

# The South's Greatest Party Band Plays Again: Nashville's Legendary White Animals Reunite to Sold-Out Crowds

By Elaine McArdle

It's 10 p.m. on a sweltering summer night in Nashville and standing room only at the renowned Exit/In bar, where the crowd — a bizarre mix of middle-aged frat rats and former punk rockers — is in a frenzy.

Some drove a day or more to get here, from Florida or Arizona or North Carolina. Others flew in from New York or California, even the Virgin Islands. One group of fans chartered a jet from Mobile, Ala.

With scores of people turned away at the door, the 500 people crushed into the club begin shouting song titles before the music even starts.

"The White Animals are baaaaaack!" bellows one wild-eyed thirty-something, who appears mainstream in his khaki shorts and docksiders — until you notice he reeks of patchouli oil and is dripping in silver-and-purple mardi gras beads, the ornament of choice for White Animals fans.

Next to him, a mortgage banker named Scott Brown says he saw the White Animals play at least 20 times when he was an undergrad at the University of Tennessee. He wouldn't have missed this long-overdue reunion — he saw both the Friday and Saturday shows — for a residential closing on Mar-A-Lago.

Lead singer Kevin Gray, a one-time medical student who dropped his studies in 1978 to work in the band fulltime, steps onto the stage and peers out into the audience, recognizing faces he hasn't seen in more than a decade. The crowd explodes, and Gray and the other band members — Steve Boyd on bass, Rich Parks on guitar, Ray Crabtree on drums and Tim Coats on keyboards and soundboard — can't stop grinning as they launch into "You Started Something," a White Animals original which they describe as "pure Neanderthal pop."

The charismatic Gray, who in work boots and mardi gras beads looks like no doctor you've ever seen, smiles down from the stage. "Damn, all those years and still fine," he shouts, as Jack Nicholson leers from "The Shining" t-shirt he's sporting.

Before finally calling it quits at 2 a.m., the band will rip through almost four hours of crowd favorites: covers of The Clash's "Brand New Cadillac," the classic "Secret Agent Man," and their own Dread-Beat version of "These Boots Are Made for Walkin'." For many true believers, the evening's highlight is the 15-minute cover of "Gloria," featuring Gray's hyper-sexual narrative and Parks' blazing guitar riffs.

But the show is dominated by a long string of their raw, melodic rock-and-roll originals, including "Don't Care" and "This Girl of Mine," which were among the first indies in regular rotation on MTV.

"That was fun as hell," says Gray as he hugs fans after the show. "Pure joy," adds Boyd.

Not a soul in the house would disagree.

It's been 12 years since the White Animals played together. But as soon as word started circulating that they were planning a reunion, fans Coast to Coast began organizing road trips to Nashville.

Timed to coincide with the release of their first CD, *3,000 Nights in Babylon*, an 18-song compilation from their six albums, tickets for their July 3 and 4 reunion gigs sold fast. And The Exit/In club — which has hosted the likes of the Police, Muddy Waters and R.E.M. — hit its all-time record for bar receipts. "Yeah, they were selling out of water and O'Doul's," cracks drummer Crabtree, who now runs his own public relations company in Nashville.

All this in a town where, to quote one longtime studio musician, "You're lucky to get 20 people at a live gig."

Yeah, but the White Animals aren't your average party band.

And their fans, who've been thirsting for more than a decade to hear them

play again, aren't your typical crowd, either. Many are wearing 15-year-old White Animals t-shirts they never discarded; others are swapping bootlegs of various live shows, a practice condoned by the band. And then



there's the guy from Mobile, who chartered the jet up for the Friday night show with a group of his friends.

"His dad said to him, 'Son, I know you're a grown man, and it's your money. But damn, when are you ever gonna grow up?'" chuckles Crabtree.

Long before the advent of Phish and the rest of the current crop of college-oriented bands, the Nashville-based White Animals paved a well-worn path through the campus and club circuit in the South and along the Eastern seaboard, playing 300 nights a year and attracting wildly devoted fans who'd drive anywhere to hear them.

With a combination of power-pop originals and crowd-pleasing covers heavy on the British Invasion sound, the White Animals developed a reputation for being able to get any crowd off its feet and dancing. They reached cult status in the South during the 1980s, and played everywhere from Los Angeles to Boston, drawing record crowds at dive bars as well as debutante balls.

They also formed their own label, Dread Beat Records, and released six albums to a measure of critical acclaim. When *Stereo Review* selected their final album, *In the Last Days*, as its September 1987 "Pick of the Month," it called them "utterly unique" and noted, "What's remarkable about these guys is that, unlike a lot of other current roots-conscious bands, they manage to sound both retro and impeccably up to date."

