

Howard and the Shakes will share the Forest Hills bill with Drive-By Truckers.



BY MAC RANDALL
Special to Newsday

Two and a half years ago, things were looking good for Alabama Shakes leader Brittany Howard. Her band's electrifying soul-rock single, "Hold On," had become a radio hit. Their debut album, "Boys & Girls," was on its way to gold sales status. And they'd been nominated for three Grammy Awards, including best new artist.

Headly stuff, but Howard took it all in stride.

"Think about it," she said in a March 2013 interview in Music Alive! magazine. "Think about if someone was telling you, 'You're No. 1. You're No. 1.' The day you're not No. 1, how are you going to feel?"

Her question was rhetorical then, but now there's real reason to ask it. When Alabama Shakes' second album, "Sound & Color," came out in April, it entered the Billboard 200 chart at — you guessed it: No. 1. So, five months later, how does Howard feel?

WHO Alabama Shakes
WHEN | WHERE 7 p.m.
Saturday, Forest Hills Stadium, 1 Tennis Place, Forest Hills
TICKETS \$39.60-\$69.50
INFO ticketfly.com

The not-so-surprising answer: pretty much the same as she did 2½ years ago. OK, maybe a little happier.

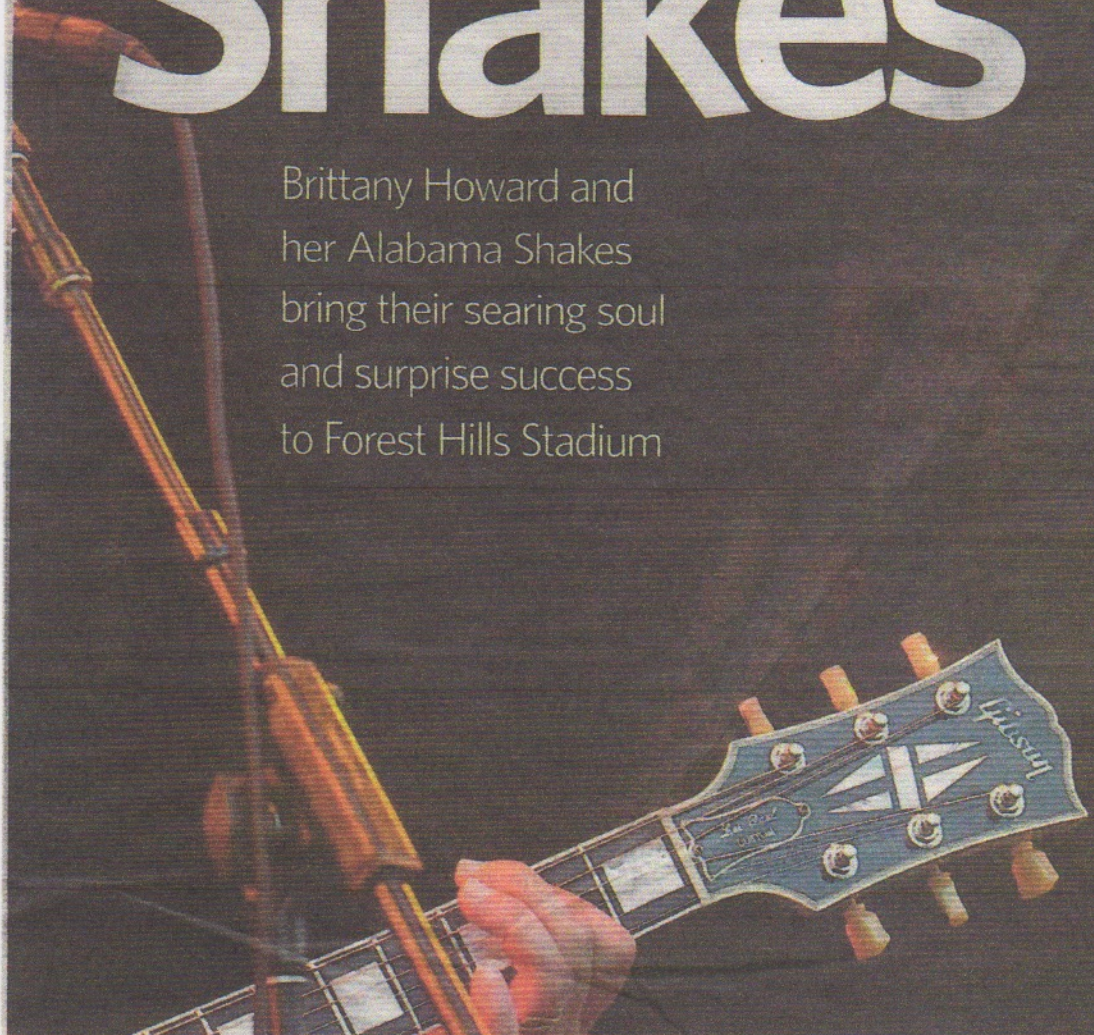
"At first, it didn't really sink in," Howard says by phone from Nashville, where she's preparing to embark on a

