

# GOIN' BACK

Interview by James Gaden. Photos by James Hole.

The release of 'Coming Home To You', Michael's first solo album since 2014's 'If Everyone Was Listening', saw him get more immersed than ever before with a record. He co-wrote four of the tracks on offer, describing it as a "labour of love" and "never having been so closely involved with every aspect of the creative process". The formula worked, with the album hitting number one, his first since his debut to have done so.

Michael did a mass of TV and radio appearances to promote this album, but many of those were short interviews tailored to get the word out, with few delving into the record itself and the process of making it.

My full time job is as a graphic artist and aside from doing this magazine, among other things I design a nationally distributed publication called *Fireworks Rock & Metal Magazine*. As well as doing the page layouts, I also contribute to the writing and over the last 14 years, I have been fortunate to have over 150 interviews published in it, ranging from up and coming acts to household names. With Michael being so proud of his creative contributions and having it paying off so spectacularly, I suggested the idea of doing an interview with him to focus more about that. I offered examples of my work to show I had experience of interviewing and I figured if anybody would be interested in hearing more about the album, it would be the Fan Club.

The request was sent through and I was thrilled to see it had been granted. Michael was coming to Hull for the first time, on the fourth date of his tour. As that is my home town, I received a call from his PA Andrew, inviting me to the Bonus Arena where I could talk to Michael prior to his soundcheck. I was taken backstage to his dressing room where I found Mr. Ball was his usual jovial, charismatic self...

**What I wanted to do Michael, was as you don't seem to have done much press for this album...**

(Sighs) No, none at all. (laughs)

**The thing I noticed was most of your interviews didn't talk too much about the record itself, so that's what I wanted to do.**

Fabulous, right, lets do it!

**Let's start at the beginning then, it's time for a new album, so what's your starting point? Do you have a theme in mind, a title, do you just collect songs...?**

Do you know, it's really daunting, you know it's time to make one but you think "what the hell am I going to do this time?" I sort of knew in my head the sound I was looking for. I had a few songs in mind, my initial idea was to call the album 'Goin' Back', after the Goffen and King song. It was all going to be songs that were relevant to milestones in my life, songs that I loved and were things that I had listened to. I compiled a great big list but going through it, I felt I really had to do something new on this album, not just do covers. The covers are nice to do but it's even nicer to do something different. So I persuaded the record company that I wanted to do some originals and they said "Okay, we'll try and find you a couple of new songs." So they sent some to me from outside writers but I said "No, these aren't... they aren't good!" That was when I met up with Jack McManus and Ben Earle. I asked if they wanted to write for me and they turned around and said "Well why don't we write with you?" That kind of gave me the spur, to start with the writing process and then to start thinking about what other songs to bring in, figure out what worked with what. It happened organically. I can't tell you that I sat down and said "Right, I'm doing that, doing that..." because things just happened. The Freya Riding song 'Lost Without You' came up and I thought "I have to do that", because I just loved it. Jimmy Webb submitted one which I wanted to do, so the theme became fairly loosely woven, which is why I changed the title to 'Coming Home To You'. That just felt right. Musically I'm coming home, and what I ended up with just felt like a good collection of songs.

**I'm glad you mentioned 'Lost Without You' because that's one of the things I like most about your albums, you often introduce me to songs and artists I've not crossed paths with. I'd never heard that before and I was blown away by it.**

Oh, great! It's such a good song, I love being able to bring songs to people, either with records or the radio show.

**You've introduced me to a lot of Country stuff as well.**

Yeah, I always loved that, I just love the rhythms and harmonies of it, the sentiment. I'm not a hardened Country artist by any means but it does have a flavour of that going on on this record.

**And you've got some Elvis on there, which is always good.**

Can't go wrong there, can you?

**I'm really pleased you went with 'I Just Can't Help Believin', if I were to pick my favourite Elvis record it would be 'That's The Way It Is', narrowly beating 'Elvis Country'. I know you love The King, do you have a particular favourite record of his?**

I do really like him but I think I'd go for one of the live albums, I don't think you can beat the 1968 Comeback Special. It's got everything in there, just amazing.

**Another great song you picked is 'To Love Somebody', by The Bee Gees, an absolute classic, almost a standard now...**

And it's the song I sang with them on my show years ago.

