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## Michael Stanley: Just Doing His Job



By Jeb Wright

Michael Stanley may be one of the most talented songwriters to be overlooked for decades by the vast majority of music lovers. With The Michael Stanley Band, and as a solo artist, he has consistently written and released well-crafted albums of well written songs. He's good. Hell, he's damn good. Good enough to be produced by Bill Szymczyk of Eagles fame. Good enough to have Joe Walsh remake his songs. Good enough to still be surviving in 2014, many decades after he started in the crazy business of rock and roll.

Stanley resides in Cleveland, a town that made him a local rock star when the rest of the world relegated him as the "Oh, I guess I have heard of him...I know THAT song" guy. In Cleveland, Stanley set attendance records and is still, to this day, a beloved community figurehead. He is still making music, too. In fact, his latest effort titled The Job is another fantastic slab of music. The songs either make you feel good, or they tear you up emotionally. They are real. They are what makes music one of the most important elements in the lives of human beings.

Classic Rock Revisited sat down with Stanley to discuss the new album, his relationship with Szymczyk and Walsh, and how he feels he can still fit in, despite being an \*gasp\* older rock and roller.

Read on to learn more about the man who coulda, shudda, woulda...and still is.

**Jeb: Your songwriting on your last two or three albums has been very personal and emotional. Do you have any idea why you are having such a creative rebirth?**

Michael: I don't, other than the realization that we are closer to the end than we are to the beginning. If there is something you want to do then you better do it. It is a weird thing.

I think at this point the problem that I have is, "What do I want to write about?" There is a lot of music

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there but, lyrically, what do I want to write about? This far down the line, and this many tunes written, it would be very easy to repeat yourself. On the other hand, you don't want to be totally age specific and write "The Colonoscopy Blues." I have to think about what is worthy to write about and that would make sense to someone in my age group.

**Jeb: Do you write music first?**

Michael: I usually write the music first. People ask me, "How do you write a song?" I say, "Anyway you possibly can." If the music comes first, great, if the lyrics come first, great, if they come at the same time that is great. You beg, borrow and steal until you get something you're satisfied with.

**Jeb: Do you compose on just guitar, or on guitar and piano?**

Michael: Just guitar. I wish I composed on piano. In the early MSB years, I did a lot of writing with my best friend who was the keyboard player. We've not done that so much, as he has time restraints. He would come up with music that I would never come up with on my own, and as a lyricist, that was really cool. It was great to write words to music that I would have never come up with by myself.

**Jeb: With The Job you have more of a band atmosphere.**

Michael: Sometimes it is very obvious right from the start where a song needs to go. Other times -and this is a part of the process I like- it is a jigsaw puzzle. You have to ask what the right colors are to paint this song with. Sometimes I get it right, and sometimes someone in the band will come up with something that will get my attention. They will come and take a song in a way that I didn't see it going.

**Jeb: I would describe this album as both smart and emotional.**

Michael: My whole idea with songs, whether I am writing them, or listening to them, is that it ought to make you dance, or it ought to make you cry...one of the two. Everything else is just kind of taking up space. Hopefully, for the people who hear it, it will move them in one direction or another. The funny thing to me is when people ask you to explain a song... I used to do it, but I found that once I explained it to them they would get this look on their face and say, "That's not what I thought it was about." I would ask, "Okay, what did you think it was about?" They would tell me and I would go, "You know, I have never thought of it that way but I can see how you would take it that way." That is one of the fascinating things about the musical process. It can mean a lot of things to a lot of different people.

Michael Stanley and the Resonators " The Job "



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**Jeb: To me, it would seem the songs are so personal that it would be odd that they missed the point.**

Michael: On some of them you do wonder why they missed it. It is the old "Born in the USA" thing. Most people think that is a flag-waving song. It is anything but, really. Musically it comes off that way, but lyrically it is pretty dark.

**Jeb: Which is easier for you... the fun songs, or the gut-wrenching emotional songs?**

Michael: We were sitting around the dressing room last night talking about that. People will tell me they like my music, but that it tends to be on the dark side. They will say, "Why don't you write more happy songs?" I tell them, "I understand what you are saying but most of the time when you're happy the last thing you want to do is go down to the studio. You're too busy being happy." For me, the easiest thing is to write when things are a little bit askew. At the same time you don't want to go the Leonard Cohen trip where everything is ultra-serious. I try to keep track of that and make sure I have some songs that are more upbeat and positive.

**Jeb: When you approach that dark side in writing, it is difficult emotionally. It takes a toll on the writer.**

Michael: If you're getting into the meat of the thing, then it can. One of the great things about being a writer is that I can write something like that, which is 100% truthful, intense and emotional and then the next song can be that way, but it can be something I totally made up, or that I observed in somebody else's life. You take the songs where you can get them, you know.

