

Episode 1: “The Song Was Moving Through Them”

Music clip: “Give Me the Gourd,” Lloyd Bricken and Crossroads, Marion, Alabama, 16 July 2019

Beth McGinnis: I’m Beth McGinnis, and this is “Hear in Alabama.”

In the summer of 2019 I was walking down Washington Street in Marion, Alabama with my husband. There’s a bookstore in Marion, a bookstore and coffee house, and all kinds of things. It’s called “As Time Goes By,” and I wanted to show my husband this. Recently the bookstore has closed, but in its heyday the owner Charles Flaherty held first-Friday jam sessions, trippy hippie Halloween parties, and kitten weekends. Across the street is the Back When... Photo Gallery, which has a rotating collection of pictures from Marion’s history. In the window of the photo gallery we noticed a sign advertising the Great Crossroads Project, “a team of Brazilian and Alabama poets and performers” who would “explore African-diasporic songs and poetry” from “Alabama’s Black Belt region and Minas Gerais, Brazil.” The performance was the next night, and I knew I had to go.

Music Clip: Dance break from Crossroads performance, Marion, Alabama, 16 July 2019

Later that evening we went into the bookstore and discovered the Crossroads performers there hanging out and dancing. Charlie Flaherty insisted on giving us a piece of cheesecake, even though we had eaten catfish at Lottie’s Restaurant down the street and were stuffed.

I came back early the next day so I could meet the musicians and ask permission to record them. I spoke with them during a rehearsal break, and they asked if there was anywhere close by where they could get some snacks and drinks before the performance. I wanted to earn their trust, so I set out for the closest place to buy quick snacks, a gas station a couple miles away. The juice, fruit, and crackers I came back with were a tiny price to pay for what I experienced that evening.

Music clip: “It’s Gonna Rain,” Rita Teles and Crossroads, Marion, Alabama, 16 July 2019

Beth McGinnis: The Crossroads group stayed in Alabama for a month that summer, performing in Selma, Tuskegee, Birmingham, and back in Marion to finish the tour. They

had such a powerful effect on me that first night in Marion that I heard and recorded them three more times. After the Brazilian musicians had gone home and the dust had settled, I spoke with co-director Lloyd Bricken about the project.

Lloyd had studied at St. John's College in New Mexico, a prestigious classics and great books program. By 2001 he had become very successful as a professional actor.

Lloyd Bricken: But the whole time there was this, this creeping feeling of "well, and so what?" kind of from every, every performance. And this was in contrast to the fact that, like I was getting role after role after role, with the best companies in the city. So it was like, well, I should feel successful, right? But there was this sense of, well, but where does it all go? Like, we sometimes had these incredible experiences, you know, working as a company together, but then the performance is finished, and, you know, it stops. I was hungry for something that I couldn't yet name.

Beth: Around that time Lloyd began to immerse himself in the writings of Jerzy Grotowski.

Lloyd: So he's this this Polish theater genius who also left the theater after great worldwide success.

Beth: Grotowski had studied performance techniques that exist in various religious traditions around the world.

Lloyd: And he was asking these questions like, well, if we look at what they do in Kathakali, if we look at what they do in India, if we look at what they do in various rituals in Japan, in various rituals in Haiti, if we, if I bring masters from these various traditions and we work together, can we find something that would be like, I don't know, behind the differences? Is there something that these things are all striving for? What is that? What are they trying to touch?

Beth: Lloyd applied to the Work Center of Jerzy Grotowski, where Grotowski's disciples were continuing his work. He didn't get much in the way of response. He also experienced a personal loss around this time.

Lloyd: I also had a kind of coincident experience in those months of my father's death, which created this I don't know, like the kind of opening that happens in a way with grief where you just have this tremendous longing for home or, what is that? I really wanted

to come back to the Deep South in any case. So I again, I didn't really know why, but I came back after, after some time to visit my father's grave in rural Tennessee.

Beth: Lloyd connected with some musicians he grew up with and ended up traveling the country with their alternative rock band. When they were not on tour, Lloyd would come back to Birmingham and comb through old records at the downtown public library. He found one that just said "Parchman Farm 1945." He didn't know what it was.

Music clip: Prison music from Parchman Farm, Library of Congress collection "Southern Mosaic: The John and Ruby Lomax 1939 Southern States Recording Trip."

Lloyd Bricken So I took it home, put it on my record player and proceeded to have, I don't know, some kind of epiphany that, from the first notes of hearing this recording, these were, these are prisoners. Parchman Farm is the largest of the of the prison farms in in the Deep South where basically like the conditions of slavery never finished. You know, and it's laid right out there in the 13th Amendment like, okay, slavery is finished. But if you're in prison, we can do what we like to with you. And it's no accident that the prison industrial complex starts getting created right at that moment. And Parchman Farm was known around the Deep South, as I've learned since then, like to be the most savage and the worst of anywhere. If you went to Parchman, it was, it was a death sentence. So regardless of whether you were there for lifetime or not, you know, you probably wouldn't leave anyway. But the music that came out of there, the recordings that were there were done there by John Lomax and then his son, Alan Lomax, who then returned there after some time.

