



**Ronni Lundy**  
**Burnsville, North Carolina**

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Location: Ronni Lundy's Residence, Burnsville, NC  
Interviewer: Rien Fertel  
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs  
Length: 2 hours, 31 minutes  
Project: Women Cookbook Writers

**[Begin Ronni Lundy Interview]**

**00:00:02**

**Rien Fertel:** All right this is Rien Fertel with the Southern Foodways Alliance. I am in Burnsville, North Carolina. It is Saturday afternoon just after 3:00, June 2<sup>nd</sup> and I'm in the home of Ronni Lundy. I'm going to have her introduce herself please.

**00:00:20**

**Ronni Lundy:** Hi, this is Ronni Lundy.

**00:00:24**

**RF:** And your birth date please?

**00:00:25**

**RL:** August 1, 1949.

**00:00:27**

**RF:** Okay and you could—the microphone will pick up everything, so if you want to relax or sit back you can do whatever you want to—.

**00:00:34**

**RL:** Thanks; I don't have to—

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**RF:** I'll lean in because—

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**RL:** I don't have to be on alert.

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**RF:** No; you don't.

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**RL:** No; I have to lean in. *[Laughs]*

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**RF:** Okay I'd like to start by like getting at the world you grew up in and came up in. So tell us where you were born and about your family, about your family's roots.

00:00:52

**RL:** Yeah; so I was born in Corbin, Kentucky which is on—it's as you start into the Cumberland Plateau out of the Appalachian Mountains proper but it is a mountain town and it was a railroad town. A lot of people ask me right away if I was born—if it was a coal town; there was some mining around there but it was totally connected to the coal industry because it was a railroad town.

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So in 1950 or [19]51, I'm actually not sure of the specific date, but I was between the age of one and two, my father and my mother and my sister Pat, who was twelve years older than I

am, all moved to Louisville, Kentucky. Actually we moved to Louisville, Kentucky but I have learned to say *Louie-ville*, Kentucky, so people [*Laughs*] know what I'm talking about.

00:01:51

And my dad had found work there. The coal mines were going through one of their regular downtimes, and there was no work. He had been hired at the railroad a year or two before; he had started working there. All of his brothers, my cousins on several sides of the family, there were a lot of railroad men in our family.

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And he was going to join that group. But he had just been hired and he was laid off.

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So we came up to Louisville and he found work in the distilleries in Louisville. It's very interesting to me now that we have the bourbon tours and the bourbon history, and so people and friends that I know through foodways sometimes end up in my old neighborhood because I grew up at—well, first of all we moved to 18<sup>th</sup> and Oak Street, which is outside of my bedroom window you could see the Old Forester bottle that is up in the air. And there was another—there was a smoke stack [*Laughs*], a white smoke stack with a black rim around it and smoke poured out of it, and so being a very imaginative child I had this image of a bottle of whiskey and a cigarette, as a piece of my childhood fantasy or whatever.

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We were part of what I call the “hillbilly diaspora” or the “Appalachian diaspora,” meaning that first of all we kept one foot up home. And so my parents any time my dad was off of work for more than a day or two we went back to Corbin. And at that point in my life, when we were living there, we were not that far from the L&N Station downtown. It's on Broadway

probably around—I think it’s right around 11<sup>th</sup> Street, I’m not sure. But my aunts, my great-aunts, would come up on the train and get me and take me home with them.

**00:04:11**

We would ride the train back. There would always be one of my uncles—would either be the engineer, the conductor, or sometimes both, and then we’d go back to Corbin and I would stay with them. And I had three great-aunts and two of them were married, so two great-uncles that were like my grandparents. It was my grandparent fixture because all my grandparents were dead at that point. And then my parents would come get me; they would take the trains back and forth. In Louisville we moved to a house that is a block away from the back entrance of Churchill Downs on 3<sup>rd</sup> Street.

**00:04:54**

My sister and I don’t know this story, the details of it, but my sister and her fiancé saw this house for sale by owner and stopped and asked. It was two older women whose father had built this brick house, it had four rooms and a kitchen and a bath and it was very well-built and sturdy. And their father had built it and they were I think in their seventies and retiring to Florida. And they kind of fell in love with my sister and she introduced my—told them our story and they sold the house to my dad, financing it themselves, and that was—I came to realize when I got older how miraculous that was because we would not have qualified for any kind of a loan.

**00:05:57**

My dad’s work was seasonal; working in distilleries people don’t realize but certain jobs in distilleries are seasonal. Distilling doesn’t happen 24/7; you distill for a while and then everything is put away. My father was a Union man, very devoted Union man. I have two spiritual backgrounds and one of them is New Deal Democrat [*Laughs*]. If we were icon sort of

people there would have been a picture of Jesus and FDR next to him and Eleanor Roosevelt on the other side.

**00:06:34**

And so my dad was a serious Union man and that meant that being laid off was even more fraught than usual because if you went to a different distillery he had to start at the bottom of the Union and work his way up again, but if he stayed laid off we didn't have money. It was very tricky.

**00:06:57**

So I was not poor in a desperate way but it was a consciousness that I grew up with. Money was not something that could be counted on; family was. Because our family, everybody kind of knew what was going on. So someone would step up to help when we were in a hard time and then when we were in a good time, we would help in that we always had people staying with us who were on their path on the "hillbilly highway" as it was called.

**00:07:35**

So sometimes we would have cousins who were moving to Hamilton, Ohio. A large number of my mom's family went to Hamilton, Ohio. Some people in my dad's family went to Detroit or *De-troit*, and other people came up to Louisville. We often had—it sounds weird when I say it; we often had strange men living in our attic who were working a job, people that I didn't quite know what our connection was.

**00:08:07**

**RF:** But doing like factory work?

**00:08:08**

**RL:** Yeah; they were getting—and they would stay with us until they could afford to have a room, you know rent a room. And the neighborhood I lived in it was a nice neighborhood, families, blue-collared families but it was also American Air Filter was a couple blocks away and the railroad tracks were a couple blocks beyond that. So there were a lot of shift-workers who lived there, so there were places that rented sleeping rooms.

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I was so fascinated by that as a child. It was like I'd come home and go, "What's a sleeping room?" It sounded nice. As you know taking a nap is one of my favorite things; I thought maybe you could do that. *[Laughs]*

00:08:52

So that—and so I have one foot—I grew up with one foot in Louisville in the 1950s and 1960s, which in itself was an incredibly dramatic time to be growing up. There were so many cultural shifts and changes in that time, but I had this extra cultural piece added in because I was also a part of this community in the mountains. And while Corbin was a town, my great-aunts had a huge garden. They raised chickens. I had several—another great-aunt; she lived out in the country. I spent time with her. So I had a piece of this very rural traditional Appalachian upbringing.

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And that piece of my life was often the most magical part of it. As I'm sort of describing you can tell that going to Corbin was magic for me, up until I was quite grown and started to kind of look at things. And I also had a lot of cousins; it was the baby boom, so most—I had a ton of cousins in Corbin that I got to hang out with and have fun with. And I introduced Chris Offutt a couple of years ago and I talked about the fact how—that Chris and I—Chris is younger than I am, but that we have different Appalachias.

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And I had a different Appalachia even than my cousins who were in Corbin because there's a different concept there. And then they also came—I have several cousins. My parents ran what I called the “safe house.” Whenever one of my cousins was in trouble they would come spend time with my parents.

00:10:45

**RF:** In the city?

00:10:45

**RL:** In the city and also when one of my aunts or female cousin's husband died, which was more often than you would think, they came and lived with us, too. So I had a couple of cousins, boy cousins that were like siblings for me at certain points of my life, that we shared space. And I also had a very good friend, not related, who had a very troubled home situation and she spent a great deal of time with us. My parents parented her, a good bit, and so we grew up with—. It's not really—I wish there was a word for it—it's not a sibling relationship but it's a deeper connection than just someone who is in and out of your house.

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So I'll go to my second religious background, which is that we're not good joiners. And you know the SFA is the longest association I have ever had with an organization. And we did not—twice we belonged to churches in Louisville and both times we left because we felt that they did not uphold their Christian ethic. The first was in the first neighborhood that we lived in, the west end of Louisville, which was transitioning at that time from a white blue-collar neighborhood into a black neighborhood and we were going to a church—I won't name the



denomination—and they were having a revival. And the minister cautioned—my mother and sister were there—and he cautioned everyone to be careful where they put the pamphlets for the revival because he’s—the way he put it was “We don’t want our darker brothers and sisters to feel uncomfortable coming here.” And my mother and sister looked at each other and put their pamphlets down and walked out and we didn’t ever go back to that church because my parents were very, very strongly pro-civil rights and all people were equal.

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**RF:** Where do you think that came from, do you know, because I’m guessing Corbin was—

00:13:07

**RL:** Mixed.

00:13:08

**RF:** It was a mixed town, okay?

00:13:10

**RL:** No, no, no, no; it wasn’t a mixed town. In fact it was anything but a mixed town. What I meant was there were—well, I would have said that—I would say that there were mixed attitudes but as I have grown older and become more conscious of—. Corbin had no black people in it except a—that I was aware of except a man named Cy who was the doorman for the—I think it was called the Whitley Hotel. I can't remember for sure; Whitley County is one of the counties that Corbin is in—and my father always made a point of talking to him and introducing me to him.

**00:13:49**

My mother told my daughter—and my daughter did an oral history in middle school with my mom, and my mom told my daughter that there was a black woman who worked for a doctor who lived next to her family, and she heard the way he talked to this woman and she would never say hello to him again.

**00:14:11**

I suspect that because she could articulate that as—she was a child—because she could articulate that as a child, I would suspect that my mother was taught, but I don't know exactly why. My father's family had—his brothers and sisters I would have described as having Christian tolerance, but Corbin has a horrible story. Corbin was a sundown town and in the 1920s there's a horrible story about them running all the black people out of town on the train.

**00:14:55**

I did not grow up knowing that. It was not anything I was told by my parents. And I just don't think most of the people in my family were exposed to anyone who was black.

**00:15:08**

My father was the youngest of eight children, and if the other seven were alive they would not like me to mention this—well, six of the other seven were alive they wouldn't like me to mention this—but they were very poor. His father was a character and a tender-hearted alcoholic, is my best understanding, and his mom died when he was a little boy, or when he was an infant, and his dad died when he was six—

**00:15:43**

**RF:** Was your father born in Corbin?

**00:15:44**

**RL:** Yes; yeah. My father, my mother, my sister, and I are all born in Corbin. The four branches of the family tree, when I start tracing as far as back as I can trace them we go back multiple generations in Appalachia. I have a great-grandfather who was born about forty miles from where we're sitting in North Carolina. I have family from Southwest Virginia; most everybody comes from Southwest Virginia, but were there for generations, so we were Appalachian for generations.

**00:16:21**

So what I was going to say is that my dad went to what he called boarding school. My guess is that he was in settlement schools because that's basically what boarding school would have been, and part of the ethic of settlement schools was to teach equality and my dad—his upbringing was not Quaker, but his father's upbringing would have been Quaker. And there is in Appalachia, we were on one side or the other pretty fiercely in the Civil War, so my great, great-grandfather or grand-uncle—there's a little confusion, two men with the same name, one child born to a woman that nobody is quite sure which one she was married to—but the one who is either my grandfather or my grand-uncle or great-grandfather and grand-uncle was a Union soldier. And on my mother's father's side of the family there was a Confederate soldier. That's very typical for the Appalachians.

**00:17:37**

So they had this very strong sense and fierce, that all people were to be treated equally. And I grew up with that. I grew up with that. I learned that there were people in my family that didn't feel the same. I learned that they held their tongue when they were with my parents. I also was taught to hold my tongue when I was around them, not to confront them. I don't know of anyone in my family who was a violent, ugly racist. I don't know of any stories of that. I don't

think that would have been tolerated, but I do know that there were people who made jokes and who didn't believe as keenly as my parents.

**00:18:28**

And the friend I was telling you about who was like a daughter somewhat in my family, her husband was someone I went to high school with, a young black man, and my parents welcomed them into our family and they were a part of our family meals with some of the cousins that I knew felt otherwise. And everyone was welcome at our table.