The White Animals also played larger venues as the opening band for Duran Duran, the Talking Heads and James Brown, among others. When they opened for the Kinks at the Grand Old Opry in 1984, the crowd rushed the stage, delaying the Kinks concert 40 minutes until the fire marshal was satisfied the situation was under control.

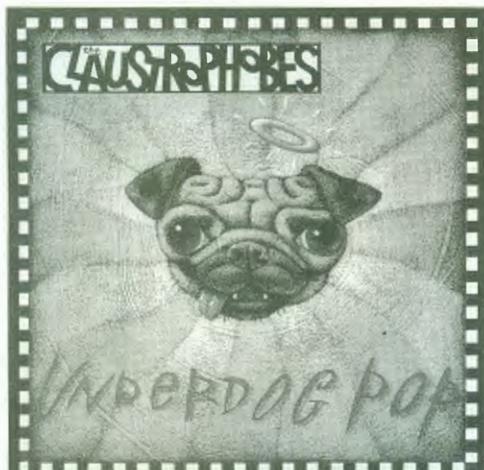
But despite some interest from major labels, they never got the big contract. Eventually, they called it quits — as always, on their own terms, after releasing their final album and going on the road one last time.

Since the White Animals broke up in 1987, their fans — now long graduated from college or grad school — have dreamed of a reunion. But it seemed unlikely. After all, the five band members have gone on to marriage, children, other careers.

But the Nashville shows were so exhilarating that the White Animals are planning future gigs at some of their favorite venues, including a possible December show in Birmingham, Ala. Parks hopes they'll record new tunes, and there's talk they'll play three or four times a year, just enough to ensure neither they nor their fans lose their current lives to rock-and-roll fever.

"It was pretty intoxicating," says Gray, the guitarist who led the White Animals for 10 years before returning to his medical studies, and who today practices in Dallas as a geriatric neuropsychiatrist. "It was easy to remember why it took me 10 years to get back [to medicine], because this was just like the funnest thing in the world."





## The Claustrophobes "Underdog Pop"

"...blatant Beatles-esque pop... that suggests everything from vintage sixties rock to Ben Folds Five."

- *Alive and Kicking*

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- *Valley Music News*



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The group's extraordinary fun quotient is what drew record crowds wherever they played. Like the Grateful Dead — although with an entirely different musical style — they create an intangible high that's nearly impossible to explain to anyone who hasn't witnessed them live.

"To be a great club band, you have to have that something extra," says R. Emmett McAuliffe, an entertainment lawyer in St. Louis and the author of *Pop Power! The Discography of Melody-Oriented Rock and Roll*. "The White Animals were pop, to be sure, but they held it together with enough grunge and interesting elements to make it consistently fun night after night."

"You feel good, you dance," explains Brown, the mortgage banker, who met up with long-lost college friends at the reunion shows. "It's their relationship with the audience. They get the audience involved."

People loved them because they were a kind of 'every person's rock band,' a little dangerous but not too, where the drug of choice was beer and more beer, with a little Ecstasy and pot thrown in. Instead of standing apart from their audience, they invited everyone to be part of the scene, from erstwhile punks to sorority girls to the elderly man who became a mainstay at their Nashville shows during the band's heyday.

"We were like the boys next door — on acid," laughs Gray, who started the patchouli craze among the band's fans in the late '70s. "I think people were able to connect with and enjoy the band in a way that was like, 'There but for my choices go I; If I'd just step onto that stage; God I wish I could do that.'"

"It was like all of us are in the position to take that step, that three-foot step up onto the stage. It was our connectedness, with us making the dream of being up there seem available."

In stark contrast to the us-cool, you-not-cool pose of many band, the White Animals appreciated their followers. Onstage, they bantered back and forth with the audience, relishing the rowdy spirit of their shows and the countless beers spilled onto their instruments by drunken fans. Between sets, they'd step into the crowd to talk. And afterwards, it was common for fans who'd had to much too drink to end up crashing on the floor in the band's motel room.

"The whole room was just sorta part of the band," says Crabtree. "If there was something that drew people to the White Animals, it was, 'Hey, you wanna talk? I'm here.'"

Someone recently sent Crabtree a tape of a gig they played at Auburn University in Alabama in 1983. "We were playing, 'For Your Love,' and all of a sudden the power goes out. All you can hear is my drums, and the whole room starts singing, 'For your love, for your love,'" he says, cackling at the memory.

Not your average band — but most definitely just average guys, out to have a good time with their friends to the beat of great music.

"Between rap and grunge, mainstream America had nowhere to go," says Gray. "Maybe that's who we were, mainstream guys. We didn't crash Lamborghinis or shoot heroin. We were mischievous. We tiptoed to the edge — and then came back."

