

Ray Benson

SWING'S THE THING FOR THE FOUNDER OF THE LEGENDARY BOOGIE AND WESTERN SWING BAND ASLEEP AT THE WHEEL.

COWBOYS

INDIANS



by William C. Reynolds

IN THE WORLD OF COUNTRY MUSIC, RAY BENSON — all 6'7" of him — has been hailed by many as the post-modern king of Western swing. Over the course of the last 36 years, Benson and the band he founded, Asleep at the Wheel, have boldly defied the whims of the mainstream — and thrived — by sticking to the noble cause of keeping this distinctly American music alive and kicking. Along the way, they've entertained hundreds of thousands and won praise and admiration from everyone from Willie Nelson to Bob Dylan, George Strait to Van Morrison — in addition to earning nine Grammys.

Asleep at the Wheel is not just your typical dance band; they're an institution comprising an ever-shifting lineup (they've had more than 80 members to date) of like-minded musicians united under Benson's crusade to carry the torch of big band Western swing music into the 21st century.

We talked to Benson during a break from a relentless touring schedule.

Cowboys & Indians: *When you launched your music career in the booming metropolis of Paw Paw, West Virginia, in 1970, did you have any idea you'd still be performing Western swing 30-plus years later?*

Ray Benson: When I was a kid in the '50s I always wondered what the world was gonna be like and what I was gonna be doin' in the year 2000. The year 2000 seemed like a far-off star, so distant that I'd never really reach it or live to see that momentous day. Heck, I had visited the House of the Future at Disneyland and read all the Jules Verne books so I knew we would be flying cars on highways of radar and wearing rubber space suits. But a funny thing happened: The recent past became the present and the roots of Western swing took a mighty hold on a few of us in the '70s and '80s. By the '90s, it became clear that this hybrid of Western music and swing had not only survived but had become a part of the fabric of modern Country music in a big way.

PHOTOGRAPHY: COURTESY BRIO PHOTOGRAPHY





Asleep at the Wheel, back row from left: Elizabeth McQueen, David Sanger, Eddie Rivers, David Miller, and Jason Roberts; front row: Ray Benson and John Michael Whitby.

C&I: How did you get into Western swing music?

Benson: I was born in 1951, and big band music was still very much around. In my community it was still very much the thing. I played bass in my school stage band in 10th grade, and my musical director introduced us to Count Basie. My friend Lucky Ocean's parents were sort of like beatniks, and his dad gave us some Lester Young records when we were still in high school. But I just happened to be a weird kind of guy: I was also into folk music, Chicago blues, and Country. My goal was to be more different than anybody, and that's what Asleep at the Wheel was all about: doing roots music that was different and eclectic.

C&I: You've released 30 albums and are still going strong.

Benson: I've been told that I'm relentless, so I guess I am. Every time that I figured I was going to quit, we'd have a wonderful, incredible show where the people were so appreciative that we were doing this music that it's like, Well, hell — this beats working, so why not keep doing it? Western swing ain't going away.

C&I: And you're its larger-than-life ambassador.

Benson: I'm a caricature everywhere I go, but people seem to love it. I'm a Yankee by birth, and because of that people seem to

always ask the same thing: How could somebody from Pennsylvania play this music and have it be representative? I say, you've got to understand something. Tex Williams was from Indiana, Roy Rogers from Ohio, Don Edwards from New Jersey, and all are phenomenal, wonderful cowboy singers. Eddie Rabbit's from New Jersey, Hank Snow's from Canada. If you had to be from Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, whatever, to be a cowboy or a Western or a Country singer... that's absurd. You play what's in your heart and what's in your ability — and swing was in me. I certainly played other music, but this is the one that when I put it on, the hat fit right. This was music that I feel is genuine and that I was born to play.

C&I: A shining moment for Asleep at the Wheel was the release of their critically acclaimed 1999 album *Ride With Bob*. A tribute to Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys, the album struck gold on the charts and at the Grammys. It features many of Bob Wills' classics — such as "Milk Cow Blues," "Faded Love," and "New San Antonio Rose" — with guest artists including Clint Black, Lee Ann Womack, Mark Chesnutt, and the Squirrel Nut Zippers.

Benson: [The album worked] in sort of a cross-generational way. I got the Squirrel Nut Zippers, who were at the time very

popular and were right in the groove. They got it and were thrilled to do it, along with all the Country artists. They were all so cool about it. Mark Chesnutt, who's on the record, tells a story about a new kid in his band who had heard all this talk about Bob Wills. "Who the hell is this Bob Wills?" he asked. So the kid went into a truck stop and bought a tape and back on the bus he's listening to it. After a little bit he comes up to Mark and says, "There's something wrong with this tape. There's some guy talking over everything." Mark says, "Those are the vaqueros." That addition Wills made was straight from the Mexican vaquero culture — perfect for the song. "Ah-hah, yi-yi-yi!" That was what was so appealing about Bob, the ability to take all of this different music of the culture and do it. So with this album, I wanted to show that broad interest and versatility.

