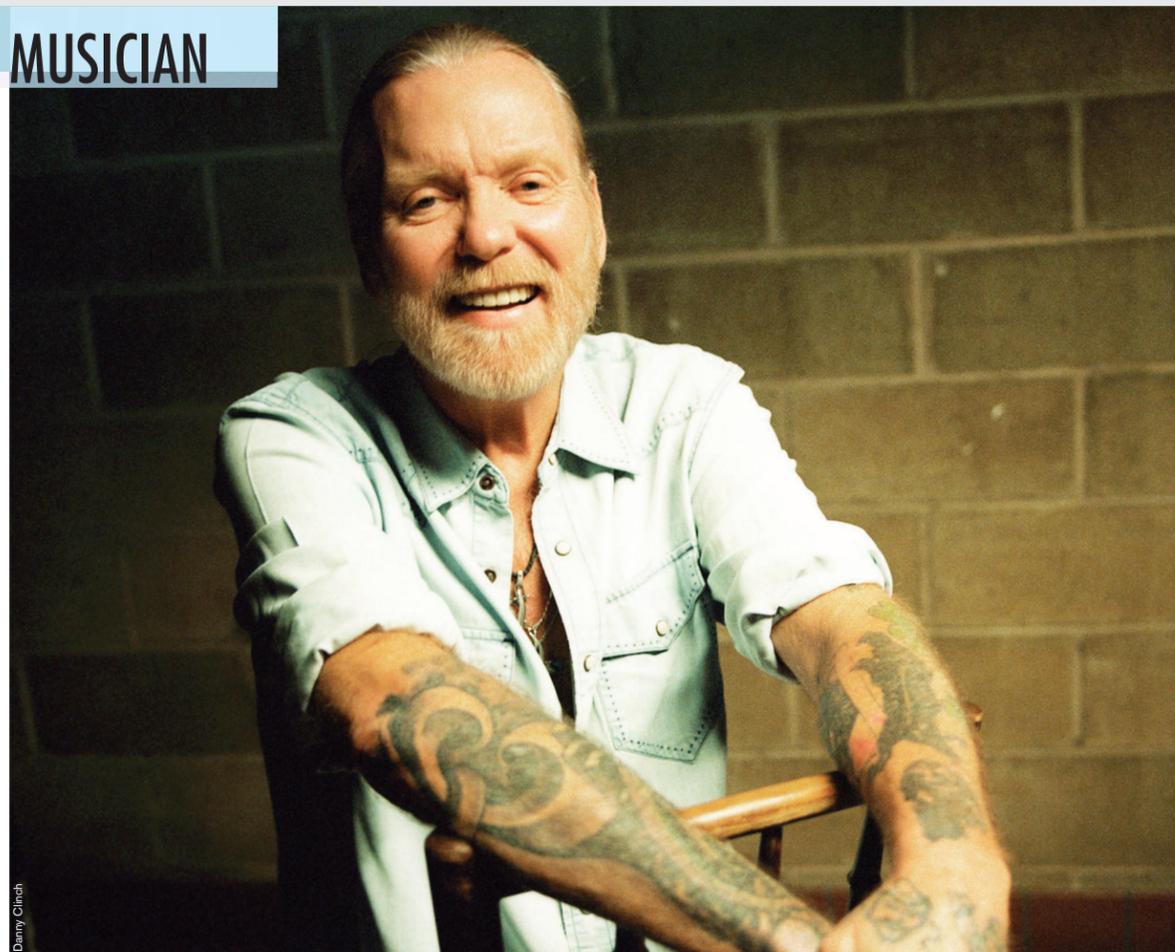


MUSICIAN



Danny Clinch

GREGG ALLMAN

After a brush with mortality, a rock legend gets back to the blues

By Chris Neal

IT'S BEEN A FEW MONTHS SINCE DOCTORS USED A DEVICE to spread Gregg Allman's rib cage as part of his treatment for cancer, but he still winces at the thought. "That hurt so damn bad," he says. "Unh! All the rib bones that go back and connect to your spine, they disrupt all that. Boy, that hurts. They can cut and sew muscles and skin, and that's one kind of pain. But you start messing with the bones, oh, god. I never realized there was that kind of pain on this earth. I don't think a human body could stand much more. I mean, it was just..." He trails off, shaking his head, then chuckles. "You pay for that liquor."

