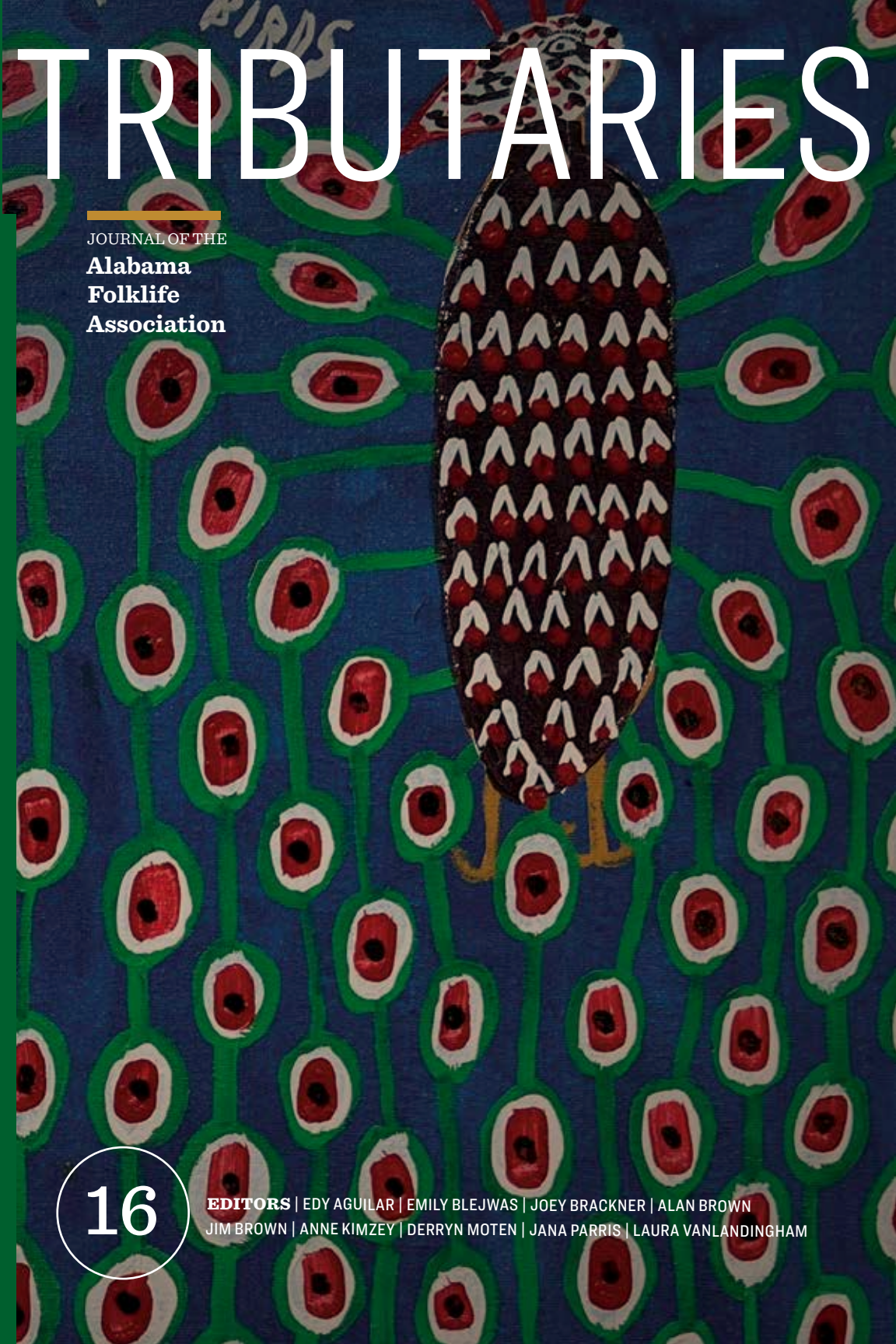
TRIBUTARIES

JOURNAL OF THE
Alabama Folklife Association



16

ON THE COVER
Cherokee Love Birds by B. F. Perkins, October 10, 1991.
Photo courtesy of Jeanie Thompson

EDITED BY Edy Aguilar, Emily Blejwas, Joey Brackner, Alan Brown
Jim Brown, Anne Kimzey, Derryn Moten, Jana Parris, Laura VanLandingham

DESIGNED BY Valerie Downes

ISBN 978-0-9772132-6-9
Published by the Alabama Folklife Association with support from the Alabama Center for Traditional Culture, a division of the Alabama State Council on the Arts.

TRIBUTARIES

ISSUE NO. 16
2022

JOURNAL OF THE
Alabama Folklife Association

Contents

ESSAYS

BOOK REVIEWS

Alabama Folklife

ASSOCIATION

Alabama Folklife

Folklife includes cultural products and artistic expressions passed down through the generations via families, communities, and work life. It includes topics like music, dance, food, stories, clothing, and traditional arts like pottery, quilting, and basketry. Folklife is comprised of living traditions that evolve as new groups arrive, environments change, and individual personalities leave their mark.

Alabama holds a rich array of folklife that includes both rural and urban traditions and contributions from diverse cultures and art forms. Alabama's geography, including the Gulf Coast, Black Belt, Tennessee Valley, Shoals, Wiregrass, and Appalachia, yields folkways representing distinct environments and histories.

Alabama folklife includes practices as wide ranging as shrimp net building, piñata making, old time fiddle, herbal remedies, gospel singing, the Vietnamese lion dance, storytelling, Indigenous finger weaving, hanji, brass bands, Greek dancing, pine needle basketry, Rangoli, duck decoy carving, layer cakes, and much more.

TRIBUTARIES

Alabama's waterways intersect its folkways at every level. Early settlement and cultural diffusion conformed to drainage patterns. The Coastal Plain, the Black Belt, the Foothills, and the Tennessee Valley remain distinct traditional as well as economic regions today. The state's cultural landscape, like its physical one, features a network of "tributaries" rather than a single dominant mainstream. **JIM CARNES** | 1994 | *TRIBUTARIES NO. 1*

Across the Generations

Mobile, Alabama's Excelsior Band

EMILY RUTH ALLEN

Brass bands have been part of Mobile, Alabama's civic life since the nineteenth century.[1] The most iconic group stemming from this era is the Excelsior Band, founded in 1883.[2] Excelsior is a predominantly Black band known for its performances of traditional jazz at a variety of events, usually sporting uniforms of black suits with caps. The band has been recognized at both regional and national levels. Excelsior was awarded the Alabama Folk Heritage Award from the Alabama State Council on the Arts in 2013 and a National Heritage Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts in 2022.

Excelsior Band members have also been honored locally by the Mobile Creole Cultural and Historical Preservation Society and the Dora Franklin Finley African-American Heritage Trail of Mobile. The Excelsior Band was also inducted into the hall of fame of the Gulf Coast Ethnic & Heritage Jazz Festival in 2012.[3] The group is a cornerstone of musical life in Mobile and has received more recognition at all levels in the last decade than ever before in its 140-year history.

Locally, the Excelsior Band has been heralded for its performances at major events in Mobile, especially the Mardi Gras parades, since its founding. For example, Eoline Pope Scott, a member of the family that initially led the band, described her experience watching the Excelsior Band in the Mardi Gras parades during her childhood in the 1910s and 20s:

Where we stood to see the parade was on Government Street, and we used to always holler, "Hey Papa." My Daddy was in front of the Excelsior Band. He'd turn around and wave and keep going. He played the trumpet. He was the leader of the band, the Excelsior Band. And they had to put the Excelsior Band [as] the last band in the parade, because all the maskers would be behind his band.[4]

John Alexander Pope, founder of Mobile's Excelsior Band

Photo courtesy of Eoline Scott, The Doy Leale McCall Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of South Alabama

Because of its engagement in communal events like this one, the band is lauded in several newspaper reports from the nineteenth century to present.

However, Excelsior is usually mentioned only as an aside in these accounts, making it challenging to thoroughly trace the band's history. This reality is surprising given the band's acclaim; only recently has its history been more clearly documented by people like Kern Jackson, Isabel Machado, Hosea London, Caroline Lyons de Freitas, Joe Cuhaj, and me. Recordings of the band are also scarce, with the best examples of the group's sound executed under current leader Hosea London. He explained the strange nature of the band's incomplete history:

It was like, they were playing. It was just something they took for granted, but it was no real documentation, either instrumentally or written. So I've tried to do something that kind of leaves some idea of history to whoever comes behind me. So they won't have to be going from scratch. But it's been interesting. There's a lot of history. It's a long history. And nobody undoubtedly, really kept a lot of records. There was not a lot of written documentation.[5]

Filling this gap, this article provides an overview of the prominent Alabama band's history.

I open with a chronology of the band, organized into three sections: nineteenth-century roots, development over the twentieth century, and

present-day status in the twenty-first century. In these sections, I identify each band leader and describe some of the ensemble's common gigs at the time. For the purposes of clarity and brevity, I do not mention every performance for which I have documentation. When possible, I also name other prominent members, but I have not been able to compile full rosters of the band across the many generations.

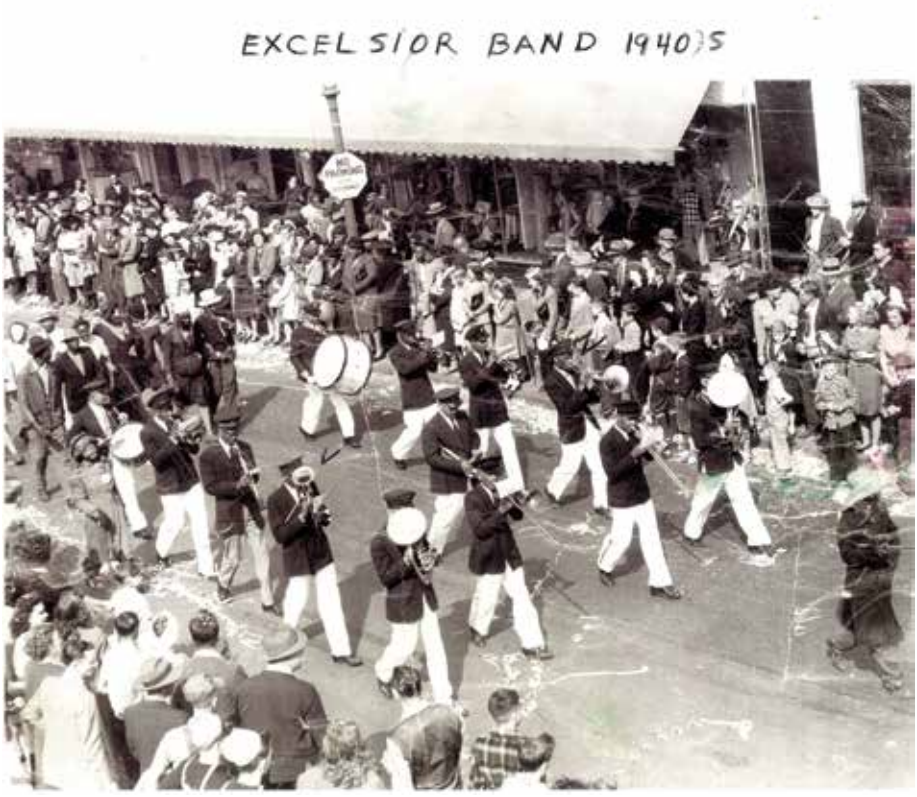
Following this overview, I situate the information within broader themes such as the band's navigation of race relations and its impact on different generations of youth. In sum, I argue that the Excelsior Band uses its longevity and tradition as social capital to balance expectations of predominantly white patronage while also accomplishing goals of musicality, repertoire, profit, and music education.

Mural in Downtown Mobile (left) featuring the Excelsior Band *(Photo by Emily Ruth Allen)*

The Excelsior Band (above) performing at a Mardi Gras event in 1982 *(Photo courtesy of The Doy Leale McCall Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of South Alabama)*

Origins of the Excelsior Band

The founder of Mobile's Excelsior Band was John Alexander Pope, whose home for the band was the Creole Fire Company No. 1.[6] John A. Pope was born on February 26, 1863 to John M. Pope and Rosette Laurendine. He attended Creole Catholic School and eventually became president of Creole Fire Company No. 1 and proprietor of Pope Undertaking Company.[7] He died in 1951 and was buried in Magnolia Cemetery.[8]



The Excelsior Band marching in a Mardi Gras parade, circa 1940s *(Photo courtesy of The Doy Leale McCall Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of South Alabama)*

The origin story that circulates most widely in Mobile is that on November 23, 1883, John A. Pope had friends over to his house, located on the corner of Scott and Selma Streets, to celebrate the birth of his son John Clement (John C.); he and his friends formed the Excelsior Band to mark the occasion.[9] Another origin story was offered by Excelsior member William Ballariel in an interview with jazz historian William Russell; he indicated that John A. Pope had quit the "Old Creole Band" and then formed the Excelsior Band.[10] Ballariel noted that this Creole Band had been around for seventy years prior to the Excelsior Band.

Opposite: Excelsior Band marching in the Joe Cain Day parade, 1990 *(Photos by Joey Brackner)*

The Excelsior Band was largely comprised of Creoles of Color. As a Creole group, Excelsior navigated complex racial boundaries. Certain aspects of their early performances illustrate how racism affected them. For example, the band was initially placed towards the back of parades as opposed to the front position that they occupy today. Colorism also often created a social divide between Creoles of Color and other people of color that prevented groups from intermingling. The stigma surrounding racial difference is evident in a description of the Excelsior Band by Billy McBride, a Black Mobile vaudeville performer from the duo Mack & Mack, who stated, "I remember them [the Excelsior Band] for the reason that, in Mobile, being born there, they lived [as] what they

called the Creoles in Mobile." He continued, "They didn't really mix too much with the rest of the colored people. So, that's why I remember them so well."[11] As a Creole-led band from 1883 through the 1930s, the Excelsior Band navigated this space carefully, occupying a liminal space between the white Mobilians and other people of color. John C. Pope described Excelsior's relationship to white and Black bands, saying, "We had some competition from other bands. Back in those days, we had Mr. Drago, Cummins, and all the white bands. Then, we had a few colored bands, but they never did work up to that point."[12]

Excelsior has historically performed in many different cities along the Gulf Coast, not just in Mobile. For example, on September 8, 1898, they performed in a white Masonic parade in Biloxi, Mississippi.[13] John C. Pope also noted that his father played in New Orleans: "Back in my father's days, they made trips to New Orleans with the Excelsior Band. Excursions. They played dances over there. On the train."[14]

Current Excelsior leader Hosea London and local Excelsior historian Caroline Lyons de Freitas believe the band became associated with funeral performances through Pope Undertaking Company.[15] This is consistent with William Ballariel's statement that John A. Pope "was a member of a society which had music for the funerals of its members."[16]

Starting sometime in the 1890s, the band was run by cornetist Martin Stokes until 1901.[17] In their early days, the band was known for their performances on moonlight boat rides on Mobile Bay.[18] Ballariel also cited other gigs, such as a funeral for the Young Men's Relief Association and a ball on the Municipal Wharf. He also noted that the band wore blue uniforms, and members affixed lights on their caps at night if they needed to read sheet music.[19]

Excelsior in the Twentieth Century

Further generational shifts within the band occurred at the turn of the twentieth century. John Clement Pope, son of John A. and Odeil Pope, took over the band's leadership in 1902.[20] John C. also formed a separate group, the Pope Dreamland Serenaders, that performed in the 1920s and 1930s. In addition to his musical

leadership, Pope had several other business interests, including a claim to have started the Mobile branch of the American Federation of Musicians.[21] According to his daughters, Pope was also a tin smith and funeral director.[22] He ran a diner at the intersection of Dearborn and Selma Streets, a newsstand in south Mobile, and at one point, a nightclub.[23] John C. Pope gave up leadership of Excelsior in 1931 and had retired as a musician by 1948.[24] Pope was later honored by the Mobile Jazz Association in 1972, the same year he passed away.[25]

Evidence from local newspapers suggests that Excelsior, under the leadership of John C. Pope, contributed to Mobilian society in a variety of ways. The band played for the Klondyke Social Club on October 17, 1901 and the Alabama Alpha Chapter of Phi Sigma Chi at German Relief Hall in 1908, so they catered heavily to private organizations.[26] The band also played in predominantly white parades like the King Felix parade as early as 1909.[27] Excelsior secretary Ballariel cited a variety of gigs between 1917 and 1918, including baseball and football games, lawn parties, maypole parties, balls, a Red Cross parade, and at different clubs in the area. He also noted that the band hosted their own balls, showing the band's intracommunal significance.[28]

Charles "Charlie" Lipscomb assumed band leadership from John C. Pope in 1931 and appears to have still been the leader as of 1948 when the group was listed as the "Lipscomb Excelsior Band" in the *Mobile Register*.[29] Lipscomb was the teacher of famous trumpeter Cootie Williams and worked as a tailor; Williams pressed pants for Lipscomb to pay for his first few lessons.[30]

In the twentieth century, Excelsior played at places like Brookley Park

(Photo courtesy of Hosea and Jerryln London)

"Just about everybody, in Mobile, African American, who was a significant musician, at one time or another has probably played with the Excelsior Band."

