

THE DIRTY SOUTH

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Drive-By Truckers' *The Dirty South* was released by New West Records on August 24, 2004. It was produced by David Barbe. Tracklist:

1. Where The Devil Don't Stay
2. Tornadoes
3. The Day John Henry Died
4. Puttin' People On The Moon
5. Carl Perkins' Cadillac
6. The Sands Of Iwo Jima
7. Danko/Manuel
8. The Boys From Alabama
9. Cottonseed
10. The Buford Stick
11. Daddy's Cup
12. Never Gonna Change
13. Lookout Mountain
14. Goddamn Lonely Love

All music written by Drive-By Truckers. Tracks 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, and 13 lyrics by Patterson Hood. Tracks 1, 5, 9, and 11 lyrics by Mike Cooley. Tracks 3, 7, 12, and 14 lyrics by Jason Isbell.

Personnel:

Patterson Hood – guitar, vocals, piano
Mike Cooley – guitar, vocals, banjo
Jason Isbell – guitar, vocals, organ, keyboards, piano
Shonna Tucker – bass, backing vocals
Brad Morgan – drums

David Barbe – piano, organ
Clay Leverett – backing vocals
Kimberley Morgan – backing vocals

Prologue

I lean forward over the rail, shouting along to Drive-By Truckers' cover of Jim Carroll band's "People Who Died" and playing air guitar. I've been playing air guitar a lot longer than I've been playing real guitar, so I know what I'm doing – I snap my wrist with quick, hard downward strokes to keep in time with the metallic boogie the Truckers are launching from the stage in front of me. But if my typically expert playing (waving? Let's go with waving) was a little out of sync, then forgive me, for I was a bit distracted at this moment on this night in Burlington. That's cause Patterson Hood was kneeling right in front of me, growling Carroll's lyrics about his felled friends, sounding at once out of breath from the mouthfuls of tragedy-besotted syllables he needed to spit out to keep up with a very quick tempo, and in complete control of the song's pace: "They were all my friends, and they died." Carroll is probably best known for his seminal sex, drugs and rock 'n roll teenage memoir *The Basketball Diaries* and the Leonardo DiCaprio movie it later spawned. But, like the Truckers, there was a lot more to him than meets the eye before he joined the ranks of the people who died in 2009. Namely, he was a lot more than the voice behind the photo of DiCaprio's petulant mug that stared back at me from the cover of the copy of *The Basketball Diaries* I read in 7th grade. In addition to being an accomplished poet, Carroll also started a short-lived but influential eponymous punk band while living in San Francisco. The Jim Carroll Band's first album, 1980's *Catholic Boy*, contained "People Who Died," which the Drive-By Truckers have been closing shows with for years.

It had an extra poignancy on this night in Burlington because just two months earlier, the Truckers' merch guy, Craig Lieske, had passed away of a sudden heart attack. Craig was a man of almost superhuman generosity and amiability, and in my experiences with him was the personification of the genuinely caring and symbiotic relationship the Truckers have with their fans. The last time I had spoken to Craig in summer 2011 at a Truckers show in Montclair, New Jersey, he had told me the band was plotting a swing through Vermont—my home away from home, and one of the last remaining states they had never played—for later that year. It took them another year and half to finally make it up to the Green Mountain State – too late for Craig. But I had made it.

Patterson dedicated “People Who Died” to Craig, of course, and the hardcore fans in front of him who had waited in line outside for an hour in the cold to get a spot in the rail—myself included—surged forward. In the Truckers' universe, there's no better way to commemorate a tragedy than with a couple of beers and a loud rock song. This was a party for Craig. There had been time earlier in the set for angry songs and sad songs about crooked lawmen and cruel bankers and getting by on liquor, guns, and luck. Now we were all busy rocking the fuck out. The best part for me came early in the tune when Patterson stuck his mic in my face and let me belt out the chorus for him. My Truckers vocal debut. It was even more fun than the time I had taken a swig from Patterson's bottle of Jack Daniel's a couple of years back. Four nights later in Northampton, Massachusetts, I got to sample keyboardist Jay Gonzalez's sweet, sweet tasting Patron. You gotta love a band that doesn't just

share some of the finest stories and songs in rock music today with its fans, but for sharing drinks with them too.

I first became aware of Drive-By Truckers some time in 2006 after seeing them mentioned on a Rolling Stones message board I frequented. A couple of board regulars whose opinions I trusted (most prominent among them a Clevelander who posted under the pseudonym 2000 Man and who served as something of a musical mentor to me during my teenage years) would bring them up every now and again, mostly to sing the praises of an album of theirs called *The Dirty South*. I figured I should check them out as I was then actively seeking out great new music for the first time. Up until the spring of that year, I had listened exclusively to “classic rock” – the Beatles, the Stones, Led Zeppelin and their (primarily British) peers. All the rap music I heard on the radio sucked, and so did the rock music; it was clear to me that all talent had inexplicably and completely evaporated from the music industry sometime around 1982. Besides, why waste time concerning myself with music that everyone acknowledged paled in comparison to the output of the greats of the 60s and 70s? (Little did I know that “everyone” wasn’t represented by *Rolling Stone* and my local radio station Q104.3 – Arbitron rated number one in America for CLASSIC ROOOOOOOCK. That station’s Boston twofers and insistence on playing Yes’ “I’ve Seen All Good People” every five minutes should’ve tipped me off).

That was my thought process, at least, until I discovered Jack White’s band the Raconteurs, and their debut album, *Broken Boy Soldiers*, within a few weeks of its release in March 2006. After hearing that record—which will forever remain one of my all-time favorites—for the first time, I immediately developed a powerful

curiosity for more great current rock 'n roll. I managed to find a copy of *The Dirty South* on the CD shelves at Best Buy, believe it or not, most likely between rounds on the Guitar Hero demo the store had set up (which is what my friends and I usually did for fun after school).

I can't even remember where or when it was that I first spun *The Dirty South*, so it clearly wasn't exactly an epiphanic moment for me. But over the course of a few weeks or months, I played the album more and more often and it slowly began to permeate my consciousness. I didn't know anything about the band or even what they looked like. I just knew that I liked the three guitars, the anthemic ambitions I sensed, and their amusing Southern accents. One of them possessed a laconic baritone I assumed belonged to a large, bearded man, while another sang in a high, throaty whinge that I thought could probably be attributed to a lanky, skinny guy. I later learned that although both a large, bearded man and a lanky, skinny guy both sang in the band, it turned out that the bearded one had the high voice and the skinny one the low. Go figure.

The Dirty South remains my favorite Truckers album, and I consider it a seminal American rock record. Here's why.

Back When The World Was Gray

Drive-By Truckers formed in Athens, Georgia in 1996, but their story begins well before that. Before, even, the difficult and ultimately doomed existence of Adam's House Cat, the Birmingham, Alabama-based band the Truckers' principal figures, guitarists/singers/songwriters Patterson Hood and Mike Cooley, labored in for the latter half of the 1980s. They were named after an old Southern euphemism ("I wouldn't know him from Adam's house cat"), appropriately enough, since when they were active no one knew Adam's House Cat from, well, Adam's house cat. They broke up after six years without ever releasing a record, even after *Musician Magazine* named them the best unsigned band in the country at one point in the late 80s. At the very least, Hood and Cooley, the Dimmer Twins, established their lasting partnership, which at least at first was molded in the classic rock 'n roll frenemy archetype, the bickering brothers who nonetheless stuck it out for the sake of the band – Jagger and Richards, Davies and Davies, Tyler and Perry (no, no, not Tyler Perry. The Aerosmith guys. Come on). "We didn't get along worth a shit until the last few years," Hood said in 2005, and as late as 2007, tensions ran high enough for Cooley to shoot Hood with a pellet gun during an argument in the studio. But the musical chemistry between them was undeniable. So they continued playing together even after the dissolution of Adam's House Cat in 1991, forming an acoustic duo called Virgil Kane (after the Confederate soldier who narrates the Band's anthem "The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down"). Then for a few years they played separately in bar bands with ignominious names like Horsepussy and the Lot Lizards before moving to Athens, reuniting, and forming DBT.

No, to truly understand the Truckers' place in music history, we have to go back farther, almost twenty years before Hood and Cooley met in 1985. Back to when a small cinderblock building by the side of the road just off Highway 72, practically no more than a hut, unmarked except for the building address—3614 Jackson Highway—emblazoned across the front, inexplicably became a hitmaking epicenter. Where a few white country boys from Colbert County, Alabama mastered a groove so soulful and funky that most people just assumed they were black. Muscle Shoals Sound Studios in Sheffield, Alabama was one of the three great soul capitals of the world during the late 60s and early 70s, along with Motown in Detroit and Memphis, home of Stax/Volt Records. Muscle Shoals gets less lip service today than either of its counterparts, but its contributions to popular music are titanic. The Staple Singers, Wilson Pickett, and Aretha Franklin, among many other soul greats, recorded some of their most celebrated work there. The Rolling Stones recorded at the studio too, cutting “Brown Sugar” and “Wild Horses” in 1969 because they would be left alone there, effectively in the middle of nowhere. But soul and rock artists alike continued to venture to this Podunk town for years, looking to capture the famous Muscle Shoals Sound, even if Muscle Shoals wasn't exactly the most thriving cultural hotspot in America. “There's a really good Cracker Barrel down there,” quipped Patrick Carney, drummer for the Black Keys, the Akron, Ohio rock duo who recorded most of their Grammy-winning 2010 album *Brothers* in Muscle Shoals. No wonder Patterson Hood, in a song on DBT's debut album, *Gangstabilly*, christened his hometown “Buttholeville.”

The guys responsible for that sought-after Muscle Shoals Sound were the Muscle Shoals Rhythm Section, the studio house band that played on many of the greatest recordings made in Muscle Shoals (in addition to other legendary studio players like Spooner Oldham and Jim Dickinson). They were known to pick a song or two, as Ronnie Van Zandt put it in “Sweet Home Alabama,” after he called them by their alias, the Swampers. They founded Muscle Shoals Sound Studios in 1969, after having previously worked at the equally renowned FAME studios in nearby Florence, Alabama. They were guitarist Jimmy Johnson, keyboardist Barry Beckett, drummer Roger Hawkins, and bassist David Hood – Patterson’s dad. Ain’t it a hell of a thing that the son of a guy who got mentioned in the lyrics of “Sweet Home Alabama” grew up to start a band that in 2001 released a double album called *Southern Rock Opera* based on the life and times of the patron saints of Southern Rock, Lynyrd Skynyrd? Rock ‘n roll never runs out of cosmic connections like that, while a pedigree like the Hoods’ is much rarer. And yet, when it comes to casual observers’ perceptions of the Truckers, the totality of the band’s lineage to the Muscle Shoals Sound seems to get overshadowed by “the whole Skynyrd thing,” as Patterson himself puts it on *Southern Rock Opera*. DBT have never tried to disguise their Muscle Shoals heritage, though perhaps it hasn’t been particularly obvious to most listeners until more recently in their career. (Since 2007, the Truckers have recorded an album backing Booker T. Jones and another one backing soul queen Bettye Lavette, as well as having recorded and toured with Spooner Oldham, and covered songs by the tragically forgotten Muscle Shoals troubadour Eddie Hinton. On New Year’s Eve in 2010, at Terminal 5 in New York, I was even lucky enough to

see the elder Hood, wearing mom jeans and a gray beard, sit in with the band on bass for covers of Wilson Pickett's "Take Time To Know Her" and the Staple Singers' "Respect Yourself" and "I'll Take You There." Papa Hood had played on the original recordings of all three).

