

Episode Title: Amythyst Kiah's Powerful Voice

Episode Summary:

In this week's episode, Sid Evans, Editor-in-Chief of Southern Living Magazine, talks to Johnson City, Tennessee based guitarist, singer and songwriter, Amythyst Kiah about studying Bluegrass, Old Time and Country at East Tennessee State University, her work with Our Native Daughters, her father's support, the loss of her Mother, and her experience as a Black artist in country music.

Episode Transcript:

(Biscuits and Jam Theme begins - Fiddler's Barn on Epidemic Sound)

Voice Over from Sid Evans: Welcome to a special Summer Tour edition of Biscuits and Jam, from Southern Living. I'm Sid Evans, editor-in-chief of Southern Living Magazine. My very first guest for the new season is Amythyst Kiah, a guitarist, banjo player, singer and songwriter who recently appeared in For Love and Country, a documentary that explores the new generation of Black artists who are transforming country music. Her Rounder Records debut, Wary + Strange, was nominated for the 2021 album of the year by Folk Alliance International. She was chosen by CMT for its Next Women of Country class of 2022, and she was nominated for a Grammy for her song, "Black Myself", which you'll hear her sing later in the show. On today's episode, we talk to Amythyst about her Tennessee roots, her father's influence and support, losing her mother at 17, and her experience as a Black artist in country music.

Biscuits and Jam theme music ends

Sid Evans: Amythyst Kiah, welcome to Biscuits and Jam.

Amythyst: Yeah, thanks for having me. Excited to be here. Excited to be here, I mean, you know, virtually, I guess. (laughs)

Sid Evans: Wherever here is. (laughs)

Amythyst: Yeah, wherever. Exactly, yeah. (laughs)

Sid Evans: Well, speaking of which, where am I reaching you right now?

Amythyst: So I'm at, I'm at home in Johnson City, Tennessee. I've lived here since 2006, but more recently, I've just been at home since December. Had some shows off and on, but ~~at~~ just back at home kinda focusing on writing. And actually in a couple of days, gonna go back out on the road, um, for a couple weeks to play some shows.

Sid Evans: So tell me a little bit about Johnson City. You know, I talk to a lot of artists in Nashville, ~~um~~, and I don't know a ton about Johnson City, but I do know it's not a whole lot like Nashville.

Amythyst: It's very, very different. I've grown up in the mountains for all of my life, and, um, it's, it's a, it's an environment and a location that really speaks to me on a spiritual level So all of east Tennessee from Chattanooga up to Johnson City, um, is in Appalachian Mountain chain, and I grew up in Chattanooga. I lived there the first 19 or 20 years of my life, and then I've spent the latter part of my life in, in Johnson City. It's a small college town, East Tennessee State University's here. That's where I went to college. And over the past, you know, 10 or 15 years that I've been here. I live in a really beautiful part of the country. and my partner also works in Johnson City, and so it's kinda like I really like it here and don't really (laughs) I don't really want to move in, because the opportunity to leave Nashville and come back to, like, kind of peace and quiet for me-is; a thing that I'd like to kind of maintain and kind of cherish that, that separation. 'cause I like peace and quiet-

Sid Evans: It, it's home.

Amythyst: ... more often than no. So yeah,

Sid Evans: Well, I love that your bio on social media says, "Singing sad songs from the hills of east Tennessee." And I love that your music is so rooted in a specific place. Have you always felt this kind of strong soulful connection to east Tennessee?

