

Episode Title: **John Paul White's Pepper Steak**

Episode Summary: In this week's episode, Sid Evans, Editor-in-Chief of Southern Living Magazine, talks to Grammy-winning singer/songwriter John Paul White about the rich musical history of Muscle Shoals, his various jobs on the farm as a teenager, and how a song he recorded with Rosanne Cash, long before the pandemic, speaks directly to our current situation.

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.*

My guest today has been a farmhand, a butcher and a forklift operator. But the creative culture of Muscle Shoals -- as well as his passion for songwriting -- propelled him to music's biggest stage.

John Paul I'm like everybody else that sang in their hairbrush in the mirror and dreamed of being on the Grammys. But, I never really thought that it would happen.

Sid NARRATION: *John Paul White grew up on the Northern side of the Tennessee/Alabama border. As he began performing in bands in high school, he was soon making friendships with David Hood, Spooner Oldham and other Muscle Shoals legends.*

In 2011, John Paul's career exploded along with musical partner Joy Williams - together known as the Civil Wars - as they released their debut album Barton Hollow, winning two Grammys. Since the duo split up in 2014, John Paul has been busy with his own record label, Single Lock, and his most recent album, The Hurting Kind, came out last year. During our discussion, he spoke to me about how times were simpler but not necessarily better when he was growing up, and that exact feeling comes through on his song "The Good Old Days." In the lyrics, John Paul questions whether the benefit of getting things back to how they used to be is just wishful thinking.

"The Good Old Days" by John Paul White fades up during Sid's statement of the "in the lyrics...", with the chorus at full volume after Sid saying "just wishful thinking." We can hear the following clearly: "Before we head down that road / Tell me something I don't know / Oh, what's so good about the good old days? / Yeah, what's so good about the good old days?" (song fades, Biscuits and Jam theme fades back in and so does Sid's narration)

Sid NARRATION: *Today, we'll hear about John Paul's various jobs on his family's chicken farm as a teenager.*

John Paul: It was probably the hardest job I've ever had. Moving my way up the ladder of being the guy that throws the bales up on the trailer to the guy that actually stacks the bales

to the guy driving the, tractor pulling the trailer. I sound so country right now talking about all this.

Sid NARRATION: *Plus his mom's pepper steak, a timely collaboration with Rosanne Cash and more on Episode 11 of Biscuits and Jam.*

Sid: John Paul White, welcome to Biscuits and Jam.

John Paul: It's great to be here.

Sid: So tell me a little bit about, growing up in Loretto, Tennessee and am I saying that right?

John Paul: You are not. You are actually, you're saying it properly. You're saying it the way it probably should be pronounced but I know immediately you're not from there. Uh, it's, uh, anybody there would pronounce it "Loretta" like, Loretta Lynn. It's it's called "Loretta", Tennessee. and it's funny to hear anybody else pronounce it, and it always makes me long for home as well.

Sid: So tell me a little bit about it. It's, this is, uh, outside of Florence, Alabama, right?

John Paul: Yeah. The Shoals is Florence. Muscle Shoals, Tuscumbia, Sheffield, all, it's the quad cities are smashed up on the Tennessee River here in North Alabama and the North West corner, almost in Mississippi, almost in Tennessee. And Loretto Tennessee is just across the state line.

But in a lot of ways it could have been a million miles away. Because we didn't come down to the Shoals that often if we needed to go somewhere, if we needed to go, to the city, we went up to Lawrenceburg, Tennessee and could get whatever we had to. And we, you know, the big city of Florence was a daunting, you know, if we wanted to go to the mall, you went to, you went to Florence.

And so, I'm really don't know what I'm, where my native soul is. I was born here in the Shoals and lived here till grade school, and then moved up to Loretto. But that Volunteer/Crimson Tide hate...I'm a Vol fan so that, that's deep seated in there. So...

Sid: Oh God bless you. That's me too. So...

John Paul: Oh, well. Oh, I knew I loved you, but now, deeply.

Sid: My blood runs orange.

John Paul: Yeah. Well mine does too, but, my skin is pretty thick too. There was a lot more to crow about when we were younger.

Sid: Right. Well, so, you grew up, on a farm, is that right?

John Paul: Yeah, chicken farm.

Sid: So tell me what that was like.

