

**Oral History Interview of
Michael Martin Murphey**

**Interviewed by: Andy Wilkinson
May 6, 2009
Horseshoe Bay, Texas**

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

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

Transcript Overview:

This interview features Michael Martin Murphey. Murphey discusses his early interest in music and how he developed as a musician and writer. Murphey further discusses his playing technique, songwriting, and influences.

Length of Interview: 01:49:30

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Keywords

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Andy Wilkinson (AW):

All right, I think we're rolling. It's the sixth of May, the day after Cinco de Mayo, in the morning—or actually early afternoon—Andy Wilkinson again with Michael Martin Murphey in the Jim Bowie suite, once more, at the Marriott in Horseshoe Bay. And we're going to take up after a wonderful night last night at the Saxon Pub and getting to hear Pat Flynn—

Michael Martin Murphey (MM):

The Pat Flynn show (laughing) with the opening act Michael Martin Murphey all within the same show.

AW:

He was certainly remarkable, but the show was remarkable. You know, there's some basic things I'd like to talk about here in just a few minutes before Bob gets here later, but one thing—while it's fresh on my mind from last night is—I've heard you play a lot, often. I've heard you solo. I've heard you with small groups like this. I've heard you with your band. I've heard you do a dance at the Cowboy Hall of Fame, and I've heard the Christmas Ball—one of the things that's really consistent is the pacing of your shows. How do you approach that? How do you arrive at that kind of pacing?

MM:

Fast, fast, slow. Fast, fast, slow. Medium tempo—(laughing) No, you know, I customize it to the situation. You know, in a dance situation people cannot dance too many fast songs together, I don't care how young they are. They'll get tired. They'll leave the dance floor. If you don't give them a waltz after about two fast songs—probably usually after one fast song these days because a lot of my audience nowadays is older—for the old traditional kind of cowboy music dancing—that stuff is actually pretty athletic. “Cotton Eyed Joe” and stuff like that comes down to aerobics a lot. When I'm doing a dance, I really kind of watch how people are. But we generally lay it out in terms of giving people some relief, and we have special dances for, Okay, let's have everybody married over fifty years get out there and lead off this dance—and we know that's going to be a slow one—and everybody else joins in. But when it comes to just a straight concert—solo acoustic—that's when I'm the freest and I have really no rules. I generally have a rough set list, but if I'm sensing that they want a little more of the pop country stuff and not as much cowboy music, or if they want—I'm in a situation where they can't wait to get to that, then I—basically I balance it now between fifty percent pop and country stuff from the early part of my career, and then the second half is from 1989 forward when my life changed, and I became a cowboy singing fanatic—then that's what I'm doing. That's how I lay it out, about 50/50. *Cowboy Christmas* is a production. It's scripted, every song we play, everything we say, every move we make, everything we wear, every prop we use, is the same every night. It's a presentation. And it's kind of interesting that it's my most successful touring format that I've

ever imagined. Nothing else that I've ever done has ever consistently drawn as more people—as many people a year as that very scripted production.

AW:

Really?

MM:

Yeah. Now I change it every year so that's it's not the same show. But I found in the beginning that—I did it the same for about five years straight, and I only changed it because some of my friends were complaining, You really ought to change it. But it wouldn't make any difference as far as the audience is concerned. People will go see *Scrooge* every year. People will go see—

AW:

Nutcracker—

MM:

—*The Nutcracker* every year. My feeling was, If we get a formula going here that's the right stuff to say about *Cowboy Christmas*, we don't really need to change it. But I yielded to the pressure of friends and family who said, Yeah, but there's a whole lot of stuff out there that's really good stuff that you're not doing that you can add in. So now I go about the same show for about three years, and then I change it pretty dramatically. I bring in about another twenty to thirty percent. But I know I'm going to have to do "Cowboy Christmas Ball." I'm going to have to do "Step around the Christmas Tree." I'm going to have to do "Christmas on the Line." There's about eight core songs that I have to do out of the Christmas album, and that is a few core song I have to do because—I can't do a concert unless I sing "Wildfire." It's the only song I always have to do or else somebody gets really upset. And I buy that. If I go see the Rolling Stones, I'm going to be disappointed if they don't play "Satisfaction" and "Honky Tonk Woman."

AW:

(laughing) Me too.

MM:

—even though they've played it a million times. These days I'm not going to see Rolling Stones all that—now if it's a production—a special on their new album or something, I can buy it—that I didn't hear it that time, but if it's just a straight Stones concert—but even if it's a production, I have to do "Wildfire." And figuring out how to fit "Wildfire" into *Cowboy Christmas* was probably the trickiest thing because it doesn't really say anything about Christmas. It's a ghost story. So it's kind off in the mystical world; it's not even identifiably anything about the real reason for Christmas. So that's where I'm at with that. Now the solo acoustic show is based on

the idea of What would I play for people if we were sitting around a campfire out on the open range, and I had about forty, fifty people who came in on the weekend after the branding—and we're all sitting around the campfire—what would I play? What I found is—what I started off with was, That would be mostly cowboy songs. What I ended up with is No, they still want to hear “What’s Forever for?”—even with solo acoustic guitar. They want to hear “Long Mile Love,” and particularly the women, they like the cowboy stuff, but they still want to hear the love songs and the romantic songs. So I put them in, and I enjoy doing it, and I don’t make apologizes to the western people that are there that I have to put those in. If they don’t understand the reason I’m putting it in, then they probably came alone (laughter) to the concert

AW:

Well—you know, I still cue to the oft-repeated maxim, “The cowboy song is any song a cowboys sings,” so it fits in there. I noticed in this most recent time—I got to hear you in Palestine, just a couple weeks ago—one of the things I noticed was how the songs flowed one into the other—with things as subtle as sticking with the drop, low string—

MM:

Or a different tuning.

AW:

—Or a different tuning. And the way that you moved between songs—not being the same, but where you didn’t have to fuss and fool with your instrument. You were able to play, and that was really interesting.

MM:

A lot about that has got to do with panic that you feel—that you’re in a B tuning, and in the next song you’re going to have to be in a D tuning and have a capo on. And you don’t have a road manager that night because it’s an award show, you can’t afford it. When I have a road manager, it’s a lot easier, but I found that every time that road manager comes up there and helps you change guitars, it’s still a distraction to the audience. It breaks the magic. People are reminded, Yeah, that’s right. This is not about my life. This is about a production. So I try to keep the road manager off stage as much as possible. That’s why I have an extra guitar up there that’s tuned to the third fret—in a dropped D tuning—and that’s so that I can play the capoed stuff—pretty much within the range of the second fret up to the fifth fret, you don’t have to retune when you move that capo. Everybody knows—or maybe the people listening don’t know that when you put a capo on a standard tuned guitar on the third fret, it is now probably sharp. Now they make a pretty good gadget now that rolls up the fret board. And it’s not as bad, but it is scientifically impossible to put that fret—at that point—between there and the end of the guitar. It’s scientifically impossible due to the tempered scale of the way the mathematics of that works out to be perfectly in tune, when you put any kind of capo on there. Because it’s mathematically

impossible to fret that note at that point or a play bar chord and be exactly in tune, so you have to reach a compromise. And so what I do is I go to the third fret and I tune it after the capos on there. I leave that sitting up there, and—I'm kind of weird. I have a B tuning that I use in a lot of my songs.

AW:

Describe that.

MM:

It is a—okay. On the top end on the high strings, it is E-B-G and D—the same as a regular guitar tuning—but the bottom strings are tuned to a B and an F#, and the reason for that is: if you're in the key of B—a bass player on the “I” [one] and the “V” [five], or the tonic and the subtonic chord, plays that. Well, in finger picking, you need access to those subtonics really easily. I like the way a guitar sounds when it's ringing, so I was playing around with the idea of—the same reason why you D tune down to a D when you're playing a D type chord and you're even capoed up. You want access to that bottom string.

AW:

—and the overtones.

MM:

And the—well you need that bass note, or else you can't really very effectively pick. You know, a lot of people don't realize this, but classical guitar players and flamenco guitar players play in different tunings. They don't all play every song in standard. In fact that's the key to going beyond being just an amateur as a classical guitar player, or a flamenco player particularly, is to go into one of those tunings. They actually go into a—they'll do, like, a D tuning or something. So I came up with this B tuning. I was playing it—I needed to sing a song in B but I didn't want to capo, so I tuned up to a B and an F#. And I liked—

AW:

So you tune up the A string to a B and the E up to an F#—

MM:

—I liked the way it worked because you're not going to a B chord. The E on the bottom is a little bit of an oddball anomaly, so you only use that occasionally. And sometimes you get a really good sonority—if you make a standard E formation in a B tuning down on the first—down by the note E chord—it comes out to be a “IV” over a “V” chord instead of a standard chord because you're putting the V on the bottom instead of the tonic note when you make that. And it's pretty. It's a pretty sound that just comes organically out of making the same formation when you're making an E.

