

Episode 6: Transcript

Guest Sonja Griffin Evans- Internationally acclaimed Gullah/Geechee artist, speaker, and Pan African Culture Heritage Fellow, Sonja Griffin Evans, shares her beautiful and unique Gullah/Geechee heritage, and its influence on her artwork. She also discusses what inspires her, and how her cultural roots from the past impacts her work and messages it will send to future generations.

Lis Malone (Co-Host):

This is the Melungeon Voices podcast series, brought to you by the Melungeon Heritage Association. My name is Lis Malone and I am here as always with the presidents of the Melungeon Heritage Association, Heather and Elena. Good day to you, Heather.

Heather Andolina (Host):

Good day to you, Lis.

Lis:

So this is the second to last episode of this first season of the Melungeon Voices podcast. And oh my God, I'm going through a separation anxiety.

Heather:

I know. I'm going to miss talking to you.

Lis:

Okay. I think we need to take like a virtual yoga class together just so I can fill my time. So, what will I do?

Heather:

Yes. I like yoga, I'm down.

Lis:

So for this week's episode, you had a very informative interview with Sonja Griffin Evans. And before we have you discuss a little bit about who Sonja is, last week we spoke about your documentary film, which you're working on with your family under Underbite Films, and it is called Infamous Characters, Notorious Villains. And it is my understanding that you met Sonja during this filmmaking process.

Heather:

My brother Andy and I actually met Sonja while filming for our documentary in Beaufort, South Carolina. And what it is, is one of the many theories on the Melungeon people, is that they are descended from the Portuguese and Spanish sailors who deserted during the Juan Pardo expeditions in the 1560s. And basically what that is, is Juan Pardo embarked from the Spanish settlement of Santa Elena, which is located on present day Parris Island, about 30 minutes outside of Beaufort, South Carolina, and then him along with about 150 or so men traveled up through South Carolina, North Carolina, Georgia, and Tennessee.

He left five different settlements along the journey, and it is believed that men from these settlements intermixed with indigenous women, and their ancestors became the Melungeon people of Appalachia.

Lis:

Well, that is absolutely fascinating. So let's hear a little bit about Sonja.

Heather:

Yes. Sonja Griffin Evans was born and raised in Beaufort, South Carolina. She is an internationally acclaimed Gullah Geechee artist, speaker, and Pan African Culture Heritage Institute Fellow. During our conversation, Sonja shares with us her beautiful and unique Gullah Geechee heritage, and its influence on her amazing artwork. She discusses what inspires her with an uncanny ability to capture the beauty, spirituality, and a pure representation of the Gullah Sea Island and African American culture.

Lis:

Wonderful. Let's take a listen.

Heather:

Sonja, how did you first learn about your Gullah Geechee heritage? And for those who are unfamiliar, what are some of the characteristics of the culture?

Sonja Griffin Evans (Guest):

Well, Gullah culture or Gullah Geechee culture, it derived from when the West Africans, Africans were brought to the Sea islands of South Carolina, Georgia, and also some parts of North Carolina and Florida, and because they were isolated on the islands could maintain more of their African culture. And so of course, I grew up in this area, Beaufort, South Carolina, which I call the heartbeat of the Gullah culture. And I did not know I was Gullah until I left this area, to be honest with you, when I went off to the military. And I can remember when someone said, "Where are you from?" I said, "South Carolina" and someone called me what I call the "Carolina Geechee." And I was like, "What is a Carolina Geechee?" And they said, "It's a person who talks funny and eats a lot of rice. You know?" And I says, "Well, I must be a Carolina Geechee because I did have a certain dialect. And also I love rice, and still love rice."

Heather:

Can you tell us the difference between the term Gullah and the term Geechee?

Sonja:

Well, Gullah is a culture, and it's also a dialect. And this is, Gullah is more on the Sea islands. Geechee is like near the Florida-Georgia area. And Gullah is like I said, it's a language. And so it's a mixture of English, African words, kind of like a Creole dialect.

Heather:

You mentioned that the Gullah Geechee culture, goes up into North Carolina. And how far does it go into North Carolina and Georgia?

Sonja:

Actually, as far over as from Wilmington, North Carolina, actually all the way over to Jacksonville, Florida, but they try to push the line to St. Augustine, Florida, but as far over as Jacksonville, Florida.

Heather:

I actually personally never realized how large it was. I always just thought Charleston, South Carolina, where you're located there in Beaufort, and Hilton Head. That's usually where I thought it was. So I never realized it was much bigger. And you had also mentioned the West African culture. The Gullah Geechee heritage has many connections to West African culture, which is also connected to the Melungeon people. What are some of the West African traditions that you and your family have practiced over the years?

Sonja:

This area, number one, is known for the sweet grass baskets. Sweet grass basket making, it's very similar to the, I believe it's the Mende people in Sierra Leone. And so with that, it's a style of basket making. It's not weaving, but it's coiling, and they use a Spartina grass or a sweet grass and Palmetto strips. And they literally sew these baskets together, once again, instead of weaving. And a lot of the other things are, of course, the foods. Being from most of our ancestors of course came from West Africa, and which was very prevalent in growing rice. And so this area, a lot of the West Africans were brought over for that particular skill, was growing rice. And so, we have a lot of, well, once again, we eat a lot of rice, a lot of one pot dishes.

