

2024 Alabama Humanities Fellows

Something to say

We have tossed around quite a few definitions for our Alabama Humanities Fellows awards since we first began bestowing them, in 1989. We've gone the highfalutin route, proclaiming them for individuals who have made "exemplary contributions to public understanding and valuing of the humanities." Other times, we've streamlined that to "people who make Alabama a smarter, kinder, more vibrant place to live." Both are true. But what we wind up saying most often now is that, at its heart, this honor is for Alabamians who challenge us to examine what it means to be human. And who help us see the humanity in each other. That description certainly applies to this year's roster of Alabama Humanities Fellows.

Brittany Howard. Jason Isbell. Rick Bragg. Roy Wood Jr.

Two musicians. An author. A humorist. Standard-bearing storytellers, all. These are four Alabamians who have been shaped by their deep roots in this state. Howard's and Isbell's rural northern Alabama. Wood Jr.'s West End of Birmingham. Bragg's Piedmont foothills. Yet they also have each, in their own way, done some shaping of their own. As the following profiles reveal, this year's honorees know how to deliver hard truths while still seeking what Cassandra King calls "the commonality in our stories." These Fellows urge us to look beyond ourselves, at a past and a present that aren't always tinted rose. "Look close," as Caleb Johnson writes in his essay on Jason Isbell. "It might not feel comfortable, but I promise you'll see the beauty among the blight."



Brittany Howard | 2024 Alabama Humanities Fellow

STAYING HIGH ON THE MUSIC

by Charlotte Teague

On a quiet evening while driving on a dirt road in rural Alabama, my mother mentioned Brittany Howard.

“Who is she?” I asked.

“She’s a singer from Athens, and I think she’s so pretty.”

“What’s her music like?”

My mother looked at me, and said, “It’s loud, but it whispers; it’s outrageous, but beautiful.”

This short conversation started my fascination with Howard, the Grammy-winning, song-writing, free-living, and soul-stirring musician whose Athens upbringing took place not far from my own in Hillsboro, Alabama. I quickly came to understand that her music tells the story of our shared Tennessee Valley homeland. Where, as Howard sings, the “tomatoes are green and cotton is white,” a place of “honeysuckle tangled up in kudzu vine,” but also where racial tensions persist: “I’m one drop of three-fifths, right?”

“The magic of much of Howard’s music encapsulates all that we know and love about northern Alabama.”

In 1854, Henry David Thoreau composed his most famous work, *Walden*, an artistic reflection about simple living and a full life: *I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and*

see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.

These famous words can also characterize the life of Brittany Howard. Like Thoreau, she, too, wants *to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life*. And she knows all too well what Thoreau meant when he wrote he wanted *to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it.*

With Howard, there’s always a striving for joy, even amidst the meanness of life. When you consider that she lost her childhood home to a lightning strike and her sister, Jamie, to a rare eye disease, you can understand where a lyric like “you gotta hold on” comes from.

Brittany Howard teaches us how to “Stay High” on the magic of the music. The Limestone County native has become a hometown hero for her music that shows the world who we are here in the Tennessee Valley.

From her famed start with the Alabama Shakes to her solo career, her music is a magic carpet — moving audiences through clouds of time and joy, sorrow and pain. Telling stories of humanity, love, grit, and home, awakening souls and opening eyes to the sky, to nature, to abundance, and to living without regret, reminding us that there is a rainbow — a promise of a better life for us all on the other side of the alarm clock, the time clock, and tomorrow. Quieting that voice that wants to be loud and torture us about all that is not the best in our lives, but pushing us to be our best selves, asking the question in song: “What Now?,” believing and not believing, and



hearing the answer in another song, “I’ll prove it to you.” This is how Howard shares herself and hugs us through her music.

Her music shows that we are connected to one another. There may be mountains, miles, and time between us, Howard concedes to someone in “Short and Sweet.” But there’s also plenty to bind us. As she sings in “You Ain’t Alone” — “we really ain’t that different, you and me.”

The magic of much of Howard’s music encapsulates all that we know and love about northern Alabama. The music is front porch waving, hop scotch stepping, moonshine drinking, tambourine playing, old story time telling, Athens State fiddling, and meeting on the street blowing car horns: hugging and holding up traffic.

