Episode Title: Rhiannon Giddens's History Lessons

Episode Summary:
In this week's episode, Sid Evans, Editor-in-Chief of Southern Living Magazine, welcomes Grammy award-winning artist, storyteller, and multi-instrumentalist Rhiannon Giddens. Today, Rhiannon talks about the first time she heard clawhammer style on the banjo, and what she learned from her mentor, Joe Thompson, a North Carolina fiddle player who introduced her to a whole catalog of lost songs. She tells the incredible story behind her latest opera, Omar, about a muslim scholar who was enslaved and brought to Charleston, South Carolina, and who later wrote down his story in a rare and powerful memoir. Plus, she explains how she became obsessed with making the perfect biscuit while spending lockdown in Ireland.

Episode Transcript:

(Biscuits and Jam Theme begins)

Sid Voice Over: Welcome to the Summer Tour edition of Biscuits and Jam, from Southern Living. I'm Sid Evans, editor-in-chief of Southern Living Magazine. My guest today is a Grammy award-winning artist, storyteller, and multi-instrumentalist who has already left a powerful mark on Southern culture—and she's just getting started. Rhiannon Giddens grew up in North Carolina surrounded by bluegrass music, but her musical appetites led her to other genres. When she was young, she started singing in the Greensboro youth chorus and went on to pursue opera at Oberlin Conservatory. After that, she co-founded the Carolina Chocolate Drops, a band that focused on traditional Black string band music, and she's since gone on to a remarkable solo career.
Today, Rhiannon talks about the first time she heard clawhammer style on the banjo, and what she learned from her mentor, Joe Thompson, a North Carolina fiddle player who introduced her to a whole catalog of lost songs. She tells the incredible story behind her latest opera, Omar, about a muslim scholar who was enslaved and brought to Charleston, South Carolina, and who later wrote down his story in a rare and powerful memoir. Plus, she explains how she became obsessed with making the perfect biscuit while spending lockdown in Ireland. All that and more this week on Biscuits & Jam.

Sid Evans: Well, Rhiannon Giddens, welcome to Biscuits and Jam.

Rhiannon Giddens: Thanks for having. It's strange and it still is to be on remotely, but (laughs), to these things. I'll get used to it someday.

Sid Evans: Someday. Well, where am I reaching you right now?

Rhiannon Giddens: I am in a hotel room in Nashville, actually,

Sid Evans: Oh, okay. You're on the road?

Rhiannon Giddens: On the road, about to head to Kentucky to do a bluegrass festival.

Sid Evans: Oh, that sounds good.

Rhiannon Giddens: Yeah.

Sid Evans: I wish I were headed that way. (laughs)

Rhiannon Giddens: (laughs) It's gonna be a little hot, so we'll see how it goes.

Sid Evans: Well, so, Rhiannon, you were born and raised in and around Greensboro, North Carolina. And I've heard you say that you spent a lot of time as a kid in the rural areas outside of town. Tell me a little bit about where you grew up.

Rhiannon Giddens: Well, uh, first part of my life was with my grandparents, my mom's folks, in McLeansville outside of Greensboro. And, there wasn't much a- around. There's, you know, houses and one grocery store (laughs) that I remember that was in town. And, yeah, I was just, we were out- out at my grandparents house and they had a acre that they farmed. And it was a- a very, very rural (laughing) space. It was great though, I mean, 'cause it's a cool way to start, you know, with nothing but trees and- figuring out what to do outside.

Sid Evans: Did you grow up with a big connection to the outdoors as a result of that?

Rhiannon Giddens: I mean, not really. (laughs) We had to, I didn't have a connection other than we had to figure out what to do with our day outside. (laughs) So, we like, made up games around the big oak tree out in my grandmother's front yard, and were really, really bored. But I think that's like, super important as a child. I do value that time even though it's not like I go hiking or anything. (laughs) I don't have like, you know, a nostalgic connection to the outdoors, but I think it's important to spend time out there.

Sid Evans: Well, at least you weren't on a phone.

Rhiannon Giddens: Definitely not. (laughs) No, and the TV was on, but it was on to like, game shows and stories, and it was not for us,

Sid Evans: Well, so, did y'all have a lot of big family gatherings? I mean, did you have a bunch of family around Greensboro?

Rhiannon Giddens: Yeah. Like, both sides of my family are in the area, so my dad's folks are in Julian. So, we would meet up with family kind of in both areas but then, the big family reunions on my mom's sides were all in Mebane. So, once a year we would go to Mebane and fish fry or whatever, it would be a big gathering of all the Morrows. That was the family reunion that I went to. That's my memories of the big family gatherings was in Mebane.

