

Down Home on Dixie Trail

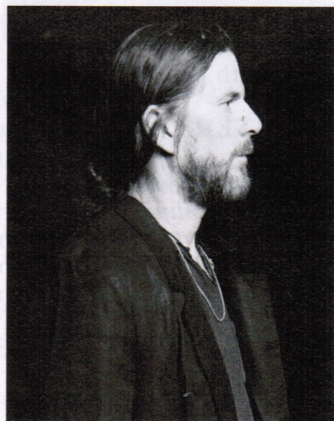
The veteran West Coast guitarist and producer decamps to Nashville on a truly organic journey to something familiar.

By JONATHAN WILSON

I WAS SHACKED UP IN some ancient hotel in Eastern Europe, walking around the old town between writing songs. That evening—as I was watching all the people smoke and drink their pints, avoiding meat dishes and only finding low-grade European quality sushi with cream cheese and sugary soy sauce on top—it came to me plain as day. Something was missing. I was longing for the old simple days, growing up on a street called Dixie Trail—the feeling of my family and my small North Carolina town environs. Where was I? How did I get here to this old world? My hometown was so far from here, so culturally distant from this Latvian happy hour. I realized that I needed to reunite with my history, to somehow touch it. I needed to be with my people again and to join the musical conversation of Western North Carolina. I began writing the song “69 Corvette”: “Put on your jacket we are gone/ Need an adventure and I feel like leaving/ Been in this hotel room too long/ The marble prison requires housekeeping—so long.”

Eventually, I began compiling tunes and went to play an NPR radio show alongside the great Steve Earle. He said, “Go to Nashville,” and boom, it hit me like a ton of bricks. It took a day to marinate but visions of Pig Hargus, Charlie McCoy and Lloyd Green came into my head. Hank Wilson’s back! I remember thinking the next day, “Nashville—that’s it.” I knew that session culture was still popping the fuck off in Nashville, and I was going get to the bottom of it, cutting some tracks along the way.

I called my old buddy Patrick Sansone from Wilco: “Patrick, lead me to the real Nashville. Does it exist still?” Patrick has known me for almost two decades and laid it all out. “Yes, we will cut at Cowboy Jack Clements’ A room,” he said. “We will use Russ Pahl, Jon Radford, Kenny Vaughan, Dennis Crouch and Jim Hoke. It will be great.” I brought my LA piano playing pal, Drew Erickson. We booked the studio for a week, eight weeks from the call. I used the time in-between to finish the tunes and meditate in my kitchen in Topanga Canyon. With only an acoustic, I imagined that I was in the studio with an upright bass, pedal steel and hot telecaster licks. I knew I



wanted chromatic harmonica, bass harmonica, woodwinds and fiddle.

I knew I needed an amazing fiddle player and thought of Mark O’Connor. Somehow the sessions and details all fell in place. I still saw myself as part producer, but mostly wanted to focus on being the artist. I saw Patrick as my co-producer. I pictured myself in the booth, listening to the band with my eyes closed—changing the

tempo, groove, keys and feel.

I was ready. My trusty engineer Dave Cerminara came with me. We slept at Jenny Lewis’ Nashville Palace (thanks JLew), procured a bottle or three of mezcal (not easy in the Bible Belt) and we were off to the races. I brought a stash of Cali weed in my bag, about seven guitars, a few fuzz pedals we never used and two Upton 251 microphones for me. We recorded 23 songs in about six days with the band and then we booked a few other classic Nashville studios for overdubs. I was really going for Leon Russell Acid mellotron in a few spots, so we rented an old M400. Mark O’Connor blew everyone’s mind; word quickly spread that he was back in town doing a recording session for the first time in 25 years. We captured some magic as a collective. I knew from the first playback day that this vibe was right.

The band was everything I imagined an A-list Nashville session band to be and more. We were cutting things so fast, moving on a dime. I questioned if I was I ready to keep live vocals. But, there proved to be no time better time to try than after 22 months of touring, singing nearly every night.

I have been a part of the exponential collective consciousness in a recording studio before, doing things with multiple energies that a single human could never do, but I had never experienced that with my own music. Usually, it was the opposite experience: a musician/producer who could play everything tricking you into thinking it was a band. After all, I had learned from the best: Stevie, Prince, Macca,

Kravitz. (Yes that’s right, Lenny Kravitz.) Many people don’t know how wicked of a multi-instrumentalist Kravitz is. Check out the drums and bass on *Let Love Rule*—the whole record. He’s a huge influence on me, a one-man studio band aspiration. (OK, perhaps I’m a bit of a control freak.) But now I wanted something different, and we did just that. After all the music was captured, I fixed a few lyrics and overdubbed a bit in Topanga—a shaker here, tambo there, BV here, triangle there. And I began to realize we had finally made a document—“Don’t fuck with it, it is human.” That is the basis of *Dixie Blur*.

Then came the footage. I sent an email out to my dad and mom in North Carolina requesting some old family photos. What came in was an onslaught of memories: childhood videos, early guitar wanks, multiple Battle of the Bands victories (that’s right, bitches) and a truly organic journey to something familiar. It wasn’t something that I ever I imagined during my endless California dream; a record hewn from the fabric of my upbringing—the hills of North Carolina, spilling a few hours over on I-40 West to the sweet sounds of Music City. The whole thing has been cathartic. I love the music; I’m proud of it. I love this band—they are absolutely epic. I love that it fits into this endless, wild thread of distinctly American music. I hope you enjoy it too. **C**

Jonathan Wilson released his latest album, Dixie Blur, in March. The guitarist/producer, who is also part of Roger Waters’ ensemble, was on the road with his Nearly Nashville band this spring before his tour was cut short due to concerns stemming from the novel coronavirus.

