

Asleep at the Wheel

Asleep at the Wheel is a musical band that plays western swing, jazz, boogie-woogie, country, and American roots music. Founded and led by Ray Benson, the band's career has included multiple Grammy awards, collaborations with iconic music legends, forays into musical theater, and four decades of touring and recording more than twenty five albums.

The band first formed in 1970, in Ray Benson's hometown of Paw Paw, West Virginia. With steel player Rueben Gosfield, known as Lucky Oceans, the band began playing locally, then regionally, and were soon securing high profile spots opening for diverse headliners including Alice Cooper and Hot Tuna. Benson's love for American roots music and western swing caught the ear of seminal western swing revivalist Commander Cody, whose band, the Lost Planet Airmen, were making a name for themselves in California. They urged Benson to move to California, and in 1971, Asleep at the Wheel relocated to Oakland, CA.

Asleep at the Wheel had increasing numbers of fans coming to their concerts, and established musicians became fans as well. Legendary Irish rocker Van Morrison was one such fan who mentioned the band in an interview with Rolling Stone magazine, giving them precious national exposure early in their existence. This mention is widely believed to have encouraged United Artists to offer the young band their first record contract, and in 1973, their debut album, *Comin' At Ya*, was released.

Although the music scene in California was vibrant, Benson found himself embraced by the burgeoning 'cosmic cowboy' movement exploding in Austin, Texas. Supporters such as Willie Nelson and Doug Sahm urged Benson to again relocate his band, to the 'Live Music Capital of the World,' and as their debut album gained critical and popular success, Asleep at the Wheel moved to the city that would be its home for the next four decades.

Their second album, called *Asleep at the Wheel*, contained a cover of the jazz boogie standard "Choo Choo Ch'Boogie." When released as a single, the song found fast and widespread success, and became the band's first single to appear on the national charts in 1974. The following year, their album *Texas Gold* produced their first top-ten country chart hit, "The Letter that Johnny Walker Read." The band appeared on one of the first broadcasts of the public television show *Austin City Limits*, elevating their exposure and helping launch one of the most successful and influential music programs in television history. Only five years after their creation, Asleep at the Wheel had found their niche in the progressive country music scene, and had become one of the most popular and successful acts to emerge from Austin.

Throughout the rest of the 1970s, Asleep at the Wheel continued to ride a wave of success, winning accolades from Rolling Stone magazine and the Academy of Country Music, Grammy-award nominations, international tours, and an appearance in a movie. They recorded their first live album at the Austin Opera House in 1979.

In the 1980s, the band underwent significant changes. They left their long time label, United Artists, signing first with MCA, and later with Epic Records. The departure of founding member

Lucky Oceans, and the subsequent departure of the female vocalist who had helped define their sound, Chris O'Connell, changed the band's line-up considerably. Benson and the band continued to tour and release albums, expanding their output to include commercial and movie soundtrack work. Benson also began producing other acts. By the late 1980s, Asleep at the Wheel had rebounded from the changes, releasing two of their most successful albums, *10* and *Western Standard Time*, and earning two Grammy awards.

By 1995, when Asleep at the Wheel celebrated their 25th Anniversary, they had begun a celebration of the music of the Father of Western Swing, Bob Wills. They released an album entitled *A Tribute to the Music of Bob Wills*, which included a stellar line-up of guest artists including Garth Brooks, George Strait and Vince Gill. The album won two Grammy's and the band repeated that success in 1999 with the album *A Ride With Bob*. Also featuring an array of guest stars, the album was accompanied by a documentary film entitled *The Making of a Ride With Bob*, which won a regional Emmy award. The album won two Grammys, and catalyzed the band's next major creative challenge.

In between major tours with stars including George Strait and Bob Dylan, recording and releasing albums, experiencing more changes to the line-up and collaborating with acts such as the Blind Boys of Alabama, Benson and the band spent the early part of the new millennium developing a musical theater piece about Wills, also called *A Ride With Bob*. The piece debuted in Austin, Texas in 2005, as part of a state-wide celebration of Bob Wills's 100th birthday, and featured the members of the band in different roles. A resounding success, the band took *A Ride With Bob* on numerous tours, in addition to their regular gigs.

In 2009, Asleep at the Wheel collaborated with another Texas musical icon, Willie Nelson. The album *Willie and the Wheel* received a Grammy nomination, and the band continues to tour and record as of 2010.