

Allman talks about appreciation for life; to play Tahoe

By Donna Isbell Walker, Gannett

At 64, Gregg Allman is lucky to be alive.

For more than three decades, as the face and blues-soaked voice of the Allman Brothers Band, Allman lived as hard and fast as he possibly could.

Copious amounts of drugs and alcohol eventually took their toll, and a 1995 intervention by friends was the impetus for his sobriety. In 2010, Allman underwent a liver transplant necessitated by all those years of abuse.

Allman, who comes to the South Shore Room at Harrah's Lake Tahoe on Saturday, has made quite a turnaround, and these days he sees things from a whole different perspective.

If he could live his life over again, "I would erase all drugs and alcohol," Allman said in a recent phone interview from his home in Savannah, Ga. "They were nothing but a hindrance, nothing but a deterrent. ... They came out with that one commercial where they said, 'Cocaine is a lie.' It's all a lie, all of it. Alcohol is not supposed to be ingested, maybe a little wine. But hard liquor, it just eats away at the lining of all your intestines."

He has spent the past few years learning about the effects of drugs and alcohol on the human body, with the same passion he once put into scoring the drugs and chugging the drinks.

"I have gone to great lengths to find out just what each one of these things that I used to take does to you. It's a nightmare. No wonder I had to have a new liver. And thank God

that they can do that. I give thanks every day, every day, morning and night. I'm so grateful to be alive," Allman said.

Much of that journey is recounted in Allman's memoir, "My Cross to Bear," which came out earlier this year. The book is a raw, down-and-dirty look at a life of career highs and lows, intense love affairs, including a marriage to Cher, and unspeakable pain, particularly the death of his brother Duane.

"My Cross to Bear" began as a journal in the early 1980s, Allman said. He mostly wrote it as a way to remember and reflect on his life, never intending to publish it.

"I was thinking, this is great, I really need to write this stuff down, go into real detail about it, so when I get to be real old – old codger sittin' on the front porch in a rockin' chair – I can pick out a few of these pages and it'll take me right back," he said.

His manager saw the journal and encouraged Allman to turn it into a book.

Allman didn't gloss over his own flaws in writing about his life. "A lot of people said, 'Man, you let 'em know a little too much, didn't you?' And I don't think so, no," he said.

One of the toughest parts was writing about Duane, his beloved older brother and bandmate, who was killed in a 1971 motorcycle crash. Allman speaks haltingly about reliving that chapter of his life.

"It's hard, you know. There's not a day that passes that I don't think of him," he said. "There were parts of (writing) it that were gotten through a little bit slower than other parts."

Through it all, Allman said, he has had the rare gift of being able to build a career around what he loves the most.

"I looked around and thought, man, what a wonderful life I

have to be so fortunate as to have your passion be the way you make your living also. I mean, that is so fortunate," he said. "So many hundreds of thousands of people just trudge to work and trudge home and go searching for the right amount of the legal tender. It's so sad. I mean, get on the freeway, (complain) about this and that, the price of gas and all. The white-shirt army, I am so glad I don't belong to it."

Saturday's show is part of a short tour in support of Allman's latest solo album, "Low Country Blues," a collection of traditional blues songs, along with a new tune written by Allman and his Allman Brothers bandmate Warren Haynes.

It's his first solo project in 14 years. "Isn't that ridiculous?" he said with a chuckle.

For much of that interim, Allman was focused on maintaining his sobriety and regaining his health.

But another factor was the 2002 death of his longtime producer Tom Dowd, a Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductee who produced most of the Allman Brothers Band's catalog.

The right producer is a crucial part of the recording process, Allman said, explaining that "he hears things that you don't hear."

The producer helps to weave all of the musical elements into one cohesive piece, and "he becomes real, real important. ... You really start leaning on this person."

Dowd was that person for Allman, beginning with the Allman Brother's Band's iconic 1971 live album "At Fillmore East."

After Dowd's death, "to have to break another one of these in, pardon the expression there, but it's like too big of a hill to climb for the stuff that was going on in my life then."

Eventually, he connected with T-Bone Burnett, best known for his work on the "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" soundtrack, and

“Low Country Blues” was released last year.

Allman’s current tour features only a handful of dates over a six-week period. That’s because he’s taken a bigger role in scheduling his tours.

“I don’t do more than two concerts in a row,” Allman said. “The first one just kind of oozes out. And the second one, you actually put a little effort into it, and it really smokes. But the third one, I don’t know, it’s like, ‘We’re gonna do this again?’”

Having the breaks between each date keeps the shows fresh, and Allman said he wishes he had taken the reins sooner.

“I should have done that all along,” he said. “Of course, I didn’t have my butt in the seat, shifting all the gears. That takes a few years to happen. My grandfather told me, ‘You have to have your foot in the door, your butt in the seat, shifting all the gears. Then you’re going somewhere.’”