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WE DIDN'T GET FAMOUS
THE STORY OF THE SOUTHERN MUSIC UNDERGROUND
1978-1990

A Thesis
Presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Department of Southern Studies
The University of Mississippi

by

CAMILLA ANN AIKIN

May 2012

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the emergence of the Southern indie music scene in the 1980s as both a rejection of the broader punk scene that had swept America and the UK in the 1970s and the blues and country inflected Southern Rock that preceded it in the 1970s. I first had the idea of doing a project on this musical era while I was living in New York City. I had loved the jangly sounds of 1980s Southern indie bands for a very long time, and I had just begun to develop a very deep interest and love of the South, which had been my home for eighteen years, but whose culture and meaning I had somewhat ignored and taken for granted growing up. The Southern underground bands of 1980s represented what I loved about the South and I wanted to figure out how to write about that, as a way to both re-introduce these great bands who were largely unknown today and to explore a faction of Southern culture not commonly thought about, providing a picture of the South that is not the one so comically and falsely portrayed in pop culture and society.

When I discovered a passion for documentary filmmaking, and how powerful it could be, it was clear to me that was the perfect tool for my project and this thesis began to take shape. Over the course of about a year, I talked to countless people who had in one way or another been involved in the Southern underground music scene during the 1980s, who had been in bands or started record labels or knew those who had. Everyone had opinions and advice about who I should include in my film, and who I should get in touch with. In my head, I had a long list of people I wanted to interview, made up mostly

of those musicians I admired the most and felt had not been given the coverage they deserved. Logistics also played a large part in who I eventually interviewed, especially where they were located geographically, and simply whether I could get in touch with them. Finally, I began to e-mail the people on my shortened list, responses rolled in, and trips were planned. Almost every single person I contacted wrote me back, and every responder was enthusiastic to participate.

My film and research draws on ten interviews (eight on film, two through e-mail) I conducted with band members from nine different bands, across five different states. In the fall of 2011, I interviewed subjects in Birmingham, Alabama, Athens, Georgia, and Oxford, Mississippi. In January and February of 2011, I travelled to Jackson, Mississippi, Winston-Salem and Durham, North Carolina, and Houston, Texas, concluding my interviews for the time being. I travelled to, conducted, and filmed each interview on my own, except for the two interviews in North Carolina, which my friend Tony Dagnall accompanied me on (and helped prevent any major crises when I ran into some technical difficulties). My friend Amy Ulmer and my mom Laurel Aikin lent their cars and travel companionship on the drives to North Carolina and Houston.

Each interview lasted around thirty to forty-five minutes. I had a set list of questions in mind, but inevitably, the interviews would organically stray from these questions and we would always end up touching on topics I had not even thought of. In several instances, the conversation kept going well after the camera had been turned off. My subjects are some of my biggest musical idols, so it was all somewhat surreal. Every interview was illuminating and provided me with more insight into Southern culture and the music scene. I went into the interview process with ideas of what I thought the scene

meant and represented and how the participants' Southern identity and sense of place shaped their music. Many of those conjectures were confirmed and expanded on, and at times, contradicted, which just gave me a different perspective and new ideas. This research highlights the ways Southern artists in the 1980s moved away from both punk and traditional Southern sounds and forged a movement that introduced a definitively new Southern sound, even as it drew from and was shaped by place and Southern traditions.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my professors Dr. Andy Harper, Dr. Zandria Robinson, and Dr. Ted Ownby for giving me their invaluable time, insight, and support throughout this entire process.

To my father Roger Aikin, my mother Laurel Aikin, and my uncle David Aikin for a lifetime of music, love, and belief in everything I do

To my friends Tyler Keith, Amy Ulmer, and Tony Dagnall for driving me across the country, helping to avert crises—both technical and otherwise, and for being there for me always.

And most of all, this thesis is dedicated to Tim Lee, Mitch Easter, Peter Holsapple, Vanessa Hay, Bob Hay, Mark Reynolds, Sherry Cothren, David Bean, Jeff Walton, and everyone else who made music, listened to music, went to concerts, started fanzines, opened venues, and otherwise helped to create the underground music scene in the South during the 1980s. Thank you for bringing art and joy into my life and giving me a deeper understanding of my Southern roots. May you finally be recognized for your immense contributions to Southern and music history and no longer languish in the footnotes.

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I. INTRODUCTION

In the wake of punk rock, whose influence was felt across the globe and forever changed music and popular culture, new bands and local music scenes were being formed in all pockets of the world at an unprecedented rate. One of the most fertile breeding grounds for new music, that has been rarely documented or given more than a footnote in the music history books, is the American South, where scenes were popping up in major cities, medium-sized industrial cities, and college towns, and a generation of influential bands were being formed.

The South's scenes were galvanized by punk's permission to be different, its hunger for something new, and its philosophy that anyone could be in a band, despite age or ability. With an affinity for power pop influences like Big Star and the classic pop of the 1960s, Southern bands carved out a distinctive, decidedly Southern niche for themselves in the post-punk era of the late 1970s through the 1980s. Their sound, style, and attitude both reflected Southern traditions and culture, and modern sensibilities, defiance, and a desire to move beyond the past. The underground Southern bands put the past and present, punk rock and Southern music traditions, into conversation with one another. They at once drew from both and furthered the impact of each, but forged completely new traditions all their own.

II. PUNK AND THE SOUTH'S MUSICAL PAST

The South's musical history can be dated back to early blues and country, both predating but entering popular culture's consciousness in the early 20th century. Both were linked to oppressed social groups-- blues originated from poor blacks from the Mississippi and Arkansas Deltas, country from working class and poverty stricken whites-- who used music as a vehicle for creative expression, social awareness, and as perhaps their only opportunity for breaking out of the vicious cycle of racism and classism. By mid-century, Southern musicians were making major contributions to rock and pop: from some of the greatest rock'n'roll pioneers in the 1950s like Buddy Holly, Little Richard, Elvis Presley, and Gene Vincent (who were from Texas, Georgia, Mississippi, and Virginia, respectively) to diverse and groundbreaking artists in the 1960s, like the seminal Texas psychedelic rock band the 13th Floor Elevators, the Memphis garage band The Box Tops (featuring a teenaged Alex Chilton, who would become a huge influence on the Southern indie bands of the 1980s), and countless soul legends including Sam Cooke from Mississippi, Otis Redding from Georgia, and Al Green from Arkansas.

