

Flagging Support for Rockabilly Rebels: the Confederate Battle Flag's Place in the Current European Rockabilly Scene

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Abstract. *The continued presence and place of the Confederate battle flag in the modern United States of America is the focus of significant contemporary debate. Originating from the American Civil War the presence and use of the flag has spread through the United States of America and internationally, and its meaning has developed and changed far beyond its origins as a military flag. This paper addresses some of the contemporary uses of the flag. It situates the flag within current U.S. domestic political debates and considers how these relate to its usage in the UK and continental European rockabilly scene. It explains the reasons for the recent, widespread focus on the flag as a symbol of racism and white supremacy. The paper argues that despite some members' shared view of the flag as a supposedly apolitical, longstanding symbol of the rockabilly scene, the rising threat of white supremacy and far right politics internationally has made the defence of the flag in these terms insufficient. It goes on to conclude that the rockabilly scene in the UK and Europe could, and should, abandon their use of the flag with no loss to its identity.*

Keywords: *Confederate battle flag, rockabilly, symbol, music scene, politics, controversy, white supremacy.*

Introduction

In this paper I will address the continued presence of the Confederate battle flag, or rebel flag, (hereafter the flag or rebel flag), in the rockabilly music scene focusing on its role as a signifier of and for the scene in Europe, with particular emphasis on the UK. I have been a participant observer in the scene for a decade and my contention is that while the flag is not the single most important or central symbol of the scene it remains a significant and increasingly contentious one. I am arguing that despite being a signifier of the rockabilly scene in Europe for decades and encoded (Hall 1973) here in that time to represent ideas of rebelliousness, Southernness and independence in a chiefly

uncontroversial manner the contemporary awareness of its complicated, provocative history and its increasingly explicit connection with far-right politics and movements demand a reflection on its place in the scene today.

Existing academic models of analysis offer a range of theoretical frameworks for research on music genres and participants and use terms like subculture (Hall, Jefferson 1976; Hebdige 1979), tribe (Hesmondhalgh 2007) and neo-tribe (Bennett 1999), as a means of framing and analysing their examples. Although the examples of scene participants I will refer to in this work could in part be included within a discussion of subculture as offered by the Birmingham School- due to the scene's emergence from the wider Teddy Boy subculture¹ – I am following the work of Richard Peterson and Andy Bennett (2004) and Andy Bennett (2004) and using the term 'scene' to refer to the more contemporary iteration of the spaces I will discuss. This term also allows for recognition of the subcategories of local, trans-local and virtual used by Peterson and Bennett each of which are central to the contemporary rockabilly scene (2004). Less academically, and more anecdotally too is the tendency of members of the scene to refer to it as such e.g. the Andrew Shaylor's photobook *Rockin' The Rockabilly Scene* (2011).

History of the 'Confederate Flag'

The symbol, often referred to as the 'Confederate flag', the 'Stars and Bars', 'the battle flag' or the 'rebel flag' was never the official flag of the Confederacy. Its wider usage through political and pop cultural contexts, both inside and outside the United States, led to it being referred to by a variety of names, a fact which in turn reflects the variety of connotations and negotiated meanings (Coski 2005).

In the heat of battle, the true flag of the Confederacy, the Stars and Bars (figure 1), was too similar to the Union's Stars and Stripes; the confusion was a manifest danger to soldiers on both sides. As a result the battle flag was adopted initially by the army of Tennessee, and by the army of Virginia in 1861 (figure 2). It was also used in different formats by different branches of the forces through this time (ibid.).

In 1863 it was acknowledged in the Confederate congress as 'the [official] battle flag', and incorporated into the second flag of the Confederacy, the 'Stainless Banner' (figure 3), a white rectangle with these new stars and bars in the top left corner and later (figure 4) into the final iteration of

1 A quintessentially British youth subculture emerging in the early 1950s. Teddy Boys wore clothes influenced by the Edwardian style; hence Teddy Boy or Ted. They preceded the birth of rock and roll but quickly embraced the music as part of their subcultural identity. Online: <http://www.edwardianteddyboy.com> [Accessed March 2 2018]

the flag (ibid.). Through the period of the Civil War the flag was seen by Southerners to have acquired layers of meaning like 'duty, soldierly valor [sic], ancestry, heritage, and tradition' (ibid. 27).



