



Introduction

What Is Southern Rock?

IT SEEMS ESSENTIAL TO DEFINE the term “southern rock” before one can write about it. This is necessary in order to plan what goes into the text and what gets left out. So what exactly *is* southern rock?

Trying to define it is tantamount to going down the proverbial rabbit hole. It’s a slippery, nebulous term that can mean almost anything. On its face it appears to imply rock music from the 1970s that came from the South, but that could include anything from Wet Willie to Marshall Tucker to Lynyrd Skynyrd, acts that have little in common stylistically or sound-wise.

Author Scott B. Bomar states that the term “southern rock” was first used in the early 1970s by Mo Slotin, a writer for the Atlanta underground paper *Great Speckled Bird* in a review of an Allman Brothers Band concert.¹ But the phrase didn’t come into broad usage until Al Kooper incorporated the concept into the name of his Atlanta-based record label, Sounds of the South, *before* he signed Lynyrd Skynyrd. Kooper was one of the first—along with Phil Walden of Capricorn Records, founded in 1969—to realize that southern talent was something that might be codified and commodified. It happened that Skynyrd fit nicely into Kooper’s concept.

Some people argue that southern rock is an amalgam of rock, blues, and country, dominated by electric guitars. However, applying this

definition, the early “rockabilly” acts out of Memphis—Elvis, Carl Perkins, Jerry Lee Lewis—along with Chuck Berry, Buddy Knox, and Buddy Holly might also qualify as southern rockers. One might go so far as to assert that rockabilly was an earlier *wave* of southern rock. There have been others. When you start digging, you never know what you’ll find down there. Variations of R&B-influenced country music go back to the 1940s with Hank Williams’s “Move It on Over” and even further, with a style called “hillbilly boogie.” Someone so inclined could probably dig even deeper.²

Country and rock ‘n’ roll may *seem* dissimilar, but they actually spring from the same Celtic roots, with rock ‘n’ roll containing Africanized and Native elements, specifically drums—traditional country or bluegrass bands eschewed drums. Rock ‘n’ roll was *always* a hybrid of country and blues, an admixture of black, white, and Native elements. Cut in Memphis in 1954, Elvis Presley’s first record was a revved-up version of Bill Monroe’s bluegrass standard “Blue Moon of Kentucky.” Elvis added African American rhythmic flourishes (that is, a gospel-style backbeat) to his interpretation.

There is a big semantic problem, however, with the term “rock.” Rock is not the same thing as rock ‘n’ roll, even though the two terms are often used interchangeably. Rock refers specifically to the music of the hippies and “freaks” emanating from California during the Summer of Love (1967), with the movement heading eastward. Rock culture was based on rejection of middle-class values, the use of “mind-expanding” recreational drugs (mostly pot and LSD), sexual freedom, and bizarre clothes. Rock, then, was the soundtrack of the so-called counterculture. It was never monolithic to begin with and in fact embraced *any* style, from Hindu ragas to psychedelic “acid” guitars to blues to bluegrass along with anything and everything in between. Hence the term “rock” as a designation for a musical sound or style has no musical meaning—it was simply the sound of the counterculture, whatever that happened to be at any given moment. Hence there could be no such thing as “southern rock” or “country-rock” prior to 1967. *Southern rock*, then, was music made by southern longhairs. The hair element is important, as noted in Charlie Daniels’s anthem “Long-Haired Country Boy.” Southern rock tended to have more blues and country in it, simply because that was closer to home for southern musicians.

Southern Rock Versus California Country-Rock

Something very similar if not parallel was happening out West with the “California country-rock” sound, which was usually lighter in tone and more traditional than what came to be called “southern rock.” California country-rock was based more on traditional styles such as folk and bluegrass than the contemporaneous country style then called “honky-tonk” or “the Bakersfield sound.” It often featured kitschy three-part harmonies. One could say that the early 1960s folk boom—spearheaded by the likes of the Kingston Trio, the New Christy Minstrels, and Peter, Paul and Mary—had been a *point of entry* for these young players, bringing them first to folk, then to bluegrass, and then to country. This amalgam was primarily developed in 1967 by a Los Angeles-based group called Hearts and Flowers, led by former Waycross, Georgia, resident Larry Murray on Dobro and including Bernie Leadon (who had moved to San Diego from Gainesville) on banjo and guitar. This style was further developed—and electrified—by groups like the Byrds, whose 1968 incarnation included former Waycross resident Gram Parsons and former Byrds member Chris Hillman; the Flying Burrito Brothers, founded by Parsons, along with Hillman and Leadon; Poco; Linda Ronstadt; and the Eagles, of whom Leadon was also a founding member. The lineage can be traced back to a San Diego folk/bluegrass group that included Murray and Leadon. Clearly, then, a good portion of the inspiration for California country-rock came from Georgia and Florida by way of Murray, Leadon, and Parsons.

It’s difficult to draw a dividing line between California country-rock and southern rock, as they can at times seem quite similar, but it is clear that country-rock came first, so it could be argued that southern rock is a *subset* or a variation of country-rock—perhaps simply another branch of the same tree. The differences seem to be:

California country-rock contains traditional country and/or bluegrass instruments such as pedal steel, fiddles, mandolins, and banjos, which are rarely heard in southern rock (with the exceptions of Charlie Daniels and Dickey Betts’s group Great Southern, both of whom occasionally used fiddles).

In keeping with country-rock’s overall adherence to country techniques, country-rock’s guitar tones are generally clean

(usually played on Fender Telecasters), whereas southern rock is dominated by louder, thick-sounding—and often distorted—electric guitars (such as Les Pauls, which are renowned for their “sustain”), more suggestive of hard rock. This seems to be the basic difference between the two styles.