Sid Evans: Yeah. Well, let me ask you about your mom. I mean, you've done so much work digging into the past, especially when it comes to music. What can you tell me about your mother's story and how she grew up?

Rhiannon Giddens: My grandmother, like my mom's mom would've been from Mebane. My grandfather was from Florida and came up. And so, they lived in Greensboro for a while, before they moved back out to the country. So, my mom kinda grew up, she went to a Catholic school, she would've had a raising in

Greensboro. And, yeah, she went to UNCG and met my dad, and then had my sister, and had to drop out of school. After she and my dad split up, the, she went back to school and she finished her degree. And she ended up getting a master's in communications. And, she worked in Greensboro as a, uh, drug counselor, and also, I remember she used to work at a women's shelter as well. So, I kinda grew up with that notion of service. I think about this now, now, I look back and I go, you know, it makes sense that so much of what I do is concerned with being of service to the culture, to the musical education, all that kind of stuff. 'Cause my mom was pretty much squarely in that field. as I was growing up, that was her work.

Sid Evans: Yeah. Well, that makes a lot of sense. It's like a continuation of what she did and what she does now.

Rhiannon Giddens: She's so very aware, she's so intelligent, and just so well read. And, she was always kinda, there's always a running commentary when we're watching movies, you know. She'd be like, "Well of course that's, blah, blah, blah," and, "That's blah, blah, blah, because of this and that. And look at what they're selling you," and all this kinda stuff. And, you know, she's one of the few people like walked out of The Lion King. She was so (laughs) offended, you know. She's just always thinking about what's actually happening. And it was like, when I was a kid, I was just like, "Oh mom, Jesus. Okay, I get it, I get it, I get it, I get it." But now, of course, like, her voice is in my head (laughs) when I watch these things and I hear myself saying it to my children. And, look, I'm so grateful for that because I think, you know, media is so dangerous what we're being sold and what we're being told are, you know, not usually connected to reality. And so, I do value very much that she was there, you know, making sure that we knew that perspective,

Sid Evans: So, did you grow up in a family of cooks? I mean, was your mom a cook?

Rhiannon Giddens: Mad respect for my mom. She had the every day like, feeding of us and taking care of us while she was working like, 14 jobs, she was not a big fan of cooking, but like, she cooked healthy meals like, black beans and rice, and chili, and sloppy joes, and stuff. She did cook as much as she needed to. But like, my fond memories of cooking are more probably with my grandparents. (laughs) So, when we would have family gatherings like the mac and cheese, the yeast rolls. My grandma made these amazing yeast rolls that I wish I could make today and I'm- I'm going to recreate them one day 'cause I can remember them so well. But, sweet potato pie, you know, these kind of pieces of family gatherings I have a really strong memory of.

Sid Evans: And you're talking about your mother's mother there?

Rhiannon Giddens: Yeah, definitely that side. I have food memories from both sides. My other grandmother would also bake and cook, and I have good memories of her. But like, in terms of like, the real solid Southern cuisine, I have more memories from my mom's side, like, fried fish and okra, and- and stuff like that, that would've been made around any time people gathered, you know, especially that custard mac and cheese. (laughs)

Sid Evans: Ooh, that sounds pretty good.

Rhiannon Giddens: Oh, so good, oh my God. I'm trying to recreate that too. (laughs)

Sid Evans: So, I've seen you post some things about baking and it seems like you're a pretty avid cook yourself. Is that fair to say?

Rhiannon Giddens: I'm a baker, I'm not a cook. Like, I cook because I have to. Again, I'm in the situation of having to cook for my kids, you know, and trying to make healthy meals for them. But, baking is what makes me happy. And, over the lockdown, I was in Ireland. And there's just no biscuits in Ireland. I mean, there are biscuits, but they're cookies, you know. They're not the biscuits that we think of as biscuits. And, they do scones and they're different. And, like, I post biscuits all the time and people say, "Oh, that looks like a good scone." I'm like, "It's not a scone." Or I post a scone and somebody says, "It looks like a bis-, good biscuit," I'm like, "That's not a biscuit," you know. They're very different and what I fell into in the lockdown was trying to figure out why they're different, how they're made, so I had to learn how to make both of them. And, I got really into trying to make a really good biscuit, I became obsessed pretty quickly. (laughs) You know, like, self-raising flour in Ireland is very different from self-rising flour here in the States. So, I had to figure all of that out and I'm still doing it. I'm obsessed. I buy every book on biscuits or any of that kind of stuff I can get and I'm trying different things. Well, what happens when the butter's room temperature? What happens when it's frozen? What happens when you cut it in? What happens when grate it in? I am obsessed. It's a thing. (laughs)

Sid Evans: So, you still haven't arrived at that perfect biscuit yet?

