

**Oral History Interview of  
Alan Munde**

**Interviewed by: Andy Wilkinson  
March 3, 2012  
Wimberley, Texas**

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

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### Preferred Citation for this Document:

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### Recording Notes:

*Original Format:* Born Digital Audio

*Digitization Details:* N/A

*Audio Metadata:* 44.1kHz/ 16bit WAV file

*Further Access Restrictions:* N/A

*Related Interviews:* Alan Munde was also interviewed December 8, 2011, December 9, 2011, March 2, 2012, June 13, 2012, and August 22, 2012.

### Transcription Notes:

*Interviewer:* Andy Wilkinson

*Audio Editor:* N/A

*Transcription:* John Clements

*Editor(s):* Katelin Dixon

## Interview Series Background:

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

## Transcript Overview:

This interview features banjo player Alan Munde. Alan continues to discuss his work with Country Gazette in terms of both recording and performing. Munde also talks about moving to Levelland, Texas, to begin teaching at South Plains College.

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## Keywords

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

**Andy Wilkinson (AW):**

So this is day two of the second sessions—the third of March, the day after Texas Independence Day—I should have said that yesterday, but I was caught up in the moment of bluegrass—the bluegrass moment. Andy Wilkinson here with Alan Munde, still in outer Wimberley. I think we left off yesterday with Joe Carr.

**Alan Munde (AM):**

Right.

AW:

Just meeting Joe Carr and getting to know him.

AM:

Yeah—and it's a good thing there's some time in between these, because I have time to remember, and go "Oh, yeah, there's this other thing." Joe Carr, we met him—as I said, I think, yesterday, he's from Dallas and went to school at North Texas State, and while he was there he got interested in—he was always interested in the guitar. The Beatles were a big influence for a lot, a lot of people where Gene Autry, for several generations back, was the big influence—the Beatles were a big one for his bunch. So he learned to play the guitar and he went to North Texas State—I think he got a degree in sociology there—and met some other people—Dan Huckabee and Gerald Jones, and there may be others in there—who were bluegrassers, and got into playing bluegrass guitar and met the bluegrass world—met Doc Hamilton and through Doc Hamilton, who lived in the Fort Worth area—and Country Gazette would come through to pick up Dave Ferguson and then play at the Hop or some other place around that we could pick up—and met Joe, I believe, at Doc Hamilton's. He was playing with a group called Roanoke that did a lot of those Chelsea Street Pubs. So that's how we met Joe. So in 1976 I'm still living in LA, Kenny has left the band, Roger has left, and so it's just Roland and I. Along in '76—actually several years before—I met Anne Solomon, who lived in Austin, and started talking and writing to her.

AW:

She was—wasn't she playing music?

AM:

She played the guitar, but what she was, was—worked in the city hall for the parks and recreation director—or no, no, let me back up. I think he was the information director for the city of Austin—his name was Coots—Gene, I think, or Glenn, one or the other—Coots—C-o-o-t-s. She wrote press releases and set up photo shoots and did publicity for the city. I believe—somehow, parks and recreation was her—but it may have been the whole city in general. But anyway, I met her, she was—the Country Gazette played at Castle Creek in Austin; I met her there—and tried to get familiar with her—and ultimately, in 1976, we got married. She lived in

Austin. There was no real reason for me to be in LA anymore—Roger, several years before had moved out to Parker, Arizona, Roland always lived in Nashville, and you know, things don't happen in a nice, neat order, so all this stuff is sort of jumbled up. The whole time I'm with Country Gazette, when I would go back home for a visit, my very best friends there were John and Judy Hadley.

AW:

Oh really? Now, was he a songwriter already?

AM:

He was always a songwriter—all the time I knew him. I met him when I was probably eighteen—a freshman in college—and—

AW:

Was he teaching then, when you met him?

AM:

Yes. He and Judy had moved there. John is from Ohio originally, and Judy is from Cleveland. John is from near Toledo—Lima, Ohio, I think is where he's from. They met at the University of Wisconsin in Madison—John is an artist, and Judy, I think, was probably to be a school teacher, best I can remember. Anyway, he got a job at the University of Oklahoma teaching art—and I met him, played music all the way through college with him, hung out, you know. The art department was really thick with party—they partied a lot, and it was always “Bring your banjo.” So I'd go over there and play with John and whoever the other players were. Actually, the head of the department, named Joe Hobbs, played washtub bass—and he was a real character. They were all—the whole art department was full of characters. So John and Judy were really great friends, and every time I'd go home, I'd go see them. At one of their parties I met some people who were from the state arts council—and this would be in the early to mid-seventies—and the arts councils were real flush with money from the National Endowment for the Arts and from the state arts councils. There must have been a lot of tax money available at that time, and it seemed to people like a good thing to do with their money at the time. So they mentioned these programs that they had—touring programs—and I was encouraged to apply. So when Anne and I decided to get married, I drove back to Oklahoma—I believe I did—with my stuff, and unloaded it there, then went down to Austin and got married. We lived in Austin for about six months or so—in South Austin, and actually a fairly prime location nowadays, but back then it was—that South Austin. It was not Austin, kind of—it was sort of nice, small residences. Anyway—and I hate to tell you what she paid for the house she bought. I think she paid twenty-four thousand dollars, and it's probably a hundred and twenty-four thousand dollars now.



AW:

Yeah.

AM:

So anyway, we lived there for six months—and, oddly enough, she was pregnant. I don't know how, but there it was. So I had gone up and applied for touring—or anything—I didn't even know what I was doing. It was just like Roland and I don't have a band right at this moment. We're still trying to do things, but it's sort of in a lull, and so I applied for this job with the Oklahoma Arts Council. We move up to Norman, because that's where my parents are and they can be helpful with the baby when it comes, and I get a job with them—and they put me in with this—they devise this performing arts team that is to travel and spend residencies in cities and appear in schools or communities, and then finish out the week with a performance—an ensemble performance. In the group are a musician, me, two modern dancers—of which I'm going to try to—Beth Shumway is one of them, and I can't remember the other girl's name. Then there was an actress and a pantomime artist—

AW:

This is pretty avant-garde.

AM:

You know, it's one of the coolest things I've ever been involved with—and they're some of the really, really coolest people. It was really—for me—really eye-opening to see how other art forms worked. You know, in the end, they all work the same—and it's all driven by “What are we going to do now?” I heard a musician talk one time, and he said, “What musicians do is they play a note,” and he played a note, “and then you ask the question, ‘What comes next?’” And it's very much like writing—I'm sure it's got to be—you write one thing and then you go “What comes next?”

AW:

Yeah, yeah—Hemingway—we were quoting him this morning at breakfast, and someone said, “How do you write a novel that's so long?” and he said “I write one true sentence,” and so the fella says “Well then what do you do?” and he says “Then I write one true sentence.” So it's like—what's next—well—I play another note.

AM:

You play another. So it was really interesting, and then the mime guy was—I should say “mime,” he was theatre, but he did—mime was what he did in the show. His name was Philip Burton—and I don't know if this is a—anymore, I don't think this is a slander—I think Philip was gay, and he ultimately went off to New York City. I saw him there several years after that, and he was really happy and doing really great. Anyway, that was the troupe, and we were called

the Players—very clever. So during the summer of 1976 my job was to go up to Oklahoma City—living in Norman—drive up to Oklahoma City and meet with this group and design our show.

AW:

Which you would do during the school year—in the fall?

AM:

Right. It was—now that was hell, because the actress was the lady that was in charge, and she was—I can't remember her name—and I hope I don't get sued for slander, posthumously or something—but she was dreadful. She had all these really bizarre ideas—as I say this—I'm sure in theatre it's—in classes, this is probably good and it helps you connect and whatnot, but when you have four weeks or five weeks to put together an hour and a half performance of these odd, disparate things, you need to be more practical than she was. So we would do these things where we would get down on the floor and crawl through the spaces. We would lay on the floor with our hands on each other's stomach and feel each other breathe. I appreciate it all, but in a class—you know, if you were in a class, that would be one thing, but we needed to come up with something. So I'm doing all this—and I'm sort of on the outside, because I've never done this—and I go “Well, okay, if this is how you do it, I'll—they're paying me to do this, so I'll do it.” So I did it. I crawled through the spaces, I felt them breathe, we did these other sort of communicative things—but we didn't do shit.

AW:

In terms of putting together a program.

AM:

Right. The lady wanted to come up with this grand theme, and create these things that would bring together some huge Oklahoma experience to do this. So this goes along—and I don't know how many weeks, maybe two weeks—and unbeknownst to me, there are phone conversations between the other members of the group. Finally they come to me and ask me what I think, and I said “Well, you know, just coming from where I am, it seems to me that at some point in this show that we're trying to create, I'm going to play the banjo. They're going to dance. You're going to do some theatre thing—and that's got to be it” and they went “That's it. Man, we've been talking about this. This is going nowhere. This woman is nuts.” Philip said—because they were all involved with arts council prior to me. This was my first experience—and they've all been out on—as Philip would call them, to “mission points.” He had been a theatre director or instructor at a high school, and so he was—he had a lot more—he was fairly aggressive—and he said, “I spoke with this woman”—the lady that was the actress, director of it—“I told her that”—and it was about a different thing, and he was talking about her as he said all this, he says, “You know, I can't do this.” At some event at a school where he was in charge, she came in and



took over somehow, and it really pissed him off. So he was telling her that he can't have this interruption any more. "I can't go do my thing and have people in there directing this," and the woman said something—and he's talking to her about her—and she goes, "Well, Philip, I will talk to these people and make sure that doesn't happen again," and he's just dumbfounded, because he was talking about her, and she just missed the whole point. So she was sort of this really disconnected person. Finally, by then, I think they went to the head of the arts council and expressed their concern over what was going on, and talked to her, and she finally quit. They got another woman in there who was just an actress—and now nobody is in charge. So we sat down and said, "Well, you're going to play the banjo. What are you going to play?" and I told them, you know—and they kind of helped me, you know, "What's important about banjo playing?" and so I would "Well, you have these rolls that have to duh-duh-duh-duh-duh, and you" —and they said, "Well, you need to do something that demonstrates that so that it's not just a performance. It's a little information, but also a lot of entertainment." So we put together this thing. So I played these tunes that I had written just all by myself—no accompaniment, no nothing—and the girls—two modern dancers—devised some really clever dance things. I don't know what you call—if I use the word—

AW:  
Choreographed?

AM:  
Yeah—routine is not—is too demeaning—is too small a term. They created these movement pieces.

AW:  
That went with your banjo?

AM:  
One of them did, yes. And I had written this tune that's very sort of impressionistic—and I don't ever play it because it's real—what do I want to say—egotistical—that's much ado about—it's too postmodern, as Kitty would say—and she devised a dance to go along with it—one of the dancers did. Very cool—I would play it—I made a tape of it for her, she did it, and we would rehearse it. I'd watch and she'd listen, and it was real cool—it was a really cool experience, to have your sounds sort of translated from musical sounds into body movements. So it was real wonderful, and that was Beth Shumway. So there was that, and then the theatre guy—Philip—and the two dancers would do some things together because he was very movement-oriented, too. He was a real interesting guy. He was from Sunray, Texas.

AW:  
I know right where that is.

AM:

Yeah. His dad was a farmer or a rancher.

AW:

Boy, I bet that was a tough place to be gay.

AM:

You know, what is interesting is I think he was an all-state basketball player, and he said, “because it’s the only place you can move.” He was really animated. In my mind, being just a dull banjo player—you know, stand there and play—to see somebody that had that much control over their body, you know, with the dancers—but Philip was really theatrical. One of the funniest humans—and he may be ADD or something, because he was always on. Backstage before a show, if we had time to kill, you know, I’m just sitting there. You know what he’s doing? He’s over there entertaining us. He does the whole Wizard of Oz. He does all the characters, and when Dorothy—he would hit himself in the head and kind of fake fall down, you know, when she was in the tornado. He was incredibly—you know, he’s like Robin Williams, you see Robin Williams—he was that kind of a character. He could do voices and he had his—because he was a mime, he did all these hand exercises—and so every motion was really incredible.

AW:

That’s amazing.

