



Michael Stanley Band

Former Bandmates strike it up one more time in the Valley

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By ANDY GRAY Tribune Chronicle

Back when it was starting out, the Michael Stanley Band played all sorts of places in the Mahoning Valley, from clubs to high school gymnasiums.

"There were so many great places down there to play," Stanley said. "The Tomorrow Club, Youngstown Agora, whatever it was called at the time, that was a great place to play. We played Idora Park, Yankee Lake, Stambaugh, Struthers Fieldhouse. We pretty much covered the gamut."

Jonah Koslen also has plenty of memories about those days. "But I don't think I should probably talk about them," he said with a laugh.

The former bandmates hope to add to those memories when they share the stage Saturday at Packard Music Hall.

The Warren venue is one of the only places MSB didn't play back in '70s.

"I know I've seen shows there, but we never played there," Stanley said.

He's looking forward to changing that.

"Theater shows, shows in smaller venues, are much more musical. As nice as the payday was at the (Richfield) coliseum, those weren't really great musical shows for the band. It's not a setting that lends itself to that. It's more about the lighting.

"In a theater, you can see who you're playing for, get feedback from the audience, what went down well and what didn't."

On Saturday, Stanley will be joined by his current band, The Resonators, which includes drummer Tommy Dobeck, a founding member of MSB; longtime MSB keyboard player Bob Pelander; and guitarist Danny Powers, who played with MSB in the '80s.

Koslen will start the evening with a solo acoustic set. But in separate telephone interviews, both Stanley and Koslen said they expect to do some songs together.

"I imagine Jonah will saddle up with us for a few songs," Stanley said. "It's always nice to get back together with him. He was part of so many of those early Youngstown memories."

Koslen said, "We just kind of wing it, wait for the right time. We might talk about it some (in advance), so I don't include those songs in my set."

Both Stanley and Koslen have plenty of music to draw from for their respective sets. Stanley has released nearly as many CDs since the breakup of MSB as he did while the band was together. And Koslen, who left the band after the release of the live set "Stagepass" in '77, has a catalog that includes albums fronting the band Breathless, under the name Jonah Koslen & the Heroes and as a solo artist.

Despite that, those MSB tunes remain fan favorites.

"With this band, there's a lot of leeway," Stanley said. "One of the hardest problems is making the set list. We have so many songs to choose from. But the majority want to hear the Michael Stanley Band things.

"Probably 75 percent (of the set) are the old MSB catalog. There are certain things we couldn't get along without playing. The rest are like starting pitchers. We'll start one and the next day we'll start another."

Fans can expect to hear at least a couple songs from the Resonators' latest album "Shadowlands" (for those who've seen the cover, the baby is Stanley's grandchild and the photo was taken by his daughter).

Koslen said he'll be touching on all phases of his career during his set.

"I'll be up there with my acoustic guitar, playing my hits unplugged," he said. "I'll do all the favorite stuff I wrote with Michael for the Michael Stanley Band, stuff from Breathless, stuff I've recorded on my own."

Saturday's show also will coincide with the release of Koslen's next CD, "Live Greatest Hits," which gathers performances from old WMMS Coffeebreak Concerts to more recent live gigs. Fans who purchase the 15-song, 74-minute disc also will be able to download four additional songs.

Koslen enjoyed going back and listening to those old shows.

"You're not looking at it with a fine tooth comb (for the mistakes)," he said. "You're looking at the whole interaction of the band and the overall performance. And the little things that go wrong are the things that add character to it."

Koslen also has been revisiting his past with another side project, Stagepass Live, a band that recreates MSB's classic live album in its entirety.

"The anniversary (of its release) came and went," Koslen said. "We were both busy doing other stuff. Just by chance I listened to the CD and thought it would be so much fun to play again, and I was pretty sure Michael didn't want to do it.

"I went over to Michael's house and said, 'This is what I'm thinking about doing,' and he said, 'Go nuts.' It's a total blast to do that stuff again."

Koslen won't be trying to recreate any records on Saturday.

"I treat it like I'm in my living room with friends, he said. "I'll share memories, talk about what's been going on and just have some fun (with the audience)."

In addition to making music, Stanley continues to handle the afternoon drive-time shift on Cleveland's classic rock station WNCX-FM. What he expected to be a short-term gig has lasted about 20 years.

"I'm getting paid to play the music I grew up with and love," he said.

The disadvantage is that the schedule doesn't allow much time for touring beyond regional shows, and working for a radio station makes the competition less likely to play his new music. Then again, the radio business has changed dramatically since the '70s, when bands like MSB could build a regional following that could expand to a national audience with the help of local radio.

"People aren't willing to embrace new stuff unless they're a top 40 station that thrives on that, and that's not where we are, so you have to get those fans where you can," Stanley said.

Those stations that won't play his new music still spin the MSB songs. And one of the band's biggest hits was inspired by the drive back home to Cleveland from the Mahoning Valley.

After a brief break where they could see the road, Stanley said, "Thank God for the man that puts the white lines on the highway."

Those words became the most memorable lyric in the song "Lover" and the words that audiences have been shouting back at Stanley for nearly 30 years.

"That probably started at one of the Blossom shows. The crowd just erupted as one. There was no concerted plan. It took us all by surprise. One of the guys suggested, 'Don't sing it. Let them and see what happens.'

"It's always a cool feeling When they don't sing it, that's when I'll know my career is over."