

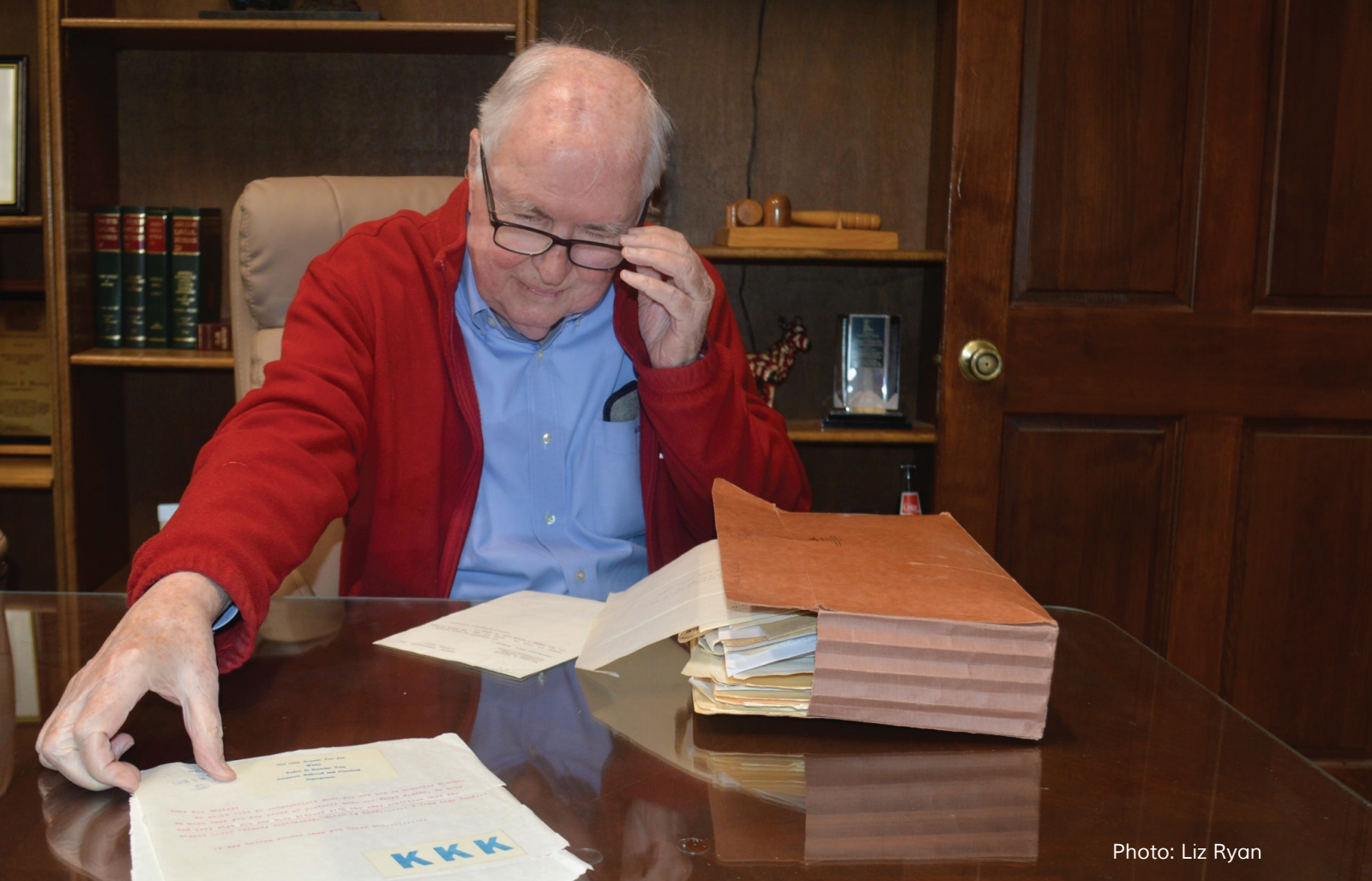


Photo: Liz Ryan

Bill Baxley | 2026 Alabama Humanities Fellow

LIBERTY AND JUSTICE FOR ALL

By Anil A. Mujumdar

Crafting a tribute to William Joseph “Bill” Baxley II — including his tenure as Alabama attorney general and his voluminous professional achievements over sixty-six years of law practice — in this compressed space feels almost Sisyphean. But despite its comparable difficulty, unlike pushing a boulder up a hill, my task is a meaningful, and happy, one.

