

Chuck Leavell: Roots of a Rolling Stone

By Andrew Jacobs, May 19, 2005

To music fans of a certain age, Chuck Leavell is rock's quintessential rambling man. Over the course of three rollicking decades, he has played keyboards with the Allman Brothers Band, George Harrison, Eric Clapton and the Rolling Stones, traveling the world on yearlong concert tours that would make the sturdiest of vagabonds wilt.

And while many of his contemporaries have burned out, overdosed or faded away, he has seemingly thrived on a life of nonstop locomotion. In July he will join the Stones on yet another world tour.

"Playing on the road has been in my blood since I'm 15," said Mr. Leavell, 52, in a sweet Alabama drawl. "Guess I'll keep going till the gods tell me otherwise."

But if you will forgive the cheap proverbial reference, Mr. Leavell has managed to gather quite a bit of moss over the years. In fact, he has planted remarkably deep roots on a 2,200-acre tree plantation he and his wife, Rose Lane Leavell, have created in the sand and clay of middle Georgia, not far from Macon.

Since 1981, when they inherited the sprawling homestead of Ms. Leavell's maternal grandmother, the couple have planted forests of loblolly and slash pine and turned their plantation, Charlane, into a nature preserve that draws corporate hunting parties and budding foresters from Yale.

Along the way, Mr. Leavell has produced two books - one on forestry, the other, "Between Rock and a Home Place" (Mercer University Press), a memoir published in October - and emerged as a national advocate for family-owned tree farms, testifying before Congress and earning acclaim for his go-it-alone brand of eco-friendly forestry.

"Chuck is not a celebrity spokesman who needs to look elsewhere for his message and inspiration," said Larry Wiseman, president of the American Forest Foundation, which represents 51,000 independent tree growers. "He not only knows it, he lives it."

On a recent spring day, as blooming dogwoods and cherry trees began to shed their petals and the temperature marched into the 80's, Mr. Leavell drove along the orange clay roads, some ancient Indian trails, that weave through Charlane's varied terrain: the swampy bottomlands of cypress and tupelo, the allées of slash pine and the fields of milo and sorghum that help fatten the quail and turkey. When a herd of deer darted from the brush, Mr. Leavell let out a childlike holler. "I love it, I love it," he yelled.

Mr. Leavell endures a fair amount of ribbing from his bandmates about what they call his "mysterious backwoods activities," and they in turn are sometimes subjected to impromptu lectures about the trees, the birds and the bees. In an e-mail exchange, Ron Wood and Mick Jagger praised Mr. Leavell's musical talents, his prodigious enthusiasm and his patience during tours, even if they expressed a bit of wonderment about what he does in his spare time. "It's fine with me if Chuck is crazy about trees," Mr. Jagger wrote. "They are very sensual and they don't talk back too much."

On the road with the Stones, Mr. Leavell may wake up at 2 p.m. after long nights of revelry with Mick and Keith, but the moment he returns to Charlane, he slips into his agrarian ways, rising with the sun and passing out before Ms. Leavell can serve up one of her blackberry cobblers. "He spends the entire day on his tractor, and by the time I see him he's black with dirt and snoring in the big green chair," she said, serving iced tea on their wraparound porch as a posse of border collies keened for attention. "Unless he's sleeping, he doesn't sit still for a minute."

That restlessness has served Charlane well. Over the years, Mr. Leavell has carved out five miles of unpaved road, created a small lake and sown thousands of oaks, elms and longleaf pines, transforming large swaths of former pasture into woodlands one sapling at a time. It is a crop that will not produce much of a dividend until the couple's two daughters, Amy, 29, and Ashley, 22, are well into their 40's. "Forestry is not like

growing soybeans or corn," Mr. Leavell said, driving past a stand of 12-year-old pines, their trunks as thick as loaves of Italian bread. "It teaches you to think of your children and grandchildren."

Delayed gratification is entrenched in a forester's DNA, but these are particularly hard times for the nation's independent tree growers. Sprawl chews up about 1.5 million acres of woodland a year - over the last decade, the amount of land lost to subdivisions and strip malls is equivalent to the size of New England, minus Maine - and those farmers who resist a developer's largesse must contend with rising real-estate taxes and a flood of low-price timber from overseas. And unlike those who grow field crops or raise cattle, small-time foresters lack the political heft and generous subsidies that help keep many farmers and ranchers in business. "People like Chuck are becoming an endangered species," Mr. Wiseman said.

To keep their plantation a going concern, the Leavells have turned to an array of money-making schemes: weddings, business conferences and pampered hunting expeditions help them keep up with the mortgage and taxes. Charlane can accommodate up to 20 hunters in a restored 1830's farmhouse, another modest home that came with a recently purchased chunk of land, and a grand lodge that was built with homegrown lumber, each room a showcase for a different species of wood. Assuming he is in town, Mr. Leavell's celebrity and Southern-style hospitality are as much a draw as the land's fur-and-feathered quarry. When guests are around, the old upright Hamilton gets plenty of attention from Mr. Leavell after a day chasing quail. Ms. Leavell, an artist, gardener and cook, keeps everyone properly fed.

Like their own home, the guest quarters are studded with framed prints of hunting dogs, fox trophies and the gold records and psychedelic concert posters that offer a glimpse of Mr. Leavell's past. The hunters' encampment includes a frontier-town-style canteen where guests can buy monogrammed caps, copies of Mr. Leavell's latest CD and the insect repellent that is an essential accessory for Georgia's hot and buggy summers. Within barking distance is the kennel (Mr. Leavell calls it the "Château du Chien") where about 20 hunting dogs - setters, pointers and springers - anxiously await their next assignment. "It's a lot like a Stones concert," he said of his business model. "We're selling an experience and memories, and helping people forget their problems for a while. But it's also a way to help people tune in to the outdoors."

For Mr. Leavell, hunting is an integral part of responsible land stewardship. Voracious herds of deer need constant thinning, and hunters, like tree huggers, he points out, are important allies in the battle for land preservation. But in the long run, the only hope for stopping the fragmentation of the nation's forests, he says, is winning the sympathies of the next generation of voters. To that end, the Leavells encourage field trips from Georgia schoolchildren, who learn about forest ecology as they amble down a nature trail marked with plaques.

Mr. Leavell the forester has come a long way since the early 1980's, when his idea of tree farming was a few rows of Christmas trees. His beard is still bushy and his manner laid back, but he has become an expert on "stumpage fees" (the industry term for lumber prices) and chummy with the nation's top agriculture officials. During the signing of the Healthy Forests Initiative in 2003, which includes a fire suppression program that allows the thinning of underbrush in national forests, it was Mr. Leavell who sang the national anthem.

Although he applauds the White House for the initiative, he says he has been largely disappointed by the Bush administration's failure to take up the plight of the nation's foresters. The one bright spot, a \$20 million program to assist small-time tree farmers that was part of a recent Congressional farm bill, had much of its funding subsequently held back. "We really feel neglected," he said. Last week, when his bandmates were at Lincoln Center announcing the start of another concert tour, Mr. Leavell was making one of his periodic trips to Congress to lobby for a restoration of its financing.

Over the last few months, Mr. Leavell has had his hands full fixing some of Charlane's flood-damaged roads, planting trees and dreaming about acquiring more land. His wife's family, which settled the area in the 1790's, once owned tens of thousands of acres and Mr. Leavell, like any land baron, would like to extend his holdings. "They're making cars every day," he said, prompting his wife to preemptively shake her head, "but they're not making any more land."

