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Soundcheck: Mark McGrath Sugar Ray singer

by [Jeff Niesel](#)

One of the most popular SoCal acts of the '90s, Sugar Ray combined Sublime-like riffs with summertime vibes on their platinum-selling albums, delivering hits like "Fly," "Every Morning" and "When It's Over." Then the band took a hiatus while frontman Mark McGrath hosted *Extra*, the entertainment-news program. McGrath is now done with *Extra*, and the band is active again. Sugar Ray just released *Music for Cougars*, its first album in six years. McGrath talked about the disc and his party-animal days.

You've titled the new album *Music for Cougars*. Is that a reference to the kind of women that hit on you these days?

The irony is that cougars *don't* hit on 41-year-old guys. The title's meant to be very tongue-in-cheek, in the long line of hopefully funny titles that Sugar Ray has had. We played a gig at an outdoor mall in L.A., and my bro looked around and said, "All your fans are cougars." We're all getting older. To me, it's not derogatory. A cougar is someone who knows what she wants. It's a term of empowerment. We just threw it out there.

When I interviewed you years ago, you bragged about the wild parties you guys used to host. Are those days over?

Dude, I just can't handle it anymore. I was the last pirate too. My body just said fuck you, no more. You can't do it anymore. I pushed it as long as I could. It used to be strippers and booze backstage, and now it's babies and formula. But we got in this band to have fun some 21 years ago. That spirit still survives.

Were you sharing a house back then?

When we got signed in 1994, we all moved up to L.A. together to this dilapidated mansion in Hancock Park. We moved in with our bro McG, who was like the sixth member of Sugar Ray and made most of our videos at the time. Now he's making movies. He just made the *Terminator* movie. He's doing well for himself. It was an *Animal House* scenario.

And years later, the guys from *Entourage* stole your story.

They took it right out from under our noses. *Entourage* isn't half as exciting, believe me.

Right from *Cougar's* opening tune, "Girls Were Made to Love," it's apparent you've improved as a singer. Did you pay special attention to your vocals on this album?

I appreciate you saying that. After just playing so long, I've become a little better as a singer. I know where my voice needs to be. I've also developed the confidence. Singing is a lot of confidence.

This is a good summertime album.

I hope so. It's not like we try to write songs like that, but it just seems to be in our wheelhouse.

It's probably a by-product of living in Southern California.

I think so. We grew up in Newport [Beach], and our guitarist made his living in reggae bands before he joined our band. We're big fans of the Beach Boys too. The band's been called worse than a summer band, that's for sure.

Is there an X-rated version of "She's Got the (Woo-Hoo)"?

No. There's no secret version. There probably should be, but we'll leave that to your own perverted mind. It almost makes it more X-rated not saying what it is and let people come up with their own ideas.

I like the analogy you used when you called Rivers Cuomo "the LeBron James of songwriting." Talk about the song he contributed.

He gave us a song called "Love Is the Answer." It's a glorious Weezer-meets-U2 song. He let us record it, and it was an honor to do. We left his voice and guitar solo in it. Even if you hate Sugar Ray, you should at least hear that song.

After five years apart, what has been the most difficult part of getting back together?

Dealing with the personalities on a day-to-day basis. This isn't No Doubt or Blink-182. There's not millions of dollars at the end of this rainbow, and you have to love it. When we're onstage, everything goes away. Things like somebody being late to the airport or blowing off a phoner can be annoying. But if it's the price I have to pay to play in Sugar Ray, I'm definitely willing to participate.

I always thought it was surreal to see you as a host on *Extra*. What was that gig like?

It was a trip. It was surreal for me, even if the way it just came out. After [2003's] *In the Pursuit of Leisure* didn't light the charts on fire, the other guys started looking for other things to do. I can't begrudge anyone who wanted to raise their kids and see them after being gone for 10 years. I had hosted some things through MTV and an executive at *Extra* called me, and I literally went in on a Friday and two weeks later I was hosting. I was like, "How the fuck did I get here?" I didn't know what I was doing. I would be at 7-11 and run into a construction worker who'd be like, "Dude, you sucked when you started, but you're getting better." Other people were like, "Dude, you sold out." I was like, "Excuse me, I wasn't in the White Stripes or Interpol." It was a trip learning on the job. I thought I'd be there a year; I was there four years. The Internet has ruined entertainment news. People want information immediately. We can't compete with that when we have a *Horton Hears a Who* junket approved by publicists. We were just circling the drain. So when they asked me about going on live shoots, I said, "I don't want to do this." Consequently, we were making the album anyway. I appreciated [*Extra*]. I split. I really cherished my time there. It was an honor working there. I know there's a giant cheese factor in working entertainment news, but I'm a giant cheese factor myself.

What's the craziest rumor you ever read about yourself? The Madonna thing?

That rumor wasn't true, but the story was true. I walked Madonna to her car and gave her a kiss on the cheek. Next thing you know, it's "Ricky Martin out, Mark McGrath in." I let that one fly. There have been rumors that I was gay. I love gay dudes, but I'm certainly not gay. I've heard that I have kids and that I'm a heroin addict. It doesn't bother me, but I just think about my poor dear mom. It makes her heart stop every now and then.

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