Notables
Episode 13: Scott Sharrard
TRANSCRIPT

Scott Sharrard: Musicians. You know you can find music in everything. You can find music in every other artistic medium. You can find rhythm in everything you can find, and the big word is storytelling. Storytelling is the thing that, whether you want to be the CEO of a company or you want to make a painting or a record, you have to be great at storytelling. If you know three chords and you're a great storyteller, you can be John Prine or Townes Van Zandt yeah, or Bob Dylan. You know, you don't need to know a lot about the guitar, you don't need to know a lot about music. You don't need to know anything about music theory. You can just know the first position of the guitar from the first to the fifth fret yeah and you can write 10 songs and two of them, might you know, change people's lives, or all of them for that matter. Comes down to the storytelling.

Noah: You are listening to Notables, an Education Through Music podcast. As always, I'm your host, Noah, and I'm joined today by Scott Sharrard in his home studio in Harlem. Scott has performed as lead guitarist and musical director for the Greg Allman Band and is currently performing with Little Feet, amongst a variety of other projects. Scott, thanks so much for inviting me into your space and taking the time to talk to me today.

Scott Sharrard: Yeah, thanks for coming over, man. Welcome to Harlem.

Noah: So the show's called Notables. I speak with notable musicians and people sort of adjacent to the music industry about their early music experiences as children and how they sort of became musicians and what influence that early music education has had on their lives. I'm wondering if you could just tell me how did you become a musician?

Scott Sharrard: Well, that's a big question. How did I become a musician? Because it started with it being in my house. So my father was a singer-songwriter. He saw Bob Dylan play live on a solo acoustic tour when he was promoting Blown in the Wind in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and I think the story is my dad at the time was playing rock and roll with an electric guitar and he saw that and he traded in all his electric gear for acoustic guitars and so I grew up with him playing in the living room. He was also in, you know, different forms of media. He was a DJ on college radio at Michigan State and then was mentored by a really well-known rock promoter in the Midwest named Russ Gibb in media and Russ talked him into going into cable television in the earliest days. So he ended up, you know, essentially working a day gig, what would eventually become a corporate day gig by the 90s. But he was always playing music in the house and playing, you know, the first things I learned on the guitar at the age of 10 or so was, you know, the first thing was the Jimmy Reed 12-bar blues pattern, backing him up. And then I remember almost destroying my bedroom out of childhood frustration, trying to learn the intro to O'Carroll by Chuck Berry, stuff like that, and this time period was like the late 80s, so there was a lot of revivals of bands like the bands I've become associated with the Allman Brothers, little Feet. There was also at that time, Bonnie Raitt, Eric Clapton. They were all in this kind of resurgence

period where they were writing new songs that were hits. And they were touring the hits. So there was a little sweet spot where you would see them on VH1 and then I'd go see them live and learn the songs. And of course those groups would espouse their influences, which were also the influences within my house. So I had a healthy education in jazz and blues and every form of like American roots music from the very beginning, and it was all centered around the guitar because that's what we had in the house.

Noah: Yeah, you were educated in music in your home as opposed to in the classroom, but I wonder if there were some influences from elementary school, middle school, high school that had an influence on your development as a musician.

Scott Sharrard: Well, in the, in the, as I was saying, in the 80s, when I was in the mid to late 80s, when I was a child you know, 10, 11, 12 and so on, going into my teens um, there was still the concept of the garage band yeah so, yes, I had my parents, um, very advanced taste in music and varied taste in music and then the ability to perform with my father in the living room and eventually coffee shops. But, um, I did meet kids, you know classmates and from the from the earliest days, I had an instinct to be a leader. I've always had that. Um, it is a uh, a double-edged sword in so many ways because you're willing to take on the responsibility and some of the time you get the credit. And I also just had a very, although my childhood was full of music and art, it was also incredibly challenging. My family was constantly moving. There was a ton of tumult for me as a kid in school and at home, and navigating all of it, I found that probably one of the greatest skills I have is taking dysfunctional situations and people and turning them into functional expressions of art. And that's pretty much what a band leader, a producer, you know that's, that's what they do. There was a period, very brief period, in recorded music where A&R people would sometimes serve that role at record labels, where they would help to kind of mentor and guide somebody. You know I mean I'm sure it's no secret to any of your listeners. You know, a happy childhood typically does not lead to a good music career. So, you know, being in a sandbox with a host of broken toys is kind of my happy place, like figuring out how to get them all together on the same page. And then the main thing is to get everybody kind of past their, everyone comes with an ego and agenda. That's humanity, right, but the thing is it's about getting everybody, the biggest thing you can do is get them to put the song first and the performance of it, and then thus the experience for the audience or your listener. If it's a record or whatever, there's a certain skill to that. I started developing that right away, like at the small stage. So I would meet kids in school and there'd be one kid who kind of played the drums and there'd be another kid who never played bass and I'd be like all right, you're playing bass. And I had like a crappy bass at my house or I had a crappy drum kit. I started bringing them over and I started running rehearsals when I was 12, 13,. I would learn all the parts myself and then I would teach them to my classmates. I would teach another kid to be a singer, you know, and I would learn the parts. I'd be able to sing all the parts, I'd have the parts memorized and then I move on. So I was already approaching music in the sense of totality.

