

# Cosmopolitan Moonshine: The SoGoth Populism of the Drive-By Truckers, Part One

written by Jason Gubbels | April 5, 2014



## **Part One: SoGoth**

Take it from this Katherine Anne Porter / Zora Neale Hurston fan – some of the finest contemporary short fiction to come out of the American South hails from the shaggy-haired and power-chord festooned likes of Athens, Georgia-based rock outfit Drive-By Truckers. Two decades into a songwriting career informed by both country music's rural/urban divide and the cultural semi-bohemianism of indie rock's club circuit, lit majors and Tin House subscribers remain largely absent from a rowdy Trucker fan base that can rival fellow classic-rock bards The Hold Steady in the beer-chugging department. Yet while both collectives embrace a bar band exterior that belies their more eggheaded tendencies and blue-collar leftism, Truckers songwriters Patterson Hood and Mike Cooley remind me at times less of Hold Steady bellicose frontman Craig Finn and more of John Darnielle, the tirelessly productive creative center of long-running DIY project The Mountain Goats.

What unites such sonically disparate types as Hood/Cooley, Finn, and Darnielle is a commitment to forthright narrative often lacking or at least undervalued within an indie community that regularly prefers obscurantism or sound poetry over storytelling. Yet while Finn's Hold Steady panoramas consider the fragmentation of hipster/hood rat cliques amid a general search for spiritual truth, Hood/Cooley spend less time examining the periphery of mainstream culture and more time pondering the daily trudge and brief highs of the kinds of working class lives receiving little artistic attention outside of country radio. And if the ongoing Mountain Goats project draws strength from Darnielle's own peripatetic tendencies, with locales and existentialist storylines constantly shifting from West Texas and northwest Illinois to San Luis Obispo and skid row Seattle, Hood/Cooley remain stubborn regionalists, few of their narratives drifting far outside a Deep South orbit, brief jaunts into neighboring states rarely offsetting the heavy familiarity of North Alabama / Southern Tennessee / Western Georgia.

Alabama and Georgia figure heavily into the considerations of the Drive-By Truckers for good reason. Patterson Hood hails from the Shoals region of Colbert County, Alabama, the son of noted Muscle Shoals session musician David Hood, one of the mighty "Swampers" of FAME Studios notoriety. Mike "Stroker Ace" Cooley grew up in nearby Tuscumbia, and both Hood and Cooley thrashed about in a handful of local punk-informed bands (Adam's House Cat, Virgil Kane, Horsepussy) before Hood decamped eastward to Athens, Georgia. Home to the University of Georgia and a flourishing bohemian support system, Athens lays claim to any number of storied alternative musical acts, from the

camp-informed dance-frug of gay-and-proud B-52s and the jangle-dance-post-punk cult band Pylon to college rock mainstays R.E.M. and beloved guitar miniaturists Oh-OK. Hood and Cooley rarely make explicit reference to the college town particularities of their adopted city – most of their characters would seem to frequent rougher, less cosmopolitan circles. Yet the Truckers could perhaps only have emerged from a town like Athens, with its uneasy yet essential blue collar/undergraduate/post-doctorate mixture, uniquely situated within a population center neither completely urban nor rural, wedged neatly between the drift of the Piedmont plateau, the southern reaches of Appalachia, and the rolling undulations of the muggy Coastal Plain.

Given the DBT's hefty artistic output – ten official full-length albums, several concert documents, a good half-dozen singles/EPs, and a couple rarities/greatest hits collections – it seems unfair to isolate a handful of thematic interests as a stand-in for their body of work. Yet a by no means inaccurate consideration of this band's unique narrative strengths could be easily launched by focusing on two major concerns, that of a Southern regionalism flirting with the grotesque and a fiery brand of leftist populism. The former could be wedged somewhat uneasily under the oft-abused umbrella term Southern Gothic, here shortened to SoGoth as a cheeky acknowledgment of the light artistic hand often favored by Hood/Cooley as their way of steering clear of the heavy-handed regional stereotypes that muck up many a swampland / spanish moss fetishist. The latter highlights the ways Hood/Cooley address contemporary southern politics head-on, both scornful of reactionary positions and aware of the ways blue-collar and poor voters are both pandered to and disenfranchised, mindful of how the South's uniquely bloody history continues to inform 21st century voting patterns even while reminding serene Yankees that declarations of institutional racism unfairly remain "a little more convenient to play with a Southern accent". Both of these tendencies fold into the shifting specter of what Hood and Cooley have accurately described as "the duality of the Southern Thing" – as fine a six-word summation of their concerns as we're likely to identify.

