

B O B W E L C H &

A V E N U E M

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B Y L E W I S S H I N E R

AVENUE M had been on tour for two weeks when they pulled in to Austin in an eight-seater van and a Ryder truck full of equipment. They'd been traveling two solid days since their last job in Colorado.

Touring with an unsigned band means you don't have a label or a sponsor paying your way. It means you everything you eat and every motel room you sleep in and every tank of gas gets paid for out of your own pocket. It's a tough way to make a living, and when you're Bob Welch, with more than twenty years behind you as a professional musician, veteran not only of Paris and a half-dozen solo albums, but also of Fleetwood Mac, one of the most popular bands in history, you have to be asking yourself why.

The answer is simply that this is the band he wants to play with. And for those who only know Welch through his ballads ("Sentimental Lady," "Future Games") the nature of this band might come as a bit of a surprise. Avenue M is an exponent of the current hard rock/metal sound that Van Halen and Aerosmith have brought into the mainstream of pop music. They play power chords and blistering solos and lay down a hard and polished groove. Over it all floats Welch's haunting voice, one of the most perfect in rock and roll.

The rest of the group consists of four guys in their twenties, recruited by Welch and his wife (now also his road manager), Wendy, from various Phoenix bands. Bob Milan, the drummer, was the first. He's reminiscent of Alex Van Halen, with a bigger, echoing drum sound. Fred Robinson, a sometime band-mate of Milan's, was next. He's tall and powerfully built, looking more like a longhaired heavyweight boxer than guitarist. A lot of the band's hopes ride in Fred's hands. He has the makings of a guitar superstar, the next Malmsteen or Rhoads or Sambora. It's easy to picture him grinning from the cover of *Guitar World*.

Glenn DeJongh originally auditioned as a bass player. Welch recalls him showing up with "a Sears stereo." He plugged his guitar into it with an adapter he'd bought at Radio Shack with his last five dollars. "That pretty much clenched it," Welch says. "If somebody has the balls to go and do an audition with that amp, that means he really wants to do it, you know? Because I wouldn't even do that."

DeJongh represents the attitude the Welches had come to Phoenix to find. "Part of the thing we were looking for was not only playing ability and all that, but willingness to go the distance," Bob says. Wendy complains about the

much-too-businesslike attitudes of the musicians in LA: “Guys would show up for auditions in three-piece suits, carrying briefcases.” She says that she and Bob felt an “almost physical pressure” to get out of town.

Ironically, the band is named after Melrose Avenue, in the heart of the LA club scene. Wendy says they like the neutrality of the name. “It’s not positive or negative. You can make what you want out of it.”

As Avenue M began to gel, the decision was made to bring in “Blitz” Yates, a bassist with an unobtrusive but powerful sound, so that Glenn could switch to (amplified) acoustic rhythm guitar. “We really liked what it added—a little edge and tone,” Bob says. “And that allows me to play guitar synth every once in a while just for a little taste of color, without having that *keyboard* player.”

After Austin they would head to San Antonio for a two-night stand. Another month would take them on to LA, then they would leave for a month-long tour of the East Coast. After that Europe, and if everything fell together right, maybe a record contract and an album.

Welch seems perfectly happy to be back to basics, especially with such young, hungry, talented players. “I find myself feeding off their energy,” he says. The dynamics in the band are still sorting themselves out; Glenn and Fred are cautiously respectful as they point out that Bob has lit his second cigarette of the interview, even though he’s supposed to be limiting himself to one every two hours. Bob starts to rationalize, then quickly backs down and stubs it out.

In person Welch is tall and ethereally skinny, with oddly layered brown hair and brilliant green eyes. He has a coat draped over his shoulders against the chill of the office’s air conditioning, and is both candid and articulate.

He started playing guitar at “fifteen, sixteen—the usual age.” He couldn’t find anyone in his high school serious enough about music to stick with a band. “Their parents would buy them a drum set, or they’d put some toward it from work at Burger King, then they’d get tired of it and get a go-cart.” After a trip to Europe he ended up in Oregon with Ivory Hudson and the Harlequins, which eventually became the Seven Souls—a racially-mixed group similar to Sly and the Family Stone. In fact Columbia passed them over in order to sign Sly Stone. “Good thing,” Welch says, “because they were really much better. But that’s the kind of running we were in.”

