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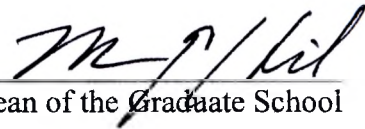


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“Daddy, Tell Me Another Story:”

The Drive-By Truckers. Southern History, and Popular Culture

A Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Arts

Degree

The University of Mississippi

Ellie Campbell

May 2006

Abstract

This work describes the connections that the Drive-By Truckers make between Southern history, popular culture, and their vision of Southern identity through an examination of lyrics from six of their albums.

Table of Contents

Chapter	Page
I. Introduction.....	1
II. <u>Gangstabilly</u> and <u>Pizza Deliverance</u>	8
III. <u>Southern Rock Opera</u>	28
IV. <u>Decoration Day</u> and <u>The Dirty South</u>	49
V. Conclusion.....	72

Bibliography

Vita

Introduction

Over the course of six albums released since 1998 the Drive-By Truckers have focused on depicting their own version of the South, often inspired by their hometowns in North Alabama. Four of the five members of the band hail from an area in the very northwest corner of the state, comprised of four cities, Muscle Shoals, Tuscumbia, Sheffield, and Florence. The Truckers' de facto bandleader and the founder of the band, Patterson Hood, grew up in Muscle Shoals and played in various bands in the area, including a band called Adam's House Cat, which he and Mike Cooley formed when they met at the University of North Alabama in Florence. That band broke up in 1991,¹ and Hood moved to Athens, Georgia in the mid-1990s. At the time, an alternative country movement nicknamed the Redneck Underground found a home in Atlanta and Athens.² Hood started writing punk-inspired country songs and formed the Drive-By Truckers as a loose studio outfit with members of the local scene, as well as his old friend Mike Cooley from Adam's House Cat.

That version of the band released two studio albums, Gangstabilly and Pizza Deliverance, as well as a live album, Alabama Ass Whuppin. in the late nineties. The band went through several line-up changes before making their album Southern Rock Opera in 2000. A major turning point in the band's career, the double album made "best of" lists for several major music magazines, including Rolling Stone. Several line-up changes occurred over the next two albums, resulting in the current arrangement featuring Patterson Hood, Mike Cooley, and Jason Isbell sharing lead guitar, songwriting, and singing duties while Shonna Tucker and Brad Morgan hold down the rhythm section

¹ Baker Maultsby, "Ronnie Can You Hear Me?" No Depression 35 (2001): 74.

² David Goodman, Modern Twang. (Nashville: Dowling Press, 1999). x and 95.

on bass and drums respectively. Hood, Cooley, Isbell, and Tucker are all from the Shoals area, while Morgan is from South Carolina.

The history of the Muscle Shoals area plays an important role in shaping how the Truckers present the South. Many of the band's songs reference different events in the cities' history, and the area's influence on popular music is particularly important in shaping the band's vision of the South. Muscle Shoals is located along the banks of the Tennessee River as it flows through north Alabama. The area developed rapidly in the early twentieth century as a result of several governmental programs based in the area. Through the National Defense Act of 1916, Woodrow Wilson authorized the building of what became the Wilson Dam, completed in 1925; the dam was used to provide power for several nitrate plants.³

Another important event in the area's history was a visit from Henry Ford in 1921. He considered the area as a site for an automobile plant,⁴ but was blocked by "southern private utilities and public-power politicians,"⁵ an event that has become part of local legend. In the early thirties, Wilson Dam and Muscle Shoals became the first experiment of the newly created Tennessee Valley Authority; as part of his plan to combat the Great Depression, Franklin Roosevelt imagined linking "the conservation of natural resources, regional development, and the creation of urban settlements."⁶ Another company, Reynolds Aluminum, established a plant in Florence in 1941 and "has been the biggest local employer ever since."⁷ Today the area is home to TVA's Environmental

³ Erwin C. Hargrove, *Prisoners of Myth* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 19.

⁴ <http://www.cityofmuscleshoals.com/>.

⁵ Hargrove, 19-20.

⁶ Hargrove, 20.

⁷ Peter Guralnick, *Sweet Soul Music* (New York: Back Bay Books, 1986), 177.

Research Center, the Public Power Institute, and the International Fertilizer Development Center.⁸

Most important to the Drive-By Truckers, however, is the town's musical history. Rick Hall and others founded FAME Studios in Muscle Shoals in 1959. Early hits like Arthur Alexander's "Anna" and "You Better Move On," recorded by the Beatles and Rolling Stones, and Percy Sledge's "When a Man Loves a Woman," led to a deal with Atlantic Records' Jerry Wexler. Wexler brought in artists like Wilson Pickett, who recorded his first top ten pop record, "Land of 1000 Dances" and "Mustang Sally" with FAME's crack studio band. Aretha Franklin recorded "I Never Loved a Man (the Way I Love You)" and part of "Do Right Woman" there in January of 1967. Hometown songwriters Dan Penn and Spooner Oldham wrote R&B classics like "Dark End of the Street," "Sweet Inspiration," "Cry Like a Baby," "Do Right Woman," and "I'm Your Puppet." When Wilson Pickett returned to Muscle Shoals in 1968, he recorded, among other songs, a cover of the Beatles' "Hey Jude," featuring Duane Allman on guitar.⁹

Patterson Hood's father, bassist David Hood, was one of many local musicians who first found success playing on tracks cut at FAME Studios, and then, with several other veterans of that studio, including Jimmy Johnson, founded the Muscle Shoals Sound Studio.¹⁰ During the 1970s, Simon and Garfunkel, Cher, Willie Nelson, Bob Seger, Rod Stewart, and the Rolling Stones ("Brown Sugar" and "Wild Horses") all recorded at Muscle Shoals Sound Studio, while Rick Hall continued recording acts like the Osmonds, Paul Anka, Mac Davis, Tom Jones, Sammie Davis, Jr., and Bobbie Gentry

⁸ <http://www.cityofmuscleshoals.com/>.

⁹ Guralnick, 376-377.

¹⁰ Maultsby, 74.

at FAME during the same period.¹¹ Lynyrd Skynyrd recorded an album at Muscle Shoals Studio and immortalized the event in “Sweet Home Alabama” in the line, “Muscle Shoals has got the Swampers/ they’ve been known to pick a song or two.” That album, produced by Jimmy Johnson, was later released as Skynyrd’s First: the Muscle Shoals Album. Popular culture was not just something to be consumed in Muscle Shoals, Alabama; it was made there and became something that defined the city and its people as inhabitants of the onetime “#1 Hit Recording Capital of the U.S.”

George Lipsitz, a sometime pop culture theorist, suggests that connections between place and popular culture may be a means to “[understand] how people make meaning for themselves, how they have already begun to engage in grass-roots theorizing about complicated realities.”¹² In his books Time Passages and Dangerous Crossroads, he examines some of the ways in which some of the inherent qualities of the mass communication of popular culture contribute to its potential for the expression of individuals’ need for connection to their pasts and to a collective community based on the idea of that past. He claims,

A century ago, the combined effects of state building, urbanization, and industrialization transformed popular perceptions about change over time, making *history* the constitutive problem of the age of industrialization. Today, the ever expanding reach and scope of electronic, computer chip, fiber optic, and satellite communication imposes a rationalized uniformity on production and consumption all over the world, making *place* the constitutive problem of the post-industrial era.¹³

The societal disruptions caused by and surrounding the Industrial Revolution created a break between people’s collective understanding of themselves by introducing major changes into all aspects of people’s lives at an unbelievably fast rate. The study of history

¹¹ Guralnick. 379.

¹² George Lipsitz. Dangerous Crossroads (New York: Verso Press. 1994). 3.

¹³ Lipsitz. Dangerous Crossroads. 5.

was transformed into a “discipline of memory” that searched for a sense of connection to a collective past. The post-industrial era and its instantaneous global communication systems disrupt a collective sense of place by making it possible to receive and share vastly increased amounts of information. Lipsitz claims the “capacity of electronic mass communication to transcend time and space creates instability by disconnecting people from past traditions, but it also liberates people by making the past less determinate of experiences in the present.”¹⁴ What are the ramifications for this crisis of memory and community on a sense of identity, particularly in a place like the South, which has, for much of its history, been home to a very deeply felt sense of identity rooted in time and place?

Southern historian James Cobb defines identity as “the condition of being simultaneously both oneself...and not another.”¹⁵ He calls “the most common foundation of group identity” a “shared sense of a common past” and emphasizes that “identity typically refers to a *perception* of reality rather than to reality itself.”¹⁶ In his recent work on southern identity, Away Down South, a change seems to occur towards the end of the book; while earlier versions of “southern identity” focused on images of real experiences of slavery, the Civil War, or the South’s economic problems, in Cobb’s second to last chapter, titled “History and Identity in the Contemporary South,” images themselves seem to be at stake, rather than the things they represent. For example, Cobb spends much of the chapter detailing controversies over the Confederate flag in the post-Civil Rights era.

¹⁴ George Lipsitz, Time Passages (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 5.

¹⁵ James C. Cobb, Away Down South (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 3.

¹⁶ Cobb, 6.

Whether the myth-encrusted memorials to the Lost Cause can ever coexist peacefully with the proliferating shrines to the vindicated, if not totally fulfilled, cause of civil rights is impossible to predict, but the preoccupation of so many contemporary southerners with monuments and symbols confirms their involvement in what Eric Hobsbawm calls the 'politics of identity' through which 'groups of people today...try to find some certainty in a shaken and uncertain world.'¹⁷

Cobb's view of the South's current obsession with the politics of identity and Lipsitz's suggestion that we look to popular culture for "grass-roots theorizing about complicated realities" suggests that popular culture about the South may be a source for a new generation's sense of Southern identity.

If the presence of mass communications in the form of popular culture has disrupted both our sense of history and our sense of place, as a society, then the Drive-By Truckers react to that disruption by becoming ever more obsessed with their home, the Deep South, and more specifically, the Muscle Shoals area of Northwest Alabama. History has become a series of images and images have replaced history as a way of understanding the world. The South has been represented in a series of very specific images. The Civil Rights period of the 1950s and 1960s and the Southern Rock Movement of the 1970s provide two major touchstones for the Drive-By Trucker's vision of the South. Popular culture's inherent ability to "liberate people by making the past less determinate of experiences in the present"¹⁸ presents the Truckers with an opportunity to see themselves from an outsiders' point of view as well as from the view of a native Southerner, the opportunity to examine images of the South from multiple perspectives.

The Drive-By Truckers' proximity to the origins of major pieces of popular culture also provide them with a unique viewpoint: they do recognize that there are

¹⁷ Cobb, 307.

¹⁸ Lipsitz, *Time Passages*, 5.

“origins and intentions of the messages we encounter through the mass media”¹⁹ that aren’t always understood by the general public, and they attempt to illuminate those origins in order to challenge previous depictions of the South. Because of their unique connection to the creation of popular culture by figures like Aretha Franklin, Wilson Pickett, Percy Sledge, Arthur Alexander, Duane Allman, Lynyrd Skynyrd, and the Rolling Stones, the Drive-By Truckers were predisposed to see beyond the tendencies of mass culture to obscure historical conditions through “the context of reception.”²⁰ Popular culture has become a major medium through which Southern identity can be articulated. The Drive-By Truckers react not to the burden of Southern history, but to the burden of the Southern image.

The following chapters will consider the Drive-By Truckers from a chronological perspective. Chapter One examines the Truckers’ first two albums, Gangstabilly and Pizza Deliverance, focusing on their depiction of romantic relationships, violence, and the beginnings of the Truckers’ examination of popular culture. Chapter Two tackles the turning point in the Truckers’ career, Southern Rock Opera, and its struggle to construct a Southern identity through its examination of the Truckers’ adolescence in North Alabama and their depiction of Lynyrd Skynyrd. Chapter Three looks at the Truckers’ next two albums, Decoration Day and The Dirty South and how they expand on the ideas raised in the earlier three. By analyzing themes in their song lyrics, I hope to examine the ways in which the Truckers critique popular conceptions of Southern culture, often through the use of images of the South from popular culture, and how the Truckers then use their assessment to craft their own version of Southern identity.

¹⁹ Lipsitz, Time Passages, 5.

²⁰ Lipsitz, Time Passages, 4.

Chapter One: Gangstabilly and Pizza Deliverance

The first two albums by the Drive-By Truckers are called Gangstabilly and Pizza Deliverance, released in 1998 and 1999. Both albums were remastered and rereleased in early 2005 with new liner notes by Patterson Hood detailing the making of the two records. From Gangstabilly, “Drive-By Truckers began on June 10, 1996 as a day in the studio at Andy Baker’s house in Athens, GA...we recorded five songs (two of which became our first release, the 45rpm single Nine Bullets/Bulldozers and Dirt).”²¹ That single came out in 1997, though the two songs wound up opening the second release, Pizza Deliverance, rather than being included on their first album. Hood notes that when they recorded their first full-length album, the band “had well over an album of material set aside, but at the last minute wrote a bunch of new songs and ended up shelving the early stuff and recording the later stuff first (the later songs made up the core of what later became our second album Pizza Deliverance).”²² Taken together, the two albums are an excellent introduction to the perspective of the band and its songwriting and include early versions of many of the themes explored in later albums. Their third album, the live Alabama Ass Whuppin’, contains songs mostly from these two albums, along with several lengthy spoken introductions in which Patterson Hood describes the origin of a few of the songs.

The names of the albums indicate the Truckers’ perspective; they are self-consciously Southern while also mocking Southern stereotypes. “Alabama Ass Whuppin’” is particularly notable for its specific misspelling, which suggests both an awareness of the redneck connotations of referring to a beating as a “whooping” and also

²¹ The Drive-By Truckers. Gangstabilly, liner notes.

²² Gangstabilly, liner notes.

a kind of pride in that state, a refusal to be ashamed of its own white-trashiness.

“Gangstabilly” combines a reference to gangsta rap with the suffix “-billy,” notably associated with words like hillbilly and rockabilly and often combined with other musical terms to indicate an early rock and roll or country influence. For example, “psychobilly” is a term sometimes used to describe a mixture of punk and rockabilly “characterized by frenzied playing, deranged vocals, and demented lyrics.”²³ It often indicates a self-conscious attempt to connect to both the sound and the rebellious attitude of the kind of early rock and roll that came from Sun Studios in Memphis. The Truckers often speak of their respect for and appreciation of rap and hip-hop; though these styles do not inform the Truckers’ own music, their admiration is in line with their tendency to identify with and enjoy genres outside of Southern rock and country, like rap and punk. This affinity fuels their need to examine Southern rock more closely. Identifying with something outside of one’s own experience often provides both a way to step away from that experience and a new lens through which to see one’s own past. The Truckers would capitalize on this point of view in later albums, especially Southern Rock Opera. “Gangstabilly” also provides the Truckers with a way to pay tribute to both white and black genres of music from the South.

