Written by Jeff Ignatius
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The opening track of 500 Miles to Memphis' 2007 album *Sunshine in a Shot Glass* starts with a fiddle and feet stomping and bottles clinking, and then an arena-sized power chord jumps in. While most folks have heard fusions of country and punk for decades, it's a little startling to have them not blended but standing next to each other, their identities clearly intact.

The Cincinnati-based band, playing at the Redstone Room on Tuesday, is led by singer/guitarist/songwriter Ryan Malott, and all aural evidence to the contrary, he didn't grow up with alt-country acts such as Uncle Tupelo and the Old 97's.

He would hear those comparisons and think, "Who the hell are these guys?" he said in an interview this week. "Had I heard those bands before I started 500 Miles to Memphis, it might sound different. ... I might have been more cautious with what I wrote and how I sounded."

Malott's influences were more direct: outlaw country (Merle Haggard and Waylon Jennings, for example) and punk. Those opening 10 seconds of *Sunshine in a Shot Glass*, then, illustrate from where the band came.

Elsewhere on that second album, 500 Miles to Memphis recalls the acts such as ... well, Uncle Tupelo and the Old 97's, and mostly in a good way. (Malott has done his homework on his most-obvious alt-country forebears since those early days: "I know both of those bands in and out," he said.) Pop Matters wrote : "Not exactly country, not quite punk, 500 Miles to Memphis just rocks, leavening the mix with instruments traditionally associated with country music."

The band's choruses are often superb, and the songs are driven by David Rhodes Brown's sterling lap-steel guitar, which almost serves as a second vocalist it's so articulate. Malott is

clearly ambitious - with a three-song cycle to close the album - but his lyrics are more anthemic than specific or sharp at this point. It works in his favor, though, that he's only 26, that the record's two years old, and that the presentation is propulsive, energetic, heartfelt, and infectious.

Plus, Malott said that he has been sober for two months now, and the band this year has put more energy into business than partying.

Although a lot of the songs on *Sunshine in a Shot Glass* tread familiar territory, the bandleader said new songs - for an album planned for release next year - are "more mature," "a little less of the drinking-beer, having-a-good-time kind of thing. A little more serious and grown-up. I don't want to get pegged as a party band, bar band. That's not what we are. ...

"There's a little more clarity. ... I've done that before. I want to do something different."

Malott said he was jailed for two weeks in April for his second DUI, and that put him on a path to Alcoholics Anonymous. "When you're a drunk, that's a very long time without a beer," he said of being locked up. "That was bottom for me."

A fistfight with his drummer almost led to the dissolution of 500 Miles to Memphis earlier this year, he added. "Well, shit, there goes the band. ... It was just a big wake-up call for all of us ... to either just quit the band ... or sober up and actually try to do this fucking thing."

From the outset, that's been Malott's aim, and when he started the band, it toured the United States rather than build a base regionally, going thousands of dollars into debt. "In the beginning we were just going everywhere we possibly could," he said.

They've since adopted a more sensible approach to band business but have established themselves enough that they'll be doing 250 shows across the country next year.

Malott said that touring and playing bars and clubs is challenging to his sobriety, but he noted that his AA sponsor will be at a lot of the band's upcoming shows.

He also said that he's not concerned that he's a different person from the guy who wrote those drinking songs. "I've been there," he said. "Those are my songs I've written from personal experience. ... I still feel every word of it."

500 Miles to Memphis will perform at the Redstone Room (129 Main Street in Davenport) on Tuesday, October 6. Boothill Ridge Opens, and the show starts at 8 p.m. Tickets are $7 and can be purchased from RedstoneRoom.com .

For more information on the band, visit 500MTM.com or MySpace.com/500milestomemphis .