

**Oral History Interview of
Ken Lattimore**

**Interviewed by: Leslie Dutton
July 14, 2000
Marshall, Texas**

Part of the:
Leslie Dutton Fine Arts Interview Series

© 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 Ken Lattimore on July 14, 2000. 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:

Lattimore, Ken Oral History Interview, July 14, 2000. Interview by Leslie Dutton, Online Transcription, Southwest Collection/Special Collections Library. URL of PDF, date accessed.

The Southwest Collection/Special Collections Library houses over 6,300 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.

The transcribers and editors of this document strove to create an accurate and faithful transcription of this oral history interview as possible. However, this document may still contain mistakes. Spellings of proper nouns and places were researched thoroughly, but readers may still find inaccuracies, inaudible passages, homophones, and possible malapropisms. Any words followed by "[?]" notates our staff's best faith efforts. We encourage researchers to compare the transcript to the original recording if there are any questions. Please contact the SWC/SCL Reference department for access information. Any corrections or further clarifications may be sent to the A/V Unit Manager.

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: Mini-Disc

Digitization Details: digitized January 2018

Audio Metadata: 44.1kHz/ 16bit WAV file

Further Access Restrictions: N/A

Related Interviews:

Transcription Notes:

Interviewer: Leslie Dutton

Audio Editor: N/A

Transcription: Bill Corrigan

Editor(s): Kayci Rush

Transcript Overview:

This interview features Ken Lattimore as he discusses his experiences with music. In this interview, Lattimore describes how he got into music and how his music discipline translated into other aspects of his life. He then recounts feeling the need to perform and joining the Sons of the Pioneers.

Length of Interview: 01:49:28

Subject	Transcript Page	Time Stamp
Introduction and his music background	05	00:00:00
Relationships between Texas Tech students; orchestra	09	00:10:08
How his music discipline translated to other areas	14	00:21:01
Knowing he wanted to perform; how parent/child relationships have changed	18	00:33:24
His thoughts on if young people will change	20	00:40:44
Leaving teaching to perform	23	00:48:49
Rap music; country music	28	01:01:33
Emphasizing words while singing; Texas Tech University	31	01:11:30
Family values	37	01:22:09
Future goals; Sons of the Pioneers	40	01:33:36
Students learning music; rewards of teaching	44	01:42:56

Keywords

Music, West Texas music

Leslie Dutton (LD):

This is an interview with Ken Lattimore to Leslie Dutton, July 14, 2000. Ken Lattimore is a Texas Tech alumni, he is a violinist and a singer. And you've done many things with that throughout your life. And we've enjoyed that here in Marshall, Texas. So I'd like to start out in your young days. What led you into music, who influenced you, did you start just in public schools?

Ken Lattimore (KL):

Well, no. My mother and my dad love music. My mother plays piano and when I was a little boy she played it a lot, and she played her records a lot.

LD:

What kind of records?

KL:

Well, she played a lot of different types really. She played, well, Chopin was a real favorite of hers, and some of her other classical records, and she played the Sons of the Pioneers a lot.

LD:

Really.

KL:

Oh yeah, and she just—she had a varied collection of, you know, Rubenstein and Heifetz, you know those type of things. But she and my—well my father was not a musician but he loved music, and he wanted one of his children to play violin. And I came home from school one day as a little boy, and my mother asked me—you know, Mother and Dad talked it over and she said, she asked me, “Would you like to learn to play the violin?” and I said, “Sure.”

LD:

How old were you at that time?

KL:

Well, I started when I was eight, so I must have been eight at that time. I started I think in September of 1969. So it was just a few months before I turned nine years old. And so it wasn't long before they got a violin for me, bought one. And we started—I started taking lessons in a group lesson format from Nell Armstrong, who still lives here in Marshall. And we met at the old Synagogue where the fire station is now, fire and police station.

LD:

Um-hm. Right.

KL:

And in fact sometimes my oldest brother, Guy, would come with me, and he'd find old coins in that building.

LD:

Really?

KL:

Yeah, it was an old building. It wasn't being used as a synagogue anymore because their congregation I think had joined with the group in Longview. But it had a beautiful sanctuary, if that's what they call it, and some of those items are still in the museum in Marshall. And if you go in to the police station there's a drawing there by Tom Beale of the old sanctuary. Tom's a real talented artist as well as an architect. Graduated from UT, it's too bad, but—[laughs]

LD:

Ah well, we'll forgive him.

KL:

But I started with the violin that year and I kept going.

LD:

Now was this in a Suzuki program, did you teach Suzuki? Just group lessons.

KL:

No. I'm not even sure if Suzuki was around in the United States at that time, but it was just regular group lessons.

LD:

Okay.

KL:

And most of the kids I believe moved away. But I ended up taking privately from Ms. Armstrong. And she really did a lot for me, I owe her a great debt really. After a while I took from Leonard Kacenjar over in Shreveport, and Mr. Kacenjar is a C-a, let's see, K-a-c-e-n-j-a-r. And I took from him in Shreveport. He is a Julliard graduate.

LD:

Right.

KL:

And of course when I left high school I took from James Barber over at Tech, he's got his bachelor's and master's and doctorate from Eastman.

LD:

Right.

KL:

And I—you know I greatly respect, admire Dr. Barber as well as Mr. Shinn and Mr. Gillis. The other folks that I took from at Tech who taught me a lot. I started singing in ninth grade choir under Mike Brock.

LD:

Mike Brock, yeah. Now were you—was there a strings program in Marshall during—

KL

Yes there was, I took—

LD:

Lucy Graves, was she the director?

KL:

No, no, it was Tommy Mayfield.

LD:

Oh, okay.

KL

I took strings from him in ninth grade, started in ninth grade, he told me not to get in until then because I was ahead of the others, he didn't want me sitting around being bored. So I got in in ninth grade and I was in through the rest of the time. And I was in band under—well first Mr. Mayfield and then Mr. Reddick, and then Dr. Payne. And the only year I missed the band was my sophomore year. And I was—me and two other fellows, Steward Atwood and Rob Cox, we were in different stuff so we were taking choir in ninth grade on the outside. And we actually joined when we got into tenth grade. But Mr. Brock was the first one that taught me, you know, about singing, and he's an excellent choir director. As you know, you took from him, didn't you.

LD:

No, we actually worked together in Greenville, Texas when he moved back there and when I was in college.

KL:

Okay. Well Brock is very good, very thorough.

LD:

Yes.

KL:

And then I went to Tech and took from K.W. Shinn until I graduated. And I was in choir—most of that time I was under Mr. Kinney.

LD:

Gene Kinney.

KL:

Um-hm. I was under him for, oh I believe it was for four years. And then I was at Tech for four and a half years. So I took from Donald Bayley the last semester, this was after Mr. Kinney in choir retired.

LD:

Right, right.

KL:

And all the orchestra I took was under Philip Lehrman. Very talented conductor. I used to enjoy watching him conduct because he really knew how to convey the message. You know the talent of a conductor is to take what's in his head and put it in your playing. And I think Lehrman had a real talent for that.

LD:

To provide leadership through beauty and artistry and—

KL

Well yeah.

LD:

To show rhythm.

KL:

Yeah, and he I believe is a percussionist so he knew his rhythm well. [Laughter] And I never took an actual on-paper class from Mr. Gillis but from time to time I'd take part in music theatre. I'd be an extra. Because of being in orchestra I was never able to get out but for a few weeks at a

time, it may be a couple of weeks. And so to rehearse with the music theatre, so usually I was an extra, you know, like a door man, or you know I was always in the chorus. But one time I had the role of Joseph in *La Traviatta*, I had maybe two lines. But I enjoyed it and I learned a lot from watching Mr. Gillis work with the others. We had some great singers in the department at that time.

LD:
Right.

KL:
I briefly knew Bruce Ford. And Terry Cook was at Tech my first semester, and I was in the offstage chorus at that time. Because at the time I was an engineering major—I was an engineering major for a semester. And Terry Cook was wonderful. I mean he not only played Mephistopheles, I mean he played it very convincingly. The man has a phenomenal voice.

LD:
How are these people—how is it to be around them, just as people? Were they fun? Were they very serious?

KL:
Well a lot of them I didn't know real well. The tenor I knew—the singer I knew best in the department was probably my good friend Brian Rosewell. And Brian has a phenomenal voice. And Brian was just always a great guy. And I was I believe an usher at his wedding when he married a girl from Waxahachie—he's from Chicago. But he has a wonderful tenor voice, and you know he was a big big Pavarotti fan so he had, you know, all kind of recordings and stuff, he'd listen to themm and all.

