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Zachary J. Lechner
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Examining Committee Members:
Bryant Simon, Advisory Chair, History
Beth Bailey, History
David Farber, History
Brian Ward, External Member, University of Manchester, American Studies
ABSTRACT

This dissertation argues that in the 1960s and 1970s, a variety of Americans, including television and film producers, journalists, rock ‘n’ roll fans, novelists, counterculturists, presidential candidates, and George Wallace supporters, looked to an imagined rural white South as a repository of supposedly discarded values. In the shadow of the civil rights movement and the South’s increasing modernization, these individuals often perceived such “southern” traits as family-centeredness, closeness to the land, common-sense thinking, manliness, pre-modernity, and authenticity as both a welcome refuge from and an antidote to concerns about “rootlessness” in U.S. society. This sense of rootlessness was grounded in the vague belief that Americans had lost touch with cultural traditionalism. It combined contemporary anxieties about social unrest and government deceit with longer standing worries about suburban blandness, the shift from producerism to consumerism, social anomie, and the increasingly technocratic nature of modern America.

My work traces the allure of the rural white South by detailing the region during the 1960s civil rights movement; country-rock music and the South in the countercultural consciousness; the Masculine South(s) of George Wallace, the novel and film Deliverance (1970, 1972), and the film Walking Tall (1973); the contrasting southernness of Lynyrd Skynyrd and the Allman Brothers Band; and the appeal of Jimmy Carter’s
“healing” southernness during the 1976 presidential campaign. This study expands the scope of historians’ recent investigations into the South’s burgeoning influence in national politics and culture. It directs a much-needed focus to Americans’ perceptions of rural white southernness, and more specifically, to how they formed and utilized these understandings, and what this information reveals about U.S. society and culture. In addition to emphasizing the malleability of race and the southland’s image in national discussions, this dissertation underscores the imagined South’s role as a safe area of contemplation in which Americans could address their conflicted thinking about a variety of national trends, from changing gender roles to evolving family structures to consumer culture, without ever having to resolve any incongruities. Finally, this work employs a new angle for integrating southern history into the national narrative while paying attention to the ways in which post-World War II Americans continued to cling to the idea of southern distinctiveness.
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INTRODUCTION

IMAGINING THE RURAL WHITE SOUTH IN THE 1960s AND 1970s

Richard N. Goodwin seemed like an unlikely booster of the South. A Jewish Bostonian, he had served as an advisor and speechwriter for Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson. He was perhaps best known for his participation in the federal government’s painful efforts to force the Deep South to desegregate in the early to mid-1960s. Nonetheless, in 1972, he was an enthusiastic—and the sole nonsouthern—contributor to the collection of essays on the contemporary South, *You Can’t Eat Magnolias*. The book was published by the L.Q.C. Lamar Society, an organization composed of southern politicians, writers, journalists, and business leaders dedicated to creating a positive post-segregation future for their region in the midst of a continued economic boom.

Goodwin’s piece, titled “The End of Reconstruction,” sought to recover a usable southern past, one that rejected racist practices and looked to southern rural traditions that the author offered as a model for the rest of the nation. In doing so, Goodwin defined his imagined South as the antithesis of modern American society. Depicting a United States that was “confused, divided, and in turmoil,” the Bostonian asserted that “what America hungers for is not more goods or greater power, but a manner of life, restoration of the bonds between people that we call community, a philosophy which values the individual
rather than his possessions, and a sense of belonging, of shared purpose and enterprise.”¹

Goodwin painted a depressing portrait of contemporary American society as a place of coldness and dislocation:

Modern man is confined and often crippled by the world he lives in. A city dweller, he is cut off from sustaining contact with nature. It is almost impossible for the individual to escape the vast and frenzied throng of strangers, stripping him at once of isolation and a place in the community.²

Goodwin sharply contrasted the South with his dystopian view of U.S. society, arguing that southerners had retained their bonds of community. In setting the South against the foil of an urbanized United States, he further implied that southerners still drew strength from their rural roots. Such roots made the region perfectly suited to combat the dilemmas of “modern man.” Indeed, he wrote, in the South, “There is a sense that life is more than the accumulation of material goods; a belief in the individual, not as a solitary wanderer, but as a person whose place among his fellows is to be secured and respected; and, above all, a fierce desire that people be able to shape their own destiny in their own way.” The history of southern racial strife “has blurred these virtues,” Goodwin concluded. “But I believe they are there, and I know the country needs them.”³

Goodwin’s sentiments about the “liberating” nature of southern culture may have appeared unlikely coming in the aftermath of the tumultuous southern civil rights movement during which news coverage had often cast white southerners as villains. Yet his views were echoed by a diverse group of other Americans during the 1960s and


² Ibid., 65.

³ Ibid., 66.
1970s, ranging from novelist Harper Lee to rock critic Lester Bangs, who celebrated the white South as a purported repository of discarded values. A variety of individuals during and after the civil rights era, including writers, journalists, filmmakers, musicians, and politicians, imagined the white South as a rural, pre-modern, communal, and authentic region that embodied both a refuge from modern ills and contained the tools for combating them. These perceived problems included anomie, spiritual decline, flagging masculinity, and technological overreach. In such fantasies, white southerners emerged as antithetical to “modern man”: uniquely familial, close to the land, exhibiting a tough masculinity, and driven by common-sense thinking rather than the demands of technology and the dictates of outside experts. Such imaginings typically utilized the white South as a critique of mainstream American culture. Conceptions of the rural white South were thus unusual and powerful tools for expressing discontent in the 1960s and 1970s.

These fantasies about the South occurred in a specific historical moment, as Americans encountered a society seemingly hemmed in on all sides by political and cultural unrest. In a book that attempted to assess the South’s role within the nation in the early 1970s, southern journalist John Egerton distilled this common portrait of an uncertain America, its people confused, searching for values, and looking for relief:

We are too shellshocked to be outraged anymore. Assassinations and riots and Vietnam and the campus revolts and the drug scene and crime in the streets and crime in the corporations and crime in the government are just too much to grasp. It takes no nostalgic longing for “the good old days,” no disdain for “progress,” no pessimistic nature, to see a tragedy of historic proportions gathering on the horizon. The America of righteousness and certitude and invincibility is up
against some problems that don’t have ready solutions and questions that don’t have easy answers.⁴

In the midst of these disorienting changes and America’s self-questioning, Egerton was not as hopeful as Richard Goodwin about the South’s capacity to save the nation because he viewed the South as becoming increasingly like the rest of the homogenized and commercialized nation. Egerton applauded what he considered the decline of the South’s overt racism, but he feared for the loss of “the moonlight and magnolias, the courtesy and kinship, the friendliness and hospitality, the importance of things personal and concrete, the sense of pace and place and space and grace and soul” that he and others ascribed to the region.⁵ While Egerton rejected a timeless South, this notion did appeal to other cultural producers and commentators who imagined the region not as a victim of U.S. consumer culture, but rather as an asylum from it.

The anxiety over the consumer culture from which the imagined rural South promised an escape was hardly an invention of the late 1960s or 1970s. Indeed, this anxiety dated to early postwar commentaries about the United States’s increasing shift to a consumer culture. This development created both excitement and uncertainty, for it represented a conflict between “traditional” values and the emerging notion of individual lifestyle. As scholar Roland Marchand maintained, lifestyle was “the uninhibited search for what looked and felt right.”⁶ Historian David Farber contends that this development,

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⁵ Ibid., 22.

although exciting, nagged at people concerned about losing a way of life based on self-sacrifice and delayed gratification. “Many Americans,” he writes, “worried about the moral quality of this ‘uninhibited search’ for self expression.” These people, in fact, posed the question, Farber continues, “Did the consumer frenzy promoted by the ‘buy now, pay later; be whomever you want to be’ ethos compromise older values of family, religion, and community?”

By the late 1960s, consumerism’s offspring, ranging from suburbanization to a purportedly shoddy and soulless culture, continued to preoccupy cultural producers and anticonformist politicos. Folk singer-songwriter Malvina Reynolds had written of the suburbs as incubators of Cold War conformity in her 1962 composition “Little Boxes” (later covered with minor chart success by Pete Seeger). The song’s narrator posited that, like their parents before them, when suburban children grow up they go “to the university / Where they are put in boxes / And they come out all the same,” as boring professionals ready to replicate the soul-sucking process in the suburbs.\(^7\) Five years later, in the midst of the counterculture’s rejection of cultural blandness, the Monkees reinforced the notion of suburbia’s conforming nature in “Pleasant Valley Sunday.” Written by the songwriting team of Gerry Goffin and Carole King about their community in West Orange, New Jersey, the song lampooned this “status symbol land” with its “rows of houses that are all the same” and its “creature comfort goals / [that] only numb my soul.”\(^9\)

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\(^7\) Farber, *The Age of Great Dreams*, 55.


This critique of the nation’s supposedly cheap and boring commercialized suburban culture also formed a key component of the New Left’s social critique in the 1960s. Searching for “a meaning in life that is personally authentic,” as the Port Huron Statement described, New Leftists bemoaned the effects of consumerism on the postwar generation.\(^{10}\) In his 1968 book \textit{Armies of the Night}, a first-hand account of the 1967 March on the Pentagon, author Norman Mailer described the New Left as driven by a hatred of authority and the ways in which this authority supposedly created an inauthentic version of reality. Cultural arbiters, furthermore, from network television producers to advertising executives, promoted an insipid suburban lifestyle and kept people’s minds doped with and jumbled by television. When viewing this medium, Mailer wrote, rebellious youth “had had their minds jabbed and poked and twitched and probed and finally galvanized into surrealist modes of response by commercials cutting into dramatic narratives, and parents flipping from network to network.”\(^{11}\) For America’s New Left, the author concluded, the “shoddiness” of modern life, its disposability and distance from anything meaningful, was especially troubling.\(^{12}\)

The wide variety of concerns that made the white rural South a beguiling alternative—cultural and political unrest, disillusionment with the Vietnam War, and continued dissatisfaction with consumer culture—could be reduced to a more singular concern: “rootlessness.” In 1972 popular sociologist Vance Packard had characterized


\(^{12}\) Ibid., 87.
the United States as “a society torn of roots.”13 Packard meant that Americans had become socially disconnected from each other, but anxieties about rootlessness also posited a broader dislocation for Americans from some ill-defined traditional center based in producerism and delayed gratification.

For various music fans, counterculturists, film and television directors, and culturally conservative voters, rural southernness was a highly malleable and useful narrative concept for both southerners and nonsoutherners that addressed the dilemma of rootlessness. The idea’s usage in popular discourses highlighted the national desire to avoid anomie in a technocratic society and to recover a feeling of roots in the modern age. This imagined South’s “ruralness” formed the core of its perceived authenticity, or its embodiment of an idealized way of life. This lifestyle countered a modern society characterized by consumerist values, suburbanization, feminization, and technological overreach. White southerners, the Band’s Robbie Robertson once aptly stated, were different because they “lived [in] this world from the standpoint of a rocking chair.”14 In his and other observers’ minds, they were a people of the land, a trait that kept them grounded and dedicated to timeless values, thus contrasting them with their fellow Americans who were spiritually rudderless and absorbed with consumerism.

These cultural imaginings of the South as white, working-class, rural, masculine, and anachronistically pre-modern were largely constructed by and for white Americans.


Such fantasies were nothing new. As historian Jim Cullen writes, white Americans have often taken comfort in this image of the region:

For some, it could be seen as a place apart, relatively free of the corruptions that had corroded modern life—sterile suburbs, mindless consumption, scarred landscapes at home as well as abroad. This is a very old trope in life in the United States, one that runs from the plantation novel of the 1830s through the Agrarian essay collection *I’ll Take My Stand* (1930) and into [Bob Dylan’s] *Nashville Skyline*, three very different cultural manifestations of a similar underlying regional nostalgia.¹⁵

Two factors served to make such southern imaginings of the 1960s and 1970s different from those of the past. First was the shifting nature of southern and national race relations. The 1960s civil rights movement challenged the Jim Crow racial order in the South. While the news coverage and popular culture often reinforced the image of the white South as peculiarly and deeply racist, other popular discourses competed with this negative image, suggesting that the white South’s racism could be mended. In a broad sense, the imagined Souths of the era should be considered as part of an effort to make sense of the shifting, and often conflicted, nature of the country’s racial thinking. Popular discourses constantly had to contend with the question of southern racism and they did so in multiple ways, alternately downplaying it, arguing that the region’s bigotry was part and parcel with larger national prejudices, presenting it as a desirable trait for combating the increased demands by minorities, or, like the L.Q.C. Lamar Society, contending that white southerners were in the process of healing the racial divide and had lessons to teach the rest of the nation. With the national racial order in flux, the image of the peculiarly racist South lost ground, reducing the strength of this iconography as

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applied to the region and its white inhabitants. This change in attitudes about southern bigotry allowed white southernness to function equally as a solution and as a pariah in the national consciousness.

The second factor that differentiated imaginings of the South in the 1960s and 1970s from those that had come before was the pervasive power of the rural South in the American mind in the midst of the region’s changing economic and demographic landscape. As the South became increasingly integrated politically and economically with the rest of the nation, many Americans still perceived it as a culturally distinctive rural bastion. In no doubt influenced by popular literature by William Faulkner and Erskine Caldwell, films like Gone with the Wind that promulgated a “moonlight and magnolias” mythology, and the Southern Agrarian movement’s promotion of rural settings as the southland’s essence, the rural southern imaginary treated the region as existing out of time, in an ill-defined, pre-modern past in which most white southerners still lived outside of cities and worked with their hands. This was ironic in light of recent southern history. After World War II, federal government investment, local municipal incentives, and right-to-work laws enticed northern businesses to move south. The resulting southern Sunbelt boom pushed the region further into the political and economic mainstream of U.S. society.  

Thus, as the South shed its status as an economic backwater, many Americans found utility in a version of southernness that was culturally distinctive and out of step with the rest of the nation. Yet they saw in southern culture

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not backwardness, but the deep roots of tradition. This led scores of filmmakers, novelists, journalists, musicians, and other cultural producers, beginning in the early 1960s, to represent the South as the antithesis of modern society. These Americans thus linked the southern imaginings of the 1960s and 1970s with the earlier antimodernism of fantasies about the rural white South while focusing on the nation’s specific, contemporary consumerist and suburban anxieties and altered racial environment. In this endeavor, they ignored the increasing distance between their vision of the region and its reality.

These 1960s and 1970s imaginings can be best identified and analyzed by turning to cultural discourses, often in the realm of popular culture. The “use” of the South was largely cultural; in addition, discourses most often encountered, responded to, and invoked southernness as a cultural creation. Analyzing culture does not, however, mean ignoring politics. Indeed, the South as both a place and an idea loomed over U.S. politics in the 1960s and 1970s. This methodology underlines the importance of southernness, for instance, in the nonsouthern embrace of contrasting figures like southern governors Jimmy Carter and George Wallace.

Importantly, for those who wished to exercise it, the South of the Mind shifted easily to meet different needs. Similar sociocultural anxieties, for example, drove both the era’s freak counterculture and the conservative backlash, as embodied in the politics of George Wallace and the music of Lynyrd Skynyrd. Just as counterculturists frequently exploited the rural, family-oriented, and communal imagined South in their

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17 In this project, I favor the term “freak,” often a term of countercultural self-identification, over the more media-driven “hippie.”
critique of mainstream, urban, technocratic society (chapter two), many working- and middle-class white Americans simultaneously utilized these traditional values as antidotes to the feminized and anti-establishment cultural politics that they assigned to the counterculture. Wallace supporters invoked the white South and “southern” principles in their endorsement of his masculine, reactionary politics (chapter three). The embrace of pre-modern, rural southernness, then, often had similar origins but divergent uses.

Because it analyzes of the role of ideas about the South, this dissertation is not a work of southern history, per se. Instead, it is an investigation of constructions of the rural white South that illuminates the larger story of postwar American culture and its discontents. My work additionally augments the existing scholarship by placing imaginings of the South at the center of the rise of a cross-class cultural conservatism.

This insight broadens recent historiography regarding the expansion of political conservatism in the 1960s and 1970s.18

Numerous scholars of U.S. culture, largely in the field of cultural studies, have delved into Americans’ past constructions of imagined Souths without specifically addressing the cultural appeal of white southernness in the civil rights and post-civil rights era. Influenced by Benedict Anderson’s concept of “imagined communities,” they assert that the reality of the region often had little to do with how Americans viewed it.\textsuperscript{19} They also highlight the nation’s enduring claims of southern distinctiveness while contending that nonsoutherners have consistently defined themselves against the South. These scholars often highlight what scholar Tara McPherson terms “our cultural schizophrenia about the South”; that is, the tendency at certain times in U.S. history for nonsoutherners to define the region as the keeper of idealized national values or, alternately, as an archive of un-American qualities.\textsuperscript{20} It is a viewpoint shared by journalist Peter Applebome who contends, “Over the years, the rest of the nation has Ping-Ponged between views of the South as a hellhole of poverty, torment, and depravity and as an American Eden of tradition, strength, and grace.”\textsuperscript{21} Such dichotomous responses are central to appreciating the nation’s conflicted relationship with the region. Furthermore, by understanding the prevailing ideas about the South within the national

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consciousness at any point in time, we can learn much about national politics and culture.\textsuperscript{22}

Scholars working largely in the historical discipline have been slower to broach the subject of the imagined South. During the 1990s and early 2000s, they instead focused extensively on the South’s political and cultural influences, without necessarily highlighting its fantasied qualities, in late 1960s and 1970s America. Dan T. Carter and other scholars have frequently emphasized the so-called “southernization of American politics” in this time period.\textsuperscript{23} This argument is undergirded by its faith in the Southern Strategy thesis, the idea that the Republican party gained the support of southern whites by promising to slow the pace of civil rights gains and that the rise of the national


\textsuperscript{23} Dan T. Carter, \textit{The Politics of Rage}. 

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conservative movement in the 1970s can be explained by its adherence to race-baiting southern-style politics.24

Peter Applebome and Bruce J. Schulman have added a cultural dimension to this notion of southernization. Applebome’s contribution to the southernization thesis is well articulated in his book’s title, Dixie Rising: How the South is Shaping American Values, Politics, and Culture. Writing of the contemporary (1996) South, he argues that the South is “a place that had managed to maintain its identity while also putting its fingerprints on almost every aspect of the nation’s soul, from race, to politics, to culture, to values.”25 Focusing on the “long 1970s” (1969 to 1984), Schulman reinforces Applebome’s notion of cultural southernization in his book, The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics. Schulman describes the transition as the “reddening of America.” He explains the spread of southern culture like the rise of “redneck chic,” for instance, as simply a reflection of the anti-liberal backlash of the 1970s.26 This perspective parallels Applebome’s vision, which conflates southernization with the dominant spread of conservative attitudes. The situation was in fact much more complicated. The white South’s appeal lay beyond a simplistic liberal-conservative, Democratic-Republican divide. Moreover, Schulman’s and Applebome’s studies leave

24 For a recent challenge to the political “southernization” thesis, one that downplays southern distinctiveness and places southern and nonsouthern suburbanites’ calls for class privilege, consumer rights, and individual choice—not racial backlash—at the center of a new conservative coalition, see Matthew D. Lassiter, The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006). For a similar argument that de-emphasizes racial motivations, see Byron Shafer and Richard Johnston, The End of Southern Exceptionalism: Class, Race, and Partisan Change in the Postwar South (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006).

25 Applebome, Dixie Rising, 22.

readers with the inaccurate impression that Americans wholeheartedly adopted “southern” attitudes.

James N. Gregory further explores the cultural dimension of southernization in his book, *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America.* He addresses, though, how transplanted southerners changed American society after World War II rather than how Americans utilized ideas about the South. James C. Cobb’s 1982 essay “From Muskogee to Luckenbach: Country Music and the ‘Southernization’ of America,” has come closest to explaining why at least one aspect of southern culture garnered renewed appeal in the 1970s. Examining the South’s cultural rise through the lens of the country and western genre, Cobb stresses the influence of national humiliations. “At the end of the 1970s,” he maintains, “the resonance of country music for a nation reeling from the disappointments of Vietnam and Watergate and the shocking discovery of the racial divisions and economic woes confronting communities outside the South should have been obvious enough.” Cobb is not necessarily wrong in his conclusion, but his periodization ignores the fact that Americans were already worried about a cultural malaise even before the exposure of governmental deceit, nonsouthern racism, and economic problems in the seventies. These issues only exacerbated existing and deeper concerns about the confining structure of modern society.

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The most recent historiography has shifted away from the above works’ focus on the supposed southernization of national political and cultural attitudes. Instead of equating southernness with conservatism, they draw more heavily on cultural studies works to contend that Americans have frequently treated “the South” as a patchwork of ideas and values on which they have drawn selectively based their needs and desires. This focus has resulted in a better understanding of the detailed and contextualized uses of fantasied, anti-modern Souths.

Although addressing an earlier period, from approximately 1880 to 1945, Karen L. Cox’s *Dreaming of Dixie: How the South was Created in American Popular Culture* explores the popularization of the “moonlight and magnolias” myth of the South and posits its national embrace as related to apprehensions about modernity.\(^{29}\) Anthony Harkins makes a similar argument about the nation’s love-hate relationship with white southern mountain people in his *Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon*. Although recognizing that hillbillies have served as a source of pity and derision, Harkins contends that in literature, cartoons, television, and film “the term and idea have also been used to challenge the generally unquestioned acceptance and legitimacy of ‘modernity’ and ‘progress.’”\(^{30}\) This dissertation expands well beyond hillbilly iconography and Old South representations to assert that a broader vision of the rural white South addressed these cultural needs during and after the civil rights movement.


In addition to building on the scholarship of imaginings of the South, this dissertation also expands on the contributions of Matthew D. Lassiter and Joseph Crespino's groundbreaking *The Myth of Southern Exceptionalism*. These historians and their fellow contributors offer two major revisions to the historiography. First, they strike at the notion of southern distinctiveness: the idea that southerners have experienced a unique history that contrasts with the rest of the nation’s past. Second, they question the usefulness of southern history as an academic subfield, providing many examples of how scholars can better incorporate the history of the region into the larger tapestry of the American past. Despite their attack on the parochialism of the field of southern history, Crespino and Lassiter and their volume’s contributors consider it vitally important to investigate how post-World War II Americans have imagined the South and continued to cling to the idea of southern distinctiveness.31 By holding fast to notions of a unique South, they argue, Americans have consistently used the locale to address both regional and national concerns. My study embraces Crespino and Lassiter’s conclusions while following their advice to seek new angles for integrating southern history into the national narrative.

The following chapters detail imaginings of the white South during the southern civil rights movement (1960-1968); country-rock music and the South in the countercultural mind; the Masculine South of George Wallace, *Deliverance*, and *Walking Tall*; the contrasting southernness of Lynyrd Skynyrd and the Allman Brothers Band; and

the appeal of Jimmy Carter’s “healing” southernness during the 1976 presidential campaign. In each of these examples, popular discourses positioned the rural white South as capable of restoring an American cultural traditionalism beset by minority challenges to white male authority, a supposed technological overreach, and/or feelings of social disconnectedness.

Chapter one discusses the multiple ways in which commentators in the North and South dealt with the ever-present issue of race in their views of the white South during the 1960s civil rights movement. These imaginings were manifested in a set of archetypes: the Vicious South, the Changing South, and the Down-home South. These representations infused journalistic, literary, filmic, and televised accounts of the region for years to come. The Vicious South presented white southerners as un-American, angry, backward racists, while the Changing South suggested that they suffered from the stain of bigotry but that their efforts to mend the region’s strained race relations might hold the solution for the nation’s increasingly visible racial problems. Even in the midst of southern racial unrest and the ubiquity of these race-centric Vicious South and Changing South discourses, the Down-home South cast aside the race issue and celebrated a portrait of the honorable, anachronistic white South that addressed anxieties about consumerism and modernity. Each narrative, including the Vicious South’s presentation of rough-and-tumble, manly southern whites, would provide the raw cultural materials for future versions of a fantasied rural white South in the 1960s and 1970s.

This constructed rural white South found many allies among the antimaterialistic and antimodern freak counterculture (chapter two). Frequently encountering pastoral images of the rural South through country-rock music, counterculturists writing in the
underground press typically envisioned the region as both a refuge from modern U.S. society and as possessing a set of lost values with which to combat the technological nightmare they called “Amerika.” Indeed, counterculturists often praised country-rock artists like the Byrds, Bob Dylan, and the Band, who sang of an idyllic South, one untouched by the ravages of time and “progress.” Many counterculturists acknowledged the intensity of white southern racism, yet they often treated this deficiency as a symptom of a larger national sickness and decried nonsoutherners’ easy scapegoating of white southerners.

As they wrestled with racial considerations and embraced pre-modernity, post-civil rights imaginings of rural white southernness frequently rested on the notion that the South was infused with manly qualities absent in the non-South (chapter three). This Masculine South discourse infused divergent elements of late 1960s and 1970s political and popular culture, including segregationist Alabama Gov. George Wallace’s presidential bids, the film *Walking Tall* (1973), and the novel and film versions of *Deliverance* (1970 and 1972, respectively). Wallace’s physicality and combative views on the campaign trail underscored his attacks on a purportedly weakened and feminized American society run by technocrats, college professors, and other cultural elites. The governor positioned himself as the representative of a manly, pre-modern South that promised the use of violent repression to restore domestic control over racial minorities and youthful dissenters. For many Wallace supporters, the candidate’s racism lent credence to his promise for a return to traditional values. *Walking Tall* similarly blasted so-called cultural permissiveness and promoted “southern-style” violence while underlining the racial enlightenment of its hulking protagonist Tennessee Sheriff Buford
T. Pusser. The film’s use of a bucolic rural South as a restorative foil for urban iniquity and facelessness found parallels in James Dickey’s *Deliverance*, where a frightening rural southern landscape offered both life-threatening tribulations and liberation from the supposed softness of suburban life. In these examples, the Masculine South promoted the use of southern violence as a regenerative force capable of restoring a flagging American vitality.

Hard-driving manhood also pervaded the depictions of white southernness in the music of the Allman Brothers Band and Lynyrd Skynyrd, the most popular purveyors of the 1970s southern rock genre (chapter four). The two groups offered divergent commentaries on the imagined South. The Allman Brothers Band exhibited a countercultural ethos. It featured an integrated lineup and its fans embraced the group’s racial egalitarianism. Lynyrd Skynyrd’s members, in contrast, positioned themselves as defenders of white southernness and reflected much of the masculine resentment of George Wallace’s South. In their responses to the bands, fans and commentators demonstrated the often overlapping allure of the groups’ differing approaches to white southernness, in both reactionary and progressive forms.

Georgian Jimmy Carter’s successful run for the presidency in 1976 further underscored the complicated allure of the rural white South (chapter five). Drawing on both elements of working-class, good ole boy southern culture and a racial enlightenment born of the civil rights movement, Carter positioned his healing southernness as central to his persona as a leader capable of ameliorating the country’s post-Vietnam and post-Watergate political and cultural malaise. The candidate showcased his rural hometown of Plains, Georgia, as a beacon of antimodernity where he claimed to have learned to rise
above the local racist culture while valuing southern traditions of family, land, and religious faith. Carter’s southernness thus managed to invoke the alluring qualities of the rural white South while eschewing its stereotypical parochialism and racism.

Rather than try to complete the impossible task of exploring every popular imagining of the rural white South between 1960 and 1980, I have chosen these subjects for both their popularity and their ability to highlight the flexibility of discourses about rural southernness. The South of the mind stretched to meet the needs of seemingly divergent groups of people, spanning from supporters of the traditionalist George Wallace to adherents of the counterculturist Abbie Hoffman—and other individuals with more moderate ideologies. The appeal of a pre-modern, rural white South, then, was not yoked to either a liberal or a conservative ethos. Instead, it emphasized postwar cultural concerns that transcended simple political categories.
“Beneath all the bad news that has come out of the South, and that may be expected to emerge for some time longer,” a 28 March 1966 article in the Nation read, “one can yet see the proof of this proposition.” That proposition was “that of all forms of human ignorance . . . racial bias has the most superficial roots. . . . Prejudice does not breed discrimination; discrimination breeds prejudice.”¹ The left-leaning Nation made this comment on the possibility of altering racist thinking in “The Thaw in the South,” an article that detailed the apparent slackening in southern whites’ racial prejudice. The magazine’s evidence for this thaw was thin. Drawing on a mere two news items—one about white students’ increasing acceptance of black students at the University of Alabama, and another story profiling a white man in Schley County, Georgia, who positively related his experience serving as a foreman on an otherwise all-black jury—the piece’s uncredited author concluded that “times change in the Southland, too.”² The discourse utilized by the Nation, what might be termed the Changing South, depicted the white South in the midst of a painful rehabilitation. It left open the possibility that

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¹ The Thaw in the South,” Nation, 28 March 1966, 348.

² Ibid.
formerly intractable white southerners might be working toward setting aside their peculiar bigotry and achieving racial healing from which the rest of the nation might learn.

By mid-decade, as William G. Carleton noted in a 1966 issue of the *Yale Review*, the South had “many moods.” The hopeful Changing South narrative was just one of three prominent discourses that highlighted the evolving and contested meaning of white southernness in the 1960s. The Changing South emerged as a response to the Vicious South discourse, a common trope in news media coverage of the civil rights movement. It focused on southern racism and cast white southerners as outsiders in the American dream of triumphant liberalism, and as antithetical to ideals of equality. A third discourse, best labeled the Down-home South, celebrated the family ties, closeness to the land, and unaffectedness of such fictional characters as the Clampetts on *The Beverly Hillbillies* and residents of *The Andy Griffith Show*’s Mayberry. These programs depicted such “southern” traits as a refuge from feelings of cultural blandness and the supposed decline of traditional values during the postwar era. While the Vicious South and Changing South seemed to suggest that race was integral to any portrayal of white southerners, the Down-home South ignored contemporary racial troubles in the region and demonstrated that its black-white divide could be easily cast aside or explained away when popular culture cloaked white southerners in the guise of pre-modern arbiters of lost American virtues.

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These differing representations of the white South, even in the midst of its civil rights public relations disaster, granted Americans the opportunity to select the version of their choice. The region was either a backward, mean, aggressively racist, foreboding, and yet tough and masculine locale (Vicious South); a region on the mend that reaffirmed a progressive story of American equality (Changing South); or a racially neutral, rural paradise that was free of modern, technological, and racial anxieties (Down-home South). These varying depictions of white southernness would provide the raw materials for later imaginings of southern race relations and culture during the 1960s and 1970s that envisioned predominantly rural white southerners as possessing the tools for escaping the ills of modern U.S. society.⁴

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⁴ The historiography of the 1960s civil rights-era South typically details the ways in which something akin to the Vicious South, as utilized by civil rights protestors and the media, roused Americans to the evils of Jim Crow and lent considerable opposition to the white southerners’ efforts to preserve their segregated way of life. For a recent example of this literature, see Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff The Race Beat: The Press, the Civil Rights Struggle, and the Awakening of a Nation (New York: Random House, 2006). Recent scholars, though, have begun to acknowledge that while the Vicious South discourse was indeed powerful and pervasive in the American consciousness during the 1960s, Americans simultaneously imagined the South in contradictory ways. Karen Cox argues for television’s influence in publicizing the often violent response of white southerners to the black freedom struggle. But she also acknowledges the contemporaneous popularity of The Andy Griffith Show, a program set in an idyllic, rural small-town South devoid of black characters and that ignored the racial unrest roiling across the region (and network TV news broadcasts). Karen Cox, Dreaming of Dixie: How the South Was Created in American Popular Culture (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 166. Media and communications scholar Allison Graham has offered the most sustained discussion of images of the South and white southerners during the civil rights era. Focusing on southern-oriented 1950s and 1960s film and television, her Framing the South maintains that these productions went beyond arousing fears of violent, backward southerners—although they often did just that. Hollywood was also centrally concerned, Graham contends, with “the reeducation of America’s most wayward whites—poor southerners—[who] became crucial to the reclamation of the South and, more importantly, to the redemption of white America itself.” Working-class white southerners, then, not only symbolized the South’s ills but also served as vessels, once reformed, through which racially liberal white Americans could assuage themselves of their own feelings of racial guilt. Allison Graham, Framing the South: Hollywood, Television, and Race during the Civil Rights Struggle (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 16. Historian Joseph Crespino furthers Graham’s interest in the symbolism of the white civil rights-era South in the American imagination. In his essay “Mississippi as Metaphor,” Crespino proposes that “in the civil rights era, the American South . . . was an iconic space that Americans argued over as a way of making sense of the nation’s formal commitment to equality and what that commitment would mean for the country’s present and future.” Joseph Crespino, “Mississippi as Metaphor: Civil Rights, the South, and the Nation in the
The Vicious South discourse achieved a dualistic purpose in its treatment of white southerners. On one hand, it closed off the South as a useful model of emulation for the majority of Americans. Certainly for nonsouthern liberals, this narrative reinforced the region as a place apart, the nation’s embarrassing relative. Conversely, reactionary Americans, often supporters of the presidential candidacies of George Wallace, would later look to the whites who populated the Vicious South as paragons of toughness and manliness. National Wallaceites would draw on the anger of the symbol of the resisting white southerner to provide an example for combating the disorder—racial and otherwise—that they wished to eradicate. But this response could only occur after the news media and popular commentators helped to infuse the American consciousness with the image of a white South seething with anger and ready to commit racial violence.

Historical Imagination,” in The Myth of Southern Exceptionalism, eds. Matthew D. Lassiter and Joseph Crespino (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 99. Crespino identifies three tropes about the state of Mississippi that southerners and nonsoutherners on the political Right and Left employed to comment on the race issue in U.S. society: “Mississippi as a ‘closed society,’” “Mississippi as synecdoche, or America as Mississippi Writ Large,” and “Mississippi as scapegoat.” The “closed society” trope most closely aligns with my notion of the Vicious South. It received the greatest attention in both coverage of the civil rights movement and in the memory of the movement. It should be noted that Crespino’s other two formulations would not capture the American imagination until the latter part of the 1960s. Until that time, the synecdoche discourse was largely voiced by southern blacks and civil rights activists while mostly white southern segregationists decried the supposed scapegoating of the state for the nation’s larger racial ills. Crespino correctly asserts that the presence of the scapegoat and synecdoche metaphors challenge “the dominant triumphal narrative of the civil rights era as a period when nonviolent activists used the power of moral persuasion to bring retrograde racist southerners into line with the rest of modern open, America.” Crespino, “Mississippi as Metaphor,” 99. In broadening the analytical scope to imaginings of the entire South, this chapter’s discussions of the Vicious South, the Changing South, and the Down-home South discourses expand on the more complicated view of southern imaginings that Crespino supports in his essay. Whereas Crespino’s alternatives to the “Mississippi as a ‘closed society’” trope were advanced by vocal fringes of the Right and the Left during the civil rights era, the Changing South and Down-home discourses were presented in mainstream, popular newspapers and magazines and on top-rated television programs. Americans utilized these narratives as well as the more dominant Vicious South discourse in order to make sense of the region and of the nation during the civil rights era.
Touring the Vicious South: Travels with Charley and Black Like Me

In 1959, white southern journalist John Howard Griffin set out to document how it felt to live as a black man in the South. Under a dermatologist’s supervision, Griffin took Oxsoralen, a drug that caused his skin to darken. He boosted the effect by exposing himself to natural and artificial light and dabbing his face and body with makeup. Once convincingly blackened, he traveled through the Deep South. Black Like Me (1961) presents an unsettling portrait of the white South as full of hate and pathologically committed to Jim Crow.

Griffin’s journey through the southland brought him and his liberal northern audience face-to-face with the Vicious South. A constant theme throughout Black Like Me is the dehumanizing impact of southern racial practices on both blacks and whites. To Griffin, the “hate stare” embodied white southern cruelty. Practically everywhere he turned, the journalist faced this look. While waiting for a bus at a Greyhound station in New Orleans, Griffin encountered a respectable-looking white man who gave him the “stare.” “Nothing can describe the withering horror of this,” he wrote. “You feel lost, sick at heart before such unmasked hatred, not so much because it threatens you as because it shows humans in such an inhuman light. You see a kind of insanity, something so obscene the very obscenity of it (rather than its threat) terrifies you.”\footnote{John Howard Griffin, Black Like Me (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1961; paperback reprint, New York: New American Library, 2003), 51.}

Griffin thickened his description of white southern racism as he described his adventures hitchhiking one evening from Mississippi to Alabama. White southern men,
he found to his surprise, were often willing to give him a ride under the cover of darkness. Soon he realized that it has little to do with goodwill. On what seemed like “a dozen rides,” he found their interests strictly prurient. “All but two,” he remembered, “picked me up the way they would pick up a pornographic photograph or book—except that this was verbal pornography.”

Griffin found himself bombarded with and vaguely threatened by questions premised on stereotypes of black men’s sexual prowess and animalistic nature. This “ghoulish” dialogue went on incessantly ride after ride. One man tried to bait him into admitting that all black men lusted after white women. Another driver awkwardly noted that “he had never seen a Negro naked.”

Griffin described the hate stare and sexual perversity as just two offshoots of the blinding hatred that afflicted many white southerners. Griffin may have wished to use his book as a broader condemnation of national racism, but by providing his readers with a fly-on-the-wall account of southern blacks’ daily indignities, he appeared to identify southern whites as uniquely, if not bizarrely, racist. Indeed, he told Time before the book’s publication, “I like to see good in the white man. But after this experience, it’s hard to find it in the Southern white.”

Griffin brought that viewpoint to millions of Americans through his bestselling book, as well as lecture tours and sympathetic advance television appearances with the likes of NBC’s Dave Garroway and CBS’s Mike

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6 Ibid., 86.

7 Ibid., 90.

Wallace. Critical response to *Black Like Me* was strong. It enjoyed overwhelmingly positive reviews, which lauded Griffin’s conclusions about the plight of blacks in the South and the brutality of their white tormentors. Griffin’s book thus served to popularize the Vicious South discourse, describing white southerners’ racism as distinctive and obsessive.

Following on the heels of *Black Like Me* and its commercial success, John Steinbeck went in search of the South and found more stories of malevolence. Steinbeck had long been an observer of American life and landscapes. He was best known for a series of popular novels, including *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), which chronicled the experiences of down-on-their-luck working people in California. *Travels with Charley* (1962) recounts his months-long trip around the United States in a pickup truck with a camper top during 1960. His only companion was his French standard poodle Charley. Steinbeck traveled from Long Island to the Pacific Northwest, down through California and across Texas, before concluding his journey in the Deep South. As his book’s subtitle attests, he went “in search of America.” If he found it anywhere, the reader is left to conclude, it was certainly not in the South. His portrait of the region, with few exceptions, describes a backward, defiant white population clinging to its racial caste system. The real problem, the writer insinuated, was the rabid, working-class white southerner.

