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September 13, 2009

The Wonder Stuff's Miles Hunt on local acts

Shared put unknown artists from a Shropshire inn on tour with Wayne Hussey of the Mission and Roddy Frame of Aztec Camera

David Sinclair

When Miles Hunt was offered a Saturday-night headlining slot for his group, the Wonder Stuff, on the Avalon Stage at Glastonbury this year, his first question was: "How much are they paying?" Apparently, the answer was not encouraging. "Not even enough to pay for the crew," Hunt says. "I had absolutely no interest in doing it. Why would I want to aid and abet Michael Eavis's empire-building?"

Hunt was eventually talked into playing the gig by his management, and was bowled over by the ecstatic reception the Wonder Stuff got from a crowd of about 5,000 crammed inside the tent, with more fans piled up about 40 deep outside. When they played favourites such as *Caught in My Shadow*, and their biggest hit, *The Size of a Cow*, the band were all but drowned out by the noise of the crowd singing along, and Hunt ended up having a ball. "I absolutely loved it," he says. "But the money was still piss-poor."

Hunt has always been one of the most plain-speaking of pop stars, which may have a bearing on why it has been 20 years since the Wonder Stuff were last invited to play Glastonbury. Back then, the group from Stourbridge, in the West Midlands, were a beacon of light on the indie-rock scene at a time when, according to most accounts, you had Happy Mondays, the Stone Roses and not a lot else going on. Hunt finds the lack of credit for his band's achievements — including a dozen or so UK hit singles and worldwide album sales of about 3m copies — "irritating" but understandable.

"Manchester bands and Liverpool bands will tell you that they are the best band in the world," he says, "but bands from the Black Country don't take themselves too seriously."

The Wonder Stuff are, however, well enough remembered for Hunt still to be leading a revamped version of the band. The original bass player, Rob Jones, died from a drug overdose in 1993, and the original drummer, Martin Gilks, died in a motorbike crash in 2006. Both were estranged from Hunt by the time they died. "Martin was at war with me over something,"

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Hunt says. "I used to annoy everybody, to be honest. I wasn't very good at talking people into things. I used to shout at them and say, 'This is how we're going to do it.'"

For Hunt, being a successful musician brought severe disillusionment. "I thought I would be going into this world where I would just constantly be in the company of people who love music, and love to talk about music as much as I do. And it was quite the opposite," he says. Above all, he hated living and working in London. "By 2004, I was the most unhappy I'd been in my entire life. I had a beautiful flat in a lovely old Victorian building in Stoke Newington. But I felt that London's energy was based on hate and fear."

In 2005, looking for someone to replace the Wonder Stuff's fiddle and banjo player, Martin Bell, with whom he had also fallen out, Hunt met the violinist Erica Nockalls and his luck began to change. A classically trained musician who nurses an enthusiasm for heavy metal, Nockalls joined the Wonder Stuff. She also, in due course, joined Hunt: they became an acoustic double act and a romantic item.

Hunt left London and set up house in a remote part of Shropshire, where Nockalls came to live with him. One afternoon, the couple came across the Horseshoe Inn, a pub tucked away in the nearby village of Ratlinghope. "It's a place I've been looking for all my life," Hunt wrote in the sleeve notes to his and Nockalls's second album, *Catching More Than We Miss*. Run with passion and care by the licensees, Mo and Bob, the Horseshoe has become a magnet for musical talent in the area, thanks to its Monday-night open-mike sessions.

Hunt and Nockalls began to show up at the open-mike nights on a regular basis, and were "blown away" by the talent of the acts playing there, and humbled by the spirit of goodwill in which the (entirely unpaid) enterprise was undertaken. For Hunt, stumbling across this scene was little short of an epiphany. All the cynicism and ill will of his previous existence was replaced by a burning desire to encourage and promote this new circle of musical friends, who quickly gathered around him like kids around the Pied Piper.

So it was that, earlier this year, he initiated the Shared project, which kicked off with a gig in Birmingham Town Hall. The idea was to gather friends from the past, such as Wayne Hussey, from the Mission, and Roddy Frame, of Aztec Camera, and put them on a package tour with himself and the unknown artists Hunt had met at the Horseshoe. He has also produced and recorded various of the Horseshoe acts for a Shared album, which was launched at an all-day show at the pub this summer.

The event was a tremendous success, attracting 500 or so people to a venue with no public transport or even a mobile-phone signal. The acts performed on a makeshift stage on the back of a truck, parked on the far side of a little stream running along the edge of the car park. Far from moaning about receiving insufficient payment for his efforts, Hunt speaks of the experience with the expansive air of a man who, at the age of 43, has finally found a little piece of heaven on earth.

"This is brilliant," he says, contemplating the scene he has done so much to nurture. "No matter where we are when we're out

touring, me and Erica say every day, 'I just wish we were at the Horseshoe. I just wish we were at home.'"

Shared, the album, is available on IRL; sharedevents.co.uk

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