

In the catacombs, 30 floors underground:  
Auerbach (left) and Carney



# BLACK & BLUES

RUBBER SOUL DUO **THE BLACK KEYS** SPILL THE  
GOODS ON MAYONNAISE, TAKING PUNCHES IN  
HIGH SCHOOL AND AKRON, OH—A PLACE WHERE  
EVERYBODY KNOWS THEIR NAMES **By Wes Orshoski**

**C**AUGHT IN A REGRETFUL MOMENT, DAN AUERBACH AND PATRICK CARNEY ARE SITTING ON THE LATTER'S FRONT PORCH ON A SUNNY SUMMER AFTERNOON IN AKRON, OHIO, SHAKING THEIR HEADS. MOMENTARILY, THEY'RE BOTH LOST IN THOUGHT, REMEMBERING ONE OF THE WATERSHED MOMENTS THAT HAVE OCCURRED IN THEIR COLLECTIVE LIFE AS THE BLACK KEYS.

Auerbach's eyes glaze, as they recall finding themselves faced with the immortal dilemma that seemingly every notable rock band in recent memory has had to at some point go nose to nose with: Whether or not to sell out—or, rather, cash in on its newfound popularity.

Message board dorks and music snobs would universally agree that when the Keys refused a mayonnaise maker's request to use one of their songs in a U.K. television commercial, they made the right (and noble) decision. But with the luxury of a little distance, the reality is crystal clear to Auerbach and Carney: They were idiots.

"They offered us £100,000 [\$189,000 at the current exchange rate], and we were like, 'No, we can't do that,'" says Auerbach. "We were so stupid, trying to be all indie, because all we ever hear is, 'Tom Waits would never sell his music,' blah, blah, blah."

"If they ever ask us again, I will fuckin' cover myself in mayonnaise," says Carney, noting that around the same time, he and vocalist/guitarist Auerbach also refused the Hummer Corporation on the grounds that it produces gas-guzzling, Earth-killing SUVs. "But, now, if something that didn't even get like eight gallons to the mile—even if I didn't like it—I don't care. Fuck it, I don't give a shit."

"Yeah, we will be in the commercial jumping out of the jar," adds a cackling Auerbach.

But Carney, the group's drummer and incessant comedian, is only half-joking—maybe not at all, actually. The band's track "The Desperate Man" has since been heard in ads hawking Victoria's Secret lingerie, netting a good chunk of pocket change, and, more importantly, massive exposure for the two, whose last video was aired on MTV only twice, despite oodles of hipster cred.

The reality, says Auerbach, is that as young musicians (he is 27, Carney is 26), they have to make the most of their financial opportunities: "This is all we do. And when you're playing music for a living, the odds are against you big-time."

**T**he Keys and their building—albeit still relatively modest—success, are proof that no matter how goliath those odds, they can indeed be toppled. With only two members, these white kids from the heartland have taken a largely unknown black man's groove (the droney, buzz-saw riffing that pulses through the hypnotic, raunchy records of such North Mississippi electric bluesmen as Junior Kimbrough) and married it with suburban garage rock. Over four albums and a handful of EPs, they've done so with increasing acclaim from both critics and rock heroes (Robert Plant, ZZ Top's Billy Gibbons, Trent Reznor and Danger Mouse all count themselves as fans). And all of it comes from an unlikely source: Akron.

Sure, Cleveland's quiet sister to the southeast is home to the likes of Devo and Chrissie Hynde, but both have produced records that—while good, even great—were decidedly white. They come from a place where the primal scream and boozy, lusty grooves of such Keys discs as *Rubber Factory*, *Thickfreakness* and the new *Magic Potion* would most certainly be considered foreign.

Here, in this rubber town, in the shadow of the rotting buckle of the steel belt, there are the neighborhoods where the echoes of the economic depression from which the North Mississippi hill country blues sprung can be spied. It's from these places, one might guess, that Auerbach, the Keys' lyricist, siphons his howl and sorrowful stories.



