

THE GREATEST SOUTHERN ACT OF THEM ALL?

Lynyrd Skynyrd may be hailed as the ultimate Southern rock band, but surely there's a case to be made for powerhouse four-piece **Blackfoot**. *Xavier Russell* chews the fat with guitarist and vocalist **Rickey Medlocke**...

SO ARE BLACKFOOT THE greatest Southern rock band of them all? That was a question *Rock Candy*'s editor Howard Johnson put to me recently. It's a toughie. There are so many great Southern bands out there and most would argue that Lynyrd Skynyrd are the kings of the genre, with a fine repertoire that includes such gems as 'Freebird', 'Saturday Night Special', 'Gimme Three Steps' and 'Sweet Home Alabama'. At the "Chicken Scratch Guitar" end of the scale Molly Hatchet might well get the nod with their classic 'Boogie No More'. And for the AOR fans amongst you, let's not forget .38 Special and their big hit 'Hold On Loosely'. Because people love their Suvvern so, it's natural that they will champion their heroes and do it passionately. For me, though, the one Southern band that stands head and shoulders above the rest is Blackfoot, from Jacksonville, Florida.

LED BY charismatic frontman and guitarist Rickey Medlocke, what I liked so much about Blackfoot was the fact that they had their own unique sound, which was significantly harder than the rest. This was due to the 'Foot's obsession with English bands like Free and Bad Company. So where did it all begin for the band? Well, Blackfoot started life as Fresh Garbage back in 1969. They were obviously rubbish at this point (*double groan* - Ed) but changed their name to become Blackfoot in 1970. Three of the band members were Native Americans. Rickey Medlocke has a mixture of

Lakota, Creek and Cherokee in his blood, while drummer Jakson Spires's folks were Cheyenne and Cherokee crossed. Bassist Greg T. Walker is an Eastern Muskogee Creek Native American, while poor old guitarist Charlie Hargrett is just a plain ol' white boy from New York City!

I'VE KNOWN Rickey for longer than I care to remember, and it's always a pleasure to catch up with him to chew the fat about Blackfoot. I began by asking him to take us back the old days and how the band got their name.

"In the early days we were huge fans of English heavy rock," he tells me. "First we studied the Free back catalogue, and then Bad Company came along, of course. So this type of music heavily influenced our band. I had blues roots too,

though, through my granddad Shorty Medlocke, and that naturally led me to some of my favourite guitar players like Jimi Hendrix, Eric Clapton, Jeff Beck and Jimmy Page. [*Shorty was a harmonica, banjo, guitar player and occasional song writing contributor to Blackfoot; including the superb 'Train Train'*]. Those guitarists had all been influenced by the American blues sound, and because my old man had raised me on that kind of music, it felt natural that I should play it as well. So when we were formulating the band we knew what we were going after, we knew what we wanted to achieve writing new material. Then we set about trying to figure out what we wanted to sound like and what we wanted to portray as an image.

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Rickey Medlocke live onstage at Monsters of Rock,
Castle Donington, 22 August 1981



Blackfoot photographed backstage at the Reading Festival, 28 August 1982. L-R: Jackson Spires (drums), Charlie Hargrett (guitar), Rickey Medlocke (vocals and guitar), Greg T. Walker (bass)

“There really weren’t any Native American bands *per se* at the time in the US. Jakson came up with the idea to call the band Blackfoot, and the minute the word came out of his mouth I turned to him and said, ‘That’s a freakin’ great idea, because it sounds heavy.’ It also sounded very organic, very native and very tribal.

“Because we were armed with a name and a Native American look people caught onto us straight away, right from when we did early club dates before we even had a deal. We were packing them in in the clubs in New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Connecticut and all the way down to the Carolinas, Texas and Florida. That led to us getting our first record deal with Island Records. We recorded the ‘No Reservations’ album at the famous Muscle Shoals Sound Studios in Alabama with Jimmy Johnson producing and it came out in 1975. It wasn’t unknown territory as I’d previously recorded some demos at Muscle Shoals with Lynyrd Skynyrd when I was the drummer in that band.”

SO DID you prefer playing drums to the guitar?

