

MOUNTAINS

Podcast explores influence of Black musicians



Word from the Smokies
Frances Figart
Columnist

“It’s not a Black music and it’s not a white music. It’s a music that was basically played together.”

This observation is one of many kernels of wisdom offered up by fiddler Earl White, who is Black, on a new podcast series produced in the Smokies that is helping to illuminate how Southern Appalachian music was shaped and shepherded by African Americans.

Back in 2018, Great Smoky Mountains National Park launched a concerted effort to begin telling the stories of the region’s Black people. The African American Experience in the Smokies project has been amplifying the voices of Black interpreters ever since, thanks to funding from nonprofit park partners Great Smoky Mountains Association (GSMA) and Friends of the Smokies.

The project’s latest initiative is Sepia Tones: Exploring Black Appalachian Music, a series spun off from GSMA’s popular Smoky Mountain Air podcast. Appalachian music historians Dr. Ted Olson and Dr. William Turner host the six-part Sepia Tones production, which includes rarely heard historic recordings and lively conversations with dozens of regional and nationally known musical guests.

“Having a seat around the Sepia Tones table, while chatting with the guests, reminds me of how we used to press our ear down onto the railroad track back in the late 1950s and early ’60s, in Harlan County, Kentucky, to listen for the coming of the train, which would be miles away,” said Dr. Turner, who co-edited “Blacks in Appalachia” and served as a research assistant to “Roots” author Alex Haley.

“Our guests on Sepia Tones are big rollers, metal-against-metal heavy, rumbling far-far back in the tracks of American history, which people of color helped to lay, busting and pouring their hearts out for what is THEIR America too,” Turner said, “like John Henry, who, while sitting on his mama’s knee, knew that he wanted to be a steel-driving man.”

The podcast’s editor and Smoky Mountain Air co-host, Valerie Polk, GSMA’s videographer and publications associate, says she never could have imagined having the opportunity to be involved in a project like Sepia Tones.

“As a video editor, assembling a podcast presents a new challenge — communicating meaningful content completely through sound — but it also allows us to incorporate wonderful recordings that capture the essence of our subject,” she said. “I’ve enjoyed incorporating these into each episode as well as meeting each of our impressive guests, and, as Dr. Turner likes to say, ‘I learn something new every day!’ This holds true for me as I edit each episode, and I’m incredibly excited about our hosts’ and guests’ abilities to shed light on a topic that needs to be explored.”

The other cohost of Smoky Mountain Air is Karen



Sepia Tones guest Earl White performs at the Fiddle Tones festival in Port Townsend, Wash.

PROVIDED BY DIANE URBANI DE LA PAZ

“One of the goals of Sepia Tones is to encourage podcast participants to share perspectives on cultural issues of concern to us and, we assume, to podcast listeners.”

Ted Olson
East Tennessee State University

Key, senior publications specialist at GSMA. She considers Sepia Tones: Exploring Black Appalachian Music a positive creative endeavor spawned in the isolating environment of the COVID-19 shutdown.

“It has given me another opportunity to work with Dr. Ted Olson, who is THE encyclopedia for all things Appalachian music,” she said. “The first opportunity was on ‘Big Bend Killing: The Appalachian Ballad Tradition,’ a two-disc album with a new generation of singers and musicians, most of them having learned their songs directly from oral tradition — either from older singers, from recordings, or both.”

Olson and Key collaborated on the design of the album artwork, liner notes, and packaging to communicate the feel of the music. The album was largely successful, receiving nominations for best graphic design at the International Bluegrass Music Association Awards and a 2018 Grammy nomination for best album liner notes.

“One of the goals of Sepia Tones is to encourage podcast participants to share perspectives on cultural issues of concern to us and, we assume, to podcast listeners,” said Olson, a professor of Appalachian Studies and Bluegrass, Old-Time, and Country Music Studies at East Tennessee State University and an award-winning author of many books, poems, articles, essays, encyclopedia entries, reviews, and oral histories.

