

A Critic's ManiPedi Festo



Today marks my second article for Salvation South, the new online magazine founded by my old buddy Chuck Reece (widely known as the founder and face of The Bitter Southerner; more on me and Chuck coming soon to the blog). This week's feature about young guitar hero Yasmin Williams marks the beginning of my weekly gig riding the SS culture desk. Even if my desk is a half-busted peach crate stood on end in a spiderweb-free corner of the back porch, I am tickled to have this platform on the regular.

My mandate calls for me to cover Southern culture, or culture about the South, or maybe things that are Southern adjacent. That could be music, books, films, teevee, comedy, dance, mumbly-peg championships, Civil War re-enactments, worm gruntin' festivals, whatever. Add the fact that I can gin up a decent argument for some degree of Southern-ness for just about any cultural artifact you can find and you have a recipe for an absolute free for all based on not much more than the random direction I point my shiny-object detector in any given week.

Occasionally, when space or context considerations force us to cut ideas from the SS article, I will provide some expansion here at the i2b blog. The blog will also continue, at intervals, to serve as my platform for ideas and musings that do not fit the Salvation South mission. Like this ramble you are reading now, assuming you are still there. Hello?

There is an abundance of excellent cultural work on offer

right now, and it is nearly impossible for most people to get their work noticed. There were roughly 300,000 books published and 100,000 recordings released in 2021. Most of the PR oxygen goes to a handful of big names, leaving the small press and indie labels – not to mention the self-promoted artists – scrambling for scraps. This is why you won't read about Taylor Swift at my joint. (For the record, I like her a bunch and admire her smarts and professed values. But she does not need my help.) And don't even get me started on the absurd inundation of video swamping the web tubes.

Too many "critics" are mere hype agents, mostly underpaid scribblers hoping to hit clickbait gold with limp twatwaffling about this or that "must see" or "what we *all* are watching" flavor of the minute. I empathize, but only just. At the other end of the stick, there are the spawn of Bangs poison-penners who live for the snappy putdown, the curt dismissal, or the sneering above-it-all brush off.

(NOTE: Not all critics, just too many! There are tens – yes tens! – of excellent writers and thinkers that I rely upon in my excavations. Who are your favorites?)

Lucky for my readers: I don't have the time or patience to hype the mediocre, and there is way too much truly cool shit on the wind to waste time on a takedown of something I do not care for. (Unless J.D. Vance shits out another book. That guy just pisses me off.) I am beholden to no press agent or advertiser or corporate megamedia conglomerate. Naturally, Chuck holds veto power as Editor; I've never met a set of toes I could not step on given enough time, but I think we are cool here. It really comes down to my taste and my ability to sift gold from an inundation of sand. I write about the things I believe in. Whether my taste aligns with yours is in the lap of the gods.

My primary goal is to amplify the work of committed culture workers who might fly below the most folks' radar, artists and

scholars whose work might offer my readers a taste of that somethingsomething that reminds us that humankind offers an enormous and rich banquet of epic wonder.

Come on and really: Life is hard enough making it through one more day of this mean old world. Surely it is easier to just listen to/watch something familiar, slip into the equivalent of that fuzzy old robe, and just sit the fuck down and rest.

Sure, we all know there is more there there. But who has time or energy to look in the dark corners of the interwebs in hopes of finding something unexpected and excellent?

Turns out I do, because I need the hunt and discovery like a pig needs mud. And since I'm down in the wallow anyway, why not share the occasional acorn or truffle?

I love to immerse myself in the back catalog of writers and musicians I have just discovered, some current, some long dead or forgotten. Days on end listening to the same artist, comparing early works to later, songs re-worked over time, the evolution of the artist's voice...that life could always be so fine. Some people binge Netflix; I binge musicians and writers and have done since an early age. (More on this in an upcoming post.)

Onward.

This week for Salvation South I wrote about Yasmin Williams, a young WOC from Virginia who is breaking down the artificial white-guys-only image of guitar virtuosity. In my lede, I explained one of the personal reference points that comes into play when I listen to music: Shimmer. If you missed it, kick over to the article and read the first 4-5 paragraphs.

