

Episode Title: Gladys Knight's Singing Kitchen

Episode Summary: In this week's episode, Sid Evans, editor-in-chief of *Southern Living Magazine*, talks to the legendary Gladys Knight about her Atlanta upbringing, making cobbler from scratch, and how her group's biggest hit "Midnight Train to Georgia" almost didn't happen.

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 says that long before her track to stardom, she sang with her family in the kitchen.

GLADYS KNIGHT: All the time I can remember that after we ate, we sang. And I could hear my mom and my aunties they would have the kitchen window up and we could hear them singing. All my folks could sing, my mom, my aunties, my uncles. And my cousins, it was, it was like that.

Voice Over from SID EVANS: *Gladys Knight, known around the world as the Empress of Soul, began performing in her native Atlanta at age 4. By 15, she and her brother and cousins, known as the Pips, already had a hit with their debut single "Every Beat of My Heart" in 1961.*

Despite success on the R&B charts over the next decade, 1973 changed everything for the quartet with the release of "Midnight Train to Georgia," which became not just the group's crossover hit, but one of the most beloved pieces of American recorded music. The lyrics center around leaving the hustle-and-bustle of the big city for a home in the South, and even if you're not a native Southerner, the sentiment remains universal, nearly 50 years later.

("Midnight Train to Georgia" plays: "He's leavin' / on that midnight train to Georgia / He's goin' back to find / A simpler place and time")

Voice Over from SID EVANS: *Along with multiple Grammys, Gladys Knight and the Pips were inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1996. Along the way, she penned a cookbook as well as an autobiography, and landed a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. On today's show, we'll hear how Midnight Train to Georgia almost didn't happen, and instead, could've been a Midnight Plane to Houston.*

GLADYS KNIGHT: I said, "We'll, I'm having a problem projecting the song cause I don't know nothing about Houston. I and I, sure ain't gonna be up 'till midnight." You know, so...

Voice Over from SID EVANS: All that and more today on Biscuits & Jam.

(Music ends)

SID EVANS: Well, Gladys Knight, it is truly an honor to have you on Biscuits and Jam.

GLADYS KNIGHT: Well, thank you so much. I love those too. I'm a sweetaholic. See, so the jam thing just wears me out. I love it.

SID EVANS: So, so is it fair to say that you love to cook?

GLADYS KNIGHT: I love to cook. I've been cooking, let's see, since I was, uh, 6 years old.

SID EVANS: Wow. You got an early start.

GLADYS KNIGHT: I did! I come from a family where—and I don't think they do it anymore, but I think it's a good idea—all the ladies in my family used to come together and they'd just be having so much fun in the kitchen, and one of them will make ~~this~~, this particular recipe, and then somebody else will be doing something else.

And it, ooh, it'd be so good, too, smelling up the whole house. It's great. And so that's when I started and I was always in there in the way. At 6 years old, but, rather than chastising me, they started teaching me. And, uh, I love that. Some of them lived in Hampton, Georgia, some of them lived in Atlanta, some of them lived in Decatur, you know, and, uh, I was just fascinated. And when it was done and they'd call everybody in to eat, the food was amazing.

And it just kept me going. And when I got, uh, 8 my mom bought me a cookbook. They had a children's cookbook and I was so excited. So I started cooking out of that cookbook. Very simple things like eggs or making a special toast or making a little soup or whatever, you know, something, something very plain.

And, uh, that's how I started cooking. And I was so amazed by these ladies in my family and they just taught us how to cook.

SID EVANS: So there was, a lot more than, uh, just your mom cooking. You had, did you have aunts and uncles, cousins?

GLADYS KNIGHT: All of them. Let me tell you something that, that people don't pick up on these days. Men are great cooks. All my uncles and my cousin, my male cousins and , and nephews, they came to cook, too. And on top of that, we'd all be singing. We had enough people in there cooking to have a choir.

SID EVANS: Wow. That sounds like a rowdy household.

GLADYS KNIGHT: Yeah, it was great. It was great. My uncle Alvin taught me how to make barbecue sauce. Ooh, it was so good. It was so good.

SID EVANS: So, so I'm wondering, can you describe the house for me where you grew up in Atlanta? It was in Atlanta, right?

GLADYS KNIGHT: Born and raised in Atlanta at Grady hospital. And I had a lot of family. Okay?

And they'd all get up in the living room while we cooking, and, and we'd be in the kitchen singing and cooking.

