

Episode Title: **John Hiatt's Southern Education**

Episode Summary: In this week's episode, Sid Evans, Editor-in-Chief of Southern Living Magazine, talks to singer/songwriter John Hiatt about making music with his daughter, having his songs covered by legends like Buddy Guy and Bob Dylan, and his mother's cooking.

Episode Transcript:

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

Voice Over from SID EVANS: Welcome to another episode of Biscuits and Jam, from Southern Living. I'm Sid Evans, editor-in-chief of Southern Living Magazine.

We've recorded these episodes as we've all sheltered-at-home, and between passionate conversations about Southern food, you'll also hear honest takes about how these cultural icons have been dealing with the pandemic.

Over the last 45 years, my guest today has bridged the gap between blues, folk and country. And though born and raised in Indiana, he found his musical calling in Nashville at just 18 years old.

John: it was 300 miles South of Indianapolis, but my impression was it might as well have been Mars. People spoke different. They dressed different, they laughed different. There was some openness about it that I hadn't experienced.

Sid NARRATION: *Since his debut album in 1974, John Hiatt has received nine Grammy nominations and a lifetime achievement award for songwriting from the Americana Music Association. His most recent release, 2018's The Eclipse Sessions, marks the 25th album of his long and acclaimed career.*

On today's show, you'll hear his thoughts on having his work covered by legends like Bob Dylan, Emmylou Harris and Buddy Guy.

John: They all, they almost always feel, at least "gee, you liked that song?" You know? "You liked it enough to record it?" You know, what a, what an honor.

Sid NARRATION: *Plus his first ever experience with barbecue, what it's like to make music with his daughter Lilly and more on Episode 9 of Biscuits and Jam.*

(theme music ends)

Sid: So John Hiatt, welcome to Biscuits and Jam.

John: Uh, nice to be here. Where are my biscuits and jam?

Sid: They're in the mail

John: I, I sorta, it's hard to smell them through Google Chrome.

Sid: Yeah. You get them when you finish the interview, we'll send them to you.

John: Okay, good. Alright.

Sid: So tell me what it was like growing up in, uh, in Indiana.

John: Growing up in Indiana. Well, it was good. It was, it was good. I'm a Midwesterner by nature, a southerner by a preferred, uh, living so. Um, you know, seven kids in my family and, uh, I was born, what, '52. So, uh, you know, growing up in the fifties, uh, you know, Dwight Eisenhower and Nikita Khrushchev later on banging with his shoe and the missile crisis.

I remember my brothers and my father sitting around sweating the Cuban missile crisis. I thought it was the end of the world.

Sid: So who was the, who was the cook in your family?

John: My mother cooked, but she, she was, uh, she was okay. I mean, she cooked, uh, mass quantities of food for seven people and, uh, uh, nine people, I'm sorry, with, with mom and dad.

So, so it was a lot of, uh, cooking by a lot of...Campbell's Cream of Mushroom Soup used in various recipes. I remember distinctly the flavor of Campbell's Cream of Mushroom Soup. It kind of permeated her entire adventures in cuisine. She made good chili though,

Sid: Cream of mushroom soup can go a long way.

John: It actually can, you know, it's, it's, it's, it's not bad over a tuna loaf casserole on Friday night.

Sid: So, uh, so big family. What did, uh, what did your, what did your holidays look like? How did you guys celebrate the holidays?

John: Um, you know, big tree and, um, midnight mass. So we were a Catholic family. So, uh, went to midnight mass. I was in the boys' choir, so one of my earliest musical delights was, uh, singing the midnight mass up in the choir loft with the, you know, no light coming through the, the uh, stained glass windows.

It looked all, even that much more mysterious, the various saints depicted. And, and, uh, I just remember being so moved by the Latin mass "Kyrie eleison. Et cum spiritu tuo." And all this mysterious chatter that I had no idea what it was about, but I just loved it. And, um, I remember weeping on the, on the singing midnight mass. More than once, I think.

