

**The following interview with
STEVE PERRY
was conducted by the Library of Congress
on April 13, 2022**



This interview was conducted by Neely Tucker of the Library of Congress

Neely Tucker: Let me say first, on behalf of the Library, welcome to the National Recording Registry. There are millions of recordings but I think there are only seven or eight hundred that are on the Registry. So you are in very, very rarefied air.

Steve Perry: Yeah, I was stunned when I got the request to do this. In my wildest dreams coming from the small town of Hanford, California, a little farm community, southwest of Fresno about 32 miles, growing up there, I had no idea that I would have the opportunity, number one, to get into the music business, which was my dream, and number two, to be interred in the Library of Congress.

NT: You started singing pretty early though, did you not?

SP: I did. Three years old, I started singing around the house. My mother said I used to hit a high C that used to go through her head. I had this falsetto, which I still have. And I started singing after watching my father sing in a production at the Hanford Civic Auditorium, and I sat there at the age of five years old with my sandals and my white socks and my outfit looking up at him. And I said to myself, “I can do that.” And so, I started singing very early on, around the house, and with my record player, of course.

NT: Your first language at home, was it English or Portuguese?

SP: That's a really good question. My first language was English, as I was coming into kindergarten in Hanford, California. But my grandmother looked at me one day and said, with her finger pointing at me like this, she said, “*Você vai aprender a falar português,*” which is “You're going to learn to speak Portuguese.” So, she taught me and I can get by; if I go to Portugal, I can get by.

NT: Were you, like the rest of us, as a little kid, singing along with the radio?

SP: Constantly, I would sing around the house. My favorite place was, of course, the shower, like everybody else because it had a nice echo to it. And to this day, I'm a bit of an echo pig, I love echo. I think it relaxes me. But I must tell you, now that you ask me that question, when I was really small, I'd used to use a vacuum cleaner hose, and I was able to sing in one end and put the other on my ear. And I like the way that sounded. So, that's what I would do in the very beginning to hear my own voice come back at me, which I guess became some pre-headphone recording training that I didn't know was coming.

NT: I know you've told your story many times before, but it's not everybody who winds up singing with a great big rock and roll band like Journey. How did that happen?

SP: That's not an easy chronology of events to explain, but I'm going to try to condense it... I had a high school friend named Larry Luciano, we kind of grew up together. My parents knew his parents.... When I moved to San Francisco during the 60s, he became connected to Santana and groups like that in the Bay Area. And also knew a gentleman by the name of Herbie Herbert who was managing and running a PA company, a very state-of-the-art PA Company for tour sound called Primo Sound. He called me up there one time to see a group play called Aztec. I went up there, that was the first time I met Neil Schon because he was jamming with Aztec. Also, that was the first time I met Herbie Herbert.

Years go by, and I tried many times to make demos and send them to record labels in Los Angeles, over and over again. Later, I was with a band called the Alien Project. We were about to get signed to Columbia Records. And the weekend before the bass player got killed in a car wreck on the 101. I called my mother and I said, "Mom, you know, I don't think I'm supposed to do this. Every time I get this close, this happens. This close, this happens. I'm coming home."

So I'm about 31, 32 years old at that point, and my mother--God bless her--says, "No, no don't. I'm sorry about your bass player, that's terrible. Just stay in there, hang in there. Something will happen."

And I had already given my notice at this little tiny hole in the wall I was living in. About a week later, I got a call from a gentleman who was running Columbia Records named Don Ellis. And Don Ellis says, "I'm sorry to hear about your bass player. We loved your band. But I'm curious, forgive me for being so quick about this, but we have a band named Journey on the label, are you interested in meeting with them? Because we think you'd be a great fit for that band, and they want to make a musical change."

NT: For the song "Don't Stop Believin'": Tell me a little bit about how you guys wrote that song and how it gelled together.

SL: Herbie Herbert had acquired for us a warehouse in East Bay, San Francisco, in the Oakland area. That's where we rehearsed all the time. And I came in one day and I have always liked quarters on the piano, "bum bum bum." I like one by Harry Nilsson. I like "Penny Lane." There are a lot of songs that have quarters on the piano. So I asked John Cain and said, "We got to write something that has quarters on the piano." And so he started doing some changes. I picked up the bass and sketched the bottom and changed it occasionally. And I just start messing with that.

The song started to take a life of its own and Neil came in and Steve Smith came in with some great drum rhythms. And then Ross showed up, and I handed the bass to him. So, the song became something that was born in that Oakland warehouse, our rehearsal warehouse, and it

continued to grow. And it literally, became a Neal Schon, Steve Perry, John Cain song because those are the three writers that contributed the most to writing the melodies that changed the hook lines, the lyrics.

Every other song we recorded at that time in the studios in Berkeley had something special. But at the same time, I must say, every one of the songs we ever recorded was treated like they were special. But that song over the years has become something that has a life of its own. And it's about the people who have embraced it and found the lyrics to be something that they can relate to and hold onto and sing.