FIGURE 1. MARSCHALL, N. N.D. 'THE STARS AND BARS' (1861-63)

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Flag_of_the_Confederate_States_of_America_\(1861-1863\).svg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Flag_of_the_Confederate_States_of_America_(1861-1863).svg)



FIGURE 2. ARMY OF NORTHERN VIRGINIA BATTLE FLAG (1861)

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flags_of_the_Confederate_States_of_America#/media/File:North_Virginia_Third_Bunting.svg

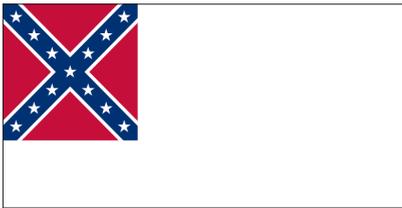


FIGURE 3. THOMPSON, W. T. N.D. 'THE STAINLESS BANNER' (1863-65)

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Flag_of_the_Confederate_States_of_America_\(1863-1865\).svg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Flag_of_the_Confederate_States_of_America_(1863-1865).svg)

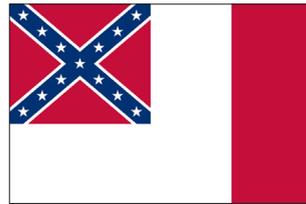


FIGURE 4. ROGERS, A. N.D. 'THE BLOOD STAINED BANNER'

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Flag_of_the_Confederate_States_of_America_\(1865\).svg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Flag_of_the_Confederate_States_of_America_(1865).svg)

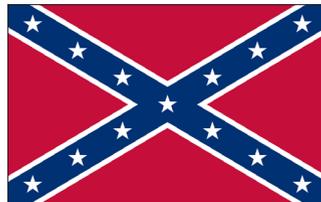


FIGURE 5. MILES, W. P. 1863 THE RECTANGULAR BATTLE FLAG OF THE ARMY OF TENNESSEE, CONFEDERATE STATES OF AMERICA ALSO CALLED THE CONFEDERATE FLAG, THE BATTLE FLAG, DIXIE FLAG, THE SOUTHERN CROSS.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flags_of_the_Confederate_States_of_America

In contemporary debates this citation of heritage has become a central point of discussion and argument about the presence and use of the flag. After the end of the Civil War the flag, in the main, disappeared from public view. In the subsequent decades it began to re-emerge in different contexts linked in some instances to political circumstances and in others to popular culture. These circumstances came to shape the reception and development of the range of meanings prompted by the flag and, significantly, the version of the flag that has entered the popular understanding as the Confederate, rebel flag (figure 5).

An early example of the re-emergence of the flag tied to wider political developments was in the late 19th century and the development of the Jim Crow laws which enforced racial segregation in the Southern United States. In this period the battle flag became incorporated in the State flag of Mississippi (1894) and the St George's cross element into the flags of Alabama and Florida (Ingraham 2015). This correlation, between periods of heightened racial tensions, demonstrations of white supremacy and instances of the resurgence of the popularity of the flag are an identifiable trend. (Thornton 1996; Talbert 2015; Strother, Piston, Ogrozalek 2017a).

The start of the 20th century saw many examples of the flag as a signifier of the South and it thus emerged as a visual identifier or metonymy for the South with all the antebellum romantic associations that it evoked (Coski 2005). There are many examples of the degree to which the Confederacy, in costume, with flags and with 'Southern Belles' became part of popular public imagination. One such example is Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936) and subsequent Oscar winning film adaptation of the book (1939). To celebrate the release of the film the city of Atlanta hosted a five-day celebration culminating in a parade attended by 300,000 people and featuring the raising of the Confederate battle flag and 'boys in grey'² as guests of honour (FlagshipTennessee 2009). This example, and the wider presence of Old South balls and Confederate re-enactment at different universities in the South, coupled with the use of the battle flag in national advertising campaigns (Coski 2005), suggests the presence of a more broadly spread appreciation, acceptance and even embrace of what has been called 'Confederate Chic' (ibid., 91); a removal of the flag from its specific military history and into wider cultural use. This widespread, pop cultural use of the flag came to offer a reading of the flag as an object and symbol detached from its original context and political significance. This new reading facilitated the rehabilitation of some of the historical associations of the

2 Surviving soldiers from the Confederate side.

symbol³. There was a shift from the dominant reading of the flag into a more negotiated reading (Hall 1973), widening the market for the symbol and softening the negative associations for many in the North.

Contemporaneously other groups like the Dixiecrats, a 1948 segregationist breakaway faction of the Democratic Party in the South, began to use the flag. The Dixiecrats' states' rights platform which included a rejection of any attempts at racial integration gave the flag greater visibility and a more obvious connection with racial politics (Strother, Piston, Ogorzalek 2017b). The 1950-1952 period offered what has been termed a 'flag fad' (Coski 2005). The rebel flag became a hugely popular, youth led trend and it was seen across the United States, North and South. Its usage went far beyond the immediate references to the Civil War and became a symbol of youth rebellion and popular taste; it was flown from cars, requested by boy scouts and carried by Shriners⁴ in New York. At the peak of its popularity flags were being made at a rate of up to 100,000 per week (Coski 2005). It also became a surrogate symbol for the United States of America for American soldiers in Korea fighting under the U.N flag. Here, the rebel flag came to symbolise soldiers' loyalty to America and the South (Korea), further illustrating the developing complexity of reference and intention connected to the flag (Grandin 2015), and developing further the set of negotiated meanings for the symbol.

