

JASON & THE SCORCHERS

HALCYON TIMES

With the release of HALCYON TIMES, Jason & The Scorchers have accomplished an extremely rare feat: almost 30 years into their career they have made a rock 'n' roll record every bit as dynamic and mind-blowing as their vintage work. Very few rock bands can make this claim. Jason & The Scorchers can, they should, and they do.

The band's story essentially starts in the late 1970s. Warner E. Hodges, the son of country musicians Blanche and Ed Hodges, was living in Nashville after his dad's retirement from the military. Warner had played drums as a boy for his parents' USO bands. He knew country music inside out. However, as a teenage rebel, he got hooked on early AC/DC and the first wave of punk rockers, waving that flag with high-decibel pride. In Nashville's schmaltzy country pop atmosphere of that time, he stood out like a pig in a perfume shop. He played in punk and rock bands with his friends Perry Baggs and Jeff Johnson, two other tough street rockers in a genteel Southern town. They made a lot of noise but were essentially ignored outside of Nashville's tiny rock community.

That all changed July 4, 1981, when a skinny, fresh-faced farm boy arrived in Nashville like thousands before him: with nothing but a van filled with music equipment and a heart filled with dreams. Jason Ringenberg really was the son of an Illinois hog farmer, and he really did grow up walking the Rock Island Line railroad tracks that bordered their farm. He played in country and psychobilly bands like Shakespeare's Riot and The Catalinas in Illinois, but felt compelled to move to Nashville, that Mecca that eventually draws in all dreamers. His vision was to combine traditional American roots music, especially country, with a modern punk rock energy and ethos. Little did he know just how dramatically that vision would be realized.

As fate would have it, he got an apartment behind Cantrell's, Nashville's only club that allowed punk rockers through the door at that time. Immediately he met Jack Emerson, then a Vanderbilt college student. Ringenberg explained his vision to Emerson, who instantly committed to this earnest young man's idea, offering to play bass and to help put a band together. In two weeks they did just that, christening the band Jason & The Nashville Scorchers. With Emerson on bass, a law student on guitar, and a Sex Pistols tribute singer on drums, they found impressive gigs from the start. Their first was opening for Carl Perkins, their second opening for a young Athens band named R.E.M.

That version of Jason & The Nashville Scorchers was absolutely horrible, but Hodges and Johnson came to one of the shows and sensed a kindred spirit in Ringenberg. When that first band fell apart, Johnson offered to take up the bass, and Hodges joined on guitar. (Emerson moved over to manager duties, eventually going on to become a major music executive in the Americana world.) Hodges then brought in his high school buddy Baggs and the epic band was born, playing its first show on New Years Eve 1981. In a matter of weeks the pioneers were packing rooms around Nashville and had released their first 45, the four-song RECKLESS COUNTRY SOUL EP on Emerson's Praxis label. Many point to this as the first true cowpunk/alt-country record in music history. After its release the band traveled the country relentlessly in Ringenberg's 1971 decrepit Econoline, assaulting any stage that would carry them.

Jason & The Scorchers' shows revolutionized the way people thought of rock 'n' roll and country music. Lives were changed. This was 1982, a time when playing a country song while wearing a Mohawk or shaved head could land the performer in the hospital. No one ever went away from a Scorchers show without having strong opinions about it. People either wanted to feed them or fight them, and both extremes happened regularly. There was something radically holy about what they did, maintaining the integrity of country while attacking the music with an energy equal to the wildest punk rock bands. R.E.M became huge fans and the bands toured together. People as disparate as Steve Jones from the Sex Pistols, Bill Wyman of The Stones, or Bill Golden from The Oak Ridge Boys came to their shows. The Nashville Scorchers would play The Bluegrass Inn one night and then open for Circle Jerks the next. Everything raced ahead at breakneck speed. In 1983 they released their landmark record FERVOR, a six-song EP that "rewrote the history of rock 'n' roll in the South" (Jimmy Guterman in Rolling Stone). The record earned them EP of the Year in The Village Voice and The New York Times. Folks began to take those crazed hillbillies seriously.

After a 1983 California run of dates, a major label bidding war erupted over the band, and they chose Capitol/EMI as their home. FERVOR was reissued with a cover of Bob Dylan's ABSOLUTELY SWEET MARIE in January 1984, and the band went to Europe, performing to explosive crowds. One writer from the UK's prestigious New Music Express called their Marquee show "one of the Top Five gigs of all time."

Their classic LOST AND FOUND followed in 1985. The songwriting in the band had matured, and the roadwork had honed the band's musicianship to a new high. Yes, Hodges, Johnson and Baggs were street guys, punk rockers, and Ringenberg was straight off the farm, but their playing was incendiary. They were from Music City, by God! Hodges was being talked about as a rock savior, a true guitar hero in the classic old school mold of Keef and Angus, but with country chops to sweeten the bravado. WHITE LIES, co-written by drummer Baggs, got on MTV. Folks were beginning to say they were the best band on the planet, the "Next Big Thing."

The glory, warranted as it was, turned out to be fleeting. Rock 'n' roll excess, record company problems, and corporate radio's resistance to the band began to drain the magic. STILL STANDING came out in 1986 to very mixed reviews, very little airplay, and a broken buzz. Johnson left the band in mid-1987 and the band was redlined by EMI.

Hodges, Ringenberg, and Baggs gamely struggled on, putting together a five-piece rock band with Ken Fox on bass and future super sideman Andy York on utility instruments and second guitar. They landed a deal with A&M and released THUNDER AND FIRE in late 1989, after spending two years writing and recording it. The record was the band's worst seller of the decade. To put nails in the coffin, Baggs developed severe diabetes while they toured with Bob Dylan. A&M unceremoniously dropped the band, after which Hodges called up Ringenberg to say he couldn't go on with it, and that the band should call it quits. Ringenberg didn't argue. Everyone parted ways, but interestingly there was little bitterness between them, an amazing thing considering all they had been through.