Although punk seemed in some ways to be radically different from all that came before it, particularly anything that could be described as "traditional" or "classic," it was following in a long line of innovative, unprecedented musical movements, which were just as much about social and political statements as they were about the music. Still, when punk burst into the world, it sounded and looked so extremely different from

anything that had ever happened, and totally shook up music and popular culture. The seeds of punk were being planted as early as the late 1960s, with bands like the Velvet Underground, the Monks, and a little later with the Stooges, the New York Dolls, and Television, all considered to be “proto-punk,” but it was in the mid-1970s, that it became a defined movement. Punk emerged somewhat simultaneously in the UK and the US, with bands like Sex Pistols, the Buzzcocks, and the Clash rising to prominence in the former and New York-based Ramones, Patti Smith, and Richard Hell and the Voidoids in the latter.

Punk was based around the credo that “anyone can do it.” Now anyone, despite their age or level of musical skill, could form a band. According to Mitch Easter of 1980s North Carolina band Let’s Active, “It was the era where you almost couldn’t admit it if you knew how to play.” Punk showed that limitations could be a good thing. Houston’s the Judy’s were teenagers when they formed their band, and punk’s influence gave them license to embrace and display their musical deficiencies. Singer/guitar and keyboard player David Bean admitted to being a very limited guitar player, but Jeff Walton pointed to that and their minimal use of the guitar in their songs as being integral in shaping their style. “That would be our unique sound!” R.E.M.’s guitar player Peter Buck has famously stated that his style of playing, which created the band’s hugely influential sound, was a product of his knowing how to play only a few different chords.

One of the things so fascinating about punk is that it *had* to happen; it was born out of necessity. Punk rock was a reaction to the bloated, overly-technical, devoid of all humor and fun progressive rock that was filling arenas and monopolizing the radio during the early 1970s. Bands like Genesis, Emerson, Lake, & Palmer, and Yes sounded nothing

like what was popular in the 1950s and 1960s, which was energetic, sexual, and youthful; it was your parents' music. It did not speak to a generation of young people, who were disillusioned and bored, and had few places to turn to, musically speaking. So enter punk. It is obvious to see why it became the phenomenon it did, and why it was so desperately needed.

III. THE EMERGENCE OF A NEW SOUTHERN SOUND

Southern indie bands of the post-punk era were also making music that their local scenes were in great need of, and were reacting against what came directly before them. Despite the South's rich and innovative musical past, in the 1970s it was stuck in a rut. During that decade, "Southern Music" came to be defined by and associated with rock acts like Lynyrd Skynyrd, the Allman Brothers, the Charlie Daniels Band, and Black Oak Arkansas, all playing heavy-handed hybrids of classic rock, country, and blues. Mark Kemp, a music journalist from North Carolina wrote in *Dixie Lullaby* about growing up in the South in the 1970s and loving punk rock right alongside long-haired Southern rockers. While he eventually became a fan of bands like R.E.M. and the Ramones, early on it was in the Allman Brothers and Lynyrd Skynyrd that he found solace from the jocks and racists all around him, and taught him to be proud to be Southern. They embraced their Southern roots and were outspoken about their regional pride, which prompted legions of fans to take what was intended as something positive and make it into a show of aggressive, misguided confederate-flag waving, Old South nostalgia, anti-Northern sentiments, and a healthy dose of racism. While the bands' Southern pride was well intended, it was manifested into something that veered from simply loud and obnoxious, to more sinister and violent, and more than anything else, displayed and confirmed enduring Southern stereotypes to the rest of the country.

As a result, during the late 1970s, when these post-punk bands were forming, there was a negative connotation with the idea of a rock band that was from the South.

David Bean remembered, “Growing up, to me the South represented Marshall Tucker, Steve Miller Band, Black Oak Arkansas.” Most of the bands in the underground Southern scene felt very distanced from that earlier wave of Southern rock and strove to be disassociated with them. As Tim Lee, of Jackson’s the Windbreakers, explained, “There was a real notion among new wave and punk bands to move away from the Southern Rock of the ‘70s, so we were probably, sort of self-consciously, making it a point to not sound Southern. I mean, Big Star was one of our favorite Southern bands, but they sounded like British guys.” Likewise, Mark Reynolds, drummer for Birmingham’s Carnival Season, never felt a connection to those Southern rockers, and especially not to the crowds they attracted. He said, “We definitely weren’t the whiskey-drinking, rebel flag kind of crowd.” Mitch Easter lamented, “There was a time when I was kind of depressed about Southern rock because it was not my cup of tea.” Peter Holsapple, of the influential dB’s from North Carolina, echoed Easter’s sentiment, saying that those bands didn’t “float his boat,” and felt it was his duty to give the people of his hometown of Winston-Salem something other than the Allman Brothers to listen to. According to Easter, people were anxious, everywhere, for something new. “The late 70’s were pretty rough. If you didn’t know about punk, and you were just listening to the radio, you’d be dying for something to come along.”

Although bands like R.E.M., the Windbreakers, Carnival Season, the dB’s, the Judy’s, Let’s Active, and many more were indeed bands from the South that played a certain form of rock music, they were miles away from what the “Southern Rock” label had come to mean. They were showing kids and music fans from the South that they could make music that was closer to the Ramones than Lynyrd Skynrd and that they

could identify as Southern, live in the South, and make music that reflected their roots, and still not have anything to do with the cumbersome baggage of outdated, close-minded ideals. Punk and the Southern post-punk were both reactions to earlier generations, harbingers of change, and encouraged being who you wanted to be, and not being confined by what came before. Just as music lovers and bored young people around the world felt when they first heard punk, Tim Lee was getting very excited with the influx of bands and small, homegrown scenes popping up across the South in the 1980s. He began to see the bands as the new “Southern Sound.” It certainly didn’t sound anything like Lynyrd Skynyrd or the Allman Brothers, but there was no doubting it was very Southern in its own way, and something fresh, new, and exciting was starting to form.

Tracing the roots of the scene and understanding the reasons why it happened and what it meant go back to its embracing and shunning Southern traditions; being influenced by and connected to the past, but also a desire for new-ness and modernity. The bands in the scene all dealt with the constant push and pull inherent in being Southern, and all seemed to share a collection of thematic patterns revealed in their lyrical content, sound, style, attitude, and ideals. They dealt with the past, an importance of place, marginalization, isolation, and an outsider’s status and embraced a more carefree, fun, and innocent outlook, connecting them to the cultural heritage of the South, and in doing so, putting traditional Southern values and cultural identity into a youthful, creative, modern context.

IV. SOUTHERN SCENES: FINDING THE SOUTHERN UNDERGROUND

To understand the Southern underground scene that developed in the 1980s we must first understand what exactly a “scene” is. In *Music Scenes: Local, Translocal, and Virtual*, Richard A. Peterson & Andy Bennett define a “music scene,” a term that was originally used in the 1940s, solely in journalistic writing, but that became a more academically-acknowledged term by 1990, as such: “...the contexts in which clusters of producers, musicians, and fans collectively share their common musical tastes and collectively distinguish themselves from others.”¹ The key term in their definition is “distinguish,” which was important to the Southern underground music scene, and in understanding the cultural meanings imbued in it. The scene was one that was distinguished from just about everything that had come before and was going on presently around it. It was distinguished from the past, from punk, from the Southern rock before it, and, perhaps most importantly, from the contemporary underground music in other parts of the country.

