

**Oral History Interview of
George Chaffee**

**Interviewed by: Andy Wilkinson
December 11, 2013
Austin, Texas**

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

© Southwest Collection/
Special Collections Library



TEXAS TECH UNIVERSITY

**Southwest Collection/
Special Collections Library**

15th and Detroit | 806.742.3749 | <http://swco.ttu.edu>

Copyright and Usage Information:

An oral history release form was signed by George Chaffee on December 11, 2013. This transfers all rights of this interview to the Southwest Collection/Special Collections Library, Texas Tech University.

This oral history transcript is protected by U.S. copyright law. By viewing this document, the researcher agrees to abide by the fair use standards of U.S. Copyright Law (1976) and its amendments. This interview may be used for educational and other non-commercial purposes only. Any reproduction or transmission of this protected item beyond fair use requires the written and explicit permission of the Southwest Collection. Please contact Southwest Collection Reference staff for further information.

Preferred Citation for this Document:

Chaffee, George Oral History Interview, December 11, 2013. Interview by Andy Wilkinson, Online Transcription, Southwest Collection/Special Collections Library. URL of PDF, date accessed.

The Southwest Collection/Special Collections Library houses almost 6000 oral history interviews dating back to the late 1940s. The historians who conduct these interviews seek to uncover the personal narratives of individuals living on the South Plains and beyond. These interviews should be considered a primary source document that does not implicate the final verified narrative of any event. These are recollections dependent upon an individual's memory and experiences. The views expressed in these interviews are those only of the people speaking and do not reflect the views of the Southwest Collection or Texas Tech University.

Technical Processing Information:

The Audio/Visual Department of the Southwest Collection is the curator of this ever-growing oral history collection and is in the process of digitizing all interviews. While all of our interviews will have an abbreviated abstract available online, we are continually transcribing and adding information for each interview. Audio recordings of these interviews can be listened to in the Reading Room of the Southwest Collection. Please contact our Reference Staff for policies and procedures. Family members may request digitized copies directly from Reference Staff.

Consult the Southwest Collection website for more information.

<http://swco.ttu.edu/Reference/policies.php>

Recording Notes:

Original Format: Born Digital Audio

Digitization Details: N/A

Audio Metadata: 44.1kHz/ 16bit WAV file

Further Access Restrictions: N/A

Transcription Notes:

Interviewer: Andy Wilkinson

Audio Editor: N/A

Transcription: Cecilia Morales

Editor(s): Walter Nicolds

Interview Series Background:

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

Transcript Overview:

This interview features George Chaffee. Chaffee discusses his interest in music, attending Texas Tech, and his musical style.

Length of Interview: 01:41:43

Subject	Transcript Page	Time Stamp
Biographical information and youth	5	00:01:21
Guitars and music at Texas Tech	10	00:08:16
Big Spring recording session	13	00:16:54
Interest in folk and trio music: The Kingston Trio, The Limelitters	18	00:23:59
Switching from ukulele to guitar: differences and similarities as well as motivations	20	00:29:00
Groups, venues, and individuals George had played with: The Alpine Trio, John Denver, Little Italy in Lubbock	22	00:33:46
Texas Tech	31	00:53:53
Journalism	35	01:03:03
Bluegrass and Tinpan Alley Songs	38	01:11:26
Musical Interlude: "Stardust" played on the ukulele	42	01:17:54
Arrangements, instruments, and jam sessions	42	01:20:35
Children	48	01:30:19
How he met his second wife Betsy	52	01:39:33

Keywords

Ukulele, Guitar, John Deutschendorf (AKA: John Denver), Delta Tau Delta, The Kingston Trio, The Alpine Trio, David Box, Phil Ochs, Texas Tech, Folk, Bluegrass, Glenn Yarbrough

Andy Wilkinson (AW):

For a time in Oak Cliff, they had that rail, the electric rail. And that's an interesting community, and it's even more interesting when you think about how much it contributed to the arts in Texas. It never fails that when I ask somebody when you're talking about arts from Dallas, they say, "Well, what part of Dallas?" "Oh, Oak Cliff."

George Chaffee (GC):

[laughs] Yeah.

AW:

Let me preface this by saying this is the eleventh of December, 2013. Andy Wilkinson with George "Chae-ffee," and not "Cha-fee." Chaffee, in his beautiful home here in Briarcliff.

GC:

On the shores of what used to be Lake Travis.

AW:

Yeah, the late Lake Travis semi-arid area near Spicewood, west of Austin. It's a really pleasant day and we're going to be talking about music and we've just had a tour of the house, which is just remarkable. So—gosh, let me get some notes out. Oh, and you were asking about the archive. Let me get just a couple of bits of information and I'll tell you about the archive. C-h-a-f-f-e-e?

GC:

Right.

AW:

What is your date of birth?

GC:

January 31, 1944.

AW:

Okay, and where at?

GC:

Harris Hospital in Fort Worth, Texas.

AW:

Harris Hospital.

GC:

Yeah, there's a big cornerstone there that has my name on it.

AW:

Perfect. I've always wondered who that was. What did your folks do in Fort Worth?

GC:

My father was head of an office of claim adjusters for Aetna Surety and Casualty. So that meant I also picked up some great deals on used cars that had been stolen and then recovered and then sold for salvage.

AW:

That's hitting the jackpot for a kid.

GC:

My first car was a little MGA.

AW:

Oh, really? Oh, man.

GC:

I thought I was hot stuff.

AW:

Well, wouldn't we like to have that back today?

GC:

We would, we would.

AW:

Yeah, I think of all the great cars I had and don't anymore, it's kind of sad. So, did you grow up in Fort Worth?

GC:

I did. In the TCU area, right off of Bluebonnet Circle. When I was about five or six years old, I think six, my mother taught me to play her ukulele. Which I've tried to find out what it was, who made it, I can't. It was not particularly a good ukulele, but it was—

AW:

That's what I just looked at.

GC:

Yes.

AW:

Well, it didn't look bad.

GC:

It's a nice-looking—and she always said, it looks much better than my brother's, but his is actually a Martin, so his is a better-sounding one, and boy, that's an understatement.

AW:

Yeah, that's the one that you just showed me, the—that—

GC:

It think it's a 1925 or '26 Martin-style Zero.

AW:

That still impresses me. I think if you were to put it in the market, you'd get more than six hundred bucks for it.

GC:

Maybe. But the thing is, collectors like one that's in very pristine condition. This one's been through some fun times.

AW:

Yeah, but you know, there are a lot of ukulele players out there now.

GC:

There are. Yeah, ukulele has kind of caught on again.

AW:

It really has. And finding a Martin that's not a baritone or a tenor is kind of hard.

GC:

It is. And I wanted a tenor Martin in the worst way, but that never happened. I never saw a deal that I could get.

AW:

They are pretty pricey. So your mother played, and your uncle played? Who else in your family played music?

GC:

Well, that's it for stringed instruments. My brother and my younger sister, my older brother and younger sister both took piano lessons. I was the only kid who didn't get piano lessons.

AW:

Did you not want them, or?

GC:

No, I wanted them!

AW:

Oh, really?

GC:

But mom, I guess she figured, Nah, you'll just do it a little bit and lose interest. And the thing is, she's probably right, because I play by ear, and I have tried intermittently, my entire life, to learn how to read music so I could sight-read music on any instrument, I don't care. Never worked. Never worked. Because if I hear it, then I can play it, and I just start staring at the notes, I'm not really reading them, you know, I'm just staring at the page.

AW:

Yeah. No, I'm the same way. I play by ear. I learned, finally, to score it, to write it, but I found out when I learned to score it, that it doesn't have anything to do with learning to read it.

GC:

Oh, really? That's good to know. I feel a little bit better now.

AW:

But if you're putting them on the page based on what you already know about the note, that's different than looking at the page and bringing it back out. They're two different skills and I haven't managed it. Well, so did you learn to play the ukulele because that was all or because you wanted to—you were interested in it?

GC:

It was really my mother's idea. She taught me the "Five Foot Two, Eyes of Blue" song. I really got interested in it. She had a ukulele book, and I remember "Georgia" was in there, so I started playing with that.

AW:

Now, this was in tablature?

GC:

No, no.

AW:

So if you didn't read music, how did—

GC:

It was in notes, but it had chord grids on it.

AW:

Yeah, so if you knew the melody, you were fine to play the chords.

GC:

Yeah, right. And so I did that. Another thing I played was the clarinet in junior high school. The funny story there is that the first time we sat individually in front of the band leader and played something. We were supposed to look at this music and play, and the first time, there was a melody, and I was toward the end and I had the melody in my head. I knew exactly what it was. So I played the melody. And I was, like, second-chair clarinet. The next time we did this, it was the same note—well, it wasn't the same note, but it was just two or three notes, but it was mostly just to see how well we counted. I blew that. [laughter] There's no way my ear could keep on the—I moved to the back of the clarinet section. So, it was fun.

AW:

Well, what sort of music did you listen to in your house, growing up? Or did you listen to, didn't have to be around your house.

