

Michael Smith – The Man Who Wanted To Be Paul McCartney, When, All Along, He Had Been The Incredible Michael Smith [Part 1].

There have been numerous great American songwriters, but in my humble opinion, in the latter half of the twentieth century, Michael Smith is one of a pair of writers who I consider to be America's finest, bar none. Now over thirty years old, his best known composition is "The Dutchman," which focuses on a couple whose love has matured with age. Over the years Michael's thoughtful lyrics have consistently been informed by great works of American literature and his songs have been recorded by a legion of his peers. That legion includes the late Steve Goodman [with whom Michael also co-wrote], Anne Hills, Tom Rush, Trout Fishing In America, Gibson & Camp and going back to Smith's early days as a writer, Cashman & West and Spanky And Our Gang.

Michael Peter Smith was born in Newark, New Jersey on September 7th 1941. Three months later America was at war. In 1989 Michael told me, *"In a sense, New Jersey is sort of a suburb of New York. Where I lived, was in a place called the Oranges - small towns, named West Orange, East Orange, and Orange. I lived in all of them at one time or another."* Michael, who attended Catholic School initially, recalled that it was a tough urban environment to grow up in - *"a lower middle class area."* Up to the age of fifteen Michael was a straight A student, and was particularly fond of English. There was one exception. Smith was always graded poorly in music class, *"we were forced to read notes and to be in a Glee Club and sing along with songs which they had selected."* This quickly led Michael to the conclusion that *"music was for men who were effeminate so I threw up a barrier to music."* Another contributing factor was that little music was ever heard in the Smith home.

That said, from an early age Michael loved to hear the songs of Roy Rogers and Gene Autrey. And there was more, *"I loved Cole Porter, when I was a ten-years old. I didn't know that it was Cole Porter. Songs like "Night And Day", "Begin The Beguine", "In The Still Of The Night." "Ghost Riders In The Sky" was another favourite of mine. The songs that I liked didn't reflect what was around me. They were like songs from another world. Then I saw Elvis on television, when I was in eighth grade."* In his early/mid teen years Smith recalled liking Gene Vincent, the Sun Records of Elvis Presley, the Everly Brothers and Dion and the Belmonts. *"When I was about twelve or thirteen, I had the purest, truest sense of what was good in music, that I've ever had. It wasn't guided by what people told me."* By the time Michael was fifteen the Smith's were living in Little Falls, where he teamed up with two brothers who sang doo-wop music. By this he was attending public school and the brothers sold him an acoustic guitar for \$5.00. Then Harry Belafonte cut the highly successful album, **"Calypso."** *"I turned away from doo-wop and went toward calypso music, because Belafonte used an acoustic guitar. When the Kingston Trio came out, I had just turned sixteen and I started working in folk groups."*

At the age of seventeen, Michael took a day job in a factory that manufactured navigational parts for missiles. *"It was a high-tech defence situation."* His father, who died suddenly that year, had worked in the factory. He also joined a local rock'n'roll band where he played acoustic guitar. *"You'd never hear me in a million years, but it was good in a way, because I got to practice without actually being responsible for the sound."* Two years later, Michael enrolled in College in St. Petersburg, Florida, where he organised a folk group that modelled itself on the Kingston Trio. He also worked in coffeehouses as a solo performer. *"By that time, I had become very aware of the recordings of the Weavers and Theodore Bikel."* For the record, the first coffeehouse Michael performed in was *"The Hungry Brain."*

While still a New Jersey resident Michael had visited coffeehouses in Greenwich Village. *"I saw Pete Seeger and other folksingers in those pass the basket houses."* Still based in Florida, aged twenty-one, Smith began working with an older Canadian named Sam Cancilla. *"We travelled throughout the United States, working in coffeehouses for about a year and a half."* When they split up Michael returned to Florida, and Miami. Auditioning for a local coffeehouse, the owner told Michael that he'd hire him if he'd perform *"more funny songs."* Michael recalled, *"I went home, wrote ten or fifteen songs, went back to see him and he hired me. I worked there for four years, six nights a week. The place was called "The Flick", because they also showed movies there."*