Cursory investigations of the Truckers, unfortunately, never seem to reveal the depth of their sound and heritage, just as cursory investigations of Bob Dylan leave most people wondering how anyone can stand to listen to this guy wheeze like an oxygen-deprived cockatoo with a pack-a-day smoking habit. Like with Dylan, the key to unlocking the secret behind the Truckers' appeal is largely about the words, man, but I can't say I would blame anyone for not bothering to figure out their songs' lyrical subtexts if they're repelled by what's coming out of their speakers – or even if they just feel like they've heard it all before. In a time when, to many north of the Mason-Dixon line, the South means little more than Toby Keith, George Bush and the Bible. Even to people from the South or the many Northerners who appreciate the region's rich musical history, the idea of an apparently self-professed Southern Rock band with three guitar players seems nearly as dated as rotary telephones or *The Andy Griffith Show*. So it must be hard for some to hear DBT, with their crunching arena rock riffs and Hood slinging out liberal references to the three D's—drinking, Daddy, and dead rednecks—in a heavy Southern accent, as anything but, at best, a glorified Skynyrd tribute band, and at worst, drunken hayseed idiots. Are they right? Let's find out.

Who Will End Up With My Records?

The Dirty South, released in August 2004, was DBT's fifth studio album, and was recorded at FAME studios in Muscle Shoals, the same place David Hood and the Swampers had split from in the late 60s. In 2001, positive buzz around DBT's third LP, *Southern Rock Opera* (which included a four star review in *Rolling Stone* that featured David Fricke extolling its "whoop-ass arena-rock fantasies" – whatever those are) had taken them from a struggling regional act recording albums on a shoestring budget in Hood's living room to a mid-level success with an uncommonly committed and quickly expanding nationwide fan base. Their lineup had undergone significant changes in the three years since *Southern Rock Opera* – the core group of singer/songwriter/guitarists Cooley and Hood and drummer Brad "EZB" Morgan remained, but third guitarist Rob Malone had departed before the tour behind *SRO* had even begun, leaving his spot to be filled by the prodigal young talent from Greenhill, Alabama, Jason Isbell, whose guitar chops and big, crackling burr of a voice were so impressive that he, fifteen years younger than Hood and Cooley, began sitting in with the Decoys—David Hood's latter day band—as a mere teenager. The new bassist, replacing Earl Hicks, was Isbell's wife, Shonna Tucker, a self-avowed disciple of Muscle Shoals soul. The result of these personnel shifts was DBT's biggest, loudest, sweatiest, but also most musically sound lineup yet.

Still, the Truckers' ancestry, and their own past, remained as evident as ever. Even Adam's House Cat, who inexplicably ended up playing a fairly significant role on *The Dirty South*. AHC's failure to ever go anywhere can be pretty easily attributed bad luck and bad location. In *The Secret To A Happy Ending*, a 2011 rock doc about

the Truckers, Hood and Cooley characterized the late-80s Birmingham music scene in which Adam's House Cat attempted to establish itself as closed-minded and outwardly hostile toward any band that wasn't only playing faithful cover versions of their favorite rock hits; original songs were things to be jeered at, especially dark, twisted hillbilly comedy excoriations (with titles like "Child Abuse" and "Santa's Out Of Rehab By Christmas") of the sort Hood was writing at the time. Whenever they did manage to generate some buzz, the entire universe seemed to work against them to ensure that buzz never went too far. For instance, in 1988, Hood spent his last dimes arranging what he hoped would be Adam's House Cat's biggest show yet in Florence, Alabama. Record company representatives were going to come and it could have been the band's big break. So that was naturally the day a tornado ripped through the Muscle Shoals area. Nobody came to the show. The next day, a broke but resilient Hood wrote a song about the incident called "Tornadoes." Sixteen years later, Drive-By Truckers recorded it and put it on *The Dirty South*.

"Tornadoes" did not, however, appear on *Town Burned Down*, recorded in 1990. The only full album Adam's House Cat ever made, it remains unreleased to this day (and how I was able to procure a copy shall remain between me and my wi-fi connection). It's a fine record, and an indication that if not for all the non-musical impediments that plagued their career, the band probably would have made it out of Birmingham's shithole bar scene and onto bigger and better things. But compared to the later DBT records, in Adam's House Cat I hear a band not quite sure of what it wants to be. The first song in *Town Burned Down's* original tracklist (though coming in the middle of the running order of my pirated copy) is "Lookout Mountain,"

named after the 2,389-foot peak that straddles the borders of Tennessee, Georgia, and Alabama. General Grant and the Union Army won a victory on its slopes in 1863, and within three months of a century later, Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke of letting freedom ring from its summit in his “I Have A Dream” speech. Hood, still in the early stages of his development as a singer, rasps about outdoing them all: “Throw myself off Lookout Mountain... Wonder if my mom will weep.” The song maintains some of Adam’s House Cat’s typical redneck cheek – “No more worries ‘bout paying taxes/What to eat, what to wear,” sings Hood. But the lyrics might cut closer to the bone than one might initially realize, in light of the fact that in DBT’s 2006 song “A World Of Hurt,” Hood confesses: “I was 27 when I figured out that blowing my brains out wasn’t the answer.” He was 26 when Adam’s House Cat recorded “Lookout Mountain,” and thus had presumably not yet come to this epiphany. However, the band’s somewhat stilted groove doesn’t accentuate the anguish of the lyrics as much as it could. Bassist John Cahoon plays a brazenly syncopated, largely off-the-beat pattern, which contrasts oddly with Hood’s square acoustic guitar strumming and drummer Chuck Tremblay’s tight, insistent, ahead-of-the-beat playing. Fig. 1 illustrates this peculiar groove, showing the timing of the bassline in contrast to the platonic ideal of where Tremblay’s snare hits take place.¹ It’s an

¹ Music scholars and critics have struggled mightily for years to come up with adequate ways to describe swing and groove. In his book *Jazz in American Culture*, Peter Townsend (no, not that Peter Townshend) writes: “[Many] have tried to define and explain the mechanism of ‘swing,’ but a consensus exists among writers and analysts that no satisfactory explanation has yet been given. Some writers are happy to settle for describing swing as ‘undefineable’, others as ‘elusive’ and ‘mysterious.’” In *Jazz: Its Evolution And Essence*, published in 1956, French musicologist André Hodeir admits that “musical analysis will not do us much good” in writing on the subject, before expressing his now horrifyingly dated theories about the phenomenon of swing having its origins in the “complete neuro-muscular relaxation” of “the American Negroes who created jazz” and “a

interestingly atypical style for a rock rhythm section, but not necessarily a synergistic one. Cooley's well played but indistinct lead guitar lines don't do much to improve matters.

Fortunately, Adam's House Cat's take on the song was only a first step in its evolution. Hood and Cooley carried "Lookout Mountain" with them after the dissolution of their old band – a rearranged version appeared on DBT's now out-of-print 2000 live album *Alabama Ass Whuppin'*, and another rerecording was slotted in as the penultimate track on *The Dirty South* when another song, "Goode's Field Road," was deemed not a heavy enough rocker for that honor. Now *that* version is how "Lookout Mountain" should've sounded all along. It isn't just the new rumbling four-note guitar riff that gives the song the memorable hook it lacked in its original incarnation. It's also that the song, and indeed the band playing it, displays a much more coherent musical identity than the original version did. Whereas Adam's House Cat couldn't seem to decide if they wanted the song to be a folksy strummer, an angry rock song, or even a soul-influenced tune (I'll explain that momentarily), DBT's version makes it obvious that we are supposed to be listening to a heavy, pissed off arena rock monster – and a damn good one. Why? First of all, the rhythm

manifestation of personal magnetism, which is somehow expressed—I couldn't say exactly how—in the domain of rhythm." Basically, the intangible qualities of swing in jazz, rock, or any genre are impossible to express through traditional musical transcription, and if I ever figure out how to write about it without sounding like either a loopy yoga instructor or a racist old coot, I may be the first in history. Unfortunately, accomplishing that lies outside the scope of this discussion. However, I can, with at least some articulation, discuss one crucial aspect of swing: playing ahead or behind the beat. For non-musicians unfamiliar with this concept, it basically means beginning the attack of a given note slightly before or after the moment a metronome would strike the beginning of a beat. Playing behind the beat gives a song a more relaxed, loose groove, while playing ahead of the beat endows it with urgency and aggression. Johnny Ramone played ahead of the beat, while Keith Richards usually plays behind it. Beat placement is idiosyncratic to virtually every musician, and is a fundamental part of understanding why bands groove the way they do. When I refer to ahead or behind the beat playing in this paper, this is what I am referring to.

section is much more cohesive – Shonna Tucker’s bass mimics Hood’s guitar riff, which, unlike John Cahoon’s syncopated bassline in the Adam’s House Cat version, heavily emphasizes the beat, where the harder strums and, for the most part, movements up the scale take place (fig. 2). This is what makes the riff feel so pummeling, and allows Brad Morgan to settle into a groove of playing the snare just behind the beat, which is more typical of and comfortable for mid-tempo rock, unlike Chuck Tremblay’s approach.

