Catiline's Letters

"Sweet Home Alabama": A Racist Song?

by Catiline

Upon crossing the state line into Alabama, some drivers may be disconcerted to find themselves greeted by large green signs reading "Welcome to Sweet Home Alabama" (replacing earlier signs that read "Welcome to Alabama the Beautiful"). The new (as of 2014) signs have raised some eyebrows because of their apparent reference to the controversial Lynyrd Skynyrd song "Sweet Home Alabama," which many critics have characterized as racist.

So what's the controversy?

The song, released in 1974, makes a nod in its title to Robert Johnson's 1936 blues classic "Sweet Home Chicago." But in its content it's explicitly a reply to two Neil Young songs, "Southern Man" and "Alabama," recorded in 1970 and 1972 respectively.

Before taking a look at the lyrics of these three songs, let's set the context.

In the two decades before this battle of songs occurred, Alabama was the epicenter of the civil rights movement, from Rosa Parks' refusal to move to the back of the bus in Montgomery in 1955 to Martin Luther King and the Selma voting rights marches in 1965. A few examples will suffice to give a general picture of the period:

In 1956, a black student who had managed to enroll at the University of Alabama was kicked out by the trustees in order to placate rioting mobs of white students

When anti-segregation activists from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee entered the state in 1961, white mobs set their bus on fire and attacked them with baseball bats. Birmingham police commissioner Bull Connor openly worked together with the Ku Klux Klan to coordinate assaults on civil rights workers.

In 1963 in Birmingham, the police set firehoses and attack dogs on civil rights marchers. Later that year, an African-American church in Birmingham was bombed by members of the Ku Klux Klan, killing four young black girls. In the same year, Governor George Wallace, who had come into office with the promise of "segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever," stood in the doorway at

the University of Alabama and physically blocked the entrance of two black students.

In 1965, protesters in Selma were beaten unconscious, or killed, by police and others. In 1966, a black man was shot in the back of the head by a white gas station attendant in Tuskegee for attempting to use the whites-only restroom.

It was against the background of these sorts of events that Neil Young wrote his two civil rights songs – one about events in the South generally, and the other about Alabama in particular. The lyrics for "Southern Man" read in part:

Southern Man, better keep your head
don't forget what your good book said
Southern change gonna come at last
now your crosses are burning fast
Southern Man

I saw cotton and I saw black
tall white mansions and little shacks
Southern Man
when will you pay them back?
I heard screaming
and bullwhips cracking
how long? how long?

And here are some of the lyrics of Young's "Alabama":

Oh, Alabama
banjos playing thru the broken glass
windows down in Alabama
see the old folks
tied in white ropes
hear the banjo
don't it take you down home?

Alabama
you got the weight on your shoulders
that's breaking your back
your Cadillac
has got a wheel in the ditch
and a wheel on the track
Oh, Alabama
can I see you and shake your hand?
make friends down in Alabama
I'm from a new land
I come to you and
see all this ruin
what are you doing
Alabama?
you got the rest of the union
to help you along:
what's going wrong?

It was in reply to these two songs that Lynyrd Skynyrd band members Ed King, Gary Rossington, and Ronnie Van Zant (none of whom, incidentally, hailed from Alabama) penned "Sweet Home Alabama," which begins like this:

Big wheels keep on turning
carry me home to see my kin
singing songs about the Southland
I miss Alabammy once again
and I think it's a sin
yes

Well I heard Mr. Young sing about her
well I heard ole Neil put her down
well I hope Neil Young will remember
a "Southern Man"
don't need him around
anyhow

Given this opening, it's easy to see why the song has been seen as racist; Neil Young is being attacked for the "sin" of criticizing Southern, and specifically Alabamian, treatment of blacks. Mustn't the song then be a defense of that treatment?

Defenders of the song argue otherwise. As they see it, "Sweet Home Alabama" is not a defense of segregation, lynchings, or Jim Crow laws; it is merely an expression of resentment against the superior attitude of an outsider from the North (very North, in this case; Young is Canadian). To the song's defenders, the message is not "Stop

criticizing Alabama because nothing is wrong here," but rather "Stop criticizing Alabama because while there may be a lot wrong here, it's our business to address it, not yours."

