

## Interview with Lloyd Bricken 12 September 2019 Samford University, Birmingham, Alabama

**Beth McGinnis** This is Beth McGinnis. I'm here at Samford University on September 12th, 2019 with Lloyd Bricken, the director of the Great Crossroads Project. Thanks for being with me today, Lloyd.

**Lloyd Bricken** I'm happy to be here.

**Beth McGinnis** I have so many questions about this wonderful project. But first, I wonder if you could tell me a little bit about your musical and personal background and the story of your life that led you to this place of becoming interested in this particular music.

**Lloyd Bricken** Hmm. OK, well, I ... I ... I've always been I've always worked as an, always I mean since I was a very young man, I worked as an actor, professional actor from a pretty early age.

**Lloyd Bricken** And then I went on to create a theater company in New Mexico during the years that I was in university, and then went on to work as a professional actor in the Bay Area, San Francisco, which went really, really well. This would this was like in 2001. [00:01:12] But the whole time there was this this creeping feeling of "well, and so what?" kind of from every performance. And this was in contrast to the fact that, like I was getting role after role after role, with the best companies in the city. So it was like, well, I should feel successful, right? But there was this sense of, well, but where does it all go? [27.0s]

**Lloyd Bricken** [00:01:40] Like we sometimes have these incredible experiences working as a company together. But then the performance is finished and, you know, it stops. I was hungry for something that I couldn't yet name, [14.4s] which was like some possibility that would that would be able to to work with the possibilities of the performing arts, like with theater and music, dance, that would be more continuous and more, there, therefore, also transformative. I was hungry to work with a master in this in this way, but I couldn't find anybody like this. Well, in this in my professional field, in that area. But I re- I revisited in the fall of that year the writings of Jerzy Grotowski. If you've ever heard of him. [00:02:37] So he's this this Polish theater genius who also left the theater? And after a great worldwide success and started researching the possibilities of the performing arts, you could call them, or performative techniques that exist in various religious traditions around the world. And he was asking these questions like, well, if we look at what they do in Kathakali, if we look at what they do in India, if we look at what they do in various rituals in Japan, in various rituals in Haiti, if we if I bring masters from these various traditions and we work together, can we find something that would be like, I don't know, behind the differences? Is there something that these things are all striving for? What is that? What are they trying to touch? [52.7s] And maybe we won't find something that goes together. But so,

**Lloyd Bricken** Grotowski, I was diving into his writings in that year and it was causing the crisis to gather for me. So I was like, well, you know, he's dead, right? He died a few years ago. But there's got to be people that are still working with him. And I found out like, yeah, so there's this place called the Work Center of Jerzy Grotowski, and his disciples who worked with him in the last 30 years of his life were still continuing. So I immediately wrote to the work center and I was like, I want to come work with you. It took them several months to get back to me. And they're like, we're not looking for anybody right now, but

we'll put you on our mailing list. Nice to meet you over email. So that was that. [00:04:21] I also had a kind of coincident experience in those months of my father's death, which created this I don't know, like the kind of opening that happens in a way with grief where you just have this tremendous longing for home or what is that? [19.1s]

**Lloyd Bricken** [00:04:42] I really wanted to come back to the Deep South in any case. So I again, I didn't really know why, but I came back after some time to visit my father's grave in rural Tennessee. [12.1s] And a while back, I ended up connecting with some other musicians that I grew up with here, and we they had a band that was about to have a national tour and they were like, Lloyd, join us. So I jumped back on the, into musical life working with an alternative rock band, basically, but traveling the country. And when we were not on tour, I was I found myself coming back into Birmingham. And one time I was down at the library, the downtown public library, and started going through old records. And I pulled out some records that I didn't know. I didn't understand what they meant on the on there, but they were part of like old recordings from the 1930s and 40s. One of them that was just like, what is this? It just said Parchman Farm 1945 on it.

**Lloyd Bricken** [00:05:50] And I was like so I took it home, put it on my record player and proceeded to have I don't know, some kind of epiphany that it from the first notes of hearing this this recording, these were these are prisoners. Parchman Farm is the largest of the of the prison farms in in the Deep South where basically like the conditions of slavery never finished. You know, and it's laid right out there in the 13th Amendment like, okay, slavery is finished. But if you're in prison, we can do what we like to with you. And it's no accident that the prison industrial complex starts getting created right at that moment. And Parchman Farm was known around the Deep South, as I've learned since then, like to be the most savage and the worst of anywhere. If you went to Parchman, it was it was a death sentence. So regardless of whether you were there for lifetime or not, you know, you probably wouldn't leave anyway. But the music that came out of there, the recordings that were there were done there by John Lomax and then his son, Alan Lomax, who then returned there after some time. [80.9s]

**Lloyd Bricken** So I just got I got fascinated with all of this history. I started to find other old recordings of the Lomaxes from Alabama, from other places. Then it was like, well, you know, sometimes I have free weekends. Let's find out where things are still going on in the state. So I started taking almost every weekend that I could over a period of about three years and went to countless numbers of churches around Alabama, Mississippi. I discovered the think incredible culture of the Gullah and Geechee, cultures on the Georgia Sea Islands went up there a couple of times. I've now been out there like four or five times. And so during that process of investigating this, not really knowing what I was doing, I started learning songs too, and started creating my own, I guess you could call them like acting pieces in relation to some of these songs, too, because sometimes it would provoke various memories or other types of things for me, and that would be in relation with the song for me. But again, I didn't know what I was doing with all of it. I had no idea. The Work Center is still not answering me. Had some feeling that that was going to be, that's where I'm headed. But I had to wait a while. So and then and these questions, it was like a research that I was getting involved in, basically. I wasn't, nobody was sponsoring me or anything like that. But so things would happen like I'd be at, [00:08:56] I remember this church in Montgomery County where it was like old, black old lined out hymns. And and then there was someone got up and led a song and then another woman got up and led the second song after this. And she just kind of erupted out of the, from the, I was sitting in the back of the congregation and something just was like it was like the temperature and the pressure just shifted in the room. Like physically, everything changed. It's hard. It's

hard to describe. It was as if something grabbed her, you know. And she just kind of went up in this flame. But, and the whole process lasted about two minutes. But what was incredible to me was the way in which the entire, pretty much everyone in the congregation, like, got up and articulated around her and moved with her. So the song was taking place in the bodies of the people. And articulating around it and in it and through it, that's what is the song. Not just her voice or what she's singing, but the song was moving through all them. [72.4s]

