

GABE DIXON BAND: THE NO-GUITAR POWER TRIO

There's no guitarist in the Gabe Dixon Band. But if you listen closely, you'll still hear the instrument in the trio's stripped-down, rock/R&B sound.

"Nine times out of ten, when I play piano or write songs, I try to play like a guitar player would," says singer/keyboardist Dixon. "I never found standard rock piano to be all that interesting, so I always gravitated toward guitar ideas."

In fact, it was a fascination with guitar players that diverted Dixon from the classical piano path. "My parents signed me up for classical lessons when I was seven, and I always kept doing that," he recalls. "But when I was 14, I became a big fan of Stevie Ray Vaughan. I read up on him and Eric Clapton and other blues guitarists. That music is all about improvisation, so I got interested in improvisation myself."

Dixon left his native Nashville to attend the University of Miami, where he studied classical music by day and pursued pop at night via early incarnations of the Gabe Dixon Band. "Guys just started signing up to play, so it wound up being a big band. I wanted everyone to get involved! We had guitar, sax, and of course, bass and drums."

After graduation, the group moved to New York City, gradually stripping down to their current trio configuration. The group caught the attention of famed producer David Kahne, who oversaw the band's major label debut, *On a Rolling Ball*, in 2002.

Kahne also introduced Dixon to Paul McCartney, who deployed Dixon's keyboard skills for the Kahne-produced *Driving Rain* album and at the *Concert for New York*, a benefit for 9/11 victims. Dixon later played and recorded with Kenny Loggins.

Dixon says he enjoys sideman gigs. "Sometimes they're very creative. When I worked with Paul, he and David were very open to any ideas I had for piano and keyboard parts. They made it easy for me to brainstorm and come up with cool things. But for other gigs, I sometimes have to copy what's already on a recording, or just lay back. I don't necessarily mind that—I like being in a support role. I admire players like

Matt Rollings and Reese Winans, who are great at filling in the holes, playing tastefully, and supporting the sound. But I can't do that forever! I have to step out sometimes."

Live and in the studio, Dixon alternates between electric piano, organ, and his favorite instrument, acoustic piano. "No keyboard on earth sounds as great as a real piano," he insists. "I look forward to the day when I can haul a Yamaha piano with me everywhere I go. They're my favorites because they're so rugged and roadworthy, yet they're also such fine studio pianos."

But when Gabe can't get a real piano at a gig, he relies on his Yamaha Motif. "I've never found another keyboard that feels and sounds as much like a real piano as the Motif. I bought the extra piano sound card, and it just blows my mind how great the sounds are. The Motif is amazing because it can do so much. I find it especially useful if I'm supporting someone else. I can assign four sounds to one sound set, with each sound on its own slider. Maybe acoustic piano on the first slider, then an electric piano, then a clavinet, then an organ. That way, I don't even have to change patches when I change sounds. I just move the sliders to switch sounds or combine them. The Motif is such a versatile keyboard, and I've barely skimmed the surface of what it can do."

Dixon has already completed all the material for his band's next album, which he says will feature the lean, stripped-down sound of the group's 2005 *Live at the World Café* EP. "It will be a logical extension of the EP. It'll revolve more around grooves and songs and less around solos. There will be more songs and more production, and we'll have more time to be creative with the arrangements. But the core will be our power trio: me, [drummer] Jano Rix, and [bassist] Winston Harrison."

"The three of us have played together for seven years now," observes Dixon. "We always track together as a trio, and the core of this album will be about capturing a great, raw take of each song. We just have to get the magic down on tape." He chuckles. "Or in ones and zeroes, as the case may be."

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