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Pictures by: Dan Marek

### [Monkey See, Monkey Do](#)

After years of evolution, Wise Monkey Orchestra is finally in full swing

By: Dan Marek

If there's one hard-and-fast rule about music, it's that most bands simply don't last. A couple years is an eternity in rock 'n' roll time. For a group to remain together a decade or more is a kind of outrageous anomaly. Most outfits either die out or just fade away. Few bands can handle the myriad challenges -- personal, professional, artistic -- that are required to keep a group together past infancy. Even fewer can hope to be stronger than when they began. But if there is a local exception to this theory, it might just be the Wise Monkey Orchestra.

WMO's mid-'90s move to San Diego may have disappointed the group's cadre of faithful Valley fans, but after seven years spent reestablishing themselves in the Golden State and a run of intense national touring, they've grabbed the attention of a whole new audience and finally run into some good fortune.

After the horn-driven combo earned awards for Best Dance and Funk Band and Best Jazz and Blues Album at the 1999 San Diego Music Awards, Colorado-based indie Lauan Records picked up the eclectic WMO and released a concert disc, *They Live*, late last year.

"They're really cool guys and support bands like us who kind of do everything ourselves," says Andy Geib, WMO's trombonist/flutist, of the imprint. "They give us our creative freedom and don't lock us down and tell us to do this or that."

Although Lauan is primarily a "jam band" label, the members of WMO feel that particular genre tag is a bit narrow to accurately describe their blend of funk, soul, rock, jazz and blues.

"I don't think we're a traditional jam band, but if you look at what a lot of people call jam bands, it's kind of strayed from what the norm is anyway," Geib says. "People used to consider jam bands like the Grateful Dead and the hippie bands of that type, but now you get bands like Karl Denson and Soul Live, so the borders have really stretched on what is defined as a jam band."

*They Live*, recorded at a trio of California clubs during a three-month period, features a mix of such classic WMO songs as "Grass Skirt" (from 1998's *Make Believe*), "Thyme" (originally released on '99's *Pathways*) and "Hell Ain't for Me," a number they've played since day one, but never recorded.

"Old and new, it's a great mix," says singer Alley Stewart. "I really liked the improv sections, even though I'm not on them, and I always liked 'Grass Skirt,' just because it's about perseverance and faith."

Aiding the group on the disc is current Ratdog and former Charlie Hunter saxophonist Dave Ellis, who appears on five cuts.

"I was a big fan of the Charlie Hunter Trio," says Geib. "The first record they put out, *Bing, Bing, Bing*, I pretty much wore out on my CD player. So when I heard he was going to come sit in with us, I was really excited."

Ellis' working relationship with WMO began with a series of live appearances, eventually resulting in him guesting in the studio on *Pathways*.

"[Geib] is always challenging me with the stuff that he has," says Ellis. "His parts are always written out perfectly and the tunes go by at lightning speed, so it's a challenge. I like being part of a horn section and I like to be in an environment of a team that is really focused on what they are doing, even if it's not exactly what I'm doing."

Despite the high-profile collaboration, the heart of WMO lies in its core talents. Stewart's robust blues-mama wailing is accompanied by her husband Chad's clever funk bass lines, Geib's tight jazz trombone, Sean Hart's swirling keys, the fluid guitar work of Marty Schwartz and crisp drumming of Bruce Stodola. All of these elements mesh together perfectly to forge the band's signature poly-textured party groove.

Although WMO's lineup has endured a number of changes over its decadelong history, singer Stewart says the current outfit may be the best ever.

"We're much more stable as a unit than we've ever been," says Stewart. "People come and go, you have creative differences, differences that just won't allow you to go forward in the direction you should be in."

Keeping a stable life on the road has also been essential for WMO. The Stewarts have two children, a 3-year-old daughter and an 8-month-old son, who've traveled the country while mom and dad have brought their high-energy shows to fans.

In the last year alone, the band played more than 200 shows in 25 states, sharing stages with the likes of Wyclef Jean, the Mighty Mighty Bosstones and the Meat Puppets -- while the kids looked on from the wings.

"We're very fortunate to have very happy, healthy, smart kids that have been able to deal

with it very well," says Stewart, who's due again in September. "We've had a lot of great help as far as friends and family that watch them while we're on the road and kind of travel along with us. All the guys [in the band] are their uncles and they love 'em to death, so it's kind of a big family deal."

WMO's national following is clearly the result of a tireless work ethic. The band spent its first five years touring the Southwest, hitting college towns, spring-break festivals and ski resorts. WMO's decision to move to San Diego in '94 -- during the height of the Valley's jangle-pop period -- was in part to get a much-needed fresh start as well as to find a climate more hospitable to the band's esoteric sonic stew.

"The West Coast is exciting and people are really fired up about the music," Geib says. "It's just a little more active. Not to mention the cities are a little closer together. We can go out on a two-week tour and not go any farther than two hours from [our] house."

Still, it appears things may have come full circle. Six months ago, Stodola and the Stewarts made a permanent move back to the Valley to be closer to friends, family and the city they got their start in. But with half the band in San Diego and the other half in Phoenix, where does WMO call home?

"I don't consider ourselves an Arizona or California band," says Stewart. "We've traveled so much across the country, Canada, and Mexico, that where we live really has nothing to do with it. We lived and played in San Diego for so many years before there was really any recognition at all. With the history Wise Monkey has in Arizona, there are probably a lot of people that remember the old school Wise Monkey and can't really get past that. I've never really claimed either."

As to the future, WMO is set to take the summer off to begin recording a new studio album. After Stewart gives birth in the fall, the band plans a quick return to the road.

"We aren't world famous or anything like that," muses keyboardist Hart. "We are doing well nationally, but I think over the past few years I started to realize that it doesn't really matter. What matters to me is that we brought a lot of joy to a lot of people and had a really good time doing it."

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## Details

### **Wise Monkey Orchestra**

**Details:** Scheduled to perform on Tuesday, May 29. Showtime is 9 p.m.

**Where:** Nita's Hideaway in Tempe