



Follow Your Heart and Nothing Else

Thoughts on the Religious Anarcho-Primitivist Message of Lynyrd Skynyrd

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INTRODUCTION

If I can't dance, it's not my revolution.

- Emma Goldman

I don't care much for fancy music if your shoes can't shuffle around.

- Lynyrd Skynyrd, "Whiskey Rock-a-Roller"

Yes, Lynyrd Skynyrd – that archetype of “Southern rock” – has a long-neglected religious anarcho-primitivist message in their lyrics which this article aims to make clear. “Anarchist” here is broadly meant to refer to any philosophy that does not regard the state as necessary. Anarcho-primitivism, often associated with anarchist philosophers such as John Zerzan, can be traced back at least as far as Henry David Thoreau (who advocated self-sufficiency and simple living) and even possibly as far as the Chinese *Dao de Jing* (or *Tao te Ching*), written more than 500 years BCE. The *Dao de Jing*'s basic philosophy was one of non-coercion, simplicity, and living in harmony with nature. As it states (in Stephen Mitchell's translation):

Keep sharpening your knife and it will blunt

Chase after money and security and your heart will never unclench

Care about people's approval and you will be their prisoner.

These values bear close kinship to those expressed by the original Lynyrd Skynyrd line-up, before the 1977 plane crash that killed several members, including lead singer Ronnie Van Zant. The original Lynyrd Skynyrd, not the revived version, is the incarnation that shall be the focus here. That they were more than meets the eye has already been acknowledged by fans as well as writers such as Skynyrd biographer Lee Ballinger:

Perhaps most important is the contradiction between the band's image as pro-George Wallace Confederate rednecks and the reality that they were anti-handgun, anti-George Wallace, pro-peace, pro-environment, responsible citizens of the South. The band's redneck image was cast in stone by the massive success of "Sweet Home Alabama," mistaken by many people (who missed the chorus of "Boo! Boo! Boo!") as an endorsement of racist Alabama governor George Wallace.

Yet “responsible citizens of the South” doesn't quite do them justice either [insert the sound of a table falling from a hotel window and hitting the ground]. They were, shall we say, a tad more complex. Despite writing an early song against handguns (“Saturday Night Special”) and being perhaps the first rock band to do a public advertisement for vegetarianism on a record cover (“Street Survivors”, 1977), such nuances were lost in the media shuffle.

"Simple Man: Henry David Thoreau," Anthony T. Fiscella.



This article does not claim that anyone in Lynyrd Skynyrd was familiar with either Chinese Daoism (used very loosely here), anarchism (used just as loosely), or the writings of Thoreau, but instead argues that the spirit that runs through much of their lyrics is in line with elements from those traditions. The anarchism described here is not one which necessarily involves active mobilization against the state (though some Daoists did that) but one in which the state “dies” out of neglect. It belongs to a tradition of mystical anarchism in which the source for authority is found within oneself. The state is neglected because, in this view, the wiser one is, the less one attempts to control others. Like Nietzsche’s dilemma (if you stare long enough into the abyss you may find it staring back at you), active opposition to the state can make opponents fight on its terms and become more coercive and state-like in their thinking and behavior as they struggle for power and control. Various types of non-coercive anarchism, however, are fairly common.

In 2012, I presented a paper at an anarchist studies conference in Loughborough, England. In order to exemplify how ill-equipped we tend to be at recognizing alternative forms of anarchism, I read a paragraph from the charter of an unnamed group and asked the listeners to identify it with an international movement:

Article 9: [Our group] as such, ought never be organized; but we may create service boards or committees directly responsible to those they serve.’ ...Did anyone ever hear of a nation, a church, a political party, even a benevolent association that had no membership rules? ...Power to direct or govern is the essence of organization everywhere. Yet [our group] is an exception. It does not conform to this pattern. Neither its General Service Conference, its Foundation Board, nor the humblest group committee can issue a single directive to [any] member and make it stick, let alone mete out any punishment. We’ve tried it lots of times, but utter failure is always the result. Groups have tried to expel members, but the banished have come back to sit in the meeting place, saying, ‘This is life for us; you can’t keep us out.’ ...It is clear now that we ought never to name boards to govern us, but it is equally clear that we shall always need to authorize workers to serve us. It is the difference between the spirit of vested authority and the spirit of service, two concepts which are sometimes poles apart. ... If nobody does the group’s chores, if the area’s telephone rings unanswered, if we do not reply to our mail, then [our group] as we know it would stop. ...[Our group] has to function, but at the same time it must avoid those dangers of great wealth, prestige, and entrenched power which necessarily tempt other societies. Though [Article] Nine at first sight seems to deal with a purely practical matter, in its actual operation it discloses a society without organization, animated only by the spirit of service—a true fellowship.

