

The sweet life of Sugar Ray

After a six year break, the SoCal band returns with a new album, tour

By KEVIN CLAPP, Staff Writer, 609-272-7255 | Posted: Sunday, August 2, 2009 |

One hit.

That's all it takes. Just one hit song and your place in pop culture is secure. Sure, you may be a footnote. But you'll always have that one song and the sometimes fuzzy, sometimes clear-as-day listener recognition it inspires.

Five hits? You rack up five hits, plus a couple lesser-charting but still familiar tunes, and you've carved out the comfortable life Sugar Ray has been living the last few years: starting families, pursuing individual passions and coming together for 40 to 50 corporate gigs or casino shows per year.

There are, after all, worse things than trotting out the hits - which include such late-'90s staples as "Fly" and "Every Morning" - for fans who've been following you for 20-plus years.

And that's where Sugar Ray may have stayed, a Gen-X radio staple-turned new oldies act. There's just one problem: That's not how the band's wired.

So, when independent label Pulse Recording approached Mark McGrath and Co. to make a new record last year, the SoCal quintet - McGrath, guitarist Rodney Sheppard, Craig 'DJ Homicide' Bullock, bassist Murphy Karges and drummer Stan Frazier - said, "Why not?"

Their motivation, Sheppard says, was simple: "Just to - having been away for a while - see if we could do it again."

"Music for Cougars," released July 21, may not reach the commercial heights of early career efforts such as 1999's "14:59," with three hits, including "Someday." But it is vintage Sugar Ray, with feel-good tunes such as lead single "Boardwalk," a slice of summer froth about the band's youth in Newport Beach, Calif., that slides easily into the Sugar Ray songbook.

"It's easy to go, 'Why are these guys doing it,'" McGrath says from Detroit, where the band is readying for its fourth show in a tour that stops at Tropicana Casino and Resort Saturday and continues through September.

"But," he continues, "we're a band. It's what we do."

For a good half-decade, though, that's not what they did. And who could blame them? After a decade on

the write-record-tour-repeat hamster wheel, churning out albums every two years, they stepped away.

Usually, when a band disbands it blows up spectacularly with friction that can simmer for years - see Guns n Roses or Stone Temple Pilots. Not that everything was all hugs and puppies for Sugar Ray, but its members knew a timeout was in order.

So, after 2003's "In the Pursuit of Leisure" didn't click with fans - "It was fun, but it wasn't the right thing to do," McGrath says. "It just didn't connect with our audience." - the band took a hiatus.

"Definitely, the writing was on the wall that we needed to take a break," Sheppard says. "It just seemed to be the right time to step away for a while and live our individual lives for a while and reassess what we wanted to do with the band."

McGrath transitioned into a hosting gig for TV's "Extra." Bullock started DJing full time. Sheppard taught music to neighborhood kids. Karges began directing videos. And Frazier wrote songs.

Meanwhile, Sugar Ray, the music - has it really been 10 years since McGrath bounced off the walls and ceiling in the "Fly" video? - became largely relegated to nostalgic radio play.

Until last year, when writing and recording of the new album began in earnest. It took some time to shake off the rust in the studio. Still, Sheppard and McGrath are encouraged by "Music for Cougars." Not that they're suffering from delusions of multi-platinum sales.

"We're not expecting to have huge commercial success," Sheppard says. "We're very realistic."

"For Sugar Ray, the million-selling records," McGrath says, "... I'd like to get back to it, but we probably won't."

What they have gotten back to is life on the road. The band has boarded a tour bus for the first time in a long while, getting reacquainted with the cramped quarters and overnight rides to the next concert hall.

Last time Sugar Ray embarked on this style of tour, McGrath remembers it as a production. Three buses, two for the band and one for crew. This time out, everybody's piled into one ride. Claustrophobics and the thin-skinned need not apply.

And you know what? Yeah, it's early in the tour. But he's loving every aspect of it.

"I feel so fortunate to have a bus at all," he says. "You better love playing music. Because that's what it's about now."

E-mail Kevin Clapp:

kclapp@pressofac.com

Sweet sounds from Sugar Ray

1995

"Lemonade and Brownies"

Key track: "Mean Machine"

1997

"Floored"

Key track: "Fly"

1999

"14:59"

Key tracks: "Every Morning," "Falls Apart"

2001

"Sugar Ray"

Key track: "When It's Over"

2003

"In the Pursuit of Leisure"

Key track: "Is She Really Going Out with Him?"

2009

"Music for Cougars"

Key track: "Boardwalk"

© 1970-2009 Press of Atlantic City Media Group