

Building a better South: Celebrities, serial fandoms and the (re)construction of Southern Identity

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Abstract:

Fans do more than express affinity for and congregate around a single fan object. Fans move between objects, across communities, and within textual fields. These movements and relationships offer fans opportunities to negotiate not only their favored celebrity's identity but also their own and those of Others. Two fan objects, their interwoven histories, and the textual fields that surround them set foundations for a consideration of how serial fandom complicates the understanding of audiences and the roles they play within cultural discourses. The analysis centers on an online magazine and one of its creators (*The Bitter Southerner*/Chuck Reece) and a rock 'n' roll band and its co-founder (Drive-By Truckers/Patterson Hood). The histories these men share are stories of places, times, and people. The stories chronicled reveal how fans of the band (HeAthens) and fans of the magazine (Cousins) work in concert to amplify the discursive positions occupied by their fan objects. Those positions challenge stereotypical perceptions of what it means to be an American southerner.

Keywords: Fans, Fandom, Audiences, Serial Fandom, Textual Fields, Intertextuality, Discourse, Identity, Popular Culture, American South

The Ties That Bind

American southerners exist between untenable "realities" – a sort of perpetual double bind. They are Americans, yet somehow distinct from the rest of the country. They are a diverse people, yet pervasive stereotypes suggest otherwise. White male southerners represent a slice of the dominant American identity; however, these same southerners often feel marginalized. They are roundly seen as political conservatives, yet a notable progressive strain exists. They are painted as continuing to fight the Civil War's "Lost Cause," yet many condemn the roles played by their ancestors. Media scholar Tara McPherson contends that

southerners are often presented through either a lens of “moonlight and magnolias” where Southern gentlemen and fair ladies live an idyllic and pastoral American Dream; or, they are depicted through a “redneck” lens that is anything but idyllic and peaceful (McPherson, 2006). Both lenses fail to adequately represent the spaces between. These tensions lead many southerners to occupy positions that require them to concurrently defend and condemn their homeland, a position that is often untenable.

McPherson likens media representations of southerners to novelty postcards with images that shift, morph, and are ultimately replaced as viewers tilt the card. She says these cards follow “lenticular logics”, which conceal the co-presence of multiple images. She uses this co-presence of dual images as an analogy to discuss Southern representation and identity. She succinctly describes what historian Carl Degler (1977) calls the South’s “two-ness” and what rock musician Patterson Hood (2001) calls the “duality of the southern thing.” McPherson writes, “Playing at being southern (via tourism or various cinematic and televisual Souths) allows Americans to connect imaginatively with Old South traditions of grandeur and elegance, escaping the perceived pressures of a culture of political correctness in favor of a lost world of white dominance and beauty, a world that via the wonders of the lenticular – is no longer complicated by race or racism. Alternately, the South can function as demonized other, as the mythic and convenient repository of racism and our racist past, conveniently serving to absolve the rest of the nation from accountability or complicity” (McPherson, Afterword, para. 9).

McPherson’s analysis suggests that the South is both the location of an idyllic America and a horrific one. The moonlight and magnolias reality glosses over the South’s painful history and works to displace it and replace it with a vision of perpetual happiness and peaceful (co)existence. The contrasting vision centralizes the South’s painful racial past but works to conveniently contain it within class-based regional stereotypes. In the latter version, the region’s rednecks, hillbillies, and white trash are to blame for Southern ills and American ills alike. These low-class, uneducated bumpkins with pronounced drawls are the repositories of racist sentiments, segregationist laws, and the continuation of systematic inequalities and individual prejudices. Neither vision of the South paints the full picture of the place, its people, or the ways Americans are trained to think about these things. The first vision reinforces images of a mythical American dream. The second compartmentalizes America’s tangible and ongoing nightmare, and does so in a way that excuses some parts of the country while isolating blame in another part (fairly or not). This is not to say that the South does not deserve to shoulder this blame, because historically Southern leaders have offered the rest of the country clear and good reasons to see the region in the ways they often do. However, it is to say that the issues often located in the South also exist outside of the South.

But there is more to the story. McPherson is not wrong, but the stereotypes conceal the spaces between and overlook substantial segments of the population where alternate negotiations of Southern identity are playing out (as the forthcoming analysis demonstrates). Southerners offer examples of not just “deplorable” mindsets, but they also

evidence how mindsets change and evolve. Promoting such changes often becomes more acceptable if the faces behind the messages look similar to and the voices sound familiar to the audiences that receive them. This analysis begins with a consideration two of these faces and voices, but then expands to include discussions of the audiences and fans who follow them. In particular, the stories of rock musician Patterson Hood of Drive-By Truckers (DBT) and magazine publisher Chuck Reece formerly of *The Bitter Southerner* (BS) are central, but an interrogation of their fans – DBT’s HeAthens and BS’s Cousins – is equally important. Specifically, the roles celebrities and fans play within the negotiation of an identity are interrogated with a multi-theoretical approach that draws heavily from celebrity studies, fan studies, textual analysis, and ideological/identity analysis. These theories and analytic approach merge to demonstrate how celebrity images are formed and consumed; how celebrities function as totemic personalities around which communities congregate; how textual fields are formed to surround and underpin these celebrities; how multiple fandoms connect and serialize in ways that enhance their ideological power; and, how fans explore and mine those textual fields to amplify the discursive positions espoused by the totemic personalities that become objects of their fandom.

Serial Fans & Evolving Identities

One’s fandom is always also part of one’s identity. And, when fans congregate into communities then the communal relations that develop and activities with which fans engage further define that identity. Fans in these communities congregate around fan objects, which are typically celebrities. Mark Duffett (2012a, 2012b, and 2014) contends that to understand one’s fandom one must also understand whom fans idolize. Analyzing fan objects provides not only insight into the celebrity’s image and identity, but also the identities of their fans. Cornell Sandvoss (2005) notes that the object of one’s fandom is not experienced “in relation to the self” but instead the fan object is experienced “as part of the self” (p. 96). Fans tend to gravitate toward and align themselves with objects within whom they see parts of themselves. As fans explore and mine the textual fields surrounding and underpinning their favored celebrities, they also explore and interrogate themselves. This does not mean that every fan engages with the same aspect of the celebrity image in the same way or at the same time, but it does suggest that this engagement results in meanings that emerge from what Richard Dyer (1998) calls a “structured polysemy.” He observes that a celebrity’s image is “complex totality” constructed within and across certain times (p. 101).

Fan scholars observe that connections and intersections between different fans and fan communities happen in different ways and for different of reasons. Sometimes a fandom may even prevent such connections and interconnections. Serial fandom, anti-fandom, intra-fandom, and post-object fandom each explore this evolution (Hills, 2016; Sandvoss, 2005; Williams, 2011; Duffett, 2013; Gray, 2003; Seregina and Schouten, 2017). This analysis highlights how fan identities intersect with and are informed by aspects of their idols’ identities. It explores how fan communities shape identities and how fandoms, more

particularly serial fandoms, serve as collective modes of consumption and expression that work ideologically to define who a people are and are perceived to be. Stereotypes offer helpful starting points for this task.

Stereotypes problematically define, and regularly marginalize, southerners. Yet, those stereotypes are not entirely disconnected from the realities surrounding them. Tracy Thompson (2013) suggests that Southern identity is composed of three distinctive attributes: (1) southerners are conservative people who prize tradition and embrace their faith; (2) southerners are adaptable people who often have served as testing grounds for American cultural experiments; and, (3) southerners suffer from a severe lack of historical awareness and/or they have rendered themselves willfully ignorant through their embrace of incomplete and inaccurate versions of their histories. She mentions that a corollary to the lack of historical awareness is a lack of self-awareness. Taken together, Thompson argues that stereotypical southerners are religious conservatives who are susceptible to rapid and substantive identity shifts while they struggle to recognize the past they shift away from and/or the future they move toward. During Trump's reign as U.S. President, the political dimension of this assumed identity grew increasingly important.

Southerners, like many Americans, wrestle with reconciling the past and present as they struggle to chart brighter futures. Thompson writes:

We have defined ourselves by what we are not (Southern Americans, as opposed to Yankee Americans); we attempted to make the question moot by seceding; we embraced that dual identity for Southerners with white skin while denying full citizenship to Southerners with dark skin. In recent years, this issue has come to seem almost quaint, maybe even irrelevant, in light of the bitter political divisions of our era; it sometimes seems more useful to think in terms of other kinds of distinctions, like whether a person gets his news from Fox or NPR, votes Republican or Democrat, goes to church on Sunday morning or heads off to yoga class. But even then, the whole issue of Southern identity refuses to go away—because as it turns out, a whole lot of people who get their news from Fox and vote Republican and go to church every Sunday happen to live in the South (p. 242).

She wrote these words in advance of the divisive rhetoric that marked Donald Trump's presidency; she wrote this during the rhetoric of hope and change that defined President Barack Obama's tenure. These contexts color her message. Her South and southerners are part of an America perched on the cusp of embracing diversity and difference. Her South was biracial and more inclusive than the one communicated by the stereotypes. Almost all Southern stereotypes project the South as white and predominantly male. Some white male southerners combat these stereotypes. This analysis centers on two men who might look a little and sound a lot like Southern stereotypes, but these men tend to challenge the stereotypes rather than reinforce them. This analysis uses these men to discuss not only

how they challenge the stereotypes, but to also interrogate how their fans participate within these discourses of identity and work to amplify the voices of the men that they follow.