**You did, which was awesome, but did you realise it's also been recorded by both Michael Bolton, and Michael Buble as well?**

No, I didn't!

**So I wanted to know, with that in mind, now you've done it too, do you think there's a risk of people's minds being blown or the fabric of the space time continuum being ripped apart?**

(Laughs) There it is. Do you know what, worlds will collide. It will be like *Avengers Infinity War* and *Endgame* all

rolled into one! We'll all be out on tour and one of us will just suddenly disappear into dust!

**With it being such a classic song, your version puts a different spin on it, a different arrangement. How hard is it to approach and record it without just instinctively singing it as it was originally?**

What I did was I knew it worked as a song done the way the Bee Gees did it, so I imagined that it had been sent to me as a demo, just a voice and piano, or just a voice and guitar. So for all the songs, I took them back to demo form and just sat with a pianist or sat with a guitarist and said "There's the dots, here's the voice, we're copying nothing". We didn't listen back, we didn't reference the original, we'd look to find the key that suited me and find our own route through the song. Of course there is an influence from memory, but when you record it and then go back to the original, you can hear it is quite different. It's the same with the Elvis song, that's really different, this version you could almost imagine Glen Campbell doing it.

**That was one of the big things about it, I've got probably half a dozen versions of 'To Love Somebody' and they are all done like the Bee Gees, except yours, and yours stands out as a result.**

'Miss You Nights' is another one, it had a very late seventies, early eighties Pop sound, it had harmonies and all sorts so I said no to that. All the harmonies on it are just my voice, multi-tracked. Between that and a change of style to make it fit with the others, it didn't feel like a typical cover.

**With you compiling all these songs for possible inclusion on the record, bearing in mind how many times you played it on the radio, how close did the insufferable ditty 'Baby Shark' come to being included on the album?**

It's actually a hidden track, you obviously haven't found it yet.

**No, thank God.**

(Laughs) Wasn't that the most annoying thing?

**It's horrendous, I have a three year old nephew and it's his favourite song, we have him every Sunday and he insists on playing it repeatedly.**

Oh God. "Baby Shark, do doo do doo..."

**Please don't! It's not in the set is it?**  
(Laughs) No, you're alright.

**That's a relief. I just had this horrible vision of you kicking off 'Party Time' with it.**

Do you know, you've just given me the most wicked idea...

**Nooo! If you're going to do it, can you do it at one of the gigs I'm not at?**

(Laughs) Alright. That is *such* a good idea though.

**It's really not! Unless you do one of your proper covers, change the style to make it fit, make it a bit more Country perhaps. Or Punk. Thrash Metal?**

Nope, I'll do it exactly as it is. "Baby Shark, do doo do doo..."

**And have all the backing singers choreographed, doing the movements?**

Yes! I don't know if I *will* put it in the set, but it's in my head now. Your fault. (laughs)

**Oops! Getting back to proper song writing, this album features more of your own compositions than any of your previous records.**

Yes, these ones I feel I properly wrote, the others from the other albums felt more like I was dabbling. They were... they were alright, but this was a proper, sitting down, "I'm on a mission to write songs" thing.

**From your older ones, I thought 'Someone Else's Dream' and 'Just When' were very good and I was a big fan of 'Never Coming Back' from 'This Time It's Personal'.**

Oh yeah! I did like that one, I must admit.

**But you rarely include them on your previous records – this time about half of the record is your own stuff, and they are a different level. And people obviously**

**like them, because the album went to number one.**

Thank you! Did alright, didn't it? I do intend to include more originals from now on. Wouldn't it be great if I ended up with an album of entirely new material? No reason why not. That would be incredible.

**Well your Decca label mate Lulu did that with her last album. After years of doing other people's songs, her latest album had only one cover and everything else was her own stuff. It got great reviews and she felt it was a truer reflection of her as an artist, because it was her words, her choice of style, not songs picked for her to sing.**

That's exactly it – it's not going to stop, the important thing was that the new songs



stood up and they weren't fillers. And you'll see it tonight, the kick I get out of people singing back to me something I wrote, it's just amazing. It's such a buzz!

