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The South's Rock Renaissance

The popularity of rock acts like Alabama Shakes, Bitter and Lee Bains III and the Glory Fires is fueling an expansion in the South's live-music scene

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Rock 'n' roll hasn't ruled American pop culture for decades, but in the South, it's enjoying a renaissance.

From the garage-punk bands of Nashville to Atlanta's metal-heads, Southern rock scenes are flourishing, sprouting new acts, clubs and publications. The new acts are different from their predecessors: They are multi-ethnic and tackle thorny subjects with a centrist voice. Rather than hiding their accents, they take pride in their Southernness and flaunt it. Musically, they've splintered into a variety of styles, from retro-soul and revved-up Lynyrd Skynyrd-esque rock to punk.

"Southern rock has gone from being music made by white guys with accents like mine to being this multicultural thing that crosses so many genres," says Chuck Reece, editor-in-chief of the Bitter Southerner, a Southern music and culture magazine whose digital audience has grown to more than 100,000 monthly viewers since its launch in 2013.

The South has long been a wellspring of American popular music, from New Orleans jazz to Memphis rock and roll to Atlanta rap. The latest rock revival shows how dramatically this region's demographic and economic landscape is changing. In the past decade, the South has seen more growth in Hispanics, Asians and mixed-race Americans than any region, says William Frey, a Brookings Institution demographer. There's also been an infusion of young people from New York, Chicago, Los Angeles and rural parts of the Midwest into Southern cities, drawn by a strong regional economy and lower living costs. This "blend of lifestyles, backgrounds and origins will keep the region on the cutting edge of cultural change," Mr. Frey says.

Among notable Southern acts are Lee Bains III and the Glory Fires of Birmingham, Ala.; Bitter, a punk band with two transgender members and a Latina lead singer; and Alabama Shakes, led by powerhouse Brittany Howard, who is biracial.

The popularity of homegrown Southern acts has fueled a broad expansion in the live-music scene. In 2015, The Bowery Presents, a New York-based concert promoter, partnered with musician-entrepreneur Brian Teasley to open Birmingham's 500-capacity club Saturn. The new venue is a step up from Mr. Teasley's earlier 250-capacity room, Bottletree. "It's unbelievable how much the demand for great music has grown here in the last 10 years," Mr. Teasley says.

Bigger bands like TV on the Radio "didn't come here in anywhere near the frequency that they do now," Mr. Teasley says. Meanwhile, Birmingham's music-business infrastructure has grown—more bands, labels, blogs, record stores and venues, such as the 1,300-capacity Iron City, he says.

Louisville, Ky., has also seen expansion. Zanzabar, a favorite local venue, recently doubled its capacity and now accommodates nearly 400 people. Co-owner Jon Wettig says he hopes an apartment the venue owns next door will entice more bands to come through.

In Nashville, Live Nation, the country's biggest concert promoter, has been bulking up. It now runs the city's Ascend Amphitheater and Carl Black Chevy Woods Amphitheater. Rival AEG Presents is planning to open two new music establishments—a 4,000-capacity venue and a 600-capacity one—in downtown Nashville as part of a new entertainment district.

Jordan Smith, 28 years old, founder of Nashville group Diarrhea Planet, moved there from central Indiana in 2007. His band has four lead guitarists—evoking the signature multiple guitars of Skynyrd, yet also sounding, at times, like Van Halen. Initially, Diarrhea Planet had difficulty getting gigs because Nashville bookers deemed its members transplants, Mr. Smith says. (Their name—they were a joke band at first—didn't help.) Now, Nashville's scene boasts bands from a dizzying array of rock subgenres, Mr. Smith says.

What unites the new crop of bands is their inclusive definition of Southernness. "The whole sweep of changes from the first era of Southern rock to where we are now has a lot to do with the younger generation becoming more comfortable living in diverse environments," Bitter Southerner's Mr. Reece says. Atlanta's Bitter, which formed a year ago, sometimes sings in Spanish; its Houston-born singer and songwriter Maritza Nuñez, 21, a first-generation Mexican-American, loves Shakira and Courtney Love. Asked about "Southern rock," which typically evokes older white bands, drummer Zo Chapman says: "We're rock, and we're from the South... You better put our picture in the dictionary."

Perhaps the region's biggest breakout group is Alabama Shakes, based in Athens, Ala., who won Grammy awards in 2016 for Best Rock Performance and Best Alternative Music Album. The band has racked up nearly 1.7 million in album units, including sales and streams, says Nielsen Music. Jason Isbell and the 400 Unit, another thriving act, debuted at No. 4 on the Billboard chart last month with their new album, "The Nashville Sound."

Armed with social media, even isolated Southern bands can build fan bases. Riley Gale, the 31-year-old frontman of Dallas punk-metal band Power Trip, says touring is expensive for "land-locked" Texas bands since it takes nine hours just to drive west from Dallas to El Paso. Streaming services and social-media postings help bands get attention and pack shows. "The signal has been boosted," he says.

The Glory Fires, who fuse classic-rock, punk and soul, released their third album on Friday. Frontman Lee Bains III, 32, an English-literature major who wears a baseball cap and holds a construction job, says his first concert was seeing the Allman Brothers Band. Yet he calls Atlanta rap duo OutKast his Beatles. "The South doesn't sound one way," he says. "It's a multitude." On "Whitewash," a new song, he rejects white privilege, saying he doesn't want "power over anybody."

The Glory Fires are the latest in a line of unashamedly Southern rockers. Lynyrd Skynyrd wrote "Sweet Home Alabama" in response to Neil Young's criticisms of the region. Drive-By Truckers, who revived Southern rock in the 2000s, took pride in Southernness but also challenged the region's troubled history. On "The Weeds Downtown," from the Glory Fires' 2014 album, "Dereconstructed," Mr. Bains tries to convince his now-wife to move back to Birmingham: "I know that Birmingham gets you down / But look what it raised you up to be."

Seventies acts like the Charlie Daniels Band defended the South at a time when it was poor, largely rural and frequently disdained in other parts of the country. By the time pop, hair metal and hip-hop dominated in the 1980s and early 1990s, Southern accents had become a career obstacle. "Everybody was trying to run from their Southernness," says Mike Cooley, co-leader of Drive-By Truckers.

Today's bands "speak loud and proud with their accents," Mr. Cooley says. Being Southern has been an asset for Birmingham's St. Paul and the Broken Bones. Just three years after forming in 2012, the soul-rock group, popular in the U.S. and Europe and fronted by the energetic, bespectacled singer Paul Janeway, opened up for the Rolling Stones.

When the band first started, fellow musicians and fans questioned how they succeeded being from a small Southern city like Birmingham, Mr. Janeway says. "Now it's like, 'Y'all from Alabama!' " He laughs. "It's kind of beautiful."