

Webb Wilder

Introduction: Webb Wilder has long been one of my personal favorites. The "Last Of The Full-Grown Men," Wilder has a sincere passion for and an immense knowledge of honky-tonk country, roots rock, psychedelica, soul and blues that I enthusiastically share. Much like Eugene Chadbourne, Wilder is a walking encyclopedia of arcane and obscure music, but where Chadbourne's creative persona borderlines on the surreal, Wilder is the 'Joe Friday' of popular music, somber and businesslike with tongue firmly planted in cheek and his fingers on his guitar strings. Too eclectic to ever break through to the mainstream, too entertaining and talented to ever become more than a cult artist, Wilder's legacy is that of good music performed with top notch musicians, with one foot in country and one in rock & roll. I've known Webb since the mid-80s and have conducted several interviews with the artist, this one from one or another of my music zines being one of the best.

Not too long ago, I picked up a zine – I don't remember it's title, but the rag was reviewing several other zines – and one zine got a positive review based mainly on the fact that they had run a piece on Nashville's own Webb Wilder, "Last Of The Full Grown Men." I thought that it was pretty cool that Wilder – a cult favorite if there's ever been one – was being considered the new standard of what was cool and what wasn't in today's pop culture. "That's great to hear," says the man, himself, "that's the kind of stuff that encourages you that there will be some sort of steamroller of momentum."

For Wilder, who has recorded five albums and toured the globe at least twice during almost a decade and a half, every word of encouragement is a welcome one. Although possessing a loyal following, Wilder's energetic and unique blend of pop, roots-rock, blues and country has thus far failed to find an audience with mainstream listeners. Coupled with a distinctive baritone voice and a charismatic stage persona that is part nineteen-fifties B-movie Private Eye and part self-styled psychedelic shaman, Wilder creates the most consistently entertaining and listenable albums on the musical horizon today.

Not that Wilder ever had a chance to be anything but a rock god. "I was into it right out of the womb," says Wilder of his decision to become a musician. "My aunt, who is a dear lady named Montressa Wilder, says that I sang before I talked. I don't think that I'm a musically gifted person, but I've always loved music and always had rhythm and songs and words in my head and an affinity for show business and make-believe."

"I was into music before the Beatles," says Webb, but the Beatles and the British Rock invasion was so good, so significant, so appealing to me as the only fourth grader who already had records. That really kicked me into high gear. Before that, I was interested in Elvis and Ricky Nelson, Hank Williams and the Everly Brothers. That's what was there in the Ben Franklin Dime Store in the suburbs of Hattiesburg, Mississippi. There were country music shows on television, the Ed Sullivan Show and variety shows that featured music...a local show called McCaffrey's Showtime that sometimes had people that were so horrible that they were wonderful."

It wasn't until much later in life, however, when Wilder hit the thirty-year milestone, that he decided to dedicate his life to both kinds of music – rock *and* roll. "I had stopped and started a lot of regular straight jobs that I had washed out of because I was more interested in music." He ended up in Nashville. "The band that I was in at the time was a band called the Drapes, and we were based out of Hattiesburg, which isn't a



good place to be based out of if you're serious about going somewhere in the music business," recalls Wilder. "One of the things that our band had aspired to do was to relocate to a music center."

"We had a female singer, Suzy Elkins, who was a little older, married, her husband had a good career at the time as a helicopter pilot, working for the oil companies offshore. New Orleans seemed like the place that made the most sense for him to go to. I couldn't dig the idea of going there, so we didn't go anywhere, and later broke up for different reasons. I had lived in Nashville in 1974 and '75, and I had lived in Austin around '77. I like Austin a lot, but I knew one guy here who is in the business, and the business is here, and although I didn't want to pursue, necessarily, a mainstream straight country thing, there was more than that here. I figured

that I'd probably end up in a 'van band' routed out of Nashville, and it was a better place to route out of...which all certainly turned out to be true."

Since coming to Nashville, Wilder has developed a knack for attracting good musicians who, unfortunately, later go onto bigger and better things. Musical contributors to Wilder's albums include guitarists Sonny Landreth and Kenny Greenburg and bassist Rick Price; his regular band has included talents like drummer Les James Lester (Los Straitjackets) and bassist Kelly Looney (Steve Earle). What is it about his music that enables him to enlist some of the region's best players?

"I do think that I've had some pretty good musicians," says Wilder, "and some of them have gone on to some pretty good things. I wish that I could say that they've gone on to wonderful things, like getting rich. I think that it's fun for them to play...I don't think that it's because I'm such a musical wellspring. Unfortunately, there's a whole lot of square music out there and those are some of the gigs that people have to get. I think that my thing is anything but square and I think that musicians like to play it. In the last few years, there's been a good measure of premeditated spontaneity, because sometimes we just go off into stuff that we don't know – which is probably more fun for us than for the audience."

"I had such a stable line-up for a long time that I really had come to believe that was what you had to do," says Wilder. "I've run through a lot of people not because they quit or I fired them, but because by the time I got around to needing them, they had previous commitments. I've gone through a lot of bass players, it seems like, lately, and they were all great. I'm on my third guitar player (George Bradfute) and he's great, and I'm on my third drummer and he's great, also."

