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'AMONG
THE
GHOSTS'

ROOTS ROCKERS LUCERO
BRING IT ALL HOME WITH
NEW DARK, FAMILY ALBUM

LUCERO BRINGS IT HOME WITH 'AMONG THE GHOSTS'

Lucero: (From left) Roy Berry, John C. Stubblefield, Rick Steff, Ben Nichols and Brian Venable. COURTESY OF DAN BALL



Memphis Music Beat
Bob Mehr
Memphis Commercial Appeal
USA TODAY NETWORK - TENN.

For Ben Nichols — singer, songwriter and front man of veteran Memphis roots rock band Lucero — life has become dramatically different over the last few years, bringing with it a marriage and his first child. As he explains how all this has affected him — personally and creatively — you can hear his daughter in the background running around getting ready to celebrate her 2nd birthday.

"It's cliché, but it changes your perspective on everything. I got a beautiful wife and a family, and I'm happier than I've ever been," he says. "The flip side of that coin is now I've got something to lose. Now the stakes are higher. And there's certain fear that I've never known before. Because I never had anybody else to care about that much."

That kind of emotional maturity and perspective colors Lucero's ninth and latest album, "Among the Ghosts," due out Aug. 3.

"It's a dark album actually, and maybe some of that family stuff worked its way into the album, some of that seriousness, some of those stakes," Nichols says. "But I've always liked songs with that kind of weight, that kind of darkness. This record definitely has got plenty of that on there."

After stints on major labels Universal and ATO, the band — Nichols, guitarist Brian Venable, bassist John C. Stubblefield, drummer Roy Berry and keyboardist Rick Steff — self-financed its latest album and will release it on their own Liberty & Lament imprint (which is distributed through Thirty Tigers). The disc arrives as Lucero marks 20 years together.

"We're still learning," says Nichols with a chuckle. "We're still trying to get it right. And each new record brings a few more lessons with it."

The making of "Among the Ghosts" brought changes to the band's working methodology. Lucero's last three LPs were cut at Midtown's Ardent studio with British producer Ted Hutt (Gunsight Anthem, Old Crow Medicine Show) behind the board. This time, the band elected to move to Sam Phillips Recording Service and co-produce the album themselves with local Grammy-winning engineer Matt Ross-Spang.

"Phillips is actually two doors down from our practice space," Nichols says. "We'd worked there before, with [legendary producer] Roland Janes back in the day. But this time, we wanted to take a different approach to how we made it or compared to the last few records, and do it in a little bit more of a laid-back Memphis environment with Matt, who's a Memphis kid."

"We knew we could do anything we wanted because there was no label, no outside producer. We didn't do any pre-production, and I didn't have any demos, really. There was very little advance planning. We just set up in the big room at Phillips, and I started playing guitar lines. And then band came in and we just played and saw what would stick and that became the foundation of the album."

Rather than work for several weeks straight, the band instead did a series of hit and run sessions between tours: 10 days to start, then three days here, another five days

there.

"It gave us a chance to absorb the songs, let them sink in and also change direction if we wanted to," Nichols says. "Seemed like a very natural way to make a record! — and a very fun way to be a musician in the studio."

The disc also marks the first project without sax man Jim Spake, who left after several years and records as part of an expanded Lucero lineup.

"Lucero has always been the kind of band that adapts to whatever is available at the time," Nichols says.

"When the horns were there, it was a lot of fun, and we were after that Stax Records soulful direction. But Spake didn't want to be on the road anymore, so we ended up being back to a five piece — the four original members and [keyboardist] Rick Steff, who's been with us for over 10 years now."

"That change necessitated a more stripped-back sound. Which is exactly the direction we needed to go. This is a rock 'n' roll record. It's more back to the original influences on the band — all that '80s alternative rock stuff that I grew up playing in cover bands. Some people might think it sounds more like old Lucero — I'm not sure about that. It's something familiar, but also unlike anything we've done before."

Later this summer the band will unveil an ambitious short film for the song "Long Way Back Home," directed by Nichols' brother Jeff, the award-winning auteur behind "Mud" and "Shotgun Stories."

"Jeff came down to Memphis for a couple weeks with his producer and

cinematographer and [actors] Michael Shannon and Paul Sparks from "Boardwalk Empire," and Garrett Hedlund and Scott McNairy," Nichols says. "They worked for free and worked their butts off to make this little film for 'Long Way Back Home.' It's a story song about three brothers — and I was thinking of Jeff's work when I wrote the lyrics for it. So it kinda came full circle."

Nichols notes there is a shared influence and inspiration between him and his younger cinematic sibling. "There's been some crossover there for sure. With this record, I was making a conscious effort to write from a perspective other than mine. To work on the craft of storytelling and expand my viewpoint — which is not easy. I was looking to a bunch of short story writers, like Larry Brown and Ron Rash, and filmmakers like my little brother. So he definitely influenced me. And, I dunno, I have a feeling it works both ways," he says, laughing.

With the record imminent, Lucero is ramping up to hit the road. Next week, on the day the album comes out, the band will headline a show at Red Rocks in Colorado. They'll follow that with a full U.S. tour in the fall. They will play their only Memphis date at the Memphis Music Fest at Shelby Farms Park in early October. A UK tour will follow in December — which means the band will skip its annual Christmas show at Minglewood Hall this year — before heading to the rest of Europe and Australia in early 2019.

"We continue to grow and make new fans, and that's a great thing for a band that's been together as long as we have," Nichols says. "We'd like to sell more records and play bigger shows, and it feels like that's happening. But we never thought we were the kind of band that was on the road to stardom. That was never really a goal. We're not rich and famous, but we can pay the bills and this is what we get to do for a living. So we feel like we've struck gold already."

At a glance

Lucero's "Among the Ghosts" is out Aug. 3 on Liberty & Lament/Thirty Tigers.

For more information, visit Luceromusic.com.

