

Text

Ellen Douglas (with Jack Spencer) on Conversations #140

Gene Edwards: I'm Gene Edwards, and on ETV's *Conversations* tonight, the images of Jack Spencer. Jack was born in Kosciusko and has spent much of his life in the south. These black and white images capture the land and it's people in ways that you won't often see and I hope you will appreciate. I know that Ellen Douglas appreciates Jack Spencer's images so much so that she's written the introduction of this collection. And here is how she begins she writes, "Jack Spencer's photographs, the faces the stances, the staged presences, invite me to first think about stories." And indeed Spencer has described his work akin to short stories. It is a pleasure to welcome Ellen Douglas and Jack Spencer to our program.

Ellen Douglas: Good to be here.

Gene Edwards: Jo.

Ellen Douglas: Jo. Jo or Ellen. Jo Ellen.

Gene Edwards: Jo Ellen What a marvelous collection this is!

Jack Spencer: Thank you.

Gene Edwards: And I couldn't agree more as I read through the introductory work that you did that each one of those images inspires...

Ellen Douglas: Could take off from the image...

Gene Edwards: Could be a novel. How did you come to this?

Ellen Douglas: I really began to think about the pictures. In the first place, LSU Press called me and asked me if I'd like to do an introduction to this book of photographs but I had not seen any of Jack's photographs at that time.

Gene Edwards: So you said...

Ellen Douglas: I said sent me photographs and they sent them. And I said yes indeed I'd love to.

Gene Edwards: Now tell me about the moment when you opened that envelope and there they were.

Ellen Douglas: I was just laid out. I was knocked over by them I thought they were so wonderful. So the faces are so grand and then something so mysterious about many of them. Like Gladys and her mother with a sheet of plastic in front of them their very mysterious. You could start thinking about a story.

Gene Edwards: So off you went.

Ellen Douglas: Right.

Gene Edwards: And you wrote away and you shipped it in and now it's part of this wonderful collection.

Ellen Douglas: Right. So, I'm delighted.

Gene Edwards: And this has been a much longer journey for you.

Jack Spencer: Oh yeah.

Gene Edwards: Tell me a little bit about it. How many years?

Jack Spencer: Well, this actually has been about 10 years. Whenever I first started this I'd moved back from out west and I started seeing Mississippi and the south in a different way, in a more lyrical poetic way, and seeing a lot of photographs everywhere. So, I started on it and built on it for a few years.

Gene Edwards: Did you have to go away to do that?

Jack Spencer: You know I think sometimes you do have to go away. Sometimes you have to go away in order to see things clearly. Whenever you come back you take a different perspective. Whenever you live around something all the time sometimes it becomes common place and you take it for granted. Whenever you go away and come back you see it completely differently.

Gene Edwards: We'll talk about some of these particular images and let's begin with the one you were talking about, all right? This is *Gladys and her Mother behind the Clothesline*, and wow!

Ellen Douglas: I was puzzled by-- what was that sheet, that strangely translucent sheet on the clothesline that they are so mysteriously behind.

Gene Edwards: And as you spend time with this image you see those feet.

Ellen Douglas: Yeah.

Gene Edwards: Yeah.

Ellen Douglas: And then the kind of detritus in the background and all very sharp within the mysterious cloudy figures.

Gene Edwards: Did you stage it?

Jack Spencer: No, I didn't. In fact I was photographing Gladys out at the clothes line. She was hanging up sheets out there and her mother was out there too. And I saw Gladys walk behind that plastic sheet that they had hanging on the line and I asked her mother to come over there and made the photograph.

Gene Edwards: Where?

Jack Spencer: That's in Cove City, South Carolina, North Carolina, I'm sorry.

Gene Edwards: In North Carolina.

Jack Spencer: Right.

Gene Edwards: Most of these images are in Mississippi.

Jack Spencer: Mississippi and Louisiana mostly what's in there, but in the last few years I've started traveling out a little bit.

Ellen Douglas: There are some wonderful things from the Carolina's.

Jack Spencer: Right. The Carolina's, I did about a four or five week trip there last summer and photographed in Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina and Virginia.

Gene Edwards: How do you do it? Do you go out and just get lost?

Jack Spencer: Well yes, basically I've got to get up in the morning and say I'm going to go, as somebody says, "Go get lost, Jack." And I go get lost. So that's basically how I do it. I look forward to getting lost, to tell you the truth.

Gene Edwards: Do you find though that-- tell me about the people that you run into. Tell me about Gladys and her mother. Do they welcome you?

