

Creative Loafing Atlanta

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From a dirty Alabama road

Guitar in hand, Donna Hopkins crafts a survivor's tale on *Free to Go*

by Bryan Powell

"I want to make a record." It's a primary ambition of virtually all musicians, as instinctive as breathing, whether or not they can articulate the reasons behind their desires.

However, it's one thing to create a recording -- to capture the performance of a collection of musical ideas. It's yet another thing entirely -- far more precious and elusive -- to make a recording that documents one's life experiences, to craft an honest, emotional *record*, literally, of one's time on the planet. It's more challenging still to make such a record that will also sound great blasting out of a car's stereo speakers, or washing across a back yard on a hot, breezy summer night.

It's on this highest level that singer/songwriter/guitarist Donna Hopkins presents us with *Free to Go*, her independent debut CD. The recording introduces us to a girl who grew up poor in rural Alabama, who found a haven in music from her early teens, who knew even then that music was her life's calling. On *Free to Go*, Hopkins, 39, speaks of what she knows. Several of her songs, including "Dirty Alabama Road," are set amid the moonshine stills and front porch swings of her youth. Cut with bandmates Cindy Adler (bass) and Kevin Thomas (keyboards), and a host of musical allies, it's a record that belies the "blues" label sometimes applied to Hopkins as thoroughly as her broad, potent voice belies her slender 5-foot-6-inch frame.

***Creative Loafing:* Have you been waiting all your life to make this record?**

Donna Hopkins: Yeah. A lot of people offered to do things and have me cut other songs, but this is all me. Yep.

This record sounds like the musical equivalent of a family album or a home movie. It's a commercial record, but it's got that genuine feeling to it.

Thank you! I had my hands tightly on the production. I was basically overseeing all of it to make sure that happened. I executive-produced it, and co-produced it with Bryan Cole. We shared a lot of musical ideas. We're very connected on that level. I didn't call in any hired guns for guitar. I played all the guitars. I was kind of proud of that -- all the acoustic, slide and electric guitars -- and wrote all the



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RON CURRENS

Donna Hopkins

Rating: 0.00000

songs, with the exception of "I'll Fly Away" and "Long Gone Lonesome Blues."

You've been described as a blues artist. But when I listen to this, I hear early-'70s rock 'n' roll and folk and bluegrass and country and more. What were you trying to accomplish with this record?

Of course, I wanted to be able to sell it, but I wanted it to be honest and real and a reflection of the inside of me. I didn't really go, "OK, I'm going to make a blues album, I'm going to make a rock 'n' roll album." I just put [together] all of my original songs that I felt great about, and they just seemed to kind of flow together, even though they're not in the same genre. It seemed to work somehow, but I didn't really put it together thinking, "I'm going to get a [record] deal." I put it together just for my soul.

Your grandfather, "Tip" Barbee, plays on this record, and your mother played music, too, right?

She played organ and guitar and sang in rock 'n' roll bands, wore go-go boots, mini-skirts.

So when you were growing up, music was all around you?

Yeah, definitely. Sundays at my grandfather's house was dinner and playing music until the wee hours of the morning, every weekend.

What made you decide to include your grandfather on the CD and to have your daughter [India, age 7] singing on one of the cuts?

That's just a big part of my life. I attribute a lot to my grandfather for inspiration. When we were kids, all the adults would feed the kids first, and then the adults would sit down to eat. After we would eat, I would go sneak my grandfather's guitar out from under the bed. I got in trouble the first couple of times until he saw that I was really interested in playing, and then he started teaching me a few chords here and there. So that's where it came from. I loved to get his guitar out. Every time I pick up my Martin, my guitar, the smell of it reminds me of his guitar. There's that whole vibe of him that is present when I play. He inspired me. As far as my daughter, oh God, she loves to sing. It's totally in her blood, and I wanted her included somehow. She did some of the artwork inside the CD. She'll get up at the Dogwood [Festival] in front of 10,000 people and just let it go. I just want to encourage her musical side.

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