

Stout and High

Austin alt-country progenitors the Wagoneers return for the first time in 20 years.

Comments (0) By [William Michael Smith](#) Wednesday, Apr 13 2011

No one knew it when the Wagoneers burst onto the Texas music scene in 1987, but the band, which lasted only two albums and four years, is now considered to be one of the earliest examples of alternative country. They reformed recently for the Austin Music Awards during [SXSW](#), and will perform in Houston for the first time in more than 20 years Friday.

Houston-born Monte Warden fronted the band and went on to a career as a solo artist and hit songwriter after the band's breakup following the release of their second album in 1990.

Chatter: Do you remember the Wagoneers' first Houston gig?

Monte Warden: Angela Mullan booked us at Chelsea 804 sometime in 1987. One reason I remember is because that's one of the few gigs I ever wore a hat onstage [laughs]. I left all my hair products in Austin.

C: Mullan passed away just a couple of years ago. What are your memories of her?

MW: Great musical tastes, never had a harsh word for anyone. And she had the one thing all musicians love: a 100 percent honest door. If you sold 52 tickets, you got paid for 52 with Angela. That's rarer than you think.

C: Ironically, I was at that Chelsea gig. What was your impression of the Houston scene at that time?

MW [laughs]: At our first couple of shows the scene was my mom, [Tom Lewis's](#) mom, [Craig Pettigrew's](#) mom. But I immediately saw that the Houston audience was much more diverse than in Austin, where our following was mostly college kids. The Houston shows were a cool mix of oilfield types — I remember meeting refinery people from Texas City and [La Marque](#) — mixed with the [Montrose](#) punk people. And everybody was just there to have a good time.

C: Any particularly memorable Houston gigs?

MW: We blew up so fast, two weeks after that Chelsea gig we headlined at Fitzgerald's. And within just a month or so, we were playing Rockefeller's. Angela also booked us at the Ale House. I remember we played the Ale House one night and flew to Los Angeles the next day to play a festival. And that was when A&M Records discovered us.

C: Was [Herb Alpert](#) your guy at A&M?

MW: No, a young A&R guy named [Patrick Clifford](#). He signed us and the [Neville Brothers](#) the same year. He later went to RCA and signed [the Strokes](#). I call about every six months and say, "Patrick, tell me what you're listening to." Nothing he ever signed would be considered contrived, and that says a lot about him.

C: What was that moment when you said to yourself, "Uh oh, this thing's not going to work out" with A&M?



Gary Mill

The alt-country laurels are nice, but Monte Warden (center) says the Wagoneers are really just a honky-tonk band.

Details

The Wagoneers
9 p.m. Friday, April 15, at the Continental Club, 3700
Main, 713-529-9899
or www.continentalclub.com/houston.html.

MW: Actually, A&M was great to us. *Stout and High* sold 100,000 copies and we made it very cheaply, so they were ecstatic about us. But we couldn't keep the band together, so we let them down in my mind.

C: You've been called one of the seminal alt-country bands. When did you first hear the words "alternative country"?

MW: In *No Depression* in the mid-'90s. Someone sent me an article about [Uncle Tupelo](#), where [Jeff Tweedy](#) was talking about the Wagoners as one of the first alternative-country bands. It's always great to be mentioned by other artists like that, but I really didn't have a clue what it was supposed to mean.

C: What's been your favorite journalistic description of the Wagoners' music?

MW [laughs]: Writers bent over backwards calling us Americana, neo-rockabilly, retro country. But when [Chet Flippo](#) wrote in *Rolling Stone* "the best honky-tonk band I've ever seen," that nailed it. We're a honky-tonk band.