



KURT WAGNER of LAMBCHOP Interview

Although the band had been together in one permutation or another for a time before the event, it really is ten years since Lambchop released its debut album. Time waits for no lamb. With that collection of beautiful, twisted songs, this strange, double-strange, many-legged Nashville outfit went a long way to ensure that the average discerning listener could never view the genre known as ‘country’ in the same way again.

In either *I Hope You’re Sitting Down* (sleeve) or *Jack’s Tulips* (spine), we were presented with country music seemingly from some parallel dimension, where everything is kinda blurred and opaque. But, though country is just how Lambchop had somehow ended up largely sounding, there has always been so much more to the experience than that. As is, say, Tindersticks, this is a soul band, a rock band, a jazz band, a lounge band and a punk band. In a short, a *band* that just follows instincts and one that has freely explored any genre it saw fit, charting new territory with old maps. Lambchop’s has been an unforced, meandering and gentle evolution to this point, where they can be called nothing but an endlessly entertaining, thrilling, heartbreaking and hilarious, *great* band - way, way beyond Nashville, yet still holding its greater traditions dear.

Considering that decade and that ten years is a traditionally convenient block of time over which to take stock or reminisce, there appears a neat synchronicity with that record and the recorded offerings of Lambchop 2004. Whereas that first album seemed to bear two titles, the band has progressed to such a position of critical comfort and respectable sales that it can be afforded the privilege of releasing *two* albums that, in *Awcmom* and *Noyoucmon* almost bear the same title! A tenuous-to-pointless observation, perhaps, but there you go.

Is A Woman is a beautiful album. It seemed inevitable that there would be a reaction to it with the follow-up(s). And a reaction there has been. Not to say that these new songs aren’t beautiful, but this is a different kind of Lambchop beauty. Yes, these albums have their *My Blue Wave*’s, but for those who may have dropped in via *Nixon*, there may be shocks in store.

Sure, the hushed, droll vocal delivery, the offbeat lyrical imagery and unrivalled ensemble subtlety are still present, but things have certainly moved on for a band whose most recent release had perhaps seen the settling into and claiming of a comfortable territory. For a start, there are five jaunty instrumentals across both new discs, there is a slab of previously unforeseen bubblegum dumbness, and there are splashes of *noise*. But, considering that the chief designer of this material gets off equally on traditional country, abstract hip-hop and Guided By Voices (“*they’re just so big, and so together*”), should such a display really be a big surprise?

Kurt, you have released two albums on one day, joining a handful of acts including Tom Waits, Guns 'N' Roses, Ryan Adams and Bruce Springsteen who have done likewise. It's a grand statement that in itself puts you in the big league. What do you have to say about that?

Well, I don't know about the 'big league,' but I do know I wanted to do something which reflected the way we were sounding as a band. It turned out we made two records, so I guess that sounds kinda grand. I also felt now was the right time as opposed to later. Shit, to me, the band sounds great, and we do happen to be playing all these new songs, so...here we go...one, two!

Were there in problems in persuading City Slang to do this?

I've been very fortunate to have the support of City Slang – and Merge in the USA – in that they are very patient, and try to make a reality of the sometimes difficult ideas that I come up with. Somehow, they make these notions become a real thing. I don't make things always easy, but I do try to make things that don't suck. They seem to understand me - sympathize, if you will.

These albums emerged from a long period during which you worked to the self-imposed discipline of writing a song a day: Just how many did you write?

I really can't say, exactly. I've never counted them. I'm kinda'fraid to look at them as matters of quantity rather than quality. There are a bunch of songs that worked and then there were some that didn't quite work. Do those 'not quite right songs' count as songs? I'm not so sure they do. Perhaps they really don't count until someone hears them other than ourselves?

Did you at any point 'finish' a song and then think "Nah, that's crap," then immediately scrap the idea? If so, was that your song written for the day, or did you strive to write another, so as not to betray the discipline?

Sure, I did that almost daily. I wrote and continue to write a lot of crap! It's not like I strive to write crap; it's just that I'm not a naturally talented songwriter. It just takes me longer. I sometimes have to work pretty hard to make things come out okay. There are also times when it happens pretty easily. Regardless, I just tried to end up with something at the end of the song day that was my best effort. There are days when that's all anyone can muster.

In that bubblegum thing, there is indeed one truly unexpected creation, in the daft-as-a-brush *Shang A Dang Dang*; the only lyrics being the title repeated ad infinitum to a mad melody that recalls the oddness of Denim. It's a novelty hit waiting to happen. You wrote two songs on the *Shang A Dang Dang* day, surely? That cheekily said, dare I suggest it as a single?

Wow, I must be retarded, but I just don't get the attraction to 'Shang A Dang Dang'! I mean, it almost didn't make the record, but I thought there was something about it that sort of rocked a bit. It certainly is fun to play and all, but we never looked at it as a single any more than the rest of the hit singles on these records!

I think Mr. Wagner is perhaps being what is known as 'typically wry' at this juncture.

How was it you knew you written 'enough,' or did you have a definite span of time in mind when you set off writing?

I knew I would have about six months to write songs. A set amount of time at home, where I could just focus on being creative for a while. It wasn't all that monastic, however. We did some other fun stuff as a band during that time, but the focus was to come up with some new material to work on. Then suddenly, it was time to record and we moved into the next part of the program – the record-making stuff.