**Lloyd Bricken** [00:10:09]And I mean, I was like, you know, all the hairs were standing up on the back of my neck and I was just absolutely blown away. And I thought to myself, after this, I was like, well, if you could do that again, if you could repeat that, what is it to repeat that? But if you could do that again, you maybe would have the basis for a whole new kind of theater. [25.2s] What would that be? So there were these kinds of questions. So that kind of working with the song in that way, doing, you know, doing it again, so to speak. That's what the Work Center works on. So I did finally get into the Work Center. I worked with Mario Biagini and Thomas Richards, the heads of the work center, and was selected to come be part of a new group over there in 2007 and then spent about nine years consistently over there. So it's a long story. I will. I'll stop. But so this this became then the Work Center, [00:11:19]we work six days a week, eight to 10 hours a day on our craft. And then you go home and you do the administrative work of the theatre. So it's like a nonstop process of work. [13.3s]

**Lloyd Bricken** And yeah. So this that this was my like my life developing the potentials of this of this particular craft and I'm not sure what to call it. It's obvious it's not exactly theater. Sometimes I use I use the term devised theater here. Peter Brook, maybe a name that, you know, I don't know. The famous theater director from France who worked with in tandem with Grotowski. He coined the term art as vehicle, art as a vehicle for certain subtle processes to become alive in a human being as the kind of work that Grotowski was doing. And I can say that that's something that I'm still aiming for. And what I do.

**Beth McGinnis** That's a beautiful story. And I can tell it's only the beginning. Only the surface of the story. How did you connect with the Brazilian musicians?

**Lloyd Bricken** So you met Luciano Mendes de Jesus. You met Luciano, ... isn't it rough [referring to the pronunciation]... this summer? So Luciano was in the Work Center with me. He joined in 2012 and came over and started his apprenticeship with the company. We did a selection for new members in 2012 in Belo Horizonte, Brazil. And we were on like a there were two different extended trips to Brazil in those years with the Work Center because we would go and we would tour our performances to some big cities and things like this, but we would also do these extended residencies in villages and other places. So we were we were learning and people were learning with us. You know, that was always the more exciting thing than just doing the performances. So I met Luciano there and he lived with me in this little Italian village for some years. And then he around the same time that I decided to move back to the states and move back to Alabama. Luciano wanted to finish his P.H.D. in, in Brazil. So he went back to Brazil. I came back to Alabama and we've stayed in touch. And his question, really from the last year, he was still involved over--overseas with us at the Work Center, was like, well, we're ... because we were working with what we call the southern songs with these songs from down here in the Deep South here. But Lou was thinking, well, if I go back to Brazil now, like, look, what Lloyd did I mean, he went to these different places like that's got to happen. And that's clearly the same kind of thing here in Brazil.

**Lloyd Bricken** So he ended up diving into all of that and researching into these different places in Minas Gerais, going on these different journeys and trips to find, if he could, living masters of the *vissungo stil*, [00:14:44] because it's a tradition that's almost gone, you know, in terms of there being people that will that are still singing it, that were taught by their grandfathers and their grandfathers and their grandfathers, you know. As you know, too, like it's really a worldwide die off that we're seeing of these types of things, and the *vissungo* is just being one tradition among many, many, many, many, many. So it's very precious, a precious time to be able to be involved in something like this. [28.3s] So Lou started sharing his the results of his and the excitement of his journey and all this with me. And we started talking like, well, what could be our collaboration going forward? So a year a year before this summer, he had written grants for me to come to Sao Paulo where he lives. And I taught down there at, it's called [SESCI?]. It's like it's a little bit like their, it's a little bit like their Tisch School of the Arts. And I would I would make that comparison because Sao Paulo is a little bit like New York in Brazil. And so I taught an intensive there. But then Lou and I were also co-directing a new group of people in in Sao Paulo, too, with the objective of over a month, like [00:16:10] to create a whole new theatrical piece and then perform it and produce it by the end of the month, which is what we did. And the whole thing by the end, this was so this was in 2018. And it really started to take off by the end of the summer. It was so exciting. And so even before I got on the plane to fly back to America we were like, well what about part two. Let's go to Alabama. So we started working on the grant the day before I left, you know, which eventually we got and brought them here this year. [29.7s]

**Beth McGinnis** Yeah. Mm hmm. You've both been exploring your own roots, but the roots, such deeper and broader roots as well. And I maybe should have asked this question early on. But tell me about growing up. Now you keep saying back to Alabama, but you buried your father in rural Tennessee. Yeah. So tell me about that.

**Lloyd Bricken** Well, my father my father left us when I was eleven, eleven, twelve. And we didn't we didn't really have any contact with him after that. So but my in the wake of my parents splitting up and his disappearance, my mother moved up to we were living in Florida and my mother wanted be closer to her family. So she's from rural Alabama. And her mom was in Mobile. Her sister was in Birmingham. She applied for, she's a teacher and a public school teacher, and she applied for jobs in Birmingham and got a position here in Birmingham. So. So we moved to Birmingham. Yeah. Yeah. And so I grew up mostly here. Okay. Yeah. From like twelve eleven. Twelve. Yeah. So I went to high school here.