**“WE ARE THE STUPIDEST BAND ON NONESUCH. FOR OUR NEXT ADVANCE, THEY’RE GONNA SEND US TO COLLEGE.”**

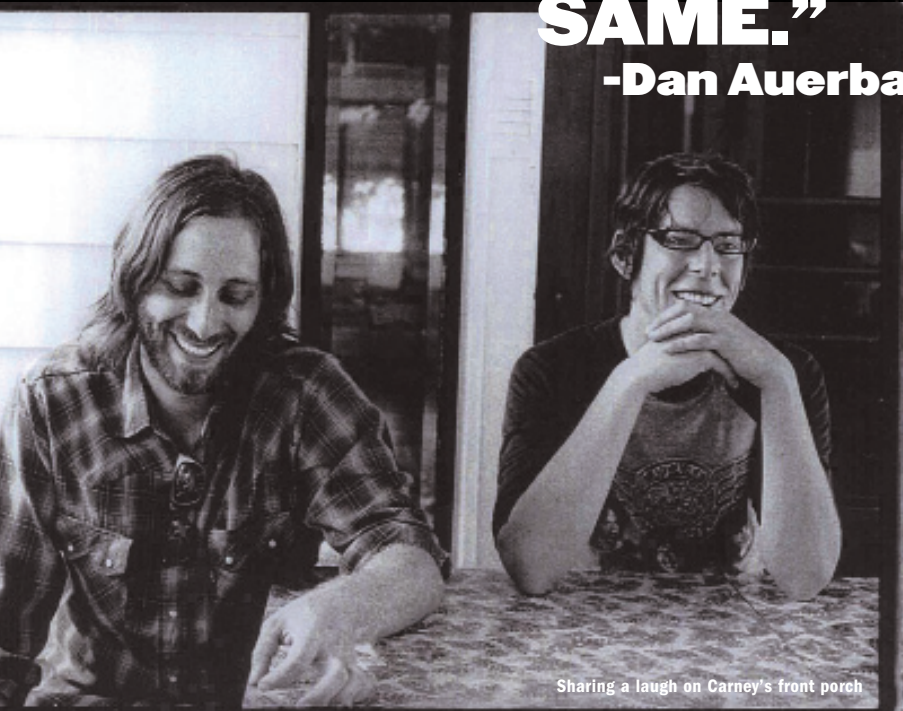
**-Patrick Carney**

Photos: Michael Wilson



# “ALL SHITHOLES LOOK THE SAME.”

**-Dan Auerbach**



Sharing a laugh on Carney's front porch

“All shitholes look the same,” he says, dismissively. “There is definitely a slower pace to the way of life here, but that’s probably where the similarities would start and end. Mississippi is totally foreign. I think if you were to spend a long time in one of those smaller cities in Mississippi, it would be insane. It’s so poor, and so ridiculous.”

**A**uerbach would know. As a teenager weaned on the likes of Fat Possum bluesmen T-Model Ford and R.L. Burnside and a slew of other electric and acoustic bluesmen and folk singers, he and his musician/folk-art dealer father made a fateful road trip to Mississippi, intent on stepping inside such influential dives as the late Kimbrough’s fabled juke joint, Junior’s.

“Every place we wanted to go was completely a maybe: They might be open, they might not. We drove 14 hours to a place that might not have been open. When we got there, it was open, but Junior wasn’t there.” In fact, Kimbrough would die a few months later. A few months after that, his bar joined him in the afterlife, after a controversial fire.

“I was just completely hooked by that music, everything about it,” says Auerbach. “In those first two Junior Kimbrough records, you could hear everything: You can hear the room that it’s recorded in; you can kind of visualize everything; you can hear sticks getting hit together when he’s not playing right; the creaking of the kick-drum pedal. I *loved* it.”

