

BEST IN THE WEST

DAVID HYAMS AND MILES TO GO HAVE THE INTERNATIONAL FOLK ALLIANCE CONVENTION IN THEIR SIGHTS

BY TONY HILLIER



Those of us clinging to the east coast and the south-east corner of this vast sunburnt land – the overwhelming majority, needless to say – sometimes tend to forget there is a fertile, albeit isolated, music scene in the faraway west. We're talking Perth, of course, a city that has produced the likes of INXS, the Eurogliders, The Triffids, John Butler, AC/DC's Bon Scott and the country's highest performed bluesman, Dave Hole, to name but a few.

Miles To Go have not yet earned themselves a place on that pantheon, but in their own quiet way they are putting Western Australia on the national map with their forays east for events such as the Woodford and National folk festivals. Having recently achieved the not insignificant milestone of reaching their tenth anniversary, one of WA's more interesting and musically literate bands is now casting a net overseas, starting with an invitation to fly the flag for Australia at the 2010 International Folk Alliance Convention in Memphis. A good showcase in the home of the blues in February could yield a string of lucrative dates in North America and beyond.

"Yes, we're going to go and also we'll see if we can work in a small tour around the convention," says Miles To Go's leader, David Hyams. "It's probably going to be just the trio line-up for this trip, which will be our first time overseas, but I'm thinking about taking the full band to some US festivals that I've been to, like the Strawberry Music festival in Yosemite National Park, which has long been a dream of mine.

"It does feel pretty amazing to have started a band that's made it this far. Miles To Go is the first band I've been in that's lasted anything like this long," Hyams attributes the group's longevity to having the right combination of players and a stable line up for the early years. "Maybe also a bit of sheer bloody-mindedness in the face of people telling us a band of that

size playing mainly instrumental music wouldn't last."

The band's moniker offers a clue to its eclectic and esoteric nature. 'Miles To Go', the title track from Hyams' debut album, was one of the pieces inspired by the musician's travels through the Celtic lands. "There's also a connection there to the Robert Frost poem 'Stopping By Woods On A Snowy Evening', which contains the lines '...but I have promises to keep and miles to go before I sleep'," he relates "When it came to naming the album, the travelling theme was a consistent thread and so the name seemed to fit.

"For a while I'd been gathering a collection of acoustic-based instrumentals that I'd wanted to record – some were written for film, others inspired by travels in the late nineties through the north west of WA, and also Ireland and Scotland, where I'd travelled for the experience of playing with traditional musicians," adds the Fremantle-based multi-instrumentalist. "The pieces all seemed to fit together with a broadly Celtic treatment and I put some of my favourite players together with that in mind. I first approached Dougal Adams and Ormonde Waters, both world-class players of wind instruments in that style, including wood flute, concertina and bagpipes, and with them developed melodies and arrangements, before I enlisted a rhythm section. I'd used Marcus Dengate (bass) and Wency de Souza (percussion) as session players on recordings I'd produced for other artists and deliberately chose players who weren't from a 'folky' or traditional background, to add shades of jazz, funk and some Latin and African rhythms into the mix. The rest were icing on the cake overdubs – cello, a horn section from the WA Symphony Orchestra and we also had David Ross Macdonald [the Waifs' drummer] playing bodhran. Bar one tune, none of the music had ever been performed live at the time of recording it. My fingerstyle playing was a centrepiece for many of the pieces, though I'd also never performed as a fingerstyle player before – it



was pretty mad when I think about it now!"

Hyams hadn't originally planned to form a band around the album but decided to launch the CD with

a live show at

Kulcha in Fremantle, and managed to assemble most of the session players involved with his first release – nearly a dozen in all. "When I realised that everyone was really keen to play the pieces live, I thought I'd better stretch the launch over two nights, so we would get to play more than just once – as I didn't really expect that a line-up that big was ever going to be an ongoing concern." For live playing, he also realised he needed someone who could play some of the same stringed instruments as himself (guitar, mandolin, dobro) to cover many of the parts he'd multi-tracked on the album, so he asked Andy Copeman to play cittern and guitar. "He also brought the didgeridoo to the band, as well as songs, which I thought fitted the material really well, so Andy became the singing voice of what was otherwise an instrumental line up. Pete Grandison also came on board on guitar and bouzouki."

The feedback from those two live shows was so positive and the players seemed so keen to do it again that when Steve Barnes, the Artistic Director of Fairbridge Festival, said he'd book them for his next festival, David thought for the first time that Miles To Go might actually have some legs.

Over the years the band has gone from being almost entirely instrumental to adding a number of songs and developing the vocal side. "At first the songs were all from Andy, or traditional ones that we'd played around with a bit, as I'd felt that the songs I'd written up to that point didn't suit the band's material. It wasn't until about three years ago, after I'd had a revival in my lyric writing and was coming up with songs that I felt would suit, that I tried them out. The trio line-up had also emerged around that time, to do some smaller festivals and tours, and this was a great way to ease the songs into the repertoire and try them out before they became part of the full band's set."

