

**SEAN DALY** | Times Pop Music Critic

A few songs in the new Kermit flick fall short of Muppetational. But two cleverly catchy ones sent my daughters into a tiz: *Me Party* and *Man or Muppet*, written by Flight of the Conchords' Bret McKenzie.

**STEVE PERSALL** | Times Movie Critic

Best reader dig at my *Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn Part 1* review: "... about as helpful as a food critique from a PETA member eating in a steakhouse."



Steve Perry performs with Journey in New York. Perry says the fans made all the difference for him: "They lifted me to places I could not go without them."

Getty Images (1979)

Others may imitate it, but there's only one Steve Perry. And come what may, his fans won't stop believin'. the voice

BY STEVE SPEARS | Times Staff Writer

When Steve Perry last fronted the band Journey, Bill Clinton was president. Reality TV was confined to just a couple of obscure shows. And iTunes was still a whisper in the ears of Apple executives. • And yet 15 years later, while little else in the world seems remotely similar, Perry still occupies a prominent perch in pop culture. Through show choirs and high school bands, his music finds new generations of fans clamoring to hear his voice. Last month a 15-minute personal phone call from Perry was auctioned off for \$10,100 on eBay. And his songs are still sung on concert stages in front of sold-out crowds — long after he reluctantly handed over the microphone to lesser frontmen.

As a chronicler of '80s culture, I've had Perry at the top of my interview wish list for years. But he rarely talks to the media, preferring a secluded life in California. I caught a break a couple of weeks ago, because Perry had just remastered and released a new album of Journey's greatest hits and wanted to get the word out.

After I fumble through introductions on the phone, I start off by pointing out that his famous need for privacy makes him the Howard Hughes of rock 'n' roll.

Perry can't stop laughing. "I've been called a lot of things, but that's a first."

These days, Perry, 62, is primarily called the voice and co-writer of *Don't Stop Believin'*, a modest hit from Journey's 1981 *Escape* album that sprang to monster status when it was featured in the 2007 finale of TV's *The Sopranos* and in more recent episodes of Fox's *Glee*.

Look for it to climb the iTunes charts again next year when the big-screen version of the Broadway musical *Rock of Ages*, which features the song in its finale, reaches movie theaters.

"I'm so grateful that the song has just caught on and people love it so," Perry says. "I've had 7-year-old to 9-year-old kids come up to me and say how much they love that

song. At a baseball game, they want me to sign their glove or a ball."

Longevity was the last thing on the minds of band members when they recorded the tune, Perry says. The San Francisco band, founded by former Santana guitarist Neal Schon, was struggling in the late '70s — pleasing neither their record company nor rock critics. Hit singles were just a dream; they merely pined for soft beds and fresh towels.

"You really got to know we toured really hard. We never stopped. A day off wasn't a day off; it was a travel day. That's how you did it back then. It was like running for public office," Perry says. "We'd live on the bus and get a day room so that everyone could take a shower. And there wasn't enough towels to go around, so we'd have to use damp towels."

Only after *Escape* became a No. 1 album could Journey afford a room for each band member — "in a nice hotel!"

"Wow, that was touring," he recalls.

The work paid off. After years of modest success, *Who's Crying Now*, *Open Arms*, *Faithfully* and *Separate Ways (Worlds Apart)* became top 10 hits and ruled the airwaves and MTV in the early '80s, leading to six consecutive multiplatinum albums and U.S. sales estimated

at about 50 million. The band sold out stadiums on world tours. The wet towels were history.

A musical evolution

Last year, Perry returned to the studio to remaster more of the band's work from the early days. Tunes like *Stone in Love*, *Walks Like a Lady*, *Just the Same Way* and *Suzanne* — not chart-toppers, but still fan favorites — were hand-picked by Perry for a new compilation album, *Greatest Hits: Volume 2*, released earlier this month.

"When I heard these tracks come off vinyl again, I got emotional beyond my wildest expectations," he says. "I forgot how good they were! The stereo separation. The echoes. The snare drum sounds. Neal's guitar is stupidly amazing, and completely still to this day underrated in my opinion."

Tensions between Neal Schon and Perry have flared throughout the years, and these days the former bandmates only communicate through representatives. In 2001, VH1 aired a *Behind the Music* documentary on Journey, giving fans their first glimpse at the long-simmering feuds that fractured the group.