Amythyst: No, not always. I would say that connection for me didn't really happen until I started going to East Tennessee State University, and I started studying bluegrass old time and country music. and it's befitting that a school environment would be the way that I would make that connection because, the way that I can relate to and process information is if it's in a, like, a very kind of structured situation. and it's hard to focus on something if I'm not truly, like, emotionally or spiritually invested in it, which has been... a challenging way to do things, but when I do find the thing that I can hyper focus on and be passionate about, it's definitely worth it. But up until going to college, I didn't have a, a great, self image of myself. I developed some pretty bad social anxiety. And so music and writing and art was my way of being able to channel my expression. It was my best way to connect with people. So it kinda left me feeling a little bit kinda discombobulated and not really having a strong sense of, place, and a real understanding of, my roots and where I come from and what's my legacy and offering to myself and to the world, you know? How do I see myself as part of a community when the way my brain is wired, it's wired in such specific things, and I'm also, trying to, protect myself from fear of rejection and abandonment, and all of these things. So there was just a lot that I was kind of contending with, finding that sense of self and identity. And I think with studying traditional music and having a natural curiosity to just learn things, it brought me to this place where I realize, my love and passion for art and for music and for, song writing, you know, there's a longstanding history and legacy of that as a southern person, as a black person, as a queer person, all of the things that make up part of who I am, there are legacies and histories that all connect and that I'm inevitably a part of,

Sid Evans: I wish somebody had told me that there was a school of bluegrass old time and country music (laughs) when I was looking at colleges. That's the coolest things I've ever heard of. Was there a teacher there who really made a big impact on you?

Amythyst: Yeah. I mean, there were a few professors that really kind helped continue to foster my interest in, in the music. I would say the first person that I met leading into, you know, pursuing it in college, was a guy named Jack Tottle. He's the founder of the bluegrass old time and country music studies. And, he was teaching a group, a bluegrass guitar class. And the reason why I found it is because I

was looking in the course catalog, and I was like, "Well I need to take a semester off." And, I wanted to take one course, and wanted it to be in music. and I saw bluegrass and I really knew little next to nothing about bluegrass, and so I called Jack and asked, "Do I need to, like, sight read or learn how to (laughs) to do all this other stuff?" And, he said, "No, no. This is an oral tradition. bring a tape recorder. if you know how to read guitar tablature, you're good." So I came in purely out of curiosity, And as time moved forward, I started to meet, um, other people. I met Doctor Ted Olson who teaches Appalachian studies history courses. I was in a class that he had called American Folk Music. And, that's where I really started to dig into, that deep, rich history, like, prior to the commercial music industry and learning about, not only European, but also West African influence within, country music.

Sid Evans: Yeah.

Amythyst: And I realized that for a long time, I never really gave much thought to country music once I found out, "Oh, there's this whole other world that's possible," it was just really motivating to just be like, "Yeah, I want to kind of dig into this," and, 'cause I really loved what I was hearing. And once I started learning more about that history and culture, again, that led me to my kind of awakening of, like, "Oh, I do have a sense of place. You know, I'm not just an alien that was randomly dropped here." That's how I've, which is how I felt for a good chunk of my teens. It's like, "Oh, I'm part of this history and legacy." You know, and, and it was cool, 'cause, my dad is a huge, huge... I got my love of music from him. He's been my number one supporter for a really long time now. So he was, like, really excited for me to embark on this adventure,

Sid Evans: What a transformative experience for you. lot of people go to college, learn some things, have a good time. This sounds like it really, like, your mind just exploded (laughs).

Amythyst: Oh, yeah. I mean, yeah. It was, it was really good for me. Um, you know, I (laughs) I mean, what I will say a big driver of that was my curiosity, but this was also part of my grieving, because, you know, my mom passed away when I was in high school. So I'm fortunate, I've, I'm glad I was able to at least channel my grief into something that was gonna be helpful for me and for, you know, the people around me that I get to share the music with.

Sid Evans: It sure has, has been impactful to say the least. Amythyst, you mention your mom, which I want to get to, in a minute, but you know, we talk a lot about food on this podcast.

