

Episode Title: Tanya Tucker's Chile Relleno

Episode Summary: In this week's episode, Sid Evans, Editor-in-Chief of Southern Living Magazine, talks to the legendary and outspoken Tanya Tucker about her love of cooking, winning her first Grammy at the age of 61, and the tragic true story behind her iconic breakthrough hit "Delta Dawn." Plus, Tanya's gift to Justin Bieber, and how her new live album due this fall will help benefit one of music's most important venues.

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 and I'm talking to legendary musicians and celebrated chefs about food, family, songwriting and Southern culture.*

For someone who has literally seen it all -- from hitting it big on the country charts as a teenager to winning her first Grammy almost 50 years later -- today's guest says cooking a holiday meal for family is about the toughest thing she's ever done.

Tanya: To me, it's more pressure than going on stage and you gotta have the right, you gotta have the right cornbread, dressing and you gotta cook the Turkey the right way. And sometimes it don't turn out and it makes me so angry. Being a housewife, someone that cares for their family - I think they're the hardest working women of all.

Sid NARRATION: *Tanya Tucker started her career at age 9 and just four years later, became a household name thanks to the now-classic tune "Delta Dawn." As the hits piled up over the years, Tanya's reputation as one of the outlaws of country music grew, placing her alongside greats like Willie Nelson, Johnny Cash and Waylon Jennings.*

*But it wasn't until earlier this year that she finally took home a Grammy -- two in fact -- honoring her latest studio album *While I'm Livin'*. Produced by Waylon's son Shooter and Brandi Carlile, that album has not only solidified Tanya's stature within the genre, but has also introduced her to a new generation of fans. Later this fall, she'll release *Live from the Troubadour*, a new in-concert album with a portion of the proceeds benefiting the iconic Los Angeles music venue, in a time where many independent clubs and concert halls are hurting due to the pandemic.*

On today's show, we'll hear stories from Tanya's early days, as well as some of her father's advice.

Tanya: My dad always told me, you know, Tanya, you got two problems. He said, one of them is you're a girl. And he said, the other one is, you're a nine year old girl. And that means you're going to have to put twice as much feeling in that song as a person who recorded it before, because they're not going to believe you otherwise, they're not going to believe that's, coming out of a nine year old.

Sid NARRATION: *Plus her new tequila brand Cosa Sa-VAH-hey, the tragic true story behind "Delta Dawn" and more this week on Biscuits & Jam.*

[MUSIC ENDS]

Sid: Well, I can't believe I'm saying this, but Tanya Tucker, welcome to Biscuits and Jam.

Tanya: Oh, yeah. Oh, I love that. You haven't got a good recipe do ya?

Sid: Oh, we've got a bunch of recipes here at Southern Living. I'll send you some.

Tanya: Oh, it's one of my favorite magazines. Two things I have not been able to do: and that is make biscuits. Great ones anyway. Like my mother used to make. And, uh, a good pie crust. Those two things. If I can get those two things down, I can be president.

Tanya: I need a good pie crust recipe and a great biscuit recipe.

Sid: I will send you one of each.

Tanya: I'd love to learn how to make jam too. I have all the really want tos. It's just having the time and the patience to do it. Cause, this COVID thing, uh, has forced me until real normalcy, you know? And I've never not worked at this much in my whole life. I've always worked. So I keep myself busy, cooking, and coming up with new ideas of how many different kinds of breakfast can you make. I'm running out of ideas. And washing dishes cause we don't have a dishwasher and no garbage disposal and no oven. So I'm really having to make do.

Sid: Well, I'm going to send you a stack of magazines, okay?

Tanya: Oh my gosh. I'll be busy for two years, you know? People still buying the magazines to get the recipe? I mean, you guys have a great reputation.

Sid: Oh, yeah, absolutely. Absolutely they are. You know, we've gotten more letters from people in the last few months that they are so happy when they get their magazine. I mean, like never before.

Tanya: Oh, that's great. That's great.

Sid: So Tanya, tell me when you were growing up, who was the cook in your family?

Tanya: My mother, whatever I learned, cooking wise, I learned from her and she's Southern cooker. Our last four or five Christmases and Thanksgivings, everybody wants my chicken fried steak. So, that's where I learned to make it. And then I learned how to make banana pudding, I take her recipes and I kind of add a little bit of my own flair to them. And what I never understood is how she could get it all out at the same time. I just can't seem to do that. So, but she was the one that taught me, anything that I've learned cooking-wise, for sure.

