

## Don't mess with Mitch Ryder

Rocker covers new projects, his odds in a bar fight and why he won't be making 'Mitch Ryder: The Musical!' any time soon

By Mike Greenblatt

### IF 66-YEAR-OLD DETROIT LEGEND

Mitch Ryder has anything to say about it, 2012 will be his year. For far too long he's been thrilling only European audiences, yet his last domestic release was the John Mellencamp-produced "Never Kick A Sleeping Dog" in 1983. Now it's finally time for the good ol' U.S.A. to sit up and take note. With a new Don Was-produced album ("The Promise"), a new autobiography ("Devils & Blue Dresses: My Wild Ride As A Rock 'n' Roll Legend") and new musical he's writing for the stage (no, it's not anything like "Jersey Boys"), Mitch Ryder is primed and ready to make his assault on an all-too-complacent music industry. Here, in his own words, no holds barred, is the man himself.

**GM: There seems to be a Mitch Ryder renaissance going on! What's up with that?**

*MR:* It's due to my overactive brain. I wasn't truly successful until I went to Europe. Don Was has always praised my work overseas, work that's gone untouched and unnoticed here in the states.

**GM: Why?**

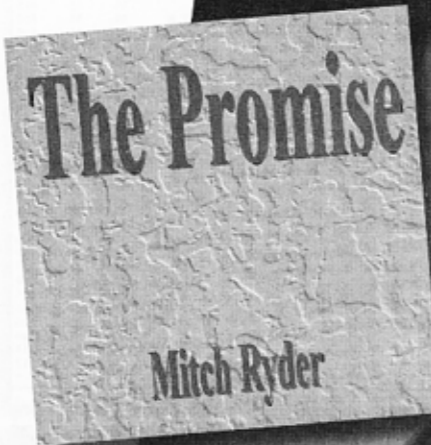
*MR:* I'd love to say Europe has better taste, but I guess the answer is I'm just not relevant anymore over here. My following is in Germany, although I tour all over Europe. They don't know me there by "Devil With The Blue Dress On." I'm not an oldies act; I've toured every year since 1978. And what allows me to do that is my extensive catalog over there.

**GM: 14 albums!**

*MR:* Yeah, and there's only a couple in that bunch that really suck.

**GM: Here at home, though, the people in the know know your worth. Bruce Springsteen's covered your material, and ...**

*MR:* Yeah, yeah, yeah, but nobody's covered anything I've done overseas, so I know they're not looking very deep. They're not searching very hard to find out what's really going on with me. But it's OK. I touch on that point in the book. It's fulfilling enough just to



know what I've accomplished abroad. It doesn't need to be covered by anyone here. It's a separate career, a parallel career, only more contemporary than what I do here. So this push that you're talking about, this renaissance, is an effort to try and open a door to make me relevant again in America, so I can bring back all of those little hidden treasures I've done overseas and just slowly put them into the marketplace here via a distribution deal. Whether we succeed or not, I don't know. The worst that can happen is

that I'm resigned to a fate I've already adjusted to. The best that can happen is that I become relevant in America again ... and that would be really more than I could hope for. But, if it does happen, I'm certainly willing to accept that.

**GM: "The Promise" starts with "Back Then," really funky, but not in the old-school, soul-man style you used to inhabit. It's a modern kind of funk.**

*MR:* I wanted the construction of that song to be similar to Motown. "Back Then," when my parents were alive, I totally blew the opportunity to thank them for what they did for me. They say that music streams to the universe, and I hope that somewhere, somehow, their energy will be able to access my sentiment. I didn't want to be part of the family. Back then, I wanted to be a hippie out on my own, start a counter-culture, have a revolution. Families were out. We were in. There was a lot of separation there that just shouldn't have been.

**GM: The title tune has that Curtis Mayfield-type wah-wah guitar intro.**

*MR:* Yeah, it's a little social politics, but not deep enough to get the cops on my ass.

**GM: Closer "The Way We Were" mentions Jesus and Osama Bin Laden in the same sentence.**

*MR:* My wife says it's Dylanesque. He's the artist I respect the most.