Sid: Yeah. I always loved the midnight mass in Memphis. We did that, too.

John: Wow. Yeah, there you go. I bet it was, uh, beautiful.

Sid: Did you have a big Christmas day kind of brunch thing, or what did y'all do?

John: It was, I think it was dinner later. And, uh, you know, my mother, uh, she came from that era where you had to cook fowl to death. And so the Turkey was, there was no, even considering whether it would be dry or not. It was, of course it was dry. It was Turkey. So you kind of toughed it out. I always asked for the dark meat that was your best shot getting something with moisture content.

Sid: I heard somewhere that you were, uh, an early Elvis fan.

John: Yeah, I caught, I caught on to Elvis. Uh, the first cut I heard was Blue Moon Of Kentucky, and I just thought, "man, what is this?" You know, being from the Midwest and of course, I didn't know at the time what it meant that he had in fact covered a bluegrass guy, Bill Monroe, one of his greatest songs, you know? And what a, what a mixture that was.

Sid: What were some of those early songs, uh, or artists that, that started to really wake you up to music and, and really have some meaning to you?

John: Well, it was mostly, you know, I was just a Midwest kid, it was mostly records my brothers brought home. Uh, and Elvis Presley was the early, early influence. And, uh, and then it was, the dance music of the early, late '50s, early '60s, Gary U.S. Bonds and Joey Dee & The Starlites, And I just thought these, I just thought it was such fabulous music, you know, that sort of thing with the beat and a great vocalist and, uh, uh, that sort of raggedy beat that, uh, that you could hear back in those days. I love that stuff.

Sid: And could you crank that stuff up in the house or did you kind of have to go somewhere else?

John: I, I started a sort of mimicking Elvis Presley with...one of my brothers, had a tennis racket, didn't really play, and I pulled it out of the closet...and I remember distinctly, I was about nine and, I stood in front of the mirror and pretended I was singing Blue Moon Of Kentucky. So, uh, that was, that was sort of my emulation.

And then when I was 11, I begged my mother to, uh, let me take guitar lessons. And, uh, that's why I picked up a guitar. I had a teacher for about two months. And I took about a dozen lessons, then, you know, he was, I was having to play the notes, you know, this is a B, this is a C. And I just, it just, I was bored to tears and didn't want to know anything about it, so I quit. We had to hand in the guitar, it was a, you know, you get the guitar with the lesson. So I had to hand the guitar back in and I stayed on it for the next couple of weeks. And, uh, she bought me, uh, a red Stella, which was kind of like Silvertone or Kay. Um, I think she paid 28 bucks for it. Was a lot of money in those days.

Sid: And, so you wrote a song, at the age of 11. Is that right?

John: Yeah. What I did after I handed in the rental guitar and my mom bought me that Stella, I got, I went in and bought a, I got a Mel Bay cord book at the same time. I learned three chords. And I wrote my first song. It was about a girl. This was tail end of fifth grade going into sixth grade.

And so I, in my sort of Walter Mitty way, imagined that she was my girlfriend, which was, couldn't be further from the truth. But wrote a little song about her. Beth Ann was her name. Yeah. "Beth Ann, ooh, you're a woman." Near as I could tell.

(Instrumental music break of Biscuits and Jam theme -- :16 fade in/fade out)

Sid: So you moved to Nashville, uh, pretty young, right?

John: Yeah. I was 18. I never finished high school. As soon as I was 16, I stopped going and I think I'd go just enough to not get officially kicked out. And then, uh, my mother said, well, you got, you got to either work or move out of this house. So I got various odd jobs, a short order cook. I was for awhile, a roof, a roofing job. That was very short lived because I was afraid of heights. So that was the end of that. But, um...