AW:

So that's—when you have that tuning you're using E shape as your "I"?—as your root?

MM:

No. The E—the main root chord is like a partially barred—what you would play if you were playing a B chord. If you were bar all the way across the second fret and you take your—

AW:

An A shape?

MM:

—your ring finger and you would bend it so you could cover all three of those—or if you put your three fingers together and then you barred it across making a B chord. Now, though, you don't need to put your finger all the way across because you got a B and an F# in the bottom already. So that leaves you with your other finger free to do some other stuff, and that's why it's such a cool tuning.

AW:

Yeah.

MM:

Because you're not having to worry about that bar all the time. But it's kind of like the same philosophy as [knocking] banjo tunings. You still are dealing with— [more knocking]

[Room service interruption] 14:29

Hotel Staff:

Hi. Room service?

MM:

Is that?

AW:

Room service—no, not food. This is your—

MM:

Oh, I see. If you could, just bring in some towels. That's all I need.

Hotel Staff:

Oh ok. Shampoo?

MM:

Yeah. That'd be good. Thank you—Actually, you know. If you want to go in this bedroom and do some cleaning, that'd be good. We have to meet in here—If you want to go into the bedroom and clean, that's ok, but we have to meet in here.

Hotel Staff:

Oh ok.

MM:

You could go in there and do everything you need to do.

AW:

[returns to the microphone] Well that's really interesting. How did you—?

MM:

—(to hotel staff) if you're going to vacuum, I'm going to need to close this door. I can do that.

Hotel Staff:

Oh okay.

AW:

Is this—were you were noodling around and figure this out or did you sit down and—

MM:

No I was playing around with Celtic tunings, and D tunings, and partial—

AW:

Excuse me. This is Gary P, do you mind if I answer?

MM:

No.

AW:

Hey Gary—that didn't work—So you were trying it with the different tunings and—

MM:

And came up with the idea—the basic philosophy of all dropped tunings or altered tunings is that you get—

AW:

Gary?

MM:

—the tonic and the “V” in the bottom.

AW:

[Andy takes phone call] [15:57-17:42]

MM:

Tell him I said, Howdy. Murph says, Howdy—he hung up, I think—Hey, Gary. How’re you doing? Great. Are you in town or you up—doing—(continues talking to Gary) [17:42-19:27]

MM:

—Well here’s Andy to say goodbye. Talk to you later.

AW:

Hey Chiefster, I’ll call you when I’m headed back down here. You bet. Okay, man, it’s good to talk to you. Thanks. [hangs up]

MM:

At this point don’t you think what would have been better put—it’s going to get worse before it gets any (laughing) better.

AW:

Yeah.

MM:

That’s basically what he’s saying.

AW:

Well, why would that—

MM:

We have to pay people a zillion dollars a year—

Eva (E):

Hello? How are we doing?

AW:

Do you want to—are we going to still talk?

MM:

How much do we have to pay people to say, “It’s going to get worse before it gets any better?”

AW:

Do you want to still talk while we eat?

MM:

Sure. I can do that.

AW:

I’ll leave this going then.

Eva (E):

My name is Eva.

MM:

Hi Eva. How you doing?

E:

Oh, I’m doing marvelous. How about y’all?

MM:

Great.

E:

That’s good. I got a classic burger here—medium.

AW:

Okay, yes. Thank you.

E:

Fries there—pasta with chicken.

MM:

I’m going to move my act right over here.

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E:

And then I got you your mixed bread for your pasta there. Nice phone there.

AW:

Thank you. Oh—I guess that looks kind of like a phone doesn't it.

E:

It's all the same.

MM:

They're only good for taking pictures, though.

E:

(laughing) You're right. You're so right about that.

AW:

Thank you. All I need out of that is a little of that mayonnaise. Is this it? Yeah, thank you. Thank you so much.

E:

Oh. No problem at all. Can I get y'all anything else?

AW:

That's it, thank you.

E:

No problem.

AW:

It did say service charges included—

E:

Yes, sir.

AW:

I want to make sure I don't short you anything.

E:

Not a problem, sir. Thank you so much. You can keep that. Y'all have a blessed day.

AW:

Thank you.—Well, yeah. I mean, if somebody were just to say what they meant, what a revelation it would be, wouldn't it? (laughing)

MM:

There are some tunings on the guitar that are the Celtic type tunings and the old blues turnings, where the tonic is not on the bottom string, it's on the fifth string. And the B tuning puts the tonic on the fifth string instead of on the bottom string. A D tuning put the tonic on the bottom string—on the lowest string. Well the way a bass line works out, you're going from the tonic—if you play bass—you're going from the tonic to the fifth, you know, like, “Bom, bom, bom, bom,” right? When you put the tonic on the bottom, now you have to think backwards from what a bass player thinks because you got to go—in finger picking, on your thumb you've got to go from the bottom back to the tonic. You've got to go from the fifth to the tonic.

AW:

Yeah.

MM:

Right? So a B tuning, or a tuning that puts the tonic on the fifth string, makes a whole lot more sense in terms of the way orchestral thinking goes and in the role that the bass plays in it. That's where I came up with it—because I play bass too. I played bass for years.

AW:

When did you play bass? What incarnations of—?

MM:

I played bass a lot when I was at North Texas State University, playing in bands and when I was at California in the California music scene, and that was just to make a living.

AW:

Yeah, because bass players always get work.

MM:

The bottom four strings of a bass are the same as the bottom four strings of the guitar. So a friend of mine called me up one night and said, “Murphy, I know you're looking for work. We don't have room for a guitar player in this band, but we have room for a bass player. Can you play bass?” And I said, “Give me a list of songs.” (laughs) “Can you get me a list of songs.” He said, “Well I work with this honky-tonk guy that kind of pulls songs out of the air.” I said, “Well, just give me the kind of material that he does, like a basic like a rough list of the kind of stuff he

sings and likes to sing every night.” And I stayed up twenty-four hours, and by the next night I was a bass player. (both laugh)

AW:

Well, this all brings up another thing that I think is really interesting about your work is that—in addition to the effort and the skill that you put into your writing, you do the same thing with your performances. And it seems like the world has not cleaved like that automatically. There are a whole lot of people who were great writers and not very good performers, a lot of great performers who are not very good writers, and I can’t help but think that you’re making a real effort to do both—to hone the performance side just like you do the writing side.

MM:

Well, I do. I put a lot of thought into it—and some things you learn the hard way—you can’t stand up there and be a tortured artist every night on stage who flies by the seat of his pants and pulls out whatever he’s feeling like a method actor and expect to have a very long career.

AW:

(laughs) Well put.

MM:

I wish it was like that, but—actually, I shouldn’t have even said method actors because what method actors study is the ability to draw on your own feelings and improvise the same lines every night, though you’re still dealing with Shakespeare. You’re just drawing on what you’re feeling inside as an additional dimension to doing a good job every night, but you still have to say the lines and you still have to get the same—hope that the audience gets the meaning out of it each night. But there are subtle differences—even in a Shakespeare play, there’s subtle differences of—maybe it’s, “to *be* or not to *be*,” one night and maybe it’s, “to be or *not* to be,” the next night. It’s still the same lines. Directors don’t like you playing around with that too much in drama, especially in live drama, but method acting, when it works, is probably the best because it seems so real.

AW:

Yeah. Is that how you approach keeping “Wildfire” fresh?

MM:

—but it’s uneven and, therefore, I think the great actors are always the ones who are pretty much use the classical method. My brother is an actor, so I’ve studied acting a lot. And I think performing is acting. Performing—and writing is not acting. Playing the guitar is not acting. But when you’re playing the guitar in front of an audience, it is. When you’re singing a song in front of an audience, it’s acting. You’re an actor. And you may feel bad when you walk on—before

you walk on stage you may have just had an argument with your wife, but if you got a happy song to sing, you better get it together and act happy up there. And I just run into so many performers who can't get past that barrier. If they woke up after being drunk and they have a headache, and they just got out of bed two hours before they get on stage, and they really don't feel that good—they don't do such a good job of performing the songs that are not going to come out right if you feel bad. (laughing) At the same time, you can't go up there and just hit them over the head with one Pollyanna-sunny song after another. When you sing a blues song, you have to be able to channel the blues. And when you sing a down song you got to be—so you do use a little bit of method acting in that you try to remember—within your own emotions—it's easier with music than it is with acting because *The Iceman Cometh* is what you're dealing with, and you've got to remember, Okay, what was there in my life that makes me be able to relate to how to do this. If you wrote the song, not a problem, but you do have to confront the fact that you may have to remember, night after night, something that most people wouldn't want to remember. So it's a catharsis of psychotherapy every night in front of an audience. If you're dealing with anything that's down or anything that's dark, you've got to go back to the dark place to really do a good job of performing that song. And then at the next song, you know, do something else. So I think studying method acting and studying acting has had a big influence on the way I perform. I think of a performance as a play—as a whole—that has a beginning, and a middle, and an end. It's not a fluid jam session like a jazz performance. But even a jazz performance—the great jazz entertainers that I've gone to see—they just played all instrumental the whole show. They have this sense of kind of coming in and—in *medias res*, is that the—?