**00:18:56**

And the other piece of what I was going to say, the other spiritual piece—oh, and the second church that we left—

**00:19:00**

**RF:** Yeah.

**00:19:02**

**RL:** —was when I was eleven, in the 1960s, and John Kennedy was running against Richard Nixon and my dad often worked the midnight shift, and so I was allowed to watch our church by myself. It was just a couple blocks away—if my dad had just come home from work and gone to bed and my parents weren't going—and so I went by myself, [*Laughs*] it was the Sunday before Election Day and our preacher preached that we should not vote for John Kennedy because he was a papist. And I had been taught enough by my parents, I think, that you could go out two doors of the church, the assistant minister was at one and the minister was at the other, and so if you really didn't like the minister's sermon you might choose the assistant minister. And he was also the youth minister, so I really should have chosen to go out that door. But I chose to go out

the minister's door and when he held out his hand to me I put my hands in my pockets and turned my nose up and walked—. [*Laughs*]

**00:20:09**

I didn't say why but when I went home and told my parents my parents said we don't have to go to that church again if you don't want to. And I said I don't want to because they—of course they were New Deal Democrats. I'm sure there was the religious issue I knew that they didn't agree with, but I'm sure there was also just the political issue [*Laughs*]. Although both of my parents always voted for John Sherman Cooper in Kentucky and he was a Republican and he was, of that era, an incredibly decent human being, and the Republican Party in Appalachia at that time still represented the Abolitionist Party as well.

**00:20:56**

So we were not actually Yellow Dog Democrats, yeah. [*Laughs*]

**00:21:04**

**RF:** Growing up, because Southern Appalachia and Kentucky has throughout the length of America has been used almost, well, as a pejorative a lot of times—

**00:21:18**

**RL:** Yeah; we're the last surviving slur, right.

**00:21:21**

**RF:** Right; okay.

**00:21:24**

**RL:** Yeah; yeah, I have—

**00:21:24**

**RF:** I mean culturally, politically—

**00:21:25**

**RL:** —to pussyfoot around. [*Laughs*]

**00:21:26**

**RF:** All right so were you aware of that—

**00:21:28**

**RL:** Oh yeah.

**00:21:28**

**RF:** —as a kid and were you warned against it by your family?

**00:21:33**

**RL:** No.

**00:21:33**

**RF:** How did that pop up?

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**RL:** I don't remember being aware of it as a little kid. But probably by around the time that I was entering junior high school—. Okay, well, all right, so here's one way that I was—you were asking if I was warned against it. How I was prepared against it to understand that this was BS from a really early age is that, okay, right behind you over there, you can't really see it, but that round oak table over there, that was given to my parents when they got married in 1937, I think, by one of my great-aunts and her husband.

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And so that table was in my family; it has leaves in it and it goes out so you can get eight people around it real comfortably. You can get ten people around it pretty comfortably. We sometimes would have a dozen people around it and squished in and sitting around in the dining room depending upon who was coming through at whatever time. And everybody told stories. And they told about how they grew up and they told about people that they grew up with and my dad was the champion, not like anybody was competing, but—

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**RF:** He was a good storyteller?

**00:23:09**

**RL:** Oh my gosh; yes. And so a couple of things that I understand about why I became a writer is that I inherently learned rhythmic storytelling long before anyone ever suggested there was such a thing that could happen. And I also understood art; you don't tell a good story that doesn't have an arc.

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When we marry people out of our group, which of course we do and I did, you have to train them that the point is not the point and there's no point in saying what's the point, because when we get to the point—getting to the point is the point and when we get there we will and we're not going there before. So my dad—but all my cousins and aunts and uncles and people were able to tell—my dad could come home from work and tell a story about something he saw out of the corner of his eye riding on the bus. And there were characters in my life that I never met. I never met any of my grandparents, but I knew stories about them that not only were interesting but that defined their character and their place in our family and their place in the world and their place in the mountains.

**00:24:34**

And sometimes these stories—I had an uncle—in the 1930s there was a bad batch of bootleg in Corbin and everybody got jake leg, and I had a cousin, Hubert, who had such a bad case that he never was able to walk without canes or in a wheelchair again but he was a hilarious character. He was also, I am sure, an incorrigible alcoholic and one of the stories is that one time on a bender Hubert thought he saw FDR and Stalin and Churchill in a cave. And so I heard these kinds of stories that people would tell that would be supposed to define an entire culture and an entire people or even to define that person. And at a really young age I knew that my cousin Hubert was totally tender-hearted toward children. I could count on him to do tricks for me, magic tricks, that he would be gentle with me, so he was a whole person, and this was a whole country and a whole region.

**00:26:00**

And I also knew these amazing and beautiful stories about character.

**00:26:06**



So you asked me about my parents, how they learned what they learned. One story that my father told repeatedly about his father was when he was like maybe about five years old a circus came to town. And part of the deal about the circus in those days wasn't the circus itself, it was everything happening before the circus. And so all night long these tents had been being put up and all this stuff had been going on and he had been watching from the window. And the next morning his dad said let's go, let's go walk around or whatever, the next day. And they went to the circus and as they walked onto the circus grounds one of the roustabouts was under a tree sleeping with his hat over his head. He had been up all night putting the circus up. And my dad—he's five years old—he has no idea, and he wants to be kind of cool with his dad and he says, "Look at that you lazy old man over there, sleeping during the day." And my grandfather said, "Son, don't you ever call another man lazy. You don't know. You don't know what his life is. You don't know why he might be sleeping during the day. Let me tell you about this man."

**00:27:27**

And my dad told that story again and again, so that defined something about him. And defined his belief that you didn't judge anything by its appearance, that you always look deeper, and I think that was given to me as a child. And so I grew up with this extremely powerful narrative without anyone ever saying, "This is a story about being Appalachian." I grew up with this extremely powerful story about what it meant to be Appalachian and I knew that people were proud of where they came from.

**00:28:07**

Another thing my dad used to say that I loved was if you meet another person and you talk long enough you'll find out you know somebody in common. And if you talk a little longer you'll find out you both know somebody from Corbin. **[Laughs]** And so I was very proud of where I was from.

**00:28:26**

And when it started to happen for me was in high school. Starting in high school—and not so much in Louisville because I went to public school that was in the center of the city. We were actually an integrated high school and we had several classes of people. And Louisville is very much a class conscious town and still is—very warm and welcoming place, but underneath that layer, the Louisville question is where did you go to school? And that is not about college; that is about tell me your high school so I know what class you are. And my school was on the lower rung, not the lowest but the lower rung, but the lower rung. And it was a huge school. It was a junior high school and high school together. There were 3,000 students. My graduating class had 600 people, so there were rungs inside of my class.

**00:29:24**

And the neighborhood that I lived in was the next to the last lowest white rung if that makes sense. And I was conscious of that. But it didn't define me in my school. I was aware of it. I was also aware that I was intelligent. I also had a mother who was like—when I grew up and thought about it, my mother was a guerrilla shopper that she knew how to find clothing for my sister and me and ways to fix up our house. I remember her dying a couch with—she dyed it a dark brown with a toothbrush, a couch and a chair, and it was stunning looking. She just understood how not to look poor.

**00:30:24**

And, oh my God, I can't believe that this is still this tangent, my parents were loaves and fishes Christians and they believed whatever they had there was enough of it. And they believed—she figured out ways that we could always be generous and that we appeared to be better off than we were in terms of financially.

**00:30:50**

But what I was aware of was when I started to travel some in high school, and in my junior year, the summer between my junior and senior year, I spent two weeks in Lansing, Michigan at Michigan State as part of a communication arts institute there. And then I made friends with kids in Michigan. One girl that I would go visit frequently both in the summer and the winter and she would come down and stay with me. I didn't realize that until later her parents didn't let her come stay with me as often as mine would let me stay with her. And I realized later that probably had to do with class issues. They weren't wealthy but—. And it's interesting because I loved her parents. They were beautiful and generous people. But they were very bigoted and my parents were not very bigoted and **[Laughs]** it's just fascinating.

**00:31:48**

Anyway everybody in Michigan had a story about the fact that I was from Kentucky. One of the interesting things about Kentucky is it's not all the Appalachian stories. If you're from West Virginia you get one story. If you say you're from Kentucky and people don't understand Kentucky or don't understand where you're from, some people will say, "Oh, you're wearing shoes," right. Some people would say, "Oh, did your dad have a horse farm?" Some people would say "Oh, did you grow up by a racetrack," which I got to say, yes. Very few people understood that I grew up in a city.

**00:32:23**

In fact, at this communication arts institute my friends from Louisville that was there with me from my high school. There were two of us and we were in a journalism class and we made a field trip to the Lansing Newspaper and our teacher who was a reporter there **[Laughs]**, we got in the elevator, our group got in the elevator and as we were going from the first to the second floor he said to my friend Linda and me, he said, "Have you Kentucky girls ever been in

a newspaper this big?” **[Laughs]** And I said, “Have you ever heard of the *Courier Journal*?”  
Which was always in the list of top ten—

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**RF:** A major—

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**RL:** —Columbian newspapers at that time. And he realized it and realized his mistake. But everybody had a story about it and I could capitalize on that story. I started going up to Michigan in the year that the Everly Brothers released the song *Bowling Green*: “A man in Kentucky sure is lucky to lie down in Bowling Green because the girls down in Bowling Green are pretty and lovely and wonderful. So while I was like not that big a deal in Louisville, when I showed up in this little town in Michigan I was like the blond girl from Kentucky and guys would ask me out and it was really interesting.

00:33:52

But there were also these assumptions. One guy in Michigan I was dating—I was not dating, I was going out with a summer that I was up there, it was when *Loving v. Virginia*—I can't—I don't—anyway it was that year, and he said to me, “Well, Kentucky girl, what do you think about that?” And I said, “Well, I think my friends Mike and Rita can get married now. What do you think?” And there were no black people in that town in Michigan. So and then when I went to the University of Kentucky I suddenly started to see all of these class things internally, in the State itself. The people who shunned the kids from Eastern Kentucky because they were hillbillies, and then the people from Louisville who would meet me and then ask what

school I went to and suddenly I was on the outs, or the people who came from somewhere else and thought all Kentuckians were degenerates.

**00:35:11**

And then in the 1970s I moved out West. I started traveling out in the West and—

**00:35:18**

**RF:** After college?

**00:35:19**

**RL:** After—well, yes. I had three sophomore years of college and retired, is the way that I explain college. But, yeah, so after that. And I lived in Colorado. I've lived in New Mexico. I lived, I guess, is the way I would explain it for a while in Santa Barbara and Bloomington, Indiana and Maine. And I would encounter these stereotypes and I would also discover that when I would start to tell this story—because when you were a hippie in the 1970s you generally—I could show you another round table, it's not oak, that we all sat around in a dome in New Mexico during snowstorms and told stories, right.

**00:36:06**

And I would tell stories about my family and I started to understand that if I didn't shape those stories the right way people were not hearing what I was telling. They were hearing this version of the *Beverly Hillbillies* or they were hearing *Deliverance*. And then as I went out into the world more, it increased.

**00:36:27**

Jessica Harris and I, when we were first becoming friends and we spent about a day and a half together, she came to Louisville. My daughter was in middle school and I taught a class—

interestingly enough I did two classes; one was African Music and African Food and the other was on Southwest Louisiana and Cajun Music and Food and the history of it. I never taught one on Appalachia, interesting. But Jessica came and did this class with me. And then we did book signings and a couple of other things. And we were spending a lot of time together. And we were talking about the culture, the foodways that we came from. And so Jessica said to me, “How do you see the difference between growing up as a hillbilly or growing up as African American in the time that you grew up?” And I said, “Well, look, the first thing that we have to talk about is that we were never in enforced slavery. We were indentured servants. We were in a form of slavery that had a short-term end. So there are people who understood that who could translate that into their understanding of slavery.

**00:37:55**

“But there were also people in the region—I don’t want to over-romanticize that aspect—there were also people who had that experience who interpreted that as it somehow made them better.” There are two ways that can be seen.

