

# whatzup

Leisure Time Weekly for Northeast Indiana

## Mike Conley

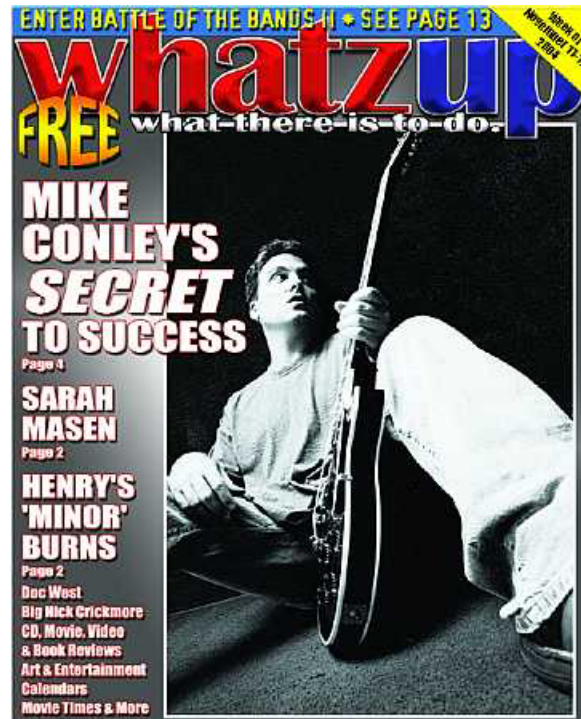
By John DeGroff

Mike Conley, well known to the Fort Wayne music scene, will be hosting his first CD release party at Columbia Street West on Friday, November 19, debuting songs from his new release, *My Little Secret*, in two different shows during the evening. From 6 to 7 p.m. Conley will be doing an acoustic set, accompanied by violinist Marty Spriggle. At 10 p.m. he takes the stage with a full band. Throughout the course of the night, Conley will be playing the entire album, as well as other music he has become known for.

Conley is this year's winner of the Whammy Award for Best Live Solo Performer. He also won, with John Forbing, Best Live Duo Performer, an award the pair also shared in 2003.

Conley has been playing guitar for just over 10 years, and did the obligatory stint as a member of various local bands. It has only been during the last five years that he got serious about a solo career. This led him to work with the multimedia art event Pop Filter and the Midwest Original Music Showcase (MOMS). Conley and Matthew Sturm also shared hosting duties for two shows with the Fort Wayne Philharmonic, in January 2002 and later that same year in October.

A song by Conley, "We'll Make It", was included on the *A Hot Cat In A Dog's World* compilation CD (May, 2004), the proceeds of which go to benefit autism. "We'll Make It" was co-written, produced and recorded by Steve Wright, who also appears on Conley's new project. The soon-to-be released *Essentials* CD from 102.3 FM will also include Conley's "My Little Secrets," the title cut from his new project.





Back in November 2002, when Conley was first interviewed by this paper (in an article written by Kevin Erb), it was apparent that he was planning this project even then. “Songwriting comes in spurts for me,” he told *whatzup* at the time. “Right now, I’m going through a little spurt. I am really feeling

confident about the original material I’m putting together for the album so far.”

Well, Conley’s fans will be pleased that no matter how his creative moments happen, there have been enough of them to enable him to finish the new CD.

Along with Conley, who did all the vocal tracks and acoustic guitar work, Jon Ross (from the band Definitely Gary) played drums; Bryan Bankson (of Rosemary Gates) played bass; Brian Lemert did guitar and trumpet; Chris Richardson, sax; Marty Spriggle, violin; Steve Wright did percussion; and Kaylie Duncan is featured on cello. According to Conley, most of the acoustic and vocal tracks were recorded at home by Morrison Agen. The project was then completed in Tim Bushong’s studio. Bushong is also credited with engineering, co-production and providing guitar and trombone tracks.

I was recently able to sit down with Conley and talk about his music, the new CD and what it means to be a working solo performer in Fort Wayne.

