By the People: Conversations Beyond 250

"A Cultural Confluence in Maine"

EPISODE DESCRIPTION

To celebrate the cultural confluence that has shaped Maine (or the Dawnland as it is called by the Wabanaki), Maine Humanities organized a night of food, music, and dancing called "Gather." In this episode, Samaa Abdurraqib talks with the event's chef and two of its musicians about the ways that cultural traditions have carried through history, are sustaining us in this present moment, and can help move us into the into the future. Tune in for a conversation on reconstructing Indigenous foodways, the way the banjo connects Africa and Black Americans, how traditional songs of the Levant make space for grief and expression, and so much more.

EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

Hannah Hethmon (Narration):

Before Maine was Maine, it was the Dawnland. The Wabanaki, the "People of the Dawnland," have lived in the place *we know as Maine for thousands of years. Before any Europeans arrived, this was a place of cultural confluence; its waterways enabling tribes in the region to travel and trade with each other. Many more cultures and traditions have arrived in Maine over the last four hundred years, shaping the state as it is today.*

When the national By the People initiative was launched, Maine Humanities saw an opportunity to explore the way these traditions and folkways have shaped the state and how they are informing where Maine is going. They picked a day and they picked a historic church venue in Bath and brought people together through food, music, conversation, and dancing for a chance to meet each other, connect with each other, and feel uplifted in community.

You're listening to By the People: Conversations Beyond 250.

By the people is a national initiative developed by the Federation of State Humanities Councils and the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage.

Throughout 2026, humanities councils across the United States, its territories, and DC developed community-driven programs in collaboration with local partners. These programs explored 250 years of our nation's cultural life and imagined our shared future.

In each episode of this podcast, we'll revisit one of these inspiring programs to hear from the community leaders, historians, performers, and culture bearers who steward and preserve the living traditions that have shaped this nation.

Throughout this episode, you'll hear clips from two of the Gather event's musical performers: Michael Kebede playing with Samuel James and the Al-Mashreq Ensemble. Now, without further ado, I'll turn it over to the humanities council and the culture-bearerers to tell you more:

Samaa Abdurraqib:

Hello from the Dawnland, or, Maine. This is Samaa Abdurraqib. My pronouns are she and her, and I'm the Executive Director of Maine Humanities. And I'm here with Zack Neptune, Sulheya Elmutry, and Michael Kebede. So, I'm here with our guests today to talk about our By the People event, that we called Gather. We hosted it back in June at a venue in Bath, Maine, called the Chocolate Church. Bath is a shipbuilding town, and the Chocolate Church was built a very long time ago by shipbuilders. You can actually see it in the structure of the building. And it currently serves a theater venue and a community art space. The directors Matthew Glassman and Jeremy Eaton are really committed to making sure that the Chocolate Church serves as a connective force for people in the Bath community and beyond.

The event was a mix of music and food and some conversation. The musicians who were featured were Firefly the Hybrid, a Penobscot musician and just all-around creative force; the Al-Mashreq Ensemble, which is a group of eight musicians playing music from the Levant region; Samuel James, who's a Black blues musician and he played with Michael Kebede, who is here today and is a banjo player; and the food was created and curated and served by Katahdin Kitchen, which is an indigenous, a Penobscot catering business.

So just to give a little bit of background about why this was the direction that we went in for this By the People project…the planning group which involved the musicians and the chef from Katahdin Kitchen, Jazz Tintor, and our staff and the Chocolate Church staff…we were really interested in looking at the ways that traditions, cultural traditions have carried through history, are sustaining us in this present moment and can help move us into the into the future. We wanted the event to be connective. We wanted people to meet each other over food and music. We wanted people to learn about the traditions that were being presented to them. And we wanted people to feel some kind of uplift. Those were our goals.

So, I'm going to ask the panelists to introduce themselves. If you can give your name and your pronouns and your contribution to the Gather event. Let's start with Zack.

Zack Neptune:

Hi, good morning. my name is Zack. I use he/him pronouns. And I am the chef and co-founder of Katahdin Kitchen. We're an indigenous catering business right now. We've opened up a café and had small pop ups here and there. And we provided all of the food for the event. We provided a large charcuterie board and some beef and bison sliders and some other finger foods. It was lovely.

Samaa:

It was really lovely. There was also amazing lemonade and corn fritters.

Zack:

Yes, yes. Those are Jazz's creations. She's super talented.

Samaa:

Thanks, Zack. Michael.