**Jeb: It seems to me that if you look back through your career, you don't have long dry spells. Do you have insight how you continue to write, where some at this stage fail to get inspired?**

Michael: I understand that. I keep waiting for it to stop. I know a couple of people who were good musicians for years and then one day they said they didn't want to do this anymore. I asked the guys in the band if they ever feel that way. They said, "no" and I was like, "me neither." I just wonder if one day I will wake up and go, "This is it. I don't want to do this anymore." Then I will sell the guitars and take up gardening. I don't know. The cool thing about being a writer, and not just a performer, is that as a writer I don't have to worry about running around the stage, or working a crowd. I don't have to worry about playing a three-hour show, or whatever. You can write the tunes in any shape you're in...you can sit around in your bathrobe eating Twinkies and do this. I do wonder if I am running out of things to write about. I hope not.

**Jeb: There is a song right there.**

Michael: That's true, exactly.

MICHAEL STANLEY - IF ANYBODY COULD - from THE ...



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**Jeb: The new album is called The Job. It is a job.**

Michael: It is. Everybody has one...well, maybe not as many people have them as used to have them. People ask me why I still do this. I tell them, "Why wouldn't you still do this?" If you are having fun and doing something that is positive, as opposed to negative, then why wouldn't I do this? It's too late for me to become a lawyer, or a brain surgeon. This is my job. The die has been cast and I am happy with it. I am going to do this the best that I can for as long as I can.

**Jeb: Do you still like playing live?**

Michael: I love performing live. We were always a good live band. I actually think we garnered more attention as a live band than we did with the albums. About half the guys in the band, five or six years ago, decided that we were not playing enough. Everyone has a real gig now so we can only play on the weekends and we can only play where we get back and forth to the gig on a weekend. It really cuts down the options. The whole Michael Stanley thing...it was good, but it would be nice to play some more. A few of us put together a little blues band and we do that when we are not doing this. We play in bars. We have two rules: We never rehearse, and we are not allowed to do any of my songs. It's been great. It got me back to realizing why I started doing this in the first place. You can get a little far away from that. We are up there for three or four sets a night in a bar playing Muddy Waters tunes, or Stones tunes, or whatever we want.

**Jeb: The Job and the last one, The Ride, are great albums. I like the fact that you have songs like "Dark Angels" that grab you and take you to a certain place, but you have songs on The Job like "The Last Good Nerve." You have emotion and you have humor. It appeals to your fans that you can be so human in your emotions for all of us.**

Michael: I am a product of the Midwestern experience. I think, not to generalize it too much, it is kind of like that. You keep pushing ahead and a put in a good day's work and that sort of thing. I like doing the humorous song. Sometimes I think people don't get them. I did one four or five albums ago called "Drinking in the Driveway." You have that guy in every neighborhood that sits in his lawn chair and drinks and takes in the whole thing. In the song I refer to Chinese people and gay people who live on the street. People got pissed. They were like, "Why are you dissing the gays?" I was like, "Get the joke here...this is this guy saying these things not me."

**Jeb: You are personal in your writing, so when you do commentary it would be easy to think it is your point of view.**

Michael: I can see that. I know I could write a lot more politically, too. I try to get something on every album that is somewhat that. At the same time, I realize people are not necessarily coming to musicians for their political views. At the same time, as an artist, and a writer, there is certain responsibility to say what you think. You get it in there and people take it, or leave and do what they want with it. You hope that the song is a good song, and that people don't fucking care what I am saying and they just like the music because they can dance to it.

**Jeb: You have a very close relationship with a famous producer named Bill Szymczyk...**

Michael: I would not be in the business without Bill. We've known each other for 45 years and we've worked together in one way shape or form most of that time. The first six albums I did were all with him. I didn't know any other way. The way Bill made records is the way that I made records. Bill has certainly proven his point that he knows how to make records. When he got totally involved in Eagle Land I had to come up with other producers. We worked with four, or five, other famous producers and I learned not everyone does what Bill does. I learned from all of them and I took stuff that worked for me from all of them. When Bill and I got back together and he started mixing my albums, it was so weird. We were putting the credits together and I said, "How do you want your engineering credit to read?" He looked at me and said, "I was not the engineer on this...you were." I said, "I am not an engineer." He goes, "You did it. I am not saying you're a good engineer, or a bad one, but you are an engineer." It would be really great if we could get the band together in one room and have him produce it, but the stars have not lined up that way. If they did it would be really great."

