

Rock 'n' Rebirth: Pharoahs 2000

Melissa Schorr

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"Gin Blossoms rule!" a female voice shrieks somewhere within the crowd at Trax, the soon-to-be trendy new nightclub at Palace Station.

"Hey, thanks, they broke up," lead singer Robin Wilson curtly replies as he launches into "Allison Road," the hit song that he wrote for the aforementioned band.

The chastened crowd goes along with his pretense, the ground rules now clear.

Though this is, in fact, the Gin Blossoms' former lead singer and drummer in front of them, that is not to be emphasized.

That band is history. This is their new band, Pharoahs 2000.

So what are two former members of a Grammy-nominated, multiplatinum, hit band doing performing a free weekend act in a Las Vegas lounge in the wee hours of the morning?

Simple: biding their time until the release of their brand new album, "From Beyond the Back Burner." The release has been postponed due to a management shake-up at A&M Records. The country's loss is Las Vegas' gain.

"All the momentum we'd built up in putting the studio and recording together sputtered out because of a situation not in our control," Wilson explains, "so we thought a great way to build a national following was to play in Vegas."

This is the story of rock 'n' roll stars who hit big, broke up, and are, they hope, on the way back to the big time, sporting a new name and new sound. But the question is begged: Does the new band have what it takes to make it -- all over again?

The Gin Blossoms finally hit the big time in 1993 with a string of hits off their multiplatinum 1992 album, "New Miserable Experience" (referring, *heh heh*, to the *agony* of being rich and famous rock 'n' rollers). With songs such as "Hey Jealousy," "Until I Fall Away," "Found Out About You," and "Allison Road," the band seemed headed straight to superstardom.

Behind the scenes, though, their guitarist and main songwriter, Doug Hopkins, had lapsed into a serious drinking problem not long after the album was cut. The band reluctantly cut him loose, hiring replacement guitarist Scott Johnson.

(Ironically, the band's name, Gin Blossoms, chosen by Hopkins, was a joking reference to damaged capillaries in the nose that can be aggravated by excessive drinking.)

Even more sadly, Hopkins' dependency on alcohol and subsequent depression led to his suicide in December 1993, right at the pinnacle of the album's success.

If the guilt over his death haunted the band members, the question of whether they could make it without him haunted them as well.

That seemed to be resolved with the 1996 release of "Congratulations, I'm Sorry," (this time, a reference to the range of reactions they got following the first album.)

With the hit song "Follow You Down," the band seemed to be back on solid ground. Sure, maybe a little of the sparkle was gone, but with Wilson's plaintive vocal stylings still in command, the course seemed steady. The album went platinum, the band went on tour, and was nominated for a Grammy.

But immediately after the tour, rumors began swirling that the band was bound for a breakup, rumors that were finally proven true in the spring of 1997.

"It was a personal thing, it was time for me to move on," Wilson says, hinting at personal problems among the band members.

The split must have been severe enough to land the four former members in two separate bands, both back in Tempe, Ariz: Scott Johnson and Jesse Valenzuela formed The Low Watts, while Wilson and drummer Phillip Rhodes (and former Gin Blossom Dan Henzerling and bassist Brian Griffith) formed Pharoahs 2000.

So far, the Pharoahs 2000 seem to have won in the race for imprimatur, signing with A&M Records in November 1997, less than a year after their debut, and producing the new record with producer John Hampton, who produced both of the Gin Blossoms' previous albums.

"It's a lot more metallic and new wave in nature than people will expect," Wilson says about the new album. "I'm really psyched about that. There's a couple songs people will not expect in the likely evolution of the Gin Blossoms. I think we have a different sound than what's on the radio right now -- even though we're ripping off everyone we're ever heard."

Wilson is confident that lightning -- or pop chart success -- can strike twice: "It's a hell of a lot easier (coming from a previously successful band)," he says. "It's like showing up in a city where your friends have never been to but you've spent time there. I feel like I can steer us clear of a lot of potholes."

Still, he admits he's "walking a fine line" between exploiting the past and using it to his advantage.

"I don't mind playing Gin Blossoms songs," he adds. "I'm really proud of what the Gin Blossoms did."

Still, he struggles over whether to let his new band play "Hey Jealousy" -- a Gin Blossoms hit he did not write, saying he wouldn't even consider it in hometown Tempe.

And he is reluctant to have the album's first release be the catchy tune "Letter," which he describes as "the only gooey mid-tempo Gin Blossoms-like song on the record," and one not as likely to establish the band's unique identity and sound.

And if the band never rises to the occasion again? Wilson says it doesn't matter to him.

"I know it's a big risk," he admits. "'Will I ever again achieve the status (of the Gin Blossoms)?' But I'm not worried about that. I do want to break and sell millions of records, but it's more important to be in the right rock band.

"This is something new that I'm more excited about than I ever was about the Gin Blossoms," he adds. "It's more like the bands I imagined being in when I was a kid."

In the meantime, the band plays Las Vegas over the weekends and in Tempe mid-week, practicing, letting their sound jell, and mostly trying to hit the big time yet again.

"It's nice to be in Vegas," Wilson confides to the crowd. "If we weren't, we'd be in Tempe playing for 300 bucks."

Of course, Wilson isn't exactly hurting for money.

He dryly acknowledges to the crowd of fans: "You bought the record, I really enjoyed your 17 cents." Sounds paltry, until you consider that 17 cents for the *two million* copies sold of the album "New Miserable Experience" -- would be a not-so-insignificant \$340,000.

"I was pretty smart," Wilson says, laughing. "The Gin Blossoms sold about 3 million albums. I'll be OK for the rest of my days. I don't live like a big rock star."

He claims not to prefer the large arenas to the small 165-seat room he plays now.

"Neither one is more valid or exciting than the other during the right opportunity," he notes. "I've played huge arenas and had musical orgasms, and in the same arenas had the worst time of my life -- and the same in clubs."

There could be something sad about watching rock stars who have appeared on Letterman, the "American Music Awards" and "Saturday Night Live," who have played stadium-sized

arenas, (including a 1994 Spin Doctors/Cracker Las Vegas concert at the Aladdin Performing Arts Center), claw their way back up the food chain.

But Wilson and his crew are handling their stint in the minors like professionals, seemingly well aware they are too good for the off-Strip venue and the miserable time slot, but appearing with dignity and grace. There is no posturing or pretensions here.

To Wilson's dismay, there is a pervasive perception that the band must either be broke or has-beens to be playing in a casino. "There's already this misconception," he says, "People saying, 'I'm so sorry you're playing in a casino.' I'm like, what are you talking about? This is a great way to expand our fan base. It's one of the smartest things we've ever done."

To Wilson, this is simply a break for themselves, a time to work out the kinks before their album comes out next month and life (hopefully) gets hectic once again.

And its a time to simply enjoy himself.

Later in the set, Wilson announces: "Here's some songs we did not write," leading into covers such as "Surrender" by Cheap Trick, and later, "Angels Want to Wear My Red Shoes," by Elvis Costello and "Just What I Needed" by The Cars.

Wilson and lead guitarist Henzerling are way too cool to show much emotion, let alone glee, in this momentary departure from angst rock. But during these numbers, they can't help but getting carried away, swaying into the music and even kicking a leg or two up into the air, on occasion.

And the crowd of twenty- and thirtysomethings -- who fill the room by midnight sharp for a freebie glimpse of a band that used to be -- get on their feet as well, happy to dance the night away with Wilson and his crew, by whatever name they want to go by.