Michael Kebede:

Thank you so much for having me. My name is Michael Kebede. I'm a banjoist living in Portland, Maine. And I was at the Gather event to play my banjo. I played a couple of solo songs, and I also played with the blues musician Samuel James. And I was so happy and honored to be part of that beautiful event.

Samaa:

Thank you, Michael. And Sulheya.

Sulheya Elmutry:

Hey everyone, good morning. Sulheya, she/they. I was part of a large group called an Al-Mashreq band, which translates to the Arab East. And I was one of two tubleh players. The tubleh is an hourglass shaped Middle Eastern drum. And our group has existed now for really just about two years and we mostly play at solidarity events, protests and are led by the amazing Fateh Azzam.

Samaa:

So, the first question I'm curious to know, what are the connections you have to the music that you play and the food that you prepare? Michael, can we start with you?

Michael:

Absolutely. I am a first-generation African immigrant. I grew up in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in the east of Africa. And I came here when I was 17 to attend university and following that I went straight to law school. And one of the things that I struggled with and wrestled with when I came to the United States was my relationship to Black Americans and Black American culture and Black American history.

I became, as immigrants become, immigrants from Africa become in this country, racialized as Black. And making sense of that experience when I first arrived was a big part of my life, a big part of my thinking. And it wasn't really until I found the banjo that I felt that I had established an extremely strong

link between my African identity and upbringing and my experience as a Black American. I've been living in the United States for 20 years now, since I came here when I was 17; I'm 37. And the banjo, as listeners might know, was created by enslaved Africans in the Americas. For its first couple of hundred years, from the 1600s until the 1800s, the banjo was pretty much exclusively played by African Americans and other descendants of enslaved Africans in the Western Hemisphere. It became a mainstream cultural instrument in the United States only in the 1840s, 50s, and 60s. And there's now a movement underway to reclaim the Black history of the banjo. The original way of playing the banjo, the style called claw hammer banjo, was imported directly from West Africa. And I believe that the banjo is the strongest link between Black people in the Western hemisphere and the African continent and African culture.

I also use the banjo to express myself. I grew up around a lot of Ethiopian folk music. My parents love singing and dancing and partying. And since becoming a banjoist, since learning how to play the banjo, I've started composing on the instrument, in part using Ethiopian scales. And taking this instrument that people who were brought to the Western Hemisphere in chains, taking this instrument back to the African continent, for me represents a full circle movement that is at once healing, delightful, and community building.

Samuel James: [Clip from event]

Can you run them through real quick what the actual technique is? I know that sounds complicated, but it’s not.

Michael Kebede: [Clip from event]

I usually charge for banjo lessons, so what Sam is doing right now… Sam is stealing from me [laughter] which is fine since we are the same person.

So essentially your hand looks like a claw, which is why it’s called clawhammer. It’s also called downstroke, it’s also called frailing, it’s also called slave style. Essentially the back of your fingernail on your index finger or your middle finger hammers down on the bottom four strings and then your thumb pulls up on really any of the strings but mostly the short string. You see there is a tuner in the middle of the fret board? That string just drones in the same key that you are playing in. It’s sort of like the percussion section of the song that you are playing. So you have a complete musical system here with the melody played with your index or middle finger and the percussion played with your thumb. That’s clawhammer.

Samuel James: [Clip from event]

Thank you. [Audience applause]

Samaa:

Sulheya, what are the connections you have to the music you play?

Sulheya:

Just hearing Michael and lots of similar themes there. One of the songs we played, “Wen Ala Ramallah,” which translates to “Where to” or “Where are you going? Ramallah,” Palestine. That was one of the songs that my seedis or grandfathers taught me. Both of my grandfathers fled Palestine and did not have a lot of words or way of talking about it afterwards. And so most of the ways that I've got the felt sense of some of what they had been through was actually through song. And that one song ,“Wen Ala Ramallah,”I probably knew the words to that as a two-year-old before I had language in English.

The strongest connection I have to the music that we played is through my lineage and the ways that song can resonate and land in ways that words can't. Like Michael as well, I was very accustomed to passively absorbing culture, living amongst hundreds of Palestinians here, being first generation. But once I moved up to Wabanaki territory and found myself just among dozens of us, it dawned on me that I would have to start creating this music if I wanted my children to have access to it.

Samaa:

Thank you, Sulheya. Zack, what are the connections you have to the food that you prepare?

