



Gravy

“What enters or leaves the doors of our bodies is the basis of morality.”
—Lillian Smith

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NEWS FROM THE SOUTHERN FOODWAYS ALLIANCE

Jason Ringenberg: From Scorcher to Farmer

by Timothy C. Davis

In the mid-to-late '80s and early '90s, Jason Ringenberg, a tall drink of water given to sporting a 10-gallon hat and star-spangled suit, probably lit more Southern towns afire than General Sherman. Considered too country for rock radio and too rock for country, the alt-country act Jason and the Scorchers nevertheless developed a huge following and went on to tour with the likes of R.E.M., The Replacements, and others. Many music writers (this one included) see Ringenberg and Co. as founding fathers of the Americana music movement, too often attributed to other Johnny-Cash-come-latelies.

Of course, as an important band—in September, the group was presented with the Americana Music Association's lifetime achievement award—they were horribly mismarketed, battled tooth and nail with their label for years, and were finally dropped. The band broke up and folks went their separate ways (although they occasionally reunite, usually for charity). Ringenberg went on to release a series of critically acclaimed solo pieces, and hotshot guitarist Warner Hodges became an in-demand session and touring guitarist.

The Jason Ringenberg biopic, as it might be played on CMT or some similar network, would be the usual story of second acts, a look at how our upbringings can rise up and reclaim us even as we least expect it. You see, Ringenberg grew up on his family's Illinois hog farm, exploring the nearby forests and fields. His goal as a child, he says, was to be a forester. Instead, he became a rock and roll star with children of his own.

These days, he spends most of his time raising his newest creation, a children's performer with the nom-de-rock “Farmer Jason.” In this latest guise, he hopes to teach kids about ecology, the natural world, Native Americans, and the land around them.

Ringenberg says he first got the idea when, about to leave on a solo tour in 2002, he noticed how much his two young daughters, Addie Rose and Camille, listened to tot-gearred artists like Raffi. Deciding to create a CD for them, he cranked out a short E.P. When he returned, the results were in: they loved it—as did all of their friends. “These days, when I prepare songs, I test-drive them with that very same audience,” Ringenberg says.

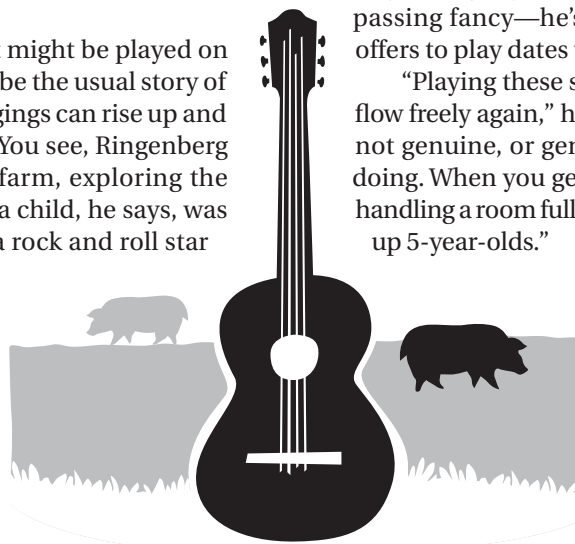
“I want Farmer Jason to hearken back to a different kind of time for children,” Ringenberg explains on his Web site. “I wanted him to sort of feel like the wonderful upbringing I had on the farm. Hopefully, listeners will get some of that feeling of rural life. With the farm animals and life on the farm, it's an absolutely wonderful way to grow up. It's definitely a dying thing, since very few people live a rural life anymore. It's so sad what's happened to the family farm. It's now a thing of the past. Even so, my dad still hangs in there. He's in his 80s and still has his 120-acre farm and his little old corn-picker and his International 400 tractor.”

Ringenberg says his guise as Farmer Jason isn't just some passing fancy—he's in it for the long haul and has more offers to play dates than he can currently book.

“Playing these songs has allowed my creative juices to flow freely again,” he says. “These kids can tell when you're not genuine, or genuinely passionate, about what you're doing. When you get down to it, there isn't a big difference handling a room full of drunken adults and a gang of hopped-up 5-year-olds.”

And now both love his music.

For more information visit
www.farmerjason.com.



