

Music review: Peter Wolf's "Midnight Souvenirs"

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Commenting on the problems of cultural life in terms of what he saw as a growing corporate-sponsored "karaoke playground," the late Malcolm McLaren once bemoaned, "If you look around here and try to find something authentic, it's like looking for a ruby in a field of tin—impossible to find."

And then one stumbles upon a ruby. "Midnight Souvenirs," the latest album from Peter Wolf is just that. The record, released in April, is Wolf's seventh solo record since his days as front-man of the J. Geils Band and his first since 2002's widely acclaimed "Sleepless" (that placed on Rolling Stone's 500 Greatest Albums of All Time list).

He has brought with him again a number of players from his previous airtight lineup, including Larry Campbell, the guitar (and anything with strings) prodigy, drummer Shawn Pelton, who plays with the Saturday Night Live band, guitarist Duke Levine, producer/multi-instrumentalist Kenny White, and veteran songwriter Will Jennings, with whom Wolf co-wrote most of the record.

Wolf, seemingly always game for a duet (the previous record featured Mick Jagger, Steve Earle and Keith Richards) has brought on Shelby Lynne, Neko Case and Merle Haggard for "Souvenirs."

"Midnight Souvenirs" is a further sojourn into the traditions of American roots music that Wolf has placed at the center of his work throughout his musical life. Like much of the early J. Geils Band material, the songs here seem to draw from a deep well of American music, achieving a raucous blend of rock and roll, country, blues, R&B and soul. The record has some low notes, but by and large it is an exceptional collection of songs that draws the listener into an almost exhibition-like tour through various musical genres, guided by an artist who binds it all together with a soulful exuberance that does not seem to fade or even flicker, even at age 64.

Peter Wolf led the J. Geils Band from the late 60s through the early 80s in a distinct blues and R&B direction that, coupled with high-energy showmanship, brought them popularity. The band helped introduce an entire new generation to the music of Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, and a host of soul, R&B and other blues artists.

Notable in Wolf's latest effort is his embrace of country music. Wolf explained in a recent interview the connection

between the country musicians and their R&B counterparts: "Growing up in the era that I did when the first generation of rock and rollers were coming out, Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Buddy Holly, there was a fusion of rhythm and blues and rock and roll.... I think that the R&B artist listened to the Grand Ole Opry and the Grand Ole Opry artist always listened to Sonny Boy Williamson and the 'King Biscuit Hour.'" Both musical forms were expressions of the "blue collar" experience, "and I don't really see the difference between the 'juke joint' and the 'honky-tonk,'" he added.

"It's Too Late For Me," the closing track on the record, featuring Merle Haggard, is a nod to the honky-tonk career of Lefty Frizzell. Then there's the country-and-folk-infused "The Green Fields of Summer," sung with indie-country hero Neko Case (Case is more subdued and pleasant sounding in her delivery here, absent her normal head-and-throaty croon, making for a lovely accompaniment), and the country-tinged "Always Asking For You."

There are also anthemic rock and roll numbers such as "I Don't Want To Know" and "There's Still Time," that possess a distinct 70s Jagger/Richards feel, and the salute to the "Philly Sound" in the soul rapping "Overnight Lows."

To gain a fuller appreciation of the music of Peter Wolf today, it's worthwhile (as well as entertaining) to glance at his past.

The Life of Peter Wolf

Musically and otherwise, Peter Wolf has led a remarkable life. In his early teens he attended the High School of Music and Art in Harlem and every week for three years he would venture over to the Apollo Theater on 125th Street, where he watched and listened to Dinah Washington, Ray Charles, James Brown and Jackie Wilson, among the many other towering black artists of the day.

Wolf gleaned from these musicians the art of performance—the importance of interaction with the audience.

“You didn’t just come out and do a song...it was your job to get the audience riled up, not unlike someone in church, where, by the end, the audience was up on their feet, the performer just gave it his all, and it was always 110 percent,” he said in a recent interview with National Public Radio’s “Fresh Air.”