GC:

Growing up in the early days, I listened to anything I could, except that it seems most of it was music like by Terry Gilkyson, Eliza Gilkyson's father. "Memories are Made of This" and those kinds of tunes, and then the forty-five stuff of rock-and-roll. Of course, Elvis was in there, but a lot of the others, Ritchie Valens, I think I still have his forty-five of "Oh Donna". Actually, even like in high school, I was listening a lot to show tunes, you know. My parents would go see a

musical or something and then they would come home with the LP or forty-fives of “Carousel” and “Oklahoma” and whatnot. I can remember loving to listen to, over at my grandparents’ house in Oak Cliff—listening to Gene Autry sing “Buttons and Bows”, and I think on the reverse side of that was “Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer”, if I’m not mistaken.

AW:

Huge hit. That may have bought him the baseball team, I don’t know.

GC:

[laughs] Could have.

AW:

Well, this photo that you showed me of you and—

GC:

Bob Black.

AW:

Bob Black, with your guitars, I see at least one Martin, and yours looks like—

GC:

Mine—mine’s a Martin.

AW:

Is it?

GC:

In fact it’s back there in my closet.

AW:

Is that a decorated sound hole model?

GC:

Not very. It’s kind of like the rest of the Martins, just the single lines, but it’s a 1950, 0028G. It’s a classical guitar, the same one that Paul Stookey is pictured holding on one of the first—

AW:

Headshots for the—

GC:

Yeah, album cover for Peter, Paul and Mary. Except his had white pick guards on it, and I never had pick guards on that.

AW:

I bet you're glad of that too.

GC:

Oh, yeah. I bought that instrument from Johnny Hatley in Fort Worth before my—let's see—after my first year at Texas Tech. At Tech, I went up to Tech with a Goya that I paid like a hundred and ten bucks for brand-new, and I got back, I was over at Johnny's, because he was another guy who loved folk music, which I got into big time when I got into high school and the Kingston Trio began being popular. In fact, I had a Sears Airline guitar in those days. I played for Mrs. Bomar's Spanish class for extra credit, "Down By the Mission / San Miguel" or whatever by the Kingston Trio. I needed a capo, I didn't have one, I took a pencil and some rubber bands and fashioned a capo, and that guitar was worthless. It was always hard to play. Oh, gosh. And my voice was shaky but I got through it and got my extra credit. Squeaked through with a C in Spanish. But Johnny Hatley had this guitar, and he had married Sally Pryor, and Sally needed a washer and drier, and so he sold me that Martin for two hundred and fifty bucks. And I still have it to this day.

AW:

That's—that's a great guitar, too.

GC:

When I see Johnny I say, "Hey, I still got your guitar." And he says, "Hey, I want it back." So—and of course, I will not give it to him. I had that guitar all through college. I loved it. I just loved it. And Bob Black, who's pictured there with me, he was by far and away my best friend ever.

AW:

Did you meet in Fort Worth?

GC:

We met my very first night at Texas Tech in Gordon Hall, room 305. And my roommate—we lived next door to two guys who were on the freshman football team. My roommate was a walk-on for the freshman team, and Bob Black and Glenn Koch.

AW:

How do you spell Koch?

GC:

K-o-c-h, I believe it was, yeah. And Donny Anderson and Larry Anderson, and I think I mentioned Bob was with this group. They came in and introduced themselves, and then they sort of, mildly hazing us, you know, because they thought we were both athletes. And Donny Anderson said—he looked at me and said, “What do you play, like, wide receiver?” I said, “Center.” His jaw dropped, and he said, “God, you must be one tough son of a bitch.” [laughter] I said, “That’s what I played in high school, I’ve played just about any position.” And I was just blowing it out my rear. I was horrible in sports. But Bob was in that group, and one day I was walking down the hall in Gordon, and I heard someone playing guitar, and looked in, and it was Bob. And I said, “You going to be there for a few more minutes?” He said, “Yeah.” I said, “I’ll be back, I want to show you my guitar.” I grabbed my Goya and I went there and that started a friendship that lasted about, oh wow, about forty-five years.

AW:

My first guitar was a Goya.

GC:

Oh, really?

AW:

It was kind of the go-to classical guitar for a kid working at the grocery store. That’s as much as you could afford.

GC:

I was able to get rid of my Sears and get my guitar, and get this by throwing the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* in one of the nicest neighborhoods in Fort Worth, which was Park Hill. You know, those people tipped very generously at Christmas, and I used those tips to buy mine.

AW:

Buy your Goya?

GC:

Yeah. Now, to buy the Martin, that was—I sold the Goya, and I borrowed one hundred dollars from another kid who was a very close high school chum named Danny Hendrix. I borrowed a hundred dollars from him, and then I cobbled together the rest of it and bought the guitar from John Hatley. Well, Danny was kicked out of Tech for stealing coke bottles for the deposit, so they kicked him out of school. He took off, he got a construction job, and that’s how come he had a hundred dollars to loan me. He said, “I’m coming back for the spring semester at Tech.” In ’64, I guess it would’ve been, and he said, “I’ll need the money then.” I said, “I’ll have it for you.” Well, I didn’t really have it, but between semesters, I played with Bob—by this time, the

original members of the trio that Bob was in had moved on. They were both a little bit older than him. He—he was just cobbling together any guys he could to form the Alpine Trio. Well, I was one of them, and at that particular point, John Deutschendorf [AKA: John Denver (1943-1997)] was the third. So over about a six-week period—I mean, we had one or two gigs a week at least. And some of them paid pretty well. And I made my money to pay back Danny Hendrix. And I did pay him back. Only problem was he didn't get to come back in the spring because he'd forgotten—he didn't realize you had to drop your classes even though you're kicked out. He said, "That's the way they just keep guys like me out of college!" He never did come back to Tech, to my knowledge, and I've lost track of him.

AW:

So even if he got kicked out, he still had to drop his classes? So that means he flunked everything.

GC:

That's right. And so they kicked him out one more semester because he flunked out of college. So there you go.

AW:

How interesting. Well, who had been in the trio—been playing with Bob before the Alpine Trio?

GC:

Well, there was Ron Logan—we were all in the same fraternity, which was Delta Tau Delta. And so it was Ron Logan and Ken Ballard. Ron was a chemistry major. He went on to get a real—had a real nice career with Michelin, the tire company, as a chemist. Ken Ballard actually dropped out of school and went to California. I don't think he ever finished up with his college. But he went off to California and he joined a group called the—he was in several different folk music groups in California, but he joined a group that was kind of made up for people, which was called the Lively Set, and they performed with John Davidson every—once a week on the Kraft Summer Music Hall.

AW:

Oh, cool.

GC:

And then he also wound up doing—getting on the USO tours circuit and whatnot. They were both, like I say, older than Bob, and so—but still, Bob was a part, I think, of the very—you know, they wanted to do a trio and Bob came along and fit in perfectly for that. And then—of course, Dow Patterson was in a group called the Logarithms. He also lived in Gordon Hall, so we were good buddies with Dow, too.

AW:

So that's how you knew Dow, but you and Dow weren't in the same band?

GC:

Never were in the same band. The only time we performed together was in Big Spring, Texas, at a recording studio owned by a man named Glenn Hall—

AW:

Ben Hall.

GC:

Ben Hall, that's right, Ben Hall. And he probably told you all about how he had to walk through the showroom at an appliance store to get to the—

AW:

Ben Hall's an interesting guy. We—I have some interviews I did with him several years ago.

GC:

Oh, neat.

AW:

He went on to Nashville to become a very well-known master of multi-track recording. In fact, to the point—at the peak of his career, when new machines would come out, the manufacturers would bring them to Ben to evaluate.

GC:

That's neat. Well, that was by far and away, the most wonderful recording experience I've ever had.

AW:

Really?

GC:

Oh yeah.

AW:

What was it like to work with Ben?

GC:

Well, it was just nothing but fun. He was—I found him to be extremely easygoing. One thing—I can't remember exactly how this was set up. It was set up through Dow, and Dow wanted to do some demo tapes. Well, there was this girl, first name was Sydna, I can't remember her last name right now. But she was trying to get into the big time, and she had a song called, "You Only Pass This Way One Time", I'm sure Dow's played you the recording of it, and so we were supposed to—he needed some guys to sing backup for her on that recording. And I guess as a part of this, rather than paying him, I think Ben said, "Well, I think we can do some demo tapes for you, too." So that's what we did, but at one point, Ben was saying—we were in there for two or three hours. Toward the end of it, we were actually getting a little bit tired. He said, "You know what you can do? Lie down on the floor, and with your heads together, I'm going to put a mike right down here and sing into that mike. It's going to be coming down from above. Let's see how that sounds. It usually works pretty well." And it did. I don't remember what we sang, or what we did—

AW:

That's really interesting.

GC:

Maybe he had the instruments on another track and we just sang along with them.

AW:

Unless your diaphragm still works, it's not like sitting down.

GC:

Right. And of course, we could hear each other beautifully and we didn't need earphones on.

AW:

Do I remember correctly—was David Box at that session?

GC:

David was at that session. And that was interesting to me, because he looked like Buddy Holly reincarnated. In the same body, somehow. It was just spooky. And he was just awesome.

AW:

Ben told me he was one of the most talented people he ever worked with.

GC:

Yeah. I would believe that.

