

Keep on Truckin'

Drive-By Truckers' Patterson Hood talks about the band's political stripe, losing his artistic heroes and setting down new roots in Portland

BY JASON COHEN
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The songs for "American Band," by Southern-rockers Drive-By Truckers, were mostly written in 2014 and 2015, and recorded in the first half of 2016.

By the time it was released that fall – but especially by Nov. 9 – lead singers Patterson Hood and Mike Cooley's story-songs and meditations about race, gun violence and the border made "American Band" feel like a Trump's America record – much like Wilco's "Yankee Hotel Foxtrot" felt like a 9/11 record after-the-fact. The Athens, Ga.-based, Alabama-bred group already had a "Black Lives Matter" sign onstage in early 2016. After the election, "DBTs" came to stand (if somewhat imprecisely) for "Dance Band of The Resistance."

Hood, who moved to Portland from Athens, Ga., in 2015, is now a stalwart of the local music scene, whether he's playing solo at Doug Fir or in an audience himself. One of his epiphanies about "American Band" came when Patti Smith played at the Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall two years ago. Hood knew that songs like "What It Means" (his reaction to police shootings and Black Lives Matter) and "Guns of Umpqua" (about the 2015 school shooting) were asking the right questions, but he didn't feel like there were any answers. Smith gave him one with a simple onstage proclamation – "Love each other, motherfuckers!"

On the band's latest release, a seven-inch single benefiting the Southern Poverty Law Center, Hood's song "The Perilous Night" dispenses with metaphor entirely, a blunt instrument for brutal times, albeit with a riffy, gospel-tinged accompaniment. Hood said he wrote it in response to the events in Virginia and what he called the "White house's shameful response."

"Dumb, white and angry with their cup half filled/ Running over people down in Charlottesville."

Hood spoke to Street Roots in his Southeast neighborhood shortly after he played the two-night Help the Hoople benefit for local musician Scott McCaughey, who recently suffered a stroke. Next up, the Drive-By Truckers play the Roseland Theater Feb. 1.

Jason Cohen: So let's go back a couple of years – you're making this record about a time in America that was troubled and disheartening, but it also felt like there was progress. And then all of a sudden...

Patterson Hood: All of a sudden, there wasn't. Yeah. I really was hoping that our record would be dated and passé by now. And I've never said that about a record before. I've always really wanted our records to hold up over time, and this one, hopefully, the songs are good enough to where it would anyway, but the topic of it, unfortunately, has become much more timely than when we made it. We finished the record before Trump had won a single primary, y'know? So to be sitting here two years after we made it, and three years after the



Drive-By Truckers, left to right, Matt Patton, Brad Morgan, Patterson Hood, Mike Cooley and Jay Gonzalez. The band will be playing at the Roseland Theater, Feb. 1

PHOTO BY DANNY CLINCH

majority of it was written, and have it be more timely is weird. And kind of unnerving and depressing.

J.C.: You and Cooley did an interview where he suggested that, as bad as it is, it also shows the progress was real. That it's a backlash.

P.H.: It's all related, that's for sure. It's part of the zig-zag of progress. It's just a matter of how much damage they can do in the meantime. I'm ready for the nightmare to be over, and it ain't gonna be over anytime soon. For my New Year's resolution, I'm trying to be more positive, and just push from a better frame of mind. We'll see.

J.C.: You've said your wife, Rebecca, encouraged you to be more political in your songwriting.

P.H.: Oh yeah. She would like the next record to be as political as the last record. I don't know if I feel up to it. But I don't know what the next record's

gonna do.

J.C.: It sounds like you struggled initially with "The Perilous Night" being maybe too on the nose, and then after Charlottesville, among other things, it was like, well, this is the time to be on the nose.

P.H.: And I'm happy with how that turned out. I'd also be really happy to let that be it, too. But I don't get to choose what the next song is. At least, not if it's going to be worth a shit. Generally, they choose me, and I just try to be receptive to it. So I'm trying to keep an open mind to whatever happens up there, and whatever it is, wherever the radio signal comes from. I'm just trying to get my antennae back up. That's the struggle right now, because there's too many things hanging on to that antenna. There's dogs to walk, and kids to pick up at school, and then I'm gone on the road. I can write on the road, but I have a hard time writing songs, which is a lot of why I started writing so many essay type things.

down. But yeah. That was like family. My first band was called Breakdown, when I was in ninth grade. I was 14. So, as much as you can mourn someone you've never met... I learned a lot about how to do what I do from watching how they did what they do, that's for sure.

