

Melungeon Voices Podcast Season Three Transcript Episode Two: Mike Richards and Tim Webb

Lis Malone: Welcome to the Melungeon Voices Podcast presented by the Melungeon Heritage Association. My name is Lis Malone, Podcast Producer, and I'm here with the president of the Melungeon Heritage Association, Ms. Heather Andolina. Heather, good week to you.

Heather Andolina: Good week to you too, Lis.

Lis: And so, we have a brand-new episode. We've been doing a little bit of a departure from normal episodes, which is fun, exciting, and all those other awesome adjectives. So, what are we doing this week?

Heather: This week, Lis we are talking to Mike Richards and Tim Webb, who are music collaborators.

Lis: I think that's a hint of some sort. Don't let me stop you. You're on a roll.

Heather: All right. Here's a little bit about them. Mike Richards and Tim Webb are longtime friends turned music collaborators. Mike Richards is a Dove Award winning songwriter and Award nominee. He has produced two albums, which charted and Billboard magazine. He founded the Bluegrass gospel group the Chigger Hill boys and Terry and he co-wrote face to face with Amazing Grace, which propelled the act to number one on inspirational music charts. Although the bulk of his work is centered in the world of religious music, he has written music for movies and television, and has had songs recorded by mainstream artist.

Tim Webb has worked in the pharmaceutical industry most of his life, but he is also a songwriter. He is a Melungeon descendant from Middle Tennessee, and now lives in Nashville. He's been married for 30 years to his wife Beth, with three children and two grandchildren.

In this week's episode, we explore the origins of Appalachian and bluegrass music and the possible connections to the Melungeon people, as well as feature for the first time on this podcast. A live musical performance.

Lis: Again, Heather, we are getting so fancy, huh? Are we wait? Is it that we're getting fancy or our guests are getting fancy?

Heather: Maybe a little bit of both.

Lis: Okay, we'll split the difference. Well, this podcast is definitely getting fancy. And I hope everyone enjoys some musical candy.

Heather: Oh, yes, I think they will. Lis.

Lis: Fantastic. Let's take a listen.

Heather: All right, we're here with Mike Richards and Tim Webb. Hey, guys.

Mike Richards: Oh, hello.

Tim Webb: Hey.

Heather: Okay. I like to start with discussing each of your connections to the Melungeon people. Tim, we'll start with you.

Tim: So, we're, in Nashville, Middle Tennessee, actually sitting in Hendersonville, Tennessee right now, which is a suburb of Nashville, but my maternal grandmother came through Nickens and Collins lines. There was a Melungeon settlement here called Bell's Bend, which is right outside of Nashville. I really didn't know any of this growing up. It's only in the last few years when I became more interested in Melungeon ancestry. I found that there was a settlement here. They self-identified as Portuguese. There were several families there. Barnes, Nickens, some Collins, I'm not sure what the numbers were. But they had broken off from a community or come from a Wilson County, Tennessee up around Lebanon, Tennessee, and settled here. So it was away from Nashville, fairly remote in the bend of a river and most of their access for a long time was via ferry. And that ferry actually places very existed up and till I believe the late 80s early 90s. You could drive your five or six cars on the ferry and go across the Cumberland River to So, access Nashville a lot quicker. So that was my connection again. I really didn't know about this. I saw read and article on the Melungeon's I think in the 1990s, the local newspaper had a piece a big section in the Sunday paper and I read it. I was so intrigued having no idea that these were some of my people through my maternal grandmother's family. There's also a Melungeon connection in there as well that Mike and I share through some folks in Kentucky. Mike is much more the expert on all things for Melungeon and genealogy. I'm definitely a pretender in this area. So that's, um, that's kind of where I stand.

Heather: Yes. And Tim, we share a common ancestor through our Collins.

Tim: And I've got a distant cousin who's a very good genealogist who claims and swears to me that via messaging we've done that the Collins that he and I are both related to were in Scottsboro. I don't know I'm an amateur on this stuff. I'll leave that to the experts. But to me as a layperson, genealogist, it would seem like you know, Collins surname Melungeon and in Tennessee. I would think there would be some connections there, but I've had a relative in Oklahoma, and he said that's not the case. So, I don't know. I'm not a genealogist. Nor do I pretend to be.

