



## The Joy of Listening

Talking with SFA documentary filmmaker Joe York

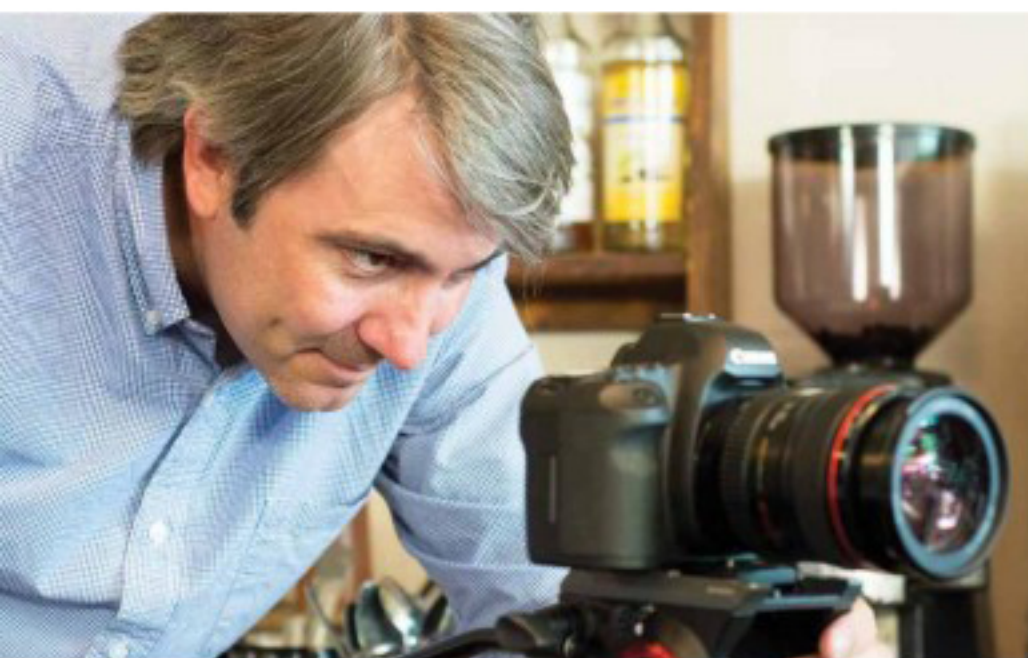
PHOTOS BY KATIE WILLIAMSON

**JOE YORK** lied to get his first film assignment. This is a guy who knew he wanted to make documentaries and would do just about anything to make it happen. The year was 2001, and Joe had just entered the graduate program in Southern Studies at the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi. The gig? Documenting

the Freedom Riders' 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Reunion in Jackson. He got it. Joe's career in film may have started with a lie, but he has spent the rest of it celebrating everyday truths, honoring hardworking men and women around the South by capturing their stories—their lives—on film. All these years later, Joe has not only filmed but directed and edited more than fifty documentary films for the Southern Foodways Alliance (SFA). Amy C. Evans met Joe on their very first day of graduate school in Oxford, fourteen years ago. Frequent collaborators, the two went on to forge parallel documentary paths with the Southern Foodways Alliance: York with filmmaking and Evans with oral history (she was the SFA's lead oral historian from 2002 until she resigned last year). Here, she sits down with him to talk about what he's learned through documenting the people of our region, how his work has evolved, and the joy of listening. ➔

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**Amy C. Evans (AE):** What question do you get most often about your films?

**Joe York (JY):** I'm amazed that so many people ask me, "How have you spent ten years doing films about food?" Well, it's not about food. It's about people. If you think my films are about food, you've missed the point entirely.

**AE:** If someone is just being introduced to your work, what film out of the fifty-plus you've done for the SFA would you want people to start with?

**JY:** What's a good gateway drug? I'd have them start with Helen Turner [FILM: *I Am the Pitmaster*]. Barbecue is *lingua franca* for Southerners, and Helen exemplifies what we're trying to do with these documentary films. She works all by herself. No team, no publicist. She's just one lady in Brownsville, Tennessee, working her ass off. And she's hilarious, charming, and beautiful—the kind of person you'd want to hang out with. I want you to feel like you're right there with her. I treasure that.