So that's what my life was like. And for some reason, we always had enough room for everybody. Like my uncle Ben. Um, he had a construction company and all of the male relatives worked for him, but they also lived in this house.

So I loved it. I don't know if people do that these days or not, but it was an amazing thing, you know?

SID EVANS: How did, how did y'all celebrate the holidays?

GLADYS KNIGHT: Whoo whee! They would, Sid, I, I'll go way back, okay? Cause we were children as you know, when we got into this and so. We would be over, like I said, a lot of us, even my mom and dad and, and the four that they had with us. They, we lived upstairs from my aunt and uncle that I'm talking about that own this six-family place and we lived on the top floor.

And so, boy, we would come down. And we'd be out in the yard playing.

SID EVANS: I mean, it sounds like y'all had a lot going on, uh, on a regular day, but the holidays must have really been something else.

GLADYS KNIGHT: It was. They would send us out to play most of the time cause they wanted to get through with their cooking and it was so many dishes, but we didn't mind that at all. And me and my cousin Gwen, we used to make up stuff to cook cause we had tea sets. So we'd take dirt and make mud and we will call that a pie. I'm sorry, I'm sorry. But that's how much into cooking we were.

SID EVANS: And, and to this day, you still love to cook, don't you?

GLADYS KNIGHT: I still love to cook. Now I'm experimenting more now, you know, that I know the basic things about, uh, cooking and how many other contemporary different ways that you can do things that we used to make by scratch. Take, take, um, uh, peach cobbler, okay.

SID EVANS: Okay.

GLADYS KNIGHT: Or apple, apple cobbler.

All right. So they made everything scratch. They made the crust and then the way they laid it out, they used a lot of butter back then. You know, now people are so aware of what they look like.

You know, they don't use as much of that stuff as we used to do when we first started cooking. You know, a lot of lard, a lot of butter, a lot, a lot of sugar, a lot of this, you know, and it was amazing. And all the time I can remember that after we ate, we sang.

And I could hear my mom and my aunties in the kitchen because their kitchen, like overlooked the driveway where we would play. It was just really a backyard with cement, you know? They would have the kitchen window up and we could hear them singing. All my folks could sing, my mom, my aunties, my uncles. You know, and my cousins, it was, it was like that.

SID EVANS: Well, so what were y'all singing? Was this gospel music were there, were there particular songs that you remember?

GLADYS KNIGHT: It was all kinds of music. you know, that's one thing I loved about my family is that they loved music, period. Now for us, it was certain things that were on the radio during that time that we weren't allowed to sing.

SID EVANS: You get in trouble.

GLADYS KNIGHT: Yeah. You know, but long as it was clean, we could always sing it. And of course, my uncle had a gospel group.

They were always on the radio on Sunday singing gospel music. They had the live, uh, gospel things on the radio on Sunday. And so, my uncle Alvin. And his group sang on Sunday. So finally after I got maybe a year or two older, um, they started carrying, my uncle Alvin started carrying me with them.

So I be up there singing on the radio, WERD with, with my uncle Alvin. So I've been singing all my life.

SID EVANS: Was there a particular song or a hymn that had a big impact on you?

GLADYS KNIGHT: Well, my mom was the first—my dad was always proud, okay? But my mom was the first to think about maybe doing something with my singing. So I got a chance to sing all kinds of music and, we would do “this little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine, this little light of mine.” That was one of the first ones that she, she taught me, you know, um, and then I would do, when I was younger, “lullaby and goodnight with roses bedight.”

And later on down the line after I got a little older, I was 7 years old by then, so they had called, uh, my aunt and my mom got together and there was the Ted Mack amateur hour had come on television. So they got together, my aunt Ann and my mom, and wrote to Ted Mack and told them about me. Then she always asked me if this was something I would like to do. She never just put me on Front Street, you

know, cause I didn't like a whole lot of attention. I liked playing with my, with my family and, and my friends. And getting dirty. You know, I was a tomboy from day one.

SID EVANS: Making mud pies.

GLADYS KNIGHT: Yeah! Making, yeah, making mud pies. And we'd be running, playing tag. We had a ball. We really, really did. You know? And then, as you know, we grew up and my family, became a singing group, which was, my sister Brenda, my cousin Eleanor, me and my brother Bubba, made a group. And so they said, "you guys want to sing?"

