

June 3, 2009

## Blues man Davis Coen finds that Magnolia Sound

Davis Coen and Jimbo Mathus has a killer blues session

BY T. BALLARD LESEMANN



Davis Coen

"I think the musicians you meet in Mississippi and Memphis are more into the blues," says Charleston-based guitarist [Davis Coen](#). The young performer and songwriter regularly delivers a funky blend of R&B, Southern blues, and gospel styles in local haunts. Speaking last week about his recent experiences in clubs, jam sessions, and studios in north Mississippi, he sounds more sagely than his youthful appearance might suggest. "There's more of a blues spirit there," he says. "It's easier to find players who are willing to only play the blues. There are great things about Charleston, but it's a different crowd over there. You got a little more time, and you can hear yourself think a little more creatively. It throws a good dichotomy to what I'm trying to say in my music."

On Coen's new studio album *Magnolia Land* — a soulful collection produced over the course of the last two years — he strongly embraces the vibes of the Mississippi Delta and the antique boogie style of the region's best blues. *Magnolia Land* picks up where recent collections *Blue Lights for Yours and Mine* and *Ill Disposition* left off. Things sound impressively rich and natural. "It's two different sessions with different drummers and different bass players," says Coen. "I was kinda going for separating enough of the songs where I had a different mind-set, attitude, and outlook."

The songwriter tracked the 12 new tunes on *Magnolia Land* at the Delta Recording Service with James "Jimbo" Mathus, the sly-grinning singer/guitarist of Squirrel Nut Zippers and Knockdown South. After running the facility in the Mississippi city of Clarksdale for the last six years, Mathus recently relocated his operation to the nearby small town of Como. Mathus is a bona fide enthusiast for traditional Mississippi music — from the gutsy boogie and blues of northern Mississippi to the honky-tonk and soul from down south — he's anchored himself pretty deeply in the art of old-school studio recording. Rather than embracing state-of-the-art digital studio equipment, he takes a traditional approach and works from a collection of vintage ribbon mics, amplifiers, organs, drums, and guitars. It recalls the Sun Studio days from 60 years ago. Mathus mostly specializes in "roots, rock, blues, country, and everything in between." His recent projects have included Elvis Costello (he recorded the single "Monkey to Man" there in 2005), Big George Broc, and Duwayne Burnside. Swedish band the Hives even tracked there in 2007.

Coen started tracking the new collection in 2007 and wrapped the final songs in July 2008. With such a break in time between sessions, continuity could easily have become a difficult challenge during the mix-down.

"The way Jimbo has it set up is just one room that we're all in," says Coen. "He kind of modelled it after Sun Studios, where it's one room with a ceiling that points up so the sound kind of goes up and gets a little lost. Everybody's in a triangle shape, and you're looking at each other."

Fortunately, there's nothing out of place in the final mix that can distract from the warm sound of Coen's electric guitar solos and chordal work, or his deep-toned singing. "If I had recorded the whole thing at one time, it would have all sounded the same with similar vocal inflections and guitar licks," Coen says. "Sometimes, I like to let it breathe. We had two different drummers, but we used the same drum set in the exact same room and set-up. They had different styles, but it kind of tricks the ear." Coen only spent a few days tracking the songs with Mathus. They hired drummers Darren Dortin and Kinney Kimbrough to lay down the beats, with bassist Justin Showah and organist Lance Ashley coming in as special guests. Mix-down was a three-day stint in nearby Water Valley. "It's where Fat Possum Studios used to be," Coen says. "It's just like a little house out in the middle of the woods, about 20 miles from Oxford. Jimbo's studio and the Water Valley studio has this little synergy thing going on." *Magnolia Land* sounds more like a warm analog recording from 1969 than a modern digital project. Most of the instruments and vocal tracks were recorded live, on the spot, with everyone in the same room. The only major overdubs involved were the additional organ tracks on a few songs. "Organ can be a little abrasive if it's used too much," Coen says. "It can make things sound like a cathedral."

"I had trouble with [coming up with] the album title, but it's a line from track three 'Anna Ann,'" he adds. "It goes, 'I'm gonna find my Anna Ann in magnolia land.' I wanted to pay tribute to Mississippi, being the Magnolia State. All of the musicians on this are from Mississippi. It was recorded in Mississippi. I think it fits."