

# Mellow path brings Vander Ark to town

By Chris Kocher

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Press & Sun-Bulletin

Ten years ago, Brian Vander Ark stood at the top of the music world.

The major-label debut album of his band The Verve Pipe went platinum, propelled by the ubiquitous radio play of Vander Ark's hit single, "The Freshmen." Fame, MTV appearances and world tours were all part of his whirlwind lifestyle.

These days, Vander Ark's career is a bit more low-key. You're won't tune in to the local rock station and hear songs from his new self-released solo album, "Angel, Put Your Face On," and he's been crowded out of MTV by today's booty-shaking pop tarts, machismo rap stars and flavor-of-the-month rock acts.

But don't think for a moment that he's one of those bitter rock stars cursing his fate and living off the memories of past glories. Instead, apart from a recent gig where he played for 10 people in a smoky Michigan bar, Vander Ark is a man who seems happy about where he is right now.

"I don't drink anymore or do drugs, and I've gotten out of the rock 'n' roll business for the most part. I'm happy in my life with a wife and a baby who travel with me - my wife plays music and the baby plays a rattle for the most part," Vander Ark, 42, said last week. "Most times it's been brilliant - but I think we've created that brilliance by having the family out on the road with me."

Light and dark share equal billing on "Angel, Put Your Face On," a 10-song album produced by Ken Coomer (Wilco) and Charlie Brocco (George Harrison, Fleetwood Mac) that explores themes of love, life and loss. Vander Ark's sensitive-guy rock is chock-full of stirring lyrics and impassioned vocals that tug at listeners' souls, as if he is sharing secrets from deep within himself.

That level of one-on-one intimacy was tough to achieve in The Verve Pipe, Vander Ark admitted: "It's easier to do it as a solo artist, because there's a responsibility to other members of the band. I could take a song that another member of the band had written and rewrite all the lyrics to be my story, but it doesn't do the song any justice. ... Even with writing my own songs [in The Verve Pipe], if you make it too personal and make it all about you, in some way you're leaving members [of the band] out in the cold."

Among the inspirations for "Angel" were classic albums by Elton John, Simon & Garfunkel, Cat Stevens and Nick Drake — singer-songwriters whose stories, while personal, had universal appeal.

"When I was a kid, I lied a little bit, but it was always for the sake of a good story, trying to be a storyteller," Vander Ark said. "I definitely want to make that connection."

"Angel" starts off with "I Don't Want To Be A Bother," which Vander Ark said "catches people up to speed from my birth until now," poses some bold questions about mixing religion and politics. In the end, as the title implies, he's resigned to bowing out of the debate.

"A Trip To Omaha" details two very different journeys from Vander Ark's childhood — one with both his parents and the other with his mother as she and his father are splitting up.

Death hovers or descends in three strong offerings: In "Too Good For This World," memories of a fallen soldier remain a constant presence to those left behind. A fatal crash cuts a life short in "History," with unanswered questions as the only legacy. And the aching "Another Good Man," from the perspective of a dying man, perfectly captures the mingling of gallows humor and somber remembrance as loved ones hold a vigil at his hospital bed.

"Everybody at my age has gone through that or knows somebody who'd gone through that — and it's not such a terrible thing. It's a great thing to be able to be there for them, even though there's



VANDER ARK

## IF YOU GO

- ▶ Who: Brian Vander Ark (opening act: John Taglieri)
- ▶ When: 9 p.m. today
- ▶ Where: Cyber Cafe West, 176 Main St., Binghamton
- ▶ Tickets: \$10
- ▶ More information: [www.briandvanderark.com](http://www.briandvanderark.com); [www.johntaglieri.com](http://www.johntaglieri.com); [www.cybercafewest.com](http://www.cybercafewest.com)

other places you'd all rather be — it's a really beautiful thing to have everybody gather around," Vander Ark said of "Another Good Man." "Collectively, I think everyone feels the same, so silence is always the best way."

Appropriately, the album's most tender moments are about Vander Ark's wife, Lux. In an echo of Eric Clapton's "Wonderful Tonight," he professes his love as she prepares for a night out together in "Based Upon The Way." The raucous "Survival" makes it clear that career success, possessions and other mundane concerns are nothing compared to her: "When the world shut me out / I was pretty lucky that you let me in / You're all I need to face another day / Whenever I'm in a bind / There's only one thing to keep in mind / You're all I never need to survive."

As a break from music, Vander Ark also flexes his creative muscles in films, mostly in indie releases but also in a notable supporting role in the 2001 Mark Wahlberg movie "Rock Star." Vander Ark said he's "the one with the mullet," but considering the film's setting — the 1980s hair metal scene — that hardly narrows it down. (For the record, he plays the bass player in the tribute band that Wahlberg leaves to front the real thing.) Other rock musicians helped round out the cast.

More importantly, Vander Ark wrote and sang "Colorful," the climactic grunge-style tune that comes from Wahlberg's lips once he's renounced the trappings of rock stardom.

"It was a phenomenal project," Vander Ark said. "For the most part, doing a movie is really boring — you sit in your trailer, waiting. I wrote a lot of the last Verve Pipe record in that trailer for two months. But I also got to hang out with Zakk Wylde every day, which was just a riot — and the guys from Slaughter and Dokken, and of course Jen (Aniston) and Mark Wahlberg were great."

More recently, Vander Ark and his former Verve Pipe band mates have played a few shows together to celebrate the 1996 release of "Villains," the album that took them to the top of the charts. But don't expect a full-fledged reunion or a new CD of Verve Pipe tunes.

"It's not really us to do that — I'm not really a big fan of bands that do that, that capitalize on something that happened 10 years ago," he said. "We've never really broken up — we've had members leave and we've picked up new members — but we don't actively make records anymore. We really get together to play because we enjoy playing with each other."

Those times are usually when he feels the need for a bit of noise: "To offset what I'm trying to do with just an acoustic guitar, the greatest thing is to get in front of the bombast of the bass and the drums and actually have a rock show. I really enjoy that as well."