“Pizza Deliverance” references the movie Deliverance, a horrific story about some young men from Atlanta who encounter murderous, degenerate, animalistic backwoods hillbillies on a hunting trip; the movie appropriates many stereotypes of white trash Southerners in its vision. The title of the Truckers’ record combines this with the idea of “pizza delivery,” a job and a food associated with young college students and twenty-something slackers. The title mocks the stereotypes depicted in the movies by

²³ Goodman, x.

the United States. James Cobb claims that both black and white contemporary southerners feel “that southerners [are] looked down upon by non-southerners, and that books and magazines often gave an unduly negative image of their region.”²⁶ Disabled from within by their poverty and lack of opportunities and attacked from without by media images and cultural narratives that blame poor whites for their economic status, class and region combine to marginalize poor white Southerners. The Truckers use country music and punk rock, both musical genres not unfamiliar with feelings of alienation among whites, to tap into this “white trash” culture.

“Love Like This:” White Trash Sexuality

Newitz and Wray describe several ways that mainstream culture uses white trash stereotypes “to blame the poor for both their own poverty and social problems.” One of the biggest “social problems” occurs in the realm of sexuality. “Stereotypes of white trash and ‘hillbillies’ are replete with references to dangerous and excessive sexuality; rape (both heterosexual and homosexual), incest, and sexual abuse are supposed to be common practice among poor rural whites.”²⁷ Many of the Drive-By Truckers’ songs parody these kinds of stereotypes, especially through exaggeration. One of the first songs the Truckers ever released, “Bulldozers and Dirt,” deals with sexuality this way.

The opening lines of the first verse, “I met your mama when I was nineteen/you couldn’t have been any more than three/she caught me stealing y’all’s color TV/she called the cops and they arrested me.”²⁸ connect the white trash cultural sins of teenage pregnancy, unwed motherhood, theft, and the threat of violence. The mother, presumably not much older than the narrator of the song, holds him at gunpoint while she waits for

²⁶ Cobb, 289.

²⁷ Newitz and Wray, 171.

²⁸ Pizza Deliverance, “Bulldozers and Dirt.”

the cops, then bails him out of jail by mortgaging her trailer. “Bulldozers and Dirt” approaches incest; the narrator of the song addresses his fourteen-year-old common law step-daughter, recounting his love for “bulldozers and dirt” as well as his growing interest in the girl. The last chorus changes a line to “I don’t mean no harm, I just like to flirt,” side-stepping actual incest and pedophilia and retaining the song’s focus on the narrator’s simpler love for “them red clay piles.”²⁹ The song’s reliance on mandolin, banjo, steel guitar, and vocal harmony underline its connection to country music and that music’s traditional focus on rural white Southerners. “Bulldozers and Dirt” takes that focus and shifts it slightly to a satirical vision of stereotypes associated with people of the same class and region, rendering stereotypes of deadbeat dads and overly sexed step-daughters laughable rather than dangerous.

If “Bulldozers and Dirt” approaches a depiction of excessive and dangerous sexuality from the perspective of someone who may participate in it, another song from Pizza Deliverance, “Too Much Sex (Too Little Jesus),” focuses on the over-policing of sexuality through religion. The song connects sex, sin, and Christian radio and televangelism by describing a teenage girl, the radio program to which she confesses her sins, and the preacher’s response:

Stop that dope-smoking!
Stop that masturbation!
Take the Lord into your heart and stop that fornication
We’re building us an army
Gonna knock out Satan
Visa or Mastercard, our operator’s waiting...³⁰

The song satirizes evangelical Christianity’s puritanical preoccupation with sex by juxtaposing it with its greed. The necessity for “a small donation” and “a word from

²⁹ Pizza Deliverance, “Bulldozers and Dirt.”

³⁰ Pizza Deliverance, “Too Much Sex (Too Little Jesus).”

our sponsors” undermines the program’s holier-than-thou attitude towards sex. The Truckers don’t write about religion very often, but when they do, those to whom church is very important are often portrayed as being very hypocritical, like the preacher in “Too Much Sex...”

Even when white trash sexuality is not sinful or criminally deviant, mainstream culture still provides a condescending view of more permissible romantic relationships between men and women that the Truckers’ parody in similar fashion. In “Margo and Harold,” parodies the life of the titular “swinging” middle-aged couple when the narrator of the song lists the reasons why he refuses to go to their dinner party: “I’m scared of the basement of Harold’s Pawn Shop/I’ve heard tales of what goes on down there/Mid-life crises, high on Dilauded, Valium, and crystal meth/Harold and Margo, feeling no pain/Fifty and crazy, big hair and cocaine.”³¹ Margo and Harold could be called “white trash with money.” A pawn shop owner is in a curious position between poor and middle-class; though he owns his own business, Harold relies on a clientele of white trash. The couple’s lifestyle exaggerates popular conceptions of what poor whites do when they get money; namely, they spend it on lots of drugs. It costs money to buy cocaine, but Margo still has big hair. White trash marks class but isn’t always limited to it; sometimes it follows you up the social and economic ladder.

“18 Wheels of Love” describes the meeting and marriage of Patterson Hood’s mother and step-father. The lines, repeated over and over as the chorus, “Mama ran off with a trucker/Peterbilt! Peterbilt!” provide an introduction to a world of white trash romance. Hood narrates the story of his mother’s relationship, in which her new husband helps her “give life another stab,” and in return she “can fix him roast beast and sweet

³¹ Pizza Deliverance. “Margo and Harold.”

potato pie.” Finally, he describes an ultimate white trash moment, “They got married in Dollywood/by a Porter Wagner look-a-like.”³² Hood undermines white trash stereotypes in his own life through his acknowledgement and exaggeration of the events. He claims white trash at the same time that he satirizes those popular stereotypes; by acknowledging that the behavior is culturally unacceptable in the mainstream, he lays claim to the outsider status it provides. Rather than criticizing white trash culture, he instead writes a song in tribute to two people who participate in the culture and live happily with their choices. The criticism is really directed outward, towards those who would look down on that culture.

Some of the Drive-By Truckers’ songs examine romantic relationships among their characters with a little less satire. They are still borrowing themes from country music, like the breakup and aftermath of marriage, but telling those stories from a slightly different perspective. Mike Cooley’s song “Panties in Your Purse” tells the story of a woman who cheats on her husband with the narrator of the song, a musician. She gets caught, divorced, and ends up living with her mother. Cooley paints a bleak but still affectionate portrait of poor white humanity, describing the relationship between the mother and her grown daughter: “Y’all still fight and she still nags you some/but somehow it’s different now than you were young/It’s your own damn fault you been through hell/for one reason or another, somehow she kinda blames herself.”³³ Country music is rarely so blunt about reasons for divorce, or the feelings that generates between family members.

³² Gangstabilly. “18 Wheels of Love.”

³³ Gangstabilly. “Panties in Your Purse.”

“Love Like This,” another of Mike Cooley’s songs, describes a turbulent relationship between a man and woman, where every weekend leaves the man sleeping on the floor “with my boots on again,” recovering from “one cut on my forehead and one on my chin,” gained from fighting with his girlfriend. Rather than lash out at his partner, the narrator of the song claims “it’s a shame to know most folks don’t ever know love like this.”³⁴ Though neither of these songs involves anything as extravagantly white trash as a trip to Dollywood, both exhibit the same sympathy for their poor white subjects as Patterson Hood’s tunes. Though they live at the margins of society, maintaining relationships that mainstream culture might look down on, the Drive-By Truckers protagonists celebrate their white trash lifestyles, and rather than denouncing white trash love, the band and their songwriters skewer stereotypes and remain sympathetic to those lower-class white Southerners who refuse to see their lives as wrong, immoral, or degraded, and instead prefer “love like this.”

“Nine Bullets:” Southern Violence

Many of the Drive-By Truckers’ songs depict a world filled with violence, much of it mirroring the kind of violence characteristic of the American South. In One South, John Shelton Reed argues that the Southern United States possesses what he and other sociologists call a “culture of violence.” Reed notes that the South has a comparatively higher rate of violence than the rest of the country, especially in the areas of assault and homicide. Rather than argue the South’s lack of restraint and “animalistic impulses,” Reed argues that the South’s culture “can permit or even demand violence in some circumstances...regional differences in homicide and assault owe more to regional cultural differences than to differences in the effectiveness of socialization or other

³⁴ Pizza Deliverance, “Love Like This.”

mechanisms of social control.”³⁵ Southern violence is often a type of social control, rather than a result from any lack of it.

Southern violence, as a part of culture, is violence of a specific type; the culture permits a level of violence higher than other areas in the U.S. under specific circumstances. Reed argues that tolerance for these types of reactions extends to all levels of Southern society, not just in the marginal groups, like the poor white Southerners at the center of the Truckers’ albums, and “if violence is not just an uncontrolled growth on the surface of Southern life but is part of the cultural bedrock, we should expect to find outcroppings of it, so to speak, in other areas of common life. Violence is not just something to be used when someone wants something, but is something to be sung about, joked about, played with.”³⁶ The Drive-By Truckers’ work proves this theory true; their work explores violence that is culturally permissible in the South as well as violence that belongs only to the more marginal members of that society.

One particular area of violence relates to my previous topic, love. In the South, love and violence are often, unfortunately, intertwined. Reed notes that types of, and attitudes towards, violence in country music reflect the same types and attitudes in Southern culture. For instance, “what the FBI calls ‘romantic triangles and lovers’ quarrels’... has historically been twice as common in the South as in the rest of the United States.”³⁷ The Truckers’, following country music and Southern culture, present these themes with a bit of a skewed perspective, sometimes satirical, sometimes more straightforward. The connection between violence and romance can already be seen in the robbery and arrest of “Bulldozers and Dirt” and the tumultuous relationship of “Love

³⁵ John Shelton Reed, *One South*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press. 1982). 141.

³⁶ Reed, *One South*. 143.

³⁷ John Shelton Reed, *My Tears Spoiled My Aim* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Comp., 1993), 85.

Like This.” In “Bulldozers and Dirt,” violence is part of the beginning of a relationship, while in “Love Like This,” it’s part of the status quo. The level of harm done escalates when relationships are broken.

The second song of their first single, “Nine Bullets,” exemplifies some of these traits. The song is a list of all the people the narrator is going to kill with the “nine bullets” in his roommate’s gun: His ex-girlfriend, her new boyfriend, his boss, the lady at the Laundromat “who goes through my dryer pulling one sock out,” his family, himself, and finally his roommate.³⁸ The imagined violence in this song is presumably inspired by the end of the romantic relationship. While the song does pay homage to a long tradition of country and western songs about killing cheating women, it takes this premise a step further when it imagines a whole community affected by this kind of response. Where does retribution stop? The hostility is directed not only at the ex-girlfriend, but at a laundry list of persons responsible for his misery. There’s a little bit of class anger in his desire to kill his boss, as well as resentment for the way job timetables (“clocking out”) rule his day. The song is a depiction of anger directed against events the narrator cannot control, from his girlfriend’s betrayal to his inability to retain all of his socks at the Laundromat. It is an exaggerated white trash anger, an anger directed against a world that the narrator cannot control any part of, and it is also a juvenile and alienated anger, which ties it in very neatly with the Truckers’ other favorite genre of music, punk rock. This connection is reinforced musically, through the rough singing and fuzzy, loud, and simplistic electric guitar.

Another one of their songs, “Wife Beater,” explicitly connects violence and love in homage to a prominent country music theme, the troubled marriage. The first three

³⁸ Pizza Deliverance. “Nine Bullets.”

verses of the song describe the relationship between a wife and her husband, as told by a male friend of hers. Those verses, sung over acoustic guitar and a gradually building arrangement with a prominent steel guitar, straightforwardly describe their relationship problems and his violence. When the song hits the chorus, the three- part harmonies kick in they take the song into the realm of parody with the lines, “Don’t go back to him, he’s a wife beater/Be better off with this potato eater/You say he’s changed, don’t be a fool/A man like that’s no good for you,” which they repeat twice.³⁹ Though the Truckers’ parody the form of the traditional country music theme of a fractured marriage, they also retain a respect for the people involved, speaking through the voice of a friend urging the woman to leave her abusive husband. The liner notes connect the song to a figure important both in the history of country music and in the history of wives who have suffered abuse from their husbands; Hood dedicates the song to Tammy Wynette, a fellow Alabamian known for her tumultuous marriages and songs like “D-I-V-O-R-C-E.”

The second type of acceptable violence in Southern culture is violence between family members. A song from Pizza Deliverance, “Company I Keep,” depicts a life haunted by the kinds of family feelings that could all too easily erupt into violence. The narrator’s parents and several wives completely disapprove of him and his life. He turns to a very un-Southern life of violence, armed robbery, to make a living, and finally reflects, “I seen my past in every thing I despise/I’ve seen my future and I’m scared to close my eyes/Is that my ghost that I see in my fears/Or just my reflection in my momma’s tears.”⁴⁰ The white trash, economically strapped protagonist turns to a kind of violence not culturally permissible, violence suitable for those members of society in his

³⁹ Gangstabilly, “Wife Beater.”

⁴⁰ Pizza Deliverance, “Company I Keep.”

marginal state. Is it possible to draw a line from his family violence to his current profession? The song starts by describing his family members' opinions of him; language is also a kind of violence. His early experiences with violence between family members lead him to a life of less acceptable violence and crime. The song suggests that there are connections between violence acceptable to Southern culture and unacceptable violence.

Two songs by the Truckers on their first two albums depict a flip side of Southern culturally permissible violence, one, "Zoloft," describes a world without violence, and the other, "One of These Days," delineates types of violence that are not permissible in the Southern code. "Zoloft," like "Company I Keep," depicts relationships among white trash family members, but this time, instead of having dangerous consequences, family problems disappear through the use of the titular prescription drug. The song satirizes the over-use of the anti-depressant. All of the problems that previously caused family strife disappeared, but the song hints at some complications; the line last in the chorus changes from "Mama's so happy, she laughs all the time," to "Mama's so happy, she cries all the time," by the end.⁴¹ Perhaps life without problems is somehow worse than life with ways to release negative emotions.

