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## The Resonator Singer-songwriter Michael Stanley embraces the role of an indie artist

by **Jeff Niesel**

As Michael Stanley walks into the downtown Winking Lizard, he's greeted by a super fan who acknowledges that when he had his 12-night farewell run at the old Front Row Theatre, she attended 7 of the shows. "There's no accounting for taste," Stanley laughs in response. Currently the afternoon drive DJ on WNCX, Stanley can't fill venues like he once did when heartland rockers the Michael Stanley Band were big. And yet, he's kept at it with a backing band he calls the Resonators; his new self-released album, *The Ride*, comes on the heels of last year's *The Hang*, an introspective album he's referred to as his darkest release yet. Stanley's not touring in support of the album but he is playing two shows this weekend and next weekend at the Tangier in Akron. Over a quick lunch at the Lizard, he talked about those shows and about what it's been like to release albums without the backing of a major label.

A four-night run at the Tangier is rather ambitious. What do you have planned for the shows?

You have to give them the ones they want every night. There are a bunch of swing songs and we'll do a couple of those each night. It breaks up the shows in case someone gets pissed off and hears a song we didn't do the night before. It also keeps the band on their toes, too. It's a nice problem to have that this far down the line there are so many fricking things to pull from. You want the audience to get what they came for but you have to keep the musicians engaged and keep yourself interested. My audience has been good about letting me move on as long as they get a certain amount of things. We'll do two or three things from the new album and see how that goes. You never know until you get out there and play them.

You essentially became an indie artist in the early 2000s when you left Razor and Tie. Talk about what that's been like.

It's weird for me having grown up in the label setting which doesn't exist anymore. There are pluses and minuses. I don't have anyone telling me what to do, but I also don't have a large distribution system behind me or a marketing squad. The Net gives you a certain amount of freedom. Everyone can find you. There are so many choices. The question is, who are people looking for? I like the idea of being able to do what I want. Since it's not my main livelihood, there's no pressure to have a hit album, whatever that is nowadays. I see the numbers of someone who has a No. 1 album and in the old days that would have been No. 50.

Were there more good bands playing rock 'n' roll when you started?

Artists development didn't have much to do with developing artists. Those guys had no idea what was going on. That was the place where someone's brother-in-law got a gig. There were a few guys who were great, guys like [Cleveland International Records] Steve Popovich. They were music people.

Who's your favorite Cleveland rock band of all time?

I would have to say the James Gang, although I'm a huge Raspberries fan too. There were a lot of good bands. Early on, there were good horn bands. It's been a great town for musicians.

What's your favorite Springsteen memory?

I'm a big Springsteen fan but I didn't want to meet him because I didn't want him to be a jerk. I've met enough people like that. I didn't want to meet Bruce and burst the bubble. Somebody who worked for [the local promoter] Belkin at the time around the Darkness tour or the River tour said I needed to meet Bruce. They took me backstage on some made-up thing and stuck me in his room. It was a dressing room. This was after the show and he played like three and half hours. There was a boombox going full blast playing the Ronettes, which I love. Bruce came out of the shower singing at the top of his lungs to the boombox after he had just been out there for 3 1/2 hours. He was very cool. We had a brief encounter but never passed paths again. It didn't blow it for me. That was at the Richfield Coliseum.

The Michael Stanley Band broke up in 1987. Talk about what broke up the band and how you've managed to stay on such good terms.

We broke up in January of 1987. It was an economic thing. We had lost our label 1 1/2 years before due to a run-in I had with someone at the label. At that point, if you didn't have a label, it was hard to keep going. We kept it together for about a year and a half. I had 15 people on the payroll and couldn't pay everyone and they all had families and houses. I thought, "If we're going to go out, I want to go out while we are still big." I didn't want to do that. Everyone thinks that we all hated each other but it was never that.

Your solo material has been more introspective. How well does that material fit with the MSB classics?

I think it's a growth. Early on, there was tremendous pressure to have a hit single, unless you were Zeppelin or somebody. We were thinking of what they would play on the radio. Once that was taken away, I could do whatever I wanted to. I like pop music so that wasn't foreign to me. At the same time, I'm not terribly focused. If I want to rock today, I'll rock. If I want to make acoustic music, I'll make acoustic music. I can do whatever the hell I want.

You don't have the luxury to play what you want on WNCX. Talk about some of the artists you would play if you could play anything.

It would be pretty eclectic. You would hear Joni Mitchell and AC/DC in the same day. That's a big jump. There's a lot of stuff I like and a lot of stuff that doesn't get much exposure. I like Steve Earle and Lyle Lovett and John Hiatt and Bonnie Raitt. Who plays them? I gave up fighting about playlists because it is what it is. You might not think it if you live here, but I can't tell you how many people tell us that we're wide open and that they would never hear Alex Harvey or Todd Rundgren or old Genesis. [Program director] Bill Louis has done a good job of making it across the board and giving it some depth.

Do your kids introduce you to new bands?

Yeah, they do. One of my daughters seems to have a good grip on what I like. One of the bands was Lifehouse. I really, really like them. They make great records.

Cleveland has a reputation as a great rock 'n' roll town. Is it still a great rock 'n' roll town?

I think in a lot of respects it is. The part that was its strongest suit was that it was a trendsetting market instead of a following market. I don't think that's here anymore but I don't know if that exists anywhere anymore.

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