Rhiannon Giddens: Well, I'ma tell you, I've gotten really, really close. I think, I have a biscuit that I'm very, very comfortable with. I actually do it when we're in Airbnbs around, when I'm doing other stuff and we get, end up, I always buy White Lily flour (laughs) and I like, make biscuits. It- It's hilarious. But, it's-

Sid Evans: Oh yeah.

Rhiannon Giddens: ... I'll tell you, the recipe that I use for my fail safe biscuits, like not my ones when I'm experimenting to see what does what, but the ones that I know is gonna deliver an awesome biscuit every time is the Southern Living recipe.

Sid Evans: Oh. (laughs)

Rhiannon Giddens: ... I'm not making that up. 'Cause people ask me all the time like, what, you know, "Share the recipe," so I link to the Southern Living recipe. And, the differences that I do are that I grate... Now, do you grate it in for that one? There was one difference that I made. I think you-

Sid Evans: You do. You fr-

Rhiannon Giddens: Yes.

Sid Evans: ... We freeze the butter and then we grate it in.

Rhiannon Giddens: Right. So, I do, I've been doing that. But, I put the pan in the oven as the oven warms up and it gives me these unbelievable crispy bottoms that are just perfect. And, I use Kerrygold butter. even when I'm in the States, 'cause you can buy Kerrygold butter. Now, Irish butter has a higher milk fat content than American butter and it is absolutely amazing. And I try to find that thick, cultured buttermilk from like Whole Foods or whatever where they sell it in the glass bottles. And so, that is my

perfect biscuit. White Lily self-rising flour, Kerrygold butter, and a really thick, cultured buttermilk from, you know, like a local farm, you cannot lose. they're the most amazing, fluffy, high, crunchy, buttery, amazing goodness. So, the recipe is the Southern Living recipe.

Sid Evans: Oh, I gotta try those tweaks. I like the idea of the pan in the oven to warm it up. That makes a lot of sense.

Rhiannon Giddens: I mean, just the bottoms are so perfect. I, it's just ridiculous. (laughs) It's just ridiculous.

Sid Evans: (laughs) I'm trying that this weekend.

Rhiannon Giddens: Yeah, do it. And like, try that Kerrygold butter. You can get it at most grocery stores now. It's just fail safe, you know. If you follow the directions, grate the butter in, put it back in the freezer for 10 minutes, it's all in the technique is what I try to tell people. Like, you just have to make them to get better at it. That's it, you know you just gotta make them and that's- that's all there is to it. So, yeah, anyway, that's been really fun. (laughs)

Sid Evans: Practice, practice.

Rhiannon Giddens: Yeah, I love it.

Sid Evans: Well, so, Rhiannon, let's talk music for a second. You know, I've heard you say that there was music in your life pretty early on, I mean, like, from the crib. And I know your sister is a wonderful singer. I mean, could everyone in your family sing or was this more just sorta your generation?

Rhiannon Giddens: My dad's side was really like, is hugely musical. So, my grandfather was a bluegrass musician, my uncle was a bluegrass musician, my dad was a musician, my aunt's a singer. Obviously, my sister's a singer. My cousin, my aunt's son is a ridiculous guitar player and composer, and writer. So, it's just kind of like, when we would be together for Christmas and we'd be singing like, four part harmony Christmas carols and stuff. I mean, it was definitely like, that family is full of music and art, and- and stuff, 'cause like, my other cousin's an architect, you know. It's really interesting how you can just kinda see it, you know, manifest in families. My mom's side, I don't know of a lot of music in that side of the family, but She's a real like, a music appreciator and just really very smart about music. And, she played a lot of really, she exposed me to a lot of really interesting things growing up, like Andrés Segovia and, she has a really eclectic taste. So, between the two, it was just kinda music was always around. And so, I always singing with my sister or with my dad and my mom, we would be singing like, Peter, Paul, and Mary songs (laughs), and stuff in the car.

