

**Oral History Interview of
Charles “Charlie” Hollis**

**Interviewed by: Curtis Peoples
July 31, 2014
Florissant, Colorado**

**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 Charles Hollis regarding his experiences recording music in the Stillwater, Oklahoma and Austin, Texas music scenes.

Length of Interview: 01:55:14

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Keywords

MARS Studio, Red Dirt Music, Texas Country, Randy Crouch, Mark Lyons, Garth Brooks, Gold Rush Palladium [AKA: Mars Palladium]

Charlie Hollis (CH):

There's going to be a tape recorder turned on, so—

Curtis Peoples (CP):

Anything you say will be recorded.

CH:

Anything you say or—

CP:

Hey how's it going?

Charles Hollis (son):

Good.

CH:

This is my son, his name is Charles too.

CP:

Nice to meet you Charles, I'm Curtis.

CH (son):

Nice to meet you.

CH:

Right, so if you're going—listening or something put on your headphones, okay?

CH (son):

Got it. Cool, you guys have a good time.

CH:

Thanks, I ran into some health problems about five years ago at this time. It was stage four throat cancer.

CP:

Oh, man.

CH:

So they fried my saliva glands and so I chew gum, and I really I over talk my ability to talk.

CP:

But you're still able to, and that's a good thing. What I do is just set this on there, plug in over here. Actually, this may just reach all the way—yeah. Alright, looks like we're already going there. I'll just preface the tape by saying this is Curtis Peoples with Charlie Hollis in his house in Florissant—am I saying that right, Florissant, Colorado?

CH:

That's right.

CP:

And today is July 31, 2014, and it's okay that we record this interview?

CH:

That'd be great.

CP:

And we're going to be talking about music, and his career with I guess MARS [Mid Austin Recording Studio] Studio, and anything else that might come up. And I guess to get going, maybe if you just tell me a little bit about you—when you were born, and where you were born, and grew up?

CH:

My father was a serviceman, I was born in Germany. And but we migrated back here pretty early on my life, and I spent most of my young age in Central Oklahoma. Went to all of my schooling in Oklahoma. I finished up my education at Oklahoma State University in Stillwater, and—

CP:

What'd you get an education in?

CH:

I got a education in humanities. It was a—and looking back upon it, it might not have been the right career move, but at the time it sounded like a pretty good deal, good general education. And as it turned out, it probably was exactly cut out for what I was getting ready to do anyway. It allowed me to travel around the world without having to leave my dorm room, or my apartment. And it also made me real familiar with the concept of art and music, which is the way I've led my life anyway. There was a time while I was living in Stillwater that I made a decision about what I was going to do with my life, and it just boiled down to music. Because I'd tried out a number of other things over the course of my young life, and all of them had special meaning to me—I lived with them. I was a pretty good golfer, I started golfing when I was just like eight years old, and so by the time I was in my mid-teens I was pretty good, and I felt like I could have

gone to be a professional golfer. During that same time, I got to be as pretty good bowler, and I tinkered with the idea of being a professional bowler. But all in all—

CP:

Would this have been the sixties, seventies?

CH:

Yeah this was in, yeah the early to mid-sixties.

CP:

When were you born?

CH:

I was born in 1952.

CP:

1952.

CH:

So I'm sixty-two years old—

CP:

Okay.

CH:

At this time. And I guess by the time I got to high school, I'd pretty much given up on the athletic part, and I had been playing music since I was about twelve years old. And not that I ever really got any good at it, but that was the one thing that had stuck with me that I felt like I could continue to do. So as I was finishing up my college degree, I made a point to choose a direction. And so I decided that whether it was playing music, or just being part of the music business—that's the way I had to go.

CP:

What instrument did you concentrate on?

CH:

Well I started off on a guitar, and I started when I was about twelve years old.

CP:

Yeah.

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CH:

I borrowed my brother's guitar until he got home from school. Usually I was home a little bit earlier than him. And then my father and my mother bought me a guitar of my own. And about the same time, I bought into a tape recorder—it was a pretty nice Sony stereo tape recorder—and could get sound on sound recording with it. So that was about the same time I was learning to play the guitar, I was learning how to operate a tape recorder. And one day my father came into my room and he just told me, “If you had studied your books like you study that guitar, you’d make straight A’s.” Well no I doubt if I would have, but I said, “I’m going to make my living with this guitar.”

CP:

Yeah.

CH:

And he laughed. And I thought that that was a challenge.

CP:

Now was the family musical besides your brother, your parents play, or?

CH:

No not really. My father could play the piano, he could play one song on the piano, and as far as I know, he could play one song on the guitar. And his brother was a pretty interesting musician, he blew his thumb off in a shooting accident, his barrel exploded on him, so he lost his thumb completely. But he played the guitar, and he played the violin, and he played string bass.

CP:

Wow.

CH:

But he was an inspiration to me, Uncle Paul. But when my father laughed, at that time I took it as a challenge, because it thought he was laughing at me.

CP:

Yeah.

CH:

As it turns out, he wasn't really laughing at me, but he had some experience with knowing musicians I guess, and he was probably just laughing at the prospect of what I was getting ready to face in my life. And I have to say that nobody supported me in my choices more than my own

family did—my mother and father. And so it was through him that I was able to purchase my own studio recording equipment, which was a TEAC Model 38 system, it was a 38 8-track, half inch tape recorder, and model 32 half-track recorder. And plus the noise reduction, and the speakers, and the stuff that went along with it.

CP:

Was this after college?

CH:

Yes, this was somewhat after college, this gets us up to about 1983. I bought a TEAC 3400 Series 4-track recorder first, and it was used and I wore it out pretty quickly.

CP:

Well did you play music before in bands and stuff, or?

CH:

Yeah, I was playing music all along. I grew up on the acoustic guitar, and was not a bad guitar player. But in order to assure myself a place in the band, I picked up the bass guitar pretty early on. And so by doing that, I did, I got to be in several bands that didn't have a bass guitarist. And that allowed me to learn another instrument, and to get proficient at it. I never was really a great bass player either, but I got pretty good. And had opportunities to play with bands that had musicians that were better than me, and so it gave me a chance to excel too. I guess I played in high school bands for a while. My best friends have always been musicians, and been in the bands that I've been with. And I got to college and got into some folk-type groups, playing acoustic music, and that blossomed—I always was into rock 'n' roll anyway, and that blossomed into rock 'n' roll, and folk rock. And mostly the things that I was involved with was original bands, and so I was always hooked up with talented songwriters. And that made an impression upon me too. I played a lot of music, but I didn't play in a lot of cover bands—played some cover music, but never much was a cover musician. And I opened my first studio in Stillwater, and was there for a couple of years. I don't know who all in the Texas music scene that you might be familiar with, but I might know a couple of them. I was well acquainted with Jimmy LaFave in Stillwater, and I recorded some stuff with him, and I recorded some stuff with Bob Childers, and those guys are I guess still pretty hooked up in the Oklahoma scene too. Bob of course passed away a few years ago, but Jimmy has been involved I guess with a thing called Red Dirt Music.

CP:

Right.

CH:

And I guess it's just kind of a commercial thing they've started in Oklahoma.

CP:

There's this Texas Country, Red Dirt thing, and it's competing, but at the same—yeah, yeah.

CH:

It's just what they call it.

CP:

Yeah.

CH:

And I don't see that much difference between it and Cosmic Cowboy days in Austin early on, or any other. It was a good idea that they had, and are able to follow through on it.

CP:

I guess it's now maybe one or two hundred years down the road people are going to go "What is this Red Dirt?" or "What is Texas Country?" I see it as sort of a progressive—it's pop country, but it's a little more progressive. They bring in the organs and stuff. How would you describe—

CH:

I don't really know how to describe it, it's just what they call it.

CP:

Yeah.

CH:

As far as I know, it's just the same thing we always did.

CP:

Yeah.

CH:

And I imagine that there's a lot of acoustic involved in it, and that a lot of it is original. And I guess—I don't know really what makes it more special than the next. I know it's Red Dirt, because that's the color of the dirt in Oklahoma.

CP:

Yeah.

CH:

And the dirt roads, they're red. And Jimmy LaFave in the first album that we worked on together—had a song called “Red Dirt Roads”, and so I'm not sure if that was a precursor to the movement, or if that was just—

CP:

What year was that first album, do you recall?

CH:

I moved to Austin, Texas on Memorial Day of 1987, and was fairly destitute, borderline homeless. But between Memorial Day and Christmas, I moved all my studio equipment down to Austin, and occupied a nice two-car garage. It was a nice apartment, but had a two-car garage, that I converted into a studio, and that was what became MARS, and that was really a special place. It was a nice apartment that people could walk right into. If they walked into the left they were into my apartment. If they walked into the right, they went into the garage, and that was my studio—and it was special. But Jimmy was the first project that I worked on in Austin, and so that was in the fall of 1987, and we released that tape— At the time, the general format that was being released was cassette tapes.

