

Episode 2: “Spiritual Nutrients”

Music clip: “Give Me the Gourd,” The Great Crossroads Project, Marion, Alabama, 16 July 2019

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

In our last episode, I spoke with Birmingham-based scholar, actor, and musician Lloyd Bricken, co-director of The Great Crossroads Project. Crossroads is a team of poets and performers who explore African diasporic songs and poetry from Alabama and Brazil. Lloyd had partnered with a Brazilian scholar and musician, Luciano Mendes de Jesus, and together Luciano and Lloyd created a new performance art out of mutually resonant traditions of African origin. As they combined these traditions they found not only musical resonances but also spiritual ones. I asked Lloyd about this.

Lloyd Bricken: I'm not scared of the word spiritual. Sometimes the word spiritual can be 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 want to be, like to be connected in a certain way. Right?

Beth: Lloyd and Luciano have found that the old vernacular music traditions they study can facilitate human connection in a profound way. Luciano’s specialty is an Afro-Brazilian genre called *vissungos*, and Lloyd’s research has been in Black spirituals, shouts, and other “southern songs” from the southeastern United States. Both of these traditions stem from African roots, and both frequently use call-and-response structure, a kind of musical dialogue between a leader and group.

Music clip: Rita Teles and Crossroads group, Marion, Alabama, 16 July 2019

Beth: This structural resonance is one thing that led Lloyd and Luciano to combine the *vissungos* and southern songs, and to perform them in communities where the music is still alive. In 2018 they performed in Brazil, and then in 2019 they came to Alabama. They started in Perry County, where a number of churches have a vibrant call-and-response worship style. When the Crossroads group performed in Marion, the community immediately joined in with the call-and-response style. For Lloyd, this response had a relational and even spiritual element to it.

Music clip: "Ain't that Good News," Community response, Marion, Alabama, 16 July 2019

Lloyd: 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 can really start to call something else. And if you start to call something else, well, be prepared for that to answer you. [Laughter] That's kind-of, yeah. That's sort of like what happens. And so unexpected things do happen, and it's your responsibility to deal with them when they do.

Beth: The call, and the response, right? Ability, responsibility.

Lloyd: Responsibility.

Beth: Right.

Lloyd: Yeah. Very good word.

Beth: 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.

Music clip: "If I Had My Way," Crossroads, Marion, Alabama, 16 July 2019

Beth: And they did. Tell me what that experience was like for you.

Lloyd: Like, I think you must understand how long I've wanted to do that. 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. Maybe that's not right to put them mixed in with each other...but, it just works.

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 what I mean, the uncanny quality of like, I know this, but I don't know this. But some of these folks in Marion, you know, they just get it immediately. And then it is their participation is so immediate and beautiful and evident in its care and. Tenderness. You know, so yeah. So that but I just felt so good to me.

Beth: One of the Crossroads group members is Salloma, a scholar and professor of Afro-Brazilian music. The Crossroads group had a community conversation at East

Village Arts in Birmingham after one of their performances there, and during this conversation Salloma had gotten to the heart of the uncanny connection between these songs. Luciano is translating.

Salloma Jovino Sallomão and Luciano Mendes de Jesus: The African descendants are full human beings. These people don't become something different from human beings. Being human beings, they continually have dreams, wishes, desires, and feelings. The African descendants that built the material richness of this nation and built the material richness of the contemporary world just were capable of surviving the violence of slavery, of racism, because they carried a lot of nutrients--spiritual nutrients.

Beth: Spiritual nutrients. I love that. And you connected, in that conversation. You connected it to the song "Give Me the Gourd to Drink Water." Could you elaborate on that connection a little bit?