LD:
How did you feel relationships between students were at that time at Texas Tech.

KL:
Well, I can tell you that a lot of them, a lot of it was very pleasant. Dr. Barber is—I think is a great example of that because we would have master classes maybe once a week or once every so often, and I'm not sure what the interval was but he—we'd have them up in his office and we'd play for each other and we'd critique one another.

LD:
Right.

KL:

And we had Christmas parties over at his house. And so—

LD:

Um-hm. What were those like?

KL:

They were fun, a lot of fun. Dr. Barber was always a very easy-going guy. He still is, you know every once in a while I'll give him a call. He lives up in Colorado now. His wife, Barbara Barber is one of the foremost Suzuki teachers in the country. And so she's doing a lot of great things and he's retired now, and they have a daughter who I believe does violin as well. But we had a lot of fun at their place. And sometimes we have a master classes, we go to a restaurant afterwards and everybody'd have something, you know.

LD:

And you feel like there was a lot of camaraderie between the students?

KL:

Between the students and teachers they worked with the most.

LD:

Really, okay.

KL:

Yeah. Now there were teachers that I wasn't around a whole lot that I had a lot of admiration for. Paul Cutter is a real example of that because you could never out-guess him, you never knew what he was going to ask in his exams, he was very thorough and he told us that he loved teaching, and you could tell. I mean he—you could tell that he loved what he taught and he loved teaching and he loved doing what he did. My oldest brother and I spent maybe two hours on the way from Lubbock to Marshall one time talking about what we learned in Cutter's lit, and my brother didn't graduate with his music degree, he switched into history and got that, then got a geology degree. But he still remembered an awful lot of what Dr. Cutter taught.

LD:

Why did you choose Texas Tech?

KL:

Well it's funny. My sister went to Tech. She started there in 1972, she got her bachelor's and master's there in the classic languages, in ancient Greek and in Latin. And then my oldest brother went there. And you know I almost didn't go because people were bugging me asking me if I

was going to keep up the family tradition, and I didn't see it that way. And at first I kind of wondered, you know whether I was going to stay or not. But Dad said, "If you want to switch out you can later on. Just go ahead and try Tech and see how it goes." So I went and I liked it well enough to stay. But I was accepted at UT and Tech and A&M. I should put Tech first. A&M didn't have a music school, so it was—and I had a feeling I would want to do a lot musical things there even though at the time I was going to major in engineering. And I didn't know whether I might switch into music anyway, so that's why I didn't go to A&M. But I admired the Aggies a lot. So.

LD:

Do you feel like that you were very well prepared to go into college and be a music major from growing up in East Texas?

KL:

Yes, yes. I took from a lot of talented people here and Ms. Armstrong and Mr. Kacinjar did a lot to prepare me. I made all-state orchestra twice in high school. And Mr. Brock worked with me—with all of us, did a real good job with us as singers. And I also took band from a very talented band director, Jerry Bank.

LD:

Right. And what did you play in band?

KL:

Oboe.

LD:

Oboe.

KL:

Um-hm. In ninth grade, I played a little saxophone in the marching band but I didn't march after that. But I was under Melvin Reddick at that time. Like I said, just another one of the many talented music teachers I've been under, so. Mr. Mayfield is a very talented man and a Tech grad, by the way.

LD:

Oh, okay.

KL:

In fact, he was an orchestra director in high school, and he was actually drum major at Tech under Dean Killion.

LD:

Really.

KL:

Um-hm. And Mr. Mayfield did a lot of for the orchestra kids. I mean he'd call us to Shreveport on Saturdays just to take part in Project String Power, which Mr. Kacinjar ran, and the kids in the group, actually in the top group, actually went to Europe in 1976, and I went in that group. And that was fun.

LD:

Where did you go into—in your—

KL:

Well we went to England, the Netherlands, Germany, Austria and Italy as far as Aviano. It was fun. I mean, two week trip for a fifteen year old kid. Quite an experience.

LD:

Oh sure. And what sort of literature did you play in that orchestra?

KL

The main piece we were playing in those concerts was Tchaikovsky's *Serenade for Strings*. We played some other stuff too, and most of it lighter, but the main piece was the *Serenade*, which is not an easy piece to play. That wouldn't be easy for me now. But I had a lot of good training here in Marshall, and I was in the church orchestra in the church I grew up in over at First Baptist. And I did a lot of playing in Shreveport at various things, you know, various jobs that Mr. Kacinjar would get together for me and my buddy Rob Cox, who was in orchestra with me. Rob is a highway patrolman now. I don't think he's played in a while but he was a talented violinist then, and he still has a good singing voice.

LD:

Do you feel like starting with violin really helped your singing?

KL:

Yes, oh yeah, you bet it did.

LD:

How so?

KL:

Well it did a lot for my pitch, for one thing. And I learned a lot about expression with it because I

was listening—when I was a kid I would listen to violin records all the time. Heifetz and Oistrakh and Stern, others. And I learned a lot about expression from listening to them. And of course, when I got into college I started listening to singers too. And plus the fact that mother played her records so much when she was doing her housework when I was little that I developed a sense of pitch from just hearing it so much. And I could hear a piece play in a different key and I remember being a little kid and I was thinking, This isn't right, this isn't right it goes like this. And I'd think it back or sing it back to myself in the key I originally heard it in.

LD:

So do you have perfect pitch?

KL:

I've been told that I do. I think it's close. You know I don't know—when I was in high school people used to drag me to the piano and have me sing the pitch and then they'd see if the piano matched it. But I don't know how close it is now. I think it's close at least. But other people have to judge things like that I guess. I mean I tune my violin without any pitch or instrument of any sort attached to it. And I tune my guitar by ear too. I'm not much of a guitar player though. Thankfully we've got good guitar players in the Pioneers, so. But I enjoyed taking music here and of course I taught music here too. I taught string orchestra, as you know.

LD:

Yes.

KL:

And I taught that for thirteen years.

LD:

Wow, I didn't know it'd been that long.

KL:

Yeah, it didn't seem that long when you really think back, but I taught a lot of wonderful students. And I learned a lot—I think as much as they were I was the student as well as them. And I think the kids taught me a lot.

LD:

Oh I think that's a wonderful attitude. That way you get to constantly learn instead of being burned out and feeling like you've given everything.

KL:

Well the kids taught me a lot about being a human being too, I think. A lot about just how to

keep my temper in check and there was a lot of love from a lot of those kids too. And I never thought when I first started teaching the little squirmy sixth graders I was getting every year, you know, that they would grow up to be friends of mine. But I have a lot of friendships with people that I taught. And I cherish greatly those friendships. In fact, I wish the ones that graduated wouldn't call me Mr. Lattimore. It takes a little while to train them to get them not to. But you used to call me that to, so.

LD:

Yes. And I know as a young musician you have to be very disciplined. Do you think that you applied that to other areas? Especially starting in engineering, as an engineering major.

KL:

Well I applied it. I have to say I wish that I'd worked harder when I was younger. I could have done better I think. And in my music sometimes when I applied. So I think that discipline in music is very, very important. And my father and I made an agreement when I first started playing violin that I would practice for thirty minutes a day at the beginning, and I would go for a year, and at the end I could decide whether I wanted to keep going or not, but as long as I was going I was going to practice. And Dad kept me to that. If I didn't feel like practicing I did anyway, and Dad always insisted on being in the next room, listening. And he always wanted to know what I was playing, what I was doing.

LD:

That's a wonderful thing that you can look back on it and say, "My father was very interested in what I was doing."

KL:

Yes, and of course Mother was a huge influence too. And the funny thing—my mother was a big influence on my father. I mean Daddy grew up loving music but she kind of expanded on that.

LD:

And was you mother degreed?

KL:

No. Mother went back to school. She had—she met my father when she was in college and she married before she graduated. And when I, the youngest in the family, got into first grade she decided to go back to school. And so she stayed with all of us until we went to school and she went to college at ATVU, and by the time we got home from school she was home. So she got her degree in education and I think she has two masters degrees from SFA, I'm not sure about that. But mother was valedictorian of her high school class.

KL:

Well was that in Marshall.

