



CRAFTING COMMUNITY

West Alabama
“Represents” at
Southern Makers
2014

by Bebe Barefoot Lloyd



Southern Makers walks like a festival, talks like festival, and maybe even looks like a festival, though those involved would never describe it as one. Nor should they. Communities usually build festivals, but this gathering of crafters and innovators transcends that norm and is itself a vehicle for creating community.

Launched in the spring of 2013, Southern Makers enjoyed another success with its second annual event on May 3 of this year. Last year's sellout crowd prompted organizers to increase 2014's number of available tickets by 500, and they sold every last one.

Co-created by Matter Creative; E.A.T. South; Goodwyn, Mills, and Cawood; and Southern Accents Architectural Antiques—a group as diverse and talented as the innovators it curates—Southern Makers takes place in downtown Montgomery's historic Union Station train shed. This central

location in Alabama's capitol city is the perfect place because a major component of the event's overall mission is to showcase the immense network of talent that thrives throughout the state. It's all Alabama, all the time, and a great opportunity for attendees from all over the country to appreciate the artists, crafters, chefs, brewers, musicians, farmers, and designers that we have right here in our sweet home.

Entering the space was entering the state, as the layout followed a standard map with each region represented. From the Wiregrass and Gulf Coast up to the Shoals and Rocket City, the borders burst with creative energy and enthusiasm. The Tuscaloosa/West Alabama area doubled its representation this year when the Kentucky Festival of the Arts and Amos Kennedy joined inaugural Makers Jessica Peterson and Andy

Grace.

Peterson, who founded and owns The Southern Letterpress in Northport, contacted the folks at Matter Creative last year after learning that Grace and his film, *Eating Alabama*, would be featured. Her query not only landed her a spot in the train shed, but she was also tapped to print the poster, an honor she repeated this year. Peterson was impressed with the top-notch craftspeople in 2013, when the event was not even juried. This year's Makers were selected through a jury process, and the results did not disappoint.

While participants showcase and sell their work and products, profits are not their mission nor are sales even a secondary goal. Instead, Southern Makers is the perfect opportunity to take the unsophisticated (and certainly unfair) image that plagues not only Alabama but the South and turn it



Andy Grace at Southern Makers

on its ear.

“All of the artists, craftspeople, and designers work to promote Alabama to be what isn’t expected. They all have the same mission as I do: to promote Alabama as not a red state, as not a cultural backwater,” said Peterson.

Grace agrees, and says that Southern Makers is an opportunity to “complicate the story about Alabama.”

“It’s a space for a new generation of Southern storytellers and artists to meet and share their ideas and their artwork. In that way, it’s really about community building,” he said.

A new generation of not only artists but also patrons and “fans” was foremost in Holly

Roberts’s mind when she secured a Makers spot. As Program Manager for Kentuck Festival of the Arts, Roberts gave herself the task of “re-introducing” Kentuck. She had a hunch that there was an audience that might not be familiar with the beloved festival, even though it has become an institution since it began as a local coalition of artists more than 40 years ago. She was right.

“I noticed most of the crowd over [the age of] 30 had experienced the festival or was at the very least familiar with us,” said Roberts. “Most of the people under that age had no idea.”

She used a few of the Kentuck quilts to create an eye-catching booth space and represent the organization, and this proved to be

a wise choice.

“We had many people of all ages interested in the quilts, which opened the conversation as to why we have them,” Roberts continued. “It was nice to share a lovely Kentuck tradition with a new crowd.”

Peterson was also impressed with the attendees, which she says was a revolving group of amazing people. Both last year and this year, she saw “lots of Alabama pride, but also interest in art and culture.” Likewise, Grace enjoyed interacting with the steady stream of nearly 2,000.

“It was nice for me on a personal level to interact with a lot of folks who had seen my film,” he said. “The intimacy of the

*Jessica Peterson (top right)
and Holly Roberts (bottom right),
Kentuck Program Manager, at
Southern Makers*

event allows for lots of interaction between the artists and the crowd.” Representing Gordo was none other than Amos Kennedy of Kennedy Prints who, like Kentuck, is a walking, talking institution and embodies Alabama-style artistic passion. Like Peterson, Kennedy is a letterpress printer, papermaker, and bookbuilder who tirelessly shares his knowledge by conducting workshops all over the world. Many attendees and artists relished the opportunity to catch up with Kennedy, and he also quickly developed a new generation of fans as he shared his knowledge, expertise, and innovation, as well as his timeless posters.

According to Peterson, many of the craftspeople who are part of Southern Makers are also involved in Design Alabama, a Montgomery-based nonprofit dedicated to increasing awareness of the design disciplines and how they contribute to quality of life and economic development. They want artists, craftspeople, and designers to be on the same page when promoting Alabama as a place where good design and meticulous craft intersect.

“In lots of other cities, there’s a design economy, but people don’t think that economy exists here,” said Peterson. “So I participate in things like Southern Makers to show that there is a design economy.”

Southern Makers also showcases Alabama food, breweries, farms, and music, not only through traditional booth space



and performances, but also via educational workshops, films, and other presentations.

Grace, who promoted his film at the inaugural event, returned this year as a panelist, speaking about storytelling and craft. In addition, he sold posters, T-shirts, and DVDs of his documentary, and even that proved to be a bonding, communal, and inspiring experience.

“It’s flattering to hear stories

from people who have been moved by my film,” he said, “and for them to do a double take when they walk up to the booth and say, ‘Wait, aren’t you the guy from the movie!’”

Peterson feels that Southern Makers’s growth over just one year made the community the event is building even more solid.

“There were more artists,” she said, “including the fabulous Green Pea Press from Huntsville,



which made the event feel more inclusive, and like a real community of makers.”

And community-building is not just among the craftspeople and innovators. Those attending are integral, and the results are mutually beneficial.

“I think the point is exposure,” Peterson continued, “so people in Alabama understand how many amazing makers there are in this state, and the people who want to use us, whether for artwork or commercial work, know that we exist.”

All of these West Alabama “makers” hope to represent this

region in Montgomery again next year, and perhaps inspire others to join them as they combine their creative energy with that of artists from other regions to enhance Alabama’s image and brand the state as an innovative force that can hold its own in comparison to any other place in the country, but also never forgetting where they come from. As Roberts noted, “In the Alabama art world, there is a connection among artists that’s like family.”

A Southern-made family.

A band (top), pickup truck turned into a planter (above left) and a cool creation (above right) at Southern Makers

Freelance writer Bebe Barefoot Lloyd lives in Tuscaloosa and teaches in the Blount and New College programs at The University of Alabama.