AW:

And of course, as you well know, he died also in a plane crash.

GC:

Yeah, that's getting creepy.

AW:

So what was David like?

GC:

Oh, he was nice too. He was just a real friendly guy. And you know, he was homely. Gosh. But you just were drawn to him by just—for no other reason than just his sheer talent. And then he turns out to be just a very gentle soul. He was not at all a prima donna. He just did as Ben instructed him and the rest of us. It's interesting, I think he could've—I think they could've left—I hate to say it—I think they could've left Dow and Bob and me off the hard part of it, because when I listen to that recording, the only part that sounds a little bit weak is us. David is singing this beautiful high harmony over Sydna and it's just wonderful. And he was also playing guitar on that recording, as well.

AW:

Oh, was he? Was he playing electric guitar?

GC:

An electric guitar, yeah. Again—

AW:

How does Sydna spell her name? I—

GC:

S—well, it's S-Y-D-N-A.

AW:

I was thinking that, but I wasn't sure if I remembered that.

GC:

Seems like her last name was Jones or Smith or something like that.

AW:

I think I have it in one of the interviews I done with Dow, but I thought it was a Y, but I just wasn't sure.

GC:

Yes.

AW:

How many—how much recording did you do in that session? Did you do other tunes?

GC:

Well, we did the one for her, we sang with Dow on a couple of tunes. He had one called, “A Single Twig of Moss”, yeah. I can’t remember if he wrote that.

AW:

Yeah, I think he did. I think he did.

GC:

Dow had such a good—he had incredibly good stage presence, and he’s very gifted, vocally. And his guitar was just fine, you know. He not Andres Segovia or whatnot, but he’s fine on the guitar.

AW:

Plus, at that point, he’d had some recording experience back in Abilene, I think.

GC:

Oh, okay. I did not know that.

AW:

I think he did some recording when he was in high school still.

GC:

Yeah. If I had any recording experience—well, as a solo performer, if I’d had any recording experience, I don’t even remember it. So that was the first one that I remembered. And it’s funny, it’s one of those—when I got reconnected with Dow, he said, “Remember when we sang at Big Spring?” I said, “Dow, that’s something I’ll never forget.”

AW:

How interesting.

GC:

I said—one thing about it is I always tell the story that I was recovering from a cold, my voice was just different then. But I was able to get through the session just fine. Bob Black was listening to it with Dow in his room and some other guys. I was not there. “Freight Train” came

on, and one guy said, "Wow, who's that? He's good." And Bob said, "It was your solo that he was talking about." And I said, "Well, that's because I was recovering from a cold, because I don't think I've ever sounded that good before or since." It's funny now that Dow—

AW:

Most of us don't want to hear anything we did when we had a cold.

GC:

No. But Dow, when he gave me that digital recording of it, I thought, "I didn't really sound that good," but because someone else thought I did sound good, I thought, "Wow, I'm pretty special." Or was for one recording session.

AW:

Well, to back up a little bit, you had already gotten interested in the trio and folk music, though in high school, before you got to Texas Tech?

GC:

Oh, yeah. My—one—I saw in high school, I saw the Kingston Trio in performance, I saw Limelickers, and Glenn Yarbrough was like my idol.

AW:

Where did you see them?

GC:

I saw—oh boy. I don't remember.

AW:

In Fort Worth?

GC:

Well, I think we were in Dallas when we saw the Kingston Trio, but I don't remember the venue. In Fort Worth, I can tell you who I was with, because I was on a date with arguably the prettiest girl in Paschal High School, and that was Shirley Kubiak. And it was at Daniel Myers Coliseum, and I remember so well because as we walked through the lobby, all the guys were, you know rubbernecking, doing the elevator eyes up and down her. She was just exotic looking. Shirley is still a good friend to this day, and she has no memory whatsoever of that date.

AW:

Sort of makes you feel—puts you in your place doesn't it?

GC:

Yeah. We laugh about it, and I tell her that, “Well, you used to date Larry Lanier, the football hero and all these other guys.” She said, “Yeah, I guess I was—it was one of my times when Larry and I were sort of not doing very well together.” I said, “Yeah, you were probably between hunks, is what you were, and felt sorry for me that I had nothing else to do that Saturday night.” But that Trio—I had never seen—I really wasn’t that familiar with the Limelighters, but boy, howdy.

AW:

So why did you pick them? Just a place to go take a date?

GC:

Yeah. I just thought, “That’d be fun to see them.” It’s funny, I saw Glenn Yarbrough in concert at Austin Community College after I’d graduated from Tech. Austin Community College—not Austin Community College, Austin College at Sherman, Texas. And so I had a nice visit with him, told him about my date with Shirley. It was—I asked him about the other guys and he said, “Neither one of them pursued any more of a music career that I know of.” They sort of broke up. That was a real treat just to get to visit with him. He’s one of those guys—like Linda Ronstadt, when you hear her talk, her voice is a little bit grating. Glenn Yarbrough’s voice when he’s talking is just as melodic and beautiful when he’s just carrying on a conversation as it is when he’s singing.

AW:

Yeah, I would say in fact the opposite is more true than not, is that very few people sound like they sing. They’re almost different human beings when they sing.

GC:

That’s true. That’s true.

AW:

So you listen to folk music on the radio, and that’s how you discovered it? How did you come by it? Other people playing it?

GC:

You know, I came by it by my high school—again, my lifelong friend, guy named Alton Parks. Alton was a real—he went to—well, he actually went to Texas Tech, too. I don’t know that he graduated there. I’m thinking he may have transferred somewhere else. But Alton was an architecture major, but he built his own hi-fi. So you know, he had the Brubeck [Dave Brubeck (1920-2012)] jazz stuff, but he also got into folk music as well. And so he—really, Alton was the one that introduced me to folk music. And I didn’t hear a lot of it on the radio, I heard most of it

by buying LPs by the Kingston Trio, and of course then the Limelighters, I discussed them, and Peter, Paul and Mary. So it was just kind of—

AW:

Who were the other folk singers that you enjoyed, that you listened to?

GC:

You know what? There's one that he's—a little bit obscurely Leon Bibb [(1922)]. And I—actually, that's when I was at Tech that I discovered him. And he was in concert at Tech.

AW:

Really?

GC:

Uh-huh. And I—this is yours.

AW:

Oh, my goodness.

GC:

And I liked him, enough that I bought one of his albums. Let's see. Folk music. Oh, boy. I don't know. Just almost any group. The New Christian Minstrels, you know, I thought they were great. Who, boy.

AW:

I was just—I was just curious. And what had brought you to play guitar instead of ukulele?

GC:

I played just the ukulele until I was about—the summer before I went into high school. I went to University Christian Church and they had a very active youth group. And we were part of a group that put on a series of sketches on stage, and there was a guy, I can't even remember what his name was, but he played guitar pretty well. And listening to him play, I thought, "You know? If I'm going to date the Shirley Kubiaks of this world, I need to trade in the ukulele for a guitar." Now, I didn't need to trade it in, it was my mother's instrument, but I need to start playing guitar. And I discovered guitar came incredibly easy because the chording is basically the same. A ukulele is nothing but a guitar capoed on the fifth fret and it's the last four strings. And so there were different chords. If I played what felt like a C, it was really an F, a C on the ukulele was really an F. So, you know, it was just very simple to add the two strings, and because I liked Glenn Yarbrough, I really got into finger-picking a lot. I had a high school friend named Charles Yarbrough, and Charles went on to Abilene Christian College, but he had taken guitar lessons

once a week for years, and he was very good. And so he kind of worked with me, and we played—I picked up some tunes from him, but I'd also picked up the finger-picking business. I probably don't do it correctly. By habit, I keep bracing my hand with my pinkie. When I met Bob in college, I got into strumming, because Bob had a strum that I just loved, so I tried to match that. I thought I had it down—

AW:

Of course, you would have strummed your ukulele, probably.

GC:

Yeah, but that was just—usually with a plectrum, but sometimes without. But—summer that I got the Martin, I decided I really needed—

AW:

The guitar?

GC:

Yeah, the guitar. I needed to strum, and I just started playing, and I wound up with a—like that.

AW:

Almost like a clawhammer.

GC:

Yeah, kind of. In fact, there's another guy named Marty Javors who's a friend of Dow's living in San Antonio, and he was Bob's high school—Bob Black's—high school friend.

AW:

Wonder if Marty is kin to Melissa Javors.

GC:

I don't know. He had a little sister named Lita Javors [(1940-2004)], and Lita and I were a hot deal when we were both freshmen. I loved her, she was great.

AW:

J-A-V-O-R-S?

GC:

Yes, uh-huh. And Marty went to the University of Texas. Lita went to Texas Tech, and that's where I met her. We were pretty serious about each other for a while there, but that kind of died out. She passed away, actually about three or four years ago, I think it was.

AW:
Oh, sad.

GC:
Yeah.

AW:
Well Melissa, the folk singer, she and I were at the first Kerrville songwriting school week, and she was from San Antonio, too. I wonder if they're bound to be cousins or something.

GC:
Could she be Marty's—

AW:
She would be about my age—

GC:
I was going to say, she could be Marty's wife.

