

JOURNAL



Anthony Lewis

Fall 2023
Volume 13

KOGER CENTER
FOR THE ARTS
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA

“THE ROOM WHERE IT HAPPENS”

David Sedaris



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American Patchwork Quartet



Desi Banks - The Purpose Chase Tour



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COVER / ANTHONY LEWIS



ON THE COVER

“Biggie” by Anthony Lewis

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THE JASPER MAGAZINE IS

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Jasper// as in Johns, the abstract expressionist, neo-Dadaist artist as in Sergeant, the Revolutionary War hero as in Mineral, the spotted or speckled stone as in Magazine, the Word on Columbia Arts

FALL 2023 / VOLUME 013

Dear Friends,

It’s always a joy when it comes time to write this little missive to you that we call *A Message from Jasper*. While no, I am not Jasper, I do get to be a part of the Jasper engine, or team, or family—there’s no limit to the metaphorical terms we use as we try to represent this body of individuals who make up our tribe.

We are: the Jasper Project board of directors, the Jasper Magazine staff and contributors, the interns, our readers, our sponsors, the artists whose work we share in the pages of Jasper and also on the walls of the gracious institutions who have allowed us to hang art there, the institutions themselves, the theatre artists and community producers and sponsors who participate in the Play Right Series, the Second Act Film Project filmmakers, the Fall Lines literary artists, the Jasper Guild members, the artists who collaborate with Jasper on one-off projects like *Frightmare on Main Street*, the institutions that work with us on other unique projects like the SC Philharmonic (April 2024) the poets of the people who share their work weekly with poetry guru Al Black and those writers of poetry and prose who share their work with Ed Madden in our online project, *Jasper Writes*. We are a large and diverse pack of artists and arts lovers who have hitched our wagons to one another’s stars and are enjoying and weathering this ride together.

I am particularly proud of this issue of Jasper Magazine. This issue brings you stories on visual artists Malik Greene, Anthony Lewis, Benji Hicks, whose block printing introduced me to components of Japanese art I wasn’t aware of, and Jean Lomasto who, in her former life as a costume designer created works on the Alvin Ailey Ballet. We have pieces on Lonetta Thompson, winner of the 2023 Play Right Series and two of her contemporaries, Marilyn Matheus and Ric Edwards; articles about Black Nerd Mafia, Opus and the Frequencies, TiffanyJ, and a bit of a travelogue documenting Brandy and the Butcher’s trip to the UK for concerts there. There are pieces on Jason Kendall’s new film project, poetry, book reviews, album reviews, a special piece on the new Ernest A. Finney Jr. Cultural Arts Center,

written in part by SC treasure, the poet Nikky Finney. And there is, of course, always more.

Please enjoy your foray into this humble piece of art that we call Jasper. By holding it in your hands, you have become a part of Jasper, too. And you are very welcome here.

Take care,

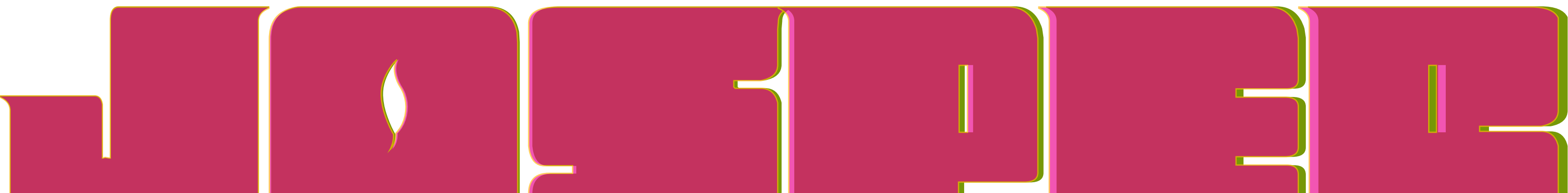


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The Jasper Guild is a group of supporting artists and arts lovers who appreciate not only the vital Columbia, SC arts scene, but the magazine devoted to promoting it. Members of the Jasper Guild recognize the labor of love that is Jasper and work to do their parts to ensure that Jasper continues to publish a 100% LOCAL & artist-produced magazine. You're invited to join us in our mission to make Columbia, SC the Southeast arts capitol by becoming a member of the Jasper Guild. And the next time you open a copy of Jasper you'll be able to say, "I helped make this happen and here's my name to prove it."

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Cause for Gratitude

Story by Jon Tuttle
Photography courtesy of Jasper

Jasper is, as you already know, the collective name for seventeen varieties of quartz, some of which are said to have magical properties, like driving away evil or to aligning chakras. Poppy Jasper, for instance, is reputed to bring joy into one's life.

And here we find an apt metaphor for today's sermon. Yes, I am come to preach, but not to those who need convincing. For reasons to be explained at the very end (please don't skip ahead), today I intend to address the choir. You are the choir.

In the beginning, meaning about 2011, Jasper was but a magazine very much like the glossy, colorful issue you're holding now, but in the fullness of time Jasper the magazine begat Jasper the Project, a sprawling, vibrant enterprise that advocates for South Carolina artists of every kind—visual, kinetic, literary, textile, tactile, traditional, anarchical, decorous, sublime, and profane. You know all this.

You know that The Jasper Project begat the Jasper Blogs, an online buffet of things to do and see and eat and think about, which begat Jasper Online, which begat Fall Lines,

an annual literary journal offering not just publication, but prize money, which authors really appreciate. And Fall Lines begat the 2nd Act Film Festival, which also offers prize money, which filmmakers also appreciate, which begat Jasper Writes, a virtual venue for unpublished work by South Carolina writers, which begat the Lizelia August Jenkins Moorer Poetry Chapbook Prize for the state's BIPOC poets, which begat the Combahee River Award for BIPOC writers of prose and poetry.

Some of these begats may be out of order, but the point here is that Jasper is also, as you know, a multifoliate helleborus perennial with snowy white flowers and green petioles that grows like crazy in favorable light, which is also an apt metaphor, because that's what Jasper has done.

Behold it's highly-evolved sense of occasion, for instance 2015's Art From the Ashes, a sesquicentennial commemoration of the burning of Columbia by General Sherman, which the next year begat Marked By the Water on the first anniversary of South Carolina's Thousand Year Flood, which begat Syzygy, a weekend of locally sourced plays as well as a poetry invitational celebrating the solar

at a triangular table still touring the state. Among those celebrated are educator and civil rights activist Mary McCleod Bethune, actor/playwright Alice Childress, athlete Althea Gibson, and the abolitionist Grimke sisters, Angelina and Sarah.

Attendant to the installation, and frequently touring with it, are several other components: a series of portraits of the women at the table; a play, *A Seat at the Table*, which summons these women for conversation; a series of twelve looped short films, each a kind of poetic documentary; a stunning studio book, *Setting the Supper Table*; and a mounted collection of 120 handmade/decorated tiles called "An Array of Remarkable South Carolina Women," each celebrating a different woman, from Elizabeth Boatwright Coker and Dori Sanders to Kay Thigpen and Viola Davis.

Having read this far—having made it, indeed, to this very sentence—you are now sufficiently prepared for the climax: The Jasper Project has been named a recipient of a 2023 Governor's Award in the Humanities and was feted as such at an awards luncheon on Thursday, October 19. This is a very big deal. The Governor's Awards exist to recognize those institutions or persons who best help South Carolinians appreciate their own cultural heritage and present it to the rest of the world. These Governor's Awards are equivalent to those other Governor's Awards in the Arts, given by the SC Arts Commission, one of which, by the way, was awarded in 2014 to Jasper founder Cindi Boiter. That makes two big deals.

Had it not already happened, I would at this point invite you, as members of the choir, to the SC Humanities Awards luncheon. Instead I will thank you, as members of the choir, for helping the Jasper board and all of its constituent parts improve the quality of all our lives and for responding to a call for letters to be made in this space in the fullness of time, once all this stardust settles. It going to be a big deal. You'll see.

Jon Tuttle is a member of The Jasper Project's Board of Directors and Director of University Honors at Francis Marion University in Florence.



eclipse of 2017, which begat *Sheltered*, a bound collection of art and literature, Jasper's answer to the pandemic.

"We know all of this," you're saying. "We're the choir. We're holding this magazine and are seven paragraphs deep into this essay and we still don't know where it's going."

"Just give me a minute," I say. "I swear I'll get there, but first I need to remind you of the series, the—"

"Yes, yes, the series," you say, "like the Artists Showing Artists Series, in which established area artists showcase work by those younger and/or emerging, or The Tiny Gallery Series, which features small works exhibited at public venues all over Columbia, and the Poetry of the People Series, featuring all those local poets."

"And the Play Right Series," I say, "which is in fact my favorite series, because it cultivates the work of South Carolina playwrights by offering development and performance opportunities. Perhaps you caught last summer's *Moonswallow*, by Colby Quick, or this past summer's *Therapy*, by Lonetta Thompson."

"That was fantastic," you say. And indeed, it was. All of these events and artifacts, individually, were fantastic, and collectively rather breathtaking. Which brings us now to Jasper's magnum opus, *The Supper Table*.

In 2019, drawing its inspiration from Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* installation, Jasper invited sixty of the state's artists to celebrate South Carolina's most accomplished women by literally setting a place for twelve of them



TWO DECADES OF MUSICAL JOURNEY THE COLUMBIA ARTS ACADEMY CELEBRATES ITS 20TH ANNIVERSARY

Story by Liz Stalker
Photography courtesy of Marty Fort

This August, South Carolina's largest private musical school, the Columbia Arts Academy, celebrated its 20th anniversary. Hosting a drop in event on Saturday, August 12, at all three of its locations throughout the Columbia area—the Columbia Arts Academy (Rosewood Dr.), the Lexington School of Music (Barr Rd.), and the Irmo Music Academy (Lake Murray Blvd.)—the school took the anniversary celebration as an opportunity to connect with the community it loves to serve. The festivities included free food and tours as well as, according to director Marty Fort, students from way back when the school was started. “Kids that I knew when they were five are now twenty-five,” Fort says, reflecting back on how far the school has come.

At the time of its inception in 2003, the Columbia Arts Academy was a small-scale studio that taught just 30 students with Fort as the only instructor. The Rosewood space, which is now home to hundreds of students, needed a lot of love to make it habitable for the business. “When I started Rosewood,” Fort says, “there were rats, there was broken glass, there was no carpet, no wall. It was \$60,000 on a Visa and a MasterCard to get Rosewood off the ground.”

But get it off the ground, he did, with the school expanding into a second location just a decade later. This expansion, and the subsequent one in Irmo in 2018, was necessary as the Columbia Arts Academy had hit 500 students and counting, a huge milestone for the company, though it pales in comparison to the over 1700 students the school now serves.

Now, Fort feels proud of the progress he's made, and the good work he continues to do to keep his locations looking sharp for his students, so that they can have the space they deserve to navigate their musical journeys. “We work very hard to keep our places nice, clean, and looking awesome,” Fort says. This effort does not go unnoticed, reflected in the pride of both its attendees and its employees. Visitors to any CAA location can expect a warm welcome and an offer of a tour from professional and personal staff, and each branch's website offers a virtual tour comprised of photos of exterior shots, lesson rooms, and the reception area and waiting room at the front entrance. “We love when people come and check us out!” Fort says.

The school offers instruction for an incredibly wide range of instruments—piano, guitar, voice, bass, drums, banjo, ukulele, violin, and even mandolin. Fort himself is well-versed in most, if not all, of these instruments.

In the spirit of modesty, he admits that violin would likely be his weakest instrument but notes that, “Once you really lock into music, there's so much crossover.” To showcase this variety, the 20th Anniversary celebration also included an instrument petting zoo, where guests could get a firsthand look at the various instruments the school offers lessons for.

Though many of the Columbia Arts Academy's students are school-aged kids, the school also sees an incredibly diverse age range among its students, with the youngest of its pupils being just three and four years old and its oldest musical scholars approaching their eighties and nineties. Fort says the school is happy to take students of any age. “Just as long as they have the attention span to sit through a lesson,” he jokes. This broad range of ages reflects the school's highest purpose: to serve the musical passions of the community at large.

This dedication to the community is very much felt by the academy's students as well as their loved ones. Abigail Reaves, a fifteen-year-old pianist who has been taking lessons at the Columbia Arts Academy for the past two years, says, “I think the Columbia Arts Academy has greatly brought together different corners of Columbia to celebrate a common appreciation and interest in music. I've met people that I otherwise probably never would've spoken to and have heard some phenomenal performers from around the Midlands that I never knew called the same town as me home.”

Her mother, Kathleen Ayer, says, “If I had to say one thing about the academy it is that they don't make you feel like you're just dropping your child off for the usual weekly music lesson, they make you a part of a family. They make an effort to get to know you, speak with you, offer opportunities that they feel would further your child. They are constantly thinking of your child and how to improve their musical journey.” Ayer is also impressed with Abigail's teacher, Sarah Ferguson: “This woman has taken my shy, performance scared daughter and helped her to blossom into an amazing performer and widened her skills.”

Abigail is one of the many students who have participated in the unique and exciting performance opportunities the Columbia Arts Academy has arranged. These performance opportunities include highly respected and admired venues and performance halls, such as the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame and the

Guest House at Graceland. Most recently, students, including Abigail, traveled to New York to perform at the Weill Recital at Carnegie Hall. It is performances like these, as well as biannual recitals, that she and her mother feel have strengthened her confidence as a performer and helped her to conquer her stage fright.

Closer to home, the Columbia Arts Academy band, including Fort himself, performed alongside Kirk Hammett, lead guitarist of Metallica, at the Columbia Museum of Art, an opportunity that opened the school up to a massive platform when Hammett posted photos from the gig on his Instagram, which were then viewed by 50,000 Metallica fans.

Fort is immensely proud of the growth and success his business has seen over the last two decades. He has such an obvious and passionate love for each location he has been able to bring to life, describing them all as “kind of like kids—they all have their own personalities.” Their perpetuity within the community is a testament to not only his robust work ethic and the excellence of his staff, but the surrounding community's love and appreciation for music.

“You know, most businesses don't make it five years,” he says. “20 years is a long time, I'm just so proud.”

As the Columbia Arts Academy moves forward, there are many wonderful events and opportunities for its students and the surrounding community to be excited about. The academy also looks forward to providing lessons to all of its students and musically enriching the local community for many years to come.



Marty Fort with Kirk Hammett, lead guitarist of Metallica.

WRITING A BOOK WITH PAINT

Visual Artist Malik Greene

Story by Matt Norris

Photography by Bree Burchfield

When an artist sets out to create a piece, the goal they wish to achieve is as unique as the artist themselves. Malik Greene is the current artist in residence at Stormwater Studios in Columbia, South Carolina. The goal Greene approaches his painting with is to tell a story. He says "... A lot of my work is narrative driven. It's based on my family's stories, or stories that resonate with me, people that look like me, people that feel like me" This sentiment is very apparent in his work. It's impossible to view his paintings without seeing them as snippets of a greater whole. Small scenes taking place within a much larger context, the pieces really do speak for themselves.

Greene's stories are often very personal to him, "... even if it's not a serious emotionally evoking story, I still feel like there's a narrative behind what I'm creating and why I'm creating it, and how it got to that point" The way he looks at painting is "... how a musician looks at creating an album ...", Greene says he thinks about "... what theme do I want to convey and what pieces can help push that forward, and from there dive deeper ..." and views the individual paintings as the tracks on the album, or the chapters of a book. Different groups of pieces make up these metaphorical albums, or books "... a lot of the artworks that I create within a specific timeframe, they coexist in a good space with one another, and that is what amplifies the story for me" Sometimes this is a conscious choice, and he chooses what theme, or story, he is working on right now. Sometimes with pieces he "... has the time to live with and look at and create the narrative that I want to ..." and that ends up a chapter in a different book. When it comes to the chapters in his books, he likes the numbers eight or nine, "... if I have eight paintings, I don't want to show seven of them if that eighth piece is that one that I feel like tells the entire story of what I'm trying to convey ... the same way if you read a book with eight chapters and you're only able to read seven, that eighth chapter is missing ..."

While there are artists whose work he likes, Greene says "... they really just influence me to create" He draws inspiration from the people and places around

him to put into his stories. He says he is "... guided by the stories I want to tell, the ideas and concepts that are appealing to me, and hope those things are able to reach out and appeal to a broader audience" While many of the paintings tell a clear story, some have a more subtle approach. While conveying these stories through his art is important to him, Greene acknowledges "I know how I felt about the piece when I created it, what my thought process was. It doesn't have to be something that everyone agrees with, and I'm cool with that. It makes me feel that art can live outside of myself. I'm perfectly fine creating art for myself, and I get that level of contentment before it ever leaves the studio space, so for everyone viewing the art, I think that's me providing that space for them to have a personal experience, and if they're able to have a personal experience, then that's successful artwork to me"

A noticeable choice in Greene's painting style is his unique use of texture and shape. Various types of texture created with different amounts of paint appear in unexpected places and are used in unconventional ways. Greene feels his work is "... very against realism ...," and the non-traditional shapes along with the stylized texturing gives each painting a look that is as distinctive as any artist's signature. Greene says he feels "... the textured portions of the work make it a more intimate experience, which makes it a more human experience, because when you look at it, you kind of want to touch it ... A really big focus of my work is making it very expressive, and I think texture, or the way brush strokes work ... those things all amplify the work and make it more cohesive ... it allows me to put emphasis on certain things and show the feeling it is conveying"

Texture is just one tool the artist uses to help tell the story. When asked if he ever struggles to put brush to canvas and make work, Greene says "... creative block isn't a thing ... before this residency I felt like I had to be inspired to create ... I can produce artwork. Producing artwork isn't difficult at all. I think creating artwork is a different experience, though ... I think producing leads to creation. If you produce enough, that leads to creating new ideas, because you are always producing. So, for me, personally, I don't go through creative block ... I think it's just a mindset thing."