Jack Spencer: Sometimes, most of the time people are very open to be photographed. Sometimes they just don't want to be. You have to honor that. For the most part people like to have their pictures taken, I think.

Gene Edwards: Their picture made.

Jack Spencer: And sometimes they don't. In that case I was driving past there and I saw her out hanging up the clothes and I thought it was a very lyrical photograph, or shot or

situation, and I just stopped and asked them and they were very open to it and very nice people. We had some laughs and made a few photographs and I was gone.

Gene Edwards: And this is Mr. Bim.

Ellen Douglas: Oh, Mr. Bim! Oh, he's Ben.

Gene Edwards: Mr. Ben.

Ellen Douglas: Wonderful, powerful face.

Gene Edwards: What do you think of when you see him?

Ellen Douglas: Well, I thought particularly about his son's in the background. They kind of faded back and he is so strong and your not sure, and again it's like a story, you are not sure what his relationships with his sons is like. It's very suggestive if you think about it.

Gene Edwards: He's the leader or the overbearing one or?

Ellen Douglas: He looks stern but after you look at him awhile, there's something very benevolent about his face.

Gene Edwards: I have a feeling you would like to take these into a class somewhere.

Ellen Douglas: And say, "Write a story about this."

Gene Edwards: Tell me about this man.

Jack Spencer: He is all of those things. He is a very powerful man but he's also has a wonderful sense of humor. And his sons all live—the family lives real close together in Palmetto, Louisiana. I saw him as a very heroic figure along with his sons. I wanted to photograph them together in one plane but he was kind of a dominant figure.

Ellen Douglas: Bim, is that a German name? He's not Cajun, is he?

Jack Spencer: No. He's not. I'm not sure where it's from.

Ellen Douglas: Unusual name.

Gene Edwards: You have an image in the book of a place called Merit Creek.

Jack Spencer: Not far from here.

Gene Edwards: Not far from here?

Jack Spencer: It's down by Mendenhall and there's a swimming hole down there in that creek.

Gene Edwards: Had kind of a whole collection of things that happened at that swimming hole.

Jack Spencer: Right. My mom lives down there pretty close to there and I came across the swimming hole down there which has actually in some parts has white water on it, which I thought was very unusual for Mississippi.

Ellen Douglas: There's so much depth in there you just feel like you could go right on down the creek.

Gene Edwards: Tell me about the time of the year.

Jack Spencer: That was in the fall, early fall.

Gene Edwards: Very appropriate to...that's why it's so comfortable.

Ellen Douglas: Yeah.

Gene Edwards: This time of the year.

Ellen Douglas: A few of the leaves had fallen off.

Gene Edwards: Can you talk a little bit about your technique? Because I know that there are photographers out there who are watching who are saying, "What kind of camera is it; what kind of film is it? Are they slides or are they stills? How do you get this look?"

Jack Spencer: Well, you know.

Gene Edwards: It looks almost like a sepia.

Jack Spencer: Yeah, it does. As far as the equipment is concerned I don't really pay that much attention to equipment. And I don't really pay that much attention to exposure. I know how to get exposure and that but I'm looking for the information to get on the film. I'm not really what picky about what film I use. I just want to make sure that the information is on the film and then I know that when I get in the darkroom I can bring it out or I can find it. So, in the darkroom is where I have all my fun. I just wanted to get the information there and get the circumstances quickly as possible and then when I get into the darkroom then I start expressing that.

Gene Edwards: So how many versions of Merit Creek might there had been before you finally got the one we're seeing here?

Jack Spencer: That one was actually fairly simple. That's a pretty straight forward photograph. A lot of them I manipulate them quite a bit. It's quite a bit over sometimes it takes me two, three or four days sometimes to figure out a print the way I want to do it. But I do things with acetate overlays and air brushing for my dodging and burning process which is denying the light to hit the paper which will-- if it hits the paper it's going to be dark if it's protected from the paper it's going to be light. So I manipulate the light on the print paper throughout a bunch of techniques that I use in the darkroom. Mostly, I just want to play. I get in there and kind of doodle around and explore a little bit.

Ellen Douglas: Do you always think that there's only one version that works, or sometimes are there several versions that work?

Jack Spencer: Well, there's one, the version that I come to and I finally say, "I've had enough of this."

Ellen Douglas: Yeah, I know that feeling.

Gene Edwards: So you don't know the version when you begin the process?

Jack Spencer: No, I don't. I think the negative is an uncovering process, that somewhere in there that negative has got something that it wants to say and I just try to bring that out. And it expresses something that I don't know where it comes from or what it means or anything, but I get to a place where I'm very comfortable with the print and I leave it alone.