Amythyst: Mm-hmm

Sid Evans: And who was the cook in your family growing up? Was it, was it your mom, or, um-

Amythyst: It was, it was my dad. Oh, my god. My dad's favorite pastime is cooking. And my mom, my mom loved to eat his cooking, and so did I. She did cook sometimes. she definitely knew how to cook and did, and did cook sometimes, uh, but it wasn't the same kind of passion project that it was, that it was, f- there was with my dad. So my dad happily, you know, cooked a huge chunk of the meals. He, he always enjoyed it. And, you know, he got inspired to cook from his mother, who cooked a lot of, what we would consider, like, southern-style cooking, you know? Collard greens, creamed corn, you know, baked beans, barbecue. Like, all that stuff. but what did tho a little bit differently is as he decided he wanted to, you know, pursue cooking and, one of the things that he did, he got really interested in, in nutrition. And

so he was trying to find ways, "Okay, I love these dishes that my mother cooked, but I want to, like, instead of using garlic powder, I want to use, you know, fresh garlic. And instead of using, like, baking grease or Crisco," which we did use, still use Cric-... The only time we used Crisco was for pancakes, 'cause that's, that's the best.

Sid Evans: You can't beat it. (laughs)

Amythyst: But you can't beat it. that was, like, you know, once a week or once every couple weeks, you know? But, he would switch from using, like, you know, butter, lard or whatever to using, like, olive oil to cook things. so he would make these tweaks, and he would... He was always interested in, like, building flavors. So there's like, always had a really diverse spice rack. He'd cook, like, you know, spaghetti, chicken and rice, stroganoff. He was always very meticulous in attention to detail when it come to all those stuff. And, I think I picked up some of that from him, too, like, on other areas of just, like, being able to kinda look at the details and think of how to make, how to tweak it to make it, you know, a little bit better or just to experiment and see what happens. but he's always been... He's a very curious-minded person, as well, you know, so got that, got that from him, too.

Sid Evans: Ah, that's great. well, so Amythyst, you were talking about your mom who you lost when you were 17, I believe.

Amythyst: Mm-hmm.

Sid Evans: And, um, you wrote this incredibly haunting and beautiful song about her, called Wild Turkey. and I'm just wondering if, if music generally, and if this song specifically really helped you kinda process that loss and that experience.

Amythyst: It did, it did. I wrote that song after a couple of years of therapy. You know, once I started unpacking, like, what, like, my behaviors, why I reacted to things the way that, or why I reacted in certain un- unhealthy ways to certain things, and trying to parse that out and trying to figure that out. And within that, it was this realization that I've never really fully, processed or accepted my mother's death. I had kinda just been pushing it down and repressing it and ignoring it. So Wild Turkey was really about, just accepting that this is what happened, this is how I reacted to it, and that it was okay that that's how I felt about it. And that, you know, I didn't have to suppress my feelings or not talk about my feelings. So when I wrote this song, it was just this, this co- this full coming full circle of being, like, "Oh, I was responding like this because I was still upset, or I still hadn't fully... I still didn't understand what suicide actually meant, that it didn't mean that this person didn't love me or didn't want to be with me anymore", 'cause that's how I was, you know, that's how my 17-year-old brain processed that. I was really young, and that was just hard to wrap my head around. And so that song is just sort of recognizing and accepting, And the importance of me writing that song and sharing it because, you know, for me, song writing is about channeling, like, negative energy or, or, or negative feelings about things that have happened. So to me, it was to process bad things and to share that so other people that are dealing with the same thing can not feel alone. So I don't know.

Sid Evans: Yeah.

Amythyst: I feel like that, that's something that's always been very important to me.

Amythyst's song "Wild Turkey" comes in underneath and we hear the following at full volume then fade out: Tried so hard to be an automaton/ Body of steel and wired circuits for my backbone/Cause she's never coming back/No, she's never coming back/Wild turkey in the car seat/The bottle's empty, I hope it gave her some relief/'Cause she's never coming back

Sid Evans: There's a, just a bravery in that songs and an honesty in that song, that just makes it incredibly powerful.

Amythyst: Thank you.

