



Music

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Benevolent Tornado

An unlikely fellow plans a Southern rock festival

by **Richard Lloyd**

Joie Todd Kerns worries that his persona—untamed hair, cutoff jean shorts, sleeveless T-shirts and leather vest, the thick East Tennessee accent and stream-of-consciousness speech pattern—undermines him with the “suit-and-tie guys” he has to deal with for things like insurance and beer licensing, interactions he has little taste for. “It’s definitely the shit I don’t like,” he says. “That shit ain’t fun.” And a month away, it’s the shit that can still wreck his vision for Mucklewain, the upcoming 30-act Southern music festival that Kerns has been organizing for months.

It’s over 100 degrees in the mid-July sun as the Van of the Great Green Jesus rolls through Memphis with the windows down. The van, which owes its nickname to the green-robed Savior bobblehead atop the dashboard, usually ferries the Nashville bar band Les Honky, More Tonkies to dates throughout the Southeast. As usual, Les Honky frontman Johnny Mark Miller is at the wheel, with drummer Kerns riding shotgun. Both 30, the pair’s friendship extends back to adolescence in Kingsport. The rest of the band is absent, but the point of this trip is not a gig; it’s a search for promotional opportunities. The air conditioning cuts the van’s gas mileage in half—on Mucklewain’s shoestring budget, conditioned air is a luxury they can’t afford.

Kerns is the brain, not to mention the tears and, especially today, the sweat behind the festival. Billed as a celebration of Southern music, art and culture, the concept took shape during late-night conversations in this very van. From such humble origins emerges the summer’s most unlikely event, with a lineup including regional favorites Steve Earle, Allison Moorer, Lucero, American Minor, Todd Snider, Will Hoge, Garrison Starr and others.

In a world of music festivals corrupted by heavy-handed corporate sponsorship and ruined by greedy promoters, Mucklewain may be just the antidote. It’s hard to imagine a more regionally embedded enterprise—Kerns has even kept the concessions specific to the Southeast, selling treats like Wickles Pickles and MoonPies, washed down by RC Cola and Sun Drop.

The festival leapt toward becoming a reality last winter when Chuck Whicker, a musician and longtime friend of the Kerns family, volunteered his farm in Harriman (half an hour from Knoxville) and some seed money. As the lineup filled in and the date drew nearer, others, including BMI and Gibson Guitars, have come on board with modest support.

Kerns estimates the makeshift venue's capacity at 10,000, though he would be thrilled to draw half as many. Tickets are \$30 to \$45, with limited free camping space on-site. The goal of 5,000 tickets sold would put the show in the black, and probably ensure another round next year. The problem is getting the word out.

With a budget for just a skeleton print and radio campaign, Kerns and Miller have taken to the 'Net and the streets. There's the inevitable MySpace page, but perhaps more important is old-fashioned street promotion—stumping in small and midsized cities throughout the region. On this sweltering July day, just inside a month shy of the festival date, the boys hit Memphis in the afternoon and then press on to Oxford, Miss., by evening. And of course, back home that night—there's no money for a hotel room, and the boys need to be in Harriman working on the site the next day.

Standing a lanky 6-foot-5, with tangled blond hair well past his shoulders, Kerns makes an impression. He was voted friendliest in his Kingsport High School class, and one can imagine that if a similar honor were conferred in Nashville today, he'd garner a significant number of votes. The sheer force of his personality has propelled Mucklewain from the beginning. Nashville singer-songwriter and festival artist Will Kimbrough calls him "Hurricane Joie." "I mean in a good way," says Kimbrough. "He's like a benevolent tornado. You know, it takes a dynamo to do this, and that's Joie Todd."

The hurricane blew into Nashville in '95 and enrolled at Belmont to study music business. Showing his penchant for bucking long odds, Kerns walked onto Belmont's powerhouse basketball squad despite having failed to crack the starting lineup of his high school team. Although he played sparingly as a Bruin, he was on the roster of Belmont's NAIA Final Four team.