**Beth McGinnis** Yeah. Which high school?

**Lloyd Bricken** Yeah. I went to Mountain Brook.

**Beth McGinnis** Okay. Yeah.

**Lloyd Bricken** So pretty close.

**Beth McGinnis** Yeah. Pretty close.

**Lloyd Bricken** And then got away from the south, you know, soon as I could afterwards. Went to went to college in Santa Fe, New Mexico at Saint John's College.

**Beth McGinnis** Okay. Yeah. That rings a bell.

**Lloyd Bricken** A Great Books program.

**Beth McGinnis** Yes. That's the bell that it rings. Yeah. What a great curriculum that was.

**Lloyd Bricken** Well yeah, I'm excited. I'm going back there less than a month right now. The whole program I'm taking to St John's at the moment.

**Beth McGinnis** That is so exciting. Yeah, I bet. Yeah. Yeah. Well you've got lots of homecomings going on, but has that did that Great Books education inform the work that you do now?

**Lloyd Bricken** Absolutely. Good question. I mentioned that I work as a tutor.

**Beth McGinnis** Yeah.

**Lloyd Bricken** Also and particularly when I work with young people that I'm well even when I am working with young people who are high school students and things like this and they have the set curriculum, I'm kind of constantly weaving the classics into everything that I'm doing.

**Beth McGinnis** Yeah.

**Lloyd Bricken** Yeah. It informed so much also about just the background of everything apart from the content itself of the, of the classics and of the of the different thinkers and researchers. That was the great ones. You know, the Western canon that we study there, is also the rigor of the St. John's program has had a huge, huge impact on me.

**Beth McGinnis** Sure.

**Lloyd Bricken** No. Yeah. The, you can't, you can't fool around there at all. It's there's like they only bring in about one hundred and ten hundred and twenty people a year and in these small group classes and from pretty much my first two or three days there, I mean I was always I was already really in love with the ideal of St. John's before I went there. But then in just the first few days of being there I was like, wait, I've got to step up my game, like, get on this. Yeah. So but there are so many authors, so many thinkers that come up with the work that I do now. Last summer, last summer in in Brazil Luciano and I worked with translations of Walt Whitman. Of William Blake, of Edgar Allan Poe. Funny, we used all these, you know, English authors, but it just they were saying the things that we wanted to say at that time with the performance and. Yeah. And I. But so philosophy. Philosophy had a lot to do with my education coming into this and the study of classic languages also, which I went even further than the St. John's program per se in terms of doing extra summer intensives for ancient Greek, because I was really, really deeply interested in being able to take that further at the time and to be able to read the gospels fluently or as fluently as possible. And Homer.

**Beth McGinnis** Yeah.

**Lloyd Bricken** Yeah. Which are two different kinds of ancient Greek.

**Beth McGinnis** Two different. Exactly. Yeah. That that brings up so many questions. I mean before we switch gears a little bit and talk specifically about the performances that

you've recently done in Alabama, I wonder, you said something early on about a, about spiritual practice and connecting your work in theater to spiritual practice. And now you just said "I wanted to be able to read the Gospels in the original language." And so you're, you clearly want to go deep with that. Could you tell me a little bit about the connection of your own spiritual practices and to your artistic work?

**Lloyd Bricken** Yeah. I mean, going back to the story that I started to tell at the beginning of this interview, I mean that in a way that's what it all boils down to for me was that I needed a situation where my spiritual practice and other spiritual practice could go together with the exploration of artistic craft. That's what I was looking for. And in many ways, that's so. So, yes, that the background of the work center was essential for all of this. Like so Grotowski, after this investigation into these different religious traditions that I was talking about. Because also beyond the question of like what's beyond the different outward differences around the world? What is it? You know, there are differences in language and there are differences in what we call this. What is the quality of what it is we're trying to touch? What's the experience that's trying to be arrived at with these various different means? So all those were questions. And then another question was, OK, now that he was experiencing a lot of them, what's one that you don't you maybe don't need to go to the monastery for thirty five years to be able to start to understand what's one that like what could work the best for everyday people in the West and what Grotowski came down on and for him was the best was the Afro-Caribbean songs of Haiti and other traditions from around there. So a group was whole vodun group was brought wholesale to Italy to be continuing their work and influencing a new younger generation of artists in the early 80s in Italy. So this was the beginning of the Work Center. And that's what happened. Like so this this younger generation started learning all these songs, hundreds of them, and then eventually were developing performances with Grotowski's aid out of these types of things.

**Lloyd Bricken** So and these performances are not what we would think of, as, you know, something that's done for the public because it's something that's done for each other and for something else. Right. So it's something that can be seen, but it isn't. I'd say for to be seen. Right. See what I mean?

**Beth McGinnis** Yes.

**Lloyd Bricken** So it's getting. It's really on this edge between something that is public, potentially public. But is ritual also. Right. But like in I'm happy to, you know, to find a way that we could watch a video of one of these older performances or something like this, because something like Action, which is the name of this original piece that evolved there for many years at the Work Center in the early years, absolutely was utterly and completely repeatable. They could finish it and do it again. It was not like depending on certain emotional states or anything else like this,

**Beth McGinnis** Context...

**Lloyd Bricken** just absolutely, that's the level of not only professionalism, but of depth and penetration into the material that they had achieved over many years. Very, very, very powerful. So something that that approaches a kind of objectivity. So I my you know, we everybody that was let's say that was brought into the new team. You know, when I started in 2007 and we were from all different kinds of countries from around the world with lots of different backgrounds and from with many different kinds of desires. But we started working on, like I said, old songs from down here in the Deep South, which was my desire.