HOSEA LONDON | PRESENT-DAY EXCELSIOR LEADER

and the Joe Radford Thomas Recreation Center on Davis Avenue.[31] They were known for their funeral performances, as described in Carroll Rubira's recollection (likely a memory from the 1930s):

Old-timers remember the 'old' Excelsior Band because they marched in front of the horse-drawn funeral coaches before the motorized cars were invented or used by Negroes. One Old Mobilian, Carroll Rubira, remembered playing in the road and from a distance they could hear the band playing the 'funeral march.' The children eagerly awaited the procession and as the sound got louder they could see the band as it lead [sic] the procession through the back fence of the Magnolia Cemetery to the 'colored section' of the cemetery.[32]

By 1948, according to John C. Pope, only one of the original band members was still alive. The Excelsior Band continued under younger players and grew in popularity. Ballariel discussed the transition: "Some of the younger men use the name, for the purpose of getting work, as the old band had all the work in Mobile at one time; the band was well-known outside of Mobile, too." Ballariel is referring to the band's reputation in New Orleans, Pensacola, and Chicago. At the time of the 1959 interview, Ballariel indicated that he, John C. Pope, and Denny Trainer were the only surviving members whose participation can be traced back to the earliest period of the Excelsior Band.[33]

By the 1950s, the Excelsior Band had thus become less of a family affair. Present-day Excelsior saxophonist, Theodore Arthur Jr., commented on the band's expansion:

Well, those situations create those type of things. More often than not, they did that out of need, because that was the only people that were qualified to do that back then. Music has always been a high society type of group of people. And there weren't a lot of people really qualified to play in a band when they started. Probably just those family members that had been trained by other family members. It was kind of a secret order if you ask me, a little bit, somewhat. So I guess as time went on, it spread it out to the other members in the community, and that kind of broke that monopoly up a little bit.[34]

As the monopoly began to weaken, other respected musicians of color like Cootie Williams and E.B. Coleman played in the band.[35] Present-day

Excelsior leader Hosea London remarked, "Just about everybody, in Mobile, African American, who was a significant musician, at one time or another has probably played with the Excelsior Band."[36] By regularly performing in numerous spaces and venues across Mobile, as well as in other cities along the Gulf Coast, the band at the time was, as present-day Excelsior trombonist Carl Cunningham Jr. explained, "going against the Jim Crow grain."[37]

In the second half of the twentieth century, others stepped forward to lead the band. Trumpet player James M. Seals Jr. joined Excelsior in 1952 and was manager in 1978 and 1988.[38] Robert Petty joined the band around 1950 and ran the ensemble as of 1994.[39] A trombonist, Petty also played for an Army band and served as president of the Musicians Federation Union. He also worked for the United States Postal Service.[40]

Present-Day Excelsior Band

Today, the Excelsior Band is managed by Hosea London, who assumed leadership from James Seals in 2010.[41] London worked his way up to that point from when he joined the band in 1976, learning from band members that included Stan Field, E.B. Coleman, and Edward Pratt:

These guys can improvise on the spot, and they enjoyed it. That was E.B. [Coleman], and ... Stan Field, who were remarkable. Because those are the guys that pretty much taught me. ... If there was a note that was a half step off, they knew it. I didn't know it. I thought I was playing the right note. ... They set me straight. That's not the note. It'd only be like a half step. Because some of those tunes you can kinda get by with. But they would know. They were excellent musicians.[42]

These skilled musicians have built a reputation in Mobile. Newspaper descriptions demonstrate the high level of respect Mobilians have for the Excelsior Band, with writers referring to the musicians as "long accepted and anticipated paraders," "the familiar Excelsior Band," "[the] traditionally famous Excelsior Band," "that musical group which consistently brings more pleasure to Mobile Mardi Gras than any other band, ensemble or collection of music-makers," "they often represent the city of Mobile," and "THE Mardi Gras Band."[43]

Such perceptions, it should be noted, are those of the band's predominantly white audiences, as Mobile folklorist Kern Jackson has observed: "Getting audiences 'to move' leads to the band members achieving reputations. Parades are very public, racialized settings where the band secures its

reputation." The band is aware of the need to participate in parades and how to navigate those racialized spaces, as Jackson explains:

The members of the Excelsior band acknowledge and contend with the absurdity of being objectified. They recognize that their performances are valued differently by different cultural groups and audiences. They parade, in part, to take advantage of other performing possibilities in non-parading venues that they do not normally have privilege or access to. Specific examples are events organized by the white Mardi Gras Association ... The members of the Excelsior Brass Band are self-consciously aware in every interchange of who they are, what is expected of them, and how to negotiate back and forth.[44]

Excelsior Band at the Mobile Carnival Museum, 2009 *(Photo courtesy of the Excelsior Band)*

Jackson's statements are based on the Excelsior Band under Petty's leadership, but are echoed in London's response to a question posed by historian Isabel Machado regarding the band's place in segregated spaces:

I talked to them [older members of the band] some. And I knew that it was very segregated. And they always, for some reason, they always treated the band like...you know, differently. Because even then they were going into mansions and being treated, you know, real nice. Even now, they treat you real nice ... A lot of times musicians kinda had that opportunity to go places that, you know, ordinary people probably would never see ... It's ok. But it gets kinda strange sometimes because you always wonder, you know, why are there no other ethnic people here.[45]

Through navigating these racialized spaces and gazes, London and the other members of the band utilize their social and monetary capital to their advantage. London noted how the band has become more commercialized since he joined in 1976: "When I joined the group, the group was a band. And now the group is more of a business. ... Excelsior started getting more corporate-type of jobs like [playing for] Airbus."[46] He reflected on the lack of business skills in the band's past:

Opposite: Bradley Cooper, trumpeter in the Excelsior Band, 2022 *(Photo by Hypothetical, courtesy of the National Endowment for the Arts)*

Excelsior Band members Charles Hall and his grandson, James Brown, performing in the Floral Parade in Mobile, 2009 *(Photo by Keyhole Photo)*

And I was really thrown off because I was so surprised. I thought, you know, one-hundred-something years, there was no sense of real business. It was like, you know how musicians are. They play and get paid and that's about it. And everybody goes on their merry way. There was absolutely no funds to do it, I think. When I recorded the CD, I just had a friend of mine who worked at South Alabama ... and he had a studio at his house. So he did, he did it for me at no cost, and it turned out very well because he also plays. ... I basically did it for marketing. I was not trying to really sell it. But once I got it done, I have a friend that runs Ashland Gallery, on Old Shell Road. And a lot of them began to sell pretty good. But that was not my original intent. My original intent was to send it to people who were hiring the band and needed to hear.[47]

This response suggests that London, as Jackson stated, is aware of how to negotiate these spaces catered to white elites, as well as how to sonically dominate them through marketing decisions like recording a CD and selling it to predominantly white clientele. Because of their frequent participation in prominent events and connections to elite community figures, London stated that current Mobile mayor Sandy Stimpson gave the band members permits for downtown parking spaces.[48] He is grateful for Excelsior's success, noting how his affiliation with the band has granted him access to spaces he likely would not have otherwise:

Today, under London's leadership, members also select more contemporary music for the band to play, achieving a balance between their clients' demand for a traditional jazz repertoire and their own desire to be known as a musical group that is iconic, yet versatile.

It's just been good to have that kind of recognition in Mobile. And the amazing thing about it is that even the young kids who know because their parents have told them about the Excelsior Band. And I've gone to places that I knew ordinarily I wouldn't be there in Mobile. Everywhere. I'm like, okay, I'm here, so I guess I'll have a drink in there. I'm a participant. If you let me in, I'll do what everyone else is doing.[49]

In my interview with Excelsior saxophonist Theodore Arthur, he also observed that affluent Mobilians are the primary patrons—the ones who can afford to hire the band—for jazz in the area: "It seems like to me that people with the money are the only ones in Mobile that really appreciate jazz." Later in the conversation, he explained that such patronage has "been a blessing in itself."[50]

Yet, this blessing comes with expectations. As Jackson stated, the band is "consciously aware" of what they must do musically as well as visually for their clientele. Although their decision to continue wearing the iconic suits may encourage further objectification from their audiences, many members believe that it is essential to their success and overall aesthetic.[51] London insisted that the suit is non-negotiable:

And I always believe this: I think when you put on a suit and tie, I think you are received differently than you are when you got on khakis and a t-shirt. The places we go. I mean, people are like, come on, I'm talking about, like Mobile Country Club. They're like, "Come in and put your cases back here. Come sit down and get something to eat. Get you a drink." This is before we start playing. I think that perception is something that's necessary in Mobile.[52]

Excelsior Band leader Robert Petty also discussed how the band's clientele dictated their stylistic and musical choices: "When we play for the whites the music we play, like I say, we play 'Stars Fell on Alabama' or a waltz, tunes like that. See, that is what white people like. … Most of our small group music we play, most of our gigs are played for white people."[53] This is apparent in descriptions of Excelsior in most twentieth-century newspaper accounts as primarily playing traditional jazz (i.e., Dixieland). Yet, as leader James Seals put it, the band

"We need stronger players for the parade season, that can project and can manage the route. ... It's a different style than sitting down, marching."

used that expectation to set themselves apart from other brass bands: "'But we have a style of our own ... We are the only marching band that plays Dixieland. There are other Dixieland bands, but they ride."[54] This statement is consistent with what London has told me: that Excelsior is more like a marching jazz band than a second line brass band. One report described them as playing "beautiful old ballads" like "Margie," traditional jazz hits such as "South Rampart Street Parade," show tunes, and standards from the 1940s and 1950s.[55]

Today, under London's leadership, members also select more contemporary music for the band to play, achieving a balance between their clients' demand for a traditional jazz repertoire and their own desire to be known as a musical group that is iconic, yet versatile. In my observations of the band's performances, I noticed that the players' focus is equally inward and outward, with members paying attention to their own musicality just as much as the crowd's reactions around them. Although their repertoire has historically been geared towards white patrons, London has thus cultivated a varied style for the band:

As a musician, you want to have some variety. I hate just playing the same thing over and over. It just doesn't make a lot of sense to me, even though it's easy and sometimes the people that'll listen don't really care. But I care because I'm the one that's got to do it. I don't want to do just the same stuff, you just keep doing the same thing over and over. It gets to be pretty monotonous.[56]

While they may still cater to the market, London clearly selects music that he enjoys playing so that he, his bandmates, and the audience can fully enjoy all that the band has to offer. Arthur also expressed his investment in the music, saying: "I just have a great time with it. It's interesting because it's [jazz] the music of the people. And I guess that's what excites me more than anything else."[57] His remark is telling—the performances are for himself, as well as for audiences. With their success, the band is accomplishing their mission to be, according to trombonist Carl Cunningham Jr., "THE band of Mardi Gras. ... And not only be the band of Mardi Gras, but to be the example of Mardi Gras."

Longevity and Tradition

Performing as a musician was once one of the few ways Mobilians of color could participate and be represented in the Mardi Gras parades. Under London, Excelsior is bringing this history to the fore through their participation in a wider variety of events (e.g., often playing for museums in conjunction with Mardi Gras history lectures or exhibits). In 2008, Excel-

sior led a Creole Fire Company No. 1 Parade for the unveiling of a historic marker in front of the old fire station.[58] Their pride in their history is also reflected in their sousaphone label, "Excelsior 1883."

The future of Excelsior is equally important to its members, as demonstrated by the band leaders' inclusion of different generations to ensure longevity. As London explained, "I don't think there is a risk of it dying it out. I've got some very, very good younger guys. ... So I've got some very good guys that understand. I think it'll be going on for a lot of years."[59] Cunningham also noted that a multi-age model helps the band to "sustain itself."[60] London explained that the older, retired members of the group have an advantage, as they can play during the day when most of the civic events occur and are ready at a moment's notice.[61] He also noted that younger members are not as familiar with the band's traditional jazz style as seasoned members:

One of the most challenging aspects is getting younger players, and a lot of the younger players are not familiar with the musical styles. Because Excelsior has a very unique style. It's basically a marching jazz band. So a lot of younger people don't listen to that style that much. So that seems to be the biggest challenge, even though they can play the melodies, but they can't improvise on the countermelodies.

However, younger members do bring an energy to performances that is critical. For example, at the 2017 Gulf Coast Ethnic & Heritage Jazz Festival, the crowd cheered for young trumpeter Aaron Covin's solo louder than any other portion of Excelsior's performance. The audience, including myself, was clearly impressed with the virtuosic playing of this young man. Today, Covin is a full-fledged member of the band. In a *Mobile Bay Magazine* feature on Covin, he states, "I think it's an honor to be in [Excelsior] at such a young age, considering how long they've been around."[62]

Most importantly, these young talented musicians are learning from older band members, showing that Excelsior is influential in music education as well. London teaches private lessons and groups around town, as does Arthur, who notes:

(Photo by Hypothetical, courtesy of the National Endowment for the Arts)

Well, my thing is, I really enjoy sharing knowledge about music with young people and older people too. I like teaching. When I was coming up, mother wanted me to be a teacher. And I didn't care for it at the time. I didn't want to do it. Because she wanted me to follow her footsteps, and I didn't want to teach anybody. I just didn't appreciate what I saw going on back then. And it wasn't until I was much older that I started to realize the value of passing this knowledge on to other folks. So I get a kind of special thrill out of showing people how to play now.[63]

Their teaching is also carried out mimetically; I have seen children "air" playing drums and trumpet around the band at sit-down gigs, and Arthur mentioned seeing such imitation along the parade routes by younger onlookers.

Though Jackson has rightly observed that the Excelsior Band is objectified by the white gaze, there is another important gaze at play: that of youth. Again, the mimetic nature of parade viewing (i.e., seeing standard floats, musicians, and other performers each year) reinforces the value of participatory performance. This process is visible in the opening anecdote of Eoline Pope Scott's observations of her father's musical activities in the parades. A more recent example comes from Carl Cunningham Jr., a current Excelsior member who admired the band's style and values throughout his early life:[64]

[Carl's high school director and former Excelsior director] Mr. Coleman was [also] my mom's band director at Central High School. And then she went to college and played in the Mississippi Valley State marching band, where Hosea London, who is our director, played in the band with my mom at Mississippi Valley State. So when I moved back to Mobile in 2002, and I think 2004, I was asked. By that time, some of the members had passed, and Hosea had needed some strong sounds for Mardi Gras. ... So we need stronger players for the parade season, that can project and can manage the route. ... It's a different style than sitting down, marching. So Hosea knew I was a solid player, and he knew my mom, knew my family, type of family I came from. And Excelsior is big on presentation, tradition, upstanding men in the community. I guess I checked the boxes. He asked if I wanted to be a part of the Excelsior Brass Band. And of course I said yes. Because I've watched them my entire life and thought I'll never be one of them. And now I'm one.[65]

Cunningham's remarks at the end of this excerpt show how Excelsior is a powerful symbol of Mobilian culture that sparks musical innovation in younger generations, as well as how the band functions as a self-perpetuating organization.[66] For example, James Brown took over his grandfather's (Charles Hall) role as the band's sousaphone player. In addition, many members in younger brass bands in Mobile have mentioned seeing Excelsior on the parade route, citing them as inspiration for forming their own groups.

Passed from generation to generation, Excelsior is an enduring organization. Arthur regards Excelsior as a "multitalented, well-organized organization," noting that most men stay in the band for most of their lives:

"I think the band has sustained its longevity because it's been true to what it was built upon, an expression of what Mr. Pope had for his generation, which was the down-the-bay area community—brown, Black, creole. I think he didn't know what was going to transpire a hundred plus years later, but I think the band has been true to the day he formed the Excelsior Brass Band. It was an expression of celebration for the people in that community."

CARL CUNNINGHAM JR. | PRESENT-DAY MEMBER OF THE BAND

Nobody ever leaves the band unless they become seriously ill or die. It's a waiting line a mile long for people wanting to join the band. The thing is that you must have a certain amount of musical skill and experience to get in this band. It's just not something that's really just wide open to the public. It's not that kind of a situation. Have to have a certain amount of proficiency and all that kind of stuff to play. The music is not simple that we play. It sounds easy. And it sounds simple. But technically, when you start speaking in terms of musical terms to play it correctly, you must have a certain amount of skill.[67]

The Excelsior Band playing at the Church Street Graveyard in Mobile on Joe Cain Day, man dancing on Cain's grave, 1967 *(Photo by Clarence Keller, Courtesy of The Doy Leale McCall Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of South Alabama)*

After I remarked that they make their music sound easy, Arthur continued, "Well, longevity has something to do with that. If you keep doing something over and over it again, it becomes easy because you find a way to make it sound good all the time."[68] Cunningham also made connections between the band's longevity and its commitment to tradition and community:

I think the band has sustained its longevity because it's been true to what it was built upon, an expression of what Mr. Pope had for his generation, which was the down-the-bay area community—brown, Black, creole. I think he didn't know what was going to transpire a hundred plus years later, but I think the band has been true to the day he formed the Excelsior Brass Band. It was an expression of celebration for the people in that community.[69]

The Excelsior Band, circa 1985 *(Photo by Michael Thomason, Courtesy of The Doy Leale McCall Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of South Alabama)*

The band's sustainability pays homage to the pioneering efforts of the Popes and other founding band leaders, and is a living testament to the significance of musicians of color who sonically define Mardi Gras and other civic events.

Due in part to its lengthy existence, the band enjoys prominent status in Mobile and other Alabama cities. They are usually positioned at or near the front of parades in which they participate, including the statewide Alabama Bicentennial Parade of 2019. As the Bicentennial parade proceeded down Dexter Avenue, I spotted the Excelsior Band at the very front, playing "When the Saints Go Marching In." Situating a Mardi Gras icon as the first musical act of a statewide parade underscored the significance of Mardi Gras, brass bands, and particularly the Excelsior to Alabama history and culture. Furthermore, a band of Black musicians marching in *the front* of a parade was symbolically important, given they took the same route as participants in the Selma to Montgomery March took in 1965 during the civil rights movement.

Across the generations, the Excelsior Band has thrived on its nineteenth-century roots and continued the tradition of being the premier brass band of Mobile. As London explained, "We stay with what we do. And it works. When people hire Excelsior, they wanna hear tunes from before I was born. They go way back. And that's what people want when they hire Excelsior. So we don't go off too much into something different."[70] In other words, Excelsior is about tradition. By epitomizing values of tradition and longevity, the band accomplishes a myriad of goals—education, fraternalism, musicality, to name a few—that make the band all the more communally significant. ○

THE POPE SISTERS

The Pope musical legacy continued through John C. Pope's and Alice Catherine Labtre's daughters, Una (Eula), Odile, Inez, and Eoline, who got their start in the choir of St. Peter Claver Catholic Church of Mobile.[71] They went on to achieve success in the 1930s as the girl group, The Pope Sisters, whose music was played on the radio, on Broadway, and in Oscar Micheaux's film *Underworld*.[72] They covered songs such as "Say It Isn't So," "St. Louis Blues," and other hits of the time, singing "in the same fashion of the Boswell Sisters but with their own hot, mellow, gospel, jazzy Harlem style."[73] The women were widely recognized as a distinctive Southern quartet (though mistaken as a New Orleans group here): "The Pope Sisters are four beautiful girls who possess four wondrously sweet and melodious voices that when blended together produce a combination of tones which are exceptionally pleasing to the ear. They honored New Orleans by choosing it as the place for their initial engagement, prior to leaving for the East."[74]


4 PRETTY GIRLS FEMALE EDITION OF MILLS BROS.?

Called Pride Of Mobile, Ala.

Sedan 'Discovers' Talented Foursome Who Outsing Boswell Sisters and Are Scoring Sensational Successes In Dixie—Odile, Eoline, Inez and Una Pope Have Bright Future.

By FLOYD G. SNELSON, Theatrical Editor

Newspaper clip from *The Pittsburgh Courier*, January 28, 1933; Photo from short film, *The Life of the Party*, April 26, 1935

As that quote indicates, the Pope Sisters had a thriving career in the northeast, especially New York, during the tail end of the Harlem Renaissance. They performed at the Lafayette Theatre and later the Apollo, and also performed in cities like Boston, Baltimore, and Washington DC.[75] The Pope Sisters also performed on Broadway, as described in this newspaper excerpt: "While the Pope Sisters appear on Broadway, they are engaged in strenuous rehearsals. With Duke Ellington's assistance, who is currently engaged in attempting to train them, they should prove to be remarkable singers and entertainers."[76] The excerpt mentions a specific production, *Lucky Sambo*: "The Pope Sisters — Una, Odile, Ines, and Eoline — famous female novelty quartet that recently made their stage debut at the Lafayette Theater, New York, are now included on the cast roster of 'Lucky Sambo.'"[77]

In addition to being shrouded in Black stereotypes in *Lucky Sambo*, the girl group also had to navigate racist expectations of performers of color by the film industry, as Eoline noted, recalling an experience of a film short: "Well, they had us like dressed as a maid with little pieces. They made us up dark—not Black, but darker. And when we came out, the man said he wanted colored girls. We didn't want French girls, that's what they said. That's when they made us up brown."[78] Navigating these terrains, the quartet enjoyed musical success through 1940.[79] ○


CREOLE
EXCELSIOR
BAND

The Excelsior Band

National Heritage Fellows

JOEY BRACKNER

In 2022, the Excelsior Band was awarded a National Heritage Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. This prestigious award was established in 1982 to honor significant traditional artists in the United States. Approximately one dozen awards are given each year.

