

**Oral History Interview of
Bob Livingston**

**Interviewed by: Andy Wilkinson
June 29, 2010
Austin, Texas**

**Part of the:
*Crossroads of Music Archive***

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Preferred Citation for this Document:

Livingston, Bob Oral History Interview, June 29, 2010. Interview by Andy Wilkinson, Online Transcription, Southwest Collection/Special Collections Library. URL of PDF, date accessed.

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Recording Notes:

Original Format: Born Digital Video

Digitization Details: MPEG-4 (Sony PSP recorded)

Audio Metadata: 44.1kHz/ 16bit WAV file

Further Access Restrictions: N/A

Related Interviews: Livingston was also interviewed on October 7, 8, and 29, 2008; March 31, 2010; and June 30, 2010.

Transcription Notes:

Interviewer: Andy Wilkinson

Audio Editor: N/A

Transcription: SWC A/V Staff

Editor(s): Leah Blackwell, Katelin Dixon

Interview Series Background:

The Crossroads Artists Project encompasses interviews conducted by the Crossroads of Music Archive Staff members. They hope to document the creative process of artists and songwriters from all across the Southwestern United States.

Transcript Overview:

This is a video for the Austin Music Connection, interviewed by Jeff Tavares

Length of Interview: 00:30:56

Subject	Transcript Page	Time Stamp
Introduction	05	00:00:00
Original Spirit song; Austin music scene	12	00:13:42
Traveling to India and exchanging musical influences	13	00:19:32
All the musicians he has played with; Lubbock Music influence	14	00:23:18
His new band, Cowboys and Indians	16	00:29:07

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Keywords:

Music, Musicians, Austin Music

Bob Livingston (BL):

[Tuning guitar] When it really got cool is when I went [singing] "I'm crazy. Crazy for feeling so lonely." And he just lit up like a Christmas tree because it was Willie Hugh. He kept saying "Willie Hugh."

Jeff Tavaris (JT):

Cell phone ringer off?

BL:

Yes.

Andy Wilkinson (AW):

Now, this is the buzz. Will the buzz bother you?

BL:

That's fine

JT:

This isn't exactly a soundproof room but I just—

BL:

I'm using my stellar cell phone app.

JT:

Oh, I just got the new Polytuner.

BL:

Polytuner, did you get it?

JT:

Yeah, I got it while they were giving it away

BL:

I know, Chris told me—

AW:

So what does it cost if they're not giving it away?

BL:

Ten

JT:

\$9.99. But it's great; I actually have the hardware version. I bought the pedal, and the pedal is fabulous. I mean, it really works. You strum all six strings and it shows you all six strings.

AW:

Man, I got to get that. I got to get it to take in the studio.

JT:

Yeah. And it's also, next to the Peterson, the most accurate tuner you can get.

AW:

Really?

JT:

Yeah, yeah. Plus or minus 0.5 percent.

AW:

Does it only work on guitars?

JT:

No, it's supposed to work basses too. However, it doesn't work capo.

AW:

Oh. So you got to do it open?

JT:

You got to do it open. Now, you can do single strings capo. Don't get me wrong. It's fully chromatic, but it only recognizes—but there's a USB port, and I suspect they're going to update that one of these days.

BL:

[Plays guitar and yodels] Yodel-lay-hoo.

JT:

Now, Bob, will you be looking down when you sing or will you be facing this way?

BL:

I'll look at you. Not you.

JT:

And, one thing, everybody sings louder than they talk. Now, I'll be doing this without any compression. Now, there will be head room, but, when we're talking, don't be afraid to speak up. I mean, I usually have to go back and, you know, bring the gain up during the talking parts anyway. And if there's anything in particular you want to address or lead the conversation towards, now is the time to tell me.

BL:

Well, I got a new record that I've been working on, and I'd like to talk about that. How many songs do I do?

JT:

Four. And I have a little spiel at the beginning I do and it ends with, something along the lines of, "Today I'd like to introduce you to the music of Mr. Bob Livingston." And at that point, you're going to do your first tune and then we start yakking.