Zack:

I feel like the connections that I have are pretty strong, but they've been carefully reconstructed, I guess, over my time, in the cooking industry and working, you know, as Katahdin Kitchen. Food sovereignty and working with indigenous food is something that is…how do how do I put this? It's difficult to say because so much of our food sovereignty and our natural foods have been kind of systematically removed and really destroyed over the past few centuries, with the you know, with the relationship with the American government. So, trying to reestablish those connections has been rather difficult, but at the same time, it's almost a blessing in disguise because we can build it from the ground up and we can kind of recreate what was already there but also using modern cooking techniques and foods that we have now but also rediscovering the old the old foods and the old ways of cooking food and different foods. I don’t know—it's an interesting juxtaposition, I would say.

Samaa:

Mm. Mm. Thank you, Zack. Thank you for all your responses. Those were so first of all, perfect segue into the next question, but really, the way that you're all tying threads through who you are and where you are currently to specific people in the past or ancestral people in the past…I just really appreciate that. I'm curious about why you're drawn to these particular practices, so food, feeding people and music as the modality that connects you to the past. Sulheya, do you want to start?

Sulheya:

Well, I'm also drawn to food, even though I don't make it. [laughs] I'm also drawn to the food. But honing in on music, I'd say it's when I saw the grown-ups around me as a child most embodied and coming alive. And you know, as immigrants in this country, there is often not a lot of room for play or joy for some families. But the cultural celebrations we all had access to monthly, I would say…Palestinian weddings, if you've ever been part of that community, they happen pretty often, and it is the cultural epicenter of the community. And so I was drawn to the practice of making music, and in particular, the tubleh or drum, because that is what carries the rhythm of the dance. And also, I'm a mother now and strings are way too complicated. But drumming…it's kind of the cornerstone of all music, you know. Harmony is important, it's needed, and the drumming is what correlates to the stomping in dabke Palestinian line dance. And so, the drumming is what inspires being loud, being big in ways that are accessible to people who often fear repression for speaking up.

Samaa:

Mm. Mm. Thank you. Zack, why are you drawn to food as the as the thing that connects you to the past?

Zack:

I am also drawn to music. Yeah, a huge part of indigenous culture is, you know, the drumming and dancing and the s the songs, which I love and you know, I love singing the songs and participating in that. I grew up always watching my great-grandmother cook food and trying to recreate her dishes and coming close but never quite hitting it spot on.

I kinda had this moment when I was working in like the electrical industry. I just had this overwhelming feeling of that I was just in this extremely extractive industry. I was looking at all the wires and pipes and just all this plastic and metal that's been so refined and pulled out of the earth. I was like, this is not for me.

And you know, I had that moment I was like, what do I want to do? What am I good at? Like how can I help provide for myself but also the people around me. And it really came down to food. I've always felt this sense of fulfillment preparing food for people and seeing the look on their faces when they eat it and the in the indigenous food kind of came hand in hand with that because I saw nothing around us in this area. Like nobody was doing nobody was doing what we're what we're doing. So we decided to really give it a go, and it's been so rewarding cooking for events like the you know the Gather, the folkways and you know, really focusing towards other indigenous and BIPOC organizations.

Samaa:

How about you, Michael? Why music?

Michael Kebede (22:27.948)

Music is the language that speaks to me the most…instrumental music, music with words, it doesn't really matter that much.

So, I was actually in Ethiopia last week. I was there for 10 days, my brother and I. My brother lives in Brooklyn, New York. And I was in Ethiopia 'cause my brother and I decided to surprise my sister for her fortieth birthday. Had a huge party that ended at 4 a.m. There was a lot of music, a lot of dancing. I took one of my banjos. But another thing that happened during this trip is my dad didn't tell me that he has been friends for over 20 years with one of Ethiopia's most prominent folk musicians, this man named Sileshi Demissie, who goes by the stage name [Gashe] Abera Molla.

Abera Molla is a krar player. The krar is one of Ethiopia's indigenous folk instruments. But Abera Molla is someone I'd admired for years and listened to his music for years. And I spent three days with him last week in Ethiopia just playing songs and playing his songs, playing my songs. We even recorded a couple of songs at the studio. Essentially, whenever that kind of thing happens in my life, everything else takes a backseat. And I don't know why that is. That's I guess where I've found my bliss. And I think maybe part of it has to do with my parents and their tendencies, my mom's extremely sensitive nature, my dad's very, very passionate dancing, and these connections that my family has had with vocalists and folk musicians.

Samaa:

Thank you for all these stories, y'all. Zack, I didn't know that you were an electrician before you were a chef. In my mind, always a chef.

I'm curious about…you know, we've been talking about a lot about the past and about the present, you all in the present, and how the past has informed where you all now.