Through the 1960s the flag began to be seen and used more as an accessory to active, rather than latent, racism. The marchers to Selma who were campaigning for African American voter rights, for example, were heckled and threatened by youths sporting the flag as a deliberate and considered racist symbol (Coski 2005). Through this period, the 50s into the 60s with the emergence of the Civil Rights movement there was an accelerated attention to the idea of heritage connected to the Civil War on the part of many white Americans. As at the turn of the century, where the emergence of the Jim Crow laws saw a spike in Confederate commemoration, this period of Civil Rights campaigning saw a re-emergence of Confederate flags (Reed, Press 2017)⁵. This embrace of the flag in the 1960s was seen, and remains

3 This was tempered with connections like that evidenced by Time magazine's 1946 photographic essay on the Ku Klux Klan showing the Confederate battle flag in initiation ceremonies (along with the Stars and Stripes) (Cosgrove 2017).

4 A Shriner is a member of a fraternal called Shriners International. The group are based on Masonic principles.

5 The Southern Poverty Law Centre has published a study of public symbols of the Confederacy in the United States which shows spikes in the dedication of Confederate monuments, the use of Confederate names and other iconography (across the North and South) coinciding with the enacting of the Jim Crow laws around 1900 and lasting into the 1920s and a second spike in the 1950s, into the 1960s which coincides with the modern civil rights movement. https://www.splcenter.org/sites/default/files/whoseheritage_splc.pdf

seen, as a 'rebuke to desegregation' (Berman 2015), and positions it as not simply a symbol of heritage or tradition as is often claimed (Petri 2015; Cobb 2017), but of intended hostility to equality, policies of desegregation and the removal of structural racism.

The use of the flag was not limited to a considered and deliberate political position in all cases, as the uses and recognition of its meaning had widened into general popular culture. By the end of the 1960s the rebel flag was seen by one journalist to have become 'simple rebellion, the degenerate form of any nameless revolt, indeed for any anomic nut with a generalized gripe.' (Warren 2014, 141). Any discussion of its presence and meaning in wider popular culture centres on this connotation of rebellion and revolt as a motivation for the wider adoption and uses of the flag. As it became incorporated into other areas of commerce and entertainment it was disseminated more widely. The use of the rebel flag by companies like Harley Davidson helped establish signifiers outside the immediately political; thus the idea of resistance and the outlaw so central to biker culture (Hopper, Moore 1990) was also incorporated into the flag's increasingly complex and adaptable semantic potential. In Europe it became a shorthand for a particular idea of American culture, specifically the idea of the rebel, the strong men and women of the romanticised South, it stood for "Elvis, the American South, and individual rebellion" (Coski 2005, 293). As Confederate Veterans Commander-in-Chief Robert L. Hawkins III stated, 'The battle flag... is not just a southern symbol. It is an American symbol and an international symbol' (Coski 2005, 292).

The Rebel Flag in Music

This widening presence of the symbol can be seen as an extension of the central theme in John Egerton's 1974 book *The Americanization of Dixie*. Egerton's book posits that the South and the North of the United States were becoming homogenised, with both sides trading some of their worst aspects rather than their best as he saw it. He argued that the South was losing its distinctiveness and this was leading to a loss of diversity and some of those traits that make the South unique. This concept of the Americanisation of the South and the simultaneous 'Southernization' of the North has been extended internationally with the adoption of significant aspects of Southern, and American culture. Music constitutes a key site both of cultural production and identity creation. The United States of America, North and South, has produced many genres of music with international appeal but the American South has 'produced most of the music genres considered quintessentially American' (Eastman 2012). Key genres like (outlaw)

country, blues, hillbilly, rockabilly and southern rock exemplify not just the musical traditions of the South but also the perception of the South as transgressive, deviant and dangerous (Decharne 2010; Eastman 2012). Additionally, the geographic origins of these genres meant that the natural association of clothing styles and other emerging signifiers of the music formed a central part of fans' identification with the music. Examples of this can be found in the wearing of hats and western or cowboy wear in country music scenes to the celebration of drinking and drug taking in song lyrics (Eastman 2007 and 2012). With the emergence of Southern rock genre in the 1970s and the success of bands like Lynyrd Skynyrd the battle flag became a key international identifier of Southern music. Lynyrd Skynyrd, and their most famous song *Sweet Home Alabama* (1974) represent a paradoxical and contradictory theme fundamental to my wider analysis. These representatives of the American South are embraced as exemplars of that region's style, attitudes and ideals while at the same time offering a challenge to many of those very same things. *Sweet Home Alabama's* lyrics celebrated the state but was critical of its segregationist Governor George Wallace, and it became an anthem for the South and adopted as a Conservative rallying cry. However, they stopped performing with the flag in 2012 citing the KKK and skinheads as having 'kidnapped' it from the tradition and towards the 'race stuff...bad things' (Fensterstock 2015).