The award recognizes the Excelsior Band's import as an African American brass marching band that has embodied the culture of the city of Mobile and its beloved Mardi Gras celebration for generations. Originally organized as a firehouse band in 1883, Excelsior survived the crucible of Jim Crow, while assuming a central role in Mobile carnival. The band is now a beloved cultural institution among both the Black and white communities of the city.

Only the finest veteran musicians are invited to join Excelsior; thus, membership is the highest achievement among Mobile area musicians. Current members are: Theodore Arthur, Jr., saxophone; Luquen Cannon, Jr., trombone; Brad Cooper, trumpet; Aaron Covin, trumpet; Carl Cunningham, Jr., trombone, Ronnie Hunter, Jr., bass drum; Hosea London, Sr., trumpet; James Moore, saxophone; Danny Mosley, Jr., trumpet; Herbert O. Nelson III, alto saxophone; Leon Rhoden, drum; and Sean Thomas, tuba.

In addition to the Excelsior Band, seventeen Alabamians have received past National Heritage Fellowships:

- **GEE'S BEND QUILTING** | Mary Lee Bendolph, Lucy Mingo, and Loretta Pettway
- **QUILTING** | Mozell Benson
- **GOSPEL MUSIC** | The Birmingham Sunlights: Bill Graves, Barry Taylor, James Taylor, Steve Taylor, Wayne Williams
- **POTTERY** | Jerry Brown
- **QUILTING** | Nora Ezell
- **BESS HAWES AWARD FOR ADVOCACY OF THE TRADITIONAL ARTS** | Al Head
- **SACRED HARP SINGING** | David Ivey
- **QUILTING** | Bettye Kimbrell
- **RAILROAD WORK SONGS** | John Henry Mealing, Cornelius Wright
- **SACRED HARP SINGING** | Dewey Williams

For more information on the National Heritage Fellowship Award and nominating process, and to catch the Excelsior Band in the NEA's new film, *Roots of American Culture: A Cross-Country Visit with Living Treasures of the Folk and Traditional Arts*, visit: **arts.gov/honors/heritage**.

The Excelsior Band at the Creole Firehouse No. 1 in Mobile
(Photo courtesy of the Excelsior Band; partial reprint courtesy of the National Endowment for the Arts)


TABACALERA A. FUENTE Y COMPAÑIA
ARTURO FUENTE
IMPORTED
Double Chateau Fuente
Hand Made in
Dominican Republic
HAND MADE
IMPORTED

Cigar Box Guitars

Finding Voice and Community in North Alabama

JOHN H. SAUNDERS

When I turned nine, my parents bought me a junior Harmony guitar with Quality Stamps that my mom had saved from the grocery store in my hometown of Memphis, Tennessee. I couldn't do much with it besides make some noise, but in the years to come, my love of guitar led me to weekly lessons, live performances in college towns, and into many music communities. I learned to listen to others, create my own sound, commune through music, and turn to guitar in times of grief and uncertainty. Then, in 2015, music brought me to a new art form, introducing me to a community where I would truly discover my own sound. I was about to build my first instrument that would be all my voice.

In 2014, I had moved to Conway, Arkansas to teach at Central Arkansas University, and met fellow guitar player Steve Karafit at a faculty happy hour at a dive called Bear's Den Pizza. Once we started talking guitars, I knew Steve was a kindred spirit. He was more Beatles and I was more Stones. He was more Hank Williams and I was more David Bowie. But together we covered quite a catalog. We started playing in his cavernous shed where we could make all the noise we wanted, and at occasional open mic nights.

A year later, Steve read somewhere online about building cigar box guitars and asked if I would be interested in building with him. I knew very little about the power and hand tools we would need to do this, and I knew nothing about building an instrument beyond having read Allen St. John's book, *Clapton's Guitar,* which I found to be equally fascinating and daunting. I couldn't do that. Or could I?

We started out by buying a few specialty tools, since Steve had most of the normal tools that we would need. We poured a stiff drink, lit up cigars, and started following directions we found online on how to build these "cbgs." Our first few were clunky, but playable. So we started thinking about building more of these and trying to sell them. We had no ambition to become rich; it was more about seeing if we could actually make quality instruments. To build an instrument with all the attributes we liked, and none of the ones we didn't.

I took over making the necks, and Steve attached them to the boxes and did all the work to make them playable as acoustic or electric cbgs. Just like when we played together, we made a good team. My necks were much smoother and

Photos courtesy of John Saunders

"As I picked up different builds to play them, the voices of their creators came through loud and clear. Each build played uniquely. These weren't instruments made by factory machines that were finished by hand, these were instruments that started with a stick and a box and were now able to make music."

rounder than some of the cbgs we had found for sale. I also started trying out stains to make the necks different colors to stand out from or blend with the colors of the cigar boxes. On our own, we were doing well. We were experimenting with various woods and stains, and making a little money on the side, enough to buy the occasional bottle of bourbon to enjoy while building. But these cbgs were about to sing a new song that I hadn't expected.

We found a local place where we could sell our cbgs on consignment and started looking in Little Rock for places that might carry our instruments. We discovered a shop that already sold another musician's cbgs. There were a few things we both really liked about his build, and a few things we preferred about our own. The luthier was a local blues musician named Bill Jagitsch. We found a gig he was playing not too far from Conway, so we went to listen and ask a few questions. Here is where our cbg world changed from black and white to technicolor.

Fortunately for Steve and me, there wasn't much of a crowd at Bill's gig that night, and we had opportunities to talk with him about his builds and ask plenty of questions. He was incredibly polite and helpful and could probably tell that we wouldn't be much competition for him, if any. He also told us about cigar box guitar festivals where builders and players get together, sell what they have built, and swap stories and secrets, sharing mistakes and experiences about building in this new world we had stumbled into.

Right at this time in 2017, my contract at CSU ended and I accepted a position at the University of Alabama in Huntsville. I don't normally believe in serendipity, and those who know my luck don't expect it for me. But my new hometown of Huntsville happened to be home to the longest running cigar box festival in the country as well as a studio dedicated exclusively to cigar box guitars and other homemade instruments in a place called Lowe Mill.

During my first full summer in Alabama, Steve drove in from Arkansas and we attended the 16th annual Cigar Box Guitar Festival. We took a couple of our builds and went to see what it was all about. Now, I have been around musicians of one sort or another for decades, and they would play their instruments to get their musical fix, but this community was different. As I picked up different builds to play them, the voices of their creators came through

loud and clear. Each build played uniquely. These weren't instruments made by factory machines that were finished by hand, these were instruments that started with a stick and a box and were now able to make music. I talked with each builder, asking questions, and they readily supplied answers. I played their builds and they played mine. I've heard a lot of songs played by master guitar players, but I was never a member of their community, just a member of their audience.

Cigar box guitars have given me a community that I did not have before. When I started building again recently after taking a couple years off, I knew who to ask when I had questions. When I had an idea of something that might work, I knew who to run it by before committing tool to wood. And I had a solid notion of what the voice of my instruments should sound like. I know what makes my cbgs unique, and that is me. But it is a me shaped by this community, and by an instrument that carries collective building wisdom with it.

Ever since I joined this cigar box guitar community, I don't think about any of my instruments in the same way. In my living room alone, I have more than a dozen instruments, and each has a different voice that I can hear now. Not just a different sound, but a different voice. I can play the same song on my Alvarez 12-string, then play it again on a 5-string cbg with a Telecaster neck, and there is more coming out than just a different variation of the song.

Maybe there is something spiritual that I now get from instruments that I didn't get before. Maybe I can hear better the differences from one instrument to another. Or maybe I'm just at a point as a player, builder, and fan where I see these instruments as collectors of stories and songs that make each one unique. Whatever the reason, I am now a part of this ongoing communal conversation where I can listen to builders' advice and the voices created by their instruments, then add my own ideas and voice. Most musicians do not normally give away all of their secrets about how they engage their craft. But as a cbg builder who has been embraced by this community, I am happy to play a role in the past, present, and future of building these unique instruments among rare companions. ○

The Freedom of the Unexpected

Profile of Cigar Box Guitar Builder Bill Jehle

EMILY BLEJWAS

Huntsville native Bill Jehle wrote the book on cigar box guitars. Literally. It's called *One Man's Trash: A History of the Cigar Box Guitar.* To better understand the cigar box guitar craft and maker mindset, I interviewed Jehle by phone (he now resides in rural France) in August 2022.

Jehle traces his love of guitar to a single moment. It was circa 1972 and he was 5 years old, watching Roy Clark play guitar on TV when one of the strings popped loose and he kept playing. Then it happened again. And Clark kept on, despite missing several strings by the end of the tune. It "became a puzzle for me," says Jehle, who has always liked to "figure out why things work the way they do."

Jehle began playing guitar at age ten and at age sixteen, a neighbor gifted him a pillowcase full of odd guitar bits and pieces. Luckily, Jehle had a carpenter uncle with a workshop, where he scavenged the rest of what he needed to build his first guitar. Decades later, Jehle was still experimenting with sound, this time with computer recordings. He needed a quieter instrument that wouldn't interfere with the electrical noise, and he stumbled upon cigar box guitars, known as "cbgs" for short.

It was the early 2000s and the early years of the internet, where Jehle discovered an online community of hundreds of cbg builders trading tips. In his hometown of Huntsville, Alabama, the inaugural Cigar Box Guitar Festival was held in 2004. (It's now the longest running cbg festival in the world). By the time Jehle attended in 2009, cbgs had gained a swell of interest. Jehle credits the internet, but also the popularity of the DIY movement, showcased on networks like HGTV and "dedicated to people doing things on their own and figuring it out."

The do-it-yourself ethos defines cigar box guitars. "Once you see somebody who's built and is playing a cigar box guitar, it's like, 'Wow, that's so simple, I could do that in an afternoon,'" Jehle explains. At festivals, onlookers will often remark, "I've got some stuff laying around at home. I'm going to make one of these." And they do. Many cbg builders have never played or built

Photo by David Sutton

Cigar box guitar made by David Sutton *(Photo by David Sutton)*

Opposite: Lukas Jam & The 106ers at the Cigar Box Guitar Festival in Huntsville, 2022 *(Photo by Tara Mello)*

guitars before, Jehle says, but "You see the light come on and they realize, 'Oh my gosh, I can actually do this.' They are so overwhelmed with the idea that they can make whatever they want and play it."

It's not the quality of the instrument that matters, Jehle explains. It's the accomplishment that gives builders a sense of triumph. "Just to build something to play. It may be no better than a toy, but the fact that you made it," he says. "Then when it makes a sound, it makes it that much more interesting. And you think, well, how can I make this better?" And the process continues:

There's this magic moment when you've built something and you put strings on it for the first time. You have no clue if it's going to work at all and when it doesn't implode, when it makes that first chord, that right there is unexpected. Because it doesn't always sound the same. It's a process of discovery and what's possible.

Jehle lauds the accessibility of the cbg craft, and the intuitiveness of its learning process. Sometimes when you learn music, he says, "you have your instrument and the teacher cracks you on the knuckles and corrects your posture." But learning music through cigar box guitars is "more like babies learning to talk." He elaborates:

You don't sit a baby in front of an encyclopedia and say, this is the language and how you're supposed to say it. It just doesn't work like that. You let a child learn how to speak and then reading and grammar and all of that comes later. So, you can think of a cigar box guitar as a more natural way to come to it. Just learn what sounds good, what works and what doesn't.

"There's this magic moment when you've built something and you put strings on it for the first time. You have no clue if it's going to work at all and when it doesn't implode, when it makes that first chord, that right there is unexpected. … It's a process of discovery and what's possible."

Once Jehle started building cbgs, he "never went back" to building traditional guitars. By 2010, he had made forty-four; today, he's built close to a hundred. For Jehle, creativity is key. Trained as a physicist and spending his career in technical jobs, "I had all this latent creativity, and being able to go home and build guitars and play them was a great creative outlet." Jehle believes creativity is inherent in human nature. "We want to be creative," he says.

And when it comes to creativity, cigar box guitars have no limits. "Once people start building guitars out of cigar boxes or anything else they can find, they just go in their own direction," Jehle says. Builders tinker with the number of strings (Jehle has seen 1-12), string tension, and methods for changing the pitch: frets, slides, and string length. Cbgs can be acoustic or electric, and they range in size: from a couple inches long to a cbg stand-up bass, made from a wine crate and a broom handle. John Lowe (stage name Johnny Lowebow), a builder out of Memphis, once made a cbg with two necks, its pick-ups wound on a sewing machine bobbin.

Amplifying the sound sets off another round of creativity in cbg builders. Jehle has dismantled alarm clocks to use the electrical coils for a tick-up. Another builder took apart a beard shaver and set its motor under the strings. "Suddenly everything is an option," Jehle says, laughing. "You'll start looking at a hinge on a doorway and think, I could make a guitar out of that. Just crazy stuff. It's all part of the discovery of playing an instrument that has no rules."

This freedom from convention paves the way for surprising things to emerge. As they did for Gerry Thompson, an older cigar box guitar maker. Jehle recalls:

Cigar box guitar made by John Terrell of Huntsville and double-necked cigar box guitar made by Richard Johnston and John Lowe of Memphis *(Photos by David Sutton)*

Opposite: cbgs made by Jeff Mello, owner of The Cigar Box Guitar Store in Huntsville, Alabama *(Photo by Tara Mello)*

When he finally opened his mouth and just let it out, he wrote songs about things that he felt passionate about. So for him, it was like being able to finally express himself in a way he couldn't do through traditional instrumentation. The fact that he could build whatever he wanted to play and then play it and sing it the way that he wanted to, it was just this phenomenal release for him. Just the freedom that that gave him. He couldn't have gotten that any other way.

I ask Jehle if he is ever surprised by things that come to the surface while he plays cigar box guitars. He responds with one word. "Always."

The anything-goes cbg building style yields guitars that are inherently unique. Jehle calls cbgs "one off" and "idiosyncratic." Thus, cbg players become familiar with each guitar's personality and adjust to it as they play. They can also tailor the building process to their own playing style. Jehle's go-to guitar, the forty-fourth he made, was built strong to withstand his hard, heavy-handed playing. "Every time I repair it," Jehle says, "it gets a little bit stronger."

It's not only the build of each guitar that's unique; it's also the resulting sound. "The fact that we can use discarded bits of stuff and turn it into a musical instrument is exciting in and of itself," Jehle says. "And on top of that, each guitar has its own unique voice. It can be as thin and nimble as a banjo. It can be softer, like a ukulele. It can be electrified and run through a Marshall stack and sound like metal."

All of these components: the investigative nature of the process, the use of castoff materials, the singular builds and sounds, generate instruments that reflect the builders themselves. "If you've made it and you play it, there's something about that," Jehle says. "It's part of you." In fact, whenever he is commissioned to build a cbg, "I don't just churn out a guitar. I get to know what they like and what kind of music they play and I customize it for them. It takes a long time."

If identity is one side of the cbg coin, community is the other. Though cbg building "attracts all different kinds of people" Jehle says, they share one thing in common: they help each other. In Jehle's early years of building, he leaned on an online community

"Each guitar has its own unique voice. It can be as thin and nimble as a banjo. It can be softer, like a ukulele. It can be electrified and run through a Marshall stack and sound like metal."

of makers who "encouraged each other a lot back in those days." He likens it to bluegrass musicians: the only other music community he's found with a non-competitive ethic. "There are only so many bluegrass songs in the repertoire," Jehle explains. So at festivals, "if you know how to play an instrument and you know the song, you just come right on in and join in. Every other style of music, it does seem to be who's the fastest gun in the west. It's very, very competitive."

But in the cbg community, the music "doesn't have to be good," Jehle says. Ingenuity, innovation, and determination are far more critical. For example, Jehle says, plenty of people build cbgs, but fewer build amplifiers or effects pedals, so he is "trying to take that same sort of building ethic and apply it to amplifiers. So I take something that is not meant to be an amplifier, like a fluorescent bulb or an old computer power supply and I turn those into guitar amps. They're not particularly good. But it's possible."

And that seems to be the crux of what drives and empowers cbg builders: finding out what is possible, and what is possible after that, and after that. ○

The Line

The Breeding Ground for Muscle Shoals Music

RUSSELL GULLEY

To have a thriving music community, musicians need a way to support themselves, and live performance is key.

The music scenes associated with our major music industry centers have always included a network of bars, clubs, and venues that serve as a breeding ground for the musicians, singers, songwriters, and engineers needed to populate the creative centers: the studios themselves.

New Orleans has the French Quarter, New York City has the Village, Memphis has Beale Street, and Muscle Shoals has ... the Line.

Since the late 1950s and early 60s, the music scene north of Florence, Alabama at the Alabama/Tennessee State Line has provided critical support for many of the musicians who populated the recording studios in the Shoals.

Often, when musicians were recruited to work in the studios, write for music publishers, or perform themselves, the Line was a means of employment between studio sessions, providing financial support while songwriting, as well as a place to develop performance skills while searching for their big break.

In the fall of 1973, I got my introduction to the Line.

Long lines of cars filled with college students, young adults, workers ready for a party weekend, even teenagers looking for their first taste of "sin," were all headed up Highway 13. They came from as far south as Russellville, Moulton, and Cullman, all over northwest Alabama where the counties were dry.

Just over the line, in Wayne County, Tennessee, the beer, the boys and girls, the dancing and the music ... all congregated at Johnny's Club, The Yellow Lantern, Club 13, and others. The scene actually extended as far north as Lawrenceburg, Pulaski, and Minor Hill, Tennessee, where clubs used many of the same local musicians.

Every weekend from 8 p.m. till midnight, the dirt and gravel parking lots were packed with cars, as crowds filled the cement dance floors, hustled to the bar, and listened to their favorite bands playing whatever was hot on the charts. Rock and Roll from Memphis, Muscle

Mike O'Rear, owner of Club 13 and band member of the Skyliters, early 1960s

Photo courtesy of Russell Gulley

Shoals Soul, Country Music from Nashville, emerging Southern Rock or what is now known as Classic Rock, and even Disco and Funk sounds filled the air. On the band's breaks, the crowds drifted back out to the cars where friends congregated to cool off and maybe get an "illegal smile" while socializing with that new girl they'd just been introduced to.

Those were short hours compared to the venues in the cities where bands would often play till dawn, but the rural county regulations forbade the sale of alcohol after midnight. Because they closed at midnight and food was not a part of the club's offerings, family and friends would often reconnect back in the Shoals at one of the late night cafes or diners, such as Biscuit Village, just down the street from Fame Recording Studios.

During weekdays, the venues might have music on a night or two but mostly served as package stores for patrons wanting a six pack.

Local bands would often play a residency for months at a time as the "house band" until the occasional touring band came through for a travel date or a pickup gig to fill in their tour. The residencies allowed the development of a loyal following of fans who became more like family. They'd come out every weekend to support their friends.

One never knew who might come up to the Line during a break from recording in the studios. Unbelievably, Lynyrd Skynyrd, Blackfoot, members of the Eagles, or some other hot new star might drop in and even set in for a song or two.

Like any bar or club scene, one of the most essential employees and a band's best friend was the bouncer. His job was to control the crowd, provide security, and escort any unruly or drunken patron to the door. You'd better not start a fight or you'd have a sore head when you woke the next morning. The Line had to watch its reputation and if word got out that there'd been a brawl the night before, there were other clubs in the scene to go to.

Mike O'Rear is the man who introduced me to State Line culture. His career as a club owner began when Mike sang with his band, The Skyliters.

