

Wonder Stuff give fans an encore

By PHILIP BRASOR

Special to The Japan Times

Anyone who knows anything about the U.K. pop scene understands how important the music weeklies are to the success of young artists, and while the Internet has undermined that influence they can still make or break a band. Miles Hunt should know. He and his group, The Wonder Stuff, were darlings of the three big weeklies in the late '80s.

"Back then we had NME, Melody Maker and Sounds," he says over the phone from a studio near his home in the U.K. "We were very popular with all three, which was unusual since each one had its peculiarities. Melody Maker

went for the goth bands, Sounds was more for rock and NME preferred some political intent."



One-time gig: The current incarnation of The Wonder Stuff (from left): Erica Nockalls, Mark McCarthy, Miles Hunt, Malcolm Treece and Andres Karu, are playing at Tokyo's Liquid Room on Sept. 10.

Hunt claims to have never considered the reason for this confluence of attention. "I don't know why it was, really," he says. "I gave good press at the time. People knew that if they sat down with me for an interview, I'd be full throttle. I had an opinion on everything. At the same time, our first album had that excitement of the late '70s — Buzzcocks, Ramones — so I suppose it was OK to like us and not have to worry about how cool a decision it was. We covered all the bases. And, if I can be allowed to blow my own trumpet, we were always brilliant live."

Blowing its own trumpet was something The Wonder Stuff was famous for. The group was witty, straightforward and often downright arrogant. Though they were identified as punk because their songs were short, loud and fast, the basic appeal of the band's sound was broader. Between 1988, when they released their debut, "The Eight Legged Groove Machine," and 1994, when they hit their commercial peak and quickly disintegrated, the band's singles made it into the U.K. Top Twenty with a consistency that recalled the fledgling rock acts of the 1960s. So if to some people the Buzzcocks are the obvious model, to others it's The Kinks or even The Beatles.

And as Hunt points out, their concerts were legendary, and not just because of the music. "I wasn't really angry," he says about his salty reputation. "That whole thing about me abusing the audience became something of a game. When we walked out on stage we'd meet this barrage of friendly invective. It was an antidote to the big rock stars of the time, who would come out on stage and yell, 'I love all you guys.'"

This attitude matched the brash outlook of the songs. The melodies may have been sweet and the rhythms danceable, but Hunt hit his targets squarely and with all his might, whether they were lovers he'd tired of or the insipid dance pop of Rick Astley. Their third album was titled "Never Loved Elvis."

They were heady times, but Hunt says he doesn't miss them. Next week, The Wonder Stuff will be making its first trip to Japan in 18 years, and he admits the band were at a low point the last time they came. "We were always at each other's throats at that point. After we returned to the U.K. we got five of the biggest headlining gigs we'd ever done and were sick of the sight of each other, culminating in a big fight in a hotel. It was a shame, because we weren't at our best. The gigs were sold out and the audiences were brilliant. They deserved better."

The group broke up several years later. Hunt's acerbic volubility landed him a job hosting MTV Europe's "120 Minutes," which seems to have soured him on television for good. "I got rid of the one at my house about five years ago," he says. "I figured I might live a little bit longer if I stopped shouting at the TV."

It was Paul Weller who talked Hunt into returning to music. "I think it was in '96," he recalls. "I'd just shaved off all my hair and we were in a bar and he said, 'By the way, Miles, it's about time you grew your hair back, wrote some f*cking songs and started another band.' I said, 'Thanks for patronizing me, Paul. You want me to kneel down so you can pat me on the head?' "

Still, it gave him an idea. "I thought when The Wonder Stuff split up I didn't want to be in a band any more, but the truth was I didn't want to be in *that* band any more." He formed another group called Vent 414 and stayed in touch with his old Wonder Stuff band mates. They reformed in 2000.

"We thought we could tolerate one another," he says. "And we tried it for three years but it didn't work again. So the guys that I didn't get on with cleared off and were replaced, and now The Wonder Stuff is the happiest place it's ever been."

For the past decade Hunt has split his time between solo acoustic work with his partner, violinist Erica Nockalls and the revamped Wonder Stuff, which has released two albums of new material as well as a newly recorded version of the group's debut.

"We toured 'The Eight Legged Groove Machine' at the end of last year for its 20th anniversary," he explains, "and our bass player suggested recording it, because he wasn't the original bass player and had all these songs to learn, and the easiest way to learn them was to record them. So that's what we did and we agreed that if it came out good we'll bring a thousand copies on tour and sell them."

Somehow, the Japanese label, Vinyl Junkie, heard about the album and contacted Hunt through his MySpace page.

"They asked me if I'd be interested in having it released in Japan, which means Japan is the only place in the world where you can buy it in a record store."

Hunt hasn't had anything to do with major labels for more than 12 years, and that's perfectly OK with him. "I think it's a better time for musicians right now," he says. "I've never gigged so much in my life. The last two years, me and Erica have been touring solidly. It pays the bills and keeps me

sane. We sell our CDs at gigs, empty a box every night, and that's a great feeling because you actually see the person who's buying your records."

He's also happy to be out of London. Five years ago he moved to the countryside, which he says has a much healthier music scene. "There's this little pub in the middle of nowhere in the hills surrounded by trees and streams. It only holds about 60 people. There's no stage. It's a wonderful atmosphere and the people who play there have an honest and passionate approach to music. I'm more comfortable around that than I am around people dressing up in their little emo uniforms and copying whatever it is they've just seen on the TV in London. I just hate all that."

The Wonder Stuff play Ebisu Liquid Room in Tokyo on Sept. 10 at 7:30 p.m. Tickets are ¥6,500 in advance. For more information, call (03) 3444-6751.

The Japan Times: Friday, Sept. 4, 2009
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