Sid: How did y'all celebrate the holidays when you were a kid? I know y'all moved around a good bit.

Tanya: Well, I don't remember not ever having some sort of a get together. And I've had some really big ones and some very small ones. I spent Thanksgiving by myself one year in LA and at a restaurant by myself. I don't know how that happened, but it did. And it makes you realize how much family is so important during that time. And I loved those times, you know, I really do. Uh, so to me, it's more pressure than going on stage and you gotta have the right, you gotta have the right cornbread, dressing and you gotta, cook the Turkey the right way. And sometimes it don't turn out and it makes me so angry. Oh. So every time I cook it's like a new experience.

Sid: It's a lot of pressure.

Tanya: I love the holidays though. And something I'd really love to be better at is being a cook and, just being, everything that involves, being a housewife, someone that cares for their family. I think they're the hardest working women of all.

Sid: I've heard that you make a really mean, uh, chile relleno.

Tanya: Oh, see, you got that tex-mex, Arizona flare, you know, my mother and my dad would bring home a tow sack, that's what we called it back then, a tow sack full of them, uh, Anaheim green chiles. And we would roast those chile rellenos and have them for a month every day, every night. And she taught me how to make them. And, one of my friends that's one of the big requests, when we all get together. I love chile rellenos. Love it. Love it. But you gotta make them with, in my opinion, IMO, uh, you gotta make it with Anaheim green chilies, not the poblano.

Sid: Right.

Tanya: Because the poblano ~~is~~ has a thicker skin and you almost have to cook them before you cook them. Because they're too tough. You know, if you want to try to cut em, it's been my experience.

(Instrumental music break of Biscuits and Jam theme -- :10 fade in/fade out)

Sid: So Tanya, you've written songs about Texas, you know, you had a huge hit called "Texas When I Die." Do you still have a ton of family and friends in Texas or are they scattered all over?

Tanya: My mother's, family is all from Texas. Denver City, Seminole, Hobbs right around there. Midland-Odessa, Lubbock. In fact, I have a cross that I give all my friends. My cousin, Leland in Denver City, Texas makes them out of horseshoe nails and he welds them together. I gave Justin Bieber one the other day and I saw him wearing his the other day. So it's just something real special that comes from Denver City. But, uh, I asked my cousin when I was, was there because I looked around and went okay, Oh, my God. Have you ever thought about leaving and without flinching, he said, "Nope. Nope. Never have." I said, well, I'm glad you can live here cause I could never live in that small town like that no more.

Sid: So did you grow up in a home that was full of music? You know, your sister's remarkable singer, so it couldn't have been an accident?

Tanya: No. Well, my sister and I were the only singers. Now my dad I know he could carry a tune. but, you know, just cause you sing, don't mean you want to, but he could sure tell me how to do it. Uh, and he had no training whatsoever.

Tanya: My dad always told me, you know, Tanya, you got two problems. He said, one of them is you're a girl. And he said, the other one is, you're a nine year old girl. And that means you're going to have to put twice as much feeling in that song as a person who recorded it before, because they're not going to believe you otherwise, they're not going to believe that's, coming out of a nine year old.

I remember looking back a record player on the floor and I'd see these 45s and I, I remember seeing the Sinatra with Strangers in the Night, you know? And then I see an Elvis I'd look over and see a Hank Williams or a Sonny James. Merle Haggard's for sure. And George Jones and of course, Loretta Lynn and Connie Smith, they were biggies, for me. My dad traded something to get me a tape recorder and, I found some tape, not too long ago, of me and boy! I mean, I was practicing and preaching the gospel! So I practiced on that a lot and he encouraged it.

Sid: There's a song, uh, on the new album called "The Day My Heart Goes Still," which I'm told is about your father, you know, who managed most of your career. What are some things that he taught you that have stayed with you?

Tanya: Oh, well that's a book, you know, that is a book. cause he's got so many sayings that like don't give somebody a gift that they can't afford to give you, you know, makes em feel bad, always tell somebody what you're going to do for them before you ask them what they can do for you. Don't smile when you're singing "Delta Dawn," that ain't a happy song. So, he taught me so much.

Sid: So speaking of that, you had a huge hit by the time you were 13 with "Delta Dawn."

