

‘Way out people, way out there.’ Rediscovering the South’s quirky folk artists.

by Tom Eblen

Lexington photographer Guy Mendes and Jonathan Williams, the late poet, essayist, publisher and photographer from North Carolina, shared an affinity for the South’s quirky, self-taught artists.

Beginning in 1982, Mendes accompanied Williams on road trips across the South in an okra-green Volkswagen to meet, interview and photograph them. Williams did the same thing in the Carolinas and Virginia with photographer Roger Manley, now director of the Gregg Museum of Art & Design at North Carolina State University in Raleigh.



Wood carver Noah Kinney of Lewis County, Kentucky, with his sculptures of presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Gerald Ford. The photo is featured in the new book “Walks to the Paradise Garden,” by Guy Mendes, Roger Manley and the late Jonathan Williams.
 Guy Mendes

“I was interested in photography and writing and art and Southern strangeness,” Mendes said. “Jonathan did all the driving, and we were along for the ride.”

By 1992, they were ready to publish a book, which Williams called “Walks to the Paradise Garden,” a nod to the sculpture garden Howard Finster created in Summerville, Georgia. Williams, who died in 2008, wrote that Mendes wanted to call the book, “Way Out People Way Out There,” but he liked his title better.

It was a quirky book, just like its quirky subjects. And nobody would publish it. Nobody.

So, it sat on shelves in Lexington and North Carolina until Mendes showed it to Lexington native Phillip March Jones, an artist and arts promoter who has worked for major galleries and collectors and started the non-profit Institute 193 galleries in Lexington and in New York City.

Not only is the book now being published, it is the focus of a major folk art show at one of the South’s most important museums, The High Museum of Art in Atlanta. “Way Out There: The Art of Southern Backroads,” which runs March 2 through May 19, takes its name from Mendes’ suggested book title.

Related exhibits are planned in the tiny Institute 193 spaces. The Lexington gallery, 193 N. Limestone St., has photographs by Mendes and Manley. The New York gallery, 292 E. 3rd Street, showcases Williams’ poems and Polaroid photographs.

“Walks to the Paradise Garden: A Lowdown Southern Odyssey,” was edited by Jones, designed by

Carly Schnur of Lexington's Iota Books and published by Institute 193. (\$45, Institute193.org.)

"I'm thrilled, because I never thought it would come to fruition," Mendes said. "But if Phillip's working on something, it's going to happen. He has done so much to promote Southern artists."



Guy Mendes' portrait of Georgia folk artist and preacher Howard Finster at his Paradise Garden in Summerville, Georgia, in 1982. The photo is featured in the new book "Walks to the Paradise Garden," by Mendes, Roger Manley and the late Jonathan Williams.
Guy Mendes



Sister Gertrude Morgan of New Orleans created paintings in her house, which she called the Everlasting Gospel Revelation Mission. Everything in it was white. The photo is in the new book "Walks to the Paradise Garden," by Guy Mendes, Roger Manley and the late Jonathan Williams.
Guy Mendes

The 350-page book includes Williams' essays and Mendes' and Manley's photographs of dozens of folk artists and Southern individualists. Many no longer living, but their work is much more famous than it was two decades ago. Some is in major collections and museums, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

The book begins with Finster (1916-2001), one of the South's best-known folk artists, whom Williams and Mendes visited in 1982 in North Georgia. Finster, a Baptist preacher, created his Paradise Garden using objects he collected, mostly from junkyards. "I'm a happy ol' codger that's livin' in a dangerous world," he told Williams.

Kentucky artists featured in the book include Edgar Tolson (1904-1984), a well-known wood carver in Wolfe County, and Mirell Lainhart (1895-1988) of Jackson County, who decorated his house with trinkets and spray-painted spots. Henry Dorsey, an Oldham County stone mason, turned junkyard finds into elaborate outdoor art. Brothers Noah and Charley Kinney of Toller Hollow in Lewis County carved elaborate wooden figures.

Not all of the Kentuckians profiled were visual artists. "Cowboy Steve" Taylor broadcast a radio show from his bedroom — a signal that traveled just a few hundred feet beyond his Jefferson Street home in Lexington. "Kentucky Ernie" Ford collected animals and claimed to be a cousin of singer "Tennessee" Ernie Ford.

We see a young "Captain Kentucky" Ed McClanahan, who was recently inducted into the Kentucky Writers Hall of Fame. And Little Enis, aka Carlos Toadvine (1935-1976), a Lexington musician whom McClanahan famously profiled in Playboy magazine as the world's best left-handed upside-down guitar player.

Ralph Eugene Meatyard, the Lexington optician who became a world-famous art photographer, makes an appearance in the book. So does Bradley Picklesimer, the Lexington-born nightclub owner and Los Angeles party impresario.

This book is a delight, especially when you think it almost wasn't published. Williams' prose is as way-out as the artists, and he creatively and sometimes profanely chronicled his travels to find them. At its heart, though, this is a book of amazing photographs as unforgettable as their subjects — proud Southern individualists for whom creating art was as much a part of life as breathing.

"I'm sorry Jonathan's not here to see it come to pass," Mendes said of the book. "It's a testament to the work these people did, the lives they lived, the figures they cut. They were all 'out there' but in a good way."