That’s because Bill Baxley’s life has much to commend. We’ll start with some of the better-known facts. Yes, he is proud of his Houston County roots and served his home county as its district attorney in his mid-twenties.

He won his party’s nomination for attorney general at age twenty-eight, and he was the youngest person in American history to serve as a state’s attorney general at the time of his election. He later represented Alabama as its lieutenant governor and became a member of the highly selective International Academy of Trial Lawyers.

Baxley is also a veteran. He proudly served his country on active duty in the Air Force, Air National Guard, and then as a commissioned officer in the Judge Advocate General (JAG) Corps in the Army National Guard; he retired as a colonel after more than 30 years of service.

Of course, Baxley's most notable contribution in Alabama is surely his successful prosecution of Robert "Dynamite Bob" Chambliss for Chambliss' role in the murder of four children (Denise McNair, Addie Mae Collins, Carole Robertson, and Cynthia Morris Wesley) attending a worship service at the 16th Baptist Church in Birmingham on the morning of September 15, 1963. The case fundamentally changed things in Alabama, as Chambliss was the first Alabamian associated with the Ku Klux Klan to be prosecuted by the state, and convicted, for the murder of black Alabamians. Also of great consequence, Baxley was the first attorney general to hire black lawyers to serve in the state's Office of the Attorney General, including the likes of judges Myron H. Thompson, Vanzetta Penn McPherson, and Charles Price.

Beyond the *whats* that demonstrate Mr. Baxley's impact on our state, it's also well worth exploring *who* Bill Baxley is. If you've ever encountered Bill Baxley at one of the innumerable events for which he is the keynote speaker, you could easily mistake him for an attendee rather than the guest of honor. At 85, Baxley still travels extensively to speak to audiences both large and small about a range of topics: the 16th Street Baptist Church Bombing, trial skills, civil rights history, wrongful convictions, and civic leadership (among other areas).

Before an event starts, you are more likely to find him offstage — mingling among the people, greeting old friends, and making new ones — rather than onstage with other luminaries. He travels sans entourage and is somehow always on time but never in a hurry, sincerely engaging with anyone who wants to talk as he enters a room. His memory is as long as it is sharp. In small, private settings, whether he is mentoring young lawyers or encouraging civic engagement and public service, he is just as absorbing. It doesn't matter if he's on stage in a large auditorium addressing thousands of spectators or sitting at a small table visiting with one or two or people, he is the exactly the same — that is, himself, always interested in learning about other topics and other people.

Bill Baxley epitomizes what a career invested in civics and jurisprudence looks like. When asked about the first thing he did after taking office as Alabama's attorney general at age 29, he said:

"[T]he night before I got sworn in, they had issued us a certificate of election and a badge and other credentials, including...a little card that had all the major cities in Alabama...and it had a phone number for each city.

"I knew that I would be using that little card very

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frequently. So, I sat down and, in each corner of that little card, I wrote one of those little girls' names that had been killed in the church bombing back in '63. And that was one of the things I was determined I was going to try to solve. And so I wanted to be reminded every time I used that card that I wanted to try to, if I could, solve and prosecute the people that were responsible for killing those little girls.”

This act is a manifestation of an idea birthed with Cicero and advanced through the Renaissance, one of moral duty, a pillar of *studia humanitatis*. Simply put, it's having the courage to do the right thing because it's the right thing to do.

Today, we continue to benefit from Bill Baxley's living legacy of service to others. And, whether we acknowledge it or not, we all owe a debt to him — as Americans and as Alabamians — for infusing true meaning, from aspirational to realized, into our shared pledge of “liberty and justice for all.”

Anil A. Mujumdar is assistant professor of law in residence, and assistant dean for leadership and professional identity, at the University of Alabama School of Law. In addition to many other roles within and beyond the university, he teaches Anti Human Trafficking.



Photo: Jonah Enfinger

Kathryn Braund | 2026 Alabama Humanities Fellow

TURNING ON THE LIGHT

By Wayne Flynt, Ph.D.

The further back into history we go, the dimmer the light is. That is one reason why most historians prefer more recent times, where memory is sharper and primary sources more numerous. Kathryn Braund chose the harder way with great success.

