

Ed Scott Jr. with catfish, Leflore County, Mississippi, 2001.



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THE LONG SYMPOSIUM TAIL

What begins here does not end here.

BY JOHN T. EDGE

Maude Schuyler Clay

BEFORE ED SCOTT JR. FRIED A MESS of catfish filets and a few buckets of hushpuppy mix on a May evening in 1998, he and Richard Schweid shared a gazebo stage on the fringe of the University of Mississippi campus. They spoke of Scott's career move from raising soybeans and cotton to digging catfish ponds and raising channel cats in the Delta clay.

Schweid, who wrote about Scott in his book *Catfish and the Delta*, prompted his old friend to talk about the power a Black man wields when he works land that he owns. Scott relished the conversation and the opportunity to connect that big idea to his work as an activist, marching with John Lewis across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in 1965 and feeding protestors on James Meredith's March Against Fear in 1966.

After the family moved from row crops to aquaculture, Scott said that he could not find a reliable local processor for the catfish he raised. When catfish processors shut him out, Scott built his own plant in the backyard of his Drew, Mississippi, home, beneath the roof of an old tractor shed, on land his father had owned and worked before him. Later in his life, when the USDA tried to shut Scott out, he would show the same courage, the same determination. And he would inspire his children to act with the same boldness.

That conversation and that meal were highlights of the first Southern Foodways Symposium. Staged a year before the Southern Foodways Alliance formed in the summer of 1999, those moments proved catalytic over the next two decades, connecting SFA beginning beliefs in the power of food narratives to the aspirations of the mature organization we are now.

Author and songwriter Alice Randall

FOR 2020, we gather in new ways to host a different sort of Symposium that relies on various platforms—from digital to print to podcast. In the run-up, I've been thinking about the moment at the end of the night at the first Symposium when Scott stood to receive applause for his words and his fish. Something important had happened. We could hear it in the sustained applause that followed Scott and Schweid's conversation. We could taste it in those filets. But we did not yet know how our time with Ed Scott Jr. would resonate.

That's the way it goes when we gather for Symposium: Someone does something brilliant. Someone says something brilliant. Sometimes those things are profound. Sometimes those things are goofy. (Raise your hand if you remember the bacon forest Melissa Hall installed in 2007, or the pimento cheese fritters that John Fler and John Currence deep-fried in 2003.)

Those somethings hang in the air for a few moments. Sometimes they diffuse. Other times, they gain new meaning when an inspired attendee or collaborator carries them forward. We don't know what dividends presentations and meals will pay. But we trust the process.



John Partipilo

OVER THE PAST decade, Alice Randall has prodded SFA audiences toward hard truths and generous outlooks. In 2009, when SFA staged a symposium on the interdependence of music and food, she spoke of Black contributions to country music and led the audience in a sing-along of "Will the Circle be Unbroken."

In 2013, she stood behind a stove podium alongside her daughter, Caroline Randall Williams, to talk about kitchen rape and unheralded Black women. Randall returned in 2015 to tell the story of Mahalia Jackson's fried chicken business, which leveraged gospel celebrity to sell drumsticks and Soul Bowls.

Last year, SFA released a Gravy podcast episode, inspired by that Mahalia Jackson presentation, featuring Randall's clarion voice. This October, SFA partnered for the second time with the Southern Festival of Books to present our John Egerton Prize. And for the second time, Randall, who hatched the idea of our partnership, spoke of the inspiration Egerton's life and work has offered.

In the gap between those two moments, Randall published her latest novel. If you got to know Randall during a Symposium, here's your chance to get to know her better. *Black Bottom Saints* is a damn good literary novel that reads like a page-turner. It's set in the Up South: Detroit, Michigan, when that city was, as Randall describes it, a "self-perpetuating cauldron of sepia excellence." Each short chapter concludes with a cocktail.

The drinks serve as toasts to characters. My favorite comes late in the book, in a chapter that entwines labor organizer Marc Stepp and the Black superstar Eartha Kitt. The Union Card calls for a jigger of bourbon, a sugar cube, half a pony-glass of water, and six or seven mint

leaves, served in a julep cup or jelly jar. You might recognize the drink as a julep. The characters in Randall's book suggest, among other things, that the payoff of a union card in the Black Bottom of Detroit was sweeter and stronger than a julep.

ON OCTOBER 8, 2015, Ed Scott passed away. He was ninety-three. Nine days later, following a homegoing service at First Baptist Church in Mound Bayou, Mississippi, his family laid him to rest on the family farm, in the family cemetery, alongside his father. His funeral took place during our eighteenth Symposium, at about the time Alice Randall stepped to the stage to talk about Mahalia Jackson.

That night, as his family gathered in Drew, 300 of us gathered in Oxford to toast his bold life. And to commemorate the struggle and success of his daughter Willena White, who helped lead the effort to buy back the farmland the Scott family had lost due to predatory USDA financial practices.

What began at that first Symposium, when Scott stepped to the stage to talk and later stepped to the fryer to cook, still reverberates. The ideas Alice Randall shared at our Symposium in 2015 continue to find new audiences via our Gravy podcast. That's the point. What begins at our Symposium does not end here.

Even in a moment like this, when SFA communicates with audiences in new ways, especially in a moment like this, the work we do pays the biggest dividends after the Symposium, when we take those stories home. When we take those stories to heart. I trust the presentations we share here will benefit from long tails, and that they will move you in the ways that stories shared by Ed Scott Jr. and Alice Randall continue to move me. 🍷

John T. Edge is the founding director of SFA and the host of TrueSouth on the SEC Network/ESPN.