John Paul: Well, uh, I'm not sure how often I've ever even talked about this. Um, it was a game farm. I worked as a seed cleaner. Fescue and grass seed and stuff like that would come in from-- farmers would harvest it and bring it in huge trucks. And then they'd dump it into our cleaner, which was basically just a big sieve that would vibrate and had different filters and it would, you know, get the chaff out of it.

Sid: How old are you at this point?

John Paul: Uh, 16. Yeah.

Sid: Wow.

John Paul: 16 and it was probably the hardest job I've ever had. We not only did that, but we sold feed and seed to local farmers. So we were always loading trucks and, and massive garden. So I was always planting or picking okra, corn. I sound so country right now talking about all this. Uh, and then hauling hay, and, moving my way up the ladder of being the guy that throws the bales up on the trailer to the guy that actually stacks the bales to the guy driving the, tractor pulling the trailer.

Sid: It's hard work

John Paul: Yeah. But it was fun. I mean, I grumbled about it. Um, I'm sure, but it just seemed like so much simpler, so much more innocent time. And, and I think that's what most of us long for is not necessarily going back to the good old days, is going back to when we didn't know about all the troubles of the world. We were just ignorant of it and we didn't have the bills to pay, all the things that we're encumbered with now. Those are blissful times, but I also know it was, you know, really hard times for a lot of the world. And I just didn't know it.

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

John Paul: Definitely my mom, my mom is a lot like my wife in that she was, she was more of an artist with the way she cooked. There was no recipes or, tablespoon of this teaspoon of that, which is what I need. I'm a great sous chef, you know? I can follow instructions like no man.

But if I don't have it, words on the page, I'm just completely lost. And my wife just throws stuff around and here it is and it's fantastic. And I'm like, well, "how'd you make that?" "I don't I don't know." And I'd try to recreate it and fail miserably. That was my mom and she learned it from her mom, they're all German Catholics. Uh, Loretto is a predominantly German Catholic community and I grew up thinking everybody was German Catholic. And little did I know that was not true. Um. But they, did not cook anything German.

There was, no German recipes. so most of the food that I ate growing up was soul food.

Sid: What were some of the dishes that you remember the most?

John Paul: My favorite thing my mom ever made. Uh, and it, to me it seemed very sophisticated and I know differently now, and that is not slighting this dish at all, but it was pepper steak. It was probably round steak, that she would cut up in really thin strips and

then peppers and onions and tomatoes, and it would all cook in the crockpot for, for most of the day.

And then you put it over rice and. +still, my mouth waters thinking about it And it it's just a very simple dish, but my mom always knew it was my favorite. And to this day, I bet if I asked her, she would be able to remember that. So every birthday, you know, every occasion, every celebratory meal probably have pepper steak.

Sid: I love it.

John Paul: But, but like, you know, lotta chicken, obviously on a chicken farm, a lot of fried chicken. We had some bottom land on the 30 acres that flooded. Bluewater Creek ran at the base of our property. And so the bottom seven or eight acres were fairly unusable for chickens, but you could put cows on them.

And so we had a neighbor, that would put cows on it and had just enough, high land that they could escape if the, if the banks of the Bluewater flooded, they'd moved to high ground. So we let him. Use it for free year around, and he would give us one, cow a year and have it processed.

However we wanted at Pete's Meat Market, which was just down the road and was a future, place of employment for me when I learned to be a butcher. But at the time, we were very fortunate to have a huge garden of everything, squash, potatoes, corn, strawberries, watermelon. But then we had a deep freeze full of stew meat and ground beef.

And then, but then rib-eyes and T-bones and stuff. And so I ate stuff that people, much more affluent than we were. Uh, I probably had better stuff on the table than they did.

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

Sid: So what did holidays look like for you guys?

John Paul: Well, my mom is one of 14 kids.

Sid: Wow.

John Paul: So holidays were ridiculous. Uh, They all went to the Navy. All the boys went to the Navy. Every one of them. And almost all of them came back.

And so every Christmas and Thanksgiving, we'd go to grandma's, the little four room house and there'd literally be 120, 130 people.

Sid: Oh, my god.

John Paul: And that was only two generations. That was grandma, her 14 kids and their kids, and that was it.

Because every family had at least four, just about, some had six, some had eight. It was awesome.

Sid: That's a lot of food. That's a lot of food to make.

John Paul: Sure. And, and she took on a lot of that. Grandma did, but of course, all the kids, it was basically covered dish. Everybody brought. Food and you knew who the cooks were and who they weren't.

