

Chapter 8

“I consider myself the luckiest and probably the happiest guy on the planet.”



CHUCK LEAVELL

When I think of the Rolling Stones, “happy” is not necessarily an adjective that comes to mind. Now, I’m not saying for a minute that Mick, Keef and the boys don’t have moments of merriment (whether natural highs or not!). It’s just, their music is driving, forceful, assertive and rarely are the themes those of contentment. Even the legendary “Satisfaction” is all about being unfulfilled.

Yet, there’s a contributor to the Stones who’s played piano and keyboards with the band since 1982 and who simply never seems to be without a smile. I’m referring to Chuck Leavell, a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award winner who’s jammed with many of the finest musical artists out there, including Eric Clapton, George Harrison, The Allman Brothers Band, The Black Crowes, Gov’t Mule, Train, John Mayer and others. Chuck is also a solo artist in his own right (check out his latest CD *“Back To The Woods: a tribute to the pioneers of blues piano”*).

I expect most of us would be content to sit back and bask in such a celebratory existence. But this respected, sought-after pianist – who is also a devoted husband, father and grandfather – has found a higher calling: he’s a respected authority on forestry and conservation. Visit Chuck at his home in rural Georgia and you’re just as likely to find him working in the woods as playing an instrument. “My family, my trees and my music,” he tells me are his passions in life.

This commitment to the land is not a hobby: it’s a serious endeavor. Chuck and his wife Rose Lane have been named National Outstanding Tree Farmers of the Year and he plays a strong role in environmental issues in the US and beyond. Former President Jimmy Carter is a good friend. Chuck is a Board member of several organizations, most notably Mother Nature Network

(www.mnn.com) and an author of books that include *“Growing a Better America: Smart. Strong. Sustainable.”*.

And Chuck Leavell is a happy guy. A very happy guy.

I begin my conversation with this modest yet remarkable man by offering up a quotation: *“When personal talent meets personal passion, we inspire ourselves to a happier existence.”* Chuck, are you in a happier existence now since you broadened your interests from music into sustainable forestry?”

“I am a very happy person,” he tells me. “As a matter of fact, I consider myself the luckiest and probably the happiest guy on the planet. I have been able to play music with many different artists through the years... I get to make my own music and CDs, I get to travel the world playing music with different artists and see all these wonderful places and meet interesting people. And I also get to walk and work in my own forest at Charlane Plantation, our 2,500 acre Tree Farm. I also get to write about these things and to advocate on behalf of forestry and environmental interests as well.”

“OK, now I know why that smile’s always present when I see your photo,” I comment. I’m smiling too as I say this: it’s infectious!

Chuck does not hesitate in adding to this glowing report: “I am the father of 2 beautiful and talented daughters and a grandfather of 2 beautiful boys age 6 and 3. I’ve been married to my wife, Rose Lane Leavell, for 39 years and we have an amazing partnership. Life is very good for Chuck!”

“So my hunch was right when I contacted you: you *are* one happy guy!” I say.

“I am. Look... we all find ourselves in situations sometimes that may be uncomfortable, may result in sadness, pain, frustration, whatever. When one of our close friends or family members passes away, or maybe we didn’t get that job or raise that we were hoping for, or maybe someone you know was in a bad accident, or perhaps you have a flat tire on your car... any of those things carry some degree of uncomfortable and/or undesirable feelings. But I think we have to know these feelings in order to truly appreciate happiness. We all can’t be happy all the time, 24/7/365. Just ain’t gonna happen. But I think the way we deal with these things and our overall appreciation for the good things we have... the love of one’s spouse or children, the opportunities for us to improve, the opportunities we have to give something back and get a good feeling inside for doing so... these things for me will always outweigh the challenges of life.”

I’m about to pose a follow up question when he dons an even broader grin and comments, “Besides, smiling makes me feel good!” He’s right.

“Chuck, let me ask you this,” I say, “you’re passionate about responsible forestry, that’s obvious. But in too many ways the globe seems to be buckling under the strain of pollution, political indifference and threats to nature and wildlife. How are you able to maintain an upbeat, happy outlook in the face of these dangers?”

“Certainly we have challenges,” he responds. “But there are solutions to those challenges, and that is what I focus on. Finding and applying these solutions, makes me very happy. We still have a lot to learn and more solutions to explore and find, but I believe very strongly that we can... and we will. As far as I'm concerned, this is still a wonderful world to live in.”

As I listen, I sense that even while grappling with environmental and social responsibility issues, optimism is a part of Chuck Leavell’s character.