AW:
Mmhm.

MM:
—in the middle of the action, like in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*—you don't start at the beginning of the story, you start kind of at the middle. You come in at the middle range of how people are. You don't start down and you don't start up because there's no place to go. You start in the middle and then kind of go up and then you can gradually go down, but you've got to go back through the middle first before you can go down. That's the basis of all classical writing. And I don't think—

AW:
—the dramatic curve.

MM:
—when I play. Yeah. I think the dramatic curve is a consideration for me.

AW:

Well, it sure looks like it from sitting outside. I noticed that last night with the band—where everybody else has to go along with the what you set out—but I really noticed it in the solo show a couple of weeks back. How one thing flowed into another, not just musically, but in the sense of—well, exactly what you said, the dramatic import—or the impact—of it.

MM:

You know, having said that, I really am a believer that there's no rules. I see people that get up there and break all those rules and do great. It just depends on the charisma involved or the personality, you know? You sort of expect Bob Dylan to get up there and do weird stuff that no other entertainer would do because that's why people kind of bought the ticket.

AW:

—and Cohen's not going to sing a happy song—Leonard Cohen. (laughter) Well, I don't know. I thought it was worth talking about it a little bit because looking at performers and I also noticed that night, too, that the core of the Cosmic Cowboys—at least in my thinking you, Bob Livingston, and Gary P. Nunn—all three of you are very much cognizant of your role as performers as well as writers—and evidently spend a lot of time. Was that what attracted you to want another to start with, or did you all learn it the same way? I mean you just don't come out doing this sort—

MM:

I really don't know how they arrived there—how they arrived at what they do—because I've really never really asked. But I think probably the classic dramatic curve is something that playwrights arrived by writing a lot of plays that bombed and some plays that made it. And they finally said, "You know, generally speaking, this is what works. Now once in a while we can shock the audience by doing it differently." Like by starting with the guy dying and the go back over his life and have a flash back. Same thing with entertainment. My hero, when you're working with a band—I wanted to throw this in—when you're working with a band, my hero in entertainment is Buffalo Bill. I think he was the greatest entertainer that ever lived. I never saw one of his shows obviously, so—but I've read about how he did it and how he lined things up. The secret to Buffalo Bill's success was that he knew when to get out of the spotlight. And I think the secret to playing with a band is having people in the band who are at least as good, if not way better, than you at the role that they play in the music, and in singing that they're equally good singers and could get up there and at least musically deliver whatever you can deliver. But the difference is you need—you're in the spotlight. Obviously you're the star—you need to step out of the spotlight. The only time I really lose my temper in a production situation is when I've got a lighting man that keeps the spotlight on me all the time. For one thing, I can never have any privacy within the performance. If it goes dark on me I can turn around and tune my guitar like all the other guys get to do, you know. If you're the focus all the time you're, like, sweating it

because you're trying to tune your guitar while you're doing the show and talking to the people. And that's the biggest tough thing for folk singers, I think is a guitar just will not stay in tune for an hour. But we now have all these great tuning mechanisms that we can—digital tuners and stuff that really, really help that situation. But every single person on the stage has got to be using one because you may tune back to standard while they drifted out, and now you're not—even though your perfect pitch, you're not in tune with the guy next door. So he's got to keep checking his tuning. So build into a band show the opportunity for everybody to stay in tune about every three or four songs. How is that going to happen, logically? What do you have to do? I love to put other people in the spotlight, anyway, but even within one song, if there is a fiddle solo there I want that spotlight to hit the fiddle player. I don't want to have a spotlight on me. I don't know how many times I've even walked into Vegas, and they put the spotlight on me *and* the fiddle player. My thing is, No. I want to disappear. I want to totally disappear. I want the audience to think this is his show right at that particular minute. I get enough relief, then, to be able to come back into the spotlight a little bit more refreshed and relaxed and do my part. I realize I'm going to be in the spotlight fifty percent to seventy percent of the time, but if you're in the spotlight more than fifty percent of the time during a song, it's not good show business. That's my feeling. And also, if you're producing a festival or if you're working with other acts, for God sakes, stand aside for once in a while. And that's why it really helps, in my career, to be a fan. I'm a fan of other people, you know. I think Don Edwards is a better cowboy singer than me. I think if I had him on a festival—really truly give him a great spotlight. Don't say, "I got to be the headliner." I remember working with some people along the way where the wife of the manager would come in and say, "We're not going to book this show unless so-and-so is the headliner tonight because he's got a bigger hit record than you do right now." And I would always shock them by saying, "Well, I don't care. I don't mind if I open this show." My time up there is my time. If I'm going to worry about following somebody because I can't do the deliver—I better get off the stage completely. And a couple of times that really backfired on a few people I not going to mention, but they came in and said, "We have to be the headliner at Westfest." Michael Martin Murphy can't close this show. I don't care if it does say Michael Martin Murphy's Westfest. You can't close the show. We're bigger than you. So I'd say, "Okay, I'll play at 3 o'clock and you guys play at 7 o'clock," or, "I'll play at four." Well what happened is—what they didn't know is, the biggest part of the crowd at Westfest was there in the midafternoon. It got too cold at night. So they'd be up there at 7 o'clock, freezing to death on stage, with lights on, and it's raining or something, and I'm up there playing in the sunshine for 25,000 people, and they go down to 15. I didn't calculate it that way, but hey, if you want to come in and make a demand like that, fine. What they didn't know is I never closed a show at Westfest. Not once. I always came in and sang "Home on the Range" and couple of other songs with whoever was the headliner. At the end of the show, I would come back out and close the show with them after they did their encore. Then we would all sing "Home on the Range" together and have an Indian dance or something. I let them preach the sermon and then I'd give the invitation (both laughing) basically is what it came down to. And that still kept me—kept it

that they got it. That it was my festival, but at the same time I'm not trying to overshadow somebody else. I get it, that there's people that are bigger stars than me, and we want to have them on our show. So, hey, let them come in and make any demand they want. Well, somebody said one time in terms of getting out of the spotlight—somebody said one time, "Boy,"—well I'm not going to mention names again—a guy that had a really hot album just after we booked him—in other words, we booked him for X amount of money and then he had this ascendancy on the charts. And when he came—by the time he got there six months later after we made the booking—this guy is like the biggest thing since soap, and we paid opening act money for him. So we got the phone calls from the agent, "Hey, he just had a number one record," you know. "We're going to come in and play the show for the same money we agreed to because we have to because we signed a contract. But we're closing the show or we want this or we want that." Well, this guy—one guy came. He got off the bus. He went straight to the stage, played his show, and got right back on the bus and left. And he had security guards all around him. And the talent booker for the show, who—I don't book the talent at Westfest. I get somebody who's a professional at doing that because a lot of that's negotiation of prices, and I really don't want to negotiate with my favorite fellow artists. I don't want to have to say, "Hey, Don, I don't think you're worth \$5,000 as a cowboy singer. I think you're worth four." Well, great, you know. What's Kathy going to say? Okay, I can't remodel my kitchen this week.

AW:

Yeah, you're right. Don won't say a word, but Kathy—

MM:

And by the way—Kathy, if you ever read this or hear this, all wives are like that and all husbands are like that—if it's a female entertainer—you always want to put your mate as a number one over everybody else. I buy that. So, anyway, they said, "We're never booking him again. He acted like an a-hole. He was a real jerk. Why in the world—why would we ever want him back?" I said, "Well, number one. He drew 25,000 people. It was the biggest crowd we ever had at Westfest out there on that mountain when he was singing. Number two. He did a great job. People went crazy." That's what I hired him to do, draw people and do a great show. I don't believe that an entertainer has any other obligations to do that. I don't think—I do not believe an entertainer has the obligation to sign one autograph if he doesn't want to. I'm talking as promoter now. I don't think you have an obligation to the public to do that. It's great if you do, and it's great—you'll keep your career going a long time. But as it turned out, that guy had been dealing with, over one year, a stalker in Colorado that would tend a show up with a pistol.