“I really enjoyed playing drums, but one of the reasons I opted out of Skynyrd was because I felt I wasn’t good enough or powerful enough to take the band to the next level. This was because I only have one lung. I have a respiratory illness that keeps me from retaining a lot of energy and oxygen, and you really need that for powerful drumming. So I told the band my reasons for leaving and they were cool with it. I left Skynyrd on good terms and finally rejoined the band again in 1996 as a lead guitarist.”

“WE PRIDED OURSELVES ON BEING PRETTY POWERFUL AND TRYING TO BE A LITTLE BIT AHEAD OF OUR TIME ON A LOT OF THINGS MUSICALLY.”

HOW DID you get on with the other Southern bands back then – acts like Molly Hatchet, .38 Special, the Outlaws and Doc Holliday?

“Well you know man, back then it was always kind of a friendly competition. Sure, we played shows and festivals together, but we didn’t really hang out with those bands a lot. I hung out more with the British and European groups than I ever did with the Southern bands. We used to love spending time with acts like the Scorpions, Iron Maiden and Deep Purple, and we got on really well with the guys in Motörhead.”

ROCK CANDY editor HoJo was talking to Eddie Clarke recently, and Eddie told him that you once tried to put a band together with him. Is that true?

“That’s a true story. Eddie and I talked about the possibility of putting a band together around the time Blackfoot disbanded, but sadly we just never got a chance to explore it for whatever reasons. I actually would have loved to see what Eddie and I could have come up with. The German group Accept even talked to me about being their lead singer at one time. Can you imagine that? But when I was offered the Accept gig, Blackfoot was doing really great, so I just couldn’t see myself leaving them at that time.”

HOW IMPORTANT was Europe in establishing Blackfoot’s reputation?

“In Blackfoot we changed from album to album. Europe – and the UK in particular – accepted us for that. When they first heard [1979’s] ‘Strikes’ in the States they just wanted us to stay exactly like that and weren’t



Lost in music. Rickey gets up the dusty end at the Hammersmith Odeon, London, 27 October 1980



really all that interested in seeing us evolve and try different things. In America you had to stick with the formula. And our record company, Atco, was really disappointed that we didn't. I always thought when you're in a band and you're growing and evolving, you get into trying different things. Looking back on it now, I always believed that the third album, 'Marauder', should have been the next record after 'Strikes'. Because we went back to a bit of a predictable formula with 'Tomcattin' [*the 1980 follow-up to 'Strikes'*], whereas in my opinion 'Marauder' was one of the best records we ever put out.

"If you listen to it you can tell we'd spent quite a bit of time in Europe. I used to be in London a lot, and that British influence, and touring with bands like AC/DC and Scorpions, had a lasting effect on us. We were on the full 'Back In Black' tour with AC/DC in America and then we did Donington with them in 1981. It was the Scorpions who first took us out on the road with them in the UK and Europe in 1982 and that's when we finally broke big over there. Then all of a sudden we were on the road with Iron Maiden for a whole tour. We were really killing it back then.

"What took us out of the ball game, though – and I can finally come out and say this – was the fact that the record label in America, Atco, and the record label in Europe had a big disagreement over us. We chose to come over and support the 'Tomcattin' album in Europe and that set the tone right there. Atco would much

rather we'd toured the States. I honestly believe that had the label not given us such a hard time the band could have been majorly, majorly huge over in Europe. It still pisses me off now just thinking about it."

IT SOUNDS to me like you deliberately recorded 'Highway Song Live' on your 1982 UK Tour rather than record the album across America. That must have pissed off the folks at Atco in the States even more, Rickey...

"Oh God yeah! And you know what, that's all we wanted to do. We wanted to record the live album just for Europe and that's what we did. That really got the record label's back up, and Atco in America got really incensed with us. Hey, what can you say? Nobody was helping us over in the States. So we just

said, 'You know what? Fuck it man, we'll go to Europe.' And that's exactly what we did."

ATCO GOT their revenge, though, when they demanded that Rickey and his not-so-merry crew totally change musical direction by including keyboards on their much loathed and misunderstood 'Siogo' album. So what went wrong, Rickey?

"Here's what was going on at that time in the States. Radio was changing very rapidly in the US and was going for more of an '80s pop rock sound with bands like Bon Jovi and all the big hair acts like RATT,

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