"One of These Days" depicts a family struggle, but rather than "Zoloft" or "Company I Keep," it is about a kind of struggle handed down rather than enacted between different generations. "One of These Days" is mostly about the similarities between the life of a blue-collar father and son; it also addresses a type of violence not sanctioned by Southern culture, that violence which Reed calls "'felony-type' homicides," which Reed describes as mostly referring to "most of what is meant by crime

⁴¹ Pizza Deliverance, "Zoloft."

in the streets.”⁴² “One of These Days” illustrates three kinds of crime and violence in Birmingham, some acceptable, some not so acceptable:

It’s no wonder everybody’s scared of downtown Birmingham
It’s just a little too close to home
But there’s more crooks down here and the cops don’t care,
While old white men wearing ties can do anything they want.

Once a country boy’s seen the way the steam rises
Off a man’s insides on the sidewalk
Tends to change the way he thinks, the way he sees everything
And he goes back to where he came from

One of these days when my face looks like a roadmap
Gonna find my way back home.
And I’ll go walking on the west side after dark
And leave my gun locked in my car.
One of these days they’ll take one look at me and run...⁴³

The narrator of the song leaves the city because of the unacceptable “felony-type” street violence in the second verse quoted here and imagines coming back one day, not to avenge the violence, but rather to conquer it. He does not wish retribution; the crime does not seem to have affected anyone he felt he needed to defend, but the violence itself scares him. He does not want to answer violence with violence, but rather wishes to become something that will deter and prevent this kind of unacceptable violence from occurring. He does not respond to the white-collar crime referred to earlier in the song; perhaps that kind of crime, because of its non-violent aspect, is somehow out of his control. He feels that he can answer, and prevent, impersonal violence, but the nonviolent crimes of the wealthy are as far beyond his power as his father’s and his ability to pull themselves out of the working class and into that world economically, as well as in retribution.

⁴² Reed. *One South*, 144.

⁴³ *Pizza Deliverance*. “One of These Days.”

Though John Shelton Reed argued in 1982 that Southern culture permitted and encouraged certain types of violence while forbidding others, none of the Drive-By Truckers' songs seem to condone those kinds of violence. They write songs about the kinds of violence native to their South, but they do not accept that those acts are proper. They offer an alternate perspective on the acceptability of both "felony-type" violence as well as family violence and violence resulting from "romantic triangles and lovers' quarrels." Perhaps the South has reached a point in its "Americanization" where, though those acts persist in being defined as Southern, they are no longer acceptable to the culture at large. Or maybe the Truckers see farther into the causes and the consequences of violence than those who would condone it. Depictions of violence coded as permissible and impermissible still persist in country music and other forms of particularly Southern culture, but, in the world of the Drive-By Truckers, come with a caveat; violence has consequences for both those who practice it, and those to whom it is directed. Different types of violence and of crime are not coded by region but also by class. Southern and "white trash" types of violence are easier to comprehend and address than white collar crime and "felony-type" violence for the Drive-By Truckers, though the band does not support those types of violence either.

"The Tough Sell:" DBT and Pop Culture

The Drive-By Truckers tentatively begin their exploration of what they call "modern Southern mythology," or historicizing Southern popular culture, in Gangstabilly and Pizza Deliverance. The Truckers start out using popular culture as a way to explore more white trash themes on these two albums. Like in "18 Wheels of Love," where everything the listener needs to know about the relationship is encapsulated in a marriage

at Dollywood. “Steve McQueen” uses the actor and his most famous roles to signify the Southern teenage hero worship of fast cars and pretty women, but brings the party back down to earth with the actor’s death. Patterson Hood narrates (possibly his own experience) through the voice of a young man who admires and tries to emulate the life of Steve McQueen and McQueen’s various movie roles. The kid claims, “Bullit was my favorite movie that I had ever seen/I totaled my go-cart trying to imitate that chase scene” and went to see “The Hunter” on his first date.

The last two lines of the song connect the loss of the narrator’s drivers’ license and McQueen’s death from mesothelioma, and, in the liner notes to the album under the lyrics to the song, Hood dedicates the song to his grandfather. McQueen’s death reflects the way real life often undermines images presented in the media; though he was a tough figure that represented a kind of masculinity the teenage narrator wanted desperately to possess, his death reveals his own mortality. In a place like the South, where the ability to drive really influences a person’s mobility, death is a kind of metaphor for the loss of a driver’s license, or perhaps the loss of a driver’s license is a metaphor for death. It’s a limited way to see the world, but utterly characteristic of a Southern teenager. A lack of mobility cuts deeply into a person’s life, as does the loss of a personal hero to a less-than-glorious end. The song reflects the ways in which people relate to images of popular culture and live their lives through those images, and also the way in which those images can be undercut by additional information about their source. It is one of the first songs of the Truckers to tell the other side of a story.

Another song from Pizza Deliverance depicts a controversial musician from two points of view, showing how popular culture can be understood in many ways. “The

Night G.G. Allin Came to Town” relates the events of a Memphis concert given by the infamous punk rocker. Most of the song is told from the point of view of “the old man at Ferguson’s Café,” who reads a newspaper article about the event to his wife. By speaking from both the old man’s point of view, which presumably represents the viewpoint of the majority of the newspaper’s other readers, as well as from the viewpoint of Patterson Hood, the song delivers more than one perspective on the controversial musician. By already identifying the “natural” response of the older, middle and upper class, the song places the performance in that context already, while the real message about the show might be in the last lines, “Me and Cooley, we just laughed so hard, we both fell down the night G.G. Allin came to town.” It isn’t a defense of Allin so much as it is an attempt to show that there is more than one way to understand his performances.

The Truckers indulge in some sophomoric political humor in “The President’s Penis is Missing,” a song that dates, in the words of Hood’s 2005 liner notes, from “the good-old days when the President’s hard-on was for banging an intern instead of bombing Iraqis.” According to the lyrics printed in the liner notes, the song is sung from the point of view of the White House Press Corps, Walter Cronkite, William Randolph Hearst, and Sen. John Glenn, who finishes up the song with the lines, “the whole world suffers from hunger and meanness, but we’re more concerned with the President’s penis!” Though the listener cannot tell from hearing the song, the printed lyrics read more like musical theater. The Truckers have often claimed that they imagine their stories as movies before they become songs.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Grant Alden. “Rocking Tall,” in The Best of No Depression. ed. Grant Alden and Peter Blackstock (Austin: University of Texas Press. 2005). 270-271.

The Truckers often tell stories about historic events through the eyes of the individuals affected by them on a very personal level. Often the stories are from the point of view of people who have no control over these events and suffer for their lack of power or agency in the face of governmental policy or corporate politics. This trend would develop in their songwriting in further albums. Another song on *Pizza Deliverance*, "Uncle Frank," deals with the effects the Tennessee Valley Authority had on the Tennessee River, which runs through the Shoals area in northern Alabama. "The United States government planned construction of a nitrate plant and a dam to supply it power at Muscle Shoals...the first plant came online just before the war ended and the second, two weeks after the armistice. But Wilson Dam was only half finished."⁴⁵ The Tennessee Valley Authority acquired and finished the dam in the early thirties as part of an effort to bring electricity to rural populations across the South. The dam backed up the Tennessee River and flooded much of the nearby town's namesake, the flat, marshy areas where mussels were found.⁴⁶

Mike Cooley's song addresses the changing landscape through the viewpoint of the title character, a veteran who owned a small piece of land that got flooded when the dam was built. The song also refers to another incident in the town's history, when Henry Ford came through the area scouting places to build a factory to build his cars. The locals were promised new jobs, but the plant never materialized. The song ends with Uncle Frank hanging himself after losing everything he owned. It's another song about the kinds of events that poor whites can't control, about how lives change in ways that can't be expected even when the government is trying to help in a time of need.

⁴⁵Wayne Flynt, *Alabama in the Twentieth Century* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 383.

⁴⁶<http://www.tva.gov/sites/wilson.htm>.

The Drive-By Truckers' songs illuminate the ways in which popular music and popular culture affect the lives of the people who identify with and consume that culture. The songs are also about the gap between image and reality, about the difference between the shallow reflections presented by mass media and the complexities that hide behind that presentation. The songs are about attempts to live through those images, and the pain caused by the refusal to acknowledge the complexity of life beyond the movie screen or three minute record.

Coda: "The Living Bubba" and Southern Masculinity

Perhaps the best song from the two earliest Drive-By Truckers albums, "The Living Bubba" is a song about Gregory Dean Smalley, an acquaintance of Patterson Hood's from his days in the Athens and Atlanta, Georgia. The local country music scene revolved around small bands playing country music in local bars, mostly in Atlanta. In the Spring 2006 issue of Georgia Music magazine, Slim Chance (aka James Kelly), another musician, wrote "a memoir" of the scene. Chance credits both Gram Parsons and Elvis Costello (especially Costello's album of country covers, Almost Blue) as some of the main inspirations for the scene. It was dubbed the "Redneck Underground" by performance artist Deacon Lunchbox. Chance explains,

The label stuck, and it cleared identified the scene as functioning on two levels. First, it was based on what is commonly referred to as 'redneck culture'—classic country music, NASCAR, family, an affinity for Southern iconography, and a strong regional pride in being Southern. Second, it was 'underground' in the sense that it was clearly a counterculture, a reactive response to both the trendy hipster scene that was also thriving in Atlanta at the time, and the mainstream country music coming out of Nashville. But most importantly, there was a love of Southern culture without the historic racism, ignorance and prejudices that stigmatized the South for so many years...suddenly, it was cool to have some pride in one's Southern heritage, to like country music and to drink Pabst Blue Ribbon beer.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ James Kelly. "What It Was. Was Country Music" Georgia Music 4 (2006), 27.

Chance also notes that Deacon Lunchbox transformed the scene from a few bands playing country covers to a motley group of “performance artists, quirky bands, and hardcore country singers.” Chance captures the spirit of the Redneck Underground when he describes its earliest beginnings, in the mid-1980s, in the side projects of a local “new wave” band, the Now Explosion: “several of the members were serious country music fans...their affinity for Loretta Lynn and Tammy Wynette appeared to be a function of the Southern gothic nature of their lyrics...Plus, the songs were fun to do in drag.”⁴⁸ The bands from the Redneck Underground had an appreciation for country music and its connections to their shared Southern roots, but they also had a willingness to experiment with alternative performance styles and an ironic sensibility not found in traditional country music. This ironic view was borrowed from the punk rock and new wave that dominated many underground music scenes in the U.S. in the eighties and early nineties.

Gregory Dean Smalley was a prominent member of the Atlanta Redneck Underground scene, and he created “Bubbapalooza,” a music festival first held in March of 1993 in the Star Bar in Atlanta. It became a yearly event, a touchstone for the whole music scene, and eventually spawned a series of CD releases. Unfortunately, Smalley contracted AIDS soon after. Patterson Hood was living in Athens at the time and running the sound board in a small club; Hood encountered Smalley when he came to play there. In 2003, Hood wrote an essay for Paste Magazine describing the origins of his song, “The Living Bubba,” about Gregory Dean Smalley. Hood emphasizes that he never knew Smalley very well but was inspired by the commitment Smalley maintained to making

⁴⁸ Kelly, 26.

music during his battle with AIDS. The song is told from Smalley's point of view, and it describes his feelings towards his music and his approaching death:

I wake up tired and I wake up pissed
Wonder how I ended up like this
Wonder why things happen like they do
But I don't wonder long cause I got a show to do.⁴⁹

Understood outside the personal story, Hood's song is extremely unusual; in the mid-nineties, AIDS was still associated with homosexuals and blood transfusions, not redneck "white trash" singers and guitar players. Rather than shy away from the topic, or try to make sense of Smalley's disease by stereotyping him as well, Hood steps into his shoes and tries to imagine what the man would have thought and felt at the time. Hood's song captures the Truckers' spirit as well as Greg Smalley's; even in the beginning, the band sympathized with poor white Southerners, valued their experiences, and resisted easy, reductive depictions of their lives and feelings. The Truckers, inspired by the Redneck Underground, tried to find a way to feel proud of their origins in the South. At the same time the band wanted to examine those origins and their all too common stereotypes. The band members' affinity for punk music put distance between themselves and their roots; the Truckers and other bands from Athens and Atlanta didn't identify with some parts of traditional Southern identity, like racism, and they needed to explain themselves and examine their pasts and their culture further before they could celebrate it.

⁴⁹ Gangstabilly. "The Living Bubba."

Chapter Two: Southern Rock Opera

Southern Rock Opera was a major turning point for the Drive-By Truckers on several levels. The band borrowed money from family and friends in order to record, produce, and distribute the record themselves, when they could not find a record label that would sign them. Once they released the record in 2001, Southern Rock Opera generated enough interest that Lost Highway, a Sony record label based in Nashville, picked up the album and re-released it in 2002. The record also ended up on many “best of the year” lists in magazines like Rolling Stone. The exposure helped bring the band to a new level in sales, touring, and fan base; it marks a shift not only in the band’s fortunes but also in the way they narrated their stories of the South. In the liner notes of the remastered version of Pizza Deliverance, re-released in 2005, Patterson Hood looked back on the making of that album and the subsequent transition to Southern Rock Opera, noting that the songs on the Truckers’ first two albums were “based on, or inspired by, country and western,”⁵⁰ while “the newer songs leaned more towards seventies arena rock in structure and approach.”

The sound of the album echoes this statement. The past two albums were more acoustic and featured instrumentation traditionally associated with country music, like mandolin, fiddle, and pedal steel, Southern Rock Opera is a full-tilt rock record, with a three-guitar lineup (like Lynyrd Skynyrd) and the amps turned all the way up. Whereas Pizza Deliverance and Gangstabilly exaggerated their Southernness in order to satirize regional stereotypes, Southern Rock Opera loses most of the humor and attempts to deal with the South in a more straightforward way by emphasizing the examination of popular

⁵⁰ Pizza Deliverance liner notes.

images of the South, namely the story of Lynyrd Skynyrd. The story of the Southern Rock band from the 1970s illuminates the Truckers' own relationship with the region.

The name of the album suggests an ironic sensibility that connects the album to *Pizza Deliverance* and *Gangstabilly*. "Rock operas" were popular in the 1970s, like the Who's *Tommy* and *Quadrophenia* and many of David Bowie's albums, and the term has come to signify the kind of overblown, pretentious, "art" rock approach that many hard rock bands from that decade aspired to, and against which punk rock rebelled. The combination of that ironic reference with the term "Southern Rock" describes both what the album is trying to do, as well as the ridiculousness of the attempt. The album's title indicates the self-awareness present in the Truckers' examination of Southern culture and Lynyrd Skynyrd in particular.

