

Episode 4: Perry County Bands

“Music breaks the human down to the simplest form.”

Music Clip: Black Belt United Mass Band, Samford University, Birmingham, Alabama, 21 March 2019

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

In the last three episodes I've told you about musical cultures I've encountered in 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. 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.

By some measures, though, Perry County is one of the most impoverished counties in the country. The poverty rate there in 2017 was almost 42%, compared to a national average of about 13%. Both of the public schools have qualified for the Community Eligibility Provision of the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs, so both breakfast and lunch are served to all enrolled students free of charge.

In the midst of this economic struggle there are community leaders working day in and day out to improve the quality of life of Perry County's residents. In the last episode you heard from two of these leaders, Mrs. Frances Ford and Dr. Pilar Murphy. The public schools have their own share of dynamic leaders, too, and one of their initiatives is a small but thriving band education program. In the minds of these Perry County educators, band education is not just about musical culture; it's about character formation.

Part of my own teaching is to help my students at Samford University connect to the musical culture in our home state. That's what led us to Perry County, where Samford actually began as Howard College in Marion, the county seat. A couple years ago, my students and I started a partnership with the two public school bands in Perry County. Francis Marion School is in Marion, and Robert C. Hatch is in Uniontown about twenty miles away. Both schools are K-through-12 now; they've consolidated with the younger grades because the communities have been losing residents.

One way to understand the story of both decline and hope in these schools is through the sojourn of one of their principals, Dr. Cathy Trimble. Dr. Trimble grew up in Marion, and in what she sees as an irony of ironies, she returned later in her life as principal of the school she had attended, Francis Marion. In the spring of 2018 my Samford students interviewed Dr. Trimble, and she told us how much has changed in her community.

Cathy Trimble: Probably at the time when I was here there was a lot of diversity among the staff and the student body as well. I went off to college and when I came back--I didn't try to come back; I got married in college and my husband got the job. And he was a football player. So that's how I got back here. And at the time things were still a lot like it was, very, very, very diverse. But then in 1987 Marion City Schools had to dissolve.

Beth: In 1987 the City of Marion adopted a resolution that transferred control of the public schools from the Perry County Board of Education to the newly created Marion Board of Education. The county was 65 percent African American then, and Marion city was 52 percent white. Before the resolution, school board members were elected, but afterwards they were appointed. This spelled the beginning of the end for diversity and integration in Perry County public schools. Now in 2020, these schools are 99% African American, compared with 33% in the state of Alabama.

Cathy Trimble: And at that time we had white flight and the private school started. And so we lost practically all of our--I guess we're not so diverse now. I guess it's a nice way to put it. So it has changed tremendously. And of course when we had a drastic change like that, we--a lot of things changed. The culture changed, the perception of the school changed, a whole lot of things changed.

There is no industry here in our town. So what our parents do is, a lot of our parents go work at Mercedes, or maybe in Montgomery with Hyundai or something like that. And initially they would allow their students to stay, and they would commute. And then the year when the gas prices went crazy? And that's the year it started where we lost a lot of students. Then our academics, I mean we nosedived from where we were to like rock bottom, and so we were on that famous failing school list. Which we're no longer there now, I might add.

Beth: It's a challenge for Dr. Trimble to attract talented teachers to her school. Younger adults struggle to create a life for themselves in this rural community.

Cathy Trimble: So we've got some awesome teachers to come through, but you know, it's just hard to keep somebody here in Marion when there's nothing to do.

Beth: Because Francis Marion School lacks diversity and is isolated in rural Alabama, Dr. Trimble says her students don't know a lot about the outside world. She told us about a time when University of Alabama students visited Francis Marion.

Cathy Trimble: There were some guys working with, I think it was the fourth-grade class, and one of our students was like, you know, "Can I touch your hair?" You know, "I've never touched a white person's hair." Because they've never been exposed.

Beth: One good way for students to gain that exposure is through music education and partnerships.

