

QUEEN
CITY

NERVE

NEWS

Is an eviction moratorium enough?
pg.9

FOOD

Reimagining Earl's Grocery
pg.16



THAT SACRED SOUND

'Hanging Tree' book and exhibit celebrate the genius of Freeman Vines
by Pat Moran

THAT SACRED SOUND

New book and exhibit celebrate the genius of Freeman Vines

BY PAT MORAN

For nearly 50 years, Freeman Vines has carved guitars out of all sorts of wood, including the steps of an old tobacco barn and the soundboard of a dissembled Steinway piano. But in 2015, the unsuspecting African-American luthier, sculptor and mystic bought some wood that would go on to change the rest of his life.

Vines remembers that he went to purchase the wood from an old man demolishing a building down the road from Vines' shop in his hometown of Fountain, North Carolina.

"He said, 'You might not want to take that wood. A man were hung on that tree,'" Freeman recalls to Queen City Nerve.

Days later, Timothy Duffy, founder of the Music Maker Relief Foundation (MMRF) and a world-renowned photographer with work in the National Gallery of Art, the New Orleans Museum of Art and Northwestern University, among other galleries and museums, visited Vines for the first time.

"[Vines] pointed out some planks of wood to me and said, 'That comes from the hanging tree, and I am making a hanging-tree guitar,'" Duffy says. "Being in the music business and trying to promote things, that title went straight to my brain."

Before crafting that guitar, Vines couldn't have guessed how it would catapult his life in a whole new direction. Last June, he opened his first solo exhibit at the Greenville Museum of Art, less than 25 miles from his birthplace in eastern North Carolina. Vines, his spiritual philosophy and his art are also the subject of a sumptuous book, published by The Bitter Southerner in association with MMRF.

Featuring text by Vines and folklorist Zoe Van Buren, and illustrated with Duffy's evocative and mysterious tintype images, the volume dropped on Sept. 1. The exhibit and the book share a title: *Hanging Tree Guitars*.

Hidden in plain sight

But all that was five years in the future when Duffy stepped into Vines' yard for the first time in 2015. He knew at once that he was in an artist's space.

The Southern yard, especially in an African-American community, is a sacred spot, Duffy offers, a space where a person can express themselves and reflect their personality. At the same time an

The sculptor, who plied his trade as a blues guitarist before turning to guitar-making, has steadfastly refused to sell any of his guitars, chasing prospective collectors away. But he showed them to Duffy that day because Duffy had come to photograph Vines' handiwork with a process as traditional and hand-crafted as Vines' approach to building guitars: the collodion wet plate process, used to create tintypes.

"You have to mix the chemicals yourself" Duffy says of tintype making. "You have to cut the tin and fiddle with the camera. In any part of the process you can totally screw up."

The result of juxtaposing Duffy's familiar yet otherworldly images with Vines' words is magical, Duffy says, and can be seen in *Hanging Tree Guitars*. Duffy feels the book's layout and design allowed him to chase Vines' ideas.

On that very first visit, which would be the starting point for a close friendship and partnership, Vines showed Duffy the two planks of black walnut wood, all that was left of the lynching tree where a Black man named Oliver Moore was purportedly murdered 90 years ago.

Duffy remembers going into Vines' shop. On a manila envelope Duffy found a drawing Vines had made. It pictured a tree with a rope and a guitar hanging from

it. It was the earliest vision for what would become *Hanging Tree Guitars*.

The unseen world

Vines remembers that the sound shot through him like an electric shock. He was leaving his shop late one evening when it struck like lightning and nearly drove him crazy. Vines says he's been searching for that sound ever since, trying to capture it in many of the guitars he made. So far, it's eluded him.

But he has found the spirit within wood.

"The thing about wood is, wood has a soul," Vines says. "The hanging tree wood, that gave me a feeling I never experienced."

In a conversation with Dr. Ndubuisi Ezeoluomba, Curator of African Art at the New Orleans Museum of Art, Vines went into more detail.

"[The wood] had all that stuff in there," Vines said. "It sounded kind of strange when I hooked it up with pickups, so I left it alone."

