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The show goes on for Three Dog Night

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Besides Three Dog Night's virtually unbreakable string of hit songs during the late 1960s and '70s, the band may be almost as well known for being the answer to a popular trivia question.

What rock group derived its name from an Aboriginal expression meaning a particularly cold evening for native shepherds in the Australian outback?

For a time, the over-asked query was as unavoidable in rock trivia circles as Three Dog Night's catchy pop-rock was on the era's Top 40 and FM radio stations.

During its 1969-73 heyday, the band was among the most popular acts in the United States, notching 18 consecutive Top 20 hits — 11 of which made the Top 10. Three songs hit No. 1.

The quantity of Three Dog Night's popular output was matched only by its diversity. From the blue-eyed soul of "Mama Told Me (Not to Come)" to the pop-reggae of "Black and White" to the power balladry of "One," the breadth of the group's set list never ceased to amaze.

"At our concerts, people will go, 'They had that hit? I thought that was Blood, Sweat and Tears,'" said group founder Cory Wells, whose bluesy lead vocals were a signature on the soulful one-third of Three Dog Night's eclectic catalogue.

The diverse hit makers return to Colorado on Aug. 7 to headline the Conifer Mountain Music Festival at Beaver Ranch in Conifer.

It took Three Dog Night more than a chilly night in the wilderness to achieve "overnight" success. The band worked for years individually in the dog-eat-dog Hollywood music scene before finding each other and sniffing out their niche.

Luck threw Wells a bone in the mid-'60s when a flirtatious Cher approached him at a party on the Sunset Strip. She soon hired his band, the Enemy, to back-up Sonny and Cher on a Dick Clark Cavalcade of Stars tour.

"She leaned up on the banister and whispered something in my ear," Wells recalled. "I won't tell you what she said, but she came back and said, 'How would you like to work with us?' I put up a facade, 'Well, I'll have to talk to my manager.' Of course, we did it."

On the tour, Wells met Danny Hutton, who had scored a few minor hits while working as a staff producer for Hanna-Barbera Records. Hutton had auditioned unsuccessfully for the Monkees and was



Three Dog Night is fronted by original lead singers (front, left to right) Danny Hutton and Cory Wells. The band plays the Conifer Mountain Music Festival on Aug. 7. Courtesy photo

looking for a new gig. The duo teamed with Chuck Negron, who had recorded, unsuccessfully, for Columbia Records.

Soon, the idea for the band was hatched: A rock group with three lead singers — not a Beatles-like collaboration or a harmony trio like the Bee Gees, but a band with three microphone-wielding Mick Jagers, taking turns, alternating the vocal spotlight.

"We had three distinctly different styles of singing," Wells said. "Danny was a California poppy singer. Chuck was supposed to be the ballad singer, and I was the R&B singer. Then we started running into each other's areas."

In 1967, the band briefly worked under the tutelage of Beach Boys leader Brian Wilson, who dubbed the group Redwood and wrote and produced a couple of tracks for them before his eccentricities got in the way.

"We tried to work with Brian," Wells said. "He was at the control counter and he got up and left. We thought he got up to get something to eat or whatever and he never came back. He came back the next day with a scuba tank and goggles and said he was no longer going to breathe the foul air of Los Angeles."

Redwood turned to lumber when Beach Boy Mike Love insisted that Wilson keep his material in the family. Redwood's "Darlin'" was given back to the Beach Boys who scored a Top 20 hit with it.

In 1968, the disenchanted former Redwood moved to Dunhill Records. As its first album neared completion, the label turned up the pressure for a new band name. Actress June Fairchild, Hutton's girlfriend at the time, came to the rescue.

"She'd read about the aborigines," Wells said of the resulting moniker that still lives in the annals of rock trivia. "We all went, 'Nah.' Finally, when the record company was pressuring us, we said, 'Alright, we're OK with it.'"

Three Dog Night's formula was concocted around the band's unflinching ear for choosing material by outside songwriters, rearranging it, sometimes drastically, and creating hits from songs that had essentially been left on the cutting-room floor.

In the process of recycling underused obscurities, the group fortified the fledgling careers of lesser-known songwriters, including Randy Newman, Harry Nilsson and Laura Nyro.

The hits included "The Show Must Go On" (Leo Sayer), "An Old Fashioned Love Song" (Paul Williams), "Lady Samantha (Elton John and Bernie Taupin) and "Easy to Be Hard" (from the rock musical "Hair").

"We turned these songs inside-out," Wells said. "We'd take a song and strip it down to the very essence and build it up from there. We had our own ears. We didn't have to rely on anyone else."

Among the band's three No. 1 hits was a drastic reinterpretation of Hoyt Axton's "Joy to the World," a song written for a rejected children's television special. When Axton played the band his whimsical verse about a bullfrog named Jeremiah, Wells was skeptical.

"It sounded like a kiddie song," he remembered. "I said, 'Are you guys serious about this?' As time went on, I got to the point where I started saying, whoa, there's some potential here."

The formula was a double-edged sword for Three Dog Night. While fans loved the hits, critics derided the group for being overly commercial and for seldom writing its own material.

"People said it was easy because we got the best writers," Wells said. "But nobody had ever heard of Randy Newman. I'd found his album in a bargain bin for 50 cents. It did bother us for a while. As soon as we started making money, we were poo-pooed."

Although the hits finally stopped in the mid-'70s, the band, minus Negron, continues to tour and has recorded two new songs, again by outside writers. The music can be heard on Three Dog Night's Facebook page. A new CD is forthcoming.

"Not to say we're human jukeboxes, but after 40 years of playing the same stuff, you need to be inspired somehow," Wells said. "We're not under pressure to get a hit because there's no way we're ever going to have another hit. The whole idea is to do songs that are fun to do. I got in this business because it was fun."

If you go

Three Dog Night will perform Aug. 7 at 5:30 p.m. at the fourth annual Conifer Mountain Music Festival at Beaver Ranch in Conifer. Former Chicago drummer Danny Seraphine and Funkiphino are among the other acts on the bill.

The first 2,000 festival tickets are \$22; \$30 thereafter. Kids are \$15 (10 and under free). Special seating tickets for \$35.

Festival is 9:30 a.m. to 7 p.m. rain or shine. Arts and crafts booths included.

For more information, visit conifermountainmusicfestival.com.

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