Heather: And how about you, Mike?

Mike: My family comes from the Riddle family. My dad's mother is a Riddle. And they came from Hawkins and Hancock County, late set, I guess, early 1800s and moved into Cumberland County, Kentucky, with Bunch, King of the Melungeon's. And he and the Riddles ended up in Cumberland County, Kentucky. And my family lived in a place deep, deep in the hills called a gyro, which I think is an Arab word which just kind of bizarre for people that were living in the mountains to have come up with that, especially in late 17, early 1800s. I've always been intrigued by the name. So, the Riddles were in the log report to the somewhat Melungeon log report that they did on all of the families. They were part of that one of the families they used. My family identified as Native American; the ones that identified as anything identified as Native. That's some of some of my family did marry the Newman's ridge. Some of the Riddles I know married Moses Johnson's daughter; I believe the Johnsons from Newman's Ridge so my family's kind of tangled all up in it also.

Heather: And how did the two of you meet and start to make music together?

Mike: Funny, you should ask let him tell that.

Tim: So, Mike is my former brother-in-law. He and my sister were married years ago, they have one child who actually is a double PhD professor in Japan, probably the smartest human I've ever known. My nephew, Mike's son. So, we have a go back to our So, teenage years when he dated my sister. And I've known each other for years, we kind of reconnected in the last, I guess four or five years, I've always been kind of an aspiring songwriter, mostly with lyrics and poetry. Mike has made well over 100 recorded and published songs. So, he's more on the professional level. I'm still fledgling and all this but um, we get together Now occasionally to try to hammer out some songs, mostly, you know, mountain bluegrass, country, style music and my supplies virtually all the music and I've tried to throw it up a word that rhymes a good layer to hear every now and then.

Mike: It's kind of interesting, if I might add that, that Tim and I connected here and there through the years. And with all of the flooding in eastern Kentucky. It might add that in 2010, Nashville had something similar and Hendersonville, where we're at in the outskirts of Nashville, flooded and we lost just about everything were homeless for a while and out of the blue. I got a call from Tim, that I hadn't heard from in a while offering to come and help and bring a crew and do anything he could to help so that that goes a long way in friendship. So, yeah, we're just thinking about the people in eastern Kentucky. Of course, I have family in southeast Kentucky, not as far east as all the damage and they came out good, but our hearts and prayers are certainly with the folks in Kentucky and that they continue to get help.

Heather: Yes, I did have family who were affected by the floods over the summer in Kentucky. The floods were devastating and we're still sending prayers and thinking about them. Mike, how would you describe Appalachian bluegrass music?

Mike: I would say originally, it was a very homemade music. It was a lot of times played on homemade instruments. cigar box guitars are just a stick with a string on it. I think some call it a deadly bow, homemade band Joe's possibly homemade fiddles. I would guess that some people probably had a little better instrument. But a whole lot of it was the home ethos of it, and the family ethos of it. So, I think the tradition of that sprang from that. So, you know, the days pre-electricity, the stuff was played on largely acoustic instruments. If you had a guitar, if you had a mandolin, which would have come in later, a banjo, which again, could have been a homemade thing. It was just kind of a homemade home, folksy kind of music. And it passed down through generations. Some of it came from old Irish and British Isles ballads and fiddle tunes that came over and mixed with the some of the African music and the banjo was largely based off an African instrument. So certainly, that didn't that came into it. And all of that kind of stood up together and kind of through the years has turned into what we commonly called Mountain Music or bluegrass music now.