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“I faced the South with dread,” Steinbeck announced at the beginning of the book’s southern section. “Here, I knew, were pain and confusion and all the manic results of bewilderment and fear. And the South being a limb of the nation, its pain spreads out to all America.”\(^\text{11}\) The region’s racial pathology, he suggested, infected the rest of the healthy nation. It was a sickness so severe and peculiar that he could not fully grasp it.

But he could not help but look. Setting out for New Orleans, Steinbeck was drawn by news reports of the “Cheerleaders,” a group of white women he had read about, known for berating black children at a recently integrated local school. The author admitted to being taken in by the promised spectacle:

This strange drama seemed so improbable that I felt I had to see it. It had the same draw as a five-legged calf or a two-headed foetus at a sideshow, a distortion of normal life we have always found so interesting that we will pay to see it, perhaps to prove to ourselves that we have the proper number of legs or heads.\(^\text{12}\)

The Cheerleaders functioned as a more overt, and similarly futile, representation of defensive white southern racism in Steinbeck’s account. They furthermore revealed the usefulness of the Vicious South for absolving the rest of the nation of its race problem by condemning the abnormal prejudice of the South. Employing a common device in civil rights reporting, the author contrasted peaceful, defenseless black schoolchildren with sneering, foul-mouthed white racists. For Steinbeck, the Cheerleaders’ behavior de-sexed and dehumanized them. He called “their insensate beastliness . . . heartbreaking.”\(^\text{13}\)

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\(^{12}\) Ibid., 189.

\(^{13}\) Ibid., 195.
One woman’s “voice was the bellow of a bull.”14 “These were not mothers, not even women,” the writer insisted. “They were crazy actors playing to a crazy audience.”15 Without stating it explicitly, Steinbeck argued, with liberal indignation, that Jim Crow transformed its white proponents into subhuman creatures.

Steinbeck’s portrait of the white South was not completely devoid of subtlety. For instance, after the Cheerleaders sequence, he included a conversation between him and an individual named Monsieur Ci Git. Steinbeck immediately indicated the man’s distance from the unrefined Cheerleaders. “He was a neatly dressed man well along in years,” he recalled, “with a Greco face and fine wind-lifted white hair and a clipped white mustache.”16 The author seemed fascinated by this debonair individual who demonstrated a keen understanding of southern race relations and exhibited a sense of racial progressivism. “You’re not what the North thinks of as a Southerner,” Steinbeck told him. “Perhaps not,” the gentleman responded. “But I’m not alone.”17 In the midst of so much white racial resistance, Steinbeck presented the monsieur as the face of another South, one not invested in the racial hatred of the Cheerleaders. The fact that Ci Git was the picture of southern middle-class refinement only lent further credence to the popular notion that white southern racism was most pronounced among a working-class horde.

14 Ibid., 196.
15 Ibid., 195.
16 Ibid., 197.
17 Ibid., 201.
Other parts of *Travels with Charley* supplemented this implicit working-class based view of southern racism. After the Ci Git episode, Steinbeck described his experience picking up hitchhikers on his way from New Orleans to Jackson, Mississippi. The novelist reported the intense racism of one man who sounded like a cliché of white southern bigotry. When Steinbeck baited him and made it clear that he rejected the status quo of southern race relations, the man labeled him one of the “Commie nigger-lovers,” who he said were “trouble-makers [who] come down here and tell us how to live.”\(^\text{18}\)

Here, Steinbeck reinforced the idea that Americans should fear the working-class white southerner. While scholar Allison Graham has argued that much popular culture during the civil rights era was invested in the rehabilitation of this figure, Steinbeck left readers with little hope that the Vicious South’s snarling white southerner would ever change despite the presence of moderating influences like Monsieur Ci Git.

Almost without fail, the reviews of Steinbeck’s travelogue highlighted the book’s southern section. Princeton history professor Eric F. Goldman was one of the most complimentary commentators, praising the book’s racial liberalism. “Here is the most powerful writing in the book,” he wrote in reference to the Cheerleaders episode, “stinging with the cold lash of outraged decency.”\(^\text{19}\)

Other reviewers found nothing revelatory in Steinbeck’s exposé of southern racism. “This opportunity for high drama,” opined travel editor Kenneth Weiss in the *Washington Post*, “for great sensitivity exposed in bitterness and horror, winds up in straight reporting with little new light shed.” While

\(^\text{18}\) Ibid., 205.

Weiss may have underplayed Steinbeck’s gift for enlivening the New Orleans desegregation drama, he was correct that the author had offered virtually nothing that readers could not already see on a daily basis in the Vicious South narrative of civil rights reporting.

_Reporting the Vicious South_

The press corps’s heavy usage of the Vicious South narrative deeply influenced its coverage of the southern civil rights movement. “Reporters in the South,” scholar Sasha Torres has explained, “often ignored the journalistic imperative to neutrality.”

There were good reasons for this, she argues, including the civil rights movement’s “moral authority” and segregationists’ obviously racist motivations even when using the language of states’ rights. Projects that strove for “balance” like the 1961 CBS documentary _Who Speaks for Birmingham?_ often fell short. Torres points out that this particular documentary “ended with [reporter Howard K.] Smith calling on President Kennedy to ‘restate’ the laws of the land to recalcitrant [white] southerners.”

Influenced by the movement’s media savviness and its careful staging of protests—and of course, by many whites’ overt racial antipathy and violence—journalists typically presented white southerners as uniquely racist and outside of the U.S. mainstream. Americans saw moving and still pictures of white southerners beating dignified black and

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21 Ibid., 17-18.

22 Ibid., 19.
white protesters, spraying them with high-pressure water hoses, and turning attack dogs on them. News media frequently contrasted these violent whites with images of upright black civil rights protesters. For nonsoutherners, the message was clear: the South and its white inhabitants were abnormal, and indeed hostile to American ideals of equality.

Well before 1960, scholar Allison Graham suggests, this subjective civil rights reporting had already established itself as a mixture of “literary and cinematic conventions.” News items often rendered the region as sizzling and claustrophobic and seemed to accept Mississippi novelist William Faulkner’s descriptions of a sweaty, benighted South as truth. In 1966, the Nation’s Dan Wakefield, for example, called Sumner, Mississippi, “an eerie place. . . . The air is heavy, dusty, and hot, and even the silence has a thickness about it—like a kind of taut skin—that is suddenly broken with a shock by the crack and fizz of a Coke being opened.” Even when reporters recognized this imagery of the South as problematic, they often seemed unable to help themselves. In a 1962 report about trying to ensure journalistic standards in southern civil rights reporting, for instance, John Herbers of Nieman Reports could not resist referencing Faulkner’s imagined South as reality. (“Today, Yoknapatawpha County . . . is undergoing rather drastic, externally wrought changes.”)

Even when not relying on overwrought prose, journalists tended to portray white southerners, like their homeland, as strangely deformed, morally bankrupt residents of the

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23 Graham, *Framing the South*, 2.


margins of the America mainstream. On television, the disappearance of three civil rights workers in Mississippi in 1964 led Walter Cronkite’s CBS News broadcast to contrast the admirable goals of the interracial movement with the intransigence of the white South. Alluding to the movement’s success in framing noble protesters against angry white southern antagonists, historian David Farber argued in *The Age of Great Dreams* that “America’s leading newsmen made sure that Americans were aware of the Deep South’s failure to create even elementary racial justice.”

In print news reports as well, journalists frequently laid that “failure” at the feet of a weird, insular white South.Echoing Ole Miss professor James Silver’s 1964 study of Mississippi as a “closed society,” that same year *Life’s* David Nevin called Philadelphia, Mississippi, the town near where civil rights workers Andrew Goodman, James Chaney, and Michael Schwerner were murdered, “strange,” and “its fear and hatred of things and ideas that come from the outside . . . nearly pathological.”

Elsewhere magazine and newspaper subscribers read reports depicting the white South as “a wild mob of men and women” attacking journalists and freedom riders in Alabama in 1961, and as “a gap-toothed old man in a blue American Legion cap” who stood prepared to prevent black student James Meredith’s integration of the University of Mississippi in 1962. “I’m ready for the kill,” a reporter quoted the man as saying, “are

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As in *Travels with Charley*, the proponents of desegregation appeared as morally, and even sometimes physically, defective. *Newsweek’s* 1963 commentary “Case History of a Sick City” was written in the aftermath of Birmingham police siccing attack dogs and turning high-pressure water hoses on black protesters, and the deaths of four black girls in the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. The article blamed an obsessive commitment to hatred and white supremacy as the culprit behind the city’s violent resistance to black civil rights. Using the words of a local white businessman, it condemned every white southerner who “spreads the seeds of hate” for creating a toxic stew of racial antipathy and violence.

Selma, Alabama, one of the centers of the civil rights struggle, only hardened the national image of the Vicious South. On 7 March 1965, cameras rolled as state troopers and sheriff’s deputies unleashed billy clubs and tear gas against peaceful black marchers on the Edmund Pettus Bridge. Two weeks later, national press followed the route of thousands of civil rights activists as they marched from Selma to the Alabama state capitol in Montgomery. The news reports from Selma often fit into the classic Vicious South mold, with villainous white southerners occupying an alien landscape juxtaposed against brave black protesters. Auto dealer Art Lewis and his wife Muriel were correct when they wrote in a March 1965 letter, “We were well aware that there was a perfect setup here with ‘the villain’ [Sheriff] Jim Clark, and when Martin Luther King arrived

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29 “Case History of a Sick City,” *Newsweek*, 30 September 1963, 27.
there was the hero.”30 White Selma’s particularly intense resistance to black civil rights, coupled with the news media’s role as an agent in the creation of the civil rights movement’s narrative, caused press reports to hone in on that dichotomous portraiture between black agitators and white resisters. *Time* highlighted the social impact of the city’s racism, noting that the majority black population represented only one percent of the city’s voters. The magazine claimed that “the place has not changed much since” 1852 when Selma passed an ordinance allowing authorities to whip blacks convicted of “smoking a cigar or pipe or carrying a walking cane.”31

*Time*’s claims of the city’s ingrained, timeless racism sounded tame compared to other journalists’ commentary. Kentucky native Elizabeth Hardwick sprinkled her ironically titled “Selma: The Charms of Goodness” in the *New York Times Review of Books* with nearly every southern literary cliché imaginable. She described “a sad countryside” with its “khaki-colored earth, the tense, threatening air, the vanquished feeding on their permanent Civil War—all of it brings to mind flamboyant images from Faulkner.”32 Throughout the article, she painted the white citizenry as degenerates. Sheriff Jim Clark’s enforcers were “middle-aged delinquents and psychopaths.”33 She saved her most vitriolic words, though, for the poor whites—“these outcasts”—who


33 Ibid. 357.
“carry guns and whips and have power over senators and governors.” Rather than pawns of the city fathers, Hardwick presented them as “a degraded and despised people.”

Again demonstrating the civil rights movement’s successful framing of heroes and villains, the journalist juxtaposed the city’s whites with the “good people”—the black civil rights protesters fighting against the city’s entrenched white power structure. She lauded “the moral justice of the Civil Rights movement” waged by “good, clean, downright folk in glasses and wearing tie clasps.”

In the hands of the press corps, white southerners occasionally appeared as akin to the worst evils of the twentieth century. Southern fascism in Selma, some reports proposed, was as bad as, if not worse than, the brutalities of Nazi Germany. One black activist told the *New York Times*, “I fought in World War II, and I once was captured by the German army, and I want to tell you that the Germans never were as inhuman as the state troopers of Alabama.”

Writing for the *Nation*, George B. Leonard, another native southerner, described leaving San Francisco to join the movement in Alabama. He opened his article with scenes from the German death camps and scattered his writing with comparisons between Nazism and Deep Southern white supremacy.

Compounding the indictments of bigoted southerners, editorial cartoons responding to the

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34 Ibid., 358.
35 Ibid., 359.
36 Ibid., 360.
Selma violence proliferated in nonsouthern newspapers. According to Time, in these cartoons, “[Gov. George] Wallace, Alabama law-enforcement officers and Selma’s red-neck hoodlums were caricatured as fascist bullyboys, Neanderthal dimwits or lumbering ogres from a horror movie.”

The overwhelming presence of the Vicious South in the national media during the early to mid-1960s helped to fuel support for the southern civil rights movement and hostility toward its white adversaries. In its posing of debauched racists occupying a strange homeland against dignified blacks fighting to assert their humanity, the Vicious South powerfully interpreted the region as backward. The trope placed this bigoted and benighted South against the non-South, the representative of what Joseph Crespino has referred to as “modern, open America.” The Vicious South discourse told Americans that the southland had nothing to offer the rest of the nation, for it was everything that America was purportedly not: racist, unequal, hateful, and violent. But, in fact, this view of the white South was vitally important to the nation’s self-image. By encasing virtually all of the nation’s social evils in one imagined space, and by marking the South as abnormal, it encouraged nonsoutherners, particularly liberals, to feel secure in their feelings of regional superiority and their own sense of U.S. exceptionalism. Although some Americans would identify with the anger and violence of the Vicious South, especially later in the 1960s, most citizens would only begin to perceive that “otherness” as a positive trait once they began to reassess the imagery of white southerners. That

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40 Crespino, “Mississippi as Metaphor,” 101.
reassessment began even as the Vicious South discourse flourished, as alternative ideas about the region emerged that questioned the notion of white southerners as racially deviant figures in an otherwise equalitarian national society.

The Changing South

By the mid-1960s, with the civil rights struggle still shaking the region, commentators—novelists, filmmakers, and journalists—had begun reassessing the image of the South. Some commentators expressed guarded optimism for the ability of the region and its white inhabitants to adjust to racial change. Whereas the Vicious South stressed the region’s intransigence, this Changing South narrative identified evidence of progress. Emerging as federal legislation dealt blows to institutionalized racism in the region, the Changing South argued for the capacity of white southerners to heal themselves of the social sickness of racism. It cast these people in another light, one that imagined them and their region as on the path to national reconciliation and perhaps capable of teaching the country a few lessons of its own. Rather than serving as the nation’s bigoted cousin, the Changing South suggested that white southerners could be brought back into the fold as rehabilitated, full Americans who were knowledgeable about dealing with persistent social problems. This discourse was an appealing in-between view of the South. It rejected the idea of white southern racism as an uncorrectable regional problem and national embarrassment, while contending that white southern bigotry was either on the wane or no worse than the prejudices of the rest of the nation. By reassessing the pervasiveness of what appeared to be white southerners’ most negative trait, the Changing South laid the groundwork for a frequent component of later
imaginings of the white South as pre-modern, rural, and maintaining traditions supposedly lacking in modern American society.

*Foundations of the Changing South*

The “surprising” aspect of the apparent white racial reform characteristic of the Changing South was dependent on the commonness of the Vicious South view of white southerners in the popular consciousness. Atlanta, dubbing itself “The City Too Busy to Hate” in the 1950s, embodied this notion as it began its initial desegregation process in relative peace. Even in the early 1960s, when it became clear that the city’s racial problems were more serious than initially reported, Atlanta continued to benefit from its comparison to other southern communities like Birmingham. In February 1964, the *Washington Post* addressed that juxtaposition in an editorial titled “Tale of Two Cities.” While they acknowledged that “there are still pockets of segregation in [Atlanta],” the newspaper’s editors insisted that “the distinction between Atlanta and Birmingham is a vital one. It is the distinction between reason and bigotry, between adjustment and conflict.”41 By drawing a line between the good South and the bad South, the Changing South discourse advised Americans that racial oppression could ultimately be conquered in the region and that, in contrast to the Vicious South narrative, white southerners might be able to salvage their sense of decency and equality and rejoin the nation.

Other pieces of journalism focused less on specific locales like Atlanta, but still found reason for optimism throughout the South. *Newsweek* posited in May 1965 that

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“like a ray of spring sun, the changing [racial] attitude is creeping across the Southern landscape.”\textsuperscript{42} The magazine’s competitor \textit{Time}’s uncredited 1965 essay “The Other South” expanded on this view a few days later. Published in the aftermath of the Pettus Bridge violence in Selma, “The Other South” embodied a hopeful message about race relations in the region while admitting to the difficult work that lay ahead. Referencing the Vicious South outlined in much civil rights reporting, the essay stated, “To much of the nation and the world, the South is Selma.”\textsuperscript{43} \textit{Time} advanced that racial tension and violence between blacks and whites would not vanish soon. Still, “another South,” had become increasingly visible in the midst of the civil rights movement. This version, the piece’s author asserted, was

a region of quiet, solid, if often agonizing, progress. That other South, all too easily overlooked, was not created this year or ten years ago; it was not brought into being only by an act of the Supreme Court or only by the exertions of the civil rights movement. It has long existed in the hearts of some men. But only lately has it begun to take over in reality and to make its true weight felt in the balance of events.\textsuperscript{44}

This Other or Changing South coexisted with the Vicious South; however, the magazine pointed to recent events to make the case that national understandings of the region should not be framed by its very real white resistance, but rather by that “agonizing,” and often reluctant, “progress” to which white southerners themselves were increasingly acquiescing.

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{43} “The Other South,” \textit{Time}, 7 May 1965 [database on-line]; available from Academic Search Premier (accessed 11 April 2012).
  \item \textsuperscript{44} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
Time acknowledged that the changes to the South “often seem heartbreakingly and absurdly slight.” Indeed, as the magazine noted, the sight of blacks being served by white bellhops in newly integrated hotels or segregationist Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus’s wife inviting black women to tea may have seemed superficial, “but taken together, and given the South’s unique history, such signs tell of an entirely new climate.” This guarded optimism came with a belief that troubled race relations were still bound to plague the South. Time declared that much of the problem lay in white southerners’ apparent inability to change as quickly as the civil rights movement demanded rather than some inherent commitment to racism. “The Southern white man’s old paternalistic and patronizing affection for the Negro has largely disappeared,” the essay read, “but has not yet been replaced with a new friendship based on equality.” Continuing to qualify its analysis, as if groping to make sense of the new southern social landscape wrought by several years of strife, Time looked favorably on the increasing numbers of southern whites who supported the goals of the black freedom struggle. White supremacy in the South may not have been broken, the article’s author suggested, yet an apparently unstoppable shift in southern life had occurred. Part of the challenge that lay ahead for black and white southerners was in redefining their relationships. White southerners would furthermore need to reconsider their own identities in a world in which their social dominance had been challenged. This Changing South of Time’s imagination was the Vicious South on the wane, due in large part to the impact of federal

45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
47 Ibid.
legislation and business interests. “Perhaps, as regional differences fade,” the essay concluded, “the South is finally approaching the point where it will cease to be an epilogue to tragedy and begin being merely a problem.”\footnote{Ibid.} As the focus of civil rights moved away from the towns and cities of the Deep South to urban unrest in the North, the Changing South discourse in fact became increasingly plausible.

Other popular publications demonstrated the discourse’s robustness during the mid-1960s as an alternative to the “othering” qualities of the Vicious South. An April 1965 special supplement to Harper’s represented one of the most sustained versions of the Changing South narrative. Commemorating the one hundredth anniversary of the end of the Civil War, the magazine featured writings by southerners, most of whom were white (with contributions by two blacks and one British author). Their opinions on the South, its national image, and its race relations ranged from frustrated to melancholic to hopeful to—arguably—delusional. The Harper’s issue indicated the vitality of the Changing South discourse just one month after the violence at Selma.

Harper’s editor Willie Morris, a native Mississippian, enlisted participants and oversaw the supplement’s content. Morris set a balanced tone for the magazine’s southern issue in its foreword. The editor noted the intense national focus on the region, contending that “the South today is more important and perhaps more obsessive than it has been at any time in the last century.” Wishing to primarily capture “the South as it has become,” Morris introduced the varying subjects and perspectives of his contributors. In all of their articles, though, he identified “a dominant human theme”: the continuing racial struggle between blacks and whites in the region. That theme “lies in the personal,
the institutional agonies, the subterfuges and cruelties which have in the past prevented or discouraged Southern whites and Southern Negroes from recognizing one another as ‘fellow Southerners,’ as children and victims of a common heritage.”49 The southern future, Morris implied, would be measured by how well whites and blacks came to understand that heritage.

As writers, journalists, and historians debated this question in the Harper’s special supplement, they portrayed a wide variety of Souths that were capable of invoking emotions ranging from fear and attraction to optimism and disappointment. But the dominant image was one of possibility. In a portrait of his hometown of Valdosta, Georgia, for example, black journalist Louis E. Lomax concluded that “the whites themselves are slowly changing,” and suggested that they were willing to accept blacks’ challenges to white supremacy if it meant that the peace could be maintained.50 White novelist Walker Percy went a step further. In a piece in which he called post-Brown Mississippi society “insane,” he also argued that the state was “even now beginning to feel its way to what might be called the American Settlement on the racial issue.”51 Although he called this transition “less of solution than a more or less tolerable impasse,” Percy joined Lomax in capturing the essence of the Changing South: a sense of optimism about the capacity of the white South to redefine its associations with its black neighbors and restore its value to the nation.52 By envisioning a way out of the southern racial


52 Ibid., 172.
dilemma, the Changing South presaged cultural productions that showcased white southern racism as a national problem while presenting southern whites as oracles of pre-modern wisdom and discarded values in an increasingly soulless U.S. consumer society.

*The Changing South in Literature and Film: To Kill a Mockingbird and In the Heat of the Night*

Two popular novels (and subsequent films) about race and the South—Harper Lee’s Pulitzer-Prize-winning *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) and John Ball’s *In the Heat of the Night* (1965)—delivered the Changing South image to a wide audience. What unites these novels’ often very different depictions of the Deep South is their argument that white southerners have the capacity to act morally and change their racist behavior. These novels aligned with the mid-1960s journalism that advanced the white South’s capacity to reinvent itself and its relationship with its black neighbors and the nation. More powerfully, they encouraged the belief that the key to southern racial reform was the middle-class white southerner who refused to give into old hatreds and instead blazed the trail for both his and his region’s racial redemption.

*To Kill a Mockingbird*, later made into a 1962 Academy Award-winning film starring Gregory Peck as the quietly crusading lawyer Atticus Finch, is set in fictional Maycomb, Alabama, during the Great Depression. Lee describes this fictionalized version of her own Alabama home as “a tired old town.” 53 “People moved slowly then,” she wrote. “They ambled across the square, shuffled in and out of the stores around it,

took their time about everything.” It was a place indeed where “there was no hurry.”

The author lulls the reader into an appealing tale of Atticus’s daughter Scout and his son Jem’s adventures in the first half of the book. Their biggest concern is trying to make their reclusive neighbor Boo Radley emerge from his decaying, shuttered home. A few years after the book’s publication, Lee remarked, “I would like to be the chronicler of something that I think is going down the drain very swiftly. And that is small town middle-class southern life.” While pointing to the uniqueness of this lifestyle, she also identified “something universal in it.” One might logically extrapolate that Lee found it a welcome respite from an encroaching modern, urban existence. There is also an escapist element in Lee’s choice of time period. Literary scholar Eric Sundquist writes that “the novel harks back to the 1930s . . . to move the mounting fear and violence surrounding desegregation into an arena of safer contemplation.”

Although Lee’s Maycomb is no Philadelphia, Mississippi, racial division is ever present in the town. It is this discord and its importance to the narrative that makes To Kill a Mockingbird’s imagined South the product of the civil rights era rather than post-civil rights era. In the second half of the novel, Atticus defends Tom Robinson, a local black man accused of rape by the poor white teenager Mayella Ewell. In court, Atticus shows that Mayella had propositioned Tom and that he had refused her advances. He

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54 Ibid., 6.


also reveals that when Bob Ewell, Mayella’s father, discovered the attempted seduction, he beat Mayella and constructed the rape accusation. Atticus’s virtuosic closing statement includes a condemnation of southern racial injustice and of the cynicism of the people who perpetuate it. He implores the jurors to abandon the falsehood “that all Negroes lie, that all Negroes are basically immoral beings, that all Negro men are not to be trusted around our women.”\(^{57}\) Despite his efforts, Tom is convicted and sentenced to the penitentiary. He is subsequently shot and killed while running for the prison wall.

*To Kill a Mockingbird* thus balances an alluring portrait of southern small town life with an extended meditation on the corrosive effects of southern structural racism on both blacks and whites. Lee’s black characters are noble in the face of prejudice, yet the reader learns little about them. The author explores whites in more detail, especially the racial liberal Atticus. The middle-aged lawyer is no crusader; he only reluctantly honors the local judge’s request to take the case. But he believes in fairness and equality regardless of one’s skin color. To think otherwise would call into question his authority and his basic humanity. As he tells Scout, who asks why he took the case, “If I didn’t I couldn’t hold up my head in town, I couldn’t represent this county in the legislature, I couldn’t even tell you or Jem not to do something again.”\(^ {58}\) It is, in short, a question of honor, which Atticus couches in a defense of middle-class respectability. Atticus’s representation of Tom already differentiates him from the hateful, unreasonable whites of *Travels with Charley* and *Black Like Me*. Lee contrasts Atticus with these people by

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\(^{57}\) Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, 233.

\(^{58}\) Ibid. 86.
making him a man for whom both reason and gut instinct dictate that blacks deserve to be treated with dignity. It is a remarkable shift in the depiction of the white southerner, one that encourages readers and viewers of *To Kill a Mockingbird* to envision this figure as capable of racial tolerance and as worthy of emulation rather than derision.

*Commonweal*’s Philip T. Hartung rightly observed, in a review of the film version, that "‘Mockingbird’ says as effectively as any propaganda that there are Southerners on the side of justice and tolerance, that there is hope for a country in which lawyers like Atticus are guiding their children along the right path."\(^59\)

The villain of *To Kill a Mockingbird*—the drunken, ranting, and loathsome Robert E. Lee Ewell—on the other hand, personifies the vicious southerner. Not only is he a virulent racist, but he is also Atticus’s social inferior. For all of Lee’s intimations of structural southern racism, like much civil rights coverage and *Travels with Charley*, the face of white southern bigotry in *To Kill a Mockingbird* is the lower class. Lee describes the short-fused, drunken Ewell as “a little bantam cock of a man” with a “face . . . as red as his neck.”\(^60\) He rules over his disease-ridden family of degenerate, pathetic white trash with a sense of misplaced pride that stems from his unshaken belief in white supremacy. Bob Ewell clearly lacks Atticus’s dignity and social respectability. His aberrant behavior is most visible when he attacks Scout and Jem after the trial as they walk home from their school’s Halloween pageant. Ewell is indicative of “the cracker from hell” that Allison


\(^60\) Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, 194.
Graham identifies as requiring suppression by more upstanding white southern characters in much of 1960s popular culture.\textsuperscript{61}

Despite Tom Robinson’s unjust conviction and lonely death, Harper Lee forecasts redemption for a Changing South that goes beyond Boo Radley’s justifiable killing of Ewell during his assault on Atticus’s children. The key to that redemption lies in courageous white southerners not only standing up and fighting, but also employing common sense and fairness, like Atticus, rather than mindlessly attempting to maintain their crumbling racial caste system. Atticus is the face of southern white racial liberalism, a man who represents the possibilities of a new South. Indeed, the lawyer serves as a forerunner of white southern figures like Jimmy Carter, who would present himself as a racial healer to American voters during the 1970s. Atticus believes that the white South’s efforts to mend itself and to restore its claim to the American creed of equality will be a hard-fought conflict. With a sly nod to the contemporary civil rights turmoil in the Deep South, Atticus describes Maycomb as a town at war with itself over the racial issue. “This time we aren’t fighting the Yankees, we’re fighting our friends,” he tells Scout. “But remember this, no matter how bitter things get, they’re still our friends and this is still our home.”\textsuperscript{62} Lee’s relative indifference toward the inner life of her black characters makes the redemption to which she alludes largely a white awakening, gradual though it may be. The Finches’ white neighbor Miss Maudie is disappointed by the jury’s verdict against Tom Robinson, but she also thinks that “we’re

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{61} Graham, \textit{Framing the South}, 17.

\textsuperscript{62} Lee, \textit{To Kill a Mockingbird}, 87.
\end{quote}
making a step—it’s just a baby-step, but it’s a step.”

By condemning Maycomb’s racial “disease,” as Atticus terms it, and making the jury deliberate for longer than usual before inevitability convicting a black man based on a white man’s word, she believes that Atticus has pushed the town in the direction of progress. Through the character of the brave lawyer, Lee thus leaves her readers with a sense that the white South of the 1960s may be able to overcome its reliance on white supremacy and exhibit its inner goodness once it contains its lower-class riff-raff. Her novel suggests an uncertain, yet guardedly optimistic, forecast of the region’s future: the “disease” may be cured only if the South’s Atticus Finches dare to rise up and expose the lies that undergird an increasingly wobbly Jim Crow society.

The cautious hope for the future of the white South that inhabits To Kill a Mockingbird is furthered in John Ball’s In the Heat of the Night (and the subsequent film directed by Norman Jewison, winner of the 1967 Academy Award for Best Picture). The community in the story (Wells, somewhere in the Carolinas, in the book, and Sparta, Mississippi, in the film) seems almost a caricature of the racist southern small town. Gone are the appealing attributes of Lee’s Depression-era Maycomb. While Lee’s 1930s town is sleepy, Ball’s contemporary rural small town is decaying and torpid. His opening lines echo the most purple imagery of civil rights reporting: “At ten minutes to three in the morning, the city of Wells lay inert, hot and stagnant. Most of its eleven thousand people tossed restlessly; the few who couldn’t sleep at all damned the fact that there was no breeze to lift the stifling effect of the night. The heat of the Carolinas in August hung

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63 Ibid., 247.

64 Ibid., 101, 247.
thick and heavy in the air.” The antiracist characters in *To Kill a Mockingbird* like Atticus and Miss Maudie are also nowhere to be found. Ball’s characters, regardless of class, are infused with a deep racism. At the beginning of the novel, the author wastes little time before describing the bigotry that infects the town. Police officer Sam Wood converses with a diner employee who bemoans the dominance of blacks in the boxing field. Sam claims that their skills are due to biology. He says “they haven’t got the same nervous system,” that “they’re like animals.” Later in the novel, a local white councilman raises the familiar white southern refrain against outside agitators. In response to a proposed *Newsweek* profile of a local murder investigation, he dismisses the magazine as a meddling “bunch of nigger lovers” trying to impose their views upon the town’s whites.

Like *To Kill a Mockingbird*, this highly racist backdrop drives the drama of *In the Heat of the Night*. As one reviewer of the film contended in 2008, it “relies on its audience’s belief—prejudice, really—in the complete backwardness of the American South.” The unsubtle case for white southern racism nevertheless resonated with many critics and audience members. A scant two months after white southern law enforcement attacked peaceful black protesters in Selma, the *New York Times* asserted that Ball

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66 Ibid., 5.

67 Ibid., 87.

“handles the racial situation with detailed perception.” The fictional South of *In the Heat of the Night*, like many real-life depictions, cast the region as aberrational. In the film version, a nonsouthern liberal asks, “What kind of people are you? What kind of a place is this?” Allison Graham is surely correct that these were “questions begged by a decade of news footage.” But the overt racism of Ball’s southern town is in fact a necessary construction to make some of its white characters’ racial progress seem all the more stunning, lending an almost romantic quality to the supposed ability of white southerners to transcend their bigoted environment.

While in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, brave white southern racial moderates, if not liberals, are entrusted with reforming race relations in the South, in *In the Heat of the Night* this task falls to an outsider—a black nonsoutherner, no less. The “outside agitator” of *In the Heat of the Night* is Virgil Tibbs (portrayed by Sidney Poitier in the film version). The drama begins when Tibbs is arrested at the local train depot, after he is found carrying a wallet packed with cash. Tibbs is in fact a Pasadena (Philadelphia, in the film) police detective. After the truth is confirmed, Tibbs assists Chief of Police Bill Gillespie (played by Rod Steiger in the picture) in conducting a murder investigation; a Chicago businessman who planned to build a factory in town has been found dead. The expected racial tension between Tibbs and Gillespie, his all-white police force, and white locals ensues. Eventually, Tibbs’s coolness and competence begin to win over Gillespie and Sam. Near the end of the novel, when a café manager refers to Tibbs as “a nigger,”

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71 Graham, *Framing the South*, 179.
Sam demonstrates that he is a changed man. “Virgil isn’t a nigger,” he corrects the man. He’s colored, he’s black, and he’s a Negro, but he isn’t a nigger. I’ve known a lot of white men who weren’t as smart as he is.”72 After the case is solved, Gillespie shakes the black man’s hand, a first for him. “You’re a great credit to your race,” he says to the detective in the novel. “I mean, of course, the human race.”73 Gillespie even allows Virgil to sit on the “white” bench on the deserted train platform. Jewison avoids such heavy-handed sentiment. There is no indication of Sam’s transformation in the film and Gillespie merely sends off the black man with a pleasant goodbye.

Critics appreciated the subtly and also noted the change in the relationship between Gillespie and Tibbs. Time commended the way in which the film’s characters “break brilliantly with black-white stereotypes” and lauded Jewison, who “has shown . . . that men can join hands out of fear and hatred and shape from base emotions something identifiable as a kind of love.”74 Life’s movie reviewer Richard Schickel highlighted the film’s refusal to overstep plausibility. “They do not suddenly become brothers under the skin,” he wrote, “put down their old prejudices, or vow to be better men.”75 But the meaning of the change in Gillespie is apparent from the knowing smile on both men’s faces as Virgil boards the train. The seemingly impregnable barrier of Jim Crow that Ball and Jewison outline at the beginning of their respective versions is showing cracks.

72 Ball, In the Heat of the Night, 161.

73 Ibid., 172-173.


Gillespie’s transformation is all the more remarkable because he sounds and looks like one of the belly-protruding, khaki-suited white southern sheriffs that personified the Vicious South in the popular press. Historian Jack Temple Kirby pointed out that Rod Steiger, playing Gillespie in the film version of *In the Heat of the Night*, “has a chilling resemblance to Sheriff Rainey who had been implicated in the 1964 murders of three civil rights workers near Philadelphia, Mississippi.” Newsweek called Gillespie “a two-bit Bull Connor” and indeed Jewison later stated that he envisioned Steiger’s appearance as the sheriff more as a nod to the Alabama public safety chief. Regardless, by the end of the work, Gillespie, after developing a close working relationship with Tibbs, could not be further from the racist white southern lawmen of television and print civil rights coverage.

The movie and novel left audiences with the unmistakable message that even the most hardened southern racists—including Bull Connor-types, no less!—might be capable of redemption. It is a message similar to that of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. In Lee’s work, white southern racism is a fundamental “disease” that cannot be easily eradicated. Historian Aram Goudsouzian posits that, likewise, “*In the Heat of the Night* never pretends to cure racism” or “an immoral social structure.” While these productions do highlight the hardened framework of white bigotry in the Deep South that impacts all strata of society, the fact remains that they argue for the possibility of individual change.

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at least when courageous white southerners or a dignified, competent black man are available to demonstrate the bankruptcy of southern white supremacy. For many Americans, particularly liberals, who looked upon the South with dread, the notion that white southerners were capable of revising their racial views opened the way to more positive imaginings of the South in the late 1960s and 1970s.

As national audiences consumed the Changing South on the screen and on the page, they watched yet another discourse on white southernness play out week after week on 1960s network situation comedies. This Down-home South showcased white southerners as close to the land, familial, and unaffected by consumer culture. It would influence a variety of imagined Souths from that of the counterculture to the Souths of Jimmy Carter and George Wallace. In contrast to the Changing South narrative, the Down-home South completely ignored southern racism, thus offering another rendering of the region: traditional, lily-white, simple, and decent.

The Down-Home South

Two of the most popular television shows of the 1960s distanced themselves from the southern racial unrest of the era and were thus able to showcase a different and more usable version of white southernness. *The Andy Griffith Show* (CBS, 1960-1968) and *The Beverly Hillbillies* (CBS, 1962-1971) inhabited worlds completely removed from the racial turmoil playing nightly on national news broadcasts about the South. *The Andy Griffith Show* tells the story of Andy Taylor, a folksy, widowed sheriff who is raising his son in the fictional rural small town of Mayberry. *The Beverly Hillbillies* is based on a more outlandish concept: southern mountaineer Jed Clampett strikes oil on his property.
and transplants his nouveau riche family (sassy Granny, fetching Elly May, and simple-minded Jethro) to the land of “swimming pools [and] movie stars.” *The Andy Griffith Show* and *The Beverly Hillbillies* idealized rural and small town white southerners, presenting them not as villains, but rather as admirable individuals who possessed deeply rooted, traditional values abandoned by most Americans. The Down-home South differentiated itself from other civil rights era discourses by presenting an admirable South that was devoid of racial strife and served as a repository of the values that other Americans now neglected in their supposedly ill-fated investment in modern, consumer society. The incredible ratings successes of both *The Andy Griffith Show* and *The Beverly Hillbillies* demonstrates that even the powerful Vicious South discourse could not crowd out openly positive views of the region and its white inhabitants. Furthermore, their popularity indicates that Americans were capable of holding different versions of the South in their mind simultaneously and for different reasons without being overwhelmed by the cognitive dissonance.

*The Down-Home South in Mayberry: The Andy Griffith Show*

In the national imagination of the 1960s, two lawmen, Eugene “Bull” Connor and Andy Taylor embodied contrasting versions of the South. Connor, the real-life public safety commissioner of Birmingham, Alabama, ordered his officers to assault peaceful black protesters with fire hoses and attack dogs in 1963 as news cameras captured every harrowing moment. “He possessed the sensibility of a billy goat,” *Newsweek* opined, and
a blind, buffoon-like dedication not to “segregate no niggers and whites together [sic].”[^79] Andy Taylor offered a stark alternative to the Birmingham chief. In protecting his town’s citizens he exhibited strength, humility, and restraint, as well as a connection to the assertedly empowering qualities of the land. Donald Freeman of the *Saturday Evening Post* referred to the character as “a relaxed, highly competent son of the soil.”[^80]

Although both Taylor and Connor were white southern lawmen, they lived in decidedly different Souths. Connor encountered (and oppressed) a large black community. Andy Taylor, meanwhile, rarely saw black faces in lily-white Mayberry. Therein lay Taylor’s powerful appeal: he was a white southerner whose positive qualities enabled him to exist without ever engaging in a conversation with the Vicious South. His widespread popularity demonstrated that one could embrace his folksy, pre-modern South while rejecting or ignoring the Bull Connor brand of racist white southernness.

The fictional Mayberry was modeled after Griffith’s actual hometown of Mount Airy, North Carolina. Mayberry was miles away, both spatially and emotionally, from the turmoil of the Deep South. It is a place where race is not a problem (a conceit made easier by the near absence of non-white characters) and where tradition and common sense rule without the anxieties of the city and consumer culture.[^81] Similar to *To Kill a

[^79]: “Case History of a Sick City,” 24.