AM:

He was, he was. But he was from Sunray—and he played basketball because as a kid, that’s the only place he could move. This was really interesting to me—he said, “I would sit there at school assemblies, and there would be this theatre group coming through. They would herd us all into the auditorium and they would be up there doing their thing. Everybody was just making fun of them, but I was there, just mesmerized.” And I always thought about this, of—you know, there are old movies that depict an entertainer that was a hypnotist, and he was up—he brings somebody up out of the audience, and he hypnotizes somebody on stage. But in fact, what happens is somebody in the audience gets hypnotized. Well that’s what happened to him. When I play sometimes, I think about that. I think, You’re up here playing and it’s like nobody is paying any attention—

AW:

But there’s one person—

AM:

—but there’s one person who’s being hypnotized. You run into—I know you do—is somebody

will come up, “Oh man, I saw you ten years ago, and ever since then I’ve done this or that,” and you have no way of—you go out there, you do your thing, you go home—and you have no way of knowing what impact you’ve had. But Philip was the guy that got hypnotized. All these guys around him—wah-wah-wah—poking each other in the elbow—with the elbow in the ribs—but Philip is the one paying attention. So anyway, that’s Philip. Then the two dancers—and then this actress who—and I can’t remember her name—but it’s real interesting, because she had been a singer in on of Mike Richey’s little jazz things. I want to say her name was Linda. Philip grew to despise her because he didn’t think she was very good. He couldn’t—it was real interesting, once again, to see them interact—but Philip was real quality—and the dancers were, too—and I was there, and he didn’t know enough about what I did to make a judgment, but I didn’t screw up, so—and I was a nice guy—so he was okay. But he really—and I say “despised” —he did not like this woman. They had a scene they did together—you know, they did a little scene together—and she would be out there doing her thing, and he’s on the other side, and I’m standing there, and he’s going, you know—

AW:

Making fun.

AM:

—making fun of her while she’s out there, and then he would go out and play the scene with her. Then he would come off and pretend he’s throwing up. In one of the scenes, he had to kiss her, which was probably—on many levels—difficult for him, so he had to really act. But she smoked, and that really got him, he said, “Oh, gosh,” he’d be—oh—he would just wipe his—I always thought she was pretty good. I thought she was good, but I didn’t know. And she tried really hard, but she was kind of a diva to a certain extent. But anyway, that’s okay. She did it. So we got this show together—and there was even an introduction. We would all be on stage at the beginning—and I can’t really remember how it started. I maybe started playing, and then the dancers danced out, and Philip came out—but they even involved me—and I don’t call it dancing; it’s just movement—but we had this finale that we did to some synthesized version of one of Bach’s Brandenburg Concerto—

AW:

Was that the “Switched-on Bach” thing at the time?

AM:

Probably so, yeah. And we had these costumes we wore, which were real lightweight in the sense of they’re just blue jeans and a blue shirt and some bright suspenders—and we did this movement thing. They involved me and I worked as best I could, and they coached me—I wish there was a video of it—there may exist somewhere in the world.

AW:

That would be cool.

AM:

Maybe.

AW:

No, it would be cool.

AM:

So we would—for two semesters, I think, we did this. So it would be the fall of '76 and the spring of '77. It was pretty good money for me at the time. I think Anne—

AW:

Was it steady like a monthly stipend, or did you get paid by the gig, or—?

AM:

No, I think we got paid as a monthly thing—and even while we were rehearsing we got paid. I don't remember what it was, but it felt good. It felt like it was a good amount of money. Anne was a barber at the time. She had gone to barber school to get—she hated—I don't know if she hated—she was very uncomfortable in the world of that city thing—and the politics and the pressure and whatnot. So she got her barber's license and had become a barber, so when she was in Oklahoma she was a hair-cutter. So she was doing that, I was doing this thing—and I'd have to leave like either Sunday night or Monday morning to get out to the community. They had arranged for us either to stay in people's homes or stay at a motel—I almost always chose the motel. So we'd meet up, do our thing—and we would all split up during the week and go to classrooms and be in—and that's pretty punishing.

AW:

Yeah it is.

AM:

They had it worked out to where you could only—let's say four hours of classroom time, or I forget what it was, so it would be two classes in the morning and two in the afternoon, and you'd eat lunch possibly with them. Some of the teachers were really hip to it, and others did not want you at all.

AW:

Or they saw you as a babysitter.

AM:

Yeah, they'd go leave the room. They told us that they weren't supposed to do that. At the arts council, people said, "The teachers are not supposed to leave the room," —which, they did. Some of them would. Philip would get into trouble, you know, because he was the one that was the least accommodating. I don't mean that in a bad way, but he just had his standards and that was going to be it. In one class he got into trouble, and it was because I think he asked for a volunteer in a theatre class and nobody volunteered—and he said, you know, this is a theatre—and he said the teacher was no help at all. So he said, "I need a volunteer," no volunteer. He got up, put on his coat. He said "I need a volunteer," nobody volunteered, and he just left. I think he got into—they complained—"Well you're supposed to do something. You're supposed to dah-dah-dah-dah" and his thing was "You know, this is theatre class. They're supposed to be—you know, they have to do these things."

AW:

Yeah, I've got to say, having toured for the Texas Commission of the Arts, I'm on his side.

AM:

Oh I was too. But I could go in and play.

AW:

Yeah, you didn't have to have a volunteer.

AM:

Right. I tried to develop some way to entertain—I tried to be something. It was really difficult, when you go "This is what I do," you do it—you're either interested in it or you're not. If they're not then you have to create some something—and it was—in America, one of the real big values is utilitarianism. It's like—

AW:

How can I use this?

AM:

Right. It's like art is great, but now what are we going to do with it? How can this banjo player help me teach my class? And that's the downfall, because there is no—I mean there is if you're really sharp and you're really interested in it, there's a lot of ways, but that's not what it's about.

AW:

Well not only that, it's—for the teacher to use it, they have to be a good teacher, and therein lies the big problem.



AM:

Right. A lot of them would sit there and grade papers. I remember one playing, and she was stapling papers together the whole time—while I'm playing and talking.

AW:

And probably not stapling in meter.

AM:

Oh no, no—and in a way probably not even thinking about it—not thinking what's going on. You know, you think about Oklahoma—and any state—they send you out to these rural areas—a lot of them are very rural areas, small—so it was all over the state, all the way out to the panhandle—very eastern part—down in the southeastern part, which is referred to as “Little Dixie.” By doing that, I got friends—there's a little town there down there called Antlers, and it's, at the time, probably fifteen hundred, two thousand maybe. The mayor and his wife were the arts council, and they were given the award for—the arts council gave an award that was called “Art against the Odds.”

AW:

Wow, what a great award, and a great idea, too.

AM:

Right. So any place that was like really difficult—

AW:

“We can't believe you did this.”

AM:

Yeah. But they were really cool, and he was the first mayor of Antlers—he was a pharmacist—to be an immigrant. He moved to Antlers.

AW:

Oh, yeah—not an Antlerian.

AM:

Right. So he was an outsider, and the first one to become mayor. It was just—they understood sort of this ruralness and ignorance—not stupidity, but ignorance—of the rest of the world, and enjoyed it. They laughed at it where, for me, I saw it as kind of dangerous, because they would laugh about a city councilman who lived in a house that one wall was missing and he had a tarp over it, and he would sit out on his porch with a shotgun across his lap, “Hahaha, ain't that cute,” and I'm going, “Yeah, I don't know. Does he ever like raise it up and shoot it?” And that's

somebody on the city council. He described that some wealthy lady had donated money for the volunteer fire department to buy this firetruck, and he laughed, “Hahaha, isn’t this funny?” but they drove it to the first fire they went to and parked it too close to the fire, and it melted the paint and the lenses on it—he said it almost destroyed the truck. Another one they drove to was an oil fire, somehow or another, and they parked the truck in between the fire and the pumps so that they’re “Ahh!” you know, and it was “Hahaha.”

AW:

So they saw this as Mayberry?

AM:

Yeah. Exactly, where I saw it as somewhat threatening, because this is Little Dixie, and there’s still a lot of stills—moonshiners and drug dealers—stuck up in the hills out there that come to town once a month—or brought their kids to school, and there we are. I asked—in visiting with one of the assistant principals—

AW:

So when did the movie “Deliverance” come about? About that time, wasn’t it?

AM:

Could be, yeah. But anyway, I was talking with one of the assistant principals about education and administration. I said, “Administration must be really difficult,” he says “Oh yeah, I’ve already had to paddle five kids this morning,” and I thought, Well that wasn’t what I was talking about, but that’s what he was talking about. When you mentioned “administration,” that’s what he meant.

AW:

Yeah, administration of justice.

AM:

Right—you know, paddle these kids to keep them in line. So it was pretty eye-opening. What was interesting to me—and Kitty—for those listening to this tape, that’s my wife, currently—was with the Oklahoma Humanities Council, and she made this observation, and it’s the same one—in the eastern half of the state is poor, and it’s redneck-y. As you go west, you get into the wheat farmers with money and oil—with money—and the schools were better, they were hipper, and things got a lot better in the west. It’s odd, you know, in that dichotomy—I-35, you go east, and you get over into the overflow of the Ozarks into Oklahoma and the Kiamichis and all these little bergs over in there. It’s really—those are—Antlers is kind of on the edge of all that, and Idabel and Tahlequah—Tahlequah is actually a little hipper, not a lot, but a lot of the towns around—they’re really rough, in my estimation.

AW:

Yeah, oh I agree with you. You can tell it just driving through. For one thing, you can't go in a straight line anywhere east of I-35.

AM:

Right, but you go out west—Weatherford and out into the panhandle were some of the hippest people I met, because they're out there—and they sort of had an appreciation for outsiders coming in and entertaining and enlightening, where the easterners were real clannish and—it's like that guy, the mayor of Antlers. He was the first mayor from the outside world—and he was a pharmacist. He called the first of the month, when all the government checks came in—because it was a poor part of the country, too—he called it “gold rush days.” That's when all of them came in and filled their prescriptions. So it was a real interesting time, touring around the state with this group of really, really interesting people—and highly talented, and very, very sharing and warm and supportive people. I wish I could remember the other dancer's name. The actress's name was Linda Parrish. She's the one that replaced the actress that was the head of the thing. Philip Burton, Beth Shumway—I can't remember the other dancer's name—it may come to me—and then me, so there were five of us. One of my experiences that I, with some fondness remember is a lot of these little schools you'd play, you'd have to play your thing on the stage they have. A lot of them were these sort of multiuse facilities.

AW:

Yeah, it could be a cafeteria, could be a gym, could be a—

AM:

Gymnasium, the whole bit. We've done it on gym floors—but this was at an elementary school, so out front, sitting on the floor on the stage wasn't very high at all—and very small—but you have parents and little kids. Parents were invited to this performance. And so you go back stage—so there's the curtain offstage, and then there's a brick wall—just barely enough to stand offstage on both sides, and then behind it there's a little bit more room. Well, the dancers had costume changes. So I'm sitting here watching Philip out on stage do his thing. You can see Philip—here are all these parents and these little faces—and then I turn and look, and here's Beth and the other dancer, naked—both of them—quickly trying to change into another costume. I immediately turn back—small children, innocent children with their parents—these two beautiful women changing—and I thought—

AW:

This is life; ain't it interesting.

AM:

Yeah. They would dance out there—and they were so precious—but it kind of—and they didn't

seem to—I mean, they accepted it—not that I was watching; I don't think they saw—I didn't take huge advantage of it, but they knew that it didn't matter—that this is what they had to do, so they did it. It's that old bit about “the show must go on,” is really true. They did everything they had to do to make this show not mess up—to not have to walk out there and say, “I'm sorry, we're going to have to stop for a moment because we've got to” —to do that was like, in their minds—I think this is what they thought—it would destroy the whole concept of this being magic. One of the other things I discovered that was really eye-opening—you watch dance in a theater or you watch it on TV, and it is magic. It's these really talented, nimble, flexible people leaping about and doing these things. But when you're on there with them, this is what it is: —and you go “Oh yeah, they're like human—like they have to breathe.” It was kind of eye-opening to see how athletic the stuff was they were doing. They had to—and they developed—you could hear them, but if you go out front, you didn't hear this because they knew how to breathe quietly—but if you're right there with them—and modern dancers don't wear shoes, so it was the pat of their bare feet. That was another thing—they have the ugliest bottoms of their feet.

AW:

Oh yeah, because they're like hillbillies who never wear shoes—and then their feet are—

AM:

I know—they're black and cracked—

AW:

—and they're tough and thick. No foot fetish there, huh?

AM:

No, nope. So it was—I did that for two semesters, and it was a really, really great experience for me, and in December of '76 our daughter was born—Rachael. This is a real—it's no wonder that musicians get divorced—or have divorce thrust upon them—is for things like this. My big concern was “If it happens while I'm gone, do I leave the show and go back?” There's a huge tug.

AW:

Well, we forget that, you know, in the nineteenth century—as recently as the nineteenth century—it would never have occurred to someone to go back from their work for the birth of a child or the death of a parent because you had to work. If you were on a ship, or if you were on whatever—I think we—and some of that, we changed our—and for the better, I think—but you're right. I remember I was touring in England when my father—I mean, I left knowing he was on his deathbed, and he said. “You've got to go ahead and go,” but you're over there, and so what do you do? And sure enough, he dies while I'm there—so do you come back or you finish out your tour? My dad would have said. “No, you finish out your tour.” Well, I went ahead and

came back, but you have to make a decision, and there's no guide. We don't have a guide for that as performers.

AM:

Right, right—well, it's just your relationship with your partner. It was really, really difficult, but fortunately Rachael was born December twenty-seventh, so I was home. It was real cool. But I turned around and immediately went back—in January I'm gone again. So that was a—

AW:

How many—though, in the mid-seventies, to be quite honest—how many husbands took maternity leave?