Although the audience agreed that this sounded like an anarchistic stance, none of the anarchists present knew that it was taken from *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* (1953) by Bill W. and Bob S. and that the group is Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)/Narcotics Anonymous (NA). In other words, there is a mass global movement of people organized in anarchist fashion and, in principle, opposed to all coercion in its ideal form of practice. This is the antithesis to coercive capitalism and the militaristic state but very close to the type of Daoistic anarchism advocated by Lynyrd Skynyrd.

BACK TO THE ROOTS: WHEN NEIL WAS YOUNG AND LYNYRD WAS LEONARD

*Looking back on the road I've traveled, the miles tell a million tales.
Each year is like some rolling freight train, and cold as starlight on the rails.*

- Utah Phillips, anarcho-syndicalist hobo, "Starlight on the Rails"

*I jumped off a boxcar down around Tennessee,
I was cold, tired and dirty, hungry as I could be,
...I'm a hobo I know but that's the price I pay,
Guess I'll write me another song while I'm on my way.*

- Lynyrd Skynyrd, "Railroad Song"

Before settling on Lynyrd Skynyrd, the band had tried names such as The Wildcats, Sons of Satan, and The One Percent (a name popularized by Hell's Angels to describe outlaw bikers). Ultimately, they named themselves in "honor" of Leonard Skinner, a high school gym coach who was known for his strictness and his intolerance of long hair. In a Daoist-like aikido move they adopted their moniker from their authoritarian teacher. His harassment was met with their mock homage. To complete the Daoist cycle, they kept their long hair but befriended him later in their career. Their non-violent protest using humor and humility won the day.

The band's music included influences from black blues artists, British rock, and hippie psychedelia. Ed King, the man behind the guitar solo on "Sweet Home Alabama", originally played with the trippy West Coast band Strawberry Alarm Clock. Core members, including Ronnie Van Zant, came not from Alabama but Jacksonville, Florida. In 1974 "Sweet Home Alabama" became an early hit for the band and helped define their image, yet it was, like their band name, laced with a subtle humor. In a 1976 interview with Los Angeles DJ Jim Ladd, Van Zant even called the song a "joke". But that was only half-true. Neil

Ronnie Van Zant in Jacksonville, 1971. Photo: Donnie Smith.



Young had written anti-racist songs titled “Alabama” and “Southern Man” which, also according to a 1974 interview with Van Zant by *Rolling Stone*, felt to Van Zant like Young was shooting all the ducks in order to kill one or two. Furthermore, Neil Young didn’t even come from the U.S. (much less the South). He was Canadian and this gave his critique the coercive flavor of a do-gooder-know-it-all. The South, in Lynyrd Skynyrd’s eyes, was far larger than its worst (and most publicized) components.

So “Sweet Home Alabama” was a playful way of owning the “ugly” as a badge of honor: it was half-serious, half-joke, and wholly ambiguous. In order to clarify misinterpretations of the song, Van Zant who was fan of Neil Young, wore Young t-shirts on stage and on the cover of “Street Survivors.” He also rejected the racism of Governor George Wallace (known for saying things such as “segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever”). In fact, Lynyrd Skynyrd had “integrated” both “Sweet Home Alabama” (which included African-American Merry Clayton as back-up vocalist) and the LP it appeared on (celebrating a fictional black blues musician in “The Ballad of Curtis Loew” who “was the finest picker to ever play the blues”).

Expressing concern for the environment and solidarity with the poor, Van Zant asked in “Things Goin’ On” (same LP as above): “Have you ever lived down in the ghetto? Have you ever felt the cold wind blow?” He bemoaned lives lost in war, money wasted on space exploration, and people in power who are “gonna ruin the air we breathe”. The lyrical contrast between “Sweet Home Alabama” and “Things Goin’ On” suggests that different songs need to be read in different ways.

THE DAO OF THE SOUTH: AN EXEGETICAL TECHNIQUE FOR DECODING LYNYRD SKYNYRD

The name that can be named is not the eternal Name.

...Free from desire, you realize the mystery.

Caught in desire, you see only the manifestations.

- Dao de Jing 1:1, 4

No man has got it made. If he thinks he does, he’s wrong.

... ‘Cause they got so much money or a woman so fine,

Well, my friends have all been fools, it happens every time.

