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Lynyrd Skynyrd guitarist plays sweet home Fort Myers

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After each tour, after thousands and thousands of fans chanting “Free Bird,” Rickey Medlocke can’t wait to slip out of his leather concert clothes and get back to sweet home Fort Myers.

“I just love it,” said the lanky guitarist for Lynyrd Skynyrd, the classic Southern rock band playing Germain Arena in Estero tonight. “Everything’s just a little bit more low key. I’ve got a lot of friends here.”

During his breaks from Skynyrd, Medlocke spends his time fishing for redfish and snook, target practicing at local gun ranges and eating sushi at local sushi bars.

Tonight’s concert marks the first time Skynyrd has played Southwest Florida in about four years. Many of Medlocke’s local friends will be there — including Sheriff Mike Scott, who might show up in his sheriff’s uniform.

“I probably won’t have time to change,” Scott explained.

Scott loved Medlocke’s music long before they became friends in 2004 — since way back in the late ’70s when Medlocke founded Blackfoot, the Jacksonville rock band best-known for the songs “Train, Train” and “Highway Song.”

A regular guy

The two met while Scott was campaigning for sheriff and he noticed a “Mike Scott for Sheriff” sign in an insurance agency’s window. He stopped by, chatted with the secretary and soon discovered she was dating Medlocke.

“She asked if I’d like to meet him,” Scott recalled. “And I said, ‘Uh... yeah.’ And she said, ‘Well, he’s just down the road at Wal-Mart buying fishing tackle.’”

The two hit it off immediately. “He’s just a regular guy,” Scott said.

Other friends echo that idea. Medlocke usually hangs out in jeans and T-shirts with his long hair pulled back. And he happily jumps to his feet and grins whenever someone notices him at a restaurant and asks for an autograph. No problem. Actually, it’s fairly difficult not to notice Medlocke.

The man appears larger-than-life, Scott said. Medlocke walks into a room, and heads turn. He towers at 6 feet, 3 inches tall with intense eyes, a dramatic forehead, tattoos and a gym-toned body.

“There’s something different about him,” Scott said. “He’s kind of got that rock-star persona.”

That persona takes center-stage at tonight’s show promoting the new album, “God & Guns.”

The album’s title doesn’t come as a surprise to Medlocke’s friends in Southwest Florida. He can talk eloquently and passionately about God, guns, the ACLU and all sorts of political topics.

“If you get him started on illegal immigration, he’ll go off,” Scott said.

“God & Guns” is the Jacksonville-based band’s first studio album in six years — and one that’s been getting some of their best reviews since the ’70s.

“We’re really, really proud of it,” Medlocke said.

He credits that quality to the heavy emotions hanging over them as they recorded.

No stranger to tragedy, the band suffered two more blows this year. Original keyboardist Billy Powell died of a heart attack in January, followed in May by bass player Ean Evans, who died after a long battle with cancer.

“We almost called it a day,” Medlocke said.

Lynyrd Skynyrd, of course, has made a habit of soldiering on after adversity — most famously after lead vocalist Ronnie Van Zant, guitarist Steve Gaines and backing singer Cassie Gaines died in an airplane crash in 1977. Medlocke grew up in Jacksonville with the band’s original members, and he briefly drummed for them in the early ’70s.

The new Skynyrd formed as a tribute band in 1987, and Medlocke joined in 1996 — five years after he’d moved to Southwest Florida from Ann Arbor, Mich., to escape the cold and be near his producer.

“And it worked,” said longtime friend Rob Robinson of Studio Sea, the Fort Myers recording studio co-owned by Medlocke (and where Medlocke recorded his vocals for the anthem “Skynyrd Nation”). “It took on a life of its own.”

In concert, Medlocke sings and takes the lead guitar solo on the band’s signature song, “Free Bird.” It’s truly something to behold, said friend Chris Whitaker, owner of Blu Sushi (where you can find a Rickey’s Special named for Medlocke — yellowfin tuna topped with jalapeño).

“It’s an amazing solo,” Whitaker said. “The place goes bananas.”

Friend Brian Howe — lead singer for rock band Bad Company — calls Medlocke one of the best rock guitarists around. He’s an old-school, Southern rock guitarist with modern tendencies, said Howe, 55, of Fort Myers Beach. Medlocke, in fact, considers himself a bluesman before a rock guitarist (he’s the grandson of Delta bluesman Shorty Medlocke).

“He doesn’t sound like an old fart,” Howe said. “He doesn’t sound like he’s playing with a 50-year-old’s arthritic fingers.”

Medlocke feels privileged to play in such an esteemed band. “Free Bird” consistently ranks in the Top 5 most-played rock tunes on radio stations nationwide. And the hit “Sweet Home Alabama” recently reached its 2 millionth download on iTunes.

Medlocke hopes to keep rocking for years to come, and he bristles whenever someone suggests rock ‘n’ roll is a young man’s game. He think he’s making some of the best music of his life now.

“I’m 59 years young,” he said. “But, you know, you put a guitar in my hands, and I feel like I’m 15.”