

## **COUNTRY QUEERS in collaboration with OUT IN THE OPEN SEASON 2 EPISODE 4 : Sam Gleaves**

DESCRIPTION: Sam Gleaves is a white gay man who was born and raised in Virginia and now lives in Kentucky. Sam is an old-time musician, educator, singer/songwriter, and a banjo, guitar, and fiddle player. This episode features Rae's 2013 interview with Sam where he talks about musical traditions, family, and finding a sense of belonging within the word "Fabulachian." Then you'll hear a phone call between Sam and Rae from January 2022 reflecting on what it's like to listen back to this interview after nearly a decade.

For this episode we're asking folks who are able to support Black Appalachian Young and Rising - which is the Black Youth caucus of the STAY Project. BAYR is for Black Appalachian Youth and by Black Appalachian Youth. Check out their work and donate [here](#). Also BIG love to [the STAY Project](#) and [the Highlander Center](#) in this episode! Please go check out all of their important and powerful work in Appalachia and the South!

CREDITS: Created and produced by Rae Garringer with support from HB Lozito from [www.weareoutintheopen.org](http://www.weareoutintheopen.org). Editorial advisory dream team: [Hermelinda Cortés](#), [Lewis Raven Wallace](#), and [Sharon P. Holland](#). Music by Sam Gleaves! Check out more of his music here: <http://www.samgleaves.com>

---

*[Sound of ducks]*

**[Intro]:** "Hi! We're Abby, Laura, Lucy and April in Brattleboro, Vermont. And you are listening to Country Queers, the podcast."

*[Banjo Theme Song with vocals by Sam Gleaves]*

**RAE GARRINGER [Host]:** Hey y'all, I'm Rae Garringer, and this episode features the second interview I ever recorded, with my friend Sam Gleaves. You'll also hear a conversation we recorded in January 2022, reflecting on what it feels like to listen back to this interview, nearly a decade later.

Sam is a white gay man who was born and raised on Cherokee, S'atsoyaha, and Moneton lands in Wytheville, Virginia and now lives on the traditional territories of the Shawnee and Cherokee nations in Berea, Kentucky. Sam is an old-time musician, a singer and songwriter, a fiddle and banjo player, and an educator who now works at Berea College as the director of Berea's Bluegrass Ensemble.

Sam and I first met in 2012 at the STAY Project's annual summer gathering - a weekend of skill shares, popular education, music, dancing, and joy in an autonomous youth-led space. STAY which stands for Stay Together Appalachian Youth - is a central Appalachian network of young people, aged 14-30, who are committed to supporting one another to make Appalachia a place young folks can and want to STAY.

I always love to shout out STAY any chance I get, because it's the network where many years ago, I found the inspiration, community, and support to set out on this now nearly-decade-long adventure of interviewing rural and small town LGBTQIA+ folks. And Sam, and our friend Ethan Hamblin, are the first people I ever heard use the phrase "country queers" to talk about themselves.

Let me just say that I A D O R E Sam Gleaves. He's one of those friends that I fell in friend-love with the first time I met him, and I think of him almost like a sibling. And this deep love that I have for him, is absolutely influenced by my admiration for and appreciation for his music. Sam plays traditional music, oldtime, bluegrass and he's spent years studying this tradition with mentors and elders in the mountains of Appalachia. But he also writes beautiful modern songs, in these old traditions, that no matter how many times I hear them always make me cry. Sam also wrote the original theme song from last season that you may be familiar with, and you'll hear some of his music along the way in this episode too.

As I mentioned before, this is the second interview I had ever recorded. It took place at STAY's 2013 Summer gathering which was held at the Highlander Center on Cherokee lands in New Market, Tennessee. Highlander is a 90 year old organization that provides training, popular education, and support for emerging and existing movement leaders throughout the South, Appalachia, and the world. We chose to include this interview in this collaborative season alongside much more recent conversations, because it felt

necessary to include an interview from the Appalachian region, for this project that was born here, is still based here, and has been deeply influenced by this place.