After graduation, Kerns parlayed an internship into a full-time—if low-paying—job at Steve Earle's E-Squared label, tour-managing artists like Starr and The Deraillers. But by 2003, he'd burned out. By 2005, Kerns was odd-jobbing it, managing the West Nashville institution Bobbie's Dairy Dip, pulling shifts at East Nashville's 3 Crow Bar and Red Wagon Café, and playing Les Honky shows. He was also fomenting his dream of a showcase for the Southeast's underexposed Southern rock scene. But Mucklewain is about more than just the music for Kerns. It's a testament both to his deep love for the region of his birth, and to his ambivalence about the South's complicated political and cultural legacy.

Mucklewain's eccentric name originates in East Tennessee lore, the story of Tunis Mucklewain, a melungeon patriarch who posed as a Native American spy during the Revolutionary War. Little known outside the region, the melungeon are a clannish, reclusive band of mixed-race settlers in Appalachia whose origins are undetermined, as much the stuff of legend as anthropological fact. "Everyone knows about the melungeon where we grew up," Miller says, describing their exotic traits (extra fingers and rows of teeth) and bogeyman status for East Tennessee kids.

The regional and mythic elements of the melungeon are what attracted Kerns to the name: "Melungeon is this kind of hidden Southern cult thing, very specific to East Tennessee....Mucklewain has just the perfect hillbilly ring to it to signify what [the festival] is about," he says.

Bonnaroo is Cajun slang for "a really good time," while Lollapalooza is an anachronistic term for "something outstanding or unusual" that Perry Farrell first heard on a "Three Stooges" short. Compared to these charming but trivial monikers, Mucklewain has a darker and more

mysterious ring. Like Kerns says, it's a regional thing, though it's not really part of Appalachia's "official" history—it's more underground and obscure.

And so is the festival, which tells a different story about the region and Southern rock music than the usual connotations of "Free Bird" or of crude red-state cultural stereotyping. Kerns doesn't entirely reject the legacy of Muscle Shoals, but Mucklewain's version of Southern rock owes more to R.E.M., Blue Mountain and Jason & the Scorchers (whose former leader, Jason Ringenberg, is on the Mucklewain bill). And unlike the reactionary racial politics of Lynyrd Skynyrd or The Charlie Daniels Band, the acts in this festival lean decidedly left, from well-known death penalty opponent Earle to Nashville favorite Kimbrough, whose most recent album, *Americanitis*, catalogs his discontent with corporate greed, religious dogmatism and presidential mendacity. While Kerns insists that politics weren't part of his agenda in setting the lineup, he concedes, "It does seem to be a group of fairly like-minded people."

And here, on the road, visiting indie record stores, head shops, hip cafés and rock clubs (all in impressively abundant supply in Memphis and Oxford), Kerns is in his element, and having fun. At each stop, the clerks, managers and baristas he meets are taken in by his effusive pitch, and many share both his enthusiasm and encyclopedic knowledge of the genre. He is careful at each stop to highlight bands with local ties. In Memphis that means Lucero, Todd Snider and Cory Branan. In Oxford, Cary Hudson (of the disbanded Blue Mountain) and Starr.

Around twilight in Memphis, he meets up with Branan at the HiTone, where Branan's got a gig later, and they take a break from the journey, sipping PBRs in an otherwise deserted club. But Kerns and Miller are on a mission. Kerns is determined to hang a poster in Oxford's famous Square Books, reflecting his intention that Mucklewain be seen as "a literate Southern rock festival," (The website, mucklewain.com, even has a recommended reading list.) Oxford turns out to be well worth the trip, and not just for the freshly made chocolate chip cookies at the bookstore, as the storied college town is filled with clubs that nurture Mucklewain-style Southern rock.

They arrive back in Nashville at 5 a.m., and are back on the road by early afternoon. This pace will continue, as they build the stages, hand-cut bookmarks and fliers, meet with the Harriman beer board (by press time, they were approved for a one-day license) and continue the promoting, anxiously counting down to Saturday when the fruits of their labor will at last be revealed, on Tunis Mucklewain's birthday.

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