AW:

Woah.

MM:

And they would have to have security around him and they never knew when this guy was going to show up—and then they would have to try to catch him in the audience. So what they did was they had sent out his security people up on the stage during other entertainers show and on the ground to see if they could spot that guy. It turned out he wasn't there that day, but that's the reason why he got off the bus, did his show and left. Okay, there could be another reason. The guy just broke up with his girlfriend, and he's feeling a lot of pain right now. And he doesn't want to deal with people. He just needs to sit on his bus in the dark. That's fine with me. Every artist has a different process. I accept that. I don't even agree with my own wife on this issue. My wife thinks that every entertainer ought to stop and talk to the public and do autographs and be nice no matter what's going on. And she, fairly often, gets upset at me if—after an award show—I go straight to the motel room and don't sit down there and jam with everybody because I'm tired. I'm just tired. Nothing to do—that I don't like Don Edwards, or I don't like Waddie or whoever is down there jamming, It's just that I'm tired. I want to go to bed. So I think if you're going to go beyond just a career as a performing artist and entertainer and writer, you're going to go beyond that in thinking in terms of show business and the entertainment business, it's good to get out of the spotlight and it's good—not control—try to control other people and make too many judgements on why they are the way they are at any particular time. One time, ten years down the line from the Austin thing, Willie Nelson invited me onto his bus during Country Jam or whatever it was called in West Virginia—Jamboree on the Hills—and I told Mickey Raphael—who came to say, “Hey, Willie wants you to come over to the bus.” I said, “Mickey, I can't do that.” “Why not? Are you mad at Willie?”—and we noticed every time we invite you over you don't come onto the bus.” I said, “I can't be around drugs. I cannot be around marijuana. I can't be around cocaine. I'm not going to go on the bus. Give Willie my regards.” That particular time I got a note back from Willie, and he said, “Okay, we'll shut everything down while you're on the bus. I want to talk to you.” It didn't have anything to do with not liking Willie Nelson. It didn't have anything to do with—but I can't get too close to somebody who's doing things I really don't want to do or be associated with. For nothing else, just, I don't want to be arrested. I don't know how in the world Darrell Royal ever got through all that because he hung out on the bus all the time. And I know Darrell never was a user in any stretch of the imagination. So looking at it from my own perspective of why that guy did what he did that day—because of the stalker—you have your internal reasons why you may not do things. And for other entertainers judge you by their standards—there could be some problems, and you're making a mistake. You can't be all things to all people. You can try to go that direction as far as possible, but there's a limit. You know, there's a limit. That's all I'm going to say.

AW:

Well, it—

MM:

—and I think being in a band and being on stage is a lot like that too. There are limits to how big of a star you can be. If you hog the spotlight the whole time, you're dead in the water. My fiddle player could get up there and do a whole show by himself and knock the audience out. Pat Flynn can get up there and do his own show and knock the audience out. So, for God's sake, give him the spotlight. That's all I'll say; I've said enough.

AW:

Well, yet I also notice that I've never seen you turn back an audience member. In fact, last night I watched you as we were heading out the back door come back in and sign a t-shirt for a straggling audience member. And you sat there for a good hour, hour and a half after the show. So it's bound to be important for you, personally, to relate.

MM:

Yeah, but it's not a policy that I try to impose on everybody else. I like people. That's why I do it. I like people. It's good socializing. It feels good, and it's good business. But if you don't like people, then you probably shouldn't get into this business. But if you don't like people, you can get through it if you just stick to your guns. The problem is if you get inconsistent—you talked about consistency—if one night you sign autographs for everybody and talk to everybody and sign—the next night at that same place—say you're doing a one week run in Vegas—you don't come out at all. Some of those people from last night may have come back the next night because they thought you were such a great guy and talked to the audience, and now you're rejecting them. We don't have to mention names, but I think we both know, in the cowboy world, that there are a few people who are so irascible with people. And I'm going to tell you something. I honestly do not know how they can get away with it year after year after year—being that nasty to people—

AW:

I don't either.

MM:

—but they do. And my wife is the fan of a certain entertainer who acts like that. And regardless of how much he acts up, she will go and see his show. Every single time. At the same time, if I acted like that (both laughing) she would kick me in the butt. Believe me.

AW:

On that note let's pause this while you finish your pasta.

MM:

Well, I pray I don't need to eat all—

Pause in Recording

AW:

Now that were back from pasta and hamburger—could we talk a little bit about how you came to music or how music came to you? What—you mentioned that your grandfather told stories and would sing acapella and things. But how did you discover music?

MM:

Well, when I was three years old, they used to be in a little—my parents would take me to church. And as a three year old, apparently—my mother—and I do remember this. It's one of the few things I remember at that young of an age—is I got up in front of the congregation—I don't remember how I learned this song—must have been in daycare at Sunday school or something—but I learned “Zacchaeus was a Wee Little Man,” and that little song for children, and apparently that was the first—that I know of—that was my first performance in front of an audience was singing “Zacchaeus was a Wee Little Man” backed up by the church choir in front of the whole congregation at the church. And something happened that day. At three years old, I liked the experience. I enjoyed it. Apparently, I was never—and I don't remember ever being the kind of kid that just kind of kid that when momma said, “Sing something,” or, “Do that,” they sulk—you know how kids will sulk off, and they're not in the mood to do it right now. They don't want to be put on a show—on a pedestal. I liked being put on a pedestal. I liked being on top—set up on the barrel. “Okay, recite something.” I like that. So that's how I started it—thinking it. So maybe it was because my first musical experience was singing in front of a crowd—other than learning the song, but I don't remember how I learned it. I could sing at that age. And then, when I was about six years old—my grandfather lived in Hawaii, my Granddaddy Murphey.

AW:

—lived in Hawaii?

MM:

He was a career Navy man—from Texas. From West Texas—but, I mean, at a fairly young age he went in the Navy and ended up living in Hawaii all his life—except when he came home to die. He was a classic Irish sailor, hard-drinking. He was the heavyweight champion of the Pacific Fleet—he was a boxer—he was a womanizer. He had all the—if you could think of stereotypical Irish stuff he had it all (laughing)—sailor—just mortified my mother cursing all the time—but played music—loved music. He brought back a basket. Every year he'd bring something as a Christmas gift. He always came home from Hawaii at Christmas time. And he brought a Christmas gift of a basket of stuff from Hawaii—like guava jelly and stuff like that. You know, whatever it was—the kiwi fruit thing of the day, and coffee, Kona coffee, and in this little basket was a plastic ukulele that was just like a little prop. Probably, in those days, might have cost seventy-five cents or a dollar at a five and dime store. But since it was a Hawaiian basket and put

the ukulele in there—and ukulele playing was fairly popular at that time—had been a lot more popular just before I came along. In the forties it was huge.

AW:

When were you born? What year?

MM:

1945. March 14, 1945. So I'm on the beginning of the baby boom deal. They took—I got that little—it had a little instruction booklet with it and a little thing you could blow on to tune up the strings. Little—I guess they were like harmonica reeds and it had the notes, (singing) “My dog has fleas.” (laughs) And so I figured out how to tune it, and I started playing it. It had a little thing with chords and couple of songs. “Red River Valley” and probably—(singing)

*I want to go back to my little grass shack
in Kealakekua, Hawai'i.
I want to be with all the kanes and wahines
that I knew long ago.*

*I can hear those Hawaiians singing at—
on the beach at Hōnaunau.*

*I can hear those Hawaiians singing,
Komo mai no kāua i ka hale welakahao.*

*It won't be long till my ship will be sailing
back to Kona—
a grand old place
that's always fair to see.*

*I want to go back to my island joy.
I want to go back to my fish and poi.*

*I'm going back to my little grass shack
in Kealakekua, Hawaii,
where the humuhumunukunukuāpua`a
go swimming by.*

(laughing) That was one of the first songs I ever learned.

AW:

And you still know it. (laughing) That's amazing.

MM:

Well, Hawaiian music was, for me, right there equivalent with learning "Amazing Grace" because of my grandfather. And he would—my grandfather would always show up—even in December in Christmas—in a Hawaiian shirt, white pants, white buck shoes, perfectly groomed. He had that marvelous flowing white hair, white mustache, blue eyes—but a big guy. I mean a big burley guy. He had been a boxer, but now, after a lot of beer, he was beyond buff, he was a buffalo. (both laughing)

AW:

You need to save that one. Beyond buff is a buffalo.