"We didn't have an agenda, we're not trying to shock anybody. You could talk to us. Nobody's so sociopathic or so screwed up, nobody's some sort of tortured alienated outsider who found a voice in music. We all dig music, dig to play, are mostly 'normal' enough to handle amazing pressures and crazy enough to find the fun in band life. No prima donnas, nor prissiness here."

The love for music was the common factor among a very disparate group of fans.

"If you look on the *Rolling Stone* genre list, there are 500 things you can be. But that's just kinda hype. I know at the core of things, it's the old, 'You gotta backbeat you can't lose it,' and harmony and ringing guitars, and a sort of upbeat kind of thing that can also be wistful or sad," Gray says.

"There's still a big fat part of the bell curve of folks who work, just ordinary people, who wanted some good ole music," he continues, admitting, "I kinda cringe that we play 'good ole music.' This whole group of people who are saying, 'I don't have a pierced eyelid, I don't want a tattoo, but I wanna dance. The guitars start ringing, the bass starts walking, and the backbeat kicks my ass.'"

As for their sound, Gray says, "One of the things I'm proudest of is that we're one of the only college bands in the '80s that didn't sound like R.E.M."

### A Deaf White Cat

The White Animals got their start in 1977, when Gray moved to Nashville from Dallas after medical school to do his internship in psychiatry at Vanderbilt University Hospital. Although he'd fooled around on an old guitar he'd bought from a pawn shop while in college, he couldn't play a song from beginning to end and decided to find a guitar teacher.

He ran into Rob Jackson, a Nashville guitarist who became his mentor. Gray caught on fast and they began playing as a duo in Nashville coffee houses, dubbing themselves The White Animals after their pets, Gray's deaf white cat and Jackson's white German Shepherd. Among other venues, they played Franks 'N Steins, an underground — literally — club that was the city's only punk venue at the time.

Soon they added Jackson's friend Phil Doss on bass. But Gray had mixed feelings.

"I liked Doss as a cool guy, but he was trying to learn sax and be John Coltrane, and he was married. I was worried that we were gonna be too domesticated, sorta Buffet-esque, gentler, with Pure Prairie League underpinnings," he recalls. When they added a drummer, another Jackson student, Joe Loftis, things became polarized into "the marrieds and the singles, the virtuosi and the rockers." Loftis supported Gray's theories of "driving the kids crazy," while Jackson insisted on note-perfect shows.

Gray then made a radical decision: he quit his medical studies, telling his parents he wanted a one-year leave of absence — which eventually grew into a decade.

"Being single, 'leaving' medicine, left me more unfettered, unchained. Once the larger decision of not doctoring had been reached, I was much more desperate, frantic, bulletproof, liberated. I had no problems sleeping on the floor and letting frat boys puke on my shoes. It had to mean something for me to do it at all. Remembering my own thought processes at the time, it was sorta like, 'I didn't give up being a doctor to play



S-A-F-E.' Home and hearth had no meaning for me at the time, only musical sensation, rush of fame and big dreams — some coming true!" he says.

Playing to drunken college students wasn't Jackson's idea of a good time. He quit. While Gray initially was shocked at the departure of his mentor, the remaining three added Willie Collins on guitar. Their popularity snowballed, and they became a mainstay at Cantrell's, a grungy former drive-in burger joint and the coolest club in Nashville.

But the raucous crowds that favored the White Animals soon compelled Doss to leave, too.

"We were playing a frat gig at U.T. Knoxville, and guys were spilling beer and pouring beer into his sax, chicks were falling into the mike stand while he was trying to play," Gray recalls, smiling at the memory. "You could tell he was pissed off and disgusted at the whole human masses. He'd had it."

While searching for a new bass player, an acquaintance told them of a friend, Steve Boyd, and said, "He's a little weird, I think you'll like him," Gray recalls. A clarinet player attending a local college, Boyd quickly learned to play bass. New-wave thin and with a terrific voice for lead and harmony, Boyd — now a talented landscaper in Nashville — has dark, brooding looks that earned him the nickname "The Bone of Death" from some Chattanooga co-eds.

"At that point, we had a rock band. I think it would have been the end without Steve," Gray says.

Then Loftis jumped ship, and Crabtree, an energetic drummer with a blues and rock background, took his place, learning 50 songs in two days in a living room in Dallas before a Saturday night SMU frat party. When guitarist Collins, married with children, also found the relentless touring too much, a 20-year-old whirling dervish named Rich Parks brought his Van Halen- and Rush-influenced guitar to the mix.