"Southern Gothic" is a sloppy catch-all term that encompasses everything from the agonized wanderings of William Faulkner's Joe Christmas to the mystery of what was tossed off of the Tallahatchie Bridge in Bobbie Gentry's loping 1967 country hit "Ode To Billie Joe". At its finest, Southern Gothic acknowledges the creepy undertow of a land haunted by slavery and smothered with kudzu; at its worst, it indulges in broad stereotypes and conscious primitivism. Hood and Cooley's particular brand of SoGoth avoids the broad metaphors of Flannery O'Connor's marauding bulls ("Greenleaf," 1956) or the anomalous horrors of Cormac McCarthy's cave-dwelling necrophile (Child of God, 1973). Indeed, an early DBT album title, Pizza Deliverance, goofily mocked the macho predilections of South Carolinian James Dickey's Deliverance, that 1970 novel (and eventual film) of inbred hillbillies and violent sodomy along the Cahulawassee River.

Far more to Hood and Cooley's tastes are the regional talents of visual artist Wes Freed, whose startling artwork has graced every DBT release since 2001's Southern Rock Opera. Darkly hued, garishly annotated, bedecked with soaring owls and menacing cranes, Freed's paintings are reminiscent of fellow

Southern-based "Outsider" artists, including Howard Finster, the Chattooga County-based Georgia visionary known as much for his artistic collaborations with R.E.M. (1984's Reckoning) and Talking Heads (1985's Little Creatures) as for his sprawling folk-art sculpture environment "Paradise Gardens". Yet Wes Freed is no naive savant – inspired by both Philip Guston and R. Crumb and having earned a degree in printmaking at Richmond's VCU, Freed cycled through various Virginia-area noise bands (Mudd Helmet, Dirtball, The Shiners) before launching noted alt-comic Willard's Garage, starring recurring character Hexter The Blood Possum.

It's typical that the DBTs would disappoint those hoping for a man-child Henry Darger-like figure lurking behind their (admittedly creepy) iconic album covers. While never denying the prevalence of spooky oddities existing below the Mason-Dixon line, Hood/Cooley remain steadfastly intolerant of the merely lurid, a quality that ensures even a song addressing that most hoary of Southern cliches – incest – remains a detached lament rather than an orthodox moral panic. "The Deeper In" has been quite forthrightly summarized by Hood as a song about "the only two people currently serving time in America for consensual brother / sister incest," and its verses largely skirt incriminating details – "Your oldest brother was away at a home / And you didn't meet him 'til you was nineteen years old / Old enough to know better, old enough to know better". Hood's disengaged reportage manages to suggest that the most unreasonable participant in the entire affair might be the District Attorney, who admits from the courtroom that while "he might've forgiven," it was "Them four little babies/ You made and delivered along the way" demanding state-sanctioned imprisonment. Faulkner's Quentin Compson may obsess over sister Caddy's virginity to the point of fabricating incestuous encounters ("i was afraid to i was afraid she might and then it wouldn't do any good"); Hood wonders more about society's insistence on punishing the transgressor:

Last night you had a dream about a Lord so forgiving  
He might show compassion for a heathen he damned  
You awoke in a jail cell, alone and so lonely  
Seven years in Michigan

Which is not to say either Hood or Cooley are opposed to the tasteless joke (1999's drunken "The President's Penis Is Missing" remains their stupidest moment on record) or the gruesome urban legend, as see the monicker bestowed upon the fictional garage band starring in the loose narrative of Southern Rock Opera, Betamax Guillotine – an allusion to the legend that Ronnie Van Zant, lead singer for southern rock pioneers Lynyrd Skynyrd, was decapitated by a loose VCR as the band's chartered Convair CV-300 plummeted into Gillsburg, MS in late 1977.

