

ABE PARTRIDGE

Cotton Fields and Blood for Days

People have said that Abe Partridge sounds older than his chronological age, and there's a very good reason for that – he's packed a lot of living into his 37 years.

Those experiences, ranging from the earthy to the surreal, the spiritual light to the depths of depression, come together with gripping intensity on Partridge's second full-length album, *Cotton Fields and Blood for Days*. Over the course of ten songs, this troubadour draws listeners in with a combination of southern gothic storytelling and a dark humor reminiscent of the late Townes Van Zandt – delivered in a gravelly tone that conjures up images of Tom Waits in his barstool warming days.

Partridge may have a gift for communing with ghosts, but he's not consumed by them. Listening to him unspool tales like "Prison Tattoos" and "Out of Alabama Blues," it's impossible to ignore his knack for separating the wheat from the chaff, the gold from the muck as he ponders the further reaches of the region where he's spent so much of his life.

"There's a lot of history here and a lot to consider," says Partridge. "People like to hold on to certain things, and some of them are beautiful and worth holding onto. There are some things that are ... not so beautiful, and those need to be looked at, too. You can see that by walking around Mobile, where there are wonderful old buildings, then a few blocks away, total decimation."

Cotton Fields and Blood for Days gives listeners a tour of both the bleakness and the beauty – all couched in character studies that could pass for short stories, narrated by folks as varied as the suburban everydude of "I Wish I was a Punk Rocker" and the pensive inward-looking protagonist who muses "Our Babies Will Never Grow Up to Be Astronauts."

And while he grants that he doesn't use a heavy hand with autobiographical detail, he admits to weaving himself into the banjo-laced blues "Ride Willie Ride or Thoughts I had while Contemplating Both the Metaphysical Nature of Willie Nelson and his Harassment by the Internal Revenue Service."

"That's one I wrote after my own issues with the IRS," he says with a chuckle. "I had a job where I did a lot of driving around to little towns in the middle of nowhere and ended up hitting a lot of thrift stores where I developed a knack for finding rare records. Some I kept, and some I'd sell on e-Bay, doing pretty well – until the tax man showed up and socked me with a huge bill. Since I was listening to a lot of Willie at the time, it seemed kind of ironic – and kind of appropriate."

Abe Partridge grew up in Alabama, a grunge-loving child of the early '90s, until he had an awakening that sent him miles away – both literally and figuratively. By his early twenties, he had completed divinity school and moved to a rural enclave of Kentucky – no high-speed internet, no jam-packed cable systems – in order to pursue his calling as an evangelical minister, preaching the gospel to a small-but-fervent congregation of true believers.

It was there that he discovered what would be one of the biggest influences on his musical personality – the dark and stormy acoustic blues of pioneers like Son House, whose cut-to-the-bone performance style really resonated with Partridge as he progressed on his journey, both musically and spiritually.

"It's funny, once I got to be part of the [religious] community, all of those rock records had to go, since they were evil," he recalls with a laugh. "But they had no problem with the old blues stuff, even though the

material wasn't all that different. They were okay with me listening to these old records, because they grew up with them too. Besides, Son House was actually a preacher before he started playing for people, so..."

Like his forebear, Partridge slowly found himself in a period of questioning, not so much his core beliefs, but the way in which he was pursuing them. Experiencing a second awakening of sorts, the pharmacist's son walked away from his post and returned home to examine his spiritual self, moving back to his childhood home and essentially rebuilding from the ground up.

"I had a wife and two children, and no real idea of what I wanted to do, and that's when I really started writing songs, though it took a while for me to let anyone else hear them," he recalls. "But I knew I had to do something. I resorted to songwriting because it helps me express myself in a way I could not in any other form."

While that period of his life certainly had a profound impact on him, he was also shaped by the stretch that would follow – serving with the Air Force in Qatar in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom, where the desert gave up secrets that would find their way into some of his darker material.

Upon his return to the states, where he's still part of the service, he began taking his stories to the streets – literally. He'd take his first shot at live performance with a roll of the dice – by sending a cell-phone recording of some of his original songs to the folks at the Gulf Coast Songwriter Shootout, an Alabama conclave that brings together some of the region's most acclaimed up-and-coming talent.

"I took the stage last. I was well aware that my songs were different than everything else that anybody did that night," he recalls. "I had no idea how they would be received, and I had to fight back anxiety like I had never had before to get on the stage. I was inwardly preparing myself for embarrassment. Well, I played my 3 songs, and the crowd went wild."

As luck would have it, the Nashville-based songwriter and producer Shawn Byrne was also a participant at the Shootout and immediately approached Partridge about recording him. "I thought he was full of it," recalls Abe, "but I googled him and found out he was legit, so I went up to Nashville and recorded having only played that one show." The result was *White Trash Lipstick*. That recording would end up in the hands of movie producer Scott Lumpkin, who instantly became a rabid fan.

Meanwhile Partridge started playing around his hometown – "lucky enough to start off in places such as The Listening Room where people came to listen, not to drink to background music," as he puts it – then began expanding his comfort zone in ever growing circles, hitting Georgia to Texas, Florida to Tennessee.

In the spring of 2017, Abe returned to Nashville to record with Byrne, who brought in some of his favorite session players for what would become *Cotton Fields and Blood for Days*. It would be this recording that would prompt Lumpkin to offer Partridge a deal on July 4th of 2017 on his newly formed Skate Mountain Records. Lumpkin says, "He's absolute magic. He simply has so much material, he's a real gem. I love his music."

But for Partridge, it is still all about the live performance. "Playing for people, striking a chord with people, for me that's what it's really all about," he says. "It's like with preaching, you need to reach them emotionally, you need to make a connection, to make people feel and believe. That's always what I've wanted to do."

That connection is undeniable on *Cotton Fields and Blood For Days*. Plug in, and its power will flow through you and keep you energized for a long time to come.