



By Larry Dobrow

Growing up in suburban Jer-Z in the '80s, you were either with Journey or against them. Either you embraced the pseudo-philosophical sap of "Wheel in the Sky" and RAWKED along with its plaintive yowls, or you dismissed it and its corporate-rock trappings. It was that simple. You had to choose a side.

Okay, that's overstating it a bit. Maybe you'd have copped, at knifepoint or after a few beers, to having enjoyed a few of their radio hits ("Stone in Love" or "Lovin', Touchin', Squeezin'). Or maybe, if you were more than passingly familiar with the electric guitar, you would have admitted to appreciating the chunky, better-than-the-material-they-accompany-riffs of Neal Schon, even as you questioned his judgment for having hired Minnie Mouse as a lead singer. This makes Schon - all together now - underrated. Wheeee!

Let me make this as clear as I can: Journey doesn't float my aural boat. While I prefer the band's artistry (cough! cough!) to that of Loverboy or the Little River Band, I have no room - even on a 40 GB iPod - for more than a handful of their radio smasheroos. Also, the whole outer-space-insect-overlords-motifs on their album covers freak me out, man.

My problem with the band? I always got the impression, fair or not, that they crafted songs for no other reason than to snare airplay; with Schon's exception, the band members never seemed to derive much joy from performing. Yes, I realize that music is about sharing and making people happy and blah blah blah, and that every record not named Metal Machine Music was/is created for consumption by as many other human beings as possible. But heavens to Betsy, Journey was shameless about their quest for chart prominence.



Schon soared above the band's pat melodies and easy-to-parse lyrics. With its sing-song

chorus and tired love-done-gone-bad words, "Who's Crying Now" likely prompted early-'80s radio buffs to secure a nail gun and use it on anyone with the bad fortune to cross their path. But the end-of-song solo, in which Schon takes a single descending melody line and builds off it, awakens new possibilities for the standard pop/rock outro.

Pretty much anywhere you look in the Journey canon (actually, "canon" isn't the right word - Pachelbel has a canon, Journey has a dungheap o' songs), Schon performs similar mini-resuscitations. I'll enjoy "Don't Stop Believin'" until the cows come home, even if I'm not precisely sure what "streetlight people" are, thanks to Schon's early flourish and to-the-point, four-bar solo later in the song. "Lights" presents him as a warm-toned bluesman; "Stone in Love" finds him sonically audacious within the context of a four-minute radio song. And I don't want to say that "Mother Father" rocks, but it comes much closer than a song featuring Steve Perry has any right to.

As for the band's learner and lighter later material, I'd mostly tuned out by then. Still, "After the Fall" finds Schon sneaking in a metallic grunt here and a Van Halen-ish flurry there. Again: handed Neal musical lemons, Schon found a way to make bitchin', shriekin' lemonade that totally got the chicks to doff their tops, and the guitar fanboys to nod approvingly if not enthusiastically.

My first rock concert was Journey, with the Greg Kihn Band opening, at the Brendan Byrne/Meadowlands/Continental JetBlue Southwest Airlines Arena in May of 1982 or thereabouts. I don't remember a whole lot about it, other than Schon's fluid, precise runs (also, at some point, my father conspiratorially whispered to me, "Can you smell that? That's MARIJUANA"). Schon's playing, even in the sterile arena setting, left an impression; the next day at school, I had something to share beyond, "Hells fuckin' yeah, they played 'Still They Ride,' dude." And for that, I hope Neal Schon someday gets his due as a versatile and - yes - eminently cool guitarist.