Southern Celebrities

Patterson Hood, the co-leader of a Southern rock band called Drive-By Truckers (DBT), and Chuck Reece, the founder of a digital Southern magazine called *The Bitter Southerner* (BS), serve as central analytic figures. They are celebrities around whom fans congregate. They are both middle-aged white guys with religious upbringings. They were raised in the rural South, albeit in different places and in different families. They speak with pronounced Southern drawls, possess artistic talents, express pointed political opinions, display penchants for good times, and are followed by loyal fans. They share interwoven histories and those histories contribute to the serialization of their fan communities. As Hood and Reece come together so do their fans.

Hood and Reece may sound like stereotypical southerners, but the words they utter belie that characterization. Unlike Thompson's typical southerner, both men are progressive and steeped in the history of their region. They are well-read and intelligent. Their progressivism underpins a desire to build what Reece calls a "Better South." For them, a "Better South" is a diverse and accepting place – much like the one Thompson imagines. Both men are clear that southerners must learn the true histories of their people and pasts before a "Better South" can emerge. Each man is a pop culture icon for connected sets of fans and followers. Each man is surrounded by a textual field that they helped produce or that was produced about them. Their fans explore and mine these fields.

The types of engagements that Hood and Reece promote cut in two directions and speak to different audiences. Southerners hear these men advocate for deep historical reflection about who they are, were, and might become. Non-southerners hear them challenge the broad acceptance of regional stereotypes by demonstrating the region's existing complexity and potential for change. They exemplify that not all southerners who look and sound like stereotypes embody them. This means that these men and their fans navigate what Hood calls "the duality of the southern thing" – a phrase uttered in relation to DBT so often that it has become a bit cliché. It is this "duality" the Reece sought to explore in the magazine he co-founded. This duality is inscribed within a set of tenets he penned to help articulate his magazine's activist mission.

Reece begins his seven tenets by stating and restating the goal: To Build a Better South. That goal is followed by encouragements to: (1) teach the *true story* of the Civil War; (2) respect individuality; (3) engage in cross-racial and cross-cultural conversations; (4) reject discrimination; (5) value equality; (6) challenge religious intolerance; and, (7) to celebrate Southern culture (Reece, 2018b). DBT's work inspired these tenets and the band has consistently embodied them. The fan communities for the band and magazine (DBT's HeAthens and BS's Cousins) amplify, operationalize, and model the values. These communities are independent, but at certain times and in various ways they connect. These

connections also spread into other communities with which these men connect. This analysis unravels and explores the complex relationships that emerge when textual fields and fan objects overlap and intermingle. Focusing on two fandom and fan objects suggests an oft overlooked complexity, yet it merely scratches the surface. A range of theoretical perspectives informs this effort and below the relevant literature is synthesized.

Totems & Fans

Many scholars endeavor to explain how audiences relate to and engage with the objects of their fandoms (see Dyer, 1998; Butler, 1991; Perse & Rubin, 1989; Sandvoss, 2005; Bennett, 2014; Duffett, 2014). Regardless of how different thinkers approach the question, they seem to universally agree that parasocial relationships exist and are often quite meaningful and impactful. Scholars also seem to concur that as affinity grows and is maintained across time then the fan/fan object relationship deepens and expands. These relationships multiply exponentially when groups of people with similar parasocial relationships congregate within fan communities. It is also arguable that when celebrities work together or are otherwise connected then their fan communities become more prone to blend and serialize. When textual fields encroach upon each other fans follow and explore those fields. The relationships and histories shared by fan objects cultivate textual and communal connections.

Too often scholars fail to account for the connections and interconnections between multiple fan objects and fan communities – even if those scholars recognize that they exist. This failure downplays the full impact of the ideological work fans and their idols perform. Matt Hills joins Garry Crawford to bemoan the limitations of analyzing fandoms in bounded ways. Hills (2016) writes, “Rather than media fandom being thought of as inherently intertextual, moving across the artefacts of popular culture and drawing them together into historicised, biographical networks of affect and meaning, fandom has instead typically been defined singularly” (p. 9). Hills goes on to say that when critics “fix” fans in rigid communities or tie them to only a single fan object then they “lose the capacity” to recognize how fluidly fans move across and between multiple texts and objects. Serial fandom, anti-fandom, intra-fandom, and post-object fandom each suggest that these connections and intersections are not just present but worthy of analysis (see Hills, 2016; Sandvoss, 2005; Williams, 2011; Duffett, 2013; Gray, 2003; Seregina and Schouten, 2017). Fan practices are inherently intertextual and dialogic. As collectives expand and overlap, their voices become louder and the communities become more significant locations that drive significant cultural shifts. When those communities challenge dominant mindsets consistently and repetitively then even those not immersed within these communities begin to hear the rumbles of coming change.

It is important to understand who fans are, how they tend to behave, and how they perceive themselves and each other. In order to accomplish this fully, one must account for connections between the things that these fans consume and the relationships they develop and/or observe. Fan scholar Mark Duffett (2014) speaks to this complex network of

interactions by observing that fans seek continuity *between* similar texts and creators (genre fandom), *between* makers and the range of texts they create (auteur fandom), and *between* what happens onstage and offstage (star fandom) (p.165). It might also be fair to add that the singular focus Hills describes might cause critics to lose the capacity to locate broader cultural connections that may be integral to understanding a fandom or network of fandoms. If the essence of media texts rests in their inherent intertextuality – as scholars like Cornell Sandvoss and Jonathan Gray have argued – then the essence of fandom is similarly intertextual (Sandvoss, 2017; Gray, 2011). This intertextuality problematizes the study of fans because the networks are contingent upon how the fan is defined.

Simply defining the word “fan” presents a challenge. Henry Jenkins (2013) notes that his mentor, John Fiske, defined fandom as simply the act of “liking” something. Jenkins pushed back against this broad characterization by suggesting that the “social dimensions” of fandom define it. Jenkins centralizes fan cultures and the ways fans construct and participate within them, which may cause him to overlook the importance of the fan object. Mark Duffett argues that Jenkins’ work, and that of others who focus on participatory culture, “represses” the attention paid to the celebrities that tend to become the objects of fandom. This is not to say that all fans are fans of celebrities, and there is ample evidence to suggest otherwise since some fans congregate around movies, TV shows, or groups of people (e.g., rock bands). However, he argues that paying the “right kind of attention” to the “cult of personality” surrounding the fan objects would likely produce deeper insights into the fan/fan object relationship and the power that these relationships engender. Here, Duffett echoes Nicholas Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst (1998) who argue that “fan-performer interaction” constitutes a “critical area” to examine. They characterize this focus as “a kind of window, ‘a limited area of transparency’, through which an examination of socially and culturally sensitive issues is possible” (p. 40).

Duffett explores celebrities as religious totems. (Duffett, 2012a, 2012b, and 2014). By drawing from Emile Durkheim, Duffett connects fandom to religion while maintaining that fandom is not religion. For him and other fan scholars, a fandom is *like* a religion but cannot become one. Fans may behave like congregations or followers, but fan objects are not super-human entities or Gods. This fact alone distinguishes fandom from almost all religions. To adapt religion to fandom, Duffett focuses on the roles that totems play. He (2012a) writes, “In a key moment, which Durkheim calls “effervescence”, each emotionally heightened crowd member experiences a life-changing jolt of electricity as they subconsciously recognize a personal connection to the totem...Each individual is therefore connected to the social body on a primal and mysterious level (p. 23). He goes on to say that “effervescence” shapes one’s understanding of the self and connects the individual to a larger community of people who have shared this effervescent experience.

Duffett argues that fan objects are less equivalent to Gods than they are to lesser aspects found within almost all religions. Put simply, totems and fan objects are symbols or leaders with which or whom followers develop intense emotional connections. By noting the possibility for totems to manifest themselves as people, Duffett recognizes a human

dimension. In this light, the totem might be more akin to a preacher or a saint. Religious scholar V. Lee Edwards (2019) observes a similar phenomenon in his analysis of the Drive-By Truckers and their fans. Edwards likens Hood to a reverend or a shepherd. He suggests that Hood functions as the representative of a religion rather than the supernatural entity that sits at its center.

Celebrities possess histories and futures. Totemic celebrities are animated, dynamic, and evolutionary figures. They travel through physical spaces and exist within certain times. They are both people and ideological constructions. Like preachers who pen and deliver sermons, totemic celebrities produce and are surrounded by textual fields. Some of these texts they create, some they reference, and some are written about them. These texts become part of the celebrity's image that audiences negotiate and define through their generally mediated interactions with the celebrity and the textual fields that surround them. This negotiation takes place within what Richard Dyer calls a "structured polysemy," which is to say that a celebrity image may be interpreted in different ways but that the interpretive process is constrained and confined within texts and across textual fields (Dyer, 1998). Like any interaction with others and texts, certain characteristics and/or themes often emerge and these then produce identifiable analytic strains. This analysis taps into such a theme by focusing on these celebrities, their textual fields, and their fans to discuss how they coordinate to complicate the definitions of the South (its places) and southerners (its people).

Smashing Stereotypes

As southerners, Reece and Hood present the regional experience in accessible and seemingly authentic ways. Because of this authenticity, fans often view their idols' images as more "real." This realness lends credibility to the positions that they espouse and encourage their fans to embrace. For Hood, Reece, and their fans this means that the South and Southern identity are negotiated openly and regularly. When asked how his fandom informed his understanding of the South and southerners Glenn Raucher, a HeAthen from New York, said:

I think as a non-southerner, DBT serves as a stereotype smasher for anyone who listens closely. (Which is why so many fans seemed to be surprised when they "went political": I don't think they were listening very closely). I certainly carried into my early adulthood certain standard stereotypes about the south and southerners, that happily receded as I got older. Discovering the Truckers, and more importantly, the community that has evolved around them killed the rest of whatever vestiges remained.

