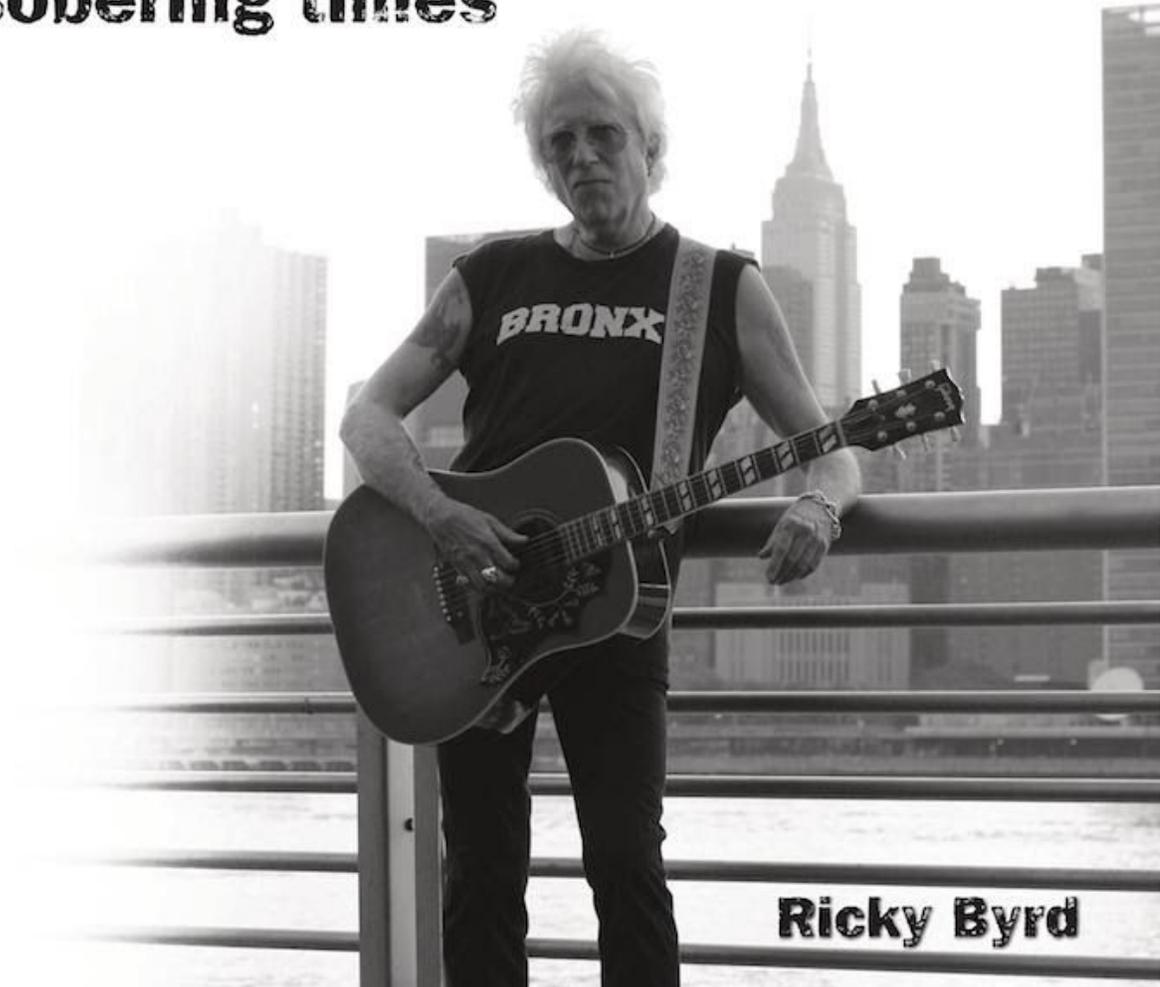


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<https://www.theaquarian.com/2020/11/13/ricky-byrd-becoming-a-recovery-troubadour/>

sobering times



Ricky Byrd: Becoming a Recovery Troubadour

Even in the most uncertain of times, Ricky Byrd continues to prove that rock and roll, sobriety, and recovering can, in fact, go hand-in-hand.

On September 25 – the day he released his fourth solo album, *Sobering Times* – venerated guitarist/vocalist Ricky Byrd marked his 33rd year of sobriety – “Which is freaking cool!” he says. But Byrd has also looked beyond his own situation: through his music, he is helping others

stay on the right path, as well. The songs on this new album, he says, are “All with the same theme of recovery, mixed in with some loud and proud rock and roll.”