AM:

Well back then, there were probably none.

AW:

I think none. I think if you'd have gone to an employer and said, "I need to take off two week because my wife had a baby," they would have said "Yeah, what are you going to do—

AM:

"Well, you're fired. We'll get somebody else in."

AW:

Yeah.

AM:

Thank you, Bill Clinton. Yeah, it's much, much better. But it was difficult, and it was—being gone is just incredibly difficult on both sides, but more so for the spouse that stays behind and has to deal with everything. I always thought, you know, just in life—in life it's like music; it's all in the timing—everything is in the timing. You could be home for three months and "I'm going on tour for three weeks," you're gone ten minutes and the water heater blows up. It doesn't matter that you were home for three months—you weren't there when the water heater blew up, or just any one of a gazillion issues. So it's—I look back on it, and I go, "Well, shit. What a stupid thing to have—to think that you could have a family and do this." It's just really difficult. But anyway, there we are—now we're into '77—and the arts council is—the Players are done; I think we're finished. They said—I said, "Would you be interested in a bluegrass group to do this same kind of thing?" and they said "Sure, we could be interested," so I said, "Well, I'll get Roland," and we were trying to get Bill Bryson, who is the bass player I mentioned that was with Desert Rose—he and I palled around a lot out in California—"I'll get Bill." And his wife was originally from around—or had relatives around Waco—and they were thinking about trying to



get out of LA, which ultimately they decided not to do. They're still there. But he came and said he would do these shows with us—these same kinds of things. We would go as a trio, Bill, Roland, and I. We would go into these schools for a week-long residency—and I went back to a lot of the same places that I went before—and we would do things during the week, you know, split up and go do classes, and then do a show at the end of the week. Sometimes we would try to get somebody to come in and play bass or guitar—because Bill could play bass or guitar—and we got a really good musician named Bobby Clark, who was an Oklahoma guy, but he's in Nashville now—great mandolin player/guitar player. He would do some of the shows—weekend, just the last performance, he'd drive out from Oklahoma City.

AW:

So it was mainly you and Roland during the week?

AM:

And Bill Bryson.

AW:

And Bryson.

AM:

Yeah, Bill came—

AW:

Then you would add somebody on the weekend.

AM:

Yeah—it'd be like a Friday.

AW:

Yeah, right, but for that finale sort of thing.

AM:

Right, right. So we did that, I think, for another two semesters, and it—

AW:

Did you go under the name Country Gazette?

AM:

I believe we did, yeah. I'd have to go look, but I believe we did. The idea was that Bill would be—would move and be out bass player, but ultimately he decided not to do it—and I don't

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blame him a bit. But then we would also try to get gigs in any space that we had—and so Roland would come and stay for, I don't know, four weeks, which, once again—because we did Monday to Friday, so there wasn't much time to do much else like fly home and fly back.

AW:

Right, and plus, that would eat into your—

AM:

—money—and same with Bill, so they both lived with Anne and I and Rachael in this little house we had at 1224 Columbia Court in Norman, Oklahoma. So we got a festival in Montana—Bozeman, Montana—and figured out we could fly up there—maybe it was a short school week or something—it worked out well to where we could fly up there on a Friday and fly back on a Sunday, and play maybe Friday night, Saturday—but we needed another player to do it with us, so we got Joe Carr, because like I said, we had met Joe, really nice guy, so Joe came up and did this trip with us and came back. And we asked Joe, “Would you be interested in being in Country Gazette?” “Oh yeah, I'd love to do that.” “Well, stay in Roanoke until we get finished with this school thing, and then we'll start at it again. It'll be you—Joe Carr—Bill Bryson, Roland, and myself—and that was going to be it. So we did a couple of semesters of—I think it was two semesters; it may have been just one semester of these school things as Country Gazette, and then we hit the road. But in the meantime Bill decided not to do it—and I don't blame him—and I was really disappointed, and I gave Bill a very hard time over not doing it—and it was to my discredit that I did that. He did exactly the right thing—I should have said, “I totally understand. We'll get somebody else.” But you know, you just get so involved in this stuff, and it's—and you start making plans, and you start trying to book things, and then this this thing falls out—and I really liked Bill, and I think that was what disappointed me the most was that I was really looking forward to being in a band with him because he was a real smart guy and read a lot and talked about interesting things and whatnot, but he just didn't want to—they decided not to leave California, and I don't blame them. I think they did absolutely the right thing. So Joe played in this band, Roanoke—and I had seen them play, and I liked the bass player in that group, and so I asked Joe—or we asked Joe—we says—and his name is Mike Anderson—“Do you think Mike would be interested in coming with you in this Country Gazette thing?” And you know, Joe's reaction was—I mean, it's sort of immature, but it's totally understandable—he says, “No, I want to be in the Country Gazette. I don't want to be in Roanoke still. I want to be with somebody hip and cool; I don't want to be with this guy I already know.” But you know, that was sort of his first reaction, but went, “Well, now, that's stupid,” so he asked Mike, and Mike decided to do it. So Mike and Joe—Mike Anderson and Joe Carr—came into the group with Roland and I, and that was Country Gazette from about '75 —

AW:

'75, or—because we're now in—

AM:

Oh, no, '77, sorry. Mike was the first to leave, but I think we may have made it to 1980, so we had three or four years there.

AW:

Did you do any recording in this new—?

AM:

Oh yeah, with that group there, yeah. For me, some of the best, interesting music that, I think, was made under the Country Gazette moniker was with Joe and Mike. All of it was good, but I think that was a little more interesting to me, because Joe was a little hipper—you know, he liked the Beatles, and he liked other stuff. And Mike was a really—I always—and I hope this is the right—guileless person, musically and personally—“Just tell me what to do. I don’t have an agenda.” And he sang the way he sang from day one of his life, I think. He just opened his mouth and sang, and that was it. “If you want any more, and I have to work at it, forget it.” He just did it, and I really enjoyed it. I liked what he had to offer, and he wrote some songs that I liked, and he didn’t mind doing old bluegrass songs, and he didn’t mind doing new songs, and he’d been—he’d played bluegrass around the Fort Worth area with a bunch of young redneck-y sorts who were into beer and drugs and having a good time and doing any song that came to their mind in whatever context they could do it in. They were sort of wide open to a certain extent. T Bone Burnett, I believe, comes—is he not from Fort Worth?

AW:

I think so.

AM:

He’s from that sort of—

AW:

Milieu.

AM:

Milieu, that’s the word I was looking for.

AW:

Although you need to say it better than I say it with my West Texas accent.

AM:

Right—what is the Burton that died here?

AW:

Yeah—great guitar player.

AM:

Right. He's from—Mike knew him. He was among those little pickers around the Fort Worth area. Mike came from that bunch, and Steve Bruton—Bruton is the name. Stephen is his brother—he was James Bruton—is it James? Bruton. So Fort Worth was a really rich musical place from all the years I visited there—and ole what's-his name is from there. What's the blues guy? He's older than us.

AW:

I'm trying to think.

AM:

Oh, country-esque blues—never really big time, but shows up as sort of a hip guy from time to time. Anyway, he's from that bunch.

AW:

Yeah, I'm trying to think—is he the guy that moved to Arkansas and then died of a heart attack not too long ago?

AM:

He may have, but I don't think that's—

AW:

I always thought of him as a rock and roll kind of blues guy.

AM:

Yeah, I don't think that's him—but I'll think of his name eventually. But all those pickers around Fort Worth knew everybody. Dave Ferguson played with this guy—I'm trying to think of his name—as a fiddle player, you know, in a different kind of context. So anyway, Fort Worth is really a world unto itself that's real hip.

AW:

Yeah, and you had all—to carry that idea further—you had Tommy Morell and the Time Warp Tophands—that was all from that same—

AM:

Yeah, Fort Worth was just really thick with a lot of interesting players—fiddle players—you know, that whole Texas style of fiddling was sort of Fort Worth-centric—I mean, a lot of

communities around North Texas—but anyway, Mike came into the band, and Joe came in—and we recorded an album for Slim Richey called *All This and Money, Too*, which is sort of our—at the time, anyway—was sort of our sensibility about the music business, is that you got to travel, you got to play music, you got to meet interesting people, you went to people's homes and ate interesting food, and traveled around the country—and people would always say, “Oh, don't you get tired of that old food?” Well, what we did—and it was mostly through Roland—but we would—almost the first thing you get into town, if you just say “What's your favorite place to eat?” You know, right away people will “Oh, man, you've got to try this so-and-so and such-and-such down here.”

AW:

Oh yeah. Well this is an interesting thing you mention, because one of the things that I've had so much fun working with both Hedges and my daughter is that the four of us, you know, when we get to a gig we're already thinking, Well, where do we go eat? What do they have here?

AM:

You know, eating is a big deal. So we'd ask and people would tell us, and usually it would be a decent or interesting place—and Roland was—and to this day, he's real food-sensitive.

AW:

Well, the other thing about the food was it told you something about the place and the people. What kind of joint was it? Who was there? What were the wait staff like? What's on the menu?

AM:

Yeah—what do they do differently? Certainly you had to stop and eat wherever you could, whenever you could sometimes, but a lot of times you wound up eating at interesting places—just a good sandwich. For me, if you found a place that had good bread, that was a real plus. So you'd wind up—“You know, there's a great little deli down here.” Go down there and—

AW:

Epicurus said, “Give me a pot of cheese and a loaf of bread and I can feast any time I want.”

AM:

Right—and he also—I don't know the quote, but it's something to the effect of “As important as the food it's the company.”

AW:

Oh yeah, in fact he thought to eat alone was essentially the same as not eating.



AM:

Right. You know, so that it was an event—and when you're traveling with a band, you're never alone. We would always sit together, we rode in the van together—and that's another thing, Mike and Joe were really great travelers. Roland certainly had done it all his life and I had done it for many, many years, but Joe—and Roger was a great, great—Roger taught me a lot about traveling and driving. Roger was real interested in cars and mechanics and whatnot, and even when we rented a car, sometimes he would go, "You know, something's not right," and he'd open the hood and tinker with it. I'd say, "Roger, this is a rental car. Why do you fool with it?" and he says, "Well I just hate to see machinery abused." Roger was a machinist as one of his trades. He taught me a lot about cars, and he's also the one that was, "Roger, there's this noise in the car," and he'd listen, and he went, "Well whatever it is, it's not broken all the way, so we'll have to wait till it breaks all the way to figure out what it is." So that was a good lesson—and just how to drive in traffic and on interstates and in towns—Roger was real good. I learned a lot from Roger. But Joe and Mike were real good travelers, and—

AW:

Now we're talking about Roger you learned from or Roland?

AM:

Roger Bush is who I learned from. Roland was good also, but Roger was more—Roger was a driver. He liked to drive, where the rest of us would do it as our duty. I can remember one night riding with Roger in a rental car—and this is back when seatbelts first came out, and nobody—and you still had bench seats up front. Roger, late at night, stopped to get gas—and we're all asleep, and I wake up and I say, "Roger, how are you doing?" And he says, "Oh, I'm pretty good. I can go a little longer," and I said "Well, if you get sleepy, just wake me up and I'll put my seatbelt on, meaning I'd go back to sleep, too. But I wanted to have my seatbelt on if you go to sleep." So we had a good time. So Mike and Joe joined the group and we recorded for Slim—recorded an album called "All This and Money, Too" in the same studio that we did *Banjo Sandwich* in, in Fort Worth. I really liked that album, that's a really—to me—Joe and Mike—and because I was there and Roland was there, there was still sort of this Country Gazette-ish sound, but Roland and Mike had this—I mean Joe, Joe and Mike—Mike just did whatever he needed to do to make the music good. I think Joe had a sense of a tradition of Country Gazette, so he tried to make the sound similar, but that's the first album—it's not the first album—but we did a John Hadley song called "The Tracker," and it's sort of typical of Hadley's songs at the time, which are really, really great songs that are not written to appeal to the mass market—because the name "The Tracker" never appears in the song. It's just a descriptive term of the guy in the song—that he's on the trail. He's a tracker—but it never says that in the song—and it has a verse and a chorus, but then it's got a bridge which, at the time, wasn't a standard in sort of country music, because country music was just verse-chorus. But this had a verse, chorus, and then a bridge, and so it was a little different, and it was more of a story about a guy who's on the

trail of his loved one or something. We did it all the time, and we did it—and it's a really great song. I think the recording is great. Slim played electric guitar solo on it, which was kind of off-putting, I'm sure, for the bluegrass world.

AW:

Yeah, I'm sure that's right.

AM:

I don't remember if we had a drummer on that. Where all that came from—I should mention this—is during my time in Norman—and I knew the art world through John Hadley and playing at those parties—but I'm gone now, but when I come home, the art world is still there, Hadley is there, and this Joe Hobbs, who was the head of the art department was there, and there was a place in Lewiston—it's either Lewiston or Louisville—New York, which is just above Niagara Falls. So you go to Niagara Falls, and when everybody turns left, you go straight—you know, to go into Canada, you go straight, and along the banks of whatever lake that is—I should know—is this Lewiston, and New York State had a park called Artpark, and it's this park that was dedicated to artists coming in and doing interesting big things, but allowing people in to see them. And they all had to be put up during the season and then taken down.

