

## The Princeton Cut by Ketch Secor

My father is losing his hair. It is not because he is old and gray, although he is gray, well actually more white than gray, and he is old, or at least as old as you are when you are born in the year 1950, which is younger than a lot of people I know, but whether my father is old and gray or not aside, those aren't the reasons why he is losing his hair. The reason why is because of the radiation treatment he has begun to fight off the non-Hodgkin Lymphoma that recently popped up and started spreading its clustering cancer across my father's kidneys. But this is not a story about my father's courageous battle with cancer, although I'm sure he will fight courageously, after all he is a man of courage. It's also not a story about my father's hair, although a story about my father's hair would be a good one. My father has excellent hair, especially now that he is old and gray, or white rather. In his 50's my bandmates and I called him the silver fox because his hair is as pronounced as one of our favorite country music crooner's the late-great Charlie Rich--who they called The Silver Fox because of his excellent hair. Then in his 60's when it went white we stopped calling him the Silver Fox, and now my bandmates just call him Whitey, after Whitey Herzog the famous manager of the 1980's St Louis Cardinals. A story about my father's hair would be a good one also because my father has had the same haircut since 1973 when, after a year of marriage, living in naval housing in Norfolk, Virginia, my father excitedly walked into a barber shop and asked for the Princeton. That's what he's called his coiffure all these years, the Princeton. It is a decidedly academic cut. It is parted on the right side and swept up above his brow like a curling wave crescendoing to the left. There are no sideburns with the Princeton. It is rounded at the neckline and not tapered in length, but falls evenly against a starched collar. It's a style that has served him well in his profession these last 40 years, a haircut as long associated with my father as his equally definitive bow tie. His walking into the barbershop that day in Norfolk signified his walking out of another business establishment, the First Tidewater National Bank. My father decided he didn't want to be a banker, which is, perhaps, what his father had decided for him to be. My father walked out of the bank and into the barber shop because he didn't want to be a banker anymore, in fact he doubted if he'd ever wanted to be a banker. First Tidewater was not disappointed to see my father go, though now that he had the Princeton surely they second guessed if perhaps they were missing out. My father wasn't a very good banker. His dyslexia made it hard for him to do the calculations. He would eventually become a great numbers guy, but in an altogether different line of work. He walked out of First Tidewater and into the barber shop and asked for The Princeton because my father wanted to be a teacher. And a teacher, especially the kind of teacher who wishes to become a leader in education, needs consistency in all things and a haircut that suggests unchanging approachability is simply a good idea. So, yes, a story about my father's hair would be a good one, but this is a story about his son, the son of The Silver Fox, the son of Whitey Herzog, and about the family affair that is a life given to the pursuit of education, independent education, elementary education; this is a story about me, the son of an independent school educator who through the twists and turns of life found himself looking more and more like an independent school educator himself, though minus the Princeton.

When my father's cancer was first detected last January I called him on the telephone at the Cleveland Clinic. My sisters and my mother were at his side. I am the only son and it's often a phone call and not a visit that connects me with my father. Had his Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma appeared any other time in the past 20 years I would have had a host of reasons why a phone call and not a visit would be the means of our connecting. I would have been in the recording studio making an album, or out on the road in Peoria or Sierra Vista or Orlando or Tulsa performing a live concert; I would have been too busy to be at his bedside because I would be in LA at the Grammy Awards or in Nashville at the CMA Awards or at South

By Southwest in Austin. But because this year, 2018 is the year that my father started having those sharp rollicking pains in his abdomen I couldn't be by his side because I had a board meeting. He picked up the phone at the Cleveland Clinic and passed it around so I could talk to my sisters and my mother, then when he was back on the line and after I had offered the usual words of love and support I told him this, "Pop, it must have been kind of hard for you all those years when you thought the apple had fallen awfully far away from the tree. Well, look at it now." "I know it son," he said. "It's like the apple rolled right next to the tree." "No, Dad," I said, fine tuning the metaphor, though altogether killing the poetry, "No, it's like the apple fell into the crook of the tree from whence it came and took root in a little dirt collected right where the branches meet the trunk. Now my apple is growing a tree symbiotically inside of yours." Just then I heard the nurse come in and my father said he had to jump off the phone, but to call him back. He wanted to hear all about the board meeting. He laughed suddenly and then he said, "Call me when you get back from the barbershop. Now that we share the same tree you're going to want to get a Princeton cut to go with it."

