

**Oral History Interview of  
Alan Munde**

**Interviewed by: Andy Wilkinson  
August 22, 2012  
Wimberley, Texas**

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*Crossroads of Music Archive***

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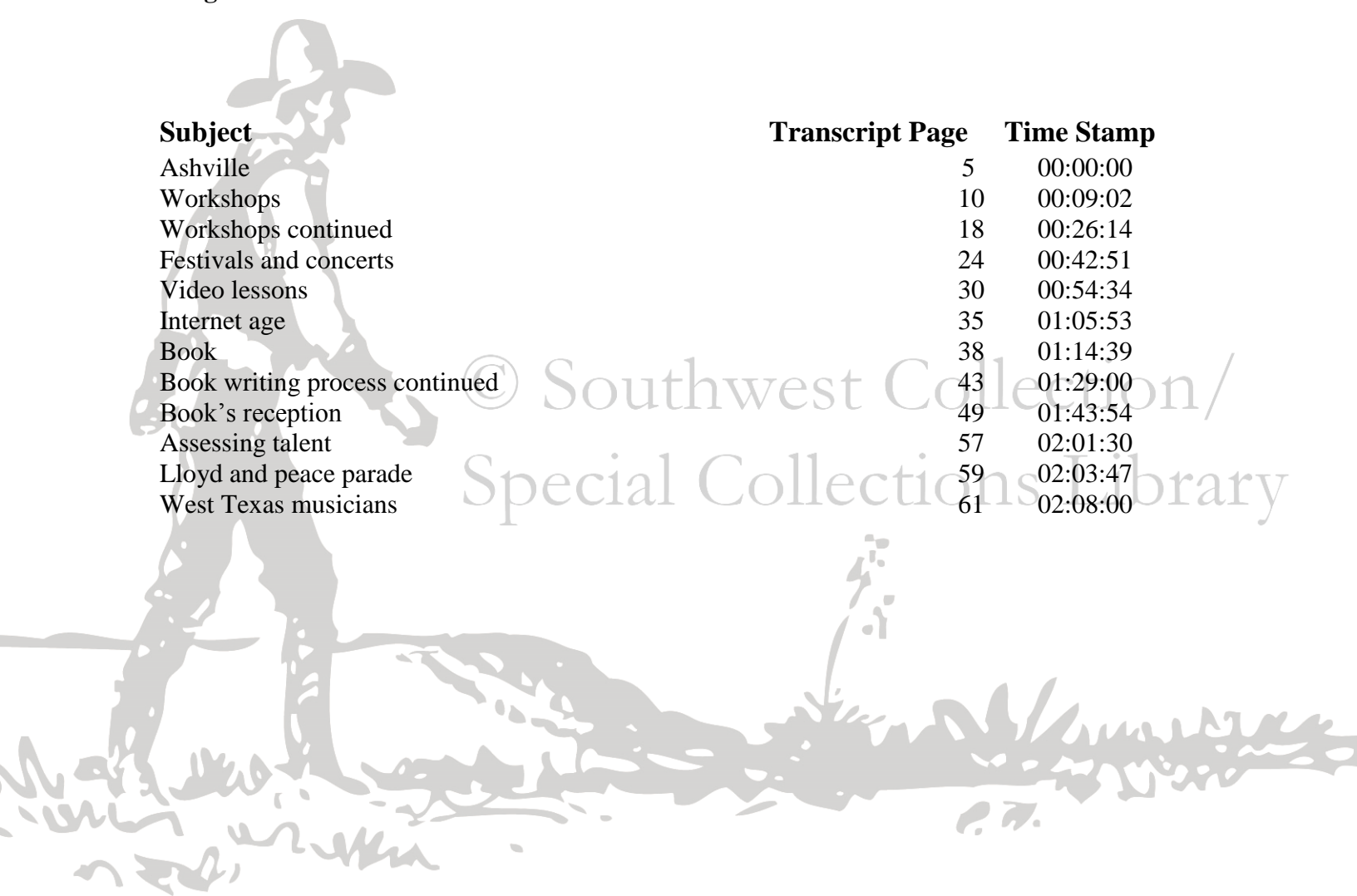
## Interview Series Background:

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

## Transcript Overview:

This interview features banjo player Alan Munde. Munde discusses doing workshops, developing a series of video instructions, and writing a book on West Texas musicians.

**Length of Interview:** 02:11:34



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## Keywords

banjo, bluegrass music, University of Oklahoma, South Plains College, West Texas music

**Andy Wilkinson (AW):**

Oh yeah, I've always wanted to go to that.

**Alan Munde (AM):**

It's kind of interesting, and it's at a college that's pretty interesting. It's called Warren Wilson, which is—this town of Swannanoa apparently is just a little attachment to Asheville.

AW:

To the college? Oh, to Asheville.

AM:

And the college—I don't know who Warren Wilson was or when it started or anything, but just from looking around, it has a big environmental sort of viewpoint—a lot of the stuff is all sort of environmentally friendly, and they have a—the college has a farm, and part of the deal is the students have to work for some part of their enrollment tuition because it's so expensive. Apparently it's a very expensive place.

AW:

And so they work in lieu of—

AM:

In part, not in lieu of tuition, but for part of it. I noticed they were—on one of the buildings we were in, they were putting a covering, with a frame and the whole bit—and trusses and the whole thing—but I noticed most of them were students, and there was a guy up there directing them. You probably wind up doing a lot of things you're not familiar with, and in turn you learn to do stuff. Then they have a farm—

AW:

And they produce stuff that they eat?

AM:

Yeah.

AW:

Oh, cool!

AM:

Yeah, in the cafeteria—so it's a real intriguing place—Warren Wilson College is the name of it. Then they also, as part of their touchy-feely, environmentally sensitive view of the world, they

do music sort of “of the people.” They’ve had several weeks of music instruction, but ours was banjo and mandolin.

AW:

Yeah, because they do a—a I think they do a songwriting workshop, and—

AM:

I’m sure they do.

AW:

And is Swannanoa—is that a river, or a valley or a something?

AM:

You know, I’m not sure what Swannanoa actually means—and there may be a Swannanoa River, but I don’t really know. Just down the road from it—there’s Ashville, then Swannanoa, then the next little burg going that direction is Black Mountain, which is famous in bluegrass and fiddling in that there’s a “Black Mountain Rag.”

AW:

Yeah.

AM:

I’m sure it’s that Black Mountain that it refers to. Also—I mean this is just a sideline to all this—is when I was with Jimmy Martin, there was a fire in the bus—

AW:

A fire in the bus?

AM:

Yeah, well, it was—

AW:

I guess Jimmy was freebasing, right?

AM:

Yeah, right. No, the tailpipe off the muffler apparently broke off, and in this old bus, the floor just above it was wooden.

AW:

Oh really?

AM:

So the heat ultimately set the wood on fire at the very back of the bus. I remember running back there with the fire extinguisher. I understand how fire extinguishers work, now, because as soon as I sprayed it, I couldn't breathe. You know, it just sucks all the oxygen out so there's no fire.

AW:

And also no fire extinguisher operator.

AM:

Right, right. Man, you have to be really—I had no idea how they—I assumed it was sort of some wet kind of thing that would—

AW:

Yeah, it's carbon dioxide is essentially what it is. It replaces the oxygen with carbon dioxide.

AM:

Right, it just sucks—I was going to say sucks it out, but just removes it—

AW:

Yeah, it replaces it.

AM:

Replaces it, yeah.

AW:

Either way, you can't breathe.

AM:

Right, I couldn't breathe. Anyway, the fire blistered the paint on the outside, so we stopped at a body shop—and I guess Jimmy knew this—but was operated by the Morris brothers—Wylie and Zeke Morris—who, in country music, had recorded real early on, and they are credited, although I can't believe they actually did this, as the authors of "Salty Dog Blues."

AW:

So this is almost like an episode out of Andy of Mayberry.

AM:

Right, right.



AW:

I'm just going to move this chair a little so I can see you better.

AM:

Oh yeah, that's—or we could scoot this back.

AW:

No, this is just as easy.

AM:

But anyway—so anyway, that was Black Mountain—and Swannanoa, I don't know what that is. There is an old-timey song called "Swannanoa Tunnel."

AW:

"Swannanoa Tunnel?"

AM:

Right, so there's probably a train trestle that went through a tunnel, and that was a—so it was Swannanoa, but I don't know what the—somebody mentioned to me what it was—it was an Indian word meaning "Pleasant View" or "High Place" or something.

AW:

Or "Work for your Tuition."

AM:

Right, right, work for your tuition, or whatever.

AW:

Well I've always, I've seen—I started seeing information on that in the days before website, I got, somehow—I guess because of attending things at Kerrville and playing there in the Dark Ages—I got on a mailing list, but they would send out this wonderful little brochure about their songwriting workshops, but it would list all the other things they would do over the summer, and I guess they have something going the whole summer.

AM:

I think so. I think all that's true. There's another place that's similar called the Augusta Heritage Center, which is in Elkins, West Virginia, I think it is—also at a college, and a similar view of sort of Earthy, touchy-feely, homemade kind of music stuff.



AW:

Well Asheville, I know, is in the center of all that local food production, which is a big thing in North Carolina generally, but Asheville is right in the thick of it.

AM:

Right, right. Well do you know Tom Pittman?

AW:

No, I don't.

AM:

Tom was the musician with the Austin Lounge Lizards.

AW:

Oh, okay.

AM:

He played banjo and steel guitar. Well he and his wife, Elizabeth, go there, and they have a place there, and they go there in the summers, and mostly it's a beautiful place, but additionally it's a big music scene, and kind of old-timey mountain-ish music, since it is in the mountains.

AW:

Right, and sort of old-timey looking. Let me take this brief break to say for the recorder, it's the twenty-second of August, 2012, Andy Wilkinson at Alan Munde's beautiful home in suburban Wimberley, and my daughter, Emily, happens to be here and Kitty, Alan's wife, is wondering around somewhere.

AM:

Yeah, she's catching up on work.

AW:

Yeah, having just flown in from the U.K. at four this morning—my goodness. So did you have to go get her, so you're also deprived of—?

AM:

Well, she went with this other lady, and this other lady's daughter picked them up and drove them to San Marcos, and I drove down to San Marcos to get her.

AW:

Yeah. Well goodness. Well, I looked at my notes from last time, and I had three things written

down that are—I know that we were interested in talking about, and they were your video lessons and the book and the play.

AM:

Oh, right, yeah.

AW:

But since we started talking about Ashville, one of the other things that I didn't have written down, but I wanted to cover at some point, but I was thinking about doing it last, but we can do it today if you want, is to talk about all the things you're doing now, since you've retired. This will be kind of leap-frogging ahead in our story, but it strikes me that you're maybe not playing as much as you did with Country Gazette, but you're playing a lot.

AM:

You know, I'm doing a lot, and one reason I—I'll use the word "retired"—from the school when I did is because I had enough years to get my insurance and my retirement monies, and I retired the first instant I could because I wanted to go play some more—

AW:

—while you still had your faculties and such.

AM:

Yeah, yeah. So I've been doing that, and a lot of it has been focused around these instructional music week workshops—either weekends or week-long events, and they've been real successful for me. Like many instructional things that happen in the world, the money isn't all that great, but it's enough.

