

FROM RESCUE UNIT TO DEAD... AND BACK AGAIN A CONVERSATION WITH JIMMY HERRING

By Fred Adams

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Jimmy Herring's resume reads like a who's-who of American musical history. As humble of a superstar musician as one could ever meet, Jimmy never dreamed that he would one day be presented with the opportunity to play with nearly every one of his heroes.

"I started playing when I was 13," recalls Jimmy, now 38. "I started because of the records that my brothers were playing in the house all the time – Hendrix, the Allman Brothers, the Santana 'Abraxas' album. I got my first guitar when I was 11, but I didn't really try to play it until I was 13. These songs were sticking in my head and I just thought 'I've got to learn how to do that.' The one that really got to me was the live (Allman) Fillmore album. Even as a kid, I'd be walking around humming Dickey Betts guitar melodies, 'Elizabeth Reed,' the solo in 'One Way Out,' the power just knocked me out.

"I really started to get serious when I was about 17," he continues. "My dad sold my motorcycle. I came home from school one day and went out to the shed and my bike was gone. It was a Honda XL350 that my brother had bought that would really move. It was stolen from him, and he got another motorcycle. Then, they found it, so he sold it to my dad for \$100. He gave it to me when I was 13. But he busted me riding it on the street a couple times and I came home one day and he had sold it –it was just gone. When my motorcycle was gone, I really lost a lot of my freedom, so I just started playing more and more, trying to learn the songs that were stuck in my head, and it became something that I was really passionate about."

As his passion grew, Jimmy started playing with his friends. He quickly grew frustrated by his inability to find the right singer for his bands.

"I was really into Led Zeppelin, the Allman Brothers, and Aerosmith. But there was no one around how could sing like that. We could play the tunes, but we couldn't sing. We tried and tried to find a good singer, but you know a good band can really be made to sound pretty bad by a bad singer.

"That's when one of my brothers said 'Why don't you check out instrumental music.' I said, 'What's that? Music without any lyrics? You are kidding me, there are bands that don't have a singer.' So by the time I was 17, I was getting really serious into progressive music like the Dixie Dregs, John McLaughlin Al DiMeola and the Mahavishnu Orchestra. That completely changed my life. From the time I was 17 to 25, I was just a complete Dregs Head.

“The Dregs toured and came through my area constantly,” Jimmy recalls fondly. “I was sort of a Dreg addict. I got in trouble a couple of times taking off from school to go see them. Steve Morse is such an imposing figure. He stood up there like a Viking and tore the guitar to bits. Then five minutes later he’d just blow your mind with some poignant, beautiful mellow phrase that he’d play. You’d here elements of classical music with funk, rock-n-roll and bluegrass type influences, which I really love. I think seeing them play that many times while I was such a young age, made me strive to practice a lot.”

When he turned 20, Jimmy moved to Georgia, where he befriended a number of up and coming local musicians including Jeff Sipe, Charlie Williams, and Kofi and Oteil Burbridge. While the band worked on putting together enough original material to open for bigger bands coming through Atlanta, Sipe wandered to the Little Five Points Pub and found an influence unlike any other – Col. Bruce Hampton.

“The band didn’t even have a name and never played a gig,” Jimmy recalls. “It never got to that point because Sipe started playing with Bruce and we started seeing less and less of him. Then Oteil started playing with Bruce, then Charlie too. Then Sipe called me one day and said, ‘Man you need to come down to the Little Five Points Pub. We are playing with this crazy guy Bruce Hampton and it is the most liberating musical experience in any of our lives.’

“I went down to hear them, and they had told me to bring a guitar and an amp. I left it in the car, not wanting to seem presumptuous. They played three sets at the Pub without really having any songs. But they did it. I sat there the first set just dying to play because it was so good. Then the second set came and they still hadn’t asked me to play. I just sat there spell bound, I was just blown away. Finally, on the third set, they asked if I brought my guitar and told me to go get it. I came in and the whole thing just exploded. Right after the gig, Bruce asked if I wanted to join the band. He said it didn’t really pay anything, but I didn’t care, I just wanted to be in this band, it was the best band I’ve ever heard.”

“We were playing at the Pub on Monday nights. Everybody in the band had to scramble just to get their rent paid, but that was the one night of the week where you didn’t have any limits on you. You could go to the Five Points Pub and play with Bruce, and you knew you were going to get your ya-ya’s out. Because you didn’t have any limits. If you wanted to come on stage with one string or tie your left arm behind your head and play the gig that way, you could do it. And you could play anything you wanted and nobody told you what to play or how to play or how to look or dress. It was that one gig that was a total outlet for creativity and nothing else. “

It was during this time, in early 1990, that several members of Widespread Panic found themselves in Atlanta to see what this Monday night madness was all about.