Rhiannon Giddens: It's so cliched. But, yeah, it was just kind of part of the fabric of life. I never thought about being a professional musician. It was just like, "Oh yeah, I sing with my sister, I sing with my dad." My mom would never allow us to like, do these star search things, you know, these talent show searches. She'd never let us sing. We would have to go like, do a kata from karate. (laughs) It was hilarious. I don't know why we would like, wait in line and then we would go up there, and do our kata, and they would be like, "Thanks, but no thanks," then we'd go home again. But she'd never let us do our Whitney Houston songs or whatever, I think she was just a little bit nervous about... And she was right to be, I

think, a little nervous about, you know, what does it mean for a kid to get up on and perform for something like that, you know. It's just, my parents were very much like, not into that. They saw that we had talent and could sing. And so, instead of doing that, like they put me in a youth chorus, a Greensboro youth chorus, you know. So, I sang in a choir and-

Sid Evans: Right.

Rhiannon Giddens: ... and stuff like that. So, I am grateful for that, 'cause I feel like it kind of allowed me to find music in- in my own way and- and in my own kind of context, rather than, I think when you kind of get on stage and you're like, "Oh, people are clapping for that thing that I just did," it kind of skews, why you're doing it, if you're not careful, if it's too young when that happens. So, I'm, I am grateful even though I was (laughs), I was always grumbly about (laughs) not getting to do my-

Sid Evans: Not at the time.

Rhiannon Giddens: ... my Whitney Houston song.

Sid Evans: Sounds like Mom knew what she was doing.

Rhiannon Giddens: Yeah, they both did, I have to say both she and my dad. They were very smart about it.

Sid Evans: (laughs) So, Rhiannon, you're known as a banjo player, though it seems like you can play just about anything. I'm guessing that in North Carolina, you probably heard a lot of banjo played by white musicians, I mean, maybe Bo Monroe or Flatt and Scruggs, or people like that. When did you first realize the banjo was a traditional African instrument?

Rhiannon Giddens: Yeah. I mean, I would've definitely heard it as a bluegrass instrument, sure. I never even heard the old-timey Clawhammer style until I was in my 20s and I'd come back home from Ohio, which is where I went to school for opera. And, I came back home and I started contra dancing in the area, in Greensboro, and there was all these old-time bands. So, I was, I started hearing Round Peak style banjo, old-time banjo playing and I was like, that Clawhammer stuff, I was like, "Whoa, what is that? That sounds so amazing." So, I was attracted to the sound immediately. And then, just gradually, I can't remember what the lightning strike was. I th-, I think I became aware of CeCe Conway's book, African Banjo Echoes in Appalachia, I think. She had interviewed and- and explored these living Black banjo players, in the North Carolina and Virginia Piedmont. And so, I think that, I started to know about it pretty soon after I started getting into it. And then, it was just like, an explosion of wanting to know more, and I just kept learning more, and more, and more. And, now I know that it was invented in the Caribbean and it has all these African ancestors, but it really is truly an American instrument, a Black American instrument. And, the more I learn, the more fascinating it is. It's just such an incredible history.

(Instrumental music break of Biscuits and Jam theme)

Voice over from Sid: I'll be back with more from Rhiannon Giddens after the break.

(AD BREAK)

(Instrumental music break of Biscuits and Jam theme)

Voice over from Sid: Welcome back to Biscuits & Jam, from Southern Living. I'm Sid Evans, and today I'm talking with Rhiannon Giddens.

Sid Evans: So, you had a mentor named Joe Thompson, and I don't know if that's the right word to describe him. But, when did you first meet him and what did that relationship mean to you in your development as a musician?

Rhiannon Giddens: I first met him pretty soon in my sort of journey. I met in 2005, I think, 2004, 2005, somewhere- somewhere around there. And, yeah, I mean, he was a mentor, he was a teacher. Me and the other original Carolina Chocolate Drops, Don Flemons and Justin Robinson, you know, we started going down and kinda learning his music. And so, it was a real apprenticeship, really, in the way that kinda almost never happens anymore where you just sit with somebody and you play music with them. And you kind of absorb their just musicality, and their rhythm, and their pieces of them. (laughs) It's just so different than playing with a recording. All three of us were kind of at the beginnings of our journeys with old-time music when we started to play with Joe, so it really changed foundationally how we look at the music. It's not like we had been playing for 10 years and then we sat, and learned some of his tunes. It was like, we literally became old-time musicians by playing with him. And, that's really significant, I think. I'm grateful for that because he was, you know, a living link to a almost completely vanished tradition that is really important in American music, the Black string band tradition. I mean, it was just everywhere for many, many, many years, many, many, many decades, and is foundational in the shaping of American music. But it's something that's almost completely forgotten today. And he was like a living link to that. I mean, it's incredible. I can't really, the older I get, the more I realize how lucky we were to have Joe. I mean, he was 86 when we started playing with him and he was delighted to see it being passed on within the Black community, he'd play with anybody who'd come to his house, you know, Black, white, whatever. But, it was, you know, significant for him 'cause he was the last one in his family to play that music and to see us pick it up, you know, I think really made him happy.

