

Georgia's Business #402

Guest: Chuck Leavell Conservationist, Musician and Author

Richard Warner:

Welcome. I'm Richard Warner and this week a real treat on Georgia's Business, a break from our usual roster of the CEOs and economic experts you've come to expect. This week we focus on the Rolling Stones and sustainable tree farming...I'm serious. Our guest covers both topics. He's one of the world's most accomplished keyboardists, 25 years with the Rolling Stones. Performed with Eric Clapton, the Allman Brothers, Indigo Girls, George Harrison and many others, and also, a conservationist and tree farmer in Dry Branch. That's southeast of Macon in Twiggs County. Chuck Leavell's new CD is called Live in Germany...it's out now from Evergreen Arts Records wherever records are downloaded or sold. Welcome.

Chuck Leavell:

Thank you so much, it's great to be with you.

Richard Warner:

It's nice to have you here. Awesome to have you here...And I want to go back, I gotta ask, 1982, take us back...did somebody call you and say, "You want to be with the Rolling Stones?"

Chuck Leavell:

Indeed, that's how it happened. The connection was a guy named Bill Graham. You may remem-

Richard Warner:

Impresario from San Francisco.

Chuck Leavell:

Exactly. He used to run the Fillmore East and Fillmore West and he did various promotions. He was also a manager. He managed artists like Santana and some others. Enigmatic figure, wonderful guy. He loved the Allman Brothers band and in the years that I was with the Allman's we made friends, well fast forward to 1981, he became tour director for the Rolling Stones. And, they wanted to try some different people on keyboards and they had a few names lined up. Bill suggested me "You oughta try this kid down in Georgia" Kid, I

Richard Warner:

What happened...I mean, does the phone ring and it's Bill Graham or it's Mick Jagger, I mean what happened?

Chuck Leavell:

Well, it's kind of a funny story to begin with. To be honest with you we were going through some kind of bumpy times...my family was. The career with Sea Level had ended. I started my own band, but we were struggling and we had inherited that we'll get into concerning tree farming and I said to my wife, Rosalane, "Well, Honey, you know maybe I should just think about giving up this music thing and concentrate on forestry and the farm" and she said "Well, that's all good and fine Chuck, but the Rolling Stones called you today."

Richard Warner:

And you said, "No no, seriously. Now really, this tree thing..."

Chuck Leavell:

That's how it happened, and, you know, I called back and I thought, aw this must be a mistake, but I called back and I got a secretary on the phone and I left my name and number and that evening, Ian Stewart, who was a confidant of the band and a logistician for the band and also a musician himself called me back personally and he said "Yes, we'd like to have you come up for an audition" and I said well...I had a little small club show that weekend and I said well"

Richard Warner:

I gotta do my show man

Chuck Leavell:

You know, exactly. I said, "Do you think I could come up Sunday or Monday?" and he said "We'd really like to have you there tomorrow" So, the next day, I was on a plane, and lo and behold, I got the gig.

Richard Warner:

Yeah, but you missed the club show.

Chuck Leavell:

I know I did.

Richard Warner:

You probably have some degree of self-confidence playing with Allman Brothers and before that, your own endeavor and yet, here's a band that when you were a kid you played cover songs of in High School and you're going to meet and audition...are you scared to death?

Chuck Leavell:

Not at all, no, you know. You know, my theory on that or any situation similar to that is we all put our pants on the same way. You know, we all get up in the morning and do what we do, we're just people.

Richard Warner:

Yeah, but you know how Mick Jagger puts his on...heh

Chuck Leavell:

Oh man...yeah, he's a character, that's for sure. But, you know, as you mentioned, I had grown up listening to this music. When we had my first band, the Misfits in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, we played primarily British invasion, Beatles, Stones, Kinks, Zombies, Dave Clark 5, all of that stuff. So, I was well familiar with the repertoire, I was a fan, of course. It was novel to get the call, but I looked upon the opportunity as, you know, go there Chuck, be yourself, play what you play, don't try to be something you're not and that's what I did and luckily, it worked out.

Richard Warner:

Who was at the audition?

Chuck Leavell:

Well, all the guys.