In 2012 my partner Lydia told me she'd had an idea about us starting a little independent elementary school. "It's in your blood," she'd said. What is not in my blood is country music. Yet, for 20 plus years now I have been a professional musician sawing out old-time music on my yee-haw fiddle, hammering out square dance tunes on the groundhog skin of my banjo, chicken scratching on the guitar, and finding proficiency on about 8 other instruments. If it's got strings I can make 'em buzz. I have shared the company of stage and studio, green room and truckstop, with some of the greatest musicians in my field. I've sung with Emmylou Harris, encored with Willie Nelson, and co-written with Bob Dylan; I sang at the funeral of Little Jimmy Dickens; I've shined Merle Haggard's ostrich-skin boots while he smoked a cigarette and stared at the sun sinking over a field of garlic in the San Joaquin Valley. I got around. Like my contemporaries and like my heroes I traveled a million miles and more riding the wheels of first a Volvo station wagon, then a passenger van, then tour buses, trains, and airplanes. I did what I did not because it was in my blood, but because what was in my blood lended itself so well to that to which I oriented myself. My father made schools and I made music (and bands and records and concerts) and these things, schools and music, are not incongruous, rather it turns out they are very nearly one in the same. What it took to make it successfully through a 20 year hitch in the music business was exactly what I needed to start the nation's newest Episcopal school. Because what it takes to start a school is faith and talent, personality and belief, determination, and lots of luck, which, when combined, also happens to be the prerequisite for music stardom. Now, just because you start a band and sing at the Grammy's that doesn't mean you're a natural at school-building. It doesn't matter where the apple falls, it's from whence it came. To the extent to which I admire my many musical heroes few of them, even the greatest, ever started a school. But few of them, even the greatest had a father like mine. If it was in Johnny Cash's blood to start a school he probably would have, Lord knows he did just about everything else. But Johnny Cash's father picked cotton. And so Johnny Cash became a kind of cotton pickers son in the music business. He knew instinctively how to stoop and hustle and move down the rows, wherever they lead, always keeping moving. He became a player who's dogged determination kept him recording and performing night after night just like all those bolls of cotton he plucked in the Arkansas sun. For me, my father's nature was that of an educator and so I knew instinctively how to communicate and connect and encourage. I became an kind of educator in the music business. The thing about the tree from whence the apple fell, my father's tree, and me the apple, the thing about that tree that made me what I am today was that it was a tree that was constantly uprooted.

From birth to adolescence my childhood was spent as on the road as any touring musicians child. But it wasn't in concerts, truckstops, or hotel rooms; it was in schools. 5 of them by the 5<sup>th</sup> grade. After my father walked out of that barbershop in Norfolk, Virginia in 1973, sporting The Princeton, he resigned from the bank and took a job in the Garden State where he and my mother moved to begin work at a girls boarding school where my sisters and I were born into dormitories proctored by my parents. This is a bit of a sore spot for me. Because had the Gods conspired to make me just a few scant years later I would have been born in New Orleans, a musicians birth-right secured simply by the luck of the draw. But I was born in Jersey (like the Boss, right? Or better, like Walt Whitman and Allen Ginsberg). It is New Orleans and not New Jersey where I have my first memories of childhood. My father was a vice principal in an Episcopal elementary school on Magazine Street called St George's. We rode the streetcar to St