CP:

Yeah.

CH:

Albums were on the verge of going out, and cassettes were a little cheaper to make, and CDs hadn't quite made their appearance yet. But the very first tape that we released, it was called “Highway Angels...Full Moon Rain” I think. And it was noticed by the *Austin Chronicle*, and was awarded number one tape of the year, tape release, and so that was pretty good.

CP:

Yeah.

CH:

That was a pretty good deal. Of course, it didn't cost Jimmy anything to make that tape. We just did it together, we were friends. But sort of was the issue all along—I had a business, but I'm not much of a businessman, more of an artist than a businessman.

CP:

Right.

CH:

So whatever you could afford was how much it cost to record there. And of course I said, "Ten dollars an hour." And if I knew somebody had some money, well that's what I charged—which was still really cheap.

CP:

That is really cheap, because most of its forty, to sixty-five, right around there.

CH:

Yeah, and that's what it was about then too, in the late eighties. But there weren't very many small studios at the time, and 8-track was just—I had that half-inch tape deck that recorded at fifteen inches per second, which was decent, really a decent machine. And it was more decent than any other 8-tracks that were on the market at the time. And so I really don't know how many studios respond out of coming into my studio and seeing what I was doing, but a bunch. And it was because all of my equipment—besides the recorders—was just inexpensive sound equipment.

CP:

What were you using for a mixing console?

CH:

I used a Peavey 8-channel PA board, and the only thing that made it special was, it was real inexpensive, the thing that made it special was it had, on each channel, it had an in and an out, a direct in and a direct out. So I could use it as between the board and the speakers, I could put my recorder between the board and the speakers. And that allowed me to send a flat signal to the tape recorder, and then have a little EQ and effects coming back from the tape recorder to the speakers. And so it was as low cost as you can possibly imagine.

CP:

Sure.

CH:

I don't want to call it cheap. Not any of it's cheap. But I used a Peavey mixing board, an 8-channel board on an 8-channel recorder, and I used SM57 microphones mostly, I had a Sennheiser here and there.

CP:

So when you would mic up an acoustic guitar—I like recording, and I love to do it. I don't do it that much anymore. But did you have any particular techniques for miking a guitar or anything like that, that you recall?

CH:

If a guy had a guitar that could plug direct, I prefer playing acoustic guitar direct. It doesn't have much of an acoustic sound, but it has a decent sound. Otherwise, if I had channels to spare—and I say I had an 8-track recorder, but I could always make it more than that, by reducing the tracks as I was going along.

CP:

Doing some copying and overdubbing it.

CH:

Yeah I could put a click track on, and then acoustic guitar, and a bass guitar, and if there was a drum put a drum on, and then mix it down to two channels, and then have six more channels to work with. But usually I would put those two 57's pointing towards one another, towards the sound hole on the guitar. And that allowed me to either run a stereo sound, or take one of those sounds out, and just keep it as a mono signal. I always paid all the attention in the world to the track I'm recording. And it doesn't matter what instrument it is, I try to make it as good, as perfect as possible. And then seven tracks later, it's the least thing you notice—but it's still there.

CP:

Yeah.

CH:

And so that was my basic premise.

CP:

What about vocals?

CH:

Vocals were the same thing, usually—

CP:

Used 57s, or?

CH:

I had the 57s, and along the way I had a couple of Sennheisers—I think they call them “Super Razor”, I don't remember what the model number was, but—

CP:

Were they the big black ones, 421s, the phaser—yeah.

CH:

And but the 57's—being just a stage mic, and being an instrument mic itself—were really decent. And if a singer had a decent voice—most of the people I worked with were decent, really decent—some of them were better with using their equipment than others. Some had good microphone technique, and with the SM57, and a Peavey mixing board, if they knew how to use it, it sounded great. And if they didn't, well we just did what we could.

CP:

Sure.

CH:

And the people I worked with were often times there in a recording situation for the first time. And so it was a learning experience for everybody—for them and for me. And it also lent me an opportunity to be a part of their music. Now, if I was working with a songwriter, they would come in with a guitar, and play the guitar, and sing their part—and they would probably be satisfied. But with that, you could always add the other instruments, and then make their song sound like a band.

CP:

Sure.

CH:

It was pretty easy, and that's what I really excelled at I think, was because, being a bass player, I had something to offer just about everybody who came in the studio. And that gave me the opportunity to get a lot better on the guitar too. And during that time, I also learned other instruments—while I was sitting there listening, I could focus on something else. And that led to a lot of different things. When I record myself, I enjoy self-indulgence, so I record all the parts, I do it all myself.

CP:

So do you write songs too?

CH:

I'm not really much of a songwriter. I did, in the early days I wrote a lot, but—

CP:

Yeah.

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CH:

It's not anything that I would boast of. They had a certain sound to them, because it was a full band sound.

CP:

Yeah.

CH:

And I had a couple of friends that were really good on guitar, and drums, and so they could come in and help fill me out. Along the way, I learned how to play the drums too, so—

CP:

Yeah.

CH:

When I'm just by myself, I love to indulge myself. That's just what I do. The studio itself, in Austin, was a place to be for a lot of the people that I met during that time. I was there for about eleven years, but the studio was only open for about four of those. And during that time, if I needed somebody to work with, I would go down to an open mic downtown in Austin. It was usually the Chicago House down just off of 6th Street. And you could sit there and listen to wonderful songs and songwriters, and talented musicians, and know that they were just looking for a place to be.

CP:

Yeah.

CH:

And so I just approached them with a card and say, "My name is Charlie, I've got a little 8-track studio, and I think that you'd sound good on tape, if you get a chance to come by." I met Betty Elders that way, have you ever heard of Betty Elders?

CP:

Betty Elders?

CH:

Yeah I don't know if she still plays around Austin or not. She used to play around quite a bit. Her husband is Gene Elders, who played violin on George Strait's Ace In The Hole Band. And she was an extraordinarily talented guitar player, singer, songwriter. And I approached her, and I told her I thought that I could record an album, a full album, of her music, for about two hundred dollars.

CP:

Yeah.

CH:

Because she was so good as she was just sitting there playing, and singing. Well, about two-thousand dollars later—I made a deal with her for two hundred dollars, and she took advantage of it big time, and I'm glad she did. I met some really interesting musicians through her.

CP:

Did Gene come and play on that?

CH:

Gene came and played on her stuff, and he came and played on others too that were involved in the studio. He played on several of the sessions that I conducted there. And there were many musicians—I'm not sure that—I'm thinking there was a guy named Floyd Black, that was a keyboard player, and the piano player for the George Straight band, and he played on a few sessions. Reese Wynans from Stevie Ray Vaughan's band, he's played with Double Trouble, by then it was triple trouble I guess.

CP:

Right.

CH:

He came in, he lived in the neighborhood, and he came in a few times. And a guy named Keith Carper, was a bass player, and Rick Ward, a drummer—and they kind of all knew each other. There's going to be many that I can't remember the names of.

CP:

Sure.

CH:

George Ensley, I don't know I you've George Ensley, but—

CP:

I've heard of him.

CH:

He's been around forever—extraordinarily talented guitar player, singer. And he played with those fellows, and associated with Betty Elders. Let's see— Hal Michael Ketchum.

CP:
Yeah.

CH:
Came in on Betty Elder's sessions, and—I can't remember his name—but the cello player for—
mental blocs on names—Lyle Lovett. [Note: Cellist's name is John Hagen]

CP:
Oh okay.

CH:
Lyle Lovett's big band. And I can't remember the guy's name, but he came in. And so I had a lot
of really wonderful opportunities to meet people, and to work with really talented musicians.

CP:
Do you remember the name of Betty's album?

CH:
It was "Coal Miner's Daughter".

CP:
"Coal Miner's Daughter".

CH:
Yeah, I've got a sample of the music that I recorded at MARS that I wanted to give to you.

CP:
Okay.

CH:
And there's a couple of songs on that, and if there's anything else that you want, if I don't have
it, I can probably find it somewhere.

CP:
So who are some of the other artists, you mentioned Jimmy and Betty, can you remember some
of the other people you recorded?

CH:

I recorded Bob Childers, and another guy named Bradley Piccolo. He's one of the Red Dirt Rangers—

CP:

Yeah.

CH:

In Oklahoma. I recorded Jimmy, and Bob, and Bradley, and Randy Crouch—all in a short period of time. And all four of those guys were big time Red Dirt Rangers.

CP:

Right.

CH:

And so that was all in Austin though.

CP:

That was really when they were getting going though.

CH:

That was at the beginning.

CP:

The beginning of it, yeah.

CH:

Uh-huh, and so maybe I was part of that Red Dirt movement too without knowing it.

