

John Wesley Harding

The story so far...

Born in Hastings, England in 1965, young Wesley Stace (now known as the inimitable John Wesley Harding) brought laughter, joy and a lot of noise to the family home. His mother was a singing teacher and music examiner while his father enjoyed a studious career as a classics scholar – this combination forever forging a link between music and writing.

Teaching himself guitar, prompted by unhealthy exposure to the Beach Boys and David Bowie, JWH developed a taste for popular music strengthened by a chance encounter at the age of 14 with the work of Bob Dylan.

After pursuing a degree in English Literature at Cambridge University, his Ph.D. was, naturally, abandoned and it was to music that JWH turned his full attention, starting to write his own songs and get the odd gig. Upon moving to London, JWH soon acquired a reputation as someone with something to say and a tune to say it with - he secured choice opening slots on a variety of stages for artists as diverse as Hothouse Flowers, Ted Hawkins and John Hiatt.

By now, a variety of talent scouts were circling but it was London based Demon Records that moved to secure Harding's signature by issuing a tight and energetic live album in 1989 titled '**It Happened One Night**'. Critics applauded and his audience expanded resulting in an enthusiastic approach from American music mogul Seymour Stein. This led to a contract with Sire Records and the release in 1990 of '**Here Comes The Groom**' taped by in-house producer Andy Paley. An entirely impressive debut with copious nuances, stinging lyrical observation and tell-tale Harding hooks, the album also featured musical support from the Attractions - Elvis Costello's familiar backing band. The LA Times called it "the first great rock album of the 90's."

Finding a very receptive audience in America, JWH uprooted and moved lock, stock and barrel to San Francisco undertaking numerous tours, sometimes in support (The Band, Michelle Shocked, Ray Davies, Los Lobos and Joan Baez among many more) and often as a headliner. This ground swell of support provided a firm foundation for his next studio album, 1991's '**The Name Above The Title**' produced, again, by Andy Paley and stuffed to the brim with wit, wisdom and wonder.

'**Why We Fight**', produced by Steve Berlin (and newly reissued on DRT), followed the next year and, having the unique appeal of having been recorded in and during the LA Riots, displays a deeper less jovial approach - a style mainly comprised of caustic lyricism and poignant melodies. It was an impressive statement and one that caught the ear of a number of movers and shakers, not least of all Bruce Springsteen. The Boss was so impressed that he immediately and personally drafted Harding as the opening act on dates on the Ghost of Tom Joad solo tour - Springsteen's first opening act since 1978.

With a new label, the much loved Rhino Records, JWH's 1995 album '**John Wesley Harding's New Deal**' hit the racks to instant acclaim and a degree of notoriety introducing an entirely new genre: 'Gangsta Folk'. The fusion continued, unbridled, with the recording of '**Awake**'. The release heralded a somewhat happier Harding, brandishing songs of love, devotion and a degree of irony not seen this side of Oscar Wilde. With work to do and audiences to impress, he enlisted a full backing band, making the rounds in Europe and North America, delving into metaphysical areas where few singer-songwriters had gone before.

Harding relocated to Seattle, and set about writing and recording '**Trad Arr Jones**', a unique and studied tribute to the work of trad English folkie Nic Jones whose career was tragically cut short by an automobile accident. A radical departure from his regular pop rock, Harding's tribute received unexpected support among fans and critics who cited his performances as both exciting and

enigmatic with an unexpected twist of pathos. Immersed in this world of traditional folk, JWH formed the roguish The Minstrel In The Galleries, a Seattle based folk combo designed and built to entertain and engage with traditional folk music in its widest sense.

Despite the musical detours, Harding's eye had never left the ball and so with a new contract with Mammoth Records he entered the pop rock realm once again with a defiant glint in his eye and recorded perhaps his best record thus far. '**The Confessions Of St.Ace**' was recorded in Nashville ably assisted by producer Gary Burnette, a determined backing band and some help from Jimmy Dale Gilmore and Steve Earle.

A move to New York City, more touring, more songwriting and more recording led to the release on WOW (Way Out Wes) of '**Swings & Roundabouts**' (2003), the fourth in the series of Dynablob self-releases. More importantly however, Harding's New York relocation brought him into contact with his latest label, the recently formed DRT Records and a deal to release '**Adam's Apple**', unquestionably his greatest and most dangerously hypnotic work to date. The album, produced by Julian Raymond and Erik Kupper, features a collaboration between John Wesley Harding and world famous classical composer Gavin Bryars.

Later in 2004, Harding will have another reason to celebrate. Signed to publishers Little, Brown Books in a two book deal, he will have his debut novel '**Misfortune**' published in September, under his real name, Wesley Stace.

Writer and critic Augusten Borroughs (“Running With Scissors”) on Adam’s Apple

“I am obsessing over the new Mini Cooper, wanting it very much because of its spunky, muscular stance and its headlights which seem to actually wink at you. I am seeing myself driving twisty roads in New England, without concerns. I need this car because for a week I have been doing nothing but listening to John Wesley Harding's new CD, **Adam’s Apple**. It is a fabulous recording and I need a new car, and possibly a new life to go along with it.

