Milligan excavates old-school sounds

By HOWARD DUKES

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Mike Milligan knows that there's a lot in a name.

 Mike Milligan and Steam Shovel perform Saturday at the Midway Tavern in Mishawaka.

In concert

Mike Milligan and Steam Shovel perform at 9 p.m. Saturday at the Midway Tavern, 810 W. Fourth St., Mishawaka. Admission TBA. For more information, call 574-255-0458 or visit themidwaytavern.com or mikemilligan.homestead.com.

A children's book, Virginia Lee Burton's "Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel," inspired his band's name, Mike Milligan and Steam Shovel.

The guitarist says his mother purchased a copy of the book at a garage sale when he was a boy.

Milligan says he loved that book as a child in part because the main character's name is so similar to his own. Milligan says he also liked the plot, which tells the story of Mike Mulligan and his steam shovel, Mary Anne, who are confronted with modernization in the form of diesel-powered shovels.

Mike Mulligan and Mary Anne have to look for work as more people turn to the diesel-powered machines, and they persuade officials in a small town to allow them to dig the cellar for a new town hall.

There are definitely similarities between the travels and travails of the fictional Mike Mulligan and Mike Milligan's musical journey.

Milligan grew up traveling in tour buses with his father, who played for The Drifters in the 1970s.

While Milligan's contemporaries listened to stadium rock, Milligan immersed himself in the music of Motown, Stax Records, Donny Hathaway and Ray Charles.

Milligan says that playing classic soul became his calling, and he has played that music for most of the last 20 years.

"I was with a cover band in the late 1980s that did radio hits," he says.

He soon returned to his first musical love, and went on to form Steam Shovel in 1993. The band will hold a release party Saturday at Mishawaka's Midway Tavern for its latest CD, "Lucky Person."

Milligan knows he's an analog musician in a digital world, and in that way, the children's story "Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel" is a metaphor for his group and his musical career.

"That is exactly right," he says. "We are definitely an old-school blues and R&B band."

But Milligan says he can't pinpoint why he gravitated to classic soul.

"I was just talking to my wife about that," he says. "When I was growing up, I heard all types of music, starting with the older stuff that my dad played."

\Milligan's father also listened to such rock legends as Led Zeppelin, but Milligan zeroed in on the classic soul.

"It might be that it seemed more real to me than a lot of other music," he says.

"Lucky Man" includes six original songs and four covers.

Each track features Milligan's soulful and husky vocals. The cover tracks includes a blues/gospel rendition of Stevie Wonder's "A Place in the Sun" and funk versions of Billy Preston's "Will it Go Round in Circles" and the Ray Charles hit "Busted."

A Kokomo resident, Milligan knows that Charles' 1963 song about hard times remains relevant in places that are still recovering from the Great Recession.

Milligan says he changed a couple of the verses because he grew up in a town that made cars instead of growing up on a Georgia farm.

"Instead of saying 'cotton is down to a quarter a pound,' I sang 'the factories in town are all closing down,'" he says.

The group's originals, such as "I'm Not Lost" and "Lucky Man," retain that classic soul feel, while Milligan says he channels the soul/country/rock sound of Sun Records on "Fool No More."

The group has been holding release parties and concerts to support "Lucky Man," but Saturday's show in Mishawaka is special. The group has played in the South Bend area on several occasions, but this will be Steam Shovel's first show at the Midway Tavern."We've been asking to get a show there for years," Milligan says, "and we are delighted to finally be at the Midway."

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