

Episode Title: **Darius Rucker's Okra Soup**

Episode Summary: In this week's episode, Sid Evans, Editor-in-Chief of Southern Living Magazine, talks to country star Darius Rucker about growing up in South Carolina, reuniting with Hootie & the Blowfish and how his mom's career as a nurse influenced his own philanthropy.

Episode Transcript:

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

Voice Over from SID EVANS: *Welcome to Biscuits and Jam, from Southern Living. I'm Sid Evans, editor-in-chief of Southern Living Magazine and I'm talking with legendary musicians and celebrated chefs about family, food, songwriting and Southern culture.*

Because of his Carolina upbringing, my guest today is no stranger to southern cooking. But in moving to Nashville recently, he admits he still wasn't prepared for authentic hot chicken.

Darius: You know, I'm not a big fan of the spicy food, but I tried it. And I'm gonna let you guys in on a little secret: The mild is really hot! The mild was too hot for me. Yes. It's really hot!

Sid NARRATION: *Darius Rucker is that rare entertainer who has landed two trailblazing careers in one lifetime. His band Hootie & the Blowfish topped the charts throughout the mid-90's with hits like Let Her Cry, Only Wanna Be With You and Hold My Hand. And their debut album Cracked Rear View has sold over 14 million copies, making it one of the 20 biggest albums of all time. Then, starting in 2009, his presence as a country star exploded as he became only the second black artist to ever win a CMA award, and the first black artist to reach number one on Billboard's country charts in a quarter century.*

On today's program, Darius tells me all about the hometown charms of Charleston, South Carolina.

Darius: Charleston is such a laid back cool city. And you know, none of us take ourselves too seriously. We're that city that, you're at a stop light, you don't go through the red to the green light. And nobody blows the horn cause everybody behind you figured, 'well, he'll go next time.'

I love that attitude. And I love spending the rest of my life in a town that I think is the best city in the country -- in the world.

Sid NARRATION: *Plus his love for okra soup, how he paved a new lane in country music, and much more this week on Biscuits & Jam.*

(Theme music ends)

Sid: Darius Rucker, welcome to Biscuits and Jam.

Darius: Thank you, man. Thanks for having me.

Sid: So Darius, you were born in Charleston, South Carolina, I actually lived there for about four years. I'm wondering if you can, kind of take me back to the house that you grew up in?

Darius: Oh goodness. My sister still lives in it. It's a little -- a very small three-bedroom house. In a neighborhood, you know, one of the cookie cutter neighborhoods where a lot of the houses were exactly the same. It was very small, I mean, I couldn't even tell you how many square feet it was.

When I was really young. It was me and my grandma and my four siblings and my mom. You know, we didn't have much, but I didn't really realize it until I got older. I just didn't think about it. I was very happy with my life, with the way life was. So, I didn't really think about the way we grew up. But it was a very typical, poor Southern black upbringing.

Sid: So who was the cook in the family?

Darius: My mom and my grandma, both. Any of my sisters when I got older. You know, cooking was -- I wouldn't say a prerequisite, but everybody cooked. You know, everybody in the house learned how to do something just because cooking was such an integral part of the day.

Sid: So what did mealtime look like? I mean, was a little chaotic or was it a moment of peace?

Darius: No meal time for us, except for holidays -- we weren't much into, 'everybody has to sit at the table.' You know? So mealtimes were very, very, hectic for us with that many people in the house. You know, my aunt lived around the corner with her four kids. And so, we ate a lot together. And so, yeah, it was pretty hectic.

Sid: Were there some favorite meals that you always look forward to?

Darius: Yeah, you know, my favorite meal was always Okra soup. It was just this okra thing that was made with tomatoes and a bunch of vegetables and some ham hocks and all that stuff, that Southern stuff. It's still my favorite meal. My sisters make it for me every now and then I love it.

Sid: Oh, it actually sounds like it's kind of good for you, you know? For a little kid to like, that's a good thing.

Darius: I mean, the funny thing is it really was good for you. But you know, back then it was all about tastes. You know, I mean, collard greens, one of my favorites, the homemade macaroni cheese, the way we make it in the house, baking it and everything was such an important part. But, food was huge in my life. You know, it was just such a big, important part of the family dynamic.