The artist, Malik Greene.

This residency has given Greene a chance to approach his work in a different way than he has been able to in the past. "I'm creating on a larger scale here, and that's been really fun for me...giving myself a larger canvas has given me the ability to tell better stories and make the work more awesome" When reflecting on how this new larger scale work fits into his growth as an artist, Greene comments "... having the work in this space has given me the ability to see how space is used and how I can take up space ... I've had times in the past where I've had artwork, and just because it wasn't a certain size, it's been placed smaller areas, or put in a corner, and not taken as seriously because of the scale of it. I understand you can make amazing work that is smaller, but the sheer size of the work being something that makes people take it into consideration is something that is really interesting to me"



Greene emphasizes how beneficial his time in the studio during his residency has been and how it has changed his perception of his artwork, and the profession of art as a whole. "This residency has given me the ability to open up and create more, and that's something I urge all creatives to do. Be willing to take yourself out of the comfort of your space. It's allowed me to be more open in my thoughts, more open in what I want to create ... I want to urge everyone not to get bogged down by the idea that to be a good artist you have to isolate yourself or be obscure or closed off. I think it's important to be expansive and allow people to see you for who you are. If you're able to do that I feel like your work will make leaps and bounds ... If you're an artist who wants to tell a story, I think it's very important to go out and build more into the story, and let others know there is a story to be told ..."



While this new outlook and approach of creating larger sized works to be noticed has been eye opening for him in many ways, he also observes that "... being a Black artist, as well, you want to be able to go into spaces and say that I am worthy of being in the space and I am willing to create artwork that demands this level of space and consideration ...". Despite this, he doesn't feel race is required to be a central theme in his work "... being an artist from the south, a big topic is always 'what racial issues do you want to address with your work?' I just feel like a lot of my contemporaries who are not of color don't get that question, they're able to create because they just like to create. I feel like that's something I want to be able to say for myself as well ... if I wanted to be a politician for the sake of being a politician, that's something I could have

pursued ... If I have an idea that relates to my race, I have the ability to use my art as a voice for that, but I don't think I should have to be confined to that ..." He believes there should be space for an artist of color to both make what they feel for no particular reason, and also make work that is commentary on very real and serious racial issues when that is what inspires them.

Green currently has a show lined up in Greenville, South Carolina, but right now he is really just trying to figure out what is going to be next for him creatively. He would love to be able to expand his reach, and bring his work to a wider audience and more spaces that allow him to create as freely as possible. Other than this, he doesn't want to create too many plans, other than to push forward with his artwork and his creativity and tell his stories. "What I plan to do creatively is something that will live beyond this

studio, beyond Columbia. I have goals to expand my work and show on a larger scale across the entire world. The stories from Columbia, South Carolina, the stories that I have as a creator are something I feel need to be shown everywhere, because a lot of them are things that can resonate with people, no matter how you look or how you feel. I love when people who don't look like me come and say 'this work reminds me of so many situations I've been through'. It's not attached to a color, or even me being a male, it just that feeling that it creates, and I want that to live outside my studio."

It doesn't seem like there is going to be anything that stops Malik Greene from writing as many books with his paint as he possibly can.



Introducing the



Happily, the Ernest A. Finney, Jr. Cultural Center, under the direction of poet and academician Nicky Finney, has been born to help address this vital need for space as well as to issue the invitation to come into the house, make yourself at home, and become the artist that you were meant to be.

the Ernest Finney Jr. Cultural Center, named in honor of Nicky Finney's late father.

It happened relatively quickly. Last year, Frances Close, co-founder of the Environmental Law Project, purchased an old airplane hangar building in the Robert Mills district of the city that had been built in the 1940s, ultimately becoming an electric and lighting company. The building is just by the railroad tracks on Laurens Street and just behind the beloved Railroad Barbeque restaurant that Close co-owned with the late Kevin Gray. A longtime friend, Close approached the esteemed poet, Carolina Distinguished Professor, and holder of the John H. Bennett, Jr. Chair in Creative Writing and Southern Studies at the University of SC, Nicky Finney, and asked if she would consider serving as executive director of the space were it to become

By January 2023, the doors to the renovation-in-process building were thrown open wide and the Finney Center hosted its first ever Pop-Up Artists Market. The community was invited in to see and feel the space, to check out architectural drawings, and to use their imaginations to will their dreams into manifestation for everyone.

Eight months later and much has happened since the doors to the center were opened and we were first invited in. At Jasper, we wanted to talk to Professor Finney about the progress and her own feelings and hopes for the space. But you don't interview a wordsmith like Nicky Finney and change the artistry of her answers into something of one's own. So please enjoy our questions for Dr. Finney followed by the eloquence of her answers herein.

– Cindi Boiter

ERNEST A. FINNEY, JR. Cultural Arts Center

Story by Nicky Finney with Cindi Boiter
Photography by Brian Harmon and Gordon Humphries

One of the questions we commonly ask of the subjects of our interviews at Jasper is What do you think the Greater Columbia Arts Community most needs to make it healthy or successful or whole? The first answer we usually hear is funding. We need money. But at the Jasper Project, this answer, pre-programmed into our psyches by the economic system that controls us, just floats past our ears and lands on the sidewalk like so much pollen in spring. While money is a critical tool for an arts community, and while all artists should be compensated for their work, over the past dozen years at Jasper we have witnessed

what can be done with very little funding and a lot of coordinated efforts, skill-sharing, and determination. Money is certainly helpful, but we know money is not the answer to our city's arts woes. Space is. What Columbia needs most is space and the invitation to use this space to create the art that has been simmering inside us for too long.

We need walls to hang art from, floors to dance on, studios to practice in, tables to sit around as we speak aloud our dreams, and colleagues to collaborate with as we make those dreams come true.



"We cannot do anything that we hope and wish and must do without the passionate help, assistance, involvement, and support of the wider Columbia community."

"We are living in a moment in time where everyone is focused on winning or only being with like-minded human beings. How boring is that? Art is when you make something. Art is when you push a wall. Only talking to those who think like you is a recipe for the end of humanity."



Jasper: What was the seed of the Ernest A Finney Jr. Center, and how long has that seed been growing? What nourished it, fed it, and brought it to this stage of fruition? And, in addition to yourself, can you drop the names of some of the other individuals who have played and are playing key roles in the life of the Finney Center?

Finney: The great historical seed of the Ernest A. Finney Jr. Cultural Arts Center is the magnificent cultural and artistic tradition of African Americans born in South Carolina that has nourished the world for generations. The sound and artistic merit of singers and musicians and actors and creatives, William Johnson, Pearl Fryer, James Brown, Dori Sanders, Chubby Checker, Eartha Kitt, Josh White, Larry Leiby, Tyrone Geter, Pink Anderson, Angie Stone, Dizzy Gillespie, Viola Davis, Leo Twiggs. There are so many!

Another seed, that is both political and racially entrenched is the stark reality that there is a virtual desert of physical spaces in Columbia and South Carolina where Black culture can be nurtured and incubated and not judged and categorized.

There are also some human seeds to acknowledge. Kevin A. Gray, and Frances Close. Friends of forty plus years who were always leaning in and strategizing on how to make the Midlands and the state itself better, richer, and more diverse. Both were community activists and organizers and investors. We lost Kevin suddenly and unexpectedly this year. His physical absence has been both crushing and heartbreaking. But we keep marching on with the sound of his dedicated drumbeat of a voice in our ears. He was a friend and dream merchant to so many. It was Kevin's idea to try and build a Black cultural arts center in the historic Waverly community, behind his new Railroad Barbecue Restaurant, near Benedict and Allen Universities where a thriving Black community once thrived, shortly before urban development bulldozed through. When Kevin first heard the news that the old Southern Electric Building was going up for sale, he called his friend Frances Close and they pulled together a plan that included lifting my father's name, and monumental judicial reputation, and deep love for jazz, to the rafters. As a poet, a daughter of South Carolina, and his love child, I was asked by Kevin and Francie to lead the artistic charge. This role wasn't on my radar but being raised in the family I was raised in meant recognizing when something was being built for the enrichment of all. I had to put my independent artist's life on hold and switch some gears.

Jasper: Continuing with the metaphor of the Finney Center as organic entity, what is its next stage of growth? While there is more and significant development to

come, the Center is already serving a vital role in the Columbia Arts community. Can you talk about some of the artists and events the Center has already hosted?

Finney: There are five stages in a butterfly's development. We are in stage one. The building of the egg or the nest. Our physical location is an amazing structure from the 1940s. We have one room that is 6000 open square feet. People often walk into that space and their mouths drop. I love when they follow that moment of surprise with, "Most buildings like this in Columbia are long gone." We deeply recognize the special quality of the physical space that we have become caretakers of. We are in stage one of live streaming our future through its dusty but old brick walls lens. We don't want to modernize it too much or customize it in narrow ways. Sometimes we need to listen even when it's the old bricks talking. They have a story to teach us. I have named this half of the building the longhouse. A longhouse is a natural meeting space for many indigenous cultures. Native Americans. Celtic. People may have different beliefs and ways of celebrating and living but there should always be one roof where people of all walks of life can visit each other and exchange ideas and information. We are living in a moment in time where everyone is focused on winning or only being with like-minded human beings. How boring is that? Art is when you make something. Art is when you push a wall. Only talking to those who think like you is a recipe for the end of humanity.

We are a Cultural Arts Center celebrating the power of the arts in general and the self-empowerment of Black Cultural Arts – with a very wide door for all – all who are hungry to be in conversation with others who are alive and well or wish to learn something new from somebody they are or might not be entirely comfortable around, others who want to challenge their narrow ways of thinking, others who want to get off the social media roller coaster and join us for real human contact. This is the tribe of human beings we are reaching out for. We want to meet them, know their names, seek out their counsel. Break bread. We need to know and recognize each other and so do our children.

Over the past year we have hosted a Pop-up Artist's market. Marlanda Dekine hosted a Saturday Ancestor workshop. Young poets have introduced their new collections to the community. Mothers who have lost poet-daughters to violence have kept their daughter's books and memory alive in our space. Professors at neighborhood universities have launched new books. We hosted a community conversation with fifty hungry artists who for the most part didn't know each other and wanted to just see each other, be around each other, and be part of the circle. Off-site we hosted journal-

“Every community is strongest when its citizens are encouraged and nurtured to speak their truth on paper, on piano keys, at a microphone, or with a paintbrush.”



keeping workshops, how to grow a garden, and topiary workshops with Mike Gibson. We hosted the five-year-old Chalk Festival with organizer Dalvin Spann. We now have our first artist-in-residence, Anthony Lewis, in-house and creating art in his own private artistic space. (For more on Anthony Lewis please see page 32.) We partnered with the World-Famous Hip-Hop Festival, featuring FatRat Da Czar, in their tenth year of unabashed hip-hop family love and joyfulness. What are we organically doing? We are listening carefully to the old brick. We are building a steering committee of human beings who will guide our feet and hands, who will help us prepare the physical space of our new Cultural Arts Center—for more exhibits, conversations, book reveals, dance troupes, yoga festivals, and Culinary feasts.

Jasper: There are dozens of reasons why this Center is important to the Columbia, SC arts community and to Southern American culture writ large. Can you please elaborate on why the Finney Center is important to you personally.

Finney: I was born in Conway, S.C. and my father, a brand-new Black attorney in the segregated south

(1955) was recruited by several Black ministers who were deeply involved in Civil Rights. We moved to Sumter when I was four years old. Sumter was a major town on the Civil Rights and Human Rights battlefield in the 1950s. The importance of what was going on on the ground and in the air around me stamped me early on. My mom grew up on a farm in Newberry, S.C. and made and grew everything by hand. She taught me the importance of paying close attention. She was my first human model of creativity. South Carolina nor the world at large would dare call here an artist. But she was and so was her mother. A Black woman born in 1899 who lived 100 years, who planted and ate the food from her own garden, who plucked herbs from the forests for belly aches, who grew the most beautiful azaleas and tended to flowers like they were children who just happened to live in the yard and not in the house. Who could pop the neck of a chicken with the effortlessness of a Katherine Dunham dance move.

My mother and my grandmother were not trained artists. They were never given the opportunity to be called or thought of as creative Black women. But they were deeply creative, and they dropped this deeply creative desire inside of me as a child. My

life is equally divided by a fierce desire to fight for a more equal society and to also create as a poet and artist who understands that she did not come to earth to entertain but to urge our eyes and ears and hearts toward each other. Every community is strongest when its citizens are encouraged and nurtured to speak their truth on paper, on piano keys, at a microphone, or with a paintbrush. James Baldwin said, “the poet knows first.” To me that has nothing to do with any context of who is right or wrong or better or worse. To me that means the heart of the artist is extremely valuable. We should not relegate artists to being called to the mic and the camera and the stage every four years. Every community needs an incubating place for dreaming and becoming that butterfly I mentioned earlier. I believe the Ernest A. Finney Jr. Cultural Arts Center is where Black butterflies -- of all ages – are waiting to take flight.

We cannot do anything that we hope and wish and must do without the passionate help, assistance, involvement, and support of the wider Columbia community. In our first year I don't think we have done the best job at using social media to help get our message out – but that's because we have been listening and sharpening our message -- behind closed doors our pencils have been scribbling wildly like mad carpenters. We have been consumed with getting our train on the right track. Aligning ourselves with people who understand the power of creativity and truth. We want to get this right. So many beautiful life-altering things wait in the balance if we do. We have been spending these last few months on the physical construction of the nest so that we have the right space for all that we want to do going forward.

For example we are right now building temporary walls in the longhouse space for a two-month residency by Tyrone Geter that is being scheduled for this October

through December. Tyrone is a brilliant teacher and one of our state's most incomparable living artists. Stay tuned for more details about Tyrone's presence at the Finney Center. I promise the social media will be humming by then.

It takes time to find the right individuals to help us get from square one to square four. It's not a race or a competition. Getting the right people in places matter so much at this moment. The right people on the inside. The right people spreading the word. Positive heads and hearts. Wide welcoming doors. The right people volunteering. Partnerships with real long-term partners. Long-term institution building cannot be done quickly. We live in this contemporary time when everyone wants it yesterday, but we pride ourselves on building a different kind of door. A door with a future. Our young people don't just need a place where they can express themselves. They need a place where they can see their future in what their hands and hearts and mouths can make. They need a place where Black history is not banned but taught and celebrated. At the Ernest A. Finney, Jr. Cultural Arts Center we are not afraid of being uncomfortable with the weight and beauty of truth.

So many people have stopped by to wish us well and to also tap their feet because they are so hungry to see the Finney Center open 24-7. We probably won't meet that 24-7 mark, but we are growing and 2024 looks strong and full of surprise.

We want to be sure-footed. We want to aim high. We won't compromise the need to say all the hard to say beautiful things we have to say. We are not afraid of making art that pushes us closer.

We would love to hear from you: finneyjrcac@gmail.com – Nikky Finney



ERNEST A. FINNEY, JR.
CULTURAL ARTS CENTER
 1510 Laurens Street, Columbia, South Carolina 29204

Lonetta Thompson

INTRODUCING LONETTA THOMPSON'S *THERAPY* WINNER OF THE 2023 PLAY RIGHT SERIES



Story by Libby Campbell
Photography by DK Turner

Let's start this with a bit of background about the Jasper Project's Play Right Series. The brainchild of Jasper magazine editor and founder Cindi Boiter, the Play Right Series was created so that audience members get an idea of "just what all" goes into the theatrical process. Most individuals see only the final product. Participating in this series allows people to witness the process from front to finish. It's an eye-opening journey, one I hope more of you will take

with us when we announce the 2024 version of the project. The first project was *Sharks and Other Lovers* by Randal David Cook, produced back in 2017. A COVID break was taken, and the series came back last year with *Moon Swallower* by Colby Quick. This year, Lonetta Thompson's *Therapy* was the winner, receiving (as did the earlier winners) a staged reading at Columbia Music Festival Association in August.

I've had the pleasure of knowing Lonetta Thompson as an actor for a number of years. She has appeared on stages throughout the Midlands and is a member of the NiA Company and Trustus Theatre's company emeritus. She earned her B.A. degree at the University of South Carolina, majoring in English and minoring in Theatre. Lonetta most recently toured with Spark, an outreach initiative of the SC Governor's School for the Arts and Humanities in partnership with Workshop Theatre of South Carolina.

