

## **Boz Scaggs: Master of His Universe?**

by Tim Wilton

**N**estled on forty perfectly manicured acres near Highland Park in Dallas is St. Mark's School of Texas, a preparatory day school for boys that *Time* magazine once hailed the "best equipped day school in the country." Sons of doctors, lawyers and well heeled businessmen have attended St. Mark's since 1950, and many have gone on to become doctors, lawyers and well heeled businessmen as well, while others have gone on to accomplish perhaps even greater feats.

From *National Lampoon* co-founder Robert Hoffman (Class of 1965) and *Texas Monthly* founder and publisher Michael Levy ('64) to actors Tommy Lee Jones ('67) and Luke Wilson ('90); from billionaire real estate developers H. Ross Perot, Jr. ('77) and George Bayoud ('73) to 2003 National Spelling Bee champion Sai Gunturi ('07) and NASA scientist Dr. Alan Stern ('75), St. Mark's has nurtured, educated and steered a long line of young masters of the universe.

Two other notable alums walked St. Mark's hallowed halls nearly fifty years ago, and then ultimately became masters of their own universe in the decades that followed. They are:

Steve Miller, class of '61, who would go on to form the Steve Miller Band and become a multi-platinum selling artist throughout the seventies, eighties and nineties, who resided at or near the top of the music charts with hit records that combined blues, roots and rock music, and who filled stadiums and venues on every continent he and his band performed. This writer will visit his life in a future issue of *MYTH*.

And this month's subject, Boz Scaggs, who graduated a year after his close friend and fellow after-school band mate Miller, and then went on to carve out his own place in music mortality, only to drop out of sight for more than a decade to raise a family away from the harsh glare of fame, and then come back completely reinvented and at the top of the charts again.

Scaggs, who is perhaps best known for his distinct vocal style and imaginative blend of rock and R&B during the 1970's and whose songs are still a staple of radio stations featuring AOR and classic rock formats, re-emerged as an acclaimed jazz vocalist a few years back, taking on the American songbook of standards including *What's New*, *How Long Has This Been Going On?*, *Bewitched*, *Bothered and Bewildered* and others on his critically received 2003 release, *But Beautiful*, which debuted at the top of the jazz sales charts and stayed there for six weeks. A live CD/DVD release of *But Beautiful* is in the works, but no release date has been set.

And earlier this year Sony BMG released the remastered *Silk Degrees*, Scaggs's eponymous 1976 monster-selling LP, that also includes never before released live tracks.

Scaggs has certainly come a long way since his prep school days in Dallas more than four decades ago.

William Royce Scaggs was born on June 8, 1944 to Royce and Helen Scaggs in Canton, Ohio. After his discharge from the army after World War II (he was a pilot), Royce Scaggs started a career in sales and then moved his family to Oklahoma for a short time before finally settling them in Plano, just north of Dallas.

The young Scaggs grew up listening to the radio, tuning in faraway stations that offered a steady diet of rhythm and blues, early rock and roll, soul music and both Chicago and Delta style blues. Scaggs has often remarked, in various interviews throughout his career, that it was after hearing T-Bone Walker's *T-Bone Shuffle* when he was around twelve years old is when he decided that he wanted to be a musician. And so it was around this time that he picked up his first guitar.

When he was fourteen, he entered St. Mark's School on a scholarship and became fast friends with another blues loving student, Steve Miller. It was also around this time that another classmate began to inexplicably call Scaggs "Bosley." Quickly shortened to "Boz," the nickname stuck.

In 1959, Scaggs became the vocalist for The Marksmen, an R&B combo put together by Miller that played at local clubs and parties. At the same time, Miller would tutor Scaggs on the guitar.

After graduation Miller enrolled at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, presumably because of the fervent blues scene that was flourishing in nearby Chicago. There he formed a popular blues band, the Ardells, and was joined a year later by Scaggs after he enrolled at UW. For the next year, they played three to four times a week around town, Miller on lead guitar and Scaggs playing rhythm and singing lead, fine tuning their craft before live audiences. To change things up, they even billed themselves as the Fabulous Knight Trains for awhile.

However, Scaggs left Madison in 1963 and returned to Dallas alone to front an R&B outfit called The Wigs. They promptly relocated to the burgeoning rhythm and blues scene in London, but soon disbanded. As a matter of fact, two of Scaggs's mates in the Wigs—John Andrews and Bob Arthur—later on found fame when they formed Mother Earth. Undaunted, Scaggs remained in Europe, singing on street corners and plazas and in small cafes until finally landing in Stockholm, Sweden in 1965. There he recorded his debut album, *Boz*, which actually did pretty decent business in Sweden and Denmark, but nowhere else. Scaggs continued to travel Europe and sing where ever he could, and eventually ended up “bumming” around India for most of 1966, before returning to Stockholm and then finally, Dallas for the Christmas holidays.