AW:

Yeah, and usually they have room and board and some travel.

AM:

Room and board and some travel, so it works out well, and I do well at it, I think, because I taught at school for so long. It's hard to find sort of players who play well and people are interested in knowing how they play, but then can also organize it and talk about how they do it.

AW:

And can talk about—yeah, and I was really surprised, we've had—or I've had, in my songwriting class, guest lecturers from time to time, and I can tell you, there is absolutely zero correlation between how good a songwriter they are and how good a teacher about songwriting they are.

AM:

Oh, definitely.

AW:

It's all over the map both ways, and some of the ones that I thought would be just a wealth of information basically sat and said, "Well I don't know how I do it," and I thought—

AM:

"That doesn't help us."

AW:

That doesn't help us one bit.

AM:

Did they go "Oh, I just make it up?"

AW:

But I do know that there's another thing, and you're too modest to say it, but another aspect of your workshops I know has to be that there're just a whole lot of people who want to come hang out with Alan Munde, and that's going to be part of the deal.

AM:

Well, you know, a lot of these that I do, it's a faculty, so there will be several other faculty members, and I think just the idea of that number of good players together at one moment is attractive, and I'll be a part of that. I'm not sure they came—they didn't come to hang out with me, but just to be part of this scene.

AW:

Well many of them know what a party animal you are, so it's—

AM:

Oh yeah. You know the real cool thing about them for me—I'm going to mention just one downside is—and it's not a downside in any way except my ego—is that people are more interested in paying more money for you to tell them how you do what you do than for them to sit and listen to you do what you do. You know what I'm saying?

AW:

Yeah. They don't want to buy the painting; they want to watch you paint.

AM:

Right, and they want to know how you did it.

AW:

So they can do it themselves.

AM:

Yeah, exactly.

AW:

So they don't have to buy your painting.

AM:

Right, right—and they might buy your painting, and they might not, but it's just an odd place to be, but I'm glad I'm there, because—so as a result, I don't go perform so much as I go do these workshops, and any performance is just attached to that.

AW:

Yeah. Tell me if this is true for you as I know it is for me: I find sitting down in the classroom with the students, and when I do pick up a song of my songs to play, I don't perform it. I play it and stop and talk about things, and it never turns in—it never is quite a performance, and I think, for myself, I build up bad habits doing that. I'm not treating it like I should be treating it.

AM:

Right, as a “This is what I do completely, and beyond anything I might say about it, it is what it is.” I always say this and nobody—I never say it to anybody in particular, but basically, there is music or art, and then everything else is bullshit. You know what I mean?

AW:

I like that. I want to quote that.

AM:

You can sit and talk about what you do all you want, but talking about what you do is not what you do.

AW:

Yeah, that's right. What you do is what you do.

AM:

Exactly.

AW:

This is sort of a Zen discussion, isn't it?

AM:

Oh it is. Well, I mean it's like if you take an artist, and they do their art. Well then you look at it, and it is what it is, but as soon as they start talking about it, that's not the art. As soon as you—and that's why—and I actually read this as a quote, Don Reno said it. He said, "The reason there is music is because you can't say it."

AW:

Yeah. It's the same with a painting. You can't say that, either.

AM:

Exactly. It's like, you know, there's not enough words—there's way too many words to describe art—

AW:

Frank Vincent DuMond, an American painter, teacher, and sort of a hero to another very famous American painter named Edgar Payne—DuMond said, "I cannot teach you how to paint. I can only teach you how to think about painting," and you know, when I read that, I thought about that discussion you and I had at your kitchen table last time I was here. We talked about thinking about the music and the different ways to envision it as opposed to something distinct from—can you learn that. I know when I say to someone, "Swing it," and you see the blank stare, you realize "Oh, I can't explain this. I can't tell them what I mean. I just can't tell them what I mean."

AM:

Right, it just feels—it feels like this. You know, I have this—I call it preaching—I'm preaching here at this point—

AW:

Oh, that's good preaching, thought. I was about to say amen.

AM:

And I should get you this book—you should get it—maybe not—it's called *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*.

AW:

Oh yeah, who's it by?

AM:

It's by a woman named Rebecca Solnit, and she has several other books out. Basically what they are, are just long, book-length essays about whatever subject she's interested in. This walking thing has a chapter in there on pilgrimages—and I may have said this earlier in a tape, I don't know—tape—I mean in our talks.

AW:

Yeah, I call it a tape, too.

AM:

Yeah. And it's about, in part, religious pilgrimages. That's one of the forms of humans walking—that humans walking take, is they make these walks. The purpose is there are things that you can't know by words—by somebody speaking the words to you. The only way you can do it is to try to be there, and that's what pilgrimages are; you put your feet in the same place that either famous people, or—and by “famous” I mean religious sorts—and so you put your feet down and you try to be in that place. So I sort of extrapolated it into playing music. The people would ask me to play “Foggy Mountain Breakdown,” “Do you hate playing it, or do you tire of playing it?” and I say “No, I'm not, because it allows me in part to take this pilgrimage. You know I can tell you all the words I can think of to say about how to play this, but you playing it as best you can exactly like Earl Scruggs did is like you taking a pilgrimage. You're trying to put your fingers down and move them in the same way that Earl Scruggs did in 194-whatever—7 or -8—and by doing that, there are things that can't be spoken that you'll leek out from that experience.” So every time I play I say, you know, “It's like taking a pilgrimage. You're trying to put your fingers down in these same places that famous musicians put their fingers when they made famous music.” It's like this thing you do. You know, when you talk about “Oh, I don't want to copy anybody,” or “I don't want to play anybody else's licks,” or—to me, it's like you're passing up this huge, huge moments of understanding that you're passing by.

AW:

Yeah. Well I think you and I talked, also—because we did have this conversation, but I think it was at the kitchen table, and not when we were on recording—but when you said that, I mentioned that Dylan Thomas—if not the most famous poet of the twentieth century, he's one of the most famous poets, certainly with Frost and Elliot and Stevens and whomever else you might put in the little tiny group of very influential poets—Dylan Thomas refused to do a public performance of only his own material. He always did other poets along with it, and in fact there's a great anthology called *Dylan Thomas's Choice*, where they reprint some of the poems that he liked to read for people, and because he said essentially the same thing, that you can't—“how can you know what I'm talking about if you haven't heard this?” So that's very interesting. I love this idea of pilgrimage—and on a much lighter and less-serious note, we almost had a pilgrimage story this morning, because—you want to tell Alan what—?



**Emily Wilkinson (EW):**

Well, on Google Maps on your phone, it has a driving option and a walking option, and I had it on walking from going around downtown yesterday, but when we were looking up the road to turn off, it was still on walking, so—it takes about eleven hours to walk here from Austin, in case you were wondering.

AM:

Steady.

EW:

Yeah.

AW:

Very steady walk—and it takes you a different route, too.

EW:

Yeah.

AW:

Instead of taking Ranch Road 12, you turn off at some little thing called 1826 just outside of Austin, and I guess it winds you through the back—more direct.

AM:

More direct, yeah. I've done that. You know, you can—I'm going to Nashville, and I was looking on there and I put the walking thing on there, and it does do a different route. "Turn down lane next to big red house."

AW:

Yeah, "Go down alley. Jump over fence."

AM:

My dad was born in 1915, he was in Rhode Island, and he was telling me that they had a car—and I've got a picture of it somewhere, and I don't know what year it might be, 1924, '25, they took a car trip somewhere—and Triple A, surprisingly, has been around since then, because he said they got a Triple A trip kit—you know, like you used to get before the Internet, you would go down to Triple A and they'd—

AW:

And tell them where you were going.



AM:

Right, and they'd put together this little flip book. Anyway, he says he remembers the directions were—he says because the roads weren't paved and they weren't marked and they weren't—and it'd say "Drive three miles to red house on left, turn left down lane, go to big tree," so it was like a physical description of—

AW:

Really—like somebody in the country would tell you how to get somewhere.

AM:

Yeah, right. They don't know the names of the roads. They just know where to turn. So anyway, back to workshops, I do a lot of those, and there are more now—Camp Bluegrass, which was started at South Plains College in probably '86 or '87, was one of the early ones. I don't think it was the first one by any means, but it was an earlier one, and did very successful for many years, and one of the reasons was because there weren't as many, but now there are lots of them, and they're in a lot more accessible places than West Texas.

AW:

But is it not still keeping a crowd?

AM:

Yeah, yeah, it did well, but it's not—from its zenith it's backed off a bit, and I think partly it's the economy, but partly it's because there's a lot of other places offering that are more accessible and at more attractive spots, and one thing and another. There's a lot of them now, and there's even real specific ones so that I do one called the Midwest Banjo Camp, there's the Suwannee Banjo Camp, and the American Banjo Camp, so there're really specifically banjo things, where other things are bluegrass—or in conjunction with Swannanoa, with other types of workshops that goes on.

AW:

Well so at a banjo camp, nobody with a guitar shows up to play second?

AM:

Well, they hire local musicians to come in and provide that, but it does get kind of rackety.

AW:

I was going to say, it's pretty banjo-y.

AM:

Yeah, because there'd be like a hundred twenty to a hundred fifty banjos—and they do old timey and bluegrass are the two big categories.

AW:

So you have people that are frailing, and people with four strings, and people with five strings, and—

AM:

There would be no four strings at these particular banjo camps, although that would be a good addition.

AW:

Well, does anybody play a four-string anymore?

AM:

I'm sure they do. I'm sure there are.

AW:

You know what I am seeing a lot more now, are the banjo ukuleles.

AM:

I see a lot more ukuleles now.

AW:

Yeah, just in general, but I've seen a lot more banjo ukuleles, which I thought was kind of an interesting—

AM:

Yeah, I think the ukulele—and this is a comment about people that come to these events, and what they're up to—they get into this idea of—I always liked this—Kitty will ask me, says “Well what were your students like?” and I say “Well, they're mostly older, and they mostly just want to learn to play a little.”

AW:

“So what—can I—I'll play the ocarina instead of the flute.”

AM:

Right, so they get into banjo because they like—they see bluegrass as this participatory music that they can enter into, and they got to the jam sessions and they see all these people sitting

around playing, and they think, “Oh, I want to do that, too.” So they hire me to come teach them, but what I’m really about is playing a banjo in a really specific way in a really specific context, and what they’re wanting is a really general way in a really general context.

AW:

So that after dinner, instead of leaning around someone at the piano playing “Way Down upon a Suwannee River,” they can do that with a banjo.

AM:

Or they want to get it out and they want to accompany themselves as they sing, but also to make a presentation of the song somehow. Really, what they—I’m trying to teach them to play in the band that—like Flatt and Scruggs had—and what they’re wanting, in my mind, I think is they’re wanting Pete Seeger. And in that sense, the ukulele is where they really need to be.

AW:

Yeah, although I got a ukulele because I just wanted to think differently about a stringed instrument, and I found that to play that—to me, it’s very much like a guitar in that you can very quickly learn three chords on a guitar, but to really play it well takes a lot more work—and the same with that little ukulele, because it makes—it’s so easy to change a chord that ukulele music has a chord every beat.

AM:

Right, a lot of chords.