Raucher's words speak volumes about how popular entertainment shapes mindsets. By noting the political dimension, Raucher highlights the important role politics can play in fandom and how politics often compliment other aspects of identity. Folks like Reece and

Hood are clear about their politics and those politics appear in their work. Fans who congregate around these folks are apt to do so because of politics. One's political identity is often part of one's fan identity and vice versa.

Identities, like cultures, exist in perpetual states of formation and reformation. Layers are constantly added and discarded. Southern identity may be distinct but it is not static, and it is not fully under individual control. No one fully controls every aspect of their identity, yet individuals can respond to those things they do not control. Tara McPherson (2006) characterizes identity making by writing, "The making of selves is not simply personal: it is deeply social, conditioned by our cultural and material milieu, the very geographies we inhabit" (Afterword, para. 11). McPherson's observations echo Paul du Gay and Stuart Hall's claims that identities form across representations and within discourses and that all identities are defined by its difference from the "norm" (du Gay & Hall, 2011). Ample research suggests Southern identity is a distinct subset of American identity. The continued existence of Southern stereotypes across media merely confirms this assessment. It is these stereotypes that Hood, Reece, and their fans seek to contest and ultimately smash.

The stories of Reece and Hood are also tales of places, times, and scenes. While DBT may have gained their notoriety earlier than Reece, it was Reece who entered the scene first. Reece grew up in Ellijay, a small town in northern Georgia that is located near Chattanooga, Tennessee and not too far from Athens and Atlanta, Georgia. These Georgia cities played integral roles in the lives of both men. Historian Grace Elizabeth Hale (2020) chronicles the emergence of the infamous Athens music scene, which produced bands like B-52's, R.E.M., Pylon, Widespread Panic, and DBT. She characterizes the scene as a Bohemian outpost that was notably different from the culture that surrounded it. She mentions both Reece and DBT in her work, but Reece plays a more integral part. He is both a source for her and a minor subject. She describes Reece as an Athens scene participant and as a reporter for the student newspaper (p. 183). Reece came to Athens to attend the University of Georgia where he studied journalism and wrote about the local music scene, which explains Hale's dual characterization of him as a fan and an aspiring media professional.

Reece's household was typical of many White, working-class, Southern families. These were Godly folks who struggled to reconcile their faith with regional policies and the cultural norms that they established. They were imperfect people living in problematic times. They were products of their communities and were insulated from cultures like the one Reece encountered in Athens. Hale asks Reece to compare the Athens he entered in 1979 to that small town of Ellijay that he left. Reece responds that he could find "absolutely no point of intersection" between the two places – even though they are geographically proximate. Reece's parents were religious mountain folks. They were members of Mt. Pleasant Baptist Church and led a traveling gospel band that performed for church congregations in the region. He describes the congregations and the towns as segregated and the people as possessors of mindsets that were typical of their times (Reece, *The Lost*

Voice). He suggests that his father was “subject to the same lack of racial understanding common to any Southern white man of his era,” but who also believed that all people were created equal – at least in God’s eyes (Reece, *My Dad the Hero*). They were products of their time and place. They are emblematic of the cultural divides, but also suggestive of a coming awareness.

Reece’s family story is reminiscent of the one Hood describes in the spoken word “Three Great Alabama Icons.” Hood narrates, “Race was only an issue on TV in the house that I grew up in / [George] Wallace was viewed as a man from another time and place / But when I first ventured out of the South, I was shocked at how strongly Wallace was associated with Alabama and its people / Racism is a worldwide problem, and it’s been like that since the beginning of recorded history / And, it ain’t just white and black / But thanks to George Wallace, it’s always a little more convenient to play it with a Southern accent” (*Southern Rock Opera*, 2001). Because of segregationist policies and demographics, mountain people like the Reeces often had limited contact with people of color. This lack of contact created distance between those southerners and issues of race. Racial protests were media events rather than parts of these southerners’ everyday lives. Reece notes that his parents frequently took him to Atlanta to see “all-night singings” and that he cannot recall ever seeing a Black group perform (Reece, *The Lost Voice*). Instead, Reece says his exposure to African-American gospel personalities came through the songs they wrote and stories his father shared about those songs and their writers. His experience with Others was mediated, but his love of music and his desire to write would eventually help him cross these divides.

In Athens, Reece worked to reconcile his deeply religious experiences in Ellijay with a place that challenged his understanding of Southern identities – even his own. Hale writes, “Maybe the South meant more than white supremacy, slavery and the Civil War, lynching and segregationists. Maybe the place had nurtured something admirable, too, forms of religious practice and art and music-making, faith and beauty (p. 184). She suggests that blending the music scene with the area’s folk-art scene produced a sense of the place as “quirky and creative.” These early inhabitants of Athens were progressive, but according to Hale they were less likely to talk about their politics (at least early on). Instead, they modeled their beliefs by becoming and engaging with people who looked, believed, and acted differently than the regional norms. These folks were not aristocrats living in a land bathed by moonlight and awash in magnolias, and they were not racist rednecks still fighting a Lost Cause. They were artists, creators, and thinkers.

Southerners are aware of the stereotypes that define them, but it often takes leaving the South to fully grasp their power. In 1983, Reece migrated to New York City for a media job. Like the awakening Hood describes in “Icons”, Reece learned that non-southerners often see the South differently than those who live there. Southerners rarely see other southerners as dumb simply because of their accents, yet Reece argues that this is often not the case for non-southerners. An interviewer from National Public Radio (NPR) asked Reece why he is “bitter” about the way that the South and southerners are represented and

understood. Reece responds, “When you move to New York City with an accent like mine, people think you’re kinda dumb. (Laughs.) After they figured out I could put a complex sentence together, then I was fine and they were curious about me. My accent became a little more charming, I suppose” (Whack, 2015). He goes on to say that this experience fed his desire to combat the stereotypes. He adds that he wanted *BS* was to use art, food, and culture to reveal the South that those stereotypes conceal.

Undergrounds & Cool Towns

Reece returned to the South in 1989 when he relocated from New York to Atlanta. The Athens scene was well-established and had gained national attention due to the popularity of R.E.M. and The B-52’s, but Athens was not the only scene in the area. A smaller scene was thriving in an Atlanta neighborhood called Cabbagetown. James Kelly, a musician who fronted one that scene’s earliest bands called Slim Chance & The Convicts, chronicled this history. The story Kelly tells revolves around the Redneck Underground (RU) – a scene DBT would enter alongside Athens. Kelly dates the RU’s birth on June 4, 1986, which is almost a decade prior to the June 10, 1996 date that Hood tabs as DBT’s birthday. DBT may have entered the RU late but the experience was clearly formative. Hood immortalized the scene and one of its key figures in “The Living Bubba,” a song DBT released on their album *Gangstabilly* (1998).

“Bubba” told the story of a legendary RU performer named Gregory Dean Smalley and his battle against AIDS. The song is equal parts a story about a Smalley and an indictment of the American healthcare system. Smalley died on March 25, 1996 – a couple of months prior to DBT’s formation. Hood and Kelly both tell tales of Smalley’s will to perform; there were times when Smalley needed friends to carry him to the stage so he could perform. By the time DBT came together Hood had already scheduled some of DBT’s earliest shows, and Smalley booked one of the first ones. DBT was slated to be part of Smalley’s annual Bubbapalooza Festival, which promoted up-and-coming bands from the region. While Smalley did not live to see that set, DBT used the opportunity to perform their tribute to him. Smalley’s mother was in the audience. It is also likely that Reece attended that show since it was during this period that Reece would find his way to DBT. Reece’s relationship started with fandom, became a friend, and then developed into what DBT webmistress Jenn Bryant characterizes extended family.

The rural Alabama town in which Hood was raised is both similar to and dissimilar from the rural Georgia town where Reece was raised. Hood comes from Muscle Shoals, Alabama. His father David is a member of the legendary Muscle Shoals Sound Studios session band affectionately known as The Swampers. The Shoals is an unusual place because most rural southern towns are not the homes to well-known record producers and recording studios. During Hood’s childhood, the Shoals was located in a South that remained largely segregated. Yet, artists like Aretha Franklin, Wilson Pickett, and Booker T. Jones would all come to the Shoals and record music with local musicians like David Hood. These local musicians stood as models of what the South could become. The South Hood

experienced was simultaneously integrated and segregated. Patterson clearly took these experiences to heart and Reece learned them too.

Hood's knowledge of the recording industry and his awareness of the now-mature scene in Athens undoubtedly informed his decision to move. Unlike his father, Patterson was set to become a traveling musician instead of a session player. It seems logical to conclude that Hood's move to Georgia was motivated by a 1992 encounter he had with Dave Schools and his band Widespread Panic. Panic came to the Shoals from Athens to record an album. Schools recounts:

We first met Patterson [Hood] in Muscle Shoals when we were recording *Everyday*. It was 1992 - his dad, David, was over that studio, and we were in town for 6-8 weeks with absolutely nothing else to do. There's nothing near the place...They had a great band and they were out of money. Their van had broken down. And I said, "I want to help. Let's get some t-shirts printed up, let's get the van fixed and let's do this." That's Athens. Athens is the kind of town where all of these musicians are working at the same pizza shops and sandwich shops. Bands here aren't out to cut each other (Ells, 2013).

