

## Pop



## Southern Bands, Progressive and Proud

Drive-By Truckers and others defy political expectations.

By BRETT ANDERSON

On the first week of his life as an expatriate southerner, Patterson Hood of the rock band Drive-By Truckers wrote an essay denouncing the Confederate flag. It was July 2015, and the 52-year-old, who had never lived outside the states of Georgia or his native Alabama, had just moved with his wife and two children to Portland, Ore.

His new home was about as far from the South as Mr. Hood could get without leaving the Lower 48, and the plan was to stop writing so much music about the issues he had obsessed over for decades. But the massacre at the Emanuel A.M.E. Church in Charleston, S.C., that June drew Mr. Hood back into entrenched disputes over race, region and identity. When Mr. Hood and Mike Cooley, 50, the band's other principle songwriter, started work on what would become their recently released album, "American Band," their left-leaning lyrics were stocked with tales about immigration and guns, blood and burning crosses.

"It's hard to look away right now," Mr. Cooley said of the topical nature of the Truckers' new songs. "What am I going to do, not write this stuff?"

From police treatment of African-Americans to the current presidential election, the issues roiling America today have led the Truckers to drill down on the topic that has preoccupied them for 20 years — the South — while bringing a relatively unheard perspective to pop music's discourse: that of the progressive white Southerner.

And they aren't alone: A few other white Southern groups, like the country-folk duo Shovels & Rope and the soul revivalists St. Paul & the Broken Bones, have started releasing overtly political music that stands with movements like Black Lives Matter. Their work joins passionate voices from the hip-hop and R&B worlds that have been galvanizing fans on a large scale, from Beyoncé's "Lemonade" to Kendrick Lamar's "To Pimp a Butterfly." On the Drive-By Truckers' new song "What It Means," which was written in response to the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo., Mr. Hood sings, "If you say it wasn't racial when they shot him in his tracks, well I guess that means that you ain't black."

That Mr. Hood and Mr. Cooley regard their Southern legacy as baggage (as opposed to a source of unquestioned pride) has always injected political undercurrents into their take on Southern rock: country-tinged and edged with punk's temper, arena rock's bombast and the craftsmanship of Southern rhythm and blues. But now their counternarrative is aligning with cultural concerns, and "American Band" has landed at a heightened political moment.

**SOUTHERN ROCK IS** a slippery genre. Its name evokes a preposterously broad sonic terrain, but it is commonly identified with its 1970s standard-bearers like Lynyrd Skynyrd, which emphasized rock's country and blues roots in songs that generally reflected Southern working-class concerns, with ambiguous political affiliations.

But the genre took a conservative turn in the 2000s, as many of Southern rock's best-known artists became surrogates for con-



servative political interests. A New York Times article about the Southern rock artists playing the 2004 Republican National Convention in New York City was headlined "G.O.P.'s Southern Strategy? Cranking Up Lynyrd Skynyrd."

The band, or a version of it, famous for its 1973 hit "Sweet Home Alabama" and for flying the Confederate flag onstage, regularly performs in support of conservative politicians, including during the Republican National Convention in Cleveland in July.

Another conservative musician, Charlie Daniels, is a former Jimmy Carter supporter turned conservative-nationalist firebrand, expressing his disdain for the "flower child president," Barack Obama, in

an ad for the National Rifle Association.

Lyrically speaking, Mr. Hood and Mr. Cooley follow in a long tradition of liberal-leaning Southern songsmiths like Johnny Cash, Tom T. Hall and Emmylou Harris. But like those artists, the Truckers and like-minded contemporary Southern musicians, such as Brad Paisley, are still "swimming against the current," said Frye Gaillard, an Alabama songwriter, journalist and historian. Citing as an example the Dixie Chicks' 2003 criticism of President George W. Bush, and the CD-burning and widespread radio bans that followed, Mr. Gaillard said it still takes "a certain amount of bravery" for Southern musicians to speak their liberal minds.

Mainstream country's conservative fans can still operate like unofficial censors. Last year, radio stations across the country stopped playing Little Big Town's "Girl Crush" after some listeners complained that it promoted homosexuality. (The song is actually about a heterosexual romance.)

The Truckers found their voice during the period when both Southern rock and mainstream country became increasingly synonymous with white conservative values, seizing on the rich creative potential of an alternate strategy: Southern music that interrogates the South while also embracing it.

"American Band," the Truckers' 11th studio album, arrives 15 years after "Southern Rock Opera," the double-disc record that all but declared the Truckers' official muse as their white Southern identity. The Truckers recorded the new album "when we still didn't think Trump stood a chance of being a nominee," Mr. Cooley said. But as it became apparent that Donald J. Trump was on a path to winning the Republican presidential nomination, the Truckers sped up the album's production schedule to guarantee its appearance in the teeth of the election.

"We're middle-aged, Southern white guys from working-class backgrounds," Mr. Cooley said. Mr. Hood elaborated in a separate interview, suggesting it can be constructively provocative for listeners to hear "a white guy with a heavy Southern accent say 'Black Lives Matter.'"

In August, at an outdoor festival in Lexington, Ky., Mr. Cooley sat for an interview, wearing cargo shorts and flip-flops. A Black Lives Matter sign pasted to the front of a keyboard was the band's only stage decoration. He spoke about being particularly angered by the Charleston massacre.

"I found that especially chilling of all the mass shootings simply because of what a young man this shooter was, and how old school that particular act was," Mr. Cooley explained. He recalled what Dylann Roof, the accused Charleston shooter, was believed to have said — "You are raping our women and taking over our country" — to his black victims. "That's old-school, lynch-mob talk."

**OVER THE PAST YEAR**, the Drive-By Truckers have been joined by other musicians who have the same conflicted feelings about their roots.