AW:

You think about it, and I hear of very few people who pick it up to—like my son got me an album, Eddie Vedder—he’s with Pearl Jam—very famous alternative rock group, he has a whole ukulele album, but mainly he’s just whanging away on three chords.

AM:

Yeah, well it’s like anything, you know, it can be—and I know Harry Reser, who’s from the twenties, probably, you can see YouTube videos of him playing elaborate stuff on the ukulele, and I’m sure there are artistes and artists of the ukulele, but I’m just talking about—they’re easy to play, small, light—

AW:

Oh, there are, but—yeah, no, no, yeah—and people are looking at the banjo as the same way.

AM:

Yeah, they want it to be that, but when they get into it, they find out what I’m trying to get them

to do is not that easy—as an introductory level. Now, after you get into it, it can be easy—it's easier than the guitar in some ways.

AW:

Do you think so, really?

AM:

Well, if you consider the guitar—you can play jazz and classical and all sorts of rock stuff and country picking stuff—all of that is more difficult than just playing bluegrass-style banjo. The guitar has a larger world.

AW:

Yeah, it does have a larger world, but there's something about maybe the smaller world of the banjo—particularly the five-string banjo—that is—to me, it leaves less room for error.

AM:

Yeah, it's a—

AW:

It's a real exacting thing.

AM:

Played at its best, it is very exact, and not just the banjo, but the whole music genre is really exact, and it somewhat demands it of you, or it isn't what it is. So anyway, but those are the workshops, and I do my best, and after having taught at school so long, I have sort of a way of—that I've thought about, how not only I learn to play, but how I go about organizing my playing, and I've got a way to present it. So I do a fairly good job, and I think it's worked well because I get invited back. Those puppies can be annoying. So anyway, I've done a lot of that. I do as much performance as I can get by with. When I went to Minnesota, I have a friend up there named Adam Granger, who plays guitar and sings—and Minnesota and Minneapolis, St. Paul has a fairly active music scene, so we can go up there—I can go up there—

AW:

And it's been active for a long time.

AM:

Oh yeah, yeah. I've got something I should send you. Somebody just sent me—maybe you've already seen it—but it's sort of the geography of music—

AW:

No, I haven't seen it.

AM:

—of just sort of musical hotspots—and you can name them all before you even start. They're all—Nashville is the top of the list, but they're Nashville, LA, New York, but then Dallas, Austin, Minneapolis, Portland, Seattle, Denver, Chicago, Florida—Tallahassee—

AW:

Does it have the old places like Kansas City?

AM:

Yeah, it has all—and what it is, it's where the populations are, obviously, that's where it's got to be. But it just sort of ranks them—and San Antonio—I think it's the top fifty, and San Antonio is maybe fiftieth.

AW:

Yeah, well San Antonio—since I've been doing these interviews, I've found that it's a lot more interesting and more complex than I thought.

AM:

Oh man, I would bet so.

AW:

Yeah, especially when you get into Mexican-American music, and there's this odd—I think you and I talked about it maybe last time I was here—this really odd and surprising connection between the swamp rock scene in south Louisiana and conjunto music in San Antonio—almost exclusively because one producer, Huey P. Meaux—

AM:

Oh yeah, Huey Meaux—

AW:

Yeah, was—he said, “Well why don't I use an accordion player also from conjunto style with some of this Cajun stuff?” And so they started this cross-pollination, and all the players liked it, and so there's this little circuit that's built up, and until you sort of stumble into it, it never occurs to you that there's actually a—not a pilgrimage—but sort of they're beating the path down for that same thing. It also makes you stop and think that maybe Kansas City got to be an old time jazz joint not just because black people were moving there from the delta, but because maybe one particular black person moved there who could play.

AM:

Yeah, oh, very much so.

AW:

I know bluegrass, what does it owe to Bill Monroe?

AM:

Yeah, it just takes one person that kind of hits upon the right strain that people go “Hold it, I like that. Do that again.”

AW:

When you’re traveling to these workshops, Alan, do you get to double dip by having concerts on the way up and back and thing appear often?

AM:

If I can, yes. Often I don’t do that, but many times—I should—often I don’t, but sometimes I do. I did one in Florida that I had to drive to, and then I’d gotten another one in Nashville, and then I sort of filled in a whole week’s worth of stuff, but that’s—it means you have to dial people’s number on the telephone and talk to them and go “Yeah, well I’m Alan Munde. I’ve been doing this, and check me out,” and I’m tired of explaining who I am.

AW:

Right—and also, it’s a little more difficult to do a solo banjo show—is it not—than—?

AM:

Well, basically I don’t, and that’s why I always try to find—like Adam Granger in Minneapolis, and Elliott went with me on that trip, and he and I do stuff, and I’m looking to do more stuff with him just as a duo, because that’s the only way I—it puts the banjo in a little more context, because I’m not—it’s not—for me, anyway, I can do a few solo pieces, but it’s not a solo instrument for me.

AW:

Right, and not very many people—when I think of—in fact the only one I think of that just jumps out is maybe Derroll Adams, who was a fifties beat era, traveled with Jack Elliott a lot in Europe, but if you think about it, he was essentially a songwriter using a banjo, and it was folk music that he had written.

AM:

Right, right. Well, I’m not a singer, which is another downside for me, because I always need a singer.



AW:

Yeah, but those of us who sing are happy to hear that.

AM:

Well yeah, we don't need any more competition.

AW:

No. Everybody thinks they can sing now.

AM:

Yeah, that's what Joe always said at school. He says, "You know, to play guitar or any instrument you have to study a little bit before you can say you're a guitarist, but everybody is a singer." So anyway—so I do those, and another aspect of them that is really—that I love, love, love, is you get to see a lot of—in terms of the faculty—you see a lot of players and singers who are either friends or unknown to you, but you get to see them and pal around with them for a week or so—or a few days—plus, this is the thing—and you may see this—have this experience at the cowboy gatherings—is that every night, or one night during the event, they have a faculty concert, and I say, "It's the best music nobody is ever going to hear."

AW:

Yeah, yeah.

AM:

You know, there's—you've got these players who you know for a certain fact are marvelous, and they get up and they play—it may just be three or four tunes or whatever it is, but it's not like they have this hit song that they're going to crank out because everybody expects it. It's just "Here's what I'm into at the moment, and I love, and I think I can do right now for you. Here it is," and it's always really good, really interesting music, and it happens and then it goes away, and maybe a hundred and fifty people hear it. It's like the best concert you've ever seen in your whole life since the last, or until the next one.

AW:

Yeah, well it's—whoever came up with the idea of cowboy poetry gathering, or Swannanoa gathering, or—I was watching this really sad PBS fundraiser thing about the folk movement—oh, gosh it was awful—but they had—not Chad Mitchell, but one of those Rooftop Singers—it was a smaller group, who, "There'll be a gathering here tonight. I see by your friendly faces—

AM:

Right, oh yeah, yeah, yeah.



AW:

Yeah, and I think that whole idea of gathering is brilliant, because most of us who go to those things, we all have plenty of opportunity to perform, but we don't have many opportunities to gather and get around other people and do something that—like you say—is ephemeral and—

AM:

And it's cool though, because you have this faculty that is like incredibly talented, just bundled up here for a week or three days—whatever it is—and they're going to do a little concert, and it's going to be the coolest thing you've ever heard. Say everybody does three tunes, and there's ten people there—and they do go on a little long, some of them—but it's going to be like two hours or two and a half hours of the coolest stuff. If you're into that sort of stuff, it's like “Man, this is it!” I listen to it, and I go “Why doesn't everybody like this?”

AW:

Yeah, and “Why are we doing that instead of getting into arenas?”

AM:

Yeah. Well you know my—what I say about bluegrass—people ask me why bluegrass is not popular, and I've probably said this before, because I don't have that many things to say—it is because you cannot crowd fourteen thousand people around a tree.

AW:

No, you haven't said that before.

AM:

Yeah, but that's the reason. That's the reason all of these kinds of musics don't make it, is because they don't—

AW:

They're too intimate.

AM:

Yeah, they don't work—they're not what they are when you have fourteen thousand people. It's just—

AW:

Yeah. Well my favorite thing that you've said—sort of similar to this—was why you didn't like rock and roll, because you preferred music that—or you didn't like music that couldn't be played without both feet on the ground.

AM:

Right. Yeah, I just stand there flat-footed and play—and that's another thing. Those musicians that are onstage during the little workshop performances, they're the same ones sitting in the lobby doing the same thing out there just between classes. There's Byron Berline and Jim Hurst jamming over there, and there's four or five people standing around listening to them, and you're going "God, listen to them." The music they're playing is worthy of fifty thousand, but there's only three or four there. I always want to tell people when they bitch about—you know, these house concerts—every house concert ought to be fifty dollars admission, minimum, because there's three or four people standing around listening to Byron Berline and Jim Hurst play—that's fifty dollars right there. It's like—they charge ten dollars or fifteen—"No, we couldn't charge over fifteen." Hell, y'all ought not to charge less than fifty. For an event like that nowadays is like "This is it, buddy." You talk about paying five hundred dollars or a hundred dollars or whatever to go hear Paul McCartney—that's shit compared with paying fifty dollars to sit and listen to Byron Berline and Jim Hurst.

AW:

Yeah, because essentially, when you go to the big arena, you can get the same—other than the experience of being there with people who are excited, which you could get at a football game or something—but the music, per say, becomes an excuse for fifty thousand people to get together, as opposed to fifty thousand people getting together for the music. Those are two different things.

AM:

Oh yeah, yeah—and that's not to say that those people don't play fabulous music and do great show.

AW:

Yeah, or that people don't enjoy it, but wouldn't we all rather be sitting in the living room with Paul McCartney, as opposed to—

AM:

Oh shit! Yeah, you'd pay fifty dollars. But I'm just—you're right, you know, and I just said it, they're there for the show—and the music is part of the show, but they're there for the show that is Paul McCartney, rather than sitting there for the music of Byron Berline and Jim Hurst.

AW:

Yeah, and the festivals have kind of done a smaller version of the same thing. People go to—and I remember when I started going to Kerrville, which was not at the beginning of it by any stretch—I've been going for about ten years—but there were plenty of people who came and were there the entire time and never attended a show. They camped out, and—now, I mean they

did have music, it wasn't like they weren't there for music, but they weren't there for the show. They were there for this even that had its own—I mean there were the same kind of people at chili cook-offs. They didn't cook any chili, they just came.

AM:

Yeah, they didn't even like chili; they just came for the event.

AW:

Yeah, and brought peanut butter and jelly. They came for the event.

AM:

Yeah, they say, "I can't eat that stuff."

AW:

Yeah, exactly—and probably good for you—

AM:

But, this—I'm sorry, go ahead.

AW:

No, no, no—keep going.

AM:

It's just that, once again, it's back to the idea of music—there's music or art, and then everything else is bullshit. It just is, it has to be.

AW:

Alan, this is bumper sticker material. I want one.

AM:

Okay. Well, it's true—and I didn't make it up—I rephrased it, but it's like Don Reno said, "The reason there's music is because you can't say it," and it's the same.

AW:

Perfect. Well when you do—you've been doing some tours, though, that aren't connected with workshops and camps. You get out and play.