Here in Carney’s neighborhood, where blades of grass spring up between the bricks blanketing the street, where red, white and blue tapestries garnish grand porch railings, and where the occasional passing car and the rise-and-fall chorus of locust-like cicadas are the only things interrupting the suburban solitude, it’s easy to see how Auerbach could wind up on that journey.

In a place where the distractions can be few, where, if you let it, boredom can squat like a 5,000-pound gorilla on your back, those records offered the young guitar player a place to get lost. Simple, full of open tunings and chocked full of groove, they beckon the teenage guitarist who still can’t quite hold his own.

**I**n fact, the very first thing Auerbach and Carney jammed on as teenagers was a T-Model Ford song. “That’s all I knew how to do,” says the former. “That’s all I listened to at the time, when I was learning how to play the electric guitar. That’s it. I was playing with a slide and without a pick. If you’d asked me to do something else, I wouldn’t have been able to.”

Though they started playing with a neighborhood friend, who played harmonica, he soon faded out of the picture. “I think just playing with a drummer made it easier for me because I probably wouldn’t have known how to interact with any other instrumentation at the time,” Auerbach laughs.



Lollapalooza 2005

"I thought it was weird," Carney says of Auerbach's early, Hill Country sound. "But I thought it was really good—unusual, because all of my other friends were either into, like, fake Sonic Youth or they liked to shred, which I always hated. I liked the simple, repetitive stuff, the stuff that was more fun to play."

"Yeah, I never had any connection with that shit," says

"It's too long for me," said Auerbach.

"What about you?" she said, looking at Carney.

"I'm not a guitar player, but maybe Lebron could wear it," he quipped, referring to the only other unmentioned Akron-born star: six-foot, eight-inch NBA standout Lebron James. "No? Well, maybe you could smoke it."

If anything has proven as consistent as the Keys' themselves, it's Carney's deadpan humor: During our chat, the lanky drummer doubles over Auerbach repeatedly, proudly working even himself into a chuckle or two with self-deprecating stories of his pathetic attempts at higher education, adolescent mishaps or torturing Auerbach and the Keys crew with tracks from Korn bassist Fieldy's side project, Fieldy's Dreams.

Before he was a Black Key, that constant joking delivered the once-nerdy teenager a good number of beatdowns: "I got beat up by the same kid two days in a row—punched up in the same eye," he says, still in disbelief.

While fellow Firestone High Falcons, Auerbach and Carney didn't really mingle as adolescents. They played in the same little league as kids, and they certainly knew each other, but the guitarist hung with the cool kids and played sports, and the thin, tall Carney played instigator to the cool kids, got high and didn't bother attending tryouts when he was sure he wouldn't make the team. Today, he cuts an almost intimidating figure—especially as a bashy, sweaty performer. "The beer's filled me out," he cracks.

Despite it being the setting for Carney's most embarrassing memories, he and Auerbach have no plans to leave. By remaining here in Akron, they not only stay close to family and friends, but they're also able to keep both housing and studio costs low. Each has his own studio. Downstairs here at Carney's house, the band cranked out *Magic Potion* for free, pocketing their advance, or using portions to purchase recording gear, which they can resell later.

Economics aside, there's just no real incentive to leave, says Auerbach: "I feel like we'd lose our souls if we moved to New York or L.A. And I don't feel like I could ever be creative in L.A. or New York," he says, as Carney plots his next joke. "It's so competitive there, and I think you could get lost in that competitiveness and forget about what you're really trying to do.

"We like it here," continues Auerbach. "It's kind of laid-back, and comfortable..."

"It's like *Cheers* on the city level," says a grinning Carney.

"So who would you be: Woody or Norm?" Auerbach retorts.

"I would be Woody, Norm and Cliff."

"Yeah, you probably would be a combination of all three. I would probably be Frasier." ★

Auerbach, leaning back on an ancient former kitchen chair. "Like the theme from Super Mario Brothers 2: That's a guitar. There's a guy with a guitar that's making all those fuckin' sounds!"

