

## Kentucky Headhunters: Still Pickin' On Nashville, But This Time Rockin' Hard + Not Lookin' Back

By [Holly Gleason](#)  
Kentucky Headhunters  
3<sup>rd</sup> + Lindley Re-Opening  
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When the Kentucky Headhunters hit country music with a low rumble and those loud guitars, people weren't sure what to make of them. Looking like hill-billy cavemen, they sang and spoke with a drawl so thick you could slice it and seemed to merge their Bill Monroe and Don Gibson with Freddie King and Muddy Waters.

If it wasn't quite a revolution – they were too well-raised and Mason-Dixon'ed for that – it tipped the glossy slickness of what was passing for mainstream country on its ear. Like the Ramones to '60s pop, the Kentucky Headhunters brought an accelerated, pumped up verve to forgotten classics like “Oh, Lonesome Me” and “Walk Softly On This Heart of Mine,”

And like the Ramones, Rockpile and even moreso Blondie in the fields of punk and new wave's nihilism, there was an innocence to their takes on Southern living that made “Dumas Walker” with his “slaw burger fries and a bottle of Ski” seem like the essence of everything a Friday or Saturday night should be. “Ragtop” was the good ole boy's Cadillac, and “Davy Crockett” harkened back to the Wild West, pioneering and yes, maybe even drummer Fred Young's honest to for real Coonskin cap.

Thing about being unique: it ain't for everybody, and the tides of what's comfortable or can be easily replicated often run the other way. There was a bumpercrop of bad Southern rock lite bands – dick-less Skynyrd's and bloated Marshall Tuckers trying to catch Headhunters' lightning in a bottle, and it didn't work. Nor did the Headhunters' filing down their eye teeth to seem less dangerous gain them any longevity in the genre.

Fact of the matter couldn't be denied: for all the “aw shucks,” “gee whiz” and Future Farmers of America jackets, this was a band that there but for the death of John Bonham was set to be signed to Led Zeppelin's Swan Song Records. The only thing truly country about them was their home in Edmon-ton, Kentucky and the fact that they had, indeed, grown up farming and carrying on out beyond the

fringe of rural America.

So, things fell apart, like they do. The band that once carried country's flag to Sturgis for Bike Week now found bikers and outlying fairs to be their bread and butter. They did a record for Elektra Records in New York with Chuck Berry's piano player Johnnie Johnson – and they tried to figure out how to fit into a dynamic that really never was meant for them.

Twenty years after **Pickin' On Nashville** turned the town upside down, earning the band and Mercury Records multi-platinum certifications, a wheelbarrow full of Grammys, CMA Album and Group of the Year designations and opening both the Academy of Country Music Awards and the Greek Amphitheatre in LA's 1991 season, they're back to scratch. Lessons learned, wins lost, music found along the way...

Ironically, they are now a tighter, bolder and more honest band. With a record fixing to come out in October called **Dixie Lullabies**, the four-piece of brothers Richard and Fred Young on electric guitar/vocals and drums, Doug Phelps on vocals and bass and Greg Martin, who remains an exacting lead guitarist decamped at 3<sup>rd</sup> & Lindsley to open the expanded and renovated club, tease their new record and play for the assembled music merchandisers in town for the Summer NAMM show.

What emerged from the freewheeling set was the unholy betrayal success dealt this band. Because while they were not just the most rocking thing on country radio, they imbued the format with a gritty bristle that defined Waylon Jennings, whose “Only Daddy That'll Walk The Line” was the show's opening song.

Facts is facts: the Kentucky Headhunters are a great rock band, filtered through the British/blue-based rock and roll of the Yardbirds, the Who, Led Zeppelin, Cream, Frankie Miller and Long John Baldry. Though the 75 minute set they played was packed with “the hits,” they also reached back into the past for a wildly foreboding “House of the Rising Son” and a torqued and tortured “Have You Ever Loved A Woman,” both delivered with enough muscle to declare ownership without saying a word.