AW:
You know, I don't know. I'll just have to look that up. Dow would probably know all that.

GC:
I met his wife. Betsy and I went out to San Diego so I could meet a couple of her friends, and there was some kind of a convention and Marty was there with his wife, but Melissa just doesn't sound right. I'm pretty sure that it wasn't.

AW:
Yeah, no. That's way off-topic. So you picked up the guitar before you started high school. And so you were playing it during high school. Did you play in any groups while you were in high school? Any bands, trios, duets?

GC:
We would do a lot of—Well, Charles Yarbrough and I appeared on some variety show in high school. We were not successful. We played—I can't remember where we learned the tune, but it was—it was about, "What'cha going to wear to the wedding, the wedding, the wedding." "My Little Buffalo Boy" was the name of that. And it's a novelty tune. It ends—I don't know if you're familiar with it, it ends with—he sang, "I wear my overalls," and then "Who are you going to bring to the wedding?" And I think he says something like, "My baby," or whatever it is. It ends with six—I guess, "I've got five babies, five babies, five babies, six if the weather be

good.” You know, it was kind of risqué for high school back in 1961 or so, so it was—we sang that, and then we sang, I want to sing this tune that Glenn Yarbrough did—oh, shoot. Oh, some maudlin thing that had beautiful fingerpicking on it. And so I sang that, and the high school kids, they don’t want to hear that at all. So we were kind of a bust. But Johnny Hatley played guitar, so I played with Johnny. Just who ever played, we’d get together and just trade tunes and everything. As far as performing—I loved to perform, but I didn’t really do that much of it in high school, other than at parties and stuff like that. I always tell people, and in college, I said—I always tell them, okay, think back to *Animal House* [1978] and Belushi [John Belushi (1949-1982)] is walking down the stairs—I can’t remember the guys name singing, “I gave my love at your asset.” I was that guy. I wish I were the Belushi character, he was far more interesting. Or any of those guys that were in that fraternity. It was—you know, that’s what I did. It wasn’t really until I got into college and Bob added me to the Alpine Trio that I started performing a lot. And then I discovered I love it. And what’s more, I’m good at performing, I’m much better at performing than I am really at playing the guitar or singing.

AW:

M-hmm. I mean, I’m not agreeing, I just know that it’s a whole other business.

GC:

Yes, it is. And I just—I feel incredibly comfortable and happy and that shows, and I relate to the audience real well, I smile a lot. It just—it’s really neat. Now, the neat thing to me is that the original Alpine Trio—Bob and Ken and Ron Logan—I idolized those guys. Let’s see—Judy was already—my first wife was already sick by that time, and I got a call from Ron Logan, and he lives in South Carolina, and he said, “The Delts are having their convention in Austin and Kent Hance wants the Alpine Trio to play. Would you fill in for Bob.” And I just started crying. I just started crying. I was just so honored. Like I said, Bob was my best friend in the world. I had friends that I’d had longer, like Alton Parks, but none that I’ve really kept up with. And Bob and I kind of lost track of each other after we got out of college and then he called me out of the blue about fifteen or twenty years later and we just picked right back up again. We met every year at Winfield, Kansas—

AW:

Oh, for the Flatpicking? [National Flatpicking Championship]

GC:

Yeah, yeah. He always played there, you know, we always jammed together there. And Bob for the rest of his life after college was forming folk music groups.

AW:

Really?

GC:

Yes.

AW:

Where did he live out his life after college?

GC:

After college? In Kansas City.

AW:

In KC. Is that where he was from?

GC:

No, he grew up in Dallas. Well, he grew up all over, but mostly in Dallas. I think his father was actually a pretty big executive with Ford Motor Company. They had a plant in Dallas, so Bob grew up there, went to Jesuit high school. And that's where he knew Marty, and they had a folk music trio in high school. Bob had incredible natural leadership abilities. And he would form these folk groups or whatever. He was the only guy that Judy was ever jealous of. Or the only person Judy was—she was not a jealous person, but she was jealous of Bob, because she knew that Bob could—back in college, he'd say, "Let's go to *Cuñia* tonight!" And I'd say, "I'm in!" And she knew that. She kind of resented that. And it was interesting that after we reconnected in Kansas City, and I was living in Topeka at the time, just fifty miles away. And so we went over to see him, and sure enough, Bob says, "Come on over!" Bunch of us get together once a week and get down to this guy's basement and we all played. And we have kind of a group sometimes that performed. I said, "Okay." And nothing had changed. Bob arranged everything, and guys did what he said. He just had this confidence that he knew how things ought to sound, and people would follow whatever he said. Except that I thought, you know, he wanted me to be in this gargantuan group and keep coming over to Kansas City all the time, I said, "Bob, I'm sorry, I love you, I love this music, but that's a long haul for me, and especially trying to make it once a week. And there's going to come a time when there's a gig and I can't make it, and you don't want a guy in your group that like that. Let me come over every now and then and let's you and I get together and whatnot and play," and so that's kind of what we did. But it—it was—it was interesting how he—I came back and I said, "Judy, you know, you used to resent Bob because I'd just do anything he said. I think I've grown up a little bit since college. I've become a little more assertive."

AW:

What kind of gigs did you play as the Alpine Trio?

GC:

Oh, gosh. We played at schools, you know, high schools. Even elementary schools. John Denver and I played at something—I think it was called Grayson Elementary, but I'm not sure.

AW:

I don't remember a Grayson Elementary in Lubbock.

GC:

Well, it was an elementary school and the guy wanted the Alpine Trio. Bob couldn't make the gig so John and I did it together. And this guy, the principal, was not happy. We went ahead and did the concert, you know, and we yucked it up—

AW:

Because it wasn't the three of you?

GC:

Because it wasn't the trio, yeah. He didn't pay very much at all—

AW:

I'm sure.

GC:

A little bit. We each made ten or fifteen dollars off of it. I think back and just wonder what that man—if that man has any clue that that was the future John Denver and some other doofus playing for his kids. You know, when he decided to go off and make his mark, we kind of tried to talk him out of it. We said, "Boy, you're taking a really big risk, you know."

AW:

Yeah, Dow told me that none of them were very impressed with his singing or playing when he was, you know—I think he would—because he was connected in some way with one of the members in The Logarithms, right? Because Dow, he—

GC:

Well. He was—yeah. John was connected with just about everyone. He was in a rock-and-roll band, he was in whatever folk music group needed a third or fourth, and he was already writing music by that time. I remember very well his—we had some fraternity party. It seemed like—it seemed like it was more than just a smoker, maybe a rush event or something like that, and John played a song that he wrote. I don't remember the name of the song, and it never—that song never became one of his stable of tunes. But I thought, "Oh my gosh, that's good," and he—

AW:
Really?

GC:
He and I got together in my dorm room. I said, "Would you let me record you singing that?" And he said, "Well, yeah, if you promise me that you won't use it. I mean, you can perform it all you want, but it's my song." I said, "Okay."

AW:
So he was already thinking ahead.

GC:
He was.

AW:
Yeah. That's—that's very interesting.

GC:
And he went out there and I think his break was that he met Randy Sparks. And then Randy put him in—it wasn't the New Christian Minstrels, he had another group, a large ensemble of players that John played with in that. And I think that it was Randy Sparks that said, "Deutschendorf isn't going to cut it, let's make it Denver." His biggest break came when Chad Mitchell left the Mitchell Trio, and they auditioned—I think it was seven hundred and fifty is the number I remember of people, and John won that audition.

AW:
How would you remember seven hundred and forty of them?

GC:
Yes, exactly. But I guess he was the kind of guy that I guess they, the other two members were looking for. And I think he met a guy named Phil Ochs [(1940-1976)]—

AW:
Mm-hmm, Phil Ochs, who was a—an important part of the New York Greenwich Village scene, you know.

GC:
Yeah. I believe he was the connection that John kind of used to then launch his career—

AW:

Is that how Peter, Paul and Mary got that jet plane song?

GC:

It probably was.

AW:

I wondered—

GC:

I hadn't thought of that.

AW:

I didn't know that he had a connection with Phil Ochs, but I bet that's—I bet that's the case.

GC:

I'm pretty sure. Oh, I noticed that Phil Ochs produced one of the Mitchell Trio that he was on albums. And I think he just made good connections there.

AW:

I need to learn about Phil Ochs because he probably would've been one of the earlier performers-turned-producers of acoustic music. But that's a pretty interesting thing. What kind of a player was John Deutschendorf when you all were working together, when he would fill in?

GC:

Oh God, he was good. He made any song we did sound a lot better. Bob, like I say, was good at directing us and whatnot, but you know, well let's see what we want to do for intro and Dutch said, "How about this?" [mimics a musical intro] "Yeah. Yeah, that'll work." And also harmony-wise, he always knew where to fit in something that made it a little extra-special. He was good. He was really good. I remember I told him I loved Glenn Yarbrough, and John said, "Eh, he's got too much vibrato for me."

AW:

Really?

