

Episode Title: **Lee Ann Womack's Potatoes in a Bag**

Episode Summary: In this week's episode, Sid Evans, Editor-in-Chief of Southern Living Magazine, talks to country star Lee Ann Womack about her East Texas upbringing, her rise to fame in the early 2000's, and helping her mom sell homemade masks during the current pandemic. Plus Watergate Salad and gardening while in quarantine!

Episode Transcript:

INTRO: (Biscuits and Jam Theme begins)

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 musicians have been dealing with the pandemic.

This week's guest says her Lone Star State upbringing is part of her culinary DNA, even if she's not the most disciplined cook.

Womack: I don't know if I have the patience, but I love to eat. I love food. I mean, Texans, you know, we love, we love food. I can make biscuits and I can make pies and cakes and, and chicken fried steak and some people would think that was a real culinary experience, I'm sure. But for me, it just seems like, yeah, that's just what we have.

Sid NARRATION: *Lee Ann Womack is known as one of the biggest names in country and Americana music. Born and raised in East Texas, Lee Ann came to Nashville to attend college and intern at MCA Records, releasing her first album in 1997. Her fame exploded in the year 2000 with her hit album and single "I Hope You Dance," leading to several CMA and ACM award wins. Her latest release, 2017's *The Lonely, The Lonesome and The Gone* also earned two Grammy nominations.*

On today's show, we'll hear how the success of "I Hope You Dance" catapulted Lee Ann's career, and the deep meaning the song has had to millions across the world.

WOMACK: People associate that song with these life-changing moments. Most singers don't get to be a part of people's lives in that way. And there was all these different versions in all these different languages, and, the song was just so huge and it was a little bit difficult for me to handle in the beginning, but I did sort of grow into it, and I'm very, very, very thankful for the song.

Sid NARRATION: *Plus her family's Watergate salad, growing potatoes during quarantine and much more on Episode 10 of Biscuits and Jam.*

(theme music ends)

Sid: Lee Ann Womack, welcome to Biscuits and Jam.

Womack: Thank you. Glad to be here. I love biscuits. And I love jam.

Sid: Well. That's good to hear. Uh, so, you're in, uh, East Texas now, and you're back in the hometown where you grew up. Um, tell me what it was like growing up there.

Womack: It, it's a very small town. And I really did not like it very much. Didn't, didn't like being in a small town cause I had a lot of things I wanted to accomplish, you know? And, and there wasn't a lot to do here, so I, I spent a lot of time watching TV and then I wanted to be on TV. You know, I just, that sort of became my, my world, I guess. And I didn't get to have a TV in my room, so I would just lie on the floor. And watch things like variety shows and the Jerry Lewis telethon and all these things where they, he would have all these cool like Dean Martin and people that would come out and sing.

And I just thought it all looked really cool. And, would plan my day in my, well, I plan my year around big events like that and the Country Music Awards, that was an escape for me. You know, there was this, place that glittered that I wanted to, be a part of.

And there was no chance of that in this small town, so I just sort of had a love/hate relationship, you know, the whole time I was growing up with the town.

Sid: paint me a picture of the house where you grew up. What did that look like?

Womack: Uh, it was a farm house. My grandfather built it. And so I guess that was in the late 40's. And when he built it, he had, you know, all the land in this part of town. And, and, um, so he had cows and horses and gardens and just all kinds of stuff. And so when I grew up and sort of had my own kids, I bought a house right next door right behind my parents. So there's a creek that runs through the property between the two houses. And we built a little bridge over it and we just run back and forth. And so when this all hit, I came straight here and my oldest daughter who lives in LA came straight here. So we've just been camping out here for a couple months.

Sid: I mean, it sounds kind of idyllic.

Womack: Well, it, it does sound, it sounds like it, doesn't it? It is now, but when I was a kid and there was no internet or, you know, it just, I felt very, very cut off from the world and I wanted to be a part of the world and see the world and travel and all those sorts of things. So I mean, I was miserable. I cannot even begin tell you.

Um, I think it would be different growing up here now though.