Our publicists have decided that we are to meet. The thinking is, if I like the new CD, maybe I will be able to write something about it, letting others know. Cell phone numbers are passed along. E-mails exchanged.

We meet for lunch at a pricey midtown steakhouse. We pass on the \$20 appetizers and he orders salmon, while I do steak. My first impression of John Wesley Harding the man is that he is very much like his music -wickedly clever, energetic, hip and very, very smart. "Have you read this yet?" he asks, producing a thick, paperback with an unattractive, textbook looking cover. I open it to find tiny type, hundreds of pages. Personally, I would rather inject myself with bleach than read such a book. "It's about street peddlers in Victorian England," he tells me. "This is the real stuff. This is what Dickens was writing about." I seriously doubt that any of the Backstreet Boys have read this particular book.

Harding gets his inspiration from a lot of unexpected places. **Monkey And His Cat** was inspired by an 18th century woodcut. It's a fanciful song, energetic, and combines playful touches of phased vocals with sly and sinuous string lines. What does it mean? What would you like it to mean? One thing is certain, you won't be able to get it out of your head.

Harding is expert at taking the dusty and obscure and making it new and compulsively listenable. Consider **Nothing At All**, a song with its origins in King Lear. This song features gorgeous harmonies, and a stick-to-your-brain hook of a chorus that makes you want to stand in front of a full length mirror with a glass of wine and sway. It makes you want to slide the spaghetti straps off somebody's shoulder. It's a sexy song, plaintive and filled with longing.

However, the first single from the CD is **Negative Love**. It's easy to understand why Harding's label chose this hopeful love song to lead with, because in a sense it's "classic" Harding. The lyrics were inspired by a poem of John Donne's called Negative Love. Yet instead of writing about a complicated conundrum in which the expression of God must be made in the negatives, Harding pared the thought to the bone and brought it home - to love. The mathematical rule that two negatives multiplied together make a positive is the reason this song is both cynical, and also inspiring and hopeful. Heady stuff. But when you listen to it, the melody goes straight to your bones. I was singing it for days, after hearing it once.

One of my favorite singles from the new CD is **Sluts**. There's something so Gucci-suit sleek, and ultra-dry martini modern about this song that it seems destined for the silver screen. The song, Harding says, is about "sexual recklessness among the recently introduced." But to me, there's something decadent about it that transcends sex. It could be about any indulgence. It brings to mind images of a handsome weekend in Las Vegas, circa 1956, with a \$4,000,000 tab, compliments of a distant gay uncle. **Sluts** is rousing and catchy enough to be the biggest frat boy shout-along since "Tubthumping" or "Who Let the Dogs Out," but built for smart people, too.

Gentle, rolling piano lines over surprising, shifting, soaring chord changes define **Hard**. While this song is about the defeat of love, "Hard" has a soaring quality to it that makes you want to stand at the edge of a cliff and raise your arms, while a Panavision Camera swoops around you. "It's hard that we changed/I send my best regards/We're strangers now/And that's hard." It's a sentiment everyone can relate to, somewhere we've all been. In less skilled hands, Hard could have been a very depressing tune. Here, it's aloft.

All of Harding's songs on **Adam’s Apple** have an air of familiarity about them. And by this I don't mean they seem derivative. Quite the contrary. Harding has created melodies to go with his smart,

clever lyrics that feel so inevitable, they already seem like hits. A perfect example of this is **Pull**. It's deceptively simple -- "What pulls you in," indeed. Here, Harding astonishes with what is, without a doubt, his best guitar solo -- an acoustic guitar solo. It is elegant, simple, and to my ear perfect. It makes me feel that I should immediately go out and get a Martin, despite the fact that I cannot even play a tambourine. Like a figure skater in the Olympics, Harding makes it seem so easy.

One thing that makes **Adam's Apple** such a breakout album for Harding is that it showcases his range as an artist. He can take you from danceable pop to sweeping emotion right into a somber and thickly gorgeous art song, like **Sussex Ghost Story**. It's haunting, powerful and wholly original ("After I had killed my wife/And by the jury been acquitted/I resolved to change my life/and try to lead a life less wicked") was recorded in London with the Gavin Bryars Ensemble. Think of a Merchant Ivory film, with the best lighting you've ever seen. And then add the trademark, Clever Wes Twist ®.

Other songs, **It Stays**, **She Never Talks** and **Protest Protest Protest** lodge themselves in your brain and you find yourself humming their refrains for days. **When You Smile** is like this, too. I feel certain it will be covered by Britney Spears when she releases her "Britney Sings The Classics" album when she's fifty.

Fans of John Wesley Harding, like myself, will be thrilled with this new CD. **Adam's Apple** is easily the artist's most accomplished work to date. Sometimes soaring, sometimes somber, **Adam's Apple** is unapologetically, unpretentiously, undeniably F-U.N. And for this, for the simple guts it takes to be fun in this age of polysyllabic, cross-referential, ironic, pop-intellectualism, to be fun is to be brave.

You know what? The Mini Cooper is too small. Make that a '57 Chevy.

AUGUSTEN BURROUGHS