The band Schools refers to was Adam's House Cat (AHC), and it was one of several projects on which Hood and his songwriting partner of over 35 years, Mike Cooley, would collaborate. AHC offered their take on the music scene in the Shoals with a song cleverly and provocatively titled "Buttholeville." DBT would record their own version of the song and release it on *Pizza Deliverance* (1996). AHC also recorded and released the song but the original recordings were lost and the AHC version was not released until they were unearthed in 2018. DBT marked that occasion by re-forming AHC and opening for themselves at a few shows. "Buttholeville" tells a different story about the Shoals since it focuses less on the people in the studios and more on the people in the community. In many respects, "Buttholeville" is the stereotypical southern place inhabited by rednecks and ne'er-do-wells.

The Athens and RU scenes embraced a sense of Southern-ness, and to a great extent Southern whiteness, but they did not do so as one might anticipate. Athens embraced the more traditional forms of art like painting, photography, and sculpture. In contrast, the RU embraced Southern pop culture. Hale notes the importance of UGA's art school and the nearby presence of folk artists like Howard Finster. In contrast, Kelly points to country music, NASCAR auto racing, and Pabst Blue Ribbon beer. While Athens seemed to separate itself from "redneck culture," Kelly and the members of the RU embraced it while simultaneously challenging it. Cultural scholars Renee Dechert and George Lewis (2002) argue that the RU worked to neutralize redneck culture and to *recuperate* the redneck label by commercializing it. They suggest that commodifying rednecks renders them less threatening. They contend that the members of the RU acted as "semiotic guerillas" who opposed dominant cultural values by embracing and warping them (p. 136-140). History

shows that the RU did not neutralize the term redneck as much as the scene worked to complicate it. Unlike Athens, which seemed more inclined to evade the redneck Southern stereotype, the RU owned it in order to combat it. The echoes of both scenes remain present in DBT's music, *BS's* tenets, and among their fans and followers.

Not all southerners are rednecks and not all rednecks are southerners. RU artists unquestionably embraced the stereotype and did so in order to challenge it. According to Kelly, it was not uncommon to hear RU bands offer punk renditions of classic country songs or conversely to offer countrified versions of punk anthems. The fact that a young RuPaul was an RU presence illustrates the community's openness and desire to embrace diverse populations. More importantly, the scene illustrates that even folks who identify as "rednecks" and/or "white trash" can combat the racism and religiously motivated homophobia that are often considered characteristics of Southern identity. RuPaul, a transgendered African American entertainer, became a household name during the first two decades of the 21st century and would use that celebrity to champion gay and transgendered rights. Members of both scenes, including DBT and Reece, would champion these causes and both would attract gay and transgendered fans. This is not to say that racist ideologies do not exist within redneck and white trash culture, because clearly these ideologies are present; however, the RU and bands like DBT illustrate that it is possible to embrace aspects of Southern culture while holding others up for scorn.

Surveying & Mining Textual Fields

It is worth noting that "redneck" is not a term that DBT embraces. The band sees redneck identity and iconography as scorn-worthy. DBT's co-founder Mike Cooley's "Surrender Under Protest" (2016) condemns the embrace of the Confederate flag, a symbol often associated with rednecks. He also offers his perspective about redneck identity in a newspaper interview. Cooley says:

Where I was growing up "redneck" was the trap a young, working-class kid in the country could fall into. These are the people who wallow in their ignorance; these are the people who blame others for their failures; these are the people who drag others down with them; and you can be one of them if you don't learn a thing or two...I wasn't taught to think I was better. I wasn't taught to look down on people, but ["redneck"] was something to rise above not aspire to. (Encorepub.com, 2017)

His words suggest that he neither attempts to neutralize nor recuperate redneck identity. It is also clear that Cooley, along with Hood and Reece, embrace their Southern identities by distinguishing themselves from the stereotypes and modeling what it means to be *better southerners*. DBT's peppers their first two albums with songs scrutinizing the South, its people, and centers of power. As part of a written exchange for this project, Hood notes that he regularly writes songs in character and that some of his characters are "less tactful"

than he might be. Yet, he attempts to stay true to the character – even if he might disagree with the perspective. By occupying these character-based positions, Hood is able to explore the world that surrounds him from a range of perspectives and themes.

Songs like *Gangstabilly's* "Late for Church" (1998) and *Pizza Deliverance's* "Too Much Sex (Too Little Jesus)" (1999) suggest shifts away from or an outright condemnation of religion – a theme that appears repeatedly across DBT's work. Hood says that his relationship to religion is "rather complex." He contends that he favors anything that brings someone "comfort and well-being," but that in the South religion has been used as a "wedge to discriminate, enable inaction, or become a defense of prejudice or hate." His body of work is particularly stinging when it comes to men of the cloth who fleece their flocks or cynically and hypocritically use their positions to feed their greed or thirst for power. "Demonic Possession" (1998) reworks the Blues crossroads myth for white audiences and does so while condemning Republican politics as Demonic. "Wife Beater" (1998) uses domestic abuse as a way to call out Southern complicity in the perpetuation of the stereotypes that define them. "Nine Bullets" (1999) speaks to the American, and particularly Southern, infatuation with guns. The song tells a darkly humorous story about a mass shooting, and has become a topic of some division among fans who wrestle with its dark humor and seeming glorification of guns. DBT has only played "Bullets" live one time since 2011. "Bulldozers and Dirt" (1999) also tells a dark tale. This song is told from the perspective of a man who is attracted to the 14-year-old daughter of his lover. This song plays on notions of incest, a subject Hood also explores again in 2003's "Deeper In." Anyone familiar with Southern stereotypes recognizes the connection between incest and rednecks since jokes about marrying one's cousin, sister, or brother are common refrains used to marginalize and criticize inhabitants of the region.

At times, the band also targets government and/or industry for its ire. "Uncle Frank" (1999) tells the story of a man driven to suicide by the systems and structures surrounding him. Frank is a casualty of imminent domain practices that allowed the federal government to take land from southerners in order to allow the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) to develop dams to power the region. The song also highlights the ways that working class folks were forced sell their property while the upper classes reaped the rewards. Later, in Jason Isbell's song called "TVA" (2009), DBT would offer a counter-perspective by focusing on TVA's regional contributions and how the government program helped jobs and tourists to the South. "Zolofit" (1999) condemns the prescription drug industry by telling the story of a family prescribed pills to help them forget their problems rather than confront them. Like many DBT songs, "Zolofit" presciently speaks to an emerging opioid problem that would plague the South (and other parts of America) in the years to come. Songs like these set the thematic foundations that DBT would later develop.

The band's third album, *Southern Rock Opera (SRO)* began to garner DBT some critical attention. *SRO* told its stories through the guise of a mythical arena band they called Betamax Guillotine. The story *SRO* tells is set during the Southern Rock heyday of the 1970's. DBT uses this setting to interrogate Southern personalities like Lynyrd Skynyrd and

Alabama Governor George Wallace. In “Ronnie and Neil” (2001), DBT lambasts the region’s failure to understand Skynyrd’s work and the band’s inability to recognize the depths of its influence. Hood sings, “Meanwhile in North Alabama, Lynyrd Skynyrd came to town / To record with Jimmy Johnson at Muscle Shoals Sound / And they met some real good people, not no racist pieces of shit / And they wrote a song about it and that song became a hit”. Hood’s barb is thrown directly at Skynyrd’s fans, and particularly their Southern fans. He observes that songs like “Free Bird” (1973) were recorded with and by people who did not agree with the Rebel Flag waving fans and that the band’s work was distorted by a recording industry that preyed on stereotypes for commercial gains.

The five songs that close *SRO* focus exclusively on Skynyrd. Fellow RU alumnus Kelly Hogan contributes to several of them by playing the part of Cassie Gaines, who died in the infamous plane crash that killed a majority of the band. Hood opens this series of songs by setting the stage for a “sad story” of a “legend” that overshadowed the music and the band. Hood links this album to DBT’s prior works by calling back to “The Living Bubba” near the close of “Greenville to Baton Rouge” (2001). There, he honors and bemoans their loss with variation of the same lyric he used to honor Smalley: “Can’t die now got a show to do.” “Angels and Fuselage” (2001) closes the album and concludes the story. This song is set inside the plane as the engines fail. It is an eerie and gothic tale. Hood’s constant repetition of the phrase “I’m scared shitless” reinforces the uncertainties of life and just how fleeting it can be. The story told across this set of songs is about a band that became so wrapped up in the rock ‘n’ roll lifestyle that they lost sight of their message. It is the story of a band of southerners that lacked an awareness of their historical significance and who struggled to see their future impact, but the record was about more than just Skynyrd.

In a spoken word song called “Three Great Alabama Icons” (2001), Hood again takes aim at a certain segment of southerners. He chastises the “good people of Alabama” for their willingness to support a politician (Alabama governor George Wallace) who strategically embraced segregationist policies and a politics of hate in order to win the favor of racist voters. The song also tells the other side of that story as it chronicles Wallace’s burgeoning “awareness” that emerged as he surveyed the damage his administration had done. This would lead to what Hood calls Wallace’s “late-life quest for redemption”. Hood follows “Icons” with the aptly titled “Wallace” (2001) in which he summarizes his point about the former Alabama governor by singing, “Now, he said he was the best friend a black man from Alabama ever had / And I have to admit, compared to Fob James, George Wallace don't seem that bad / And if it's true that he wasn't a racist and he just did all them things for the votes / I guess Hell's just the place for ‘kiss ass politicians’ who pander to assholes”. Hood and DBT are prone to view politicians and religious men through the same cynical lens. They implore southerners to learn to recognize when the men they follow are leading them astray.

Their popularity grew when Jason Isbell joined the band during the *SRO* tour (he did not perform on the album). The music DBT produced with Isbell remains some of their most critically acclaimed work. Hood, Cooley, and Isbell are each gifted songwriters and guitarists.

