



Mike Conley

By Michele DeVinney

It has been three years since Fort Wayne favorite Mike Conley released his debut CD, *My Little Secret*, and while his follow-up may still be in the works he has hardly remained idle in the intervening years. An ardent and ambitious music maker and repeat winner of many Whammy awards, Conley continues to find new and interesting ways to present himself and his music for local audiences.

Always a singer at heart, Conley began his career the way many of us spend our downtime: singing along with records when no one is around to hear. But where he clearly distinguished himself from the average rock star wannabe was in the decision to take the show public. While many may think they can hold their own with Billy Joel in the comfort of their mother's living room, Conley decided he had what it took to make it in the real world. That bravado didn't necessarily translate in his first performance, however.

"I was terrified at first," he recalls now. "I was opening for a friend's band at Mad Anthony Brewing Company, and I was supposed to play for an hour. But after four songs, I just said 'Goodnight, I'm done!' I completely freaked out."

No such jitters are evident now as Conley takes the stage, a far more seasoned pro than the one who began taking the stage at open mic nights around town. Catching the end of the Toast & Jam and Dash-In musical eras, Conley also played at venues like Higher Grounds and the aforementioned Mad Anthony's, building confidence as a solo performer, just a man and his guitar.

After building a solid reputation as a singer-songwriter and guitarist in town and establishing good relationships with many of the people who were booking acts at the local coffeehouses and clubs, Conley was approached about playing Happy Hour at Columbia Street West. Concerned that his solo show might not provide enough interest for a regular gig like that, he looked to become a duo, first enlisting John Forbing before eventually teaming with Chris Dodds, who Conley calls "my bestest friend."

"I've been really fortunate," says Conley. "I did the solo thing, and then I got to diversify and do the duo thing. Then in the fall of 2004 when I decided to release an album, I formed a band with really good musicians."

That band, aptly dubbed the Mike Conley Band, provided yet another outlet for Conley's musical aspirations, but he found it difficult to handle – much more so than his previous work had been.

"It turned out that coordinating the band was a lot more work than playing with a band was," he says. "Just calling everyone up and getting everyone's schedules together was tough."

With his solo career still viable and his partnership with Dodds still going strong, Conley has opted to diversify yet again, this time with a completely different sound. The Beef Manhattans, named for Conley's favorite dish, is a jazz outfit, à la the Rat Pack, and provides Conley with some new challenges as a singer.

"I never appreciated jazz until I started singing jazz," says Conley. "It doesn't seem like it'll be difficult, and the range isn't difficult. But the bridges and changes in the songs go places that you don't expect them to go, and it's really easy to go flat or sharp when you're singing jazz. It's definitely helped me grow as a singer."

The move to jazz may seem an unexpected one for Conley's fans who have heard him playing more conventional forms over the years. In many ways it has been a surprise to Conley, as well.

"I sort of put the cart before the horse. I liked jazz as a genre and then started finding a lot of different artists and studying them. It's really unexplored terrain, so I'm really excited about it."

The idea of a jazz band came from Todd Phillips, who plays piano and trumpet for The Beef Manhattans ("sometimes at the same time," says Conley) and is joined by Casey Stansifer on upright bass and John Moss on drums. Conley is content to provide vocals only, leaving his guitar behind for the purposes of the new configuration. Having only played together since late summer, The Beef Manhattans are starting to book some shows around town, with a pre-holiday show scheduled at Mad Anthony's on December 21.

While a lot of Conley's time and attention is being devoted to this new project, he has far from abandoned his other efforts, and he hopes that 2008 will finally see him release his second CD, something he had hoped to do in 2007.

"Finding time to do everything is definitely the toughest thing," says Conley. "I'd like to release another album of my original music, and I have enough music for a couple of albums. I carry around a recorder and put bits of stuff on that ... so I'm writing all the time."

Conley likes to find opportunities to play some originals when he performs around town, although there are no plans to do so with The Beef Manhattans. When he does his solo shows or takes the stage with Dodds, Conley likes to include his own songs, but concedes that it needs to be balanced with a large helping of covers.

"If you want to stay busy and stay performing you need to play covers. Playing covers buys you the freedom to write originals, and then once in awhile you can slip in one of your original songs, and that's how people get to hear them. If I only knew originals, I'd never play."

Among the covers audiences can expect to hear from The Beef Manhattans are "Fly Me to the Moon," "Moonlight Serenade" and, less predictably, "Creep," a Radiohead song transformed into a suitably jazzy arrangement. Of course, there may be a Christmas song or two thrown into the mix when the band plays at Mad Anthony's in December. That shouldn't be a surprise to Conley's fans, who already know one Christmas standard, "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas," given the unique Conley treatment, a reworked version that was played on local radio stations last year. That song alone signals another goal that the entrepreneurial Conley has.

"I'd like to release a Christmas album next year," he says. "I wanted to do that this year, but now I'm hoping to release a new album of originals and a Christmas album in 2008."

And he also hopes to take a stab at public service, as well. Aside from his interest in music, Conley is also concerned with local politics and is considering a run for city council in four years.

With that many irons in the fire, Conley is certain to be a fixture in Fort Wayne for many years to come. In the meantime The Beef Manhattans are already provoking cheers from those who have heard them play, and Conley is happy to have another outlet for his diverse musical talents.

"I'm having a great time with the jazz band, and I'm really anxious to get it going."