What's Between the Lines

SWEET HOME ALABAMA

Southern rock's preeminent band, Lynyrd Skynyrd, hit paydirt in 1974 with their Top 10 single, “Sweet Home Alabama,” from the album Second Helping. Hot on the heels of the band's debut, Pronounced Let's Nerd Skin-Nerd (which contains yet another guitar rock classic, “Free Bird”), the proud song about the South helped to catapult them to a well-deserved place in rock history. A tight, rocking outfit, Lynyrd Skynyrd featured the three-guitar onslaught of Gary Rossington, Allen Collins, and Ed King (who was later replaced by Steve Gaines) and was fronted by charismatic lead singer Ronnie Van Zant. They rode a wave of immense popularity until their charter plane went down in Mississippi swamp in 1977, claiming the lives of several people, including band leader Van Zant and guitarist Steve Gaines.

“Sweet Home Alabama” defines the very essence of Lynyrd Skynyrd. The finely crafted arrangement of this (basically) three-chord song reveals the group's subtle, distinctive approach—what Skynyrd bassist Leon Wilkeson so aptly described as “the art of complex simplicity.”

THE INTRO AND VERSE RIFFS

The opening measures of “Sweet Home Alabama” represent one of Southern rock's finest moments. A clean-toned, honking Stratocaster (Gtr. 1) spews out the famous three-chord riff that launches the song and keeps it soaring for four minutes and forty-two seconds. Based upon D5, Csus2, and G voicings (Fig. 1), the highly syncopated 16th-note figure breaks the chords into an arpeggiated form, and fills in the spaces with a few tasty embellishments.

The two-bar riff is cycled throughout all of the verses, with subtle variations mainly in the tail end of each pattern. Gtr. 2 enters in the 2nd measure of the intro with a cool little sliding lick, and then breaks into a counterpoint riff that supports Gtr. 1 throughout the verses. This is Lynyrd Skynyrd at its best: intricately crafted guitar parts that complement each other perfectly.

THE INTERLUDE AND CHORUS RIFFS

In the two interlude sections (between the first and second verses, and after the main guitar solo) Gtrs. 1 and 2 whip out yet another catchy riff. Here, the basic three-chord progression is retained but elaborated upon with a more linear approach. Both guitars play in unison, with the exception of the 12th-fret, “scooped” (quick dips with the whammy bar) harmonics played by Gtr. 1.

The same basic D–C–G chord progression is used for the structure of the chorus, too, but Gtrs. 1 and 2 mold it into an entirely different riff. Stripping the note choices down to only the root, 5th, and 6th of each chord (Fig. 2), they weave a syncopated 16th- and 8th-note rhythm across a cycling two-measure pattern, with Gtr. 1 adding hammer-on and pull-off embellishments over the G chords. In the final bar of the chorus, the band accents the chords F and C on beats 3 and 4, one of the very few change-ups in the relentless D–C–G chord progression.

THE SOLOS AND FILLS

The first guitar solo comes at the end of the first chorus and is a gem in itself. Relying heavily on G major pentatonic (Fig. 3), a scale common to Southern and country rock, it begins with a bluesy bend, then slinks and slithers its way through the four-bar section with the help of passing tones (C, B♭, and D♭). The longer main solo features some classic Skynyrd, rapid-fire pull-offs in bars 5 through 7, and keyboard player Billy Powell gets to exercise his chops on the outro section.

Not to be overlooked are the fills that add flavor to certain key sections of the tune. As an introduction to each chorus, the entire band plays a G major pentatonic line in unison (Fig. 4). Gtr. 3 says some tasty goodbyes in the interlude section following the main solo, then makes another appearance between the last two choruses. These are just some of the well-placed subtleties that add sparkle and flair to this “simple,” timeless piece of music.
SWEET HOME ALABAMA

As Recorded by Lynyrd Skynyrd
(From the MCA Recording SECOND HELPING)

Words & Music by Ronnie Van Zant,
Ed King, and Gary Rossington

Transcribed by Troy Nelson

Intro
Moderate Rock \( \frac{d}{d} = 98 \)

Gtr. 2 (slight dist.)

Gtr. 1 (clean)

***let ring throughout

*D keys signature denotes D Mixolydian.
**Chord symbols reflect implied tonality.
***w/slight P.M. on bass notes

D
Csus2
G

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D

Carry me home to see my kin.

D  Csus2  G

Sing'in' songs about the southland.

D  Csus2  G

I miss Alabama once again and I think it's a sin.

yes.

Interlude

D  C  G

Gr. 2  Riff B1

w/bar

Harm. 1/2  1/2  1/2

Gr. 1  Riff B
Verse

D

Csus2

G

2. Well, I heard Mister Young sing about her.

(Oo...}

Riff C

Rhy. Fig. 1
Oo. Well, I heard ole Neil put her down.

Well, I hope Neil Young will remember...
Sweet Home Alabama

D
Csus2
G

a southern man don't need him around anyhow.
South ern man don't need him around.

End Riff C

End Rhy. Fig. 1

Chorus
D5
D6
D5
C5
C6
C5
G5
G6
G5
C5

Sweet home Alabama,

Rhy. Fig. 2A
P.M.
P.M.

Rhy. Fig. 2
P.M.
P.M.

1/4
Sweet Home Alabama

where the skies are so blue...

To Coda 1

Sweet home Alabama.

End Rhy. Fig. 2A

End Rhy. Fig. 2
Sweet Home Alabama

Lord, I'm comin' home to you.

Gtr. 3 (slight dist.)

Gtr. 2

Gtr. 1

Fill 1

Gtr. 3