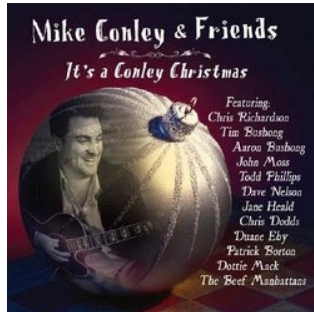




Steve Penhollow
The Journal Gazette

Some people are going to hate me for this column. Because today is Nov. 8. And this column is about a Christmas CD. I am usually the last person in the world to support the hauling out of Christmas display cases, display racks and other Christmassy store fixtures on the day after Halloween. But this project needs special attention.

It all started when local singer-songwriter Mike Conley was a little boy. No, let's not start there. If we start there, we may never stop. When Conley was a boy, he learned a love of Christmas that has not been dulled by the cynicisms of adulthood. of "The Little Drummer Boy" and probably, the song was picked radio stations. "I had a woman airplay, tell me it was the best says. This gave Conley the full-scale Christmas album. And make this one of the greatest



Last year, he decided to record his own version send it out to his friends as a free MP3. Im-up and played by a number of local and regional in her 60s in Angola, where the song had some version of the song she'd ever heard," Conley courage to go ahead with a long-gestating idea: a not just any Christmas album. "My goal was to Christmas albums ever," he says.

Conley's busy performance schedule was curtailed this summer because of some voice issues, but this gave him a perfect opportunity to concentrate on the Christmas CD. "Everything happens for a reason," he says. Even though Conley is about as versatile and eclectic as any musician in Fort Wayne, fans of his rock and jazz must still have been a little surprised at news of the project. "There have been some giggles," Conley acknowledges. "But I just love Christmas music. I think it is some of the most well-written music around." The resulting CD, "It's a Conley Christmas," proves to be true to both Christmas and Conley. There are traditional combinations of orchestral sounds and crooning, and revamps both funky and countrified. And yet Conley says he avoided disrespecting the material in his attempts to make it his own. "It's a fine line, I know," he says. "But I was careful not to cross it." Conley even went so far as to give the CD a "concept album" feel. "I wanted it to flow from song to song," he says. "That was very important to me. I agonized over the song order."

The songs are mostly secular (which Conley says is reflective of his gift-centered childhood mind-set), although there is one of the most unusual (yet still poignant) versions of "O Holy Night" ever recorded. Conley says he and his fellow musicians "hillbilled it up." All of those musicians' names, most of them instantly recognizable to area music fans, will be listed on the cover, Conley says. So earnest is Conley about all this Christmas stuff that the album's cover art features a picture of him smiling inside a Christmas tree ornament.

Conley expects the album to be in area Wooden Nickel stores the week of Thanksgiving. There will be CD release parties at Columbia Street West on Dec. 4 and at the Wooden Nickel Collector's Store on North Anthony Boulevard on Dec. 12. Conley's enthusiasm about the album and life in general is infectious. He has carved a nice niche for himself in the Fort Wayne music world, but that doesn't mean he has been able to (or will ever be able to) quit his day job(s). Still, Conley doesn't mind. "I love Fort Wayne," he says. "I get to gig out regularly and bring a smile to someone's face. "I probably get the same feeling that Bon Jovi does playing for 10,000 people when it's just me and a bartender."

For more information, go to www.mikeconley.net.