MM:

So, he was fat. He was a big, fat guy. But he always drove. He had a lot of money, and it was mainly because of a kind of a scam that he ran. Even though he was General Quartermaster of Pearl Harbor while he was in the navy, his brother was not in the navy. And they figured out that the military guys, when they got off on R&R, couldn't wear their uniforms around or else the island people—the Polynesians and the Japanese—wouldn't let their daughters go near them because they were military. But if you were in civilian clothes, okay. So what they would is they would bring their uniforms to my great uncle's laundry, which my grandfather was secretly a partner in—now you see why I'm a republican. (both laughing) We had all kind of insider deals in the military—the military-industrial complex—but this wasn't over munitions. This was over a laundry. They had a laundry. These guys would drop off their uniforms on a Friday night—getting off on R&R—put on—they had lockers at the laundry, locker rooms, and you'd rent these lockers. These military guys would pay some rent, and that was partly how they made their money, then they would put on their civilian clothes, leave their military clothes to be laundered over the weekend. When they got off of R&R on Sunday, before they went on the ship, they picked up their uniforms. Monday morning inspection, everything was perfect. And they were willing to pay for this service because it was really hard to keep a neat uniform on a ship in 1940s. So they made a ton of money doing this. It was the biggest base—the biggest navy base in the world at that time. So he had a lot of money—handsome navy man, Irish man, hard drinker, lots of music, always brought a new girlfriend—he was divorced—he always brought a new girlfriend with him every year and always showed up in a white Cadillac. And I remember as a kid, the white Cadillac with wired wheels on the spokes. And it was always a convertible. And what he would do is he would come across on a ship with the old Cadillac that he had the year before—because you couldn't buy them on the island—buy a new one in San Francisco, drive it to Texas, visit the family, give away lots of gifts just like Santa clause—he was the Hawaiian Santa clause—drive that car back, and then take it back, and then use it and drive it around the

island for a year. Then the next year he'd do the same thing again—always had a brand new white Cadillac convertible, white pants, white shoes, white hair, if he went out to dinner he would wear his formal military white—navy whites. Women just fell at their feet. I mean, and this guy was big. I mean, he was— (laughs)

AW:

He must have been quite an attraction in your neighborhood.

MM:

Well, we would—we'd go out to dinner, and—

AW:

This is in Texas?

MM:

Yeah. We'd go out to dinner and he did magic tricks. He was an entertainer, and he always would go to the novelty stores along the way—driving from San Francisco to Texas—and buy whatever the latest whoopee cushion was or whatever. We'd go out to dinner and my mother was just mortified embarrassed because he wouldn't go to a restaurant that didn't have—that wasn't willing to bring him some beer. And in Dallas that meant private club. So we went to a lot of private clubs for dinner. And he would drink, and he would do magic tricks and pigeons would fly out of his sleeves. He was an amateur magician, too. Okay, that's how I came to music through him. And music, for him, was a way to get the girls, and it was an entertainment thing—which is why I've always been much more oriented toward trying to be an entertainer than a suffering writer. And it may be, somewhat, my downfall, but—that was granddaddy. And so I learned that ukulele. The next year, when granddaddy came back, he was so shocked that I learned to play on that plastic ukulele. He said, "We're going down to the music store." We went down to the music store, and he bought me a rosewood—it was a totally rosewood ukulele that was a little bit bigger that had a better tone—it wasn't plastic—catgut strings—before that was illegal—and bought me the little felt pick, you know, that got the real soft sound? But he also bought one for my dad. And he said, "Pink, you know, Michael needs somebody to play with. He can't just sit around doing this by himself. You should learn this too." So my dad, who's a CPA and deacon in the Baptist church, starts learning how to play Hawaiian songs, and cowboy songs, and whatever songs you played on the ukulele at the time. It was a wide range of stuff. But cowboy music was part of it. It was hugely popular in Hawaii along with Hawaiian music—

AW:

Cowboy music was?

MM:

Yeah. and they're very, very similar in the way chord changes ran and everything. So my dad and I started playing. Then my brother took it up.

AW:

Is your brother older or younger?

MM:

Younger. Three years younger—my brother Mark—he's the one who's an actor. He took it up. We all started playing together as a family. By age ten or eleven, I was a camper at a Christian youth camp. Along with the gospel songs we played around the camp fire, I was out there in a Hawaiian shirt and a cowboy hat, (laughs) playing Hawaiian music. And I don't know how well the hula girl songs went over with the Baptists, but they apparently accepted it okay. They thought it was kind of cute. And then Granddaddy kept coming back year after year, and year after year I'd improved a little bit, and so had Dad and Mark. Finally he said, "You know what? You're ready for a guitar," took me down to the best music store in Dallas, which was—is that McCabe's? No that's California. I can't remember the name of the music store—but it was the only store in town at the time that had Martins and Gibsons together. Almost no dealerships could carry Gibson if they carried Martin, or if they carried Martin they couldn't carry Gibson. But this guy somehow pulled it off. I think it's because he had a piano store and a guitar store of folk instruments, and they were separate. And he would sell the Martins out of the piano side without anybody knowing it. I remember my grandfather went in and said, "Okay—taking this kind of guitar and we'll take this kind of guitar off the rack. We're going to go home, and then we're going to take a look at these for a few days. And he would play them. And one was a Gibson hummingbird that really had all the fancy stuff on it and that was—the other one was a D-28 Martin. This was probably 1957, '58—'59 maybe? And he said, "Now, you can't have both of these, you're going to have to pick one of them." And he sat down beside me after playing both of them, and I said, "Well, that—" in my mind I'm saying, That hummingbird sure looks fancy. So I looked at Granddaddy, I said, "The one that's got the hummingbird flying on it." He goes, you can't see this on tape—but with his elbow, he just jabs his elbow as hard as he possibly can in my ribs—he goes, "Think again." I said, "Well, okay. The other one does really sound a lot better than the other one." My apologies to Gibson. It wasn't a J-200. So he said, "Okay. The Martin—the D-28—is yours." So when I started playing the guitar, and when I started playing the ukulele, I had the best instruments. I had a Martin ukulele and I had a Martin guitar. So I mean, I had a silver spoon in my mouth. And to this day when people say, What kind of guitar should I buy for my kid? He wants to learn to play. I tell them, "How much money have you got?" And they'll say, "I got maybe \$400." Don't put your kid through it. Wait till you've got a \$1,000, and buy him a Martin or a Gibson or something, that's a good instrument. You'll never regret it. They'll get to be good—if they're playing a basically good instrument in the first place—playing a lousy instrument, you're never going to get anywhere. It's kind of like horses.

You've got to have something that's got some kind of something in the blood, not just a rough horse. So, that's how I came to music. And then I started playing every day. I had that Martin guitar and I learned how to add the bass strings to what I was doing because—four-string instrument. Ukulele. I still played the ukulele a lot though. I played the baritone uke, and all the way up to tenor—and even soprano ukulele—the little tiny ones. And I still love the sound of those. I've only got one of them left, though. I've got the original first one he bought for me.

AW:

The Martin?

MM:

The Martin that was rosewood. I've still got that one, and I understand those things are worth a huge amount of money. I'm afraid to even ask. I keep it in the safe at home now. I keep the D-28 in the safe, too, because I can't take it on the road with me. I can't take a chance of that it would get stolen or busted up or—busted up would be one thing. That could be restored. But stolen—but I loved the sound of it. It was magic to me. I loved the smell of it. I loved the feel of it. All I wanted to do was play that guitar. And I listened to every kind of music on the radio and tried to figure it out and try to play it, all by ear. Granddaddy played by ear; that's how I played. I didn't read music. I just learned chords out of a chord book, and it wasn't until much later that I figured out, "Gee. Maybe I better understand a little bit about what these little pin scratches on a page mean." My first music that I played was all over the map. I'd play everything from Cole Porter to "Red River Valley," and pretty much anything that was popular or you could sing and play on the guitar or ukulele that you didn't need a whole jazz band to pull off. And I think that made a permanent mark on me, to be—to constantly return to a solo act. I have to do that. At least some of the year I have to play solo—because that's how I started and that's what I know. Then I got an electric guitar and ruined my life for a while. (laughs) I eventually realized that that Martin was the one. That was the thing. And I played that guitar all the way through 1976. I remember "Wildfire" came out, and I got enough money together, I had a custom made guitar made by Randy Wood in Nashville, and I put the D-28 in a safe. And from since 1976, I played the same Randy Wood guitars—those two guitars you saw on stage last night? I've had them since 1976.

