



ASLEEP AT THE WHEEL
by Tamela Meredith Partridge
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On a long stretch of Texas asphalt, nothing keeps a driver from falling "Asleep At The Wheel" quite like a thermos of hot coffee and speakers cranking out tunes from Austin's favorite western swing band.

"There's no big story behind why we named the band Asleep at the Wheel," says lead vocalist and guitarist, Ray Benson, who will perform with his AATW band mates at Nashville North USA on Saturday, November 2.

"It was just something we came up with out of the blue. Truck driving music was big at the time, and it's quite obvious that if you are asleep at the wheel - you are probably going to be dead. The connotation of it being something that it really can't be is what made the name memorable and something the people liked."

AATW has received nine Grammy awards, recorded over 20 albums and experienced 85 personnel changes since it initially formed in Paw Paw, West Virginia in '70.

"I'm the founder and only original member left," says the lanky, 6'7" Benson. "The band was my idea and then I recruited my friends, Lucky Oceans, who has since left the band and lives in Australia, and Leroy Preston, who got out of the business entirely. We currently have six members in the group, but I have had up to twelve members in the past."

Benson, a Philadelphia, PA native, was musically influenced by the jazz-enhanced Texas swing of Bob Wills, country of Willie Nelson and Hank Williams, legendary swing band/jazz of Count Basie and the R&B "jump blues" of Louis Jordan.

"I like all kinds of music," Benson says. "But that is what western swing music is really all about. It's an improvisational genre that grants the freedom to explore many different kinds of music. The western swing difference lies in the unique instrumentation of the fiddles, steel guitars, bass, drums, electric guitar - and cowboy hat."

The improvisational aspects of western swing make each performance fresh and unique.

"The inspiring thing about improvisational music is that every night, every chorus, every song, you come up with something new," Benson says. "It's not the same thing every night, so it keeps you on your toes."

Being a part of the George Strait tour for four years was a trip down memory lane for Benson.

"We had some pretty big hits back in the mid-'70's when George was just getting his start," Benson says. "He used to open shows for us back then. And now that he has become the superstar that he is, he was kind enough to remember his old pals by putting us on his shows. It was great."

In conjunction to fronting the AATW band, other irons Benson has burning on the music industry fires include producing albums for Pam Tillis and Suzy Bogguss, recording his first solo album due out next year, providing a couple pieces of jitterbug music for Robert DuVall's latest movie and producing/starring in a CMT special due to air in February.

"I'll be hosting a one-hour CMT special about Texas," Benson says, "My guests will be Dolly Parton, Vince Gill, a cowboy poet and lots of other Texas related things. CMT might do a series if the pilot does well. We'll just have to wait and see."

As the hectic AATW schedule continues to catapult the tour bus down the highway, Benson simply leans back in his seat and enjoys the ride.

It's like Willie Nelson always says when people are telling him to slow down or take a break," Benson says. "Willie says, 'Heck, I'd be doing this even if I wasn't working, because it is just so fun to do.'"