

Where Do We Go With Stephen Schijns?

NM: *We're here with Stephen Schijns (did I pronounce that right?) to discuss his journey through music that has led to his unusual debut album "Where Do We Go?" at age 62.*

SS: Don't worry, I've heard all the pronunciations. I seriously considered calling the album "Steve Skynz" so that people would get it right.

NM: *Well, there's no rule about who gets to make music and when they do it, but pop/rock in particular was once considered a young man's game. Why have we had to wait until now for your first album?*

SS: I'm slow! I began listening to the radio during the glory days of AM hit singles in the late 60s, but I had no musical training myself as a young guy; I didn't buy a guitar until after university at 23, and even then I had to have a friend pick it out because I had never so much as strummed one. But I loved surf music and it didn't sound too difficult to play, so I got a 6-string Vantage and a reverb-heavy amp and started to noodle around. I then started playing easy cover songs with a friend, and began writing my own tunes as they came to me. I wasn't a great guitarist – still aren't – but I took lessons off and on for years, mostly as a device to force me to play once a week for half an hour at least! In those days it simply never occurred to me that I could make a record, and I didn't know or play with anyone who did. In my late 40s I became part of a jam band with some work friends, which was great – I was finally competent enough to be a third guitarist and backup singer on some good loud rock songs. But they were not into recording or playing live. I also began talking music with my son's hockey coach, and started an annual backyard rock festival featuring our band, his band, and other musical friends. One of them – Glenn Domina – had a home studio and suggested I record one of my tunes, so we gave it a try. I was 56 at that point, and had never even been in a recording studio. Glenn and his friends helped on the music and I did the vocals and a guitar solo, and we were all pretty thrilled with how it turned out. That was "I'm Coming Over Tonight". The next year we did "I Know A Man" with the same crew. At the start of 2020 I moved to Kelowna in British Columbia. I googled "record producers Kelowna" and found Andrew Smith at Lake Studios, and here we are. Andrew is a spectacular musician and producer, so we've been working through the back catalogue of songs that I've written over the years to come up with the collection we have now.

NM: *So you didn't grow up with music in the house?*

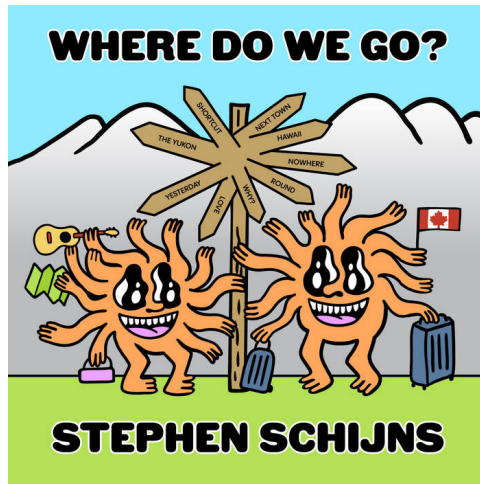
SS: Well we had a record player and a few albums, but the transistor radio was pretty much it. I was in a small mining town so I never experienced live music. I moved to a larger place in my teens, so I could at least go to a record store, and begin seeing a few bands.

NM: *Was there an "a-ha" moment in your musical upbringing?*

SS: I guess I was 14 or so when I sort of inherited a box of a hundred or so 45s. I didn't have many of my own records so I played them a lot. They weren't just the usual Beatles and big hits; there were lots of obscurities and oddities – sixties pop, country, novelties, and hits that never made it. That woke me up to the full range of non-radio music. While AM radio moved through the 70s and hits became less and less interesting to me – disco, yuck! – my musical taste went backwards year by year until it landed solidly in about 1966. Then I bought the Nuggets compilation of 60s garage band and psychedelic obscurities, and really found my musical home. I became a pretty keen record collector of 60s punk and its offshoots like New Wave and modern garage. Remember when you could go to a new city and the first thing you'd do is hit the new and used record stores? I'd spend hours and days doing that. I still have all those records.