I also treasure the little mementos that I pick up when I'm in the field. They're a collection on my bookshelf at home, like the bottle of wine I shared with Will Harris [FILM: *CUD*] when we were driving through his cow pasture at dusk. It was a cheap Shiraz. We just drove around and talked. I had a wine bottle in one hand and my camera in the other. The archaeologist in me loves having some tangible, material thing like that.\* Mementos. It's important to have souvenirs from these experiences. It puts you back in that Jeep. It reminds you of that day.

*\*Joe received a BA in anthropology from Auburn University.*

**AE:** Tell me more about those shared, intimate moments and how they translate on film.

**JY:** In the field, it's just me. When I first started doing this work, I thought it would be hard to work alone, that it would be detrimental. The exact opposite is true. I'm a one-man band out there, and because it's just the two of us [me and

the person I'm interviewing], it really does lend itself to these one-on-one moments. In a film, hopefully you're experiencing these moments, too. We're just really having a conversation, and there happens to be a camera there. It's been that way for all of the SFA films. What people are seeing is not just the story, but, for me, it's been my life for the last ten years. Those were important moments for me, and I hope they are for them, too.

**AE:** After only three months as Southern Studies graduate students, we traveled to Jackson, Mississippi, to document the Freedom Riders' 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Reunion. Talk about that as your first foray into doing documentary filmmaking.

**JY:** We lied to get that gig! My mom found the job listing online. I said I was a filmmaker, you said you were an oral historian, and they hired us. I bought a video camera with my student loan money, and we recruited our classmates to help conduct the interviews. We just went down there



and we did it. And we got forty oral histories! We collected all of these amazing stories that are now in the University of Mississippi archive. April Grayson made a film using that footage [FILM: *The Children Shall Lead*]. That was really meaningful; I got on John T. [Edge's] radar, and so did you. Having John T. and Andy [Harper] believing in us and throwing money behind it? I mean, we had no idea what we were doing. The SFA was growing up at that time. I did a lot of growing

up too, and so did you. A lot of that was finding my voice, my style. The thing that has never changed is our desire to tell the stories of the hardworking, regular people everywhere.

**AE:** That's a good segue to something I want to ask you about your most recent film, *The Katrina Class*—your film that tracks down a group of students whose names you found on a class roster in an abandoned schoolhouse in New Orleans just after Hurricane Katrina. One of those students you followed up with recently, Johnny Cotton, talks about having written a screenplay of his experience that's ready for film. How does that make you feel—to connect with a young person like Johnny over the subject of filmmaking?

**JY:** That all came from an SFA project [FILM: *Saving Willie Mae's Scotch House*]. I needed a quiet place to work, so I went across the street to this abandoned school. The place was perfectly preserved as it appeared the day before Katrina hit. The class roster was there. I still have it on my wall; I look at those names every day. Being able to tell that story and have those names come to life and tell me those stories, that's what does it for me. That's what we argue about in archaeology: Who is that person? What does it for them? That's what I've been doing with these films. And it's exactly what Bill Best [FILM: *Saving Seeds*] is doing with the seeds he saves in his freezer—saving this cultural knowledge for someone later.

But back to Johnny, I'm working with some people in Atlanta [where Johnny lives] to connect him with an internship possibility. For Johnny to want to do films, I hope he's crazy enough to go out there and get in enough trouble to do it—to lie about his experience like we did. To take the lie and make it true by going out and doing what we said we could do, and do it.

If I had been born twenty years earlier in Glencoe, Alabama, there's no way I could be doing what I do now. Technology is so accessible now, anyone can make a film. I could've gone to film school and learned this better and faster, but it certainly wouldn't be as meaningful.

Now my films are starting to look like I want them to. Take Goren Avery. [FILM: *Red Dog*]. That's the film I wanted to make eight years ago. I finally realized my vision of it. Something like *Hot Chicken*? I would never make that film now. I used to try too hard to be funny. Now my films are very stripped down. It works that way, I think. When you're young, you overthink everything and try to do too much. As you get older, you realize that less is more.