CP:

Getting that sound, maybe.

CH:

Yeah maybe. I've got some examples of that too on that—The guy that I hooked up with early on in my music, was Randy Crouch. And I would just call him borderline, insane music. At the time that I was first seeing his bands, they were so good, it was unbelievably good bands. But I think he had been courted by Commander Cody to come and play in his band. Randy is an extraordinary musician, a multi-instrumentalist. But as much as the electric guitar, he's a fiddle player. And he's been known as the best rock 'n' roll fiddle player in the world.

CP:
Yeah.

CH:
Of course nobody is going to try to deny that.

CP:
I think I saw a picture of him somewhere the other day that had that on there.

CH:
Maybe so.

CP:
It popped up on a Facebook thing somewhere.

CH:
He conducts his own band still, but he's a sideman with the Red Dirt Rangers now too—

CP:
Okay.

CH:
And he's been doing that for years. Randy and I have known each other since the early eighties, and we recorded a lot of music together. And I guess we'd known each other for about twelve years before we released his first album, and it was called "The Flying Horse Opera". I've got that record that I want to give to you too.

CP:
Great, I'd love to hear that.

CH:
Randy's music is as important to me as it is to him. He's the fellow that allowed me to stay in his band.

CP:
Yeah.

CH:
And to become a better musician, and to—

CP:

So you played with him before you started the studio?

CH:

Oh yeah.

CP:

Oh yeah, okay.

CH:

Those were the Oklahoma days in 1887 [1987], as a I left Oklahoma, and I've not lived in Oklahoma again since then.

CP:

Why'd you decide to leave Oklahoma and move to Austin?

CH:

You know, it was that virtual homelessness. I got real sick in 1986 while I was living in Tahlequah near Randy, and we were playing in bands. But I got real sick and pneumonia and double pneumonia—

CP:

Yeah.

CH:

And ran out of health, and out of luck, and just I moved home with my mother and father for a couple of months, and was trying to get well. Came down with kidney problems, and things just weren't going very well at all.

CP:

Yeah.

CH:

Then a, old friend of mine from the Stillwater days, another musician whose name is Gene Williams, called me up to see how I was doing. And he and Jimmy had just moved down to Austin, oh maybe six months earlier. And he asked how I was doing and I said, "Times were tough." And he said, "Well, can you work?" I said, "I think so." And he said, "If you want a job, I think I can get you one in Austin." And so on Memorial Day of 1987 I arrived in Austin, and started a job driving a mail truck. And that's what got me I think ten hour shifts and probably

four-day weeks, and got me to where I could afford to buy some building materials. And it wasn't a great job—By the end of the year I quit out of it and started on something else. But at least it afforded me the opportunity to be in Austin. It was all just kind of an accident.

CP:

Sure, yeah.

CH:

Now we all—the whole Stillwater music scene, which was kind of hustling and bustling at the time in '85, '86—we all knew that there was something going on in Austin that we really wanted to be part of. And one by one we all drifted down there. And as I said on my own, it was just a lucky accident. But we got down there, and as in other places in Stillwater and in Tahlequah, and as it turned out in Austin, the studio was a catalyst for a small community of musicians that were going unnoticed. And it gave us the opportunity not just to hear our own voices on tape, but to gain a little confidence, learn a little bit about what we were doing, and to get up there and act like we knew what we were doing, and whether we did or not.

CP:

Yeah.

CH:

And so I'd say that everybody that I was associated with had already given up on a straight life, and had already given in to the concept of playing music, and it was just a foothold. Having a studio to work in, access to other musicians who were really good, and in Austin if you're making a living playing music, you're probably playing in more than one band. And so often times a band might have a guitar player that was paying it two or three other bands, and same with everybody.

CP:

Sure.

CH:

But that's how we came to be in Austin.

CP:

So you said Jimmy moves down there, Randy, you're moving down there. So I'm kind of interested the Stillwater music scene, what would that have been all about. Austin's sort of that place, Lubbock's got a pretty significant music scene—everybody goes to Austin—Stillwater—

CH:

Well I would just say, coming out of Stillwater, that not all of it. There was quite a bit of rock 'n' roll, I played rock 'n' roll there, but there was a lot of acoustic-oriented music. And that's how I came across the concept of my studio, was that somebody left a cheap PA system in my care one week. And I plugged it in—I didn't plug any speakers in, I just put the headphones in—and played guitar into a microphone, and sang—and with a little bit of reverb, it sounded deep, rich—it sounded great. And I was thinking this acoustic guitar can really compete with anything on tape. And it doesn't have to be an electric guitar to play with the drum, and you can make a bass guitar fit on anything.

CP:
Sure.

CH:
And so that's where I go the idea that the acoustic guitar doesn't have to be a solo instrument.

CP:
Yeah.

CH:
And that's what I got to be known for in Austin was the acoustic sound—I don't know if it was any good or not. But because I was familiar with it, and I was working with acoustic musicians, that's how it turned out. But that's sort of how it was in Stillwater too. Jimmy was playing, and I played in a band that was folk rock. It got way heavy, and too many musicians in it. But my best friend, Mark Lyon, is an electric guitar player, and he'll fit in anywhere. And so he played in that band—we played in several bands together.

CP:
You said Mark Lyon?

CH:
Yeah, Mark Lyon.

CP:
L-y-o-n.

CH:
L-y-o-n. He's one of the finest guitar players I've ever known, and he's my best friend. And so is Randy, and Randy, and Mark, and I played in bands together. Mark introduced me to Randy. So we have a deep, rich history all of our own.

CP:

Are they still at Oklahoma, or at Austin, or?

CH:

Mark lives in Oklahoma City and he plays with a couple of bands. He has his own band called 13 Seeds, and he played with a Grateful Dead cover band. And I can't remember their name, it's not the Okie Acid Test, but it's Okie something Test [Note: Electric Okie Test]. But they're good, that's a good band. I know they are because Mark and I were Deadheads from the very beginning. And he studies it—he's a great guitar player, but he can play that. But he's also a great songwriter, and a instrumentalist, and he also conducts his own recording sessions. He has his own recording studio. And I will never be able to say enough about him, he's a great friend, and a great musician too. He was just here this past week, and we had a chance to play a little bit together.

CP:

Do you think that him and Randy would be open to do some interviews like this and talk about that scene?

CH:

Mark would absolutely, you'd love talking with Mark—he lives in Oklahoma City, he's real accessible.

CP:

Okay.

CH:

If you wanted to talk to him on the telephone I could hook you up easily.

CP:

Okay.

CH:

Randy, on the other hand, lives in a geodesic dome in the middle of a forty acre track in northeastern Oklahoma, that, until just this past year or so, he's been out there for over twenty years, and just this past year, he got electricity.

CP:

Wow.

CH:

So he lives off the grid pretty much—not as much off the grid as he probably would want to. Thing about Randy is—besides being a genius—I hesitate to call him an idiot savant, but it might be. He's a great musician, songwriter. His songs are wonderful songs, and they're not simple songs, they're complicated. But until just this past few years, it never occurred to me that perhaps he was suffering from a fear of succeeding, and it was probably obvious all along.

CP:

Well a lot of musicians are like that.

CH:

Yeah.

CP:

Yeah.

CH:

I am.

CP:

Yeah, yeah.

CH:

I conduct my own concert sitting on the edge of my bed, just singing to myself.

CP:

Yeah.

CH:

And it's in front of an audience, and all the instruments in the world—but nobody there, except for me, and I have stage fright. I'm a good guitar player—I can't sing, especially since the throat cancer. I'm not much of a singer but I still do it. But if you asked me to stand up and play a song in front of a crowd, I would freeze up. It would be extraordinarily stressful for me. Now as a bass player, no problem—I can stand up with anybody—two of us, I'm okay. By myself, I get stage fright. Now Randy, on stage, sometimes the music that comes out of him is really coming out of him, you could see it. I don't know if you ever—it's kind of the thing that makes you a musician I suppose.

CP:

I was watching a Jimi Hendrix documentary the other day—shy, bashful, really just—but you see him on stage, and it's coming out of—it's that what you're talking about?

CH:

It comes out. If he's playing the violin, he'll arch backwards a little bit, and his mouth will open, and you can see the energy coming out of him, it radiates out of him. And so there's been times that I really got to where I would not loan him an instrument, because he would lay his guitar down on the stage, and as it started to feedback, he'd be playing his fiddle, and he'd be stepping on his guitar on a whammy bar, or fretting it with his foot. I just couldn't see treating an instrument that way. Myself, I treat my instruments with a lot of respect.

CP:

Yeah.

CH:

But he'll take that guitar, or fiddle—play his guitar with his fiddle, or play his steel guitar with his—

CP:

Who's he playing with these days, or is it a solo thing?