Ghastly as that detail may be, Hood's recreation of the final moments of the unlucky flight (or an eerily similar flight) draws more from Wes Freed's totemic depictions than gross-out gags: "I'm scared shitless of what's coming next," he slowly keens, noting those "angels I see / in the trees are waiting for me," taking their place alongside the plastic highway flowers, road

crosses, and greasy spots on the asphalt detailed in earlier songs – “Friends in the swamp / Friends on the ground”. And sometimes Hood recounts horrific accidents with wry detachment, as in “Tornadoes,” when funnel clouds assemble “five miles north of Russellville” and the resulting twister pulls Bobbi Jo McLean’s husband Nolan out the window (“he ain’t come home again” they shrug) before sucking audience members from an auditorium where they’d gathered to hear the homecoming concert of the “Nightmare Tour”.



But acts of god don’t worry Hood and Cooley nearly so much as willful human cruelty and casual violence. Country music legend George Jones may get a single-vehicle pass even as he “hit[s] the pylons on the overpass” after flipping his Mercedes in a drunken cell-phone mishap (the aptly-titled “George Jones Talkin’ Cellphone Blues”), but most drastic actions within the DBT universe yield sober consequences. The murderous Colbert County Reverend of “Go-Go Boots” and “The Fireplace Poker” (a stock character of congregational duplicity directly in line with Bert Williams’ 1922 song “Brother Low Down” or the Rev. Harry Powell of David Grubb’s 1953 gothic thriller *The Night Of The Hunter*) “packed a big-ass church out near Rogersville” and kowtowed to his mistress, eventually leading to a fifteen-hundred dollar hitman arrangement – “his wife’s in the ground / the devil’s in his head”. When the Reverend’s son shoots his father in the head, authorities defiantly look the other way: “that bullet was deserved / better call it suicide”.

Hood would later again make glancing reference to the terrain of *The Night Of The Hunter*, hearkening back to imagery from Charles Laughton and James Agee’s 1955 film adaptation in “Drag The Lake, Charlie”: “Lester didn’t come home last night / And Wanda’s all irate”. The details may differ, but Lester’s possible watery grave –

Remember what happened last time  
When Lester went on the lake  
They never found that teenage girl  
They never found that car

– can’t help but conjure the famous imagery of Shelley Winters lifeless at the lake’s bottom, strapped into a sunken open-hatch vehicle and swaying like Ophelia (or, indeed, Anthony Perkins submerging Janet Leigh’s car beneath the swamp waters in Hitchcock’s 1960 *Psycho*).

Equally insensible is the violence permeating the title track of 2003’s *Decoration Day*, a song penned by one-time DBT member and Alabama native Jason Isbell, in which the now-hazy details of an ongoing family feud reminiscent of Hatfield/McCoy urban mythology gets morosely dissected. “I don’t know the name of that boy we tied down / and beat till he just couldn’t walk anymore,” the last of the Lawsons muses, shortly before considering whether or not to hawk some phlegm onto his own father’s grave.

And Hood holds no patience for the kind of outlaw mythos so often permeating

the fictional deeds of literary serial killers or psychopaths. Cormac McCarthy's Lester Ballard may represent social isolation on a grand and murderous scale; Hood's mournful relation of "When Walter Went Crazy" documents a single atrocity, a house fire purposefully set by a man with a "rattlesnake in his eyes/ blended whisky in his veins / and murder in his heart". Stray lines suggest an event both preordained ("Their friends could see it coming / like yellow piss on snow") and hyperreal ("When the lights came up we all went home / but never quite the same").

The fact that the blaze swallowed whole a woman who hadn't crawled off of her couch in twelve years in no way lessens the horror.

"Two Daughters And A Beautiful Wife" takes the further step of avoiding any bloody specifics of the real-life 2006 Richmond, VA spree killings which inspired it, denying the killers even a fleeting moment of notoriety and refusing to satisfy the primal curiosity of his audience, focusing instead on the shattered lives left in the deed's wake. Obliquely referring to the home invasion and subsequent execution of the Harvey family, which included former indie rock House of Freaks frontman Bryan, Hood will only look away ("Is it just a dream / Is it just a crazy dream") and then look ahead ("Maybe every day is Saturday morning"). The details are too loathsome to consider: "Everybody cried and cried" for "Two daughters and a beautiful wife". Violence, like vengeance, must be refused ceremony; a notion anathema to a supposed Southern creed based upon tradition and lineage. That disavowal is at least partly political – after all, both Georgia and Alabama are death penalty states.

Speaking of politics.....

[READ PART TWO](#)