

'Route 22' immortalizes local towns, lifestyles in song



Chris Cassone stands outside a restaurant on Route 22 in Brewster. He's written a song and produced a video about Route 22. Frank Becerra Jr./The Journal News

Port Chester native pens tune about travels on busy stretch

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BREWSTER — It may be that few people think about getting their kicks on Route 22.

Heck, it doesn't even rhyme.

But the local road means a lot to performer and songwriter Chris Cassone, enough that he's penned his own tune about it.

"You don't have to travel if you want to roam," Cassone sings in his song "Route 22," to an early rock 'n' roll beat. He's got his own rhymes, naturally, and in a couple of cases they use the names of towns along the road.

"Don't even think of stalling till you get

to the town of Pawling," one line goes.

"The song writes itself with some of these town names," Cassone, 59, said recently at the Red Rooster, a food joint serving cheeseburgers, hot dogs and other classic roadside treats on Route 22 in Southeast.

The song is getting airplay on at least one radio station — WQQQ-103.3 FM in Lakeville, Conn. — and is accompanied by a video that has gotten more than 25,000 hits on YouTube. Joe Loverro, WQQQ's morning show host and general manager, says the station gets five or six calls a day asking for the song, "which is a lot for this area."

He's a fan of the song himself.

"It kind of moves, you know?" Loverro

said. "It's a high-quality song. Otherwise, we wouldn't play it."

But maybe you're skeptical. Sure the hometown road stretches more than 330 miles from Mount Vernon almost to the Canadian border, but you may feel that it doesn't have quite the wow factor as roads immortalized by more famous songs. Like, maybe it's only a third as cool as Route 66.

Try telling that to Cassone. Growing up in Port Chester, the grandson of J.J. Cassone, who founded the bakery that still sells rolls, garlic bread and submarine sandwiches on South Regent Street, Chris Cassone would travel up Route 22 to Camp Siwanoy in Wingdale as a Boy Scout or to

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Lake George on family vacations. That was in the 1960s.

"That was a long ride from Port Chester," Cassone recalled. "You didn't just zip up there."

He raised a family in Carmel and now splits his time between Los Angeles and Patterson — in a home from which he can hear traffic on the route.

A couple of years ago, Cassone debuted a musical play called "The Cakeman Chronicles," which tied together elements of his grandfather's murder in 1923 and Cassone's own youth, when he would finagle his way into the Capitol Theater not far from the bakery to meet rock stars such as Janis Joplin, Santana and Derek and the Dominoes

by bringing cakes for the bands.

The germ of the idea for the Route 22 song came several years ago.

"I had heard a guy say, 'Red Rooster. You know, just north of Brewster,'" he recalled. "I had heard that phrase, and I had always liked it."

He wrote it down, but didn't know what to do with it until two or three years ago when he was in Los Angeles, missing the Northeast winter.

"I was really very homesick," he said. "It was Christmastime, there was artificial snow on the trees. I missed Christmas, I missed the snow. I missed my kids."

Then he heard "Route 66" on the radio, and knew what to do. He wrote his own song, checking on Google for place

names along the way. He had to mention Amenia — "Last time I seen ya ..." — because his brother Kevin lives there.

His brother can be seen on the video by his home in one shot, standing by Cassone, who sits on a stone wall playing his 1959 Fender Stratocaster.

Route 22 has been around for a while, probably dating to the early 1700s in lower Westchester, for instance, said Richard Forlano, town historian of Eastchester. There the road — known once as Albany Post Road, now as White Plains Road — is the most prominent in town. And it's got history.

"The White Plains Road was the scene of some of the most vicious guerilla fighting during the American Revolution," Forlano said. From the

1820s to the mid-1840s, a red high-quality Tuckahoe marble was pulled down the road in ox carts to Eastchester Creek; later, it was shipped by rail.

The road's southern end is urban, in Mount Vernon. A traveler heading north will find it flanked by large homes in Scarsdale before it heads through downtown White Plains and up to the sprawling estates and Bedford's Village Green in northern Westchester.

"Once you get past Pawling and Wingdale, it's just farms all the way up," Cassone said.

In the 1960s, trips north became quicker when Interstate 684 connected Interstate 287 with Interstate 84 in Southeast. Even now, however, once a family headed north reaches that point, the jour-

ney puts them back onto Route 22. Jon Callahan, a manager at the Red Rooster since 1993, sees people from the city driving to and from country places for summer weekends.

"People with summer homes we see Friday night and Sunday," he said. Retirees stop travel north a day earlier and head back a day later, he said.

Spying a regular customer pulling into the lot, Callahan poured coffee for the man before he even got out of his car.

To make the video, Cassone and cameraman Doug Abdelnour drove Route 22 from Mount Vernon to Hoosick Falls, N.Y., not far from Bennington, Vt., in Cassone's Hyundai Santa Fe (though for the shots where he and Abdelnour are super-

imposed over a map of the route, they're in a BMW 700 convertible.) Along the way, they played the song "about 800 times" while Cassone lip-synched, he said. He liked the small village where they ended the trek.

"It was very retro," Cassone said of Hoosick Falls. "It reminded me of Port Chester in the '50s. It was a cute little town."

Cassone hopes the song will be his breakthrough. Either way, his dream, like the song, has a strong local bent. Looking out the window of Red Rooster toward the parking lot by the miniature golf course, he says he would love to put on a concert there.

"My dream is to have a stage right out there, have a couple thousand people," he said. "It'll happen."