

Hippie



Photographs by Ken Weingart

ShakeUp

The Black Crowes Rock Again



Black Crowes bros Chris and Rich Robinson. Rich cradles a Bigsby-equipped, late-'60s Gibson ES-335.

IT was going to be a long day. That wasn't my initial thought when a 5:00 A.M. wake-up call shattered the quiet of my New Orleans hotel room. I pondered the gig I'd played only a few hours earlier. My sluggish brain took in the sleeping figure sprawled on the couch—a friend who'd crashed here after the show, and then got sick. Gad, I've only had three hours of sleep! ■ And this was not the day to be off-balance—I was scheduled for an early afternoon interview in New York with the

By **ArT**
Thompson

Hippie Shakellp

feisty Chris and Rich Robinson of the Black Crowes, who were putting the finishing touches on their fourth Columbia release, *By Your*

Side. Hmm, could be difficult.

The Crowes had recently cleaned house in an apparent move to shed their increasingly psychedelic image. Psychedelic? Yep. On last year's Furthur Festival tour, the band displayed a penchant for jamming and shared the bill with hippie-era heartthrobs Hot Tuna and Rat-dog (a Grateful Dead spinoff featuring guitarist Bob Weir).

But that was then and this is now, and the Crowes have migrated back to rock territory—without guitarist Mark Ford and bassist Johnny

Colt. Longtime pal Sven Pippen has been drafted to play bass, and Rich Robinson is now the lead player—a role that he had traditionally avoided.

It was about 3:00 P.M. when a cab driven by someone straight out of *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* delivered me to Avatar Studios in downtown Manhattan. I was chatting with Black Crowes guitar tech Derek Phelps, explaining why I was two hours late, when the studio door swung open and the Robinson brothers emerged. Great. But they seemed to be in good spirits.

The scent of incense was heavy inside the recording area, which consisted of a huge central room containing drums, keyboards (including a vintage Mellotron), bass gear, and a pool table. A smaller adjacent room housed Rich's multi-amp rig and extensive guitar collection.

Rich and keyboardist Ed Harsch were still overdubbing parts, so I was able to hear rough mixes of a few new songs. As "Kickin' My Head Around" and "Horsehead" thundered from the monitors, it was clear why everyone was so up on beat. The songs were positively spine-tingling, and beneath Chris' relentless vocals, Rich's slide playing was incendiary—his riffs tight and focused, and his tone happening. Things had obviously gone well under the guidance of producer Kevin Shirley (who also produced Aerosmith's *Nine Lives*).

I was checking out Rich's old Telecasters when he quietly entered the room. "I've used that '68 Tele on almost every song," he said. "This was my first real guitar. It was all over the first record—all the records, actually." Phelps added: "It has a maple-cap neck, and the bridge pickup is stock. It sounds *amazing*. It's one of those weird, beautiful pickups that everyone wants." I knew right then this was going to be fun.

Forging Sounds

Do you find it strange to track all the guitar parts yourself now?

Rich Robinson: No, I did most of them on the last record too. I know the songs really well because I wrote them, and having only one guitar player really gives Ed and Sven a lot of space. It gives the band a different dynamic.

Do you have more latitude now to play what you want?

I've *always* done what I want to do. We're pretty good about trying different things and just letting the music happen. I demoed the last two albums at my house and played all the guitar parts, so I already had an idea of what would sound good.

It's not new for me to approach a record as the only guitar player, but it *is* new for the band. There's an emotional aspect that's different. At the end of the *Three Snakes* tour, I just knew

Rich Robinson tracks with his Zemaitis Custom Deluxe through a vintage Fender Twin.



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Crowes nest: (Top)
Dual racks containing
a large assortment
of Robinson's fave
recording axes.

(Bottom) The guitars
in this shot include
(L-R) '97 and '98
James Trussarts (the
former is a Steel-
Phonic model), a '97
Fender Relic Strat, a
'92 Zemaitis Custom
Deluxe, and two
more unidentified
Trussarts. The amp
backline features a
'55 Fender Twin (on
a Marshall "Jubilee"
4x12), a Matchless
Clubman (on a
Matchless 4x12),
a vintage Marshall
model 1962 "Blues-
breaker," and a
'53 Fender Twin.



something was going to change, so I began modifying my guitar parts.

In what way?

I've been trying to expand how I use the open-G tuning. That's what I'm most comfortable playing, and not because it's just an easy, one-finger thing. Yes, you can make a chord with just one finger, but there's a lot more to it. Chords need to ring, and with open G, you're playing a lot more open strings. Also, you can

play small barre chords that sound really cool without being totally dissonant.