George's, first dropping me off at the Jewish Community Center. I remember Mardis Gras and the rain-swollen river; I remember music and food and heat, always the enduring heat of Louisiana. But mostly I remember that we were there because of a school. We were there so my father could go to it every day and talk about it every night. Well, then it was on to St Louis, home of Whitey Herzog and the World Series bound St Louis Cardinals where, for the first time, I attended my father's school. It was here in the dawning light of morning in Missouri that I shared another experience with the fellowship of country music makers. I call this shared folk life pathway: "What my Daddy done is what I done too." In cultural terms, this is not so much about a shared vocation, such as Elvis' father driving a truck and so Elvis becomes a truck driver, rather it is more of a phenomenon I'll call acculturation orientation where one's domestic life is so all-encompassing that one at once pledges unity over self and ascribes to an all-party body politic. Like Johnny Cash's family for example, having breakfast at sunup before another sweltering day in the cotton fields. At the Cash breakfast table, after crusty biscuits sopped up the last of the gravy, after the last swallow of buttermilk was drained from the jelly jar glasses, the Cash family left the table together as one and headed out into the cotton fields of Arkansas. Well, in 1983, just 200 miles upriver the Secor family left the breakfast table together and went to work together too. Our work was Community School, a historic secular independent primary school in the suburbs west of St Louis. We piled into the car together, the 5 of us, my mother checking her makeup in the rearview mirror of our school issued white chevy wagon, my father swooping the top of his Princeton cut, my sisters and I strapped into a sticky vinyl bench seat, scrambling through homework at red lights as we pattered across the city to go to work together. Disembarking, my sisters and I went to our classrooms, my mother to her development office, and my father to the administrative wing of Community School where he served as the new lower school director. Our school-centered family life had been the same in New Orleans and New Jersey. And it would be the same in 1985 when we left the Show Me State and headed for Aiken South Carolina, where our family cotton field became the magnolia studded grounds of an Episcopal parish day school, Mead Hall. The drill was the same, only this time my mother went instead into her 4<sup>th</sup> grade classroom where she was my older sister's teacher, and at the breakfast table, instead of cream of wheat, it was Jim Dandy quick grits with a dollop of margarine. For my father, instead of a vice-principal position, for the first time he was head of school. He was 35 years old and had been in the school business for 10 years. He would spend another 30 years wearing the many hats (not to mention bowties) of an independent school administrator.

It was in Aiken that I found a cotton field of my own. At age 7 I began to write music. My first song was a rewritten version of the Lord's Prayer, set to a tune I conjured on the old spinnet piano in the corner of the dining room. I was finding a voice all mine, a place of autonomy in the uniformity of a family whose clock was wound by the seasons of the school business. With music the seeds of my revolt were sewn. Like Johnny Cash sang, "I Never Picked Cotton (like my mother did and my brother did and my sister did and my daddy died young)" Well, I was gonna pick it either. There in South Carolina at age 7 banging on the keys of that Yamaha we picked up from an unclaimed school auction, I was busting loose out of my acculturation orientation. I would be the headmaster's son but I wouldn't be the headmaster.

Our tightly-wound up school clock began in September with the new school year. My father's palpable nervousness at embarking on another trip around the calendar with the 100 or so families who had placed their complete trust in him and his unflappable dedication to their most treasured possessions, their children. As youngsters we instinctively knew when Autumn had come, not because the magnolia leaves had browned and fallen, but because of the hushed tones after dinner when my parents did the dishes. My sisters and I heard them fretting over the fall fund drive, and were the hooziwhatsits going to make their big gift again this year. That's a catch-all term from my youth. Anybody who could save with their checkbook the school we had come to town to work in were called The Hooziwhatsits. There were just too many names to remember from this chapter of life, from board chairmen to foundation grantors, to the octogenarian donors whose fragility made it difficult to play around, and so with one general name, The Hooziwhatsists, I can know them all. Fall was when the Hooziwhatsits pitched in for the fall fund drive, Christmas was the annual fund, Winter was the visit to prime the Hooziwhatsits at their country club. And spring was not the appearance of daffodils, but the envelopes we all licked for the Garden Gala. Knowing who the Hooziwhatsits were, where to find them, and how to charm them, proves

