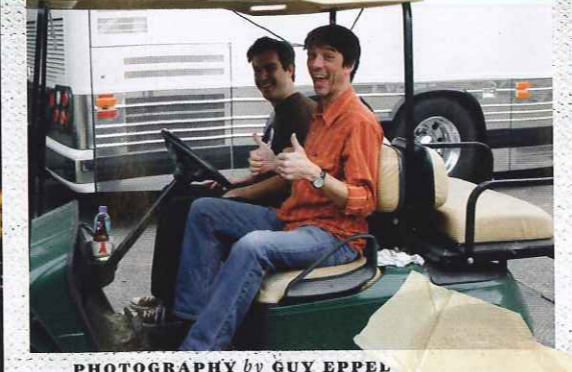


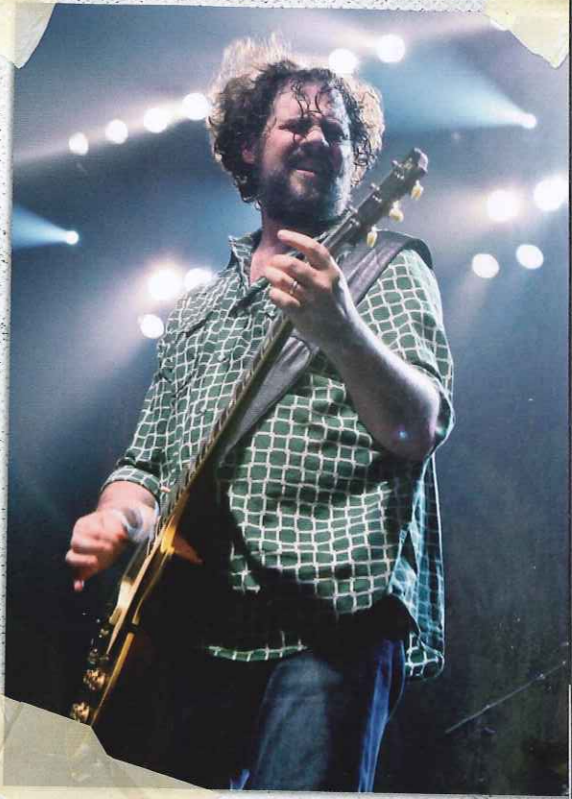


WORDS by ANDREW MUELLER



PHOTOGRAPHY by GUY EPEL

TRUCKERS & HOLD STEADY



Craig Finn of The Hold Steady, and Drive-By Truckers' Patterson Hood, Atlanta, November 1, 2008



ROCK N' ROLL MEANS WELL

That's the name of Autumn 2008's premium tour, a raucous Stateside double-header featuring the **DRIVE-BY TRUCKERS** and **THE HOLD STEADY**. From Atlanta to Tallahassee, Uncut rides the tour bus for the inside story on this heroic rock love-in – a journey which leads, improbably, to a date on George Clinton's Mothership...

"HIS SHIT is so good," declares Patterson Hood, brandishing the bottle meaningfully, "they... they put a cork in it." One senses that this is praise indeed for whiskey, where Hood is concerned. He waves dismissively at the lesser, screw-top bourbons huddled on the tour bus kitchenette, and passes the eight-year-old Basil Hayden's across the aisle. One swig confirms his judgement: high-octane honey. Hood, a man gripped by ungovernable enthusiasms even at his most

relaxed, is not long from taking his last bows after a riotous performance by The Drive-By Truckers and The Hold Steady at Atlanta's Tabernacle, and is somewhat amped. Meet the wife (hello). Here's a picture of my daughter (she's lovely). You gotta hear the new Jenny Lewis (I have, but carry on). Next to Hood, the Truckers' tour manager, Matt DeFelippis, demonstrates the efficacy of communications technology in co-ordinating the modern rock tour. The Truckers' other primary songwriter, Mike

Cooley, returning from a post-show drink, has phoned in lost, muttering imprecations about the tramp he paid four dollars for erroneous directions, and going so far as to suggest that General Sherman had the right idea when he burnt Atlanta to the ground in 1864: spectacular heresy from a son of Alabama. Matt sighs, flips open his laptop, calls up GoogleMaps, and talks the guitarist in. It's already nearly 3:00am, and we have a six-hour drive to Florida ahead of us, just as soon as all are aboard.