KL:

No. That was in Wilkesboro, North Carolina, where she was raised. My father graduated from North Carolina State with high honors. My oldest sister graduated third in her Marshall High School class, and of course I told you about her degrees. And Guy, my oldest brother, has two degrees. He's a brilliant man. And I graduated at fourth in my class. And so education was highly valued in my family, and I—if I made a C in any subject I was not happy to have to tell my folks about it. Because they, you know if I'd have been dumb and was doing my best and made a C it'd have been different, but they knew better. And my father used to tell me, you know, "C means average, and we both know you're above average intelligence. I expect better than that." And they'd say, "You bring your grade up or we'll ground you the next six weeks." And so I brought it up. That's the way it ought to be. Too much of that doesn't happen these days. I remember there were kids that I taught whose parents were very interested in what they were doing but there were other kids who would tell me their parents made them go to the barn or to their room, shut the door and didn't want to hear them practice. I never understood that because my folks were very interested in everything us kids did. And they just wanted us to do our best. And that's what was really important. But you're not going to be the son of a chemical engineer and a school teacher and not value your education.

LD:

Oh, that's very true. Did your parents ever question you having a music degree when you switched?

KL:

Well, I think they were a little apprehensive about the making a living part of it because it's not easy for a musician to make a living.

LD:

Right.

KL:

For the most part. But my dad told me, oh I think a couple of summers before he passed away, that if I decided to get an engineering degree later on he'd pay for it. You know, if that's what I wanted to do. But Daddy always told me, "You do what you want to do but you do your best at it." And Mother felt the same way. But I figured when I switched into music that if the lord wanted me to make a living at it I would. And I have. I got out of college and I was in the upper chorus in Houston, Houston Grand Opera, and then I wanted to get out of the traffic so I went to Dallas, and I was in the Dallas Opera chorus. But at the time I was in Houston I was working as

a temporary at Union Oil. And I was in—that was in Houston. In Dallas, I was doing a lot of things. I parked cars, moved furniture, substitute taught, I was a singing waiter at Caruso's. So that was a challenging time. Thankfully it didn't last very long.

LD:

Did you enjoy—I mean you were singing in the Opera instead of playing violin.

KL:

Yeah.

LD:

What changed that? Why did you decide to go vocal instead of violin?

KL:

Well, I don't know. When I really think about it I guess I thought I was a better singer than I was a violinist, I suppose. I don't know. Maybe that's what I was thinking. But I was very intrigued with singing. But I was always intrigued about playing violin too, because I taught strings after all for thirteen years. And I still love playing. But on stage now they still refer to me as a violinist and not a fiddle player because of the style that I do. And the fact that learning to be a fiddler was kind of a rude awakening because all of a sudden I was called upon to improvise, and I'm still learning that. That doesn't come automatically, I mean you have to do a lot of improvisation to learn to do it well.

LD:

Yes.

KL:

And I was used to reading notes off a page. Now that doesn't mean I didn't play with feeling, it just simply meant that I was interpreting what someone else had written, which I could do. But writing music, writing songs is a natural talent. You know, I have a song written now, but I don't have the words to it yet. When I get inspired, I get inspired, and I write it down. But the—I think it's a good melody, but the words just aren't quite there yet, I have an idea of what I wanted to write about but I've got to get the words to it. Now I wrote another song that I recorded about the Confederate battle flag, which was inspired by my anger at the Carol Mosely Braun, I believe was in the senate, she denounced the Confederate flag when the United Daughters of the Confederacy wanted to renew their payment. And she referred to it as slavery and all that mumbo jumbo junk, you know. It's nonsense. So I wrote the song as a response to her. I am a member of the Sons of Confederate Veterans and I don't know if Lubbock was named after this particular Lubbock, but there was a Lubbock who fought for the Confederacy in the war. And I

don't know if it was the same man that was governor of the state at one time. I consider myself both a Texan and a North Carolinian. I was raised here in Texas.

LD:

Were you born here as well?

KL:

No. I was born in North Carolina. So I claim those states. My family came early to this country as far as white settlers were concerned. We came—my daddy's family came in 1690, the Lattimore's did. The Chitwood's came in 1695. The Flynns came very early and the Rush's came early. And I'm kin to Benjamin Rush, who signed the Declaration of Independence. And the—my mother's family, my mother's maiden name is Godby. And her ancestors came very early through Jamestown. And there was one that came in 1690, and there was one who came in 1608 on the second boatload on the ship Deliverance.

LD:

Wow.

KL:

But I don't know which one we're descended from, but I know her family came from Virginia. So my family fought in the Revolution, the various branches of my family. In the Revolution, in 1812, the Mexican War, and the Confederate side of the war between the states, World War—let's see, I had a distant cousin in the Spanish American War, uncles in World War I, a cousin in World War II, one in Korea, one in Vietnam. So my family history is—

[Pause in recording]

LD:

With all this family history and veterans in your family, did you ever think about joining the service?

KL:

Well I thought about it at one time, at one time I thought about going into the reserves. But at the time I was teaching I was wanting to be a performer, and I didn't know what the situation would be if I became a performer and had to do a lot of traveling. And if you're in the reserve you've got to be—you know you've got to be off on weekends, and you have to give a certain amount of time in the summers too. But now, I had an ancestor who joined the Confederate army at the age of forty. And he was wounded in the leg, he went home, he got well, he went back. He was wounded in the throat, and I've held both the Minié balls that hit him in my hand. He was hit in the throat, he went home, they thought he was going to die, he coughed up the Minié ball and

lived. He went back and he was with Lee when he surrendered at Appomattox, and he must have been forty-one then. Now I'm not yet either one of those ages and if my country was in peril I'm not afraid to go. That's just part—but I've always been in a family of citizen soldiers. Most of the men who have fought in my family were not career army men, and usually went in when their country called, and when they were done they went back to their plows. So you know, we're willing to do that.

LD:

Ken, when you were a child did you know that you wanted to be a performer?

KL:

Not at first. When I was in first grade, I decided I was going to be a veterinarian. And when I got into ninth grade I wanted to be a concert violinist. And somehow just finally got to where I was going to be a singer. But what I'm doing now of course, get to both sing and play, which is very satisfying for me. And I love doing that. And I enjoy working on my guitar, although I don't play in front of guitar players—I don't want to get laughed at. I'm learning. But I've got some—I've got some good guitarists to answer questions if I have any questions. I mean, Gary LeMaster and Sonny Spencer, Luther and John Nally, both of them are all four fine guitar players. And so if I have questions I can always ask them as far as that's concerned. Sonny plays a lot of instruments though, he's a talented man. Seventy years old and still performing.

LD:

That's amazing.

KL:

My boss is seventy-five and he's still singing. I mean he's on some of the Pioneers' classic recordings. I mean classic. And it's phenomenal when you meet people who have been in the business for a long time, and they can tell you a lot of very interesting stories. But, you know, music is of course my life and I'm, like I said I'm a huge enthusiast for history, as you can tell from my books.

LD:

Yes.

KL:

You don't see any nonfiction up there really. And I like to read about, I like to read about flying.

LD:

Flying?

KL:

Yes. The early history of the space program is a big passion of mine. My dad and my stepdad both. So my father died in 1983 and when my mother remarried she married a friend from my father's work. So dad and—my dad and my stepdad were friends at work. And my mother's been very blessed. She's been married to two good men in my lifetime. And that's a wonderful thing.

LD:

That's very unusual.

KL:

But Dad and Paul were working for [redacted] [00:36:07] when they were making the engines that sent Apollo to the moon. So those things were of huge interest in the family and when I got older I started reading more about it. I was really inspired when I went to the NASA Museum down at NASA Base near Houston. Just absolutely fascinating. And I think—I wish that NASA had the excitement now that they had in the 1960s, when they were giving it a go, they were going to the moon before the decade was out. At the time there were people saying it was impossible, it wasn't going to happen, and it did. But it happened because these men were veterans of World War II and Korea, they knew teamwork, and they believed that they could do anything. And at the time [redacted] [00:36:06] and NASA and everywhere else, there just wasn't any limit on what these men could do. That I think there's a difference between—one big difference between my generation, the generation afterwards—my generation knew the World War II vets very well. And we admired our parents. We loved our parents. And you didn't—when I was a kid you didn't talk about a kid's father or mother without getting punched. And we weren't ashamed to ride to school in our parents cars. Today's kids it's different. I mean I know there are a lot of kids still who respect their parents. But there's a lot of them that don't. I saw kids from time to time at school when I was teaching, you know, talking on the phone to their folks like they were dogs. And like I said, not all kids did that but some of them did. When I was a kid you didn't dare talk that way to your folks it didn't matter who you were. And when I my parents where young what you did was a reflection on your family, and you never wanted to shame your family.

LD:

Right. Why do you think that that change has occurred? And I know that you've got to watch it for a lot of—thirteen years as an educator at public school.