But the Truckers don’t sound like just any old classic rock band on this cut. That’s because of their very distinct guitar attack. All three guitarists in DBT tune their instruments down a full step – it’s the same trick Tony Iommi pulled with Black Sabbath, and it’s what gives the Truckers’ riffs their growling, bottom-heavy crunch and burn. Their favored chord voicings also provide an idiosyncratic flavor (though not on “Lookout Mountain,” which contains mostly power chords). Hood, Cooley, and Isbell have a tendency, when playing certain chords, to lay on the third fret on the B and high E strings (which are in reality, having been tuned a full step down, the A and D strings), in essence adding extra notes to the chords. This results in some very specific and nonstandard chord formations – B flat chords become Bbadd9 chords, D minor chords become Dm7 chords, G chords become Gsus4 chords, and F chords get an extra 5th added to them. This not only spices up the Truckers’ chord sequences, taking them beyond basic major and minor triads, but also, because of the particular way these chords are fingered on the guitar, gives them a high, ringing drone that contrasts interestingly with the low rumble that results from tuning down. All this gives the Truckers an overall guitaristic identity

without interfering with the identifiable styles of the three individual guitarists: Hood's chunky rhythm work, Isbell's fluid yet gritty leads, and Cooley's sloppy, successful attempts to sound like a redneck Keith Richards. Fig. 3 illustrates two of the more common modified chord voicings the Truckers use, transcribed next to the standard guitar voicings of those chords to demonstrate the added richness of DBT's voicings. (The chords, as with all my transcriptions, are written as they sound, not as they're played. For instance, F chords are played as G chords but sound like F chords because the guitars are tuned down a step.)

Tucker's bass part on "Lookout Mountain," however, is not typical of her work on the rest of the album. And interestingly enough, on *The Dirty South*, it's through her, not Patterson, that DBT's lineage to the Muscle Shoals Sound becomes most obvious. "When I was first picking up bass, the songs that I wanted to learn were all the old soul songs," she said in 2008. "And most of them were David Hood." Indeed, her rhythmic tendencies make her love of soul music fairly evident. Remember the syncopated bassline of Adam's House Cat's version of "Lookout Mountain"? It may have clashed somewhat with the way the rest of the band was playing the song in that particular instance, but it didn't come out of nowhere. I hope you're ready for this, because I'm going to reveal to you the secret of all bass playing. Ready? The major distinguishing factor between rock and soul bass playing—and thus a huge part of what makes the two genres groove differently—is syncopation. Most rock bass players aim for rhythmic synchronicity with the drummer – also known as staying "in the pocket." So they usually keep pretty steadily on the beat rather than playing off of it. To use an extreme example, fig. 4 shows the bassline of

Lucero's "Johnny Davis." Lucero, who hail from Memphis, are contemporaries and friends of the Truckers – they started around the same time, playing a contiguous synthesis of rock and country. They're also heavily influenced by Stax/Volt soul, not unlike the way DBT are influenced by the Muscle Shoals sound. But they're just as indebted to punk rock and the Replacements, which gave bassist John Stubblefield the idea to play the way he does on "Johnny Davis." Just straight eighth notes and no syncopation whatsoever.

David Hood would never play like that. According to Patterson, he used to have an outright distaste for the punk rock style of playing: "When I was about to learn guitar for myself the first time it was right when the Clash, the Sex Pistols, and Elvis Costello all put records out," he said in 2012. "I started playing in my first band in '78, and that was kind of the generation gap between my father and I. I went through all this garagey punk rock shit, and he thought it sucked... I remember playing him The Pixies around the time *Doolittle* first came out, and him just being mortified that I liked such a thing." As a consummate soul bass player, David Hood was and is a master at weaving his way around the beat, anticipating and subdividing it, with exquisite timing, through syncopation. His playing on the Staple Singers' uber-classic "I'll Take You There" constitutes one of the catchiest and most rock solid basslines ever (fig. 5). He alternates masterfully between the syncopation that gives the song its soulful identity (for instance, the second note of the second measure, which appears between the second and third beats) and on-the-beat playing (such as the rhythmic doubling of the vocal line at the end of the third and fifth measures).

Any bass player hoping to match Hood's dexterity is an all likelihood going to fare about as well as I do when I try to play guitar like Jimmy Page. But Shonna Tucker manages to make her indebtedness to David Hood evident in her own stripped-down way. The rhythmic pattern of the very simple bass figure she plays on "Carl Perkins' Cadillac" (fig. 6) recurs several times on *The Dirty South*, but can be heard most clearly on this song. All it takes is that syncopated eighth note between the second and third beats of each measure to add a bit of soul flavoring to her playing. Loud rock guitars drive the song along, and Tucker is just supporting them, unlike Hood on "I'll Take You There," where his bass serves as the primary rhythmic *and* melodic instrument. But even just a hint of that soul-inflected bass playing endows the Truckers' sound with an extra musical layer that they otherwise wouldn't have. Some bands are more blatant about incorporating a soul influence into a guitar rock formula. Upstart Grammy nominees the Alabama Shakes (who are from Athens, Alabama, less than an hour away from Muscle Shoals) and their 2012 hit "Hold On" are evidence of this. As shown in fig. 7, the lead guitar, aside from some extra ornamentation, doubles the David Hood-esque, heavily syncopated bassline line throughout the verses. Effectively, this turns it into a soul song with rock instrumentation and attitude instead of a rock song with soul-flavored underpinnings. It's a great tune, but for me, it's the Truckers who strike the perfect balance between rocking out and hinting at their Muscle Shoals heritage on much of *The Dirty South*. It's rock with an occasional understated soulful swing. Dig it.

It should be noted that Tucker has since left the band and DBT has a new bass player named Matt Patton, who used to play in a great band from Tuscaloosa,

Alabama called the Dexateens. When I saw them play “Carl Perkins’ Cadillac” in Burlington, I noticed that Patton didn’t play it the same way Shonna Tucker did on the record. He avoided syncopation and kept it on the beat, as almost any rock bass player would. The jury is still out on whether the switch from Tucker to Patton helps or hurts DBT. Most fans seem to think he’s reinvigorated their sound, while one online commenter with the unfortunate screen name “ballsdeep” on the DBT fan site 3 Dimes Down submitted, “the dude flubs notes constantly... his groove is stilted.” What do I think? Well, I like Matt’s bass playing, but his choice of hairstyle—an old-fashioned bowl cut—is questionable.

Besides beat placement, one major factor that defines a particular band or song’s groove is beat subdivision. Basically, the beat within the beat, if I may go all *Inception* on you for a moment. Virtually every piece of Western music ever made is in either duple meter (i.e. 4/4 time, 2/4 time) or triple meter (i.e. 3/4 time, 6/8 time). Most rock songs are in 4/4, and a whole lot of those remaining are in 3/4, which is identifiable as the meter of a waltz. But how the beat is divided at the second level underneath the time signature—which may be in triple even if the song is in a duple meter—is what gives a song a certain feel. This rhythmic phenomenon isn’t always easy to transcribe accurately onto a page, but take a gander at the Band’s “The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down” (fig. 8). The song is in 4/4, and the meter is hammered home by pianist Richard Manuel pounding out quarter note chords. Go ahead, dig out your old vinyl copy of *The Band* you used to roll joints on back in 1970, drop the needle on track three, and try clapping and counting along with the piano. It becomes obvious that it’s in duple meter. But try clapping out

eighth notes—dividing the beat in half—and it will sound horribly out of time with the song. But try dividing the beat into thirds by clapping faster—which you will naturally want to do—and it will all start sounding right again. That’s because the beat is subdivided into triple meter. One can detect this without hearing the song by looking at my transcription of the vocals in fig. 8 – they’re all based on triplets, following the triple subdivision. This is how the song achieves its woozy waltz feel while still being in 4/4.

The Truckers have copped to being huge Band fans – recall that Hood and Cooley named their 90s acoustic duo Virgil Kane. DBT took part in one Levon Helm’s famous Midnight Ramble concerts in his barn in Woodstock, New York in 2011, and they covered “The Weight” in concert the night Helm died the following year. Most relevant to this discussion is the fact that one of Jason Isbell’s songs on *The Dirty South* is called “Danko/Manuel,” after Rick Danko and Richard Manuel of the Band. “When I started writing this one,” he explained upon the album’s release, “I wanted to capture some of Levon Helm’s feelings about the deaths (and lives) of Richard Manuel and Rick Danko.” But in its finished form, “Danko/Manuel” uses the specters of Danko and Manuel as a barely mentioned frame in which Isbell can croon, mournfully, esoteric but evocative lines about his doubts and struggles in his life as a touring musician: “They say Danko would have sounded just like me/Is that the man I want to be?”

Coincidentally (or perhaps not!), “Danko/Manuel” has that same semi-waltz feel as “Dixie Down” despite its being in 4/4. Try the clapping method again and you’ll notice that the beat is again subdivided into a triple meter. This time, the

indicative triplets can be found in both the vocal line and the loping acoustic guitar riff (fig. 9). But the two songs' grooves aren't quite an exact match. The drumming, and more specifically, where the two drummers place the beat, distinguishes the two tunes from each other. Levon Helm's drumming on "Dixie Down" is looser than Dick Cheney's morals. It's common practice for rock drummers of the non-punk and metal variety to place their snare hits just behind the beat; that's part of what keeps a song's groove loose and swinging. But Helm's snare hits are well behind the beat, and never seem to come quite at the same time they had the previous hit. His fills are sloppy as hell, and are played seemingly irrespectively of where the beat actually appears, almost as if Levon were just throwing his toms down a flight of stairs and hoping the result sounded all right. But that's how the Band was—sloppy and elastic—and Levon's drumming works fantastically for this song. But it's hard to believe that an up-and-coming drummer with the same, shall we say, ambiguous approach to timekeeping that Levon Helm had would pass muster in 2004 when *The Dirty South* was released.

A lot can change in music over thirty-five years, and a lot did change about rock drumming in the time between *The Band* and *The Dirty South*. Maybe it was the advent of drum machines, or maybe it was all that "garagey punk rock shit" that David Hood hated so much, with its simple, straight-on or ahead-of-the-beat drumming. It's probably a combination of both. But whatever the case may be, rock drummers don't play as loose and free as Levon Helm did in 1969 anymore; they are expected to be more strict in their timekeeping because hey, if you can't keep the beat, then we'll just get a TR-808 to do it instead. Levon would probably make the

cut today because he had his own incomparable groove, but many other similarly loose but lesser drummers of his era probably wouldn't. And by any objective standard, but especially compared to Helm on "Dixie Down," Brad "EZB" Morgan's drumming on "Danko/Manuel," and throughout *The Dirty South* is positively metronomic. His snare hits come just behind the beat, but unlike Helm's, always arrive at the exact same point. EZB isn't exactly the world's flashiest drummer, and a lot of his drum parts on the album are simple to the point of being rudimentary (hell, even *I* can replicate his drum part on "Tornadoes," and I'm about as experienced a drummer as I am a contortionist). But he never fails to provide a steady and tight backbeat virtually one hundred percent of the time, which is more than one could say about a whole lot of much better-appreciated drummers. DBT takes advantage of EZB's sturdy beats by building assaults of pummeling rock power on top of them. Chestnuts like "Where The Devil Don't Stay" and "Puttin' People On The Moon" aren't loose and scraggly like the Band was, but they don't try to be; they rock because of how heavily the guitars pound home the beat in synergy with the drums.

