

Flint band Dixie Hustler is back in business

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Courtesy PhotoMembers of Dixie

Hustler are, from left, Chris Baker, Brian O'Leary, Dan Coburn, Dusty Brill and Jon Drew.

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Not every local band gets the chance to record two albums, blow up big enough on the local scene to open for Lynyrd Skynyrd at The Palace, tour around the country, eventually go their separate ways and then get back together to do it again.

But Dixie Hustler has that chance, and the bandmates are looking to do it right this time.

Formed in 2002 by Dan Coburn, Eric Allen, Chris Baker, Clay Frink and Shawn Ramsey, Dixie Hustler set out to be a band like AC/DC because, as guitarist Chris Baker says, "Nobody was doing an AC/DC thing. We tried, but it didn't really work out. After all, there's only one AC/DC."

[Preview](#)

So they decided to change it up and play more of what they knew, which happened to be a lot of ZZ Top, Lynyrd Skynyrd, .38 Special and other classic rock artists.

At that time, Flint had a big punk, metal and hardcore scene, but rock bands were a little harder to come by. Dixie Hustler fit that bill.

They started off primarily as a cover band with a few originals thrown in.

“We played dirty Midwestern rock with a blue-collar edge,” Baker says. “Since all the members were from the Flint area, we all had that connection. Everyone had a family member who worked in one of the GM shops.”

When lead singer Coburn and guitarist Allen started writing songs, they had a Flint edge to them.

“Flint is a hard town,” Coburn says, “And our music was a reflection of our experience.”

That experience paid off early for the band, and it became a mainstay on the local scene. Dixie Hustler shows were “must see” mostly because, as Coburn says, “We filled a void. People wanted a rock band and we delivered.”

Their early success came from equal parts hard work and good luck. They had a friend and fan in Kevin Zink, owner of The Machine Shop. Zink was a key player in Dixie Hustler opening for Lynyrd Skynyrd at The Palace of Auburn Hills.

Coburn explains, “We were scheduled to open for Jackyl at The Machine Shop on that same night. Skynyrd’s opening band, Rare Earth, couldn’t do the show because one of their members was sick and they really needed a band. So Kevin Zink called and said, ‘Get down to The Palace to open for Lynyrd Skynyrd. You go on in an hour.’”

Baker adds, “We got there and met Kid Rock’s manager, who was running the show backstage. We got a half-hour, which was cool, especially because we had a half-hour of original material.”

The band members remember that as a monumental experience, one that doesn’t come around every day. And, true to their blue-collar roots, they hustled back to Flint and played The Machine Shop.

“We played for 14,000 people at The Palace,” Baker says, “and then we came back to open for Jackyl and Blackberry Smoke.”

- What: Dixie Hustler show, with opening acts Tripp 'N' Dixie and The Hangers On

- When: 7 p.m. Saturday, Aug. 6

- Where: The Machine Shop, Flint

- Admission: \$5

- Info: themachineshop.info

The show at The Machine Shop will add another dynamic element to Dixie Hustler: JC Westwood on backing vocals. Westwood has been friends with Dixie Hustler through her own bands in the Detroit area.

“She’s got a great voice and the perfect attitude for Dixie Hustler,” Baker says. “We’re thrilled that she’s doing the gig with us. She’ll really add to the dynamics of the new band.”

“We’ve got a great lineup of people who are all very good at what they do,” Coburn says, “and that’s not easy to find.”

The new members of Dixie Hustler each bring a new level of excitement to the band. For Brill, it was the chance to resurrect something great.

This early success eventually took its toll on the band. Too many shows, too much time on the road and too little money caused the stress to build up, and they went their separate ways in 2006.

During that time, the individual members went on to their own musical successes, including Eric Allen forming Whitey Morgan and the 78’s, who are currently touring Europe.

Dan Coburn lived in Memphis for four years, playing in Hill Country Revue, featuring members of the North Mississippi Allstars, and working on his songwriting. Chris Baker began playing country music, too, as The Dirty Cowboy.

During his time in Memphis, Coburn says he always wanted to start a Dixie Hustler-type band, but it just never came together.

But now it has. Coburn moved back to Michigan and called Baker to see if he was interested in getting Dixie Hustler back together. The answer was an immediate “Yes!”

Joining Coburn and Baker are bassist Brian O’Leary, guitarist Jon Drew and drummer Dusty Brill. They all share that blue-collar, Flint edge with Coburn and Baker.

The group has gelled through practice and reworking songs from their original two albums. They have even got at least one new original, “Hard Luck & Heartbreak,” to work in among hard-driving originals including “Whiskey & Women,” “Empty Wallet Blues” and “Take Me Back.”

Coburn said the new songs are just as hard-edged but a little more dynamic and more melodic, “because my vocal range is bit lower and more bluesy.”

But, Coburn adds, “We’re still just as heavy and in-your-face, but not as overly macho.”