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## Southern Rock Music as a Cultural Form

Brandon P. Keith  
*University of South Florida*

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Southern Rock Music as a Cultural Form

By

Brandon P. Keith

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
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Department of American Studies  
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Major Professor: Andrew Berish, Ph.D.  
Raymond Arsenault, Ph.D.  
Daniel Belgrad, Ph.D.

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## Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my beloved Oma, who is a constant and renewing source of inspiration and encouragement.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Andrew Berish, for his assistance and patience in this endeavor, as well as committee members Dr. Raymond Arsenault and Dr. Dan Belgrad. I would also like to thank Gene Odom and Rick Hirsch for their willingness to be interviewed for this project.

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## Southern Rock Music as a Cultural Form

Brandon P. Keith

### ABSTRACT

Southern rock bands of the 1970s were a cultural formation that displayed racially and politically progressive views in the post-civil rights South through the cultural form of southern rock music. Southern rock bands, such as The Allman Brothers Band, and Lynyrd Skynyrd, responded to the political and social changes in the South brought forth by the civil rights movement by reconciling pride for southern heritage with progressive racial views through their music. The southern rock era was essentially between the years of 1969, when The Allman Brothers Band released their first album, until 1977, when a tragic airplane crash took the lives of members of Lynyrd Skynyrd, including lead singer Ronnie Van Zant.

Southern rock music was both a reflection of, and a response to, the changing way of life for southerners as a result of the civil rights movement. The political and cultural shift that occurred because of the civil rights movement forced many in the South to reexamine traditions and regional identities. Although many southerners had a strong sense of regional pride, the civil rights movement exposed many of the unfavorable characteristics of the South, and forced southerners to reexamine what it meant to be a “southerner.” As those in the South reexamined their southern identities, southern rock

bands emerged and offered a way to embrace southern pride, while rejecting traditional racist views, through the cultural form of music.

As a cultural formation, southern rock bands not only demonstrated progressive racial views, they also demonstrated progressive political views through the lyrics and subjects of their songs, as well as by actively participating in the 1976 presidential campaign of Jimmy Carter. The cultural form of southern rock music is political in that many songs address social issues like racial injustice, poverty, gun control, domestic violence, and drug and alcohol abuse. These inclinations towards liberal politics went against the political trend being set by many white southerners who increasingly supported the more conservative Republican Party in the post-civil rights South.

## Introduction

Southern rock bands of the 1970s were a cultural formation that displayed racially and politically progressive views in the post-civil rights South through the cultural form of southern rock music. Southern rock bands, such as The Allman Brothers Band, and Lynyrd Skynyrd, responded to the political and social changes in the South brought forth by the civil rights movement by reconciling pride for southern heritage with progressive racial views through their music.

Southern rock, then, is a paradox between two modes of southern identity. On the one hand, southern rock musicians openly expressed pride in their southern heritage and southern identity through their music. But on the other hand, southern rock musicians demonstrated racially tolerant and politically liberal views that were in opposition to what may be considered traditional conservative southern views, which included racial intolerance and prejudice. The tension created from this paradox is evident in the music, as well as the politics, of southern rock.

Southern rock music was both a reflection of, and a response to, the changing way of life for southerners as a result of the civil rights movement. The political and cultural shift that occurred because of the civil rights movement forced many in the South to reexamine traditions and regional identities. Although many southerners had a strong sense of regional pride, the civil rights movement exposed many of the unfavorable characteristics of the South, and forced southerners to reexamine what it meant to be a



“southerner.” As those in the South reexamined their southern identities, southern rock bands emerged and offered a way to embrace southern pride, while rejecting traditional racist views, through the cultural form of music.

Unlike other styles of popular music like blues or jazz, southern rock has not endured a large amount of scholarly review. It has only been in recent years that scholars have taken a fresh look at southern rock music in order to explore its historical significances and contributions. Some scholars, like J. Michael Butler, have explored the religious aspects of southern rock, while other scholars, like Thad A. Burkhart, Ted Ownby, and Jason Eastman, have analyzed the white male tradition and identity of southern rock. Still, other scholars like C. Kirk Hutson, have looked at southern rock in the larger picture of the evolution of popular music. Les Black touches on the issue of race in southern rock music in his larger work that deals with “black” music and how it has evolved in the “racist” world of white culture. Little research has been completed with respect to the political and racial aspects of southern rock, which is what I aim to address in this thesis.

The southern white male identity, however, has been of interest to scholars and writers throughout the twentieth century. When considering the image of the southern man, it is important to keep in mind W.J.Cash, a writer and southern ethnographer in the early twentieth century. In his 1941 book, *The Mind of the South*, he discusses varied characteristics of the southern male, and describes a stereotype that he dubs a “helluva

fella.” Cash’s “helluva fella” was largely removed from the modernity of the early twentieth century, and was independent, hard working, hard drinking, simple, but ready to fight at all times.

More recently, contemporary scholars have examined the southern male identity. Ted Ownby builds on Cash’s description by adding other characteristics that he says apply to the image of a southern man in the southern rock genre. Ownby argues that the characteristics all pertain to the differences between southern white males and women and blacks.

First, he argues that southern white males strive to be independent and not rely on others because to do so would put them in the position of slaves, women, or men with no character. Second, southern white males live with honor and have a desire to prove themselves within their communities, and are extremely sensitive to challenges. The concept of chivalry is important in this respect because southern white males see it as their duty to protect women. Third, Ownby asserts that an inherent characteristic in the southern male of the southern rock genre is racism. He argues that white men have long shown a desire to have power and control over black men, and black women. Finally, Ownby sees the concept of Cash’s helluva fella relevant to the southern white male in southern rock, specifically the idea that violence is often necessary.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ted Ownby, “Freedom, Manhood, and the Male Tradition in 1970s Southern Rock Music” in *Haunted Bodies: Gender and Southern Texts*, ed. Ann Goodwyn Jones and Susan V. Donaldson (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1997), 370-371.

Although I agree that the image of the southern man had traditionally included many of these characteristics, I reject Ownby's assertion that racism applies to the image of the southern male in southern rock. In fact, in this thesis, I will argue that the southern rock movement was a cultural formation that sought to bridge the racial gap and redefine the southern male identity to include racial and politically progressive qualities. Having lived and grown up in the South during the Civil Rights era, southern rock musicians played an important role in confronting and reconciling these very personal and bitter issues important to all southerners. As a cultural formation, southern rock musicians attempted to accomplish this via music.

Although Lynyrd Skynyrd and The Allman Brothers Band are perhaps the most well-known southern rock bands, they were only the originators in a genre that spawned dozens of bands that followed in their footsteps. These bands expressed southern pride by emphasizing their regional identities, demonstrated racial tolerance, and lived the lifestyle of a rowdy, rebel, rock and rollers. Bands such as The Marshall Tucker Band, The Outlaws, Charlie Daniels Band, Blackfoot, Molly Hatchet, Black Oak Arkansas, Wet Willie, and .38 Special, can all be described as southern rock bands. As much as southern rock is a paradox, it is also a musical hybrid, as exemplified in the multi-genre classification of some bands. This concept is also discussed later in the thesis.

Considered the originators of the southern rock genre, the primary bands of focus

in this thesis will be Lynyrd Skynyrd and The Allman Brothers Band, with supplemental discussion of other southern rock bands when relevant.

This thesis combines three personal interests: politics, history, and music. Based on interviews with southern rock musicians, scholarly critique of existing literature on the subject, biographical information, and analysis of the music, this thesis explores the relationships between race, politics, and southern rock. Southern rock music is inherently political in that it confronts social and racial issues. In a more literal context, southern rock is political in that The Allman Brothers Band, Lynyrd Skynyrd, and Marshall Tucker Band campaigned on behalf of fellow southerner Jimmy Carter during the 1976 presidential election.

## Chapter One

### Genre of Southern Rock

Before an analysis of southern rock as a cultural formation can occur, it is necessary to discuss and define the “genre” of southern rock music. However, the concept of genre is itself more complex than simply a label or a category. Modern approaches to the idea of genre have shifted from classification of categories towards a fluid, flexible concept that takes into account social and historical contexts, the relationship between performer and audience, and is not defined solely by analysis of stylistic features.<sup>2</sup> Genre, therefore, becomes more than style or form; it is the product of historical and social factors, and is “dependent for its definition on context, function, and community validation and not simply on formal and technical regulations.”<sup>3</sup>

Using this approach, we can discuss the genre of southern rock music not only as a style of 1970s American rock music, but also as a product of historical and cultural intersections *and* interactions. The genre of southern rock is distinguishable by the historical era in which it rose to prominence— the post civil-rights era of the 1960s and 1970s. This was a time of great strife in the South, and resulted in the creation of the

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<sup>2</sup> Jim Samson, “Genre.” In *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*  
<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/40599> (accessed January 19, 2009);  
Charles Hamm, “Genre, Performance, and Ideology in the Early Songs of Irving Berlin” in *Popular Music*, Vol. 13. No.2. (May, 1994): 144.

<sup>3</sup> Hamm, 144.

genre of southern rock by, and largely for, southern white men as a renewing source of southern pride.