The weekend gathering is just wrapping up, it's a Sunday morning in August. Sam and I sit down on a wooden bench on the small second story porch that wraps around the circular workshop center's main room. It is a partially cloudy summer morning. It's windy, and there are young people cutting loose in the background. When I listen back now, I hear how nervous and stiff and new I was to this whole process. I also hear how much has changed in a decade of recording these stories, through the types of questions I asked, through the things Sam talks about. 9 years is a loooooong time in queer time, and I know our conversation would sound so different if it was recorded today. But even still, Sam is slow, and sweet, and thoughtful with his story. Here's Sam:

### **[INTERVIEW]**

**RAE:** So you're gonna say your name and what today's date is. I'm gonna make sure it's working.

**SAM GLEAVES:** Sam Gleaves. August 10<sup>th</sup>. The year of our lord 2013.

**RAE:** ....wait..shit.

*[recording 1 ends. recording 2 begins]*

**RAE:** So, if you can just say your name and your age and where you live?

**SAM:** I am Sam Gleaves. I'm 20 years old, and I'm from Wytheville, Virginia in southwest Virginia, and I attend Berea College in Kentucky, so that's where I live now.

**RAE:** So, um, what's it like, I guess just if you could describe Wytheville for people who don't know anything about it, what's it like where you grew up?

**SAM:** Wytheville is a small town at the junction of I-81 and I-77 and that's why most people know it, and it's grown rapidly in my lifetime. Right when you get off the Wytheville exit, there's a big Wal-Mart shopping plaza with Lowes and all these other chain stores and a strip mall type thing, and I remember when that was the Crowgey Farm. So the Wytheville that I grew up in is pretty different than the Wytheville that we have now. There's a Gatorade plant has moved in because the water on Reed Creek is good, and that's brought a lot of jobs and a lot more people to the area, so I grew up in a smaller Wytheville. What else, do you want to know?

**RAE:** That's great, that's fine, that's good enough, and then um....So, let's see...I'm sorry, this is only the second time I've done this and my questions are in a funny order.

**SAM:** That's ok, it's practice for me too.

**RAE:** So, what was your childhood like? What are your parents like? What was your schooling like? You know.

**SAM:** Ok, um. Well! My Daddy started out teaching English in high school for years so he could coach football, that's what he wanted to do. And he's a tremendously thoughtful, well read, articulate person. My daddy has a poise about himself and his words that I always felt was really uncommon, and I always really admired that in my Daddy. He's worked for years as a signal maintainer at Norfolk and Southern Railroad and so I always felt like the working class part of my raising was from my Daddy. Because he was the son of a lawyer. So, they didn't live like they were well to do, they didn't act like they were well to do really. But, he has this deep ingrained blue collar working man humility about him that I always really admired, and that's kind of what I absorbed from my Dad. And he's a natural story teller, he's hilarious, and he just, he gave me the love for the spoken word.

And then my Mom is an English teacher, also, and she's done that for many years. And she calls herself a hippie with makeup, which I think is a really good way of describing her. Because socially she's very inclusive, loving, effervescent, fun lady, you know, and so that's sort of the hippie side this embracing quality about her which everybody notices, and then the makeup is also about you know, she's from a small town! She believes in presenting herself well, you know, and um and she jokes about being just a little materialistic. So the hippie with makeup, that's my Mom.

**RAE:** Great, um, so, when did you first know you were queer? Or my first question is how do you identify, actually.

**SAM:** Yeah. I identify as a gay male, and I remember having feelings that I could not understand, or I couldn't categorize, when I was very young, like elementary school age. And when I was in middle school, one of my classmates who I didn't always know very well, but I came to know better when I was in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, and he *knew* he was gay. He was comfortable enough in himself to be going for that. He kind of spotted that I, I mean, he knew that I was gay, and I really didn't at that point. So then, we started talking and he would say, "Well, you know, there's this thing that I've learned about myself," and he would just kinda present it. And then I would get to thinking and slowly I started piecing it together, "This is who I am, this is a part of who I am." And then I started to realize that those feelings of being different that I've had my whole life might

have stemmed from there. And so it all started falling into place a little better. And then, as you know, around that time, more and more people started having that realization too. I feel like middle school is like a crucible, you know. It's sort of testing fire, and people either bend or break. And so a lot of my friends started to kind of come out as well, one by one. And so then I realized we had this little tight knit queer community and we all liked each other pretty much. So then we carried each other all the way through high school.