Kathryn Braund was one of my favorite Auburn University historians. As anyone familiar with university

culture already knows, preening and posturing is just part of the academic game. It is amazing how many “scholars” spent more time weaving other scholars’ research into a “new paradigm of worldwide importance” than in the trenches digging for hard and fast evidence of something wholly strange and remarkable that no one else had noticed.

As chair of Auburn's History Department, I valued those new insights that moved history in directions not often explored. And that is where my friendship with Kathryn began. First, she was mapping an important part of American history that preceded "American history." How could that be? There was an America before Americans arrived? Yes! Though you wouldn't have known it from the lack of strong scholarship at the time on the indigenous people of this very land.

As our only such scholar at the time, I noticed that some senior faculty diminished the topic. But Kathryn waded right in, ignoring some of the senior "Americanists." She was mature enough to ignore those who thought her work not "important enough," or not focused on the "right subjects." And she won them over with hard work, voluminous research, fascinating historical storytelling, innovative analysis, and a kind and sweet spirit. In the end, she became one of Alabama's — indeed, the South's — finest and most respected scholars of early America. And she taught Auburn's History Department far more than the department taught her.

Throughout her career, Kathryn has remained one of those rare academics whose humility is as large as her accomplishments. And that is saying something when you consider how sterling those accomplishments are, by any measure.

Kathryn became the Hollifield Professor of Southern History at Auburn University, and has authored or edited some of the most important and accessible books on Creek-settler history in our region. Those works include *Deerskins and Duffels: The Creek Indian Trade with Anglo-America, 1685-1815*; *The Attention of a Traveller: Essays on William Bartram's Travels and Legacy*; *Tohopeka: Rethinking the Creek War and the War of 1812*; and *The Old Federal Road in Alabama: An Illustrated Guide*.

One of the most fascinating projects she's authored is *Mapping Conquest: The Battle Maps of Horseshoe Bend*. In it, Kathryn analyzes a collection of a dozen hand-drawn battlefield maps created by soldiers in the aftermath of, arguably, the most consequential battle ever fought within Alabama's borders. Brilliantly, the book doesn't exist to evaluate war strategy; it exists to highlight the human response to war and examine how these conflicts — right down to the battle maps — shape our collective memory.

Of course, I have long been impressed not only by the range and excellence of Kathryn's scholarship but also by the human qualities she exhibits. Chiefly, her respect for others and her willingness to go out of her way to

“In the end, Kathryn became one of Alabama's — indeed, the South's — finest and most respected scholars of early America. And she taught Auburn's History Department far more than the department taught her.”

help any student or colleague who was floundering and in need of guidance. The word “colleague” meant something to me that it did not always mean to others in academia. After all, we must “watch out for ourselves,” or so many academics think for the sake of tenure, publication, and other feathers in our caps. Not Kathryn! She always had time for her students and for struggling faculty. She had a kind of moral grounding that pulled her outside herself.

Speaking of outside herself, she also always sought to push her discoveries far beyond the halls of academia — to make her fascinating findings available and accessible to all. She is a frequent public speaker who continues to bring this history to life for anyone wise enough to listen. Yes, Kathryn knew what was required of her in terms of academics and administrators. But her sense of deepest responsibility has always been to her students, of all stripes. And her work ethic remains a model to every young (and old!) aspiring historian and lifelong learner — here at Auburn and far beyond.

Wayne Flynt, Ph.D., is professor emeritus of history and retired chair of history at Auburn University. He has also been a partner scholar with Alabama Humanities since its beginnings in 1974, including as founding editor of AHA's *Encyclopedia of Alabama*.



Photo: Kat Villacorta

Emmylou Harris | 2026 Alabama Humanities Fellow

STEWARD OF SONGS

By Allison Moorer

Mention the name Emmylou Harris in a room full of music lovers and faces instantly light up. Even before she sings a note, there is a collective reverence for her voice — a perfect mixture of tingling crystal and burning kerosene — and her prowess as an unrivaled sonic storyteller.

To view Emmylou Harris through a humanities lens is to understand that singing is one of the ultimate human artifacts, an emotional primary text of its time and culture, and that albums are historical documents rather

than static statements. Never content to be categorized, Harris' art, whether as a recording artist or live performer, is led by her gossamer soprano, her primary vehicle for exploring the fluid, liminal spaces between genres. And that's on purpose: in 2013 she told *The New York Times*, "You must do things to try to jolt yourself." Those jolts and their results are widely heralded.

