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EDDIE ROBERTS

FRETPRINTS:

BOBBY BROOM



61 MODULATION EFFECTS

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'60 DALLAS  
SHAFTESBURY  
30 AMP

'75 IBANEZ  
CONCORD 642

GIBSON  
WALL-BOARD

'67 DANIEL  
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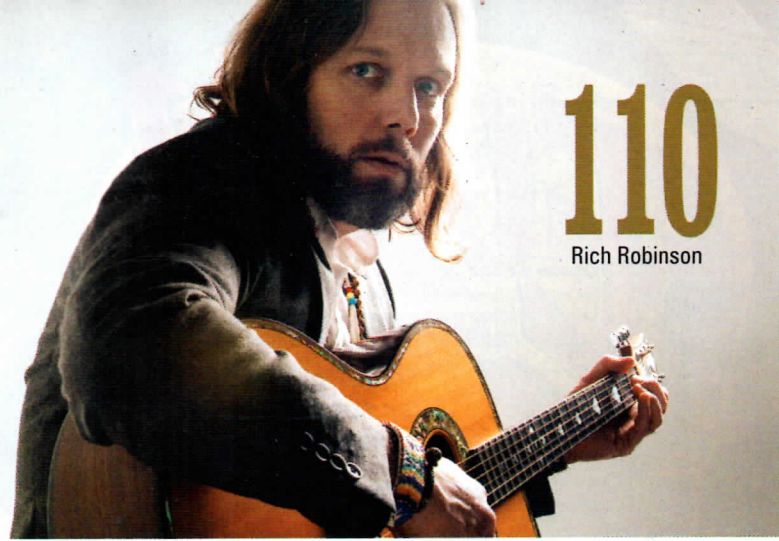
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Rich Robinson



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**Rich Robinson Re-Launches**  
With a new album, *Flux*, set for release, the former Black Crowes guitarist/musical force signed a deal to move his solo work under one label, and re-worked some of his catalog. | By Ward Meeker



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PHOTOS: COVER: Rich Robinson: Alysse Gafkjen. THIS PAGE: Robinson: Alysse Gafkjen.



# Solo Again

## RICH ROBINSON RE-LAUNCHES

BY WARD MEEKER  
PHOTOS BY  
ALYSSE GAFKJEN

### AH, GLORIOUS COHESION.

For guitarist Rich Robinson – who today records and tours solo after serving as co-founder and musical driving force in the Black Crowes – it's been too long coming.

Fans of real rock and roll will forever appreciate how the Crowes helped keep it afloat with its 1990 debut album, *Shake Your Money Maker*, and seven other studio efforts, five live albums, and a few compilations. Stylistic contrarians in the age of grunge, the band sold 35 million units pushed by hits like “Hard to Handle,” “She

(LEFT) Robinson with a Teye El Dorado, one of the guitars used to record his new album, *Flux*. “I was first made aware of Teye’s guitars by a friend in Nashville,” he said. “I was blown away by how beautiful and unique they are, and I use them every chance I get.”



(LEFT TO RIGHT) This '53 Martin D-28 has been in the Robinson household since Rich was born. "I grew up with it," he said. "It was the first guitar I ever picked up, banged on, and tried to make sounds come out of." It was used to record the band's first album, *Shake Your Money Maker* (including "She Talks to Angels,"), as well as *The Southern Harmony and Musical Companion*, *America*, *Three Snakes and One Charm*, and others.

Robinson got this Zemaitis Japan prototype in 2008 and has played it live and in the studio ever since. "They took Tony Zemaitis' design to a great acoustic builder called Lowdown Guitars, in Ireland, and had them build this. Tony's eye for design and their workmanship makes a great pairing."

This '60s Guild 12-string was restored after being damaged in floodwaters caused by Hurricane Sandy.

Talks to Angels," "Jealous Again," "Twice As Hard," "Remedy" and "Thorn in My Pride."