Now, meet Lonetta Thompson, playwright. When the PRS process began, Lonetta mentioned several times that she had always thought of herself as a writer more than an actor. I asked when she came to this realization and as is the case with so many creative types, it all started back in middle school, with the obligatory writing assignment What I Did On My Summer Vacation. Her entirely fictitious summer vacation that year was fascinating, and I dare say none of her classmates had such an adventure. In her story, Lonetta and her family went to the Swiss Alps. A snowstorm, a grizzly bear, and a handsome ski instructor were just a few of the elements. Behold! The birth of a novelist! She admits she never saw herself as a playwright early on; she was going to pen the Great American Novel, dreaming of authoring a classic like *Jayne Eyre* or *Little Women*. She continued writing pages no one ever saw. Short stories, poetry, a script. She took the plunge and submitted *Therapy* to the PRS committee and is now a published playwright.

The obligatory question for playwrights, actors, and directors is to name their all-time favorite play, and of course the answer is "there isn't just one." Lonetta loves so many, as she (we) should. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolfe*, *Fences*, *The Gin Game* – an especially special piece because it was the first Broadway play she attended and starred Cicely Tyson and James Earl

Jones. But her ultimate favorite, if she has to name one, is *Intimate Apparel* by Lynn Nottage, because of the beautiful manner in which each of the characters and their individual stories blend together.

Therapy crossed our playwright's mind several years ago. "I was thinking about my own personal journey with therapy and what the process must be like for the therapists tasked with "therapizing" me. *Therapy* was my attempt to see the process from their perspective. My goal was to create characters that could tell me their stories and see where that took us, and it definitely did not end where I thought it would. As I got to know them, the characters truly took the lead, and I dutifully allowed them to show me the way."

In a lovely shoutout to several local playwrights - Jon Tuttle, Eugene Washington, and Leasharn Hopkins, Lonetta says, "I have had the pleasure of working with each of these playwrights and though I've learned something different from each, the one thing they all taught me was passion and commitment. You can't half step and you have to believe in yourself. You have to trust your gift and know that it was not arbitrarily given to you. When these three tell their stories, you know -without question- that they believe this is what they were meant to do, and they do it aloud and with gusto!"

When asked what she thinks makes a good playwright, Thompson responded, "observation and respect. Human beings and relationships – the two primary ingredients of any story – require honesty. I think the stories I don't respond to are the ones that don't feel real or authentic. I need to believe that what's happening on the stage could really happen – even if it's fantastic (like the ending of *The Piano Lesson*). The people and their relationships and interactions have to be authentic for us to buy into and accept their world. Forced characterizations and narratives make the audience work too hard to suspend disbelief and that makes for a long evening at the theatre."

When asked how it feels to see her play in the hands of the actors and the director and if she ever wanted to step in and say no, no that's not how this should be done, Thompson replied, "It feels AMAZING! It's quite surreal to watch people bring your imagination to life. And because I am an actor, even when I want to say 'No! Stop! What the heck are you doing?' I never would because I respect the process. The director and actors have to bring themselves and their perspectives to the work. If I didn't specify it somewhere on the page, I have to let it be."

Therapy is a one-act play, but the playwright is considering the possibility of a companion piece. Talks are also in the works for a collaborative production of *Therapy* by the NiA Company and the Jasper Project during the summer of 2024, as well as a full production of our 2022 PRS winning play, *Moon Swallower*, produced by the Jasper Project, both at Trustus Theatre.

For me, I've loved watching the success of a dear friend who, in addition to her talents as a performer and writer, is an e-learning developer for a large insurance company, a mother, and a grandmother to a grandson she adores. One of the benefits of winning the Play Right Series is the author sees their work published by Muddy Ford Press and submitted to the Library of Congress. *Therapy* is available for purchase through The Jasper Project. You should buy a copy. It's critical that we support local theatre artists. Lynn Nottage, Edward Albee, August Wilson, and so many more, all started with someone trusting their work.

Please see the current call for entries in the next act of the Play Right Series on page 25 of this magazine.



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JIM "SONI" SONEFELD celebrates 15th anniversary of *Snowman Melting*

Story by Kevin Oliver
Photography courtesy of Jim Sonefeld

Back in 2008, you may have missed that Hootie and the Blowfish drummer Jim Sonefeld released his full length solo debut album, *Snowman Melting*. Sonefeld himself admits it wasn't the best timing for it, which is part of the reason he's just reissued the album in a fifteenth anniversary edition with two re-recorded songs featuring Darius Rucker and Edwin McCain.

"It was ill-timed, or my life was ill-timed," Sonefeld remembers. "I went in with good intentions, we were at the end of our last Hootie tour, which would have been a great leaping off point, but my own life was still changing. I got sober and was trying to get a more spiritual angle on life, and then my marriage fell apart and there was just too much going on." After an initial post-Hootie show release party in Greenville, he says that was about it for album promotion, until now.

"I was talking with Rusty Harmon, our old band manager who runs Veer Music now, where I'm signed as a recording artist," Sonefeld says, "And he suggested either using unreleased outtakes or re-recording some of it—why don't I call some of my lead singer buddies?" Meaning Darius Rucker, of course, and fellow South Carolina hitmaker Edwin McCain.

"I'd never really called up that kind of musical favor before from either of them, so I went through the songs and looked at what I thought would work best for each," Sonefeld says. Rucker shows up on the second

verse of the breezy strummer, "Sittin In The Green Grass," while McCain's turn on "No Reason" has the kind of retro-soul love song vibe that makes it a natural fit for him to join in on.

"Francis Dunnery wrote that with me," Sonefeld says, "and he's a little bit older than I am so we were both raised on that 70's soft rock and soul stuff. Edwin is just one of those guys who appreciates a good love song that seems like it may belong in a different decade." As for the original album, Sonefeld is still proud of what he did back then, and is eager for people to hear it with new perspective.

I'm still proud of it, and I was when we made it," Sonefeld says. "I think it's a good time to hear something in a fresh way that's now from what was a different era of music. Even though it's only fifteen years old, the way Francis and I wrote together is from an even older time, so it feels like a record that could maybe be twenty or thirty years old and it's just been unearthed again."

As much time as he has spent in the spotlight, Sonefeld says that being at the front and center of that attention has taken some getting used to. Earlier this year, he added "published author" to his resume with the release of his first book, *Swimming With the Blowfish: Hootie, Healing, and One Hell of a Ride*. It's a revealing look at the band's rise to fame from the inside, and Sonefeld's

own path through addiction and, ultimately, recovery. He has undertaken a series of book release events and incorporated his music into them to present all the different sides of what he can do.

"The book really opened up a new lane for me," Sonefeld admits. "For a guy who doesn't want to have a side band, hustle playing clubs and selling tickets, I found that when I combined my book and its story with some of my music, some of Hootie's music I helped write, I could still get in front of people and it would be enjoyable." Sonefeld has also done some public speaking at various private corporate events, something that he says gives him even more latitude to express different things.

"The speaking side suits me too, because there is a story there, in living and learning how to be in a band with others," He says. "It has a bit of entrepreneurship, a bit of creativity, and I've enjoyed telling that story and people seem to appreciate the humor and the Hootie

tie-in. Talking about sobriety can be surprising to some people, but it's also incredibly personal to others. It's a new experience for me, it allows me to be authentically me, I think. I can be spiritual, I can be a bit of a cutup, and I can be a guy who was in a band that sold a bunch of records in the 1990s."

As for that band, yes, they are talking about touring again according to Sonefeld.

"The band has been talking about touring since we last toured in 2019," He says. "We're a touring band, we always have been, but the timing has to be right, the mood has to be right, and Darius' schedule has to allow for it, too. We all live in different places now. We're talking about the next tour for sure, we hope to get out there before too long and get in front of people. I look forward to whenever that happens, a chance to get together, reinvigorate the fans, that's what we're here for."

ANNOUNCING THE 2024 PLAY RIGHT SERIES!

The Jasper Project announces the fourth cycle of its Play Right Series, a collaboration between area theatre artists and Jasper Community Producers—or theater aficionados, supporters and even newcomers. The project will culminate in summer 2024 with the staged reading of a brand-new South Carolina play.



SUBMITTING A PLAY

- Submissions must be one-act plays, 45-75 minutes in length, typed according to industry-standard format Collections of shorter revue sketches on a common theme will be considered.
- Please include, as a cover sheet, a one-page bio of the playwright and description of the play, including cast size and any unusual technical demands, bearing in mind that smaller and fewer are usually preferable.
- One submission per playwright, please.
- Please submit your play no later than January 31, 2024, to playrightseries@jasperproject.org
- Playwrights must be natives or residents of South Carolina.
- The winning playwright must be present for development sessions with Community Producers in Columbia during the summer, 2024 and must agree to offer program credit to The Jasper Project at any subsequent productions or publications.
- Plays may address any topic, using language appropriate to the subject matter; we are not, however, considering musicals or children's plays.

BLACK NERD MAFIA

& Their Quest to Reimagine the Local Arts scene

Story by Liz Stalker
Photography by Bree Burchfield

The local arts scene is a vital part of the Columbia community. From indie shows at New Brooklyn to orchestral concerts at the Koger to murals decorating the sides of local businesses through the Vista and Main Street, local artists are constantly enriching the experience of all who live and work in the city. However, the Columbia arts scene is not always one that is inherently inclusive and inviting. That's where Black Nerd Mafia comes in.

Columbia locals may have noticed a certain figure around town in the last couple of years, displayed proudly on t-shirts and bumper stickers. This figure that those at Black Nerd Mafia call "Mirror Face," depicts a faceless person in a black or white hoodie, always with the Black Nerd Mafia logo at its center. In their left hand, they hold a water gun. In their right, they hold the Marvel Comics Thanos gauntlet. Every detail has a purpose, down to the colors of the logo: always black, red, and green, the colors associated with the Pan-African movement set into a white background. "The Black nerds, we have to exist in this white world," founder Kwasi Brown explains.

The water gun is specifically a Super Soaker, which was invented by Black scientist Lonnie Johnson in 1982. The infinity gauntlet serves as a reminder that anything is possible in a way that is sure to connect with Black Nerd Mafia's Black and nerdy fanbase. Even the hoodie has a specific meaning behind it. Brown describes it as a "call back to Trayvon Martin, and Black youth being vilified for just wearing hoods."

"I want people to know that there was a lot of thought that went into it," Brown says.



In a way, this figure and the simpler Black Nerd Mafia logo get at the heart of why Black Nerd Mafia's existence is so important: there needs to be more space for Black people in Columbia's local arts scene. There are many spaces that are vital to local arts that are often inaccessible for Black artists. "I don't even think that a lot of times the people that they put out are reflections of who the community thinks is dope," Brown says, "It's just like, I know you, and you know me, and I know this venue owner."

This is where Black Nerd Mafia comes in. Acting as a proverbial infinity gauntlet, they work tirelessly to create spaces and host events that will be accessible, not exclusively to Black artists, though that is understandably the priority, but to artists in general who are being kept out of the local arts scene, whether that be due to a simple lack of connections or the anti-Black bias that can be incredibly socially pervasive, one that local arts venues are not exempt from.

"The ultimate goal for me is to open my own venue," Brown says. "I want to have my own venue that exclusively caters to independent artists. . . I'm in the process of the groundwork stuff for that."

Aside from this future project, Black Nerd Mafia has hosted many successful events at Curiosity Coffee Bar on Main Street, including indie music shows, poetry readings, and open mic nights. "Curiosity is like, home base for us," Brown says, though he also adds that he'd love to expand into other venues in Columbia as his goal is to make every indie space one where Black people are welcome.

A large part of the accessibility of Black Nerd Mafia events involves the inclusive environment that the organization fosters. It's apparent that the spaces Black Nerd Mafia facilitates, both in person, at different venues and meetups, and online, through social media. "It happened organically," Brown says. He suggests that this sort of inclusivity comes naturally for an organization that is filled with diverse and intrinsically tolerant individuals, saying further, "How can we have these people. . . and not support them, and not support



the things that they care about? And not give them their own platforms to talk about these things, you know? So if you feel like people that are gay are being persecuted, that women are being persecuted let's have a fucking show about it, dude! It's not pandering, it's genuine true emotion from the community that we've built."

Another incredibly interesting part of the way that Black Nerd Mafia operates is their very active digital presence. The organization has relatively large followings on both Facebook and Instagram. They use these platforms to share information about upcoming shows and events, but it's also much more than that.

Both pages, for example, share a daily vocabulary word. Brown also goes on walks every morning, which he posts as well. "We have people that follow our page just to go see me walking every day," Brown says. "Because [they say] 'you inspire me to go walking every day,' or 'you inspire me to do a word of the day myself, or to read.'" Through little touches like these, Black Nerd Mafia has successfully created close knit digital communities that are, in many ways, just as valuable as their in-person supporters.

While most of his work with Black Nerd Mafia involves setting up events for other local artists to highlight

their talent, Brown is also an artist himself. As an artist, though, he says he can struggle with being put in boxes even by the enjoyers of his genre. “I make hip-hop music, so I rap, and a lot of times that can be viewed as being, like, a young person’s thing. . . I’m 44 years old, y’know, so I had to get over people saying, ‘you’re so old, why are you still trying to make music? Why are you still trying to rap? But I mean, to me, like, hip-hop or rapping is an art form like anything else, and art doesn’t have an age limit on it.” He assures us that he will continue making music, despite these ageist attitudes, saying, “It feels like now I’m in a place in my life, where I have this platform, and I have more free time to just do the creative things I want to do.”

In addition to Brown, there are many other ridiculously talented artists who are affiliated with Black Nerd Mafia. “We have a collective that we call The Cool Table,” Brown says. And the Cool Table has artists, like visual artists, like painters, singers, rappers, producers, business owners, influencers... It’s a lot

of different types of people.” The Cool Table includes artists like hip hop artist Tam The Viibe, DJ and producer Airborne Audio, muralist Ija Monet, and bassist Dani Blood. Brown also hints at an upcoming project the Cool Table is working on. “By the end of the year, there’ll be a Cool Table album,” he says. “I’ll put pressure on this.”

To support Black Nerd Mafia, The Cool Table, and the goals they are trying to accomplish, Brown urges Columbia locals to do one simple thing: show up for local artists. “There needs to be an indie scene where artists can make money,” Brown says. “I’ve lived in South Carolina since I was in elementary school, and I’ve always heard, if you want to make it, you’ve got to go to Atlanta. You’ve got to go to New York. You’ve got to go wherever. Which shouldn’t be the case. There is zero lack of talent here in Columbia, South Carolina.”



The Mark Making of Parenthood Celebrated Artist Jordan Sheridan and Her Creative Journey

Story & Photography by Kristine Hartvigsen

COOL TABLE ROSTER:

	Gregg Slattery	
Aisa Blue	MidiMarc	Myke Soun
Airborne Audio	Yyusri	Lamontae Foyay
Tam The Viibe	Ija Monet	Corey Stone
Milah	Cre	Tatyanna Taylor
Toni Esther	Dani Blood	Wannapoundjuu
Eezy Olah	Death Ray Robin	Mikeya Janee
Lady T The Fire Sign	Mahjestiq	Darius Dior
BayRay	JB Samson	Moon Kat
Kenya T	the life of jp	Niyah Dreams
	PATx	

Parenthood can be bursting with enduring memories and vibrant images of connection: The eye contact between parent and child while feeding. The guiding hands as a child takes her first wobbling steps. It can be an unbreakable bond, an interweaving of emotions that run the gamut from astonishment or weariness or absolute joy to fearful or ecstatic to simple, all-encompassing love.

When she was beginning research for her MFA thesis, Jordan Sheridan had all the feels. There was compassion for the youth of Cuba and the nonprofit she worked with that helps fulfill their dreams. In fact, that was originally to be the subject of her thesis. But then there were even greater, more powerful feelings — the complete saturation of parenthood itself.

“The thesis committee members asked, ‘What is the most important thing in your life?’ I, of course, answered my son, Samuel,” Sheridan recalls. Samuel was born in 2017 while Jordan was in graduate school. “The committee said, ‘That is what you need to be doing for your research. It is taking so many hours of your time. It needs to be personal.’”

Indeed. Ask any parent, and it can be difficult to compartmentalize parenthood from one’s complete identity. It can be a continual and ever-present dynamic in every choice a parent makes. So Sheridan regrouped and forged ahead, not knowing exactly where her work would take her.

“I started off doing several paintings, but I just couldn’t quite capture what being a mother is, with all the complexities that come with it,” she says. “I wanted to immerse people in an environment that represented what motherhood was, so I experimented with 3D and





installation work. I began using cardboard, but then I remembered my great grandmother teaching me crochet, and I started creating miniature environments using crochet.”

Throughout her thesis year, Sheridan’s studio was awash in a chaos of yarn and other materials as she worked to give her vision the right shapes connected in the right ways. The whole time, it seemed like a moving, shapeshifting target.

“I didn’t know what it would look like until I installed it for the first time,” she says. “It organically came together. There is so much intuition that goes into it. ... Everything is connected. It’s web-like. It seemed kind of random, but it made so much sense conceptually to do that.”

The finished installation was titled “The Mother,” a woven labyrinth of vibrant color and engaging fabric geography that seems to convey how the all-consuming role of parenthood is not unlike living on the autism spectrum, coping with intense stimulation from all directions yet uncannily offering security through enclosure.