*"We're a dance band.
That's what we're about.
And that's plenty."*

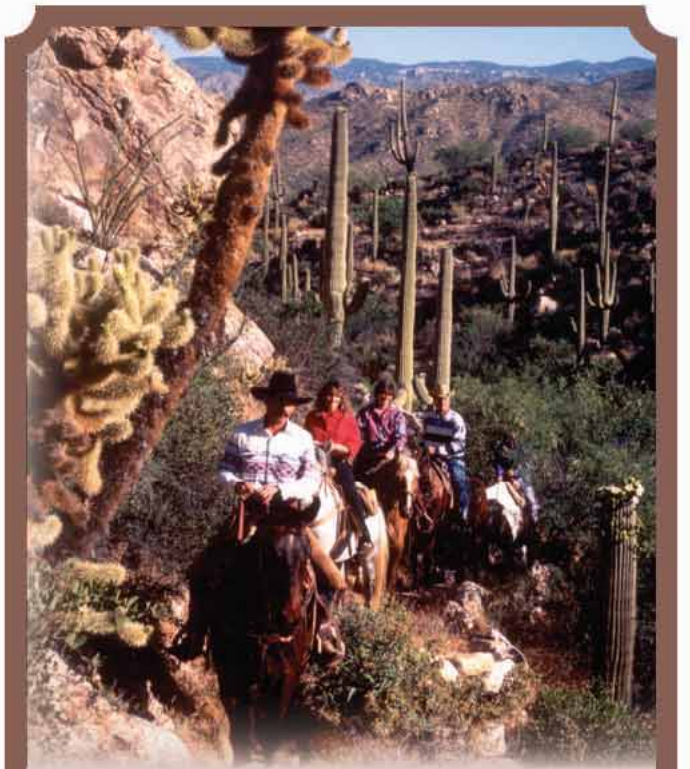
C&I: You're quite a student of Bob Wills history.

Benson: It's an interesting story. Bob was a farmer. At the time, all of West Texas was filled with cotton farmers, hardscrabble cotton farmers. But the lure of the cowboy was always there for him as it was such a romantic notion. The man on his horse, who rides through, you know, and he's independent. So from the earliest time there was also a horse culture in Bob's shows. Bob was quite a horseman. He rode out on stage and the band guys all had to ride out on horses for the rodeos. Now, these guys were jazz musicians, not cowboys, so many of them rode like jazz musicians — on the horns! Bob had a horse called Punkin and another one called Flea Bite. Punkin was his big "show" horse because every Western star had a horse. It was the history of the cowboy mixed with the myth of the cowboy and then the later Hollywoodization of the cowboy. It was not historically correct, but it was culturally correct yet diverse — as was Bob Wills.

C&I: The success of *Ride With Bob* led to many opportunities, including a 2000 tour with Bob Dylan.

Benson: It was fresh all the time. Every night, Dylan would do songs a little differently, and it made it very exciting to see where the songs were going.

C&I: Following the success of *Ride With Bob*, you weren't finished with the celebration of Bob Wills' legacy and contribution. Little did you know that what started out as a little idea would someday end up on the stage of the Kennedy Center.



*The vacation of your dreams
is closer than you think...*

*Revel in scenic horseback riding,
hiking & mountain biking through
the lush Sonoran desert*

*Relax in our refreshing pools,
hot tubs and saunas*

*Relish our delicious cuisine
and hearty BBQ's*

*Rejuvenate and pamper yourself in
our La Sonora Spa*

*Come, experience the magic
of the Last Luxurious Outpost
of the Old West...*

Tanque Verde Ranch

Tucson, Arizona

Toll free 800-234-DUDE (3833)

www.tanqueverderanch.com



Autry National Center

Albert Bierstadt, Cho-Looke, The Yosemite Fall, 1864, oil on canvas. The Putnam Foundation, Timken Museum of Art, San Diego.