Do you approach open G as a rhythm tuning?

Yes and no. I am part of the rhythm section, but on the other hand, I'm playing specific parts within the song. "Thorn in My Pride" is a specific part. It's not someone hacking through three barre chords. Same on "Remedy." If you break down what I've played on the last records and what I play here, there are riffs, dis-

sonant chords, and strange chord progressions. I always try to add new things.

Do you use open tunings exclusively?

No. I play standard. I play open E, and I'll drop open G down a few steps. I mostly play in the open-G configuration, though, whether it's tuned down to E or F, or capoed up to B, B \flat , or whatever. When you change the key, it changes the song. We've had songs that we weren't excited about until we changed their key.

Hippie Shakellip

How did you discover open tunings?

I got into it because of [British folk artist] Nick Drake. He didn't play in open G, but I liked how he played. I can't really explain it, but it was something about the sound of those droning strings. There's a lot of that in our songs too—a sort of underlying drone.

Stage Moves

Are you going to handle all the rhythm and lead parts live?

I think we're going to bring someone along for the next tour because we have a ten-year history as a two-guitar band. [When GP went to press, the Crowes announced that former Cry of Love guitarist Audley Freed would join them for their upcoming *By Your Side* tour.] I'll admit that with Mark Ford the sound was sometimes really cluttered. I mean, we had six people onstage. You've got Chris who sounds amazing, and you've got

me who plays a lot. The two of us fill up a lot of space. And then you've got Ed, who can cover so much with his keyboards, but he was under Mark who was soloing all the time! So there was really very little space. Sometimes it worked great, though, and the parts really flowed.

Mark was a really good guitar player, and most of the time—when he wasn't messed up—he knew how to stay off of people's toes. Knowing when *not* to play is probably one of the most valuable things you ever have to know. It's hard for people to learn that because your first inclination—especially when you play lead guitar—is just to go *woo* and do back flips and score the goal. But my whole mentality is that the song is the center. It needs to be "What's better for the song?"

No more jamming?

I don't know if we're going to jam much on this next tour as we did when we were touring with the Furthur Festival. I always liked the aspect of jamming where we took a piece of music somewhere—going places as a whole band—but not spaced-out stuff.

You're so riff-oriented, it's hard to imagine the Black Crowes going into deep space.

Well, Mark loved the Dead. He really respected Jerry Garcia as a player, but Mark had this thing where he imitated everyone he liked, and

then tried to turn it into himself. Because he was such a utility player, he could pull from a lot of his favorite guitarists. Some of our strange chord progressions were counteracted by some of the things he would play, which were more normal. That's how you get into the whole layering thing and using different elements.

On *Southern Harmony*, Mark came in and just went for it. He played some amazing solos. That's why he was in the band. I didn't want to be a lead player, I wanted to write songs. We brought him in and it just worked.

That first tour went really well, but then the drug thing, the ego thing, and all this other crap happened. I learned early on that when people tell you you're great, don't necessarily believe all of them. I think there was some of that "I can do whatever I want because I'm *this person*."

The prima donna syndrome?

That and the onslaught of drugs and near-killing himself 15 times. Mark started with a style and then regressed. It was really strange. And then it would get into the noodling thing, which drove me nuts. He would play over everyone all the time. If you listen to some of those tapes towards the end, God, it was horrible. Our sound guy even started asking us if we wanted to turn Mark off in the PA. Granted, he would get sober and start playing his ass off



Producer Kevin Shirley at work.
The console is a Neve 8068.

Hippie Snakepit

again, but then he'd go right back down. He had some moments where he was great, but they were few and far between.