**00:38:15**

So I said, “That didn’t happen.” I said, “Nobody was lynching my people. We weren’t vulnerable in that way but we were killed by the people in power who wanted to use our backs and use our human resource to make their money. We share that in common.”

**00:38:38**

**RF:** Labor—

**00:38:39**

**RL:** The labor yeah. And I said, “And the other thing Jessica is—.” I said, “I walk into a room and I pass for white and you don’t. And by that I mean people feel perfectly comfortable making every joke, casting every aspersion, that everybody quiets down when you come in, so you’re not going to hear the N-word and you’re going to hear some stupid stuff but you’re not going to hear the darkest assumptions that people have about your people. I walk in a room and I can hear about incest. I can hear about murder. I hear about feuding.”

00:39:17

**RF:** White trash jokes.

00:39:18

**RL:** Yeah, yeah. And I hear the word—yesterday having a conversation—I was on the art tour, a conversation with a young woman, I love, she’s great, she’s a tremendous fabric artist. I know both of her parents. Never, never would the N-word come out of her mouth and she started telling me about a caramel corn recipe that her family makes that they put in a paper bag with confectioner sugar and you shake it up and you call it *white trash cracker jack*. And I immediately thought, “And if you put cocoa powder in there would you call it N-cracker jack? No, you wouldn’t.”

00:40:04

And John T. and I fight about this all the time because there’s a whole school of thought that *The White Trash Cookbook*, in some way, exults or honors the people that it’s about. And I think Sherri Castle said it very well, which is that if you have never been called white trash you don’t get to make that call. If you’ve never been somebody who has been in that situation. And I

never heard anyone refer to me as white trash. But I certainly heard even friends of mine refer to another friend of mine as white trash and make judgments. And it's not okay, yeah.

**00:40:46**

But so I hear that, I hear that, and I hear people use the term hillbilly all the time as disparagement. When I say where I'm from, even people who should know better make jokes. Ed Lee when *Fiddles* came out, Ed Lee's big supporter, Edward Lee, the chef from Louisville, posted on Facebook, "This is my friend's book about the culture and the cuisine of Appalachia. It's beautiful. It's powerful. It'll change your mind. You should read it." The first guy who commented said, "Appalachia cuisine, what's that, OxyContin and a Mountain Dew?" And I wrote, "You know we can hear you, right?" But nobody does and nobody gets it.

**00:41:34**

And even people in the region, I grew up with people in my family who believed that there was a division between educated, good Appalachians and trashy people. And part of my life is to say—and I've said this at the SFA in a speech, and Lolis, bless his heart, often quotes this, but, "Tell me at what economic level; tell me at what dollar amount a person earns. Tell me what kind of trailer they have to live in. Tell me how many velvet paintings on the wall, qualifies somebody to stop being a human being and become something disposable."

**00:42:27**

And it's a hard—I appreciate a lot of Buddhist teaching. I feel like I grew up with a lot of Buddhist teaching, and part of Buddhist teaching is to have compassion for everyone, and it's hard to do. One of my favorite stories about that is about Ram Dass. He's actually Hindu, he was Richard Alpert. He was the hippie guru of *Be Here Now*, blah, blah, blah. And this was like ten years ago or something, a writer was visiting him and writing about him, he asked if she wanted to see his altar and it was beautiful. It was a low table and it had you know candles and flowers



and fresh fruit and figures and things. And in the center of it there was a beautiful frame with a picture of a person in it. And she leaned in to see who it was, expecting—he had a guru in India and she expected to see his beautiful picture in there. And when she got close enough to see it was George Bush, Jr. [*Laughs*]—George W.

**00:43:38**

And she jumped back, and Ram Dass started laughing and said, if I can't have compassion for him I can't have compassion for anyone. It's a natural thing for human beings to believe that there's someone so far below them on the scale that they don't qualify as human. And I struggle with that because there are violent and horrible behaviors that people commit.

**00:44:08**

But from the conversation that we were having earlier, where people draw that line tells you more about that person and that system and our culture than it tells you anything about the person below the line or their lives or their culture. It's not a judgment of them.

**00:44:32**

So my work, a piece of my work—so my father started consciously teaching me this as I went into my teenage years, he gave me Harry Caudill's *Night Comes to the Cumberland*s to read.

**00:44:47**

**RF:** Okay, so that was my next question. So what books and music were in the house?

**00:44:51**

**RL:** Yeah, yeah. Oh, any book that anybody wanted to read was in the house. Sometimes the book I was reading was hidden because my father had this priggish—I would call it a priggish

morality about sexuality in books so that I had to not read *Exodus* when I was a teenager in front of him. But my sister was twelve years older than I was, and we were huge readers. Everybody, we read, so we've got the *Courier Journal* and the *Louisville Times*, both great newspapers, came to the house. We read them, we talked about what my parents discussed, what people had written about, not just with the news but they read the editorials and the opinion columns and discussed them. That was part of conversation around the table.

00:45:49

I started reading—my dad taught me to read. I would sit on his lap and he would teach me how to read the funny papers. And I still remember this, he would then read the classifieds. I'm sure he was looking for a better job or a better place for us to live. And I started reading words in the classifieds when I was like—before I went to school. I read by the time I was in school.

00:46:16

My fifth or sixth birthday my sister gave me a *Child's Book of Religions*, so I actually had a very fundamental grasp on the difference between Shintoism and [*Laughs*]  
—I mean very, very loose, but you know what I mean? So my family was very literate. My sister was brilliant. I had a cousin, my cousin David [Kidd], who was maybe eight or ten years older than my sister and my sister is twelve years older than I am, he taught English in China in the 1950s and wrote stories about it that later became this book, *All the Emperor's Horses*, when I was eleven years old, because he was one of the last—

00:47:13

**RF:** Yeah, that's your cousin.

**00:47:14**

**RL:** Yeah, yeah. This is David. So again, my upbringing is not—I like to think we looked a lot like—he’s a character, I’ll tell you about him sometime. He then ended up in Japan and became a wealthy antiques dealer, Japanese antiques and art dealer, and eventually started a school in Hawaii teaching the Japanese spiritual arts, etcetera, etcetera, and his friends included Alan Watts and the Archbishop of Canterbury and it goes on. This came out when I was eleven years old—*All the Emperor’s Horses*. It was optioned at that time and Peter O’Toole was supposed to play David. You can see, right.

**00:48:11**

So, and then nothing ever happens from that. And then there was a reprint that came out in the late 1980s called *Peking Story*. It was republished and that time it was optioned and David Bowie was supposed to play my cousin David, and David and Iman were friends of my cousin David, so this is my best near-fame story, okay. You ready for it?

**00:48:36**

David translated recipes out of *Shuck Beans, Stack Cakes, and Honest Fried Chicken*, my first book for his Japanese cook, so his Japanese cook could make a real Kentucky meal for David Bowie and Iman when they came to visit him. **[Laughs]**

**00:48:54**

**RF:** All right.

**00:48:55**

**RL:** Okay, and David was born in Corbin, Kentucky, right.

**00:48:57**

**RF:** Yeah, yeah.

**00:48:58**

**RL:** So part of my life is to tell those stories also and say, think about this, shake it up a little. And so my dad was very much about that. He gave me Harry Caudill's *Night Comes to the Cumberlands*, which was the first book that ever attempted to look at why Appalachia has the history that it has and to place it in the context of exploitative industry, to place it in a context of capitalism versus an economy of sharing, or what Bill Best calls a culture of connection, which is what I grew up with.

**00:49:48**

And I inherited this, we don't do well in my family on the capitalist scale. A friend looking at my astrology chart once started laughing and said, Well now I get it, you have absolutely no sign whatsoever that has anything to do with money. You don't even know what it is." And I think that's pretty valid.

**00:50:10**

But we were always supported and supported other people in this web of connection that seemed to be limitless. And so Harry Caudill is the first person who looks at it. Unfortunately, Caudill also succumbs to the concept of Appalachia and exceptionalism and begins to interpret it negatively and goes crazy and starts talking about eugenics, which is after my father's time.

**00:50:40**

**RF:** In the same book or in a later career?

**00:50:40**

**RL:** No, it's later. The eugenics comes later, but in the book you can start to pick up some traces of it, but I didn't pick that up as a kid. And that's why it's like there's a square over here that's my dad's and it's got *Night Comes to the Cumberland*s in it even though that book is one that Appalachian scholars have very mixed feelings about.

**00:51:05**

The other book which when I get a good copy of it will go in there is *The Dollmaker*. My parents went to Detroit. I was just up there. I went up. Courtney Balestier who is this fantastic writer. You all need to know.

**00:51:22**

**RF:** I think I have met her.

**00:51:23**

**RL:** Yeah, she's great. She and her husband Jonny are up there. Jonny is teaching at Wayne State and she set up a night called the Hillbilly Highway, and I went up with Rebecca Gayle Howell and Brett Ratliff. And then she brought in some writers in Detroit and we all did a reading together, kind of talking about that web and that connection.

**00:51:48**

But my parents lived in Detroit during the War, and David grew up in Detroit. His dad and mom moved there. He graduated from the University of Michigan. So they were up there. My mother had some positive memories of being in Detroit because—and unlike *The Dollmaker*, a lot of times going to the city was much easier on the women than it was the men.

**00:52:19**

My father told stories about—like I told you—he told stories about absolutely everything in his life including a bus ride or sitting on the back porch. We had narratives. There was a bar in our neighborhood you could see from the back porch and there were characters and narratives based on who came and went from the bar, right.

**00:52:38**

But I never heard my father tell a story about Detroit. He hated it. And he gave me *The Dollmaker* when I was in high school and said this is the most important book, this book means the most to me of any book that I have ever read.

**00:52:57**

My dad liked Faulkner, didn't want me to read him as a teenager, because it was too sordid, right. Sandburg, very big in our house, Sandburg's poetry. My mom loved—she started working at Katherine Spalding College's bookstore when I went to college and it was just when black literature had become a thing. And my mother brought—I read—*Their Eyes are Watching God* has become kind of a cool thing now, but there was a pretty long period nobody knew who Zora Neale Hurston was, but my mom brought those books home and I read them. I'm a compulsive reader, like kind of I would say it's an addiction, truly, but I don't care.

**00:53:57**

And my mom wanted to know everything about black culture. A story about my dad I'll share with you: my dad had been a boxer when he was young and he—

**00:54:11**

**RF:** What were your parents' names just so we have them on the record?

**00:54:13**

**RL:** Oh, yeah, okay, so my father was Kenneth Franklin Lundy but he was called Pap. That was his name as a boxer, a young man as a boxer. And I think I was probably in my twenties before it dawned on me that Pap was like a stereotype because I didn't see my dad as a Pappy, although one of his sisters called him that.

**00:54:42**

My mother's name was Geraldine Fair Fore, and her name was Jerry. So Pap and Jerry were my parents.

**00:54:50**

And they actually asked my friends to call them by their first names. And a lot of my friends [*Laughs*]*—*so I had a boyfriend at the end of high school and through the first two years of college. We were going to get married, the whole thing. We broke up, we stayed friends for a long time. When he got engaged a couple years later he took Kathy, his fiancée, they went to tell her parents and then they went to tell his parents. And then he said, "I want you to meet some people," and he took her to meet my parents because they had stayed friends that long.

**00:55:35**

So they weren't character—they weren't larger than life people. They were like the most welcoming people I ever knew. So anyway—

**00:55:51**

**RF:** You were going to tell a story about—

**00:55:52**

**RL:** My dad and boxing. So Cassius Clay comes along when—my dad went and saw him box Golden Gloves. My dad would go to the Golden Gloves. And then the Liston fight was on film.

And I remember my dad came home from work. He was working the day shift. He came home from work. He changed out of his work clothes. He took a bath and he put on his suit and a tie and he walked the block up to the Cozy Theater where it was showing and he watched the fight. And there was always controversy about Clay because he didn't fight like a slugger. And my dad came home and said, that is the greatest boxer who has ever lived, ever will live, and it's his footwork. My dad got what was going on there and he was such a fan. And then of course, Cassius Clay becomes Muhammad Ali and won't go for the draft and has his title stripped. And I was in college by that time and I was in and out of the house, and my dad, I could tell, was processing all this.