It is love wrapped in lyrics — in a gift box for us all to hear and behold. It blesses my heart and yours, and the music beckons us to come closer and sit around a warm fire of loving and living life. Her music uplifts

and transforms through the power of all that we know about our past; after all, according to Howard, “History Repeats.” As a daughter of northern Alabama, I, too, understand what this means; but her music reminds me of possibilities, so I touch the music to dream.

Yes, like Howard, I, too, just want to “Stay High.” To “smile and laugh and jump and clap, and yell and holler and just feel great.” And holding on to that joy is easier when you listen to Brittany Howard. Her guitar, the voice, the lyrics — all fresh air, sunlight, innocence, and fireworks. The music keeps us hopeful. She tells the stories — her stories and our stories — through her sound, and we listen with our hearts, minds, and souls, seeking connection and freedom. It’s magic, and it’s how we stay high, together.

Charlotte Teague, Ph.D., is an associate professor of English at Alabama A&M University.

WHERE DO YOU COME FROM?

by Caleb Johnson

When I was a student at The University of Alabama, seeing bands was an aspirational experience. Not because I harbored any illusion of becoming a musician. I knew back then that I wanted to make something, and whatever resulted would likely have its foundation in my home state because, well, that was all I really understood of the world. I never dared to call this dream art; nobody where I come from made art. However, a relative noticed this urge and introduced me to the Drive-By Truckers. Their songs cracked open my head, my heart. In particular, the narrative-driven tunes written by Jason Isbell, who was in the midst of a well-documented tenure with the band. I became even more captivated by them when I learned that he, like myself, came from an unincorporated rural community in north Alabama.

“That’s what Isbell’s songs say: Look close, it might not feel comfortable, but I promise you’ll see beauty among the blight.”

Green Hill, where Isbell comes from, has the advantage of being located near Muscle Shoals and its rich musical history, though there was also a time not so long ago when said history was forgotten outside the Quad City area. Before the documentary *Muscle Shoals*, before Isbell became a movie star himself. I imagine a younger

Isbell had to work through the geography of answering the loaded question — where do you come from? — by first hoping someone knew where was Muscle Shoals or, God forbid, Green Hill. When I was growing up in Arley, a lakeside community in Winston County, classmates used to say they were from Jasper. It was easier to lay claim to the nearest town of any size rather than explain where was Arley exactly. Or better yet *what* was Arley, and what did it mean to come from there.

It is impossible for me to consider what it means to be human without considering place. I’m not an academic, despite what my day job implies; I’m a fiction writer, which means I put stock in symbols and rely on magical thinking. It seems reasonable to me that we share more than just proximity with the dirt upon which we trod and the air that we breathe. There must be something happening at the cellular level. I can’t help thinking that Jason Isbell would not be Jason Isbell were he not from Green Hill. I know were it not for his origins there he never would’ve written the masterpiece “Decoration Day,” which tells the story of a local feud between the Lawsons and the Hills. I suspect Isbell could’ve continued writing cinematic songs such as this one for as long as he wished. But he didn’t just do that, because he is an artist, and being an artist means refusing to settle for what comes easy, remaining curious about the world, and striving to connect with others, as well as your past and present self.

Isbell certainly refused to settle when writing his breakout solo album *Southeastern*, and it catapulted him into popular culture. I remember once, not long after Isbell left the Truckers, seeing him play at a bar in Tuscaloosa best known for yellowhammer cocktails served in plastic cups. You could count on two hands the number of people in the room that night. Hearing Isbell’s songs live was, for me, like grabbing ahold of an



electric fence. Later, I felt protective over his growing popularity, especially as the conversation around his music urged a reckoning with rural, white working-class Alabama. A reckoning that never happened, at least not in the arts, but one that reaffirmed our stories matter.

Of course they do. To believe otherwise is to buy wholesale a lie, to accept that some bogeyman is to blame for our current socioeconomic station, for our jealousy, for our bitterness, for our lack of self-worth — rather than look in a mirror. That’s what Isbell’s songs say: Look close. It might not feel comfortable, but I promise you’ll see beauty among the blight.

