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Allstars, Hill Country Revue sling that Mississippi mud

By [Steve Wildsmith](#)

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Aside from a few personnel changes and the title of the songs, there won't be a clear dividing line on Thursday night between the opening act and the headliner at The Bijou Theatre in downtown Knoxville.

That's because the two groups -- openers Hill Country Revue and headliners the North Mississippi Allstars -- spring from the same fertile soil of the North Mississippi hill country, a place where pine trees line roads rolling through acres of cotton fields and falling-down shacks off the beaten path hide hidden music treasure within.

It's a sound that borrows from the soulful sounds of Muscle Shoals, just over the Alabama line, and from the muddy blues of the Delta to the south. It's a genre that's more Southern than it is Southern rock, and it's played with all of the joy and exuberance of simple guys celebrating the soundtrack to the place from which they come.

And for Cody Dickinson, who pulls double-duty in both bands (guitar in HCR and drums with the Allstars), splitting a bill between the two is the height of his own personal artistic expression.

"It's very musically satisfying," Dickinson told The Daily Times this week. "By the end of the night, I feel like I've been able to express myself in every possible way I could ask for, and I love it. I have to pace myself, because it's almost like running a marathon. Our shows, they can be epic anyway as far as length.

"But I'm having so much fun with Hill Country Revue. I love this band, so it's not hard playing in both at all. I feel lucky and blessed to be in it. I just go backstage after Hill Country Revue, rewire my brain and get ready to play drums."

Dickinson and his brother Luther come by their talent naturally -- they're the sons of legendary Memphis producer Jim Dickinson, who worked on classic albums by such artists as Ry Cooder, Big Star, Jim Keltner and The Replacements. They could play an instrument before they could ride a bike, and hill-country blues, gospel and roots music are as much a part of their background as church music is to a Southern Baptist preacher who's never lived more than a mile from the church in which he grew up.

By their teenage years, the brothers were playing in Memphis punk bands, but gaining an even better appreciation for the music of their birthplace. Through that rediscovery, they formed the Allstars, joined by Chris Chew on bass. The band began a run of twice-a-week, four-hour long shows on Beale Street in Memphis, and from there, the group exploded, releasing "Shake Hands With Shorty" and 2001's follow-up, "51 Phantom." "Polaris" followed in 2003.

"Electric Blue Watermelon" came out in 2007, followed by the more stripped-down "Hernando" last year. Earlier this year, the band released "Do It Like We Used to Do," a retrospective of its career. Putting it together proved to be an interesting process, Dickinson said.

"The cool thing about 'Do It Like We Used To Do' is that we picked two or three cuts from each year," he said. "They're not chronological, but they're very interesting to go back and check out. My biggest fear was going back and thinking, 'Man, we were really good in 1998 -- what happened?' But that's not the case. We're still growing. With 'Hernando,' we stripped back to a trio and cut all the tracks live, and with Hill Country Revue, we've taken yet another step forward. It's always interesting and never dull."

Hill Country Revue first appeared in 2004 as the title to the Allstars live album, recorded at Bonnaroo. Last year, Dickinson turned the project into a full-time band, adding Allstars bassist Chew to the lineup along with Kirk Smithhart, Ed "Hot" Cleveland and Dixie Dan Coburn. The band's debut album, "Make a Move," will be released in May, featuring a majority of songs written by Garry Burnside, the youngest of 14 kids fathered by blues legend R.L. Burnside.

Dickinson first met the younger Burnside at the juke joint owned by another blues icon, Junior Kimbrough.

"Garry and I are the same age, and he was the first Burnside I became friends with, really," Dickinson said. "He and (his brother) Cedric were on 'Shake Hands with Shorty,' and they toured with us, to. Lately, he's come into his own as a songwriter. I produced his band and we cut 20 original songs in one day, and that really got my interest going in using his songs for Hill Country Revue."

This year, the Allstars and HCR will be on tours of clubs, theaters and festivals, and every night, Dickinson will switch from guitar to drums and play for any number of hours. The songs will change, and the players around him will shift positions ... but the music is something that stays the same, because it wells up from that place in his heart where the intangible sense of home and place combine.

"I'm in the studio now, working on four new Hill Country songs," he said with a laugh. "Overall, I just stay motivated by all of the exciting things happening. It's almost easy to do all of the work, and I think Hill Country is building a sound and an identity that's our own and separates us from the Allstars in a good way."