CH:

He always conducts his own band, it's called Flying Horse, and he plays as a sideman with Red Dirt Rangers now.

CP:

That's right.

CH:

I'm not sure what else he's got going on. I talked to him this past week and he said he's been sick. But I hadn't heard from him for months, usually we're in pretty good contact. And I'll call him—of course he lives out in the middle of nowhere. He does have a telephone out there, but if he's there, sometimes he doesn't answer. And if you leave a message, well he may not call back. But he's been hard to get in touch with lately, but I talked to him last week and he sounded pretty good. He really took a beating through his life of music, where as I escaped without any addictions at all. Randy's got a pretty good alcohol problem. I don't know how much it bothers him now, but over the years it's taken a toll on him.

CP:

Yeah.

CH:

But it hasn't changed him as far his character goes, he's a great man, real interesting character. Lives a tough life, but he—and I don't think he drives anywhere. If somebody wants him to play, they got to go get him, and so they're willing. He still can do everything. Of course we're all getting along now, and facing being musicians in our sixties. I don't suppose there's anything wrong with that, especially me, because my audience is always young.

CP:

True.

CH:

And I don't have to look at me whenever I'm playing. Those other guys, they're good enough they don't have to stop. There's not any age bracket on them, there's just good musicians. I'll just say that as far as the Stillwater music scene went, there was another studio that was open there before mine, run by a guy named Mike Hufford. And he started recording 4-track, and then bumped up to 8-track, and then later on got into some much bigger equipment. I don't know, I lost of track of him after about the 4-track, and he and I were, for a very short period of time, had 8-track systems. There was a guy named—well I won't think of his name now—there was a band that was playing as I left, as I was starting college, and it was called Moses—I'll think of the guy's name here in a minute—Steve Ripley.

CP:

Steve Ripley.

CH:

He had a little recording studio in Stillwater that was pretty neat. But he was pretty well connected to the music scene, and he moved out of Stillwater by the time I was starting to get involved with recording myself. But I know that Mike Hufford knew him, and Mike might have got his inspiration from Steve Ripley. And Steve moved out of Stillwater, I think he must have moved over to Tulsa, and got hooked up with Leon Russell, and he became Leon Russell's studio engineer for quite a while. And then, him being a great guitarist on his own, I think he played guitar for Bob Dylan on tours. And I remember seeing a postcard from him to one of his friends that said that he had dinner at George Harrison's house, and that, I think—well of course Bob Dylan was there, and I'm thinking Eric Clapton was there.

CP:

Wow.

CH:

So he really got well placed. And he's in the Oklahoma scene again now; he's probably a big part of that Red Dirt scene too.

CP:

I've heard his name, so yeah.

CH:

Yeah he's one of the big time guys. And although I don't think that I ever really met Steve, he indirectly inspired me. Of course I had always been involved with a tape recorder and my music, and I was going to do something anyway, but Mike Hufford showed me that you didn't have to have a million dollar studio in order to do some recording. And I never had a million dollar studio. It would have taken way too much at ten dollars an hour to get that money back.

CP:

It's all about ears, and getting that sound, and the artist—like you said, if it sounds good, you can keep that sound.

CH:

That's right, and a lot of times that's what I would tell my friends that came in to record. They'd say "This sounds great", and it may have sounded great because they were hearing themselves in the best possible circumstance that they had ever been in, but I would always tell them that it always help that you sound great to begin with. And then recording that—well you're recording something great, it's hard to mess it up. The truth is is that you can mess up a great recording.

CP:

Sure.

CH:

But that was my lucky point also, was that the people that I worked with, if they weren't already friends of mine, they became friends of mine. And going back to my father, who I said supported me as anybody, and financed most of my music, wrote me a letter later on in his life and just told me, he says, "You have way too many friends in the music business, you need to raise your rates." And I couldn't, I couldn't because it was more important to me to have that relationship with those musicians, and to set our place. I always thought that if you published a book, well then you have achieved a certain amount of immortality; if you wrote a song and could make it to where other people could listen to it, you've achieved a certain amount of immortality. And that was always important to me—not just the music, but the history.

CP:
Right.

CH:
And as it turned out, since even before I made that decision to make my living in the music business, even as my father was laughing about it—that's how my whole life has gone. I was a record manager for Travis County, the first record manager that they had. As I had history at my fingertips, and a record manager, that's what I did in my studio, I was record managing records.

CP:
Sure.

CH:
And so a lot of the things I did—just I can't say coincidentally, because I believe in a higher power—but one thing led to another. And for an extended period of time, it got very interesting. I got to meet people that I'd only heard about before. I never did meet Willie Nelson, but I got to go into his studio at the Austin Opera House, and his studio out at his home a few times, and that was because I knew Harold Eggers. I don't know if you know Harold or not, but—

CP:
We know Harold, we've been working with Harold for about five years now. We've got a Harold Eggers collection. We didn't know how that was going to play out until the court cases played out with him and the family, which was—

CH:
Poor him, Harold is really a sweet guy, but man he was beleaguered with court cases. I think he was the one that told me, he said, "I hate lawyers, I hate them as much as anybody on this earth. But if you get into a legal battle, go hire the meanest son of a bitch you can find."

CP:
Yeah.

CH:
And that's what happened to Harold, and I'm sure of it. He's really a decent fellow, and he opened some doors for me.

CP:
He's opening doors for us, bringing in some things. I think it was him got us in touch with Louis Black—

CH:

Probably, yeah.

CP:

And so we've now got some interviews and things like that.

CH:

And who was that other fellow, the record engineer and producer—I struggle with remembering names, I'll think of his name in a second too.

CP:

Well he was helping us with Bob Johnston.

CH:

Bob Johnson.

CP:

Bob Johnston, yeah.

CH:

Yeah, Harold opened a bunch of doors for several people. That first tape that Jimmy and I did together, the "Highway Angels...Full Moon Rain", Harold scored a recording deal that was with his brother. His brother was the owner and president of Tomato Records out of New York City, and they—as far as I could tell—they did Jimmy a huge favor. They may have spent a hundred thousand dollars on trying to get the same sound that we got out of my 8-track studio. And they eventually gave up, Jimmy backed out of the deal, and started his own record company.

CP:

Did he come back to record with you more?

CH:

No, I never recorded with Jimmy again.

CP:

Yeah.

CH:

I've got recordings of Jimmy that we made in Stillwater. For a while we were next-door neighbors. But I've known Jimmy for a long time, but I can't say that we were close friends.

CP:
Yeah.

CH:
I played in a band with him for a short period of time. But we I guess had too many other things going on. In Austin, he lived about a block and a half from where I had my studio, so it was real convenient. And Jimmy's first experience in the recording—I hope this doesn't get back to him, but when he went into the major studios to start recording for Tomato Records, he called in everybody that worked on his 8-track project, except for me. And I played bass on most of it, and had a lot to do with engineering the sound of it. And so I'd say that there's not really any hard feelings; little disappointed that I didn't get the same opportunities that everybody else did. But that's okay, there was a lot of other stuff going on, and I had hundreds of other wonderful opportunities, because Jimmy scored first.

CP:
Yeah.

CH:
Because he was the first project, and before we even started this second project he won an award. And by doing that, that got me some attention. And by Jimmy saying "Go over to MARS and do some recording." Well I had clients coming to me that I didn't have to solicit. And so Jimmy is a wonderful individual too, and a great voice, I haven't seen him for a long time since I left Austin in '97.

CP:
That's when you moved up here to Florissant?

CH:
Yeah, I moved here to Colorado in October of—

CP:
Where was the studio located at?

CH:
I'm sorry it was '98.

CP:
Oh '98.

CH:

It was my two-car garage studio, which was called MARS, was on Hollow Creek. It's just off of Barton Springs Road, in the 78704 zip code a few blocks from Barton Springs.

CP:

Okay.

CH:

So it's a great place to be, it was just—

CP:

Now how'd you come up with the name MARS studio?

CH:

Well, I have to say that it was just a name. I'm not a superstitious person, but my sign is Aries, and with Aries, the planet that corresponds to that is MARS, and I had MARS Rising, MARS Setting—MARS appeared too many times in my life to just go unnoticed. And it was way out there—

CP:

Yeah.

CH:

It's like someplace people hadn't been to before. And when Jimmy recorded there, I was just calling it MARS, and he assigned the anagram of "Mid-Austin Recording Studio".

CP:

Oh, okay.

CH:

And so that stuck too, and that's where we were, right in the middle of Austin—and it's just MARS.

CP:

Yeah.

CH:

And not any significance to it, not the god of war, it was just a place to be, and easy to put on a card.

CP:

Sure.

CH:

My card said MARS, Austin, Texas, and my name, and a telephone number. And I'd leave that with somebody, and that's how I got my business. And I should also say that besides being a really inexpensive to do your recording, that it was what you'd consider to be the classic underground studio. There was nothing about it that was really legitimate. I'm pretty sure that if the Internal Revenue Service knew about it, that they would owe me money, because there wasn't any real cash flow.