AM:

I try to. I don't do very many of them because it's just not the way it's worked out, but like I was getting back to that Minnesota trip I did with Adam Granger—and he had a friend named Dick

Kimmel, who was a mandolin player, and they were able to put together a nice little tour up through south of Minneapolis, and then I got the thing over in—Al's concert over in Wisconsin, and it was all music-making. It wasn't any workshops at all. I really enjoyed doing that, because that's—you know, in the end, that's what I do, and I'd like to do that from time to time, is just play and move on to the next song and not necessarily stop and talk about it. So I do that, but that's—and then I play with Janice and Elliott Rogers some, and some with just Elliot, or I play locally with a guy named Jerry Burns, who has gigs from time to time, and I'm trying to record now with Billy Bright, who's a really fantastic mandolin player that lives not a mile or so from here as the crow flies, but to drive there it's five or six miles. So I am trying to continue to do that just to—because—you know, years and years ago, Jim Dickson, who was the producer of those early Country Gazette records, he had mentioned—and I think I already said this—that when people ask you what your favorite record is, tell them “The next one.” So that's what I'm always—always trying to have a next something. It might not be a big deal or something, but it's just something to have to sit down and go “Well, I need to learn to do something on this tune that Billy has written,” and it allows me to explore and do pilgrimages, and the whole bit—it's wonderful.

AW:

Yeah, there's no question for me that the best song that I've got is the one I'm working on.

AM:

Well, you know, you always—

AW:

If you didn't feel that way, you need to just quit.

AM:

And I'm sure—I don't know if other people are like this, but you know car salesmen, it's always the next deal. I need to do the next deal, and if you've sold all your cars, then what do you do? Well, you need to go out and buy some more cars and try to sell them, and that's the same—what I'm trying to do is just trying to keep enough things out there in front of me that I'm still moving forward, whether the rest of the world notices or not, which is fine. I'm moving forward on my own—at a very small pace, but it's okay.

AW:

Well one of the things that you said when we were talking earlier about your time spent at South Plains College teaching, was that—you didn't use these words exactly, and if they're too strong one way or the other, then correct it, but what I took from it was that it was almost like “My real career is on hold for a little while,” and one of the reasons you wanted to retire was to get it off hold and back.

AM:  
Right.

AW:  
Now, do you feel like that's happened?

AM:  
Oh yeah, yeah, very much so. Yeah. It's not as intense—you know, and musicians are always—this is always, always the musician's complaint: "I don't have enough work; I've got too much work." Where people who go to work every day, they can—

AW:  
They have the right amount of work.

AM:  
Yeah. They go in and they work eight hours a day, and then they come home, and then they work eight hours, and then come home—where musicians—and there's some truth in this—they think every gig might be their last gig.

AW:  
Oh yeah, it's why we never say "No."

AM:  
I know.

AW:  
it's because you don't know, "Is the phone ever going to ring again?"

AM:  
You know, and people ask me something, something—and I say, "Well, you know, I'm trying to never turn down work." They say, "You don't play in North Carolina very much, do you?" and I go, "Well, no, but I've never turned down any work in North Carolina." They always have these false images that you're in control.

AW:  
Yeah, yeah, I know. People will say to me "Well why don't you just get a gig up here and come visit?" and I said, "Well, I wish it were that easy."

AM:  
Yeah, exactly.

AW:

You know, I can't just go to the shelf and pull a gig off and say "Okay, I want to—"

AM:

Early, early on—I mean when I was still in high school and would go hang out—and could hardly play and go hang out at Slim's music store, or there was a little folk music club called—I think it was called The Well—but anyway, I'd hang out there just way off to the side, and I'd hear all these people talk about "the circuit" —if you get on "the circuit," as if it's a merry-go-round you get on—

AW:

No, it's like catching a train or something.

AM:

Yeah, if you get on it, it just moves around and when you get off, you're at another place. But there is no circuit. You have to go out and create it, and that's the hard part, and it's the part I don't enjoy doing, and I'm not good at, and I'm not very watchful of it.

AW:

Yeah, I started going downhill the minute the phone started ringing on its own—and it wasn't ringing that much, but as soon as people were calling me, it was like I quit calling them.

AM:

I know, I know, it's really difficult because for a musician—and as you well know—you spend 90 percent of your time just trying to get to that 10 percent.

AW:

Uh-huh, that's well put.

AM:

It's like what you really do is you're a truck driver, and when you get there you also play music.

AW:

Yeah, and what you get paid for is usually hauling stuff around—setting up a PA, taking it down, loading it in the car.

AM:

Yeah, it's a funny, funny, funny business, because it's—you know, you'll spend a day or two getting someplace where you can do something for an hour.



AW:

Uh-huh, and then a day or two getting back.

AM:

I know, how goofy is that? You have to make that hour or two hours pay for the two days, and it's tough. It's a tough way to go—and people, I don't think really quite realize—they say, "Oh, well, here's some gas money," or "Here's this or that," and you go "Yeah, but what about my time?"

AW:

Yeah, yeah—my favorite is people say—and they're in North Carolina and they call you on the phone and say "How much do you charge for a thirty-minute concert?" And you say, "Well, two days to get there, two days get back, so that's four days—a day there, that's five days, so—" and they say, "No, we just want you for thirty minutes."

AM:

Yeah, and I may—since we're rambling on here—Joe used to say—people would call and say, "How much do you charge to play something?" "Oh, we don't charge anything to play. We play all the time. Alan's over in his office playing right now. We don't charge anything to play at all, because we play all the time." "Oh great! Do you think you could come such-and-such and be such-and-such and play for such a length of time?" "Oh, you want us to play somewhere at a certain time. Now that costs. Getting there at a certain time, that costs. The playing part is free."

AW:

Yeah. No, people don't understand that. They also don't understand that when—early on I got really tired of going to these really tiny, ill-conceived cowboy gatherings in our area, you know, and you'd play—you'd get up there and you'd play two songs. So I thought, Well, I'm going to start charging. If I only play two songs, I want fifteen hundred dollars. If I get to play an hour, I only want two hundred dollars. No one ever quite understood that.

AM:

You know, my favorite deal that I offered—and I actually did this—a festival promoter said, "Man, I lost seven thousand dollars this weekend," and I said, "I'll tell you what I'll do; I'll make you a deal. You give me seven thousand dollars, and then next year at this same time, on this very day, take your family out to dinner—and you will have come out in the same place you are now, but you will not have to have done all this work," and they look at me like I'm nuts, where I'm looking at them as "You're the nutty one." So anyway, that's what I'm doing now, and I have a little mail-order business with a website, but who doesn't?



AW:

For your CDs?

AM:

For my CDs and instructional stuff—

AW:

Ah, good segue.

AM:

—and downloads of instructional stuff—

AW:

Good segue, because since we've been talking about workshops, I thought this would be a good time to talk about the video lessons.

AM:

All righty.

AW:

How did that—is that a thing that started with John Hartin?

AM:

Now, for me, it started with John Hartin. The early pioneer of that, I suppose—and I'm making this up—would be Homespun—

AW:

Homespun, yeah.

AM:

—which is Artie and Happy Traum. They're the ones that sort of started—in terms of music instruction—and John Hartin picked up on it. I started at the school in 1986, and almost immediately, John started this instructional video business called Texas Music and Video. I did many—I don't know how many titles I've got with him, maybe as many as fifteen. So what else do you want to know?

AW:

How do you envision what a lesson is? It seems to me like that would be a really difficult thing to do.

AM:

It is, it is—well, mostly it was driven by his commercial concept of what he could sell. He would, like many people—and songwriters do the same thing—they come up with a title, or a hook.

AW:

Yeah, and then they fill in the rest.

AM:

It's like a car—a classic car that you've restored, but all you had to start with was the handle.

AW:

Yeah, the bumper.

AM:

Yeah, the bumper or something—and everything else is made up. So he would come up with this idea of something he thought he could sell, but in part it was based on what he thought I could do—you know, each one of his teachers could do. So he would think about Alan Munde, and—“Well they would want to know how you play a certain song, so what if you got”—and it all had to be done in an hour, so however many songs you thought you could teach in an hour.

AW:

But he didn't say, like, finger rolls or—?

AM:

Well, no, not in that sense, but he would say—we've got one called—rather than calling it “Beginning Banjo,” we're going to call it “Basic Bluegrass Banjo,” and so that would be that, you know sort of that sort of thing. Then most everything else after that was groups of songs and how to play them, but also did a follow-up to the beginning one. You would need some songs—now that you could play a few tunes in a relatively simple way, you need some other songs to practice that way.

AW:

And they're a little more difficult?

AM:

Well, these would be—

AW:

Oh, just to add to your repertoire?

AM:

Right, these would be easy solos for the banjo. So it would be a follow-up—

AW:

Yeah, one, two, and three?

AM:

Yeah, for that, and then after you do that, here's some more advanced tunes, which were basically taken from my recorded output, and then "Here's how I played this song," and "Here's the first two measures, and be careful to watch for this, and here's the important thing in here," and I'd say a few words about it, and then work all the way through the tune, and then whatever would edit down into an hour, that would be called "Festival Favorites." Here's one called "Bluegrass Banjo Favorites." Here's another one called "Gospel Favorites." Another qualifier in all this—the more he got into it is the more it became important, is you had to wind up using basically PD material—either original or PD.

AW:

So you didn't have to pay—

AM:

Yeah, so you didn't have to pay some royalty rate. It got to be—I think he got a few letters, going "Oh, if you're using that title, you need to pay this tune," and I think one or two, I maybe even went back and redid—to eliminate the song that was the problem.

AW:

Yeah. Well, as we found—Hedges and I doing recordings—the change in the copyright law put a bunch of things back into copyright that had been in PD.

AM:

Oh really?

AW:

Yeah. So like some of the old blues guy, we'd—Blind Willie Johnson doing "John the Revelator," and some other things—we did some of his, and under the immediately-preceding version of the law, it was in public domain, but the Mickey Mouse revision made it retroactive, and so it really narrowed the scope of what was—at least for sung-word songs—which ones of those were PD, and which ones weren't.

AM:

Right, right, oh I'm sure that's an issue. So that was another caveat in doing those things. Over

time, like I said, I did maybe fifteen or twenty—probably closer to fifteen—but then he would also be a contractor for other—like Mel Bay. So he would say, “Mel Bay wants a product that does this. Would you do it?” And the downside of that—and I don’t begrudge him one little bit—but he became involved in the income stream, also. It didn’t take long to figure out, “Well, you could go to Mel Bay and—”

AW:

On your own.

AM:

On my own, and didn’t always have to go through John Hartin. I don’t know if he noticed that or not, or cared about it, because he knows how things operate.

AW:

He strikes me that he would find it odd that you didn’t—

AM:

—do it yourself. Yeah, “If you’re not going to do it, I’ll do it.” But it was—he did have the contact and I didn’t. So anyway, I’ve wound up doing several books through Mel Bay, and the video part of it has sort of really, really fallen off. John had some very, very lucrative years, and I made very—what I thought was pretty nice—royalties from those video instruction things. We got in—or John, and through John, me—got in fairly early enough to where people—that was a novelty to them, and they would buy them. So I did fairly well early on, on those things, and now it’s nearly nothing.

