

Endless Boogie

Former Squirrel Nut Zipper Jimbo Mathus gets back to basics

By John Nova Lomax

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Oh, we got both kinds of music in here," said the barmaid to Elwood Blues. "Country *and* western." That line from *The Blues Brothers* got a lot of yuks, but that hillbilly barmaid was right. There *is* a difference. Country music and western music sound the same only to Yankees and other provincial sorts. Country is Roy Acuff, western is Bob Wills. Hank Williams and George Jones are country artists, while Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings are western.

Similarly, just because their originators were Southern blacks, blues and boogie music are often lumped together. Most blues musicians play a little of both, with a few exceptions. John Lee Hooker, for example, was all boogie all the time -- he never played what you could call a traditional blues in his life. Unlike the country-western dichotomy, there is no regional quality to blues versus boogie. While there's as good a case for the blues having been invented in Texas as in Mississippi, boogie would seem to have almost certainly been invented in the Delta.

Everybody knows the blues when they hear 'em, but what is this thing called "boogie"? For rockabilly legend Charlie Feathers, who heard it played by a young Junior Kimbrough in the 1950s, it was "the beginning and the end of music."

Former Squirrel Nut Zipper and current solo artist Jimbo Mathus finishes the Feathers quote before I do, and adds, "That's one of those quotes that the more you think about it, the truer it is."

But still, we haven't answered the question. What is boogie?

"One chord is all you need, and you need the African influence, and then float those lyrics in there and keep it going," Mathus answers. Like that of Comets coach and fellow small-town Mississippian Van Chancellor, Mathus's accent is so Dixified that the word "accent" fails to suffice. "Southern brogue" is a better description.

It was the recordings of a third rural Mississippian that inspired Mathus to leave the Squirrel Nut Zippers and fire up his current band, the Knockdown Society. Mathus says Charlie Patton is his creative font, in the way he approaches both lyric-writing and guitar-playing.

"To electrify Patton was my initial idea," he says. "It just got a hold on me back in

'94, '95, and that's what kind of got me out of Squirrel Nut Zippers. The Zippers was a great opportunity, and I just had to ride that thing out, because there's not that many times where you get in a band and people are throwing money at you. And plus we made a lot of people happy, so it was a good thing for a lot of reasons. But then I always had the Knockdown Society as kinda my shrink, my way to deal with all that crap. And of course now it's my main thing, and I'm real happy about that."

There's plenty of reasons to be real happy with his new album, *Stop and Let the Devil Ride*, a mesmerizing and narcotic collection of ten originals and a cover each of Otis Rush and Booba Barnes. The last thing you would confuse this album with is a Jonny Lang record -- there's not a hint of Stevie Ray- or Slow Hand-worship in the proceedings.

Mathus deifies older gods. While Patton might be the Abraham in Mathus's pantheon, the Moses -- the guy who took him to the promised land -- was Buddy Guy. Mathus worked with Guy on *Sweet Tea*, the elder man's nod to north Mississippi blues, and later toured as a second guitarist with him. The kid got quite an education, both in the studio and on the road.