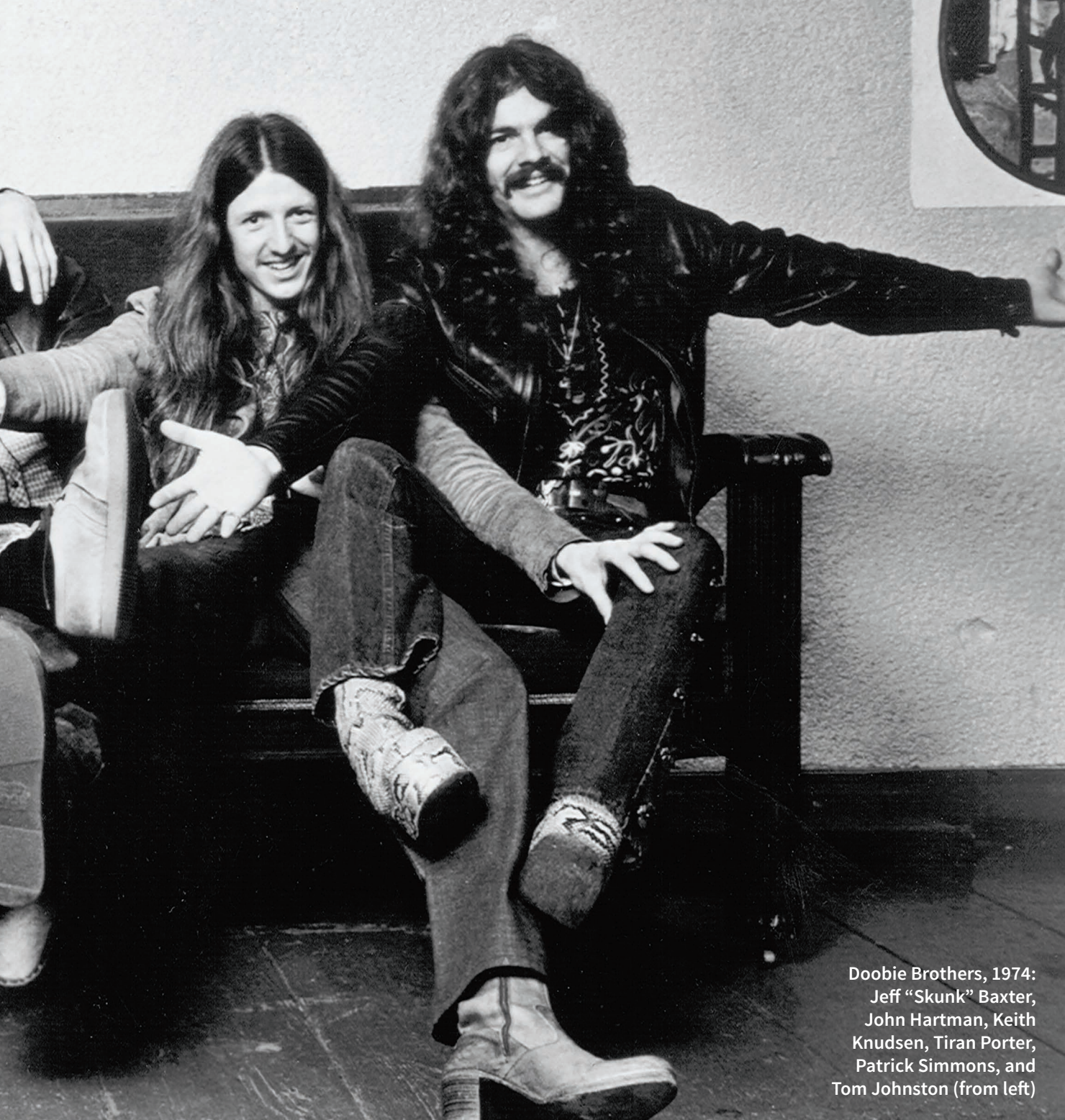


THE  
DOOBIE  
BROTHERS



Doobie Brothers, 1974:  
Jeff "Skunk" Baxter,  
John Hartman, Keith  
Knudsen, Tiran Porter,  
Patrick Simmons, and  
Tom Johnston (from left)