Richard Warner:

All the guys.

Chuck Leavell:

They were preparing for a tour and they were in this place in Longview Farm, Massachusetts, it was. And I had actually met Charlie Watts once before with the Allman Brothers. We were at a social function, at a party there and I met Charlie and we talked and got to know each other, and he did remember me. And I had never met Mick before, or Keith or Ronnie, but we met very quickly and we started by playing Chuck Barry songs, you know, it was kind of loose rock and roll stuff to get a feel for each other and then, at the time, they had the new CD Tattoo You that had the song had the song "Start Me Up," that was kind of the big hit off of that one. So, I had done a quick study of those songs and felt comfortable playing them, and the audition just went very smoothly.

Richard Warner:

Mick Jagger. "The Stones wouldn't be the Stones without Chuck" What does Chuck do besides play keyboard because there's more to it than that?

Chuck Leavell:

It's all me Richard, I do everything. They can't do it without me. Heh

Richard Warner:

The quote, though, I mean, he said that, you know.

Chuck Leavell:

Yeah, I mean, it's a nice compliment. The role that I have played with the Stones, as you might imagine over the 25 plus years that I've been with them

Richard Warner:

Before you dyed your hair gray.

Chuck Leavell:

Gray, yeah, I've been doing this for a long time now. Chicks like this. Heh. No, the role has evolved and morphed through the decades that I've been with the band and when I started out, I was more or less kind of second keyboardist to be honest with you. There was two keyboard players, Ian Stewart, who played most of the sort of rock and boogie-woogie stuff, but Stew was not interested in playing ballads "I don't like slow songs, they're boring" and, you know, he didn't like minor keys, or, you know

Richard Warner:

Aw man, minor keys are the best keys, you know?

Chuck Leavell:

If it was straight ahead rock and roll, Stew wanted to play it, but if it was anything other than that, he wanted somebody else to do it, and so that was my original role. Well, Stew passed away, God rest his soul, in 1985, and I had become very close friends with Stew. I spent a lot of time with him. Studied his playing and also, he had turned me on to this whole genre of boogie-woogie piano playing...artists like Albert Ammons, Mead Lux Louis, James P. Johnson, Pete Johnson...these are all really specific a style of playing and I had listened to those records with Stew and sort of learned his style. So, it was natural for me to move into his shoes, although I'm sure I could never fill them, but to take over that role as time went on and then, during the subsequent years and tours, I began to get more involved in arrangements and making suggestions as to how to present the program live and work on the set lists and keeping detailed records of the rehearsals and any minor changes we might have made. So, they sort of look to me to do those things now.

Richard Warner:

You're kind of the epitome of balance because on the one hand you have life on the road with the world's greatest rock and roll band and all the dynamics and energy and tension that that involves. And then you come home...And we're talking a Twiggs County farm that you inherited?

Chuck Leavell:

What a perfect balance, Richard, yes. I'll try to give you the whole story here as quickly as I can. My wife, Rosalane comes from a family that has, for many, many generations been connected to the land one way or another...farming, forestry, wildlife, all of those things. Some of the land in one of her forefather's families, the Faulks, go back to the King George the 5th land grant, so this is pretty deep family heritage of stewardship of the land. So, when we first began dating in the early 70's, eventually the time came when the long haired hippie-boy musician had to go out and meet the farming family...you can imagine, that, Now that made me nervous, okay. I was very nervous that day, I promise you, whoa. But, they welcomed me with open arms, and very quickly, I got this sensibility of the love of, the respect for, the passion they had, for the land. Of course,

we were married in '73. And, as time went on and I would go out there and hang out in the woods, so to speak and get more of a dose of this, it began to rub off on me. I began to see how deep these roots were. And then in 1981, her grandmother passed away, and, indeed, left her about 1,200 acres of land and we woke up one morning, that this was a responsibility. This was our responsibility. It was no longer a place we would go visit, it was on our shoulders to do the right thing by the land. And I took it very, very seriously.

Richard Warner:

I guess so, because you're moving from...where were you living at that point?

Chuck Leavell:

We were living in Macon, Georgia.