Jimmy says, “If it wasn’t for Widespread Panic, no one would have probably ever known about us. JB, Mikey, and David came up to us after the set and said ‘You guys are nuts, what happened to you, you’re crazy.’”

“They invited us to come play with them and it was one of the first gigs we ever did outside of the Pub. After that, they asked us to go on the road. That’s when Bruce started in on, ‘You’re getting ready to go into a whole other world boys,’ like he thought we wouldn’t last on the road, like we were to wimpy, or that my wife would make me come home.”

For several years, ARU played between 280 and 300 shows a year. Before the band broke up, Hampton would actually be the first to leave, a move precipitated by health concerns. While ARU did continue touring for a period of time after Bruce’s departure, the band had already made its impact on Jimmy’s life.

“Being in that band was the single most important thing I think that has ever happened to me in the development of my musical life,” Jimmy says. “ARU is the nearest and dearest thing to my heart because I think that was the whole reason for anything and everything that has happened to me since. I think that Bruce was the most profound influence that I’ve had in the past 15 years. Although he didn’t tell us what to play, I just think his philosophy was a profound influence.

“As a result of playing with them, I got exposed to some great groups like Widespread Panic, Phish and Blues Traveler and got to become friends and tour and play with them. You know, there was a serious musical renaissance going on in the early 90’s around here in Atlanta. And it all tied in with the Grateful Dead in a way that I was not aware of at the time.

“Our fans, although we didn’t have that many of the time, always thought we sounded a lot like the Grateful Dead in their early days. I never could understand it. I didn’t have any of their records, other than my brothers having ‘Europe 72.’ Oteil certainly never had any Dead records; neither did Matt Mundy or Jeff Sipe. Bruce knew some of those guys and he remembered and respected them, but we never listened to their music a lot. So we thought it was funny that people would compare us to the Dead and we didn’t understand it.”

“Then one day I was home cleaning out my basement when I was home off tour and I had the radio on Z-93 and the Dunham show came on and they played some vintage Dead from like ‘68 or ‘69. I had to stop what I was doing and sit down and listen. They were totally improvising and were out there as hell. I heard it and all of the sudden, it clicked that we did sound like the Grateful Dead back in those days.

“What Bruce was trying to get us to do was just fearlessly explore, and that is what the Grateful Dead were doing. And it knocked me out. I called Bruce right after it got done playing and said ‘I just heard a 45 minute long improvisation by the Grateful Dead that

absolutely knocked me down. I could not believe how good it was and how fearless they were.’ He said ‘Yeah man, they were unbelievable.’”

Jimmy started listening to some of the Dead’s live tapes, but quickly decided to stop. “I was afraid that it was going to influence me,” he recalls. “At the time, so many people in our genre were influenced by the Dead. I thought it would be important for us to not be, even though we were and didn’t really know it.”

The next step in Jimmy’s now heralded career came when he received a phone call from one of his heroes, Allman Brothers drummer Butch Trucks.

“At the time, when I wasn’t on the road with ARU,” Jimmy recalls, “Derek Trucks would call me up and ask me to come play with him for a month back when he was about 14. We were playing a gig in Florida and Butch came out and said he really liked the chemistry between us. He was looking at putting a band together to play some when the Allman Brothers weren’t touring, and he asked if I knew any good bass players. I said ‘Man, I know the Michael Jordan of bass players’ and told him about Oteil. Little did I know then that he would wind up becoming an Allman. Frogwings had a lot of great moments that I’ll cherish forever.”

During rehearsals for the second Frogwings tour, Jimmy received a phone call that he will never forget.

“I was actually at a Frogwings rehearsal out in the woods in Gray, GA when the phone rang. It was T Lavitz (whom had become a good friend of Jimmy’s during T’s stint with Panic) and he asked me if I wanted to play with Bill Cobham and Alphonso Johnson. I said ‘You’ve got to be kidding me, where do I sign up.’ He said they were going to fly me to LA to have to audition, but ‘as soon as they hear you, they’ll give you the gig.’ I said ‘Oh man, I’m nervous, what do I do.’

“T told me to go buy ‘Blues for Allah,’ the Grateful Dead album. I was like, ‘what?’ He said, ‘Yeah, we’re going to be playing Grateful Dead music.’ I said ‘You mean to tell me that you, Billy Cobham, and Alphonso Johnson are calling me to come play Grateful Dead songs.’ I didn’t mean it condescending, I was just shocked. He told me the whole concept, so I said ‘ok,’ went and bought the album. So, they flew me out for the audition and as soon as it was over they said, ‘Jimmy, you’re the guy.’

“When I played with them on that first tour, I could barely breathe. Three of my biggest heroes, I was in a band with. I was really knocked out by that. It was an awesome experience to play with those guys.”