Michael Trent and Cary Ann Hearst, the married duo who perform as Shovels & Rope, are native Southerners who live in Charleston and describe themselves as "leftist, modern Southern people." Their first response to the A.M.E. church shootings was to write a song, "BWYR," that they never intended to put on their new album, "Little Seeds." ("BWYR" stands for black, white, yellow, red — an allusion, Mr. Trent said, to the lyrics of the children's song "Jesus Loves the Little Children.") Ms. Hearst said they changed their mind after their manager discovered the song's lyrics on a computer "and reminded us that it was important for us to not be afraid to put the song on the record."

Paul Janeway, frontman for the Alabama soul group St. Paul & the Broken Bones, traces the politically conscious lyrics on his

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band's new record, "Sea of Noise," to his reading of "Just Mercy," a memoir by the Alabama-based, African-American civil rights lawyer Bryan Stevenson. The book, Mr. Janeway said, moved him to tears.

"It was almost like a religious moment," said Mr. Janeway, 33. "I was like, I have to write a record like this, from a lyrical stance. If I don't, it's not going to mean anything."

These artists are quick to point out that racism is, and always has been, a national problem, not just a Southern one, and they

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are wary that their speaking out on the subject could be construed to suggest otherwise. As Mr. Cooley put it, "The South is certainly guilty of everything it's charged with" but added that racism "was never uniquely a Southern thing."

The Dexateens, which formed in Tuscaloosa, Ala., just put out "Teenage Hallelujah," an album that opens with "Old Rebel," a song that tweaks Southerners who celebrate the Confederacy.

"People already say that Alabamans are racist," the band's frontman, Elliott McPherson, explained in an interview with punknews.org. "Why give the rest of the country more ammo to fire at us?"

Lee Bains III, the Atlanta-based leader of the rock band the Glory Fires (and a former Dexateens guitarist), considers his music to be part of a long, pan-racial Southern tradition. "I'd say it goes back to Jimmie Rodgers cutting songs with Louis Armstrong," he said, "to Hank Williams learning guitar from the African-American blues musician Rufus 'Tee-Tot' Payne." Mr. Bains and others also credit Southern hip-hop and outlaw country artists for bringing diverse voices from the South to broader attention.

Mr. Bains's raw, guitar-driven music challenges listeners to "come to terms with the wages of sin" that he's grappled with since he discovered, as a child growing up in Birmingham, that his family attended the same Methodist church as Bull Connor, the city's brutally segregationist commissioner of public safety.

**MR. HOOD AND MR. COOLEY** roughly split the Truckers' songwriting duties. Both grew up in North Alabama, in the area around Muscle Shoals, where an extraordinary number of African-American soul artists recorded significant hits in the '60s and '70s. Mr.



LARRY BUSACCA/GETTY IMAGES

Hood's father, the bassist David Hood, played on many of those sessions as part of the Muscle Shoals Rhythm Section.

"My dad was always an unabashed, proud liberal," Mr. Hood said. "He hated George Wallace." Mr. Hood recalled his father saying as much before "he would leave and go to work backing up Wilson Pickett and Aretha Franklin."

The Truckers have never shied from hot-button material. Their first album, "Gangstabilly" from 1998, includes a tribute to a friend who died of AIDS. In 2004, while on tour during the Kerry-Bush race, Mr. Hood said the band was met with jeers when it played "Putting People on the Moon," which is pointedly critical of Ronald Reagan.

"One night in Charlottesville, Va., it got so heated, I thought we were going to have a riot in front of the stage," Mr. Hood recalled. "There were frat boys shooting us birds. I think we ran off a certain part of the fan base over that."

Truckers songs are populated by Southern characters, not caricatures, and they are drawn with an empathy that has brought flattering comparisons to Bruce

Springsteen and Southern literary heroes like Flannery O'Connor and Larry Brown. Like all of the group's albums, "American Band" bristles with the love-hate tensions that animate the Truckers' relationship with the South. But Mr. Cooley and Mr. Hood's new songs, including those on the 2014 record "English Oceans," pivot more frequently from the metaphoric to specifically address flash points of the late-Obama political era.

Mr. Hood and Mr. Cooley said they never consider how their chosen subject matter will affect the Truckers' commercial prospects. In varying degrees, the Truckers helped nurture the talents of recent Grammy winners like Alabama Shakes, who Mr. Hood first saw perform at a North Alabama record store, and Jason Isbell, a songwriting member of the Truckers until he left in 2007. But it remains to be seen if those artists' success will pave a path to a larger audience for the Truckers.

Jessie Scott, program director of WMOT-FM, the new 100,000-watt Americana station out of Nashville, said she expects songs from "American Band" to become part of her rotation. Alabama Shakes, Mr. Isbell

and St. Paul & the Broken Bones already are.

The Americana format, which could be loosely described as alt-country or Southernish, "has by and large taken a left-leaning political slant," Ms. Scott said. "There are a lot of different flavors under that umbrella. It's not all 'my country, right or wrong.'"

The Truckers have never benefited significantly from radio play. Relentless touring has been their most effective means of audience development. The only aspect of the Truckers' performance in Kentucky that appeared controversial was its relative brevity, as mandated by the Moontower Music Festival: barely an hour, or roughly the length of one of the Truckers' more fiery encores.

The band ended its set with an extended cover of Prince's "Sign o' the Times," and the audience members didn't voice any obvious disapproval of the political Truckers songs that came before it. Mr. Hood suggested it wouldn't have mattered if they did.

"This is what we do," Mr. Hood said. "If you like it, great. If you don't like, go see someone else. Go see Charlie Daniels."

Above left, Charlie Daniels, holding a fiddle, with his band. Mr. Daniels is known for his conservative-nationalist political views.