Isbell, who was also from the Muscle Shoals area, easily tapped into and deepened DBT's themes. He too told Southern stories in song. A majority of the songs written for *Decoration Day* (2003), *The Dirty South* (2004), and *A Blessing and a Curse* (2006) tell decidedly Southern tales. Taken together, the albums arguably represent DBT's deepest and most intertextually laden dives into the South and its people.

"Sink Hole" (2003), one of Hood's songs from *Decoration Day*, extends a story that Ray McKinnon wrote and told in short film called *The Accountant* (2001). DBT would even play at least one concert that included a screening of that film, which tells the tale of two Georgia brothers on the verge of losing their family's generational farm. The family turns to an accountant, played by McKinnon, for help. McKinnon's unnamed character stands as a reaffirmation of Southern stereotypes and a distinct challenge to them. In a key scene that takes place during a journey to a barren dirt field, McKinnon observes how socio-economic powers work to compromise people's abilities to not just fend for themselves but to recognize themselves. McKinnon intricately and precisely details how corporations, financial institutions, and media informally collude to strip working-class people of their individuality, or as he says their "country-ness".

In his song, which is filled with allusions to the film, Hood extends the tale by setting it in his family's Alabama homestead. Unlike the film, Hood allows the farmer to turn the tables on the "banker man". His song allows the rural southerner to violently push back against a Capitalist system that he feels has marginalized and treated him unfairly. The song validates what many working-class southerners feel about the systems that surround them. The titular "Sink Hole" becomes that banker man's final resting place and the farmer stands as a praiseworthy anti-hero. Taken together these songs offer complex readings of Southern culture by working to explain how the rural/urban divide manifests itself within the lives of everyday people. McKinnon would help DBT continue this theme by producing and appearing in the band's music video for "This Fucking Job" (2010), a song that also details the daily struggles faced by working-class Americans.

The three albums with Isbell continue DBT's exploration of Southern existence. "The Deeper In" (2003) toys with incest again as Hood notes that the song was inspired by a magazine article that chronicled the story of the only two people currently serving time for brother/sister incest. The song takes a clear regional perspective because of the drawl that delivers the lyrics, but the two people at the center of the story are not southerners at all; they are from Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Isbell's "Outfit" (2003) captures the advice that a working-class father passes on to his son. This song includes an intertextual nod to The Beatles while also speaking to the South's religious sensibilities when the father warns his son not to "tell them you're bigger than Jesus," echoing a line from a John Lennon interview that led many southerners away from The Beatles.

"Heathens" (2003), the song which provided DBT's fans their moniker, is a Southern take on a Romeo and Juliet type of relationship, and the struggles that come when a coupling violates the tenets of one's faith. Similarly, "(Something's Got To) Give Pretty Soon," "When the Pin Hits the Shell," and "Do It Yourself" (2003) each speak to the

challenges working-class people face as they try to make their way in a world that is not designed for their advancement. The former chronicles a dissolution of a relationship and the latter two, like “Lookout Mountain,” are suicide songs that allow both of DBT’s frontmen (Mike Cooley and Hood) ways to process a friend’s “not-so-accidental” death. DBT’s music dwells in darkness, yet offers hope that can emerge if eyes are simply opened.

The Dirty South (2004) is DBT’s most popular album and among their deepest dives into regional history. DBT is aware of their region’s past and they use that awareness to mark a path into the possibility of a brighter and better future. “Puttin’ People on the Moon” (2004) offers another scathing takedown of the bureaucratic systems that surround working-class people. Hood highlights how corporations and public entities like NASA invest in rural infrastructure but eventually abandon the people who helped build them, and too often leave those same people sick, broke, and uninsured. This song reiterates Hood’s views of politicians and preachers as he sings, “Another Joker in the White House, said a change was comin’ round / But I’m still workin’ at The Wal Mart and Mary Alice, in the ground / And all them politicians, they all lyin’ sacks of shit / They say better days upon us but I’m sucking left hind tit / And 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 some hungry mouths to feed.”

Cooley’s “Carl Perkins’ Cadillac” (2004) harkens back to the RU’s disdain for Nashville by telling a story of the greed that drives that city’s music industry. Again, this is a song that highlights the damage that record labels can do to bands and artists. “The Sands of Iwo Jima” (2004) drives a stake into the heart of the John Wayne myth by highlighting that the actor was only a hero on the silver screen. The story Hood tells is of his relationship with his Great-Uncle George A. The song recounts the memory of a night watching old movies and hearing George A., who served in World War II, note that he “never saw John Wayne over there.” Like so many DBT songs, “Iwo Jima” lifts up the working-class person by poking holes in the myths that surround the cultural elite. “The Boys from Alabama,” “Cottonseed,” and “The Buford Stick” are a trilogy of songs about the Redneck Mafia. Together these songs highlight the corruption that too often infiltrates the South’s justice system. These songs each offer outlaw perspectives rather than glorifying the lawmen in the way that movies like *Walking Tall* (1973) had done. These songs shift the perspective away from the oppressor toward the oppressed. Since these songs’ characters are Southern, they illustrate how oppression manifests within subcultures and in doing so they complicate Southern identity.

A Blessing and a Curse (2006) was the final DBT studio album on which Isbell would play. The album also begins to move the band away from the South in some ways foreshadows where they plan to go. Cooley’s “Space City” (2006) and Hood’s “Little Bonnie” (2006) are arguably the most Southern songs on the album. The former is a break-up song that uses NASA’s presence in Huntsville, Alabama to illustrate how something nearby can actually be far away. Cooley sings, “Space City’s one hour up the road from me / One hour away from as close to the moon as anybody down here is ever gonna be.” The song not only speaks to the break-up of the lead characters, but it also speaks to the inability for folks to move beyond their current lots in life. Hood’s “Little Bonnie” (2006) is a tale of a child that

died young and the way her presence continues to be felt by generations of the family, many of whom never knew the little girl. The album closes with “World of Hurt” (2006), which moves between the joy and pain that life provides. Each of these songs negotiates a need for change but the struggle to move beyond the pasts that anchor people in places.

Isbell departed in 2007 and the band shifted into a transitional stage, but many of the themes persisted. During this period, DBT released three studio albums – a 19-song opus called *Brighter Than Creation’s Dark* (2008) along with two more albums – *The Big To-Do* (2010) and *Go-Go Boots* (2011). For those albums, Hood wrote songs like “The Righteous Path” (2008) and “Assholes” (2011, which continue the focus on working class struggles. “You and Your Crystal Meth” (2008) continues his theme of drug addiction and the pains they cause. “Used To Be a Cop” (2011) expands the band’s dive into policing, which Hood would deepen even further in “What It Means” (2016). And, songs like “The Wig He Made Her Wear” (2010) and “Two Daughters and a Beautiful Wife” retell true tales of murder. “Wig” also pairs with “Go-Go Boots” (2011) and “Fireplace Poker” (2011) to create a trilogy of gothic storytelling songs that reiterate the hypocrisy and of religious men.

Shonna Tucker, who married and divorced Isbell, played on three more albums before Matt Patton replaced her. DBT recruited Patton from a fan favorite band called The Dexateens, who often open shows for DBT. When this occurs, Patton performs with both bands. As Tucker departed so too did John Neff, who was in a relationship with Tucker at the time. Multi-instrumentalist Jay Gonzalez replaced Neff. The additions of Gonzalez and Patton mark the beginning of an unprecedented period of stability for the band.

The four albums DBT recorded with Gonzalez and Patton are overtly political and during this period the band began speaking about their progressive politics more openly and inviting their fans to embrace their activism. *English Oceans* (2014) contains two songs about GOP strategists. Hood’s “The Part of Him” (2014) is a takedown of Tea Party politics that tells the story of an imminently replaceable GOP operative who has a seemingly limitless desire for power. This song, which is largely about lies and the men who tell them, presciently references Donald Trump’s book *The Art of the Deal* (1987) and foreshadows the reality television star’s rise to power. On the same record, Cooley takes aim at late-GOP strategist Lee Atwater in “Made Up English Oceans” (2014). Atwater, who was also a southerner, capitalized on the region’s dominant views of race and religion. Atwater worked with white Evangelical leaders to inflame those views in order to sway the region’s voters to support the GOP. In doing so, DBT connects contemporary GOP politics to its Democratic party roots. Atwater is often credited as an architect of the Southern Strategy, which used religion and race as wedges to drive people apart. Hood says that “The Part of Him” was inspired by the same sort of “political assholery” that Cooley attributed to Atwater in “English Oceans” (Brownlee, 2014). It is clear that DBT’s version of the South is not the one envisioned by the GOP.

American Band (2016) expanded upon the themes of *English Oceans* and served as a prescient and full-throated takedown of Trumpian politics. DBT released this album in the run-up to the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, but it did not sway enough Southern voters to

avoid the damage Trump would bring. *The Unraveling* (2020) and *The New OK* (2020) followed. These records were recorded in the same Memphis sessions and were released in the moments leading up to Trump's 2020 re-election bid. This time Trump was defeated. On these albums, Hood and Cooley were not shy about their disdain for the President, the National Rifle Association, Sarah Palin, the Confederate Flag, and modern-day Republicans more generally. "Perilous Night" (2020) rips Trump's relationship with Russia and charts his seeming embrace of fascist tendencies. "Babies in Cages" (2020) takes down Trump's immigration policies and the separation of immigrant children from their parents at the country's Mexican border. "Thoughts and Prayers" (2020) mocks the GOP and their followers for their predictable offerings of condolences rather than legislation after each mass school shooting. "Guns of Umpqua" (2016) also speaks to gun control as it recounts contrasts the terror of a college shooting with the beauty of the day it occurred. "Heroin Again" (2020) continues Hood's theme of addiction by pointing the finger of blame away from the industry and toward addicts who are apparently unable to learn lessons from their fallen icons. Hood asks, "Didn't '71 teach us anything / Didn't '94 teach us anything." The dates reference the years that Jim Morrison and Kurt Cobain died. "Ever South" (2016) stands out as the record's most regional song. It outlines the history white immigration to the South and nods toward Hood's southern departure. In 2015, Hood relocated his family from Athens to Portland, Oregon. "Ever South" speaks directly to Southern identity as Hood observes that no matter where one lives southerners remain southerners by virtue of the "drawl that leaves our mouth." The song tells listeners that Southern identity is not an identity that one simply chooses; it is inherited and bestowed.