AW:

Wow, I knew—I've seen them on stages with you forever, but I didn't know if it was the same ones—

MM:

So I didn't grow up in an exactly—like, you hear people say, "I grew up in a musical family," or "Mom taught a music course and had taught piano lessons," or "Dad was in a band." It wasn't like that. It was like I just told you.

AW:

Still pretty musical to be involved like that and get that encouragement.

MM:

But it was amateur. It was for fun, and that's what I've always seen—music, for me, has always been fun. When it stops being fun, don't do it.

AW:

How did you find outlets to play?

MM:

Meanwhile, I had friends who were taking piano lessons, and their parents were saying, You have to practice exactly so many hours a day after school, and they were miserable, except for a few who really took to that. I had a girlfriend named Claudia Williams who was a really good classical piano player. And she practiced and performed and loved it and had a real strict teacher. I would go over sometimes and sit there while her teacher was working with her. And I'd say, "Man, I can never do this," because she would have a ruler, and she'd go, "One! Two! Three! Four! Buh! Buh!" tapping right along with a metronome. And my girlfriend's just sitting there sweating. But she always loved it. She loved the strictness, but I couldn't handle that. To me, music was too much of a fun thing. It was too loose, which is why I became—I looked like a pretty challenged guy when I first took off in the music business because I'd go into make a demo on a song, and I couldn't read music. I was in the LA scene, and everybody in the studio could read music except for me, so in the session, so I would say, "Get somebody else to play the part, or else, I guess, play what I play."

AW:

Well how did you—that's a long stretch from the ukulele to LA. You played some, though—you mentioned yesterday—at the Rubaiyat, and you played—

MM:

Oh, I thought the question was how did I get into music, not the music business.

AW:

Okay, well but music, part of that is playing for people. And so where did you get that experience?

MM:

At camp and at church, and they didn't pay me. And then one day somebody said, "Hey, the Kiwanis Club is having a luncheon—or the ladies' whatever is having a little deal—and we'd like for you to come play for it, and we'll give you ten bucks, or something. And that's how I

started was playing for service clubs. What's the old joke? Weddings? Bar mitzvahs? And then I had a little band in high school—actually, in junior high school—it was kind of a Kingston Trio type band—and we played at a lot of events, but never the dances because you had to have a drummer. So the guys that played Buddy Holly got all those gigs, but we got the gigs for the Baptists who were having a party but didn't want any dancing going on. (both laughing)

AW:

Are any of those people still in music that you worked with?

MM:

Steve Fromholz. I had a band with him when I was a freshman in college at Denton. And he's still doing it. It was like a folk music group. Michael Nesmith is not doing it anymore, but he's still around, I mean, but he's not very active. But he was in a—we were in a band together real early on in Texas—played music together—more as kind of like two guys on stage jamming. We had a band called the Lost River Trio when I was in High school. And that's was Bob Jacobs, who's no longer playing, but a guy named Owens Castleman, and Owens Castleman is still playing guitar, writing songs, and is a publisher in Nashville.

AW:

Yeah. I know his name. I don't know him, but I know the name.

MM:

His middle name was Boomer. He was named Boomer by his dad because his dad is one of the biggest oil men in Texas and West Texas. And he thought Boomer was a cool name because he basically got in on the oil boom. So for a while he was Owens Castleman. Later on I went out—when I went out to UCLA, I roomed with Boomer even though we didn't go to the same college. By then he had started calling himself Boomer instead of Owens because he really liked Doc Watson and all that, so he thought Boomer Castleman sounded better the Owens Castleman.

AW:

I think he's right. That's a—Boomer is a—that's a stage name.

MM:

He was a great flat-picker, a great finger-picker, and to this day he's still a great musician. So I was exposed to guys who could really play pretty early on—they could really, really pick, way beyond my level. And we had a great time being in a band. And then my first entrée into the big time music business, out in Los Angeles, was playing in night clubs and folk—they're really more like coffee houses—where you could do some original material because that's—what I had done in Texas—I guess I should hack up. When I was a teenager, I played solo in a place called the Rubaiyat, and that was from the time I was in junior high, at probably sixteen years old—you

couldn't play in a bar because they didn't have any in Dallas at that time—other than private clubs, and that was considered, like, Boy, you're going to the dark side if you go down there in that dungeon. Those are the places that Bob Wills and the Texas played. The Panther—Panther Hall, and—gosh, I forget what the one in Dallas—oh, the Longhorn Ballroom in Dallas. And my mom and dad would drive by those places and they would go, “Don't look. We don't ever want you to get into that kind of entertainment.” So I had to play in coffee houses, and fortunately little coffee houses are really popular at that time because of the folk music movement, or as Steve Martin used to call it, the Great Folk Music Scare. But yeah, folk music ruled the world then. And so I played a lot solo, and then I played in that little band called Lost River Trio, and that was more of a bluegrass, Kingston Trio kind of a band with two guitars and a banjo, and once in a while, there was a guy who came in and played standup bass. We had a number of two or three friends that did that. But there were mostly jazz musicians in the band department at either North Texas or high school band, and they had real trouble figuring out how to play folk music because you actually had to know where you were going on the next chord. I've always said jazz musicians kind of—can kind of fake it. They can kind of start playing a walking bass thing and people keep saying, Oh man, that was cool how you went to that chord. Well that was actually a mistake. But I loved the band thing. I still love the solo thing. And then we couldn't get it off the ground doing anything in music in Texas, and after two years—I told y'all about the UCLA classical department and going out there to school. But the other side of that coin was, the music business was out there.

AW:

You told me that in the car. For the tape—we were in the car—Mr. Tape Recorder, we were talking about various things like Robert Graves, and T.S. Elliot, and the Greek language, and how the testaments were probably written, or the fact that Jesus knew Greek because of certain things that he said, and you mentioned one of the reasons you went into UCLA was because they taught Greek.

MM:

Well, and also, for another reason, because Jesus probably sang the Sermon on the Mount. He probably didn't say it. He probably sang it—because the Aramaic of the Sermon on the Mount is in meter and rhyme. They discovered that about ten years ago.

AW:

Really?

MM:

Yeah, they found the—they got it back to ancient Aramaic because of some script they found somewhere. Some papyrus thing, and said, “Wait a minute. If you start saying, in ancient

Aramaic, Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth, but you know what? This is in meter, and it rhymes.” (coughs) Sorry.

AW:

I'd love to see a citation of that. That's really interesting to me. Very interesting.

MM:

Now, they don't know exactly how it stacked up in ancient Aramaic, but poets in that time in the ancient world were musicians. Nobody recited poetry. It was sung. So Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount in meter and rhyme. He was probably singing it. And in Greek they didn't always rhyme it. You had non-rhyming stuff in Greek. Okay, how did I know about all this, and how did I get into it? I wanted to be a minster. I took Koine Greek classes, which is common Greek, at North Texas State University. And kind of a little sidebar—they kind of weren't supposed to teach religion at the school. Those issues were there even then. State school wasn't supposed to be a seminary or anything like that, so teaching Koine Greek was probably off kilter. They'd be able to teach ancient Greek because that's classical. That's part of classical education, but Koine Greek—so they called it adult education. It was a little bit off campus and it was taught by a minster who knew it—who had been to Baptist seminary—and I really became fascinated with it. I loved it. I loved Koine Greek. Then I got interested in ancient Greek, because the guy would constantly say, “This is common language Greek.” I said, “Well, gee, Mr. Professor, what's the classical thing then? What's the ultimate?” Then he'd say, “Well, you know, it's Plato and Aristotle.” “Well how does that go?” And he'd say, “Well I really not—I can teach you 101 and 102 in that, but I can't really go beyond that. And if you really want to study the classics, you need to probably matriculate. You need to get out of here.” So I said, “Well, where should I go? He said, “Well, the UCLA—the University of California at UCLA just stole the entire classics department from Harvard and offered them twice as much money as they were making in Harvard. So if you want to go hear the great guys who know, and gals, who know about this” —there were a couple of females—my first Greek teacher at UCLA was a women— “you got to go there.” Was it supply-side economics? Reganomics caused me to go to California because, you know, he figured, Buy them. It's like a basketball team or a baseball team, go out and scout and find out who's the best is, and offer them up a good deal. They all moved out there. And so I was taught by British and American scholars—the Greek experts and the Latin experts at UCLA were all British. In the English department, though, the medievalists were all Americans, and the people who taught classical English were all Americans, then all the British taught American literature. This was a little twist that Dr. Durham, who was the head of the department, did on the English department, and I always got a kick out of that, that the Americans taught Shakespeare and the British had to teach Mark Twain. But he went for the fact that American literature really does have world status, and if you're going to have it be—have world status—which he was really into the American thing—then you need to bring people from the outside. Just like—I talked to AJ yesterday. It was a totally

different take on our music then I would have gotten from you. It's what they get when they are in India, of it—I had a great time. You can tell I had nothing but fun doing it. But the reason I was interested—I got beyond the ministerial thing and I got interested in the fact that—I mean, I was already writing songs and playing and making money being a wandering minstrel—and I got really interested in the minstrels of the ancient world, and I thought, Someday I'm going to write my PhD thesis on the whole tradition of the wandering minstrel and how literature really grew out of—literature really grew out of the wondering minstrel. And that all ancient literature is music. It's singer songwriter stuff. It didn't split off until about the middle Dark Ages. I've said that to a lot of professors at school. I've said that to a lot of people, and they just stare at me. And I think it's because they're ticked off that I thought of it, and they didn't. I can find a line of demarcation pretty much in about a hundred year period, people started reciting poetry and not singing it. And that was somewhere around the time period when the Irish saved civilization—so by allowing to—by starting to copy secular music down instead of burning it, which the pope got pretty ticked off about but he lived too far away to do anything about it and didn't want to send an army over there.