Other Southern performers like Hank III (Sheldon Hank Williams, grandson of Hank Williams) and the metal band Pantera adopted the flag as geographic marker, a visual shorthand for outlaw spirit and rebellious attitude, using it to stand for the bands origins and attitudes⁶. Other artists like Florida born Tom Petty adopted the flag as part of album art and merchandise (e.g. 1985's *Southern Accents* tour) only to latterly apologise for its use, making the point that he had seen the it as a 'logo' of the South and it fitted with the theme of one of his songs (Green 2017).

This practice of 'flagging' (Scott 2016, 432-433), displaying or flying the flag as a marker of identification is for some an act of resistance, one that identifies an opposition to rebel against or resist. For others this display of the flag is less a mode of resistance as an act and more adopting the position of a rebel as a fuller identity (Scott 2016, 432-433). This sense of rebellion, so central to the idea of the Southerner as an identity, became a central part of the music of the South. With the success and spread of Southern music genres nationally and internationally these markers of the outsider spirit, rebelliousness, and danger and accompanying moral panics went with them.

6 The documentary *Slow Southern Steel* (Lipke, Terry 2010) contains interviews with musicians like Hank III and Pantera's Phil Anselmo in which they discuss the Confederate flag (from 54 minutes).

History of Rockabilly

Rockabilly music erupted from the Southern United States; specifically, Sam Philips' Sun Studios in Memphis where Elvis Presley, Scotty Moore and Bill Black recorded *That's All Right* in 1954 (Dregni et al. 2011). Its earliest stars, a young Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, Jerry Lee Lewis and Carl Perkins drew on the music of their homes and their country and hillbilly influences to create this new sound.

The term 'rockabilly' itself was not used in print until two years after the recording of *That's All Right* and though the exact definition remains contentious and mutable, key identifiers remain the country and rhythm and blues influence, strong rhythm and beat and an upright bass (Morrison 1996; Décharné 2010)⁷.

In 1969 Sam Philips sold Sun Records to Shelby Singleton (except the Elvis recordings which had gone to RCA along with Elvis' contract in 1955). The new owner was interested in making use of their available archives and back catalogue and European music fans began to compile and reissue some of these, and other, 1950s recordings (Décharné 2010). This interest in rockabilly sparked a full revival in Britain and other parts of Europe and gave a second life to many songs and artists who had achieved limited success in the 1950s. In Britain the rockabilly revival emerged from the wider rock and roll and Teddy Boy subculture and with the revival of interest in the music genre came a growing market for clothes and other connected symbols of rockabilly, the American South and rebellion.

For some, the embrace of American 1950s dress; from shops like Rock-a-Cha marked a shift away from the traditional Teddy Boy uniform of drape jackets and brothel creepers (shoes). In adopting the American styles these hepcats or rockabilly rebels looked to the styles of their 1950s musical heroes⁸. In some instances, this return to the American South for inspiration included the rebel flag⁹ as a marker of the scene, and in some cases elements of Confederate uniform as part of their sartorial choices¹⁰. The geographic

7 For a much fuller discussion and analysis of the emergence of the term and the identifiers of the genre see (Décharné 2010) chapters 1-4 or (Morrison 1996) chapters 1-2.

8 Example of reproduction clothing sold in Rock-a-Cha, <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O164832/trousers-rock-a-cha/>

9 In 1994 the Victoria and Albert museum held an exhibition of subcultural style. Their model of a UK rockabilly (1977-8) wore a 'confederate flag' badge on its jacket lapel (De La Haye, Dingwall, McGrath 1996).

10 In the 1980 documentary, *Blue Suede Shoes* (Clark 1980), you can see examples of this. At 4 minutes, two girls are hanging a flag in the bus window while the group sings the popular, originally 19th century parlour song, *Old Black Joe*. At 15 minutes, while Ray Campi plays *Rockabilly Rebel* the footage includes shots of an audience flying a flag with one wearing a grey Confederate uniform type cap, another wearing a leather jacket with studs spelling

and cultural remove from the United States, along with the music scene connotations of the flag offered it as a symbol encoded with meanings fitting the scene and not one that would for most participants evoke connections to the history of the flag as part of political expression in the United States. With the success of some of the bands in the scene, the flag, and its Confederate associations reached a high point of visibility in the UK in 1979 when the band Matchbox appeared on the nationally broadcast music television show *Top of the Pops* to perform their single *Rockabilly Rebel* with a prominent rebel flag and frontman Graham Fenton wearing a Confederate uniform (Sandorkeri1 2012)¹¹.