**00:57:15**

So one night I was home and he said, "I want to have a talk with you about something." And he said, "I don't understand this black-Muslim thing because I don't understand violence." And at that point Malcolm X and the Muslims were being presented as this violent overthrow of white people in America. And he said, "So I don't understand why Clay—," I mean Ali, — "joined that religion or changed his name." My dad always called him Clay, I mean Ali. But my dad said, "I know why he's not going to fight that War." And he said, "And people are saying he's a coward. And I just want you to understand that is the bravest act of that man's life, braver than getting in the ring with anyone, and he used to be admired because of that."

**00:58:18**

I thought—I don't know. So that's how I grew up. That was the atmosphere I grew up in. And I realized later that most of my baby boom friends didn't have those kinds of conversations with their parents. We watched television, we had a television. We had shows we watched, but a lot of them we watched together, a lot. And another part of that was cultural was the music. My



parents loved Swing. My mother listened to the black R&B station when she did housework, and Louisville had a great station.

**00:59:01**

When I became a music writer in Louisville or would write about things—I remember being on a call-in show with other white guys, with white guys and me, and somebody called in and was saying, “I’m sure that I heard the song “Ruby Baby” before Dion recorded it.” And the guy who was the music historian said, “No, no, no, no, you couldn’t have,” blah, blah, blah. And I’m like, “Did you grow up around Louisiana?” And she was like, “Yeah.” And I’m like, “Of course you heard it. It would have been recorded. It would have been something that—.” And—and it’s not like I went out and learned that stuff, it was all around.

**00:59:44**

So I grew up in this sort of pan-cultural atmosphere of—and we talked about justice. We talked about—my dad didn’t want me to read *Exodus* but he wanted me to talk about the Israelis. They wanted me to understand the Holocaust. We watched the civil rights movement in front of us and there was no question who was right and who was wrong and horrifying and shameful in that.

**01:00:21**

And we’d read a book, and my sister and I always talked about the same books. I remember the first Vonnegut book we read was *Cat’s Cradle* and I remember her reading it and laughing and reading as fast as she could, so I could read it, so we could talk about it. So that was a part of how I grew up. And it was an assumption that I had and still have that that’s a piece of my cultural background, that story is so important and that community and connection was so important that that was the dialogue and the conversation of my childhood and my adulthood with my parents.

01:01:14

**RF:** Yeah.

01:01:14

**RL:** Yeah.

01:01:16

**RF:** You mentioned briefly the 1970s and late 1960s, I'm guessing, and all that traveling. And you called yourself a hippie, what did you do? What did that life look like? And you can answer that any way you want but what were you doing out on the road?

01:01:36

**RL:** I still have no idea. No. *[Laughs]*

01:01:38

**RF:** It's a life a lot of people led in America at that time and what did yours look like for that?

01:01:42

**RL:** Yeah, well, and it's interesting, Rien, because I think, if I get to, I think this is what I want to write about next and I want to write about it for my grandson or I want to write about it for myself. Are we running out of time? Do you need to be—?

01:02:02

**RF:** No, I just checked the levels. No, no, no, no, we have all the time.

01:02:06

**RL:** Okay, great.

01:02:07

**RF:** We can talk until you get tired.

01:02:08

**RL:** Yeah, well, no, we'll keep talking until you get tired.

01:02:13

Because that experience was shaped for me by my upbringing also is one of the things that I want to say. And so the experience that I had was different than the experience of many of my peers during that time too. And I'll kind of explain. But the first thing that I say is that it took me a year or two after I had been traveling to realize that *On the Road* was not a book for girls. So women of my generation who are literate, who were literate, grew up having to translate everything through the male gaze, and for a long time you accepted it and then you began to question it. But it was always in conversation with the male voice and the male gaze.

01:03:06

I was reading a book that was written in the late 1960s, or early [19]70s, I think it's called *It Starts with Ayn Rand* and it was about the intellectual and the cultural shaping of the radical conservative movement. And this guy is talking about the great books. And there's not a woman in there other than Ayn Rand, who is like the absolute perversion of the male gaze, yeah, complicated.

01:03:39

Anyway, so I was always reading these books and thinking that this was my story, not understanding. I just realized when I was telling you that story that my dad drove a truck for many years as a young man and traveled. The Gray Line Tours, I don't know if you know what they were; they were bus tours in the 1930s and [19]40s. I think they still exist, but in the 1940s I guess maybe or 1930s they would take college students on these educational trips, from this part of the country or the Midwest, they would go to Colorado, to Pikes Peak, or whatever, and you camped, you're on this bus tour and camped. So my dad was a roustabout, setting up the tents or whatever. But he also participated in the lessons, and so it was a fascinating thing.

**01:04:37**

Both of my parents graduated from high school and neither of them went to college. But they were very intelligent people and sort of found their ways to broaden their intellect.

**01:04:54**

So my dad would tell these stories about being on the road, and so I knew from like—at the point that I figured out that I was not really going to marry some guy and that I didn't actually want to marry somebody and live in the suburbs and raise a family is just about the time that the counter-culture hit. And I'm not sure I figured that out. I think maybe what I would say is at the point that I was forced into that realization, I was very fortunate not to marry either of the two young men I thought I should and wanted to marry. And they were very fortunate; they were way more fortunate than me, I'm sure. **[Laughs]**

**01:05:47**

And so all of this is coinciding at the point where I'm going I'm never graduating from college. I don't know what end is up and a new friend of mine—we didn't really know each other very well—graduated the summer of 1971. She finished at the end of the summer of 1971, and we'd been hanging out a little and I had—. Now you have to understand I didn't even drive.

Not only did I not have a car, I didn't know how to drive. We had one car and my father was not going to let his daughter drive that car and wreck it, right. It was a [19]56 Chevy, which I inherited in 1976 and drove for three years, by golly.

**01:06:34**

So I didn't know how to drive and I didn't own a car, but I had this fantasy. There were still railroads. There was a railroad stop in Lexington and I had an ongoing fantasy of taking my typewriter and a bag and getting on the train and just getting off somewhere with a little bit of money and living somewhere else, it just was really appealing to me.

**01:07:02**

So and then I sort of figured out that probably wasn't going to happen and I bought a road atlas, of all things. It was like how people call the *Sears Catalog* the "Wishbook?" This is my wishbook. And my friend was having a party, and I had bought the atlas on the way to her apartment and when I got there there was a joint being passed around and somebody said, "Cindy what are you going to do? Are you going to go to graduate school?" And she was like, "Maybe but I don't know. I'd kind of like to just go out West." And I was like, "Me, too! I bought this atlas." And we opened up the atlas. We decided we were going to Colorado. Her uncle had given her a Plymouth Valiant station wagon, I think a 1962 or something like that or [19]64 maybe, I'm not sure. But anyway she had a car. I was working at this restaurant. I got her a job at the restaurant. We started saving up our money, and in September of that year we piled into the Valiant station wagon with all of our stuff in the back and another friend of mine and her brother, who were going to California were going to ride to the Rockies with us and then hitchhike on. And we went to Poudre Canyon, which is this beautiful canyon outside of Fort Collins, where there was this sweet little cabin and absolutely nothing going on and we were completely bored out of our minds within a week. I'd love to live there now.

**01:08:40**

And so she started driving up and down the mountains. It turns out that I'm a great navigator, like I love maps and I love reading maps. You can ask Edward Lee about that sometime; he died laughing and got in my van **[Laughs]** two years ago to go on a trip in the mountains and there's a road atlas on the floor. And he's like, "I didn't even know they made these." **[Laughs]** I'm like, "Buddy we're going places that GPS does not know." **[Laughs]**

**01:09:06**

But anyway we started traveling around the mountains and we found this crazy town that had a bar in Nederland, Colorado, which has now become a very hip place and people call it "the Ned," and I like to say you never would have referred to that town by its first name, by a nickname in those days. And we just spent about two years; we'd live somewhere. We'd move somewhere. We lived in Silverton, Colorado—here. Cindy sent me this postcard recently. This is Silverton, Colorado and this is the building that we lived in. There were mines there and there were apartments upstairs for miners and businessmen, largely for businessmen coming there for the thing back in the day.

**01:10:03**

And this was like in hippie days. So we rented this wonderful—it was like a four-room apartment for \$55 or whatever. And an epilogue to this story, in 2007 or '[20]8, I guess, I had an assignment from *Gourmet* that was going to pay a little bit of a road trip and Cindy and I had a big gap in our friendship where we didn't get to see or be with each other. And then we renewed being friends in the 2000s, so I called her up and said, "You come out here. I'm renting a car. We're going to drive everywhere you drove but I'm going to drive so you can sit in the passenger seat and see everything." So we went to Telluride, to the concert in Telluride, and then

we drove over to Silverton and it was a bed and breakfast and we got to rent one of our rooms as our [*Laughs*]*—*we got to rent our old apartment for a night.

**01:11:00**

**RF:** Probably for a year's rent, too.

**01:11:02**

**RL:** Yeah, yeah, totally, totally; it was totally ridiculous. So we had a system of checking out a town that you assigned points—I can't remember it—but you assigned points for Volkswagen vans—Volkswagens, Volkswagen vans had a higher percentage. Volkswagen van with Indian print curtains even higher; apartments with Indian print curtains, a health food store, a bookstore, blah, blah, blah. And then after about almost two years, doing this and never finding the place and it never really fully working out and there's a story in here that involves a bank robber in a Beetles wig and a blue convertible in Reno, Nevada. There's are all these epic tales in here.

**01:11:57**

We had at one point driven through Santa Fe and we drove into Santa Fe on the Old Santa Fe Trail just as dusk was settling, just at sunset in the winter. And I don't know if you've ever been there but it's still the most exquisite light. It's like passing through—if I ever have that near death experience, the tunnel of light will look like that. And I knew I wanted to live there, and it didn't hit Cindy at all.

**01:12:29**

New Mexico is like that. And so we had decided we were giving up living in Colorado. It was too intense and she had decided to go to Chicago and live with her aunt and go back to school, and I was debating going with her, going to Bloomington, we had friends in

Bloomington, going to Lexington, going back to Louisville. We had friends in Leadville, Colorado. My friend who lived in Southern California wanted me to come there, blah, blah, blah. And I knew absolutely nobody or anything about Santa Fe other than that driving through but it was on my list. And I was alone in this house and I remember I was lacing up my hiking boots—you used to lace them like this [*Gestures*] kind of thing, crisscross—and I was lacing up my hiking boots and a voice said go to Santa Fe. It was a male voice. It was heavy but it wasn't Charlton Heston. And I said, "Okay, but don't ever talk to me again."

**01:13:34**

And it never has and I'm really sorry because I could have used that guidance. [*Laughs*]

**01:13:39**

So I moved to Santa Fe by myself, moved in next door. I moved into a one-car garage that had been turned into a tiny efficiency apartment next to a house that a bunch of hippies were living in. And one of them turned out to be Ken Jones, who became my husband and my daughter's father and is still my really good friend. And I ended up living in and around New Mexico for most of seven years at that time and it had a powerful effect on me. I love it, but Santa Fe was becoming a thing and untenable and we ended up—and I got pregnant and we moved back. In the end of 1978, we moved back to Louisville, and my daughter Megan was born in 1979.

**01:14:42**

My mother was in Louisville. My father had died. My mother was in Louisville. I wanted my daughter to be around her. Ken's mother was in a nursing facility in Baltimore. We moved her to Louisville. Both Ken and I found jobs that were—up until then he had worked in construction and I had worked in restaurants. I started writing and was very fortunate to meet an editor—to send a letter to an editor who took a ridiculous chance on me and developed into this



great relationship and job at the newspapers. And Ken worked as a bar manager for a couple years and then realized that his calling was education. And so we lived there until Megan was in her twenties; so I guess we lived there twenty years.

