

SOUNDTRACK OF MY GENERATION: MICHAEL STANLEY

The heat of the packed basement crowd had me sweating that crisp October night. It was 1979 in the old stone Rathskeller bar of Miami University's East Quad, and my first major gig.

I remember two songs from that Midwest night.

"This song goes out to my boys stuck in line outside!" I can see the faces of Millsy and Greenie- my boyhood friends, now college mates- poking through the clearstory window, jean jackets and high-top Converse, trying to get inside.

"On a cold Ohio morning, everything is gray
Then there you are, bringing back some sunshine"

Just my acoustic cover version of Michael Stanley's classic 'Among My Friends Again'. Our hometown hero's music was the sound track to our lives: Midwest Midnight, Lover, Spanish Nights- Michael Stanley spoke to us in a way that no other artist had, and let's face it: music in Cleveland in the late '70's was our life, our soul, our reason for being. Concerts, shows, and the radio- this is what we knew, and we knew it well. Yes, summer brought us dusty baseball games and the roar of friend's muscle cars and motorcycles, but the lingering dark winters of Northeast Ohio had us clamoring for rock and roll. And Michael Stanley brought the goods- and the girls.

The second song I remember from that night was my rendition of Bruce Springsteen's 'Born To Run'. It killed: the entire room sang the lyrics at the top of their drunken young lungs, so loud I couldn't hear myself. I doubt it was my version that was so great, it's just that someone (anyone!) playing Born To Run on an acoustic guitar in those days was a welcomed party and a chance for Miami's freshman to let loose, preppy polo shirts and jean skirts and all.

We lost Michael Stanley recently, and this got me to listening to the old records and reminiscing the intoxicating combination of my high school girlfriend's perfume, Stroh's beer and cheap Panama Red- but especially the long cold winter nights, the music, and the never ending discussion of why Michael Stanley never conquered a national audience. He was to Cleveland as Bruce Springsteen was to the Jersey Shore- how could anyone not hear the genius lyrics and feel the pounding emotion of Lover? Or Rosewood Bitters? Cleveland was His Town- but Michael was 'Our Guy'- our connection to the enormous world of rock and roll limelight.

Was it a conspiracy against Cleveland? Is this why the Browns seems stuck in the Factory of Sadness? Is this why our beloved Indians couldn't win a series let alone the World Series? Who actually set the Cuyahoga on fire back in 1969?

So I listened. Again. "Somewhere in the Night", Michael Stanley's noir rocker from the 1981 "North Coast" album (yes: albums!) is a song that'll get your feet and heart moving with a searing lead and lyrics that will bring back one's testosterone teenage self:

"Seventeen and caught in between
What I was and what I wanted to be
I was listening to no one
And no one was listening to me"

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A strong blues-based rocker with gray sky hopefulness for which we clamored. But as I listened deeper, I recognized the flatness of the sky: less than stellar production, and a shallowness of shadow. Punches thrown, but merely glancing blows.

Only half of a word in the title separates Bruce Springsteen's 1978 "Something in the Night" and Michael's. But more than a gap in the heavens separates it: Bruce's depth of despair, longing, and clarity that is missing from 'Somewhere'.

"Well you're born with nothing
And better off that way
Soon as you got something, they send
Someone to take it all away"

Two noir songs but a vastness between the two: the precision, depth, clarity and well-pointed production of Springsteen's 1978 masterpiece far outshines Stanley's 1981 romantic record. It's just not in the same league. Is it a symptom of the 'nice guys finish last'? By all accounts Michael was a gem of a guy- and Bruce is 'The Boss'. But their similarities tie them together more than their differences separate. Just as Bruce lived tight to his Jersey roots, Michael hunkered down in his beloved hometown of Cleveland, continuing to write, perform, and take on television and radio with Midwest success. Both excelled as singer songwriters with their early works exploring romanticism, working class kids trying to find their way, taking a chance on life, the road, and the dark corners of the street.

Once, at a diner in Cleveland's east side I suggested to my younger brother Bill and soul brother Jeffrey J that ex-Brown's owner and hated ex-Cleveland Art Modell had, in my book, been vindicated for moving the Browns to Baltimore: Modell had told the powers-that-be in Cleveland what he needed to make the Browns successful, and since he didn't get it, he moved the Browns to Baltimore. He then won a Superbowl: Boom.

I thought I was in physical danger for speaking such blasphemy- or truth. And I suspect my Cleveland brethren might feel the same about such comments about Michael Stanley. But make no mistake about it: Michael Stanley and MSB composed our youthful soundtrack, and, like my love for the Browns, I wouldn't trade it for the world.

I just read that Billboard credited Michael Stanley and MSB digital sales and streaming climbing up over 1,000% (streaming) and 2,000% (sales) in the days and weeks since his death. Back in the day, we all owned his music on vinyl or cassettes. But we want to re-live the sound on today's terms and technology, so let's delight in this recognition. The thrill of rediscovering the soundtrack of our generation brings forth an emotive reaction second only to the memory of that first kiss behind the schoolyard on that dark Midwest summer, somewhere in the night.

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