This transfer and transmission of the symbol through aspects of popular culture, rather than mainstream political discourse or the study of history, was widespread. There was a fuller pop cultural presence of the rebel flag for European film and television audiences with, for example, the hugely popular film *Smokey and the Bandit* (1977), featuring licence plates sporting the Georgia state flag (incorporating the rebel flag). Another example is the television show *The Dukes of Hazzard* (debuted 1979) in which the heroes' car, the *General Lee* with a rebel flag painted on its roof, played a significant part¹². These celebrations of rebellious, outlaw characters presented viewers with an example of Confederate iconography encoded with positive, playful ideas of independence, rebellion and admirable Southern icons. These encoded meanings hold significant weight for many when analysing and discussing the flag as part of the rockabilly scene.

Subcultural Peers and Controversial Symbols

The rockabilly scene in the UK emerged from the wider rock and roll scene. This was led by the Teddy Boys, a particularly British subculture, and one of the key youth cultures of the 20th century (Hall, Jefferson 1976; Hedbidge 1979). In the 1970s there was a Teds revival from which the rockabilly scene developed. Though coming from the same social spaces the differing emphasis of interest, influences and age groups meant there were some splits and divisions within the scene. For many of this newer generation the attitudes and tastes of the older peers did not always sit comfortably.

Rock-a-Billy and a rebel flag patch and a third audience member with a larger rebel flag patch on the back of their leather jacket.

- 11 Sandorkeri1. YouTube. December 26, 2012. Accessed January 19, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d3nPOfDCFtc>.
- 12 In 2015 repeats of the show on the TV Land channel were stopped in response to the Charlottesville murders. This decision was made explicitly due to the presence of the Confederate battle flag on the roof of the *General Lee* (Schaible 2015).

In *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Dick Hebdige addresses the significance of racism as part of the Ted revival. He addresses how, 'the visibility of the black communities [combined with a patriotic war time spirit in search for an enemy] to make racism a far more respectable and credible solution to the problems of working-class life' (1979, 83)¹³. This racism offers a seemingly significant paradox: how the people who champion the music so fundamentally tied to African American artists and culture could separate this from their own cultural and racial prejudices. Jerry Chatabox, founder of the Rockabilly Rave festival in the UK, addressed this when recalling his own start in the scene in the 1970s; "It all seemed crazily exciting. But it was also puzzling for us youngsters...some of the old Teds were very racist, yet they liked the music by Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Big Joe Turner and all the fantastic (and mainly black) American doo-wop groups" (quoted in Shaylor 2010, 11).

In this context the presence of the rebel flag might be read with degrees of innocence or intent, a range of implications from the well-established rebel connotations alone to a more explicitly racist application. These attempts to work out the dominant reading of the flag in the rockabilly scene is one that occurs and reoccurs in different forums (Sabin 2002; The Black Cat n.d.; Chernoff 2015; hoodoovoodoolounge 2009). Such discussions often hinge on the argument that due to the influence and impact of black music and artists on the creative side of rock and roll and rockabilly music there cannot be any racism inherent in the actions or intent of people in the scene even if they sport a rebel flag. Other forum posters see it as a significant part of the scene, one with longevity and so here to stay regardless of the negotiated meaning for participants (rockabilly.nl). This sympathetic interpretation of a symbol significant in one's own scene is understandable. However, I contend that contemporary debates about racism, heritage, white supremacy and free speech connected to this particular symbol demand a reconsideration of this attachment.

Rise of Far-right US and Rethinking the Flag

The Confederate battle flag remained a central part of Southern politics through the 1980s and 1990s and the presence and uses of the flag became a repeated site of controversy and conflict. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)¹⁴, frequently challenged the

13 Hebdige quotes a young Ted who hedges his xenophobia 'blacks...let's just say we are not with them' (1979, 67). This perception of continued hostility to non-whites is also evident in the documentary (20th Century Fox Rock 'n' Roll, 7m 43s), where two Teds discuss a black Ted and his 'right' to wear a drape jacket.

14 (NAACP's aim 'is to ensure the political, educational, social, and economic equality of rights of all persons and to eliminate race-based discrimination.' (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People).