Let's look at the future just a little bit and thinking about these practices, and these cultural forms of expression that have you know, moved through time. How do you think they might be able to sustain us over time and space and into an uncertain future?

Zack, do you wanna start?

Zack:

I would start out by saying Penobscot culture and Wabanaki culture have existed since time immemorial. We've been here for over ten thousand years and you know, we're gonna be here for another ten thousand at least. Michael and Sulheya, you know, you guys can relate to that having come from cultures and backgrounds that have that have been around for millennia and longer. And I guess in the in the way that it relates to food in my background is…we are pretty I guess quote-unquote lucky to live in this region where we are because of course we'll still feel the effects of climate change and everything, but we will be the least susceptible to the most extreme, you know, situations. So we'll still be able to grow food, and to be able to sustain ourselves as best as we can, you know, given that that circumstance. But I feel like, you know, growing food that is native to the to the region, to the Americas and growing and eating food seasonally and locally and regionally will help inform the future and it'll

reflect our relationship, I guess, with the land, which is which is super important, not only to Wabanaki culture but to a lot of indigenous cultures around the world. I'm hopeful about the future. Cautiously optimistic, I would say.

Samaa:

Thank you, Zack. And how about you, Michael?

Michael Kebede (31:32.587)

The f the first quote that comes to mind in answer to your question is the opening line of *Twelfth Night*, the Shakespeare poem. “If music be the food of love, play on. Give me excess of it.” In the play the character might have been talking about romantic love. But music for me is the food of every kind of love. And that's really, for me, best reason to be alive. And the only reason that I have to be alive, ultimately. Love for my friends and family, for the land, for the biosphere, for extensions of myself and my relations throughout the world. Music is the best way I've encountered to express that love, to deepen that love, to capture that love. And that's why music for me is such an essential way of sustaining myself and the communities I'm a part of into the future.

Music is also a form of memory but it's not a form of memory the way a history book is a form of memory. It's a form of memory that changes every time you recall it. Two pieces, even if it's the same song, are never played the exact same way. I play a song today, I play that same song tomorrow, it's a different song. And if that song was written by my ancestor, my musical ancestor or my ideological ancestor or my biological or national ancestor, it doesn't matter. If that song was written by my ancestor, they've transmitted something from the past to the present. And when I learn it, I transform myself in the process and inevitably also transform the song. And it's a very beautiful form of memory because it's such an intimate relationship with the past. It's such an intimate way of connecting the past to the future. And that's one other way music sustains me and sustains us into the future.

Samaa:

Thank you, Michael. Sulhleya, how would you respond to that question?

Sulheya:

So, I didn't really start translating with accuracy the words to these songs that I've heard my entire life until recently. And it's incredible to me how these songs were present at milestone events like weddings, graduations, joyous events. Yet a lot of their lyrics are about holding grief. But the harmonies wouldn't tell you that. They're light, bouncy, people are jumping around. And if you take the time to translate some of these songs of Palestinian resistance—you know, naturally they're about resistance, which is not light work. And so these songs have taught me about the blend or the balance that I'm always searching, searching around for, and that is how to hold grief collectively while not falling into

despair, how to allow spaces for release while propelling us somewhere else. And these songs and dance really open up avenues of feeling, of expression that is very accessible oftentimes and it can be done in groups and all of our cultures, all of our ancient lineages have known how to do that for thousands of years and it's something I think that we're going to have to continue to remember and call on.

Samaa:

Mm. Mm. Such powerful and thoughtful responses. I appreciate you all. And Zack, I really am grateful that you were the first one that responded to that that question and you started off by just pointing to the long arc of time and indigeneity. I think that I know for me personally, when I get fixated on this current moment that we're in, I think about the indigenous teachers and just folks I know who just have so gently reminded me always that this is like a small moment. Indigenous people have been here for time [immemorial], as you said, and this is a small moment in a long, long, long timeline. And even when we think about apocalypse, there's this great poem by Franny Choi. it's called “The World Keeps Ending, The World Keeps Going,” something like that. I'm getting it wrong. But it's just a list poem of all of the many apocalypses that particularly people who have experienced depression, repression, genocide, enslavement, all of those things. All of the big and the small apocalypses. And so that is just always a reminder for me. So, thank you, Zack, for pointing to the long arc of history, and all of you and your responses did just that as well.

So, for this event, we were in some in many ways trying to represent stories of the Dawnland. The Dawnland is the place that we live that we now call Maine. And there are many ways that you can represent the Dawnland, but we felt strongly that if you are representing the Dawnland you have to you have to put Wabanaki voices and stories and traditions in the forefront, and you have to represent just that just that this place is a confluence of many cultures and people. you have to represent the Dawnland as it is, as it has been and as it is now. That is really what we wanted to do.

