

Charlie Daniels at 75

Still Playing Music Despite the Loss of Friends
and Fellow Musicians

by Derek Halsey

When the Charlie Daniels Band tours America this year, you can bet that they will play their hit song, “The Devil Went Down To Georgia.” That song first appeared on the *Million Mile*

Reflections album which was Daniels’ biggest selling recording ever, reaching the impressive Triple Platinum status. It is the song that, along with his total body of work, probably won him a coveted membership on the Grand Ole Opry in 2008.

However, long before “The Devil Went Down To Georgia” gained popularity in 1979, the Charlie Daniels Band (CDB) cut a swath across the United States beginning in the early 1970s.

Sometimes touring with the fellow southern rock legends the Marshall Tucker Band (MTB), the CDB performed many concerts in big and small towns alike in the pre-*Million Mile Reflections* days of the mid-1970s, a time that many fans view as the band’s Golden Age.

Daniels first gained radio airplay with his song “Uneasy Rider” in 1972. That was followed by the successful 1974 album *Fire On The Mountain*, which featured future CDB standards like

“South’s Going To Do It Again,” “Long Haired Country Boy,” “Trudy” and “Caballo Diablo” as well as one of the best live southern rock performances ever recorded, “No Place Left To Go.” *Fire On The Mountain* was the first of a series of classic CDB albums produced by ace musician

and Alabama Music Hall of Famer Paul Hornsby that helped to define an era.

The Hornsby-produced recordings by the CDB include; *Fire On The Mountain*, *Saddle Tramp*, *Nightrider*, *High Lonesome* and *Midnight Wind*. These projects are filled with some of Daniels’ best story songs, numbers that could only be written by someone well-traveled. Daniels has added some of those old school gems to his concert set lists in recent years including “Saddle Tramp” and “Billy The Kid.”

“Let’s take ‘Billy The Kid,’ first of all,” says Daniels. “I was in

El Paso, Texas, back in my wild, misspent youth and I was sitting on a city bus and Pancho Villa (*Mexican revolutionary in the early 1900s*) used to hang out in that part of the country. I got to thinking about a song about Pancho Villa. It just came into my mind; ‘*the southern part of Texas, east and west of El Paso, where the mighty Franklin Mountains, guard the trail to Mexico,*’ and I was sitting there looking at the Franklin



years later, I sat down and took that idea and wrote 'Billy The Kid.' As far as our set goes, we'll do 'Saddle Tramp,' we'll do 'Billy The Kid' and we'll do 'Birmingham Blues.' And we do a new instrumental that is about ten minutes long that features all of the guys in the band called 'Black Ice.' The thing about it is, you can only put so many tunes like that in a set. You can't load the whole set up with those kinds of songs. So, we'll do 'Saddle Tramp' and 'Black Ice' in the same set. If we do a long set, we may do one of the others."

"Saddle Tramp" is one of Daniels' many songs based on his appreciation of the history of the Old West. His love of horses and time spent west of the Mississippi River as a young man helped to bring his cowboy songs to life. The cowboy theme was one he shared with Toy Caldwell, guitarist, songwriter and leader of the aforementioned Marshall Tucker Band.

"I don't remember having a conversation *per se* with Toy about cowboyin', but Toy was into horses and I was, too," says Daniels. "I was very much into it. In fact, I used to go out west to ranches. I've been a couple of times to the O6 Ranch out near Big Bend (TX) and do what they call 'going out with the wagon' where you'd go and stay out and sleep on bed rolls and brand calves and that sort of thing. I know that Toy got into team roping for a while. I've never heard anybody play like Toy did. To this day, people may copy what he does or something, but nobody could grab what Toy did. Toy paid no attention to convention. Toy didn't copy anybody. Toy just grabbed a guitar and whatever came into his mind, he just did it. It was great to listen to and it was so inventive. And when he sang, he sang wide open, man. He didn't hide that South Carolina accent or nothing. 'Here I am. I'm Toy Caldwell. I play this guitar this way. I sing this way. I hope you all like it. If you don't, I can't help it. Here it is.' He was a very unique character."

Daniels has fond memories of the days when the MTB was hitting on all cylinders.

"That was one of the hottest bands that I ever heard," says Daniels. "When Tommy was alive and when they used to go balls to the walls onstage, it was so unorthodox. It was so unconventional. One of the big parts of that band, and I

don't think he ever got enough credit for it, was George McCorkle and that electric rhythm guitar that he played was bang-slamming, just taking a straight pick and playing all six strings. He played the electric guitar in the same style a lot of people would play an acoustical guitar. Wide open. He was such a big part of that sound. And Toy and Tommy picking with their thumbs and Paul (Riddle) playing the drums and throwing in licks he thought of to throw in there whether anybody else would or not. And while the saxophone was not an anomaly, the flute (played by Jerry Eubanks) was almost an anomaly in a band like that. I mean, you go along with a real country sound, with singer Doug Gray front and center, and all of a sudden a flute comes out of nowhere. It was so unconventional and so much fun to listen to, and when they played, the energy just poured off the stage. Where Tommy stood onstage, it looked like it had been raining. Tommy just poured sweat off of him. It fell off in drops onto the floor. They'd go so hard, up there hitting them thumbs together on those instruments. What a great band."