CP:

Yeah.

CH:

I made enough to pay my bills and pay the rent—I did not really make enough money to buy food with that, so my clients, often times that there was their payment—just to fix something for me to have to eat. And as my father said, “I had too many friends in the music business.” But I'm glad, I'm glad that's how it worked out.

CP:

So after you left Austin, did you leave the recording studio behind, do you still do any recording, or play anything?

CH:

I pretty much wore out that Model 38 equipment—I still have it, but I believe the 8-track needs a new motor, and probably needs new heads on the—the half-track has a couple of other problems with it, it's just not reliable. Plus, it's extraordinarily cumbersome—

CP:

Yeah.

CH:

And there's noise reduction and effects and everything that goes along with it. If I moved it—it was not portable at all—if I moved it, I needed a truck. When I moved up here, my wife, who is also a real sweet musician herself, and I spent a lot of time—in fact, that's how I met her, was through my studio in Austin.

CP:

And you said your wife's name is Susan?

CH:

Her name is Susan, and we recorded a project there in Austin. But when we came up here—she's got a lot of faith in Jesus, and she's a pretty decent songwriter. She writes really sweet songs, and so first she talked me into buying a digital studio, and that in itself—making the transition from analog equipment to digital equipment, was a huge leap for me, because my mind understood analog, and the digital just seemed too complicated. Once I learned it, I can't see how I lived without it. It just made my life a lot easier.

CP:

Was it a portable studio, or program?

CH:

Yeah, I bought a twelve channel—six mono channels, and then three stereo channels—and so technically a nine channel—

CP:

Yeah.

CH:

But twelve, and plus, a lot easier to reduce your channels—I never did with just what I had to work with, I always used more. But it was a Korg Model 1200 I think, and they don't make those anymore. But it's like this big, and the speakers that I bought for it are like this big. I could probably pick the whole thing up and carry it out under my arms.

CP:

Very portable, yeah it's small.

CH:

And dynamic, no noise reduction required, all of the effects in the world built into the recorder. It had drum tracks—it had not just a click track, but if you wanted any of three hundred drum effects, you could program it if you wanted to, if you were good enough, but for me those were always just like a click track.

CP:

Okay.

CH:

Something to play to that you could erase later, or not use. But after I bought that 12-track digital recorder, the next thing she did was she bought me a drum set. Now that came totally from left

field, is that the right expression? I had never considered playing the drums before. I'd sat in my studio with drum sticks, and playing on my knee to the tracks that I was recording, but never once gave a consideration to being a drummer. But then at Christmas one time—it's been probably seven years ago now—after we had opened all of our presents, she said, "There's one other thing." And she took me upstairs to our loft, and she'd gone to the Guitar Center in Colorado Springs to find a drum machine for me to work with. And while she was there, she wound up buying an electronic drum kit. It's the kind you sit at and you play with sticks.

CP:
Right.

CH:
It's a Yamaha electric drum kit, and I said, "You have got to be out of your mind." I said, "How much—" "I've always been kind of stingy," "How much did it cost, and when can we take it back?" And of course before I could take it back, I wanted to at least set it up to see what it looked like, and then I'm sitting there with headphones and not knowing how to play the drums, and I got an amplifier out and hooked a couple of speakers to it, plugged it into that, and it sounded so real. And the pads, they bounce so—everything—and I put a record on and started playing to records, or to recordings that I had made, and started learning from the very scratch—and over the weekend, decided not to take those drums back.

CP:
Yeah.

CH:
Kept them, and I could not stop playing them. And it really rekindled my love of music. And the joke was always—and I told it—was that did you hear about that car accident down in the corner? Yeah, five musicians and a drummer died. And but playing the drums, to me it was a workout, and it was fun, and it got to be the way it felt to strike those pads, the way the sticks bounced off the pads, and the sounds you could make. And on those electronic drums, you can turn the knob, and turn it from a trap set, to a tabla set, to a Japanese set.

CP:
And you can turn it down.

CH:
And you can turn it up and down.

CP:
Yeah.

CH:

And it always sounded good, you could plug it right into the tape recorder, and you didn't have to set mics, it was always really easy. And like I said, I love it. And I don't play a lot anymore, but over the course of about one year, I got pretty good at it, good enough to where my wife, who got me to buy the tape recorder and the drums, thought that maybe we should start a band. And I knew a fellow at the church we were going to who played bass, and I'd gone over to his house to play guitar with him before. And he was just like me, he didn't play anywhere, he just learned to play the bass sitting in his own room. And he was pretty good, but we couldn't connect—I couldn't play the guitar the way his bass style—and so we quit trying. But later on, when I got those drums, well now I'm playing an instrument that I can relate to him with, and together with him on bass and me playing the drums, was pretty interesting. And so Susan just stepped in and played the guitar and sang her songs, and sang other Christian rock songs. And it got to be a garage band, we were just making noise. And in fact, we practiced, we would go up to a church, I think on Wednesday evenings, when nobody was there, we were given permission to go into the sanctuary and plug our instruments in, and just do whatever we wanted to do. And everybody at the church knew about it, it's just a small church so everybody knew about it, and alongside of the church, the church conducted a food ministry. And one night they conducted their food ministry on the same night that we rehearsed. And one night, this guy, this old man came in and he said, "Do you all practice on Wednesdays?" And we were just sitting there, and I said, "Yeah we usually do." And he said, "Well there's a guy here who wants to play with you, his name is Chris Wojtecki." And he walked up and he had his saxophone in his hand. So I'm playing the drums, and I'm a new drummer; the bass player's just this kid, he was a pretty good bass player, but he didn't have any experience. He suffered from a severe case of stage fright too, and Susan, who up until that point, if she played guitar, she played acoustic guitar—well I gave her my Telecaster to play—and so she was playing electric. And we were just making noise, and so grunge Christian, and we were having enough fun.

CP:

Sure.

CH:

We were just doing what we wanted to do, and then this guy with a saxophone came up. And the guy who introduced us said, "Heard that you were practicing, and this guy wants to play too." And what I most felt like saying was that well yeah we rehearse on Wednesday nights, but we're really not auditioning—and if we were auditioning, it wouldn't be for a saxophone player. However, we went up and started playing, and when Chris joined in, we were no longer a grunge band, we were smooth jazz.

CP:

What was his last name again?

CH:

Wojtecki, it's W-o-j-t-e-c-k-i.

CP:

Okay.

CH:

And he's from around here, he lives just off of Twin Rocks Road, that you came up here on. And one of the most extraordinary musicians I've ever met in my life, and he walked right up. And he didn't mind playing with a garage band, and he came every time we rehearsed, and if we had a gig, and we had a few, he was there and often times we couldn't have done it without him. And he plays classical music, he plays anything that you want.

CP:

So did it turn into a Christian to a jazz band, or just an instrumental, a little bit of everything?

CH:

We call that band The Rest. Now I'm not sure how that came about, other than I had a recording gig as a court reporter on the Navajo Reservation a number of years back, and they call that place "The Rez" and that's typically the life, the life on the Rez. And I correlated that to the resurrection, and we started to call it The Rez. But then thought there's actually a band called The Resurrection Band I think, and so I got in touch with the guy who had formed that band, and said that we were just a small-time—we weren't ever going to do anything—but we were thinking about calling it to The Rez, and he said, "You know, it'd probably be okay, but it might be a problem." And so we just changed it to The Rest. And we made two records, and the first of them was with the bass player that I mentioned before, his name was Quinn West.

CP:

Quinn West?

CH:

Yeah, and he's moved off since then. But the second one we started recording at just before I started my treatment for throat cancer. And my friend Mark Lyon happened to be here. We went to a Grateful Dead concert in Denver, and came back here, and I don't know how familiar you are with recording sessions, but usually they're just time eaters.

CP:

Oh yeah.

CH:

You start recording, then twelve hours later, you haven't really got anything done. But in a matter of a few hours, Mark and Susan and I sat down in my downstairs room, where my recording equipment is, and laid out the foundations for three to four songs. And each one of those were pretty interesting, and good enough to keep. I played the drums, Mark played guitar, and Susan played guitar and sang. And so in a few hours, we did that—I think four songs. And then later on, I wanted to see if Mark and I could collaborate long distance, and so I sent him the rhythm track to a song—I think that he had actually played rhythm guitar on—but I sent him the rhythm track to a song and asked him to record a lead part. And just to record his lead part onto a CD, and send it back to me. And then I synched it up—his lead guitar part onto the tracks that I'd recorded. And—

CP:

It's getting pretty standard these days.

CH:

It was—the analog version of digital recording—more trouble than it was worth. I probably could do it over the internet.

CP:

Yeah.