Of the three types of music scenes that they describe-- local, translocal, and virtual-- this one was local, which rightly puts the focus on the geographic location of the scene.² Bennett and Peterson explain, “a local scene is a focused social activity that takes place in a delimited space and over a specific span of time in which clusters of producers, musicians, and fans realize their common musical taste, collectively distinguishing

¹ Richard A. Peterson and Andy Bennett, *Music Scenes: Local, Translocal, and Virtual* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004), 1.

² *Ibid.*, 6.

themselves from others by using music and cultural signs often appropriated from other places, but recombined and developed in ways that come to represent the local scene...the focused activity centers on style of music, but music scenes also involve other lifestyle elements, like distinctive styles of dancing, styles of dress, politics, etc.”³ These bands did just that; they distinguished themselves from all others that came before and existed alongside them, but appropriated styles and sounds from the past, taking bits and pieces from punk’s credos and attitudes, and the South’s cultural and musical traditions, and made them into something wholly new and all their own.

“Scene” was also originally used in terms of marginal groups and groups outside of the mainstream, both of which apply to the identity of the Southern underground scene. The term was first widely used by journalists in the 1940s to characterize the marginal and bohemian ways of life of those associated with the jazz subculture⁴, which at the time was seen as something dangerous and subversive, similar to the way punk was received outside of its own subculture. Marginalization was also something not unfamiliar to the South. The term can also be applied to “describe the music, dress, and deportment appropriate to a scene, but also has functioned as a cultural resource for fans of particular musical genres, enabling them to forge collective expressions of ‘underground’ and ‘alternative’ identity and to identify their cultural distinctiveness from the ‘mainstream.’”⁵...In many ways the organization of music scenes contrasts sharply with that of the multinational music industry, in which a relatively few people create music for mass markets...but the industry needs scenes to foster new forms of musical

³ Peterson and Bennett, *Music Scenes*, 8.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵ *Ibid.*

expression and to give its products the veneer of authenticity.”⁶ Because of the scene’s distance from any major cities or cultural areas, and most (although not all) of the bands’ disinterest in leaving the South, they were, with some exceptions, destined to exist outside of the mainstream, getting records made and supporting music communities all on their own.

⁶ Peterson and Bennett, *Music Scenes*, 3.

V. BUILDING A SCENE IN SPITE OF ITSELF

Once these bands started forming across the South, the formation of local scenes was slow-going, due to the distance between cities in the South, and a lack of local examples and great numbers of bands in any one town. Mitch Easter and Peter Holsapple both remembered booming local scenes in Winston-Salem during their childhoods in the 1960's that had since all but disappeared. But after Easter went off to college, and punk had made its way down South, when he returned to his hometown, things were finally happening.

When Tim Lee started out with the Windbreakers in Jackson, the majority of bands played covers and no venues for original music even existed. "But as I got older and ventured out to see original music in clubs in New Orleans, Birmingham and Atlanta, I figured out that things were different elsewhere. That's what made me go in the direction I went." In time, he cultivated a small scene in Jackson that revolved around his band, the Occasions, the Oral Sox and the Drapes, who were from Hattiesburg. Lee worked tirelessly to make Jackson's music happen; he brought in bands from the West Coast like Rain Parade and Green on Red, started his own record label, and encouraged his friends to make records. "It was really trying to build a scene in spite of itself," he said. Due to his enthusiasm, support of and friendship with bands all around the region, and dedication to building the scene, by the age of twenty-five, he had been unofficially crowned "the grandfather of the scene."

In Alabama, Huntsville and Birmingham established their own small but important scenes. Rick Storey, who sang and played guitar in Sex Clark Five, explained the Huntsville scene in an e-mail he wrote to me: “There were a few people in Huntsville that were part of a local scene. Several bands were doing original music and playing at a disco that had punk night. You'd see most of the Huntsville crowd if the Ramones were playing in Birmingham or The Clash in Atlanta. [There was] probably proportionately as much going on in Huntsville as either of those cities.” When Birmingham’s Carnival Season started out in the early 1980s, there was a lack of any real scene, and so they were forced to make their own. According to Mark Reynolds, they and the Primitons got a “pretty decent little scene going. It was a pretty exciting time, from around ’84 to ’89. But it just ran its course.”

Musicians in the Southern scene had to work a little harder at everything, but it made them more independent and able to do exactly what they wanted. Since everything was not at their finger tips, they had to really dig deep to find out about new bands, venues, and likeminded people. Music was not spread so effortlessly through the South, so music fans had to actively seek out this new sound and look, scouring record shops for the latest magazines and singles and albums. In *Dissonant Identities*, a study of Austin, Texas’ punk-era scene, Barry Shank wrote, “The rock’n’roll fan who did not live in New York or LA was forced to obtain all of his or her information at the closet small independent record store.”⁷ It was hard to find what they wanted, but once they did, it was all the more satisfying for the hunt. The scene became very DIY (Do It Yourself) out of necessity, because they quickly saw no one was going to do it for them. They started

⁷ Barry Shank, *Dissonant Identities: The Rock’n’Roll Scene in Austin, Texas* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1994), 96.

their own record labels, printed singles themselves, had local fanzines, and promoted everything by word of mouth. “We didn’t have a CBGB’s or even a 40 Watt in Birmingham,” Mark Reynolds said. As a result, he saw their little scene as less jaded. Tim Lee thought it also made them more uncompromising and defiant; “more ‘we’re going to do it our way.’”

While so many of the Southern bands of the era have been endlessly described as “hidden,” “secret,” and “underrated,” and the lack of commercial success by pretty much all of them save for R.E.M. and the B-52’s was more than a little frustrating, it also freed them from the confines of the cruelly finicky music industry, and the worries of “selling out.” Tim Lee said they were much more concerned with having fun and playing music than making money or getting signed by a major record label. Because of his DIY ethics and never being indebted to a major label, he felt as though he was able to make the albums and musical choices he wanted to make, without having to conform to anyone else’s wishes. Mitch Easter calls his legacy a “blip” and Peter Holsapple lamented the trouble the dB’s had getting signed in their own country (though they did have success in Sweden and the UK), but both of them are thought of as some of the greatest, most beloved and influential American indie musicians of the modern age, and one wonders whether that would have been tarnished (or in danger of being so) had they gotten more mainstream success, and more pressure from the music industry to conform.