*[soft instrumental banjo song]*

So then I came out to my mother first. I went down into the bathroom, she was curling her hair. I had wanted to for a long time, and I knew that she knew. She was starting to say things like...wonderful things, things that few people are blessed with, like we were riding in the car one day and I remember her saying, "You know if one of my sons discovered that they were gay and wanted to tell me that, I would absolutely embrace them and think of them no differently." You know, I remember her saying that in almost those same terms! And I would just shake my head and look at the floor cause I wasn't ready to tell her yet. And I just walked in there and sat down on the washing machine which is over in the corner and said, "Well, Mom, I'm gay" and you know. And then fumbled through another sentence or something and she said, "Oh honey! Did you just wanna tell me that?" That was her first response. And she smiled. I mean she beamed, cause she was so glad that it was out in the open and it didn't have to be skirted around anymore. And I said "Yes" and I remember her reassuring me, and saying "Well, you *know*, you know how I feel about you and that's not gonna change, it's not gonna be any different." Which was a tremendously reassuring thing, and I mean I just shook for a day it felt like, just with that weight being off my shoulders.

And I went straight in, my brother was sitting at the kitchen table and I went straight in there and told him and he said, "Of course we know that." And it was a similar welcome, I have an older brother who's 6 years older. So that welcome was warm and they've remained that way and they've gotten progressively more supportive all the time. I frequently get emails or messages from them if they read an article about gay rights issues or something that they think I'm interested in, they'll send it to me. And they've started - it's entered their humor more. So that's when you can tell they're really comfortable with it, you know.

And um, then, I waited longer to come out to my dad, because I just...that side of the family didn't...sex just wasn't talked about. Period. And then, when I got to seeing the first boy I ever loved seriously, and it was gonna last awhile, and I knew, and my dad was on Facebook! So it was gonna come to light. It was gonna be known. So I called

him from college my freshman year and I told him. And he, immediately, his first response was, “of course I love you no different.” Very affirming. And then he started to say that he was worried, because “there are risks associated with this lifestyle,” is what he said. And I said, “Well, Dad, I don’t appreciate the term lifestyle and this is why,” and so we started to negotiate and talk about it, and I figured out what he meant. Which was that he wanted me to be safe. Which he may not have told that to my *straight* older brother, you know? But I appreciated that notion, that he wanted to protect me if he could. That was still out of love and I knew that. We still don’t talk as much about that part of my life. We just don’t, you know, it’s not comfortable for either of us so we don’t talk about it much. But I’m not scared to. And he’s met boyfriends I’ve had since then and been very, so good to them.

I’m not out to my grandparents. I haven’t told them, I haven’t verbalized it to them. Because I think it would shake up the foundations of what they know too violently. It would be this sudden, kind of rupture. I mean it would just kind of hurl a lot of things up in the air that have been planted for them their whole lives...that they expected since the day I was born and they held me for the first time, that I was gonna grow up and marry a woman and have children, you know. That’s what they thought. [laughs] It would give them great religious concerns. And their love for me would not shift one iota, it would not move, and I know that. But, it’s just not somewhere that we need to go, I don’t need to sit down and tell them that, because I think they know.

And um, well, we can get to that later, I guess [laughs] next

**RAE:** What were you gonna say, do you want the next question, or do you wanna finish your...

**SAM:** Well I was gonna say, I think, I had an experience where I felt like my grandmother knew for the first time that I was gay. I was playing a gig somewhere, and my grandmother has been the greatest supporter of my music that I ever could have asked for. She’s a singer herself and sings gospel music and directs the children’s choir at church and all of that. And she told me from the time I was little tiny that I had a pretty voice and I should really pursue it, that I should share it. And so, she was the foundation of me taking up music, period. And so she comes to hear me anytime that I’m around playing locally and I play in her kitchen all the time. You know. So one time she came to this little local gig that I had in a bar, and I wanted to sing a song that I had written...it just talks about the struggles of loving, you know, loving country boys. [laughs] And it says, there’s a line that talks about, you know, me kissing another man, and I thought to myself, I’d already started playing the song before I even thought about...cause the song was broader to me, I didn’t think about “Oh, I shouldn’t share that cause it’s got

those lines in it,” I wasn’t thinking about outing myself, but then I got to the verse that was gonna out me and I thought “I can’t change the words on the spot, and why would I?” So I just sung it.

And I remember them both, my grandfather and my grandmother, both scanning the ground. It was immediate. What immediately registered with me was “Oh, there’s some kind of shame going on.” Cause there’s people that we know from the community sitting all around them. So I thought, but, not that, I mean it’s in a bar. So it’s not like everyone’s honed in listening to me either. And I thought, “well they’re ashamed for some reason and they know and that’s it, and I’ve made them uncomfortable for some reason” is what I thought initially. But I don’t know that. They could have been taken by the beauty of the song, or the way I was singing it, or proud of me, or you know there’s a number of things that can make somebody express that - just looking at the ground. I mean, looking at the ground is looking at the ground. So I don’t know for sure if they were ashamed, or if they caught, if they noticed. I feel like they did.

