

North Mississippi Allstars: *Up and Rolling*

A forgotten roll of film inspired a musical accompaniment, the North Mississippi Allstars' new record *Up and Rolling*. Shot before the turn of the century, the photographs resonate with the music of four families from the Mississippi hills. The album captures the communal spirit upon which the band was founded.

In 1996, a photographer from Texas, Wyatt McSpadden, traveled to North Mississippi looking to photograph local musicians. Brothers Luther and Cody Dickinson had grown up just south of Memphis and cut their teeth playing experimental rock & roll together, as well as the roots repertoire pioneered by their father, Jim Dickinson, a legendary producer (Big Star, the Replacements) and session player (Rolling Stones, Bob Dylan). Their feet were firmly planted in the North Mississippi mud and music scene, and they were excited to show Wyatt around their community, to introduce him to the musical families of Otha Turner, RL Burnside and Junior Kimbrough.

Their first stop was Otha Turner's farm. Then in his late eighties, he was the last living fife and drum musician in the hills—"and a friend to all," Luther exclaims. "He looked sharp that day, still in his Sunday best and ready for a good time." They all sat together on Otha's fabled front porch, which was something like a classroom for the elder Dickinson brother. The two would sit for hours, the kid playing guitar while the old man made up lyrics on the spot. That's how "Call That Gone" came into the world, decades before the Allstars recorded it for *Up and Rolling*.

After Otha treated Wyatt to an impromptu concert featuring his family band of drummers, the fife player sent them down to Junior Kimbrough's nightclub. They crossed the county line to see Junior and his Soul Blues Boys perform electrified, multigenerational cotton patch blues in their own unique style. Later that evening RL Burnside showed up, took the bandstand with beer in hand, and proceeded to tear the house down. "Wyatt was so smooth nobody felt he was taking photos," Luther recalls. "No one was self-conscious or posing. Wyatt had a cloak of invisibility."

Once the Peavey amps were turned off and the jukebox unplugged, Cody and Luther parted ways with the Texan. Wyatt shared a handful of the images with Otha and the Dickinsons but no one saw the remaining photographs for decades. Wyatt's images were forgotten. The Dickinsons had other matters demanding their attention—namely, a new band they envisioned as a loose collective of local musicians who would play the community's repertoire.

A month after Wyatt took those photos, the North Mississippi Allstars made their Memphis debut, incorporating their father's concept of roots music as a framework for improvisation and blending experimental/psychedelic excursions into Hill Country anthems. As Luther tells it, "after NMA first shook em' down in Memphis, RL Burnside hired me to tour with him in '97. A natural momentum began building up that slowly led to Cody and I hitting the road full-time. Our lives changed forever with the release of *Shake Hands with Shorty* in 2000. The music that rings thru the hills carried us away and became our home away from home as we began touring around the world. In orbit, we lost track of time and of ourselves."

*Shake Hands with Shorty* made the Allstars one of the most celebrated roots acts around. In 23 years they've released ten studio albums, three of which were nominated for Blues Album of the Year Grammys. (Luther has notched another four nominations in various categories on top of that.) More important, they've played countless shows in front of avid crowds, touring alongside Robert Plant, Patty Griffin, Mavis Staples, and John Hiatt, among many others. Says Luther, "I'm grateful to work together as a family—with Cody, the musicians we roll with and the people who support our live shows. Together, we keep this music up and rolling."

All those years of touring took the Dickinson brothers far away from their North Mississippi home and the people who taught them this music. "The elders passed on in our absence—Junior, Otha, RL, our father," Luther says. "Every time we returned home, it was less recognizable." In 2017 Wyatt tracked the brothers down and shared those photographs with them. "The images stopped me in my tracks and blew my mind. The music that changed our lives was captured in these photographs. Cody and I wanted to set the music free and record an album to accompany these photographs illustrating what Mississippi music sounded like in 1996—and what it sounds like now. The fantasy of what music could have been on the radio that day in '96 was the portal for the new original songs we recorded for this soundtrack. Drunk Outdoors, Up and Rolling, Bump That Mother, and Living Free sing about life in Mississippi, be it our memory, reality, or dream for the future."

Inspired by Wyatt's images, the Allstars returned home to their family recording studio, the Zebra Ranch, to make the record they heard in those photographs. "We trimmed back the wisteria, emptied the traps, and swept out the old barn. Firing up the tube amps and the old computers, we began conjuring up modern Mississippi music, ancient and futuristic."

Along with originals, they covered some of their favorite songs by these local heroes, with help from Cedric Burnside and Sharde Thomas, Otha's granddaughter. "She was only a child when she became his apprentice and heir to the bamboo throne of fife and drum music," says Luther. "Now she's the Queen of the Hill Country and my favorite singing partner." In addition to duetting

with him on RL's raunchy "Peaches," she also sings with Luther on Otha's "Call That Gone." "She read over her grandfather's lyrics and proceeded to nail it in one take. It was like she was singing from the collective soul of her family."

Cedric Burnside, RL's grandson and two time Grammy nominee, is featured on two tracks. "It's an honor to play with Cedric. "Out on the Road" was a highlight of the RL tour we played together in '97 and he sang his heart out on the new version."

"When we make a record," says Luther, "we invite the people close to us at the time to join us. Recording with the musicians we are touring with or hanging with help capture a record's time frame." The great Mavis Staples takes them all to church on the old spiritual "What You Gonna Do?" Jason Isbell joins to record a tune that has been in the Dickinson family for years: "Our father recorded 'Mean Old World' with Duane Allman and Eric Clapton during the *Layla* sessions. Jason invited me to record an acoustic, slide guitar duo version. Cody came up with the new arrangement and wanted to record an electric version with Jason and Duane Betts, using Mean Old World as a vehicle to lay down an epic statement about modern-day roots rock guitar."

As Cody puts it, "It's all inclusive. Everyone is invited, the bar is always open, and drinks are on the house. But it's important to us that we stay true to the vision of Hill Country music. There is incredible talent here in North Mississippi, so I'm always learning. The best thing about being in this band this long is developing a sound and identity that is unique. That's truly a blessing, so we do our best to keep the music honest."

While inspired by the community and music of that Sunday more than 20 years ago, *Up and Rolling* is the sound of modern Mississippi. Luther hopes, "the music is rooted, but spreads evasively from the kudzu jungle grown over Junior's concrete slab and Otha's porch boards thru the Zebra Ranch's razor wire chain link fence. Transcending time and space, music reaches out into the dark of night like the wisteria vine, looking for free-hearted souls to latch onto and wedge into the foundations of hate, slowly tearing down walls a generation at a time."