Songwriting

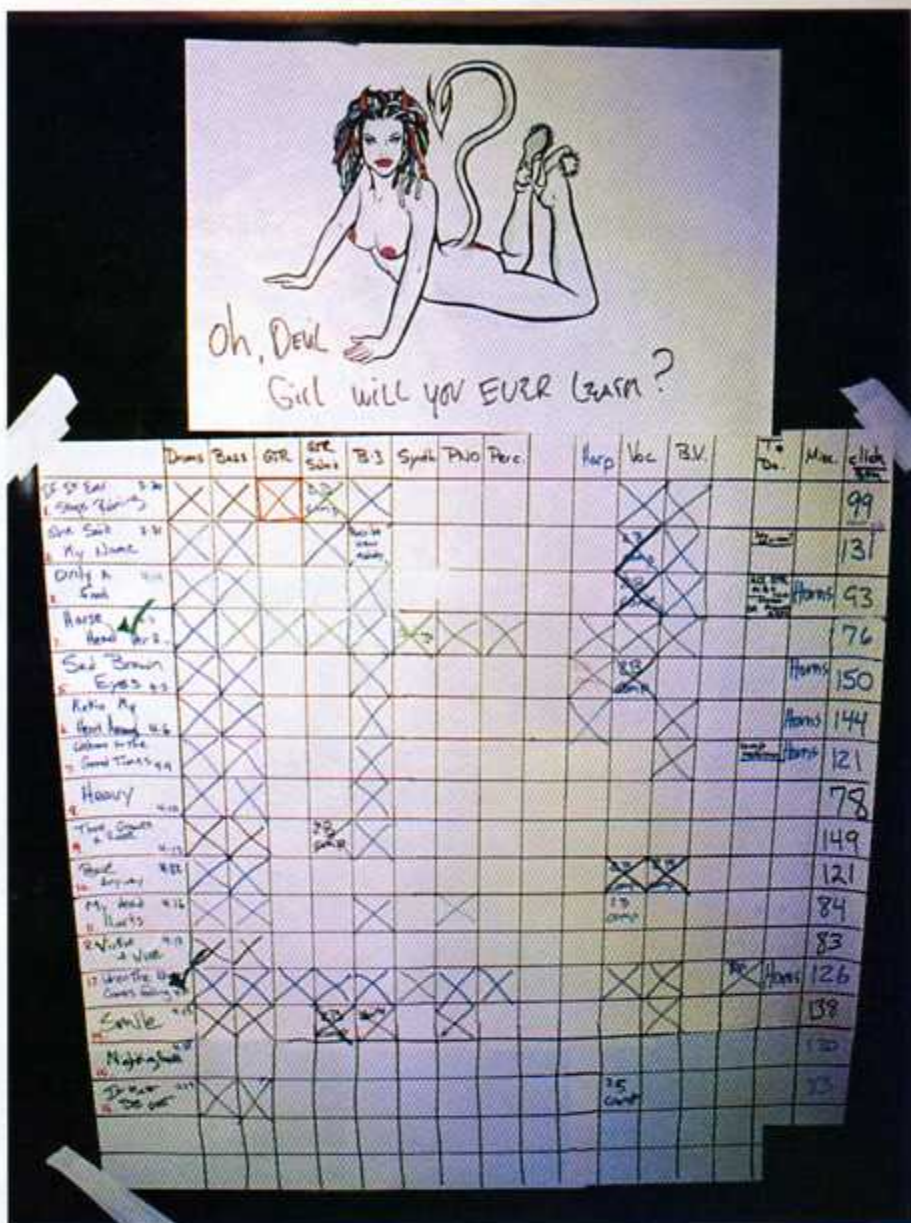
Do you draw on any particular influences to create songs?

Maybe it's naive, but I've always felt that you push music forward by knowing what has come before. Everyone's interpretation is going to be

Chris Robinson's Tips For Surviving the Biz

"nobody puts a gun to your head and makes you sign a record contract," says the Crowes' extremely verbal vocalist. "You do it, you survive, and you find a way to deal. The one reason we used to be so angry—and people thought it was all arrogance—was because we thought music was so sacred. But then you get there and you realize that you're just a schlep for these guys who smoke cigars and make all the money.

"You have to find a way to deal with the insensitivity of the recording industry. It's one of the reasons people get so involved with drugs. It hurts your feelings when you realize that a lot of people don't give a damn—they could be selling a Toyota or your record. When it's your life, and when you're naive and you're an artist, sometimes that can be really devastating. The thing is, you're the one who has to worry about your art. It's your music, not your accountant's or your lawyer's. Make something great."



Tracking chart shows which instruments have been recorded on each song. Note the tempo numbers at the far right.

different. If I take Mississippi Fred McDowell, Thelonious Monk, and Joni Mitchell and spit 'em out, and then you take them and spit 'em out, what we come up with is going to be different. We're interpreting differently, and that's how music moves forward.

How does that philosophy affect your songwriting?

I'll purposely try different chord progressions and parts that don't normally suit each other. I try to push the envelope a bit. Our new bassist told me that he always thought "Remedy" was a good rock song, but he never realized how weird it was until he had to play it.

You're doing more home recording these days.