Richard Warner:

And now you're going to move to Twiggs which is an appropriate name for a county, you know...I mean, you're out in the sticks.

Chuck Leavell:

We were in the sticks...we are in the sticks. But, I took this responsibility seriously, and so I began to self-educate and I went out and I checked out books from the library about land use, farming, forestry, peach trees, pecans. You know, I looked at all sorts of commodities that might work for a Georgia farm. And, the parameters were that, I realized quickly that cattle farming and row-cropping, that sort of thing, was going to be very difficult for me to do. That's so much day-to-day activity that's required. And I wanted to follow my career as a musician. I wanted to record, tour, and be involved in that. But I, again, I took this very seriously. So, the more I read, the more I studied, the more I leaned towards forestry. I thought, "What a wonderful thing" Like many people, I'd taken trees and forests for granted most of my life, but as I studied this, I began to realize all the things that they give us. You know, materials to make our homes and schools and churches. Materials to make books and magazines. Newspaper, fine furniture. They clean our air, they clean our water over 5,000 come from this natural, organic and renewable resource. And it just began to...I was amazed, I was enamored to learn more. So, we started planting and managing trees on our land. And, as time went on we began to get some recognition for it.

Richard Warner:

Managing trees means this is a business. I mean, right? I mean, you do have a lodge there...there are different ways that there's income, so, I'm sure you could afford to run it without the income element, but that's part of being sustainable, right? That's part of the equation.

Chuck Leavell:

Absolutely, and it is a business and that's what people need to realize in this state for the Southeast and throughout the United States and other parts of the world for that matter, that forestry is big business. And, the interesting thing, here in the Southeast and in

America in general, but especially in the Southeast, is that most of our forests are privately owned, like Rosalane and I. It's mostly mom and pop..

Richard Warner:

Really? Is it Warehouse is the biggest landowner in the state of Georgia?

Chuck Leavell:

They used to be until they sold 330,000 acres of which a lot of it wound up in individuals hands. They sold about five years ago, all of their land holdings in the state. IP has sold most all of their land holdings, I believe all of them. So there's a shift going on, in industry ownership. They want to concentrate more and more on the products that they make and the products that they deliver to the public, than they do on the land ownership. This is going to create some changes in the dynamics of forestry. There's another interesting demographic in the private ownership of our American forests, and that is the average age of these privately owned forests is something like 62-63 years old. And so, it's not going to be much longer before those lands begin to go down to heirs or to be sold or to change. So, the dynamic is changing and America needs to pay attention to this, because this is very, very important. Let me give you a couple of other statistics, that are, for me, worrisome. We lose, here in Atlanta, the city of Atlanta, loses about 108 acres a day to growth and development. We've seen a slow down in recent years, so we know in housing...

Richard Warner:

But a 100 acres, man, that's a lot of land.

Chuck Leavell:

108 acres a day on average. That's tremendous. Every day that you wake up, those bulldozers are, you know, converting natural lands to parking lots, pavement of some type, skyscrapers.

Richard Warner:

We have our own weather.

Chuck Leavell:

You got it. The Southeast in general, from Virginia down to east Texas, lose about a million acres a year. Some of the studies that have been done show that we might lose up to twelve million acres a year by the year 2020. Now, look, we're going to have growth and development in the Southeast and in our country whether we like it or not, it's gonna happen. We have what, over 300 million people in this country...6 billion on the planet, we're going to grow. That's not going to change. I think the question becomes, "Are we going to grow rapid, rampant and reckless?" Or can we grow smart, strong, and sustainable. And I certainly hope it's the latter. And can we grow in ways that we can preserve some lands and also concentrate on working forests. That's the phrase that we like to use when we talk about forests that are used to make these products that I just described earlier. Working forests are very, very important to this country. Again, this is an organic, natural, renewable product.

Richard Warner:

You mentioned international paper, Warehouse, Kimberly Clark did the same thing. Georgia Pacific did it. Wall Street wasn't interested in the return that these forests generated for these big companies. They were more interested in Brawny paper towels because the profits are much higher. You know, that's the reward, and so they sell these forests off to individuals and the question is, can you make a decent living at it. Most people can't tour with the Stones to offset the revenue.

