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DOWN SOUTH

KEEPING THE
HILL COUNTRY
BLUES ALIVE
WITH THE
NORTH
MISSISSIPPI
ALLSTARS
by WES ORSHOSKI



Luther gets a lesson at Junior's juke joint

"I remember laying there just wishing for a thought, just blank-minded. I burned so much energy that I think I just had to regenerate, recharge." From behind the wheel of Casper, The North Mississippi Allstars' tattered but trusty road warrior, Luther Dickinson is relaying his worst rock and roll war story: a long, taxing acid trip from some 15 years ago.

"It was a normal weekend. I dosed with my brother and some other friends, and we jammed and recorded. At first, I wasn't scared, I was thinking, 'Eureka!—I have reached the place of consciousness that we're all trying to get to.' But, in reality, I was just free-associating bullshit I couldn't make any sense of."

Right in the middle of it, DDT, Luther's then-band with younger sibling and Allstars drummer Cody Dickinson and bassist Paul Taylor, played a gig at the Antenna Club in Memphis, before which Luther pointed to the symbols on the cover of a box of Marlboro Reds as the keys to the universe—and he wasn't joking. While half-laughing about it now, he's still a little embarrassed by the memory: "I made an ass of myself in every worst cliché LSD rock-show indulgence way. I played awful, out of tune. I was saying all kinds of crazy shit. I was wearing a poncho with shit written on my belly underneath it and these big, buck-ass tennis shoes. I had this zit rising out of my fuckin' face."

Speeding down the kudzu-lined, church-dotted backroads of North Mississippi, we're heading to two of the area's most storied spots: first to the former site of late bluesman Junior Kimbrough's juke joint and then to the former home of Otha Turner, another blues hero who passed in 2003 at the age of 94. Both the men and the places have registered an immeasurable impact on Luther, who honors them on the best songs on the Allstars' new disc, *Electric Blue Watermelon*.

It's a bit of a trek to the ash-covered spot in Marshall County where Junior's burned to its foundation, and as we wind our way through the hill country, Luther is outlining

his evolution as a guitarist. As cringe-worthy as it is, that psychedelic experience is an important part of that story.

He remembers tripping hard for about a week, before his celebrated musician/producer father Jim Dickinson postponed work on Toy Caldwell's eponymous album to basically tranquilize Luther and finally get him to sleep—a lack of which Luther blames for temporarily frying his brain. While Jim calls the experience the worst of his life, Luther, now 32, says it was by no means a near-death experience, and that he frankly *enjoyed* most of it—having believed he finally reached enlightenment.

It was a year before he felt completely normal again. At the end of that year was a pot of gold of sorts, he says: "I had to re-teach myself a lot, because I lost a lot of continuity



Luther on the hallowed grounds where Junior's place once stood

in my mind, like improvising a solo or whatever, and form—there was no form, structure or logic. It was just disjointed and scattered, as was my brain. But once I got my playing back together, it was better than it had been—the end result was so much smoother.

"I conquered something that I had been fighting all my life, in my personality and in my music," he continues, while pulling up to Junior's. "I just couldn't break through. I had been playing guitar and I couldn't get the sound I wanted to. I was too aggressive. I just couldn't play the way I wanted to."

Shifting Casper into park, Luther chuckles. "When I got better, I remember my dad saying, 'Well, son, you've finally done it: You've reached the next stage of human evolution.'"

I F YOU'VE NEVER BEEN THERE—OR IF you don't have someone like Luther guiding the way—you would never notice the break in the Crayola green shrubs along Highway 4 where Junior's stood for years. Well, you *might*. Passing motorists must occasionally catch a little sun from the bottle tree that's sprouted where the jukebox once rested. But you have to actually pull over and get out of your car to see the black ash-dusted concrete floor, which dips on the right side, where the Dickinson brothers would sometimes sit in with Kimbrough, or where Luther was sometimes treated to an impromptu lesson in Junior's brand of raunch boogie.

Burning to the ground not long after Kimbrough's death in 1998—in a controversial fire some suspect was lit by his beleaguered son Dave (local authorities didn't respond to attempts to confirm or deny the rumor)—Junior's was a haunt for everyone from such peers as the recently deceased R.L. Burnside to underage Ole Miss. coeds who imbibed here with ease. U2 and the Stones even made the trek. It was a place where hill country blues fans could drink and shout alongside pillars of the local blues scene, something akin to hanging out in a velvet rope- and ego-free Max's Kansas City with Lou Reed. "In no way did Junior hold himself above anyone," Luther says, lighting a cigarette. "He was a special person in the community. People would come here to dance on

Sundays, and they loved R.L. and Junior so much—and they were one of them. It was all one community."