Not every piece of wood that comes into Vines' hands becomes a guitar, the sculptor told Dr. Ezeoluomba. He told of another piece of wood, much vaunted by its seller for its superior vibrations. Vines had hoped to find his elusive sound with it, but in disappointment he turned the wood into a guitar where the body resembles a mask.

The mask-guitar led Dr. Ezeoluomba to compare Vines' sculpture, including his guitars, to traditional African masks, and not just because the aesthetics are similar.

"I see you as a vessel," Dr. Ezeoluomba said to Vines. "You are the process through which spirit manifests itself," likening Vines to the African mask-makers who are also conduits for forces from an unseen world.

Vines is no stranger to that unseen world, with interests ranging from the pagan religion Wicca to 19th-century occultist Madam Helena Blavatsky, founder of Theosophy, an amalgam of Western esoteric beliefs and Eastern religions. In the Theosophical view, space is not only boundless, it also contains of a number of unperceived dimensions. It's a concept not unlike the multiverse posited by physicists.

"There are dimensions that are as real as this one," Vines tells Queen City Nerve. He offers that it's easy to get out to those dimensions, but not so easy getting back to ours.

"I know the proper incantations, the [magic] circles and going to the trees," he elaborates.

Vines also speaks of meditation. "[You can] keep on going deeper and deeper until you realize that having an OOB, an out-of-body experience. And that's when it gets dangerous."

Duffy says the guitar maker is a voracious reader, recently racing through the epic medieval Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf* for fun.

"Who reads *Beowulf* for fun?" Duffy asks. "He's got me reading *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*, so I can understand what he's talking about."

Duffy says Vines has taught him the spiritual nature of things, which may be why he takes it seriously when Vines feels power in the hanging tree wood.



FREEMAN VINES WORKS IN HIS WORKSHOP, 2017
PHOTO BY TIMOTHY DUFFY

African-American artist also has to keep his work invisible to the white community. Otherwise whites will steal it or destroy it, Duffy says.

"Freeman started pulling guitars out of piles in his yard under linoleum," Duffy remembers. "He was hiding all his prized possessions in plain sight."

Dozens of rough-hewn yet elegant guitars, in myriad and fantastic shapes, unpainted and showing their wood grain, were on the property. The guitars' pickups had also been fashioned by Vines out of old radio parts.

"[Vines] talked to me about how the blood of the fellow that was lynched was coming into him in his dreams and thoughts," Duffy says. "It was obvious to him that the wood spoke to him."

Confronting racial terror

The lynching took place in 1930 on Aspen Church Grove Road, close to where Wilson and Edgecombe counties meet, but the hanging tree is long gone.

It was a particularly brutal lynching, Duffy says. The white men put a mule harness under Moore's armpits and suspended him from the tree. Then they shot him 200 times.

According to folklore around Fountain, the bullet casings were so heavy on the street, the postman couldn't deliver the mail.

Afterwards, the vigilantes left guns on a card table under the tree so anyone else could drive up and shoot the carcass.

Folklore or not, Duffy says the story taught him the realities of racial terror.

"I learned how a society can terrorize a people. They do [acts of terror] every once in a while, so everyone knows their place," he says.

Vines has encountered that terror for most of his life.

Born in 1942 in rural Greene County, he grew up on a white man's farm in Snow Hill. Both Vines and his mother worked for the owner.

"My mother was a house woman. I know you know what that is," he says flatly. "She was a house nigger."

Vines went to jail for the first time at age 14. For what, he will not say. In 1964, at 22, he and some white men got caught with two 500-gallon moonshine stills, Duffy says. The white guys walked, but Vines did time in the federal penitentiary system.

He spent a total of five years, first in Atlanta and then in Tallahassee, Florida, with a ball and chain attached to his leg. He still bears the scars.

Though Vines learned to read and write in the penitentiary, in *Hanging Tree Guitars* he's emphatic about the nature of his incarceration.

"The college I went to is spelled C-H-A-I-N-G-A-N-G."

"Freeman has suffered deeply and painfully," Duffy says.

At the same time, Duffy believes Vines' body of work, which includes all his guitars, is a statement on how to address racial terror.

"It's art of resistance," Duffy says. Although a code of silence remains in small towns throughout the Carolinas, it will only change when voices like Vines' are heard, Duffy believes.

