

# FACE THE MUSIC<sup>®</sup>

## JOBY ROGERS

Music ♦ Arts ♦ Entertainment ♦ Political ∞ Writer

### INTERVIEW with

**TOM JOHNSTON** of the **DOOBIE BROTHERS**  
**MOHEGAN SUN ARENA, CT**  
**November 11, 2018**

The Doobie Brothers have been delivering mind-blowing, roots-based, harmony-laden, guitar-driven Rock n' Roll for nearly five decades. They're currently writing and recording new music and recently announced a fall 2018 headlining tour, including 2 historic nights at the Beacon Theater in NY where the band will play entirety-album shows for the first time in their nearly 50 year history. With over 48 million albums sold, 4 Grammy Awards, 7 multi-platinum, 6 Platinum, and 11 Gold albums including 'Best of the Doobies' which earned a rare RIAA "diamond" record award, five Top 10 singles and 16 Top 40 hits, the Doobies have stood the test of time, selling more than 48 million albums and winning four GRAMMY® Awards. Their latest album, 'Southbound' was released on 'Arista Nashville' and features new recordings of the band's biggest hits, with renditions by some of Country Music's biggest stars including Blake Shelton, Zac Brown Band, Brad Paisley and Toby Keith. Boasting one of the most loyal fan bases in music, the band continues to write and record new material and tour the world. Their Number one singles "Black Water" and "What a Fool Believes" lead a catalog of indelible songs that include: "Listen to the Music," "China Grove," "Jesus Is Just All Right," "Rockin' Down the Highway," "Long Train Runnin'," "Take Me In Your Arms," "Takin' it to the Streets," "Minute by



L to R: Tom Johnston, Joby Rogers of FTM, Patrick Simmons & John McFee

Minute", and many more. I talked with founding member Tom Johnston backstage at the Mohegan Sun's arena about the history of the Doobie Brothers and their current national tour.

**TOM JOHNSTON:**

Hi Joby, I'm Tom Johnston.

**JOBY ROGERS:**

Hi Tom. Thank you very much for taking the time.

**TJ:**

Absolutely!

**JR:**

Let's get to it. You started playing at 12 and now you've just turned 70. How do you carry the heritage and legacy of the band forward through all of the years and keep it fresh and relevant for yourself as well as new fans you've connected with along the way?

TJ:

Hmmm. I would have to say that it's not a conscious thing. I just keep doing what I've always done, which is writing songs, playing music and touring. Just continuing to do what I know how to do. I don't think of it in those terms, to be honest with you. It's a day to day and year to year thing. It keeps continuing and I'm fortunate that I am able to still do this and people want to hear it. We're all fortunate, everyone in the band. We enjoy it and we have a ball doing this.

JR:

Why is performing live still so vital to you at this point in your career & life?

TJ:

That's how we all started out. Well, not everybody, some people were studio house plants. But we started out in bars and clubs just like the Beatles, Stones and Joe Blow down the street. Everybody pretty much did that and you played as much as you could and you just kept going and going. We wrote a lot of songs, we spent a lot of time writing songs, even early on. There's a little bit of luck involved in this as well. We happen to run into various people along the way. One of which was Skip Spence, who helped get us into a studio in San Mateo, California, which was owned by a guy who sent our demo tape to Warner Brothers. Warner Brothers signed us on the strength of that tape. That's the stuff I call luck, fate, good fortune or whatever you want to call it.

JR:

I can't think of any Artist over 50 who is on mainstream radio, no Bruce, no Stones. How do you navigate that reality?

TJ:

I don't think about it. Whatever reality, to me it's just playing music and that's pretty much what it's all about. A good song is a good song. When we go out and play live we give it our all and the

crowd usually responds in kind. We've also been fortunate enough to have written a few songs that have stood the test of time and are still getting airplay now. They are a part of peoples lives. We didn't set out to do that but that's how it ended up. That's been a real boom. I think that as far as trying to fit into a certain niche or market, we don't think about that. We just do what we do.

JR:

I certainly get that. I'm 51 and I grew up on the Doobies. I love your music very much.

TJ:

Well, thank you!

JR:

It's the early 70 's. You're in your Volkswagen, driving down the road in San Jose. "Listen to the Music" comes on. You...?

TJ:

[Laughs] I remember that! I remember standing on the brakes and sliding to the side of the road, saying "Holy Shit, that's us!" That pretty much covers it. I just sat there and listened to the song and said: "Wow! We're on the radio". It was a big deal at the time.

JR:

You recently signed with perhaps the most powerful manager in the music business, Irving Azof. Has he given the band new life? Did he influence the Doobie's decision to put out the bands first new material since 2010?

