

**A Conversation with Adam Schlesinger of Fountains of Wayne
by Frank Goodman (5/2007, Puremusic.com)**

The catchiest, funniest power pop band today. Fountains of Wayne write these three minute short stories that have fantastic grooves and great guitars, plots, characters, and melodies that stay with you through the day. Nobody does it as well as they do.

The main writers are lead vocalist/guitarist Chris Collingwood and bassist and background vocalist Adam Schlesinger, whom we interview in this issue. He first came to the spotlight by landing the big musical shot with the title song for the movie *That Thing You Do*. He's extremely smart and focused, and took the time to be very friendly, though I'm sure he had at least 5 interviews backed up behind mine. (I like the early slot, after coffee, before the idiots burn them rotten.) Adam and I talk a little about Chris, but the other stars go unmentioned, so let me say here that they are drummer Brian Young and lead guitarist Jody Porter, formerly of The Posies and Belltower, respectively, and they've been in the band since the beginning.

Gods be praised, FoW leaped to higher levels of stardom off the relatively huge success of the hit single "Stacy's Mom" on the last record, *Welcome Interstate Managers*--and the video with Rachel Hunter burning up the screen as the too-hot mom of the young girlfriend, she was extremely funny. But it's the lyrics that make it possible, because the stories are so well-crafted, perfectly twisted vignettes of messy life.

A friend of mine just caught their show in SF and marveled at how cross-generational and adulation the audience was, hanging on and singing along with every word. FoW are totally hip on the one hand and family entertainment on the other; that is a *very* small road to be roaring down the middle of.

This new record *Traffic and Weather* (see our review last month) is a tour de force in a brilliant career that will add thousands of fans to the ever-growing fold of one of the greatest acts touring and recording today. If you like fun pop records, you must get this CD, and it will bring you great, simple, guiltless pleasure. We love them to death, here's Adam Schlesinger of Fountains of Wayne.

PM: I'm really crazy about *Traffic and Weather*, man.

AS: Thanks a lot.

PM: Even more than *Welcome Interstate Managers*, which I thought would be awful hard to top.

AS: Oh, I really appreciate that.

PM: And it must be heavy going into the studio trying to top a record like that. How is it doing so far, in comparison?

AS: How is it doing? Well, it really just came out today, so it's not doing anything yet.
[laughs]

PM: "Stacy's Mom," I mean, that was such a big single, and such a big video--it's got to be hard to match a thrust like that into the marketplace.

AS: Yeah, I mean, I don't think we even really are trying to. Obviously we'd love to have another hit. But we couldn't go in and really change our process to try to do that. We just tried to do what we always do.

PM: Yeah, make your next record.

AS: Just make another record, exactly.

PM: In fact, having moved by the time of that last record from Atlantic to S-Curve, right, how tricky was it to get Rachel Hunter to star in that huge video for "Stacy's Mom"? What's the story?

AS: Well, there's not much of a story, really. The director and the band made up a little wish list of people that we thought would be right, and she was number one. And she said yes. We just contacted her through an agent, or whatever, and she was interested, and she did it.

PM: Amazing.

AS: We got lucky.

PM: And she thought it was fun, no doubt, because it's so good.

AS: Yeah, it was great. And she was great. She was totally cool, and really did it with like the right sense of humor and all that stuff.

PM: Yeah, she's totally funny. So the band is super. What's even more amazing to me, and a lot of people, I think, are the songs. For the avid but not rabid fans who may already know, maybe you'd talk about the songwriting with me a little bit.

AS: Sure.

PM: You and Chris Collingwood were dually credited. But is that how the songs actually go down, or is a more of a Lennon/McCartney--

AS: Yeah, we don't really collaborate anymore. I mean, we used to when we were younger. But these days we actually write separately. And we don't even live in the same state. So we just each write a batch of songs and get together with Jody and Brian and arrange them and record them.

PM: So does it get known like who actually wrote what, or not really?