Sid: Yeah. And well, so you had to leave to really appreciate it.

Womack: Yeah, definitely.

Sid: So who was the cook in your family?

Womack: My mom. But she also worked and wasn't, it wasn't like it was a passion of hers or anything. She cooked out of necessity, but we ate all of our meals at home. We went out to eat once a week usually to Sadler's, which was a diner here in town.

When we would go to Sadler's on Friday night, I would always get a cold roast beef sandwich and a Coke, and the Coke was like six ounces of Coke, I think, you know, and this was, you did not get free refills back then, you know, when I was a kid.

So that was what I would always get the, the cold roast beef sandwich and a Coke.

Sid: you posted a video the other day of you and your mom making biscuits. So obviously some of this, some of this cooking, uh, has found its way to the next generation.

Womack: Yeah. Uh, I'm not nearly as good at it. My husband's a great cook. I don't know if I have the patience, but I love to eat. I love food. I mean, Texans, you know, we love, we love food. And there's great barbecue and great Mexican food down this way, you know? And like I said, my husband's a great cook, so I've learned some stuff from him too. But you know, I mean, I can make biscuits and I can make pies and cakes and, and chicken fried steak and you know, that kind of stuff. So some people love, you know, would think that was a real culinary experience, I'm sure. But for me, it just seems like, yeah, that's just what we have.

Sid: Did y'all have any Southern Living's laying around the house?

Womack: Oh yeah, of course. I told somebody earlier that was, uh, they wanted me to come out to the lake, to, to their house to see him. And I said, well, "I've got this interview, Southern Living", and, and she wrote back, she said, "interview for a job? Ha ha.", because you know, I can't work right now. And uh, and I said, "no, not that kind of interview." She goes, "no, I'm just kidding. That's my favorite magazine. I know what you mean."

Sid: I love it.

Womack: So yes, we all had Southern Living.

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

Sid: So, Lee Ann, what did, uh, what did holidays look like, uh, when you were a kid?

Womack: You know, it was the '60s and '70s, so we had those plastic blow molds everywhere. You know what I'm talking about?

Sid: Oh, yeah. Oh yeah.

Womack: I collect those now. I love them. Every time I go to a thrift store and antique mall, when I'm on the road, I'll get one of those. My husband, just rolls his eyes when I come in with a reindeer under one arm and a snowman under the other.

But I love those. Those '60's, um, snow molds, but that, you know, that, that kind of thing, tinsel on a real tree, you know, um, and those big colored bulbs and of course the cousins would come in. Had cousins from North Carolina and Louisiana and we all would get together and, and it was food. You know, everybody comes in with plates of, especially

Southern people, you know, or, uh, country people. They come in with big plates of food and, uh casserole dishes and that sort of thing.

Sid: Did your mom have any kind of favorites, or standouts that you remember?

Womack: Mm hmm. Yeah. Well, she made Watergate salad, which everybody from that era, did you know, do you know what that is?

Sid: I don't.

Womack: Well, Watergate salad has, um, Cool Whip and, and, pistachio pudding mix and, crushed pineapple. And, um, I'm just trying to think of what else. Anyway, Watergate...

Sid: Sugar.

Womack: Little, little tiny, little tiny marshmallows.

Oh my, it is so good. Um, so there's all kinds of, of things that, that Southern girls make with Jello and Cool Whip.

Sid: Oh, yeah.

Womack: So that's one of them. Um, and then she would make, uh, no-bake cookies, which has like peanut butter and oatmeal and chocolate and stuff in them. And, um. Her pound cake, uh, is really famous around here. In fact the neighbor, uh, saw me out on the street the other day and said, "Hey, can I keep your mom's pound cake recipe?" And I said, "yeah", I'm, I still haven't taken it to her, but, um, I got to run that over there. But that's, that's famous around here.

Sid: Do you have it on one of those old recipe cards?