AW:

Like installation pieces?

AM:

Right. There you go. That's the word I'm looking for. But they could be almost anything you wanted to do that you could convince them to pay you the money and bring you there to do it. So they would bring these artists in to do things that were of interest to the artist, and convinced the head of the park to do. So they had things like—and I only remember—I saw some of the books. They weren't there the year we were there, but one of them was a guy had built a boxing glove—a big boxing glove that went onto a—like either a motorcycle or something, so it was a motorcycle disguised as this huge boxing glove. He had built this big face with a big nose, and then a ramp going up to the nose, and he would drive this motorcycle/boxing glove up there and punch the face in the nose. And that was the piece.

AW:

That was it. How many times, or did he just do it once?

AM:

I don't know. Well, he had to construct it, and probably did it once, and everybody cheered and then he tore it all down.

AW:

Even better.

AM:

Yeah, and they had another thing that was real cool is a guy had buried in a parking lot—in an area out there—all these transmission wires in different places—I'm going to say random, but he may have done it correctly—and then he broadcast through each one a different tone. So each wire was hooked up to a generator that broadcast a radio frequency in a certain tone. You would take your car and you would tune your radio to a certain frequency, and then you would drive randomly through the parking lot, and it would play a tune.

AW:

I love that.

AM:

I do too. I thought it was great. Well, that's an Artpark piece, so you'd have these cars just sort of weaving in and out, just discovering these things.

AW:

How many wrecks did they have over there?

AM:

I don't know. I wasn't—the other one they had, this guy had a puzzle—huge puzzle pieces that were, you know, the span of my arms, here, as I'm holding them out—but they had a hole in the middle and you would wear them.

AW:

Oh, and so you'd have to assemble yourself?

AM:

Yeah. You'd have to walk around and find the other pieces that would go together, and you'd click yourself together, and then you would walk around until you found somebody—

AW:

It's kind of like Pass the Apple—party icebreaker sort of a thing.

AM:

Yeah, so I mean, it was stuff like that. Well, this Joe Hobbs had a trucker—he was into—CBs had just sort of made the appearance, and he had this CB art piece that he did—and I can't tell you what it is because I can't remember—but he had sort of a Western setup, but with a semi and

some deal with truckers that he did. But he wanted some music to go along, so they hired Country Gazette to come to Artpark and do this art thing—but they didn't want it to be just Country Gazette, "You've got to do something different," so we brought a drummer and Slim as a guitar player and a steel player named Rob Haines—and I see Rob—I saw him just—he's in Nashville. He's a Nashville guy now—steel guitar player—

AW:

Session guy?

AM:

Session guy, yeah—or traveling, touring steel player. So there was myself, Roland White, Joe Carr, Mike Anderson, now Slim Richey, Rob Haines, and Mike McCurdy was the drummer—and Mike I knew from Norman, and he's still there, still heavily into music. You know, that's the cool thing about knowing musicians.

AW:

How old is Mike McCurdy? Is he younger than us?

AM:

He's maybe a year or two younger.

AW:

Oh, okay, then—because Hadley introduced me to a guy—

AM:

Mike McCarty.

AW:

Hadley introduced me to a guy whose name—that just sounds like him, but he was younger—a little younger—like maybe forties now.

AM:

No, he's probably—

AW:

Okay, I'm thinking of someone different, then.

AM:

He's probably sixty-two or -three, I guess. But Mike played drums, and he's a really great drummer. So he did this thing with us. They all flew to Detroit—Country Gazette drove in—we

flew to Detroit—or they flew to Detroit, picked them all up—Slim and Mike and Rob—and went out to do the Artpark—why would it be Detroit? Why would it have been Detroit? It must have been Buffalo.

AW:

Yeah, Detroit would have been going into a different part of Canada.

AM:

Yeah. It must have been Buffalo—so picked them up, drove out, did this thing, dropped them off, and went away. So now, when we go to record this “All This and Money, Too” with Slim, we’ve had this Artpark experience, so we want to include some of it on this album. So Mike came—Slim was already our producer—is it still going?

AW:

Oh yeah, I was just checking.

AM:

Seeing if we’re out of tape yet?

AW:

Yeah.

AM:

Slim Richey is the producer. We get Mike McCarty to come down—M-c-C-a-r-t-y—Mike McCarty to come down, and then we use a Fort Worth steel player whose name I can’t remember, who hadn’t been playing steel very long, but he played well enough to do what we wanted him to do. We recorded a couple of tunes with that—in that setting—that was sort of—

AW:

On that album?

AM:

What’s that?

AW:

On that album?

AM:

On that album—that was from our Artpark experience.



AW:

What were those?

AM:

Well one of them was this Hadley song, "The Tracker," and then Mike—I had recorded an album with Sam Bush called "Together Again for the First Time," which I think I've mentioned—or maybe I didn't mention it.

AW:

No, you mentioned it, I think on our last session.

AM:

Oh, okay. On there we did "Eleanor Rigby," and Mike knew that I had recorded "Eleanor Rigby," and the group he had played with sung "Eleanor Rigby" as sort of a—at a bluegrass rhythm. So we put those—it was a different key, but we brought it all together in the key that Mike sang it in, so we recorded "Eleanor Rigby," and we used the steel player and the drummer on that—and Slim. And then we did "Devil in Disguise," which is a Burrito Brothers song. So that was sort of an expression of our Artpark experience, and it's one of the best of our albums, I think. Kitty loves it. She likes it, I think, the best of all.

AW:

Cool.

AM:

Yeah it was.

AW:

I need to go re-listen.

AM:

Yeah, you know, I think it's just well-done. I don't think you're going to be startled by—there's nothing incredibly innovative about it other than I think it's real good. Then we did another Hadley song called—I can't even remember it—it's almost like a little kid's song.

AW:

"Piddle in the Puddle," is it that song?

AM:

Yes.

AW:

That's what little kids do.

AM:

Well, no, let me back up. That's not it. I think it's called "A Little Rain Song."

AW:

Okay, I don't remember that one.

AM:

Well, you wouldn't. It's just a Hadley song, and I thought we did it really cutely—preciously, or whatever. It's—and I played guitar, and we got Dave Ferguson, because he's a Fort Worth guy, and had been in the band, to play fiddle for us, and he played a really sort of a classical kind of feeling little solo on it—it may be in triplets—to go along with what Joe and I—but I thought Joe and I had some real nice guitar—I played a guitar that was maybe capo'd differently than Joe's—or I can't remember—I played finger-style while he played strummy-style. But it was real good. I'd have to go back and listen to it, also, because I really like it. So we did "The Tracker" and that, and then we did some bluegrass stuff and "Devil in Disguise" sort of as a rock sort of a country-bluegrassy-rock kind of thing—and then "Eleanor Rigby" and "Cotton-Eyed Joe," and Roland did a Lefty Frizzell song, "Gone, Gone, Gone," and I thought it was great. I like that album a lot now that I think about it. Oh, and we did another Hadley song that Mike sang that is—that's the one Joe and I played guitar—two guitars—on, and it was a real—came out really well. It's amazing. That Lipitor has really got my memory clouded. But anyway, it's a real good album. So we did that, and we were touring and played as much as we could and traveled, you know, and actually did a lot. Somewhere in that material I've turned over to you all, there is an organization called the IBMA—International Bluegrass Music Association—and they asked me to lead a panel on sort of touring band in the music business. So I went back—and I believe the year was '88—so I probably did it in '92 or so—or '90—at the IBMA, but I took the year of 1988 because that was maybe the best year we had. That may be the best year we had financially because we were still doing some music in the schools things in Oklahoma. We didn't do like a whole semester, but we'd go—they'd ask us to do a week. We got on with the Mid-America Arts Alliance and their touring program—and they were really going strong at the time. So that was really good. So we played—let's see—Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Missouri, I think were the Mid-America Arts Alliance states at the time. So we played a lot of those things all over Kansas—western Kansas, eastern Kansas, Dodge City, Garden City—I mean we did a lot, and it always paid well and you were always well-respected because it was an arts group, not a bluegrass group. So you would go in, and you would be invited into the homes of the very wealthiest people in town, whereas if you played the club, you would have never seen them. So it was a whole different ballgame. I remember the guy that recruited me initially into that program for the Mid-America Arts Alliance—and that came from me being in the Oklahoma group. I sort

of moved up—was recommended or whatever—and the guy—it's hard to imagine back then that art was a big time business. I thought it was—and a guy actually flew into Oklahoma City, and I met him at the airport, to interview me. Then he was flying on to LA or New York after that. You know, it was real intriguing. It was like they had hired this consultant—and he said “What are your requirements?” and you know, here I am, having played gigs where I provided everything, practically—“Oh, y'all just set up over there and start about five.” Here I am—they're “What are your requirements?” “Well, just a space.” “Well no, you need things. How big of a space do you need? I need to know, is it twenty-by-thirty?” So I made up stuff. But he pointed out to me, he said—I said, “Well, we would like to have such-and-such, but if we don't it's okay,” and he says “Look, these are not requests. They're requirements. If you require it, there is not option. That's required.” He was trying to make this point to me that “You can have—I'm asking you, what do you want? It's not like what do you want and maybe we can do it,” —

AW:

—what's your ideal—

AM:

Yeah, it's like, “If you want it, you will get it. If that's your requirement, we'll make them do it. They sign a contract that says they're required to provide this,” and it was just like—for me, I'm just “But I don't need—I don't want to be a hard—make it inconvenient for anybody,” and he's telling me “Look, you're the artist. Don't do this.” So it was a kind of eye-opening thing for me. So this Mid-America Arts Alliance was excellent. They treated the artists well, they held their sponsors to a certain level, they provided a lot of support. To this day—I don't think I have it anymore—for years and years and years they've sent out a kit—so it would be “Country Gazette is coming to your community. Here's your Country Gazette kit,” and it would be all the promotional stuff that had to do with Country Gazette. Some of it I developed and some of it they developed. In there was this huge calendar, and it was like—I'm going to say maybe a two-month calendar—and it didn't have dates on it; you put your own dates in, but this is four weeks out, “On this day, you do this.”

AW:

To get ready for this gig?

AM:

Right. So it had things that all—they were supposed to do all the way down to the gig—and you would look at it and it was just stunning.

AW:

Yeah, I think they call those Gantt charts.

AM:

Is that what they're called?

AW:

I think so. They're developed for how to do a project, but it would be the same thing.

AM:

—same thing—“On this day, you carry this press release down to the newspaper, and you tell them it needs to be in Sunday's edition. On this day, you put out—you go to the printer and you have the posters printed up, and on this day you take the posters and you place them in these places.” So it was a real eye-opening for me of the other side of—so all these communities that were going to have these events, they had to do these things, and as a result, they all went well.

AW:

And part of it, too—wasn't it—that partly they went well because by having requirements, they weeded out the ones that were going to be disasters.

AM:

Right, right. But still a lot of them were very small communities who—and this is being wither sarcastic or facetious or whatever—but Mid-America's sort of byline—or what do they call it?

All the—

AW:

Mission statement or something?

AM:

Yeah, it was, “Bringing arts experiences to communities who otherwise couldn't afford them.” I altered it to say “Bringing arts experiences to communities who otherwise wouldn't want them,” because they—you know, it took this kind of force to get them in there.

AW:

Almost a steamroller.

AM:

Right. So if you played Colby, Nebraska—or Colby, Kansas, I mean—if you left Colby to their own devices, they wouldn't do shit. But if you forced—if you went there and said, “We've got this money. We'll underwrite it if you'll do this,” there would be some community people that would go “Yes, we live in the wilds of western Kansas and need something.” So we would go play there, and they—some of the times it would be outdoors—and they loved it everywhere we

played with the Mid-America Arts Alliance, it did really well, and it was because they had underwritten it not only financially, but just—

AW:

—with the energy and the planning and—yeah—

AM:

—and just with the endorsement of the artists. If they're a Mid-America artist, they're good. So we would go in and do these things—and we did it for several years, but I believe '88 was maybe the best. Let me back up. '78—I don't know where the hell I'm talking here—'78—is that right? God, I am so confused.

AW:

Well we were operating in '78 and '79 when we were talking about that makeup of Country Gazette and the album “All This, and Money Too.”

AM:

Yeah, because Joe left in like '82 I think. So anyway, I'll say '78-'79 we did these and worked a lot, made good money—the money was guaranteed, you know, it was “Here's your check” when we walked in the door. It was none of this “I'm sorry, we didn't have a very good night. We don't have the money.” So that was always really good. So we used that and toured a lot of places that people did not go—I mean bluegrass bands did not go. So we did that, and then we did a lot of the other bluegrass things and traveled a lot and did as much as we could.