Three years later, Johnson floated the idea of reuniting the original band for a tour. He talked Hodges and Ringenberg into it, and they hit the road again in early 1993. At that time the "alternative country" was the New Cool Thing. Bands like Wilco, Son Volt, and The Bottle Rockets were having respectable commercial success, whilst acknowledging JATS as the pioneers and groundbreakers of the movement. The Country Music Hall of Fame included a permanent exhibit of the band in 1994. Folks were talking about them again, and venues were filling up. They signed with Mammoth and proceeded to have another productive run in the '90s, releasing *A BLAZING GRACE* (1995), *CLEAR IMPETUOUS MORNING* (1996), and *MIDNIGHT ROADS AND STAGES SEEN* (1998). *MIDNIGHT ROADS* had Kenny Ames performing admirably on bass, after Johnson departed in 1996 on amicable terms to pursue his film making dream, permanently leaving the music business.

At the start of the new millennium, the band was comfortably doing occasional shows, although there was no drive to record new material. JATS suffered a significant blow in 2003 when Baggs decided to leave the band for health reasons and to pursue his solo persona. Ringenberg was stunned: "With both Perry and Jeff gone, I had no stomach for it anymore. I felt that we were milking the legacy, a shadow of our past. I was just waiting for a good excuse to retire JATS." For the next few years the band would do an odd show here and there, with Fenner Castner doing a heroic job filling in for Baggs, but JATS was slowly fading to gray. Hodges joined Dan Baird's *Homemade Sin* and did some solo work, whilst Ringenberg hit a seam as kid's music star Farmer Jason.

Hodges, to his eternal credit, kept the band from folding. "I don't know if it was 'keeping the band alive' as much as feeling like we still had something to say," he said. "I still felt all these years later, that we had a great record in us. JATS just wasn't over, in my head. I felt we had a bunch more music in us."

As Hodges was expanding his musical network, playing with *Homemade Sin* and *The Stacie Collins Band*, he quietly began laying the groundwork for a new record and band. When Ames left the band in early 2008, Hodges worked in Al Collins, bassist and band leader of the *Stacie Collins Band*. The new bassist turned out to be perfect for them. In Hodges' words, "I asked Al to join the band because he 'got' the older records, and knew JATS' place in music history. He is also the easiest guy in the world to get along with, on top of the fact he's a monster bass player." They toured Europe in May 2008, this time with Swedish musician Pontus Snibb on drums. The new Snibb/Collins rhythm section turned out to be a godsend, giving the band a dramatic new energy and rock solid groove. The tour was an unabashed success, and the mojo was rolling off the stage once more.

That summer the Americana Music Association bestowed upon the band its 2008 Lifetime Achievement Award for Performance, further stoking the buzz. Momentum grew, with more good fortune coming their way. One day at lunch, Ringenberg and JATS manager Deb Whittington determined that economically there was no way they could afford to cut a record. As they were leaving the restaurant to tell Hodges that the dream was over, they ran into the Music Producers Institute's founder Steve Fishell, who on the spot offered to give them studio time in return for allowing people to attend the sessions. In a moment, destiny did a 180-degree turn. Immediately songs fell out of the sky at an astounding rate. They started writing in December and by late February the songs were finished. In one week they wrote ten songs, with Tommy Womack, Ginger from *The Wildhearts*, and Dan Baird all camping out at Hodges' home to help the cause. Friends came out of the woodwork to lend a hand. Baird volunteered to play rhythm guitar so Hodges and Ringenberg could "do their thing." The band went into the studio in early April, filled with fire and hope. Brad Jones co-produced the record with Hodges. For the first time in their history, Jason and the Scorchers recorded the basic tracks live in the studio, with real folks actually watching and contributing to the vibe.

The resulting album, *HALCYON TIMES*, speaks for itself. This record is no "return to their roots." It is instead a creative leap forward, showing the band at its peak, not on some sort of self-absorbed nostalgia trip. *MOONSHINE GUY* opens the record, full of bravado and bravery, driven by a character who "yells and he roars / likes The Stones, hates the Doors." Whilst *MONA LEE* is certainly as exciting as anything the band has ever recorded, but it's hard to pick a standout track on the record - they are all that strong. Hodges' guitar work has never been better, full of style and inspired originality, while Ringenberg rocks like he is still 18, leaping off the edge of the world, laughing while doing it. Snibb and Collins supply that elusive, magic rock 'n' roll groove, full of energy but grounded in confident unhurried power. Brad Jones, no stranger to the studio, says of Snibb, "Pontus might be the best rock 'n' roll drummer I have ever worked with." However, like all classic rock records, *HALCYON TIMES* has more than enough moments of sublime grace to balance out the hormones. Listen to the 12-string guitar on *LAND OF THE FREE*. It's like stepping into a Steinbeck novel. Or put on headphones and let *MOTHER OF GREED* take you down a road that winds from northern Wales in 1910 to Birmingham, Alabama, in 2009, the protagonists careening from one set of "arms of need" into another. It's that kind of song, literary without being pretentious. In terms of production, it's hard to imagine a better team than Hodges and Brad Jones. They succeeded in making a JATS record that captures the live energy of the band, with enough added ear candy to keep you coming back for repeated listens. This release almost demands multiple listening experiences; there is so much to take in.

Fourteen songs deep, covering a staggering range of emotions and style, *HALCYON TIMES* shows Jason & The Scorchers not only celebrating thirty years of creating music, but still expanding that creative envelope, still in command of their legacy. You can bet your life that in concert they will deliver with equal majesty. Catch their shows as they continue to find themselves out on that Lost Highway.

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