

May 30, 2002----

The North Mississippi All-Stars will feature an authentic North American all-star during tonight's set opening the Chicago Blues Festival.

Legendary Memphis, Tenn., producer Jim Dickinson will make a rare appearance as keyboardist with his sons Luther Dickinson, guitarist for the boogie blues band, and Cody Dickinson, the drummer.

Dickinson played piano on the beautiful soundtrack of "Paris, Texas" and produced the Replacements and the watershed reggae album "Toots in Memphis." Dickinson also brought the Rolling Stones to Muscle Shoals (Ala.) Studio, where they recorded "Brown Sugar" and "Wild Horses," and more recently he played piano on Bob Dylan's 1997 Grammy winner "Time Out of Mind."

Dickinson has lived in the Delta most of his life, but he has Chicago roots, physically and musically. Dickinson was born in Little Rock, Ark., in 1940. When he was 6 months old his family moved to Pratt Avenue, just off of Sheridan, where he lived until he was 9. His father, Jim, worked for the Diamond Match Co. His mother, Martha, was a piano player.

"My mother started me on music lessons while we were in Chicago," Dickinson said from his studio-home in Independence, Miss. "I've got real screwed-up multiple vision. I could never read music, so my lessons were frustrating in Chicago. But I got very into 'Two Ton' Baker the music maker on the radio."

The rotund ragtime player Dick "Two Ton" Baker was popular on Chicago radio during the 1940s. Baker had two hits in 1947, "Near You" and "I'm a Lonely Little Petunia in an Onion Patch."

"I think about him all the time," Dickinson said. "A lot of my musical concepts really go back to 'Two Ton' Baker. He would play the piano the whole time, whether he was doing the news, the weather or whatever. It was narration over this piano pad that he was doing. It gave me the idea of continuum, music beyond the box."

Dickinson also picked up some of his percussive style of piano playing, which went down well in the Memphis blues scene and later in the Dixie Flyers, of which Dickinson was a member.

"I call it 'rhythm piano,'" he said. "It's like the way I sing. I holler because I started playing without microphones. My first band the New Beale Street Sheiks, discovered by Bill Justis of 'Raunchy' fame were largely instrumental, and we had to play loud. As a teenager I had to get my own piano because my mother wouldn't let me play hers."

Dickinson has kept a lower profile around his sons since the All-Stars broke out. But he often sat in with Luther and Cody in the early 1990s when they gigged around Memphis in a teenage punk band called DDT (Dickinson, Dickinson and Taylor). Cody Dickinson got his first drum set at age 4. It had belonged to the late Al Jackson of Booker T & the MG's and was used on a majority of the Stax Records sessions. "When Stax went out of business, they sold the stuff at an auction," Dickinson recalled. "Collectors and drug dealers bought it all off. A friend of mine got the drum set. Now its in the Rock 'n' Soul Museum in Memphis."

Dickinson first heard blues giants such as Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf on WDIA radio in Memphis. "I just assumed it was Chicago music," he said. "It wasn't until I started reading books that I realized those people were from around Memphis and had gone to Chicago--about the same time I left Chicago for Memphis. There's an undeniable connection between Chicago and Memphis."

"And I don't think there's anything more important in American music than Howlin' Wolf who was born as Chester Burnett in Aberdeen, Miss., but came of age in Chicago."

Dickinson included a couple of Wolf covers on the record he just finished producing for T. Model Ford and Spam.

This is where Dickinson echoes his Memphis mentor Sam Phillips, who recorded Wolf at Sun Records. Wolf took the spooky country yodel of Jimmie Rodgers and sprinkled over sharecropper's blues with fuzzy amplifiers.

"I've heard Sam say he considers his discovery of Howlin' Wolf more important than Elvis Presley," Dickinson said. "I've heard him say it twice. I know he meant to say it."

In a 1987 interview in Memphis, Phillips told me that Wolf's voice "contained all the raw beauty of everything I had thought about in one man."

A few years ago, Dickinson wrote some liner notes for a Wolf reissue. He asked Wolf's former road manager for his best Wolf story.

"He answered, 'My indelible memory of Howlin' Wolf is seeing him sitting on a hotel room bed in his boxer shorts with his hair in a net doing his imitation of (Illinois) Sen. Everett Dirksen.'"

A hard blues ethic is at the base of Dickinson's production technique. He attempts to tap into an artist's primal motivation,

which is something Sam Phillips did. "The recording process is near mystical," Dickinson said. "It barely makes sense. It violates nature. It is an unnatural act. You're recording a moment, preserving it and playing it back. That's a primal desire of man. I've thought about it way too much."

Dickinson is also thoughtful enough to stay out of the way. He believes a record already exists subconsciously. "It's my job to pull it out of them," he said. "I don't rearrange. I don't rewrite. Whenever I work with a group I can generally tell when they're walking in which one I'm going to have to cue in on. Bassist Tommy Stinson was 18 years old when I did the Replacements. Whenever I didn't know what to do, I would put Tommy in a position where he had to respond. And I would take his response. He would be glowing like a light bulb.

"I like to take people who haven't been encouraged in life and encourage them."

These are lessons Dickinson learned from Phillips. The most telling Phillips story in Dickinson's mind is the way the producer handled Johnny Cash and the Tennessee Two when they recorded mid-1950s Sun Records hits such as "Hey Porter" and "I Walk the Line."

"Sam will say it was all about 'Takin' It Off of Luther,'" Dickinson said. Luther Perkins was Cash's amplified guitarist and the brunt of the band's jokes.

"He played real simple and he was a simple guy," Dickinson said. "Johnny and bassist Marshall Grant made fun of him. If anybody made a mistake, they would turn and look at Luther as if it was his fault, whether it was or not. Sam was perceptive enough to see this bothered Luther. If he wanted the session to work, all he had to do was take the burden off of Luther. Sometimes its that simple."

Lately, Dickinson hasn't been hearing much that grabs him. He's a big fan of dark singer-songwriter Johnny Dowd. "And Homer Henderson, the one-man band from Fort Worth Texas, I like him," Dickinson said. "But for the first time I really do feel old. I'm 60 years old. I saw rock 'n' roll be born. I never thought rock music itself would make me feel outside. I don't understand what's happening now. There's no groove. What are they so damn mad about? They certainly don't explain it.

"The White Stripes? I'm sorry, man. Arrogant incompetence. And this is coming from a person who worked with Tav Falco an esoteric Memphis-born compatriot of Alex Chilton. Believe me, Tav was trying as hard as he could. I like to hear people try. I don't like to hear work. Nobody wants to hear or see work artistically."