public and state supported presence of the flag as a symbol of oppression and trauma (Coski 2005). Though there were some compromises of note, like the removal and relocation in 2000 of the flag that had been flown since 1961 from the dome of the Capitol building in Columbia, South Carolina. The central criticism of its presence remained; the flag is a symbol of the Confederate States of America, and as such, a symbol of racism. Many defenders of the flag supported their position and retention of the flag referring to it as a 'heritage' (Thornton 1996), and their embrace of it as 'Southern Pride' (Wright, Esses 2017) and 'heritage not hate' (Holyfield et al. 2009). In June 2015 some of these issues came to a head following a mass shooting of African American church goers in Charleston, South Carolina. Nine members of the congregation were murdered and one was injured when the white supremacist Dylann Roof opened fire on a bible study group (Larty 2015). In the subsequent police investigation Roof's website was discovered which contained images of him posing with the battle flag (as well as wearing a jacket with patches of the flags of Rhodesia and apartheid era South Africa), and visiting Confederate memorials (Lewis, Holpuch, Glenza 2015). In the aftermath of the murders there was significant response and a push for the removal of the flag from the front of the State Capitol building. It has been said of the shooting and the campaign to remove the flag that, "the shooting did not absolutely and permanently change the meaning of the flag, but it was an act of violence that, as an ideological practice, brought one of several competing ideologies to greater prominence, to such a degree it could no longer be ignored, and the Flag was removed" (Scott 2017, 433). For many others this feeling was shared and the state legislature agreed to remove the flag to the Confederate Relic Room and Military Museum (McCrummen, Izadi 2015). Others, like David French, attorney and staff writer for the conservative magazine *The National Review*, proposed that the flag should stay. He argued that while flying the flag as an official symbol of white supremacy is vile and should immediately end, the flying of the flag over Confederate monuments 'is simply history' (2015). This idea that intent and meaning would be evident and absolute is commendable but ultimately unrealistic. The flag was raised, depending on who you ask, either as a commemorative action on the centenary of the start of the Civil War or as an act of defiance and resistance to desegregation (Thornton 1996; Strother, Piston, Ogorzalek 2017)¹⁵. This point of contention itself highlights the difficulty in any attempt to apply and strictly define meaning and intention to the presence of the flag. In 1993 African-American Senator Mosley-

15 For the past three years on July 10th the flag has been raised, with permission, by the S.C Secessionist Party. Glantz, T 2018 Online: <https://www.thestate.com/news/politics-government/article214555950.html>

Braun stated “Everybody knows what the Confederacy stands for.” (cited in Thornton 1996, 234). This simple statement addresses the central difficulty with the topic, while everybody may ‘know’ what the Confederacy stands for what they ‘know’ is not necessarily the same thing. As Kevin Thornton states “these arguments are not about facts. They are about meaning” (ibid).

Since 2015 and these events the presence of the flag as a symbol of hate and right-wing politics, and as part of a national and international dialogue, has increased enormously. The claims and counter claims of a hegemonic meaning of the flag have been much more visible in national and international discourse. The American presidential election in 2016 and the closeness of President Donald Trump to groups and individuals who are self-confessed members of the ‘alt-right’ have brought these groups into the mainstream. In August 2017 a ‘Unite the Right’ rally was held in Charlottesville, Virginia. Ostensibly organised as a protest against the removal of a Confederate monument, the rally descended into violence and murder (Ruiz, McCallister 2017). Through this march and subsequent events the Confederate battle flag was carried alongside swastikas, Gadsden flags¹⁶ and a range of other flags and symbols. These groups included Neo-Nazis and members of the Ku Klux Klan who were joined by an array of other groups sporting symbols and identifiers connected with white supremacy and other fringe groups¹⁷.

Professor of Political Science Dr Nancy Love refers to the United States as now entering a phase which has the combination ‘of what might be called “retro-racism” with new forms of racial oppression’ (Love 2017, 26). Some of these groups are making use of traditional means and new media opportunities to disseminate their hate and develop support. Further in her book, *Trendy Fascism*, Love addresses the way that ‘struggles for justice need to address the realm of the arts and popular culture, as well as political and economic systems’ (2017, 27). With many of these groups using music, humour, pop culture and different aspects of internet culture to promote their ideologies it suggests that we should reflect on the ways in which our interests could be used to mask, or hijacked to promote, these positions.

Newer Identifiers and Nostalgia for Traditional Symbols

For the past six years I have attended the Rockabilly Rave, a four-day festival in England, now into its 23rd year. At the Rave there are up to 3000 attendees who are there for the music (bands and DJs), the dancing, cars, fashion

16 The Gadsden flag featured a coiled snake and the legend ‘Don’t tread on me’. It dates from the American Revolution but has become a widely used flag by Tea Party groups, Libertarian groups among others (Walker 2016).

17 The Southern Poverty Law Centre offers a guide to some of these symbols used at the rally (Southern Poverty Law Centre 2017).

all of which centre on rockabilly and wider musical influences such as country and hillbilly. As the Rave is held at a seaside holiday park the chalet accommodation gives attendees an opportunity to decorate their temporary living spaces. There are frequent examples of the rebel flag pinned to front windows for the weekend. Some are in isolation, others paired with other flags, which add interesting connotative possibilities. One example from the past two years include rebel flags side by side with a pirate flag with a skull and bones and text reading 'The beatings will continue until morale improves'. Other examples include the rebel flag beside the Texan 'Come and Take it' flag, commemorating the Texan revolution of 1830s and the rebel flag beside a flag with a silhouette of line of 'Tommies', British soldiers in the 1st World War on the background of a red poppy; the symbol of remembrance for that war (figure 6). Each of these combinations offers sets of signifiers that allow for a wide range of interpretation; from memorial, to resistance, to more overt celebration of Southern connection and politics. These examples and other instances of rebel flag patches on attendees clothing could simply fit with the tradition of the flag as marker of 'Southernness' and connecting to the music and the event through this geographic and symbolic reference.