Music Clip: Warmups, Black Belt United Mass Band, Samford University, Birmingham, Alabama, 21 March 2019

Beth: Dr. Trimble works constantly with her school's band director, Mr. Tony DeVaughn, to provide a comprehensive music education program for the students of Francis Marion School. Twenty miles down the road in Uniontown, at Robert C. Hatch School, Mr. Issac Lanier was the band director for a couple of years. In the summer of 2019 Mr. Lanier moved to Memphis to pursue further education, but while he was in Uniontown he worked diligently to rebuild the band program, which had been languishing. Mr. DeVaughn and Mr. Lanier had been classmates at Alabama State University several years before they both began working in Perry County.

In 2019 Mr. DeVaughn and Mr. Lanier gathered their students together with other players from the area to form the Black Belt United Mass Band, and they rehearsed together several times before visiting Samford in March. During their visit, Samford band students joined them for rehearsals and a concert led by Mr. Lanier and Mr. DeVaughn.

We also sat down for an interview, where we were joined by two Samford students, Sarah Harbaugh and Samuel Robertson, and a Teach for America teacher, Nolan Crawley. You can hear in the voices of these band directors the rivalry, the collegiality, and most of all the friendship between them. Here's Issac Lanier.

Issac Lanier: We started in the band together at Alabama State University. His name is Tony DeVaughn, one of the best trombone players I know personally. And it's just crazy that we kind of started school together and we kind of finished around the same time and we got placed in a county where there are only two high schools, so it's just like me versus him you know. So it's competitive and it's fun and all in the same sense because we still have to help each other because we're all we've got.

Beth: Healthy competition has always been part of the friendship between Mr. Lanier and Mr. DeVaughn. We asked the band directors how they got into this line of work, and we learned that some of their competitive spirit may have come from athletic experience.

Tony DeVaughn: I was an athlete at first.

Beth: That's Tony DeVaughn.

Tony DeVaughn: But at this age I'm six foot three, two hundred fifty pounds. I've always been a big guy but I've always loved music. I've always been in a band program even though I played sports. I kind of got looked down by my coaches from doing sports. They used to call me Big Flute out on the basketball court "What you doing Big Flute? I love the music. It was my first go to and after a while I kind of left sports alone and did, put all my eggs in one basket with the music. And it worked out for me.

Beth: Issac Lanier had a different experience growing up in New York.

Issac Lanier: I think with me not being from the south, band was kind of the last stop. I played basketball, I played football in New York, you know stuff was a lot different. I actually did boxing or wrestling, you know that's way bigger than basketball and football, you know that's phenomenal up there. And so when I moved down and relocated to the south, I actually saw someone that I just couldn't take my eyes off and she happened to be in a band. And I asked her, I said "whatchu play?" and she said "I play baritone," and I said "oh, well," *knocks on table* "I'm in!" The next morning I said "you guys want me in band?" He said "yeah." So guess I kind of just stuck with it.

Beth: Issac Lanier moved to Alabama for middle school, and he was blown away by the difference in marching band culture.

Issac Lanier: When I first got here, you know I was a kid from New York. You know I thought I was a little bit better than everybody you know, knew more. Go to a football game, I'm like wow, it's halftime, let's go to a concession stand. They're like no, no, no, no, the band is about to start. I'm like, so? They're like, Dude, do you know where you at? Just stay right here. You'll see why nobody's moving. And that was my first time seeing a halftime show, by Selma High School, it was in about 2004. I was in middle school. I'll never forget it.

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Issac Lanier: When I first joined the band and came to the south, I think *Drumline* was just coming out. So you know. Half times you know that wasn't the time to go get your hotdog, you go get that within the last two minutes of playing because once the halftime show you know nobody's moving and all. That was weird to me. So. I knew there was something special about it. I just couldn't wrap my finger around it.

Tony DeVaughn: You brought up the movie Drumline, Drumline played such a huge role in our era of musicians becoming musicians. That movie came out in like 2001, 2002. We would have been in the fourth and fifth grade. That's the start of, you know when you would start to learn the instrument. I joined the band after watching that movie not to mention I had a band members all throughout my family but after watching that movie,

Issac Lanier: Immediately after,

Tony DeVaughn: It made a lot of our era want to join the band.

