



## Michael Conley

By Kevin Erb

One of the more regular haunts that area acoustic guitarist Mike Conley frequents outside of Fort Wayne is a Kendallville hangout called Mutt's. It was during a performance he held there on a recent Friday evening that he had what he considers his most memorable encounter with audience members.

"There was this couple in their 40s or 50s, who looked somewhat familiar to me, sitting in the crowd at Mutt's," he remembers. "Afterwards, the gentleman came up to me and said, 'We're from Fort Wayne. We checked out your website and saw you were playing up here. We enjoy your performances so much we decided to come up to Kendallville to see you play."

"I thought that was cool. That is just about the ultimate compliment you can receive as a musician, to have someone travel however far it is to come see you play."

Such a tale is symbolic of Conley's rise as a solo acoustic guitarist locally. Through regular performances at venues frequented by some of the area's more sophisticated musical aficionados, the northeast Indiana native has used a balanced mix of original material and cover tunes to craft a popular stage show.

"I'm really fortunate, because I have the best gigs in Fort Wayne as a musician," he says. "I love the places where I get to perform at. Columbia Street, Munchie's, Henry's: They're all wonderful venues to try different things out at and really develop as an artist."

Conley's regular gigs include a monthly weekend show at Henry's, a happy-hour duo with John Forbing every Friday evening at Columbia Street West, and hosting duties every Thursday for Munchie Emporium's open mic night.

Starting out almost exclusively as a cover artist specializing in Dave Matthews Band tunes, Conley has steadily incorporated both more ambitious cover tunes from a variety of artists and – more importantly – his own original material.

“I think it’s important to play covers, at least when you’re starting out, because it helps you develop as a musician,” he contends. “I’m a firm believer in people playing covers to help you get your style as a guitarist.”

Conley says his original material has been coming along well; his first performance of all-original material will take place Dec. 17 as part of Columbia Street’s weekly Midwest Original Music Showcase (MOMS) shows.

“It should be a really cool night,” he says. “Of course I’ll be a little bit nervous about doing all original stuff, but the original tunes that I throw out now as part of my shows have been received very well, so I’m real excited too.”

The original material has been coming along so well for Conley, in fact, that a studio album is in the works, with an anticipated release date sometime in spring of 2003.

“Songwriting comes in spurts for me. Right now I’m going through a good little spurt,” he explains. “I’m really feeling confident about the original material I’ve been putting together for the album so far.”

One of the foremost challenges Conley’s expecting when recording begins is to be able to transfer the relaxed, intimate atmosphere of his live performances into the recording studio.

“It wouldn’t be a very good idea for me to be known as the solo guy around town and then go and do an album of all full-production numbers,” he argues. “But I will have a mix of solo, stripped-down stuff and full production songs. It’ll probably be something like 60 percent solo acoustic material and 40 percent full production stuff.”

Conley hasn’t picked a title for the new album as of yet; he says he’ll wait until all material for it has been compiled before thinking about a name.

“I need to finish all of the songs and then look at the material as a whole, look for a concept,” he says. “I’m the kind of person who wants to look at the album as a single entity, not just a collection of songs, to discern a personality before I can think of a title.”

Conley claims to be free of influences when he sits down to turn out original material, but also knows that many times it’s inevitable that his own musical history will find its way into his new material.

“I honestly don’t think that I consciously incorporate other influences when I’m writing new songs,” he explains. “But I also know that sometimes you can’t help that, without even thinking about it, you’ve turned out a song that sounds heavily influenced by some other group I’ve covered or just listened to.”

Aside from Dave Matthews Band, Conley does draw from a variety of artists when picking cover material for his shows.

“My first true interest in music was inspired by four men in makeup ... that’s right, KISS,” he proudly states on his website, [mikeconley.net](http://mikeconley.net). “Say what you will about these guys; but, in a way, they helped me get through some pretty tough childhood years.”

Conley’s affinity for the legendary rock group continues today. For his Halloween show this year at Henry’s he performed his entire show with a KISS-esque makeup job.

Conley draws on just about everything in between KISS and Dave Matthews Band as well. He’s been known to cover songs from The Police, the Beatles, David Gray, Fleetwood Mac, Prince (or whatever misnomer he now goes by), the Eagles and Cat Stevens, to name just a few.

“My shows are laid back, interesting and make you feel the warm-fuzzies,” he says on his website. “Just expect an evening of good music.”

Beyond the near future, consisting mainly of more shows locally, the release of his first studio album, Conley is admittedly at a what he terms “a bit of a crossroads” for his long-term prospects. He says he’s even been mulling a move to a larger-market city.

“I love Fort Wayne in so many different ways; it’s just that there’s always the curiosity for me if I can succeed in a different place, somewhere maybe outside of my comfort zone,” he explains. “If I do stay in Fort Wayne, I still want to make more frequent trips to surrounding big cities like Indy or Chicago on a more regular basis. I feel like I’m ready for that next level.”