[^81]: Allison Graham makes much of the lack of black characters on *The Andy Griffith Show*. She argues, “For a comedy series so intent on capturing an unusual level of emotional realism, the studied remoteness from the connotations of its [southern] setting was remarkable.” Graham, *Framing the South*, 158. In large part, network standards mitigated against showing a biracial Mayberry. The three television networks—NBC, ABC, and CBS—carefully controlled the images that they beamed to their viewers. In the tense racial climate of the 1960s, executives were apprehensive about putting blacks on TV. Erik Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Television*, 2d rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University
Mockingbird, *The Andy Griffith Show* furthered its lack of relevance to contemporary events by inhabiting an alternate present. Griffith, in fact, recalled that he and others associated with the show understood the time period to be the 1930s. “It is this sense of a *remembered* community that is most striking about the series,” Allison Graham contends. The distance from current events may have encouraged the sense that the show inhabited a mythical southern setting, but nothing in the program indicated that the characters existed in any time period but the present. Mayberry’s effectiveness in preserving the appeal of the bucolic and communal nature of its rural South and its dismissal of the race question idealized the rural South’s purported superiority over the industrial and suburban world. This perspective would influence post-civil rights-era imaginings, including the idea of the South in the counterculture and country-rock music.

*The Andy Griffith Show*’s Down-home South created an out-of-time sensation for viewers that represented a major part of its appeal. It marked “an illusory return to innocence,” stated Donald Freeman, “to a time and place slipped forever out of reach.” The show’s producers sympathized with many of the era’s cultural commentators in their critique of America’s supposed suburban blandness and social anomie. But they did so in such a way that did not seem preachy. The show enveloped viewers in its perfectly

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Press, 1990), 326-327. Nevertheless, for a program about the American South, the racial absence of *The Andy Griffith Show*, whether in reference to black characters or to the civil rights struggle, seems gaping. But this racial absence was necessary in order to construct Mayberry as a southern locale without the baggage of contemporary racial unrest. The lack of black characters on *The Andy Griffith Show* broke with the obvious racial reality of southern life. But in doing so, it gave the program’s creators the ability to emphasize the supposedly positive qualities of a pre-modern South.

82 Graham, *Framing the South*, 158.

83 Ibid.

84 Freeman, “I Think I’m Gaining on Myself,” 70.
tightly knit southern community and its appealing residents’ lives. Andy’s folk wisdom enticed Americans fascinated by the fabled “good old days,” and the series highlighted the sheriff’s benevolent and fair personality. He helped the townspeople to avoid questionable situations, saved the hapless Deputy Barney Fife from (greater) embarrassment, and selflessly gave others credit for his ideas.

In addition to what the show’s producer called Griffith’s “Lincolnesque character,” an apparent reference to Andy Taylor’s honesty and integrity, Mayberry was populated by southern stock characters whose personalities were presented as indicative of their rural and small town background. These characters included the country rubes Gomer and Goober Pyle; the nervous, bumbling Barney; the doting, domestic goddess Aunt Bea; and the Tom Sawyer-like Opie. Viewers alternately laughed with and laughed at the residents of Mayberry. Andy’s calmness and keen insight into the human condition balanced Barney’s delusions of authority and overzealousness in performing his duties. Even when using them for laughs, the series always treated in its characters in a warm-hearted manner and as implicitly—and sometimes explicitly—superior to more “modern” Americans.

The show’s writers and producers, for instance, frequently created story lines in which an outsider—often a city dweller—visits Mayberry and learns an important lesson about the virtues of the small town and its values. The episode “Man in a Hurry” (1963) offers a prime example. The story involves an urban businessman who is stranded after his car breaks down outside Mayberry. He becomes annoyed when repairs are delayed

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and he is forced to endure the company of the town’s easy-going residents. Although initially reluctant, he eventually comes around and heeds the townspeople’s calls, according to scholar Don Rodney Vaughan, “to try to relax and enjoy the simple things.” The obvious celebration of small town, rural values at the expense of urban bustle and agitation is undeniable, as the businessman fabricates another car problem, ending the episode in his newly beloved Mayberry, fast asleep in a rocking chair.

The power of *The Andy Griffith Show* lay not in its realism, but rather in its presentation of the rural small town “southern” authenticity apparently lacking in the rest of 1960s American culture. Show chronicler Richard Kelly has written of the importance of Mayberry in counteracting “our middle-class, technological society” in which people feel detached from their fellow humans and community. Indeed, the series’ themes acted as a counterweight to the consumerism and increasing reliance on technology in 1960s America. *The Andy Griffith Show* was most certainly escapist, but it carried an implicit critique of modernity in its celebration of rural and small town southern life. The program achieved widespread popularity during its initial run. As it continued in syndication in the late 1960s, a 1970 national survey revealed the show performing better

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89 Kelly, *The Andy Griffith Show*, 89.
in nonsouthern than in southern urban markets.\textsuperscript{90} This popularity suggests the mythic clout of Mayberry’s pastoral southernness.

\textit{The Down-Home South Meets Sunny, Deceitful California: The Beverly Hillbillies}

\textit{The Beverly Hillbillies} conveyed a similar message about the value of southern rural living in the midst of a pure white South. Like the residents of Mayberry, the absence of black characters on \textit{The Beverly Hillbillies} made the show’s appealing southernness more viable. It taught viewers that erasing was easier than confronting the weighty problem of white southern racism. By taking the Clampetts out of the South, their distance from the civil rights anguish from the era was less noticeable. The portrayal of the clan as an Ozarks family also mitigated against viewers comparing them to the angry Deep South whites they saw on television and in print. Regardless, it is remarkable that a show casting white southerners as clownish, but ultimately lovable and wiser than their nonsouthern counterparts, enjoyed an unprecedented popularity, premiering as it did during the Ole Miss integration crisis.

The \textit{Hillbillies} episodes occurred mostly outside of the South, far from Oxford, Mississippi, and other sites of the civil rights struggle. It functioned as a fish-out-of-water comedy, with the rural foibles of the main characters contrasted with snooty southern Californians who often lacked the hillbillies’ common sense. The show did offer viewers an opportunity to laugh at the outsized mountain people stereotypes as manifested in Jethro’s stupidity or Elly May’s animal husbandry skills. Audiences could also find humor in Granny’s use of their mansion’s swimming pool, or “ce-ment pond.”

\footnote{\textsuperscript{90} Ibid., 12.}
as a giant washtub, or the family’s confusion of the pool table for a dinner table. Still, the characters were not simply punch lines. The show’s writers consistently presented their rural ways as superior to the practices of their rich, urbanized neighbors.

Even with all of the show’s silly antics and creator Paul Henning’s contention that “there’s no message except ‘have fun,’” *The Beverly Hillbillies* critique of modern 1960s society, along with its accompanying greed and materialism, is clear. As David Farber has argued, “In both *The Beverly Hillbillies* and, for example, the immensely popular *Andy Griffith Show*, the moral integrity of a consumer-based lifestyle—as against a rooted way of life—was sharply and [in]creasingly mocked.” Jed and his clan enjoy a sudden, dizzying transition to prosperity, one to which they never fully adjust over the course of the series. They continue to hold fast to their rural values of hard work, simplicity, and honesty except for fleeting moments like Jethro’s brief flirtation with the hip set on the Sunset Strip, which results in his ridicule and a critique of that lifestyle’s supposed vacuity. Notably, *The Beverly Hillbillies*’s rejection of technology and consumerism fit into widely held cultural concerns and anticipated later imaginings of the South that critiqued modern U.S. society. Jed’s family never loses its identity and it always triumphs over its southern California neighbors, who are often depicted as the epitomes of deceitfulness and consumerism. For instance, the family next door, the Drysdales, is composed of money grubbers who condescend to the “peasant” Hillbillies.

In one episode, Mr. Drysdale, the Clampetts’ banker, soothes his ragged nerves by

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92 “The Corn is Green,” *Newsweek*, 3 December 1962, 70.

smelling a stack of money. Other outsiders to the southern mountain tradition constantly seek to defraud the hillbillies, thinking that the clan’s lack of sophistication indicates an innate stupidity. Yet the joke is on them, as the Clampetts, particularly the commonsensical Jed, always stifle their schemes. As historian Anthony Harkins explains in his study of hillbilly iconography, “The program therefore presents modern America, at least superficially, as venal, boorish, materialistic, and, ultimately, ethically and spiritually hollow.”  

This positive portrayal of the rural South and accompanying negative depiction of the contemporary United States defines the former’s values as morally superior to those of the technology-obsessed non-South.

Not surprisingly, many television critics lambasted the program’s broad comedy as appealing to the lowest common denominator. United Press International (UPI) wrote that “the series aimed low and hit its target,” while the New York Times critiqued its “rural no-think.” The show, meanwhile, shot to number one in the ratings. Other commentators, though, like Arnold Hano recognized The Beverly Hillbillies’ anti-urban critique and its call for “a return to . . . natural ways.” Robert Lewis Shayon, writing in the high-brow journal Saturday Review, called it a “challenge to our money oriented value system” and “valid social criticism.” The show’s cornball factor, then, could not obscure its promotion of supposedly authentic rural southern characteristics.

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96 Both Hano and Shayon quoted in Harkin, Hillbilly, 196.
The Beverly Hillbillies and The Andy Griffith Show’s “southern” values were prized by many viewers worried about the state of modern society. The imagined Souths of these television programs possessed antithetical values to those promoted in a rapidly expanding, urban-based consumer culture. The Andy Griffith Show and The Beverly Hillbillies combined escapism with trenchant social analysis, managing to identify, but also to defuse, their prominent cultural anxieties in the make-believe worlds of Mayberry and a Beverly Hills invaded by the Clampetts. It was a testament to this race-erasing narrative’s power that it remained viable in the midst of the toxic imagery of white southerners publicized by the national media during the black freedom struggle.

Conclusion

The three most prominent discourses about the South during the 1960s civil rights movement—the Vicious, Changing, and Down-home Souths—served specific cultural needs while also providing the raw materials for imaginings of the South during the next decade and a half. The Vicious South narrative, while perhaps most familiar to Americans during the period, did not preclude these other popular views. The Vicious South offered liberals a worthy scapegoat for American racism. It largely identified those problems as peculiarly the fault of white southerners who were depicted as departing from mainstream American values. At the same time, the Vicious South’s othering of white southerners also cast them as manly, violent resisters who refused to give into unwanted social change. That notion of white southern virility would form the centerpiece of politically and culturally conservative Americans’ use of the Masculine South discourse of the early 1970s. The Changing South trope, in contrast, lent hope for
the possibility of attaining the elusive goal of national unity and for the country’s triumph over racial division without abandoning the Vicious South’s idea that the region’s primary problem was race. The Changing South would influence future positive imaginings by allowing liberal Americans to think of racism as more than simply a white southern problem. In other words, it helped to mitigate the biggest flaw in the South’s image. While race infused the Aberrational and Changing South discourses, it was totally absent from the Down-home South narrative as played out on popular television comedies in the 1960s. Even at the height of black-white turmoil in the Deep South, the immensely popular *Andy Griffith Show* and *Beverly Hillbillies* celebrated a white South far removed from contemporary racial unrest. The programs’ antimodern critique of postwar U.S. consumer society and celebration of an idyllic small town and rural white South anticipated many future manifestations of the imagined rural white South.

By 1968 the image of the rural white southerner stood available to meet the cultural needs of a variety of Americans. Drawing on the Changing South’s fairly nuanced understanding of white southern racism and the Down-home South’s rural celebration, the 1960s and 1970s freak counterculture frequently embraced rural white southernness as a collection of noble, long-forgotten values perfectly suited to its critique of an impersonal, technocratic “Amerika.” Their primary vessel was a strange musical hybrid: country-rock.
CHAPTER 2
“THIS WORLD FROM THE STANDPOINT OF A ROCKING CHAIR”: COUNTRY-ROCK AND THE SOUTH IN THE COUNTERCULTURAL IMAGINATION

In March 1968 the Byrds flew south to Nashville—what the band’s bassist Chris Hillman called “the motherland” of country music—to record tracks for their upcoming Columbia Records album.¹ The LP that emerged in part from those sessions, Sweetheart of the Rodeo, marked the first major effort by a rock act to fuse rock ‘n’ roll with country and western. Was this the same folk-rock sensation that had extolled the virtues of traveling “Eight Miles High” two years earlier? Whereas that song had rocketed to #14 on the Billboard Hot 100, Sweetheart of the Rodeo peaked at a disappointing #77 on the magazine’s LP chart.

The album also did not sell well among traditional country music audiences. This failure was foreshadowed in the Byrds’s negative reception at the Grand Ole Opry. Not long after the Sweetheart session began, the group’s manager convinced the program’s producers to place the Byrds on the March 15 bill. During the performance at the historic Ryman Auditorium, some in the crowd greeted the (by Nashville standards) longhaired

¹ Chris Hillman, interview by author, 14 December 2009.
performers with catcalls of “tweet, tweet” and “cut your hair.” The band received some applause—although that may have been due to the show’s electronic applause signs—as it made its way through a Merle Haggard tune and an original by new member Gram Parsons. The Byrds exited the stage and were quickly accosted by hostile producers and musicians, angered by Parsons’s refusal to stick to the prescribed set list. “They don’t fancy rock groups down there,” bandleader Roger McGuinn later told the countercultural music magazine *Rolling Stone*, “not on [the] Grand Ole Opry.”

The Byrds may have not captured the attention of the Nashville establishment or national country and pop audiences with *Sweetheart of the Rodeo*, but they joined an all-star roster of rock artists experimenting with country music in the late 1960s and early 1970s. At this time, Bob Dylan, Buffalo Springfield, the Flying Burrito Brothers, Linda Ronstadt, Dillard and Clark, and the Band all infused their music with a country sound, dubbed country-rock by the music press. While some of these acts enjoyed moderate mainstream success, they found some of their biggest support in a niche market: the freak counterculture.

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3 Ibid., 90.


5 When discussing the views of the counterculture, it is important to note that I am relying primarily on writings of the so-called underground press. These publications emerged in mostly urban centers throughout the country in the mid- to late 1960s. They represented a merging of New Left and countercultural styles. Some scholars have treated underground newspapers as virtually unvarnished repositories of freak ideology. See, for example, Timothy Miller, *The Hippies and American Values* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 71-84. Historian John McMillian alternately describes underground papers as proponents of New Left ideology. But in acknowledging the hazy boundaries between the “‘politicos’ who wanted to change society” and “hippies,” who he identifies as “lifestyle
Although by 1968 country music’s popularity had spread far from the cradle of the South, enjoying a sizable blue-collar audience and heavy radio airplay throughout the country, it remained for many Americans—counterculturists included—a deeply southern style of music. When the Byrds performed in Nashville, they crossed cultural lines in two ways: they publicly merged rock and country styles, and, less successfully, they brought together a west coast countercultural ethos and white southern culture. The Byrds were hip, but not hippies; they were wealthy rock stars recording for a multimillion dollar conglomerate. Their largely countercultural audience, however, many of them already suspicious of the blanket condemnations of the South ala the Vicious South discourse, welcomed country-rock as an opportunity to explore new musical terrain and the enticing culture of an imagined South.6

The countercultural interest in country music makes little sense if one considers country music as the music of a backward, racist people. Although some freaks certainly felt this way, others saw in both country music and in the southern culture from which it sprang tools for their fight against the stagnancy of so-called mainstream American society. Country sounds further appealed to counterculturists who felt burned out by what they saw as the chaotic nature of U.S. society, with political unrest and race riots as common occurrences. Envisioning the white South, then, became another variation of

7 In a 2005 *Western Historical Quarterly* article, historian Michael Allen takes a different stance in his examination of the counterculture’s utilization of cowboy mythology. He argues that hip youths largely identified with the western imagery in country-rock and that in a fantasy West, they found a spirit of freedom. Allen’s work suffers from its emphasis on musicians at the expense of the counterculture. Although his article has much to offer in complicating scholarly perceptions of the counterculture, his contention that freaks’ interest in country music demonstrated that “they in fact adopted some of the fundamental tenets and values of [the dominant] culture” fundamentally misinterprets the countercultural interest in country music. Michael Allen, “‘I Just Want to Be A Cosmic Cowboy’: Hippies, Cowboy Code, and the Culture of a Counterculture,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 36 (Autumn 2005): 296. The underground press record demonstrates that freaks were as excited by what they thought country music represented as they were by the music itself. In adopting a mainstream musical style, musicians and counterculturists selected the “country” values that fit their understandings of that world. These were not necessarily establishment principles. They in fact recalled an imagined past that freaks believed contemporary Americans had forgotten.
“dropping out” for interested freaks. Opinions expressed in countercultural newspapers often followed the Down-home South discourse, celebrating the white South as a rural refuge against modern practices and technologies. But while supporters of country-rock typically rejected the Vicious South portrait of white southerners that they grew up watching on television news civil rights coverage, they did not ignore white southern racism. Rather, according to underground press accounts, they considered racism an American problem, not a distinctly southern one. Counterculturists thus freed themselves to invoke a pre-modern rural South in their critique of Amerika, in which the white southerners were no more responsible than nonsoutherners for the country’s racial ills.

Through their embrace of country-rock, underground press writers frequently constructed southernness as an idea that celebrated community, family connections, closeness to the land, and perhaps most importantly—and nebulously—authenticity in a rural setting. “The new left’s search for authenticity,” Doug Rossinow asserts, “was expressed most often as a conflict between the artificial and the natural.”

8 The same holds true for the counterculture’s own “search for authenticity,” which simultaneously rejected the commercialized culture of what historian Lizabeth Cohen has termed the Consumer’s Republic.9 Country-rock provided an avenue for counterculturists to utilize southern traits as part of an anti-modern critique of modern American society. The widespread popularity of the Byrds and other bands that were even more focused on presenting rustic southern sounds and imagery, especially the Band, additionally


highlights the broader social appeal of the countercultural vision of the South as not just an anti-modern tool against the technocracy, but as an escape from the real and imagined political and social turmoil of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

The Southernness of Country Music

In recent years scholars have granted country music considerable attention, frequently concluding that its reputation as a strictly southern art form has been overstated. Historian James Gregory notes,

Country music historians typically stress the music’s close connection to the culture of the rural and working-class white South, and while acknowledging the importance of New York record companies and other commercial structures, they are happiest telling the story of Jimmie Rodgers, the Carter family, Roy Acuff, and other great musicians who reshaped the sounds and styles of country music while remaining in the South.  

Scholar Gerald W. Haslam has gone further, suggesting that “the fertile crescent” of country music is not the deep South, but rather central and western Texas and Oklahoma, which “escaped rebel homogeneity in their populations and music.” Haslam argues that while the South has played a major role in creating and nurturing country music, the “southernness” of the genre has been exaggerated in large part because of Nashville’s consolidation of commercial country music in the mid-twentieth century. His study Workin’ Man Blues: Country Music in California makes a convincing case for the strength and success of country music outside of the confines of Music City.


Haslam’s book holds important implications for the study of country-rock’s creators, many of whom grew up absorbing the ample country-themed television and radio offerings broadcast on Golden State stations after World War II. Chris Hillman of the Byrds and the Flying Burrito Brothers first took up the mandolin and got his start playing in bluegrass bands. By the early 1960s, Bakersfield, California, had emerged as something akin to Nashville West. Popular artists like Buck Owens and Merle Haggard contributed to the Bakersfield Sound, a response to the slick, orchestrated Nashville Sound of the 1950s and 1960s, that featured the distinctive twang of twin Telecaster guitars, a heavy backbeat, and prominent pedal steel guitar. Rock artists who dabbled in country music often identified the Bakersfield Sound as more authentic than the Nashville style. Many of them sought to emulate this purportedly more “real” musical approach over the perceived artifice of contemporary Nashville music. As the Grateful Dead’s Jerry Garcia claimed, “We’re kind of on the far fringe of it, but we’re part of that California Bakersfield school of country-and-western rock ‘n’ roll—Buck Owens, Merle Haggard.”

Underground press writers, too, contended that the best country music expressed honesty and avoided the “banality” and the “plastic finesse” of contemporary Nashville. Countercultural enthusiasts of country-rock disagreed about what “authentic” country music sounded like: Was it current Buck Owens? Or the Byrds’s

12 Ibid., 199, 201.

13 Quoted in Haslam with Haslam Russell and Chon, Workin’ Man Blues, 205. Chris Hillman stated that “without [Buck Owens] . . . there might not have been . . . that country-rock left turn so to speak.” Chris Hillman, Interview by author, 14 December 2009.

notion of an “almost outdated country album;” that is, “20-years-ago or 15-years-ago country” that came out of the South? Even so, few country-rock musicians would disagree with former Monkee and country-rock pioneer Michael Nesmith’s belief in country music’s founding by white southerners. In the liner notes his 1970 album The Magnetic South, Nesmith cited Jimmie Rodgers, Hank Williams, and Jerry Lee Lewis—all southerners—as “to me something of a musical triumvirate. Somehow I always get back to them.”

Despite the fact that west-coast country-rockers drew on southern lyrical themes and looked for inspiration in the South by frequently recording in Nashville and cutting cover versions of southern artists, the case can be made that these artists were influenced as much, if not more so, by what was happening in the California country music scene. That does nothing, though, to address how counterculturists interpreted the meaning of country music. By morphing a southern musical form to relate to a west coast context, these musicians created a brand of country music (country-rock) that encouraged counterculturists to similarly bend the image of the South to fit their needs. Indeed, prior to 1968 and the proliferation of country-rock recordings, hip youths and country music rarely mixed. Pamela Des Barres, famed groupie and dedicated fan of Los Angeles country-rock outfit the Flying Burrito Brothers, conjured images of southern rednecks

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when she recalled, “I had always thought of country music as lame and corny, played by backwoods guys with crew cuts.”

The relevant question is not whether country music was primarily southern, but whether counterculturists interpreted it in this way. The conventional wisdom of the 1960s and 1970s, as Haslam’s analysis indicates, portrayed this music as southern. Nashville’s hold on the country music industry after World War II and its delicate presentation of the genre as universal, yet distinctly (and distinctively) southern contributed to this popular view. In his seminal study Country Music, U.S.A., first published in 1968, historian Bill C. Malone, added another reason for the music’s perception as southern: its origins in the southland. “Commercial country music,” he argued, “developed out of the folk culture of the rural South.” Identifying the music’s on-going romance with the South, contemporary commentators also maintained that country music remained rooted in a southern milieu. In addition, they surmised, southerners remained the primary audience for the genre. In 1972 sociologists John D. McCarthy, Richard A. Peterson, and William L. Yancey, wrote that country music, no matter what its origins, had retained its southern roots. They advanced that country’s fans were “predominantly southern and white.” Many writers in the underground press

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18 Haslam with Haslam Russell and Chon, Workin’ Man Blues, 14.


argued along similar lines. The countercultural Berkeley Barb described the southern and rural nature of “the traditional country and western market.” 21 Baltimore underground newspaper Harry likewise stated that country was perceived negatively by “non-Southern, non-hip listeners.” 22 Country music, then, was strongly connected to southernness in both the popular and countercultural imaginations. By envisioning the music as southern, counterculturists were free to interpret it as a window into the region’s culture and values.

The South and Race in the Countercultural and Country-Rock Imagination

In their endeavor to employ an imagined South’s family-oriented, rural, simple, and authentic values as tools in their resistance to the supposed stagnancy and phoniness of modern American society, country-rock producers and consumers picked the “southern” concepts that best challenged what they saw as the mainstream. Given the considerable media attention to the 1960s southern civil rights movement, race played a surprisingly small role in country-rock and its reception. Influenced by the Vicious South discourse, underground press accounts typically acknowledged the pervasiveness of white southern bigotry, but counterculturists broke from that narrative by arguing that white working-class southerners were themselves, ironically, constrained by a racist society. They were not the problem; rather, their views were symptomatic of the nation’s larger racial ills. Youth radicals, both those more focused on culture than politics, and vice-versa, decried nonsoutherners who blasted white southerners as racists while

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22 Ira Allen, “We Don’t Take Our Trips on LSD,” Harry (Baltimore), 8 January 1971, 14.
denying their own prejudices. This belief in shared responsibility for the American dilemma allowed many counterculturists to look past their fears of white working-class southerners in order to idealize them as proud, honorable people who lived by values that were antithetical to modern society. That is what country music represented to many freaks, and so it is not surprising that they were attracted to rock artists who drew on the roots of southern musical tradition. For example, in a review of a 1969 concert by the country-rock band the Flying Burrito Brothers, the Philadelphia *Distant Drummer*’s Frank Gruber praised the band’s music as “songs [that] make you and the whole world simple. By no means hicks, the group persuades you to take a walk in the country and yearn for small-town America. I like it.” The absence of racial commentary accompanying the discussion of country-rock in the counterculture speaks to the power of this vision of white southernness, which many in the movement considered an invigorating source of antimodernity.

Certainly, some counterculturists refused to excuse the region’s racist past (and present) or to express optimism at its potential for change. Such individuals received their anthem in 1970, with sometime country-rocker Neil Young’s release of “Southern Man.” With its relentless beat and blistering guitars, the song is a full-out rock assault on the southern past. Historian Jim Cullen describes the tune as “one of the most passionate

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denunciations of the white South that has ever been recorded.”25 The first verse lambastes hypocritical white southerners who have failed to rectify their painful, brutal legacy of oppression:

Southern man, better keep your head
Don’t forget what your good book said
Southern change gonna come at last
Now your crosses are burnin’ fast . . .
I heard screamin’ and bull whips crackin’

Young’s song perhaps spoke to a larger truth about the tortured legacy and continued torment of southern racism, yet “Southern Man,” like the Vicious South discourse it echoed, lacked any subtlety or nuance. Its racialized and anachronistic imagery had more in common with the South in 1870 than in 1970.27 The artist’s use of the masculine singular to embody the whole of the region’s racial transgressions shared the tendency of other nonsoutherners to scapegoat individual southern rednecks during the civil rights era, rather than address the more elusive problem of institutionalized racism.28

Counterculturists frequently viewed the South and white southerners through a different lens while waging a cultural critique of the larger American society. In line with their appraisal of the systemic problems plaguing the country, ranging from overconsumption to social anomie, many writers in the underground press crafted a

28 See, for example, Allison Graham, Framing the South: Hollywood, Television, and Race during the Civil Rights Struggle (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).
deeper commentary on southern racism. Counterculturists were apt to consider “rednecks” or “hillbillies” loathsome, yet often they discerned this bigotry as part of the broader structure of American racism. In other words, the white southerner was, to paraphrase Bob Dylan’s civil rights-era song, “only a pawn in [Amerika’s] game.”

Underground newspaper reviews of the film *Easy Rider* (1969) provide a useful window into freaks’ refusal to view individual southern whites or southern white culture solely through the lens of race. During the movie’s climax, a shotgun-toting Louisiana redneck kills the two main characters, the freak-looking Wyatt (a.k.a. Captain America) and Billy, whom the locals had earlier disparaged as “refugees from a gorilla love-in.” The underground response to the dual death scene was overwhelmingly negative. Reviewers blasted the easy scapegoating of an entire region as particularly racist and violent. “Of course, there’s rednecks around who wouldn’t mind blowing the head off some long-haired communist Yankee queer,” read a review in Houston’s *Space City News*. “But those people aren’t the system; they’re the sick products of a sick culture, and to one degree or another every one of us is infected with that same sickness.”

Nonsouthern publications laid out similar critiques. Providence, Rhode Island’s *Extra* called the film “a lie because it makes the South the villain without making it clear that this whole nation is going insane.”

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in concluding that bigotry was a national, not a regional, predicament. “My experiences indicate that the only difference between Southern prejudice and Northern prejudice (or Western) is that it is easier to express it in the South,” he wrote.\(^{33}\) (Interestingly, the underground press typically focused on the southern rednecks of the film’s conclusion rather than Jack Nicholson’s character George, a drunken ACLU lawyer who personified the countercultural reading of the South and its potential for decency.) These accounts identified southern racism not as a parochial problem, but as indicative of the moral failings of modern American society.

In his 1970 book *Total Loss Farm: A Year in the Life*, Raymond Mungo, co-founder of the Liberation News Service, an underground press news syndicate, further highlighted the countercultural tendency to condemn white southern racism while praising white southern culture. It was this separation of the good and the bad in their interpretation of the southern lifestyle that enabled many counterculturists to imagine the region’s whites in idealized terms. Although Mungo critiqued white southerners as backward and pathological, he could not deny that there was something invigorating about their music, particularly country, and their rural surroundings. In fall 1969 Mungo and a group of friends departed the East Coast on a trip west. They swung through the Deep South along the way. Mungo’s conflicted view of the region arose from his preconceived notions, as well as his encounters with its landscapes and its people. “The South has nothing to do with anything,” he insisted, “nobody you really love lives in the South, nothing you need comes from the South, you have identified with *Easy Rider* and

centuries before that Goodman, Chaney & Schwerner.”\textsuperscript{34} The region was a cesspool of bigotry, then, according to Mungo, yet he was still taken by its natural beauty. This dichotomy lay at the center of his assessment. For instance, he looked in wonder at the Alabama countryside. But while it was free of the “jackhammering” that accompanied so-called progress, he seemed haunted by its racist history. Its “universe . . . hangs always, like a man lynched,” he wrote, “at the same suspended point in time and space.”\textsuperscript{35}

The South’s dedication to—and one might say obsession with—its past, along with its agrarian landscapes, appealed to counterculturists like Mungo. He and his companions also admired the feeling of easy-going timelessness that he ascribed to its culture, such as the “good music” they found on Nashville’s country radio.\textsuperscript{36} They took comfort in the city’s array of musicians “ingesting the sacrament.”\textsuperscript{37} Mungo spoke directly to the appeal of southern country music and its ability to inspire positive feelings in “a world so thoroughly fallen-apart as our own”: “‘We need a whole lot more Jesus and a lot less rock n’ roll,’ one song went, and rightly so; for the basic pulse of Nashville is neither existential or apocalyptic, but easy toe-tapping happiness.”\textsuperscript{38} Mungo was silent on whether he actually approved of the song’s pro-Christian message; regardless, his

\textsuperscript{34} Raymond Mungo, \textit{Total Loss Farm: A Year in the Life} (New York: Dutton, 1970), 82.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 84.

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 83.

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 87.
comment indicated a respect for the cultural traditionalism that could produce such a
song.

Mungo’s harsh critique of white southerners denied any purported nobility on
their part. But this did not stifle his fascination with the South’s invigorating mixture of
“pure” musical culture, and outside of Nashville, its inviting countryside. Mungo’s
musings echoed freaks’ views of the region that acknowledged its shortcomings while
seeking to recover elements of perceived virtue. That is why, like Mungo, many freaks
could simultaneously “love the South, and fear it awfully.”³⁹

Similarly, country-rock artists could praise the South while pointing out its
alleged deficiencies. In the case of the Byrds, Gram Parsons sang of a beautiful rural
setting “callin’ me home” on “Hickory Wind,” one of Sweetheart of the Rodeo’s standout
tracks.⁴⁰ Elsewhere the Byrds took satirical aim at southern racism. On the curiously
titled Dr. Byrds and Mr. Hyde (1969), the band included a Roger McGuinn-Gram
Parsons composition called “Drug Store Truck Drivin’ Man.” This comical song pokes
fun at a white southerner who works as a late night country music disc jockey and serves
as “the head of the Ku Klux Klan.”⁴¹ Although the song mocks the DJ’s racism, it plays
as less of an indictment of southern prejudice and more as an attempt to make the
character appear ridiculous. “Drug Store Truck Drivin’ Man” was, in fact, a thinly veiled
brush-off to influential Nashville DJ Ralph Emery, a member of the country music

³⁹ Ibid. 82.

⁴⁰ Gram Parsons and Bob Buchanan, “Hickory Wind,” Sweetheart of the Rodeo, The Byrds,
Columbia Records CS 9670, 1968.

⁴¹ Roger McGuinn and Gram Parsons, “Drug Store Truck Drivin’ Man,” Dr. Byrds and Mr. Hyde,
The Byrds, Columbia Records CS 9755, 1969.
establishment who had criticized the Byrds on the air when they came to play at the Grand Ole Opry in March 1968. The song’s sardonic edge acknowledged white southern bigotry without engaging in a blanket condemnation of the South’s racial problems. The Byrds, like Mungo, could stress what they considered the strengths of the South without these traits being overwhelmed by the region’s supposed drawbacks.

In their responses to country-rock, counterculturists at times expressed their desire to forge connections with white southerners. Contributors to underground newspapers typically embraced a white southern rural lifestyle while rejecting, and sometimes ignoring, the southland’s racism. Take, for example, the Flying Burrito Brothers’s “Hippie Boy,” the final song on their 1969 debut album *The Gilded Palace of Sin*, and the countercultural press reception. The tune features a loping country backing track, an organ that adds a hymn-like feel, and spoken vocals by Chris Hillman. The narrator is a member of straight society who encounters a young male freak on the street. The boy suggests that they find unity in their common humanity. He alludes to a basic similarity between any “hippie, bum, or hillbilly.”

“Hippie Boy” underlines its theme of harmony by evolving in its concluding moments into the gospel tune “Peace in the Valley,” a 1951 country hit for Red Foley and the Sunshine Boys. The reference to hillbillies obviously brought to mind white southern mountain people. In these admittedly tongue-in-cheek lyrics—Chris Hillman later dismissed the song as “stupid,” the result of too much...

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drinking—the Burritos did highlight the countercultural desire to reach out across the cultural divide.\textsuperscript{43}

\textit{Rolling Stone} seemed to agree in its full-page featured review of \textit{The Gilded Palace of Sin}. Referring to “Hippie Boy,” writer Stanley Booth wrote, “The album’s ending somehow summons up a vision of hillbillies and hippies, like lions and lambs, together in peace and love instead of sin and violence, getting stoned together, singing oldtime favorite songs.” Booth speculated that Burrito Gram Parsons’ apparent southern “country” purity—he was a native of Waycross, Georgia—provided him with a unique perspective on “the strangeness and hostility of the modern world, but he speaks to and for all of us.”\textsuperscript{44} Besides highlighting the song’s evocation of countercultural-southern unity, Booth explicitly defined southern values as universally applicable but somehow lost to “the modern world.” This premise bolsters the conclusion that freaks identified an authentic culture in southern society.

Elsewhere in the underground press, writers argued for the importance of counterculturists forging an understanding with white southerners. Gurney Norman’s \textit{Divine Right’s Trip: A Novel of the Counterculture} (1972) was originally serialized in \textit{The Last Whole Earth Catalogue} and chronicled a freak’s rediscovering of his rural Kentucky roots. The main character D. R. travels from California and ends his journey at his family’s Appalachian farm. During one sequence, he is accompanied by an old miner named Virgil who shows him the strip-mined ravaged countryside. As scholar Rob

\textsuperscript{43} Einarson with Hillman, \textit{Hot Burritos}, 131.

\textsuperscript{44} Stanley Booth, review of \textit{The Gilded Palace of Sin} by the Flying Burrito Brothers, \textit{Rolling Stone}, 17 May 1969, 15.
Holton writes, “This alliance between a rural blue-collar man such as Virgil and hippy such as D. R. unites the new alienated hip youth of the 1960s with an older tradition of working-class resistance.” D. R.’s marriage to his companion Estelle on the farm reinforces Norman’s meditation on the desirability of a countercultural and rural southern alliance. “Their wedding celebration,” Holton argues, “unites rural Kentucky traditionalists with the young, rebellious urban youth who arrive for the party.”

In the underground press, much of the commentary about the freak-southern unity implied by country-rock centered on Bob Dylan’s late 1960s abandonment of folk-rock and his move into country and western. Often the publications reflected on the artist’s supposed efforts to attract traditional working-class country audiences on his 1969 album *Nashville Skyline*. In a piece detailing Dylan’s apparently changing politics, *Fusion* embraced his country turn, calling country and western perhaps “the one non-middle-class musical form that speaks for working people,” and suggesting that *Nashville Skyline* contributor and country star Johnny Cash could, like Dylan, be a prophet for the Movement. Other counterculturists were not so sure. “Chris” of the *Washington Free Press* would have preferred that “Dylan . . . do a duet album with Jerry Rubin instead of

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46 Ibid., 104.

Johnny Cash. Like, you know where Johnny Cash stands,” Chris said. “And it isn’t for the revolution.”

In a 1969 article titled “The Politics of Country Rock,” the Berkeley Barb also questioned the legitimacy of the Dylan-Cash collaboration. The article’s author, “Tari,” was not upset by Dylan’s association with Cash; instead, Tari abhorred his perceived alliance with the country musician’s audience, or “‘Tennessee Studs’ north and south of the Mason-Dixon line who hate niggers, hippies, commies, and jews.” Tari’s inclusion of southerners and nonsoutherners in the country music audience not only recognized the reality of the late 1960s country listenership; it also reflected the countercultural sense that perhaps southerners were no more bigoted than the rest of the country. In spite of his/her vitriol, the author concluded with a call for unity. Invoking the poor white southerners of Dylan’s “Only a Pawn in Their Game,” Tari envisioned a political usage of the white South beyond a model for countercultural emulation. She insisted that freaks and their southern and nonsouthern antagonists must form an alliance, which sounded ironic in light of her criticism of Dylan’s association with Cash. “We are their victims,” Tari wrote, “and if we don’t get them off our backs soon, and get together with them, the machine’s survival instinct will have won.” Tari’s assessment of country-rock led the writer to bolster countercultural calls for human accord and for an attack on the perceived soul-sucking American technocracy. Atlanta’s Great Speckled Bird echoed the Berkeley Barb’s appeal for inter-generational and inter-regional harmony. The paper described


50 Ibid.
“the roots of Cash’s music” as “the warmth, vitality, community and stubborn stick-to-it-ness of the rural South” and suggested that, particularly in the South, country music could serve as point of commonality for freaks and rednecks.  

Writing in the *New City Free Press*, Stephen Bloomfield and Robin Shaikun, like Tari, argued for the necessity of this partnership. These authors argued that stereotypical media images like those of the vicious rednecks in *Easy Rider* created “false mistrust . . . among groups of people who ultimately have common interests.” White southerners and freaks, then, were a good match because the American system exploited both of them. Solidarity with working-class white southerners, though ill-defined and impractical, appealed to many counterculturists. They simultaneously found inspiration and reinforcement for their values in their fantasy of a strangely out-of-time, racist, and yet idyllic, South.

### Imagining White Southern Culture through Country-Rock

When imagining the South, country-rock artists generally presented counterculture-pleasing, bucolic versions of the region; in short, a kind of timeless southern agrarianism. The cover of Linda Ronstadt’s Nashville-recorded 1970 release

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*Silk Purse* depicted her as a fetching hippie chick down on the farm. She sat barefoot in a pen surrounded by hogs. The artwork for the Beau Brummels’s 1968 LP *Bradley’s Barn*, also cut in Nashville, featured a red, slope-roofed country barn, a wooden fence, green trees, and colorful flowers. On his own Music City-recorded *Nashville Skyline* (1969), Bob Dylan assumed a country crooner persona, appearing on the album’s cover dressed as a rural itinerant musician surrounded by a blue sky and tipping his hat to the would-be listener. By portraying themselves in rural settings and cutting their records in the South’s country music capital, these artists encouraged a linkage between the supposed authenticity of their country music and what they identified as the genuine pulse of southern culture.

