

# Reckless Country Soul

## Jason and the Scorchers



Nashville, Tennessee — There's no hint of a breeze in the sweltering Southern summer afternoon, but the rebel flags are waving wildly. There's a tall, slightly goofy figure on stage dressed in a loud red and black country and western style suit and he's cheerleading the happily intoxicated crowd into yelling out a hog call he claims "was also the battle-cry of the Confederate soldiers."

This bizarre sounding spectacle indicates that Southern rock is on the rise again, and the phenomenon is just about the brightest hope for rock and roll's cloudy future.

The above perpetrator is a former Illinois farmboy called Jason Ringenberg, and on this day he's whipping his comrades the Scorchers through a frenzied yet typically triumphant homecoming gig in front of 7000 boogie brethren here in Nashville.

This ain't just your (unfairly) stereotyped crowd of beer-swilling people though. The open-air concert is held on the picturesque campus of Vanderbilt University (Nashville is more a college than a country town), and the audience com-

prises students, hippies and punks as well as good ole boys. They're united in their enthusiasm for what is simply the most exciting Yankee rock band around.

### Cow-punk Camp

Forget tags you've heard like cow-punk or heavy metal country. Jason and the Scorchers are not urbanites playing cowboys, purist revivalists, or camp parodists. They possess the heart and soul of the best country music shot through with the raw power of the best rock and roll.

The band has yet to threaten gold, or even brass, but they've already helped change the musical face of Nashville, still known primarily as the home of country music. Veterans of the new Nashville rock scene, Jason and the Scorchers are, in the words of their new LP, *Still Standing* (at the crossroads). They're huge in Scandinavia and have pockets of fans and critics around the world convinced that they're the best rock band drawing breath. That's fine for the ego, but it hasn't exactly padded their bank balances.

"We can continue to scrape by,

breaking even or making a little bit of money, but then at 40 we'll be looking at jobs at McDonalds!" said Scorchers guitarist Warner Hodges just before their Nashville show. "Bands the critics love often go nowhere, and Jason and I have sat around and said, 'shit, hope that doesn't happen to us!'"

If there's any justice in the music biz (and sometimes we all have doubts), that won't happen to Jason and the Scorchers.

### Eclectic Electrics

Their saga began back in 1981, when a rural Illinois lad with the unstar sounding moniker of Jason Ringenberg strolled into Music City USA looking for action. He almost got more than he bargained for when he encountered three local hell-raising rockers, Hodges, drummer Perry Baggs and bassist Jeff Johnson.

"Jeff, Perry and I played in the garage, then called ourselves the Electric Boys," says Hodges. "We'd do three sets, one of Sex Pistols stuff, one of New York Dolls, and one of country songs — mostly Hank Williams — done way too fast and loud." Add Jason's ringing voice and rootsy songwriting into a merger of those styles and you're close to the Scorchers sound.

Jason's arrival meant the others got a little serious. "Jeff and I espe-

cially had a reputation for drinking too much and being fuck-ups," says Warner. "People thought Jason was crazy for playing with us, but now we've got the last laugh! I never in a million years thought we'd get a record deal. I thought I'd play with the Scorchers until I found a 'real band'. I was too damned stupid to realise I was already in one!"

### Jumping Jackrabbits

The band's live reputation as the wildest and craziest guys since Frank and Jesse James (imagine jackrabbits on speed) spread like a prairie fire through the South. REM helped them get out-of-town gigs, and their first two independent EPs, *Reckless Country Soul* and *Fervor* (both on indie label Praxis) forced reluctant record companies to sit up and take notice.

EMI picked up *Fervor*, and last year's *Lost and Found* sealed a large number of speakers. It proved too meaty, beefy, big and bouncy for the wimpy ears of most commercial radio in North America, a problem cited by just about all the young American rock bands.

Hodges is hopeful that their new LP will get a better response. "We're knocking on the air, but there's a difficult fine line," he says. "You can't sell out, but in America it's a fact that if you don't get FM airplay, for-

get it! The band is still as sloppy as hell, but some of the songs we're doing are more melodic simply out of playing together this long. Things tighten up that you didn't even want to tighten up. I want to do things with a little melody — not just bang a guitar to death and wonder why only Sex Pistols fans buy the stuff. We have more to say than that."

Jason agrees: "I want us to be seen more as a rock and roll band rather than punk, and I think the new songs are a step in the right direction."

The new LP sees heavy producer Tom Werman (Motley Crue, Twisted Sister, Cheap Trick) at the helm, so the low-budget days (*Fervor* only cost \$3000) are firmly behind them. But don't view this as do-or-die time yet. "We know it is going to happen, but it may take a while," says Jason. "This one may be just another stepping stone."