As a young man, often bartending by day and playing music by night in clubs at the Line, O'Rear learned the tools of his trade. Not just the accounting and management skills needed to run a successful business, but networking with the community of musicians, writers, and recording studios, all while continuing to grow his own cult of followers.

It seems like legends just float in the air up on the Line. Stories range from Jerry Lee Lewis's pounding away at his piano to an excited and drunken crowd to Duane Allman sitting on the back step playing bottleneck slide for guys who had never heard slide before. ... One never knew who might drop by.

The Line clubs often booked touring bands, so Mike and the Skyliters opened for acts such as Charlie Rich, Ace Cannon, and Bill Black's Combo, all Memphis recording artists with hits and rising careers.

Later, as the owner of Club 13, O'Rear connected with the stream of touring musicians from not only the South, but the nation. As a musician himself, Mike supports other musicians by booking them for gigs in his venues, but also by sharing his experience and mentoring successful musicians like Billy Lawson, a leader in today's Muscle Shoals Music Industry with chart topping songs to his credit.

Mike met Billy when he was eight years old, growing up on the Line near the club. Billy's dad introduced him to Mike and he played a song on a guitar with only four strings. Mike replaced the two missing strings and as he grew older, Billy started playing the clubs himself with various bands.

It seems like legends just float in the air up on the Line. Stories range from Jerry Lee Lewis's pounding away at his piano to an excited and drunken crowd to Duane Allman sitting on the back step playing bottleneck slide for guys who had never heard slide before. If an artist was in town to record but had some time and wanted music, well, one never knew who might drop by.

Junior Lowe, Travis Wammack, and Jimmy Johnson in session *(Photo courtesy of Junior Lowe)*

Opposite: The Skyliters, early 1960s; sign outside of Muscle Shoals *(Photos courtesy of Russell Gulley and Muscle Shoals Music Foundation)*

But alongside the legends were the local music leaders who made the Line possible. One of these was Hollis Dixon, a bandleader, singer, musician, and icon of the Line who helped countless musicians with gigs.

Like most of the nation, Dixon was smitten by the sound of the country's hottest new sensation, Elvis Presley, whose mid-1950s performance in Sheffield, Alabama inspired Dixon to become a rock and roll singer. He became one of the most popular performers up on the Line.

Dixon was also one of the Shoals' earliest recording artists, recording the first release ever for the Malaco recording label, now the world's leading Soul label. Although he didn't gain national prominence, Dixon's status as a Shoals musical pioneer and the esteem in

Standing (L to R): Billy Lawson, James Counts, Mike O'Rear, Wayne Chaney, Russell Gulley; Seated (L to R): Rev. Jerry Reeves, Junior Lowe, Mickey Buckins, Wishbone Recording Studio, Muscle Shoals, Alabama, June 20, 2022 *(Photo by Mary Carton)*

which the community holds him led to June 16th being recognized as the annual Hollis Dixon Day in all four of the quad cities near the Line: Florence, Muscle Shoals, Sheffield, and Tuscumbia.

Local recording studio regulars, including Jimmy "BeBop" Evans, Travis Wammack, Wayne Chaney, and Ronnie Eades, were all regulars up on the Line, playing whenever they weren't on a session or on the road with an artist they had met in a session.

One of the earliest of these pioneers was guitarist, bass player, and unsung hero, Albert "Junior" Lowe. Lowe's family came early to the club business, and Junior became a fixture in the clubs all over the region and one of the earliest session players at Fame Studios. His session work includes major hits such as "Land of a Thousand Dances" by Wilson Picket and "When a Man Loves a Woman" by Percy Sledge. As a writer, Lowe co-wrote "Greenwood Mississippi" with Travis Wammack, recorded by Little Richard and Tom Jones.

As the 1980s rolled in, Florence, Muscle Shoals, Sheffield, and Tuscumbia reversed their status on alcohol sales, opening up the Shoals for bars, clubs, and entertainment venues. Most of the Line's music community shifted to the Shoals. Even Mike O'Rear moved Club 13 to the Shoals, continuing to promote young talent. Patterson Hood of the Drive-By Truckers cut his musical teeth there, as well as many more of music's next generation.

Today, the Line lives on, but not like in its heyday. No longer do patrons returning to the "Bama" side of the line deal with police road blocks and sobriety tests, and most of the clubs are now located in the Shoals. The Muscle Shoals music culture is still vibrant, bolstered by a public that is more aware than ever of the tremendous impact of the Shoals and eager to support the heritage and the music.

Together, along with many other unsung heroes, they form the fabric of the Muscle Shoals music industry. Out of this musical culture, an industry was born that helped create the American music soundtrack.

The W.C. Handy Festival, Shoals Fest, First Friday, The Salt and Pepper Roots Music Celebration, the Alabama Music Hall of Fame, and the Handy Birthplace, along with many special events and music venues, keep the heritage and the music alive.

Shoals Music is a living tradition. On any given night, Travis Wammack, Billy Lawson, or some other State Line veteran may be playing in town. It's this sense of a living tradition, combined with the spirit of musical community, that recently brought together some of the earliest participants of the State Line music culture.

In 2022, at Wishbone Recording Studios in Muscle Shoals, Line veterans openly discussed, told stories, pled the fifth, and shared memories of the times they all worked on the Line. Intertwined with the memories of the clubs were concurrent memories of hanging out at the studios. Recalling, "Oh I was there when so and so cut that song. Wow, what a bass line!" The Line made it possible for these musicians to be there, then and now.

Mike O'Rear, Wayne Chaney, Junior Lowe, Billy Lawson, Mickey Buckins, Rev. Jerry Reeves, James Counts: each participant shared his perspective on the scene at the Line and its effect on him personally. Each has been successful in his own musical career and has a lifetime of stories to tell. Together, along with many other unsung heroes, they form the fabric of the Muscle Shoals music industry. Out of this musical culture, an industry was born that helped create the American music soundtrack.

As a product of the Line, I play my own small part in perpetuating this living tradition. In 2017, I, along with music historian Dick Cooper, Bob Garfrerick at the University of North Alabama, musicians Dennis Gulley and Maxwell Russell, founded The Salt and Pepper Roots Music Celebration, an annual event that brings artists who reflect the Shoals musical roots to perform at the University of North Alabama's Mane Room. These roots were embedded in the set lists of all the bands that played on the Line. Rockabilly and Blues, Country and Soul, Rock and Roll, and Gospel… it's all there on the State Line stages.

As the Salt and Pepper Series moves forward, we are devoting more time to conducting research and oral histories that document not only the artists' performances but the artists themselves. By collecting materials to be preserved for future music scholars, we can enhance awareness of the heritage and traditions, as well as promote ongoing participation in the creation and presentation of Muscle Shoals Music. We are proud to be a part of this living tradition. ○


RFD BARON

The Power of the Spirit of the Creative

A Remembrance of Brother Benjamin F. Perkins

JEANIE THOMPSON

This is a story about visionary art and literary art meeting in an unusual way. In 1992, I wrote a poem called "Litany for a Vanishing Landscape" about driving US Route 82 west, from Tuscaloosa to Montgomery and back. At that time, there were many picturesque structures, including peach stands, kudzu-draped barns, and trucks moldering in the overgrowth that begged to be photographed. Some thirty years later, US 82 has lost much of its rural charm through various improvements as buildings have fallen in or been replaced with more up-to-date establishments like multiplex gas stations. The highway that inspired me to write a poem while driving has faded, but vestiges are there.

I made this inspirational drive in 1992, headed to the Alabama State Council on the Arts to take part in a literary arts program panel. The poem came to me in an interrogative mode, a series of questions, and soon afterwards I asked my friend, photographer Wayne Sides, if he could shoot in response to the poem, which turned out to be the first poem in a series called "Litany for a Vanishing Landscape." He agreed, but wanted to make his own trip, to find his own images. So, one day soon after, we rode the highway, ending up at the Pratt-Mont Drive-In, eighty miles from Tuscaloosa, where US 82 crosses US Highway 31. Wayne and I pulled into the Pratt-Mont as they were cutting the grass where cars would park for the show that evening and got a look at a real Southern drive-in that would be demolished in 1994 when Hurricane Opal rampaged south central Alabama. From this project of a few poems and a day's worth of photographs came the idea for an installation: a collaborative arts experience that we could share around the state, eventually funded by the Alabama State Council on the Arts. This was poetry and photography, but it would soon be bound together through the influence of one of the state's most recognized visionary artists.[80]

Photo courtesy of Jeanie Thompson

Photograph by Wayne Sides, shot in response to Thompson's poem, "Litany for a Vanishing Landscape"

Opposite: *Cherokee Love Birds* by B. F. Perkins, October 10, 1991 *(Photos courtesy of Jeanie Thompson)*

Wayne shot black and white film, wet processed it in a darkroom, then hand-colored the silver gelatin prints with Marshall's oil pencils. This gave an antique look to the "Litany" photographs — very nostalgic and in tune with the poems' attempt to define a vanishing Southern landscape. He set about framing these prints in several ways — some traditional, some inventive (like a tar paper cut-out frame), while I searched for a way to present the text, the poems. At this time, before the internet dominated our experience of visual and print media, visual artists were beginning to incorporate text into their canvases, photos, and murals as never before. I sought out a few professors at the University of Alabama art department, asking for ideas on how to present poems in an innovative way — not just typed text stuck up on the wall.

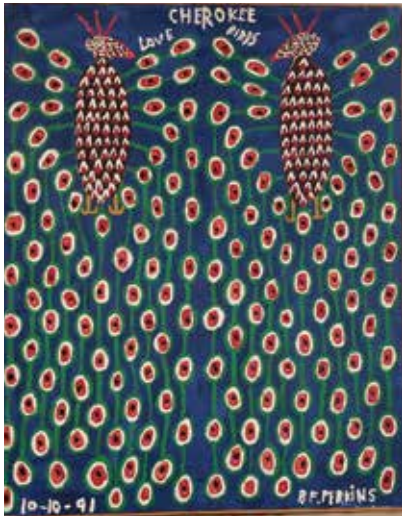
Someone suggested etching on glass. Another person asked, "Do you know Brother Benjamin Perkins — Brother Bennie — over in Fayette? He's a folk artist. He paints words on a lot of things, including gourds."

I did not know Brother Perkins but set out to find him, which was fairly easy; at that time Tuscaloosa was a nexus for many folk artists who made regular appearances at the annual Kentuck Festival in Northport. Someone — probably the legendary Georgine Clarke, founder and director of the Kentuck Festival and Art Center in Northport — told me how to get to Brother Perkins's house in Bankston, Alabama, a small hamlet near Fayette. I made the 45-minute drive from my home in Tuscaloosa with a friend. I

did not yet know that Perkins was a revered folk artist whose signature imagery included Christian crosses, country churches, American patriotism manifested in the Statue of Liberty and the American flag, as well as the history of the Georgian calendar, but I soon learned. He also had a favorite subject he called the "Cherokee Love Birds" — painted repeatedly because he had once seen peacocks perched on a fence with their tail feathers hanging down and was moved to paint them.

I found his place, one of the first self-taught artist's environments I had encountered, consisting of several structures built around a circular gravel drive. I turned in, past the tomb of Jesus at the top of the drive where the stone was rolled away and scripture, painted in large letters, announcing Perkins's personal testimony, then down to the house he had constructed, covered in cross-hatched red, white, and blue bricks, with a tin roof and a lookout porch with a cross on top. Think small country church recast in red, white, and blue. The windows on one side were overlaid with American flags and text. One of my favorites of his text panels on canvas was his "Ten Commandments for Successful Daily Living" that led the way into his studio. (I later acquired a version for my collection.) Around the outside of the house were many large gourds in various states of preparation for painting — some freshly picked, others drying in piles and covered in what looked like scaly mold. He might have been cleaning one of these when my friend and I pulled up.

I introduced myself, told him I had heard that he liked to paint a lot of things and that I wanted to see his work. Later, I found out he got random curiosity-seekers frequently. He showed my friend and me around, pointing out projects in progress, including an old suitcase decorated with his iconic American Flag imagery and several large plywood panels he was painting for Alabama folk art dealer Marcia Weber. These triptychs were obviously a favorite of his.

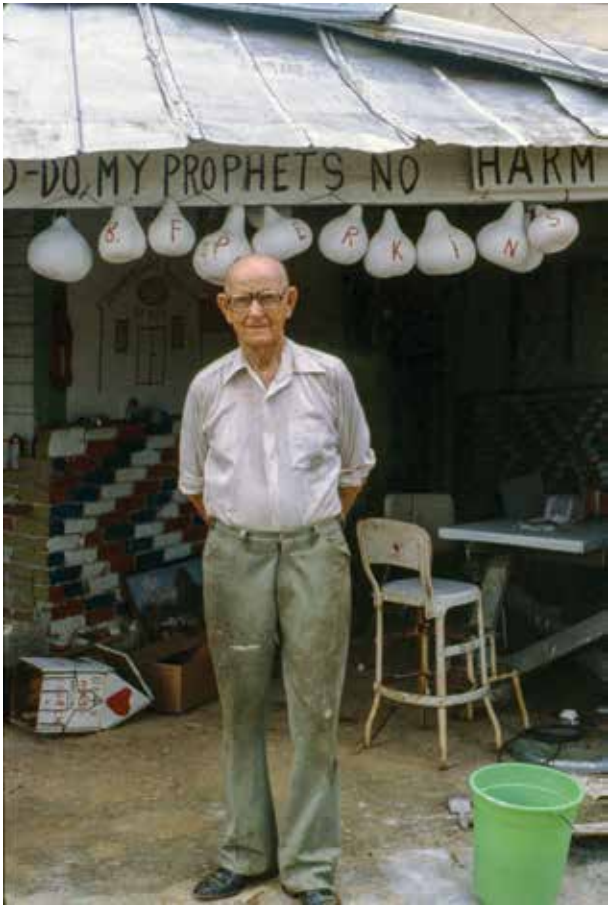


Finally, I worked up my nerve and asked, "Brother Perkins, I'm a writer, a poet, and I'm trying to figure out how to get my words into a show with a photographer — do you think you could paint some of these words on gourds for me?" I handed him a copy of one of the Litany poems called "Traveling South by Night." I may have given him a few others at the time.

"Of course," he said, smiling, and took the piece of paper, glancing at it briefly.

Brother Perkins was a classic Southern white man, about six feet tall with prominent ears and tufts of white hair (he was in his late eighties when I met him). He had a slim frame and an engulfing smile which put people at


THE GRAVES SHALL HEAR


MY PROPHETS NO HARM

I turned in, past the tomb of Jesus at the top of the drive where the stone was rolled away and scripture, painted in large letters, announcing Perkins's personal testimony, then down to the house he had constructed, covered in cross-hatched red, white, and blue bricks, with a tin roof and a lookout porch with a cross on top.

ease instantly as he laughed almost shyly. He was a man who built things with his hands — that was evident. I was unsure about his education level, though he was a worldly person, literally, widely traveled with the Marine Corps and the Merchant Marines.

The next time I visited, he had created a unique little gourd that showed the highway circling around the gourd, a black asphalt road with the car lights reflecting on it, and placed around the ribbon of highway, the names of the cities we passed through on the way, as I had recounted them in the poem. This was my early childhood memory brought to life — from my words to his paintbrush — all on a gleaming "Walmart blue" background, a color he had named that was perfect for the night sky, decorated with white stars. I had ridden that road traveling south to my grandparents' house in Tallassee, Alabama, as a very young child and heard the hum of the gravel asphalt as we sped along. It was as if he went straight inside the poem and found me.

This meeting led to Brother Perkins creating a suite of about a

Artwork at B. F. Perkins's home (above) in Bankston, Alabama, August 1987

Opposite: Artwork at B. F. Perkins home; "All American Suitcase" or "Turned into Folkart" by B. F. Perkins, November 1991; Tomb at Perkins home, circa 1993; Artwork and Reverend B. F. Perkins at his home in Bankston, Alabama, August 1987 *(Photos courtesy of Jeanie Thompson and the Alabama Department of Archives and History)*

When I was presented with my words rendered in his signature brush strokes it validated my writing in a new way. It was not just a print version of something I had written; it was tactile and vivid. It made me see my words in a different way.

dozen gourds for the "Litany for a Vanishing Landscape" installation. Several of these were later donated to the Birmingham Museum of Arts' burgeoning folk art collection, and the original gourd was exhibited at the Museum in 2021 as part of an exhibit about travel and art during the first year of the 2020 Pandemic. Brother Perkins had been filling commissions for years, but when I was presented with my words rendered in his signature brush strokes it validated my writing in a new way. It was not just a print version of something I had written; it was tactile and vivid. It made me see my words in a different way. He had taken a brush in hand and rendered each letter on the body of the gourd he had cleaned, seasoned with gesso, then base-painted. The words lifted the poetry into the strata of the other art pieces in the show that Wayne had created. Ultimately, we had about a dozen gourds, with some duplicates of "Traveling South by Night" painted on larger identical gourds because they were so appealing. They were big hits.

Inspired by Brother Perkins, and to accompany the original poem, "Litany for a Vanishing Landscape," I painted parts of that poem on the horizontal slats of a wooden bench rescued from a chicken house in Sulligent, Alabama. In the poem, which references a photograph by William Christenberry, I imagined a woman watering her flowers on the front porch of a frame house — perhaps they are in large coffee cans for pots, as cars speed down 82 (or fill in your favorite road). She wonders where people are going, why they are in such a hurry, why she is not going there, too. She seems not to care, just content to stay at home. I painted the bench white, distressed it, and started

out with my green paint, sitting cross-legged and backwards on the bench to paint a stanza from the poem. It was not easy for a poet used to fingers flying on a keyboard to paint each word.

My interaction with Brother Perkins was the realization of a desire to present words to an *artistic* and *folkloric* audience outside of conventional means for poetry and poets. These words existed outside the usual print media of magazines or books. They were part of the artifact itself, and the audience was invited to meet them on their terms. Later, there was a chapbook with photographs and the text of some of the poems, thanks to a grant from the Kennedy-Douglass Center for the Arts in Florence, Alabama, where the show debuted in 1992. This small book is now being digitized for wider distribution. Eventually, I created large cardboard, whitewashed panels with the poems drawn in a red-dirt hued Cray-Pas in block letters. I slowly shaped the words by smudging each letter with my finger to give a more homemade look. This was my way of paying homage to Brother Perkins's painted words.