AS: Well, it's not like a secret, if anybody wants to know, we'll tell them. But we don't like to make a big deal out of that, just because I think it's more important for the band to have an identity, really.

PM: Well, yeah. I think that's really cool, too, and so I won't ask any further about that, even.

AS: Like I said, you're welcome to ask. I mean, people ask all the time, and it's fine. It's just that we don't like to credit it separately because we don't want people to saying, "Well, I like this guy better," or whatever.

PM: Right. When you consider you and Chris, for instance, are you guys more of a mellow, or more of a volatile pair?

AS: We fight all the time, but it's not really about the music, so much. Usually the fights we have are more about just bullshit day-to-day stuff.

PM: Personality shit.

AS: Yeah. That's the weird thing about us, and I think the only reason that we were able to keep working together, is that musically we really do see things the same a lot of the time, and we both really trust each other's judgment, so on that level it still works really well.

PM: It's amazing. So is Fountains a very democratic setup, or do the songwriters benevolently call the shots, or--

AS: There are certain things that are democratic, and certain things that aren't. I think that I'm more of the guy that just, by default or whatever, ends up making a lot of sort of day-to-day minor things happen, or keep things moving.

PM: Yeah, somebody's got to.

AS: But Chris definitely has like a veto power, whether it's musical or whether it's business, or whatever. He can definitely--

PM: Knock something down.

AS: Knock something down, and nobody can question that.

PM: Right.

So you're a great pop and rock 'n' roll songwriter. What do you think of hip-hop and rap, and what I sometimes think of as its kudzu-like effect on other American pop music?

AS: Well, I think that different kinds of music has different kinds of pleasures attached to it. I don't really see one as necessarily being better than the other. There's the kind of music that I make because that's just what I happen to do. But I can enjoy music that has nothing to do with guitar pop in different settings.

PM: Right.

AS: I think just like anything else, most hip-hop is terrible, but some of it is really great, just like most guitar pop is terrible, but some of it is really great.

[laughter]

AS: And most movies are terrible, and most books are terrible, and like every once in a while you find one you like, and that becomes the thing you're into.

PM: Yeah. Movies above all, I mean, with all the channels you get, there's never anything you want to watch.

AS: Yeah, exactly. You sit through 20 minutes of some movie, and you're like, "You got to be kidding me, I'm going to get to the end of this?"

PM: Yeah. And like an album costs 30,000, it costs 100,000 to make, but movies costs millions of dollars.

AS: I know. It's so insane. It's so insane. There's just too much entertainment in general. Well, even when I was in high school and stuff, the release of a new record would be this big deal. And it would be like, oh, a new Pretenders record is coming out, or something.

PM: Yeah!

AS: And it would be like this big event.

PM: Momentous.

AS: And now it's just like every week we're just bombarded with so much product. It's almost impossible to really get that excited about stuff.

PM: And we're moving into the realm where audio fidelity means zero.

AS: I know. That's really depressing to me, too. You work on these records, and you're listening to it in the studio environment, and it sounds so amazing. And then it just gets squashed down to this computer file, people listening to it on an iPod, and it just sounds like crap.

[laughter]

PM: Yeah, right. They say, "Oh, no, it sounds good on my phone. It's cool."

AS: Yeah, exactly. It's very depressing.

PM: In this upcoming issue we're going to also have an interview with a different kind of rock band, to some extent, the Kings of Leon.

AS: Oh, yeah.

PM: Are you familiar much with them? You have anything to say about them? You like them?

AS: Yeah, I like that band. Actually, I have not heard their new record, but everyone tells me it's great, and I'm excited to hear it. I think they're a really cool band.

PM: It's totally different. It's much more kind of a bandy, and a little more psychedelic, and more raw.

AS: Yeah, but they've got a vibe that works. That's what I was saying about different music works in different ways. And there's a lot of music I like just because it has a great kind of energy or vibe or a sound. It's not so much about writing the kind of narrative songs that we do.