The Black Crowes were fed—and fractured—by Robinson and his older brother, Chris, as it evolved from a Rolling-Stones-influenced jaunt to a rootsy, original sound and presentation. After it disbanded—the first time, in 2001—Robinson turned his energy to producing music for other acts, furthering his skill as an abstract/mixed-media painter

(in February, his works were shown at L.A.'s Morrison Hotel Gallery), and projects like composing the soundtrack for the 2002 theatrical film *Highway* (starring Jared Leto, Jake Gyllenhaal, and Selma Blair). His post-Crowes band, Hookah Brown, proved short-lived after Robinson decided to try life as a solo performer, and in 2004, his debut album, *Paper*, introduced the world to his vocal chops and lyric-writing skills. After

five more years with the reunited Crowes, he followed with 2011's *Through a Crooked Sun* (accompanied by the four-song EP *Llama Blues*), and 2014's *The Ceaseless Sight*. In May, he will release *Flux*.

A desire for oneness recently motivated Robinson to sign a distribution deal with Eagle Rock Entertainment that allowed him to re-work his solo catalog, including dressing *Paper* with new lead-vocal tracks,

thanks in part to Hurricane Sandy in late 2012, which obliterated a storage unit with Robinson's master tapes and some of his gear including about 60 instruments.

While he was hopeful of a Black Crowes reunion to mark the 25th anniversary of *Shake*, in January of 2015, Robinson released a statement proclaiming the band *finito*. He then returned to playing solo, including acoustic dates that continue his "full circle" bender; he was just 15 years old when he wrote the music for "She Talks to Angels," which was recorded using his father's '53 Martin D-28 tuned to open E. The topic launched our conversation.

### How did you get into alternate tunings at such a young age?

The music I was drawn to as a kid was stuff like Crosby, Stills, and Nash. Steven Stills always played really cool... the way his guitar sounded, I was always so into it. As I started getting older, playing guitar on my own, a friend brought me this Nick Drake record, *Time of No Reply*, which is a compilation that has the last five songs he recorded. Hearing the way his guitar sounded, how the strings and chords interacted, drew me in just as I was getting into the blues and the Stones; Keith doing his thing in open G and the way he approached different surroundings. All of those things got me into it.

### There's some magic in open tunings, isn't there?

I think so; the chords and the broad spectrum of each chord, with open strings that ring. There's a subtlety to it – a drama that I was drawn to and have always loved. Same thing happened when I first heard the sitar and music from India. It elicited a feeling, you know? Digging into the tunings Nick Drake used gave me a broader spectrum that I could write songs around.

### Are there certain songs you've written where that influence is most pronounced?

One of the first I wrote where it showed was "Thorn In My Pride." And I don't always hear the influence, but that one was fairly direct. When I wrote it, the timing – that off-time pace and the way it unfolded – I was like, "Cool, that's what I'm going for." It was interesting to put in a band setting... a rock and roll setting. Nick Drake songs are rock and roll, in a sense. There's one called "Road" on *Pink Moon* that has really cool



Robinson onstage with his much-used 2009 Gibson Custom Shop Les Paul/SG. "It's pretty much my go-to guitar and always sounds and plays great, studio or live," he said.



**"It was a struggle, going from 5,000-seaters to playing a club, trying to figure out these songs, and learn my identity. But it was an amazing experience."**

rhythms that if you built around could be such a cool band song.

### What came first for you, slide playing or open tunings?

Open tunings came first and developed listening to my favorite blues; I never got into three-chord blues – it just wasn't my thing. I had a love for the composition and the movement of music. My favorite music was country blues – Mississippi Fred McDowell, Furry Lewis, John Hurt, Bukka White. Some of the original Chicago-blues guys, too, like Muddy Waters. Mississippi Fred McDowell would ride a chord and make it sound like there was so much more going on – so many tones and undertones, and this rhythm that was relentless, you know? The composition was brilliant, and within that was this slide

that was so hard-sounding, like a dart into your soul – stabs of this beautiful metal-on-metal sound. It was so rock and roll to me, even coming to it backwards. So, I started really loving the slide, because I like classical music and I always envisioned the slide to be not unlike violins or a line of cello – especially listening to George Harrison and the beautiful, floating melodies where the slide goes along on top.

So, I had these contradictory influences – Bukka White's crazy, really aggressive sound, and then this beautiful sound. Between the two, I found what I wanted to convey.