**01:15:43**

And it's a great city to bring up a kid in. It's a great city to live in—beautiful neighborhoods, really affordable housing, just the food thing—. It's interesting because people discover Louisville all the time and think that everything is started then but the dining scene was actually starting to shift right around that time in the late 1970s and to increase, to build up steam, etcetera, etcetera.

**01:16:22**

So I got to write about that. I got to cover food there.

**01:16:29**

**RF:** Were you covering music first?

**01:16:31**

**RL:** Uh-hmm, and I was a features writer, but I then became the music writer, I focused on pop music. And this is in the 1980s to the 1990s when Zydeco has been—Zydeco and Cajun is coming up. New Grass Revival, David Grisman, Jerry Douglas, Mark O'Connor, Alison Krauss, all these people are changing bluegrass music, and I knew a lot of those people from before writing, so it was really great to—. And Louisville started this huge bluegrass festival that all these people were at so I not only got to write about in Louisville, I got like the *Boston Globe* had me cover it for them. I wrote a piece for *Esquire* about Sam Bush. Afro-pop is coming along.

Los Lobos, Lyle Lovett, Dwight Yoakum, KD Lang, Steve Earle are percolating up in Nashville. I'm two hours from Nashville. I'm in and out.

**01:17:34**

So I had this amazing, incredible, fertile field to work in that was just—the timing couldn't have been better. And because I had been hanging around these bluegrass guys and these people interested in ethnic music, even before I started writing about it, I was able to have conversations with them about what they were doing that went deep and went into the cultural conversation about it.

**01:18:09**

**RF:** I have one question because you've written about your early writing career writing about music for these newspapers in Louisville and you've done interviews on this but I never heard anyone asking you this question so I want to ask: you joined the domain that is kind of the most homogeneous music writing is the writing of white dudes.

**01:18:31**

**RL:** White men.

**01:18:31**

**RF:** And it is always, and so was there pushback? Did it help being a woman writing about music? But in the 1980s writing about music as a woman could not have been friendly. I know there were other female music writers, but it was a great rarity.

**01:18:48**

**RL:** Uh-hmm.

**01:18:48**

**RF:** In the [19]70s and [19]80s.

**01:18:49**

**RL:** So one of them was my mentor briefly at the paper and then she was killed in an accident. It was devastating. But her name was Laurice Niemtus and she was the music editor at the *Scene* magazine, which was the *Louisville Times* Saturday magazine. It was an anomaly already and it covered culture and it was very hip and very cool. And I had sent in—the editor of that magazine is the person that I sent the letter to. And I think I sent him three clips. I had written two reviews for the *Santa Fe Reporter*. One was really a promotion of New Grass Revival but it was written like an article because I had been journalism major and I knew that you didn't send them—I knew how to write an article.

**01:19:42**

And then they had me do a review of Paul Winter and then I had written a cover story for *Bluegrass Unlimited* magazine about the New Grass Revival because I called up Pete Kuykendall, the editor, one time, really pissed off because they wouldn't write about New Grass Revival. And there was this big drama going on in bluegrass at that time and he had said, "Well, nobody has ever asked. You write the story I'll run it."

**01:20:07**

And so I wrote the story; it's like a year and a half—it was ridiculous. Anyway I wrote the story and it was a cover story. So I looked much more experienced [*Laughs*] than I was but I did understand journalism and I think I'm an inherently good reviewer. I am not a deep

musicologist, but not only my dad's narrative kind of thing and observation, my mother trained my sister and me to observe everything. When we went out and then came home we had to give details down to was it Hellman's or Miracle Whip on the sandwich that we had. So that kind of thing you know observing and writing a story is something that I had a natural skill for.

**01:20:55**

And what I was writing about was stuff that Laurice didn't really know the deal on and she was confident enough and comfortable enough to recognize that and to ask me to come on as her second. And this bluegrass festival is happening and this thing is happening, so I'm writing about these people. And it becomes evermore fertile all the time.

**01:21:25**

And then Dick Van Kleeck comes in and starts this thing—you can look him up—but anyway, he starts this thing called The Lonesome Pine Special, which was a series at the Kentucky Center for the Arts that brought in D. L. Menard, Michael Doucet, Zachary Richard, the Neville Brothers, New Grass, Bela Fleck's the Flecktones' first performance was there, Youssou N'Dour, not just Ladysmith Black Mambazo but, oh gosh, the fabulous woman singer from Africa, Lyle Lovett's Large Band plays their first gig there. It's just all this stuff is happening right there.

**01:22:12**

So I'm building this reputation because this is my natural—. I'm not having to write about—I don't even know who because I'm not having to write about them but I'm not having to cover [19]80s pop music. I'm writing about this substrata of it and the substrata is so appealing to Louisville. I say one of the secrets about Louisville is Louisville is this great guitar town. People love guitarists in Louisville and know and understand. So you have a really good guitar

player anywhere and that's the focus that people are really into it. So I had this amazing experience.

**01:22:52**

So Laurice—back to Laurice; Laurice was about five-foot-two and exquisitely beautiful. She looked like a tiny Elizabeth Taylor. She had those kind of violet eyes. She was hard as nails. She was a total character. She was the woman in that business who guys thought they were going to hit on and then discovered she knew more about their music than they did and blah, blah, blah. And it was fascinating to watch her work.

**01:23:29**

I was a young matron. When I started writing Megan was two years old. My hair had turned sort of brown. I wasn't un-pretty but nobody hit on me, nobody. That wasn't the way that I came across. The way that I came across was I'm really interested in why you do the music you do. And the white male realm of writing about music is really interested in two things. How you do the music that you do, and the second part at that time and I think still is let me impress you mister musician with how smart I am. And that was not my—I listened to one of my first taped interviews and realized that I was answering questions before the person answered them and that what they were going to say a lot more interesting than what I thought. And I learned to shut up. I learned how to give enough information to make you feel like it was worth your time to talk to me, but it wasn't about me, other than my curiosity. Well why? Well, what does that mean? Explain that to me. How does that work?

**01:24:57**

So in terms of having relationships with the musicians themselves I had great friendships that still continue and great connections and connections on a level that made them willing to talk about themselves and how the music affected them and what they wanted it to affect in other

people. So that was a benefit to me. I felt like the stealth writer. I could kind of slide in undercurrent and sometimes it literally worked to my benefit.

**01:25:33**

There's the first piece that I wrote about Bill Monroe, the first profile that I wrote about Bill Monroe, Pat McDonough, this great photographer was my photographer and he went with me and Bill would talk about anything to Pat. He was nice to me but he didn't comprehend that I was the person that was [**Laughs**] taking all this info down. And every once in a while—it was very funny because I remember once Bill started telling some story and I wasn't writing it down and Pat is like [**Gestures**], and I'm like [**Gestures**], because I had heard that story 800 times. And I didn't want to trigger him. And sure enough he goes into another part of the story that nobody has ever gotten or nobody I knew had ever gotten that.

**01:26:21**

So in terms of the work in that way it was fantastic. So Laurice had been the music writer and had just been promoted and had pushed and pushed and pushed and become the music editor and had received a raise in salary. She was killed in a terrible accident. I was up for the job along with a really great friend, a really great guy, who had gone to work at the paper in Kansas and wanted to come back to Louisville. He got the job instead of me because as I said, my lack of a college degree was against me. The fact that I was local was against me. The papers don't really—unless you're the son or daughter of someone important, you don't come up there.

**01:27:14**

But anyway John got the job. He was the music editor at that salary. He kept it for a year. He got a better offer and went somewhere else. I got the job. The job was immediately downgraded to be music writer, not music editor, and my salary was half of what John's was.

**01:27:36**

That continues you know through my story, not just in terms of music writing but in terms of all writing. It's the reality. It is the reality. And then there were times—there is one story I can think of. ZZ Top was playing the Derby and they had just declared—it was like this thing that it was a musician and other places that they had cleaned up their act. They were partying. They were doing health food. They were working out at the gym, because I think Dusty maybe had like a heart attack or something; I don't know.

01:28:25

Anyway my boss sent me off to cover them with Pat McDonough up in—he would send me places to cover somebody, a big act who was coming. He'd send me out to do the preview and write the story. And so we spent a day with ZZ Top and it was so incredibly boring. And I am sure, I just feel certain, had I been a guy it would have been a different story. But that's the only one I can think of that I actually think that worked against me.

01:28:54

Did I ever get anybody at *Musician* or *Rolling Stone* to pay any attention to any story that I ever suggested? Nope. I did get into *Esquire* by virtue of Roy Blount. I had corresponded with him. He had done some reviews of bluegrass, contemporary bluegrass music and it was All Rounder Records who are up there in Massachusetts with them and I actually sent him a couple of records of acts on Flying Fish and Star Day and—I don't—I guess Sugar Hill—that Sugar Hill, the bluegrass Sugar Hill might have been around by that time. And wrote him a letter and saying how I excited I was to see bluegrass covered and if he got a chance to do it again here's some people and why they mattered. You know what an idiot. And he sent me a Dolly Parton postcard back and then I sent him an Elvis Batwing postcard back and whatever. And then one day they asked him to write about a young progressive bluegrass star, and Roy astonishingly said, "I don't know enough about this but I know this person who does."

**01:30:06**

And I got to write about Sam Bush in *Esquire*. It was amazing and I'm forever grateful. And he's tired of me telling that story I think but—

**01:30:16**

**RF:** And eventually the music writing and you were doing food writing, too; it coalesced into your first book. Were you surprised that that first book happened like that?

**01:30:27**

**RL:** Yes, the first book is kind of an astonishing story. Well pause here, I'd like to point out that I can lift my cup with one hand. I don't need two.

**01:30:39**

So what happened was that the papers were going through all of this crazy stuff and of course all of this is due to barbecue because, as we know, in Southern food everything begins and ends with barbecue, right.

**01:30:56**

Vince Staten and Greg Johnson's book *Real Barbecue*, are you familiar?

**01:31:02**

**RF:** It was the first kind of like road—or one of the first barbecue road guides?

**01:31:03**

**RL:** It was, yeah.

**01:31:05**



**RF:** I think it was the first.

**01:31:06**

**RL:** Yeah, yeah, it was one of the first and it was actually the first that was something besides just—that really went at it.

**01:31:13**

**RF:** Yeah, it was good.

**01:31:13**

**RL:** Okay so Vince Staten was my colleague at the newspaper and Greg Johnson is the editor that I told you about who gave me that chance.

**01:31:19**

**RF:** Oh, I see.

**01:31:21**

**RL:** Right, right. So they had done the barbecue book and there was an editor at Atlantic which was pre-Morgan Entekin—he was there, but Atlantic was still a privately owned [*Laughs*] publisher, I wanted to say label and that's the perils right. Anyway an editor there, John, whose last name will come to me in just a minute, had a conversation with an agent, Beth Vesel, and Betty Fussell was somehow in on the story. And they were trying to come up with some food books that would be interesting or whatever. And one of them had said, country music is having this kind of—country music is always having a-resurgence, it's like it never really goes away,

but people look at it and then suddenly think it's resurging. But anyway, so country music is having this resurgence and people are starting to get interested in home-cooked food. What if we did a book about country music and country food?

**01:32:39**

And Beth said I'm going to call this guy Vince Staten. I'm going to call these guys who did this barbecue book and see if they want to do it. Greg by that time was managing editor at the consolidated *Courier Journal*, Gannett, blah, blah, and Vince was working on another book about Elvis or drugstores, or I can't remember. But anyway Beth called him up and Vince said, "Yeah, I'm not going to do this book but the person who should do it is sitting five desks away from me." So he gave Beth my number and Beth called me. And she said so—I'm trying to remember—she wondered if I would be interested and I said, yeah. And she said, "I know you've written something for *Esquire* and what are your other chops," or whatever. And I don't remember what I told her, or maybe she—I don't know; I don't remember the conversation fully. I was having to prove myself to her. Yeah, it just so happened that a day or two before *Spy* magazine had come out with some snarky article about food writing or reviewing or something and they had said something really snarky about a piece that I had in *Esquire* about burgoo or something like that and something Michael Musto had written. **[Laughs]** And I said, "Oh, and I got dissed in *Spy* magazine this month." And I always remember that. Beth said, "Well, that's two of your fifteen minutes of fame." **[Laughs]**

**01:34:20**

So we totally hit it off. And she said, "Do you want to do this?" And I said, "Well, let's talk about it, because the answer would be no if what you're talking about is we were on a glossy picture and a recipe that a PR person picked out and that's what the deal is and it's about creating this faux story." But I said, "I am really interested in the cultural underpinnings of the music and

the cultural underpinnings of the food. And if I can go have conversations about the musicians that I want to talk to, along with the musicians that you all think I have to talk to, about what they really grew up eating and why it matters and what they eat when they're on the road and blah, blah, blah and yada-yada-yada, I'd love to do a book like that.”