CH:

But we did it through the mail, and it turned out pretty well. I do have that record that I want to give to you to take too—you have a CD player in your car?

CP:

Yeah, I do.

CH:

Oh well then you'll have something to listen to on your long trip, but—

CP:

Remind me when we get back to town, I'll give you one of my CDs from the first album I recorded—I'm working on some new stuff right now, but I'll be sure to get you one of those.

CH:

Thank you.

CP:
Yeah.

CH:
Those things are more important to me. My record collection is the records that I made. I've got a record collection that I quit collecting in the early eighties. I haven't collected records—I collected a few I guess in the eighties, but I got to where I didn't really listen to music that much, because when you do it all the time, it's not that much fun. As opposed to in the early days when you sat down to listen to a record, you sat down and paid attention to it, and then you'd turn it over and listen to the other side too. Those days are long gone. And I have to say that over the years of blasting my own head with the music that I was recording myself, the effect has been a real severe case of tinnitus.

CP:
Yeah.

CH:
Tinnitus.

CP:
Tinnitus, yeah.

CH:
But it really is, it's pretty severe, and so these days I can't decide if I'm really hard of hearing, or I have super hearing—because lots of stuff is way too loud for me. And I'm pretty sure technology has something that I could put into my ears to make it better. But at this time, I get by.

CP:
Yeah.

CH:
But the hearing loss is pretty significant. I don't know what my recordings sound like anymore. It's hard to tell, you know. I might record a good signal, but then listening to it, I might tune it to my own ears, which might not be good anymore, we'll see.

CP:
Yeah.

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CH:

I'll give you a chance—I recorded—After I went through the treatment for throat cancer, we finished up that Second Rest album with Chris, and the bass player had moved away, so I played the drums, and the bass, and guitar too, because I liked to indulge myself.

CP:

Sure.

CH:

But the real talent is my wife's voice, Susan. And we finished that recording up, and then, thinking all along that I was going to die from this throat cancer business, they actually gave me six months when they diagnosed me. It's been five years now, so.

CP:

Congratulations.

CH:

I still don't know what's going to happen, but part of it is not knowing. I was extraordinarily fortunate to have health insurance whenever it was important, and when it wasn't important anymore, the health insurance went away so. But after the being lucky to be even able to talk, I embarked on a project that was impossible, and that was to record a full album of Randy Crouch songs. And, as I said, Randy's music is not simple—it's complicated, not just lyrically, but musically too. So I recorded—and I could have gone on, but I stopped myself at fifty-five minutes I think, of songs. And I actually embarked on songs that I didn't think I could do. But once I got started on them, I couldn't stop. And so I guess it was the very concept of self-indulgence. I recorded somebody else's songs by myself, and played the drums and the guitar and the bass, and I even played the violin on some of it, because Randy's a violin player. And I played some keyboards, and had to learn the instruments, had to learn the songs, did the recording, and I just will say it's kind of a joke. When you're self-indulgent, and you're recording all the parts yourself, except for the lead guitar part, which I want to leave to someone who can really play the lead guitar, when somebody else is listening to that recording, they say "That's really cool. Who played the lead?" Well Mark played the lead, but I played everything else.

CP:

Right.

CH:

And so that always plagued me. Throughout my whole recording career, no matter what I did, it was always what I didn't do that was noticed. And now I record everything, including the lead

guitars, everything, but it's Randy Crouch songs. So hopefully when you listen to it, you'll think, "Who wrote those songs?"

CP:

I'm anxious to hear them, I've heard of him, but I'm not that real familiar with the music, but I'm going to become familiar with it now.

CH:

Well actually the very first record that Randy and I released together was called "The Flying Horse Opera", and I recorded many more songs than actually what made it onto the record. My recorder crashed—I lost some songs, I had the rhythm tracks, but no lead parts. And so that's when I decided, "I can't wait for somebody to come and do the lead part for me, I have to do it myself." And so I became a lead guitar player. They're not great, but they're certainly better than nothing.

CP:

Right.

CH:

And as it turned out, many of the songs that appeared on Randy Crouch's "The Flying Horse Opera" were the same songs that I recorded for my record, and I called it just "The Flying Horse". And I'm not sure if that refers to Randy, because the spirit of flying and the spirit of wild horses, or if it was for me. Because there were times when it was Randy Crouch and Flying Horse, and I was the only other one there. So I was the flying horse. So I don't know, it's like I said.

CP:

You said Randy's from Stillwater too?

CH:

Well no, Randy, when I met him, lived in Tulsa. And the musicians that were coming out of Tulsa at that time were outstanding. Some of them became Eric Clapton's band in the eighties, the late seventies and eighties. And many of them, and I won't be able to think of any of their names—

CP:

Didn't you say you worked with Garth Brooks at some point?

CH:

I did, that was in the Stillwater days. Early on, when I very first got my 8-track equipment, I was

acquainted with Garth. He worked on campus for one of the alumni association I think. And at the same time he was working for the alumni association, I was working for the audio/visual center.

CP:

Yeah.

CH:

Tape recorders again, and we'd occasionally bump into one another on campus. We knew each other just well enough to say hi, and stop and casually talk for a minute. But he was a musician, and I'd seen him out playing around Stillwater a couple of times. Generally speaking he was solo, and you could find him sitting there playing the acoustic guitar, and playing Simon & Garfunkel, or some folk music. And he was pretty decent, but he was a folk singer, and over the years, he got talked into country. I think he was basically a rocker. I think he loved KISS. But the band that I knew him in Stillwater with, I won't remember the name of the band, but the characters, he had some guitar player, a bass player, and a violin player, I believe. They were the Skinner Brothers, and I was familiar with them before. Decent folk rock band, real decent. And Mark—

CP:

So you didn't actually record with him or anything, just worked at university together.

CH:

Yeah, and actually when Garth found out that I had a recorder, he came over and paid for me to record him on 8-track. And I don't know how many of the sounds we used, it wasn't a complicated session. I think he just wanted to make a demo.

CP:

Okay.

CH:

And we did that, and then later on, he had a friend that he was interested in hearing what she would sound like on tape. And so he actually paid me for three hours, thirty dollars, three hours of recording for a friend of his that I never met, she never appeared. And I never gave Garth his thirty dollars back. And coincidentally, this is hearsay, a friend of mine told me this, there was a guy that I met and did some recording with in Austin, and as it turned out his occupation was as a telephone operator. And he met and married a girl that I had known in Austin, and they moved to I think Pennsylvania. And while they were living in Pennsylvania, a friend of theirs invited them to come to New York City for dinner or something, and they found themselves at a high-rise club in New York City, and sitting at a pretty nice place I guess. And there was some kind of

hubbub going on across the room from where they were, and the guy that they were with just said, "Let me go check out, see what's going on." And then he came back and he said, "There's a guy over there that I'd like for you to meet." You know just, they were all strangers, and so they went over and sat down at this table. And my friends, that I've known from Austin, they didn't know anybody, but they went over and sat at this table with this fellow, and it was Garth Brooks. And in their conversation, Garth said he was from Oklahoma, and they didn't know who Garth Brooks was. And they thought don't we know somebody from Oklahoma, and they said, "Yes, Charlie's from Oklahoma", and they said, "So you're from Oklahoma, do you know Charlie Hollis?", and he said, "I sure did." Well that's pretty interesting—of the three million people who lived in Oklahoma, that I'm—

CP:

Yeah, and didn't say, "He still owes me thirty bucks."

CH:

No, no, Garth didn't say that I owed him money, but if he wants it I'll give it to him.

CP:

Yeah.

CH:

He may have to come and get it. I never was much of a Garth Brooks fan, but I sure admired him. He did great, and in fact the guy that I started my first rock 'n' roll band with in high school, he just became a drummer on the spot. Turned out to be a great drummer, and he played in Garth's country band in Stillwater, and was good enough that when Garth made a breakthrough, he offered my friend a job as a drummer. His name was Ron Beckel, and Ron, since I very first new him since ninth grade, had always wanted to be a doctor, and he told Garth "No."

CP:

Wow.

CH:

And he did become a doctor. So I'm sure that if we ran into one another again, that Garth would remember me. But we weren't special friends, we just were acquaintances, and I recorded him.

CP:

He seems like a personable kind of guy.

CH:

I recorded him.

CP:

Yeah.

CH:

And somewhere I might have him on tape as a folk singer.

CP:

He's had that alter ego album that came out of that rocker—I can't remember what the name of it was, but. [Note: Chris Gaines was Garth Brooks' rock alter ego]

CH:

I can't remember either—

CP:

Yeah.

CH:

But I do remember that. It might have crushed his career.

CP:

Well he's trying to make a comeback.

CH:

Yeah he is making a comeback now.

CP:

But he made it, I mean—

CH:

He made it big time.

CP:

Yeah.