Even when mining old-time, traditional material, she brings an avant-garde spirit with her and opens doors few other artists knock on. Rooted in the "Cosmic

American Music” she helped pioneer, her catalog is a big enough tent to draw in cowboys, hippies, folkies, and academics alike. When she covered both The Beatles’ “For No One” and Merle Haggard’s “Tonight the Bottle Let Me Down,” on *Pieces of the Sky*, her second studio album, she didn’t just sing the songs, she uncovered their shared DNA and made it sound like the most obvious thing in the world.

As a vocalist, Harris translates complex psychological and emotional states into common conditions by turning her glorious instrument into a tool for empathy, shared narrative, and a multitude of perspectives. From her own “My Name is Emmett Till” to any number of classic, broken-hearted ballads, her voice is hypnotic; almost paralyzing in its ability to be earthy and ethereal all at once and still convey more in an utterance than most can in a verse.

Her stewardship of songs is renowned; Harris is both an enthusiastic archivist and a discerning creator. She unearths ancient folk tunes and gives them timeless context just as easily as she champions uncompromising songwriters who write from the shadowland of the literary and the poetic.

After 1995’s experimental and brilliant *Wrecking Ball*, she stepped away from interpreting and turned to her own pen, revealing a mature and restrained literary voice and yet another artistic rebirth. Harris wrote or co-wrote all but one song on the 2000 album *Red Dirt Girl* and followed suit on the subsequent *Stumble into Grace* and *Hard Bargain*, three albums on which she sails over the bar for songwriting she had long set. In one of my favorites of her compositions, the masterwork title track “Red Dirt Girl,” she tracks the tragic arc of her childhood friend Lillian from her Alabama girlhood to her Mississippi death in five verses that deftly explore what it means to be stuck, and what it means to be free. As the Alabamian’s Southern Gothic statement, it is a piercing commentary on lost potential in the American South.

Her restraint makes her the ultimate collaborator — a formidable foil who builds community through her harmony singing. At her core, she’s part of the band. From her foundational, heartbreaking work with Gram Parsons, to her poignant duets with Don Williams, Herb Petersen, Buddy Miller, and a scroll of others, to the triumphant Trio albums and appearances on countless records, her voice ties together seemingly far-flung elements. She is as at home on a Mark Knopfler record as she is singing mountain music with Ralph Stanley or experimental indie rock with Conor Oberst.

“For over five decades, Harris has connected the dots between country and rock, bluegrass and folk, and between the preservation and evolution of roots music. Even when mining old-time, traditional material, she brings an avant-garde spirit with her and opens doors few other artists knock on.”

When Harris sings on a record, she elevates it beyond the sum of its parts. Her voice can wrap itself around almost anyone’s. It’s a skill, yes, but it’s also born of deep listening and a sense of artistic service.

“You do whatever you can do to make the song work, because it’s not about showing off your voice. It’s about the song. It’s always about the song,” she says.

As one of the primary architects of contemporary folk music, Harris remains a musical curator with deeply refined taste — in songs, in musicians, and in artistic choices. She offers a living masterclass in how to gracefully synthesize and evolve American roots music by approaching the past in as fresh a manner as she does the present.

Allison Moorer is a renowned singer-songwriter who has been nominated for both a Grammy and an Academy Award. She was born in Mobile, raised in South Alabama, and today serves as a writer-editor for the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum.



Photo: Jennifer Alasbrook-Turner/
BANG Images

Ashley Jones | 2026 Alabama Humanities Fellow

A WOMAN OF TRUTH

By Jacqueline Allen Trimble

Ashley Jones follows the mantra of many an ancestor — if you do not see yourself reflected in the world, create the world that reflects you. That’s why, in 2018, she founded the Magic City Poetry Festival, a multi-generational, multi-venue series of literary/poetry-focused events held around Birmingham and designed to celebrate a breadth of poetic voices during the month of April. Year after year, the festival brings together

people from a wide swath of demographics to discuss, celebrate, and highlight the enduring power of words. While Jones was creating and nurturing this legacy institution, she never stopped working, reading, editing, teaching and writing, producing four books of poetry, one anthology, scores of essays and interviews, and a critical volume on black women poets.