AW:

Can we stop for just a second and talk about—this is all kind of different stuff. How did this impact your reception in the more traditional bluegrass world?

AM:

Well, I'm going to—these are all just my prejudices and my views—is that the bluegrass world, for the most part—and they would never admit it—but are sort of eastern-centric. All the bluegrass that is real bluegrass comes from North Carolina or Virginia, or in this wad of Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, eastern Tennessee—that's where it really is, and I wouldn't argue with it. A lot of the players are generational players—their dads played, their granddads played—where a lot of players from the west, they're the first generation of players. Like me and my family, and Joe Carr's family, Mike Anderson's family, Dave Ferguson's family—we're all, I think, first generation players. Now Roland—but he also lived in California, and so they have a certain sense—and since this is not going to be heard by anybody ever I'll go ahead and say it—they have sort of this redneck view of bluegrass, that it's got to be played this certain, certain way, and you do the pull-off and you make it sound like this because that's the



way it's supposed to go. And it's all a really sort of tight-ass kind of music. I will say contemporarily, it's broadened a bit, but it's still that same performance model, which is this really tightly-fit-together music. I think most of the music of the western bluegrassers is a little looser and a little more airy-feeling. The song selections are from broader sources, and the vocal stylings are not as mountain-esque, or whatever—I don't know what the word would be—as sort of the traditional bluegrass world is. You could point to people from North Carolina that played differently, but in general—this is just my view. So anything you did in the music that took it away from that sort of tight view of it was less well-received, and so *Country Gazette*, even from its earliest days, I don't think was that well-received in the east, among the traditional bluegrassers—because it wasn't. I'm not sure what we were trying to do. I know, for me, we were just trying to play whatever song we decided we liked the best way we could, and it turned out not to be as attractive to bluegrassers as other stuff. I remember, I used to tell Roland—we'd record an album and we'd be there listening to it, and I'd go, "Well damn, Roland. If they don't like this, I don't know what we can do. There's nothing else we can do." Roland finally told me this, and I think it to be true in the end—nowadays everybody says, "At the end of the day," as if—but I was complaining to Roland one day about "How come we never get to play such-and-such festival? That would be a good festival for us to play, but we never get to play it," and he said, "You know, I've had a career and never played that festival," and I went "That's right." When you look up and see what you're doing, you go, "Here it is ten years, fifteen, twenty, twenty-five years down the road, we're still here. We've never played that festival, but we're still playing and we're still going out and doing stuff," so I went "Oh yeah, that's right." So we went to Colby, Kansas instead.

AW:

Or, as Utah Phillips said one time—I'm sure he said it many times, but he said about that whole issue, "Life ain't deep, but it's wide," and I always thought it makes a lot of sense. We were talking this morning about the Rhizome theory, you know, spreading out that way and—yes, you have a career. So really it's the fault of the festival. They're missing it by not finding people who have been playing twenty-five years; why aren't they there?

AM:

Yeah, exactly. You know, there's a huge festival—two of them—one of them is called the Gray Fox, and the other one is the Doc Watson Festival—what do they call that festival? I forget.

AW:

Gray Fox of Virginia?

AM:

No, Gray Fox is in upstate New York, I think, or Western Massachusetts. It's been going, and

it's one of the real premier festivals—well I've never played there, and it's been going thirty years. Then this other one—what is it called? MerleFest.

AW:

MerleFest.

AM:

Yeah, Merle Watson—it's called MerleFest. It gets thirty thousand people, you know, and it's another premier festival, and I've never played—I've never even been close—never dialed my number, never nothing. I was like, "Roland, are you going to MerleFest this year?" "No, I've never been there." What is the festival—Winfield, Kansas—I've played there twice, and it's been going how long? Thirty years or more—and I said, "I don't need them to have a career, and they don't need me, obviously, so it's okay." But anyway, I forgot what we were talking about.

AW:

'78—good year.

AM:

Yeah, '78 was a good year, and it was with Mike, and we recorded that album, which I liked a lot, and it was on Slim's label. But then—I don't know if it was our idea or Slim's—we wanted to get on a better label, and so Slim said, "Well let me produce a record, and I'll sell it to Bruce Kaplan at Flying Fish. So we let Slim negotiate us a deal with Bruce Kaplan—and Slim is a real entrepreneur, and Bruce, I think, was an odd character, and Slim had problems with him, but he finally came to—you know, one of the things in the music business that I see from back then is everybody thought everybody else was cheating them out of money somehow—didn't know how, but they were. Now Slim didn't so much, but Bruce thought we were screwing him out of money somehow, just by doing this album through Slim. We should have gone to him directly, but Slim was going to suck up part of the money—which is true—but Slim made the deal, and that's what producers do and dah-dah-dah-dah—so we did it, and we thought, You know, we know these songwriters. Let's do a whole album of just John Hadley and Bill Caswell songs—and then Mike Anderson songs. So we did an album called *American and Clean*. I think that's what it was called. I don't know where that name comes from.

AW:

That sounds like a Terry Allen line.

AM:

You know, that's where it came from.

AW:

Is it?

AM:

I think so, because on there—

AW:

“The Great Joe Bob?”

AM:

Yeah, we did “The Great Joe Bob” on there.

AW:

Well that’s the line from “Great Joe Bob.”

AM:

All right, yeah, that’s probably where we got it. Yeah, I’m glad you mentioned that because—Terry Allen, we did a Terry Allen song. So we did sort of regional songwriters. That was our goal. So we did the ones we knew, and we did a couple of Mike Anderson songs.

AW:

How’d you get to know Terry’s music?

AM:

Maybe through John Hadley—and somehow I had the album—what is the album that it—is it Lubbock—

AW:

*Lubbock (on Everything)*

AM:

Yeah, *Lubbock (on Everything)*. That’s where we got it. And that right there—that one album is one of the very best—it’s got to be one of the top hundred albums ever made. That album is brilliant, brilliant, brilliant.

AW:

Yeah, it’s—to me, like—well, I’m getting ready to do a paper at the West Texas Historical Association, and I’m calling it “First in a series of important Texas music,” and just the first on I’m going to do, and it’s going to be on *Geronimo’s Cadillac*, but *Lubbock (on Everything)*, it’s got to be maybe the next one—and then the Flatlanders record that didn’t come out for fifteen

years, that's got to be one of them. But you go back and you listen to those albums, and it's—to me, they're—it's not just that it's good music and it's well-done, but they're game-changers. It's something that alters the landscape, you know, afterwards. I know when—I got *Lubbock (on Everything)* vinyl it first came out, and I sat and listened to it and listened to it and listened to it, and it was like—well the other thing is they're so obvious. Once they happen, you go, “Well of course,” but before that, there was no “of course.”

AM:

Well, what it took was Terry Allen—somebody like Terry Allen, that just had this sort of irreverence—irreverent view of the world, but could put it in really—I mean just right, spot-on lyrics and music and delivery—and piano playing, and the whole bit. Everything about it was just perfect. It was really stunning. It's a stunning presentation—one of my favorites where the guy picks up Jesus as a hitchhiker.

AW:

Yeah, “Give me a ride to Heaven, Boy”

AM:

The capper is that—when he pulls out the gun and he says, “The son of God wants your car.”

AW:

Yeah, “God works in mysterious ways, and tonight he's going to take your car.”

AM:

Yeah. I thought, The son of God wants your car—I thought, It's all yours.

AW:

Yeah, “Cracker crunch,” I mean they're just all those—

AM:

Right, and when he picks up the guy and the guy tells him he's Jesus, he starts kicking the beer cans back under the seat. I mean just stuff like that is so perfect. It just is such a wonderful image.

AW:

Well, and you know—and you mentioned art—the way that album came about—I'm sure you've heard the stories—Paul Milosevich tells Terry he's got to come to Lubbock, and Terry doesn't know any of those people—he doesn't know the Maines, he doesn't know Don Caldwell—and he didn't have the money, and he sells a piece of art, a check comes in the mail, he goes to

Lubbock. So you know, you're talking about all the art connections in this seventies period—very interesting.

AM:

It was a cool time. You know, and I'm not sure—I'm sure it is that music is important for people, but it seemed back then it was really—you know, the sixties and seventies music was really important.

AW:

Yeah, it wasn't the wallpaper that it is, sort of—

AM:

Yeah. It was just a really important thing back then, and people—it was important to play it, it was important to hear it, it was important to be there—but I'm not sure—and it probably is for people nowadays, but it just seemed real vital back then. Anyway, we did—we recorded *American and Clean*, and did some Hadley songs and did some Mike Anderson songs. Mike is actually a real—a pretty good little writer.

AW:

Yeah, I need to learn more about his writing. Where would I go to find—

AM:

Well that *American and Clean* would be about it—and he's only got a—

AW:

What's he do now? Where did he go after—?

AM:

He's from around—he was from White Settlement, and he now lives around Weatherford.

AW:

And does he do music?

AM:

You know, I don't know. I haven't talked to Mike in fifteen or twenty years. I'm sure if I did—I have every faith that it would just pick up where we left off, but I don't know.

AW:

Weatherford, Texas or Weatherford, Oklahoma?



AM:

Weatherford, Texas.

AW:

I'll try to track him down.

AM:

Yeah. I like Mike a lot. He was a really nice guy—and by “guileless,” I mean—and I don't want to—

AW:

Yeah that's—I think that's a compliment the way you put it.

AM:

He was a—just to illustrate—we played in Fort Worth, probably at the Hop, and there were these guys—and Slim was sort of a refuge for any sort of touring Japanese guys that were into bluegrass. They would somehow—Slim had gotten—maybe had gone to Japan, and through his record—selling some records over there and whatnot—so they were probably staying with Slim, and they came out to hear us play and wanted to know where we were playing next—and we were on our way to—played in Tuscaloosa, Alabama—one of the few times we ever played in Alabama—played Montgomery one time, and Birmingham. So lo and behold, when we got to Tuscaloosa, there they were, these same Japanese guys, and they had just gotten on a bus and rode to Tuscaloosa—and where we were playing provided us with a house to stay in, which was out in the country. So we asked them if they had a place to stay, and they said they didn't, and we said “Well, come on out and stay with us.” So they floated in the van with us and rode out there and stayed with us for a day or two, and Mike—and none of them spoke English very well. So Mike asked one of them—and he asked it about like this, “That bomb thing, was that pretty bad?” and so they looked kind of confused at him, and they huddled and spoke among themselves—and you know, he was asking about Nagasaki and Hiroshima, but he asked, “That bomb thing, was that pretty bad?” and they huddled and came back and said, “Yes, it was very bad,” and Mike says, “Well I kind of thought so.” That's kind of where Mike was, and he wouldn't—he would ask these questions that were—anybody else would kind of tiptoe around or something, but Mike would go, “I noticed you've lost your leg. How did—was it bad?” To this day I ask a question that's sort of based on Mike's questioning. When somebody—like Slim—when he was hit by a car, I said, “This is important Mike—Slim—when that car hit you, did it hurt?”

AW:

So that's a Mike Anderson question.

AM:

It's a Mike Anderson question. And Mike said, "Yeah, it hurt," and I thought—or Slim said, "Yeah, it did hurt," and I says "I was afraid of that. I'm real sorry." So Mike was a real—I like Mike. He did a lot of drugs—I mean dope—he mostly smoked dope. We played a gig one time, and I mean you can't believe some of the places—I think it was called "Green Acres Music Hall" in Rutherfordton, North Carolina—and they would call it "Ruffton"

AW:

Ruffton.

AM:

Yeah, but it was Rutherfordton. And it's down in sort of the southwestern corner of North Carolina—and it was run by a guy named Metcalf, I think his last name was, he and his wife. He was the county health inspector and drug dealer.

AW:

And drug dealer.

AM:

And drug dealer—so he would go inspect restaurants, and then supply the drugs to anybody.

AW:

So were they healthy drugs? That would be the question.

AM:

Well for him they were. It was all dope—just marijuana.

AW:

So it was clean and not adulterated—good stuff.

AM:

They were aficionados. They traveled—they had pictures around—we'd stay at their house—they had pictures around of them in a dope—poppy field—in South America.

AW:

How interesting.

AM:

They had a little shelf all the way around their room, and were with pipes that they'd gotten from around the world, different places. They had two boys, and you'd think they'd just be real

bizarre, but the kids were real sharp and did well in school, and were big huge sports fans of—and had big posters of whoever was big at the time. So it was normal in every way except they were big druggies. The parents lived just down the road—they lived out in the country, there—parents lived down the road, and they were just as straight-laced as could be. It was just an odd, odd thing. But he ran this—he didn't run it—there was a farmer who had a cinder-block building that you'd play at—you'd have music there. I think his name was Mike Metcalf, but I could be wrong. Donna was his wife's name. He booked the acts out there, and he was a dopey guy, so New Grass Revival played there, Country Gazette played there—not that we were dopeys, but they liked our music. So we'd play there, and Mike was like in heaven, so to speak, because he smoked dope. So we're playing there, and Mike is back there, and the music is just dragging—incredible—and Joe turns around to Mike and says, "Mike, you're dragging," and Mike sort of goes on and plays. So at the end of the evening, this is Mike's excuse—he was kind of angry at Joe—he says, "Joe, don't ever tell somebody who's stoned they're dragging. That's all I could think about all night, is that I was dragging. Don't ever do that again." So he was scolding Joe—

AW:  
—for scolding him—

AM:  
—for scolding him, because don't you know, when somebody is stoned, you're not supposed to tell them they're dragging. So Mike was—he was a character. So we're going along there and playing gigs and doing stuff with Mike and Joe, and Mike decides to leave the band.