to be an invaluable skill wherever your cotton field is. Years later, trying my best to gain any ground in the sharecropping life that is spent in the pursuit of a career playing in a band I learned how to locate Hooziwhatsits in many a town. Back in South Carolina the financial support of donors was a life line for both our school and our family. In addition to the Hooziwhatsits whose donations would be the life-sustaining gifts to both my family and whatever institution we were ascribed to represent, there were also the Hooziwhatsits children who were often the first kids I met in a new town. My parents arranged playdates with these kids as soon as we arrived, as it was the parents of these children who would pay my father's salary, which in the worried mind of a young me seemingly depended on how I behaved to them on the playground or at the dreaded sleepovers in their palatial homes. The pressure was intense. In this way the metaphor would suggest that Johnny Cash's sharecropper father would occasionally drop him off at the boss man house, to play with his children in the hopes that buttermilk and gravy, not to mention a stream of income, would continue to flow in the Cash homestead. It's surely too strong a sentiment to suggest that my father, to use a Dirty South expression, *pimped me out* to the board chairman's son, but it certainly didn't hurt my father's chances at success to have an even more youthful version of the headmaster smiling politely and representing both family and school to the outside world. At this time I should mention that my own hairstyle at age 7 was a playful swoop leftward from a razor sharp part on the right---yes I too had the Princeton cut. And by the time we moved to the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia for my father's first attempt at starting a school from the ground up, I could tie a bowtie too.

The Valley is a hundred mile stretch of rich cropland that ribbons southwestward from the Maryland border towards Roanoke, Virginia, hemmed in by the Blue Ridge Mountains to the east and the Alleghenies to the west. It's a region known for its rock outcroppings and caverns so it was well-suited that this would be the place where my father would step into his inner-most cave to reckon with the decision he had made 15 years previously when he walked out of the First Tidewater National Bank and into the barber shop. Starting a school was more than the sum of all our previous moves and positions. It was everything we'd ever done as a family, and for him as a professional, all rolled up into one. It was all engines gunning. And it was the hardest thing he ever did and it nearly broke us all in two; such are the trials and troubles of the pioneering school-building family. For starters, the Hooziwhatsits in the Shenandoah Valley didn't know they were Hooziwhatsits, because no one had ever asked them to be Hooziwhatsits before. Save for one nearby holy-rolling, creationist academy (for whom the notion of independent education meant independence from any authority except God's holy word), save for that, there was no other independent school for miles around. Nobody had even considered the notion before. And with no independent education tradition, there were no Hooziwhatsits except for the one who had brought us to this rural outpost of Rockingham County, Virginia, the self proclaimed Poultry Capital of the World. This lone Hooziwhatsit was an orthodontist named Jim. Jim had move west from a more cultured region of the Old Dominion. He was an orthodontist who left the comfort of a capital city to move into a tertiary market where overbites were a bit more prevalent. In fact the dental hygiene of the Shenandoah Valley was on par with its school system. My parents were headed for a cotton field that not only had never grown cotton, the seeds weren't yet sown, the fields hadn't even been cleared. Rockingham County was a wilderness.

The Secor family kicked it in to gear, full-notch. We moved into an old Victorian charmer-turned boarding house and redid the floor plan for 5 instead of 20. My mother painted the shutters pink as if to say, we are the ones who came to start the school. My sisters and I went to a public school in the year it took for my father to launch his new elementary. My parents signed us up for the all the fellowship halls of discriminating taste our little burg had to offer---the Governor Spotswood country club, the Elk's Lodge, and the Episcopal Church, resulting in our one Whooziwhatsit quickly becoming 3 then seeming to multiply exponentially. Now there were more kids to be forced to play with and to disregard the general obnoxiousness of no matter how difficult the task. But I knew my duty because I was part of the team. And things were getting better. Ground support had swelled. Families were actually starting to sign up. My father's task in this regard became convincing the discerning and education-minded parents of this tri-county region to drive upwards of 50 miles over hill and dale and wait in their cars behind tractors and manure spreaders, dodging the wind-borne rush of errant turkey feathers, all to send their

kids to a private school that didn't yet exist, that was not yet a school with neither buildings nor teachers but was instead essentially a post office box to which only my Father and a couple of Hooziwhatsits held a key. But somehow, my father convinced them to come, and a year later we climbed onto a school bus, my sisters and I and those kids I'd been taught to be nice to and we followed those 18 wheelers spewing feathers, and we dodged those tractors and manure spreaders 26 miles south of town to a former textile mill workers daycare facility in a town spelled like Shakespeares fair Verona, but pronounced by the natives as Vrohna. We rode a ramshackle Blue Bird bus with a 28 child maximum, half full, my father at the wheel, the Princeton cut undulating slightly in the breeze of his cracked triangular window as he politely but with all seriousness leaned back from the driver's seat asked us all to lift our feet, as we were going over a railroad track.