⇒ GRAVY ⇐

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On the SFA Bookshelf



In preparation for our 2009 symposium, focusing upon the intersections of food and music, we're stocking our bookshelves with books and CDs. Here's a quick look at a few of the titles on the shelf.

BOOKS

Country Music U.S.A., Bill Malone

It Came from Memphis, Robert Gordon

Linthead Stomp: The Creation of Country Music in the Piedmont South, Patrick Huber

Rhythm Oil, Stanley Booth

Swamp Pop: Cajun and Creole Rhythm and Blues, Shane Bernard

CDS

American Routes: Songs and Stories from the Road, Nick Spitzer

Doug: A Rock Opera, the Coolies

Greens from the Garden, Corey Harris

Too Much Pork for Just One Fork, Southern Culture on the Skids

The Unreleased Recordings (Mother's Best Flour), Hank Williams

2009 Events

**Our calendar is full.
Won't you join us?**



APRIL 18: Potlikker Film Festival in Washington, D.C. Look for new films on buttermilk and catfish and farming at the festival, hosted by Johnny's Half Shell. Registration will open on the SFA Web site in March.

JUNE 12: Craig Claiborne Tribute Dinner, Astor Center, New York City

JUNE 13-14: Big Apple Barbecue Block Party, New York City

JUNE 26-28: Mountain Empire: Cornbread at the Carter Fold and Fast Cars in Bristol, the annual SFA summer Field Trip. Explore music and food and drink as we walk the fine state line between Tennessee and Virginia. Registration info available late spring.

AUGUST 22: Potlikker Film Festival, Athens, Georgia

SEPTEMBER, DATE TBD: Viking Range Lecture, University of Mississippi

OCTOBER 28-29: Delta Divertissement, Greenwood, Mississippi. Our annual debauch in the Delta is the ever popular prequel to the symposium. Our H.Q. is the Alluvian Hotel; our intent is experiential learning.

OCTOBER 29-NOV. 1: 12th Southern Foodways Symposium, Oxford, Mississippi. Our focus this year is food and music. We'll eat, we'll dance, and we'll learn a few things.

President's Letter

Folks are attracted to the Southern Foodways Alliance for a variety of reasons. Some of us are passionate about food history, others wax nostalgic over endangered recipes, and many enjoy the party that a bowl of gumbo or a bottle of bourbon engenders. All of these things, and more, attracted me to the SFA, but what truly won me over was the organizational commitment to gathering a myriad of people at a common table. Our organization is mindful of racial and social and economic injustices. We work to be change agents in our region.

The year 2009 has just begun, and we're off to a good start. At our annual Blackberry Farm dinner and benefit, Emile DeFelice, of Matthews, South Carolina, was inducted into the Fellowship of Farmers, Artisans, and Chefs. During the same weekend, an auction yielded about \$60,000 for the SFA. This money will fuel our documentary and programming efforts.

Answering President Obama's call to service, the Southern Foodways Alliance, on Martin Luther King Jr. Day, catalyzed an ongoing Skillet Brigade of food-focused volunteers. This effort is a way for SFA members to band together with other

nonprofit organizations while working toward a better South. We've just begun. A team in Atlanta is working with Slow Food Convivium leader (and SFA member) Judith Winfrey. In New Orleans Sara Roahen and crew are working with Share Our Strength. In Tyler, Texas, Leigh Vickery is teaching cooking classes to underserved children; in Nashville, Thomas Williams is working with soup kitchens. These projects reflect important actions that give life to our mission statement.

This year, we celebrate foodways and musicways. We begin with a Potlikker Film Festival in April in Washington, D.C., and we follow with a Field Trip to the cradle of country music, Bristol, Tennessee—which is, of course, cheek-to-jowl with Bristol, Virginia.

I look forward to working with the staff, the board, and membership to enhance the SFA's mark on our cultural fabric.