John: Starting at 15 I had made various attempts to, leave Indiana. And I wanted to, uh, go out and be whatever I thought I was, uh, going to be as a songwriter and singer and all that stuff. Musician. And, um, so I made two or three trips, uh, with friends. and we came through Nashville and I just was, fell in love with the place. Met a guy named Bob Frank, who was a, a folk singer from Memphis, um, actually I made some records...

Sid: My hometown.

John: Yeah, there you go. Made some records, uh, for, the venerable Vanguard folk label. And, uh, so anyway, I met him and, uh, I heard him play and, uh, we sat, we spent some time together and I just thought he was wonderful guy, a great songwriter, and, I said, "so how do you survive?"

And he said, you know, "I got a little deal with a publishing company. And they pay me money each week an advance against, you know, future earnings that my songs might earn." I said, "really? How much...", you know, getting paid to be a song writer? What is that? I said, "how much do you get if you don't mind my asking?" He said, "I get, they pay me 25 bucks a week", and I thought "I could live on that."

So I went back home and I was determined to, uh, get enough money together to come back to Nashville. So I worked a sort of a normal job, for, making 50 bucks a week, I think, uh, and bought a little, uh, Corvair from a friend of mine, actually.

Only paid him 35 bucks for it. It didn't have any floorboards. They were gone. Rusted through. And I said, "man, I'm going to Nashville. I'm quitting this job. I'm going to Nashville. I'm going to, I want to be a songwriter. I want to do what this other guy Bob Frank does." So I made this tape, uh, which I thought was exotic and would instantly get me, you know, not only a publishing deal but a record contract and every other damn thing. And so I came down with, uh, high hopes and, uh, it was 1970 and we spent the first night in Centennial Park. Me and my buddies sleeping.

Sid: Really?

John: Yeah, sleeping under a picnic, uh, table. Uh, and no cops bothered, nobody cared. You know, it was very quiet. You know, I mean, Nashville in those days was about maybe 400,000 people, you know, a sort of a bigger, small town, I guess. Kind of.

Sid: Were you at this point thinking about country music a lot?

John: No, you know, I didn't, I didn't know anything about country music. I, I mean, very little. I knew Hank Williams, I knew who Hank Williams was, and I'd put it together. Uh, that Blue Moon Of Kentucky was a Bill Monroe song. So I'd heard some bluegrass, and, uh, and I'd heard Hank Williams and Jimmy Rogers, but that was about it. I was more, stuck with the rhythm and blues stuff, you know, Otis Redding and, uh, the, the Memphis Stax/Volt stuff. And, uh, you know, I was more, more into that. I discovered Bob Dylan of course when I was 15, 16. People like Mississippi John Hurt and Howlin' Wolf,

Sid: Bob Dylan, who ended up covering one of your songs.

John: That was freaky. What an honor. What a thrill. It was funny because I sent him, he asked for songs in a conversation for this movie,

I said, "yeah, okay." You know, nervous shaking in my boots. And then I wrote him, I wrote about three or four and sent them up to him and he, he turned them down. Uh, they were basically just bad Bob Dylan songs is what they were, so he did this, this song called The Usual, which is sort of my angry young man period.

Sid: Was there someone who really kind of, uh, helped you take the next step, help you kind of get on your feet?

John: A lot of people, a little encouragement goes a long way. And, uh, when you're a kid and trying to be a some kind of artist, uh, you're just dying for it. You're dying for somebody to say, "you know, you got, I think, I think you got something there." You know, just a little encouragement. And so, uh, Bobby Braddock springs to mind, I mean, he...

You know, I was writing songs about, uh, killing ants with my guitar and, uh, you know, whistles in my ears and all these weird sort of, you know, uh, personal, wacky sort of kid stuff really. And, uh, but he was just...and here's the guy that wrote the, you know, all these great songs, and he was very encouraging and funny. And, uh, so he was kind of an early, you know, "hang in there" kind of thing.