**RAE:** Yeah...um, so do you think that being from the country, or living in the country or a small town, made it harder to come out?

**SAM:** Yes. I do. Because there wasn’t an open community of gay people around that I had as models coming up. If I’d of known, like, if my parents had had friends that were couples, you know, same sex couples, that would have instilled this whole different awareness in me that this existed in the world, and that it was ok, and that people grew up and grew old together in same sex relationships. Which I didn’t get that in a small town because everything was behind closed doors. As I became more aware and started coming home in the summers from college, I learned of course, that all these people I had known growing up were queer, that there was this whole community, but it was underground. So, I’d had support in high school, which I’m really really lucky for and thankful for, and I wasn’t bullied in high school which is you know an unexpected blessing in the area we live in. It could have been much worse, and there’s a lot to be done in making queer people feel at home in the area where I was raised.

**RAE:** So, that’s a good segue into what do you think the largest struggles facing rural queers are? And do you think that - it’s sort of a two part question, like what do you think the largest issues sort of like for queer people in the country is right now? And then do you think it’s the same or different for rural queer people? Or however you want to answer that.

**SAM:** Ok, well you know the initial obvious one is that lack of *open* community. The second is lack of a history. You don’t get told about, “Oh these are, there was a same sex couple and they lived in such and such area of the county and they lived there for a

long time together and they farmed or they did this, and..." You know you don't have that kind of history in stories that you get in your family where we're from, that that's part of your birthright, the stories about your family. And that you get in the music and the social, you know the socializing, the visiting. You get that history in all these different places that makes you feel rooted there. Whereas when you discover you're queer, I think a lot of peoples immediate response is to think, "Oh, I suddenly I feel like I don't belong here you know when my whole life I felt I did." And then...just that tension, between having to reconcile your queer identity with your heritage, which can seem contrary at times, like two things that can't go together. But, I've found that those two things go together beautifully, and that I've been able to embrace that.

**RAE:** Hmm, how do you feel like you've been able to combine them and embrace that?

**SAM:** Mmmmm? I had to be in a place where both of those could be celebrated with others first. And for me that was at Berea College, because I made some friends who were country queers. And we started thinking, "well we're Fabulous and we're Appalachians, so we're Fabulachians." And so that all came together and we clung to that word and used it, and used it, and used it, and used it when we first combined it, because it set something right in ourselves. It announced that we were fully human. That we were whole. So that's how I found it, was by connecting with other queer people from the same culture.

**RAE:** So, when do you feel the most proud to be queer?

**SAM:** The most proud...

**RAE:** Or maybe even the most comfortable, or the most - I guess proud...

**SAM:** I have a rainbow banjo strap that I put on my banjo a couple years ago. And I put it on there, and I had some gigs coming up where I was gonna play in front of people, and I thought, and I almost took it off and replaced it with just a normal leather strap before one gig, Cause I thought this is a bunch of older folks and I don't want to, I was performing with someone else, and I don't want to make the person I'm singing with feel uncomfortable, and I don't want to make the audience feel uncomfortable either cause that distracts from the music, which is the holiest thing to me that they hear the music. I approached the person that I was gonna be singing with and I said, "do you think that that banjo strap is too gay?" and he said, "there's no such thing as too gay, it's like having too much money." And I was in stitches laughing, you know, doubled over, and I thought I'm *never* taking this strap off here now. I haven't since. So I feel most proud to be a country queer in a way, when I put my rainbow banjo strap on and I go sing in front of people because I get to present my culture and the thing that I think is most beautiful



about it and our music, our songs and also in a sneaky way reveal something else about my culture, that there have always been queer people where I'm from and all over the world. So just being able to bring across that subtle realization to people.

*[song Honest Men by Sam Gleaves on acoustic guitar]*

**RAE:** Do you wanna talk about music for a minute? Cause I feel like for you, right, you also play what some people would call country music - I know you might call it something more specific - But how do you feel like, I don't know, if you just would want to say anything about that, and being queer, and being from a small town and being a country musician.

**SAM:** I had a really affirming good experience coming out to my musical mentors too, which was just as daunting and just as important as coming out to my family, because the people that taught me to play and sing are every bit as much my parents as the ones that birthed me, the older mentors anyway, and my peers that I make music with, we all have a big impact on each other and there's a real community centered around traditional music where I'm from. It's a tight knit community where everybody knows everybody, and so I started edging into more and more openness with that.