Sid: Well, it's kind of how you connect with people, right?

Darius: Absolutely. Always.

Sid: So Darius did any of that, cooking rub off on you?

Darius: Ha ha! I could cook a little, you know? I cook a mean spaghetti and I can make a pretty good chicken pot pie. But I wish I could make okra soup but I haven't tried it yet.

Sid: So you were talking about the holidays. What did the holidays look like for you guys?

Darius: Well, my mom had two sisters, they had a lot of kids. I think there was maybe 16 of us kids at the time. And on holidays we were always together. It was a family reunion every holiday. All the cousins were close we might as well have been brothers and sisters. We were that close. So it was really big and the food was crazy. You know? I mean, all week Thanksgiving week, starting on Monday the food's just amazing cause when people started to show up. And I love it. The Southern cooking and for me, there's nothing like holidays down South because of the food.

Sid: And was it, everybody was bringing a dish?

Darius: Yeah. Everybody's bringing a dish. Or we were lucky, because we just made do at the house. It wasn't like anybody was staying at a hotel or anything. People were just sleeping on couches and floors and we were all gonna stay in the same place. And so, it was not so much bringing the dishes, just getting up and making your dish. You have to get your time in the kitchen cause somebody else was going to need their time too. So you got up, they got up and do what they needed to do and got everything ready.

Sid: Now was there a lot of singing around the holiday time?

Darius: There was always music playing on the stereo. And so, we were a pretty musical family, so we'd sit around and sing and laugh and play cards or do whatever you're doing to entertain yourself and just have a really good time. It was singing and laughing was what it was always around in our family. Always.

Sid: Darius, did you grow up going to church a lot?

Darius: Yeah. Big time. I was scared to sing in church 'cause everybody was so good. You know, that really inspired, listening to people sing like that and listening to people be moved like that. It really had, I think influenced me a lot with what I do with my music.

Sid: Were there early songs or early artists that really kind of lit a fire on you?

Darius: Oh yeah. The reason I'm sitting here talking to you right now is Al Green. I mean, Al green for me, made me want to sing. I mean, as a young four or

five-year-old kid in '71, '70, '72 Al Green's coming out with these records that are just stupid, crazy great.

I remember going through puberty and singing Al one day. And I couldn't hit the high note and I started crying. Cause I realized that I wasn't gonna be able to sing Al Green songs anymore. That was pretty, that really depressed me.

Sid: So were you encouraged by your mom or your family to sing as a kid or was that not something that came until later?

Darius: My mom always encouraged me to sing. My mom was a great singer. I never really pigeonholed music Like a lot of people do. I never said 'I can listen to that, or I can't listen to that.' It was always, I listened to what I liked. I never decided what I liked until I heard it.

You know, and growing up where I grew up, there were times -- even from family members -- you get a lot of grief because you know 'why you listened to that white boy music.' I've heard that, as a kid, I heard that a million times. And my mom would always get a take out for me, always tell them to leave me alone. Don't bother him, let him listen to what he wants to listen to. And you know, it all paid off in the end, I think.

Sid: Yeah. So and your mom was pretty busy, right? She was a nurse at the medical university of South Carolina.

Darius: Yeah. She worked really hard. You know, you're trying to feed five six kids, working doubles and stuff like that. She worked really hard, but she was, she was a great mom.

She was always there for us. When she came home, no matter how tired she was, if you wanted some time or attention, she was always there to give it to you. And you know, she was great, but she worked her butt off for us. Yeah.

Sid: Well, you know me right now, we see the nurses are on the front lines more than ever with everything that's going on. I'm just wondering what are some things that you learned from your mom about what it takes to be a nurse.

Darius: Oh, compassion. Compassion is something that she just really instilled to us and empathy for other folks. All the stuff I do with charity comes from that nurses mentality of helping people.

She was wanting to help people in neighborhoods. She wanted to help her friends. She wanted to help my friends. You know, she was always that helper. And I learned a lot of that because she probably became a nurse because she was that way. She just wanted to help people. And that's what nurses do.