As soon as young Samuel could hold a paintbrush, the artist invited him to collaborate with her on some paintings. She was exceptionally pleased with the outcome. He did brush work on two of her paintings, “The Matriarch” and “Catharsis.” The form of a growling hyena is prominently recognizable in The Matriarch, featuring energetic mark making paired with primarily purple and green brush strokes from Samuel. Catharsis depicts a high-energy person who may be shouting. The figure is sketched in black and white with brilliant orange and rust brush marks.

“They are sister pieces that Samuel collaborated with me on. He did a lot of brush work. The Matriarch is in my living room,” Sheridan explains. “At that point, I was starting a series of paintings based on animal societies that are matriarchal.” In the wild, female spotted hyenas outrank males in their clans and can be more aggressive, especially when protecting their young.

To say that the artist was getting noticed would be an understatement. By 2020, she was selected for the School of Visual Art and Design (SVAD) residency at Stormwater Studios. The same year, her and Samuel’s

painting, Catharsis, was selected for inclusion in the prestigious competition Art Fields in Lake City.

In 2021, The Mother, her solo MFA exhibition at McMaster Gallery, helped earn her a 2021 Emerging Artist Grant from the South Carolina Arts Commission. She also won the 2021 Graduate Studio Art Research Award from the SVAD at USC. And the momentum only continued to build.

The following year, Sheridan won a residency at the McColl Center in Charlotte. Topping off the year, her installation, titled “Illusory Stasis,” won the 701 Center for Contemporary Art Prize and a six-week paid residency at 701 CCA. The highly competitive prize is offered for young artists under 40.

Illusory Stasis continued Jordan’s intensely visual, textile-voiced narrative of motherhood. The striking work features white, web-like crochet netting that hangs protectively around a central cocoon that is flooded in violet-blue light. The viewer can walk inside the cascading walls and feel the energy of the work.

“My goal, 100%, was to make someone be present in the experience,” Sheridan says.

Continuing the run of recognition, the artist’s work was accepted into Artfields again in 2022 and 2023 as well. “I have been accepted three times now. The first time was during COVID, so there was no physical, in-person event,” she says. “I’ve done two installations in the past two years. It’s really a great event, and I am glad that the Southeast has something like it.”

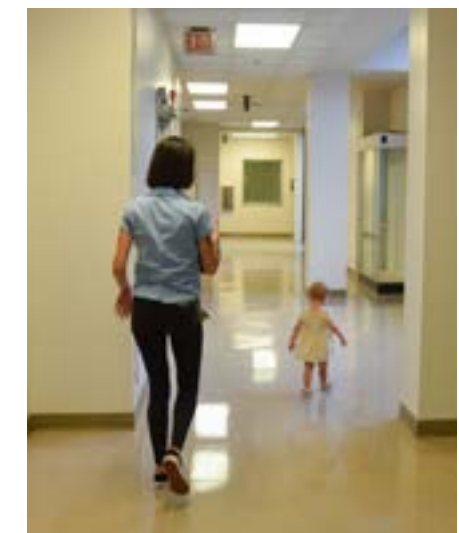
For years, Jordan Sheridan has worked with a nonprofit organization, Amigo Skate, which provides skateboarding equipment to young people in Havana. In Cuba, skateboarding has been outlawed, and equipment is virtually impossible to get. Amigo Skate also brings in art supplies and everyday essentials for youth in need. While in Cuba, she became captivated by the art and culture.

“The art is amazing. There is so much liveliness and energy in their work,” she says. “I have been to Cuba five times and brought 400 pounds of equipment with me. I really connected with the skateboard community there. I get to see what they experience in their daily lives. I just kind of fell in love with it. I used to skateboard myself but don’t anymore.”



Today, Jordan Sheridan is a full-time art instructor at USC. She lives in Columbia with her partner and young children. Samuel is 6 years old now, and daughter, Kora Quinn, is 18 months old. Sheridan is grateful to be doing something she adores — teaching art to college students.

“I love the students, and I love when they hit that epiphany moment, and a concept you are trying to make them understand connects in their brains,” she says. “I love being in the environment with young minds, watching and guiding them to paint and figure out what they want to create conceptually. It’s really special.”



ANTHONY LEWIS

Blender of Medium & Recorder of Story

Story by Christina Xan

Photography by Bree Burchfield



Painting and photography: these two mediums have similar missions—to tell a story through visuals—but each accomplishes it uniquely, one capturing and one recreating. What is revealed, though, when these two types of storytelling mix?

Anthony Lewis started as a painter, or perhaps more accurately, he started as a doodler. Long before his move to South Carolina, Lewis used to be a young boy from Camden, New Jersey, bullied in middle and high school for his tall frame and ‘coke-bottle’ glasses. Sketching in his notebooks in class became a way to escape, a discovery that has stayed with him since.

Doodling followed him, but at first, art never felt like a priority, or even an option. However, after back surgery to fix sciatica and leg numbness, he needed an outlet, needed a way to express himself in this period of stillness.

“I was dealing with pain, depression, anger, anxiety, social issues, marital issues, so I had to do something to help me just be present,” Lewis reflects. “I went to Michael’s, got me some canvases, then I went to the museum in Wilmington, Delaware, and I remember thinking, ‘I could do this. I could paint. I could do this,’—so I started painting.”

Art remains a beacon in the dark for Lewis, but as in the search for any lighthouse, the current can lead one astray. At many times over the course of his life, Lewis has found himself not creating due to anxiety and fears of not being good enough. He is far from the kind of person who runs or hides, a post-military man who moved to South Carolina in 1996 to work with the South Carolina HIV/AIDS Council after his own father was diagnosed with AIDS from intravenous drug use. It is easy for people to say that traumatic events pave the way for inspiration—it is harder, but perhaps more important, to admit how they stop us.



Lewis has gotten divorced, been homeless, and lost his mother, all of which have been their own riptides. But the universe never keeps you too far from what you love—when there is something in you that needs to come out, this raw voice begging to be released, it will always crest the surface. And as that voice reaches its peak, others hear. He returned to creating, and before long, Preach Jacobs got Lewis his first show at Frame of Mind, and Trustus Theatre asked him to do a piece for them.

Over the years, his style has continued to shift and grow. As he says, “My style was just all over the place. I just know I love figures, I love movement, I love expression.” With the constant shifts of his own life, it is no wonder that movement became the focus of his work. Seeing figures, one might anticipate a stillness, but Lewis’ pieces move across the canvas. It may seem trite, the statement ‘it feels like his pieces are moving,’ but it is not simply that Lewis’s figures move due to the vibrancy of his colors and texture of his strokes. What really feels like movement is the stories. In his art, the people feel real, like they have individual histories and a future they are moving into, like they have been not simply caught in a suspended moment but exist outside it.

For a long while, acrylic was the way Lewis shared these stories—he was an acrylic painter. After a few years of his own exploration, as he met more artists, saw other people’s work, and got feedback on his own, he finally made a decision that would become a turning point in his art career: “I realized I needed to go back to school. I needed to get more skills, to learn, and to network with other artists.” And at the University of South Carolina, Lewis grew beyond his imagination.



“In school, I learned more about myself. I learned more about the process. I learned more about writing my CV, my artist statement. The professors at USC helped me to just see things differently than my own way,” Lewis shares. “It helped me make better decisions when it comes to my paintings, but also being creative and not being trapped in a box. I like to be explorative. If it works out, it works out. If it don’t, it don’t, but I’ve learned so much from the basics, from color theory especially.”

These foundations were vital, but perhaps the most surprising experience that broke his identity as an artist wide open was his decision to take a photography class.

“I really didn’t feel like I came into my own existence until this year. Kind of like an epiphany or something popping in your head, like somebody smacking the back of the head. My style and my delivery and my actions are very intentional about what I’m doing, and I didn’t have that before,” Lewis says. “So I’m glad I took photography because I love the nostalgia of black and white film and I gravitate towards the nostalgic field of black and white photography—so I started shooting in black and white.”

Lewis started shooting with a 25mm medium format handle, continuing being drawn to figures. At this time, he mainly painted women, innately connected to all the women in his life, and as he began taking photos, he initially took this direction. In a series titled Exodus, “which stems around black women and their existence

when it came from the acclimation of being slaves,” Black women stand forefront in landscapes in South Carolina, places like Beaufort and St. Helena’s Island and locations like the swamps enslaved black people fled into during slavery.

“I like to shoot intimate portraits of Black women in compromised locations, like dilapidated buildings and dark structures that brings out the silhouette of the individual but also shows movement, also represents the strength that was needed to escape to a new beginning,” Lewis says. “I just want to express the Black experience through painting, through movement, through photography, and just give the viewer the understanding that things have not changed that much since then.”

It was in this exploration of the Black experience that Lewis got the idea, around the end of 2022, to merge found photography—vintage black and white photos from the early 1900s from the Harlem Renaissance to the Great Black Migration—into his personal paintings. People often allow themselves a separation between themselves today and photos from the past—this is what Lewis wants to challenge. Though America has grown significantly in the ways Black men and women are treated, “we still got young boys and girls who are displaced.”

In this vein, Lewis tries to give life to the found black and white photographs, to add to their stories and to the way we as audience imagine their stories in our minds.

“When I look at these black and white photos I think ‘Man, what was these people doing? Where were they going? Where are these people now? Who are their ancestors? Who are the people that came after them?’



Did they have kids or were they living in poverty?” he ponders. “I don’t know their history, their story, but it’s just that that makes me believe they—and everybody—has a story.”

Most prominently, Lewis explores this in his diptych *Shooting Marbles*, which features two found photographs of boys from the early 20th century playing stickball in a vacant lot. Lewis printed one of the photos, while he painted the other and its background. Though he does not add brand new elements, per se, to the photos, by adding colors, he is able to play with the viewer’s imagination—and with his own.

“It adds identity to that black and white photograph because if you look at it in black and white, you don’t know what colors they had on, only the textures, but the existence of each individual is going to have their own identity, their own uniqueness, their own colors.” Lewis emphasizes, “They were forced to be adults at a young age, but still they took time out to be kids, and I like capturing kids to be able to show the youthfulness of them and adding color from black and white photographs using my imagination to add to that subject because I don’t know the subject.”



This form of documentation is crucial. For Lewis, who has to reckon with his relationship to his own past—both communal and personal—exploring the history and future of another and preserving and presenting these potential stories is a way of keeping our history in our eyesight—and still keeping our eyes forward to our own futures.

In his own future, Lewis aims to continue to explore this collapse of medium, time, and place. He’d like to experiment with intertwining his own photos with his art. And now, he has a physical place to grow in as the first artist-in-residence at the Ernest A. Finney Cultural Center, where he hopes to not only keep exploring medium but to collaborate and network with fellow artists.

“I love being present for other artists because you have to support each other. You know what I’m saying?” he shares. “Other painters, I embrace them, I love them, I give them kudos. There’s so many disciplines and creatives making stories out here—and it’s enough for everybody to eat.”



Anthony Lewis in the Ernest A. Finney, Jr. Cultural Arts Center

Benji Hicks

From Singular Idea to Animals with Stories



Story by Christina Xan with Cindi Boiter
Photography courtesy of the artist

Benji Hicks has considered Columbia his home since birth—over 50 years now—having resided in West Columbia since 1973. He is a completely self-taught artist, woodcarver, and woodblock print maker, though he can recall the act of creating being valuable to him from an extremely young age. “For as long as I can remember, I have always been an artist. Drawing with pencils and pens, and later, painting with watercolor,” Hicks says. “Growing up, I got to spend many hours in my dad’s woodworking shop, learning to use tools and make things. This is when I found a love for wood carving.”

Hicks’s professional work as a carpenter compounded with his self-driven exploration of art, and ultimately led to a new relationship with woodblock printmaking—and to handmaking unique frames for each individual print.

Specifically, a Japanese woodblock printmaking technique called Mokuhanga is what caught Hicks’s attention: “Mokuhanga can best be described as a multi woodblock printing technique where there is a keyblock (black outline) and a separate color block carved for each color in the print. My prints are made with anywhere from 2 blocks to as many as 21 blocks per print. . .since every print is handmade and shows subtle differences, each one is considered an original piece of art.”

The Mokuhanga technique’s ability to remain close to tradition and to keep the art uniquely handmade throughout the process stood out to Hicks, who had never even made digital prints of his own paintings. “When I discovered Mokuhanga, I knew right away this was the path for me. It encompasses all the things

I’ve always loved to do,” he says. “My whole life of watercolor and wood carving finally came together in one art form. I use the same paper and paints I was already using, combined with woodcarving to make prints. I love it!”

Mokuhanga is similar to other printmaking techniques in that the artist carves into solid surface before adding a colored medium and pressing some form of paper onto the surface before pulling it off to reveal a design. However, this is a technique all its own: “Each block has registration marks carved into it, to line up all the many color impressions. The watercolor is applied with printmaking brushes. Many color gradients (bokashi) are created by hand using brushes on the



blocks. The washi is then lined up with the registration marks (kento) and then pressed by hand with a bamboo sheath covered disk called a Baren. Since it is a damp technique using watercolor, the washi is damp during printing and has to be dried flat under weights. When they are dry, I number, title, sign and date including my hanko stamp (name seal stamp).”

Beyond being able to create these personal, dream-like images, the meditative process itself keeps Hicks returning to Mokuhanga. “One thing I enjoy about Japanese woodblock printing is the process—beginning with a drawing or painting and then carving wood and finally making prints. I enjoy the methodical process and each step keeps things fresh along the way,” Hicks says. “Another thing that keeps me interested in Mokuhanga is I am always learning. Every time I make a set of prints, I learn something new. I can only aspire to the greatness of the Masters; I feel like I will always have something to learn and never get tired of it.”

Ever since embarking on this journey with Mokuhanga, Hicks has begun experimenting with adjacent forms of printmaking as he becomes more comfortable with his personal style. “I also have started to do some white line printmaking, or Provincetown print making. It was invented by print makers in Provincetown, Massachusetts, in the early 1900s and is derived from Mokuhanga. These are prints made with no key block and only one-color block. The white line of the print separates the color fields on the block,” Hicks explains. “The block is then painted with watercolor, and then pressed with a Baren. This process was invented to reduce the amount of carving and woodblocks needed for a print, but the printing process is a lot slower. Some of my prints are a combination of white line and Mokuhanga.”

When it comes to what Hicks likes to make with his beloved technique, he is “always drawn to funny little characters and...animals doing human things.” According to Hicks, “With animals it doesn’t matter what age they are. They can be young or old and wise, and still get away with being playful and silly or just out to have fun. I tend to let nature take its course and inspire me in my art. If you see a character show up in my artwork, then you can believe that I had an encounter with that sort of creature in nature, a dream or maybe even a song brought them to mind. Each idea is a seed. Once planted, it grows into a new series.”

These series may emerge from a single seed, but it is just that—an idea. Hicks does not have a firm idea of how exactly this idea will emerge into its final physical form; he prefers to let the characters and their stories

bloom organically. “If it makes me smile or even giggle a little, then I know I’m on to something. As I create one, I see the next,” Hicks says. “They lead one to another until the end of that path. Some paths are longer than others.”

For a recent Jasper Project Tiny Gallery show the artist put together a mix of old and new—all coming together to tell a new story. A “woody theme” tied the collection together, with Bear Loves Honey being one of his favorites. “I was trying to make each print bring a smile and also evoke the imagining of the before and after. I try to capture the moment just before or just as the main event happens,” Hicks says. “You can imagine if there were more panels like a comic book, you would see the bear getting ready for a hike and packing his backpack to go look for honey. Afterwards he would be happy with his stash of honey. I tried to capture the moment he sees the bee and feels the anticipation of finding honey.”

Hicks hopes that when people view the pieces, they “will recognize these moments and use their own imagination to fill in the before and after.”

Hicks has been an enthusiastic member of the art community for years now, recalling one of his favorite memories as an artist when he was commissioned to make a commemorative print for Dawn Staley and the Lady Gamecocks 2022 National Championship.



WOODBLOCK PRINTMAKING TERMS

Mokuhanga

Traditional Japanese woodblock printmaking (moku = wood, hanga = printing) best known for mass producing images of Katsushika Hokusai’s The Great Wave off Kanagawa

Bokashi

A hand-application technique in Japanese woodblock printmaking that results in a variation in lightness and darkness of colors. The best-known examples are Hiroshige’s One Hundred Famous Views of Edo.

Washi

Traditional Japanese paper handmade from the fibers of three plants indigenous to Japan

Kento

A kento or pass mark is composed of two guides, a right-angled key in the lower right corner and a straight-line draw stop, known as a hikitsuke along an adjacent line. The paper rests on these marks.

Christmas On The Mount

A New Start to the Long Running Local Holiday Music Tradition

Story by Kevin Oliver

When I started the Christmas at Red Bank concert eighteen years ago, I had no idea I’d still be producing the show in 2023, or that it would become a much-loved local holiday tradition.

Back in 2006, I was promoting monthly Sunday evening gospel music performances as a member of Red Bank United Methodist Church, booking everything from southern gospel quartets to Christian rock bands. When it came time to plan a December show, I thought to myself, “I’ll just ask a few friends to come play some Christmas music, we’ll have a good time and maybe a few people will come out and enjoy it.” Then everyone I asked said yes, and we had a dozen artists to put on stage in two hours’ time—this is when the two songs per act format was born.

