



Cincinnati sextet 500 Miles to Memphis bring a stampede and redefine cowpunk's resurgence

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By Joshua Boydston



500 Miles to Memphis
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The Blue Note
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What do Johnny Cash and The Ramones have in common? According to Ryan Malott, lead singer for 500 Miles to Memphis, more than you may think.

"Country and punk are both just about being honest, about expressing what you feel in an open and honest way," he said.

Cincinnati's 500 Miles to Memphis is one of several bands following the recent

resurgence of cowpunk, a blend of country, blues and punk rock. The movement has roots in 1980s Southern California, led by groups like The Cramps.

Thirty years later, bands such as Lucero, The Gaslight Anthem and Drive-By Truckers have broadened the scope of the style to bring it into the mainstream. 500 Miles to Memphis has tried to do much the same, and although it took a little time, the six-piece is finally starting to get there.

Malott formed the band in 2003 with, mostly, an entirely different lineup of musicians. Initially, he struggled to marry his love of country and punk into a cohesive sound.

"I was trying so hard at first to find that sound, but it just didn't come," he said. "I kept at it, and it just kind of came through repetition. Now, it's a very fluid thing."

The act released its full-length, self-titled debut in 2005, and followed that in 2007 with "Sunshine in a Shot Glass." It was around then that 500 Miles to Memphis got its first taste of success.

The rebelliousness of its cowpunk blend suited the equally unruly nature of the extreme sports and stunt craze. Several of the tracks from "Sunshine" were used in the MTV series "Nitro Circus," and to accompany extreme sport videos on the Web. The band even landed the track "All My Friends Are Crazy" onto the "Rock Band" video game.

But when it came time to record a new album, February's "We've Built Up to Nothing," Malott and his bandmates felt the need to step things up a notch.

"We felt this pressure to create and outdo ourselves," he said. "It was just about taking a little time, trying to do something even more different than country punk, trying to expand and carve out our own spot in cowpunk."

So while Drive-By Truckers looked to Tom Petty, and The Gaslight Anthem to Bruce Springsteen, 500 Miles to Memphis got hooked on none other than the Fab Four.

"I'd be lying to you if I said I hadn't been listening to a lot of The Beatles," Malott said.

With the latest record, 500 Miles worked to include more layered vocal harmonies, catchy hooks and even more orchestration. The group is quite proud of its latest effort, and thinks it may have found its niche beyond cowpunk.

"It's not so much about the genre as much as it is about the songwriting," Malott said. "I try not to worry about what it is and just what it sounds like."

The band has enjoyed taking the new material out on the road, and thinks the new

sound is only helping reach new audiences, but Malott admitted that live, The Ramones' influence might come to the forefront.

"The band's sound is versatile enough to adapt to the venue, either it's an all-age punk venue or Western swing bar," he said. "It's just very animated, fun music. We play the music fast and loud. It just becomes a little more punk in the process." — *Joshua Boydston*