Country-rock’s nostalgia for the region’s purported pre-modernity extended beyond record artwork. Bands like the Everly Brothers and the Byrds crafted wistful versions of the South in song. Don and Phil Everly were a Kentucky duo who had scored several country-tinged pop hits in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Despite the addition of such hip touches as wah-wah guitars, their move to country-rock in the late 1960s signified more of a commercial strategy designed to boost flagging record sales than a fundamental change in style or sound. The Everlys’ “Bowling Green,” released in 1967, described the Kentucky city as a place where “folks treat you kind / They let you think your own mind.” The jaunty melody and tight Everly harmonies contributed to the portrait of southern purity. Bowling Green, the song suggested, was a place that boasted not only good-hearted people of the live-and-let-live variety, but beautiful natural

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surroundings, too. “Kentucky sunshine makes the heart unfold,” the Everlys sang, and “the fields down in Bowling Green / Have the softest grass I’ve ever seen.” Even though it described a city of moderate size, the song followed the country tradition of idealizing the rural and small town southern existence. And one can easily detect the appeal of such descriptions for the counterculturally minded. On the aptly titled 1968 LP *Roots*, the Everly Brothers further emphasized their southern heritage, with particular attention to defining southernness as family-oriented. The album opened with a snippet from *The Everly Family Show*, a 1940s and 1950s radio program. The voice of Everly patriarch Ike promises the audience some “family style and country style” tunes.

On other recordings, country-rock artists constructed southernness in a manner appealing to their largely freak audience. The Byrds’s “Hickory Wind” (1968) presented bucolic images of singer Gram Parsons’s childhood visits to South Carolina, exemplifying the countercultural critique of cities “with a faraway feel.” Parsons’s aching vocal and the interplay of a whining pedal steel guitar and fiddle added to the song’s nostalgia for the South as a refuge from urban anxieties. Similarly, some country-rock artists lauded southern religiosity and the seemingly unchanging traditionalism of southern culture that it represented. There is a certain degree of irony in the Byrds’s renditions of Arthur Reid Reynolds’s “Jesus is Just Alright” (1969) and the Louvin Brothers’ “The Christian Life” (1968). The same goes for Linda Ronstadt’s cover of

55 Ibid.


“We Need a Whole Lot More of Jesus (And a Lot Less Rock and Roll)” (1969), the song that Raymond Mungo had admired during his tenure in the South. Occasionally, these efforts turned unintentionally toward parody. On the Byrds’s “The Christian Life,” Roger McGuinn sang such lyrics as “my buddies shun me since I turned to Jesus” in what band mate Chris Hillman described as a “terrible [southern] accent.” “He overacted, so to speak,” Hillman said, implying that McGuinn was trying to make the song sound more authentic. Many freaks did not seem to mind; those who took these religious songs seriously established their respect for the supposed genuineness of southern faith.

*Rolling Stone* appreciated how the Byrds universalized the sentiment and communal spirit of southern religion. Critiquing a series of 1969 shows with the Flying Burrito Brothers, one of the magazine’s contributors wrote, The Byrds “extract, from what might otherwise be a dated Southern hymn, the joyfulness and optimism which is a part of all religion and they allow you to participate in it.” The reviewer’s enthusiasm for southern piety is reflective of many freaks’ embrace of not only Eastern, but also Christian faiths. This trend is evidenced by the rise of evangelism and religious communes in the counterculture. Another *Rolling Stone* piece noted that Ronstadt “obviously feels the music.” Country-rock’s “feel” showcased to the counterculture the

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60 Allen, “‘I Just Want to Be a Cosmic Cowboy,’” 280.

appeal of country music and its southern origins. Freaks, likewise, could enjoy the “feel” of the South: its ties to family, rural setting, communalism, and religious dedication.

The emphasis on feel, or to put it another way, intuitiveness, fit with the countercultural valuing of experience over rationality. “Logical argument doesn’t work,” said Jerry Rubin. “People’s heads don’t work logically. People are emotion freaks. People are crazy.” Fellow Yippie Abbie Hoffman was more succinct: “Words are the absolute in horseshit.” Rationality promised to reveal universal truth, but freaks insisted this truth could not be accessed by science and reason. Furthermore, it was rationality that undergirded the waging of the war in Vietnam and the creation of the banal world of suburbia. The values that counterculturists attached to the South in the underground press all existed in the realm of the spirit rather than the mind. The construction of southernness as pre-modern and rural, in particular, lent the counterculture’s South an earthiness that clashed with the approach of technocrats who placed their unmitigated faith in objective truth. Southernness thus became an anti-rational tool against the establishment. This was remarkable; the fact that few southerners—or Americans, for that matter—would have accepted this assault on objectivity demonstrated the extraordinary flexibility of “the South” as an idea when handled by the imaginative minds of the counterculture.

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63 Quoted in Miller, The Hippies and American Values, 120.
The musical act that best embodied countercultural imaginings of a pre-modern white South was the Band, a group frequently identified as country-rock. Whereas most country-rock acts sang tangentially of the South, the Band presented a direct portrait of the region’s white inhabitants. The group’s perspective, in its sympathetic and anachronistic portrait of the region and its people, deeply connected with accounts of the South in the underground press. An analysis of the Band’s South and its countercultural and mainstream responses deepens our understanding of the counterculture’s fascination with the region and, perhaps more importantly, it suggests that an imagined pre-modern white South held considerable appeal to straight Americans, too. This endeavor necessitates a thorough parsing of the nature of and influences on the Band’s southern imaginings, as well as countercultural and mainstream responses to their music.

When sixteen-year-old Robbie Robertson stepped off the train in Fayetteville, Arkansas, his head must have been spinning. He had recently been hired by fellow Canadian Ronnie Hawkins to play guitar in his rock ‘n’ roll backing band, the Hawks. It was the first time Robertson had ever been to the South, and yet he had been dreaming of it for years. After a boyhood dedicated to soaking up the white and black music of the region on vinyl, Robertson would now encounter its people, music, and culture firsthand. He spent time at the family farm of fellow band mate Levon Helm, the Hawks’ drummer. Helm’s family hailed from eastern Arkansas. Robertson was captivated by the place where black and white musical styles fused and laid the groundwork for the integrated rock ‘n’ roll sound that provided the soundtrack for his southern imaginings. The guitarist and songwriter began to formulate the tale of a struggling, honorable white
southern people that he would perfect in song once the Hawks morphed into the Band in the late 1960s. That story was driven by Helm’s relatives and their neighbors, who impressed him with their strong sense of community; music brought them together in a way that crossed generations. Robertson’s imagined South was further influenced by later readings of William Faulkner and Tennessee Williams, which added a sense of the tragic to his tales of hard-working, striving people who lived close to the land.

As music journalist Robert Palmer later observed, “The songs Robbie ended up writing came out steeped in the South’s bottom lands and shacks and cotton fields, steeped in the Baptist and Holy Roller churches where folks in the throes of religious hysteria invented the duck walk and all the other classic rock & roll moves.” Robertson’s initial wide-eyed approach to the South tempered somewhat, but he never lost the feeling that the South was a world apart. His version of the myth of southern distinctiveness dovetailed perfectly with countercultural reactions in the underground press. The South as Other did not mean racial aberration in this case; instead, it signified a repository of lost values. The sepia-toned southernness explicated by Robertson on record existed out of time. It was a refuge from modern ills: urban anomie, suburban blandness, and inauthenticity.

The Band’s mainstream success allowed it to reach a broader audience than the counterculture. (Its second album reached number 9 on the Billboard charts in 1970.)


66 These sepia tones were often literal in publicity photographs and record artwork. See, for instance, the coloration of the picture of the group adorning the cover of 1969’s *The Band.*
The Band’s success indicated, in part, the extent to which countercultural perspectives had impacted straight America as well as the broad appeal of a pre-modern white South in the national imagination. For less hip Americans, Robertson’s South could serve as an antidote to the perceived breakdown of modern society and the social unrest driven by riots, debates over the Vietnam War, and changing mores that gave the 1960s its off-kilter feeling. In short, the Band represented what a Rolling Stone cover story on the group referred to as “the search for a calmer ethic.”

Perhaps most powerfully, in the music of the Band, the South promised, for those who encountered it, healing of racial and political strife. In analyzing Robertson’s fascination with the South in his 1975 book Mystery Train, Greil Marcus captured this sense of the South as a land with rich lessons to teach. “Here was a different world,” he asserted, “with more on its surface than Canada had in its abyss; you could chase that world, listen to it, learn from it. Perhaps you could even join it.”

A prime component of the Band’s countercultural appeal lay in its communal ethos. Its members—Robertson, Helm, Garth Hudson, Richard Manuel, and Rick Danko—exhibited this trait in their personal lives and it was key aspect of their depictions of southernness in song. They first gained the reputation of a tightly knit unit due to their association with Bob Dylan. While still known as the Hawks, they toured the United States and Europe with Dylan in 1965 and 1966 as he tried his hand at electric rock ‘n’ roll. When he retreated to Woodstock, New York, after a near-fatal motorcycle accident

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68 Greil Marcus, Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock ‘n’ Roll Music, fifth revised ed. (New York: Plume, 2008), 46.
accident, Dylan and the group recorded several album sides’ worth of material at the Band’s home, dubbed “Big Pink.” The Band’s communal living arrangement in Woodstock attracted hip youths intent on recovering their humanity in a society stricken with anomie. The members created an alternative model. The group’s biographer Barney Hoskyns has described the musicians as “a kind of microcosmic community, a potent model of the early American pioneer settlements.”

The members played together, ate together, and lived together, establishing their own commune of sorts in their imagined South in rural New York. Underground newspapers often praised their communal spirit. Importantly, the Band’s togetherness and rural hermitage appeared to youthful observers as deeply rooted, and not simply a marketing pose. After the release of its second album, *Time* interviewed Amherst College students about the Band. One student remarked on the naturalness of the group’s iconography: “You listen and you just know that’s no group of johnny-come-latelys from the suburbs who’ve gone off to a commune while Daddy foots the bill.”

The Band’s perceived sense of community was bolstered by a vibe of familial connectedness, which appealed to audiences craving a sense of roots. The group’s persona was one of sons and brothers who had not forgotten from where they came. The Band exemplified this spirit on the artwork for their 1968 debut *Music from Big Pink*. One photograph, titled “Next of Kin,” features the group’s members surrounded by their

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families in Ontario. The faces of multiple generations stare out at the viewer. The message was simple: these were men who had not turned their backs on their loved ones or their traditions.

The photograph lent credence to the Band’s seemingly ironic contention that its members found little in common with young cultural and political rebels. After the release of *Music from Big Pink*, in an interview with the Toronto underground newspaper *Egg*, Robertson expressed his dismay with the “punky attitude” in current music and youth culture. He objected to the tendency to “hate your mother and stab your father.” As Robertson explained, “We don’t hate our mothers and fathers.”

Drummer Levon Helm agreed, later exclaiming in his autobiography, “Hell, we loved our families!” In Robertson and Helm’s formulation, counterculturists and other young people exhibited a kind of slash-and-burn mentality when it came to the past and their families. Indeed, few counterculturists seemed interested in maintaining the kind of biological familial connectedness that informed the Band’s imagined South. Many counterculturists dissented from the views of their parents and distanced themselves from traditional notions of family; commune and non-commune freaks forged alternative families with one another. Robertson, Helm, Danko, Manuel, and Hudson had themselves formed such a connection with each other, and it was this communal brotherhood with which many freaks could identify.

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The Band, like its countercultural devotees, promoted a search for roots and a return to simplicity, and each looked to the South as a major repository of “lost” values. The group never laid claim to any political agenda and denied interest in crafting political songs. “Besides,” Robertson said in 1970, “who can write songs about all this garbage that’s happening now, wars and revolution and killing? I can’t.” The Band claimed that it simply wanted to play good music that avoided what it considered the excesses, overthinking, and empty flash of contemporary rock music. Both mainstream and underground publications picked up on this defining feature of the group. The New York Times’s Mike Jahn commended the Band in December 1969 for its ability to simultaneously recover both the simplicity and the depth of feeling in southern music. “The musicians,” the journalist advanced, “still play like five friendly old coots picking away in the back of some Kentucky barroom. Their songs, even when cryptic and wordy, after the style of Bob Dylan, sound like old family favorites.” Counterculturists concurred, commenting on the “aura of authenticity” that ran through the Band’s music. While alluding to the deep southernness of its songs, Houston’s Space City News referenced this aura and praised the “gaping agelessness and placelessness” that infused the group’s tunes.

The Band’s songs may have denied any political agenda, but its frequent promotion of a pre-modern, rural white South spoke to its view of this mythical region as a worthy alternative social model. While conveying the power of old southern music,

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Robertson and his band mates also wielded potent ideas about the South. The group’s most sustained treatment of the region can be heard on its second LP, 1969’s *The Band.* Barney Hoskyns has suggested that the record functions as a kind of concept album about the South. Although arguably not every song is about the region, Robertson clearly wished to interpret the white southern experience on vinyl, or what Hoskyns describes as “the things Southerners themselves took for granted.” Robertson’s visions of the South assumed an impressionistic tone. He was, like other country-rock artists and countercultural enthusiasts of the South, most concerned with the *feel* of the region and its people. Describing his early visits to Arkansas, Robertson explained his approach to writing about the South: “There’d be a little shack out in the middle of a field at night, and I’d wonder who was in there. Not that I wanted to knock on the door, because I preferred to use my own imagination, but that’s what kinda led me to this songwriting style.” The Toronto native wrote as an outsider—Hoskyns calls him “a Yankee with his nose pressed up against the window of the South”—and nonsouthern counterculturists and other Americans could relate to Robertson’s search to identify and shape the dynamic images that he perceived as uniquely southern.

As heard on *The Band,* the group sings about Robertson’s South in the voice of nostalgia. On “Rockin’ Chair,” the geriatric sea dog narrator speaks wistfully of his southern homeland. The old man longs, he says, to “be home again / Down in old

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77 Hoskyns, *Across the Great Divide,* 185-186.
78 Ibid., 186.
79 Ibid.
80 Ibid.
Virginny,” to smell the air, enjoy the tobacco, and “have no care[s].” The funky “Up on Cripple Creek” tells the story of a man trying to get back to Lake Charles, Louisiana, to see to his “little Bessie.” References to trucking and watching Spike Jonze on television date the setting to the 1950s or 1960s but the theme of the South as a rural sanctuary remains intact.

The group envisioned an archaic South, a place where white people lived simple, meaningful interconnected lives, often in the face of great hardship. Musicologist David Emblidge rightly argued that “there is plenty of good humor in the ill-fated romances they recount; yet they also treat the pain, suffering, loneliness and hard work inherent in rural life.” As the underground newspaper Harry similarly noted in 1970, “The Band’s world is a rural, country one where one faces the stark forces of nature and existence alone.”

“The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down,” the centerpiece of The Band, and its most “southern” song, extends beyond visions of an idyllic pastoral South. It is a deeply political song that investigates the collision of war, working-class values, and a mythical southern past. Its brilliance lies in its regional specificity as well as its universality. In the song, a poor Tennessee soldier named Virgil Caine narrates the Confederacy’s demise. Virgil describes the fall of Richmond, the death of his brother, and a fleeting

84 Marcel Proust, review of Stage Fright by the Band, Harry (Baltimore), 16 October 1970, 14.
vision of Robert E. Lee. “Dixie” presents Virgil as an honest man struggling to overcome forces beyond his control. In the face of adversity, he sticks to rural, working-class values of hard work and simplicity: “Now I don’t mind choppin’ wood, and I don’t care if the money’s no good / Ya take what ya need and ya leave the rest.” The song’s lyrics and mournful tone, enhanced by Garth Hudson’s anguished melodica and Rick Danko’s lonesome-sounding high harmonies, create a feeling of despair for a region and people who have succumbed to the Yankee invaders. Levon Helm’s lead vocal, with its flat southern inflection, further heightened the powerful message of “Dixie.” Historian Jim Cullen finds parallels between the message of the song and attempts by former Confederates to reinterpret the war’s meaning during and after Reconstruction. “Ironically,” Cullen argues, “a sober contemplation of Southern defeat shaded, almost imperceptibly, into a celebration that did little to examine the underlying causes of that defeat by anything other than overwhelming numbers.”

By telling the story of the Civil War at a microhistorical level, the Band avoided the uncomfortable and central matter of southern slavery and racism. The meaning of the song was no accident; Helm helped Robertson conduct research, he remembered, so that “General Robert E. Lee c[a]me out with all due respect.”

The song’s Lost Cause content received little attention from countercultural and national commentators. What seemed most compelling and powerful about “The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down” was how, as one Band chronicler later pointed out, it

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86 Cullen, “Reconstructing Dixie,” 122.

87 Helm with Davis, This Wheel’s on Fire, 188.
“gives voice to several thousand anonymous people’s stories.”
Many listeners found that these stories challenged their preconceived notions about the region and caused them to look upon the South not as a bastion of racism, but rather as a storehouse of positive, uncommon traits. Jonathan Taplin, the Band’s tour manager, was deeply affected when he heard “The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down” for the first time:

> It was just the most moving experience I’d had for, God, I don’t know how long. Because for me, being a northern liberal kid who’d been involved in the civil rights movement and had a whole attitude towards the South, it was a very cathartic experience. It was like having it all wrapped up in three and a half minutes, the whole sense of dignity and place and tradition. It brought tears to my eyes.

“Dixie’s” perspective, as Cullen indicates, was hardly new, but rarely had the Civil War’s consequences for ordinary white southerners been presented so powerfully and appealingly. By focusing on the white working class, Robertson’s interpretation left no room for considering the war’s impact upon the South’s enslaved black population. His songs about the South like “Dixie” fit with the common countercultural view that the South was not singularly responsible for the country’s racism, and that in fact its traditional white culture had much to offer the technocratic North. Had the Band tried to recover the regional black perspective, it would have complicated—if not undermined—its imaginings of the South.

The Band’s evocation of the white South in “The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down” received lavish praise in the countercultural music magazine of choice, *Rolling Stone*. Echoing Jonathan Taplin’s feelings of cultural discovery and reevaluation, Ralph

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89 Hoskyns, *Across the Great Divide*, 192.
J. Gleason asserted, “Nothing that I have read . . . has brought home to me the overwhelming human sense of history that this song does.” “It has the ring of truth and the whole aura of authenticity,” so much so in fact that “it seem[s] impossible that this isn't some oral tradition material handed down from father to son straight from that winter of ‘65 to today.” For Gleason, the triumph of Robertson’s songwriting in “Dixie” was its apparent reality. And if this song was reality, then most nonsoutherners’ understandings of the Civil War and of white southern racial guilt must be wrong. More than that, Gleason’s reading of the song reflected a belief in the greater authenticity of the white southern experience—an experience steeped in history and moored to traditions of labor and family.

Both countercultural and mainstream publications moved beyond song analysis and sought to explain the larger meaning of the Band within the context of their imagined South’s supposed cultural utility. It is in this effort that the national power of a pre-modern fantasied South in the late 1960s is clearly demonstrated. The group developed a reputation in underground and mainstream press circles for creating music that offered a refuge from the decade’s social upheavals—race riots, political assassinations, war, and student protest—which formed the basis of an imagined America in turmoil. The Los Angeles Free Press found that the Band’s “lyrics paradoxically reflected the troubles of these times with the backwoods flavor of the music.” In other words, theirs was not simply old music, applicable only to the southern past; the Band had taken tradition and

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91 Don Buday, “The Band was Awfully Good . . .” Los Angeles Free Press, 30 January 1970, 35.
made it relevant to the milieu of 1960s America. There was a sense among countercultural observers that by returning to the traditions of the southland, the Band had crafted a musical and cultural world that veered from the modern unrest that wracked American society. *Rolling Stone* contributor Ed Ward would later argue “that *The Band* helped a lot of people dizzy from the confusion and disorientation of the ’60s feel that the nation was big enough to include them, too.” Although the Band’s South featured struggle and both actual and anticipated violence, it also offered an unchanging safety net of community and family support that often seemed missing in modern America. As Ward suggested, Robertson wrote about a world that touched on the counterculture’s profound sense of alienation in its environment.

This sense that the Band promised refuge from an imagined America through an imagined South was even more pronounced in the popular press and reveals the power of the group’s southernness to speak to many mainstream Americans. Titling its 1970 profile “The Band: Music from Home,” *Look* contrasted the performers with overtly political musicians and noted Robertson’s aversion to mixing music with politics. The article’s author, John Poppy, did not explicitly say so, but his descriptions of the Band’s music pointed to the deeper cultural politics that infused their songs. He singled out *The Band*’s “The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down,” “Up on Cripple Creek,” “King Harvest (Has Surely Come),” and “Rockin’ Chair” as indicative of the group’s ability to write songs that “tell stories of things we may not have experienced directly but still feel

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in our blood, bits of our collective life on this continent.”93 Note the similarity between Poppy’s and Ed Ward’s analyses: the idea that the Band was teaching Americans about themselves and helping them to recover a sense of their true identities. It is telling that Poppy selected four of The Band’s songs that are most explicitly about the South. Like other observers, he detected not only authenticity, but also universality in the artists’ sonic expeditions into the region. “The Band,” argued Poppy, “seems to be recording an American history—of earth, humor, muscle, emotion—that could stand with [James Agee’s photographic documentary of Depression-era southern farmers] Let Us Now Praise Famous Men for truth.”94

Journalist Jay Cocks drew similar conclusions in a 1970 Time cover story, “Down to Old Dixie and Back.” The author considered, among other things, Americans’ increasing search for roots as key to the Band’s success. Cocks placed the group within the country-rock movement, noting the genre’s birth in the midst of artists’ desire to return to musical simplicity. He went further, though, to describe the music’s larger cultural meaning. “Country rock,” he contended, “is also a symptom of a general cultural reaction to the most unsettling decade the U.S. has yet endured. The yen to escape the corrupt present by returning to the virtuous past—real or imagined—has haunted Americans, never more so than today.”95 Few observers made this claim as explicitly or as eloquently as Cocks. By setting the Band against this cultural and musical backdrop, the author highlighted the importance of its southern-focused songs in speaking to the

93 Poppy, “The Band: Music from Home.”

94 Ibid.

95 Cocks, “Down to Old Dixie and Back.”
particular anxieties of the 1960s-era United States. Addressing the “commercialized, McLuhanized, televised, homogenized world” in which the Band made its music, Cocks maintained that Robertson’s songs functioned as a salve against the artificialities of the modern, workaday world. 96 “What The Band has worked out,” he explained, “is something that countless other Americans hope for, a sort of watchful, self-protective truce within the encroaching world of noisy commerce.” 97

The very title of the *Time* article proposed that the Band had located in the South valuable alternatives to the status quo in order to recover the type of authentic lived experience negated by modern American life. By embracing a South that was old, traditional, and pre-modern, Cocks articulated, these four Canadians and one Arkansan were not only making interesting music and paying tribute to southern rural people, they were building a refuge from the unpleasant realities of the present. Cocks concluded his piece with a quote from Robertson that demonstrated the musician’s understanding of the escapist appeal of his group: “‘Live outside what’s going on? Well, look what’s going on. You almost have to live outside or you lose it. You lose everything. You become your own joke.’” 98 The Band’s popular success among both the counterculture and the larger record-buying public suggests that its use of an imagined South as sanctuary found many willing adherents.

Although Cocks and other commentators grouped the Band with other country-rock acts, its sound never fit with the country experimentations of acts like the Byrds, the

96 Ibid.
97 Ibid.
98 Quoted in Ibid.
Everly Brothers, or Linda Ronstadt. Its influences were too diverse—the Band arguably owed as much to Ray Charles as to Hank Williams—to be easily categorized. Still, country-rock was the name that stuck. “We hated it,” Helm said of the label. Aside from the sound, Robertson felt little in common with west coast country-rock performers who he thought likely had more of a familial connection to southern music and culture. Regardless of the Band’s attitude, in terms of its southern imaginings, it had much more in common with other country-rock acts than Robertson acknowledged. No band better embodied the views of counterculturists who embraced the rural, working-class, white South than the Band, a group of mostly nonsouthern outsiders whose songs’ imaginative and imagined depictions of the region showcased the continuing allure of a pre-modern South in the 1960s, not only for freaks, but for straight Americans as well.

Conclusion

Counterculturists carried with them two complicated notions of the South. On the one hand, they saw a region wracked by racism, full of ignorant, oppressive whites trying to keep blacks and other challengers of tradition in their places. In this version of the South, freaks tended to write off white racism as symptomatic of national bigotry, although more pronounced below the Mason-Dixon Line. Another strand of thinking shaded countercultural reception to country-rock music: the South as a repository of values ignored by mainstream American society. The two views were not antithetical,

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99 Helm with Davis, *This Wheel’s on Fire*, 177.

and therefore counterculturists could embrace both outlooks simultaneously without much cognitive dissonance. In this way, the stereotype of the rural white southerner of *Easy Rider* could co-exist with the noble farmer/Confederate soldier of the Band’s catalogue.

Many freaks saw in country music a window into southern culture. This cultural legacy appealed to both musicians and counterculturists dissatisfied with the emotional distance of contemporary rock music. By crafting their own version of country-western music, country-rock artists reinterpreted the genre for their mostly countercultural audience. But the sound of country-rock mattered less than what it embodied. It meant honesty, simplicity, family, connectedness, and simple rural living. Freaks idealized the South as one of the last places where these values existed in unadulterated form. Their conception of southern authenticity was based on a pre-modern past that never really existed, but counterculturists were not interested in the reality of the South; they desired its symbolism. In the southland and in country-rock music, they saw instruments to bolster their condemnation of modern, technocratic American society. Counterculturists used what they admired about the South for this larger purpose.

It is perhaps most notable that freaks searched broadly to locate resources for their critique of the alleged oppressive plasticity of America. This knowledge necessitates a more complicated approach to the cultural revolt and the malleable uses of southernness in late 1960s and 1970s America. Just as counterculturists found pre-modern models in imagined Native American and Eastern cultures, as other scholars have noted, they also encountered them in the South, the land of both the Band and George Wallace. As will be seen in the next chapter, Wallace personified a very different South that still
maintained the sense of masculine self-reliance implicit in the counterculture’s South. Wallace wielded his southernness on the national scene during his four presidential campaigns (1964-1976). He engaged in a discourse best termed the Masculine South and he was far from its only purveyor. Although in many ways rejecting Wallace’s perspective, popular productions like the novel and film Deliverance (1970, 1972) and the film Walking Tall (1973) shared the Alabama politicians’ argument that the rural South offered an antidote to a supposedly flagging national virility in the late 1960s and early 1970s.
In 1974 Creem, a music monthly that distinguished itself as a more purely rock-oriented publication than Rolling Stone, dispatched a team of nonsouthern writers to travel into the South. There they interviewed locals and provided readers with an updated, tongue-in-cheek version of southern journalist W. J. Cash’s The Mind of the South (1941). The magazine’s mostly young white male readership learned about southern men’s supposed sexual proclivities, Atlanta’s drag queen scene, and the enduring legacy of racism. Creem trafficked in an overtly salacious and visceral presentation of southern life. Editor Lester Bangs called it a place with “an abiding and unaffected warmth, and a raunch that can’t be belied.”¹ For him, white southern traditionalism comprised not only hospitality and communalism, but also a proclivity for violence. Borrowing a line from a bar patron he met in Macon, Georgia, Bangs summed up what he considered this shoot-first-ask-questions-later attitude of the South: “When in doubt, kick ass.”²

² Ibid.
The freewheeling spirit, similar to W. J. Cash’s “hell of a fellow,” that Bangs and his fellow Creem writers attributed to the South showcased a key part of southern imaginings in the popular and political discourses of the late 1960s and 1970s: white southernness as embodying the violence necessary to stem the supposed decline of masculinity during the era. The valuing of white southern masculinity in this period drew on the image of white southerners in the Vicious South discourse of the civil rights era, including the characteristics of toughness, brutality, and occasionally, racism. As the movement waned, political and cultural actors began to explore the perceived benefits of the white southerner who exerted a regenerative violence capable of bolstering the masculinity necessary to achieve social control over what they considered a permissive, soft, and out-of-control society.

By the late 1960s, new challenges to standards of American masculinity emerged from previously marginalized groups, including blacks explicitly advocating for both civil rights and the rights of manhood and feminists attacking arguments for the “naturalness” of gender roles that encouraged notions of male supremacy. Simultaneously, the longhaired men of the counterculture and members of the New Left pushed for new definitions of masculinity. One key aspect encouraged pacifism and utilizing “unfulfilled capacities for reason, freedom and love” and the “unrealized

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3 Cash presented the “hell of a fellow” as a model of unrestrained manliness. He lived “to stand on his head in a bar, to toss down a pint of raw whiskey in a gulp, to fiddle and dance all night, to bite off the nose or gouge out the eye of a favorite enemy, to fight harder and love harder than the next man, to be known far and wide as a hell of a fellow.” W. J. Cash, The Mind of the South (New York: Knopf, 1941), 50.
potential for self-evaluation, self-direction, self-understanding, and creativity.” These liberal/leftist calls for new understandings of masculinity rejected violence as an acceptable form of manly behavior. Instead, proponents of such views contended that violence demeaned both its purveyors and victims.

Cultural conservatives fought back against this rhetoric, expressing their desire to restore traditional male dominance. The men’s magazine True, for example, offered in the 1970s “informative features that bring the American man and American values back from the shadows. Back from the sterile couches of pedantic psychiatrists. Back from behind the frivolous skirts of [women’s] libbers.” Action and violence were the keys to restoring languishing masculinity, these critics often argued. This mentality informed much of popular culture, such as director Sam Peckinpah’s controversial 1971 motion picture Straw Dogs, a tale of an effete American mathematician who restores his manliness by killing off the ruffians terrorizing him and his wife in the English countryside.

Other proponents of regenerative masculine violence looked for solutions closer to home—to the Masculine South of their imaginations. The Masculine South, particularly as a rural incarnation, proved a popular discourse to culturally and politically conservative Americans who treated these traits as capable of saving the country from its alleged softness and social permissiveness. Three major examples cast this model of southern-derived restorative violence as worthy of national emulation: George Wallace’s

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5 Quoted in Kimmel, Manhood in America, 275.
national campaigns for president (1964-1976)—especially his 1968 third-party run—the successful film *Walking Tall* (1973), and the even more profitable novel (1970) and film (1972) versions of *Deliverance*.

Wallace constructed the South as a place where white men still ruled without question and would defend themselves with force if necessary. In contrast to the allegedly lawless North, he argued, southerners used violence to maintain their masculine prowess, which in turn helped to preserve the social and racial order. In a “based on a true story” account of Sheriff Buford Pusser’s attempts to fight bootleggers in McNairy County, Tennessee, *Walking Tall* showcased a South similarly reliant on regenerative violence, yet it appealed to nonsouthern fantasies of the southland as a rural and masculine refuge without Wallace’s incessant race-baiting. Meanwhile, in their respective versions of *Deliverance*, southern novelist James Dickey and British director John Boorman detailed four Atlanta suburbanites’ search for manhood in the terrifying Georgia hinterland. Dickey and Boorman identified the rural South as a locale with a distinctive penchant for brutal aggression, which they deemed, to varying degrees, a useful tool for overcoming the emasculation of suburban life. Each of these popular representations simultaneously provoked and embodied powerful imaginings about the rejuvenating violence supposedly inherent in the white South—particularly in the rural white South—as an instrument for shoring up masculinity, and in turn, stifling the social disturbances that were rattling American society in the late 1960s and early 1970s.
George Wallace: Violent White Southern Masculinity on the National Stage

In his 1970 book *DO IT!: Scenarios of the Revolution*, Yippie leader Jerry Rubin depicted segregationist Alabama Gov. George Wallace as the personification of American imperialism and violence. “He is the symbol of the country which destroyed the Indian, enslaved the black, colonized Latin America, A-bombed Japan, invaded Cuba and napalmed Vietnam,” wrote Rubin. “He is the Amerikan flag. He is the cowboy, the Marine, the Bible-toting missionary priest, the businessman and the cop-on-the-beat.” Rubin’s use of the right-wing Wallace to represent Amerika’s purportedly mean-spirited, foot-on-the-neck policies at home and abroad fit with the radical’s larger leftist critique of the nation. The deeply masculine imagery that Rubin applied to Wallace was no accident. A major component of the iconography of the four-time presidential candidate lay in his manly demeanor and his vigorous attacks on a host of social enemies supposedly plaguing working- and middle-class white American men and their families, from black welfare recipients, to hippies, to northeastern elites.

As a presidential contender, Wallace appealed to Americans who felt powerless in the face of confusing domestic and international transformations. These people included Chicagoans Ronald and Sally Hoppe, who found in Wallace a mouthpiece for their beleaguered values. “The world they [the Hoppes] were born to, a white world of upward mobility based on hard work, has been threatened by the storms of social change,” reported *Time* in 1968. “They now find it an incomprehensible world of yippies and hippies, riots, crime and inconclusive war, and they long for solutions couched in phrases

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that they can understand and relate to themselves.”

The Alabamian spoke to such presumed powerlessness, highlighting the value of “southern-style” violence as a tool for keeping the social and racial order in check and regenerating an allegedly depleted American masculinity. Without real men, Wallace indicated, the country was in danger of succumbing to disorder at home and abroad. The governor stressed his own virility through his physicality on the presidential campaign trail, pounding podiums to underline his points and reminding voters of his early days as a boxer. Wallace exploited this pugilist image, suggesting that not only would he protect “average” Americans from their enemies, but that he would beat those enemies into submission with his fists, recommending for them “a good crease in the skull.”

Wallace’s race-baiting southern masculinity appalled critics. But it appealed to Americans who admired southern whites like Wallace for holding the line on race and for standing up for “rednecks,” regardless of region, who felt ignored by party leaders. The candidate’s virile, violent southernness constructed the region as a distinctive, masculine alternative to hippies, black protesters, feminists, government bureaucrats, and intellectuals, who he deemed as undermining the manly vigor necessary to maintain order in the midst of the political and social confusion of American society in the 1960s and 1970s.

Arguably, no postwar politician was more identified with the South (that is, the white South) than Wallace. A group of British journalists covering the 1968 presidential campaign noted: “The Alabamian spoke to such presumed powerlessness, highlighting the value of “southern-style” violence as a tool for keeping the social and racial order in check and regenerating an allegedly depleted American masculinity. Without real men, Wallace indicated, the country was in danger of succumbing to disorder at home and abroad. The governor stressed his own virility through his physicality on the presidential campaign trail, pounding podiums to underline his points and reminding voters of his early days as a boxer. Wallace exploited this pugilist image, suggesting that not only would he protect “average” Americans from their enemies, but that he would beat those enemies into submission with his fists, recommending for them “a good crease in the skull.”

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campaign termed him “a southerner to the end of his brilliantined hair.”

Wallace was a self-described “professional southerner,” who considered his vocation not only to represent the white South, but also to ardently defend what he saw as its interests. As governor of Alabama, he spoke as a patriarchal protector of the segregated southern way of life against a supposedly intrusive federal government. Wallace, declared journalist Marquis Childs, was driven by “an almost Messianic sense of his own mission to free the South of the hated Yankee domination.”

In that effort, Wallace enlisted a malleable, transferable notion of energetic southernness rooted in the anger and backlash racism of the Vicious South. He searched broadly to locate support for his quest to maintain the segregated southern way of life against the orders of the federal judiciary. His first inaugural address as governor, delivered in January 1963, is best remembered for his declaration, “Segregation today. Segregation tomorrow. Segregation forever.” But Wallace surrounded that pledge with an entreaty to nonsoutherners to join the cause of white southern segregationists. One did not have to hail from the South to be “southern.” The governor proclaimed,

You native sons and daughters of old New England’s rock-ribbed patriotism . . . and you sturdy natives of the great Mid-West . . . and you descendants of the far West flaming spirit of pioneer freedom . . . we invite you to come and be with us . . . for you are of the Southern spirit . . . and the Southern philosophy . . . you are Southerners too and brothers with us in our fight.

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Wallace’s attempt to redefine southernness as not contingent on birth or place was self-serving and cagey. It was also necessary in order to support his contention that the South had maintained the true meaning of the nation’s founding in liberty (not equality).

If the white South had maintained the values of true American manhood, then, according to Wallace’s logic, nonsoutherners who espoused these values must be “southern” too. Political scientist Joseph E. Lowndes has stated that during his presidential campaigns, Wallace furthered this sleight of hand. The Alabamian, Lowndes argues, took the “symbolic figure of the white southerner under attack from the federal government” and expanded it to “the more general ‘Middle American’ as the embodiment of the signifier America—the white middle-class male from every region who is pushed around by an invasive federal government, threatened by crime and social disorder, discriminated against by affirmative action, and surrounded by increasing moral degradation.”

But for Wallace southernness comprised more than apparent victimization; it also meant resorting to violence to punish what he considered the nation’s victimizers. And lower class and middle-class white males would remain victims, in the governor’s view, until they unleashed their full manhood. “Southern” violence, then, was a trait that he presented as worthy of trans-regional emulation.

Beginning as a presidential candidate in 1964, Wallace contrasted his toughness and capacity for purposeful violence with the imagined effeminacy of his political and social targets. Wallace focused much of his rhetoric on vilifying Washington’s institutions as run by weak, ineffectual men. In 1967, he told the conservative *National*
Review, “The people are going to be fed up with the sissy attitude of Lyndon Johnson and all the intellectual morons and theoreticians he has around him.” Elsewhere he denounced the hostile press corps as “sissy-britches intellectual morons.” Government bureaucrats, activist Supreme Court justices, and “pseudo-intellectuals” (i.e., professors and supposed policy experts who would be better served by using a little common sense) were running down the entire country, he insisted. They were robbing states, municipalities, and individuals of independence and self-reliance, both qualities of manliness he associated with the South.

At campaign rallies, Wallace mocked any longhaired and bearded peace protester who dared to shout insults or hold signs with ironic slogans like “Seig Heil, Ya’ll” and “Weirdos For Wallace.” He carefully honed his responses, which he used repeatedly. The governor offered to autograph protesters’ sandals. And in response to hippie-looking hecklers, he would joke, “Now, take it easy honey. Oops, it’s a he; sorry I thought it was a she.”

With lines like this, Wallace contrasted himself with the feminized opponents of what he considered a good, decent, orderly, patriarchal society. He positioned himself as the perfect masculine foil: tough and combative; in short, always ready to fight. Observers consistently referred to Wallace in his early days as a two-time bantamweight Golden Gloves champion to underline his cantankerous personality and political style.


14 “Wallace’s Army: The Coalition of Frustration.”