You know, I might be near mom and I'd be like, "okay, so what'd aunt Rosanne make?" You know, cause I want that. You know? And I won't name any names now but there'd be certain ones, it'd be like, Oh man, there's not a lot of room on my plate. I'll just skip that one. You know, that kind of thing. But, almost all of them just crush it.

Sid: It was probably a little competitive.

John Paul: Oh heck yeah. 'cause a lot of the kids wouldn't even pay attention to who made what. But you'd hear them all raving, like, dude, "did you have that strawberry cake?" and then people would be able to crow. That's real. It's still that way.

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

SID NARRATION: *Much more to come with John Paul White, after the break.*

SHORT BREAK OF SILENCE

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

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

Sid: I want to move to music a little bit and um, just tell me about some of your early experiences with music... And you know, what was being played in your house?

John Paul: My dad was a country music, uh, aficionado. And my mom was a show tunes, Broadway, West Side Story, you know, but also soundtrack, Doctor Zhivago, stuff like that. And most of the music we heard was probably in the car, you know, AM radio, FM radio, um, country music and pop music. And, uh, always country with dad, Merle and Johnny Cash. But then older, you know, Bob Wills and Tex Ritter and stuff like that. He, he loved all that too.

Sid: Was there an early song or artist that really kind of turned your head around?

John Paul: There were two, Merle Haggard for one, because, I would venture to say it's my dad's favorite artist, and Merle could do it all. He could out-write most, he could play, you know, you could actually play his guitar. He wasn't just holding it like George Strait or Alan Jackson or somebody like that.

he would take a solo. Um, he sang like a bird and he's a great entertainer. And he would, you know, go on the variety shows and do impressions. It was like, "god, this guy can do everything." And then the flip side of that would be, um. There's actually three, but the second one would be Johnny Cash who wrote some of his stuff.

Most of it, he didn't. He was not, you know, classically a great singer, quote unquote. But you felt every word that came out of him, you believed every single thing, every emotion that he

gave you. You believed it like it was his life story. And so I took equal measures of those things, but then, uh, Patsy Cline.

She was the elegant side of it. She and Jim Reeves both showed me a more sophisticated side, to where I came from and what I grew up around and that there was, it didn't have to be honkytonk. It didn't have to be hillbilly. You know, there was an elegance to what she and Jim Reeves and Eddie Arnold and later Charlie Rich and folks like that to what they did.

And that really was what I wanted to do. You know, Kris Kristofferson, he said things like Dylan, but he said them in a way that made sense to my brain. He immediately went straight to my heart. Those were the formula, you know, that cooked me up.

Sid: Yeah. So you grew up, you know, right down the road from Muscle Shoals and Florence and, that's just, you know, one of the great musical centers of the world when did that start to dawn on you? When did you start to realize what you were living, near?

John Paul: It wasn't 'till high school, um, my parents weren't big R&B soul fans, and so those records weren't really around the house.

When I got to high school and figured out that I could carry a tune, which was news to me cause I'd just sang in church and all the little old ladies would ooh and aah, and I thought, you know, um, I can carry a tune. But then once I sang around my friends and I was immediately the lead singer in our band, I started wearing out their records and realized, okay, the drummer, um, his dad plays in a, in a bar on the state line.

Well, why are there bars on the state line? So I was learning about the fact that Lauderdale County, where I live now, Florence, uh, was dry up until early 80's, I believe. So all down the state line of Tennessee and Alabama is juke joints that, everybody from Alabama would go up cause it was the only place they could get a drink.

And they were pretty rough. And so that's where I started playing. And I would meet folks and they'd be like, "Oh god, you know who that is?"-"That's, David Hood." Who the hell is David Hood? You know, "he played on" and then you know, they list off all the stuff that the Swampers had done.

And I started realizing, hang on, these guys are from 20 miles away and I'd learn every day exponentially. Oh yeah, that was cut in Muscle Shoals. Yeah. That was cut in Muscle Shoals. You see that guy over there, he played on this, this, this, and this, see that guy. He wrote this, this, and, it blew my mind, you know, this is pre internet. So there was no way I was going to get this info until I got out into the world and off that farm.

But then at some point you just think, Oh, well, that's how all big cities are, you know. That's how all those country guys find out when we moved to town, and it was a while before I realized how unique Muscle Shoals was and how lucky I was to live on the outskirts of it. But also in order to get a club gig, you had to beat out people like that.

