

A BandHouse Gigs Tribute to Fountains of Wayne

Program Notes:

Fountains of Wayne (FOW) was an American power pop band founded in 1995 around the songwriting partnership of Chris Collingwood and Adam Schlesinger. Although FOW's songs were credited to "Collingwood/Schlesinger," they rarely wrote together but shared composing credits to avoid disputes over the value of the contributions they routinely made to help finish each other's songs.

The two songwriters shared a talent for composing sugary, melodic and sturdily-crafted modern pop rock, with cheeky references to their '60s musical heroes (e.g., Beatles, Beach Boys) and an openhearted embrace of grungy guitars, analog synth riffs, and other ear candy sonics associated with more recent '80s and '90s pop peers (e.g., Cars, Doobie Brothers, Billy Joel). With a knack for landing punchy melodic hooks, FOW often emphasized the first part of the "power pop" equation, deploying walls of crunchy guitars over thrashing beats, but they tempered every album with quieter acoustic songs, featuring melancholic melodies and harmonies with an emotional weight to rival their '60s idols' best work. For a loving salute to FOW's use of the "radical dynamic shift" and other musical trademarks, seek out Robbie Fulks' brilliant "Fountains of Wayne Hotline" ("Slightly distorted melodic guitar solo? Check!").

Lyricaly, Collingwood and Schlesinger were bards of the Tri-State subway, bridge and tunnel crowd, chronicling in reportorial, finely-detailed fashion the foibles of a parade of Northeastern Gen X characters, including office temps, lovable losers, bottom-sinkers, custom van owners and bikers with breadcrumbs in their beards. The two songwriters fused tongue-in-cheek humor with a mania for proper nouns that anchored their songs to particular places and times in a novelistic way. Collingwood's reedy tenor lead vocals could be gently sardonic, genially snarky, wistfully aching or earnestly imploring; it was the right instrument for FOW's wittily mordant meta-level songs exploring themes of suburban ennui, pop culture folderol, early adulthood angst and unrequited longing. They also wrote about women with a refreshing degree of tenderness and empathy.

The artistic partnership between Collingwood and Schlesinger stretched over a 35-year period. Born a few weeks apart in October 1967, Collingwood (from Sellersville, PA) and Schlesinger (from Montclair, NJ) first met in 1985 as freshmen at Williams College. They quickly became self-described best friends, playing music on and off together in various bands throughout college.

Following graduation in 1989, the two friends moved to Boston, where they continued their musical collaboration, playing in local clubs under the name the Wallflowers, before eventually selling their rights in that name to Jakob Dylan's band. Using the name Pinwheel (sometimes referred to as "Pinnwheel"), Collingwood and Schlesinger then recorded a 13-song album for an independent label that failed to release the record (although you now can find unauthorized copies online). Several Pinwheel songs would end up on future FOW releases, but a reported dispute between the band and their label would spark a multiyear legal battle in which the label sought to keep Schlesinger and Collingwood from recording.

Frustrated by the failure to launch Pinwheel, the two friends eventually decided it was time, in Schlesinger's words, to take a break from each other. By 1991, Schlesinger had departed Boston for New York City, where he pursued a songwriting and producing career. A workaholic by nature (in contrast to the more deliberate and ruminative Collingwood), the multitasking Schlesinger would maintain a separate career as a songwriter and producer for hire throughout his tenure with FOW.

He wrote occasional music for television and movies, as well as ad jingles for clients including the Maryland State Lottery. Responding to a *Village Voice* ad in 1991, Schlesinger helped found the indie chanson pop trio Ivy, fronted by the breezy voice of Parisian Dominique Durand. Ivy's first recordings, produced by Schlesinger, appeared in 1994, and the band would release six albums between 1995 and 2011, recorded in between Schlesinger's commitments to FOW and other projects.

Meanwhile, by late 1995, after playing occasionally in Boston with new band the Mercy Buckets, Chris Collingwood had decided—after realizing “one day that I was working in a bank”—to move from Boston to New York, where he soon reunited with Schlesinger to resume their musical collaboration under the “Fountains of Wayne” banner.

The band name came from a garish lawn ornament store in Wayne, New Jersey. (The store closed in 2009, several years after serving as a set location for an episode of *The Sopranos*.) According to Adam Schlesinger's mother, her son—who had been playing music and writing songs since childhood—had been proclaiming from a young age that the store's name would be a great future band moniker. Collingwood claims it was actually Schlesinger's mother who originally proposed the FOW name in the 1980's for Collingwood and Schlesinger to use as a band name for the introspective songs they were then collaborating on as college students.

Once Collingwood and Schlesinger reunited in 1995 in New York, they started recording demos of new Collingwood songs and decided to write and record a full album as quickly and spontaneously as they could. The two songwriters would meet at a West Village bar (the still-standing WXOU Radio Bar), where they would drink and write song titles on napkins, dividing the more promising titles between themselves at the end of the night with the assignment of returning the next evening with a completed song.