GC:

You've got vibrato coming out your butt, buddy, and you're saying Glen Yarbrough's got too much. I guess he—John couldn't quite hear it or something. It was funny. And you know, the neatest thing about him was that he had the greatest memory for people. He did not forget. He would—two things: one, he just never had good luck with the girls. He'd get really serious with

them, they would cheat on him or whatever, they'd fight until they broke up. That, and the memory thing. The last time I ever saw John was when he was still at the zenith of his career and he did a big performance at Tulsa, one of those revolving stage deals. And I—radio-connection guy, radio station owner knew of my past with him and gave me two tickets, second row. During the intermission, I saw his mom and we started talking. She gave me a backstage pass. I went backstage—he was playing a Yamaha guitar, and I said, "How on earth did you wind up with a Yamaha?" He said, "Well, I was in Japan, I was doing this concert, and these guys come up to me, each one of them holding, like two guitar cases," getting into the story, and his mother came up with this other guy, and said, "John. Do you remember this person?" And he looked at him for maybe no more than just five seconds and said, "Garth!" Not Garth Brooks, but it was a kid that he had played with when he was staying with his grandmother, who lived in Tulsa.

AW:
How interesting.

GC:
And he could—he hadn't seen this guy probably—

AW:
When we're done with your interview, remind me to tell you of a similar experience I had with my pal Rambling Jack Elliott whose memory is phenomenal.

GC:
Kind of like—oh, yeah.

AW:
You know, remembers what shirt he's wearing—well, Dow Patterson's a little bit like that, you know. Dow can remember what color shirt he was wearing—

GC:
Well, Dow remembers much more of that recording session than I did, I know that. You know, memory's a funny thing. You can—every time you have a memory—it's not like you—it's digital. It's not like you get exactly the same information.

AW:
Exactly. Yeah, yeah. And—in my case, I never put it back in the same slot, either.

GC:
I don't either, I don't either. And my sister—

AW:

So when I go to look for it, it may not be there.

GC:

I'm convinced my sister, who's, "Oh, remember the time that I drove your little MGA and you threw papers—" and I thought, that didn't happen, and I know it didn't happen, because you're right, I did sprain my ankle and maybe I let you drive that car, but I couldn't throw papers sitting on the back of the car as you described, because these people had to have it on the porch. One lady even had me set it on the porch in a certain way so she'd known I had hand-delivered it. She didn't want her screen getting dented by some kid throwing a newspaper at it.

AW:

No wonder you got good tips.

GC:

Yeah.

AW:

Were there clubs or other kinds of venues in Lubbock that you played?

GC:

Well you know, I—I—my greatest gig probably was playing a pizza place called Little Italy.

AW:

Oh, yeah. That's where we took our dates, because I was going to school in Lubbock at this time, so I probably heard you play.

GC:

You may have.

AW:

Little Italy, we loved it.

GC:

I played every Wednesday night—

AW:

It's the closest thing we had in Lubbock to being sophisticated as an eatery.

GC:

Every Wednesday night that I wanted to—if I couldn't make it, if I had—

AW:

So you'd do this as a solo?

GC:

Yes. I just strapped on the guitar and went out and Michael and I rode the boat to shore just one more night. And—but I would stroll from table to table and I got five dollars and a free pizza. And I did it for two hours. But this lady that owned it, I just loved her. I wish I could remember her name. She would hire these guys from the Air Force, from Reese, who really—they could—boy, they could throw the dough, you know. Everything was made from scratch and co-eds loved her bread. Boy, the bread that you got when you ordered spaghetti, and they would just order the bread because it was always served very warm and they'd put butter on it, you know. And they would—and she would not sell the bread by itself. These girls would come in and each order as small spaghetti because they knew they'd get bread with that. They wouldn't even touch the spaghetti. They'd just eat the bread. And of course, they couldn't take the spaghetti back to the dorm, because you couldn't have any kind of a refrigerator. You weren't even supposed to have—what—

AW:

A hot plate?

GC:

Hot plate in there, but some people snuck them in. But anyway, I just loved that job, because I enjoyed, you know, the back-and-forth with the people. And there's some who didn't really want—and I could recognize that, and I'd just leave them alone. But it was so much fun, and sound was never a problem because you were just right there at their table.

AW:

And you were walking around.

GC:

I'd get a request, and if I didn't know it, I could at least sing a few bars of it usually at least and then joke around with them with it. And I remember once, there was a little girl, she thought that was the most wonderful thing in the world, and she got this big crush on me. Her parents brought her in one night, she said, "I want to marry you!" Nine- or ten-year-old kid. I said, "Honey, no, you don't want to marry me, I'm way too old. I'm old." "I know!" She started crying, her parents—they never came back. Susan—one of my friend's brothers was Steve Danbom, and he

married his high school sweetheart Susan Kimbrough. Susan—they both went to Tech, and Susan said, “Oh yeah, we always used to come to Little Italy just to hear you play.”

AW:

Oh, cool.

GC:

In fact, I have a picture of me playing at another restaurant. I don't remember the name of it, and it was downtown. And that was also a solo act. What else? I cannot remember the name of this place, but it was one of those campus deals. All I can remember is that it had a little stage. Bob and I played there a couple of times. They had great Monte Christos, is what I remember about it.

AW:

I wonder what that would've been.

GC:

I don't remember the name of it. It's a pretty popular spot. They had—I know Dow had played there. Dow—maybe even just with Monte Christo—wonderful Monte Christos.

AW:

I'll ask him about that.

GC:

Maybe the—I don't know if it was an ice cream parlor as well. I'm just not sure.

AW:

Now, there was an ice cream parlor on what then was College, just south of Broadway. But I don't remember them having food other than ice cream, so it may have been a—

GC:

I guess that's another—

AW:

Well, what made you choose Texas Tech?

GC:

My brother went there. So I had been out to see it, and I just kind of liked—I was a big fan—my favorite movie of all time was *Giant*. Still is. And it just reminded me of *Giant*. I remember coming back after we took my brother out to college and—I don't know if it was when we took

him to college or maybe it was when we went back for parent's day or something like that, and we were driving back and somehow we got on a dirt road, we're throwing this big plume of dust and I thought, this is just like *Giant*. But I tell people, "Well, a lot of my friends were going to Tech," that was a draw. But I think the real reason that I went to Tech is because I wanted to get as far away from home as possible. I wanted an adventure. And my mother had offered to let me keep my MGA if I just went to TCU and lived home, and I said, "No. Let me think about it: no." Because I want—and I've learned that about myself. I've always sought adventure, all my life. Sometimes not in a very constructive way, or positive way, but I've always—

AW:

When did you start? When was your fall semester or year?

GC:

Sixty-two. Fall of '62.

AW:

What did you study? Had you thought of that before you got there?

GC:

That's a great—it's a fun story to tell. I had no clue, my mother told me to major in business. So I went through the, you know, picking all the classes and stuff. I decided to major in finance and minor in insurance, or some crazy thing like that. And oh, darn Andy, if I'd taken it—I knew by that—after my first semester, I'll never pass accounting. There's no way. Mathematics and me just don't agree. But I had—by my summer, that same summer I got the Martin guitar, I fell in love with Marcy Goode, whose mother was a childhood friend of my mother's. They lived in College Station, I was invited to their home sometime in the fall of '63, I guess in College Station, spend the weekend, and her mother offered dessert and she said, "I've got a pie and I've got some chocolate cake, but I don't know if the chocolate cake's very good." I said, "I'll try the chocolate cake." She wrote a letter to my mother after that weekend and she said, "That cake was so dry, it crumbled like gunpowder when I tried to cut him a slice. And then when I asked him how is it, he said, 'It's very good,' and ate every single bite. I think George has a future in public relations." And I—I knew that I had good writing skills, thanks to my high school English teacher. I got her all three years in high school, her name was Goldie Ripper at Paschal High.

AW:

Ripper, R-I-P-P-E-R?

GC:

Uh-huh.

AW:

What a name, Goldie Ripper.

GC:

Yes.

AW:

She should've been a novelist herself.

GC:

Yes. And she had jet-black hair.

AW:

Oh, my goodness.

GC:

I have no idea how she got the name Goldie and looked—unless the hair was dyed. But—oh, and the thing is, she wasn't—she made us write a whole lot, and in that process, I learned—I realized I'm a good writer. I'm a real good writer, and that and folk music were my only skills, and I knew that—I researched PR a little bit and discovered that it puts a premium on good writing and putting a good spin on bad cake. So I went back and without even consulting my parents, I changed my major from finance—well, I had to change from the school of business to the school of arts and sciences, changed my major to journalism and my minor was speech. Boy, it was the best thing that ever happened to me, because—

AW:

Over a piece of chocolate cake.

GC:

Over a piece of chocolate cake. And—and—and this woman's letter to my mother saying George ought to be in PR.

AW:

How did—Goode, how is that spelled?

GC:

Oh, G-O-O-D-E.

AW:

Okay, that's how I would've spelled it. I'm glad.

GC:

Yeah, Marcy's dad taught business law at Texas A&M. And then she broke up with me later that semester right after the assassination of John Kennedy. I had flown from Lubbock to Austin to take her to her sorority Christmas dance, you know, and when I dropped her off at the dorm, she said, "By the way, I don't want to see you anymore. I've just got too many things planned in my life and you're way too serious about this relationship." I hitchhiked back to Lubbock and was just—just morose for a long time, but it's the best thing that ever happened to me, probably, because we probably wouldn't have made it. But then I met Judy taking Government 230.