Womack: Oh yeah, definitely. So when you say that, cause when I asked my mom, I said, you know, the neighbor wants your pound cake recipe. And I thought she would just hand me a print out cause people are always asking for it. And she went inside and wrote it all down on the cutest little card. She is so cute. My mom is so cute. But she did, she wrote it. She's 80 years old. She wrote it out by hand. Um, cause it's sort of like a little gift, you know,

Sid: Yeah. It just, it means more that way, doesn't it?

Womack: I guess so I...it did. Yeah. I didn't think about it until she handed it to me. And, and yeah, it does. She's a great cook. Like I said, she, um, and she sews a lot. Went back when this whole thing started, I started a business with her because I told her, I said, "you got to stay busy. You got to stay home." So, um, we started a, a little gift business and she's been, it has been going crazy and she's been sewing like crazy.

Sid: Well, she's been making masks, hadn't she?

Womack: Yeah, she has. Yeah. She was making tons of masks, and taking them to the hospital and to nurses around here. And we have a nurse that lives next door, and so she has

a lot of friends and I think she made about 200 and something masks by herself and delivered those to, to all these places around here.

And there's a hospital around here. And, finally, um, I started making some cute ones with her. I would go out there and sit with her and, and she taught me to sew when I was a little girl. So I started making some little cute ones that were different and one looks like the Texas flag and one with Mickey Mouse on it and all these different things and

I just told her, I said, you got to start putting these, you know, on your Etsy site. And, and, and it's just, she's been a little busier, I think, than she wanted to be, but it's really cute. We don't, we don't sit around. I've also grown a garden since I've been here. We do not, we don't sit around. We're busy people.

Sid: I mean, your mom sounds very cool. I don't know a lot of 80-year-old women who have an Etsy site and a new, and they're starting a new business.

Womack: I know, I know, right? She is. She's very cool. She, her, her mother was that way, and we've just, I don't know. That's just the way we were taught to be.

Sid: Is there a recipe that she kind of passed down to you that you love to make?

Womack: Well, the biscuits, the biscuits are the, the main thing, because she has this little, with the self rising flour and everything, that's really easy way to kind of do it and have homemade biscuits anytime you want them. And so that's one for sure. And so it's hard to get like real recipes from her so you really have to kind of get in the kitchen and watch her do it. Um, so. I've tried to, to do that.

Sid: Well, those looked like some very experienced hands in that video.

Womack: Yeah, definitely.

Sid: They knew what they were doing. So, so when did your interest in music really start to take off?

Womack: Well, it was never a thing that I remember beginning. It just always kind of was. I do know that when I was older, when I was grown, I remember finding my, um, report card from, uh, kindergarten and my teacher, Miss Bunny Bell was her name. She, um, had written "Lee Ann shows an unusual amount of interest in music." So I guess it was, you know, from early on. But I don't remember ever thinking, you know, "hey, I got an idea, I'll be a singer." You know, when I grow up, I just always guess, I was going to do it. I don't know.

Womack: In fact, I can remember hanging around here one summer, a little too long and my mom going, "you know what, you need to get back to Nashville and get, you know, get, get on with whatever it is you're going to do."

Um, so yeah, they were very, very supportive and, and um they weren't stage parents. That wasn't it. If I had said I wanted to be a teacher, or if I'd said I wanted to be a doctor or whatever, you know, that was, that was all great, but just do it.

Sid: And so you left Texas and went to, did you go straight to Nashville? To Belmont University?

Womack: I came from Texas to, to Belmont, but I did, I left my hometown and went out to West Texas for one year and went to school there because they had a recording studio at the school and, and, uh, you could play country music there. So I was there for one year, then went to Belmont.

Sid: Was that year a real big influence on you?

Womack: It was, yeah. I was 17 when I graduated from high school, and when I started my first year of college, I was still 17 so my parents were a little, not too happy about me just going up to Nashville, you know, which seemed like such a big city being from where, uh, we were. And it seemed like such a huge city to me.

I remember I had an interview for an internship at MCA records and, and it was his tiny little building. I mean, you'd laugh if you saw it now and think MCA records was in there, but it had this tiny little parking garage, two levels with about, I don't know, 50 spots on, in each level. And I remember I'd never been in a parking garage before, and I remember pulling into that thing and thinking "this is really the big time".