To be sure, it's a little sad to be standing in the club's ashes, the frayed buzz of Kimbrough's riffing replaced with waves of cricket chirping. As much as anyone, Luther misses Junior's heyday, which he waxes nostalgic on in the *Electric Blue Watermelon* gem "Moonshine." "The club burned down to the concrete floor/Old jukebox won't play no more... I miss the moonshine and the old times/Sitting in with the house band and the bootleggers of the bottom land."

Junior's partially inspired Luther's original concept for the Allstars, which he initially thought might develop into a hill country

collective open to rotating cameos from members of the Burnside, Kimbrough and Turner families. While it's never really become that, it may, however temporarily: Luther plans to make a bona fide hill country collaboration with all the above sometime in the near future. And that record would hopefully be complimented with an Allstars picnic/concert in North Mississippi, both sporting the spirit of the band's celebrated Hill Country Revue at Bonnaroo 2004 (featuring a rare performance from Jim and Burnside's final bow).

In a way, *Electric Blue Watermelon*, the band's fourth album, insists that these collaborations *need* to happen, that their time has come. While written more than a year ago—long before the revered Burnside's recent death—the album laments the change sweeping through the hill country in the wake of the passings of legendary stalwarts like Kimbrough and Otha Turner. If the Dickinson boys moved to North Mississippi from nearby Tennessee just in time for the heyday of the hill country blues, that time has surely passed. Says Cody, "There's no doubt about it, there's a disturbance in the Force."

E ASING CASPER UP TO OTHA'S tin-roofed shack in Gravel Springs, Luther is turning heads. Like his father before him, he's a throwback for sure, one who's spent much of his life casually apprenticing under the hill country's blues greats, none more so than fife and drum master Turner, who Luther recorded and produced in the late '90s. And in this economically depressed, all-black neighborhood, Luther's not only universally accepted, but also universally respected and *adored*. It's a site to behold.

A last remaining link to the fife and drum culture of 19th Century Mississippi, Turner—or "Gabe," as friends knew him—was an internationally recognized bluesman who toured the world, but had no use for any modernisms. He raised his own vegetables and animals here on this tiny patch of land where goats roam free and strings double as door locks. Before Turner's death, Luther came here countless times to learn about life and the blues—and to play. "Otha's music exemplified the hill country blues," he says from Gabe's

water-warped plywood porch. "You have three drums beating out the rhythm, and the vocals and the fife playing the melody. To me, that's what hill country is like."

For as long as folks around here can remember, on the last Saturday in August, Turner's family has hosted an annual picnic, where people from around the globe come to taste the real Mississippi, to feel the spirit of the country blues, the world boogie, as the Dickinsons call it. It's an enlightened event, for sure, where strangers are embraced and color and class lines disappear.

At the last minute, this year's picnic was pushed back a week into September. It's clear the word hasn't really gotten around as out-of-towners drive by confused. But for those who came out, tonight there will be a little consolation party over at the home of Miss Betty, Gabe's oldest daughter, where some 25 of us will feast on fried catfish and goat, sip moonshine and catch the world boogie under the moonlight as a smiley Luther and local howler R.L. Boyce grind out raunchy riffs into the night.

If any one thing marks just how much things have changed in recent years for Luther, it's Turner's passing. "It made me rethink who we are and what's unique about what we're doing," he says. About a year after Gabe's death, Luther started writing lyrics remembering Turner and slain guitarist Lee Baker, while also celebrating those who are still around, like friend and Burnside guitarist Kenny Brown.

"There are these sort of folk heroes who get immortalized through song, like, say, Stagger Lee or Casey Jones," says Cody. "And after Otha's death, Luther saw an opportunity to immortalize the folk heroes that we know, and grew up around. So there are these certain characters, reoccurring themes and locations throughout *Electric Blue Watermelon*," which finds the boys covering Turner, Odetta and Charley Patton. Turner himself shows up on the album, via an old recording. A mélange of country blues and southern-fried rock and hip-hop, the disc features friends like Lucinda Williams and Robert Randolph, and takes its name from the all-white house band that backed the likes of Furry Lewis and Mississippi Fred McDowell at the Memphis blues festivals of the 1960s.

Ask the brothers' father, a former member of that band, and he'll tell you: There's something in the air here. It's one of the reasons he moved his family here. "I think it's a wandering spirit. It comes and goes, but you can always feel a little of it." Considering both their history and genes, if anyone's qualified to kindle that spirit, it's the Dickinson brothers.