YOSEMITE

ART OF AN AMERICAN ICON

SEP 22, 2006
THROUGH
JAN 21, 2007

In Griffith Park • 4700 Western Heritage Way • Los Angeles, CA 90027
323.667.2000 • autrynationalcenter.org



Benson: Talk about a ride! I couldn't have dreamed this up. It was July of 2004 and I was sitting with my friend Anne Rapp from Estelline, Texas. Her daddy was a cotton farmer and a piano player who loved Bob Wills. She's a screenwriter—she's written a number of Robert Altman films. She looks up at me and says, "Let's write a play about Bob Wills." I loved the idea but what's it going to be about? You can't just tell the story. It has to have the music. So I told Anne and another writer friend of mine, Sarah Byrd, about the only time I met Bob Wills. It was 1973 and Bob Wills was making an album that I helped put together called *For the Last Time*. It was Bob Wills' last album as he was very sick. A lot of the Texas Playboys came back to be on the recording, so we went up to meet them. And as we pull in to the studio, there's Bob in a wheelchair. [I was introduced to him as Ray Benson from *Asleep at the Wheel*] and he just kind of grunted. We had just put out "Take Me Back to Tulsa," our first single. So they said, "Look, Mr. Wills is tired. He's going to go back to his room. You can talk to him later." Well, later that night he had a stroke, went into a coma, and died two years later. So here we had met my idol, but I didn't get to talk with him.

Sarah looks at me and says, "Well, that's your play—the conversation you never had with Bob Wills." It was perfect. So Anne and I start writing and the play becomes the story of *A Ride With Bob* on the old bus. The bus driver turns into Bob Wills and we sit on the stage the whole play and have a talk through time—me and the ghost of Bob Wills. Is that cool?

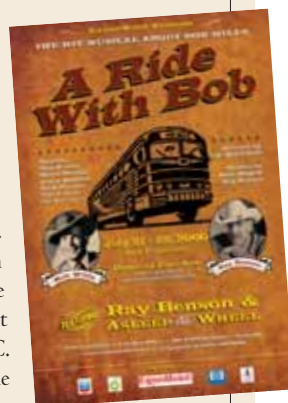
C&I: *It's a ride that shouldn't be missed, not only for the music but for a glimpse into a part of a root-based culture in America that continues to evolve.*

Benson: Western swing is improvisational music. It's malleable, which I think is the whole ball of wax—it's why we play it. I think it's interesting to listen to updated versions of what people do—whatever it is—hearing and seeing how they have evolved. People change, and I love the luxury of having a career this long to continue to do it.

A Ride With Bob

A Ride With Bob—deemed "the most entertaining night in Texas" by the *New York Post's* Liz Smith—debuted in spring 2005, playing mostly in the homelands of Texas and Oklahoma. In 2006 it has toured nationwide. On September 22-24, *A Ride With Bob* will be performed in the Eisenhower Theatre at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. *Tulsa World's* John Wooley describes the show as "raucous, spirited and joyous as the music that inspired it."

For more information on Ray Benson and *A Ride With Bob*, visit www.aridewithbob.com or www.asleepatthewheel.com.



Twin Rocks Trading Post
Art of the Southwest
at the intersection of tradition and innovation

WE GOT THE STONES

www.twinrocks.com
913 E. Navajo Twins Drive Bluff, Utah 84512 800-526-3448

Houston Creek Ranch
Scenic . Secluded . Spectacular

5000 Private Pristine Acres Await in the Wyoming Black Hills

Pine and hardwood trees
Flowing creeks & springs
Scenic views of mountains
Pasture & hay meadows
Wells and reservoirs
Trophy game hunting

HoustonCreekRanch.com
307-754-0594

The PRESCOTT Area

ARIZONA'S FIRST TERRITORIAL CAPITAL

450 MILES OF RECREATIONAL TRAILS,
OVER 600 HISTORIC BUILDINGS
90 HOLES OF PUBLIC GOLF,
THREE MUSEUMS, FIVE LAKES,
TWO CASINOS,
HUNDREDS OF BACK COUNTRY MILES
and lots, lots more.
Just 90 minutes north of Phoenix.
1.800.266.7534
Visit www.visit-prescott.com

ROUGHSTOCK EXPLOSION
Sep. 9 & Oct. 7
Prescott Rodeo Grounds
Bucking stock and barrel racing.

ARIZONA REVIEW: THAT'S ENTERTAINMENT!
Every Sat., Sep. 10-30
Elks Opera House, Prescott
High energy music, comedy and dance variety show.

28th Annual FOLK MUSIC FESTIVAL
Oct. 7 & 8
Sharlot Hall Museum, Prescott
Musicians, dancers, storytellers and workshops.

SMITHSONIAN CULTUREFEST
Nov. 1-5
in Phoenix/Scottsdale,
Nov. 10-11
in Prescott/Flagstaff
Celebration of culture, history, heritage and art.

ARIZONA GRAND CANYON STATE
HISTORY LIVES ON! The PRESCOTT Area