- Lynyrd Skynyrd, “Every Mother’s Son”

Instead of searching for “true” or “false” interpretations of their lyrics, the proposal here is to offer one lens with which to read Lynyrd Skynyrd. This lens entails looking at some broad recurring themes in their records from 1968–1977 and then at how some of these themes might be understood as a form of religious anarcho-primitivism. These themes can, for simplicity’s sake, be organized in two broad clusters: 1) Worldly songs (often dealing with attraction to women, leaving a woman, hardships, personal stories, etc.), and 2) Idealist songs (often with images of nature, the simple life, or life as an unattached traveler).

Sometimes elements from both clusters were combined in one song (i.e. “Free Bird”). Indeed, the two theme-clusters can be seen as a *yin-yang* circle where each of the clusters contains elements of both the utopian ideal and the bitter reality. For example, the ideal of finding a suitable partner (i.e. “Searchin’”) was contrasted with the worldly reality of heartbreak (i.e. “Cheatin’ Woman”) and lust (“On the Hunt”). Women, as both a symbol for unattained ideals and actual temptations and disappointment, like the *yang* in the *yin*, could be both at once. This unity of inseparable but complementary opposites also ensured the inevitability of constant tension. Subsequently, the ideal of living with little or no money was contrasted with the reality of success and the temptations that wealth provided.

Thus, the contrast between the “ideal” and the “worldly” is one way that we can make sense of the apparent contradictions in Skynyrd’s lyrics that addressed the battlefield that each person faces in their soul, in their mind, and their daily life. The results are inevitably mixed. So while “idealist” songs railed against substance abuse and materialism (i.e. “Poison Whiskey”, “That Smell”, “Simple Man”, etc.), the “worldly” songs seemed to celebrate such things (i.e. “Whiskey Rock-a-Roller”, “What’s Your Name?”, etc.). At the same time, the band’s idealist songs were never preachy or spoken from a position of higher moral authority. As Van Zant sang in the song “Every Mother’s Son”: “I’m not trying to preach to no one, to no one at all”.



“The Dao Will Rise Again,” Anthony T. Fiscella.

This is the core genius of Lynyrd Skynyrd’s Daoistic approach: the ideal was expressed as a non-moralizing appeal to the moral conscience. As such, “Saturday Night Special” stated that “handguns are made for killin’– ain’t good for nothin’ else” and encouraged gun-owners to freely throw their guns “to the bottom of the sea”. But it did not call for coercive gun control organized by the state. In other words, Skynyrd advocated a non-coercive approach to confronting coercion. Substance abuse was challenged from the perspective of someone who has been there. Detachment from state and society was described from the perspective of poverty and the hobo. So when Skynyrd spoke about the idealized simple life away from the pollution of city life, they did so without casting judgment. As the philosopher Lao Tzu is said to have written in the Dao de Jing: “Because the wise one believes in himself, he doesn’t try to convince others”. Instead of wasting their time on arguments (“don’t ask me no questions and I won’t tell you no lies”), Skynyrd emphasized the choice to move on and go with the flow of life (“I must be travelling on now”, to be “free as a bird”). The theme of the journey is also common amongst Christian, Islamic, and Daoist mystics as both a metaphor for and practice of being in connection with Ultimate Reality.

SIMPLE PLAN: THE RELIGIOUS ANARCHO-PRIMITIVIST MESSAGE OF LYNYRD SKYNYRD

Question authority.

- Anarchist saying

Don’t let anyone tell you what to do.

- Lynyrd Skynyrd, “Ain’t No Good Life”

The lyrical world of Lynyrd Skynyrd does not deal much with the state. Its legitimacy is denied primarily in its lack of recognition. It dies by neglect. The meaning of Ronnie Van Zant’s lyrical claim that “Watergate does not bother me” is found in the line that followed: “Does your conscience bother you?” As Jesus is said to have defended the prostitute from stoning, this line similarly suggested, “Let him without sin cast the first stone.” As implied by the Dao de Jing, moralism itself is problematic. A person who is humble and honest doesn’t need (or expect) government to guide them.

When figures of power appeared in Skynyrd’s lyrics (bankers, police, city slickers) they were viewed as the antagonistic “Other”. Police did not protect the free society but threatened freedom, for it was their “job to put you in the jail” (“Trust”). Police were neither dehumanized nor celebrated. Instead, lyrical self-identification lay more with the hobo, the free traveler, and the working class. In explicitly stating “I’m a hobo”, Van Zant affirmed the first article of the Hobo Ethical Code of 1889: “Decide your own life, don’t

let another person run or rule you”. The anomalous reference to Alabama as a place “where the governor is true” can be read as more sarcastic than representative of their stance on government.

