

Episode Title: Anderson East's Southern Hospitality

Episode Summary: In this week's episode, Sid Evans, Editor-in-Chief of Southern Living Magazine, talks to Alabama native and Grammy-nominated soul vocalist Anderson East about his job as a teenager slinging barbeque, his mother's church piano which he now uses in his own studio, and how the title track from his latest album *Maybe We Never Die* was influenced by his grandmother's battle with Alzheimer's.

(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. My guest this week is a Grammy-nominated singer/songwriter whose dynamic vocals have made him a favorite on stages all over the country. But as you'll hear today, he originally set out to just work in a recording studio, far outside of the limelight.*

ANDERSON: I didn't have any aspirations of like making it as a singer or songwriter. That wasn't really my goal. I just wanted to make records. You know, I was always just so intrigued with like, "how do these Michael Jackson records sound this good and mine coming off of this little cassette recorder don't?" Like, what's the difference? And then eventually you're like, "well, not only does it take like all the buttons and knobs to do it, but you have to have a good song and you have to be able to perform it well and play your instrument well. So, everything was just all these ingredients to make the chili.

Voice Over from SID EVANS: *Anderson East was born and raised in Athens, Alabama—about 20 minutes from the Tennessee border. Having moved to Nashville right after high school to pursue music, Anderson made a name for himself with a powerful voice that harkens back to soul singers like Otis Redding. Songs like this one, "Devil In Me," from his album *Delilah* in 2015, have a timeless quality that sounds like something out of the '60s, but at the same time, you've never heard anything like it.*

("Devil In Me" fades in)

Voice Over from SID EVANS: *On today's show, Anderson discusses his job as a teenager slinging Alabama barbeque, how the title track from his latest record, *Maybe We Never Die*, is influenced by his grandmother's battle with Alzheimer's, and much more on Biscuits & Jam.*

(Theme music ends)

SID: Well, Anderson East, welcome to Biscuits and Jam.

ANDERSON: Well, glad to be here, Sid. Thanks for having me.

SID: It's not very often that we get an Alabama native on this show, uh, which is something that we need to correct.

ANDERSON: (Laughs)

SID: But, you grew up in Athens, Alabama, which is about 90 miles north of Birmingham, where I am right now. Tell me some of your favorite things about Athens.

ANDERSON: Man. There's a lot. I think number one, Dubs Burgers is probably my, uh, one of my favorite restaurants in the world. And, man it was a really great place to grow up. Right now, that whole area of north Alabama is just exploding. But, when I was growing up, it was still a very small and sleepy town. And looking back on it now, I think it definitely is a blessing. So it was [SID: Yeah.] a great, great way to come up.

SID: Tell me about that burger place. Is that still there?

ANDERSON: Yeah, yeah. It's called Dub's Burgers. It's one of those kind of joints where like once the burger comes from the grill to your table, the paper's already transparent.

SID: (laughs) I've got to make a detour and check that out.

ANDERSON: You certainly should.

SID: Well, Anderson, tell me a little bit about the house and the neighborhood that you grew up in.

ANDERSON: Well, we lived in a subdivision growing up that was just outside of town and backed up to Isom's Peach Orchard. And so, I can't imagine how many hundreds of dollars we used to ruin by riding four-wheelers through their pumpkin patches and all that stuff. But then my folks moved out a little west of town, closer toward the Florence area and had a nice little farm out there. So, yeah, it's just good simple country living. Everybody knew each other. Everybody was in each other's business. Everybody was taking care of each other. And my entire family's still there. And everybody lives no more than two miles from each other. And I'm the only one that's ever left.

SID: So, you know, we like to talk about food on this podcast. Who was the cook in your family?

ANDERSON: Really everyone. Both of my grandmothers on both sides, they're devastating cooks. My grandmother on my mother's side, she, you know, still to this day, every Sunday it's the full family dinner, everybody's over. And just real Southern cooking. My stepmother's amazing. My mom's amazing. And my stepmom, she's originally from Korea—but she calls herself a Korean redneck. And she'll make roast and fried chicken paired with an egg roll and it's just the best. It's so good.

SID: What were some of your favorite things growing up? I mean, is there a dish that you love to kind of come back for that someone in your family makes?

ANDERSON: Well as a kid, I was a super picky eater. I was all about just rolls and ketchup. And then anything you could just fit inside of a roll, that's all I cared for. I mean, I still eat the same McDonald's order that I've had since I was five years old. Uh, granted, now my palate has expanded, thankfully. It's odd that, you know, the name of y'all's show is Biscuits and Jam because each family member's biscuits was very signature. You know, Memaw's biscuits were definitely different than my mom's. But I remember those the most. And, you know, God love them for putting up with my picky ass as a child.

SID: It's hard to be picky about biscuits, though.

ANDERSON: Oh, yeah. Well, you'd be foolish if you were.