KL:

It changed a lot from the beginning. It changed a lot from the beginning. Now I will admit that most of the kids I taught were the higher minded group of kids. And—but that's kind of kids you generally get in an orchestra class. They wanted to take the class. But I think that when they took prayer out of the schools, when they took mention of god out of government, when Hollywood decided that they could fly into the face of god in the movies they made—although they're fools

to think that—nobody flies into god's face. I mean they just haven't gotten high enough to get slapped down yet. And they will. I am very much a believer in Christ. I believe that salvation comes by the grace of god through faith alone in Christ alone, without works and without faith plus works. It's faith in Christ alone. I am very, very much convinced of that. I feel that our country is going in the wrong direction with the abortion and the homosexuality, the disrespect for true authority. And when you've got a president who does the things that he does—and there are people who are more interested in their careers than they are their children, a lot of people are like that these days. And the values of the Bible have been ignored by a lot of people. But, of course, at the same time I know that god has everything under control. And—

LD:

Do you think that this generation of young people, which also got out of teaching because of the disrespect—and you know, do you think that that's going to change?

KL:

I think it may change. I have to agree with my mother. I think it may change when some family sues the school district because his kids are not learning because of someone else's kids behavior in the classroom, then it may change. It may change at that point, but right now there's a lot of political correctness in schools, a lot of politics, a lot of good people working in the schools today.

LD:

Sure.

KL:

We've got great teachers, great administrators, good people working right here in Marshall. But it is—but the schools as a whole are becoming too politically correct and too political, period. It used to be you went into to teaching to teach. Now you take long courses just on how to control the children. And when I was a small kid the only control you had to do was to call that kid's parents. And control was done at home. And you—and the controversy behind religion in schools wasn't that strong because you were taught religion at home. And when you got in the school, you know, people believed. But like I said I think a lot of people in my generation, and I'm not talking like you said, at all, because I had—

LD:

Oh yeah.

LK:

I've known a lot of good parents in our generation, but there's a lot of people today that are too busy entertaining themselves than to take care of their children.

LD:

So that would be a self-centered society.

LK:

Yeah. It is. It's sad. But that is the way it is at this point. But I don't know, I think at times we could see it coming. I mean the Tech paper was getting pretty liberal when I was there. And there were controversies that the paper did at that time that I disagreed with. Some fellow made a comment about sororities one day, and the paper just reported it and reported it and reported it until it got to be a big controversy on campus, and not long before the paper was doing a survey on whether people liked fraternities and sororities or not. If the paper hadn't pushed it, it would have been a dead issue. Nobody would have talked about it.

LD:

So what exactly was this?

LK:

Oh, some fellow wrote an ugly letter to the paper about sororities, and he had some ugly things to say about the girls in the sororities. And the paper just picked it up, just ran with the ball and they should have just left it alone—it would have been better if they just hadn't printed the letter. Because it was offensive. I was not in a fraternity at Tech. But I didn't see any reason to go insulting everybody else.

LD:

True.

LK:

Now my landlady at Tech was the widow of Tech's first band director.

LD:

Oh really.

KL:

Um-hm. Her name is Hazel LeMaire. She was about eighty years old when I left so she's—if she is still around she would be almost ninety-seven now, if she's still around. Which she could be—she was a fine lady, real Christian type lady. But he was the one I believe, I believe it was her husband, Harry LeMaire, and I may be wrong, but I think he's the one that wrote "Fight Matadors" for Tech. And she had a lot of very fond memories—she had a rose bush that was—that I think came from a clipping or something from one of the early administrators at Tech. And I have a lot of good memories, you know, the statue of Will Rogers, the way the lights where on the three—you know the science and math buildings and around the campus when I was at Tech.

And my buddies from Snead Hall when I was living there, and my friends from the music department. And lot of folks that were very kind to me, you know in church as well as everywhere else.

LD:

Did you find the town of Lubbock supportive of the arts?

KL:

Oh, I think they were. There, of course, were controversies between school and town, as there always are.

LD:

And always will be.

KL:

Yeah, although I don't find that as prevalent in Marshall between ETBU and the citizens of Marshall. But ETBU is not as big a school as Tech is.

LD:

Right, right.

KL:

But yeah, we had controversies when I was there. I'll never forget the impromptu pep rally before the Aggie game when I was a freshman, and a bunch of folks got together and did a lot of damage to the area around University.

LD:

Tech Terrace?

KL:

Well, they smashed windows and I mean the students—some students—it wasn't, it was just a small percentage of the students but some students took control of University and did some vandalism. And the worst damage, I don't think they knew they were doing. Some of them were getting on the roofs, and they were pushing the pebbles down into the tar, and that did a lot damage. So next year some folks were wanting to do the same thing before the UT game, and the police chief made it very plain to all concerned that he would arrest the first student who caused any kind of trouble, and I think they did arrest one or two. They curtailed it pretty quick. I remember that particular night, and I watched it for a little bit and went to bed, I was just disgusted with it and I went on to sleep. But I could hear it down in the street because the dorm room I was in at Snead was—you know you could look out the window at it. But Lubbock has a

lot of fine folks in it. And the Civic Center at that time was real nice, as I recall. I'm sure they're still keeping it up though.

LD:

Yes, it is quite nice.

KL:

Yeah, and I'm sure Buddy Holly's statue is still in front of the building.

LD:

Um-hm. In fact, we have a Buddy Holly Museum now.

KL:

Oh you do?

LD:

Um-hm.

KL:

I'd like to see that if I come back to Lubbock sometime. My niece was born there. My brother was still there and he married an English teacher there. And they moved away a little while later but my niece was born there. She was about two months old when they left about. I think she was born at the Methodist Hospital. Good kid.

LD:

Good. You mentioned several times that you taught for thirteen years. So when did you leave teaching?

KL:

Nineteen ninety-eight, in May.

LD:

Now—and also this is going to go with this—that you knew that you wanted to be a performer. So did you feel like your goals were not satisfied, personal goals were not satisfied while teaching in public school?

KL:

Yes. Because I wanted to be a performer.

LD:

Um-hm. Didn't you play with Shreveport Symphony?

KL:

Not much, not much. Only a few times, really when I was younger. I tried to join the Shreveport Symphony at one time, I don't know why they weren't taking anybody at that time or what the situation was, but it turned out to be a blessing anyway—I ended up not having time. Because I had my hands full. I was teaching in two sixth grade schools and the junior high and the high school, and that was taking up a lot of my time.

LD:

Long work.

KL:

Now that didn't mean that I didn't love the kids.

LD:

Right, right.

KL:

But I wanted to be a performer, and specifically by the time I was—well it wasn't long after I got out of college I determined that I wanted to be a Western singer.

LD:

Oh, okay. And what brought that about?

KL:

Well, I told you I—when I was little my mother played Sons of the Pioneers albums a lot. And when I got back from college after I graduated I started listening to the albums again and I just fell completely in love with the music. I had remembered the music—the songs that I heard when I was little and I wanted to hear the albums again. Turned them on and I was just totally turned on to that sound. Western music is very different from the others. Western music is purely American. And it's patriotic music, it's music about—that glorifies the cowboy, the pioneer, the old sheriffs and marshals of the old West, and sometimes it glorifies the Indians and the old Vaqueros and stuff. And it's just—it's a great music, but I will admit that it was greatly enhanced by the lord putting the right men in it at the right time. Because Sons of the Pioneers were founded by a young fellow named Leonard Slye. And he left the group a few years afterwards to become Roy Rogers. And Roy had Pioneers in a lot of his movies. But you had Tim Spencer and Bob Noland writing the songs. And you just can't have a better combination than that. I mean Tim Spencer wrote "Room Full of Roses," he wrote "Timber Trail," and of

course, Bob Noland, everybody knows that he wrote “Cool Water,” and “Tumbling Tumbleweeds,” and then Stan Jones comes along with “Riders in the Sky,” and “Saddle Up,” and “My Gal is Purple.” In fact, all the songs that the Pioneers sang in the movie *Rio Grande* with John Wayne were written by Stan Jones. And he was from Douglas, Arizona. So I mean, you don’t get tired of these songs because they’re so well-written. They have beautiful words and they have beautiful melodies. And that’s the only kind of music that the Sons of the Pioneers, or any really good Western group ever sang, is always just great music. And funny thing about it—if a parent or a grandparent takes a kid to a Pioneer concert, I don’t know what the kids thinking as he goes in but as he leaves he’s discovered that he loves Western music. And I have found that to be very true. And when the kids hear it they like it. And I want Western music to keep going because it’s a worthy, wonderful—

LD:

And is that one of the reasons that you’ve gone into this, is to keep this going?