My father's school was my cottonfield for 3 years until it ran out of grades for me and back to public school cottonpicking I returned. For high school I went to Phillips Exeter Academy where more important than Goethe or Trig--- I learned to play the banjo. Afterwards I dropped out of school and found my labor by starting bands, and began searching for work playing music, searching for support, searching for inspiration. After 12 years my father moved on from Rockingham County Virginia and began work on opening a new school in a much more likely place, where he never once drove the school bus. That I came to dwell in Nashville and he in Knoxville meant that I could see his dream grow in many midnight passes down the interstate as I crisscrossed Tennessee; it helped that you could see his school from the highway. With the passing years came progress as the tour buses continued to roll past Episcopal School of Knoxville. One day he had buildings and no more trailers, then another time he had a goal post and the next year a second one, then it was a gymnasium and a chapel, a garden, a chicken coop. And after nearly 20 years of driving down I-40, passing the Kingston Highway and looking past the Country-Line Dance Bar behind the gravel pit, on the southerly sloping hill with the shading oaks amidst all he and others had built, suddenly you could make it out, even doing 70 down the highway, there, cut in silhouette against the grey skies, the most powerful symbol of all, a bell tower. 40 years it took for my father to get that belltower. 40 years to hear it ringing. To see it cause children to jump at the sound of it. A belltower my father consorted to build and raised every penny to procur. I think of Johnny Cash's father who picked all that cotton, and never knew a Hooziwhatsit in his life, and it makes me wonder what his idea of a belltower was. 40 years of picking cotton, and Johnny Cash's father probably didn't even get a belt buckle, let alone a belltower. As for me and my belltower, I always assumed was about the music. That my belltower was a couple of Grammy Awards and a picture of my wife smiling with her arm around Dolly Parton, a good story about shining Merle Haggards shoes. But it turns out my belltower is actually, well, a belltower. The apple didn't fall very far. It may not have even fallen at all. But someday a bell tower. I don't have a bell tower yet. For now, I have a bird house.

Episcopal School of Nashville is the home of the purple martins. We were very narrowly going to be the Poplar Trees until an inspired board member texted me at the Kroger saying, "Dude, there's like a million purple martins at the school right now". By school she meant roped off area in a parking lot beside interstate 24 where stray cats gather. But I took the message to heart in the milk aisle and thus we narrowly averted one of the great flaws in school start-ups, picking the wrong mascot. Before we even had a school we had a bird house. Our purple martin house was given by a great Hooziwhatsit who we all hope will someday give us a belltower. But for now we don't need a belltower, sure we'd take one, but it would look pretty strange tacked on to our trailers. For now the purple martin house grommited to the corrugated walls of classroom #3 will suffice. We are an urban independent Episcopal elementary that costs under 10K, \$7,500 for preK. 50% of our families pay significantly less but everybody pays something. We started with 16 kids, had 37 by year two, 50 by year 3, and by the time I read this in for the ESHA conference we'll surely have 70 or more. I know we'll have a 5th grade. Presently our students are 35% children of color, and perhaps that's been my belltower from the beginning: to make a school that is as beautifully diverse as the city it serves. Our faculty is also wonderfully diverse as talented people have come from all walks of life to commit their spirits to the vocation of school-building. It's a beautiful cotton field growing through the asphalt on this by all accounts bleak stretch of Nashville's urban core. It's a cotton field where we occasionally find needles, where buses drop off the poor at benches where homeless newspapers are sold, where a port a potty is called an outreach ministry by