TONIGHT HAS been the third of the 23-date "Rock'n'Roll Means Well" tour. The bands are taking turns headlining, and in Atlanta, in deference to the Truckers' local roots – most live in nearby Athens – The Hold Steady took the early slot. Even by his own hyperactive standards, Craig Finn had been animated, whirling and twitching and conveying the impression that his guitar strap was all that was holding the constituent parts of his body in one place (he dances about as much like a late-thirtysomething white guy from Minnesota as possible). It's a jarring, compelling, spectacle, these wordy, coolly literate songs, soundtracked by the supercharged bar blues of The Hold Steady, delivered by this seething, bespectacled, anxious apparition: Bruce Springsteen trapped in the body of Elvis Costello. It was always going to be the Truckers' night, though – most of the audience looked like one or

other member of the band, many men sporting beards rivaling those of drummer Brad Morgan, women favouring the high-piled hair of bassist Shonna Tucker. Patterson had already appeared once, lending backing vocals, as he does on The Hold Steady's current album, *Stay Positive*, to "Navy Sheets", and lumbered on ahead of his own group looking like a grizzly stalked by hunters. He'd just beamed out at the crowd until Cooley cranked up "Three Dimes Down". From there, the Truckers had unleashed a stellar selection of their bleary boogie, culminating in a furious version of Neil Young's "Rockin' In The Free World", Finn joining in on backing vocals, followed by a barrel through Jim Carroll's "All The People Who Died", involving an amount of instrument-swapping between both bands, road crew and friends. All in all, it's an invigorating reminder of why The Drive-By Truckers and The Hold Steady are

two of *Uncut's* favourite bands. The show has also, like this tour as a whole, functioned as a heartening national unity ticket. At first glance, the Truckers and The Hold Steady are a stark illustration of America's enduring North-South divide. The Truckers seem almost an archetype of Southern rock – thick of facial hair, heavy of riff, lyrically interested in drink, despair and defiance. The Hold Steady appear almost a cartoonish exemplar of college indie – wordy, nerdy, bespectacled. What they have in common is that, in both cases, there's far more going on than that. The Truckers have omnivorous musical interests – at one point, quite unprompted, Hood launches into an impassioned and detailed soliloquy on the genius of Squeeze – and a lyrical outlook that is curious, compassionate, and not terribly similar to the writings of Lynyrd Skynyrd. The Hold Steady rock as hard as any old-school **CONTINUES OVER**

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Patterson Hood: "All our songs are about small, fucked-up little hick towns"

"I WOULDN'T RESPECT THE HOLD STEADY IF THEY DIDN'T GO UP THERE AND ABSOLUTELY TRY TO WIPE THE STAGE WITH US EVERY NIGHT" - HOOD

oar-room rattlers, the unreconstructed fretboard-wringing of lead guitarist Tad Kubler suggesting what might have resulted had Steve Gaines survived the plane crash that wiped out Skynyrd, then successfully auditioned for The Attractions. Another thing the two groups have in common, for the next 20 shows at least, is a hell of a tough act to follow.

THE ATLANTA TABERNACLE is the kind of place that bands tell themselves they'll play one day, to make the endurance of lesser dives and dumps feel worthwhile. The room itself is spectacular, a former Baptist church and hospital, built in 1910, now a 2,600-capacity rock venue. But it's the separate backstage annexe that has everyone grinning. The catering is terrific, the toilets are clean, the dressing rooms sufficiently plentiful that *Uncut* get one to ourselves, and, best of all, it has a washing machine and dryer. As the Truckers' soundcheck thuds through the walls, The Hold Steady's bass player, Galen Polivka, sorts piles of socks, shirts and boxer shorts. "Living the dream," he smiles, and he's not entirely joking.

In between soundchecks, with the accordion practice of The Hold Steady's Franz Nicolay providing a soundtrack from an adjacent dressing room, Hood and Finn gather to survey the road ahead.

Finn is 37, Hood 44, two men who acknowledge that they are (at least slightly) wiser, as well as older, than most rock'n'roll bands. The recent health problems of Tad Kubler seem to have been a wake-up call: The Hold Steady cancelled a European tour in autumn 2008 when Kubler was hospitalised with pancreatitis.