Gene Edwards: It sounds kind of mystical.

Jack Spencer: Well, it is kind of mystical.

Ellen Douglas: Sounds like writing a book.

Jack Spencer: I think it pretty much all comes from the same place. But I pretty much try to allow it to dictate to me what where it really wants to go.

Gene Edwards: But it goes where it's wants to go. Let's look at another one of these images. This is *Dawn Fire*, which says Louisiana to me. Am I right?

Jack Spencer: No, that's up near Clarksdale.

Gene Edwards: Sorry.

Jack Spencer: That's up by Clarksdale and I was just happened to be driving by. I'm kind of drawn to elemental things--water, fire, smoke--those kinds of things.

Gene Edwards: Are you drawn to a particular time of the day to do your work?

Jack Spencer: Uh... No not really, because every photographer loves what's called "golden hour." At the end of the day when the sun is doing its thing and it's brilliant contrasting light at that time. But I'm not picky about it.

Gene Edwards: Do you see a story in that?

Ellen Douglas: I thought a long time about whether this was a threatening figure behind the fire or whether it was a genial figure behind the fire.

Gene Edwards: What did you finally decide?

Ellen Douglas: Didn't make a decision, but I don't think the photographer made a decision.

Jack Spencer: I never did.

Gene Edwards: Never did, never would. *Patriot Number 1* and *Number 2*. Tell me a little about them.

Jack Spencer: Well, actually they're two of my favorite photographs and whenever I made those photographs after they were done I thought, "This is the best I could ever do." I just thought they were wonderful images and there's so many different things going on as far as composition and poetic content and also the textures and the tonalities in there just kind of has everything. I sent them out to galleries and they all just kind of went..."Ugh." They didn't want anything to do with them.

Gene Edwards: Really?

Jack Spencer: And I thought that they were just wonderful and I don't think that I've ever sold a single image of them. Actually, I would have liked to have had one of them on the cover of the book but everybody seems to be frightened of these photographs. But they are photographs of my friend Cooter-- Mr. Will Branch--who lives up in Coila, which is by Carrollton, and I've been photographing him for about four or five years now and we've become very good friends. I've made hundreds and hundreds of photographs of him but these are two of my favorites.

Gene Edwards: Did they frighten you?

Ellen Douglas: No, I didn't find them frightening.

Jack Spencer: Some people do, and apparently they're just not the kind of the pieces people want on their walls or something.

Gene Edwards: Maybe the galleries have it all wrong. This is a piece which I would think a lot of people would like to have on their walls this is *Amorous Window*, which is romantic and interesting; and it's going to come up here...

Ellen Douglas: There it is.

Jack Spencer: Yeah, that's an interesting compositional piece and it also has a lot of thing to say.

Gene Edwards: Where was it?

Jack Spencer: That's up in Crenshaw, Mississippi and it's an abandoned beauty shop window. It's an old poster that was in there and it was rotting and falling down but there's so many symbolic... textural tonal qualities to it. That's it really goes with...

Ellen Douglas: And the mullions of the window crossing it there.

Jack Spencer: I really do like the image, it's one of my favorites.

Gene Edwards: It seems like it has a lot of things going on.

Jack Spencer: It does.

Gene Edwards: Do you look for abandoned places? I know that Bernie Imes in his photography looks a lot for empty spaces and abandon places and juke joints and things like that.

Jack Spencer: You know, I couldn't say that I really look for anything. I don't really set my mind and go out and look in any one particular direction. In fact, I do just the opposite I try to clear my mind as much as possible and allow things to present themselves to me as much as possible. If you go out in the morning and you wake up and you say, "I'm going out to photograph a field burning," you're not going to find a field burning. So you're going to be disappointed and you're going to be doing a lot of driving around and there's not field burning out there. But if you happen to drive down the road and there's burning then you've been given a great gift and it's presented itself to you.

Gene Edwards: Of a juke joint with a wonderful vision through the window.

Jack Spencer: Exactly. If you have a clear mind and these things present themselves to you, you are ready for them at that point.

Gene Edwards: Is that advice that you give to writers.

Ellen Douglas: Sounds like I could. It's very good advice. I found the same things true in my work that the thing that you are most familiar with is not likely to be what gives you a

story or an image. It's when you come to something that you don't know too well that you can work with that better.

Gene Edwards: Can you make any money doing this?

Jack Spencer: You can make a living if you are lucky. I don't think that you can count on making-- there's some wealthy photographers but there's not very many that did it in this style of work.