SID: Well, you also grew up in barbecue country and that part of the world is kind of known for its white barbecue sauce.

ANDERSON: Mm-hmm.

SID: Big Bob Gibson's, which is kind of down the road from Athens. Are you a barbecue fan? Is that something you spent much time pursuing?

ANDERSON: Yeah. Speaking of white sauce, my granddad, his white sauce was the one. I never really cared for it until recently; there's a place in Nashville called Martin's and they do an Alabama white sauce. And it's spectacular.

SID: Sure.

ANDERSON: But it's radically different than the kind of white sauce that I grew up with. But as far as barbecue, a lot of my best friends, their families, they own LawLers barbecue, which is from Athens.

SID: Yeah.

ANDERSON: And then, my friend Franklin's parents own Simmons' Barbecue. And I used to work at the Simmons barbecue and we were in high school, and that was a scene. You know, I was a little hippie kid running around in Birkenstocks with barbecue blood all over me. And it was a nightmare, man. But, yeah, all the loaded baked potatoes you could eat, though.

SID: Were you making the sandwiches or were you manning a pit of some kind, or what?

ANDERSON: We would cook the barbecue there and then they had a wholesale business that they would cook the barbecue, packaged it, and then it would get distributed to a lot of the restaurants in the area. But it also had just a drive-thru window. And so, we'd be in there

smoking cigarettes and, uh, throwing barbecue sandwiches out the window. I'm sure now that we've gone, it's a far more respectable establishment.

SID: They've cleaned things up a little bit.

ANDERSON: Yeah. Got rid of the riffraff.

(Instrumental music)

SID: So Anderson, I understand that you grew up spending a lot of time at church.

ANDERSON: Mm-hmm.

SID: And your grandfather was a Baptist preacher. Is that right?

ANDERSON: Yes, sir.

SID: I'm wondering if you can describe the church you went to and what it might have looked like on a typical Sunday.

ANDERSON: Church was right, across from our house. Literally. Like, our neighborhood, you could throw a rock and hit it. I have my mother's piano right here that she — she was the piano player in church — And I actually have that piano here in the studio. I would say it was probably very traditional looking back on it. It's taken me a long time to come full circle around to giving it the respect that it was due. You know, everybody goes to their rebellious kind of adolescent phases and you definitely stayed quiet during the service or you're going to get it at lunchtime. But, yeah. All my family, my grandmother, and mom, they would do the Wednesday night potluck and they'd be in there cooking for, you know, 100 people, 200 people every week. And, you know, it was a great way to grow up.

SID: Well, tell me a little bit about your grandfather. Um, what was your relationship like with him?

ANDERSON: He was very close. He was kind of the epitome of, you know, "strong Southern man." He's like 900 feet tall and just Jesus and fishing was like his world. That was all. So we were in the boat from before the sun came up until it got too hot. But a very, very wise man. He was in the Air Force and we look identical. Like, if you look at pictures of him, you know, when we were similar ages, it's like, "oh, God, genetics is a real thing." So he's handsome as can be, I'll tell you that. Still full head of hair. But yeah, he's definitely a great role model. And he raised three pretty amazing women, one of them being my mom, and then us grandkids. He was always the one to look up to, within everybody's faults that they have. But he's led a really tremendous life.

SID: You know, you were talking about the music of the church and your mom's piano right there. Were there certain hymns or songs that have stayed with you?

ANDERSON: Yeah. "In the Garden" was always a big favorite. I remember singing that with my sisters back in the day. It's very powerful and it made a big impact on me, probably more so than I even care to admit. But, to be trying to move a congregation into, you know, this kind of bigger spiritual moment, music has a lot to do with that. And that transcends that emotional feeling. Even into a concert setting nowadays that I can relate to.

SID: So did it impact you a lot as a performer? Were some of your first times on stage as a musician on a church stage?

ANDERSON: Mm-hm. Yeah, absolutely. I sang in the kids' choir from the time they would let me in. And then later on, being kind of like the praise band and you're just like trying to get through G, C, and D chords on a guitar. And for where we grew up, there is no kind of live music. You just couldn't go see anything like that. So we're having the opportunity to do that. So every Wednesday night you can at least go play with, like, some of the other kids that were fumbling around on the instruments and a lot of people being like, oh, yeah, I was playing down and such and such with so and so when I was 16 and I was like, oh, that's cool. You know, I was down at the Baptist Church playing with Jim Bob.

ANDERSON: His bass, he stole from his granddad.

SID: Well, you clearly picked up a few things.

ANDERSON: Probably. Probably more than I should have.

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

Voice Over from SID EVANS: I'll be back with more from Anderson East, after the break.

BREAK

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

Voice Over from SID EVANS: Welcome back to Biscuits & Jam, from Southern Living. I'm Sid Evans, and I'm talking Alabama native and Grammy nominee Anderson East.