15 English and the staff of the London Daily Express, Divided They Stand, 357.
During his 1972 presidential run, Wallace’s campaign sold wristwatches depicting a caricature of the candidate as a boxer. For noted conservative commentator James Jackson Kilpatrick, Wallace was “a man in constant motion,” who, while being interviewed, “is constantly bouncing on the ring ropes and shuffling in the corner, shadow boxing, skipping rope.”\textsuperscript{16} The governor also had swagger. “He can,” wrote Kilpatrick, “strut sitting down.”\textsuperscript{17}

Wallace’s pugnacious image derived not only from his deftness at ducking and weaving around difficult questions; he also preached violent retribution against those whom he deemed a threat to his notion of country. For a working-class and middle-class white constituency wracked with feelings of powerlessness, Wallace represented raw power.\textsuperscript{18} Through his hypermasculine fantasy of governance, he spoke to these feelings of inadequacy, asserting that a readiness to utilize violence would generate the masculine toughness necessary to stifle the permissiveness that allowed social disorder to breed. His politics largely consisted of “getting tough,” but he offered few policy solutions. A 1969 \textit{Esquire} article summarized the centrality of violence to Wallace’s politics. “His message was simple, his rhetoric unvarnished,” the article read. “Ghetto riots? ‘People who riot ought to be bopped on the head.’ Campus protests? ‘We ought to grab some of those college students by the hair of the head and stick ‘em under a good jail.’ Law and order? ‘Just let the police enforce the law.’ Vietnam? ‘We should go in and beat hell


\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 400.

out of ‘em or get out.’”\textsuperscript{19} In one of his favorite lines, Wallace pledged to run over any anarchist who lay down in front of his car.\textsuperscript{20}

Ronnie Van Zant, singer of the 1970s southern rock group Lynyrd Skynyrd, underlined the cathartic appeal of Wallace’s southern message, assuring the British music magazine \textit{New Musical Express}, “If any of them Russians or anyone call your queen a \textit{whore}, he wouldn’t let ‘em get away with it.”\textsuperscript{21} Van Zant perfectly embodied the Alabamian’s linkage of violence, manliness, and feelings of empowerment. Like his approach to the domestic scene, through his constant willingness to fight, Wallace would help maintain the United States’s preeminence as the democratic world’s masculine protector, capable of withstanding the forces—communist and otherwise—that he identified as threatening to undermine it.

Violence was central to both Wallace’s allure and his ability to draw dividing lines between himself and his supporters and the forces they opposed. Although he never engaged in violence himself, \textit{Newsweek}’s claim that “his appeal is metaphorically violent” ignored the way that the candidate presented himself as personally ready for violence.\textsuperscript{22} Frequently, his threatening rhetoric melded with violent action at his rallies. Joseph Lowdnes has explained that “in his stand against federal authority, in his threats to run over demonstrators if they got in the way of his car, in his links to violent white


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supremacists, and in the fistfights at his rallies, Wallace and his supporters forged a new sense of us and them, drew new lines that defined new identities.”

Wallace presided over the chaos, baiting protesters and at times threatening them. While campaigning in the West in October 1968, the New York Times recorded, “He angrily challenged ‘ punks’ to come to the platform.”

The candidate generally maintained control of his emotions despite such threats. Instead, he let his supporters engage in violence on his behalf.

Presidential campaign watcher Theodore White, for example, described an attack on one anti-Wallace protester in Cicero, Illinois, the Chicago suburb where in 1966 angry whites had pelted black civil rights marchers with bricks and bottles. White recounted seeing a woman, one who obviously drew on Wallace’s gendered and racialized rhetoric, assault an anti-Wallace demonstrator. She “clawed [at the protester’s] face, slapped it,” wrote White. She “yelled, ‘You nigger-loving homosexual!’” while other “approving” Wallace supporters spewed similarly hateful utterances.

Such occurrences were not uncommon and were well documented in the national press.

Not surprisingly, the violence lacing Wallace’s rhetoric prompted critics to label him and his supporters as rednecks. The governor, of course, treated the redneck epithet as a badge of honor. “Well, there are a lot of us rednecks in this country,” he told a nonsouthern audience in 1968, “and they don’t all live in the South.”

Like southern identity itself, Wallace re-imagined “redneck” as a term applicable to any white

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23 Lowndes, From New Deal to New Right, 88.


American, regardless of class or region, who adhered to the candidate’s principles. In doing so, he suggested that the nation would be better off if its leaders embraced their inner redneck and met social disorder with quick, retaliatory violence.

Wallace’s appeal to the nation’s rednecks carried with it obvious racial undertones. His weaving together of southernness and violence was a dominant feature of his dual effort to restore white masculine vitality and combat perceived threats to the status quo. Nowhere was this more evident than in his anti-black rhetoric. As a presidential candidate, Wallace rarely spoke in openly racist terms. He instead employed a coded racial language that identified the problems plaguing the nation in the late 1960s and early 1970s as largely black-perpetrated. Through veiled language, Wallace touted his southernness as an implicit marker of his willingness to use violence to maintain order and white supremacy. As one former Alabama senator put it, “He can use all the other issues—law and order, running your own schools, protecting property rights—and never mention race. But people will know he’s telling them, ‘A nigger’s trying to get your job, trying to move into your neighborhood.’ What Wallace is doing is talking to them in a kind of shorthand, a kind of code.”

Wallace’s supporters frequently demonstrated their understanding of the centrality of violence and racial suppression in his message. In September 1968, as the governor’s third-party candidacy crested in the polls, a crowd of 150 whites, some wearing Wallace buttons and shouting the candidate’s name, attacked a group of Black Panthers at a Brooklyn courthouse. *Newsweek* associated the violence with Wallace’s own extreme

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rhetoric.\textsuperscript{28} In the same piece, the magazine quoted a Wallace supporter who touched on the candidate’s link between forcefully maintaining racial control and his pledge to restore peace and stability to American society. “He’s gonna turn this country around,” the man said, and in the same breath, “It’s not that we dislike niggers—we hate ‘em.”\textsuperscript{29} Other supporters believed that a Wallace presidency would result in a strongly enforced racial hierarchy like the one he tried, but failed, to maintain as Alabama governor.

During the 1968 campaign, \textit{Washington Post} columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak interviewed a collection of Wallace voters in Warren, Michigan. A school janitor spoke approvingly of the racial violence that he saw as dominating Wallace’s rhetoric. “He’d crack the whip on the Negroes,” the man said.\textsuperscript{30} In each of these instances, the governor’s supporters followed the logic of his politics of powerlessness that posited violence as crucial to restoring both racial and social control to beleaguered white Americans.

Racist sentiments among Wallaceites were not uncommon, in large part because Wallace attributed much of the violence wracking American cities to out-of-control blacks. His authority to stop that violence rested in part on the premise that he embodied a law and order South distinctive from the lawless North. For his audiences, Wallace imagined the South as a land where authorities kept control with the threat of violence and crushed unruly and criminal behavior, especially that exhibited by minorities. In the South black offenders were not coddled, as he claimed they were in the North. He

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  \item \textsuperscript{28} “Wallace and His Folks,” \textit{Newsweek}, 16 September 1968, 26.
  \item \textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 27.
\end{itemize}
declared that illegal violence must be met by righteous and overwhelming force. “We don’t have riots in Alabama,” he told a packed Madison Square Garden crowd during the 1968 campaign. “They start a riot down there, first one of ‘em to pick up a brick gets a bullet in the brain, that’s all. And then you walk over to the next one and say, ‘All right, pick up a brick.’”

The governor did not have to tell his listeners who “they” (i.e., blacks) were.

In an interview with southern-born journalist Robert Sherrill, Wallace further outlined his racialized distinctions between the purportedly orderly—and roughly policed—South and the crime-ridden cities above the Mason-Dixon Line. As detailed in the reporter’s 1968 book *Gothic Politics in the Deep South: Stars of the New Confederacy*, Wallace argued that blacks actually enjoyed greater protection in the South than in the North. He added that both black and white southern neighborhoods were safe. “We know how to live together down here,” he asserted. “You can walk through the nigger section without fear. A nigger can walk through the white section. We’ve got good law enforcement in Alabama.” Wallace’s hypocrisy was obvious. Sherrill editorialized that Wallace made this statement in the midst of a series of black church burnings in Lowndes County, Alabama.

For Wallace, violence was the basis of ensuring law and order. He embodied what Marshall Frady referred to as white southerners’ “loosely leashed readiness for

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32 Sherrill, *Gothic Politics in the Deep South*, 265-266.

33 Ibid., 265.
mayhem.”\textsuperscript{34} Wallace would not have necessarily disagreed; it was simply the target of the mayhem that made it justified. Although the Alabamian claimed to deplore violence, he excused it—even promoted it—when it was used against demonstrators, rioters, non-whites and other enemies of his hypermasculine South. Using rough tactics to maintain law and order was one of the characteristics that Wallace felt distinguished the South from the rest of the country. Nonsoutherners seemingly did not have the fortitude to properly enforce the law. While campaigning in New Hampshire in late 1967, Wallace judged the state’s people as “kind of overbred,” meaning in part that they lacked the toughness and penchant for the justified violence he considered central to the character of white southerners.\textsuperscript{35} In an interview with the \textit{New York Times}’s Tom Wicker, he implied that this northern overrefinement led to a failure to crack down on social disorder. Wallace promoted southern-style repression against an activist federal government, articulating his desire to “smash one of these federal judges in the head and then burn the courthouse down. But,” he told Wicker, “I’m too genteel.”\textsuperscript{36} Wallace then went further, pledging that Americans would benefit if only he could cut loose a group of reactionary white southerners on the nation’s racial and social problems:

\begin{quote}
What we need in this country is some governors that used to work up here at Birmingham in the steel mills with about a tenth-grade education. A governor like that wouldn’t be so genteel. He’d put out his orders and he’d say, “The first man who loots something what \textsuperscript{sic} doesn’t belong to him is a dead man. My orders are to shoot to kill.” That’s the way to keep law and order. If you’d killed about three that way at Watts the other forty wouldn’t be dead today.\textsuperscript{37}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{34} Frady, \textit{Wallace}, 11.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 2.

\textsuperscript{36} Quoted in Sherrill, \textit{Gothic Politics in the Deep South}, 265-266.

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 266.
Wallace’s claims of the South’s relative safety and the benefit of a violent southernness were clearly self-serving and obscured continuing racial conflict in the region. But it presented an enticing portrait of law enforcement for like-minded Americans: all the effeminate North needed to do to recover its masculinity was to embrace severe force as a method for combating crime. By emulating the example of the manlier South, he insinuated, criminals would be running for the shadows instead of terrorizing city residents while impotent public officials looked on.

Besides racial antipathy, a faith in gut-level instincts drove the manly logic of Wallace’s violent southernness. The candidate celebrated the “common-sense” thinking of masculine, hardworking non-elites whose solution was to lash out rather than to engage in the softness he identified in the measured judgments of the country’s “pseudo-intellectuals.” While “the folks” (i.e., the people that supported him) intuitively knew how to deal with a problem, pseudo-intellectuals, said Wallace, used effeminate overanalysis. “Any truck driver’d know right off what to do at the scene of an accident,” he explained, “but you take a college professor, he’d just stand around lookin’ and gettin’ sick.”

“The folks” had much more sense, he argued, than these so-called experts. With populist and anti-intellectual zeal, he promoted the judgments of barbers, steelworkers, textile workers, autoworkers, firemen, policemen, and beauticians. The Washington

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38 “Wallace’s Army: The Coalition of Frustration.”

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Post’s George Lardner wrote that Wallace, a former taxi driver, touted cabbies as “a fount of the right kind of knowledge, an exemplar of instinctive wisdom.”

Wallace identified the common folks—his token inclusion of beauticians aside—as robust, patriotic men, willing to take vigorous action against America’s enemies in the nation’s cities and in Vietnam. His theme of restorative, retributive violence was central to his oft-said line during the 1968 campaign that the police should be allowed to run the country for two years in order to suppress the domestic crime and anti-Americanism that he saw as one of the nation’s major problems. When he made this statement, the Alabamian was surely thinking of individuals like the Philadelphia cop, and self-described potential Wallace voter, who told pollster Samuel Lubell of his quick turn to physical brutality when he witnessed a black man assault a fellow police officer. “Well, I’ll tell you I got extreme,” he admitted. “I chased that nigger for three blocks and when I caught up with him I beat his ass off.”

The country’s intellectuals, according to Wallace, lacked the manly toughness to deal with the nation’s social problems. The Alabamian questioned liberal experts’ policy decisions that favored careful consideration and explanation over blind action, particularly when assessing the high crime rates in urban ghettos. In a speech before white southern expatriates in the “Little Dixie” section of Los Angeles in 1968, Wallace blasted this approach with racist enthusiasm. He mocked the liberal tendency to search

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40 Chester, Hodgson, and Page, An American Melodrama, 283.

for underlying social factors as the root of criminal behavior. (“The killer didn’t get any watermelon to eat when he was 10 years old.”) In short, Wallace prescribed less thinking and more gut-level reaction for the nation. He placed his faith in the cop and the cabbie, who were men because they responded to problems with muscular action. The calm ruminations of the effete professor and public policy planner, the candidate asserted, sacrificed manly vigor, which led to social chaos. Only by engaging in violent, “common-sense” responses could the nation hope to regain its manliness and stifle the urban disorder plaguing the nation.

This anti-intellectual approach to governance was a case study in feel over facts. “Naw, we don’t stop and figger,” he told Marshall Frady, “we don’t think about history or theories or none of that. We just go ahead.” Frady, basing his judgment on Wallace as a “consummate political and cultural articulation of the South,” concluded that the governor had little use for logic or rationality. Likewise, leftist gonzo journalist Hunter S. Thompson suggested that the Alabamian touched “people on some kind of visceral, instinctive level that is probably both above & below ‘rational politics.’” Indeed, Wallace’s adherents were more likely to praise the candidate for his ability to “tell it like it is” than for his careful analysis of policy issues. As one Wallaceite explained to Thompson at a 1972 rally in Milwaukee, “He don’t sneak around the bush. He just


43 Frady, Wallace, 13.

44 Ibid., 10-11, 224.

comes right out and says it.” Part of Wallace’s attractiveness lay in his ability to exploit the South as a place that eschewed the excessive thinking apparently plaguing the rest of the country. For instance, when southern blacks got out of hand, no one needed a government commission to explain their behavior, and there was always a brick ready to keep them in line. Both Wallace’s campaigns and his imagined South were largely about “kicking ass” as an antidote to the rational, expert-driven, coddling approach allegedly favored by the rest of the nation.

One of the ironies of Wallace’s rhetoric of violence was that a would-be assassin’s bullet shattered his national ambitions. In May 1972, a white loner named Arthur Bremer shot and paralyzed the governor in Maryland during the Democratic primaries. The now wheelchair-bound candidate attempted a fourth and final presidential run four years later and failed miserably during the primary season (see also chapter five). New York Times journalist Robert Reinhold contended in 1976 that “the collapse of support for Mr. Wallace can be traced both to his crippled condition and to the relative unimportance of racial matters as issues. The Governor’s health seems to be the more important factor.” Undoubtedly, Wallace’s presentation of himself as an ideal, virile man willing to use violence to restore the social order was no longer tenable.

But the viability of Wallace’s message of socially regenerative violence did not rise and fall with his presidential candidacies. Discourses on southern-style law and order solutions outside of Wallace’s orbit gained popularity, particularly in the realm of

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46 Ibid., 156.

film. The best and most popular example is the 1973 movie Walking Tall, a tale of vengeful justice in the contemporary South. It made $23 million at the box office and would draw considerable attention from critics and audiences. While the film followed Wallace’s argument that violent action affirmed masculinity and that a lack of force resulted in disarray, its discourse notably differed in its treatment of race. In the rural South of Walking Tall, violence kept men manly and society together, but it did not act in the service of white supremacy.

Walking Tall: Skull Cracking and Racial Brotherhood in the Law and Order South

The 1973 film Walking Tall is a highly fictionalized chronicle of the life of Buford Pusser, the sheriff of rural McNairy County, Tennessee (1964-1970). Pusser seemingly followed the violence-as-creating-order philosophy, dedicating himself to rooting out vice (prostitution, gambling, and bootlegging) in his jurisdiction by “kicking ass.” At least that is the story the film tells. The low-budget bio picture shows Pusser in almost superhuman terms; he survives shootings, stabbings, and the murder of his wife. Unlike the real-life sheriff, the movie character frequently does not wear a gun; instead, he mostly relies on an over-sized hickory stick that he uses to beat on bootleggers and other lowlifes. The Masculine South components of Walking Tall quote almost word for word from the imagined South of George Wallace. Both the governor and Pusser were men who exerted power, order, and manliness through brutality. The film reflected, moreover, Wallace’s contention that the “system” was broken; feminized authorities

coddled criminals rather than jailing them. What might seem like policy brutality or vigilance, then, was not only justified, but necessary. Besides criminals, *Walking Tall*’s villains similarly include a rule-bound and seemingly naive judge—the bane of Wallaceites—and a sheriff (Pusser’s predecessor) who refuses to stand up to the vice lords. The film condones the robust Pusser’s extralegal violence and vigilantism.

*Walking Tall*’s rendering of the politics of violence in the rural South and the coverage it received in the national press reinforced the popular tendency to identify the region as a uniquely pre-modern space where the use of force against unruly elements reinforced the vitality supposedly necessary to ensure social control.

At the beginning of *Walking Tall*, wrestler Buford “The Bull” Pusser returns to his hometown in McNairy County with his wife and two children after spending years away. (Note the similarity to Wallace’s boxing background. These are men who are grounded in violent, masculine pursuits.) Veteran action director Phil Karlson included shots of the bucolic countryside that Pusser’s parents call home, setting up an inviting and familiar portrait of the rural South. Danger, however, lurks underneath the surface. In town, Pusser meets up with an old friend who is portrayed as an archetypal good ole boy. He takes Pusser to the bustling, ironically named local bar the Lucky Spot. There the viewer is bombarded with images of debauchery, including prostitutes working out of trailers in the parking lot and rigged games of chance played in the backroom. Pusser’s friend is cheated during one such game, prompting Buford to protest. He is immediately seized, beaten, and stabbed several times, before being left for dead on the side of the road. After a long recovery, Pusser returns to the bar. Equipped with the belief that lawlessness can only be stifled through force, he exacts violent revenge on his attackers,
busting limbs and skulls, armed only with his self-fashioned hickory stick. He is tried for his crime but successfully appeals to the jury by ripping open his shirt on the stand and displaying his disfigured chest.

Fed up with local enforcement and the justice system’s refusal to crack down on the local vice industry, Pusser enters and wins the local sheriff’s race and declares war on the gang. An orgy of violence ensues. He endures gunshot wounds (his jaw is nearly blown off at one point), and the vice gang murders his wife in an ambush. After his wife’s funeral, the sheriff drives his car into the Lucky Spot, killing two of his attackers. The film concludes as the townspeople, energized by Pusser’s vigilantism, throw the bar’s gambling tables and furniture onto a bonfire. While a maudlin Johnny Mathis theme plays over the credits, the camera lingers on a bandaged Pusser as he is driven away from the scene. The viewer is thus left with the message that righteous violence is the solution to restoring wounded masculinity and stemming social disorder.

The law and order aspects of Walking Tall and their ties to Wallaceite and Nixonian political rhetoric are undeniable. As historian Jack Temple Kirby noted, the film “had most of the ugly, majoritarian sentiments of Richard Nixon’s ‘law and order’ reelection campaign [of 1972].”49 Many commentators similarly espoused a liberal critique of this connection and the film’s right-wing elements. Adopting a faux southern dialect in her review of Walking Tall in New York magazine, Judith Crist judged it “so durned Amurrican that only a quote from Nixon seems lacking from its publicity.”50

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Similarly, a British film reviewer bemoaned the penultimate scene in which the townspeople ransack the Lucky Spot. It is, as the film defines it, the culmination and ultimate justification of Pusser’s bloody vengeance and “a terrifying image of Nixon’s silent majority at work.”

Some liberal observers went further. Echoing the Left’s criticism of Wallace as a dangerous reactionary, New Times’s Michael Robbin both admired the picture’s aesthetics and labeled it a “fascist work of art.”

Commentators at times made explicit links between Wallace and Walking Tall. In a satirical March 1974 piece, the Washington Post categorized different groups of Americans ranging from “Just Folks” (a.k.a. Wallaceites) to “Plain Bureaucrats” to “Counterculture,” and broke down their interests according to such distinctions as “Investments,” “Furniture,” “Birth Control,” and “Bumper Stickers.” Under “Heroes” for the “Just Folks” crowd, the author listed George Wallace, along with Lt. William Calley (of My Lai massacre infamy) and Buford Pusser. By placing Wallace and Pusser alongside each other, the Post pointed to their similar capacities for violence. It also amplified the idea that the heroes of “Just Folks” were hypermasculine white southerners.

“Just Folks,” or simply “The Folks,” as Wallace envisioned the great mass of white American working people, surely found much to legitimize their worldview and

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51 Gareth Jones, review of Walking Tall, Monthly Film Bulletin, January 1974, 16.
53 “Keeping It,” Washington Post, 3 March 1974, Potomac, 11, 41
54 Ibid., 41.
55 Calley was also technically a southerner, as he was born and raised in Miami, Florida. Still, his public persona was not tied to his southerness like Wallace’s and Pusser’s.
Wallace’s own masculine southernness in *Walking Tall*. While there are no meddling “pseudo-intellectual” characters in the film, there are plenty of coddled criminals, and a judge concerned about following strict legal procedures even when it means releasing potentially dangerous individuals. Joe Don Baker’s depiction of Buford Pusser put Wallace’s rhetoric into action, confirming that law and order violence was paramount in this Hollywood-created South. The masculine protector Pusser spends the film performing vigilante actions such as threatening to dynamite a turncoat cop if he does not reveal his duplicity, and avenging Pusser’s own savage brutalization at the hands of the local vice gang. The extreme breakdown of law and order in McNairy County only further justifies his actions in the film. The celluloid Pusser, therefore, brings to mind Wallace’s contention that cities in the North and West would be better off if the police took control for two years.

Far from a minor plot point, the southernness of *Walking Tall* is central to its law and order discourse. Scholar Allison Graham, though, has argued against the southernness of the film, stating that it depicts Buford Pusser “as an icon of upright American—not lawlessly southern—vigilantism.” Graham’s argument for the universality of *Walking Tall* is valid on the surface. Remember, for example, Judith Crist calling the picture “so durned Amurrican.” But the film treats its setting as anything but generic. From the shots of bucolic rural surroundings to the familial closeness among the Pusser kin to the depiction of a strained interdependence between the white and black populations, this is a film that could not exist outside of its imagined South. Graham fails

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to acknowledge that Pusser’s tough southernness in the film functions as an example for the rest of the country. *Walking Tall* harnesses rural southernness in the service of *American* masculinity by deeming it capable of reenergizing the nation’s men while exerting social control. Set against an appealing southern locale, albeit one beset by criminal forces, Pusser’s good ole boy nature clashes, for instance, with Inspector Harry Callahan’s nihilistic bent in *Dirty Harry* (1971), director Don Siegel’s portrait of nonsouthern urban decay. *Chicago Tribune* contributors Jim Higgins and Shirley Rose Higgins ventured to McNairy County, Tennessee, shortly after *Walking Tall’s* release, where they marveled at the “scenic rural countryside where homespun towns and villages make a traveler feel he has rediscovered the tranquil America so frequently lost amid city bustle.” Referencing the film’s plot, the Higgineses found “it . . . hard to visualize there is corruption” among such beautiful surroundings.57

Representations of the South, especially when they were presented as counter to a corrupt status quo, could be utilized as distinctly southern *and* fully American. George Wallace, after all, held up his home region as the embodiment of the country’s supposedly endangered values. Thus, Pusser’s role as a masculine patriarch for his community appears as both universal and southern in *Walking Tall*. In other words, despite its genre elements, *Walking Tall* cannot be considered as simply a “Southern Dirty Harry.” It presents a Wallace-like southern model for using redemptive force to combat national dilemmas of crime and a purportedly creeping emasculation.

Some commentators, one should note, were quick to highlight the importance of the film’s southernness, particularly in the portrayal of the tough Pusser. Reviewers largely considered his propensity for violence as central to the character’s southernness. For Chicago film critic Gene Siskel, “Joe Don Baker plays Buford Pusser as a cross between Li’l Abner and ‘Popeye’ Doyle [of The French Connection fame]. His enthusiasm for swift retributive justice is catching.” Pauline Kael, writing in The New Yorker, dug more deeply into Baker-as-Pusser’s southernness, playing on the connection in the public mind between white southerners and manly exertion:

He seems Southern redneck—a common man who works outdoors in the sun—to the soul. He has that heavy, flaccid look that Southern white men often get early in life; it goes with a physical relaxation that can fool Northerners like me, who don’t always recognize the power hidden in the flab. As Baker plays him, Buford is a nonreflective hero who, when angered, tramples on his enemies uncontrollably.  

Kael assessed the character as a kind of animal, a man who does not think, but merely reacts. Her analysis put a negative spin on the visceral type of southern manhood parlayed by George Wallace. She and other liberals may have looked fearfully upon the Pusser character’s representation of white southern manhood as violent, swift acting, and anti-intellectual. But Wallace and Walking Tall argued that these traits were essential to creating and maintaining “real men”—men who acted, and sometimes violently.

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58 Gene Siskel, “‘Tis the Season to Be Dirty, Tough, Etc.,” Chicago Tribune, 16 March 1973, section 2, 3. Siskel’s parallel to The French Connection is apt. By featuring a man dedicated to cleaning up the spoiled Tennessee countryside, Walking Tall borrows from the “grittiness” of The French Connection’s post-industrial urban aesthetic. For a discussion of this common characteristic of 1970s police films, see Carlo Rotella, Good with Their Hands: Boxers, Bluesmen, and Other Characters from the Rust Belt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), ch. 3.

Although their film buttressed George Wallace’s Vicious South-influenced argument that the region represented a bastion of rudely enforced lawfulness in the midst of national lawlessness, Phil Karlson and screenwriter Mort Briskin’s depiction of Pusser’s white southern manhood differed from Wallace’s example. Race marked this point of departure and made *Walking Tall* a unique discourse on the meaning of the contemporary rural South. George Wallace’s white southern masculinity was grounded in a tradition of racial antipathy that drove his race-baiting politics. *Walking Tall* breaks with this vision of white southern manhood. On the issue of black-white relations, the film implicitly contrasts Pusser with the image of the southern lawman represented by the likes of Bull Connor. He may look the part of the bigoted lawman, with his tight jaw and bulbous, hulking physique, but Pusser is remarkably egalitarian. Jack Temple Kirby astutely surmised the significance of the film’s racial message in the context of Pusser’s mission to be a man and “walk tall.” He wrote:

> If the means of rising from the crawling posture seemed frightening and quasifascist, the positive ends, for once, did not exclude people on the basis of color. Southern violence was redefined, and [W. J.] Cash’s savage ideal, thriving still, was no longer quite so solidly based upon the Proto-Dorian bond of white supremacy.  

In short, the Pusser character is a New Southern man, whose message of racial reconciliation would allow him to resonate with a broader national audience than the Alabamian, while still possessing the “loosely leashed readiness for mayhem” that Marshall Frady attributed to the southern mentality.  

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60 Kirby, *Media-Made Dixie*, 151.

therefore, combined both reactionary and progressive elements: it spoke to national concerns about lax law enforcement and male weakness as it embraced a more enlightened approach to race relations.

Pusser’s racial open-mindedness manifests itself most notably in his friendship with Obra Eaker, a young black man. He first hires Obra to help process timber on his large farm and later makes Obra one of his trusted deputies. Obra and Buford are old friends; they recognize each other when the black man humbly arrives on Pusser’s land looking for work. Buford’s father Carl warns his son that Obra has been infected with “a raging case of that new social disease: Black Power.” Buford laughs off the comment. “Is that all?” he asks, unconcerned by Obra’s resistance to traditional black and white power structures in the rural South. The younger Pusser and Obra feel a kinship that both acknowledges and transcends their racial difference. During their initial reunion, Obra says that they are “part of the oppressed minority.” He means it partially as a joke, but both the characters and the film find truth in the statement. Southern white society has victimized Obra because of his skin color; Buford’s oppression has come at the hands of a gutless law enforcement system that refuses to grant him justice after his vicious beating at the Lucky Spot.

*Walking Tall* confirms the connection between Buford and Obra as equal human beings through their collective violence against white and black offenders. After eight black civil rights activists die from drinking poisonous moonshine, the new sheriff is

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63 Ibid.
intent on bringing the responsible bootleggers to justice. He enlists the help of Obra, who is all too aware of the white authorities’ typical callousness toward black victims of crime. He is reluctant to assist Pusser until the white man explains that he, unlike the old sheriff, thinks it important to investigate “eight dead niggers.” Obra agrees to help Pusser capture the bootleggers, who turn out to be black themselves. This scene again showcases Buford’s belief in enforcing justice harshly—but equally—across racial lines. The countercultural *Great Speckled Bird*’s review of the picture recognized this liberal racial dynamic at work in the film’s depiction of the South. It stated that the sheriff “shows [Obra] how to stand tall against the reprobates of the white world and those of his own color.”

Despite Pusser’s philosophy, his views mark him as an anomaly in the film’s rural South. This imagined locale remains, in the film’s judgment, deeply bigoted, which makes Pusser’s actions all the more noble for a man of his race and social position. In one scene, Obra is jumped by a gang of outwardly racist rednecks when he tries to arrest them. Spectacularly, he is able to subdue and drag them outside while a bemused Pusser looks on. The ringleader of the group later apologizes to Obra for his obnoxious behavior. It might appear that the film is offering a hopeful message about southern race relations. In this case, *Walking Tall* suggests that even hardened bigots are capable of reform. Furthermore, Pusser obviously treats both races fairly, or at least with equal brutality. But the film’s racial politics are actually more complicated. In a 1974 analysis of *Walking Tall*, film scholar Peter Biskind engaged in a rare analysis of those politics.

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64 Ibid.

and articulated what he considered the problematic nature of the film’s imagined South. In the picture, he argues, “Racism is a minor annoyance easily amenable to a few knocks on the head, and clearly subordinate to such intractable problems as gambling.”\textsuperscript{66} For all of Pusser’s railings against “the system” in the film, racism is not treated as a systemic concern. It is, rather, an individual deficiency with which the picture dealt at “the primitive level of personal relationships,” wrote Biskind, “and then dismissed.”\textsuperscript{67} Like the earlier southern crime drama \textit{In the Heat of the Night}, with its Changing South narrative, \textit{Walking Tall} advanced the liberal fantasy that white racism could be eradicated by individual blacks proving their humanity to whites. The film’s racial message was one that allowed the white South to serve as a model for liberal nonsoutherners. Although \textit{Walking Tall} does not go as far as white southern politicians like Jimmy Carter who argued that the region had already undergone a period of difficult racial healing unlike the North, it does present an alluring portrait of the South transcending its black-white troubles—at least in some instances. In racial terms, the film breaks with the Wallace model of traditional southern masculinity grounded in white supremacy. Yet without a serious challenge to the “system” of racism in the South, its questionable notions of racial change and race relations, while enticing, left little of use to nonsoutherners struggling to resolve the race issue.

The film instead functioned as a salvaging of the Vicious South—its violence, masculinity, and generally reactionary nature—putting the emphasis on a brutal sheriff


\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., 226.
cleaning up his small town and the surrounding countryside, rather than on white dominance. This feature of *Walking Tall* is perhaps the only element distinguishing it from George Wallace’s politics of regenerative violence. In contrast, the novel and film versions’ of James Dickey’s *Deliverance* ignored racial issues completely while further augmenting the idea of an exotic rural South in which violent exertion shored up the supposedly feminizing effects of urban and suburban living. Here again, cultural creators presented rural white southerners’ apparent penchant for force as a useful antidote to a modern society that nurtured male weakness.

*Deliverance: Seeking Masculine Regeneration in a Terrifying Rural South*

Southern novelist James Dickey’s popular 1970 novel *Deliverance* and its 46.1 million-dollar-grossing and Academy Award-nominated 1972 film adaptation (directed by Englishman John Boorman) lacked the law and order aspects and racial preoccupations of both Wallace’s campaigns and *Walking Tall*. But it did imagine the South as a violent, masculine proving ground. This was not the bucolic and familial rural South of *Walking Tall* or the white supremacist refuge of Wallace’s rhetoric. Referred to as “quintessentially a man’s book” by the *Wall Street Journal*, *Deliverance* is a tale of four southern suburban men left to fend for themselves in the wilds of northern Georgia. Before this experience, they have been made effete by their family life in the

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suburbs and white-collar work in the city. *Deliverance* identifies the rural South as a distinctive, pre-modern site of masculine regeneration capable of helping these men overcome their softness through violence.

The film’s trailer describes the four protagonists not as southerners, but as “suburban guys like you or your neighbor.”\(^7\) This claim marks them as regular Americans; not true *southerners* by *Deliverance*’s standards. They are lacking in the only southernness that will matter in the film and the novel: the manly prowess to conquer the punishing local rural terrain.

The story begins with Lewis, an outdoors enthusiast and faux survivalist, convincing his fellow white-collar friends—Ed, Drew, and Bobby—to take a canoe trip down the fictional Cahulawassee River before it is dammed and its wildness is lost forever. He impresses his friends, especially the novel’s narrator Ed, with his studied knowledge of nature, and so they decide to go along. It is a journey that will result in Drew’s death, Bobby’s rape by mountain men, Lewis’s severe injury, and Ed’s transformation from a soft suburbanite into a primitive man who scales cliffs and kills in order to save the others.

Dickey bookends Ed and his friends’ violent experiences in the Georgia wilderness with depictions of Ed’s boring, coddled existence at work and with his family. In the beginning of the novel, he suffers from a nagging emptiness—a lack of masculine exertion. Ed narrates that his advertising “studio was full of gray affable men who had

tried it in New York and come back South to live and die.”71 This was not the rural South, but rather the air-conditioned leisure of the new southern suburbs. Although the handsome star Jon Voight would portray Ed in the film, Dickey describes the character as balding and overweight. He is the personification of a man who has allowed all of his hard edges to be sanded away. His character arc traces his painful recapturing of his inner capacity for action and violence, and thus, his manliness.

Dickey couples this description of Ed’s masculine slide with the well-muscled Lewis’s anti-urban critique and praise for the natural life. “Life is so fucked-up now, and so complicated,” he tells Ed in the novel, “that I wouldn’t mind if it came down, right quick, to the bare survival of who was ready to survive.”72 Lewis is the proverbial weekend warrior, whiling away at ill-defined white-collar work during the week before breaking free for two days of bow hunting, canoeing, and communing in the southern wilderness. He sees nature as something to be conquered, not simply enjoyed. Ed regards Lewis’s survivalism with awe, admiring the qualities in his friend that he so obviously lacks. Not surprisingly, Lewis sees the city as the problem. “The city’s got you where you live,” Lewis warns Ed in the book.73 In an early version of the film script, Dickey (who also served as screenwriter) makes the character’s anti-urban critique even more explicit. “City life is killing you,” Lewis insists. “It’s boring you to death. You’re


72 Ibid., 41.

73 Ibid., 46.
Although Ed is not completely sold on the notion that he needs to abandon suburban comfort, Lewis is set up as a god-like individual in Ed’s (and the reader’s) mind.

Contemporary reviewers of the novel and film versions of *Deliverance* frequently assumed that Dickey used Lewis as a surrogate for his true feelings. Indeed, the author was an avid bow and arrow hunter and had canoed on southern rivers. Dickey claimed, though, that all of the characters reflected different parts of his personality, including the pathetic, blundering rape victim Bobby. Furthermore, Dickey exposes Lewis’s survivalist rhetoric to be nothing more than tough talk. Lewis kills Bobby’s rapist and orders his companions to bury the mountain man’s body. But later, his apparent ironclad will falters. When the canoeists hit a rough section of rapids, Drew drowns and Lewis is injured. Lewis collapses physically and emotionally, forcing Ed to exert his manliness and get the group to safety. In a climactic scene, Ed somehow summons the strength to climb the sheer face of a rock cliff to kill a mountain man who is hunting them.

“‘The film undercuts everything Lewis says,’” wrote the *New York Times*’s Stephen Farber in a thoughtful analysis of the film’s masculine themes. “‘Nature turns out to be threatening and destructive rather than regenerative.’” Actually, Dickey does not totally discount all of Lewis’s assertions. After all, it is manliness, not nature, that is restorative

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in *Deliverance*. Ed arrives at his “deliverance” by overcoming his fears, resorting to violence, and surviving the wilds of nature. “He knows what he’s capable of, even though maybe only once,” Dickey explained to Boorman during pre-production on the motion picture. “He knows it, and he knows he knows it.”

This character development is born out in the novel by Ed’s post-trip narration in which he reflects on the meaning of his harrowing experience on the now dammed river: “The river and everything I remembered about it became a possession to me, a personal, private possession, as nothing else in my life ever had. . . . I could feel it—I can feel it—on different places on my body. It pleases me in some curious way that the river does not exist, and that I have it.”

In other words, Ed carries the river and his triumph over nature—and his own former weakness—with him. The southern wilderness has reinstated his manhood.

Dickey thus lampoons Lewis’s phony survivalism while leaving intact the character’s critique of the city and his insistence that regeneration comes from the assertion of masculine power in the woods. By embracing violence, Ed, the personification of suburban America, faces the dangers of the wilderness and reaffirms his vitality. He has escaped the apparent traps of domesticity that come from living in suburbia and working in the city. The backwoods South in *Deliverance* is full of peril and claims three lives—Drew and the two mountain men. Still, it allows Ed to fulfill the unsatisfied feeling that hounds him in his regular life. In 1981 Dickey explained, “Ed Gentry’s dilemma, as Lewis points out, is that he has everything the society promises.”

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78 Dickey, *Deliverance*, 233-234.
His emptiness “is to be dealt with not by the acquisition of goods but by something other, something inner.” Dickey’s novel stresses this theme. It critiques modernity by heralding the inner virtues waiting to be discovered while traversing a dangerous but revitalizing pre-modern South.

Boorman’s film somewhat tempers the regenerative aspect of Ed’s encounter with the rural South. The difference in Boorman’s and Dickey’s versions stems from the director’s stylistic choice to begin the story with the suburban men’s arrival at a small mountain community near the river without any background on Ed’s life before the excursion. The viewer is not aware of the stakes involved in the character’s masculine test; the film concentrates more narrowly on Ed and his friends’ attempts to survive and therefore obscures the advertising executive’s personal deliverance. On the issue of whether violence could help to bolster the flagging of modern American masculinity, the director outlined his departure from Dickey’s point of view. “Dickey’s beliefs,” Boorman told an interviewer “are not unlike Hemingway’s, especially the idea that one attains manhood through some initiatory act of violence. For me, the contrary is true: violence doesn’t make you a better person—instead, it degrades you.” The film itself is more ambiguous than Boorman’s statement would suggest. Ed is haunted by his backwoods trials, yet the director also portrays his resort to primitivism as necessary and courageous. Boorman’s version shows that the recovery of Ed’s masculinity enables him


to save the lives of most of his friends even if the movie denies the savage ideal that Dickey promoted.