I brought that to Mario, and was like, if I'm going to join, this is what I want to do. And he was like, OK. So I think he was drawn to some of this material himself. And he just allowed me to do that and all of my messiness in the first year of doing this. And so my colleagues and I started working on that material. And then we were also working with the poetry of Allen Ginsberg and creating our own songs and actions with Ginsberg's poetry. And if you've read Ginsberg's poetry, like there's this incredible spiritual ferment throughout his work, his oeuvre, you know, in his career, but also his like life transformation. And in fact, everybody knows Howl or something like that. But like to really go deeply into what a lot of people don't read the later books of Ginsberg. There is this incredible work. It's really there, my opinion. But so there was that there was a there was a great spiritual ferment that grew up within this company and within this team.

**Lloyd Bricken** And we were working with our master teachers and directors to help us open up to the processes that we were aspiring to to embody. So and that takes a lot of time. It's not something that you can just wish it into existence. And so now when I you know, when I work with people, too, after, you know, I mean, like in the project you saw this month, you know, it's you can't you can't just be like, I do this. There's something like I need to work with someone who's going to meet me from where they are. I will never try to impose anything of myself on somebody else. And someone else's content is strictly their own. But I know that in another, we human beings are. Are sensitive to the forces that are inside us and outside us and then move us. And so when certain people that I work with, you know, they start to get touched for certain things, maybe they have some kind of intuition that this song or that song or something else can be a tool for them to touch something else inside of them. Then we work on that together. So it is, [00:28:53]I'm not scared of the word spiritual. Sometimes the word spiritual can be like a like a blanket that is not very precise. I'm not scared of it, though. At the same time, because it's also frank. It's like, yeah, I have these spiritual desires. They don't have anything to do with my necessarily with Lloyd's ego or with my monetary or other types of desires or trying to achieve something necessarily in the arts. But I I want to be, I don't know, like to be connected in a certain way. Right? I feel that. [40.1s] And then I talk with other people about that and they seem to agree with me about it. Even if we have various different definitions for it, don't we all?

**Beth McGinnis** Yeah.

**Lloyd Bricken** So yeah. Yeah. We never really get into conversations of religion in terms of this needs to be this or that needs to be that. Sometimes that can create issues. But [00:30:00]I think it's also helpful to remember that religion I mean means "relegere," reconnection. Literally, that's what it means. So yeah. I will probably be throughout the course of this lifetime on like an endless search to touch and to create work that can. That can that can that can help that. That can help reconnection for us and for witnesses as well as people that are doing. [41.8s] Of course, it's much more important that there is really something done there. But the, and it's not just something in our imagination, but it's something that is evident, is in evidence. I mean, you can you can understand that. And. [00:31:05]It's harder to put your thumb on in something like theater or in music, right? Also, because a performance happens and it's over, it's gone. So this whole notion of do it again. What does that mean and how is it possible? And to repeat, of course to rehearse in French is "repetition." So this idea of to rehearse something. What are we rehearsing and how can we make work together in a way that our work together and for ourselves and for our inner wishes leads towards clarity, leads towards real clarity of intention. [48.3s]

**Beth McGinnis** I'm fascinated by fascinated by the idea that there's an objectivity to this and that that you could repeat something with such a profound spiritual effect, because I think we have this idea that such things just happen and I can't make them happen.

**Lloyd Bricken** Right. That it's arbitrary.

**Beth McGinnis** Right. And I know you've spent years studying this, but I wonder if there's any if there are any components of it that you could talk about. Like, how does that work?

**Lloyd Bricken** Well, so, yeah, the components of that. So there is there is that there is the, what I would call. The question here involves like how to enter a deeper process. I'm going to need to probably define that, but a deeper process of. My contact with something with something other now. So like, for example, maybe I don't know why, but there is there is a song that I that I work on. And every time I sing this song, there's this particular type of memory that comes up with me. Well, I might then work with someone on the outside who can start to help me as an actor, for example, start to work with like those various questions. OK, who is it? What is he or she doing? Where did you come from? Where are you going? This kind of Stanislavskian questions of the work of the actor to start to clarify, well, well, who is this? Who is this person? And where did this? Where? Where? What is going on here? So I think all of my colleagues can point to many of their own types of experiences. I can kind of just speak deeply about my own. But like, you know, so [00:34:04] I remember working with this one piece with Mario's assistant director and our company for a while. And we were she had me doing the piece over and over again. And then there was a certain moment where she was like, no, stop, stop. Do that, do that. Just that little bit again, you know? And I did it again. And something was starting to shake. And she like, I was trembling and she would. And she was like, yes. So say that again. And I said it again. She was a deeper when I said it again. She was like, from here. Yeah. Like so I said it again. So that she was helping me go to anchor the body on what started to happen there. Right. And it was very odd. I like the. And after this experience, I cried for, like, I don't know, two hours, but I like became my grandfather. It was like the. His voice, his full mannerisms, everything just became him, you know. And. It's really bizarre. But then it's like, OK, that was a lot. How do I go? How do I go back to that tomorrow? [80.4s]

**Beth McGinnis** Yes.

**Lloyd Bricken** So now would you go if you're going to be intelligent to go back to something, you don't go back and you're like, OK, just try to try to feel it again. It doesn't work like that. You need to have a lot more modesty and kind of like re-find your various actions. So if like the day before I was doing something with my hand, like him like this, I might come back the next day and be like this. Oh, yeah, just like this. Then he was. Like. And so I'm finding that I might I might even start making notes and other things like this of what, little by little? What were the different actions? And when I don't know something I don't know. That's OK. But little by little, I'm creating a score that I can come back to. There's opening. There's mysterious places on that score. But I know I'm going to be. And then I know that I'm going to be trying to find, again, a certain kind of resonance of the voice. Not trying to kind of imitate an intonation, but to find again, physically re-find. Again, the physical and the vocal and other type actions, the actions, the intentions, the little elements of behavior, the little. Even in the way of working in this very small way, like even getting down to the level of the impulses so that those things are start to become known, various parts of them start to become known. And then through time and sincerity of working, you can go further and further and further.