**FIGURE 6. GLAVEY, P. 2016
FLAGS IN CHALET WINDOW AT
ROCKABILLY RAVE**



**FIGURE 7. GLAVEY, P. 2017.
BÉTHUNE BAR FLYING REBEL
FLAG**

In August 2017 I attended a 'retro festival' in Béthune, France. This is a weekend long free festival held throughout the town of Béthune and offering a range of attractions like live music, DJs, drinking, dancing and vintage cars. It is not exclusively rockabilly but centred on 1950s (and some 1960s) American and American inspired music. In the town there were a number of identifiers of this scene. One such identifier was a bar flying both the Stars and Stripes and a rebel flag featuring a skeletal soldier and the text

'The South will Rise Again' (figure 7). Another was a small Airstream style trailer, called The Memphis Rebels, selling alcohol which flew two small rebel flags (figure 8). Among the stalls selling vintage and reproduction clothes was a large stall selling t-shirts, caps, sew-on patches and other accessories. There was a huge range of caps, and sew-on patches with the rebel flag (figure 9), and alongside one board of rebel flag patches was another board of patches of different right-wing groups like the Front National as well as recognised Neo Nazi symbols. I include these examples not as an accusation against any attendee or organiser but to demonstrate the proximity in some quarters of these different symbols and groups who subscribe to them in one way or another. These examples, sported by far-right groups, are embedded in the political circumstances of a current American president openly supported by far-right groups and who is seemingly uninterested in distancing himself from these groups¹⁸. In France there continues to be significant support for right wing politics as exemplified by the (relative) success of Marine Le Pen, and in the UK this current Brexit hiatus or countdown has provoked substantial feelings around ideas of nationalism and immigration (Bulman 2017). These rises in right wing populism are widespread in Europe, more recently in Italy and Hungary (Sierakowski 2018). The proximity of these symbols and the range of meanings that can be understood from more ambiguous symbols like the flag can mask motive or launder intent. The meaning encoded is not guaranteed to be understood in those terms by those encountering the flag.



FIGURE 8. GLAVEY, P. 2017.
BÉTHUNE DRINK SELLER WITH
REBEL FLAGS



FIGURE 9. GLAVEY, P. 2017.
BÉTHUNE STALL SELLING REBEL
FLAG SEW-ON PATCHES

18 Details of this press conference demonstrate Trump's refusal to condemn the alt right factions at the demonstration (Gray 2017).



**FIGURE 10. GLAVEY, P. 2018.
CHALET WINDOWS AND
VINTAGE CAR WITH FLAGS.**



**FIGURE 11. GLAVEY, P. 2018.
CHALET WITH (GREYSCALE)
FLAG.**

This concern is being raised by some participants in the scene. Following this year's Rockabilly Rave one attendee made an appeal on the Rockabilly Rave Facebook page to ban the flag at future events (examples figure 10 and figure 11). The subsequent comment thread contains in microcosm the key arguments and counterarguments I highlight in this paper (Rockabilly Rave Official Facebook page). The arguments about the meanings of the flag in the UK, within the rockabilly scene historically and its origin during the American Civil War are all offered in the thread. There are charges of 'snowflake' against those asking for the flag to be excluded, and nostalgic (Smith 2009) references to the longevity of both the participant and the symbol in the scene as support for its continued use. All of these arguments and assertions exemplify the impossibility of defining the meaning even within the shared space of this music scene. But current rockabilly culture sees a mix of styles and identifiers of a rockabilly, or a wider rock and roll, scene that have emerged or risen to significance in the past decades. Many of these have become more ubiquitous than the flag. Does acknowledging their newness lessen their 'authenticity' of these styles and identifiers, or invite recognition of the possibility of a change in ideas of what the scene could be? One could see, for example, the presence of mid-century tiki or Hawaiian styles, the continued biker/greaser elements or the presence of a lot of Western wear as a demonstration of a range of signifiers that currently exist alongside the rebel flag. These three examples allow connotations of mid-century American culture, the traditional conception of the outsider or deviant, and the visual reference to the American frontier with its rugged individualism and a tradition of resistance; all things cited as central to the importance of the rebel flag. Further, the insistence upon tradition as a defence of the flag offers a paradox of such a scene; the regressive attention to tradition and a nostalgic view of some elements of the past is being