AW:

So you met Judy at Texas Tech?

GC:

Yeah, a teacher seated us alphabetically, but starting with the back of the alphabet at the front of the class and working back, and he did that because I think his name was like Zimmerman or something.

AW:

Yeah, he was tired of being in the back of the room.

GC:

Yeah, so he was going to—yeah. That was his little fun thing, but Judy wound up sitting kind of catty-cornered from me. I just, you know, really thought she was cute. I just stared at her and used the social network of the time, which was fraternities and sororities, she was in the same one as Susan. So I kind of set up a date with her. It didn't take us long at all to just fall completely in love. We married after—we both started Tech at the same time. She graduated in '66, like I was supposed to. I tell people, I changed schools and then majors and minors—truth of it was I was a horrible student. If I studied as much as I played guitar, I would've been a four point oh, probably. I was just very immature at the time. I had one more year to go, and she taught school at New Deal. Hated it, but she taught school at New Deal and I finished up. We lived in the University Arms, married students apartment, also concrete walls. I was telling that story to—oh, boy. Who was the dean of the school of communications? Jerry—can't think of his last name. Oh well---

AW:

Mass—mass—

GC:

Mass communications—

AW:

Oh, yeah.

GC:

They got a new one now. But whatever his name was. Judy and I went up to Lubbock. She'd finished her radiation, she just had to take chemo like once a week or something like that, and it was by pills, so we could travel. And I took her back up to Lubbock, we found the classroom where we met, you know, where I noticed her. And then I said, "I want to go look in the j-school, the mass communication school, I'll be right back." I ran into him, and I'd never met him before. And I told him this story, and he said, "So how'd you do in that history class where you met Judy?" And I said, "Jerry, it was the best F I ever made [laughter]. I made a few, and that was the best one. The very best."

AW:

What was her maiden name?

GC:

Crews, C-R-E-W-S.

AW:

She kin to John Crews, the lawyer in Lubbock?

GC:

No. She grew up mostly in Midland. She was a daughter of Sam Crews, he worked for like Drilco. Also worked for Howard Hunt for a time, and then worked for Drilco. I don't know, she just had a real natural beauty to her and everything. But we got married before that last year and she taught school and I finished up, then we went to Sherman, where I was a reporter. And that's what you had to do. There was no public relations major.

AW:

Yeah, so you went to work for the newspaper in Sherman, Texas?

GC:

Yes. The Sherman Democrat. Loved it. Also wound up doing a lot of performing in Sherman.

AW:

Well, I was going to ask after you graduated from college, did you graduate from music, too?

GC:

No, no. And that was what was fun. I—that last year at Tech, I really wasn't— Oh, the journalism students, we put some end-of-year skit where we made fun of our professors, and so I'd do stuff like that, but I was mostly focused on getting out of Tech and getting my career started. But then in Sherman, like I say, I wound up getting some gigs in Sherman, and I loved telling—that's when John Denver was getting to be a big deal, so I took some liberties, and I'd tell people, "I was in a folk music trio, one of them was Ken Ballard," and he's on the right there, and Ken went off and was singing with John Davidson on TV once a week and still has a career as a musician. "The other guy was John Deutschendorf, and he dropped out of school, and we said, 'Don't do that, and he did it anyway,' and then he became John Denver. I was the only one who stayed in school and got his degree and here I am." And everybody would laugh. I said, "But!" And I worked for the phone company at the time at Southwestern Bell, and I said, "But I work for Southwestern Bell, I get free telephone service. John Denver has to pay for his."

AW:

So how did you go from newspaper reporting to working for the phone company?

GC:

Another Texas Tech connection, a guy named Ray Fenfer [?] worked for Bell at the time, and I was sitting at my desk at the newspaper and not only—I thought I needed a two-year minimum experience at the newspaper before I went on in PR. Ray called and said the phone company's hiring, and there's two openings right now, get a resume in, quick. I said, "I only have just over a year. And I also got a raise from a hundred dollars a week to a hundred and sixteen a week. I'm making big money now, Ray." He said, "Phone company will do a lot better than that. We start at about seven hundred and fifty a month." "Oh, my gosh, that's fantastic!" And this is in '68, and so I said, "Okay, I'll do it."

AW:

And this was in Sherman?

GC:

Mm-hmm. And I went down to Dallas—one thing I did, I went by the *Dallas Times Herald* and tricked the secretary. She wanted to know why I wanted to see the managing editor, I said, "Ma'am, I'm sorry, this is between me and the managing editor. Just tell him I need about five minutes of his time, I've got something I think he'd be interested in." Well, what newsman doesn't want to hear that? I just wanted to talk to him about if I continued my career in journalism as a reporter, what do I have to look forward to, what would be the career path I'd take? He really liked me. Actually, he said, "You were a business major for a while, took some business courses, economics courses, have you considered business writing, you, for a newspaper in the business section?" I said, "No." He said, "Well, we might be able to get

together on that, so let me think about it.” So anyway, we—I even did that because I loved the journalism thing so much. But I interviewed in Dallas, they hired me. It’s funny, I thought they’d hire me to do this job as editor of the company newspaper for certain employees. I thought they’d hire me in San Antonio, and instead they hired me in Oklahoma City and from that point on, I never worked and lived in Texas. I began a stint of just a little over twenty-five years as an expatriated Texan. Moving back here, people thought, “You’re from Kansas, aren’t you?” “No—well yeah, I moved here from Kansas, but I was born in Fort Worth, my wife has a couple of relatives who were at the Alamo, with the Mexican side, not as tourists. One of them died there, the other was a courier. My roots are Texas, this is where I’ve always wanted to return to.”

AW:

Did you get to keep playing music—you said, at least for a while—

GC:

Well, and the thing is—my job in public relations, especially for five years in Tulsa, I was always asked to go talk to civic clubs and stuff. So I’d go talk about five minutes about whatever was important at the phone company, and then I’d grab my guitar and I’d say, “Now that you know what I wanted to tell you about the phone company, I’m going to sing you a couple of songs.”

AW:

Really?

GC:

After the first song—

AW:

So I’m sure the Kiwanis Club wanted to have you back after that, didn’t they?

GC:

Oh, yeah. It worked out perfectly, you know. “Oh, God, I’ve got to sit here and listen to this guy.”

AW:

How did—I grew up next-door to a guy named Vern Caruthers who was with Bell, there in Lubbock. He was in the Lubbock office. He didn’t me as the type of guy who would—in his company, tolerate folks singing. How did the phone company people react to your—

GC:

They loved it. They loved it. The guy that I worked for in Tulsa was Bob Bresnahan [(1931-1999)], and Bob saw the value in this more—probably more than anybody. And he knew—word was getting back to him, golly, this George Chaffee guy is a hoot. He is good. He's fun. And I was in the Gridiron show, because I was member of the Tulsa Press Club, and you know, like I say—I tell people, I say, “Thank you very much, now when I go back to the office and my boss asks, ‘How'd that talk to the Lions Club go?’ I can say, ‘Boss, I was interrupted by applause several times. It was a huge success.’” It was always a good joke. And I wouldn't sing more than three or four songs, and usually they were kind of funny songs or whatever. I wasn't singing that song, I can't remember the name of it, Glenn Yarbrough did—

AW:

The maudlin song?

GC:

Yeah. Right. The maudlin song. Part of the lyrics go, “sing sorrows, sing sorrow, now she sleeps in the valley where the flowers grow.” She's dead or whatever. “No one knows she loved him.”

[Note: Song title is: “Lass from the Low Country”]

AW:

That would kill the buzz.

GC:

Oh gosh, it just. She loved a man of high degree and whatnot, but she was, you know, a lowly maiden, took advantage of her and then dumped her, broke her heart so she killed herself. One of those typical folk songs.

AW:

Right. Was it—trying to think of which of the great women authors who said, “All true stories end in death.” But she could've gone ahead and said, “All true folk songs begin in death.”

GC:

Yeah, right, right. Well, and you see, you still have that today.

AW:

I write them myself.

GC:

Yeah, yeah. “Look On and Cry”, is one by some group that's—the band Perry, I think is the name of the group. And you listen to the thing, you go, God. But it's interesting stuff to listen to.

AW:

In fact, the reason I took up the ukulele a year ago was I figured I couldn't write any sad songs.

GC:

It's kind of a Steve Martin joke, there are no sad songs on the banjo, none on the ukulele, either, when you get down to it. But yeah, it's interesting. Somehow, even when I moved to Topeka—now, that was a little bit of a challenge there. I got into bluegrass in Topeka, because that's what some of my friends played. And I'd go over to Lecompton to this guy's house, and we'd go in his basement where he had a wood-burning stove, we'd sit in a circle and we'd play all the bluegrass chestnuts, you know, and pass the lead around. That was interesting for me because I'd always use the guitar as my accompaniment. Here, I had to play leads, and it scared me to death.

AW:

Oh yeah, that's tough. That's a real—bluegrass. I teach songwriting at Tech.

GC:

Oh, really?