PM: Right. Yeah, your apparent knowledge of popular music is deep, and so many good influences pop up so credibly everywhere. I wonder, are you an NRBQ fan, or do you like The Band, or--

AS: I like The Band. I never really listened to NRBQ that much. I mean, I didn't actually hear them until I was a little older. But I was definitely into The Band as a kid. I still am. I still like those records.

PM: What about rootsy things? Like do you like bluegrass, or country blues, or early Muddy and Howlin' Wolf, stuff like that?

AS: I was never a big blues guy. I took piano lessons as a kid, and I was into more like jazz blues than like the kind of guitar blues. I liked a lot of sort of like jazz versions of blues stuff.

PM: Mose Allison, and stuff like that?

AS: Yeah, or whatever, just like Charles Mingus.

PM: Right.

AS: I was into that kind of blues. But I'm not like the hugest blues fan, really, in general. But Chris is definitely into country and bluegrass. And in fact, he plays the banjo and listens to a lot of country music, especially like old kind of country rock, like Gram Parsons type stuff.

PM: Really?

AS: Yeah.

PM: Oh, wow. So you say you live in different states. Where do you each reside?

AS: I live in Manhattan, and he lives up near Northampton, Mass.

PM: What about reading? Do you make time for that in your schedule?

AS: In terms of reading fiction and stuff?

PM: Yeah, and whatever.

AS: It depends. Actually sometimes when we're really in touring mode there's actually more time to read because a lot of your day is just sitting around. At home, I've got two kids now, and I'm working all the time. It's like if I get in bed at night with a book, I'm usually asleep by page 2. It's barely enough for me to like get through a magazine.

[laughter]

PM: Would you call yourself a spiritual guy to any extent, or a political one?

AS: I definitely wouldn't really call myself a spiritual guy. In terms of politics, I think Chris is probably the more angry liberal. I think we're both very liberal politically, but I think that he's like--he'll get on like political websites and blogs and really get himself really worked up about stuff. It's definitely like a second area of extreme attention for him.

PM: Wow. I spent a number of early years in the same county as Wayne, in Oakland.

AS: Oakland, New Jersey?

PM: Yeah. And I remember going to the Preakness Mall and stuff there. Will you watch the return of *The Sopranos* on Sunday, or *Entourage*?

AS: Oh, yeah. I like both those shows a lot.

PM: So your professional life always seems rich in side projects and songwriting for movies and all that. Anything come up lately in those arenas that's been fun or rewarding?

AS: I wrote some songs for this Hugh Grant, Drew Barrymore movie that was out early this year called *Music & Lyrics*. Yeah, that was a cool project, it was fun. I liked the director a lot.

PM: How was the film? I didn't see that yet.

AS: It's a cute film. It's a romantic comedy. That's what it's supposed to be. It's a cute love story with some music in it.

PM: Did you get to hear your song pretty well, or did they push it way back or--

AS: The songs are pretty prominent--one of them in particular. I mean, I didn't write all the songs in the movie. There's a bunch of writers that worked on that movie. But my songs are pretty prominent in it, so that was cool.

PM: Other projects?

AS: I have a studio that I co-own with a couple guys in New York. It's called Stratosphere Sound, it's in Chelsea. From time to time I'll produce other bands if I've got some free time. I just worked with a band called Motion City Soundtrack. They're from Minneapolis, and they're kind of a punk pop. They're very sort of of the moment. They're pretty popular these days, and they get a lot of video play on MTV and Fuse, and all those channels.

PM: In fact, I couldn't figure out or find out which one, but I know you produced some record on my friend, and fellow Nashvillian sometimes, David Mead.

AS: Yeah, we did a record together called *Mine and Yours* that came out in 2000 or 2001.

PM: He's a talented dude.

AS: Yeah, he's great. Also, apart from being such a great songwriter, he's probably the best singer in America.

PM: He's an unbelievable singer.

AS: I mean, the guy is just--it's weird.

