

Band Profile:

Wild Turkey – celebrating 20 years!

It isn't often that a band can claim to have had a busy working career over two full decades, but that's exactly what we are celebrating in this issue with the twentieth birthday of Melbourne outfit Wild Turkey.

The band was put together in 1988 by John Marsden (ARRAS member 2061) when he was just sixteen years of age, and while Marsden has always been frontman for the group, (guitar and vocals), the original line up also included Matt Walker on lead guitar, Matt Ralph on bass guitar and Chris Latham on drums.

The band was briefly called The Deviates until they settled permanently on the "Wild Turkey" tag, and their very first gig was played at the Sherbrooke Community School on 20 August 1988.

From the outset, their sound has always been influenced by the intensity of rockabilly, psychobilly, blues and '60s garage, plus a little early surf. Their sound developed into a powerful representation of all the above. Their musical diversity and their unique style have proved popular both at home and abroad, and have earned them an eclectic mix of dedicated fans.

In the early years there were occasional personnel changes. Several drummers came and went until 1990 when Kirk Syrett joined the group and became a permanent fixture. By the time the band released its first CD in 1993, the line up consisted of Marsden, Walker and Syrett, with Phil Smith on bass guitar. That debut disc was a five track EP titled *I Drove All Day* and it further spurred on the band's popularity.

Matt Walker left the band in 1994 to further his solo career and Wild Turkey then made the comfortable transition to a three-piece outfit. In 1996, after a change of bass guitar players, Marsden and Syrett were joined by Guy Lawson, whose double bass added a new dimension to the Wild Turkey sound, and it is these



three musicians who we recognise today as the Wild Turkey trio.

For some years now, the band has been easily recognised by its quirky features that set them apart from other bands in the local rockin' scene. On stage, and on the road, they make a strong visual impact which matches the intensity of their music – their touring vehicle is John's 1959 Tank Fairlane hearse. Syrett's kick drums have always been heavily decorated with the ghoulish designs of his striking original artwork, while the double basses used by Lawson are all instruments that he has built himself.

The band's second CD, *Love That Kills*, was completed in 1997, and because it had taken three years to complete, it included several musicians from earlier line ups. This album was

followed by two subsequent releases featuring only Marsden, Syrett and Lawson: *Surfin' Hearse* (2001) and *Devil Ridin' Shotgun* (2006), which both did very well, the latter being distributed by MGM. The *Devil Ridin' Shotgun* CD attracted much attention, firstly for its music, but also for its striking cover art. (See album cover on page 27 and refer to *Big Beat of the '50s* issue 104 to read a review of this CD).

Today the Wild Turkey sound contains so many elements that it is impossible to pigeon-hole it into any particular genre. The music has developed through an amalgam of influences from hillbilly and rockabilly, blues and rock'n'roll, to punk and psychobilly. Syrett's favourite bands include Kiss, the Rolling Stones

and Black Sabbath, while Lawson says he is currently listening to a combination of traditional country, (Hank senior and Hank III), and punk rock. Marsden quotes a most extensive list of influences, starting from some of the great names of the '40s and '50s, through to a few legendary instrumentalists, and finishing with some contemporary sounds: Screaming Jay Hawkins, Hank Williams, Johnny Cash, Elvis, Jerry Lee Lewis, The Johnny Burnette Trio, Roy Orbison, The Cramps, The Meteors, The Atlantics, early ZZ Top, Linc Wray, Intoxica, Dick Dale, Hank III, Southern Culture On The Skids and Reverend Horton Heat.

While Marsden has always been the main songwriter for the group, the trio have collaborated on many tunes and some of the originals by Syrett and Lawson have been included on the band's CDs.

Wild Turkey has had the honour of supporting a range of great artists over the years, including Slim Jim Phantom, (of Stray Cats fame), during his most recent visit. They have also shared the stage with some notable bands such as Intoxica, Shindiggers, Fireballs and The Exotics.

Touring has always been an important part of Wild Turkey's career, and in recent years they have twice been over to the US, where their music is well known and much appreciated. But while not all states of Australia have seen these three perform, they do carry out an annual tour of Tasmania. (Get ready, Tassie – they'll be heading your way again next month!)

Over the years, the boys have enjoyed some spectacular and memorable gigs, one of which was playing at a Punk Rock bar in Las Vegas. Another explosive event was their performance to ten thousand people in the main street of Cowes some years ago, where a riotous crowd had gathered for the Superbikes. But Marsden tells me that the most extraordinary experience of all took place at a gig on the Mornington Peninsula: "The floor of the Flinders Hotel collapsed into the disused and flooded cellar of the building, dumping our dancing fans into the drink!" I'm guessing there are probably many more odd and



L to R: Syrett, Lawson and Marsden

interesting stories this band could tell us – probably enough to fill a book.

Very recently, some of Wild Turkey's music has been included on several local compilation discs, notably the *Swamp Buck Blues Sessions 2*, (put together by Melbourne's PBS radio), and the *It's A Gas* CD, (compiled by Jamie Suppa). We can only hope that they'll be heading back to the studio again in the near future to lay down some new tracks as they look forward to another ten (or twenty) good years.

Wild Turkey's twentieth birthday celebrations were held at the Micawber Tavern in Belgrave (Victoria) on August 22, but... with a band like Wild Turkey the party never stops because at every gig they deliver a high octane show. Get out there and help the boys celebrate their wonderful success, and wish them well as they prepare to head off on another US tour.

Thank you to Wild Turkey for sharing their story with Big Beat of the '50s. We have one Wild Turkey Prize Pack to give away. Full details on page 33.

Kiz. - Member 1838

Visit them online:

www.myspace.com/wildturkeymusic

