

MARTHA'S WAKE

Photo by Geoff Leventhal



by Debra Jennings

Alright, I'm gonna free the feline from her gunny sack captivity. I'm gonna spill the frijoles. My lips are loose and my tongues a waggin'. No, I don't need a doctor, thanks, I'm just blowing the lid off one of the best kept secrets in town — Denver has a music scene! (Duh! I'm just kidding — I know you're already hip to that because you're reading this 'zine!)

The real best kept secret is Martha's Wake. (Ah-hah! I heard a couple of you say "Martha who?") They're only one of the coolest bands in town — three guys and three gals generating killer harmonies and "90s Psychedelia" all over town! Leah Carson sings her heart out, Drew Cullis grooves on drums, Jon Nichols jams on guitar, Melody Nichols kicks ass on bass and backup vocals, J.W. Penzien rules the synthetic ivories and Lori Penzien wails on trumpet, flute and backup vocals.

(Don't worry, man, you can still save face! Just dig this scoop, check out their gig and score their CD — who knows, maybe some of their coolness will rub off on you!)

CMW: So, what's up with the name of the band, Martha's Wake? Is that like in an Irish wake, a funeral?

Jon: Yeah, it's based on a biblical story. (Martha, Mary and Lazarus.) Martha's brother dies and she's the one who throws the party.

Leah: Martha was the type of character who always questions "Why? Why? Why?" We all feel like we question "why?" a lot — "Why aren't we more successful sooner?", "Why is this happening?" We just identified with the character of Martha, and also the situation of the wake for Lazarus. There was a lot of spiritual meaning that we related to.

CMW: Having 3 men and 3 women in the band, was that planned?

J.W.: Things just kinda formed that way. We always tried to stick to a female vocalist, because we like the female sound.

Jon: The dark rockin' sound has always appealed to at least some of us — and the rest of us have grown into it!

Leah: I do think that is what makes our sound really unique is that people don't expect to hear us first and then say, "Well, gosh, there's three girls in the band and they have this really heavy sound." The way it's mixed now is just perfect.

Drew: So I guess a sex change operation is out of the question.

(Ha. Ha. Drew didn't say much during the interview, but when he did it was a zinger!)

CMW: Now for you married couples (Jon and Melody, J.W. and Lori) — is it difficult working with your spouse?

Lori: No, it's awesome!

J.W.: It's kinda cool in a lot of ways because we spend so much time at this that we get to be together even though we're working. And we're both striving toward the same goal.

Jon: And you don't have to explain where all the money went!

Lori: It didn't take long for me to get the "equipment fever." Now I have no money — ever!

J.W. (into the tape recorder): So send your money to 35...

Jon: They're like us. (Melody and I) like to spend a lot of time together.

CMW: How long have you been married?

Jon: Seven years.

CMW: Really?! The band has been around that long? (Jon and Melody founded the band.)

Melody: Yeah, we were in the basement for a long time.

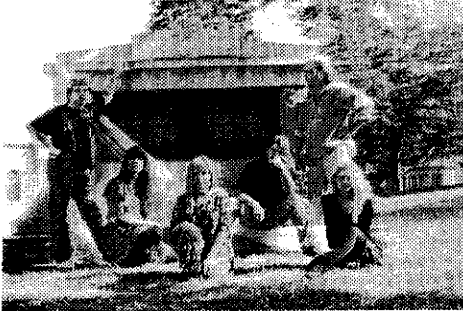
CMW: Do you think Denver's music scene is getting more attention lately?

Melody: I can't really say for sure if I've seen a change. It seems to me more like it goes up and down month to month.

J.W.: It's really bizarre — we do really well in Colorado Springs, we have a great response down there. It seems like it's been really difficult to get people out in Denver.

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Photo by Geoff Leventhal



Jon: We played Wyoming and (the crowd) was huge. In some ways, I think Denver lacks a commitment to the music scene.

J.W.: I think there's some great bands here in Denver. Like Monkey Siren, Fourth Estate, Sic 'Em Fifi, Psychedelic Zombies. Sometimes I don't think they get the credit they deserve. I think that there's some others, some throw-together jobs that seem like they get great crowd response. And you sorta wonder, a record rep comes into town and says "Well, who's got the best crowd?" and they lead him to this band....

Leah: Who's just playing whatever's popular right now.

Lori: I think the difficulties we've had in Denver have made us a better band — we work harder. We're appreciated more elsewhere, but maybe that will come in time here in Denver.

Leah: In general, people in Denver, they're not used to something real new. I mean, like, Seattle now is probably open to a lot of new material coming in because the locals understand now that Seattle has a scene.

J.W. (insistently, in the background): Grunge is over with! Over with! Grunge is gone!

Leah: Denver — except for the few people who understand alternative and original music — for the most part Denver is either a cover-tune town or they are still back in the 70s rock and roll era. They don't really understand that we're in the 90s now and we're creating new styles. When (people) come to our shows, they'll sit back and listen and they'll go "That was really cool." And they liked it but no one wants to get up and move and dance or do anything. We write stuff that's hard that you could mosh to or whatever, but people think that we're just too different. And there's a lot of bands besides us that are creating new styles and people don't know how to handle that here.