**Jeb: You and Bill have the Joe Walsh connection and all of this stuff. What was up in Cleveland back then?**

Michael: There was a lot of good talent coming out of Cleveland. You are always discovering someone who has ties to this area. Backstage last night we were talking about this. JD Souther was born here and I didn't know that. Boz Scaggs was born down the road. You had a great R&B scene here with the O'Jays and the Dazz band and all of that. You go south to Akron and Columbus and there was a serious country thing going on. We were a product of Detroit, as that was the type of radio we were listening to, all the Motown stuff.

Most people think Night Moves was Seger's first album, but that was his eleventh album, or something like

that. We used to go see Bob play for a buck. It was a great place to hone your craft. There were a lot of good players and singers here. Sometimes the club scene would be really strong and then it would go away and then it would come back. I don't know if I could have asked for a better place to grow up, musically.

M.S.B. - American Bandstand - Solid Gold 1983



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**Jeb: You are Mr. Cleveland. You are a huge star there. How did you avoid the same success on a national level?**

Michael: We didn't consciously try to avoid it; let's get that out front right away [laughter]. I think we were America's most unsuccessful successful bands. We did something like 11 albums. We were on the road for 13 years. We had a few Top 40 things and we sold a bunch of records, but we were not a household name by any means, except in three or four cities. People will say they never heard of us and then you sing them a few songs and they are like, "I know those songs." We didn't look like Rod Stewart or Devo. We looked like the guys who lived next door to you. I think it was part of our strength, as that was an important thing to our audience, but at the same time, it makes us harder to market. Who knows what all the guys in REO Speedwagon or Seger's band or MSB looked like? They take it as an entity. They either like it, or they don't like it.

**Jeb: Any idea why Cleveland has been so supportive?**

Michael: It isn't like it used to be. There is a place here called the Blossom Music Center and we hold the attendance record there, which was four sold out nights, it was like 86,000 people. I get asked why we don't play Blossom anymore, and I tell them an empty Blossom is not a nice thing. They say, "Oh, I would go." I am like, "No you won't. You don't go to shows anymore."

The nice thing is that there have been enough people who have remained on the bandwagon to keep it financially viable. More important than that is that our fans have been generous at letting me move on. They accept that I am going to do something different. They listen to us with an open mind. If you come see us live then three quarters of the set is the old stuff, which is what they are coming to hear. It reminds them of when they were 18 or 19. The other quarter of the set is from the last ten years or so. Some of these things have become standards. I could not get away without doing them as much as I could not do some of the MSB hits, which has been a nice thing. I let them figure out which songs stay in the set and things like that.

**Jeb: You did not do a track remake on The Job.**

Michael: There is not one. I like doing that stuff. I had a couple of things in mind, but I didn't put them on this. There are always two, or three, extra songs. While I am waiting for everyone to come and finish their stuff, after I am pretty much done, I have this time sitting around, so I end up writing more songs. It gets out of hand. A lot of times they will show up on the next album. That is how The Ride came about entirely. I had about four or five songs that were in that funkier non-guitar solo vein. All of a sudden I realized I really liked these songs, and I knew I just needed a few more in the same vein and I would have an album. That was a fun album to do, as there was not a lot of dark stuff on that one. I didn't know what the reaction would be like, but it turned out great.

**Jeb: I love the remake of the Bee Gees song, "To Love Somebody" on that album. I am not a fan of that band. I know everyone likes them, but I never did.**

Michael: I was just fooling around in the studio one day and I was playing that song. I loved that song and I wondered what it would sound like if it was a little more R&B. A lot of their stuff goes that way if you go back and listen to it. I always was a big fan of that band. Most people just know them for Saturday Night Fever. They go way back before that. I don't know any songwriter that, if they are honest, does not tip their hat to the Bee Gees. I can understand if you don't like that style, but they can write songs.

**Jeb: The one before that had "Romeo and Juliette" from Dire Straits. That is a heavy tune, and you pour your emotions into it.**

Michael: That was going to be a surprise on the album for my wife. When we first started hanging out together that was our song. I would only record it when she wasn't around the house. I wasn't even going to tell her it was on the record until the record came out. She would have found out because she ran the record company, but I wanted to keep it secret. She passed away before the record was done and she never got to hear it. Once again, it was a fun thing to do. I like to also take a tune of someone else's that no one knows and turn them on to it.

