

## Wagoneers saddle up again

### *After SXSW gig, late 1980s country band regroups, starts making music again*

Michael Corcoran *American Statesman* April 11, 2011

In the late 1980s, rock 'n' rollers tried to save country music from its Mandrellian decline, and among those leading the charge was a quartet from Austin called the Wagoneers. Led by a teenage Monte Warden, an equal mix of Southern charm and light heavyweight champ's ego, the Wags were a local club sensation seemingly moments after forming in 1987. They were signed by A&M's new Nashville division after a torrid bidding war, released two albums, opened tours for Emmylou Harris and Willie Nelson, and by 1990 they were no more.

In three years they went from the band everyone wanted to one that couldn't get a phone call returned. Warden got a solo deal with RCA, drummer Tom Lewis and guitarist Brent Wilson became in-demand sidemen and bassist Craig Pettigrew, the bad-boy heartthrob of the group, took a different route, quite literally, hiring on as a Capital Metro bus driver.

You would think that in the past two decades, there would be occasions to regroup for a night — weddings, anniversaries, paydays — but when the Wagoneers crumpled in a mess of shattered dreams, these guys didn't want to have anything to do with that past.

But the fans didn't forget. If you were lucky enough to catch a Wagoneers set at the Hole in the Wall or Liberty Lunch in the late '80s, you were guaranteed a night to remember, with Warden channeling pre-pop Buddy Holly in front of that country shuffle engine. Couples met at Wagoneer gigs and held out hope that their kids would one day experience the same exuberant, innocent, hop-daddy country music.

When word started getting around that the original Wagoneers were rehearsing for a March 19 performance at the Austin Music Awards, where they would be inducted into the Hall of Fame, Warden said he had no intention of the Wags playing after South by Southwest.

That was after the first rehearsal in the living room of Warden's South Austin abode, when Wilson counted off 1-2-3-4 and the four went right into "I Wanna See Her Again" like former manager Carlyne Majer was in the next room complaining to A&M about woeful radio promotion.

Although it makes a nice story that, galvanized by the crowd's unbridled reception at the music awards and the Continental Club later that night, the four realized they still had it and decided to give it another go, Warden said the true impetus for the full-on revival was when the band worked up a new song.

"That was when, I think, we all realized that we weren't done," Warden said. In the past three months, the band has fine-tuned a dozen new songs and will play most of them at the Continental Club on Saturday night. The show is also a CD release celebration for "Essential Wagoneers," which combines the two A&M albums — 1988's "Stout and High" and 1989's "Good Fortune" — with three gospel songs that were cut in Nashville in '88 with producer Emory Gordy, but never released. The band is limited to press only 1,000 CDs because of their still-binding contract with A&M.

Ask him about how the can't-miss band whiffed on fame and fortune and Warden will say, among other things, that A&M didn't know the country market. The Wagoneers were the first act signed to Herb Alpert and Jerry

Moss' Nashville division. But their musical sister Kelly Willis also failed to catch on nationally and she was on MCA, the home of George Strait, Reba McEntire and Vince Gill.

The real reason the Wagoneers weren't bigger was their records tried to appease too many types of fans. It was music made on purpose, aimed at the country charts, while also trying to draw in traditionalists.

Such tunes as "I Wanna Know Her Again," "I Confess" and "Sit a Little Closer" were smoothed and shined, with the rhythm section of Lewis and Pettigrew, so driving in concert, locked down on a simple two-step cue. Warden was cast as a teen idol, when he really didn't have the big voice to pull it off. And his direct songs were light on hooks.

Most of all, the albums didn't reflect that these were four guys coming together to create what they couldn't as individuals with a studio budget.

The term "alternative country" wasn't around back then, so nobody knew what to think about a band that opened for Bill Monroe one week and the Ramones the next. Inspired by "cow-punk" pioneers Rank and File, with Alejandro Escovedo on rhythm guitar, the Wagoneers tried to take their self-contained approach to Nashville and it didn't work.

With the coming of Dwight Yoakam, k.d. lang, Steve Earle, Nanci Griffith and Lyle Lovett, country music was slowly, slowly changing in the late '80s. But as a band, not a solo act, the Wags couldn't adapt without major flare-ups at every turn. The divorce was messy.

Expectations did in the Wagoneers, but didn't finish the job. The four are back as full-grown men with families and roots deeper than a record collection. They've booked shows in Houston, Dallas and at Gruene Hall in the next few months, and are shopping for a record deal. They're pricing tour buses.

The band that was all out in 1990 is now all in. Warden is not known as patience's wing man, but in this case, the waiting was the smartest part.