(Instrumental music break of Biscuits and Jam theme -- :10 fade in/fade out)

Sid: So Darius, you went off to university of South Carolina you're a game cock.

Darius: Yep. Through and through, Yes I am.

Sid: And so this is where Hootie And The Blowfish was founded. Right?

Darius: yep.

Sid: I'm just wondering if there was something about that school that really made the band possible?

Darius: I don't know if it was something about the school so much. It's just where we were playing, playing in the South. When we were starting to play, there were, 50 to 100 college towns from New York down to Florida that had a bar for bands to play.

And that was huge for us to be able to just get in our van and drive up and down the East coast. Go to these college towns and play these college bars. The South was such a great place to hone your craft and to go and play and to find places to play. And it really made Hootie And The Blowfish possible.

Sid: Do you feel like your early fan base was really Southern?

Darius: Oh yeah. Cause we never played any place else, you know? We only played the South. We'd go to New York and play the wetlands every now and then, but you know, going to Virginia and we would just, it was Southern.

We played SCC schools and ACC schools and going to play frat houses and stuff like that. So yeah, it was definitely Southern.

Sid: So, Darius, you've spent a lot of time on the road. What are some of the things that you miss when you're away from home for months at a stretch?

Darius: Oh man. You know, of course your kids. Yeah. But you know, I'm never going that long without seeing them. But I miss -- I'm real Southern, I'm real Southern to a fault sometimes. So, Like if I go to California or if I go to Chicago or Cleveland -- I always miss the laid back, like life that we live in Charleston.

Charleston is such a laid back cool city. And you know, none of us take ourselves too seriously. We're that city that, you're at a stop light, you don't go through the red to the green light. And nobody blows the horn cause everybody behind you figured, 'well, he'll go next time.'

Yeah. I love that attitude. And the thing I miss the most is the people. I love people in my hometown and I love living there. And I love spending the rest of my life in a town that I think is the best city in the country -- in the world.

Sid: So you must get a lot of emails and texts from people asking you, you know, they're going to Charleston and they want to know what some of your favorite spots are. What do you tell them?

Darius: You know, every on wants me to talk about the restaurants, always. And I tell this, I tell him to go to Fig, which I always tell them that. And you know, I never

tell them there's a two month wait to get in. I never tell them that, but yeah, I go to Fig. There's a restaurant on Sullivan's Island called The Obstinate Daughter that I love that I send people to. It's just a great restaurant. Great food.

Sid: Yeah. I know, it well, yeah.

Darius: Yeah. I love it out there. I always say to people, we might not have the number of restaurants as New York. But if you're talking about quality, I think our restaurants even rivals anybody's in the country.

Sid: Has it been hard for you moving to Nashville? You've been in Nashville for a little while now. Right?

Darius: I've been here for a few months, you know, it's different. I miss Charleston. I would be lying to you if I said I didn't. I miss Charleston, But you know, I've really enjoyed my time here. I had some friends when I came and I made some more friends as I got here. And the golf course I play is great. So, I like Nashville. I think I'll stay here a little longer.

Sid: Have you become a hot chicken fan?

Darius: You know, I'm not a big fan of the spicy food, but I tried it. And, I'm gonna let you guys in on a little secret. The mild is really hot. The mild was too hot for me. Yes. It's really hot.

Sid: Yeah, I've done some damage to myself on that hot chicken in the past.

Darius: Yeah. It hurt, it really hurt.

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

SID NARRATION: *Stay tuned for more with Darius Rucker, after the break.*

BREAK

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

SID NARRATION: *Welcome back to Biscuits & Jam, from Southern Living. I'm Sid Evans, and we're talking with Darius Rucker.*

Sid: So Darius, I want to ask you about a little bit about what's going on recently particularly with the Black Lives Matter movement and all the protests. And it has been a remarkable year to say the least, you know. After the death of George Floyd, you came out with a pretty powerful statement on Instagram. And you said 'it's no longer okay for me to perpetuate the myth that things are okay.' And I'm just wondering what these last few months have meant for you personally.

Darius: For me, it's been a whole new endeavor, a whole new look on things, you know what I mean? Especially when you grow up in the South, the way I grew up, it's so easy to see it and just say, 'well, that's just the way it is.'