Sid Evans: What's an example of a song that you would've sung with him?

Rhiannon Giddens: Oh, we- we did stuff that was, like a lot people would know, like, something like, I Shall Not Be Moved, you know, or Lights in the Valley. And then, there are things that were kinda really not so common, like Old Corn Likker or Dona Got a Ramblin' Mind. Then he would have really unique versions of stuff like John Henry, which is a very, very old widespread tune, Polly Put Your Kettle On, so it was a lot of the real basic kind of pan-Southern tunes. But, he- he always had a real unique spin on them, you know. You just know when you hear it, that's a Joe Thompson tune.

Sid Evans: How does one of those go? I mean, were these songs that became part of the Carolina Chocolate Drops catalog or were they sort of unique to to him?

Rhiannon Giddens: Oh, no, we- we played I mean, that was part of the beginning of the Carolina Chocolate Drops was like, spreading Joe's music and talking about Joe Thompson, and talking about early Black string bands. I mean, so, we played a lot of his stuff. You know, it was on the first record. I think the first record that we ever put out was Dona Got a Ramblin' Mind, it was called that, you know. (singing Dona got a Ramblin' Mind/ Dona got a ramblin' mind/ Dona got a ramblin' mind/ D ona got a ramblin'

mind). And, you know, you kinda think that's a woman, Dona, but, you know, it's his dog. (laughs) You know, 'cause when you get to the second verse, it goes, "Dona done jumped the fence, /gone on down the line" you know. (laughs) But, that's the kind of stuff that's just so great, you know, you're like, "Tell us, tell us about Dona," "Well, Dona was my coon dog," you're like, "Oh my God." (laughing)

Sid Evans: (laughs) Oh, that is so great. I mean, so, was this music that really came out of just North Carolina? Was it unique to that part of North Carolina? Or, are there examples of this Black string band music kind of all around the South?

Rhiannon Giddens: Well, the thing is that Black string band music, string band music in general, like the banjo's a African American instrument, right? It was invented in the 1600s and it only makes that transition to white culture in the 1800s. So, it is looked at as some sort of kind of foreign object for a long time, you know, when you read people writing about the banjo, like white people, like Europeans writing about the banjo. But then, in the 1800s, you start seeing a transition and a transfer. So, it's happening in countless areas where Blacks and whites are living, you know, in the same area, it's happening in the mountains. 'Cause up until The Great Migration, like, up to one in four in the mountains were Black, It was particularly like, in spaces in Kentucky and West Virginia. And,you had string band music up in New England. You had it all over, what was then the United States it was kind of the backbone of the entertainment (laughs), what was there to do? Dancing. (laughs) you need a string band and a lot of times these people were enslaved, Black people were seen as being naturally musical for various racist reasons. And so, there's this kind of thing that's- that's happening and- and the banjo is sort making that transfer in the 1800s, and it, and it becomes a Minstrel instrument. It becomes like a stage instrument and a commercial instrument. And so, it's, all of this stuff is happening all at once. But, meanwhile, there's always these string bands happening, and then you start seeing white string bands, and then there's mixed string bands. But, what happens is that you just have regional variation of sort of a pan-Southern thing, these songs are kinda going back and forth to- to Minstrelsy, back to folk music, back and forth. people travel and they take the music with them. So, what happens in the- the lead up into the beginning of the recording industry in the '20s is the shift in demographics because Black people are moving out of the South because of white supremacy. (laughs) And they're moving in great numbers to different urban areas. And so, the tastes are changing. But then, also, there's this idea of, you know, creating a- a white mythical narrative of this sort of unblemished white Appalachia that is the heart of, you know, American culture, which is not true, right? You know, they weren't that isolated, there was a mixture, there was all these different cultures who were there-

Sid Evans: Right.

