

THE ALLMAN BROTHERS BAND

THE ALLMAN BROTHERS BAND ARRIVED at a point in history when rock, jazz, country and blues were colliding in a volatile fusion. In 1969, when *The Allman Brothers Band* was recorded, no major group marshaled all those musical elements more effectively. Led by the consummate playing skills of guitarist Duane Allman and Dickey Betts, the singing and songwriting of Gregg Allman and the relentless rhythm section of drummers Butch Trucks and Jaimoe and bassist Berry Oakley (plus Gregg's organ), the band staked out a uniquely American claim on the rock-music vanguard at the end of a decade dominated by British innovators.

The Allman Brothers Band stamped an indelible mark on rock & roll, creating an entire genre, Southern rock, and inspiring the careers of countless bands. As the flagship group of Capricorn Records, the Allmans turned Georgia into a regional music capital and helped organize the sociopolitical forces of the New South that culminated in Jimmy Carter's election to the presidency in 1976.

Howard Duane Allman was born in 1946, and Gregg in 1947, in Nashville. The two brothers were stalked by tragedy from childhood: Their father, an Army sergeant, was killed by a hitchhiker while home on Christmas leave from the Korean War. Their mother, Geraldine, took a CPA course and raised the brothers by herself. In 1958, looking for better work, Mama A moved the family to Daytona Beach, Florida, where the boys were exposed to Southern blues, R&B and roots rock.

By 1961, Duane and Gregg were playing in Daytona Beach bands, alternating on lead and rhythm guitars. In such bands as the Y Teens, the Shufflers and the Escorts, the young Allmans played Chuck Berry and Hank Ballard and the Midnighters instead of the surf music their peers preferred. In 1963 the brothers backed a black R&B trio, the Untils.

When Gregg graduated from high school in 1965, he and Duane hit the road as the Allman Joys, developing a sound that combined the rhythmic reducibility of James Brown guitar vamps with the expansionary dynamics of the guitar heroes from the Yardbirds. The Joys toured the roadhouse circuit, where they met Trucks, who played drums in a band called the Bitter End and who sat in on several occasions.

In early '67 the Allmans joined the Five Minutes before reuniting the Joys in St. Louis, where Nitty Gritty Dirt Band manager Bill McEuen encouraged the Joys to move to L.A. As Hour Glass, they recorded two albums for Liberty, but the label rejected a third LP recorded at Rick Hall's Fame studio, in Muscle Shoals, Alabama. Gregg remained in Los Angeles to develop a solo album while Duane returned to Florida, where he began jamming with Jacksonville's Second Coming, a band featuring Oakley and Betts.

Hall was so impressed with Duane's playing on the Muscle Shoals tracks that he invited him to play with Wilson Pickett. Already a virtuoso on lead and slide and a master arranger, Duane was immediately

accepted into the fold, doing R&B sessions in '68 and '69 with Aretha Franklin and King Curtis and befriending future band mate Jaimoe.

But Duane Allman was more interested in forming a band than in playing sessions. He took Jaimoe down to Jacksonville to form a trio with Oakley, but when they all started jamming at Second Coming gigs, new possibilities opened up. After Trucks started sitting in, the Allman Brothers sound materialized. Duane then brought Gregg back from Los Angeles to add the final touch, a gritty vocalist with a book of killer songs like "Dreams" and "Whipping Post."

In September '69 the Allman Brothers went to New York and in two weeks recorded a debut album that keyed the direction of rock in the 1970s. The band's musical premise was that the hardest rock intensity could work in a setting of intricate rhythmic subtlety and harmonic structures inspired by the jazz innovations of Charlie Parker, John Coltrane and Miles Davis. Outside of the South, however, the public was slow to respond to these new sounds, so the Allmans took their argument to the stage with a vengeance — in a two-year period from late '69 to the fall of '71, the band played some 500 dates across the country. At a show in Miami, Eric Clapton (in town recording what would become *Layla* with his band Derek and the Dominos) was so impressed that he invited Duane down to the sessions. He and Clapton teamed up for the rest of the album in a sublime interaction of two of rock's most brilliant instrumental lights.

The Allman Brothers Band's awesome live shows left devoted fans everywhere they played and led to the epochal *At Fillmore East*, recorded in March 1971. The live album vaulted the Allmans to the pinnacle of American rock, but tragedy struck before the band could release another record. On Oct. 29, 1971, Duane Allman died in a motorcycle accident. The band soldiered on, finishing up *Eat a Peach* and adding keyboardist Chuck Leavell for *Brothers and Sisters*, which included the hit "Ramblin Man." On Nov. 11, 1972, during the making of *Brothers and Sisters*, Berry Oakley died of injuries from a motorcycle accident and was replaced by Lamar Williams. That was the lineup that performed before more than 500,000 people in 1973 at Watkins Glen, New York. The band recorded *Win, Lose or Draw* before splitting into several directions. Betts put together Great Southern; Gregg Allman recorded with his wife, Cher; and Leavell, Williams and Jaimoe put together Sea Level.

The surviving original members of the Allman Brothers reunited from '78 to '82 and recorded *Enlightened Rogues* with two members of Betts' group, guitarist Dan Toler and bassist David Goldflies, filling in the missing chairs. A 20th anniversary reunion tour in '89 turned into a new career for the Allman Brothers, who soared into the '90s on the strength of the magnificent interplay among Betts, guitarist Warren Haynes, bassist Allen Woody and drummer Marc Quinones. For this legendary rock medicine show, the road indeed seems to go on forever.

— JOHN SWENSON

The Allman Brothers Band, circa 1969: Duane and Gregg Allman, Jaimoe, Oakley, Betts, Trucks (clockwise from top left)