The word genius gets bandied about indiscriminately these days, but there is no other way to describe the Renaissance woman who is Ashley Jones. She is a visionary poet, writing about the good, the bad, and the ugly of Alabama and Southern environs with grace, clarity, and a nuanced understanding rarely seen. Her work is a masterclass in poetic craft, meticulous in its use of language and image, and she is an old soul with the vision of a wise woman who sees the extraordinary in everyday objects.

Always, her poetry is a tangle of complications rooted in a Southern sensibility as lush as kudzu winding its way along road embankments. Unlike kudzu, however, Jones is native to this soil, laying claim to her various identities which are sometimes at war with expectations of what it means to be a Southerner. Though her love for Alabama is apparent, she never allows us to forget that we must always question the thing that we love. Unapologetically black, female, and intellectual, she magnifies the South both because of its history and despite it, calling out the region's problematizing past at the same time she celebrates its beauty, its people, and its possibilities. In "All Y'all Really from Alabama," she writes,

this here the cradle of this here
nation—everywhere you look, roots run right
back south. every vein filled with red dirt, blood,
cotton.

Born and raised in Birmingham, and the product of the Alabama School of Fine Arts, she became the youngest and first person of color to be named poet laureate of the state of Alabama. No one was surprised. Her poetry unabashedly explores her vulnerabilities and self-doubts as she lays bare, as only a daughter of the South could, the preoccupations of our time, deploying history and her arsenal of poetic gifts as weapons and shields against the onslaught of despair. Even her most recent collection, *Lullaby for the Grieving*, inspired in large measure by the death of her father, moves beyond a personal meditation on grief to consider the world writ large with insight and hope. In the title poem, she writes,

the slip of a rain-glazed rock
against my searching feet.
small steps, like prayers—
each one a hope exhaled
into the trees. please,
let me enter. please, let me
leave whole.

**“This is what Jones
does repeatedly:
navigates the terrain
of humanity with
trepidation, but
also prayer.”**

Written near the Sipsey River, the poem aligns wilderness with uncertainty, and the speaker takes small steps down slick rocks, tentative in this unknown territory of despair. This is what Jones does repeatedly: navigates the terrain of humanity with trepidation, but also prayer. Though the path is slippery and the possibility of disaster ever present, there is always the hope of wholeness. We readers are pulled along as well, feeling our way through each poem, each word negotiating life's perplexing moments with our poet guide helping us reach the angels, which in this case may be “the crown of light / atop the leaves.”

Ashley Jones' work is never simple, but always accessible. Perhaps this reflects her work as a teacher. After earning her MFA from the University of Alabama at Birmingham, she returned to the Alabama School of Fine Arts to teach creative writing and later returned to UAB to teach in the same honors program in which she was once a student. Even as she continues her own education as a Ph.D. candidate at Old Dominion, she persists in teaching us something — about history, the nature of loss, the nature of love, about how to love ourselves. That love for oneself is a form of resistance, too, as is all of Jones' poetry. Resistance to erasure, to annihilation, to someone else telling her history. Jones is a truth teller. And the best part — with all she has done, all the awards she has won, all her accomplishments — she is just getting started. Alabama has been made more beautiful by her presence.

Jacqueline Allen Trimble, Ph.D., is poet laureate of Alabama (2026-2029). Among many other honors, she has won the Balcones Poetry Prize and a National Endowment for the Arts Creative Writing Fellowship. She lives in Montgomery, where she is professor of English at Alabama State University.



Photo: Chad Edwards

Will Kimbrough | 2026 Alabama Humanities Fellow

FROM A PIECE OF WORK TO A WORK OF PEACE

By Kate Campbell

I first met Will Kimbrough in 2003, when I recorded *Twang on a Wire*, an album of country songs first made famous by women artists of the 1960s and 1970s. My friend in England, John Graveling, had suggested a stellar group of session players for the project: Jeff Finlin on drums, Kevin Gordon and Pat Buchanan on guitars, Dave Jacques on bass, and Will Kimbrough — who seemed able to bring the right sound to almost anything he touched. On that record, Will added guitar, dobro, mandolin, piano, accordion, Wurlitzer, banjo, and backing vocals. He also joined me for a duet on

Emmylou Harris' "Boulder to Birmingham," a fitting choice since Will is also from Alabama.