### When you decided to go solo, how did you prepare, vocally?

Well, the 11 years I was in the Crowes, I never sang – I never wanted to sing. It wasn't my thing and my brother had such a strong voice; I would sometimes sing high harmonies, but it's a whole different thing when you step up front to carry something. For me, the guitar is all heart, all emotion, it's all feeling. With singing, I didn't have that connection because I'd never done it. I loved building harmonies, but playing complicated rhythm parts while singing and trying to make it all work in context, that was a challenge. So, I called a friend who's a vocal coach, and she said, "Here's some things you can do," and it was an eye-opener.

When the Crowes broke up, I put together Hookah Brown with John Hogg, who has a great natural voice, but after that band didn't work out, I came away with all these songs and this desire to make a record. I just

decided, "F\*\*k it, I'll do it myself. I can do this." The difference is, most people cut their teeth singing in clubs when they're teenagers or in their early 20s in front of no one, and no one cares. But I was doing it in clubs after my band had sold 30 million albums, so it was hard for people to recontextualize and *not* compare. So, it was a little more daunting. For 11 years, I was in a band that fired on all cylinders when it went onstage and had my brother's great voice. So, I had to re-learn... start over. It was a struggle, going from 5,000-seaters to playing a club, trying to figure out these songs, and learn my identity. But it was an amazing experience.

### Did people expect you to sound like Chris? Because that would not be fair...

Not only is he a great voice, but from

early on in the band, he showed his strengths were lyrics and his ability to sing, not unlike Rod Stewart or Steve Marriott—that classic rock-and-roll vocalist. I always liked my voice to softer vocalists like James Taylor or Jackson Browne. I'm not loud—my brother is the loud personality, the guy who talks a lot, so he's a good front man. That's not me. I've never wanted the limelight. I was comfortable hiding behind my guitar, listening to the music, and directing the band.

I've always written music that moves me. When people hear that sound juxtaposed with my voice, which is much softer and kind of unique, they will draw conclusions. The Black Crowes meant so much to people, which is such an amazing thing. So, people who listen to my music have expectations because they have this relationship with the Crowes' sound. It's gonna feel a little different; it's not a bad thing—it's all steeped in love for what I did and what I do now, but there will be that element.

#### You're writing for your own voice...

Yeah, and I'd never written lyrics. My role in the Crowes was clearly defined—I wrote the music. I communicated that way, so it was interesting to delve into the lyrical content, to ask myself, "What do I have to say? How do I want to say this?" And not only was it that, it was also, "Am I going to be comfortable with my voice creating melodies over this music?"

It was a whole other world opening up, letting me communicate that for the first time. And the process was amazing—it's such a cool thing to learn. Every time I make a record, every time I play a show...

with the solo acoustic shows, I was unsure at first, but grew comfortable with everything being broken down to the most basic form—the way I wrote it, on acoustic.

Half the songs on *Paper* were for the Crowes or Hookah Brown—for other people to sing. But I really loved the music, so I had to figure out how to sing them, and I got into a concep-

tional element: "Okay, these are big rock-and-roll songs. What if I approach them more like David Gilmour? His singing is mostly blissful, pretty melodies over this heavy rock music. How will that sound?" That's how I started.

#### Did the transition from the Crowes to solo affect your song-writing?

If I'd changed how I write, it would be inauthentic, like something that wasn't natural.

#### Performance-wise, how have you progressed from *Paper* to today?

Well, 90 percent of it is believing in what you do. At first I wasn't very confident—it wasn't stepping

(LEFT) This '68 Telecaster was "equipped" with a humbucker when Robinson acquired it years ago. (RIGHT) This Les Paul goldtop has long been one of Robinson's most-used guitars.



onstage with a band to play music I'd played a thousand times before with a tremendous amount of confidence. It was a whole new thing; I didn't know how to go onstage and sing for two and a half hours over loud amps in a tiny club with no monitors. So, I had to learn by doing it over and over again. I did maybe 50 shows before the Crowes starting touring again in 2005; on

that final tour, we did two sets, one electric and an acoustic set that was basically was me playing acoustic while everyone else still played electric. It was kinda difficult because I couldn't hear myself, but still, to break it down just to me and hear those songs was really cool. I liked getting up there on my own and doing it. I approached it as another way to present what I'm doing.

My solo stuff was on hold until 2010, so by the time I made *Crooked Sun*, I had a deeper understanding of my voice, what I wanted to say and how to say it. I did a fair amount of shows, maybe 100, and then the same for the next record. Now, I'm a lot more comfortable, a lot more confident because I had my band shows and I love playing acoustic.

