

## Reviews and articles on *Moonee Valley Drifters*

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[from Terry Reilly in *Bea*]

*Moonee Valley Drifters* (Larrikin/Festival)

So often, eponymous albums indicate a debut. Not so in this case. This is the third CD from the Melbourne combo and for mine, it compares very favourably with their previous set, *Juke Joint Johnny*. Led by Tom Forsell, the band can be bracketed with such elite Austin-based, country combos as The Derailers and Big Sandy And His Fly-Rite Boys who inject scintillating swing into strong rootsy sounds. For proof of that swing and verve, savour the impeccable zydeco-oriented shuffle throughout the Forsell-penned song, "Make Up Your Mind" that indulges itself - and us - with a

brilliantly superb guitar bridge. 'Authentic' is probably too condescending a word to describe bands such as The Moonee Valley Drifters despite honest intentions from passionate reviewers. This band knows what it is about and must be considered a force in this music. Excellent.

[from Greg Bush in *Country Update* issue #7, March, 1996]

The Moonee Valley Drifters have been around since 1985 and the fact that they have made a living singing country music in Melbourne speaks volumes for their abilities.

Lead singer Tom Forsell wrote seven of the 16 tracks on the album, and most show a liking for the non-Nashville style of country music, or more particularly western swing and Cajun music.

Of Forsell's compositions, "Steppin' Out", "Make Up Your Mind" and "Creole Rhumba" stand up very well against some of the covers, which include George Jones' "Why Baby Why" and Buck Owens' "It's Crying Time Again". In fact, the strength of the original compositions force the question as to why the Moonee Valley Drifters bothered to record American covers at all.

This is an extremely competent album and it's good to see that country music is still alive and well in the southern capital.

[from Terry Reilly in *EG, The Age*, 19/4/96]

### Moonee Valley Drifters digging boogie roots

*With a reputation for feel and drive, the Moonee Valley Drifters are nostalgically entrenched in traditional American country music. Terry Reilly catches up with band leader Tom Forsell.*

TOM FORSELL says directly: "I hate the term 'roots', but our music is the roots of rock 'n' roll... country music with its different roots from the blues to R&B, cajun, Tex-Mex and rhumba feels."

For Forsell (guitar, accordion), Rick Dempster (harmonica, steel guitar), Paul Pyle (double bass), Jeremy Rasmussen (drums) and Ashley Kluss (lead guitar), the five-year residential engagement at the Homestead Inn in Clifton Hill has truly paid off. Their latest album, *The Moonee Valley Drifters*, the band's third since 1988, was recorded in less than two days and is a reliable measure of their commanding live feel that recalls the versatile flavours of the old, Texas honky-tonks. The album's integrity is heightened by the production of James Black, whose piano complements a punchy, bopping version of George Jones's mid-'50s classic "Why Baby Why", the band's latest crowd-pleaser.

When it comes to the vibrant music of Bob Wills, Hank Williams and Buck Owens, Forsell, possessor of a Lefty Frizzell-inspired vocal, is a responsive student. For instance, his year-long experience in Lubbock, Texas, in 1989, with the crack country-bluegrass outfit the Juke Box Playboys helped sow the seeds of a personal regeneration.

Born in Hancock, a small, chilly, rural town in north Michigan, Forsell grew up in Detroit and Ann Arbor before eventually settling in Australia. "In playing this music," he explains, "there is a homesick thing and I miss those bars where you could see people play like Marty Robbins, George Jones, the Louvin Brothers and Ernest Tubb."

However, an ability to slip into top-gear zydeco means the Moonee Valley Drifters have made their mark as a dance band, often closing sets with accordion-driven chestnuts such as Johnnie Allan's gumbo-inspired take on Chuck Berry's "The Promised Land" and Tom T. Hall's "I Can't Dance". As well, Gene Autrey's "Back in the Saddle Again" from the band's first CD, *Boogie Woogie Fever* and Forsell's "Here I Go Again" from *Juke Joint Johnny*, have been featured recently in local films.

Gradually, the Moonee Valley Drifters are making quite a profound impact outside Victoria. Dempster has won three instrumental awards at Tamworth, while *Boogie Woogie Fever* was nominated in the best instrumental category. With the latest album already on the playlists of 50 stations in New South Wales and Queensland, Nick Erbe, of 2TM in Tamworth, has encouraged Forsell "to share the good music you play with people up here".

However, if early childhood memories are anything to go by, Forsell traces the initial spark of interest back to his three-year-old eyes being entranced by Hank Williams's once-only television appearance in the early '50s. "I sensed it was a big occasion when I saw him on The Kate Smith Show," he says.

As a songwriter, Forsell is obedient to his own casual inspiration. "I don't take my song writing that seriously," he claims. "I wrote "Here I Go Again" in the Killarney Hotel in Port Fairy at 3 o'clock in the morning because I

couldn't sleep."

Forsell's passion for traditional country music is underscored by this comparison with Nashville's formulaic attitude. "Older country brings people into the songs. It is not cluttered like the contemporary songs put together by hooks and cliches. The music of Bob Wills, Hank Williams and Lefty Frizell is a real art form."

[from Keith Glass in *On The Street* 26/2/96]

Melbourne's MVDs were there before 'retro' was cool. It seems like they've been around since the sounds they favour were new, (but not quite). On this their third album, they've achieved a balance of some solid original material and country/cajun classics of the '50s and early '60s, "reliving a past we never had", as Ross Wilson once said at an early Daddy Cool performance.