**01:35:17**

And they were totally down with it. Everybody was. And Betty was wonderful. I sent in clips and they also had me send in potential recipes. John Barstow—gosh, it's been bugging me—John Barstow was my editor. He was also a year or two later or so Amanda Hesser's editor on her first book and so he was great. And he's from Connecticut. I called him my Connecticut Yankee editor. And, anyway, they really loved the idea and they asked me to include my own family stories.

**01:36:05**

So what happened was this was really supposed to be a book about country food, primarily Southern food, and there's stuff in it—people don't realize this—but there's stuff in it that's not Appalachian. But because of the musicians that I had particularly strong connections with and their background and because they asked me to include my stories and my background, it became primarily about Appalachian food, and it turned out to be the first mass, the first large-scale, not for a regional audience and not for a tourist audience, not a regional book, that talked about Appalachian food and that talked about Appalachian tradition and culture in that respect.

**01:36:50**

*ShuckBbeans, Stack Cakes, Honest Fried Chicken*, those all turn out. I mean honest fried chicken would be everywhere, but shuck beans, stack cakes are strictly Appalachian and you can sing it to “Dim lights, thick smoke and loud, loud music music,” too, which helps. And I'm talking to Chet Atkins and I'm talking to Emmy Lou, who is born in Northern Alabama, and her

mom is from there. And then everybody is putting me in touch with their parents. So I'm talking to John Prine's mother and I'm talking to Brenda Lee's mother and it became this really wonderful—to me it was just this wonderful amazing experience.

**01:37:38**

And I look at the ways that things work now; that you see somebody who writes well about food and their first book is whatever is happening at the moment. And again, it just so happened that what was happening at the moment was something that my heart was into. So I got to write a heart-felt book.

**01:38:06**

**RF:** I was reading the book earlier this week—

**01:38:11**

**RL:** Good, because there is a ten-point quiz.

**01:38:12**

**RF:** —and I was reading—well, and there's I think twenty-five years separates that book, which came out, yeah, in [19]91—

**01:38:20**

**RL:** And *Victuals*.

**01:38:21**

**RF:** —and *Victuals*.

01:38:21

**RL:** 2016.

01:38:22

**RF:** And so it feels like there is a common voice, like it—

01:38:27

**RL:** Oh, yeah.

01:38:29

**RF:** —they sort of feel like the same book. So is that a voice you worked on? Is that just your voice? Why does it feel like there is some continuity, and the middle book too, if there's kind of three books that—?

01:38:41

**RL:** Right, right.

01:38:41

**RF:** The *Butter Beans and Blackberries*.

01:38:43

**RL:** And *Blackberries*; there's actually—this is interesting, there are actually seven books.

01:38:49

**RF:** Yeah, yeah.

**01:38:49**

**RL:** Among those three, but those are the three, and those are the three that I think of as my books, along with *Cornbread Nation 3*, which I edited but I also feel is totally my voice.

**01:39:06**

I think if you read *Victuals* what you understand and *Shuck Beans*—am I too loud?

**01:39:19**

**RF:** Uh-umm; no, no, no.

**01:39:20**

**RL:** Okay. What I can see in that is the maturing of my voice. But it doesn't change. I mean they encouraged me with *Shuck Beans* to write as myself. And largely as a writer, I am continuing the narrative tradition that I grew up with. So I am telling you a story. It would be naïve and incorrect to say that I write the way that I speak.

**01:40:07**

But I write in such a way that it sounds like the way that I speak. And it's the way that the story gets spoken in my head.

**01:40:19**

I mentioned my amiable ex, Ken; at one point Ken was teaching writing to middle school and high school students and so he was studying the writing process. And there's a process to writing and blah, blah, blah, and we teach it. We teach the organizational concept of the outline

and we teach the process of working through drafts, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. And it was fascinating to me to hear him say this because that was not what was happening for me visibly.

**01:40:58**

But what happens for me is that happens mentally. I finally realized that there's—my daughter can tell you that until you get used to it, it can be a little unnerving to live with someone who can stand in the middle of the room with an empty cup for thirty minutes and not move. But that kind of goes on.

**01:41:23**

So I guess what I would say is that I am fortunate that voice was given to me and it took me a while to understand that that's not true for all writers. And by saying voice was given to me I don't mean that it wasn't affected, it was affected by everyone that I've read. The fact that I read so much and that I had certain narrative tropes that I learned from a book or certain pieces. But then there are other things that—the Rule of Three, it cracked me up when I learned that there was such a thing as the Rule of Three because I heard it all my life. It's the ba-dom, ba-dom, ba-da, and if you look at my books, I keep waiting for an editor to go, "Enough with the Rule of Three!" *[Laughs]*

**01:42:24**

And I was helped and shaped by really great editors. I remember one of my copy editors at the paper, at the *Louisville Times*, when I was working there in the magazine, he was wonderful. But he kept trying to change the order of my words and I finally had to sit down and say, "Jack, you're from Minnesota. And so I know that this word correctly belongs here, but if you can understand the gist of what I'm saying, this word musically belongs here. Listen to it. Listen to me say it." And so I had a sense of things like that but—. When I read *Shuck Beans*

recently because we talked about the—it stayed in print for twenty-five years. It only went out of print two years ago.

**01:43:22**

And so Lisa Ekus, my agent, and I talked about should we reprint or whatever. And I went through to kind of graph what I might change or might do blah, blah, blah, and for me to read it I hear a young woman's voice. I hear someone who is still a little bit more performative than I am in *Victuals*. But writing is performative too. I'm conscious of having a voice but I'm more conscious of polishing it after it's come out than constructing it. Does that make sense? Does that answer your question?

**01:44:14**

**RF:** It does, it does, yeah, yeah. And it really kind of draws the chain, the lineage between those three, very personal books. I had one question I want to ask about the middle book, about *Butter Beans*.

**01:44:25**

**RL:** *Butter Beans*, uh-hmm.

**01:44:27**

**RF:** It didn't strike me until—I had seen the book forever on the book shelf and then I was like wait, you're actually on the cover of this book, right?

**01:44:37**

**RL:** Right.



**01:44:37**

**RF:** —and you didn't have a restaurant, you didn't have a TV show, and it comes out in [19]99, and that is I think it must have been rare to put a non-celebrity, and a woman at that, on the cover of a book—

**01:44:50**

**RL:** On the cover of a book.

**01:44:51**

**RF:** Whose idea? How did that happen?

**01:44:53**

**RL:** It's I think—well, I will tell you—

**01:44:54**

**RF:** Did you think about it?

**01:44:55**

**RL:** Yeah; I will say that it's a little less rare than it appears at this point in time, because we did not have food celebrities. We had food celebrities but not in the way that we do now. It was before branding. It was before franchising. It was the idea of my editor at that time at Farrar, Straus & Giroux, Elisabeth Dyssegaard, she just felt like it was—I would paraphrase what I think she said, this is me remembering, and again it went back to that voice, that idea of

voice, which is that when I wrote it, my books weren't just about the subject, but it was about my relationship with the subject and my voice in telling the subject. And the book in the middle between *Shuck Beans* and *Butter Beans* is called *The Festive Table*. It's the lost book. It's a book about how we were changing, how we were adapting, celebration and food to fit a changing society, and it, too, is full of storytelling. It's full of interviewing. I'm a good storyteller. I think I'm a good interviewer. And I think my strengths are that I do a good job of portraying what people have said to me, of representing them.

**01:46:24**

And so she felt like my voice was important. But you're right. I mean I was nobody. I was not somebody that magazines were asking to write for them. By virtue of the fact that there was no one else who had written a national book about Appalachian food, I got to show up on—I write about being at this event in Atlanta with [John] Egerton is how *Butter Beans*—we're talking about a book about beans. And it's how that book comes to be.

**01:47:02**

I was there to speak on a panel about minority voices in Southern food, so I was the token hillbilly. And there were two black writers on that panel also. I don't even—and when I went to—Egerton connected me to John T. [Edge] And it was by virtue of Egerton that I was invited to be a part of the SFA. I was not able to go to the first SFA because John T., God bless his heart, had it on Derby weekend. [*Laughs*] Which never happened again, I can say.

**01:47:49**

**RF:** Before they changed it, right.

**01:47:50**

**RL:** And so when I went to the second it was kind of shocking to me because I went to the second and I knew that Egerton would know who I was and I knew that John T. would know of me. I had introduced myself to Nathalie [Dupree] at one time and I had introduced myself to Damon [Lee Fowler] at one time. And I had met, oh my God, I can't—I'm having trouble with—it truly—I'm having an age issue that I am losing names of very important people, and so you know who I'm talking about, I'm talking about the goddess of food writing—. [*Laughs*] From Virginia, our black writer, the woman who begins this beautiful narrative of think about the South differently, and blah, blah, blah. Thank you for pretending like you can't think of it either.

**01:48:56**

**RF:** No, I can't. [*Laughs*]

**01:48:59**

**RL:** Anyway it'll come to me. It'll come to me like John Barstow.

**01:49:01**

**RF:** We'll fill it in right.

**01:49:03**

**RL:** Oh God and I'll go down in history with this. Leah Chase's name is the only name that's coming to me and—

**01:49:08**

**RF:** Oh, Edna Lewis.

01:49:10

**RL:** Yes, oh, dear God, oh my God, thank you so much. And I once had this conversation with someone about Edna Lewis, a young person is referring to the fact that she was not known in her lifetime. And I'm like no, she was very known in her lifetime, but in her lifetime being known in food is not what it is now.

01:49:35

But I'd go to food events and, "What do you do?" "Well, I write cookbooks." "Oh, what's your book, blah, blah, blah. Oh nice to meet you." I mean the IACP and things like that. So when I showed up in Oxford I just kind of felt like I was going to be a fly on the wall. And I'm not sure exactly why but instead I was known and asked to be a moving force, probably because I was the person at that time—Joe Dabney hadn't written his book—I was the person at that time who represented a part of the South that was ignored. And then also I think—and the other thing about *Butter Beans*, when you started saying that what I thought you were going to say is that you realize—that was one of the first books about garden foods. And particularly one of the absolutely first books about the Southern garden, because almost everything else focused on meat.

01:50:42

A John Barstow story, my editor on *Shuck Beans*, he said, "So I want you to write a first food chapter. Let's just complete a chapter and do the first one. What do you want to do?" And I said, "I want to do the vegetables." And he said, "Oh, why don't you do chicken or pork?" And I'm like, "No, I want to do the vegetables." And finally he said, "Okay, okay, do the vegetables," blah, blah, blah. And so I sent him the chapter on vegetables when it got done and he called me back and he was laughing and he said, "I can't believe this chapter." He said, "When you said

you wanted to do the vegetables I thought you were taking the easiest route, that there would be like four recipes and there's twenty recipes." And I'm like, "John, that's what you got. The number of recipes that are on the floor under my desk are countless, and that's the story. This is the story of Southern food that nobody is talking about.

**01:51:38**

So *Butter Beans* became that.

**01:51:40**

But anyway Elisabeth Dyssegaard decided that I should be on the cover in order to emphasize the narrative part of the book. And she didn't want me on the cover standing in a kitchen stirring something. She wanted me surrounded by vegetables. I mean I lived in Louisville. I'm not a great gardener and people think I am. That was Steve Smith who was my CSA outside of Louisville. I wanted to have my friends Phil Wakeman and Deane Patton do the photo. I was getting pushback in New York from—Elisabeth was fine with it but they wanted to send a New York photographer down. And I had sent Elisabeth a couple of pictures and some New York photographer that they worked with walked in and looked down and said, "Oh my God, that's a Phil Patton." And she's like, "How the hell do you know that," and blah, blah, blah? And it's always this constant kind of training New York—I don't know if you have this experience. But it's like even when everybody is behind you, you're still kind of convincing them.