**THESE ROAD WARRIORS'  
EVER-MORPHING LINEUP  
AND LONGEVITY TESTIFY  
TO A SHARED DESIRE  
TO STRETCH MUSICALLY  
WHILE SEEKING ALCHEMY  
AMONG THE PLAYERS.**

*By Holly Gleason*

**F**ew bands spoke of the innocent freedom of the 1970s quite like the Doobie Brothers. The San Jose-born group transcended the hippie/free love moment to crest the California-rock promise of open roads, feathered hair, and throwing your heart to the wind. Their original sound was a blend of guitarist Tom Johnston's driving rock/soul tilt, drummer John Hartman's post-Moby Grape/Skip Spence polyglot thump, and Patrick Simmons' folk/country blues picking.

If San Francisco was Haight-Ashbury psychedelic and Los Angeles more Laurel Canyon country and Troubadour rock, the Doobies brought a biker bar intensity straight out of Santa Cruz's Chateau Liberté. Never so daunting as to alienate AM radio listeners, they swept commuters up in a surging, polyrhythmic thrust that was equal parts shine, feel-good downstroke-age, and thick three-part harmony. From the moment "Listen to the Music" and "Rockin' Down the Highway" poured out of tinny car radios, the

## Selected DISCOGRAPHY



**Toulouse Street**  
1972 (Warner Bros.)



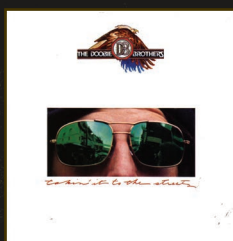
**The Captain and Me**  
1973 (Warner Bros.)



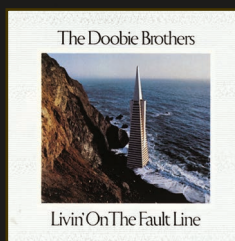
**What Were Once Vices Are Now Habits**  
1974 (Warner Bros.)



**Stampede**  
1974 (Warner Bros.)



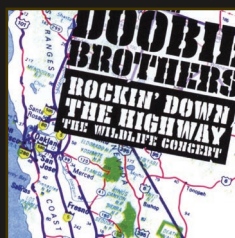
**Takin' It to the Streets**  
1976 (Warner Bros.)



**Livin' on the Fault Line**  
1977 (Warner Bros.)



**Minute by Minute**  
1978 (Warner Bros.)



**Rockin' Down the Highway: The Wildlife Concert**  
1996 (Sony/Legacy)

Doobie Brothers became a people's favorite.

After the band released the wildly nonperforming self-titled Warner Bros. debut in 1971, its sophomore effort, *Toulouse Street*, clicked in 1972. Ted Templeman's production on *The Captain and Me* (1973) continued the double-platinum magic, with Johnston's funky "Long Train Runnin'," the driving "China Grove," and Simmons' romantic, pedal steel-tinged acoustic, "South City Midnight Lady."

Tiran Porter on bass and Michael Hossack as a second drummer had firmed up *Toulouse's* rhythmic authority. But the arrival of Steely Dan's co-lead guitarist Jeff "Skunk" Baxter, who had guested on *Toulouse* and *Captain*, put forward a triple guitar onslaught. Playing 500 shows in three years, the Doobies baptized fans on the road with a musical attack that embraced all, leaning into the power of a

FROM TOP: Doobies Go Dutch: Live on Holland's *TopPop* TV show, 1974: Hartman, Simmons, Porter, Knudsen, and Johnston (from left); Simmons, Porter, original drummer Michael Hossack, Johnston, and Hartman (from left), New York City, 1973.