After *Twang on a Wire*, Will became far more than a gifted player on one of my records. He became a friend, colleague, songwriting partner, and the producer of four of my albums. His role in shaping *The Portable Kate Campbell* was so central that I put his name on the front cover — a small acknowledgment of the depth of his influence and the trust I had come to place in his musical judgment.

In one of his songs later recorded by Jimmy Buffett, Will unabashedly declares, “I’m a piece of work.” The phrase, borrowed from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, began as a meditation on the wonder and complexity of human creation, long before it became a modern idiom for someone difficult or exasperating. In Will’s case, the older meaning feels especially true. His songs are full of that delicate tension between beauty and brokenness, grace and grit, mystery and mischief. He writes as someone who understands that human beings are rarely one thing at a time.

Whether he is writing about the futility and tragedy of war or composing songs alongside veterans, Will does not turn away from what James Carr once called “the dark end of the street.” He is willing to stand in the hard places — where grief, memory, and moral uncertainty gather — and listen long enough for a song to emerge. Yet his music never settles for despair. Again and again, he reminds us that “there is good in this world we can see,” if only we open our eyes and our hearts to it.

As I reflect on our years of friendship and songwriting, two songs in particular come to mind.

The first is “Alabama Department of Corrections Meditation Blues,” inspired by inmates who discovered peace through the practice of meditation. Being an Alabamian himself, Will knew the phrase “Alabama, here we rest” — a familiar translation of the state’s historical motto, rooted in a Choctaw expression. That understanding helped shape the song’s closing lines:

*Alabama, here we rest,
Live in light and peacefulness.*

The second song grew from a few spare lines by Emily Dickinson:

*It’s all I have to bring today—
This, and my heart beside—*

Will was raised in Mobile in a home filled with books and literary conversation, especially the works of Southern writers whose cadences and storytelling traditions helped shape his own narrative songwriting. I knew he would be the ideal collaborator for a song that began with Dickinson’s spare offering of the heart:

Together, we allowed her words to open into a meditation for peace:

*Peace be still, Lord, come what may
In this I will abide
Rock of Ages, help me please
Shine a little light*

**“His songs
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He writes as
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That is what Will Kimbrough does. Through his life and art, he shines a little light. From the Alabama coast to the quiet beauty of Chimayó, just beyond Santa Fe, to the rolling hills of Tennessee and every road in between, Will gives voice to the deep longing for peace we carry in our hearts, even amid struggle. His songs embrace both the wound and the blessing, the frailty of the human condition and the hope that endures beyond it. In doing so, he has become more than a piece of work. He has become a work of peace.

And like a prayerful benediction, his music sends us onward with a simple, luminous wish:

“Peace come to all who hear.”

Kate Campbell is an acclaimed singer-songwriter known for mixing Southern history, culture, faith, and humor. Born in New Orleans, raised in the Mississippi Delta and Nashville, and daughter of a Baptist preacher, she has spent plenty of time in Alabama, recording albums at FAME Studios in Muscle Shoals and earning degrees from Samford University and Auburn University.



Photo: Alyssa Cash/Jacksonville State University

Randy Owen | 2026 Alabama Humanities Fellow

AND FROM FORT PAYNE, ALABAMA...

By Caity Bell

“Where are you from?” A question I’d become quite familiar with in my first semester away, and one I initially answered expecting very little in response. I had entered college thinking that Fort Payne was a small town of, seemingly, very little note.

“Wait, Fort Payne, *Alabama*? Where the band is from?”

That was the first time someone I’d met had recognized my hometown but, as I’d come to learn over the years, it wouldn’t be the last. (Most recently, while on a trip, I had answered that same question only to have a random passerby begin to sing the last lines of “Christmas in

Dixie.”) Fort Payne, though a small city, is far from being one of very little note.

As an archivist, I can tell you there have been several things that have put our town on the map throughout its history. But there is no doubt that our present place on the map of memory is due to the band ALABAMA and, especially, its lead vocalist and songwriter, Randy Owen. You can easily spot the bronze statues at City Park or spy the band’s handprints framed outside the DeKalb Theatre, but the true impressions, those that extend from a person’s actions like dominoes falling into the lives of others, aren’t as easily seen.

“Folks know, if they’re fallin’ on hard times, they can fall back on, those of us raised up down home...”