Many thanks for the opportunity!
Angie Mosier

An SFA Potlikker Film Fest Primer

by Ashley Hall

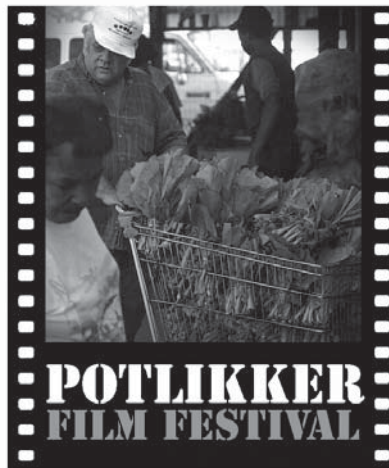
If you've ever had trouble explaining to your friends what the SFA is exactly, you should mark your calendar and prepare to haul them to the next SFA Potlikker Film Festival to be held on April 18 at Johnny's Half Shell in Washington, D.C. These events, sponsored by Jack Daniel's Tennessee Whiskey, offer a first-rate introduction to the Southern Foodways sensibility.

For starters, it's really more of a party than your typical silent-in-the-dark film festival experience. Guests will soak up live music, a delicious array of local vittles, cold beer, and of course, some savory shots of Potlikker.

But the main event is a series of bite-sized documentaries produced and directed exclusively by the Center for Documentary Projects at the University of Mississippi. While the exact line-up is still to be determined, it will include titles such as *Buttermilk: It Can Help*, which debuted at October's symposium.

Buttermilk is a profile of 2008 Ruth Fertel Keeper of the Flame winner Earl Cruze of Cruze Family Dairy in east Tennessee. Not only will you revel in the interviews of family patriarch and consummate flirt Earl Cruze, you'll begin to wonder why buttermilk isn't a part of your daily regimen.

Other items on the bill include *Jones Valley Urban Farm*,



Matthew Graves's tranquil and colorful account of Birmingham's own inner-city Victory Garden, and this correspondent's personal favorite, the racy *Hot Chicken*.

Whatever the roster, attendants will be reminded why they came to like this organization in the first place. Using a mixture of humor, honest camera work, and historical footage, each documentary shines a respectful spotlight on the folks responsible for our Southern food traditions.

"The great thing about documenting these people is that we pay attention to the ones who don't get highlighted, but have made great contributions to our culture," filmmaker Joe York says.

The festivities will be hosted by SFA board member (and James Beard Award-winning chef) Ann Cashion at her Capitol Hill eating house, Johnny's Half Shell. Cashion hopes that the event will not only help spread the gospel of the SFA, but introduce folks to another side of D.C. Cashion says, "It's a very Southern town. It's a very African American town, and we hope this event will give people the opportunity to remember that."

If you can't make it to the festival, remember that you can watch these documentaries any time on the new SFA web site www.southernfoodways.com.

Introducing the Craig Claiborne Lifetime Achievement Award from the Southern Foodways Alliance

by Georgeanna Milam Chapman

Craig Claiborne, a native of the Mississippi Delta, born in 1920, helped change how Americans ate, how they entertained, and how they understood food. In spite of his influence over a core component of American culture, developed during his 30-year tenure at the *New York Times*, Claiborne is, today, underappreciated.

At an event to be staged on June 12, 2009, at the Astor Center in New York City, the SFA, along with the State of Mississippi, will celebrate his life and legacy. And the SFA will announce the naming of its Lifetime Achievement Award, in honor of Claiborne.

Among the facets of his life to be explored by a panel of three New York City-based experts, and feted by Mississippi-based chefs, are Claiborne's Southern upbringing, his formal culinary education, and his career as a preeminent food writer.

Claiborne was born in Sunflower, Mississippi, on September 4, 1920. Several years later the family moved to the nearby Delta town of Indianola, where his mother opened a boarding house. That

Southern, food-focused home environment played a paramount role in influencing how Claiborne later covered food.

Claiborne received formal culinary training at the Swiss Hotelkeepers School in Lausanne, Switzerland. Prior to that education, he earned a journalism degree from the University of Missouri and tasted a number of ethnic foods while serving in World War II and the Korean War. All experiences impacted his culinary career.

Claiborne was the first male to edit the food page for a major American daily. He introduced the star-rating system to the American restaurant review. He wrote about the personalities behind the food and historical context relevant to the food.

We will acknowledge the numerous careers Claiborne bolstered (Jacques Pepin, Marcella Hazan, Paul Prudhomme, etc.) as well as the mark of Pierre Franey on his own career. Claiborne was the first widely read proponent of world foods.



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