By analyzing the historical and social context in which a specific genre of music was produced, we are able to identify several important aspects about the genre— for instance, for what reason did the genre originate?; for whom and by whom was it created?; what was the purpose of the particular genre?; and, how well did it serve its purpose?

This method, when applied to the genre of southern rock music of the 1970s, provides an interesting assessment of the context, purpose, and goals of the southern rock movement. Southern rock bands attempted to redefine southern white male identity in the post-civil rights South by demonstrating racially and politically progressive ideals. To explain why and how southern rock bands did this, it is most useful to identify southern rock musicians as a cultural formation that demonstrated racially tolerant and politically liberal views through the cultural form of music. This idea is discussed in detail in chapter two.

Musical genres and labels have historically been used by the music industry as marketing tools, intended to promote specific performers to specific audiences.<sup>4</sup> This is also true of southern rock music. Although the origins of the term “southern rock” are

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Wasler, “The Rock and Roll Era.” in *The Cambridge History of American Music*, ed. David Nicholls (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 347.

unknown, it was a style of music that became inherently linked to southern culture and southern identity because of both the hybridist style of the music, as well as the use of southern imagery in southern rock.

Within the larger context of popular music, southern rock would best be described stylistically as a subgenre of American rock music, infused with the blues, rockabilly, and country forms of music that are indigenous to the South. Southern rock bands appeared on the popular music landscape in the early 1970s, shortly after the psychedelic, flower-powered era of the 1960s. But unlike many popular bands of the 1960s (Jefferson Airplane, The Grateful Dead, or any bands from the British Invasion, for example), southern rock bands returned to the roots of 'rock-and-roll' by bringing elements of black, rural, southern culture into white, suburban, mainstream American society. Southern rock continues the 'rock-and-roll' tradition brought forth by Elvis Presley, Carl Perkins, Chuck Berry, Little Richard, and others, who combined elements of rhythm and blues, rockabilly, and country music to create a musical style unique to the South.

Record companies marketed southern rock bands with "a self-conscious southernness" not yet seen in American music.<sup>5</sup> Through songs like "Sweet Home Alabama" (*Lynyrd Skynyrd*), "Statesboro Blues" (*The Allman Brothers Band*), "The South's Gonna Do It, Again" (*Charlie Daniels Band*), "Dixie Rock" (*Wet Willie*), and

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<sup>5</sup> Bill C. Malone and David Stricklin, *Southern Music/American Music* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2003), 113.

“Carolina Dreams” (*Marshall Tucker Band*), southern rock bands proudly sang about, and identified with, southern places.

Bands also used imagery to display southern pride, the most obvious example being the use of the Confederate flag, which is discussed later in this thesis. Furthermore, bands considered a part of the southern rock genre were signed to either Capricorn Records, or MCA’s Sounds of the South. These record companies were based in the South, and actively sought bands which could be marketed as southern rock.

Additionally, southern rock bands shared similar musical styles and influences. For instance, Ronnie Van Zant, and Duane and Gregg Allman among others, have praised blues musicians like Muddy Waters and BB King, and have openly acknowledged the influence of the blues on southern rock, as well as country musical influences, like Merle Haggard.

As the first southern rock band, The Allman Brothers Band has been credited by music journalist Chet Flippo for “returning a sense of worth to the South.”<sup>6</sup> In the words of Rick Hirsch, guitarist for the band Wet Willie, “southern rock was defined by Duane Allman and the Allman Brothers Band. Everyone who followed was pretty much emulating or at the very least inspired by the Allmans...The Allman's template became formulaic for bands coming up around the South eventually. It did morph into country

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<sup>6</sup> Malone, 114.



rock and a lot of what you hear out of Nashville now is certainly derivative of that formula.”<sup>7</sup>

Structurally, southern rock bands followed the instrumental format of The Allman Brothers Band, usually consisting of two or three guitarists, two drummers, a bassist, and a keyboardist. This format was in large part due to Duane Allman’s fascination with the way James Brown utilized two drummers in order to achieve a stronger rhythm section, and Allman sought to emulate this in The Allman Brothers Band.<sup>8</sup> Stylistically, southern rock music is centered on a strong rhythm section, usually featuring a guitar (or several) and a piano/organ, with up-tempo hooks, and harmonic instrumentation. Originating from The Allman Brothers Band, the southern rock sound is most notable for dueling harmonic multi-instrument solos, as demonstrated in songs like “Ramblin’ Man,” and “Jessica,” but also used by other bands such as Wet Willie and Lynyrd Skynyrd.

Some in the southern rock community were not particularly fond of the term “southern rock” because of the ‘redneck’ connotations associated with it.<sup>9</sup> Some southern rock musicians shunned the label, arguing, as Ronnie Van Zant did, that they were a rock band that just happened to be from the South.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Rick Hirsch, email message to the author, March 11, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> Scott Freeman, *Midnight Riders: The Story of the Allman Brothers Band* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1995), 37.

<sup>9</sup> Marley Brant, *Southern Rockers: The Roots and Legacy of Southern Rock* (New York: Billboard Books, 1999), 22-23.

<sup>10</sup> Gene Odom, *Lynyrd Skynyrd- Remembering the Free Birds of Southern Rock* (New York: Broadway Books, 2002), 106.

Interestingly, the southern rock brand originated with the establishment of Phil Walden's Capricorn Records in Macon, Georgia. Founded in 1969, Capricorn Records was an Atlantic Records subsidiary that focused on producing southern musical talent, much like Motown in Detroit, or Stax Records in Memphis. Walden was frustrated by the failure of the South to hold onto its rock musicians, and established Capricorn Records in Macon, as a means to make use of the rich musical traditions of the South, as well as to keep many musicians based in the South.<sup>11</sup> Capricorn Records was the first company to capitalize on what would be known as southern rock by actively seeking out southern bands, recording them in the South, and marketing the southern image of the bands.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Malone, 112.

<sup>12</sup> Brant, 47-59.

## Chapter Two

### Southern Rock Bands as a Cultural Formation

In *The Sociology of Culture*, social theorist Raymond Williams discusses the concept of cultural formations. Williams uses the term to describe groups of artists that share a common style and background that work together towards common artistic or political goals.<sup>13</sup> Williams identifies the artistic product of these formations as cultural forms.

Williams writes “formations of the more modern kinds may be seen to occur, typically, at points of transition and intersection within a complex social history, but the individuals who at once compose the formations and are composed by them have a further complex range of diverse positions, interests, and influences, some of which are resolved (if at only times temporarily) by the formations, others of which remain as internal differences, as tensions, and often as the grounds for subsequent divergences, breakaways, breakups, and further attempted formations.”<sup>14</sup>

This description is applicable to the cultural formation of southern rock bands, or what has been referred to as the southern rock movement. Southern rock bands were a cultural formation that demonstrated racially and politically progressive views via the

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<sup>13</sup> Dan Belgrad, “Theories and Methods: Interpretative Strategies in Literary and Cultural Studies” (working paper, Department of American Studies, University of South Florida, Tampa. 2008), 4.

<sup>14</sup> Raymond Williams, *The Sociology of Culture* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 85-86.

cultural form of southern rock music. The southern rock era occurred at a point of transition and intersection within the complex social history of the South, that is, the post civil rights era of the late 1960's/ early 1970's. In order to explicate the idea of southern rock being a cultural formation, it is important to understand the political history of the South, as well as the dilemma of the southern white male in the post-civil rights South.

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the battle for civil rights was largely waged in the South and exposed many of the unfavorable and unfortunate characteristics of the traditional South— fervent racism, intolerance, resistance to change, and contempt for the federal government. Southerners born in the 1940's and 1950's grew up in the midst of the Civil Rights battle, and this included those who would go on to establish the genre of southern rock.

In the early twentieth century, racism and discrimination were accepted aspects of life in the South. But after World War II, the struggle for civil rights accelerated, and led to the Supreme Court's landmark 1954 decision, *Brown v. Board of Education*, which desegregated public schools. The civil rights movement, led by groups like the NAACP, the Congress of Racial Equality, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, rapidly gained momentum, while trying to advance a non-violent agenda to secure protection of civil rights for blacks, and end discrimination in the Jim Crow South. These groups advocated on behalf of civil rights by staging protests and demonstrations throughout the South. Although many of the

protests were intended to be peaceful demonstrations, protesters were met with violence from many whites who opposed the cause.

After the assassination of President Kennedy, President Johnson signed into law the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which has been described as “the most sweeping affirmation of civil rights ever made by a U.S Congress”.<sup>15</sup> The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was a landmark piece of legislation that essentially outlawed segregation in public facilities. Over the next several years, more civil rights legislation was passed, including the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the Civil Rights Act of 1968.

As the sixties grew into the seventies, racial issues migrated from the South to the North, while many southerners adjusted to the implementation of the Civil Rights Acts. Civil rights issues, such as busing as a means to desegregate public schools, became a part of the national debate, as other states in the Union adapted to the new civil rights laws.<sup>16</sup> The significant achievements with respect to civil rights legislation forever changed the social fabric of the South.

These events had an important role in the formation of southern rock. The tremendous political and cultural shift that occurred because of the civil rights movement forced many in the South to reexamine their traditions and regional identities. Although those in the South had a strong sense of regional pride, the civil rights movement exposed

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<sup>15</sup> Dewey Grantham, *The South in Modern America- A Region at Odds* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), 238.