KL:

Well I got into it because I wanted to sing with the Pioneers. I love it, I love singing, and of course that’s a big goal. I want to keep it going.

LD:

Now how did you go from teaching to singing in the Sons of the Pioneers.

KL:

I went to Branson, where the Pioneers sing most of the year, in June of ’97. And I had a promotion package of the albums I did in Texas with Al Petty. And a lot of those songs were written by a friend of mine named Rudy Gaddis, who lives in Tyler. He’s a wonderful songwriter. And I gave the promotion package—the albums and my photograph and my bio—to Dale Warren, and asked him if he’d listen to them. Well you know, most people don’t do that. Most people will tell you, Sure, we’ll listen to them, and then they go on and they’ll throw it in the **file thirteen** [00:54:46]. But he didn’t, he listened to particularly my gospel album. And he was pleased with it, and the next day I called my folks, told them I was coming home. And they said, “Well don’t come home yet, Sons of the Pioneers called and they want you to call them back.” So I said a quick prayer—I hit the floor and thanked the lord first, then said a quick prayer and I called, got the marketing guy, he said, “Boss listened, liked what he heard, and wants you to come up tomorrow to the show, wants to talk to you after the show. And they gave me six tapes, they sent me through the mail, and about sixteen albums and said, “Learn these songs as best you can.” And I put my rear end to work and learned those songs. I wrote down every word. And I wrote down all the tenor harmonies. And so by the time I did kind of an audition with them in November of that year I knew the songs fairly well.

LD:

And this was in 1997?

KL:

Um-hm, and then in January of '98 Dale called me and said, "Come on up, let's see how it goes." And so in May I started singing with the Pioneers and it wasn't long before I was a full-fledged member.

LD:

I think that that's really amazing because in this book called *Prairie Nights and Neon Lights: The Story of Country Music in West Texas*, and in something—one of the other country music encyclopedias—they talk about Sons of the Pioneers, and they talk about the harmonies and words, but they also say that all the members are in some way related.

KL:

Well not all the members are, because you've got to remember that there's been over twenty. But as I was looking here in the book I'm surprised—oh yeah, here they are. Karl and Hugh Farr are mentioned in this book. They were two of the original members. Now usually people think of the first four as being original members. That would be Roy Rogers—

LD:

Tim Spencer.

KL:

Tim Spencer, Bob Noland and Hugh Farr. But Karl joined about a year after they got together—

LD:

In 1945.

KL:

—And I consider Karl to be an original member. Karl and Hugh were the grand-daddys of the modern guitar and fiddle playing.

LD:

Now Ken, when I said that they were all related, I didn't mean—

KL:

They were brothers.

LD:

Well I know that the Farr's were brothers, but when—if something happened to one of the members then they were replaced by one of their family, either a nephew or a brother.

KL:

That's not really so I would say. I mean there have been people who have been family members. There have been four Nallies in the group, three brothers and the son of one brother. But when a man left the group he was usually replaced by whatever talent they could find at that point. When Bob Noland left the group everybody was upset because they were losing a very distinctive voice, and nobody sounded like Bob Noland so who're we going to find? So I think it was Hugh Farr who discovered a guy on the radio, and he sounded so much like Bob that it was hard to tell the difference. It was Tommy Doss.

LK:

Um-hm.

KL:

And Tommy Doss joined up with the group and a lot of people couldn't tell the difference. Now I can, but that's because I've listened to these albums so many times that I know Bob apart from Tommy. And Tommy, you know Tommy is still around. He lives in Oregon, in fact. But it's—they would find whoever they needed. Ken Carson was a fine tenor with the group, Ken Curtis sang with the group. Shug Fisher was one of the comedians at one time. A lot of very distinguished, wonderful talent was in that group—were in that group rather. And the Farr brothers were pretty phenomenal though. I believe it was Stokowski who was asked who he thought was the best violinist of the twentieth century was, and he said the left hand Heifetz and the right hand with Hugh Farr.

LD:

How about that.

KL:

Oh yeah. I mean you don't have to play classical music to be a talented musician, and you don't have to read music to be talented either. A lot of very talented musicians I've known don't read a lick.

LD:

Right, right.

KL:

And they're better improvisers a lot of the time because they started out that way. So generally if

a young person asks me for advice, I say, “Well, learn to improvise, but learn to read too.” Because you need to expand yourself. And I tell people, young people who want to write music, “Well, what you’re doing sounds good, but learn some more about music theory, learn some more music lit.” Because you get more ideas from that, you can expand on what you’re doing.

LD:

Well that’s very true. And the harmonies in the songs that are played by the Sons of the Pioneers, they’re very different from what’s on the radio today.

KL:

Oh yeah.

DL:

They’re much more complex.

KL:

Well they have melodies and they have words, that’s the difference. A lot of what I hear the young kids listening to today, well it’s either rap, which really isn’t music unless you count a ground bass in the background. But a lot of the songs that they do today—and I’m sure there’s good songs out there. I don’t listen to it much, but a lot of what I hear coming through the speakers in the stores and wherever I hear the kid’s music being played sounds more like chanting to me than it does a melody.

LD:

Um-hm. Now when we talk about that, do you think that rap is an important form?

KL:

Well—

LD:

Well okay. Let me ask it another way, or preface it with this—

KL:

I’m not too familiar with rap to tell you the truth. I’ve listened so seldom to it I know that there are Christian rappers who use rap to give the message of salvation to kids. That’s a good thing. Any way that you can get the salvation message across is important and good. But it’s not my favorite genre. I don’t really care that much for it.

LD:

Well I know that it’s important because it reaches so many people.

KL:

Yeah, but you know you have to remember, music, you know, it's what you do with the music too that has a lot to do with it. Just about every genre there is has people who are glorifying god with it and people who are glorifying themselves with it. And I think you have to tell the difference. I'm very happy that the type of music that I do can be sung before anybody—young, middle age old, children, parents, grandparents. We're not cursing, we're not giving a bad message and in fact a lot of the times it's a good message. And that's something I take a huge amount of pride in. Now I'm—it makes me very happy. I wish that more of the art forms were like that, you know, painting or movies or plays and things like that, but unfortunately a lot of times it's not. But I did a career day in Tucson this year—

[Pause in recording]

LD:

Well Ken we're back now and I have just a few more questions for you. And one of them is something that you kind of touched on a while ago, and that is going from classical music to country music. And how did you blend your sound as an—with an opera background, to country music?

KL:

Well at first I just sang pretty much the way I'd been taught, you know, I still do right much. But I sang the songs that I thought fit my voice. Now, if it needed to be kind of countrified, like if it was a comic song you know I'd make it a comic voice, that sort of thing. Now in order to blend in though with other singers you—if you're not doing opera you've got to take a little of the vibrato out and smooth it out a little. Because that's important to that sound—you can't just—you can't stick out more than the other singers. You've got to understand that if you're singing a cowboy song you can't sing it like you're singing "Die quella pira," you know.

LD:

But we know in vocal pedagogy, and when you actually look at the vocal folds in action, that when you straighten the tone out, your throat—it develops tension.

KL:

Yeah, but I'm talking about straightening into a perfect straightness. I mean you listen to the best Western and country singers, you're going to hear vibrato, it's just not going to be an opera-type vibrato.

LD:

As prevalent. Um-hm.

KL:

You still have to support your voice. You still have to use the vowel sounds that get the message across, and the consonants. I don't think anybody ever gave Lloyd Perryman of the Pioneers—he was with the Pioneers for forty-one years—I don't think anybody ever gave him a singing lesson, but yet he sounds like somebody gave him some pointers, or he either was very observant and learned them on his own. Because you understand every word, it's pleasant, his tone, everything. The man was a phenomenal singer. And he sings with such spirit. That's what I love to listen to. And, well like I said, the Pioneers just been blessed with many, many fine singers. My boss, one of the premiere of them as far as I'm concerned—my boss is seventy-five, he's still got a great voice. And you know, you listen to classic albums like "Cool Water" and—oh lands, "Lore of the West" and some of these others, you listen to his solo voice and it's just—just knocks you over it's so good.

LD:

How about that.

KL:

Well, and it has a lot to do with taking care of your physical self. Got to eat right, got to take care of yourself physically so you have the strength to sing that way. And that's another thing that has been often stressed by Dale. And he says, "You must take good care of yourself physically." He doesn't like to hear that I've been eating stuff I shouldn't be eating or not exercising or not taking care of myself. He knows that that's important for singers.

LD:

When you did this career day did you emphasize that to the children?