I want to tell the story somehow of queer people making country music, because, this is an arguable statement, but I think you can say that there are more queer people in the arts than there are straight people. I mean, when you're marginalized in some way I think you turn to the arts. And if you're marginalized as an Appalachian and you're marginalized as a queer person, how can you not turn to art? You know, in some way. I mean, it's no wonder that so many of the country singers and musicians I admire are queer, because how could they not turn to it? It's such a comforting music, it's such a healing music.

So I wanna tell that story somehow. It's not quite time. The audience for our music is in some circles still very very conservative. And there's a lot of people scared of losing work because they come out. You know like musicians, that would be a very real threat to them, losing gigs because they came out. You know just flat out less money in the bank account because they came out. So, I'm looking forward to bringing that story forward through some kind of documentary work in the next decade or so. I hope for that. And I hope that the time will be right, hope the climate will be right by then.

**RAE:** Great. Alright, well let's do a couple, just a couple more, so I guess....do you feel pressure to move to a city?

**SAM:** Yes, for two reasons, because I'm studying folklore and I will likely end up in some kind of teaching position if I end up taking a steady job, and that will probably take

me to a university in a city, Well three reasons all together, because then as a musician if I wanted to travel and tour it would make a lot more sense for me to be in a centrally located city. And then also as a queer person, I would be able to find a whole new level of community, I mean just numbers, just a sheer overwhelming amount of gay people in the city, you know.

But, I don't think that any of those are the right move for me, and I will fight to live rurally. Because on one hand on a very dramatic note, I feel a duty to be a queer example in the community that I was raised for young queer people who are coming up. For me to be present in that way, and to be there for them in a way that I didn't have. I feel that duty. And also, because I feel like if I run away to the city it'll take something from my music, and that I need to be as immersed in this culture as I possibly can because so much of it is being erased, and that I need to be close to my people in that way, and be listening to them, while our elders are still here.

**RAE:** So....so I think I'll just do my last one which is, what is one thing - is there anything you'd want to say to other rural LGBTQ folks who are struggling? If they're young or old, or maybe even if they're not struggling? [ laughs ] I don't know.

**SAM:** Yeah.....This is a challenge I present to myself, as well as with everyone else, all the other country queers in the mountains, and I would say, be brave, and to take strength in each other, and to learn our history, to seek it out. To learn about the gay or the queer history of their communities, which is there, it just needs to be - the surface needs to be scratched. And then I would say, take that next step that you're a little fearful of and live as openly as you possibly can, because, even though it's a sacrifice, it breaks barriers. And younger, you know, future generations will be thankful for that. And we've *got* to do it, it's time, it's been time.

*[song Honest Men by Sam Gleaves]*

## **[BREAK]**

HB LOZITO: [Host]: Hey, friends, I'm HB Lozito with Out in the Open. Because we know the impact of colonization on people, land, and resources, we're encouraging our white listeners to engage in an ongoing process of reparations. So, during each episode break, we're asking our white listeners who have extra funds to donate to projects founded and led by, queer & trans, Black and Indigenous folks, and people of color.

Today, Sam is asking you to support Black, Appalachian, Young and Rising, which is the Black Youth caucus of the STAY Project. BAYR is for Black Appalachian Youth and by Black Appalachian Youth. The link to their website, where you can donate and learn more about their work is in the episode notes, and over on our websites at [countryqueers.com](http://countryqueers.com) and [weareoutintheopen.org](http://weareoutintheopen.org).

## **[END BREAK]**

*[song Honest Men by Sam Gleaves]*

### **RAE [Host]**

When I reached out to Sam for his feedback on edits of a draft of this episode, he suggested we hop on the phone to talk a little about what it's like for us to listen back to this conversation after nine years. Here's some of that call:

*[phone ringing]*

**Sam**

Hi Rae!

**Rae**

Hey Sam, how you doing?

**Sam**

Hey! Doing great. I'm so glad to hear your voice.

**Rae**

I know! You too!-Well...So it's been, it's been really interesting and pretty fun to sort of go back to this conversation that we had, in the summer of 2013. And I can actually still just picture the spot where we were sitting up on that porch at Highlander.

**Sam**

Me too. Yes. What a beautiful place in the world,

**Rae**

I know. Well, and it's so fun to listen back too cause it was during the STAY gathering. And I can recognize all these voices of so many people I love in the background, who are still really good

friends.-And I think in some ways, like, because we're still friends, like this conversation feels in some ways, like the beginning of our friendship, you know?