headlining tour that will bring Alabama Shakes to Forest Hills Stadium on Saturday. "It was just, 'Oh, that's cool.' It didn't sink in that maybe people liked the record and that's why it went to No. 1. Then my parents called me, super-excited, and then I was like, 'Oh, yeah, this is a good thing!'"

Howard points out that she and her bandmates (guitarist Heath Fogg, bassist Zac Cockrell, keyboardist Ben Tanner and drummer Steve Johnson) weren't aiming to top the charts.

Great Shakes

Brittany Howard and her Alabama Shakes bring their searing soul and surprise success to Forest Hills Stadium



AP / GETTY IMAGES / OLI SCARFF

"Our mindset was that it wouldn't be right to do this any other way than the way we want," she says. "It wasn't about hits."

The music backs this up. Atmospheric, slowly developing songs like "Gemini" and the title track don't exactly scream commercial potential. But even the more rambling numbers have a focal point: Howard's astonishing voice, which is in its own gutsy way as dramatic as those of her idols David Bowie and Freddie Mercury. Her hair-raising falsetto parts on "Future

People" are a case in point.

"That's a really in-your-face song," she says, "and now it's one of my favorites to play live. The fun part is wondering, 'Can I hit that first note?' If I hit it well, then I know everything else will be fine."

One other thing that sets Alabama Shakes apart is the emphasis the band puts on leaving space in their work. Even though "Sound & Color" adds plenty of elements to the band's basic sound — including strings, vibraphone, and autoharp — it always feels open, never cluttered.

"That's something I learned from a lot of my favorite singers," Howard says. "For example, in Al Green's 'Simply Beautiful,' there's hardly anything going on. There's just a great rhythm section and a great performance by Green. It doesn't need a lot. I hope that we can recognize when enough is enough."

Also on the Forest Hills bill is the Georgia alt-country quintet Drive-By Truckers, whose singer-guitarist Patterson Hood was a key cheerleader for Alabama Shakes early on.

A sort of secret side project

Alabama Shakes isn't Brittany Howard's only band. She also fronts a harder-edged side project called Thunderbitch, and on Sept. 1, with no fanfare, its self-titled debut album appeared online. It's available on iTunes and also can be bought or streamed for free at thundabetch.com

You won't find Howard's name mentioned anywhere in connection with the album, but then again you won't find anybody else's real name on the credits, either. According to the band's very succinct online bio, the members are Thunderbitch, Matt Man, B Bone, ThunderMitch, Char Man and A Man. Still, Howard has definitely been behind the microphone for the handful of gigs they've played around Nashville during the past three years. Various members of Music City bands Fly Golden Eagle and Clear Plastic Masks complete the lineup.

The new album is a hoot and a half, putting Howard's rip-roaring voice to perfect use over tracks that rock out in the grand tradition of Chuck Berry, the Stones, AC/DC, the Stooges and the Ramones. A few song titles will give you the idea: "Leather Jacket," "I Just Wanna Rock n Roll," "Wild Child," "My Baby Is My Guitar."

Asked for further details about the band, Howard refuses to come clean. "I'm sorry, but I can't talk about Thunderbitch," she says firmly. "There's a silence hanging over it, and I can't disrupt that silence."

— MAC RANDALL

Given that Hood's belief in the band has now been borne out by a No. 1 album, touring with the Truckers must feel like a real celebration.

"I consider that band to be family," Howard says. "When we were coming up, we saw that they were from the South like us, but their message wasn't about driving big trucks and waving Confederate flags. And I was inspired by that. It was like, I can be who I am and come from where I'm from and be proud of it. It's my South."