

BRIDGING WORLDS WITH RISING APPALACHIA

BY CHRIS ASSAAD

During these times of great planetary change and uncertainty, the many ways in which humanity is divided are becoming undeniable and the need for unity, harmony, and synergistic co-creation are evermore apparent. As we collectively lean deeper into this significant moment in history and look for a path forward, an ancient, timeless modality for catalyzing evolution and supporting healing is being rediscovered and renewed. As outdated societal norms, systems, and structures are crumbling—and those in positions of power, once entrusted to lead, are being more highly scrutinized—a new wave of rebel leadership is emerging to support the movement towards a more life-affirming, equitable, inclusive, and sustainable future.

Enter sisters Leah and Chloe Smith, founders and co-creators of the folk roots band, Rising Appalachia. Both are fierce music medicine women, mystics, singer-songwriters, multi-instrumentalists, word-weavers, dedicated activists, and wayshowers. Each forms one half of the heart-trust of a multi-faceted collaborative endeavor that encompasses a wide range of passions and expressions, and that extends in reach well beyond their impressive independent success as artists. Born of a gentle beginning, fueled by passion and resilience, organically-grown out of a strong blood bond and deep family roots, Rising Appalachia has evolved into a force of nature that encompasses a potent blend of changemaking artistry and relentless real world activism. Bridgers of worlds old and new, visible and invisible, the band has gathered a global family of allies through the unifying force of music, sacred song, and a common cause.



On their most recently released full-length album, *Leylines*, Rising Appalachia reveal the fruits of a well-worn path of world travel, adventure, and experience. Their seventh album, the first to be birthed with a producer and to be recorded outside of the South, was captured mostly live and stunningly displays the ripening of Leah and Chloe's many crafts well-honed on their journey since answering the calling to join creative forces nearly two decades ago. On *Leylines*, Rising Appalachia seamlessly weave their individual and shared gifts for storytelling, wisdom-filled wordplay and sonic spellbinding, beautifully blending elements of their southern roots and upbringing with the flavours and textures of a global tapestry of influences. The resulting work of art is a rich, deep, cohesive and soul-filling offering that is the perfect companion to those seeking a soundtrack to aid in connecting the dots, both within and without, amidst these times of uncertainty. Indeed, *Leylines* is much needed medicine for the massive waves of change and kindling for the fires of transformation that are burning strong at this moment in time.

In this FtC Conscious Artist Feature, we caught up with Chloe Smith of Rising Appalachia and got a deeper insight into the band's inspiration and personal take on all things music, art, activism, and the current state of affairs in the world. Chloe openly shares about the ways in which this time of "great pause" has informed Rising Appalachia's direction forward and vision for what's to come, and the essential ways in which music and art can contribute to the collective process of change and healing that are unfolding. Chloe also sheds some light on the coming to fruition of a lifelong dream collaboration with their "all-time favorite righteous musician/activist/hero/babe", Ani DiFranco, who is a featured guest on "Speak Out"—a fiery, anthemic protest song and call-to-action from the new album. The feature also includes a question from our readers and some sage advice for anyone looking to use their voice and express more fully. In the spirited, thought-stirring, artful responses shared, we get a true taste of the creativity, medicine, and experiential wisdom that infuse Rising Appalachia's music, message, and mission.

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Photo Credit: Syd Woodward for Come to Life

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Photo Credit: Hemmie Lindholm

Chris Assaad: We are living in a time of immense change, deep collective healing, and rapid transformation. What role do you feel music and art have to play in the process of releasing the old ways that no longer serve humanity and creating a new world?

Chloe Smith: Music and art, the way I see it, is a twofold offering. Well it’s a million-fold offering, but I’ll highlight two that feel most prevalent for me. One is a call-to-action, using the beauty and potency of art to inspire movement, deep thinking, and change. Across the globe we have witnessed this power, from the music

that kept people going in the Civil Rights Movement to the Irish ballads that told the stories of The Troubles. The other offering of music and art is as a breath away from reality, using the vibration of creativity to transcend the times into something brighter, bigger, universal, untouchable. An escape, perhaps. A salve or balm, like a prayer or meditation. We can feel this in the place of levity we reach when dancing, or the trance-like state of repetitive beats or chanting, or even the sense of renewal we get when blasting our favorite song and singing it loud and proud in the car on a road trip. Both of these avenues of collective healing and transformation are real,

important, and interchangeable.

