



DIRK POWELL

WALKING THROUGH CLAY

On the cover of Dirk Powell's new album, *Walking Through Clay*, sits a truly primitive-looking fretless banjo. Crafted in the mountains of Virginia by his 85-year-old cousin, it contains hickory from a church built in 1840 – and a soundboard of wall-paneling wood from Home Depot.

For Powell, that puts the timelessness of so-called “old-time” music into a neat little nutshell. He's plucked his share of strings in Kentucky, where his grandfather passed down Appalachian fiddle and banjo tunes in the great aural tradition. And he absorbed Cajun bowing and Creole accordion straight from Dewey Balfa and Alphonse “Bois Sec” Ardoin, respectively (and was married to Dewey's daughter, Christine, with whom he co-founded the Cajun band Balfa Toujours). But Powell doesn't see tradition as a re-creation of the past or something to be preserved like a museum artifact; to him, it's a map to help future generations navigate their own roads of expression.

On *Walking Through Clay*, the longtime Lafayette, La., resident does just that, speaking myriad musical languages with amazing fluency. But he goes even deeper, breaking down self-imposed barriers and finally allowing wide-ranging elements of his musical identity to converge.

His five-year touring relationship with Joan Baez, in which he functions as her seven-instrument “band,” is just one of those elements. Powell's virtuosity is revered in many musical camps; he's performed rock with the Raconteurs and played on Loretta Lynn's Jack White-produced Grammy winner, *Van Lear Rose* (as well as blues and traditional folk Grammy winners). His film soundtrack credits range from Ang Lee's *Ride With the Devil* to Spike Lee's *Bamboozled*. Steve Earle calls him “the greatest old-time banjo player alive.” Powell and fellow multi-instrumentalist Tim O'Brien collaborated with *Cold Mountain* author Charles Frazier to create a worthy musical companion to the Civil War-era bestseller, which led to Powell's work on the Academy Award-winning film and the T Bone Burnett-produced soundtrack.

During the recent Burnett-arranged concert to celebrate the early-60s folk era depicted in the Coen Brothers film, *Inside Llewyn Davis*, those elements converged in real time as well. Taped in New York as a benefit for the National Recording Preservation Foundation, it features Powell performing with Baez, Elvis Costello, Gillian Welch, Patti Smith and Marcus Mumford, the film soundtrack's associate producer.

“Jack White was there, whom I’ve worked with a lot over the years, and Rhiannon Giddens of the Chocolate Drops, who acted in my film *Deep on Hog Mountain*, plus a bunch of folks from the bluegrass world. And then Joan and T Bone,” he says. “Those people had never arrived in one place for me before, and it was really cool to have all those tangents line up.”

His description makes the event sound awfully similar to the annual Americana Music Association honors and awards show in Nashville, where he just might find himself after voters get a listen to *Walking Through Clay*, his fourth solo album and first for Sugar Hill Records.

The album is the definition of Americana — a quilt that stitches together the past and present in a way that honors both. It might be sewn on a modern machine, but its patterns and cloth swatches carry generations of stories.

The reach of Powell’s own family roots are reflected throughout these 12 songs. In fact, the title tune is about his great-great grandmother, who shares the album dedication with Levon Helm. At 13, Eliza Davis hid under a bed to elude marauding Civil War soldiers who captured her family. Landing on a Virginia plantation, she was impregnated by the owner, then fled on foot to Kentucky and gave birth to Powell’s great-grandfather. It’s an upbeat song, on which banjo and fiddle step aside for an assertive electric-guitar solo.

Though he bought his first Stratocaster at 13 after working all summer at a drugstore, Powell never played electric on a solo recording until now. But he explains, “I was at the point where it was like, ‘OK, I really want to say what I have to say in all the languages I speak.’ I have a relationship to music that is about finding the underlying unity in sounds, not separating them, and it was time for me to express that.”

To handle the skins, he brought in Patrick Keeler, with whom he worked on *Van Lear Rose* and the Raconteurs’ *Consolers of the Lonely*.

“He’s got this big, garagey, massive sound that never seems contrived,” Powell says. “I wanted to make sure it didn’t sound like fusion or a concept, like I’m mixing this with that. I wanted it to feel like it’s my world and my brain and my heart and the actual musical world that I live in, where things are not really separate. It always sounds real.”

Yes, it does. The track “That Ain’t Right,” for instance, stakes bluesy territory somewhere between Cajun and zydeco, with Powell bending electric guitar notes and singing like a young Delbert McClinton to a waltz beat driven by steady tom-tom thumps.

Another cut, the hymn “Abide With Me,” features the late Helm on drums and his daughter, Amy, on gospel harmonies, with New Orleans jazz horns in the procession. They recorded it at Helm’s Woodstock studio.

“It was really special to work on that as Levon was passing away, sharing that with Amy,” Powell says. “It felt like that was a healing thing in the process of losing him.”

He also addresses loss in “Golden Chain,” a sad, stately tune on which his pensive, sighing vocals echo the mournful notes of his instruments. *I can't see how there's air to breathe/in a world without you*, he sings. As Powell explains in a manifesto of sorts he wrote a while back, “I want to be granted the power to break a heart.” His own might have been breaking as he wrote this; that he conveys it so completely is a testament to his depth as a man and skill as a musician.

Powell says the Celtic-tinged traditional, “Goodbye Girls,” reminds him of the feeling he gets when he has to leave his daughters to travel. The almost dirgelike tempo is lifted by Aoife O'Donovan's soprano as they repeat, round-style, the chorus line, *Won't we look pretty in the ballroom/early in the morning*.

“Some of those old songs, they leave so much space for you to fill in the experience,” Powell says. “I love that about traditional verses in old-time music. You have to complete it with your own story.”

One of his daughters actually is heard in the intro to “Break the Chains”; her steeping in aural musical tradition not only includes fiddling, but following Daddy's audio-engineering directives. It's a 21st-century touch that nonetheless suggests unbroken chains.

The song itself is a pretty, harmony-accented message of hope to a friend who suffered abuse. But like traditional music itself, *Walking Through Clay* is hardly just about adversity or sorrow. “As I Went Out A Walkin’,” in which a Cajun fiddle waltzes over heavy electric-bass chords, is an energetic near-stomp, blending mountain and bayou sounds with some grinding, southern-influenced rock.

And Powell says the sweet “Spoonbread,” penned by David Egan, “just sums up a lot of things I love about Louisiana. The sense of what makes life valuable here is something I share deeply. It's been put to the test time and time again, but people always persevere.”

Powell won't deny that his Louisiana address and Appalachian heritage imbue his music with a certain soul. But he believes it has just as much to do with what's in his heart — and that trumps any divisions as artificial as state lines or old versus new.

“This is my life and what I love and what moves me,” he says. “It's time to share it without any limitations.”