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**Abstract:** The article profiles the musical group The Black Keys. The group is comprised of drummer Patrick Carney and singer-guitarist Dan Auerbach. The duo met in Akron, Ohio during high school, and in 2010 the group released their sixth album "Brothers," which pays tribute to their friendship. Carney's response to Auerbach's solo album "Keep It Hid" is also discussed.

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## **TWO AGAINST NATURE**

### **THE BLACK KEYS FIGHT LIKE BROTHERS, PARTY WITH THE WU-TANG CLAN AND HAVE CREATED A MASTERPIECE OF NOISE AND HEARTBREAK**

'I CAN'T BELIEVE 'JISM' counts.'" The Black Keys' tour bus is speeding down Interstate 10, somewhere in the armpit of north-central Florida. Drummer Patrick Carney, six feet four and scarecrow lanky, adjusts his thick black glasses and examines the game of "online Scrabble on his phone. "Hey, Dan," he says. "I just played 'jism' on your brother." By his side is breakfast: a carton of Camel Blues, eight sugar-free Red Bulls and a 24-ounce can of a malt-beverage energy drink called Dragon Joose. It's 11 a.m.

Singer-guitarist Dan Auerbach grunts his approval. He's trying to rest up. The Keys — a punky, bluesy duo from Akron, Ohio — are on their way to a jam-band festival called Wane.

"I haven't played you in a while, Dan," says Carney, popping open a Red Bull. "What's up with that?"

"I got bored of winning," Auerbach says.

"You beat me once. I beat you twice."

"That's how you remember it."

They're always like this: On the hour-long trip from the airport to the venue, they'll bicker about everything from whether salt is a powder or a crystal, to Diet Coke's flavor relative to Mountain Dew's, to how famous Oprah is in Africa. Auerbach, 31, is quick with a sarcastic aside; Carney, 11 months younger, is king of the schoolyard burn. (To wit, this recent text exchange, from 10 p.m. on a random Thursday: Carney: "You going out tonight?" Auerbach: "Nah, going straight to bed." Carney: "Yeah, with a man.")

The Keys grew up around the corner from each other in Akron. But aside from the occasional acorn fight or baseball-card trade, they didn't hang out. Auerbach was a soccer jock; Carney was a "superindie nerd dude." "If it hadn't been for music," Carney says, "we probably wouldn't be friends." They started playing together in high school, mostly out of convenience — Carney had a drum kit, Auerbach had a guitar — and cemented their bond through years of touring in Carney's minivan, which they'd take turns driving while the other slept.

The duo pay tribute to their complicated partnership with the title of their sixth album, *Brothers*. "Pat and I have spent more time together than with anybody in our families," explains Auerbach. "We understand each other better than anybody on Earth. We love each other, we get on each other's nerves, we piss each other off. But like brothers, we know it's all OK."

Auerbach wants to talk to Carney about the video they're shooting next week for their new single, "Tighten Up."

"I haven't read the treatment yet," Carney says.

"Yeah, you have."

"No, I haven't."

"Well, you should. You're acting in it."

"I'm acting in it?"

Auerbach rolls his eyes. "It's like a Laurel and Hardy skit, basically. Both of us are at the park with our kids. They start trying to show off for some girls and start fighting, and we have to break it up. But then one of the kids' hot moms comes over, and we start competing over her. It ends with us lighting in the sandbox and the kids standing over us, shaking their heads."

Carney laughs. "Oh, I gotta read it, that sounds good. Who plays the hot mom?"

Auerbach doesn't miss a beat. "Your mom, actually." A pause. "And I fuck her."

THE BUS ROLLS INTO THE FESTIVAL grounds. Seen from the window, the vibe is vaguely post-apocalyptic — like a refugee camp for survivors of the Tie-Dye Wars. There are young hippies, old hippies, barefoot sorority girls, sunburned stoners, rednecks. A hand-painted sign trumpets the lineup: Widespread Panic, Ivan Neville's Dumpstaphunk, headliners the Allman Brothers Band. As some improvisatory guitar noodling comes wafting over the fence, Carney takes in the scene: "This is my worst nightmare come to fruition."

The Keys' music is raw and minimalist, leaning toward rough mixes and first takes. "The harder we work on something, the less good it gets," says Auerbach. Their first album, 2002's *The Big Come Up*, was recorded on a four-track in Carney's rat-infested basement, using \$18 microphones they bought at Radio Shack. By their third, they'd graduated to an old tire factory, where the heat from a steel-melting operation downstairs kept them warm. It was always just the two of them — no bassist, no producer. "We've tried playing with other people," says Auerbach, "but it was never as easy as playing with each other."

Since the beginning, they've felt like outsiders. "Dan and I aren't as naturally cool as most dudes in bands," Carney says. "When we'd go to festivals and stuff, we never really fit in."

