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Pickin' country, singin' blues

Jimbo Mathus mixes it up: originals and covers, new stuff and old school

By **Bob Mehr**

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April 13, 2007

When Jimbo Mathus was trying to come up with a name for his new country band, he immediately seized on The Starlite Wranglers as a moniker.

The original Starlite Wranglers were a fairly significant footnote in Memphis music history. Led by nasal-voiced singer Doug Poindexter, they released one poor-selling single on Sun: the hillbilly dance number "My Kind of Carrin' On" in 1954. But two of the group's members, guitarist Scotty Moore and bassist Bill Black, would go on to far greater success backing up another vocalist, an unusual looking 19-year-old truck driver.

"I was sorta thinking if I started a country-western band in Memphis called the Starlite Wranglers, maybe I'd find my Elvis," says Mathus, laughing.

Although primarily known for his run with '90s swing-roots eclectics the Squirrel Nut Zippers and for his more recent blues-based records with Knockdown South, Mathus' new project is the fulfillment of a lifelong relationship with country music.

"I grew up picking a lot of country," says the Mississippi native and Midtown resident. "And I've always written country songs. Even on my so-called blues records, there's always some country stuff on there."

In 2005, Mathus finally cut a full demo of his country material and passed it around to a few pals. "A friend of mine in Little Rock heard it and he said that if I would start a honky-tonk band that he would buy me a real country-western Nudie suit -- embroidered, with rhinestones, all that," says Mathus. "So I did, and he did. That's what started this whole mess."

Mathus' new honky-tonk outfit -- and his Nudie suit -- made their debut with a well-received gig at the Gibson Showcase Lounge in March; the group will begin a five-week Wednesday night residency at the club on April 25.

The Starlite Wranglers lineup includes a talented and rotating cast of regional musicians such as Arkansas guitarist Matt Pierce, Mississippians Ken Hart on guitar, Darren Dortin on drums, Will Dawson on accordion, and Memphians Paul Taylor on bass and Eric Lewis on pedal steel. "It's a pretty good-sized band," says Mathus. "What we call the 'folk orchestra.' Basically, throwing everything in but the kitchen sink."

Mathus will also be adding some star power to his weekly Gibson sets. His most recent concert, this past Wednesday, included an appearance by Sun veteran Sonny Burgess. Future shows will feature guest spots by other local notables. "We're gonna get some legends, both old and young, to come every week and do some country songs," says Mathus.

The band's weekly sets will mix Mathus' originals with a healthy helping of twang-tinged classics -- and he plans to emphasize a collection of locally connected covers. "We're gonna lean on some of that Memphis country stuff you don't get to hear a lot," says Mathus. "We're peeling off and doing some Charlie Feathers, Carl Perkins, some of Jim Dickinson's country stuff, some things by Dan Penn," says Mathus, citing the latter's rarely heard 1973 gem "Tearjoint."

"That's one of my all-time favorites and I've never heard anybody cover it," he says. "Probably 'cause it's got so many chords in it. But we actually took the time to learn it."

The run of Gibson shows will provide a good warmup for the Wranglers album Mathus is planning to record this summer. His most recent CD, released last year, *Old School Hot Wings*, was an acoustic jug band foray. Since then, Mathus has kept himself busy on a number of musical fronts. He's toured the blues circuit with Knockdown South, played guitar on Amy LaVere's forthcoming album *anchors and anvils*, and written material with Luther Dickinson for the North Mississippi Allstars



A.J. Wolfe/The Commercial Appeal

"I'm always doing like 10 things at once," says Jimbo Mathus of The Starlite Wranglers -- who's toured with Knockdown South.

next record.

This past winter, Mathus reunited with the Squirrel Nut Zippers for the group's first shows since 2001. "There was so much interest for us to do some shows from promoters, we kinda test drove it back in February with some dates up the East Coast," he says. "They were so successful that they're going to book us all through the summer and do festivals.

"I had forgotten how much people like that band," he adds. "People really have a lot of great memories about the [Zippers]. So many people met their wives or got pregnant, or brought their grandmother to our show. We really did touch a lot of people's lives." Mathus adds that while a new Zippers record is a possibility, nothing has been discussed.

Since last fall, Mathus has also been busy re-launching his Delta Recording Service studio. Originally founded in 2003 in Clarksdale, Miss., the studio produced a number of notable projects. "We did Elvis Costello down there, a lot of blues records, some Memphis underground stuff, too -- we did a South Filthy record, a King Louie record," says Mathus.

In early 2006, Mathus closed shop in Clarksdale and reopened several months later in Como. While the location is new, the studio's aesthetic remains the same. "I'm using real old recording techniques and gear -- vintage ribbon mics and '50s preamps. We're talking Sun-era, Chess-era equipment. It's just a real raw setup."

That old-school approach hasn't slowed business. Oxford's Sweet Tea Studios owner Dennis Herring -- whose production credits include Costello, Cracker and Modest Mouse, among others -- recently brought Swedish garage rockers The Hives into Mathus' digs for a session.

"I've been working with Dennis on projects for the past two or three years," says Mathus, who met Herring while playing guitar on Buddy Guy's Grammy-winning *Blues Singer* album. "He'll bring certain bands he thinks will get a kick, or some cool material, out of coming to my joint," says Mathus. "He'll bring 'em down to loosen 'em up, or tighten 'em up, whatever the case may be. He wanted The Hives to get back in the woods a little bit more for their record."

Before Mathus and the Starlite Wranglers begin their run at the Gibson, his other band, Knockdown South, will take the stage Saturday at the Juke Joint Festival in Clarksdale. He'll then bounce back between Memphis for gigs and Como for more recording work. "I'm always doing like 10 things at once anyway," Mathus says of his schedule, "so that's sorta normal for me."

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More info:

Music preview

Jimbo Mathus and Knockdown South

9 p.m. Saturday at Messenger's in Clarksdale, Miss., for the Juke Joint Festival. Wristbands \$10

Jimbo Mathus and The Starlite Wranglers

8 p.m. at the Gibson Showcase Lounge on April 25 and May 2, 9, 16 and 23. \$5.

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