In 1967 Scaggs received a postcard from Miller inviting him to come to San Francisco and join his newly formed Steve Miller Blues Band (which was later renamed the Steve Miller Band). Without any hesitation, Scaggs moved to San Francisco and reunited with his old classmate and immediately became the group's rhythm guitarist and one of its songwriters. Scaggs performed on the group's first two studio albums, *Children of the Future* and the critically-hailed *Sailor*, which had more of a psychedelic feeling than the rhythm and blues flavor that was sought by Scaggs. Consequently, Scaggs saw that his and Miller's musical tastes were going in different directions, so Scaggs left to pursue a solo career.

Jan Wenner, the founding publisher of *Rolling Stone* magazine, recognized Scaggs vocal prowess and help him secure a recording contract with Atlantic Records. In 1969, with Wenner as producer, Scaggs released his American solo debut *Boz Scaggs*. Recorded in Muscle Shoals with the famed Muscle Shoals Rhythm Section and a then-hardly known slide guitarist named Duane Allman, *Boz Scaggs* was critically

received by the music press, but did not register with the buying public. The album is also noted for the cut *Loan Me a Dime*, which was the subject of a lawsuit brought on by bluesman Fenton Robinson, who successfully sued for composer credit.

Soon thereafter, Scaggs left Atlantic and signed with Columbia Records where he recorded a few more critically received albums that met very little sales success: 1971's *Moments* and *Boz Scaggs & Band; My Time* in 1972, and then *Slow Dancer* two years later. Each release was a testament to Scaggs's evolution as a singer and song writer. His rough-edged blues-styled vocals had become smoother and his writing more refined. He began to mold together the different music genres that had influenced and fascinated him ever since his days as a kid in Dallas listening to the radio, and in turn he developed a refreshing sound that epitomized blue-eyed soul.

The result of Scaggs's continued growth as a music artist was on full display in *Silk Degrees*, his artistic and commercial breakout album from 1976. The album spawned four hit singles: *Lowdown*, *Lido Shuffle*, *What Can I Say* and *We're All Alone*. *Silk Degrees* would go on to sell more than 5 million copies, and Scaggs was awarded the 1976 Grammy for R&B Song of the Year for *Lowdown*.

Scaggs had finally become an overnight sensation and he took to the road, performing before sold out audiences every where he went around the world. His sound-- a hybrid mix of urban rock, soul and R&B that dripped with highly polished production value--became a "vibe," a welcomed respite from the bloated sounds of the typical seventies corporate rock that still held sway over the radio. However, some music historians today will point to *Silk Degrees* as a harbinger of the still nascent disco sound that was brewing in small dark corners of New York City.

His 1977 follow-up album, *Down Two Then Left*, was another best seller but did not yield any hit singles. In 1980, Scaggs released *Middle Man*, which also sold millions and produced two more hit singles: *Breakdown Dead Ahead* and *JoJo*. Additionally, *Look What You've Done To Me*, his contribution to the 1980 *Urban Cowboy* soundtrack, became a huge crossover hit.

And then Scaggs "disappeared."

Despite his chart-topping successes and a world wide audience, Scaggs became increasingly dissatisfied with the pressures of stardom. His 1972 marriage to Carmella Storniola resulted in a 1980 divorce. Music had become too much of a business for him, and so he backed away for awhile. Actually, it was little longer that “awhile.”

From 1980 to 1988, Scaggs went into semi-retirement, concentrating on raising his two sons and starting up a San Francisco nightclub, Slim’s. He lost all interest in music, and except for an occasional New Year’s performance at his club, he stayed away from the business. Of course, his song publishers kept his name in the mix by continuously releasing “best of” collections throughout these years of his inactivity.

But he was eventually talked into performing with the New York Rock and Soul Revue, an all star lineup of musicians that included Donald Fagin, Michael McDonald and Phoebe Snow. The one-time performance turned into a string of shows, and eventually an album. This was the impetus that brought Scaggs back into the studio, and in 1994, he released his long-awaited return to music, *Some Change*, to excellent reviews and decent sales.

*Come On Home*, his 1997 collection of ten R&B covers as well as four originals that are heavily influenced by the Chicago and Delta blues that he adored as a youth, was another winning release and was immediately followed by the comprehensive *My Time—Anthology (1969 – 1997)*, a definitive collection of songs that spans Scaggs entire career up until that time. Having rediscovered his love for music and performing live, Scaggs embarked on a tour that found him opening shows for Stevie Wonder, thus bringing his music to a whole new audience.

Other albums have followed, most notably his 2003 effort, *But Beautiful*, an excellent mix of jazz standards that he recorded with a jazz quartet, and released on his own Gray Cat label; and *Fade Into Light*, an updated take on some of the songs that make up his 40 year-old catalog.

Now free of the pressures that nearly suffocated him in the late-70s, Scaggs has successfully transitioned into genres of music that he might not have played during his *Silk Degrees* days.

Perhaps Boz Scaggs has finally and truly become the master of his own universe.