

BLACKBERRY SMOKE

Charlie Starr: vocals, guitar
Paul Jackson: guitar, vocals
Richard Turner: bass, vocals
Brit Turner: drums

"We don't pull any punches about calling this Southern rock because that's what it is," says Blackberry Smoke front man Charlie Starr. "It's what we think new Southern rock should sound like."

Starr, guitarist Paul Jackson, bassist Richard Turner and drummer Brit Turner are indeed sons of the South, but their considerable chops recall The Swanee River Boys and The Stanley Brothers as well as Lynyrd Skynyrd and The Allman Brothers.

"We love all kinds of music our CD collection in the van is extremely diverse," Charlie continues. "You can hear a bluegrass influence on our harmonies. We all grew up listening to that kind of music, and I started singing in church, so I think a little gospel flavor filters through, too. We like to mix it up and take some chances."

Still, discerning ears will detect a strain of Bon Scott in Charlie's upper register. "Our music is probably harder driving than what you'd call classic Southern rock," he concedes, "especially in the guitar and drum sounds." In fact, this ain't no gospel, this ain't no bluegrass, this ain't no fooling around: Blackberry Smoke is balls-out rock and roll.

The response of fans to the live performances on *Bad Luck Ain't No Crime*, the band's debut disc, is thrilling confirmation of that. Studio tracks "Testify" and "Sanctified Woman" may be attracting the most attention at rock radio, but these rough-and-ready versions of originals "Scare The Devil" and "Muscadine" and the standard "Freeborn Man" may better capture the essence of Blackberry Smoke.

"We recorded those during the motorcycle rally in Sturgis [South Dakota], at The Full Throttle Saloon," Charlie informs. "We took an RV, parked it behind the stage and just lived there for a week. We opened for everyone who came through. It's outdoors and the weather was beautiful. There's no charge to get in and lots of booze flowing. What that audience sounded like we couldn't have asked for better live recordings. Technically, there are some warts, but the energy was so high that we didn't care. We aren't brain surgeons it ain't pretty sometimes, but it sure does feel good."

Even when Charlie is singing about hard times, there is joy in the music. You can't help thinking that he, Paul, Richard and Brit were born to play together.

The road to Blackberry Smoke winds through Lanett, Alabama, where Charlie was raised, LaGrange, Georgia, where he met Paul, and Atlanta, longtime stomping grounds to brothers Richard and Brit. Growing up in Lanett, a textile mill town ringed by fields of corn, peas and butterbeans, Charlie began his training as a singer before he could talk. His mother's uncle is Bluegrass Hall of Famer Buford Abner, lead singer for the aforementioned Swanee River Boys; great uncle Merle Abner sang bass.

"My dad has played guitar and sung bluegrass my whole life," Charlie adds. "I spent a lot of years going to bluegrass festivals. Every weekend we'd drive to Virginia or Kentucky. It was a fun thing to do. When I got to be a teenager, I said, 'I don't want to play this kind of music; I want to play 'Smoke on the Water.' But after a while, I think you always come back to whatever sparked your interest in music in the first place."

He vividly remembers his mother singing along to the radio, with The Rolling Stones, The Faces, The Beatles and Bob Dylan among her favorites. He notes that his own idols range more toward Hank Williams of whom he says, "I don't think a better songwriter has ever walked the earth" and Steve Earle, but the Bad Luck Ain't No Crime track "Normaltown" is indisputably reminiscent of the Beatles' psychedelic awakening.

Charlie recollects: "When I was growing up, we'd all sit around the piano singing, and I'd grab my dad's guitar every time someone put it down. About the time I turned six, I guess he figured he'd better get me one before I broke his."

The boy learned how to play on his own after a few lessons from Dad. He graduated to the electric guitar in his teen years. By then Charlie was getting into the Allmans, Skynyrd, Marshall Tucker, Molly Hatchet, Blackfoot and .38 Special, whose material he calls "a little more pop, riding-around-in-your-Camaro stuff."

He naturally gravitated toward other rock musicians. "Paul and I have been buddies for a long time," he says. "He's always been a great guitar player.

We'd go down to Atlanta to see bands. There's a couple of late-night watering holes where musicians would convene after concerts, and that's where we got to know Brit and Richard. We kept saying we should all jam and when we finally did, there it was; the band just kind of fell together."