–“Down Home,” ALABAMA, Pass It On Down

As the face of one of the most well-known groups in country music history, Randy Owen could have easily left Fort Payne for greener pastures once the band finally took off in 1980 (after a slow start in 1973 as Wild Country before finding their footing as ALABAMA). While that would have been a predictable road to take, Owen instead chose a different route. This path, tied to his roots, found a “little dot on the state road map” sharing its stories with a wider world.

Growing up here, I always felt that the music of the mountains was really just stories. Conversations, accompanied by instruments, that spanned generations, bearing within them an invitation to share in another’s life. Perhaps the popularity of Owen’s music comes from this sense of invitation that his songwriting offers to his audience. Owen’s lyrics invite you into the slice of life that a small rural town has to offer — a life woven by an elder’s wisdom, a neighbor’s helping hand, hard work and long days, and the inescapable connection to the earth beneath your feet. Yet you do not have to be from Fort Payne, Alabama, to connect with this music. This music, I believe, is a conversation, and it is one that invites us to reflect on the sense of community that these lyrics stir within us, wherever our homes may be found, and the ways in which we may contribute to them.

As Owen stated in an interview with *The Boot*, in 2012, “as long as God lets me live, I want to do things that make a difference in the world besides play music.” Looking back, there can be little doubt that he’s done just that. His other contributions to his home state are, arguably, as extensive as his musical one. Back home, he has served on the board of trustees for Landmarks of DeKalb County, helping to preserve the history of the area he calls home. And those famed June Jams could have happened anywhere, but Owen and the band chose to hold them in Fort Payne, where the community could benefit from their success (and, when Fort Payne was no longer the “Sock Capital of the World,” it would be *this* that kept us on the map).

He’s also given back to his alma mater, (where he earned an English degree that would encourage the writer within him to venture into short stories and poetry), by serving on the board of trustees for Jacksonville State University and playing a key role in completing JSU’s Little River Canyon Center (housing the field school and the National Park Service). Most recently, his legacy in the arts and humanities has been honored through the

“Owen’s lyrics invite you into what small rural town has to offer — a life woven by an elder’s wisdom, a neighbor’s helping hand, hard work and long days, and the inescapable connection to the earth beneath your feet.”

Randy Owen Center for the Performing Arts. The Center is intended to serve as an investment in the arts for JSU; it is also an investment for us all, as the next Randy Owen could pass through its doors. Beyond honoring Owen’s contributions to JSU, it will carry on the collaborative nature of the humanities by which Owen has lived his life, investing always in another.

In another song, “Pass It On Down,” Owen calls us to care for our home at an environmental level, yet it always reminds me of the sentiment he (and others from our shared local history) has chosen to live his life by. Fort Payne, to me, is a place that is saved from obscurity by its people, who, time and again, upon finding unexpected success, choose to give back to their community. People recognize my home on the map because of the impact Randy Owen has made promoting our region’s history, traditions, and culture to the world. I am hopeful that, whoever places us on the map next, will follow the example Owen has set out in his songs — and held true in his life.

“It’s only ours to borrow, let’s leave some for tomorrow. Let’s leave some and pass it on down.”

–“Pass It On Down,” ALABAMA, Pass It On Down

Caity Bell is an archivist and exhibit curator who works with Landmarks of DeKalb County in the hometown she shares with Randy Owen. She also serves on the board of directors of the Alabama Historical Association, the alumni board for the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Alabama, and on the education committee for the Scottsboro Boys Museum.



Photo: Heinrich Butler

Fred Wesley | 2026 Alabama Humanities Fellow

DAMN RIGHT, HE'S SOMEBODY

By Burgin Mathews

In 1967, Fred Wesley Jr. got a call from a friend: James Brown needed a new trombonist and, if Wesley wanted it, the job was his.

He wasn't sure he did. Wesley was above all a jazz man, and he didn't think much of Brown's music: beneath the screaming and squealing and grunting and strutting, there just wasn't any substance or complexity to it. Wesley's own band, The Wesley-Davis Mastersound, had recently fallen apart, in large part thanks to a James Brown tune. His bandmates wanted to add Brown's "Cold Sweat" to their act, but Wesley insisted the music was beneath them, unworthy of the sophisticated thing — that mastersound — they'd been building. The

dispute ended in drunken shouting and curses in the mud and rain outside a Tuscaloosa nightclub. Then the band fizzled out.