KL:

I don't know if I mentioned that or not. Mostly what I mentioned to them was that they needed to get with good singers and they needed to get with good trainers, and they needed to do it while they were young. Western music is very different from the other genres too in that that the other—in opera they want you before you're twenty-eight. A lady told me, if you don't start your opera career before you're twenty-eight, forget it. Nashville wants them while they're very young, they want them young and they want them pretty. But in Western music they don't care how old you are, and they don't really care what you look like. They care how well you sing and perform and play. And that's what gets you up there. I mean it's—that's the neat thing about it. The people want to hear good Western music—they don't care if you look, you know if you look like a guy from the beach or whatever. Even though Bob Noland was a lifeguard before he started with the pioneers. He was a big man, strong, very strong.

LD:

And Roy Rogers, or Leonard Sly, was a very handsome man.

KL:

Roy Rogers used to keep in shape at the studio when he had some time, when he didn't have to be on the soundstage, he used to—he and another fellow used to keep in shape by walking on their hands around the studio. Roy Rogers was extremely athletic, strong man, physically. And I'm going to tell you what, he could do a heck of a lot. Very strong man. Rex Allen, well this is Rex right here, and you can tell he was a strong man. And Rex had actually been a cowboy. He was known as the Arizona Cowboy. He—sadly he died just recently too. We've lost Roy, we've lost Gene Autry, we've lost Eddie Dean and we've lost Rex. And we've lost the Lone Ranger, all within a year and a half. And I mean that's sad. But no, Roy took good care of himself, I guess that's why he lived to be eighty-seven, that's probably why Gene lived to be ninety-one. Herb Jeffries is still living, the Bronze Cowboy. And so it Monty Hale. So these were singing cowboys as well. And in fact Herb Jeffries is still singing.

LD:

Really?

KL:

Yes.

LD:

I didn't know that.

KL:

Um-hm. So it's pretty amazing, and I enjoy hearing about these men and their stories. And boy were they attached to their horses. When Rex died his body was cremated and his ashes were scattered out where he had scattered Cocoa's years before.

LD:

How about that.

KL:

And Trigger is mounted in the Roy Rogers Museum. So it's—now I think Gene buried Champion, but he was pretty attached to her.

LD:

How about that. Now can you also mention something about text being very important. And I know from studying with John Gillis that he also emphasizes that. And there's not a day go by

that we're not saying something correctly, whether it's in German, Italian or in English, and in opera or in musical theater. Did you have that emphasis early on?

KL:

You mean as—

LD:

So Mike Brock and then Shinn?

KL:

You mean as far as the words were concerned?

LD:

Um-hm.

KL:

Well Brock had us singing—well we sang of course light stuff too, but we sang a lot of serious works. And we sang a lot of very beautiful songs, and a lot of very complicated songs—we did “Madman’s Song” one year. You’re familiar with that, I’m sure. And boy I’m going to tell you the words to that are pretty powerful and they’ve got a hidden meaning to them. And woo hoo was that a tough piece to do because of the harmonies and the dissonance in it. And I have heard “Walking on the Green Grass” performed by other choirs, well that’s tough. And of course when I was at Tech I was doing “Adelaide” by Beethoven under Mr. Shinn. I was doing you know Italian operas, and the arias from different operas. And the—of course these operas were all stories, and librettos before they were written as music. And everyone who watches Gilbert and Sullivan today sees the politics as just as valid today as it was back when they were writing it.

LD:

Many of the young people don’t know and don’t get most of the text in Gilbert and Sullivan.

KL:

Well it’s strange because I did a lot of Gilbert and Sullivan in Shreveport. Did lead tenor and quite a few—I think eight productions with them. And I hear this and I think, Well that reminds me of so and so. Might be president, might be a congressman, might be a judge. And the same things that go on—that went on then happen now.

LD:

Are going now, yes, yes, yes.

KL:

But see, they're not introducing that kind of music to the kids as much as they were. But the people who discover it end up liking it.

LD:

Yes.

KL:

Now that doesn't mean that everything that the kids listen to is bad—some of it's pretty good. And I also know some young friends who are writing in a new style of music, and they're very talented and they're doing some great things. I think in the future they'll do some great things. There may be a new style of music on its way, which would be great.

LD:

Um-hm. Seeing lots of styles in the twentieth century.

KL:

Oh heck yeah. But that century's either over, or nearly over, and going to be a new century upon us pretty soon.

LD:

And I'm anxious to see what kind of music will come out in the next century.

KL:

Yeah, I'm a little antsy though about them getting too close to instrumental sounds on these synthesizers. I'm not so sure I really want that. Live music is where it's at, and so far you can't produce a violin sound unless you're playing a violin.

LD:

The violin, um-hm.

KL

And hopefully it'll stay that way. And I'm sure as long as the directors and actors are in Hollywood they won't put up with these—well they may have to one day, one day they'll be able to make a film with a character and actor who's not real.

LD:

Um-hm.

KL:

And you know I'm sure it will happen too. But we're just living in a different day and age, and—although I still think the rapture's going to come soon too. I mean it's all coming together and you can see—the more I read the Bible and the more I see what's going on today I can see the end times come. And that's my opinion, I know that lord said that no one knows the day or the hour, it could be tomorrow and it could be thousand years from now. But I just see too many things happening, and the lord said when you see these things happen, look up, because your redemption is coming. But like I said I have a lot of good memories of Tech, going to the games at Jones stadium. And I still keep up with the football team. Our marketing guy went to Baylor and we really give each other a hard time about the rivalries. And I have a lot of friends who are Aggies, and one in particular won't let me forget if the Aggies beat Tech some year. So I'm always happy if we beat the Aggies.

LD:

Do you ever keep up with anything besides football?

KL:

Oh yeah, I mean I know we had the only—at the time of this interview the only national championship we've had has been the women's basketball team.

LD:

Right, right.

KL:

We've had some very good baseball teams. Gosh, Coach Myers, back when he was doing the basketball team was very good. And you know whenever I can hear something about what's going on in the music department or the engineering department I'm interested. I'm particularly proud of the fact that our law school won the moot court national championship in 1980. And how many people think of Texas Tech when they think about a law school that we've got one of the best in the country.

LD:

Um-hm, um-hm, and med school.

KL:

Yes, oh yes, our medical building is really good, you know. I mean when a student's sick it's a good place to go.

LD:

Yes it is. And Preston Smith, Governor Preston Smith was responsible for those two things.

KL:

Well Smith graduated from Tech. Well it's a great school and I just hope that Tech continues to have success in everything. And of course I know it's got a good language department or my sister would not have gone there. And history department that Guy went to and the—of course the geology department and everything else, which is very, very tough.

LD:

Yes.

KL:

And the engineering department when I was there was very, very hard to get through. And I knew a lot of engineering majors and they'd tell you—and one fellow when I graduated had a four point average with an engineering degree, and we gave him a standing ovation.

LD:

How about that.

KL:

Oh yeah, oh yeah. I do wish they would be a little more careful about who they get as speakers for their graduations though. Because when my brother graduated the fellow that came—I don't remember whether it was him or someone else—gave a long commercial for the Tech alum society, which is a—you know, that's a great organization.

LD:

Yes. And are you a member?

KL:

Um, I've given a little bit, I need to give some more. But graduation's not a time to talk about it. And I remember when I graduated, had a guy who came up there and told us he was so happy to see so many business majors out there. And he was glad to see people going out there with, you know, degrees you could make money at. And I'm thinking, Well I just graduated from, you know, in the arts. What would you say if I was to shout out, "I'm a music major, what do you got to say about me?" I mean they need to be a little more careful who they pick, maybe they have since then. I'd like to think so.

LD:

I think so.

KL:

[Laughs] Yeah. Well everybody makes mistakes. But I think I got a lot of good education here in

Marshall as well, and I have a great many really good teachers. And a lot of inspiration—somehow I think the lord steered me into a great many good teachers. So I haven't been deprived.

LD:

Yeah, you've had some of the best.

KL:

Yeah, I really have.

LD:

I think that's fantastic.

KL:

Oh yeah. And I like the fact that Lubbock and Texas Tech are preserving the Western heritage.

LD:

Um-hm.

KL:

You know, and that they're keeping that Western heritage going. You know, from the old settlers who came in and built the dugouts and the people who survived the Dust Bowl, and the cattlemen and the circuit preachers and everybody else that made the Western culture what it is. I have a friend here in Marshall whose family were ranchers in West Texas.

LD:

Really?

KL:

Um-hm.

LD:

Who is that?

