

DRIVE-BY TRUCKERS
English Oceans (ATO Records)
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Patterson Hood, Mike Cooley, Brad Morgan, Jay Gonzalez, Matt Patton

English Oceans, the 12th release by Athens, Georgia's Drive-By Truckers, is an elegantly balanced and deeply engaged new effort that finds the group refreshed and firing on all cylinders.

All but one of the collection's 13 new songs, written by singer-guitarists and co-founding members Patterson Hood and Mike Cooley, were recorded during 13 days of sessions in August 2013 with longtime producer David Barbe.

Six of the songs were the result of a burst of writing activity by Cooley.

"I had time to write," Cooley says. "After we came off the road last time, we decided we were going to let it rest for a while. So I had time to really focus. I kind of had to re-learn how to write, because I didn't write as many songs as I'd wanted on the last couple of records. I was happy with these songs, and thrilled to go in and record so many that I felt real strongly about."

Hood notes, "I don't think we've ever had a record where Cooley was as deeply involved in every aspect of the making of it as he was this time. With Cooley's writing, there's almost no precedent for it in our catalog. He came in with this stunning bunch of songs, full of this beautiful imagery."

Writing independently, Cooley and Hood penned songs that dovetailed brilliantly with each other. Hood says, "Every song on this record connects with another song. I noticed Cooley's got a line in 'Primer Coat' about 'apron strings,' and I have the exact same image in one of my songs, 'Hanging On.' It goes on and on and on like that on this record, and that's a pretty good sign for things, particularly given how different our temperaments are and our styles of writing are."

Cooley and Hood's brace of character-based songs depict a neatly interlocking gallery of relationships, often in dissolution and discord. The last song written and recorded for the album, Hood's rave-up "Pauline Hawkins," was based on a new novel by Willy Vlautin and penned after another of his compositions was scrapped.

Hood says, "There was such a balance between Cooley's songs and my songs that taking a song off the record would upset the balance a little bit. I liked the back-and-forth flow, like our shows tend to do. I got an advance copy of Willy's latest book, *The Free*. I've been a fan of his writing for a while. I read it in about three days. I finished it on Saturday, I wrote the song on Sunday, and then we cut it on Thursday and mastered the record on the following Monday. It sure makes it a better record."

DBT's ever-keen political edge can be seen in two songs on the release. Cooley's "Made Up English Oceans" derives from his interest in the career of Lee Atwater, the Republican operative who was active in the Reagan and Bush campaigns of the '80s. "He was the guy that Karl Rove and all of the modern dirty tricksters looked to – he was one of the granddaddies of it all. That song is from his point of view, fictionally of course. It's him making his pitch, telling what he understands about young, Southern men."

Hood says "The Part of Him" was inspired by the procession of scandals that plague the political world year after year. "It's about political assholery -- there's someone new playing that role every few months," he says. "As soon as we get rid of one of them, someone comes up and starts playing that part again."

Reflecting the renewed high level of collaboration between the band's two principals, *English Oceans* marks an unprecedented event: the recording of a Hood song, "Til He's Dead or Rises," with Cooley assuming the lead vocal.

Cooley says, "I remember Patterson was getting frustrated trying to sing it. He was doing fine, but it seemed like there was something he wanted to do that wasn't coming. I was in the control room thinking, 'I could probably sing this' -- though it wasn't like I was saying, 'Oh, I can sing this a *lot better* than that.' I was thinking, 'This sounds like something I could sing.' Right after that, he walks into the control room and says, 'You want to try singing this? It sounds more like you than me.' I said, 'Yeah, I was just thinking that.'"

"Grand Canyon," the final song on the album, is an emotionally overwhelming elegy for Craig Lieske, a longtime member of DBT's touring family. The former manager of Athens' 40 Watt Club and a key player in the city's experimental music scene, Lieske died suddenly of a heart attack in January 2013 following the first night of the band's three-night homecoming stand in Athens. *English Oceans* is dedicated to him.

"I probably wrote it in 15 minutes," Hood says. "It wasn't any kind of a conscious thing. It's the most important song of mine on the record. I wrote new songs to go with it. It recalibrated something. It became a totally different record for me than the record I thought we were going to make."

The album was recorded with a compact, retooled lineup. Jay Gonzalez, who joined the band in 2008 as keyboardist, stepped into an expanded role by adding guitar to his duties, while bassist Matt Patton was drafted from the Tuscaloosa group The Dexateens. The unit was road-tested during dates in 2013.

Cooley says, "This lineup is so direct. It can go from this chainsaw rock 'n' roll to very delicate, pretty-sounding stuff." We wrote a lot of those kinds of songs, and this lineup got all of that well.

Hood agrees: "We recorded with a stripped-down lineup that gave things a more primal and immediate feel. It's a more turn-on-a-dime kind of thing, which suits these songs, and us as a band. It's a very tasteful group, and when it needs to be it can be a very big, powerful, over-the-top band, too, and it can go from one to the other seamlessly."

Looking at the accomplishments of *English Oceans* from the perspective of DBT's nearly three-decade history, both Cooley and Hood decline to hedge their bets on the quality of their latest work.

"You're always hesitant to say, 'Oh, this is the best record we've ever made,'" Cooley says, "because you always want to. And sometimes you say it, and sometimes you're right, and sometimes you think, 'Well, maybe I jumped the gun on that a little bit, I got excited.' But I think this just might be the best record we've ever made."

Hood concurs enthusiastically: "It's my favorite thing that we've ever done. I'm proud of our catalog -- we always try to make as good a record as we can make. Sometimes things just work. This time, we made kind of a magical record. I've always felt that *Decoration Day* was our best record, and this is the first one that I think is a better record than that was. Every piece of the puzzle fit."

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