It was just this little bitty parking garage, but it seemed so, uh, big, big time to me. So big city. But yeah, I'm sure...

Sid: Well and think about how big it is now.

Womack: Oh, I know. Crazy, crazy. It's just, it's exploding. But you know, I mean, I'd never been to New York or anything like that. I'd probably, I'd been to Dallas and Houston, but I'd never really spent any time in cities. Um, so my parents weren't thrilled about me leaving and going to Nashville, um, at 17.

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

SID NARRATION: *Stay tuned for more with Lee Ann Womack, after the break.*

AD BREAK

(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 Lee Ann Womack.*

Sid: So was there one song for you that really started to kind of change everything?

Womack: Well, the very first thing, a lot put out was one of those, it was called Never Again, Again. The reason I say that one is because even though it only went up to about, I think, 17 on the chart, but, it was so different and so country. So much different than what everybody was doing at the time that it, that that I think that's the reason why people like Alan Jackson, you know, started calling early on and, and taking me out on tour and stuff like that. So that

was one that really made a difference for me. Um, and then of course, I Hope You Dance, when that one came out that, you know, that was a pop crossover thing and all that.

And that opened me up to a whole new audience that never would have known who...I was so country, you know, they never would have known who I was if it weren't for that song. So those two are the, are the ones that really, I think, opened a lot of doors and changed things for me.

Sid: Yeah. You know, I wanted to, I wanted to ask you about, I Hope You Dance. The other day I spoke to Gladys Knight on this podcast...

Womack: Yeah.

Sid: ...who covered that song, and I'm just curious, what's your relationship with that song now?

Womack: Well, I mean, we still do it in the shows. Um, there was a time though, when the song, it was really difficult for me because I was this country, traditional country singer who had this song that, sonically, it wasn't like, it wasn't traditional country, you know? And, and I still was, I mean, I even sound country on the record and everything, but it was more of a pop production and everything.

It affected so many people, in such a deep way that they would come to me and expect me, I felt, I told Frank one time, I said, "I feel like they think I'm Billy Graham. You know?" I mean, I feel like they think that I can, you know, heal them or something, you know? And so, it, it, but it just wasn't who I was and it made, it was awkward.

It was awkward for me for a while, and then almost became sort of an albatross where I just, dragging that thing around, you know, and how, what am I going to do? And, and, but I eventually grew into it and grew up and did a better job of handling it. But, um, I'm so thankful for the song now. People associate that song with these life-changing moments you know, their graduations, or their kids being born. Most singers don't get to be a part of people's lives in that way. And I don't care where we went. Uh, when we were on, on a boat in the middle of, um, uh, we were around Tahiti and the people that worked on the boat couldn't speak English, but they were, they knew exactly who Lee Ann Womack, and I Hope You Dance was, you know?

And I mean, it just, just odd. I mean, my mouth would just fall open, you know, just odd. And there was all these different versions and all these different languages, and, the song was just so huge and it was a little bit difficult for me to handle in the beginning, but I did sort of grow into it, and so I would used to would say I had a love/hate relationship.

Now I just, I'm very, very, very thankful for the song.

Lee Ann Womack's "I Hope You Dance" starts fading in as Lee Ann states "I did sort of grow into it...". Song should be at full volume with these lyrics "I hope you still feel small when you stand beside the ocean / Whenever one door closes, I hope one more opens / Promise me that you'll give faith a fighting chance / and when you get the choice to sit it out or dance / I hope you dance / I hope you dance" Song fades before second verse begins, and Sid comes back in.

Sid: Well, it seems especially relevant right now.

Womack: In times like this, exactly. Um, It's great to entertain people and make people laugh and, and, and sing and, and dance and all that sort of thing. But when, when you have a song that can heal, that is a whole other level. And so, you know, at my age now, that's, you know, that's, that's golden.

Sid: You know, it seems like your music has definitely taken a, a darker turn, uh, over the last couple albums, but in the best way. I mean, I just love it.

Womack: Oh, good.