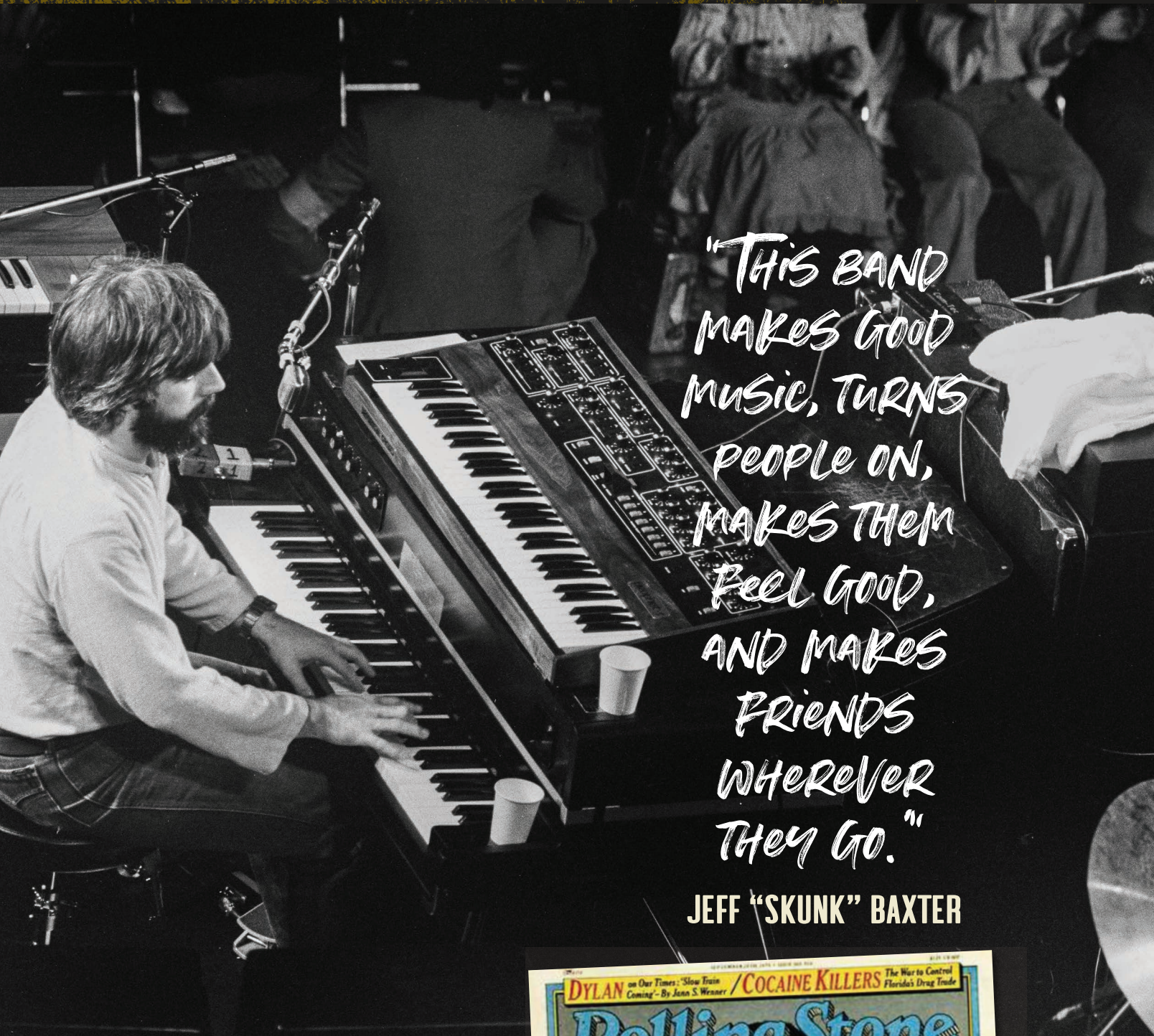
band's ability to spark off one another's diversity.

"We are basically an American band," Johnston has said on numerous occasions. "We cover blues, R&B, country, bluegrass, rock & roll. It's based on rhythms, rhythm structures, picking, and harmonies. That's been the signature of the band."