The album is also notable for Wes Freed's artwork. Freed has designed the covers and the interior artwork for all of the Truckers' albums since, and his gothic comic book style fits the Truckers' vision perfectly. His paintings for the album include shadowy swamp scenes with indistinct, menacing human figures with glowing red eyes, car crashes, and even a skeletal version of Ronnie Van Zant on the back cover. The album itself is designed like a double gatefold LP, also harkening back to the days of 1970s hard rock. Freed contributed six pictures to the album, and other artwork includes pictures of the original site of FAME Studios, above the East Florence Drug Store, in the Shoals area, as well as several live shots of the band. The artwork further expands the band's vision of their past and the stories they want to tell.

In Tell About the South: the Southern Rage to Explain, Fred Hobson examines a series of writers from 1850 onwards who also felt called upon to write about their home. Hobson loosely divides these writers into critics and defenders. He explains,

The Southerner, more than any other American, has felt he had something to explain, to justify, to defend, or to affirm. If apologist for the Southern way, he had felt driven to answer the accusations and misstatements of outsiders and to combat the image of a benighted and savage South. If native critic, he has often been preoccupied with Southern racial sin and guilt, with the burden of the Southern past—and frustrated by the closed nature of Southern society itself, by that quality which suppressed dissent and adverse comment.⁵¹

Hobson maintains a distinction between the two types of writers over the course of the book; however, Southern Rock Opera seems to fall into both categories. The band takes issue with outsiders' perceptions of the South and criticizes the region's natives as well. In the song "The Three Great Alabama Icons," Hood mentions his own experience with outsiders' criticism of the South, when he "left the South and learned how different people's understanding of 'the Southern thing' was from what I had seen in my life." Hood and his bandmates complicate the outsiders' view of the South through their interrogation of popular culture about the South and its stereotypes.

The Truckers also take issue with some assumptions that Southerners themselves make. Their attitude is probably best expressed in a line from "The Three Great Alabama Icons:" "bands like Lynyrd Skynyrd attempted to show another side of the South, one that certainly exists, but few saw beyond the rebel flag, and this applies not only to their critics and detractors but to their fans and followers as well."⁵² According to the Truckers, symbols like the rebel flag and the simplistic interpretations they inspire, both inside and outside of the South, only tell part of the story. In Southern Rock Opera, the

⁵¹ Fred Hobson, Tell About the South (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), 3-4.

⁵² The Drive-By Truckers, Southern Rock Opera, "The Three Great Alabama Icons."

Drive-By Truckers attempt to set that story straight, by telling the story of Lynyrd Skynyrd. and through Lynyrd Skynyrd, telling their own story as well.

Because the album was conceived as a “rock opera” or (more accurately) a kind of song cycle, the songs follow a very loose narrative arc, progressing from stories about life growing up in Alabama on the first half of the album, to stories more about Lynyrd Skynyrd and the life of a band on the road on the second half of the album. Though I grouped the songs by theme in the last chapter, I felt it was important to keep to that loose arc while examining the songs from Southern Rock Opera. The liner notes and “song-by-song commentary” from the band’s website provide additional information and reflection on the songs and themes of each album.

For Southern Rock Opera in particular, the liner notes to the album offer a fictional framework through which to view the story and also incorporate more connections between Skynyrd’s story and the story of the Truckers and their fictional band, “Betamax Guillotine.” The fictional band is named after “the legend (myth?) (truth?) about Lynyrd Skynyrd that claimed Ronnie Van Zandt was killed by a strike on the head from the on-board VCR.”⁵³ It would perhaps be unwise to make too much of the framework story in the liner notes; in the “epilogue” liner notes of the album, Patterson Hood notes “as the album progressed, it became less literal in story and more about modern, Southern mythology.”⁵⁴ Though the fictional band and protagonist don’t show up in the lyrics of the songs, the framing story nevertheless provides a way of interpreting the album, particularly as a response to some of the themes introduced in that section.

⁵³ Southern Rock Opera. liner notes.

⁵⁴ Southern Rock Opera. liner notes.

The liner notes encompass three sections; there is an introduction to “Act 1,” an introduction to “Act 2,” and an epilogue for the whole album. The introductions are about the fictional band and its story, while the epilogue is more concerned with the Truckers’ own journey making the album. The story of the fictional band echoes that of the Truckers, though perhaps with a bit of wish-fulfillment in the form of more success than the Truckers had experienced at that point in their career. The opening notes for “Act 1,” or the first half of the double album, describe the journey of this man;

Our hero moved to the city, then to a couple more cities. He got himself a funny haircut or two. He became a punk rocker and tried to disassociate himself from his youthful transgressions. Much like so many well-meaning southern people who try to talk down their southern accents for fear of sounding ‘too-southern.’ (As if that were inferior or something.)⁵⁵

The fictional protagonist distances himself from Southern rock and his Southern past, but as he gets older, he’s “being visited by spirits of the past; now he wants to remember.” By “Act II,” he has put a band together to “[tell] stories of a forgotten South, stories no one else was bothering to tell. Stories that own up to the terrible while telling of the beautiful.”⁵⁶ That last line suggests that double purpose of criticism and defense, the Truckers’ signature move of “telling another side of the story.”

ACT 1: The Southern Thing

In the first song, “Days of Graduation,” the narrator’s best friend dies in a car crash the night of their high school graduation. On the Truckers’ website, Hood writes of the song, “the first fatal car wreck of some peers in high school is unfortunately a near universal right of passage. We tied that in with the old urban legend about ‘Free Bird still

⁵⁵ Southern Rock Opera. liner notes.

⁵⁶ Southern Rock Opera. liner notes.

playing on the stereo' as a way to kick our story off and set the tone for the album."⁵⁷ The experience of the tragedy of teenage death and the "rite of passage" to adulthood is mediated through popular culture. The song uses "Free Bird" to communicate both the length of time that those kids sat in the car, bleeding to death. "Days of Graduation" also taps into the tragedy of "Free Bird" and Skynyrd's history of deaths in plane crashes and automobile accidents. "Free Bird" begins with a mournful tone but gradually builds to a crescendo that celebrates the freedom of constant movement away from the strictures of home, making the both reference in "Days of Graduation" and the later history of Lynyrd Skynyrd ironic, because both stories involve death at the hands of the very instruments that kept both the band and the teenagers moving. The Truckers' reference to the song incorporates all of these elements and ties them into a "modern myth" with which many Southerners can identify.

While "Days of Graduation" sets the stage for a look at Southern youth, the second song, "Ronnie and Neil," opens the topic of the larger historical events affecting Alabamians. Southern Rock Opera focuses some of its attention on civil rights era events in Alabama, a major catalyst for many Southern writers. Fred Hobson said of the Civil Rights period, "the attention riveted in the 1950s and 1960s upon Little Rock, Oxford, Birmingham, Selma, and other civil rights battlegrounds brought again to the region the reputation it had earned in the 1920s—the savage or benighted South...if the Northern interest in the South accelerated, the Southerner's desire to explain himself—both to outsiders and to himself—grew correspondingly."⁵⁸ The album addresses these historical

⁵⁷ DBT website.

⁵⁸ Hobson. 297-298.

moments both to expound on their complexity to outsiders, and also to acknowledge the harm done by Southerners themselves during that period.

“Ronnie and Neil” begins with a description of the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham:

Church blew up in Birmingham
Four little black girls killed for no goddamned good reason
All this hate and violence can't come to no good end
A stain on the good name
A whole lot of people dragged through the blood and glass
Blood stains on their good names and all of us take the blame.⁵⁹

Those first lines make two points clear. First, the Truckers face, head on, the fact that the 1960s marked a very violent period in Alabama's history, during which white people committed senseless acts against innocents like those four girls because of their race. Second, that though racial violence still marks the state's image and the reputation of its people, the Truckers emphasize that not all Alabamians are responsible for that violence. Patterson Hood, who wrote the song, separates the historical fact of the bombing, the popular perception of the state and its people on account of the bombing and similar incidents, and the effect of that image on the people of Alabama. The Truckers present a critical view of the racial violence of the event, while defending the state from an outside viewpoint that judges all Alabamians by the acts of a few.

The next two verses set the stage for the Truckers' understanding of race relations in Alabama: Wilson Pickett and Aretha Franklin both “come to town,”⁶⁰ to the integrated recording studios in Muscle Shoals. The song then moves on to present a direct example of an outsiders' view of the South and a native's response through the story of the feud between Neil Young and Ronnie Van Zant. Young wrote two songs in the early

⁵⁹ Southern Rock Opera. “Ronnie and Neil.”

⁶⁰ Southern Rock Opera. “Ronnie and Neil.”

seventies, “Southern Man” and “Alabama” attacking the South and Alabama specifically for its racist behavior, and Skynyrd included a verse in “Sweet Home Alabama” responding to those songs. Though Young’s songs “certainly told some truths; there were a lot of good folks down here and Neil Young just wasn’t around.”⁶¹ Like Wilson Pickett and Aretha Franklin, Lynyrd Skynyrd recorded in Muscle Shoals and wrote the other verses of “Sweet Home Alabama” about the experience. Hood finishes the song by invoking Van Zant’s line to Neil Young, “Southern man don’t need him around anyhow,”⁶² but changed it to “to my way of thinking, us Southern men still need both of them around.”⁶³ Instead of simply rejecting an outsider’s criticism of the South as Skynyrd did, Hood and his bandmates instead acknowledge the need and the importance of taking outside criticism into consideration. Neither side is completely right; Young condemned the whole South for the actions of a handful, while Skynyrd refused to acknowledge the harm that had been done in an attempt to defend their precious “Southern way of life.”

In his article “Freedom, Manhood, and White Male Tradition in 1970s Southern Rock Music,” Ted Ownby suggests that “young white men who were finding freedom in ignoring or rejecting some of the traditions of a white Southern culture were sometimes looking instead to a tradition of African-American music...and Southern rock generally ignored the racist tradition except to claim that they admired the blues tradition and to suggest that the forms of violence they respected were distant in time and place form

⁶¹ Southern Rock Opera. “Ronnie and Neil.”

⁶² Lynyrd Skynyrd. Second Helping. “Sweet Home Alabama.”

⁶³ Southern Rock Opera. “Ronnie and Neil.”

recent forms of violence.”⁶⁴ Are the Drive-By Truckers going farther in their acknowledgement of a racially violent South than their Southern Rock ancestors? Or, by depicting the “integration” of the South in the past, are they making the same move as Skynyrd?

In “The Ballad of Curtis Lowe,” Skynyrd expressed respect and cultural ties to the music of the black bluesman of the title, but by putting the encounter in the realm of childhood, Ronnie Van Zandt didn’t have to contemplate his interaction with the contemporary Southern African-American community and the problems they faced during and after the Civil Rights Movement. By placing their depiction of an integrated community in the 1960s, the Truckers both present an alternative view of race relations than the popular stereotype of the state during that era, as well as an alternative to Skynyrd’s silence on the issue, but they also avoid having to deal with the state of race relations in the South that is contemporary for them. Is this a view that moves past Skynyrd’s silence, or does it merely echo it? The South might have been more integrated in the 1960s than people generally believe, but what is it like today?

The next three songs on the first disc of Southern Rock Opera deal less with historical events associated with Alabama and its people and more with personal experience of life growing up in the South. “72 (this highway’s mean),” refers to Highway 72, which runs through North Alabama and connects Memphis and Huntsville. On the Truckers’ website, Patterson Hood notes “you pretty much can not get in or out of our hometown (the Shoals area in North Alabama) without traveling down Hwy. 72.”⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Ted Ownby, “Freedom, Manhood, and White Male Tradition in 1970s Southern Rock Music” in Haunted Bodies, ed. Anne Goodwyn Jones and Susan Donaldson (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1997), 383-384.

⁶⁵ DBT website.

Mike Cooley connects the specific landscape of his hometown to the contradictory experience of freedom and entrapment that roads offer to teenagers in the South; “mean old highway, stuck to the ground in Mississippi, it’s the one to set me free, but it’s the same one that I see being ripped up off the ground and wrapped around me.”⁶⁶ The image of the highway echoes the struggle of the members of the fictional band and the Drive-By Truckers; the harder they try to outrun their Southern roots, the tighter those roots seem to cling.

“Guitar Man Upstairs” is another song by Mike Cooley. Again from the website, Hood explains, “he wrote this one about the guy upstairs who used to call the cops every time he played his guitar (even acoustic guitar in the middle of the afternoon), yet never seemed to mind any other kind of noise. It’s perfectly typical of Cooley that he told the tale from his adversary’s point of view.”⁶⁷ This song also resembles some of the character portraits in Gangstabilly and Pizza Deliverance and introduces the importance of the idea of class in Southern Rock Opera. Though less developed in Southern Rock Opera than in some of the Truckers’ later albums, here they begin to understand class as a force that both unifies and divides people: “I’ve seen white and blacks folks alike get treated just like sin, and every year or so I seen a new truckload of white trash moving in.”⁶⁸ This depiction of class will carry over into other songs on the album, particularly “The Southern Thing.”

The next two songs on the first discs, “Birmingham” and “The Southern Thing,” bring us back to Alabama history and Southern image. “Birmingham” begins by describing some of the biggest problems associated with the city in the lines “economics

⁶⁶ Southern Rock Opera. “72.”

⁶⁷ DBT website.

⁶⁸ Southern Rock Opera. “Guitar Man Upstairs.”

shut the furnace down. Bull Connor hosed some children down, George Wallace stared them Yankees down in Birmingham.”⁶⁹ Birmingham was built on steel mills that left many jobless when they shut down. Eugene “Bull” Connor was the police chief in Birmingham for several decades, and he became a symbol of segregation when Birmingham police, under his orders, used dogs and fire hoses to attack African-American demonstrators. At the time, the city itself was sometimes referred to as “the Johannesburg of the South.” George Wallace also embodies the worst tendencies of the segregationist South, a depiction the Truckers will also complicate later in the album. Hood explains that the song is about “Birmingham’s rebirth and somewhat successful reinvention of itself.”⁷⁰

Hood also describes his connection to the city, “most of my family came from Birmingham; I can feel their presence in the street.” Though Birmingham’s history and image have been marked by the terrible violence also associated with Bull Connor and George Wallace, that image again does not tell the whole story. Hood’s personal connections to the city do several things: they give him the authority to talk about both the city’s image and present alternatives to that image, and they also give him a stake in that depiction of the city. His connections tie him to that legacy and, because he clearly feels that Birmingham’s image as “the Johannesburg of the South” does not apply to himself and some of his family members, provide an urgent reason to challenge those portrayals. Hood sums up Birmingham’s “reinvention” in the last lines of the song:

“Vulcan Park has seen its share of troubled times. but the city won’t admit defeat/Magic

⁶⁹ [Southern Rock Opera](#). “Birmingham.”