Issac Lanier: Everybody wanted to play the drums, everybody wanted to be in the band you know, everybody wanted to face off. Have that competition so yeah.

Tony DeVaughn: I credit that movie a lot for you know just the,

Issac Lanier: definitely an epidemic

Tony DeVaughn: for the up-come of musicians.

Beth: Now I'm going to have to go watch the movie *Drumline*.

Issac Lanier: Most definitely. If you see me in *Drumline 2*, just shoot me a text message.

Beth: Ok haha.

Perry County is rural and remote, with poverty and unemployment rates that consistently rank among the highest in the country. This of course affects arts education. When I first visited these two public school bands with my Samford students, we noticed bass drum heads that were ripped, cymbals with broken edges, and brass instruments that were old and in disrepair.

The band directors told us how their students juggle school, extra-curricular activities, and family responsibilities. In small schools such as these, students are involved in multiple activities. One student might be in band, athletics, student government, and a study group, and more often than not they have to fit all the activities in during the regular school day instead of after school. Sometimes even getting to and from school is a hurdle.

Cathy Trimble: I think we would have more students involved in anything that we offer. But our students ride the bus. They have no transportation. We try to offer as much as we can. But it is a transportation issue.

Beth: Samuel Robertson is one of the Samford students who interviewed Mr. Lanier and Mr. DeVaughn. Samuel asked the band directors about the bus situation.

Samuel Robertson: Do you have the school buses running over the summer? Like I feel like it would be much harder to get them there.

Tony DeVaughn: It would be almost impossible. Almost impossible to let the buses run over the summer.

Issac Lanier: And you have other casualties that you just can't even account for such as car troubles or emergencies parents being at work anything.

Tony DeVaughn: Siblings having to take care of a sibling, you name it. They live responsible, well they have to be responsible once they leave school. Like live very grown lives once they leave school.

Beth: But federal poverty statistics, transportation issues, and band instrument inventories are poor measures of the cultural and spiritual richness in these communities, and the hope these dynamic educators represent. Mr. DeVaughn and Mr. Lanier have spearheaded multiple fundraising campaigns for new instruments and uniforms. They have invested their own time, energy, and money in renovating the band rooms. They have personally donated instruments.

Issac Lanier: And before we go on I have to make sure I say our principals and our superintendent is a major support because a lot of school systems, they don't have the proper support for whatever reason.

Beth: The principal at Robert C. Hatch School in Uniontown, where Issac Lanier taught, is Dr. Leslie Ford. The Perry County School Superintendent who worked with Mr. Lanier is Dr. John Heard. He has now retired, and the new superintendent is Dr. Marcia Smiley.

Issac Lanier: So it's a blessing when you can just call your superintendent and say "hey, we're trying to build a band. You know we want to make a better program. You know, can you get us these horns?" And he said "go get 'em." You don't, you don't get that often. And I mean these are sousaphones we're talking about, brass instruments that cost \$6000 apiece, and so we're blessed to have that as well.

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Beth: A band the size of Hatch typically would have at least two of those sousaphones Mr. Lanier mentioned. Perry County schools also have technology resources: in 2014 the county received an Apple Grant through the White House ConnectEd initiative. During the 2020 COVID-19 outbreak, the school district worked to convert school buses into mobile hotspots so students could use their iPads to log on and do schoolwork.

Tony DeVaughn: Every student has an iPad, every student, every teacher has a MacBook, Apple TV.

Beth: For Dr. Trimble, the Apple Grant is just part of a much larger enterprise. She wants to expose her students to the wider world.

Cathy Trimble: And one thing I wanted to do is to change the culture of our school. And I wanted our students to experience what I experienced as a child. Although the diversity is out here in the population, there's a lot you can be exposed to, there's a lot that you can learn outside of what you go home and see every single day. So we've really been working on that. And the students have been responding extremely well. I do appreciate that much.