Boorman’s and Dickey’s enthusiasm for the utility of a violent rural South may have varied, but they offered parallel characterizations of the southern rural men that populate *Deliverance*. The book and novel depart from Wallace’s and *Walking Tall*’s portrayal of salt-of-the-earth white southerners. *Deliverance*’s mountain people are alien and unsettling, but Dickey, in particular, judges them as worthy of respect and emulation because they are men who understand the value of force. Lewis is enthralled with them. He couples his anti-urban/suburban critiques with an admiration for the anachronistic lifestyle of the mountain people (who are almost exclusively men) in both versions. These individuals, Lewis contends, live a more natural, robust existence than him and his suburban buddies. Ed ponders this notion in his car ride with Lewis to the river. Along the way, he mentally marks “the exact point where suburbia ended and the red-neck South began.”

In this “red-neck South” lay considerable virtue, claimed Lewis. Though “awfully clannish,” the mountain people produced beautiful music and practiced a natural lifestyle unfettered by modern intrusions. They are the perfect models for surviving Lewis’s vision of a dystopian future in which “the machines are going to fail, the political systems are going to fail, and a few men are going to take to the hills and start over.” These rural southerners already live in those hills, forging a hardscrabble existence that, in Lewis’s estimation, defines them as real men capable of thriving

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81 Dickey, *Deliverance*, 37.

82 Ibid., 43.

83 Ibid., 40.
without the emasculating conveniences of modern life. “We’re lesser men,” Lewis tells Ed, but his overfed companion is unmoved at the time; he is content with his cushy suburban life.  

The mountain people of *Deliverance* possess tantalizing traits of the rural South while also forming a central component of the rough, unforgiving nature that Ed must violently overcome to kill his suburban softness. This dual representation manifests itself most visibly early in the film and the novel. Before they can begin the canoe trip, the Atlanta suburbanites must find two men who will transport their cars to Aintry, a town at the mouth of the Cuhulawassee. There they can pick up their vehicles once their journey concludes. Ed and his companions stop in a decrepit little community called Oree to fuel up and locate drivers. Looking upon the elderly gas station attendant in these surroundings, Ed is flabbergasted:

> He looked like a hillbilly in some badly cast movie, a character actor too much in character to be believed. I wondered where the excitement was that intrigued Lewis so much; everything in Oree was sleepy and hookwormy and ugly, and most of all, inconsequential. . . . It was nothing, like most places and people are nothing.  

Ed feels that this town and its residents can offer him little of value. They seem foreign. A fleeting opportunity for rural-suburban unity is lost when the guitarist Drew encounters a mentally disabled banjo-playing boy who bests him in a frenzied, but good-natured, exercise in bluegrass showmanship. The possibility of forging a connection is lost, most notably in the film version, as the boy rebuffs Drew’s enthusiastic offer of a handshake.

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84 Ibid., 45-46.

85 Ibid., 51.
As Commonweal stated in a review of the film, contrary to the “affable dolt” in the book, “the boy in the film remains ominously hostile to every overture made by the canoers except the music.”

Deliverance furthers its unsettling portrait of distinctive southern mountain people by describing the ways in which their lifestyle has disfigured them. Early in the novel, Ed ponders why so many rural southerners are afflicted with missing fingers and other deformities. “There is always something wrong with people in the country,” he reflects, and refers to the rural South as “the country of nine-fingered people.”

He is confused by southern farmers who are far from the paradigm of health that their “fresh air and fresh food and plenty of exercise” should seemingly afford them. Boorman extends Dickey’s emphasis on the degradation of Oree’s residents. The actor Bill Redden, who portrayed the banjo player, wore makeup that made him appear inbred. “Talk about genetic deficiencies,” Bobby says to Ed in the film. “Isn’t that pitiful.” At another point, the director’s camera lingers on a woman holding a severely disabled child. In his Life review of the film, critic Richard Schickel noted the “malformed” nature of the rural southerners that the suburbanites encounter. He suggested that this artistic choice

87 Dickey, Deliverance, 51-52.
88 Ibid., 52.
represented Dickey’s apparent belief that “there is . . . no social or psychological deliverance to be found in the currently fashionable belief in the retreat to primitivism.”

Schickel’s analysis makes sense only if one ignores the symbolic nature of the film’s mountain men and the rural South in general. In *Deliverance*, they are not so much real people as they are sites upon which the suburbanites are challenged to prove their manhood. Boorman’s recollections attest that the film version’s treatment of rural southerners, at least, aims more for symbolism than realism. The director stated “that the journey of these urbanites is also a journey through time, through America’s history, in search of its beauty, its power, its resources and its wealth.” The people they find in Oree are “degenerates” but they are also “people who live by the old frontier values, in an autonomous society in which they themselves build their houses, cultivate their land and defend themselves against outsiders.” The natural environment has instilled them with admirable traits of toughness and self-sufficiency purportedly eroded by the suburban experience, even if it has taken its toll on them physically. Ed emulates the mountain men’s savagery to survive in their world. Only when he begins to behave like—and conquers—the “nine-fingered people” does he save his friends and start to address the nagging anxieties of modernity that plague his mind. Through that process, he has resolved his—and the nation’s—masculine crisis and is now defined by his reconstituted vigor instead of his dull, sedentary lifestyle in the suburbs. Such is the

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91 Ciment, *John Boorman*, 129.

92 Ibid.
power of *Deliverance* to evoke and offer a resolution—in the rural white South—of the masculine anxieties circulating through 1970s American culture.

**Conclusion**

George Wallace’s presidential campaigns, *Walking Tall*, and *Deliverance* were united by their portrayal of manhood in crisis, which could be alleviated by the supposedly innate violence of the white South. The image of an ass-kicking South owed much to the Vicious South narrative of the civil rights era even when this ass-kicking attitude rejected that discourse’s racist aspects. The region’s purported penchant for violent action over careful thinking, these cultural productions argued, was the perfect antidote to what their creators perceived as masculine decline and the resulting loss of order in late 1960s and early 1970s American society.

As a presidential candidate, George Wallace held up the white South against a flaccid non-South, as immune to the rest of the nation’s urban and social ills. The Alabamian contended that the United States’s problems stemmed in part from its squeamishness toward exerting control against criminals and antiwar and minority dissenters. By following the example of the South, he insisted, American men could reclaim the potency necessary to combat disorder in the streets. *Walking Tall* excised the white supremacy of Wallace’s message while holding true to his linkage of masculine regeneration and public order. The fictionalized Buford Pusser invited Americans to look to the rural South to recover their inner vigilante and vigorously stifle lawbreakers. *Deliverance* doubled down on this notion of white southern savagery, arguing that
suburban living feminized men and that only by conquering the southern wilderness could men reassert their strength.

All of these incarnations of the violent South were, at their core, reactionary. Their target was a soft American society set adrift from its traditions and in need of a severe lashing. The depiction of the rural white South as a bastion of appealing tradition and stability in the midst of a chaotic American society ironically paralleled countercultural fantasies of the region. Without ignoring the myriad of differences in how they utilized the region, it should be remembered that these incarnations’ imaginings of the South similarly underscored an intense dissatisfaction with the state of late 1960s and 1970s American society. It is a testament to the power and flexibility of rural white southernness that it could be exploited by individuals as oppositional as southern demagogues and dope-smoking freaks.

Debates about the utility of the rural white South and the politics of “kicking ass” did not end here. Further incarnations of the Masculine South would inform the popularity and public reaction to southern rock, a genre born in the South that enjoyed huge national success in the 1970s. The contrasting styles of Lynyrd Skynyrd and the Allman Brothers Band would offer, respectively, reactionary and progressive visions of the cultural potential of the white South: as pre-modern and rural, largely defined in racial terms, and capable of teaching Americans how to live freer, less encumbered lives.
CHAPTER 4

A TALE OF TWO SOUTHS: THE ALLMAN BROTHERS BAND’S COUNTERCULTURAL SOUTHERNNESS AND LYNYRD SKYNYRD’S REBEL MACHO

When Lester Bangs heard what he considered the embodiment of the white southern mindset—“When in doubt, kick ass”—he was sitting in a bar in Macon, Georgia. It was a logical place to be in the mid-1970s for a journalist writing for the rock-hungry readers of Creem magazine. Macon was indeed the new nerve center of American music. There Capricorn Records president Phil Walden had amassed a musical empire of southern bands that had rather suddenly achieved massive commercial success. The music press often grouped together such Capricorn artists as the Allman Brothers Band, Wet Willie, Elvin Bishop, and the Marshall Tucker Band with other native, longhaired, generally working-class white southern musicians, like Lynyrd Skynyrd, under the label “southern rock.”

Southern rock was a sound—an amalgam of blues-rock, rhythm and blues, and country—but it was also a statement about the meaning of the white South. White southern pride was a major theme of the music, but like other positive imaginings of the South in the post-civil rights era, its purveyors (and, to some extent, fans and national commentators) also argued for the value of white southernness as a solution to national

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The genre’s two most popular artists were Lynyrd Skynyrd and the Allman Brothers Band, both of whom produced numerous gold records and hit singles during the 1970s. Despite their similar commercial successes, these two bands presented very different versions of the rural white South in their music and personas.

The Allman Brothers Band’s countercultural southernness showcased its members as hippie-like representatives of an integrated New South, one that had healed the old wounds of regional racial strife by excising the white supremacist element from white southern manhood, and provided a model for national emulation. Commentaries on the group inevitably highlighted the supposed naturalness, spirituality, and authenticity of close-knit southern family life as a soothing tonic for feelings of sociocultural and political alienation in the 1970s. Lynyrd Skynyrd’s persona, on the other hand, took the virile manliness at work in the Allmans’ image to craft a rambunctious white southernness that proclaimed the rural South as a symbol not only of white male freedom, but of white male rebellion. This “Rebel Macho,” as the British Melody Maker termed Skynyrd’s persona in 1977, was steeped in the tradition of W. J. Cash’s “hell of a fellow.”

The southernness of the two bands calls to mind what the Georgia-based rock group Drive-By Truckers called “the duality of the southern thing” on its 2002 album Southern Rock Opera. In the Truckers’ hands, the phrase refers to the ability of white southerners to acknowledge their racist past while celebrating the more positive aspects

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of their heritage. 3 When Americans imagined the South in the 1970s, they too were engaged with a version of the duality of the southern thing; in this case, the ability to hold in their minds simultaneously two seemingly contrasting ideas about the South without resolving them. Many southern rock fans embraced both the Allman Brothers Band’s and Lynyrd Skynyrd’s southernness; the hypermasculine, defiant white southernness of Skynyrd coexisted in many fans’ consciousnesses with the healing, interracial appeal of the Allmans. These bands and the response to them demonstrates the diverse appeal of rural white southernness—in both liberal and conservative forms—in 1970s America as well as the often overlapping nature of that appeal. 4

“A Brotherhood of Enlightened Rogues”: The Allman Brothers Band’s Countercultural Southernness

The six-piece Allman Brothers Band formed in March 1969 in Jacksonville, Florida. Between 1969 and 1976, they released five hit albums and a number-two pop single, “Ramblin’ Man” (1973). Initially a regional phenomenon, the group rocketed to


mainstream stardom with the release of 1971’s *At Fillmore East*. Writer Marley Brant calls the LP “one of the classic rock and roll live albums, if not *the* classic rock and roll live album.”\(^5\) By 1974, the Allmans’ concert attendance rivaled that of such high-powered British acts as the Who and the Rolling Stones.\(^6\)

The group was originally composed of brothers Duane Allman and Gregg Allman, along with Dickey Betts, Berry Oakley, Butch Trucks, and Jai Johanny (“Jaimoe”) Johanson. Duane Allman had first gained notoriety as a session musician for FAME (Florence Alabama Music Enterprises) Studios in Muscle Shoals, Alabama. FAME famously featured a white session band that recorded behind a variety of black R&B artists in the 1960s and 1970s, including Aretha Franklin, Wilson Pickett, and Otis Redding. Stax Records, a legendary Memphis R&B label, also utilized an integrated session band. But the Allman Brothers Band would serve as the first commercially viable, integrated southern-grown *rock* group.

After signing to Capricorn Records, Duane Allman recruited the band members and recalled his younger brother Gregg from southern California where he had been performing as a solo artist. To record, the Allman Brothers Band moved to Macon. “On the surface, Macon seems like it could have leaped out of one of Faulkner’s classier sketchbooks,” wrote Ben Edmonds of *Creem* in 1972. “Its streets are sleepy and tree-lined; though she shows the signs of a contemporary face-lift, the spirit of Macon is old.

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The band’s countercultural ethos clashed with the city’s conservative, religious values. “Those people thought we were from another planet,” Gregg Allman said. “It was a real culture shock.” The band’s countercultural style did, however, eventually garner them a large freak and youth following throughout the country. For observers, their countercultural southernness meant that they were six men grounded in a traditional southern culture of rural landscapes and close family life while practicing an integrated personal and musical lifestyle.

The Allman Brothers Band presented itself as a collection of liberated southerners and models of racial tolerance, as evidenced by its multiracial lineup. Even so, its members played down the significance of having a black player. Butch Trucks has claimed, “It wasn’t part of our thinking. We weren’t an interracial band. We were just six guys playing music.” Despite Trucks’s claim, the band made an effort to highlight its integrated image from the outset. The photographs used on the group’s debut, 1969’s *The Allman Brothers Band*, are telling. The cover shows the group dressed like hippies and standing on the front porch of a decaying southern mansion. The striking mixture of modern and old is reiterated on the LP’s gatefold sleeve photo. Each member is seen sitting together (save Trucks, who is standing) in a stream surrounded by thick foliage. All are nude. The contrast of Jaimoe’s black skin against the others’ white skin, as well as the intimacy of the shot, told potential record buyers that the band promoted a sense of

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interracial harmony. The use of a rural setting suggested that the Allman Brothers were connected to the land and to each other in countercultural brotherhood. Reflecting ten years later on the meaning of the band’s southernness, southern journalist David Jackson called it “a revelation to see them naked . . . with their black ‘brother.’”

Outside of the South, the Allman Brothers Band’s racially egalitarian iconography encouraged listeners to imagine the region in new ways, deflating northern liberal notions of moral superiority on the race issue. “They have to be credited with confounding the racist stereotype [of the white southerner],” argued a fan from just outside of Boston, where racial tensions raged in the 1970s in response to court efforts to create integrated schools through busing black and white children. The Allman Brothers Band powerfully contrasted with the southerners of the Vicious South discourse on which many rock fans and counterculturalists had been raised. “My thoughts of the South were of a backward, uneducated, and racist group of folks,” admitted one Allman Brothers fan from Ohio. This self-described McGovernite argued that the group’s integrated lineup proved a powerful corrective to nonsouthern stereotypes of white southerners:

The Allman[s] did however dismiss a lot of the thinking of the south being a hot bed for racist ideals as they had a black man, Jai Joh[a]nny Joh[a]nson on drums and after the death of Berry Oakley filled his shoes with another black man, Lamar Williams on bass. I thought it was a slap in the face of any idea folks from up north held about the south being racist when the

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11 Gary Nagle, e-mail communication to author, 23 May 2009. This e-mail was a follow-up response to my southern rock questionnaire. In spring 2009 I posted messages on specific southern rock band Internet message boards and contacted individuals who had signed guest books of various bands’ websites. I sent interested people a questionnaire that asked them to reflect on their experiences as southern rock fans from 1969 to 1980. I received 30 responses. Several respondents asked to remain anonymous. For the questions, see the appendix.
most popular band in America was from the south and had two black men as members.\(^\text{12}\)

For some young liberal white southerners, in particular, Duane Allman was an ideal ambassador of a new brand of white southern masculinity, one that exemplified both open-mindedness and freedom. Decades after the southern rock boom of the 1970s, Louisianan Patricia Goddard told music journalist Mark Kemp that Duane Allman had deeply influenced her. For Goddard, Kemp stated, Allman “personified the ideal southern man,” not the Neil Young caricature of the region.\(^\text{13}\) She thought, “He’s going to bring people to the point that they are going to have to take a real look at us and delve more deeply into our history and our racial interaction, our roots and our music, and come out with a real sense of who we are.”\(^\text{14}\) Fan Randy Stephens from Gadsden, Alabama, compared the positive image of the South engendered by southern rock to the successful football program of the University of Alabama. “Southern rock was like Alabama football,” he said. “Duane Allman was like [celebrated University of Alabama football coach] Bear Bryant. It was our way of saying we’re as good as anybody.”\(^\text{15}\)

The Allman Brothers Band fans who came to imagine the South in new ways took particular notice of what they considered the band’s grounding in southern black musical culture. Particularly on its first two albums, it played hard-driving covers of black blues artists and crafted originals like “Whipping Post” and “Midnight Rider” that drew on

\(^{12}\) Anonymous 1, author’s southern rock questionnaire, 23 May 2009.


\(^{14}\) Ibid.

\(^{15}\) Randy Stephens, author’s southern rock fan questionnaire, 26 May 2009.
these performers’ styles. The blues was the band’s greatest musical influence. While growing up, Gregg and Duane Allman “listened . . . incessantly” to Muddy Waters, Bobby Bland, Blind Lemon Jefferson, and Blind Willie Johnson on the late-night R&B radio programs on WLAC-Nashville.16 Dickey Betts drew on similar influences and idolized black rock ‘n’ roller Chuck Berry.17 For a rock band emerging in the late 1960s, playing blues-derived rock music hardly made them innovative. What made the Allmans different, according to numerous commentators, was the way they played the blues. The Allman Brothers’ original take on the genre, with their hard-driving rhythms coupled with soulful lyrics, was, according to observers, central to their supposed authenticity as representatives of the rural South. In a review of their first album, Lester Bangs informed readers the Allman Brothers were “the real article . . . a white group who’ve transcended their schooling to produce a volatile blues-rock sound of pure energy, inspiration and love.”18

Most commentary that praised the group’s blues influences contended that it had created not so much a replica of black approaches, but rather a white complement to the blues, one that might be termed a kind of “white soul.” Listeners perceived the Allmans as tapping into black musical forms to create a sound that was not a rip-off of black culture. Fans and journalists credited the band with utilizing blackness in order to create a more liberated version of the white southern male, a symbol of liberation. “It was

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confident music,” wrote southern-born music journalist Chet Flippo, “full of the South’s rhythms and carrying a sense of freedom, a wide-open feeling of room to move around in.”

The yardstick of authenticity used to measure the group’s blues was created in the folk revival of the late 1950s and 1960s. As historian Grace Hale has argued, “external” authenticity, whereby white folk artists tried to imitate the sound of poor, rural black artists, “became increasingly difficult to pull off after the mid-sixties.” White folk revivalists, accordingly, changed what it meant to be “authentic.” Instead, they chose to stress “internal” authenticity, characterized by its focus on “feelings.” “Being alike on the inside, as people who shared emotions and the need for self-expression,” Hale writes, “replaced being alike on the outside, as people who shared a history of oppression and isolation.” In other words, white musicians could be as authentic as black artists as long as they shared the attainable goal of an equivalent depth of feeling.

The Allman Brothers Band’s supporters might have described its version of authenticity in similar ways. Some of the earliest proponents of the Allmans’ music were Atlanta’s hip youths and their cultural voice: the city’s underground newspaper the Great Speckled Bird. The biggest backer of the Allmans at the Bird was Miller Francis Jr. In 1972, journalist Laurence Leamer called him “the most articulate of the cultural radicals”

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19 Chet Flippo, “Getting By without the Allmans,” Creem, November 1974, 36.


21 Ibid., 98.
at the paper. In a profile of the group’s performance at Piedmont Park in Atlanta in April 1969, several years before the Allmans gained a national audience, Francis focused on the band’s purported authenticity. He described it as intimately related to its connection to black blues. In Francis’s estimation, the Allman Brothers’ music, like the best rock, spoke to the unique concerns of “young white tribesman” (i.e., counterculturists) and set the stage for liberation from the purportedly stifling nature of modern American society. Francis argued that the Allmans mined black blues “without exploiting its source.”

Reflecting a racially primitivist strain common to elements of the counterculture, the music reviewer praised the band through racial objectification. He argued that a linkage with black culture would help freaks to reach their desired liberation more effectively:

Since our generation is tribal, totally unlike our parents and grandparents and their parents, it is only natural that we would turn to the black man, whose tribal roots go so much deeper and do not have thousands of years of bullshit ‘civilization’ to cut them off from these roots, for forms with which to relate to the new world.

But, espousing the outlook of white blues revivalists, this countercultural perspective posited that simply aping black musicians’ versions of the blues would not lead to white youths’ transcendence. “Our music must develop its own power, its own forms, its own patterns of relationship with our tribal roots and our space-age technology in an unbroken

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24 Ibid. See also Tim Hodgdon, *Manhood in the Age of Aquarius: Masculinity in Two Countercultural Communities, 1965-83* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 44-47. Hodgdon details the San Francisco Diggers’ primitivist views of black masculinity as less restrained and more virile than that of whites.
line all the way down into our preliterate origins and all the way out into unknown galaxies.”

Behind the implicit racism and hippie philosophizing laid Francis’s belief that the Allman Brother Band’s sound made it a forceful manifestation of the counterculture’s critique of U.S. culture and society. Just as counterculturists often praised country-rock artists for their ability to capture the “feel” of southern culture, Francis contended that the Allman Brothers Band’s music was not something that one could—or should—“‘listen’ to;” rather, “you feel, hear it, move with it, absorb it.” Their blues ultimately allowed hip audiences to “catch a glimpse of the kind of world we are becoming,” one free of “the horrendous load of bullshit” that comprised consumer- and technology-driven American culture.

Commentators outside of the counterculture would more explicitly tie the Allman Brothers Band’s imagined authenticity to its treatment of the blues and the way it captured the “feel” of southern culture. Like many articles on the group, Lorraine O’Grady’s 1973 piece in the *Village Voice* stressed the group’s southernness and indicated that its realness—its representation as something apart from the purported banalities of nonsouthern culture—lay in its ability to play the blues in a manner that captured the music’s essence without “affecting blackness.”

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26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 Lorraine O’Grady, “First There Is a Mountain, Then There Is No Mountain, Then . . .?” *Village Voice*, 2 August 1973, 42.
for fans, too. “It was Gregg Allman’s voice that first captured my attention” recalled one fan from Atlanta. “I suppose it was the closest thing I had heard to blues music.”

O’Grady admired Allman’s ability to draw on the black vocal style without ripping it off. To her this talent captured the earthy appeal of the Deep South. His singing “is rooted in the kind of self-confident, self-conscious sexuality that you most often hear connected with black voices,” she wrote. But she also identified “an almost translucent intelligence, a calm, mystical, oddly interiorized turn of mind” in Allman’s vocal style. These characteristics, in O’Grady’s mind, were intrinsically southern: “I know that Gregg is from the Deep South, that the intonations aren’t being forced, that they are coming naturally.”

In the minds of many fans and commentators, the Allman Brothers Band’s musical authenticity—what the Village Voice’s Ben Edmonds called “pure music”—stemmed from the group’s perceived embodiment of southern rural culture. As one critic wrote, “the world from which they sprang” was a place where “the solace of whiskey, drugs, music, religion, and superstition are inextricably linked.” This seemingly magical land of rural traditionalism also captivated music critic Jon Landau. “As someone who came from the North,” he said, “Duane Allman represented something

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29 Anonymous 2, author’s southern rock questionnaire, 28 June 2009.
30 O’Grady, “First There Is a Mountain,” 42.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
33 Edmonds, “Snapshots of the South,” 40.
that was going on in the South that most people where I lived didn’t know anything about.” He led a band, according to Landau, that “conveyed a sense of roots, a sense of stability, a sense of realism. . . . They were authentic.”  Like other observers, Landau clearly perceived Duane Allman and his cohorts as ambassadors of the rural white South, and as implicit critics of the North and its supposed anomie, unrest, and lack of authenticity.

Reaction to the group’s purportedly soothing model of rural southern traditionalism often reflected the sense that the group had captured the religiosity of this background. Texas fan Steve Schmidt described his first encounter with *At Fillmore East*, the Brothers’ hugely successful third album, as “like a religious experience.” Similarly, for Duane Allman, playing this music was “like church,” while Jaimoe claimed, “It was so spiritual, the music, I can remember several times when I was so at peace with what I was playing that my soul actually left my body, right on stage.” For its supporters, the group’s music promised not just authenticity, but transcendence. Like counterculturists embracing country-rock, the Allmans’ audience took sustenance from their combination of countercultural mysticism and the supposedly unaffected nature of the South’s Christian beliefs; they lavished in the music’s promise of a celestial encounter. The group even coined a term for the moment onstage when they seemed to

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36 Steve Schmidt, author’s southern rock fan questionnaire, 22 May 2009.

be communicating musically with each other on an instinctual, cosmic level: “hittin’ the note.”

Rock ‘n’ roll, like most southern music, was partially rooted in the church. But whereas Elvis Presley drew inspiration from gospel and Ray Charles adapted secular lyrics to existing hymns, the Allman Brothers Band transferred the rapturous feeling of southern religion to a high-intensity, hard-rocking context. According to rock critic Mark Kemp, who grew up in North Carolina during the 1970s, one could hear “the mournful echo of a country church choir” deep in the group’s sonic stew. The Allmans did not preach condemnation, but rather inclusion, while rejecting the rigid judgments of the region’s conservative Christian denominations. This church sound fit with images of the South as a hospitable, welcoming community.

Audience reactions to the “religious experience” of the Allman Brothers’ performances occurred within the context of what Tom Wolfe called the “Third Great Awakening” in the 1970s. This “religious revival,” historian Bruce Schulman contends, was “an outpouring of enthusiasm and spiritual experimentation that ran the gamut of American religious life.” The search for a transcendent experience that pushed Americans to pursue a variety of spiritual outlets, from evangelical Christianity to New Age, also informed listeners’ passion for the Allman Brothers Band. And again they


located that promised transcendence in the rural South. As rock critic Andrew Kershaw alleged, “There’s a feeling in each of the songs that the band has really grasped and is living the strength and intensity of the root music of the South to an almost cathartic degree.” In other words, listeners could find in the rural southern religion of the Allman Brothers Band’s music at least a partial fulfillment of the search for “authentic” spiritual encounters and individual redemption common in 1970s popular culture.

The Allmans’ religious dimension linked the group to a broader search for “connection” in the 1970s. So too did the other components of its “traditional” rural southernness. The group’s notion of brotherhood (i.e., its communal and familial spirit), for instance, was intimately tied to its southernness in the minds of audiences and commentators. Their brotherhood drew on the idea of the South—the rural South—as more family-oriented than the North. “Family life is very vital in the South,” Capricorn Record’s Phil Walden told Creem in 1974. “Maybe it relates from rural days, when you lived out in the country [and] you hoped you had a lot of brothers and sisters, because that’s the only god-damn people you had to play with.” Walden considered the Allman Brothers Band “the beginning of a Southern renaissance,” a communal spirit of creativity among black and white southerners, many of whom, he stressed, had decided to stay in the region and work for the region’s benefit. Reflecting on the Allmans after their 1976 breakup, the Village Voice’s Dave Hickey related the group’s southernness—and much of its appeal—to its iconoclastic, communal ethos. “They were a band of brothers against the world,” Hickey remarked. “Where they came from nobody came from, and what they


played nobody played—not with that combination of passion and precision which marks all Southern avocations from football to stock-car racing to rock-and-roll.”

The band’s reputation as southerners intent on maintaining the bonds of family and community was reinforced by the deaths of two of its members just over a year apart. The Brotherhood suffered a serious setback with Duane Allman’s death in 1971, and yet it soldiered on without a replacement. (In 1972, the Allmans did hire keyboardist Chuck Leavell to fill out the sound.) Rather than destroying them, Duane’s demise appeared to draw the group closer together. As a friend of the band explained, “Most of the Brothers are from rural areas in the South, from tight, close-knit families. . . . When Duane died, the question of identity became paramount. They switched their total allegiance to the family: The constant mention of brothers and sisters isn’t any sham. It’s a necessity.”

Bassist Berry Oakley’s death in 1972 resulted in more turmoil. Again, the remaining members continued, quickly hiring Lamar Williams, a black musician, to take Oakley’s place. The British music weekly Melody Maker credited the Allmans’ perseverance with helping “w[i]n them the love and sympathy of America’s youth.” If anything, the tragedies made “the warmth” generated by their concerts “that much more genuine.”

How could this band bounce back from such crippling losses stronger than before? Writer Geoff Brown attributed it to their southern origins: “Well, that’s good ole

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47 Ibid.
Southern boys for you.” In other words, the South’s supposedly distinctive familial quality instilled its people with a strength that was missing in other parts of the United States. Only southern boys like the Allmans, raised in a communal culture, would respond to loss by growing closer.

Fans and commentators’ frequent highlighting of the Brotherhood revealed their larger imaginings of the rural South as an attractive, communal refuge from the seemingly anomic pull of nonsouthern life. It also indicated the appeal of a revised version of traditional white southern masculinity that disconnected itself from white supremacy. This new model of white southern manliness added platonic male affection while simultaneously maintaining its perceived tough, virile quality. Historian Mike Butler has detailed the Allmans and other southern rock bands’ disentanglement of racism and traditional white southern manhood. Although this new version of masculinity did not completely replace its predecessor, Butler argues, in the 1970s, “Southern white males began to separate their regional and racial identities for the first time in Southern history.” The Allman Brothers’ lineup and music reflected this change. The group members’ masculinity could thus appeal to liberal nonsoutherners looking for a representation of racial harmony, even as this masculinity addressed a more conservative cultural impulse by highlighting the widespread concerns over declining manhood that George Wallace’s presidential candidacies had articulated.

The band’s manhood combined both countercultural and imagined southern perspectives. The Allmans’ image blended a robustness with a peacefulness born of their

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48 Ibid.

49 Butler, “‘Luther King Was a Good Ole Boy,’” 55.
countercultural ethos. Their manliness would prompt *Down Beat* to describe the group as able “to succeed on nothing more than good music and good old Southern macho,” even as a fan described their live performances as “full of friendship [and] love of the music” and a spirit of connection with fellow concertgoers.\(^{50}\) The band’s ability, in the minds of observers, to combine traditional southern and countercultural aesthetics is well articulated in the term “enlightened rogues,” a moniker that Duane Allman gave the group. Allman’s biographer Scott Freeman stresses the Brothers supposed personification of both the hell-raising and relaxed nature that formed the basis of seemingly divergent imaginings of the rural South. “They were a group of guys from the South playing brilliant, sophisticated music, who projected the image of peaceful hippies totally devoted to their art,” Freeman contends, in explaining this duality. “And yet they also were throwbacks to the outlaw days of the Old West, like Butch Cassidy’s Hole-in-the Wall Gang—lovable yet dangerous as they roamed from town to town, playing rock ‘n’ roll rather than robbing banks.”\(^{51}\)

Freeman’s statement reveals that much of the lure of southern rock lay in its artists’ hard masculinity, which, although rooted in earlier gender representations, carried with it an implicit critique of the feminist revolution of late 1960s and 1970s. It was a message not lost on followers of the Allman Brothers Band. Andrew Kershaw, for example, identified what he considered the Brothers’ conventional views of men and women when in 1973 he wrote, “Here was a true Southern band that lived wild, toured

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\(^{50}\) James D. Dilts, “Caught in the Act: B.B. King/The Allman Brothers,” *Down Beat*, 8 June 1972, 30; Renee Dudley, author’s southern rock questionnaire, 10 March 2009.

\(^{51}\) Freeman, *Midnight Riders*, 69.
amid heaps of comic books, coke, booze and girls, rode Harley Davidsons and behaved like guys from the South—where men are men, and girls are Southern Belles ripe for the pickin’—are supposed to.”\textsuperscript{52} Notably, Kershaw argued that “the band’s image” “hooked” its fans.\textsuperscript{53} In other words, the group’s apparent machismo was part of its draw. Similar to George Wallace, who called for a return to traditional gender roles, the more roguish aspects of the Allmans’ persona addressed anxieties of the seeming decline of masculinity in 1970s America.

Ironically, Wallace lashed out at hippie-types and assorted longhairs for sapping the country’s potency, but the Allman Brothers Band’s countercultural identification actually reinforced the conservative element of its masculine image. Feminist scholars have argued that countercultural men, rather than staging a revolutionary challenge to male-female relations, frequently reiterated arguments for women’s unequal roles.\textsuperscript{54} The historiography of countercultural manhood is limited, although Tim Hodgdon has outlined two extremes of hippie masculinity. He draws a dichotomy between “outlaw” masculinity, as practiced by the Diggers of San Francisco’s Haight-Ashbury, and the “tantric,” chivalrous, mystical masculinity of the rural Tennessee transplants the Farmies. The aggressive, swaggering Diggers sought to live without limits, while the Farmies called for a more structured existence. Both groups, Hodgdon articulates, often forced women into subservient roles. The Diggers and the Farmies believed that society would

\textsuperscript{52} Kershaw, “A Family Affair,” 47-48.

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 47.

reconstitute a “natural” gender order once it was loosened from modern interferences.\(^{55}\)

The perceived masculinity of the Allman Brothers Band’s members should in part be understood as a combination of the categorical extremes posed by Hodgdon. Duane Allman’s conception of the Brothers as “enlightened rogues” is again instructive. Their status as peaceful, racially liberated southerners coexisted with their brash attitudes about gender that infused elements of countercultural thought.

Audiences and commentators thus saw in the Allman Brothers Band a complicated rendering of white southern rural culture, one that celebrated its ascribed traditions of family, communalism, and masculine dominance but also rejected the racism typically associated with that culture. The group’s unique southernness wedded culturally liberal, conservative, and countercultural points of view. Arguably, this wide net accounted for the Allmans’ increasingly broad appeal in the 1970s, when their depiction of racially reformed white southerners, rural authenticity, masculine togetherness, and religiosity spoke to national desires to mine racial harmony, personal realness, and spiritual and familial unity from an imagined South. The Brothers’ South served as a seductive antidote to the feelings of political, cultural, and social dislocations during the era. Southern rockers Lynyrd Skynyrd presented an equally seductive southernness, albeit one centered in defiance and white hypermasculinity. The popularity of their violent, reactionary image further advanced the Masculine South discourse while, in the context of the Allman Brothers’ success, illustrating the overlapping appeals of the region as a site of both healing and rebellion.

\(^{55}\) Hodgdon, *Manhood in the Age of Aquarius.*
“The Most Joyously Unreconstructed of All Southern Bands”:
Lynyrd Skynyrd’s Rebel Macho

When Robert Christgau dubbed Lynyrd Skynyrd “joyously unreconstructed,” he was following them on a 1975 tour of the South. The Village Voice’s music editor enjoyed the Jacksonville, Florida, group’s simple, straightforward music. “I love Lynyrd Skynyrd,” he confessed, “a band that makes music so unpretentious it tempts me to give up subordinate clauses.”56 The group’s seemingly simple sound actually combined an intertwined, three-guitar attack with often complex arrangements. In reality, Christgau seemed to be referencing the band’s cultural messaging, or what he considered the uncomplicated rural southernness that Skynyrd presented. Its members’ regional origins appealed to Christgau, who viewed the South somewhat condescendingly, as possessing unique qualities. He suggested that it was freer and more laid-back than the rest of the country and that it offered a sensibility that could soothe the anxious nonsouthern psyche. After watching Skynyrd’s drummer care for an endangered bird, the critic mused, “We are cynical about such stuff up North, but in the South they like to believe. The comfort and tradition of the place is enough to make a person expect that freedom is just around some corner of time.”57

Christgau implied, though, that Skynyrd’s South was not all porch swings, church socials, and mama’s lemonade. “If I love Lynyrd Skynyrd I’m obliged to come to terms with its Southernness,” he stated ominously.58 Speaking for many of his liberal


57 Ibid. 73.

58 Ibid., 26.
colleagues, he saw in the band a representation of a violent, strangely alluring, dark side of the rural South along the lines of the Vicious South narrative. While the Allman Brother Band’s lyrics, words, and imagery also spoke to concerns about declining manhood, for many observers, Skynyrd represented full-on masculine rebellion. The group rejected the peaceful vibe of the Allmans’ healing, rural South, proudly self-identifying as defenders of the white South (if not white supremacy) and seemingly standing ready to fight anyone who looked askance of them. The respective views of music commentators and fans reveal the common perception that the Skynyrd’s rural southernness and reactionary masculine bent functioned, more singularly than the Allman Brothers Band, as an alternative to what seemed like an increasingly feminized 1970s U.S. culture.

Lynyrd Skynyrd’s original lineup included Ed King, Gary Rossington, Allen Collins, Billy Powell, Leon Wilkeson, and Bob Burns.\(^{59}\) Ronnie Van Zant, the lead singer and lyricist, “was father, founder, and leader of Lynyrd Skynyrd,” Powell later said.\(^{60}\) The band exhibited a tremendous work ethic. Van Zant drove the members hard, and to good effect. Holing up in the “Hell House,” a rickety cabin outside of Jacksonville, the band practiced from morning until night during its early days, honing its heavy-sounding combination of bluesy rock and country music that also drew on British hard rock influences like Free. In 1973 the band secured a recording contract with musician and producer Al Kooper’s Sounds of the South label, a subsidiary of MCA.

\(^{59}\) Artimus Pyle would replace Bob Burns in 1974. Steve Gaines joined the band in 1976, several months after Ed King’s departure in 1975.

\(^{60}\) Brant, \textit{Southern Rockers}, 114.
Over the course of producing five top-selling albums and several radio staples, including "Free Bird," "Sweet Home Alabama," "Saturday Night Special," and "That Smell," Skynyrd became one of the most popular bands in America. A 1977 plane crash in a Mississippi swamp killed Ronnie Van Zant and replacement guitarist Steve Gaines, and left the rest of the band and crew severely injured.61 Prior to the accident, producer Ron O’Brien claimed in 2001, “All indications were that Skynyrd was about to break the Southern Rock genre wide open and become the American equivalent of the Rolling Stones.”62

Like the Allman Brothers Band, Lynyrd Skynyrd’s southern origins were central to its public persona. But whereas the Allmans’ countercultural aspects seemed to cut against stereotypes of the rural white South’s looming violence and terror, for many music commentators, Van Zant and company served as the projection of a virile, masculine ideal, much like George Wallace or the filmic Buford Pusser. They were supposedly authentic representations of white southern rural working-class culture. Accounts of musicians’ unruliness were not uncommon in 1970s rock journalism; however, reporters stressed a band-as-brawlers narrative in stories about Lynyrd Skynyrd and melded it with discussions of the group’s regional origins. It’s members became manifestations of W. J. Cash’s “hell of a fellow.”63 The typical profile of Skynyrd talked endlessly about its off-stage antics. Part of this tendency was manifested in descriptions

61 Lynyrd Skynyrd disbanded after the accident and reformed in 1987 with a mixture of original and replacement members. My discussion only pertains to the original version of the band.


of the band’s music. The industry trade publication *Cashbox* called the group’s music “tight, mean and rough,” adding, “they’re one of the few rock acts in the business that really get it on.” Skynyrd’s ability to “really get it on” attracted writers who equated the band’s powerful sound with the group’s personalities. Guitarist Ed King confirmed “there was . . . violent incidents every day on the road,” and journalists exploited this reality to construct an image of Skynyrd as simple, violent rednecks from a rough-and-tumble South, despite the band’s accomplished musicianship and often thoughtful lyrics. They similarly classified the group’s music as uncomplicated and straight-ahead, as well as brutal and intense. As the *San Francisco Examiner* claimed, “They don’t just play rough music, they are rough music.”

