

The Long Run

Five decades into his career, Akron native Jim Ballard continues to perfect his songwriting craft on new, two-disc release *Ask John Steinbeck*

Dew glistens in the sunlight breaking over the horizon on this unseasonably cool morning in early July. A solitary figure is bending and stretching in the parking lot at the Wilbeth Road trailhead of the Ohio & Erie Canal Towpath prior to embarking on a planned 15-mile training run. By a runner's reckoning, the Akron Marathon, 12 weeks away, is fast approaching and putting the miles in now is crucial in the training process.

This year's race will mark the twenty-first time Jim Ballard has laced-up his running shoes and hit the pavement to compete in a marathon. Running is a passion Ballard embraced long after he embraced another passion he has pursued with the dedication of a marathon runner: music.

The Long and Winding Road

Although music is inherent in his DNA (Ballard's mother sang in a Carter Family-style group on the radio in the 1930s), Ballard's musical passion was first stirred by the arrival of the Beatles in America. Following their 1964 appearance on the Ed Sullivan show, thirteen-year-old Ballard ordered his first guitar from a catalog and began his musical journey.

Throughout his high school years, first at Hoban and then at Garfield, Ballard performed in bands covering hit records by popular groups of the day ranging from the Beatles to the Rolling Stones, The Kinks, the Animals and the Who. After graduating in 1968, Ballard spent several freewheeling, adventurous months hitchhiking around the country with a friend. In the spring of 1969 he received a draft notice. By the fall, Ballard was on an aircraft carrier, becoming a technician and flier in the U.S. Navy. (An encounter with a horrific storm in the Bay of Biscay in 1972 was later immortalized in the song *Red Sky Suite* and appears on Ballard's 2011 release, *Wood & Wire*).

Upon discharge from the Navy in 1973, Ballard had no plans to pursue a musical career — he went to work for a local publishing company. The persistent entreaties of legendary local musician, Jammin' Paul Hively, finally convinced Ballard to pick up his guitar and join Hively's band to play cover tunes in local bars. During this time, Ballard began to write his own songs and, recognizing a cover-tune-playing-bar-band was not the appropriate showcase for his craft, decided to go solo. In early 1975 Ballard acquired an acoustic guitar and began building a musical career as a singer/songwriter.

Ballard released his first album, *South Side Days* in 1976 followed by *Thunderhead* in 1979. By 1982, Ballard had formed a band and released a trio of albums over the next six years: *Into the Heartbeat*, *Speed Demons* and the live gem, *In The Wings*. In 1988 Ballard came within inches of achieving the dream