

# Blues Joint

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### **James Mathus**

A blues record as raw as James Mathus Knockdown Society's *Stop and Let the Devil Ride* [Fast Horse] could only be made by a man who just stepped out of a time machine. Known mostly for his vaudevillian take on hot jazz with his former band, the Squirrel Nut Zippers, James "Jimbo" Mathus returned to his Mississippi roots in 1997 with *Play Blues for Rosetta*, a tribute to Delta legend Charley Patton. In 2001, Mathus landed a dream gig as second guitarist for Buddy Guy's band, and he played on Guy's two subsequent recordings: the explosive *Sweet Tea* and the all-acoustic *Blues Singer*.

### ***What brought you back to Mississippi music after your stint in the Zippers?***

Mississippi is my home. That's where my heart is. I moved to North Carolina when I was in my early 20s, because, although Mississippi is a great place with great people, it's hard to make a living there. Thankfully, I had some success with the Zippers, so I made enough money to visit home frequently. It was during one of my visits in 1995 that I met Luther Dickinson from the North Mississippi Allstars, and that really brought me back home. Finally, I found out that my old babysitter, Rosetta, was Charley Patton's daughter, and Charley Patton is my all-time hero. Nobody knew! A small Japanese label had put out a Patton record, and one day, this tour bus pulled up in front of her house, and all these Japanese people got out and gave her a check.

### ***It's strange that nobody knew about her.***

That's the funny thing about Mississippi, man. It has spawned a whole lot of music—and artists like John Lee Hooker, Muddy Waters, Ike Turner, Son House, and Charley Patton—but the people there don't acknowledge, or even respect it.

### ***You said that Luther Dickinson "brought you back home." How so?***

Luther and I have been partners in crime ever since we met. He showed me Mississippi Fred McDowell's tuning and got me started playing slide. The Allstars have made a great impact on people, because they're playing this great, undiscovered art form that's so raw, so pure, and so close to the bone.

### ***Can you detail the McDowell tuning?***

It's open-D, or [low to high] D, A, D, F#, A, D. To play it right, the rhythm has to be real solid, and the bass is on the upbeat of the two and the four. I don't use any picks—just my thumb and third finger, and I phrase like I have two drumsticks in my hand. Most people fingerpick by plucking the bass note with the thumb on the downbeat of one.

***Do you feel you bring something new to the legacy of the great Mississippi bluesmen?***

I've got my own experience, so I don't ape their words. I won't sing unless I know it's true, and I know what I'm talking about. Musically, I bring a country element to the blues. I love Charley Patton and Jimmie Rodgers, so I like to mix up the white and the black side of the coin. I've also got a few signature things, such as the riff I came up with for "She Got the Devil in Her" from Sweet Tea. I really like mixing a major third with a minor third inside the same riff. I've based my whole band on that sound.

***What makes North Mississippi blues music sound distinctly different from the music that originates from other areas?***

It's all about a driving riff. You don't spend a lot of time on arrangements, you just fire it up and go.

***What's the best state of mind to be in to really nail the style?***

Well, I just dig in as hard as I can. But being relaxed while you're playing is the best thing you can do. Just be in the moment, play from the heart, and relax.

—Jimmy leslie