AW:

So I get students—not all of them in my class don't know anything at all about music, but I'm really interested in how many kids I've seen that come through that are heavy metal rock-and-roll players who love bluegrass. Because if you think about it, they're very kin in terms of structural ideas, i.e. the importance of the lead, the importance of the rhythm instrument, it's a player's medium much more than it is lyricist's medium.

GC:

Yeah, it is. And when I—when I told my—Judy that—I said, “Boy, this is strange for me, I have real performance anxiety with this.” And she said, “You know? I know what it is. When you stand up in front of a group or sing, if you forget words or flub up somehow, you always charm your way right through it and the audience just loves you all the more. You can't do that when you're playing a solo on the guitar. It's just that instrument and that instrument alone.” And yeah, you can kind of be charming between songs, but you can't just stop and say, “Oops!” you know? Rick Perry oops.

AW:

Yeah, and then besides that, you've got all those other bluegrass players standing around who are very serious.

GC:

Yeah, yeah. And I remember the first—I had a good friend at Tech and—not at Tech, up in Topeka, we used to race sailboats together, his name's Dave Abendroth. Dave—he's big into blues guitar now, but he was playing bluegrass at that time with me. We were sitting around, and he was sitting off to my—just beside me on my left, and I was trying to play "Billy in the Lowground". I was just getting tenser and tenser as the lead was coming there, and I launched into it and I just butchered it. I mean, I could barely—I really couldn't get quite through it. And Dave played and then right after he played he reached over and he—

AW:

Patted your foot?

GC:

Yes. Just kind of his way of saying, "Don't worry, you'll get it." And sure enough, the more I did it, then the more I was comfortable with it. Now I've evolved into—to music that is the old standards.

AW:

What genre of old standards?

GC:

I'm sorry—

AW:

Because there—because now, I hear the songs I thought were revolutionary when I was in high school that people call classic rock, you know. It makes me feel so—

GC:

Old.

AW:

Old, yeah.

GC:

Yeah. No, I—on my CD that I did—now the CD, by the way, was done mostly so that my—my progeny, you know, could hear what their crazy uncle—grandpa George or whatever sounded like. So this is the CD that came—just one of those things—this is what I mean by old standard—just one of those things, "Someone to Watch Over Me", "Honeysuckle Rose", "Dream"—

AW:

Tinpan Alley.

GC:

Yeah, yeah. I did something called “My Moonglow Melody”, which I start off in *Glow Worm*, and then went into how high—“Fly Me to the Moon”, and then “Moon Glow” itself. “Indeed I Do”, “Embraceable You”, “Stardust”—I play guitar on “Stardust” and then play the ukulele on top of that. And so that’s—that’s what it is.

AW:

Yeah, one of my favorite Willie Nelson records is—

GC:

Oh, *Stardust*. Yeah.

AW:

I just—that record knocked me out. I was living in Colorado at the time and I was just—it was incredible.

GC:

Me, too.

AW:

Basically said, I want to—these are the songs that turn me on and— [GC plays opened strings on a ukulele, continues to tune and play as the dialogue continues] That’s that Collings? Oh.

GC:

Yeah, this is my newest acquisition, and I just—

AW:

Yeah.

GC:

I love this thing. I was amazed to find it. Bought it at Hill Country Guitars in Wimberley, which has now moved to Austin.

AW:

Now, are those geared tuners?

GC:

They are.

AW:

I've seen some advertise they look like pegs, or geared.

GC:

I like—I like them because for that—because they look like the old traditional—

AW:

Well, they're ergonomic, too. You don't have to turn your hand sideways to tune your—

GC:

Well, that's true. Yeah. However, my Kamaka ukulele has the gear tuners, and frankly, I like the—you know the ones that—

AW:

Stick out the side?

GC:

Stick out the side. They work better.

AW:

Do they?

GC:

Yeah, these don't have quite as—these feel a little bit mushy or something.

AW:

Well, they have an odd mechanism. They call it a planetary or something inside that—boy, that's a nice sound uke.

[Long musical break. Plays "Stardust"]

GC:

—I knew I'd get it sooner or later.

AW:

Very nice.

GC:

Stardust on the ukulele.

AW:

Did you write the arrangement yourself?

GC:

I did that arrangement on my own.

AW:

That's very nice.

GC:

Thank you. There's a guy named Lyle Ritz [(1930-)] who has some wonderful books. I learned like—

AW:

Cool. Lyle Ritz, like the hotel?

GC:

Yeah. In fact, let me loan you one of his books.

AW:

Oh, I'll—I'll look one up and order one.

GC:

No, no, no. They're just sitting in my thing. In fact, I'll give it to you.

AW:

Well.

GC:

Because they're just sitting in my desk and I've learned all the tunes off of this one book, anyway. That and there's a—[Musical interlude]—so that's a Lyle Ritz arrangement.

AW:

How nice.

GC:

Some of his arrangements are on that CD, and I—I if you would, watch the zipper.

AW:

No, I'm—

GC:

But you're welcome to play it.

AW:

Oh no, I'll just get all caught up. Dow may have told you. I bought a LoPrenzi.

GC:

Oh, yeah. From Florida? They're made in Florida.

AW:

Yeah, and I bought it from those nice folks at Guitar Tex in San Antonio. They're pals of Dow's, and it's—it's a nice little ukulele, it's a tenor. But I'm—I'm just getting started trying to learn how to play the ukulele versus the guitar, you know.

[Musical interlude]

GC:

Helps to come slowly.

AW:

These thing really does sing, though, I've got to say. It's amazing.

GC:

Yeah. It's interesting. This was my first really nice ukulele. And I bought it from the Kamaka family in Hawaii.

AW:

Yeah, that's what you'd said on the phone. Wow.

GC:

I wanted to buy one of these one-off units, and I just couldn't find one that I liked.

AW:

This also has a very nice action—Collings does.

© Southwest Collection/
Special Collections Library

GC:

It's interesting. This is a tenor as well, and yet this neck is a little bit wider, and the instrument is deeper, and also the bottom of the instrument has a curve this way. This is flat as a pancake. I'm fascinated by the difference in the way they're designed. And this company's been in business since 1916.

AW:

Yeah, this is like a—one of the—

GC:

This is Koa.

AW:

It's like the Martin of Hawaii.

GC:

It pretty much is, yeah.

AW:

And Koa—this is rosewood?

GC:

No, it's figured mahogany.

AW:

Mahogany? Gosh, it's really so dark.

GC:

Yeah. But the finish they put on these Collings instruments is just remarkable.

AW:

I know, it's so live. It's really—it's looks sturdy, but it's very live.

GC:

I have one of those limited edition Martin guitars. It's the orchestra model Perry Bechdel model, and he was the guy that convinced Martin to go from the twelve-fret to the body-neck to a fourteen-fret body-neck. And he said, "Give me a wider fingerboard a wider neck so I can finger-pick." And so I bought that from one of Bob Black's friends, a judge in Kansas City.

AW:

So how long have you had the Kamaka?

GC:

Since—oh, what was it? Two thousand six was the year—I went to a convention and found it there. I was looking for my cheater glasses.

AW:

Oh, I did—no, I was curious, I didn't know old.

GC:

Yeah, I think it's 2006.

AW:

What do you prefer to play?

GC:

Which one? This one right now because it's new. Yeah. It's a little bit more difficult to play because of the narrower neck. This one also has a pickup in it, so you feel the weight of it compared to that. And of course, if you pick up that little Martin, that thing. That couldn't weight three ounces, I swear, it's just paper-thin, light. And of course, that's why it's so freaking loud.

AW:

Well next time we get together, I'll bring my LoPrenzi.

GC:

Okay, good.

AW:

And maybe I will learn something off that book.

GC:

Yeah, yeah. There's some good stuff in that book.

AW:

I just have to get—I don't yet have the concepts down in my head. I mean, I know it's a lot like guitar, but it's very different going backwards, I think. For one thing, the strum on an ukulele is a different animal than the strum, I mean, because as you learn—

GC:

I still use that same strum that I learned so I could do folk music with Bob Black. And it works well. The thing—the interesting for me is sometimes I would like to play with a pick, which would be louder. There's a group at this Winfield thing I was telling you about that played—they played a lot of gypsy jazz stuff, and some of these Tinpan Alley tunes, and there's one that they played that—[Singing with Ukulele accompaniment] I could teach the world how to smile, I could be glad all for the while. I could start my whole life anew, if I had you. [End singing, accompaniment continues Note: song title is "If I Had You"] And—when I was playing that with that group, and these guys are—Shelby Eicher, fiddle player that played for Roy Clark a lot, he jams with these guys. A jazz banjo player, believe it or not, named Rick Bentley from Oklahoma. Rick is just awesome. In fact, he won the banjo-picking contest in Winfield one year. And a gal named Susan—I can't remember her last name all of a sudden. She's a kind of girlfriend of a fellow who plays one of those—Mac Fury things, Tim—I can't think of Tim's last name. But anyway, they're there. Tim plays just unbelievable rhythm, and then she plays violin much better than Shelby Eicher, actually.

AW:

Really?

GC:

Yeah, so anyway, these people—this was the first year I got up the nerve to say, "Can I just sit in?"