Indeed. Their first Number One came from *What Were Once Vices Are Now Habits* in 1975: Simmons' swampy Cajun/gospel stomp "Black Water." The tune was marked by fiddle, handclaps, a cappella church vocals, and Simmons' yearning tenor. The B side, Johnston's "Another Park, Another Sunday," originally flipped by a West Virginia disc jockey, expanded the road warriors' already diverse palette even more.

Rocking hard. Living the life. Two private jets in the seventies. Rehearsing at Winterland. Million-selling albums. Free-form AOR dominance. They forged the rock





"THIS BAND  
MAKES GOOD  
MUSIC, TURNS  
PEOPLE ON,  
MAKES THEM  
FEEL GOOD,  
AND MAKES  
FRIENDS  
WHEREVER  
THEY GO."

JEFF "SKUNK" BAXTER

& roll lifestyle for the rest of us; being actual mortals, we could relate to the way they were living the dream.

"When I joined the Doobies," Baxter recalled to *Rolling Stone* in 1975, "I found out, 'Hey, this band makes good music, turns people on, makes them feel good, and makes friends wherever they go.'"

While the fans drove the oft-evolving band, so did the charts: Two Number Ones, five Top Tens, and sixteen Top Forty hits. Over forty million albums sold, including four multiplatinum, seven platinum, and fourteen gold certifications. Their diamond-certified 1976 package, *The Best Of*, moved well over eleven million copies on the strength of "China Grove," "Long Train Runnin'," "Takin' It to the Streets," "It Keeps You Runnin'," "Take Me in Your Arms," and "Jesus Is Just Alright."

Then there are the Grammys. The band won twice: Record of the Year for "What a Fool Believes," and Best Pop Vocal Performance by a Duo, Group, or Chorus for "Minute by Minute." And garnered four nominations, including Best Pop Instrumental for "South Bay Strut," and Album of the Year for *Minute by Minute*.

But what truly makes music matter is heart. And for





the Doobies, the ever-morphing lineup testifies to their desire to stretch and seek alchemy among the players. *Creem* even titled a 1975 profile “The Reward of Facelessness.” The truth was simple: The songs and gigs were everything to these musicians.

The addition of Keith Knudsen as second drummer gave a thunderous backbeat to their already rhythmic forward press. By the rootsy *Stampede* (1975) and official arrival of Baxter as a full-time member, the playing almost outstripped the songs. Johnston’s howling fervor and slashing guitar on Holland-Dozier-Holland’s “Take Me in Your Arms” embodied the blaze the band was becoming.

Burning so hot inevitably takes its toll. The cycle of stadiums and arenas, back into the studio and then back on the road, found Johnston succumbing to bleeding ulcers. As the *Stampede* tour kicked off, Johnston was sidelined. To shore up the band, as *Rolling Stone* noted in its 1975 profile, Baxter suggested Steely Dan vocalist Michael McDonald.

McDonald would prove a pivotal addition. The dusty-voiced power singer was steeped in blue-eyed soul. He also provided the keyboard grounding the band had been “borrowing” from Little Feat’s Bill Payne, who had been part of their Doobie touring brigade for years.

Adding the familiar Memphis Horns, as well as guest appearances from friends such as Ry Cooder, Arlo Guthrie, Maria Muldaur, Norton Buffalo, and

**FROM LEFT: Enter McDonald: Vocalist/keyboardist Michael McDonald and Baxter perform on tour in Japan, 1979; at the rehearsals for the No Nukes concert: Simmons, McDonald, vocalist Nicolette Larson, producer Ted Templeman, Knudsen, singer Amy Holland, and drummer Chet McCracken (from left), New York City, 1979.**





Herb Pederson, the band expanded into a fertile musical fellowship for *Takin' It to the Streets* in 1976. The urgency of the title track and the stop/start soul of "It Keeps You Runnin'" suggested a band taking stock of the times as well as the pace they were keeping. Johnston's health remained fragile, but the band carried on, playing sold-out shows and shifting roles.