Since the release of their 2002 debut, *The Big Come Up* (on the teeny Alive Records label), on through their brief tenure on Fat Possum—the Hill Country kingpin without whom The Black Keys would probably not exist, at least as we know them—groove has been the centerpiece of their music.

And since moving on to the Warner-affiliated Nonesuch label for the release of the squonking, squealing *Magic Potion*, nothing has really been lost in the transition—the band made sure of it. Like each of the Keys' previous records, *Magic Potion* was cut in Carney's basement—"Thirty floors underground, in the catacombs," he says—and one mic was used to capture both the guitar amp and the drums, while overdubs were minimal. If in songs like the brilliant ballad "You're the One," they take a breather, on stomping barnstormers like "Your Touch," their groove has grown tighter.

"We've both gotten deeper as musicians," says Auerbach, "but every time we go to make a record, we simplify things again. We like to keep it that way, because everything seems to be better that way."

Here in Akron, Auerbach and Carney have come a long way since the days when they fended off shredding and shredders. In and around the University of Akron, the school they attended for a heartbeat, they are minor celebs. At a neighborhood coffee shop earlier, a cherub-faced woman sitting nearby feigned ignorance as to who was sitting at the next table, until the Keys got up to leave.

"I know you're a guitar player," she said to Auerbach, the first to pass, before holding up a clumpy brown strip of macramé, which she explained was in fact a guitar strap she had sown from hemp. "I wanted to see what you thought. Is it long enough?"

## CARNEY QUICKTAKES

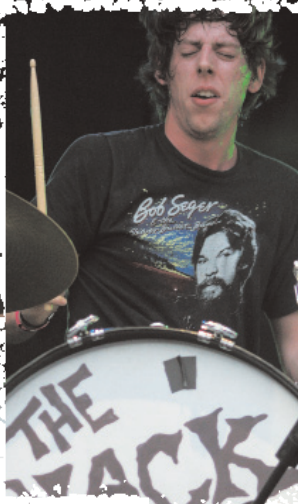
IN ADDITION TO DRUMMER AND PRODUCER, PATRICK CARNEY PLAYS THE ROLE OF RESIDENT COMEDIAN IN THE BLACK KEYS. HERE, THE DRUMMER DISHES SARCASTICALLY ON THE BAND'S NEW DEAL AND MORE:

**On signing to the world music-affiliated Nonesuch label:** "We are the stupidest band on Nonesuch. For our next advance, they're gonna send us to college."

**On cutting the new album:** "When we get ready to make a record, I usually start by making a 15-minute PowerPoint presentation."

**On his ideal bassist:** "I'd personally like Fieldy from Korn."

**On a failed collegiate career:** "I took this philosophy class, and my teacher kept talking about universal truths, and I went up to him and said, 'What's universal? What's that mean?' He said, 'I suggest you drop the class.'"



## SPREADING THE LOVE

SINCE FINDING SUCCESS AS THE DRUMMER OF THE BLACK KEYS, PATRICK CARNEY HAS ALSO SOUGHT TO SHINE A LIGHT ON BELLOW OHIO TALENTS WHO MIGHT NOT OTHERWISE CATCH A BREAK. HERE HE GIVES US THE 411 ON THE LATEST RELEASES ON HIS FAT POSSUM-PARTNERED LABEL AUDIO EAGLE, WHOSE MOTTO (AT LEAST, ACCORDING TO THE DRUMMER'S BAIL TIG) IS [PUSHING THE MANILA ENVELOPE] [TEH, T] A TIK WRITE OFF [HE QUIES].

**Houseguest, High Strangeness:** This is the best pop band around right now and they are from Akron, which helps. Maybe like a young Guided by Voices.

**Beaten Awake, Let's Get Simplified:** These guys opened for us on our West Coast tour and "blew minds." They play really organic rock that will make you want to drink loads of beer.