

Ben Dickey

A Glimmer on the Outskirts

For a guy whose career has evolved more by serendipity than design, Ben Dickey's professional journey has turned into one heckuva ride. It's not every day an obscure musician's famous actor/director friend hands him the lead in a passion-project indie film, and he not only winds up sharing the screen with one of his musical heroes, he also wins a Sundance Film Festival Special Jury Prize for Dramatic Achievement in Acting — and a *Variety* magazine “for your consideration” plug for a Best Actor Oscar nomination.

Dickey's acting debut in *Blaze*, Ethan Hawke's biopic about doomed Texas singer-songwriter Blaze Foley, has already led to more roles, including their pairing as bounty hunters in *The Kid*, a western directed by Vincent D'Onofrio. But just as exciting, as far as Dickey's concerned, is the opportunity it provided to record with that musical hero, longtime Bob Dylan guitarist Charlie Sexton (who played *Blaze*'s other troubled Texas songwriting legend, Townes Van Zandt). After they did the film's original cast recording (on Light in the Attic Records), Sexton produced Dickey's solo album, *A Glimmer on the Outskirts*. That inspired Sexton, Hawke and *Blaze* executive producer Louis Black to form SexHawkeBlack Records, a new Austin-based imprint under the umbrella of Nashville's Dualtone Records. Dickey's March 7, 2019 release is the label's first.

It's hardly Dickey's first recording foray, however. In fact, he says, he preferred the idea of forming a label to shopping for one because he'd been signed before — and still bears scars from watching the dream morph into a momentum-sucking nightmare. But SexHawkeBlack president Erika Pinktipps happens to be friends with Dualtone's founder; that connection quickly turned into an actual alliance. “We're all doing this together,” Dickey says, “[it's] a group of people who all care about each other and have similar artistic arrows pointed in the same direction.”

Dickey was 10 when his artistic arrow started pointing toward music; that's when his grandfather handed down his 1935 Gibson L-30 archtop. “He was a magical fellow, and his guitar is, too,” Dickey says. “So I wanted to be magic, too.”

Within a year, his grandfather was gone. The magic, fortunately, stayed. But conjuring it wasn't always easy for a kid growing up in Little Rock, Arkansas, far from his dad — a college football star who'd moved to Georgia after the parental split, when Dickey was 4. Ten years later, Dickey's mother left, too — following her friend and boss, Bill Clinton, from the Arkansas Governor's Mansion to the White House. Dickey moved into his grandmother's basement — and became one more angry, disaffected teenage rocker.

He formed his first “real” band, Shake Ray Turbine, at 16, made his first record at 17 and began touring at 18, ditching Little Rock Central High (most famous students: the Little Rock Nine) for an \$850 Ford van. When the founder of their D.I.Y. label, File 13 Records, headed to Philadelphia for college, they followed.

Dickey wound up staying for 17 years, becoming a chef, falling in love and making music, first with Amen Booze Rooster (the band that got signed, then shafted), then with Blood Feathers. That band recorded three albums, including one created over “a magical rock ‘n’ roll summer” at

a Nova Scotia home Hawke owns. (Hawke's wife and Dickey's "sweetheart," artist Beth Blofson, have been besties since childhood.) Several labels and a top management agency courted them, but some members' changing priorities and Dickey's label trauma scotched potential deals. Still, when Blood Feathers fractured, he was heartbroken. It was time for another change.

Once again, a music connection provided it. The band's former manager had returned to north Louisiana to run his dad's cotton farm, and offered Dickey and Blofson a vacant house on the rural property. They've been frolicking in that cotton since 2014.

Before leaving Philly, however, Dickey devoted 8½ months of Mondays (most chefs' lone day off) to recording *Sexy Birds & Salt Water Classics*, his first solo album. Former Arkansas Times arts editor Robert Bell called it "impeccable rock 'n' roll ... which effortlessly melds Dylan/Petty singer-songwriter tunes and a touch of T. Rex-y sheen with a peppering of country-blues guitar-picking of the first order."

