

Drive-By Truckers

"The Three Great Alabama Icons"

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I grew up in North Alabama, back in the 1970's, when dinosaurs still roamed the earthâ€¦
Speaking of course of the Three Great Alabama Iconsâ€¦ George Wallace, Bear Bryant and Ronnie Van Zantâ€¦ Now Ronnie Van Zant wasn't from Alabama, he was from Floridaâ€¦ He was a huge Neil Young fanâ€¦ But in the tradition of Merle Haggard writin' Okie from Muskogee to tell his dad's point of view about the hippies 'n Vietnam, Ronnie felt that the other side of the story should be told. And Neil Young always claimed that Sweet Home Alabama was one of his favorite songs. And legend has it that he was an honorary pall bearer at Ronnie's funeralâ€¦ such is the Duality of the Southern Thingâ€¦ And Bear Bryant wore a cool lookin' red checkered hat and won football gamesâ€¦ and there's few things more loved in Alabama than football and the men who know how to win at itâ€¦ So when the Bear would come to town, there'd be a parade. And me, I was one a' them pussy boysâ€¦ cause I hated football, so I got a guitarâ€¦ but a guitar was a poor substitute for a football with the girls in my high schoolâ€¦ So my band hit the roadâ€¦ and we didn't play no Skynyrd eitherâ€¦ I came of age rebellin' against the music in my high school parkin' lotâ€¦ It wasn't till years later after leavin' the South for a while that I came to appreciate and understand the whole Skynyrd thing and it's misunderstood gloryâ€¦ I left the South and learned how different people's perceptions of the Southern Thing was from what I'd seen in my lifeâ€¦ Which leads us to George Wallaceâ€¦ Now Wallace was for all practical purposes the Governor of Alabama from 1962 until 1986â€¦ Once, when a law prevented him from succeeding himself he ran his wife Lerline in his place and she won by a landslideâ€¦ He's most famous as the belligerent racist voice of the segregationist Southâ€¦ Standing in the doorways of schools and waging a political war against a Federal Government that he decried as hypocriticalâ€¦ And Wallace had 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 integrationâ€¦ Wallace ran again in '62 as a staunch segregationist and won big, and for the next decade spoke out loudlyâ€¦ He accused Kennedy and King of being communists. He was constantly on national news, representing the "good" people of Alabamaâ€¦ And you know race was only an issue on TV in the house that I grew up inâ€¦ Wallace was viewed as a man from another time and placeâ€¦ And when I first ventured out of the South, I was shocked at how strongly Wallace was associated with Alabama and it's peopleâ€¦ Ya know racism is a worldwide problem and it's been since the beginning of recorded historyâ€¦ and it ain't just white and blackâ€¦ But thanks to George Wallace, it's always a little more convenient to play it with a Southern accent. And bands like Lynyrd Skynyrd attempted to show another side of the Southâ€¦ One that certainly exists, but few saw beyond the rebel flagâ€¦ And this applies not only to their critics and detractors, but also from their fans and followers. So for a while, when Neil Young would come to town, he'd get death-threats down in Alabamaâ€¦ Ironically, in 1971, after a particularly racially charged campaign, Wallace began backpedaling, and he opened up Alabama politics to minorities at a rate faster than most Northern states or the Federal Government. And Wallace spent the rest of his life trying to explain away his racist past, and in 1982 won his last term in office with over 90% of the black voteâ€¦ Such is the Duality of the Southern Thingâ€¦ And George Wallace died back in '98 and he's in Hell now, not because he's a racistâ€¦ 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 Southâ€¦ But 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 the Civil Rights causeâ€¦ For Tunately for him, the Devil is also a Southernerâ€¦

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