Hanging out in the catering tent later that day, Auerbach spots Dr. John shuffling through in a pair of white alligator-skin boots. "Check out those shoes!" says Auerbach, who had heard the New Orleans legend just recently, when he took his daughter, Sadie, to see Disney's *The Princess and the Frog*, in which Dr. John sang the opening song. Sadie is two and a half — it was her first movie in a theater. Auerbach takes out his phone; a photo of her eating applesauce is the background.

He and Sadie are both early risers, so when he's home, most mornings they'll get up and go for a drive. "We'll go to Starbucks, I'll get a coffee, she'll get a chocolate milk," he says. "For, like, 45 minutes we'll just drive around, listening to Howard Stern. I turn it off when he starts talking about pussy." Auerbach also has a studio at his house, Easy Eye Sound System, where he's started moonlighting as a producer, working with bands including Hacienda and Jessica Lea Mayfield. When he's not recording, he'll take Sadie in there to play. "She loves the drums," he says.

Carney, meanwhile, is coming off of a rough divorce. He and his wife were married two years but together for nine, and according to pretty much everyone involved, that was about eight and a half too many. "It was really fucked up," Carney says, sucking on a cigarette outside the band's trailer. He says she slept with his best friend, lied to him for years, bilked him for money. By the end, Carney was depressed, drinking a lot, and had gained 25 pounds.

"Homeboy was miserable," Auerbach says. "He was being manipulated mentally and emotionally. It was so draining." Carney finally broke it off last July, with a phone call while his wife was in Europe. ("The ultimate pussy move," he admits.) He says it cost him a quarter of a million dollars, plus health insurance and a monthly alimony check: "Totally worth it."

A couple of months later, the Keys went to Alabama to start work on *Brothers*, setting up shop at the legendary Muscle Shoals Sound Studios, where Bob Dylan found Jesus, and the Rolling Stones recorded "Brown Sugar." The place was long past its heyday — a cinder-block building that Carney says reminded him of "a sweaty, ashtray, grandparents'-rec-room type thing." But it fit their vibe perfectly. The first song they cut was "Next Girl," a blistering kiss-off to a lover and her "wicked ways." "Pat was fried from his divorce," says Auerbach, who writes the band's lyrics. "Bummed out, spacey. When he heard the lyrics to 'Next Girl,' he was just so stoked. The rest of the session it was smooth sailing."

The Keys call *Brothers* their darkest album yet. The sting of bad love is all over the record, from "Ten Cent Pistol," about a jealous woman's revenge, to "I'm Not the One," about exactly what it sounds like. Auerbach says the songs weren't written about Carney, but it's not much of a stretch to see *Brothers* as a kind of breakup album by proxy. "I think Dan wrote the songs from his own experience," says Carney's brother Michael, who does the band's artwork. "But I think he wrote them for Pat."

The Keys bash out their Waneeset — it's explosive, visceral, almost punishing. (When they finish, a sweet little hippie girl in a sundress and flip-flops turns to her friend, rubbing her ears: "That was loud.") They're through by 6, but the bus doesn't leave until 2, so there isn't much to do afterward but sit around and drink. Auerbach sips bourbon slowly from a red plastic cup. Carney is more ready to party. He starts with beer, graduates to vodka, and when that runs out he settles for gin and grapefruit juice. By midnight, he is pretty obliterated. He bursts onto the bus, a beer in hand. "Look at you old women," he says. "Sittin' here. I'm out there having so much fun — Allman Brothers... ." He cackles. "You look like a bunch of old dykes."

Auerbach laughs. "I'm sorry I let you down, dog."

Carney turns back toward the door. "Can I get y'all dykes anything? Some rice cakes? Turquoise?" Everyone cracks up, and he heads off in search of another beer.

THE NEXT MORNING, CARNEY — impressively — is the first one up. The bus is parked in Miami now, and it's raining. He grabs a Vitamin Water and his smokes, and ducks outside to call his girlfriend.

Last summer Carney started dating Emily, a cute blonde from California he met at a bar in New York, where he moved after the divorce. He bought designer boots, a \$5,000 watch, started hanging out with people like the Kings of Leon and Mark Ronson. Auerbach calls him "NYC Pat." Meanwhile, Auerbach has been thinking of leaving Akron too — he's looking at houses in Nashville, where he wants to build a new studio.

Over the past couple of years, the Keys have slowly been opening up. Last year they worked on a hip-hop collaboration called *BlakRoc*, for which they recorded with a slew of MCs including the Wu-Tang Clan's Raekwon and RZA. ("If weed were peanut-butter-and-banana sandwiches," says

Carney, "it was probably a lot like hanging out with Elvis") "I think what they do is so classic," says RZA. "They probably should have been in the Sixties and shit."

