

Episode Title: **Erin and Ben Napier's Home Town Pride**

Episode Summary: In this week's episode, Sid Evans, Editor-in-Chief of Southern Living Magazine, talks to home restoration experts and HGTV personalities Erin and Ben Napier about their own family traditions and how the small town of Wetumpka, Alabama -- the site of their latest program, Home Town Takeover -- helped Erin & Ben when they needed it most. Be sure to read Erin's article in the August issue of Southern Living Magazine!

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ERIN: Oh, being southern. What does being southern mean to me? I think it means being great storytellers. [CUT]

ERIN: We're all storytellers. Even the bad ones are pretty good ones. [CUT]

ERIN: My mama is this incredible writer and her stories make the South—you can taste it. You know what I mean? And I guess I inherited some of that. But the storytelling, you know? We have the best writers. Everybody knows it. [CUT]

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

Sid NARRATION: Welcome to Biscuits and Jam, from Southern Living. I'm Sid Evans, editor-in-chief of Southern Living Magazine. My guests this week have emerged as the faces of small-town revitalization in the South in recent years, but you won't hear them taking credit for it. For this incredible duo, they're just cheerleaders for the power of a Southern community.

BEN: People come and they see the houses that we've done on the show. And they think that that's it, but what they don't see are the people who, you know, organized the lighting project in downtown Laurel. They see us, you know, plastered on everything and they think, gosh, look at what all Erin and Ben have done in this town.

ERIN: We just get to be the mascots of it.

BEN: Yeah. And so that's the thing that we always try to convey to people when they say, gosh, I wish we had an 'Erin and Ben'. You're probably the 'Erin and Ben,' if you care about it. Or you might be the Josh or the Jim or the Randy or the Mallory.

ERIN: Yeah, everybody's valuable. So valuable. [CUT]

Sid NARRATION: Erin and Ben Napier are the husband and wife renovation team from the hit HGTV series Home Town, which premiered in 2016. By shining a spotlight on their small town of Laurel, Mississippi, Erin and Ben have introduced millions of fans to the charms, quirks, and history of their community. But after helping spur the growth and prosperity of their own town, the Napiers were inspired to hit the road, launching a nationwide search to find another town that needed a helping hand. In May of this year, they launched a new series called Home Town Takeover, which is based on an ambitious plan to recharge and revitalize Wetumpka, Alabama. In just a few short months, they renovated a beautiful small town that was devastated by a tornado in 2019.

Sid NARRATION: In this week's episode, Erin and Ben talk about their own Southern childhoods, getting ready for baby #2, and how the town of Wetumpka came to *their* rescue when they needed it most. All that and more this week on Biscuits & Jam. **[THEME MUSIC ENDS]**

SID: Well, Ben and Erin Napier, welcome to Biscuits and Jam,

ERIN: Thank you for having us. We're honored.

ERIN: We're big fans.

BEN: Of Biscuits and Jam and Southern Living.

ERIN: Yeah.

BEN: And Sid Evans.

SID: it's great to see you guys. It really is. First of all, I just want to say how honored I am to have you guys on this show, especially when you have so much going on. Erin, you got a second daughter on the way.

ERIN: Yes.

BEN: Any day now.

SID: And she is probably going to be here before this show is even out there. So, how are you feeling?

ERIN: Tired. I'm very tired, but I'm good. I'm thirty-six weeks pregnant today. Her sister came at thirty-seven weeks, so I hope we have a little more time than that. I hope she'll give me till the end of the month.

BEN: So today, when we're recording this with you, right now, is the last day of filming for Hometown.

ERIN: Yeah.

BEN: And so we are really—

ERIN: Whoo.

BEN: Right down to the wire.

ERIN: Yes. But we made it. So we're good. We're good.

SID: So your daughter, Helen, is about, what, three and a half now?

ERIN: She is. Yup, good math.

SID: So what has she been saying about becoming a big sister?

BEN: Every day she asks, or every night at bedtime, she says, is my little sister coming home tomorrow? I say, no, hopefully not.

BEN: Or if we have a doctor's appointment, she'll say, are you going to bring my little sister home? No. She's ready and excited.