KL:

Dennis Griffith. And Dennis grew up in West Texas, and his family was into ranching in West Texas. In fact, he's got a few artifacts from the old family ranch. And I think he was active in rodeo for a while. And he and his wife Jackie, who is from East Texas, and they met when she was going to Tech I believe. But very intelligent family. But that his culture is the old Western ranch.

LD:

And that's what we do at the Southwest Collections is try to preserve a lot of that Western heritage.

KL:

Um-hm, well he could probably tell you some things about his family that would be very interesting.

LD:

Well that sounds wonderful.

KL:

And of course I believe in keeping the Southern culture here in this part of the country, because I'm very Southern, and I was taught to be by my father. And I believe in the old American way, and I don't mean the way that they talk about today, I'm talking about the founding fathers, the men who fought for freedom and the first congress lost—of the most—a great many men in our first congress lost everything. Their wealth, sometimes their families, one's wife was arrested and she died not long afterwards, some of them died in the revolution fighting, some lost their sons, one died in rags. At Yorktown the British had taken over the house of one of them, and he told General Washington to fire on it. They ruined his house, and he died bankrupt. American values are too important to destroy. But if you look at some of the more successful people today, who are they? They're the children of first generation immigrants.

LD:

Immigrants, um-hm.

KL:

Because they brought that work ethic over. Now I used to tell my students back when I was teaching, "You better get on the stick or you're going to be calling these people boss."

LD:

That's right.

KL:

And I'm not criticizing them for working hard, I'm criticizing the people who don't. And of course, you know in a few generations their kids will learn to be—you know. But every generation seems to work a little less than the one before. And working is a good thing, you know they talk about families playing together—families should also work together. I mean I actually had a few students who told me they'd never vacuumed, never pushed a vacuum, never washed dishes, never done anything like that, I thought, My lands, I sure can't say that.

LD:

Oh no, no, no, no. Well do you think that being a member of the Sons of the Pioneers has increased that sort of family value in you?

KL:

Yes, yes. I love the music and the more that music gets into you the more you feel that way.

LD:

Um-hm. What about maybe a brotherhood or camaraderie.

KL:

Oh there's a definite brotherhood in Western music. And in fact we did a Western festival last year and we had acts from all over the country come into Branson. And we all got—the neatest thing of it was we all got to talk to each other and get to know each other better. And yes, there's a great camaraderie in it. Because we all want to keep that music going. I mean you're not going to meet any Western singers who don't love Bob Noland, Tim Spencer, you know, Stan Jones, and all the—and Jack Hannah, who's with the Sons of San Joaquin. And he's writing some wonderful songs. So, we got a guy alive today who's going at it. And I want people to keep writing those songs, because I want to keep performing them, and I love doing the new stuff but I love doing the old stuff too. And heck, we do “Red River Valley,” and the Red River Valley wasn't about—when it was first written, wasn't about the one bordering Texas and Oklahoma, it was about the one in Canada. And you always hearing about “doggies,” well a doggie was a motherless cat, and because their bellies were so soft the cowboys called them dogites [01:26:11] and that's how it came around.

LD:

How about that.

KL:

Yeah, yeah. So we sing—there's many traditional songs. And I'm quite surprised sometimes that there aren't more Black Western singers, because the most liberating job that a Black man could have when slavery shut down its doors was being a cowboy. And one out of every four cowboys in the old west was Black. And as long as they were on the trail they were treated as equals. So some of these traditional songs you hear, you don't know whether the guy who wrote it was white, black or Mexican, because they all took part—or Indian, they all took part in the cowboy legends. And there's a real good show on television called “The Real West,” it's on the History Channel. Oh, so good, really, really good, I mean to tell you the history of Dodge City and you know about the other great Western things. And I haven't seen it in a while because I haven't watched much television in the last year. I hope maybe they've done one on San Antonio, that would be cool.

LD:

Yes it would.

KL:

But you know, you stay in Texas as long as we have, you get intensely proud of being from Texas. And I don't care what anybody says to tease me, and people tease me sometimes. I don't care, I mean I love Texas, and I love North Carolina. And to me they're the two great states of the Union, that's the way I see it. And you can't be from Texas and not brag about Texas, it would be wrong if you didn't. That's kind of the way it is. And Marshall is a marvelous town. I mean, full of history, I mean it just, I just nearly laugh every time I hear somebody say that nothing ever happens in Marshall because a lot of significant things have happened in Marshall, and still are. And Jefferson, you know it's hard to drive through Jefferson and realize that Jefferson was once a very important town. And of course you get all the legends around that. And, of course, I've been in Tucson several times and so there's a huge amount of Western culture there. And you, of course if you ride through Saguaro Park and see the desert for what it used to look like. And I have a lot of sympathy for the people in Arizona because a lot of them are very upset because of so much development there they're seeing their beloved desert shrinking. And a lot of them are very concerned, and lot of them are concerned too because a lot of people come in from other places and tell them how to run their towns. And I think that everybody should have a voice but I think when people moving into town of natives I think they should have two town councils—one for everybody else and one from the people born and raised there. And that way the natives will always have a voice. Sometimes they lose a voice in a city.

LD:

Yes.

KL:

And I hate to see that too because you talk to the natives, people born and raised in Arizona, they still have a very Western cowboy type of outlook, very pioneer type of outlook. And they're fiercely proud. And it's true about Texans. We're very fiercely proud of our state, and this fellow the other day was, he was talking about how sophisticated, you know, politics in Texas was and how we were changing this old image about, you know, driving around with Stetsons and stuff and I think, What's wrong with that? I like people who drive around with Stetsons and ride horses and talk about the old King Ranch. And I like the fact that the last time I went to the capital building in Austin you've got a bunch of old men sitting there in the front lawn with their big Stetsons on, probably talking about old times. That's Texas. I don't want that to change, I don't want Texas to be like everywhere else. New York's a nice place. I've been up there, visited New York State where my brother lives right now, but I don't want Texas to be like New York.

LD:

And we need different places.

KL:

No, you want a place to be like it is. I've told my students many times, "Speak properly, use the right kind of English, but don't change your accent. Be proud of who you are and where you're from." I mean, heck, that's what makes the world go round. If we all end up being the same what fun is it?

LD:

And it's boring. And when I think about all these different cities—what is your favorite city that you've performed in?

KL:

Performed in?

KL:

Um-hm.

KL:

Well I've performed in a lot of places. Now with the Pioneers we are usually in Branson or Tucson. And they're both good places. As to when I used to run around singing before I joined the Pioneers I used to enjoy performing in Mesquite and Shreveport. I went up to Maryland up there and performed near Chrisfield, beautiful place. Chambersburg Pennsylvania, Avoca, Iowa, and the people were nice everywhere I went. I went to Vienna and performed in Vienna, Austria for a country music festival there. Beautiful place, very beautiful but very romantic—you don't want to go there alone. San Antonio is one of my favorite places to go—I love San Antonio. Alamo, the Minger Hotel, the Mi Tierra Restaurant, there's just something about San Antonio that really has a great culture to it. You know a mixture of Tex-Mex, which is really wonderful. And Fort Worth is still—Fort Worth still has a Texas atmosphere.

LD:

Yes it does.

KL:

Really does. And Austin is a wonderful place to go. And the Western culture's still very much alive in Lubbock. And the people in Lubbock I, you know when I was in college I always felt like the people in Lubbock were very nice people.

LD:

I think they are, I really like them.

KL:

Oh yeah. And in Marshall, you know, people are friendly. And we have a great culture right here, and we're one of the best museums in the State.

LD:

Yes.

KL:

I just hope that the people will get the clubhouse fixed up.

LD:

Treasure it. Um-hm. What are your future goals? I'm sure to keep singing with the Sons of the Pioneers. But do you hope that they actually record or sing some of your songs?

KL:

Ah well. I don't know if I've got the songwriting talent for that or not. May the lord bring that out one day. That's not a humongous goal for me—I enjoy writing songs and I like to perform them and I like to have them performed. I don't do much songwriting, but I want to keep the Western music going and Western culture, the Western music culture going. And I still want to see the orchestras in our cities doing well. I'm very interested in the music programs continuing in our schools. I know that they're dumping the music programs in a lot of places.

LD:

But what about your personal goals?

KL:

Personal goals?

LD:

Um-hm.

KL:

Well, to keep the Western music alive and to improve on my playing and to improve on my singing. I know that I still have ways in which I could improve and do better, and so I want to keep doing that. And I want to see places I haven't seen yet.

[Pause in recording]

KL:

Africa—any place I haven't seen yet. And funny thing—if they ever put tourists in space I want to go there. Want to see the world from the outside like the astronauts have. I think it's pretty cool. And I met a kid not long ago who told me that his folks forked out six thousand bucks on his eighteen birthday and gave him a ride on an F-16. I would love to do that.