Heather: And what makes it unique from other types of music,

Tim: I would say it seems to be the confluence of hard times and hope these were hard working, exploited people, whether bother timber companies, other coal companies, the power companies, the government, working literally from dawn to dusk, and possibly getting a respite on maybe on Saturday night or, or Sunday night together with their local community and, and just kind of in a free, free form, communal music together. And as Mike alluded, some of these people were descendants of the, of the Highland people from Scotland. And so, a lot of those old ballads and teens and urges got brought over

and just through oral history and oral tradition where may have been modified or added to it, but just certainly, kind of storytelling, the songs, so much of this music, or their story songs telling about something that happened quite certainly, often tragic, jilted lover, someone that loves sick or has lost something, those kinds of things.

Mike: What's really interesting is that very, very little of this was written down. So, if you research some of these old songs, there's 100 different verses and musicologist have studied some of this for years, trying to figure out exactly where these things came from. Some of them were old murder tales or death tales that came over from the old country. And a lot of it was fiddle tunes that maybe never had lyrics. And they were passed down family member to cousin to nephew to friend. So, when you pull up or if you want to listen to an old fiddle tune, you're never going to find the same version. Everybody's is slightly different. And I think that's kind of what So, gives it its awesome sound. All of it is somewhat different. It isn't when you cover one, you're not just playing the same thing may be the same song, it may have the same structure. Lyrically, it may be different. The melody may be different, and that's just because the stuff wasn't written down and it was just handed down and handed down.

Heather: Do you see there being a Melungeon influence on Appalachian bluegrass music?

Mike: Yeah, I think a lot of that that came out of the mountains that way. I think the music kind of has a Malaysian thing to it itself. I think you have the influence of the fiddle that came out of the British Isles Scotland, Ireland that we talked about earlier and it mixed with African banjo and rhythms and you know, people played sticks or spoons or whatever they had. So, I think in itself, it's a mixture of things coming together and probably predating the later blues later jazz probably started in the mountains and came together. I can name you a few people that you know, without doing their So, genealogy I couldn't say but some of the names in the industry, particularly the country and bluegrass mountain industry. Herschel Sizemore's really famous banjo player, one of the one of the names Don Gibson, former Grand Ole Opry star. He wrote sweet dreams for Patsy Cline. I can't stop loving you was a hit for Ray Charles. Oh, lonesome me was a hit for everybody. Leslie Riddle, who was the guy who found all of the songs and traveled with AP Carter, which was the origination of the country music as we know it, AP Carter, and Leslie Riddle would go into the mountains, and they would like I spoke about earlier, they would ask people if they had any old songs that were handed down. And they would actually write them down at that point. And still, they just have pieces and parts of songs. Lastly, Riddle was an African American mixed race. I read the book on the Carter family. And in the book, it talks about AP Carter dropping Lesley Riddle off to stay with Milan Gins. So, I know that was part of their world. A lot of famous fiddle players named Collins one in particular was named Randall Collins, fantastic mountain fiddle player. It bleeds throughout that industry. There are a bunch, interestingly enough, Dolly Parton again, I don't know that I could say, Melungeon, but I know her grandparents were the Moors, the Evans and the Colts. So, I feel like her being in the mountains and where she's from. And with that line, I would, I would say she's probably got some ties. So, there are a few.

Heather: So how has American music been influenced overall?

Mike: I'm very biased. But I think that all of all of American music flows from the mountains first with bluegrass, which begat country, country, but yet, rock and the blues and was a cousin to jazz. So I think that if you if you trace it back at all, or a considerable portion of it comes from the mountain music which you're going to have the influences of very poor, white immigrant families from the Scots Irish people, the Highlanders, the Native Americans, who were removed from their tribal lands and the few

were able to hide out in the mountains and then previously enslaved African people just that you had that that melting pot and all those, all those seeds and streams, formulated in the mountains that just flew down literally like a spring or a stream into the larger rivers that became country and rock and all the iconic things about American music.