AW:

Is that because of YouTube and all the free stuff out there?

AM:

I think YouTube has been a factor in that because people can get stuff for free.

AW:

And not only can they get it for free, they now think all of it should be free.

AM:

You know, and I’m—that’s a disappointing aspect of it, because my analogy of it is, even if you leave your keys in the car, it’s still your car, and it’s not for anybody else to take, and “Oh, you left your keys in it” is not an excuse, but that’s the way they see it.

AW:

Yeah. File-sharing. Well people don't—a video came in a box. You had to plug it into your machine and play it, but a file is just bits and bytes, and I think people don't see a—

AM:

—a connection between the producer of it—or the owner, or whatever you want to call it.

AW:

Yeah.

AM:

Oh yeah, and people—and I like this line—I asked a fellow musician how he was doing, he says, “Oh, I’m doing great. You know, there was a—last night, there was a crew from YouTube filming our concert,” and you think “A crew from YouTube?” What he means—you know, he’s being facetious.

AW:

Right, the crew was the audience.

AM:

The crew was the audience, you know. So you go do something, and the next day it’s on YouTube. The point they make, which is a point well-made, is it’s a good thing and a bad thing. You do get out there, and if it’s good—but you have no control over whether it’s any good or not.

AW:

Exactly, there’s a very interesting article in the New York Times today about the summer hit songs, and they were focusing on the song “Call Me Maybe,” which, as they say, went viral—and you know, you get a little tired of hearing that phrase, but it went viral. The girl who wrote it I thought was very interesting, because in the article they ask her, “Well what’s your next hit song?” and she says, “How would I know? There’s no way of knowing. On this, you just do your best, you do something you think is catchy and you put it out there and hope that people like it, because you don’t know,” and I thought, Maybe there’s always been a little of that, but there were filters along the way—for better or worse—so that when something finally did come out on a record and got it to the radio, it’s odds of being successful were far greater than where we’re starting now.

AM:

Right. It’s just a whole different—I mean this is a stupid thing to say, but it’s a whole different world right now. What it is for me, anyway, and for you, possibly—and Emily would be a good

counter to all this, because—you know, I can't remember what year you would have to be born that your whole life was spent with the Internet. What year would you have to—did they have the Internet when you were a kid, or—?

EW:

I think it was around, but I don't remember really getting on it until I was in, probably junior high.

AM:

Right, so—

AW:

She was born in 1980, so there were people using the Internet, but they were in universities. If you had a computer at home, the whole idea of a modem was outrageous, you know. You used the computer—it sat by itself, and you did your books on it, or you did games on it, but it wasn't connected to anything.

AM:

Well so, let's say you had to—if you were born in the nineties sometime, then your whole life has been in the Internet Age.

AW:

And you're now in your twenties.

AM:

Right—and you and I come from an age when—and I'm going to use this; you can use a lot of different words—but we come from the age of the editor. There was always—whatever you did that was going to go out into the public almost always had to be filtered through some channel, where somebody had to look at it or listen to it and go “Yes, I'll pass it on.” So all the information and music you got was sort of trimmed, and is that good or bad? I don't know.

AW:

Well, it's good if yours is the stuff that gets through. It's bad if yours is the stuff that doesn't.

AM:

Well, I mean, you could say, then, “If mine didn't get through, then I need to get better,” or “I need to get some other way,” but you could make the argument, “Well, what all the great art and music we lost because nobody ever heard it or read it or saw it because some asshole didn't like it.”



AW:

Yeah, Eddie Reeves recounts in this little book he's written about his career that he started, from the very first, when he'd get a 45 down of one of his songs, whether it was him or someone else, he would frame the 45. So he had—by the time he's on up in his career, he had this one wall in his hallway of his home that had all these 45 records in a frame. Someone—a contemporary songwriter that was a big factor in Nashville, and I can't remember who it was—came over for dinner and saw those 45s and said "Oh, Eddie, what are all those?" and he said, "Well, these are 45s that are my songs," and he said, "Oh, and what kind of hit was this?" and he said, "Oh, it wasn't a hit," and he pointed to another one—and it turns out not a one of them was a hit. Finally the songwriter turns to Eddie and said "Eddie, can't you take a hint?" I thought, Well, there's one way of looking at the filter, you know, Can't you take a hint?

AM:

Well, then the other side is, everything is available, but you have to figure it out yourself. I don't know, is that better? I'm not smart enough to figure it all out. So it's just a difference, and I'm not saying one is better than the other, although I do appreciate the idea of an editor.

AW:

I do, too—and I see it, especially in the work I do as an editor for a press—I see what comes to me, and then I see what it can be when the author and I work together to get it improved, and something much better comes out of it. I say that because I'm the editor, but I see all these self-published books, and you can—the other thing is you can tell one in an instant, just like a self-produced record. Most of the time, you can tell that in an instant, as well, because there are things that are wrong with it that should have been fixed—and that's a minor—that's not saying, "Well, you shouldn't write this kind of book or record this kind of music." That's just saying, "If you do it, fix it."

AM:

Well you know, I read somewhere—and this had to do with political speech, but it could be true of the Internet—that no other time in history have things been more well-documented and less memorable. There's—you can go on the Internet and see anything and not remember any of it, whereas you could have read a book from 1920 and never forget it, you know, because it was so finely-honed to a point that it was just—I can't remember where I read that, but it was about political speech. But on the other hand, I read a book once called *The First Casualty*, and it was a book on war correspondents, and I thought, Well, maybe —before I knew it was—I thought well, maybe the war correspondents were the first casualty of a war, but it wasn't—it was the quote, "The first casualty of war is the truth."

AW:

Yeah, I was going to say it's the truth.



AM:

Right, and it's because how the war correspondents get it wrong.

AW:

Yeah, and how if you got it right, someone is there to stop you from saying it.

AM:

Exactly, exactly. That was the whole point is that if they got it right, the editors would squish it, but if they got it wrong, it just—and my favorite little episode in there was what has come to be called Lincoln's Gettysburg Address was reported in one of the newspapers. It described the whole event because it was part—his address, or his speech was just part of a larger celebration, so it described the whole celebration. The last sentence of the article was, "And Lincoln also spoke."

AW:

Yeah, "and Lincoln also spoke."

AM:

And that was the Gettysburg Address.

AW:

Yeah, there's somebody who, at least in our estimation, didn't get it right.

AM:

But the filter of time got it right, whereas the filter of time for the Internet, I don't know if it exists.

AW:

Well, it's hard to say, because—we talk about in the archive world, we're worried about we're going to lose all this stuff, yet if you've ever gotten your name misspelled on a mailing list or an email list, you realize that it never goes away. Emily just had this great project that she organized—came up with an idea, brought in an artist, had this art installation where these giant sculptures of fire—range fire—were made with Crayolas—and they're set outside, the idea is they melt and deteriorate, just like the destructive thing that fire is, so they get some photographs, and it goes viral and starts appearing—she gets attention for this all over the world. But early on, somebody left out the name of the Ranching Heritage Center, right? And so all this brilliant publicity, no one knows where the things are. So like you say, is there a filter for it? I don't know.

AM:

Yeah, no there's not. People do it themselves. It's sort of a self-filtering thing, which is more democratic and less totalitarian or controlling, and so—it's—everything is a double-edged sword. It has its good things and its bad things.

AW:

Well this is another good segue, if we have time, to talk about the book.

AM:

Oh, the book Joe and I did?

AW:

Yeah.

AM:

Yeah, we can talk about that. Whose idea the book was, was Susan Miller.

AW:

Ah, Susan Miller, yeah.

AM:

And Susan—

AW:

She was an editor at Texas Tech Press.

AM:

Yeah, here we go, an editor—an editor, again, and a really, really good one—really slick. The reason she called, initially, was—I mentioned this Adam Granger—well, Susan Miller is from Norman, Oklahoma, and she knew Adam Granger.

AW:

Now was Adam from Norman?

AM:

Adam was from Norman.

AW:

But he's living in—?

AM:  
Minneapolis.

AW:  
Okay, I didn't know he was from Norman.

AM:  
Yeah, he's from Norman. I knew him in Norman, but I did not know Susan, because she's—

AW:  
She's native, right?

AM:  
Yeah.

AW:  
Cherokee or—Osage—

AM:  
I'm not sure, but she's a really smart woman, I thought, the little bit I dealt with her. She said she had just moved to town, and her husband at the time—I can't remember—he maybe was an artist.

AW:  
Or a teacher.

AM:  
Or maybe he was a teacher. Anyway, they divorced not long after—and they, also—I mean this is sort of off the point, but their son, who was maybe going into high school or in high school, was kicked out of school because his hair was too long—

AW:  
Yeah, and there was a lawsuit.

AM:  
—and there was a lawsuit. I think they lost, but I'm not sure that they said, "You have to cut your hair." But that was right after I moved there, I remember reading that and going "Man, where are we living?" I thought—which, I want to ask you before you leave, I read something disturbing about this county judge named Head.

AW:

Head? Yeah, we'll talk about it after we—

AM:

Yeah. Anyway, Susan called and basically just introduced herself and said, "I'm living in town. I knew Adam Granger," and "Oh, that's great," and she said, "Oh, by the way, we're looking for someone to write a book. I'm the editor at Texas Tech Press and we need somebody to write a book on country music in West Texas. Would you be interested?" And I thought, You know, and here I am again—I should have said no, but I'm always—the musician thing in you is like "God, if I turn this down, what happens?" So I said, "Well, I can't do it by myself, but if I could get Joe Carr involved—if he'll do it, we'll come talk to you." So I talked to Joe, and he said, "Oh yeah, I think we could do that." I mean, stupid. So we go in and talk to Susan and come up with this deal—this idea—Joe and I are not historians, nor do we know any—or know how it's done. So we just—we only write a book because we read a book, so we wrote a book that's like books that we've read. So you need this stuff—so we claimed we could do it, and Joe says, "Oh yeah, I think we could do a chapter a month," and then he, years after it was out, he says, "Oh, yeah. We did. We did the first chapter in February of '95, then the next chapter was about June of '98," you know. So we just kind of sat down and divvied it up. I said, "I'll do the one on bluegrass," and Joe did the introductory chapter, and we just sort of divvied out these chapter titles that—or ideas that we came out with—came up with—and guided by Susan, and started going out and interviewing people. I had a little machine, and we'd—either we'd go together or separately and interview people—Joe claimed we interviewed over a hundred, and I'll go with that number. Some of them are real good, and some of them weren't, some of them were more interesting than others, and some of them kind of understood what they were up to. Tommy Hancock was real good—he had a good handle on what he was up to. Sonny Curtis was real good—but all the other people were just sort of confused by it to a certain extent. So you'd try to ask the questions that were like just friendly questions—that's the way I thought of them—so I'd ask people, "What are the earliest memories of music?" or "What are the first song titles you remember?" or "Do you remember seeing music?" or you know, just whatever I could think of that were just more conversational than "What year did you do this, and what year did you do that?" now I would stop and ask as we went along, "When was that?" The most disappointing one—or not most disappointing, but I was hoping for more—and some of them are on the phone—but I interviewed—and I'm not going to remember his name, but he had a recording studio in Big Spring.