NT: When you all were putting the song together, did it come together in more or less one day? Or was this something that was pieced together over a couple of weeks?

SP: All the songs come together in segments. You rehearse them. You play them. You drive them like a test car. So, the songs usually, when I was in Journey, would come together at the Oakland rehearsal location. [From there] you could turn them up and see what's working and see what's not working with the arrangements with the size of it, everything. So that's how it starts and then, it goes to going into the studio and cutting the basic tracks.

Then you agonize for a while. Back in those days, there was no Pro Tools. Like my studio here, [I have] Pro Tools, where you have so much extra ways of doing things. But, back then, you just rolled the tape and you have recorded many different times to get a basic track. And [then] you start overdubbing guitars, background vocals, and lead vocals until it becomes something unto its own. But it becomes like a layered process as you go, making musical decisions, very big musical decisions along the way.

I remember singing the harmonies in the outro and the big high notes. I had to keep punching those until I was satisfied with them. Because they were so emotional, I had to try my best. I didn't know if I could reach for that yet, but I was certainly not going to give up until I reached it for that night, I just kept going. Eventually, I got what I wanted. Those are what I call payoff notes.

NT: Was the song difficult for you to sing? For most people, it's just impossible what your voice does there.

SP: That's a great question about the lyrics and singing. I don't think people realize that the vowel sounds that are comfortable with a singer are very important. If someone else writes a song for me, or anyone, they're going to pick vowel sounds that make sense lyrically but they may not make sense vocally as it pertains to the requirement of the melody.

You don't want to sing e-vowels on real high notes or something.... You don't want to sit there and use e-vowels in those moments because they sound tight. They don't soar.

So, in my case, for writing the lyrics, I was focused on John Cain and being sure that the melody requirements I was going to have to sing when those lyrics were being said, or something that I could dig into and help soar if necessary. That's something that's helpful if you're writing your own music because you can choose the vowels, but it does sort of limit you lyrically to a lot of things you might be able to say because you want to be able to sing them the way they are required to sing....

So that's been something I've always sort of stayed within my own writing for, because of the character of my voice I kind of know what I can sing, and I kind of know what I want to sing, and I know what I don't want to sing, vowel-wise.

NT: The song, famously, mentions Detroit, was there any particular Detroit connection for you in writing the lyrics?

SP: Yes. So... at this point, we had just finished a show at Cobo Arena, which is an old little beautiful arena that sounded so great. I've heard they've torn it down. It was one of my favorite places to play in Detroit. It was intimate and it was echo-y, and it was bright-sounding and the Detroit fans were rabid for rock and roll and we were rabid to give it to him.

And so, we had done a great show that night and there was a hotel we stayed at right across some square near there. And I was up on the top floor that night and wasn't tired. Just sitting there, just kind of trying to come down so I could go to sleep. And I just started staring out the window, looking down and the street lights of Detroit at that time were kind of this orange color. They weren't white streetlights like I had grown up with, they had this very cool sort of Amber color to them. And the amber was washing down.... But I'm seeing just the street, being lit by these amber lights and it's like three in the morning and these people are still milling around. So I thought, wow, "Street-light people." Look at these Streetlight People! They're just out in the night under the street lights, and they're still running around.

And then, I start thinking about that, when it came time to write the lyrics I told John Cain about this moment, and I wanted "*Streetlight People, Living just to find emotion.*" And then, we came up with "*Hiding somewhere in the night.*" That's where that came from. It came from downtown Detroit. It really did.

NT: You mentioned the afterlife of the song and I don't even know if "afterlife" is the right word. It's one of those songs that sort of never went away. Is that how it seems to you?

SP: I'll tell you what I think about that song, being still around: I think it does the same thing for all people, including at weddings and nightclubs--they all jumped in at that moment and it becomes the biggest camaraderie moment across all people which is a dream come true for me. That's what music can do. It has the power for all people.... I'm getting goosebumps up my neck. Nothing can make me more proud of Neal Schon, Jonathan Cain, and myself, Steve Smith on drums, Ross Valory on bass. And for Herbie Herbert, who was the one who believed in this whole incarnation. And the mastering engineer Bob Ludwig and Adam Ayan. I mean these people have contributed to the sound of it. It's a painting in a gallery now.

And I'm so grateful that it's still embraced because it does the same thing for so many people that so much music does for me. When I hear Sam Cooke, I'm good. I don't care what's going on. I'm going to be okay. We all have stuff going on. But music, it's one of the greatest gifts to humanity, I think because it can teleport us to somewhere really special.

NT: I really do appreciate your time in taking a few minutes out to talk to us. It's been a real pleasure. And it's just nice to talk to you after hearing your voice on the radio for so many years.

SP: Well, thank you so much. And I just want to say this is the greatest honor of my life. I've gotten platinum albums and gold albums, and I've been inducted into the [Rock and Roll] Hall of Fame. But from my mother, my father, and my grandmother and grandfather, I truly am beside myself and grateful that this is happening. Because through me, I know they are seeing this happen.