#### How did you choose venues for the solo acoustic shows?

The original idea was to go to cool places that weren't crappy clubs. We were doing performing art spaces, something a little different. But, those places are hard to book because it's for a different purpose. It's also expensive. Still, we try to find cool venues, even if some are more-typical clubs.

#### Which guitars did you take out for those shows?

I lost all my guitars in the flood during Hurricane Sandy, so I took a bunch of new guitars. One was a Martin 0000-21 George Gruhn had specially designed, and then a parlor guitar from Tangled Strings, out of Huntsville, Alabama, which is really cool.

One I had restored after the flood is a mid-'60s Guild 12-string with a tobacco sunburst finish. I've had it forever. I got it for *Three Snakes* and played it on every record after that. They had to replace the back, but the bracing and the rest of the guitar was original, and that thing sounds great. I also took one electric guitar just to give a different tonality.

#### Your dad's '53 Martin wasn't in that flooded storage unit, was it?

No, I keep that with me.

Whew! Do you still have the Gibson

### Hummingbirds you used in the '90s, or have they departed through the years?

Some left, some were a casualty of a divorce, but it's no big deal. I mean... guitars are guitars, wood is wood, you know? To me, it's really not the guitar, it's what I do with it. There's thousands of really cool guitars out there. I mean, it's cool to keep certain guitars for a long time, but it's also to cool to get new energy in there and see where it takes you.

### How did the deal come about with Eagle Rock, and who came up with the idea to re-mix and add tracks?

Well, when we mixed *Paper*, we didn't really know what we were doing – we were young and bit off more than we could chew. So, after the tapes were destroyed and a friend restored them, I remembered how when we recorded it, what we heard in the room always sounded so much better – the tones were great, everything sounded really cool. But, in the mix, things were out of phase, cancelling each other, and there was a lot of problems. It didn't sound good – very dim-sounding. I'd always wanted to re-mix it, so when Eagle Rock said they were interested in having all of my solo catalog, I was like, "Man, this will be great. I'd love to add tracks, re-mix *Paper*, and put *Llama Blues* on vinyl."

We wanted to have everything under one roof. That being said, I was in making the new album when the files showed up – we had everything transferred to ProTools – but with no vocals. But I was like, "F\*\*k it, I'll just re-sing this thing," because I had a whole new take on the songs after playing them for 11 years.

So, I re-recorded about 20 songs and got to finish three or four more that had been sitting around, add stuff, re-sequence it, re-mix it, and re-master it. I even re-wrote some of it – I hated some of the lyrics on that record. So it was cool to get in, pull it apart, and hear how good it sounded in the recording element.

### Is there a sense of cohesion with the Eagle Rock deal?

Yeah, across the board. The last three records were on three small labels. Now, everything's under one roof and moving forward together, as a piece of work. After reimagining *Paper*, to me it fits in more with what I did on the other solo records.

### Who played on the new record?

Well, this last record is just me and Joe Magistro, who's played drums on all the records, I play guitar and bass and some keyboards, but it was mostly my keyboard player, Matt Slocum, with additional keys

by Marco Benevento. Daniela Cotton sang "Everthing's Allright," and I had Charlie Starr, from Blackberry Smoke, play a solo on "The Music That Will Lift Me." I thought he'd bring something to it, kinda step it up. He's such a good player, and just a cool dude.

### Which guitars and amps do we hear most on it?

I've been using Reason Amps, made by Obeid Khan, and they sound amazing, I really love what Obeid does – really cool, very simple, two 12s in a closed-back cab. I had just a few electric guitars – my 335, an SG, my Teyes, and my goldtop. That's basically it. I used the Martin 0000 a ton, and my Guild 12-string.

### Which effects will we hear?

I used a lot of Echoplex – I love the Fulltone Echoplex and tour with two of them – one for a slap-back, long delay. Otherwise, there are some cool fuzzes and different things.

### Who produced?

I've always produced these myself. But, I had Mike Birnbaum mix it – he mixed my last three albums.

### Do you have plans to tour with it?

Absolutely. We're booking right now, looking into clubs and festivals – cool stuff like that. **VG**

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