

Michael Johnson Biography

Red House Records continues to score coups in signing some of the best in the business. It includes a classically trained guitarist, an off-Broadway actor and an ex-member of the Chad Mitchell Trio. The artist credits encompass two #1 Country hits, a #1 Pop hit and a #1 R&B song. Actually, all of the above describes just one musician, Michael Johnson.

A series of strange occurrences led Johnson, a native of Denver, into music. At thirteen, he contracted a severe case of pneumonia. Concurrently, his twenty-year-old brother, Paul, was in an auto accident and suffered a badly broken leg. Faced with two invalids, the Johnson family moved hospital beds into the living room, placing the brothers side by side to recuperate. Desperate to keep them entertained, their father bought them a guitar. It proved to be a stroke of genius. The boys taught themselves together: exploring unique chord changes and progressions, experimenting with different fingerpicking and tunings, sharing everything they had learned and challenging the other to surpass the latest achievement. By the end of the year, the Johnson boys had their first gig at the local VFW hall. "They paid us \$5 and all the screwdrivers we could drink," Johnson recalls. With that inauspicious beginning, Johnson had found his calling. Lessons learned early would not be forgotten: Keep trying new things and do not be bound by convention; Strive for excellence and let the music be your guide.

In 1963, Johnson went off to Colorado State University to study music but his college career was truncated when he won an international talent contest two years later. First prize included a deal with Epic Records. Epic put out "Hills," written and sung by Johnson, as a single. It barely made a ripple in the music world. Twenty-three copies were sold (13 of which Johnson can still locate) and they sent him an 11 cent royalty check, which he framed, earning him the ire of their bookkeeping department. Another part of the prize was a two week stint in a Chicago pub, although Epic didn't bother to mention he wouldn't be paid. However, that two weeks stretched into twenty-two and the last twenty were paid. Johnson began extensive touring of clubs and colleges, finding a receptive audience everywhere he went.

Wishing to hone his instrumental skills, 1966 found him in Barcelona, Spain at Liceo Conservatory studying with the eminent classical guitarist, Graciano Tarrago. Upon his return to the States, he joined Randy Sparks in a group called the New Society and did a tour of the Orient. When the band dissolved in 1967, he signed on with the Chad Mitchell Trio for a year, spending some of that time co-writing with another member, John Denver.

When the Chad Mitchell Trio came to an end, Johnson made a radical departure from everything he had done previously by taking on a major supporting role in the off-Broadway production of "Jacques Brel is Alive And Well And Living In Paris." The show visited New York, Los Angeles and Chicago over the next year and by then Johnson was ready to return to creating and performing his music. In 1971, he signed with Atlantic Records to release his first album, **There Is A Breeze**, produced by Peter Yarrow and Phil Ramone in New York.

Feeling this first effort wasn't a true reflection of his music, Johnson self-produced his next LP in 1975, **For All You Mad Musicians**, relying solely on his voice and guitar for a jazzy, folk feel. He followed this up with **Ain't Dis Da Life**, where he added a rhythm section. With each new recording and his continued touring, his popularity was increasing. It was time to make a move on the national market.

Teaming up with Brent Maher and Steve Gibson in Nashville, Johnson created a two-song demo consisting of "Bluer Than Blue" and "Almost Like Being In Love" from the Broadway musical Brigadoon. EMI America took one listen and wasted no time in signing him, quickly getting **The Michael Johnson Album** out in 1978. The first single, "Bluer Than Blue" went straight to Number 1 on the Pop and Adult Contemporary charts, leading to its being nominated for a Grammy. "Almost Like Being in Love" went to Number 1 with R&B while hitting the Top 5 in Pop and AC. His next EMI album, **Dialogue**, provided his third big hit, "This Night Won't Last Forever" and a Gold Record for European sales of "I'll Always Love You."

EMI America put out three more albums with Johnson: **You Can Call Me Blue** (1980), **Home Free** (1981) and **Lifetime Guarantee** (1983) in addition to re-releasing his first three recordings in 1981 and 1982. Then, in 1985, a duet with Sylvia, "I Love You By Heart," on RCA became a Top 10 Country hit and led to a recording deal with them. With his first RCA album, **Wings** (1986), Johnson conquered the Country charts. "Gotta Learn To Love Without You" moved into the Top 10. "Give Me Wings" rocketed up to Number 1 and was the Billboard Country Song of the Year, earning a Country Music Association nomination for Song of the Year. "The Moon Is Still Over Her Shoulder" also went Number 1 and was the Billboard #4 Song of the year.

His 1988 RCA release **That's That** produced three more hit singles, including the title cut, "I Will Whisper Your Name" and "Crying Shame." Johnson also moved into recording songs for movies and television specials. By now, Johnson had circled the world with this music, performing in Spain, Japan, Holland, Switzerland and the Philippines. He has appeared on both the CMA Awards and the ACM Awards, along with pretty much every show the Nashville Network offers, including Nashville Now, Music City Tonight and Austin City Limits. In 1993, Johnson went on the road with Wynonna and Clint Black, opening the show as a solo in 91 cities.

Always most at home on stage with just an acoustic guitar, Michael continued to tour mostly as a solo performer. In Dec. 2011 at the Dakota Jazz Club in Minneapolis, he met up with singer-songwriter **John Gorka**. Michael talked about wanting to return to his acoustic roots. John mentioned it to his manager/agent David Tamulevich of Tamulevich Artist Management, who was a long time fan of Michael's, who jumped at the opportunity to work with Michael. John also connected Michael with St. Paul-based label **Red House Records**. Very familiar with Michael's work, Red House president Eric Peltoniemi was delighted to meet Michael and hear his new material. "I was just stunned at how great his new songs were," he says. "It thrilled me to hear a true artist still at the top of his game." Michael signed with Red House and got to work recording his new songs at Minneapolis' Wild Sound Recording Studio.

The result was the recording " Moonlight Deja Vu" in 2012, which was extremely well received by an audience that had been waiting for a number of years for a new recording by Michael. A new CD is in the works, scheduled for a Fall 2014 release.