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VETERAN ROCKERS RETURN TO LIFE ★★



From Wages To Resurrection

by JOHN HENDEL

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The future of the Drive-By Truckers came down to a late Sunday night and a bottle of whiskey in the fall of 2006. The members of the band found themselves in Louisville, Ky., for a couple days with nothing to do but watch movies in their motel rooms and hit up a nice restaurant every now and then. After six albums and a decade of constant touring, they were exhausted.

But founding members Patterson Hood and Mike Cooley, pals of more than 20 years, got restless and started wandering. During one of Louisville's wettest years ever recorded, the October air was still cool with rain.

"We found ourselves thinking about the same thing at the same time," Hood says in the soft, welcoming accent of his native Alabama.

They ended up at the band's tour bus in an empty parking lot where they broke open the liquor cabinet and did some soul-searching about the future of the Drive-By Truckers. The band, which formed in 1996 in Athens, Ga., suffered from quarreling and Hood's months of writer's block. Tension happens when you try to run a band as a democracy — "a messy strength" — with three songwriters offering soul to the triple-guitar attack that earned the band its fame. Idleness from the road's routine and whiskey doubts finally led them to raise the question.

"Is this it?" Hood said. "Is it time to pack it up?"

Recalled to Life

They both thought they knew what the future held — the repetitive beat of the music industry where bands record an album, tour, record and tour till they're dead or broke.

The thought scared Hood.

That's when they realized they needed to unplug, rest and rediscover their own voices. They had established well-earned fame over the past decade, pioneering an ironic yet profound meditation on classic and Southern rock. They grinned through their beards at sold-out crowds every night. But the magic was fading. Hood and Cooley could not imagine the transformation and resurrection the following year would bring to their little rock 'n' roll band.

2007 changed everything. In April, the Truckers parted ways with Jason Isbell, who had been with the

band five years. Isbell served as one of the band's three heavyweight singer-songwriters on its last three albums, yet his divorce from fellow band-member Shonna Tucker added to the tension of the road. He also had worked on solo material predating his membership in the Truckers and that, combined with his younger age, manifested itself in impatience and pushed him in a different direction. Hood says the split was amicable and the band members all still love him.

Others came to fill his place. Isbell's ex-wife, Tucker, began writing and continued playing bass. John Neff took over Isbell's guitar work, and Brad Morgan and Cooley never stopped unleashing hell on the drums and guitar. As for Hood, a little time off to relax his brain and an added office in his house helped galvanize the creativity that a decade of pressures and touring nearly crushed.

"I had this big stack of song lyrics typed out," Hood says about the spring of 2007. "That's when I knew we had another record to make."

Now, Hood continues writing and has launched a world tour to support what he considers the Truckers' strongest album to date, *Brighter Than Creation's Dark*. It's a collection of 19 songs that, in Hood's words, "stuck together well." The new band members entered the studio for 10 days in June of 2007 and left with 17 songs before finishing up the record in August in one of the smoothest processes they've experienced. Unlike 2006's *A Blessing and a Curse*, they broke all the rules about album length and didn't care if they sounded like Southern rock.

The new album is more personal than most and reflects the catharsis from the rough times of the past couple years. *Brighter Than Creation's Dark*, released on Jan. 22, describes alcoholic fathers, personal devastation and how Hood came to encounter the Iraq War in the past year. The album has the perspective of a confessional, and it exudes a raw spirit not heard in the Truckers' sound since the band's first two albums.

On "The Righteous Path," Hood paints an image of "trying to hold steady on the righteous path/80 miles an hour with a worn-out map/no time for self-pity or self-righteous crap," driving in a "brand new car that drinks a bunch of gas." Hood penned this song, the album's "missing piece," near the end of the recording process.



The band has finally embraced what Hood calls the most important line of *Southern Rock Opera*: "Living in fear's just another way of dying before your time."

Whiskey and War

Two songs on the new album, "That Man I Shot" and "The Home Front," evoke the war in Iraq and involve two different encounters the Truckers had after concerts. A meeting with three Green Berets inspired "That Man I Shot." One of the veterans, who hadn't been dealing well with his return home, planned to return to Iraq soon, much to the chagrin of his fellow Berets. They all joined the Truckers over yet another bottle of whiskey.

"It was an intense night," Hood recalls.

"We had a heated conversation about a lot of things about the war."

The family of a different soldier who hadn't returned from the war inspired "That Home Front." The deceased veteran's favorite band was the Drive-By Truckers.

"They played our music at his wedding, and they played it at his funeral," Hood says and pauses. "It's a delicate thing."

The unabashedly liberal Hood hesitates about getting too political with his songwriting. He thinks a politically charged tirade at a rock show would be unfortunate and, besides, "I don't know if anyone'll have their mind changed by what someone with a guitar says."

Yet politics inform his writing. He calls Barack Obama a force of nature and shares the ideology of John Edwards. His speech quickens with emotion when he talks about politicians overlooking the working poor — a natural sentiment for someone who's spent half his life writing about the ramshackle, restless existence of the South.

For Hood, it's impossible not to touch on subjects such as the war. Change shakes our country as well as the band's lineup, and Hood reconciles all these changes through song. The Truckers tell stories, and these are the stories that matter now in America.

Transcending the Machine

Hood started off as a shy, nervous kid and his journey has been about rising above that. He dreams about eventually writing "my *Huckleberry Finn* adventure" — memoirs of two decades on the road. Storytelling comes naturally to the man who as a young rocker considered film school and originally envisioned the band's 2001 magnum opus *Southern Rock Opera* as a screenplay.

The break from touring helped Hood remember what matters to him most — the joy of falling in love with new sounds and songs like a 14-year-old kid who gazes at bands with unchained awe. This renewed embrace of creativity led him to think

about artistic freedom and how to take music directly to the people. "Look what Radiohead did," Hood says about the British band's online release of its latest album, *In Rainbows*, which let fans choose what price they would pay. "To me they're just a great example of a band that's remained artistically viable."

Hood wrote his first new songs in five months during the last week of January. He doesn't know if any are keepers, though he likes a song tentatively entitled "Go-Go Boots," which tells a story about a preacher who had his wife killed. Hood can already envision recording a new Drive-By Truckers album. The past year has revealed a band revitalized and ready to go as new miles appear within the band — the secret all along has been about making the system work for them.

"We're trying to control and drive the machine," Hood declares, "rather than the machine driving us." ▶

"We're trying to control and drive the machine rather than the machine driving us."

— lead singer Patterson Hood