NM: *I understand you actually hosted radio shows yourself back in the 80s before becoming a musician.*

SS: Well, I'm still "becoming a musician"! I'm actually a Civil Engineer, so if you want a carpool lane or bus terminal design, just let me know! In any case, as I dug into the 60s records I also became intrigued by all the stories and background to the bands, so I added music research to my interests. At Queen's University, starting in 1979 or so, I took the opportunity to volunteer at the radio station and soon had my own weekly show – "The Good, The Bad, and The Sixties"! I got to play whatever I wanted (to an audience of dozens) and it



spurred me to listen and research even more. Just being around community radio at that time was great, with the flood of punk, new wave, and rock music coming in and interesting people to hang out with. After graduating in 1982, I ended up in Ottawa, where I joined CKCU and created "The Sixties". I got to do some cool interviews with people like Scott McKenzie and Les Emmerson. I left to travel in 1985 but "The Sixties" carried on for 30 years courtesy of some fantastic like-minded folks. I also spent a lot of time later in creating an "International 60s Pop Encyclopedia" but that was rendered moot by the explosion of information available on the internet so I dropped it. I also created an extensive tabulation of worldwide 60s record charts which will be featured on my web site www.schijnsmusic.com.

NM: *So although your musical roots are in 60s garage rock, your own style is hard to classify – it has some classic power pop moves, 60s-style pop, folk-rock, crunchy rock&roll, some slower pieces, and even a reverb-drenched surf rocker. What genre do you tell people you play?*

SS: For me, it's all about a good song, whatever the genre. It could be bluegrass or The Ramones; doesn't matter to me. That said, I'm pretty focused on melodic, catchy, upbeat (usually), pop-rock. I go back to 60s AM radio when you could hear Connie Francis, The Rolling Stones, The Turtles, and The Ohio Express all jammed up against one another. So the album is kind of like that. You could call me a Venn Diagram of Tom Petty, The Hoodoo Gurus, and Gordon Lightfoot – how about that?



NM: *So some of the songs on the album are new, while others were written back in the '80s?*

SS: That's right. I wrote a bunch of songs in 1986-87 when I was travelling and learning guitar, and the rest are just ones that have come to me over the years. I'd say I barely wrote anything between 1990 and 2015. It's strange to me to now have fully-formed productions of these old tunes that have literally been rattling around only in my head for 35 years! And of course I never wrote them with the intent of recording, but I have strummed them for myself and others on occasion.

NM: *Are you touring or playing live these days?*

SS: I've never played much live, even though I enjoy it. So my annual back yard gig and a couple of open mics are about it. My guitar playing remains at the "barely competent" level. I plan to take a few of the tunes around to local open mics, but I don't think you'll be seeing me on a worldwide arena tour any time soon! I wouldn't mind finding a guitarist to play with as a duo, or play in a casual band.

NM: *How does the recording process work with you and Andrew Smith at Lake Studios?*

SS: I'll come in with one or two finished songs and strum them on guitar for him while he maps out the tempo and structure. I'll usually do the lead vocals at that session. He then takes it away and records all the rest – guitars, bass, and whatever other instruments are appropriate. His son Zach in Montreal usually does the drum track - I never even met or spoke with Zach until after the album was done! I then return to the studio to fill in some vocals or add some guitar lines, and I'll give Andrew some thoughts about any edits or changes. Most of the guitar solos are his, and he'll often come up with the perfect piece without me having to spell it out. Then there may be some additional tracking for a session player or background singer, and I'll await for the finished product to land in my dropbox! So easy!

NM: *There are almost twenty tracks on the album....*

SS: I'm not that prolific a songwriter so in my mind I approached this as my one and only album ever. I therefore wanted to put every good song I had on there. Plus in this digital age, what's an album anyways? We're no longer limited by the size of a 33 rpm disc. It does make a bit of a confusing mess musically, as I'm not sure that anybody other than me wants to hear surf rock, ragtime pop, a folk ballad, and a bunch of punchy power pop tunes all together. But hey, it's my album, and you can skip a tune or two, or even rearrange things on a playlist if you want.