Byrd rose to fame as a longtime member of Joan Jett and the Blackhearts, playing on hits including “I Love Rock ‘n’ Roll” and “I Hate Myself for Loving You.” After that, he worked with Ian Hunter and Roger Daltrey, then released his first solo album, *Tough Room*, in 1999. By his 2015 album *Clean Getaway*, he was still playing his signature blues-influenced rock, but he had begun singing lyrics that examine and encourage sobriety. “My rule of thumb was, this still had to be like *Exile on Main Street* – with a message of addiction recovery, hope, [and] change for better,” Byrd says during a call from his home in Queens, New York.

This transformation into being a “Recovery Troubadour,” as Byrd calls himself, started about ten years ago when he was invited to perform at a recovery benefit show in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. He accepted, and recalls that he played “I Love Rock ‘n’ Roll” and some blues cover songs. Afterward, “I had people coming over to me and saying, ‘Wow, man, I grew up on your music. It’s so cool *you’re* in recovery. *I’m* in recovery!’ Or, ‘Unfortunately, I lost somebody to addiction.’ The proverbial lightbulb went off in my head,” he says.

When Byrd returned to his home in New York City, he recorded a demo song, “Broken Is a Place,” which contained lyrics about recovery. He made it available online. Soon, he says, “I started getting messages from people around the world saying, ‘I so identified with that!’ And not only people [who are] struggling, but people that are in long-term recovery and also people that just love rock and roll.” Encouraged, he wrote a few more songs with the same theme.

After that, Byrd began taking his acoustic guitar to treatment facilities in New Jersey, leading music recovery groups. He found that the songs worked the same magic with these clients as they had with his online audience: “They laughed, they cried. They asked questions. They’d come over to me and say, ‘I can’t believe you’re telling my story.’ Then they’d ask, ‘Where can I get this music?’”

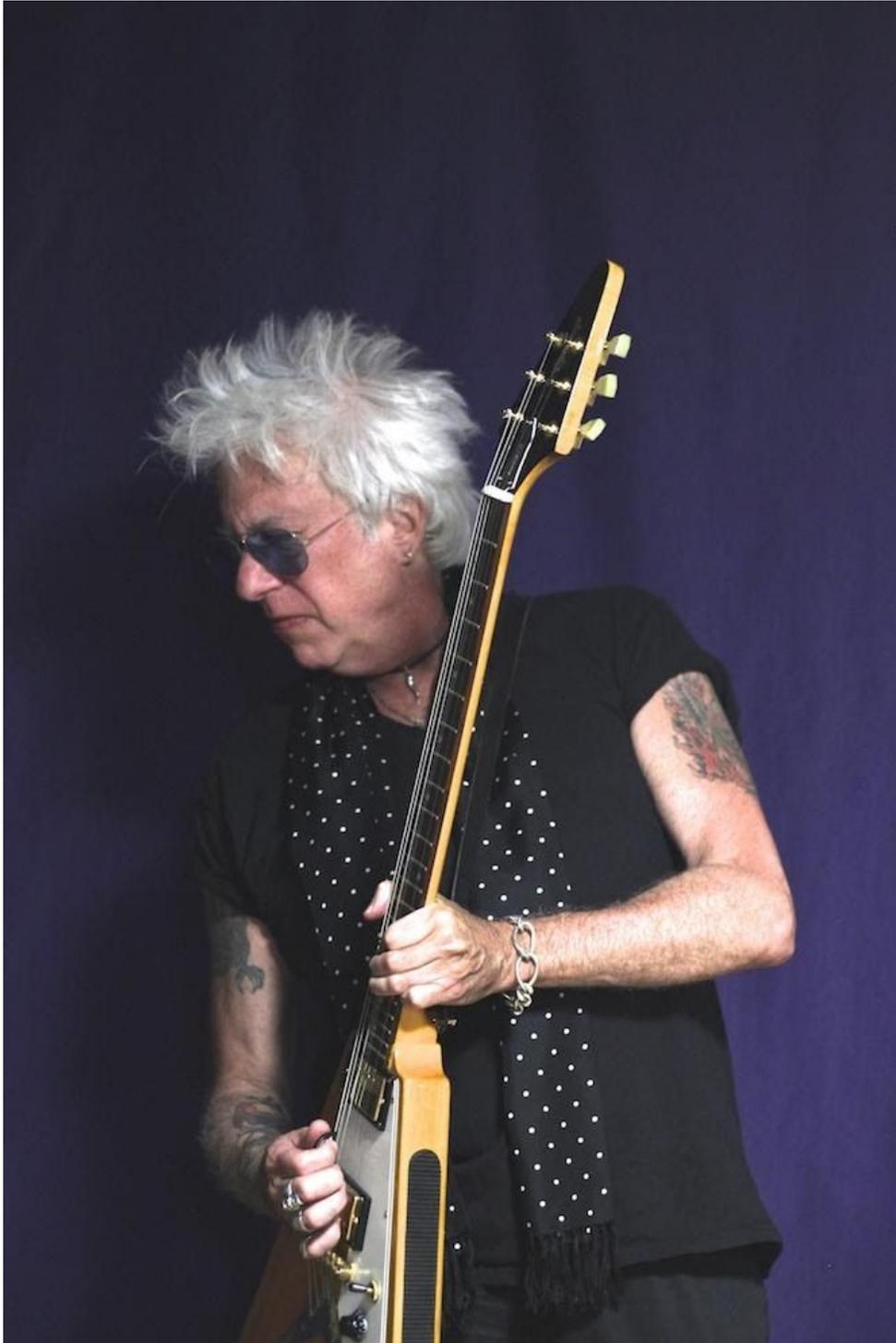
Realizing he had an eager audience for this type of material, Byrd released *Clean Getaway*, which proved so successful that he continued the recovery theme with *Sobering Times*. With both albums, he says that his ongoing work with recovery groups has played a key role in his songwriting process. “Some of the subject matter is from conversations I have with the clients about gratitude or triggers or ‘how do I stop?’” he says. “If I feel like I’m getting a great response and they’re identifying, then it becomes one of the ones that I record. That’s my tryout period.”