Sid: Your last album was called *The Lonesome, the Lonely, & the Gone*, there's a wonderful song on that album called *All The Trouble*, and I just wanted to ask, what is the story behind that song?

Womack: Well, Adam and Shannon Wright wrote that song, and, um, who I love. He's from Georgia. I heard it. And I just thought I knew what I would want to do with it, how I'd want to cut it and everything. And, and I, I just connected with it for some reason, you know, I love what I call "the high low", which is like wearing Louis Vuitton shoes in Walmart, and I love...

Sid: That's a very Southern thing to do.

Womack: And I love, I love the high low, I love the, the dark and the light and all that sort of thing. And I don't know, to me, the way I'm living, just sort of, is dark and hopeful all at the same time. Somehow in my screwed up mind it, that's how it, that's what it, how it feels to me. And so I'm just drawn to that kind of stuff.

Lee Ann Womack's "All The Trouble" starts fading in as Lee Ann states "I did sort of grow into it...". Song should be at full volume with these lyrics "Well, it started with a dark cloud and a couple drops of rain / Then the storm and the wind and the thunder and the lightning came / Somebody give me shelter, I've had all I can take / 'Cause I got all the trouble I'm ever gonna need / I've got all the trouble I'm ever gonna need..." Song fades before chorus of the title of the song ends, and Sid comes back in

Sid: I wanted to ask you about Willie Nelson, who, uh, I think has been a, a long time friend of yours. Tell me about his influence on you and, and also is there, you know, is there one Willie song that has really made a big impact on you.

Womack: Well, Willie, we had a song together called *Mendocino County Line*, and we got to tour together and do a lot of TV, um, late night TV shows and award shows and things like that. And I, so I got to work with him quite a bit. And he really taught me a lot without saying, "Hey, Lee Ann, I'm gonna teach you something."

You know, just from being around him. Um, he, was never too tired to rehearse the song one more time. He was never too tired to stop and sign an autograph or shake a hand, speak to somebody or listen to somebody's story. And I worked with people who were half or a quarter his age that, you know, were just "too tired" and just couldn't, "couldn't do it", you know?

And, and it was a really good experience. And that's the best way to learn things from people, or teach people things is not necessarily to tell them, but, but to just do what you do and let them learn, you know? And, so I learned a lot from him during that time. He had a big impact on me. And then before that, of course, just growing up in Texas, I mean, you know, he's the boss down here, you know, and everybody, uh, loves Willie.

It was so funny when we were doing the video for Mendocino County Line in, in Austin. They blocked off all the streets downtown Austin, and people just started showing up and it was like, I mean, I swear to you, I thought, this sounds like the stories I've heard about Jesus and people throwing the palm leaves down and you know, wanting Jesus to touch him and stuff people want, they would hold their babies up and want Willie to touch their babies.

I'm not kidding you. It was just unbelievable. It was amazing. And he is completely, totally unaffected by every bit of it. And I just love the man. I love him. I'm so glad my kids have gotten to be around him, see him. It just, he's one of a kind, one of a kind for sure.

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

Sid: Well, Lee Ann, tell me what, uh, the last couple months have been like for you. Um, you said you came back to Texas right away. Has this been a real positive for you, or has it been difficult?

Womack: It's been positive for sure. I mean, I never sit still, always have a million things going. Too many, really. Um, so at the beginning I just thought, okay, instead of looking at it like, Oh my gosh, everything is shutting down and I can't work, you know, I can't perform I just thought, if I have two months off or three months off, what's it going to look like? So I, um, I started growing a garden, which I've always wanted to do and, and haven't been able to,

Sid: What are you growing?

Womack: Okay. The most fun thing, have you ever grown potatoes?

Sid: No.

Womack: You can grow them in a sack. It is so cool, and I'm doing it. Of course, I haven't gotten them out yet. I don't know if there's any down there, but it's so far it looks like it's going great, but you put them in this, um, fabric bag. It's like a potato bag. And then you, it tells you how to mix your dirt up and everything.