So some of the stuff we got a chance to do from the radio, and Pip where we got our name from with my mom's nephew. And, uh, he was, uh, a man about town. He'd come from work and it'd take him one hour and he'd come out, he'd be sharp as a tack going see some girl.

SID EVANS: He's a good role model.

GLADYS KNIGHT: Yeah, going to see some girl. And then when my mom called him and said, "Hey, get over here," she didn't ask him if he wanted to be our manager, but he knew we could sing. And he knew every, all the singers. He knew everybody in the clubs. The owners and everything, you know. So she called him up and told him to "come over there, get over here".

And, my mom said, "well, well you going to be their manager." He said, "I ain't got no time for them children!" But my mom said, "yes, you do". And of course, he became our manager and he was a great one because he knew all about show business because he was out every night. That's how we got started.

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

SID EVANS: So one of your first big hits was called "Every Beat Of My Heart."

GLADYS KNIGHT: Yes.

SID EVANS: And, and you must've been 16.

GLADYS KNIGHT: Uh, 15.

SID EVANS: Wow. Yeah, what was it like to have a breakout hit at that age?

GLADYS KNIGHT: We prayed a lot. We didn't know it would go be a breakout hit, but everything that we did, because it, it was the way of our family, we prayed about it. "Is this the right thing to do? Can we be successful with this? Could you help us with this?" And so, uh. Pip knew The Midnighters. I don't know if you've ever heard of them, you know.

SID EVANS: Mmm hmm. Yes.

GLADYS KNIGHT: But anyway, it was a very popular group called The Midnighters and there was a, a gentleman in it by the name of Sonny.

And so, uh, Pip would take us around to different people's houses and have us singing in the living room. We said, "Pip, we don't want to sing in the living room." So he said, "Get up, come on, come on and do something with it. Do something with it." That was his thing all the time. So we sang for Sonny and he was very impressed and he started gathering music for us.

And "Every Beat Of My Heart" was one of the songs and uh, so we sang it and he said, "we got to record this. We got to record this". So, we went to this club where we were doing like a night probably, you know, we're going to high school almost by then. And so we sang it. I was walking down the street on Hunter Street one day with my friends from school, and they said, they had said, "We love your music".

I said, "what music?" So they said "your song, your song, you know that song, your song." I said, "I don't know what song y'all talking about." We happened to pass by the record store And we were just walking and talking. I wasn't paying no attention. They said, "Oh girl, Oh girl. Your song is on." I said, "what song?" Said "listen, listen." And it was "Every Beat Of My Heart."

SID EVANS: And so, so from then on, uh, were you on the road a lot?

GLADYS KNIGHT: Yeah. Now that was something new. Being on the road. Pip was a, a very, very staunch, uh, manager. When it came down to us, it was just certain things he didn't allow us to do. He did not allow us to sit down in our uniforms. He did not allow us to come up on that stage until it was time for them to call us.

He did not allow us to be with certain people that didn't have what he called the proper thing to be saying or doing around us. So I'm so grateful for my family. I am, you know, because the things that they did teach us, kind of stay with us and they're still with us. And so he set rules and that was it.

He said, y'all sit down right there till I come back and we had school to do. So he'd make us go out and sit in the car and do our homework.

SID EVANS: So, so you grew up, in such a crazy existence. I mean, you collaborated and performed with people like Smokey Robinson, Stevie Wonder, Marvin Gaye, Patti LaBelle. So many legends. I'm wondering if some of these folks. Really felt like family to you.

GLADYS KNIGHT: They did. Matter of fact, during that time we became family. And, and we would go to each other's houses. It was such a natural, real kind of thing. I don't see artists doing that these days.

You know, they too important or they want to be, you know, way up here. We weren't concerned about that. We wanted to do the best music that we could do. And, uh, we would teach each other. It wasn't so much envy, or anything like that, you know, it's

like we just come together, you know, and, and Stevie, or Smokey or Marvin or Mary Wells, or anybody, say "Try this. Do that", you know?

And then as we grew, we got to the top of the line entertainers that wrapped their arms around us. You know, like Sammy Davis Jr., Billy Eckstein, uh, Sarah Vaughan, I mean, everybody that was in that arena, adopted us, so to speak. You know, and they just taught us what we should do and, and even how to perform when we were on stage. I just remember that I was a little bit shy cause I didn't know that avenue. I didn't know that well. And so I really hadn't learned how to captivate or to capture an audience in their ear if you were in a noisy nightclub or if you were in a auditorium or anything like that, how do you get them to listen to you?