TJ:

Yea! In a sense. We wanted to do it anyway and we were working on it before he suggested it but he was definitely behind us in that decision. Irving has been a blessing. He helped make a connection with a much wider audience. We're playing in the same places, but things have just gotten better all the way around since we got on board with Irving. I wish we would have done it 30 years ago, but you do it when you do it and it

happens when it happens. It's been a joy to work with him.

JR:

So, a welcomed second wind?

TJ:

Absolutely! [laughs]

JR:

This is your first new material in over 8 years. When writing new songs, do you retain any pressure from your past work or successes?

TJ:

I would say that there is a little of that because you want to try and do the best you can and you want it to hopefully be relevant, which is anybody's guess. There is a small portion of that, but really, the major portion of the songwriting is geared around whatever you come up with. It's like it's always been. We're not trying to rubber stamp what we've done in the past. We're just trying to write new songs and wherever they go they go, but you want them to be good songs. You don't want to just write songs for the sake of doing it. You want songs that say something and have a good chord change. Songs that people can relate to and you want to move people. The same with the lyrics. [Laughs] Well actually, nobody thinks that, if you want to know the truth. We all just write the songs and hopefully they come out good.

JR:

That might be the most honest answer I've ever gotten from that question.

TJ:

Well, that's kind of the way it is.

JR:

What's your thoughts on artists like Blake Shelton, Zac Brown and Toby Keith, putting a country spin on some of the Doobie's classics on the 'Southbound' LP?

TJ:

That was a fun project, I have to say. It didn't really make a big ripple or anything but there are several reasons for that which I won't bother to go into. We had a ball doing that though. Playing with those guys in Nashville was a jaw-dropping experience. They were really good, incredible musicians.

JR:

Who do you think did the best and on what song?

TJ:

That's impossible to call. I mean they were all good all the time. There wasn't any let downs on anything.

JR:

Any favorite?

TJ:

I know this is going to sound strange. I really dug the way 'Nobody' came out. In fact, we recorded that twice already and did it again in 2010 on 'World Gone Crazy'. It was also the first single we've ever released, which was in 1971. It was sloppy compared to the rest of them. David Huff did the producing for that album I thought his take on that song was really cool. Using Charlie Worsham to sing on it just worked, it really worked. Not to say that the other songs didn't because they did. But the arrangement on that instrument was great. The Dobro in the picking, the Pedal Steel, and the drumming, just kind of layered really, really nice and it didn't have a chuck-a-chuck guitar in it. I played it but it was pulled out in production which left it with this whole new feel. But that's just me. I'm sure everyone has other songs that they would point out. I felt really good about 'Listen to the Music'. I went down and watched Blake [Shelton] do the vocals on that, which was one of a few chances we had to do that. Most of the time when everyone was doing their vocals we were nowhere around.

JR:  
Speaking of your guitar style. You've used an acoustic guitar styling that blends a unique strum and percussive accented rhythm at the same time on one instrument. How did you come up with that technique?

TJ:  
I guess you can say by accident. I needed a drummer and I didn't have one. I kind of unconsciously invented a way. It just sort of morphed from when I was doing a frame rhythm with two and four and that's what you hear on 'Listen to the Music', 'Long Train Running', 'Another Park, Another Sunday' and on and on. It's basically not having a drummer and making it up while you're playing rhythm.

JR:  
When you first began playing like that did any of your fellow musicians have trouble keeping time with it?

TJ:  
No. Not at all. If you're talking about the band and when we first started, or if you're referencing if that's what this bands all about. When we first started it was the rhythm. Pat's [Simmons] fingerpicking, the harmonies, and whoever was singing lead. That's how everything started. Not that every song had that rhythm but it was an overall example of what the band was. It held all the elements of everything from 'Rhythm and Blues', 'Rock' n Roll' and I'll call it 'Americana' rather than 'Bluegrass'. It's all wrapped up in one deal and that's kind of what this bands always been about. Even though we started experimenting more as the albums went by. That's how it started and I believe it's still there today.

JR:  
Does everybody bring their own piece to it?

TJ:  
Absolutely!

JR:  
Are the Doobie Brothers more rooted in Blues or

Country Music?

TJ:  
From my point of view, it's definitely 'Blues' and 'Rhythm & Blues', even 'Soul Music'. Pat will definitely get hats off to the fingerpicking part. John McFee can play anything, I don't care what it is, if it's got strings, he can play it. He can play slide guitar, pedal steel and all of that is added into the mix now-a-days.

JR:  
You'll be at the 'Beacon Theater' in NYC in November. The plan is to play the albums 'Toulouse Street' and 'The Captain and Me' sequentially in the original order they appeared on the LP's. Any reservations on that?

TJ:  
We've never done that before.

JR:  
Who initiated that idea?