Gene Edwards: I'm just trying to get to the place where I understand the courage that it takes you to get up every morning and go out and look for whatever it is. Because you have to pay the bills somehow.

Jack Spencer: Sure. I struggled for years and it was very tough there for a long time because photography is not an easy thing to do. It's a very expensive process and it inhibits a lot of people and they run from it because it is so costly to do. I've never been a rich man at all. In fact, I've told stories about coming down to Mississippi to paint signs for a Buddy Jones Ford up in Greenville, who was always real generous with me and helped me out a lot. It would pay for my trip down here. But I would get back to Nashville and I would have to go pawn my camera to buy paper to print the stuff that I just shot. I'd sell a few photographs and get my camera out and go through the same cycle again. So, it's been a struggle but it's not something that I've sat around and complained about because I loved it so much.

Gene Edwards: You just keep going.

Jack Spencer: Sure.

Gene Edwards: So what does it mean in terms of a career to have a book like this?

Jack Spencer: Well, you know, it's done very well. The last couple of years I've been showing at major galleries and museums. So these days I'm doing fairly well. It's a matter of faith I suppose.

Gene Edwards: I don't want to run out of time before we get to some more of these images. This is called *Reverend Stoker's Baptismal Pool*.

Jack Spencer: Reverend Stokes.

Gene Edwards: *Reverend Stokes' Baptismal Pool* and it's just magnificent.

Jack Spencer: Thank you.

Gene Edwards: It makes me think so much of the primitive art that you see so much of in this part of the country.

Jack Spencer: Rev. Stokes' life was pretty much the life of folk art. He's painted those signs and religious sayings all over the Delta and around Clarksdale. He lives in marks, Mississippi and I think he just moved out to Jonestown. But that's where he did his baptizing in the concrete pool there.

Gene Edwards: Were you there for one of the baptisms?

Jack Spencer: Never saw a baptism there.

Gene Edwards: Let me ask you about your friend Cooter. This is an image-- this is one of my favorites. This is *Cooter in the Corn with Horn*. That's a perfect title. What a perfect image!

Ellen Douglas: It's wonderful to see the corn back behind Cooter it curves like the bell of the horn. It repeats the...

Gene Edwards: How did you meet him?

Jack Spencer: Well, I was driving around up there in the hills around Carrollton up around Coila. It's a little dirt road there-- and there's one photograph in the book called *Cooter's Road*, but it's on that road. It's a little narrow road and I looked over to the right and he was sitting out there. He paints a lot like Rev. Stokes, and he'd painted some religious slogans and stuff on his house. I got interested in it right away. So, I went up and met him and talked to him and instantly we became very good friends.

Gene Edwards: Does he play that horn?

Jack Spencer: No. In fact, Cooter is an active participant in this whole process. We've had a ball over the years making these photographs and he's pretty much involved in the whole thing. He saw that horn one day in a junk store and he said, "I bet Jack could make a good picture of me with this." I showed up day and he had it there. So I told him that he was going to have to get dressed up and we'd make a formal portrait with the horn. We went riding around, as we usually do, and found that corn field. It looked liked the perfect spot so we made the portrait.

Gene Edwards: And the joke that went with it?

Jack Spencer: Oh yeah.

Gene Edwards: Just marvelous. Another character whom we know from Vicksburg.

Jack Spencer: Lot's of people know him. All over the country people know him.

Gene Edwards: Everybody knows this man. They have been to his place and what a wonderful picture of *Reverend Dennis in Prayer*. You know him?

Ellen Douglas: Yes I know who you are talking about. I've never...

Gene Edwards: Never been there?

Ellen Douglas: Never have been there.

Gene Edwards: It's a revelation. It really is. How did you meet him?

Jack Spencer: Someone told me about his place over there and told me that it might be an interesting thing for me to take a look at. They were mostly talking about the building there where he is. I went over there and right away when you meet him you are in love with him because he's such a wonderful person, such an interesting person. So we connected and I made a few images. I went back a couple of other times.

Gene Edwards: So are the images of the building more interesting or the images of him?

Jack Spencer: I think him. I was not that interested in the buildings, some of it I was. I made a few exposures of the building but mostly I was interested in him.

Gene Edwards: What did he say to you when you are there?

Jack Spencer: He's mostly testifying.

Gene Edwards: Yeah.

Jack Spencer: He's witnessing. He's a very religious man.

Gene Edwards: There's an image in the book called *Man Sleeping in the Pool*. And you started to write a story about it practically.

Ellen Douglas: When I was thinking about the images that were perhaps revealing about the artist, the photographer. That seemed to me to be very appropriate. He might be dreaming this whole book. This might be an image of the photographer dreaming his book.