Blackberry Smoke's creative approach remains a collaborative one. "Sometimes I'll come in with a basic idea, just play some chords and a melody on an acoustic and a song will grow from that," Charlie explains. "But most of the time I'll write with Paul we live within 15 minutes of each other or we'll be in rehearsal and just start jamming on something and magic will happen."

The band members have a similarly easygoing, give-and-take personal rapport.

Charlie says he knows it's a cliché, but he nonetheless attests: "We're like a little family, like four brothers. We all just get along really well.

We've all been in cover bands, and in every cover band there's somebody ya hate. There's nobody in this band like that unless I'm the guy and they haven't told me! We could never stay on the road for 40 days if we weren't laughing and having a good time. All our dads were in the service and they taught us respect for other people. Hell, Brit and Richard's dad is a retired Air Force colonel; they really walked the line."

During their travels, the Blackberry Smoke boys have headlined all over the U.S. and opened for a slew of rock acts. They've toured with Jackyl (Jackyl's Jesse James Dupree produced Bad Luck Ain't No Crime) and have even shared the stage with Blackfoot, .38 Special and Lynyrd Skynyrd, at Dallas' Smirnoff Music Centre (capacity: 20,000).

The band got their name from another likeminded artist, former Black Crowes singer-songwriter Chris Robinson.

The name has a bittersweet quality, as do many of Charlie's lyrics.

Sometimes there's only room for the bitter, like in "Scare The Devil Outta

You": "Keep yourself on your side/ And I'll keep me on mine/ Keep yourself to yourself/ And we'll get along just fine/ You say the devil made you do it with a smile/ Raising hell and howling at the moon/ Well I'm gonna put your ass back in line/ I'm gonna scare the devil outta you"; and sometimes it's just plain sweet, as on "Muscadine": "Muscadine, my girl's sweeter than a muscadine/ Muscadine, sweetest berry hangin' on the vine."

But more often than not, Charlie manages to navigate the murky but evocative waters between these two emotional territories. On "Sanctified Woman," he sings: "I went lookin' for a sanctified woman/ She's the only kind of woman I was hopin' to find." He does find her, "livin' by the highway in a pink doublewide." But in the chorus he moans, "Can't you see me go up in flames/ Can't you hear me screamin' your name/ I need some redemption today." And later, he confesses: "I don't even know/ What we're gonna do, where we're gonna go/ But we got to go somewhere 'cause we sure ain't got no home."

An ambivalence about the idea of home also surfaces in “Normaltown,” where the singer reasons, “In Normaltown they say/ A man can make his life/ Find a Normal girl to make his wife/ Normaltown is home/ I guess it’s just as well,” but then he destroys the illusion of nostalgia, spitting, “Now you know why this is a living hell.”

“Angeline” connotes a tumultuous romance. The protagonist says of his wife, whom he calls “my valentine”: “She had enough money to get herself out of town/ Next thing I know she’s New Orleans bound \$ / I stay home and try to make ends meet/ She’s turnin’ tricks down on Royal Street.” He laments in the song’s refrain, “Oh Angeline, where have you gone?” But despite the misery she has clearly caused, he wants her back, pleading: “If you see that girl out walkin’ the wrong way/ Turn her around and send her back my way.”

This pervasive bittersweetness is put into context in songs like “Testify” and “Sure Was Good,” the first line of which is “Bad luck ain’t no crime.” Charlie goes a long way toward summing up his worldview with lines like:

“Wanna testify About the things I’ve seen/ Wash my hands but they never come clean/ Testify some win some lose/ Everybody’s gonna have to stand accused.” Likewise, the banjo-inflected “Sure Was Good” demonstrates a philosophical acceptance of life’s ups and downs: “Sometimes easy, sometimes not/ Hope I did the best with what I got/ Sure was good.”

These songs, like the rest of *Bad Luck Ain’t No Crime*, represent the burnished-by-experience, no-bullshit, hard-won wisdom of the most enduring Southern rock. “Sometimes we shake our heads about what goes on in life and think, Wow look at everything we’ve been through and seen people do and done ourselves,” says Charlie. “But we always remember that no matter how bad it gets, someone’s always got it worse, and that pretty much keeps our feet on the ground.”

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