VI. ATHENS: THE MODEL SOUTHERN SCENE

While many small scenes were thriving in all pockets of the South, Athens, Georgia was thought of as the largest, most fully realized one, something of an inspiration and model for what a local Southern scene could become. By the mid-1980s, Athens, once a sleepy college town, a small oasis in the middle of nowhere, had become America's coolest town and a major music destination. A crew of non-Southerners capitalized on its hip status and made the cult-favorite documentary *Athens, GA: Inside/Out*, released in 1987. The film, while an important record of Athens bands both hugely famous and now forgotten, also fell into the trap of portraying a romanticized South, with its religious iconography, moss and kudzu, crazy but poetic characters, barbeque joints, farms and cows, and dirt roads, all dripping with sweat and old-timey charm. But what was it about Athens that allowed for this scene, a minor phenomenon, to take place? Athens icons Vanessa Hay from Pylon, and her husband, Bob Hay of the Squalls, both point to Athens' cheap practice and living spaces as one of the reasons why Athens became such a fertile ground for musicians and artists. Additionally, the presence of a university and good art provided the "right climate for that artistic blossoming," according to Vanessa. But as Bob mentioned, what really made Athens happen was their two most famous local bands, the B-52's and R.E.M.

The B-52's were the earliest Southern punk-era band to form, and they made their way to New York by the late 1970s. They formed right alongside punk, and were for a moment, the "hottest band around," as Vanessa Hay remembers it. They opened the doors

for so many bands-- Athens bands Pylon and Oh-OK got shows booked and records made with their help, and the Judy's landed an opening spot on one leg of a regional tour, one of the band's only experiences outside of its sheltered Texas suburbs. Rodger Lyle Brown, author of *Party out of Bounds*, the mostly oral-history account of the Athens' 1980s heyday, also believed it was the B-52's who really made the town what it was. He wrote, "Athens was typical of many small American college towns, but the success of the B-52's bestowed a bewildering new sense of value to living there. Washing into town were the kids who saw in punk and new wave their own revolutionary trend...In Athens, punk was moderated by the rural air, its raucous sound softened by the plentiful trees and still streets. Then the B-52's came along, took punk on a picnic, and showed the local art kids how they could be rebellious yet still have fun."⁸

Mark Reynolds and Tim Lee both credit Athens and in particular R.E.M. as playing a large role in forming their own bands and scenes and giving the rest of the world a look at the South. R.E.M. was seen as the most successful example of the Southern indie music scene. They were the ones that "made it." They validated and helped the others, just as the B-52's had. Peter Holsapple and Mitch Easter both credit their bands' friendships with R.E.M. as a major boost to their own, though decidedly less commercially successful, careers. In the early 1980s, R.E.M. recorded at Easter's Drive-In Studios, and when he told them he had just formed a band, they offered him the role of opening band in Atlanta. It was Let's Active's first show. R.E.M. sounded totally different from "Southern rock" but they still had an identifiably Southern sound and feel,

⁸ Rodger Lyle Brown, *Party Out of Bounds: The B-52's, R.E.M., and the Kids Who Rocked Athens, Georgia* (Atlanta: Evermore Books, 1991), 77.

and they acted as a national representation of the new Southern scene, changing the South's reputation. Due to R.E.M.'s success, "the South had a buzz," as Mark Reynolds put it. He said, "Eyes started to look South."

VII. SHUNNING, EMBRACING, PERFORMING: SELLING SOUTHERN IDENTITY

For the bands of that era, being Southern was complicated. They felt a combination of pride and embarrassment, an initial reluctance to embrace their regional identity, but an eventual awareness of its importance and place in their music and identities. When the Judy's first played in New York, they were billed as "The Judy's from Texas," and although Jeff Walton and David Bean both said they were proud Texans, they were afraid the connotation with their home state would be a harmful one outside of the South. Tim Lee said that at first, the Windbreakers' "punkish/new wave attitude" caused them to push away their Southern identity, but "it didn't take us long to figure out, okay we're Southern. We live there, we talk that way." Mark Reynolds felt that because "this is where the music came from," all Southern musicians inherently felt a connection to and awareness of where they came from. "Whether we want to admit it or not, I think everybody has that or carries that inside of them." Some Southern artists even played up, performed their Southernness, when they were elsewhere in the country, which meant they were owning and connecting to their regional identity even deeper when they were away from home. They were also playfully mocking Southern stereotypes and the expectations of them by non-Southerners.

Entrenched in the grit and glamour of their newly adopted New York City home, the B-52's realized that being from the South made them special. The South was seen as a mysterious, misunderstood, untapped region; they might as well have come from a foreign country. So they used that to their advantage, performing their Southern-ness,

exaggerating their genteel drawls and playing into “their coy Southern out-of-the-dark-of-the-wasteland new-discovery-from-the-swamp oddball trailer-park Georgia charm.” In interviews, singer Kate Pierson never failed to tell about how she used to milk the goats back on her farm and listen to the old rooster in the yard.⁹ Similarly, Mitch Easter mused, “I had a good time going to New York and talking more Southern than maybe I really do.” Peter Holsapple recalled of the dB’s experience as North Carolina transplants living and playing in New York, “The folks that were up there saw us as Sherriff Andy Taylor and his pals...We kind of cultivated the ‘Southern Thing’ because it wasn’t as brusque as New York, or as [self-consciously hip] as Los Angeles...We were just Southern kids who grew up with good upbringings and politeness and we brought that with us...and the girls certainly liked that a lot! We had a way of being fairly charming. And people were amused by a culture that brought us Black Oak Arkansas but also brought us the dB’s, who were considerably different.”

When outside their home base, Southern bands felt an especially strong bond with each other. Holsapple and Vanessa Hay both recall reaching out to and spending time with fellow Southerners when they spent time in New York. Sex Clark Five didn’t necessarily feel a lot of kinship with other bands in their scene and around the South when they were home, but when they were touring outside of the region, they felt more compelled to connect with other Southerners. Rick Storey said, “If we happened to be touring in the North and on the bill with somebody from below the Mason Dixon line there might be some kind of little bonding thing like sweet tea.”

⁹ Brown, *Party Out of Bounds*, 96.

The importance of Southern identity in the region's music can be traced back to the dawning of country music. In *Don't Get Above Your Raisin'*, Bill C. Malone writes about how Southern identity was at the heart of country music. He writes, "Musicians and fans alike were Southerners who carried in their personalities and music the burden of their region's history, as well as its many contradictions."¹⁰ He also states that what made country music popular in other regions was its inherent "Southernness." "Even during its early hillbilly days it attracted fans in the North and around the world *because* of its presumed Southern traits- whether romantically or negatively expressed."¹¹

¹⁰ Bill C. Malone, *Don't Get Above Your Raisin': Country Music and the Southern Working Class* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), viii.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, ix.

