

Michael McDonald Biography (Longform)

A prominent part of the soundtrack to our times, Michael McDonald has been thrilling listeners with his distinctively soulful style for four decades. From '70s-era Doobie Brothers classics such as "What A Fool Believes" and solo hits like "I Keep Forgetting" through two highly-acclaimed *Motown* covers albums and recent genre-busting guest spots with alternative buzz bands Grizzly Bear and Holy Ghost, the five-time Grammy-winning McDonald is that rare thing in contemporary pop music – an artist and songwriter whose work is both timeless and ever-evolving.

Along with his musical contributions, McDonald has long been an active humanitarian. Over the years, he has lent his performing talents to many causes and benefits, including Toys R Us Children's Fund, MusiCares, the National Council of Alcoholism and Drug Abuse and the 7UP Grammy Signature Schools Program. Most recently, in April 2011, he was part of a star-studded lineup at Kokua For Japan, a concert that raised \$1.6 million for tsunami relief.

Yet for all his accomplishments, McDonald has kept a modestly low profile. Shunning theatrics and trend-chasing, he has trusted in the power of his singular voice and a deep catalog of memorable songs to point the way through his long career. Few have made such an impact with so little media hoopla.

More than anything, what has kept McDonald grounded is his connection to his family. Whether it was writing his first song with his father in the early '60s or trying out the verse of an in-progress "What A Fool Believes" on his sister in the '70s or overhearing his 12-year old daughter secretly listening to his *Motown* album, the subject of family is intimately tied to McDonald's career, past and present.

Born in St. Louis on February 12, 1952, Michael caught the music bug early. His dad, a bus driver and amateur tenor who'd once sung with Bob Crosby and the Bobcats, was known for performing around local haunts. Like father like son, McDonald made his singing debut at age four, warbling "Love Is A Many Splendored Thing" for his parents and a

roomful of delighted friends. After tinkering with banjo and guitar, McDonald found his musical "voice" at the piano. Soon he was writing his first songs and doing the time-honored apprenticeship with bands in the family garage.

Determined to pursue music full-time, McDonald moved to L.A in the early '70s. An early association with Rick Jarrard, a producer whose credits included Harry Nilsson and Jefferson Airplane, yielded steady session work, both as a keyboardist and a singer.

All the networking led to an invitation in 1972 from drummer Jeff Porcaro to join Steely Dan. Over the course of four albums, from *Katy Lied* to *Gaucho*, McDonald became an integral part of the group's sound. Listening to his backing vocals on classic tracks like "Rose Darling," "Any World That I'm Welcome To" and "Peg" (his presence is so front-and-center it could almost be considered a second lead vocal) you can hear that unmistakable style taking shape.

Three years later, another session player friend, Jeff Baxter, asked McDonald to join The Doobie Brothers. It was on 1976's *Takin' It To The Streets* LP that McDonald really hit his stride artistically. Channeling his Motown and R & B roots through a more relaxed West Coast sensibility, his songs had a laid-back groove and emotional immediacy that record buyers and radio embraced.

And at the heart of it all, there was *that voice*. The dark chocolate tone, the husky vibrato, the keening falsetto that always seems to carry the ache of unrequited love. McDonald belongs to an elite group of blue-eyed soul vocalists - Van Morrison, Rod Stewart, Daryl Hall - whose sound is recognizable after a mere two notes.

That sound made him the world's most sought-after session singer. Aside from his hits with The Doobies, McDonald lent his voice to records by an A-Z of artists, including Ray Charles, Aretha Franklin, Elton John, Bonnie Raitt, Little Feat, Joni Mitchell and Vince Gill. Meanwhile, his solo career in the '80s and '90s zoomed from success to success on the wings of evergreen hits like "I Keep Forgettin'," "On My Own" (a duet with Patti LaBelle) and the Grammy-winning duet with James Ingram "Yah Mo B There."

Continuing to explore new vistas, in 2000, McDonald became one of the new century's first major artists to declare independence, teaming with actor Jeff Bridges and producer Chris Pelonis to start a label, Ramp Records. In 2002 and 2004, McDonald released the Grammy-nominated, platinum-selling *Motown* and *Motown Two*, his tributes to the artists of Detroit's legendary soul label. Following that success, McDonald partnered with Hallmark for 2005's special Christmas album, *Through The Many Winters*, which sold 500,000 copies in its first two weeks.

Now on the heels of 2008's acclaimed crossover album *Soul Speak* (which hit three different charts simultaneously) and multiple appearances on PBS's *Soundstage*, McDonald continues to tour the world, from Europe to Asia to Australia, while moonlighting alongside Donald Fagen and Boz Scaggs with The Dukes Of September, an 11-piece soul supergroup. And as one more feather in his cap, in May 2011, McDonald received an honorary doctorate from Berklee School Of Music.

If you think all of his success has gone to his head, you'd be wrong. While McDonald takes his music seriously, he's always quick to laugh at himself. Long the subject of funny imitations and parodies, from SCTV to the Yacht Rock viral videos to a running gag in the hit movie *The Forty Year-Old Virgin*, McDonald says he's "flattered" for all the good-humored attention.

With a career that encompasses five Grammys, numerous chart successes, personal and professional accolades, as well as collaborations with some of the world's most prominent artists, Michael McDonald remains an enduring force in popular music.

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