SID: Anderson, your voice is so powerful and so distinctive and expressive, and it has so much range. When did you start to have a real awakening as a vocalist? And I'm wondering, who were some of the people that you were listening to that were influencing you?

ANDERSON: I remember two instances and I remember one of them was in church and had a solo and I was very young. I was probably like maybe eight or so? And I had a solo in one of

these performances at church and I just remember it felt good. I liked the way it felt like singing, especially singing by myself. Even to this day, like doing any kind of background harmonies and things like that? Count me out. I'm not your guy, but the solo thing was like really nice. And then I remember we were probably like 14 or so and me and some buddies started our middle school band. And I was just the guitar player. I wasn't a singer or anything. And my friend Will, who was the singer at the time, that's when, like, puberty hit. So every Wednesday we would play down at the Methodist Church. They were, the competing church in town, but they had like a coffeehouse thing. It was the closest thing kids could do that was like the equivalent of going to see a show or something like that. We'd play whatever was on the radio or any kind of tabs you could find in like the back of, you know, Guitar World Magazine that we could all learn. But yeah, he started going through puberty. And so he'd, you know, get that crack in his voice when he was singing. And finally we were like, "hey, man, everybody's laughing at us. So we got to quit this." I stepped up and that was kind of like the essence of where I was like, "oh, I'm still not a very good guitar player, but like, I can at least get through these songs."

(Instrumental music)

SID: So, at what point did you move to Nashville? I mean, this is not a super long trip for you. It's only, [ANDERSON: Mm-hmm.]uh, what, one hundred miles up the road?

ANDERSON: Yeah.

SID: But I'm wondering what those first few months were like for you in Nashville and whether you felt really confident about where you were headed or did you have some doubts?

ANDERSON: Well, I moved as soon as I graduated high school. And my parents were like, "You got to get an education. You got to go to college." I was like, "OK. Well, that's not something I'm really interested in. And I don't really have any interest in having any kind of job." So, I looked around and found Middle Tennessee State down in Murfreesboro because they had a recording engineering program and I was like, "well, if I'm going to go to school, I'm going to go hang out in the studio because that's the only thing I care about." I went up there. I was all by myself. And sure enough, I just lived in recording studios and I was still very much in my rebellious years and couldn't be bothered to listen to anybody telling me what to do. And a friend of mine, he'd started an actual commercial studio and he built out the rooms and the floating floors. I was like, "this is a legit thing." And so he just let me start hanging around. And then eventually, I moved up to Nashville about a year and a half into that. I was like, "you know, Murfreesboro is great and all, but I want to be up there where they're doing the real thing." And so I'd do the commute but, yeah, I don't think there was ever any moment of doubt in the decision to come up here. There was definitely doubts on other things, on various days.

SID: Right.

ANDERSON: But, I heard very early on this Paul Simon quote, where he's like something to the effect of like, "the recording studios is the perfect place because it's the only place that you can fix anything." And I was like, I think that's where I want to be too.

SID: Well, what a great experience for you. and what a great foundation for so much of what you're doing now.

ANDERSON: Yeah. I mean, everything's always kind of led into itself. You know, I didn't have any aspirations of like making it as a singer or songwriter. That wasn't really my goal. That was just a byproduct of, I just wanted to make records. You know, I was always just so intrigued with like, "how do these Michael Jackson records sound this good and mine coming off of this little cassette recorder don't?" Like, what's the difference? So that's been my entire life's goal, it's like how do you keep chasing to make these records sound like that? And then eventually you're like, "well, not only does it take like all the buttons and knobs to do it, but you have to have a good song and you have to be able to perform it well and play your instrument well. So, everything was just all these ingredients to make the chili, essentially. And, then it just so happens that, I just randomly get seen playing the show one night and life just takes another turn. But, it's that self-fulfilling thing where you just keep finding interests and different aspects that ultimately feed back to the same source.

SID: Yeah. Well, you seem like you've had some great partners and great mentors along the way. I know that you toured with Chris Stapleton quite a bit and you've written songs together. What are some things that you picked up from him as an artist?

ANDERSON: I don't know how somebody gets blessed with all those gifts. It's like writing a song with him. You just watch it happen, and you're like, "that was the most effortless thing." And you know, and he'd had quite a bit of success before he became the Chris Stapleton that everyone knows him now. But just as a writer, I don't think he gets talked about—maybe it does get talked about enough and I don't pay enough attention. But, you know, just his songwriting is really, really incredible. And then put on top of it that, he could sing the phone book and it's just like, "golly." But, beyond just like the music stuff, just being nice to people. I don't think I've ever seen that man be anything less than a sweetheart. He's been nothing but kind and gracious to me. And him and Morgan, both, have been nothing but supportive. I met him the day they finished doing *Traveller*. And Dave Cobb was like, "hey, man, come over here and sequence this record." And I'm sitting there with everybody and I was like, "oh my God, the world is about to have something serious on their hands."