Sid: Right.

John Paul: If you wanted to be the singer, then Wayne Chaney or, uh, Travis Womack all these guys were playing those same clubs and they'd all had hits.

But I found out really quick that there was little to no competition. It was all, a brother and sisterhood that everybody helped each other out. And "Hey, come sit in man. You sing? All right, what do you know?" "I know Creedence" every band knew Creedence, so, "all right, cool. Let's do Green River." Jump up here.

Sid: Who were some of those artists who saw something in you early and really gave you a hand up?

John Paul: Jimmy Johnson was the first. Um, and that was through a mutual friend. And he told me, he said, "I know Jimmy and Jimmy's still got an office at Muscle Shoals Sound. Would you like to meet him?" And when he first mentioned him, I didn't know who the hell he was. And, on the drive he told me, "well, you know, he played on Little Richard records and Aretha, records" and I'm just like getting more and more nervous the whole time he's talking. He said, yeah. "And he produced Lynard Skynard, and, and he was, uh, engineering when Rolling Stones were there doing Brown Sugar," and I'm just like about to throw up at this point.

And so we got there and he's the sweetest, most humble. He treated me like I was a star. I was nobody from nowhere and just playing bar gigs on the state line. And he heard me sing and, um, took me around the entire studio, showed me where, you know, "Joe Cocker sat right there. And Rod Stewart was scared to come in the room and sing 'cause he was nervous to play with us 'cause we had played with Wilson Pickett and he didn't think he was, he would measure up" that kind of, and I'm a kid, you know?

And, and then, uh, I also meant a Spooner Oldham on a daggum, uh, creek bank next to a field where there was a flatbed trailer and a bunch of us bands were playing and there was a makeshift PA well, Spooner was there just hanging out.

He was helping out with a band called Farmer that he was a fan of. And I, and I met him and I just thought he was some stoned old guy that wandered off, you know, out of the hills.

And talked to him for a while and he was telling me, he's like, "man, I really like your singing man, that's really good. I'd love to hang out. Maybe we write a song sometime." I'm like, "yeah, sure, dude, whatever." And now he walks away and he's got on a Neil Young jacket and thought, "well, that's cool. He, he's a Neil Young fan that's all right."

Turned out he had it because he'd been playing with Neil Young on tour, and so buddies came over and they were like, "Dude. What was Spooner talking to you about?" And I told him, "I was like, who is that guy?" And they said, "well, played with Bob Dylan. He wrote, I'm Your Puppet. And he's a Rock and Roll Hall of Famer."

And, uh, and again, I wanted to throw up and, and both of them treated me the same way. I met David Hood, exact same thing. Uh, and I realized that's, that's what, that, that's what makes this place unique, is that camaraderie and that we, we actually cheer for each other. It's going to raise all ships, you know?

problem for me was I wouldn't say no to anything cause I'd been begging for opportunities for so long.

And so. It was just, yeah, "what do you got? Yeah, I'll do that. Just tell me where to stand. I will give everything I've got every time I do it." And I did. And, um, and I'm proud of that. You know, there's, I realized that's the only way those things work is if you put the time in, it's not, you can't just be talented.

You can't just have the right song. It's all encompassing and you really have to give everything to it. And to be frank, I gave too much to it. I gave all of my time to it until my priorities were screwed up and I barely knew my family.

Sid: Well, you were on the road pretty much nonstop for years, right?

John Paul: Yeah. Our manager figured up one year, maybe 2011, we were home 40 days. And I have a sneaking suspicion that a lot of those 40 days I was in Nashville, you know, he was just figuring what we, when we were on the road. So, and that's what you have to do. You know, if you want to, achieve those kind of levels, that's what you have to do.

And, and I'm glad I did it and I, now I know it, but, that's not what drives me anymore.

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

Sid: You know, we're in the middle of a crazy time right now. We're all dealing with this virus. This is, we're still in April here. And, we're all trying to stay healthy and safe. And you were telling me earlier about a collaboration that you had with Rosanne Cash... and a song that y'all did, uh, that, that seems awfully relevant right now. And I'm just wondering if you could tell me a little bit about that.