But more than that, they're great because of the stories they tell.

Turning Mountains Into Oceans

How do you tell a compelling story in rock?

It can't be solely about the lyrics. If it were, we would all be reading poetry instead of listening to music. There wouldn't be so many Bob Dylan covers in the world, either. I have a hunch that if "Blowin' In The Wind" had the exact same lyrics sung to the tune of "Who Let The Dogs Out," there wouldn't have been so many thousands of versions performed and recorded over the last fifty years. No matter how gripping the wordplay, a listener's patience will inevitably wear thin with an artist droning on for a dozen structurally identical verses if there isn't something compelling about the musical accompaniment. I believe there's a basic harmonic language to so-called story songs, going back to Woody Guthrie and the earlier folk tradition, that glues that style of songwriting together. It has evolved over the years, of course, and the Truckers, as storytellers and songwriters, both embraced and subverted it on *The Dirty South*. The gist of it? Keep it simple, stupid.

The basis of keeping it simple (stupid) is the pentatonic scale. Pentatonic scales only have five notes in them, as opposed to seven in major and minor scales. In major keys, the pentatonic scale omits the fourth and seventh scale degrees; in minor keys, and second and sixth scale degrees are absent. Pentatonic melodies are generally easy to sing, and to remember, since, well, they have relatively few notes in them. Sure, they can as a result be less melodically adventurous than a regular scalar or chromatic melody, but goddamn it, sometimes five notes is all you need. In the wise words of Woody Guthrie, "If you play with more than two chords, you're showing off." Surely he would have said the same about singing with more than five

notes, because he rarely did it himself. A devout musical utilitarian, Guthrie based a great number of his songs are based on a very basic formula: three-chord I-IV-V blues progressions—often in the key of G—and pentatonic melodies. Fig. 10 shows “Pretty Boy Floyd,” which appeared in Guthrie’s famous 1940 album *Dust Bowl Ballads*, and was later covered by the Byrds on their 1968 country rock opus *Sweetheart Of The Rodeo*. It doesn’t get much simpler than that, but the form fulfills the purpose of the song—to tell the story of the outlaw, Pretty Boy Floyd—perfectly. The melody serves the lyrics, rather than the other way around; keeping it within the limited range of G major pentatonic allows Woody to deliver the tale efficiently and clearly. The drama and catchiness of the song thus doesn’t come from melodic variation, but rather from the chords “orbiting” around the static pentatonic melody, even when that chord sequence is the most basic and frequently used in all of American music. Thus, the melody and lyrics feel more like the song’s center of gravity than the tonic chord does. I have illustrated this concept of pentatonic orbit in fig. 11.² As you can see, the inner circle—the “planet”—represents the pentatonic melody and shows which notes the pentatonic scale in the song’s particular key contains. The outer ring—the “orbit”—shows, above the planet, what key (or, as I’ll later explore, mode) the song is in, and, below the planet, which chords appear in the song. Chords that contain at least one note not in the pentatonic of the key are

² Rock and other forms of popular music are often, it turns out, not so easy to analyze in traditional terms of major and minor keys. David Temperley writes: “The application of the major/minor system to rock is discussed and rejected by Covach (1997, 10–11), Stephenson (2002, 42–3), and Burns (2008, 65). This point is also often made implicitly: theorists who propose tonal classification schemes for popular music generally do not use major and minor keys, but rather employ either diatonic modes or alternative custom-made systems.” My pentatonic orbit is my attempt to do the same.

bolded. I make this distinction because it is my contention that the melodic and harmonic potency of the music I am analyzing with this method comes from the singer singing against those chords. For instance, in my chart for “Pretty Boy Floyd,” both C major and D major are bolded because those chords contain a C natural and an F sharp, respectively, two notes which do not appear in the G major pentatonic scale.

As the decades passed, chunks of the pentatonic planet began floating off into the chordal orbit. Bob Dylan, Woody’s most famous disciple, was a little more creative with his chord sequences, especially as he matured and went electric, but this was already evident in his early folk material, even if to occasionally add in, say, a minor iii chord doesn’t exactly constitute reinventing the wheel. He also tactfully ventured out of the pentatonic at times. Not always; “Masters Of War,” for instance, is completely pentatonic. But overall, Dylan has a tendency to appear to be singing in the pentatonic before quickly adding in a note on the fourth scale degree at the end of a verse or during a chorus in order to differentiate it melodically from the other sections of the song (fig. 12 and fig. 13 show this maneuver in “My Back Pages” and “John Wesley Harding”). Dylan still avoids the seventh scale degree, and fourth scale degree is used so fleetingly that the effect is essentially pseudo-pentatonic with some extra melodic spice. So even though the melody follows the chords more than in “Pretty Boy Floyd,” the lyrics are still the center of attention. However, a further stage in the development of the story song brought us Bruce Springsteen, who nearly tore the pentatonic planet off its axis. In “Thunder Road” and “Racing In The Street” (fig. 14 and 15, respectively), while Bruce’s vocal melody avoids the

seventh scale degree, the fourth scale degree is more frequent than it is with folk Dylan, and the melody is clearly following the chord changes—which remain very straightforward and within the key—rather than the chords feeding off the gravity of the melody. When a G minor chord is played, Springsteen sings a G; when a B flat major appears, he sings a B flat. Effectively, although his lyrics espouse the same working class populism that Guthrie’s did decades earlier, Springsteen was getting further away from Guthrie’s template. This is partially a symptom of the electrification of American music that Bruce was of course a part of; the reality of having a huge rock band behind a singer instead of just an acoustic guitar means that melodic subtleties are sometimes lost and often makes following the chords with the vocal melody a practical necessity. But Bruce altered the formula not just in terms of timbre, what with all the hyperactive pianos and saxophone solos and what not, but also melodically. This greater sophistication is hardly a bad thing, unless you’re concerned about Woody Guthrie accusing you of “showing off.” But it shows that, just maybe, at times, as many critics have griped over the years, the Boss has gotten caught up in the bombasticity of his sound instead of communicating his message clearly. Said Keith Richards in 1988, “...I like the GUY... I love his attitude. I love what he WANTS to do. I just think he's gone about it the wrong way. These are just my opinions, and OK, I'll annoy the lot of you. Bruce? Too contrived for me. Too overblown.” Keep it simple, Bruce.

Like Drive-By Truckers. In some ways, Patterson Hood and Mike Cooley (Jason Isbell less so) are the most straightforward folk/rock storytellers since the Woody Guthrie era. Dylan drifted away from the prototype with amphetamines and

increasingly esoteric wordplay, and later a whole mess of other things, like country crooning, born again Christianity, and forgetting how to write a decent song for almost the entirety of the 1980s. Springsteen did it with bombast and headbands. By comparison to those two the Dimmer Twins are, in terms of syntax, fairly plainspoken. In the tradition of Guthrie and classic country music (or of Dante writing the *Inferno* in vernacular Italian instead of Latin), the Truckers embrace the language of the common people to get their message across. You know, droppin' g's off the ends of words and singin' about guns and drugs and whores and booze with incorrect grammar in those heavy Southern drawls. It all sounds very high-concept on paper, I know. I mean, a song with a hook line like "Don't piss off the boys from Alabama" must be kind of goofy *Dukes Of Hazzard* idiotfest, right? Not so fast. The Truckers are the diametric opposite of today's radio country artists, who turn their characters into insulting lowest-common-denominator stereotypes who have no depth beyond a love of beer, trucks, and kissing pretty blonde girls in cowboy boots. Instead, for the three-headed songwriting Cerberus that drove DBT on *The Dirty South*, the chronically down-on-their-luck redneck characters they portray become unlikely conduits for some of the most emotionally insightful storytelling and social commentary I've ever heard in rock.

The Dirty South was released in 2004, at the mid point of the Bush presidency. Unsurprisingly, then, existential anger and disillusionment with the Establishment pulsates throughout the record. But unlike Green Day's comparatively guileless *American Idiot*, released just a month after *The Dirty South*, it thematically transcends its time period. It accomplishes this partially with specific

allusions to the past – Hood says the album is conceptually set in the 1980s, which would explain the appearance of two former Adam’s House Cat songs and the line “Goddamn Reagan’s in the White House and nobody gives a damn” in “Puttin’ People On The Moon,” though Hood has changed the reference to “Goddamn Bush” and, more recently, “the motherfuckin’ Tea Party” in live airings. The first song, Cooley’s “Where The Devil Don’t Stay,” even takes place “Back in the 30s when the dust bowl dried” and “Prohibition was the talk.” But more than just dropping a few historical references, DBT communicate their messages about American society the same way Woody Guthrie did – by only very rarely making explicit mention of politics, and instead focusing on the universal human element that is the constant core of their stories. And wouldn’t you know it, they use the same tool that Woody himself did in order to accomplish this – that trusty old pentatonic scale. But they use it in a compelling way that has few apparent parallels in the catalogs of Guthrie, Dylan, or Springsteen.

I’ll get to that in due time, but first let’s take a closer look at what kinds of stories the Truckers are telling. I didn’t choose to compare their melodic inclinations to Guthrie, Dylan, and Springsteen for nothing, you know.

Becoming a Truckers fan is like joining a new family. Not one that replaces your real family, of course. (Though I do know folks who have traveled around the country for years to see upwards of one hundred Truckers shows, and it takes a pretty special set of circumstances to keep a family together while allowing for that kind of devotion to an outside entity). It’s like a second, probably more drunken, family, with its own lore and traditions and quirks that become part of a fan’s

bloodstream through the music and the stories of DBT. You feel like you knew Gregory Dean Smalley, the local Atlanta musician who died of AIDS in the mid-90s and whose brief but inspiring encounters with Patterson Hood moved the Truckers' frontman to write the song "The Living Bubba," and you miss him like a dead uncle. You share in the joy of remembering the arena rock that Hood claims "saved my life as a teenager" in "Let There Be Rock," and in the pain and sadness over the murders of friends of the band that inspired "Two Daughters And A Beautiful Wife." Sometimes you even get important history lessons. The disgraceful life of Alabama's infamous segregationist governor, George Wallace, is the primary subject of two songs on *Southern Rock Opera*, while Isbell's ode to the Tennessee Valley Authority, "TVA," which explains how the massive New Deal program provided his sharecropper ancestors work during the Great Depression and "brought power to most of the South," serves as the flipside of Cooley's "Uncle Frank," which tells of the organization's latter-day corruption.