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

SID NARRATION: *Stay tuned for more with John Hiatt, after the break.*

(AD 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 John Hiatt.*

Sid: You had a really big hit called Memphis In The Meantime, uh, you had another huge hit called Drive South. I mean, clearly it, it seems the South is a place that speaks to you. Is that fair?

John: Well, you know, I came to Nashville in those days. Uh, it was 300 miles South of Indianapolis, but my impression was it might as well have been Mars. People spoke different. They dressed different, uh, they laughed different. Um, there was some openness about it that I hadn't experienced, you know.

Uh, and, um. I just loved it. I mean, I, you know, the first sort of thin-lipped Presbyterian woman I heard with that accent, that, that middle Tennessee accent, I just, it sent me to the moon. It just sent me, it was music. It was music and by that point I'd kind of started to put together that most of the roots of the things that I'd grown up listening to, had come from the Southern United States primarily. From most, most of the blues I listen to, Mississippi John Hurt and Fred McDowell and, you know, even the guys with the band, Howlin' Wolf and Muddy and all those guys, uh, just that, that was the sound that, that caught my ear.

Sid: So what about the food? I mean, when you, you say you moved to Nashville and, and you know, it's a completely different thing. I mean, are you, are you discovering Southern food, uh, for the first time?

John: Oh yeah. Oh yeah. The meat and three was, that was a unique experience. We had cafeterias up North, but, uh, I hadn't experienced the meat and three, there was a place called Mack's. It's where a lot of us hung out because it was the cheapest meat and three in town. It was, I think it was 95 cents. Uh, in 1974, uh, you know, fried chicken and fried okra and most of it fried.

But really, I'd never eaten anything like it. I mean, this, I came from tuna noodle casserole. You know, my mother, God bless her. Uh, so yeah, it was a revelation in that area too.

Sid: Do you have any favorite dishes?

John: Well, I mean, fried chicken is pretty hard to beat, you know, if you do it right. And, uh, I fell in love with grits for godssake. I've never had a grit in my life. And, pinto beans with gravy, you know, things like that that just, whew, man.

Sid: Did you become a barbecue fan, or are you a barbecue fan?

John: Yeah. I had my first, uh, uh, had my first, uh, pig meat, uh, in Nashville. Uh, we used to, I had a buddy, uh, met a guy, Andrew who was, uh, in college at Vanderbilt, and he'd haul us out to this little joint out in Wilson County. It was a juke joint, uh, dirt floor, and it was farmers, African American farmers.

It was called Rufus Carter's place, and that was the guy's name, Rufus Carter, and he slept...he had a little room out in the back and that was where he lived. And then he'd had this juke, juke joint on the weekends. Dirt floor. Beer served out of big wash tubs full of ice and, uh, man, they would come from miles around, fill that place up in a heartbeat.

so we go out there to Rufus Carter's place on Friday and Saturday night and play and get, you know, we'd take the door, they'd pay a buck.

Maybe we'd get 50 bucks total, but it was just, just wonderful.

Sid: And he had some good, good barbecue or chicken or something?

John: Always something to eat, yeah. He had chickens going I think I had my first barbecue, uh, pork barbecue sandwich out at Rufus Carter's. Delicious.

Sid: So, so John, we're at the end of April right now, and I believe you were supposed to be on tour with Lyle Lovett about right about now. Is that right?

John: Correct. Yeah. We just spoke the other day about it as a matter of fact, and we love going out together and we have so much fun and it's something we've done since 1989 and never planned a second of it, which is probably why we love it so much. It's just, it's just not like work. It's just going out and goofing off for a month. We would giggle about, you know, "don't tell the wives", you know, they think we're at work.

Sid: So, so John, I'm trying to picture, you know Lyle Lovett and John Hiatt sitting down at a restaurant together somewhere. What does that look like? Where do y'all like to go?

John: It's so funny because Lyle goes out to eat on the road and I am the worst. Peanut butter sandwich on the bus. It it's, and it's because I get so focused on what I'm doing that the idea of going into a restaurant and having to look at a menu you know, tell me to go to the dentist. And have a root canal and I'd probably have a similar reaction.