<sup>16</sup> Jason Sokol, *There Goes my Everything: White Southerners in the Age of Civil Rights, 1945-1975* (New York: Vintage Press, 2007), 237.

many of the unfavorable characteristics of the South, forcing southerners to reexamine what it meant to be a “southerner.” As those in the South reexamined their southern identities, southern rock bands emerged and offered a way to embrace southern pride, while rejecting traditional racist views.

Living in poor, interracial neighborhoods, as many of them did, southern rock musicians largely grew up around the bitter and entrenched racism that was so prevalent in the South.<sup>17</sup> However, because of this, as youngsters, many southern rock musicians were exposed to various elements of black culture, including rhythm and blues music.

Perhaps the empathy towards blacks is also in part because Southern rock musicians have felt the cold chill of prejudice and discrimination themselves, though certainly nothing comparable to that experienced by blacks. As teenagers and young adults, the members of Lynyrd Skynyrd and The Allman Brothers Band were perceived as hippies and encountered intolerance in the conservative South because of their long hair, even to the extent of being assaulted and harassed by other southern whites.<sup>18</sup>

Similarly, Rick Hirsch from Wet Willie is Jewish and has experienced discrimination as a result. “(As a Jew, I felt) the direct effect of bias and prejudice on more than one occasion. It only served to increase my awareness and to make me

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<sup>17</sup> (For information on southern rock musicians growing up poor and/or in interracial neighborhoods, see Ballinger, *Lynyrd Skynyrd*, 2-6; Odom, 113; Freeman, 4-7.)

<sup>18</sup> Odom, 40; Freeman, 96.

stronger in the end, and in fact enabled me to act on my great interest in the music that had been and was being created by black musicians,” said Hirsch.<sup>19</sup>

The image and reputation of the South, and of course, southern white males, had been scarred and diminished because of the South’s resistance to civil rights. According to historian Ted Ownby, whites of the southern rock genre had grown up hearing a great deal of criticism about the South, since many whites had not endured the civil rights movement with much dignity.<sup>20</sup> Arguably, much of this was deserved, although southerners will insist they were resisting government intrusion on the southern way of life, and not resisting Civil Rights, per se.

In conclusion, the post-civil rights era was a time of change in the United States, but especially in the South, and southern white males found themselves in a chaotic period as they searched for personal and regional identities.<sup>21</sup> In response to the changing times, a new generation of southern white males, who had grown up in interracial neighborhoods, and whose musical style was heavily influenced by blues music, appeared on the national scene as the southern rock movement, and offered a way for southern white men to be racially progressive and still maintain pride for southern heritage through the cultural form of music.

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<sup>19</sup> Rick Hirsch, email message to the author, March 11, 2009.

<sup>20</sup> Ownby, 370.

<sup>21</sup> J. Michael Butler, “‘Luther King was a Good Ole’ Boy’: The Southern Rock Movement and White Male Identity in the Post-Civil Rights South,” *Popular Music and Society* (Summer 2003): 43.

This idea may seem contradictory, especially when considering the paradox of being racially progressive with the use of Confederate imagery, both of which are characteristics of southern rock music. However, as discussed in the following chapter, southern rock bands, as a cultural formation, acknowledged the shameful history of the South and tried to move forward racially, while still having pride in that which was honorable about the South.



## Chapter Three

### Southern Rock Music as a Cultural Form

As a cultural formation, southern rock musicians demonstrated racially progressive views through the cultural form of music. This was done in several ways, the most obvious being the open acknowledgement of black musical influences in southern rock. This is demonstrated most commonly by southern rock bands recording old blues songs, what is known in the music business as “covering” a song. Although most southern rock bands covered blues songs at some point, the Allman Brothers Band had a string of recordings that introduced a new generation of southern rock fans to traditional black blues music.

On their debut self-titled album in 1969, the Allman Brothers Band included a version of Muddy Waters’ “Trouble No More,” and followed that with a version of Willie Dixon’s “Hoochie Coochie Man” on their second album, *Idelwild South*. The Allman Brothers took the unusual step of releasing their third album as a live recording called *Live at Fillmore East*. On this album, the band included four live covers of blues songs: “Statesboro Blues” by Blind Willie McTell; “Done Somebody Wrong” by Elmore James; “Stormy Monday” by T-Bone Walker; and “You Don’t Love Me” by Willie Cobbs. (In the 1990s, the compact disc release of this album included even more blues covers not previously released on the album.)

This trend would continue with subsequent albums. The release of *Eat a Peach* in 1972 included live covers of Elmore James's "One Way Out" and Waters's "Trouble No More." 1976's *Win, Lose, or Draw* album included a cover of another Muddy Waters tune called "Can't Lose What You Never Had." Later albums included live versions of blues cover songs. For example, featured on the 1988 *Duane Allman Anthology* is an early recording by The Hourglass (the band that became The Allman Brothers Band), simply titled "BB King Medley," in which Duane and Gregg Allman honored the legendary blues man by recording a seven-minute medley of "Sweet Little Angel/It's My Own Fault/How Blue Can You Get." Eventually, the Allman Brothers Band experienced a series of band breakups and personnel changes in the late 1970s and '80's, and did not record any more blues covers until 1991's *Shades of Two Worlds* which included Robert Johnson's "Come On in My Kitchen."

Other southern rock bands honored black musicians by covering their songs, although nowhere near the extent of The Allman Brothers Band. The Marshall Tucker Band, whose name was an homage to a black piano tuner who owned the rehearsal hall in which the band practiced, recorded Memphis Slim's "Everyday I Have the Blues" on their 1974 album *Where We All Belong*, a song made popular by BB King. Charlie Daniels recorded Stick McGhee's "Drinkin' Wine, Spo-Dee-O-Dee" on his 1972 album *Te John, Grease and Wolfman*. Daniels also featured BB King's "The Thrill is Gone" on the live recording of the 1976 Volunteer Jam, an annual festival concert featuring a

variety of musicians and bands. Blackfoot, the only southern rock band that was led by a Native American- Ricky Medlocke, recorded Elmore James's "Rollin' and Tumblin'" on their 1982 live album *Highway Song Live*. In 1981, Molly Hatchet recorded Little Richard's "Long Tall Sally" on the *Take No Prisoners* album. Lynyrd Skynyrd recorded a version of Robert Johnson's "Crossroads" on their 1976 live album *One More for the Road*. Although "Crossroads" was the only blues song covered by Lynyrd Skynyrd, the band referenced blues musician Son House in the song "Swamp Music" on their second album, *Second Helping*.

Wet Willie paid homage to black musical influences by covering songs like Otis Redding's "Shout Bamalama," Little Richard's "Keep A Knockin,'" Elmore James's "It Hurts Me Too," and Little Milton's "Grits ain't Groceries," which were featured on the band's second album *Wet Willie II*, and Arthur Crudup's "That All Right," which was featured on the band's third album, *Dripping Wet Live*.<sup>22</sup>

It is important to mention that southern rock bands were certainly not the first white musicians to record "black" music. From Elvis Presley's early recordings of "Big Mama" Thornton's "Hound Dog" to Pat Boone's recording of Little Richard's "Tutti Frutti," the white appropriation of "black" music has been the subject of much scholarly debate. Some scholars, like Nelson George in *The Death of Rhythm and Blues*, have suggested that white musicians essentially "steal" black music, while other scholars, like

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<sup>22</sup> Butler, 50.

Gilbert Rodman in his article *A Hero to Most?: Elvis, Myth, and the Politics of Race*, argue that white musicians, specifically Elvis Presley, transformed “the mainstream pop music scene [which was] dominated by the white-bread sounds of Perry Como and Frank Sinatra into a more integrated and diverse beast than it had ever been before,” thereby facilitating the rise and acceptance of black musicians into mainstream popular music.<sup>23</sup>

In this thesis, I am expanding Rodman’s argument to include the idea that southern rock bands continued integration of popular music by introducing black music to white audiences. White southern rock musicians were less interested in trying to reproduce black music in order to sell records to white audiences, and more interested in paying homage to these blues musicians, and in fact, introducing white audiences to these blues musicians.

Whereas Pat Boone and Elvis Presley released their versions of “black” songs at the same time the originals were released (Boone recorded “Tutti Frutti” and “Long Tall Sally” the same year that Little Richard recorded them— 1956; Presley’s version of “Hound Dog” was released in 1956, three years after “Big Mama” Thornton’s), southern rock bands recorded blues songs that they had grown up listening to, and were years, if not decades, old. The Allman Brothers Band recorded “Statesboro Blues” in 1971, over

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<sup>23</sup> Gilbert Rodman, “A Hero to Most?: Elvis, Myth, and the Politics of Race,” *Cultural Studies* (October 1994): 473.

forty years after it was written by “Blind” Willie McTell; Lynyrd Skynyrd recorded “Crossroads” in 1976, forty years after it was recorded by blues legend Robert Johnson.

Also, southern rock bands were different than Boone or Presley because they openly, and commonly, acknowledged the influence of these blues musicians on their music, and would identify the blues musicians who wrote the songs which they performed. For instance, on various live recordings including *Live at Fillmore East*, The Allman Brothers Band introduced blues songs by identifying the songwriter (e.g. “This next song is an old Muddy Waters tune”).