the senior wardens of the adjacent Episcopal church. It's a cotton field hemmed in by a 6 lane highway and a two lane expressway spur. There's an alley across the street where people sleep between fixes. It is probably an even more unlikely place to shake out those powerful school-building seeds as that former textile mill workers daycare in fair Verona, but it'll do. It is mission appropriate. It is a tiny patch of green reclaiming a long overlooked landscape. A glade in the rough. And it is a place that has become the purest embodiment of joy for me and for my daughter and son and for many daughters and sons. Sometimes driving in in the morning after chatting at the red light with Douglas the homeless newspaper agent who works the bus bench adjacent to her school my daughter will express to me her own belltower dreams. "Papa, when are we going to get a flag pole?" Hearing this I know that school-building is a family affair. By the time I read these words in October when our little Episcopal School of Nashville will be brimming with 70 plus kids, with purple martins in the birdhouse and a flag on a flag pole proudly waving, I know that by this time, next October my father will have lost his hair. That the eponymous Princeton cut will be no more. Hopefully my father will have many years in which to grow back his handsome, school-builder hair. That, I cannot know. But in the meantime he still has his belltower and his bowtie. And I have mine.

When I look in from the road and see it standing there, this school I have been building, and take in the view and feel the pause of consideration, leaving behind any particular detail, forgetting momentarily about the effort spent, momentarily forgoing all conclusions, momentarily disremembering the names and details of the children and teachers out on the playground, though I know them all by heart, but just staring without judgment rather dwelling in that perfect pause of consideration, that is when I think, and the only time I think, "damn, you did it." Because every other moment spent either looking in from the road, or standing right in the middle of school, on telephones or computers up the street or halfway around the world, and in whatever state my mind is in, whether caught up in a storm of school-building panic or holding a successful mark of achievement, like a yearbook, every other moment I spend at work building this elementary school, I would never be able to say those words, damn you did it. Sure, I could say them but they wouldn't be true. Because I haven't done it. I am doing it. But it will never be done. No belltower will toll the end of my school-building. Neither will it toll for yours. Every school that was ever started, by a guy like me, a guy like that orthodontist, or maybe somebody here this afternoon, a guy like you, a woman like you, their schools, our schools,---the ones we reoriented our lives towards, poured all that prayer into, mortgaged our homes for, every one of our schools will never be finished being built. School-building just isn't something that gets folded up when the day is through. It won't end with my father because it didn't begin with my father and beside, he passed something to me and it won't end with me because I too will pass something along. The keys. My father passed these keys to me and with them I have turned, with the help of many others, the lock and, with the help of many others I have opened the door and walked in to Nashville's newest elementary school. And let me tell you: it's a real beaut. To put it in Southern terms, it's a peach ya'll. And there's a birdhouse there, and there's a flagpole, but there's no belltower there to confuse anyone into thinking that this place is any more than just a plain old cotton field, plotted out near the bending river, a cotton field long turned fallow, a cotton field that became a yard with a few houses and then a store and then a wig shop and then a parking lot and then twenty winters passed on the old cotton field that was now a parking lot until there came a seed that spring and by summer, growing up through the cracks in the pavement, there bloomed a school. And it grew well not because it was native to the place, but because it had grown well elsewhere, and elsewhere its bloom had sent seed in all directions. And this one windborne seed, with all intentions of landing, did come and began to make a good volunteer crop. I have volunteered to tend this land, though I know that I am not the master. But as the journeyman, quietly, I have made a promise with the Lord. That, with God's help, I will try my best to do this impossible thing. That, with God's help, I will keep my faith even though, now as I write, I'm uncertain we'll have payroll next month. That, with God's help, I will make a glorious place on Earth for all Gods' children.

These are the thoughts in my mind as I think about this rare occasion of standing before a room of elementary school educators. I appreciate you and I recognize that you have worked incredibly hard for your elementary schools. I know that many of you have made similar promises with the Lord Almighty. And I pray for your schools. I've been in front of a lot of different crowds through the years and it's funny,

but I always act the same. I act like my father. Like an educator. And whether I was going through my Mohawk or my dread lock phase, I always carried myself like a guy whose haircut suggested good-natured approachability, Like an educator. And even if I had my fiddle under my chin right now and I was playing Hell Broke Loose In Georgia at a dizzying pace, I would be doing so like an educator, just like my Pop. Entertainers have a way of channeling their influence through their work. I've always heard it told that artists, particularly musicians are the closest human beings get to being like Gods. Honestly, I don't think I ever felt like a God a single day in my life. I think that's because I'm the kind of musician who underneath is really a teacher. And I think being a teacher is the closest human beings ever really get to being human.