

## White Man with Guitar Kills Pop Country

DEK: Alabama native Asa J. Harris is a white man with a guitar and he sings about social issues that he has never experienced.

(story start)

His demeanor is reminiscent of an old, Southern home: posture relaxed, cold beer perspiring in a Mason jar and a quilt draped over the couch. Asa J. Harris, a 25-year-old songwriter, musician, University of Alabama graduate student and a nonprofit organizer, tells Loretta, his rescue dog with a little bit of everything in her, to “load up” on the couch.

You would never guess his home is a two-bedroom condominium tucked in the heart of Tuscaloosa, Alabama. Old books, furniture that has relaxed a steady stream of visitors, musical records and players out-aging the patron of the home invite a nostalgic feeling of Southern hospitality. An array of knick-knacks and old photos prove Harris’ Southern roots run deep. One bedroom is even outfitted as a separate space for entertaining and showcasing the artifacts that encapsulates Harris’ livelihood. Photographs of a chummy Harris with his friends and family decorate a \$20 bookshelf, which he restored himself.

Perhaps the most striking element of the home is the four guitars lining the entire wall above the couch like a regal court of Southern symbolism. The two guitars in the middle – one a 12-string -- are standard, and each gives Harris different sounds to his music. However, the two surrounding the standard guitars are the crown jewels of Harris’ collection.

On the far right, a homemade guitar stands out from the others. It boasts no color coordination and no stage presence. Harris and his high school classmates made this guitar in shop class, and it is visibly noticeable because every part is different shade of deep brown. The bout, or body, is a repurposed large cigar box and the neck was salvaged from a thrift store. The music it produces is robust with personality and takes the listener to the time of radio music infancy. The sound is crisp and earnest, and the machine requires constant tuning. Though the instrument could never compete with Martins or Gibsons, it is proudly displayed as though it won a Grammy Award.

The other guitar is Harris' gig guitar, the one that enchants his audiences. The craftsmanship is masterful – the bout hosts stylish, curved cut-outs. The neck gracefully extends into a sturdy tuning head. In the style of Woody Guthrie and Avett Brothers bassist Bob Crawford, Harris painted “THIS MACHINE KILLS POP COUNTRY” in bold, white letters on the right side of the bout.

“Pop country doesn't create enough space,” said Harris. “I think it's fine it exists, but if the entire industry is [centered] around music that sells to both country and pop audiences, then there are definitely voices being left out.”

Harris is passionate about creating space for voices that are not often heard. He writes songs, researches the artform and works to create space in his community. Good music with dynamic lyrics were part of Harris' life from a very young age.

*Saturday Night Legends*

Born and raised in southern Eufala, Alabama, Harris grew up listening to Charlie Gilmore host Legends Saturday Night on WTVY FM out of Dothan. Harris proclaims himself a “fan kid” of the show, and even recorded the show on a cassette recorder to listen throughout the week.

Harris only met Gilmore once, and the proof is framed in his home. A grinning 7-year-old Harris sits on Gilmore’s lap. Gilmore seems to be in mid-laugh as his smile is wide and his eyes are squinting the way meeting your biggest fan would make them. In the background, permanent marker spells out “To Jackson with all my love. Charlie Gilmore.”

Harris recalls hearing the terse cadence of Merle Haggard and lively tones of Loretta Lynn (his dog’s namesake). Dolly Parton, Don Williams, Willie Nelson, Reba McEntire, John Conlee, Connie Smith and even bluegrass legends such as Ricky Scaggs, Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs lived on Harris’ tape recorder week after week.

“I grew up when radio stations played neo-traditionalist country music like George Strait, Dwight Yoakam, Randy Travis and the Judds,” said Harris. “But Charlie Gilmore played artists and music my parents grew up listening to, and seeing them enjoy it made me enjoy it. There was a strong bond there and it reminded me of home.”

Home. Harris says that is a central theme to a lot of his music. Writing music in a style that reminded him of home led him to discover other artists who sang about social critique in the same style.

Harris has always been passionate about giving a voice to the voiceless, so merging social critique and the “rootsy” style of music excited him.

*Social Critique, the Musical*

Harris' music covers several themes. Home. Humor. History. Gospel. Biography. And in the style of any Americana artist worth his or her salt, Harris also turns social critique and commentary into an art form.

Being home to the most abhorrent historical controversies with the occasional news story about a public figure being rooted in the wrong side of tradition, Alabama was (and is) the perfect environment to observe what happens when the voiceless have no voice.

When the Dixie Chicks criticized President George W. Bush in 2003, the social uprising in Alabama was one to remember.