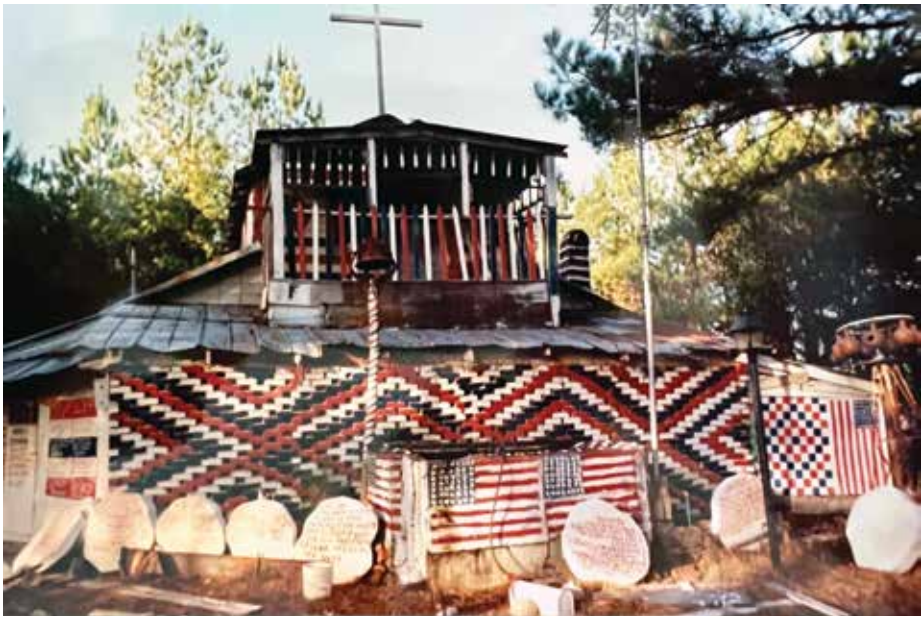
South by Night gourd by B. F. Perkins on bench with poem by Jeanie Thompson *(Photo courtesy of Jeanie Thompson)*

Although Brother Perkins did not teach me to paint, he did tell me how he cleaned the gourds, and I witnessed people bringing him objects — suitcases, a guitar, tables, chairs — to be emblazoned with his personal imagery — the American flag, the Statue of Liberty, the Cherokee Love Birds, stars in the night sky. I was inspired to paint the bench and had intended to find other objects to paint. Unfortunately, time and pressures of work and family kept me from following that dream, but I have the satisfaction of knowing I did practice his craft in my own way.

When Brother Perkins passed away in January 1993 in the retirement home in Bankston where he had been living for several years, Georgine Clarke called me and said, "We need to go over there." I knew what she meant — it was likely that less scrupulous types would want to break in to steal his remaining works and anything not nailed down. When we pulled up, we met a young man who had been making t-shirts for Perkins. He let us into the house which was now bereft of the lively energy and friendship of Brother Perkins.

Opposite: "History of Time" or "Who Can Invent the Perfect Calendar" by B. F. Perkins, November 1991; Chapel outside the entrance to the home of B. F. Perkins in Bankston, Alabama, August 1987 *(Photos courtesy of the Alabama Department of Archives and History)*

The studio was also a dwelling with a kitchen, bedroom, etc. His ties were all hanging there, and his art supplies and paint



Ten Commandments on tree trunk slices at B. F. Perkins home, 1993 *(Photo courtesy of Jeanie Thompson)*

brushes were just as he had left them. By that point he had stayed in assisted living and visited his studio for several hours a day. He had finished a painting at the facility shortly before he passed, and when Georgine and I arrived, we immediately saw there were ten sections of a tree painted solid white and lettered in red paint with the ten commandments — one each. They looked very new, but I do not know if anyone ever determined what Brother Perkins had intended for them, if they were a commission or not. As art dealer Marcia Weber reports on her website, "at the time of his death, [Perkins] was painting ten large sections of a tree trunk, cut down on his property to depict his 'Ten Commandments for Successful Daily Living.'"[81]

Brother Perkins taught me how to see the way natural objects can become art pieces — a slice of tree stump, a gourd, posts from the field that previously held a fence. Everything he made in his environment was repurposed to glorify his vision of life and the spirit. He found his material and fashioned it to create a place where people might see his word, "the" word, in a physical dimension. Weber also quotes him as saying, "I enjoy preaching and I enjoy painting. That is why I keep at it. All of my works have a message. If art don't tell me anything it is not art. When I begin to paint, I think about something that has meant something to me."[82]

In a paper written in 1992 for a graduate history course at the University of Southern Mississippi, Cynthia S. Gerlach researched Southern evangelicals and interviewed Perkins, chronicling his

Brother Perkins taught me how to see the way natural objects can become art pieces — a slice of tree stump, a gourd, posts from the field that previously held a fence. Everything he made in his environment was repurposed to glorify his vision of life and the spirit.

life and work as an evangelical minister, and how he saw his artwork as part of that. In the interview he gave to Gerlach, a year before he passed, Perkins described his religious conversion: "I saw a big sign with a cross on it and with the words Jesus Saves. It kept flashing, Jesus Saves, Jesus Saves. It hit me like a lightnin' bolt. I kept being drawn to it as I was walking away." He then describes going into the mission. "I said to myself, surely, this must be God dealing with me. I answered the call, and that's the happiest day of my life."[83]

I did not realize the depth of his religious conviction during my several years of knowing Brother Perkins. I am ashamed to say I did not ever attend his church, though once he invited me to stay when I came to pick up some art. I declined, having to get back to Tuscaloosa to my young son. As I pulled out that afternoon, I heard what sounded like an electric guitar strumming loudly inside the HeartLine Church on the circle across from his house. I simply did not understand that I could have attended the service in reverence and not been swept away in the spirit, never to return.

We all seek successful daily living whether we are artists or writers or just folks going about our lives. We all have credos, rules for living, philosophies, beliefs. My time with Brother Perkins taught me to see across a divide, to bring my words into vivid red, white, and blue relief, to include one art tradition inside another. It was a project of collaboration — sharing arts, passions, beliefs, and visions among three people — a photographer, a visionary self-taught artist who was an evangelical seer, and a poet. Perhaps we were in some ways the same for a brief time. Or perhaps we were always different, but with an overlap at the center, where the art lived.

Some thirty years later, I find myself tracking back to this type of collaboration with visual artists and musicians. The urge to be successful in daily living during these trying times is stronger than ever. What folk artists continue to teach us is that we will be truly successful in our lives when we find ways to share and connect through our art — whatever that chosen medium may be. When we keep the boundaries between our art forms fluid, and seek connection between them, it can yield beautiful, often startling results. Brother Perkins did not hesitate when I asked for his help — he understood the power of collaboration innately — the power of the spirit of the creative. ○

A Picture from the Breezeway

MARGARET ANN SNOW

Twenty years ago, while working at the farmer's market, a lovely older woman with short, gray hair and a wide, friendly smile approached the table. I had seen her waiting patiently for other customers to clear out, the way someone does when they want to talk and not only to buy produce. While she chose her bunch of collard greens and a couple of sweet potatoes, she told me of a photograph of herself as a little girl in a zinc tub on the breezeway of the old cabin that my husband, David, and I were living in at the time.

"Wow!" I said, as I tried to look around for my next customer.

Busy selling produce I had only recently learned how to grow, I was more focused on the work at hand than on her offer to share her picture and stories with me. I was young, only twenty-four, and my understanding of what is important in life had not yet fully formed. Back then, every day was a learning experience. There was a direct connection between how David and I worked and how much money we made. Each year, each week, each day we were figuring out how to do things more efficiently, getting to know the crops' individual needs. We were obsessed with our new career, all that potential.

After college and a summer internship on an organic farm in Washington, we returned to our home state, Alabama, and began to work on a cabin on his family's land in Tuscaloosa County, attempting to make it habitable and planning to live in it as we started our own farm on the property. It was simple and beautiful, just two rooms divided by a breezeway. One side was older, constructed of large hand-hewn timbers, likely sourced from the heart of ancient pine trees on the property. The other side was comprised of milled boards, a more recent addition. It was built in the mid-1800s and had sat empty for around fifty years.

Electricity was run to the cabin for the first time by a contractor friend of ours. Another friend's father had experience installing plumbing and offered to help run water lines for a kitchen sink. The property held an existing well

Photos courtesy of Margaret Ann Snow

dug in the 1950s that we could tap into. There would be no bathroom, though. Only a small, separate outhouse and a showerhead off of the back wall.

There were large gaps between the timbers that needed to be filled. We began with five-gallon buckets of the abundant Alabama red clay and sand from the banks of the Black Warrior River, screening the clay down to a mixable size before incorporating it with sand and straw. Handful by handful, we placed the mixture between the timbers. At first, I found the process interesting and rewarding, the combining of different elements into something new and substantial. After several days, it turned cumbersome, our progress slow, but something about the way the terra cotta colored mixture nestled between the deep brown timbers looked, and the way we were working toward improving our living space in a meaningful way, kept me going.

Along the top of one of the walls, there was a gap of six or seven inches. We inserted blue, green, brown, and clear glass bottles and then filled in around the bottles with our chinking concoction. The sunlight filtered through the colored glass added a welcome bit of color and light to a fairly dark space. It made it feel like ours. This room would be the bedroom, living room, and office. We installed a tiny window air-conditioner and a cast-iron wood burning stove. The large timbers and chinking kept it well insulated and we nicknamed it 'the cave.' After hot days, farming in the full sun of summer, it offered a welcome respite. In the winter, it could be freezing outside, but we would be warm by the fire in t-shirts. When the fire went out overnight, we would

Our local library's shelves held an array of cookbooks and we worked our way through most of the vegetable recipes within them, poaching fish in parchment paper with greens, roasting chicken with coriander root, and tossing penne pasta with beets, rutabaga, butternut squash, thyme, and goat cheese. … We ate tomatoes with nothing more than a sprinkle of salt and watermelons best enjoyed on porch steps. All of that Alabama heat, concentrated into the ripening of flavors of food grown by us upon the same land we were living.

linger in bed under our stacks of blankets until it warmed up enough to face the cold of the early morning. It was really only one small step from camping.

The second room would be our kitchen: where we stretched our culinary muscles by trying new recipes. We perfected pumpkin and sweet potato pies. I learned to prepare beets in a way that converted alleged beet haters. Hours were spent making jars of basil-pecan pesto to sell at farmer's markets. We figured out the exact ratio of peaches, tomatoes, onions, garlic, and peppers necessary for highly addictive peach salsa. Our local library's shelves held an array of cookbooks and we worked our way through most of the vegetable recipes within them, poaching fish in parchment paper with greens, roasting chicken with coriander root, and tossing penne pasta with beets, rutabaga, butternut squash, thyme, and goat cheese. We made huge salads with arugula, lettuce, carrots, radishes, cucumbers, tomatoes, and everything else from our garden that we could fit into them. We ate tomatoes with nothing more than a sprinkle of salt and watermelons best enjoyed on porch steps. All of that Alabama heat, concentrated into the ripening of flavors of food grown by us upon the same land we were living.

To this day, when the frustrations of farming get to me, when I find myself lamenting the amount of time I spend solving problems, dealing with the logistics of vehicles stuck on our dirt road turned to mud, entire crops lost to disease, or a to-do list that sometimes leaves me feeling as if I'm drowning under the weight of it, I always turn to the kitchen and cook a nourishing meal to remind myself why we chose, and continue to choose, this lifestyle.

By living on the farm, in the cabin, we were able to save money and invest any profits back into our farm, as well as save time commuting to and from

work. There was no noise. There were no neighbors. On Saturday afternoons and evenings, I would make mint juleps and turn on some bluegrass, the sounds matching our life in this old cabin in the woods.

After four years in the cabin, we moved into a house in town. It had modern plumbing, closets, and no raccoons. It was an adjustment. There were things I loved, like having a washer and dryer, and things I missed, like living among the trees.

I had always known that the farm held stories, that many people had lived and worked upon it over centuries. With distance and time, my curiosity grew. I became a mother, my children two more beneficiaries of this land. I began to reflect and piece together the past. As I did so, I felt a strong desire to see the picture the woman at the farmer's market had told me about so many years ago. From David's dad, I learned that when this woman was a young girl, her father rented the ridge and spent time in his own cabin there. She used to come over and socialize with the people living in the cabin David and I lived in. They were sharecroppers. I am learning more about them, too, slowly and with difficulty. It must have been on one of these visits that the photograph was taken.

At my local library, a bored young girl sits behind a formal wooden desk under a large sign that reads "Reference." When I ask if they have a phone book, she seems perplexed. "I think we have the yellow pages. Is that what you mean?" she asks, opening several cabinets and rummaging through drawers before going into the back office to ask someone else. Returning, she opens the first cabinet she had looked in and pulls out a thin book. The yellow pages are first and as she flips through them, I notice the white pages in the back and ask if I can see the book. It takes me seconds to find the phone number I'm looking for and when I get into my car, I try it immediately. There is no answer and no way to leave a message.

A week later, I try again. I'm nervous when she picks up and she seems hesitant, scared, surely wondering who this stranger is calling. She must be approaching ninety years old by now.

"I met you several years ago at the farmer's market. I'm one of the owners of Snow's Bend Farm," I say, hoping she'll remember me.

"Oh, yes. I remember." Her tone opens up, becoming friendlier.

"Once you told me that you have a picture of yourself as a young girl at the old cabin my husband and I lived in on the farm."

"Yes, yes. I still have the picture," she says.

"I would love to see it. Is there a way we can meet?" I ask.

She hesitates. "I no longer drive and my son is leaving for a month, so I don't know how."

I offer to come to her house.

"No. That won't work," she tells me. "I am going to have my hair done at the parlor tomorrow morning at eleven. You could meet me there."

"That sounds great!" I say. "I'll be there."

The next day is busy for me. It's the week of the Fourth of July, compressing our already overloaded work week to just four days. On a farm, there is never enough time for all that needs to be done and leaving the work day to chase a picture sounds ridiculous, but I know that if I pass up the opportunity this time, there may not be a third.

I have to stop what I'm doing, weighing bags of tomatoes for our customers, in order to meet her. It isn't easy and stopping actually creates more work, having to put things away only to get them back out and begin again later. I grab a few choice tomatoes to take to her and one of my business cards out of a farmer's market tote, then make the thirty-minute drive into town.

At first, I thought that "parlour" was a generic term she used but soon realize that is the actual name of the salon. When I step inside, I step through time. The Parlour is in an old house with a large, central entryway. An elaborate chandelier hangs from the ceiling and two rooms flank either side. Each room is decorated differently: one with bright pink salon chairs, another floral themed. Almost everyone is of a certain age and they are all women. I wonder how many stories are in here, waiting to be told, waiting for someone to listen. Everyone is dressed nicely, as if for a social event. I'd put on a clean shirt and pants, but I'm still pretty fresh from the farm and feeling self-conscious. As discreetly as possible, I begin to look in each room for her. It's been several years since I've seen her and I'm not sure I'll recognize her. Just as I resign myself to asking one of the beauticians, she rounds the corner with curlers in her hair, pushing a walker with bright green tennis balls on the feet.

She doesn't recognize me at first, but when she sees the colorful array of tomatoes in my Ball jar cardboard box, she knows who I am and shares one of her big smiles with me.

"I forgot the pictures at home," she says. "My son was leaving and in the hurry, I forgot them. I got them all together for you though."

I had expected this. Tracking the past takes time and persistence. It would have been too easy, too simple, to make one call and see the picture.

"I understand," I tell her, offering a smile and my cardboard box. "I brought

I wonder how many stories are in here, waiting to be told, waiting for someone to listen.

you these tomatoes and my phone number is on this card."

As she and another woman admire the tomatoes, I ask her to call me sometime and rush out the door, back to the farm to finish my work. In hindsight, maybe I should have carved out more time, made an appointment and sat next to her while we had our hair done together, but I am a farmer with a multitude of tasks awaiting me at all times.

The following Sunday morning my phone rings. My young son and daughter, playing on the floor nearby, register the polite shift and note of surprise in my voice after I answer and both quickly turn their heads up to look at me curiously. I seek the privacy of my bedroom, but they follow me asking "What, Mommy?" and "Who is it?"

It is her.

"I have been taken back to my childhood with your tomatoes," she says.

My heart leaps. I thank her and we begin trying to find a way to meet, but she still doesn't want me to come to her house. She offers the farmer's market, but I know I'll be pulled into farm work there. I offer the public library. She says she will still need a ride. Meanwhile, I move from my bedroom to the back porch because she is having trouble hearing me with Maxwell and Flora asking questions in the background. Ignoring them only excites them more. They follow me from room to room, to the back porch, into the yard. No formal plans can be made and we leave things with "Let's keep in touch."

A week goes by and I decide to check back in with her. She answers in her cautionary tone but becomes friendly once I reintroduce myself.

"I have the pictures and I would love for you to be my guest at a restaurant for lunch next week," she says, "but you'll need to pick me up. Do you drive?"

"I do and I would love to," I answer.

The night before our lunch date, she leaves me two messages, conveying her embarrassment at not being able to find the pictures.

"I've looked everywhere, even in the refrigerator," she says jokingly. "You know that safe place you put things and then you can never find them? It's the story of my life, babe."

She reminds me of fiery, Southern women of literary lore. I don't know that I have ever met anyone like her and it excites me. In our conversations there is no façade. She has strong feelings around politics and social justice, rare and different from the norm here in Alabama, and much in line with my own. Unlike me, she speaks them aloud, unapologetically and with a bit of humor, in such a way that is completely endearing.

I call her back to confirm our plans. She tells me she is looking forward

to our lunch and hopes we can still go.

We are both eager.

The next day is set to be another busy one on the farm. After settling my children in their nursery and classroom, I notice a new voicemail from just that morning. Her tone is different from the previous night.

"I didn't get any sleep last night and I'm having a hard time," she says.

I call to check on her, to see if there is anything I can do to help.

"Why do you want the pictures?" she asks, sounding tired.

"You told me once that you have one of the cabin my husband and I lived in. That's the one I'm most interested in."

"Oh, yes. White Crawford lived there. We called him Mr. White. I remember him."

She tells me how he'd drive his wagon from the farm into town, to the kitchen of the hotel her father managed in downtown Tuscaloosa.

"He would come to the kitchen and flirt with the girls. They'd give him a bowl of ice cream and my father would bring a bottle of whiskey to share."

It's a story, a name, a person that lived in the cabin before us. It's a brief story, but I can envision the scene. It's a thread. She likely has more.

Before we say goodbye, she is adamant that I am not a bother and should keep trying her, though I am not sure. I know she offered the picture and stories fifteen years ago and I should have acted then. Now, she does seem

tired and the memories more difficult to access, everything more difficult.

I tell her that I am going out of town for a week and will check back in when I return. We say our goodbyes and I move on to my work on the farm.

It is late September, a month or more later, before I call her again.

"I wish you'd just let me go. I'm not feeling well and I don't know where the pictures are," she says.

My stomach seizes up. What am I doing? Harassing an elderly woman? I'm not sure what changed. Maybe she is simply weary, frustrated with not being able to find the picture. Maybe I am just reminding her of time passing, of the process of aging. There is no way for me to know exactly what is happening in her life. I never intended to bother her or cause any stress. I think back, many years ago, to the market when she had been excited and willing to share the photos and her memories with me, but I was too busy to care then. Now the window has shut. My opportunity missed. She was the only lead that I had that far into the past.

"I am so sorry," I manage to say. "I hope you feel better." I feel awful.

If I could go back in time, I would grab my younger self by the shoulders, give her a good shake and say 'Pay attention. Take time to listen. This is important and you will care about it later.'

The photograph may not have any context for others. What if it is tossed aside or worse, thrown out? I think of this picture so often that I can see it in my mind. Having spent years living in the cabin, it is easy to conjure up the image of the breezeway and from there fill it in with a tub and young girl. It must be a black and white photograph. Standing behind the tub, I see a

I feel nostalgic about those days, while also knowing that I have no desire to return to them. I wonder if she felt this way, too. I wonder if that is what led her to my table of vegetables years ago.

woman. Whether she is in the real picture or not, she is there in my mind. Wearing a long, loose dress, she leans against the left side.