In the 1960s, bands from the United Kingdom, like Led Zeppelin, Rolling Stones, and Cream were also heavily influenced by American blues musicians and paid homage by covering blues songs. Southern rock bands were different, however, because they grew up in the same region as their blues influences, and witnessed firsthand the racism of the South. According to Jerry Wexler, former President of Atlantic Records, “southern rock bands were saturated in blues because they didn’t have to learn their blues by buying a Barbecue Bob record at a second-hand counter on Fleet Street (in London). They lived the life. They were the low end of America’s agrarian society, just like the blacks were. They were some poor boys. They did the same things that the blacks did. They heard the exultation, the frenzy of the black church, directly in the church. Not off the records.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Brant, 23.

As youngsters, Gregg and Duane Allman had black friends, played in interracial bands, and immersed themselves in blues music, even as they were questioned by their mother for “playing with those niggers.”<sup>25</sup> As The Allman Brothers Band, they did the same thing. Duane Allman worked as a session guitarist at Fame Studios in Muscle Shoals, Alabama, and had worked with legendary black musicians like Aretha Franklin, Wilson Pickett, John Lee Hooker, and King Curtis, among others. At Fame Studios he met Jai Johnny Johnson, a black percussionist, who would become the drummer for The Allman Brothers Band.<sup>26</sup>

With Johnson on drums, The Allman Brothers Band symbolized the southern male identity that the southern rock movement would attempt to redefine to include racially progressive ideals. In 1973, after the death of original bassist Barry Oakley, Lamar Williams was tapped to replace Oakley, making him the second African-American member of the preeminent southern rock band at the time.<sup>27</sup>

As mentioned before, southern rock bands were influenced in large part by blues music and black musicians. However, it is worth noting that there was perhaps no musical influence more instrumental to The Allman Brothers Band than Miles Davis. Davis’s eminent jazz album, *Kind of Blue*, has been credited for being a major influence on the improvisational style of The Allman Brothers Band, and Davis’s (as well as John

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<sup>25</sup> Freeman, 10.

<sup>26</sup> Brant, 42.

<sup>27</sup> Freeman, 143.

Coltrane's) influence on Duane Allman and Dickey Betts is evident in their long improvisational solos.<sup>28</sup>

According to Dickey Betts, "a lot of our guitar arrangement ideas come from the way (Miles Davis and John Coltrane) played their horns together."<sup>29</sup> Betts paid homage to Davis with the instrumental "In Memory of Elizabeth Reed," a song with a sophisticated blend of intricate melodies and furious jamming.<sup>30</sup> As a blueprint for the song, Betts used Davis's "All Blues" from his jazz masterpiece *Kind of Blue*, which, incidentally, has been identified as Duane Allman's favorite song.<sup>31</sup>

On the *Brothers and Sisters* album insert, a photo appeared in which various multi-racial friends and family members of the band sat on a back porch. Although the band was experiencing inner-turmoil because of the usual stress that accompanies a sudden rise to fame and success, the photo insert demonstrated the band's convictions of racial equality. Similarly, the band Wet Willie from Mobile, Alabama, included a photo of guitarist Ricky Hirsch holding a young, African-American boy on the back of their second album *Wet Willie II*, and a picture of Reverend Pearly Brown, a blind African-American blues guitarist on their third album, *Keep on Smilin'*.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Randy Poe, *Skydog: The Duane Allman Story* (Milwaukee: Backbeat Books, 2008), 183-191.

<sup>29</sup> Paul Wells, "The Last Rebel: Southern Rock and Nostalgic Continuities" in *Dixie Debates: Perspectives on Southern Culture*, ed. Richard King and Helen Taylor (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 122.

<sup>30</sup> Freeman, 73.

<sup>31</sup> Freeman, 63.

<sup>32</sup> Butler, 51.

The roots of Wet Willie are steeped in African-American influenced rhythm and blues, gospel, and blues music. Band founders Jimmy and Jack Hall were brothers who sang at the Baptist church they attended in Mobile, Alabama, and learned to play the harmonica by listening to bluesmen Jimmy Reed, Little Walter, and Slim Harpo.<sup>33</sup> Guitarist Rick Hirsch grew up listening to musicians such as Muddy Waters, Elmore James, BB King, and Howlin' Wolf, and acknowledges that, as a young adult, his musical style was heavily influenced by the likes of Ray Charles, Curtis Mayfield, Marvin Gaye and James Brown.<sup>34</sup> Like other southern rock bands, Wet Willie endorsed racial equality by paying homage to the black musical influences that inspired them.

Whereas The Allman Brothers Band and Lynyrd Skynyrd were influenced by blues music, Wet Willie was heavily influenced by another genre of black music— funk. Guitarist Rick Hirsch described Wet Willie as a “funk and roll” band, a fitting description of the band.

This is also evident when looking at the “black” songs Wet Willie chose to cover, and the ways in which they recorded them.

“Wet Willie was different in that we produced much rawer versions of these covers than say Elvis or Pat Boone,” according to Hirsch. “We were pretty rock and roll,

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<sup>33</sup> Brant, 81.

<sup>34</sup> Rick Hirsch, email message to author, March 11, 2009.



and if you listen to the way we did “That’s Alright, Mama” on *Drippin’ Wet*, it becomes quite apparent quickly.”<sup>35</sup>

Although Wet Willie is by all accounts a southern rock band, their music incorporates elements of funk, and rhythm and blues more than any other band in the genre. Songs like “Baby Fat,” “Keep on Smilin’,” “Airport,” “Country Side of Life,” and “Lucy Was in Trouble,” could easily be categorized with other 1970s funk songs from bands like Sly and the Family Stone or The Ohio Players. However, Wet Willie did not neglect their southern roots, and sang about the South in “Dixie Rock.” In the song,

Jimmy Hall proclaims

So gimme some nasty pickin Some blues on a black guitar  
Don’t you dig that Dixie, lady? No matter who you are  
You can hear me down in Alabama We’re playing down in Tennessee  
From Georgia to Louisiana, They’re dancing to the boogie beat  
Of that Dixie rock and that Dixie Roll  
Got a real good beat and a whole lotta soul

In the song, Hall acknowledges the influence of black music on those in the southern rock genre, or as he calls it “Dixie Rock.” By asking for “some nasty pickin’, some blues on a black guitar,” and then declaring that Dixie rock has “a real good beat and a whole lotta soul,” Hall is recognizing the contribution of black music in southern rock. But he is also recognizing that the black influence on southern rock is evident *in* the music— from the guitar notes of the minor pentatonic scale (also referred to as the blues

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<sup>35</sup> Rick Hirsch, email message to author, March 11, 2009.

scale), to the howling, raspy vocals of Gregg Allman, the influence of black music can be heard in southern rock music. This type of music, which Hall refers to as “Dixie Rock,” can be heard throughout the South, and in the typical southern rock fashion, Hall specifically identifies these southern places in the song.

In addition to covering African-American composed songs, recognizing the contribution of black music on the South in their songs, and including blacks on the front and back covers of their LPs, Wet Willie, like The Allman Brothers Band, was an interracial band —backup singer Ella Brown was black, as was drummer T.K. Lively, who joined the band in 1978.

Southern rock bands attempted to bridge the racial gap of the South by not only having interracial bands, but by touring and performing with African-American musicians. Lynyrd Skynyrd burst onto the scene in 1973 with the release of their first album, *Pronounced Leh-nerd Skin-nerd*, and soon after toured as an opening act for a variety of blues musicians, including Dr John, BB King, John Mayall, and Muddy Waters.<sup>36</sup>

The members of Lynyrd Skynyrd were childhood friends who grew up in the interracial neighborhoods of Jacksonville, Florida. They attended Robert E. Lee High School where they were harassed for their long hair by gym coach Leonard Skinner. As the band began considering a name change, someone at a concert mockingly yelled out

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<sup>36</sup> Odom, 205.

the name of Coach Skinner, and the audience reacted positively to it, hence giving the band their new name. Unlike The Allman Brothers or Wet Willie, Lynyrd Skynyrd was not a racially diverse band and did not include blues cover songs on any of their studio albums. That is not to say, however, that they were not influenced by the blues.

Blues music was a tremendous influence on the original songs of Lynyrd Skynyrd. The first song on their debut album *Pronounced*, “I Ain’t The One” is an upbeat song, centered around a funky guitar riff, and is structurally a variation on the common I-IV-V pattern in twelve-bar-blues, but also features .

The blues influence is also evident in Lynyrd Skynyrd’s second album *Second Helping*. In addition to the J.J. Cale song “Call Me the Breeze,” which follows the I-IV-V structure of other 12 bar blues, *Second Helping* features another blues song, an original composition called “The Ballad of Curtis Lowe.” In the song, which incorporates a very blues-sounding slide guitar, Van Zant tells the story of an aged black man who owned a country store, and would pay money to the ten-year-old narrator for the return of glass bottles. The essence of the song, however, is in the chorus:

Play me a song Curtis Loew, Curtis Loew  
I got your drinking money, tune up your dobro  
People said he was useless, them people are the fools  
'Cause Curtis Loew was the finest picker to ever play the blues

The chorus of the song acknowledges the hate and discrimination felt by blacks in the South. Although there was no actual Curtis Lowe, the protagonist in the song was described as “useless,” which is reminiscent of hateful descriptions of blacks by racist

whites in the South. The young narrator, as represented by Van Zant, called Lowe's detractors (presumably whites) "fools" for not recognizing the talent of "the finest picker to ever play the blues." This is an example not only of the admiration that southern rock musicians felt towards the black musicians who were important influences in southern rock, but also an example of the admiration extended towards blacks with whom southern rock musicians had personal relationships.