PM: Do you know the guys from Joe, Marc's Brother, too, that he--

AS: Yeah, yep.

PM: Oh, wow.

AS: Yeah, I know that whole crew--

PM: Small world. Yeah, the Pisapias, and all them, and Josh Rouse, and all that, yeah.

AS: Yep.

PM: I hope you don't consider my curiosity crass, but is it okay to ask: What's made you the most dough so far as a songwriter, was it the first big single, "That Thing You Do," or something else?

AS: Oh, well, it's hard to say. I mean, definitely, when "That Thing You Do" happened, that was a huge break for me in a lot of ways, just like in terms of opening doors, but definitely financially. I really hadn't made any money to speak of. I was trying to just do whatever I could to survive as a musician at that point. We had signed a record deal, but that didn't really put a lot of money in our pockets. So that movie definitely got me through a few years. But it wasn't like this runaway hit, either. The movie didn't actually do that well. But still, by my standards, especially at the time, it was like all the difference in the world.

PM: Right. But it's just been some here, some there, not one thing that, oh, that's the one that bought the house, or--

AS: I've been lucky in that I've been able to kind of work steadily. I've always just sort of seen myself as like a working musician who tries to keep busy, and tries to keep getting work doing different stuff. I've been lucky in that for a while now I've been able to keep working.

PM: Yeah, always doing something.

AS: Yeah. Some things end up paying more than other things do, but I kind of see it as just trying not to turn anything down unless I have to.

[laughter]

AS: I'm always going to have that fear of just being unemployed, because I remember what it was like just trying to like, whatever, just to cut demos for commercials, or something, to make some money.

PM: Absolutely. What videos have been shot for this record, or are being considered?

AS: We actually just shot a video that isn't finished yet, it's not edited yet, but it's for this first single, which is called "Someone To Love."

PM: Yeah, great song.

AS: And we've got a guy in the video whose name is Demetri Martin, who is a comedian, a really talented young comedian from New York who he actually does a lot of guest appearances on the *Daily Show* with Jon Stewart.

PM: Ah.

AS: So I'm pretty excited about that. We're hoping to see a finished version of it in a week or so.

PM: And is that the only one planned at the moment?

AS: Well, we'll see how it goes. Videos are expensive.

PM: Absolutely. That "Mexican Wine" video I saw this morning sure looked expensive, wow.

AS: Yeah. That was really over the top. We didn't spend that much this time around. But still, they're expensive. So we're not going to immediately go out and do four of them.

PM: You must have heard it--how did you like Robbie Fulks' song "Fountains of Wayne Hotline"?

AS: I love it.

PM: Super funny, right?

AS: It's my favorite thing ever, yeah.

PM: He is a funny mofo, that guy.

AS: He is totally funny. We met him after that.

PM: Oh, you did? Where?

AS: We beat the crap out of him--

PM: [laughs]

AS: --but we're all friends now.

PM: Yeah, he's a very brainy, very funny dude.

AS: Yeah.

PM: Where did you run into him?

AS: Well, he actually came and introduced himself in Chicago. We were playing up there right after that song was available--

PM: Had you had any contact, like an e-mail before that to set it up, or anything?

AS: Yeah, yeah. I mean, he kind of reached out to us and just said he wanted to come to the show. I don't remember if he sent us the song first himself, or if somebody else did, but we had already heard it at that point, and we were just cracking up.

PM: It's really amazing. I mean, it's an unusual kind of a tribute.

AS: Yeah. But we took in what I think is the right spirit.

PM: Well, I'm just really, really excited about the recent album. And I really appreciate your time. It's great to talk to you.

AS: Oh, cool. Well, thanks for doing this, Frank. I appreciate it.

PM: Okay. We'll have you on the cover with Kings of Leon. I hope to meet you in the future myself.

AS: Oh, sweet. I can't wait to see the piece.

PM: Yeah. I'll pass it along, of course, when it goes up.