



# RICH PICKINGS

THE BLACK CROWES ARE BACK WITH A FANTASTIC NEW ALBUM. **DARREN EDWARDS** MEETS GUITARIST AND CO-FOUNDER RICH ROBINSON

**Rich Robinson, the guitarist who, together with his older brother Chris, founded the American rock band the Black Crowes, couldn't be more thrilled with his band's latest album. *Warpaint*, the group's seventh studio effort, is everything that any long-term Crowes fan could possibly want. A monolithic slab of pure rock 'n' roll, it encapsulates elements of blues, country, soul, gospel and southern rock, blending them together like only the Black Crowes can.**

Always the masters of the unconventional with their long adlib jams and retro tones, the Black Crowes stormed onto the music scene in 1990 with their debut album *Shake Your Money Maker*. Seducing music fans, peers and critics across the globe, it earned the band tours with the likes of the Rolling Stones, ZZ Top, AC/DC, Metallica and Aerosmith, and record sales in excess of 3 million. The brothers Robinson, it seemed,

possessed the true spirit of rock 'n' roll and more success followed. Their sophomore album *The Southern Harmony And Musical Companion* debuted at number one in the American charts, and total album sales to date across the band's catalogue exceed the 20 million mark.

#### BLACK TOGETHER

But life hasn't always been rosy in the Black Crowes camp. Although the core of Chris and Rich Robinson has always remained constant, the band has been plagued by numerous line-up changes, the inevitable pressures of life on the road and the much-publicised inability of the two siblings to always see eye-to-eye. This climaxed in 2002 when the band announced that they were on indefinite hiatus, a situation that lasted three years.

"We got back together in 2005 and spent the first year really just readjusting to being in the band again and to playing every night," explains Rich Robinson. "The next year, we really focussed on writing this record

because we really wanted it to be special. We wanted to get everyone on the same page so we could record the album as a full band."

#### VINTAGE GEAR

Considering the Black Crowes strong connection with the rock music of the '60s and '70s, you'd expect vintage gear to play a big part in Rich Robinson's sound. So what kind of amps did he use on the new album? "Obviously mostly old amps," he explains, "but a couple of custom amps as well. There's a company in North Carolina called Headstrong that made me an amp that's sort of like a souped-up Twin [see box on page 30 for more]. I use that with my '61 Gretsch White Falcon on five or six songs. I also have a Matchless – one of the original ones that were made for us for *America* [the Black Crowes 3rd album] – a 50-watt Plexi Marshall and a small tweed Fender Vibrolux from the '50s. I keep to smaller amps and combos and really try to get the best out of them." 

## "WE WANTED TO GET EVERYONE ON THE SAME PAGE SO WE COULD RECORD THE ALBUM AS A FULL BAND"

The Gretsch White Falcon is one of the most iconic electric guitar models of all time, and Robinson's 1961 example is understandably close to his heart. "The White Falcon is one of my favourite guitars," he says. "It's got the original Filter'Tron pickups and it's a '61, so it's the double-cutaway and the body is a little bit thinner. I traded a Gibson ES-335 for it. I had two early '60s 335s, one that's just great and one that was OK. A friend of mine who I buy a lot of guitars from said he had this great White Falcon that I should check out. I did and I was like "Wow!", so I traded it with the OK 335 and I've



Brothers in arms: Rich and Chris Robinson

been using it ever since.

"I use the other early-'60s 335 a lot and I have a blond Tele that I've had and used since *Shake Your Money Maker*," Robinson continues. "That's pretty much what I used on the new record from an electric standpoint. From an acoustic standpoint, I have this old Gibson Dove that I used, a 1953 Martin D-28 and this really cool Guild 12-string. I think I bought it right before we made *Three Snakes & One Charm*. For this record, I didn't want to bring everything just to be bogged down by choices, so I probably brought 15 or 20 guitars and just really tried to keep it pretty mellow on the guitar front."

### GREAT GUITARS

Robinson's "keeping it mellow on the guitar front" is clearly a relative concept – many might consider 15 or 20 guitars rather a lot! So how many does he own overall? "I don't know, probably about 30 or 40," he says. "Maybe even 50 – I haven't counted them. I used to have more but I got rid of a bunch because I just didn't have the storage space for the hundred and somewhat guitars that I had."