Van Zant seems to be making the point that those who have ill-feelings towards blacks are missing something because they don't recognize the genuine talent and goodwill in even the unlikeliest of characters. Also, he makes the point that this man, who was thought so little of by others, was an influential and inspiring figure in the young life of the musician to whom the audience is listening. In this respect, Van Zant is pointing out the paradox, or perhaps hypocrisy, in being a fan of southern rock music and being a racist.

Conversely, Van Zant himself may be reinforcing racial stereotypes with his sentimentalization of Curtis Lowe. In the song, Lowe is presented as a poor, black man, who relies on the young narrator for his "drinking money." Van Zant attempts to show how Lowe made a positive impact in the life of the young narrator, yet he portrays Lowe in an unflattering light, declaring in the song that when Lowe "lost his life, that was all he had to lose." Additionally, Van Zant claims that Lowe "lived a lifetime playing the black man's blues." By describing Lowe in this way, Van Zant may be reinforcing racial

stereotypes through his sentimentalization of a poor, old black man whose hard life amounted only to his importance to a young white child. Although it is unknown if this was Van Zant's intent, this description of Lowe demonstrates the complexities and ambiguities when dealing with southern race relations.

It is important to note, however, that Curtis Lowe was not an actual person, but a composite of several people that had influenced Ronnie Van Zant, a fact missed by other scholars examining this song.<sup>37</sup> Curtis Lowe is a composite of several influential people important to Van Zant, including, legendary blues icons Robert Johnson, and Muddy Waters, family friend Shorty Medlock, and neighborhood store owner Claude Hamner.<sup>38</sup>

The song was most heavily influenced, however, by Hamner, who owned Claude's Midway Grocery in the Jacksonville neighborhood in which Van Zant grew up. As a child, Van Zant did odd jobs around the store, from sorting bottles to sweeping the floor, and other various tasks asked of him. Hamner played guitar and taught the young Van Zant some guitar chords.

As stated by Gene Odom, "Ronnie was very much aware that many talented blues artists had never had the opportunities that he had, simply because there were black. And

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<sup>37</sup> (Scholars and writers on the subject of "The Ballad of Curtis Lowe" have mistakenly argued that Lowe was actual person; See Ownby, 383; Butler, 52-53.)

<sup>38</sup> Odom, 111; Ballinger, 84-85.

so, to honor them all, along with the men he knew, Ronnie made ‘Curtis’ an old black man with white curly hair.”<sup>39</sup>

According to scholar Michael Butler, the inclusion of the song on the album *Second Helping* “demonstrates that Skynyrd endorsed a form of racial integration and black acceptance that deviated from traditional Southern attitudes, which contributed to and reflected the perception of a changing concept of white masculinity in the 1970s South.”<sup>40</sup>

“The Ballad of Curtis Lowe” was one of several southern rock songs about African-Americans. Some southern rock bands were even more specific in their references to blacks in their music, and wrote tribute songs to an African-American they much revered — Dr Martin Luther King, Jr. Southern rock bands who composed, recorded and released tributes to the slain civil rights leader risked backlash and protests, not to mention poor record sales and poor concert attendance, from fans who may not have been as empathetic to the civil rights cause.

In “You Can’t Keep a Good Man Down,” Black Oak Arkansas, a southern rock band from, interestingly enough, Black Oak, Arkansas, praised King as a “good ol’ boy” that “gave people hope.” This song, featured on their 1977 release *10 Year Overnight*

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<sup>39</sup> Odom, 113.

<sup>40</sup> Butler, 53.

*Success*, praises King's achievements and dreams, and encourages the audience to continue to carry the torch:

Luther King was a good ol' boy, raised in poverty  
Couldn't be broke or even provoked, made rock and roll history  
Gave the people hope with a good full scope of freedom been denied  
Politicians know that freedom grows, and because of that he died.

By describing King as “a good ol' boy,” lead singer Jim “Dandy” Mangrum is imposing on King a term of endearment usually reserved for southern white men.

Mangrum is identifying King as someone who is ‘one of us’— he was a good ol' boy who was raised, like many southerners, in poverty. The lyric is significant. It demonstrates how, as a cultural formation, southern rock bands displayed progressive racial views in the post civil-rights South through music. The song was not merely an acknowledgement of an influential African-American in the life of a southern rock musician as was “The Ballad of Curtis Lowe”—it was a tribute to Martin Luther King, Jr., the man who became the face of the civil rights movement. King was not a person to whom many white southerners referred affectionately as “a good ol' boy,” and Mangrum risked alienating many white southern rock fans by openly proclaiming this about King.

Mangrum goes on to credit King for making rock and roll history. This assertion, however, is not offered with any explanation of how exactly King did this, which leaves room for listener interpretation. One possibility is that Mangrum is acknowledging the

impact of the civil rights movement on the genre of southern rock since King's influence and inspiration was felt by the southern rock musicians who had grown up in the wake of the civil rights movement. Or perhaps more generally, Mangrum may have meant that King's impact, and that of the civil rights movement, was felt throughout various genres of music and/or pop culture.

In the second verse of the song, Mangrum calls on listeners to carry on the "flame of hope" even through unbeatable odds:

I feel like singing to you this song for all the living underdogs  
The flame of hope must carry on, even against unbeatable odds

Mangrum makes it clear in the first line of this verse that he is on the side of the "living underdogs" who are presumably those fighting on behalf of civil rights. By calling on those who are "living" to continue the fight, Mangrum subtly acknowledges the progress made in the struggle for civil rights by those who are no longer living. His encouragement to keep fighting on even in the face of overwhelming challenges clearly shows his support of the civil rights movement, and thus is another example of how southern rock musicians advanced progressive racial ideologies through the cultural form of southern rock music.

The Allman Brothers Band also recorded a song about Martin Luther King, Jr. titled "God Rest His Soul." This tribute was composed early in the musical career of Gregg and Duane Allman, but was not released until 1989's *Dreams*, an Allman Brothers



Band box set compilation. Unlike Black Oak Arkansas, The Allman Brothers Band never mentions King by name. However, the reference is quite clear.

In the song, Gregg Allman sings:

A man lay dying in the streets, A thousand people fell down on their knees  
Any other day he would have been Preaching  
Reaching all the people there

But Lord knows I can't change what I saw  
I Say God Rest His Soul

The Memphis battleground was red cause blood came pouring from his head  
Women and children fallin' down crying  
For the man they loved so well

The morning sun will rise again with all the passions growing thin  
What we gonna do when war is come and we're dying  
Dying for the cause I know

Although the song's only 'call to arms' is a warning that "their (presumably those fighting on behalf of civil rights) patience is growing thin," the lyrics promise that "another day will rise again." The song's refrain admits that the narrator "can't change what I saw," but asks that "God rests his soul." The verses in the song describe the pain and horror on the day of King's assassination, while the music of the song is a slow, funky shuffle reminiscent of early Motown. Although the structure of the song is not that of a typical blues progression, the influence of black music is obvious through Gregg Allman's soulful, expressive voice that gives character to the song through his syncopated, improvisational vocal style, which, because of the minimal instrumentation of the song, is the essence of the song.

One of the great paradoxes in southern rock music is that southern rock bands play their blues influenced music, in (sometimes) interracial bands, while still using Confederate imagery to display their version of southern pride. For example, Black Oak Arkansas and Lynyrd Skynyrd both adorned their stages with Confederate flags and performed renditions of the southern anthem “Dixie” at their concerts. Furthermore, a poster for an Allman Brothers Band show at the Winterland concert in San Francisco included a picture of slaves and Confederate soldiers.<sup>41</sup>

Southern rock bands have stated that the use of Confederate imagery was meant to display their pride of the South, not an endorsement of racism. This notion, however, creates a muddled dichotomy between two modes of southern identity, one which never fully gets resolved in southern rock music, or possibly even in white southern culture. As southerners tried to move forward from the racist tendencies of the past, the tension created by trying to integrate imagery and icons from the past into contemporary southern culture conveyed a sense of ambiguity and an elusiveness to recognize past transgressions. Yet this was something that southern rock bands attempted to do. By displaying the Confederate flag, and other similar images, bands demonstrated southern pride, while simultaneously rejecting the racism, and dishonorable history, of the South.

As a cultural formation, southern rock bands displayed liberal views on race and politics. However, these displays were not always received by the audience as bands had

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<sup>41</sup> Butler, 46.

intended. Audiences misconstrued the use of the Confederate flag as an endorsement of the racial views of the Confederacy, causing Lynyrd Skynyrd to quit using the flag at its concerts, and to stop playing “Dixie” as a show opener.<sup>42</sup> According to Lynyrd Skynyrd, the idea of associating themselves with this imagery came not primarily from them, but from MCA Records as a way to market and promote the band.<sup>43</sup> Southern rock bands, however, were obviously complicit in the record companies’ strategic marketing of Confederate imagery.

