

ONE STRANGE JOURNEY



Steve Perry performing live with Journey, 10 October 1981, Nassau Coliseum, Uniondale, Long Island

His was the voice of AOR, a soaring majestic thing that always offered escape, fittingly the name of Journey's best-known album. **Steve Perry** was the most famous rock vocalist in America. Then he simply went away. Long-time fan *Jon Hotten* examines his extraordinary life and wonders where this most singular singer will go next, if he goes anywhere at all...

10 JUNE 2007. THESE are the final moments of the final episode of the final series of what is, by common consensus, the greatest TV show ever made. Tony Soprano sits in a booth in Holsten's diner waiting for his family to join him. His fat fingers flick through the table jukebox until he finds a song he likes. He pushes a coin into the slot. The music begins. It's a song everyone knows. As the piano chords play, his wife Carmela, then his son AJ and finally his daughter Meadow arrive. The song reaches its climax. "DON'T STOP..."

But everything does. The screen cuts to black. *The Sopranos* is over.

TONY SOPRANO'S lights went out in an instant. The man whose voice accompanied him into history, however, didn't so much burn out as fade away. He slipped from the public arena so gradually and quietly no-one really saw him go. Steve Perry walked off a stage for the last time in 1995, and

did not appear to sing live again until 2014. During those years he recorded nothing (or at least he made nothing he recorded public) and gave only a handful of interviews. It may not have been as high-profile an exile as that of W. Axl Rose or Brian Wilson. He hadn't gone full Phil Spector. Perry's was a more gentle absence, remarked on only by Journey fans who witnessed the band attack the nostalgia circuit with a couple of replacement singers, the latest of whom sounded spookily like Steve Perry.

Then something unexpected happened. The songs he made famous took on a second life, first with *The Sopranos*, then with another television show, *Glee*, and at last people began to wonder where Steve Perry had gone.

AT THE end of 2010, my old editor at *Kerrang!*, Geoff Barton, asked if I wanted to write a piece about the making of 'Escape', the album that turned Journey into the biggest rock band



Larking around in New York before the lawyers got involved, June 1979

in America. Neal Schon and Jonathan Cain were happy to talk. What were the chances of finding Steve Perry? I looked around. Although it seemed otherwise, he hadn't vanished completely. In 2003 he'd sung on a track by jazz musician Jeff Golub, apparently after a chance encounter at a recording studio. In 2005, Perry produced a song for former Ambrosia musician and producer David Pack's solo album and went to Hollywood to see Journey's star put on the Walk of Fame. The same year, the Chicago Cubs baseball team adopted 'Don't Stop Believin'' as their team song and invited Perry to join them on the road during their World Series win. In 2008, he'd given an interview to *Rolling Stone* in which he talked about his reasons for leaving Journey.

Finding him was straightforward, if not easy. There was no manager, record company or PR agent. Instead, there was a fan club email address that led eventually to a Los Angeles lawyer, L. Lee Phillips, a prominent music business attorney with a client list that included Barbra Streisand, Don Henley, Brian Wilson and Perry. I sent him an email and waited. A few days later, an email from his assistant came back. Mr Phillips had passed the request to Mr Perry. Soon after that, he emailed again. I was to

call a number, and the person on the other end would connect me to him.

I dialled with some trepidation. Not for any particular reason. But because, well, this was Steve Perry... His reclusiveness meant speaking to him had a buzz that didn't accompany the usual rock star phoner. I needn't have worried. We talked for two hours. Reliving 'Escape' seemed to be a pleasure for him. Once he realised I was a fan of the band, he pushed deep into his memories, describing scenes from his childhood in California, when he'd ride his bike into the hills and imagine what it would be like to one day be the singer in a rock'n'roll group. He talked about Alien Project, his first proper band, and how they'd been within touching distance of a record deal when his friend Richard, the band's bass player, died in a car accident; about how his mother rang and urged him not to give up, and how manager Herbie Herbert had called him soon afterwards to talk about Journey. To him, it still had a dreamlike quality.

PERRY JOINED Journey (keyboardist and vocalist Gregg Rolie, guitarist Neal Schon, bassist Ross Valory and drummer Aynsley Dunbar) at the point when Herbert

was pushing the band to make the change from wiggly, musicianly jazz rockers into something more commercial. The reality was that their record label Columbia was going to drop them if they didn't. He recalled the almost instant joy of writing with Jonathan Cain when Cain joined for 'Escape' in 1981, the two of them in a room with a piano conjuring up 'Open Arms' and 'Don't Stop Believin''. He talked about his parents, Ray and Mary, and how they'd run a small radio station called KNGS in Hanford, California. Perry was a sound freak, obsessing over small details in the studio and deeply invested in everything from the quality of the mastering to the type of vinyl his records were pressed on.

Soon, he was pulling memories from everywhere, talking about Sherrie, the girl who'd inspired his great solo hit of the same name; about how alienated he'd felt when the band were playing stadiums, gradually becoming more and more "toasted" and worried about

the state of his voice. By the end of the touring cycle for 'Raised On Radio', the 1986 record that represented their creative highpoint for me and many other fans, Perry reached the end of his tether, "in February, in Alaska, and I just said, 'stop...'"

In 1994, he'd made an amazing solo album called 'For The Love Of Strange Medicine', a collect on that sounded as burnished and melodic as anything he'd ever done with Journey and that proved his voice was untouched by the years of toil. But it came out when the most popular bands in America were playing grunge, and although he toured, he realised that, "despite myself I was missing more and more being the singer in Journey."

Perry rejoined Cain and Schon, who'd filled their time as part of Bad English, and they made 'Trial By Fire', a good but not great record that sold a million copies and reached number three on the *Billboard* chart. They planned a tour, but Perry had gone hiking in the

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