

Keller Williams
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Sugar Ray on the Current State of Music

Guitarist Rodney Sheppard explained the new CD's title this way: "We were playing about a year ago in Los Angeles and our friend, who ended up producing the record, Josh Abraham, said to Mark [McGrath, vocals], 'Look at your audience dude, it's all cougars...'" and it kind of was, a lot of moms and kids. We try to always have humorous titles for all of our CDs, kind of showing our age" he said, laughing.

"Music For Cougars" has a modern Beach Boys sound and reflects Sugar Ray's Southern California roots. "We're surely not worthy of that," said Sheppard, "but being huge life-long fans of The Beach Boys and Brian Wilson, it's wonderful to even be put in a category or thought of as a summer band like The Beach Boys. That's an honor. The whole band came from Newport Beach, California" he added, "so what naturally comes out is that summery sound."

And like The Beach Boys, Sugar Ray works hard to remember that their fans experienced many "firsts" to their music: first dates, first loves — "songs that people fell in love to, that people got married to... the songs became bigger than the band. They're the world's property now, and we need to be humbled by that," said McGrath.

On "Music For Cougars," Sugar Ray joined songwriting efforts with Pulse Recordings' in-house producer/song-writer Luke Walker, and according to Sheppard, they really clicked.

"Our writing process, it's pretty scattered... every guy in the band contributes in different ways, so we all have our strengths and weaknesses," he said. "When we got the offer to record the new record and Mark took off from his TV hosting job, we decided we were going to take our time and take a year to write the CD, which is

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a little different in that we reached to outside song writers. We collaborated with him [Luke Walker] a lot, Weezer's Rivers Cuomo, Donavon Frankenreiter... we've usually collaborated with at least one other artist on each CD, but this time we took that to the next level... it really came together for us, and we're really lucky."

Some critics might have been a bit surprised to find Josh Abraham and his newly formed Pulse Recordings (30 Seconds to Mars, Staind, Velvet Revolver, Limp Bizkit, Linkin Park, etc.) producing "Music For Cougars" but Sheppard explained it this way: "Josh has a crew of different people that work there with him, and that enables him to be versatile and do all sorts of artists from American Idol contestants, he'll produce records for them; he'll do Korn. His versatility is amazing. What's funny is dating way, way back to our first CD, "Lemonade and Brownies", which was produced by DJ Lethal, his best friend at the time was Josh Abraham, so we've known him our entire recording career, but this is the first time we've actually got to work with him and it's pretty cool."

And what is Sugar Ray hoping to accomplish with "Music For Cougars"? "We have a very realistic approach to the band, and we realize that the recording industry has completely changed from when we started... realistically, all we went in to do is challenge ourselves and see if we could write another record and we proved that and our goal is to hear a new song that we've written on the radio again. It's been so long, and we've questioned ourselves whether we can do it again, so if we can accomplish that that would be wonderful, but realistically all we're hoping to do is release the CD, get it out via online, as there are really no more music stores left... having a new CD out enabled us to do what we do the best, which is go out and play live and do a tour... so our goals are to get out there and play again... that's all we could ask for."

Sugar Ray's first big hit, "Fly," was noted by the critics as being a success because it was so unlike any other song they had on the "Floored" album. Said Sheppard, "Prior to that song, we had been kind of a tongue-in-cheek heavy metal band... we never really took ourselves too seriously. We originally formed the band just to play at parties for our friends, and it's one of those things where it just kept snowballing, and it took us to where we are now... but we never really thought it would get us anywhere. We hired a very good experienced producer for our second record and 'Fly' was one of the last songs that we wrote for that CD, and I feel like if maybe we had worked on the Cd for a few more months perhaps we would have come up with a few more like that but the main difference between 'Fly' and anything prior to that was our producer really worked with Mark to sing more instead of yelling and screaming, which we were doing before that. That set that song apart, and it ended up changing all of our lives because it became our first number one song and took the band to a whole different level and with that gave us confidence to go off in that direction. And then '14:59' had a couple of songs which were more in that vein ("Every Morning," "Someday") we are today."

And what about bands that are starting out now versus 14 years ago, when Sugar Ray released their first album?

"Music has become more disposable, which is heart-breaking... labels have had to squirm and change what they do, and I feel sorry for new bands being signed now because when you sign a new record deal you sign over everything... in the old days when you played live that went straight to the band, if you sold T-shirts, that went straight to the band; now, any income the band makes, no matter what the source is, they get a percentage of it so that's a whole new deal. I'm sure their patience and their development is completely gone... look at a band like us... if we weren't allowed to make a second CD, I wouldn't be here talking with you... I feel sorry for bands now that are going to get one chance," Sheppard said.

Finally, did Sugar Ray ever imagine making it to this stage of their career, six CDs, two number one singles and multiple gold and platinum records? "Absolutely not!" said Sheppard, "and any band that tells you 'Oh yeah' is either full of themselves or full of it."


Questions and comments: lawndmn@yahoo.com 

Who: Sugar Ray & Smashmouth

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