AW:

There's Bob, looking for a drink—(Andy answers phone) [1:23:31-1:25:04] Uh, Bob? Yes sir?—I think it's not too far, the Horseshoe Bay—Yeah—Well, no, I think the Horseshoe bay is actually in Llano County, so it should—No, I think you're probably still good. It's a farm-to-market road, so it'll be marked. And if you haven't seen a marked farm-to-market road, you haven't passed it yet—Probably—Okay, the address is—let me look at it here—200 Hi Circle—That's it. Okay, there you are. Turn on that—We'll see you in a little bit. All right. (hangs up phone) I've gone too far. No, here it is.

MM:

So I was—I got fascinated on an academic researcher level—Alan-a-Dale. Who was Alan-a-Dale? Who was Rabillard [Abelard?] Who were these guys that walked around with a lute, hitchhiking around the world—singing for the king, and singing for the royal court, and singing for everybody else—then eventually putting out those old broadside ballad pages when printing came in. But way before printing, guys were doing this. You had to—I discovered that in most of the Celtic world, you had to learn your instrument for seven—first of all everybody learned everything by an apprentice, not by going to music school, most of the time. You had to apprentice for seven years, in the Celtic way anyway. The Irish people—even after it all got to be Catholic—you had to apprentice for seven years just playing the instrument, and learning the classic songs of the culture. Then the next seven years you—no, excuse me. You played the instrument for seven years, then the next seven years you learned to perform, and the last three years of that seven years you were allowed to compose. If you tried to compose early on, they slap you with a ruler—just like that old music teacher did my girlfriend—and I looked at the fact that so much classical poetry and literature—*The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. *The Iliad* and *The*

Odyssey started to make sense to me when I analyzed them from the standpoint—this is a ballad. This is a song. This is somebody entertaining a crowd. They would actually play these things, though, for days. They'd play for as long as they could stand it, and then they'd go drink some wine and go to sleep. And then they'd get up the next day, and everybody'd be there, and then they'd keep on going until they sung the whole story of Ulysses. And that was cable TV.

AW:

Or Woodstock.

MM:

That's right. Thousands of people showed up for this. It says in the bible, "Jesus fed the five thousand," wow, he drew a crowd of five thousand people? (phone vibrates) [1:27:38-1:27:41] Not uncommon if you were a poet.

AW:

Here's Bob again. (Andy answers phone) Yes sir?—Yeah. It's called Horseshoe Bay Resort, and—Okay. Just keep driving. You'll come to a little, uh, circle and it will say "hotel," and take the exit off that little circle that says "hotel." And you'll have to park on your right because right in front of the hotel is valet only. But there's a parking lot on your right when you see the hotel. You can park there—Yeah. Yup. Yeah, just keep—you, as they say back home, you can't miss it. You drive straight into a traffic circle kind of thing. It's real decorative. But there are little signs that keep saying hotel—Okay (hangs up phone)

MM:

Well that's really affecting, then, my actual approach to writing songs and playing music.

AW:

Okay. How—?

MM:

The English department—I concentrated on poetry as a specialty, not reading *Jane Eyre*. And I had great poetry teachers. I'll never forget—Dr. Charles Gullans was a published poet—

AW:

Gullans?

MM:

Gullans. G-u-l-l-a-n-s. He was a published poet—No poets ever made any money in those times, so if you didn't hear of him, no big deal. Nobody ever heard of Marianne Moore then either. (laughs) Only the English department would know who these people were—but he was a

published contemporary poet. He understood all the classical connections, which is why I took his class. And then they put me in a class that really became the first creative writing class at UCLA because there were no Creative Writing majors then. It wasn't a discipline. But Gullans said, "I'm going to teach you poetry by having all you people write poetry." But when he went to Phillip Durham and said, "I'm going to do that," Phillip Durham said, "We can't just put anybody in that class. We're going to have to put some people in that already know something about writing." So he hand-picked about twelve students—I can't remember if there were ten or twelve in there. Maybe it was twelve disciples (laughs)—Gullans definitely did have that attitude. (laughing) But he would have us, "Okay, we're going to write—today we're going to write a Petrarchan sonnet. You can write it on any subject you want, but it has to have the Petrarchan form. Today were going to write a Shakespearian sonnet—which is two lines shorter—today we're going to write something in hexameter. Today were going to write something in iambic pentameter—you know, on and on and on—that we're going to write an ode. I'm going to write—try to cop the meter of a Greek ode, you know, in English. And those were the things—and I loved it. I had nothing but fun doing that because we were able to express ourselves—write stuff that we were thinking about—but try to put it in these forms. And that was totally separate from music, but I got the connection with music real early on.

AW:

You mentioned, just briefly a moment ago, that it was affecting how you were writing, how you were approaching your music. In what way?

MM:

My early songs all tended to really match up line-by-line in perfect meter. And I had the wide range of the rhyming dictionary in my head by the time I had got through two years of working with twelve people in Charles Gullans' special poetry class, which was really a creative writing class but they couldn't call it that. They didn't have that—and so I would sit down and try to write things in those meters and try to match that—get a melody that matched up that way, even like—then along comes Paul Simon and everything's ragged and uneven. But in his early work—(singing) "in the corner stands a boxer and a fighter by his trade. Duh-duh-duh-duh, Duh-duh-dee-duh, Duh-duh-dee-duh, Duh-duh-day. Duh-duh-duh-duh, Duh-duh"—that's all perfect.

AW:

In fact, as soon as you—

MM:

Notice Bob Dylan did the same thing except when he tried to write blues stuff. Those blues guys didn't have any of that influence—which may in some sense been a negative influence—but nevertheless, if you analyze a lot of the blues guys, they had a real sense of structure, too. You had to have a repeat line to start off with, and then you commented on the repeat. (singing) "My

baby left me. I'm all alone. My baby left me all alone. And here I am, stuck, trying to reach her on the phone." I had this sense of structure about what I did. Later on I learned to break the rules.

AW:

How do—two quick questions. Were you writing—were you performing your own material when you were in the Kingston Trio type group and when you were in the Rubaiyat back in Texas before you got out to UCLA?

MM:

Mostly not, but there were—we would write a few songs and try to come up with something. And I wrote my first songs when I was thirteen, fourteen years old. I didn't think much of them—

AW:

Do any of them survive?

MM:

Still don't think much of some of the things I write. (laughing)

AW:

Well, do any of those survive from that period?

MM:

Except, now, I think they're great when I write them, and then ten years later I look at them and say, That really wasn't very good. My hubris gets control of me as a writer.

AW:

I think we all—

MM:

People keep on telling you you're a good writer long enough, and that can totally ruin your career. I think Hemmingway suffered from that. He never topped *For Whom the Bell Tolls*.

AW:

I don't have any trouble controlling my pridefulness. All I have to do is get a blank piece of paper in front of me, and I'm back to being scared to death. How did—because I got this sense talking to Bob Livingston some months back—he mentions going to Red River and hearing Ray, Three Faces West, those guys, and they're playing your songs. How did your songs get from UCLA, California, out to people, like that?

MM:

Well, I came home for Christmas every year. I came home for the summer. And in the summertime we played all the same haunts and got together and had all night jam sessions. And I just happened to be one of the few guys who was actually writing some of his own songs, and they would pick them up and play them. A lot of those bands—nobody wrote songs. I don't really know why. I just—I had that inclination, and I don't really like some of the songs of mine that they learned anymore. But now they haunt me. (Andy laughs)

AW:

Are you willing to share with us which ones?

MM:

Well, one of the first songs I ever wrote was "West Texas Highway," and I don't think it's a very good song. I think it's—

AW:

We all love it, though.