VIII. CREATING THE NEW SOUTHERN SOUND AND IMAGE

There were several characteristics present among all the Southern bands that distinguished them from others around the country and tied them to their geographic roots, whether they were aware of it at the time or not. One of those identifying traits was the past's influence on their sound. Most of the major players in the scene, including Tim Lee, Peter Holsapple, Mitch Easter, and Mark Reynolds, point to the psychedelic rock and classic pop of the 1960s as well as the power pop of the next decade (which was itself influenced by the 60s sound), especially Big Star and including the Raspberries, the Flamin' Groovies, and the Dwight Twilley Band, as the most immediate and important influences on their music. Holsapple conjectured that there was a clear, logical progression from the Beatles to Big Star to the dB's, who were themselves, along with other North Carolina bands Let's Active and the Sneakers, very inspirational to Southern bands of their same era. Tim Lee said they showed him "people from the South can do this." Mitch Easter attributed that kind of attitude to a Southern "sense of inferiority. We need to see another Southerner doing something," and remembers having the same feeling when he saw Alex Chilton playing with the Box Tops on television; he was surprised and inspired when he found out they were from the South.

The Southern underground sound was fresh and youthful, but there was also something decidedly traditional, classic, almost old fashioned about it. The bands' music emphasized catchy, poppy hooks, beautiful melodies, and great songwriting. They represented a shift backwards to the days of the three minute pop song and the

importance of the guitar, in an era when synthesizers were becoming all the rage. Holsapple said, “Southern bands of the era did not eschew the guitar” like so many post-punk and new wave bands did at the time. He recalled a girl in England once saying to him, “Why do you even bother with guitars? You know there are just going to be synthesizers from here on out.” He saw the Southern guitar-centric, pop sound as “organic,” and recalled growing up listening to influential DJ’s playing classic pop like the Kink and Beatles on the radio all the time. “We based our sound on that. You could find that in a lot of the Southern bands. I’m not sure it that’s just left over back porch mentality of sitting around...it’s certainly a connection to the recent past, of the Beatles and Big Star.”

The Vulgar Boatmen, who formed in the early 1980s in Gainesville, Florida, led by professor Robert Ray and graduate student Dale Lawrence, had a very nostalgic, timeless feel to their music, which was often compared to past greats like Buddy Holly and the Everly Brothers. They placed a large emphasis on straight-forward storytelling in their songs, reminiscent of Southern oral traditions. Their take on classic 1960s radio pop, country, soul, and folk was indeed imbued with more modern, punk-inspired urgency and ethos, but it was past musical traditions that were dearest to their hearts. In Fred Uhter’s documentary about the Vulgar Boatmen, *Drive Somewhere*, both Lawrence and Ray bring up a music critic that once said of their music, “Buddy Holly would be proud.” Lawrence said that it was the highest compliment he could ever hope for, while Ray remarked that to him that it was better than being compared to Shakespeare.

The B-52’s, with their wild bee-hive hairdos and 1950s thrift store duds, and the Judy’s, who dressed in uniforms of retro turtlenecks and v-neck sweaters found in a

Houston thrift store, took style cues from the past. Other bands paid playful tribute to beloved sixties acts in their band or album names; Sex Clark Five was an homage to Dave Clark Five, while the Windbreakers named one of their albums *Meet the Windbreakers*, descending from *Meet the Beatles*. Pensacola, Florida's Beach Monkees, who were locally famous for their fusion of Eddie Cochran and The Clash, spliced together the Beach Boys and the Monkees to come up with their name, at once making clear their influences and love of the classic rock'n'roll and pop tradition, but doing so with an irreverent, rebellious punk wit. There was a great sense of nostalgia in country music as well, that Malone writes about, for both past times and places, and especially a longing for and reminiscing of home.¹²

Southern clichés of politeness and friendliness made their way into the underground scene as well, resulting in a more humorous, fun, less serious and assertive sound and attitude, an obvious change from aggressive British punk rockers and the dressed all in black, “too cool” New Yorkers. In Texas, Barry Shank writes, “Fun was the object...Punk in Austin was represented as simply about having a good time.”¹³ Along those same lines, many of the bands in Austin employed humor in their lyrics and live shows. They put on a front of being serious about punk and emulating the aggression of the Sex Pistols, but everyone knew it was just for show; everyone was in on the joke.¹⁴

When the B-52's went to New York, their zany, carefree, dance-centric style and sound was a stark contrast to the city's music scene. “Everybody was posing and sulking,” Kate Pierson recalled of their first New York audience. “But our friends who

¹² Malone, *Don't Get Above Your Raisin'*, 38.

¹³ Shank, *Dissonant Identities*, 103.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 116.

came up with us [from Athens] broke loose on the dance floor and people just started dancing and all of a sudden there was a dance craze!”¹⁵ The B-52’s were the antithesis of the hard raucous scene then dominant in the New York club scene. Brown wrote, “Where punk was political, the B-52’s were absurd. Where punk was serious, rude, macho, and violent, the B-52’s were polite, nonthreatening, feminine... When a too-cool New York crowd stood around in the clubs, posing, leaning against the walls, the B-52’s showed them it was all right to look silly; it was all right to dance.”¹⁶ Dancing was a way they could be physical and uninhibited, without being violent. If they did have aggression or anger inside of them, they could get it out by moving and dancing around, instead of doing anything dangerous. At punk shows in New York and in the UK, the only dancing done was the “Pogo,” in which one simply jumped straight up and down, or a kind of chaotic, violent, thrashing about. It was restrained and less fluid and joyful than the dancing the Southern punks enjoyed. Dancing was crucial to the Athens scenes and the success of bands there; if an Athens band played and nobody danced, they never played again. Mark Cline, guitarist of Athens band Love Tractor said, “It didn’t matter what you sounded like if they could dance to you.”¹⁷

The B-52’s songs were largely inspired by entertainment, drawing inspiration from b-movies, Sixties dance crazes, comics, animated cartoons, and pulp science-fiction, exemplified by tunes such as “Planet Claire” and “Rock Lobster.”¹⁸ Another Athens band, Oh-OK, led by R.E.M. singer Michael Stipe’s sister Linda, created songs with a childlike vision. They sang about hairdos, recess, siblings, and jealousy, “themes straight

¹⁵ Brown, *Party Out of Bounds*, 51.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 96.

¹⁷ *Athens, GA.: Inside/Out*, DVD, directed by Tony Gayton, 1987.