Especially if it was a dinner show. You got forks, clanking, all that kind of stuff, you know? And when Sammy come out there, he'd control that audience. I was in awe of that and I used to go, I said, "How do you do it? How? How do you do that? I know they love you and they love your music, but you know when you step on stage or you start to performing and you get to your quiet time in your perform—how do you do that?"

He said, "when you get out there, you do your song from your heart, which you always do. But do it—" Cause I'm, I'm a contralto and so I kind of belted out my, my music, it had power to it and he said, "And if you say anything to them or singing anything to them, just bring it down and just get softer and softer and softer and they'll want to hear what you got to say, or what you're singing."

And it was, it was something that worked with me from that day to this one.

SID EVANS: Mm.

GLADYS KNIGHT: Don't try to outdo the audience if they're noisy because somebody is going to say, "Shhhh." And that's going get it—and he was right. He was right!

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

Voice Over from SID EVANS: We've got plenty more with the great Gladys Knight, after the break.

BREAK

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

Voice Over from SID EVANS: Welcome back to Biscuits & Jam from Southern Living. I'm Sid Evans, and we're talking with the Empress of Soul, Gladys Knight.

SID EVANS: I've got to ask you about "Midnight Train To Georgia," of course. I've heard that that song had another name when you first came across it: "Midnight

Plane to Houston." It doesn't have the same ring to it. Uh, what is the story behind that?

GLADYS KNIGHT: That's what he, he intended for it to be, you know? I would always read the lyrics first, when somebody would send us some music and I was reading and, uh, I said, just what you just said, I said, "That don't sound right." I didn't, I didn't know that I didn't have nerve enough to tell, the writer how it was supposed to be. You know.

I did so many foolish things that I didn't know about, but anyway. So I said, "Hey, would you mind if, um, if we kinda change the lyric around a little bit?"

I'm having a problem, um, projecting the song cause I don't know nothing about Houston. I said, and, and I, sure ain't gonna be up 'till midnight." You know, so.

Anyway, he said, "Yeah, go ahead. What do you want to do?" I said, "I think, how about, how about midnight train to Georgia? Cause that's where we're from."

SID EVANS: And the rest is history.

GLADYS KNIGHT: Yeah. I said, "We don't fly. We ride the train or we drive," you know, and he started laughing. He said, "yeah, go ahead. Do it. Just do it any way you want to do it," so...

SID EVANS: Wow. Well, you know, there's a line in that song that says he's going back to find a simpler place in time.

GLADYS KNIGHT: Absolutely.

SID EVANS: What do those lyrics mean to you?

GLADYS KNIGHT: Well, they mean everything. Georgia for us was always home, especially Atlanta.

And that's why that line to me just hit home. It's just easy. Going back to find a simpler place in time. The further up North we got, the less they were. What can I say? Amenable to being cordial, so to speak.

They would, they were separated. They were in pockets. It wasn't just an ordinary thing that you would do, whether you knew a person or not. You walk by you say hello. You say hi, or you wave, or you smile. You do something. It's a simple thing. So that's, that's why that meant so much to me.

SID EVANS: It's a Southern thing.

GLADYS KNIGHT: It is. Southern hospitality. You, you're absolutely right. You hit the nail on the head then. But I, I loved it. I loved that. You know, we lived in New York for a while. And, uh, it was a totally different kind of thing.

You know, you'd be walking by people, you say hi, and they look at you like you lost your mind. We brought them Southern ways on up in there, we'd be saying, "What's wrong with them? What, what did we do?"

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

SID EVANS: So I want to ask you about, uh, about Little Richard who we just lost a few days ago. Tell me what he meant to you as, as an artist and on a personal level.

GLADYS KNIGHT: He was amazing. We worked with him a lot too. You know, and you know, I don't care what you do in life, whether it's history, whether it's music, whether it's just hard work or whatever. You got to have something and someone on your side saying, "Oh, you did a great job." It helps.

Whether it's building a house or whether it's singing a song. Those were the kinds of things that would happen. And Richard was good at those things. He'd be calling me upstairs, you know? I mean, we were at the Apollo together. We were at a lot of places together, but I remember him calling me and said, "Hey, Gladys!"

He said, "girl..." And he wasn't playing either. He be telling me about the song that I just did and how it just swept him off his feet at that, that I did such a great job on it. Well, you take those things. Who doesn't want to be uplifted like that? And Richard was wide open about that and he had fun with what he did.