The barstool brainstorming led to FOW's eponymously named first album (*Fountains of Wayne*), quickly recorded in early 1996 on a \$5,000 budget, with Collingwood and Schlesinger playing most of the instruments (with bassist Danny Weinkauf, later of They Might Be Giants' touring band).

Produced by Schlesinger and released on Atlantic Records in October 1996, the FOW debut was received warmly by critics and power pop fans, and it was especially popular in the U.K. The album tied for second place in *Billboard's* 1996 Critics' Poll and the single “Radiation Vibe” hit number 14 on the *Billboard* Modern Rock Tracks in 1997. The *Village Voice's* Robert Christgau rated the *Fountains of Wayne* debut as an A- (and he gave all of their subsequent albums a similar grade of A- or higher). The critical buzz on FOW was further sparked by the separate success Schlesinger enjoyed as writer of the title song for the movie “*That Thing You Do,*” which was theatrically released the same week as the *Fountains of Wayne* album. The song was later nominated by the Academy Awards and Golden Globes for best original song.

To assemble a proper band to tour in support of the FOW record, Schlesinger and Collingwood quickly recruited virtuoso lead guitarist Jody Porter, whom Schlesinger knew from Porter's stint with London-based band The Belltower, and drummer Brian Young from The Posies. With Collingwood on lead vocals and guitar and Schlesinger on bass, this quartet became the classic FOW lineup for the remainder of the band's existence.

The FOW quartet toured the world to support the first album but the band's second album (1999's “*Utopia Parkway*”), featuring Porter and Young for the first time, along with a bigger recording budget and a fuller sound, failed to generate significant sales or mainstream hits, notwithstanding favorable critical reviews,

college radio airplay, and nonstop touring. Atlantic Records dropped the band in early 2000, a demoralizing blow which led to the first of several extended hiatuses in FOW's recording and touring career.

Without a label deal, FOW regrouped after a few years to record new songs in sessions paid for by Schlesinger, which resulted in 2003's breakthrough FOW album *Welcome Interstate Managers*. The novelty MILF anthem "*Stacy's Mom*" became an MTV staple and reached number 21 in the *Billboard* Hot 100 chart, although the song's mainstream success was an anomaly, creating a "one hit wonder" aura for the band, notwithstanding two more excellent albums (2007's *Traffic and Weather* and 2011's *Sky Full of Holes*), plus an odds-and-sods roundup of B-sides, live covers, and other stray songs on 2005's *Out-of-State Plates*. With multi-year gaps between the band's successive albums and tours, FOW effectively disbanded after playing their final live show in October 2013, although the band never officially called it quits.

During that final hiatus, Chris Collingwood issued in 2016 what was essentially a solo album under the group name Look Park, while Schlesinger's songwriter/producer career blossomed. In addition to recording and producing Ivy and Tinted Windows (a side band with Taylor Hanson, James Iha and Bun E. Carlos), Schlesinger won multiple awards and nominations for various non-FOW projects, including three Emmys for his work on television shows, a Grammy, and multiple Tony award nominations. During four seasons of the "Crazy Ex-Girlfriend" television show, Schlesinger wrote or co-wrote an astonishing 157 songs, in a wide variety of styles. He also produced records for The Monkees, They Might Be Giants, David Mead and Dashboard Confessional, among others. Tragically, on April 1, 2020, the 52-year old Schlesinger died of complications from COVID-19.

At its core, the FOW story is about the decades-long friendship and artistic partnership between two gifted songwriters, who shared a singular dedication to pop craftsmanship and a generationally-detached but archly humorous perspective on cultural ephemera and the human condition. As with many other musical partnerships, it was a complex friendship that evolved and ultimately became strained as they pursued their shared musical vision while charting separate parallel individual lives, through good times and troubled times, until there no longer was any kind of time left.

Reflecting on his partner's untimely death, Chris Collingwood told *Rolling Stone*: "Our sensibilities were very much in sync, and with only a word or two, he could understand exactly what I meant. Part of that is being a great player, but part of it is a kind of synergy that's rare between musicians. I certainly haven't had it with anyone else. There were a lot of things I took for granted in FOW that I assumed all other bands had, but have since learned are rare. All four of us could play pretty much any song just by hearing it, in any key, and it was often like self-stump-the-band during sound check, with someone starting a riff and the rest of the band jumping in. We got really good as a unit, and would play whole songs we hated just because we could and it was funny."

What remains for the rest of us is the FOW legacy: a luminous catalog of hook-filled, melodic, bittersweet, comic and rocking pop songs. It's a radiation vibe we're all grooving on—shine on, shine on, shine on!

—Edward O'Connell