**Lloyd Bricken** So there does start to become something that is, I mean, objective and in the sense of like you watch an actor's work like that for two years, three years, ten years, you may not like what you see. You may be disturbed or this, that or the other. But you're, it's undeniable what you're watching. You're not going to be able to deny it. So, yeah, I do think there is a possibility of this kind of objectivity and there's different ways of reaching objectivity in the arts. This way is obviously different from I mentioned kathakali in India earlier, you know, but like there's these incredible forms of art around the world where you start with the young child and the child learns to do all these movements with the body to become a supple vessel from this from a very early age, you kind of need to start early. It's hard to learn all that later on, once the body is codified in its various habits. But in a way, those processes work from the outside in to really deeply it be able to represent something. And there is an objectivity to that. I think the one that I was deeply attracted to and what I've been exploring for these years is something that is less concerned with what the outer form of what it looks like and concerned with the inner experience. And yes, there is a possibility of developing a line that can be very, very finely crafted from the inside like that, too.

**Lloyd Bricken** And that is obviously also something unique to each person. And it isn't something that well, I think so, I mean like a very good actor could figure out, follow me what I did with my grandfather in that particular performance and do it, you know, at least imitate it very, very well. I don't know. I just I'm just saying that I like I don't have any final definitions about any of these things. But. Yeah.

**Beth McGinnis** It's sort of amazing that there is this unique to each person aspect of it, but there's also this underlying connection between all of us, among all of us.

**Lloyd Bricken** Yeah

**Beth McGinnis** That this kind of art can offer,

**Lloyd Bricken** can touch,

**Beth McGinnis** can touch

**Lloyd Bricken** and that we start to become a little more transparent.

**Beth McGinnis** Yeah.

**Lloyd Bricken** When we're and you could [00:40:02] I think you can sense that like even in Marion when there's the it's like it's as if with some of the some of these songs it's like, it's like there's a subtle food in the air or something like this where we're even if you're not doing it but you're witnessing it or you're part of it. You start to you start to see, oh, you know, it clears these divisions that we are subject to all the time. And it starts to open up a possibility of being able to see one another and hear one another in a way that is. Maybe more real, maybe more just as we are and all of our questions and vulnerability. Right? So and that's my experience, is that they're from that place with the work on these songs can. That door can open up there. And from there you can really. You can really start to call something else and if you start to call something else, well, be prepared for that to answer you. [Laughter] So, that's kind of. Yeah, that's sort of what happens. And so unexpected things do happen and then it's your responsibility to deal with them when they do. That's what I'm saying.[90.9s]

**Beth McGinnis** [00:41:33]the call, and the response, right? Ability, responsibility. [4.3s]

**Lloyd Bricken** [00:41:39]Responsibility. [0.0s]

**Beth McGinnis** [00:41:39]Right. [0.0s]

**Lloyd Bricken** [00:41:40]Yeah. Very good work. [1.0s]

**Beth McGinnis** [00:41:41]Yeah. In Marion, it was so beautiful how that happened in Marion. And I know that you issued that call. You and the group did. And you did it through call and response. And you told the community many of these songs are call and response. We want you to participate. We want that. And they did. Tell me what that experience was like for you. [26.7s]

**Lloyd Bricken** Oh, just like I am. I mean, I told you in the early part of this interview that the, that I went to these churches and things like this for years, I went to these different communities. But I guess as you can imagine, I mean, people would talk to me during that time and I had conversations with folks and at times I did sing with them. But I was really green in all of this. But like my dream of being able to come back here and with a group that I like knew what it was doing, like be able to come back with some of this material and touch some of these communities and see what would happen. [00:42:47]Like, I think you must understand how long I've wanted to do that. So this is like 20 years of. And even in these years, all these years at the Work Center, like I want to go to Alabama, like with our team, you know, like we go back there sing some of these songs and what's it going to be like for folks to hear some of that from their? From their or from their? They maybe their parents, you know, but coming from these, you know, strange weirdos from other parts of the world. But. Yeah, but it's not so weird. I mean, we weren't. No, I don't think we were perceived as so weird. It was really like it was very frank, very normal. And what was remarkable was how really seamless this work with the vissungos and the southern songs is like you would think from the outset, like, oh, those are two different traditions. [64.7s] Like maybe it's not right to just put them next and end with each other, but it just works, you know. And so Lou and I were seeing this from the year before. And Sao Paolo was like, wow, this is really like this was seamless. So I think it helps. I really do. Because having that, I think it helps in these areas. We also did performances in Tuskegee as well as in Marion. And when somehow when for people to experience, particularly the vissungos and then to have the southern, what we can call this week, you know, in shorthand we call the Southern songs. To established shorthand about it. I realize of course there's like more specific names for the different kinds of these songs, whether spirituals or W.E.B. Dubois called them the sorrow songs. But then the Gullah Gullahs culture might call them shouts. So we have different terms for different types of songs also that are woven in there, but shorthand we'll call them southern songs. In any case. [00:45:02]But for people to hear the vissungos, I think, or what I perceived is that it's a little bit of like the experience of the uncanny double, you know, like the twin or the you know, I mean the uncanny quality of like, I know this, but I don't know this. What? And then how odd, how big is my own experience with this material? If it's this universal that it touches this whole other part of the globe, it just opens up these various windows I think in people. And it didn't it doesn't matter their educational background or something else like that. In fact, I know it doesn't, I mean, probably the more educated you are you probably have like more blocks, but some of these folks in Marion, you know, they just get it immediately. And then it is their participation is so, so, so immediate and beautiful and evident in its, in its care and. Tenderness. You know, so yeah. So that but I just felt so good to me. I mean, this way in which we were kind of witnessing each other in this profound way without

needing to spend much time talking about it. Pretty big. [95.9s] Yeah. [00:46:42]Yeah. I mean, in [salaam] I will be able to continue working with these parts of rural Alabama. Go back there with people from this group and keep growing. I think there's a lot that can be found in these communities. Mm hmm. Very interesting. [21.4s]