On this reading, the writers of "Sweet Home Alabama" are reacting to criticism of Alabama in the same way that people often react to criticism of family members by outsiders: "*We* can criticize our family, but *you* have no right to do so." Hence the lyrics:

now Watergate does not bother me
does your conscience bother you?
tell the truth

In short, these lines can be read as saying: "Watergate is a Northern scandal; and you don't see us criticizing the North in general for it. Nor, we suspect, do you as a Northerner feel guilty about Watergate. So you shouldn't criticize Alabama in general for the wrongs committed by some Alabamians; nor should you expect us to feel guilty about what other Alabamians have done."

Further controversy has been generated by the following lines, which have been seen as endorsing Governor Wallace:

In Birmingham they love the governor
boo, boo, boo
now we all did what we could do

A possible endorsement of Wallace has also been seen in the lines toward the end of the song:

Oh sweet home
where the skies are so blue
and the Governor's true

as well as:

Yeah, yeah
Montgomery's got the answer

(Montgomery is the state capital, and thus the site of the Governor's mansion.)

Ronnie Van Zant has denied any intended endorsement of Wallace:

"The lyrics about the Governor of Alabama were misunderstood. The general public didn't notice the words 'Boo! Boo! Boo!' after that particular line, and the media picked up only on the reference to the people loving the Governor. ... Wallace and I have very little in common. ... I don't like what he says about colored people."

So if Wallace isn't being endorsed, what point is being made by the lyrics about the Governor? According to defenders of the song, the lyrics mean something like this: "we don't support Wallace, in fact we opposed him (hence the line 'we all did what we could do'), but it's not our fault that he's so popular (hence the line 'in Birmingham they love the Governor')." On this reading, the lines "the Governor's true" and "Montgomery's got the answer" are merely sarcastic. (I'm not sure who the "they" in Birmingham are who love the Governor – presumably not the same people who were being gassed, bludgeoned, and bombed in the name of segregation.)

Well, suppose the defenders are right in all these claims. Suppose the song is booing Wallace, not endorsing him. Suppose the song expresses *only* resentment against Neil Young's officious interference, and not a positive endorsement of Alabama's racist policies. Let's even add in the fact that Neil Young himself is a fan of "Sweet Home Alabama," and has said that the band's skewering of his own "Alabama" was justified because Young's lyrics were, he now thinks, "condescending." Is all of that enough to get "Sweet Home Alabama" off the hook for being a racist song?

I don't think so.

Racism needn't always take the form of active race-hatred, or positive support for race-based oppression. Trivializing race-based oppression is racist too.

Consider the following analogy. Suppose I say: "I am strongly opposed to shoplifting, rape, and littering." When accused of being soft on rape, I reply: "I *said* I was strongly opposed to rape! What more do you want?" The answer, of course, is that by throwing rape in with such far lesser offenses as shoplifting and littering, I'm implicitly treating it as trivial.

"Sweet Home Alabama" may not treat racist oppression as *justified*. But it sure as hell treats racist oppression as *not important enough to be worth making a fuss about*. What was happening to Alabama's black population was horrific; but it inspired no song of protest from Lynyrd Skynyrd. What inspired the band's song of protest, instead, was Neil Young's expression of sane, humane concern for people suffering from oppression and for a state riven by bitter conflict. It's a strange sense of priorities.

Was racial oppression in Alabama none of Neil Young's business, because he wasn't an Alabamian? Why wasn't his being a *human being* a good enough reason for him to care? Maybe Lynyrd Skynyrd saw Neil Young as a self-righteous Northerner poking his nose into affairs that didn't concern him. But we might well ask whether Alabama's African-American community, which was being victimized by organized violence both governmental and private, would have seen it the same way.

The central message of "Sweet Home Alabama" is: "Alabama may be the site of massive racial injustice against blacks, but don't you dare criticize it, because you'll hurt some white guys' feelings." If treating the tender feelings of some good ol' boys as more worthy of respect than the cracked skulls and bruised bodies of black people fighting for basic dignity isn't racist, what in hell is?

"Sweet Home Alabama" is, undeniably, a catchy song. But it's also a racist song. The song by itself is offensive; and forcing the taxpayers of Alabama, including the black ones, to pay for signs promoting the song is doubly offensive. It's time for those signs to go.

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