Is it possible we'll see any of the rejected songs on future records?

I hope so. I think we're trying to put some of the songs we mixed for the Murneau film (or Murnau, source dependent: see below) on our next tour CD... working title: "Nashville Does Dallas".

In the Matt Boyd Josh Rouse documentary *Fact/Fiction*, you talk of your admiration for the confidence you feel Josh has in his sound, and how you wish you felt the same of Lambchop's. Considering the breadth of ambition displayed on the new albums, do you still feel like this?

I guess there might have developed a slight amount of ambition surrounding the idea for these two albums, but I'm gonna hold the party line here, and restate that these records are in response to the amount of material we created, and simply represent a solution of dealing with that dilemma.

(One song bearing it as a title), is there any significance in the date Jan. 24?

None whatsoever. It was simply one of the last songs that bore its original title. All the songs I wrote during this time period started out as a file with the name being the date they were created. I had to call them something before I could open them, so I chose the current date, and it seemed like a nice way to nod toward the whole song a day thing.

Another is the provocatively (?) entitled 'Women Help To Create The Kind Of Men They Despise': If that is so, could you explain how you feel that is?

It's not true really - c'mon! (No, you c'mon!) Well, maybe it's only true to the extent that they do give birth to the little fuckers, so in a very small way they are somewhat complicit!

Although there is evidence on the (US/Japan-only compilation) *Tools In The Dryer* that your very early material was often quite scuzzy, you are bound to be asked a lot about the thrash and squall of *Nothing Adventurous Please*: So, were you getting something out of your system, setting out to show that Lambchop is no band of delicate pussies, or merely reveling in the power of rock?

I guess this song is an example of something that we have been doing, or have had the potential of doing since we started playing. This type of sound is just another part of who we are, or rather who we can be, should we choose to get on with the rock!

To this end, what's with the *Paranoid* steal on *The Gusher*? Is a Lambchop metal album bursting to get out?

No – it was a bit of a joke that got out of hand! This is an example how our arrangements sometimes come about. An off-colour reference can turn into a permanent part of a song by virtue of its sheer audacity. The joke's on us!

The strings on these recordings are very striking: Did you instruct (arranger) Lloyd Barry in any capacity as to how you wanted them to sound? Did you use reference points – Paul Buckmaster, Reg Guest, Charlie Rich, Mancini or Philly, for example?

I sent Lloyd some notes on how I wanted certain things to sound, but a lot of it was just suggesting a general direction or sound, if you will. I remember that I mentioned the Barry White / Love Unlimited Orchestra type of sound would be nice for one song, but I also think with him I'm better off saying simple, general things like 'pretty' or 'dark' or 'nice'. Lloyd is so good, really; you don't have to tell him much. He just knows.

It is not just these records that have been keeping Kurt and his precociously talented cohorts busy. At the invitation of the fine folk behind the (46th) San Francisco Film Festival, Lambchop attended the Castro Theatre on April 18th of last year, to perform live their specially composed score for F.W. Murneau's landmark 1927 silent movie *Sunrise*, which won three Oscars for its powerful study of the lure of a femme fatale who demands action from her lover beyond reason and sanity – murdering his wife, that sort of thing. (You should know 1922's *Nosferatu*, but seek out the loose biopic *Shadow of The Vampire*, where F.W.'s madness is portrayed with expected high camp by John Malkovich.)

Are all of the instrumentals across the two albums from the *Sunrise* score?

Why, no. 'Being Tyler' and 'The Lone Official' are not part of the score. I just thought that it would be a nice way to enjoy the sound of the band more if I laid out of the singing sometimes. So, we started featuring the idea of the instrumental. It's almost too goofy to be 'prog', so maybe it's more like "grog"?! At any rate, it was pretty coincidental that we were working on instrumentals at that time, anyway.

The last time we spoke (CwaS # 7), my suggesting Lambchop's music cinematic, I asked if you'd like to score a movie. Your response was an emphatic affirmative (particularly for Harmony Korine): Did you find the experience as exciting and rewarding as your appetite

was for it?

Absolutely. I want to quit my life and run away and join the movies – or at least a movie about circuses. I enjoyed the experience as a beginner. I need to do more in order to learn; there’s a lot to be learned here.

You also stated that “*films make (you) feel like doing things...make (you) want to go and write things*”: Was it your scoring *Sunrise* that unleashed the writing frenzy, or was it part of it?

The writing ‘frenzy’, as you put it, was actually prior to the conception of the film score. I tried to look at the score as a result of or a response to the work that was then available; an adaptation of pre-existing elements.

Such adaptations of pre-existing elements should apply to most bands of worth, and also in life. Otherwise you just stand still, do you not? Lambchop is no exception, and so it is not only an unswerving quality control thus far, but also the unexpected moves that keep us hooked and curious. Whilst *Awcmon* and *Noyoucmon* may not be so immediate, everything that has made the band so interesting is still apparent.

But, there are yet more mysteries to unravel from this disparate collective of characters and inventive musical minds. Guided by voices he right now maybe, but they speak only words of encouragement in expression to Kurt Wagner and his ever-dazzling Nashville orchestra. Big band, and *certainly* big league...

TOM SHERIFF

For ‘Comes with a Smile’ magazine, London, UK, 2004