You know, it's so easy to do that because not only do you feel that way, but when you were a kid, when you saw something, that's what the older people said to you. 'That's just the way it is.' But you know, after seeing how it affects my kids and after seeing how it is affecting the world so much, this whole thing, you realize it's not okay and you can't just keep saying it's okay.

The best part I think of the whole thing has been -- my white friends, who've called me to talk about it. Because I know how hard that was for them to want to talk about it. And find out what they could do and get my opinion on what they could do.

It was a great thing to know that they cared enough to call and say, 'Hey man, can I talk to you about this?' That's been a beautiful part of it. I think dialogue has increased a lot.

Sid: Yeah. Well, you know, Darius, you've obviously been thinking about this for a long time and working on this for a long time, and I want to ask you about a song that you wrote called Drowning. It was on your debut album with Hootie And The Blowfish back in 1994. Is that right?

Darius: Yeah.

Sid: And, you know, you had a line in that song that said, 'why is there a Rebel flag hanging from the state house walls?' And this was, you know, this was 20 years before that flag was removed. I'm just wondering if you can take me back to when you wrote that song and what was going through your mind at the time?

Darius: Yeah, it was a big, that was a big controversy at the time. That on the South Carolina state house, it was the U.S. flag, the South Carolina flag and then, right under it, the Confederate flag. You know, I understand the whole, remember history, or you're going to repeat it thing.

But like when, when you fly -- for me back then, and especially now,-- when you are flying a flag of an organization that was basically a terrorist organization against the United States, that just didn't make any sense to me. And when you fly the flag like that, to 20% of your population, means something so hateful, so heartbreaking. How could you not just put it in a museum, but also fly it over to the state house? That was a problem that we had.

And so we wrote a song about it. You know, I remember writing that song and didn't think it would cause a controversy that it did. But you know, it did. And I didn't mind that because the flag finally came off the state house. The state house is one of the tallest buildings in Columbia. And a lot of places where you walk on campus, you could see it. That was tough to be a part of and to do every day, but you did it because it was just the way it was.

Sid: Well, that song just could not seem more relevant right now, 25 years later.

Darius: Yeah. Pretty crazy, man. Pretty crazy how stuff like that happens.

Sid: I think it's fair to say that you have paved the way for a lot of black country artists. And I'm just wondering, who are you listening to these days and who are you watching?

Darius: Oh, you want to give a shout out to Kane Brown, but that kid's about to play stadiums. He's going to be a superstar soon so Kane's doing just fine. Jimmy Allen, you know, Jimmy Allen just put out that EP, Betty, which is a great, great record. I mean, great record. That kid is so talented. Yeah. You got Mickey out there that's doing good.

Sid: Mickey Guyton?

Darius: Mickey Guyton, yeah, Mickey's doing great. And somebody asked me a while ago, like when I had my second number one. Somebody asked me if they thought I had changed or broken down some barriers in country music. And I said that if one person -- If an A&R guy picks up a CD with a black person on and listened to, instead of throwing it in the garbage can, I think I've done something. You know, and now it's just so great to see all these guys and gals, getting a shot and actually doing something with it. I love it.

Sid: I wonder if you can tell me a little bit about your relationship with Charlie Pride.

Darius: Oh goodness. Charlie and I are friends, we're good friends. Don't get to see each other as much as I think we'd like to. But, when we see each other, it's a nonstop conversation. The one thing I truly love when we get together, we try to always have a moment where we could just sit down me and him. Because you feel bad if there's other people in the room, because we're just not talking to them and you feel bad, you know? But, he's an amazing man. I could call right now and I'll ask his advice and he'll give it to me straight, whether I like it or not. And I love that. He's a great man.

Sid: That's great to be able to make that phone call when you need to.

Darius: Oh yeah, it really is.

Sid: So Darius lately, you've been real involved with the National Museum of African American music in downtown Nashville. What does that project mean to you? And, and what do you think it will mean to visitors?

Darius: I think it's going to be a great place for people who love music to come experience the side of music that comes from African Americans. We're represented in most music museums just cause you know, some African Americans played everything.