The Allman Brothers Band's singer, keyboardist and co-founder has been sober for 16 years now, but the damage had already been done. He was diagnosed with hepatitis C in 2007—most likely the result of having been tattooed with a dirty needle more than 40 years ago. "Later on in life, when drinking raised its ugly head, that

paved the way for the hep C to turn into cancer," explains Allman, 63, who received chemotherapy in late 2010 and finally underwent a successful liver transplant last June. "That chemo made me sick as a dog, but if they hadn't found those cancers I would not have been with us much longer."

As the Rock and Roll Hall of Famer recuperated, he comforted himself with the knowledge that he had a killer new solo album in the bag—*Low Country Blues*, recorded with producer T Bone Burnett over 11 days in Los Angeles early last year. Burnett convinced Allman to record with his own hand-picked musicians, including pianist Dr. John and guitarist Doyle Bramhall II, tackling a set mostly composed of vintage blues songs (along with one original, "Just Another Rider," written with Allman Brothers Band guitarist Warren Haynes). We spoke with Allman during a visit to New York City about his illness, his new music and his love affair with the blues.



'I never realized there was that kind of pain on earth. I don't think a body could stand much more.'

How did you discover the blues?

When my brother [late guitarist Duane Allman] and I were first starting out, we played the Chitlin' Circuit, all those sleazy-ass clubs in the Southeast. (laughs) The ones with the chicken wire up so beer bottles won't hit you, and Sweaty Betty and her girlfriend dancing like go-go girls. Oh, we saw some trashy places. Anyway, we'd go back and forth between these clubs and would listen to this radio station out of Gallatin, Tenn., WLAC. You could get it anywhere from New York to Miami after 9 at night. That's when I first heard Lightnin' Hopkins, Robert Johnson, Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, all of them. It was the first time I heard Sonny Boy Williamson and got turned on to the harp. It was like a wonderland of music. It sounded so much better than the Beach Boys and Dick Dale and all that bullshit. Then at night this guy Herman Grizzard would

'When I met T Bone Burnett I thought, "Maybe the gods are looking out for me."'

come on with the late show, and his thing was jazz. That was the first time I heard [jazz organist] Jimmy Smith. So we listened to that every chance we could.

What was touring like then?

When we went on the road I was 16 and just out of high school. The Beatles had come out and everybody and their brother—no pun intended—had a band. There was some very good competition out there. A lot of 'em fell by the wayside, but a lot of 'em didn't. The Brothers have always been pretty much blues-based, but when we first started we'd play Otis Redding, James Brown—it was rhythm and blues back when we were playing the clubs. We played six nights a week, five sets a night, 45 minutes a set and we got \$440 for the four of us a week. Even in 1966 that wasn't any wages at all, especially if you're trying to buy amplifiers and sound systems. (laughs) I came up busted every week, man.

How did this album begin?

It started with meeting T Bone. My manager, Michael Lehman, said to me, "You know, it's about time for you to get into the studio." I was coming off an Allman Brothers tour and was in Detroit and on my way home to Savannah, Ga. Michael said, "On your way I want you to stop in Memphis and meet T Bone Burnett. I think you'll like him."

What was your first impression?

When I saw what he was doing in Memphis, that sealed it. He was there with two architects and they were measuring the Sun Records building board by board. He was going to go back to Los Angeles, where he had this big lot of three or four acres next to his house, and he was going to rebuild the Sun studios exactly. I thought that was the coolest thing I'd ever heard. I thought, "Man, this guy might just be it. Maybe the gods are looking out for me." At the meeting he said, "I've a couple thousand blues songs on my computer—old, obscure ones. Some of them you might recognize, most of them you might not. Some of them have that old scratchy sound because they were from 78s, but they're all there. I'm gonna send you about 20 and I want you to listen to them and call me." So I took 'em home and listened, and there was some good stuff on there.

How did you and Warren Haynes come to write "Just Another Rider"?