The tension between these two modes of southern identity affected even the very musicians central to the southern rock movement. While some regarded the Confederate flag as a symbol of southern pride and heritage, others recognized that it was a polarizing reminder of the South’s shameful past.

“I hated the fact that they ran the Stars and Bars, the rebel flag, behind everything that Lynyrd Skynyrd did,” said Skynyrd drummer Artimus Pyle. “They don’t know that all that was MCA trying to sell a southern rock band and figured that the Confederate flag would be the way to go. People see the Confederate flag and hear the music and think that we hate black people...That’s not true.”<sup>44</sup> Others saw the use of the flag differently. According to Ronnie Van Zant, “as far as the Confederate flag is concerned, we’ve

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<sup>42</sup> Odom, 109.

<sup>43</sup> Odom, 106; Ballinger, 58.

<sup>44</sup> Ballinger, 58.

carried that with us for a long time before we did anything; it's a part of us. We're from the South, but we are not bigots."<sup>45</sup>

In conclusion, southern rock bands demonstrated racially progressive views through the cultural form of music by openly acknowledging the influence of black musicians in southern rock music. However, the use of confederate imagery by southern rock bands as a means of displaying southern pride created a paradox that is even more muddled when considering the politically progressive views of southern rock bands. As discussed in the following chapter, southern rock bands displayed progressive political views in music and in action by working on behalf of the 1976 Democratic presidential candidate.

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<sup>45</sup> Ballinger, 59.

## Chapter Four

### The Politics of Southern Rock

As a cultural formation, southern rock bands not only demonstrated progressive racial views, they also demonstrated progressive political views through the lyrics and subjects of their songs, as well as by actively participating in the 1976 presidential campaign of Jimmy Carter. The cultural form of southern rock music is political in that many songs addressed social issues like racial injustice, poverty, gun control, domestic violence, and drug and alcohol abuse. These inclinations towards liberal politics went against the political trend being set by many white southerners who increasingly supported the more conservative Republican Party in the post-civil rights South.

In order to understand why southern rock bands rebelled against the trend of white southern conservatism, it is necessary to understand the political context in which the Republican Party rose to power in the South. From the end of Reconstruction until the mid-twentieth century, Republicans were nearly powerless in the South as a result of the antipathy southern whites had developed toward the Republican Party (the party of Abraham Lincoln, the great emancipator), and its agenda of civil rights for blacks.<sup>46</sup>

An implicit agreement between southern whites and the Democratic Party ensured that southern whites would continue to support the Party so long as it avoided

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<sup>46</sup> Michael Nelson, "How the GOP Conquered the South," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (October, 2005): B14.

addressing civil rights issues. However, beginning with the Truman administration, Democrats took a more favorable approach to the issues of civil rights, which continued until the Johnson administration and the passage of the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1968, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, thereby driving traditional southern Democrats who felt “abandoned” by the national party to the reemerging Republican Party.<sup>47</sup>

This political realignment has been described as “the legacy of the Civil Rights Acts,” and resulted in southern whites flocking to the Republican Party, which actively appealed to conservative southerners dismayed by the advancements of racial integration.<sup>48</sup> Conversely, southern blacks, who had been disenfranchised throughout the Jim Crow South, exercised their newly granted freedom by actively supporting the Democratic Party. The irony is, then, that during the 1976 presidential race, white southern rock bands ardently campaigned on behalf of the Democratic governor of Georgia, Jimmy Carter.

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<sup>47</sup> Nicholas A. Valentino and David Sears, “Old Times There Are Not Forgotten: Race and Partisan Realignment in the Contemporary South,” *American Journal of Political Science* (July 2005): 673.

<sup>48</sup> Sokol, 237.

## Jimmy Carter

Jimmy Carter, a former peanut farmer, began his political career as a Georgia state senator before being elected Governor in 1970. As the state's Democratic governor, he expressed liberal views on racial equality and worked successfully to achieve environmental, tax, judicial, and welfare reform.<sup>49</sup> An unlikely candidate, he expressed an interest in running for President to his mother, to which she famously asked "president of what?"<sup>50</sup>

During his term as Governor, Carter traveled the country, speaking to nearly any group that would have him, and began organizing support for his candidacy. Because of Nixon's devious reputation and involvement in the Watergate scandal, Carter knew that the 1976 Presidential election was going to focus more on the character of the candidate than politics.<sup>51</sup> Carter was a deeply religious man and ran his campaign on the promise of restoring honesty and integrity to the White House.

At first, Carter seemed to be a long-shot candidate, but after early victories in the New Hampshire and Iowa primaries, his campaign gained momentum which led to other primary victories. In the South, Carter was victorious in the Florida primary, signifying that Carter was able to present himself as a moderate, alternative to another southerner,

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<sup>49</sup> Burton Kaufman, *The Presidency of James Earl Carter, Jr.* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1993), 8.

<sup>50</sup> Kaufman, 15.

<sup>51</sup> Numan V. Bartley *The New South 1945-1980*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), 413.

Alabama Governor George Wallace, who launched his third presidential bid in 1976.<sup>52</sup> After Carter became the Democratic nominee, he was endorsed by Wallace, who was promoted as a possible running mate.<sup>53</sup>

The strength of Carter's appeal to southern rock bands was that he was a southerner. According to Lynyrd Skynyrd's former road manager Gene Odom, it was the fact that Carter was a southerner with a reasonable chance of becoming President that initially got Lynyrd Skynyrd interested in presidential politics, even though no one in the band was registered to vote.<sup>54</sup> That is not to suggest that the band was apolitical; in fact Ronnie Van Zant had outspoken political opinions, and was described by friend and guitarist Jeff Carlisi as being "tuned into the political climate" of the 1970s.<sup>55</sup>

Although Rick Hirsch described the political leanings of his band Wet Willie as "liberal," he also claimed that the band's support of Jimmy Carter was more a display of southern unity than an outspoken endorsement of Carter's politics.

"I think, given the circumstances, it was more a case of his being a southerner," said Hirsch. "And he was very close to home. After all, Phil Walden basically funded his campaign, and Phil had some serious clout with his roster of bands, which of course we

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<sup>52</sup> Grantham, 292.

<sup>53</sup> Patrick Anderson, *Electing Jimmy Carter: The Campaign of 1976* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994), 37; Grantham, 292.

<sup>54</sup> Gene Odom (former Lynyrd Skynyrd road manager), in discussion with author, March 2009.

<sup>55</sup> Ballinger, 150.



were part of. But if Wet Willie had been from Texas or somewhere else, we likely would not have been campaigning for Carter.”<sup>56</sup>

As governor of Georgia, Carter befriended Phil Walden, and members of The Allman Brothers Band. The governor was a fan of the southern rock sound coming from Macon, and genuinely enjoyed the music of The Allman Brothers Band.<sup>57</sup> Walden invited Carter to watch a live recording session with Dickey Betts at Capricorn Studios. As governor, Carter hosted and entertained Walden and members of the band at the Governor’s mansion.

When Carter announced his candidacy for President, Phil Walden arranged to have The Allman Brothers Band, The Marshall Tucker Band, and The Charlie Daniels Band perform at fundraisers which helped raise nearly \$600,000 for the campaign.<sup>58</sup> These fundraisers are credited with helping Carter in the early presidential preference primaries, and established Carter a viable Presidential candidate.<sup>59</sup>

Other southern rock bands supported Carter as well. The “Sunshine Jam,” a fundraiser for Carter’s campaign, took place at the Gator Bowl in Jacksonville, and featured southern rock bands Lynyrd Skynyrd, The Outlaws, .38 Special, Charlie Daniels

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<sup>56</sup> Rick Hirsch, email message to author, March 11, 2009

<sup>57</sup> Brant, 165.

<sup>58</sup> Freeman, 210-211.

<sup>59</sup> John Orman, *The Politics of Rock Music* (Chicago: Nelson Hall Inc Publishing, 1984), 19.

Band, and Marshall Tucker Band.<sup>60</sup> Southern rock bands may not have necessarily agreed with all of Carter's political views, but for them, he was a southerner. Ronnie Van Zant acknowledged that southern rock bands united behind one of their own, which is why they were outspoken Carter supporters.<sup>61</sup>

For a campaign theme, Carter used the Charlie Daniels Band song, "The South's Gonna Do It, Again," in which Daniels tells the listener to "be proud you're a rebel because the South's gonna do it again."<sup>62</sup> As another example of the influence of blues music in southern rock, the song uses the I-IV-V structure of a twelve bar blues, performed in an upbeat tempo, yet accented with traditional country and western instruments; a fiddle, a steel guitar, and a Fender telecaster guitar solo.

However, keeping in tradition with other southern rock songs, "The South's Gonna Do It, Again" also references southern places:

Well, the train to Grinder's Switch is runnin' right on time  
And them Tucker Boys are cookin' down in Caroline  
People down in Florida can't be still  
When ol' Lynyrd Skynrd's pickin' down in Jacksonville  
People down in Georgia come from near and far  
To hear Richard Betts pickin' on that red guitar

"The South's Gonna Do It, Again" celebrates the music and musicians of southern rock with an ambiguous chorus that leaves room for listener interpretation. But

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<sup>60</sup> Odom, 145.