CMW: So why do you stay in Denver?

Leah: I think that there's something to be said for getting yourself known and kind of making a name for Denver and not just uprooting to L.A. or someplace where there's already a name.

J.W.: It does look good to have a Colorado sound.

Leah: We had a conversation with a bunch of other band members one day, and the thing that happened in Seattle was small labels were forming, and some band got known, but they all stuck together — between the clubs, the semi-independent labels and the bands — they all worked together, and I don't feel like in Denver that's always happening. If we could get something working all together, and trying to show the outside world what's happening here, we might get some attention. I think it's going to start happening, but it's gonna take some time.

CMW: I think my favorite song on your CD (*Romans*, released in August) is "Cafe Moderato."

Melody: Really?

Jon: Well, there's some freaks out there....

(Watch it, Jon!)

J.W.: It's been weird. We sent ourselves out to a lot of radio stations across the country, and in New York city there's a guy that really liked that song. He says every time he gets on the air he plays "Cafe Moderato." We had another person say they really liked "Rain" and "Race of Life." All the way back to Arizona, they said they like "Shadows" a lot.

CMW: There's a lot of variety on the CD, something for everyone to choose from. Personally, I like the darker songs.

Lori: You're going to like us live then. We have a lot of dark songs now.

Melody: A lot of new stuff.

CMW: Cool! What about "Race of Life"? That's another one I really liked.

Drew: I was just goofing around with sounds with my sequencer, and came up with some sounds and everybody said "We like that, let's put a song to it."

J.W.: That was when Lori joined, a little bit before that. She brought in her flute and we just all kinda jammed. That's how we do a lot of our tunes.

Leah: We're glad you like the variety because I complain so many times when I listen to a CD that, you know, you kinda flip through the CD, and every song, if you just listen to the beginning of it you feel like you're going to hear the same song again. I know I'm bragging on our band, but I really like the fact that we can do something very surreal, very moody and light, and then we can turn around and do something hard and edgy, and maybe something even danceable....

Lori: Even danceable!

All (in unison): Oh no! Eeew! Grodie!

Jon: You know, I read an interview with the Scorpions the other day, and their guitar player was saying in the 10 years he's been there, they've only written songs in two keys, E and A.

(A chorus of groans from the rest of the band.)

J.W.: That's a big contrast from us.

Lori: What key haven't we done?!

CMW: Do you strive to have a different sound, strive for that variety, or do you think it just comes out of everybody contributing?

Jon: No, we were just the world's worst cover band!

Melody: Yeah, it does come from what you said. We all come from such extremely diverse backgrounds that it just is what we are. I think we've all come to that understanding, that's what we are, a variety. We like that about ourselves. We've learned that we need to stay focused. We've gone from being really unfocused, in order to allow everybody's diverse styles, to really narrowing it.

Leah: Blending it better.

Lori: Once everyone gets their own ideas in, (the song) has a consistency about it because it's all of us contributing. I think that's true with every band.

CMW: I think it's true of talented bands. Bands that can take their individuality and blend it and make something unique. Not every band can do that.

J.W.: That's the great thing about this band is that, you know, if any of us comes up with a song idea and brings it in, we don't have a set form to it, not really. And we can really trust in the fact that everybody's going to have a great idea and it's gonna work.

Leah: And if (not), we just throw that song out and say "Sorry, it's not working. Next!"

J.W.: I think that's one of our strongholds, though. We love to write songs, even though it's like we go in song writing hell sometimes. But we always have new song writing ideas. Melody's got these things just flowing off her brain continually, like a huge stream. Our CD reflects some of the material we wrote like two years ago. I think that we've grown immensely since then, so of course we can't wait to get new material down on tape because we feel it just really blows away all that stuff we're doing on this last CD.

Melody: It's so hard, because it takes so long to get a CD out, to really capture what you're writing at that time. We're just liking what we're doing now so much, we wanna capture it, too. It's not that much different, I don't think. It's just better.

Lori: And I think Leah has developed her style a lot in the last year, since she became lead (vocalist).

J.W.: It was kinda hard for her to jump in and take over for an old vocalist, trying to somewhat accommodate for some of the notes she didn't like as much. So, it's not really all us that was on that CD, as far as what we'd like to do or what we feel comfortable doing. And I think the new stuff is all us.

I asked Martha's Wake one final question: tell me something unusual about yourselves. The band insisted they were fairly normal.... Except for Jon and Melody's eating habits (they eat whatever sounds good for dinner, like Italian bread and wine.) And of course there's Lori's job (operating on small animals while eating Taco Bell), and J.W.'s house full of plants. And Drew and Leah's strangely mellow music collection (considering the type of band they're in!) But other than these minor quirks, Martha's Wake is perfectly unremarkable. (Yeah, right!)