MM:

The rhyming scheme in it is a bit hackneyed. It's not all that well realized, but anyway. But George Hamilton IV recorded it when I was in college. It got out through a publisher I was working with. Again, it was one of those early songs. I think "West Texas Highway" was the first song that an artist recorded—

AW:

Of yours?

MM:

George Hamilton IV. God bless him. I'm sure Gordon Lightfoot says, "God bless him," pretty often, too, but then it was a while before somebody else did, and that—I've told you the story that the next one was "What am I Doing Hangin' 'Round," and then some rock bands that everyone's totally forgotten. So I was writing songs even in high school and junior high school—maybe around the beginning of teenage years. I tried to, "Hey. You ain't nothing but a Hound Dog." How about "You ain't nothing but a rattlesnake?" (both laughing)

AW:

Well on that rattlesnake, let me—

MM:

It's pretty clear who I was imitating.

AW:

Well—while I dial Bob Livingston and see where he's lost at the moment—isn't imitation some of the way, though, that we actually learn those forms?

MM:

It's the only way you can learn.

AW:

(on the phone) Yes, Bob?—Okay, well just—you'll look at—uh, yeah. I—oh, really? Okay. Well then you'll know it when you get there—yeah. It's still a low stone thing that says "Resort" and it may say "Hotel and Resort." I can't remember. But it's not very high. It's not a big Marriott sign. You can't see a Marriott sign from the road—alright. We'll see you.—bye. (hangs up) The *only* way is imitation, right?

MM:

Well, I can't think of any writer or any composer that just sort of sprung out of the womb playing some kind of original style that nobody'd ever heard before. Mozart is probably the closest that we ever saw of that—and anybody who was writing when he was writing, when he was ten, eleven, twelve years old. But his father totally immersed him in music from the time he was born. People say this little genius could play at five years old, or six years old, in front of the king. Well, from the time he was able to move his fingers out of diapers, his dad had him sitting in front of that piano, and that's all he knew. It was almost like a Skinner box experiment. (laughing) He knew nothing else but music, so was he a child genius? Or was he a freak of nature? Or was he just—beat into him from the time he was little? My theory is it was beat into him from the time he was little. Now, Rachmaninoff, on the other hand, apparently started playing piano right out of the box. He heard music in the apartment next to him—this is in his autobiography—he heard music—somebody playing a piano. From the time he was a baby some classical pianist lived over there. And one day the family decided to buy a piano and have the kids start learning to play piano. And apparently Rachmaninoff sat down and, in one sitting, started playing some of the pieces from next door. He figured out the fingering and everything from scratch. Just a genius—simple stuff, but he had it in his head. So I wasn't—those are just anomalies. It's kind of exciting that it's possible, but I just borrowed from everything. But you've got to imitate something for a while, then imitate something else, and then you put—what if you wrote a Beatle-like song but it was like a Woody Guthrie chord change? What if you took a Hank Williams song and used a Shakespearian sonnet form to play it? Same kind of chord change. But the farther back you go in folk music, the closer you get to the old classical forms of writing, though.

AW:

I know—probably other people have said this but—Mick Jagger is quoted famously as saying, “All music starts out as folk music.”

MM:

Well, you know, all bluegrass. (singing) “Twas midnight on the stormy deep. My solitary watch I keep.” Well, that could be Lord Byron, “Twas midnight on the stormy deep. My solitary watch I keep.” Well he probably wouldn’t have said—he would have said, “I kept.” (laughs) So the hillbillies just didn’t get the grammar, but they got the idea.

AW:

Although there’s a—the grammar of the hillbillies is interesting, and I discovered this by accident when I was writing a one women show about women on the American frontier, and one of the characters is an Irish immigrant girl—1870s, 1880s—so the problem is how do you write her language? Well, by pure serendipity I discovered a book by a fella named P. W. Joyce. *English As We Speak It in Ireland*, published in 1910. He says, “I’ve been collecting this for thirty years.” So that put him right into my spot. One of the most interesting things I discovered in reading that was that hillbilly grammar, the syntax, comes not from ignorance but from a direct and literal translation of Erse into English. So it’s proper and appropriate in the original language

MM:

Oh you mean like if you’re taking the Celtic language and trying to sing in English you get that arrangement of syntax.

AW:

Well, just in the speaking, Me and myself I did this. Me and so-and-so did this. Those were direct translations from the Erse to the English, not modified by saying how did we do that, and that’s pretty interesting

MM:

Maybe you’ve got a point, because romance languages like Spanish—why do Mexican people say, “De chair señor, you’re sitting on it.” That’s correct English and correct grammar in Spanish. You always mention the noun first and then you describe it—put an action with it, or whatever. We don’t do that.

AW:

And the use of the feminine pronoun for men because of putting the mother’s name second in Spanish, and after one is—yeah, it’s those things that are intriguing to find out. Make us—

MM:

So they're trying to write in English because they were living in an English speaking situation, but they would use the old syntax and stuff like that. Yeah, you're right.

AW:

It's pretty intriguing to see that. Well, you want to take a little break while we wait for Bob? And let me check—I want to replace the batteries on this.

MM:

I'm going to mention one last thing about the early days before Bob—and that is the Bob period—one thing that was different about my life, that was different from—the other hillbillies, and country people, and city people I was around in Texas had a fairly narrow range of things they would listen to, gospel music, Hank Williams, Hank Williams, gospel music, gospel music, Hank Williams. There was this radio station called WRR in Dallas, and there was a guy named Jim Lowe. And he had "Jim Lowe's Midnight Blues Caravan." And when I was a kid I got a transistor—actually, got a crystal radio—I made a crystal radio for a project.

AW:

Cat whisker radio.

MM:

Right, and then I got a transistor radio. It had earphones on it, and after—and I'm sure you did the same thing—after my parents put me to bed at night I would stay up under the covers—with a little flashlight so I could find the dial—and I would put those earphones in, and I'd wait for "Jim Lowe's Caravan." And "Jim Lowe's Caravan" was an all-night blues show. All black artists singing, and I'm talking about Sonny Terry, Brownie McGhee, all the—and I loved that music. So that influenced me a lot musically. I tried to play those song, and I was very much disliked by a lot of people because I liked "The Key to the Highway" as much as I liked "Amazing Grace." And my momma would say, "Don't sing. Don't sing those kinds of songs at the church picnic," (laughing) because they were dirty lyrics and things, "My woman's jelly roll" and all that kind of stuff, "You you really know what you're saying?" "No Mom. What does that mean?" "Oh just, just get at it—" Now I realize she understood it. Now how did she know? (both laugh)

AW:

"Soft and easy. Good and greasy. How I love my collard greens," not about collards at all. Well that—one of the—just as an aside—one of the drawbacks in growing up in Lubbock. We had all kinds of music, but I actually learned black music from white English rock-and-rollers and would go back to the black sources after I learned where the things came from—because we didn't have a radio station that we could get on the air, we got a KLMA, but they were playing pop music. Now if it was a black group doing pop music, fine, but they weren't playing blues. So

we didn't get to hear that except second hand and then had to go back and dig it out. That is a very cool—that you had the chance to listen to that.

MM:

Well, then we had a guy who worked for us. My dad rented houses to blacks in the black part of town, which was very segregated when I was a kid. And so we had renters and then guys who worked for my dad fixing up their houses because you didn't send a white guy into an all-black neighborhood to do repair work, or try to collect rent, or he might not ever come back. Same thing is that you didn't—a black guy didn't go in an all-white area and just hang out or else the Klu Klux Klan'd come after—so I got to know some of these blacks that took care of—that helped my dad take care of things, did repair work for him, and they would sing. And Hiram, who was the main guy that did all the yardwork and fixed up the rental houses, was a singer, and mostly a gospel singer, but he also knew some of those blues songs I heard. And when I realized that I was actually personally around somebody that knew all those songs coming over WRR, I thought to myself, I am going to learn some of that stuff. So I got Hiram to teach me how to sing and how to play some of that stuff—kind of the QT when my dad was at work, and my mom worked at the dime store. And he was around the—doing yard work. I would say, “Come in here for a minute, and show me how to play “Key to the Highway,” stuff like that. So it was kind of like in the “Ride with Bob” play, where there's the black guy that teaches him about the blues, and he's always kind of the mentor in the back of his mind. I had a lot of—I just wanted to add that I had a lot of influence from black culture. That's why I got into the civil rights movement in late high school and early college because I loved the culture. I couldn't stand to see somebody burn a cross—

AW:

Stop just a minute. Let me change this battery, because I want to get this—

End of Recording