**Beth McGinnis** [00:47:04]So much richness there. [1.1s]

**Lloyd Bricken** [00:47:05]That's right. Yeah. Yeah. [1.4s]

**Beth McGinnis** We've been talking about Marion and I also heard a performance and a conversation in Birmingham in East Village arts. And I was looking back at my notes at on the conversation and some of the some of the beautiful poetic language that members of your group were using to describe that human connection that this this music elicits. And I I guess is it. I'm not sure if I'm pronouncing his name right, but Salloma had this beautiful description about slavery being a common experience at the root of a lot of this music. And he says slavery submitted people into situations where they became something different from human beings. But being human beings, actually, they continually have dreams and desires and feelings and wishes and thoughts. He. And then he comes back to this. What is the human? It's characterized by all these things, feelings and ideas and wishes and thoughts. And I think his point was partly that the songs express this, but they offer this kind of nourishment. He used this word also nourishment. And that here's some of his language, some more of his language. African descendants that built this material and built the material richness of this contemporary world were capable of surviving the violence of slavery and racism because they carried a lot of spiritual nutrients.

**Lloyd Bricken** Yes.

**Beth McGinnis** In this art. In this music, spiritual nutrients. I love that. And you connected in that conversation. You connected it to the song The Gourd to drink water. Could you elaborate on that connection a little bit?

**Lloyd Bricken** Certainly. [00:49:20]So this this idea of the water. I think the water being used as a as a metaphor for the spiritual nourishment in this. Well, a couple of things I'd say here. So, yeah, with the, with the gourd. Give me gourd for drink water. I don't. The other lines of the song are I don't I don't need a cup for the snow water. And we're rolling, rolling, rolling under. I think that's it. Those are the lines of the song. It's so funny with these songs because they can't have, like, I don't know, fifteen words, but they have they have a way of. It's almost as if, you know, I can sing them. And for months and months and months feel like I'm in I'm in a I'm in a whole country, you know, like in the richness of being in a whole new country, like a field of various different impressions and experiences. And when one day it's absolutely meaning this particular thing for me, it's not the kind of thing you can say. It means this. But there are certain suggestive qualities here. I could say, for example, that rolling, rolling, rolling under. Maybe also has to do with the kind of a kind of dance walk that goes very, very well with this song. We didn't do this in this performances this summer, which has analogs in in the Caribbean, Haiti and also in.... The shout, by the way, is not to call loudly Gullah culture. It's a particular dance walk. Mm hmm. So the so to roll under is also like it's like this dance walk prayer because you're literally rolling under with this movement. So maybe it's referring to that. I think probably is. I also think that it's also referring to the fact that the water goes underneath the earth and it comes back out again eventually right? Then with this with different springs. And it's from the springs that that we're able to drink the most nourishing water. So there is a powerful image in here, which is like we're dying and you're killing us for thinking about slavery. This

particular song is like the, for the Library of Congress it's the oldest slave song that's been found going back to the sixteen hundreds. I forget exactly the date, but it's like close to Jamestown. I mean, we're talking like that. [177.8s]

**Beth McGinnis** It's incredible.

**Lloyd Bricken** [00:52:20] Yeah. So. So the idea of like we're going to die. We're going down, but we're coming back. It's is connected to the water too is deeply connected to the water in many, many of these African, let's say African or African diasporic songs, Wade the Water to My Knees is another one that we were working with. Yeah. And many songs water has this has this metaphor of death, but also new life. [36.1s] All right. It's funny that those two go together like they do. Of course they do. I wanted to say also that like with Salloma's metaphor there, his speech there, that it that the that we the African music in created the poss... like held these nutrients. So but think about it for a minute. If we get those spiritual nutrients weren't carried in a certain vessel in this case, songs and traditions of singing and dancing and moving together and being together through song. And think about what we've been talking about with these older songs. They're like at the inner rhizome of what then became jazz, blues, all of this, right? Like. And then soul, gospel. All of these different traditions are really going back to one. But think about what might have been the alternative. You know, we're used to our very white definition of like looking at the 60s of like, where do you think that came from? The music that that allowed people to start becoming so-called conscious, conscious in the 60s, all these bodies starting to wake up and be like, oh, I'm a person, I'm not a little robot mind thing programed and acting this. No, no, no. I'm a, I'm a human being and I have choices to make. And I don't like what my government's doing, for example, so that this consciousness, this idea of a consciousness revolution, whether it happened or not in the 60s, I don't know. But I can say that there was a big change. Huge change. I mean, there's the civil rights movement in everything, too. Well, African-Americans gave our country. Everyone in this country the possibility for that. Everyone. They saved the soul of this country. Like we would probably, I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that we probably would have blown each other up in in this century if it weren't for being saved by the various people that but by the the culture that we are treating the worst in our country. So, I mean. Yeah. You know, and these days I've been reading *The Fire Next Time* by James Baldwin. And actually he writes about this quite specifically. He says like, you know, he's writing maybe you. Did you read it in Ta Nehisi Coates' book in this last year or so? Which is a little bit like tipping his hat to *The Fire Next Time* because *The Fire Next Time* is like, it's an epistolary novel. Yeah. Like he's writing to his young nephew. Yeah. He calls them he sort of perceived that he's writing to himself. Got to like. But he says exactly this. He says we are. We have to save them. We have to save them from themselves. This is what we've been doing and that's what we must keep doing.