“Sure it is,” he tells me. “I’ve always been an optimist. It’s part of who I am... part of my DNA. I think I’ve always looked at the bright side of things. Not that I fool myself into believing that life is a bed of roses... we are always going to have bumps in the road, no matter what road we take. But if we wallow in the mire of what is hard, what is tough, or what is bad in the world; or when we have to make tough decisions; or when we have to deal with unpleasant circumstances instead of looking for solutions and finding better ways to do things... well, we’re just wasting our time.”

We move to a discussion about Mother Nature Network, the organization that Chuck co-founded with ex-ad man Joel Babbit. MNN works towards “A healthier family. A cleaner planet. And a sensible budget that considers both.” I mention their mission: “Improve Your World”. “Not to belabor the point, but with so much political unrest and financial dilemmas around the globe, do you think such an improved world would be a happier world?”

“Of course it would,” he states firmly. “Look Peter, I believe that doing nothing is not an option to our environmental challenges. We have to be proactive. We have to work at it, and it’s not easy. But if we all make small changes together, they will result in big changes for the better. I don’t know anyone that would say, ‘I’ll be happier if we just let our planet burn up’!!!”

“I’ve read studies that show activism can produce increased happiness amongst participants,” I tell him. “People become involved in a morally-infused social network. Does your participation in the Mother Nature Network work in that way?”

“Absolutely,” he confirms. “We have a staff of some 25 or so folks that work with us at MNN. They all have a great sense of gratification in their work with us. When someone finds a great story about solving an environmental challenge, the result is a big smile and a sense of having done something

valuable. When Joel Babbit and I meet with some big company like Coca-Cola or AT&T or AFLAC, CSX or Mercedes Benz and we see their genuine desire to be more responsible as a corporation, when they do things in partnership with us that results in them being more involved in environmental or social issues, it's a wonderful feeling for us and for them. We've seen it many times, and it reflects positively for all the folks that work for those companies. That gives all of us a sense of pride and accomplishment and certainly makes us all happy!"

"So you think active commitment to the work of Mother Nature Network 'nurtures' happiness amongst the others involved, right?"

"I think the results we foster are contagious and that the attitude of doing good while doing well rubs off on those that are watching, observing and studying what we do. That makes them want to get involved, makes them want to do better. I believe so strongly that the vast majority of folks out there have deep and sincere concerns about our environment and want to find ways to be more aware and more responsible for their own impacts. Making these improvements results in them feeling better about themselves."

One of the things that intrigued me when researching Chuck's life is that he's a "triple threat": musician, writer and environmental activist. "So 'fess up, Chuck: which offers you more happiness?"

He pauses to consider this. As he does so, I sense his joy in all three vocations. "You know, I couldn't put a number on any of those things in terms of one making me happier than the other," he says. "Every day is different, and it depends on what the day brings. It might be that I get a phone call asking me if I'm available to do a recording session with someone the next day... well, then my focus will be on music and what I can bring to the table. One day I might get an email with a story about the environment that I think we should include on MNN. One day I might be able to do some things on Charlane Plantation that I'm excited about. It just depends."

"I expect this is almost like asking which one of your kids you like most," I comment.

Suddenly, a light goes on. "You know what really makes me happy?" he exclaims. "Mowing! I love to mow. I like mowing my lawn... I like mowing my horse pastures. I like mowing my woods roads. There is something very Zen about mowing, and it relaxes me, lets me think freely and it makes me very happy."

Mowing. Who knew?

"Chuck, obviously you've travelled a lot in your work. As you get to know our world better, any thoughts on what is contributing to people being less than

happy today around the globe?”

“I think there is a lot of psychology at work here,” he tells me. “For instance, there is so much negative reporting these days on our economy and on our unemployment numbers. Now, there is no doubt that we have some real problems with these things... but when you constantly hear on TV, radio, print media, etc. about how bad things are, then you start to believe it, and it sort of feeds on itself. The unfortunate thing is that bad news sells better than good news, and so the media in general focuses on the bad things. This can lead to conversations between people about how bad everything is instead of trying to find solutions to our problems. Again, I'm not making light of the fact that we do have challenges and that a lot of people are out of work... but when you hear that unemployment is at 8%, that still means that there are 92% of the people working. Beyond economics and jobs, there are other very real and sad problems like the conflicts we see in certain parts of the world... Afghanistan, Sudan, the potential problems in North Korea, Iran, etc. These are clashes of cultures and philosophies, and in some cases are resulting in many people being killed, wounded, maimed. There are places where folks can't get enough food to eat and to feed their families. These things break our hearts, and we want to see them ended, see suffering stopped.”

“Of course the reality is that we can't wave a magic wand and make it all go away...” I say.