That first year we had Ryan Monroe (Just before he joined up with Band of Horses), Hannah Miller (who is now a successful Nashville based songwriter), and Chris Conner of Sourwood Honey and The South (one month before the cancer diagnosis which would take his life before the next year’s concert), among others. Just over 150 people came out to see and hear them play that night, and we considered it a success.

Over the next decade and a half, the concert grew and the list of performers who have played the show includes Mark Bryan (of Hootie and the Blowfish), Johnny Irion and Sarah Lee Guthrie, Lauren Lucas, Mac Leaphart, Danielle Howle, Brian Conner, Zach Seibert, Josh Roberts, and a multitude of others. Some have come back and played nearly every year, like Brent Lundy, James Etheridge, Jr., and Todd Mathis. Others made brief, yet memorable appearances—Stagbriar, The Restoration, Sea Wolf Mutiny, Sunshone Still. Every year’s show feels like a family gathering now, with familiar faces greeting new participants and welcoming them into the fold.

With every family some change is inevitable, but this past year has seen some major issues emerge that

required changes to be made. After a personal decision to change my own church and denominational affiliation, it became clear that the concert would need a new home if it were to continue.

That new location, Mt. Tabor Lutheran Church in West Columbia, has been very open, welcoming, and eager to help us host the concert, and I am excited about the possibilities that the historic sanctuary space there offers us. With the venue change comes a name change; the concert is now “Christmas On The Mount,” and it will tie into the regular music offerings that Mt. Tabor Lutheran is already known for.

The basic format of the show will not be changing much, and many of the same regular performers will be back again this year along with some new acts, and also some returning faces we haven’t seen in a while. As we’ve always promised, you’ll hear some traditional and some not-so-traditional songs of the season, played by some of the best musicians in South Carolina. It’s our way of telling you the Christmas story, and I couldn’t be happier with the potential of this new beginning for the show.

The concert is still free to attend, but we do accept donations; our charity beneficiary this year will be Central South Carolina Habitat For Humanity. Find the Facebook page “Christmas On The Mount” for updates on the list of performers for this year and any other announcements before the concert date, which is Sunday, December 3, 2023, at Mt. Tabor Lutheran Church, 1000 B Avenue, in West Columbia.



Homegrown Love Song

By Rhy Robidoux

after Allison Russell

I am the sunrise over bog-lands, cypress rising out of mosquito nest expanse, I'm the pasture of knee-high grass with the dusty mirage on the horizon. I'm the chicken of the woods prized by the forager with the thick, brown hands that tenderly pluck me from my mycelial maze.

I am mountain mint, homing carpenter bees, bumblebees, sweat bees, miner bees, mud dauber wasps, paper wasps, sphinx moths, and flies to my petals from monsoon to drought, dealing nectar to the needy in parking lot post apocalypse. I'm wood sorrel under viburnum, mistaken for good luck.

I am the spiderwort, vetch, and magnolia sharing shades of lavender. I'm the arrowwood plant crafted to kill the colonizers I descend from, my berries plucked by wrens, leaves crying at the last sign of frost. I'm the squirrel that stole my sphagnum moss and struck gold heart.

Rhy Robidoux is a queer poet, writer, and farmer born and raised in the Carolinas. They are a member of Queer Writers of Columbia, and their poetry has appeared in Screen Door Review. They are currently launching a farm and apothecary in Columbia, with a focus on teas, herbs, and education. You can connect with them on Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter @honkytonkwitch, and with the farm @honkytonkfarms on Instagram.

Stillness

by Joyce M. Rose-Harris

In memory of Eric Harris

Jingling house keys clinking
Against car keys is music
When slipped into the lock
The push, just right
Of a door swollen by humidity
Then closed, gently in case
I was asleep, no late night
Stealthiness just love in tender
Gentle movement, to kitchen
Then study, to take off your day.

A sigh of release and being home
We both make, you remove
Your uniform, watch a late night show
I hear a suppressed laugh
Already in bed, I mumble goodnight
You reply goodnight sweetie
I hear the TV clicked off
You stop in hallway bathroom
Moving toward our bedroom, you sit
And pray thinking God for your day
I touch you, you get under the covers
I turn for a goodnight kiss
Then go to sleep.

I've replayed this memory
Repeatedly since your death
It is my late night lullaby
That rocks me to sleep.

Joyce M. Rose-Harris is a political activist, blogger, and poet based in the Midlands. She first appeared in Jasper in 2015. She also has poems published in the anthologies Chemistry of Color: Cave Canem South Poets Responding to Art and Home is Where: An Anthology of African American Poets from the Carolinas. Joyce is a Graduate Fellow of The Watering Hole, a tribe of southern poets of color.



THE PIPELINE, BRIGHTON

BRANDY & THE BUTCHER goes out

Story by Kevin Oliver
Photography by Wade Sellers

Columbia punk rockers Brandy & the Butcher have had a well-traveled 2023; in May and June the band toured England, playing dates in London, Shrewsbury, Manchester, Brighton, and York. Then in July they ventured up to Rockaway Beach, New York to play a show with fellow South Carolinians Bedlam Hour and Soda City Riot. Like any good road trip, things happened, flights were canceled, luggage and gear were hauled, and new fans were gained. Wade Sellers of Coal Powered Filmworks was along for the ride, what follows are some of his photos of the experience along with a few stories from drummer Kevin Brewer and guitarist Jay Matheson.



May/June:

- THE BIRDS NEST, London, England**
- ALBERT'S SHED, Shrewsbury, England**
- SPINNING TOP, Manchester, England**
- THE PIPELINE, Brighton, England**
- YORK VAULTS, York, England**

**THE ROSE DEN, Rockaway Beach, NY
(with Bedlam Hour and Soda City Riot)**



“Our host Steve Iles promotes underground bands in England, complete with booking, feeding, and housing them while they’re in the country, making it possible for hundreds of bands like us.” -JM



“The New York show was our third with Bedlam Hour and Soda City Rio on the Bedlam Hour anniversary tour. I don’t know if Rockaway Beach was ready for South Carolina punk rock, but they got their fill of it that night.” -KB



“Brighton was an eight-hour drive, but the town was incredible, an old school seaside town with a very enthusiastic crowd and a lot of very liberal people, and it was a sold-out show.” -JM



“Then in York we played at a pub that was at least 100 years old. I enjoyed the UK hospitality and had a few good meals and as many regional cask ales as I could.” -JM



“I didn’t much care for the food, to be honest. On our last day in the UK we found a salad bar and I think I ate my body weight in fresh vegetables. All of the transportation worked out beautifully and was uneventful. Unlike the New York trip.” -KB

Jason Kendall's New Film *The Next Chapter*

Story by Wade Sellers
Photography by Jason Kendall

The poisoning of a young person's passion for what they love through overuse of that talent has been well documented in all areas of our society. Whether a brilliant young chess mind, a musical prodigy, or young athlete with skill beyond their age, the push to be as great as you can be, or greater than you are capable is hard to resist when praised by others. Wanting to not disappoint those around you, one's love of their field can be taken away by simply becoming your life. Dissolving that bitterness can be a long road.

For artist and filmmaker Jason Kendall, football was this passion. His new documentary project *The Next Chapter* follows the Ridge View High School program during their 2023 spring practice. Ridge View's varsity football team had to vacate all wins from their 2022 season due to a South Carolina High School League ruling that the team used three ineligible players that year.

Kendall was drawn to the high school program because his brother coaches with the team. "Our initial thought was that we would come out to film practice, shoot a few short interviews and get some highlights from the spring game to use in putting together some content that could be used to boost interest in the football program, show off for spring, provide us with some marketing material, and make something that could benefit everyone involved for little or no cost. What ended up happening was I was witness to one of the most compelling football stories in high school football."

Jason Kendall was a gifted football player, working his way through middle and high school, playing with a talent above his age group. Put on the field so much by his coaches that by his senior season he was playing through multiple injuries, limited practices to heal, all to play in every aspect of his team's game plan. Serious college recruiting interest in his junior year of high school dried up towards the end of his senior year.

After a year as a walk on at the University of South Carolina under Sparky Woods, he renewed his college playing career at North Greenville College.

Kendall was injured in a kitchen fire the summer after his first year at North Greenville college. Recovering from 3rd degree burns he committed himself to recovery and to the game of football even more than he had before.

Finishing his second year at North Greenville and another year of unexpected changes, he left the game. During the team's post-season award ceremony that year Kendall received the Christian Leadership Award. "After receiving my award, I went over to the head coach, shook his hand, and said I wasn't going to play football anymore. I was attending art school but thank you for the opportunity to play football for him, and I wished him and the team well," recalls Kendall. He eventually received his MFA from New York University.

Kendall has explored his turbulent relationship with football through installation works, film, music, and visual art. But his focus has never been limited to football. His 2015 "The Dorothy Project" explored gender roles and musical relationships that grew in the decades after the 1939 film, *The Wizard of Oz*.

2016 found Kendall creating *The Tonewood Experiment* for Jasper's 2nd Act Film Project. In the 5-minute experimental film he explores the idea of a musical instrument, in this case an electric guitar, taking over the role of the lead character in the narrative.

Every creative endeavor Kendall pursued seemed to explore areas of his life that the years of focus on football had covered up. "I abandoned my football roots many years ago and immersed myself in the art world while dissecting my experience as a player," Kendall says. "I became disengaged from the sport on all levels. It wasn't until I completed a body of artwork that spanned over 20 years of investigation

into the sport that I begin to embrace my history as a football player again."

With *The Next Chapter*, Kendall allowed himself to enter the world that he had distanced himself from many years before. "For the past 5 years, I've been working hard on growing as a person and opening myself up to the possibility of what I'm meant to do, what I want to do, and how to do it. After Wim (Roefs, owner of if Art gallery in Columbia) died, I started reaching out to the people doing things I wanted to do and asking them for advice. In doing so, I humbled myself in a way that allowed me to see the niche I could fill and let my talents and skills become a service while continuing to grow as a business professional and a creative. So, I reached out to several high school coaches with the idea of creating some content for their team for no cost, hoping to fill that niche and tell the kind of stories that only I can tell."

What was intended to be gathering footage for possible marketing content soon became a new entry into the sport he had familiarity with, but the artist found that there is a new age of athlete.

"They (the students) all live in an attention-seeking environment these days, and with the inception of the NIL and the way social media is used to recruit, they all understood that they were going to present a level of excellence. Still, I was surprised to find out how polished they were while filming during the interviews. To say I was impressed with them all would be a tremendous understatement," Kendall says. (NIL is the acronym for Name, Image, and Likeness and references new rules allowing college athletes the agency to financially profit from their own NIL.)

During filming, Kendall also found himself overwhelmed by the coaches themselves. "I was blown away by the quality of experience the coaches provided and how well the young men responded to their responsibilities as players and community members," Kendall says. "I never expected this from a high school team."

After a few days of gathering footage, Kendall approached the coaching staff with his thoughts for *The Next Chapter* project. The staff agreed and Jason continued filming, this time with a focus on completing the project as an exploration of these students and their mentors' motivation to move all of their lives and goals forward from a very public defeat.



Kendall could not ignore his on personal history and his unique ability to tell the story he saw forming in front of him. "As the days went by and the footage accumulated, I knew that I had something extraordinary on my hands, and I had to do justice to the team, coaches, players, program, school, and community by creating the best representation of the narrative I witnessed as my skill set would allow me to make."

Emotions ran high for Kendall when he reviewed the footage and edited the film. Screening the film for coaches was also an emotional moment, punctuated by a huge hug given to Kendall by the Ridge View head coach after the viewing.

Kendall's own personal connection with his subject also allowed him to reconcile a few moments from his own personal history with the sport. "If you were a player, especially a college-level player, you belong to a club in a certain sense. It's an experience that only those who've gone through it can understand. So, there's a level of trust you have immediately when you begin having a conversation about football. The only difference was a camera in the room during those moments."

You can visit kendallprojects.com for information on how to view *The Next Chapter*.





TIFFANYJ

Eclectic Soul and an Inspiring Story

Story by Kevin Oliver
Photography by Bree Burchfield

When Columbia soul, jazz, and R&B artist TiffanyJ scheduled the taping of a live performance at the SCETV studios that was designed to become her next album release, the preparations didn't include an ambulance for after the show—but maybe they should have. The week before the taping, she fell ill and was told she needed to have her gallbladder removed; with the concert booked, tickets sold, sound and video production paid for, the decision was made to wait until afterwards to schedule the operation. Her gallbladder tried to speed up the timeline, unfortunately.

"It was amazing, I was able to get through almost the whole show—then I started feeling pain again just before the last song," TiffanyJ recalled recently. "Up until that point the audience had no clue anything was wrong. I told them 'Y'all, I need five minutes to take a break and sit down' and it must have been pretty evident I was in pain if I couldn't get through just one more song." Her hospital stay began almost immediately after the performance, and one successful surgery later she was on the mend. The result of the day, "Solbird Sessions Live," premiered in September 2022 with a showing of the video (a six-

camera production shot by Wallace Media Company) and a live set from most of the same musicians who played on the album taping.

It is the culmination of nearly a decade of development and growth for TiffanyJ as an artist, with shades of jazz and retro soul throughout the run time and the electrifying presence of the multifaceted TiffanyJ front and center.

Her full band, led by musical director Antonio Mckie II, includes a host of local talent: Christopher Hopkins, Emanuel Johnson, Joshua Sullivan, and Justin Allen along with background vocalists Ke'Andra Davis, Kenyatta Adams, and Isaiah Bell. "This is an upgrade from the pandemic era production we did in 2021, "Solbird Sessions Live at the Warehouse," the artist says. "We redid some songs, introduced new music that hasn't been out before, and rearranged some other originals. Having the audience there this time really raised it to that next level for me."

Like many soul and R&B artists, TiffanyJ got her first exposure to the power of music when she was in church. "I grew up watching my mom sing in church every Sunday, and what attracted me to it was seeing people come up to her afterwards saying that she had touched their heart with her singing," TiffanyJ says. "That was one thing I aspired to do, but I figured out growing up, with a little more wisdom, you don't have to have that impact only in church. I grew past those four walls to be able to touch lives and hearts wherever I go. Church will always be the root of my tree, though."

Call her a soul artist, or a jazz singer, it really doesn't matter to TiffanyJ, since she is comfortable in any setting that she finds herself involved in. "For me as an artist my sound isn't really defined by one style, so it's easy for me to connect with and collaborate with different genres and be eclectic in that way, without staying in a box," she says.

TiffanyJ's talents extend past music, however. Her work in the community with young women has also grown over the past decade.

"This year we celebrated ten years of my Beauty You Are bootcamp. We had 42 girls this year for a two-day event with a sleepover from ages 6 to 16." The summer program is the linchpin of her work all year, she says.

"I'm passionate about the building of self-esteem and confidence in girls and youth—when I was twelve, I



attempted to commit suicide myself," she reveals. "It's all a part of what I do even with my music. I purposely did my live album in May, which is Mental Health Awareness Month, and I'm releasing it in September, which is Suicide Prevention Month, because I feel that my music has strong ties to both issues."

There is a method to what she has been building, TiffanyJ notes, and a plan for the future.

"My plan is for everything to be tied to mental health advocacy—I would love for Solbird Live Sessions to be a continuing platform that highlights artists other than just me and gives them a space to share things that build up self-esteem. I'd be the host for the other shows, we're doing mine as a kind of pilot project, so we'll see what happens after that. I want to be pushing and performing this new music as much as possible."



10 Questions for Two Theatre Artists

Marilyn Matheus & Ric Edwards

Story by Cindi Boiter

Photography by Bree Burchfield

The miraculous transformation of a mere mortal into a theatre artist is one of the great mysteries of the arts. How does a seemingly shy, reserved human who observes all the practices and policies of polite culture change into the sultry killer Roxie Hart, Grizabella the Glamour Cat, or the malicious villain dentist Orin Scrivello? So much of what makes an actor a character happens in a place in their hearts and heads that the audience will never know. But Jasper wanted to give our readers a glimpse into this very private process by asking ten questions of two of our 2023 Play Right Series actors, Marilyn Matheus and, back for his second season, Ric Edwards. Here's how they responded.

Jasper: Tell us about your beginnings in theatre. When and where did you start, did you ever leave, what made you come back or continue?

Edwards: My journey in the world of theater embarked amidst the cultured ambiance of Leiden, a picturesque Dutch city steeped in history and renowned for its artistic vibrancy. Nestled along its charming canals and

cobblestone streets, I took my initial steps upon the grand stages. I had the privilege of experiencing a British education, an enriching layer to my artistic and intellectual growth. Though my pursuits briefly ventured into other realms, Leiden's rich artistic heritage, marked by its world-class museums and vibrant arts scene, continually influenced my path toward the enriching world of the theater. Laying the foundation for a remarkable journey that would eventually lead me across the ocean to the bustling stage of Chicago.

