

Soil to Soul Series Volume 1 - Sister Perry & Phil Cook

Music Credits:

Lobo Loco - "You Get the Blues"

Sean Derrick Cooper Marquardt - "The Day God Took Your Blues Away"

Phil Cook and Sister Lena Mae Perry - "Ole Ship of Zion"

Hello all and welcome to the very first Soil to Soul podcast. Our names are Adithya Vaidhyan and Dio Casillas and we are a part of Raleigh Charter's SOOTS community work group. On April 9, 2019, SOOTS students had the pleasure to converse with Sister Lena Mae Perry and Phil Cook, two musicians who had visited us before, but never together. What was so special this time around was being able to see their friendship in action in person.

Fortunately, before Sister Perry and Phil Cook played for a Raleigh Charter audience, they agreed to sit down for a recorded conversation with SOOTS leaders. These students had never interviewed anyone on tape before, but keeping with SOOTS style, they found a way to make it happen with a healthy dose of curiosity, lots of patience, and a willingness to make mistakes in order to capture a bit of greatness. Sister Perry and Phil Cook offered us a window into how to cultivate a creative mindset while following one's own path. What our peers recorded last year inspired us to create this inaugural podcast and the vision for a long-term Soil to Soul Series project.

In the spirit of Sister Perry and Phil Cook, we wanted to take heed of the lessons we'd learned and give as much back as we possibly could. In the words of Phil, we wanted to “water the garden” that had been bestowed upon us so others could harvest its goodness, too.

In the taped conversation, Sister Perry shed some light on an important, and somewhat unconventional, figure in her life who came through for her even when “law and order” could not. While relating a story about working at her soul food restaurant, Mae's Country Kitchen, Sister Perry taught us that anyone can offer you what you need if you are willing to receive their goodness. Such openness is a key to being able to live a fulfilling, creative life. To be a musician, you have to learn how to give and receive, all the time.

Sister Lena Mae: ...somebody would come in my restaurant and I thought they needed clothes; here I go, I'll get them some clothes. Whatever they would need, I would try to supply. those people you sometimes see walking the street, you would be surprised at how much help you could get out of them without them saying “No I can't do it I won't do it, I ain't gonna do it.” Instead, “What else can I do?” Wash the dresser, the windows, sweep the sidewalk in front of the restaurant, those high places I couldn't reach. All that kind of stuff. So, they—I had to show love to them, and they loved me. I could feel the bond that we had. They made sure that I was well-protected, and I didn't feel, you know, afraid, 'cause I knew there was someone in my corner, there was somebody watching me when I didn't even know they were watching me. When I go into my restaurant so early in the morning, before daylight. I'd go down there and get out of my car and unlock the door, turn off the alarm system and walk in there. Little did I know there was this man that was way up on the hill somewhere there, and I was trying to get into the restaurant, before a whole lot of traffic and whole lot of walkers came. I was trying to make sure I got myself in there. Policemen would come by, and instead of them slowing down to see if I could get in there, they mashed the gas. Yeah I'm a little old lady trying to get into my restaurant, where they're supposed to be protecting us, and yet they're like “Uh-uh.” So this man comes down and says “Miss Mae, I saw you coming to work this morning,” and I was like “Really? Where were you?” He said “I was standing up yonder,”—he was a tall man—“on that hill, waiting to see if you would get in that restaurant safe.” Now that was early in the morning. So, when he would come and ask me for something—and I could deal with him; he drank a lot. So every time he would come and ask me “Miss Mae? I need a dollar to buy something,” or “I

need a dollar and seventy-five cents,” I knew what he was going to with it, but I would just give it to him. Every time he would ask me and I had a dollar or a dollar and seventy five cents, he would get it, because I knew I could depend on him. So I’ve been happy—I’ve been really happy—in my life’s work, whether it was good, bad, hard, or struggling. I’ve done it. As long as I can remember.

These words epitomize a core value at the heart of understanding each other: trust. If Sister Perry had only trusted the police to protect her in time of need, she would have never been able to help or meet this man. Although this story doesn’t have the happiest of endings it does have a happy lesson. It is valuable to understand how people within a community can look out for each other even when they themselves are struggling. These are the types of lessons that you can’t learn in a classroom, from a textbook, or online. It’s these same lessons that brought Phil Cook, a native of Wisconsin, to North Carolina in the first place.

Phil: (0:31) I mean, you know, when you grow up someplace, you just get used to it, you're used to the surroundings that cause that's how life is; you're just there. So because I grew up in a very northern, very wintery place, I didn't know any different. So we just make life easier to adjust to winter. So when you're down here in North Carolina, I mean, I know now because I've lived here for 15 years. Like man, that winter is cold as it gets, a cold place. But growing up I didn't think of it that way. It was cold. But we just, your life adjusts to things like that. You know, you just, your clothing is different up there. You're at your mindset around it in, you have to either get a hobby or, or you're going to either go stir crazy inside all winter or you're going to develop a drinking problem, which happens up there a lot, for sure because you're just stuck inside or else you get outside and just get in the snow and you do you like just get out there. So there's a resiliency that people in the Midwest that I see that I, that I think when I grew up, people have a lot of heart up there and they're in extreme conditions. And I think that creates a sort of, I like the spirit of a lot of people in the Midwest. I think it, it, um, people go through a lot every year there's a, there's a lot that they go through that, you know, the, the, the, the, the environment inflicts on you. Um, so I dunno, it was good, but I spent all my time inside playing music. That's how I tried to waste my time. And my, my childhood, you know, growing up, I mean that was something that was able to do is just play the piano at my house **(1:54)**

Phil Cook's life has been and continues to be an adventure. Born and raised in Wisconsin which Phil describes as "a cold place" with "resiliency" and "spirit". The unique characteristics of the Midwest made Phil into one of the warmest souls we have met. Drawing on countless influences across many genres, Phil Cook is certainly a multi-faceted musician. Phil is more than someone who can play music well, he can play well with many other musicians & thus he, like Sister Perry has learned to listen carefully to others. This ability to listen to others stems from Phil's respect and connection to his community, which seems to be, quite intentionally, ever growing. People gravitate to Phil because he is so inviting. From his warm smile to unassuming posture, his gravitational pull may stem from Phil's willingness to never stop learning - to be open and not be afraid. His move to NC in 2005 embodied these qualities.