As a child growing up in the Bronx in the 1950s, in a small apartment that—as he told NPR—resembled the flat in the popular television show “The Honeymooners,” the radio and particularly music was always on. At the end of each week, he would pull in WWVA from Wheeling, W. VA, and the “Coffee Drinking DJ” Lee Moore, who played bluegrass and honky-tonk records that included the haunting music of the Stanley Brothers. Moore’s radio shows put the hook into Wolf for country music from that point on.

Peter’s father, Allen Blankfield, was a professional musician who sang vaudeville and left home at a young age to join the Schubert Theater Touring Company. Like Peter, he possessed a musically open and progressive mind—as Peter later recalled, his father was wildly excited the first time he heard Little Richard on the radio. They spent a summer at Tanglewood in the Berkshires where Blankfield took on a job, and the young Peter took painting instruction from a local painter named Norman Rockwell in his studio.

His mother was a civil rights activist and union organizer throughout the 1950s and 1960s who attended many southern “freedom rides” and marches for desegregation.

In his late teens Wolf hitchhiked around the country, spending time in Chicago, immersing himself in the blues scene there and other cities, and then headed to Boston after being accepted at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts. There he found an apartment rooming with the young film student David Lynch.

By the late 1960s, for the great blues musicians, the “Chitlin’ Circuit” had all but run its course and was being replaced with a new urban scene: the “College Circuit,” whereby American college students and youth began to trickle into the coffeehouses in their college towns to see the likes of Muddy Waters, Howlin’ Wolf, Johnny Lee Hooker and others.

Peter Wolf was living only a few blocks away from one of the scene’s mainstays, Cambridge’s Club 47. It was there that Peter, who had just begun playing in a band called the Hallucinations (that played blues and R&B) met and befriended a number of the blues greats and would invite them to hang out and relax at his apartment before and after shows. It became a watering hole for a host of performers.

“And so everyday they would come and use my apartment as a hang-in, and then James Cotton would come and cook up all sorts of chicken, and it became a clubhouse,” Wolf told NPR. “And Muddy would tell Howlin’ Wolf, ‘Hey this young guy has an apartment,’ and so he’d come by.... And they would all just hang.”

The Hallucinations, or more specifically Peter, wrangled their way into becoming the opening band for John Lee Hooker (he

promised Hooker that his band would pack the house if brought on as an opener) and then for a number of big blues acts as they toured around the US. They also went on to tour with other notable bands such as the Velvet Underground, the Byrds, the Young Rascals, the Lovin’ Spoonful, and others.

During this period Wolf fell into a position as music and program director, and late night DJ of radio station WBCN in Boston, where he played blues and R&B records and interviewed numerous musicians as they passed through town, including Howlin’ Wolf, Carla Thomas, Mose Allison, Jeff Beck and the young Van Morrison, with whom Peter became close friends.

By 1967, as the Hallucinations began to dissolve, he decided to put together a new band with guitar player J. Geils and harmonica player Magic Dick. Geils was under management at the time that would not allow the guitarist to play in any band unless it was under his name, so the group took on the moniker of the J. Geils Band. Peter and Seth Justman, who soon after joined the band, became the group’s songwriting team.

He married actress Faye Dunaway in 1974; the couple split up in 1979.

After well over a decade of playing a heavy blues-and-R&B-driven rock and roll, the band pivoted into a more pop direction in the early 1980s, charting huge hits with “Centerfold,” “Love Stinks” and “Freeze-frame,” which coincided neatly with the birth of the music video and MTV. But when Wolf attempted to navigate back more toward their roots-steeped origins, he suddenly found himself out of the band.

As evidenced on “Midnight Souvenirs,” Peter Wolf has today come full-circle and has managed to perfect his vision and skill as a purveyor of much that is soulful in American music. He tags a lot of bases here but manages to hold it all together somehow in a relatively effortless fashion. Philly soul, Detroit R&B, rock and roll, funk, swampy blues-rock and country all make themselves felt on this exceptional record and are delivered with the familiar energy, conciseness and cool that Wolf continues to exude after so many years.



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