¹⁸ Simon Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again: Postpunk 1978-1984* (London: Penguin, 2005), 263.

out of the bedrooms and off the porches...their image was kids at play, and their sound was kids untrained.”¹⁹

The Judy’s were something of Texas’s answer to the B-52’s. They formed while the members were still in high school and had their first show playing at a high school dance. Their approach to music was naïve and whimsical, embracing both their technical limitations and love of nerdy pop culture. Like the B-52’s, their live performances were high-concept kitsch. They played pots and pans on stage, held TV’s, dressed in a variety of silly styles-- they wore milkman uniforms, Hawaiian print shirts and leis, Hare Krishna robes-- and had theme shows. Jeff Walton explained, “We would do a beach party show, or Mount Saint Helens’ eruption...that was kind of a *Spinal Tap* moment because the volcano was [very short]...that was our thing. Plus we were so small, just the three of us, so minimal, so you really needed to be entertaining to keep it going.” Their wholesome retro image was completed by David Bean playing his keyboard atop an ironing board.

Sex Clark Five were also infamous for their wacky live shows, wherein drummer Trick McKaha was known to wear a bag over his head while he played. Their songs were filled with wry, outlandish humor, and they counted the Marx Brothers as an influence.²⁰ Atlanta’s Guadalcanal Diary was known for their absurdist humor, with songs like “I Wish I Killed John Wayne,” “Cattle Prod,” and “I See Moe,” an homage to the Three Stooges. By employing humor and whimsy in their songs and live performances, these Southern bands took hold of the cliché of the dumb, goofy Southerner, intellectualized it, and reclaimed it. They made an insult into a positive attribute, which is just as rebellious,

¹⁹ Brown, *Party Out of Bounds*, 196.

²⁰ Chris Welch, “Sex Clark Five Reunites Saturday for Birmingham Concert,” *The Huntsville Times*, February 3rd, 2011.

and (subtly) shocking as anything British or New York punks did. Maybe it was just a coincidence, but just two years before the B-52's fired up the scene in Athens, Georgia boy Jimmy Carter had been elected president, bringing with him to the White House his "feelgood populism" and peaceful rule.²¹ The B-52's and other Southern bands were being embraced because of their sense of fun, danceability, and good natured spirits.

²¹ Brown, *Party Out of Bounds*, 56.

IX. WHAT THE MUSIC SAID: LYRICAL CONTENT

The Vulgar Boatmen's lyrics also revolved around Southern places and themes. Robert Ray, who was originally from Memphis, often referenced the city in his songs, from the radio station WDIA to Germantown Road. He sings about an array of other Southern cities including Mobile, New Orleans, and Knoxville. More abstractly, the narratives and visuals painted by the Vulgar Boatmen's songs are intuitively Southern in nature. Trouser Press writer Ira Robbins called the Vulgar Boatmen "as American as an Andrew Wyeth painting and as evocative as a Robert Frost poem."²² Robbins dubs them quintessentially American, but I argue they are more specifically Southern; it is their affinity for past musical styles, timeless and nostalgic sound, deep ties to and sense of place and most explicitly their lyrical focus on Southern themes and areas that make them feel so Southern. There is a connection in their lyrics to the land and the natural world; it's rural, leisurely, simplistic, and classic-- almost old fashioned, and fundamentally Southern.

Both the Vulgar Boatmen and the Silos, an influential alt-country band started by one of the Boatmen's founding members, Walter Salas-Humara, employ similar lyrical themes and actions in their songs; correspondence (calling on the phone, writing letters), cities and landscapes, travel and movement (driving in cars, flying on planes, taking trains, walking down the road, standing on street corners and in front lawns), weather and seasons, late nights and early mornings, and being far away-- from

²² *Drive Somewhere: The Saga of the Vulgar Boatmen*, DVD, directed by Fred Uhter, 2010.

home, from loved ones, from anything at all. These are inherently Southern themes because they apply to a more rural way of life; in a traditionally rural South, cities are farther apart, so one must write a letter or call on the phone to communicate, or travel miles and hours to get somewhere else. There is also a deep sense of isolation in the South, an integral concept in the formation and blossoming of the Southern underground scene that will be explored later. These lyrical themes are also a nod to classic country music. Bill C. Malone covers the importance of travel in Southern music. He explains, “Industrialization in the South during the early 20th century created more opportunities for travel. Railroads especially symbolized freedom and escape for working class Southerners. Anything that moved and could take you away from your daily reality was fascinating and appealing.” In the 1980s, Southern bands like Vulgar Boatmen and The Silos relied heavily on lyrics steeped in images and stories about trains, driving, flying, and leaving home. This idea is also associated with the “restless spirit” of country music’s “rambling man,” who moved from town to town, never settling in one place.²³

R.E.M. too played into their Southern roots, both lyrically and visually. On their first album, 1983’s *Murmur*, they capitalized on the mystique of the South and the region’s sense of place and environment. For the cover, singer Michael Stipe and guitarist Peter Buck wanted something “‘Flannery O’Connor-like’...something twisted, crazy-rooted, mystical.”²⁴ They decided on a photo of a kudzu field, which seemed to be a perfect representation of their sound and image, that was at once very classic and traditional; true to both their Southern and rock’n’roll roots, and somewhat unruly, complex, and unstoppable.

²³ Malone, *Don’t Get Above Your Raisin’*, 124.

²⁴ Brown, *Party Out of Bounds*, 204.

Although Stipe's lyrics during R.E.M.'s early days were famously abstract and nonsensical at times, they also integrated Southern sayings, places, and characters. In "Sitting Still," he sings "Up to par/Katie bars the kitchen signs," using the phrase "Katie par," meaning that one should prepare for coming trouble. "Can't Get There From Here" gets its title from the saying used when asking for directions south of the Mason-Dixon line. "Life and How to Live it" is about Athens writer Brivv Mekis and "Wendell Gee" was named for a used car salesman from Pendergrass, Georgia. "Swan Swan H" is about the Reconstruction period, and one of their most well known tunes, "Losing My Religion," refers to a saying used to describe a feeling of love or lust so great that it makes you "lose your religion."²⁵

Other Southern underground bands used their regional roots as lyrical inspiration as well. Atlanta's Swimming Pool Q's had a literary bent, like R.E.M., with Michael Stipe's penchant for Flannery O'Connor and Southern Gothic literature. The Swimming Pool Q's singer Jeff Calder had developed his love of Southern literature at the University of Florida while studying with famed Southern novelist Harry Crews. He used Southern Gothic archetypes and twisted backwoods Southern characters in his songs.²⁶ Guadalcanal Diary displayed a preoccupation with the mythological margins of American history which included Southern folklore and Civil War mythology, evidenced in songs like "Trail of Tears." It was obvious that the South was fertile breeding ground not just to novelists and poets, but to young songwriters as well.

²⁵ Renna Tuten, "R.E.M.," in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture Volume 12: Music*, ed. Bill C. Malone (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 339.