"I distinctly remember hearing on the television about a community in Alabama that met in a field to run their Dixie Chicks CDs over with a bulldozer," said Harris. "I never threw away my CDs, though. Even though I was only 8 or 9 at the time, I recognized that their music was too good."

Current events continuously caught Harris' attention. United States immigration policies laid the foundation for one of Harris' most prominent social critique songs, "Emerald Girl."

The melody haunts like an ancient Irish elegy with the urgency of crisp acoustics. With Lady Liberty playing the starring role of the Emerald Girl, Harris sings in the first verse and chorus:

I come to this land like your forefathers did

Though I look like you not at all.

I have come from far away – leave the famine and the war

To land upon this glistening shore

Where's she go, where'd she go – my emerald girl

Who once held a flaming torch o'er the sea?

Where's she go, where'd she go – my emerald girl

Is there no more room for me?

Harris wrote the song in response to President Donald Trump's 2017 executive order to halt resettlement of Syrian refugees in the United States, but he recognizes the lyrics' salience today.

“The only difference between now and then is that the players have changed,” said Harris. “From week to week immigration is a news story. We had the president constantly talking about the caravan, but what actually materialized?”

Harris was also reminded of the song's relevance when a former Auburn head football coach and Republican candidate for U.S. Senate in Alabama Tommy Tuberville erroneously stated that, “We have more Middle Easterners coming across that border at times than we do people from Latin America.”

The United States' treatment of immigrants is not the only issue Harris tackles. “For My Brother” is an anthem of allyship with those such as people of color, sexual assault survivors and Americans in the Armed Forces. Harris even sings a pointed call out to the corrupt and powerful.

This one's for my brother – a marine over seas

This one's for my brother – sneakin' around Los Angeles

This one's for my brother – up in Baltimore

This one's for my brother – who ain't in Ferguson no more

(Chorus)

And I – I know I ain't alone

Wond'rin why – why this must go on

It's time that we – step up to the mic

Got to be free – and do it right

This one's for my sister – workin' hard for lesser pay

This one's for my sister – gettin' preyed on every day

This one's for my sister – tryin' to stand up and be heard

But we do not believe her, we question every word

Chorus

This one's for the Wizard – up in the Emerald City

We don't need your condescension, we don't need your pity

Don't you push that button, keep your hands to yourself

Someone get that Declaration down from the shelf

Chorus

This one's for the mothers – who have gone away to war

This one's for the fathers who can't punch the clock no more

This one's for the Child of God – on execution row

How come nobody's sayin' life is sacred no more?

Chorus

“When I wrote this, it came from anger,” said Harris. “I gave it a '60s, '70s country outsider sound. It has the vibe of Waylon Jennings and Johnny Cash.”

The beat is indeed catchy, but the lyrics commentate on serious modern issues. Cop violence and the use of excessive deadly force on black males. U.S. Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh's hearing for sexual assault allegations of Christine Blasey Ford. The gender pay gap. Economic marginalization. Mothers serving in the military in need of support. Harris wrote this song to lend a voice to those who need it.

### *Creating Space*

Harris recognizes that these stories are not his. He admits his life as a straight, white male born and raised in the South is a fortunate one. It is human nature to talk about societal wrongdoings, but sanctimony is an easy trap when these wrongdoings are not a personal affront.

“I know I'm not these people,” said Harris. “But I'm going to write a song and create a space for these people anyway.

“There are stories that we sometimes don't get to hear, and I'm specifically referring to the line talking about the person on death row. I'm not saying what that person is saying, what

stories they have to tell or even as a person on death row. I'm creating a space for questions to be asked."

Harris stresses that he tries not to assume the role of anyone he is not.

"Songwriting lets stories that come from these issues be told from whatever perspective," said Harris. "What's interesting and an intentional choice is that I could have easily written this like I was a lonesome man wandering the streets of Ferguson. I don't write songs from the voice of Dr. Ford or a mother in the military. Instead, I write them from the perspective of giving a space for these people through my music."

There are no plans for Harris to stop creating space for those who need it through his songwriting.

"Artists recognize their work can potentially lead to progress, and we have to continue telling the stories and creating space until we can hear it from those who need to speak."

Harris has a lineup of venues and bars that will hear his sound in the near future. I asked if he would play "Cruise" by Florida-Georgia Line for me, a toothy smile spread across his face, he sipped from his Mason jar beer and said, "Stay at home."

(supplemental materials on the next page)





The framed photo of 7-year-old Harris with Charlie Gilmore.



Harris, Loretta and his four guitars.

Soundcloud: <https://soundcloud.com/asajharris>

Spotify:

<https://open.spotify.com/artist/7DRpA8KRmPGBWGKl60DB4L?si=Z2yjZEKISMSsPmXZliHH>

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