J.C.: Because of your father (Muscle Shoals' bassist David Hood), did you have a sense that music could be a craft and a discipline, as well as a party and art?

P.H.: Yeah, probably. Without realizing it. I don't think I was necessarily conscious of that. 'Cause my dad's on that far other extreme of it. He's a session guy. That's disciplined as shit. He had a whole other discipline in his 20s that I only have now in my 50s. I definitely inherited that work ethic from him and from some non-musical people in my family.

J.C.: And you're not the Stones, with tons of money and the ability to only play 20 shows a year. It's grueling physical work. A blue-collar profession.

P.H.: Yeah. I still play 100 shows a year. And even as the band is starting to play a little less, I'm making that up and going out and playing solo shows. Because I have to. It's expensive as shit to live out here! It was all I could do to make ends meet in Athens – what was I thinking? But I love playing. I dread – besides not knowing how we'll survive – when I can't play that many shows a year. I'm gonna miss it. I get tired on the road, and some of the travelling gets to me, and being gone from my family so much gets to me, but I love the rush of playing as much as I ever did in my 20s and 30s. And maybe in some ways more, because back then, there was all these other aspects to it: a lot of partying, all that kind of stuff. Now we've really stripped it all back to where it's really all about the rock. I'm maybe enjoying the actual playing more than ever because I'm really there for it.

J.C.: Has moving to Portland affected your writing, and your relationship to your subject matter?

P.H.: "American Band" is my favorite record we've made since "Decoration Day," at least. It's definitely one of my favorite things we ever did. And I wrote the majority of that in the first four months of living here. I had a good bit written, but that really opened the floodgates, being in this new place. So I think it's been great for me artistically, and I think it's been great for the band, on every level. From the second I broached this to them, Cooley was like, "I think that's a great idea! I think you're crazy, but I think it's a great idea!"

J.C.: The idea of a band as a gang that is together all the time usually falls by the wayside if you stay together long enough.

P.H.: Those days were long ago, yeah. But we're closer friends as a gang than we were then. I think when we started having kids, (Cooley) and I got closer. And our band's had a lot of struggles. We've gone through a lot of shit, and whenever the shit

comes down, he and I and (drummer Brad Morgan), we've always been really good about banding together to get through it. And the payoff is now, when there's no upheavals. There's no drama, there's no bullshit, we've got the magic line-up, we're happy with our label. All the parts work the way they're supposed to. We get together and we either get to talk shit about nothing of any importance or buckle down and really talk shit about what is important: about the music.

J.C.: You've written a lot about race and Southern culture. Now that you've been here a while have you picked up on Portland's own troubled history?

P.H.: Sure. I'm still learning. But I'm seeing it, and I'm hearing it. I wasn't naive enough to think there weren't problems. Some of the racial stuff definitely took me a little bit by surprise, but it probably shouldn't have. Because our country as a whole – the whole world as a whole – has problems with people who look think, fuck or pray different. And skin color is a big one. Our evolution as humans is gonna be slowed down and thwarted by that, forever, until we overcome it. I guess in the grand arc of history, it is getting better, but slowly. I won't live to see it. My kids could. But they probably won't. The most we can hope for is for it to keep getting a little better, enough to compensate for every time it zig-zags the other direction, like it is right now.

J.C.: You were here after the inauguration?

P.H.: Yeah. We went out in the freezing rain. Did the march. The kids all made signs. I can't say it was a good day, but at least I felt like we were doing what we should be doing. I'm glad that my kids are extremely aware about things – much more so than I would probably choose for them to be. But I was that way as a kid too! I used to come home and watch the god-damn Watergate hearings. Third grade, cursing Richard Nixon! So I guess I come by it honestly, and Rebecca is probably more political than I am.

J.C.: I came back to Portland from Texas in 2014, and after 2016, I felt that urge to go back to somewhere where my vote might make more of a difference.

P.H.: I've gone through some of that, for sure. They keep saying Georgia's gonna swing. I don't know. The thing that happened in Alabama – I'm awful excited it happened, but at the same time, there's still a lot of old white men that thought it

"The thing that happened in Alabama – I'm awful excited it happened, but at the same time, there's still a lot of old white men that thought it was perfectly OK to vote for that pedophile piece of shit, y'know? So we got a long way to go down there. I feel like I did my time."