²⁶ Mark Deming, "Swimming Pool Q's: Biography," Allmusic, www.allmusic.com.

The importance of place was not just evident in Southern bands' lyrics. Mark Reynolds was aware of the band's location as a direct influence on the sound of their music. He said, "I felt like our sound pretty much spoke to Birmingham being an industrial Southern city...We weren't as jangly as R.E.M. and some of the others. We definitely had a little more nastiness about us."

X. PLACE MATTERS

The Southern bands' sense of, ties and loyalty to place were strong, and apparent in their songs and their narratives. In *Site and Sound*, her study on independent music scenes, Holly Kruse writes of the importance of place in underground music, that "in indie music it was not only the music itself but also where its practices were located (or where they were *not* located) that was essential in the production of meaning." She uses R.E.M. as the embodiment of the importance locality played in defining their music and image. In 1981, an Atlanta journalist, commenting on R.E.M. and the Athens scene, reported "It's rare that where a band comes from takes on nearly as much importance as what it's playing."²⁷

There was a sense in the South that leaving your hometown was neither necessary nor an appealing option. Especially in Athens, musicians saw no reason to move to a larger city, where perhaps the chance for conventional success would be greater, but quality of life would surely diminish. Life down South was presented as something of a utopia; it was cheap, laid back, unpretentious, comfortable, and uncomplicated. There is a scene in *Athens, GA: Inside/Out* that sums up this loyalty to place perfectly: R.E.M.'s Peter Buck, is sitting out on the front steps of his house, wearing pajamas, and drinking a beer, talking about the virtues of living in Athens over New York or Los Angeles (keeping in mind that this was at a point when R.E.M. had reached a modest level of

²⁷ Holly Kruse, *Site and Sound: Understanding Independent Music Scenes* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 28.

international success). He said, “I was talking to my parents about Athens today and they were saying, ‘Are you going to move to New York, or Los Angeles?’ And it’s like, why? I mean, this place has got everything I want. It’s got nice weather, nice people, good record stores. Great barbecue.” He then goes on to talk about how bigger cities’ music scenes are more “professional,” centered around money, status, and fame, while the scene in Athens was more communal and friendly, devoid of competition, and most importantly, playing music was still fun, a key factor in defining the punk-era scene in the South.

Location and a sense of place, in a very literal sense, played a large part in the story of the Vulgar Boatmen and they served as an example of the differences between North and South. The band started as a single collective in Gainesville, but split off into two factions, essentially two different bands, that were each fronted by one half of the Boatmen’s songwriting duo. Dale Lawrence was a student of Robert Ray’s at the University of Florida, and when Lawrence graduated and went back home to Indiana, the two continued to write songs together through the mail, and each kept a version of the Vulgar Boatmen going in their respective homes. It seems clear that there was a difference in style and ambition between the Southern and Northern branches. Ray said, “Whenever I have joined the Indiana band, rehearsals involved finding a compromise between two different senses of time: Dale and his band tend to play on the beat; I tend to play and sing behind the beat...”²⁸ The Indiana band was more serious about the band as a career. They played live much more often and according to drummer Jonathan Isley,

²⁸ Kyle Barnett, “We Can Figure This Out: Reintroducing the Vulgar Boatmen,” *Perfect Sound Forever*, 6.

judged their success by how many people were in the crowd and how much excitement was generated. The Florida group, however, viewed the band more as an art project of sorts; Ray never quit his job at the university. Isley said that their barometer of success was, “How cool did that sound?” That sentiment is echoed by other Southern musicians, like Bob Hay, who said, “We weren’t really serious about it...It was just about playing.”

But for the Southern musicians in the 1980s underground, where they *weren’t* from was just as important as where they were from. As Tim Lee said, “We were a product of being from nowhere.” Which brings us to perhaps the most defining, most important aspect of the scene: the sense of isolation and its effect. Hailing from what Holly Kruse called “geographically peripheral” locations informed the direction the Southern scene would take. Meaning, because these bands were based in towns and cities distanced from major cultural and musical centers like New York and Los Angeles, and to an even further degree, because they were based in the historically over-looked, marginalized South, they were allowed to grow and create in their own way, forming something totally unique and unburdened by outside trends and distractions and; or as Lee put it, “It left us free to make our own messes.”

Mitch Easter brought up a few of those Southern stereotypes-- how trends and news take longer to find their way down South, its long-standing status of “the underdog of the nation,” and the inherent inferiority complex that comes along with such difficulties. But the underground scene was able to take these traditionally negative situations and characteristics and reimagine them into something positive.

In the South, musicians and fans in the underground scene felt that everything was new and anything was possible. In her article on the giddy, childlike Oh-OK, Grace Hale

wrote, “Geography mattered: the town’s distance from the urban centers of punk and new wave music gave people the space to experiment and play.”²⁹ There was an awareness that staying away from those major cities was beneficial to them, and what made them special was where they lived, where they could do something truly new and different. Sherry Cothren, from Jackson’s the Germans, felt as though had her band been formed in New York, they would have just been one in a million new bands; in Jackson, they stood out, and were able to make an impact. Peter Buck told *Rolling Stone*, “We wanted to make a non-cool, non-trendy record, and we particularly didn’t want to go to Los Angeles or New York or London. We really wanted to do it in the South with people who were fresh at making rock & roll records.”³⁰ Down South, bands had space to explore and grow on their own.

Place mattered for the diversity of the scene as well. Marginalized groups seemed to be welcomed with little fanfare into the underground scene in the South, perhaps a result of the region’s historically marginalized relationship with the rest of the country. While the New York and UK punk scenes that preceded it were both largely male and aggressively macho and not known for being particularly gay-friendly, it was a much different situation down South, where a strong female and gay presence was felt in the underground scene.

A staggeringly large number of the Southern bands contained female members; the B-52’s, Pylon, Oh-OK, the BBQ Killers, and the Squalls in Athens, the Vulgar Boatmen in Gainesville, Swimming Pool Q’s in Atlanta, Let’s Active in Winston-Salem,

²⁹ Grace Hale, “The Complete Oh-OK: Music as Child’s Play in Athens, Georgia,” *Southern Spaces* (2011): 2.

³⁰ Mark Kemp, *Dixie Lullaby* (New York: Free Press, 2004), 165.

Sex Clark Five in Huntsville, and the Primitons in Birmingham all had women in their bands. Vanessa Hay was never made to feel different or belittled as a female musician at home; it was only when she travelled elsewhere, she said, that she was sometimes met with sexism. Sherry Cothren felt that being a woman in the punk scene was beneficial, because it forced her to work harder, and “caused a fire that pushed us all along.”