Olson described how the recently released second episode of the miniseries generated a particularly



Turner

powerful moment when two podcast guests, aforementioned Black fiddler Earl White and White scholar Kip Lornell, exchanged perspectives regarding how the recording industry and commercial radio — from the early years of the 20th century forward — fostered an environment of racial and cultural segregation by using music to divide rather than to unite people.



Olson

“As Earl and Kip observed, records and radio marketed music to specific groups constructed according to racial considerations, which limited the potential audience for some universally significant cultural expressions,” Olson said. “Earl and Kip also discussed how Blacks as well as Whites often ignored music genres and other formal, ‘official’

cultural categorization and instead freely and informally shared their musical culture with each other. Appalachian music is shaped by Blacks as much as by whites, and this podcast series is dedicated to acknowledging and understanding this shared heritage.”

Turner pointed out that Sepia Tones speaks directly with some of the living luminaries of so-called country and faith-based music across the Southern and Central Appalachian musical registry. Guests recorded or set for forthcoming appearances on the miniseries include Dom Flemons, Amythyst Kiah, James ‘Sparky’ Rucker, James Leva, and Dr. Kathy Bullock.

“When the music-talk starts, these folks take us back to the roots, to those whose voices — though now silenced by death — will live forever as ‘Black country artists you should know’: Arnold Schultz, Charlie Pride, DeFord Bailey, Rufus ‘Tee Tot’ Payne, Lesley Riddle, and Linda Martell, among others. Not insignificantly, listeners hear on Sepia Tones how the styles of these pioneering Black country artists seeped into the work of the genre’s icons, such artists as Hank Williams, The Carter Family, Bill Monroe, and Merle Travis.”

Sepia Tones is distributed through Smoky Mountain Air and available through Apple, Google, Spotify, Stitcher, and most other major streaming services. Two episodes and an introduction interview with Turner and Olson are now available.

Dr. Turner’s memoir, “The Harlan Renaissance: Stories of Black Life in Appalachian Coal Towns,” is forthcoming from West Virginia University Press in late September. In June, Dr. Olson received the East Tennessee Historical Society’s Ramsey Award for Lifetime Achievement.

Frances Figart edits Smokies Life magazine, delivered in spring and fall to the 28,000 members of Great Smoky Mountains Association, an educational nonprofit partner of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. She also directs the Creative Team that produces Smoky Mountain Air and collaborated with her fellow native Kentuckian Dr. Bill Turner on the name Sepia Tones. Learn more at SmokiesInformation.org and reach the author at frances@gsmassoc.org.

STATE BRIEFS

National Weather Service warns of rip currents

WILMINGTON – The National Weather Service is warning residents and beachgoers on the North Carolina coast of rip currents and rough surf associated with Tropical Storm Henri.

Meteorologist Steven Pfaff of the weather service’s Wilmington office says swells from Henri are expected to create hazardous surf conditions at all area beaches beginning Friday and continuing on Saturday as swells from the storm intensify. The weather service also says dangerous swimming conditions are expected given the high likelihood of rip currents and larger breaking waves in the surf.

As of Friday morning, the system was centered in the Atlantic Ocean about 370 miles (600 kilometers) south-southeast of Cape Hatteras with maximum sustained winds of 65 mph (100 kph).

Two killed in single-engine airplane crash

WADESBORO – Two people are dead after a small airplane crashed and burst into flames shortly after taking off from a North Carolina airport, authorities said Friday.

The Federal Aviation Administration said in a statement that a Piper PA-24 crashed around 10:20 a.m. after taking off from Jeff Cloud Field at Anson County Airport.

According to the North Carolina State Highway Patrol, it appeared the aircraft encountered some type of engine trouble and managed to clear one set of trees before dropping into another group of trees and bursting into flames, WSOC reported.

Investigators had not identified the victims as of Friday afternoon.

The FAA said it will join the National Transportation Safety Board in an investigation of the crash.

Associated Press

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