ERIN: Yes, and she has a pet rabbit that she's been treating like her baby, as soon as she wakes up in the morning, she goes to get Madison, the rabbit—Madison, named after Daryl Hannah from the movie Splash. She gets her out of her little hutch in the yard, brings her inside and carries her like a baby, and feeds her spinach. And she sits her down and takes pictures of her and says, “Look at Mommy. One, two, three... “

SID: That rabbit is going to be worn out.

ERIN: She is. She's exhausted. She's an excellent baby. She's doing a great job.

SID: So, listen, you guys have done so many kids rooms for so many families. Can you tell me a little bit about what you've done to design a nursery for the new one?

BEN: Well...

ERIN: We cheated. And she's just moving straight into Helen's old baby room exactly the way it was.

BEN: Yeah. Helen got a new room and we let her pick—like Erin gave her a few options and said, which one of these do you like?

ERIN: What quilts do you like? And...

BEN: What artwork do you like?

ERIN: Yeah. And so we have, ballerina quilts and trapeze artist art and we have Reid classic beds.

ERIN: And those were antiques we found at an estate sale. They're little twin poster beds. And so she's always ready to have a "spend the night." Her cousin comes over. She's had one "spend the night" so far and that was...pretty good. They woke up at 4:00 in the morning and thought it was time to get up.

SID: Yeah.

BEN: We informed them it was not.

ERIN: We let them know it was not, in fact, time to get up.

SID: Well, I hate to break it to you, but that doesn't really get better.

ERIN: Oh, good. Awesome.

(EDITING: Instrumental music break -- pull from various choices -- :10 fade in/fade out)

SID: Well, so Erin, you grew up in Laurel, Mississippi.

ERIN: Mm-hmm.

SID: And I'm wondering if you can tell me a little bit about the house that you grew up in.

ERIN: Yeah, my parents still live in it, and it's out in the country with a lot of land and a big pond in the backyard. It's kind of paradise. Like they have this great back porch that's kind of an outdoor kitchen and it was a great house to grow up in. And Mama let me decorate my own room when I was in seventh grade and I put cloud wallpaper on the ceiling and painted a mural on the wall, and it's still exactly the way it was when I was in seventh grade. So, uh, yeah. It was an awesome way to grow up.

BEN: It's got a huge kitchen and it's a eat in kitchen, but then they also have a formal dining room and—.

ERIN: Yeah.

BEN: Erin learned a lot of her design style from her mom. There's a lot of things that Erin took from her.

ERIN: Like a couple of gallery walls of family ancestor photos that really I thought was so cool when I was little. And then I kind of applied it in our own house and lots of other houses we've done. So, yeah, it's a good house.

SID: So you are already starting to think about home design and what a home should look like when you were little.

ERIN: Yeah. It was just always something that Mom and I enjoy doing together. I thought that she was a professional artist when I was growing up because she painted all the time. But she was actually a realtor. We were always making things. Creativity was a big part of growing up in that house.

SID: Who was the cook in your family? Was that your mom?

BEN: I can speak to this. And I don't think that my mother-in-law would mind. But, Erin's grandmother—was the family cook.

ERIN: And she lived just around the corner from our house.

BEN: and Erin's mom was always, you know, a good cook and Erin's mom has written about this, about how she had to learn—.

ERIN: To love it.

BEN: To love it. And that it was about the love that you put into it and the love for the people that you were cooking for, not necessarily the love of cooking.

ERIN: Yeah.

BEN: It was the love of the people. She over time became the cook in the family.

ERIN: It's true. She has filled Mamaw's shoes the best she can. Mamaw wears size 5 shoes but they were really tough to fill.

ERIN: They say mama's is gumbo may be better than my grandmother's was.

BEN: See, I never had Erin's grandmothers gumbo. So I—.

ERIN: You can't speak to that.

BEN: I mean I can't but it is very good gumbo.

BEN: But then my grand-

SID: That's a strong statement.

BEN: I know. I know. Erin's dad's a great cook, too, though. He does a great wilted mustard salad. He does a lot of like fried fish and things. And it is really hard to beat, like having a man catch a fish out of his pond, clean it, fry it for you, and you get to eat it while it's hot with fresh onions that he grew—and his garlic. It's just—.

