

Gregg Allman has lived the blues many times over - USA Today

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NEW YORK â Gregg Allman has earned the torment in his singing voice to a degree that's ridiculous even for a bluesman. Tragic deaths of family members and bandmates, drug and alcohol addiction and much more have seared his soul over 63 years. Yet when he softly recounts his most recent torture, a liver transplant in June after a battle with hepatitis C, he punctuates it with a Southern-inflected half-chuckle that's endearing.

"It's the roughest thing I've ever been through," says the lead vocalist/organist of Rock and Roll Hall of Famers the Allman Brothers Band. "I've been in military school, through six divorces, heh-heh â this is worse than all that."

The decision to seek a transplant was made soon after he had been cajoled into the recording studio last January to make his first solo album in 14 years, *Low Country Blues*, out Tuesday. Allman's reluctance (he'd last been in a studio in 2003, with the Allman Brothers) had stemmed from the death in 2002 of legendary producer Tom Dowd, who had guided Allman to most of his greatest successes. "It hit me hard. When recording would raise its ugly head, I would roll over and play dead."

But in 2009, Allman's manager lured him to Memphis to meet with 10-time Grammy-winning producer T Bone Burnett.

"I swear to God I had never heard of him," Allman says. "Has it ever struck you that the East Coast (Allman lives in Georgia) and West Coast (Burnett is based in L.A.) are shamefully divided?"

The two clicked. Allman says he was taken with a Burnett project to replicate Sun Studios at his home ("that was the hippest thing I had ever heard") and with Burnett's admiration for Dowd.

Says Burnett: "The place where we could relate most profoundly was in the blues. I didn't know how good a blues singer he was. He hasn't lost a thing â it just gets better with age."

The producer envisioned an album of lesser-known blues and R&B covers from artists who had inspired Allman, and gave him hundreds to sort through. The deal was almost scotched when Burnett insisted on using musicians other than Allman's touring band. "I almost slammed the door on him," he says. "I'm so glad I didn't. But that's two clicks from being an insult, you know?"

Allman softened when he saw that Burnett had assembled top-flight session veterans, including guitarist Doyle Bramhall II and Dennis Crouch on upright bass. Burnett sweetened the deal by bringing in longtime Allman friend Dr. John (Mac Rebennack).

"This is special," Rebennack says. "Gregg had been through health problems. And Duane (Allman's beloved guitar-legend sibling, who was killed in a motorcycle accident in 1971) had asked me to look out for his little brother, like he knew something maybe would happen."

Many of the songs Allman chose mirror themes in his life, most notably a harrowing Sleepy John Estes tune about a man who is rescued from drowning and considers mending his ways. "Floating Bridge definitely points to my life," Allman says. "It hits one of your

sympathetic strings."

Knowing he had a solid album in the can gave him strength the past six months to recover from the transplant of his cancerous liver. "It did, it really did," he says. "Let me tell you, they put me through some pain."

He likens it to kicking his addictions in the mid-'90s. "Not as time-consuming, but as rough. I just kept saying and praying, 'This, too, will pass.' "

By October, he was playing solo dates and a few guest spots, including duets with Neko Case on Midnight Rider during Burnett's Speaking Clock Revue, and he's preparing for the Allman Brothers Band's annual March residency at New York's Beacon Theater. He'll play some festivals with his solo band (including Bonnaroo and New Orleans Jazz Fest) this summer and fulfill a few commitments with the Brothers, now in their 42nd year.

Though he wonders "how long the band will last," given the members' various side projects, he hopes for another studio album. "You've got to take care of the Brothers."

[Submitted by Radical Red]