AW:

Oh man, those guys scare me to death at Winfield—

GC:

I'm not, "I just want to do one song with you just so I can go back and say, 'yeah, I jammed with those guys!'" They laughed and said okay. And so—I had been working on that "If I Had You" song. It went over really well. It was fun. And what was funny is that there's three old gals that sing the Andrews Sisters-type harmonies.

AW:

So that would've been right up there.

GC:

They wanted to do "Moon Glow". And it was in F. [Musical interlude] And—you know, they do the same thing, kind of passing lead, and these girls sang a couple of verses or whatever and then they'd pass the lead, so I start doing that, and they, "You've been holding out on us!" I said, "I

got so lucky.” Because these guys, they don’t worry about what key anything is in, and they just can take a lead and just make it.

AW:

You know, the key doesn’t bother me in a guitar. I’ve played guitar long enough that I don’t have trouble transposing, typically. Sometimes I have trouble paying attention, but I don’t have much trouble transposing. One thing that I’ve found in my short career on the ukulele is that I don’t transpose very well on it. I’m not—

GC:

Well it’s harder. It’s much harder.

AW:

Is it harder?

GC:

Yeah. If you’re playing in C—

AW:

I’m glad to hear that, because—

GC:

In C or F, you’re in pretty good shape.

AW:

It’s built for C.

GC:

Well, [Strums a chord on the Ukulele] that’s a C6 right there. But you’ll enjoy—you’ll enjoy a lot this Lyle Ritz book.

AW:

Okay, I can’t wait to learn something about that.

GC:

We’ll do that.

AW:

Well, let’s—we’ve got a couple minutes. We’ve got to get back down to downtown Austin in just a little bit. But real quick, tell me about your family. Kids and—

GC:

Oh. Well, Judy and I had two kids. Our son was born in Oklahoma City when I worked at that first job with Southwestern Bell. We—and not long after he was born, we were transferred to St. Louis, and that's where our daughter Maggie was born. And—it's kind of neat. Maggie—that copy of the CD, that's my last copy. Three hundred made, but I can, dub one for you.

AW:

We don't have to do it now, but later, I would like to. I just set it to the side over there.

GC:

But she sings "Someone to Watch Over Me".

AW:

Oh, cool.

GC:

On the second track. And it's the first time I'd ever heard her sing solo. She's incredibly shy.

AW:

Okay. How old was she when you first—

GC:

She—at that time, she was thirty-six and about six months pregnant.

AW:

My daughter is thirty-three, and about four years ago, she came to me and said—we were getting ready to do a big show, I was getting ready to do a big show, and she said, "I think I'd like to sing a song in this," and I said, "Do you sing?" I'd never heard her sing.

GC:

She's probably really good.

AW:

She's great. She's terrific, but I'd never heard her—I mean, she'd never sang around me for the same reasons, so I'm glad to hear that this is not that unusual a circumstance. How very cool.

GC:

Maggie sang in choirs and madrigal groups. I actually heard her sing a duet, and that's as close as I came. I knew she had a great voice. But it just thrilled me that she would do this. And she was able to do it because she was off in a booth by herself and didn't have to look at me going—

or whatever I do. It's funny, Betsy, my new wife plays piano by ear really well. But everything is C or the relative minor, A minor. That's where she plays, that's where she lives. And I mentioned that to some people, she knew—she heard me mention it to them, and she said, "You know, I really don't want to play piano when you're around because you intimidate me." I said, "How did you know that was C?" "Well, I've got a good ear, just like you." She said, "Yeah, but people used to think I was great, now it's as long as it's in C, she's great." So I have to watch myself. I don't consider myself all that good, but you know—

AW:

That's a pretty good ukulele I was just listening to.

GC:

Yeah, well, I botched a few things, too, I'm sure you picked up on that.

AW:

One of the great things about the ukulele and the reason I wanted to take it up was you get away on a guitar playing a one-chord or four-chord for three or four measures, you can't do that on an ukulele.

GC:

You have to—

AW:

You got to be moving around.

GC:

Yeah, you've got to play in different positions to make it interesting. And you really have to be able to play in a few different keys. C and F and G—the G is a D formation, so you can do that.

AW:

A little bit more difficult. I sing a lot in E and E-flat and B-flat. I found those are not happy keys on the ukulele.

GC:

No, not for the ukulele. E-flat is just—But I think—I never have recorded this, but this is another Lyle Ritz chord arrangement. [Start singing, "All the Things You Are" by Oscar Hammerstein II and Jerome Kern with ukulele accompaniment] "You are the breathless kiss of springtime that makes a lonely winter seem long." This is in B-flat. "You are da-da-da-da-dum trembles on the brink of a lovely song. You are the angel glow, that lights the stars, the dearest things I know." [End singing] Woops. Someone said, "Oh!" I was with that same group, Winfield. I said,

“Oh, we can—I can do “All the Things You Are”.” Tim said, “Oh, that’s called, “All the Chords You Are”.” You know, you can—Lyle Ritz is real good at that. This book will be very helpful to you.

AW:

Good. I’m looking forward to that. I will—So what does your daughter do?

GC:

Oh, my daughter now—she was in advertising, and now she’s got two little girls, so she’s a full-time mom and her husband is an IT security guy for the University of Minnesota. My son is in sales and got into the healthcare industry just at the right time selling software to hospitals for Cerner. Now, he married his college sweetheart, she’s now a senior vice-president for Cerner. And Harper, my son, is now headhunter, works in a very small company that places, top executives at various hospitals. Boy, they just—he said, “Dad, you know, this is not like I have any special talents. My wife does, but my gosh, with all the money being spent on healthcare now,” they’re doing quite well. But he plays guitar and loves guitar.

AW:

And where do they live?

GC:

Kansas City.

AW:

Kansas City?

GC:

Mm-hm. That’s where Cerner is headquartered. But he—it’s fun when he comes home and he always grabs the guitar and starts playing these songs. Of course, he’s playing Jack—was it Jack Johnson?

AW:

Yeah.

GC:

Yeah. And John Mayer and those kinds of things. I can sometimes fit in a little bit of lead even on the ukulele with him, but it’s not my kind of music. And I guess, because I’m progressing—or regressing, I don’t know which, to these Tinpan Alley songs, I remember them well. I like them. Some of these songs, like “All the Things You Are”, the construction of that, and I don’t even

know enough to describe it, but I know that the melody line is a really interesting piece of work, and so I like that more than Jack Johnson, even though he plays ukulele a little bit.

AW:

Yeah, well I—one of the great things, especially if you listen to ukulele at what was once its peak in the thirties, maybe, the melody lines in those songs were very interesting, but what was even more interesting to me was how the ukulele framed them by following them along. Whereas with the guitar, particularly folk guitarists, we think of it from the sixties, we sing a melody over a pretty static chordal structure and that's sort of a balance. Whereas the ukulele and the chord, melody structure, the melody structure—the chordal structure and the melody structure move along together in a way that's really fundamentally different than what we mostly do on guitar.

GC:

Yeah, that's true. That's true.

AW:

Unless you're Django Reinhardt [(1910-1953)] or somebody, you know, and playing that kind of guitar, which has some of that same sort of thing.

GC:

I always—I'm really attracted to the Django Reinhardt gypsy jazz kind of stuff. In fact, that's what—

AW:

It'll make you humble though.

GC:

Oh, yeah. And that's what these people play so well.

AW:

I know. I mentioned Michael Ferry. There you go.

GC:

And it's fascinating, just—I'll sit there with a glass of wine, and I'll sit there for hours and hours listening to these people, because what happens is this little group is intimidating to ninety-eight percent of the people at Winfield. But the guys who come sit in, oh my gosh, there's some—I've seen some mandolin players that just, you know, are jaw-dropping in their ability and everything. And they all just play. It's amazing stuff. I love it. But yeah, that was the family.

AW:

How did you meet Betsy?

GC:

Online. I tell people in a porn chat room, and she makes me—if she were here, she'd slap me.

[Laughter] Not so. We met on Match.com.

AW:

Cool. How interesting.

GC:

I just realized I cannot live by myself. I'm worthless by myself. I can't get motivated to do anything by myself. I need some structure, I need someone else in my life. So we—you know, she was in San Antonio, she owns a little day spa. I was getting ready to go up to New Mexico and buy my Scottish terrier. I decided I'll get a dog for companionship. I'm striking out with all these Match.com dates, either I don't like them or they don't like me, or we all realize we're just not compatible. I told her that I'd really like to meet her for coffee, and she said, "My manager that runs the spa for me is on vacation, so I'm running it this weekend, I can't get away for coffee." I said, "Okay. You're there at your work?" And she said, "Yeah." "And you all do facials?" She said, "Yes." I said, "Well, I'd like to make an appointment for a facial." So—

[Laughter] I'm lying there. Put all this—

AW:

Avocado, right?

GC:

Yeah, right. "And now, we're going to do the Asahi treatment." What's funny is I like it. That's how we met. Just like with Judy, there was this attraction right away. She's not like Judy at all, which I think is good.

AW:

Sure. You don't have to compare.

GC:

Judy is a lot more—she was a lot more introverted. Also though, a lot more, what's the word. She felt—she had a real good self-esteem. She'd say what she needed—

End of interview.