ERIN: Yeah, my dad could be like a pioneer man. If he had his way, the air conditioner would never come on. We wouldn't need TV or Internet. You'd read books and you'd grow your own food and you'd be happy. And that is how he wishes the world was. Like growing up, when my mom would go out of town to play in like a tennis tournament and I would be left at home with Daddy. He would open every window in the—even in the dead of summer. He'd open every window in the house, turn the air off. And I would just be like, “Daddy, I can't. I can't live this way.” And he's like, “well, you're going to.”

BEN: My family was never that way.

BEN: We quite enjoyed our air conditioning.

ERIN: Oh, yeah?

SID: That's sounds like good training for shooting a bunch of episodes of Hometown in the middle summer.

ERIN: He was just preparing me for the future.

SID: So I want to ask you about your grandmother, Erin, who you called Mamaw and her name was Weeda? Right?

ERIN: Oh, that's coming up. The story that I wrote about her.

SID: Yes. And I wanted to ask about that. You've got this wonderful story coming up in Southern Living And I'd love for you to share a little bit about her and the discovery that you made when you were going through her things. She passed away last year.

SID: Tell me what happened when you went over there.

ERIN: Well, she had a stroke, a massive stroke in 2008, which stole a lot of her memory and a lot of her vocabulary.

But I learned as much as I could from her before 2008. I learned a handful of recipes because I thought I'd have more time. She was just so healthy and so spry and so self-sufficient. My grandfather passed away in 2001 and she had just been so tough, you know, like those women were so tough. And she was just OK on her own. And I thought, you know, she'll be here forever and I'll learn everything when I'm done with college and I move back home.

When she passed away in May last year and it was time to clean her house out, which was just devastating, we had kept a lot of things in storage and daddy was like, I think it's time for us to deal with these things. And so he and Ben and my brother and my cousin Jim were emptying out all the big furniture pieces and they're taking this console out,

BEN: Just a ugly piece of furniture.

ERIN: It was not a great piece of furniture, so they were going to donate it and they were carrying it out when the door flung open—.

BEN: Well, it weighed a ton and we had to carry it down the steps. And we couldn't open it in storage and we got it down the steps and a glass fell out and it broke the glass. And we're like, oh, shoot. We need to see what's in here, make sure there's nothing special. And none of it was special. You know, we were like pulling out just cheap glasses and, uh, cookie jars and things, and none of them had any significance

ERIN: Stuff I'd never seen before. But then—.

BEN: And it was the bottom shelf in the back, there were three cookie jars.

ERIN: Just like a little basket of strawberries, a peach. And there were these ceramic jars and I was like, I remember those. They were always in the kitchen and they were heavy. And I thought, did she leave the sugar and flour in them? We need to empty that—gross. And so we open the lid and it's all her recipes on tiny scraps of paper, folded and shoved. They were packed full with every recipe she'd ever cooked. And it just felt like this great big gift, like she was giving it to us. It felt like more than—it was more than recipes. But then what do you do? Because everybody wants them. We all want to be able to access the recipes. So I went to school for graphic design. I thought, well, I can quickly make this book. Quickly, was not the right word. It took many months to scan everything. She had duplicates of, like—she would have like 15 coconut cake recipes.

BEN: She was known for her coconut cake.

ERIN: [sighs]

BEN: But—.

ERIN: And I don't know which one it is. So I included all the coconut cakes. But yeah. So it's a treasure. I'm so glad we have them.

ERIN: What do you call the book?

ERIN: The Book of Weeda. And about two years before she went into assisted living, I was spending an afternoon on the back porch with her. And I had the good sense to think one day she won't live here. And I want to remember what this was like. And so I took photos of her rooms exactly the way they were, like her dining room. It was not a designer dining room or anything. There was nothing fancy or ornamental about it. I just wanted to take pictures of exactly the way they always looked, her kitchen, her dining room, her living room. She had a wooden rotary telephone in the dining room that she still used as the main phone in the house. And I took a photo of that and of the back porch with all the rocking chairs. Like, eight rocking chairs on the back porch.