You know, Charlie in country music and Jimi Hendrix, the guy's in the rock roll hall of fame. But this one is a Testament to the struggles that African Americans have made to make it in music. And I love being a part of that. And I'm really excited for it.

Sid: Well, it's opening soon and I'm excited to see it myself. And I know a lot of other people are too.

Darius: Yeah. It's going to be great. It's going to be another reason for people to come to Nashville. Like they need another one, but it's going to be another reason.

Sid: I want to talk about your new single. You've got a new single out called 'Beers and Sunshine,' which you recorded in the middle of this pandemic. I love the line, 'The only BS I need is beers and sunshine.'

Darius: yeah, that's the line everybody's talking about. I remember when we wrote that line, I was like, 'I don't think we can say that on the radio,' you know. But we could it's and -- we were writing that song right in the middle of the real lockdown. You know, no one could go anywhere or anything.

And we were just all really talking about how you turn on the TV and there's so much crap on, you know, from both sides. And we just got tired of that. And so that line right there, 'the only B.S. I need is beer and sunshine.' That definitely summed up how we were all were feeling right then.

Darius' "Beers & Sunshine" starts fading in as John says "the only BS I need...", and song is heard at full volume for these lines, "Cause everybody's down in a world gone crazy / don't know how to fix it but I think maybe / turn on the good times, turn off the TV / Yeah, the only B.S. I need is beers and sunshine" (music fades, Sid comes back in)

Sid: What's it like for you getting back with, Hootie And The Blowfish? I mean, you guys had a big album and a tour last year. Has the dynamic changed, since you guys have gotten back together?

Darius: I mean, it's still basically the same. We still fall in that rut that we're use to. Everybody's grown up so much, and I think the big difference is we hadn't played music together in 12 years when we did that. It's easily the longest we had all gone since we met each other of not playing music together. And so it was a little weird at first, but once we got back into it, we fell right back into the same old thing, having a great time.

Sid: You know, people have a real emotional connection, I think, with a lot of the lyrics that you've written over the years and I'm wondering if there's one song that has really resonated the most for you or the one that you kind of hear about the most from some of your fans?

Darius: Oh, goodness. "Let Her Cry," even all these years later, it's still the song that people talk about. Even, people that know me as a country singer, and then go back and discover Hootie, "Let Her Cry" is the song that everybody will talk about. That still maybe the best song I ever wrote.

Sid: Would you mind singing a; just a line or two from it?

Darius: “Let her cry tears fall down like rain, let her sing if it eases all her pain.” Like I got, I'm trying to hear it run front or remember it. I play it every night.

Hootie & the Blowfish's “Let Her Cry” begins to slowly fade in as we hear Sid ask Darius to sing a bit of it. Right after the laughter from Sid and Darius after he talks about remembering it, we hear the following at full volume: “Saying let her cry, if the tears fall down like rain / Let her sing if it eases all her pain / Let her go...” and the song begins to fade as Sid comes back in with the next question.

Sid: Well, Darius, what are you looking forward to the most? When we get on the other side of this?

Darius: I'm looking forward to playing shows again, man. Just playing big, huge packed out shows and I'm looking forward to going to sporting events. Those are the two things that I'm ready for.

Sid: And I'm guessing you've gotten in some golf. I know that you're a big golfer, so maybe your golf game hasn't suffered that much?

Darius: Definitely has not suffered. That's the one thing that has gotten better over this, for sure.

Sid: Well, Darius Rucker, thank you so much for being on Biscuits & Jam.

Darius: Thank you for having me, man. You guys take care.

Sid NARRATION: *Thanks for listening to my conversation with Darius Rucker. You can find his new single “Beers & Sunshine” as well as the latest album from Hootie & the Blowfish, called Imperfect Circle, wherever you get music.*

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Biscuits and Jam is produced by Heather Morgan Shott, Krissy Tiglias and me, Sid Evans, for Southern Living. Thanks also to Erica Huang, Ann Kane, Jim Hanke, Eliza Lambert and Rachael King at Pod People.

I look forward to having you here next week for more Biscuits & Jam!