<sup>61</sup> Ballinger, 65.

<sup>62</sup> Mark Kemp, *Dixie Lullaby- A Story of Music, Race, and New Beginnings in a New South* (New York: Free Press, 2004), 130.

the question, as posed by historian Ted Ownby remains: “what is it, exactly, that the South’s going to do again? Fight again? Secede again?”<sup>63</sup> Clearly, the song’s political implication was that the South was going to rise again with Carter’s ascension to the Presidency. The song became a political anthem that celebrated the South, and allowed southerners to display a renewed sense of southern pride through support for Carter’s presidential campaign.

On October 6, 1975, Carter introduced The Allman Brothers Band at a concert in Atlanta. Concert attendees did not share The Allman Brothers’ fondness for the Democratic presidential nominee, however, and the candidate was met with boos and light applause.<sup>64</sup> After Carter won the election, Phil Walden was appointed to the President’s inaugural committee, and as a result, several southern rock bands performed at the Presidential inauguration on January 19, 1977, including The Allman Brothers Band, The Marshall Tucker Band, and The Charlie Daniels Band.<sup>65</sup> Having southern rock bands perform at the Presidential inauguration seemed appropriate since, as described by New York Times music critic Robert Palmer, “southern rock band(s) predated and perhaps helped create the climate for Jimmy Carter.”<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Ownby, 369.

<sup>64</sup> Brant, 165.

<sup>65</sup> Kemp, 135.

<sup>66</sup> Robert Palmer, “Southern Rock is Spreading Across the Country,” *New York Times*, July 24, 1977, D18.

Although southern rock bands campaigned on behalf of Carter, as well as demonstrated other liberal political tendencies, many southerners at the time did not share the same political views. Generally, the South was viewed as the most conservative region of the country, so it is ironic that southern rock bands displayed political views contrary to many other southern whites during this time.

In the election, Carter carried nearly 90 percent of the black vote in the South, and won all of the southern states except Virginia.<sup>67</sup> Carter carried these states partly because he was a southerner, but also because he was a born-again Southern Baptist and had the support of white evangelical voters.<sup>68</sup> Conversely, his opponent, President Ford had more support from non-evangelical southern whites.<sup>69</sup> Carter's victory in the general election was a proud moment for southerners who were elated by the first election of a President from the South since 1848.<sup>70</sup>

As President, Carter's major achievements dealt with foreign policy and international relations, specifically, the Camp David accords which ended the conflict between Israel and Egypt. However, at home, Carter's presidency was marred by increasing economic troubles. During his term, cost-of-living rates increased by double digits, interest rates increased to 20 percent, the value of savings diminished, and the

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<sup>67</sup> Grantham, 293.

<sup>68</sup> Nelson, Michael., B14

<sup>69</sup> Grantham, 293.

<sup>70</sup> Grantham, 293.

prices of meat, milk, and oil rose to prices never before seen.<sup>71</sup> Although many of the economic problems at this time were the result of factors that were hard for the government to control, Carter, as President was held responsible for them. By the end of his term, the President's approval rating had fallen to 33 percent.<sup>72</sup>

Regardless of low approval ratings, Carter was still looked at favorably by southern rock musicians. Charlie Daniels, who years later would become a staunch political conservative, acknowledged that Carter "was too good a man for the powers that be in Washington" and when history judges the Carter presidency, it will show that "he was the man who put decency back in the White House."<sup>73</sup>

Only ten months into the Carter Presidency, tragedy struck in the world southern rock. On October 20, 1977, a plane carrying members of Lynyrd Skynyrd crashed into a Louisiana swamp en route to a concert in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. According to the official report by the National Transportation Safety Board, "the probable cause of the accident was fuel exhaustion and total loss of power from both engines due to crew inattention to fuel supply. Contributing to the fuel exhaustion were inadequate flight planning and an engine malfunction of undetermined nature in the right engine, which

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<sup>71</sup> Bruce Schulman, *The Seventies- The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (Cambridge, MA: DeCapo Press, 2001), 131.

<sup>72</sup> James. T Patterson, *Restless Giant- The United States from Watergate to Bush v. Gore* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 110.

<sup>73</sup>Kemp, 135.

resulted in higher than normal fuel consumption.”<sup>74</sup>

Killed in the crash were guitarist Steve Gaines, backup singer Cassie Gaines, and lead singer Ronnie Van Zant, as well as the two pilots of the plane. The remaining passengers were all injured, including road manager and childhood friend of Ronnie Van Zant, Gene Odom, who was interviewed for this thesis. Interestingly, after the plane crash, it was Governor Wallace who sent personal letters of condolences to the surviving members of the band, expressing his sympathy over the loss.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Odom, 175.

<sup>75</sup> Gene Odom, (former Lynyrd Skynyrd road manager), in discussion with author, March 2009.

## George Wallace

Alabama Governor George Wallace was a political chameleon, infamous for his outspoken segregationist views. During his first campaign for Governor of Alabama in 1958, Wallace campaigned as a segregationist, though he was less strident in his views than his opponent, and was even endorsed by the NAACP. His loss in the Democratic primary that year to the outspoken segregationist John Patterson compelled Wallace to adopt a stronger anti-civil rights platform, on which he vowed “never to be out-niggered again.”<sup>76</sup> Four years later in 1962, his, staunchly segregationist views led to a victorious campaign for Alabama governor.

Throughout the 1960s, Wallace attempted to block school integration by using the Alabama National Guard to deter civil rights protesters, and publicly affirmed his belief of “segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever.” In the mid-1970s, Wallace toned down his segregationist rhetoric, and adopted a moderate approach to race relations and a renewed focus on championing the rights of the poor and downtrodden, a political move aimed at appealing to newly enfranchised blacks.<sup>77</sup> This earned him praise

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<sup>76</sup> Daniel McCabe, Paul Stekler, Steve Fayer. "George Wallace: Settin' the Woods on Fire". *The American Experience*. PBS. 2000. Complete transcript of the PBS documentary <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/wallace/filmmore/transcript/index.html>. Retrieved on 3-23-2009.

<sup>77</sup> Sokol, 250.

from many southerners, including many southern blacks who supported him in subsequent elections.<sup>78</sup>

Like Carter, Wallace was an important figure in southern politics, which was reflected in southern rock music. The most popular song on Lynyrd Skynyrd's 1974 album *Second Helping*, "Sweet Home Alabama", included a vague, and often misinterpreted, condemnation of Wallace, which is another example of southern rock bands demonstrating a propensity for racial equality.

The song was Van Zant's response to Neil Young's song "Southern Man", in which Young chastises the South for its racial strife. The song was meant to convey Ronnie Van Zant's view that, according to drummer Artimus Pyle, "southern men aren't like that anymore. We don't have bullwhips, and we ain't bullwhipping nobody. And if somebody is (bullwhipping), I will help you fight against them."<sup>79</sup>

In the second verse of the song, Ronnie Van Zant sings:

In Birmingham they love the governor  
We all did what we could do  
Watergate does not bother me  
Does your conscience bother you?

After the first line of the verse, the female back-up singers express the band's disapproval of Wallace by proclaiming "boo-boo-boo." The "boo," however, is somewhat indistinguishable on the original recording, and it sounds as if the back-up

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<sup>78</sup> Sokol, 251.

<sup>79</sup> Ballinger, 73.



singers are simply singing “ooh.” The “boos” were intended to demonstrate the band’s disapproval of George Wallace, although this reference was misunderstood by southern rock fans and critics. (Audiences also seemed to miss that Montgomery, not Birmingham, is the state capital of Alabama).

Ronnie Van Zant is on record stating that “the lyrics about the governor of Alabama were misunderstood. The general public didn’t notice the words ‘boo! boo! boo!’ after that particular line, and the media picked up only on the reference to the people loving the governor. I don’t agree with everything Wallace says, I don’t like what he says about colored people.”<sup>80</sup> Skynyrd producer Al Kooper asserts that although the line “we all did what we could do” is ambiguous, it was meant to convey that they “tried to get Wallace out of there.”<sup>81</sup>

In spite of Lynyrd Skynyrd’s attempt at distancing themselves from Wallace, writers, scholars, critics, and fans alike have misinterpreted the reference to Governor Wallace, something that members of band came to regret. In an article on southern rock in the journal *Popular Music and Society*, Michael Butler falsely asserts that “Skynyrd...went a step farther than other southern rock groups in projecting an adherence to traditional southern racial ideals in their glorification” of Wallace in “Sweet

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<sup>80</sup> Ballinger, 74-75.

<sup>81</sup> Ballinger, 74.

Home Alabama.”<sup>82</sup> Writer Bruce Schulman inaccurately claims that the song was meant to “honor” the governor, and in fact, that it was the band that “still loved the governor.”<sup>83</sup>

Historian Bill Malone described the song as “a militant hymn of praise to (the South) with at least an ambivalent defense” of the governor.<sup>84</sup> Scholar Paul Wells argues that the defense of the southern man in the song added with “an endorsement of George Wallace into the bargain only serves to support the view that southern rock expresses a mode of unquestioning traditionalism which signals separateness and resists ideological revisionism and political guilt.”<sup>85</sup> These misconceptions reflect a narrow interpretation of the song, demonstrating that the complexities of southern rock, and the tension created by attempting to interweave traditional southern identity with racially progressive views, are often missed by scholars.