Noah: One story that I read that I thought was very interesting was that when you were playing with the Chesterfields, there was a conversation with Ahmet Erdogan about the direction of the music industry.

Scott Sharrard: You know, Ahmet, he invited me up to his office and he had heard me live at Terra Blues and he had heard a demo I had by the first iteration of this group, the Chesterfields. Now, actually there was one even before that. It was called the Chesterfield Kings when I was in high school, and I'll give you the full story on that. So I went to high school of the arts in Milwaukee and I met Sean Dixon, a great multi-instrumentalist but also just fantastic world-class drummer. Sean also can arrange for horns and strings and he's been doing it since he was a teenager. So we were a natural kind of pairing. We moved to New York together in 96-ish. We formed a trio here and we named it the Chesterfields instead of the Chesterfield Kings. Now you may ask yourself how did we get that name? No, we did not steal it from the Canadian punk band. Now this is way before the internet. We did have a couple fans of the Canadian punk band come to see us at the Up and Under Pub on Thursday nights in Milwaukee and be very angry that it was not the Chesterfield Kings of Canada. But we didn't know the Chesterfield Kings existed back then, we weren't into the underground punk scene of Canada, um, and we recorded a record here, um, and it had a couple of originals, but it also had a cover of a Ray Charles Fool For You on it. And Ahmet it lands on his desk. I ended up in his office, which is a longer story, but uh, you know, he sits me down and he kind of I'm sitting there, let me see, I might be 21, 22 years old, something like that. I'm sitting there and I'm shaking and the first thing he does is I sit down at his desk corner office, the old-time Warner Center, which was right across from our Radio City Music Hall. Okay, so you see Radio City out his window. We're up on like the 20th floor, huge office, and the first thing he does is sits down and he lights a cigarette. Right, it was a pretty cool moment. Yeah, you know, I knew his history. You know I knew about Atlantic Records. I knew about Jerry Wexler and his relationship with him. His brother is one of my favorite arranger producers of all time. Um and uh, I was in awe, you know. I mean, this is the guy who signed ray charles, and here I am sitting in front of him with my cover of Ray Charles Fool For You which he produced the original recording of right, and I'm just shaking like right. What the hell was I thinking, even coming here trying to talk about my cover of a Ray Charles song. And he had some kind things to say, but he also, you know, he had uh, one of the first things he said to me is you know, if this was the 60s or 70s, I would get you with a producer and we would change your image and I would sign you to a deal. And he said what I would do with you, if you remember, now, at this time, the swing craze thing was starting to wind down and we're going into the um, the crooner phase. So, like Rod Stewart's about to make his jazz album, Michael Buble is about to break, Peter Sincati, all these guys. And at the time I had a music lawyer who I still work with, Peter Thall, who's an absolutely amazing man and he has a great book on the music business. Peter Thall, t-h-a-l-l about publishing law. He's a publishing lawyer. He's legendary in the publishing law space. Uh, you know, Peter was instrumental in helping me get this meeting with Ahmet. Yeah, and Peter had Peter Sincati and there was this whole idea that Ahmet floated to me of you know well, we could put you in a suit with the guitar and kind of do this sort of like John Pizzarelli Sincati thing with you and but he's like you know I'd have to put you with Tommy Lapuma and we could do you know orchestral stuff, and I'm sitting there going I might do this, you know if I have to, I might do it, but then again I have another voice in the back of my head that loves. You know Tom Waits, you know who's going. You know this is, this is suicide for my life. You know, even if I'm a success, I'm gonna end up crashing and burning because this isn't what I really want. It's one lane and there's so so many

things I want to do. And he immediately had picked up on this from hearing the record we had made. But he said but you know, um, I can't do that to you because obviously you know, you're somebody who, um, has a lot of different interests and abilities. And he said you know you're going to be miserable if you do this. And he also pointed out he said we're probably not going to make any money off that lane anyway. But he said, if it was the 60s or 70s, I could sign you to a four or five album deal and we could try a different producer every album and see how it shook out. But he's like there's no way that's going to happen now.