Many fans mistakenly believe that these later albums and songs represent a political turn – and in some ways they are correct. Yet, the turn they sense is not one toward politics. As illustrated, DBT's music has always been political. Instead, DBT's themes began to move beyond the South. *American Band*'s title symbolically tells listeners that the music they hear is not just Southern; it is American. DBT suggests what many scholars have argued: The South is not an exception to American identity but an instance of it. The themes that DBT explores suggest that these southerners possess an awareness of their history and an ability to keenly see the present and near-future. Their songs create a textual field for fans to scour and mine. These fields also tap into the discourses with which the band and their fans participate. The ways that DBT confronts Trump and the GOP caused some fragmentation within the fanbase. The divisions mirror the chasms that began to appear across American culture. While the band's fanbase may have fragmented, it is also fair to say that the fan community became more cohesive.

Southern Misfits & Bitter Southerners

HeAthens and Cousins are similar, but also different from one another. HeAthens are predominantly white, middle-aged men and quite a few are southerners. There is a notable gay presence within the community and there is at least one transgendered HeAthen. There is also a contingent of vocal female fans. HeAthens range from working class to upper class

and represent an array of religious backgrounds, although disaffected Christian may be the most common religious type. In contrast, the female presence among the Cousins is more notable and these fans are more likely to represent a range of racial diversity. They are also more likely to practice their religions, but like HeAthens they are also politically progressive so certain religions or religious beliefs are apt to be questioned. Cousins are also more likely to be southerners. The ways the communities congregate is also notable.

HeAthens come together in several ways and in several places. They exist geographically and virtually. DBT plays an annual series of Homecoming shows in Athens that offer opportunities for fans to plan and take regularly scheduled pilgrimages, but any Rock Show represents an opportunity for fans to gather. It is in these spaces where the collective effervescence Mark Duffett describes is easiest to witness. Regardless of how often HeAthens come together, many maintain virtual relationships that keep them connected when they are apart. It is also not uncommon to find band members inhabiting those virtual spaces. These interactions alter the relationships that fans have with their idols by rendering them more direct (see Marwick and boyd). The HeAthens have created multiple virtual communities and they even penned a book.

The 2019 book was compiled by fan Robert Fiveash, but the content was drafted by a range of fans who answered common sets of questions. The book, called *The Company We Keep* in reference to a similarly titled DBT song, features Reece prominently. He is represented as a fan of the band, their friend, and as a celebrity in his own right. When asked about his relationship to DBT Reece opines, “The Truckers, to me, have always been the band for a certain set of southern misfits, people who, like me, are not afraid to face the struggle that goes on between the great pride we have in our regional identity and the great sorrow that comes from discovering that our home has too often stood for some of the vilest values, practices, and institutions ever known by humanity” (Fiveash, p. 13-14). Reece’s words echo his tenets and mission while highlighting the band’s regional themes.

By calling HeAthens “southern misfits” Reece separates the fans from their country and their region, which is also a space the Cousins tend to occupy. It is common to see Reece in the crowd at DBT shows, particularly Homecoming where he is prone to stop, introduce himself, and say thanks to HeAthens wearing their *BS* gear at the show. Reece is also sometimes present in DBT’s online fan community. The “misfits” Reece describes were not all southerners, but they all participate in discourses about the region and its inhabitants. This participation began as fans established two message boards as places to congregate (Nine Bullets and Three Dimes Down). Those boards were occupied by relatively small groups of fans, but those fans formed the foundations for the community that exists today. Facebook expanded it. Facebook’s main DBT group (the Big Group) now hosts well over 10,000 HeAthens, and Reece is counted among them. There are also several smaller Facebook communities.

The Cousins are a bit different. Their fan community is almost exclusively virtual. Their now-defunct Facebook group was home to about 2,500 Cousins, although the magazine purports to attract 90,000 unique visitors to its website each month (Emerson,

2020). Cousins visually identify in different ways, but the magazine's slogans are primary markers of *BS* fandom. Slogans like "Abide No Hatred," "All Y'all," and "Better South" appear on T-shirts, tote bags, dish towels, and stickers. These items allow Cousins to recognize each other in a range of spaces and places. DBT shows represent one such place, which begs one to question why and how these two groups of fans serialized. To get to the heart of this question, one must unravel the dialogic webs enveloping the Reece and Hood because those webs provide the trails that fans follow to their idols.

While DBT predates *BS* by almost two decades, Reece acknowledges DBT's influence immediately. He references Hood in the mission he penned to launch the magazine. He writes, "*The Bitter Southerner* is here for Southern people who do cool things, smart things, things that change the whole world, or just a few minds at a time...We're talking here about people whose work embodies what my old buddy Patterson Hood once called, in a song, 'the duality of the Southern thing.'" (Reece, 2013). One could easily interpret this mission through a consumerist lens to cynically suggest that economic imperatives drove Reece to connect the magazine with the band. However valid that reading may be, it is equally important to consider ideological and cultural influences. Reece's reference to a DBT lyric is a signal that he intends to have the magazine pick up their discursive mantle. He and his team guide their fans and audiences on a textual expedition to explore the same dualities as the HeAthens. Reece and Hood bring their fans to many common places, but they do so in different ways.

From the outset, the *BS* team called attention to and confronted stereotypes by promoting the work of particular types of Southern or South-inspired writers, photographers, artists, musicians, chefs, and other storytellers. The *BS* team conceived of a production process similar to that found in academic journals and op-ed sections of newspapers. They invite submissions to review and select for publication. The content represents a blend of *BS* staff creations and work from outside contributors. Hood has been a semi-regular guest writer, and he was a Cousin who occasionally participated with other *BS* fans in the now-defunct group. It would be easy to assume that a Southern band and regional online magazine would attract just regional fans, but drawing such a conclusion would be a mistake. The *BS* team compiled a digital map that pinpoints the geographic location of each Cousin. It includes pins in almost every American state in addition to Australia and Europe. *BS* uses this presence to advocate for a different understanding of the South. The work they promote addresses both the joy and the pain associated with Southern identity.

Both DBT and *BS* are clear about who is welcome within their respective fan communities (and who is not). And, their fans are not shy about policing the borders, protecting the communities from interlopers, or shielding their totems from criticism. Reece details who is welcome by writing, "If you are a person who buys the states' rights argument...or you fly the rebel flag in your front yard...or you still think women look really nice in hoop skirts, we politely suggest you find other amusements on the web. *The Bitter Southerner* is not for you" (Reece, 2018a). Reece echoes DBT's perspective. In a 2015

editorial for the *New York Times* Hood discusses the Rebel flag, “It’s high time that a symbol so divisive be removed. The flags coming down symbolize the extent to which those who cry ‘heritage, not hate’ have already lost their argument...Why would a people steeped in the teachings of Jesus Christ and the Bible want to rally around a flag that so many associate with hatred and violence?” (Hood, 2015). The band’s relationship to religious and political symbols is clear but complicated.

The rebel flag was a symbol embraced by early members of the RU. Kelly says that this embrace happened during a period that he calls “pre-awareness.” White southerners often were so steeped in the discourses of heritage, which were reinforced by state and local policies (see Reece’s father) that they failed to recognize alternative interpretations for these symbols. The dominant ideologies were so woven into the fabric of Southern identity and its feelings of victimization that many white southerners failed to see their divisive nature clearly. As members of these scenes began to recognize the polysemic possibilities, they began to abandon them. As awareness emerged, the culture began to shift – albeit slowly. Kelly notes that by the early 1990’s the flag had all but disappeared from the RU and in its place increasingly diverse fanbase began to grow. He notes that some members of the RU refused to abandon the flag and that those who continue to hold tight are “comfortable with their racism” and “best left to themselves.” These shifts foreshadow future community fragmentations.

It is worth noting that DBT never welcomed the flag as one their defining symbols (they learned lessons from Skynyrd), but that does not mean that it had no presence within their fanbase. Hood speaks to this in his *New York Times* editorial when he writes, “[W]e noticed that fans were bringing rebel flags and waving them during a song called ‘The Southern Thing.’ The song was written to express the contradictions of Southern identity...Instead, people were treating it as a rallying cry. I’m still grappling with how easily it was misinterpreted — and we rarely play it today for that reason” (Hood, 2015). As more southerners see others’ perspectives and advocate for them like Hood and Reece, the fans develop new types of awareness. When fandoms serialize then those types of awareness are shared and amplified.