Although writing this type of material has been a learning experience for Byrd, he first started mastering music when he was still a child growing up in The Bronx. “My parents were divorced, so we lived with my grandparents at one point in this big apartment building overlooking Yankee Stadium,” he says. “There was always music playing. I can close my eyes and see my grandmother dusting the draperies [while] there was music from the ‘30s and ‘40s on the radio.

“And then I listened to New York Top 40 radio, which played everything from Frank Sinatra to The Rolling Stones and Otis Redding,” Byrd continues. “And then of course every Sunday night

we'd watch *The Ed Sullivan Show*, which is where I saw the Beatles and The Rolling Stones, which is what made me want to play guitar in the first place.”

By the time Byrd was fourteen years old, his family had moved to Queens, where he began actively seeking out other musicians and forming bands. “We would actually play in people’s garages and church dances, [because] we were too young to play clubs, really,” he says.



By the time Byrd was sixteen years old, though, he'd figured out how to slip into rock clubs in Manhattan, and he became a regular at legendary venues like Max's Kansas City. "That's where you would see everybody from the New York Dolls to Iggy Pop," he says. "We would go from one club to another and listen to different kinds of rock and roll bands. It did have a big influence on the kind of music I loved. Then you'd get on the 7 train back to Queens at four in the morning and hope that nobody beats you up!" With a laugh, he adds: "But of course, I had my Bronx swagger so that didn't happen!"

Being at Max's Kansas City further fueled Byrd's rock and roll dreams: "There was a famous round table in the back where they put the rock stars," he says, recalling one time when "Mott the Hoople were sitting at this table. I loved "All the Young Dudes" when that came out. I was staring at them, dreaming: someday. And then 20, 25 years later, I was [frontman] Ian Hunter's guitar player for a tour of Scandinavia and England and I got to play all those songs that I listened to with those giant headphones you had when you were a kid."

At the same time, Byrd was learning about the blues by reading magazine articles about his idols. "I would read stories – Jimmy Page or Robert Plant would talk about John Lee Hooker or Robert Johnson. I'm like, 'Well, who's that?' And I would go find those albums and listen to that music."

Byrd took this mixture of rock and blues and turn it into his signature swaggering style, leading to his invitation to join the Blackhearts and all of his ensuing success. He believes that having an extensive musical foundation has been crucial to his career: "Every generation is supposed to have their own music, but you should know the history of where everything came from," he says.

Now, Byrd himself has firmly established himself as part of an important part of musical history. He was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2015, as a member of Joan Jett and Blackhearts. Now, with *Sobering Times*, he is seeking to make his legacy even more meaningful through helping others as much as he can.

While he's staying focused on helping others, Byrd says he's also being careful to mind his own sobriety, especially during these pandemic-riddled times. "I'm part of the recovery community, so I'm a strong believer in community support groups, like spiritual 12-step stuff," he says. "We all keep each other sane in a freaking nutty world. Let me tell you. I've used that community support group, Zoom technology, almost every day since this [pandemic] started in March."

Before he hangs up to go sign copies of *Sobering Times* that will be mailed to fans around the world, Byrd has a parting message: "Anybody out there that's struggling, just keep doing the deal, one day at a time. Recovery rocks!"