

One-man band brings razzle dazzle to Swamp Stomp

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Diving into old blues folklore, Tallahassee-born musician Dylan "RP" Allen uncovered the term ragpicker while working in a local music store. He explains how the timeworn word describes a vagrant who rummages through rubbish and reinvents litter.

Shortening ragpicker to "RP," Allen fully owns the moniker, transfiguring olive oil tins into mandolins and cigar boxes into guitars, and making them the homemade stars of his one-man-band.

His lead guitar was assembled out of his grandmother's hardwood floor, and then there's the diddley bow — a stick with a string and a can that he can make sing electric. Once lugging around an entire drum set, Allen now creates the illusion of snares, high hats, and toms from the inside of his traveling suitcase, rigged with an electric drum kit.

He infuses humor into his performances by introducing his multitude of instruments as "the band," and hopes they will all razzle dazzle the Tallahassee Museum's Swamp Stomp on July 14.

"If you want people to move and dance you have to have some kind of beat behind it, and if you don't have a drummer, this is the next best thing," says Allen, who says he plays a lot of low-fi instruments through hi-fi equipment. "Some pedals sound like an old keyboard or organ, others like I have a bass guitar coming out one side and regular guitar out the other. The long-term goal is if someone were to close their eyes, they'd think it was three or four people onstage."

Allen aspired to become a musician after hearing Elvis Presley croon on a movie soundtrack, and dedicated much of his time in high school to learning music in band, choir, and orchestra. Raised on country and gospel, Allen got hooked on the likes of Muddy Waters and Stevie Ray Vaughan for their showmanship.

In hopes of emulating these greats, he's busked on street corners since age 15, and recalls his first time performing outside Omaha, Nebraska. Allen played music for three hours straight and didn't make a dime. Going into his last song, a 5-year-old boy placed a nickel in his case and gave him a request. Afterwards, the boy's father told Allen he had spent the last of his allowance on the tune.

"The night before I saw Def Leopard in a stadium full of people and thought, 'that's what I want to do, I want that feeling,'" says Allen. "I was able to get that feeling from one kid. Even though I didn't make a lot of money that night, I had made one little fan."

Never playing within a set genre, Allen can easily fit into a bluegrass festival one week and a punk and metal show the next. He's often described his sound as swamp, funk, rockabilly, and blues. Instead of predetermining his set-lists, Allen will walk into a venue, read the crowd, and keep spontaneity in his music selections.

It's usually a mix of covers peppered with Allen's original work. He might hear a melody inside the rhythm of car tires hitting ruts in the



Dylan Allen plays a mix of covers peppered with original work. He'll play July 14 at the Swamp Stomp KAYLA KING/REWSKI PHOTOGRAPHY

road, or wake up in the middle of the night with a rhyme. Allen has notebooks filled with these bits and pieces of lyrics that portray countless personal or passersby's stories.

"Tallahassee has given me a lot of really good stories," says Allen. "If I hadn't gotten into music I would have gotten into photography, because I can find stories or something cool in the little things. Music is just how I capture those moments instead of taking a photo."

Whether it's fellow musicians or just folks passing through Railroad Square, Allen will rearrange details to protect the anonymity of the stories he turns into lyrics. Other times the songs are deeply personal, like "Use Me," which portrays the unhealthy habits he's used to deal with relationship breakups, while "Stand Tall" reaffirms that one doesn't have to go down that path.

Allen is most proud of the songs that he's written based on encounters with young adults he has met on First Fridays in Railroad Square. After listening to the myriad of struggles and heartbreak, he strives to transform the difficulties and trials these young people have faced into thoughtful music that will hopefully spark conversations.

"The only way to make changes happen is to talk about the uncomfortable things," says Allen. "I've played in front of politicians, drunk college kids, and everything in between, and if at least one person hears something, at least I can say I did that. To me music is the best kind of therapy you can get. If you can't say it talking to somebody, you can put chords to it and say it better than you ever thought you could."

Allen has toured these stories along the coasts and southern states of Alabama, Florida, Tennessee, and Georgia, and his goal is to play all 50 states someday.

Currently, Allen is fundraising to play in Krasnodar, Russia as the international destination is celebrating its 225th year as Tallahassee's sister city. He'll kick off the entire festival, a job he takes seriously as he believes the opener often sets the tone for a whole

If you go

What: Swamp Stomp 2018

When: 9 a.m.-5 p.m., Saturday, July 14

Where: Tallahassee Museum, 3945 Museum Drive

Cost: Included with general admission to museum, free for museum members and active duty military

Contact: For more information, call 850-575-8684 or visit <https://tallahasseeuseum.org/event/swampstomp-2018>.

Details: To learn more about Dylan Allen, visit www.facebook.com/Ragpickerallen.

show.

Locally, Allen has played numerous bars and juke joints in town, but most enjoys Swamp Stomp where he'll return for his fourth year performing. It's the kids in the crowd that he most looks forward to, as many will bring their sense of wonderment up to the stage as they look over his strangely unique instruments.

Becoming an elementary music schoolteacher is on Allen's list of dreams, right up alongside getting signed to a label and opening his own studio slash venue slash restaurant. He also hopes to divorce the image of a one-man band from Dick Van Dyke's portrayal of one in "Mary Poppins" with a drum on his back. No matter where his vagabond journey leads him, Allen envisions leaving audiences dazzled and chewing on the meaning behind his layered lyricism.

"Musicians are some of the biggest tricksters that I've ever met," laughs Allen. "I like to shock people. Admittedly I do a lot of shtick, but at the same time it's to trick people into listening. You put on a character to draw people in, but the trick is making them believe it."

Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).