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In review

Sunday, June 03, 2007

By Mark Bialczak
Staff writer

Yup, it's summer.

Dickey Betts, his band, Great Southern, and an excited crowd of music fans that completely jammed the parking lot across from the James M. Hanley Federal Building and overflowed into the adjoining Syracuse streets agreed.

Calendar be damned. When an original member of The Allman Brothers Band shows up to play a free concert in front of all those sweaty bodies, the hottest season arrived Saturday night.

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Betts and his six band mates in Great Southern headlined the two-day Taste of Syracuse in fine style.

Although he split acrimoniously from The Allman Brothers Band in 2000, Betts had done enough writing of songs during his years with brothers Gregg and the late Duane to start quite the project of his own.

And with that cache of great tunes for jamming, why wouldn't he find very talented musicians willing to sign up? Guitarist "Dangerous" Dan Toler likely was the most well-known name to join Betts, but he split before last summer's tour. If you looked hard enough at Toler's replacement, you'd think somebody had rolled the calendar back 3 decades. Yes, the guy to Betts' right was his son, Duane Betts. And, yes, he was named after the late Duane Allman.

The band hummed magnificently with the Betts boys, lovingly attacking Allman Brothers classics that included "Statesboro Blues," "Blue Sky," "Back to Where It All Began," "In Memory of Elizabeth Reed," "One Way Out," "Nobody Left to Run with Anymore" and a feel-good encore of "Ramblin' Man."

Traditionally a man of few words, Betts addressed the dancing throng with, "Thank you for your applause. It makes us feel good. We're glad to be here."

His drawl was far more vociferous at the microphone, caressing the country lines of "Blue Sky" like he's been singing it since the 1970s.

Great Southern's structure looks much like the Allman Brothers, right down to keyboardist Mike Kach's gritty voice and pulled-back hair, both reminiscent of Gregg Allman, and the twin percussion attack of Frankie Lombardi and James Varnado.

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In review

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They stray from the ABB with the textures of their jams. While the Allmans' Southern rock style then and now dipped heavily into the blues, Great Southern lays down a tighter groove more consistent with the modern jam band genre.

But no matter. They couldn't take that old Allman sizzle out of that memorable melody of "In Memory of Elizabeth Reed" if they tried. So longtime ABB fans, many wearing tie-dyed shirts stating such allegiance, danced along in the small amount of space around their feet.

The two Central New York bands that preceded Great Southern to the main stage both obviously drink deeply from the Allman Brothers Band well.

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Syracuse roots rockers Los Blancos turned in their typically excellent set of favorites that the club scene here adores, including "Crazy Mama," "Big River," "Good-Hearted Woman/Do Watcha Wanna" and "Another Man Done Gone." Guitarist Colin Aberdeen, bassist Steven T. Winston, keyboardist Mark Nanni and drummer Mark Tiffault were indeed in fine ensemble form, sharing the spotlight.

Aberdeen confessed to the crowd how much Betts' guitar work has influenced the way he plays. Anybody who thought back during Betts' runs to Aberdeen's work would have to agree.

Oswego favorite Frostbit Blue, with its twin guitars of Nick Graveling and Tom McCaffrey and keyboards of Mike Place, are the best Southern rock band in New York state.

Their originals "Lake Ontario Twilight," "The Preacher" and "Child of December" proved that point.

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