And she had roses and four clocks that grew all the way around the screen porch. So you'd smell it. [sighs] So I have pictures of all that. And those are the only photos. Her on that back porch, because that's where she spent the whole day. She would work in her garden and then sit on that back porch and wait for people to come by and visit. And, I'm so glad I took those pictures. What if I had never taken the pictures?

ERIN: Yeah. I really urge anyone, who's listening to this, if you are able to photograph your grandparents home and them in their home, do it. They will be treasures for your family.

(EDITING: Instrumental music break -- pull from various choices -- :10 fade in/fade out)

Well, Ben, tell me a little bit about the house where you grew up. I mean, you grew up with a few brothers. Right?

BEN: Yeah.

SID: So somebody was doing a lot of cooking in that house.

ERIN: A lot of laundry.

BEN: So, growing up, we didn't have a house that we grew up in. My parents are both United Methodist preachers, and, anybody who knows anything about the United Methodist Church is the preacher's move. And so, we lived in several little small towns and big houses, small houses, you know, really dumpy houses and some really great houses. My mom when I was probably twenty-two and I was at school at Old Miss and I was having to fend for myself and feed myself, I called her one time and, I said, you know, I owe you an apology. I said, I don't know how you and Daddy afforded to feed four of me, much less myself, because I'm going broke just trying to eat three square meals.

ERIN: Like Ben's mom, she cooks for an army every meal.

BEN: And my mom, like it took her a long time—.

ERIN: To stop buying a two-pound brick of butter.

BEN: I mean, you don't have to buy a gallon of mayonnaise every time you go to the grocery store. I mean, we would go through two gallons of milk a day—.

My parents started shopping at Sam's Club before it was a thing. You had to own a business to be able to get a membership. And my dad owned his truck. So he was considered a small business. And he was a truck driver before he was a preacher. And so he started grocery shopping at Sam's Club in bulk in the early 90s.

ERIN: But they still do.

BEN: And they still do that.

ERIN: Which is the cutest part. You go to their house and they have boxes of crackers that are the size of like a refrigerator. And we're like, what are you don't these crackers. "They just looked good to me."

BEN: Yeah, they looked good. They were, they were on sale so, um, you could buy two and get four for free. So...

ERIN: Yeah.

BEN: but then, like, growing up in our house, we were doing our own laundry, you know, [sighs] we were very domesticated young men, by the time we were in high school.

ERIN: Great at ironing.

BEN: Yeah, I can—.

ERIN: Exceptional.

BEN: Erin's always like, you want me to iron your shirt? I'm like, no. I'm gonna have to re-iron it after you iron it.

ERIN: I didn't have to wear dress shirts growing up.

BEN: Yeah.

ERIN: I never had to iron. I'm sorry.

BEN: Yeah, we did a lot—.

SID: Don't ever let anybody know that you're good at ironing because I made that mistake and now I own that in my house.

ERIN: Yup. It's yours.

(EDITING: Instrumental music break of NEW Biscuits and Jam theme "Fiddler's Barn" from Epidemic Sound -- fade in/fade out)

SID NARRATION: We'll continue with the amazing Erin and Ben Napier, after the break.

BREAK

(EDITING: Instrumental music break of NEW Biscuits and Jam theme -- "Fiddler's Barn" from Epidemic Sound -- fade in/fade out)

SID NARRATION: Welcome back to Biscuits & Jam, from Southern Living. I'm Sid Evans, and we're talking with Erin and Ben Napier of HGTV's Home Town Takeover.

SID: Well, Erin, you once said that Hometown is more than a home renovation show, and it seems like there is a real sense of purpose behind a lot of what you're doing. And I think that seems to be what so many people respond to. What did you mean when you said that when you said it's more than a home renovation show?

ERIN: I think that the home renovation aspect of it is really like—.

BEN: It's the motor that drives it. Like that's what—.

ERIN: That's what put it on TV.

BEN: That's what put it on TV. That's why HGTV keeps it on but there's more there.

ERIN: It's rarely the thing that people reach out to us about. Out of all the emails and questions we get, a third of them pertain to the renovation. Two-thirds pertain to what it means for people to have hope and living in a small town that's struggling.