There was a time, not so long ago, when it was much harder to find complex representations of rural Southern folks in our culture’s nooks and crannies, let alone out in the open. There was no “Outfit” or “Speed

Trap Town” or “White Beretta,” or the many other working-class songs spread across Isbell’s eight studio albums of original material. Forget stories about what it means to stay and make a life, which Isbell has done personally and professionally.

Not so long ago, if you as a Southerner felt, say, apart — then you wanted to leave. You dreamed of getting far, far away. You had to go searching for a place where you felt like you belonged. Many understandably still do. But thanks to artists like Jason Isbell, it’s a little easier to imagine that place right here, then work to make it so.

Caleb Johnson is the author of the novel *Treeborne* (Picador), which received an honorable mention for the Southern Book Prize. Currently, he teaches creative writing at the University of South Alabama.

Rick Bragg | 2024 Alabama Humanities Fellow

HIS GRITTY GRANDEUR

by Cassandra King

In the prologue of Rick Bragg’s stunning memoir, *All Over but the Shoutin’*, Rick writes that it’s not an especially important book, simply the story of a strong woman, a tortured man, and three sons who lived “hemmed in by thin cotton and ragged history in northeastern Alabama.” Rick claims that his is a story that could be told by anyone, with this addendum: anyone with an absentee father who drank away his finer nature and a mother who sacrificed so her sons could rise above the poverty and degradation of their upbringing. Although the author admits that it’s a story that needed to be told — deserved to be told — he argues it isn’t really important to anyone but his family and the others in their orbit who lived it, friend or foe.

I, for one, beg to differ. And I can say with a clear-eyed certainty that I speak on behalf of a vast multitude of devoted Rick Bragg readers. I would even argue that Rick’s works aren’t just important, they’re the essence of why we need the bond of storytelling today more than ever.

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Rick wrote *Ava’s Man* as the story of his maternal grandparents. In his endorsement, Larry McMurtry called it a book of a certain “gritty grandeur.” High praise indeed, from a master. To me, McMurtry

was acknowledging that Rick’s works aren’t merely picturesque, tragicomic tales of those who have been called hillbillies, peckerwoods, rednecks, even po’ white trash — the mill workers, cotton pickers, bootleggers, tenant farmers, and vagabonds dragging their ragtag families here and there, chasing the dream of a better life. Nor are they stories for the holier-than-thou to relish, with smug gratitude that their families never faced such degrading circumstances. Gritty and grim, true; but beyond that, these tales reveal the steely courage it takes to overcome even the most difficult obstacles life throws our way. And the grandeur? That comes in the telling, the magnificent tribute paid to those unheard voices by giving them a venue to have their say, to tell their stories.

This was made true for me in a whole new way when I first met Rick Bragg. Many years ago, my husband Pat and I visited him at his mother’s farmhouse near Jacksonville, Alabama. Pat had received an advance copy of *Shoutin’*, which moved him so deeply he not only endorsed the book but also sent flowers to Rick’s mother, Margaret. I brought her half a chocolate cake (another story, for another time). Just as Pat and I arrived, Rick came varooming up the driveway in a racy sports car, his arm hanging out the window. As soon as he slung himself out of the car and drawled a greeting, I knew him. We’d never met, but — as we say in the South — I knew his people.

The lower Alabama of wiregrass, peanut farms, and sandy fields where I was raised is a different world than Rick’s Appalachian foothills. Our vernacular differs, but we still understand each other. Both of us have eaten purple hulls, tea cakes, and field-dressed quail. We have kin who were washed in the blood of the Lamb; we celebrate buck dancing, banjo picking, and the Crimson Tide. There is a commonality in our stories, in the way



the past has formed who we are and how we got here. No Southern storyteller can truly tell the tales of his or her life without delving into the past.

Rick Bragg's own works are shaped by a past that turned him into the writer he became. At one point, he was urged to dig deeper into his father's life by the great Mississippi writer, Willie Morris: "My boy," Morris said, "there is no place you can go that [your father] will not be."

