

INDIE SCENE



Marty Smith

COLIN HAY

The former Men at Work frontman learns to enjoy life after platinum



IN THE EARLY '80S, MEN AT WORK exploded on the scene with such smash hits as "Who Can It Be Now?" and "Down Under." Quirky new-wave panache and goofy MTV videos propelled the group to global fame and millions in album sales. Yet just three years and as many albums later, the wild ride was over. And the man in the middle of it all, Colin Hay—whose spunky vocals formed the core of the band's signature sound—had launched a solo career with his first album, *Looking for Jack*. In the decades that followed, Hay released nine more on his own—including his most recent, *Gathering Mercury*.

"When I first went out, there would be maybe 40 or 50 people in the audience," he recalls. "It was challenging because I had come from playing for 20,000 a night. So for the last 20 to 25 years, I've been building a solo career. The Men at Work thing was really a benefit, because people would go, 'Hey, that's the guy from Men at Work!' They may have an attitude about it, but at least they know who you are. Better than them not knowing!"

These days, the reggae lilt and easy embrace that characterized the band's hits have been replaced by Hay's emphasis

on weathered narratives and emotional reflection. "There might be a thousand people in the room who are there for very different reasons," says Hay, 59. "Those people who are coming because I'm the guy from Men at Work are pretty much the minority. If they're in the room, I don't care why they're there. By the end of the night, I'll get them. They can't escape—they've been corralled."

Not surprising then, Hay's solo efforts often appear autobiographical, reflecting the independent path he's pursued. That's especially true of his albums released since signing with Nashville indie Compass Records in 2003. "I'm making up for lost time in a way," Hay chuckles. "After the band broke up, I was on my own for nearly 13 years, and I was very inefficient. I was doing everything pretty much myself—and not especially well. Once I got to work with the label, things were better."

Still, Hay has never turned his back on his past entirely. There was talk about getting the old band back together, and he and a former bandmate, saxophonist/flautist/keyboardist Greg Ham, briefly toured under the group's banner. But plans to retool the group never

materialized, and Ham died in April in his native Australia at age 58. Nevertheless, a pair of tours with Ringo Starr's All-Starr Band offered the opportunity to revisit the old hits.

"You can try to turn your back on it all you want, but you're never able to," he says. "You can't help but be affected by momentous events like that. You don't have a couple of records that sold millions of copies and play to ridiculous amounts of people and not have that affect you for the rest of your life. In the '80s, I had this emotional reaction like 'Oh, the band broke up,' and you want to distance yourself from that because it causes a certain amount of pain. But you realize what comes back to you are the songs. You say, 'The songs are great' and you start playing them again."

Hay says time as a solo artist has allowed him to put things in perspective. "There is a certain part of you that says, 'I had that incredible success. I want that again.' Of course you do. You'd be crazy not to admit that a part of you wants that to happen again. But the thing for me is to not go insane if I don't have it. It's a challenge."

—Lee Zimmerman