Singer Tom Forsell came closest, growing up in Detroit and listening to The Grand Ol' Opry, beaming its way out of Nashville's WSM. Lap steel man Rick Dempster has studied the music, having cut his musical teeth in The Dancehall Racketeers, as have bass player Paul Pyle and guest Jerry Hale (fiddle) through their respective careers.

Songs like George Jones' "Why Baby Why" are so ingrained that when Tom sings of "*empty bottles and broken hearts*" in his own songs it's a totally unaffected appropriation of the honky tonk tradition. Dempster's vocal offering on "Allons s La Fayette" is followed by Forsell's self-written accordion workout on "Creole Rumba".

The Moonee Valley Drifters love this music and it shows. They'll be launching the album in a on-off Sydney show at The Britannia Hotel, Cleveland Street, Chippendale on Friday March 8.

[from David Latta *Total Country Magazine* April, 1996]

#### *Moonee Valley Drifters*

Back in 1985, way before that amorphous mass of non-radio friendly music became trendy and had the roots label pegged to it, there were the Moonee Valley Drifters. Beloved of hard-core rockabilly rebels (those who wear rope petticoats or pegged pants everywhere, even to the CES), the Drifters expanded their music way beyond into Cajun and Zydeco (with frontman Tom Forsell's blistering accordion skills), Tex-Mex, Western Swing and the like.

With sporadic ventures into the studio, fans have had to be content with just two releases in ten years, *Boogie Woogie Fever* (1988) and *Juke Joint Johnny* (1992). Now comes the latest and greatest Moonee Valley Drifters release. Self-titled and available through Larrikin/Festival, it has 16 tracks including seven penned by Tom Forsell. The band's line-up comprises Tom, Rick Dempster (steel guitar and harmonica), Paul Pyle (double and electric bass), Ashley Kluss (lead electric guitar), Jeremy Rasmussen (drums), James Black (piano, electric guitar and tambourine) and Jerry Hale (fiddle). If the names seem familiar, it's because these guys have passed through some of Melbourne's legendary bands, like the

## Dancehall Racketeers and the Swingin' Sidewalks.

This is the album the Moonee Valley Drifters were destined to make: a seamless, wall-to-wall explosion of good-time music that will have you dancing around the room with your Prince or Princess Charming (or reasonable facsimile thereof).

For those who don't know. The Drifters are long-time regulars of the Melbourne pub scene, having recently celebrated a five-year residency at the Old Homestead Inn in Clifton Hill. If you live in Bleak City or you are just passing through, check out the gig guides and drop in. Say hello from Total Country. Buy the band a beer and they may give you a personally guided tour of Tom's accordion.

[from *Country Update* issue #7, March, 1996]

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[Larrikin press release]

We're talking hard-hitting, foot-stomping, knuckle-busting, horn-swagging, steel-stringed country music mayhem here, and we're saying this: no one, but no one, does it better than the Moonee Valley Drifters.

Look, its simple: The band contains graduates of legendary outfits like the Swingin' Sidewalks, Dancehall Racketeers and Ramblin' Rose. It contains a man who regularly pops off to Lubbock, Texas, to share the stage with graduates from the Flying Burrito Brothers and sidemen to Jimmy Buffett and David Alien Coe. It contains a three-time pro harmonica Tamworth champion. It even contains the bloke who backed up Johnny O'Keefe and played bass on Slim Dusty's "I Love To Have A Beer With Duncan".

Put that lot together and you've got an unmatched combination of technical skill, road-tested experience, sweat-soaked passion and, above all, mega-whomping grunt.

The Moonee Valley Drifters formed in Melbourne in 1985 and quickly established themselves as the most exciting purveyors of roots music on the circuit. The band has an awesome command of country genres and takes a fiendish and joyous delight in delivering a high octane package of

tex-mex, western swing, hard-core zydeco, blues, cajun and country-billy.

Ballads about weeping into beer mugs because the wheat crop's failed again have never been the Drifters' style. These guys get on stage and burn it up, powering through a hollering and rocking repertoire which packs the dance floor every time and draws breathless praise from critics and punters alike.

The Moonee Valley Drifters' new self-titled album, out now on Larrikin, continues to increase the band's reputation for country music excellence and innovation. It follows in the strong tradition established by the band's first album, *Boogie Woogie Fever* (1988), and the second, *Juke Joint Johnny* (1992). That album was aptly summed up by one appropriately excited critic, who wrote: "steel guitars and a harmonica from hell blast the latest album from Melbourne's Moonee Valley Drifters into Country rock twanging heaven".

The album finds the band in white hot form, mixing up originals with lovingly recrafted numbers by greats such as George Jones and Johnny Horton. Most of the originals have been penned by the band's founder, singer, guitarist and accordion-squeezer, Tom Forsell, and they are truly great contemporary country stories.

In 1995, the Moonee Valley Drifters found themselves in constantly high demand, playing well over 100 gigs in pubs, clubs and festivals across Australia. In February 1996 the band celebrated a remarkable five year long residency at the Old Homestead Inn in Clifton Hill.

Propelled by the strong demand and musical excellence of the new album, the Moonee Valley Drifters are heading into a huge 1996. To the thousands of people who have already experienced the twangs and arrows of their outrageous fortune, this is very good news indeed. (Interviews available)

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