⁷⁰ DBT website.

City's magic's getting stronger/Dynamite Hill ain't on fire any longer/No man should ever have to feel he don't belong in Birmingham."⁷¹

"The Southern Thing" has been called Hood's "thesis statement" for the album, and he explains that the song works to "tie it all together (particularly Act 1) and define what it was all about."⁷² The song begins by listing a series of images associated with stereotypes of the South, stereotypes that both outsiders and Southerners associate with the region: the flag (Confederate, of course), guns, northern drives and Southern roots, cowboy boots, rebels, guitars, cotton fields and "cotton-picking lies," and pride. It does not make much difference whether the song is specifically addressing Southerners or not; Hood's attitude comes through loud and clear when he says, "proud of the glory, stare down the shame, duality of the Southern Thing."⁷³ Both the song and the whole album are centered on this statement; Hood and the rest of the Truckers attempt to "own up to the terrible while telling of the beautiful," just like their fictional band. Their journey from rejection of their Southern roots to acceptance requires examining and admitting the awful events of the South's history, and somehow figuring out a way to feel proud of the better aspects of the South meanwhile. Is there a way to reconcile the dichotomy, or is it enough to admit that it's there?

The song also brings back the issue of class that was featured earlier in "Guitar Man Upstairs," when Hood claims "it ain't about the races, the crying shame, to the fucking rich man all poor people look the same."⁷⁴ For the Truckers, class becomes a more illuminating way to talk about the problems of the South, as well as another way to

⁷¹ Southern Rock Opera. "Birmingham."

⁷² DBT website.

⁷³ Southern Rock Opera. "The Southern Thing."

⁷⁴ Southern Rock Opera. "The Southern Thing."

challenge Southern stereotypes from without and within; Hood's story of his great-great-grandfather stands as an example of this redirection. This story is the only place in all of their albums where the Truckers mention the Civil War. He claims that his grandfather "did NOT believe in slavery, thought all men should be free," but fought to defend his home from the Union army.⁷⁵ Hood claims that in "four generations, a whole lot has changed" and name checks the progression of Southern heroes from Robert E. Lee and Martin Luther King as a way to describe the change.⁷⁶ The song rejects racism as a major characteristic of the Truckers' version of the South. Hood's great-great-grandfather did not hand down a tradition of fighting to keep people enslaved, but rather fought for his own freedom at Shiloh, "less than thirty miles from home." The song also addresses more recent racial issues by invoking the death of James Byrd, Jr. in Jasper, Texas, in the line "hate's the only thing that my truck would want to drag."⁷⁷ Class replaces race as a way to identify with your fellow Southerners; in a land where "white men wearing ties can do whatever they want,"⁷⁸ the Truckers want to stand up for the poor whites that are misunderstood as racist, backwoods rednecks. Those people have been exploited by Southern culture and society as much as African-Americans and they have become the scapegoats for the South's "race" problems. When the Truckers recast the South's problems in light of class rather than race, they reclaim poor white Southerners as a group perhaps equally sinned against as sinning, and make a convincing argument for that groups' fortunes bring worth a closer look.

⁷⁵ Southern Rock Opera. "The Southern Thing."

⁷⁶ Southern Rock Opera. "The Southern Thing."

⁷⁷ Southern Rock Opera. "The Southern Thing."

⁷⁸ Pizza Deliverance. "One of These Days."

“The Southern Thing” also sets up the next two songs on the album, a long spoken-word track called “The Three Great Alabama Icons” and a song about Alabama’s infamous governor, George Wallace. “The Three Great Alabama Icons” addresses the legacies of George Wallace, “Bear” Bryant, and Ronnie Van Zandt. To use Hood’s own words, George Wallace is “most famous as the belligerent racist voice of the segregationist South, standing in the doorways of schools and waging a war against a federal government that he decried as hypocritical.”⁷⁹ Paul “Bear” Bryant was the legendary University of Alabama football coach, and Ronnie Van Zandt was the lead singer of Lynyrd Skynyrd and wrote the song “Sweet Home Alabama.” thus his connection to the state.

Patterson Hood has noted that this is one of the most autobiographical songs on the album, and he describes his youth in North Alabama, hating football, and playing music instead. He uses the song to complicate stories about both Skynyrd and Wallace. Hood claims that Lynyrd Skynyrd were trying to present the “other side of the story,” again emphasizing the need for multiple viewpoints necessary to read the past, but Skynyrd were misunderstood because “few people saw beyond the rebel flag.” Wallace, of course, represents the story that Hood claims Skynyrd were trying to complicate. When he first left the South, Patterson Hood “was shocked at how strongly Wallace was associated with Alabama and its people.”⁸⁰ Hood sums up Wallace’s legacy by stating:

George Wallace died back in '98, and he's in hell now, not because he's a racist. His track record as a judge and his late-life quest for redemption make a good argument for him being at worst, no worse than most white men of his generation, North or South. But because of his blind ambition and hunger for votes, he turned

⁷⁹ [Southern Rock Opera](#). “The Three Great Alabama Icons.”

⁸⁰ [Southern Rock Opera](#). “The Three Great Alabama Icons.”

a blind eye to the suffering of black America and he became a pawn in the fight against the Civil Rights cause.⁸¹

The song “Wallace” continues the examination of the figure of the governor, from the perspective of the devil as he prepares for Wallace to arrive in hell. The song in particular speaks to the irony of Wallace’s last election in 1982, where Hood claims he won the governorship with over 90% of the black vote. The devil says, “I know in the end he got the black people’s votes, but I bet they’d still vote him this way,” and “if it’s true that he wasn’t a racist, and he just did all them things for the votes, I guess hell’s just a place for kiss-ass politicians who pander to assholes.”⁸² Wallace’s legacy is far more complex than the usual stereotypes of racist, redneck, segregationist Southerners, and deserves to be considered as such. For the Truckers, an important part of dealing with Wallace’s legacy is understanding his actions and denouncing them for the right reasons: not because he was racist, but because he overlooked and prolonged suffering in his quest for power.

The last two songs in “Act 1” bring us back to the life of a young kid growing up in the South, after setting up the larger events that preoccupied the South and the rest of the nation at the time. “Zip City” explores the relationship of two teenagers in the quad cities area while “Moved” depicts the experience of moving away from home, though not out of the South, for the first time. The first half of Southern Rock Opera introduces the world, through stories of personal experiences and tall tales of dirty politics and musical legends.

⁸¹ Southern Rock Opera. “The Three Great Alabama Icons.”

⁸² Southern Rock Opera. “Wallace.”

ACT 2: Let There Be Rock

After the long exploration of the social and cultural environment of the South, seen through youthful eyes, “Act 2” brings us back to the story of Lynyrd Skynyrd and the importance of Southern Rock to the experience of growing up in the South. The first song on this disc, “Let There Be Rock,” describes teenage life in the rural South, lived through drinking, drugs, and 1970s hard rock. The choruses name check Blue Oyster Cult, Lynyrd Skynyrd, Molly Hatchett, .38 Special, the Johnny Van Zandt Band, Thin Lizzy, Ozzy Osborne, and AC/DC, while the verses describes a series of dangerously close encounters with death and the law. Hood describes the song as “a pretty damned autobiographical account of my teenaged years, and how partying and going to Arena Rock shows kept me from going off the deep end in high school.”⁸³ The last chorus of the song continues naming several hard rock bands, but with a twist: it refers to a series of tragedies like the plane crash that keeps the narrator from ever seeing Lynyrd Skynyrd in concert, the plane crash that killed Ozzy Osborne’s guitarist Randy Rhoads, and the accidental death of AC/DC singer Bon Scott.

These deaths both signify the dangerous quality of a musician’s life and reflect the danger that the narrator courts in his own life by drinking and doing drugs. The song’s narrator, whether it is the lead singer of “Betamax Guillotine” or Patterson Hood himself, understands his own life, in fact, lives his own life, through the realm of popular culture. He constructs his narrative of his own life to mirror the hard living that his heroes experience. Unlike “Ronnie and Neil” where popular culture is used to frame an argument about the truth or fiction of images of the South, the popular music referred to in “Let There Be Rock” is valued as a way to understand and shape the singer’s own

⁸³ DBT website.

experience, as well as for the cathartic experience of the music itself. This is why popular culture matters; it is where self-image is constructed and the lives of small-town Southern kids are lived out.

“Road Cases” and “Women without Whiskey” are two parables about the price of the lifestyle fame demands. “Women without Whiskey” describes the pain of alcoholism and effect it has on personal relationships. “Road Cases” in particular moves us from the world of teenage rock and roll dreams to the world of the life of a band on the road and the price that world demands. The first two verses are imbued with the pride that the narrator dreams of feeling when he and his band “get ourselves a big tour bus, maybe even an airplane/ fly around the world and back, hope we don’t run out of gas.” The third verse describes the end of that dream, when the narrator admits “someday we’ll sell our road cases, when we don’t need them anymore/pay off that big cocaine dealer, only thing them things is useful for...”⁸⁴ The road cases become a symbol for the dreams that drive the search for fame and fortune.

Patterson Hood describes “Plastic Flowers on the Highway” as a “tribute to a good friend and comrade Chris Quillen who...was set to be a member of this band before being killed in a car crash a couple of weeks before our first gig.” The song could just as easily refer to the deaths of Duane Allman and Berry Oakley from the Allman Brothers or the car crash that paralyzed Allen Collins from Lynyrd Skynyrd. The song evokes the image of a ubiquitous phenomenon that can be seen across the South, the commemoration of a site of a car crash with flowers or crosses. The liner notes to the album include a picture of one such site, a white cross that reads, “Danny Smith,” “We Love You,” “Beloved Son,” and “July 1970-Jan. 2000.”

⁸⁴ Southern Rock Opera. “Road Cases.”

The narrative arc that moves from the excitement and danger of “Let There Be Rock” to the acceptance, compromise, and shattered dreams of “Road Cases” and “Women Without Whiskey” to the roadside deaths that haunt “Plastic Flowers on the Highway” mirrors the arc that Lynyrd Skynyrd’s fortunes took at the time; the next two songs, “Cassie’s Brother” and “Life in the Factory,” deal directly with Skynyrd’s story. “Cassie’s Brother” tells the story of how Steve Gaines came to join the band, and “Life in the Factory” takes a closer look at Skynyrd’s beginnings as “bunch of fatherless boys from Florida.” The song describes Skynyrd’s experience of growing up in north Florida as “ain’t no good life down at the Ford plant, three guitars or a life of crime,” a choice for many that the band would explore further on later albums. Hood repeats a theme from the first act at the end of the song when he says, “it’s still a sad story when the legend overshadows the songs and the band.”⁸⁵ The line refers again to Hood’s claim that the popular interpretation of Lynyrd Skynyrd, whether by their “critics and detractors” or their “fans and followers,”⁸⁶ does not express the whole story of the band. The two final songs on the album, “Greenville to Baton Rouge” and “Angels and Fuselage” describe the end of Skynyrd’s journey. “Greenville...” describes Skynyrd’s excitement about their new tour, guitarist, and album right before the plane crash, and “Angels and Fuselage” depicts the thoughts of the band on the plane, anticipating the crash in those few seconds before they hit the ground.

The Truckers use Skynyrd as a way to articulate their journey from rejection of their Southern roots to a kind of acceptance. That journey requires examining and admitting the awful events of the South’s history, and somehow figuring out a way to feel

⁸⁵ Southern Rock Opera. “Life in the Factory.”

⁸⁶ Southern Rock Opera. “The Three Great Alabama Icons.”

proud of the better aspects of the South meanwhile. Is there a way to reconcile the dichotomy, or is it enough to admit that it's there? Hood himself suggests an answer to the question in an interview from No Depression magazine published in July of 2003. Hood seems tired of answering questions about "the duality of the Southern thing." The whole band seems to have tired of being called southern, or "Southern Rock." In a discussion of the importance about the variety of songwriting voices on the Truckers' albums, Hood says, "Honestly, without exception, Cooley's written my favorite song on every record...I think that the most important line on the whole record is the line at the end of 'Shut Up and Get On the Plane': 'Living in fear is just another way of dying before your time.' That sums up the whole record in one line. That's everything that's really important to know about that record, forgetting all that bullshit about dualities." Though I still think "the bullshit about dualities" is pretty interesting, Hood has a point.

"Shut Up and Get On the Plane" is about the events leading up to the 1977 plane crash that killed Ronnie Van Zant and Steve and Cassie Gaines, and basically brought an end to Lynyrd Skynyrd for about a decade, and maybe to the original 1970s Southern Rock movement as well. It's about "a bit of mythology" about Skynyrd that claims Cassie Gaines bought a ticket for a commercial flight to Baton Rouge after Skynyrd's previous flight trouble. Ronnie Van Zant convinced her to give it up and fly with the rest of the band because, as Mike Cooley put it, "living in fear is just another way of dying before your time." Maybe the point isn't to find a way to reconcile the pride and shame native to the South and its history. Maybe it's about figuring out what you believe, and then living without fear. The process of coming to terms with the South's legacy is

important, and it is equally important to know what to do with that knowledge once you've gained it.

In Tell About the South, Fred Hobson also notes that, in the mid-twentieth century, “the school of shame and guilt held sway,”⁸⁷ and for many of those authors, Willie Morris in particular, “his South had changed in a way that would strip a certain measure of urgency and anguish from his writing.”⁸⁸ Post-Civil Rights Movement writers found themselves living in a more tolerant and less unjust society, and thus their telling was less urgent than that of their predecessors. The writers Hobson cites are often concerned with issues of race, and the systematically unjust treatment of African-Americans by the South. Because the Truckers focus on issues of class rather than race, their viewpoint becomes correspondingly more urgent. The South’s racial problems might have been lessened by the Civil Rights Movement, but its trailer parks keep on growing. Have we reached a point in the South’s history where it is possible to reframe the issue of Southern suffering, where the “benighted” South is no longer shameful for its racial attitudes but more for its treatment of its attitudes towards its working class?

The Drive-By Truckers became an embodiment of the goals of their nameless narrator and his fictional band; they’ve traveled the same road of love and hate for the South and its music. They are a band “telling stories of the forgotten South. Stories no one else was bothering to tell. Stories that own up to the terrible while telling of the beautiful.”⁸⁹ The Drive-By Truckers seek to tell these stories, to make the forgotten South known again, to examine the pain of the past and try to come to terms with it, to reconcile the terrible and the beautiful by taking another look at old myths and stereotypes. The

⁸⁷ Hobson, 300.

⁸⁸ Hobson, 306.

⁸⁹ Southern Rock Opera liner notes.