BEN: Or they want to know about the people on the show.

ERIN: They want to know about the people that they've seen on the show, they want to know that Mike is OK after his hip surgery. He's our floor restoration expert. That Mallory's baby was born and

everything's good. Like, people get very invested in the people that they've met on the show, but also, they're finding a lot of hope in it. Especially—so 2020, we got emails... Like I got emails that made me cry for the first time, but one in particular that stands out to me was from a woman who was in the hospital for maybe a mastectomy, but it was during COVID and she said, I'm in the hospital and I'm completely alone and—.

BEN: Because of COVID, she couldn't have anyone there.

ERIN: Couldn't have any family with her. And, we kept her company in the hospital because they played so many reruns of Hometown. And people told us that we were a comfort; that it was more than home renovation, it was soothing and it was comforting in a time when they were very lonely and trapped in their houses, or trapped in a hospital without any family. And that makes you feel like, gosh, we're doing something so much bigger than making pretty houses. Like that's not the point at all anymore, really.

SID: Well, I think it's also very relatable to so many people. I mean, Hometown has never been kind of “lifestyles of the rich and famous.”

ERIN: Nope.

SID: I mean, the homes are modest. The budgets are small but somehow you managed to infuse a lot of magic into these places. And you can see the response in the families that are affected.

BEN: Yeah, the home renovation aspect of our show is very attainable for all of America. We actually just left the house from filming that, it's people who are moving to Laurel—from New Jersey—and they had never owned a property. They've lived there for twenty-five years. And thought that they never would be able to own property, just thought that, you know, they would continue renting forever and ever. Amen.

ERIN: And I mean, how big is their lot?

BEN: The house is seventeen hundred square feet and I bet the lot is—

ERIN: 50 yards wide, at least.

BEN: It's probably—yeah, yeah.

ERIN: 50 yards by 50 yards. And they spent one hundred eighty-five thousand dollars total to buy the house, renovate it and they want to grow a garden. They've been surrounded by concrete 20 years and they're like, I don't know why we live this way. We couldn't afford it. Now we want to have a garden and a dog and we want a big kitchen to cook food in and—They've never even been to the south before. So I hope that they're going to love it.

ERIN: Oh, they visited Laurel.

ERIN: They visited Laurel. Yeah.

BEN: They had been—they had been here a few times and just fell in love with the town and the people. And—

ERIN: Yeah.

BEN: And, um, like I said, I mean, it was very attainable. Their house is incredible.

SID: So I want to ask about your new show. called Hometown Take Over—

ERIN: Yup.

SID: Where you all spent four months trying to breathe some new life into Wetumpka, AL, after this nationwide search. What was it about Wetumpka that made it stand out after looking at—what, five thousand different entries?

BEN: So the network picked the town for us. Thank goodness they didn't put that on us, because like every submission that we saw—

ERIN: They're all wonderful.

BEN: They're all wonderful. And it's people who care so much about their town and they want to see it come back to life. And—

ERIN: It comes down to what's really universal for most small towns in America, and it's being bypassed by bigger roads that go to bigger cities. And then—

BEN: Changes in industry

ERIN: changes and industry...

BEN: Young people leaving.

ERIN: Loss of young people. And, they had suffered a natural disaster as, you know, a tornado hit Wetumpka and wiped out half the town.

BEN: Those elements are what HGTV, what drew them to Wetumpka.

ERIN: Yeah. And then logistically, they would communicate with us. What do you feel about this town, that town, all over America? And there's a lot of difficulty in travel for us.

BEN: You think about—so like for Laurel—.

BEN: We're two hours from an airport that you can—I mean, like the Laurel Airport you can fly to Houston out of. But let's say that, you know, we were having to go to some small town—.

ERIN: Pennsylvania.

BEN: In Pennsylvania.

ERIN: It's very difficult to get to from here.

BEN: It's very difficult. And also, like once you get there, how difficult is it going to be to get to that small town from a major airport?

ERIN: Yeah. True.

BEN: And so there are a lot of logistics there.

ERIN: So, yeah, Wetumpka just shined for so many reasons. I think it was really the people there, were really standouts. They were trying so hard.

