

Trailer: “Deep Roots”

Music clip: “Swing Low,” spiritual performed by Crossroads community gathering, Back When Photo Gallery, Marion, Alabama, 31 July 2019

Beth McGinnis: I’m Beth McGinnis, and for years I’ve been captivated by the rich sounds and stories of my home state. I’ve decided it’s time to start sharing them. In “Hear in Alabama,” you’ll hear the voices and music of the remarkable and resilient Alabamians I know and love.

I teach musicology at Samford University. Samford is in Birmingham, but it started as Howard College in Marion. Marion is the county seat of Perry County, Alabama. If you drive southwest from Birmingham towards Tuscaloosa and then bend back east towards Montgomery, you can get to Perry County. I’ve been making that drive for a number of years now, going to hear the music and stories of the people there. It’s gotten to where my pulse slows down, my breathing settles, and my shoulders relax after I get off the interstate and onto Highway 5. I’ve found incredible richness in Perry County. Rich music, rich community, rich human spirit. Every time I go back, I know those riches will nourish me again.

In the summer of 2019 I crossed paths in Marion with a group of musicians from Alabama and Brazil. You’ll hear about this group and their music in the first two episodes. One of the group members, Salloma, told us how after the Civil War many Southerners left the United States to escape Yankee domination. Most of them went to Brazil, where slavery was still legal. The enslaved Africans they brought with them endured the same kinds of racism and cruelty that happened in the American South, including Perry County. How did they survive? Salloma’s answer to this question resonates deep in my bones. He said they survived because they carried “spiritual nutrients” in their old, vernacular music traditions. Their songs nourished them and bore them.

Salloma Jovino Sallomão and Crossroads group: “Spiritual nutrients”

For a couple years I’ve been taking my Samford students to Perry County to work alongside the people there. We’ve seen how the old music traditions have evolved and

how they still carry and nourish communities. For me this has felt like a homecoming. I grew up in Livingston, not far from Perry County, and the people I've met in my capacity as a musicology professor have taken me back to my childhood. I don't think you have to have grown up in Alabama to experience the power of this music, though. The people I've interviewed definitely know what I mean.

I think you'll hear it, too. I think you'll respond, as I have, to the spiritual nourishment this music provides. I think you'll find a deep rootedness, a groundedness, a solid sense of place in these old music traditions. All that is here.

Join me to find out the amazing, surprising, life-giving things we hear, here in Alabama.

Music clip: "Swing Low" reprise