“Exactly. So we have to keep on trying to find reasonable solutions. That's all we can do, and we should continue to do it to the best of our ability. But beyond these terrible challenges in these pockets around the globe, I think most of the world is happy and I think a lot of the things that people get focused on are overblown. Yes, maybe you can't afford that new car that you really want, but the old one still runs and gets you where you need to go. So I think a lot of this is about perspective and the things that are really important... love, opportunity to pursue your ideas, talents, family, friends. And as for the real problems that do exist, if we do at least something to try and help, this can make us feel better about ourselves and lead to being happier, even in the face of these harsh realities.”

“How do you personally overcome those negative influences that you just mentioned?”

“I mow as much as possible!” he laughs. “No... just kidding. Look, we can't solve all the world's problems. But look at a guy like former President Jimmy Carter who gives so much of himself to try and help people, trying to solve problems like disease, conflicts. He is a great inspiration to me and to the world. Now, I don't get as involved in these things as he does... but in my own way I try to solve problems that I feel I can do something about. Like our forests, our environment... and playing music to try and help people feel better. I do what I

can on my own land and in my own life to lower my carbon footprint. I try to expose others to reasonable and good solutions through my work for MNN and in my speeches, my books and such. Rose Lane and I contribute to various causes that we believe in. We talk to others that know more about these things than we do so we can try to better educate ourselves and better understand how we can help.”

“You know Chuck, if more people were like you, we truly could get this planet on a happier, more sustainable level,” I say. “But think about this: the ancient Greeks celebrated happiness as an enactment of the good life. So that leads me to ask how you define happiness as it applies to Chuck Leavell? Is it contentment, satisfaction, serenity, well-being, something else?”

“Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote, ‘In the woods we return to reason and faith’. That certainly works for me. When I need to think something through or when I just want to celebrate life, being out in nature provides a great setting to do so. But I also like the company of friends and family... having a great meal together, a drink or two, good conversation and good times. I think it's important to give yourself time to celebrate the good life.”

“Let me give you a sentence and you tell me if it holds true for you: ‘I wouldn't be happy if I wasn't engaged in trying to change the world.’

“Hmmm... well, I feel that I am happy without trying to solve all the world's problems, and the fact is that I'm not trying to do that. I do try to contribute in a meaningful and reasonable way and to help in matters that I think I know something about... and I try to learn something every day that might lead to some solutions. But I don't live my life trying to be some kind of miracle worker and I'm a very happy person. Now, I have a great admiration and appreciation for those like Jimmy Carter who do give so much of themselves to try and make the world a better place. But the fact is that some folks have more to give than others, and I think as long as we all do what we can within our means, within our own reason, we can make a significant difference.”

I tell Chuck about a recent study – “Kindness Makes You Happy... and Happiness Makes You Kind” – which reports that giving to others makes us happy, even happier than spending on ourselves. “You're giving your time, energy and prominence to Mother Nature Network: do you think this increases the happiness you can enjoy in life? Would you be less happy if you focused just on your music?”

“I don't know that I would necessarily be ‘less happy’, but I can say that it does give me a good feeling to be engaged with MNN and all the things we are trying to do. If not MNN, perhaps it would be some other avenue. I sit on some really interesting Boards...like the American Forest Foundation, The US Endowment for Forestry and Communities, The Georgia Land Conservation

Council and others. I get a lot of joy and happiness out of these Boards and the projects we are able to support and foster and are not directly connected to what I do with MNN. So it is with my books and speeches. I get a lot of joy and happiness from those things... there are plenty of avenues that we can all find to contribute something.”

“Sounds like you have really discovered an idyllic existence,” I comment. “But no one is happy 24/7. What, if anything, gets you down or stands in the way of your being happy?”

“I think one's happiness is in large part up to ourselves,” he tells me. “When you see someone like Bethany Hamilton, the young girl who had her arm bitten off by a shark and continued to pursue her love of surfing without missing a beat... when you see someone like Aimee Copeland, the Georgia girl who is a victim of flesh eating bacteria and had to have her hands and legs amputated, but she is still happy to be alive and grateful for the love of her friends and family... that shows us that happiness is so much a state of mind. It's not about the things and toys you own, it's about what is deep inside your soul.”

And clearly Chuck Leavell is a man with a beautiful soul.

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THE CHUCK LEAVELL HAPPINESS HIERARCHY SCALE									
1.....	2.....	3.....	4.....	5.....	6.....	7.....	8.....	9.....	10
<i>reasonably happy</i>			<i>happy</i>				<i>very happy</i>		

“As far as a scale...I'd say 11 out of 10 for me!”