**What is your approach to writing, are you a lyrics man, melodies, do you get involved with chord structures, what's your input?**

All the lyrics and some of the melodies. I'll take suggestions of course, and whoever I'm writing with, if there's a riff or something I might say "I can hear it going here, or doing this..." And I'm the king of the key change. The times I've heard "Not another bloody key change!" Yes! Another one! Trust me!

**Had you been writing here and there ever since 'If Everyone Was**

**Listening' came out?**

No, not at all, these are all new, in the moment, for this album. It was a proper series of song writing sessions. Each of them were done in a day. I might tweak the odd thing when we went into the studio to record them but generally the song was done. We would start in the morning and have a rough demo of a song done by the end of the day.

**Do you have a listening panel of people close to you for feedback, or do you trust your own judgement?**

I pretty much know myself. Cath's great at listening to them and offering advice of course, but she's not perfect! There is one that made the record and she said "Oh, that's terrible" and I said "Nope, I promise you, that is going to work". She was adamant it wouldn't, the first night I played it in Nottingham the whole audience were on their feet, clapping and joining in. I just looked down and winked, saying "Told you". (laughs)

**Was it 'All Dance Together' by any chance?**

Yep. I think it's alright, it is what it is.

**A lot of the fans like it, when I polled on the Facebook Group what people's favourite song was from the new album, that was right up there, it was second only to the**

**title track.**

Brilliant. For me, I think my favourite is 'Tennessee Dreams'. I'm really pleased with that, I think it's a clever song, it's witty, it's got a good vibe, I like that one.

**How did Jimmy Webb get involved in writing a song for you?**

I met him, we were going to be doing a documentary for Radio 2 that actually got axed... well, not axed but he was sick so we couldn't do it. I mentioned to him that I liked the songs he'd written for Glen Campbell and was considering covering one and he said "I'll write you a new one". And he'll be at the Palladium, so that's alright isn't it?

**So no 'Baby Shark' that night then?**

(Laughs) No, he might wish he'd written it!



**With 'All Dance Together' being such a great track for the concert, do you have the show in mind when you're making an album or do you cross that bridge when you come to it?**

Certainly with that song, that was definitely written with a live performance in mind but that was the only one, the others were all about how they'd work for the album. That one though, I could just see how it would work both live and on record.

**Years back you did a cover of 'Why Haven't I Heard From You Lately' which was meant for 'This Time It's Personal', but you didn't include it on the album because you felt you couldn't capture it in the studio properly. You still played it live though. Has that happened with many other songs?**

Not many, a couple.... there's one I've got in the bottom drawer, not because it didn't work musically but I felt it just didn't gel with the rest of the album. It's a Dan Fogelberg song called 'Longer', you'd probably know it if you heard it, it's

a lovely song but I thought we had that vibe already on the album, so that's just been put away for now. I tried writing a song with Guy Chambers but it didn't quite come off. And I also tried writing with Paul Carrack actually, but we just didn't really click.

**That happens sometimes, you'll see song writers who on paper might sound like a dream team, but I've talked to some who said "Oh, I went to write with so-and-so but it didn't work, we cancelled each other out because we had the same strengths".**

Totally! So it didn't pan out this time but that doesn't mean to say it won't in the future.

**One thing I have to ask about, which fans always ask when you tour – the live DVDs. We haven't had one since 2013.**

I know. Nobody makes them anymore. That is the bottom line, it's purely down to finances. If a TV company offers to film you then great, but it just doesn't make financial sense otherwise because they cost

so much to make, what with the production, paying everybody involved...

**I wondered if it was because you have a big band and you do have a lot of other people's songs in the show, whether the performance fees and songwriters royalties were the issue.**

It's more the production. We just don't sell enough because sales are down generally, with Netflix and things, people aren't really buying DVDs now. A live music DVD just doesn't sell in the volume needed these days to cover the costs.

**That's a shame. What about following your Elvis example from earlier and making a live album then? You've only done the one, the Royal Albert Hall one. And that was twenty years ago.**

That's not a bad idea. Yeah, all the rest were filmed weren't they? Wow. A live album... That's not a bad idea at all!

**Just don't put 'Baby Shark' on it...**

I will - bonus track! (laughs)