Let me add a straight line to this. It may be easy to understand that the mountain music as it makes its way down from the hills, Bill Monroe, the father of bluegrass music, the mountain music, bluegrass music, huge influence on lots of things and lots of people. He influenced the Everly Brothers dad, who taught his harmonies and that high harmony based off what he heard from Bill Monroe, to the Everly Brothers. So, when the Beatles got together, their harmonies were largely based off of Everly Brothers Records. So, there's you there's a straight line and an interesting fact Bill Monroe as mountain as you get hard to listen to if you're not into that kind of thing. I love it. but it's not for everybody. Some people think that was the rumblings of the beginnings of rock and roll. And Bill is actually in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. A lot of people probably don't know that he's in the Rock Hall of Fame, the country Hall of Fame and the Bluegrass Hall of Fame. So, a lot of influence. And for that matter, Elvis, his first rock and roll record was Blue Moon of Kentucky. So, a lot of influence came down out of the hills. I play currently play bluegrass music, in a group called the Chigger Hill Boys and Terry. And we've been doing it for 20 plus years. And I would like to think that what I learned from my family up in Cumberland County that came out of the gyro, Siemens and church singing is that all of that comes out through music that I still make all the time. So, I tried to honor it and have just gone back to that's, that's kind of what I'm interested in. Is the old stuff, the old tales, the old songs, the old sounds, Bill Monroe called them the ancient tones. And that's how I try to keep it alive.

And what about you, Tim?

Tim: I'm more of I think a storyteller and a lyricist than a musician. But both of my grandmothers were storytellers, from the early days and as a child with me listen with rapt attention to stories about a chicken that got leaves in the attic, and they thought it was something evil up there in the attic and crawl crossing a flooded river one time coming from Ohio to Kentucky. There are all sorts of old stories in the church influence as well. Singing old hymns from both of my grandmother's

Mike: Can I add, Tim saying that about the old hymns? That is a huge, huge part of mountain and bluegrass music. And it certainly can't be, you know, trivialized how important that is. Every bluegrass band still plays a song or two, even if they're not a gospel brass band, still play those old gospel songs. Anytime we get together, anytime family gets together, from the days of my youth on handful of old gospel songs are huge, are a huge, huge part of it. So, the just the singing the old gospel songs, again, totally ties into that.

Heather: Mike and Tim, we would love for you to share some of your music with our listeners, please tell us what you'll be playing for us.

This is a mandolin tune. I'm going to play just a tiny little piece of it called gyro morning thrill gentle things real quiet so.

Heather: All right, that was awesome.

Mike: Thank you.

Heather: Mike. When did you write that?

Mike: I started working on it several years ago, and just recently kind of picked it up and started working on it again. So, kind of a few years old, but then kind of fresh again for me,

Heather: Mike and Tim, I'm sure our listeners would love to learn more about your music. We're going to end the interview with one more piece from you. But before we do, how can our listeners get in touch with you?

Mike: You can reach me at my e-mail 446 six@gmail.com

Tim: And you can reach me at TR w rebel@comcast.net.

Heather: And where can people find your music?

Mike: You can find it anywhere that that music can be downloaded any of the platforms of that iTunes, et cetera, under the chigger Hill boys and Terry, that'll have a lot of the stuff that I play on or if written a nice one that people might want to Check out his one called Lonesome mountain that Tim and I wrote, I think that's an exceptional one. And I think people that are interested in the mountain sound in mountain life would love that song.

Heather: Now, Mike and Tim, tell us about this last song that we'll be playing.

Mike: This last one is just an old, old traditional song, another one of those old ones. It was handed down forever that there are 100 verses. I'm just going to play an instrumental version. I have recorded this with George Hagen, George and Tony Cooper, who plays in like a Native American flute at the beginning and end George play slide guitar on it. But this one is just me playing guitar. However, that one is available to be seen on YouTube. But I'm going to take a shot at it just a little quick version of that is an old mountain tune. And if you're playing along at home, I'm playing it in double Drop D on a 65 Gibson guitar.

Heather: Mike and Tim, I just want to thank you so much for being on the Melungeon Voices podcast.

Mike: Thank you for having us.

Tim: Thank you very much.

Heather: It was our pleasure. Now let's take a listen to Mike's song.

Lis: You've been listening to the Melungeon Voices Podcast. On behalf of myself, Heather Andolina 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 www.melungeon.org. 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.