I just, I get so focused on the two hours that I, I can't, everything else just distracts me. But occasionally on a day off, I'll have something good to eat. Recommended. But Lyle, Lyle is the cuisine of the town man. He finds the best place, you know, that has the most, you know, and he mentions it on stage and always gets a rave review.

You know, the... "You ate at that, our favorite place", you know, and you'd think I'd pick up on it, but I don't. "What'd you have, John?" "A little peanut butter and jelly."

Sid: Uh, so John, uh, you have had your songs covered by so many legendary artists. I mean, Bob Dylan, Eric Clapton, BB King, Bonnie Raitt, Jimmy Buffet. It just goes on and on and on. What is that like for you and, and I'm, I'm also wondering if there's a, is there one kind of surprising cover that really stands out?

John: Man, there's been more than one. Buddy Guy doing Feels Like Rain just about killed me. Uh, loved it. Just loved that. Since he's one of my heroes and, uh, you know, the Buddy Guy, Junior Wells records I listened to when I was a kid. Uh, oh man. The surprises, uh, you know, Emmylou Harris doing a song was like, you know, that sings like an angel woman is cutting a song of mine?

You know. That's how it, that's how they all, they almost always feel, at least "gee he liked that song". You know. "He liked it enough to record it?" You know, what a, what an honor.

Sid: What do you think they're responding to?

John: You know, I, I, I can't put my finger on it other than, uh, people, and, uh, lives, and, and the secret life beneath that we, we try to name, and can't. The secret life of folks.

Sid: Yeah. Keeping it simple.

John: yes, I love simplicity. I'm not always the best at it. I remember I wrote a...was a guy at Capitol right before they dropped me in 2000. And, uh, he said, he said, "you write too many words. If you could just, uh, you, you write, you just write too many words. If you could just boil it down."

And I, you know, he's right, of course. So I wrote in response, I wrote a song called, What Do We Do Now? And the chorus is, "What do we do now? What do we do now? What do we do now? What do we do now?"

I kind of wrote it thinking of this guy...

(Instrumental music break of Biscuits and Jam theme -- :15-:20 fade in/fade out)

Sid: So tell me what it's been like having a very talented daughter Lilly Hiatt, who's making her own way in the music business.

John: Oh, you know, thrilling, exciting. all three of our kids are just so amazing. And, uh, and one of them happens to be an amazing, uh, singer, songwriter. Uh, which blows my mind, she was secretive about it. Talk about having your secret life. She spent her time in her room. I gave her a guitar, I think when she was 12, And, uh, we didn't hear from her again until she was 16, and she sang at, at the...uh, uh, her high school talent show. She got up and sang, Wild Horses and, uh, Angel From Montgomery, and we, I mean you couldn't pick our jaws up off the floor. It was like, "where, what this is? That's what she's been doing up in her room", you know? So yeah, it was quite a revelation.

Sid: And-you and Lilly both seem to write songs that are, that are very personal at times. She wrote a song about you called Imposter on her album, Trinity Lane.

John: Yes, yes.

Sid: Which is a really powerful song. Tell me, when was the first time you heard that and what kind of impression did it make on you?

John: She told me about it when she, after she'd recorded it, so I heard a rough, and it came out of a conversation. You know, she was a barista at, uh, this little coffee shop, uh, on and off. They had a great relationship with her, they'd let her go out on the road and then come back and pick it up when she needed the dough and I was in her coffee shop.

And we were talking and I was 62 at the time, so it was five years ago. Cause I remember telling her, you know...'cause we were talking about authenticity and, what is that. And sometimes we don't feel, we neither feel authentic nor even real, you know, uh, it's like

vapor...wisps of something, and I say, you know, I felt like an impostor until I was about 62 it took me till almost about 62 to stop feeling like I was faking it.