**Beth McGinnis** Yeah.

**Lloyd Bricken** So. Yes, Salloma is very modest about it, and I think it is important to be to be modest about it, but it's also very important, too. I don't know. Yeah. To be outspoken about these matters and about what hasn't been told about this. These stories, you know. And I know that there's many things that I'm. No, don't. Don't get me wrong. I don't I'm not trying to position myself here as like as a as an expert. And I'm not on those questions. I'm one that is in process of investigating and researching and will continue. [00:57:20] But I do think that there is there's a deep there's a deep quality that you face in relation to this type of music, too, that it starts to kind of right the scales a little bit because it by its very nature,

they start to ask you to confront certain questions, the intimate questions, but then also social questions. Right? So, yeah. [22.8s]

**Beth McGinnis** [00:57:44]And there's this deep connection between intimate questions and the social question. Yes. Yes. [4.1s]

**Lloyd Bricken** [00:57:49]In. But then it's particularly in the Black church and in, that those things were never separated. [4.9s]

**Beth McGinnis** Right. Right. Yeah. We're the ones that try to separate. Yeah. Oh this is a good connection here. Let's see. This is Luciano talking. He says. I thought this was very generous of him to say this. For white people to sing these songs can be an awakening, not appropriation. I thought that was so generous of him to say that because he also had such poetic language, this richness, this diamond of the spirit. And then songs are sweet weapons or sharp weapons to open possibilities. And I wonder what your thoughts are on awakening versus appropriation. And yeah how you reconcile those.

**Lloyd Bricken** Yeah. And this is a, it's a very it's a very important question. And it's one that it's one that I will answer. I will I will probably answer in different ways as I go along in my experience. And I have two different people at different times because I don't think that there's just a catch all be all answer to this, because, you know, I can I can say, OK, this is appropriation and this is not. And we can try to define that. But exceptions are going to arise on one way on one side or the other. And I think that when certain things are being appropriated, not in the right spirit or something has an exploitive quality in one way or another, we must call it out and we must open up the conversation. And it's really there when I'm working with others and things like this, too, [00:59:46] obviously, I'm a white man. Like there's going to be some questions about who are you to be working with this material? It can and it has and it always will come up for me and my career. I what to say, yeah, what Lou said is really beautiful. It can be an awakening and doesn't have to be appropriation. I think that there should be a fundamental modesty around a lot of these matters. It's pretty evident to anyone. First of all, that we're not dealing in this particular case with pop songs. You know, we're not dealing with we are dealing with songs that have some. I don't know, weight behind them in a way. Right. There's this not that it's a heavy weight, but I'm saying like some gravity, some of this mystery around them, too. And the sense of. Something having been passed on for generations and generations and generations. Wow. You know, so. Oh, I mean clearly. Clearly, part of this is just like the reason we get into so much questions of appropriation is this there's not generally enough humility face to material that the people might be working on. And that's a. That's an essential element. It's absolutely an essential element. And a modesty about one's own capacity, isn't it? It's this kind of material, too. And I think in between those two things is another word which is hard to define, which is sincerity. We know it when we're like, but it's like you sense with sincerity. You know it when you see it only means like, okay, now this person is sincere in what he's doing with this work. Like we mentioned the subject about transparency, people becoming a little more transparent, that that's when, you know, I'm sincere if I'm I don't have anything to hide. So if but I put I'm putting that there to be tested. I want it to be tested. I don't. I don't. I'm very happy to have this conversation anytime that it comes up. I do think there's another, you know, on the one hand. So on the one hand, we're looking at something that's like this fundamental modesty and sincerity. But on the other hand, there is something in the nature of like what needs to be a genuine penetration into craft, into someone's craft, too, to like because the sincerity isn't just enough. You know, you could be really sincere and your work be bad. And if that's the case, then people will go, oh, you should not be doing this right. You know, and then I mean, this is

this is obviously the case with certain pop culture figures, things like this, too. But I don't want to go down that road right now. But it's. But with the idea of penetration in your craft, like how deeply have you learned how to do what it is that you're doing? How seriously have you taken this? Have you worked on this for years so that, you know in every detail what it is you're working on? Right. [216.3s] Like, I wouldn't I certainly wouldn't consider it consider myself like able to be able to lead something like this. If I hadn't spent so much time. But and I'll also but as I said before, too, it's not like I consider myself an expert or consider the work having been done. It's never done. That would be immodest of me and would contradict the other side. So I don't know if there's like a, if there's a there's not a blanket response to like what is appropriation and what is not. My I have I have a colleague who like did a singing who's like very much like me. He's from South America and is Latino, but was working on working on Afro Latino Caribbean songs with some young people in New Mexico recently. And some of them were Native American. And they had a really hard time with this work session. And some of them were crying and like didn't want to sing, didn't even really want to get started singing with them. And one of the things that they said was like, you know, you're going to try to take our songs, too. That's the last thing that you could take from us. And I don't think that was fair of my, towards my colleagues, but I understand that there's a lot of raw feeling out there. One thing that disappointed me about this experience was I was like, so you guys then had this painful conversation for how long? He was like, oh, about 50 minutes, something like this. I was like, did you sing after that? He was like, no. We never sang. And I was like, Oh, well, that's the real tragedy because, like, yes. Had the conversation. Yes. Delve into these things. Yes, please. Let's get everything out there. But sing together, please. We're still, we also live in a time where we've a little bit more than a little bit like fetishized things like singing, dancing. Mm hmm. You know, it's like only the people who are really good at that are have their nice videos on YouTube or whatever. Like should be singing and dancing, particularly in North America. You feel this way. But in other parts of the world, too, it's like, oh, no, no, I'm not a singer, I can't sing. Singing is like making your breakfast. Singing. And then dancing is like walking. Dancing is like, you know, brushing your teeth. I mean, it's we I the quality actually of hearing some in these old recordings is that you hear just how normal this is for everyone. They're not trying to like make something out of it. You know what I mean?

