

## **Panel: “United States As a Work in Progress”**

### **Melissa Norton**

**Title:** “Ballad of Jimmy Carter: Southern Rock and Presidential Election of 1976”

**Faculty Advisor:** Dr. David Schuster

**Paper written for:** History A335: American History Through Music (Fall 2015)

**Melissa Norton** is an IPFW Senior pursuing a B.A. in History and Women’s Studies. She transferred to IPFW in the summer of 2014 from Cottey College in Nevada, Missouri. She received the Linda C. Fox Scholarship as well as Withers Scholarship for the 2015-2016 academic year to assist in her studies. She is also the student representative for the 2015-2016 COAS Student Affairs Committee. She is a co-author of an encyclopedia article on women’s lives in Mexico with Dr. Richard Weiner.

### **Abstract**

The 1976 Presidential Election was the first after the Watergate Scandal that awakened Americans to the corruptible nature of politics and its prevalence in the United States government. James Earl Carter Jr., former Governor of Georgia, ran as the Democratic nominee promising to restore honesty and morality back into government. While people knew little of him, he became the political face of the “New South” of the 1970s that promoted racial equality and tolerance through political action. Carter’s “New South” went against Nixon’s own Southern Strategy aimed at drawing the white southern vote from the Democratic Party to the Republican Party. In the hopes of cultivating a progressive Southern constituency on behalf of his presidential campaign and the Democratic Party, Carter reached out to his friends, the leaders in Southern rock. Southern rock celebrated Southern heritage but also represented a progressive “New South” that recognized the problems of racism and tried to change them. Through primary sources such as newspapers and magazine articles from the period, along with secondary studies on rock music, Jimmy Carter, and the region, this paper explores the ways Southern rock was instrumental to the Carter campaign. Its artists supported Jimmy Carter’s presidency prominently by playing benefit concerts for his campaign that helped to both jump-start his campaign and keep it running. Carter and Southern rock musicians shared many characteristics, such as their outsider status. Carter was a Washington outsider, while Southern rockers were countercultural outsiders. Additionally, Carter and Southern rock both tried to represent the common man. By the late 1970s, the fortunes of Carter and Southern rock also appeared tied to one another, with the Iran-Hostage Crisis sinking Carter’s 1980s reelection campaign and bankruptcy and tragedy striking Southern rock. By 1981, Reagan’s application of Nixon’s Southern Strategy had successfully peeled away the white Southern vote from Carter and the Democratic Party, thus ending the attempt to forge a lasting “New South” of progressive ideals.

### **Bibliographical Note**

Primary sources came from magazine articles like the *Rolling Stone* and *Time* and newspapers such as *The New York Times*. Song lyrics, primarily from the Charlie Daniels Band and Lynyrd

Skynyrd were used as well as books such as *Why Not the Best?* (1975) by Jimmy Carter and *Jimmy Who?* (1976) by Leslie Wheeler. Secondary sources included *The New South, 1945-1980* (1995) by Numan Bartley, as well as oral histories on southern rock from *Lynyrd Skynyrd: An Oral History* (2003) by Lee Ballenger, *One Way Out: The Inside History of the Allman Brothers Band* (2014) by Alan Paul, and *Rebel Yell* (2014) by Michael Smith. An interloping memoir and cultural criticism called *Dixie Lullaby: A Story of Music, Race, and New Beginnings in the New South* (2004) by music critic Mark Kemp was also used.