The group scaled down to a trio and moved to Europe—they were in Paris for the ‘68 student uprisings—where they cut a couple of records as Head West (this well before the American one-hit wonders Head East). By 1971 the band was history and Welch was stranded in Paris, broke and desperate for work. Enter Judy Wong, an old friend of Welch and also “with people in Fleetwood Mac and with Eric Clapton. It was a very small scene in those days—the Boyd sisters, the Beatles, and all the hangers-on ... probably a hundred people.” She got Welch the audition that led to his five albums with Fleetwood Mac.

His best-known work from the period is probably his ode to UFOs and Carlos Castaneda, “Hypnotized.” Although he was contributing about half the band’s songs, Welch became dissatisfied. He left to do something with “more energy.” That idea turned into Paris, featuring Jethro Tull’s Glenn Cornick on

bass and Thom Mooney from Nazz on drums (later replaced by Hunt Sales, currently of Tin Machine). The band's two albums are probably the most obvious ancestor of the power and guitar crunch of Avenue M.

"Paris," Welch admits, "didn't work out. Today hard rock is mainstream, it's all over the singles charts, but back then it was, 'These guys are too *loud*.' It just wasn't acceptable." Welch's solo masterpiece, *French Kiss*, was meant to be the third Paris album. Welch had the songs written and was set to go into the studio when the band lost Hunt Sales. "We were so stressed out, and working so hard—we went on the road with Foghat and were hopping back and forth—that Hunt got Bell's palsy. Which is that thing where your face freezes up and you can't move. The whole side of your body freezes up, from stress, from not eating right, the usual reasons."

Rather than replace him, Welch put Paris "on hold." He went into the studio and cut *French Kiss* virtually by himself, playing all the guitar parts as well as bass. His producer found Alvin Taylor to play drums, and agreed to use strings to fill out the sound, using Motown arranger Gene Page. Welch remains a fan of the hard-rock string section. "I would like to see a heavy metal band, one of the new generation, use the string section for the really kick-ass stuff. Not for the tear-jerking, cookie-cutter clone ballads that are all over the radio."

After four solo albums at Capitol and two at R C A , Welch gave up on performing temporarily. He continued to write songs, and produce and nurture up-and-coming bands—including Guns N' Roses, an early configuration of which used to rehearse in his garage. And he continued to listen to current rock and roll.

"My number one favorite band is Van Halen. I mean of all time. They have the most magical rhythm section. It almost sounds improvised, but it's not. They hit stuff that's so weird ... how do they do it? It's almost like a jazz heavy metal section."

In fact the term "jazz heavy metal" is a good description of Avenue M. Welch started out listening to "hard bop" in the fifties. His jazz influences show up everywhere from the Wes-Montgomery-style octave leads on "Hypnotized" to the scat-influenced vocals on some of his new material. In their live show, Avenue M updates a number of classic Welch tunes, most notably "Hypnotized," which starts fairly faithfully, then mutates into an onslaught of power chords and driving rhythms, without ever losing the mystery and beauty of the original.

The new material is strong, melodic, and easily accessible. If it has a flaw, it's in the lack of range of subject matter. The themes tend to cluster in the area of adolescent lust, some of them seemingly aimed more at Motley Crue's audience than, say, Paris's: "Man Crazy," "Daddy's Little Cannibal," and "Love Is A Bitch," for example. On the other hand, Welch brings a sly wit to even the least sophisticated of these ideas.

And on the best of the new songs, like "Bridges Burning Down," the band is a juggernaut. Welch's voice soars over the pounding rhythm section as he moves around the stage with cautious theatricality, like a subdued Mick Jagger. Fred is all over his guitar, with pinch harmonics, two-hand tapping, lightspeed

scales, all the post-Eddie-Van-Halen pyrotechnics, but tightly held in service to the greater good of the band and the song and the melody. The audience yells for “rock and roll” and Avenue M delivers, satisfying the hard-core headbangers and the aging hippies alike.

It’s hard to imagine the band not having a major-label album out by this time next year. It’s not just that they’re “commercial”—which they are. It’s that this music is heartfelt and real, and the natural extension of what Welch had in mind when he left Fleetwood Mac fifteen years ago.

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