(EDITING: Instrumental music break of Biscuits and Jam theme -- fade in/fade out)

Sid Evans NARRATION: I'll be back with more from Amythyst Kiah after the break.

(AD BREAK)

(EDITING: Instrumental music break of Biscuits and Jam theme)

Sid Evans NARRATION: Welcome back to Biscuits & Jam, from Southern Living. I'm Sid Evans, and today I'm talking with Amythyst Kiah.

Sid Evans: Speaking of, of bravery, and honestly and, all of that particularly being a, a black artist in country music, I wanted to ask you about, this documentary that you were in recently-

Amythyst: Oh, yeah.

Sid Evans: ... called For Love and Country, it was fantastic. you're featured in it, and it's all about black artists who are transforming country music, and kind of forging a new path. And I'm just curious, what was that experience like for you being a part of that?

Amythyst: I mean, it was really great, to be one of the voices considered, for this particular aspect of country music history, American music history really. and, it's not something that I necessarily, I thought I would see happen, any time soon. but I think,, with this documentary, for me being able to see it and, and what I feel like this documentary is doing is it's answering that question, "How'd you get into bluegrass, or how'd you get into country," but on so many levels. I mean, you've got, older people in the documentary who were around for the worst, I mean, I guess you could say for the worst of it. The fact that Charlie Pride was the only black artist allowed to be a star, if you will, in country, and then to know where If you're going into pop country to make hits and, and do that kind of things, the fact that its' still an uphill battle for certain people. There's a lot more people that are, like, understanding and seeing, the truth of the history and are, wanting to, do better and make things more, open and hospitable to that, the fact that we can have all kinds of audiences listening to this music, and that it shouldn't be kind of hijacked for a, a certain demographic with certain values. It should be, you know, all of us should be able to tell our story in this medium, you know? And that there's all different kinds of country music, you know? I feel like they did a really good job with sort of getting this wide plethora of people from

different background with different idea, different ways of how they got into country music. All of us have a different story, but at the end of the day, our skin color is sort of (laughs) been seen as this deal breaker, historically. And also, I wasn't in the pop world and, like, big music industry world. personally, I don't care - I don't care about having a number one hit. I don't care about bring a platinum-selling artist. I care about making a living doing something that I love and creating art that speaks to me. obviously I've been nominated for awards with, you know, with the Grammy and with, Americana Music Awards, I a- and, you know, won the Folk Alliance Song of the Year award, and I'm not saying that it's not important. it's just that for me, focusing on what I enjoy doing and finding people that support that regardless of what their sexual orientation or their race or gender are, and really creating a community of, of people that want to hear good music. What I define as success is just, you know, making a living, playing music with people that, that love and support what I do, work with people that feel the same, you know, have close friendships and close family that exert that same thing. That's just... I've just been doing a lot of that reevaluating of things, um, and to not get so caught up in, like, grabbing the attention of people and just focus on, like, the music and whatever comes out of that when it is time to post something, and if I'm proud of it and I love it, then if someone doesn't like it-

Sid Evans: (laughs) that's, that's enough.

Amythyst: ... they don't... You know, yeah. So-

Sid Evans: (laughs) That's enough.

Amythyst: Yeah.

Sid Evans: Amythyst, speaking of awards, and nominations, you were nominated for a Grammy with Our Native Daughters, which is this wonderful kind of super group, with Rhiannon Giddens and others. And, and it was for a song called Black Myself.

Amythyst: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Sid Evans: Which is this incredibly powerful, incredibly soulful, and, and it sounds like an incredibly personal song. I'm just wondering if you can take me back to the moment that you wrote that song. where were you when you, when you sat down and you wrote that song, and that really kind of came to you?