On a crisp fall day, David and I take our children on a hike. Along the way we stop by to show them the cabin we moved out of sixteen years ago. Surely, they had been there before, but it is not a place we go regularly. It needs tidying up, another thing we never quite get around to. Forest animals have taken over and there are little nests of twigs and leaves on the floor. Cobwebs and dust cling to the rough, unfinished wooden walls. The sunlight still shines through our colorful glass bottles. Some of the boards on the breezeway have begun to fall in. Maxwell doesn't want to get anywhere near it. It looks abandoned, which it is, and very old. Flora takes the place in, being uncharacteristically quiet. I tell them stories of our encounters with possums and raccoons. Flora asks where we went to the bathroom. We tell her, then show them the showerhead still hanging off the back wall of the kitchen for rinsing off after a long day of work in the fields. I feel nostalgic about those days, while also knowing that I have no desire to return to them. I wonder if she felt this way, too. I wonder if that is what led her to my table of vegetables years ago.

Behind the cabin, the earth falls away, creating a gulley. A large beech tree holds up a good portion of the hill, its strong roots staving off further erosion. When you look up at it from down the hill, the roots look like arms covered in bright green moss stretched out and holding something back.

We walk further down, Flora falling and sliding a good way on her bottom. The hills converge on a small stream created by a spring. This is where the land levels out. Beside the stream, buried under years of fallen leaves, I spot a metal wash tub. I attempt to pick it up, but only the rim comes free. This probably belonged to the people who lived in the cabin in the 1950s. Was this where their clothes were washed? Is this where they gathered water for cooking and drinking? It could be zinc. It could even be the one the woman was sitting in as a young girl in the picture.

The past leaves clues, like stepping stones. A picture somewhere. A washtub here. As we walk back up the hill, I look down into the gulley, wondering. I may have missed this one link to the past. I will not let another slip by. ○

Alabama Blizzard

AMANDA BANKS

A long time ago, back almost to the beginning of my memory, I experienced an Alabama blizzard. The magic of that time still lingers in my bones: waking up to a blanket of fresh snow, beautiful frost patterns etched on every window, and creamy hot cocoa spreading warmth through my whole body. The cousins were all home from school and we played in the street until our hands and feet, wrapped in plastic to keep them dry, were too cold to move.

Like all blizzards, this one lasted much longer than a child's patience. One afternoon (at the end of her rope, I'm sure), MeMaw sat me down at the kitchen table with a piece of hooked red steel and a ball of twine. She tied a slipknot to get me started, then showed me how to create long chains of perfectly nested loops. While I practiced the complex motion of drawing my twine around the hook and through the loops, MeMaw crocheted next to me. Her hands flew at a dizzying pace, creating one strange spider-like shape after another. Eventually I got restless, and she moved us to the next step of her creative process.

She pulled a small box from the depths of her kitchen pantry. Inside was a tin of rust-proof pins, a few pieces of well-used cardboard, and a scratchy olive-green towel with vibrant yellow flowers pinwheeling across the bottom. As I worked at spreading the cardboard over the table, MeMaw made a paste with warm water and flour. We spread her well-used towel over the cardboard, and she taught me how to use my hook to dunk the spidery shapes into a bowl of her paste. Each time a shape was saturated to her liking, she took it from me and performed the most amazing magic trick I'd ever seen. Her spiders became snowflakes, revealed through strategic pinning and tension. We filled the towel with snowflakes that afternoon: each one different from the one before, each one made with a simple chain of perfectly nested loops. I remember taking a nap that afternoon and waking to see our (now stiff and dry) snowflakes hanging from ribbons pinned to the window.

Photos courtesy of Amanda Banks

Like all blizzards, this one lasted much longer than a child's patience.

The snow melted and not too long afterwards, MeMaw passed on. Her magic stayed with me though. I've been working with yarn for close to thirty years. A small steel hook and a ball of twine are always close at hand. I have my own well-loved towel and a lace maker's blocking board filled with tiny holes from my pile of pins. The skills MeMaw taught me have been shared with countless others, nurturing a community built of friendship and cooperation. My snowflakes have even traveled the world, creating opportunities I never dreamed possible. I'm thankful for the legacy that MeMaw gifted me and grateful for the magic of Alabama blizzards. ○

BOOK REVIEWS

Of Mules and Mud

The Story of Alabama Folk Potter Jerry Brown

BY JERRY BROWN | EDITED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY JOEY BRACKNER
TUSCALOOSA: UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA PRESS, 2022

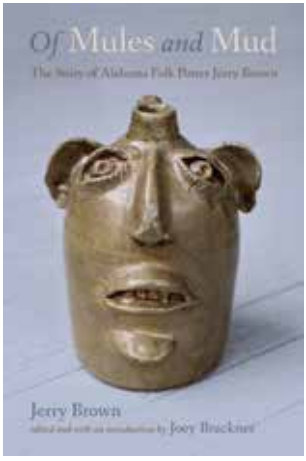
REVIEW BY SARAH BRYAN

In artistic traditions, as in history, periods of transition are often the most revelatory. In Southern folk pottery there have been several such touchstone eras, each embodied by particular artists or entrepreneurs who were affected by or helped to effect major change. The William Rogers pottery, for example, in early eighteenth-century Virginia, was the first known site at which colonial African or African American artists worked in a formalized workshop context, wheel-throwing European-style vessels. Rogers' shop was also the first known example in southeastern North America of a pottery enterprise run by a businessman who was not himself an artisan, but employed turners, both Black and white, to make and sell his wares – a proto-industrial format that would be echoed just over a century later in some of the famous workshops of Edgefield, South Carolina.

A very different period of tumultuous change came in the late nineteenth century, as the increasing availability of mass-produced household goods – glass canning jars, affordable cast-iron cookware – rendered hand-turned pottery unnecessary in many American households. As a result, some potters who remained in their traditional line of work began to concentrate on making decorative, non-essential items like flowerpots, or materials for construction, such as drainpipes and sewer tiles; or, like the Robins and Henderson plant in Pinson, Tennessee, or the Strasburg Stone and Earthenware Manufacturing Company in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley, tried to prolong the trade's viability through steam-powered factory technology.

The Southern potters who lived through the greatest period of transformation in their craft were those – including, most famously, Lanier Meaders of White County, Georgia, and Burlon Craig of the Catawba Valley in North Carolina – who came from long family or regional lines of production potters making utilitarian wares, but found opportunity in the twentieth-century craft revival, accepting newfound recognition as traditional artists. It seems appropriate that crockery-related adjectives like "churning" and "jarring" are so often used to describe tumult. For such an ancient art, pottery isn't exactly prone to stasis.

Jerry Brown of Hamilton, Alabama, was born in 1942, and though he was a chronological generation younger than Craig and Meaders (who were born in 1914 and 1917, respectively), within the Southern pottery tradition he occupied the same artistic generation. Of the three, Brown was the anachronism. The fathers of all three men were born within two years of each other, in the late 1880s, but Horace "Jug" Brown was well into his fifties when Jerry was born.



Jerry Brown was not only a great craftsman, he was a great talker and storyteller. Vivid and funny, he also had a strong sense of history, and of his responsibility as a ninth-generation potter and tradition-bearer. Sadly, Brown died in 2016, in his early seventies, when he should have had years of pottery-making and storytelling still ahead of him. For those of us who didn't have the good fortune to know him, it's a blessing that Joey Brackner did.

So much of what we know about Alabama's exceptionally rich pottery heritage comes from Brackner's decades of research on the subject. Jerry Brown was not only one of Brackner's key informants, but a friend, and that long and fruitful relationship made *Of Mules and Mud* possible. This important account of an Alabama artist's life would not exist had Brackner not spent forty years documenting Jerry Brown's life and work, encouraging him to talk about himself, recording his stories, transcribing his words, and ultimately, with Brown's blessing, editing and assembling a series of interviews into an autobiography. Yet Brackner takes very little credit, speaking of himself in this book only when use of the first person is a narrative necessity. As the best of folklife documentation so often is, *Of Mules and Mud* is a labor of love on the part of the folklorist, in service of a tradition and its bearers.

Jerry Brown shared his life story with Brackner over the course of many years – most often, Brackner writes, in chats after hours in his shop, or while riding around his land to check on his cows. The interviews from which this collaborative autobiography was assembled took place mainly during a 2015

visit that Brackner and his wife Eileen Knott (herself the descendant of a major Alabama pottery dynasty) made to the Brown family. Some sections also draw from the 1986 documentary *Unbroken Tradition*, made by Herb Smith, Erin Kellen, and Brackner, about Brown and his work.

Of Mules and Mud is presented episodically, in brief chapters that suggest the structure and cadence of how Jerry Brown spoke and told stories. Preceded by an essential introductory essay, the chapters are organized into general thematic sections ("The Early Years," "Process," and "Success and Recognition"), well- and heavily illustrated with photos, and followed by an epilogue, additional images, and appendices.

Brown's life and career were marked by departures and returns, losses and, usually, resurgences. As a boy growing up in the pottery business run by his father (who had moved to Alabama from Georgia only a few years before Jerry was born), and working alongside his older brother Jack, Brown resolved to put that life behind him when he grew up, and make his way in a different profession. He did work for some years as an independent logger, but a slowdown in the lumber market in the early 1970s led him to reconsider his options and view pottery in a new light. By that point he had so completely disowned his identity as a potter that, when he told her he was thinking of returning to the trade, his wife Sandra was surprised to learn that he knew how to make pottery at all – it was the first she'd heard of it.

Fortunately, Brown found that being a potter suited him after all. Over the next forty years, he became a highly regarded maker of alkaline-glazed vessels – including, most famously, face jugs – which he fired in a traditional groundhog kiln, much of that time with wood. He embraced his role of representing the ninth generation of his family tradition, and set about training the tenth. Sandra Brown took on much of the shop's work as well, making Brown's Pottery a family business. Jerry was featured at the 1984 Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife, and he was named a National Heritage Fellow by the National Endowment for the Arts in 1992 (a year whose distinguished cohort of inductees also included Kentucky fiddler Clyde Davenport and Mississippi fifer Othar Turner).

Some of the richest parts of this absorbing book have to do with Brown's responses to the changes he encountered on returning to pottery. It was during the final quarter of the twentieth century that he was building his life as a potter, but in many aspects of his work he was using methods learned in the 1940s, from a father who had himself learned in the late nineteenth century. As Brackner notes in the introduction, when Brown founded his pottery business, he "had little knowledge of the emerging national interest in American folk pottery" (xiv). It was a practical matter of a trade that he knew, a product he could make and sell.

In the early days of Brown's shop, he priced vessels by volume, as his forebears had done. Upon running the numbers, though, he discovered that, selling his churns at three dollars a gallon, he was barely covering expenses,

much less remunerating himself for the time and expertise he brought to the work. Shifting to pricing his pieces by the effort it took to make them, rather than by utilitarian traits like capacity, is emblematic of the Southern potter's changing place in society, from someone regarded simply as a manufacturer of wares to one recognized as an artist. While Brown doesn't articulate this, one imagines that this may have been as transformative a moment for his sense of self as it was for his business model. Similarly, he didn't sign his pottery at first. Like most traditional potters of earlier generations, Jug Brown had not signed his, so Jerry naturally followed the same convention. Customers made it clear to him, though, that they expected pottery to be signed by its maker. It's art, after all – though he may not yet have seen it that way.

Brown sometimes dug in his heels, though, and kept up the old ways. Customers complained at first that his crocks were unglazed on the top of the rims; not having seen this feature in craft pottery, they evidently assumed that it was a defect. In fact, Sandra Brown would scrape the glaze off the top of each dipped churn before firing it, so that pieces could be stacked in the kiln without fusing together. A complex art form like pottery is made up of a thousand such seemingly small details; yet it's in those details that history and heritage are found.

As the title suggests, mules are important characters in this book, and their prominence says a lot about Jerry Brown: about his adherence to tradition, and also about his kind heart. Several mules make cameo appearances – Jess, Pat, Ruff – but when an ingénue named Blue appears, she steals the show. Brown worked with mules all his life. He drove a small team for logging, and when he took up pottery full-time, Blue was designated to turn the clay mill. She was a working mule for most of her life, though in her later years she only turned the mill for a few hours once a month. She was obviously also a pet and friend. Brown makes fun of himself for spoiling her so much that she would refuse her feed of shelled corn unless he salted it for her. Blue Brown outlived Jerry by a few months, and one of the most touching pictures in the book is of her enormous grave, which the family, while still mourning Jerry, had lovingly marked with a wooden cross and standing funeral wreath.

I paused in reading *Of Mules and Mud* long enough to watch *Unbroken Tradition*, which is available for free viewing on folkstreams.net. At the heart of that film is a scene following Brown as he makes a five-gallon churn. He was a strapping man, but even so it's remarkable to watch the facility with which he could wedge and then turn a twenty-seven-pound lump of clay, taking only a few minutes to pull it into a beautiful vessel that appears to be nearly two feet tall. In the documentary, Brown's self-assuredness as a turner stands out in contrast to his somewhat shy way of speaking; in his forties at the time, but only newly embarked on his pottery career, he seems not to have fully grown into his role as the spokesman for his business and

his family tradition. The same modesty and gentle personality are evident in how Brown, then over seventy, speaks of himself in *Of Mules and Mud*. By that age, though, he seems at least in part to recognize himself as the person others saw: a distinguished artist and bearer of generations of knowledge.

Of Mules and Mud is a rare opportunity to follow a traditional potter's career through pivotal phases of folk art history, and to understand his own changing perspectives about art, commerce, tradition, and himself. It's all the more valuable because, as such a slim and engaging book, it will appeal to a general readership, while being full of both technical and historical information, and nuanced interpretations of tradition, that will make it an essential title for scholars as well. Thank you to Joey Brackner for encouraging and enabling Jerry Brown to tell us about his life.

Distracted by Alabama

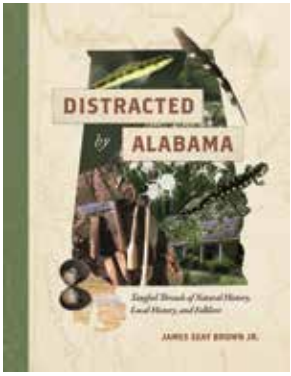
Tangled Threads of Natural History, Local History, and Folklore

BY JAMES SEAY BROWN JR.

TUSCALOOSA: UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA PRESS, 2022

REVIEW BY MICHELLE LITTLE

As an undergraduate history student at Samford University in the late 1990s, I heard tales of a Professor Jim Brown. Rumored to teach the hardest class in the department, he required Folklore students to weave a rivercane basket, sketch a tulip poplar tree, and learn shape note singing. Never sure if these tales were fact or fiction, I kept a wide berth of Dr. Brown and his unusual history class that convened in canoes rather than classrooms. I had a GPA to protect and was all too aware of my poor vocal skills and inadequate drawing abilities.



Dr. Brown taught his final Folklore class in the spring of 2014. By some enormous stroke of luck, I was working at Samford at the time and allowed to audit the course. Having long since realized that my college GPA mattered little, I was eager to see what I missed all those years ago. I wove a rivercane basket, waded in the Cahaba River, and sang "What Wondrous Love is This" at a Sacred Harp Singing on Lookout Mountain near Collinsville, Alabama. I was simultaneously envious of my classmates experiencing these magic moments at such a young age and sad for all future students who would never have this opportunity. Thankfully, in his first few years of retirement, Dr. Brown put together a guidebook.

Brown's recent book, *Distracted by Alabama: Tangled Threads of Natural History, Local History, and Folklore*, is a behind the scenes look at many of the experiences which shaped his research and teaching. It is a boutique history of Alabama brought to life through oral history interviews and the author's personal stories. *Distracted* is for Alabamians old and new, folklorists, teachers, hobbyists of many ilks, and anyone hoping to snare a redhorse fish on a spring day.

Dr. Jim Brown is no stranger to the Alabama Folklife Association, nor to regular readers of this journal. A Tennessee native, Brown relocated his family to Alabama in 1971 to teach Russian history at Samford University. He immediately started exploring all parts of Alabama and became involved in many local organizations. *Tributaries* readers will recognize several of the book's chapters as previous articles in this journal.

Published by the University of Alabama Press, *Distracted* is printed on 304 heavyweight glossy pages encased in a beautiful hunter green hardcover. Forty-two images and figures illustrate the book; many are photographs and sketches by the author himself. To readers unfamiliar with Dr. Brown, the range of subject matter may seem disconnected, but Brown explains his guide and motivation in the epilogue. He experienced an urge to connect with "older, slower cultures, and [learn] about the natural world in which they existed" during a time when he felt "swept along too rapidly in modern technological and societal currents." Each new distraction was like "dropping a sea anchor overboard, a sort of underwater sail that drags and slows a boat's drift." (275)

Distracted is divided into twelve chapters with subjects ranging from folk crafts to foraging with Herb Doctor Tommie Bass to attending The Mountain Workshop of the Alabama Audubon Society. While each chapter can stand alone, the title phrase *Tangled Threads* beautifully describes the flow of the book. Brown often references future chapters or previously recounted stories to fill in details. In this way, the book is as organic as an oral history interview. Reading *Distracted* feels like having coffee with the author as he tells you about the annual spotted salamander migration along Lakeshore Parkway in Homewood, Alabama which then meanders into a story about Egyptian pharaohs.

Above all, *Distracted* is a guidebook to a life well lived, a road map to following inspiration wherever it may lead. Despite teaching full-time and having a young family at home, Brown continually sought out learning and volunteer opportunities. He taught ESL classes, enrolled in graduate level biology courses, led Boy Scout hiking trips, learned white oak basket making, traversed Blount County in search of surviving folk artists, and so much more.

In the introduction, Brown tells of a visit to The Walter Anderson Museum of Art in Ocean Springs, Mississippi. He understands Anderson's motivation "was that a good artist, by concentrating on one slice of nature closely enough, could present its rhythms and patterns of life clearly

enough to awaken an understanding of it in the rest of us" (3). Jim Brown's detailed stories of Alabama explorations bestow this gift upon his readers. The sight of a tulip poplar bud, the feel of the first cool rains of fall, or the whispered refrain of an old hymn stir the senses to secrets hidden by time and technology. May we all be so distracted.

Boyington Oak

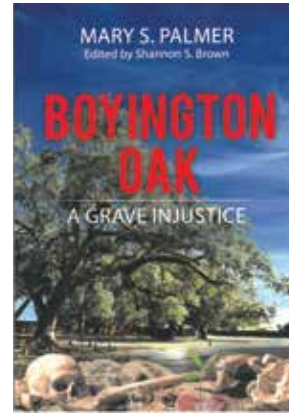
A Grave Injustice

BY MARY S. PALMER

BOCA RATON, FL: UNIVERSAL PUBLISHERS, 2019

REVIEW BY ALAN BROWN

The story of the Boyington Oak is familiar to many Alabamians who read Kathryn Tucker Windham's account in her book, *Jeffrey's Latest 13: More Alabama Ghosts* (1982). According to Windham, Charles Boyington arrived in Mobile, Alabama, in November 1833, around the same time that the "stars fell on Alabama." At first, the appearance of the meteor shower proved to be a good sign. Boyington got a job at the printing company of Pollard and Dale, found lodging at Mrs. William George's boardinghouse, and fell in love with a beautiful young French girl named Rose de Fleur.



About six months later, on May 10, 1834, Boyington was accused of the murder of his roommate and friend, Nathaniel Frost, whose body was discovered near the Church Street Graveyard. He had been stabbed repeatedly in the heart. Boyington was arrested on the steamship James Monroe and incarcerated on May 16, 1834. His trial was held in November. Despite his protestations of innocence and the solely circumstantial evidence, the jury found Boyington guilty of murder. The judge sentenced him to be hanged on February 20, 1835.