During his residency, various members of the group, Spanky and Our Gang, sang at "The Flick" as solo acts. When the group formed they asked him if he had any songs for them. Michael wrote his first song, "The Lonely One," at the age of fifteen, but in the ensuing years had only penned one or two songs a year. "The Flick" years saw his songwriting skills flourish. Spanky And Our Gang eventually recorded three of Smith's compositions – "It Ain't Necessarily Bird Avenue," "Commercial" and "Join The Klan." *"One day we got together in Miami and I taught them all those harmonies to "Bird Avenue." They didn't change them, when they recorded it. I was thrilled and thought "this is the way it always is" (Laughs)." Michael was invited to join Spanky and Our Gang. "I thought they were wonderful people, but I turned them down." In fact Michael almost made a habit of it saying "No." "At one time, I was asked to join the Kingston Trio. I was about thirty, and the original Trio had disbanded. Bob Shane, asked me."*

By his fourth year at "The Flick," Michael had become friendly with Ron Kickasola and Barbara Barrow, a lady who eventually became Smith's second wife. *"Ron was an interesting man, and a folk song scholar. He did a lot of English ballads. We called ourselves the Baker Street Regulars, after Sherlock Holmes, and then we changed our name to Juarez. The name came from the Dylan tune "Tom Thumb's Blues"."* The trio headed to Los Angeles and started working regularly at "The Ice House" in Pasadena. *"It was a very famous club at the time. The Smothers Brothers came out of there, Steve Martin and Pat Paulsen. Bud and Travis worked there. The Dillards. The Stone Poneys - Linda Ronstadt's band - they were all there. It was a comedy, folk room."* Based on the success they were enjoying, the trio signed a recording contract with Decca.

The "**Juarez**" album was released in 1970, and apart from Gene Austin's "Occidental Woman" the remaining songs were credited to Michael Peter Smith. In fact Michael openly admits that *his life* was the principal subject of most of the song lyrics. Although not an *out and out* concept album, a number of the songs were linked. The lyric of "Donna from Mobile," which opens the album, mentions "St. Mary's Railroad", which is also the title of the closing track. *"In Georgia, there's a St. Mary's Railroad. St. Mary's Railroad was a symbol for breaking free. To do what you wanted to do. When we went on the road, it was an act of courage. "Donna from Mobile" was in fact me."* In comparative terms "Lauderdale Rain" is to Juarez, what "Creeque Alley" was to the Mamas and Papas. *"The summer child was my wife, Barbara Barrow. "The Pegasus" was a coffeehouse and it was the first place I ever played, where I really felt I belonged in the milieu. Melinda was my first wife. Freddie was Fred Neil, who wrote "Everybody's talking". I thought of Fred as a trailblazer, and he was. The house on Langdon Street, was where I grew up in Orange, New Jersey."* "Starfisher," a eulogy, was written for Malcolm Hale of the Spankies. *"I'd heard that he had died. A day later, I wrote the song."* Decca certainly underpinned the recording sessions with a coterie of top-flight players, including Hal Blaine, Larry Knechtel, Joe Osborn and James Burton. Not everything ran smoothly however. *"Larry Bangheart produced "Juarez". Three-quarters of the way through, he just left and we finished it ourselves. "Juarez" took eight months to record."*

Decca remixed the album after the band handed in their finished tapes. According to Michael, *"We thought it was awful."* That was not the only serious issue they had to deal with. Once the album was complete, Barbara and Michael decided that they wanted to work in the pop field, while Ron was a committed folkie. The trio broke up and the Smith's formed a rock group. *"We got a bass player, a guitar player and a drummer from the San Francisco area and went out on the road as Juarez. We mostly worked in California. It was the acid period. We liked Jefferson Airplane and people like that, so we played a lot of long involved jams. We were almost like the Incredible String Band, in the sense that we wanted to combine folk with that jamming, rocking quality. I wish we had recorded the band."*

Let's skip ahead for a moment. A decade and a half later, Michael recorded the solo album, "**Love Stories.**" The liner featured a pen and ink drawing of a train carriage bearing the logo, St. Mary's Railroad. *"That is Juarez, the band. McNulty, the artist, was a lady who lived in Colorado. She was good friends with the drummer and did a drawing of us. I'm in the front with the hat. Barbara is on the train. Behind us, the fellow playing the mandolin was our guitar player. The fellow with the ram, was the bass player. Then there's the drummer."* As a band, Juarez lasted for around two years and then broke up.

To be continued.