Matheus: As a child, my first role on stage was Rosa Parks in a school play about the bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama. I was about 8 years old; it was the 60s, at the height of the civil right movement. As a willing participant, my teachers would always choose me to speak or recite poetry. I won a city-wide poetry contest for reciting The Ballad of the Landlord by Langston Hughes. On Sundays I'd go to work with my mom at the library and read Plays for Children and then act out the scenarios with my neighborhood friends. My front porch was our stage. We were always performing, singing, and dancing for

our families at gatherings and in talent shows at school. Performing became a natural part of my formative years. Later, I studied at the Cleveland Playhouse Youth Theatre, performed with the East Cleveland Community Theatre, and won a theatre scholarship to Kent State University.

Jasper: What was the first role you played that convinced you the stage is where you belong and how did it deliver this message to you?

Edwards: During my first production ever, Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream, I was initially cast as Peter Quince or "The Wall," a character known for its comedic quirks. However, fate intervened, and I found myself stepping into the shoes of Nick Bottom, a role filled with depth and complexity. The transformation from Wall to Bottom was a profound journey into the heart of theater. The audience's laughter and applause affirmed that this was where I truly belonged. It was a transformative moment that solidified my passion for acting and my deep connection to the world of theater.

Matheus: It was a play I saw at Karamu House in Cleveland, OH called Viet Rock. I was so moved by the music, the movement, and the message that I knew I would be a part of this world for the rest of my life. I was 9 years old.

Jasper: What do you do to prepare yourself for playing a role?

Edwards: Preparing for a role is a meticulous craft. I delve into the character's psyche, dissect their motivations, and navigate the script's narrative intricacies. Physical and vocal exercises are essential tools for character embodiment.

Matheus: Research. I try to find out as much as I can about the time period, the people, the vernacular, anything that leads to knowledge about the character. Then, table work with the director and other actors is an important part of the process to decide how we bring the people on those pages to life.

Jasper: Do you adhere to one of the 5 commonly used acting techniques or methodologies and, if so, which one and how has it served you?

Edwards: My approach to acting is a unique blend, drawing inspiration from Stanislavski's emotional authenticity, Uta Hagen's truthful behavior, and the Alexander Technique's exploration of physicality. This

eclectic fusion has enriched my portrayal of diverse roles, adding layers of depth and realism to my performances. **Matheus:** I was introduced to these methods in college as a theatre major. I don't necessarily subscribe to one over the other. I think it depends on what the role calls for as to what method I use.

Jasper: What 5 words would you use to describe how it feels to be on stage?

Edwards: Electrifying, mesmerizing, euphoric, transcendental, and magnetic.

Matheus: Honored. Connected. Comfortable. Confident. Exhilarated.

Jasper: Do you ever suffer from stage fright? If so, how does it present itself and how do you combat it?

Edwards: Always. It's the flutter of excitement before the curtain rises, a racing heart, and the awareness of the countless small, unpredictable moments that live theater brings. In these moments, I embrace the unpredictability, drawing from my training in the Alexander Technique. I use deep breathing and affirmations to center myself, allowing me to focus on those small, nuanced details that make each performance unique. Once the lights come on, that initial nervous energy transforms into a vibrant energy that fuels my connection with the audience and the magic of live theater.

Matheus: Oddly, I rarely experience stage fright on stage. I experience some anxiety during the preparation process and also directly following an audition. When I'm prepared, I have the space to calm down and enjoy the experience.

Jasper: When you watch someone else act, what are you looking for?

Edwards: When observing fellow actors, I'm drawn to the captivating presence they bring to the stage. It's that ineffable quality that has the power to engage the audience on a profound level, allowing them to become immersed in the world of the performance. This magnetic connection between actor and audience is what truly elevates a theatrical experience to something extraordinary.

Matheus: Connection. Connection to the work or the moment, connection to the character and other characters, and connection to the audience.

Jasper: Locally, whose theatre work do you most admire and why?

Edwards: Michael Hazin is a remarkable figure in our local theater community. His work ethic and dedication are truly inspiring. Michael approaches each role with a level of commitment that's exceptional. He delves deep into character development, leaving no stone unturned, and his performances consistently radiate authenticity. Michael's passion for the craft and his unyielding pursuit of excellence serve as a shining example for aspiring actors in our community.

Matheus: I appreciate and admire everyone with the courage and commitment to learn lines, create a character, climb onto the boards, and present to an audience. I believe there's something to learn from everyone.

Jasper: Same question, but on a bigger stage and living or dead?

Edwards: On a grander theatrical stage, the esteemed Sir Patrick Stewart commands my deepest admiration. His iconic portrayal of Captain Jean-Luc Picard in Star Trek holds a special place in my heart. I fondly recall watching Star Trek episodes with my dad, sharing in the captivating adventures of the USS Enterprise and the wisdom of Captain Picard. Sir Patrick's commanding presence and his ability to convey both authority and empathy left an indelible mark on my appreciation for the art of acting. His performances not only exemplify masculine acting excellence but also serve as a cherished connection to cherished memories with my father. Which is what it's all about. The privilege to serve moments.

Matheus: I admire the standard icons, of course. Sidney Poitier, Cicely Tyson, Denzel Washington, Helen Mirren, Meryl Streep, Tom Hanks, Viola Davis, as well as Paul Giamatti, Uzo Aduba, and Ariana DeBose, are just a few of the actors who I admire and who inspire me. There are too many to name.

Jasper: Finally, what role do you aspire to perform (or perform again) that you believe you were born to play?

Edwards: Richard The Third.

Matheus: I aspire to play myself in a one woman show about my life and experiences. I was certainly born to play that.

METHOD MADNESS

While there are a number of acting techniques and many theatre artists adhere to a combination of methodologies or create their own, there are five distinctive acting techniques recognized today that most artists say they follow. They are:

STANISLAVSKI

Developed by Constantin Stanislavski, this technique seeks to bring a sense of realism to the character by asking standard questions about the character's places in the world writ large.

STRASBERG/METHOD

Inspired by Stanislavski, Lee Strasberg developed this methodology by encouraging actors to use their own actual emotional experiences to inform how their characters would respond to situations.

MEISNER

Also influenced by Stanislavski, Sanford Meisner developed this technique by encouraging actors to rely primarily on instinct as they embrace their characters' circumstance, using improvisation and imagination as tools

CHEKHOV

A very physical technique that utilizes gestures and physicality to interpret how a character will act and respond.

MAMET'S PRACTICAL AESTHETICS

Created by director and playwright David Mamet, this technique involves tools used by Stanislavski, Meisner, and philosopher Epictetus, and uses a four-step process to approach a scene – the literal, the want, the essential action, and the what if.

Introducing A Story of the City: Poems Occasional and Otherwise by Ed Madden

By Cindi Boiter

I remember the first time I sat at a table with Ed Madden

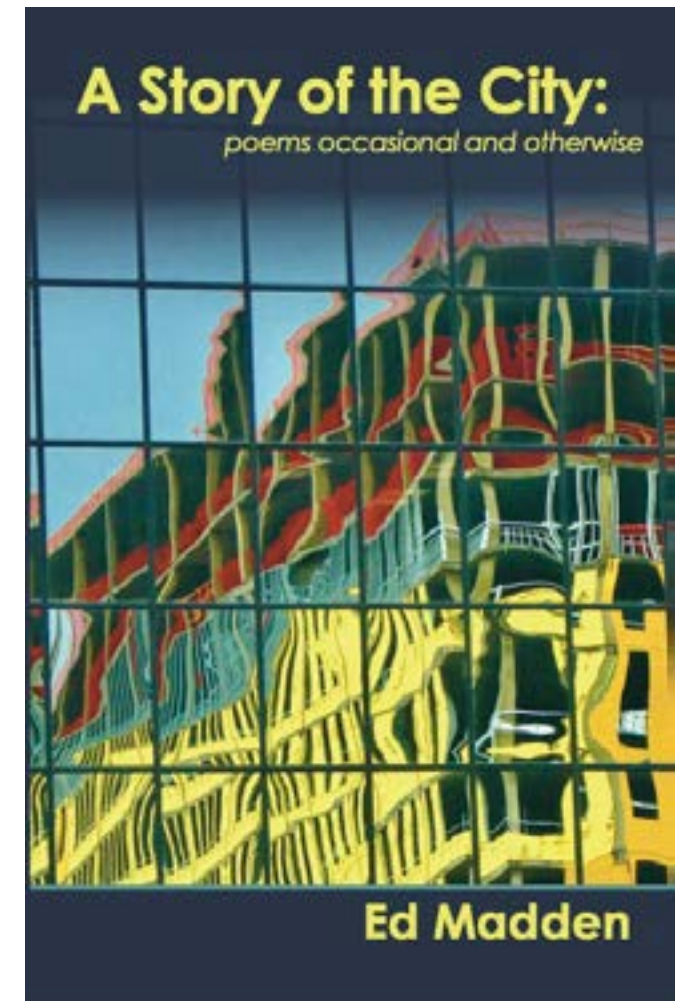
. Drue Barker, who was coming in as the new director of the women's studies program at USC, had come to town and Ed, Julia Elliott, and I had taken her down to the Hunter Gatherer pub on the university side of Main Street to chat.

It was sometime in 2007 and I felt like I was among royalty.

I knew of Julia because she sang in the alt-band Grey Egg, which may be the most innovative and eclectic musical group Columbia, SC has ever seen. She had copies of the band's most recent CD to share with Ed and Drue.

I knew of Ed because it seemed like everyone knew of Ed. A proudly-out gay man, his reputation as a poet and activist set a standard for community engagement. I'll admit now that these three people, all clearly commanders of their own fates, were a bit intimidating. I was just an adjunct instructor looking to find a new place to grow myself, having spent the last two decades teaching, writing, and watching my daughters grow into adults. If I had known then how many tables Ed and I would sit at together over the years to come, how many projects we would hatch and secrets we would share, I would have taken better note of our surroundings than I did. I would have recorded those observations like historical artifacts of the moment. I would have recognized that I was meeting a person who would play a unique and cherished role in the rest of my life.

Fast forward eight years and I had the proud pleasure of cheering Ed on as he took the title of Poet Laureate for the City of Columbia. A brave and selfless thing to do. Ed embraced the role like it was made for him,



working with Lee Snelgrove to create a culture of renegade poetry at the same time that he seamlessly elevated the importance of poetry by creating beautiful and profoundly honest responses to the events that occurred in the life of the city.

As the first poet laureate in the capitol city of a state that has gone without a state poet laureate for three years and counting, Ed's position took on greater significance than it had to. While South Carolina's first state poet laureate, Archibald Rutledge, had served a lifetime appointment from 1934 until his death in 1973, followed in succession by Helen Von Kolnitz Hyer, Ennis Rees, Grace Freeman, and Bennie Sinclair, in 2020, Marjory Wentworth, the sixth person to hold the

title, left the post and, as late as summer 2023, Governor Henry McMaster had failed to fill the position. In the absence of a government or appointing body following through on its responsibility to maintain the continuity of leadership in the poetic arts, poets throughout the state looked to Ed Madden as their guide. And guide them he did. Soon, city poets laureate were being named throughout the state in Charleston, Greenville, Rock Hill, the Pee Dee, and more.

Why does it mean so much to poets to be represented by an honored one of their own? Several reasons, none of which are monetary. In fact, the small budget once allocated to the state poet laureate was rescinded by former Governor Mark Sanford in 2000. There is a smaller budget for the Columbia city laureate, but it all goes toward supplies needed for various projects and never sees the inside of the laureate's pocket.

It is validating to wordsmiths of all genres to have an artist among them who represents the importance of the part they play, we play, in the creation of our culture. The poet laureate of a city or state is a role model for all of us who confess our words and perceptions to paper in an attempt to make sense of the chaos that surrounds us. That person reminds us that the act of creative writing is not an exercise in frivolity but rather an important practice in interpreting the turns of events that make up our history.

Similarly, patrons of poetry depend upon the writers among us, especially our poet laureate, to help us find truth in ways that sooth and unite us. Time and again, Ed Madden reminded us that in addition to being a city of individuals whose unique gifts intimately design the world around us, we are also a cohort of creatures living life together at this particular place and time and are forever united by the community we create.

So much has changed over the almost two decades I've called Ed Madden my colleague, friend, and collaborator. Neighbors have moved, both to and away from us. Elected officials have come to office, created policy, and moved on. Friends and allies have passed away from us, leaving their own legacies on the landscape of our home. And because Ed Madden used his inimitable gifts to record his perceptions of this community and commit them to paper to preserve for posterity, the record of our lives as citizens of Columbia, South Carolina will live on in the volume—*A Story of the City: poems occasional and otherwise*, Columbia, SC 2015-2022.

On a tour of the State House grounds At the Strom Thurmond Monument

*No room at the top to list her,
The eldest sister, dropped in
At the bottom, an afterthought
A smudge in the stone, a scar;*

*What no one would say or said
While he was alive, though now
He's dead, she's there, the lie
Filled in, carved out again:*

*That four kids is five, and standing
Ten-foot-tall is really
Eight, that history is messy
And written too quickly, and what's*

*Written in stone
Is often wrong.*

-Ed Madden



OPUS & THE FREQUENCIES

For Opus and the Frequencies, All Frequencies Welcome, is More Than a Motto

Story by Christina Xan
Photography by Kati Baldwin

Genre-bending and categorically defiant, Opus and the Frequencies has emerged as a force to be reckoned with in the local music scene. Behind the name are four people with an innate love for music, anchored by a desire for storytelling, vulnerability, and authenticity.

The core of the band is the eponymous Opus (vocals, keys, saxophone, clarinet, and more), who originally did not want to be a musician. It was a challenge from a band director to play the saxophone—band itself a simple mix-up in his middle school schedule—that eventually led to music being his driving force. As soon as he found music, Opus became dedicated to creating unique sounds, a journey that eventually led him to the Frequencies.

Columbia is rife with talented musicians, but Opus was not interested in just sound. What he was looking for was raw emotion, something unspeakable and intangible. All at different times, he got the opportunity to hear Jesse Tortorella (drums), Steven Tapia-Macias (bass), and Kirk Barnes (guitar) play. As Opus recalls it: “I wanted the boys that we have now. Luckily, the universe gave me exactly what I asked.”

Today, nearly seven years after forming, Opus and the Frequencies have found their identity as an eclectic group with an eclectic sound. Though Barnes says their genre is best described as “a mixture of rock and funk,” the band sees it as a point of pride that they do not sound like anybody else—sometimes even themselves.

“Everybody always asks, what’s your genre? And it’s like, I don’t think we have one. We’re all over the place,” Opus says, “My music taste is all over the place, so why shouldn’t the music I play be? I feel like what we do should be all over the place because I don’t like being limited, sticking to one sound or genre.”

This inherent variation is echoed in their live performances as well. A band has to be intuitive, to read an audience, and, as Barnes says, “play what feels right in the moment.” Opus indicates that there is a current that runs throughout the room during a show, a charge that keeps the energy moving, and everyone has to be connected for it to work. As the front man, Opus directs energy into the rest of the band, which comes back through him and into the crowd, circling back into him—and the cycle repeats.

“I want the audience to know when we play that, yes, obviously if you paid to see the show, it’s for you, but the show is not for you,” Opus asserts, “The show is for the band to enjoy, and we love it and give that energy out, and that’s what then makes the audience enjoy it so much.”

Tapping into this is what has led to two of the band’s notable ‘we made it moments’: their first time playing at New Brooklyn Tavern and their recent July tribute to James Brown. These are the experiences that provide them the fuel to work on their own music, particularly their first EP, “You’re Trash, Kid,” which was released in January of 2023.



The EP consists of five songs, a vibrant mix of sound and emotion where, around each corner is an unexpected turn. Almost all the songs are created collaboratively; take, for instance, “Jesse’s Song.” When Barnes played his hand-written tune (one oft-requested by a college friend) for the band, they all immediately felt a connection. After hearing it, Opus penned lyrics about missing old friends, and the four honed it sonically into its final version—and named it after the college friend that first heard it.

Reflecting on their journey, the group sees Columbia as having been vital to the ways they have blossomed. However, as they ruminate on their future—which includes new music coming in 2024—they recognize that significant growth must take place to shore up the city as a supportive space for all artists.

“I think we need more connection between the art scenes; there’s not enough communication from the inner circle to the outer circle,” Opus argues. “Right now, there’s a centralized group of musicians that more or less control the scene. Fortunately, we’re blessed to be a part of that group, but there are newcomers trying to get into the group who can’t and people who have already been here that don’t get recognized—I know this because I used to be on the outside.”

Barnes echoes this, noting that while “it is not any one person’s fault, ... there is a lot of socialized power here” that can only be remedied by larger, established venues dedicating themselves to local artists, versus just regional or national, as well as smaller, central venues taking chances on emerging artists.

These concerns are only reflections of the care the group has for the city. This is a place they are fully committed to continuing to grow in while also assisting in the growth of. It will take a village to fortify this community as the art-oriented space that so many creators desire it to be, but the embrace of the effervescent talent that is Opus and the Frequencies is proof we are already on the right track.

“This city, these venues are special. We’ve played a bunch of shows here, made friends here.” Opus says. “The people are what have made this place special. We’ve had a lot of good memories here, and we plan to keep that going.”