Finally Tim Coats, a highly respected soundman in Nashville who today runs his own recording studio, Moon Dog Music, with Bruce Springsteen's bass player Garry Tallent, put the final touch on the lineup that became the White Animals that most fans knew. "To me, elevating him to full band status was one of our main innovations/legacies," says Gray. "You don't hear the band, you hear the sound of the band."

At that point, Boyd says, the group had "the total package," not the least of which was the good-looking lead singer they called "Lightning-Strike Kevin," the zealous missionary on the quest for a good time in the church of rock 'n roll.

The band played every gig they were offered, including a debutante ball in Dallas that earned them a mention in *Time*. They played 300 nights a year for 10 years (inspiring the title of their CD, *3,000 Nights in Babylon*), and shared a single motel room most nights on the road, too broke to rent two.

"In those tight quarters for that much time, that's tighter than family," says Parks, the fiery guitarist who today plays in other Nashville bands, including Drain the Lobster and Igmo. "Looking back on it, I couldn't work that hard again, rotating behind the wheel to the next show, running our own P.A., hooking up all the microphones and mic cords."

"We never worked out a set list," says Crabtree. "We had verbal cues and chord cues to know what our next song was, and Kevin was our Troy Aikman. He'd call the plays. To hell with a set list. I'd lean over my drums and say, 'What are we playing now?' Again, it comes down to accessibility. We'd stop in the middle of a song and start over, we'd play stuff live we'd never even played before. It was like everybody was in on it, the whole room was part of the band."

As for their choice of covers, Crabtree says they picked songs "because we thought they were fucking cool. They rocked. Our whole philosophy was, we wanted to rock people, whether it was the Stones or the B-52s or Gang of Four, whoever."

Parks recalls a college gig in Tucson where they were shut down by the police for being too loud. "So we set up an impromptu thing in the living room at this guy's house a couple of blocks from campus. It was wild. But we wanted to play. It's what we were there for. It's not, 'We got our money, we've been run off by the police so we're leaving.' No, we wanted to rock."

Of course, the question their fans want to know is, why didn't the Animals ever hit the big-time?

"One frustrating thing for us is that somehow the record companies never seemed to put that much stock in the fact that we had this passionate connection with the audience," Gray says, even though some bands, most notably the Grateful Dead, had parlayed that into mega-record sales.

While major labels including Island Records sniffed around, the big deals never came through — in large part because the band steadfastly refused to turn over control to anyone else.

"The record companies couldn't tag us," says Crabtree. "It was a little too rough for them, we played just a little out of time, we weren't perfect. It's just these guys going up there going, 'This is neat-keen to be in a band.' That's all we wanted to do."

"Finally we just said, 'If they don't get it, it's their fault. We did the best we could to show the record companies we were serious about this business. We formed our own label, we toured all to bejesus, we had our own fan club, our own management, all in-house. We felt that would be important to the majors, to see we were committed to this. Unfortunately they just didn't get it.'"

Ultimately, it didn't matter.

"We always knew people would be real happy to see us. We could always slink back to the frat circuit and be kings among men," he adds.

Looking back, Crabtree says, "We think we were seven to 10 years ahead of our time, with the fact that now it's nothing for people to follow around Phish. But back then, people would road trip like crazy to see us. It'd be nothing for us to have people from Hampden-Sydney in Virginia show up at gigs in Chapel Hill."

Gray is wistful sometimes, thinking about what might have been had they been able to spend months crafting their songs in a state-of-the-art studio. But not if it meant losing who they were.

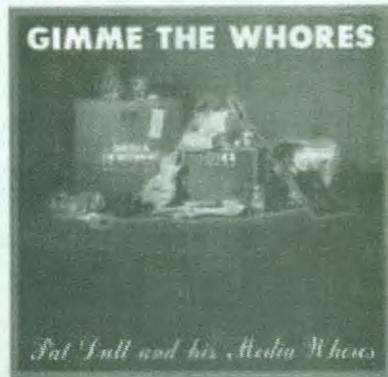
"In a real perverse way, we got to have the best of the music business, because like at the Exit/In, you can really see folks. You can feel their sweat fly off onto you, it's packed and exciting. It's not like paying some scalper \$500 to get on the 10th row at a U-2 show. That's crazy, to be watching it on the Jumbotron. You're better off watching the IMAX," Gray says.

And the band themselves — all happily married but for the still-single Parks — say it's all in how you define success. "We've made it, just in a different way," says Crabtree. "What's your definition of making it? Losing your ass on a record deal and ending up in rehab? I don't think so."

"When I watch VH-1 and see that 'Where Are They Now?', there's not a lot of bands that can say, 'Twelve years later we reunited and packed the fucking show,'" says Crabtree. "It's having your CD sell pretty well on the Net, and not having to answer to anybody."

"It's not always pretty, but it rocks. There's something about that."

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