**GM: You do "What Becomes Of The Broken Hearted" as a tribute to Jimmy Ruffin.**

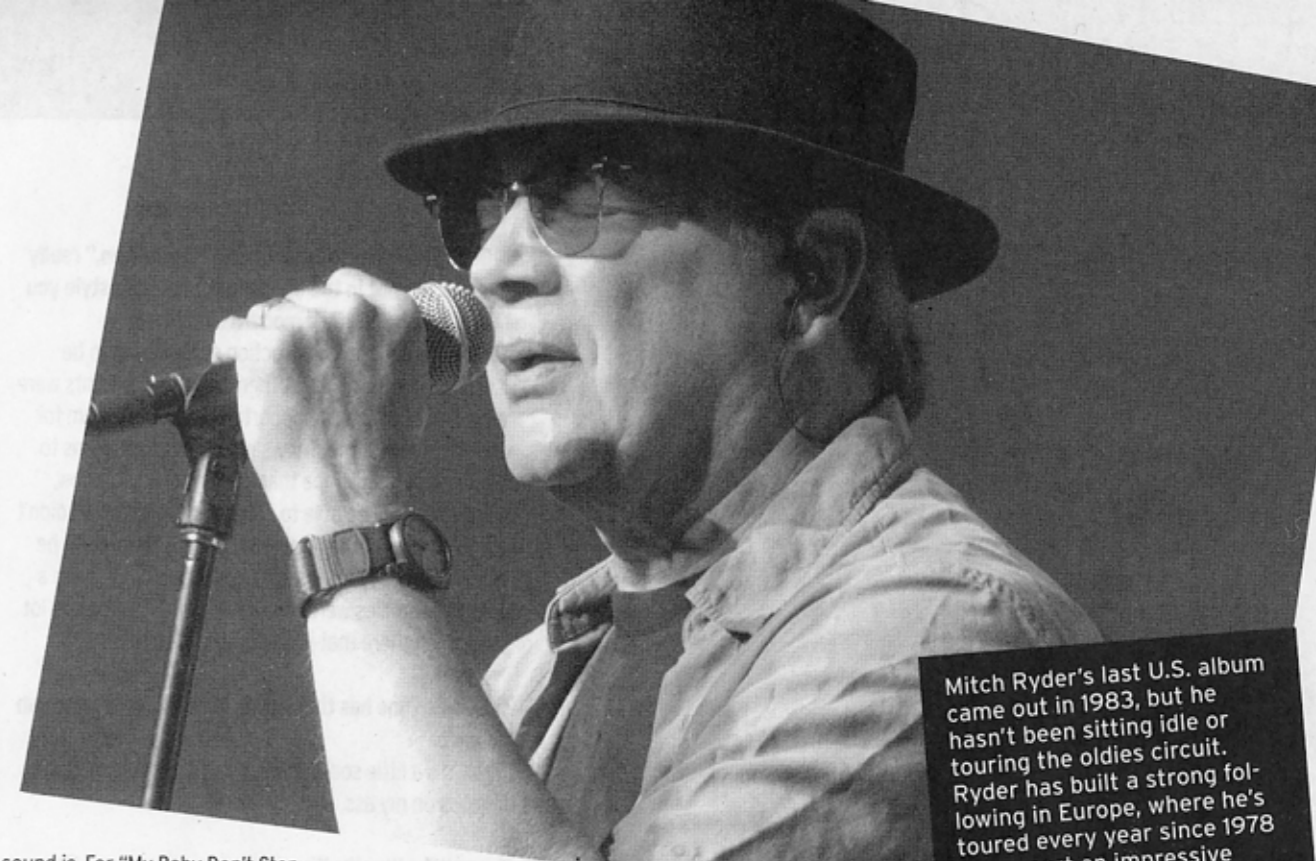
*MR:* He only had two hits for Motown, and that was by far the biggest [the other was "I've Passed This Way Before" in 1966]. It was also covered by some English guy [Rod Stewart, 2009]. I was sitting there, getting ready to go on stage, talking to somebody about Jimmy, and they said, "He's not working, not well, kind of broke." Don Was and I then put the song together right there, and I did it live that night. It turned out so well, considering we literally put it together at the last second, we put the performance on the album.

**GM: Dug that salsa tune, too, "Let's Keep Dancing."**

*MR:* That's a love song for my wife. I consider it separate and apart from the rest of the songs.

**GM: You have a lot of different colors here.**

*MR:* It worked out well. "My Heart Belongs To Me," for instance, was written for an earlier European album, but I wanted a Stax sound that I was never able to achieve, but Don Was did! I recorded with Booker T & The MGs in 1968 down in Memphis, so I know very well what that Stax



Mitch Ryder's last U.S. album came out in 1983, but he hasn't been sitting idle or touring the oldies circuit. Ryder has built a strong following in Europe, where he's toured every year since 1978 to support an impressive catalog of material.

sound is. For "My Baby Don't Stop Crying," I wanted a New Orleans 1958 feel, and we got close. If you listen to my European albums – especially "You Deserve My Heart" or "Air Harmony" – you'd see that this is just a continuation of that process and that progress I've been making overseas. I'm very pleased to have had the opportunity to record all those albums. It's an accounting of what I've been doing with my life. If anybody ever cares to really examine my career, they can look and say, "He didn't waste it. We just didn't know he was doing all this really good stuff." It's unfortunate that nobody cares. Like I said, I'm just trying to open a door here and share all those years that I feel are worthy of American attention. My fans would be delighted to not only know but to be able to listen to what I've been doing overseas. I haven't just been sitting home waiting for the phone to ring, doing oldies shows. I don't have time for that. There's too much work to do. That's my reality.

Now I'm deeply enmeshed in this musical that's killing me to try and get the damn thing right. I've set a deadline for myself. I've spoken to people about it. I'm getting help from people in the business who are familiar with what I'm trying to do, and advising me about how to go about getting investors. I'm going to symphonies, watching the players, picking somebody who can help me with orchestration.

**GM: Well, you better write your musical fast, because Tommy James and Dion are planning similar theatrical projects about their lives.**

*MR:* Yeah, but they just want to do another piece of shit like "Jersey Boys," which isn't even a real musical. I don't want to do a rock

musical or a f\*\*king "Jersey Boys." All that is is a snapshot of a career when you were making hit records with a weak storyline. I'm talking about a real bona-fide musical that has nothing to do with Mitch Ryder or his career. Nothing whatsoever! I wouldn't waste my time on that.

**GM: But you have to admit that you've had the kind of life that would warrant that kind of treatment.**

*MR:* Then let somebody else do it. As far as my personal story is concerned, that's in the book. I'm totally honest in the book. Hey, all the witnesses are right here in Detroit where I still live. If I was going to sugarcoat it, I'd have to face them every friggin' day ... and I'm not about to face off with everybody over a book of lies.

**GM: You come clean about your drug addiction and bankruptcy.**

*MR:* Those are minor. They're not felonies; they're misdemeanors.

**GM: Well, the fact we're talking about you having survived it all says something about you as an individual. You must be one tough ornery dude, no?**

*MR:* I wouldn't want to have to back it up in a bar fight, but I could if I had to. And what glory would it be for the other guy to say he beat up a 66-year old man? **GM**