DBT's songwriters accomplish virtually all of this with focused, first-person character studies. Thus, the universal human drama of the guy who serves as a song's narrator, whether he's someone from real life, a composite, made up, or the singer himself, is always at the forefront. So if you're a first time listener, it's likely that before you grasp whatever connections to the band's lives or political subtext or other depth lie in the songs, you'll first be hit by the emotional impact of their most straightforward lines: "Hell no, I ain't happy." "Sometimes I feel like shit." "All them politicians, they all lying sacks of shit." "We ain't never gonna change." And these are still the lines for which the crowd's fists are raised skyward at live shows.

Sure, it may take a couple of listens to fully appreciate just how brilliant Cooley's *Southern Rock Opera* ringer "Zip City" is, and to realize the significance of the son of the Southern Baptist preacher in the song having "ten fingers and ten toes/And it's a damn good thing cause he needs all twenty to keep the closet door closed." But dammit, if you can't connect with lines like "Don't know why I put up with this shit when you don't put out and Zip City's so far away," then you've forgotten what it's like to be a bored and horny 17-year old, in which case, shame on you. These are the lines in Truckers songs that anyone can relate to; they're the hooks that grab you and then drag you along for the rest of the song toward a deeper understanding of American life and American music.

The Dirty South contains a three-song suite about Sheriff Buford Pusser, the Tennessee lawman who was immortalized in the popular 1973 Hollywood whitewashing job *Walking Tall* (not to mention a remake—incidentally released only a few months before *The Dirty South*—starring Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, because, let's face it, professional wrestlers always make the best actors). "This is the other side of that story," Hood menacingly intones over the intro to "The Boys From Alabama." The suite makes its point, with Hood and Cooley adopting the vantage of the crooks Pusser tried to run out of "his little dry county," who see him as nothing more than "just another crooked lawman from Tennessee." In his stark, haunting, solo acoustic "Cottonseed," Cooley convincingly plays a murderous outlaw who sings, "Say what you gotta say to shut their Bibles and their mouths/If they was to tie a noose they'd have to lay their Bibles down." This is all good meta-political stuff, but for me, the Pusser suite is the least compelling stretch of music on *The*

Dirty South. That's mostly because the hooks, whether the musical ones or the lyrical ones I talked about, aren't as strong as in much of their other work. ("Don't piss off the boys from Alabama" might suffice for natives of the Heart of Dixie, but I can't relate. Unfortunately for me, "Don't piss off the boys from East End Avenue" just doesn't have the same ring to it.) But I think their harmonic tendencies also offer a clue.

Hood and Cooley's melodies are based almost slavishly on the pentatonic scale. In fact, Hood's grinding mid-tempo rocker "The Buford Stick" is the *only* Hood or Cooley song on *The Dirty South* to feature a non-pentatonic melody. For instance, in "Tornadoes," which I'm using as a first example because it features the most standard chord progression on the album (a circular I-V-IV progression in D major), all the notes of the melody are within the five-note D major pentatonic scale (fig. 16). Then, when the song modulates to D minor for the bridge, the melody adheres to the D minor pentatonic scale. So, with the blanks filled in, the pentatonic orbit of "Tornadoes" looks like this (fig. 17). (The modulation to D minor is represented by a third ring of orbit, and the subsequent shift in the vocal melody to D minor pentatonic is represented by a dotted circle around the original planet. In all of my pentatonic orbit charts, a dotted line indicates that particular ring of orbit is tied to a modulation.)

Like "Tornadoes," both "The Boys From Alabama" and "Cottonseed" feature pentatonic melodies. The former is in the key of D minor, along with five other songs on *The Dirty South* ("Cottonseed" is played in D minor but sounds in C minor because of Cooley's tuned-down guitar). However, unlike those five songs, the

Pusser suite tunes feature chord sequences completely within the tonic key (this just means that they can be analyzed normally in the key; for instance, the Cm-Eb-Bb progression that makes up the verses of “Cottonseed” can be analyzed in C minor as i-III-VII, all chords that appear normally in the C minor scale). If it seems unusual that this would be the exception rather than the rule, that’s because it is.

After much deliberate searching (madly scrolling through my iTunes library), I have been able to find few rock songs that pair pentatonic melodies with non-standard chord progressions the way Hood and Cooley do. One example I did find was the Raconteurs’ “Carolina Drama,” a story song about doomed Southern rednecks (coincidence?). The song features a pentatonic melody in the key of A minor. However, the first several verses frequently feature D major chords. D major chords have an F# in them, and that note does not appear in the A minor scale. Thus, the D major chord comes from outside of the scale. In chordal analysis, it would be given the unusual designation V/VII, because D major is the V of G major, which is the VII chord in A minor. However, this is not sufficient to explain the chord’s significance. The appearance of the D major actually implies an alternate scale outside of A minor – in this case, the A Dorian mode. The tonic center is still clearly A, but Dorian in A contains an F#, which allows for the presence of a D major chord. This element is like an extra layer of musical icing on top of the “Carolina Drama” cake. It makes the pentatonic melody much more interesting to listen to than if it were backed by a standard I-IV-V chord sequence of the variety Woody Guthrie favored, because the melody is being sung against a chord that isn’t “supposed” to happen, and the effect is exciting and unexpected. When a melody is constrained by

the limitations of the pentatonic, then the only way to spice it up is to get creative with its orbit (fig. 18).

This apparent anomaly in rock—remaining stubbornly pentatonic in the melody while using the chords to imply modes or other keys—is actually Hood and Cooley’s harmonic trademark. Yup, those loud-ass guitars aren’t the only trick they use to support their mostly straightforward melodies. Let’s examine how it works in *The Dirty South’s* powerhouse opener, “Where The Devil Don’t Stay.” Cooley wrote the music, and the lyrics are based on a poem by his uncle, Ed Cooley, about Ed’s daddy (and, it follows, Mike’s granddaddy), a Depression-era moonshiner. The setting is spooky and visceral: a poker game in the backwoods of Alabama, “back when the world was gray.” Which, of course, highlights the fact that class relations and economic inequality the song touches on are eternal in America, and were in some ways just as much a part of the Reagan and Bush eras as of the Depression years: “Tell me why the ones who have so much make the ones who don’t go mad/With the same skin stretched over their white bones and the same jug in their hand.” So, it seems, are pentatonic melodies – “Where The Devil Don’t Stay” features one, just as a tune from *Dust Bowl Ballads* would.

The chord sequence, however, is more complex than a typical Depression-era Woody Guthrie composition. The track opens menacingly, with a grimy D power chord and a quarter note bass drum pattern. Power chords contain only roots and fifths and omit the thirds necessary to create a full triad, and thus are neither fully major nor minor. But the fact that the verse vocal melody is perfectly within the D minor pentatonic scale (fig. 19) would seem to imply that the song is in the key of D

minor. However, the next two chords of the verses' three-chord progression—F major and G major—do not imply D minor. F major appears in the D minor scale as a major III, but G major doesn't. The D minor scale contains a B flat, not a B natural, so any G chord that adheres to the D minor scale would have to be a G minor chord. Even if we were to change our minds and assume that the D power chord is in fact implying the key of D major instead of minor, the progression still wouldn't fit. The G major would now act as a IV chord, but F major does not appear in the D major scale because that scale contains an F# and a C# (an F major chord contains an F natural and a C natural). Ultimately, the only way the verse progression makes sense is if it is analyzed in D Dorian mode. The D Dorian scale contains no sharps or flats, allowing D5 (power chord), F major, and G major to all exist comfortably within it, while D continues to act as the tonic. However, the verses cannot be said to be fully Dorian because the vocal melody remains entirely within the D minor pentatonic. Even though the D Dorian scale contains all the notes of the D minor pentatonic, the fact that the vocal never ventures to the other parts of the scale means that Dorian isn't as fully established as it is in, say, the Beatles' "Eleanor Rigby," whose melody outlines the Dorian scale (fig. 20). This is crucial, because had Cooley sung a B at any point during the song—which he doesn't—we would then have a much better idea, based on whether or not it was a B natural or a B flat, of whether or not the song was supposed to be in D minor, D Dorian, or some other key. Thus, because the Dorian mode is only implied by the chords, these verses are a perfect example of the pentatonic orbit, which the Truckers turn into something especially interesting by shunning a basic Guthrie-style I-IV-V progression and instead using a modal

progression to circle around the pentatonic melody. It becomes especially evident how well this works when the full band kicks in and Isbell begins playing a guttural, bluesy, three-note slide guitar riff, which he repeats throughout the song. Isbell could have kept playing those same three notes all day and night, and they would still sound as dramatic and kickass as they do now, thanks to the unexpectedly modal D5-F-G progression that's stomping furiously around it.

Things get even more interesting on the pathos-drenched bridge (the “son come running, better come quick” part). The vocal melody bursts out of the D minor pentatonic and circles between C, D, and E notes, which indicates modulation to a different key. But to *which* key? The chord progression during this section—C-G-Bb-F—doesn't fit completely in any one key. I would argue that the first two chords represent a momentary modulation to G major (acting as a IV-I progression in that key³), followed by a momentary modulation to F major with the second two chords (also a IV-I progression in the new key). The B flat chord, after all, sounds very powerful and really changes up the feel of this section when it appears, which indicates further modulation. Add all this stuff up, and the pentatonic orbit of “Where The Devil Don't Stay” starts to look more like a pentatonic solar system (fig. 21).

³ In classical music, a V-I chord progression is called a cadence, and is traditionally the strongest way to establish a key. A IV-I progression is called a plagal cadence and is not considered to be as strong. However, there is evidence that in rock music, IV-I is more common. In 2011, Trevor De Clercq and David Temperly analyzed 100 songs from *Rolling Stone's* list of the ‘500 Greatest Songs of All Time’ and found that the IV chord appeared a total of 2,104 times throughout 90 of the songs, while the V chord appeared 1,516 times throughout 80 of the songs. Furthermore, in his 2002 book *What to Listen for in Rock: A Stylistic Analysis*, Ken Stephenson argues that “much rock does not have V-I cadences,” while “The IV-I cadence, in fact, turns up with some frequency...”

