

## True Believer

### Continent-hopping roots songwriter Alejandro Escovedo gives props to the Bluff City.

By ANDRIA LISLE

Alejandro Escovedo is just 500 miles upriver in Chicago, but two weeks and more than a dozen gigs will go down before his next Memphis performance. He'll head east to New York and south to Atlanta and Nashville before driving here by way of Lexington, Kentucky. Nevertheless, Escovedo is bubbling with enthusiasm about his pending trip to the Bluff City.

"I always have a good time in Memphis," he says. "How's Teenie Hodges doing? I heard he's been sick. The Hodges brothers are my favorite rhythm section, *ever*," Escovedo emphasizes, and almost before I know it, we're talking Al Green, Hi Records, and our favorite soul 45s.

Listening to his music, it's easy to discern that Escovedo's influences come from myriad sources. Some, of course, are as obvious as the conjunto and Tex-Mex musics of his San Antonio youth, while others, discovered after the family relocated to southern California, are more obscure. Escovedo cites a litany of long-forgotten garage-rock bands (including Mouse & the Traps and the East Side Kids) alongside mentions of Buck Owens, the Byrds, Dillard and Clark, the New York Dolls, and Iggy Pop and the Stooges as inspirations for his own first two bands, the Nuns and Rank and File.

"I feel lucky, having been a part of that West Coast scene in the late '70s," Escovedo says. "Lots of groups -- including the Nuns -- were doing shows even though they couldn't play their instruments. We were the worst. Absolutely horrible," he says with a laugh. "But it was a time when anybody could get up and get on stage," he adds. "Not just punk. There were reggae bands, rockabilly bands, and rock bands. It was a good time for me. Anything goes."

When the Nuns disintegrated after an East Coast tour, Escovedo formed Rank and File from the ashes of the punk-rock scene. "[We] started out as a cover band," Escovedo recalls. "We covered everybody from Muddy Waters to Marty Robbins. I guess that's where I get my inspiration from now."

Alongside the Blasters and Lone Justice, Rank and File spearheaded the alt-country scene of the early '80s. Formed in New York, the band relocated to Austin and signed a deal with Warner Bros. imprint Slash Records. But Escovedo wasn't happy, and he walked away from the group after recording their ground-breaking album *Sundown*.

The True Believers came next. Escovedo, his younger brother Javier, and Jon Dee Graham provided the band's unique triple-guitar onslaught, which led to a deal with Rounder Records for their self-titled debut. "When the True Believers got ready to record, we called in Jim Dickinson to produce," Escovedo says, uncovering another unlikely Memphis link. "I was really listening to Ry Cooder's soundtrack work at the time, and my friend Kent Benjamin hooked us up with Dickinson."

*True Believers* was cut in early '86 at Austin's Arlyn Studios. The sessions lasted less than a week -- and cost less than \$10,000. "I think we did preproduction during the drive from the airport to the studio," Escovedo says. "Working with Jim was incredible. We learned so much about how to make a record, just from being around him. It was all about contrast," he recalls. "At the time, I was making the drive from Austin to Los Angeles and back fairly often, and I wanted to record something that reflected that landscape

-- my own version of Brian Eno's *Another Green World* -- and I think we did it."

But by the end of the '80s, Escovedo was on his own again. He woodshedded for a few years then recorded the seminal *Gravity* album for Austin's Watermelon label. *Gravity* showcased the versatility Escovedo had developed over the previous decade while shining a light on his emerging talents as a songwriter. Always introspective, *Gravity's* tracks range from delicate acoustic guitar and cello-based compositions to full-on rockers. Most importantly, it catapulted Escovedo to the forefront of the burgeoning No Depression scene.

Escovedo has released six albums since then, including the maudlin, autobiographical *Thirteen Years* and the polished roots-rock masterpiece *With These Hands*. *No Depression* magazine declared him "Artist of the Decade" for the 1990s, yet Escovedo is modest: "I still can't play guitar. I'm more of a writer than a guitarist. I keep a notebook and just write down words and thoughts then elaborate on them with music. I usually start out with a sentence. I don't like to use a lot of adjectives. I prefer to let other people fill in the blanks in the stories," he says.

That sentiment led him to *By the Hand of the Father*, a collaboration with playwrights Theresa Chavez, Eric Gutierrez, and Rose Portillo. The original theater production -- which chronicles the lives of first-generation Mexican-Americans -- debuted in Los Angeles in 2000. Later this spring, Escovedo -- the lyricist for *By the Hand of the Father* -- will appear in the play in a handful of cities across the Southwest. "I don't play a character," he clarifies. "The musicians and I work to guide the story along. The music provides the narrative."

Escovedo's local concert this week at the Blue Monkey is a benefit for WEVL FM-90, yet another local connection for the songwriter, who has performed in the station's studio twice. As station manager Judy Dorsey explains, "This is an experiment -- a way to bring national artists more local exposure and simultaneously raise money for the station's general operating expenses. Since 9/11, fund-raising has been a little tougher. Bringing [Escovedo] in for a benefit seemed like the perfect thing to do."

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