B ORN FOUR YEARS AFTER JIM PLAYED piano on the Stones' "Wild Horses," Luther's first word was "studio," and his earliest childhood memory is of his dad teaching him to snap his fingers.

With Luther in her womb, Lindsay Dickinson attended a Stones show in Nashville and the funeral for McDowell, a major influence on Luther.

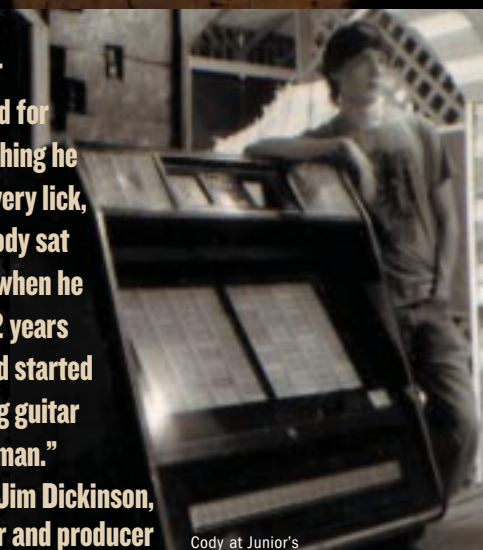
Arriving 10 days after the death of Jim's dear friend and former Dixie Flyers bandmate Charlie Freeman, Luther's birth put the brakes on his dad's rock excesses. Born as Jim was making Big Star's 3rd: *Sister Lovers*, Cody "stopped me cold," he says. "I'm sure I would have been a dead junkie."

While Jim would later try half-heartedly to steer Luther away from music, he didn't shy away from surrounding the boys with the tools of the trade come Christmastime, Jim remembers, noting that he used to put toddler Luther atop an old piano previously used in the writing room at the great Memphis soul label Stax. "He couldn't get down, so it became sort of the playpen." Before Cody had finished kindergarten, he and Luther had formed a band.

A natural musician, Cody started on guitar and moved to drums at 10. When he got his

"Luther worked for everything he got, every lick, and Cody sat down when he was 12 years old and started playing guitar like a man."

—Jim Dickinson, father and producer



Cody at Junior's



Jim Dickinson at home with his son, Luther

first full-sized drum set, the boys jammed on “Honky Tonk Women” in the living room. With his check for producing The Replacements’ *Pleased to Meet Me*, Jim built a studio and rehearsal space for the boys in the basement. “Before either one of them could play, they could make noise rhythmically together—it was *almost* like music,” he laughs.

Growing up, both kids sought the approval of their father, who was particularly hard on Cody. “When I was a teen, we would back up their dad for concerts, and I remember being at rehearsals and hearing him just screaming at the top of his lungs at Cody: ‘You’re *dragging!*,’” says DDT’s Paul Taylor. “Can you imagine the pressure on him, knowing that your dad had played with Jim Keltner?”

Says Jim: “It troubles me that it came so easily, because you have to work for it. Luther worked for everything he got, every lick, and Cody sat down when he was 12 years old and started playing guitar like a man.” His entire life, Cody, a fan of pop and hip-hop, has clashed with Jim and Luther over music.

“We’re just totally different people,” he says of Luther. “He likes to go to record stores and look through the vinyl and hang out with indie rockers, and I’ll get on the internet and download the song from iTunes if I want the new G-unit track or whatever. He’s married and I’m a total player. He rolls his own cigarettes, and I smoke Parliaments. He’s more kind of on the old-fashioned country boy tip, and I’m sort of more the ‘give me everything new’ city boy.” Case in point: while Cody lives in a new home in a cookie-cutter neighborhood

not far from the Memphis airport, Luther still resides in the country, sharing a 103-year-old home with his wife Necha and two dogs. What’s more, Cody has launched his own label, Diamond-D Records, which is to officially bow with the new album from local MC Al Kapone, who guests on *Electric Blue Watermelon* and is featured in the movie *Hustle and Flow*.

With Taylor, the brothers formed DDT as teens. “We called it a punk rock band,” says Cody, “but the reality is we were just playing punk rock clubs. We were actually playing more like fusion rock.”

An early fan of the band was Hernando High classmate and prep sports standout Chris Chew, a growing mountain of a man who hung out at gigs and occasionally jammed with the guys in their basement. As DDT grew its fanbase in the early ‘90s, Chew attended community college and the University of Memphis—playing offensive tackle for both—and began directing both the choir and band at his church. So when Luther, having become obsessed with the hill country blues, called in 1997, saying that Taylor had left to pursue other projects, Chew was the natural choice for a replacement. DDT had already morphed into the Allstars and featured a saxophonist, extra vocalist and keyboardist, all of whom would leave to pursue other interests.