In 1975, Wallace acknowledged Lynyrd Skynyrd by making each member of the band an Honorary Lieutenant Colonel in the Alabama State Militia. As pointed out by Skynyrd former road manager Gene Odom, “Wallace was a skillful politician, and in all likelihood it was his political acumen that motivated him to honor Lynyrd Skynyrd...either way, there were a lot of Lynyrd Skynyrd fans in Alabama at the time, and Wallace figured that some of them might be voters.”<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Butler, 46-47.

<sup>83</sup> Schulman, 103.

<sup>84</sup> Malone, 114.

<sup>85</sup> Wells, 122.

<sup>86</sup> Odom, 108.

The band, however, seemed to have mixed feelings about the honorary titles bestowed upon them by the governor. Ronnie Van Zant called the event a “bullshit gimmick thing,” and bassist Leon Wilkeson summed up his view on Wallace by declaring “I support Wallace about as much as your average American supported Hitler.”<sup>87</sup> However, guitarist Ed King defended Wallace for standing up for the South, and defending the rights of working class Southerners.<sup>88</sup>

The cultural formation of southern rock is complex, as mentioned earlier, as it attempts to reconcile two modes of southern identity—one of immense pride of southern heritage with one that embraces racially progressive characteristics. There is no clear-cut resolution, and the tension created because of it is reflected in the politics of southern rock. As demonstrated in “Sweet Home Alabama,” southern rock bands, vis-à-vis Lynyrd Skynyrd, reject southern racism by expressing their disapproval of Governor Wallace, yet in action and through their music, they endorsed populist politics and showed concern for the poor and impoverished.<sup>89</sup>

Regardless of the different views on race between the band members and the governor, Lynyrd Skynyrd subscribed to Wallace’s brand of populism, which also had

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<sup>87</sup> Ballinger, 74-75.

<sup>88</sup> Kemp, 155.

<sup>89</sup> Odom, 108.

strong support from blacks in Alabama.<sup>90</sup> This led a music critic in Rolling Stone magazine to describe Lynyrd Skynyrd as a band with a “populist character.”<sup>91</sup>

It is evident through lyrical analysis that Ronnie Van Zant demonstrated populist tendencies and a sincere regard for the less fortunate, regardless of race. Featured on the album “*Prounced...*,” the song “Things Going On” is a harsh indictment of politicians who, as Van Zant sees it, have misplaced priorities. In the song, Van Zant asks:

“Have you ever lived down in the ghetto? Have you ever felt the cold wind blow?  
If you don't know what I mean Won't you stand up and scream?  
'cause there's things goin' on that you don't know  
Ask them why they spend lives across the ocean ?  
Ask them why they spend millions on the moon?  
Well, until they make things right Lots of people gonna be uptight  
They better make some changes pretty soon  
They gonna ruin the air that we breathe y'all  
They gonna ruin us all bye and bye  
Telling all you beware I don't think they really care  
Think they just sit up there and just get high

In the song, Van Zant asks the listener if he or she has ever felt the cold wind blow in the ghetto. Clearly the lyrics can be interpreted as referring to the racial inequalities that continued even after the Civil Rights era had ended. The song is a call to arms for those who seek to end the injustices still continuing in the South at the time, which was an audacious move for a band trying to sell records to an audience that had recently experienced the civil rights battle in a very personal way. Van Zant’s frustration

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<sup>90</sup> Kemp, 155.

<sup>91</sup> Odom, 117.

is directed against a government that would rather wage war and send a man to the moon than feed its poor, hardly a position espoused by the conservatives of the era. By including this song in their debut album on MCA's Sounds of the South label, Lynyrd Skynyrd took an important step by demonstrating that southern rock bands embraced ideologies that confronted southern poverty and destitution, regardless of race.

In 1978, the band released "Skynyrd's First...and Last," a collection of early recordings from the Muscle Shoals recording sessions of the early seventies. This album features one song notable for its populist, socially-aware lyrics. In "Lend A Helping Hand," Van Zant sings,

"Oh, now when you think the times are great, take a look around  
'Cause babies are dying from disease, sleeping out on the ground.  
People never see the tortured eyes from a foreign land

When you see somebody who's down and out  
Lend a helping hand, Lend a helping hand, if you can  
Lend a helping hand, Do it if you can

Oh, every time you feed your face, do you bow your head?  
Hunger kills each and every day, Won't you share your bread?  
If you've ever felt the pain inside, I know you'd understand

With these lyrics, Van Zant is reminding the listener of the plight of the poor and downtrodden in society by referencing childhood disease, homelessness, and hunger. The song is underscored by the minor key tonality in which it is played, as well its off-meter beat that emphasizes the song's message of looking out for those less fortunate. In the second verse, Van Zant tells the listener that if he or she has ever felt the pain of

starvation that he or she would have a better understanding of what it would be like to go without food or shelter. Van Zant is implying in the second verse that he understands what life is like for those less fortunate, probably because of his humble upbringing. These issues make no distinction regarding race, and by singing about them, Van Zant is demonstrating the populist, progressive views of the cultural formation that is the southern rock movement.

Southern rock bands sometimes advocated liberal political positions on social issues, such as gun control. In the song “Saturday Night Special,” from the 1975 album *Nuthin’ Fancy*, Lynyrd Skynyrd takes on an issue sacred to many southerners— gun control. The song is a persuasive artistic argument against hand guns in which Van Zant sings in several gripping verses of senseless killings, followed by the suggestion that all hand guns be thrown to the bottom of the sea.

In the final verse, Van Zant sings:

Hand guns are made for killin'  
Ain't no good for nothin' else  
And if you like your whiskey  
You might even shoot yourself  
So why don't we dump 'em people  
To the bottom of the sea  
Before some fool come around here  
Wanna shoot either you or me

Then, in the chorus:

It's a Saturday night special  
Got a barrel that's blue and cold  
Ain't no good for nothin'  
But put a man six feet in a hole

Van Zant's assertion that handguns are made for nothing but killing and should be disposed of flies in the face of southern gun-rights advocates who cherish their constitutional right to bear arms. Additionally, Van Zant is on record stating that guns should be thrown away.<sup>92</sup> According to former road manager Gene Odom, Van Zant believed that the small-caliber guns known as 'Saturday night specials' could not be fired with any accuracy, which made them worthless for hunting and inadequate for self defense.<sup>93</sup> By coming out strongly in favor of gun control, Van Zant is expressing a liberal political view that strongly risked alienating, if not angering, conservative southern rock fans. But it was a view that Van Zant obviously felt strong enough about that he was willing to take that risk.

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<sup>92</sup> Ballinger, 98.

<sup>93</sup> Odom, 115.

## Conclusion

As discussed throughout this thesis, southern rock musicians of the 1970s were a cultural formation that demonstrated racially and politically progressive views through the cultural form of music by openly acknowledging the influence of black music on southern rock, performing in interracial bands, and addressing racial and social issues through song lyrics, as well as campaigning on behalf of Jimmy Carter.

However, it remains difficult to examine the extent to which southern rock bands were successful in conveying their racial and political views to their audience, as well as the extent to which these views influenced their audience. In some respects, southern rock bands failed: racism did not end in the South; Jimmy Carter was not reelected in 1980; and the South increasingly became more conservative throughout the 1980s.

In other ways, southern rock may have been successful: the music of southern rock has remained consistently popular, and songs like “Sweet Home Alabama,” or “Ramblin’ Man,” have become staples of classic-rock radio, as well as used in current television commercials, and have been remade by contemporary musicians, like Kid Rock.

In the 1970s, southern rock musicians represented a paradoxical ideal of the white male in the post-civil rights era South through the integration of pride for southern heritage with progressive racial and political views, thus creating a sense of ambiguity and ambivalence that even persists to this day. This begs the question: does southern rock



music still represent today what it did back then? I would suggest that it does not. In modern times, southern rock bands adorn themselves with Confederate flags, not distance themselves, and many contemporary southern rock audiences appear more interested in the nostalgic idea of the southern rock than in progressive racial, or political, causes. Southern rock music does not have the social significance that it did in when it originated and peaked in the 1970s.

As an unfortunate epilogue to this thesis, many original southern rock musicians have died within the last decade: Leon Wilkeson (Lynyrd Skynyrd) in 2001; Bruce Waibel (The Allman Brothers) in 2003; Danny Joe Brown (Molly Hatchet) in 2005; Duane Roland (Molly Hatchet) in 2006; Capricorn Records founder Phil Walden in 2006; Hughie Thomasson (Lynyrd Skynyrd) in 2007; and Billy Powell (Lynyrd Skynyrd) in 2009.

Southern rock music is experiencing a comeback of sorts, as demonstrated by the current popularity of Lynyrd Skynyrd and The Allman Brothers Band, among others. Many of the southern rock bands mentioned in this thesis still tour and perform throughout the world, albeit without most of the original lineups. Clearly, southern rock music still has an audience, and the bands that tour are expected to perform the fan-favorite songs from the southern rock era. Although southern rock may not be as socially relevant as it was during the 1970s, there is no doubt that the music has transcended regional and generational boundaries, and has immeasurably impacted popular culture.

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