It was also during this period of his care that Jimmy first immersed himself into the vast catalogue of the Dead.

“I had no real previous exposure to the Grateful Dead, other than the times my bothers would play ‘Europe 72,” Jimmy recalls. “But at the time, when I listened to it as a kid, it didn’t hit me as hard cause it was more subtle. At that time, when I was a kid, I needed to

be hit between the eyes with excessive testosterone. The Dregs and the Allman Brothers really gave me that. So did Led Zeppelin and Aerosmith, because it was rocking hard. The Dead, now that I've been playing that music for a while, it blows my mind the incredible body of music they have. There are just so many songs, and they are improvising. The way they went fearlessly right into uncharted territory with no blockage. It's so funny how things have all come full circle."

The circle grew much broader when Jimmy received a phone call to come audition for Dead bassist Phil Lesh in January 2000. Jimmy toured with Phil in April 2000, then went home thinking that gig was over.

"When I got home, they tried to get me to go out on the road with Jazz Is Dead for 37 dates, and I just couldn't do it. I needed to stay home and be a father. I told my wife, for the first time in 12 years, that I was going to stay home and take the summer off. Phil's gig had given me enough to be able to stay home and not work for the summer.

"Then," he says, "the Allman Brothers called me four days later and said 'We're kicking Dickey out and you're the new guy. Butch wasn't going to take no for an answer. I told him, 'Butch, man, I can't take Dickey's spot. He didn't die. Now if he was retiring, and asked me to take his place, or if he had unfortunately passed away, then that's one thing. But Dickey is still a vibrant, unbelievable musician, and his fans are not going to be thrilled to see me standing there in Dickey's place.' Butch said 'Just shut the hell up and learn the music. We have rehearsal next week. You've got three days of rehearsal before you hit the tour.'

"I called Warren Haynes immediately and asked what to do. He said 'Jimmy, that's really weird. I'm not telling you not to do it, but the Allman Brothers without Dickey?'

"They had to talk me into it. I said no for five days, but they said 'no, you are doing it.' I kept telling them I just couldn't. But two of my best friends were in the band in Derek and Oteil, and I knew they would help me through. I leaned on them and joined the band for a summer. During that summer, I had uneasy feelings the whole time. The press was hounding me, following the bus everywhere we went and trying to get me to say bad stuff about Dickey. I just said that Dickey Betts was the main reason that I picked up a guitar and I wasn't about to say anything bad about him. It was just a really strange place to be because it was sort of the band that was responsible for me starting to play."

At the same time, "Phil is calling me up in my hotel room while I'm on Allman tour and saying, 'Jimmy, we are starting a core band and we want you to be in it.' I was like, 'wow, that's incredible, but what do I do, I'm in the Allman Brothers.' He goes 'man, I'm so happy for you, I think it's great that you are in the Allman Brothers, but we really need you.'

"So, I had to choose between the two. If anybody would have asked me whose music I enjoyed more, man, I grew up in North Carolina, I'm a southern boy, and I've lived in

Georgia for 17 years. The Allman Brothers are the pinnacle. That's the stuff that is closest to my heart and was the biggest influence on me.

"But, in Phil's band, I didn't have to replace a living legend. And Warren was in the band too, so it wasn't like I had to replace Jerry Garcia. I talked with Derek and Oteil about it at length, and they told they wanted me to stay but they also wanted me to do what's best for me.

"I let them know that I was going to step down after the summer. That was all I was supposed to do to anyway, but by the middle of the summer, they had more falling out with Dickey and started telling me they wanted me to stay. I was hoping the situation with him was going to get better, but it was getting worse. I really believed with all of my heart that when I stepped down that Dickey and the band would work out their differences and it was going to be the Allman Brothers again the way it was supposed to be.

"Then, Allen Woody passed away a week later. With me stepping down, and Allen passing away, the logical thing for them to do was to call Warren, and they did. Warren, Derek and myself were all kind of passing the hat back and forth, playing both gigs, because they had both played with Phil before I did. I got the audition because of them. Most people think it was because of Jazz Is Dead, but Phil wasn't really impressed with that band. He called me because Warren and Derek told him to.

"In the Allman Brothers," Jimmy continues, "there is not a big outlet for me harmonically because it limits me to a couple certain tonalities. The dorian tonality and the major pentatonic tonality are about the only tones they play in, which limits you, even though you are very free within those parameters.

"In the Phil camp, you have incredible freedom of tonalities. They play so many different styles and at one time or another they will explore nearly all the different types of tonalities. In that respect, that gives you more freedom than even the Allman Brothers. But, in Phil's band, he didn't want a lead guitar player; he wanted a band that always played lead. That's a very difficult thing to do because nobody wants to step on each other.