Those words struck me like a thunderbolt. They say all there is to be said about the past, and why none of us ever truly escapes it. It is a part of who we are, as a people, a community, and a nation. We are compelled to look at our own history through the lives of our

people — and to share and listen to others' stories, too. Storytelling enables us to form a common bond, to understand each other better, and to look more deeply into our lives. Rick says that he tells his stories mainly for "one more glimpse into a vanishing culture for the people who found themselves inside such stories, the people who shook my hand [after reading my books] and said, 'Son, you stole my story.'"

Yes, son, you did. And mine, too.

Cassandra King is an Alabama native, an award-winning author, and an Alabama Humanities Fellow.

Roy Wood Jr. | 2024 Alabama Humanities Fellow

MAKE US LAUGH, MAKE US THINK

by Jeffrey Melton

Comedy is serious business. Roy Wood Jr. understands that basic fact quite well; he is a formidable comedian because he is a serious man.

The Birmingham native has often discussed his indebtedness to his father, who devoted his professional life as a journalist to the civil rights struggle. Wood's respect for his father is best illustrated by how he summarizes his father's commitment: "If it was Black and it was strife, he was embedded there." Though the career differences between father and son are significant, Roy Wood Jr.'s work is equally embedded in reporting on the ongoing racial strife in America. His method is clear: "If I can get you to laugh at it, then I can get you to listen." The message comes through time and again, and hope for a better, more empathetic world can be found in the laughter of those of us willing to listen.

"For serious-minded humorists like Roy Wood Jr., laughter is often tinged with pain, and therein lies its vital importance and its undeniable power."

All humor arises from the recognition of incongruity. And that's why America is the funniest nation on the planet. Our humor arises from a peculiar cultural values

system that teeters on a democratic idea of equality, one that often walks hand in hand with outrageous inequalities. The set-up goes like this: On the one hand, the United States grants equal freedom to all individuals. On the other hand, the preceding statement is simply not true. The distance between our aspirations and our day-to-day actions makes for a very slippery banana peel, indeed.

The cultural discomfort caused by this basic incongruity has defined American humor for generations. The disconnect between beautifully noble ideals and a less-than-ideal reality is both tragic and comic. Its persistence has created plenty of room for comedians to draw laughter from Americans who too often seem willing to accept failure but who nonetheless persistently dream of a better world. For serious-minded humorists like Roy Wood Jr., laughter is often tinged with pain, and therein lies its vital importance and its undeniable power. When Wood makes us laugh, the goal is not only to soothe pain in the short term but also to initiate change for the long term.

There is no way I can do justice to any segment from Wood's work, but I hope one quick example will indicate the ways he has worked to make us laugh and think. In his 2021 special *Imperfect Messenger*, Wood makes comic references to examples of American popular culture that feel like they have, as he puts it, the "residue of racism on it." He observes, for example, that the hyper-presence of American flags suggests something uncomfortable. If he encounters a scene with an abundance of flags, he cannot help but worry that "there's a little too much freedom in this space." This great American joke plays with our tensions because, quite simply, it implies an uncomfortable fact: "Freedom" is often expressed most loudly by those who have only their own freedom in mind. In some



instances, flags may send a message that goes beyond, or even against, a genuine patriotic expression. Wood, then, poses a simple but provocative question: “How many American flags equal one Confederate flag?”

That is a funny line. It challenges any simplistic notion of American values as fully shared. Life in America has never been that simple. The power of the joke resides in its structure. It is a question that has no answer, but it nonetheless forces some reckoning from the audience. We laugh, but we must also think about it. Go ahead.

Wood’s raucously funny material has already brought much laughter to Americans who need it. More significantly, his capacity to mock false cultural assumptions forces us to face the incongruities that too often undermine the bold promise of America. Unlike tragedy, however, comedy asserts an expectation for a better world — one where we learn from our past,

rather than repeat it. His sensitivity to the hardships that define so many moments in American life shines through in his humor and so does his hopefulness.

Roy Wood Jr. has earned success as a humorist, but much work remains. As he has noted: “I think my father would be proud, but I think he’d be even prouder if I go up there and make sure that I’m talking about something real. Because when you have the microphone, you better have something to say.”

Of that, there is no doubt: For those willing to listen, Roy Wood Jr. has something to say.

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