Truckers define their vision as “the duality of the Southern Thing,” and many magazine articles about the Truckers and reviews of their albums have latched on to that phrase. For the band themselves, the “duality” is a place to start thinking about what the South means, not the place to finish.

Patterson Hood claims that he thinks the most important line on Southern Rock Opera is from “Shut Up and Get on the Plane,” when Mike Cooley writes, “living in fear is just another way of dying before your time.” The liner notes that introduce “Act 2” state “maybe what’s important is what we do while we’re here.”⁹⁰ The Drive-By Truckers use their third studio album, Southern Rock Opera, to answer the question, what does the South mean for us? What has our experience of the South been? They construct an answer to the question through the lens of popular culture, particularly the music and the bands that are connected to the Truckers’ hometown of Muscle Shoals. If their perception of the South is of a “duality” of shame and pride, then what they choose to do with that knowledge is to not live in fear or shame, but rather to live with pride, brutal honesty, and strength of will. After bringing the past back to light, telling the stories no one else was telling, trying to figure out how to deal with the wounds inherited from past generations, how to redeem oneself in the face of all this history, the legacy of rock and roll seems to live in the cathartic experience of the music itself. All the hurt and pain of the plane crash, the drugs and alcohol, “the cost of these dreams,” are redeemed, in a way, by the band living as hard as they could, fearlessly; “what’s important is to stand tall, turn your three guitars up real loud, and do what you do...ROCK!”⁹¹

⁹⁰ Southern Rock Opera liner notes.

⁹¹ Southern Rock Opera liner notes.

Chapter Three: Decoration Day and The Dirty South

If Southern Rock Opera focused on the experience of growing up in the South and coming to terms with that identity, then the Drive-By Truckers' next two albums, Decoration Day and The Dirty South, concentrate on the consequences of life in the South for adults. Problems of southern masculinity dominate these two albums; several of the songs examine the ways in which economic class shapes men's sense of success and failure. Decoration Day, released in 2003, features more songs about personal relationships and fewer songs relating to popular culture about the South, but the band continues to reference other pieces of popular culture in The Dirty South, released in 2004, which provide them a means to articulate their vision of the South. The band themselves link the two albums, calling Decoration Day an album about "people who make choices" and The Dirty South an album about "people who have no choices."⁹² The albums examine the effects of those choices, or the lack of choices, on the lives of the people whose stories they chronicle.

The definition of Southern masculinity deals with some very specific issues. In his article, "Freedom, Manhood, and White Male Tradition in 1970s Southern Rock Music," Ted Ownby identifies "four of the traditional definitions of white Southern manhood...important in Southern Rock."⁹³ These four are personal independence, honor and chivalry, racism, and the "helluvafella" tradition, coined by W.J. Cash. Ownby argues that 1970s Southern Rock dealt with these four themes in varying ways. The bands glorified personal independence, often manifest as perpetual "rambling," by denying connection to family and community. They also discarded traditional notions of

⁹² Clark Collis, "Keep On Truckin." Blender 29 (2004), 102.

⁹³ Ownby, 371.

honor, particularly as it applied to women, the family, and the home. Instead of seeing women as something to protect, home and family were simply a nuisance to be left behind or degraded. The songs mostly ignored racism and African-Americans except when paying tribute to the blues as a meaningful Southern heritage. Finally, Southern Rock in the seventies either renounced or glorified violence. Renouncing violence often included references to peace and love ideals of the sixties, while glorified violence was attached to the image of the cowboy, an image originating in country music that allowed them to extol traditionally acceptable “helluvafella” violence without recalling the racial violence of the past decades. Because the Drive-By Truckers often deal directly with their predecessors’ legacy in Southern Rock and use that legacy to examine their own experiences in the South, their work also involves traditional definitions of Southern manhood.

Decoration Day and The Dirty South also show a heightened sense of the effects of economic class; many of the songs on these two albums deal with the fallout from a lack of money and/or opportunity. To return to Annalee Newitz and Matthew Wray, their article “What Is White Trash?” notes “for contemporary writers and activists...white trash becomes a potent symbolic gesture of defiance, a refusal of the shame and invisibility that come with being poor. It also becomes a way to call attention to a form of injustice that is often ignored, given popular conceptions of the United States as a meritocracy.”⁹⁴ James Cobb makes a similar observation when speaking of the significance of the Confederate flag to modern southerners: “the Rebel flag [has] become a signifier not just of racial but of class differences as well, and not simply the economic difference between white and blue collar but the emotional distance between believing

⁹⁴ Wray and Newitz. 170.

the system is there for you and believing that it is there for everybody but you.”⁹⁵

Decoration Day and The Dirty South are albums about those people.

Decoration Day: “You want to grow up to paint houses like me?”

Though not presented as part of a concept album like Southern Rock Opera, the songs of Decoration Day are loosely linked by themes that the band describes as “songs about people who make choices,” and then have to live with those choices.⁹⁶ The Truckers’ website describes the period when they made the record:

[Those were] some dark times. The band had spent several years on the road, recording four albums between tours, and often leaving loved ones back home, to deal with all kinds of financial hardships alone. The same period also saw the passing of several loved ones (some by natural causes, and some not).⁹⁷

Decoration Day is also notable for the addition of a new guitarist, singer, and songwriter, Jason Isbell, who contributed the title track and “Outfit.” Decoration Day includes several songs describing unraveling relationships that illuminate the Truckers’ perspectives on Ownby’s four aspects of Southern masculinity. Though many of the songs are not specifically about the South the way much of Southern Rock Opera or The Dirty South is, they still respond to and criticize the themes of masculinity that exist in the work of bands like Lynyrd Skynyrd. If 1970s Southern rockers tried to rebel by going beyond their fathers’ legacy of hell-raising, the Drive-By Truckers seem to have moved beyond the need to out-drink and out-fight their predecessors. Instead they seem to acknowledge the downside of that lifestyle; their songs about relationships with women often illuminate their attitudes towards personal independence and honor.

⁹⁵ Cobb, 292.

⁹⁶ Collis, 102.

⁹⁷ DBT website.

“Marry Me” describes a musician’s disillusionment with hard living and life on the road, and his willingness to settle down when his girlfriend gets pregnant: “Rock and roll means well but it can’t help telling young boys lies/a baby on the way’s a good enough reason to get you out alive/get you out without having to swallow any pride.”⁹⁸ The final verse (and the instrumental climax of the song) testifies to the narrator’s notion of honor:

I don’t want anything I done to be nobody’s fault
Even if they got more money and mouth than they got balls
That’s just how it went down, right or wrong it’s just that way
And just ‘cause I don’t run my mouth don’t mean I got nothing to say...⁹⁹

The singer admits to making mistakes in the past and refuses to let anyone else take the blame for them. Personal independence is manifest in the act of choosing, rather than in the road itself. The narrator takes on responsibilities, stating “this old town’s alright with me, there’s nowhere I’d rather be.”¹⁰⁰ Strength and honor lie in an ability to accept responsibility and a willingness to participate in a relationship and a family. The message the song seems to impart is undercut by the song’s clearly obviously fictional nature; the members of the band have yet to give up their lives on the road in order to settle down. Nevertheless, the song does suggest an alternative system of values to Southern Rock’s “rambling” lifestyle.

“Heathens” also addresses the connection between honor, personal independence, and relationships. The song describes the end of a relationship and speaks to “the tradition of the southern white man who tolerated no challenge or criticism;”¹⁰¹ “and I never hear a single word you say when you tell me not to have my fun/it’s the same old

⁹⁸ The Drive-By Truckers. *Decoration Day*. “Marry Me.”

⁹⁹ *Decoration Day*. “Marry Me.”

¹⁰⁰ *Decoration Day*. “Marry Me.”

¹⁰¹ Ownby, 377.

shit that I ain't gonna take off anyone." In contrast to "Marry Me," the narrator of "Heathens" refuses to give up his lifestyle though he too knows its cost. Like "Heathens," "(Something's Got to) Give Pretty Soon" and "Your Daddy Hates Me" describe the end of a relationship, both with a kind of mourning but also a refusal to give up an identity or a lifestyle in order to compromise.

"Sounds Better in the Song" continues a theme from Southern Rock Opera by quoting Lynyrd Skynyrd. Mike Cooley uses the line "Lord knows I can't change" from the chorus of one of their most famous songs, "Free Bird,"¹⁰² to illustrate his own perspective. Typically of the Truckers, "Sounds Better in the Song" rejects Skynyrd's view of relationships and offers a more complex outlook:

Well the drifter, he holds on to his youth like it was money in the bank
And 'Lord knows I can't change' sounds better in the song
Than it does with hell to pay
I might as well of slipped that ring on your finger from a window of a van as it
drove away
Now she's found herself, and I lost mine
And I'm just another guy who can't give her anything.¹⁰³

By linking drifting to youth, the song rejects "rambling" as a lifestyle, suggesting instead that settling down and making commitments are a part of growing up. Through the use of the quote, the verse also implies that "Free Bird" is just a fantasy, a song that sounds good but has no relationship to real life as the singer knows it. The speaker acknowledges the toll that traveling takes on relationships between men and women and admits his part in their problems. Instead of representing freedom, the road becomes another problem, and his main concern about the relationship is not what she is or is not doing for him, but what he cannot do for her. The last two lines are repeated at the end of every verse in the

¹⁰² Lynyrd Skynyrd, Greatest Hits, "Free Bird."

¹⁰³ Decoration Day, "Sounds Better in the Song."

song, emphasizing their message; the singer puts concern for her above concern for himself, rejecting the values represented by “Free Bird” and the 1970s Southern Rock bands and using their example to articulate his own beliefs.

The Drive-By Truckers’ perspective on relationships suggests a connection with country music rather than ‘70s Southern Rock; their identities also seem to be “embedded in their homes and families,” though without country music’s accompanying nostalgia. The sound of Decoration Day also echoes this connection; many of the songs, including “Heathens” and “Sounds Better in the Song,” are played with acoustic rather than electric instruments and are correspondingly softer in tone. “Heathens” features a lovely pedal steel part played by John Neff, who also guested on Pizza Deliverance and Gangstabilly, and a fiddle part by Scott Danborn. Tellingly, perhaps, the songs dealing with violence, another major aspect of Southern male identity, are often the loudest songs on the record. For example, “Careless” ends in a wash of feedback, perhaps evoking the emotional pain the lyrics describe. “Do It Yourself” recommends the cathartic experience of rock and roll as an alternative to dealing with pain through suicide, and the sound of the song itself seems determined to make the listener experience both the pain and the catharsis.

For the Truckers, violence is not an ideal. It may be “a central aspect of male life,”¹⁰⁴ but it is certainly not celebrated; on Decoration Day, violence pretty much equals death. In my first chapter, I argued that certain types of violence are considered permissible in Southern culture. According to John Shelton Reed, acceptable violence in the South often includes homicide and assault in response to personal insult or injury, while unacceptable violence is usually unprovoked violence.¹⁰⁵ Reed does not include

¹⁰⁴ Ownby, 376.

¹⁰⁵ Reed, One South, 141.

suicide among the types of violence he considers, but for the Truckers it is clearly unacceptable. “Careless” addresses the “accidental death of a good friend,” and “When the Pin Hits the Shell” and “Do It Yourself” describe, respectively, Mike Cooley and Patterson Hood’s reactions “another friend’s not-so-accidental death”¹⁰⁶ from two slightly different points of view. “Do It Yourself” is less forgiving; the narrator accuses the departed of being self-centered, lists the family members hurt by the act, and screams “living too hard just couldn’t kill you, so in the end you had to do it yourself.”¹⁰⁷ He finds release in the cathartic power of rock and roll, advising the lost friend to “turn your demons into walls of goddamned noise and sound.”¹⁰⁸ Rock and roll becomes an alternative to violence and way to work out problems, rather than choosing self-harm.

“When the Pin Hits the Shell” presents a less accusatory (though no less moving) reaction to the suicide. The song considers the departed friend’s point of view, imagining some of the reasons why he might have chosen to kill himself: “It’s enough to make a man not want to be nobody’s daddy, when all he thinks he’s got left to hand down is guilt and shame.”¹⁰⁹ For all his understanding, the narrator concludes in the chorus that because he has gone through the same experience and chosen to not to kill himself, his friend’s decision was not the right one: “I ain’t gonna crawl up on no high horse/’Cause I got thrown off of one/When I was young and I ain’t no cowboy so I ain’t going where I don’t belong/And it wouldn’t do no good to let you know that it damn near killed me too/So I ain’t gonna mourn for you, man, now you’re gone.” Significantly, the song even rejects the “cowboy” image so precious to the ‘70s Southern Rockers when the narrator

¹⁰⁶ DBT website.

¹⁰⁷ Decoration Day. “Do It Yourself.”

¹⁰⁸ Decoration Day. “Do It Yourself.”

¹⁰⁹ Decoration Day. “When the Pin Hits the Shell.”

discusses why he refuses to either pass judgment on his friend for committing suicide or to mourn his loss.

“Loaded Gun in the Closet” is the last song on the record; the specter of violence (which can be clearly seen in the title) hangs over the entire song, but in the end, the gun remains in the closet and no one gets hurt. It is also the only song the Truckers have recorded that discusses femininity rather than masculinity. It tells the story of a relationship between a working class man and his stay-at-home wife from a third-person perspective. Instead of reacting to a particular piece of pop culture, the song instead takes issue with the more general stereotype of the “little wife.” The first few lines of the song describe the “loaded gun in the closet, and another one in the dresser drawer, just in case the gun in the closet didn’t make a big enough hole.”¹¹⁰ After the first few verses depict the couple’s daily lives together, the last verse outlines an outsider’s view of the woman’s life:

Most women today would say she was a disgrace,
most men would say she wasn’t much to look at
And they all would say she’d be a lot better off
If she cared a little more about what they all think
She could have a life of her own if she had a little pride
Some silicone implants and another man on the side.¹¹¹

The end of the song brings the listener back to the guns, which her husband placed in the closet and dresser drawer. Though she knew little of the outside, her husband wanted her to have the choice to end her life, or his, if she needed a way out. Like Mike Cooley’s song “Love Like This” from Pizza Deliverance, “Loaded Gun in the Closet” sympathetically describes a life that outsiders would disparage. It respectfully presents an alternative set of values characteristic of working class Southerners. The song implies

¹¹⁰ Decoration Day. “Loaded Gun in the Closet.”

¹¹¹ Decoration Day. “Loaded Gun in the Closet.”

that the mainstream image of success is less important than a relationship characterized by respect and understanding, no matter how it looks to “most” men and women.