Like people were gonna, you know, pull me aside from the stage and go "you know what, it's, you know, we're, you know, it's not, you're just..."

Sid: We're onto you.

John: "We're onto you and find another line of work." And so yeah, the first time I heard it, I, I think I cried. I know I cried. I did cry.

Lilly Hiatt's song "Imposter" starts fading in as John says "find another line of work," and song is heard at full volume for these lines, "He said 'I feel like an imposter / Took me 'til 62 / to realize I'm good at what I do / There are things that I've been hiding from / Things that I've been looking for, ooh" (music fades, Sid comes back in)

Sid: Well, it's a beautiful song. Um, are y'all talking about other, uh, collaborations working together?

John: You know, anything could happen. We, we've always threatened to write some songs together and the, we're home a lot now. So, uh, although we've been, we've been quarantined from our kids, they took responsibility right away. "Look, you guys are in the age group most, uh, you know, you're up there and we don't want to get you sick."

And so they're just starting to visit. Uh, you know, six feet apart. Uh, and that's nice. It's nice to see them, but, you know, we FaceTime, but we, we miss them. We miss spending time with them.

Sid: So you know, you, you wrote a beautiful song, um, called, Have A Little Faith In Me that just seems very appropriate right now and it's been covered by everyone. It was covered by Mandy Moore covered by Dolly Parton, many others.

John: Joe Cocker.

Sid: Joe Cocker. Um, I'm wondering, do you remember the day that you wrote that song?

John: I do. I was in early sobriety. I think it was '86, '87, probably '87. I probably had about a year and I was trying to learn how to write without liquor and drugs. I'd never done it. I hadn't since I was 11 without the aid of a, of one or, one or, one or both of those, uh, things.

So I was writing songs and I had little keyboard set up and I'm not a good keyboard player at all, but I like the sound of piano. So I was banging out that little intro, those little three note clusters, and uh, I wrote that song in 20 minutes. It just showed up. I think I was crying at some point after it came out and it was as much, uh, somebody, uh, you know, telling me to have a little faith as the singer was telling the listener to have a little faith.

I didn't have much, I was trying to scrounge some up.

John Hiatt's "Have a Little Faith in Me" starts fading in as John says "as the singer was telling the listener to have a little faith," and song is heard at full volume for these lines, "And when your back's

against the wall / Just turn around and you will see / I will catch you, I will catch you if you fall baby / just have a little faith in me, have a little faith in me" (music fades, Sid comes back in)

Sid: Well there, you know, there are a lot of people out there that could use some right now.

John: Absolutely.

Sid: So it's an, it's a, might be a nice one to bring back.

John: You know, the Today Show, uh, did a little photo montage of, uh, first responders and babies seeing their grandparents through glass. And it was a beautiful thing. They, they aired it, uh, a couple of weeks ago and my manager sent me the thing and I didn't know that they'd even done it.

I mean, I was blubbing. By the end of it, you know?

Sid: I just got one more question, John, and that is, you know, what are you, what are you looking forward to the most when we get on the other side of this.

John: Oh, performing, going out and playing and well, hugging my kids for godssake. You know, we've, we're, we hug people, you know, and, uh, I miss that I think more than anything, just having the, you know they're kids at 42 36 and 31. But yeah, they're our kids. And just to be able to hug them and have them for dinner, uh, that would be my first, uh, thing.

And the second one would be to, to play music with some people. You know, listening in close proximity, six feet or more, or however it's going to work. I don't know, but it's, it's coming. It'll come. You know?

Sid: Well until that day, it's been great to have you on. John Hiatt.

John: Thank you, Sid.

Sid: Uh, thanks for being on Biscuits and Jam.

John: Yeah, a real pleasure. I, I really appreciate it.

Sid NARRATION: *Thanks for listening to my conversation with John Hiatt. His latest album The Eclipse Sessions is available however you get music, and from JohnHiatt.com.*

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, Eliza Lambert and Rachael King at Pod People.

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