



Only a block from my Madrid apartment— amidst complimentary shots of imported Kentucky bourbon and domestic cerveza chasers— my trip-hop chill-out Monday night mellow is crashed by a pushy septuaphiliac rocker from Barcelona, and it turns into a Southern-fried rock family reunion. "The guide says this bar plays '70s music!" insists this long-haired Catalan stranger, charging up to the bar with an irritating earnestness. "Lynyrd Skynyrd is coming in and they want to hear '70s music!' Aren't they dead?" I'd been seeing those eagle flight Dixie flag concert posters all over town ("First time in Spain!"), but I was sure they were dead. Only some of them. I would shortly learn. Little did I know that twenty years to the night of their fatal plane crash I'd be drinking till dawn with men who had not so long ago popped my pre-pubescent rock'n'roll cherry.

Looking For Love in all the Wrong Places

Even as a Left Coast euro-sissy-boy-turned-adopted-Spaniard, I've always had an affinity for things Southern. I was raised by an Arkie grandmother who pampered me with cornbread, okra and black-eyed peas. I am lucky to still have relatives who play instruments they buy at hardware stores and who refer to me as "kin."

Alabama ain't my sweet home, but when I see a line-dance, my DNA gets antsy for action. So when them Skynyrd boys make a trip to Madrid, we got shit to talk about. As "so you're American?" handshakes and road warrior stories are exchanged, the bartender cans the ambient drone and cranks up some Billy Joe Six-pack's pre-punk salvation. Windows tremble to "Sweet Home Alabama" as a roadie waves his Heart of Dixie driver's license, much as a fan might flash a lighter. We hang for awhile,

There, perched above his left
is the immortal phrase:

listening to rowdy southern rock. But alas, Leonard Skynyrd throws no rock-idol drunken tantrums. They do not bust the place up. These are congenial, down-to-earth, good ol' boys. There's not even any loud belching or discernible ass-grabbing.

Beavis and Butthead are Role Models

Has time and tragedy eclipsed their sense of duty? Fortunately, my fears are assuaged when one of the band members, inspired by a little southern comfort, turned to my friend and me to utter those rock star words: "Alright boys, where's the pussy?" "Hot damn!" I think. "Now we're whistlin' Dixie. It's party time!" In minutes, a visiting New Yorker and I are leading the band through empty streets in search of an after-hours alternative.

As a writer, I'm conflicted. Should I share these moments

of Southern charm and rebellion? To wit: how can I write about Lynyrd Skynyrd yelling "PUSSY!" in the streets of Madrid, knocking down street construction barriers at four in the morning, tossing Coke on the rude lady at Burger King, and still convey heartfelt appreciation for the camaraderie we shared? I'm gonna have to struggle with this one.

Here, There, Everywhere A Redneck

At this point, the orthodox, Southern-fried, original recipe purists among you might be cryin' foul: redneck rock in Spain? Actually, throughout the Iberian Peninsula, in towns like Albacete, Granada, and Morata a small musical subculture listens to home-grown country bands with names like Tennessee and Montana. They smoke Lucky Strike or Chesterfields, wear cowboy boots and aggressive sideburns, and relish an American dream few Americans have ever tasted. But when them Skynyrd boys come to Madrid, they are idolized only by the occasional human rarity— like the irritating fan who, in a moment of bedside bonding, shows me the tattoo on his chest. There, perched above his left nipple in indelible English-language caps, is the immortal phrase: BORN SOUTHERN BY THE GRACE OF GOD. "Mississippi. God damn!" is all that I can muster. I've been repeating the phrase all night (thinking only of that soulful ode to Dixie's darkside) and getting grim little smiles from the band in return. "Mississippi. God damn!" What I don't know is that The Magnolia State was Skynyrd's Jericho, until I scan the press release they happened to have with them. Skynyrd stood on the edge of becoming America's favorite touring band. They were on top of their world when it all fell away at 6000 feet above a Mississippi swamp. At 6:42 PM on October 20, 1977, the pilot of Lynyrd Skynyrd's chartered Convair 240 airplane radioed that the craft was dangerously low on fuel. Less than ten minutes later, the plane crashed into a densely wooded thicket in the middle of a swamp. The crash killed

Ronnie VanZant, Steve Gaines, Cassie Gaines, road manager Dean Kilpatrick and seriously injured the rest of the band and crew, shattered Skynyrd's fast rising star as it cut a 500 foot path through the swamp. Mississippi. God damn! Later, I'll learn that a Southern expatriated, Paris-based, writer friend of mine witnessed their final concert: "[I remember] about 10,000 screaming stoned drunk fans. My college roommate and I were directly in front of the stage and could look right into the faces of the performers. (Two nights later, I thought about those faces and



nipple in indelible English-language caps,
BORN SOUTHERN BY THE GRACE OF GOD

souped-up
Daisy Duke in some
Hazzard County
honky-tonk. In the US,
they're legends. In Spain, where
Southern-fried faithful are few and
far between, they're just some scary
looking dudes spilling Coke on the lady
at Burger King. I personally had to calm
their taxi driver with a quick "these guys
are famous. Don't worry, they won't hurt you.
And they pay."

When the sun came up, the band was gone.
They had to fly to Paris. I continued my rounds
solo. I ended the night Skynyrd-less, lying in
an 11am hashish haze on the neo-hippie pad
floor of a Spanish psychedelic rock band.
Despite their snakeskin cowboy boots, the boys
of Buenas Noches Rose had never heard of
Lynyrd Skynyrd. And they were scarcely
impressed by my impassioned explanation.
Mississippi. God damn!

how
they
didn't
exist any-
more... I
was surround-
ed by hysterical
teenage girls
screaming up at
VanZant. For 'Freebird',
the lights went out and
thousands of people lit their
lighters. It was a good concert,
even with all the vomit spewing
out of those young mouths."

My own Freebird memories are
rooted firmly in junior high school.
Etched in memory are those '70s sock
hops in the school cafeteria, the ones
where I always got stuck with the ugly girl. I
remember parent chaperones in leisure suits. I
recall my own rowdy hippie parents stirring up
Skynyrd-laced dance-floor scandal, to the great
amusement of Sycamore Middle School 7th-graders.

Now, here I am with Leon, an original band member, talking
man-to-man, recalling the day of the crash. Two decades ago,
almost to the minute.
He vividly recalls VanZant (if my Old No. 7 sour mash memory
serves correctly) sitting next to him, dead. "He had the face
of an angel, like an angel in heaven." Several times Leon repeats
something which my hazy memory records as "You've flown so
high, only to fall so low." He shows me his scars. We talk about
the crash, secessionism, and Led Zeppelin's Satan-inspired
lyrics. Leon shows me his tattoo, which, filtered through the
pre-dawn myopia of this whiskey-laden night, is either of
deceased band members or naked ladies. I cannot remember,
but I know there was reason to kiss the tattoo. When I do,
Leon shakes my hand, just as he will an hour later when I tell
him I'm trying to get him laid. Laying Lynyrd Skynyrd does
not wield the same cachet for Spanish women as it does for