Amythyst: Well, the head space I was in at that point, you know, we were, I guess, a couple of weeks in of writing and recording. And this song in particular is one of the more, confrontational songs that I've written. Obviously, it was a subject that was being explored throughout the entire project. And what attracted me to the project was obviously getting a chance to, you know, work with Rhiannon Giddens, and the fact that, like, this concept is something that I've thought about and read about and talked about, you know, the history of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, how that set a precedent for, you know, race relations, in this country. But to actually be able to have the opportunity to write songs about this, it's something that I've kicked around in my head for a really long time. And I think a big part of my reluctance was, the fact that I could possibly lose fans, you know, 'cause I was still building up a fan base. And so I was doing my best to let kind of music be a uniting force and not wanting to write anything that could possibly be used against me, you know? But once I got in the room with Leyla McCalla and Allison Russell and Rhiannon Giddens, and we, started writing songs and started talking about the different, like, slave narratives, we were reading into things that we were looking at in the, African American Museum

archive, from DC, I kind of developed this sense of courage. And that, you know, I'm, whatever I'm, when I'm writing, I'm coming from a good faith place, and I'm coming from,, from facts and from personal experience that, ended up happening as a result of these facts. And so Black Myself was kind of a culmination of all of the things that I've thought about or wanted to say at some point, or have said at some point. but instead of just saying it to people that I know, I'm now, like, "Okay, this is in a song, and now everybody's gonna hear it." And I came to that conclusion where I'm just like, "You know, there have been people before me that have written songs, spoken out loud, and their circumstances and how they were treated were above and beyond anything that I've could ever imagine happening in my own life." So if I, if the worst thing that happens, I write a song and some people don't want to listen to me anymore because they've taken this song, and they've internalized it as a personal attack against them, I mean, I that's the worst thing that happens, I say I've, I'm getting off pretty well, you know? And what that allowed for me was a way to also kinda test the waters and see. There are a lot of people that are not only are they willing to hear s- a song like this or a whole record, you know, like this of, of song covering similar themes, not only are they willing to listen, they're also willing to sing the song, And I'm talking about white people-

Sid Evans: Yeah.

Amythyst: ... when I say "they", I've met people of, you know, of obviously different, all different races at my shows, and at Our Native Daughter shows and stuff like that, but the majority of our audience is white, because that's, that's the majority of the demographic with American Roots Music. And so for me, it was kinda like, "Okay, well..." Even had there not been a good reception of it, I would have known that this is, I mean what I say, I'm not trying to manipulate anybody or create a situation. I'm simply speaking on something that things that have happened, and, you know, and then also, my hope for the future and the fact that as time's gone on, it has gotten a little bit, it has gotten better over, over the span of time. And so, to recognize the, the, the atrocious past transgressions, but then also recognize that, you know, while there's still some things that need to be worked on, I also love and appreciate the fact that because of the people before me, I'm able to have a life that a lot of people dreamed of, you know? And so there's, you know, paying homage to the ancestors, uh, I think is, um, is important, for any of us to do in, in our lives, to pay homage to the people before us that have given us the opportunity that we have if we, if, if we're in a good spot, you know, to give gratitude to that. But I think it's also always important to continue to, to think and be critical, and, and still iron out issues if there are issues, instead of sweeping it under the rug. "Well, oh, that happened a long time ago, and all that's over now. And..." Yeah, like, nothing just drops off the face of the earth and ends. There are consequences of, of policies and of things that are put into place, and, you know, you have to parse all that out, you know? So, anyway. It's, it's a tough job to parse all of it out, obviously, but-

Sid Evans: It's, it's a magnificent song. I mean, it's kind of an earthquake of a song. And, uh, it's just, it's so powerful, and,so beautifully done. And it's gonna be around for a long time.

Amythyst: Thank you.

Sid Evans: Amythyst, would you mind just singing a verse or so of that song?

Amythyst: Oh, yeah. Which verse? Just any of them? The one that-

Sid Evans: You pick.

Amythyst: The last one? The middle one?

Sid Evans: You, you pick.