AW:

Ben Hall.

AM:

Ben Hall, thank you. I interviewed Ben Hall on the phone, and he is the source of this video—

it's just a home movie, color video, no sound—of Buddy Holly onstage, and there's Johnny Cash—and I can't remember if Elvis was in it or not—but anyway, it's this sort of moment, and he's got this video of it—and I was trying to pin down what year that was, and I had this idea that it was—I'll say '56 —and this is how he did it: “Do you remember what year that was?” “Well, let me see. I had a '59 Cadillac,” and I'm going “No, no, no, no, this is wrong. This can't be it,” and he says, “Yeah, I think it was '59, maybe,” and I'm going “No, this is wrong,” but you can't go “That's wrong.”

AW:

Yeah, because Buddy died in '59.

AM:

Yeah, it's like “This is not right.” So those were disappointing—and then another one—and I'll go ahead and say his name—Bill Myrick told me a story that turned out to be not true, but—

AW:

Because he didn't remember it right or because he made it up?

AM:

I think a little bit of both. How he made it up put him in a better light, so that was—

AW:

Yeah, how he misremembered it put him in a better light.

AM:

Right, and then Sonny Curtis, who was wonderful—I have nothing but great admiration for Sonny Curtis, but he said he played—I said, “Do you remember the first” —one of the questions I would ask—because I wrote the chapter on—it was called “Country Boy Rock and Roll;” it was on Elvis—“Do you remember the first time you saw Elvis?” Sonny Curtis: “Oh yeah, I remember it. I played on the show with so-and-so, and it was January of this certain year.” “Great, great, this is wonderful,” so I went—part of the research was to go through newspaper stuff—which, you go blind rolling those damn things—so he said it was in January of '56 —and I'm going to—'57 —it was probably '56 —so I go scrolling through there, not a word—there's nothing. There's no advertisements for a show; there's no nothing. So I asked him again, “Are you pretty sure about that?” “Yeah, I'm positive.” Well, I couldn't find anything, so I didn't say that—or maybe I said, “Sonny remembers this,” and I just let it go at that, but I could not find anything to go with it, and surely, if it was a show at the Lubbock Coliseum, there would have been advertisement.

AW:

Oh yeah.

AM:

So I couldn't find it. Also, I should mention this, that in the book I mentioned a Buddy Holly gig, and I cited the newspaper and the date and everything, and ole Bill—

AW:

Kerns?

AM:

Kerns—no—

AW:

Or Bill Griggs?

AM:

Bill Griggs said, "You were wrong on that. I couldn't find it," so I made a mistake. I don't know—I thought that I had everything straight, but obviously I didn't. So I made mistakes, too. So it was a lot of interviewing, driving, making appointments to go see people, and driving a fair distance. I went down to Midland or Odessa—both of them—a couple times and scrolled through the newspapers down there, and found a few things—as a result, you find stuff—a record review that's something you could use—or a Buddy Holly playing down there that Bill Griggs didn't have—and still doesn't, because I didn't tell him, but I found a Buddy Holly concert down there. Going up to the—I think it's—is it the Museum of the Great Plains? Whatever is in—

AW:

In Canyon?

AM:

—in Canyon.

AW:

Yeah. Panhandle Plains Museum.

AM:

Panhandle Plains Museum, and going through stuff there—and certainly the *Lubbock Avalanche-Journal*, you know, and finding out that all these newspapers—I needed a picture from 19—there was, in the Lubbock newspaper, there's a picture of Elvis with some women standing around



him—but I found it on the microfilm, so I called up and asked if they had a paper from then, “Oh no, we threw all that out five years ago. We had a whole basement full of stuff, we just cleaned—threw it out,” and so I was able to get it—I mean, it was—what I did was—you know, microfilm is the negative, is that correct?

AW:

It’s a negative image.

AM:

Yeah, it’s a negative image. So to get a positive image, I looked and saw who provided—who converts the newspapers to microfilm, and this particular bunch was a company in El Paso, so I called the El Paso company and said, “If I give you the paper and the date and the front page there’s a picture of Elvis, could you make me a positive from it?” And they said, “Yeah, we could do that,” and what turned out is in the book, but is not very good. I found another disappointment—for me, but not—is that there’s a photographer in Lubbock, I. G. Holmes—you’re not going to believe this—I mean, as I think about it, I just get goosebumps as to what was lost—is, he said, “You know, after the war, I would go to all these clubs and take pictures,” you know, because that’s how photographers could make money. They would take pictures and then you’d give them a couple bucks and they’d send you a picture—or five dollars, or whatever it is—and he said, “I took pictures of all the musicians, too,” and I thought, Here’s a guy that had, from the war on to some point, had pictures inside these clubs of the musicians, and I said, “Is there any way to look at those?” “Well, you know, my wife and I got a divorce, and I threw all those out,” and I went, “Got, almighty, here is this treasure trove of stuff,” I mean you could throw the pictures away of the people, because—we had a picture somebody found for us of a guy that wrote “Slippin’ Around”—and I can never ever remember his name—but anyway, he’s there at this club in Midland or Odessa with these two other women—

AW:

—slippin’ around.

AM:

The innocent view is he played there, and these women wanted their picture with him, but I could just see it coming out in the book, and his wife going, “There she is, I always knew you had—

AW:

Well, how did he write the song?

AM:

Yeah. So all those shots he took in those clubs could have had consequences, but the one of the

artist would have been—I mean, can you imagine a picture of Lefty Frizzell and Bob Wills and Little Jimmy Dickens and the Wilburn Brothers—just all these people that played the Cotton Club, and all the local artists, local performers whose names you might not ever know, but there they were—be playing at the Glass-o-rama, or the Bamboo Lounge, or whatever they were in Lubbock, there. It was like—I mean, I almost just fell into the floor.

AW:

I know it. It's been happening for a long time, though. You mentioned Museum of the Great Plains, that's in Lawton. They have a series of beautiful postcards that you can buy—Quanah Parker, Quanah and his favorite wife, several other—a number of Native American—most of them Comanche. They have those because someone found a stack of glass plates in an alley by a trashcan, and whoever found them just happened to go “Oh, these might be worth something.” I mean, they didn't even know, and they took them to the museum, and the museum could never track down where they had come from, but they had obviously been thrown out, and they just happened to be rescued. So yeah, it's a very scary—

AM:

Yeah, well you know, it—to me, all the issues—political issues—that America has, in part, is on this—what I call the “garage sale theory,” is “What do we keep, and what do we throw away? Do we keep public education, or do we throw it away? Do we keep voters' rights, or do we throw it away? Do we keep social security, or do we throw it away? What do you keep and what do you throw away?” And it's in everybody's life, and it's a big, big issue. It gets solved the way it gets solved. Some people throw away stuff and they wish they hadn't, but of all that stuff you threw away, a lot of it needs to go away.

AW:

Yeah, there are some things that need to be thrown away.

AM:

Sure—and I guess the Internet is a way to keep it all. You don't have to throw any of it away, I suppose, or it's all thrown away already.

AW:

Yeah, I was going to say, what's the difference between throwing it away and throwing it in a giant pile of things that look just like it?

AM:

I know. Well, it's like that scene at the end of *Citizen Kane*, you know, when they say—or maybe it's also the same scene at the end of *Indiana Jones*, where they “Oh, we've got this—it's

in safekeeping,” and they show you the workmen storing it, and then the camera pulls back and it’s just this miles and miles of storage—of boxes.

AW:

Yeah, just like it.

AM:

Yeah, just like it—that nobody knows what’s in it, and that’s the—I mean, you’ve got to give up stuff, or you’ll drown, but that’s part of it. But anyway, so I. G. Holmes had those pictures that were lost, but he had these pictures of Elvis that he kept, taken at the Cotton Club. He had maybe four or five, and I said, “Man, can I use these?” And he says, “Now, what’s this for, again?” And I said “It’s for a book Joe Carr and I are doing on country music in West Texas. It’s for the Texas Tech Press,” and he said “Well I won’t do anything for the school.” He hated Texas Tech.

AW:

I know it. I never did find—I went by to see if we could archive all of his—and he never would tell me. He hated it, but he never would say—

AM:

Yeah, he never told me why, but he—and as a result, I saw it come out in one of Bill Griggs’s little books. So they’re in there, and I had hoped to get them, but you know, that’s when I went and got the photograph out of the *Austin American-Statesman*—is that what it’s called?

AW:

Uh-huh

AM:

No, *Lubbock Avalanche-Journal*—

AW:

Oh, the *Avalanche-Journal*?

AM:

Yeah, the *Avalanche-Journal*, I’m sorry.

AW:

Well, the—in Austin, it is the *American-Statesman*.

AM:

Yeah, but it’s the *Avalanche-Journal*, which is pretty damn funny.

AW:

Yeah, it is funny. It's even funnier—there were two papers: the *Journal*, which makes—pretty predictable—and the *Lubbock Avalanche*. That was the other paper.

AM:

Morning and evening paper?

AW:

Yeah, then they merged and it was the *Avalanche-Journal*, and the really funny thing was, growing up, it didn't—you didn't just laugh every time you saw it. It was just such a common thing, it never occurred to you, "Well, how can we have an avalanche when this is—it's perfectly flat?"

AM:

Yeah, right? Well, we're living on top of the avalanche. Well, you know, I played an event for some students—or maybe it was faculty—early, early on when I got there, and it was kind of like a roast, but they said a real funny thing, and it may be a common thing in—newspaper thing—but you know how *New York Times* has all of the news that's—

AW:

Fit to print?

AM:

Fit to print—and somebody said "The *Lubbock Avalanche-Journal*: If It Happened in Lubbock, It's News to Us," which is pretty damn funny, I thought. So we scribble along and write this stuff down as best we can—and Joe has his chapters, and we finish some and turn them in to Susan, and she sends them back—and she did this to one of my chapters—the chapter on the rock and roll—and it just shows you my incompetence and how good she was. She went through—and it may be in the stuff I turned in. Joe and I gave everything we have to the Southwest Collection, and it may be in there—is, she gave me—she says, "Here's your chapter." She went through and numbered every paragraph and wrote down the thesis statement of the paragraph, and then she reordered it—the whole thing—so paragraph one, then it would be paragraph five, paragraph two, paragraph—she reordered a hundred and fifty or two hundred and fifty paragraphs, and I went—you know, I was just "Whoa!" Now that is—and I went through and did it just pretty much like she wanted it, but also—and I always loved this—she had a sentence circled—big circle around it, and then a note that said "This is the sentence that ate Cleveland."

AM:

So she was real—rather than going "Run-on, correct," or whatever—

AW:

Well, and as a writer, I think I would much rather have that kind of critique.

AM:

Oh yeah. It's like "Yeah, I've got it."

AW:

"Now I have to fix it."

AM:

So anyway, she helped us get started and keep focus—and also presented questions that were too hard for Joe and I to answer. She wanted—and most books have a thesis statement, "This is our claim."

AW:

Uh-huh, "We're going to prove."

AM:

"And this is the proof."

AW:

"We assert"—yeah.