Sid: Tanya, what do you think it was about that song and that album that resonated with people in such a big way?

Tanya: Well, that's something I, I, I still ain't figured out. But the one thing for sure was how it attracted and really, really hit on really young kids. I mean, I'm talking five, six, seven, eight, nine, the really young kids. Uh, and I've probably heard it if I've heard once I've heard it a million times. "I used to sing that song on the way to school every morning. My mother used to sing it to me when she's trying to get me to go to sleep."

I mean, I put a lot of kids to sleep in my day, uh, but I'm not sure how a story about a forty-one year old woman is so attractive to a young kids. plus the fact that I think that nobody really knew what that song was about, including me.

And I had asked and asked and asked Alex Harvey, uh, when I'd see him, can you tell me what you wrote that song about? And he never would tell me, fast forward about forty years, and I'm in church and, uh, really great preacher, he's a teacher, Stan Mitchell. And I was sitting there and I was sleeping. I mean, I just shut my eyes while he's talking. And all of a sudden I heard "Delta Dawn, what's that flower you have on?" And I opened my eyes and Stan was right in front of me.

He'd come down from the pulpit. And he starts saying these lyrics. And I'm like, Oh, okay. What's going on here? And so when we came out of church, he said, well, you know the story, don't you, about the Delta Dawn? I said, actually, no, I don't know the story. Alex would never tell me. And Alex went to my church and Stan knew him real well. He said, well, let me tell you the story and you probably have never heard the story either, have you?

Sid: No!

Tanya: Well Southern Living would be the first one I tell it to cause I was really trying to keep it a secret, but what happened was, his mother was from the Mississippi Delta, but they had moved to Kentucky and he had a lot of siblings that were way younger than him.

He was about 15 and he had, three or four younger siblings and his dad left his mother for another woman. So his mother started drinking a lot and ultimately she drank herself, into losing her mind basically. So every Sunday she'd dress them all up and get them all in their Sunday best and go downtown, carrying their bags and their suitcases. And, she said your daddy's going to come back. He's going to take us to that mansion in the sky. We're going to go. And he's going to come get us today. And that was her thing every Sunday. And then Alex was starting to sing a little bit and, she would take them to bars and he would get up on top of the bar and sing, and then they'd pass the hat. And that's how they pretty much got their foods, you know, and, she always wore this, faded rose that he'd given her years and years ago and they called her Delta Dawn because she's from the Mississippi Delta and everybody around there knew she was losing her mind. and so, the Kentucky state fair comes along and Alex had talked to somebody about getting on stage and singing, and maybe getting, his start.

They were all getting ready to go to the fair. And here he looks at his mother and he says, mom. You got to stay home tonight because you know, she embarrassed him basically. And, you can't go with me tonight. I gotta go, I gotta do this by myself.

And she was heartbroken. So he went on to the fair and sang and did his thing. And when he came back, his mother had killed herself. So, I mean, can you imagine the grief and the regret? And I think he lived with that for a long time until he finally got that song out, but he never would tell me, and I realize why now. But I think I told my dad the story. He goes, "hell, that's a movie." And I don't know why a movie hasn't been written.

Sid: Maybe it's still needs to be a movie.

Tanya: Well, there you go. There you go!

Tanya Tucker's "Delta Dawn" starts fading in as Tanya says "and I realize why now," and song is heard at full volume for these lines, "Delta Dawn, what's that flower you have on / Could it be a faded rose from days gone by? / And did I hear you say he was meeting you here today / To take you to his mansion in the sky?" (This is an a capella portion of the song but as the music comes in, it starts to fade out, and Sid comes back in)

Tanya: I've left a lot of it out, but that is a special story. And I think that when people listen to it, as far as the record goes, I don't think they knew, you know, a man of low degree, you know, when a man of low

degrees stood by her side, I mean, they didn't, it was like what did she say there? People put their own, story to that song. And guess what, it's my favorite song. I never get tired of singing it. I'm so thankful for that.

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

SID NARRATION: *We've got much more with Tanya Tucker, after the break.*

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 Tanya Tucker.*

Sid: So Tanya, I want to fast forward about 50 years. And, I'm wondering if you could tell me a little bit about your new album "While I'm Living," which just won a Grammy award for best country album.