**01:52:59**

They sent me the proofs for that, they had three different page layouts and they wanted to know—and if you look at it, the color inside, the color accent is the same purple as the purple beans that are hanging, the runner beans that are hanging on it, and I mean it was a no-brainer, right. And Elisabeth thought it was a no-brainer, too. The art department said [*Laughs*]—I'll

never forget this—“Well I think people in New York would get purple but isn't that a little radical for the rest of the country?” **[Laughs]** It's the end of the 1990s. It's like my entire wardrobe was phasing out purple, it's just—I don't know; it was so funny. But anyway it was her sense of that that should be there.

**01:53:49**

Now I will say that because of my haircut at that time, the way my hair is cut, Nathalie Dupree and I—I have more than Nathalie at that time would have people say, “Oh, I love your book,” and then think it was Nathalie's—saying one of Nathalie's books.

**01:54:08**

**RF:** But she was also on the cover of her book back then, right.

**01:54:11**

**RL:** Yeah, and she was. And she was a celebrity, but, yeah, you're right, I was not. I was not. That's interesting. I hadn't thought about that. It's really true, really, really true.

**01:54:20**

**RF:** I have just two more topics I want to cover real quick, some more questions. Do we have time?

**01:54:24**

**RL:** Yeah, oh yeah.

**01:54:25**

**RF:** Are we okay? Should we turn on the light?

**01:54:28**

**RL:** Would that help you think? [*Laughs*]

**01:54:31**

**RF:** Turn on a light.

**01:54:34**

**RL:** We should note here that Noah is building an ark across the way from us because it's pouring down rain. [*Laughs*] And the room is dark or it's probably ten o'clock at night.

**01:54:46**

**RF:** I want to ask one question about *Victuals* but before that I want to ask a question and this—I think it's an important question to ask because you did do an oral history with the Southern Foodways Alliance back in 2005 and a large part of that conversation is about your illness. And you are at a very—I think you were at the end of a long recovery period or—and I wanted to know if having cancer and that battle and that recovery, did it change the way you ate and did it change the way you wrote and told stories?

**01:55:32**

**RL:** Hmm; that's interesting. It changed my life. I haven't thought about those two specific things.

**01:55:40**

**RF:** I know it changed your life but because you are now a writer about food, you—

**01:55:45**

**RL:** Right, right. I know what's healthy and I eat healthy foods and I know what's good and sometimes what's good is what's healthy and I eat that. And then sometimes what's good is not and I eat that too. Diet was not a part of my recovery. Do we need to explain that I had—actually I'd like to say.

**01:56:15**

**RF:** You can explain however—

**01:56:15**

**RL:** I'd like to say that in 2001 I was diagnosed with fourth-stage ovarian cancer and it metastasized in my liver. And so the anticipated survival time, the median survival time is two years or less for that. And it is now seventeen years later and I'm still here and I'm cancer-free from that. And it was a miraculous recovery. And I'm pretty sure I talked in that SFA interview about the role that the SFA and my colleagues played in that, so I won't go back into that.

**01:56:53**

I will also add that two years ago was diagnosed with first-stage breast cancer. Obviously we know now that I have the gene for that and so I underwent radical surgery and I'm fine. I just saw my cancer doc two days ago and everything is fine, so the knowledge and the presence of—the knowledge of your limited time becomes keener. And in that limited time you—when you bring that to the fore, you make choices based on that.



**01:57:40**

One of the first things that I read about chemotherapy—I had a book, in 2001, I had a book about chemotherapy and what it said was in order to heal you have to have calories. In order to heal this is not the time to diet. Eat milk, butter, avocados, ice cream, cottage cheese and it was like, oh my gosh. You know the first time in my life because I have always struggled with weight issues. I have not always been heavy but it has always been a piece of my reality.

**01:58:15**

And what happened was I went to a healer during that time, an energetic healer, and one of the things that she said to me was be conscious of what you're eating but she said sometimes your spirit needs something that your body doesn't. So she said if you feel like you need to eat that brownie, just hold it in your hand and ask your body to take what it can use and get rid of the rest.

**01:58:49**

Now I'd like to say that I practice that all the time and it's led to me being incredibly healthy. I mean I eat like a normal person you know. But one of the things that changed for me is that there's a Katherine Anne Porter line that's something like, "Our father's said we ate as if there were no God," like there's not going to be a tomorrow or whatever and that's not—. When I eat now, and particularly in this world that we live in where eating is—it's not optional. We go to somebody's restaurant and it's not like we have the choice really to say I don't need this. And so what I have learned is to pace what I eat, to be conscious of that, to try many things, to be aware of the fact that if I have fried chicken and mashed potatoes and gravy that the next day I should really think about eating a salad and roughage and going easier or whatever.

**02:00:00**

But it wasn't a part. There's this great book called *Remarkable Recovery* and it's about people who have the kind of experience that I have. They have a diagnosis that you're not supposed to get well from and for some reason they do. And so a reporter and a psychoanalyst paired up together to do this book, trying to find as many people like that as they could, and to ask them what they were in order to find the commonality of what they did, because you can talk to people who will say macrobiotics saved my life. You can talk to people who will say acupuncture. You can talk to people who will say moving, blah, blah, blah, blah. What they found was there was no commonality of a thing but what the commonality was that the people themselves dedicated themselves to healing and defined for themselves what healing practices they wanted to do.

**02:01:06**

And so that became important to me and it set me on a process. It's not like it changed my life like completely turned it around in one moment. It set me on a process of trying to inquire of myself, does this matter to you? Is this worth your attention today? Is this worth your energy? And it changed. I didn't write after that except to make money most of the time and that's an issue for me. And it's one that I have to confront and deal with. It's kind of a place that I'm at right now, which is that I have always asked my creativity to make money for me and I need to allow it just to have some fun.

**02:02:04**

I moved back to New Mexico for the second time and lived there for seven years because that just felt right to me to do that. And, buddy, let me tell you, when that was up it was up. I mean even literally on the day—I wrote a poem about it because on the day that I left there was this huge windstorm, like nobody's business, blowing from the west to the east. It was like—

02:02:27

**RF:** It was sweeping you out—

02:02:28

**RL:** Oh man, I couldn't have stayed. It was fascinating. It taught me to listen better, and by listening better it taught me in terms of food to be more aware of who needs this right now? Does my mouth need this? Does my body need this? Do my emotions need this? What the heck is going on here?

02:02:54

So there's more consciousness of that but it didn't make like a big dramatic change and I find—and because Southern food is so much healthier than people think it is. And also because I finally got proven right; I've sworn for years that bacon grease and lard were better for you than butter substitutes and other crap, right. *[Laughs]*

02:03:20

**RF:** Right.

02:03:21

**RL:** So we're starting, we're learning those things. You know we're learning that when everybody started on the kale kick it was like if you read about kale it tells you that it has to be tempered for your body to access it. If you eat it raw it's not happening. So you have to actually cook it. It's not wrong to cook greens and to drink the liquid. It's not wrong to cook green beans for a long time; they've got a bean in it for crying out loud. It's wrong to think a green bean

looks like grass. So there's not some radical thing but certainly there's subtleties that go on and continue to shape my life and continue to shape what I write about.

**02:04:07**

*Victuals* was an intense, an extremely intense emotional experience for me because I knew I wasn't writing *Shuck Beans 2*. I was writing first of all with an intention to deepen the understanding of the region. When I think about *Shuck Beans*, *Shuck Beans* is my celebration of being Appalachian. It's my saying, "Hey, you don't know how good we had it. You don't know how smart we are. You don't know how loving we are. You don't know all this stuff."

**02:04:54**

By the time I had come to *Victuals* I understood that I wanted not just to understand it and embrace that part of my history but I also wanted to understand the darkness. So let me tell you a story, which is that the first chapter that I sent to Francis Lam, and Francis Lam—the proposal for *Victuals* was shopped around for six years. And I would get people who were interested, who couldn't pay for me to travel through Appalachia, and I was not willing to write from what I thought it was about without knowing what was actually happening.

**02:05:37**

And then there were people like the woman, the one editor/publisher, I kind of thought might be the deal toward near the end and then she asked me if we could drop Appalachia from the subtitle because of its associations with poverty. And it was like, "Yeah, no. We can't do this book. This is not going to happen." And then one day Lisa Ekus called me and said Francis Lam wants to talk to you about your book and I said, "Oh my God, that's like the Dalai Lama wants to talk to you about your meditation practice." **[Laughs]** Let me get my act together here. **[Laughs]**

**02:06:13**

But Francis got it. Francis understood that we were not just doing a cookbook. We were doing a book and recipes are a part of it. And he had so much credibility where he was that he was able to get the support for that. And so I was able to hire a photographer and after a false start I found Johnny Autry and his wife Charlotte, who became my recipe tester and then as the food stylist, and they live in Asheville. And Johnny wanted nothing more in the world than to do a food book that wasn't about the plates, wanted to do a narrative book, a story of what he calls it a piece of art.

**02:07:01**

And he made it an incredible piece of art.

**02:07:05**

So the first chapter that I sent to Francis wasn't even in the proposal because I didn't really understand the significance of salt and then realized that its significance is beyond beyond. Not only is it salt, for God's sake, which is so fundamental, but it's the first extractive industry. It begins in the late 1700s. It sets the narrative for this being a place that people take out of, people not from here take out of, and we get left with the rest and what we do with that.

**02:07:38**

And so I sent him the piece and it's not your—and I think the writing in food books has become extraordinary. I read Edward Lee's books like novels. And so it's not like I was inventing the wheel here. But I was not talking about the beauty of the garden—. And I was talking about the resilience of the people, but I was talking about the dark—what that resilience is up against. And I was talking about leased slavery; part of the history of Appalachia, the wrong history of Appalachia, is that there are no African American or black people or slavery in Appalachia. No, there's leased slavery, there's free blacks, there's a whole history of black

people here. And it's not pretty. Some of it is; some of it's powerful. We get Melinda Russell, a free black woman who is a single mother creating her own businesses.

**02:08:37**

But we also get Booker T. Washington's stepfather who's an indentured slave in the salt mines in the Kanawha Valley. So it's a dark chapter. It's a beautiful chapter but it's a dark chapter. And I sent it to Francis because it was like I got to know right up front if this is going to be okay. And Francis wrote back to me and said, "I want more, I want more of what this is. This is exactly what we want to do." And I was so relieved. And then I got Johnny, and Johnny and Charlotte and it's February. And Johnny is going out to take pictures of the landscape of Appalachia, and we're weird—the people from Florida come up here in the summer and then when it starts to snow they think it's sad and they go away. And we just feel sorry for them because it gets stark and dark and incredible and moving and powerful and there's just so much that goes on it.

**02:09:44**

So Johnny is taking these pictures of these landscapes with naked trees and rocks everywhere and blah, blah, blah. And Charlotte is creating this palette that has grey as a primary part of it and she's putting things on very plain plates. And she's showing the food, not in that brute way that got really popular for a while that I was terrified of but it's real. It's very real and so we send off those pictures to the art director. And you've been down this road before and you know publishing, the art director is really the person who drives the wagon. Your editor can be on your side, everyone can be on your side, if the art director says I don't know if people in the Midwest will understand purple you're not going to have purple unless you can convince them otherwise.

**02:10:48**

And so we're waiting for—we like to call it the Appalachian cookbook version of more cowbells. We're waiting to hear where are the Mason jars? Are there no flowers in Appalachia? How about some of those grandmother dishes with the little decorations on the side? Could we have gingham? Don't ever get me started on the cover of the paperback of *Shuck Beans*, by the way, which I hate because it is all of those things and it's not even good-looking fried chicken.