held on to as a means of connecting with the progressive, provocative and subversive past the music represents (Kattar 2014). The continuity and the connection with signifiers of this past offer a sense of a heritage within the scene (ibid). As such symbols and identifiers of the scene can become ossified and seen as essential aspects of it, offering continuity, validity and reassurance but can undermine that vitality, urgency and newness that made it so attractive in the first place. Dr Nicola Smith, in her essay about aging youth cultures (focused on Northern Soul), offers a typology of returning or constant participants as ‘progressive’ and ‘nostalgic’ (in Scott 2009)¹⁹. It acknowledges this identity as a dialogue between participants and as such open to change. With the rebel flag having become part of a wider and much more rapidly moving discourse in the public imagination since 2015, the arguments and assertion of its meaning(s) continue to be a significant point of disagreement. Though these discussions and analyses of the flag in the rockabilly scene are not new (Sabin 2002), I would argue that since the 2015 mass murder, the Charlottesville ‘Unite the Right’ rally and violence, an American president unwilling to condemn Neo Nazis and white supremacists (Gray 2017), and the rise of the far right in Europe demand serious reflection on the value of this particular symbol to this particular scene. The multiplicity of meanings made by the flag evidenced here and the continued variance in how it is decoded demonstrate the impossibility for a hegemonic meaning. The idea of traditional, casual usage or similar denials seem to be a less and less credible justification for a ‘neutral’ or playful embrace of this symbol (the ‘punk defence’, cited in Love 2017, 59²⁰). The presence of the flag as an opportunity to mask, or promote far right politics should be questioned. While acknowledging the historical significance of the flag in rockabilly culture and its continued significance for many I would argue that the scene would not lose anything essential by moving on from the symbol. Its current widespread and explicit use by Neo Confederate, white supremacist and far right groups as a symbol of their politics and racial prejudices is undeniable and should be cause to question its place in the rockabilly scene. Decades after his reflection on cultural change in the Southern United States it is time, as John Egerton (1974) then observed, to furl the flags and have Dixie fade for good.

19 This sets up a discussion about what might be perceived as essential to the identity of an older music scene and the degree to which change or adaptation might be accommodated while retaining this essential identity.

20 The ‘punk defence’ refers to the way humour or irony can be used to mask true intent or political feeling. The use of the swastika in the punk scene is the key example. Further discussion about the use of the swastika in punk can be found in Hebdige 1979, Sabin 2002, Hannerz 2013 and Croland 2016.

Postscript: *Between the completion and publication of this article the organisers of six of the biggest international rockabilly, rock and roll and roots music events (The Rockabilly Rave and Viva Las Vegas among them) published an announcement in which they ask attendees not to display the flag at their events. They recognise the flag as a symbol of the scene but also as one used by 'race hate groups' and as such ask people not to display it. I see this request and a positive development.*

The reaction to, and comments on, the post were broadly supportive but some people argued against the request; some of these are examples of arguments in defence of the flag I have discussed above (<https://bit.ly/2uah00Z>). This is a significant decision and demonstrates a divide in some parts of the scene around ideas of its evolution and is for some a demonstration of a kind of generational divide.

The reactions show a range of responses and reflections on the nature of the meanings created and developed in the scene and offer fuller and further spaces for analysis and discussion.

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Mojuojant vėliavomis rokabilio maištininkams: konfederatų kovos vėliavos vieta šiuolaikinėje Europos rokabilio muzikoje

Santrauka

Konfederatų kovos vėliava vis dar plačiai diskutuojama šiuolaikinėse Jungtinės Amerikos Valstijose. Atsiradusi JAV pilietinio karo metu vėliava išplito tiek Amerikoje, tiek už jos ribų, o jos reikšmė smarkiai pasikeitė; ji prarado ir originalią karinės vėliavos reikšmę. Šiame straipsnyje analizuojami keli šiuolaikiniai konfederatų vėliavos naudojimo atvejai. Autorius aptaria dabar vykstančias politines diskusijas apie vėliavą JAV ir mėgina paaiškinti, kaip jos susijusios su vėliavos naudojimu Jungtinės Karalystės ir kontinentinės Europos rokabilio muzikoje. Straipsnyje paaiškinamos priežastys, dėl kurių vėliava laikoma rasizmo ir baltųjų suprematizmo simboliu. Autoriaus teigimu, nepaisant kai kurių rokabilio muzikos atstovų požiūrio į vėliavą kaip tariamai nepolitinį, ilgalaikį rokabilio simbolį, vis didėjanti baltųjų suprematizmo ir radikali dešinės politikos grėsmė tarptautiniu mastu paverčia šį požiūrį nepagrįstu. Straipsnyje daroma išvada, kad rokabilio muzikos atstovai tiek JK, tiek Europoje galėtų ir turėtų atsisakyti vėliavos neperasadami savo kultūrinio tapatumo.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: konfederatų kovos vėliava, rokabilis, simbolis, muzikos scena, politika, kontroversija, baltųjų suprematizmas.