"They just touched on about 1 percent of it," Perry says of the show. "That's the truth of it. And they turned that into a meal."

Still, Perry — freshly refueled by his work on *Greatest Hits* — remains full of praise for his former partners.

"Neal and I have had our problems over the years. We probably don't like each other very much, because we had a lot of time together," Perry explains. "But I know we love each other, because when I listen to those tracks, I get all messed up about it. We don't have to work together. It's in the tracks. It's in the grooves. There was something magical about that band."

The collection features tunes from his entire career with Journey, beginning in 1978 and ending in 1996.

And yet, it's *Don't Stop Believin'* — which is on an earlier hits collection — that casts the largest shadow.

"We couldn't have said back then, 'Hey, gee whiz, in 2011, *Don't Stop Believin'* is going to be the one.' They all felt like they were in that category because we loved them all the same," Perry says. "But, you know, the world chooses what it chooses, and time does what it does."

A sudden departure

Time has marched on for Journey — and perhaps stood still for Perry.

In 1984, Perry — still part of the Journey lineup — released a solo album, *Street Talk*. (That album too has just been remastered and re-released, including a vinyl version). It proved to be a huge success, and it opened the door to a future independent of Journey.

It also included his signature solo

tune, *Oh Sherrie*, a love song written for girlfriend Sherrie Swafford, who also appeared in the music video. I ask Perry how it felt to hear that song again, long after the two called it quits. A long pause follows.

"Sherrie and I were crazy in love, I can tell you that. And it was a very tough time, because the band was peaking," he says. "And if any woman out there thinks that it would be real exciting to be the girlfriend of somebody in a band like that and that it would be all peaches and cream, the truth is that it's hard to navigate a relationship when you're in the midst of such a ride."

His escape

Perry hasn't released new material since 1996. The group parted ways with the singer officially in 1998, after Perry hurt his hip hiking in Hawaii, eventually requiring hip-replacement surgery. The band has since used a handful of different singers, all of whom ably mimic Perry's distinctive voice that stretches to reach and sustain impossibly high notes.

Perry has spent his time producing a Journey concert DVD, remastering albums and attending World Series games when his beloved San Francisco Giants won the title.

I ask if maybe he's a bit intimidated making new music that would invariably be compared with his previous work.

"Is it intimidating at some level to not want to disappoint people? Of course it is," Perry says. "I had to give myself the right to suck and write some music that maybe isn't so great. I don't think it's so great. I play it for friends; they love it. But then there are other ones I know are better."

I stop Perry here. I need to tell him something: "You don't understand how much your fans adore you and want you to be happy." Suddenly, I'm a therapist — to Steve Perry. "If you knew that, I think you'd take the pressure off your fear of sucking."

I brace for backlash. If he hangs up, maybe I deserve it.

"You know, Steve, God I wish that was true," Perry says instead. "I wish I could embrace that as true. I'm slowly starting to see that that's possible. But if I could tell my fans anything right now, it would be that I want them to know I am happy. I was happy being in front of them every night. They lifted me to places I could not go without them. My voice was actually their voice, because I had to go get it because they wanted to hear it."

"I can't get that without them. I've tried to sing like that in my living room with my Pro Tools rig," he says.

His words flow, but more slowly than before, more deliberate.

"They don't even know how much of a part of my life they were. They think I was a part of theirs? But they'll never know 50-50 it really was. They need to know that. Without them, I was not who I am. That needs to be said. They literally made me happen."

I sense he feels the sun is shining again. Therapy time is over. Perry has found a voice again.

"I just want them to know that for the years that I have not been around, it was a difficult comedown in the beginning. It was like coming off the earth's orbit and coming back through the atmosphere and burning some heat tiles off your face on the way in. . . . And now I'm okay. I love my life. And I'm so pleased that everyone still loves the music."

Steve Spears is the host of the *Stuck in the '80s* blog and podcast at tampabay.com/blogs/80s. E-mail him at stuckinthe80s@tampabay.com

ON THE WEB

Listen to the interview

You can download and listen to Steve Spears' interview with Steve Perry, along with samples of Journey's hit songs, at tampabay.com/blogs/80s.



Associated Press (1987)

The 1987 Journey lineup: from left, Steve Perry, Jonathan Cain and Neal Schon. Schon, a former Santana guitarist, founded the group.