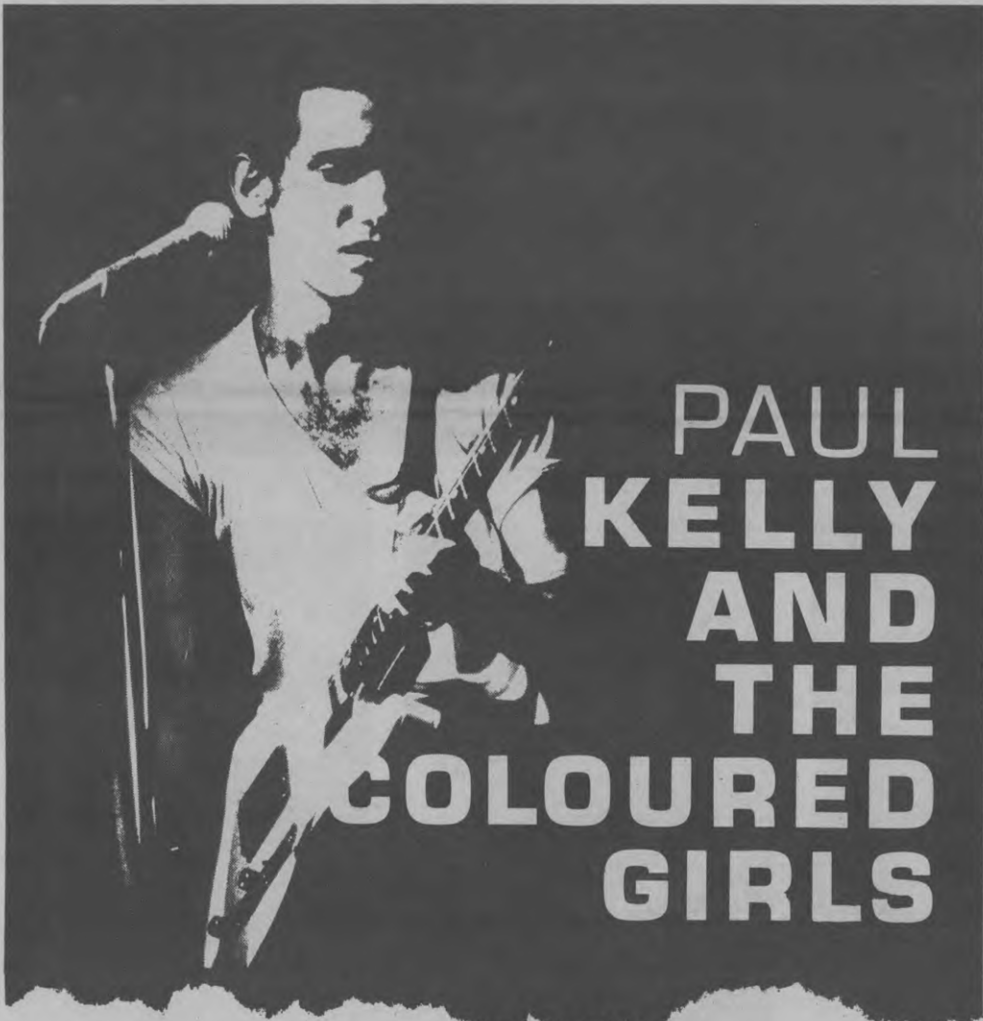
Besides, even a total transfusion couldn't take the musical blood out of their veins. Hodges' parents were both country musicians (his father played with Johnny Cash), and at the Nashville gig they were spotted wearing proud smiles. Perry Baggs' father sang gospel, Jeff Johnson was raised in the Blue Ridge mountains, and Jason reportedly hummed Woody Guthrie songs while working on the railroad and feeding pigs. Hell, these dudes have more roots than the average forest!

The Scorchers' tempestuous early days have cooled a little, but Hodges and Jason remain markedly different personalities. Hodges is the fast-living extroverted leather-clad rocker who now hangs out in New York with his actress girlfriend, while on-stage live wire Jason prefers the quiet life in the country with his new wife.

"All the great bands have had major friction," says Hodges. "We have each other's best interests at heart now, but there's still friction in the music. I like to think of what we're doing as a constant guitar-versus-vocal duel. The vocal always wins, but you can fight and try to pull it off with the guitar."

"Hey, I do get mowed down sometimes," laughs Jason.

Kerry Doole



# Gossip

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