

If *Shake Your Money Maker* announced the Black Crowes arrival, their follow-ups trumpeted success at the critics with a thumb to the nose. *The Southern Harmony and Musical Companion* rolled out its own red carpet as the boys grew into their skin. *America* was a bar fight in the land of the funky. The band was selling millions of records, but the brothers Robinson weren't speaking, and the whole ball of wax was on the verge of meltdown. With their fourth album, *Three Snakes and One Charm*, our heroes are at a moment of clarity. Rich Robinson tells *Flatiron* how the smiles returned—and how he deals with journalists who rub him the wrong way.

"It actually started before we did *America*, and lasted until midway through last year," says Rich Robinson of the tension that threatened to break up the Crowes. "Every band has to go through phases, and when you live with twelve people on a bus for twelve months on end, it sort of wears you out. Chris and I were fighting and hadn't spoken for two years, aside from yelling at each other. We finally realized that it wasn't really working. We were either going to quit it all or figure it out, but we couldn't go on the way it was. So we took a break for about a month, and talked. We started getting along, and it became fun to be in a band again. And because of that, we made the record we made this time around."

Like the Kinks before them, brotherly disdain can create passionate combat rock. Thus, *America* came to bang and blame.

"Sometimes great songs and great art—what we do is not product, it's creative—can come out of conflict. For *America*, everyone was coming into the project from a totally different frame of mind, and the album turned out great. On the other side, the new record [recorded September 1995–January 1996] turned out very positively, because everyone was getting along, and it shows."

*Speaking of combat, you are duly warned: pigeonholing a Black Crowe can be hazardous to your health.*

"I just get so tired of hearing all that garbage: retro, seventies, bell-bottoms, loudmouth, whatever—it's such crap," Rich says. "We've always made the records we wanted to make. After everyone was asking how we were going to follow up *Shake Your Money Maker*, we did *Southern Harmony* in eight days and said, 'Here you go—now go screw yourself.' *America* was a conscious effort to make a more "studio" record instead of a live record. It's a natural progression."

"In this industry for some reason, you can sell a million copies on your first record, but it's hard for many bands to go anywhere after that. And I don't think it's their fault necessarily. It's MTV's fault, people get force fed, and they get sick of stuff quickly. It makes it hard for a band to grow. It seems as if no one is ALLOWED to go through phases. And the minute you don't sell two million records, they're saying, 'Those guys are over. They're bombing.'"

**Rich cites similar circumstances plaguing one of his earliest influences, The Artist Formerly Known As Prince, whose own roller coaster career never diminished his overall acclaim.**

"*Dirty Mind* was the first album I bought. I was in the sixth grade. He writes such amazing songs, musically and melodically, they're always amazing. The cynical music industry gives him a hard time. His record will get released, and they'll say 'He's over. He didn't sell any records, but his music is great.' Then the next one will sell, and they'll say, 'Prince is back!' People should just give him his due."

*But music writers come and go [Thank God—ed.], and the band plays on, ever evolving.*

"It's easier for the press to criticize than actually critique. What if the Beatles never advanced past 'Please Please Me'? And Bob Dylan? When Bob Dylan put out that electric album, my father wouldn't listen to it. People aren't allowed to change. That's what pisses people off about us. We change, and they still try to put us in a category. But some writers GET it. They'll admit that we have our own sound."

Although Rich enjoyed this year's changes (including a new baby boy, Richard Taylor), he can't predict the Crowes' next ten years.

"I hope we're still around," Rich laughs. "That's really what you want at the end of the day. It's more fun now than it's ever been. It's great when you're on stage and you're not looking at another person and saying to yourself, 'I hate that guy.' That's no way to live."

The Black Crowes' new album finds the band at peace with their seven-year itch. But why is guitarist Rich Robinson still so sore?



# REALITY CHECK

by Stephen Pitalo