Yes, “Dumas Walker” was all the freewheeling exuberance it was back in '91, but there was also a sense of respect for what the song had meant to people. It is

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not shame that they bring for the pop success, but homage to a moment when the possibilities for people like them – the plain, the husky, the cheap shoes’n’tube top set – were better than the guys striving and clawing.

Beyond the blues and the obvious, there were the new songs: a deliciously redneck manifesto in the title track that rocked hard but not off its rural axis, “Tumbling Roses,” a dusty, dusky song that merges the Faces most organic rambles with the kind of wistful balladry Keith Richards favors and the sweepingly melodic “Great Acoustics,” a new age love song about – if my hearing doesn’t betray me – a guy losing the girl to another girl!

What’s most heartening about the new songs isn’t that they fit so well with their “hits,” but more the juiciness of the playing, the quality of the music and the quartet’s willingness to follow their rock instincts instead of leaning towards what might access the middle-aged wasteland that is country music’s current pretty-young-thing-quake.

Honesty about their true roots allows “Oh, Lonesome Me” to bang like a barn gate – setting up Fred Young’s always jaw-dropping drum solo, all polyrhythmic, dynamic, hard-hitting yet masterful with a ferocity the spider monkey of a musician deserves. Unleash the Fred, watch what happens: whether it’s the kick drum thumpage, the toms being struck with his hands or just a showmanship that has been lost to so much of today’s empty performance posturing and flash.

Indeed, Doug Phelps bass playing – driven by melody, but so propulsive it hits you in the sternum, making your ribs rumble – and Greg Martin’s encyclopedic soloing – ranging from evoking Duane Allman to Eric Clapton, Jimmy Page to “My Favorite Things” – has never been better, Always players’ players – as evidenced by the Georgia Satellites’ Dan Baird, Hank Williams’ Jr’s Mike Daly, original Steve Earle & the Dukes guitarlinger Mike McAdam, Jack White and Foster & Lloyd/Patty Loveless vet Pete Finney in attendance – freed of the shackles of fitting in, their playing has gone to another level.

Which is perhaps the largest truth about the Kentucky Headhunters: they came of age when it was about songs and playing them within an inch of your

life. Get the best stuff – write it, find it, flush it out from old records – and see how to set it on fire in a way that is your own.

It was what made them stand out in Nashville all those years ago. Certainly they gave country music a jolt of genuine originality, drawing on the same racial charge that ignited Memphis’ poor white boys channeling the charge of black music from the South.

By scraping away the compromise, by bringing the things that make them burn front and center, it becomes a bonfire not of vanities, but of everything you need to forget, to jettison, to eschew. Sure, Richard Young – who is a fine blues singer, raw and throaty in the rough places – talked far too much, but even that couldn’t break the momentum.

Rock & roll played right, even played with the brutal punch and precision the Head’s seemingly loose show achieved, sets you free. It is a place to not think, but surrender to every primal urge you ever had. In those moments, that extra beer isn’t about escape, but celebration – of all the things you coulda been, but never bothered with cause what you have is enough, and this moment is perfect.

Perfect ain’t about getting it all right, it’s about being right in the moment. It’s about moments with so much adrenalin, thrills and thrust you don’t wanna look back or down. It was that kinda night at 3<sup>rd</sup> & Lindsley, a bar that always booked music not for the buzz, but the playing – and in a larger forum, it appears the kineticism is only going to get larger, too.

As for the Kentucky Headhunters, **Dixie Lullabies** – at least based on the 3 songs played – could be a harbinger of a future about who they are, not what a genre desperately seeking testicles wanted them to be. You can’t take the fuzz off the peaches and expect them to drop full and hard; no, that only comes from letting ’em grow wild and as they are.

Twenty years after being the biggest thing there was, it appears the Kentucky Headhunters are on the verge of being what they were meant to be: a slamming rock/roots band that fears no corner at any speed. Like the old blues guys, they ain’t afraid to sweat or make it moan.

We should all take that lesson to heart.

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