Finally, no discussion about Southern masculinity would be complete without mentioning relationships between fathers and sons. The band’s personal stories as well as their songs often involve fathers. Patterson Hood’s father David Hood, a bassist first at FAME Studios and then at the Muscle Shoals Sound, provides a personal connection to the local musical tradition; those recording studios produced hit songs from integrated recording sessions in the 1960s and 1970s when the rest of the state seemed ready to explode over racial relations. However, that musical tradition proved restrictive as well; much of the conflict in Southern Rock Opera stems from the Truckers and the fictional narrator choosing to identify more with punk rock than with Southern Rock as a way to rebel against stifling high school and small town life.

Lynyrd Skynyrd represents musical tradition-as-fatherhood; the Truckers struggle with Skynyrd’s legacy in much the same way they struggle with the legacy of their hometown. The band pays tribute to Skynyrd in song but criticizes the perspectives of Southern Rock with which they don’t agree. “Sounds Better in the Song” references Skynyrd’s attitude towards women, family, and life on the road by quoting “Free Bird,” and the narrator of that song rejects that legacy and reveals the emotional cost that Skynyrd’s song concealed. Other songs on Decoration Day explore the ambivalence between trying to value what your father(s) did and rebelling against those values. These songs also continue to highlight more ways in which men are often shaped by their economic circumstances, and several explore acceptable forms of violence that are a part of Southern masculinity.

The title track in particular highlights a son's ambivalent attitude towards his father's legacy. It describes a family feud much like stories of the Hatfields and McCoys in the mountains of Appalachia, but rather than depict the usual ignorant redneck stereotypes, Jason Isbell takes a closer look at the effect of this violence on one of the family's sons. The narrator responds to his dead father's legacy of violence by threatening, "I've a mind to roll a stone on his grave" but admits his father would respond by saying "keeping me down, boy, won't keep me away."¹¹² The violence between the two families would be considered justifiable in Southern culture though its origins have been forgotten by the current generation; the narrator nevertheless ends the song by rejecting his father's legacy. He finally understands that if he had been a member of the other family, he too would have tried to kill his father and his brothers. What he chooses to do with this understanding is left unsaid.

A more acceptable form of violence is explored in "Sink Hole." In the song, a father loses his farm to an unsympathetic banker who regards him as an ignorant redneck. The narrator evokes his family history to express the pain of the loss; "it was my daddy's and his daddy's before and his daddy's before and his daddy's before, five generations and an unlocked door and a loaded burglar alarm."¹¹³ Finally the farmer daydreams about killing the banker and burying him in the farm's sink hole but ultimately chooses not to do so. The farm represents family and connection to the past. The existence of both is threatened by the banker, so the farmer feels "morally justified"¹¹⁴ in his daydream. Though the song seems to accept this type of retaliatory violence, the violence is left imaginary.

¹¹² Decoration Day. "Decoration Day."

¹¹³ Decoration Day. "Sink Hole."

¹¹⁴ DBT website.

The most explicit father-son relationship is explored in “Outfit,” which Jason Isbell describes as “[focusing] on the advice I got growing up, mostly from my father.”¹¹⁵ The father in the song relates the story of his working class life in North Alabama; he married his wife after he got her pregnant, worked in an industrial park, went to a technical college, and finally came home to work for his father painting houses. The chorus contains a laundry list of warnings passed down from father to son, about getting ahead, staying to true to your roots, and honoring your family:

Don't call what you're wearing an outfit
Don't ever say your car is broke
Don't worry about losing your accent
A Southern man tells better jokes
Have fun but stay clear of the needle
Call home on your sister's birthday
Don't tell them you're bigger than Jesus
Don't give it away.¹¹⁶

The second chorus changes the line about losing your accent to “don't sing with a fake British accent and don't act like your family's a joke.” In this song, the father himself expresses ambivalence about the legacy he is passing on to his son; though he wants his son to maintain respect for his family and his background, the father still wants a better life for his son than he had. After the father finishes describing his own life, he warns his son, “don't let 'em change who you are boy, and don't try to be who you ain't, and don't let me catch you in Kendale with a bucket of wealthy man's paint.” The song values the working class experience but also acknowledges how frustrating it can be; the father wants his son to remember who he is but also to strive for more in life than a job painting the houses of wealthier men.

¹¹⁵ DBT website.

¹¹⁶ Decoration Day. “Outfit.”

“Outfit” also references pop culture in order to articulate the Truckers’ own view; “don’t tell them you’re bigger than Jesus” refers to an incident in 1967 when John Lennon was quoted as saying “we’re more popular than Jesus now.”¹¹⁷ Beatles records were subsequently burned, banned, and “damned eternally” across the U.S., especially in the South and Midwest. The backlash reached its height just as the Beatles played a show in Memphis, which may be, along with the South’s traditional association with religious conservatism, the reason the controversy is primarily associated with the South, though radio stations from New England to Nevada claimed to ban Beatles records at the time.¹¹⁸ Isbell addresses the Beatles quote from the perspective of someone who might not have burned Beatles records but certainly felt the insult of Lennon’s comment. The quote illuminates the distance between a working class Southerner’s perception of mainstream culture and its condescending views towards his own lifestyle, and the father advises his son not to give into fame or pressure and remain true to his roots even if he does (as his father hopes) outgrow them.

Though the songs on Decoration Day are less concerned with history and pop culture on a large scale, they nevertheless dig deep into a personal experience of white male Southern identity. All of these songs depict characters making hard choices about their lives and their relationships and the pain caused by those choices. Overall, they all seem to find a way to live with what they have become. Ex-husbands find a way to live with themselves by owning up to their mistakes and putting concern for their ex-wives/ex-girlfriends over concern for themselves. Rather than running from their problems, they recognize that being “on the road” in a rock band causes more problems

¹¹⁷ Bob Spitz. The Beatles (New York: Little, Brown, and Comp., 2005), 627.

¹¹⁸ Spitz, 627-631.

than it solves. Southern culture's acceptance of certain forms of violence is challenged, and other forms of violence are condemned. The album also further develops the theme of class problems and their effect on the lives of Southern men. From "to the fucking rich man all people look the same" to "don't let me catch you in Kendale with a bucket of wealthy man's paint," Decoration Day bridges the historical concerns of Southern Rock Opera and the economic concerns of their next album, The Dirty South, while including extended meditations on personal lives and romantic relationships.

The Dirty South: "Down so far even the devil won't stay"

If Decoration Day was about people making choices, The Dirty South centers on stories of people without choice who still attempt to find a way to survive.¹¹⁹ Themes of working class loss and masculinity continue in this album, but the stakes are higher. Rather than being consigned to "a bucket of wealthy man's paint" as in "Outfit," the characters in The Dirty South face jail, poverty, and death. The album paints a picture of men in crisis; desperate economic straits have eroded society to the point where men can no longer make a living without resorting to illegal activity. In Away Down South, James Cobb describes a series of contemporary Southern authors he dubs "white trash fiction," including Larry Brown, Dorothy Allison, Rick Bragg, and Harry Crews. He notes, "Although...their characters often revealed a smoldering class resentment at the treatment they received from their socioeconomic superiors, the 'white trash' writers did not flinch in their portrayals of the homicidal violence, physical, sexual, and emotional abuse and other wounds that their characters inflicted on each other."¹²⁰ Those writers too comment on popular representations of the South, and Cobb observes of Harry Crews in

¹¹⁹ Collis, 102.

¹²⁰ Cobb, 256.

particular, “A Feast of Snakes emphasized the widening chasm between the caricatured, commodified representations of regional culture currently in fashion among upwardly mobile white southerners and the grim realities of life facing those for whom upward mobility did not exist.”¹²¹

Like the work of those authors, The Dirty South stands as a declaration of the injustice of the poverty that has plagued the rural South for most of its history. Some songs reference the Great Depression, while others speak to more recent economic concerns like the elimination of jobs at TVA and NASA, institutions that meant paychecks to many residents of North Alabama. The Truckers turn again to discussing popular representations of the South as a way to articulate their own views; their discussion often mirrors Cobb’s description of Harry Crews as they deconstruct those “caricatured, commodified representations” in order to depict the lives of their working class subjects. Finally, The Dirty South is also notable for the addition of Shonna Tucker on bass guitar, another native of the Shoals area in northwest Alabama and the wife of guitarist Jason Isbell.

In “Where the Devil Don’t Stay,” a son narrates the story of his father’s life as a moonshiner in “the woods of Alabama” during the Great Depression. Making moonshine for a living is a stereotype associated with rural Southern whites, usually but not always in mountainous regions. Mike Cooley explores the class themes that making illegal whiskey represented in the 1930s; “Prohibition was the talk, but the rich folks walked to the woods where my daddy stayed.” Though the narrator’s father makes whiskey for the upper class, he remains tied to his illegal business and his gambling. He is taken to prison when his wife turns him in, sick from his own whiskey. The narrator asks his father, “tell

¹²¹ Cobb, 257.

me why the ones who have so much make the ones who don't go mad, with the same skin stretched over their white bones and the same jug in their hand."¹²² Though the lines could also refer to race, the song specifically invokes class as a dividing line between men. Because of the father's lower class status, he is not able to provide for his family in a lawful way. In the chorus, the father cries out to his son for help, which represents a change from the father-son relationships in Decoration Day. There fathers give advice and hope their sons achieve more than they did. Here the father and son are both rendered helpless by their economic situation.

In "The Day John Henry Died," Jason Isbell uses the myth of John Henry as a metaphor for working class Southerners and Americans. On the Truckers website, he relates the song's topic to his grandfather's life:

According to family legend, my grandfather could pick four hundred pounds of cotton in a single day in his prime. When he first heard that men were making money riding bulls, he hopped on the biggest one he could find and made his brother tie his feet together underneath the animal. Somehow he got loose before he got trampled. He spent years working in a rock wool plant producing the material that was phased out in favor of the cheaper, safer alternative—asbestos. He died last year of lung cancer.¹²³

In the various forms of the folk song, John Henry wins a contest laying railroad track against a steam drill, but his heart gives out after his win. In his song, Isbell outlines the class lines between John, the lower class worker, and those who control him and the steam drill with exacting detail; "when John Henry was a little bitty baby, nobody ever taught him how to read, but he knew the perfect way to hold a hammer was the way the

¹²² The Dirty South. "Where the Devil Don't Stay."

¹²³ DBT website.

railroad baron held the deed.”¹²⁴ John Henry’s loss of life (and job) becomes a metaphor for the plight of modern working class Americans.

Over the past twenty or thirty years, machines have replaced blue-collars workers in factory jobs that were often dangerous but paid a living wage. Isbell puts a new spin on the story at the end, declaring, “Say your prayers John Henry Ford, because we don’t need your work no more. You should have known the final score the day John Henry died.” The song ends with a declaration of independence from the dominance of the upper class, but never says what kind of work they’ll find to replace those they left behind. “The Day John Henry Died” also suggests that class may be a way of reaching across racial lines; though the song never states it, in the legend, John Henry was a black man. As some of their earlier songs did on Southern Rock Opera, “John Henry” refutes traditional Southern racism in favor of a class-based view of society.

Perhaps the most devastating account of the effect of economics on men and their families comes in Patterson Hood’s “Puttin’ People on the Moon.” The song takes place in northwest Alabama, the birthplace of four of the five band members. Huntsville, Alabama, is just up the river from Muscle Shoals; after World War II, a group of German rocket engineers settled in the area and founded the Redstone Arsenal Ordnance Rocket Center, which led to the creation of NASA’s George C. Marshall Space Flight Center in 1956, dedicated to matching the Russians’ attempts at space exploration during the height of the Cold War.¹²⁵ The Space Center generated enormous growth for Huntsville’s economy, but also led to “rocket envy,” which Patterson Hood defines as “a non-diagnosable psychosis affecting people in an economically depressed community, located

¹²⁴ The Dirty South, “The Day John Henry Died.”

¹²⁵ Flynt, 155-156.

just 60 or so miles from The NASA Space and Rocket Center.”¹²⁶ Hood also notes some of the detrimental effects of Huntsville’s industrial growth: “to make matters worse, our community is downstream from [the] industry, contributing (surely) to our massive cancer rate.”¹²⁷ The song describes the life of a member of that community and his downward-spiraling fortune.

The narrator of the song begins by getting his girlfriend pregnant, getting married, and getting a job at the Ford plant. He soon loses his job when the plant closes and turns to gambling and drug dealing to make a living, but his wife gets cancer and dies because they don’t have insurance to pay for the treatment. The narrator sums up his plight by stating, “I wish I was still an outlaw, was a better way of life. I could clothe and feed my family, still have time to love my pretty wife.”¹²⁸ Being an “outlaw” for these characters is still about rebelling against authority, but it is no longer a choice. Being an “outlaw” is the only way to support your family and honor your commitments, but in the end, even that does not pay off for the characters in the song.

As well as rewriting folk songs and using their hometown as a reference for rural poverty all over the South and the U.S., the Truckers return to exploring popular culture. Three of the songs on The Dirty South examine the story behind Walking Tall, a 1972 movie that inspired two sequels and a 2004 remake. The movie is loosely based on the life of Buford Pusser, a sheriff in rural Tennessee in the 1960s and 1970s. Pusser was made famous for his attempts to “clean up McNairy County, Tennessee, from all those bootleggers that was bringing crime and corruption and illegal liquor into his little dry county.” His wife was killed in an ambush meant for him, which formed the main plot of

¹²⁶ DBT website.

¹²⁷ DBT website.

¹²⁸ The Dirty South. “Puttin People on the Moon.”

the movie. Patterson Hood introduces the Truckers' three songs by announcing, "this is the other side of that story." Hood and company tell the story from the perspective of the bootleggers that Pusser fought in their continuing effort to examine rural poverty and working class attempts to make a living despite their circumstances.

The Truckers also manage to reclaim Buford Pusser as a Southerner. Alison Graham describes Walking Tall as embodying "upright American—not lawlessly Southern—vigilantism."¹²⁹ Jack Temple Kirby notes that the film "exploited the national outrage over crime, the inadequacy of the law enforcement and penal systems, and impatience with liberal Supreme Court interpretations..."¹³⁰ Both authors, in their books about media representations of the South, argue that Walking Tall represents a moment when "the South" as movie setting lost its regional aspects and simply reflected what the rest of America wanted to believe about itself. Because McNairy County is on the Tennessee-Mississippi state line, and not too far from northwest Alabama, the Truckers reclaim the story behind Walking Tall as a Southern story rather than an American one. "Boys From Alabama" is told in the voice of one of the "outlaws" as he speaks to a younger man going to jail for the first time. The older man promises protection for the younger so long as "you remember who your friends are" and threatens a very unacceptable form of violence—rape—if the man does not cooperate.

