

Riding with the new Kings

By Clemens Matuschek

Although the North Mississippi Allstars have long outgrown amateurism and positioned themselves as the new hot shots of Blues-Rock – their most recent CD “Electric Blue Watermelon” has been reviewed by numerous media across the country – one was curious if the “Allstars” live up to their name in performances outside the studio. Last Tuesday’s concert at the Bluebird gave the opportunity to experience the trio on stage.

The opening act Grace Potter and the Nocturnals was already worth the cover charge. Led by a charismatic lead singer blessed with a voice to either make you cry or dance, they were more than a perfect support act. The Bloomington music scene would certainly appreciate if Vermont-based Grace and her band stepped by again to play a concert of their own.

The North Mississippi Allstars (NMA) see themselves as the successors of Memphis legends such as Bukka White or Fred McDowell, to whom they are connected through their producer and (for two of them) father, Jim Dickinson. Strong references to the band’s heroes can be found in the NMA’s music, but they took the Blues-Rock to a new generation’s state, marked by less musical restriction and more line-crossing experiments.

Guitarist Luther Dickinson is by far the dominating element of the band. His solos were performed with astonishing technique and were of such intensity that time seemed to stand still while the music inexorably streamed into your ears. In most of the songs the solo took up two thirds of the music –

galaxies of arpeggiated chords, bendings that stretched endlessly, and forever ringing feedbacks. Dickinson used a variety of sound effects and distortions – not to mention his guitar rack that resembled a well-equipped music store.

His brother Cody sat behind a huge drum set that he employed in creative ways. Not only did his beats immediately find their way to the audience’s feet, but he also showed virtuosity in numerous breaks and a drum solo that almost blew the roof off the Bluebird’s wooden structure. A special solo highlight was the use of an amplified washboard, hooked to an effect pedal, which resulted in powerful sounds of the kind one would encounter in a Techno discotheque.

Complimentary to the Dickinson brothers is Chris Chew, a huge man whose figure makes his e-bass look tiny. He wears his instrument like a necklace, resting on his enormous chest right below his chin – like B.B. King used to play his guitar. Chew accounted for repetitive, grooving riffs that he occasionally spiced up with funky excursions up and down the fingerboard.

Alas, the sound was much too loud, as if the NMA wanted to prove that their Marshall towers were more than just eye catchers. This overdose of volume might be necessary to explore the guitar’s possibilities to the limits. But it heavily distorted the overall sound, covering up musical details and technical skills. Also, Luther Dickinson’s low and rough voice collided with his guitar’s tone. He would avoid the interference with the low harmonics if he sang one octave higher – or not at all. One might say that the Mississippi Allstars are best when they are not singing.

But they definitively justified their name.