BEN: And also the logistics—or you take those logistics and then pile on the fact that we did this while we were filming Hometown in Laurel.

ERIN: But we were never supposed to do it that way.

BEN: It was supposed to be we finish one show, Hometown Takeover.

SID: Right.

BEN: Then we start Hometown season five. But because of COVID, everything got wadded up at the end of the year.

SID: Well, I've been to Wetumpka and it's an amazing place, and I floated down the Coosa River and did a little river trip there one day and it's just gorgeous. It's a beautiful little town.

BEN: How far is it from Birmingham?

SID: It might be about an hour and a half.

BEN: OK.

SID: It's not that far. Yeah. So I'm wondering if you all made some lasting friendships in Wetumpka and if there are one or two that really kind of stand out?

BEN: Uh, yeah, we went through a lot while we were in Wetumpka. It was a—.

ERIN: That's a whole other—that'd make a great TV show for another time.

BEN: It'd be disaster show.

ERIN: Whoo. Yeah, every week in our personal life, something—like our first week of filming, I, nearly knocked myself out in the middle of the night.

BEN: It was just like every time we were there, there was something catastrophic where we would have to call on the people of Wetumpka and say, hey—.

ERIN: Help.

BEN: This has happened. We don't know who to call.

ERIN: Yeah. Um, and it was just like being at Laurel, where people just stand in the gaps. They bring you food, they bring you cow insemination gloves for your child's cast so you can give her a bath after she breaks her leg. People just really stepped up to take care of us when we were out of our element without knowing who to call.

ERIN: Shelley and Wade Whitfield were really wonderful. And they were the big fish house that you'll get to see if you watch Hometown Take Over.

SID: I saw it. Yeah.

ERIN: Yeah. Jenny and Troy Stubbs have kept Helen in Popsicles. They own the Popsicle shop downtown, and it's her favorite thing. And so Helen got strep throat. They sent popsicles. Helen breaks her leg, they send popsicles. And, um, It just makes you feel loved. It makes you feel like they know us and care about us.

BEN: We had such a good experience with the town that, we're planning a family trip with my whole side of the family.

ERIN: Because they didn't get to see it.

BEN: They didn't get to see it.

ERIN: Ben's mom did but...

BEN: We really want them to see the town and see the work that we did.

SID: Well, so y'all went there to help Wetumpka get back on its feet, but really they helped you all and a lot of ways.

BEN: Oh, yeah,

ERIN: They for sure helped us. If they hadn't been so welcoming, I don't know how we would have gotten through it. It was really hard.

ERIN: It was the most difficult season of our life ever.

ERIN: Making all the shows together and being pregnant during the pandemic in a place we'd never been before. It's the hardest thing we've ever done. And they made it so much easier.

(EDITING: Instrumental music break -- pull from various choices -- :10 fade in/fade out)

SID: Well, Erin, I want to ask you a little bit about music, you know, the show is called Biscuits and Jam.

SID: So we talk about music a lot on here. And, one of the surprises of your new show was that Sheryl Crow made an appearance.

SID: Tell me a little bit about how you all got to know her and how that came about.

ERIN: So we did our Airstream in an episode of Hometown last season that was given to us by the Stapleton's, Morgan and Chris.

BEN: And weirdly, Sony Camper's that they're an hour from Laurel. They helped us do Jolene, the Airstream.

ERIN: The restoration.

BEN: They had been talking with Sheryl about doing some airstreams for her. And then weirdly, we got connected through that. But then she's friends with the Stapletons. And so it was like all these overlapping things surrounding our Airstream.

ERIN: The Airstream really pulled us together.

ERIN: And Sheryl called us one night just to talk about, like, would we be interested in helping design her airstreams? And, of course, we were. But then COVID happened and everything just got put on hold. But

she was like, I love Hometown so much and I love what you guys stand for with small town revitalization. And I'm from a tiny town in Missouri. If y'all can ever use me for anything, call me. So we did. (laughs) We called her. And, uh, it was all supposed to be so much bigger. Sid, it was supposed to be a very big concert, where everybody in Wetumpka could come for free. Then COVID.

SID: yeah.

