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Cody Dickinson and Hill Country Revue Make a Move

Mike Greenhaus
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Cody Dickinson's [Hill Country Revue](#) formed out of necessity, but it's unfair to simply describe the all-star group as a fallback plan. In 2008, the North Mississippi Allstars took a breather so lead guitarist Luther Dickinson could focus on his new gig with The Black Crowes. Taking a cue from a family jam session the Allstars hosted at Bonnaroo in 2004, the remaining members of the trio—drummer Cody Dickinson and bassist Chris Chew—started to assemble a loose revue featuring the core band of Ed 'Hot' Cleveland (drums), Daniel Coburn (vocals) and Kirk Smithhart, as well as the contributing associates Martin Shore (drums), Garry Burnside (guitar) and Aaron Julison (bass). Further separating the Hill Country Revue from the North Mississippi Allstars, the younger Dickinson switched from drums to guitar both on the road and on the group's studio debut, *Make a Move*. Below, Cody Dickinson discusses his new instrument, walks us through the Hill Country Revue's development and clues us onto why the hip-hop and jamband scenes aren't that different.

Let's start at the beginning. When did the Hill Country Revue first come together?

In 2008, the Allstars took a break from touring. I had the year off, pretty much, and I found myself with enough time to play with a lot of the musicians I've been wanting to work with. I've never had a chance to work with these guys with the Allstars on the road so much. So when it came time to put a band together, I reached out to Garry Burnside, who I've been friends with for years, and we started jamming with [Chris] Chew and Kirk [Smithhart].

Now, the fascinating part about the development of Hill Country is that Kirk and I met in church of all places. I heard his playing on a record that I was releasing on my digital label and it just got my attention. I was like, who was that? And they said it was a guy named Kirk Smithhart from Memphis—an up-and-coming guitarist. And sure enough I was at church with my ex-girlfriend, and I'm sitting there and I can't see him but I hear this amazing guitar playing and I'm like, "Who is this guy?" So the next time I walk up and talk to him briefly there after the service. And then I run into him in Italy the next time. I'm over there doing a random festival with the Allstars and the elevator opens up in the bottom lobby of the hotel and there's Kirk. And we start talking. So that's a long story but it was very, truly meant to be. It was like a blessing. It was amazing.

The North Mississippi Allstars also called its all-star jam-session at Bonnaroo in 2004 the Hill Country Revue. I assume you named your new project after that set and subsequent live album?

I named the band after the Allstars' performance at Bonnaroo. I felt like it encompassed what I wanted to do with the project. I made a very conscious decision not to stray artistically too far from what I'd been doing. It was very much a case of wanting to continue on the same path, so it just made sense. I honestly had quite a few good names, and I put a poll up on a blog and asked people what the coolest name was and Hill Country Revue won by a landslide. I had a couple more like "Hand-Me Down Blues Band." And it identifies us with the Allstars enough to where I think people will get it, Allstar fans get it. It was wide open so it gave us all room to work under the name of a revue, meaning that the line up can change. It's more of a dynamic entity opposed to being set in stone.

Though Garry Burnside wrote many Hill Country Revue songs and appears on the album, he does not always tour with the group. How does that change the Hill Country Revue's dynamic?

Garry Burnside is a huge part of the group who doesn't tour with us. There are others like him, like Duane, his older brother. Obviously Luther plays a big part in the band. Luther was huge when I was first putting the group together. I think the final key player was Dan Coburn. When I got Daniel down to be our singer—when he moved to Memphis and started working with us full time—that's when we really found our voice. Really that's

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when it started to take off. The recording started to get people's attention and the gigs were solid.

The line-up changed quite a bit but I think it's an old fashioned way of making records and touring bands where it's not necessarily the same musicians on a record as it is at the show. I like basically to focus on my strengths as an artist and I focus on other people's strengths. So I brought in the best guitar player, the best singer, the best songwriter and tried to produce a record that we are all proud of. And once that really started to click...

Another key person was Aaron Julison. He plays with Kid Rock of all people. A promoter in Florida named Sharisse [Pessar] gave me his CD and said, "You need to listen to this." It blew me away, and I instantly called a random number on the CD. That led to a long-time friendship with Julison who produced what I heard. Once Julison came from Detroit and helped me co-produce with Dan singing, that's when the gel really just solidified. And we all knew we were on to something. And bringing all these heavy hitters in it took on a life of its own, and I no longer had to orchestrate and be behind, pulling strings and doing tricks. It sort of just started to grow naturally, organically.

Did you always plan to play guitar in Hill Country Revue?

There have been a lot of interesting twists and turns along the way with Hill Country. We sort of roll with the punches—we don't see things as setbacks, we see them as opportunities. Kirk totally encouraged me to move to guitar. Garry had some family issues and had some other shows. We were leaving for a JJ Grey and MOFRO tour, and he didn't make the first show in Fayetteville, and I was racking my brain trying to think of a guitar player to replace him. He was such a key player in the grand scheme of the band. And I'd already exhausted my possibilities of guitar players. And Kirk said, "Dude, let's call [drummer] Edward "Hot" Cleveland and why don't you move to guitar." As soon as he mentioned it, I was like, "That's what we've gotta do!" It was that tour where we went to NY and [our label] Razor and Tie saw us play, and we got signed and the whole deal. It really took off once the five of us got together. I love playing guitar! My goodness, I didn't really realize I was missing out on all the fun! It separates Hill Country from the Allstars completely. There is no confusion. I play drums in one band and guitar in the other. That's pretty different.

You were originally a guitarist actually, correct?