Given his passion for collecting and playing a variety of vintage makes and models, could this be the reason why he has never signed on the dotted line of a lucrative product endorsement deal? "Yeah, pretty much," he says matter of factly. "Back then when we

started – it was 19 years ago when I made *Shake Your Money Maker* – they would make you sign these contracts and you would only be allowed to play that one guitar and shit like that. Fuck that! Especially back then – new guitars just weren't that good a lot of the time. That's when I really started buying vintage guitars. They just sounded better and were better made.

"As time went on, manufacturers really started getting hip to that fact and really started focussing on making better instruments, and now you can find really good new guitars," he says. "People started taking a little more care in what they did and that came with the Custom Shop stuff – the Fender Custom Shop and the Gibson Custom Shop and things like that. Then there are lots of great guitar makers like James Trussart, who made a couple of guitars for me. Obviously, Esquires, Teles, 335s and Les Pauls are great guitars, but to me someone like James Trussart is really interesting and has a different approach. It's cool to be able pick and choose to give me different tones, because every guitar has a different tone."

### CROWE SOLOS

Anyone who has had the good fortune to witness the Black Crowes performing live can testify to their ability to break into an impromptu jam at the drop of a hat. Is this something that Robinson needs



## HEADSTRONG AMPS

WE FIND OUT ABOUT THE COMPANY THAT BUILT RICH ROBINSON'S CUSTOM COMBO

■ We caught up with Wayne Jones from Headstrong Amps ([www.headstrongamps.com](http://www.headstrongamps.com)) to find out a little more about this boutique amp company whose client list includes members of the Black Crowes, ZZ Top, the Allman Brothers Band and many more.

"We started Headstrong in late 2002 and it's basically just myself and my wife Jessica, and we have a couple of good friends that help us out on certain aspects of the company as well," Wayne Jones explains. "We basically do a couple of things. One is the whole Fender replica line that we offer. Those are the amps I have always played, worked on, built and loved. For example, we do the Lil' King amp, which was the first ever recreation of the 1964 Fender Princeton Reverb. That's still our best seller

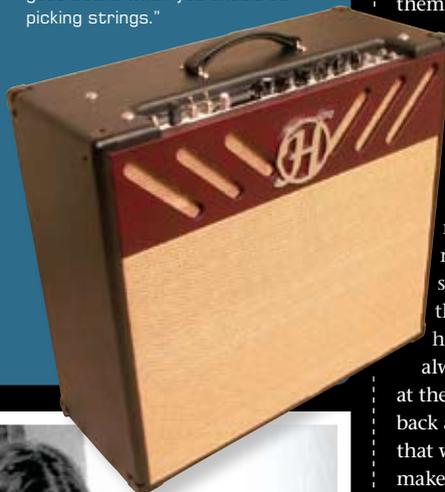
and it's really the amp that put us on the map.

"We also build our own Prima series of amps. We currently have both 30- and 50-watt versions, with 5-, 18- and 100-watt versions to come later on this year. All of the Prima amps are my design, which is to say that they are an amalgam of a couple of classic designs – there's a little Marshall and a little Fender in those amps.

"Another thing we do is classic circuits custom-tailored for artists. The amp that Rich used on the new record [pictured here] is based on a late-'50s high-powered tweed Fender Twin, but we beefed up the filter supply and did a few other things to really tighten the amp up. I think it worked very well for Rich and his style of playing.

"The main thing you will get from

a Headstrong amp," Wayne explains, "is an amp that can become an extension of the player and the instrument. All our amps are straightforward as far as controls go, so you won't spend too much time turning knobs to find a good sound when you should be picking strings."