Maybe the fact that Hood and Cooley both rely on this harmonic language is the reason the Truckers, to date, have never released an album featuring songwriting contributions from just the two of them. This indeed seems somewhat curious at first, considering the fact that Hood is highly prolific, and Cooley, while less so, establishes himself as an extremely powerful and distinctive voice with the songs he does contribute. Plus, when it comes time for the release of a DBT album, they always seem to have written about the same things, and the dichotomy of their perspectives is part of what makes listening to them so much fun. On *Southern Rock Opera*, Hood wrote the gorgeous, waxing, album-closing ballad “Angels And Fuselage” about the plane crash that fells Betamax Guillotine (the rock opera’s fictional stand in for Skynyrd), in which he sings, “I’m scared shitless about what’s coming next.” Cooley tackled the subject, well, *differently*, with a walloping boogie called “Shut Up And Get On The Plane,” and snarls “We’ve been this close to death before but we were just too drunk to notice... Living in fear is just another way of dying before your time.” On 2010’s *The Big To-Do*, Hood wrote a loud, bitter recession anthem called “This Fucking Job”; Cooley was again more sarcastic with his “Get Downtown”: “Kim said ‘Jimmy, you better get yourself up off of that raggedy couch/I’m too pretty to work and I’m tired of you uglying up my house.’” On 2003’s *Decoration Day*, they switched roles when writing about their anger over a friend’s suicide – Hood’s contribution was a sneering Stones-style rocker called “Do It Yourself,” while Cooley’s take was “When The Pin Hits The Shell,” a bewailing country-soul ballad. But in DBT’s never-ending quest to tell “the other side of the story” (a phrase that appears with grim determination on both *Southern Rock Opera*

and *The Dirty South*), just two sides of it aren't enough. Especially when both those sides are dependent on the pentatonic orbit.

Stories, I guess, are like triangles, and for six years, Jason Isbell was the third side that completed the Truckers' version of events. And on *The Dirty South*, his contributions are vital, and show he was at that time on *at least* equal footing with Hood and Cooley as far as songwriting goes. But his songs are brilliant in a different way, and stand out harmonically and lyrically from those written by his bandmates. The first of his four songs that appear on *The Dirty South* is "The Day John Henry Died." The legend of John Henry is of course an inexorable part of American folklore, and, like the either partially or wholly invented tales of Paul Bunyan and Davy Crockett, symbolizes the strength and ingenuity of the American frontiersmen of a long bygone era. But John Henry's story contains more layers than either Bunyun or Crockett's – according to the tall tale, Henry was a mighty black steel driver who engaged in a race against a steam powered hammer to build a railroad tunnel; he won, but collapsed and died upon his victory. It's an effective metaphor for the effects of the industrial revolution on American life and the subsequent "death" of the rugged agrarian individualist America that preceded steam power and industry. No wonder John Henry seems to have inspired more folk songs than all other American folk heroes combined, including George Washington or Davy Crockett ("The Ballad Of Davy Crockett," written for the 1950s Disney TV series *Davy Crockett*, is hardly a pillar of American popular song). It seems like everyone and his sister has recorded a version of the traditional folk ballad "John Henry," from

Leadbelly to Johnny Cash to Bruce Springsteen. But “The Day John Henry Died” differentiates itself textually and musically from all of them.

Although, in the hundreds of versions of “John Henry” there were bound to be significant stylistic and lyrical variations, most of them follow the same basic form. The narrative usually begins with John Henry “sittin’ on his mammy’s knee” and picking up a hammer for the first time, mentions a love interest, Polly Anne, reports a confrontation between John Henry and the railroad captain that leads to the fateful race with the steam drill, and ends with a final verse that mourns the great steel driver’s death. It’s usually a fairly straightforward telling of an old legend, often embellished and lengthened, but sometimes the tale’s social context and implications are left unsaid and implied rather than outwardly explored. A version by Woody Guthrie, recorded in 1944, follows the typical outline pretty well. Note, in fig. 22, the pentatonic melody and the two-chord I-V progression – Woody sure wasn’t showing off with this one.

Jason Isbell, then, had two challenges in writing “The Day John Henry Died”: to go beyond the usual strictures of the John Henry story without losing sight of what made it a great topic for a song, and, since he was writing it for the Truckers’ mighty three-guitar army, make it rock in a way the folk tradition never had. He succeeded in doing both, managing to sidestep the tale’s mythic qualities by addressing them head-on (“The letters flew across the wire, filtered through a million liars... the day John Henry died”) and turning his song into a rowdy yet poignant paean to the American worker’s losing struggle against the automation and greed that has come with the inexorable march of industry and big business, which

John Henry's pyrrhic victory over the steam drill did nothing to slow. The sad truth of the matter, according to Isbell, is that "It didn't matter if he won, if he lived or if he'd run/They changed the way his job was done, labor costs were high." That last bit is really all that matters to a businessman looking out for his bottom line, after all, whether an 1870s railroad baron or a corporate head in 2013 shipping jobs overseas. And why bother paying for labor at all, anyway, when you can just get a machine that's much easier to deal with to do it? "An engine never thinks about his daddy/And an engine never needs to write its name." We, like John Henry, never stood a chance against the machines. This is starting to sound like *The Matrix*, so I'll move on.

Musically, Isbell manages to update the old folk ballad to suit the Truckers while acknowledging its traditional lineage. Sticking to rhythm guitar on this one, Isbell adapts a consistent strumming pattern on the verses. While it doesn't quite compare to the barreling, madcap rhythm shifts of Leadbelly's 1940s version ("It sounded like a train," indeed). But, along with, obviously, the added presence of a guy playing the drums, it certainly endows the song with more rhythmic drive than Woody Guthrie's square, folksy strumming on his version does (fig. 23). Only during the first bridge, when Isbell makes a direct reference to the traditional lyrics ("When John Henry was a little bitty baby...") does the strumming switch to a squarer eighth note pattern, such as Woody might have played. Fig. 23 also illustrates Isbell's use of those distinctively Truckersian chord voicings I discussed in the previous section. But harmonically, "The Day John Henry Died" differs from both Woody Guthrie's folk tradition and from Hood and Cooley's template. Notice in fig. 23 that Isbell's vocal

melody strays without inhibition from the pentatonic, instead stretching out across the full F major scale. Plus, all of the four chords that appear in the song—F, C, Bbadd9, Dm7—can all be analyzed normally with the key of F major, so there are no modal elements to be found. Fortunately, Isbell can make up for this embrace of more conventional rock harmonic language with his singing, and in this song and others, he uses more melismas, note bends, and other ornaments than his less vocally gifted bandmates are capable of.

Isbell further establishes a songwriting identity distinct from that of Hood or Cooley with the album's heart-wrenching closing ballad "Goddamn Lonely Love." One obvious distinguishing factor is that, on an album full of songs about corrupt politicians, moonshiners, cancer, death, and racecar drivers, "Goddamn Lonely Love" is "just" a love song. On the fan favorite acoustic bootleg *Live At Cooley's House*, Isbell claims he wrote it for Shonna Tucker. Unlike the rest of the songs on *The Dirty South*, it's got no particular message or point to make beyond articulating the pain and loneliness Isbell feels when he's apart from his lover. But it captures the essence of that feeling so beautifully that some days I consider "Goddamn Lonely Love" not only my favorite song on the album, but one of my favorite songs ever. And once again, it differs from Hood and Cooley's harmonic style. First of all, it's in standard tuning, eschewing the Truckers' usual practice of tuning their instruments down. Second of all, it's in the key of G major, but interestingly begins on a minor ii chord (A minor), which is an unconventional way to begin a song, giving it a semi-minor feel. The rest of the chords are once again not modal and fit neatly within the G major scale. That is, except for the periodic C minor chords that appear throughout

the song. With these, Isbell is using a trick called modal mixture, which means borrowing a chord from a parallel key – in this case, from G minor. C minor (the iv chord in the key of G minor) always appears directly after a C major (the IV chord of G major) in the song, which emphasizes the effect of the C minor chord’s cameo appearance. And because both C major and C minor appear in the song, we can be sure the appearance of the C minor, a chord that doesn’t fit in the song’s established key, is not meant to imply a modal scale and is just providing a temporary modal mixture. This isn’t an uncommon practice for composers and songwriters by any means, but Hood and Cooley never try it on *The Dirty South*, while Isbell does it twice – on “Goddamn Lonely Love” and also on “Danko/Manuel,” which is in the key of F# minor and borrows a B major chord from the key of F# major during the chorus. Melodically, “Goddamn Lonely Love” adheres to the Bob Dylan school of appearing pentatonic before briefly introducing the fourth scale degree during a key line, which Isbell does on the word “of” in the line “All of what you got” during the choruses. But even though the melody is mostly limited to the pentatonic, Isbell really sells it with his singing, turning in a moving vocal performance that is, again, much more ornamented than any Hood or Cooley vocal on the album.

Of Isbell’s four songs on *The Dirty South*, the only one that’s comparable harmonically to Hood and Cooley’s songs is “Never Gonna Change.” It’s a bitter, thunderous mid-tempo rocker that highlights the stubborn personal conservatism of some “mean and strong” Alabamans whom Isbell has surely dealt with often in his life, and I always thought it sounded like Isbell trying to write a Patterson Hood song. Turns out there’s a reason for that. It’s in the key of D minor—the most

common key used on *The Dirty South*—and the melody is entirely pentatonic, while the repeated G major chords, which don't appear in the D minor scale, imply the D Dorian mode (even though the chord sequence isn't entirely Dorian because the verses contain repeated B flat major chords, which appear in the D minor scale but not the D Dorian scale). Thus, "Never Gonna Change" is the only Jason Isbell song on the album for which I can create a pentatonic orbit (fig. 24). Still, the fact that three out of four of Isbell's songs differ harmonically in significant ways from Hood and Cooley's songs goes a long way toward explaining why, less than three years after *The Dirty South* was released, Isbell departed the band to begin an increasingly successful solo career. Well, that and the fact that he and Shonna Tucker divorced in 2006, compounding the personal tensions between him and the rest of the band that existed during that time. That could have had something to do with it too.

But I wouldn't discount the musical aspect. DBT is Hood and Cooley's show, after all. Casual observers might even make the mistake of considering it Hood's show alone. After all, he's the band's the band's spokesman in the press and its de facto frontman on stage, and he writes the majority of the songs. But serious DBT fans love them some Mike Cooley. Many of them refer to the area of the crowd in front of stage left, where Cooley stakes out his territory at DBT shows, as Cooleyville, and it's prime real estate. He's the epitome of effortless rock 'n roll cool off stage and on it, tearing off searing guitar licks with a confident nonchalance, a cigarette dangling from his lips (at least until recently – he's quit smoking). That deep, molasses North Alabama drawl is part of it too – it's a gift he used to follow in Johnny Cash's footsteps and become the voice of STP engine cleaning fluid in a

series of recent commercials. He ain't sexy, but then again neither was Keith Richards in his prime (and *definitely* not now in the Gollum-like state he has decomposed into). He's also probably the best songwriter in the Truckers, and he always leaves us wanting more, rarely contributing more than three or four songs per album. "I've never been the kinda person who could write a song a day," he said in 2013. "[Sometimes it takes me] two and half years – thinking about those almost daily. It's a wonder that I'm not completely batshit insane." But the ones he does come up with are, to me, unarguably the work of a master songwriter. Although there have been many more erudite songwriters in rock, none of them have ever used the English language quite like Mike Cooley. His brilliantly idiosyncratic turns of phrase can be gut-bustingly hilarious ("Well, my daddy didn't pull out/But he never apologized"), heartbreakingly poignant ("If I could have one wish right now/I'd be about as half as tough as I pretend I am") or evocative and mysterious ("Some believe it's God's own hand on the trigger and the other dumping water in the streets"). Usually, it's a mix of all three.

