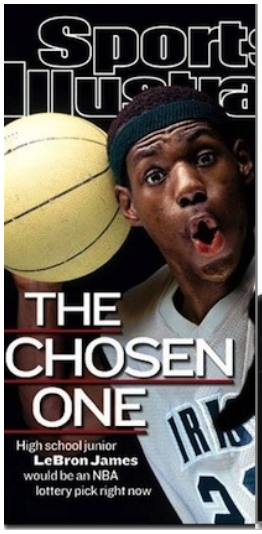

It's official: LeBron James will not be the only Akronite selling out arenas in 2012. In fact, with headlining gigs lined up at cavernous venues like the Q and Madison Square Garden, The Black Keys have created a bizarro scenario in which America's biggest sports star *and* biggest rock n' roll band both hail from the same downtrodden little metropolis in Northeast Ohio. Call it a pop-cultural fluke, if you will. But the stranger part is how the unrelated career paths of a basketball phenom and a garage band can start to look more like perfect parallel lines—casting long shadows over the very hometown they were supposedly shining a light on.

The saga of "King James," of course, has been well documented—okay, probably severely over-documented. But whether you're the embittered Scott Raab type or a devoted LBJ apologist, you at least can agree on the astronomical star power of the man in question. By comparison, the Black Keys' blues-rock juggernaut is really just beginning to enter the public consciousness (if you haven't heard *of* them, you've definitely still *heard* them). Still, these dueling Akron success stories make for a nice case study on how the egocentric world of pop music pretty well mirrors that of pro sports—where achievements are greatly amplified by (a) where they happen; and (b) who's talking about it.

This week, for example, the Black Keys are promoting their eighth album (*El Camino)* by gracing the cover of
Rolling Stone
magazine for the first time—a longstanding rock n' roll rite of passage that still carries weight, even if it says far more about your famousness than your talent. From the Akron perspective, the headline "Black Keys Rising" on the RS cover works almost like a complementary bookend to LeBron James' first appearance on the cover of
Sports Illustrated
back in 2002, when the then 16 year-old was famously anointed "The Chosen One." That was the same year, incidentally, that a pair of scruffy Firestone High School grads named Dan

Auerbach (singer/guitarist) and Pat Carney (drums) made a presumptuous statement of their own—naming their first, self-recorded album
The Big Come Up
.
Basically, everybody was getting a little ahead of themselves.

A year later, as James was winning his last state title with St. Vincent St. Mary's, the Black Keys signed a record deal with the respected independent label Fat Possum, which swiftly put out the group's sophomore effort, *Thickfreakness*. This was the record that helped Auerbach and Carney escape some of the "White Stripes rip-off" accusations of their debut, while still maintaining the fuzzy, riff-heavy, foot-stomping sound that would become their calling card. Critics loved it, but it's hard to say the album was a hit (nary a dent in the Billboard charts). Unfazed, the Keys continued to work on new tunes in Carney's tiny makeshift home studio, while playing the occasional intimate show at Akron's now defunct Lime Spider club, or Cleveland's Beachland Tavern, or any other venue they could get to in their beat up minivan.

Back then, fellow Akronites might see Dan or Pat at a local haunt like Square Records or Seoul Garden, and stop to chat about new music or the most recent sightings of LeBron's mythical gold Hummer around town. Nobody asked Auerbach or Carney about upgrading their own vehicle. As good a band as they were, the Black Keys just didn't look like the future hitmakers of America.

Flash forward to 2006. King James had proven himself a superstar against NBA competition, but his Cavaliers had failed to make the playoffs two years running. Similarly, the Black Keys' superb albums *Rubber Factory* and *Magic Potion* had elevated the band into something closer to national cult status, but hadn't quite cracked the glass ceiling of mainstream recognition. Still, something was clearly happening. Just as Cavs fans sensed that unprecedented glories were on the horizon, the original Northeast Ohio fan base of the Black Keys began to see their favorite little local band entering a new phase—more national press, international touring, Letterman appearances, and a sudden barrage of licensing deals putting their songs in TV commercials (if LeBron could have Nike, McDonalds, and Sprite, then the Keys would take Nissan, Sony, and Victoria's Secret, thank you very much) All the while, Auerbach and Carney remained vocal and visual ambassadors for Northeast Ohio, tagging the word "Akron" onto much of their band merchandise, while regularly wearing the hats and t-shirts of Cleveland sports teams on stage. For the locals in their orbit, the Black Keys had become a source of pride every bit as significant as LeBron.