02:11:22

But [*Laughs*]—

02:11:24

**RF:** [*Laughs*] The fight over the cover of my book was over gingham.

02:11:27

**RL:** I know, I know, the gingham fight, oh my God. So we're waiting. We're all holding our breath. We get an email from Stephanie Huntwork, the art director, and it says, "I am so grateful you all understand the importance of shadow and telling the story of Appalachia. I'm from West Virginia." And I still—you know that thing you do here right before you cry? I still get that. Tears don't come out but I couldn't tell that story for a while without crying every time that I told it.

02:12:00

So we just had this extraordinary thing that came together in terms of that book and what it was going to be. And for me to be able to confront things in the story of Appalachia that are dark, the legitimate things that are dark, not the BS. In "Salt" I get to talk about the White/Gerard feud in Clay County which is an industrial feud that was sparked by two competing salt industrialists. And they pitted their workers against one another and it bleeds over into the

community. It's not about somebody married your daughter or stole your liquor or shot your cow. It is an industrial story and I got to write about—

**02:12:54**

One of the things I asked Stephanie and she was like, “Oh, hell yeah.” She’s from up around—she’s from the corridor from Ashland up to Charleston where Nitro and Ashland Oil and you know all the chemical factories are, etcetera, etcetera. And I said, “In the early pages I want there to be a picture of an urban—I want this photo of Chattanooga to be in there.” I asked Johnny to take for me an urban scape, and not Asheville. So when he went to Chattanooga he took Chattanooga because Appalachia was an industrial center, this whole agrarian—. And there’s still stuff; there was a book that came out around the same time, lovely book, all about folksingers and farms, and, yeah, that’s a part of our history. But to pretend like that’s the whole history is not getting the deal.

**02:13:51**

So that became you know important in this book.

**02:13:58**

Why am I answering this question? What was it?

**02:14:00**

**RF:** Well—

**02:14:01**

**RL:** What was the actual question?

**02:14:02**



**RF:** We were talking about the darkness of the book and how you wanted to inject darkness.

That's how we started. Let me ask this, you've done a lot of talking about *Victuals* over the past two years.

**02:14:22**

**RL:** Yeah.

**02:14:24**

**RF:** I think it's done well. It's won awards. And I guess is there—well, let me ask this before I ask the question I want to ask though about *Victuals*. Is there a question that hasn't been asked about *Victuals* that you've—because I know you've had to answer a lot of the questions about *Victuals* but is there something that—?

**02:14:42**

**RL:** Well, let me tell you one thing and this is not answering the actual question you're asking but it's answering the question. One of the things that surprised me about *Victuals* that was radically different than *Shuck Beans* was I didn't get the squirrel hee-hee-hee question, right.

**02:15:01**

With *Shucked Beans* I had to always begin—the term I would say is on the defensive but I wasn't defensive. But I had to be prepared to say, “No, well, actually, you don't understand.”

**02:15:20**

The first person to write about *Victuals* and the first piece about it on the day it was released or the day after it was released was Jane Black's piece on the *Washington Post*, it was the Food Section front. And Jane Black is a brilliant writer who has already studied and

understands Appalachia. We met each other; I was doing recipes for a story she wrote about Bill Best for *Eating Well* and we have become colleagues. We reference each other back and forth. I'm having a panicky feeling right here like am I—is there a question she asked me I haven't answered?

**02:16:03**

But anyway and we've talked back and forth. She and her husband, who is from Huntington, West Virginia, have worked forever on a book that came out of the Jamie Oliver BS, of Jamie going to teach us poor hillbillies how to eat, and they have written a book about the underpinnings of that and what the reality is. And also what it's like to be a cafeteria worker in a modern day America trying to serve food.

**02:16:31**

So Jane understood; she wrote about the book from this much deeper context, and both Lisa and the folks at Clarkson Potter were able to see what the book was about and to get me interviews with people who wanted to talk about that, who wanted to talk about it from a deeper level. So I haven't really had the tee-hee-hee kinds of questions—possum.

**02:17:08**

**RF:** Do you think it's because the country has matured or do you—?

**02:17:12**

**RL:** If you had asked me that question before November 2016 I would have said absolutely. And I'm not talking about—I should change that. If you had asked me that question before 2017 and the coverage of what supposedly happened in the election of 2016 and who was responsible

for it, and why, I would have said absolutely, absolutely. We are starting to address this and approach it.

**02:17:46**

It's interesting to me. Here's the question that is usually the second question, for a while it was the second question I got asked after I would speak, "What do you think of *Hillbilly Elegy*? What do you think of *Hillbilly Elegy*?" That's the possum question now. And I'm sorry that it's the question but I am really glad to answer it.

**02:18:14**

And now I don't get asked it because I've managed to work into speaking and talking about the resilience of what is—and not just the resilience of people but what is happening right now. This change that's happening in Appalachia because young people can stay here because of the information highway, because you can do work, and young people are staying here to do community work and to create lifestyles that are not—that come back to the idea of a lifestyle that is not solely about acquisition and achievement but is a lifestyle about connection and community.

**02:18:47**

And so all this work is going on here and it's hardly being covered, but it's happening. And I get to talk about that and that's how *Victuals* ends, talking about there's possibility here. I didn't want to say oh it's sunny and wonderful and blah, blah, blah, but there's possibility here because we have never been people with agency at our core. We've been people whose agency has been taken away from them every time it came into conflict with the need of someone in power to make more money or to exercise that power.

**02:19:24**

And so I mean you know that's a piece of talking about *Victuals* and at some point I managed to work into that, the line, "we don't need no stinking *Elegy*." So nobody asks me anymore about *Hillbilly Elegy*, and the pushback against *Hillbilly Elegy* has started to be really great. And people are starting again to come back around to recognizing the fact that the numbers that indicate the number of Trump voters in Appalachia are not an indication of the number of people in Appalachia or necessarily the zeitgeist in Appalachia any more than it is anywhere else. I mean the suburbs of Wisconsin and Minnesota and the country there and Staten Island had a larger percentage of people voting for Donald Trump. But again, as we do in this country, we look for our, the acceptable, Achilles heel. Let's blame it on the hillbillies.

**02:20:25**

So that's actually the question and thanks for asking that question because what is exciting to me about it is frustrating but it's also exciting to understand that in twenty-five years the conversation has been elevated. The conversation—and the work of the SFA and the people who spiraled off of the SFA, people who are saying we're going to use food as a lens to talk about deeper issues are a huge part of that, a huge, huge part of people coming to cookbooks now or books about food asking questions. The one thing about *Victuals* that I was allowed to do that I think is radically different, and I would never say it's the first book or whatever because who knows, but the fact that they allowed me to write three- and four- and five-thousand word essays that were not just about the food itself but about everything around the food in order to begin chapters. And the fact that the chapters didn't have to be about breakfast, lunch, and dinner or even a specific food, but could even talk about foodways in it. Those things were huge, and the fact that it got to be a cookbook with colored photographs that people who would not pick up a scholarly book about Appalachian food will pick up and read, that's thrilling to me.

**02:22:00**

And one of the great things when I go out and speak and sign books is having people who come up and say, “I never knew this. I never knew this and you’ve changed; I’ll never think—.” I actually hear people say I’ll never think of Appalachia in the same way again.

**02:22:18**

And I don’t mean like you know it’s not thousands of people. You know what a book signing is like. It’s like three on a really great incredible day. **[Laughs]** But to have been allowed to do that, encouraged to do that, supported to do that and then to have had the good fortune of a number of writers and interviewers who wanted to talk about that’s radically different than twenty-five years ago, radically different.

**02:22:53**

And that’s not just a function of the fact that this book goes deeper than that book did, then *Shuck Beans* did but it’s very much a function of how—and how we have changed the discussion of food and foodways. And having watched it, I can say that the SFA has been the primary mover and shaper of that, yeah.

**02:23:18**

**RF:** Yeah, just one more question. Maybe you answered this but I still want to ask this.

**02:23:24**

**RL:** I’m sure I can answer it differently. **[Laughs]** I’m sure I can answer it a very interesting way. **[Laughs]**

**02:23:30**

**RF:** Have you thought about what you want the legacy of the book to be beyond people's perceptions about Appalachia? Is there something the book can do in America, for America, beyond the way I, a non-Appalachian, and a bunch of others, a world of non-Appalachians, think about Appalachia? Is there something else the book does?

**02:23:50**

**RL:** Yeah—

**02:23:52**

**RF:** Or can do; have you thought about that legacy?

**02:23:54**

**RL:** Yeah, yeah. I want to say this in a way that acknowledges the fact that *Victuals* is a grain of sand, and I'm talking about building a new world. But what I want it to do is to change that un—I want it to be—no, not what I want it to—. I want it to be a small part of a shifting conversation and a change in our value system. We value exceptionalism. We value acquisition. We value fame. We are a narcissistic society.

**02:24:49**

And *Victuals* is a testament to the power and the beauty of a web society, a society of connections, not tribalism because I think that tribalism is just narcissism for a group, right. But that thing that Bill Best talks about and I try to talk about it whenever I talk about Appalachia or write about it, I try to make this point that what is best about the region and what has sustained us in the region are those webs of connection.

**02:25:33**

For me it's the great-aunts who will get on a train and come get this child in Louisville and take her back to be with all of her cousins. They would come to the house. And we'd sit on the porch and we'd string beans and we'd tell stories, it's the web of stories. It's the knowing that—that it's the time my dad got laid off for a little longer than usual and my parents' friends, who I thought were my aunt and uncle and their sons were my cousins and I was grown up later when I found out they were just friends, but they come over to visit—they lived in the same neighborhood—they'd come over to visit and we'd all have coffee. They'd talk with my parents as much as my dad is willing or able to talk. And then they go home and about forty minutes later my mother walks out on our back porch and discovers two bags of groceries sitting there. That sort of thing, that web of connection, which is the strength of the region, is what I want people to understand and take away from this.

**02:26:42**

I would say one of the books, a current book, that talks on that same—that—and—and we don't go at it head-on. If I went at it head-on nobody—it's that magic that Egerton talks about. Really basically what I'm doing is I'm setting the table and saying y'all come eat and then I'm bringing up a difficult subject, right, and saying let's think about this.

**02:27:08**

And a current book this year that does it is Sean Sherman's *The Sioux Chef*. It's more bare bones but each time he talks about the food he takes us back to what this meant in the culture and what it still means to people. And we have very similar stories. I've lived in the Southwest. I've experienced what happens when people are ghettoized and marginalized, not just the Native American culture but the Hispanic, Chicano, Norteño—it's Norteño in Northern New Mexico—culture.

**02:27:56**

The first time I lived in New Mexico, when I was a hippie, everybody was into the Indians. That was the cool deal. But all my friends, all my middle-class, counter-culture buddies would joke about the Chicanos, the low-riders and the, “Oh, you better not live there. They’ll kill you,” blah, blah, blah and yada, yada, yada. And I’m sitting there eating pinto beans and corn, tortillas, and I’m listening to this and I’m thinking, “Oh, this is bullshit. This is the same story.”

**02:28:33**

And we’d work and I’d love to see—one of my goals in life is to connect the person who can write about Northern New Mexico foodways with somebody who gets it and will publish the book, right. And it’s not me, I want to be the fulcrum there.

**02:28:52**

But from these shattered societies struggling there is alcoholism. We’ve had alcoholism. We’ve had pot. We’re now in the opioid crisis. New Mexico is in the opioid crisis. I’m sure that it’s happening on the Reservations although maybe not as much because there are not doctors up there that are lucrative to push it, right.

**02:29:21**

But we’ve had all these things thrown at us and yet something survives. This very powerful thing survives and it’s not the part of us that’s about exceptionalism. It’s not J. D. Vance saying I rose above the wasteland because I had strength and the wasteland didn’t. It’s about the people in the still in the wasteland who are saying I can see these threads and I’m going to make them stronger again.

**02:29:48**

And yeah that’s what I would hope for this humble little cookbook to just be one more voice in that conversation.



**02:29:58**

**RF:** Well, I think that's a good place to end. I want to thank you.

**02:30:02**

**RL:** That was a heck of a sumuppance wasn't it? [*Laughs*]

**02:30:20**

**[End Ronni Lundy Interview]**