I started on guitar and moved to drums when I was like 12 or 13 to accompany Luther. He's just an amazing guitarist, and he was progressing so fast as a teenager. There was no way I could keep up. I picked it back up in my 20s but I just recently got to the point – I'm definitely more of a rhythm player – where I can play pretty fluent solos, and I'm really getting into lead improvisation.

Another difference between Hill Country Revue and the North Mississippi Allstars is that your new group has a defined frontman.

It's a bit of a lost art in rock and roll these days, and Daniel pulls it off. I'm so proud of him. I can't say enough about this group. When the pressure's on, we really step it up a few notches. We've been in some pretty – for a relatively new band that's been at it for about a year – we've been put in some intense situations already. And these guys come out with flying colors. I'm so proud of it and to be a part of it and watching it grow is amazing.

The North Mississippi Allstars definitely tow the line between bluesy improvisation and more song-oriented albums. Where do you see the Hill Country Revue falling on that scale?

Well, that's ever-changing. We definitely focused on song structure at first because I think it's easier to get tight and then loosen up, as opposed to the other way around. It never gets tight and that's not a bad thing. A big part of what got people's attention with this group were the songs. They're very relatable and also authentic, modern blues, which is just hard to come by these days. In the sense that Garry, he played with Junior Kimbrough his whole life—he's just an amazing talent and very prolific writer. His songs just resonate with me. They have a sort of nitty-gritty, down-home feel but they're also sophisticated and new. It's just a great combination. But that being said, the new stuff we're working on is real upbeat and groovy. People can dance to it. We have the tight hard rockers under our belt. We bring the heat and melt the faces. No doubt with the rock and roll guitar frontal attack, we have that down. Now, I wanna kinda loosen the band up a bit. One trick we've been using is to drop a few songs off the set list so we have to stretch other ones out. It works too! Kirk and I can go all day soloing on guitars. But Dan is really good at bringing the verses back in when it's time to pull the reins back a little bit. He's the man. He's real good at that. Chew and I, it feels so good cause we didn't miss a beat. We're picking up right where we left off.

At first, I was producing this record before the band even knew it. I was calling it a

rehearsal and setting up microphones and recording it. And that's ultimately what "Alice Mae" is. And I think it had a lot to do with us gaining momentum early on because I was releasing the music as we were making it. It was very live and vibrant. And once we got signed we had a chance and the time to go in and focus a little more on the recordings. But we pretty much play it once and that's it. The bulk of the material was recorded at the Zebra Ranch Studios we have down in Mississippi, it's my dad's place. It's basically just a barn out in the country. And that's where we were rehearsing so it was comfortable. I think we cut six of the tracks down there. The other four tracks come from Young Avenue Sound, and we did them all in one day.

That live feeling is definitely apparent throughout the album.

"Georgia Women" is off the floor, totally live—including vocals. That was done in the barn. "Let Me Love You Baby." That's live off the floor. And again, I had the tracks at home afterwards and I was able to edit them and manipulate them a little bit, but I pretty much left it as is. Kevin Houston, our amazing engineer here in Memphis, he mixed the stuff while I was on tour. He did it all. He did all the mixes. And I was like, "This sounds great, I love it, don't change a thing." It was a painless process and I think that says a lot for the project. When things are meant to be they seem to just to happen. As opposed to forcing it. Every band runs into that "Oh man, your live shows are great! If your records reflected how hot you were live, then you'd be getting somewhere." I didn't want to get caught in that trick bag. So I made sure the record was as live as it could be. When people go to a show, like the show, and buy a CD, take it home and listen to it, they get what they expect.

There's a great integrity in the jamband world. The fans are fans of good players and good musicianship, and it's a very musical world to be in. I think the one common thread that ties each jamband to the other is that there is at least one or two guys in each band who can play their asses off. And a lot of the time, it's all of them. If you can't bring it live on stage, they won't even pay you the first bit of attention. But then again, you don't have to have a hit record or be a pop sensation for them to get into it. They truly react to the music in a very genuine way. It's almost like jazz or something. It's very sophisticated. I've always been flattered to be a part of the jam scene. It's a very cool world to be in.

You grew up with the blues and later discovered punk and hip-hop. When do you feel the jamband crowd really caught on to the North Mississippi Allstars?

When Bonnaroo was first happening, it was a real exciting time. It was very much the combination of all of the elements together that made it a success. There were no big headliners and there was no Metallica playing Bonnaroo. It was Superfly. To me the promoters were the superstars of the early days of the jamband scene, really sort of busting out. It was real exciting. There was a lot of energy and a lot of people looking for the same thing. And the guys in Superfly knew how to give it to them, and knew how to present it in a way that, collectively, we all benefited from it. That's amazing. That's really something to be proud of. I think the Allstars, that first year at Bonnaroo, we carved a niche that we're still in. We're real grateful for that.

Though Bonnaroo has expanded to include headliners from all different genres, it has also introduced those bands to the jamband audience.

It launched a lot of bands. That's another cool thing about the jamband genre – that's still regional. It's like hip hop in that way. I can listen to a rap record and know well that's from Houston or that's from Memphis and that's from Atlanta—or that's obviously from San Francisco. It's like they have these distinct styles, but they mesh in a real interesting way, and I want to tap into some of that in the next Hill Country record. I have some ambitious, lofty producers in mind—like Quincy Jones is amazing or even Dr. Dre. You know, fuck it, I wanna get the best producers out there and let them hear the band and I think they'd be into it. I really have high expectations for the future of Hill Country. It's an amazing group of guys I'm so proud to be a part of. There's real longevity here. We're blues musicians and we're still real young. We're ready to get after it. These guys are ambitious. We're the young pups on the block.

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