



MARLEY'S GHOST

Even the members of the band have trouble describing their music, but they all know whatever they do, it always comes out sounding uniquely like Marley's Ghost. Mandolinist Jon Wilcox thinks it's the vocals. Steel guitarist Ed Littlefield says it's the broad repertoire. Guitarist Dan Wheetman just calls it American roots music, if you count reggae.

After more than 22 years of making music together, recording nine albums, and performing thousands of shows across the country, Marley's Ghost remains one of the best-kept secrets of the acoustic music world, an untapped natural resource waiting to be discovered.

The absence of a handy label or glib marketing slogan — like a soft drink without a jingle — may have helped obscure the work of this richly rewarding musical venture, but the group keeps working, keeps getting invited back, keeps winning fans and, perhaps most importantly, keeps getting better at what they do, whatever you call it.

"Our criteria," says guitarist Mike Phelan, "has always been: bring it, let's run it. It's not about genre or style." "What I love about this band is that whatever we play," adds percussionist/keyboardist Jerry Fletcher, "it gets filtered through our individual personalities and playing styles and emerges collectively our own."

This is one band that knows all the songs from both *The Harder They Come* soundtrack and Ralph Stanley's *Cry From the Cross*. "Instead of being in an old-timey band and a blues band and a reggae band and an acoustic folk group," says bassist Dan Wheetman, "I can be in one band and do it all."

The most important ingredients in the Marley's Ghost equation are the characters in the band. The five multi-instrumentalists boast distinctive musical personalities that couldn't be less alike:

Dan Wheetman — Remarkably versatile and powerful singer and show business veteran of the band whose Simi Valley (CA) '60s teen rock group, the Humane Society, earned a regional hit and, as a member of Aspen '70s country-rockers Liberty, toured for years with John Denver and Steve Martin.

Jon Wilcox — School teacher, mandolinist and vocalist who used to trudge around the country as a solo artist to the same folk clubs where all the fledgling singer-songwriters tried their hands; the group's tender, sensitive side.

Mike Phelan — Boy tenor who can tear your heart out with a soul tune, put a romantic lilt into an Irish folk aerie, or blast molten lead guitar licks through the heart of a blues. Like Dan and Jon, a prolific songwriter.

Ed Littlefield Jr. — Innovative pedal steel guitarist son of a millionaire industrialist/philanthropist, he spent years playing C&W in rugged roadhouses for loggers and cowboys across the Pacific Northwest — he kept active fishing licenses for Montana, Wyoming, Alaska, Idaho and Washington — and brought the psychedelic spirit of Jerry Garcia to western swing. Eddie is all music — he plays fierce fiddle and is a tasty bagpiper who cuts quite a figure in a kilt and tam o'shanter.

Jerry Fletcher — Long the band's secret weapon and unofficial fifth ghost, appearing on albums and gigs from the outset, he became "certified" in 2006, bringing his eclectic musical skills (drums, keys, accordion, vocal arranging) to bear full time. Teen rock rival of

Wheetman's and his cohort in Liberty, Jerry lays down a thoughtful groove that grounds the band and completes the musical puzzle.

Together they are a unique amalgam of their respective backgrounds, personal proclivities, and musical abilities — a blend honed to a seamless collaboration over the many miles they traveled together down the road.

Wheetman, Wilcox and Phelan first came together like bluegrass samurai during a fateful week of St. Patrick's Day shows in the San Fernando Valley in March 1986. Wheetman, freshly divorced, was living with Wilcox, who brought along his friend, Phelan. The three clicked instantly. It was reggae-minded Wilcox who thought up the name.

They reprised the act a couple of months later at the first spring edition of the Strawberry Music Festival, the long-standing California folk music tradition just about to branch out beyond the strictly traditional music the festival always featured, perfect for Marley's Ghost. They mowed 'em down at the breakfast show with their a cappella version of Dylan's "Lay Down Your Weary Tune."

That winter, when Wheetman went to record his solo album at the invitation of his friend, Ed Littlefield Jr., who built a recording studio on his remote Washington farm, Wheetman brought Wilcox and Phelan to sing with him on the sessions. Littlefield set up his gear with the band the first night they arrived and the jam session went into the night. "When I woke up the next morning," says Phelan, "Eddie was in the band." They would record the first three Marley's Ghost albums — *Haunting Melodies*, *Let De Groove Rise Up*, and *How Can I Keep From Singing* — before finishing the Wheetman solo album.

Despite what at first glance may seem to be a lack of cohesive style, a distinct, clear thread runs through all this apparent disparity. The same river of feeling flows through the heart of everything the band does, whatever sound or shape it may take at any particular moment. These men are mining for emotional convergences of voices and instruments, sentiments and sensibilities, song and style, and often find it in rich, unexpected combinations.

Even though Marley's Ghost has managed to maintain this unintentionally low profile over the course of two decades, the band has been attracting intriguing, prestigious associations on recent recordings. The 2006 CD with the R. Crumb cover, *Spooked*, was produced by Van Dyke Parks, the musical mastermind who wrote "Heroes and Villains" with Brian Wilson and produced the first album by Ry Cooder, among many, many other accomplishments. Parks ingratiated himself into the fabric of the band at the keyboard bench and led the Ghost through its most accomplished recording to date.

But the latest development of the band's recording career may yet prove to be the crucial missing link for Marley's Ghost, who recorded their new album in Nashville — spiritual home of so much of the music that shaped Marley's Ghost — with producer "Cowboy" Jack Clement, country music cornerstone whose career entwined with Jerry Lee, Cash, Waylon, among so many others. He is the beloved dean of Nashville producers and having Marley's Ghost in his studio this past year has put a buzz around the band on Music Row for the first time.

Although the kind of hand-crafted music Marley's Ghost plays is long out of fashion in today's sequenced and synthesized Pro Tools country music world, there are still musicians in that town who appreciate what the members of Marley's Ghost do. They make music the old fashioned way. They play it and sing it themselves. And they don't care what you call it.

—Joel Selvin
Senior Pop Music Critic, *San Francisco Chronicle*

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