Hyams wrote just about all the instrumental parts on *Miles To Go*. With the second album, *Knowing The Place*, he had an opportunity to play the pieces together before recording and so the players had more of a chance to develop their own parts. "For example, Jennifer Tingley has been our cellist for the last nine years and would have started off playing parts that I'd mostly written. These days I'll play her a song or piece and we'll usually toss some ideas around, but ultimately she'll work out her own part."

Over the years a good number of core players, as well as part-timers and guests, have passed through the band. "For the first six years, aside from rotating three bass players, we had a pretty stable line up. In recent years there's been a few big changes, probably the most significant being when both Dougal and Ormonde left to follow a more traditional path, and more recently when Andy moved to Queensland. Stuart Paterson has been with us on flute and whistle, but we haven't seemed to be able to hold down a fiddler for very long. Tom de Ridder was a great addition to the band, but the session scene in Ireland lured him away, along with our most recent addition, JP Sweeney."

Besides the aforementioned players, the current MTG line-up also includes Manoli Vouyoucalos (bass), Dan Bright (guitar & didgeridoo), Nola Formentin (trombone) and Tom Walwyn (pipes and flute). With such a large cast, regular rehearsals are a part of life for the band. "The way I've tried to make it easier for new players to slot in, is to stay pretty faithful to the recorded arrangements. And to pick great players who can get on top of the material quickly."

Over the past decade, MTG has done a fair few tours to the East and played a lot of the festivals. "The National Folk Festival has been a particularly good one for us and I think it was our first time there in 2004 where I initially thought that the band was able to really cut it on the

bigger stages." Hyams reveals. "It really was a highlight the first time the band was invited to tour, as part of the Boite Winter Festival of World Music. Eight of us headed over there – we played in Wangaratta and Melbourne and I can remember having to pinch myself that this little album I'd recorded a couple of years back, was now being toured by this amazing line-up of musicians."

Although they've supported legends like Bob Geldof and Marianne Faithfull, Hyams says opening for Irish accordion whiz Sharon Shannon at the Perth Festival in 2006 was more memorable, largely because they had the great Anglo-Irish flute player Michael McGoldrick on stage as special guest. While Celtic music is at the core of his creations, Hyams enjoys listening to and playing a wide range of music. "When I was 18, at the same time as playing in blues and rock bands, I was also listening to a lot of popular music on the radio, but also learning bluegrass mandolin and dabbling in banjo. There was a strong bluegrass scene in Perth and I was getting out to listen to a lot of that and also recorded material from bands like New Grass Revival, which completely blew my mind. In more recent times, I've been listening to a lot of singer-songwriter material, as well as instrumental guitar. Through my songwriting/recording work in prisons, I've been introduced to a lot of hip hop and found myself in the role of hip hop producer."

David's work with prisoners came by chance. "I ran into Frank Italiano, the arts co-ordinator for WA prisons, in a café in Fremantle and he asked me whether I was interested in doing songwriting workshops in Woorooloo Jail. After the first few sessions I was so blown away by the songs coming out that I suggested I take my recording gear in to do some demos. I was given a couple of days." When Italiano heard the results, he sent Hyams to several other jails and the project is still going strong three years on. "We've recorded over forty songs, some from the women's prison at Bandyup also and we're looking to put together an album, the proceeds of which will go to a victim support service. One of the songs is now being used in an offender treatment program and there is a lot of interest and positive feedback on the project. The result to some of the inmates' self esteem from being involved has been huge. From my side, it has been amazing to work with and have a role in developing some of the great talent there. It has also been an education in hip hop, which I've had to educate myself about in order to produce some of the songs that are coming out."

Hyams rates himself a better composer of instrumental music than a writer of lyrics: "I'm really happy with the reaction I've had and some of the things I've achieved." He says the spectacular geography of his home state has been a major inspiration. "It's certainly something that has had a profound influence on me – there are so many parts of this state that are unique, from the most north west regions, the Pilbara and Kimberley areas, to the complete contrast of the Great Southern region, whose wild blue ocean and green hills remind me a lot of the west of Ireland. I developed much of the two albums in this area and it certainly had a big role in shaping the music that resulted. In the north and with some of the more remote areas of WA, like the Central Desert, I've been lucky enough to spend time there and work with Aboriginal people, and in some small ways getting to know the country through their eyes, which has forever changed the way that I look at the landscape."

He concedes that being based in the West is logistically challenging, with most of Australia's big festivals in the East. "I used to think about it constantly. I've had a bit of a love affair with Sydney over the years and did live there for a year while playing in rock bands once. But when the band came into being, it was never going to be practical for all of us to even consider moving and I'd wanted to keep the line-up together and see what would come of it. There are bands based in Perth that maintain a healthy touring circuit and we've been able to get quite a few tours to the East with the big line up. Perth has a lot of great musicians and class acts and the scene is a healthy one in many ways. It does get a lot harder when you don't play in pubs, though. We get a few of the community concert type shows and local festivals, which is a great way for us to stay in front of listening audiences, but the scene here is not enough to sustain a band like MTG, without us regularly touring elsewhere."

David Hyams will be performing with Bernard Carney at the Woodford Folk Festival (December 27-January 1).

Miles To Go are locked in for Nannup Music Festival (February 26-March 1).