Sid: I want to, # ask you about the lead single. "Bring my flowers now," which you wrote and recorded with Brandi Carlile. And that song also won a Grammy earlier this year. When did you realize it was something special happening with that song?

Tanya: Well, I I've had a song since I was a kid. I think I was 11. I had that chorus for a long time. And then, on the way from Nashville to Texas I don't know, some reason I called her or she called me. Loretta Lynn. I was talking to Loretta. And uh we're always talking about writing songs. "You got to come home, come back and write some songs with me. you got any ideas?" I said, "yeah, let me sing you one. So, you know, 'bring my flowers now while I'm living.'" And I sang her the chorus. And I got done. She goes, "when you get back, on the way through here, you come back; we're going to write that song because that's a good song."

And so I said, "okay, well we'll do that." And then I go off to LA. And the last day, we were there three weeks, Brandi walks in and I'm in the control room and she says Hey, T she's a, she's always like miss upbeat, you know, Hey T that's up, let's finish that song idea you had.

I said, what I didn't even remember saying it to her, you know? And I said, okay, she goes, yeah, the band's on break. Let's write it and come back in and cut it. And I'm thinking what I need a little damn practice or something I don't just throw this on me, you know, I don't write songs all the time, I'm a singer.

So I said, I stood there are deer in the headlight look, I'm sure. Trying to be cool. So I went to the bathroom. And I'd say that's where I do a lot of my best thinking. And I, I was thinking I gotta come up with something here gotta come up, you know, gotta have something we've got to get programmed to this, I, I wasn't expecting it, you know?

and I just said a prayer. I said, Lord, you're on. Cause I don't know what to do. I mean, I just don't want to look like a fool. and when I went back in the studio, she was in the back in the piano room on the

piano. she said, okay, we started it. She said, "All the miles." She had that first line, "cast a long shadow. I'd take a couple back if I could" you know? And then pretty soon I was adding to it about my horse Jessie Ray, even though one day they'll bury me and Jessie Ray, just know we're gonna ride again someday.

And, uh, it just sort of flowed and it didn't feel like it was 30, 40 minutes and we finished it and there was a couple of things I'd like to have changed. But, Brandi didn't want me to, she said, no, it's not about Tanya Tucker the performer or the entertainer, this is Tanya Tucker, the singer flaws and all. I go well you gonna get a bunch of that now.

I think when the stars line up, on any other day, it might not have ever happened. It was perfect for that time. And then to find out it was going to be the title, Hey T let's just called his thing "while I'm living" you know. And then she goes, I want people to know how important you are and your role in music and, your catalog, how important it has been for all of us girls like me and how influenced we were by you.

And, how tough you were and I'm thinking, Oh boy, I must have been a good actor, you know. But uh she goes, I want them to know you and high five you while you're living. Um, and so I, you know, uh, you get so many awards after you die. What the hell good is it then? So I was just like, wow, this ain't my idea. This is someone else's idea. And someone that everybody says is great. Cause I hadn't even heard her sing yet, you know? And uh, after we come out of the studio, first time I heard her sing was on the Grammy. And that was February last year, you know?

And uh, I heard her sing, um, the, the joke, and she just blew me away. I didn't even know my kids knew her, you know, mom, Brandi Carlile. Oh my God. You know, I said, I don't know her, I'm out of the loop, but she's a hell of a singer. Uh, I found that out later First day, I met her, I walked into the studio and we started to work. And then when we came out of the studio, that's when our relationship grew.

Sid: Well, you guys seem to have a pretty special connection.

Tanya: It is. It's so special that I don't even really know how to explain it. There's no words for it and believe me: I never would have thought those songs would have done this album would have done what it did. And I have never been so glad to be wrong in my life, you know? I think I have a whole lot better in me, so, I don't think I've done my best yet. You know, people might think that's my best. It's a far cry from it. So I just hope I live long enough to get my best out. You know?

Tanya Tucker's "Bring My Flowers Now" starts fading in as Tanya says "I don't think I've done my best yet," and song is heard at full volume for these lines, "Bring my flowers now, while I'm living / I won't need your love when I'm gone / Don't spend time, tears and money on my old breathless body / If your heart is in them flowers, bring 'em on" (piano fades out, and Sid comes back in)

Sid: So, Tanya, I want to hear about your new tequila and, uh, I don't think you could have timed the launch of that much better.

