

Krista Detor, Tim Grimm, Carrie Newcomer, Tom Roznowski and Michael White with Scott Russell Sanders **“Wilderness Plots”** University of Indiana

We reviewed the nineteen song **“Wilderness Plots”** CD recording during May last year [\[link to review\]](#), and a year on Indiana University has released an almost sixty-minute long documentary featuring the five Bloomington, Indiana area musicians involved in the project. The songs performed on this DVD are merged with insights, by the songwriters, into their evolution. In addition, Scott Russell Sanders author of the 1983 book of short stories that spawned the project reads a number of extracts and offers his thoughts on the present day impact of issues featured in his stories.

Filmed at the one hundred plus year old Opera House in Mitchell, Indiana, at the outset of the documentary Tim Grimm recalls finding Scott Russell Sanders’ **“Wilderness Plots.”** *“There was an element of fate. There was an element of serendipity. I don’t know, something brought me to a particular bookstore on the square in Bloomington, Indiana.”* He continued, *“I saw this little – it looked like an old book, but it was brand new. There were two or three of them, with a brown and tan cover. I immediately read a story. Read another story.”* Sanders short stories, fifty of them, fill all of 120 pages in the latest reprint. *“Probably by the second story I realised, these are songs.”* Grimm, an actor/songwriter/musician/farmer, brought the book to the attention of his local songwriting group consisting of Detor, Newcomer, Roznowski and White. A seed was planted.

Scott Russell Sanders was born in Memphis, Tennessee during 1945. His parents moved to Portage County in North East Ohio when he was aged five, and Scott went on to study Physics and English at Brown University. In 1971 Sanders gained his Ph. D. in English from Cambridge University. For the past thirty-seven years Sanders has held the position of Professor of English at Indiana University in Bloomington. To date, Scot has written around twenty works of fiction and non-fiction, including a number of children’s storybooks. While reading the chapter titled **“Famous And Infamous Crimes In Portage County,”** in an old history book housed in the Indiana University library, Sanders stumbled across reference to a ‘grotesque’ murder during 1813 in the Ohio county where he had been raised. Intrigued, his interest sparked, the novel **“Bad Man Ballad”** [1986] was the result. In the process of his research for that novel, Sanders composed a number of factually based short stories – historically founded folklore tales, if you will - that focused on the settling of the Northern Ohio/Southern Indiana region during the period 1780 through 1860 [ie. from the closing years of the American Revolutionary War through to the onset of the American Civil War]. Those tales were published as **“Wilderness Plots.”**

As the opening titles roll, the musicians are seen setting up their equipment on the Opera House stage. *“I’d be thrilled”* was Sanders reaction when Grimm informed him that the group planned to write and record songs based on his short stories. With the quintet sat in a circle [the Opera House remains empty], Roznowski, assisted by the others, opens with his gospel tinged “Miracles Happen” a song that didn’t appeared on last year’s CD. Since the nine other songs performed on the DVD were captured in their entirety on the CD, rather than settle for a formulaic ‘paint by numbers’ in-concert style presentation of the music interspersed by narrative readings from Sanders, documentary producer/director Susanne Schwibs has cut, into each song, footage of the songwriters and the author, offering thoughts on the lyric and issues raised therein.

Newcomer and Grimm recall that certain songs drew heavily on Sanders narrative, while others were based on a phrase or a character. In the case of the latter, the character was sometimes transported to an entirely different landscape. Inspired by the story “Profit And Loss” Carrie penned “Biscuits & Butter” the sad tale of loss and survival on the frontier. Sat at her keyboard supported vocally by the quartet, Krista performs the geomorphic themed “Ice Mountains And Hairy Elephants.” White’s “Israel Coe” is a short amusing number featuring honey thieves that possesses a ‘positive’ sting in the tail – or was that tale! Based on the story “Clearing For Sunlight,” Tom, filmed in a nearby forest, launches his rendition of “Whenever I Look At Trees” and completes it in the Opera House. With White plucking a banjo and Detor on accordion, based on “Freeing The Waters,” Newcomer’s “One Woman And A Shovel” attests that affirmative action is not a new phenomenon.

With nary mention of the term ‘environment,’ White offers a potential modern parallel in Sanders work *“Part of my interest in this book is that, I’m not really sure what direction society will ultimately take. This may seem like storytelling from a long time ago, but in a way it might just be a preview of coming*

attractions." Newcomer's view is that the stories are *"Like modern parables,"* while Sanders adds *"I don't think of these historical tales as about something dead and gone. I see them as explorations of the sources of our present time."*

Inspired by the tale "Fruit," Grimm penned a song of the same name. In the latter an army spy released by a tribe of Native Americans informs his general that the tribe farm their land rather successfully. The military man concludes that this cultivation equated to *"their soft belly"* and within days decimates it, which in turn eventually led to the demise of the tribe. Pursuing the latter theme, Sanders alludes to *"America's long violent history"* and continues *"to understand contemporary wars, and the penchant for wars, and the number of murders every year"* the nation must acknowledge the *"violence out of which society grew. Some of the virtues of our culture can be traced back to the frontier era. And some of the blemishes – some of the flaws - can be traced back there too."* White retains an agricultural theme in "Bones," while Sanders reveals that the narrator of Detor's "More Than I Dare Say" is actually a former slave woman. Based on his tale "Without Regard To Race," the woman attained her place, in the back of the schoolroom [where she consequently learned to read and write], by virtue of her skill in making quill pens for the students. Grimm's "Frostbite On The Soul," a 'winter's tale,' is the final song on the DVD and relates how a travelling preacher plies the trade of a cobbler on other days of the week. In closing, Grimm summarises the project as the finding of *"Common ground and a common language,"* the resulting suite of songs proof *"That the whole is greater than its individual parts."* Amen to that.

The DVD Extras include a seven chapter interview with Sanders, shorter elements of which feature in the main documentary, a multi-media three minute long Overture that merges a Detor penned instrumental, performed on keyboard, with old photographs from the N. Ohio and S. Indiana region. The Overture prefaces concert hall performance of **"Wilderness Plots."** In addition there's a selection of some twenty still photographs taken while making the documentary, and completing the Extras are biographies of the five musicians, plus Sanders and Schwibs. This documentary is a handsome and informative companion to the original CD.

Arthur Wood.

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