Gene Edwards: Any truth to that?

Jack Spencer: Well, I thought it was wonderful that she said that. But no, it's just one of those circumstances that presented itself. It was a very hot day in Savannah and I was out at the pool and they have the water that sprays up. The pool doesn't fill up. But the sprinkler was on and this fellow was out there cooling off. But it looked like a dream like image to me.

Ellen Douglas: There's another one of the boy swinging out over the pool.

Gene Edwards: You must be psychic because that's the one that I picked.

Ellen Douglas: That's what's coming up?

Gene Edwards: I picked that. I have to know about the moment you caught it; how long it took you to get that. That's in Marks, right?

Jack Spencer: That's at Merit Creek.

Gene Edwards: Merit Creek.

Jack Spencer: It's down by Mendenhall again.

Ellen Douglas: I want to swing on that rope.

Gene Edwards: Yeah.

Jack Spencer: One frame was all it was. It's the only shot that I took around there. He was just up there swinging off that rope and, bam, there it was.

Gene Edwards: Often you think of photographers waiting and waiting and waiting for that one chance that one opportunity.

Jack Spencer: Not me. Not me, if it doesn't present itself, then you move on.

Gene Edwards: There it was and there it happened and you happen to catch it.

Jack Spencer: Exactly. Exactly.

Gene Edwards: Do you know him?

Jack Spencer: Don't know him, no. I just had a very brief conversation with him.

Gene Edwards: Boy, when you look at that as a writer the whole image, the whole story, just kind of opens itself out in front of you.

Ellen Douglas: Can you tell the friend and family watching him on the bank.

Jack Spencer: Yes.

Ellen Douglas: Yes, that's grand. He's so proud of himself.

Gene Edwards: Yeah. I would be, wouldn't you?

Ellen Douglas: Absolutely.

Gene Edwards: Wouldn't that be fun? Let's go to one more image of Cooter and this is his road that you've talked about before. Did you plan that?

Jack Spencer: Did not. Did not. We were out walking around. He had a gun that day and he was showing me his shotgun. We were out in the road and he started walking up the road and we got that.

Gene Edwards: It's almost cathedral-like, isn't it?

Jack Spencer: It has a lot of meaning for me. I think it's a wonderful image.

Gene Edwards: Tell me where are you going now? What happens with you now? Are you out roaming around taking pictures now?

Jack Spencer: Not lately. Too busy in the darkroom and I have a lot exhibits going around the country right now. I have a total of nine, I think, by the time it's over, in galleries all over the United States. So I'm busy printing for those and printing for print sales and that kind of stuff. I don't have much time anymore to go out and shoot. It kind of bothers me.

Gene Edwards: No time to go look for those stories.

Jack Spencer: You know, I kind of miss those days when I'd kind of wonder around the delta footloose and fancy free and didn't have to be anywhere, didn't have to do a television interview. I could go out and make a few photographs.

Ellen Douglas: That time will come again.

Jack Spencer: I'm sure it will.

Gene Edwards: I hope that it will. What are you doing with yourself these days?

Ellen Douglas: Well, I'm thinking about a non-fiction book that I'm barely beginning to get started on, which maybe the university press interested in, a craft book-- a book about writing. So that's mainly what I'm doing.

Gene Edwards: And you are living here?

Ellen Douglas: Here in Jackson.

Gene Edwards: In Jackson now.

Ellen Douglas: I have a son and daughter-in-law and granddaughter here.

Gene Edwards: Spreading out everyday.

Ellen Douglas: Hanging out.

Gene Edwards: Getting to know people.

Ellen Douglas: Kicking back.

Gene Edwards: I think you must cherish this experience with this book.

Ellen Douglas: Indeed I do. I think I was very lucky to get to do that. It was a great pleasure.

Jack Spencer: And I was very lucky to have her, too.

Gene Edwards: It's a great book. It really is. So now back out on the road for you?

Jack Spencer: Yes. To Baton Rouge tomorrow, then New Orleans, then San Francisco, Seattle, Austin, back to New York, then Los Angeles and then Atlanta and then I'm done.

Gene Edwards: And home is now?...

Jack Spencer: Nashville.

Gene Edwards: Thank you.

Jack Spencer: Thank you.

Gene Edwards: In the conclusion to this collection Jack Spencer writes, "To all those kind souls who over the years have allowed me to peek in your windows and witness your tales, I thank you for your wonderful gifts." Jack Spencer and Ellen Douglas, we thank you.

Ellen Douglas: A pleasure.

Gene Edwards: Good night. See you next time.