**Jeb: You were like Dire Straits before they hit the big time. Kind of like Warren Zevon where everyone respects you but the mass appeal was not there.**

Michael: All you can do is show up and do the best you can and the rest is luck. I think so much of it is being in the right place at the right time. I hold the theory that to get your first break is more about luck than it is about talent. If you have any talent than that will give you a chance to turn it into some sort of career that has longevity, but luck is a factor. We can't think that everyone we are listening to is the best that there are out there. That is misguided. Everybody I know knows someone sitting in their basement who would burn your eyes out with what they write. They don't do it on a stage for whatever reason. Ninety percent of the game is just showing up.





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**Jeb: I think Bill is one of your biggest fans.**

Michael: I think so. He has no reason to go through what he goes through to do this with me. My day job is as a disc jockey on a classic rock station. If you took Bill's songs out of our rotation then we would not have half the songs that we play. If you know his story it is more amazing. He started out with these R&B guys in New York. I have known him for 45 years and every time we get together I find out someone else that he worked with that I didn't know about. He cut Joni Mitchell's first demos. I would wear a T-shirt that said that, but Bill does not brag.

**Jeb: Even though it has been a friendship, what is your collaboration like? I bet you get tickled pink to get his reaction to your new songs.**

Michael: It is still a mentor/student thing to me. When we get to the point where he asks if I have my stuff together for the next one I tell him I will send them to him. When I do he says, "I got them... let me spend two or three days with them and I will send you the report card." I am waiting around to see if I did well on my SAT's. He will write back and go, "There are five A's and three B's and a C and I hate this one." I don't think there is anybody around who I can get a compliment from who means more.

We've been doing this longer than anyone else he has worked with. Obviously it is less successful than anyone he's worked with, but at the same time, it's been 45 years. It has been so cool to watch him grow from the time he worked with my band which was the same time he signed The James Gang.

The James Gang was great and we sucked. He did the BB King stuff and the Eagles stuff. I remember him calling me up and saying, "I got this call to do this band called The Eagles. They seem like they are more down your line than mine. What do you think of them?" He was looking at them as a country thing which was never his trip. I said, "We've done some gigs with them and they are really good. They sing amazing. They write great songs. I don't know if you've seen them live but they rock a lot more live than they do on record." He says, "Well, they'd have to." I told him, "I think you should check it out. What's to lose? Do an album and if you don't like them, or they don't like you, then who cares. Move on to something else." The rest is multi-platinum history.

**Jeb: How did you and Bill meet?**

Michael: He roomed with a guy in New York when he started out and this guy had moved to Cleveland and was running a couple of clubs here. Bill came in just for the weekend to party and to hang out with his buddy. He went to one of this guy's clubs and we happened to be playing in one of them. The whole true story is...he may deny it...but he was tripping. We had a really good light show so maybe that helped. I guess we sounded good to someone who was tripping.

He came up after the set and gave us his card and said he was a producer for ABC Records. It was the old, "Hey, I like what I'm hearing and maybe we can do something." We were like, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, we've heard this a million times before." Then he followed through on it and we went to New York. We didn't have enough money for hotels, so we slept on the floor of his apartment. We made a record in like six days and he tried to save it, but there wasn't really much there to work with. It was the opening of the door for me.

When he started his own independent label, Tumbleweed, he called me out of the blue. I had not talked to him for about a year. He says, "Are you still writing songs?" I said, "Yeah." He says, "Do you want to make a record?" I said, "Sure." He said, "Do you have a band?" I said, "No." He said, "I'll put a band together for you." That's how I met Joe Walsh. I didn't know Joe in Cleveland. I never saw The James Gang play until their reunion and I never saw the Rasperry's play until their reunion. Everyone was always out playing at the same time.

**Jeb: Tell me how Walsh came to record "Rosewood Bitters."**

Michael: That song was on my first solo album. Joe said he really loved that song. Every time I would see him after that he would say, "I am going to do that song. I am." I said, "Go right ahead, Joe." It took him twenty years to do it, but one day he did it.

**Jeb: When you hear someone take one of your songs, what does that feel like?**

Michael: It's a great feeling. I've always felt that a lot of the tunes I've written would be a lot better with someone else singing them. That door has not opened as much as I would like it to. Someone told me that Widespread Panic was opening their shows with one of my songs and I went and checked it out and they did great with it.

I got lucky with a group in Nashville called Little Texas who were big for about a year and a half. I had sent a tape around Nashville of what I thought were country songs to see if anyone would record them. One day the manager for Little Texas called up and said, "We heard one of your songs and we'd like to talk to you about doing one of your songs." I said, "Where did you hear the tape?" He said, "What tape?" I told him I had a tape going around. He said, "No, we want to do your song 'My Town.'" I would never have thought of that song for a country person. He told me they wanted to change one line if it was okay with me. They did it and it ended up on an album where they had five number one singles.