Fan serialization often follows intertextual totemic connections. In an essay he wrote for the *BS* launch, Hood recounts his decision to collaborate with Reece by saying that he “got what Chuck was trying to do” (Hood, 2013). He would then work connect Chuck’s mission to his band’s. His essay *Into the Perilous Night* (2017) serves as a history of the *American Band* album and its reception. The piece chronicles the cultural moment surrounding the album. Hood offers a scathing indictment of American race relations as he tells the story of “What It Means” and how this song solidified the band’s determination to speak their truths. “What It Means” is a race anthem that tells the stories of several African-Americans shot by police or citizens acting as if they were police. The story is personal for Hood. His song references the shooting of Edward Wright, a mentally challenged African American man who had experienced a psychological episode in Athens near a house where Hood once lived. Wright’s mother called police for help. Although Wright was naked and

unarmed, officers shot and killed him. Hood weaves this shameful anecdote into a tapestry of similar stories. More importantly, he delivers the song from a white Southern perspective that is not stereotypical. Hood expresses anger, sorrow, frustration, and exasperation. As its title implies, it is not a song about solutions. The solutions evade the narrator – just as they evade southerners who see the world through a similar set of eyes. He writes, “The song doesn’t offer any answers; I have none. It just poses a bunch of questions. I figured that was the first step — at least, acknowledge the questions” (Hood, 2013). And Hood sings, “What’s the point of post-racial when the old prejudice remains?” The song responds to the Conservative vitriol that emerged during Obama’s presidency and it condemns the America emerging alongside Trump. The song pleads for white southerners to develop an “awareness” by engaging in contemplative reflection and learning the local and regional histories associated with these types of racial violence.

Reece worked to expand that awareness by organizing and moderating a panel to debate it. The panel featured Hood, musician Chastity Brown, R.E.M. manager Bertis Downs, academic dean Ken Paulson, and journalist Ron Wynn. The diverse panel engaged in difficult conversations about race in Trump’s America. Attendees heard about the roles white Southern men should play in healing cultural divides and/or protesting racialized policies and practices. In his thick Southern drawl Reece hammered home the panel’s point by saying, “What I want to encourage all y’all to do is not be so damn afraid...Talk to your brothers and sisters, ask them questions you otherwise might be scared to ask — because that’s how we learn, y’all!” (Davis, 2019). Reece implored the crowd to engage in hard conversations – even if they prove messy.

While Hood and Reece stand as totemic personalities for their fans to follow, the fans perform much of the ideological work. Leaders create the spaces in which changes occur, but their followers execute those changes. By delivering messages through popular culture, Hood and Reece capitalize on the power of pleasure. Fans perform discursive work as they enjoy and discuss the texts scattered across the various textual fields. Play and work collide. While it is difficult to determine exactly how many fans are members of the two communities, it is safe to conclude that the overlap has been significant.

Both HeAthens and Cousins possess activist strains. HeAthens come together to support an Athens non-profit called Nuçi’s Space that connect musicians to mental health and other social services. Hood has been open about his struggles with depression. The multitude of suicide songs speaks to this topic. The fans also established a fund to help HeAthens who are down on their luck or who face economic struggles. Cousins give back through their purchases from the *BS* general store. Proceeds from the sales of many items are shared with non-profit organizations. *BS* even sold a DBT shirt that benefitted Nuçi’s Space. These fans are not simply reliable consumers; they are communities that collectively imagine ways to improve the world around them.

The connections also emerge within the topics the fans discuss. A quick sample of posts from both Facebook communities demonstrates this. HeAthens and Cousins both talk about music, and more often than not music made by southerners. Both communities

consider history, debate politics, reiterate their love for their fan objects, discuss the trials and tribulations of everyday life, and share occasional memes for a giggles or relevant articles for edification. Like families, members are not shy about picking on one another. Cousins and HeAthens both discuss food, which reinforces the findings of Christopher Cooper and Gibbs Knotts (2017) who contend that regional foods and flavors are one of the South's most distinctive identity markers (p. 17-19). Both communities negotiate what it means to be Southern. The *BS Family's* food discussions are central to the group. Cousins can get heated about whether it is okay to put sugar in cornbread (the answer is no) or which brand of mayonnaise reigns supreme (the answer is Duke's). In contrast, HeAthens separate their food discussions by isolating them within a splinter fan group called Sandwiches for the Road, which is one of several topical groups named after DBT songs.

Each topical group generally includes a smaller slice of the larger fan base and the themes of each group suggests the topic of discussion. In their main group and another splinter group called the HeAthens for Sanity – A Three Dimes Down Annex (Annex), HeAthens talk music, discuss Wes Freed's art (he designs many DBT posters and album covers), chronicle pilgrimages to live shows, perform covers, analyze concert setlists, or chat about performers they consider extended members of the DBT tribe (e.g., Jason Isbell, Dexateens, Slobberbone, Jerry Joseph etc.). The Annex emerged as an extension of the Three Dimes Down message board community that it references. These HeAthens tend to know each other and only about 300 fans regularly mingle in this virtual space. Like Cousins, their discussions often orient around the South but the HeAthens less likely to be southerners than their *BS* counterparts.

The HeAthens also splintered along gendered lines during the #MeToo Movement. During this time, DBT's female fans adopted SheAthens as their moniker. They then asked Freed to design them image (Fig. 1.0). and they launched their own online group where only fans who identify as female gather and bond. The discussions in this group are decidedly gendered, and in a male-dominated fandom this space allows the women in the group to express concerns about their community and its perspectives. When one SheAthen was asked about the way that Freed's art represents women (his subjects are generally at least partially nude) she responded by noting that Freed's work tends to position female figures in dominating positions (Fig. 1.1) thus conveying a sense of empowerment. It is also notable that for many years the band included a female bassist (Shonna Tucker).

The level of conversation within these fan communities also may surprise those who hold stereotypical views of southerners. Several HeAthens and Cousins hold post-graduate degrees and fans who are educators formed a splinter fan group to discuss issues related to their occupations. At least one member of the HeAthens community, V. Lee Edwards who was cited earlier, penned a dissertation about the band. Others, like the author of the current piece, have written academic articles and delivered scholarly presentations about the band. Similarly, there are several Cousins who hold post-graduate degrees and it is not unusual to see them discuss academic works. Some Cousins have hosted a book club which reads and discusses books like Chef John T. Edge's *The Potlikker Papers*, which connects Soul

food to Civil Rights history. Another Cousin used the online community to crowdsource ideas to help her develop a high school Southern Studies curriculum. She asked fellow Cousins to recommend readings that would help “decolonize the traditional [Southern] narrative.” Cousins may also discuss DBT and HeAthens sometimes share *BS* articles. A keyword search in the *BS* Facebook group reveals hundreds of posts that contain the band’s name and a similar search of DBT’s Big Group produces similar results for *BS*. Both exercises reveal an observable connection between the fandoms and demonstrate that the textual fields connect.



Figures 1.0 & 1.1: SheAthens & Other DBT/Wes Freed Women

Neither group avoids politics, which almost always reveals a progressive lean. Both groups condemned Donald Trump and the cultural divisions his rhetoric fostered. Progressive politics are not simply characteristics of these groups; this brand of politics is part of each community’s reason for being. The fans’ political identity becomes quite clear when they discuss questions of race and policy. These conversations are usually sparked by a text produced by one of the fan objects. DBT songs like “What It Means,” “Grievance Merchants,” “Babies in Cages,” and “Perilous Night” participate directly and candidly with the racial and political discourses. Similarly, *BS* delves into these topics with stories like “Dear Disgruntled White Plantation Visitors,” “Fannie Lou Hamer’s Perspective: A Primer,” “Frank X. Walker’s ‘New Word Order,’” and “Frank Yerby and Lillian Smith: Challenging the Myths of Whiteness.” Just as the Nashville panel encouraged, these fans engage with difficult topics and messy conversations that occasionally go awry.

Splinters, Fractures & Breaks

In May 2020 the shooting of an unarmed African-American citizen named Ahmaud Arbery momentarily seized the Southern/American imagination. While Arbery’s death occurred in February, the story exploded in national news and across social media when an associate of

the assailants leaked a video of the shooting. In this case, a former Georgia police detective and his son (Gregory and Travis McMichael) killed Arbery and justified their actions by claiming they suspected his involvement in area burglaries. As Arbery jogged through the neighborhood, the two men followed and blocked him in with their truck. They exited the truck with rifles in hand and confronted the jogger on a public street. A fight ensued and another Black man ended up dead at the hands of a citizens acting as officers.

The event was eerily similar to Trayvon Martin's death, which Hood references in "What It Means." Hood sings, "And that guy who killed that kid down in Florida standing ground / Is free to beat up on his girlfriend and wave his brand new gun around / While some kid is dead and buried and laying in the ground / With a pocket full of Skittles." Hood's words speak to the futility of the legal exercises that often follow events like this. In the case of Martin, the shooter was exonerated in a legal proceeding because Florida's stand your ground law provided a defense for someone who uses deadly force when they feel threatened – even if that threat was precipitated by that person's actions. Race and gun laws collided in the Martin case and similar factors are likely to be in play once the McMichaels face trial. Events like this often lead to contentious discussions in social media, and this can even happen when members of the community are on the same side.

In the days that followed the release of the Arbery video, a White, female Cousin posted the video and commented on the shooting. Her post was made in the weeks after a similar post had created similar problems. After the first post, the community agreed to engage in difficult conversations but pledged not to glamourize the issues by sharing visual evidence. The post violated that pledge and the community took notice. The original poster's (OP) intent was well-meaning, but decidedly contextualized by her experiences as a white southerner. The OP labelled the event horrific and encouraged other Cousins to discuss it constructively. An African-American Cousin commented and requested the video be removed. This Cousin likened the video to a lynching postcard by arguing that it normalized and glorified White attacks on African-Americans. Cultural critic Marcus Wood (2013) offers some context to these postcards. For Wood and other African Americans, texts like these postcards and the Arbery video are prone to become forms of entertainment for some white viewers (p. 211). Wood's take explains how the African-American Cousin's context differed from her Caucasian Cousin's. For the Black viewer, the video becomes almost theatrical and watching it play on loop represents a painful and unnecessary reminder of what historically has become a much too common occurrence. Instead of simply complying with the request to remove the video, the OP pushed back by suggesting that it represented a constructive mode of discursive engagement. The conversation turned toxic and divisions within the diverse, but seemingly like-minded, community surfaced. The African-American Cousin exited the group and the community began to splinter.