How do you feel like the Gather event and what you what you all brought to the gather event, all the practices and those stories, how do you feel like they represent the Dawnland as it is now? Michael, can we start with you? And then Sulheya and then Zack.

Michael:

Absolutely. One way that the event clearly represented the history of the Dawnland is through the many cultural confluences that have taken place here over hundreds and thousands of years. The four Wabanaki nations have traded which with each other for millennia. The two closest to the ocean, the Penobscot and the Passamaquoddy, are so intimately connected to the local waterways, and those local waterways for the last several hundred years have brought so much of the world to these shores. And the cultural exchanges that take place when people trade and when people travel, I thought were really beautifully represented in the Gather event. My part in the Gather event involved me playing music with Samuel James, whom Rolling Stone, when he was just getting started as a blues guitarist, compared to

Jimi Hendrix. Samuel James is virtuosic practitioner of Black folk music, Black American folk music. And my feeling about the role of the banjo in in my life is that it's a way to heal and strengthen the relationship between Africans and African Americans.

And the fact that I've I had a chance to play on stage with him at the Gather event is an example of the kind of cultural exchange that makes communities thrive, the kind of cultural exchange that creates something new out of the convergence of different strands of music, different strands of food, different strands of self-expression. I thought what Maine Humanities did and what all of the artistic and culinary dimensions of Gather did, it really epitomized the beauty and the creativity of cultural confluence.

Samaa:

Thank you. Sulheya.

Sulheya:

Yes, I'll start by saying that something I haven't thought of until now and that was how Zack and his crew were the group that provided the food. And that, you know, and that displaced people such as myself and my family, we don't often choose where we end up, but where we end up was oftentimes someone else's land. And those people know the land better than we do. And so, there's that tension in me always here, as a displaced person who is also a settler on this land. It's important to remember that there are populations of people here who have lived with this land and are relatives of this land. And so, when I get up on stage to share Palestinian culture, it just feels much better when I'm in groups like these, where there's a nod to the fact that we are all here on native land. Just a reminder of how oftentimes natives you know whether here or in Palestine…when you're on your land there's a graciousness and a hospitality that often comes with it. At the event I was just feeling moved being able to share food found and prepared by people who really understand the nourishment on this land. And how the rest of us here, displaced here, moved here, dragged here, how we can continue to remember that this was home to others who are still here. And displaced people can very quickly turn into pawns and also a cog in the wheel of repression. And so it's important to continue to ask… how do I stand strong in my culture and my native knowings and also remember you know that I am a guest here. But I think events like these are kind of the opening to this tension, dialogue and solidarity.

Samaa:

Thank you, Sulheya. Zack, do you wanna bring us home?

Zack:

I guess to start with a bit of a food allegory, if I could. So, everybody refers to America as the melting pot. But I feel like that is has a lot to do with the assimilation culture, whereas I like to look at it as the blending of cultures could be compared closer to a salad where each component its own thing. It stands out. You know, you get a little bit of everything in iin each of your figurative bites. And I feel like that was really well on display at the Gathers event. It was really special, the Gathers event for me in

particular to hear Firefly, the Penobscot singer and performer, to do the drumming and singing in that church. It was just really, really touching to hear those songs that we've been singing for thousands and thousands of years you know, reverberating off of those walls…in a church most specifically, was it was really powerful to me. And I'm sure, Michael and Sulheya, you guys can relate to that with you know hearing your own music in that in that kind of setting.Being able to serve food was really, really special too. Food not only to like nourish the body and to fill bellies, but also to nourish people's souls and spirits by eating food that really reflects the land and reflects, you know, the seasons. That's something that we really, really try to focus on…returning to those traditional foods and traditional ways of eating, locally and seasonally. Just honored to be to have been a part of it.

Samaa:

Wow. Gratitude for all of you. I know the three of you were not folks who were in the room when we were in the conceiving and planning stages, but you all in different ways spoke to what was said explicitly in those rooms, what was implied, and what was just in the air and so much gratitude. Thank you for your thoughtfulness and your words.

Hannah (Narration): *Thanks for listening to By the People: Conversations Beyond 250. This podcast was produced by the Federation of State Humanities Councils as part of the national By the People initiative, developed by the Federation and the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage. You can learn more about By the People at statehumanities.org/bythepeople or at festival.si.edu.*

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