

Observations: Still Hup for the Wonder Stuff

By Warren Howard

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In my class at school in the West Midlands, some time around the turn of the 1980s, your indie credentials rested on whether you were a Stuffie, a Poppie or a Neddie. Grunge hadn't quite yet wiped its greasy maw over the alternative-music scene and the bug-eyed goings-on in Manchester all seemed a little, well, exotic.

At the head of the triumvirate of bands that made a temporary NME Mecca of the town of Stourbridge, on Birmingham's western fringes, were the petulant, spit-in-your-eye quartet The Wonder Stuff. Flanked by Po Will Eat Itself and Ned's Atomic Dustbin, they dealt in fuzzy rushes of acerbic guitar pop, but in 1989, after trot around America and the addition of the multi-instrumentalist Martin "Fiddly" Bell, things were about to take a bit of a hoe-downish turn.

"Being on a tour bus with us was a nightmare," explains the band's frontman and famously spiky mouthpiecer Miles Hunt. "We wouldn't let each other play our favourite music, so we settled on stuff that we all agreed that we hated. We'd been on the road in America for a couple of months and then we got into this album called *Forty Trucking Greats*. Just 40 songs about trucking. Very yee-ha. We were also starting to enjoy a bit of country and bluegrass."

The resulting album, *Hup*, was a sparkling mixture of Wonder Stuff old and new: "Don't Let Me Down, Gently", the band's first Top 20 hit, was one of a clutch that still provided kindle for the sweaty mosh pit, but others, notably the glorious "Golden Green", leant the band a rootsy brio and provided a benchmark for the rest of their career.

Twenty-one years later, and The Wonder Stuff are back to celebrate *Hup*'s longevity, playing the album in its entirety over a series of live dates and pegging on an hour's-worth of old favourites for very good measure. bostin' time, then, as they say in the Black Country, and absolutely nowhere else.

The Wonder Stuff Hup Tour, 02 Academy, Oxford, tonight; Shepherd's Bush Empire, London W12, Sat; then touring to 25 Apr (Thewonderstuff.com)

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