The next day Cousins awoke to a message from Reece announcing the dissolution of the Facebook group. He explained, "The bottom line, for us, it is virtually impossible to manage this page without a full-time moderator. We do not have the bandwidth on our tiny team to watch over what is posted here. Last night someone posted the video of Ahmaud

Arbery's murder. That is something we would never — under any circumstances — post on any of our platforms, and we are truly sorry for the hurt this caused" (Reece, 2020). While most Cousins expressed remorse and sadness at the loss of their community, many also understood the decision. This understanding did not stop the community from re-organizing without the magazine's oversight. The day the *BS* group ceased to exist was also the day that the "Abide No Hatred" (ANH) community formed. This group, which takes its name from a popular *BS* T-shirt, is much smaller than the original *BS* Family but its goals are similar. To date, the ANH membership rests at about 450 Cousins. Reece would eventually join the community but Hood has not.

Interestingly, the splintering the Cousins experienced was well-trodden ground for HeAthens. HeAthens saw a similar division after the release of *American Band*. Disputes about the band's politics and support for the Black Lives Matter movement caused some fans to leave the Big Group while moderators jettisoned others. It was clear what types of fans were welcome. This splintering foreshadowed changes to come. Cooley, observes that DBT's musical themes remained consistent over the years, but he acknowledges that the way the band spoke about their music and politics changed (Koppelman, 2020). DBT wanted their positions and beliefs to be clear — even if that meant forcing fans out of the community. In the wake of *American Band*, the Big Group held together, but it was coming apart.

Sometimes breaking apart becomes a way to stay together. In February 2020, following the release of *The Unraveling* and a few months prior to the *BS* blow-up, some HeAthens broke away from the Big Group. A collection of about 250 fans formed the Annex. That group's founder, Dean Gavney, described his motivation by writing, "Mostly I think, and this is part of the reason I formed this group, that this record [*The Unraveling*] is about far, far more than politics and how can you discuss that when the thought-stream always comes back to the most polarizing opinions?" Having experienced the fall-out from *American Band*, the Annex represented a pre-emptive strike that allowed a certain segment of HeAthens to engage in more constructive discussions about a range of topics surrounding the band and political moment. Hood and several members of the band joined the Annex, but the group does not currently include Reece.

Political discussions do occur in this group, but they happen differently because those who were invited to join could generally engage with one another constructively and were more likely to know and spend time with each other offline. The goal was not to exclude alternate views inasmuch as it was to raise the level of discourse by minimizing the flow of information and by avoiding internet trolls. The members of the Annex understand why the space exists, and typically they are careful to keep their discussions constructive. The Annex promotes a tighter sense of community and closeness, at least when compared to the Big Group. Unlike the *BS* Family, the new community did not form because the main space ceased to exist. In fact, most members of the Annex remain part of the Big Group. The new community emulated the message board communities that first brought many of these fans together and helped them develop a sense of community. The splintering also

demonstrates challenges that larger communities face as a glut of voices can, and often will, work to silence each other. Those same voices come together more easily in smaller communities, but even these communities encounter challenges.

Concluding Notions

This analysis illustrates that celebrities, textual fields, and fan communities are prone come together and sometimes they drive people apart. It shows how celebrities and their histories influence fans and shape fan communities. It demonstrates how celebrities help produce and connect (inter)textual fields. It suggests that fan communities are prone to serialize and to fragment. It contends that all exhibitions of fandom are exercises in identity formation. It contends that fan identities connect with other pre-existing aspects of one's identity and values. In short, this analysis shows that celebrities, texts, and fans operate in overlapping and interwoven ways.

Fan cultures are not insulated from the cultures that surround them. They are not abhorrent or pathological deviations. Their splintering suggests that they are emblematic of their times. The political divides are cultural divides, and they are not uniquely Southern. Among the HeAthens, conservative southerners pitted themselves against progressive southerners. The divides were clearly the product of some fans' inability to understand and comprehend who they followed or what the texts they consumed meant. When those fans became "aware," then their political identities conflicted with their fan identities producing not just an internal cognitive dissonance but a communal backlash. HeAthens who openly embraced Trump were no longer welcome. The fandom splintered as DBT positioned themselves as something more than a Southern band. It splintered as they worked to reveal that Southern issues are American issues. Conversely, the Cousins divided from within a more confined ideological perspective. They battled over which version of the Southern Progressive was most appropriate and acceptable. They waged their war internally. They peeled back the veneer of Southern identity to reveal numerous layers of both good and bad wood underpinning the narrow stereotypes that others see. These fans were engaging in the kinds of "messy" conversations that Reece spoke about at the panel to discuss Hood's "What It Means."

Fans perform important cultural work and they do so discursively. They serve as cultural connectors and amplifiers. When the totemic personalities that they follow connect the communities serialize. Fans reveal how collectives bind – even as they splinter. Sometimes the splinters merely create more complex webs of interaction. The lessons of pop culture fandom are not merely lessons of distraction. Fans escape into their objects and communities. As they tie themselves to each other, they bring their ideas with them and they discuss those ideas. One might apply these lessons to other audiences, like the various groups that come together under the umbrellas of political parties, because they seem to apply. Sometimes cultures shift because leaders divide people in order to retain power (see the contemporary GOP), but other times cultures fragment because those who are part of them evolve (see the RU).

The divisions these communities experienced were not purely Southern things, and it is worth noting that much of this splintering happened in election years in which Trump was a Presidential candidate. The heated rhetoric that divided these communities was emblematic of Trump's America. In the weeks that followed the Arbery shooting, a series of events unfolded that fundamentally challenged the American conscience. On May 25, 2020, just days after *BS* shut down its fan community, a team of Minneapolis police officers killed an African-American named George Floyd who was accused of passing a counterfeit \$20 bill. Minneapolis officers handcuffed Floyd and placed him face down on a Minnesota street. A crowd formed, watched, and recorded as Officer Derek Chauvin placed his knee on the back of Floyd's neck and held it there for around eight minutes while Floyd pleaded for air and bystanders for mercy. The videos bystanders shot, like the one that turned toxic for the Cousins, circulated widely. Protests erupted around the world and American policing was scrutinized for months to follow. These protests became a central topic of the 2020 American presidential election and Trump's GOP became tied more and more tightly to white supremacist communities. The GOP did not seem to dissuade those communities from joining their effort. Instead, the party gave those groups access to their megaphones. They then used these megaphones to promote Trump and their own beliefs. These beliefs stand in direct contradiction to the world that Hood and Reece seek to create. Sides were chosen. A New South may not have emerged in these moments, but the Old South reared its ugly head with Cousins and HeAthens there to greet it.

These protests were different from many of the past Civil Rights and more recent Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests. More White Americans joined the cause – even in the South. One member of the Abide No Hatred group shared an article to help White protestors become stronger allies with their brothers and sisters of color. Another member posted a map of the protests so Cousins could join marches. In the meantime, DBT remained at home because of massive COVID-19 pandemic shutdowns. But, Hood and other members of DBT would stream live solo shows on the internet for fans. Hood used one such event to focus on his protest songs. With the help of artist Wes Freed, DBT sold a BLM T-shirt and they donated the proceeds to that organization. Neither HeAthens nor Cousins remained quiet during these troubled times. These southerners and non-southerners came together to celebrate the fall of Confederate statues. They revelled in a civic imagination that helped them to envision a better South and better America awaiting on the other side of this moment.

Folks like Reece and Hood are dynamic, totemic personalities. They stand as examples of what the South could become and challenge stereotypical and monolithic views of the region's inhabitants. Reece, Hood, and a lot of their fans may look and/or sound like regional stereotypes, but they do not reinforce them. The ideological work they perform is important and is rarely swift or easy. Totemic personalities do not perform their work alone. Fan communities matter. When communities serialize voices amplify, and sometimes those voices challenge cultural norms and dominant beliefs. Historian James Cobb (2005) argues that "Southern identity is not a story of continuity *versus* change, but continuity *within* it"

(p. 7). Hood, Reece, and their fans do not deny those characteristics that define Southern identity historically. They embrace the characteristics worth holding onto and they confront the more deplorable aspects. The “Better South” these celebrities and their fans endeavor to construct is not an entirely New South, but it is not the Old South either...such is the duality of the Southern thing.

Afterword

During this writing, Chuck Reece his partners at *The Bitter Southerner* parted ways. For many fans, particularly the serial fan communities discussed above, Reece’s identity was inextricably linked to the publication that he co-founded. That publication’s identity also was attached to Reece. One *BS* contributor who is also member of the ANH community summed up Reece’s importance:

I know Chuck wasn’t a one man show, but there was never any doubt that his vision and creative energy gave the magazine its direction. I’ve published four pieces with *BS* and I never interacted with anyone but him on the creative side. I mean, is this like the Heartbreakers going on tour without Tom Petty?
(Anonymous Cousin)

Reece’s departure changes *BS* and alters the fans’ experiences. The publication already has evolved considerably since Reece left. Following Reece’s exit, the magazine seated a more diverse editorial board and has continued to diversify its content. Much to the chagrin of some HeAthens, *BS* also seemed to separate itself from DBT. In 2020, a year in which DBT released two studio albums, the *BS*’s annual list of the best Southern albums mentioned neither.

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