According to the man himself, the main reason Cooley labors so hard to finish his songs is to make sure the lyrics are perfect – not just in content, but in how they cadence with the music. "I might know what I want to say for weeks," he claimed in 2013, "and it might take me a long time to find the number of syllables in the words to have that cadence that is natural and feels like another part of the music and not just words." His obsession with finding phrases with just the right number of syllables should come as no surprise to anyone who has listened to his songs much. His vocal style is thoroughly rhythmic and conversational; he often subdivides beats

in his vocals in a manner that seems more characteristic of the way people speak than of the way they usually sing. Look at all the rhythmic variation in just the first two lines of “Carl Perkins’ Cadillac” (fig. 6), for instance, and compare it to the rhythmic homogeneity of Hood’s vocal in “Puttin’ People On The Moon” (fig. 25). The focus is not only on what the words are, but on how they *sound* rolling off his tongue. The music acts in concert with the lyrics rather than the other way around. This, like the pentatonic orbit, is a way to ensure that Cooley’s stories are told with clarity. He sings them the same way he would tell them to you if the two of you were seated in his living room having a couple of beers.

This characteristic is certainly essential to the success of Cooley’s songs on *The Dirty South*, three out of four of which (the incomparable “Where The Devil Don’t Stay” notwithstanding) are among the most barefaced story songs Cooley has ever contributed to the Truckers. The layers of deeper meaning and intriguing references that are so much fun to try to decipher in previous and later masterpieces like “Loaded Gun In The Closet” or “A Ghost To Most” are not nearly as prevalent in these tunes. The lyrics of “Daddy’s Cup,” for instance, come across like the plot of a TV movie about a racecar driver with daddy issues; the concert staple “Carl Perkins’ Cadillac” is a pretty straightforward song about the history of Memphis’ legendary Sun Records, while still containing plenty of classic “only Cooley” lines (“Dammit Elvis, I swear son I think it’s time you came around/Making money you can’t spend ain’t what being dead’s about”). Fortunately, Cooley has such a way with words that he could probably write a song recounting the events of a

board meeting at an insurance firm and make it entertaining and insightful as hell. He also knows how to use harmony to keep things interesting.

Take “Daddy’s Cup.” Cooley’s narrator says he “was my momma’s little angel, my daddy’s second chance” and spends the next six minutes and twelve verses telling the story of how he has spent his life trying his former pro daddy proud on the racetrack. The topic is easy fodder for anyone who might want to claim the Truckers are just dumb rednecks who actually write songs about—snicker—stock car driving. And you know what? Lyrically, I do think it’s a song that the average guy who loves watching NASCAR and listening to Brad Paisley would probably like a lot. But, unlike the modern-day Nashville machine’s most popular hacks, Cooley was not motivated by having to pander to that particular audience, but rather just by wanting to tell a fun story, to create a strong character, and to make it mean something to him personally. “I was kind of drawing why I do what I do into that,” he said of the song on Alabama public radio in 2013. “I’m not really a fan of racing or anything. I went to one race and it was fun.”

The song is also creative musically. At first, it seems to follow the same pentatonic melody/Dorian chord sequence formula as “Where The Devil Don’t Stay” – the melody stays within the D minor pentatonic scale, while the main chord sequence—G-F-D—is the “Where The Devil Don’t Stay” verse progression backwards. In this case, though, the D chord is definitely a major chord, not a power chord with major/minor ambiguity as in “Where The Devil Don’t Stay.” So the song is definitely not in the key of D minor, despite what the vocal melody may indicate. Instead, Cooley seems to be singing parts of the D blues scale, which includes a

flatted third scale degree, or “blue note.” In this case, that’s an F natural, which appears throughout the vocal melody and is even sung at times against D major chords, which contain F sharps. The bluesy effect is amplified by some of the instrumental performances – the shuffling acoustic guitar figure that opens the song and shifts between D major and D dominant 7 chords and Isbell’s twanging slide guitar also contribute to the song’s heavily bluesy feel. Otherwise, most of the chords that appear in the song—F major, G major, and less frequently, C major—do seem to be implying a Dorian modal identity, with the exception of the D major chord. This indicates Cooley’s willingness to drift in and out of a given mode or scale to another one, even if it’s only for a brief moment. For instance, the chord progression of “Carl Perkins’ Cadillac” fits entirely within the F major scale until Cooley quickly throws in a G major chord during the choruses. This briefly implies the F Lydian mode—the only mode in F that contains a G natural, a B natural, and a D natural all together, and thus the only such mode that can accommodate a G major chord—before returning immediately to the familiar confines of the F major scale. The song also features an F major pentatonic melody, thus creating a clear pentatonic orbit (fig. 26).

So Isbell and Cooley’s songs are great, but the success of any DBT album is always going to hinge on Patterson Hood, the band’s heart and soul. The band was his idea in the first place, way back in 1996 when he lured some friends to come jam with promises of those eternally impossible to refuse pinnacles of culinary science, pizza and beer. He is always the primary driver of the band’s conceptual direction, and of its musical one, simply by virtue of writing most of the songs. Interestingly,

The Dirty South is an anomaly in the DBT catalog in that respect. The normally highly prolific Hood contributed six songs to the record, as opposed to Cooley and Isbell's combined eight. That marks one of only two instances of a DBT album on which Hood's songs don't outnumber those written by his bandmates. "I just came out of a pretty bad writer's block, at least for me, over the last few years..." he said in 2008. "It was getting to the point where I couldn't say I do write a lot anymore." That would certainly explain why two of his contributions to the album date back to the Adam's House Cat days. Two others are part of the Buford Pusser suite, and are, as I mentioned previously, not the most interesting songs Hood has ever written. That leaves only two new songs that rank highly in his formidable canon: "The Sands Of Iwo Jima" and "Puttin' People On The Moon."

Patterson Hood is not the easiest songwriter in the world to appreciate. He's not even the easiest songwriter in Drive-By Truckers circa *The Dirty South* to appreciate. He's not as smooth or idiosyncratic as Cooley, not as polished or eclectic as Isbell. Sure, it's one thing to see him perform live: to see him throw back his arms from his tall, husky frame in an inadvertent crucifix pose and tilt back his head while singing, alternately in anguish or in ecstasy depending on the song; to see how totally committed and passionate he is about sharing these songs with the audience; to never feel even a glimmer of doubt about how much he genuinely loves playing rock 'n roll on stage with this band. But listen to the records, especially the earlier ones, and you may find yourself struck by how many of his songs seem to be constructed from a limited pool of chord sequences, and how his thickly accented, phlegmy vocals rarely wrap their way around really catchy hooks, or even

melodies that bother differentiating themselves from one another all that much. Even some hardcore Truckers fans find the reedy falsetto Hood employs on some songs on *The Dirty South* (which he hadn't displayed before and hasn't since) just a bit weird (I happen to dig it, for the record). And just look at figures 26 and 27, which demonstrate how similar the exceedingly simple contours and rhythmic patterns of the (pentatonic, of course) verse melodies of "The Sands Of Iwo Jima" and "Puttin' People On The Moon" are. And observe how little rhythmic variation there is compared to Cooley's songs, and how little vocal ornamentation there is compared to Isbell's.

So maybe Hood is a fairly limited songwriter and singer. But, perhaps unsurprisingly, I prefer to think of him as a shrewd musical utilitarian in the tradition of Woody Guthrie, who knows not only how to use the pentatonic orbit and the modal possibilities it offers to his advantage, but also how to tell an evocative, emotional powerhouse of a goddamned story. "The Sands Of Iwo Jima" and "Puttin' People On The Moon" are two of the most powerful examples of this that he's ever written. They're also two of the best, most insightfully nuanced political songs I've ever heard.

The title of "Iwo Jima," of course, references not only one of the most crucial events in modern history, but also to a famous John Wayne movie of the same name. But unlike Cooley's comparatively bald retelling of an already well-known story in "Carl Perkins' Cadillac," "Iwo Jima" is really about Hood's great-uncle, George A. Johnson. George A. is one of those legendary figures in Truckers lore, the great uncle every DBT fan wishes to have. It's clear from this song and from the way Hood

speaks and writes about him, that George A. was a primary role model of Hood's, and, in Patterson's own words, "like a second father." By Patterson's account, he was an exemplary member of "the Greatest Generation"; he lived his whole life in a farmhouse in rural McGee Town, Alabama from his birth in 1920 until his death from Alzheimer's in 2011 at age 91. He served in World War II, fought in the Battle of Iwo Jima, and "was a family man, even in those days." He was a humble and hardworking man who "never drove a new car, though he could easily afford it/He'd just buy one for the family, take whatever no one wanted/He said a shiny car didn't mean much after all the things he'd seen." "What a sweet wonderful man he was," Hood wrote upon George A.'s death, "and you always had a good feeling any time you were around him. I never saw him angry or upset. When tragedy struck, he was always calm and stoic and a quiet beacon of strength." George A. wasn't perfect, of course—no one is—but at least one of his faults was subject to a redemptive arc. At my first DBT show, which took place on November 6, 2008 at Terminal 5 in New York City, just two days after Barack Obama was elected President, the Truckers played "The Sands Of Iwo Jima" and Hood prefaced it by giving an update on George A.'s doings. "I am so proud of my great-uncle," he said. "Like so many of men his age from all over the world but especially from Alabama in that era, he was born and raised with some of the usual prejudices. Nonetheless, I'm proud to report that this past Tuesday, my great uncle George Albert Johnson, 88 years old, cast his ballot for a black man for the presidency of the United States of America." (In case you're curious, no, I don't have a good enough memory to remember his exact words, but I

do have a bootleg recording of the show, conveniently enough.) I would say George A. is worthy of being a character in his own movie.

Hood does not seem to think *Sands Of Iwo Jima* was the movie that did George A. and men like him justice. The story he tells in the song centers around his experiences spending every weekend of his childhood at the Johnson homestead, where “we’d stay up watching movies on that black and white TV/We’d watch *The Sands Of Iwo Jima* starring John Wayne.” Then the setting shifts to the WWII veteran reunions at which a young Patterson used to accompany George A. During one such event, Patterson turns to his great uncle and asks him something: “I thought about that movie, asked him if it was that way/He just shook his head and smiled at me in such a loving way/As he thought about some friends he will never see again/He said, ‘I never saw John Wayne on the sands of Iwo Jima.’”