Wesley had just accepted another job anyway, a delivery job for Barber's Milk. He had a wife and baby to support, and the milkman gig was security. But he weighed the pros and cons and, in the end, music beat milk.

In hindsight it's hard to believe a milk route might have derailed the storied career that followed. But Vetta Wesley, Fred's mother, was sure he'd made the wrong choice. A devoted civil rights worker, she herself had led the charge for a black milkman, and her son was set

to be Mobile's first. It wasn't just a steady job; it was a community milestone, full of symbolism and honor.

Wesley would soon contribute to the civil rights cause, all the same, even without the milk. His first recording session with Brown produced one of the era's essential anthems, "Say It Loud — I'm Black and I'm Proud." Other anthems of empowerment followed, like "Damn Right I Am Somebody," released in 1974 by Fred Wesley and the J. B.'s, the group he directed for Brown. Wesley even warmed up to "Cold Sweat," whose relentless groove he came to relish each night onstage.

Over the next few years, he established himself as Brown's bandleader, arranger, and chief composer. He helped oversee the transition from soul to funk, and emerged as one of the essential architects and patron saints of the new sound. He became a star soloist, spurred by Brown's exhortations to "Hit me, Fred!" or "Cook, Fred, cook!" And he laid down his signature sound on cut after cut after cut: "Doing it to Death." "The Payback." "People Get Up and Drive Your Funky Soul."

Wesley had been steeped in music since the moment he entered the world. His grandmother was organist and choir director at Mobile's Metropolitan AME Church, and she'd taught him some rudiments of classical piano. His father directed the high school band and choir, played a mean boogie-woogie piano, and led a swinging big band, the Rhythmic Sensations.

By the time he was seventeen, Fred had played in the school band, in his father's big band, and in a couple of jazz combos, the Sounds and the Esquires. He'd studied with his father's friend and colleague, E. B. Coleman, Mobile's music master. He'd played blues and R&B with a local nightclub act, and even worked a few times with the Excelsior Band, the historic marching ensemble at the heart of the city's Mardi Gras tradition. But it was bandleader Ed Pratt's Sunday night jams at Mobile's Kings Club that truly expanded his universe, introducing him to the bebop that became his deepest love.

This immersive, eclectic training would serve him well. After high school came college at Alabama State, then a stint with Ike and Tina Turner, a season in a world-class, jazz-fueled Army band (based at Huntsville's Redstone Arsenal), and his own first ventures into bandleading. Next came the call from Brown and his rise as a celebrated sideman. From there he graduated into the orbit of George Clinton, Bootsy Collins, and Parliament-Funkadelic, arranging and directing horns for a run of the funkier, wildest, freest records ever made, beginning with 1976's *Motherhip Connection*.

“One of the most sampled artists on the planet, he’s widely embraced not only as a founding father of funk but as a key contributor to the sound and soul of hip hop.”

He started his own band, the Horny Horns. Then came a seat in the Count Basie Orchestra and a return to his jazz roots.

Since then, Wesley has released numerous solo albums, from dance party classics to straight-ahead jazz. In the 1990s, he reunited with two other James Brown veterans, Maceo Parker and Pee Wee Ellis, to form the acclaimed JB Horns. In 2002, he published one of the great music memoirs, *Hit Me, Fred: Recollections of a Sideman*. He's worked with student musicians in clinics, classes, camps, and colleges across the country. And now, in his eighties, he continues to record, continues to compose, and continues to tour the world with his band The New JBs and his Generations organ trio. One of the most sampled artists on the planet, he's widely embraced not only as a founding father of funk but as a key contributor to the sound and soul of hip hop. He just recorded a solo for Dr. Dre. And he's working, too, on an original funk symphony.

"I could have been just another trombone player," Wesley says today, at his home in Montgomery. "In fact, maybe I would have been just another trombone player if I had gone the jazz way." Instead, he forged a unique and unexpected path, developing a voice that reverberates across the world. "I just have to be thankful," he says, "for whatever it is that guides me — or drags me along with it," he laughs.

The rest of us are thankful, too.

Burgin Mathews is a writer, radio host, and founding director of the Southern Music Research Center, a nonprofit that documents and preserves the many musical histories of the American South. His book, *Magic City: How the Birmingham Jazz Tradition Shaped the Sound of America*, won the 2025 Alabama Library Association Award for nonfiction.