I really got into it on the last two records, *America* and *Three Snakes*. I wouldn't know how to make a record, but I know enough to press "play" and "record" and knock something out.

Describe your home studio.

I have an API 24-track, but right now I'm just using two Sony PCM-800 modular digital multitracks. They work great. In my last house, I had the board in one room, and I ran a snake down the hallway to record the drums and everything else. It worked really well and it got my point across. Then I'd send the demos to Chris, and he would come up with lyrics and melodies. We'd go back and forth, and then we'd bring the songs to the band. That's when we'd add everyone's input.

Hippie Shakellup

On *Three Snakes*, I plotted out all the songs and sent tapes to Chris. Then he came to Atlanta, and we moved my studio to a rented band house. We had almost 40 songs, and Chris and I put a lot of time and effort into making them the best that they could be.

In the past we've often said, "These are the songs and this is what we want to do." But this time we decided to let someone produce our record. We wanted to listen to what someone else had to say, so we left a lot open. I purposely didn't finish all of these songs. And Kevin kicked us in the ass. We used to get so caught up in the music and really dissect things. We'd try different combinations of amps and guitars, and spent a ton of time on sonics and playing parts. This time it's like, "Let's make a rock record." We're looking at it from a totally different perspective now.

Do you ever give Chris ideas for song topics?

No. I come up with parts that sound good to my ear, and then Chris writes lyrics based on how the song makes him feel. Sometimes I'll come up with melody ideas, but I don't give him ideas for what I want a song to be about. The music does that—it's far more subconscious. You can't explain it.

Guitarmania

How do you choose your guitars?

I pick guitars because they sound good—I don't collect them. The people we buy guitars from know their stuff, and we've built a relationship with them. If I say, "I need a Tele that sounds great," they'll send me one. If I like it, I'll buy it.

You also have a number of custom guitars.

James Trussart made this metal guitar that's shaped like a Les Paul, but it has chambers. He knows I play slide and Dobro, and he had this idea for a resonator electric. When he told me about it I asked him to send me one to try out. That first one was called the Steel-Phonic, and it has a really distinct, totally different sound.

What is it about the Zemaitis that you like?

Tony's philosophy is the denser the guitar, the better the strings will resonate, which is sort of opposite what everyone else thinks. A Zemaitis can sound like those clear lucite Dan Armstrong guitars, because there's nothing natural about them. You get a freaky sound with those things. That metal body covering that Zemaitis uses is more ornamental than anything,



Robinson's Marshall Jubilee-series cab was close-miked using an AKG C-1000 and a Shure SM57 in an off-axis arrangement.

but I always loved the one that Ron Wood has, so I had one made back in '92. Mine is made for slide. Tony made me trace my left hand and he fit the guitar to my hand. It's an amazing slide guitar.

Where does the Travis Bean fit in?

It's a 5-string. I think they made it for Keith Richards, but he didn't want it.

What do you use it for?

Effect—when I need a really loud, freaky-

sounding guitar. I brought my basic guitars, and some others that can add different textures—like the Charlie Christian and the Gretsch.

Do you consciously try to use alternate chord voicings or play in different registers whenever you add a different guitar?

It depends on what the part is. I used a dulcimer for a solo on one song. I also used a 12-string and a Weissenborn. Bringing organic elements into a really electric rock song is the

Hippie Shakell

key to what we're trying to do.

Tell me about your Tele with the Parsons/White Stringbender.

I got that on the *Shake Your Money Maker* tour, because I was a huge Byrds fan. Clarence White—he's the man. I had the Fender Custom Shop build it.

It was interesting to watch you using it in a rock context.

You can go crazy with it and fall into that thing where you play it too much. I like it where it just stands out a couple of times.

A lot of your humbucker guitars are equipped with Tom Holmes pickups.

When James Trussart sent me that first guitar I was like, "Man, what are these pickups?"

How do they compare with a Gibson humbucker?

I think they're pretty similar to the original Gibson humbuckers. Holmes treats making

pickups like an art form or a tradition. That's what I like about them.

What do you think of his DeArmond copies?

They're really good. I put a couple of them in my black Gretsch Roc Jet. I'd been playing that guitar for some time, and the pickups just weren't happening. Tom sent these replicas, and they sound great.

What is it about the Gretsch sound that you like?

It has this way of cutting through. I've got a White Falcon that I've had for years. I got it right before we did *Southern Harmony*, and I've played it on every record since. It sounds amazing.

Do you use any of your electric archtops on stage?

Yeah, I use my ES-335 all the time.

You've never been a Strat player.