Amythyst: I don't know. (laughs)

Sid Evans: You pick. (laughs)

Amythyst: All right. Um...

"I don't creep around. I stand proud and free,/ 'Cause I'm black myself./ I go anywhere that I want to go,/ 'Cause I'm black myself./ And I'm surrounded by many loving arms,/ 'Cause I'm black myself./ And I'll stand my ground and smile in your face/ 'Cause I'm black myself./ I wash away the blood and tears./ I've been born brand new./ There's no more work horses/ But still some work to do. Yeah,/ 'cause I'm black myself./ Ooh, 'cause I'm black myself./ 'Cause I'm black myself, black myself, black myself, black myself, black myself, black myself./ Black myself,/ 'Cause I'm black my- black my-/ Black myself./

I kept going, but anyway (laughs).

Sid Evans: Wow. (laughs)

Amythyst: I was feeling the moment. So anyway, yeah. (laughs)

Sid Evans: Oh, man. Wow. What a song. And, and what a refrain.

Amythyst: Yeah, thank you.

Sid Evans: You must get so much of a reaction, from the crowd and, and from your fans to that song. I mean, I have to say, it's been, incredibly humbling, that song, really connected with a lot of people.

Amythyst: And, one thing that white people ask me is it okay if they sing this song. And I think it's because they're, concerned with, I guess, culturally appropriating, or, like, you know-

Sid Evans: Yeah.

Amythyst: It's, uh, "This isn't, this isn't my experience. Is it okay if I sing?" And, and obviously when it comes to race, it is a very, very hot topic with a lot of contention that can be surrounded around it. And so I understand why someone would be hesitant, but, and there's, I know, and I do know there are people that are like, "Well, this ain't a b-... This ain't got nothing to do with me, 'cause it's talking about black people." And there, that attitude's out there, too, and, you know, everybody's entitled to their opinion of course, but the way that I look at it is there's lots of songs that I like to and I, that I like and that I sing that the experience didn't happen to me. The Coal Miner's Daughter by Loretta Lynn is a great example of an amazing song there's a lot of people, myself included, that didn't grow up in a coal mining town. So, but it's a great song. And so, and again, I know that the word black plays a huge role in people's, of why people make an acceptance for that, and, you know, there very well could be someone that maybe would write a song like that and maybe would feel that way, you know, that there's, there's so many different ways that people can process and internalize stuff. But for me, I liken it to if it's a song that speaks to you, regardless of what words in it, you know, I think you should be able to enjoy the song, and if the story resonates with you, it's probably because it's, you know, you recognize it's another

human being experiencing something. Like, You know, adversity is something that we all have to deal with in life in various ways. And so, for me personally as a person that wrote the song, if you feel compelled to sing, please do, you know? I'm not one to restrict people from, or attempt to tell people how to live their lives or what to do, especially when it comes to music. This is... Music to me is the moment where everybody can tell their story and, like, communicate, you know? And it's a way to start a conversation. And so, yeah. (laughs)

Sid Evans: Well, that song resonates with a lot of people, and your story resonates with a lot of people. and I'm so excited to see you going out on the road and, and sharing it with so many people. I know you have a lot of tour dates coming up. Amythyst Kiah, thank you so much for being on Biscuits and Jam.

Amythyst: All right. Thank you so much for having me. It's been a pleasure.

Sid Evans NARRATION: Thanks for listening to my conversation with Amythyst Kiah. You can check out her latest album, Wary + Strange, wherever you get music, and you can visit AmythystKiah.com for summer tour dates, social media and more. Southern Living is based in Birmingham, AL. Be sure to follow Biscuits & Jam on Apple Podcasts, Spotify or wherever you listen so you don't miss an episode. And we'd love your feedback. If you could rate this podcast and leave us a review we'd really appreciate it. You can also find us online at southernliving.com/biscuitsandjam Make sure to come back here next Monday for my conversation with country music artist Carly Pearce.