

James Mathus: "Unzipped"

by Hal Horowitz, Blues Revue Magazine

The frontman of the Squirrel Nut Zippers talks about his new blues album, his experience recording with Buddy Guy, and the complexities of finding a new audience.

Those looking for the rooty-toot-toot jump style of the Squirrel Nut Zippers will need to be patient. Keyboardist Tom Maxwell, singer Katharine Whalen, violinist Andrew Bird, and guitarist/founder James Mathus have splintered temporarily, freeing the members to explore different musical paths.

Mathus' solo career, bubbling under the surface for the past five years, has recently exploded in a volley of deep, hardcore blues with his sophomore album *National Antiseptic*. His solo debut, 1997's *Songs for Rosetta*, was a benefit for Charley Patton's daughter Rosetta, who was Mathus' nanny when he was a child. Only moderately successful commercially, it nonetheless raised thousands of dollars for the woman and was a critical favorite. It also established Mathus as a legitimate Delta blues artist.

Three years later, Mathus was fortuitously tapped for the rhythm-guitar spot on Buddy Guy's dramatic (and Grammy-nominated) revival *Sweet Tea*. That experience, in addition to a longstanding friendship with Luther and Cody Dickinson of the North Mississippi Allstars and their famous dad Jim Dickinson, who co-produced *Antiseptic*, led him back to the edgy sound exemplified by the Fat Possum stable of artists.

Like the Allstars' first disc, *National Antiseptic* is an uncompromising example of the revitalization of what Mathus describes as the "raw juke-joint sound." Fifteen cuts slosh in the Mississippi mire as Mathus plays guitar hero with a wicked tone - one derived as much from R.L. Burnside, Junior Kimbrough, and T-Model Ford (who opened for the Zippers) as from Creedence Clearwater Revival's John Fogerty, though Mathus says the latter had little effect on his sound. "I mostly get my influence from the original generation," he explains. "I go to the source."

National Antiseptic was compiled from years' worth of recordings. "I had done demos since *Songs for Rosetta*. Every time I got three or four songs, I'd get a band together in a studio somewhere and cut them. I sent Mammoth a collection of 30 or 40 [cut since 1997], and these were the ones they picked." The album's noncommercial sound is due in part to the lack of any postproduction sweetening. "Some of the tracks are just me

and the drummer in my attic," says Mathus. "They just stayed as they were."

Not surprisingly, Mathus tackles a Charley Patton composition, nailing one of his best-known tracks, "Shake It and Break It." But he finds rearranging these tunes difficult. "His songs are hard. I'll work on one for a year before I'll even try to put something down. The songs aren't easy to internalize. I could copy them verbatim, but I want to add something. I still struggle with trying to bring more of his material out because it is already pretty complete."

The uncut blues, gospel, hillbilly, and rockabilly of *Antiseptic* is light years removed from the good-timey Zippers, and those who come to see Mathus live aren't anticipating a solo version of "Hell." "The response has been real good," he states matter-of-factly in an easygoing drawl. "Nobody that comes to see me is expecting something that I'm not doing. They've heard the record and know it's a different group with a different sound."

At least some of the inspiration for *Antiseptic* came from the *Sweet Tea* sessions, a turning point in Mathus' career. "That came about through Ethan Allen, a producer out of New Orleans I worked with in the Squirrel Nut Zippers. Dennis Herring, who produced the Buddy Guy record, called friends looking for a second guitarist. Allen knew what I was into and it ended up that I was the right man for the job."

The ad-hoc band had plenty of time to nail the sound Herring was looking for. "We had about a week before Buddy even got there where we rehearsed every day about 10 to 12 hours. We had arrangements and songs worked out, and then we worked with him for another week. The sessions were long and there was a lot of music played. The producer was going to get the takes he wanted and he made us work for it. He made us *all* work for it. And I think it sounds it on the record. I'm real proud of it."

Interestingly, much of Mathus' album was already finished when he headed into the Guy recording, but preparations for *Sweet Tea* brought a new appreciation for the Fat Possum style. "I had been listening more and more to T-Model, Junior Kimbrough, and R.L. Burnside. Dennis Herring sent me a CD with the original versions of the songs, and he wanted me to come in with a good idea of how to translate them to a band. So it made me dig in on that material, take the format that they were working in, but clarify it so it made sense to me and I could convey that to the band. It got me into the groove even heavier and got a formula for me that worked. After that record, I said, 'I gotta get a trio together and do this. I'm tired of waiting on it.' I had the music I was working on already, so I cut some more stuff like 'Snake Drive,' 'Boogie,' and 'Take a Ride With Me.' Actually, I have a whole set of music that I lean on now, and the live show is not

even on the CD. It's mostly hard electric boogie."

Mathus and his Knockdown Society have expanded their gritty sound along with the set list, deepening the intensity as they head out to open a month of dates for Buddy Guy. "I just added a Hammond player," Mathus says. "It's been a trio for about a year, but I've got a four-piece now and I'm really happy with that. The response has been great and the band is really coming together."