Soon Johnston exited, and a new jazz inflection marked an evolution, as reflected in Simmons' tempo-shifting, triple-instrumental-passage title track of *Livin' on the Faultline* (1977). McDonald's soul-simmer had its own Holland-Dozier-Holland moment with "Little Darling (I Need You)," as well as his slinky "You Belong to Me," also recorded by the song's coauthor, Carly Simon. The ragtime bluegrass closer, "Larry the Logger Two-Step," created an even more far-flung musical tableau.

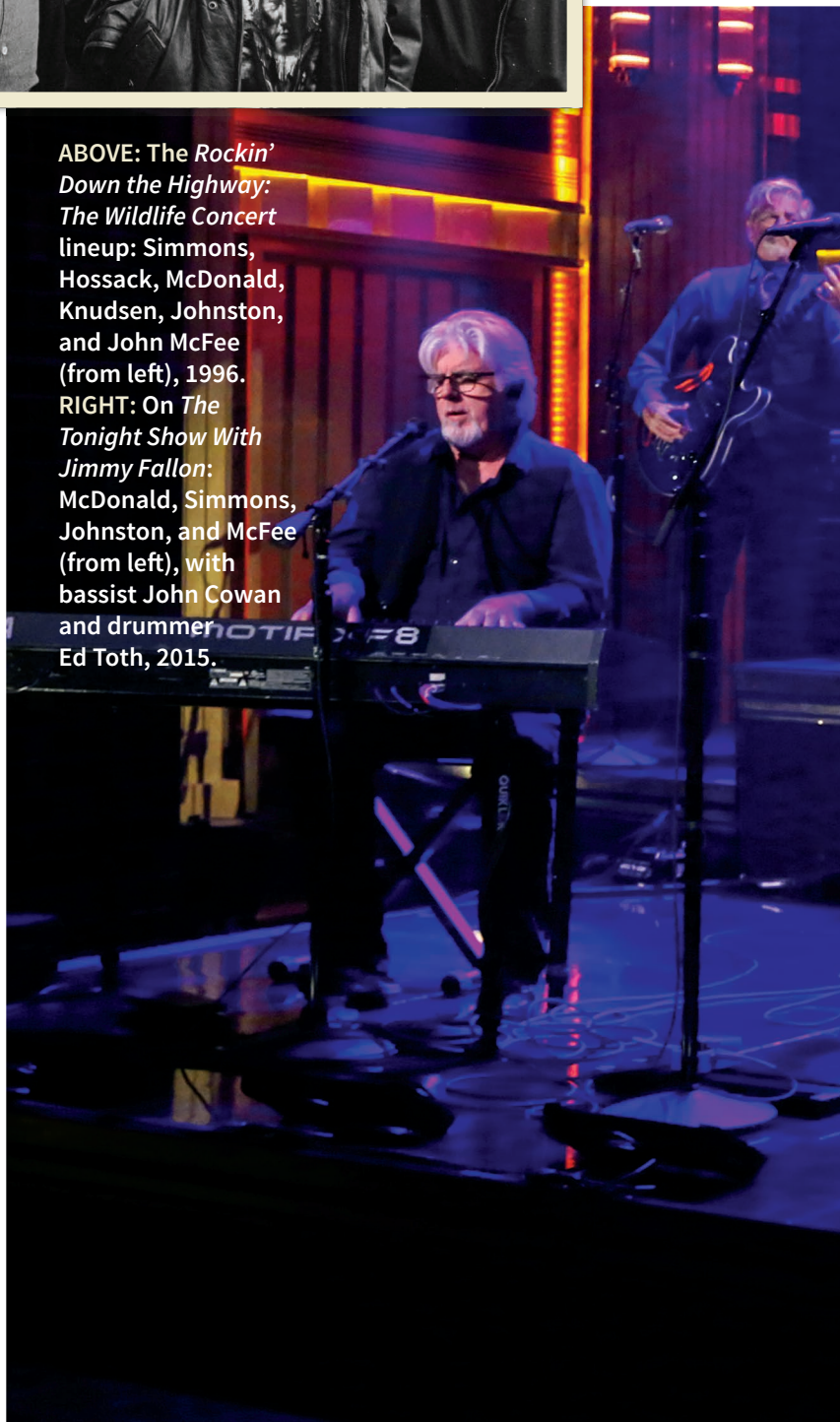
Settling into the new band order, *Minute by Minute* (1978) marked the band's most decisive stylistic shift. Considered the dawn of yacht rock, the horns, keyboards and synths, and subtle rhythmic shifts created a foundation for a more pop-minded sound. The plangent, chart-topping "What a Fool Believes" – cowritten by Kenny Loggins – became ubiquitous; its bouncing beat and skyward harmonies packing the euphoria of an amyl nitrate popper.