Noah: And now for a short break. This podcast is made possible by Education Through Music. ETM's mission is to positively impact student motivation, achievement and self-confidence by partnering with under-resourced schools to integrate music education into the core curriculum. To find out more or to support ETM in its mission, go to etmonlineorg mission go to etmonlineorg.

Scott Sharrard: So Ahmet also mentioned in that conversation that we had that, basically, it was going to be really important if I was going to survive as an artist on my own terms, to learn or to strengthen a whole variety of disciplines to become the best musician I could be overall and take every single opportunity I could get, because he had already identified that the record industry was going to eat itself. I think the way he had described it is, you know, because of corporate conglomeration, at that time in 1999, at radio and at album sales, you had all these kids coming in from law school or being grandfathered in by their corporate fathers who had bought the label right, and they want to get a couple houses and a yacht. So they're looking for, they're looking for a quick buck and I mean, I don't have to tell you what that resulted in. It was the, the boy band situation, and the Britney Spears, the early Christina Aguilera, that stuff.

Noah: So based on the current state of the music industry, what advice would you have for a 21, 22 year old or even, you know, a high school aged musician who aspires to make music their professional life and you know their life in general.

Scott Sharrard: Well, the first thing is is to get out in the world, but then also balance that with creating your own content at home. It's never been easier to make a great sounding recording and video, it's never been easier. So that means that the onus is on you now, as a young person, to create the art, and it stinks. It really does. But remember when the Beatles started there wasn't a handbook on how to play through an amplifier in a club.

Noah: Right, they just had to do it a lot.

Scott Sharrard: Or how to sing through a mic in a club, you know. Or what to do. There wasn't a handbook for Jimi Hendrix on what to do with a guitar pedal. There wasn't a YouTube instructional video about what fuzz was the best fuzz to use. He actually designed a lot of his pedals that ended up becoming some of the benchmark pedals that we all use now in plugins, in tutorials and stuff that are wired and rewired and infinitum. These were real, like kind of real world hardware problems. Also, you know, just to get this out of the way, what I've done in my career. You know I spent so much time as a solo artist and in the Chesterfields and these bands

and as a producer trying to be forward looking, but I've been. Every time I've tried to get out of the live performance business I've been pulled back in by my musical heroes. So the first one was Greg Allman in 08. I became his guitarist, then the band leader, music director, producer, played guitar, made two records with him, got nominated for two Grammys. He passes away, went solo, was ready to quit music completely and just do education and producing. And then boom, Little Feet needs a sub. I go in. I do one gig. The gig I do is the day Paul Barrere dies. After the gig they go, you're in the band. Now, I, you know, am a member of that band and they were the two most important rock bands for me personally, as a child.

Noah: Yeah.

Scott Sharrard: As bands were the Allman Brothers and Little Feet, because I would go see them every summer. They had new records that were very important. The back catalog obviously was monumental. Will George has always been my biggest hero as a singer, songwriter, as has Greg Allman equally, I would say. So participating and perpetuating that legacy has been an honor like beyond description and it's been a joy. It's also an incredible challenge on many different levels. But my role in music, as a 47-year-old man who plays in these legacy acts, you know it's been 14, 15 years of this now of me doing that, you know I'm similar to musically, probably more similar to your, your, uh, the guests you've had who play classical music

Noah: In that you're playing a book that's already written

Scott Sharrard: Yeah and I'm using a lot of tools. I'm intentionally using tools that are voiced to be like instruments you would have gotten in the 60s or 70s.

Noah: Yeah.

Scott Sharrard: And I'm using them in ways that are traditional. Now, that said, I make solo albums and they're also using these tools, but when I make solo records I try to be more forward thinking, and we do have a new Little Feet album that's coming out next year that has a number of songs I've written um, where we're kind of trying to push the sound but we're staying rooted in the tradition. For younger people, I mean, look to people like I could, now the younger music I'm obsessed with. So I could go on all day. So stop me if I get too out of control, but Jacob Collier is creating his own form of music. His own form of media. You see what I mean about the, you know, like film yourself, record yourself but then get out in the world. That's what he does. That's a great template to start with for a young person these days to get that set of skills and then find your own way to do that. Another artist who I absolutely love is do you know Raye at all, from the UK, R-A-Y-E. She's an incredible, world-class vocalist. She could sing any style of music. I mean, she's got just a powerhouse talent, but she's a great songwriter and she mashes up genres in a way that's very particular and she has a social media presence that's very tied to her personal story and I think that's very powerful. An artist who's closer to my age who does that also is Brandi Carlile, who creates these incredible songs and is another powerhouse vocal talent. I mean, I can go on and on. Maggie Rogers I adore her music. I think she's a brilliant