And lately Vines' voice has grown louder. Some of his work was part of *We Will Walk* — Art and Resistance in the American South, a group show at the Turner Contemporary art gallery in the United Kingdom last February.

In June, Vines' debut solo exhibition went up in his home community at the Greenville Museum

up a sustainability program for traditional artists.

"They're the cultural wellspring of America's greatest export, our music," Duffy offers.

He also feels that eastern North Carolina has been overlooked in the narrative about American music. Those who point to Mississippi as the birthplace of the blues and New Orleans as the cradle of jazz are forgetting our history, Duffy maintains.

In the colonial South, more than half of all the enslaved people that were brought to this country came through the eastern Carolinas and the Piedmont, Duffy asserts.

"This is where the first people were enslaved and this is where African-American music was first created."

In 1994, Duffy launched Music Maker Relief

Several of these artists perform on a full-length album, released in tandem with the *Hanging Tree Guitars* book, with which it shares its title. On the collection, Daniels plays a guitar carved and crafted by Vines on the song "Somewhere to Lay My Head."

MMRF also provides musicians with sustenance, Duffy says, offering basic aid for artists living in chronic poverty. When people are living on just a few hundred dollars a month, receiving aid for food and home repair is a big deal, Duffy offers.

"We've bought homes for people that were homeless," he says.

The nonprofit helped Vines pay for doctors' bills and medications to get his diabetes under control. The foundation also bought an old drugstore in Fountain, converting it into an art studio for the sculptor and guitar maker.

Shot through with sound

For all the work MMRF has done, *Hanging Tree Guitars* and giving Vines' art and philosophy its broadest forum yet is perhaps the most important, Duffy says.

"I think the book is a jewel," he says. "It's the greatest thing Music Maker has been a part of."

In the book, Vines talks about racial terror and how it effects an artist and a community, and although Vines has been terrorized, he comes through it to a place of beauty and love.

Hanging Tree Guitars also

examines the mystery of a parallel universe, Duffy says. Vines' story offers an examination of the other side and the unseen world, told by someone who has studied it extensively.

As Dr. Ezeoluomba suggests, that other side could be, in part, the source of Vines' genius.

But with that gift, the ability to be a vessel, comes the responsibility to share that transmission from spirit.

Vines suggests that he's often unable to control or shut off the transmission, and that consequently he'll never stop trying to replicate it in the material world.

When asked about what message he'd like his life's work to convey, Vines returns to the night he received an unexpected blessing that also almost drove him mad.

"It's the sound," Vines says. "Like the howling of a dog in the middle of the night, it's the sound."



FIELD OF GUITARS, 2017
PHOTO BY TIMOTHY DUFFY

of Art. The exhibit, which engages memory, racial identity, and spirituality — themes that thread through all of Vines' work — is open to groups of 10 or less by reservation, and boasts a steady stream of visitors, Duffy says.

Let the music lead you

For Duffy, his visit to Vines' home in 2015 was an unexpected result of a passion that took hold when he was 16 years old. At that early age, an interest in ethnomusicology spurred him to start recording and photographing traditional folk, gospel and blues artists throughout the South.

After studying music in Mombasa, Kenya, Duffy was introduced to Piedmont blues while earning a master's degree in Folklore at UNC Chapel Hill.

"All the people I worked with had the greatest talent but were really poor," Duffy says. Realizing that there was little space for traditional artists in a fame-obsessed music industry, he determined to set

Foundation along with his wife Denise. The nonprofit takes a people-first approach, Duffy explains, preserving the traditional music of the South by supporting the musicians who make it. The foundation focuses on sustenance, education and performance.

"This work is real social equity," Duffy says.

Tour support is one of three tent poles for MMRF's sustenance approach. Many traditional musicians are too poor to tour, Duffy offers. So, the organization acts like a small bank, paying for airplane tickets, meals and hotel rooms for artists who've never owned a credit card, then collecting on its micro-loan after the tour has made a profit.

The foundation also focuses on education, releasing books like *Hanging Tree Guitars*, and mounting exhibits like the one at Greenville Museum of Art to let people know about artists like Vines, Lightnin' Wells, Pinetop Perkins, Johnny Ray Daniels and others.