Lynyrd Skynyrd’s song lyrics reinforced its reputation for busting heads and teeth and furthered the association between the band’s supposedly violent tendencies and its southern masculinity. For example, the song “Mississippi Kid,” from its 1973 debut (*Pronounced 'Lĕh-'nérd 'Skin-'nérd*) involved a pistol-packing narrator who warned would-be assailants to stay clear:

When the kid hits Alabama, people
Don’t you try and dog him ’round.
‘Cause if you people cause me trouble,
Lord, I got to put you in the ground.

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65 Ed King, interview by author, 23 July 2009.


Women, like male opponents, typically fared poorly in Skynyrd’s songs, often functioning either as sexual conquests or victims of violence. It should be noted that Van Zant sometimes wrote about women in respectful terms, as sources of tender and loving desire. Still, steeped in the blues lyrical tradition, the band’s music generally displayed a pervasive misogyny. “What’s Your Name” (1977) told the story of a one-night stand in Boise, Idaho, while in “On the Hunt” (1975), Van Zant sang, “In these two things, baby / Oh, you must take pride / And that’s a horse and woman, yeah / Oh, both of them you ride.” He went further in other tunes, charging that women refused to remain faithful, and therefore, should not be spared violence. “There are many ladies here among us,” Van Zant stated in “Trust” (1975), “that’ll stab you in the back when you ain’t around.” And in “Cheatin’ Woman,” he planned to shoot his lover, who “loved every man with pants on.”

In a rather characteristic comment, music journalist Tony Parsons dismissed the art of the band and directed his attention to its violent undertones, remarking that “the lyrics are a celebration of perennial Rebel Macho—man as predator, provider and abuser

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of women, and the rock ‘n’ roll star as contemporary outlaw, and, yeah, the south shall rise.’” In 1976, Lester Bangs described Skynyrd’s members as “crude thudstomper hillbillies whose market value rested primarily on the fact that they could play their instruments about like they could plant their fists in your teeth.” One only had to survey the titles of articles about the band to get a sense of its unruly image: “Lynyrd Skynyrd: Fifths and Fists for the Common Man” and “Live Lynyrd Skynyrd: One Mo’ Brawl from the Road” distilled this persona. An article on Skynyrd in a February 1977 issue of the British magazine *New Musical Express* was subtitled, in part, “Rivers of blood . . . The crunch of bone against bone.”

The South, as portrayed by the band’s observers, became a romanticized masculine refuge where violence was a way of life. Tony Parsons began his article on the group with a description of Ronnie Van Zant’s father Lacy beating up his then seventeen-year-old son for cursing Ronnie’s mother. The writer also related the singer’s claim that he had recently bested his father in a fight for the first time. Even the occasional reporter who sought to dispel the notion that Skynyrd was consumed with violence usually approached the band members with a sense of trepidation. Joanne Jeri Russo of *Teen* magazine assured her young readers that the musicians were not unruly

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76 Ibid.
rednecks, but were actually quite well-behaved. Accompanying the band on a Los Angeles-St. Louis flight, and later to Jacksonville, though, she expressed apprehension at being locked in a plane with an outfit known “as the South’s rowdiest rock ‘n roll rednecks,” who had rocketed into the public eye behind “sensational stories of torn-up dressing rooms, drunken brawls and lawless rabble-rousing.” These “sensational stories” were based in truth, yet ultimately they said more about journalistic fantasies than the reality of the group itself.

Fans sometimes viewed Skynyrd in similar ways, fascinated by what one listener described as “the rebel flag waving, hell raising, beer drinking, fist fighting, redneck band.” Other fans distilled its southern appeal more succinctly. One New York southern rock listener stated that “the [Allman Brothers Band] is more about loving your fellow man while Skynyrd is more about being a rebel.” For both Skynyrd’s fan base and the music media, an important aspect of the band’s appeal was thus the supposed links between its southernness and its manly, physically defiant spirit that clashed with social constraints.

Even more than its violent reputation, Lynyrd Skynyrd became known for its unapologetic celebration and defense of white southern masculinity. The group contrasted with the interracialism of the Allman Brothers Band and exerted its southern pride more vocally. Ed King contended that Skynyrd’s members never associated with


78 Michael Buffalo Smith, e-mail communication to author, 19 April 2009.

79 Anonymous 3, author’s southern rock questionnaire, 23 May 2009.
blacks—“I mean, none at all!” Some commentators wondered if Skynyrd’s violent white southernness placed them in league with the region’s racist tradition. *Creem*’s Jaan Uhelszki, for instance, wrote that she expected to hear “some juicy tales of nigger skinnings” when she interviewed the band in 1976.

Skynyrd broadcast its white southern pride and focus on southern masculine rebellion, if not its racial attitudes, by flying the Confederate flag. The group used this and other Confederate iconography in album art and onstage as much as—if not more than—other southern rock bands. Its logo, for instance, consisted of a cigar-smoking skull wearing a Stetson hat, motorcycle sunglasses, and a Confederate neckerchief. A typical Lynyrd Skynyrd concert in the South began with an orchestrated tape of “Dixie” as the musicians took the stage. The band frequently played entire shows against the backdrop of a massive Confederate flag. At other times, the flag was lowered dramatically during Skynyrd’s performance of “Sweet Home Alabama.” In his 1974 *Rolling Stone* profile of the group, Tom Dupree stated that Skynyrd did not fly the Confederate flag when it played outside the South, but this was not true. Ed King denies that the band ever discussed whether the flag should not be flown in certain

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80 Kemp, *Dixie Lullaby*, 157.

81 Uhelszki, “Fifths and Fists for the Common Man,” 49.


locales, claiming “it wasn’t a big deal.”

Coverage of the group’s nonsouthern concerts throughout the 1970s mentions the flag’s presence onstage. During a July 1977 show at the Oakland (California) Coliseum—a long way from the Deep South—Skynyrd played against the backdrop of a replica of Mount Rushmore. A huge Confederate flag situated in the middle of the stage separated Washington and Jefferson from Roosevelt and Lincoln. At concerts inside and outside the South, some fans waved their own Confederate flags, suggesting a deep identification with the band, particularly its rebellious attitude. Ronnie Van Zant stated that European crowds “like” the flag “because they think it’s macho American.” In other words, these fans were identifying with the unrestrained masculinity that the emblem seemingly represented.

Van Zant’s comment makes sense when reviewing the place of the Confederate battle flag in 1970s American culture. A reporter concluded in 1969 that it had come to stand for “simple rebellion, the degenerate form of any nameless revolt, indeed for any anomic nut with a generalized gripe.” These “generalized gripe[s]” were often expressed by self-described rednecks, who Americans no longer solely identified with southern culture. Whereas the redneck had once been a pariah in national culture, by the

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86 Ed King, interview by author, 23 July 2009.
88 James Kelton, “Rebel Band Wows 40,000,” San Francisco Sunday Examiner & Chronicle, 3 July 1977, A3. See one of the photographs that accompanies the article.
1970s many conservative, non-working-class whites self-identified with this icon of southern rural culture. Bruce Schulman argues that “these demi-rednecks” “adopted the term redneck as a badge of honor, a fashion statement, a gesture of resistance against high taxes, liberals, racial integration, women’s liberation, and hippies.”

This was the way in which George Wallace used the term when he proudly called his southern and nonsouthern supporters rednecks. The Confederate flag represented one key symbol of this identity, an indicator of one’s reactionary sociocultural, if not political, bent. It is what historian David Goldfield called, in supporters’ eyes, “a symbol of freedom against oppression and for individual rights and self-determination.”

One Atlanta factory worker described it more succinctly as meaning “get the hell off my back and leave me the hell alone.”

Both southern and nonsouthern fans similarly accepted Skynyrd’s treatment of the flag as exemplifying defiance and defensive southern chauvinism rather than racism. Rick Whitney, a listener from Skynyrd’s hometown of Jacksonville, Florida, described the emblem in masculine terms. He stated, “The rebel flag always meant bikers, rebels, or Southerners in general, not this anti-black symbol from the racist South and the Civil War era. . . . Skynyrd used it just to show southern pride.”

“With Skynyrd,” explained Patricia Goddard, a fan from Louisiana, “I think it was the ‘wild eyed southern boy’

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91 Schulman, The Seventies, 117.


94 Rick Whitney, author’s southern rock questionnaire, 2 June 2009.
usage of the flag[.] I tend to believe that it was less about race and more about [the] cultural identity of the hard rockin, hard drinkin, rowdy southern boy identity that a good deal of their audience could relate to."95 Along these lines, a suburban Philadelphia fan pointed to the Confederate flag as symbolic of Skynyrd’s message of manly robustness. “We more saw Bands like Skynyrd and the Outlaws as Gallant and honorable,” he maintained. “Still fighting the Civil War and taking over the North.”96

As this last fan’s comment reveals, Skynyrd’s Rebel Macho not only celebrated the South—and its seeming masculine spirit—but also a prickly, male defensiveness about the “southern way of life” with which fans identified more universally. This outlook was central to the band’s biggest hit, “Sweet Home Alabama,” a warm, country-inflected rock song with a rolling rhythm, which reached number eight on the Billboard Hot 100 in 1974. The second verse includes a pointed rebuke of Neil Young. The Canadian rock star’s song “Southern Man” (1970) painted southern white manhood as racist, while his “Alabama” (1972) labeled George Wallace’s state as aberrational. He sang of Alabama as a state that had “the rest of the union to help [it] along,” and yet he still found it a land of “ruin.”97

Van Zant called out Young by name in “Sweet Home Alabama,” singing, “Well, I hope Neil Young will remember / A southern man don’t need him around anyhow.”98 In concerts around the South, the line drew an ecstatic response. “When Van Zant sneered

95 Patricia Goddard, e-mail communication to author, 9 April 2009.

96 Lawrence Zeitz, author’s southern rock questionnaire, 11 March 2009.


out that final line,” Tom Dupree wrote about a 1974 Atlanta show, “the electricity almost became visible and the entire coliseum exploded in a triumphant roar. Our boys! they screamed.” The group, Dupree continued, was “vindicating the thousands of kids who were wondering why they didn’t feel guilty about loving life in the Deep South.”99 The band’s kiss-off to Young drew enthusiasm from northern crowds as well. According to Creem’s Richard Riegel, “Sweet Home Alabama” was the band’s “most popular song with Northern audiences.” Why? “Guilty masochism, perhaps?” Riegel suggested.100 More likely, these fans identified with the macho spirit of the line even if they happened to like Young’s music.

The Neil Young verse in “Sweet Home Alabama” did little to rebut northern criticisms of the South. Highlighting Van Zant’s failure to address his fellow rocker’s charges, historian Jim Cullen states, “It is crucial to note that the suggestion that Young get lost echoes a century of similar advice that those north of the Mason-Dixon line should mind their own business.” Cullen draws a parallel between Skynyrd’s rebuke of Young and those late nineteenth century southerners who called on northerners to let the South deal with the “Negro Question” by itself.101 This race-based perspective, while valid, is not how most fans of the band interpreted the song. It was, instead, a tonic for many of Skynyrd’s white southern enthusiasts, who still smarted from the barbs of northerners who labeled white southerners backward and racist. One fan from Alabama


described his resentment toward what he considered unfair outside criticism of his home region and his fellow white southerners. “It was us against the world,” he insisted. “I had travelled in the north as a teenager, NYC, Pennsylvania, DC. I was mocked, hated, despised, demeaned, because of where I was born.” Even nonsouthern Skynyrd fans could identify with the band’s defensive southernness and its idealization of tough white southern masculinity. In a comment that underscored the patriarchal appeal of Skynyrd’s Rebel Macho, a nonsouthern fan claimed that the band’s message “was about defending your way of life, your family[,] your town, your home state and doing your duty against great odds even if you didn’t necessarily agree with everything.”

While fans focused on the band’s manliness as embodied in its defense of the South, critics made much of the third verse of “Sweet Home Alabama” and its references to George Wallace. Here Lynyrd Skynyrd appeared to endorse the Alabamian and suggest that it held white supremacist sympathies:

In Birmingham they love the governor
(Boo, Boo, Boo)
Now we all did what we could do
Now Watergate does not bother me
Does your conscience bother you?
(Tell the truth)

Van Zant implied to Robert Christgau that the boos came from the band as an indictment of the governor. The rock critic rejected the argument, writing that Van Zant’s “explanation, which seemed to imply that the jeers were intended in some abstrusely

102 Randy Stephens, author’s southern rock questionnaire, 26 May 2009.
103 Lawrence Zeitz, author’s southern rock questionnaire, 11 March 2009.
satirical way, made no sense to me.”

According to Ed King, the booing crowd in fact represents voices of northerners, which clarifies the meaning of the next line, “Now we all did what we could do.” King claimed that this lyric amounted to a southern endorsement of Wallace: “‘We all did what WE could do!’ to get Wallace elected.”

Whatever its meaning, the line logically serves as an opposing response by Van Zant, representing all white southerners, to the angry chorus of “boo, boo, boo.” The southern speaker ends the verse by referencing Watergate. He insinuates that this event is a nonsouthern crime for which the South deserves no blame. This remark upholds the sentiment of the Neil Young verse: northerners should stop moralizing and leave the southland alone. Overall, Skynyrd used the third verse of “Sweet Home Alabama” to augment its masculine focus, as defenders of an allegedly beleaguered class: white southerners.

The band’s support for Wallace appears more explicit when one examines its members’ public statements about him. Although the governor had tempered his public racism by the mid-1970s, he remained a controversial figure. In 1975 Wallace, recognizing his kinship with the group, made them honorary lieutenant colonels in the Alabama State Militia, a distinction Ed King says the band “took pride in.”

Searching for signs of racism, music journalists grilled Skynyrd’s members for their assessments of

106 Ibid.


Wallace. Their comments were rife with ambiguity. Echoing fans’ interpretation of the band, Skynyrd tried to distance itself from Wallace’s racism while identifying with his masculine, southern image. Bassist Leon Wilkeson explained, “I support Wallace about as much as your average American supported Hitler,” before adding, “I respect him, not as a politician—but as a man who hasn’t given up what he was after. That’s how we all feel.”

Van Zant seemed to agree. He told Robert Christgau, with a notable lack of racial sensitivity, “I don’t like what he says about colored people.” Still, he informed reporter Lisa Robinson that he considered Wallace a “gentleman [who] has a lot of nerve.” More than that, he had “balls. And I admire that.” In short, whatever reservations they may have had about his racial politics, Skynyrd’s members connected with Wallace’s masculinity: he was real man who not only stood up for the (white) South, but also for the cause of masculine regeneration.

In spite of the press’s interest in the meaning behind the band’s Wallace connection, fans generally rejected charges of racism leveled against the musicians. In Skynyrd’s catalog, Gary Nagle asserted, “There are no lyrics I know of, that speak to the proliferation of racial prejudice.” Other fans identified racial progressivism in the group’s music. One Pensacola, Florida, listener stated, “Ronnie Van Zant wrote lyrics which demonstrated inter-racial acceptance and friendship,” pointing to the song “The

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112 Gary Nagle, e-mail communication to author, 23 May 2009.
Ballad of Curtis Loew” (1974), in which the white narrator describes his friendship with a socially disregarded elderly black bluesman.\textsuperscript{113}

The disconnect between journalists’ fascination with Skynyrd’s racial politics and fans’ seeming lack of interest in the topic perhaps speaks in part to liberal reporters’ Vicious South-style wariness of the white southern working-class culture that Lynyrd Skynyrd represented. But by ignoring racial issues, or by arguing that the band was actually racially enlightened, fans could submit to the appeal of what scholar David Stricklin has called “a defiant southern perspective that avoided sinking into overt support for returning to the pre-civil rights days.”\textsuperscript{114} That defiance was based in the band’s reputation as backwoods purveyors of violence, which in turn underwrote its message of masculine rebellion. The success of a rock group that preached this kind of message further demonstrates the powerful pull of the rural white South as a repository of male aggression and social control in the context of a 1970s American society in which the tradition of white masculine dominance appeared under assault.

Conclusion

The two brands of southernness presented respectively by the Allman Brothers Band and Lynyrd Skynyrd—the Countercultural South and Rebel Macho—appealed, in part, to different audiences looking for different values in an imagined rural South. The Allman Brothers further showcased one of the central components of country-rock’s

\textsuperscript{113} Anonymous 4, e-mail communication to the author, 30 March 2009.

reception; that is, the alleged similarity in countercultural and so-called rural southern values. While the Brothers’ southernness attracted listeners intrigued by the rural South as an anachronistic alternative to modern America, they also seemed strikingly modern; they offered a portrait of whites and blacks living and working together for a common goal. Lynyrd Skynyrd, in contrast, appeared to promote white southern male defiance and violence as admirable traits central to the reassertion of white male patriarchy.

Nevertheless, southern rock fans often embraced both Lynyrd Skynyrd and the Allman Brothers Band. Aside from the quality of their music or marketing, this reality puts into sharp focus the ability of 1970s Americans to imagine the South in divergent ways without reconciling the obvious disconnect. In a larger sense, this duality allowed Americans to place the cultural anxieties that the Allmans Brothers Band’s South and Lynyrd Skynyrd’s South addressed into an area of safer contemplation. The bands’ southernness collectively spoke to commentators’ and fans’ concerns of declining masculinity, racial strife, and social unrest. Whether the solutions to these problems lay in the ass-kicking South of Skynyrd or in the brotherly South of the Allmans was unclear. But the groups’ variations of rural white southernness at least offered observers an opportunity to use the contradictory imagery of the pastoral white South to review their own conflicted thinking about the current state of the country.

Despite their differing depictions of the region, both the Allman Brothers Band and Lynyrd Skynyrd united in their support of presidential candidate Jimmy Carter—himself a son of the rural South—during the 1976 campaign. The bands’ concert benefits helped to raise money for the former Georgia governor as he worked to establish himself as a viable candidate. The Democrat’s message, though similar to that of his beloved
Allman Brothers Band, avoided any whiff of hippiedom or masculine chest-thumping. Instead, he cast the region in a positive light, playing up its supposed rural virtues and presenting the South at the forefront of racial progressivism in the post-civil rights era. Carter’s enticing rural white southernness was a source of pride for white southerners like the members of Lynyrd Skynyrd and the Allman Brothers Band, who were well-acquainted with nonsouthern condescension. But, more importantly, Carter’s persona also played well on the national level. Indeed, it fit perfectly with the narrative of a nation searching to find itself politically, morally, and spiritually in the 1970s.
CHAPTER 5


In an effort to make sense of Jimmy Carter’s southernness, Gerald Ford’s Republican campaign strategists turned to another southerner, Tennessee-born Kaye Pullen, a speechwriter for First Lady Betty Ford. During the campaign, Pullen drafted a memo on the meaning of Carter’s southern origins for both fellow southerners and the wider electorate. She recognized the Georgian’s dualistic rendering of his southernness as a major campaign issue. “Carter,” Pullen wrote, “is playing upon two essentially conflicting myths—the ‘good ole boy’ rural South and the ‘black and white together’ new South.”¹ In other words, the Democrat combined powerful claims of both the region’s post-civil rights racial transformation and the continuity of seemingly timeless southern rural virtues of family, simplicity, and hard work.

Carter’s healing southernness comprised this winning combination of disparate notions of the South, which drew on appealing concepts of southern rural life while promoting the region as racially reformed. Rather than try to ignore the race issue, or exploit it by playing to bigoted white voters like George Wallace, Carter held up southern race relations as a model for national emulation and made the case that a white southerner

could be especially trusted as a racial liberal. He argued that both blacks and whites had emerged from the civil rights movement with new a understanding of each other. Thus, the Changing South of the civil rights era was now the “Changed South.” This view was bolstered by the growing public perception of racism as a national—not a uniquely southern—problem, or, as the *Buffalo Evening News* put it, that “Boston has replaced Birmingham as the national symbol of racial trouble.” Carter coupled this claim of southern racial progressivism with a Down-home South celebration of the revitalizing aspects of the rural and small town lifestyle from which he emerged. Summing up his healing southernness, in May 1976 the Georgian described his grounding in traditions that allegedly lay dormant in the rest of the country. To be southern, he said, meant exhibiting
closeness to our places of worship. A love of our land. A deep sense of patriotism. A basic conservatism that lets us look to the past and preserve the finer things of life but lets us root out the things that need to be changed. A confidence in the future. A love of our nation. A belief in the chance for a better education than we’ve had . . . a belief in the work ethic. A closeness in family. We’re no better than anyone else. I think the election has shown, so far, that the rest of the nation sees that we’re just as good. And in a lot of ways we have some things that we can show the rest of the country.

Rather than simply serving as a referendum on the place of the white South in national politics, as some news commentators postulated, Carter’s victory was an

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2 Commentators rarely placed Texan Lyndon B. Johnson, who shared Carter’s racial liberalism, in the southern camp. As columnist Theo Lippman Jr. explained, “He had more of a drawl than Jimmy Carter, but he claimed he was a Westerner and at least one of his biographers, also a Texan, agreed. A more basic reason for crossing LBJ’s name off the Dixie Presidents list is that his real home was Washington, D.C. He moved there to year-round employment before he was 30.” Theo Lippman Jr., “Southern Presidents,” *Baltimore Sun*, 3 June 1976, A22.


important moment in the country’s thinking about the South—its notions of southernness and its meanings—in the post-civil rights era. Similar to the counterculture’s sense of the rural white South as a soothing refuge from an upturned 1960s-era society, the candidate presented his southernness in a manner that spoke to the particular anxieties of 1970s Americans. While addressing persistent postwar apprehensions about alienating technologies and the allegedly bland and stifling experiences of urban and suburban life, this healing southernness served as an alternative that also spoke to more recent feelings of public helplessness in the face of government lies about Vietnam and Watergate and the social turmoil of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Carter’s southernness also touched on Americans’ fears that the nation had drifted from its core values of family, community, and political and personal faith. A *Time* survey taken in May 1976 found that 61 percent of Americans “feel something is morally wrong in the nation.” Among those voters, 54 percent supported Carter, versus 31 percent for Ford. Dean Francis Sayre of the Episcopal Washington Cathedral speculated that the Democrat’s popularity stemmed in part from his perceived “spiritual quality,” which some voters believed would help the nation recover its moral bearings.

What made Carter’s embodiment of these apparently rural white southern values so important in the 1976 election was the perception—fueled by both the candidate and

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5 For an example of this referendum view, see Anthony Lewis, “Look Away, Dixie Land,” *New York Times*, 25 March 1976, 35.


the press—of this southernness. Southern-born author Neil R. Peirce highlighted the potentially restorative power of Carter’s southernness. During the campaign he wrote of the values that nonsoutherners could learn from the South: “honesty about race questions, direct and openly expressed religious faith, a deep sense of family and of place—all values so often lacking in the more acquisitive and devious North.”

Years before his controversial “malaise speech,” candidate Carter frequently addressed the purported spiritual, racial, and political crises afflicting the country. By invoking his past and utilizing rural southern imagery, he argued that he was perfectly suited to pull the country out of its deep angst.

Carter’s southernness as symbolized by his liberal racial views, rural hometown, tight-knit family, and Southern Baptist religion spoke to a deeper American desire for healing in the 1970s. For Americans looking to revitalize the national spirit in the Bicentennial year, and with it the nation’s battered economy, Carter’s wielding of imagined white southern culture promised a set of useful, albeit abstract, tools for cultural, social, and political rehabilitation. It exploited a powerful national yearning for a redemptive fantasied past combined with a desire to move past the troubling problem of race in America.

The Southern Issue

Although Carter’s southernness addressed voters’ cultural concerns and bolstered his post-Watergate-era, anti-Washington image, political commentators during the 1976 campaign questioned whether the Georgian’s origins would ultimately prove a liability.

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They wondered if nonsoutherners, particularly northern liberals, would be able to put aside the Vicious South discourse and notions of white southern backwardness and buffoonery and elect the first Deep South president since 1848. Early in the primary season, Carter acknowledged this prejudice, but he told the Washington Star that perceptions of the white South had changed. “It’s become of lesser significance,” he said, “as people begin to realize more clearly that the South is no longer represented by people like George Wallace or [former Georgia governor] Lester Maddox.” Still, privately, Carter and his associates worried about a lingering antisouthern bias. In a letter to his wife and informal political advisor Rosalynn, Carter’s daughter-in-law and campaign surrogate Judy argued that the candidate should be aware of the “prejudice against Southerners,” however “subtle and ill-defined.” Carter’s campaign director Hamilton Jordan claimed, “If there’s something about Jimmy people don’t like—his religion or he’s from the South—it’s easy to say he’s fuzzy on the issues.”

Carter and Jordan found plenty in the newspapers and magazines published during the campaign to support their fears. Journalists gathered piecemeal evidence of this alleged anti-southern bias, which usually consisted of quotes from voters or Democratic party officials. Newsweek’s Susan Fraker cited one Oregon voter who said, “I try to tell myself I don’t care [that Carter is a Southerner], but it’s always in the back of

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my mind. I have to jump that hurdle everytime I listen to his accent.”

Occasional letters to the editor in national publications indicated part of the electorate’s discomfort with a Deep South president. Shortly after the general election, one suburban Chicago reader told *Time* sarcastically, “Just what this country needs: a vague, big-spending, fast-talking hillbilly redneck in the White House. May God help us.”

Reporters themselves commonly engaged in unsupported speculation that anti-southern bias would substantially color voter response to Carter. For example, the *New Republic*’s Richard Strout (writing under the pseudonym TRB) recounted the following encounter:

I have a political activist friend in Washington who burst out against Carter with a vehemence that startled me: “He’s a two-faced louse!” he ejaculated or words to that effect. My friend thinks Carter’s a hypocrite; maybe he is prejudiced; deep down perhaps, he is asking a variant of that old question, “Can anything good come out of Georgia?”

Conservative columnist George F. Will also identified a tendency for white northern liberals to automatically label Carter a racist, suggesting that his southern origins were a definite factor in the opposition to his candidacy.

Even though most of the written coverage of candidate Carter and his family treated their southernness in positive terms, the same could not be said for political cartoons. These often portrayed the Carters as ignorant and backward and played on

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12 Ibid.


stereotypes of a benighted South. After he clinched the Democratic nomination in New York, the cover of Newsweek showed Carter as a hayseed leading a march of donkeys through the big city. One month earlier, the magazine published a piece by nationally syndicated cartoonist Pat Oliphant in which various segments of the Democratic Party establishment—represented by George Wallace, Chicago Mayor Richard J. Daley, and Washington Sen. Henry “Scoop” Jackson—arrive in Carter’s hometown Plains to pay their respects to the candidate, who sits on his front porch. Oliphant set Carter’s famous smile into a cadaverous, sunken face. The Georgian looks like a barely animated corpse. Scholar Alette Hill maintained that “Carter’s clothing is that of a farmer, but his face is that of a grotesque opportunist.” A cartoon appearing in the Denver Post managed to lampoon both Carter’s southernness and his campaign promises to transcend petty partisan politics. In this drawing, the artist exaggerates his Georgian dialect. The Democrat proclaims to reporters, “Wahtuhgate? I don’t intend to make Wahtuhgate an issue . . . Let us fo’get Wahtuhgate . . . Wahtuhgate . . . Wahtuhgate . . . !”

The newspaper juxtaposed this cartoon with a satire piece titled “Love and Justice in the White House.” Presenting the Carter clan as fish out of water at the president’s residence, the column depicts the Carters planting peanuts in the Rose Garden, preparing

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18 Pat Oliphant, political cartoon, Newsweek, 21 June 1976, 16.


to serve fried chicken to Mrs. Gandhi, and building a cotton gin on the White House lawn, which is brimming with encamped Carter relatives. The family appears, Alette Hill explains, as “presumably a southern version of the Beverly Hillbillies.” Elsewhere, cartoonists lampooned Carter’s Southern Baptist faith, alternately drawing him as a grinning Jesus wrapped in the Confederate flag, a faith healer, and God’s personal pick for president. By reducing the governor to a hick, a misshapen corpse, or a deluded Baptist preacher, these depictions leaned on pervasive southern stereotypes and the Vicious South’s portrayal of white southerners as aberrational.

Despite negative—or at least ambivalent—cartoon representations and conjecture about anti-southern bias, public opinion polls found scant evidence that Carter’s southernness hurt him among voters. Americans, as other imaginings in the 1960s and 1970s had demonstrated, possessed the ability to view the white South in antithetical ways simultaneously. And in an environment in which the Georgian’s origins were constantly scrutinized, Carter and his surrogates did not shy away from his southernness. Rather, they positioned him as a transcendent figure who captured the best of the region’s supposed traits while overcoming its racist baggage. Early in the campaign, an advisor alerted Carter and Hamilton Jordan to the potential benefit of a candidate who exceeded the expectations of a stereotypically demagogic southern politician. Were the candidate

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able to represent himself as “the ‘good Southerner.’” the advisor theorized, “Carter should be able to turn this ‘disadvantage’ to his great advantage.”

Carter: The White Southerner as Racial Healer

If Carter was the “good southerner,” then the “bad southerner” was George Wallace. Carter showcased himself as the personification of the Changing South feature of racial reconciliation. He was a rural white southerner—seemingly the stereotype of the cracker—who had nevertheless risen above his bigoted surroundings. He used this identity as an argument for his ability to show the way forward on the nation’s race issues. In 1976 Carter challenged Wallace, now in the midst of his fourth presidential campaign, for the Democratic nomination. While the wheelchair-bound Wallace had moved away from overtly racist appeals, in the minds of many Americans, he remained the quintessential representation of the Vicious South: angry, bigoted, and demagogic. These characteristics, coupled with his reactionary politics, appealed to a considerable number of working- and middle-class nonsoutherners, yet for most moderates and liberals, Wallace embodied an old, bankrupt brand of southern—and indeed national—politics. As biographer Marshall Frady wrote in 1975, “Only Gov. George Wallace remains now as a last vestige, a curious transitional urban mutant, of that long pageant of splendidly gargoyleish, musky old demagogues during the South’s age of tribal politics.”

The “eminently inoffensive” (Frady’s words) Carter told southerners that his primary

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24 Knox, memo to Jimmy Carter and Hamilton Jordan, “Targeting,” 7 May 1975, in Memorandums [2] folder, Box 30, Jody Powell Papers, Subject Files, Jimmy Carter Library, Atlanta, Ga. The memo does not make clear who “Knox” was, but most likely, it was Patti Knox, the Michigan state coordinator for Carter’s 1976 campaign.

battle with Wallace was “a matter of who best represents the South,” although he just as
easily could have been speaking to northerners. After Carter beat Wallace in the early
southern primaries (Florida and North Carolina), he laid claim to the mantle of the “good
southerner.”

Wallace understood the stakes involved in his contest with Carter. Based on the
relative successes of his previous presidential runs, he knew that playing on voters’
conflicting notions of the imagined South was a crucial element for any white southerner
seeking to make inroads into national politics. Wallace reacted angrily to Carter’s
victories in the South and to the larger sense that the Georgian’s charming southernness
was now more relevant than the Alabamian’s angry, race-baiting approach. Journalist
Elizabeth Drew remembered seeing a frustrated Wallace speaking before a North
Carolina audience of supporters. He was clearly bitter at being out-southerned by Carter:
“His face twisted in anger, his voice ringing with contempt, Wallace says, ‘I’m not one
who says, ‘I’m a Southerner but I’m a different kind of Southerner.’ What kind of
Southerner does [Carter] mean? I think all Southerners are good.’”

Media commentators identified the shift from “bad” to “good” southerner as a
passing of the torch from the Old South of Wallace to the New South of Carter. The
1976 campaign marked the end of Wallace’s pretenses to national power as well as his

overwhelming appeal to white southern voters. Former editor of the Atlanta Constitution Reg Murphy insisted that Wallace fell behind because he failed to adjust his outdated racial politics or to recognize the increasing influence of black southern voters. Murphy and other commentators correctly deemed Carter more adept in his understanding of the shifting role of race in the new southern politics. In this revised state of affairs, white southern Democrats would need to appeal to both blacks and whites. They could no longer rely on racial demagoguery to sway voters, thus representing a break with the reactionary nature of southern politics before and during the civil rights era. The contest with Wallace, not surprisingly, allowed Carter to ground his southernness in racial healing rather than division. Carter repeatedly asserted the South’s racial progress, describing passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act as “the best thing that has happened in the South in my lifetime.” In speeches and campaign materials, he highlighted both his quiet attempts to resist segregation in 1950s and 1960s South Georgia and his progressive racial record as governor.

By referencing his racial egalitarianism, Carter was in part trying to allay nonsoutherners’ assumption that, as a white southerner, he must be racist. The press often encouraged this reasoning by scrutinizing the Georgian’s racial views. Reporters delved into Carter’s conservative 1970 gubernatorial campaign in which he had courted

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29 Reg Murphy, “Not Since Jefferson and Madison . . .” Saturday Review, 4 September 1976, 9, 10.


31 See, for example, “Jimmy Carter on Civil Rights,” in Civil Rights folder, Box 419, Jimmy Carter Papers/Pre-Presidential, 1976 Presidential Campaign, Margaret McKenna, Field Office Northeast Region Subject Files, Jimmy Carter Library, Atlanta, Ga.
the Wallace vote, and they dwelled on his embarrassingly worded comment in April 1976 that urban Americans should be allowed to maintain the “ethnic purity” of their neighborhoods. That these incidents did little to blunt the governor’s success in the Democratic primaries suggests the power and effectiveness of Carter’s persona as a white man who had risen above the racist culture of his homeland.

In addressing his regional origins during the campaign, Carter argued that as a white southerner he was uniquely suited to promote racial harmony in the nation. It was a claim that seemed counterintuitive but that could appeal to the desire of white Americans to either address, or at least move beyond, the problem of race in the United States. This sentiment is apparent, for example, in the June 1976 Democratic campaign survey responses of two white Wisconsinites. Asked about Carter’s expected actions on racial issues, including busing, a middle-aged home contractor from Green Bay acknowledged the importance of the candidate’s claim of knowing blacks. “Carter has lived and worked with coloreds,” the anonymous pollster paraphrased the man. This self-identified Republican implied that the Georgian’s integrated background would lead him to ease (or stifle) racial unrest by preventing forced busing and desegregation of white ethnic neighborhoods. Another voter interviewed by the Democratic team additionally supported Carter’s anti-busing position, despite her liberal affiliation. But this woman also claimed, according to the surveyor’s notes, that “racism will be curtailed due to his great southern compassion.”

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32 Both quotations found in Memorandum-Pat Caddell, Questionnaire/Responses, 6/76 folder, Box 199, 1976 Presidential Campaign, Campaign Director’s Office, Hamilton Jordan Correspondence/Subject File, Jimmy Carter Library, Atlanta, Ga.
Regardless of their individual racial ideology, many whites could envision Carter’s southernness as promoting the alleviation of racial strife. This contention would have meant nothing without the support of black leaders, who often deemed southern white liberals particularly trustworthy on racial issues. Indeed, as Vernon Jordan, executive director of the Urban League contended, in contrast to “basically paternalistic” northern liberals, “the Southern white man who gets converted to the cause—why, he would die for you.”33 Along the same lines, a Harlem resident told the Washington Post simply, “I respect a good Southern white man because he’s not a hypocrite.”34 This sentiment was evident among the broader black electorate, too. Polling information demonstrated that Carter’s southernness was hardly a hindrance for blacks. He ultimately won 82 percent of the black vote nationally and maintained the Democratic party’s traditional dominance among this constituency.35

Carter did more than proclaim his southern racial progressivism. He also echoed the narratives of white southern moderates and liberals who insisted that the South had made great strides in overcoming its racial problems, and that in doing so, had something to teach the rest of the nation. As the New York Times reported in December 1975, “Carter thinks that other parts of the country—Boston, for example—are now passing


35 Betty Glad suggested a connection between Carter’s black backing and his southernness. She wrote, “One might speculate that in their support for Carter, voting blacks, led by black pastors and politicians, were voting on the symbolic issue of the South more than on issues of substantive programs of social change. They were voting out of nostalgia, trust, and hope—nostalgia for the rhythms and religion of rural Christianity, trust in the leaders who told them Carter was all right on race issues, and hope that a man who grew up with and cared for blacks could make the transition into the new South of equality and justice more readily than a Northern stranger.” Glad, Jimmy Carter, 329-330.
through the period of trauma the South passed through a decade ago, and that they, too, will reach a point of racial understanding.”\textsuperscript{36} The Georgia Democrat thus exploited the shift in national focus during the late 1960s from racial conflict in the South to the unrest in the urban North.

Carter’s speech at the groundbreaking ceremonies for the Martin Luther King Jr. Hospital in the Watts section of Los Angeles exemplified his efforts to present his racially progressive southernness as an asset outside of the South. On 1 June 1976, at a location not far from the riot zones of 1965, where nonsoutherners had been faced with their own racial problems, the white southern Carter presented himself as an heir to the legacy of King’s Dream. “I sometimes think that a southerner of my generation can most fully understand the meaning and the impact of Martin Luther King’s life,” Carter said. “He and I grew up in the same South, he the son of a clergyman, I the son of a farmer. We both knew, from opposite sides, the invisible wall of racial segregation.”\textsuperscript{37} The candidate went on to recount the experience of growing up in the Jim Crow South and the region’s struggles to accommodate change. But because of that change, Carter asserted, he now made a serious claim on the presidency—as a white southerner.\textsuperscript{38} Carter’s willingness to speak of the past wounds of the segregated South, in addition to his religious commitment, won him the support of many black leaders, including Georgia’s Andrew Young and Martin Luther King Sr., both fellow southerners. These


\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 198.
endorsements deemed Carter a viable candidate to members of the black community as well as among northern liberals, many of whom looked to black leadership to determine if a candidate, especially a white southern candidate, was acceptable in terms of civil rights issues.39

Carter’s racial views did more than simply pass the liberal litmus test. Because these beliefs came from a white southerner, one who had seemingly learned hard lessons during the civil rights movement, many voters perceived them as more authentic. More broadly, on a national level, Carter’s persona as a racial healer appealed to what historian Thomas Borstelmann has referred to as “the egalitarian, inclusive flavor of contemporary [1970s] America.” The former governor reflected what Borstelmann describes as most Americans’ commitment to eradicating discrimination in public life while he simultaneously promised relief from the racial dilemma.40 Indeed, even as more insidious forms of inequality persisted, Americans longed to put the divisive racial struggles of the 1960s behind them. They hoped that this small-town Georgian who rose from a culture he claimed had gained wisdom from the civil rights struggle might hold the solution for alleviating the country’s continued racial anxieties.

