

THE ADVOCATE

Striving for a song: Steve Conn -- an LSU grad -- keeps searching for the sound in his head

• BY JOHN WIRT | Special to The Advocate • MAR 20, 2019 - 7:45 PM

Steve Conn could be Louisiana's Jackson Browne or Bruce Hornsby. A Pineville native and LSU graduate based in Nashville, Conn is a keyboard-playing singer-songwriter whose songs mirror the depth and poignancy heard in Browne's and Hornsby's work.

Reinforcing the point, Conn released his fifth album, "Flesh and Bone," in February.

"When I started this album, I thought it was going to be the best record I've ever done," Conn said from Nashville ahead of his return Saturday to the Red Dragon Listening Room in Baton Rouge. "About half-way through it, I thought it was going to kill me. When I finished, I thought it wasn't very good. I didn't listen to it for months. But now I'm about three-quarters of the way back to thinking it's one of the best things I've done."

Inspired by his hillbilly jazz violinist father, Conn began performing in central Louisiana at the age of 13. Before his father's service in World War II, Conn said, he "was getting written up in the big music magazines at the time. Melody Maker called him one of the best swing violinists in the South."

Although Conn loved music from his early childhood, the classical piano lessons he took during his elementary school years were torturous.

“Man, I was miserable,” he said. “I wanted to play ‘House of the Rising Sun’ and ‘St. James Infirmary’ and stuff like that.”

Playing music became much more fun when Conn joined his first band, the Luv Machine.

“It was the British invasion time,” he said. “We played ‘As Tears Go By’ by the Rolling Stones, Paul Revere and the Raiders songs, ‘Sweet Soul Music’ by Arthur Conley and a lot of soul stuff.”

Already captivated by music in childhood, Conn’s interest grew even more with the late 1960s debuts of Blood, Sweat & Tears, Chicago and Led Zeppelin. Later, he loved the music theory classes he took at LSU. Almost immediately after his college graduation, he was playing keyboards six nights a week in Alexandria.

In 1981, Conn co-founded Gris Gris, a popular band in Boulder, Colorado, that specialized in Louisiana music. After moving to Los Angeles in 1986, he worked with Scottish pop star Sheena Easton and actor Dennis Quaid’s band.

Conn’s keyboard playing can be heard on 10 Grammy-nominated recordings. In the studio and on stage, his dozens of sideman gigs include playing with Jake Shimabukuro, **Bonnie Raitt**, Albert King, Kris Kristofferson, the Dixie Chicks and Levon Helm. He's also appeared on Sonny Landreth's Grammy-nominated 2017 album, **“Recorded Live in Lafayette.”**

Despite the many recording sessions Conn played after he moved to Nashville in 1993, session work wasn't his primary reason for going to Music City.

"This is a songwriter place," he said. "I figured there was room for me. This is where I started to learn how to write really good songs."

Conn's made-in-Nashville new album pairs him with veteran Music City session players who've worked with Buddy Guy, Luke Combs, John Prine, Prince and Miranda Lambert.

His Louisiana music roots flavor "Flesh and Bone," especially the zydeco-powered "Around and Around" and the Professor Longhair-touched "Famous." Landreth, Conn's longtime friend, contributes his unmistakable slide guitar to both songs.

"I'll be famous when I'm dead," Conn sings dryly in "Famous." "Someone will write a book about this visionary man, how I can take a simple truth and make it hard to understand."

The ballads on the album are especially important to Conn. One of them, "Forever Seventeen," recalls a high school love through the bittersweet lens of multiple decades. In another ballad, "Without a Trace," Conn tells the story of a suicide with a poet's grace.

"'Without a Trace' is the song that comes closest to what I heard in my head," he said. "But every song means different things to different people."