He had fun at what we do, but he was also the kind of person he'd tell you right off. Just tell you about yourself. "What you think you doing?" You know, kind of thing. If somebody came up with an attitude, you know, like they were all that, you didn't want to hear from Richard. Cause he'd be wearing people out. You know.

SID EVANS: He, he would, he would tell it like it is.

GLADYS KNIGHT: Yes, he would. And he was so fun. And as big as he was, as, with his music and, and his performances, his performances were dynamite. You couldn't help but move, you know, Jenny, Jenny, Jenny. Won't you come along with me? Jenny, Jenny.

And he'd be putting his foot on the piano and all that kind of stuff. So it was great. I loved him to death. Matter of fact, uh, he lived not too far from me once I moved to LA. So we had a chance to, spend more time together than we did when we were all on, on the road, you know, so yeah, I miss him already.

SID EVANS: Well, I just got to ask you how these last few weeks have been for you, um, being quarantined and not being able to perform. Um, what's it been like for you?

GLADYS KNIGHT: Well, to tell the very honest truth, I am very grateful that they're handling it, like they are. With a situation like this, you have to have a certain empathy in your heart to be able to function in a situation like this. I mean, if you got people who know more about it than you do, you need to listen. That's the same with

music. The same with, with growing up. The same with whatever job you have with people that's been there for ages and know how to do it and know how to teach you to do it. That's what needs to happen. And you need not to be selfish to say, shoot, I want to go over here. I want to go outside.

I want to do this, you know. And they're saying, "Hey, please, please, you know nothing about this virus. Stay inside."

So if I'm sick, why would I want you to come around me? I'd be the one telling you, say, "Hey, be still, I don't want to see you like this I just, to think that I could infect somebody if I was sick." That's, that's not thinkable, you know?

SID EVANS: Have you been able to enjoy this time at home? Just cooking and being on the farm?

GLADYS KNIGHT: Without a doubt. I love what I do. I have been blessed to be able to do what I do. I have been blessed to be married to a man that just loves home stuff. You know, he's not a traveler, so to speak. So us being home is a whole nother kind of joy for us. And we got a new baby. It's a puppy.

SID EVANS: Oh, really? What's the name?

GLADYS KNIGHT: Pepper is his name and he's our son and he is the sweetest. Everybody loves Pepper.

SID EVANS: Now, and you've got, you've got a lot of children and grandchildren. I, I'm guessing you miss seeing them.

GLADYS KNIGHT: I have 17 grandkids and I have 10 great grandkids and I miss seeing them. I do, but I teach them also, you know how to be careful and take care of themselves cause they just want to play and that kind of stuff. But we have them wearing their masks. See? Children go according to what you do. And when that broke out and they saw us, before they got their masks, uh, with our masks on and everything, and we just tell them, "Okay baby, you have to wear these."

You know, "You have to do this, you have to do that. You can't touch this and you can't touch that." But if you are setting the example for them, it's so much easier for them to do.

SID EVANS: We all need to be safe, that's for sure. Well, Gladys Knight, thank you for being on Biscuits and Jam.

GLADYS KNIGHT: It's my pleasure. And I do love Biscuits and Jam. Matter of fact, I had one yesterday, didn't it? We had some biscuits left over and I, I had the strawberry jam and I was making a cake and I said, "I'm going to put this strawberry jam in my cake." And I did, and I took some mint jelly and put in there, too. It's so good y'all!

SID EVANS: Well, I hope you'll come see us at the test kitchens down here in Birmingham sometime. We would love to have a visit.

GLADYS KNIGHT: I would love that. I'm telling you. I really would. I would love that.

SID EVANS: Well, I'm not kidding. The invitation is always there. At least when we open this place.

GLADYS KNIGHT: Yeah. There you go. Well, I'll be singing while I'm cooking cause that's the way I do it.

Voice Over from SID EVANS: *Thanks for listening to my conversation with Gladys Knight. You can keep up with her on Facebook or at gladysknight.com.*

Southern Living is based in Birmingham, Alabama, and this podcast was produced and edited in Nashville, Tennessee. 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.

This season of Biscuits & Jam was 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.

We're excited to let you know that more episodes of Biscuits & Jam are coming your way soon! Just stay tuned and subscribe to us however you listen to podcasts."

From everyone here at Southern Living, we wish you health, happiness and of course, great food and music. We hope to see you again, and thanks for listening!