John Paul: Yeah. The song is called We're All in This Together Now, and as on the nose as that probably sounds, we wrote it a year ago when no one knew anything about this virus. and "pandemic" was a word you just used to talk about the black plague or Spanish flu or whatever, you know, it was just something we didn't think about. And we wrote it about different times in different times. And the song, I didn't end up using it for my record. She didn't either, and we both loved it, but it just hadn't had its moment yet. And then this happens and I got to thinking about it. We, we as a label here at Single Lock Records, we, you know we started a label here in Florence. We had a meeting, a very socially distant meeting, and Reed Watson said, "what do we have in our catalog? Either that's been released or hasn't been released, but it's appropriate."

And it just hit me like a ton of bricks, that song. And I went back and listened to it and it was eerie. It's, it's so prescient. It's like, it's weird. I've never been a part of that before where I wrote something and then way down the road it's, like, this was meant for this moment. So, uh, I called Roseanne and I said, "I think we have our moment for this song. Will you sing on it?" And I had already done a guitar vocal a year ago, and she said, "I thought you'd never ask."

"We're All In This Together Now" by John Paul White / Rosanne Cash fades up during John Paul's line "And I had already done a guitar vocal..." , with the chorus at full volume after

JP says "i thought you'd never ask." We can hear the following clearly: "So hold tight the sword, hold fast the sail / 'Cause we might be taken down / It's a lonely world / It's our only world / And we're all in this together now" (song fades, Biscuits and Jam theme fades back in and Sid asks his next question)

Sid: You know, a lot of your songs have a darkness to them. But they, but they do make you feel good. And I think especially on, on *The Hurting Kind* and just seems like a very appropriate antidote to these times.

John Paul: Thank you very much. I, I don't try to bum people out. Um, I was always drawn to dark songs. It didn't necessarily have to be sad songs, but they made me feel something and that's what I want to do. My dad would always, when we'd be in the truck, every once in a while he'd be like, "Hey. Listen to this one."

And I'd sit up and every time it'd be, dark, it'd be *Long Black Veil*, or it'd be *Sunday Mornin' Comin' Down*, and I still gravitate toward those. I need songs to make me feel something or I know they won't make anybody else feel anything. And... I worry that what's gonna come out of all this is a whole lot of sad songs, a whole lot of isolation and loneliness and distance songs that are just going to be too much.

You know, I, I tend to write about the sun when it's raining, But, I choose to be optimistic about this and some of the happiest music is going to come out of this. You're longing for the sun, your longing for happiness and all your friends and all your loved ones, and you're longing to play shows and to get back to work and get away from your kids. You know, whatever. Uh, I hope people are writing about that, you know?

Sid: Looking at the bright side of things. What have been some of the positive, moments for you in this quarantine?

John Paul: Obviously time, time with my family and time to, um, stop and reevaluate and reprioritize and, and clean out my closets, literally and figuratively, you know, clean out the attic, you know, literally and figuratively. I feel like I'm emotionally in a pretty good place. Um I'm, I'm feeling a little, you know, cabin fever, you know, as we've got three kids and two dogs and two Guinea pigs and a cat, and

Sid: That's a full house.

John Paul: It's getting a little claustrophobic and they're all very active.

And so they're penned up in the house and we're doing all we can to stave off, um, going crazy. But, it's two, two sides of this, one, I really appreciate being able to get out in front of people and play songs. And, uh, I think we all took that for granted for awhile. But number two, I think people are really appreciative that they could go to shows and that they could go and listen to someone sing, and they could be with other people that feel the same things they do. Kindred spirits and listen to sad songs or happy songs and go to a club and dance or go sit in a chair and cry.

I hope that people don't take live music and music in general, and musicians for granted, and appreciate that just streaming music isn't enough to really get the full benefits of what music can do for you emotionally and physically. And, we shall see.

Sid: Yeah, amen to that. Well, John Paul White it's been a pleasure talking to you and, thank you for being, on Biscuits and Jam.

John Paul: My pleasure. I talked about a lot of things today I've never talked about. This is fun.

Sid: Well, hopefully you can, uh, come back sometime.

John Paul: I'll always come back for biscuits.

Sid Narration: *Thanks for listening to my conversation with John Paul White. Proceeds from downloads of his duet with Rosanne Cash, "We're All In This Together Now," are going to the Music Health Alliance, to assist families dealing with COVID-19. John Paul's latest album The Hurting Kind is available however you get music, and from johnpaulwhite.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.

Join me next week for our final episode of the season with the legendary Gladys Knight. See you then for more Biscuits and Jam!