With Chew bringing a gospel sense of harmony to the mix, things began escalating. “As soon as Chris started, we had 30 people, and then we had 60, and pretty soon we had 150,” recalls Cody. “We could have played the same music with Paul but it wouldn’t have happened the way it did.” While the music was increasingly more adventurous and sophisticated, the band now had massive stage presence. Says Jim: “All they had to do is walk onstage to connect. You’ve already said, ‘Look at this: Here’s the two crazy white boys and the big black guy.’”

During a string of gigs on Beale Street in Memphis, the Allstars caught the eye of Tone Cool Records, through whom they made their official debut in 2000, with *Shake Hands With Shorty*. Cut at their dad’s home studio, the Zebra Ranch, for next to nothing, the album did better than expected, moving some 100,000 units. After another tour behind their follow-up, 2001’s *51 Phantom*, the Allstars moved to

the ATO label and were universally bashed for their third disc, the schizophrenic *Polaris*, which featured the addition of R.L. Burnside’s guitarist son Duwayne. Disjointed, the album is a collection of three drug-fueled batches of songs, one written by Luther and produced by him and his father, another written and produced by Cody, and a third from Duwayne.

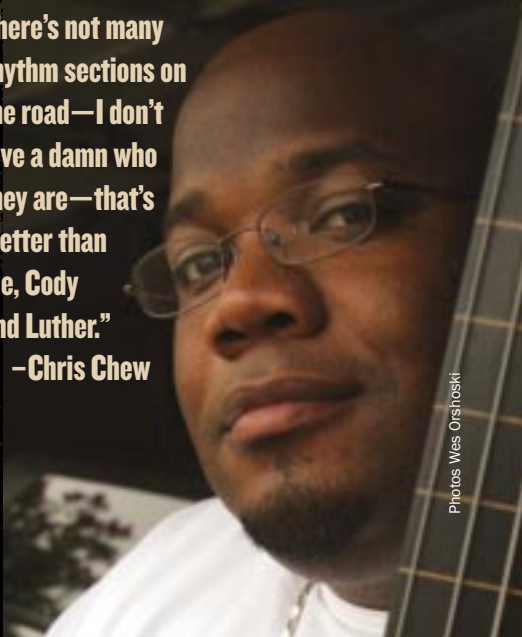
“All the people that pissed on *Polaris*, it’s fair enough, I understand that,” says Cody. “But there was just a lot of things that were happening at the same time that made that music happen. When we made *51 Phantom*, Luther hadn’t showed me a lot of these songs before we went in, and I felt a little blindsided. It’s a great record, and I love it, but there was so much happening, and there wasn’t enough communication. Dad was producing the record, and he was kind of forcing these songs. I just felt a little strong-armed, and I just got fed up, and I went to England to visit my girlfriend at the time, who was studying abroad.”

While there, Cody bumped into Oasis: “I remember telling Noel Gallagher one night, ‘I’m not really getting along with my brother.’ Liam was sitting right there and said, ‘You don’t fucking *need* him,’ got up and walked away. Noel said, ‘Don’t listen to him. This is the way it’s been for us: Don’t hold one day’s grudges. You’re gonna have a good day, then a bad day, and then a good day, but you basically have to let bygones be bygones.’ In hindsight, Noel was totally right and Liam was totally wrong, because I totally need Luther, there’s no doubt about it.”

Back home, Cody was “tearing shit up” in the Memphis ghettos. “I was doing a lot of

“There’s not many rhythm sections on the road—I don’t give a damn who they are—that’s better than me, Cody and Luther.”

—Chris Chew



Photos: Wes Orshoski

drugs and hanging out with a lot of rappers in neighborhoods where kids like me just don’t go—and I was staying there all the time.” It was there that he befriended Duwayne, whom he started recording at the Zebra Ranch, merely for fun at first. But Luther saw an opportunity to both experiment musically and mend his relationship with his brother. “Part of the reason I asked Duwayne to join the band,” he says, “was to help bring us closer together. We were at a real strained point, and, sure enough, it worked,” noting that if *Polaris* sounds disjointed, it’s because it was a completely collaborative album on which both Cody and Duwayne were given equal space. “I was trying to keep the band together.”