AW:  
So this is '79? '80?

AM:  
I'll say—yeah, '79 —'80 —it may be in 1980 some time. So he leaves, and we had played—and I don't remember how you find out about other people—but there was a band up in Virginia—some players that sort of centered around Steve Smith, who's the mandolin player in Country Gazette in the last few years. He lives out in New Mexico now, but he's from Virginia—met him, Bill Evans, who are both still very hot in the business—a banjo player named John Lawless who runs the bluegrass blog now and still going. I think John Lawless had a band, which had the worst name—it was called the Nothin' Doin' Band—and I thought, That's not a good name.

AW:  
Not good marketing.

AM:  
No. But in that band was a bass player named Bill Smith, and maybe we hung out some when we

toured through Virginia, but we called Bill Smith—and we got him at a time when he was just divorcing his wife—and said, “Would you be interested in joining the band?” “Yes” “Would you be interested to move to Oklahoma?” “Yes, I need to get out of here,” and I thought, Oh great. Here we’re going to have a single guy, and he’s going to move here, and there’s that much less travel, and that much less—

AW:

—budget—

AM:

—also internal friction. Well, what does he do but show up—moves there—but brings this woman with him.

AW:

The girlfriend, not the wife?

AM:

Not the wife, but a girlfriend. And Bill—I love Bill. Bill is a really nice man, and somewhat like Mike, but he was married—Bill was married to a lawyer, and his father was the assistant city manager of Norfolk, Virginia. So he comes from a good spot—he comes from a good place. He shows up with this—and I won’t say her name because I can’t remember it—but trash—just a lowlife woman and a child. She has a child.

AW:

She has a child. Wow.

AM:

So here’s Bill in Norman with this woman. They get an apartment and we’re now out on the road—and Bill is very good—great singer, sounds not unlike Mike, and a pretty good bass player. First he plays acoustic bass, but then he switches to electric bass, which helps, travel-wise and whatnot. Now we record an album with Flying Fish that maybe Roland negotiates—no, no, that’s not it—oh yeah, forgot this. We’re also approached by a booking agent—and I’m going to say his name—Herschel Freeman. He’s in Durham, North Carolina and he wants to book us. Roland and I and we all agree, “Let’s try this,” and he does—he does book us. But he is really—and he’s a very bright guy—and I’m going to whisper this word: he’s Jewish. He’s very hard-ass about it, and he doesn’t understand why we won’t do some things—because he’s worked real hard to get them, “But I’ve worked so hard!” as if that’s the justification for us driving a thousand miles—

AW:

—out of your way, too, yeah—

AM:

Yeah—to do this thing. “You’ve got to do it. You’re in the business or not. Are you in the business or not?” That was his attitude. Now, you would talk to Herschel on just a friendly basis—he was a really bright man, very personable—but I grew not to like him at all. Roland wouldn’t even talk to him at some point, so I had to deal with him, and he was very, very difficult, and not that profitable for us. He didn’t do many things that were really good—and actually, he was booking us while Mike was in the band, and that’s probably one reason Mike left, too; he didn’t like Herschel. I didn’t either, but I—that’s part of business, is dealing with people you don’t like. So Bill came into the band, and Herschel wanted to—he negotiated a deal with Flying Fish, and he wanted to be the producer of it. So he came to Nashville—we recorded it in Nashville—and used an engineer whose name escapes me right now, but I love him. He was great. I loved everything about him. I love the way he made the music sound, I like the way he talked, I like how he operated—and I’ll think of his name. But he wanted to help pick the songs, he wanted to have a hand in everything and we resisted the whole way.

AW:

Herschel, yeah.

AM:

Herschel did. In the end he didn’t understand why we didn’t want to do what he said. This album—and he had the idea for the album, the album cover, the liner notes he wrote, and the whole promotion—it was called *America’s Bluegrass Band*, and it was the Dallas Cowboys being America’s Football Team—and he came up with this promotional thing that we paid for, he wrote it all up, and it was a Country Gazette newspaper, and that was out brochure—which I thought was real nice. I thought he had good ideas.

AW:

Yeah, I still remember those—

AM:

Seeing that—

AW:

Yeah, seeing that.

AM:

All right. So I liked it—and I like his ideas and everything, but he was real forceful, you know,



“You have to pay for it. You have to give me this. I want to be paid to do it,” and just on and on. So he was there when we mixed the album and recorded it, and he didn’t understand why we wouldn’t listen to him any more than we did. He said, “I told you what I thought and you didn’t listen,” and I said, “Herschel, you told us what you thought. We did listen. We just don’t agree. There’s a difference.” He’s sort of that kind of a manipulator. So we just plowed ahead and did what we wanted to do. He even sang bass—thank you sweetheart—sang bass on one song—on the gospel song—and he did well. It was fine.

AW:

So was he one of these agents that was really a frustrated band member?

AM:

I think, ultimately, yeah.

AW:

So Bill Smith was on this record?

AM:

Yeah, Bill Smith was on this record—and did a really good job. We did a couple of Bill Caswell songs again. We did—and to this day are some of the best Country Gazette stuff—which is “Sweet Allis Chalmers” and he did “Stop Me,” which is sort of a ballad, and very different for bluegrass. But then he sang a lot of the normal stuff—and we did a song that I hear on the radio—on Sirius Satellite Radio—the one I hear the most of Country Gazette is one called “Saro Jane,” and it’s an up-tempo song.

AW:

I believe this may be one of the first of your albums that I got and actually had a chance to listen to a lot before I then explored the other ones.

AM:

Yeah—and it’s a good record. There’s a lot of good stuff on it. We did a—

AW:

And doesn’t Joe sing the lead on “Sweet Allis Chalmers?”

AM:

No, Bill Smith does.

AW:

Does he?

AM:

Yeah, that's Bill Smith. Bill Smith and Joe and Mike Anderson all had sort of similar voices.

AW:

Yeah, because I listened to that, and I would have sworn it was Joe.

AM:

No, that was Bill Smith that sang it—and did a damn good job of it. Roland sang “Saro Jane,” and then Bill and Joe sang with him, and it was real good. See, this is Herschel Freeman’s deal—and I remember it became every time I hear “Saro Jane” I remember it—is that’s the first song we recorded. When we went into the studio, that’s the first song we recorded. We got the take, went all the way through and recorded all the other songs—and Herschel says, “You know, you always pick up steam as you go along, so you should always go back and record your first song again because you’re really doing better,” and I said “Where did you hear that?” It was like—it was just like a thing he’d made up.

AW:

Like he’d been producing a hundred years or something.

AM:

Right, but it was like a rule written down, “Always record the first song,” so he said it to us, and I said “I don’t agree. I like that cut. I thought we got it.” “No, you should always—I think you could do it better now,” and so I remember going back in there and doing it again, pissed off. So that’s—when I hear “Saro Jane,” that’s what I hear.

AW:

Oh, so he kept the second one?

AM:

Yeah, we kept the second one, because all I know is I was pissed off the whole time, and I didn’t play it as well as I thought I did the first one. Now, Roland and them and everybody must have thought the second time was better because that’s the one that made it—or maybe Herschel just pushed and they didn’t give a shit—so that’s what I hear when I hear “Saro Jane.” I love the song, I like everything about it, but what I hear is I’m pissed off because we’re doing this again just because he had this notion that you should always do the first song again because it’s not going to be as good as you are now. It’s like an un-truism that he thinks—so anyway, we recorded that album and it did pretty well, and we—

AW:

And this is 1980?

AM:

I'm going to say it's '80 or '81—I can't remember.

AW:

No, that's all right, just general is good enough.

AM:

Yeah, I'd have to look at the records. They'll have a copyright date, I assume. So Bill stayed with us a little while, and—oh, no, I don't want one right now. You have it.

AW:

We're arguing over the muffins. I'm going to set them in the middle and we can grab one when we want.

AM:

Joe had married a woman he met—Paula—he met her up in Canada.

AW:

I didn't know he met her in Canada.

AM:

Yeah, she was—she loaded up, was a little hippie girl and moved to Canada—and it was in London, Ontario, Canada that she was living, and we met her there. He sort of took up with her, divorced his wife—

AW:

Oh, he was married before Paula?

AM:

Yeah.

AW:

I didn't know that, either.

AM:

Yeah. Paula tells the very best story about when she moved back from Canada. She lived up there for seven years—just went up there—just drove across the border and stayed—and ran a restaurant and played music or did whatever it is she did.

AW:

No papers, no nothing, just—?

AM:

No nothing. So when she was going to move back—because Joe had divorced—was going to move down with Joe—I think that's the chronology of it. She had a little crappy old car, and everything she owned in it—and in the front seat on a pillow—or maybe down in the floor of the front seat on a pillow—was a cat that had just given birth to kittens before she got to the border. So she got to the border in the middle of the night, and the guy stuck his head in and looked around, and she said, "It's just a crappy car with all this crap, and there's these two newborn kittens over there," and he said, "How long have you been in Canada?" or, you know, citizenship—"I'm a United States citizen," "How long have you been in Canada?" "Seven years." Then he asked, "Did you buy anything while you were there?" and she said he looked—says—he looked all around, and he says, "I don't think it's worth over four hundred dollars. Go on." "How long have you lived in Canada?" "Seven years." "Did you buy anything while you were there," she said "Everything." "I don't think it's over four hundred dollars. Go on." He didn't want to fool with it.

AW:

Yeah, especially with the kittens.

AM:

I love that story. Anyway, Joe had met her up there and was living in Dallas, and was about to have a child, so he decided that it was not time for him to be in Country Gazette anymore.

AW:

So having a child with Paula?

AM:

Yes.

AW:

So this is about 1982, you said?

AM:

Yeah, I think it's '82 is when he left.

AW:

So did he go straight out to South Plains?

AM:

No, he was around Dallas for a couple years. No, actually—

AW:

Because it would have been about then, wouldn't it?

AM:

He went there in '84. Okay, man, I'm messing this up. Joe, I guess must have got married in '79 or so, so he was—he and Paula—see, I've messed this up. He and Paula actually moved to Springdale, Arkansas, because he knew a guy up there named Snuffy Smith that we knew, who was an instrument builder, and Joe wanted—thought that might be his career, would be instrument building and repair. So he moved up there to get into that. So that may have been—because he was still in the band when we were doing that, and we would drive through and pick him up.

AW:

But he left the band in '82.

AM:

Yeah, I think he left the band in '82. I'm sorry. Then he moved back to Dallas with Paula, from Springdale. That's how it worked. No more Lipitor for me.

AW:

I think you're doing brilliantly, remembering all the names of dancers and mimes—that's pretty impressive to me.

AM:

But he decided to leave the band, and Roland knew this guitar player in Nashville—guitar/Dobro player—named Gene Wooten—and got him to come into the band. This gave somebody on Roland's end that Roland could ride with when we would drive to meet at places, because otherwise it was—

AW:

He's coming all the way from Nashville.

AM:

Otherwise it was me and Bill and Joe, and then we would meet Roland—so with somebody in Nashville, he would have somebody to ride with. So Gene Wooten came into the band—and Gene was a really great Dobro player and singer, I thought—and he was young enough and hip enough to want to do “Eleanor Rigby” and “Sweet Allis Chalmers,” and he was hip to all that



stuff. He was from North Carolina, and he was younger than me, and I'm going to say he was probably—if I was thirty-eight, he was probably thirty. So I'm going to say he's as much as ten years younger than I am. So he was young enough to be hip to all this stuff, and had played hip stuff, but he was a real traditionalist. He played Dobro very much like Uncle Josh—better, cleaner, but sort of in an Uncle Josh Dobro tradition, and he lived in Nashville, and he was single.

AW:

Now Bill Smith is still with you?

AM:

Bill Smith is still with us—and we do some gigs like that. What we did, which is real—to me, this was a different sensibility, and it really was good—but we would go out and play and it would be—there were four of us—and it would be Roland on mandolin, Bill on bass, Gene Wooten on Dobro, and me on banjo. So there would be no guitar—no guitar player—but Gene played such great rhythm on his Dobro—and could do guitar runs on the Dobro—that you didn't miss it, and it kind of cleaned up the music.

AW:

Well, and you had the bass keeping the bottom end and playing the ones.