And then also there is a lot of traditions based around, we have like this spiritual dance or religious practice of the ring shout and the call and response. So there's a lot of tie-ins with West African culture that we still practice today.

Heather:

You share your Gullah Geechee heritage through your art. Tell us about how you became an artist and how your unique heritage influences your work.

Sonja:

I started painting actually for therapy, back in 2005. And in the midst of that, there's this Gullah saying, and it says "[foreign language 00:08:11]." And what that means is if you don't know where you come from, you can't possibly know where you're going. So what I did was in order to find my way, I had to tap in to where I came from. So I started learning more about my Gullah culture, my Gullah roots, my ancestors. And like I says, when you're living in that culture, you don't understand that you're different from anyone else in the world, until you step outside of your environment. And so then with my artwork, because I try to let everyone know or communicate that my ancestors were not slaves. They were agricultural engineers and masterful craftsmen who were enslaved because of their intelligence,

because of their skills. And so I try to portray that in my artwork, you know, along with telling the history of the area, the history of my ancestors and the contribution, not only to African American culture, but to American culture as well.

Heather:

I feel the same way, Sonja, about my Melungeon ancestry. We didn't know much about it until we started working on this documentary. And it has certainly made me feel more whole, knowing this history that I didn't know about. Your beautiful heritage comes to life through your art. I'm sure the listeners would like to know where they can see your artwork and jewelry for themselves.

Sonja:

Well, you can see my artwork actually on my website, which is sonjagriffinevans.com. And if you visit South Carolina and the beautiful Sea Islands, you can also view my work in person at the Red Piano Art Gallery in Bluffton. And I hope when you view these pieces, because my main objective when I create the artwork is that when you view my art, you will not be the same person that you were before you saw it.

Heather:

Many times artists work people have a different appreciation or perspective years later. Sonja, what would you want people to take away from your artwork in 20 years from now?

Sonja:

Well, what I want people to take away from my artwork 20 years from now, is number one is the passion for the artwork, the compassion in the artwork. I want them to take away that this is a group of people who overcame obstacles by great lengths, and if they could do it and the situation and in the times that they were living in, and still be able to maintain their culture, their heritage, and more importantly, their identity and self worth, that's what I want every person from now on to 20 years later and more to be able to take away and say, "If they can do it, so can I."

Heather:

I love that. And can you share with us what you are currently working on right now?

Sonja:

Well, right now I'm currently working on Blessings of Liberty. In this area, the Beaufort County, Charleston area, a lot of American history is embedded in the grounds of this area. And so one of the things is there was a gentleman from Beaufort, South Carolina, and Congressman, Robert Smalls, who stole a ship and he went through Fort Sumter. There's a story about him in Fort Sumter. And so therefore you will see the mother and her three children, and like I said, it's called Blessings of Liberty. She is Lady Liberty. And the three children are the 13th, the 14th and the 15th Amendment, you will see that embedded in their clothing. And Gullah people were an integral part in every fabric of American life. And so I wanted to portray that in this particular piece, not only just the culture, but the accomplishments of people of Gullah descent.

Heather:

That's so cool. I can't wait to see it. As many of our members of the Melungeon Heritage Association can relate, in your voyage, Sonja, in discovering your West African roots, what's been the most fulfilling aspect of that journey?

Sonja:

One of the most fulfilling aspects of that journey for me is being able to, number one, learn more about my West African culture, because Gullah culture, Gullah Geechee culture is a derivative of West African culture. But the other thing is, is the very thing that my ancestors brought from the shores of Africa to the shores of America, along with their culture and their heritage, and that is their desire to be free. And one of the pieces that I created, and this is a piece not only for people of Gullah descent but for all people, it is called Freedom's Door and Freedom's Door is written in a Gullah dialect, and it is based on New Year's Eve of the Emancipation Proclamation.

And the person is walking through that door for the very last time as an enslaved person, walking into a newfound freedom, a new way of life, and a new year. And it says, "They say freedom is a step away. Open the door freedom wine. My own mother, brother, sister, they going way before. Get way this freedom door. Don't know I'm more specky on this door. One thing knowing, ain't going live to share life no more." So I tell people to take your key, open your door and find your freedom.

Heather:

Thank you so very much, Sonja. What a wonderful way to end this amazing episode and what a wonderful way to end this interview. And thank you so very much, Sonja, for being a part of the first season of Melungeon Voices podcast.

Sonja:

Thank you for having me.

Lis:

You've been listening to the Melungeon Voices podcast on behalf of myself, Heather and Elena, and the entire MHA executive committee, we'd like to thank all of those who participated in making this episode possible. For more information, you can visit them on the web at melungeon.org. That's M-E-L-U-N-G-E-O-N.O-R-G. The information, views, and opinions expressed in this podcast episode do not necessarily represent those of the MHA. Melungeon Voices is presented by the Melungeon Heritage association. All rights are reserved.