CA: Throughout your career, you have shown a fierce dedication to a path of our collective evolution, both with your music and your activism. How has the unfolding of the last few months impacted you personally and as an artist? Has it inspired any new visions of how you wish to contribute or altered the direction of your compass as you look ahead?

CS: Indeed, we have always used the stage as a way to gather more than just our own voices...sharing the mic with local nonprofits, speakers,

indigenous leaders, and thinkers within the communities we tour through. Since Covid, everything has changed for so many of us. We have really taken this moment to quiet down, to look inwards, and recalibrate our visions for our art and our personal lives. After pushing our craft to the maximum extent throughout the past five years and living quite extroverted lives, this “great pause” has forced Rising Appalachia to internalize and distill. To catch up with ourselves and our families and our health. To go back in order to go forward. We have been speaking to the fast-paced, un mindful demands of the music industry for years, trying to slow down our tours and carbon offset our travel and take long pauses in between trips to distill what we learned. Although we are not able to perform for a while, we ARE able to strategize and write music and look at our business structure and reach out to folks to build partnerships with. That is the benefit of the times. We have more space and ample time to look closely at both ourselves and our work as artists. Some of that work is vocal and public, and much of it is private and intricate.

In the future, we imagine smaller gatherings will be the route to share our work in person. Community centers and smaller listening rooms. Outdoor festivals and farm-to-table dinners and art throw downs. Some of our favorite shows in years past have been small, intentional, land-based gatherings. We look forward to weaving and building those in

the future, with a focus on local community resilience.

CA: What are some of the causes that really light a fire in you and that are close to your heart at the moment?

CS: Right now, it’s the injustices of race and class and patriarchy. We are collectively witnessing how systematic racism and oppression is built into the very fabric of our



country. This is not a surprise to most of us who have been working on justice initiatives for many years, however the immediacy of action and attention has shifted. I believe art has and will continue to play crucial roles in the rebuilding of communities post Covid and post police reformation and post climate crisis. We need to vote, organize, strategize, reform, educate, meditate, and get our country on a track of healing. It’s a ton of work, but the time is ripe.

CA: Who are some of your heroes in life, art, and activism?

CS: Carlton Turner from a nonprofit we are a part of called Alternate Roots. Jane Fonda. Our friends, Climbing Poetree. Winona LaDuke and Lyla June Johnson. Bob Marley and Playing For Change. Our mentor, Paul. Rosemary Gladstar. Xiuhtezcatl. All the youth climate activists, known and unknown. Benazir Bhutto. Bisa Butler, the incredible visual artist. Saul Williams. Aja Black. AOC. Our friend Mark Brand who is a chef and feeds homeless folk. The Obamas. Joanna Macy and Joan Halifax. The Dali Lama. Honestly, this list could go on for fourteen pages. There are so many good people, past and present, who work hard for the breath of the earth and the rights of the people. Let us not forget that and spend too much time paying attention to the ones who misstep. All these voices should be heard and well-known.

CA: You recently released a remix of the song “Resilient” by your long time band member David Brown. You’ve so poignantly

described the album version as “a song of resistance and empowerment to that which subdues or moves focus from the center. Resilient is for anyone who needs a reminder of the meaning of that word. Resilient: able to recoil or spring back into shape after bending, stretching, or being compressed. Written to affirm the feminine, affirm the ley lines of the sacred, affirm the raucous power of a collective roar into the face of the restrictors and oppressors of the world.” Has this song and its message taken on new meaning



to you in light of the current times?

CS: I wouldn't say new meaning, as it's just as potent to its original message now as when it first released. But I would say new eyes, new vibrancy, and a new focus. This song ("Resilient") is for everyone, but we dedicate it right now to our black brothers and sisters who are STILL working for equal rights and protection. May they be resilient, safe, protected, joyous, honored, and spared from the violence of the system. May we all take action in the turning of the tides.