**Beth McGinnis** Yeah. Yeah.

**Lloyd Bricken** You feel that organicity of that normalcy in the recordings.

**Beth McGinnis** [01:06:34] I'm so glad that you said that personally because it blesses part of my experience in Marion. When you were doing the, that "If I Had My Way" song and Rita comes over and she's trying to get everybody involved and she says, OK, it's your turn and so everybody can make up your own version. What would you do if you had your way? And she's inviting people in. So the rest of the community there seemed so comfortable doing that. And I didn't, you know, I'm not a, not a singer. I don't consider my I can sing, but I really didn't consider myself the kind of singer in the rest of the room. And I'm not used to a call and response tradition in my own church. And so that it's a very diff ... I'm a church organist. And so it's a very different thing. You know, I play the organ for other people to sing. And, you know, so it's it was very much outside my own tradition. Although I had this beautiful experience while I was there and listening and recording and I was, you know, I guess I was there, first of all, as a researcher to find out about what you were doing. But it the experience turned into a very personal one for me. And so when she came and invited me to sing with her body language and I the thing that that came out of me, the response that came out of me was love. This is just this overwhelming experience

of love that this music brings. And, you know, my I didn't feel like my singing voice was a musical contribution to the experience, but I did feel that my experience was part of it.  
[127.6s]

**Lloyd Bricken** [01:08:42] Absolutely. [0.0s]

**Beth McGinnis** It was this response of love, which was really welcome. So thank you for the blessing of the normalcy of singing. Even if you're not a singer, you know capital S, right?

**Lloyd Bricken** Yeah. I have I have a book, a collection of these songs from Gees Bend. You know, there were there were moments that really helped me see some of this. I [01:09:09]mean, it's hard for us to imagine now because like I people used to sing much more like all the time as the way I imagined it. I mean, so many more different situations in life. You know, like we mentioned work songs and other things like this. But just around the house, like maybe not every culture, you know, maybe not everybody's family. But I just imagine being like that being something so, not only imagine, I mean you have a lot of evidence. This is something so much more normal if you go back a hundred years ago, you know, and before and all my travels now to again in various parts of the world where in certain rural places, yeah, these things are still kind of going and you see like where you don't you don't have to like you don't you don't you don't have to even poke very much. And somebody will just start the thug that these other people, as they're joining you, just like you kind of were just sort of like a little bit kind of like a wink, like, hey, would you do this? Or they just they'll go for it. And we don't have that. I don't know that that kind of it's such a beautiful quality. And it's like we're as human beings. We're like we just we're so, we're cruel in a way towards our own heritage and towards our own possibilities as human beings. Of course, in the music we're talking about here right now, all of this, all of his all of this is complicated by questions of race, because what happens this is a theory. But what happens when you when you when you denigrate these other people this much? Who is really suffering? Who really starts to suffer, who loses contact with who they are and with God. If we want to use a big word and with spirit and with their bodies. So it's not it's not it's not surprising that that. Yeah, that that's been that way, but that African-American music has. We need it like we need food or water [147.3s] to help us like restore the balance and to go back to what you were saying again there, too. You know, with like white like Luciano said, like this can be an awakening experience for white people. I hope so. And we are. I don't. I don't. I don't. I don't want to get into necessarily the loftiness of like let's heal, that it's a healing experience. That's not it's not my job. Let me put it that way. But I have seen incredible experiences of healing go on between different groups, different people in the course of these years of working with it with these songs. So like, I know many things that are possible. Yeah,

**Beth McGinnis** It strikes me that sometimes you're like the gourd that's carrying the water.

**Lloyd Bricken** Mm hmm. Mm hmm. A little bit like that. And that that that makes me think of something, which is the songs. What is that? It's you're in relationship with something then. It's like you're in you're in relationship with a song. It's like a song like that in the field of songs we're talking about. I don't know, maybe if I really, really, really loved you know, I don't say that it can't be possible with a pop song or something like that. Like I turned Hit Me, Baby One More Time by Britney Spears into like my spiritual ode of talking to God. It is. It is possible. It is possible. García Lorca. Federico García, look at the ...poet spoke at these lectures, the Duende lectures that he gave in Cuba in the last year or two before he died or was murdered, rather, I he spoke about like the most moving experience he ever

had. Of song in his life was a 12 year old girl walking through the streets of Madrid. And she was singing like a trashy Britney Spears like pop song of the day and just fully, absolutely and utterly transformed. And so it is it's not impossible that any material could ignite into something, something else. [01:14:28]But but these particular these particular songs, like I do view it as this this relationship. It's this this ongoing relationship. And like in any relationship, you have to give give yourself over and over and over again. If you if you want to if you want to receive, you got to be giving yourself over and over again. It's a there's a call and response between you and the songs. So you are, you're carrying them as long as you are working effectively to serve something there. [40.0s] Does that make sense?

**Beth McGinnis** Yeah

**Lloyd Bricken** Yeah, yeah, yeah. Like I do have, I do, I do. I couldn't, I couldn't and I want like turn you know, I wouldn't like create a record or something like this where I like turn this kind of material into like OK Lloyd Bricken and band go and perform songs. It would just get can't work like that. You know, they are for something else.

**Beth McGinnis** You've given me so much today. Is there anything that I haven't asked that you wish I had or anything else that you would wanted to say that you haven't had a chance to?

**Lloyd Bricken** Oh. No, I don't feel like that right now, I'm sure. I'm sure we can have. I'm sure it will. I hope it will be the first of several conversations.

**Beth McGinnis** Yeah, I do too, because I think this is just such a big thing. And I think that we can we can only skim the surface, but I'd love to have opportunities to go a little deeper. Okay. Yeah.

**Lloyd Bricken** Let's do it.

**Beth McGinnis** Yeah. Let's do it. Thank you so much.

**Lloyd Bricken** Yes, my pleasure. Thank you.