Tanya: Well, I've never been in the tequila business, so this is a new one and I really don't know how I got into it, except for the fact that my ex, father of my oldest two kids Presley and Grayson, he's an actor, Ben Reed, I can't remember how it happened, but he said, Hey, I've got this tequila I'm trying to launch and you want to be a part of it. I'd loved to have you. And I said, well, let me have a taste of it, you

know? Cause I drink a lot of Patron. My buddy John Paul DeJoria owns Patron. He just sold it for 5 billion. So, that gives us something to look forward to. But anyway, so I tried it and I liked it and I've done a lot of taste tests with Strait, George Strait's tequila, uh, and, um, George Clooney and I try to taste every tequila I can get my hands on to compare and, um, I just really love my tequila and I love it with the fresh grapefruit from Texas ruby red and, uh, people that don't even like tequila love my little Tanya-tini. I compare it to building an artist. You have to go person by person, state by state. It's who, you know, cause there's so much competition in it and we just have to go little by little.

And people are wanting it everywhere. We got it in the state of Tennessee now. And, I'm telling Texas that they ought to be ashamed of themselves. Cause I'm a Texas girl and Tennessee beat them to the action. So I think they're going to get involved pretty soon.

Sid: I don't think we have any in Alabama, so you might have to send me some.

Tanya: I'm going to put it into my complaint today. We'll have it down there. I'll have to bring it to you.

Sid: Also, you've got a new album coming out this fall. And I saw that some of the proceeds are benefiting the Troubadour, which is a historic venue in Los Angeles. And I'm just curious why that was important to you to do that.

Tanya: Well, these venues like that have supported us for all these years, all over the country, but the Troubadour just happens to be a real iconic one because, you know, hell the Eagles and Elton John basically got started there.

A lot of great talent has been inside those walls. That's the thing: they've, kept me going when it wasn't nothing going, you know? And, um and I think it's payback time. I think it's time to, you know, that we support them and I hate to see everybody's going through hell right now, I'd hate to see them go under and I hope this COVID thing, like everybody, goes away real soon, but until then, I just wanted to come out with an album that, extends myself so to speak with my fans, you know, give them something to listen to but all at the same time, support these venues that have always supported us.

Tanya: These smaller venues are just, that's where we started. That's basically that's the base of our, or my, success. So I'm hoping that we can support them. Besides that it has to have a live album from the Troubadour. It's not like you're coming from Branson, you know, Live from Branson. To hell with that, you know?

Sid: Yeah. Well, it's a, it's a wonderful thing you're doing. So you had a big hit back in the eighties called "strong enough to bend" and everyone is struggling right now. And as someone who's been through a lot, I'm just wondering if you have any words of wisdom for people who are trying to make it through some tough times.

Tanya: Oh, wow. Uh I mean, what do you say? I mean, My son called me the other day and said, "man, mom, reach out to some of your friends that you know, that haven't had the success you've had. And they, you know that they're already struggling right now. And I think you should reach out to them and tell them you're thinking about them and give them some encouraging words, like only you can do."

And so I did, I reached out to several of my friends, how you doing and want you to know um, we're going to get through this and know there's gotta be a reason for it. You know, of the man upstairs. He has a reason for everything, but my George, I'm going to hang out and find out what the hell it is. Cause it's gotta be something good. Oh my God, I wish I had Oprah's money and I could just take care of everybody and say, "Hey, don't worry about it here's a new house," you know? I would love to make a living at giving. I'd be really good at it. So I just want to inspire people to, you know, say their prayers. That's about all we can do right now. Say your prayers. Cause he knows what we're going through and he can change it. I believe that.

Sid: Yeah, I sure hope so. Well, Tanya Tucker. It is truly an honor having you on Biscuits and Jam. Thanks so much for spending the time with us.

Tanya: Thank you, Sid. You were so great. I loved talking to you, too.

Sid NARRATION: *Thanks for listening to my conversation with Tanya Tucker. Her most recent studio album While I'm Livin' can be found wherever you get music. Enjoy her new tequila Cosa Sa-VAH-hey from your local spirit shop, and look for her new album Live from the Troubadour later this fall. A portion of the proceeds will benefit The Troubadour in Los Angeles, through SaveOurStages.com.*

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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, Eliza Lambert and Rachael King at Pod People. I'll see you back here next week for more Biscuits & Jam! [MUSIC ENDS]