AM:

Right, and the mandolin—it sounded really full—and I can remember playing—and we would go out and play—the way we had our set organized, we'd go out and play about four or five songs before we ever stopped. We'd play one and then just go into another one. I have a really good friend that's a DJ in D.C., and we played the—what was it called—we played the Birchmere. I had a friend there, and at some point we would stop, and I'd put the banjo down and I would get the guitar, and we did a couple of songs where I played guitar and we had Dobro and mandolin and bass. And she told me, she said, "You know, I didn't realize you didn't have a guitar until you stopped and picked one up." So it worked—I loved that format.

AW:

Did you record with that format?

AM:

Yeah, eventually, but Gene was a really sort of a redneck-y guy—in a good way, in a good way—he was a really nice man, but he complained a lot about everything—and he was a racist—I mean, he was from North Carolina—if you didn't take him just right, you could be irritated by him, and he irritated Bill. Bill was having trouble at home with this woman he'd brought along, and—

AW:

Trailer house lady.

AM:

The trouble was she had gotten a job at a bar in Norman, Oklahoma called The Beaver Club—

AW:

Well, that tell us something.

AM:

Yeah—and started bring friends home.

AW:

Male friends?

AM:

Yeah, and dope-smoking and drug-doing-dealing friends, and just—Bill would call home and say, “Who are those other people there?” “Oh, they’re—it’s after work and so we had a little party over here,” and it just got weird. So he decided he couldn’t do the band—wanted to pick her up—and he maybe married her. I think he married her eventually, and they moved back to Virginia. He quit the band and moved back to Virginia—and ultimately divorced her, and I’ve heard, went back to his first wife, who’s the lawyer, and I thought, Smart guy. So Bill left the band, so we didn’t have a bass player—and we used a couple of pick-up bass players. We used Smith—Terry Smith, who is now in a group called The Grascals—

AW:

Oh, what a great name.

AM:

Yeah, and they’re doing real well. The other one—why can’t I remember his name? He’s a very, very good bass player, and top-notch in all the top-notch sort of—I’ll remember it sometime. Anyway, both of them were from Nashville that Roland knew. So there was Roland and Gene and then bass players from Nashville, so I’m the odd man out now—which is okay—but we’re still getting together, touring, and looking for a bass player, because those guys didn’t want to—they didn’t sing as well as Roland—we needed somebody that could sing lead. Well I knew this kid in Oklahoma. He was a kid at the time, and he was in a band—a really excellent little bluegrass band in Oklahoma—and his name is Billy Joe Foster—and it’s Billy Joe and Craig Fletcher, and Craig’s brother, whose name I forget—but the singer is Joe Diffie. Do you know that name?

AW:

Oh yeah.

AM:

Back then he was Joey Diffie. So he was in a band with—

AW:

A bluegrass band?

AM:

Yeah.

AW:

Wow.

AM:

Yeah, Joe—Joey—is a great singer, but he was a great—I've got a video somewhere of me playing with them, and there's Joe Diffie as the lead singer, singing whatever bluegrass song it is we did—and he was a bluegrasser. But he loved country music, and he knew that's where the money was, so that's his story. So I went to Billy Joe, and I asked him—I don't know why I did this, Billy Joe was the banjo player in that group—and I said "Do you think Craig Fletcher would be interested in playing bass with us?" And Billy—I think either at that moment or a day or two later—said, "I'd like to do that," so Billy Joe came into the band. And again, here I thought—he was eighteen or nineteen, maybe twenty—single, just this kid living with his parents down in Duncan, Oklahoma—and I went "Yes!" So I said, "Billy, I'm going to come down there and rehearse with you," "Great," so I go down there, and there sits this woman—and Billy's twenty, she's thirty-five or forty—and "This is"—and I forget her name [**Phyllis Yeager**]"—and we're going to get married, and she's got three kids." And I'm going "Is it like a curse? Is this a curse?" And not only that, she wasn't divorced, and her husband was a Texas Ranger. [**Warren Yeager**]

AW:

How much worse could this kid have made it?

AM:

Yeah—but do you know a fiddle player out in West Texas—he's probably dead by now—named Suggs—Bobby Suggs?

AW:

I know of him. I don't think I ever knew him.

AM:

They had a group called Sandyland.

AW:

Oh yeah, no, I know that group. So I do know him.

AM:

It was her—it was his daughter—it was his daughter. Billy knew him from West Texas and music, and she left her husband and took up with—I mean, just disaster written all over it. She ultimately—

AW:

Not only disaster, but with violence as a possibility.

AM:

Deadly—yeah, with violence—disaster with violence. She ultimately went back to her husband, which is really great—and Billy was by himself, which was good. But Billy joined the group as a bass player, so we had Billy and Gene Wooten and Roland and I, and we recorded an album—again for Flying Fish—called *Bluegrass Tonight*. I think for Roland, that was the best band—

AW:

Really?

AM:

Yeah, because the timing was really good. Gene and Billy Joe were both—not that the others were not good, but I think it just suited Roland better. It was a really good group, although we were a little more traditional.

AW:

So this was about '83?

AM:

'83 or '84. [**Bluegrass Tonight was released in 1986**]

AW:

So it was a little more traditional?

AM:

Yeah, you know, with Gene singing and Billy singing—but even in that, you can do traditional songs and kind of hip them up. Billy Joe wanted to sing “Kentucky Waltz,” which is fine, but he

let me play guitar on it, and I played all these chords that, to me, made it really beautiful. I won't say I totally—I didn't re-harmonize it by any means, but just played sort of a—what is that guitar player that was with Buddy Holly, played bass when the plane crashed? He's the one that didn't get on the plane.

AW:  
Waylon.

AM:  
No, the other one that was with him, then—was the guitar player.

AW:  
Tommy Allsup.

AM:  
Tommy Allsup—sort of a Tommy Allsup approach, you know, with some nice chord sounds. So I thought it turned out just really great—so you can do traditional stuff, but kind of still do your own thing. For me, you know, I never was the singer, obviously, so I never had much influence over how—I would suggest, “You know, I like this song,” or they'd say “Do you like this song?” I'd go “Yeah,” but I'd always had the opportunity to do whatever I wanted on the song. So you know, I said, “I'll play guitar,” and the same way we did an old song that Roland sang, that was an old Gene Autry song, I think—it escapes me right now—but I played guitar on it, and I got to play some different stuff. It's not earth-shattering or anything, but it's just a different little touch—a little sensibility about it. So we did that, and we recorded a tune which is one of the best instrumentals I've ever recorded called—it's called “The Great American Banjo Tune.” That was at a time, in terms of naming things I was trying to think of marketing, and so I thought—I always thought you should say as clearly what you do. So you'd see band pictures without instruments, and I thought, No, it's better to have with your instruments so they have some sense—

AW:  
You're the banjo player, or he's the bass player—

AM:  
—that I'm the banjo player, yeah, and what kind of music it might be,” so I thought, Bluegrass is the word, and then Tonight made it immediate. It's like this immediacy about it. It's bluegrass right now. So that was the album title *Bluegrass Tonight*, and it was kind of—not a poster, but it looked like a poster to a certain extent—the cover of *Bluegrass Tonight*. So when I had this banjo tune that was part traditional, but part new—part modern, I'll say—so I called it “The Great American Banjo Tune,” because it drew from an earlier model of a banjo instrumental, but



then had this modern part to it. So I was trying to make it seem like it was a generic—like if you had to pick one model, “What does a bluegrass banjo instrumental sound like, and what does it do?” this would be it. So I called it “The Great American Banjo Tune,” as if it were an example.

AW:

Yeah, or the ultimate—the be-all end-all—

AM:

Yeah, like if you only got to listen to one to know what it was about—what banjo instrumentals were about—this would be it. It may be a little inflated, but that was sort of the—I was trying to think marketing kind of stuff, so I called it that. So that’s on there, and it’s one of the best instrumentals I think I’ve recorded. I like it a lot, and the recording came out well. Roland played really great, Gene played great on the Dobro, the timing was really good—so that whole album, it’s real together. It’s a real good record—a lot of good songs on it. “Be Nobody’s Darlin’ But Mine,” that’s the name of that song that I played guitar on that’s an old—I think it’s an old Gene Autry song.

AW:

Yeah, that’s a great tune, too.

AM:

Yeah it is—and a lot of the Western people do it. It was just a popular song of its day. I don’t know if Gene Autry wrote it, or—

AW:

Probably Smiley Burnette wrote it.

AM:

Yeah, but it’s a good ole song, “Be nobody’s darlin’ but mine, be honest, be faithful, be kind. Promise me you will always love me, be nobody’s darlin’ but mine, or—

AW:

—Or I’ll love my horse—

AM:

—or I’ll cream you.” So that was that group. Joe, after he left Country Gazette, went to Dallas from Springfield, Missouri, and was there for a couple years—and in searching about for places to play, when Joe was in the band, we had read an article in Pickin’ Magazine about a school in West Texas that had a bluegrass music program. So I called out and spoke, actually, ultimately to

Ed Marsh about Country Gazette coming out there and playing and doing a workshop or something. So they hired us—I'm going to say a thousand dollars—

AW:

And this was when Joe was still in the band?

AM:

Joe was still in the band. We went out there and did a couple days in Levelland, and then went on, probably to California or somewhere and played—or Colorado or somewhere. Then, when Bill Smith was in the band with Gene Wooten, we went back to the school, and they said, "Where's Joe?" and I said, "Oh, he quit the band," and they asked me, "We're looking for an instructor. Do you think he would be interested?" And I said, "Oh yeah, I think he probably would." So they got in touch with Joe—and I said "He's living in Dallas," and he was working as a buyer at half-priced bookstores, and had a kid then—already had one from Arkansas—Ashley was born in Arkansas. So Joe negotiated and got that job and went out to South Plains. That would be '84. He went out there in '84. So we're still knocking around, trying to—Roland and I and Gene Wooten and Billy Joe—and while we're in that configuration, and just after that "Bluegrass Tonight" came out, Eddie Tickner, our old manager from California, is now in Nashville because he's made a lot of money off of Emmylou Harris, and Emmylou moved to Nashville, so Eddie is there. Roland sees him from time to time, and when I'm traveling through, Roland tells me that Eddie's there—the Nashville Network was cranking up along in that era, and when you're twenty-four hours a day, you're struggling for content. So they had this program called New Country, and what it was, was an opportunity for artists to come on and play stuff from their new album. They had had bluegrass—I think Hot Rize had been on there—but it was mostly country artists. So Roland asked Eddie Tickner if he could get us on there, and Eddie said, "Sure." He was Emmylou Harris's manager, so he was somebody—and he got us on there. We got paid—I think they paid three hundred dollars apiece or something to do this Nashville Network show. We did the material from that *Bluegrass Tonight*—"Featuring their new album"—

AW:

So you got to do a whole album—it was that long a show?

AM:

Well it was thirty minutes—as many songs as we could do—so we got five or six songs in. So we hired Bobby Clark, who was from Oklahoma, who was in Nashville at the time—and I don't mean visiting; he was living there—and he's a great musician—great, great mandolin player, and a really, really fine player all the way around. We got him to play guitar. So what you see is me and Gene Wooten and Billy Joe and Roland and then off over here—you don't notice him very much—is Bobby Clark—because we're the band and he's not. Sorry Bobby. So they set it up,

we rehearsed, and—you know, this is Nashville. Nashville knows how to do music. So they record it multitrack, you know, and the visuals are all good. We rehearsed every song—I think we rehearsed every song—it wasn't like "Let's do a sound check and then we'll roll"—we rehearsed every song and did the show, and they said "We're going to do it in segments," and they told us "After this song—when you do this song, come back and play just a little bit more of it and say, 'You're listening to Country Gazette and we're doing—thanks for being here,'" and they would roll the album up, "You're hearing songs from Country Gazette's latest album, *Bluegrass Tonight*." So we did that, and it was great. Roland got to go down after the show, a week later, and mix the sound—it's like ideal. It's like Nashville knows how to do music. They can bitch and moan all they want about Nashville—

AW:

Well, as Tommy Hancock said why people left West Texas and went to Nashville, and he said, "Because they had a longing to go someplace where people play in tune."

AM:

Very good. You know, one of the—Joe Nick Patoski, do you know—?

AW:

Yeah.

AM:

He lives right around the corner here.

AW:

Oh, I didn't know that.

AM:

Yeah. I see him walking out all the time, and I say hello to him—nice guy.

AW:

Yeah, he is a nice guy.

AM:

And he's got this Willie Nelson book—biography—and you read in there, during the heyday of the Austin sound, somebody from Nashville comes to see what's going on and then goes back, and the report back is "What Austin is, is a celebration of amateurism," and I know what he means—and it's the same thing that Tommy Hancock was alluding to. But, you know what? Amateurs can be pretty fun and good—but they do have that about them—it's more like a game—music-making—"You've got a guitar? Come on—

AW:

—let's see if it works!

AM:

—it's not in tune—yeah—yeah, that sounds good!" So I understand what he saw—coming from Nashville, you would see that and miss—

AW:

—the good stuff.

