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ARTIST'S STATEMENT: MEALS I'VE LOVED (MAY 2024)

"I done hit a lick!"

This is the phrase that my friend Leroy "Spooney" Kenter, aka The Rib Doctor, would scream with jubilee whenever he pulled a particularly delicious dose of barbecue from beneath the rusty lid of his offset smoker. I first met Spooney when I walked into his tiny shoebox of a restaurant on Johnson Street in Greenwood, Mississippi, in the summer of 2003. I was in town to conduct my first formal oral history project for the Southern Foodways Alliance, a nonprofit based at the Center for the Study of Southern Culture in Oxford, Mississippi. I've spent quite a lot of time in Greenwood in the years since, stopping to pay Spooney a visit with each and every pass through town. Sometimes he'd have his smoker going, the metal grate heavy with slabs of ribs or, my favorite, his chicken wings, each one wearing a white halo of onion, creating a beautiful, quilt-like grid peeking through the smoke. Over the last ten or so years, Spooney had all but retired from the barbecue business. He was having some health issues and mostly stayed at home—his mother's old house in Greenwood's Baptist Town neighborhood—where I'd bring him groceries whenever I was in town. No matter his needs or cravings, he'd always ask for green grapes.

Spooney passed away in October of 2023. Our twenty-year friendship that was born from collaboration, sustained by regular visits, and celebrated through story, was suddenly gone, evaporated into the ether. But, of course, the memories remain.

There are so many more memories. Having spent more than a decade traveling the South, documenting the region's food culture, many people I first interacted with as strangers eventually became good friends. They were always eager to share their stories and generous in sharing their food, whether a full meal or an impromptu snack, as soon as the business of my visit was over. From Delta hot tamales eaten hot from the pot with Barbara Pope in the Mississippi Delta, milkshakes at the Apalachicola Burger King with Unk and Gloria Quick, or soup beans and cornbread shared as sustenance before clogging with locals at the Carter Family Fold, each shared moment, each bite of food, each generous and kind soul, has made a lasting impression on me and, collectively, they've inspired many of these paintings.

So, to honor all of my friends with whom I've shared moments, and stories, and meals—meals I've loved—I share this body of work.

I think I done hit a lick.