Another of the "outlaws" describes his life's work in "Cottonseed:" "stories of corruption, crime and killing yes it's true/Greed and fixed elections, guns and drugs and whores and booze." Though the narrator is no saint, the song also condemns as hypocrites the men with whom he fights; his girlfriend comments on the discrepancy between their

¹²⁹ Alison Graham, Framing the South (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 184.

¹³⁰ Jack Temple Kirby, Media-Made Dixie (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986), 150-151.

desire to lynch him and their “Christian” principles: “if they was to tie a noose they’d have to lay their Bibles down.”¹³¹ The narrator himself notes that he could never save enough souls to equal the men he killed, but it doesn’t matter because all of those men’s souls “had long been bought and paid for like that fool’s in Tennessee.”¹³² The fool, of course, is Buford Pusser. The song suggests that Pusser was actually part of the crime and corruption that he became so famous for “cleaning up.”

“The Buford Stick” concludes the trio of songs that attempt to rewrite the Buford Pusser story from his adversaries’ point of view. The narrator (“I’m just a hard working man with a family to feed”¹³³) disparages Pusser for all of his Hollywood trappings after the release of Walking Tall, claims Pusser was no different from any of the other corrupted government officials taking advantage of rural Southerners at the time, and concludes, “that son of a bitch has got to go.” All three songs explore the aura of “upright vigilantism” that Walking Tall portrayed from the perspective of the kind of men that Patterson Hood also described in “Puttin People on the Moon:” men who turn to making a living outside the law when they cannot find any other way to provide for their families. “Cottonseed” notes the “wad of hundred dollar bills” and “big ole’ Cadillac” the narrator acquires through his activities, and “The Buford Stick” explains the narrator’s motivation in the line, “I’m just a hard-working man with a family to feed and he made my daughter cry.” The Truckers again use a piece of popular culture with a hometown connection, the movie Walking Tall, to examine both the ways in which popular culture falls short of truthfully representing the lives of rural, poverty-stricken Southerners, but also to attempt

¹³¹ The Dirty South. “Cottonseed.”

¹³² The Dirty South. “Cottonseed.”

¹³³ The Dirty South. “The Buford Stick.”

to explain those lives themselves, while maintaining a degree of respect and honesty rarely found in any Hollywood version of the South.

Two of the album's songs address the legacy of several of the South's most famous musicians. Mike Cooley's song "Carl Perkins' Cadillac" depicts the artists of Sam Phillips' Sun Studios in Memphis, and Jason Isbell addresses deaths of two members of the Band in "Danko/Manuel." "Carl Perkins' Cadillac" in particular tackles the legacy of the most famous members of the Sun Studios roster in Memphis: Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, Carl Perkins, and Johnny Cash. All four came from rural, working class Southern families in Mississippi, Tennessee, and Arkansas. The song describes the shady financial workings of Sun Studios and its the effect on the artists. According to Hood's liner notes, "Sam [Phillips] had told all his acts that the first one to hit number one would get a brand new Cadillac. Everybody probably expected Elvis to get that Cadillac, but Perkins got there first. The Cadillac was then charged back to him against his royalties."¹³⁴ As unethical as those tactics might have been, the song (sort of) defends Phillips, stating "if Mr. Phillips was the only man that Jerry Lee still would call sir, then I guess Mr. Phillips did all of y'all about as good as you deserve. He did just what he said he's gonna do and the money came in sacks."¹³⁵ Though the characters may have "been done as good as they deserved," they still live their lives under economic circumstances that allow people with greater power to take advantage of them.

"Danko/Manuel" is Jason Isbell's attempt at "captur[ing] some of Levon Helm's feelings about the deaths (and lives) of Richard Manuel and Rick Danko."¹³⁶ The Band was a celebrated rock and roll group starting in the late 1960s; before they made their

¹³⁴ The Dirty South, liner notes.

¹³⁵ The Dirty South, "Carl Perkins' Cadillac."

¹³⁶ DBT website.

own albums, they were Bob Dylan's back-up group for a European tour and got their start playing with rockabilly singer Ronnie Hawkins on the club circuit in Canada. Four of the five were from Canada, while Levon Helm was the sole American and a Southerner to boot, raised in the Arkansas delta. Tragically, Richard Manuel committed suicide in 1986, and Rick Danko passed away in 1999 of a heart attack. The title of the song alludes to its topic; the deaths are not discussed specifically, but they clearly haunt the song and the narrator as he identifies with the Band. Isbell goes on to state that the harder he tried to write about the Band, "the more impossible it became. I felt like the best I could do was to explain my own attitude toward being a working and traveling musician."¹³⁷ Again popular culture and the stories that lie behind it provide the Truckers with a way to express their feelings about their own lives and their own culture.

"The Sands of Iwo Jima" combines pop culture and history by invoking the story of Patterson Hood's great-uncle, George A., who was drafted and fought in the Pacific during World War II. By comparing his story to that of the John Wayne movie, *The Sands of Iwo Jima*, Hood makes clear the lack of understanding pop culture provides when addressing this particular historical event, simply by evoking one incident in his life:

And I thought about that movie and asked if it was that way
He just shook his head and smiled at me in such a loving way
As he thought about some friends he will never see again
He said, 'I never saw John Wayne on the sands of Iwo Jima.'¹³⁸

Rather than glorifying violence, the song speaks to the devastating effect it can have on the lives of people who survived it, not to mention those who did not. The song also describes some of the ways people deal with this experience, particularly the yearly

¹³⁷ DBT website.

¹³⁸ The Dirty South. "The Sands of Iwo Jima."

reunions many war veterans attend, and the shift in values depicted in the line “he said a shiny car didn’t mean much after all the things he’d seen.”¹³⁹ The song suggests that the pop culture response to World War II and the glorification of violence that happens in Southern culture are extremely shallow ways of understanding what really happens to people when they experience that kind of violence. Again, the song undertakes a re-examination of stereotypes in order to produce a more nuanced version of the popular stories we tell ourselves about what past events mean and what effect they have on ourselves and our culture.

Mike Cooley’s song “Daddy’s Cup” describes a man’s involvement with that modern Southern invention, NASCAR. The narrator grows up under his father’s shadow; his dad “went end over end the first year he turned pro, lost part of his eyesight so he couldn’t race no more.”¹⁴⁰ The father trains his son to race in his place, and the child grows up without any choice in the matter. The song details the son’s history with racing, from early childhood to his professional career; the song probably takes place on more dirt tracks than professional NASCAR arenas, though the lyrics never specify. Even though he never had a choice in the matter, the son still vows to keep going “’til they put me in the ground or Daddy’s name on that cup” because “you gotta know when it’s all over you did the best you could have done.” Though the song does not respond to a particular piece of popular culture, it uses the popular image of auto racing to tell the story of a man trying to come to terms with the legacy his father has left him.

Decoration Day and The Dirty South juxtapose examinations of popular culture and more personal experiences of life in the South in order to come to terms with

¹³⁹ The Dirty South. “The Sands of Iwo Jima.”

¹⁴⁰ The Dirty South. “Daddy’s Cup.”

what that life is actually like. Perhaps Decoration Day can be called an album “about people who make choices” because it focuses so much on songs about personal relationships rather than stories of economic failure. For the kind of working class white Southerners about whom the Truckers sing, personal relationships may be the only place where they have the freedom of choice, without being too constrained by their economic circumstances. Thus The Dirty South, because it focuses more on how economic circumstances affect its characters’ lives, can be called an album about “people who have no choices.” The Truckers’ songs depict poor Southerners as victims of institutions outside their control, who nevertheless strive to live out their lives with some sense of dignity.

Conclusion

Over the course of their career, the Drive-By Truckers play with ideas of Southern identity, through images from popular culture, references to their hometowns in North Alabama, and more subtle discussions of race, class, masculinity, violence, and romance, sometimes mediated through popular images and sometimes not. When the Truckers talk specifically about the South, they talk about the South through those images from popular culture. When their songs recall more personal experiences, they include fewer references to popular culture. Gangstabilly and Pizza Deliverance played around with the idea of Southern culture and Southern stereotypes, mentioning Steve McQueen, Dollywood, and G.G. Allin, while Southern Rock Opera used stories about Lynyrd Skynyrd, Neil Young, FAME Studios, Wilson Pickett, Aretha Franklin, Bull Connor, George Wallace, AC/DC, Ozzy Osbourne, etc. to evoke Southern adolescence and construct a vision of their Southern identity. Decoration Day spoke to personal experiences with martial problems and the loss of friends to suicide and accident. That album quotes Lynyrd Skynyrd and the Beatles briefly, while The Dirty South's songs delve into stories about Elvis, Jerry Lee Lewis, Carl Perkins, Johnny Cash, the Band, John Henry, John Wayne in The Sands of Iwo Jima, Buford Pusser in Walking Tall, and NASCAR. I've tried to argue here that most, if not all, of the Truckers' work is shaped by the culture of the Southern United States, whether they claim it is or not. But where they are most self-consciously Southern, they are most obsessed with popular representations of the South.

George Lipsitz claims the "capacity of electronic mass communication to transcend time and space creates instability by disconnecting people from past traditions, but it also liberates people by making the past less determinate of experiences in the

present.”¹⁴¹ If he is right, then the Truckers’ early connection to non-Southern forms of popular culture, like their affinity for punk rock, and their exposure to alternative styles of performance and the ironic sensibility of the “Redneck Underground” movement in Atlanta, made the band more aware of the constructed nature of Southern identity.

Popular culture rendered Southern identity one of many identities rather than a “natural” state of being and threw into relief the constructed nature of all identities. This revelation in turn made the band more aware of how Southern identity shaped and continues to shape their lives.

They started out playing with images of Southern culture, writing half-serious, half-ironic songs on their first two albums. By the time they hit Southern Rock Opera the band discovered another way of telling their stories. The band’s albums are their attempt at constructing the epistemology of Southern identity. How do we know what it means to be Southern in this day and age? Because urbanization, industrialization, and mass communication systems have disrupted our collective notion of history and place, the Truckers (and their audience) know what they know about the South by taking popular culture and juxtaposing it with their own personal experiences.

Through their examinations of popular culture, the Truckers’ have become aware of its ability to both “disconnect” and “liberate” people from the past; they have an almost reflexive tendency to historicize their own work, especially when they are most self-consciously talking about the South. Southern Rock Opera and The Dirty South have extensive liner notes, including essays explaining the albums and commenting on some of the songs. All of their albums include printed lyrics, except for Alabama Ass Whuppin’, and its liner notes include a song-by-song commentary similar to those found

¹⁴¹ Lipsitz, Time Passages, 5.

on the band's website. The website includes lots of extra material (much of which I have referenced when describing the songs), including a song-by-song commentary written by Patterson Hood and Jason Isbell for Southern Rock Opera, Decoration Day, and The Dirty South. The reissued versions of Gangstabilly and Pizza Deliverance include new essays by Patterson Hood written in 2005 that refer to the process of making the albums as "capturing a moment in time."

From the Truckers' point of view, the process of recording music is ephemeral; but they are always aware that their audience often receives their music through the fixed form of a CD. The band plays the same songs every night; every performance is a little different, but the context of reception that mass media promotes privileges one instance over all the others: the one take of each song released on their CDs. That one instance takes on a free-floating quality that does not tie it down to one time or place; it has no sense of history. The Truckers seek to remedy this quality and take advantage of it. Patterson Hood often includes a line along with the printed lyrics noting where or when he wrote a particular song. The Truckers released a live DVD in 2005, recorded over two nights at the 40 Watt Club in Athens, Georgia. Jason Isbell wrote a few paragraphs included in the DVD's insert in which he states, "Like our records, this is an artifact from a moment in time. This DVD represents where The Drive-By Truckers were, in every sense of the word, on August 27th and 28th of 2004. We're somewhere else now. Come see us. Hell will once again be raised." Because they are so aware of the nature of popular culture and its importance in their understanding of the South and their identities, they not only seek to historicize other kinds of popular culture about the South but their own as well.

At the same time, their recognition of the ephemeral quality of popular music allows them to keep moving forward and to resist assigning any fixed meaning to their work. It is entirely possible for audience members to take what they want from their shows; it has been my observation at some of the Truckers' shows that some of the audience members might not be overly familiar with the concept of the unreliable narrator, but the idea is there for people who might want to understand the song that way. Because, as Lipsitz claims, "individual artifacts of popular culture have no fixed meanings,"¹⁴² it is possible for a member of the audience to interpret the Truckers' work however they wish. The Truckers attempt to provide their audience with supplementary materials that widen the context of reception, which are readily available for those who go looking for them, but they insist on allowing themselves to always "be somewhere else," to keep moving and keep revising their opinions and telling different stories that may or may not contradict their earlier claims.

However, it is not enough for the Truckers to construct an epistemology of Southern identity, to explain how they know what they know about the South in their songs. They also want to explain (perhaps to themselves as much as to their audiences) what to do with that knowledge once they have gained it. Perhaps what happens after epistemology is ethics; once the band knows who they are and what their world is, they have to figure out how to live in that world. Thus Patterson Hood claims that the most important line in Southern Rock Opera isn't "all that bullshit about duality," but rather Mike Cooley's assessment of why, even in light of the plane crash that took her life, Cassie Gaines' decision to give up her commercial ticket and fly with the rest of the band was still the right decision to make. because "living in fear is just another way of dying

¹⁴² Lipsitz. Time Passages. 13.

before your time.” It’s why the narrator of “Daddy’s Cup,” though he has lived his entire life in his father’s shadow, claims:

It ain’t about the money or even being number one
You gotta know when it’s all over you did the best you could have done
Knowing that it’s in you and you never let it out
Is worse than blowing any engine or any wreck you’ll ever have.¹⁴³

The Drive-By Truckers have spent their career telling stories about the South, stories they feel no one else is telling. Because of their background in Muscle Shoals, their affinity for punk rock, their residence in the alternative country scene in Atlanta and Athens, their realization of the constructed nature of Southern identity and subsequent desire to rebuild their own version, the Truckers take advantage of several aspects of the nature of popular culture. They deconstruct popular images of the South in order to rebuild them, juxtaposing them with their personal experiences and their imaginative empathy for the characters about whom they write in order to present alternative versions of Southern identity. They use popular culture’s ephemerality to resist any fixed version of that identity, allowing themselves to refuse to reconcile contradictions. Finally, they take the identity they have constructed and use it to find their way out of the “burden of the Southern image,” by turning their Southern identity into successful way to live in the world.

¹⁴³ The Dirty South, “Daddy’s Cup.”

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Vita

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