



The Salt Lake Tribune

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Sugar Ray soldiers on

By Sam Sessa
Baltimore Sun

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From the start, it's been hard to peg Sugar Ray. When the Southern California five-piece formed in the early 1990s, audiences thought it was a straight-up hard-rock party band. Then it released the summery acoustic single "Fly," a smash hit that rocketed the group to platinum status. Listeners and critics were quick to label Sugar Ray a one-hit wonder. But the band's next album had two more hit singles, "Every Morning" and "Someday," and went triple-platinum. Now, audiences look at 41-year-old lead singer Mark McGrath, with his six-pack abs and frost-tipped hair, and think he's an empty-headed frontman disillusioned by his band's success. That couldn't be further from the truth. "People look at me and go, 'Oh, Sugar Ray — lightweight,'" McGrath says. "I've done some things that are pretty lightweight. But I respect and enjoy music. I'm not trying to be and the band isn't trying to be anything we're not." That's loud and clear on the new album, "Music for Cougars." Released in July, it's Sugar Ray's first studio effort since 2003's "In the Pursuit of Leisure." More or less, the album is another chapter in Sugar Ray's catalog of carefree, feel-good grooves with a slight rock edge. Most of Sugar Ray's albums have telling titles. The band and the public were floored when the second album, "Floored," went platinum (that was the one with "Fly"). The band followed it with "14:59," its claim that its 15 minutes

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of fame hadn't quite run out. It hadn't — "14:59" (which had "Every Morning" and "Someday") was at least twice as successful as "Floored." The new album is no exception.

One Sunday last summer, Sugar Ray was playing a gig at the Grove, an outdoor mall in Los Angeles, when McGrath had a mini-revelation.

"My buddy looks at me and goes, 'Dude, all your fans are cougars,'" he says. "I went, 'Bing! Music for Cougars — that will be the working title.'"

A "cougar" is a woman of a certain age on the prowl for a younger man. And apparently, a large number of cougars dig Sugar Ray. McGrath doesn't seem to mind.

"I think it's funny," he says. "I think cougars are cool. They're independent, strong women. The

cougars that I've met? They're proud to be called cougars."

For someone who has led a multiplatinum band, opened for the Rolling Stones and hosted the entertainment news TV show "Extra," McGrath is strikingly unpretentious and self-deprecating. He knows people think of Sugar Ray as a '90s band whose heyday has long come and gone, and he's fine with that. He has never claimed to be an expert singer, either.

"God did not put me on the Earth to be a singer, but I just love music," McGrath says. "I'm such a student of music and a fan of music, and I was dumb enough to think I could do it, so I did it."

These days, McGrath increasingly finds himself at odds with the younger generation of music lovers who don't have much respect for Sugar Ray.

"I know a lot of the cool, indie hipster guys, and that whole wave, they really dislike my band and they dislike everything we're about, and I understand that," McGrath says.

"We're almost like the REO Speedwagon of the '80s when the '90s were coming in. That's fine; I get it. That's almost like your backstage pass, or your galvanizing calling card — to say you hate Sugar Ray, so you can go to American Apparel and get your headband and listen to the Decemberists. I get it. I really do. You're at a young age, and it defines your life and stuff. But I love music."

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The backlash against Sugar Ray hasn't stopped McGrath from listening to a decent amount of indie music, he says. Recently, he caught Death Cab for Cutie, the New Pornographers, and Tegan and Sara at the Hollywood Bowl in Los Angeles. Concertgoers were shocked — even appalled, McGrath says — to see him there.

"I could see people looking around at me going, 'What the hell are you doing here?' " he says. "I was bumming their whole night out just because I was there."

Still, McGrath doesn't seem to mind. He likes what he likes and doesn't care what other people think. When people ask him what his guilty pleasures are, he says he doesn't have any.

"I love them all," he says. "The New Kids on the Block single 'Summertime' last year was one of my favorite songs of the year. No shame."

McGrath is happy with the music Sugar Ray has made and the role the band has played in listeners' lives.

People have come up to him and said they've gotten married to the song "Fly." One fan said he watched his child take his first step to "Every Morning." That's all the affirmation McGrath needs.

"When you start getting into people's personal lives like that and being part of their life landscapes and aural soundscapes," he says, "that's pretty powerful stuff."

"I'm happy that's the legacy of the band right now."

Sugar Ray

When: 7 p.m. Wednesday

Where: The Catalyst, 1011 Pacific Ave., Santa Cruz

Tickets: \$20, www.catalystclub.com

Also: 8 p.m. Tuesday, Grand Ballroom, 1290 Sutter St., San Francisco. \$23.50, www.ticketmaster.com

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