Country-rock often features gleeful-sounding three-part harmonies derived from faux-folk acts like the Kingston Trio and Peter, Paul and Mary, whereas southern rock more often focuses on one main singer, sometimes adding a single harmony vocal, rarely more (with exceptions being the Outlaws and Cowboy, who both sound quite folkish).

Country-rock, generally speaking, seems to be about 40 percent folk, 40 percent country, and 20 percent rock—if even that much. Southern rock seems to be about 60 percent hard rock, 15 percent country, 15 percent blues, and the rest miscellaneous influences like jazz, soul, folk, and what-have-you.

The dividing line between country-rock and southern-rock is fuzzy because country music came from the South, so country-rock already had a southern component.³

However, as California country-rock was taking shape in the late 1960s, the South reacted with a harder, more rock- and R&B-influenced country hybrid.

Early Southern Rock

Out of Memphis, a place where black and white styles—if not people—mingled freely, came the oddball proto-rap (or “talking blues”) of “Let It All Hang Out” by psychedelic country-rockers the Hombres (their debut album was produced in Memphis by Houston’s Huey P. Meaux, who had worked with the Sir Douglas Quintet). Also in Memphis, Delaney and Bonnie and Black Oak Arkansas (under the name the Knowbody Else) had recorded music that could be categorized as southern rock for Stax Records in 1968 and 1969 respectively. In Nashville in 1967, Louisiana singer-guitarist-songwriter Tony Joe White signed to Monument Records. White was clearly a seminal southern rocker, although his sound was heavy on the funk/R&B side (not unlike Wet Willie’s would be later) and was referred to at the time as

“swamp rock.” It sounds like it was recorded in Muscle Shoals, but his 1969 breakout hit, “Polk Salad Annie,” was recorded in Nashville at RCA’s illustrious Studio B. Nashville artist Jerry Reed, from Atlanta, was working on his own swamp-rock sound, very much reminiscent of White’s—replete with references to Louisiana swamps and alligators—releasing his breakout “Amos Moses” in 1970. Stylistically, it’s only a short step from this to Lynyrd Skynyrd’s 1974 song “Swamp Music.” The point here is that what came to be called “southern rock” was already a fully fledged form—without a name—by the time the Allman Brothers Band (ABB) released its first album in 1969.

Allman Brothers as Pioneers of Southern Rock

A case could be made that Duane and Gregg Allman, under the name the Allman Joys, had pioneered a blues-based southern-type rock with their September 1966 album recorded for Nashville-based Dial Records (that album went unreleased until 1973, when the ABB hit it big). However, what the Allman Joys were doing was really not much different from what blues-based bands like the Rolling Stones, the Yardbirds, and the Animals had been doing in Britain since 1962 (Duane and Gregg Allman even wore English-style “pageboy” hairdos like Brian Jones and Keith Relf). So it seems Britain might have been the actual home of “southern rock.” But of course the music had to be made by real southerners to be seen as authentic.

Many fans assume the style we now call southern rock began with the ABB’s 1969 debut on Atco Records. There is little on this album that evinces a direct country influence. The ABB’s debut album is a gumbo of psychedelic rock, blues, soul, and jazz. However, Gregg Allman did experiment with country-rock on the ABB’s second album, 1970’s *Idlewild South*, with his song “Midnight Rider,” which he had written while living in Los Angeles during his tenure with the Hour Glass.

In 1972, ABB guitarist/vocalist Dickey Betts began adding his own style of country-rock to the band’s mix with the song “Blue Sky” (from *Eat a Peach*) on which he implemented his unique style of what sounded like mandolin licks played on a Les Paul through a humongous Marshall amplifier (Betts had played mandolin in a bluegrass band as a youth). In 1973, he contributed the song “Ramblin’ Man” (on

Brothers and Sisters), which sailed to number two on *Billboard's* Hot 100 singles chart. Betts's breezy paean to wanderlust was hardly representative of the ABB's overall sound or style. "Ramblin' Man" wasn't appreciably different from what the Eagles were already doing in California. "Ramblin' Man" and "Take It Easy" are so similar they could be made into a medley.⁴ In actuality all that really separated these two ostensibly disparate styles was geography.

Whereas blues were commonly associated with uneducated blacks, country music was associated with uneducated rural "rednecks." First of all, neither of these stereotypes holds true, and second, this division itself is a false dichotomy: In fact, both styles had much in common—as did the people themselves—and borrowed generously from each other.⁵ As Ray Charles, who spent his youth in St. Augustine and Jacksonville, told music historian Peter Guralnick, "You take country music, you take black music, you got the same goddamn thing." Charles's gift, according to author Tom Moon, was "erasing artificial divisions between genres to uncover the common heart and soul lurking underneath."⁶

The Allman Brothers Band tried to disassociate itself from the southern-rock tag, largely because, after the arrival of Lynyrd Skynyrd, this tag would become a liability, often equated with rednecks and racism, an inference ABB members disdained.⁷ Southern rock, as exemplified by Skynyrd, was music for "redneck hippies": crude, simplistic, it celebrated drinking, juking, and fighting, whereas the music of the Allman Brothers Band was sophisticated, complex, and cerebral.

Tom Petty, Southern Rocker?

Tom Petty, mostly known as a pop-rocker, did briefly flirt with a southern-rock image in the mid-1980s.⁸ Journalist Darianne Schramm writes, "Though he's often thought of as a southern rocker, Tom Petty actually shied away from that label as much as he could."⁹ Petty himself has said, "We're an L.A. band," since the Heartbreakers were formed in Los Angeles.¹⁰ However, three of the group's five members had been in a previous band, Mudcrutch, formed in Gainesville. In 1985 Petty was writing and singing about the South, even displaying a rebel flag at his shows. However, he later expressed remorse for this gesture.¹¹