Classics took Dickey in a folkier direction, which continues with *A Glimmer on the Outskirts*. With a broad, low-edged tenor, this 6-foot, 5-inch linebacker's son sometimes sounds remarkably like Dylan. But while he claims to be influenced by all musical forms, including "mockingbird word, Marshall feedback stack, tap-dance prance, orbital odes and Dinah the dog" (a partial list), Dickey says he's most attracted to cats like jump bluesmen Big Joe Turner and T-Bone Walker and especially, the phrasing of Piedmont/ragtime bluesman Blind Willie McTell.

"I've been doin' an impersonation of him forever," Dickey claims. "He takes joy in certain words, and the listener likes that. And I like that."

Of his own style, he says, "I reckon I play rock 'n' roll — emphasis on the roll."

"The roll" is about musicality and rhythm, he explains. It's the unforced ease of big-band swing, or the way late guitarist Hubert Sumlin played before or after the beat, creating another rhythmic pattern. "Chuck Berry doing the first 16 bars of 'Maybelline' is a microinjection of what I consider rock 'n' roll. When I think of rock 'n' roll, I think of that; I think of the Stones; I think of the Beatles' 'I Feel Fine.'"

The roll is all over *A Glimmer on the Outskirts*, most of which was written over a few days after *Blaze* wrapped, except for "Eloise" and his easygoing, JJ Cale-like cover of Foley's "Sittin' By the Road."

"When I say wrote, I mean they just came," Dickey clarifies. "They usually come in clusters."

That helps explain their thematic connection; the album, he says, is an exploration of hope.

"Hope comes in different ways, and in little doses, like when you're on the freeway and you're hungry, and you see a sign for food," he says. "It also comes when you're chest deep in quicksand and you see someone coming with a rope."

In "Stranger on a Silver Horse (Be Amazed)," it comes "on the outskirts of town, like *A Fistful of*

Dollars; a fixer or something.” In “Sing that One to Me,” hope takes the form of an adventure. Its lyrics directly mention that fixer, who appears again as Dickey explains the album title “refers to finding or remembering hope when all is lost, but there’s a light on the edge of town, or the edge of the galaxy. A fixer on the way.”

That’s not necessarily a divine metaphor, however. Celestial citations fill Dickey’s lyrics and conversation, but they’re mainly astronomical, not biblical (though he does debate what’s heaven and what’s hell in “I Think It’s All Different”). His favorite memory involves watching the Orionids meteor shower with his family when he was 3, and he admits, “My version of counting sheep is reading how fast Jupiter is expanding and despaning through the day.”

He’s got a thing for prime numbers and has fantasized about working for NASA, but can’t imagine not making music. “That’s how I relate to the world,” he says. “I’ve always been drawn to it.”

Eventually, he figured out why.

“What happens when you go to a show? You form a relationship with an artist,” he notes. Despite the uncertainties and absurdities of the troubadour life, Dickey needs that connection — “this weird hour of time where you share with a group of people” — to satisfy his soul.

Something else he’s figured out: the benefits of trust. After finally agreeing to let Hawke put him onscreen, Dickey discovered he loves acting. “It’s very musical,” he says, “so it feels natural.”

He also agreed to let Sexton choose the album’s songs, and players: drummer Conrad Choucroun, bassist John Michael Shoepf, pedal steel player Mike Hardwick and keyboardist, pianist and Mellotron player Bukka Allen. (Dickey and Sexton both play guitar and sing; Blofson sings backing vocals and Emily Galusha whistles on “The Man with the Hammer.”)

Dickey is thrilled with the results. He’s giddy about life in general right now. It took a while for him to find his script, so to speak, but he sums up the experiences between getting his grandfather’s guitar and his current pursuits with a perfect quote from Blaze: “You might not get what you go after, but you do get what you wouldn’t have got, if you hadn’t gone after what you didn’t get.”

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