TJ:  
I was on a conference call with Azof's people and that led to a call with CAA. I was pushing to get the band in the Beacon for a while now and I wasn't getting anywhere. Once we joined up with Irving's label, I was able to talk to people about things like this and actually get some response. He suggested doing an album night and that hadn't even crossed my mind, if I'm honest. It was the last thing I was thinking about because I just wanted to play the 'Beacon' and I know that other bands have done it and I was surprised to find out that the 'Allman Brothers' have done it too. I mean, they owned that place. They played eight or nine shows in a row, as did 'Steely Dan' and other people. It'll be the first time we've ever done that. It's going to be interesting. It's a challenge, but we've already been working on it on the tour we just wrapped up with 'Steely Dan'. We've always worked on tunes from those albums during sound checks that we are not already playing live. They were hell raisers and I said "Wow!



JR:  
For something like this, that you haven't attempted before, do you get stage fright or have any reservations?

TJ:  
If we get stage fright about anything, it's about playing the album's front to back the way they're sequenced for the record, which is not how you would do it live, normally. It's like somebody just put the needle on the album and you're playing it from 'Side A' to 'Side B'.

JR:  
Do you plan on releasing this online, DVD or live streaming it?

TJ:  
Nobody's really settled on that. It's been brought up. I get the feeling that might happen, but I'm not going to swear to it because I haven't really discussed it with anybody.

JR:  
What was your family's initial reaction to you when you decided to enter show business and be a professional musician/entertainer?

TJ:  
They weren't really thrilled [laughs]. I think they probably figured it was a trip down a path of bad things happening to you and things like that. Even though they both loved music, they associated it with the 'fast life' for lack of a better way to put it.

JR:  
What did they think of your success later in life?

TJ:  
I think they got a kick out of it be honest with you. But they kept it muted [laughs]. Nobody jumped up-and-down. I gave them a set of gold and platinum records. I think they were happy about it, but they still had some qualms about that lifestyle. But it is what it is and I wasn't going to change my mind, and everything ended up fine. They're not with us anymore.

JR:  
What sacrifices have you made to be here today?

TJ:  
I attribute the longevity to, number one, we play all the time. We tour every year. We do between 70 and 90 shows a year. We were fortunate enough to have songs that still get airplay every day. 'Spotify' adds another element as far as our playlists go. It's just another way to reach out to the world to people who might not have been checking us out before. 'Spotify' is known for suggesting songs to people based on what they already listen to. I don't do 'Spotify' but my kids do. Mostly, I will say it's having songs used in everything from television ads to movies that gets our songs into people's consciousness. I talk to fans, and I hear this all the time when we do a meet and greet. People come up to you and say everything from "You guys have been the soundtrack to my life or a certain song really got me through a tough time or a particular album that I partied my ass off too". Some guys have been to Vietnam and say "Thank God! You guys really helped me get through that". It's a wide swath of incidences. People have attached it to their lives and that makes a big difference.

JR:  
Any possibility of a reunion with founding member Michael McDonald for upcoming gigs?

TJ:  
Probably not the tour we're preparing for now. We occasionally do corporate gigs with Michael.

JR:  
Do you remember your first famous musician or encounter?

TJ:  
Oh boy! I watched Steve Winwood when he was with 'The Spencer Davis Group' when they performed 'Give Me Some Lovin' in a neighboring town. I had to be 16 or 17 years old. Before that, it was James Brown, and that just blew my mind. I was just 15 and that was a life

altering experience, even though I never met him.

JR:  
if you were allowed to release only one Doobie's song that you could share with the world, Which would it be?

TJ:  
Oh God! One thing this band has is a ton of songs. I would probably say, for the reason that the message is good and I think it still works today, and it's the same way that I thought of it when I wrote it, that's probably 'Listen to the Music'. It's a way for people to communicate, which was the original idea behind that song. It was written during a time of war, which was Vietnam. People used 'Listen to the Music' to communicate rather than the rhetoric language and threats and all those kind of things that were going on at that time. 'Listen to the Music' is a feel-good thing, especially with the way it was written and what the lyrics were about.

JR:  
When you hear the opening chord progression you just can't help but turn it up and smile.

TJ:  
Therein lies the whole secret. It makes you happy. I think that you could apply that to these days now. I also wrote a song on 'Sibling Rivalry' called 'People Got to Love Again'. It covers all those kinds of things that are going on right now. That's why I wrote the song 'World Gone Crazy'. It had an overall point of view. I liked 'World' because it had kind of a New Orleans thing and it was all about the common man on the street, working every day, and so on. But the uplifting part I'd have to give to 'Listen to the Music'.

JR:  
Do you have a favorite album or song that you feel has been underrated or misunderstood?