***whatzup*:** You won two Whammys back in February. Congratulations. How do you feel about the win?

**Mike Conley:** It’s a humbling thing. I didn’t really aggressively market people to vote for me. It feels good to have made enough of an impact on somebody to have them go out of their way to vote for you like that.

***wu*:** You’re getting well known around Fort Wayne. How much do you play outside of this area?

**Conley:** I get outside of Fort Wayne a couple times a month. Not a lot. I go up to Michigan once in a while. But until the CD was done, and I had product in hand, I really wasn’t going to aggressively go much further than Indiana.

**wu:** You mentioned in a previous interview that you might consider relocating. How serious are you about that?

**Conley:** I think that the success, or lack thereof, of the CD will dictate that. I've got some things going on behind the scenes that might help me out a little, but I won't pick up and go to a bigger city just to play. Fort Wayne will definitely be my central hub from a playing standpoint. I never understood the logic - everybody wants to move to New York, or Los Angeles, or Chicago, or Nashville. That's great, but if you take supply and demand into effect, nobody gets paid in those big cities.

**wu:** Okay, let's talk about the CD ...

**Conley:** The project is titled *My Little Secret* and has 13 tracks. I came up with that title because it just kind of summarizes the whole thing. You might think it's a stupid name, but once you listen to it all the way through, you probably won't think that.

Of the 13 cuts, five of them are full band - bass, drums, guitar. Five songs have violin. Two have saxophone. A few are just me playing acoustic guitar and singing, because that's what I do around here. I didn't want the CD to be so far off the beaten path - somebody comes out, sees me play solo, buys the CD and says, 'This isn't what I just saw tonight.' I knew I had to have some solo acoustic stuff on there, but in addition to the band tracks ... I have some stuff that's kind of in between. I have one song with me playing guitar, accompanied by a cello.

**wu:** What's the plan once the CD is available? Will you be looking to shop it to a label?

**Conley:** I'm doing the distribution myself, but I have some contacts, so we'll see what happens. As far as a label goes, if it's the right offer. I feel comfortable enough with the material, but I'm going to be picky. Locally, it will be available at all Wooden Nickel stores, Barnes & Noble, Mitchell Books, Bishop's Guitars, the Dash-In and the Sound Cellar in Angola. My plan is to aggressively market it for a month to two months locally, and then concentrate on regionally, and then national. I also want to focus getting it out via the Internet.

**wu:** You've been part of the local music scene for a while now. How is the local acceptance level towards original music?

**Conley:** I have a lot of respect for the Fort Wayne music scene. A lot of respect. I think there's a lot of variety. You can go out any given night in this city and have entertainment. As far as acceptance of original music, I think it's declined a little bit, unfortunately. I don't have an answer for why. The bottom line is that when Friday and Saturday night gets here, people want to migrate to the fun places. If a band is playing three hours of material nobody's ever heard before, it's not gonna fly on the weekend. I can understand if bar owners can't jump into the original music scene with both feet.

**wu:** What kind of advice, if any, would you give to other musicians?

**Conley:** I've always said that I'll never give advice, but I will give my opinion. To me, just play from the heart. I think you have to play what you believe in, what you enjoy. Because the minute you deviate from that, I think it shows. There's a fine line there, too, because you want to please the audience, which means you have to play a certain degree of cheesy stuff. But yet, you also have to have some sort of integrity. I don't play any song that I don't like. There's a balance - do what makes you happy. But also understand that you have a responsibility to the audience, and to the venue that hired you.

In addition to the material, I think a lot of people overlook the volume. Look at the room. Look at your speaker placement. Do you have a speaker firing right into somebody's face who is sitting in the front row? Or do you have the speakers up above their heads? Recognize these sorts of things. These are big deals.

**wu:** Any final thoughts?

**Conley:** All I can hope for, as far as this project goes, I just hope people enjoy the CD. Start from song No. 1 and listen to it all the way through. I've put the lyrics in there for people to enjoy, and I hope they do enjoy the project. That's all I can ask.