The Curious Lives of Nonprofit Martyrs

by George Singleton

α JASPER review

by Cindi Boiter

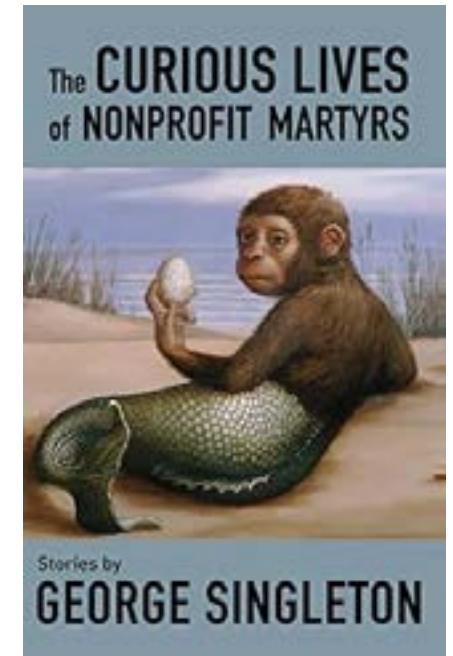
In a recent social media exchange in which this reviewer asserted that George Singleton’s new book of short stories, *The Curious Lives of Nonprofit Martyrs* (Dzanc Books, 2023), is, in a word, *lovely*, the author himself addressed me, saying that he did not think his work had ever been described as *lovely* before.

I was taken aback, as my notes in the margins of this collection would attest, if they could, given that the word *lovely* is scribbled there no less than one dozen times with passages demonstrating the loveliness of this book circled, underlined, and starred throughout.

I am delighted to have the opportunity to elaborate here.

As a reader of a certain age born to the imperfect soil of Spartanburg County, SC, Singleton’s stories evoke in me filtered memories of a homeland I knew and loved before I knew how little there was to love about it. Well written stories, lyrics, and lines of poetry can do this for us—filter out most of the -isms that our grown up and enlightened psyches won’t let through anymore. This is how we can read anything from the Waverly Novels to the Christian Bible without constantly cringing.

But rather than cringing when we read Singleton’s stories about bad parents, wayward spouses, and ethically compromised southerners in unfortunate situations, we can celebrate that the writer so capably shares these tales that we can not only temporarily check into our own personal versions of the Ignorance is Bliss Motel, but we can remember that not everyone who picnics on the lush grounds of a Confederate War Monument believes the monument should have ever been built in the first place. This is what George Singleton excels at; reminding us that good ol’ boys and good ol’ girls may be, in fact, actually good, even if they aren’t observant.



And in a world in which friends and neighbors are too often urged to choose sides about everything from music tastes to ice cream flavors, this is, in a word, *lovely*.

Lovely, too, is Singleton’s unique knack for bringing back to memory both artifacts and phrases from a time that was what a lot of people want to call simpler, but was, in fact, incredibly complicated. When was the last time you thought about Rose’s department store, Blue Horse spiral notebooks, or heard the phrase, “You ain’t right” aptly applied? Or heard tale of a character named Big Ned who on occasion shot a pistol into the air “if someone tried to fish beyond the rules of common decency ...?”

For example, in “Standard Hole” Singleton uses a combination of banana pudding, sweet potato casserole, saltwater taffy, and a shaker of pepper snatched from

Continued on p. 68

A DESIRE TO COMMUNICATE

Jean Lomasto is a Costume Artist Turned Painter

Story by Emily Moffitt
Photography courtesy of the artist

Sometimes it seems like a disdain for one's high school years is a rite of passage for every American teenager. For Jean Lomasto, this was a shared experience, except for one saving grace: theatre class. Lomasto may not have known at the time, but this class, along with a history of daydreaming in classes and playing with paper dolls, ultimately shaped her future.

Lomasto, born in Brooklyn, moved to South Carolina when she was 15. The culture shock of living in the South as a Puerto Rican woman during the 1960s was tough to experience, but the early exposure to theatre helped pave the pathway of her undergraduate studies. She attended the University of South Carolina and pursued costume design, surrounding herself with the craft both in and outside of classes. "I had to work, so I got a job in the costume shop here at USC the year that Lyn Carroll took over," Lomasto says. "She was a marvelous craftswoman and historian. I learned so much about draping, construction, and the history of clothing from her."

Lomasto also found great joy in Terry Bennett's scene design class and went on to work with him for a few summers as his costume shop advisor. After garnering encouragement from the two, Lomasto decided to pursue a Master of Fine Arts in costume design at the University of Virginia. Her career took her to new heights post-graduation as Lomasto decided to move back to New York. After gaining some guidance from the legendary studio of Jim Henson, she started to work on several projects alongside Carroll again, who was at the time working for Tony award winning designer Santo Loquasto. This experience allowed her incredible opportunities including the chance to work on costumes for *Radio Days*, a film by Woody Allen from 1987.



The intersection of creative disciplines is a reasonable turn of events for artists involved in multiple creative outlets. Lomasto has experienced the theatre scenes of New York and South Carolina first-hand, and notes that they are not all that different; she says, "theatre people in New York are wonderful and unpretentious. If they like your work ethic, they respect you and help you. The theatre scene in Columbia is somewhat similar. Once you work with someone and it turns out you work well together, you will most likely work together again."

Lomasto poignantly points out that our actions today are often dictated by our past. Taking this statement into account helps understand some of the creative decisions she makes currently with her visual art, even if costuming is not always overtly referred to when she begins a new painting. "I do a lot of underlayers of collage, using tissue paper. It so happens the weight of commercial patterns is perfect for this, and the lines and written instructions coming through are a bonus," she says.



When Lomasto decides to create a new body of work or painting, she says what she thinks about primarily is capturing and conveying a certain sensation through her piece. Drawing inspiration from a photo of something that impressed her is a quick way for her to start putting paint or crayons on the canvas. "I collage and mark the surface with paint and pencils or crayons and then block in the colors," she says. "I usually work on more than one piece at a time, which keeps things balanced and not pressured to get one perfect." She often finds herself painting impressions of cities she has visited and loved, but there is little figurative work in her portfolio.

Lomasto has nothing but praise for the work that artists involved with the Columbia theatre industry

create. Of course, there are a few reminders for the patrons that experience this art, too. "Regarding the high price of theatre tickets in Columbia for these top-notch productions, what people are paying to see did not really happen by magic," she says. "Many people were up until 2 a.m. painting scenery, hanging lights, sewing, and ripping for less than \$100 a week."

Lomasto mentions that it would be extremely beneficial for Columbia to open a costume shop that could serve each theatre venue, rather than having a few isolated costume designers doing the work for everyone. She holds great pride in the work she has done for Columbia, particularly for Trustus. After all, there is one thing that Lomasto mentions as her motivation to create—the desire to communicate.

STANDING TALL

Singer/songwriter (and all-around sideman) Darren Woodlief brings ADHD, autism diagnoses front and center to his creative process



Story by Kyle Petersen
Photography by Brodie Porterfield

Darren Woodlief, a Columbia native, has also been a fixture in Columbia's music scene for the last two decades.

And in some ways, we mean that quite literally—Woodlief stands 6 foot, 6 inches tall and is an imposing figure on stage, even with his gentle giant vibes. But his regular appearance as bassist with groups ranging from Saul Seibert's conceptual psych-drone project Zion to the winsome folk-rock of Admiral Radio as well as his collaborations with everyone from alt-country singer/songwriter Todd Mathis to fiddle player extraordinaire Kristin Harris have made him an oft-present background player, even if he tended to under-serve his own songwriting (both under his Pocket Buddha moniker, which ranges from twangy Americana to contemplative electronica and baroque folk-rock, and more recently in his new alt-country outfit Hard Pass with singer/songwriter Stephen Stokes).

The reason for this, he understands now, is a bit more complicated than social anxiety or stage fright. You see, Woodlief is a licensed clinical psychologist who spends his days doing psychoeducational, ADHD, and mental health assessments, as well as autism and neuropsychological screenings. A self-described "late bloomer" who didn't begin graduate study until well into his 30s, as he received his own diagnosis for ADHD, the musician also recently learned that he was autistic as well.

"When I first started doing evaluations, I never had adults coming in for autism evaluations. Now we can't book people fast enough, the demand is too high," he explains. "This is not because of some increase in the prevalence of autism, it is just that these adults were raised in a time when the understanding of autism was limited. There is no one way it looks and many, like myself, have spent many years hiding our weirdness and stimming and sensory issues."

His journey to that point had been a rocky one. A high-achieving high school student and decent athlete, Woodlief passed on both playing Division 3 basketball and a full ride to The Citadel ("One of my favorite authors at the time was Pat Conroy, and I had read *Lords of Discipline*," he offers as an explanation) to go to USC, which proved to be a decidedly mixed blessing. His freshman roommate was a proficient guitar and banjo player who quickly inspired him to pick up the instrument again. Thanks to a few years playing violin in orchestra, Woodlief hit the ground running—on guitar at least. Academically he floundered, constantly jumping majors over the next few years with poor grades to show for his efforts. More worryingly, he also started drinking a lot.

"I didn't realize at the time that I was basically self-medicating for social anxiety," he explains. "It just got out of hand. I ended up being kicked out of school two separate times. And then I was just drinking a lot just to escape."

Eventually his family got him into recovery, an experience that inadvertently helped him out with some of his social and mental struggles.

"The 12 Step [program and] fellowship was incredibly helpful for me because of the structure," he notes. "It's not made for autistic folks, but it's really good for autistic folks who want to learn about social functioning and just life functioning. You get a sponsor, you get a network, you have people to call, people you need to reach out to. There's a structure that spells a lot of stuff out for how you are supposed to do things."

Woodlief would spend some time as a draftsman and play intermittent acoustic gigs in the proceedings years,

but the songwriting valve wasn't really hatched until he went back to graduate school. There he fell into a pattern of repeatedly working with collaborators as a sort of validating comfort blanket, he says.

"I needed somebody whose tastes I trusted to be like, 'this is actually okay,'" he confesses. "I was very much thinking about how it was going to be perceived, which ultimately kind of stifled me from doing much of it by myself. And I wasn't really aware of the value of doing it just to do it."

It was a combination of the autism diagnosis, and coming to terms with it, along with the pandemic lockdown that truly opened up his creative process.

"Most of the people who are diagnosed with autism show very overt signs of it—either they are nonverbal, or they do some of the stereotypical things [associated with the disorder]," he explains. "But as I was doing screening, I started to understand more and more that there's all of these other people out there who have just been getting by."

He points to the lacking "DSM," which are the standards and criteria set by the American Psychiatric Association, as well as the fact that there are common misunderstandings and misapprehensions about autism in the larger culture that make the label difficult. But gradually, he came to accept "the label" and started opening up to family and friends about it.

And now he recognizes the importance of songwriting in dealing with these issues.

"Now that I was paying attention, I realized that writing is how I make sense of myself," he says. "One aspect of my autism is called 'alexithymia,' which means that I have difficulty understanding and describing my emotions. It turns out that songwriting is the best, and maybe only, tool I have for doing this. For making some sense out of things that feel entirely overwhelming and too big to look at all at once."

Woodlief also says he was inspired and encouraged by many of the people he makes music with name-checking Saul and Zach Seibert, Jeff Gregory, Todd Mathis, Chris Compton, and Ken Mixon.

"I think it's great that he wants to have these conversations," says Mathis, who is producing the new Hard Pass album. "So many artists struggle with mental health issues, but historically most haven't talked about it openly. It should

be normalized. We're all just searching and seeking love, so compassion and understanding should be at the forefront when interacting with our fellow artists, and humans in general."

"I've also encouraged him to just say 'no' and not overcommit himself and focus on his own art. I've seen him do just that," Mathis says.

Woodlief also credits some keyboard lessons with Ryan Monroe (Band of Horses, Captain Easy) during the pandemic for unlocking some additional creative juices but emphasizes that he wants to make a difference when it comes to this topic.

To date, he's only released one song in this vein, the Tom Waitsian "My Label," which features a slinky groove with layered instrumentation as Woodlief croons about the misconceptions and apprehensions he felt in claiming the diagnosis. Others are in the works, he says, including material tentatively set for the Hard Pass full-length due this fall. Among these is a big-hearted heartland folk-rock tune called "Doing My Best," which (at least on the demo) has Hootie and the Blowfish vibes.

It's also, he says, "the most direct song I've written about being neurodivergent."

Woodlief is still in the early stages of figuring out what else his string of epiphanies might mean, but he knows he wants to do more to help people, and artists in particular, who are in a similar boat. Aside from the 12-step program, he notes, what has helped him most socially is collaborating with other musicians and writing his own material.

"Those collaborations pushed me to be honest with other people and to be open to other people in a way that I had not done before," he believes. "There's too many people that are stuck in the places that I've been, who need to realize that this possibility exists."

But most of all, he wants to stand up and be understood, to be an example of how this might work.

"I'm in a unique position, because of the qualifications that I have, and having a songwriting voice," he contends. "[And] I've learned that that's the stuff that I'm afraid to write, the stuff I'm afraid to let people hear, that's the stuff I need to dig into. I feel like it can be relatable to people who are struggling with the same thing."

REMEMBERING THINGS

Essay by Jenks Farmer

Writing about events from 30 years back and remembering details requires some tricks. Journals, scrapbooks, and a slide library are key. But other things carry memories. A pottery pencil holder, a copper plate from my days at the University of Zambia, and even the handmade curtains bring back moments and emotions.

In the early '90s, when young, newly returned South, arrogant me first met Betty, I quickly put her in a box with older ladies I'd known as a boy. That box included a prissy church organist who kept clear vinyl on all her furniture and a bible schoolteacher who sent me home for using sinful language. Durn her.

I had come back here, reluctantly, for a job offer. I got to spearhead the new Botanical Garden at Riverbanks Zoo. Volunteers came every Tuesday to do physical work, but they also went to political meetings where powerful folks I didn't know voted on our Garden budgets. They were

emissaries. Betty started out shoveling compost but soon switched to library work. She had soft, pale hands and practical, polished nails.

In her gray pants and pastel blouse, books suited her better. When we got volunteer t-shirts, Betty said, "Oh! Look at that flower design! Did you draw it?" But she never wore a T-shirt. Women like Betty didn't wear T-shirts. She'd married a powerful, respected commander at Fort Jackson and knew how to talk, walk, and dress the part.

At first, I couldn't see any connection between the ladies in that box and me, a young, rule-challenging, outspoken gay guy.

She probably lived in a very tidy ranch house with a boring boxwood hedge while I lived in a once abandoned wreck of a house where bamboo grew through the deck. The place was special as it had been the set of *The Garden*

Spot, a '60s TV show hosted by Willie Freeland. It faced Rosewood Drive, squeezed between Hardee's and the Beverage-Mart. The backyard was an impenetrable patch of pine trees tangled with wrist-thick wisteria vines and bamboo. Through it, I could hear the shooting range and revelry from Fort Jackson. I didn't need to get any closer to folks of that mindset.

But Betty figured out that we were physically connected. Her perfectly maintained brick ranch backed up to those same woods.

She needed someone to do yard work. I needed extra income. A few hot afternoons of that, and soon, she asked me to stay for supper. Then she introduced me to her family. Her blouses nor her perm ever changed. Her pale, wrinkled hands worked but never seemed dirty. How did she garden with a simple diamond wedding ring on? Why did she want to tell me stories while we dined? Slowly, we were like family. I was the gay-son she never had. She was my in-town Mom.

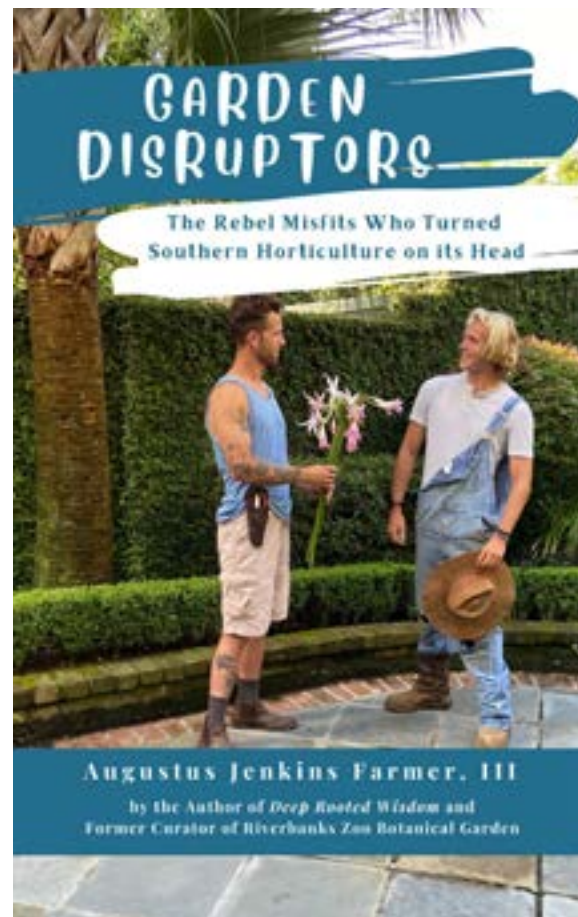
When I started dating a young journalist, Betty invited him to supper. As a military wife, she'd hosted thousands of young soldiers at this table. I'm pretty sure she had never asked them the questions she asked us. Mom questions; she was making sure I'd made the right choice. Patrick and I bought a house that had a study with three walls of windows. We dreamed of floor to ceiling Roman shades. Betty sewed them by hand.