TJ:  
I don't think we've ever had anything that's been misunderstood. I'm a fan of a song called 'Dark

Eyed Cajun Woman'. That's because I grew up listening and playing 'Blues' music. That song's a tip of the hat to BB King. For me, it was just a thrill to write and record that song. It's the only original blues tune we've ever done. We did one on 'Toulouse Street', but that was a cover. This one, I wrote the lyrics to, so it had some meaning to me.

JR:  
Are there songs in your catalog that weren't singles or hits that you would you like to see get their moment in the sun?

TJ:  
[Sigh] Ahh... God! That's a hard question to answer and I'll tell you why. We played an awful lot of songs off all the albums, at least with this formation of the band. 'Another Park, Another Sunday', was very popular with a lot of people. I can't think of anything right off the bat that I'd wished we played and we hadn't. There are songs that I like to listen to because their neat but I don't know if they'd go over well. That's a tough question to answer.

JR:  
What do you hope or think your greatest impact as an artist has been or will be?

TJ:  
I look at us as a working man's band. 'Joe Q Public' really relates to this band. We've been there for them and they've been there for us. It's a two-way street and we couldn't do it without them, that's for sure. A lot of the songs have stood the test of time. I want to be remembered... well, I don't want to be remembered at all [laughs], I want to keep doing it and stay active for quite a while. If it comes down to that, then at that point and time I'd just like to say we were a band that really worked on being quality musicians who were good on their instruments and good on vocals and spent the time to put on the best show possible for people, always.

JR:

I've had the pleasure of meeting the Doobies on two occasions. Once when I was working at Mystic Lake Casino in Minnesota and here in Connecticut at Foxwoods.

TJ:

Oh yes, I remember those places, but we've been playing Mohegan Sun lately.

JR:

What do you think of today's political climate? What do you think the role of Artists, specifically, needs to be in this highly charged political climate?

TJ:

Scary isn't it? You know, what I've noticed about this, and I'm not going to get all political because number one, it's not going to make any difference. I think the artists role in this is to keep doing what they do. I don't think artists are going to make any difference in how things are going or that they're going to change it. It's one thing to voice support for what's right, I totally agree with that. I'm just saying, from what I've seen, it really doesn't matter what happens, it just keeps on rolling.

JR:

Do you think it's better to use your voice and risk losing fans or not say anything at all? Are there boundaries?

TJ:

There are two ways to look at that. You can take a staunch view of this whole thing and be very public about it, I mean, I think a lot of our fans probably like 'Trump' and a lot of our fans don't. Our job is to play for people. They listen to the music and whether or not you agree with their political views or what's going on in our country right now, it's not my job to put that face on. When I'm playing a show it's my job to entertain people and that's what I get paid to do, that's what I love to do. If anything, it's to take people minds off of it for a while and forget all that stuff for a bit and escape from the everyday craziness

that's going on right now. That's my job.

JR:

Any other passions aside from music?

TJ:

My passion is writing. That's something I've always enjoyed doing.

JR:

Were there any Doobie Brothers songs that seem to have come out of nowhere?

TJ:

'Listen to the Music', 'China Grove', World Gone Crazy', 'Young Man's Game', actually a whole lot of songs. Most of your best tunes are those kinds of songs. You don't really have to sit there and run your brain through a strainer trying to come up with this and that. The lyrics and music just start popping into your head, like someone's already doing it and you're just channeling whatever that is.

JR:

Are all the members open to contributing their song(s) to the group and open to everyone's input as well?

TJ:

Essentially, when we get into the studio, that's what happens anyway. It's always been that way. We may change a chord structure here and there, but the song stays the same in the bare bones of it. We add things like Pat's fingerpicking or the drummer or bass player may come up with a part. Titan Porter, for years added very singular parts because nobody else played that kind of bass style. Those types of things may bring a song in a different direction.

JR:

Do you have a favorite song that you enjoy performing live?

TJ:

Anything that goes over big with the crowd is my favorite. [laughs] You want the crowd to respond. 'Dark Eyed Cajun Woman' is one. If you want that great response you have to play a song that was big on the radio and that the audience is familiar with or that's anthemic in nature like 'Listen to the Music', 'Long Train Runnin' or 'Black Water'. That gets them up and dancing and they're singing the song with you and sometime's they're singing it louder than we are, and to me, that's what it's all about.

JR:

What do you think is the most Rock and Roll thing you've ever seen or done on the road?

TJ:

Oh, Jesus Christ! That covers a lot of time. Ahhhh... nothing recently. Probably back in the seventies when we were being a little crazy. 'Door Wars' with the cars. Driving go-carts and throwing tv's out the windows or the crew was trashing hotel rooms or whatever. I'd call that 'Rock & Roll', but that kind of stuff is passé now. No one's doing that anymore.

JR:

Thank you very much, Tom. Very Much appreciate your time.

TJ:

Absolutely!

Information: [www.thedoobiebrothers.com](http://www.thedoobiebrothers.com)



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