CA: When you look back at the road you've traveled from Rising Appalachia's humble beginnings busking and playing at farms to now having a global family that has gathered around your music and message, what would you say have been some of the most challenging aspects of the journey?

CS: Above and beyond, the most

challenging part of the journey was the toll that constant travel takes on the body, mind, and soul. We LOVE our work and LOVE sharing music in beautiful spaces, even LOVE to travel and experience the diversity of the world, however the sleeplessness and heavy lifting of touring is not slight. We were growing tired of being in new towns every night, taking all the trains and planes and bus drives, leaving our gardens and partners and families at home. We are looking now for a more meaningful and impactful way to weave our music into global communities. We will re-emerge with our Slow Music Movement. Residencies. Teaching song workshops for a week that culminate in a big community concert. Collaborations with conscious brands. Political work. Permaculture work. Educational work.

CA: Has it helped you to persevere and made it just a little sweeter to be co-creating, singing and harmonizing, growing and evolving, and building a thriving career as

sisters, with family by your side and all around you?

CS: Of course and absolutely. Leah and I are blood sisters, life partners, and creative cohorts. That is an incredible thing, something we try not to take for granted. It makes the road less lonely as well as keeps the ego humbled in a profession that serves the ego first. We balance and shift our weight between one another and that keeps Rising Appalachia a growing, ever evolving, family-led project.

CA: Have either of you ever flirted with the idea of exploring your own artistry outside of Rising Appalachia with a solo project or other collaborations?

CS: Yes! And now more than ever. We are lucky to have countless artists all over the place that we collaborate with and are building with. The entire band, aside from myself, have solo projects that they tend to and water. I focus more these days on writing, some of which ends up in Rising Appalachia and most of which ends up elsewhere. I look forward to stretching that muscle more and more in the years to come.

CA: Can you tell us about the journey of a song and your songwriting process as a duo? How have you managed to both weave your creativity, your ideas, and your voices into one creation, one sound, and such a cohesive body of work?

CS: Well, they are each unique, like having different children with different things they want to do in this world. Some we "catch" from the ethers. Some we craft from the bottom-up like clay pots. Some are a collaborative throw down from all six band members in a jam session. Some are a nugget of a personal story whispered into the hole of the guitar.

That is what is fun about being an artist: you learn to allow each piece to be what it wants to be... lending your efforts but also somehow getting out of the way. It's a delicate dance; a beautiful tango.

CA: What was it like to collaborate with Ani DiFranco on "Speak Out"? Can you share the story of how that collaboration came about?

CS: It was about fifteen years in the making. We are huge fans and would leave her love notes and presents at her shows, which she likely never received. Then slowly as we emerged as folk musicians, our circles got smaller and smaller and we had some shared friends. Then we met at our hometown music festival and said hello and she asked us to sing harmony on stage with her. Then we asked if she might sing on our record. It's amazing, really, how a seed of an idea or a dream comes to fruition.

Sometimes, it's instant like lightning. Sometimes, it's a slow wave coming in from way offshore. Either way, in my opinion, prayers and ideas are heard and received and come out when they are ready.

CA: A question on behalf of our community selected from submissions from our readers: "What daily practices would you recommend to boost confidence and for people wanting to express their voices and themselves more fully?"

CS: Sing! Sing in the shower. Sing along with your favorite artists. Start a singing group. Try writing a song, even if it turns out terrible. Flex the muscle that is your voice. Find freedom in opening that part of your body. The sooner the better. Join a songwriting class, even if it terrifies you.

CA: If you could send a direct text message to everyone on the

planet, what would it say?

CS: Ha! Great question. Dear Michelle Obama: help us.

CA: Who are you currently listening to and loving? Any hidden gems that you would like to shine a light on?

CS: The impeccable Ibeyi sisters. Lots of Django Rheinart and Robert Glasper. 4 Tet and Dirtwire. Nils Frahm and The Sudan Archives. The Tufted Titmouses' and Cardinals that live right outside my window and offer me birdsong every morning. Tara Brach and her immensely helpful meditation podcasts. Beautiful Chorus. The Ganapati meditation. Toumani Diabate, Arouna Diarra, and Tinariwen.

more info:

www.risingappalachia.com



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