AM:

Yeah, and Joe and I did not do that—and we didn't, in part, because of our ignorance, but in part because we consciously didn't want to have one, and one did not emerge. I think you could make one, but I don't—the book proves it, but—anyway, we didn't have one. So our approach, as it turned out, were musicians who make music writing about musicians who made music, and so we did it from our point of view, rather than—

AW:

Sounds like a pretty good thesis statement to me.

AM:

Well, if we'd have said it—if we'd have figured it out early enough to say that—and maybe we did in a roundabout way—so that when you talk about Buddy Holly, you don't talk about him being a brilliant musician, because he was not. He was clever, and witty, and engaging, and you could say a lot of words, but you don't get into this bull crap about what a fabulous songwriter he was, other than he came up with really straight-ahead, simple concepts—"I love you, Peggy Sue,



with a love so rare and true.” That’s all that that song is. It’s not any more than that, but at the time, it hit right straight to the target.

AW:

Well, and as you said earlier, it’s music because you can’t say it.

AM:

Right, exactly.

AW:

And so the whole performance—the whole thing—who Buddy was, the geek with the glasses, the hiccups, the—all that sort of stuff came together in a rare way.

AM:

Right. So my observation—and I still think it’s valid—is that Buddy Holly played the banjo early on. Now, I don’t know how he played it—and I did ask, but can’t remember—but there were, at that time—because I was born in ’46, and he—so he would be maybe eight or nine years older than I am—maybe ten—he was born in ’37, or—?

AW:

He died in ’59, and he was twenty-two, so ’37. **[He was born September 7, 1936.]**

AM:

Yeah, okay, so he was nine years older than I was. So I saw some of the same things he saw on TV, which, there were a lot of banjo players, and they played the tenor style. So they played with this really fast pick stroke, and if you listen to some of Buddy’s guitar solos, to me they are sort of this banjo-esque—

AW:

Well, “Peggy Sue” is a great example

AM:

Right, that sort of stuff. So that was my observation, was that he—that’s where that may have come from. I don’t know if a historian would have made any—not that that’s a tremendous connection—

AW:

To me, it’s an observation that a historian couldn’t make, unless some teacher said, “Well, Buddy—I couldn’t ever stamp out that damned banjo strum. I tried, but I couldn’t do it,” and an historian might say, “Well!”



AM:

Exactly, or to read in the liner notes of Buddy Knox record about their seeing Elvis, and when they saw Elvis, Buddy Knox and his buddy—I can't remember—a Nashville record producer—

AW:

Bob Montgomery?

AM:

Bob Montgomery maybe it was, he said when they saw Elvis, they knew exactly what he was doing. It was not a secret to them, because they played G, C, and D on their guitars, and they saw Elvis doing the exact same thing, but they knew he was—had this other thing going—this energy in there. That's what Buddy Holly—in my mind, what Buddy Holly and Sonny Curtis and all those—Buddy Knox and Bob Montgomery, who was Buddy's friend—Buddy and Bob—

AW:

Well that was Bob Montgomery.

AM:

Oh, was that Bob Montgomery? There was another guy that was with Buddy Knox who also went on to Nashville.

AW:

Yeah, and I don't know who.

AM:

But anyway, for us looking—as a musician looking at it, you appreciate what musicians would see, which is it's the same G, C, and D that Hank Williams used, and that Little Jimmy Dickens used, and that Bill Monroe used, and they knew those G, C, and Ds. So you could see why, one day, they were country and the next day they were Elvis—is because they had it all. It was all there, Elvis just showed them how to really do it and turn it on. So we had a little different sort of view of that—not that it's profound or anything, it just comes out differently. So for me, when you see Joe Ely—for me to see why Joe Ely was so hot, is because of Lloyd Maines and—

AW:

—Jesse Taylor?

AM:

Jesse Taylor—and I don't know who the rest of the bunch were, but it's like—you know, because I saw—this was real—and I don't mean to put him down at all, but when I first got to

Lubbock, there was a concert—and you were probably there; I didn't know you at the time—and it was Sonny Curtis, Jimmy Dale Gilmore, Butch Hancock, Joe Ely, and—did I say Sonny Curtis already?

AW:

Uh-huh.

AM:

It was those—and Lloyd Maines put it on as part of some—it was their West Texas Music Organization—

AW:

—Hour—Well, there was the WTMA, the West Texas Music Association, which I was president of for a while, during the ill-fated years of doing the Buddy Holly Festival—

AM:

Right, well this was—

AW:

This was before that.

AM:

It would be '86 or '87.

AW:

No, then it would be after it, because we did that—'85.

AM:

Oh, okay, this would be after that. So you were probably there, and you probably helped organize it.

AW:

Yeah.

AM:

Well, for me, as a musician sitting there watching that show—and not being a songwriter—Sonny Curtis was the star.

AW:

Oh, yeah, Sonny—man—but even if you are a songwriter, Sonny's a star, I think.

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AM:

But here's what I saw when I saw Joe Ely: He came out with only his guitar, and he came out in a black leather outfit, and he looked incredibly uncomfortable. He did all these guitar things, and trying to—it's like, "If there was a band here, you'd know why I'm doing this. You'd know why these songs make sense," and I didn't know it at the time, but "You'd know why these songs make sense if Lloyd and Jesse were here." That's what I got out of it, was that this guy needs a band. Now Butch and Jimmy Dale didn't so much, but Joe Ely, to me, was like a fish out of water.

AW:

But see, that's the important observation, because I can't think of the time when Joe didn't have a band. He always had a band.

AM:

Yeah, well he didn't at—

AW:

But what I mean is, in his career—and that's where he really shined, because he—to me, the thing that was always impressive about him onstage when he had his band was, he had this incredible energy, and I remember watching him backstage getting ready to go on, and it was almost like a prize fighter getting his—you know, up and his energy, and he did that for—it's like he was gunning the motor, and then he jumps onstage and "Bam!" it was. I'll never forget standing there watching that, because I learned something about Joe that I suspected, but never really was able to say "Yes," until—if it's time to—

AM:

No, no, no, I've got nothing. I just—I don't know what time you need to leave.

AW:

Oh, we'll leave here in a little bit, because we have to get back at a tolerable hour today—but no, see, your observation is dead-on, and to me that's not saying anything bad about Joe, it's just that he's doing something different, whereas if a folk guy like me walks up in front of a band—to start with—I may learn it later, but to start with, I'm still going to be a folk guy standing up in front of a band, like a guy running in front of a locomotive to keep out of the way.

AM:

Yeah, well, it was real interesting. I'm glad I got to see it, but Sonny Curtis was just—I thought, My God, and all I knew of Sonny Curtis was Nashville songwriter, I thought, Oh God, here's some guy come out with a pick that's like made out of cardboard, strumming on a guitar and

singing some weepy old song, and he came out and played the guitar incredibly sophisticatedly—

AW:

Yeah, and clean—

AM:

—and crafted for his songs, and a real presentational sense of it, where Joe Ely would just come out and sort of, where there should be a solo, he would just sort of flap around. It was just really awkward, I thought, at the time, whereas Jimmy Dale and Butch were much, much more comfortable just standing there, doing their thing.

AW:

Yeah, and of course, again, they had—

AM:

—done that—

AW:

—and especially Butch. Jimmy played in bands—well, they had the Flatlanders, you know, for a time, but it was—what was the first release when it was finally—the album was released some fifteen years after it was recorded?

AM:

Oh, *More a Legend than a Band*.

AW:

Yeah, which I thought was a great description of this cult thing that no one had—everyone knew about, but no one had. Well, one of the things Joe said about the book was—Joe, I think, felt like the book was not a failure necessarily, but that it had received some criticism of—that it should have been something that it wasn't, and my observation to him was that I thought the book was—it was seminal—it was the beginning—and someone had to do that book before you could do any other book. To me, you've got to have someone who says, "How do we get a handle around this big thing?" And here's the first one. That doesn't mean that it will be the last one. Somebody may find some other photographs or learn other material—

AM:

Boy, I hope they do.

AW:

—but I thought that—I still get that book out and refer to it often.

AM:

Well I'm glad, because I felt really uneasy about it, because I didn't know what—I didn't know whether it was any good or not. I think any criticism of it was probably—that was—I don't know what the right word—I guess any criticism of it that I felt like came from them reading the book was probably well-deserved, because it was not going to be everything for everybody, and like I was—I may have mentioned this another time—we had a real negative review in the *Journal of Country Music*, which was real disappointing, because it was—it was sort of like home base. You would think if you're going to get anything good, it might be there, but it was reviewed by some guy from Fort Worth, and his review was—in my mind, it was almost like, “I should have written this book, and not these guys.”

AW:

Yeah, right, “How dare they beat me to it.”

AM:

Well, or “How dare they leave out all these things,” and another review I read was that we took a passionate music”—and mostly they were talking about Joe Ely and Butch and that bunch—“and made it—took all the passion out of it,” or something. But to me, that's—again—the musician's view of it is “I'm more interested in Lloyd and Jesse Taylor, myself.” To me, they were—and having never seen Joe Ely with that group, but I saw a video—and you ought to get it—of Lloyd Maines and Jesse Taylor—was done in a studio, and for some local production there in Lubbock—and you listen to that music, and it's really, really good, and you go, “Well now I can see putting that behind Joe Ely and being interesting.”

AW:

Well, and you watched Joe—I mean Jesse and Lloyd in particular work together on stage, and I watched them—I went out and danced to that band I don't know how many times, and watched the two of them—and it's one of the things that in a great bluegrass group, a great jazz group, a great whatever you see—see some musicians on the stage that have a communication, and this thing that we can't talk about, and so you know the communication can't be verbal—it's something beyond that, and it's sort of, to me, the essence of ensemble playing. They're on the same wavelength, they were reading each other's mind, and when it came time to trade off—not solos, they were trading off licks—notes—that's complicated!

AM:

Well, it's some of the very, very best ensemble playing I've ever seen, for sort of blues stuff and steel—and I don't know who the rest of the band is, but you ought to—and surely Lloyd knows—is aware of that.

AW:

Yeah. Well to me, see, this observation you're making is the kind of thing that a musician would make, and a music critic would never make—

AM:

Exactly.

AW:

—because they don't get it.

AM:

And that gets down to me—what I said earlier about everything else being bullshit—is those guys made that music, and as soon as the music stopped, then it's over and anything you say—even the good stuff—is just words chasing after the music, “Oh, and you were really good!”

There's a line I heard—and I love this—Jimmy Day, who is an early pioneer of the steel guitar—and I feel fortunate, I got to meet him when I was with Jimmy Martin—and he played steel with Commander Cody at one time—

AW:

Really?

AM:

Yeah, and Jimmy asked him how he liked that, and he said oh, he loved it. He can play anything he wants—and Jimmy even mentioned to me, not long after that, he says, “Yeah, that's his problem.”

AW:

He can play anything he wants.

AM:

See, Jimmy was an editor—

AW:

Yeah, Jimmy Martin.

AM:

Yeah, Jimmy Martin—but anyway, somebody told me this, that Jimmy Day said this after a set, he got down, and somebody from the audience came up and he said, “Man, you sounded great,” and Jimmy Day said “How the fuck would you know?” And that's what I mean. After he quit playing, it's gone. They loved it and he hated it.



