

life Music

Michael McDonald finds his voice

By Peter Jones

Of course, Michael McDonald was trying to sound black.

"Probably more than anyone, Ray Charles. He was my all-time idol as a singer," McDonald said. "The feeling in his voice and the emotion that came through. Every twist and turn in his treatment of a melody had something to say. I marveled at how much emotion you could feel. It went far beyond the written notes of the song."

Like Charles, McDonald also developed one of the more distinct and memorable voices of modern popular music. His gruff and soulful baritone walked a convincing and sometimes controversial line between blue-eyed soul and soft rock, a style informed by the mostly black musicians the singer admired as a teenager.

"That's really how I learned to sing."

"That's really how I learned to sing, just by emulating singers on records," he said. "Over the years that settled into a voice of my own, an amalgam of all the singers that I'd ever admired. The hardest part was to not emulate anyone too much."

Not bad for a white boy from St. Louis who would eventually help transport the interracial Doobie Brothers from their biker boogie roots into slick pop R&B, a divisive makeover that for a time had fans and industry pros scratching their heads.

"It was thrilling because I was being given an opportunity," McDonald said. "All I could do was take the opportunity. It was an intense time for all of us."

When the Doobies finally burned down to the resin, McDonald took a solo hit. In the 1980s, his jazzy soul found an easy audience on adult-contemporary radio; perhaps a little too easy, as the musician eventually suffered the downsides of over-exposure.

Over the years, McDonald, with his distinct beard and vocals, became a reference point for parody. In a scene from *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, an electronics-store employee played by Paul Rudd complains to his boss about his endurance of a McDonald concert video that has played on every TV in the store for two solid years.

"If I have to hear 'Yah Mo B There' one more time, I'm going to 'Yah Mo' burn this place to the

ground!" the character warns.

The good-natured McDonald has been known to dedicate songs to Rudd in concert and earlier this year the musician joined comic Jimmy Fallon and singer Justin Timberlake... both clad in gray wigs and beards... in an hilariously husky round of "Row Your Boat" on Fallon's television show.

McDonald says he has tried not to take his career or himself too seriously.

"You can't hang your whole being on it because obviously things happen," he said of his place in popular culture. "You have a tendency to think it's just a hook in my mouth, and how much am I going to flip around?"

The Grammy-winning singer will perform Aug. 28 at Denver Botanic Gardens. The career-spanning set will include new and old music, including his period with the Doobie Brothers. No word on "Row Your Boat."

Born in St. Louis in 1952, McDonald was practically raised in the city's blues and R&B clubs, where he performed before he could legally drink the refreshments.

"I don't even know if my voice had changed. I always wanted to sound older," he said. "I was playing in saloons from the time I was ten. From my father, I learned to appreciate a good song. He had such a great love for singers and songwriters."

As soon as McDonald turned 18 he headed for Los Angeles. Although he recorded a few demos as a solo artist, his first success came as a studio musician and backup vocalist for a variety of artists, most prolifically for Steely Dan.

"That gave me great experience playing with top-notch musicians," he said. "My background singing career became something that I never wanted to give up."

Even after McDonald started making hits with the Doobies he continued his lucrative sideline as an adjunct member of Steely Dan. He says he relates to such singers as Merry Clayton and Darlene Love, as seen in *20 Feet From Stardom*, a new documentary that portrays some of the triumphs and disappointments of the great background singers of the rock and roll era.

"I totally related to the spirit of the whole thing. That was my life," McDonald said. "We all aspired to be solo artists and we all hoped we would get our break."

McDonald finally got his in 1975 when Doobie Brother Jeff

"Skunk" Baxter, a fellow Steely Dan alumnus, recruited the singer to replace the Doobies' outgoing lead singer Tom Johnston, who was suffering health problems at the time.

McDonald's entry signaled a significant change for the band as it inched its way further from its '60s-rooted boogie and toward McDonald's contemporary R&B.

Still, the singer is quick to emphasize that the band's transition was anything but single-handed.

"Quite honestly, I think Pat Simmons and Jeff Baxter had as much to do with the change, because it was a free for all, basically," McDonald said. "It was more of what happened in the absence of Tom Johnston than it was what I brought to the band. We were just trying to come up with something... anything."

