Asleep at the Wheel
Biography
2014

Can a wheel reinvent itself while it’s still rolling?

Sounds like an impossible task -- but you never want to say “impossible” to Asleep at the Wheel, the famed western-swing, boogie, and roots-music outfit that’s, amazingly, still on the upswing. That’s saying something, too, considering the group’s been around for nearly 40 years, turning out an incredible 25+ albums while playing an unrelenting schedule of one-nighters that would make a vaudevillian dizzy.

“In terms of how many people we played for, what we accomplished, and how much money we made – well, we didn’t make any money – this year was absolutely our best year ever,” says Wheel founder and front man Ray Benson with a chuckle.

And even as the Wheel rolled on, the reinvention had begun. You could see and hear it in their live shows, where new vocalist Elizabeth McQueen invited comparison with the classic female vocalists of the band’s earlier era, and fiddler-singer Jason Roberts gave the band a second male lead voice to complement Benson’s immediately identifiable baritone.

These days, the reinvented Wheel is also rolling down a couple of new avenues. One involves the critically acclaimed musical play, A Ride With Bob, which stars Benson as himself -- encountering the ghost of Bob Wills on a tour bus – Roberts as the young Wills, and McQueen as Minnie Pearl and other famed entertainment figures, with the rest of the band members featured as well. Originally designed as a one-off celebration of Wills’ 100th birthday in ‘05, A Ride With Bob quickly took on a life of its own and, notes Benson, “it’s absolutely a part of what we do now.” Another success has been the adaptation of the Wheel’s repertoire for pops symphony. Performances with Dallas, Austin, Fort Worth & Amarillo symphonies have drawn record crowds.

The Wheel’s new look is also spotlighted in several new discs – the first called, appropriately enough, Reinventing the Wheel. The 12-cut celebration of American – particularly Southwestern – music features guest appearances by gospel’s Blind Boys of Alabama (with a splendid reworking of the old Wills tune “The Devil Ain’t Lazy”) and banjoist Rolf Sieker, along with lead vocals by McQueen and Roberts as well as Benson, whose voice has been synonymous with Asleep at the Wheel for decades.

The second is 2009’s Willie and the Wheel; a collaboration with Willie Nelson that was originally envisioned by famed producer Jerry Wexler in the 1970s. Unfortunately before they had a chance to cut it, Nelson had left Atlantic Records. But over the ensuing decades Wexler kept the idea alive and even gave Ray his entire collection of western swing vinyl that included his notes on song choices and treatments. In late 2007 the idea was revived and Jerry and Ray reconnected by phone. Always the producer with a vision, Jerry was involved in every way. He insisted that some of the tracks should include horns as well as a return to traditional fiddles and lap steel guitar associated with western swing. As the sessions concluded and Willie finished his vocals the tracks were sent to Jerry. “To my delight and relief,” says Ray, “he loved them.” In fact, Wexler heard most of the finished tracks prior to his passing in August 2008. “Jerry wanted us to do this album and I’m glad we got to do it for him,” says Willie Nelson. “And that he heard it before he passed on.”

The success of the Willie and the Wheel album release was quickly followed up by a tour and even a taping of the 35th anniversary of Austin City Limits for PBS (for broadcast in Fall of 2009), a fitting double-bill as Willie had taped the pilot and Asleep at the Wheel appeared in the very first regular episode of the legendary live music television program.

And now in contemplating the 40th anniversary of Asleep at the Wheel in 2010, Ray remains focused on the original concept. “I carried the load for many, many years, but I’ve always just wanted to have a band, as opposed to Ray Benson and Asleep at the Wheel,” Benson explains. “That’s what we had in the ‘70s – a band, a revue kind of deal, which was the whole concept. But trying to replace a Chris O’Connell was very difficult. And then Elizabeth walks up, and boom – here’s my girl singer. And then I
kept pushing Jason, both through the play and through the band, saying, `Man, you’ve got talent. You can sing. You’ve got the golden ear – just apply it to your singing and songwriting.’”

Roberts, who’s been the Wheel’s full-time fiddler since early ’96, welcomed the opportunity to be a part of the revamped, revue-style Wheel. “I think everybody got a chance to put their two cents in, and bring to the table what they had,” he adds. “God bless Ray Benson for allowing us to do that…”

Adds McQueen, “One of the things about Asleep at the Wheel is that they always have great musicians. That’s what they’re known for. So for them to ask me to join and then to keep me in the band, and to let me step out a little more and stand in the shoes of Chris O’Connell and Maryann Price, who were amazing singers – that’s an incredible honor. It’s above and beyond my greatest expectations.”

So, whether your next encounter with Asleep at the Wheel is at a dance or concert, or backing up Willie Nelson via the new disc, or at a live production of A Ride with Bob, you’ll be witnessing something very special -- a band that’s not only been entertaining audiences with its own genre-busting music for four decades, but also a group that’s never been afraid to try something new -- including a reinvention, inspired by the past, that rolls joyously toward a long and shining future.