BL:

Do we edit some? Because if I change harmonicas and that kind of thing?

JT:

Um, if we can do it without editing, all the better. If something happens, if you break a string or forget a verse, we can start a song over. If you need to change the tuning on your guitar, give me a sign and I'll find a spot to stop the recording, we'll change the tuning and then pick up where we left off

BL:

Okay

JT:

But if we can do it all in one swell foop [sic], all the better. Plus, I know you're under some time constraints.

BL:

I got to do this City of Austin Cultural Contract which I get. They're having the Peer Pan Review Sessions. And normally, I wouldn't think to do it. I don't get to say anything. [Strums guitar] That sound in tune to you?

JT:

Sounds like a very good approximation of being tuned.

BL:
Okay.

JT:
Close enough for Austin, as they say. [Harmonica tunes] And, if you can think of what might be your most aggressive tune, let me get the levels on that.

BL:
Aggressive, aye?

JT:
Well, or loud or whatever, however you want to term it.

BL:
Well this one. [singing] “Well I want to see—” I can’t, I don’t have my voice warmed up yet. It’s unfortunate. “Well I want to see that I’m a part of that original spirit. Where my aim is sure, and I ride and royal road. I know, I know the truth. I know it when I hear it. And it’s original spirit.” [Harmonica] I’ll do something like that. I think I’ll do “Cowboys & Indians”, and then I’m going to do two new ones.

JT:
Okay, works for me.

BL:
Because, if I do “The Original Spirit” and then we talk about some—whatever you want to talk about, and then I’ll lead into “Cowboys & Indians”, which is the one that I wrote with Bobby Bridger that has the Indian country and Eastern flavored stuff in it.

JT:
I’ve got to do a little reboot here. [BL clears throat and hums] Pro Tools is very touchy if you every lose contact with the—through the fire wire. It goes “Yeah, well, I can’t just reestablish this by myself; we have to start from scratch.” And evidently something happened, so. I just need to reboot

BL:
[Sings and yodels] Whoa-oh-ho-hoo, yodel-lay-hey-he. [Clears throat] “Close your eyes. Close the door. You don’t have to worry anymore. Because I’m going to be all, baby, tonight.” [Pause as he plays guitar] So what did you do yesterday, Andy?

AW:

Drove, and delivered a bunch of stuff to the state archives. I've got this pal that lives here in town. He's a political operative working the Bill White campaign. So we went out to dinner, and I suggested a good Mexican joint and he said, "Oh no, man, I've got a favorite." So he lives here, so I take him up on it. He takes me to El Mercado. I mean, it was like going to Denny's and ordering an enchilada. [laughs]

BL:

Where did you want to go?

AW:

I like that Arandas down on South First.

BL:

Arandas? I don't know if I've been there.

JT:

The *taqueria*?

AW:

Yeah.

JT:

Really? I've not enjoyed any of the food I've eaten at a *taqueria* around here.

AW:

Really? This place—what's good is they have the flat iron steak with *nopalitos* and it's, like, six bucks or seven bucks. And the *nopalitos* are done just right.

BL:

[chuckles] You know, we did a thing for Bill White, the Los Gonzo ban. We had a reunion and we played along with Bobby Bridger

AW:

Yeah, I wanted to come. That was the one you did just recently, right?

BL:

Yeah.

AW:

Yeah, I couldn't make it

BL:

And we played down there and they had all these muckety mucks; Democratic Party. And it was in this beautiful spot and it was just surrounded by glass. Had all this great food and really—you know, all the guys are dressed in suits and blacks—all the girls are dressed in little black dresses and have clipboards and stuff. They're part of the campaign, I guess. The real—you know, the beautiful of Houston, the young and beautiful Democrats. And as the time went by, it's getting close for us to play and everybody was just really engaged. Then Bill White gets up and he talks for a little while, and you could hear a pin drop. Then he turns to three other Democratic governors that are there and they talk and everybody laughs. Then it gets back to Bill White and he goes, "Now, you know, we got some great—a great surprise for you. We got the Gonzo Boys. [laughter] And Bobby Bridger is here, too. You know, he's got that song, that 'Healing of Wisdom.' So, here are the Gonzo Boys." [Laughter]

JT:

Tap your foot, would you?