I just got one a couple of months ago. I'd never owned a Strat before. I tour with about seven Teles, a Les Paul, an SG, and the Trussarts and the Zemaitis. I travel with about 15 or 20 guitars.

How do you like your action?

It's medium, I guess. I sort of keep it to where I can play slide without getting too funky. But I'm not that anal about it.

Do you prefer a certain fret size or shape?

They're pretty much medium. There aren't any jumbo frets on any of these guitars. I don't

really think about that stuff. Derek takes care of my guitars. I never really even notice my frets unless I'm bending a note and it's dented from using the slide.

You use a brass slide?

Yeah, they're thick Dunlops. It's more of the Lowell George way of thinking. He used to play with a socket wrench.

What string gauge do you use on your electrics?

I use Gibson .010s.

Picks?

Dunlop .72s. The yellow ones. I always play with the rounded side. I never use the pointy side.

You obviously prefer vintage flat-tops.

Yeah. I have a 1953 Martin D-28 that just sounds amazing. I also have a '61 D-18 and a '58 D-21. I own about six Martins. I also like Gibson Doves. I have a '64 that's really cool, and a really good original Hummingbird. I bought a newer Dove for live shows, and it sounds great. Whoever made it was in a good mood that day. I especially like the Gibsons for strumming. I also have a Guild 12-string.

Amp Fever

You seem to favor a mix of vintage and modern amps.

What I really like about the old Fenders—have a Tremolux, a '53 Twin, and a '55 Twin—

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that they let the guitar speak. Same with Matchless amps. Sometimes you get a Marshall that sounds the same with ten different guitars. To me, a good amp is one that enhances the sound of every guitar that you have.

Which amps worked best on this record?

I used the Twins and the Tremolux on almost every song. Any guitar you plug into them sounds great, but it also sounds like itself. We also used this old Marshall Bluesbreaker combo—I'm not sure what year it is.

I see the Twins are feeding the Marshall cabs—is that configuration similar to your stage setup?

I tour with three combos and run them through three 4x12 cabinets. I play Matchless amps on tour. I don't know if the old Fenders would be very tour-friendly. The Matchless puts out 35 class A watts, and it's loud as hell. I don't need any more than that.

Do you run several amps simultaneously?

Yeah. I try to pick a really good clean sound and a great dirty sound. The third amp is optional. If we're playing an arena or a festival, I'll use it. I used to tour with two Marshalls and a Fender Showman. On the last tour I used a Matchless DC-30 and a Clubman. I used the Clubman for a dirtier sound and the DC-30 for a cleaner sound. I ran each of them through two 4x12s.

Why do you use the 4x12 cabs instead of the combo's internal speakers?

I just like the added bass. A lot of what's missing in music is bottom end. That goes for live sound as well as records, because with digital recorders you really lose that warmth and low end. We actually had Matchless build us some 8x12 cabinets. The bottom four were closed-back and the top four were open-back. They were a pain to carry, but they sounded really cool. Now I like those Matchless 4x12 cabinets. They're deeper than a Marshall, so they push more bass.

Do you have any speaker preferences?

I don't care what it is as long as it sounds good.

How do you split your guitar signal?

I have a THD tube splitter that has one input and three outs.

Do you have any tube preferences?

Derek sends our amps to a guy in Nashville who puts in the old stuff—Mullard EL34s and Telefunken preamp tubes.

I see that the cabinets you've got miked up here in the studio are Marshall Jubilees.

We were writing songs, and I just wanted to hear them. I hadn't heard them in four years. They sound great. They did something special with those 25th Anniversary cabs.

What mic setup worked best for recording the Jubilees?

Just a condenser and an SM57.

Have you experimented much with miking in your home studio?

All our amps sounds great, so all I need is an SM57. I have a couple of the AKG 414s that I use for acoustics.

Do you use any distance miking?

No. Both mics are close to the speakers. The condenser allows the engineer to blend a cleaner sound with the dirtier SM57.

What kinds of stompboxes are you using?

I use a Dunlop Hendrix Special wah, an Ernie Ball volume pedal, an Ibanez analog delay, a Fulltone Fulldrive, a Fulltone 69 Fuzz, and an Ibanez Rotary Chorus, which has a really cool, stereo Leslie sound.

How much of your distortion is coming from the Fulltone pedals?

I don't use them that much—mainly for slide and for solos. I'm entering into a new realm because I don't know what I'm going to do gear-wise for this next tour, or how I'm going to use pedals. I'm up in the air about it right now.

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