Finn was partly inspired to form The Hold Steady by seeing the Truckers live. But the formalising of their mutual admiration society into this tour took place by email between Hood and Kubler after the two met in New York last summer. Hood loves The Hold Steady: the line "I'm trying to hold steady" in "The Righteous Path" is a deliberate homage.

"I just thought," says Hood, "this tour might be the best chance I ever have to see them play." In some respects, the two groups are very



different. The Drive-By Truckers hold open house backstage more or less until show time, and arrive onstage with nothing planned beyond the first song - the set is then improvised according to the mood of the room and the band. The Hold Steady take turns by alphabetical order to write a setlist, and prefer to be left alone, listening to music - including, in Atlanta, The Cars' "Let's Go" and Boz Scaggs' "Lido Shuffle" - and engage in a circle of high fives just before taking stage. There's also that North-South thing...

"I know we had to cancel those UK dates when Tad got sick," says Finn, "but my plan was to buy one of those Newcastle United shirts with Northern Rock on it. But really, you can't say Northern rock and have people understand what you mean the way you can with Southern rock."

"I'm envious about that," says Hood, "because I fuckin' hate the phrase 'Southern rock'. I always loved music that had a real sense of place - Springsteen's Jersey Shore, The Ramones' Queens, The Replacements being so obviously from

Minneapolis. When I was in high school, I didn't know what any of the stuff they were singing about was, but I wanted to."

"When I watch a movie," nods Finn, "I get really obsessed with the location, almost to the point where I can't concentrate on the film. When I get to spots on tour, I need to walk around for a while, just to understand where I'm at. I think that's very much part of writing, just being rooted, figuring out where you are."

Are there worries, putting together a tour like this, that there'll be locations where one band gets called back for three encores, while the other gets chased to the city limits at pitchfork-point?

"We broke up North first," says Hood. "The South and the Midwest were difficult for us. Actually, the South was brutal for us. All our songs are about small, fucked-up little hick towns, and in the South the only places where there are venues to play tend to be college towns full of kids who just got the fuck out of some small, fucked-up little hick town. The last thing they want to hear is someone singing about where they came from. They want to hear someone singing about somewhere exotic. Like Minneapolis, or Brooklyn. I love that. I also like the fact that both our new records end with songs that namedrop directors, and they're almost representative polar points - John Cassavetes [*In the Hold Steady's 'Slapped Actress'*] and John Ford [*in the Truckers' 'Monument Valley'*]."

"We were on this tour this summer," says Craig, "and we hadn't really done the South-East much at all, and we went to Baton Rouge, Oxford, Charleston - roadhouses, you know, putting 400 people where 300 people should be, and it was great."

"The lines in this country now," says Hood, "are more red state/blue state, rather than North and South, because so many Southerners moved up North in the hundred years after the war."

