



MUSIC

JACK OF ALL TRADES MEET MR. VERSATILITY, WESLEY STACE.

BY CHRIS COLLINGWOOD

MOST musicians in my generation, when we let our parents know of our rock 'n' roll dreams early on, were treated to some variation of *Great, have your fun, but you better have a backup plan because you're going to starve.*

Is it different today, with helicopter parents and participation medals and gushing praise for the modest efforts of average children? Maybe so, but on the other hand, the music industry is in way shittier shape. Enter it now and...well, you better have a backup plan. Like our parents used to say.

Anyway, this stuff was on my mind as I pondered the mosaic career of Wesley Stace, who emerged in England in the late eighties under the stage name John Wesley Harding. Back then he was just a protest singer with a keen lyrical sense, one of many great British acts riding the era's post-New Wave boom.

This year Stace, now using his real name (kind of), released his 17th album, *Wesley Stace's John Wesley Harding*. It's a bittersweet collection that showcases a literate, meticulous craftsman in fine form. Backing him are Minneapolis quartet the

Jayhawks (*Paging Mr. Proust*, their own ninth release, came out last year), who sound both spontaneous and remarkably solid here, despite logging just two rehearsal days before recording started.

Making albums with established bands is kind of a thing Stace does, having previously done so with the Decemberists and the Minus 5, a side project from R.E.M. guitarist Peter Buck. "I really like the process," Stace told me. "If I've committed to something with [a band], it's never in my mind going to go wrong. Musicians are more versatile than people think they are."

Since the music industry tanked earlier in the millennium, musicians have been scrambling to stay afloat. The example of Stace stands out, as he has regularly delivered new music while also stepped adroitly into other arenas. He's been a professor at three universities. He's published four novels (including the critically acclaimed *Misfortune*, from 2005). Now he's working on a new book—a memoir of legendary choreographer Mark Morris, a personal friend.

Stace even hosts a nationally broadcast variety show, *Wesley Stace's Cabinet of Wonders*. It got its start when

a book publicist suggested he throw a party for *Misfortune* and invite musical friends. That led to more such gatherings, then a home at City Winery, then NPR syndication. Now it's practically a New York institution, a very hot ticket featuring musicians, writers, comedians, and assorted oddballs.

Comic Eugene Mirman is a frequent cohost. Fashion icon Isaac Mizrahi recently sang cabaret songs. A natural emcee, Stace brings boundless energy to each performance, introducing guests Shakespearean-fool-style with wry narrative poems about their books or albums.

It's an unpredictable affair—will you get to hear novelist Salman Rushdie sing? (Yup.) Will Stace join in? (Frequently.) The show's backup band, the English UK, are kickin'. If you're at all like me, watching a performer pull off so many different tricks may just inspire you to get off your ass and try something new. ☪

Chris Collingwood is a singer, songwriter, and cofounder of the rock group Fountains of Wayne. His new band, Look Park, released their eponymous debut in 2016. Follow him @lookpark

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