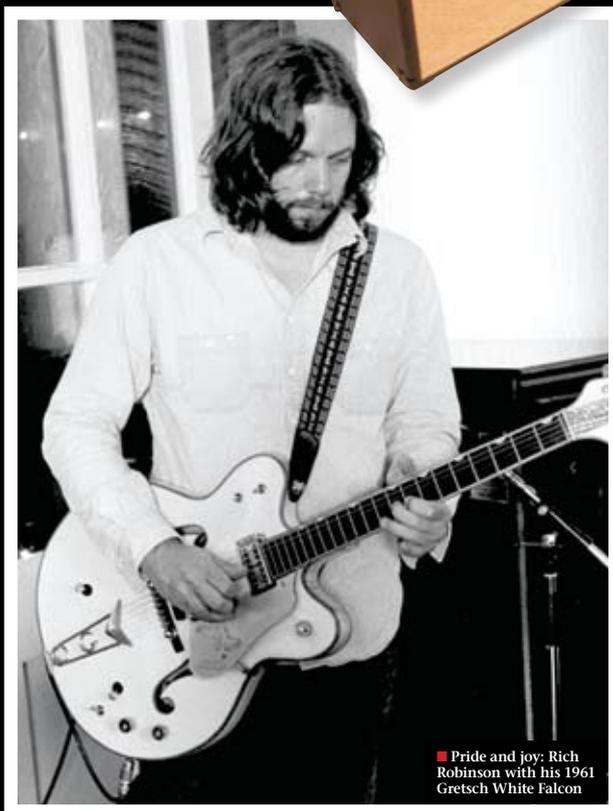
## "I ALWAYS PUT THE SONG FIRST AND SO I DON'T REALLY THINK ABOUT SOLOS"

to do to keep things interesting?

"I think everyone in the band needs it," explains the guitarist. "It keeps it fresh and keeps us on our toes and more agile as a band. You can get stuck in a rut and get up there and play the same set every night – you can just go through the motions. If you get up there and challenge yourself I think it really helps the band move as a unit.

"For me, soloing is pretty spontaneous," he explains. "I always put the song first and so I don't really think about solos. Live, I mainly play the song and whoever else is on stage with us will come on and play the solo. When we jam we will trade off and on and it's always spontaneous. I may have a general idea of what I like to stick to and I'll go from there. When writing, the most important thing for me is putting together a great song and coming up with great riffs or a great chord structure."

Although Robinson himself is a very accomplished slide guitar player, it's interesting to see that on *Warpaint*, new band member Luther Dickinson



■ Pride and joy: Rich Robinson with his 1961 Gretsch White Falcon

handled nearly all of the slide parts. "We didn't have a second guitar player on the *By Your Side* album, so I played all the guitar, and on *Lions* we just did it the same way," he says. "On this record, we really wanted to make a band album so it's mostly Luther playing slide on everything but 'Oh Josephine'. We were all in a room recording with very minimal overdubs, and Luther's slide lines were

unbelievable – I mean, straight out of the Ry Cooder handbook. He's just a really talented player."

## SONG LINES

So how does Robinson go about writing Black Crowes material? "I just believe in being natural. There's nothing that I set out with, it's just how the songs come out when I write them. I believe that they are supposed to come that way and it's just how it's meant to be. I send them over to Chris and he puts lyrics to them and they sort of take shape, and the record becomes what it becomes. It's definitely a natural process and not something that's forced. It's not like we set out to make this or set out to make that, we just get in there and write our songs and just hope for the best. And we are always really happy with the record at the time. Sometimes you can look back and say this wasn't as good or that wasn't as good, but at the time we make the records, everyone is happy with them and we release them because of that.

"I probably write about 80 percent on an acoustic," Robinson explains. "Sitting in a room with a great acoustic guitar is a great thing, but to hear a great sounding electric guitar really inspires me as well. Growing up I was influenced more by songwriters. You know, Keith [Richards] was great but I loved Nick Drake. The way he played just moves me in a way that I can't think many others do. Stephen Stills was also a big influence on me, not only for his songwriting ability but his approach to solos and stuff like that. Jimmy Page is obviously amazing, Jeff Beck and all the standard guys that everybody likes, but there are also some people that I was really into that were a little more off the beaten track.

"When you first start out you want to be your heroes and by about the second record you sort of move on and want to find your own voice. I was 19 and living in suburban America when I made *Shake Your Money Maker* and I had only been playing guitar since I was 15. I didn't have a lot of experiences in life, but when you get out on tour and play 350 shows over two years, you really gain knowledge on how to play with other people, how to really think about music in a more holistic or encompassing way, and that gives you your own legs to stand on." **GB**