Beth: One of the things I've noticed about Lloyd is that he immerses himself passionately and completely in whatever he's working on. This is what happened with the Lomax recordings. He found other recordings from Alabama and other parts of the south, and it wasn't too long before he started taking every weekend to visit churches in Alabama, Mississippi, and around the south. He visited the Georgia Sea Islands and got to know the Gullah and Geechee cultures there. Everywhere he learned songs, and he started creating performances of them that combined singing, dancing, and acting.

Lloyd: I remember this church in Montgomery County where it was like old, black old lined out hymns.

Beth: Lining out is an old tradition in black and white gospel music. The leader sings through a phrase quickly to remind everyone of the words and tune, and the congregation joins in at the normal tempo. Often the leader and group will overlap.

Music clip: Lining out, Provewell Baptist Church, Sprott, Alabama, 10 March 2019

Lloyd: And, and then there was, someone got up and led a song and then another woman got up and led the second song after this.

Music clip: "There Is a Name," Dr. Pilar Murphy and the Provewell Baptist Church choir, Sprott, Alabama, 10 March 2019

Lloyd: And she just kind of erupted out of the the from the I was sitting in the back of the congregation and something just was like it was like the temperature and the pressure just shifted in the room. Like physically, everything changed. It's hard. It's hard to describe. It was as if something grabbed her, you know. And she just kind of went up in this flame. But, and the whole process lasted about two minutes. But what was incredible to me was the way in which the entire, pretty much everyone in the congregation, like, got up and articulated around her and moved with her. So the song was, was taking place in the bodies of the people. And articulating around it and in it and through it, that's what is the song. Not just her voice or what she's singing, but the song was moving through all them.

And I mean, I was like, you know, all the hairs were standing up on the back of my neck and I was just absolutely blown away. And I thought to myself, after this, I was like, well, if you could do that again, if you could repeat that, what is it to repeat that? But if you could do that again, you maybe would have the basis for a whole new kind of theater.

Beth: Lloyd finally got accepted as a participant in the Work Center, where once again he was able to immerse himself thoroughly for nine years.

Lloyd: We work six days a week, eight to 10 hours a day on our craft. And then you go home and you do the administrative work of the theatre. So it's like a nonstop process of work.

Beth: At the Work Center with Lloyd was a Brazilian musician, Luciano Mendes de Jesus, who was doing Ph.D. research on a musical tradition that has all but died out, the vissungo stil. Luciano was traveling all over Brazil to find living masters of the vissungo tradition, just as Lloyd was traveling all over the deep South to find southern songs.

Lloyd and Luciano found that the roots of these musical traditions were the same.

Rita Teles: It's interesting, because the roots of the histories are the same, about survival, to keep alive, to make our descendants with a better condition than what we have.

Beth: That was Rita Teles, a member of the Crossroads group.

Lloyd: because it's a tradition that's almost gone, you know, in terms of there being people that will, that are still singing it, that were taught by their grandfathers and their grandfathers and their grandfathers, you know. As you know, too, like it's really a worldwide die off that we're seeing of these types of things, and the vissungo is just being one tradition among many, many, many, many, many. So it's very precious, a precious time to be able to be involved in something like this.

Beth: So, Lloyd was collecting southern songs, and Luciano was collecting vissungos. While they worked together, they experienced a kind of spontaneous combustion, like a powerful chemical reaction that happened when they brought these two repertoires together. Lloyd and Luciano directed a group of musicians in Sao Paolo.

Lloyd: ...to create a whole new theatrical piece and then perform it and produce it by the end of the month, which is what we did. And the whole thing by the end, this was so this was in 2018. And it really started to take off by the end of the summer. It was so exciting. And so even before I got on the plane to fly back to America we were like, well what about part two? Let's go to Alabama. So we started working on the grant the day before I left, you know, which eventually we got and brought them here this year.

Beth: You've both been exploring your own roots, but the roots, such deeper and broader roots as well.

The roots of this music go deep, and they tap into what one of the Crossroads group members described as "spiritual nutrients." In the next episode, we'll hear more about these spiritual nutrients, and the deep roots Lloyd and the Crossroads group found.

"Hear in Alabama" is produced by me, Beth McGinnis, and oral historian Michelle Little. Want to hear more fascinating human stories or even tell your own? Check out Michelle's oral history company akousate. That's "a-k-o-u-s-a-t-e dot com." We're supported by a grant from the Alabama Humanities Foundation.

Special thanks to Lloyd Bricken and the Crossroads group. I'll let them introduce themselves:

Crossroads group: Introductions

Beth: My entire interview with Lloyd is available on my website, hearinalabama.com. That's "h-e-a-r in alabama dot com."

The prison music from Parchman Farm is in the Library of Congress collection "Southern Mosaic: The John and Ruby Lomax 1939 Southern States Recording Trip." You can find it at "l-o-c dot gov."

The church music is from Provewell Baptist Church in Sprott, Alabama, and the soloist is Dr. Pilar Murphy. You can hear more about Provewell in a later episode.

I'm Beth McGinnis, and this is "Hear in Alabama."