**Sam**

Yes, yes! I feel the same. I really do. And the - Yes, I feel very grateful that you're a constant presence in my life, and that we, we got to know each other in a way because you are open to asking others to share their story! You know, and that's, that's such an honor for me to have an opportunity to share my story with you, and feel understood by you. So that's, that's been our mode from the beginning.

**Rae**

Mmmm [laughs] Well, thank you. And yeah. We - I could get distracted by just telling you that - how much I love you. But um [laughs]

**Sam**

Oh same! Yes.

**Rae**

Yeah. Well, and so I'm curious, kind of like, when you look back through this conversation, listen back, like, what are some of the things that come up for you?

**Sam**

Yes. So you know, in 2013, I was a student at Berea College and the STAY project and that community of people that you were mentioning, and you, were a really important part of me, coming into my own as a person from Appalachia as a queer person and a musician and someone who loves to write songs. So when I listened back or read back through the interview, it was all sort of marked by that time, and I had no idea where my journey was going next. You know, I mean, like so many young people, you know, we can't, we can't know where things are headed. And I thought about how much love and support and affirmation from my family, and from my found family, you know, chosen family, it took for me to be able to even share my music and to take this next step in my journey of recording my songs and performing more and, and sharing. And community and family were the only reason that I was even able to do that from the beginning. You know, so I just feel a lot of gratitude.

When I read back, and I think about how nervous I was to tell my story, even though you put me at ease, because I felt trust with you, knowing that you're another queer person from Appalachia, that we had a lot in common and shared experiences in some ways. And so you put me at ease, but also, you know, it's just.... it always feels like a risk telling your story as a queer person, you know, and so that was coloring, I think my, my responses, the things that I said. But one thing that I wanted to revisit was that moment that we talked about, where I was singing a song that I wrote, called "If I Could Write a Song." And, when I was singing at a bar in my hometown, long before I recorded the song, and my grandparents were sitting there and I wasn't

out to them at that time. And I thought that they were somehow disturbed by hearing the song or something, you know, or the queer content of the song. But what I remembered now, when I look back, is that I sang the song, you know, I felt nervous about it. I felt like I was outing myself to my grandparents. And I didn't know how they felt about it. But then after I played that night, my grandfather came up to me and hugged me and said, "I feel like I know what you're supposed to do in your life, and you're supposed to write songs." And, you know, he just was really affirming. And he just had this twinkle in his eye when he said it, and he made me feel like I could, I could do this. You know, like, I could be open about who I was, and that that was a real gift to me.

And, you know, I never did have a conversation where I came out to him, but he met partners of mine, and was always loving and welcoming. And you know, it just, there's so much that happens in family that's not spoken, but there was this shared understanding and love and support of each other. And with my grandparents, I just never questioned that. They always showed up for me, and they were always here for me. And even now that my grandfather Bo who I'm talking about is passed on, I still feel his presence, you know. And my grandmother, who is still with us, Brenda, that encouraged me to play music in the first place. She's still, you know, so important to me, and like a dear friend, as well as my grandmother, you know. So that, reading that story again, and thinking about it made me think of how much love and affirmation it really takes to - to grow up and survive and learn to thrive and also tell the world something about yourself, you know? Yeah. And I absolutely couldn't have done it without the support of so many people.

*["If I Could Write A Song" by Sam Gleaves fades in, with a verse about his grandmother]*

So, yeah, and what I'm curious, like, when you're going back and listening to these pieces, what's coming up for you about revisiting these moments?

**Rae**

Well, first of all, I just, I don't know what it is about you. But I just - that story just made me totally tear up. It's just so sweet. And I'm so glad you had that moment with your grandpa. And I do feel like...the first time I remember hearing you play music, I was just like, this is - this is what you're supposed to be doing Sam. It's such a gift to us all. I am being so emotional. I'm sorry. [laughs]

**Sam**

Aw, thank you, I know, I feel really emotional, too. And it's hard to collect myself and to tell this story. So thank you for being patient.

