



By Chip Lovitt

The Allman Brothers Band returned to New York City for their annual spring residence at the Beacon Theater.

Springtime in New York is an Allman Brothers tradition. The classic ABB album, *Live at the Fillmore East*, was recorded in New York in March 1971, and the band has played a multi-night stand at the Upper West Side theater each spring since 1989. They've played somewhere around 200 shows at that venue since then.

As I said in my last column, I keep getting these offers I can't refuse.

I have a high school friend, Andy, who like me, was lucky enough to hear the original version of the band at the Fillmore East in 1970-71. I'm even luckier. I got to see the Duane Allman and Berry Oakley version of the band four times, including the night the Brothers closed the Fillmore East on June 26, 1971.

Back then, I thought the Allman Brothers were the best band in America.

Despite the deaths of Duane and bassist Berry Oakley, I still enjoyed seeing the band in the early to mid-1970s—the years when Dickey Betts admirably and capably carried the weight of lead guitar duties—the Watkins Glen, Brothers and Sisters, "Rambling Man/Blue Skies" days.

But somewhere I lost connection, and my interest in the group flagged. I saw the band in the 90s when Warren Haynes added his many talents to this mix. As much as I dug those shows, it just wasn't the same for me.

But Andy is a true believer, a card-carrying Allman Brothers fan. Unlike me, he never lost faith with the band, even at their lowest points.

History, as they say, often repeats itself, and in the spring of 2003, Andy offered me a ticket for one of the Beacon shows and I took him up on the offer. I was glad I did.

By then Warren Haynes had become a stalwart of the band, lending his Les Paul-driven lead guitar, solid slide work, and his considerable singing and songwriting skills to the mix. And it was a great show. So when the Brothers pulled into the Beacon in March, 2007, and Andy scored four tickets, I happily claimed one.

And once again it was a great show. The band led off with "Don't Keep me Wonderin'", then segued into Muddy Waters' "Trouble No More," and the energy didn't let up until the band finished its encore of "One Way Out," sometime around 11:30.

While Warren Haynes and Derek Trucks provide plenty of guitar fireworks, and Greg Allman's vocals and organ work still have the magic, the real unsung heroes of the band, in my opinion, are the drummers, Butch Trucks and "Jaimoe" Johanny Johansen, along with percussionist Marc Quinones. With Oteil Burbridge on bass, they keep the music moving, powerfully and propulsively. With hints of jazz and Latin rhythms thrown in, the rhythm section is a big reason why the Allmans can keep a crowd on its feet for hours at a time.

Another highlight of the shows at the Beacon is the fact that they often feature special guests. The night I saw the band, Susan Tedeschi delivered a great version of Dylan's "I Shall Be Released" (best known from the Band's classic version off *Music from Big Pink*.) Col. Bruce Hampton and one-time Black Crowes guitarist Audley Freed also joined the band on the Willie Dixon classic, "Spoonful."

The Allmans' shows at the Beacon are a major guest fest. It seems that any musician of note who's in town during the gigs wants to play with the Brothers. Over the course of three weeks at the Beacon, musical guests included Peter Frampton, Leslie West, Dave Mason (doing "Feeling Alright" and "All Along the Watchtower"), Luther Dickinson of the North Mississippi All-Stars, Greg's son Devon Allman, Jimmy Vivino, Johnny Winter, Robert Randolph and many more.

The shows by the current version of the ABB also include a variety of memorable cover songs, more so than the original band. While the original band did cover songs by bluesmen like Elmore James, T-Bone Walker and Muddy Waters, live recordings of the original Allmans Brothers shows circa 1969-71 show that the band's set didn't vary that much. Most of the shows featured a core of the same songs, mainstays like "Statesboro Blues," "Whippin' Post," "In Memory of Elizabeth Reed," "Mountain Jam," and other songs from the first three albums.

If you were really lucky you might have gotten to hear Duane sing his only lead vocal on "Dimples" (featured on the *Allman Brothers Live at Ludlow's Garage 1970* CD.) But with the exception of a few tunes that rotated in and out of the sets, the Allmans Brothers' song list pretty much stayed the same night to night, except for the overall free-form nature of the jamming.

Obviously, with thirty-plus years' worth of songs, and Warren Haynes' tunes, the current version of the ABB has a lot more song choices than the original band. They seem to be able to segue into a limitless variety of tunes effortlessly and smoothly.

And as far as current ABB cover songs go, it's like *Forrest Gump* said, "you never know what you're gonna get." Looking at the set lists reveals a cool range of covers by Bob Dylan ("Highway 61," "Don't Think Twice"), Van Morrison ("Into the Mystic," "And it Stoned Me"), the Band ("The Weight," "The Night They

Drove Old Dixie Down"), Otis Redding (I've Been Loving You Too Long," "Dreams to Remember") Derek and the Dominoes ("Why Does Love Have to be So Sad," "Anyday") Jimi Hendrix ("Manic Depression") the Meters/Neville Brothers ("Hey Pocky Way," "Fiyo on the Bayou") Elmore James ("The Sky is Crying,") Robert Johnson/Cream ("Crossroads") and even Miles Davis' "In a Silent Way" featuring John Coltrane's son Ravi on sax

I could easily wallow in nostalgia like a cranky old New Yorker, and tell you how the original Allman Brothers were just so much better than the modern version, but I'm not going to-and I actually can't-say that.

True, there was a magic in the way Duane and Dickey locked in with those trademark twin harmony leads. Warren Haynes and Derek Trucks certainly duplicated that classic sound/style when I saw them, but they also blend their diverse styles-Haynes' fat Les Paul blues based style and Derek Trucks adventurous and often jazz-tinged lead and slide work on his Gibson SG-in their own way. It's a fat, glorious, guitar-rich sound that owes much to the original Allman Brothers. At the same time, Haynes and Trucks have created their own signature sound for the 21st century Brothers.

An interesting twist, guitar-wise-during the show I saw, Trucks and Haynes, a slide master in his own right, actually played twin slide parts that soared into a whole new sonic territory, one I can't say I've heard before. Both Haynes and Trucks are virtuoso players, and while they can lock into a groove as well as anyone, they each do their own thing. And they do it very well, which I think is one of the hallmarks of the current Allman Brothers Band, along with-of course-Greg Allman's soulful vocals and musical presence and Butch Trucks and Jaimoe.

I was convinced in 1970-71 that the Allman Brothers Band was the best band in America. Based on what I heard at the Beacon, I'm convinced they are once again.

Well, that's my story and I'm sticking to it.