Perhaps the most prominent symbol of “leadership” in Skynyrd’s lyrics was the mother figure Van Zant recalled as a guide and support – not as a form of authority (“Simple Man”). She did not set directives or give commands. She did not tell him to obey the law, get rich, pay his taxes, or join the army and fight for his country. Instead, she told him to live a simple life: “Forget your lust for the rich man’s gold, all that you need is in your soul”. The individual soul here is the *sole* source of authority. The core of the mother’s advice was to “follow your heart *and nothing else*”. This, in turn, was the core of the anarchist message of Lynyrd Skynyrd: Follow no authority outside of your own heart. When his mother told him to find a woman to “find love”, he was immediately reminded that there is “someone up above”.

The non-denominational and non-sectarian religious message was clear: Be involved in this world yet remember that there is a larger picture (also see “Ain’t Afraid to Pray”). The creator in the lyrics of Lynyrd Skynyrd was, like the mother figure, a source of support – not a judgmental deity with commandments to be blindly obeyed. The primitivist aspect, appearing in various songs, was particularly clear in “I’m a Country Boy” where Van Zant declares: “I don’t like cars buzzing around, *I don’t even want a piece of concrete in my town.*” This Thoreau-like rejection of technology and support of radical simplicity was complemented by two pillars of anarchism: mutual aid (expressing the importance of friendship in “Am I Losin” and “Need All My Friends”) and independence (pointing out that if people would just stick to themselves “they’d be much less abused” as Van Zant sang in “I Know a Little”).

This, in turn, was the core of the anarchist message of Lynyrd Skynyrd: Follow no authority outside of your own heart.

CONCLUSION: “THE ONLY TIME I’M SATISFIED IS WHEN I’M ON THE ROAD”

The world is our consciousness, and it surrounds us. ... To be truly free one must take on the basic conditions of life as they are – painful, impermanent, open, imperfect – and then be grateful for impermanence and the freedom it grants us.

- Gary Snyder

*Do you like to see a mountain stream a-flowin’, do you like to see a youngun with his dog,
Did you ever stop to think about... the air you’re breathin’, well, you better listen to my song,
And Lord, I can’t make any changes, all I can do is write ‘em in a song,
I can see the concrete slowly creepin’, Lord, take me and mine before that comes.*

- Lynyrd Skynyrd, “All I Can Do Is Write About It”

It is possible to see traces of anarchism in Lynyrd Skynyrd’s praxis as well. Years before hardcore punk record label Dischord initiated a policy of “signing” bands without the use of contracts, Skynyrd at one point refused to sign contracts. As scholar Walter Benjamin has pointed out, “the outcome, the origin of every contract ... points toward violence” of the state. Ronnie Van Zant explained to Jim Ladd in 1976:

Van Zant: We just decided that we wouldn’t trust anyone as far as what I call ‘pencil-pushers’, period. And we won’t sign contracts no more.

Ladd: At all? You don’t do no more paper?

Van Zant: Uhn-uhn. We won’t do paper.

Ladd: I hope you guys can hold that line.

Van Zant: Well, still it depends on what position you might be in. Fortunately for us, we have been selling a lot of records and stuff and, like I said before, we just looked at 'em all and said "What are you gonna do? Fire us?"

This stance was taken in response to the “bad man” who “lives his life for a dollar sign” (“Cry for the Bad Man”). Yet, like Alcoholics Anonymous and the Dao de Jing, the band was not interested in preaching an anti-state message or, indeed, in preaching at all. Hence, their lyrics managed to make appeals to the listener’s moral conscience without moralizing. They spoke about dreams and ideals without pretending to have reached those idealistic goals. In doing so, they helped spread ideas about racial harmony, vegetarianism, humility, simplicity, self-sufficiency, non-violence, mutual aid, anti-authoritarianism, the dangers of substance abuse, and believing in yourself without beating anyone over the head with it. The message is simply there for whoever wants to hear it.

Although Lynyrd Skynyrd may be remembered simply as symbols of the South, their lyrics suggested a greater commonality with street children in Brazil, Irish travelers, or Palestinians living in occupied territories than with the bankers, politicians, military, or corporate elite that run the United States. There may be no name for that type of anarchism but if Lynyrd Skynyrd were from ancient China instead of Jacksonville, it might have been called Daoist.

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