced by WestBeth Entertain-

ment, whose offbeat Off-Broadway credits include "Kiki & Herb: Coup de Théâtre" and "Hedwig and the Angry Inch." Arnold Engelman of WestBeth compared Campion to another theatrical rocker, the Kinks' singer Ray Davies, who also likes to combine music with storytelling.

"There's one fundamental difference between Ray's show and mine," Campion pointed out. "He becomes an iconic rock star at the end of his story. I end up chained to a bed getting Thorazine shots in the arm."

WHEN & WHERE "Escape From Bellevue," opening tonight, plays at 8 Thursdays and Fridays, with two shows at 8 and 11 p.m. Saturdays, at the Village Theatre, 158 Bleecker St., Manhattan. Tickets are \$30-\$40. Call 631-888-9000 or go to ticketmaster.com.

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