Written by Jeff Ignatius
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The Deadstring Brothers never really went away. But in early 2011, singer/songwriter/guitarist Kurt Marschke retired the outfit as a band and instead performed alone under its name – singing and accompanying himself on drums, guitar, and harmonica.

There were several reasons for the change: the frustrations of keeping a band together and maintaining reliable transportation. In 2010, he said in a phone interview this week, he had three different lineups on the road with him and three separate vehicle breakdowns.

“I felt like an administrator,” Marschke said. “I didn’t feel like a musician. ... ‘Is there an easier way to present music to people, where I can focus on the craft as opposed to focus on filling a drum seat or a steel or an organ player? ... Can I be a musician and feel like I am?’”

And going a little further back, the decision of singer Masha Marjieh in 2008 to stop touring meant that the group lacked the harmonies Marschke loved so much. “2009 and 2010 were just strange, because she wasn’t around,” he said. “I’d sung with her for so many years, and not having another singer with me felt strange.”

So when the Deadstring Brothers perform at RIBCO on Saturday, August 25, it’s a bit surprising that Marschke will be leading a five-piece band. It’s a bit surprising to him, too.

The outfit over the past decade has been the regular recipient of one of rock music’s greatest compliments, with the All Music Guide, for example, noting that its “alternative country-rock with no small amount of rock-and-roll swagger and a deep bluesy undertow ... often suggests *Exile on Main St.*
-era Rolling Stones ... .” That’s a comparison nobody can live up to, but it’s a fair enough summary of the sound and feel, and Marschke’s soulful voice
is

sometimes Jagger-ish – most obviously on “Houston,” from 2010’s *São Paulo*

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There was no way for Marschke to replicate the ensemble sound by himself, but he was intrigued by the possibilities of a single source for both the rhythm and the remainder of the music, including electric guitar. “It was coming together pretty good” musically and with bookings, he said. “I wanted to be able to have volume and beat, so that it wasn’t just a singer/songwriter ... . I definitely felt that there’s places you can go with that, because you lock. Nothing’s ever out of beat, even when the tempo moves forward or backward. ... I’m still really interested in that. ... Everything, mentally and physically, is completely different than performing with a band.”

But J.D. Mack, an old friend from Detroit who played with Whitey Morgan & the 78’s, called and said he’d left that band and was available.

Marschke said that Mack was a great fit – a good musician who’d also managed the day-to-day grind of bands. “He knows what I’ve been through ... ,” Marschke said. “I just said, ‘You’re really the only person that I would want to get back in the van with and undertake this again.’ I know exactly what he’s made of, and what his goals are, and where he’s coming from musically. ... If you have at least one other person that’s real solid and knows the game and knows all the ins and outs, ... it’s not so difficult.”

Still, Marschke said, he was hesitant – but not because of the prospect of dealing with band business again. “My reservations were more that I’d invested a whole lot of time into developing this whole different approach to playing music, and I really felt that I ... was getting in the zone of what I was picturing and hearing in my head when I thought of how to do it,” he said. “It was more the idea of having to shelve this,” including a solo Deadstring Brothers album that he’d started. “But I really felt that ... I can get the music across better with a group.”

Mack now handles the Deadstring Brothers’ bass and booking, and their first show was in June. Marschke has also found a vocal partner in singer/songwriter Katie Grace, who played bass in the band back in 2009. “She’s ready to get out of Detroit – she’s got great songs and she’s a great singer – but she can’t get a band to leave Detroit, because everybody’s kind of rooted ... ,” he said. “She sings like an angel. It’s kind of back to being fun.”

Saturday's RIBCO show is part of a two-year plan, Marschke said. The band is recording a new album and is trying to pack as many shows as it can into the rest of 2012, "so that when the record comes out next year, we've kind of reintroduced ourselves."

The Deadstring Brothers will perform on Saturday, August 25, at RIBCO (1815 Second Avenue in Rock Island; RIBCO.com). The band will perform an early show at 6:30 p.m. and additional sets beginning at 9:30 p.m.; cover is $3, but admission is free with a ticket to RIBCO's Festiv-Ale beer-tasting event.

For more information on the Deadstring Brothers, visit MySpace.com/deadstringbrothers .