LD:

That sounds like a lot of fun.

KL:

I envy pilots. I envy jet pilots who have flown the fast—you know the furthest, farthest, fastest thing. I mean that's so cool. I envy the men who've been to the moon. You know there's not many men who can look up there and say, look at the moon and say Hey, I've walked up there. And there's only ten alive today who can say that—there were only twelve that even went, who've even walked on it, and only ten alive today who can say that they've actually walked up there. So that's a pretty special thing. I hope that if technology keeps going our country will send people to mars. And, you know, just learn. I mean we don't have to have a colony there, just like to learn what's over there.

LD:

Do you hope to record, or are you recording with Sons—

KL:

We do record.

LD:

You do.

KL:

Yeah, we've done an album.

LD:

Okay.

KL:

We did an album, less than a month—we started on it, less than a month after I joined. Yeah.

LD:

And what is it called?

KL:

Our Best to You. And I'm immensely proud of it. And I think one of the things that I'm happiest the most about is that I got to sing on an album with Dale Warren, and I mean I never knew when I heard his voice as a little boy that one day he'd be my boss. I mean you're singing with a guy that to people who love Western music is a legend really. I mean the man's been at it for forty-seven years, and he was an entertainer before that with his father. His father was a well-known entertainer on the radio when he was a kid. And his wife was a well-known fiddle player named Fiddlin' Kate. Her real name's Margy, but she's a good violinist as she is a fiddle player. She was concert mistress of her college orchestra. And she played fiddle with Johnny Bond, you know the guy who wrote "Cimarron." I mean these are phenomenal people. I've gotten to be good friends with a fellow named Ken Griffis, who wrote *Hear My Songs: The History of the Pioneers*. And this man has known so many people in the Western Music field, and it's fascinating to talk to him. He'll tell you things about Bob Noland because he and—the two of them were friends, and he was friends with the Farr's and with Roy and with Stan Jones, all these folks. He can just—he can tell you some fascinating things. And he's just a nice guy. And that's the thing—in country music and in Western music you meet a lot of nice people. And the people who listen to the music are often very very fine, fine folks. People who come in our audiences are good people. And it's always fun to make people happy for an afternoon, or for them to buy a recording that they're going to enjoy. And people will tell me, "I listen to your tape all the way to work and back every day" and that sort of thing. And that makes you feel good too.

LD:

Sure.

KL:

And I'm very much an admirer of Rudy Gaddis, my friend who writes songs, and he has written over two thousand.

LD:

Oh wow.

KL:

And Rudy, Rudy's a very rare individual. He's a World War II vet, he was at Iwo Jima, he has performed quite a bit, he made his living as a drywall worker but—well not worker, he was a drywall artist really. I mean he knew the technique of it in a way that probably never really be known again. And he of course doesn't do that anymore but he's written so many great songs. And to listen to him talk, Texas, all over. I mean the man talks Texan better than anybody I've ever heard. I just—I love to go see him just to hear him talk. And if you've heard the recording on the second album I did with Al Petty—no it was the first recording, "Singing Fiddles," it was a speaking voice on there, that's Rudy. He wrote the song. But of all the songs he wrote I think

my favorite is "Goodbye Maria." He wrote—oh, what a beautiful song that is. And Rudy is one of those songwriters—I mean you don't just walk up to him and say, "Rudy, I want you to write a song about thus-and-such." No, Rudy gets an inspiration about something, he gets an idea in his head and in his heart, and he picks up his guitar and he's got a song written in ten minutes. You know, Bob was like that. I have heard it said, I'm not absolutely sure, but I have heard it said that Bob didn't like being given a subject to write. It just came out of him, and it was harder to write when someone says "write about this." Although they did write "Timer Trail" for a movie in just a few minutes. They said, "We sure do need a—" they were doing movie in Canada I think, or about Canada, and they needed a song about the timber country. And so he and Tim Spencer, Tim Spencer and Bob Noland got together and wrote that song. And Tim's song "Roomfull of Roses" has been recorded I don't know how many times by how many artists, and it made the hit parade. And he also—Tim Spencer was the man that founded Manna Music, the gospel music publishing company. And his son still runs it, Hal Spencer. But writing songs, you have to be inspired. It's very hard to sit and write something just [phone rings] because you know you have to.

[Pause in recording]

KL:

But Rudy can write a song in no time flat. You know, but it all comes out of the heart. It's just like when I started learning how to improvise, and Mark Perryman, a really fine fiddle player who was playing for Roy Clarke at the time, I said, "Man, I don't know how you do that just off the top of your head." He said, "It's not from the head, it's from the heart." And if you ever hear Mark play, I mean he'll just play the dog out of it. Guy's good, guy's really good. And you know, and you meet a lot of very interesting people. You know recently there's a girl working over there at the Cracker Barrel over in Branson, she's trying to make it into fiddling and I don't think she's even twenty yet.

LD:

How about that.

KL:

But I told her, I said, "If you're going to do it, do it now." And I think she'll get a job before long. I mean she's got some prospects. And nothing makes me feel better than a young person getting into it. Two of my students are either majoring or minoring in music, two of the people that I taught, and that just made me feel great to hear that.

LD:

Yeah.

KL:

It always made me feel good to see a student learn and I think that was—that's the most rewarding thing about teaching. You know, there's a lot about teaching that are headaches. In-services are probably the main thing that I hate. I hated in-services, and I don't care—you know I don't mind saying it, I just didn't like it. I didn't like sitting there listening to someone talk. If I was going to something I want to be in the office working, doing something, or teaching the kids. But I didn't want to sit there and listen to someone give some sort of educational philosophy that had nothing to do with what I did.

LD:

Makes sense.

KL:

Well they waste a lot of time in education today with that kind of nonsense. They get some educational philosopher who's never taught a class in his life telling people how to teach. And you've got politicians who've never taught a class telling people how to teach. It's ridiculous. Well I'm sure you've experienced that.

LD:

Sure have.

KL:

And until they stop all that nonsense—now we had a lady in the education department, and I didn't agree with her at first, but it is an interesting thought. I still don't know whether I agree with her or not but it's an interesting thought and it's worth thinking about. But she thought that education majors should have to get a doctorate and then be paid like doctors and lawyers.

LD:

Well it might be a much more respected position then.

KL:

Well you've got television making teachers and principals out to be idiots, which is very unfair. Because I've known so many good principals and good teachers. And people that I've learned from watching, you know, learned a lot from walking Dr. Payne through the years, and Anthony Robinson, and you know as well as Al Hobson, and heck our choir directors, you know like Mike Brock, Louann Nealy, and Mike—

LD:

Welch.

KL:

Yeah, Mike Welch. So you know there's a lot of people that you can learn from, and I hate to see the profession being downgraded like it is. Every time a kid doesn't learn they blame the teacher.

LD:

Well then it goes a little further than that.

KL:

Yeah. But I enjoyed doing the albums I did with Al. We went—I went over to his studio, which is in the woods out in Overton. And just a one-man operation. But Al's a man with a lot of talent. And he's been in country music for years and years and years. And I've met a lot of people in country music that are really nice folks.

LD:

Well Ken it sounds like that you're headed on a career path that many people are after, and that you've just really found a place where you should be.

KL:

Well I feel that way, and I'm honored that the lord would put me in that position. And I hope that I can use it for his glory instead of my own. Because, you know it's truly what you do for Christ that's going to last. But you know at the same time there are people from Marshall who are on their way up.

LD:

Um-hm.

KL:

I can name quite a few of them, but right here in front of me I have a videotape of Allison Brown's last recital, which was very good, very, very good. And you many know about Beverly Jane Harris and how well she's doing over at SMU. And you know she made—she was second chair soprano at All-State her junior and then first chair her senior year. So there are a lot of folks out there who are really starting to make names for themselves. Wes Jeans from Marshall is so good on the guitar that I mean, he's not even twenty yet, and he's already getting a heck of a great reputation. And boy is his family proud of him.

LD:

Oh sure, I'm sure.

KL:

I can't wait to hear his first album. So, you know, a lot of good coming out of this town as I

know there's a lot of good coming out of West Texas.

LD:

Yes there really is. It's a really wonderful and exciting time. Well Ken, thank you so much for your time. And for this interview—it's been—

KL:

Thank you. I hope it has some interest in it.

LD:

A wonderful pleasure. Thank you.

KL:

Thanks.

End of Recording



© Southwest Collection/
Special Collections Library