However, tragedy hit the Marshall Tucker Band in their prime with the death of Tommy in 1980. Then, 13 years later, after the original lineup of the band had broken up, Toy died in 1993. McCorkle died of cancer in 2007. The deaths hit Daniels hard.

"What a sad, sad story," says Daniels. "I remember Tim (Caldwell, Toy and Tommy's brother) died and then Tommy died just a month or so later. I was in California when Tommy died. I just kept calling (after Tommy's car accident) and had people calling me. I thought, 'Tommy is going to get better. This just can't happen.' We were out there doing television and I kept calling daily and daily and finally George (McCorkle) called me and said, 'Charlie, he's gone. He's out of here.' So we canceled the Dinah Shore Show and came back to the funeral. When Toy died, it was the day the World Trade Towers blew up the first time in New York. We were playing Radio City Music Hall that night with Lynyrd Skynyrd and my manager David called me about 8 o'clock in the morning and he told me and, what can you say. We traveled so many miles together and were such good friends. We did more stuff. I



mean, we traveled, I can't tell you how many miles and shows. Weeks on end we'd travel together. My mother was in the fairly late stages of cancer then and I had taken my family to New York, my wife and my son, to get away from it and see a couple of shows and kind of have a little time away from it. I called Abby (Toy's wife) and said, 'Abby, I just can't come to the funeral. I just can't do it. It ain't my time to be doing things like that.' And, she understood."

Back in the height of the southern rock era, Daniels hosted an all-star concert in Nashville called The Volunteer Jam. The shows were released as live record albums and a movie was filmed of the concert as well. However, many of Daniels' most memorable jams back in the day took place off stage.

"I used to go down to Dickey Betts' place sometimes when we were recording in Macon and he'd have us out to his house and we do a BBQ or

something on Sunday afternoon," says Daniels. "We'd have some pretty good little jams while sitting on some bales of hay out in his barn. Just some acoustic stuff, singing songs and messing around and having a good time. Some of the favorite jams that I've ever had with my band and myself was when we'd have time to sit in the dressing room and we'd have amplifiers back there and we'd sit and jam. We got into some great jams. And, I used to go over to Toy and Tommy's dressing room when we'd play together and I'd bring my fiddle over and Toy would get on the steel or the guitar and Tommy would get on the bass and we'd sit there and play off the cuff."

When you have been around as long as Daniels, sooner or later you are going to end up losing friends and band mates along the way, as the Marshall Tucker Band story above testifies. However, a couple of deaths in the last two years

have hit very close to home for Daniels. Tommy Crain, Daniels' right hand man on guitar throughout most of the 1970s Golden Age, died last year in January of 2011. Crain wrote and sung one of the CDB's most beloved songs, "Cumberland Mountain Number 9." And then, boom. Taz DiGregorio, Daniels' keyboardist for over 40 years, died in a car wreck while on the way to a CDB gig this past October.

"I wouldn't replace him for a while," says Daniels, about DiGregorio. "When I got word about Taz, I was playing down close to Atlanta that night and my bus was already there and the band bus was on the way. They were running a couple of hours behind us. About 5:15 Atlanta time, my driver called me on my intercom and said my manager David, 'wants you to call him.' I knew immediately that something was wrong. He called me and he just came out and said, 'Charlie, Taz got killed this morning out on Interstate 40.' If you ever have to tell anybody anything like that, it is better if you don't try and soft-soak it, just come out with it because the worst is said. I didn't know what to say. But I waited until the band bus got in and I got on and got all of the guys up and told them and we all headed back to Nashville."

Daniels mourned Taz hard and then soon went back on tour. The show must go on. Yet, every now and then, a momentary thought of Taz will give him a jolt.

"During the time before we replaced him, something would come up in a song, his signature part that he had done like his piece on 'Saddle Tramp' or a part that he had originated and played," says Daniels. "And, it was during a drum solo when I was sitting behind stage and one of the guys started walking across and for a millisecond I thought it was Taz going across the stage. It didn't last that long and I knew he wasn't there, but there are little moments like that. We were together for 40 years. He was my buddy, my friend, for a long, long time. We saw each other through a lot of things."

But, life rolls on and Daniels finally replaced DiGregorio recently when he hired veteran keyboardist Shannon Wickline. The rest of the CBD includes 40-year veteran Charlie Hayward, Pat

McDonald, Chris Wormer and Bruce Brown.

"I love touring," says Daniels. "I wouldn't have it any other way. If I didn't like it, I'd quit it. I love it. I love what I do. I love the people I do it with. I love the people I do it for. In so far as to being nice to fans is concerned, my life is a dream. Nothing aggravates me more than to see some artist mistreat a fan. These people have made my life a dream, and they are still making my life a dream. If people didn't enjoy what I was doing, I wouldn't be doing it any longer. I'd be sitting in my house playing scales or something. I have the greatest respect for anybody that spends their money to come and see us." •

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