Since Shimmer is basically my own new coinage, I emailed Yasmin those grafs for a reality check. Here's our exchange.

yw: Shimmer is an interesting concept as a musical genre. It

goes beyond the more surface level, general musical genre definitions and delves deeper into the qualities of a musical piece itself. Shimmer seems to use an almost spiritual description of a genre and encompasses how music can make us feel or remind us of, which is certainly a unique approach to describing a musical genre. I'm assuming Shimmer can apply to any genre, since its definition lends itself to a wider interpretation. I think, logically, everyone would have a different interpretation of what qualifies as being a part of Shimmer, which might make this term difficult to use in a musical critique. However, this could be a good thing as a lot of music criticism focuses on comparisons and not on emotion.

rr-k: I really appreciate the consideration you gave to this. And yes: There will be disagreement as to what qualifies as Shimmer and what does not. Then again: What is Jazz? What is Country? And so on forever...

yw: Yes exactly! But since Shimmer is a new term there isn't a general consensus on what it means yet, whereas jazz and the like have an understood implication. I think this is good though. Shimmer is less about comparing one band/song to another band/song or forcing music to fit into a neat genre "box," than it is about analyzing the actual qualities of the music and what makes it great or makes us feel. Anyway, finally some fresh ideas in music criticism, thanks for this!

rr-k: There is no consensus because nobody but you and me even knows it exists!

yw: Hahaha well yeah.

Two comments in particular stand out for me.

"Shimmer seems to use an almost spiritual description of a

genre and encompasses how music can make us feel or remind us of..."

...and...

"Shimmer is less about comparing one band/song to another band/song or forcing music to fit into a neat genre "box," than it is about analyzing the actual qualities of the music and what makes it great or makes us feel."

Man, talk about getting it.

My other big goal for this column is finding a way to articulate the *thing*, that whatever-it-is-ness a piece or body of work delivers that gives me a tingle in my fingers and toes, gives me that warm spread in my belly I used to get from beer.

The driving Question, capital 'Q': What is happening when artists give us a glimpse inside something bigger than ourselves and let us in on something mysterious and ineffable?

Shimmer is part of that calculus. I'll be struggling to find more language, an always imperfect medium for expressing the ineffable, to fill out the equation. Along the way, I would love for readers to weigh in on this conundrum. I am opening comments again here on the blog despite the constant barrage from Eastern European porn and vape merchants. Help make it worth my while.

That's it for now. Hold the victims of war in your hearts, and hold your loved ones close. While you do that, here's one of my fave songs of recent vintage. Let's all be one of these.

Update on Peanuts and Famine Relief



So color me amazed and humbled. Since I announced the fundraising drive for the Send Your Narrator to Uganda project, the donations have been rolling in. We have passed the \$1000 mark and well on our way to two large. I am incredibly encouraged and excited. And grateful.

First thing: the link to the 501(c)(3) Domi Education account is live. Hit the Donate button at the top right of the page to make a tax deductible contribution.

There have been a few questions about the project, the why and how, but one question in particular has popped up several times:

Given all the great publicity the Mana folks will receive from my work, why aren't they paying for my expenses?

Fair question. There are a few reasons, but the main issue is this:

I want Immune to Boredom to retain complete editorial independence and ownership of the resulting work.

I'm not doing this as a paid PR operative. I am looking for a story that, hopefully, represents some aspect of our human/social/political drama that helps us understand the larger implications of community, compassion, and the human condition. I want to be able to ask uncomfortable questions

when needed, and not feel bound to any specific interest beyond the story I find.

Second, the farther into this that I dive, the range of work this research can produce expands almost by the hour. Already fielding questions and contacts from a variety of possible channels that I had not imagined were viable. Very exciting.

Third, my travel costs to cover this story amounts to treatment for about 100 kids suffering from Severe Acute Malnutrition. I really don't want that money if it takes away from kids who are in dire need. And as I've said before, if you don't want to donate to this project, please consider contributing directly to Mana. Fifty bucks will literally save the life of a child.

Heck. Donate to this project and to them. You'll feel double plus good.

Finally, I will be receiving substantial support from Mana. All our critical arrangements – for ground transport; access to government officials, relief agencies, and camps; and on-the-ground security – are in the hands of people who know the terrain and the political landscape. They are providing access to some very difficult to reach people and places. It would be unthinkable to travel there without that kind of logistical support.

Hope this clarifies the situation. Thanks for the support and well-wishes. I have an amazing community around me, both close at hand and at-a-distance. My gratitude is indescribable.

PS and also, too: if anyone knows of a suitable audience within driving distance of Tallahassee, I am happy to come speak to groups about this project. Let's do this.

PPS and also, too, too: **If you prefer to make your tax-deductible donation via check, please remit to:**

Domi Education
914 Railroad Ave
Tallahassee, FL 32310

Field Tested Fool Proof Granola



Posted this almost exactly a year ago. I've been making at least a batch of granola a week since then, and today finds me making a couple of batches for holiday gifting. Seemed a good time to share this one again. BTW, the Bitter Southerner has a new Best Of list up for 2015. Check it out.

Field Tested Fool Proof Granola

Looking for an activity that'll cure what ails you? Cook something.