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

Lloyd: So this idea of the water. I think the water being used as a metaphor for the spiritual nourishment. So, yeah, with the gourd. Give me a 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 have, like, fifteen words. But it's almost as if I could sing them and for months and months and months feel like I'm in a whole country, like the richness of being in a whole country or field. Like it's an experience, and one day it's meaning this particular kind of thing for me. It's not the kind of thing where 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 a kind of dance walk that goes very well with this song (we didn't do this in the performances this summer), which has analogs in the Caribbean, and Haiti. The shout, by the way, is not to call loudly in the Gullah culture. It's a particular dance walk. So to roll under is also like this dance, walk, prayer, because you're rolling under with this movement. Maybe it's referring to that. I think it 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? With different springs. And it's from the springs 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.

So the idea of like we're we're going to die. We're going down, but we're coming back. It's 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. In many songs water has this metaphor of death, but also new life.

Music clip: "Wade the Water to My Knees," Rita Teles and Crossroads, Marion, Alabama, 16 July 2019

Lloyd: 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.

Beth: And there's this deep connection between intimate questions and the social questions.

Lloyd: Yes. Yes. And it's particularly in the black church that that those things were never separated.

Music clip: "He's All Over Me," Brenda Heard and Provewell Baptist Church choir, Sprott, Alabama, 10 March 2019

Lloyd: Obviously, I'm a white man. Like there's gonna 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 in my career. Yeah, what [Luciano] said is really beautiful: it *can* be an awakening; it 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. 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.

Beth: I heard in my conversations with Lloyd a great sense of responsibility as he sought to investigate and honor traditions that were not his own. He spoke about the importance of sincerity.

Lloyd: That's when you know I'm sincere. If I'm, I don't have anything to hide. So I'm putting that there to be tested. I want it to be tested. I'm very happy to have this conversation any time that it comes up. 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 can be really sincere and your work be bad. And if that's the case, then people will go uh-uh, you should not be doing this. Right? You know? 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?

Beth: At the same time Lloyd stressed the importance of being deeply committed to craft, he also pointed out that these old traditions are for everyone, and they're meant to be part of daily life. In some ways, Lloyd's concerns mirror my own. I approach this project with a sense of deep respect as I come to know a living tradition, and I'm very interested both as a researcher and as a person. In fact, the project got very personal for me in Marion. I told Lloyd about my experience.

Beth: I'm so glad that you said that personally because it blesses part of my experience in Marion. When you were doing the "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?

Music clip: "If I Had My Way," Crossroads, Marion, Alabama, 16 July 2019

Beth: So the rest of the community there seemed so comfortable doing that. And I really didn't consider myself the kind of singer in the rest of the room. And I really didn't consider myself the kind of singer in the rest of the room. And and 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. 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. When she came and invited me to sing with her body language, the thing that came out of me, the response that came out of me was love. There 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.

Music clip: "If I Had My Way," Crossroads and Beth McGinnis, Marion, Alabama, 16 July 2019

Lloyd: Yeah. It's hard for us to imagine now because like, 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. 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. We need it like we need food or water.

Beth: I've certainly felt that need myself. I set out to learn more about this music and not necessarily to be changed, but I've found myself spiritually nourished and changed by the music and the people who carry it from one generation to another. I told Lloyd I felt like he and his friends were the gourd carrying the water.

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

Lloyd: But these particular songs, I do view it as this relationship, it's this ongoing relationship. And like in any relationship, you have to give yourself over and over and over again. 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.

Music clip: "Give Me the Gourd," Crossroads, Marion, Alabama, 16 July 2019

Beth: Serving something larger than ourselves is a theme I hear again and again from the people I've interviewed here in Alabama. I think it's a key to those spiritual nutrients we find in these old traditional songs. Another place I've found spiritual nutrients is at Provewell Baptist Church in Sprott, Alabama. You've already heard some of their music, and we'll hear more from them in the next episode.

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

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

Crossroads group: Introductions

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

The church choir is from Provewell Baptist Church in Sprott, Alabama, and the soloists are Brenda Heard and Dr. Pilar Murphy. You can hear more about Provewell in the next episode.

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