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Cody Dickinson: From drummer to strummer

By Andria Lisle

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Imagine this: The band you've invested more than a decade into goes on hiatus, so you form a new group. Then, after you've booked a high-profile tour, your guitarist announces he can't do the majority of the dates. What do you do?

In Cody Dickinson's case, he simply set down his drumsticks and strapped on a guitar.

Though few Memphians might realize it, Dickinson actually started out strumming.



With his new band, Hill Country Revue, Cody Dickinson retains influences of the North Mississippi Allstars but has put away his drumsticks for a guitar.

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"I moved to drums to accompany Luther, and we stuck to that formula because it worked," the 32-year-old percussionist says of the relationship forged with his elder brother in bands like D.D.T. and, more recently, North Mississippi Allstars.

When Dickinson's newest project, Hill Country Revue, rolls into the Hi-Tone on Saturday night, he'll be making his local debut as a guitarist.

Let's backtrack: The Allstars went on hiatus after Luther joined the Black Crowes, and when handpicking players for Hill Country Revue, Cody Dickinson originally tapped Garry Burnside (the son of hill country bluesman R.L. Burnside) and Kirk Smithhart as guitarists, with Allstars bassist Chris Chew and former Dixie Hustler vocalist Dan Coburn rounding out the group. Then when Burnside couldn't commit to a coast-to-coast tour opening for J.J. Grey and MOFRO, Dickinson was faced with a tough decision -- hire another guitar player, or take over the slot himself.

"In hindsight, it feels like it was meant to be all along," he says.

"When I finally got out front and was playing guitar and singing, it was a huge release. I can express myself musically in a whole new way.

"I've been touring for a long time, and for it to be fresh again, it's just amazing."

The decision was easy, claims Dickinson, who hired Ed "Hot" Cleveland on drums and never looked back.

The transition from the jam-oriented Allstars to the harder-rocking Hill Country Revue has been equally organic, Dickinson says.

"I like to stay busy, and all of a sudden I had more spare time than I knew what to do with. At first I was scratching my head, wondering what to do, and then I made a plan, which was to continue.

"The Allstars are still a band; now, this is my band. All the work I've done up to this point has been in preparation for this. Everything Luther taught me, everything my dad (producer Jim Dickinson) has passed on to me. The way things have played out, it's given me an opportunity to grow and stretch out."

In layman's terms, there are more similarities than differences between the two groups. Like the Allstars, Hill Country Revue draws much of its repertoire from songs penned by the late hill country bluesmen Junior Kimbrough and R.L. Burnside. In live settings, both bands tend to shine a spotlight on the musicianship of younger generations from the North Mississippi hill country.

"This is real music from real people," says Coburn, who, with his girlfriend and her daughter in tow, relocated from Flint, Mich., to Memphis to front Hill Country Revue.

"Listen to the lyrics of 'Alice Mae': 'If you mess with that woman, I'm gonna take your life,' " Coburn, 32, says. "It's so hard-edged, so real. I think people can sense that they come from the heart."

Success has come quickly for Dickinson's new group.

Earlier this year, the Revue's version of R.L. Burnside's "Alice Mae" hit No. 1 on Sirius Radio's Jam Bands channel. The band has already recorded a full album during sessions split between two recording studios, Zebra Ranch and Young Avenue Sound. And following an exhilarating performance at the Highline Ballroom in New York City, Dickinson has been fielding interest from multiple record labels.

"We're mixing the album now; it's gonna come out in April 2009," says Dickinson.

Preview

Hill Country Revue with the Lee Boys