ERIN: So there were like 40 people and everybody had to be tested twice before they could come. You had to wear a little wristband that proved you'd been tested. You can only stand with your family.

BEN: Nobody in the town even knew that Sheryl Crow was going to be there.

BEN: And so it was this legitimate surprise for the town. But anyway, that was like the theme of 2020 was we have to—.

ERIN: Think small suddenly.

BEN: We had to pivot and think small about everything

ERIN: because Hometown Takeover's gonna like kick off with a big marching band. And then there was going to be a town supper in the middle of Main Street. And then there was going to be a festival at the end. And we just had to find ways to make these huge feelings work on a small scale during COVID.

SID: Well, Erin, I happen to know firsthand—.

ERIN: Oh, Sid.

SID: That you play guitar.

ERIN: Are you gonna embarrass me now?

SID: And that you have a beautiful singing voice.

ERIN: You're sweet.

SID: And I've also heard that you used to sing in coffee shops in Laurel back in the day. Did you ever think of music as something that you would pursue as a career or as something more serious,

BEN: I'm not going to comment on this, at all.

ERIN: Ben and my mama cannot let the dream die.

BEN: What dream?

ERIN: I've never written a song, I just like to play cover songs. That's fun to me. But, I'm no songwriter and I know people, who are great ones and I just couldn't—I just couldn't.

BEN: I'm not saying anything, Sid.

SID: Well, I know that you sing a mean version of "Me and Bobby McGee".

BEN: She also does a really mean version of just about every Sheryl Crow song there is.

ERIN: I loved her in high school, so I had a hard time being cool when we met. Y'all are embarrassing me.

SID: Did you and Sheryl get to play together?

ERIN: No, we didn't. She was there for just a couple hours and she had to get back to Nashville. So we did not get to play. I'm sorry. I'm sorry, everybody. I,—I used to be a musician.

SID: Someday.

ERIN: I'm so bad now.

SID: Well, I respectfully disagree with that statement, but—.

BEN: So do I.

SID: It'll just be our secret.

ERIN: Y'all are sweet. Thank you.

SID: So, Ben, I want to talk about a passion of yours for a minute, and that's building furniture.

BEN: Yeah.

SID: And you've got your own show called Ben's Workshop and you've said that, building furniture really changed the way that you look at the world, and you said in your book—and I'm going to quote this, "The more time I spent building things, the more it felt like I'd grown a new set of eyes." And I thought that was such a cool way to look at things. What did you mean when you said that?

BEN: it changed the way—or I don't know that it changed or it just made me notice something that I've never noticed about the way I notice things.

SID: But for me, design and furniture design, specifically, is all about balance. Like if you look at something. In it, there is something when you see or at least when I see a piece of furniture that is not very well designed or that's not very well built, there is something either the legs are too big or the top is too wide.

BEN: One of the first things I built is our dinner table, and I absolutely hate it.

ERIN: It's very special.

BEN: It's a very special and sentimental piece. But when I built it, I didn't have all of the equipment that I have now. And I didn't have—.

ERIN: The knowledge.

BEN: The knowledge of how to do things the way I do now. But even as I was building, I was like, this doesn't look right. But Erin loved it, which was always the goal anyway. I mean, to this day, I'm just trying to impress her. But then, like, the legs are just so chunky. But they're—her parents' old porch columns. And so that's a cool story. But gosh, they don't make any sense.

ERIN: You're too hard on yourself.

BEN: It's but it's something that like the more I do it, the more I can recognize what's wrong with the piece of furniture and how to fix it.

Yeah. And it's something that I never in a million years would have thought, like, this is what I'm going to end up doing. I think that a lot of it is the way that I came to woodworking. Like most people, especially in this part of the country in south Mississippi, it's not a big furniture world. It's not a fine woodworking world. And so most people who get into carpentry, they start on the framing side. So they start framing houses or building decks or porches for people.

It's like when we're—on Hometown, when you watch it, very rarely will you see me framing a wall in the house.

ERIN: He's not a contractor.

BEN: because I'm slow. The beautiful thing about a good framing carpenter is that they are so fast. They can have a house framed in a day. And it takes me an hour to get a wall because I'm like, OK—

ERIN: Measuring down to the—.

