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VIBES | FEATURE 03.05.03

A Crowe's new nest

Rich Robinson returns with Hookah Brown

BY OMAR PEREZ

Minus the bad haircuts, the Black Crowes' Robinson brothers -- guitarist Rich and singer Chris -- were the closest American equivalent to the Gallagher brothers of Oasis. Years spent fighting and bickering between them, however, took their toll early last year, when -- almost two decades after forming in Atlanta -- the band announced it would go on indefinite hiatus.

"Working with the Crowes and Chris was great, but it also had baggage. Because he is my brother and it was 18 years of doing one thing," says Rich Robinson, whose latest project, Hookah Brown, has since become the focus of his attention. "I was really proud of what we did as the Crowes, but this is a new thing and we're writing new songs."

After the Crowes went on hiatus, Robinson, who now lives in Connecticut, worked on the band's final live album and kept busy with other non-Crowes projects, penning the score for a friend's play (*The Mayor's Limo*) and helping out with the solo debut of former Spacehog vocalist Royston Langdon. Meanwhile, Robinson continued writing songs.

"It was fun doing all that other stuff, but I wanted to get out and [play in a band again]," he says.

Last year, Robinson spent about three months jamming with a string of musicians in a loaner loft in downtown Manhattan, looking for the right chemistry. He found it in drummer Bill Dobrow and bassist Fionn O'Lochlainn. Meanwhile, Robinson's ties with Hookah Brown vocalist John Hogg, go back to the late '90s, when the Crowes took Hogg's band Moke out on tour.

"I was trying to figure what kind of band to put together," Robinson says. "I know I didn't want to recreate the Crowes. I wanted it to be something different."

Still, this apple doesn't fall far from the tree. Some of Hookah Brown's first songs (of about 20 so far) retain the blues tinge that made the Crowes famous. Southern hooks and soaring gospel moments propel songs like "Cut the World," itself an outtake from the Crowes' *Lions* album, while a dirgeful bass line basks behind a wall of wah-wah guitars and Hogg's vocal bravado -- at times melodic, piercing in others -- on tracks like "Black Cloud."



MURDER OF CROWES: Rich Robinson (left) rebounds from the Black Crowes' demise with his new band, Hookah Brown. (MSO)

Hookah Brown

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"I'm just going to write music the way I write music," Robinson says. "If it sounds like the Crowes, it does. And if it doesn't, it doesn't."

Just like in his former band, Robinson serves as Hookah Brown's chief music composer and, for the first time, he also dabbles in lyric writing. A bonus for Rich: For the first time in years, no one in the band is blowing up while writing songs. "It's definitely a less volatile working relationship," he says.

Nowadays, hearing Rich talk about Chris, who has embarked on a solo career, it seems the tension between the two has diffused considerably. That's no doubt due to having less interaction on the road or in the studio.

"We speak about more brotherly things instead of music or business," Rich says. "Now we talk about kids or whatever. It's definitely refreshing."

Getting used to a whole new group of musicians reminds Robinson of his alma mater's early days. And although Hookah Brown doesn't have a record deal yet, Robinson hopes to release a proper debut by September. Still, he's in no rush.

"It is sort of like starting over," he says. "I find it really fun actually, and it's right for where we are as a band. I'm playing small clubs and taking it little by little. I'm not in a big hurry. I'd rather just do it right than do it fast."

music@creativeloafing.com

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