Rhiannon Giddens: ... that go into it. And so, when people start recording stuff, they start recording white people doing string band music and Black people doing blues, and kind of create this artificial division where there was still like, a lot of crossover and mixing that was going on, really in reality, but you start just recording this. And what's recorded is remembered, so the Black string band starts to die out because, if you wanna go get recorded... Whatever, you know, anyway, so this is, I'm trying to encapsulate it. But, you woulda had like, all of these people everywhere doing different versions of these songs. Joe's people were in the Piedmont. And, there's a different feel to like, Piedmont music than to, say, music in the western part of North Carolina or the eastern part, they're all different styles and things. And Joe was just part of a family that, for some reason, there was this kind of hold over where all the different communities around had sort of abandoned that idea of community dancing. Community dances, white square dances, Black square dances, and there's one community dance band that plays the music for everybody, and that was the Thompson Family Band. And this would've been the case all

over the place like, a generation or two before, but, and it started dying out. And, for some reason, in Mebane, it continued into say World War II with the Thompson Family. And then, after the war, his brother moved away and there was, the dances kinda weren't happening anymore, and then he starts to become a performer when he's rediscovered. But, we were just lucky that we had Joe, because it's very, it could've very easily died out,

Sid Evans: Yeah.

Rhiannon Giddens: ... in his family too if he hadn't picked up the fiddle, for example, or whatever, if his family had moved away. So, we're really lucky. It was just this link to such a vibrant tradition. I gave a little snapshot of it, but it, can't really dig into here in the podcast. But, there's just so much to learn and so much richness to- to that music. So, yeah, it's- it's great to have that connection.

Sid Evans: Mm, what a story. Well, Rhiannon, I wanna switch to opera for a second. I was very fortunate to see the premiere of Omar,

Rhiannon Giddens: Oh, cool.

Sid Evans: ... the opera that you wrote, when it premiered in Charleston. And, the story is about a Muslim scholar from Senegal or what's now Senegal, who was captured and enslaved, and brought to the city of Charleston. And, he ended up escaping to another plantation in North Carolina and then he wrote a book about his journey, and his faith, which makes it an incredibly unique document. When did you first become aware of this story?

Rhiannon Giddens: It was at Spoleto, actually, I was performing there with my band. And, Nigel and Nicole, who are head of, you know, uh, the artistic programming there, asked me, "Have you ever heard of Omar ibn Said?" And I was like, "Who?" (laughs) they hipped me to it and I looked him up. And- And then, when the opportunity came, I think Nicole sent me this email and was just like, "What do you think about writing an opera about Omar?" And I was like, "Let's do it," you know, I didn't know what I was doing. I didn't know what I was getting into. But, it's such an important story. I mean, he's, it's the only document that we have of an enslaved man writing his story in Arabic. He was literate and he was incredibly intelligent, and he was 37 when he was captured. I mean, it's really hard to imagine. 37 years old and he lives to his 80s, in a totally foreign land. so, it was just a really intriguing story and I, and I didn't know what I was getting myself into, thankfully, (laughs) or I would've said no, you know. But I, that is one of my things is I throw myself into the unknown, you know, and it makes me really figure out what I'm doing. And it's been an incredible experience of, you know, five years of- of stress and (laughs), and also joy. There's been a lot of real creativity that has come around doing this project and trying to sink into his story.

Sid Evans: Well, the opera was incredible and such an experience to see that. It almost seems like your whole career kind of led you to Omar. I mean, you studied opera when you were at Oberlin and you've also spent a lot of time studying slave narratives, and putting them to music. What was it about the form of opera that made it such a great vehicle for this story?

Rhiannon Giddens: Well, it's such a massive story, you know, when you think about it. It's really massive and opera can hold that. Opera is an art form that can hold a massive story when you think about the stories that are told, that we know of already. They're just very high drama and high emotional content.