Though it didn't win the Grammy, *Minute* proved the scrappy musicians could withstand change. Simmons joined McDonald to write the staccato "Dependin' on You," which would ground their landmark No Nukes: Musicians United for Safe Energy concert appearance, and wrangled with Baxter for the cascading guitar-drenched, horn-punctuated rock blues of "Don't Stop to Watch the Wheels."

Though the lithe *One Step Closer* in 1980 would prove a swan song, it also marked the addition of multi-instrumentalist John McFee, a session player on Van Morrison's *Tupelo Honey*, Elvis Costello's *My Aim Is True*, Rick James' *Throwin' Down*, Carlene Carter's *Musical Shapes*, and Steve

ABOVE: *The Rockin' Down the Highway: The Wildlife Concert* lineup: Simmons, Hossack, McDonald, Knudsen, Johnston, and John McFee (from left), 1996.

RIGHT: On *The Tonight Show With Jimmy Fallon*: McDonald, Simmons, Johnston, and McFee (from left), with bassist John Cowan and drummer Ed Toth, 2015.



Miller's *Fly Like an Eagle*, among many. As McFee explained, "The one thing that's always been true about the Doobies is there's this avoidance of limiting the music stylistically. It's always been about making the best music, no boundaries involved."

The band embarked on another tour to the delight of its fans, then called it quits in 1982. But in 1987, they were back. Inspired by a *Los Angeles Times* poll declaring Led Zeppelin and the Doobie Brothers the groups people most wanted to get back together, and moved by the plight of Vietnam vets trying to cope with the challenge of returning home, they reunited for a benefit for the Vietnam Veterans Aid Foundation. Knudsen called on almost everyone who'd played with the band for the event. Tickets to the show at the Hollywood Bowl sold faster than anyone since the Beatles, so a small tour was organized off the momentum.

As always with the Doobies, the playing pulled them together. While McDonald's solo success kept him in his own lane, the band began toying with writing and recording. Beginning with the gold-certified *Cycles* in 1989, the Johnston/Simmons/Hossack/Hartman/

Porter Doobies restarted the engines for a band that would ultimately reabsorb McFee and Knudsen after their own country-rock Southern Pacific ran its course on Warner Bros. Nashville.

Knudsen died in 2005 from cancer and complications of pneumonia. Hossack passed away in 2012, also from cancer. But the group remains vital to this day. When McDonald joined them on-stage at Nashville's historic Ryman Auditorium in 2019 for an encore of "Takin' It to the Streets," it marked a triumphant reprise of *Toulouse Street* and *The Captain and Me*, and also another tour. The collective's upcoming 50th Anniversary Tour will mark the first time in twenty-five years the quartet of Johnston/McDonald/McFee/Simmons has gone on the road together.

"We had all been playing music for a long time before we put a band together," Simmons recalled, "and our roots are what comes out. Those influences take over whatever conceptual ideas you might have. It's always been that way with this band. You always return to who you really are."

Brothers – if not in blood, then in music – forever.

