

LIFE Music, June 2018: Doobie Brothers—still smokin’

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By Peter Jones

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When you Google musician *John McFee*, you might stumble on the story of *John McAfee*, the colorful antivirus kingpin and libertarian whose exploits in Belize ended in criminal intrigue. For a few fleeting moments, a web searcher—or a music columnist—might scratch his head, thinking, “Gee, I never knew any of this about the longtime Doobie Brother.”

“Leaving (McAfee’s) technological impact behind, that can happen,” the Doobie conceded with a laugh. “If you go back, these are all the same names. Somebody decided on Ellis Island or whatever (to change the spelling). I’ll know I’m successful when John McVie from Fleetwood Mac has to say, ‘I really never was in the Doobie Brothers.’ But it’s the same clan.”



Long train runnin': The Doobie Brothers' John McFee, Tom Johnston and Patrick Simmons play the Pepsi Center with Steely Dan June 12. Courtesy of Richlynn Group.

McFee was never the best-known member of the California rock band, whose rotating membership saw the comings and goings of fellow Scotsman Michael McDonald and half the population of Steely Dan. Still, McFee, a talented multi-instrumentalist, made a career—Doobie and otherwise—out of mastering everything from ukuleles to Hawaiian steel guitars.

“There are plenty of instruments that I can’t play, I guess,” he said modestly. “But once I pick something up and try to fool around with it, I get interested enough to stick with it long enough to get past the pain.”

McFee would bring that stick-to-itiveness to everything from session work with Elvis Costello to playing the solo on a once ubiquitous 1970s jingle for Hawaii’s C&H pure-cane sugar.

“I did a lot of commercials, and back in those days you actually got royalties on them,” McFee said. “Not to be crass about it, but that was a good payday. I always loved Hawaiian music.”

The sometime fiddler will evoke a bayou more than a luau on Tuesday, June 12, when the Doobie Brothers perform the Southern-drenched “Black Water” and other hits at the Pepsi Center in a double bill with longtime brethren, Steely Dan—the “Doobie cousins,” if you will.

Founded in San Jose, Calif. in 1970, the original Doobies featured original members Tom Johnston and Patrick Simmons. Guitar-based boogie hits like “Listen to the Music” and “China Grove” helped expand the band’s audience well beyond its birth in northern California’s biker bars.

When Johnston fell ill in the late ‘70s, lead guitarist Jeff “Skunk” Baxter recommended his former Steely Dan bandmate Michael McDonald (interviewed in this column August 2013) as a replacement, signaling a move into R&B that would be as popular as it was divisive. By the time “Takin’ it to the Streets” had funk-ed up the charts in 1976, the gig was up and the new Doobies were flying higher than ever.

McFee would similarly replace Baxter after McFee departed Clover, a band that had included a pre-fame Huey Lewis, just before he made the “News.”

“I felt very fortunate because I was a fan of the band before I joined it,” McFee said of his move to the Doobies in 1978. “I admired the band’s music and felt lucky to get drafted, basically. I joke that I’m still the new guy—and I’ve been here for 40 years.”

Not full-time, however.

After the Doobies officially broke up in 1982, McFee co-founded country’s Southern Pacific with fellow Doobie Keith Knudsen while McDonald exploded into a successful solo career. The Doobie divorce held until 1987, when virtually every member of the band, from all its phases, reunited for a crowded one-off reunion tour.

“We had four guitarists. We had like four drummers and a percussionist,” McFee said. “There’s no big hurt feelings among any of the alumni, and there never really has been. We used to laugh when we would read articles about how Michael and such and such aren’t getting along.”

Although the *complete* Doobie Brothers soon dispersed, a smaller, new and exciting, semi-revisionist version reformed on a permanent basis in 1989 with a lineup led by Simmons and—amazingly to some—the long-departed Johnston. The new music would recall the band’s early ‘70s heyday, almost as if the still-fresh-in-mind McDonald period had never happened.

McFee returned to the fold in 1993.

The current lineup centers principally on McFee, Johnston and Simmons, with very occasional guest appearances by McDonald, such as on 2014’s *Southbound* collaboration with contemporary country artists.

As the Doobies endeavor on yet another tour, the band is preparing new material, which is expected to be completed sometime after the current concert schedule. According to the Doobies’ publicists, a comprehensive boxed set is also on the way—but don’t ask McFee about that.

“I don’t know,” he said with a laugh. “I’m probably the last guy to find out about it, partly because when we’re off the road I’m almost always recording. So sometimes I don’t catch up till we’re all together again.”

For more information, visit livenation.com or thedoobiebrothers.com.