So we're looking and we're bouncing back. And I just see it as a major rebound. Our students, the number of students going to college, I think, within the last two years, at least 79 percent of our students go to college. We really emphasize that. Our graduation rate is over 90 percent, and they're not just going unless they can't afford it. They're staying and they're graduating.

Beth: Issac Lanier and Tony DeVaughn agree there's a lot to celebrate in Perry County.

Issac Lanier: Both of the basketball teams are area champs, returning area champs, let me say that. So yeah, Perry County has a lot of positive things going on in Perry County, despite what people are saying.

Tony DeVaughn: Best kept secret.

Beth: One thing that impressed me the most about the Perry County Band Partnership was the collaboration between these schools, which have traditionally been fierce rivals. Earlier that year Mr. Lanier had told me about the rivalry--*and* the collaboration--both of which are reinforced in a positive way by the friendship between Mr. Lanier and Mr. DeVaughn. When they are competing against each other, the focus is on the rivalry:

Issac Lanier: Once the uniform goes on we're no longer friends.

Beth: But they also switch into a collaborative mode to perform together. They sound a little like siblings who might argue amongst themselves, but nevertheless always have each other's backs.

Issac Lanier: Yeah we're rivals, but It's Perry County against everybody else at the same time.

Isaac Lanier: Well we don't really have to talk about the competitive part because I think that's inbred within the county you know like we're kind of just inherited,

Tony DeVaughn: to the area.

Issac Lanier: Yeah, we just inherited the rivalry. You know 'cause we were brothers long before you know we didn't like we planned this is just maybe a God idea. But to balance it off, I think we all just put our best foot forward and make sure we're all teaching our kids important values such as sportsmanship, leadership, musicianship, and academic attainment.

Beth: I spoke with a Francis Marion graduate who wanted me to understand how very intense the rivalry between these two schools and even communities is. This rivalry makes the Perry County Band Partnership all the more impressive. These band directors know the students are watching and mirroring their directors' behavior. This is Tony DeVaughan here:

Tony DeVaughn: I feel like when they see us connect, it makes them want to connect too. If they saw us put on and be negative towards each other it'll make them be negative towards each other. Once they see us vibe and be positive and don't throw shade they have a better vibe between each other. They want to learn from each other's way.

Beth: The way Mr. DeVaughn and Mr. Lanier talk about their bands is the way people talk about family, and these bands and band directors *are* like family to one another. Dr. Trimble also sounded like family when she spoke about her own caretaking role.

Cathy Trimble: This is when I knew that I'm where I'm supposed to be and doing what I'm supposed to be doing. Our students have to walk on the right side of the hall, up and down the hall. And I would give them one tile length. That's as wide as they could get. They can't walk outside the tile. So I would stand in the hallway every morning and our children would come in for breakfast, and they would be walking in line. And then it started. And students would come in and say can I talk to you? And I said yes and I would listen, and their stories were heartbreaking. And this happened more times than I realized. You know, that I was more compassionate than I thought I was. And I started listening and then they found someone that they can trust and talk to. And I found someone that I could listen to. And it has made a big difference.

Beth: These stories demonstrate a constant tension between deep scarcity and amazing resilience. Mr. Nolan Crawley is the Teach for America teacher who came to Samford with the bands. Mr. Crawley put his finger on this tension.

Nolan Crawley: Like you always hear about like rural test scores and how low they are. My students benchmark on ACT growth in the 9th grade. Like they, if you put in the work they can produce the results that you need. Something I can also attest to is a sense of community down here in the south that just doesn't exist up north. And I think if you give especially somebody these like kids who just lack the resources to express themselves artistically in a way that they can't because they just lack the resources, beautiful things will happen.

Issac Lanier: I don't think I could've said it no better. Now you see why we get along.

Beth: These educators assume personal responsibility for creating a comprehensive arts education program in their schools. Tony DeVaughn has taught Music Appreciation and Music Theater classes in addition to directing the band.

Tony DeVaughn: At Francis, I am the only, the only fine art in the school so without coming to my class, without coming to see me for at least band or music theater which is my other class that I teach, you won't have a fine art credit to graduate. There's no choir, no strings, no visual art.

