

James Luther Dickinson and North Mississippi Allstars: I'm Just Dead, I'm Not Gone

By **Stephen Foster** 12 September 2012

Live Set from the Influential James Luther Dickinson

The influential in our culture often die unrecognized and unacknowledged. Or their once-prominent reputation wanes, depending on the latest scholarly or public consensus. To the cognoscenti, the true disciples, usually a minority of admirers and standard bearers, nothing could be further from the truth. They work diligently – sometimes successfully, sometimes not – to keep an artist's memory alive and the flame of remembrance burning. Fortunately for James Luther Dickinson (who died in 2009), his influence was so vast and prevalent, his musical reach so profound, his relationships so extensive, that we'll likely be listening to (and by doing so celebrating) him in one way or another for years to come – even though he is clearly not a household name and will never be.

His latest aptly named release, *I'm Just Dead, I'm Not Gone*, while not particularly ground breaking (nor is it meant to be), should go a long way toward reminding us of the musical power of the man. In this live stomp of a bar show, with Dickinson on vocals, we're given a glimpse into the historical Dickinson, and that's the record's value – that and the fact that it simply represents a live set of rollicking blues, soul, and roots music, the kind of unfinished, less than perfect sound of a band, and of a man, out to have a good time (and successfully so) rocking the house down. Even though it was recorded in 2006, *I'm Just Dead, I'm Not Gone* was recently released by Memphis International Records.

James Luther "Jim" Dickinson was a Renaissance man in the music world. Pianist, producer, singer, session musician, front man for several groups – Dickinson left a legacy virtually unequaled by musicians who are not always front and center, and who don't wish to be. Although he was born in Arkansas, he moved early to Memphis, and for the rest of his life would be associated with that town's musical milieu. Among the highlights of his career: he played on recording sessions with some of the greatest talent in the business, including Aretha Franklin. He played piano on the Rolling Stones *Wild Horses*, on the Flamin' Groovies album *Teenage Head*, and other sessions too numerous to mention – including what many believe to be the last great Sun Label release, *Cadillac Man* by the Jesters, where he played piano and sang lead.

He also accompanied the following on various projects: Delany and Bonnie, Jerry Jeff Walker, Ronnie Hawkins, Brook Benton, Ronnie Milsap, Lulu, Duane Allman, Albert King, Maria Muldaur, and the list literally goes on and on. He also worked with Ry Cooder, and played on Dylan's album *Time Out of*

Mind. In 1998, he produced Mudhoney's *Tomorrow Hit Today*. His other production credits are extensive and include work with: Alex Chilton, Jason & the Scorchers, Green on Red, the Replacements, Primal Scream, and Rocket from the Crypt.

I'm Just Dead, I'm Not Gone features Dickinson's two sons, Luther (guitar) and Cody (drums), who are founding members of the roots and rock band North Mississippi Allstars. In a scant 42 minutes this set is an all out tribute to artists Dickinson knows and loves. Dickinson's band is clearly having a good time; the playing is loose and easy because it is, after all, live bar music and the disc captures what must have been, for Dickinson, a joyous experience because it shows everywhere on *I'm Just Dead, I'm Not Gone*.

Of particular note is his cover of Buffy Sainte-Marie's strung out, gut wrenching "Cod'ine" and "Ax Sweet Mama" by Sleepy John Estes. He opens the disc with a rambling and discursive shout poem – with references to George Bush, Novocain, whiskey, honey, pretty girls, and somebody else who makes all the money – that paves the way for the opening track, Sir Mack Rice's "Money Talks". Among the other artists covered are Bob Frank, Furry Lewis, and Terry Fell.

As this set so aptly proves, Dickinson is dead and is definitely not gone.