Just before he was hanged from the gallows that had been built on Washington Square, Boyington predicted that an oak tree would sprout from his grave as proof of his innocence. Not long after he was hanged and buried in a potter's field at Church Street Graveyard, Boyington's prophecy came true. The Boyington Oak still stands near the wall on Bayou Street.

Although Windham's version is based on a stronger historical foundation than many of the variants that have found their way into print over the years, it does not tell the whole story. It has taken 184 years for the publica-

tion of a book that attempts to "fill in the gaps" in the tragic tale of Charles Boyington. In her meticulously researched book, *Boyington Oak: A Grave Injustice*, author Mary S. Palmer treats the material with the respect it deserves while going to great lengths to distance her account from a dry, academic retelling of the tale. Like Windham, Palmer embellishes the facts with narrative flourishes that make her book more readable for a general audience. For example, in Chapter 14, Palmer imaginatively recreates the discovery of Nathaniel Frost's corpse by a group of people walking on a path behind the Church Street Graveyard:

"Oh, dear God!" a woman gasped as she made the Sign of the Cross.

One of the men accompanying her stooped to see several blood spots from wounds and bruises on the body's head. The absence of any sign of a pulse made it clear that the victim was dead. He got to his feet and called, "Help!" No response. He turned to a teenager in the group. "Go get the sheriff. Hurry."

The boy took off in a run to the sheriff's office to report the crime.

Before he'd run one block, a horse trotted toward him. "Stop!" the young man yelled. He pointed to the cemetery gate. "There's a dead body over there."

Sheriff Joseph Bates, Jr. said, "Follow me," and headed in that direction (60).

Palmer also tries to make her version come alive by illustrating her book with images, such as Boyington's execution report, the trial report, and the arrest report, as well as intriguing transcriptions of articles from the *Mobile Commercial Register and Patriot* with titles like "Bail Denied," "Juror Not U.S. Citizen," "Arrest report," "Court House Packed," and "Execution." Photocopies of accounts of the trial in *True Detective Magazine*, April 1934 and the *Mobile Mercantile Advertiser*, May 12, 1834 and May 19, 1834, are intriguing but difficult to read without a magnifying glass. Her photographs of the Church Street Graveyard and the Boyington Oak are helpful for readers who have never visited these sites, although the inclusion of specific tombstones is misleading because it suggests that these individuals had some connection with the story of Charles Boyington.

The book also contains a comprehensive endnotes page, most of which were taken from accounts of the trial in the *Mobile Mercantile Advertiser, the Mobile Commercial Register and Patriot*, and a published account of Boyington's trial by Francois Ludgere Diard. However, because Diard's work is so important to Palmer's book, one wishes that more information about the author or the book had been provided.

Palmer clearly grasps the importance of humanizing Charles Boyington to support her contention that "A Grave Injustice" was committed when he was executed for a crime he did not commit, and does so by including a selection of poetry written during his stay in Mobile. These are part of a collection of poems that Boyington had intended to publish in *The Young Rambler's Port Folio.* Chapter 6: Courting Rose is centered around one of

Boyington's early love poems to Rose de Fleur, "No. 1: A Sketch—A Fragment," composed in February 1833. Chapter 11: Backlash features two poems. "The Wanderer" reflects Boyington's feelings of restlessness after losing his job at Pollard and Dale's printing firm. His poem, "To a Butterfly at Christmas," was presented to Rose after only a week's separation. The bulk of Boyington's poems can be found in Chapter 14: The Murder. With titles like "Youth and Age," "Kindness and Hate," "The Heart," and "The Soul," these poems reveal the sensitive side of Boyington. In Chapter 20: Looming Fate, the poems "The Prisoner" and "Lines" open a window into the soul of a man facing imminent death.

Chapter 24, Afterward, and Author's Final Notes constitute a sort of epilogue. Chapter 24 includes a fanciful depiction of Rose de Fleur's final words to Charles Boyington in the Church Street Graveyard before she moves on with her life. In the Afterward, Palmer proposes that a woman named Florence White and her lover had stabbed and robbed Nathaniel Frost. In the Author's Final Notes, Palmer apostrophizes the spirit of Charles Boyington, asking him questions that investigators have been asking themselves about the case for almost two centuries.

In *Boyington Oak: A Grave Injustice,* Mary S. Palmer combines the distinguishing elements of narrative fiction and historical accounts to produce a compelling chronicle of a time in Mobile's history when the wrong man paid with his life for a crime he did not commit. The excerpts and illustrations draw the reader into the tale by creating a very tangible sense of time and place. Palmer is clearly trying to fulfill the expectations of two audiences—the general reader who wants to read a good story and the avid historian who craves verification for her slant on the tale. For the most part, the author succeeds in convincing the reader that the saga of Charles Boyington is much more than just a tragic legend. ○

ENDNOTES

1 This article is an improved version of a chapter from my dissertation. Emily Ruth Allen, "Brass B(r)ands in Mobile, Alabama's Mardi Gras" (PhD diss., Florida State University, 2021).

2 In Mobile, Alabama, a brass band is a small marching ensemble of players on trumpet, trombone, sousaphone, saxophone, and drums (usually with no more than 15 people). There is typically at least one bass drum and snare drum. Sousaphone is almost always involved, as that is essential to the signature bass lines that characterize second line music (i.e., the Mardi Gras brass music). There are sometimes one or two saxophone players of some sort. The core of the band's sound comes from the trombonists and trumpet players who fill out the sound of the group and give the band the full volume necessary to be heard in the noisy Mardi Gras parades. Members are usually friends or people who gig together around town. Brass bands are different from marching bands, which are usually tied to an educational institution and have a wider variety of and greater number of wind and percussion instruments.

3 Lawrence Specker, "Excelsior Band Shines as Honoree at Concert," *Mobile Press Register*, August 5, 2012; "Mobile Excelsior Band Honored with Alabama Folk Heritage Award," *Beacon Citizen*, July 10–16, 2013.

4 Eoline Pope Scott and Odile Pope Owen, interview with Kern Jackson, April 21, 2000, Mobile Tricentennial Video Oral History Project, Local History & Genealogy Library, Mobile Public Library

5 Hosea London, phone interview with author, June 1, 2020

6 It should be noted that there was also an Excelsior Brass Band in New Orleans, as "Excelsior" was a common name for brass bands in the nineteenth century. See Charles E. Kinzer, "The Excelsior Brass Band of New Orleans, 1879-1889: A Decade in the Development of a Vernacular Archetype," *Journal of Band Research* 29, no. 1 (Fall 1993): 14–24. Ethnomusicologist Matt Sakakeeny explains that, in the nineteenth century, brass bands of color "adopted names (the Excelsior, the Imperial, the Superior) that captured some of the grandeur previously reserved for the white bands." Matt Sakakeeny, "New Orleans Music as a Circulatory System," *Black Music Research Journal* 31, no. 2 (Fall 2011): 307.

7 In the case of Excelsior founder John A. Pope and his family, Creole referred to a racial, class, and general social status in the late nineteenth century. The Pope family members were considered Creoles of Color. Eoline Pope Scott, the granddaughter of John A. Pope, indicated some tensions around the term "Creole" to their family: "It was French in the family. I'll tell you what they call 'em now: Creoles. We were never allowed to say it. I guess it's French and Black and all that mixed together. But you have one ounce of Black blood in you, you're Black." Scott and Owen, interview with Jackson, April 21, 2000. Even the interviewer of Scott, Kern Jackson, indicated that no one he spoke with for the oral history project agreed on a definition of Creole.

8 Angela D. Davis, "The Excelsior Band Continues a Century-Old Tradition," *The New Times*, February 11, 1988, 5.

9 WALA FOX 10 and Mobile Bay Monthly, America's First Carnival: *The Guide to Mobile Mardi Gras*, February 1998, 32. Some members of the original 18-piece band were John A. Pope, Leo Battist, Alex Terez, and Ted Collins. George Werneth, "Excelsior," *Mobile Register*, January 30, 1994, Local History & Genealogy Library, Mobile Public Library.

10 William Ballariel, interview with William Russell, October 2, 1959, Hogan Archive of New Orleans Music and New Orleans Jazz, https://musicrising.tulane.edu/listen/interviews/william-ballariel-1959-10-02/. William Ballariel was born on October 11, 1881 and was in the Excelsior Band for 25 to 30 years.

11 Billy McBride and Mary McBride (Mack & Mack), interview with William Russell, July 1, 1959, Hogan Archive of New Orleans Music and New Orleans Jazz, https://musicrising.tulane.edu/listen/interviews/billy-and-mary-mcbride-mack-and-mack-1959-07-01/.

12 John C. Pope, interview with William Russell, May 1, 1959, Hogan Archive of New Orleans Music and New Orleans Jazz, https://musicrising.tulane.edu/listen/interviews/john-c-pope-1959-05-01/.

The Drago and Cummins families were tied to a prominent white brass band of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Drago Band. One descendant, William Cummins, has written an unpublished manuscript about the band, "The Members of the Drago Band of Mobile, Alabama."

13 "Masonic Parade: The Program of Exercises for Thursday, Sept. 8," *The Biloxi Herald*, September 3, 1898, Readex America's Historical Newspapers.

14 Pope, interview with Russell.

15 Hosea London, phone interview with author, May 30, 2020.

16 Ballariel, interview with Russell. This would be consistent with the benevolent associations of people of color in New Orleans to which London and Lyons de Freitas believe the Mobile organization had ties.

17 Stokes died on October 21, 1901. His funeral was held at Zion's Church, led by the Eureka Brass Band (which Stokes had also led). Paulette Davis-Horton, *Avenue: The Place, The People, The Memories, 1799-1986* (Self-published, 1991), 70. "Interesting News from Mobile," *The Freeman*, November 2, 1901, Readex African American Newspapers. Ballariel indicates that John A. Pope was still running the band as of 1890. Ballariel, interview with Russell.

18 Freeman Jones, "Glory of Excelsior Band Recalled by Leader Here," *The Mobile Press Register*, July 4, 1948, 7D.

19 Ballariel, interview with Russell.

20 Davis, "The Excelsior Band Continues," 5; Jones, "Glory of Excelsior Band," 7D; Werneth, "Excelsior."

21 Pope claims Cootie Williams and Eugene Doyle played in this group. Jones, "Glory of Excelsior Band," 7D; "Recognition Given to Excelsior Band," *The Mobile Press Register*, 1983.

22 Scott and Owen, interview with Jackson, April 21, 2000.

23 Jones, "Glory of Excelsior Band," 7D; Davis, "The Excelsior Band Continues," 5; WALA FOX 10 and Mobile Bay Monthly, *America's First Carnival*, 32. John C.'s daughter Eoline mentions that they opened a restaurant called Pope's at Washington Avenue and Elmira before moving to the Selma and Dearborn location. Scott and Owen, interview with Jackson, April 21, 2000.

24 Jones, "Glory of Excelsior Band," 7D.

25 Davis, "The Excelsior Band Continues," 5.

26 "Mobile Notes," *The Freeman*, November 2, 1901, Readex African American Newspapers; "Mobile Society," *Montgomery Advertiser*, June 17, 1908, Readex America's Historical Newspapers.

27 "Carnival 1909," *Mobile Register*, February 23, 1909.

28 Ballariel, interview with Russell.

29 Jones, "Glory of Excelsior Band," 7D; Charles Ditmars, "Knights Show 'Child's Fantasy,'" *Mobile Register*, February 11, 1948.

30 Lipscomb supposedly played with an Excelsior Jazz Band in New Orleans as well. Bivens, *Mobile, Alabama's People of Color*, 122. "Cootie Williams Rode to Fame on His Talented Trumpet," *Plaindealer*, May 19, 1944, Readex America's Historical Newspapers. Williams was a famed trumpet player in Duke Ellington's orchestra.

31 Shawn A. Bivens, *Mobile, Alabama's People of Color: A Tricentennial History*, 1702-2002 (Bloomington: Trafford Publishing, 2005), 114, 146.

32 Davis-Horton, *Avenue*, 70.

33 Ballariel, interview with Russell.

34 Theodore Arthur Jr., phone interview with author, April 13, 2021. Arthur has been in the Excelsior Band for 55 years and is the longest-standing member of the group.

35 Coleman started an Excelsior-adjacent group, the E.B. Coleman Orchestra, which is run by Hosea London today. A Hanover, Virginia native, Coleman went to Alabama State and was a band director at Central High School and, after desegregation, at Murphy High School. He had a profound effect on musicians like Fred Wesley Jr. and Excelsior trombonist Carl Cunningham Jr. He passed away on November 25, 1996. Rhoda A. Pickett, "Orchestra Leader, Teacher E.B. Coleman Gone at 66," Mobile Press Register, November 26, 1996. Local music journalist Lawrence Specker summarizes Coleman's legacy: "The impressions he made on students, colleagues and friends illuminate a more vivid portrait: a steadying hand during tumultuous times; a gifted arranger and composer who shared his talent freely with others, even competitor; a bandleader who shunned the spotlight, always preferring to see someone else advance." Lawrence Specker, "E.B. Coleman's Musical Legacy Lives on in Mobile," Mobile Register, November 24, 2006, 1A.

36 London, phone interview, May 30, 2020. Examples include Cootie Williams, a trumpet player in Duke Ellington's orchestra; Theodore Arthur Jr., a saxophonist who played with Bobby "Blue" Bla nd; and Fred Wesley Jr, a trombonist who has played with James Brown's and George Clinton's groups.

37 Carl Cunningham Jr., phone interview with author, June 30, 2020.
38 WALA FOX 10 and Mobile Bay Monthly, *America's First Carnival*, 32. He grew up in Mobile and attended Heart of Mary High School and went to Alabama State University. He was later faculty at Bishop State Junior College. His grandfather also played in Excelsior in the 1930s. Martin Schneider, "Grave Future for Mardi Gras Band?," *Azalea City News & Review*, July 13, 1988. "The Excelsior Band," *1998 Mardi Gras Guide*, 32.
39 Werneth, "Excelsior."
40 Kim Lanier, "Longtime Excelsior Band Trombonist Dies," *Mobile Press Register*, January 14, 2009.
41 Hosea London grew up in Winter Haven, Florida, eventually attending Mississippi Valley State University for college (1966–1970) and Delta State University for his graduate coursework. He takes pride in his time in band, stating that Mississippi Valley was the first HBCU band to march in the Rose Parade. London moved to Mobile in 1975 and joined the Excelsior Band in 1976. When asked about how music education shaped his role in Excelsior, he stated, "I think it gave me leadership abilities because I was section leader. I was dorm president. So it gave me a lot of leadership abilities. And then when I started working as a trumpet instructor, it gave me a better understanding of the education side of it. So when I came to Mobile, I was easily able to assume that leadership position as a band leader." London, phone interview, May 30, 2020.
42 Hosea London and Kevin Lee, interview with author, August 16, 2017.
43 Hope Northington, "Excelsior Band Upholds Tradition," *Mobile Press Register,* July 6, 2009, 1D, 3D; Howard Johnson, "In Retrospect: Mobile's Public Masked Ball," *Mobile Press Register*, March 6, 1949; "Infant Mystics Will Tell Story of Famous Journeys," *Mobile Press Register*, February 28, 1960, 18A; "Halley-Harbinger to Hilarity," *Azalea City News & Review*, February 6, 1986; "OOM 'Popular Sayings' Tuesday," *Mobile Press Register*, March 4, 1962; WALA FOX 10 and Mobile Bay Monthly, *America's First Carnival,* 32; "Colorful Floats Give Large Crowd 'World Cruise' at MAMGA Parade," *Mobile Register*, March 4, 1987; Werneth, "Excelsior."
44 Kern Jackson, "Going to the Boomalatta: Narrating Black Mardi Gras in Mobile, Alabama," *Tributaries* 7 (2004): 42–44.
45 Hosea London, interview with Isabel Machado, quoted in "Marked Bodies and the Invention of Tradition in Mobile, Alabama's Mardi Gras" (PhD diss., University of Memphis, 2019), 194.
46 London, phone interview, May 30, 2020.
47 London, phone interview, June 1, 2020. The CD was recorded in 2004 and includes tracks such as "Cabaret," "Closer Walk With Thee," "South Rampart St. Parade," "Stars Fell on Alabama," and "Tuxedo Junction."
48 London and Lee, interview, August 16, 2017.
49 Ibid.
50 Arthur, phone interview, April 13, 2021.
51 My white gaze tinges this article, particularly when it comes to the power dynamics the Excelsior Band has historically navigated in racialized spaces. Excelsior, along with other performers, navigate a Mardi Gras system in Mobile that has traditionally been segregated. For more on this, see *The Order of Myths*, directed by Margaret Brown (Brooklyn, NY: Folly River Films, 2008), Machado, "Marked Bodies," and Emily Ruth Allen and Isabel Machado, "Mobile, Alabama's Joe Cain Procession: A Confederate Memorial or The People's Parade?," *Journal of Festive Studies* 3, no. 1 (2021): 92–120, https://doi.org/10.33823/jfs.2021.3.1.91.
52 London and Lee, interview, August 16, 2017.
53 Jackson, "Going to the Boomalatta," 44.
54 Schneider, "Grave Future for Mardi Gras Band?" Many of the brass band musicians use the term "Dixieland" to refer to older styles of jazz closely related to the New Orleans jazz style, as primarily embodied by the Excelsior Band. However, in the narrative of this article, I use the term "traditional jazz," the alternative term suggested by London when I asked what identifier he prefers for Excelsior. Traditional jazz is the descriptor increasingly embraced by scholars and practitioners. However, recognizing that Dixieland may not be problematic for other people, and since the term is still part of the jargon used by many Black and white brass band musicians in Mobile, I have left the term in quotes. For more on these terms, see Zachary Thomas Wiggins, "Mediating Tradition in Traditional Jazz as a Scholar-Performer," (PhD diss., Arizona State University, 2021).
55 Werneth, "Excelsior"; Mike Brantley, "Celebrating the Excelsior Band," *Mobile Press Register*, November 13, 2008, NewsBank. See Excelsior playing at the 2012 Gulf Coast Ethnic & Heritage Jazz Festival here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=ueMZHq_1VZM.
56 London, phone interview, June 1, 2020.
57 Arthur, phone interview, April 13, 2021.