**Rae**

Well, thank you! Yeah, I mean, there's so many things, I think when I listen back sort of hear. And some of it is just-that STAY community and how important that space was. Like Country Queers just wouldn't happen without that crew without this really wonderful group of young people in the mountains, saying, like, "Yeah, go do it, you can do this, you'll figure it out!" You

know. And in some ways, I feel like, like, STAY and like my STAY kind of family, like taught me how to do this work through just like how much like, storytelling, tradition, everyone in that in this in this region, and everyone in that kind of crew brings, you know. So that's one thing I hear. You know, I mean, I interviewed Elandria later that same day, who's since passed on and interviewed her in the the office building, which has been burnt down, right? And so there's just so much in that moment. But another thing that's been really interesting is like. It's not been quite a decade, right? But like things change so fast in queer time, you know? So in some ways, like, the questions that I was asking, and also the conversation we were having is like, both of us much younger queer people, much newer in our own journeys of figuring out how to, like, navigate queerness in this place that we live in and grew up in and love. Like, it feels so different now, you know, in some ways. Like I think if I had met you and done this interview, now, it would sound really different. And some of that's just like, how much like, changes in queer time in terms of even just media representation.—~~And~~ that doesn't mean that it's all a walk in the park or whatever. But it's just, it's really interesting to hear that, and I don't even - I can't even like pinpoint a moment. But it's just kind of a, like reflection and listening back that I've been having.

### **Sam**

Oh, absolutely! And I think that Highlander is such a place of talking about ancestors and generations of people in movement work, you know. And so that, absolutely, I mean, when you put yourself there, on the hill, as you were saying that all comes up. And queer time is a new concept for me, but it's really expansive, you know, to think about how our growth as queer individuals and community that we experience time in a different way. Yeah, so I could, you know, obviously be thinking about that for a long time. But I think, you know, yes, so much has changed for me, because, I mean, when we talked in 2013, I knew that I wanted to play music, I knew I wanted to be involved in teaching to try to empower other people to play music, and also study Appalachian music that's been handed down. And I knew I wanted to talk about social and environmental issues in music. And Highlander is such a place of that intersection. And, you know, so all of that comes up, and I just didn't know the shape and the forms my life was gonna take. So what I've discovered is that what I love most about music is collaboration. And that opportunity to sing and play together, change the space and share who we are, you know? So what you're saying?

### **Rae**

Well, that's just I think you're starting to go there. But I'm kind of just like... yeah, like, at this time of this interview, I don't think you had recorded an album right? And since then, you've just done so much. You've recorded a lot. You've toured a lot. You've collaborated with so many folks. And you have done so much work to like, share this music with young people and are still doing that. So I wonder if there's like, yeah, updates you would want to share for listeners about kind of like, the past nine years. [laughs]

### **Sam**

Yes, yes, Absolutely. So yeah, like I said, I mean meeting Cathy Fink. I had met her before at a Reel World Stringband concert. And Reel World String Band, like those ladies are so fierce and have been such a great inspiration to me, as have Cathy Fink and Marcy Marxer. You know, when I really had a chance to connect with Cathy was at a music camp, Common Ground On The Hill, in Westminster, Maryland. And so then when we decided we wanted to work together and record this album, Ain't We Brothers. I just started to realize, you know, that, through Cathy's example, Cathy and Marcy both, that music is always about community. And that telling stories through music is not only important, but it was necessary for me. And so it was such an honor to work with them on that recording and then we continued Cathy produced an album that I recorded with Tyler Hughes - amazing singer, instrumentalist, traditional musician from southwestern Virginia. -And then my friend Deborah Payne, and I made a recording - Deborah is an amazing fiddler and singer from Berea. And then Saro Lynch Thomason, and I recorded an album of songs written by Si Kahn, who is someone who's been very involved with the Highlander Center and writing about social issues, labor issues, women's issues, you know, environmental issues, so many things that Si Kahn tells really meaningful stories in his songs.

So, yeah, what I love most is just collaborating through music. And you know, when we talked in 2013, I was playing with the Berea College Bluegrass Ensemble, under the direction of Al White, who's another dear friend and mentor of mine. And so it's really crazy to think that now, since 2020, I've been directing the Bluegrass Ensemble at Berea and teaching applied lessons in Appalachian instruments there. When Al White chose to retire, I applied for that job, and I was so fortunate to get it. And I love love love working with the young people at Berea College and I'm so inspired by them, and they're so resilient and creative. And you know, especially teaching through the pandemic, and seeing how hard these students have worked to continue to grow and learn. It's been really inspiring. So I'm very honored to, to get to work there. Yeah. So that's, that's some of what's happening now.

### **Rae**

Mhmm. Yeah. Well, I actually wanted to ask you... you know, I spent a long time with this project not knowing what to do with the stories, or like how to share them.. And I remember I was like, I think I'm gonna do a podcast. But I remember that I was like, "Okay, if there's a theme song, who would I want to write that?" And I reached out to you and asked, if you might be up for writing something. And I don't, I didn't give you any parameters or topics or focus or anything. And you wrote this beautiful song that I just love. And I guess...What is my question? I'm curious how that song kind of came to be?