And so, the idea of music telling the whole story, but in conjunction with drama, in conjunction with the production, you know, the visual of the production, which are, were so incredibly strong for this production of Omar, and told their own story, their own piece of the story, you know. It's just, it's an art form where everything comes together, all the art comes together, we had dancers. And, it was the ability to really engage with this on that level, His story deserves that because it is so, it is so massive. And all of the things that I've done leading up to it, yeah, it was kind of interesting how much of it... 'Cause I wrote the libretto, how much of that libretto just sort of poured out of me, it was from all of the study that I've done. I didn't even have to think about a lot, you know, the middle passage, just like, just came out, you know. And so, yeah, it does kinda feel like it was everything that I was doing (laughs) in my life kinda led me to that moment. It's really interesting. Even Joe Thompson is represented, you know, we do Old Corn Likker is the square dance and those calls that that singer is singing are Joe's calls. It was really important to me to put DNA that was tied to real people, you know, in the African American musical community. Like, the opening melody is from a scrap of transcription of Black people in Jamaica who we know were Muslim, we don't know anything else about them. But, you know, they were singing this- this melody and it was notated down in the late 1600s. Wherever I could put those Easter eggs, you know, I did, because I was like, this is not about me and what I'm doing, this is about how much can I put our anonymous voices in that where I- I just thought it was really important to do that. And so, I don't know what Joe would think, (laughs) if he was able to see this, if he was still alive. Uh, he would probably be a little nonplussed. But, I'd like to think that he would, he would be tickled by hearing an orchestra play Old Corn Likker, you know, and to see these people doing the dance. I mean, I thought the chorus, like, I actually worked with them to do the dance we had a lesson, I like to call it the dance. I taught them how to, how to square dance, you know. And, they just looked so real and so good. And, I wanted to make sure that these different aspects of Black culture that people don't know were part of our culture were represented in this, in his story as- as we think about how Omar was coming into this world that he had never seen before. What part of that world I wanted make sure was- was that.

Sid Evans: Well, it's just such a spectacle and it's a beautiful piece of music. And I'm so glad it's going on the road. I think it's gonna be in a number of cities, so I hope people get the chance to go see it. It's really something special.

Rhiannon Giddens: Oh, thank you. I'm really delighted to hear the you know the response has been really strong. And, it will be in Chapel Hill, in, February of 2023, so, that's the closest Southern (laughs) performance, at this point. So that's exciting. Yeah, but, it'll be in a lot of cities around. Yeah.

Sid Evans: That's great. Well, so, Rhiannon, I interviewed Amythyst Kiah not long ago. And, I was talking to her about your collaboration on Our Native Daughters, which also included Allison Russell and Leyla McCalla. And, I'm just wondering if you can take me back to the first time that that group sang together and how that happened?

Rhiannon Giddens: I was in charge of this project for the Smithsonian Folkways label. and I had this idea of investigating and excavating this- this music around the time of slavery, and brought in those ladies who, I knew each one of them obviously, in different ways. And, we just got together to make the record. And, it was just so incredible and amazing that this idea of becoming a band (laughs), you know, to- to tour it and stuff just kind of came out of making the record. It was not my in- intention, you know. It was just so strong and we all play instruments, and it was just like, why not? Why can't we do this? And, it's just really magic. There's no getting around how magical it was to- to play together. And, that project I think was a really important project just on it's own. But, to see, I think it also kinda lifted people in a timing that was just really perfect for their careers. You know, I think it opened the doors, especially for

Amythyst and Allison, I think it made a lot of people aware of them in a way that really set- set up things for them to ju-... I mean, they just took, they just took off, you know. (laughs) It's incredible. I'm just so, I'm so pleased, I mean, it's not like, it's, Native Daughters is the reason that they're taking off, but it was, it was a great kind of preparation pad, I think. And, they just, yeah, they're doing so amazing.

Sid Evans: Well, I hope y'all will get back together and maybe do some more touring 'cause it's a really special when that group comes together.

Rhiannon Giddens: It is. And- And- And I know that when people have had a moment to like, do their second records and cement their solo careers, I know that we'll- we'll all come back together. We do have a performance at Carnegie Hall in Stern Auditorium in November of this year. And, that's- that's really exciting. So, we're really gonna gear up and- and blow that out. It's gonna be awesome. (laughs) We're gonna blow out Carnegie Hall. (laughing)

Sid Evans: (laughs) I have no doubt. Well, so you won a Grammy last year for your album, They're Calling Me Home. And, there's a wonderful song on that album called Waterbound where you keep coming back to North Carolina. What's the story behind that?

Rhiannon Giddens: It's an old song. It's an old song from like, the '20s and it's about a flood. And, I've known it for a long time and it just reflected how I was feeling, you know. I was locked down in Ireland, surrounded by water, couldn't go back to my, my birth home. And, it was so funny 'cause I sent it to the head of my label, David Bither, and he was like, "Did you write this?" And I was like, "No, (laughs) it's just so appropriate," you know. It was just like, perfect for that moment of like, I just wanna be home. I just wanna be home and I can't be home right now. and we did that with a- a- a great… It was me and, of course, Francesco, my partner, but we we found this really amazing groove with this Congolese guitarist who lives in Ireland, who was also locked down in Ireland too. He couldn't go home, to where he was from either. And so, there's three of us expats in this farmhouse in- in the wilds of Ireland, like, performing this song about being homesick, you know. (laughs) It was just, it was really, it was very meta. (laughing)

