Better South



I don’t really know where to begin to talk about this year’s Word of South Festival. I could begin at the beginning, that moment when I had my photo taken with legendary Muscle Shoals bassist David Hood, creator of what is arguably the coolest bass part in the history of pop music.



Both these gents can play the bass part from
I'll Take You There.
Only one of them created that masterpiece.

Go on and check that endless groove behind Mavis Staples. Set it on repeat. Mercy.

Alright. Ain't nobody crying. Come on now, David. Little David.

Or I could begin at the end, when David's son Patterson, founder of the Drive By Truckers, laid us all flat with his invocation of Patti Smith during his solo performance of "What It Means", his no-holds barred response to the ongoing series

of assassinations of Black men by law enforcement.



“Love each other, motherfuckers!”

It was all I could do to not dissolve in tears, but there’s no sobbing on a bar stool, motherfuckers, so I did what everybody else did and damn near yelled myself hoarse in assent.

Either beginning works, so I’ll go ahead and start in the middle of last year’s festival.

Anybody who knows me knows that I love The Bitter Southerner. And you also know I pretty much love my now-and-future hometown of Tallahassee — especially the Word of South festival, our yearly mashup of music and literature. About a year ago, over breakfast with BS editor Chuck Reece and WoS founder Mark Mustian, I watched an agreement take shape that made Bitter Southerner the host for a stage at the 2018 shindig. A full weekend of whatever Chuck and his crew could cook up. I had no idea what was coming.

A year later, the Bitter Southerner Stage was the center of gravity at a festival that had no shortage of crackerjack talent. Whether it was sax killer Darius Jones trading verses with novelist Catherine Lacey, or novelist (and Lacey's husband) Jesse Ball reading his austere prose from his latest novel, *Census;* or maybe a two-hour presentation from Guggenheim Fellow filmmaker Bill Morrison, or John T. Edge holding forth on the social and political implications of Southern Foodways, or civil rights activist and lawyer Ben Crump laying out harsh reality for the (lamentably) mostly white audience.

Maybe your high point came when 80s pop star Suzanne Vega lit up the night with her radiant voice and presence on the big stage. I sat down with a pal to "watch for one song" and move on, and one song became one more, and one more again until I had watched the whole show, amazed at the sheer beauty of Vega's language and sound.



When I stood up after Suzanne Vega, this is what I saw. Our

town cleans up right nice.

It would be ridiculous to try and pin down my favorite moment, much less the best moment of the festival. Because like any good fest, I missed more than I could possibly fit in, and you just know that FOMO feeling you have is justified.

But still, I'll give center of gravity status to the Bitter stage, and not just because I love that crew like I love breathing. It's because Chuck and team put together the kind of cogently thematic program that makes a festival more than just a collection of cool events. It's the kind of thing that makes a statement, delivers a manifesto. BS teamed up with friend-of-the-publication Patterson Hood<fn>Himself the originator of the "duality of the Southern thing" concept that drives BS.</fn>, who hooked in his own pals – including the angel-voiced John Paul White, ex of the band Civil Wars – who each extended the network one by one until the program took shape.

The festival began with White, Hood pere and fils, and another Muscle Shoals legend, Funky Donnie Fritts in a panel discussion with editor Reece. Tales of how it all began, what it was like to hang and play with folks like Aretha and Percy Sledge and Wilson Pickett and Mick and Rhymin Simon and, and. And how the tiny towns of the Shoals somehow became one of the most prized places to make a record (remember those) in the 60s and 70s.



And then came guitarist Cedric Burnside, grandson of the legendary RL Burnside, with a set of deep in the groove blues from the Mississippi hill country. Serious roots.



Then it was set by John Paul White and a tribute to the great Muscle Shoals songwriter Arthur Alexander, and I had to miss them both and endure the looks on friends' faces when they said, "Dude, how did you miss that? It was amazing.", which it most surely was, and which would have crushed me had I not been getting my gob smacked by Jesse Ball, or Jeff and Ann VanderMeer and their trusty bird sidekicks. And that led to Vega, which led to a kind of amazing after-party event featuring Charlie Crockett playing some ass-kick Texas roadhouse music.