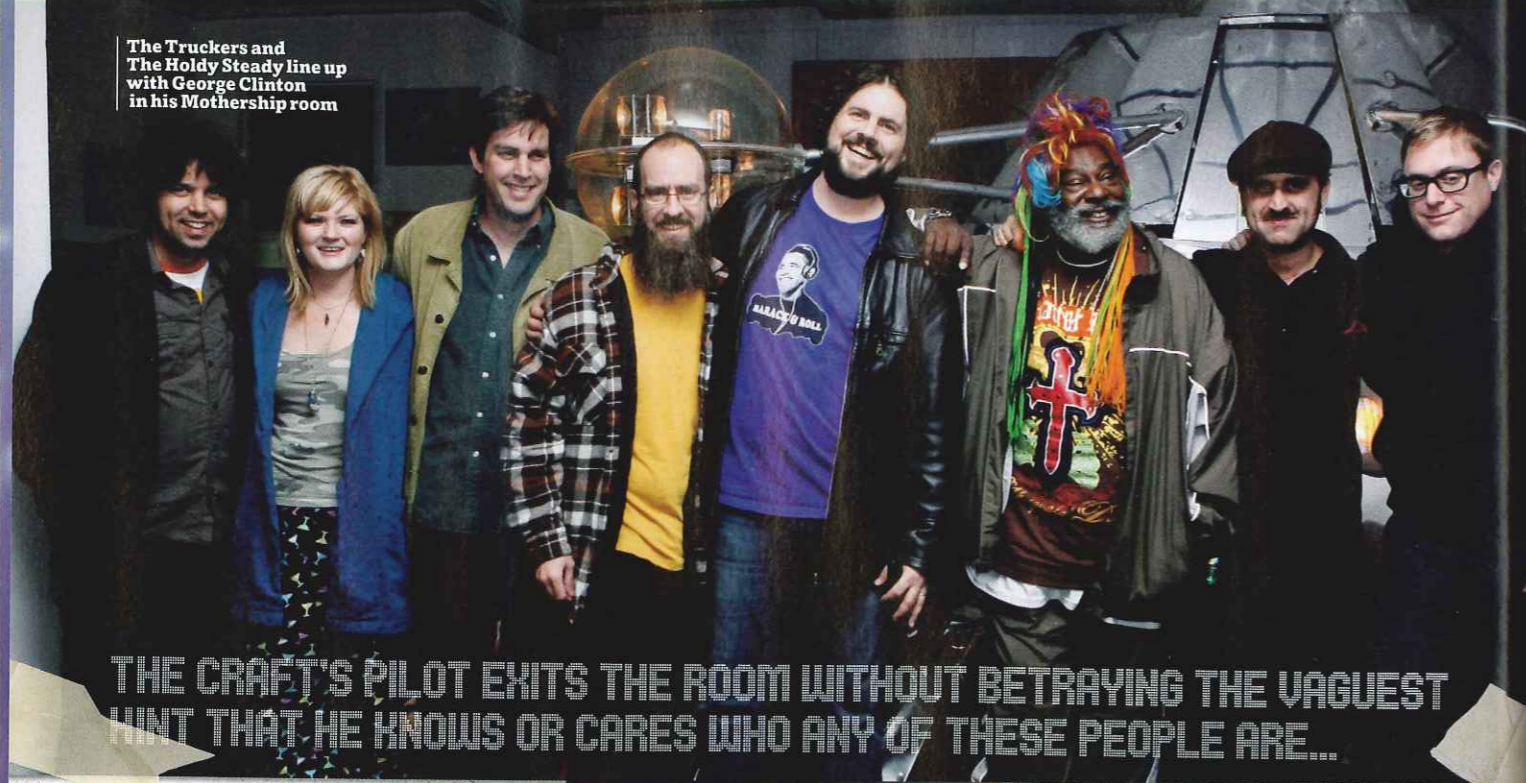
There is laughter all round at this reminder that Hood is the only one in the room who comes from a place where "the war" is shorthand for the American Civil War, rather than World War II.

The collective regard notwithstanding, is there a sense of competition between the bands?

"It's the good kind of competition," **CONTINUES OVER**

GUYERPEL

The Truckers and The Hold Steady line up with George Clinton in his Mothership room



THE CRAFT'S PILOT EXITS THE ROOM WITHOUT BETRAYING THE VAGUEST HINT THAT HE KNOWS OR CARES WHO ANY OF THESE PEOPLE ARE...

says Hood. "I wouldn't respect 'em if they didn't go up there and absolutely try to wipe the stage with us every night. That's good for the rock."

This last line is delivered utterly absent of irony. Something else the two bands have in common: an unswerving belief in rock 'n' roll as a means and expression of redemption and succour. Even if on some nights it feels like neither of those things.

"MAN," SAYS COOLEY, leaning on the bus behind a Tallahassee nightclub called The Moon. "That was like fucking your sister. I mean, respond, goddammit."

It's night and another Drive-By Truckers set later. Cooley's gift for deadpan coinages is no surprise: his songs heave with glorious descriptions and zingers. It is clearly his view that these have been insufficiently appreciated this evening: the Truckers went on first, playing to a room barely half-full, mostly Sunday drinkers who seemed to be coming down off a big weekend.

"The one time of day I don't want to be alone," he continues, "and where is everybody? This is Florida, dammit. Holler. Show me some titties."

Today has been a study in the unglamorous reality of touring: overnight on the tour bus, all day hanging around a venue in the kind of town in which there's nothing to do but hang around the venue. At one point in the afternoon, Cooley had discovered a golf cart, and the interesting fact that you can start one by jamming a bottle opener into the ignition. But there are only so many piles of empty beer cartons a grown man can satisfyingly drive through in a day. The only thing which has distinguished today from hundreds of others Cooley has had, and hundreds more he is yet to have – and it will, in fairness, do – has been the startling manifestation in the backstage parking lot of rooster-haired funk god George Clinton (he lives up the road, for reasons surpassing understanding and is a friend of the venue's owner).