“I never saw John Wayne on the sands of Iwo Jima.” There is so much to unpack from just these eleven words. There are political and moral implications: John Wayne was an outspoken conservative and appeared in pro-war films like *The Green Berets*, but when it came time to serve in WWII, he was granted the deferment that George A. wanted so he could continue to take care of his family but was unable to procure (“Uncle Sam decided he was needed anyway,” as the song goes). But John Wayne isn’t much of a target compared to draft-dodging chickenhawks Bush and Cheney, who at the time the song was written were sending thousands of Americans off to die in Iraq and Afghanistan for reasons based on willful deceit. And the jingoistic “love it or leave it” patriotism espoused by both John Wayne and Bush is hollow and meaningless when it comes to actually fighting for America on the sands

of Iwo Jima or in the swamps of Vietnam or the deserts of Iraq – when it comes to doing what George A. did with solemn duty and what Bush and Wayne desperately avoided. And ultimately, that’s what “The Sands Of Iwo Jima” is about – how George A.’s quiet heroism at home does a hell of a lot more to make our country great than the glorification of battle and the flag depicted in certain Hollywood movies and propped up by certain idiot presidents. It is one of the most patriotic songs I have ever heard, though I suspect explaining why to Dubya would make his head hurt.

“The Sands Of Iwo Jima” also features perhaps the most interesting pentatonic orbit on the album. The tonic, once again, seems to be D minor, while the main chord progression—Dm-C-G—once again implies D Dorian, which if you’ll recall, is the only scale or mode in D without any sharps or flats and thus the only one that can accommodate those three chords. But then, at the end of the first verse, an astonishing two-chord progression occurs: E flat major-F major. These two chords do not appear together in either D Dorian or the D minor scale. I would argue, then, that they represent a momentary drift into D Phrygian mode, which contains both a flatted second scale degree (in D, it’s E flat) and a flatted sixth scale degree (in D, it’s B flat). Phrygian is the one mode in D in which D minor, E flat major (which contains an E flat and a B flat note), and F major chords can all appear. One could also argue it constitutes a momentary modulation to the key of F major, and the Eb chord implies F Mixolydian, which contains a flatted seventh scale degree that allows for an E flat major chord (especially since Hood uses this same trick during the cloud break guitar solo section of “Lookout Mountain”). Whatever the case may be, this progression creates an exciting swelling effect when it appears

throughout the song before returning to the familiarity of the original three-chord Dorian progression, like George A.'s feats in battle at Iwo Jima threatening to overtake the song, but never quite exploding into bombast, instead receding behind the hard facts of his quiet strength and sacrifice back at home. The strummed acoustic guitar, countryish Cooley leads, and harmonica, in contrast with the roaring three-guitar army on display on much of *The Dirty South*, underscore George A.'s humility. Here is what the song's pentatonic orbit looks like with the Eb-F progression analyzed in D Phrygian (fig. 28).

"Puttin' People On The Moon" is an even better song, and one of the most effective and searing treatises against Ayn Randian fuck-the-poor-ism that I know of. At the time of *The Dirty South's* release, Hood described it as "my latest, and best attempt at a song I've written and re-written at least a dozen times since the mid-80s." He also claims the song "deals with 'rocket envy,' a non-diagnosable psychosis affecting people in an economically depressed community, located just 60 or so miles from The NASA Space and Rocket Center" in Huntsville, Alabama. This framing makes for a powerful metaphor for the narrator's tragically plausible storyline. "Mary Alice had a baby and it looked just like I did," the song begins. "We got married on a Monday and I've been working ever since." He turns to dealing coke to support his family, until Mary Alice gets cancer and dies because they "can't afford no insurance." Every line is a raging cannonball aimed at the hypocrisy of the powers that be, which can afford to send rocket ships off the moon but doesn't bother with helping its own poverty-stricken people back on earth ("They can put a man on the moon, but I'm stuck down here just scraping by"), either because they

don't care or because their misguided ideology tells them everyone should be left alone to pick themselves up by their bootstraps. The narrator aims his anger at all the usual suspects. "The preacher on the TV says it ain't too late for me/But I bet he drives a Cadillac and I'm broke with hungry mouths to feed"; "Another joker in the White House said a change was comin' round/But I'm working at the Wal Mart, Mary Alice in the ground/All them politicians, they all lyin' sacks of shit/They say better days upon us but it's sucking left hind tit." The preachers and the politicians may make all kinds of rhetorical overtures to the poor and downtrodden, but when it comes to actually helping, they do nothing and then have the nerve to blame people for their own poverty and unemployment: "If you say I'm being punished, you got better things to do/Turning mountains into oceans, puttin' people on the moon." Hood's use of authentic back-porch, ungrammatical dialect in this song really helps bring his character into focus, but by the end of the song, after four minutes of unrelenting tragedy, misfortune, and desperation set to diabolically heavy guitars, the only thing left for Hood to do in order to portray his character's rage is to let loose a piercing, wordless banshee wail. Isbell then tears off a quick, biting guitar solo before the music ends abruptly, as if to indicate that there's no hope for this guy unless the fucking assholes in power start actually caring about him as much as their rocket ships and their bank accounts. But they never will.

The pentatonic orbit of "Puttin' People On The Moon" is fairly straightforward compared to many other songs on *The Dirty South*. The melody remains in the D minor pentatonic, and all the chords are of the D minor scale. The bridge shifts the song's rhythmic pattern and reaches into bombast in a manner

similar to the bridge of “Where The Devil Don’t Stay.” I think that it too features a modulation, in this case to the key of B flat major. Even though chord progression on the bridge fits in the D minor scale just as well as it fits in the B flat major scale, I have determined, based on my own highly scientific method (which you may know as “humming”), that the tonal center shifts during this section from D to Bb. Observe the resulting pentatonic orbit in fig. 29.

“Puttin’ People On The Moon” is the best song on *The Dirty South*. It’s earth shatteringly rocking. It’s against my anti-objectivist philosophy as a music critic to say this, but I’ll make an exception in this case: if you don’t like it, then fuck you.

Conclusion

Drive-By Truckers have built a fairly large fanbase, draw well on tour, receive consistently glowing reviews from critics, and are today probably more well known than they've ever been. In a just world, they would be as popular as Kings Of Leon are right now, and Kings Of Leon would be living in a dumpster somewhere. But in the real world, DBT are old, ugly, and sweaty. They are never going to "make it big." It's probably too late for that. Thus, barring some radical posthumous reevaluation of their work a la what happened to the Velvet Underground, instances of the Truckers being mentioned in the same breath as Woody Guthrie, Bob Dylan, and Bruce Springsteen, as I have done during my discussion, will continue to be hard to come by.

Their best chance to break through came during *The Dirty South* period; they were at the peak of their performance powers and had just released their best album. But then came tension between Isbell and the rest of the band, which went so far as to manifest itself musically on DBT's follow-up to *The Dirty South*, 2006's *A Blessing And A Curse*. *Curse*, while in retrospect a solid effort, divided fans upon its release; it lacked the ambitious sprawl and conceptual cohesion of DBT's best work. It also bore the marks of some new, somewhat unwelcome influences. Isbell's two songs were a cringe-worthy, ham-handed tribute to Blue Oyster Cult ("Easy On Yourself"), and a shockingly sissified singer-songwriter effort ("Daylight" – though I'll be damned if Jason's money note on the chorus doesn't send chills down my spine). It is telling that the one song Isbell brought to the table during the *Blessing And A Curse* sessions that actually fit right in the Truckers' usual wheelhouse—a

twangy, brooding, lament called “When The Well Runs Dry”—was left off the album (though it was later released on DBT’s 2009 compilation *The Fine Print (A Collection Of Oddities And Rarities 2003-2008)*). Isbell was moving inexorably in a direction away from Hood and Cooley, and as incredible as Jason’s previous contributions to the band had been, nobody fucks with the DBT formula – unless it’s Hood and Cooley themselves.

Which they have, to an extent, since Isbell’s departure. On the two best albums they’ve made since *The Dirty South*, 2008’s *Brighter Than Creation’s Dark* (which prominently featured Spooner Oldham sitting in on keyboards) and 2011’s *Go-Go Boots* (which featured two covers of songs by forgotten Muscle Shoals soul great Eddie Hinton), they quieted down somewhat and came closer to explicitly replicating the Muscle Shoals Sound than they ever had before, while still keeping their noisy three-guitar juggernaut intact. This shift in approach over the last five years has coincided with a renaissance of soul influence on the pop charts – not just among singers like Amy Winehouse and Adele, but it’s even noticeable when listening to rock bands like the Black Keys. I’ve been a Black Keys fan since before they were famous, during the ancient time period we now know as “the mid-2000s,” and never would have expected them to become one of the most popular rock bands in the world, as they have done in the years since then. Then again, I never would have expected them to go in the direction they took to get to that point. Namely, they built on their lo-fi, garage blues roots, overcame their lack of a bass player, and headed down South to the still operating studio at 3614 Jackson Highway, where they recorded most of their heavily soul-influenced 2010 breakthrough album,

Brothers. The album's hit single "Tighten Up," despite being one of the few songs on the record *not* recorded in Muscle Shoals, is a great Muscle Shoals-style rocker. The heritage cannot be denied – just look at that syncopated David Hood-style bassline (fig. 30). And would you look at that... it's got a pentatonic melody with a partially modal chord sequence (fig. 31)! If I didn't know any better, I'd say it's almost as if singer/guitarist Dan Auerbach and drummer Patrick Carney were working off of a template for how to use harmony to make sense of a soul-style groove in a rock song.

In reality, it would be presumptuous and probably inaccurate to claim that Drive-By Truckers were a major influence on the Black Keys during the *Brothers* era, even though Patterson Hood visited them in Muscle Shoals while they were recording the album. But the success of "Tighten Up" must be some sort of indication that there's something to the Truckers' formula, even if, at present, the Truckers themselves may not be recognized for it to the extent that they should.

But whether or not the majority of rock fans ever wake up to the potency of DBT's distinctive and potentially innovative harmonic language, one aspect of DBT that simply cannot go on unrecognized forever is their mastery as storytellers. Hood, Cooley, and their cohorts explore the realities and the myths of American life in ways no one has quite matched before in rock – sometimes with humor, and sometimes with great gravity. And for that, Drive-By Truckers are the Great American Rock Band.