

Pop Talk: Poltz likes being sober and in charge of his own destiny

by *George_Varga*

Steve Poltz has discovered that sitting on top of the world - or at least feeling like you are - can sometimes be a simple matter of achieving a clear-eyed perspective ... literally.

STEVE POLTZ - A clear-eyed Steve Poltz tackles his music with new vigor and dedication. CNS Photo courtesy of Conquero. Headbangin' with Steve Poltz

A sensitive troubadour and punk-rock upstart rolled into one, Steve Poltz has long been known for his lively performances. But his solo gigs now tend to be less raucous, and painful, than they were in the 1990s with his band, The Rugburns.

Here's a look at some of his most memorable escapades:

INCIDENT NO. 1: Memorial Day Weekend, 1994

Location: The Casbah, San Diego

Ouch! factor: Poltz crowd-surfed while wearing a white prom gown. When a fan grabbed him "where the sun don't shine," the shocked singer fell on his head. Dazed, he ran into a mirror, cutting his head open above his right eye and concussing himself.

Poltz: "I tried going more in the direction of Kenny G, playing the sax, and I felt better about myself."

INCIDENT NO. 2: July 7, 1994

Location: Molly Malone's, Los Angeles

Ouch! factor: Shortly before the three-man Rugburns concluded a riotous gig, Poltz dashed off to don the

same white gown he'd worn at the Casbah. Bounding back on stage, he ran into a wooden beam. Rushed to a hospital, he was treated for another concussion and bruised ribs. He received 48 stitches near his blood-soaked hairline.

Poltz: "What I've learned from all this is that the white gown is cursed. I may wear it again, but only with a hard hat."

INCIDENT NO. 3: Aug. 16, 1995

Location: Ocean Mist, Providence, R.I.

Ouch! factor: The Rugburns discover their Rhode Island "concert" is being billed as Chicken Wing Night - and a band. Angered when the club ran out of chicken wings, the 25 patrons throw discarded food remains at the stage.

Poltz: "I also got pelted with stuff when we opened for The Ramones in Cleveland; the first thing that came flying at me was an orange. I blocked it with my Taylor acoustic guitar. Every time I got to Taylor's factory (in El Cajon, Calif.) to get my guitars repaired, they gather around to see what happened."

"It's been three years now since I stopped drinking, and it makes traveling so much easier," the world-hopping troubadour said recently from Sydney, the last stop on his Australian tour.

"Creatively, I'm more available for when the songs arrive and I need to write them; I can work harder. And I think (being sober) has made me a more focused and maybe more genteel person."

Make that a much more genteel person.

"I don't feel like my life is in danger now, like I used to think when I'd go out on a drinking binge with friends," the Canadian-born singer-songwriter said. "I don't have that worry anymore."

Poltz has learned some valuable lessons.

One of the most important is that genuine satisfaction and fulfillment come not from the glitz and glitter of rock 'n' roll stardom, or near-stardom, but from devoting yourself to a job you truly love. Perhaps the best way to illustrate how he came to this realization is to compare his homespun career as it is today with how he was faring at the end of the last decade, so join us now in his musical time machine.

It was the late spring of 1999, and Poltz had good reason to feel smug as he awaited the start of a sold-out concert in London by Bruce Springsteen & The E Street Band. Having recently completed a tour as the opening act with his former protege, Jewel (in whose band he also performed at the time as a singer and guitarist), Poltz found himself seated in London next to one of his longtime heroes, Elvis Costello.

Costello, it transpired, liked Jewel, whose first Top 10 hit (1996's "You Were Meant for Me," from her 11-million selling debut album) was co-written by Poltz. To add to Poltz's excitement, he and Costello both had songs featured on the just-released film soundtrack album to "Notting Hill," the hit romantic comedy starring Julia Roberts and Hugh Grant. So, his conversation with Costello was as a peer, not just a fan, and both of them heartily sang along during many of the vintage selections in Springsteen's concert.

It was a heady time for Poltz and, in some ways, a simpler time as well.

"Back then, I didn't even have an e-mail address!" he recalled with a laugh.

Flash forward to 2008.

Poltz, now in his mid-40s, has an e-mail address and a thriving Web site (www.stevepoltz.com) he updates on a regular basis. He no longer has a contract with Mercury Records, which - in the wake of his success with Jewel - had signed him in 1998 as both a solo artist and the leader of the Rugburns, his raucous folk-punk trio.

In fact, Poltz has no record deal at all, preferring to release his music on his own label, 98 Pounder Records. And where he once flew to some concert dates with Jewel on a private jet, he has now happily returned to driving himself to gigs a cheaply rented car or van.

"I like being in control of my own destiny and seeing the hard work pay off," said Poltz.

"It's sort of magic to me the way these songs come out. Then, I go and play in a club and some guy hands me money for something I'd do for free. Plus, I meet the most interesting people. And now that I have a way to put my CDs out, I can put something out every year. I have a backlog of songs I want to release."

As if to prove his point, Poltz actually has two new albums out, each with 11 songs and each with a similar cover of him in the ocean, his trusty acoustic guitar in hand.

The first is "Traveling." The second, "Unraveling," was recorded at the same time as "Traveling" and at the same studio in Austin, Texas. It features many of the same musicians and has a similarly autobiographical tone, but there's a catch.

"'Unraveling' will be available only at my shows," Poltz explained. "It fits the package, the idea of traveling, but it's like the quirker cousin. I wanted to do something different to keep people coming to my shows."

Whether heard together or separately, "Traveling" and "Unraveling" offer a more sustained introspective tone than any of Poltz's previous albums. Two of the songs, "Hater's Union" and "I Believe" (the latter co-written with A.J. Croce, a longtime pal), have a pronounced Beatles-like feel to them. Then there's "Street Fighter's Face," which offers a poignant look at the plight of a returning Iraqi war veteran.

"I played an American Legion Hall in Indiana and there were a couple of hundred people there, including about 15 Marines," Poltz said. "It was really weird, because they all called me 'Mr. Poltz.' They told me: 'We're really happy you wrote this song; we had a lot of friends who were wounded over there.'"

"I don't know if I'll get asked to do a USO tour, but I just got an e-mail from someone who had his legs blown off and his face scarred. And he told me how much he liked the song."

"Traveling's" longest song, "A Brief History of My Life," clocks in at almost 4 1/2 minutes. It begins with the Poltz family's move from Nova Scotia to Pasadena, Calif., when Steve was a child, then revisits his first communion (sample lyric: I thought by the time it was my turn / Jesus would be all eatin' up).

In other verses, he pays homage to some of his favorite Major League baseball announcers and recalls growing up in Palm Springs, Fla., where Elvis Presley seemed to take a brief, but creepy, interest in Poltz's underage sister and the two siblings went trick-or-treating at a famous neighbor's house.

"Liberace had rings on every finger and they looked like diamonds to me," Poltz recalled.

He chortled when asked if the famous pianist tried to hit on him.

"No! He had a handsome suitor behind him; I think it was that blond chauffeur guy who was in those famous photos with him. I tell you what, though, the steps to Liberace's house were in the shape of curved piano keys and they were black and white."

Without alcohol to cloud his vision, Poltz's life is now in full Technicolor. True, he's no longer with a major record company (then again, neither is Jewel, who recently signed with a new indie label). But Poltz is the master of his own destiny at last, and he couldn't be happier about it.

"I did a two-hour show in Sydney last night," he said. "And the audience knows the words to so many of my songs, which have not been released, through hearing them on the Internet. It's the same in the U.S., and it's not from having something shoved in their face by a big record company. It's been from coming to see me play live."

"The whole journey has been amazing. I just enjoy it more now."

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