Chuck Leavell:

Now we're getting into the nitty gritty, and this is so important for people to understand. Markets are going to change...they're dynamic, they shift one way, they shift another. One of the things that we've seen in recent times is the loss of pulp-wood operations in the United States. So much of that has moved off shore...Brazil, South America, other places, Australia, New Zealand and other areas of the world. Now, it's very important that we have a usage for what we call juvenile wood. Let's say that we plant that seedling and that, sometime between 12, 15, 18 years, you're going to want to do a thinning...weed the garden, I like to say, and those products traditionally went to make paper and boxing and other paper products. But now, it's not gone...thank God they're still some industry here in the southeast, but it has shrunk in large part. So, what usage can we make of that juvenile wood? And the answer is bio-energy. Here in the state of Georgia, Soperton, they actually are building the first plant in the United States to make Ethanol exclusively from wood chips. There's at least two other plants that I know of that are going in other states in the southeast, so you're going to see more of this. And this is so important. The technology is so new, the process is so new, but...it's so interesting to me, Richard, because, once it becomes an economic issue, things start to move. Once you see that electric cars are going to be important to this country when the fuel prices are \$4 a gallon and in the case of somebody that uses diesel fuel \$5 a gallon. You know, we calculated the other day that once of the tractors we drive, fuel costs alone, forget the guy running it or the maintenance of the machine itself, costs \$20 an hour, just for the fuel. I mean, that's crazy for a farmer, for loggers, and for people that are working in the outdoors. That's a tough pill to swallow. But, getting back to the juvenile wood issue, I am very, very encourage by this and one of the beauties of it is that you're not only using the juvenile wood, but you're also using what traditionally used to be waste products. The tops, the limbs, the twigs of the tree, can now be chipped and put into this process to make ethanol. And look, this is again, there's this problem of corn and soy beans...

Richard Warner:

Replacing food.

Chuck Leavell:

Exactly. We've seen the price of corn go crazy, it effects poor families in places like Mexico who depend on making tortillas from corn and now the price to make that tortilla has quadrupled or more and that's a negative. We want to balance that and the logical way to do it is to shift towards cellulosic ethanol. And I think we can do that, I think trees and forests are going to play a huge role in that.

Richard Warner:

I almost sense a greater passion about this than I do about traveling with a rock and roll band that the rest of us could only dream of.

Chuck Leavell:

Don't make me choose. heh

Richard Warner:

I mean, I'm watching the QuickTime videos on your website, Chuckleavell.com, going through the forest, actually, it may not have been, it may have been the Charlane, which is the name of his plantation, Charlane.com. Now, you watch Chuck, and Chuck will stand there and take you through it and you can see somebody who is actually knowledgeable...identifying plants and what does this mean, you know, you've got three QuickTimes over three years, showing how this whole sustainability works...you're really into this...

Chuck Leavell:

Well, absolutely. It's so important to our state. Forestry is a \$24 billion a year industry in the state. It's behind food processing as the second largest industry we have. I mean, that's pretty important to all of us. And you know, I would applaud our governor, Governor Perdue has done some very, very good things to promote forestry, and not only forestry, but conservation issues. I sit on the Georgia Land Conservation Council, appointed by the governor and it's our job to go out and identify place that we may want to put conservation easements on. Now, if you want to get into that for a minute, which I think is important for people to know. A conservation easement is basically a promise to never have your land developed into some commercial or residential usage. So let's say you have 1,000 acres over here and you put a conservation easement on it. Now you're going to partner with somebody like the Nature Conservancy, the Conservation fund. In my case I partnered with the Georgia Forest Commission. There's a number of entities that are legally able to accept and run and manage a conservation easement. The land owner makes this promise, I'm never going to develop this land. He's given the right to manage it as he always has, he or she always has. So, I manage the forest, I do the day to day activities. I harvest when I want to. I make those decisions, I get all the income from it.

Richard Warner:

In exchange for...