Rhiannon's song, "Waterbound" comes in and we hear the following at full volume then fades out:
River's up and I can't get across
River's up and I can't get across
River's up and I can't get across
Before the water rises
Waterbound and I can't get home
Waterbound and I can't get home
Waterbound and I can't get home
Down in North Carolina

Sid Evans: Well, it's a great song and I love the North Carolina reference. You could feel the, you know, kind of, I don't know, longing for home in that song. (laughs)

Rhiannon Giddens: Yeah. It was, it was very real. (laughing)

Sid Evans: Well, so, when you're not writing operas or producing albums, you're also working on children's books. And you've got some projects in the works and I- I just wanted to know what has that creative outlet done for you that you can't really find in producing music?

Rhiannon Giddens: Well, that was kind of a pandemic pivot, you know. It was like we were at home and I had, I had performed this, well, performed. I had made a video with- (laughs) with Yo-Yo Ma of this song that I wrote for Juneteenth called Build A House. And, somebody on Twitter was like, "That should be a kid's book." And I was like, "Huh, that's a really interesting idea. (laughs) I've always wanted to write kids books," you know. And so, I got a- a contract with Candlewick Press who is a- an amazing children's book publisher. It's all they do is kids books. And, the editor, Karen Lotz, she's just amazing. So, they really saw the potential in Build A House as lyrics, turning it into a book. And so, the first two books of that contract are actually two songs, Build A House and then another one that I wrote that'll be coming out in a couple years. But, the thing about this book is... 'Cause it's coming out this October. I have a copy in my hands, finally, and it's just really beautiful. The illustrator's Monica Makai and it was just one of those things where it's a way to connect to another artist in a really amazing way. So, she just, she read the words and I guess she did her research on me because the book is full of banjos and fiddles, it's amazing. She came up with this story that just fit the words so beautifully and illustrated it. And, it's just this little family and this little girl, and it was such an incredible experience to look at somebo-, another artist's response to my art. And, now that that'll be something that I can give to kids, that, you know, it'll be in libraries hopefully and another way for that song, and that message, that I've been working on for the last 15 years, to live. And so, you know, as I get older, I think are there ways for this message to live in other art forms, you know, not just me on a stage, live, but as a book or as a video, as a, as a podcast, you know. And that was kind of an amazing (laughs), it was an amazing just thing all together. So, I'm very, very proud of that.

Sid Evans: Well, I love the art. I've seen you post, uh, some examples of it and, uh, can't wait to see that when it comes out this fall.

Rhiannon Giddens: Yeah, it's- it's really beautiful.

Sid Evans: Well, Rhiannon, I just have one more question for you, what does it mean to you to be Southern?

Rhiannon Giddens: It means, you know, embracing the fullness of everything that I am, 'cause I- I feel like I represent what the South is, which is a mixture of things. And I think that's where our strength is. And, as I grew up as a mixed race person in a society that demands that you check a box, right... I have many memories of like, you know, do I check white, do I check Black, do I check other? (laughs) Like, none of these things are true, you know. As I tried to make sense of who I am, really the music kinda rescued me and my identity as not only a musician, but a Southern musician and a North Carolinian musician. And, the music shows all of the influences mixing and becoming this really beautiful thing. And- And so, I could kind of step into that identity of I'm a result of a lot of years of hard things, a lot of years of beautiful things, and- and ultimately that mix is what being Southern is.

Sid Evans: Well, Rhiannon Giddens, thank you so much for being on Biscuits and Jam.

Rhiannon Giddens: Thank you for having me. And now I really wanna go make some biscuits. (laughing)

Sid Evans: Yeah, keep working on those, okay?

Rhiannon Giddens: I will. No- No worries there. Let me know how it goes with your pan in the oven.

Sid Evans: I'm gonna try it this weekend. (laughs)

Sid Voice Over: Thanks for listening to my conversation with Rhiannon Giddens. You can check out her latest album, They're Calling Me Home, wherever you get your music. Make sure to visit rhiannongiddens.com for tour dates, music and more. Southern Living is based in Birmingham, AL. Be sure to follow Biscuits & Jam on Apple Podcasts, Spotify or wherever you listen. And we'd love your feedback. If you could rate this podcast and leave us a review we'd really appreciate it. You can also find us online at southernliving.com/biscuitsandjam Make sure to come back here next week for my conversation with country star Walker Hayes.