The Vulgar Boatmen got their first regular gig playing at a Gainesville transvestite bar. The bar was run by a guy who called himself “The Redneck Homo,” who was equal parts flamboyant gay man and down-home Southern boy.³¹ Mats Roden, the singer of the Primitons, was gay, as were the three male members of the B-52’s, who frequently wore makeup and women’s clothing. And Michael Stipe, who came out officially in the past decade, was notoriously ambiguous about his sexuality.

The fact that the B-52’s were two-fifths female and three-fifths gay male gave their music a “giggly, giddy, and diva-fabulous vibe,” that was totally different from No Wave, a dissonant, noisy, avant-garde branch of punk, happening when the B-52’s reached New York. No Wave was a prime example of “‘heterosexual modernism’ at its most punishingly po-faced.”³² A high school friend of the B-52’s members Keith Strickland and Ricky Wilson explained, “I vividly remember seeing them walking to school with lipstick on and their hair all done, holding hands. I was just like, ‘Oh, these boys, they are not gonna make it.’ Because in Georgia back then, it was not at all cool to be gay. So we all kind of stayed together, in and out of each other’s house. It was a tightly knit group, and that came from not being accepted by the larger community.”³³

³¹ *Drive Somewhere*.

³² Reynolds, *Rip It Up*, 261.

³³ *Ibid.*, 263.

Many of the bands of the underground Southern scene embraced and celebrated marginalization, as they were all living in one way or another on the outskirts of traditional Southern life, and existed outside of the national indie music world as well. Beyond that even is the fact that Southerners have long been outsiders in their own country; set apart, looked down upon, misunderstood, and constantly made to defend all of their peculiarities, which the underground scene realized they could embrace and make into something positive.

XI. CONCLUSION: SOUTHERN ROCK'N'ROLL REDUX

The Southern rock'n'roll bands of the 1980s, including Carnival Season, the Windbreakers, Pylon, the Squalls, Sex Clark Five, R.E.M., the B-52's, Let's Active, the dB's, the Judy's, and the Vulgar Boatmen, among many others, carved out their own niche in the independent music scene and built something new, exciting, and undeniably Southern in it. Influenced by classic sixties pop, Southern music traditions, and punk rock, they took bits of everything, combining old and new, traditional and radical, and made something that was all their own. Sometimes consciously and sometimes not, these bands had strong Southern identities and attachments to their roots. They owned their Southern backgrounds and fused traditional regional themes with modern ideals and blazed new musical and cultural trails.

The underground music scene that thrived in the shadows, on the outskirts of the music industry and Southern society, in all corners of the South throughout the 1980s, superficially seemed like just a small moment in time, a slice of history, involving only a small section of the population. But beyond the great music and the extraordinarily talented people that created it, the scene is representative of Southern culture—past and present, 20th century musical traditions, and the era it was both a product of and reaction against, and this thesis only begins to touch on what we can learn from it.

As is so common with those of us who do not want to be associated with the past's mistakes or everlasting cultural stereotypes, or who youthfully, ignorantly ignore the importance of our roots, the Southern bands in the underground scene were initially

reluctant to identify as Southerners. They were afraid of what their regional heritage would falsely imply and were aware of the negative connotations that “Southern Rock” had at the time, which referred to a sound, image, and attitude that could not be further from what they were. But eventually, these bands embraced their Southern identity, quickly seeing the positive effects; being Southern made them different, special, mysterious, and free to do what they wanted, without the constraints of the music industry and outside distractions and influences.

These bands were young, modern, progressive, and energized by punk’s rebellion. But they were also deeply tied to place both geographically and culturally and reflected historical precedents and long-held Southern characteristics and traditions in their music, attitude, and style. The South’s traditionally rural setting was mirrored in the isolation that the Southern underground scene felt. They existed on the periphery, in the margins, distanced from the major musical, cultural centers of the country. Their deep sense of isolation informed their creative spirit, DIY attitude, acceptance of and identification as outsiders, and their indifference towards mainstream success. Continuing both punk and early country music’s anti-mainstream, pro-authenticity stance, their belief that having fun and being free to create exactly what they wanted to was far more important than getting signed to a major label or making money was a double-edged sword. It allowed them to be independent and innovative. But it was also frustrating to be totally ignored and looked over by the music industry, to toil away for so long, without much to show for it. Without industry revenue or support, this kind of solely independent, underground scene could only last so long.

The next major independent scene was grunge, which quickly became a part of the mainstream, when first Nirvana, then all the others, got signed to major labels and were constantly played on commercial radio and MTV; that never happened with these bands in the 1980s.

Like punk rock was intended to be, the Southern underground music scene was an ephemeral one. It eventually just ran its course. Some groups imploded, others quietly drifted away. But today, their ideas and sound are as relevant as ever, and their influence is felt across the indie and mainstream rock and pop spectrum. Many of these bands have gotten back together in recent years for reunion shows, album reissues, and even to release new records. Perhaps there is hope that they will no longer languish in the margins, or in the footnotes, of Southern and musical histories, but will be recognized for their singular contributions to both.

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APPENDIX

Glossary of Interview Participants

1. David Bean: singer and guitar and keyboard player of the Judy's, from Pearland, TX. Interviewed at SugarHill Studios in Houston, TX, on February 27th, 2012.
2. Sherry Cothren: guitar player and main songwriter of the Germans, from Jackson, MS. Interviewed at her home in Jackson, MS, on January 21st, 2012.
3. Mitch Easter: singer, guitar player, and main songwriter of Let's Active, from Winston-Salem, NC. Interviewed at his home in Kernersville, NC, on February 20th, 2012.
4. Bob Hay: singer, guitar player, and main songwriter of the Squalls, from Athens, GA. Interviewed at his home in Athens, GA, on November 27th, 2011.
5. Vanessa Hay: singer of Pylon, from Athens, GA. Interviewed at her home in Athens, GA, on November 27th, 2011.
6. Peter Holsapple: singer, guitar player, and main songwriter of the dB's, from Winston-Salem, NC. Interviewed at the Durham Performing Arts Center in Durham, NC, on February 20th, 2012.
7. Tim Lee: singer, guitar player, and one of the main songwriters of the Windbreakers, from Jackson, MS. Interviewed at the Barnard Observatory at the University of Mississippi in Oxford, MS, on October 31st, 2011. Also interviewed via e-mail on September 19th, 2011.
8. Mark Reynolds: drummer of Carnival Season, from Birmingham, AL. Interviewed at his home in Leeds, AL, on October 12th, 2011.
9. Rick Storey: singer and guitar player of Sex Clark Five, from Huntsville, AL. Interviewed via e-mail on September 19th, 2011.
10. Jeff Walton: bass player of the Judy's, from Pearland, TX. Interviewed at SugarHill Studios in Houston, TX, on February 27th, 2012.

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