SID: Well, there's a song from your album, *Encore*, called "If You Keep Leaving Me, I'll Keep Loving You"

ANDERSON: Mm-hmm.

SID: That you wrote with him. And it is such a great song. And it kind of reminds me of Otis Redding.

ANDERSON: Hmm. You should hear Chris sing it.

SID: And, it's such a great song. What was your process like working with him on that song?

ANDERSON: Well, that one we wrote with my friend Aaron Raitiere, as well. I think that was probably the second song we had written that day. And that was a lot of like how I write and a lot of people around town write, as well. You just kind of carry around a note of, either some kind of theme or idea or a title. And that title. Aaron, he just kind of threw it out. And then Chris just, you know — [sings] if you keep leaving me — OK, I see where we're going now. And, I mean, maybe it took us 15 minutes.

SID: That's amazing. Well, it seems like such a simple song, but I know that there's also nothing simple about it in terms of making it all come together.

ANDERSON: Yeah, I don't know the relationship between, like, simple and just easy. You know, when something just falls out, you just got to kind of accept it and go with it. And that was definitely what that song was.

(“If You Keep Leaving Me” plays)

SID: So, Anderson, you've got a new album out called *Maybe We Never Die*. Congratulations on that.

ANDERSON: Thank you. Thank you.

SID: It's a beautiful record, and it's a brave record, and it seems to go in a different direction for you. And I wanted to ask you about the title track, which I've heard you say was partly a reference to your grandmother's battle with Alzheimer's.

ANDERSON: Mm-hmm.

SID: Can you tell me a little bit about that?

ANDERSON: I'd kind of just had the thought of, what are you at the end of your life if your memory is gone? Right? Like, what part of you is this person? I know a lot of people have seen family members go through that thing. And it's the hardest thing, just watching that deterioration of memory. And so I was thinking one day, your essence has to be more than these like electrical impulses that are firing in your brain that somehow is triggering these memories, and I don't have any kind of definitive answer on what you actually are. I just couldn't wrestle the thought down. And, I'm a fan of the idea of the soul and things that live on and reincarnation or something like that. I couldn't just accept the fact that this is what this person is now, if that makes any kind of sense.

SID: Anderson, would you mind singing a little bit of that song?

ANDERSON: Oh, Lord. Um, I'll try. Let's see here.

(Anderson sings "Maybe We Never Die")

SID: Well, it's just a beautiful song, and I can see why you would want to open the record with it.

ANDERSON: Yeah, all while making the record, I was like, "this is going to be a great closing song." I was just dead set, like, that was the final song for the record. And then once it came time to put it all in order, and even throughout, you know, making the record, I was like, "this is the kind of cornerstone that everything else kind of looks back to." And so it just felt natural that that should be the lead off.

SID: Well, Anderson, I just have one more question. What does it mean to you to be Southern?

ANDERSON: Hmm? That's a very interesting question. That's a very — I don't know, that's a very big question. I think you have to live within some of the Southern stereotypes and there's a lot that I'm super into. I'm very into hospitality. I want to make sure everybody's having a good time around me. Neighborly and then being friendly and kind. And those are kind of the southern tropes that I'm really into. And I like, you know, the yes or no ma'ams and those kind of things. The pleasantries I think, are probably very important. To me at least.

SID: You got some good rules to live by.

ANDERSON: Yeah, I think so.

SID: Well, Anderson East, thank you so much for being on Biscuits and Jam.

ANDERSON: Well, Sid, thank you so much for having me. I had a lovely time talking to you all.

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

Voice Over from SID EVANS: *Thanks for listening to my conversation with Anderson East. His latest album, Maybe We Never Die is available wherever you get music, and you can visit AndersonEast.com for tour dates, social media and more.*

Join me for our next episode with up-and-coming country star Reyna Roberts.

REYNA: I just want to have a song that can resonate with people. I want to create a song that can outlive me. And so that is really my goal. That's really what I want. I want to have a song that I'm so in love with I can hear myself singing it 20 years from now. And even when I'm gone, it's a song that people will remember and a song that they love.

Voice Over from SID EVANS: *Southern Living is based in Birmingham, AL, and this podcast was produced and edited in Nashville, TN. If you like what you hear, please consider leaving us a review on Apple Podcasts or telling your friends about the program. You can find us online at southernliving.com, and subscribe to our print publication by searching for Southern Living at www.magazine.store.*

Biscuits and Jam is produced by Heather Morgan Shott, Krissy Tiglias and me, Sid Evans, for Southern Living. Thanks also to Ann Kane, Jim Hanke, Danielle Roth, Andy Bosnak, Matt Sav and Rachael King at Pod People.

We'll see you back here next week for more Biscuits & Jam!