Chuck Leavell:

For promising never to develop that land. Never to put a parking lot on it, never to put a high rise, a shopping center, anything of that nature. And you can write conservation easements with certain restrictions. And I have on part of our property and one of the restrictions I said was that I'd like the right to build one family home. And, by the way, this is in perpetuity. Perpetuity is an awfully long time, as we know, so, it's a big decision for a landowner to make. But, I wanted to do this in my case to make a

statement, to say, look, again, you know we're going to have this growth in our country, but we really, really need to find some ways to counter act the negative effects of that growth, and conservation easements are one way. It's not THE way, but it's one really important way that we can do that. Now, in return, I mean, why would a landowner want to do this.

Richard Warner:

Yeah, why would you do it?

Chuck Leavell:

Because there's a very significant tax benefit.

Richard Warner:

Tax break.

Chuck Leavell:

Exactly. And at present, you can spread...I won't get into the mechanics of it. Anybody out there can Google it or learn or ask about the exact mechanics of this, but it's very significant, and some states offer a tax credit as well. Georgia does. I'm very proud that Georgia does. So, this can be a significant benefit. At present, you can spread the benefit out over 15 years, so it can be a way to keep your land, number one. A lot of families are struggling to keep their lands. And to have a conservation easement offers tax relief that will help you do that. For those that may be wanting to hang on to the land, but have other interests. It can also be a way of looking way into the future and say I want my family to maintain this, hopefully for ever.

Richard Warner:

Your land has, a lodge, right?

Chuck Leavell:

Yes, you mentioned this earlier and I think it's important for people to realize this to. You know, trees and forests, again, it's not just about trees and forests. It's about the ecosystem, it's about the bio-diversity, it's about the wildlife. And all of these things can provide an income stream to a family that own the forest. Let's talk about the wildlife. Here in Georgia we're known as a wonderful state to come hunt and fish and, whereas the old paradigm was you went and knocked on the farmer's door "Would it be okay if I hunter your land. I've got my bird dog in the back the truck" and he gave permission, he'd go out and do it. Well, that's pretty much gone now. Now, there are some public lands, as we know. Wildlife management areas that offer public hunting, but what's happening more and more is commercial hunting, so that you go to a place that is very well managed. They're managing the wildlife in a good way. For x amount of dollars a day you're allowed the privilege to hunt, and it's really eco-tourism, what you're doing. You're offering an experience, you're selling memories. I say, it's not that different from what I do as a musician. You know, these people come to our place, Charlane Plantation. They arrive, they're looked after, we feed them three squares. We take them in woods, we have friendly guides with the dogs work well, you're in nature. You forget your

problems for a while...you know, it's the same thing you do when you go to a concert, all the problems go away for a couple hours, well, in this case, it goes away for the time that you're communing with nature, and it's not always about going out there and shooting everything in sight, it's not about that, it's really just about being in nature...and renewing your batteries, and taking a little mini-vacation if you will.

Richard Warner:

I want to give you the chance, you've got Live In Germany coming out....I've got about a minute here. Available? It's out.

Chuck Leavell:

It's out, it's available. Very quickly, it came from a show I did in Germany with some excellent German musicians. This was for the biggest radio station in Germany. The stars lined up, we had a fabulous concert and thank heaven it was documented. And...

Richard Warner:

This was after the Stone's tour, right?

Chuck Leavell:

Right after the Bigger Bang tour. Yeah, last September to be specific, September of '07, and I'm so pleased with the way it turned out, Richard, I'm really, really happy with the CD.

Richard Warner:

2 CD set.

Chuck Leavell:

Right, double disc set

Richard Warner:

And you own it. Right? You own the asset? That's different than in the old days...

Chuck Leavell:

Well, that's right...if we had more time, we'd get into that, but, Evergreen Arts is my company, it owns all of my intellectual property whether it's books, CDs, or whatever it might be.

Richard Warner:

Awesome, just great stuff, so it's Chuckleavell.com....it's Charlane.com and so you can really get a chance to know the guy by visiting the website and seeing what's going on and the CD's called Live in Germany, so awesome, I appreciate your making the trip.

Chuck Leavell:

Thanks so much, really enjoyed it.

Richard Warner:

Likewise. Chuck Leavell, and we appreciate your watching this week...