Issac Lanier: We are the music in fine arts in Perry County to say, to be honest

Tony DeVaughn: I was teaching music appreciation where I had a curriculum book but now I teach music theater and it's new to me, it's a new curriculum. Being a band director, it was kind of, you know outside my comfort zone. But I kinda teach it as a sort of a movie quiz class. Where I have Broadway movies that I show them that I loved as a child and break it down, interpret it to them, the dialogues, the songs, you name it and we test out on. We just did a *Phantom of the Opera* vs *Phantom*

of the Opera comparison, there's so many different versions of that movie. We've done the *Wizard of Oz* versus *The Wiz*, we've done the Temptations versus the Five Heartbeats.

Issac Lanier: Oh that's a good one.

Tony DeVaughn: And right now we're on *Dreamgirls* studying the 1982 *Dreamgirls* versus the 2006 with Beyonce and Jennifer Hudson and Eddie Murphy, all those other characters.

Issac Lanier: I think with my extra one, I do music technology. I know a lot of kids, they talk about they want to rap, they want to sing, they want to do this ok well let's show you how to properly do it. Do you know what a hook is? Do you know what a chorus is, do you know what an ad lib is, let's talk about percussion kids. You know this really get down to the technicality of it instead of you saying "I made a beat, I like the way it sounds." Let's talk about the tempo, wavelength, frequency, you know different stuff like that. I actually have a playlist where two semesters straight where they've made like an album you know. So this is let's say we make do with what we have.

Beth: Mr. Lanier and Mr. DeVaughn more than "make do." The community they build is like family, and just like family, they make character development the central core of their curriculum.

Issac Lanier: If you're in the community and you're doing something positive for their children doing something right, keeping them out of trouble, being a great example, the people will rally together and do whatever they need to do to make it happen for those kids. That's what I love about Uniontown.

If you can matriculate through my band program--and I have very strict rules--if you can matriculate through the band program you'll be an excellent adult, because A, you'll know how to talk to people. You'll know there's a certain time and place to do and say certain things and certain things that won't be allowed. And that's not acceptable. And you have to have discipline ... Just like I tell them and my students, regular students, band students, all: I'm just teaching you how to think. Not what to think, how to think and how to be able to matriculate through life.

You know, I'll say, everyone that's in the band don't get out and be band directors. Some people take and graduate and go own restaurants. I know somebody that graduated now and they own branches of Chick-fil-A. Some people have clothing lines. Some people have media teams, different things like that. Everybody doesn't graduate and be a band director. I just want you to be a great person, so you can be able to appreciate stuff and know what it takes to earn and work hard and deserve something and enjoy yourself in life.

Music breaks the human down to the simplest form. I mean music doesn't have a color, it doesn't have an identity, it doesn't have a race, it doesn't have a gender. It's for everybody.

I feel like once they get that feeling they'll eternally--not essentially--eternally be on the right path.

Beth: What my students and I have found in Perry County is a vibrant and fascinating musical tradition. But more than that, we are seeing in these schools how music can instill character, discipline, healthy competition, and an abiding commitment to a group. This deep commitment can go by another name--love.

I hear love in the way these teachers talk about their students, love in the way they relate to one another, love in the way they elevate their communities through music. Again and again, love is what I hear in Alabama.

I hear it back in my home city of Birmingham, too. In Season 2 I'll talk with some of the musicians I know there: my friend Walker Burroughs, who was a finalist on *American Idol*; the world-renowned euphonium player Dr. Demondrae Thurman; and members of a brass band called the Mutton Chops. I hope you'll join me then.

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

You heard the Black Belt United Mass Band, directed by Tony DeVaughn and Issac Lanier and recorded in March 2019 on the campus of Samford University.

Our entire interviews with Dr. Cathy Trimble, Mr. Tony DeVaughn, and Mr. Issac Lanier are available on my website, hearinalabama.com. That's "h-e-a-r in alabama dot com."

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