Imagining Carter’s Roots

In his southernness, Carter deftly combined the modern and progressive—in terms of racial views—with the traditional: rural values, a close-knit family, or, in short,

39 Journalist Peter Goldman reported that Carter’s black support was an important draw for white liberals. “Carter’s Trip of the Tongue,” Newsweek, 19 April 1976 [database on-line]; available from Lexis-Nexis Academic (accessed 19 November 2008).

roots. Many voters saw in the candidate the encapsulation of lost values and traditions. As Carter biographer Betty Glad has argued, “The rich and idealized description of Carter’s roots during the campaign . . . tapped some broader national impulse to escape from the anomie of contemporary society and its social and political fragmentation by a return to the past.” Moreover, “By looking to Plains and the values there, one could find the spiritual and social solace that seemed lacking throughout most of the nation.”

Plains was, in fact, an alluring location that seemed almost too good to be true. It was as if Hollywood, noted several journalists, had applied its magic to the town’s appearance. One could drive through the small, unassuming town in a couple of minutes, but it left a major impression on observers. The apparent incongruity of a serious presidential candidate hailing from a place like Plains (population 683) drew the interest of the press and attracted hundreds of daily visitors during the summer of 1976. Helen Dudar wrote in Esquire that it was “a town so benign, so beguiling, so cute, so clearly the ideal site for the Home of an American President—and so superior to the vulgarity of, say, San Clemente [where Richard Nixon resided]—that you are ready to

41 Glad, Jimmy Carter, 345.


write campaign brochures for him.”

When Norman Mailer ventured to Plains to interview the candidate after the primaries, he expected to see a gothic little town, marred by decay. Instead, he found a welcoming alternative locale: “It had the sweet deep green of an old-fashioned town that America has all but lost to the Interstates and the ranch houses” and other markers of the homogenized nation.

Carter himself pushed voters to visualize his hometown as a pre-modern bulwark against the encroachment of unsettling modern changes that seemingly threatened to destroy the bonds between Americans. His campaign autobiography Why Not the Best? stressed an idyllic upbringing. Like The Andy Griffith Show, his descriptions addressed Americans’ sense of nostalgia for a simpler time and the notion that rural places and small towns, particularly in the South, housed dormant traditions. The book’s longest chapter, “Farm,” opens with a bit of hyperbole. Describing his early years on his 350-acre family tract in Archery, a predominantly black settlement near Plains, Carter wrote, “My life on the farm during the Great Depression more nearly resembled farm life of fully 2,000 years ago than farm life today.” Despite some exaggeration, the candidate wove an enticing connection between land, family, and the Almighty. “We felt close to nature, close to the members of our family, and close to God,” he stated. During the campaign, Carter would describe his childhood as enriched by his family’s love and

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44 Helen Dudar, “Jimmy Carter Has Good Teeth and Is Always on Time,” Esquire, April 1976, 68.


47 Ibid., 32.
devotion. The Democrat also encouraged the public to see Plains as unchanging in its values—with the exception of racial segregation. “Plains, Georgia (1925),” read one caption in Why Not the Best?, “same in ’75.”

Plains, Carter maintained, was a place where people knew and could rely on each other. For Americans in the 1970s who were worried about the breakdown of the family structure, Carter’s close kinship network lent credence to his argument that his brand of moral leadership, drawing on tradition, would address this dilemma. Speaking in Manchester, New Hampshire, in August 1976, Carter stated, “I have campaigned all over America, and everywhere I go I find people deeply concerned about the loss of stability and the loss of values in our lives. The Root of this problem is the steady erosion and weakening of our families.”

This focus on family and values was typical of Carter, who, Betty Glad asserted, “implied that he could make the whole nation a caring people—he would make America like his family.”

Carter’s rustic image was crucial in making this argument. In his early television advertisements, viewers saw the Georgian on his farm, walking the fields or examining peanuts. The message was simple: here is a man untainted by Washington politics, whose values are as rich as the southern soil that grew them. Carter repeatedly discussed

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Plains in campaign speeches, prompting reporters to address its political and cultural meanings. Kenneth Reich of the *Los Angeles Times* concluded, “The scenes of Plains go hand-in-hand with the central message in the speeches [Carter] has delivered throughout the country—that Americans and American government need to return to the old values, and that he is the man who represents them.”53 “Even in big cities,” wrote the *Washington Post’s* Helen Dewar, “he talks about the smallness and intimacy of Plains and its people, appearing to evoke in his listeners a nostalgia for the old days and simple ways, in many cases a life they never knew.”54 “Down-home” descriptions of Plains thus benefited the outsider Carter who associated his southernness with the town’s unassuming nature and promoted it as an antidote to both Washington politics and sociocultural discontent.

The Carter campaign continued to wield the fascination with Plains to its advantage, especially after the candidate captured the Democratic nomination in July. The Georgian camped out in his hometown, met with policy advisors, and waited for the fall campaign against Gerald Ford to begin. He said that he wished to avoid the fate of marathon campaigners who “tend to lose stability and have their roots torn away.”55 For bored reporters, there was little to do in Plains. Democratic campaign officials, in turn, manufactured a series of local events for the press corps. Journalists watched and reported while Carter drained ponds, taught Sunday school classes, played softball, and

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inspected his peanut fields. These events may have appeared mundane, but they served a real purpose. They touted Carter’s image as a disarming, simple, small-town southerner, one fully rooted in his locale. And they kept the media’s and the public’s attention fully situated on his promotion of southern rural traditions.

While in Plains, reporters took the opportunity to interview Carter’s colorful family, a veritable collection of southern archetypes. There was the strong, sassy matriarch Lillian; the motorcycle-riding Charismatic Christian sister Gloria; the faith healer sister Ruth; and most vivid, the hard-drinking, beer-bellied brother Billy. Carter’s relatives furthered his “Plains-as-family-as nation” concept, with their local color reinforcing the candidate’s southernness as a worthy, distinctive alternative to mainstream American politics and culture.

According to reporter Kandy Stroud, Carter’s seventy-eight-year old mother “Miz” Lillian was “spunky, determined, witty and a dominating influence on her sons.”

Lillian was willing to speak her mind with humor about Jimmy and a variety of other issues, guaranteeing that her remarks would always make good copy. “I’m certainly in favor of doing things for old people,” she once said at press conference for the elderly rights organization the Gray Panthers. “I’m going to get old myself someday.”

Visitors

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to Plains, whether members of the general public or the press corps, always found her accessible. She often manned her son’s campaign headquarters and was willing to shake hands and talk with people about Jimmy. At other times she traveled, stumping in support of progressive causes and her son’s candidacy. The press narrative frequently repeated Lillian’s claims of instilling young Jimmy with his drive and determination and his racial open-mindedness, thus augmenting his appealing brand of healing southernness. As Helen Dudar wrote, “A lot of her has gone into her son: her appetite for learning, her feeling for black people, her grit.”

Lillian Carter’s apparent personification of “southern charm” made her a celebrity during the campaign. Nowhere was this more evident than at the festivities accompanying the Democratic National Convention in New York City in July 1976. Journalists sought her out for interviews; celebrities and Democratic politicos wanted to meet her (and gush over her). “I think I’m secretly in love with Miss Lillian,” Walter Cronkite was overheard saying at one event. Former radical Tom Hayden believed that “she could be another Eleanor Roosevelt.” Lillian hobnobbed with the well-known and the well-connected, including journalist Carl Bernstein and actress Shirley MacLaine. Some of this fawning over Carter’s mother was symptomatic of “peanut chic,” a somewhat condescending fascination with all things southern during the campaign. Still,


61 Ibid.
Jimmy could not have asked for a better ambassador for his southernness and his candidacy than Lillian.

Malcolm MacDougall, an advertising executive, who worked on President Ford’s campaign against Carter, recalled one incident that epitomizes the boost Miz Lillian’s southernness appeared to provide the Carter campaign. On the evening of 7 August 1976, MacDougall tuned his radio to a Boston call-in talk show called *Sports Huddle*. The topic was the low-brow sport of wrestling. This was not the environment in which one might have expected to hear a presidential candidate’s mother, but there she was, talking about her favorite wrestlers and discussing such intricacies as the merits of “midgets” in the sport (she did not like them). MacDougall marveled at the Carter campaign’s imaginative use of Lillian, dispatching her to relate to the common folks in her down-home manner.

One little phone call and 100,000 avid Boston sports fans had undoubtedly fallen in love with Jimmy Carter’s mother. I pictured her hanging up the phone and dialing city after city, talk show after talk show, a smiling campaign worker at her shoulder, sliding type-written notes under her elbow. Her deep Southern accent, just slightly cracked with age, drawling into the telephone—and into a million homes a night.62

As MacDougall understood, in her performance of white rural southernness, Lillian functioned as a surrogate for Jimmy who was able to exploit her appeal as a free-speaking southern matriarch into more generalized support for his folksy, rural southernness. Jimmy’s more buttoned-down personality—or his “official piety” as southern journalist Larry L. King called it—did not lend itself to this kind of outspokenness nor would it have been appropriate for him to behave in this manner as he

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tried to represent himself as a serious presidential contender. His mother not only loosened up his image; she reinforced his appeal as a representative of the Down-home South.

Carter’s younger brother Billy fulfilled a similar function, but in more outlandish ways. He was, as one media observer advanced, “the proverbial ‘good ole boy,’ as Southern as saw mill gravy and hominy grits.” Whereas Lillian was portrayed as a sassy southern woman who simultaneously embodied the best of Old South strong womanhood and New South racial acceptance, Jimmy’s brother was what freelance journalist Roy Blount Jr. would later call a “hero to beer drinkers and workingmen.”

Billy’s disarming style and willingness to speak to the bored press corps made him a media star. When visiting Plains, reporters and tourists were sure to stop at Billy’s gas station where he could inevitably be found drinking beer, swapping stories, and telling a few off-color jokes with friends. “Yes, I’m a real Southern boy,” he would tell journalists. “I got a red neck, white socks and Blue Ribbon beer.” When not wearing polyester leisure suits, brother Billy could be seen sporting blue jeans and t-shirts emblazoned with phrases like “Cast Iron,” the nickname that referenced his astonishing gastrointestinal prowess.


64 Kandy Stroud, How Jimmy Won: The Victory Campaign from Plains to the White House (New York: Morrow, 1977), 42.


66 Stroud, How Jimmy Won, 42.

67 “Fish Fry and Barbecue.”
Billy’s rube-like persona could have—and surely did—turn off some voters. He was unrefined, profane, and had no qualms about drinking in front of (and sometimes with) reporters. But the appeal of the good ole boy was precisely his lack of sophistication. This stock character combined a hard masculinity with a seeming unaffectedness that was indicative of his southern environment. Bonnie Angela explained the good ole boy’s charm to *Time* readers in September 1976. To begin with, he knew how to have fun in an old-fashioned manner. His “all-male camaraderie” and loose, casual social style focused on enjoying the company of friends. Angela surmised, “Behind his devil-may-care lightheartedness, however, runs a strain of innate wisdom, an instinct about people and an unwavering loyalty.”68 Billy Carter embodied these ideas. *Boston Globe* journalist and fellow southerner Curtis Wilkie described him as “a fount of folk wisdom” eager to deflate pretentiousness and arrogance. One day in Plains, Wilkie and Billy observed a reporter on the street dressed in overalls and a straw hat chewing on a piece of straw. Recognizing this “act of ridiculous condescension,” Wilkie later recalled, “Billy turned to me and said, ‘Look at that asshole.’”69

Carter’s campaign utilized Billy’s “redneck power” to make the worldlier candidate appear not as a real redneck, but as simply more accessible. In the midst of the Wisconsin primary, Hamilton Jordan hit on Billy’s symbolic campaign role. “Maybe that’s what Jimmy needs to get rid of some of this churchy image he’s got. Um’m, a brother whose standards are a little more relaxed, who boozes a little, that you can really

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relax with . . . the press won’t have to be pushed to pick up on that.”

Jordan was right. The Carter campaign’s recognition that their candidate’s southernness could attract national voters, Garry Wills suggested, caused Billy to shift in his role as “the family’s closet redneck” to “something like the token redneck.”

With journalists anxious to cover the folksiness and apparent authenticity of mother Lillian, brother Billy, and the town of Plains itself, Carter gained a series of incredible assets during the campaign. “Interesting in their own right,” wrote Betty Glad, Lillian and Billy “provided relief from Jimmy’s pieties, all the while reinforcing his basic claims of intelligence, morality, and dedication.” But more importantly, his family served to highlight him as a man whose southernness was deeply grounded in family, community, nature, and tradition.

These traits bolstered his persona as an attractive outsider and his more abstract promise to help Americans recover their moral bearings in the uncertain post-Vietnam, post-Watergate period. Carter exerted his southernness in populist terms as the antidote to the supposedly elitist, out-of-touch, and corrupt nature of standard inside-the-beltway politics. “His invocations of ‘the people,’” historian Dominic Sandbrook asserts in his study of conservative populism in the 1970s, “were perfectly calibrated to take advantage

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70 Genelle Jennings, Into the Jaws of Politics: The Charge of the Peanut Brigade (Huntsville, Alabama: Strode, 1979), 113-114.


72 Glad, Jimmy Carter, 288.

192
of the distrust of politicians after Watergate.”

It was an appeal that stretched across political boundaries.

Along with his rural and family roots, Carter linked another traditional aspect of his southernness—his deep religious convictions—to broader, bipartisan trends in 1970s culture. His Southern Baptist, born-again faith and his penchant for speaking about it on the campaign trail certainly troubled some voters, who were dismayed by his devotion or wondered if he would blur the line separating church and state. Still, while the press speculated about the impact of the “God issue” on the Georgian’s candidacy, it also reported that Southern Baptists were fully in the mainstream of U.S. religious thought. They were in fact part of what Catholic theologian and writer Michael Novak referred to as “a hidden religious power base” of evangelical Christians. According to internal Democratic campaign polling in September 1976, 74 percent of respondents agreed with the statement, “I respect Jimmy Carter for letting people see his religious side.” A national Gallup poll taken one month later found that for voters who were swayed by

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75 Quoted in Woodward, “Born Again!”

Carter’s religion, a two-to-one margin cited the candidate’s religion as augmenting his appeal.  

Overall, Carter’s religiosity attracted a variety of Americans because it fit with the outpouring of religious fervor during the 1970s. His spiritual beliefs benefited his candidacy because they supplemented his claim as a moral leader who hailed from a southern culture that offered lessons for the rest of the nation. Carter presented his religion as a refuge in an uncertain world. In a speech before the laymen of the Disciples of Christ on the campus of Purdue University, he referenced the dislocating events of Vietnam and Watergate. He also spoke to the gathering of his unwavering faith and of “our religious convictions [that] don’t change.” Carter did not explicitly claim that his religion would help to revitalize the national spirit. Instead, his professions of faith underlined the implications of his identity as a political outsider, one who through his hometown, family, and religion could offer the nation the healing balm of his southernness.

The Republican Attacks on Carter’s Southernness

The appeal of Jimmy Carter’s healing southernness placed Gerald Ford’s Republican campaign in an awkward position, particularly in the South. The president faced an uphill battle against the Georgia governor in the states of the former

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Confederacy, which Republicans had gradually come to dominate in the presidential contests of the 1960s and 1970s. With nothing to lose, Ford undertook a bold campaign to question Carter’s regional credentials. The GOP campaign maintained that the Democrat’s liberal policy positions clashed with the majority of white southerners’ conservative political views on such issues as gun control, taxation, and the size of the federal government. But at the same time, the Republicans struggled to counter the lure of Carter’s southern origins outside the South. They looked on in frustration as his simultaneously traditional and progressive southernness attracted many nonsouthern voters. Ford’s unsuccessful efforts to challenge Carter’s southernness further reinforced the allure of the Georgian’s roots and highlighted the 1976 campaign as a contest over the cultural meaning of the region in the post-civil rights era.

Despite the perceptive musings of Kaye Pullen, the Ford campaign never outlined a systematic strategy for combating Carter’s healing southernness outside of the South; that is, aside from suggesting to black and white northern liberal voters that he had overstated his commitment to racial change in local and Georgia state politics in the 1960s and early 1970s. Still, the Republicans recognized Carter’s exploitation of his southern background as a serious problem. Soon after being hired as the Ford campaign’s creative director in August 1976, Malcolm MacDougall met with Dick Cheney, the president’s chief of staff, to discuss the upcoming fall campaign. Cheney identified Carter’s well-articulated origins story and family of southern archetypes as a considerable advantage over Ford’s perceived lack of roots. “Everybody knows that

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Carter is a peanut farmer—even though he isn’t a peanut farmer. He’s a peanut wholesaler,” Cheney complained. “Everybody knows about Plains, Georgia. And Lillian. Nobody really knows Ford. He never had a hometown. He never had a mother. He never had a childhood, as far as the American people are concerned.”81 At a strategy session weeks earlier, Cheney and other Ford staffers fretted that images of the president alongside his family would pale in comparison to the media depictions of Carter and his kin in idyllic Plains.82 The search for spiritual, cultural, and political rebirth at the heart of idealizations of Plains and Carter’s family proved a vexing issue for the Ford campaign and one for which it never devised an effective solution.

Ford’s staff faced its biggest challenge in the South, where favorite son Carter seemed destined to return the region, at least temporarily, to the Democratic fold. Carter’s television advertisements often stressed his rural and peanut farming background in addition to the perceived connection between southernness, family, land, and hard work.83 His October ads pushed the issue further. Carter pollster Patrick Caddell stated, “They were blatant—waving the bloody rebel flag.”84 Caddell did not exaggerate. In one television spot, the announcer insinuated that a Carter victory represented revenge for “years of coarse, anti-southern jokes and unfair comparison” and the region’s status as “a

81 MacDougall, *We Almost Made It*, 23.


political whipping boy.” “The South has always been the conscience of America,” the commercial concluded, “maybe they’ll start listening to us now.” For southerners, particularly white southerners, Carter implicitly argued regional identity was much bigger than policy positions: it comprised a shared history and a struggle for national respectability and vindication.

Ford could not compete with the Georgian’s imaginative (and imagined) wielding of rural southern culture. Instead, his campaign constructed southerness narrowly—and self-interestedly—as the equivalent of political conservatism. In other words, birthplace, family, and rural surroundings did not make one southern; rather, it was one’s advocacy of a robust national defense, low taxes, and opposition to gun control and an expansive federal government that embodied what it meant to be southern. It was an argument that the Republicans borrowed from George Wallace. They treaded a perilous line in trying to overcome the cultural “he’s one of us” appeal of Carter among white southerners. The Republicans settled on arguing that the Georgian had forsaken his own region by abandoning the conservative politics that it favored. Ford’s spokespeople hoped that with time they would be able to convince enough white southerners that a vote for Carter might boost regional pride, but that it would undermine the conservatism Fordites insisted was central to the white southern mindset.

While Carter flew the “bloody rebel flag” at full-staff with white southern voters, the Ford campaign challenged his image as the personification of “southern” values. The Republicans recognized that this tactic could have easily alienated southern whites and driven more of them toward Carter. In its lengthy campaign strategy memo to the

85 Ibid.
president, Ford staff’s vowed, “The attack in the south must be on the issues. We should not attack him *personally* there since this would cause a backlash of regional pride.”

Indeed, the Midwestern Ford would have looked suspect criticizing Carter as a far-left liberal lacking in true southernness. So he called on other white southern politicians to wage this attempted deconstruction of Carter’s regional legitimacy.

For a quintessential conservative white southern politician, the Ford campaign chose Strom Thurmond, a nod both to the southern political past and its Republican present and future. The South Carolina senator and 1948 Dixiecrat presidential candidate starred in two television ads. Both ran for one week during the fall campaign throughout the South. Thurmond, in a straightforward, unpolished style, blasted Carter’s southern credentials. In one spot he told viewers, “In a presidential election, it doesn’t matter who’s from the South. What matters is who is for the South. . . . When President Ford talks about the issues—defense, gun control, taxes, big government, inflation—he sounds more like a southerner than Jimmy Carter.”

Thurmond’s sentiments clearly found support among a sizable minority of white southerners for whom policy trumped Carter’s brand of southernness. In a letter to *Time*, Tommy Thompson of Stone Mountain, Georgia, stated that although Carter hailed from the South and talked with an accent, his politics were decidedly unsouthern.

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87 MacDougall, *We Almost Made It*, 178.


Ford nevertheless struggled to utilize effective southern imagery in his uphill quest to siphon away southern votes from the Democrat. In late September, Ford embarked on a much-publicized seven-hour cruise down the Mississippi River through the Deep South aboard the steamboat *Natchez*. The trip was designed, wrote one *Washington Post* reporter, to demonstrate that “the GOP ticket has not abandoned the South.”90 A Dixieland band and women wearing antebellum garb accompanied the president. This was clearly not Carter’s healing southernness. At stops along the way, the president addressed crowds, focusing not on Carter, but on the Democrat’s running mate Walter Mondale and his supposedly un-southern liberalism.91 After the river voyage was over, Dick Cheney spoke with reporters aboard Air Force One, implying that Carter’s cultural appeal for southerners would bow before political considerations. “A man of [C]arter’s liberal philosoph[y] has never carried the [S]outh,” Cheney concluded.92

Elsewhere in the region, Ford’s people struggled to find the right language to counter Carter’s cultural allure. On ABC’s *Face the Nation*, Ford’s vice-presidential running mate Bob Dole attacked Carter as “Southern-fried McGovern.”93 The president’s campaign staff seemed to realize that such language might strike many white southerners as demeaning, not only to Carter but to the South; as a result, Ford’s consultants


91 Ibid.


generally avoided public references to the governor that denigrated his appeal in the South or the region itself. A month after the Mississippi River trip, Ford spoke at the North Carolina State Fair. An early draft of the speech included a passage that attacked the Democrat, ala Strom Thurmond, for not sounding like a southerner: Carter “has been fuzzy as a Georgia peach on a lot of issues, but he has made it clear that his proposals have anything but a southern accent.” Coming from Ford’s mouth, the president’s advisors apparently believed, the passage sounded trite at best; at worst, it might have been construed as insulting to Carter and other southerners. The final draft employed much less colorful—and awkward—language, with Ford stating that he “admire[d]” southerners’ inclination to vote for a native son. “But it is also important that you look beyond the birthplace,” the speech read, “and listen to what Governor Carter has been saying during his campaign for the presidency.” The Republicans thus did not deviate from their position that the Georgian was just another big-government liberal whose views on the issues were wrong for white southerners.

In covering the Ford-Carter match-up in the South, journalists often framed the contest similarly as a battle between an almost instinctive southern pride and steadfast conservative principles. Reporting from Louisiana, a *Baltimore Sun* correspondent conjectured that “the result here will depend on whether regional pride will outweigh the going perception of Mr. Carter as a liberal unacceptable to his Southern neighbors.”

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One campaign event, in particular, seemed to illustrate Ford’s failure to define southernness in terms of political issues and detach Carter from his southern base. On Labor Day, the annual Darlington 500 NASCAR race was held in South Carolina. Both campaigns saw the event as an opportunity to reach out to white Deep South voters. Carter himself appeared; the Republicans sent Bob Dole. With a crowd of 70,000 looking on, Carter and Dole entered the racetrack riding in separate cars. Cheers and applause greeted Carter, who had propped himself on the back of a Cadillac convertible, while Dole endured relative indifference and a few boos. Once their cars stopped, both candidates stepped off. Dole headed immediately for the VIP box, but Carter shook hands with mechanics before greeting the crowd in the grandstand. Dole watched as the Democrat soaked up the local adulation. Media coverage of the event considered it a public relations success for Carter. Among Republicans, one North Carolina congressman’s constituent summed up the general feeling that Dole’s appearance “was a complete disaster.”

Journalists framed the event as indicative of Carter’s ability to appeal to white southern chauvinism. The Darlington racing fans may have agreed with Dole’s political positions more, Newsweek’s Pete Axthelm contended, but Carter understood these people’s culture. “As a group they saw Dole as an outsider,” the reporter wrote. “It was Carter who could understand their weeks of sweaty work and endless weekends of fondly polishing and tuning the cars that are their escapes and their joys. It was Carter who

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could say that race drivers have always been his heroes—and make the fans believe it.”

For many people at the race, journalist Martin Schram suggested, the fact that Carter hailed from the South and represented it with pride was enough. One of those fans, Billy Johnston, complained to Schram about everything from Carter’s liberalism, to his pledge to offer amnesty to Vietnam War draft dodgers, to his sizable spending proposals. But when the reporter asked him why he still cheered the candidate, Johnston responded, “He’s a southerner, isn’t he?”

This kind of commentary, which posited mindless white southern egotism as the key to Carter’s support in the region, essentially amounted to an argument for false consciousness. Behind the pride, many of the Democrat’s white southern supporters were focused, like nonsouthern voters, on his particular portrayal of his southern roots. Political scientist and native Georgian Margaret Law Callcott, for instance, admitted to a journalist the role of southern “pride” in her attraction to Carter while also admiring how “he stands for those Southern values of family, community, religion and public service that have not been emphasized in recent years.”

Carter himself pointed to the importance of his progressiveness on the race issue as key to his popularity in the South, as well. “There was a disinclination [before the civil rights movement],” he said, “to admit that we had ever made a mistake. There was later a feeling of pride that we had made progress. And, recently, I think there was even a feeling of superiority in the

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100 Schram, Running for President, 1976, 275.

Southern consciousness that we had handled the rights issue better than other parts of the county.”

When reporters wrote of white southerners casting their vote for Carter because he represented the South in a positive light, the specifics of how he did this were often left unstated. But in addition to noting that “Jimmy Carter’s greatest significance has been as a representative of the new South,” journalist Anthony Lewis was surely correct when he stated on the eve of the election that “in Texas and Louisiana and Georgia and Mississippi, good people will judge this election in terms of the country’s readiness to accept a liberal Southerner;” not just any southerner, Lewis could have added, but one with Carter’s unique blend of racial tolerance and perceived rural southern values.

Ultimately, Carter narrowly lost the total white southern vote to Ford by a count of 46 to 52 percent, even as blacks helped to propel him to victory in every southern state except Virginia. Still, the Georgian succeeded better than past Democrats in capturing the votes of white Protestants. Strom Thurmond and other Ford supporters were correct, in a sense, when they claimed that the president better represented the South, or rather, the white South. And yet, setting policy aside, they could not negate the cultural power of a white southerner who stood up for his region and accomplished the impressive feat of celebrating southern rural life and traditions while rising above the white South’s racist image.


Conclusion

Carter clearly grasped the political and cultural desires of American voters in 1976. By constructing a southern identity that was racially progressive and that exuded rural, communal values, he outlined a symbolic and deeply powerful set of characteristics for citizens who felt distanced not only from the federal government, but also from the purportedly invigorating resources of family, nature, and so-called authentic experience. A white southerner’s ability to overcome his region’s deep racial divisions suggested to many Americans, especially nonsoutherners, that he might be able to solve the nation’s own seemingly intractable racial problems. Carter also played to feelings of nostalgia for an imagined past in which the people and the soil provided both real and symbolic sustenance. This nostalgia grew from Americans’ specific fears relating to social disconnectedness, government deception, racial tension, the uncertain legacies of the 1960s culture wars, and the pestering feeling that the country had lost its moral and spiritual bearings. Carter presented his background as free from the anxieties of modern American society. It was full of fresh air. It was rooted in a spiritual search to address life’s meaning. It was full of people—black and white—who loved each other like family and who lived honest, unaffected lives. Carter’s South, in short, offered many voters an appealing manifestation of seemingly discarded values.

What worked for him in 1976 failed Carter four years later. Many nonsoutherners no longer found his southernness so alluring when he had firm policy positions and a mixed presidential record to defend. Ronald Reagan’s capturing of the South, save Georgia, in the 1980 election demonstrated that regional pride could be a fickle asset.
Reagan, better than Ford, made the case to white southerners that they should pay more attention to Carter’s politics than to his origins or the way he promoted the South. This sentiment particularly resonated with white southern evangelicals, who felt that the Democrat had abandoned them. The most critical event in the 1976 election cycle was not Carter’s temporary re-stitching of the New Deal Democratic coalition, but rather the race’s collision of politics, culture, and region. Even as the South further distanced itself from the vestiges of political and economic distinctiveness, its power, utility, and malleability as a cultural construct in the post-civil rights era remained as strong and volatile as ever.
EPILOGUE


Even after Jimmy Carter’s electoral collapse in 1980, the white South has continued to function as an imagined construct in American culture. Indeed, positive notions of the rural white South have persisted, representing an ongoing repository of traits supposedly lacking in contemporary U.S. society. While these post-1970s imaginings could be the subject of another scholarly project, it is clear that such fantasies owe a considerable debt to the images of rural white southernness that Americans summoned in the 1960s and 1970s. The South as a genuine cultural alternative to the drab predictability of mainstream American society has endured even if the cultural anxieties it addresses appear less defined than in the earlier time period. Consequently, musicians, filmmakers, television producers, and other cultural commentators still portray the rural white South as an endless reserve of masculinity, familial and communal interconnectedness, “feeling,” and “authentic” experience. As controversies like the use of the Confederate flag in southern public life and former Mississippi Sen. Trent Lott’s praise in 2002 for the 1948 candidacy of segregationist Dixiecrat Strom Thurmond indicate, unresolved racial tensions continue to serve as an unavoidable point of debate within the “real” South. But in contemporary visions of the rural white South, the legacy
of the 1960s and 1970s is the increased ability of such imaginings to downplay race while Americans use the region’s supposed virtues to express their contradictions.

This tendency was evident in Arkansas Gov. Bill Clinton’s 1992 presidential campaign. Clinton frequently invoked the South of Jimmy Carter, labeling the region as a distinctively communal, familial, and healing place. He referenced his birthplace of Hope, Arkansas, a small town in the midst of a largely rural state, as a microcosm of American values and ideals, and as the bedrock of the middle class he promised to protect. Clinton’s invocation of Hope mirrored earlier efforts by Carter to utilize Plains, Georgia, for similar purposes. In his acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention in July 1992, Clinton explained his grandfather’s influence on him. “He ran a country store in our little town of Hope,” the candidate told the nation, describing the man as someone who had transcended the bigoted thinking of most whites in the segregated community.¹ It was “in that country store” where Clinton claimed to have learned these lessons from his grandfather. “If you want to know where I come by the passionate commitment I have to bringing people together without regard to race,” he said, “it all started with my grandfather.”² Like Jimmy Carter, Governor Clinton presented his southernness as a unique qualification to serve as a racial healer. He also made a broader, more subtle argument about how the best of the white South, which he claimed to represent, marked him, rather than the Republican Party leadership, as the real representative of “family values.”


² Ibid.
Unlike Carter, though, Clinton could reference the rural and small town South without having to endure endless questions concerning his racial views. While Clinton was forced to defend himself against charges of veiled racism (e.g., the uproar surrounding his criticism of rapper Sister Soulja as extremist and questions about his decision to allow the execution of a mentally disabled Arkansas black man in January 1992), such accusations seemed to have little to do with his southern origins. Clinton benefited from Carter’s successful pitch to the American people in 1976 that the white southerner could represent racial reconciliation rather than racial discord.

In reality, post-1970s imaginings of the white South, including the rural South, no longer necessarily addressed racial issues at all, even when they detailed black and white interactions. Admittedly, a variety of films and novels produced since 1980, often dealing with the civil rights movement and its legacy, have offered meditations on the South’s lingering racism, including *Mississippi Burning* (1988), *Ghosts of Mississippi* (1996), and John Grisham’s *A Time to Kill* (novel, 1989; film, 1996) and *The Chamber* (novel, 1994; film, 1996). Still, the contemporary imagined South in popular culture lacks the earlier imaginings’ obvious wrestling with race when presenting ennobling images of the rural white South. Whereas *Deliverance* and *The Andy Griffith Show* excised black characters to avoid discussions of racial matters and films like *Walking Tall*, which featured both white and black characters, were forced to address the issue, viewers today can find depictions of the rural South in which blacks and whites interact with little or no reference to race.

A powerful example of this development is the otherwise forgettable 2011 remake of Sam Peckinpah’s controversial 1971 film *Straw Dogs*. The newer version, directed by
Rod Lurie, relocates the action from the English countryside to present-day rural Mississippi. The movie is populated with frightening, violent white characters who seem little interested in race or racism. The updated *Straw Dogs* draws on easy stereotypes of vicious rednecks and unsuspecting, naïve nonsoutherners, but it also furthers the Masculine South discourse of regenerative violence in the countryside. The film begins with aloof screenwriter David and his pretty actress wife Amy returning to live in her small rural hometown. They travel in a European-style convertible and sing along to the hip strain of the Monkees’ “Goin’ Down,” marking them as disconnected from their earthy new surroundings. A local group of roughnecks soon begins accosting David and Amy. David’s pronouncements of pacifism ring increasingly hollow as the violence against him and his wife escalates. (Amy is raped at one point by a former boyfriend and his companion.) Eventually the locals attack David and Amy in their home, prompting the screenwriter to put down his pen and fight and kill the invaders with a fire poker, pots of boiling oil, and a bear trap. Like Ed Gentry in *Deliverance*, David must engage in brutality in order to recover his masculinity, and only by doing so may he defend his wife and homestead. The rural South in *Straw Dogs* remains a cache of manly virtue in the midst of nonsouthern effeminacy.

The film reveals the continued pull of the Masculine South, but one cannot ignore its equally significant racial (and racist) absence. David and Amy’s attackers are most certainly vicious—indeed the most cunning, violent crackers one can imagine—but they are not the racist southerners of civil rights reporting or even of *Walking Tall*. While *Straw Dogs*’s sheriff character is black, it is notable that he is the victim of racial prejudice only once in the film, menaced briefly by the redneck gang’s oldest member.
Whereas imaginings of the South during the 1960s and 1970s had to, in some way, deal with the issue of white southern racism—alternately embracing it, ignoring it, or considering it no worse than the bigotry in the rest of the nation—*Straw Dogs* creates a narrative that expunges it almost completely. This approach was already put into motion by the Changing South discourse of the 1960s, and it has been furthered over the years by the increasing perception that racism is just as likely to exist in nonsouthern, as southern, locales. Furthermore, with overt racism less evident in the South and throughout the country, the white South’s role as the nation’s racial scapegoat has lessened, yet has certainly not disappeared. The distance between the terrible, violent bigots of *Travels with Charley* and the equally terrible, violent (non-racist) southern whites of *Straw Dogs* makes that development clear.

Contemporary imaginings of the rural white South, aside from their evolving treatments of race, share the criticisms of modernity, if not the historically specific anxieties underlying these appraisals, that were so central to fantasies of southernness during the 1960s and 1970s. These earlier imaginings emerged from a confluence of concerns stemming from the era’s political and cultural unrest (along with continuing uneasiness about the meaning of postwar consumer culture), the emergence of the South as an economic and political juggernaut, and the national decline in attitudes, spurred in part by nonsouthern race riots and busing controversies, that presented the white South as uniquely racist. The rural white South continues to function as a perceived storehouse of vague authenticity in an allegedly inauthentic world. But these perspectives often replicate the substance of 1960s and 1970s imaginings while lacking the specific context in which those fantasies occurred.
In past and present imaginings, the South operates in a larger sense as a place in which Americans can work out their often contradictory ideas about themselves. Recall the Drive-By Truckers’ notion of “the duality of the southern thing,” or the inability of the white South’s evils to wipe away its virtues. The Truckers speak as white southerners trying to make sense of the South’s legacy of racial hatred; this is not the perspective of most Americans today or in the past. To explain the continued importance and contradictory place of the white South in the national consciousness, a better term might be “the duality of the American thing.” This duality helps to illustrate how the nation has used its notions of the South to explore ideas about a variety of issues.

In the 1960s and 1970s, in the midst of and in the immediate aftermath of the southern civil rights movement, one of those issues was race. George Wallace’s South and Jimmy Carter’s South differed greatly, for example, no more so than on the issue of human equality. But the ability of “the South,” as an idea, to seemingly hold such divergent solutions to national racial problems during the era as those proposed by Wallace and Carter speaks to the utility and malleability of various constructions of the South. Imaginings of the region between 1960 and 1980 allowed Americans to air their conflicted thoughts about a variety of national trends, including changing gender roles, evolving family structures, and consumer culture, without ever having to resolve any incongruities. In the aftermath of the southern civil rights movement, the white South functioned as a foundation of “traditional” values against such cultural concerns. These anxieties of social unrest and declining spirituality and morality were themselves partly

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invented, so it is only fitting that a diverse set of Americans, including counterculturists, southern rock fans, Wallaceites, presidential candidates, and television and film producers would conjure an imagined rural white South to address them. Then and now, the region functions as an idea, a tool, a safety valve. Thus, when Americans are talking about the South, they are really talking about themselves.
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APPENDIX

QUESTIONS FROM SOUTHERN ROCK QUESTIONNAIRE

I located 1970s fans of Lynyrd Skynyrd, the Allman Brothers Band, and other southern rock artists via Internet message boards and band websites. I asked interested fans to complete a questionnaire comprised of the following questions about their experiences:

1. A few easy questions to begin: When and where were you born? Where did you live during the 1970s? How would you describe your social and economic environment?

2. When and where did you hear southern rock for the first time? How old were you? Who introduced you to the music? What were your initial impressions?

3. What southern rock concerts did you attend (include city, venue and dates, if possible)? Please describe your memory of these events: the band’s performance, the crowd’s reaction, the way people dressed, the overall atmosphere, and so on.

4. What southern rock fan literature did you read, if any (fanzines, fan club publications, national music magazines—Rolling Stone, Creem, Crawdaddy, etc.)?

5. What most attracted you to southern rock? In other words, why did you become a fan?

6. Can you describe your impressions of the South at the time? What kinds of traits/values did you associate with the South? How did southern rock help to influence and/or reinforce these impressions?

7. List and discuss any bands of which you considered yourself a fan. What made these bands’ music “southern rock”? Please comment specifically on how they represented the South and contributed to your thinking about the South.

8. What types of audiences were attracted to the various bands in the genre? Did certain bands appeal to particular audiences? (example: Allman Brothers vs. Lynyrd Skynyrd)
9. What did you think about some southern rock bands’ use of the Confederate flag and/or Confederate iconography? For what purpose did you think they were using the flag?

10. How would you characterize your political orientation, if any, in the 1970s?

11. What were your other interests besides music?

12. If there is anything else you wish to add, I encourage you to do so below. Also, if you have any suggestions for other questions I could ask to help me better understand the experiences of southern rock fans in the 1970s, please don’t hesitate to make suggestions.