After a couple of late-80s/early-90s major label releases, Wilder later resurfaced on Austin's acclaimed indie Watermelon Records label. How did he end up on the Texas label? "I guess this is the biggest faux pas in the world to say," exclaims Wilder, "but it's true – we have the same lawyer, which is supposed to be suicide. We had the first album, ***It Came From Nashville***; sadly, it had wound up, for various reasons other

than demand, oddly enough, going out of print. They were interested in reissuing it and have done so, and that was the beginning of our relationship with them. We dug it and it wasn't like people were beating down our doors, and they were there to make some records for us, so we did."

Recently, Wilder has taken his lone wolf, hard-boiled image into the literary world. In an extension of his private eye persona seen on the Night Flight videos, Webb Wilder P.I. is the protagonist in a wonderful and entertaining double-sided, two story book titled **Webb Wilder And The Molemen**. How did Wilder end up on the pages of a mystery novel?

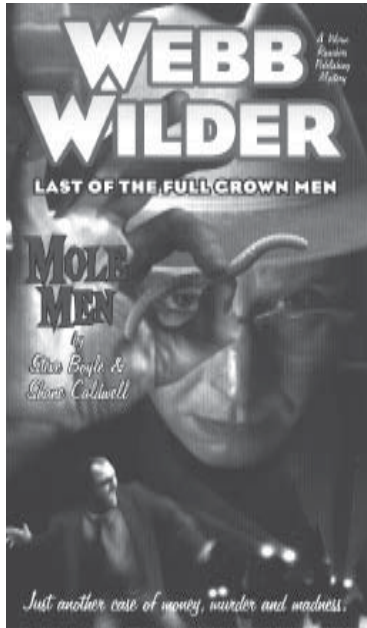
"I wish that I had a concise answer for that – I almost don't know," says Wilder. "I first worked with Shane Caldwell, who is one of the two authors of the book, when Bobby Field and myself cast him in the role of Carlsbad Deveraux in our *Horror Hayride* film, which came out later on the *Cornflicks* video on BMG. I had met Steve Boyle before that, casually, and he is and was a video director, among other things. Somehow, we all came together."

"Steve had wanted Shane and I to do some video vignettes, short promos for the Hard Rock Cafe to play in their inside programming. Steve puts together these long tapes, music videos with things between them. We did some short, goofy things for that and he had the idea that it would be cool to put a package together and try and develop a Webb Wilder television series...the Molemen idea came out of that, and Shane and Steve went and wrote the script for that and, later, *The Doll*, and then they thought that we might attract attention for these ideas by putting them in the classic pulp novel form so that the average person could read it. It seemed like kind of a companion to the film noir film, anyway, so there you have it. They had a bunch printed up and there you go."

Outside of a loyal cult audience, Wilder is mostly unknown, even after five albums, to the American music-buying public. He has also earned significant followings across Europe and in Canada. It is in France, though, where he has found his greatest popularity, a fact that mystifies even Wilder. "I talk better than I sing, and I'm certainly no Eric Clapton on the guitar," says Wilder. "I've been thinking about that. Country music, for instance, is not big in France. The reason for this is that a large part of what's happening in country is the lyrics. Therefore, it's more popular in countries that speak the English language. We have some great lyrics to some of our songs, but the beat is more important than the lyrics in some others, and I think that must be it. There's enough sizzle that they go for the steak; enough beat that they like it. They really prefer speaking French, but they like American stuff and they get some of the lyrics, but they like stuff that's – and I hate this word – 'packaged' as classic iconography. Maybe I'm inherently that, I don't know."

On his albums and during live performances, Wilder has frequently dipped into his encyclopedic knowledge of musical history to unearth choice musical nuggets to cover. In 1995, with his current band the Nashvegans, Webb decided to record an entire album of classic obscure rock and country covers. "It bought us more time to finish the originals," says Wilder of the ***Town & Country*** album, "and we wanted to do it. We knew that it would be fun, and it was. It was about seven seconds ahead of its time," he adds. "I'm not going to say that it is the best one," of his albums, says Wilder, "but it was the most fun. We've been fortunate that when we picked the most over-worked song, people loved it and said that we had one of the best versions, which was 'Baby, Please Don't Go.' On this album, we picked our own weird collection of songs."

Wilder adds, "we had made the deal with Watermelon – you know, small labels



have small budgets, and money isn't everything but it can help you make a better record. You can spend more time or buy better stuff or whatever. To get the budget up, we had said 'how about a 2-for-1 thing?' so we got a 'one' budget that was bigger than a 'two' would be...I wish that I knew how to answer questions where I just didn't have to tell the truth, because nobody does, and it usually comes back on you. That's the truth, though, and we knew if we made two and we made the one with the original songs on it second, we could get them written." That album of original tunes was released as the acclaimed ***Acres Of Suede***.

Who would Webb Wilder play with on his next album, if he could play with anyone? "I do have the fantasy sometimes that it would be cool to play and not sing and try to be as good a guitar player as I can be. Somewhere on the Internet, is an answer to a question like 'if I could put together a great band, who would it be?' In my case, it would be Ian McLagen, James Burton and all these people. It would be fun to play with different people. It was fun to play with Al Kooper on ***Doo Dad***. It would be cool to work with Rick Danko, I'd be playing rhythm guitar and he'd be playing bass, or Duck Dunn. Be Steve Cropper for a day and play with the MGs. The thing is, though, is that he's better at being Steve Cropper than I am, so I don't have those fantasies as much as I once did."

"My latest fantasy – and this is another time where I'm being honest and I don't know why – is that someone famous would stand up and say 'Webb Wilder is good.' I don't think that I have that, where a name brand rock & roller has come out for me in some sort of way. It may never happen, but it would feel good..."