Those shades surround me thirty years later. Being in this room is kind of like being inside a jewelry box.

Over the course of writing this new book, journals, photo albums, and even long talks with her daughters helped me confirm details. But those Roman shades, a bit tattered now, renew an unexpected connection. The sunlight changes the patterns on them as shadows fall from a craggy, thorny Mayapple tree. I planted it as a seedling. Now it towers and casts shadows on the creamy fabric. Embossed into the fabric is a pale print of rotund Bourbon roses.

It never occurred to me until now, but I'm pretty sure Betty had a blouse of the same fabric.

Jenks Farmer's new book, *Garden Disruptors: The Rebel Misfits Who Turned Southern Horticulture on its Head* (self-published 2023), is a telling of antics of the odd-ball gardeners who built Riverbanks Zoo Botanical Garden in Columbia, SC. These raucous and provocative stories focus on the hidden controversies of the 90s culture and gardening world of the old South.



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LOCAL ALBUM REVIEWS

By Kevin Oliver

Lowcountry - Lowcountry



Since 2012, composer and arranger Matthew White has been working in the South Carolina and the Georgia Sea Islands, specifically St. Helena Island, documenting songs and oral histories of the Gullah Elders, those from the Gullah culture who speak the language and still have the memories and history. This new musical ensemble, Lowcountry, is an offshoot of that work, taking the spoken words and sacred hymn traditions and weaving them into a tapestry of jazz music and rhythms.

The St. Helena Island Singers figure prominently here; the trio including Gracie Gadsen, Rosa Murray, and Joseph Murray pop up in separate instances lining out traditional folk songs, reminiscing about attending rural prayer houses, and invoking sometimes familiar tunes.

White, on trumpet, and Quentin Baxter (of Grammy-winning Charleston group Ranky Tanky), on drums, provide the foundation for these tracks, all either composed or arranged by White, and a rotating cast of other voices and players see action throughout.

The extended pieces here follow a pattern, where a spoken moment from either of the Murrays, or Gadsen, is followed by a composed section of music that relates to what was just said.

“If you can’t line a hymn, don’t raise it,” begins “Raise the Hymn,” which refers to how the songs were sung in the prayer houses due to the lack of hymnals—with one person “lining” out the hymn by singing the lyric and melody first, and the congregation repeating after them. The person lining out the hymn, then, would need to know the whole song to be able to lead it.

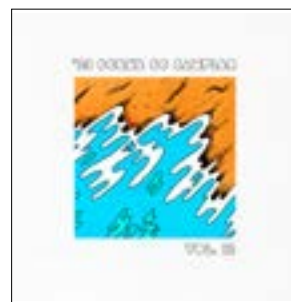
The short interlude is followed by Gadsen’s ancient-sounding voice lining out the first verse of the well-known Christian hymn “Were You There,” followed by the Charleston Symphony String Quartet’s subdued response to her call, and segueing into Baxter and company’s rhythmic jazz interpolation that features interplay between the piano of Demetrius Doctor and a sax solo turn on the melody by Chris Potter.

Gadsden’s storytelling interlude about the different praise houses pops up along the way like a PBS documentary narration, yielding again to a more interpretive Potter sojourn, then the whole piece concludes in a denouement that incorporates the hymn melody once again. It’s a journey, to be sure, one that paints vivid imagery with every measure.

“Watchman,” is another trek worthy of a movie of its own; Rosa Murray is a soulful, jazzy presence there. “Prayer” is more storytelling woven into song structure, and the closing “Come By Here” wraps up the experience in a familiar tune, albeit one done in a theatrical, dramatic fashion.

Does Lowcountry achieve its lofty goals? Yes, if the narration by Gullah Gullah Island star Ron Daise can be taken as an embedded statement of purpose on the music: “They should linger from generation-to-generation lending meaning to the past, nurturing strength and hope for the future.”

2023 SceneSC Sampler Showcases Diversity of South Carolina Music Scene



Since 2008, the little website that could, SceneSC.com, has been compiling sets of music from across South Carolina and releasing the “SceneSC Sampler” every couple of years. Looking back, they’ve become a timeline of much of the state’s musical history, and inclusion on a volume has long been considered a sign of at least some level of local notoriety. For 2023, SceneSC’s David Stringer has assembled a lengthy 33 tracks that span multiple genres

and styles, showcasing not only the depth of talent in our state, but the breadth of diversity as well. Many of the tracks are exclusive to the sampler, too, making it a must-have piece of local music.

Some of the highlights include hip-hop from Charleston-based rapper Sxvxt with “The Vow,” a fully realized hip-hop love song with a West Coast style slow groove, and Nxx Friday’s “Beautiful People,” a retro-leaning slice of electro-funk with some breath-defying verses.

Postpunk and noise rock get some love, from Gamine’s near-goth postindustrial “Capitol” to the insistent drone of Leta Facta’s “Applause.”

Need to chill out a bit? Try Infiniterefall, “New Genesis,” which tops a drum and bass foundation with an early 00’s chillwave vibe, or Invisible Low-End Power and “Cicadas,” the restrained majesty suggesting a meeting of Radiohead and the National.

If you’re in search of a little folk and twang, check out the humorous “Suck it Up,” from Tom Coolidge, the dark folk harmonies of Admiral Radio’s “Tragedia,” or the Jackson Browne meets the Band feel of “Mona Lisa Motel,” from Hard Pass.

The SceneSC tradition has always been to lean heavy on the indie rock side of things, and there’s plenty of that here, but even within it, there are diverse options available. Death Ray Robin’s happy and sunny “Sun For Everyone,” Kat Hammond’s “Parking Ticket” that manages to be indie and retro simultaneously, the whispery bedroom-intimate pop of Cassidy Spencer’s “Friday the Thirteenth,” and the sugary disco dance floor groove of “Freeze Frame” by Human Resources. There’s punkabilly from Dim Jim and Rocco and His Bones, Alt-rock from KELLY, emo from Homemade Haircuts, and screamo from Candescant.

“I think compilation albums are a great way to introduce people to local music,” Stringer says. “We try to go a level deeper with exclusive songs, deep cuts, or unreleased material. It’s not just for the “singles,” or more popular tunes.” He says that he doesn’t expect listeners to love everything on it, however. “The goal was to make it flow so that listeners could find something they like throughout.”

Jeff Gregory of the Runout, one of many local bands new to the SceneSC sampler with their track “Too Little Too Late,” says it means having newly released music this

year, in a time when his band is still working on a new full length of its own. “It helps put your music in front of new potential listeners,” He adds. “And it connects the artists together, which can lead to cool and interesting things from shows to collaborations.”

Becca Smith of Admiral Radio has an interesting distinction, with a solo track of hers included on the 2009 sampler when she was a teenager and now in 2023, her duo with husband and musical partner Coty Hoover. “We are different than many of the acts included, and that’s what makes this so special,” Smith says. “To us it feels like a testament to the many genres and expressions we have here in South Carolina. You can always count on the SceneSC Sampler to serve as that jumping-off point for music discovery, but it’s one that feels even richer and more prideful because it all comes from right here in our own state.”

Decadence - Book Of The Redeemed



There comes a time in the shelf life of a heavy rock band when the sum total of its experience and commitment adds up to a career defining moment, whether it’s that hit song that connects with a mass audience, or just an artistic statement that is so clearly above and beyond anything else they’ve done to that point. For Columbia’s Decadence, this new album *Book of the Redeemed* is the latter—an astounding, bracing listen that reveals more depth and meaning with every page that’s turned.

The band has been a stalwart presence on the local and regional heavy music scene for a while, and this release was a long time coming—now we know why. Not only is the production and songwriting top notch, but singer Scott McGrady’s lyrics are deeply personal. This had to be a difficult set of songs to write and record, not to mention let loose into the world for others to judge if they are worthy or not (They are.).

Decadence straddles that line between commercial appeal and unapologetic, raw power better than most, and the

production on the new songs showcases the intensity of the band's sound, with stop-start arrangements that drop out completely, then blast back moments later with even more unrestrained fury. Drummer Ben Burris and bassist Ryan Wicker have played together long enough now they move and groove like a single unit, powering the monster riffs that cut through each tune. McGrady has a decent singing voice when the song calls for it, but most of these tracks require his most angst-laden, guttural near-screams.

The content of the lyrics is as intense as the music, and McGrady has said online that there is an intentional running theme present, related to a friend who dealt with abandonment, pain, and anger, and moving on from that. "Abandonment" relates a story of being placed in foster care, inserting a line out of a childhood prayer to really drive home the innocence lost in the process:

*Strangers tuck me in my bed
Shuffled through this castoff's deck so
Now I lay me down to rest
Left alone through your abandonment*

The most furious track is "Take Your Shot," which addresses that person with a problem that won't allow anyone to help, or even admit they need help in the first place. It's like the band pours that frustration directly into the stacked guitar riffs of Dustin Welch, as McGrady sings:

*Tell me how to understand
Why you need to live this way
While I watch you take another shot at what this
could have been*

The somewhat title cut "Redemption" is the slowest, most melodic one of the bunch. McGrady channels Roger Daltrey of the Who, circa "Behind Blue Eyes," as he sings the chorus in triumph:

*And now I see
A new dawn rising
I feel redemption
And I'll leave
It all behind me
Won't let it blind me*

This is the sound of someone, or maybe some band, that's gone through hell, come out the other side intact, now appreciating but not dwelling on the experience. Sounds a lot like they've been redeemed, doesn't it?

SINGLETON REVIEW Continued from p. 54

the Halfway Barbecue restaurant to plug up radiator holes to remind us to check ourselves before we become suspicious of others.

And yet, Singleton doesn't hesitate to remind us in "Cock Rescue" that if someone enters your place of business and you can smell the booze and Aramis on him before you see his "big-ass truck, complete with NRA decals, a Confederate flag front license plate, three MAGA bumper stickers that advertise the Wall, Traditional Marriage, and the ability to say 'Merry Christmas,'" you are probably correct in your decision to call the authorities.

Of the many examples of authentically good people, even those dressed as cosplay characters from Duck Dynasty, my favorite may be the Singleton-created characters in the short story, "Dispensers." In addition to the narrator, this tale seats the reader at a table at the Rabbitown Diner along with his English faculty wife and a cluster of model airplane craftsmen wearing t-shirts and ballcaps emblazoned with VAGINA in block letters. The story accomplishes so much in its telling. White people are reminded to be more sensitive in choosing names for their pets, to start with. But once we learn that that the VAGINA acronym stands for Veterans Against Guns in North America, we realize that the seeds for life-long friendships can be planted in piles of pancakes and actually hearing the words coming from a person's mouth rather than imagining what they might be.

Lovely.

And funny!

In "Proofs of Purchase," the author places us in a home for the elderly with ex-deputies who "patrolled the hallways in their wheelchairs, playing quickdraw with unsuspecting visitors." This is the same story in which the narrator runs the nonprofit Cartographers Without Borders. Let that sink in a second.

In this, the twelfth of George Singleton's books, *The Curious Lives of Nonprofit Martyrs*, the author delivers yet again on sharing the best and the worst of southerners and their stories and he invites us to look on our neighbors and ourselves with humor and grace. It is a lovely thing to read and do.

IN MEMORIAM – MICHELE REESE 1973-2023

To lose someone we love is heartbreaking. We have memories, maybe keepsakes and mementos, maybe offspring, maybe scars, and those reminders get us through this life. But what we have more than anything else is loss.

When we lose a poet, we lose a light, a voice, the physical person, but we still have their words. We still have their poems and with those poems, the poet. They live on through their words, and not just for us, the ones who knew the poet, but for generations to come.

When we lost Michele, I was in shock. Still am. Everyone who knew her was and still is. We lost her kind spirit, her joy that she brought wherever she showed up. We lost her quirky sense of humor. We lost her understated power. But we did not lose her words. We did not lose her.

Michele was easy to talk with. There was a mutual respect that we had for each other's work. Our conversations were like lots of conversations poets have – which surprisingly was rarely a conversation about poetry. Poets have lives and shop talk can be boring to us. I would see a poem from Michele and tell her that her tetrameter was showing, and she would laugh, hard. That laugh. I'll miss that.

And Michele was quiet about the successes she had – her publications, her manuscript landing finalist distinctions, or her work with a community organization, her work with other poets, her traveling 50-100 miles just to hear a poet read, a mutual friend of ours that she wanted to show her support for. Sometimes I only knew about these things because I would see her in a picture or read about it in a publisher's newsletter. And when I said something to her about it, whatever it was, she would just matter-of-factly say meh as if it was no big deal, that was just what she did, nothing to see here. And that was Michele in essence. She was just a fireball quietly warming those around her. Nothing to see here. Just what she did.

Michele's poetry was her. On the surface: quiet, understated, sharp. And with those words, a power that would consume you. I'm grateful for that. I'm grateful for the time I got to spend with Michele. I'm grateful for the publishers and organizations that saw what we all saw. I'm grateful for Jasper, the Columbia Museum of Art, the publishers of anthologies, especially in South Carolina, who made space for her work. We are all better for it.

Read her words, and you will hear Michele. You will feel her. It's the greatest gift to the living, being a poet. Often a thankless gift, and so often it is a gift people won't recognize until the poet is gone. Michele's words are her gift to us. We should recognize how we are better for receiving what she has given. We should take the time to give thanks. We should take time to give.

Thank you, Michele. You were a good friend, colleague, and poet. More than anything else, a poet. We are lucky to have known you. And we are lucky to know you now, never still, always daring to go where others haven't been.

-Ray McManus

Turtleback Farm

*While sharing seafood tapas
on the dining patio we watch
grey fog stretch over the evergreens
as green, yellow, and purple passionflowers
unfold in a vase.*

*Stairs lush with nasturtiums and roses
lead us to a crystal doorknob.*

*From the bed's pillows,
she removes a stuffed bunny
hand-sewn by an old lady one winter,
then immerses herself in the Tale of Genji;
I fall asleep holding her hand.*

*In the morning, we climb the tower.
Through the settling mist the Northwest cascades:*

*the snow-cone of Mt. Baker;
the Olympics; through Seattle's smog and
civilization, The Octopus.
As she points, her red scarf
flutters in chilled wind.*

The ferry blasts its departure.

-Michele Reese

IN MEMORIAM – Benjamin Wilson Woodruff, Jr. 1938-2023



Dr. Woodruff or “Woody” as he was lovingly called, died peacefully in his sleep late in the evening on Saturday, July 29, 2023, at Still Hopes Episcopal Retirement Community, following a period of declining health. Woody was the beloved Music Librarian for the South Carolina Philharmonic, and the upcoming season would have been his 40th.

Much like traditional librarians, music librarians organize, catalogue, and maintain collections; select rare materials for acquisition; oversee preservation processes; answer reference inquiries; and teach people how to interact with the orchestra’s library.

Woody attended the University of South Carolina and in 1961 received a Bachelor of Arts in Music Education with oboe as his primary instrument. His studies continued at the University of Illinois, where he earned his Master of Science in Music in 1963 and Doctor of Education in 1976. His dissertation, a measure-by-measure analysis of every Rachmaninoff orchestral composition, with conducting suggestions and instructions, was published in four volumes.

Woody was a wealth of musical knowledge and a delightful conversationalist. When you asked his opinion – he gave it. If he didn’t like a piece of music, he told you. Woody did not concede to computers or cell phones and when the SC Philharmonic office internet would fail, you would often hear him say

“technology fails again!” as he continued to work on his typewriter and card catalogue.

As the SC Philharmonic librarian, he was responsible for every piece of sheet music. For string parts - he penciled in bowings, and for winds, brass, and percussion – every phrase or breath mark. After every concert performance, Woody patiently waited backstage to gather the music, gently erasing all his meticulous notations, so the music could be returned in pristine condition.

Woody attended every orchestra rehearsal for more than 40 years, making sure every musician had what was needed. He appreciated good grammar, good food, and good manners. He saved his seersucker suit and white shoes for after Easter and enjoyed a proper place setting. On a weekday, he could be found in his office, conducting, and singing loudly to everything from Verdi to Doris Day and on the weekends, he performed every Nutcracker and Messiah in town.

Woody was selfless, offering his spare bedroom to out of town guests and treating your children like his own. He loved dining with friends at the Blue Marlin, appreciated a well-made chocolate milk shake and secretly matched his socks to his shirt, no matter the color. Most importantly, he was a devoted and wonderful friend to many, from the moment you shook his hand.

-South Carolina Philharmonic Staff

“It is hard to imagine a South Carolina Philharmonic without Woody. He was simply a beloved part of our fabric, from his earlier years as a very talented oboist in our orchestra, to his impeccable attention to detail as our music librarian. He was also our resident historian. I could ask him anything, such as “Who was the guest artist who performed with us in April 1976?” and he would either remember off the top of his head or have the answer in a few minutes. He would even sing a bit of the piece for us, as if to help jog our memories.”

-Rhonda Hunsinger, Executive Director of the SC Philharmonic



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