NM: *So you don't have more songs in mind for a follow-up album?*

SS: I may record new material as it appears, but no, I don't have a dozen more smash hits waiting and I write only sporadically so don't wait for another album. Just enjoy this one!

NM: *Where did the album title "Where Do We Go?" come from?*

SS: I came up with a couple of dozen options and polled my friends. The winner was "Where Do We Go From Here?" and I trimmed it. My son Tim Schijns is a talented artist and graphic designer, so I prevailed on him to provide the cover art!

NM: *We'd like to go through the album track by track, so you can tell us a bit about each one.*

SS: Sure! I'd start off by saying that I'm proud of the songs and of the quality of the recordings. I wanted to have them stack up against anything else on the radio, and I have had a bit of play on community radio and internet playlists. Noted rock producer Genya Raven even picked three of them for her monthly review of best unsigned artists on Sirius XM 21, so that shows that the production quality is there. It's not just me in my bedroom with a guitar and a drum machine.

What? Why?: I was excited about this one, because it was the first time I worked with Andrew Smith who was known for his folk-jazz material and I was unsure whether he could create a great rock song. He came through with flying colours! I so love the way that my friend Patrick Gough's drumming propels the song along, and I did put a fair bit of thought into the lyrics. One of my favourites, and a great punchy start to the album. "What is life" indeed!

Continued...

...Where Do We Go With Stephen Schijns? (cont.)

MAP: I wrote this while on a corporate retreat to learn about “Managing AECOM Projects”, or “MAP”. So it’s about a quest to find someone, but in the structure of a project management problem. It’s a bit of a pun as well, with a map being used to guide the quest – and the video showing me buried in the hundreds of maps I’ve collected from my travels. The music rocks pretty well in the power pop vein. Fun!

1,000 Miles From Nowhere: Sort of a companion to “Sad Man”, “1,000 Miles” tells a similar story from a different perspective – what happened to drive someone away from their home and wander into a faraway place



to start a new life. The strumming and guitar/banjo/mandolin instrumentation almost turn it into an acoustic country-pop song, sort of like what Gordon Lightfoot used to do. The whistling was just me messing around in the sound booth.

Take Your Life And Run: A bit of inspirational power pop! This just rocks out from start to finish, with great guitar work by Andrew and a repetitive chorus that begs to be sung along to.

Friday Saturday Sunday O’Clock: This was a real 60s-inspired tune, starting with the doo-doo-doo backing vocals (provided by my wife and daughter, incidentally). It goes through a half-dozen ways to spend your weekend. I had the melody, then came up with the title from when people say “it’s beer o’clock” or stuff like that. The verses followed pretty quickly.

Round We Go: I had the bass riff in my head for a while, and envisioned a wild 1963–style dancefloor as the scene. The riff is sort of a variation on The Rolling Stones’ “I’m Alright”. The lyrics had to be simple and easy to yell along to, like “Twist and Shout”. I couldn’t help myself though, and got a bit more adventurous than that. Still it’s catchy as hell. And Craig Thomson’s improvised sax playing really adds a special element to the tune.

What Do I Know About Love?: Well, this doesn’t really fit in, but I had a jaunty ragtime piano sound in mind from the day I wrote it. And it’s only 1’ 45” so it flies by quickly. I thought the lyrics were pretty clever, and I like the middle eight.

Hard Edged World: I was a little uneasy with the slow pace and the idea of a heartfelt ballad, but it’s a protest song of sorts. I was getting pretty fed up with all the political correctness around Hallowe’en costumes, and thinking back to the more innocent and fun celebrations I had as a small town kid in the sixties. Then it occurred to me that pretty much every happy day has been commercialized to death – don’t get me started about Valentine’s Day and Grandparents Day and all the rest.