BL:

Tap my foot? So we get there and we get up on stage, and as soon as we start, everybody in the place starts going, And then [mimics crowd talking]. And they just turned and look away from us and they never paid us one second of attention for the rest of the evening.

JT:

Wow.

AW:

Yeah, well, you know, their job is to see and be seen, not to listen.

BL:

And they were.

JT:

All right, let's get levels and we'll be good to go.

BL:

[Singing] Woah yeah, yeah. [Clears throat] Sorry.

JT:

It's all right.

BL:

Clearing them.

JT:

Do what you got to do.

BL:

[hums and sings] Yeah I—[strums guitar and plays harmonica].

JT:

Okay, we should be good. We should be good.

BL:

This is sort of right on top of this.

JT:

What do you need?

BL:

Move it down just a little bit. Just a—yeah, yeah, yeah.

JT:

Yeah. And it's coming through real nice. A nice little thump down in there.

BL:

Yeah.

JY:

Very good, all right. [BL clears throat] Oh no, save that for the show.

BL:

Okay. I was just going to say I hope you can edit that stuff out because it's bound to be there.

JT:

[Laughs] No, it's what adds the realism to the show.

BL:
Okay.

JT:
If we had a spittoon I could mic, I would. All right, one two, one two, one two. Cache is good. Everything's good. Let's give this a go, shall we? All right. [Pause] Welcome to the Austin Connection. This is Episode 103 for 2010. I'm Jeff Tavaris, your host and recorder for this podcast series. Each episode of the Austin connection features prominent Texas songwriters performing their tunes live and in color here at Cheshire Moon Studios in Southwest Austin. Austin calls itself the Live Music Capital of the World, and it remains a gathering place for today's up-and-coming and already established artists. I'm here to introduce you to some of these acts and their music and make it easier for you two to find each other. Today, we are very happy to have a historical figure, an icon in Austin music. He looks iconic. He sounds iconic.

BL:
[Laughs] Iconic. That's ironic.

JT:
Yes, that too. Very ironic. I'd like to introduce you to the music of Mr. Bob Livingston.

BL:
Okay, thank you, Jeff. [Strums guitar and plays harmonica]

[Singing] "She lives down south where the rivers age. Goes back to the original spirit. And the Indian ink's flowing over the page, down to the original spirits. And the rhythm of life is still young. Yes, she is one among the original spirit. And every morning she walks up to the sacred ground where the ancient music is played. She begins to sing as the rain falls down, like a thousand voices were praying. And then the clouds have all gone. And her light shines on in her original spirit. And I need to know that I'm a part of that original spirit. Where my aim is sure and I ride that royal road. Yes I know, I know the truth. I know it when I hear it. And its original spirit. Said take me down south where the rivers age. Goes back to the original spirit. And the India ink is flowing over the page, down to the original spirit. And the rhythm of life is still young. Yes it is. And we all are as one, with the original spirit. [spoken in sing-song voice] Right here, I tell you, in Austin, Texas. Beaming out into outer space.

JT:
Now that was the best performer board fade I have ever heard.

BL:

Thank you, sir. I always like to start the show with a fade. [laughter]

JT:

And what a great song to typify the Austin music scene. Bob, when they talk about Austin musical history, you're a big part of it.

BL:

Well, you know I—there's just so much history, I was really lucky to get in on some really—a fun part of it during the seventies and eighties. And still, nineties. Here we are in the twenty-first century.

JT:

Thank goodness. And when I came to meet you, you were very much involved in your own Cowboys and Indians Project. And you were touring between here and the Orient, bringing our music there and bringing their music back and kind of homogenizing the two in some ways.

