

Drive Like Jehu

"The Three Alabama Icons"

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i grew up in north alabama back in the 1970s when dinosaurs still roamed the earth. i'm speaking, of course, of the three great alabama icons: GW, BB, and RVZ. Now, RVZ wasn't from alabama, he was from florida, he was a huge neil young fan but in the tradition of merle haggard writing Okie From Muskogee to tell his dad's point of view on the hippies in vietnam, Ronnie felt that the other side of the story should be told. Neil Young always claimed that Sweet Home Alabama was one of his favorite songs and legend has it that he was an honorary pallbearer at Ronnie's funeral, such as the duality of the southern thing.

...and Bear Bryant wore a cool lookin' red checkered hat and won football games, and there's few things more loved in Alabama than football and the men who know how to win at it. So when the Bear would come to town, there would be a parade. Me, I was one of them pussy boys cuz i hated football, so i got a guitar but a guitar was a poor substitute for a football with the girls in my high school. So my band hit the road, and we didn't play no Skynyrd, neither. I came of age rebelling against the music in my high school parking lot. It wasn't until years later after leaving the south for a while that I came to appreciate and understand the

whole
Skynyrd thing and its misunderstood glory. I left the
south
and learned how different people's perceptions of the
Southern Thing was from what I had seen in my life,
which
leads us to George Wallace...

...now Wallace was, for all practical purposes, the
governor
of Alabama from 1962 until 1986. Once when a law
prevented him from succeeding himself, he ran his
wife
Lurleen in his place and she won by a landslide. He's
most
famous as the belligerent racist voice of the
segregationist
south, standing in the doorways of schools and waging
a war
against the federal government that he decried as
hypocritical. Now Wallace started out as a lawyer and a
judge with a very progressive and humanitarian track
record
for a man of his time, but he lost his first bid for
governor in
1958 by hedging on the race issue against a man who
spoke
out against intergration. Wallace ran again in '62 as a
staunch segregationist and won big and for the next
decade
he spoke out loudly. He accused Kennedy and King of
being
communist and he was constantly on national news
representing "the good people" of Alabama.

...and ya know race was only an issue on tv in the house
that
i grew up in. 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.

Bands like Lynyrd Skynyrd attempt to show another side of the south, one that certainly exists, but few saw beyond the rebel flag and this applies to their critics and detractors but also their fans and followers. So for a while, when Neil Young would come to town, he'd get death threats in Alabama. Ironically, in 1971, after a particularly racially charged campaign, Wallace began backpeddling and he opened up Alabama politics to minorities at a rate faster than most northern states or the federal government. Wallace spent the rest of his life trying to explain away his racist past and in 1982 he won his last term in office with over 90% of the black vote, such as the duality of the southern thing.

...and George Wallace died back in '98 and he's in hell now, not because he's a racist. His track record as a judge and his late life quest for redemption make a good argument for his being, at worst, no worse than most white men of his generation, North or South. Because of his blind ambition and his hunger for votes, he turned a blind eye to the suffering of black America and he became a pawn in the fight against Civil Rights cause.

...fortunately for him, the devil is also a southerner.

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