AW:

Yeah, but you know, I've started telling people something that people would say to me on a good night, and I always thought it was quaint and sort of—well what do they mean? I wanted to hear them say, "You're probing social understanding of this on that song," or it's terrific or something, but what they would do is come up and they say, "Man, I enjoyed your program."

AM:

Program.

AW:

Yeah, and I remember thinking how dorky that was, and now I realize what a great compliment that was, and so like the other night, I saw Lloyd Maines and Terri Hendrix at a house concert in Lubbock. Terri's voice was a little off—unusual for them, they had a little more trouble than usual keeping in tune—of course, we were outdoors. You know, they check their tune in the middle of songs—I've never seen anybody quite as adamant about it as they are. Musically, it may not have—and how they were feeling—but it was a great program. They transcended all that, and it was a wonderful evening, and all I could think to say was "That is a great program," and as I said it, I went "Oh," this takes on a lot better meaning, now. It's what is an event like and how does it make you feel and when it's over with, you remember "It was a great program."

AM:

Right. My favorite compliment was John Hartin played somewhere, and some old lady came up and says "Oh, we loved your volume."

AM:

I thought "Whoa."

AW:

That's being a little too specific. "We're glad you weren't any louder."

AM:

Yeah, right. So anyway, back to the book, it took a—I can't remember when we started, probably 1990—or probably even before that. It came out in '95—1995—and so we probably started it in '88 or somewhere along in there—interviewed a bunch of people and wrote as best we could, and actually enjoyed interviewing the people—don't remember them all, but they're all there—and came out in 1995, and it won an award. Belmont College had just instituted an award for the best country music—sort of serious country music book of the year. So each year they'd pick out one, and I believe ours was the first winner. The other book they were

considering was a biography of Lefty Frizzell, and I don't know who the author was. It won, basically, because it was the first book about an area that had been—

AW:

—ignored?

AM:

—ignored and underreported on, which is West Texas.

AW:

Well—yeah—and you can say that it won because that, but on the other hand, to be first in talking about an area that is important musically—to be first is exceptionally significant.

AM:

Yeah.

AW:

And you know, as I said to you, I still go back to it, and that's one interesting thing, but the other interesting thing is that I will read something or come across some bit of information, and I'll go "Man, this is new stuff. I wish Joe and Alan had known that," and I look, and I'll go check your book, and you already did. It's already in there; I'd just forgotten it. So I keep thinking, Well, I really haven't dug up any more stuff to speak of.

AM:

Well I'm sure there's a lot, there's a lot, but it's kind of disappointing, I guess, that there hasn't been a follow-up.

AW:

No, there needs to be, but, you know, the follow-up people now are fan writers. There is a book now about West Texas music, written by an attorney in Austin—and he's a nice guy, and he loves the music, loves the people, but it is clearly written from the point of view of a fan—and a fan of a very specific group of people. Nowhere in this fellow's book would he mention Pop Echols, or the Lubbock String Ensemble, or those kinds of things that are really, if you look at the big picture, are very, very significant.

AM:

Right, right. Well, you know, I met a guy—and I'm going to say his name is John Conquest—

AW:

Yeah, the English critic.

AM:

Right—and he had told me he was writing a book on—is it the Panhandle Mystery Band?

AW:

That's—but the Panhandle Mystery Band is the Maines Brothers Band backing up Terry Allen.

AM:

Right.

AW:

Well, he is doing a book for—I hope, for me—for Tech Press that will be a collection of his critical reviews in his newspaper, over a period of time, because Conquest, whether you like him or not—

AM:

Oh, I like him. I like him.

AW:

I do, too. I like him a lot. Most people don't like him because he is not afraid to say what he thinks, and he's a champion of the music that you can hear under the tree, and not any of the stuff coming out of Nashville, but I just posed to him, You and I—you, John, as a music critic who doesn't play, me as a player who listens to music—we recognize something in a person or a band or something, and we think, This is brilliant, and we can give you all the reasons, and ten years later we can't even find them. We don't know where they are. They're selling cars or insurance somewhere. How do we—do we get it wrong, or is there something else operating in the world? How do we pick this that doesn't become great, and yet sometimes we listen to something and go 'They're going a long way,' and they certainly do? How is that, and would you be willing to go back and look at your—take your essays and select them and say 'Where are these people now, and how has this followed through?'" So I'm hoping to see that, because to me, there's a bigger picture to be addressed, and when we do these critiques—and even though, like you and I don't do a critique to write an article—but if you'd written an article—a column—after that show you saw with Sonny, Butch, Jimmy Dale, and Joe, you would have had something to say that—and how does that look ten years after the point? Yeah, John is an interesting—just an aside—

AM:

I only met him one time, so—

AW:

Do you know, his father was—and may still be—may still be alive—very well-known in modern art—an Englishman, lives in California, has for a long time.

AM:

Uh-huh, no.

AW:

I just thought it was kind of an intriguing—

AM:

Yeah, no, it's not surprising that he came from a sort of a critical background, because—and he may have been the one that said he was disappointed—you know, I can't really remember. I met him, and he seemed supportive of the book.

AW:

Well John, the good thing about him is John can be very supportive of the book and still say you didn't give Butch and Jimmy and Joe enough ink, and he would say that and then say "I love the book, but he—

AM:

Yeah, well no, and I could go "Yeah, you're right," because we weren't—we had our interests. Somebody ought to do something on Lloyd.

AW:

Yeah, I agree.

AM:

You know, and I probably have told you this—I know I did—about him marching in that peace parade.

AW:

Lloyd?

AM:

Yeah, did I tell you?

AW:

No.

AM:

Oh, Richard Bowden, who's another interesting guy—

AW:

Yeah, I marched in one of Richard's peace parades, too, but I don't think Lloyd was there the day—

AM:

Well the day I went down there to do it—it was early on in the Afghanistan thing—and it was, you know, Musicians for Peace, or March for Peace, or whatever—but it was after the Dixie Chicks said what they said about George Bush—and I got there, and I'm standing there, and up walks Lloyd, and I thought, Now, this doesn't—I mean, I don't know Lloyd's politics, at all—

AW:

Well, he never had any until that event, and that even awakened Lloyd and his whole family. To them, politics was an unnecessary diversion, until all of the sudden they were—

AM:

They saw the consequences of it.

AW:

Yeah, they had a personal involvement, you know, their little girl having to wear a bulletproof vest onstage to do a gig. That's got to change your thinking.

AM:

Oh yeah, but there he was, and I wondered about that—whether that was a result of it—but I was proud to stand there next to him and play my tambourine or whatever it was I had—because I wasn't going to carry no damn banjo for a mile.

AW:

Yeah, no, no. Richard asked me about bringing a guitar—and the day I went on this it was raining—and I said, “No, I don't think I'm going to—I'm not that—I'm sort of committed to peace, but not a whole guitar's worth.”

AM:

Yeah, “I don't want to get my guitar wet,” yeah. But anyway, somebody ought to do something on Lloyd and that whole family, because—you know, for me, coming into the scene, the best thing—and this goes back to bluegrass. You talked about it being precise and well-executed and everything, so the music I like tends to be that—played that way, whether it's—you know, the blues, it's like Jesse Taylor, but he was no slouch at it. He was really, really organized and

accurate, and no—and he and Lloyd—that's really some of the best music I've heard. But just the idea that the Maines brothers—and I don't know the older family—the older brothers—but—

AW:

He's the oldest.

AM:

Well, I meant the dad—

AW:

Oh, his dad and the older group, right, right.

AM:

Right, the older group—but Lloyd and his brothers, no matter what they did, they did it expertly, and professionally, and really, really well—and they were always the cream of the performance crop that I saw.

AW:

Yeah, well I think you're exactly right. He—Lloyd is going to get his own Walk of Fame plaque in September. There went a deer, Emily, a fawn. You can still see the—

EM:

Oh, they're still there.

AW:

Uh-huh.

EM:

Wow.

AW:

And I think it's interesting that Terry Allen is coming to town just to see Lloyd get that, and I think it's very interesting that Lloyd is getting one—and of course, Lloyd makes no big deal out of it, but I think it will be cool, and I agree with you. He's—there's another thing—and I'm about to run out of battery, and this is probably a good time to stop, anyway, until the next one—but there's a thing about Lloyd and some of those other—and Jesse would be one—that I think that epitomize what is so important to me about West Texas musicians—and I'm just throwing this out for your “Yay, nay, or maybe,” or whatever, but they're musicians that have perfect confidence, but they seem to have no ego. It's like “Oh, yeah, I can do that,” but it's no big deal to them. There are a lot of other places where that doesn't—those things don't—



AM:

Yeah, don't go together. That's a really good way to put it—perfectly confident, but not—how did you say it, again?

AW:

No ego.

AM:

No ego.

AW:

But see, I see the same thing in you, I see the same thing in Joe Carr—the people that I really admire as musicians—and artists, painters the same way—writers, “Well I can write that,” you know, “That’s a thing I know how to do,” or “I think I can write that, and I can learn from it,” or “I can learn how to do it,” but nobody gets caught up with, “Obviously I can do that,” and I go to other areas—and we happen to be in one now—where there’s a whole lot more ego involved.

AM:

Yeah.

AW:

And especially amongst the stars—and I don't know if it's a cultural thing, or just luck.

AM:

I don't know, you know, it's just—now, I won't say—Lubbock is not the center, but it's certainly closer to the edge than Austin or Dallas—and I don't know if being out at the edge helps sort of relieve that sense of it, because—I don't know—to me, I always felt out there that all the musicians kind of felt like they were in the same boat.

AW:

Yep. I think you're right on—I call it the “frontier democracy.” When you're on the frontier, you've got to rely on the person next to you, whether you like them or not—and it changes your behavior.

AM:

Right, yeah. Well you know the thing—I was going to say something, but I forgot—is just their—Lloyd and Jesse and any of the other good players out there, which—even like Jay Lemon and Cary Banks—Cary played with Lloyd, as you know—among the many things they do, there's always this dedication to the art of how they move their fingers to do what they want to do. So the music that comes out may be this or that or the other, but their dedication to getting

their fingers there at the precise times and in a graceful way and a controlled way and a confident way, is there, and I think Lloyd and Cary and Jay and Jesse Taylor and Ed Marsh, certainly, and the faculty at South Plains College—that Scott Faris that was out there—you know David Brandon is out there, and he's a brilliant—

AW:

Oh, yeah.

AM:

You know, and just that dedication to the artfulness of what they're doing, whether it's country or classical or folk or rock or far-out electronic music, there's this dedication to the artfulness of it, and I find that really admirable. Not that others aren't, but I just find it—it's easier for me to identify that in musicians than it is in singers, for me, because I'm not a singer, but I know one when I hear one.

AW:

Well, there you go. And on that wonderful note, let's—

AM:

Let's call it quits.

AW:

Let's call it quits for today.

AM:

All righty.

AW:

Thanks, again, Alan. It's always such a pleasure.

AM:

Thanks for taking your time to do this, and I apologize, again, for being late.

AW:

Oh, now, that is not an issue. Thanks.

AM:

I mean, we could have talked another thirty minutes.

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AW:

Yeah, but it wouldn't have been this good stuff—

AM:

—but your battery would have ran out, anyway.

AW:

That's right, that's right. All right, here it is.

***End of Interview***



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