Michael McDonald on keeping things in perspective

July 5, 2017 - Michael McDonald is an American singer, songwriter, keyboardist and record producer with one of the most immediately recognizable voices in contemporary pop music. As a member of both Steely Dan and the Doobie Brothers, McDonald had a hand in writing some of the most iconic songs of the ’70s, before embarking on a solo career that would carry through the next three decades. This fall McDonald will release his tenth studio album, *Wide Open*. Despite having penned some of the most culturally ubiquitous songs of the last fifty years, McDonald, now 65 years old, reflects on how aging has (and hasn’t) affected his creative output: “You don't really count on the fact that you're going to have a lot of the same desires and, in some cases, the same fantasies about your life and your contribution to the world around you that you did when you were younger. You don’t necessarily get over those certain wants. It doesn't really go away.”

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2214 words.

Tags: Music, Process, Focus, Success, Anxiety, Inspiration.

You’ve been a solo artist for a long time now, but you remain a frequent collaborator. Do you miss the dynamic of being part of a group?

There’s a great comfort in being in a band. And I was very comfortable with that whole thing. First of all, in a band like the Doobie Brothers, there are multiple singers. You don’t have to sing all night long when you play live, you get to sing maybe five songs at the most. So you can do eight shows in a row and it’s not really all that taxing on your voice.

I really enjoyed that part of being in bands, especially coming up with the Doobies. There were a few of us that sang. There was a lot of material to draw from. And when we went in the studio, there was generally a surplus of ideas. We’d forge the songs by virtue of just jamming them over and over. It was a good place to start. I miss the filtering process you get in a band, the soundboard aspect. I miss that camaraderie. Even though as a solo artist life’s a lot easier in many ways, the imagined ease of decision-making can actually be more difficult. You start second-guessing yourself and there’s no one around to bounce your ideas off of. Total freedom can be a double-edged sword.

Do you find that your process for songwriting has changed much over the years?

It has. I don’t know if it’s fundamentally changed *that* much, but my approach has differed. It used to be that I always wrote the music first. That was my formula. Then I would come up with a lyric later. Eventually I became more interested in writing the lyrics first and then trying to make music that suited the lyrics instead of the other way around.

The approach always seems to change, which I think is healthy. I never know how it’s going to happen. I’ll write something down in a book, I’ll keep notes on my phone; I have a thousand titles and lyric ideas that might someday become a song, or maybe not. In most cases the chances are I never even look at them again. Sometimes I’ll write a song—and I’ve done this many times over the years—and the whole thing will come together in 10 or 15 minutes. It just kind of pops out, fully-formed. Then later on I’ll find some cassette in a drawer from about four years ago and that same song idea in some form of metamorphosis is on this cassette. So it’s kind of like it just disappeared into my subconscious and came out finished later. I think in the creative process that’s an important thing to allow to happen, let the ideas gestate until they’re ready. And that’s why sometimes it takes me five years to write a song.

You’re releasing a new record this fall, which is your first album of all new material in nearly a decade. At this point in your career, do you still find that to be nerve-wracking?

It really is. Sometimes I still feel like the guy who somebody threw shoulder pads and a jersey on and pushed out onto a professional football field who’s never actually played. I can still feel that way at times. And I’m sure other musicians do, too. When I was younger, a lot of times you’d write something and you couldn’t wait to play it for the band. You went into it with the confidence of “oh *this* is the shit that we should be doing next.”

I don’t necessarily feel that way too much anymore. The creative process has kind of tempered with age and I tend to be a little more analytical. I wonder what part of this is relevant and what part of it is just the musings of an older guy. So there’s all of this going on in your head when you’re trying to make a record. I still enjoy the process and I still believe that songs kind of write themselves if you let them. When I’m writing lyrics, for instance, I just write it down. I don’t really think about where I want to take it me or what it means yet. I wait for the opportunity for that stuff to reveal itself to me.

I still try to maintain that aspect of songwriting, where it’s kind of spontaneous and has a life of its own. A big part of songwriting for me is driving around in my car and listening to a demo where I don’t have a completed lyric and just hoping that whatever it’s going to be drops out of the sky hits me square between the eyes. Because I don’t really enjoy sitting down and going “Okay I’m going to write a lyric today. And this is what it’s going to be about.” I don’t do well with that. I get very uncreative in that situation.

Having been doing this now for decades, do you find that writing songs has become easier with time? Is it like a muscle that gets stronger with practice?

Not necessarily. I’m still surprised by what comes out in the songs, how often they’re a metaphor for where I’m at in my life. Back when I was 30 I thought about being 65, maybe I imagined visiting some of my old musician friends at the coffee shop, getting in my Smart Car and driving home to take a nap. I don’t know what I thought I’d be doing at 65; I had no clue.

What I didn’t count on at this age was having a lot of the same feelings that I had in my 30s—where I would just love for somebody to throw me the ball so I could run it into the end zone one more time. You don’t count on the fact that you’re going to have a lot of the same desires and, in some cases, the same fantasies about your life and your contribution to the world around you. You don’t necessarily get over those certain wants. It doesn’t really go away.

