

Drive-by Truckers release new album, *English Oceans*

Eric London
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Athens, Georgia-based, Southern alt-country/rock group Drive-by Truckers released their newest album, *English Oceans*, earlier this month. The 13-track album comes three years after their last studio record, *Go-Go Boots*, made it to number 35 on US charts. *English Oceans* is the group's 12th album since the release of their 1998 debut, *Gangstabilly*.

Drive-by Truckers have proven themselves to be a powerful musical force in their nearly 20 years of existence. Under the musical direction of Muscle Shoals, Alabama-area natives Patterson Hood and Mike Cooley, Drive-by Truckers have gained a reputation for a unique sound capable of joining the best elements of Neil Young's forceful rhythm with Waylon Jennings' twang, even while the melodic influence of the Replacements is injected throughout.

At their best, Drive-by Truckers combine these elements with a lyrical approach that elevates the prosaic realities of life in an honest—and at times devastating—manner. Their genuine, humane approach to life comes alive in those powerful and often somber tracks that address the suffering of the most exploited layers of the population. Drive-by Truckers, however, do not ignore the “softer” side of life. The group writes and plays about love, beauty, and the pursuit of happiness in a mature manner that does not find expression in the scripts of contemporary romantic comedies.

It would be difficult for Drive-by Truckers to match the quality and creativity that made a trio of their earlier albums some of the most genuine and complex country music produced in the last few decades. It is the opinion of this reviewer that *Decoration Day*, *The Dirty South*, and *A Blessing and a Curse* were major contributions towards shaping the past decade of alt-country music into one of the most dynamic periods in

country music history.

However, *English Oceans* is neither groundbreaking nor does it represent a noteworthy artistic development for the group. The album's bright spots indicate that Drive-by Truckers can make new music that is both gratifying on its own as well as different from previous efforts. *English Oceans* is by no means an announcement that the group is on the downward swing—but having said that, one is left with a sense that something is missing from their most recent release.

The bright spots on the album make it an overall enjoyable listen. The track “Pauline Hawkins” begins with a portentous baseline and dark rhythm piano before flourishing unexpectedly and stunningly into a complex song marked by touches of Flaming Lips-esque chord changes. Its quick rhythm and exultant tone contrast sharply with harsh lyrics: “Don't tell me your secrets/I'd rather not listen/I know what I'm missing/ It's always too soon/It's always too soon to be cold for comfort/To belong to someone inside a locked room.”

“Primer Coat” has the elements of a classic Drive-by Truckers anti-love song. Backed by a simple melody, the track bears the strong mark of Mike Cooley's ability to use major/minor chord transitions to evoke something subdued and somber beneath the complex story-line lyrics for which the band is so well-regarded. “When Walter Went Crazy” has a slow-moving piano backbone and tells the moving story of a man who “had rattlesnake in his eyes” and descends into emotional oblivion.

In contrast, “The Part of Him” is an upbeat track, one-part Confederate marching song, one-part Irish ditty and one-part mountain banjo breakdown. The lyrics offer some insight into the Drive-by Truckers' social outlook. They conjure up the general but vague and

simple recognition that politicians are liars: “He was an absolute piece of shit to tell the truth/but he never told the truth to me/he never told the truth to you/don’t think he ever set out to/he was indifferent to honesty.”

Hood, the song’s writer, explained that the song is not about any one politician in general, but is instead “about political assholery—there’s someone new playing that role every few months. As soon as we get rid of one of them, someone comes up and starts playing that part again.”

Along similar lines, the most interesting track on the album is “Made Up English Oceans,” which leads with a quick-paced desperado-type sound and tells the story of the life and times of Republican political operator Lee Atwater, from Atwater’s own post-mortem and cynical perspective. The song has a dark and urgent feel to it, which is appropriate considering the content of the lyrics:

“Cause only simple men can see the logic/in whatever smarter men can whittle down/and fit it on a sticker/and get it stuck like mud and bugs to names that set the standard/they’ll live it like it’s gospel/and they’ll quote it like it’s scripture.”

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Hood explained his preoccupation with Atwater: “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.” It remains to be seen whether Hood, who publicly supported Barack Obama’s re-election in 2012, will extend his insight to the present criminal occupants of the White House.

Hood and Drive-by Truckers continue to be an extremely talented group who have proven themselves capable of producing material that combines artistry with biting political commentary. Their song “Puttin’ People On The Moon,” released in 2004, is a prime example. The song tracks the life of a young autoworker who blames his tragic experiences on the social devastation being wrought on the population by the powers that be. With a coarse rhythm guitar and a quick beat like a clock striking midnight, Hood exclaims:

“Mary Alice got cancer just like everybody here/Seems everyone I know is gettin’ cancer every year/And we can’t afford no insurance, I been 10 years unemployed/So she didn’t get no chemo so our lives

they was destroyed/And nothing ever changes, the cemetery gets more full/And now over there in Huntsville, even NASA’s shut down too/Another joker in the White House, said a change was coming ‘round/but I’m still working at the Wal-Mart and Mary Alice in the ground.”

The group’s most moving and aesthetically pleasing tracks are those that honestly consider the trials and tribulations of everyday life in all their beauty and pain, in all their complexity and sometimes simple but mundane truth.

This reviewer will limit himself to four examples for readers to sample: “The Deeper In,” “Bulldozers and Dirt,” “Outfit” and “Goddamn Lonely Love.”

Those readers who have yet to do so should avail themselves of the opportunity to explore the music of this fine group of musicians.



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