"In the Allman Brothers you can't play as out and weird. You can do it, you just have to be very careful about how you do it. In Phil's band, you can play out as hell anytime you want. In the Allmans, you get featured, you get to stand up and swing the bat, uninterrupted, for five minutes at a time. In Phil's band, everybody is always soloing and Phil does not want one guy to shine more than another. He wants everybody playing off of each other all the time. He always said that if you find yourself playing in your own space, stop, listen, react. So that was a huge challenge. I'm always up for a challenge, so that's one of the reasons I ended up going with Phil, because I was learning so much from playing with him. That dude knows so much about conventional harmony, he's like a Beethoven. Phil Lesh is a harmonic genius.

“In the Allman Brothers, I was afraid that if I stayed in their band that they would not have a future. I’m not the kind of songwriter who writes songs that Gregg is going to jump on. I knew that if Warren came in, him and Gregg have an awesome rapport. They’ve worked together for many years, they write songs together very well, and I just figured it as the best thing for the band.”

As for his future with Phil’s band, Jimmy says, “That’s up to Phil. All of us in the band definitely think that Phil is still going to want to do his band. Maybe he’ll do it less, but we’ve been working a lot. Phil is 62 years old. Whenever I would get tired on the road, I would think how could I even say anything, he’s 62 and he’s not even tired. He blows my mind, his stamina and endurance are just unbelievable.

“Phil once referred to his band as a sports car and playing while The Other Ones is like riding a train. Both are valid, but sometimes you want a sports car and sometimes you want a train. I think that the more that he plays with The Other Ones, the more he’s going to want to drive the sports car again.”

In many ways, Jimmy finds comparisons between Phil’s band and his own, Project Z. “The whole Project Z thing was about seeing how far we could go without a song. We were just picking up where the old ARU left off. But Phil does it on a nightly basis, too. He’ll just pick a key and say ‘ok we’re going to groove in D-sharp minor until it feels right to move to the next song.’ I’ve learned so much from Phil about the way he does his set lists. My favorite sets are the ones where there is never a pause between songs. Some of my favorite moments in that band were things that went on between songs. It could last 2 minutes, or it could be 20, and I loved that not knowing and totally leaving it up to chance and totally serving off the moment, because that is what we did with Bruce, so I always loved that opportunity. And that’s what the Dead guys are doing, too. When they asked me about doing The Other Ones, I jumped on it. Not for the money, but I am learning something here. This is like going to school.

“I really feel bad that I haven’t had more time for Project Z,” Jimmy adds. “It is a great band and is my true musical calling, I think. I’ve just been so busy that if I were to come off the road and then rush off the go play with them, I wouldn’t have a life with my family. So it’s hard to make that happen and still justify it to myself that I’m away from my kids, and missing my son’s soccer games, or missing my daughter getting an award at school. My wife has had to deal with all that by her self for so long. She’s sacrificed everything so I could be a musician. Now that I’m in a position that I don’t have to tour to pay the rent, it’s time to give her a break and for me to take the kids to practice and pick them up from school.

But that hardly means that we’ve seen then last of the Z, let alone Jimmy Herring. “There is definitely going to be more for Project Z,” he says. “We are going to do another record, probably in January. I’ve been writing stuff, but not all of it is really Z material. That is part of my plight, whether to do a really eclectic record or do several different projects. I have all the stuff I’m writing and I’m influenced by the music that I’ve been playing the

past two to three years with the Allman Brothers and the Grateful Dead camp. That experience has effected me and influenced me as a composer.”

When he does return to the studio, Jimmy plans to bring several guests along. “There are a lot of great people I’ve met over the last few years that I’d like to work with,” he says. ‘Greg Osby, he’s an awesome saxophone player. When he played with us in Camden, he was really holding back because he didn’t want to step on anybody. He really loves the philosophy that Phil has were we all play at the same time and work off of each other. I want to work with him, with Robert Randolph, John Medeski, Susan Tedeschi, Derek Trucks, and obviously anything I do Jeff Sipe is the man as far as drummers go. But I would also love to do more records with John Molo, Rob Barraco, and Warren.

“But I’m not in a hurry because I want this next record to be really good. The record company has been extremely patient, but I do still owe them two records. They know that the record that I’m doing for them will be better if I’m not spread too thin. They don’t want me to come off a tour and go straight into the studio I’d rather be at home because my heart wouldn’t really be into it.”

There is no doubt that Jimmy Herring has made a name for himself as one of the top guitarist in the world today. He has accomplished so much already, yet he continues to evolve, and seemingly has yet to reach his peak. With that in mind, there is no telling what the future may hold, let alone where Jimmy will turn up next.