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Music

Battle of the bland

Sugar Ray. Smash Mouth. We finally settle the great(est?) '90s debate.
By Brent DiCrescenzo



ON THE ROCKS Rivers Cuomo pops up alongside McGrath, second from left, to duet through "Love Is the Answer," an unreleased Weezer song, on Sugar Ray's new album.

There is nothing cool about this article. If you're looking to find the latest, hippest act to name-drop at your neighbor's BBQ, turn the page. This week, we dig through the prior decade's trash, hoping to settle once and for all that great debate: Who's better—Sugar Ray or Smash Mouth?

The two Cali crews scored breezy summertime bubblegum smashes, but mentioning ubiquitous hits "All Star" and "Fly" around the office evoked thoughts of waterboarding before boogie boarding.

The parallels between the two groups run eerily deep. Hell, the two went on their first tour together. Both first topped the charts in September '97, Smash Mouth with "Walkin' on the Sun," Sugar Ray with "Fly." Both scored massive comebacks in the spring of '99. Both are playing a casino in upper Wisconsin this week. "Both our careers went down the toilet at the same time," says Sugar Ray frontman Mark McGrath. We caught up with the erstwhile *Extra* host as he prepared his band's comeback tour for *Music for Cougars*, its first album in six years, out this week. The humble L.A. denizen graciously conceded victory to Smash Mouth: "They probably have more cred." We disagree.

Somebody else's songs

Originality ran as deep as the L.A. River with these dudes, so both acts frequently turned to others' songs for album filler and often hits. SM seemingly had the record collection of a kid in 1976, offering takes on the Monkees, War and Neil Diamond. They did tackle the awesome "Every Word Means No" by Let's Active, but they ruined it. SR revived Adam Ant, Joe Jackson and Steve Miller. It's a slight edge in better taste, but really we're splitting frosted-tip hairs here.
Winner: Sugar Ray

Self-awareness

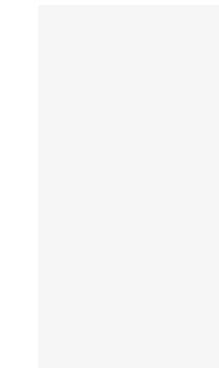
Both bands had a sense of humor, but SR was far more aware of its lot in life, dubbing its third album *14:59*. We ask McGrath what the minutes-of-fame clock now reads. "I lost track a decade ago," he says. SM came across a little more defensive. Steve Harwell sneered lines like, "Can anybody tell me...why we feel so up when we're kept down?" We'll take a stab: Perhaps because he sounds like a cross between a crying baby and Batman's nemesis the Penguin.
Winner: Sugar Ray

Selling out

"We never had any credibility to sell out to begin with," McGrath corrects. When asked which muckraking moment of *Extra* most embarrassed him, the 41-year-old jokes, "All of it?"

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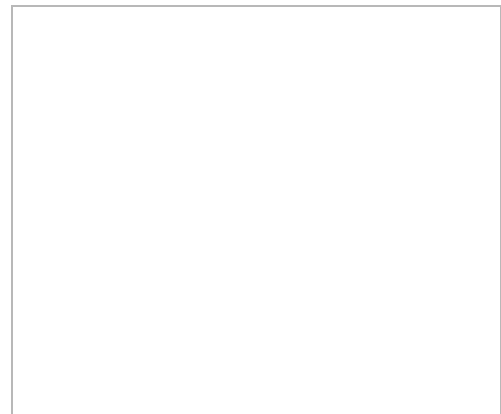
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SM served up tunes for toddlers in *Shrek*, *Inspector Gadget*, *Snow Day* and GapKids and Pizza Hut commercials. It's hard to call, again, but this all comes down to the Scooby-Doo factor: SR made it into the 2002 feature film, whereas SM only appeared on the *What's New, Scooby-Doo?* show.

Winner: Sugar Ray

Seminal album

These are singles bands. Nothing wrong with that. Just don't try to get through a full record. But if you must... Like us, McGrath sticks up for *Lemonade & Brownies*, SR's Camaro-cruisin' cartoon-metal debut. So why did the band give up the heavy riffs? "We learned how to play our instruments," McGrath says. "When we got signed to Atlantic, we had two songs and only knew how to turn up amps and jump around." Similarly, *Fush Yu Mang*, SM's first, rises above. Those snotty vocals pair better with sloppy punk than cocktail tunes. The two albums are dated and dopey but devoid of any scrap of pretension.

Winner: tie

Sandwich eating

At this weekend's Taste of Lincoln fest, SR shares the bill with a Jimmy John's sandwich-eating contest. "Is that before or after the puppet show?" McGrath asks. Hey, at least he's headlining. So after our failed efforts to ignite a beef between these two chummy bands, we leave it up to lunch meat. McGrath admits he'd beat out his bandmates but quips that his friendly rivals could smash more meals into their mouths. "Oh, Steve is a big dude," McGrath says of his, er, plus-size counterpart. "He'd destroy us." Oh, snap!

Winner: Smash Mouth

Sugar Ray closes the Taste of Lincoln Avenue festival on Sunday 26. The two-hit wonder also tops the bill at the Lake of the Torches Casino in Lac du Flambeau, Wisconsin, on Saturday 25... just above Smash Mouth. Music for Cougars is out now.



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Posted by **Pat** on Wed, Jul 22, at 03:31pm

I've had a non-sexual crush on Mark McGrath for years...

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Posted by **Stewie** on Wed, Jul 22, at 03:20pm

I like the final score. Sugar Ray is still on my ipod after all these years. I still laugh every time I listen to "Fly" and "When its over." It's some of the best comedy out of the nineties. That's staying power.

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