

SHOWCASE

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'Asleep' stays with what it does best

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To music fans, the friendship between country music's Asleep at the Wheel founder/vocalist Ray Benson and rock's Huey Lewis of the News might seem odd.

What might seem still stranger is a result of that friendship — Asleep at the Wheel's cover of Lewis' "I Want a New Drug" on their latest Epic album, *Asleep at the Wheel 10*.

Benson and Lewis date back a long time. They've been friends more than 15 years. And if the two started out working similar musical styles, their paths have become widely divergent since their early days in the Bay area.

Benson, who, with his band will perform as part of the free entertainment at the Antelope Valley Fair Sept. 3-4, says musicians see things quite differently than their fans.

"It doesn't seem weird at all,"

he said in a phone interview. "We do what we do best as professional musicians. George Jones is a better country singer than Huey Lewis, and Huey's a better rock'n'roll singer than George is.

"I guess to the outside world, it seems it should be either one or the other. But to musicians, it's all just 12 notes."

The pair's association began in the early '70s, when both were playing local clubs in the San Francisco area.

"We played the same little joints," said Benson. "We would do double bills."

At the time, from the music fan's point of view, Lewis' country rock style wasn't that far from the Wheel's western swing sound.

But Lewis has changed his tune from those days, while Benson and the band pursued the western swing path through thick and thin.

His 17-year pursuit has taken him through six record companies and more than 75 musicians.

"Asleep at the Wheel is a concept," said Benson. "The concept is to play roots, western music. Western swing and country western boogie-woogie music. "That's what Asleep at the Wheel is.

"In reality we can play anything. The band's versatile enough to play jazz, rock'n'roll, r&b, whatever," he said.

And although western swing — a style developed in the 1940s by Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys — has been the thread running through all the band's albums, the Wheel's versatility has allowed them to experiment.

That's where the *thin* of the *thick and thin* part comes in.

One experiment is the band's jazz-oriented *Framed* album of 1980. The album is as pertinent and energetic as any of the group's country albums. But along with the shift in style, Benson takes turns on lead vocals with female vocalist Chris O'Connell. This only added to the diffused image the public already had of Asleep of the Wheel.

The result was a financial flop.

Since then, Benson has tried to focus the Wheel's style. His attempts are evident on *Asleep at the Wheel 10*, which is the band's most connected album since the early '70s.

On the new LP, western swing is undoubtedly the style, and the deep, resonant vocals are unquestionably Benson's. From the

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band's Top 20 country hit, "The House of Blue Lights" to the swinging version of Huey Lewis' hit, "I Want a New Drug," *Asleep at the Wheel 10* maintains a smooth consistency.

The bearded, 6-foot-7-inch-tall leader said he now recognizes that creating a recognizable image for the public — then living up to it — just comes with the territory.

"Fans find it difficult to identify a band with more than one vocalist," he said. "If they can

hear the one sound, they can identify it as so-and-so by their name or a group's name.

"The public are not musicians," he said. "They're not as well-educated in music as they could or should be. But they do relate to the emotional level quite well.

"So the emotional content of the stuff is what it's all about. If you can say something to someone through music — that's much more important."

Besides, after several financially unsuccessful albums, he's somewhat wary of experimentation.

"It's made me wary about it," he said. "In other words, you just can't experiment and take what happens. You've got to be careful and make sure you don't put out something that was a failed experiment."

However, it's sometimes difficult to compromise his music, he admitted.

"But it's the artist's choice," he said. "You can do whatever you want, but you will be compensated for it in different ways.

"In my mind, if you don't want to make any money, do what you want to do. As long as you're happy with it, fine. You might not make a million dollars, but don't worry about it."

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