



Then you've a lot to sort out.



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THE WONDER STUFF

Escape from Rubbish Island

(IRL/BMG)

Rating: 6

US release date: 22 March 2005

UK release date: 27 September 2004

by Patrick Schabe

PopMatters Music Reviews Editor

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Sing the Absurd

This is the fourth incarnation of this review.

Admittedly, the first two appeared only in my head, and the third only lived in the confines of my hard drive for a few days; the three together brief flashes of a fitful and highly contentious existence. All four are (or were, depending) tied up in a conflicted state of hopes and expectations, understandings and misgivings. In that sense, these reviews and the Wonder Stuff's catalogue are alike in a lot of ways.

You see, the old, early '90s fan in me wanted this to be *the* Wonder Stuff album... the one that freed them from the unfair claims of a weak swan song, the one that finally broke the band in the States, the one that cemented Miles Hunt's reputation as a witty and charmingly acerbic songwriter, and the one that meant the Wonder Stuff are *back!*

The first version of this review tried to write itself before the disc arrived, struggling to form itself out of pure anticipation and guesswork, while the second reacted to a mounting sense of disappointment and let-down, and even some slight confusion over what went wrong. (The third version was an attempt to regain balance and an open mind despite the angel-devil specters of the previous two versions, and was, frankly, even messier than this and bears no further mention.)

All this because, despite the same name on the CD case, this isn't the Wonder Stuff of yore.

In 1994, the Wonder Stuff bore the strange distinction of announcing their break-up just as they released their fourth -- and presumably final -- album, *Construction for the Modern Idiot*. Despite 17 Top 20 UK singles (including a number one for their cover of "Dizzy"), the band members had reached a state of near constant feud, critics claimed the album was a sagging reflection of the fire dying out, and announcing that the joy had gone out of it all, they went on a brief farewell tour and called it quits. Though hardly a unique story in the annals of rock and roll, it was still a frustrating thing for those few Stateside fans the UK band had gathered who kept waiting for the Stuffies to come to their town. Especially since the bootleg of the Phoenix Festival show I acquired (before the video of the event, *Finally Live*, was released) showed that they still put on a killer show for their (at the time) last ever performance together.

Then, almost miraculously, it was announced that the Stuffies were reuniting for some UK live dates in 2000. The shows garnered positive press, the old fan base came out in strength to support the band, and it seemed like a good time was had by all. After continuing to play together sporadically for the next couple of years, inevitably the idea of a fifth Wonder Stuff album came up. But, according to Hunt, the process of plotting a new release served to open up all the old wounds from a decade prior, and it looked like the Wonder Stuff was finished. Again.

In spite of those frustrations, Hunt and founding guitarist Malcolm Treece continued to kick around the idea of an album. Hunt had continued writing and performing following the 1994 break-up, first fronting short-lived band Vent 414 and then as a solo artist (often with Treece in tow), but following the reunion gigs, the pair felt they owed the fans another Wonder Stuff disc. So they reached the decision to proceed without Martin Bell and Martin Gilks (the remaining members of the original line up) and recruited bassist Mark McCarthy and recorded *Escape from Rubbish Island*, then added drummer Andres Karu to make up the new Wonder Stuff and went out on tour under the old moniker. Not exactly happy about the situation, the two Martins have come out with a statement claiming this disc is a Hunt solo affair cashing in on the Stuffies' name, while Hunt claims his right as the Wonder Stuff's founder and primary songwriter to maintain the band as he sees fit.

To be fair, *Escape from Rubbish Island* proves them both right. Hunt's lyrics are as wry and bitter and sneering as ever. But by the same token,



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musically *Rubbish Island* is missing a piece of the formula that made up the old, familiar Wonder Stuff, most notably the instrumental contributions of Martin Bell. Once dubbed "Fiddly" for, obviously, the fiddle parts he contributed to the band, Bell's inclusion helped shape the folk-infused rock sound began on *Hup* and fleshed out on the band's truly brilliant *Never Loved Elvis*. And while fans and critics claim that the more guitar-oriented sound of *Rubbish Island* hearkens back to the group's debut, *The Eight Legged Groove Machine*, it just doesn't feel like the same Wonder Stuff this time around.

That said, it doesn't mean that this is a rubbish disc. Lead and title track "Escape from Rubbish Island" does a solid job of reminding listeners of the original jangle-rock guitar pop of the old Wonder Stuff, and the song itself is a textbook example of Hunt's bitterly disenchanting lyricism, as he rages against Britain and most fully expresses his desire to flee his homeland. In fact, the album is aptly named after the song, as divorce and escape are definitely recurrent themes for the disc in the same way that *Elvis* skewered pop culture and *Idiot* tackled growing up. "Rubbish Island" is followed up by a solid and tense "Bile Chant", which qualifies as one of the classic Wonder Stuff malcontent barnburners. If only... well, you can just *hear* the spaces that a nice bit of Fiddly would have fleshed it out completely.

On the other hand, "Better Get Ready for a Fist Fight" and "Another Comic Tragedy" are among the best work ever recorded under the Stuffies name. The former has a full sound that could have been lifted off of *Modern Idiot* (that's *not* necessarily a bad thing) and features a plain but insistently catchy melody, whereas the latter is one of Hunt's finest brokenhearted love songs, both plainspoken emotion and clever lyrical constructions. But things start to sag in the middle, especially the bizarrely out-of-place "Head Count", which finds Hunt doing some odd version of Dave Gahan fronting Peter Murphy's back-up band.

Thankfully, things end on an up note. "Back to Work" reminds old fans that Hunt always knew how to mine a bass line with his vocals, and if "One Step at a Time"'s funk sounds like Squeeze covering "Inertia", *Rubbish Island* has the good sense to send things out with the anthemic "Love's Ltd.". Featuring some beautiful tin whistle work from guest musician Geoffrey Kelly, it's a hopeful sounding tune that's undercut by its own sadly broken lyrics. But then, you wouldn't expect a Wonder Stuff album to end on a blissfully happy note, which makes it fairly ideal.

So there's no "Mission Drive" or even cheerfully fuck-all exuberance of "Size of a Cow" here, nor is it as bratty and in-your-face as the good old days of "Radio Ass Kiss" and "Give, Give, Give Me More, More, More". But that's sort of to be expected from a band starting anew, yet a decade more mature. *Escape from Rubbish Island* inspires conflicting emotions for fans like myself because, in the end, there really couldn't be *the* Wonder Stuff reunion album that picked up, brushed off, and trumped their back catalog. The bourbon-soaked piss-take years may be gone, but at least Hunt and company still have some teeth. While less familiar than hoped for, *Escape from Rubbish Island* is still a pleasant visit from an old friend, and different or not, it's Wonder Stuff enough.

— 18 April 2005

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