CH:

And it's probably that rock 'n' roll, that KISS thing, that pushed him through, and made him a really dynamic live performer.

CP:

Yeah, yeah.

CH:

Like I said, I wasn't real acquainted with him, and I didn't follow him. But I was pretty sure that I was one of those friends in low places, I'm pretty sure. There were several of us. I'm not sure if I had any other brushes with extraordinary fame or not. I got to shake hands with Ringo Starr on a stage after his standing ten feet away from him during a sound check on the stage outside of Washington D.C., because of an opportunity that arose from my friend Mark Lyon, who was invited to join the Ringo tour.

CP:

Oh.

CH:

An so I've had some really wonderful opportunities because of what I chose to do. Didn't get paid for it, but the experiences themselves were worth the fortune.

CP:

For me to come here, and to meet you, and to learn this history, I never thought in a million years I would be doing what I'm doing. I was like I was going to be a musician, we were going to tour the world, and then, I've never really left West Texas and done anything.

CH:

Well see that's what I did. What do you do at Texas Tech?

CP:

Well, the official title is "archivist." It's a person that collects things.

CH:

And you're doing essentially what you intended to do, in music, and it allows you to do what you want to do, but it also puts you in a position, like me. There's nothing quite like being a musician to put you in a position to meet other musicians.

CP:

Right.

CH:

And so by being there, you put yourself in the position to meet people that you had heard about before.

CP:

I was driving up here yesterday, had to stop in Pueblo, and drop off some stuff to Michael Martin Murphey. We have his collection—I would have never met him in a million years if it wasn't for this job.

CH:

I love Michael Martin Murphey. I haven't followed him strictly, but in 1975 I moved off to Tucson, Arizona to join up with a guy that I played music with, and we were only there for about six months. But while we were there, he introduced me to the album that had "Wildfire" on it. And we played "Wildfire" just in our living room, and I'm thinking that he had an album called "Souvenirs"?

CP:

"Cosmic Cowboy Souvenir".

CH:

Yeah.

CP:

Yep.

CH:

And I was fairly familiar with that, and then of course when it came out, it had "Renegade".

CP:

Let's see, he had the "Swans Against The Sun", and then the first one was "Geronimo's Cadillac"—

CH:

Yeah, I heard that one, and then I was up to the album that had "Renegade" on it, it may have been called "Renegade", but then I stopped really buying records and listening. And I think that he went from being "Cosmic Cowboys" just to being "Cowboy". And but really a talented singer, and I know that there's a train tour that I'm thinking that it might be the train that goes down through Royal Gorge, and goes through someplace, and then there's a concert that he does, and then they move on, finish their train trip. But and I heard about that a couple of years ago, and—

CP:

Is it about that Durango, Silverton Thing?

CH:

Yeah I think so.

CP:

I'll have to ask him about that, I'm not familiar with that.

CH:

I'd love to go on that train tour and hear his music. And there's something else—I need to go and get my iPad, I'll be right back, I wanted to tell you something else. [Walks out of room] This technology. A year ago, a little more than a year ago, my wife was working at the Cripple Creek School, and she and my son after school one day went walking downtown and they came across a place just off the gambling district, I mean it's right behind the major casinos. And Cripple Creek has gone through an little economic problem in the last couple of years—let's see if I can get this. They were just wandering around and came across— It's a venue, and this is sort of what it would look like—do you know how to make it go like that?

CP:

Yeah, okay. So a little amphitheatre there?

CH:

Yeah, it was called the Gold Rush Palladium, and she saw that place and it was laying in ruins, you can see by those pictures that it had been—

CP:

It's a nice setup.

CH:

Abandoned for a few years.

CP:

Yeah.

CH:

And in fact, the Gold Rush itself, a huge casino had been out of business for quite a while. And I knew that this place existed, there were some pretty big name bands that came through and played there. And I knew that it was there, but I never really thought—you never heard any

advertising. I think Little Feat played there; there's a long, long line of incredible acts that played there. She came home and was explaining that to me, and I told her I knew that it was there, it had been there for a long time, and it was just a junkyard—and you can see that it was. And she had a bigger vision; she's always had a bigger vision than me. But she came home and made a phone call to the city of Cripple Creek, and just happened to connect on the very first phone call with somebody who knew the guy who owned the complex—the casino, the restaurant, the hotel, and the annex for business building, and the Palladium. And so she called that guy and told him that she was interested in doing something—not very specific—and he said, “Well, I'm going to come to Cripple Creek, and let's meet.” And they met, and that day he gave her permission to do whatever she wanted to with the Palladium. And so we worked on it all last summer, and it was this year it just rains all the time, and so we didn't really do anything. We did get a business license, we got insurance. It had been sort of condemned. Part of it was in such bad shape that it was condemned. They couldn't use the whole place if they used it at all, and we restored it to a full capacity—it holds nine hundred people, if you can find nine hundred people around. And it has a wonderful atmosphere.

CP:

If you could get on some little—

CH:

We didn't conduct any business last year, and then between this year and last year, and now things happened that we just decided that we didn't really want to be associated with it anymore, but we still are. We are associated with it, and we have the keys to the building, and can turn the electricity on, and do anything that we want to. But it rains every day, so if you want to play down there, we'll just have to go and open it up.

CP:

What's the hotel facilities like there in Cripple Creek?

CH:

It's closed.

CP:

Everything huh?

CH:

The whole complex is closed.

CP:

Man that's great, you could get a whole little music festival, some of these Texas country guys,

these Red Dirt guys come up—We went up to Steamboat, they have a little festival they do up there where they bring all these Texas country guys up. But of course they all go skiing and fans can get little ski packages and stuff.

CH:

It's the Mars Palladium now.

CP:

Oh see there you go, the Mars Palladium. That's great. It looks really cool, like I said, it's great having it, it's a great atmosphere. Looks like a bunch of bikers there in town.

CH:

Yeah, they have a rally every year.

CP:

Well that'd be the time to put on a show.

CH:

Yeah, that would be the perfect time, because they are right outside the door. There was one event that was scheduled for this year that we tried to—I think that's my sister-in-law now—but a group of churches around here wanted to put together something for the youth of Cripple Creek. And they scheduled a concert, and a bunch of activities for the day, and it rained, so they couldn't conduct it at the Palladium. But that's just how it goes, whenever you have an outdoor facility, and in July, typical that it'll rain for at least fifteen minutes every day. But last year it was more than just fifteen minutes, and man it wasn't a gentle shower, it was deluges every day, just like now. And so it's really too hard to try to get friends to come up from Oklahoma, or from Texas—

CP:

Sure.

CH:

Or from anywhere, to make a long trip up here, and then say, Sorry we can't do it." But if somebody just came, said, "Here's the band, here we are right now, we can play a gig tonight." If it doesn't rain, then we can just go up there and open up the doors, and plug in.

CP:

What's the population in Cripple Creek? [Note: Population in 2014 was 1,183]

CH:

Smart people—not any. There's a lot of poverty, there's rags and riches. Even the gambling industry is not I don't think doing all that well up there right now. Small town, the high school I think the last year my son's ninth grade class was sixty—

CP:

Yeah.

CH:

Maybe, and so it's not a very big school, getting smaller, and the economy doesn't seem to be catching on. It used to be great. The gambling was great, there was a bunch of casinos, but most of the buildings are empty now, so they're not doing real well. It was a ghost town twenty years ago, and had a mining industry, and the mine is still there, but there's not much else happening.

CP:

Sure. Well you had so you had some tapes and stuff to look at?

CH:

Yeah I do, as a matter of fact I have a favor to ask of you.

[Walks out of room and returns]

CP:

Okay.

CH:

Here's some CDs, these are [inaudible], there's three of them. That's a cross-section of my class there at the studio. And I tried to put two songs from each artist, some of them may have three, and some of them may just have one.

CP:

Okay.

CH:

But they come from larger projects. So there's a lot more than that, and I dubbed all of those from cassettes. So they're not the highest quality, but they're not bad. They're listenable, and pretty much a cross-section of the whole time I was there. And their arranged from solo musicians playing the guitar and singing, or maybe even just playing the guitar, to Jefferson Starship-type bands.

CP:

Sure.

CH:

And this is the first Randy Crouch project that we released, and this is my very good cover. I did awfully cheap on myself. But that's the record that I did that was the "Flying Horse".

CP:

Okay.

CH:

And this is the—

CP:

The rest.

CH:

Christian rock band that my wife was responsible for.

CP:

Okay.

CH:

And I actually recorded a Mark Lyons song on that record, and a Randy Crouch song on that record too. Randy's music is, like I said, it's important to me. And that's where this favor comes from, is that you can see that Randy is borderline—That's his writing I'm pretty sure, or the scratch part, the scratch part is his writing. I'm thinking that that tape—yeah this goes way back. This says '78 on it, it may be a little later than that, but it's got some songs on it that were pretty good.