I've mixed in all this stuff. Put it in there, and then you put the potatoes in there and then you cover them up. Okay. Then in a couple of weeks they'll start growing and then you have to put more dirt on it and you keep doing it till you get to the top of the bag and they're growing like crazy.

There's like these tall green leaves and stems or whatever coming out and, and now they're starting to get these little flowers on them, which means there are potatoes in there. So, um, in a few weeks, hopefully we'll dump it out and there'll be potatoes in there. But that is so fun. Everybody ought to do that with their kids.

It is so fun. It's so easy. So that, and I've got, um, beans and I, so I made this teepee, uh, I took a bamboo poles and did them in the shape of a teepee. And so they grow up that and they make a little tent, you know, so I got, uh, beans and potatoes and tomatoes and squash and cantaloupe and it's all growing.

It looks really cool out there, like, I know what I'm doing, but I don't. So I'm doing that. And then like I said, I started a business with my mom. Because I'd been telling her forever, she sews and makes all these things, pot holders and all these things. So told her, said, you need to start, um, uh, uh, you know, a business.

her name's Gertie, so that's what we call her. So it's Gifts By Gertie and she makes little baby thing, all kinds of cute things. And, then I go, hang around town. There's not a lot to do here in my hometown, but there's a great place called Ritual. It just doesn't even look like it would be in a small town. It's a cool little restaurant. And so I go over there and that's it. That's my life. But I have my daughter here and, and so we've all just been really busy doing all that kind of thing.

Now, you know, I don't know how long this is going to go on. I don't know. But I do know that I'll look back at this time and know that I didn't waste one minute of it. I've been very busy and, and doing some really cool things.

Sid: Well, I saw you fixed your screen door too.

Womack: Oh my gosh, I did, but it's not perfect. Uh, but I know now what I did wrong, but I haven't had time to fix it yet, but I did.

Well, I didn't want to call, I can't call anybody, come over here and put one in, but I'd always wanted one in the back, so I had to trim it. And all I had was a jigsaw. Which is not really what you use to do that sort of thing with, but I did anyway, but it was fun and I got it up and you know. I felt pretty proud of myself, I guess.

Sid: You are busy. Um, well, I just want to end by asking you what you're looking forward to the most when we get on the other side of this.

Womack: Gosh, I guess playing again, and I don't know when that will be, you know.

Other than that. I really enjoyed being with my family and having an excuse since I, since I can't work, you know, I get to be with them. My mom and dad and my oldest daughter, I miss my, uh, other daughter and my husband right now, but hopefully we'll be back together soon.

But, I guess just playing is, is what, and traveling, you know, getting out there and, and seeing the folks. And other than that, um, I've been really happy with, with a lot of the way things have been going. Is that weird?

Sid: No, it's, it's, you know, I think everybody's got real mixed emotions about it. You know, we're all kind of living under a dark cloud, but trying to find some, some good things, you know, in the day to day.

Womack: Right, right. I, um, I think because of the way I was living so fast and traveling all over the world all the time and not seeing my family enough, I think that's why this was sort of a wake up call for me.

Sid: Do you feel like it's changed your perspective on things?

Womack: Um, I do, and I really feel like it's been a gift. When I say it, I mean the time. I don't mean the, you know, the virus and all the horrible things, and I've lost friends and you know, it's, that part is obviously horrible. And, um, I have friends also who live in, in New York and in New Jersey, and, things have really been harder for them, you know, so all that's terrible.

And I hate that. I just mean the time that I've been given to spend with, with my family. You know, when I say, I'm grateful for that.

Sid: Well, enjoy the time you have. And, uh, please tell your sweet mom that we said hello from Southern Living.

Womack: I will. She'll be thrilled.

Sid: Lee Ann Womack, thank you for being on Biscuits and Jam.

Womack: Thanks for having me.

Sid NARRATION: *Thanks for listening to my conversation with Lee Ann Womack. Her latest album 2017's The Lonely, The Lonesome and The Gone, is available wherever you get music. You can also follow Lee Ann on Instagram to keep up on her gardening, cooking and her mom's Etsy store.*

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!