BL:

Yeah, not so much the Orient but India, Pakistan. I'd gone there in 1986 and done a tour for the U.S. State Department. Part of their mission is a cultural side, winning hearts and minds. And they send American musicians and poets and artists and painters and dancers, what have you, photographers, over there to give workshops and to do performances. The best example of this, I think, would be when they took the New York Philharmonic to North Korea just recently. That was a State Department show. I've done those, on a much smaller scale, but since 1986, and I've visited over twenty-five countries.

JT:

Wow.

BL:

And India seemed the furthest out for me, and the furthest in as well. And I love that country. I loved the music and the food. It's a vegetarian's heaven.

JT:

[laughs] Too many sacred cows. And it's also plain that the music that you experienced over there has really influenced what you've done here. I've heard songs of yours that actually have scales that are not usually used in a lot of our music here.

BL:

Yes, my experiences there have informed my work, for sure. The scales that I've used—I know some rudimentary scales and ragas over there. It was funny. When I was in Pakistan, I did a show at the Islamic Heritage Folk Life Center, and we did a workshop and I played with this world-class sarangi player. It's this forty-stringed, bowed instrument, and it's very archaic, and he's one of the last, sort of, doing it. His name is Allah Rakha. It's not the Allah Rakha that played with Robby Shankar, but this man is a sarangi player from Pakistan. And they had him in there and they were videotaping him and making audio tapes and just trying to capture that so it will be there forever. So we did this workshop. And he could not speak a word of English, and I couldn't speak a word of Urdu of course, except *khoda hafez* [God be with you] and *as-salaam-alaikum* [Peace be unto you]. Those are my two. And he—this man said it was just great to play with me and I said, “Yeah, and I'm just really glad that you can add to my music and you can play it, because there's no way I could do what you do.” And he told the translator to tell me, “Tell this man that he speaks the truth.” It's like he knew that I couldn't do that. These scales are so intricate and their music, both in—you know, Muslim music is a little different, but it follows the same scales. They use the same scales, they use a lot of those that are sa-re-ga-ma-pa-da-ni-sa, you know, scale. But, it somehow fits in. I'm working on a song called the “Sa-Re-Ga-Ma-Pa-Da-Ni-Sa Rag” [Laughter].

JT:

That's fabulous. For the benefit of our listeners that don't know about your history, can you encapsulate who you've played with, what you've done in the past. Because we all here in Austin know, but—

BL:

Well, I was born in San Antonio. I grew up in Lubbock, and so I had that Lubbock music influence. I saw Jo Ely and actually booked him in a little club that I had when I was in college. I went to Lubbock High School. Buddy Holly was a big influence on me.

JT:

What is with the water up there? I mean, really?

BL:

I don't know. It makes your teeth turn brown and makes you a musician, I guess [JT laughs]. But I don't know. I just—I loved music. And my brother was a musician. And I went to Tech. But when I—in 1969 I won the lottery, the first draft lottery of 1969, and I got a really good number and I was out of there. And I went to Red River to get me a gig, and I met Ray Wiley Hubbard there. He was playing in a group called Three Faces West. So, he and I became friends, all of them—Rick Fowler and Wayne Kidd. And they were playing music by Michael Murphey. He had already written “Wildfire” by that time. So when I went out to Los Angeles, by just this

lucky happenstance, I picked up a hitchhiker who knew him and ended up meeting Murphey literally that night, and we became fast friends. And my record deal fell through, which I had out there, so did his, so we just went on back to Texas and we moved to Austin. And, by way of Nashville, we recorded an album called *Geronimo's Cadillac*.

JT:

I remember that

BL:

For A&M Records.

JT:

I had that record.

