

MASTERPIECE

Taking Instruments to New Heights

On its eponymous debut album, the Allman Brothers Band put time-tested ingredients together in a new way and used maverick instrumentation to create a fresh, funky sound.

By John Edward Hasse

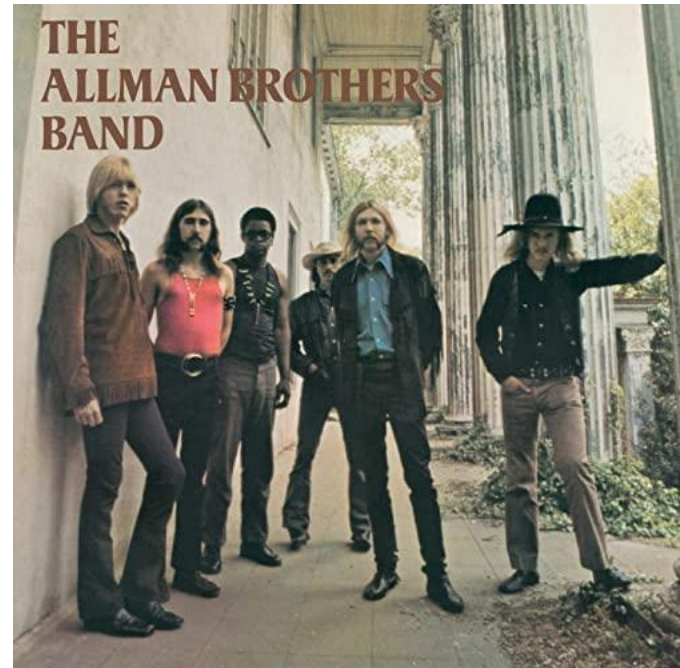
Published originally in The Wall Street Journal, Nov. 1, 2019

The Allman Brothers Band's eponymous debut album, released Nov. 4, 1969, rose to the level of classic art, pushing the boundaries of electric guitar, rock and improvisatory American music to establish the Allman Brothers as one of the foremost rock bands in history.

As teens in Florida in the 1960s, Duane and Gregg Allman latched onto late-night broadcasts from influential radio station WLAC in Nashville: blues and R&B from the likes of B.B. King, Muddy Waters and Jackie Wilson. Inspired, they took up musical instruments and played in several bands—including the Allman Joys in Florida and Hour Glass in Los Angeles—before establishing the Allman Brothers Band in March 1969.

At a time when the blues had reached its largest popular audience and just days before the Woodstock Festival in August 1969, the band made its maiden recording. The biracial band—the brothers, plus Dickey Betts, Berry Oakley, Butch Trucks and Jai Johanny “Jaimoe” Johanson—put time-tested ingredients together in a new way, creating a fresh, funky sound with smoking solos, inspired slide-guitar, two-guitar contrapuntal and synchronized lines and double drummers playing polyrhythms. Along with such guitarists as Jimi Hendrix and Eric Clapton, the Allman Brothers Band expanded rock from primarily a vocal genre to one spotlighting instrumental virtuosity as well.

Music critics dubbed the Allmans the first of the “Southern rock” bands, but guitarist Betts told writer Alan Paul “I think it’s limiting. I’d rather just be known as a progressive rock band from the South.”



I listened closely for the first time in decades and was struck again by that first album's musicality, originality, and genre-blending of rock, blues, R&B, jazz and even Latin conga rhythms.

A major innovation was the sextet's maverick instrumentation, with two lead guitarists, Duane Allman and Mr. Betts, and two drummers, Messrs. Trucks and Johanson, complementing Gregg Allman on vocals and Hammond B-3 organ and Mr. Oakley on bass. Duane and Dickey's often-harmonizing twin leads were signatures of the band's sound.

Duane Allman spun out clean, fluid, well-shaped, single-note lines. When "vocalizing" his guitar by bending pitches—a lone, crying blue note or a chord slipping upward or downward—he could raise goosebumps. Despite his abbreviated life—he was killed in a motorcycle accident in 1971 at age 24—he entered the pantheon of rock heroes.

Drummer Johanson, a jazz devotee, sparked Duane's reverence for Miles Davis and John Coltrane. In a year when jazz artists such as Davis were incorporating rock into their music, here was a rock band flipping the script by imbuing its sound with a jazz sensibility through virtuosity, polyrhythms and improvisation.

Complex meters such as 5/4 and 9/8 were popularized by Dave Brubeck's best-selling 1959 album *Time Out* and used by a few "prog-rock" bands. The Allmans' album offers several unusual time signatures: *Black Hearted Woman* switches among 7/8, 2/4 and 4/4 and *Whipping Post* alternates between 11/8 and 6/8 meters, creating contrast and keeping the listener thrillingly off-balance.

Throughout the album, the players sound, with their deep grooves, like roadhouse vets. The slowest cut and one of the best—the dark lament *It's Not My Cross to Bear*—features Duane's stabbing crying-notes and his two perfectly paced solo statements. With its melodic repetition, guitar vibrato, looping bass line, and long two-chord vamp, *Dreams* creates a hypnotic mood. *Black Hearted Woman* includes a duet between conga and trap drums and what can only be described as a primal vocal wail. The band makes Muddy Waters' *Trouble No More* uniquely their own by changing the beat and embedding original motifs behind Duane's sizzling slide guitar. In the climactic final track, *Whipping Post*, you hear double-guitar harmony, a pulse-raising RAT-a-tata-tata beat, two memorable guitar solos, and a dizzying melodic climb to the skies.

In *Whipping Post*, the lyrics of principal songwriter Gregg Allman evoke a certain Southern rebel youth of dive bars, wooden dance halls, and faithless lovers. His passionate, whiskey-soaked voice instantly grabs your attention:

She took all my money, wrecked my new car.

Now she's with one of my good time buddies,

*They're drinkin' in some cross-town bar.
Sometimes I feel, sometimes I feel,
Like I been tied to the whipping post.*

The Brothers' debut involved little studio wizardry, enabling them to perform these songs on tour. Indeed, their 1971 *At Fillmore East*, including a 23-minute version of *Whipping Post*, ranks among the most celebrated live rock recordings ever. You can compare their first, cleanly recorded album, tight as a sailor's knot, with the spontaneity and extended jams of their Fillmore double-disc set.

Both are American classics.

—Mr. Hasse is curator emeritus of American music at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History. His books include *Beyond Category: The Life and Genius of Duke Ellington* (Da Capo) and *Discover Jazz* (Pearson).