

Michael Stanley 3-CD solo years retrospective shows an artist at the top of his game (CD Review)

michael-stanley-solo-years-big.jpg

Michael Stanley is still rocking. A three-CD package of his post-Michael Stanley Band -- Michael Stanley: The Solo Years, 1995-2014," comes out in November. (*Line Level Music / Classic Music Vault*)

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CLEVELAND, Ohio – Every discussion about rock 'n' roll music in Cleveland involving fans "of a certain age" eventually gets around to the **Michael Stanley Band's**

back-to-back sellouts at the Richfield Coliseum on New Year's Eve / New Year's Day of 1981-82, or the four nights the MSB filled Blossom Music Center in August of that year.

CD REVIEW

"Michael Stanley: The Solo Years, 1995-2014." ClassicMusicVault.com. \$22.99.

Depending on whom you ask, **Michael Stanley** is either the greatest rock 'n' roll singer-songwriter to come out of Cleveland or a hack who didn't have the drive to take it to the next level.

Stanley himself has his own opinion – one with which I agree: Thirteen albums – including a pair of greatest hits compilations that came after the fact – over the life of a band that lasted from 1975 to 1986 is hardly what I'd call a failure.

But the thing that stands out for me is that Stanley didn't do what I think a lot of us would do in that situation: quit.

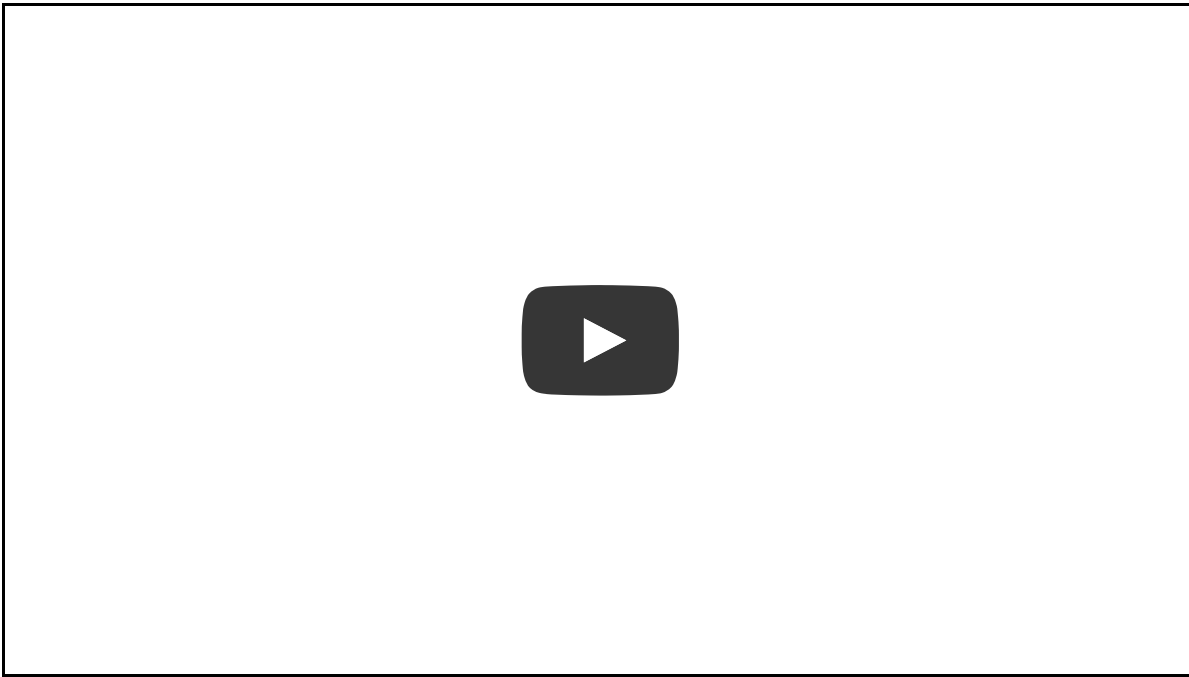
He was making albums before the MSB and he's continued to do so after the band. The dozen albums in the post-MSB era have provided fodder for a new three-CD compilation package called **"Michael Stanley: The Solo Years, 1995-2014."** It will arrive in stores on Tuesday, Nov. 11.

The first album features 15 tunes Stanley and his longtime producer, Bill Szymczyk have dubbed "the Rousers." The second boasts 14 the pair calls "the Weepies." And the third is a 14-tune collection they call "Crispy's Critters" that Stanley told me were "the weirdies."

Stanley picked the tunes in the first two CDs, and Szymczyk – whose nickname is Crispy – chose all but a couple for the third. Both contributed to the liner notes that make up a 12-page booklet that's part of the package.

MSB purists will claim that the "new stuff" can't compare. Maybe in this regard, I'm fortunate in that I didn't come to Cleveland till AFTER the demise of the band. It means my view isn't colored by what was, and is

instead based on what is.



What I hear in listening to these songs is a singer-songwriter who has honed his skills to the max degree, working almost symbiotically with a producer who – through years together – almost seems like he could finish Stanley sentences for him.

Stanley's most recent studio releases – "The Hang" in 2012, "The Ride" in 2013 and "The Job" in 2014 – really are the work of a man at the peak of his skills, and all are mined for tunes.

Now I admit that my favorite is actually a cover – the BeeGees' "To Love Somebody" – off "The Ride." But it doesn't sound at all like the Brothers Gibb. It, like all the songs here, show a harsher edge in the 66-year-old Stanley's voice, one that's come from years of singing and (sorry, Michael, but I'm gonna fuss at you) smoking.

The range isn't what it was in "Rosewood Bitters," but there's a depth that comes from the lower registers. "Any Time I Try," originally on the 2008 album, "Just Another Night," is one of those "Weepies" that cuts through all the blather and blarney that usually surrounds a love song.

"My Brand New Day," which first surfaced on the 2009 album "Shadowland," has ghosts of that guy who pretty much defined the term "Heartland rocker."

Best of all, two bonus tracks -- "Money Shot" and "Raise the Dead" – show that at 66, he's not done yet.

Stanley told me he knows he couldn't fill Blossom again, and "there's nothing uglier than an empty Blossom" – and he's OK with that. He and one of his current bands, the Resonators, typically do four shows at Akron's Tangier every year, and those are always sold out.

But the reality is his "failure" is actually his success. Today, he's not making music with an eye on the brass ring. He's making it for the pure JOY of making music. It's a freeing thing, I believe.

And nowhere is that clearer than in the 10-year retrospective that is "Michael Stanley: The Solo Years, 1995-2014."

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