Warren and I got together at a time when we both weren't working and worn out, which are few and far between. I was doing a benefit for the Michael J. Fox Foundation here at the Waldorf-Astoria [in November 2009]. Of course Warren lives here now, up on the Hudson River. So I had a day off and he came down and I had a piano brought to the room. We finished up this song, "Just Another Rider," which we had started a long, long time ago. A few days after that we went on the Allman Brothers tour, and after that tour I met T Bone. We got a little over halfway through making the record and T Bone says, "Oh man, I'm sorry. Do you have anything that you've written that you want to put on the album?" I told him I had one that I thought would fit in, and sure enough it did. We just had to make sure it would sound right. It needed to be in the same vein as the other songs.

Why did you play with T Bone's musicians instead of your solo group?

They told me at the last minute, "By the way, you're not going to be bringing your band." I almost slammed the door on the

HITTIN' IT AGAIN

The Allman Brothers Band hasn't recorded a new studio album since 2003's Grammy-nominated *Hittin' the Note*—and for a while it appeared that recording would be the group's swan song. Asked about the possibility of a new Allman Brothers recording about a year ago, guitarist Warren Haynes told *M Music & Musicians*, "At the moment I don't foresee that happening." Well, things have changed—Gregg Allman now says the band will likely return to the studio very soon. "It's getting to be that time," he says. "We're probably about three or four songs short—we have songs that I've written, songs that Warren's written, ones we've both written, and then other people's tunes we'd like to do." The group has seldom recorded outside material, which Allman chalks up to former guitarist Dickey Betts' aversion to doing so. "He was like, 'If we didn't write it we're not recording it,'" Allman says.

One reason the group has avoided the studio was Allman's own reluctance to record without longtime producer Tom Dowd, who died of emphysema in 2002 having helmed most of the group's output since its self-titled 1969 debut. (*Hittin' the Note* was produced



by Haynes and Michael Barbiero.) "I thought I'd never find anybody else like Tommy Dowd," Allman says. "I dreaded anyone even bringing it up." While plans are nebulous at this point, Allman might have found an intriguing successor for Dowd. "What I'd really like to see is T Bone Burnett producing a record for the Brothers," he says. "That would be very interesting."

MUSICIAN



Kevin Kane/WireImage

On stage at Farm Aid, New York, 2007

'I almost slammed the door on the whole thing. I'm glad I didn't'

whole thing. I'm so glad I didn't. I spent a couple of days with no sleep, just thinking. Imagine getting that kind of request. But finally I said, "We're going to his sandbox, I guess we'll play with his toys." (laughs) So I got down there, and I was so astounded by those guys. Turned out he got Dr. John. Doyle Bramhall II was there playing guitar. Dennis Crouch was the bass player, he's from Nashville. And on drums was Jay Bellerose.

How is your health now?
I feel real good. I have my moments, of course, but they're nothing to get upset

about. Every now and then I'll have a lag in my energy level. It was a hell of an ordeal—I hurt so damn bad sometimes. But I thank God, because I want to live at least five or six more years. It was heavy, man. It was. I've gotten real close to God.

Did it affect your voice?
That's about the only thing I think it didn't affect. I was singing two weeks after it was over.

Do you have a goal in mind?
I just want to sail on and do what I'm doing.

ACTIN' MAN

In the early 1990s Gregg Allman began trying his hand as an actor, with a high-profile role in the movie *Rush* and appearances on the TV series *Superboy* and *Tales From the Crypt*. Allman didn't keep his nascent acting career going, but now he says he's eager to try again. "I'd like to take a crack at another movie now that I know something about it," he says. "When I did *Rush*, if [co-star] Sam Elliott hadn't held my hand through the whole thing I don't know if I'd have gotten through it. I think I could do a better job now." Allman reports that he's had several offers in the last few years, but hasn't found the right script to leap back into the movie business with just yet. One script in particular, he laments, "was very trite—and every other line had a curse word in it." He chuckles. "My mother might see that film, you know?"

IRON AND WINE | ADELE | DURAN DURAN | ERIC JOHNSON



GREGG ALLMAN
Blues power

DECEMBERISTS
Barn burners

BRIGHT EYES
Keyed up

STING

Exploring his history,
with strings attached



ZEP'S MASTERPIECE
IN THE STUDIO
PEDAL PUSH