

The time security saw me as a threat to a new civil rights hero

By [Jesse James DeConto](#)

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I was a security threat to Bree Newsome at the Wild Goose Festival.

On Saturday, July 11, with the festival almost over, word got around:

Newsome would be speaking that night. My first thoughts were: *How am I going to reach an editor when there's no cell service in this damned valley? Who's going to lend me a laptop? Can I get enough of a Wifi signal to file a story from the café in Hot Springs?* This was news, and I'm a reporter.

But that's not all I was. I've been performing music at Wild Goose since 2012. Last year, I [read excerpts](#) from my [spiritual memoir](#) and interviewed my friend [Scott Bass](#). This year, [my band](#) had a set on the [main stage](#), and a few hours after [Bree Newsome's appearance](#), we were scheduled to host an "AcoustaGoose" jam session in the same tent where she spoke.

At Hot Springs Resort, there's a lot of distance between the parking, the stage areas, and the far reaches of the campground. Between daytime presentations I'd wanted to hear, I'd had to retrieve our merch case from the car, along with my brother's little brown faux leather box containing small percussion instruments. I'd had to replenish copies of my book and CDs at the sales tables just a few tents down, and, rather than lug our stuff all the way back to our campsite, I decided to stow it—in what I didn't know would soon serve as Newsome's green room.

That's how I became a potential danger to the woman [being depicted as Wonder Woman](#) after climbing a 30-foot pole to capture the flag. Both Newsome and her co-conspirator James Ian Tyson had already noticed suspicious vehicles lurking outside their homes in Charlotte. That's why staff delayed announcing their visit, and they still almost declined. The festival's health and safety contractor, F.L.O.W. Event Services, provided an eight-person security team. [F.L.O.W. founder R. "Aslan" Cray](#), appropriately nicknamed with his red beard, dreadlocks and protective vocation, assured me no one was afraid of festival-goers but rather of anyone who might infiltrate the grounds.

Still, the team was suspicious of our vintage blue suitcase and oddly small gear box. Why were they there? We weren't around to explain. Might they contain some kind of explosive devices? They moved our stuff to the woods.

"Just to be on the safe side," said stage manager Tommy Brown.

Who knows if Newsome and Tyson had reason to fear? My wife and I did notice a Confederate flag displayed on a home along Highway 25, just a few miles east of Hot Springs. We also saw one on I-40 heading back toward Winston-Salem Sunday, not long before William Barber would appear there at an [ecumenical worship service](#) on the eve of the [U.S. District Court's hearing](#) of a lawsuit [challenging North Carolina's newest voting laws](#). This Confederate icon was no small sticker affixed to the back of a window but a full-sized banner flying from a pole mounted in the middle of a pickup bed. Other festival-goers reported seeing a flag posted just across the French Broad River from the resort, but also in places they never did before in their hometowns, some kind of protest against the South Carolina legislature's removing the statehouse flag for good.

I confess: Seeing that flag whipping in the 70 m.p.h. draft made me mad enough to think about running that pickup truck off the road.

Of course, I would never do such a thing. I sit on the sidelines of activist demonstrations, watching, observing. My journalist training makes it hard for me even to sing or shout along, let alone do anything really crazy.

I had a brush with a new civil rights hero, but I can't pretend I was at the festival as anything other than a teller of stories. I'm not a cheerleader. Objectivity's a myth, and I still try to practice it. (Some of you might take the same approach to religion). During our music set, where other artists used between-song banter to say something inspiring, I just quipped about how terribly Facebook functions if what you want is thoughtful spiritual or political discourse.

Maybe I'm an anti-activist. (My book is subtitled, "Some Thoughts on NOT Changing the World.") We journalists are trained to stand above the fray, to provide some sort of God's-eye view. But something Newsome's [human step-stool](#) said is sticking in my craw. "As a white Southerner I'm taught to be silent in the face of racism," said Tyson, who grew up as a Presbyterian.

What is respectable and what is right are two very different things. Your silence is doing violence. As white people, we're the ones who perpetuate white supremacy. ... Even if you lose friends from telling the truth, you're being held and cherished by God all the time.

Tyson pointed out that the proper, Southern gentleman was also the slaveowner. I wonder if there's an analogy with us journalist types: What a privilege, what a luxury, to not have to get involved, to not have to *feel*, if we don't choose to.

After my Newsome story [came out](#), I got a Facebook friend request from Wild Goose board president Jeff Clark. (Obviously, he wasn't listening to my on-stage rant about Facebook.) I guess that makes me a full-fledged insider now. But Jeff should still look at me with suspicion. I might not always be on his team. While I'm not a terrorist, I am a journalist.