58 Renee Busby, "Saving History," *Mobile Press Register*, April 21, 2008, NewsBank.
59 London, phone interview, May 30, 2020.
60 Cunningham, phone interview, June 30, 2020.
61 London and Lee, interview, August 16, 2017.
62 "Wonder Kids," *Mobile Bay,* August 2022, 48.
63 Arthur, phone interview, April 13, 2021. Many of his students play in his Gulf Coast Jazz and Blues Orchestra, for instance.
64 Cunningham is a native Mobilian whose family has been in the area since 1868. His family has been heavily involved in the Black Mobile Area Mardi Gras Association (MAMGA), including its courts. He began playing in fifth grade; he furthered his music education under E.B. Coleman, Randy Davis, Jessie Sharp, and other music teachers/directors at Murphy High School. Cunningham went on to play in the Jackson State University marching band.
65 Cunningham, phone interview, June 30, 2020.
66 Another Excelsior member, soprano sax player James Moore Jr., stated, "When I was a little boy, I dreamed of being in this band." His former band director was playing with Excelsior, and he was invited to play with the band as a result. Moore said to the journalist, "I'm doing what I love." Casandra Andrews, "One Word: Excelsior," *Mobile Press Register,* January 28, 2010.
67 Arthur, phone interview, April 13, 2021.
68 Ibid.
69 Cunningham, phone interview, June 30, 2020.
70 London and Lee, interview, August 16, 2017.
71 Floyd G. Snelson, "4 Pretty Girls Female Edition of Mills Bros.? Called Pride of Mobile, Ala.," *Pittsburgh Courier,* January 28, 1933, 14, newspapers.com.
72 Joe Cuhaj, *Hidden History of Mobile* (Charleston: The History Press, 2020), location 711, Kindle.
73 Alicia T., "Pope Sisters Biography," accessed October 20, 2021, www.imdb.com/name/nm0990791/bio. Also quoted in Cuhaj, *Hidden History*, location 712.
74 Charles W. L. Johnson, "Pope Sisters' Popularity Sweeping Southland," *Pittsburgh Courier,* February 4, 1933, 6. Transcribed in Charlene B. Regester, *Black Entertainers in African American Newspaper Articles, Volume 2: An Annotated and Indexed Bibliography of the* Pittsburgh Courier *and the* California Eagle*, 1914-1950* (Jefferson, NC : McFarland, 2002), 157.
75 Scott and Owen, interview with Jackson, April 21, 2000.
76 "Pope Sisters are Being Trained by Duke Ellington," *Pittsburgh Courier,* March 18, 1933, 7. From Regester, *Black Entertainers*, 160.
77 "With 'Lucky Sambo,'" *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 24, 1933, 6. From Regester, *Black Entertainers*, 165.
78 Scott and Owen, interview with Jackson, April 21, 2000. There is a video of them performing as maids in MusicandDancing4Ever, "The Pope Sisters – First Black Girl Group," August 26, 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=SBVFwmJssYc.
79 Cuhaj, *Hidden History*, location 747.
80 Throughout this essay, the author uses the terms folk, visionary, and self-taught interchangeably to describe those artists who feel compelled to create art but are not studio-trained. These artists are idiosyncratic and as such are not to be confused with traditional folk artists who work in a community (folk) tradition passed down through the generations.
81 https://marciaweberartobjects.com/perkins.html.
82 https://marciaweberartobjects.com/perkins.html.
83 "Reverend Benjamin Franklin Perkins" by Cynthia S. Gerlach, scholarly paper submitted to Dr. Charles Wilson, HIST 607, University of Southern Mississippi, May 11, 1992.

Contributor Biographies

Emily Ruth Allen holds a PhD in Musicology from Florida State University, where she also completed a Master of Music degree in Historical Musicology. Allen also holds a Bachelor of Music degree with Concentration in Outside Fields (Math) from the University of South Alabama. Her research focuses on Carnival parade musics in Mobile, Alabama, inspired by her experiences marching in parades during her high school and college years. Allen's work has been supported by the Society for American Music's Adrienne Fried Block Fellowship, an FSU Graduate School Dissertation Research Grant, and other grants and fellowships.

Amanda Banks is an interdisciplinary artist local to Huntsville, Alabama. Her inspiration comes from the pattern language of life and her artistic practice questions how patterns can be re-contextualized to create new realities. Banks graduated with honors from The University of Alabama in Huntsville where she also led research directed by the NSF, DOJ, and NASA. She lives in North Alabama with her partner and their two children. Banks works from her home studio and is available by appointment. Her current exhibition, *Holey*, runs through January 6, 2023, at Lowe Mill ARTS & Entertainment in Huntsville.

Emily Blejwas directs the Alabama Folklife Association. She is the author of *The Story of Alabama in Fourteen Foods* (University of Alabama Press) and two middle grade novels: *Like Nothing Amazing Ever Happened* and *Once You Know This* (Random House). She has written for the Encyclopedia of Alabama, Alabama Heritage Magazine, the Alabama Review, and Mobile Bay Magazine, and serves on the boards of the Alabama Historical Association, Alabama Visual Arts Network, and Mobile United. Blejwas holds an MS in Rural Sociology from Auburn University and a BA in Religious Studies from Kenyon College. She lives in Mobile with her husband and four children.

Joey Brackner directed the Alabama Center for Traditional Culture for the last twenty years of his thirty-six year tenure as folklorist with the Alabama

State Council on the Arts. He is the author of *Of Mules and Mud: The Story of Alabama Folk Potter Jerry Brown* (2022) and *Alabama Folk Pottery* (2006) published by the University of Alabama Press. Since 2013, Brackner has been the host of the Alabama Public Television series, *Journey Proud*. His research interests include Alabama folk pottery, traditional graveyard decoration, and southern horticultural traditions. A native of Fairfield, Alabama, Brackner received a BA in Anthropology from the University of Alabama at Birmingham in 1977 and an MA in Anthropology from the University of Texas at Austin in 1981. He was Humanities Scholar in Residence at the Birmingham Museum of Art prior to being hired as state folklorist in 1985.

Alan Brown holds a DA in Rhetoric from Illinois State University, an MA in Educational Administration from the University of Illinois, an MA in American Literature from Southern Illinois University, and a BA in English from Millikin University. He began teaching at the University of West Alabama in 1986, and has since developed an abiding interest in Southern Folklore, in particular Southern ghostlore and African American music and culture. Brown's extensive research has culminated in twenty-nine books, including several collections of Southern ghost stories: *The Face in the Window and Other Alabama Ghostlore* (1996), *Shadows and Cypress* (2000), *Haunted Places in the American South* (2002), *Ghost Hunters of the South* (2006), *Ghosts along the Mississippi River* (2011), *The Big Book of Texas Ghost Stories (2010), Ghosts along Florida's Gulf Coast* (2015), and many others. Brown has also hosted ghost tours in Charleston, South Carolina; Livingston, Alabama; Meridian, Mississippi; and New Orleans, Louisiana.

Sarah Bryan is the director of the North Carolina Folklife Institute and editor of the *Old-Time Herald*, a magazine about traditional Southern music. She is currently collaborating with potter and historian Hal Pugh on a history of Southern folk pottery, to be published by the University of North Carolina Press in 2024. Bryan and Pugh are co-recipients of a 2022 Joyce H. Cauthen Fellowship from the Alabama Folklife Association, supporting their research on Alabama pottery traditions.

Russell Gulley is a veteran Muscle Shoals musician, songwriter, and recording artist with national touring and recording credits. During the 1990s, as director of the Big Wills Arts Council in Fort Payne, Alabama, Gulley was introduced to the tremendous folklife heritage and traditional culture of Alabama through the Alabama Folklife Association, and later became an

active member of the AFA board of directors. This led him to researching, documenting, and presenting traditional arts and culture through such projects as The DeKalb County Fiddlers' Convention, RadioVisions (a live performance and radio broadcast series on APR), and The Salt and Pepper Roots Music Celebration: developed in partnership with the University of North Alabama and the Music Preservation Society in Florence, Alabama and currently debuting on Alabama Public Television.

Michelle Little is an oral historian in Birmingham, Alabama. She has been interviewing Alabama natives for over a decade and is passionate about preserving local stories. Prior to working as an independent oral historian and audio producer, Little founded an oral history program at Samford University. She designed and directed large scale interviewing projects and developed methods to incorporate oral history and podcasting into the classroom. Since leaving Samford in 2019, she has worked extensively with the Southern Foodways Alliance and WBHM 90.3. She is currently developing an oral history based walking tour of Birmingham's Central Business District. She holds a bachelor's in History from Samford University and a master's in Theological Studies from Beeson Divinity School. She previously served on the Emerging Professionals Committee and the Independent Practitioners Task Force of the Oral History Association. Michelle is married to Terry and they have a Jack Russell, Molly. When she is not researching and interviewing, Michelle enjoys trying out recent additions to the Birmingham food scene and is always on the hunt for the best latte.

John Saunders is a lecturer in the Communication Arts department at the University of Alabama in Huntsville. In the classroom, he teaches students about rhetoric and finding and using their voice to create positive change in their world. Outside the classroom, Dr. Saunders is a musician and cigar box guitar builder who tries to find voices through music and the creation of instruments. He is a co-founder of the Alabama Communication Association for students, faculty, and practitioners within the discipline and field of Communication to have opportunities to share their voice through their research, projects, and experiences. One theme that runs through Dr. Saunders' entire professional and personal life is the articulation of one's voice.

Margaret Ann Snow lives in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, where she spends her days farming, mothering, reading, and writing. In 2004, along with her partner, David, she started Snow's Bend Farm. Both her farm work and her writing

are inspired by a love of good food, a conviction to care for the land and people, the scientific aspects of farming, a passion for plants, and a wonderment of nature. Her work has previously been published in *Gravy*.

Jeanie Thompson has published five collections of poetry, including *How to Enter the River*, *Witness*, *White for Harvest: Selected and New Poems*, *The Seasons Bear Us*, and *The Myth of Water: Poems from the Life of Helen Keller*, which was a 2016 Indies Finalist in Poetry. She is a poetry faculty member of the Naslund-Mann School of Professional and Creative Writing at Spalding University and founding executive director of The Alabama Writers' Forum, a statewide literary arts service organization.

• • •

The Alabama Folklife Association

The AFA was founded in 1980 to document, preserve, present, and promote the folkways of Alabama through research, education, and programming.

To share folklife broadly statewide, the AFA supports a variety of work including community and school programs; hands-on workshops; the Alabama Folk podcast, the Alabama Community Scholars Institute; exhibits; interviews and oral histories; the Archive of Alabama Folk Culture; performances, festivals, and events; and the annual publication of *Tributaries*.

Visit alabamafolklife.org to learn more about our work, become a member, and sign up for AFA updates. Follow us at alabamafolklife on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.

Getting Involved

There are so many ways to engage in Alabama folklife!

Listen to our new podcast. In Alabama Folk, we go deep with artists and makers who carry on traditions passed down through the generations. Through their lives, we discover the many histories, cultures, communities, and landscapes that make us Alabama folk. 6 episodes are now available wherever you listen! alabamafolklife.org/podcast

Learn from a traditional artist in your community through our Alabama Folk program. We partner with local organizations to deliver community workshops that engage local traditional artists and makers to teach others. The AFA supports artist fees and workshop supplies. alabamafolklife.org/alabama-folk

Submit to *Tributaries*. We accept research articles, personal essays, photo essays, and reviews. Or, enjoy our sixteen published volumes and learn about railroad calling, jubilees, graveshelters, mayhaws, the blues, gumbo, and much more. alabamafolklife.org/tributaries

Share your Alabama folk tradition in five minutes with a Folk in Five video, helping to build a repository of folkways that reflects Alabama's diverse cultures, environments, and histories. alabamafolklife.org/folk-in-five

Strengthen the documentation of Jewish life in Alabama by joining our Jewish Alabama Folklife Committee, working to inventory Jewish cultural assets in Alabama and plan a statewide symposium. alabamafolklife.org/jewish-folklife

Gather with folklife enthusiasts, artists, makers, and scholars at Folklife in the South, a regional celebration of southern folklife, at Lake Guntersville State Park, Alabama, June 8-10, 2023. Produced by South Arts, in partnership with the American Folklore Society, Alabama State Council on the Arts, and AFA.

Contribute your piece of Alabama folklife to the Archive of Alabama Folk Culture, housing photographs, recordings, slides, papers, and ephemera collected over thirty years by the AFA, ASCA, and through public donations. Located at the Alabama Department of Archives and History, the AAFC has the expertise and resources needed to conserve your piece of Alabama folk history. alabamafolklife.org/aafc

Connect with the AFA by signing up for quarterly email updates at alabamafolklife.org and following us at alabamafolklife on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.

Join the AFA! Become part of a diverse group of community members, artists, makers, and scholars committed to documenting and celebrating Alabama folklife. alabamafolklife.org/join

Special Thanks

TO OUR **2022 AFA MEMBERS** — YOUR SUPPORT BRINGS *TRIBUTARIES* TO LIFE!

Alabama Department of Archives and History
Emily Ruth Allen
James Baggett
David Bagwell
Dewanna Banks
Diane Barnard
Paul Barrett
Anita Bean
Maiben Beard
Anna Bedsole
Denise Benshoof
Lynne Berry Vallely
Zanice Bond
Joey Brackner
Randall Bradley
Deborah Branyon
Michael Brenner
Joan Broerman
Ginger Brook
Kay Brotherton
Alan Brown
Sarah Bryan
Marilyn Burchett
Valerie Burnes
Loretta Burns
David Campbell
Jim Carnes
Deborah Casey
Joyce and Jim Cauthen
Bud Chambers
Ramey Channell
Jackie Clay
Jim Cox
Black Belt Treasures Cultural Arts Center
Victor Cypert
Steven Dark
Charles Day
Linda Derry
Matthew Downs
Leslie Ecklund
Martin and Helon Everse
Kathie Farnell
J. Wayne Flynt
Fred Fussell
Elijah Gaddis
Karen Gearhart
Diane Gerard
Stephen Grauberger
Ann Griffin
Anton Haardt
James Hall
Annie Hallman
John Hardin
Andrew Henley
E. Cameron Hickman
Carrie Hill
Escambia County Historical Society
Richard Holland
Teresa Hollingsworth
Beth Hunter
Laura Hurst
David Ivey
Katie Jackson
John Jackson
Wanda Johnson
Allen Jones-Halli
Erin Kellen
Gottfried Kibelka
Anne Kimzey
Carole King
Jacqlyn Kirkland
Suzanne La Rosa
Jay Lamar
Elizabeth Limbaugh
Jeff and Sherry Loper
Holly Fowler Lowery
Patricia and Ken Martin
Burgin Mathews
Shawnee McKee
William Melton
Naomi Buklad
Amy Milligan
Rebecca Minder
Stan Moss
Ginger Mulcrone
Hubert Nall
Marty Olliff
Kay Paul
Karren Pell
Debbie Pendleton
Patricia People
Annie and Robert Perry
Donna Pierce
Charles and Cenda Price
Susan Reynolds
Donna Russell
Charlie Smith
William J. Smitherman
John Spence
Nick Spitzer
Roger Stephenson
Micki Beth Stiller
Alan Swindall
Sandra Swindall
Kaye Thackerson
Susan Thomas
Jeanie Thompson
Mary E. Vehlow
Linda Vice
Gregory Waselkov
Daniel Waterman
Penny Weaver
Marjorie White
Hank Willett
Randall Williams
Ray and Elfreda Winegar
Margaret Wrinkle

Special Thanks

THE AFA THRIVES THROUGH SUPPORT FROM OUR **GENEROUS FUNDERS AND PARTNERS**:

Alabama State Council on the Arts

NATIONAL ENDOWMENT for the ARTS arts.gov

ALABAMA HUMANITIES ALLIANCE

ALABAMA ART4AL Support the Arts

The Daniel Foundation OF ALABAMA

WILLIAM G. POMEROY FOUNDATION For History. For Life.

Alabama DEPARTMENT OF ARCHIVES & HISTORY

City of Foley PUBLIC LIBRARY

EXCELSIOR BAND

A-KEEP ALABAMA-KOREA EDUCATION AND ECONOMIC PARTNERSHIP

Black Belt Treasures CULTURAL ARTS CENTER

Mobile International Festival YOUR PASSPORT TO ADVENTURE

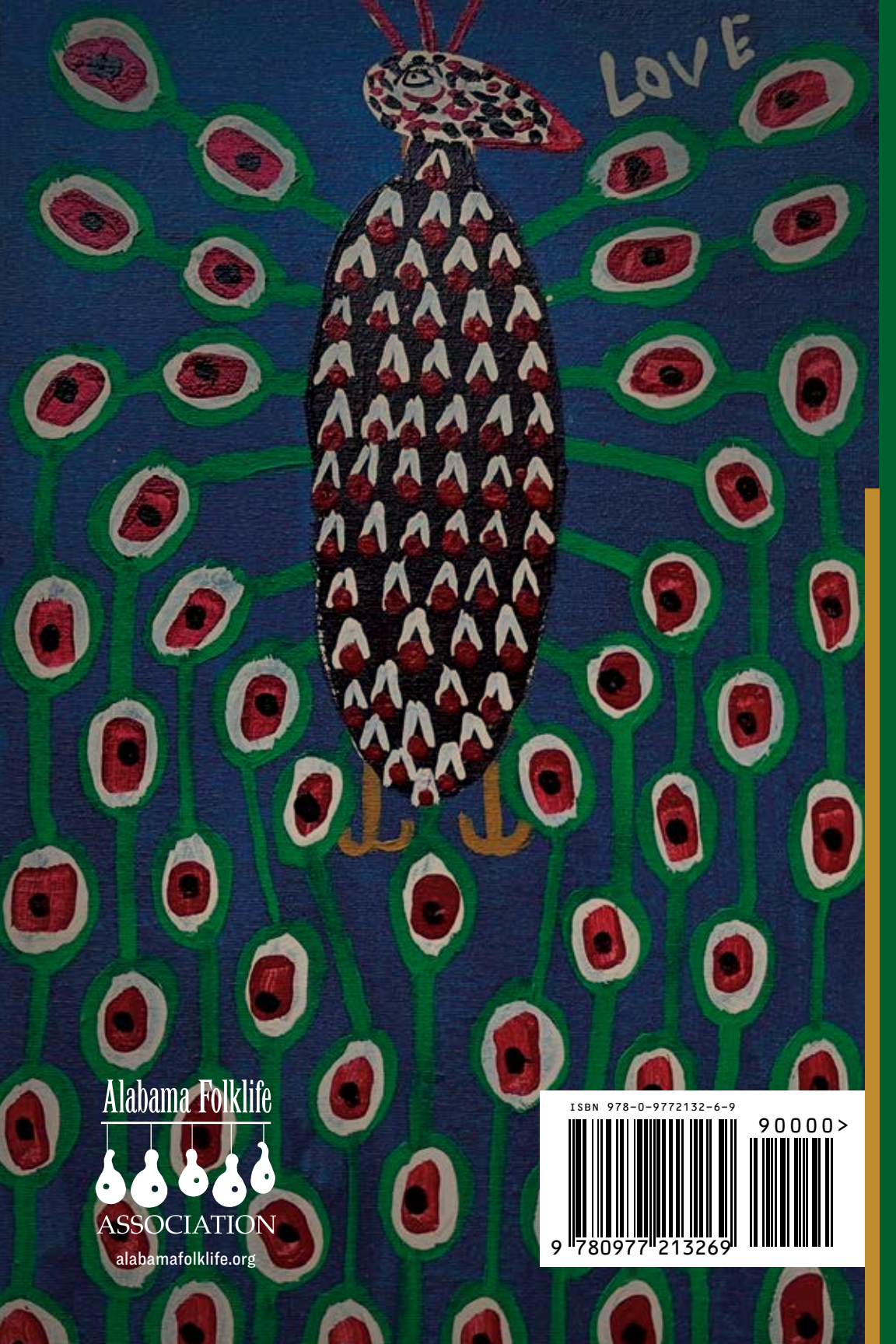
BURRITT FOLK SCHOOL ON THE MOUNTAIN

MOWA BAND OF CHOCTAW INDIANS

Landmark Park

AGRICULTURAL

MOBILE arts COUNCIL



Alabama Folklife Association

alabamafolklife.org

ISBN 978-0-9772132-6-9

9 780977 213269 90000>