BEN: It's got to be down to the—.

ERIN: It's got to be down to 16th of an inch.

BEN: 32nd to be perfect. And anyway, that's, that's where it goes for me. You want to talk about wood species now? Because we could really go in—.

ERIN: You want to really go deep?

(EDITING: Instrumental music break -- pull from various choices -- :10 fade in/fade out)

SID: You guys have become real champions of small town America. What are some of the things that you hear from people about their hopes and dreams for their small towns?

ERIN: A lot of people say they wish that there was an Erin and Ben where they live.

BEN: And—.

ERIN: And thing is—.

BEN: We didn't do this. We get to be the face of it.

ERIN: we are two of many, many people who have been working so hard to make Laurel feel alive. And I wish that people could see that two people don't do it. Two people definitely can't do it.

BEN: Well, and people come and they visit on a weekend and they see Laurel and they see our stores and they see my pickup truck. And they take a picture with it and they see the houses that we've done on the show. And they think that that's it, but what they don't see are the people who, you know, organized the lighting project in downtown Laurel. They don't see the people who organize the Mississippi Made event that's happening this weekend. They see us, you know, plastered on everything and they think, gosh, look at what all Erin and Ben have done in this town.

ERIN: We just get to be the mascots of it.

BEN: Yeah. And so that's the thing that we always try to convey to people when they say, gosh, I wish we had an Erin and Ben. You're probably the Erin and Ben. If you care about it or you might be the Josh or the Jim or the Randy or the Mallory.

ERIN: Yeah, everybody's valuable. So valuable.

SID: Well, I just have one more question and I'll put it to each of you. What does it mean to you to be Southern and Ben, I'll start with you.

BEN: To be southern is to be where my people are from. I lived in North Carolina for a while and North Carolina is very much southern. But it is not where my people were from. And I love North Carolina. It is one of my most favorite places to visit. It's one of those beautiful states in our country but Mississippi is where my family's from. This is, this is our home. This is—.

ERIN: Swimming in the creek.

BEN: It's swimming in the creek.

ERIN: Your grandma's whoopie pies.

BEN: It's grandma's brownies.

ERIN: Oh.

BEN: We don't talk about whoopie on Biscuits and Jam.

ERIN: Oh, I'm sorry.

BEN: That's a little—.

ERIN: That's racy.

SID: Family show.

BEN: It's a little too racy.

BEN: But yeah. It's my granny's fried catfish. My grandmother's brownies, swimming in the creek, playing with my brothers, that's for me, this is where my people are from.

ERIN: Yup. Oh, being southern. What is being southern mean to me? I think it means being great storytellers.

BEN: [snaps]. That's better than mine.

ERIN: No, it's not.

BEN: I think that's pretty good.

ERIN: No, it's not. We're all storytellers. Even the bad ones are pretty good ones. Ben's a long storyteller.

BEN: Well—.

ERIN: He loves include every detail, um...

BEN: I don't want anybody to get lost.

ERIN: It's true. My mama is this incredible writer and her stories make the South—you can taste it. You know what I mean? And I guess I inherited some of that. But the storytelling, you know? We have the best writers. Everybody knows it.

SID: That's the truth.

ERIN: It's true.

SID: Well, Ben and Erin Napier, thank you so much for being on Biscuits and Jam.

ERIN: Thank you for having us.

BEN: Thanks for having us.

ERIN: We miss seeing you in real life.

SID: You get your friend Sheryl and, you know, I'll be there at a moment's notice.

ERIN: Sounds good. Thank you, Sid! **[INTERVIEW OVER]**

NEW Biscuits theme music "Fiddler's Barn" from Epidemic Sound fades in

Sid NARRATION: Thanks for listening to my conversation with Erin and Ben Napier. Tune in to Home Town and Home Town Takeover -- both on HGTV or Discovery Plus — and be sure to read the August issue of Southern Living, where we have a piece by Erin about her grandmother's lost recipes.

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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 Ann Kane, Jim Hanke, Danielle Roth, Matt Sav, Erica Wong and Rachael King at Pod People.

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

END MUSIC