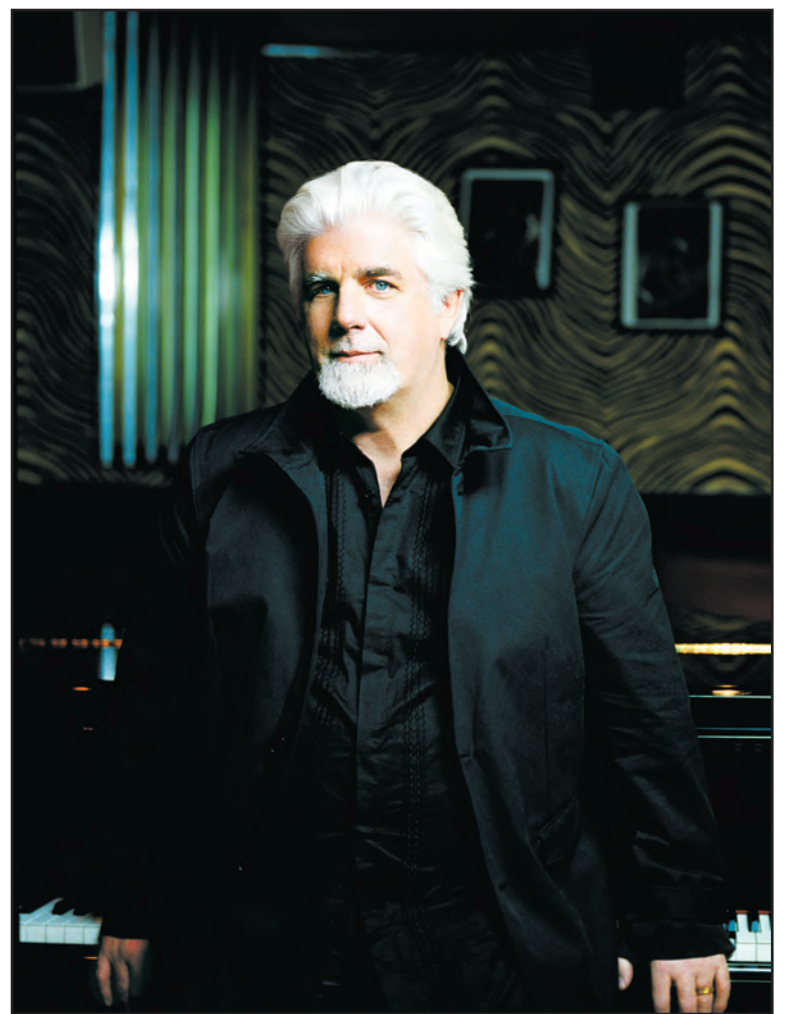
The result was 1976's *Takin' it to the Streets* and its distinctively funky title track. Although the record would go platinum and produce two hit singles, not everyone, least of all Warner Brothers records and longtime fans, were convinced of the new direction.

"There are people who much prefer the Doobies before me, and vice versa," McDonald said.

The hits continued, most notably with "What a Fool Believes," a Grammy winner McDonald co-wrote with Kenny Loggins. When the Doobies dissolved in 1982, albeit tenuously, McDonald reluctantly launched a solo career.

"It was one of the most terrifying things, just from a self-conscious standpoint," he said. "But like all things, you just kind of walk to the center of it and you find your way. Looking back, it's kind of foolish to me how frightened I was. I couldn't sleep. As an artist, you sometimes think things are much more important than they are."

McDonald kept his neurosis in check with a range of duets



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and songwriting collaborations that never kept him "solo" for too long. In 2003 he earned two more Grammy nominations for *Motown*, his tribute to the Detroit record label.

"I enjoy playing other people's music as much, or maybe more than, playing my own music," he said. "Those songs are milestones in my life. I was never happier than I was when I was in [cover] bands and those were the Top 10 records."

Aside from singing the songs of his heroes, McDonald's other great musical love is live performance, an experience that makes the stress of songwriting

worthwhile.

"I'm not a prolific songwriter," he said. "I have to drag myself to the task and hope I come up with something good. I suffer about whether things are any good or not. It's a lot of insecurity and fear. The reward for me has always been to go on stage with other musicians and play."

Michael McDonald will perform Aug. 28 at Denver Botanic Gardens with opening act the Hazel Miller Band. For more information, visit swallowhillmusic.org or michaelmcdonald.com. Call the Swallow Hill Music Association at 303-777-1003 or Denver Botanic Gardens, 720 865-3585.



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Upon checking in at either Amerigo's, 2449 Larimer, or ViewHouse, 2015 Market, participants will receive a "Passport" with the names and map of the participating locations where they can receive a free food or beverage sampling.

All proceeds will go towards neighborhood improvement projects in the Ball Park neighborhood, roughly bordered by 20th & 38th Sts., Larimer & Delgany/Brighton Blvd.

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