



normaltown records

The Howdies
Howdies All Around

Howdy. That word is a cowboy greeting, loose and casual, something you'd say to a friend you see on the street. But in Athens, Georgia, a howdy is something more. Order one at a local bar and you'll get a half-shot of your particular poison. It'll treat your head and your wallet kinder than a full shot, even if you get a generous bartender with a heavy pouring hand. "I think it's a service industry thing," says Shoni Rancher, who sings, writes songs, and plays guitar in a band called the Howdies. "You just got out of the weeds with your crew. You want a drink to celebrate, but you don't want to get too messed up. So it's howdies all around."

Howdies are an Athens custom, an unheralded aspect of life in this small college town with a big music scene. "That's why we took the name," says Austin Darnell, who also sings, writes songs, and plays guitar in the Howdies. "It's a wink and a nod to something that feels so specific to this place." Their debut, *Howdies All Around*, was inspired by and created for long nights in local bars, but they are a different kind of Athens band, one that specializes in a rambunctious yet thoughtful brand of honkytonk—a style not typically associated with this place. They're barstool philosophers who fill their songs with tangy guitar licks, loose rustic grooves, and a scrappy optimism. "Sometimes staying standing is the best you can do," Darnell testifies on "Staying Standing," as the band fight gravity with a two-step rhythm and a sympathetic guitar lick. "Look at me, I got the whole world underneath my feet." For the Howdies, the shotglass is always half-full, never half-empty.

Its two frontmen have taken very different paths to the Howdies. Darnell has been playing around town for more than 20 years, first as a teenager in basement punk bands and later as frontman for the country-leaning Darnell Boys. For most of his life, he thought country music didn't have much to show him, but then he heard Hank Williams and the Carter Family. "It's stories about life," he says. "It's stories about hardship. That's the most interesting part to me—those real-life stories, those laughing-to-keep-from-crying songs. As a child of the South, maybe that's just baked into me a little bit."

If Darnell gravitates toward classic country of the '50s and '60s, Rancher loves the outlaws of the '70s: Willie and Jerry Jeff and especially Waylon. Even as a teenager in Arizona, he heard something special in their songs, something that resonated with him. "That's what spoke to me—all those falling-in-love songs and heartbreak songs. I hadn't done any drinking or honkytonking at that point, but I could still identify with those tunes. I got the heartbreak."

The duo met at a fish fry, but didn't get close until they worked together at a pizza shop Darnell managed. During the pandemic Darnell would host guitar pulls in his backyard, and that's where they discovered they both shared an interest in classic country songwriting. Rancher recalls the arrival of one of the very first Howdies songs: "We were hanging out at my house and drinking way too much whiskey, bitching about politics or whatever. Around 2 in the morning, my wife comes out and yells for us to shut up and go to bed. The next morning I felt like absolute shit, but Austin texted me a song he'd already written called 'Quitting Time.' He's a wordsmith. He just breathes this stuff. He's been at it a lot longer than I have, even though I'm older than him."

Rancher, a philosophy professor (most recently at Georgia State) had never been in a band or even played a live show when Darnell floated the idea of the Howdies, but the 48-year-old newcomer took to it naturally. "I think we contrast each other nicely," says Darnell, who works as a lab technician. "Shoni has such a unique voice, and we're coming from these two different periods in country music. Between us, we get this weird thing that's neither this nor that. It's old, but it's new. It's Athens, so it has a little bit of weirdness to it. It gives us more versatility." The Howdies coalesced around the pair, eventually adding a who's who of great local players to its ranks: bassist Seth Barham (LeeAnn Peppers), guitarist Rob Hibbs (Hibbs Family Band), multi-instrumentalist Tyler Key (Tyler Key & the Strangers), and drummer Johnny Watson.

In the summer of 2021 they played their first show—an outdoor gig in the parking lot of Buvez coffeeshop in Athens. In the crowd were Mayor Kelly Girtz, Patterson Hood of the Drive-By Truckers, producer David Barbe, and T. Hardy Morris. "We were drinking PBR tallboys on a sunny Sunday afternoon, and their songs just fit the moment and vibe," recalls Morris. "The songs really stuck with me, too—good lyrics and great stories. They were doing classic country and were having a good time. It was something different for Athens at the time."

Morris and Barbe immediately offered to co-produce a Howdies record, and soon the Howdies were holed up at Chase Park Transduction. They tracked live in the studio, with a minimum of overdubs, all with the idea of showcasing the band's stage dynamic. "I think that a great recording—a truly great recording in any genre—you can listen to each individual person and can hear everything they do," says Darnell. "They're all making interesting things happen individually, but they're all making those sounds together. That's what we wanted to capture."

Despite being a relatively untested band, the Howdies knew their songs well and knew what they could do together, which meant they had to loosen up and let in new ideas. On Rancher's song "Buddies," the band had always jammed the intro, slowly building it up before breaking into the song. It was a way to stretch themselves out and add a little drama to its tale of tragedy and perseverance. In the studio, however, Morris suggested another line of attack: "He came up with this opening lick, which wasn't even close to how we normally played the song," says Rancher. "But now I can't hear it any other way. He found the way it needed to be."

Soaked in bluesy harmonica and riding a bucking-bronco rhythm section, "Buddies" is ostensibly about Rancher's hero, Waylon Jennings, who suffered extreme survivor's guilt after giving up his seat on Buddy Holly's doomed plane. "His last words to Buddy were something

along the lines of, I hope your plane crashes,” says Rancher. “Afterwards, he moved out to Arizona to clear his head, met his wife, and decided not to give up on his recording career.” It becomes not just a story song, but a rumination on why you play story songs in the first place. “If you want it to live forever,” Rancher sings in his bone-deep baritone, “you gotta have a lotta soul.”

That’s the heart of the band’s driving philosophy: music as a means of connection and commiseration. “It’s about reaching out to each other and to the audience,” says Darnell. It’s about sharing a feeling and exorcising it, because there’s a catharsis in sharing. It’s not always easy to get people to put themselves in your shoes or to let them find themselves in your words, but it’s always worth trying. We’re trying to say something that’s true to us and true to them.”