So, after James and the Cavs fell to San Antonio in the 2007 NBA Finals, it was at least a mild pick-me-up to hear that Auerbach and Carney were at work on a new album—something a bit different. They'd be spending some time in L.A., in a real studio this time, working with famed producer Danger Mouse on a record for the Nonesuch label (owned by Warner Brothers). When *Attack and Release* came out the following spring, it was a whole other animal indeed—an explosive rocker with hip-hop inspired beats and a big-time marketing campaign to boot. The record climbed to #14 on the Billboard 200 chart, and songs like "Strange Times" and "I Got Mine" were popping up everywhere, including ESPN montages of LeBron James dunk footage.

Writer's Note: It was around this time, shortly after seeing the Black Keys play to 20,000 shirtless worshipers at Lollapalooza, that I interviewed Auerbach for a newspaper story. I mentioned my own Akron roots and how cool it had been seeing the band grow into what they'd become. Then I asked him why he and Carney had elected to stay in Akron, rather than heading to the brighter lights of L.A. or New York. I think I was expecting some sort of statement on hometown pride. Instead, I got this: "Sometimes I'm not sure why we're still in Akron, honestly. The quality of life isn't so great. It's weird, though, because we're kind of stuck here. It's like there's an invisible chain around our ankles."

By the time the infamous summer of 2010 rolled around, the LeBron and Black Keys fairy tales had finally converged. Pat Carney—the more vocally pro-Akron member of the Keys—had picked up stakes and moved to New York, unable to resist the temptations of music, culture, and, well—constant recognition—that the big city offered. Auerbach was still in Akron but carefully planning his own escape to Nashville. The duo had just released their biggest album

yet, *Brothers*, which hit #3 on the charts and would go on to collect three Grammy awards—the musical equivalent to LBJ's MVP trophies, perhaps.

In any case, as the fates would have it, both the basketball phenom and the garage band were outgrowing their native habitat at the same moment in time. And this was not lost on the national media—not even the dolts at ESPN, who once asked Carney why he'd chosen to be an Indians fan instead of a Reds fan (because Akron is obviously evenly split between the two???). *Rolling Stone* managed to wrangle the best insights, though. Two years before putting Auerbach on their cover, they contacted him directly after "The Decision" to get the personal reaction of an "Ohio rocker" on the exodus of the King from Cleveland.

In a telling response, Auerbach refrained from the vitriolic reaction the magazine likely expected, and instead offered a reasoned defense of James, prefaced with an helpful explanation of his own biases.

"My hometown heart was broken long ago, back when Ernest [sic] Byner fumbled the ball at the one-yard line," he wrote, adding, *"I stopped propping my heroes up on pedestals immediately after meeting Lou Reed."*

Then came the crux of Auerbach's argument, which on some considerably smaller scale, he probably saw as applicable to his own impending situation.

"Any grown up who's now wishing ill will on LeBron should be ashamed of themselves. Just because we bought a ticket to a game every once in a while and we rooted for him, that gives us the right to shackle him to our court? It's time to grow up. He doesn't owe us anything. I love

Cleveland and I go there weekly when I'm home but no one person should prop up an entire city — that's just unhealthy. I think we should all cherish the moments we got to spend in the stands with our family and friends rooting for our hometown hero. It was fun while it lasted. He gave us seven years of his life; 11 if you include those amazing high school games. That's longer than most marriages last! If you wanna complain about something, how about the $7 hot dogs at the Q?!"

It's unconfirmed what the hot dog prices will be when Auerbach returns to Quicken Loans Arena as a performer this March, but it's safe to assume he and Carney will not be mercilessly booed for abandoning their hometown. If anything, heading south has proven every bit as rewarding for Auerbach as it has for James (yes, LeBron still has a house in Akron, but it's kind of hard to say he still lives there). The Black Keys latest album, *El Camino*, has been their biggest splash yet, debuting in December at #2 on the Billboard 200—a near-miss not unlike LeBron's first playoff run with the Heat (except in this case, the Dallas Mavericks =

Michael Buble's shitty Christmas album). The Keys also became the first band ever to play *Saturday Night Live*
twice in a calendar year, and their upcoming tour will see them visit roughly 50 first class venues across the globe.

Next to the Goodyear blimp, no Akron exports have ever flown higher than "The Chosen One" and the "Supercharged Stomp Machine." And like any good origin story, Northeast Ohio will always help define what these performers are about. In the long term, though, the eventual departures of LeBron James and the Black Keys may also help define Akron in the 21st century—not for the city's uniqueness in creating these heroes, but for its inevitable failure to hang on to them. Here lies Akron, the former Rubber City, and former home of…