Phil: (5:44) You know, I, like I said before, you know, you learn and you learn, you learn, you think of yourself like I'm a student still. Every day, I still look at myself as a student. I still want to meet people that will teach me things. I still carry that in my heart. But you know, at some point you have to become a teacher at some point in your life. You have to become the teacher, you know, that is, you have to be, um, you'd have to be able to look at the things that you're doing and take ownership over them and see the beauty in what they are. Because it's so easy to be your own biggest critic and to be like your biggest enemy. And I think a lot of people struggle with that for a lot of their life is they're their own worst enemy. And, um, I think about four years ago is the first time I, I think I just, everything came into focus and I think I just, um, I don't know, I just came to terms with a lot of things about myself, accepted my flaws, accepted my faults and just wanted to, um, also just knew that like, um, music was my path and that my path to people and the music was the way I was going to communicate with other people and communicate my truth about my existence is going to be all through music and that, and music always bringing me in in close proximity with people, like really beautiful experiences and beautiful people. So that's like, those are all things that I feel like in the last four years have just been more present in my everyday life. It just clicked. I don't know. And I think I was there. I found my confidence four years ago. I would discount myself four years ago and be more like I'm not worthy. I would stand in a room with say like somebody, um, that I thought was just better than me at, at anything in which is, you know, I would just, I just would just, just discount

myself all the time, just like, not, not standing tall and being like, this is what I know so far about life. You know what I mean? Um, be humble and at the same time be able to just be confident and just say like, you know, I'm, this is what I know and where I'm at, you know, and what I think is beautiful and, and, uh, what I can offer a situation. Uh, you know, some people find that, I find young people find those, find those roots and stand taller, um, on their feet at a younger age than I did. I was 35. I feel like I was 34 years old before I was like, actually, oh, this is me. This is me. You know what I mean? Is it really is me and that's, I'm up. But I'm, I'm slow on a lot of things. It's just like, I'm alone. I always tell my wife, I'm a long arc. You patient with me, honey. I'm a long arc. Um, so yeah. Yeah. I think that's Kinda, that's Kinda where I'm at. You know what I mean? And that coincides funny enough with like Sister Perry. I can be honest with you, Sister Perry. **(8:32)**

(Maybe insert one of the pieces they played together here like “Ole Ship Of Zion” or “Can The Circle Be Unbroken”)

Phil, like many other artists, struggled with finding and accepting himself. However, unlike many artists, he found a way to become his own teacher and embrace his uniqueness. Phil realized he doesn't have to be a typical musician: chasing fame and fortune. Instead he can be the person who breaks the mold and appreciates himself and his roots while also listening to others and what they have to share. This understanding of himself and his purpose as a musician could not have come about without the help and support of a strong community and musicians like Sister Perry who seek to build people up wherever they go.

Here's an example of Sister Perry's interaction with children, more specifically Phil's children, who affectionately call Sister Perry Grandma:

Sister Lena Mae: (9:14) Yeah. And, and one of the cutest things is when Phil called to talk to me and I hear in the background “Hey Grandma,” I feel so honored. Shoot little grandchildren. Yeah. Oh, it's all those other kids and all of those, they had grown up. You don't hear that little voice. It makes you just, just long to hear a little bit of it. And I, and I do, I love, I love little children, you know, and just to hear that little voice because we are not handed little children

because all of my children is grown folk. Yeah. And it does me good in the neighborhood when somebody bring those children **(end)**.

And just like that, Sister Perry gives us a beautiful snapshot of what is so rewarding to her about her life's work: you get to see those little voices grow bigger; shape those voices into love and faith rather than violence and hatred; embrace those little voices for their unique beauty. This connection between what is and what can be is what teaching is all about. To reach such a stage in our lives we must break the mold as Phil Cook did when he moved away from his hometown with its harsh beauty and resilience; as Sister Perry did when she judged the man who watched over her when she was walking to her restaurant. She chose not to judge by his appearance or habits, but by his faith to her and the goodness within him.

We must become our own teachers as Phil did when he moved to NC; as Sister Perry did when she left Shaw to learn what she needed to be her best self. We must accept ourselves and our shortcomings as part of who we are and embrace what makes us unique. The same way in which both Phil Cook and Sister Perry have shared with us throughout their stories. But throughout this self-actualization process, we cannot forget to listen to others, even when it's hard; even when it feels like they aren't listening to you; even when we don't agree with what's being said, because this is how Sister Perry will pass on her stories. She has passed them to us and now we pass them unto to you. This is how I'm choosing to pass on my stories to my friends and family; how a community is built, strengthened, and preserved. So remember, that sometimes the best thing to do is listen. *You've been listening to 'This Little Light of Ours' - the first volume of the Soil to Soul Series brought to you by the Sustaining Root Music Community Project - SOOTS. Thank you for listening.*