The Yukon Doesn’t Care: The provocative title garnered some attention, and this is another song that has generated a lot of reaction. When you listen to the

bass line, and like the classic structure of verse – chorus – middle eight – guitar solo – quiet verse – chorus. This is a Glenn Domina production, so it sounds a bit different from the Andrew Smith-produced material.

Say Goodbye To the Sad Man: I mostly write in a third-person observational manner – it’s “the sad man” rather than “I’m sad”. This one tells the story of a good man who never really fit in to his new town and has decided to move on, while everyone wonders what happened. Then I personalize the idea in the last verse. I’ve had a lot of listener response to “Sad Man”. Musically, I pushed Andrew to build the guitar layers verse by verse, and he did a fantastic job with that. My vocal style and beat doesn’t change at all over the four verses; the dynamics come entirely from the instrumental backing.

Fully Committed: That’s as close as I got to Ramones-style simplistic punk. I consciously wrote brief, catchy verses that could fit in a strong punk-style guitar structure. I’m a big fan of the guitar sound on this one, as is Andrew. I’d love for the “gonna play the game now” verse to become a sport stadium anthem!

I’m Coming Over Tonight: Well, this was sort of an experiment, basically taking a catchy, simple song to initiate me to the recording process. Just a fun party song, but I like the way my guitar solos build and extend each time.

I Met Her Yesterday: I wore my influences on my sleeve for this. The chiming guitar at the start and end is inspired by The Hollies’ “Look Through Any Window”, while some of the melody is close to a Flamin’ Groovies tune. We made it sound like it could be played on the radio in 1965, with a concise three-verse structure. I first wondered why it was so short, then realized that it doesn’t actually have a chorus!

You, Me, Love: Pretty much the only truly personal song in the group, I wrote this as a birthday present to my wife Susan a few years ago. It’s about the journey we have taken together over three-plus decades of partnership, but I think the theme is universal enough to apply to lots of other couples. She allowed me to make it public, and my friend Chris Taylor contributed the orchestration on top of Andrew’s usual fine guitar work.

Elegy: Phew! This was always going to be the last song on the album. It tries to sum up a whole life – the joy, the stress, the regrets, the accomplishments, and the missing pieces. Although not strictly autobiographical, they’ll play it at my funeral. Its length and six-part arrangement almost makes it prog-rock! The second part, where my younger self (or any new generation) barges in, guitars a-blasting, is powerful, and I love the atmospheric guitar coda that Andrew came up with to end the whole production.

NM: *Hey, thanks for the insights and background! I just want to congratulate you on an excellent collection of original songs, and hope that it finds a broad audience.*

SS: Well, this was mostly done for my own amusement, but now that “Where Do We Go” is out in the world I’d be happy for as many people as possible to get the chance to listen to the songs. Thanks!

lyrics you understand it is both a comment on man’s insignificance in the majesty of the wild north and a celebration of how inspiring wilderness travel can be. I actually wrote this while on a rafting trip in the Yukon, and Andrew brought some great production touches to the recording.

Trans-Pacific Beach Bum: The first thing I wanted to do with my first guitar was to play surf music! The song morphed from a folksy-type tune about dreaming on a Hawaiian beach. Recognizing that this might be the only surf song I ever get to record, I wanted to jam everything in – a surf instrumental, fun lyrics, oo-wah backing vocals, and a singalong melody. So I pushed for a real splashy Dick Dale / Ventures-style sound and Brian MacLennan delivered it. And since there are enough surf songs already with cliched beach / cars / girls lyrics, I made sure to have some fun with puns and in-jokes in my words.

Fooling Yourself: A gentle critique of someone who’s oblivious to what’s really going on. This one has a classic rock structure, with really strong guitar work and a nice rockin’ instrumental coda. There’s a bit of a new wave feel to it, and the piano-guitar interplay is great. I always liked the “morse code” type keyboard riff in songs like Grand Funk’s “We’re An American Band” so that’s in there a bit.

I Know A Man: An observational song about the various situations people find themselves in. I have about a dozen verses, but we picked four for the recording. I really wanted to drive the song with that Motown-style