The threat of overnight storms – the same line of storms that flat out shut down the French Quarter Fest in NOLA – led organizers to scramble to find indoor spaces for Sunday. Word of South has had its share of weather woes, and the danger of losing the energy of a festival by dispersing around town is very real. Our Sunday began with the Morrison film program – well attended despite the rain – an absolutely captivating overview of his career that led me to immediately subscribe to the FilmStruck streaming service so I can watch his stuff over and over again. You can get a 14-day free trial. Go ahead and sign up and watch Morrison's *Decasia*. You can thank me later.

Then it was time to get back to the Bitter South, which had moved indoors to 5th & Thomas, a fine listening room that was just barely big enough to hold the crowd. I missed the all-star tribute to guitarist/songwriter Eddie Hinton, who wrote the second sexiest song of all time, "Breakfast in Bed"<fn>Marvin's "Let's Get It On" will never be beat.</fn>,

and again I had to endure the “Dude, how could you?”, and I arrived too late for Allison Moorer’s set that had everybody buzzing.

But I was in place for Patterson’s solo set. Now here’s where I drop a mea culpa and admit that I have never, not even once, listened to the Drive by Truckers before.<fn>This is where most of you are thinking, “Dude, what the hell?” I know, right?</fn> No reason, it just never happened.<fn>This gap, along w my ignorance of John Paul and Civil Wars, is going to change, and fast. Is there anything as wonderful as finding music you did not know about?</fn> So I was completely unprepared for the way Hood got inside my head and heart, heedless of the passion and social consciousness this guy has going on. His evocation of the shared complexities of human existence – and the particularities of the Southern thing – literally had me shaking and in tears. And then all the Muscle Shoals-grown talent took the stage, and Little David struck up the bass line to “Respect Yourself”, and nah-nah-nah, the place damn near exploded, y’all, we were in the presence of The Spirit, that thing that undergirds everything there is, whatever the hell that might mean to anyone, much less this heathen scribbler trying to make some kind of sense of all this.



Respect yourselves, motherfuckers

I was fortunate to be able to share this thought with Patterson later: He had taken my heart and shown me what was inside, a direct challenge delivered with love and compassion. And when he invoked Patti with “Love each other, motherfuckers”, I was rendered paralyzed with hope and fear and resolve to maintain my own small engagement with the larger world in vain hope that I can change something, even if it is only my own limited understanding of how we thrive and suffer together.

And that has been the mission of Bitter South from the jump: to show us where we connect, where we are all the same even while we honor and embrace our (and your) difference. The programming of the Muscle Shoals crew – hell, of Muscle Shoals as an ideal to live up to – delivers the kind of thematic resonance that can take a good festival and move it towards greatness.

Most of these musicians could have made a much better paycheck doing another gig elsewhere, but they chose this weekend to make a statement and take a stand. They made the world a better place for the several hundreds of people in their orbit, and their work went to support my pal Chuck and my hometown – and Word of South itself. I love all these things fiercely, and as such, I love my new friends Patterson and David, John Paul and Reed and Adam and Ben. Thank you gentlemen.

Word of South stands at a hinge point. Four years down, it faces the question of "what are we going to be when we grow up?" From the first time I heard about Mustian's idea, well before the first festival took place, I had a sense that this was the kind of event that could put Tallahassee on the cultural map, an event that would make people say, "We have got to go to Word of South this year". It has been a very good festival, with year after year improvement. And I take nothing away from the rest of the talent at the 2018 fest: it was loaded and fabulous. I elevate the Bitter South contribution because it has the internal logic and structure that, as I said before, can make a good festival great.

There is rumor of BS returning next year. Let's hope so. There is rumor of other collaborations of this sort. Bravo! As WoS celebrates its fifth birthday next Spring, I want my friends from Atlanta and NOLA and Knoxville, from Seattle and London and New York to look at the lineup, mark the dates and say, "Wild horses wouldn't keep me away".

The challenge is drawn, WoS. It won't be easy, but I'm with you 100 percent.