I’ve learned to lean more heavily on things I took for granted. I remember a friend of mine’s dad when we were young. He wasn’t like the other dads; he didn’t go to work at the office, the insurance company or GM or those places that most of our dads worked. He always had his own small businesses—vending machines, rehabbing old houses, different things—and he always kind of kept his independence that way. I always thought it was cool. He had this very adventurous spirit. After his kids were grown he went to Palestine and worked in a hospital for a few years, but it wasn’t until he was in his 70s that he really found his true artistic calling.

He took up whittling. He’s sitting on his porch in Ferguson whittling little things out of wood and within a year he had become a bronze sculptor. He wound up doing a lot of the municipal statues in Ferguson. These very beautiful statues. He even got written up in *Artist Way* magazine, you know, as one of the nation’s top emerging sculptors… at the age of 70. I take a lot of heart in that these days. Creativity is this thing you can carry with you through your entire life. I’ve realized, it’s not over until we say it’s over.

You’ve obviously worked with some of the most legendary people in the music business (Steely Dan, The Doobie Brothers, Ray Charles, Aretha Franklin, Elton John, Patti LaBelle, Joni Mitchell, but you’ve also been embraced by younger musicians like Solange, Thundercat, and Grizzly Bear. Why do you think that is?

Yeah, there’s always been this conversation, especially in the last couple decades of my life, where people will approach me with this subject of, “Oh, you know, the music of the ’70s was so amazing, but music today is just terrible,” or something like that. It’s like their ears and minds shut off after a certain point. It’s funny because I’ve always found in each generation something new that I’ve really liked, some new movement that I really got excited about.

We played Coachella this year and afterwards my daughter had me out all hours of the night listening to all sorts of stuff. We stayed to the end and watched everything. It was a lot of fun. Albeit at my age, your body feels like it’s trying to drive itself into the earth after you’ve been on your feet for that long, but I really enjoyed it. On the way home we were listening to some of the bands we’d just seen—people like Radiohead and Father John Misty—and it was really great to have this renewed perspective on the whole thing. No matter how much things change or technology changes, it’s not so different from what rock bands have always been trying to do. Music is still exploring the same spectrum of what it is to be human. People are always going to be trying to find new ways to talk about love. What else are we really here for anyway, except to interact and try to understand each other better. Music is still doing that.

What advice, if any, do you have for young musicians?

It's such a different business now. The music industry is such an enigma to me now. I don't know what advice I have other than to be honest and try your best. These days I focus on what it is I can contribute, which is the music part of it. As long as that still feels valid, I'll keep doing it. And if there's a day when that's not the case, there are other things I wouldn't mind focusing on. I would like to paint more. I feel like it's one of those things that I don't get to practice enough but that makes me really happy.

Did you always do that?

As a kid I doodled a lot, but I got very timidly into painting as I got older. I do it for my own enjoyment, and it brings me to a place spiritually that very few other things can. Like a lot of artistic people, I often suffer from an inability to focus in the real world. I'm all over the place all the time. So when I'm making music or if I'm painting there's that kind of therapeutic aspect to it where in that moment that's all I'm thinking about. And it kind of rests my brain.

Has your perception of success changed radically over the years?

I've grown old enough to be wiser about what success really is, and at times I'm struck with this overwhelming gratitude about everything that has happened to me. It's still very complicated. The other day somebody asked me what my plan was for the next five years and the only thing that I could think to say was that I just hope to stay above ground, basically. I don't really think beyond that much. Hopefully I'll be healthy enough to pursue some artistic endeavor, whatever it is. If I'm not able to perform and sing anymore, if my arthritis gets so bad that they have to strap a paintbrush to my fist so I can paint, I'll be okay with it. Because life is a gift, you know, and it's already been given. It's all what you do with it.

This is something I might tell young artists: the things that are most important to me today are not the things I would have put on a list 30 years ago. I still struggle with all the same fears—health, finances, etc—that everybody has. At times they get a little larger than life and I forget that they're not really all that important compared to other things. We do tend to focus on the wrong things too much of the time and make a big deal out of things that are ultimately kind of inconsequential. Success is being able to *not* do that. So much of being happy in life—both as a person and as an artist—is just being able to put things in the right perspective. If your kids are healthy and if you have meaningful, loving relationships in your life, and you don't have too many unresolved resentments, and you're all about the business of learning to forgive yourself and other people, then you're heading the right direction. And all of us can only do that so well, you know. We're only human after all.

Essential Michael McDonald:

Takin' It To The Streets - The Doobie Brothers

"Minute By Minute" - The Doobie Brothers

"What A Fool Believes" - The Doobie Brothers

"On My Own" - Patti LaBelle ft. Michael McDonald

"Yah Mo Be There" - James Ingram & Michael McDonald - Yah Mo Be There

"Show You The Way" - Thundercat featuring Michael McDonald & Kenny Loggins

Name
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Vocation
Muscian, Songwriter

Fact

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