CP:

So just a stereo quartermaster?

CH:

I think that I compiled these, not sure, see you can see that there's dust or something on there. I'm not sure, I've had these tapes in my possession for probably twenty-five years, and this is the condition that they came to me in. And so they've been pretty safe for quite a while, but I'm not sure what they went through before. And one of those songs is going to be probably at fifteen inches per second, and the other one is probably going to be at seven and a half. But I think that they're half-tracks. And they were pretty quality recordings to begin with.

CP:
Okay.

CH:
They were put on records, and I think that I might be responsible for this, but there's a few songs—I put an orange highlighter on that one because some of these songs, really decent recordings, have gotten lost, because Randy lives like a mountain man.

CP:
Alright.

CH:
And some of these might be in pretty good shape.

CP:
Well I'm find that a lot of stuff from the seventies or eighties, if you try to play them they stick, they got sticky shed, because they changed the tape composition, and so you have to put them in a food dehydrator and bake them, get that moisture out, and then you can play them on the tape machine, and get the digital transfer.

CH:
If you can get a copy, and if it's easier just put the tape on and let it run, that'd be great, that'd be fine. But I think these probably all run at the same speed—this one might have two different speeds on it. And this one I think it's—this is not as old as those.

CP:
We'll just put them on, and we'll run them all down, and then track them out, and then from there figure out what's what.

CH:
And then this—these songs that I've highlighted were the songs back in 1980 that could have, if Randy hadn't been afraid to succeed, would have made him succeed—he definitely had the talent. And as a songwriter, as a band leader, he had it all together, but he shot himself in the foot.

CP:
So this is the “Flying Horse” master?

CH:

Yeah, and part of that—that says reel number one—is that too much? I may have another—

CP:

No, no, that's not too much at all, this is easy.

CH:

Let me see if I can find another, it's right here in my room I think. [Walks out of room and returns]

CP:

No I just got a new NCI half-track machine in, and it's completely refurbished—relapped heads, completely gone through and from the fan motor, everything resoldered it's a completely restored machine, some I'm itching to try it out.

CH:

My half-track has been out for so long that I've started forgetting what I did.

CP:

Yeah.

CH:

And some of it, I went through the trouble of putting it together. And the way it's rolled, it doesn't look like it tails out; this one probably isn't. But I went through the trouble of putting spacers between it, leader tape between the songs, and preserving it as best I could. But album cuts—if it is album cuts, it's just side one, or side two. And how I came into possession of it—at some point, I was the most stable person Randy knew, and we were partners.

CP:

Okay, well we'll give it a listen to, and get it transferred—

CH:

If that's possible, that would be great, not to lose that.

CP:

Oh, no.

CH:

Those songs.

CP:

No, we've digitized—when I get back, like I said, I'm real curious to hear these songs myself, so we'll put them on the quarter inch machine and transfer them down. We'll do like ninety-six, twenty-four bit, real high-end quality WAV files, that then can be edited or mastered, whoever wants to do that. But I can just make some, I'll give you the copies of those raw masters, and then we'll go ahead and make a little CD just so you can listen to it, and then you could take those raw files.

CH:

That would be perfect.

CP:

Yeah.

CH:

And at the same time preserve Randy's music. I think that Randy, even though he didn't succeed on a very big level, he dedicated his whole life to it. And at some point I think Bob Childers talked him into writing songs that other people can play, as opposed to composing music—

CP:

Yeah.

CH:

He just started being a songwriter, so there's—besides "The Flying Horse Opera" that we released together, we had recorded enough other songs together, that over the years, I turned into records themselves. I think altogether, there's five homemade records that we did together, and one live record.

CP:

Do you have masters on all those, or?

CH:

We made them on the 8-track machine, and then duplicated them onto a cassette, and then duplicated those. I had a recorder for a while, it was called a "DCC"—I don't know if you've ever heard of it. My brother-in-law worked for the Phillips Corporation, and he told me about this digital tape recorder that Phillips was making—

CP:

Oh the Digital Compact Cassette.

CH:

And I think that they may have sold them for one or two years.

CP:

Yep, yep.

CH:

I bought one, and so I made—it's like a regular cassette, same size as a regular cassette, but it plays digital tapes, and it also plays a regular cassette. But it records digital signal, and it was like a DAT [Digital Audio Tape] recorder, except for different.

CP:

Right.

CH:

I've got a bunch of DAT masters, and don't have a machine to play them on.

CP:

I just recently got a DAT machine, I've got to see if it's working, that's one thing I'm—I got one of those Panasonic, the white Panasonic, something 7000 or something.

CH:

Yeah, for a while those seemed like those were really going to catch on. I don't know what made them disappear so quickly, but I can't find one anymore, hardly.

CP:

Yeah, they're hard to find.

CH:

But I mastered on one for—it was actually Harold's machine, Harold Eggers—I mastered on that for quite a few of my projects. I guess because that half-track was starting to go out anyway.

CP:

Yeah.

CH:

But the DAT, it had just seemed so much easier. The digital recording was also a lot less expensive. A ten inch reel of half-inch tape was about fifty bucks wholesale. And I could get it for around forty-five or fifty bucks. And that's a half an hour of recording time. And a ninety minute DAT cost about five bucks or something.

CP:
Yeah.

CH:
It was pretty cheap, and that's how it is now. But my understanding is, and I do have an understanding about it, there's something about tape, just listening to it passing over the heads, there's just that sound—

CP:
You get this natural compression, you can get bigger sound waves—if you record to a 16-track, 2-inch block, then you're going to get better bass response.

CH:
Yeah, but it's also sort of like putting a needle on a record, if we still hadn't gotten a bunch of scratches on it, there's a sound that's created just even on the silent moments, you could hear it passing. And there's just something that's really interesting about that to me.

CP:
Yeah.

CH:
And it's part of the sound, it's part of what I listened to, was just the sound of the tape going.

CP:
Now are these things that we could start a Charlie Hollis collection with at the archive?

CH:
Yes I'd love that.

CP:
Okay.

CH:
And when you get done, if you want to send them back, I'm pretty sure that—

CP:
Well we like to keep the originals there, because we've got temperature, we've got humidity control, air handling systems—

CH:

That would be perfect.

CP:

It's a real stable environment, so we've got a ton of tape.

CH:

That would be fine then.

CP:

I just ordered a—it's getting finished up right now I think, and completed, a two-inch reel-to-reel machine with 24 and 16-track heads, and then I'm going to be working on the one inch 8-track, and then I'm trying to buy a half-inch 4-track—

CH:

Wow.

CP:

From Don Caldwell Studios; I have this huge studio collection from Don Caldwell. But he's got that machine and I want it, and it needs to be completely gone through and re-done. But it used to belong to Norman Petty, and he recorded a lot of early stuff on that. Don did, he bought it from Norman, and so I wanted to get that machine, and had the heads relapped, and get it in working order again, because it's a historic machine—

CH:

Yeah.

CP:

That we can also playback on those early masters. So we've really got a lot of good things going on.

CH:

I've got a list somewhere—probably should make you a copy of that just to take with you—because there's people that are a lot more interesting than I am, that you might want to talk to.

CP:

Sure, yeah, any leads.

CH:

And from that, the late eighties era. I don't know—. It's like I said a little earlier, when I was

doing my 8-track recording, not only was it fairly decent, low budget place to record. But I think that it also inspired a bunch of other characters to do the same thing. And so even when I was doing it, you could tell that the recording industry was changing. And that was before digital music was really available. When you had a copy that you could use as a master, it was before that. But even then, you could tell that you don't need to pay a hundred dollars an hour to go to a studio, and then when you leave, you just have a record, you don't have the studio too. That was my idea was, I want to do a recording, and then have the studio when I'm done, and so we can do it again if we want to.

CP:
Yeah.

CH:
But let me see if I can find that list of musicians, because I'm sure that some of them are still around Austin—

CP:
Sure.

CH:
And others—I'm not really in contact with most of them. Harold might know some of them.

CP:
Oh I bet Harold does, and we stay in contact with him fairly regularly, so.

CH:
Some of them have died unfortunately—I was looking for a kid that played guitar on some of my wife's first record. He had raw talent, he was just very, very good, and he's on that. His name is John Strom. And the other day I was thinking about him, and I hadn't been able to find him. I just googled his name in Austin, Texas, and his obituary came up.

CP:
Oh man.

CH:
He was twenty-one when I knew him. And [inaudible, 01:54:43] well of course he was a recovering alcoholic at that time, and heroin addict probably too. I don't know what caused his death. But he was pretty young. He died a couple years ago, and that's heartbreaking to wish that you'd had a couple bit more years involved with it. Let me see if I can find that list though, and I can make you a copy of that. [Walks out of room]

End of interview



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