**Jeb: That has to be an honor...**

Michael: Joe doesn't need to look around for songs. Some people do, as they do not write. But Joe Walsh can do whatever he wants to do. He is not only a good friend he is an amazing musician. To have someone like that to go all out with one of your babies is really cool.

**Jeb: Your vocals are very good on The Job.**

Michael: It's strange because I certainly don't have the range that I used to, but I think I sing better than I used to. I don't know if that is because I am smarter about it than I used to be, or if I learned something along the way. I think I sing better in the live shows as well. I go see people from my era and that is not always the case. I am not out there playing five nights a week either, which takes its toll. I appreciate you saying that. We do the best we can with what we've got.

**Jeb: How much time is spent on lyrics? Also, are they more important at this stage of your career?**

Michael: I've always been a lyricist first, but I also realize the majority of people don't listen to them. They might know the chorus. They hear the song and they either like it, or they don't. I have always been drawn to lyrics but, at the same time, "Mony Mony" is a great song and there are five writers listed on that and I have no idea why. But I wish I would have done it!

Each time we get ready to put out a new album I think about saving some money and not putting the lyrics in the booklet. Everyone in the band tells me I can't do that and that I have to put them in there. My people want lyrics. I think, on a certain level, that is the group that is drawn to what I do. They spend a lot of time listening to them, dissecting them and trying to figure them out. That's what I do when I hear somebody turn a great phrase, then it is just as cool to me as a great guitar lick.

**Jeb: Are you the guy that keeps going back to them and erasing one little word and replacing it?**

Michael: I do more rewrites now than ever before. Once again, it has to do with the finite thing. Whatever I do is there and it is not going away. If somebody wants to access it ten years from now then they can, so I had better mean what I mean. I used to be more about doing the first thing that came into my head and thinking that was the right thing. That often happens with titles. Now I go back and I look at them a little more with scrutiny and I think that is because, once again, it is important to me. Whether anyone else pays attention to that or not, I have no control over. It is just the way I work.

Michael Stanley Band - He Cant Love You



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**Jeb: Last one: Where did you find that old photo for the cover of The Job?**

Michael: I have taken the pictures for the last three or four covers. I had one for this one all set to go. It was a little different and weird. I had it all to my graphics guy and he did exactly what I wanted him to do and it was horrible. It didn't work the way I wanted it to work, whatsoever. We are like four songs into the mix, so I had to come up with something really quick.

I went on to the Internet and went to one of those free graphic sites and they have everything broken down into categories. I knew the album was called The Job so went to this category called Industrial and there are all of these pictures of old factories. Right in the middle of all of that this picture comes up and I just pulled it off and I go, "Those guys are cool."

I sent seven, or eight, things to my graphics guy and asked him to tell me what he thought worked. I said, "There is a picture of these old dudes and for some reason it really speaks to me." He calls me back in ten minutes and says, "We've got to use those guys. Those are the coolest guys ever." I have no idea what it is. All it said was "Wench Workers." There was no credit or anything. For like twenty-five bucks I had my cover. I told Bill that is basically what we look like when we are mixing a project. Before he saw it I told him, "After all of these years we are going to be on a cover of the album." He said, "Why in the world would you put me on a cover?"

**Jeb: He's the one on the right.**

Michael: Yeah.

**Jeb: You took the picture on The Ride. What did you do to that poor car?**

Michael: I was driving to work downtown one day and there was a car lot that I always passed. One day I went by it and the entire place had caught fire. The next day I went by, and they had all of the burnt cars piled up on top of each other. I keep my camera in my car—I am not a photographer but I keep it there. I started taking pictures and I knew one day I would use that photo in a picture.

**Jeb: You said most people think Night Moves is Seger's first album. I thought Heartland was your first album when it came out. I had no idea you had an entire career before that. I love the song "He Can't Love You" and you are this singer/songwriter guy and you didn't write that tune.**

Michael: I didn't write it and I didn't sing it. People were freaking out at the time. There have always been two lead singers in MSB. The only album that didn't have two singers was the Cabin Fever album. I liked having more than one singer. Look at the Beatles. Everyone is the lead singer. When Heartland came out and started getting some airplay...the record company originally had a song of mine they wanted to be the single, but they did a focus group and they came back with this one. They asked me if it was okay with me and I was like, "It's fine with me. If this sells records and gets us gigs then it's great."

**Jeb: As good as The Job is, I want to know when the next batch of tunes will come out.**

Michael: It will be a little bit longer this time as Bill has said he will not come to Ohio in the winter. So, he will be here in the spring, so look for a new one out about this time next year.

**Purchase The Job Here: <http://linelevelmusic.com>  
<http://www.michaelstanley.com/>**

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