YES, THE MOVE WORKED, BUT ALMOST at a huge cost: Duwayne nearly drove Chew out of the band. Having driven a truck in the band’s early years, Chew began to look for a day job by the end of the *Polaris* tour, his memory of which is marred by Duwayne’s erratic behavior. After routinely getting wasted on drugs and booze, Burnside started missing soundchecks and floating on and offstage during shows, Chew says. “It was getting to where he was kind of like running the band, like it was his band.”

Eventually, Duwayne returned to a solo career, but not before he skipped an overseas tour and began asking for a bigger nightly

cut than Chew, who couldn’t be happier the band is back to a trio. “These past five years together, we’ve bonded together as a team. There’s not many rhythm sections on the road—I don’t give a damn who they are—that’s better than me, Cody and Luther. There’s not a rhythm section better. We just feel each other out. It’s something that we worked on, worked on, and worked on. It took a lot of years to get to this point.”

DOWN THE MUDDY DRIVE LEADING TO the Zebra Ranch, there’s a pair of trailers, one the Allstars H.Q., the other Lindsay and Jim’s home. Behind the latter, Jim’s tossed several of his old paintings—he finds them more interesting as they rot. Inside are scores of zebra-striped knick knacks and mounds of CDs and music magazines. The kitchen counter is lined with trophies from the Recording Academy acknowledging Jim’s many Grammy nominations. On the walls are pictures of Jim with some of his so-called “victims,” including Keith Richards and Bob Dylan, who during a visit a few years back, remarked, “*Jim*, ya got all a man could need out here,” on his way out back to the vine-covered barn housing his studio.

On the way in, you pass the old Stax piano, also rotting in the elements. “It originally came from a gay bar,” Jim says, pointing to the sparkly Formica.

Inside, he waxes poetic on the record-making process and old friends like Lee Baker, the motorcyclist racing Heavenward on the *Electric Blue Watermelon* cover. Holding a vinyl copy of the album, he’s glowing with pride. Luther explains that since childhood he’s wanted to make a truly collaborative album with his father, and on multiple levels, this is finally it. While Jim helmed *51 Phantom*, *Watermelon* is a shared vision. It digs much deeper.

“This goes back 25 years,” says Jim. “They started producing this record 25 years ago. For the boys, it’s either a jumping-off point, or it’s the lid on the box. One thing’s for sure: If we put this record out in the ‘70s, they’d be worshipped like *gods*.” ★

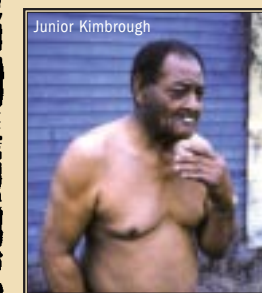
YOUR ELECTRIC BLUE DECODER

From Stagger Lee to Casey Jones, rock and blues music has a rich tradition of turning Joe Everyman into folk heroes. When writing the songs filling *Electric Blue Watermelon*, Luther Dickinson sought to create a few folk legends of his own. If you’re wondering who the hell Lee Baker is, here’s your answer:



Luther and Otha Turner

Otha “Gabe” Turner (1908–2003): Veteran bluesman/fife and drum master. Enormous influence on, friend of and collaborator with Luther Dickinson. Recommended listening: *Everybody Hollerin’ Goat* (1998, Birdman)

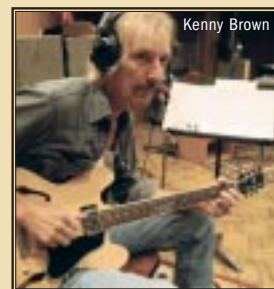


Junior Kimbrough

Junior Kimbrough (1930–1998): North Mississippi hill country blues icon. Fat Possum Records artist, owner of Junior’s juke joint. Recommended listening: *You Better Run: The Essential Junior Kimbrough* (2002, Fat Possum)

Lee Baker (1946–1996): Eccentric Memphis guitarist for Mudboy and the Neutrons (featuring papa Jim Dickinson) and Stax Records act Moloch. Killed mysteriously. Recommended listening: *Fresh Oil* (1997, Blues Works)

Kenny Brown (1953–): Mississippi-born guitarist schooled in the ways of the hill country blues by childhood neighbor Joe Callicot, longtime sideman for the recently departed R.L. Burnside. Recommended listening: *Stringray* (2003, Fat Possum)



Kenny Brown

Bobby Ray Watson (1943ish–): Local singer and scenester who helped call attention to Burnside, Mississippi Fred McDowell. *W/O*

Photos: Wyatt McSpaeder (Luther and Otha), Wes Orshoski (Kenny Brown)