### **Sam**

Well, I'm so grateful that you asked me, I mean, that's truly an honor for me, because I have such respect for you and your work. So I thought about you and other queer people that I know. I mean, I was especially thinking about people that live in the mountains, but or people that choose to live rurally you know, I was thinking about the, the tension of that, but also the deep love that binds us, to the land and our homes, and how we can create community by magic! You know, like, with each other, I was thinking about, you know, when you're living in a rural place, a

lot of times your queer community, it's not found in a bar, or, you know, the, the, the scenes that typically, like, you know, in urban places are where they go, you know, like, some amazing cities that have like LGBTQ+ community centers, you know, or, that sort of thing, you know? I was thinking about moments that I've shared in people's kitchens, you know, and bonfires out, you know, outback of their place, you know, that. That's how queer people that live in the country, stay together! And support each other. And so I was thinking about how that can give us life when we feel isolated. And that tension to you know...We're all aware that if we move to a city that there's potential to find a greater number of queer people our own age, but there's something really special about choosing to live in a rural place and savoring the community that we have and and keeping it going, you know?

**Rae**

Yeah. Well, it is such a beautiful song. And thank you again so much for, for writing it. And also, yeah, I just, I guess I kind of want to thank you for your music which has been, so... so grounding and so supportive. To hear these sounds and songs that have such a rich history in this very particular regional space. But also in a way where our communities are represented is just - it's been so powerful and so important for me, and I know for so many of the queer people I love in the Appalachian region. We've just taken so much strength from your music. So thank you also.

**Sam**

Well, that means the world to me, and I'll hold on to that. Thank you. And yeah, there's.... there's so much more I want to learn, you know? And I'm just thankful that we can learn together and stay connected. Yeah.

**Rae**

Thank you so much, Sam. I'm just so glad to get to talk to you today. And this has been really, really fun to go back and think about this conversation after all these years. [laughs]

**Sam**

Oh, yeah, I know. Thank you for being willing to put in this extra time because I really appreciate it and it just feels so good to me to get to be in touch with you. And just - I think you are magic. I just love you Rae.

*[ Theme Song on banjo with Sam's vocals fades in ]*

**Rae**

I love you. Come visit! Bring Matt come see the baby goats in the spring!

**Sam**

Ok yeah, yes, yes, yes. Yeah, well you're always welcome here too. So we'll intersect as soon as we can.



**Rae**

Okay. All right.

**Sam**

Thank you Rae,

**Rae**

Thank you!

**Rae**

Okay, sounds good. Bye!

**Sam**

Bye!

*[theme song on banjo with Sam singing fades up]*

**RAE [host]:** Next time on Country Queers, we'll hear Tovia DeGroot's interview with Sharonna Golden. Sharonna Henderson is a mother, an activist and a burlesque performer. She believes in liberation through rest and art. Her life is full of love and beauty and it's her mission to share it with as many souls as possible during this lifetime. In this episode Tovia DeGroot draws from Bhanu Kapil's "The Vertical Interrogation of Strangers" for a dream-like conversation about bodies, fatness, disability, race, ancestral memory, parenting, white violence, silence, and more. Here's a clip:

**SHARONNA GOLDEN:** *"Generationally. What has gone, you know, through my great grandmother through my mother through through every member of my family and the ones that are also not with us anymore from each generation, sits with me."*

**RAE [Host]:** This episode was created and produced by me, Rae Garringer. Editorial support on this one comes from HB at Out In the Open - thank you HB! Music on this episode was all written and performed by: Sam Gleaves! You can find links to his website in our episode notes. And thank you, dear sweet Sam, for sharing your story with me all those years ago, for hopping on the phone with me for this reflection, and for all the good work you do in the world and your music!

If you liked what you heard, please subscribe, rate, and review the Country Queers podcast wherever you get yours! You can find all our episodes and more about the project at [www.countryqueers.com](http://www.countryqueers.com). And while you're there, please consider becoming a

sustaining supporter of Country Queers on our Patreon page. You can also find this episode over on the website of our co-facilitators of this Season 2 adventure at [weareoutintheopen.org](http://weareoutintheopen.org). While you're there check out and connect with their rad work with rural LGBTQ+ folks in the north east

Until next time...stay queer out there, friends!

*[Theme Song on banjo with Sam's vocals fades in, then ends]*

**[END]**