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40 years later, Doobie Brothers still resonate

By James Grant of The News-Sentinel
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The Doobie Brothers, who will be playing a sold-out show next Wednesday night at Foellinger Theatre, have been a fan favorite and hot concert draw for well over 40 years since their career first took off in the early 1970s.

Beginning with "Listen to the Music" (from 1972), the Doobie Brothers created one of the most beloved catalog of hits of the '70s, including such radio staples as "Jesus is Just Alright," "Long Train Runnin'," "China Grove," "Black Water," "Takin' it to the Streets," "What a Fool Believes," "Minute by Minute" and "Real Love" among their 16 Top 40 hits that graced the Billboard Hot 100.

The Doobie Brothers, who have sold over 40 million albums, have a musical career that can be roughly divided into three distinct eras.

The first era from 1969-1975 featured the group headed by lead guitarist and vocalist Tom Johnston, who wrote some of the group's biggest and most played hits, including "Listen to the Music," "Rockin' Down the Highway," "China Grove" and "Long Train Runnin'."

This era of the Doobie Brothers was hallmarked by tight vocal harmonies mixed with rock guitars and a touch of folk, bluegrass and roots music.

In 1975 Johnston was sidelined due to health issues, and singer/songwriter Michael McDonald was brought in to help fill out the lineup creating a second phase for the group.

McDonald was a member of the group from 1975-1982 and helped change the group's sound from guitar-oriented rock to a more Soul-influenced style.

Johnston ended up leaving the group in 1977 with McDonald taking over lead vocals and songwriting for the band.

The Doobie Brothers hit their commercial and critical peak after adding McDonald to the mix. McDonald, a more R&B-influenced singer and keyboard player, brought a much more commercial sound to the group, highlighted on the smash No. 1 album from 1978 called "Minute by Minute."

The "Minute by Minute" album not only sold well, moving over 3 million copies, but it also generated a lot of critical acclaim, winning four Grammy awards at the 1980 Grammy ceremonies.

Another song McDonald co-wrote with Carly Simon ("You Belong to Me"), which was recorded by the Doobie Brothers in 1977, also became a hit in 1978 for Simon when she recorded it herself.

The Doobie Brothers' second phase ended in 1982 when the group performed a farewell concert tour that year (documented on the 1983 album "Farewell Tour"), after which they disbanded to pursue solo careers.

The group did reunite for a short tour in 1987, which was organized to benefit various charities, including both lead vocalists Johnston and McDonald along with Patrick Simmons.

In 1989 the Doobie Brothers embarked on their third career phase with the release of their album "Cycles," minus McDonald, which harkened back to their earlier guitar-oriented sound, even producing a further Top 10 hit that year with a song called "The Doctor."

The Doobie Brothers have continued to record and tour since 1989, and while the group has undergone several lineup changes, the different eras of the band have produced a uniquely American sound that encompasses many different styles of music.

"We're basically an American band – we cover a lot of areas," group co-founder Johnston said in an interview on the group's website – www.doobiebros.com.

"We cover blues, R&B, country, bluegrass, rock 'n' roll. It's based on rhythm structures, picking and harmonies. That's been the signature of the band."

Johnston, along with group co-founder Simmons, who wrote and sang "Black Water," has been a mainstay in the Doobie Brothers lineup over the years and has seen the band through their early days as an up-and-coming touring band throughout California, to a hit recording act, to the present day incarnation that will appear at Foellinger Theatre.

In 2014, the Doobie Brothers released their most recent recording called "Southbound," an album in which the group (along with McDonald) re-recorded its biggest hits with some of today's top country music performers. From their inception, the Doobie Brothers have made touring a major part of their career, which has enabled them to build a solid fan base that has lasted to this day. Their fan base has helped keep the group prosperous along with their music, which is still ever-present on rock radio stations around the country.

"We have a hardcore fan base that has handed our music down through the years to their children and their children's children," Simmons said in an interview from the band's website. "Repeatedly, people go to our concerts and come up to us and say, 'My dad turned me on to you guys years ago, and I've loved you guys all this time, and my kids are



More Information

Takin' it to the ... outdoor theater

WHAT: The Doobie Brothers In concert with opening act Lara Johnston
WHEN: 7:30 p.m. Wednesday
WHERE: Foellinger Theatre, 3411 Sherman Blvd,
COST: Sold out

listening to you now," Simmons said.

"And the songs that people all know, be it 'Listen to the Music' or 'Black Water' or 'China Grove,' are still getting played," Johnston added.

"Any song that stands the test of time for 40 years or is getting played around the country on a daily basis – that to me is a testament to the quality of the tunes, and that they had something to say that resonated with people," Johnston said. "I'd like to say this band has been relevant – it's been relevant musically, it's been relevant lyrically, and we've always put out a high quality of music."