Alas, my kitchen chops are just enough to keep me from starving, and to get myself in trouble once in a while, but there are a few go-to recipes that keep me from being a cliched, *Leave It To Beaver* era patriarchal putz.<fn>There are plenty of other areas where I qualify, but I'm nearly redeemable on this score.</fn> If you are generally kitchen savvy, this post is likely beneath your notice, save as an opportunity to point and laugh as I wobble on toddler legs

through the world of food.

This one is an amalgam of lots of different granola recipes I've made/bungled/burned over the years. I've finally learned the guiding principles, though, and now I can whip this out at a moment's notice, as long as I have all the ingredients:



Oatmeal – 4 cups

Sunflower seeds – 1 cup

Flax seeds – $\frac{1}{2}$ cup

Coconut flakes – 1 cup

Tupelo Honey – $\frac{3}{4}$ cup (any other sweetener will do, but this is my fave)

Vegetable Oil – $\frac{1}{2}$ cup

Salt – A couple two three pinches

Vanilla extract – A scoche

Then, if you're like me, you'll realize you forgot something, so off to the market to get:



Pecans – 1 cup chopped

Dried fruit – A fistful (cranberries today). DO NOT put the dried fruit in the oven or they will turn to stone.



Mix all the dry ingredients (except the dried fruit!!) in a big pan. You can substitute or add any kinds of seeds or nuts, but if you add much more than I use, you might want to add another cup of oats to keep the granola from becoming too seedy. Add the salt, oil, honey, and vanilla. Then stir like crazy. I use a pan with high side walls because I'm clumsy and spill a lot otherwise.

Put the mix in a 300* oven for 30 minutes. Make another pot of coffee after SOMEONE drank the rest of the first pot.<fn>I'm not naming names.</fn>

At the 30 minute mark, pull the pan out and stir well. Put it back in for another 15 minutes or so. Keep your eyes and nose peeled for any hint of burning.



After 15 minutes, or around the time your kitchen begins to smell like heaven's garden, take it out and stir again. Let cool for a while, stirring occasionally. Once it cools, add a fistful of dried fruit <fn>Exactly, no more or less. Be precise.</fn> and stir it in.

That's it. If I can do it, any prat can make it work. Half a cup of this mixed with a half cup of yogurt makes this My Favorite World.

Today's Music

This morning, Bitter Southerner posted their 25+1 favorite CDs to come out of the South in 2014.<fn>I wrote this last week, so the date's off.</fn> With just a couple of exceptions, I had not heard of the musicians on the list. So I pulled one up to provide the soundtrack for granola wrangling: Curtis Harding's *Soul Power*.

An ATL-based guitarist/singer, Harding serves an updated take on one of my favorite styles – late 60s/early 70s soul and R&B. Isley, Curtis Mayfield, Issac Hayes, Al Green...not that he *sounds just like* any of these folks, but that you can feel the through-line from the pioneers up to more recent R&B authenticos like Prince and Cee Lo. (Harding was in Cee Lo's band for a while.) He also reflects the great blues vibe of Muddy Waters and the like. And then comes "Cruel World" to wrap things up and I'm reminded of Los Lobos and the great guitar of David Hidalgo. All in all, I really love it. Just one more surprise puzzle piece that fits right into MFW. I'm sure it made the granola more better.

And now we're into Amy Ray's *Goodnight Tender*. I've met Amy in passing a few times<fn>Not that she'd have any reason to remember.</fn> and she's truly one of the world's good people. Loving this album, a heaping helping of pure country. And all respect for the incred harmonies that pal Kelly Hogan is dropping here. M. F. W.

I'm looking forward to checking out the whole list, especially the latest Lucinda Williams, whom I adore, yes I do. And if you don't know the Bitter Southerner, get to know them. They provided more than a little bit of inspiration for establishing this here little bloggy vineyard.

The Management Wishes to Apologize



It appears The Writer slipped a fast one past Standards and Practices a few days ago. The Mgmt. wishes to apologize for the overly harsh tone The Writer took when discussing the food of the irresistibly delightful and perky Rachel Ray, whose food deserved better than the snide dismissal she suffered in our last post. We beg the forgiveness of the perkyperkyperky Ms Ray, and of our readers.<fn>Sincerely, we like the perky Ms Ray, and find her food to be perfectly fine, albeit unspectacular. The Writer is an embittered wretch, however, and is prone to unseemly outbursts. Again, we apologize.</fn>



What kind of monster would be cruel to this bubbly sprite?

As penance, The Writer has been chained to our kitchen counter

where he will be forced to create this dessert twelve times a day for the entire twelve days of Chrismakwanzkuh.

And he will be forced to eat every. damn. bite. That oughta learn him.

Sisyphus, upon hearing of this punishment, said "Wow, that's kind of harsh, doncha think?"

No. We most certainly do not.