There's actually always been something hip-hop about the Keys' commitment to the DIY hustle. They have stories about sneaking into an SNL afterparty to give Beck their demo; scalping their Bonnaroo credentials to get money for a strip club. Now Carney estimates they clear almost \$2 million a year — and unlike most bands, they split it only two ways. They're also accumulating the kind of experiences that people start rock bands to have: Bro'ing down with Robert Plant and Thorn Yorke, drunk-wrestling Eddie Vedder in Berlin. They have no use for what Auerbach calls "indie-world bullshit" and make no secret of their desire to play bigger rooms, for more people and more money. Says Carney, "We want to be as big as we can with — out having to do anything that makes us completely uncomfortable."

Still, the bigger the Keys get, the trickier it is for them to maintain their just-the-two-of-us bubble. For their last album, 2008's *Attack and Release*, they sprung for a proper studio and enlisted Brian "Danger Mouse" Burton to produce. They like Burton a lot but say that it was strange working with an outsider. "It was almost like we were bouncing ideas off Brian," Carney says, "rather than communicating directly."

Last February, Auerbach put out a well-received solo album called *Keep It Hid*. There was only one problem: He didn't tell Carney. "I was fucking pissed," Carney says. "Everyone knew but me. I was mad at Dan. I was mad at our manager. I was mad at everybody." He worried Auerbach had moved on, that he might quit the group. For a few months last spring, the two hardly spoke. They weren't sure they'd make another record.

"I'd played him the songs," Auerbach says in his defense. "Maybe I didn't explain that there was a record coming, but I didn't know until it was pretty much done." Besides, he says: "I didn't feel like I could share a lot with Pat toward the end of [his marriage]. His ex-wife was really cock-blocking our relationship."

Eventually, says Carney, he realized that his anger "was really misdirected anger I had toward [my wife]." After they split, he and Auerbach talked it out, and they realized how important the band was to both of them. "Then we hugged and made up," says Auerbach. "And it's been all good ever since."

NOW BEGIN EVEN BIGger tests. "I'm sick of this bullshit," Auerbach says that afternoon in Miami. "It's so retarded." He's talking about a promo video shot by their label for "Next Girl," featuring a stuffed T-Rex lip-syncing with a bunch of bikini-clad babes. (And for the record: Yes, it's a little retarded.)

"It's a fucking viral video," says Carney. "You're over-thinking it."

"There's a fucking dinosaur singing my lyrics!" Auerbach says. "It's not funny, and I really don't like it." He adopts a mock-dramatic tone: "They're fucking with our art. man."

"It's called promotion," Carney says. "It's the first time Warner has ever spent money on us. You shouldn't be complaining." But then Carney watches the video again. This time he frowns. "It's a serious-ass song," he says. "And this cheapens it."

He opens his e-mail and taps out a three-word response: "Shit is gay."

"I feel like we're surrounded by retards," Auerbach says with a sigh. "Is this what you have to do to get popular?"

Frustrated, Auerbach decides to check out what's popular. He fires up his laptop and opens iTunes' Top Songs chart. First up is Lady Gaga.

"How is she so huge?" he says. "I've never heard any of her songs."

"Dude, you don't understand," says Carney. "There's 300 million people in this country, and 295 million of them are fucking retarded. That means you just need one out of 295 retarded people, and you've sold a million records."

Auerbach double-clicks another track. A breathy falsetto comes floating out of the speakers: "Baby, baby, baby, ohhh...."

"Who is this?" Carney asks.

"Justin Bieber." (He pronounces it "BYE-ber.")

"That's a dude singing?" asks Carney.

"Mm-hmm."

"No, seriously. That's a boy?"

Yeah."

"What the fuck?"

Eventually, they get tired of the Top 40 and decide to check out the competition: the records that are coming out the same day as Brothers. First up is LCD Soundsystem's, which they both admit is pretty great. Next, former American Idol runner-up Bo Bice, whose existence they find too offensive to even contemplate. Finally, there's the new album from bearded indie-rock crew Band of Horses. Auerbach fires up the first single.

"Pfffft!" he says after about 15 seconds. "I'm already bored!"

Carney is unimpressed, too. "That's it?"

Auerbach sticks out his tongue and gives an enthusiastic thumbs down.

"We smoked that!" says Carney, hopping out of his seat to do a little victory dance.

He hops over to Auerbach, and the two exchange a celebratory high five. Then they get ready to go play a show.

"DAN AND I AREN'T AS NATURALLY COOL AS MOST DUDES IN BANDS," CARNEY SAYS. "WE NEVER REALLY FELT LIKE WE FIT IN."

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Auerbach (left) and Carney in Akron, Ohio

PHOTO (COLOR): HOMEBOYS: Carney (left) and Auerbach in Auerbach's Akron, Ohio, home studio. "We want to be as big as we can without having to do anything that makes us completely uncomfortable." says Carney.

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By Josh Eells

PHOTOGRAPHY BY Danny Clinch

JOSH EELLS profiled Vampire Weekend in RS 1097. He lives in Brooklyn.

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