BL:

Yeah, it was really fun. Just he and I went in and cut twenty-five songs in a couple of days. And I remember Leonard Cowen was hanging out. Bob Johnson was the producer who had produced "Nashville Skyline" and "Blonde on Blonde", "Sounds of Silence", "Alive at Folsom Prison." He was a heavyweight. And heard Murphey and me at a club in Dallas called the Rubaiyat and just literally, "I can get you a record deal. Come to Nashville." So we went and we did that. Well, we moved to Austin and one thing lead to another. I left Murphey. It's just like me. The Livingston way is have a nationally-released record and then jump ship for a while. And I went off back to play with Ray Wiley in a band called Texas Fever. Ended up getting back with Murphey. One day Jerry Jeff poked his head into the band rehearsal that we were having and he says, "Man, this is great." It was like instant band for him. So, started playing with him, too, and we made a record in Austin in 1972 called—it was just called "Jerry Jeff." And it's the brown album that has Ellie Freeway and Charlie Dunn, old beat up guitar. And then ended up making another record with Murphey called "Cosmic Cowboy Souvenir." And then I pretty much stayed with Jerry Jeff after that, and I played on eighteen or so of his records. And the Los Gonzo Band came into being sometime after we recorded an album for MCA called *Viva Terlingua*. It has all those quintessential Texas—you know, "Bucket of Blood Bashers", "Redneck Mother", "London Homesick Blues", "Sangria Wine", "Getting By", "I Like to Sleep Late in the Morning", all those songs. Jerry Jeff—actually, we were looking for a name for a band and Lost Gonzo Band kind of took, and we stuck with that name. And that's when it first appeared in print, "Lost Gonzo Band," on *Viva Terlingua* record. And we said, "Well, we got a band. It'd be nice to record and do our own thing." And so in nineteen—I believe it was seventy-four, we recorded our first album for MCA. And then we did one a year, '75 and '76, jumped to Capitol in '76 and put out. And then we tried—we left Jerry Jeff at the end of '76. It was sort of a financial disaster. We were out on the road. We had a six-piece band that we're trying to, you know, play showcases and stay out on the road, and we were starving. And finally ended up—the band

breaking up in just the end of '79, early part of '80. And I went back with Ray Hubbard, which turned out to be the best gigs I've ever played, money-wise. And able to really have some great fun with him. Played with him a couple of years, two or three years, and then got back with Jerry Jeff. And I was with him, pretty much, on and off from that '82 year, I guess, until about four years ago from now.

JT:

Wow. Just amazing.

BL:

And along the way played a lot of stations with other folks. You know, Pat Greene and Cory Morrow, and a lot of the Texas—

JT:

Yeah, I saw your discography on your website, and it's just huge. Just huge. You got to check out this man's website, which is—

BL:

boblivingston.o-r-g. Yeah. And become a Facebook friend, too. It's just on facebook.com/boblivingston. I'd love you—there's a lot of stuff on Facebook that's not on the website and vice versa. But I have a lot of photographs on the website, and there's a whole history of the Lost Gonzo Band, as I know it. [JT laughs] I have a disclaimer at the beginning.

JT:

The truth gets fuzzy.

BL:

"As I remember things."

JT:

How about another tune?

BL:

Okay. I just saw a deer jumping outside your window here, so [strums guitar] that's a good omen. This is—when I was in India, I got to play with the local musicians, and we were playing a music called Country and Eastern music. Or "Ragabilly," as we like to say [JT laughs]. So I came back home and I just wanted to duplicate—I wanted that sound. So I found some Indian musicians in Austin and we put together this group called Cowboys & Indians. And we've got a—

JT:

I've heard that band too, it's really good

BL:

We've got a tabla player and a sitar player. Once in a while we have a bharatanatyam dancer. She's Anu Naimpally. She's really cool, and interprets the lyrics. So this is the title track for this musical we have, *Cowboys & Indians*. [strums guitar and sings] Of course, I'm going to change my capo, because they don't make—I'm sorry, I'm going to change my harmonica. They don't make capos for harmonicas yet. [Playing guitar and sings] "Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh, oh. Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh, oh." That's your part. [JT laughs]. [Singing] Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh, oh. Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh, oh. [Yodels] Yodel-lay-hee.

End of Recording



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