singer-songwriter. Um, you know I can't say enough good things about her. She's based out of New York. Her band is now out of New York. Um, there's a young musician named Jordan Rose who's I've watched him when he was young playing blues gigs and now he's playing with Maggie and I'm so proud of him and our scene for that whole movement. Yeah, uh, that's going on. Um, uh, again, a little bit closer to my age, maybe 10 years younger than me isParamore. Um, you know, they continue to just put out these incredible like performances, records, you know that just blur the lines on genre, that put the song first, that have these incredible grooves, production, arranging, everything has its place. These are old school concepts, but the way they're presenting them and the stories they're telling are theirs, totally new. And the biggest guy for me, or biggest talent for me, because most of the talent I'm obsessed with right now is female but the male talent I'm obsessed with is Sam Fender, who's also out of the UK and I think he might be the most important new songwriter that I'm aware of and he's a wonderful singer. He has an amazing band. Again, the whole package, the records are so everything, his young band, everyone is playing so maturely. The sounds are so good. This is the big advantage now for younger artists is they have access to the abilities to understand how to use their equipment and play their instruments in ways that would take me years as a kid. With a CD or tape over and over and over again, they can learn in a month or something.

Noah: The book is written and it's all on YouTube.

Scott Sharrard: And that's how these younger artists, bands, sound. They have incredible control. They have incredible tone. They have like very mature things. So really the only thing at that point is, if we're producing so many great musicians and we are the songs become the thing, and those are happening now too. It's just things tend to happen in these bubbles now, and it reminds me of the stories I've heard about America in the 1940s and 50s, where it was transitioning from swing and dance hall to regional album hits where you'd have an artist like where Little Richard would break in three states and he would play there for years and then he would expand in what they used to call the chitlin circuit, which was the segregated circuit of theaters and clubs. But he wasn't reaching a white audience at first until The Beatles started to cover his music or Pat Boone or whoever did it right, and then all of a sudden he was able to cross into that, but he was locked in this regionality until then. I see a lot of that now with emerging artists, where with their internet presence they'll penetrate a certain corner of the internet and then some of them can sell out madison square garden, but 99% of Americans have never heard their name, so maybe that's, maybe that's where we're at and, of course, the hope for young people in that is, what is the dawn of this musical renaissance that became Rock and Roll. It was really Sam Phillips, Barry Gordy, um, you know the Stacks Records crew. I mean, these were these tiny regional studio labels. They would have regional records that they, you know. They'd throw singles in the back of a cadillac and drive it around and drop it off at radio stations and a lot of them would bribe these DJs or take them out on the town or whatever they could do to get them to play the single. But they would go out and hustle that. And that's where you're at now. You got to make the single, you got to put it in the back of your car, you got to drive to every DJ. That's where things are, but in a digital sense

Noah: In the sense of developing a YouTube persona or an Instagram or TikTok persona, I think that's what it would be now.

Scott Sharrard: I think that's what it would be now. That's what young people should be thinking about stuff like that. You got to get ahead of this a little bit. As a musician, you can't, I mean, unless you just want to play guitar in somebody's band. I think that's a little bit different. If you want to be a side person for artists, I think you can kind of hang back and ride the wave, but you're not going to get, if you're somebody who's writing songs and you want to be out front, or you want to be producing artists or you know what used to be called signing artists or developing artists, I think you've got to be ahead of this stuff.

Noah: Anticipate it yeah.

Scott Sharrard: And I always tell, like, whenever I do any teaching, I always at some point reach a place with a musician, I do this with producing sometimes too, where it's like don't forget to look at paintings and read novels. It's, you know, don't forget to fall in love. Don't forget to travel and, if it suits you, have a family at some point, because all those things are what will make you a great storyteller. That's your story, you're building your story and that's the biggest thing. Great musician, great execution, we have tons of them, and I love every one of them and I'm grateful for every one of them. However, the great storytellers, the great improvisers, the ones that we really will lead the pack, you know they have a story to tell because they've approached life and music in totality. And that’s to me, that’s the ethos of what I try to do, it's a process that I try to follow. It’s very easy in life, and very convenient in art to get distracted, but the storytelling, it keeps you grounded, it goes okay this is what it’s about, it’s about going back to that. Are we telling the story, as a group as a band, are we playing the song? Are we serving the songwriter? Are we serving the singer? That's the storytelling part, it's the reminder but it's been great talking with you man, great questions, congratulations on your ability to do all this.

Noah: Thank you. I appreciate it.

Scott Sharrard: I'm in awe, I really am. Thanks for having me.