And the show, in the Truckers' view, hasn't been great. They're back in the bus, consuming the superb roast dinner that Shonna Tucker has concocted on the onboard kitchenette. Hood, as ever, is talking eight beats to the bar about music –



about his father's recent induction into the Alabama Music Hall of Fame (David Hood played bass in the legendary Muscle Shoals rhythm section) and about the album the Truckers have just made as a pick-up band for Booker T, with Neil Young contributing guitar (Hood plays me some rough mixes: the version of OutKast's "Hey Ya" is astounding).

By common consent, tonight belongs to The Hold Steady. From the moment they bound on to their intro tape, David Lee Roth's "Yankee Rose", they're focused, furious, determined to wring what gold there is from the base metal of a smallish, diffident audience. Their enthusiasm proves overwhelming, and the screams – actual screams, by the end – for an encore are rewarded with the biggest convening yet of The Drive Hold By Steady Truckers supergroup. Hood appears in a Barack Obama T-shirt to help on The Hold Steady's creeping, malevolent take on AC/DC's "Ride On", and further Truckers wander on for Blue Öyster Cult's "Burning For You", The Band's "Look Out

Cleveland" – Cooley has not yet changed out of sweatshirt, pyjama bottoms and slippers – and The Hold Steady's "Killer Parties".

In normal circumstances, all they'd now have to look forward to is another interminable bus ride. But the schedule is disrupted by one of those strange, surreal surprises that makes the boredom of touring worth enduring. Would we, someone asks, care to drop by Clinton's studio, where he is not only awaiting us, but has apparently switched on the Mothership – the famous flying saucer stage prop in which Clinton would descend stageward in his '70s heyday? And so, at two in the morning, two vast tour buses follow a car through the outskirts of Tallahassee, to a house distinguished only by a poetically apposite address – 1300 Hendrix Road – and by colourful flashing lights in the windows. The bemused groups troop inside, through a couple of recording studios, past walls of gold and platinum albums won by Parliament and Funkadelic, to the source of the illuminations: the Clinton Mothership, now parked permanently in one room in the complex. The craft's pilot duly enters the room, poses for photos, offers handshakes, bestows blessings and exits without betraying the vaguest hint that he knows or cares who any of these people are.

THE LINE AFTER "Rock 'n' roll means well" in the Truckers' "Marry Me" is "...but it can't help telling young boys lies". *Uncut* bids farewell to both groups outside Clinton's studio, and commiserates them on the 16-hour drive between here and their next assignment in Raleigh, North Carolina. Both bands are, as they freely admit, old enough to know better, but both are full of people still driven to scratch furiously at that itch caused by that first brush with Bruce Springsteen, The Replacements, or whatever you're having yourself. And somewhere in America, though they may not know yet themselves, in the audience at the four shows played or the 19 still to go, is someone who, 20 or even 30 years hence, is going to struggle for sleep on a bus, curse a flat crowd, unexpectedly meet a legend of popular music, and wonder whether to thank or blame The Drive-By Truckers and The Hold Steady. ☉

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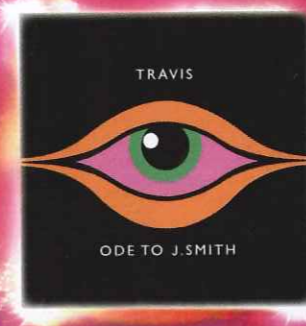
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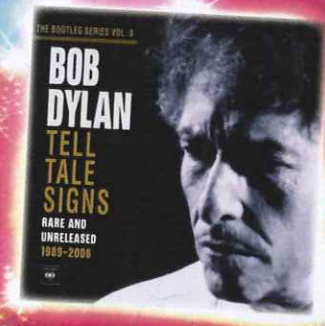
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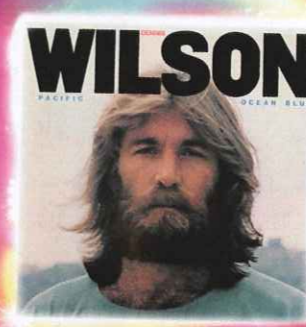
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