AM:

Right—what the kernel of the nut is.

AW:

Yeah, and just like when we—those of us from the amateur world go to Nashville, we miss the—you know, like I listen to all that slick crap coming out of there, and sometimes I have to just make myself listen and go "Oh yeah, that started out as a really good song. The songwriting was good," or "the playing is good," because it's conformed to a thing that is not my cup of tea, so—

AM:

Yeah, Nashville has their thing they do, and they do it better than anybody—and music is it—and how to make music and record it and have it be very, very slick—and if you like that, then that's really good. So anyway—

AW:

Is that video still around, and do we happen to have a copy at the collection?

AM:

If it exists—which, I think it does—I mean I have a copy of it. You may have it.

AW:

Okay, I'll look.

AM:

It's also—some of it is on YouTube.

AW:

I wish I knew the whole inventory of what we have of yours.

AM:

Oh, it's okay. It's too much—nobody will ever want to know—but it's on YouTube. Some performances of it—some select songs are on YouTube.

AW:

Okay, I'm going to check that out.

AM:

All right. What time do you need to be done?

AW:

I don't need to be on the road until right around two—but we probably need to take a break and I need to hit the sandbox—

AM:

Yeah, I'm getting—toilet—

AW:

So let's put a—and I'd like to start on new SD card, because I'm about to run out of this one. So let's put a stop to it at this moment, and we'll reconvene.

AM:

All right.

***Pause in recording***

**Andy Wilkinson (AW):**

We can do it—now this is part two of the day after Texas Independence Day, 2012—Alan Munde, Andy Wilkinson here. We were—we just finished talking about the TNN video, and Gene Wooten, Billy Joe—pardon me—Billy Joe Foster?

**Alan Munde (AM):**

Foster, yeah.

AW:

—and Roland and yourself—and Joe was now headed towards South Plains.

AM:

Yes. As I said, Country Gazette—once with Joe and once without Joe—played at South Plains College and did a workshop, so we were very hip to—you know, that they had the program out



there. We continued playing and Billy Joe was in the band, but Billy Joe, he played everything—he was a really fine banjo player, and was a good fiddle player—and really what he wanted to do was to be in Nashville, and I think one of his goals, which he never made—and I don't know why—wanted to play with the Osborne Brothers—wanted to be the bass player for the Osborne Brothers and sing with them, because he loved their music. So that was always his wish, so he wanted to leave the band and try for that—try the Nashville thing—and so he did—and ultimately, rather than the Osborne Brothers, he got on with Ricky Scaggs, and was with Ricky Scaggs for several years—played banjo and fiddle and sang. I think he really liked his time—and it was when Ricky Scaggs was doing pretty well, you know, “Highway 40 Blues” and beyond that—

AW:

“Don't Get Above Your Raising,” and all that?

AM:

Yeah, “Don't Get Above Your Raising,” and just all these songs. “I wouldn't” —what is that—“I Wouldn't Change Your Name” —what's the name of that song? “I Wouldn't Change A Single Thing About You Even If I Could,” and I always wanted to go “I wouldn't change a single thing about you, even if I could, but—you know how your jaw pops when you eat? Oh, man that really irritates me. I'd change that.” But anyway, so Billy Joe wanted to leave and go do that, and so there we were. All of this sort of happened at the same time—is Anne was tired of me traveling so much, we had Rachel, and Rachel, by then, was in the second grade, and the oil—there was a second oil bust, you know, along in '83 or '84 —and housing prices fell terribly far, and she was very nervous about it all because here I am, this stupid traveling musician, and she's a barber—but she also taught at the University of Oklahoma as a hired instructor. She had her master's degree in English, and taught classes at OU as a hired hand.

AW:

As a—yeah—adjunct.

AM:

Adjunct.

AW:

Yeah, that's my gig.

AM:

Yeah.

AW:

No committee meetings.

AM:

Right—and she was just nervous about it all, and so she encouraged me to call the school, and—because they had hired Joe—so I did. I called and I spoke with John Hartin, and said, “I’m interested in a position there if one ever opens up.” At that time at South Plains College there was this program which was called Country and Bluegrass, and it had been around since ’75 or ’76, and it was the brainchild of a guy named Nathan Tubb, who was a—

AW:

I did an interview with Nathan Tubb.

AM:

Did you?

AW:

President of the school—college—right?

AM:

I think he was vice president or something—Dr. Baker was the president. I don’t think Nathan was ever the president, but he was a high muckity-muck—maybe the vice president or something, but apparently his family has been in that area for a length of time.

AW:

Yeah, or was he a dean of something?

AM:

Yeah, he was a dean. That’s a good question.

AW:

Yeah, I have to listen to my own interview to find out.

AM:

But it was his idea to start this program, and just from the stories I head John tell—and it may be different than Nathan’s story, I don’t know, but John always attributed it to Nathan and his very good West Texas common sense of walking in and interviewing students as they stood in line for enrollment. He would ask them, “Did you play in the high school band?” “Yes I did,” the student would say, and he would say, “Are you going to be enrolling in any of the music programs here at the college?” “No I’m not” “Why not?” “Well, I don’t like it.” “What kind of music do you

like?” “Well, I kind of like country music, and I’d like to learn to play the guitar.” And the way John sort of phrased it, he said Nathan went “Why—it seems to me interest in music is high, but enrollment in our music program is low. What’s the disconnect?” So he just interviewed them and found out that they were interested in country music. “If you had some guitar instruction and country bands, I’d be interested in that.” So I don’t know the mechanics of how they made it all work academically, to offer that job, but they ran an ad—I think in some country western magazine—and John Hartin saw it. John Hartin was a musician from Nebraska—played guitar and worked—was always entrepreneurial.

AW:

And still is.

AM:

And still is to this very day—and in a lot of ways is very much similar to Slim Richey. They’re the two people that I think are real similar.

AW:

How interesting.

AM:

John is a little more conventional than Slim. John also worked for Conn Musical Instruments, which is a big corporate musical instrument world—and to hear him describe him—and you should talk to John, also. He has an incredibly interesting story. He said they would saddle him with two hundred damaged trombones and tell him he had to sell them—and he would drive around to all the music stores and band programs and—I mean, he was a salesman—and drive around, and he said, “I told all these damaged trombones,” or saxophones. I can’t remember what they are. But he was a salesman, but he said, “Every Monday, you would go into a sales meeting, and no matter what you did last week, they demanded that you do more the next week,” and he said, “I had a big house, a boat, a swimming pool, I had all the stuff you’re supposed to have” —

AW:

Where was he living?

AM:

Somewhere in either Nebraska or South Dakota.

AW:

So it was in the Midwest?

AM:

Yeah. He said the pressure was just intense, and he said “I saw this as in the paper” —or in one of these country music magazines—“for somebody to teach guitar and whatever,” I don’t know how the ad was laid out—but he drove down, or flew down, or however he did it—he got down to Levelland and interviewed with probably Nathan Tubb and Dr. Baker. They asked him, you know, “Can you do this?” and he said “Yeah, I can teach all the instruments,” which was a lie. It’s not a lie—he could teach them all. Now, he couldn’t play them, but he could teach them. So they hired John Hartin to come down and head up this whatever. Joe always would say his first office was a converted broom closet in the women’s gym, and I believe—John kind of denies that, but I think that’s what it was. So he started there, and he knew in a way that is probably not—I’m going to it’s unique to him in that circumstance—how to do it. There are other people who are—have this gift of making lemonade out of lemons sort of world, but I think he had just had it with that corporate sales world. He would tell the story; he said, “When I told my boss I was leaving the company to take this job at this college, he said, ‘Boy, they must be paying you. I can’t imagine what they’re paying you to get you out of this job,’” and he says “You would not believe what I’m getting paid to do this,” and his meaning was, “It’s nothing. I just want out,” and he had a family—you know, the same musician story, “I’ve got a family, I can’t be traveling, and the pressure is getting to me,” so he got there, and he is really, really, really good at figuring out what people want and how to deliver.

AW:

And how to talk other people into doing it for him.

AM:

Exactly—just every way you can think of. He saw right away that Dr. Baker was intensely interested in certain things about this program, and he played everything he could to please Dr. Baker. Then the other thing he realized was that despite everything that colleges claim they are in their mission statement, the one thing they are is a numbers game.

AW:

Yep. How many widgets?

AM:

Right. You have to have “X” number of students to get “X” number of dollars from the state, and charge “X” number for tuition, and so—they are genuinely concerned about educating the kids, and everything they say they are, but the bottom line is not lurking far behind. That’s just the way America is.

AW:

Well, we could kindly call it a parameter within which we have to work.

AM:

Right—and it's a parameter that America is sometimes strangled by.

AW:

Uh-huh. You can't have a church if it's not getting bigger.

AM:

Exactly—all of the above, all of the above. And so John knew how to recruit students. He would go out and physically stand in the enrollment line, and “Are you interested in music?” “Yeah” “Well you want to learn to play guitar?” “Well yeah” “Well here, sign up,” so he would recruit students. Somebody even joked that he would go out to a Mexican food restaurant that had a little mariachi band, and that he would go out and pass his card out to them, trying to recruit them to come to school. He got things going, and about that time—this would be in the seventies—bluegrass festivals were making their way west, and there was some in Oklahoma, and maybe in Texas—and he had—somewhere in his mind, he identified bluegrass as a potential market to get students, so he took students with him to bluegrass festivals.

AW:

Did he not look at—which would seem the obvious thing to me—that “Nobody's doing this with bluegrass. Why don't we?” That sort of thing?

AM:

I'm sure—any way you could imagine it, I'm sure he thought about it, because he was—he did everything he could. His whole life was around promoting that program and playing music—he loved playing music. So he went to bluegrass festivals and recruited students there, and he hired his first—when the numbers got right, he convinced them to hire another instructor—and he hired his first student, which was Tim McCasland. Tim was an early student of his.

AW:

I didn't realize that Tim was a student or that he was one of the early hires.

AM:

Yeah, he was the first. He was the first after John. Tim played banjo, learned to play banjo, started teaching banjo, fiddle, and then they hired—got the numbers up again—and the third hire they advertised for and recruited Ed Marsh—Ed Marsh was the third one. He was from Virginia, but was at school at Western Kentucky in Bowling Green, Kentucky. So he came—I don't know what year—probably '78, '79, '80, maybe—and came there. Those three sort of were the core of it all, and they said, “Well, we need a recording program. Wouldn't it be cool” —see, this is John—“We need a recording program,” so they convinced them to install a recording program, and I don't know the Waylon Jennings connection—



AW:

—or the Tom T. Hall.

AM:

Well I know about that, because I was there for that—but for the Waylon Jennings thing, I think he donated some money or a piano or something and got a little recognition. Somewhere along in this—I believe '79 —Frets Magazine, which was—originally Frets Magazine was called Pickin, and Pickin' Magazine—John, in this whole time, is writing letters and making phone calls to anywhere, any magazine that'll do them—and got a response from this Pickin' Magazine, and either in interview over the phone or whatever—they did an article on South Plains College that has this bluegrass music in the school. It came out in the magazine. Somehow Tom T. Hall saw it, read it, and was doing a special for PBS—an hour-long presentation of bluegrass music from the Ryman Auditorium. But as part of it—maybe as much as ten minutes of this hour-long program was dedicated to South Plains College. He brought a crew out there and did a special from South Plains College. Between the Pickin' article and that thing was a big huge boon to the program, and got a lot, a lot of students—and got Mike Bub and Ron Block—and Mike Bub is a Nashville bass player, plays with everybody. Ron Block plays banjo in Allison Krauss' band. Stuart Duncan is the first-call fiddle player in Nashville. All of those were as a result of these articles and that program. Then another guy named—I think his name was Tim Austin, but I may be wrong—and he came there. One of the times I went, I met all those guys except for Stuart Duncan, he was never there. So in '83 or '84—must have been '83—I went out there just by myself to do a workshop, but I met Ron Block and Mike Bub and this Austin guy—and he wound up playing in Reba McEntire's band, and was on the plane that crashed, and was killed. So he was a South Plains College graduate, also—or student. So it was that—through John Hartin's efforts of publicity and getting the word out, and just the luck of the draw, he got a lot of good students. Let me back up. I didn't go out there by myself. I went out there about '85, because Joe was already there. So we had played there—Country Gazette—they asked about Joe and called Joe, and they hired Joe in 1984, so that was the fourth hire in the music program. Also in there, they started this recording program, and hired a guy named Randy Ellis, who was from Lazbuddie—I always loved that. I think—or maybe his wife was from Lazbuddie—but anyway, those West Texas places—and he was the sound recording guy, and they had a studio—the Waylon Jennings Studio. This was all located in what had been the maintenance building. The very interior part of that Tom T. Hall complex was the maintenance building.

AW:

So if it looks like a garage, there's a good reason.

AM:

Yeah. It's so oddly put together and everything—that's because it's, you know, mashed things around that. So in 1985, by the time Billy Joe had left, and Roland and I and Gene Wooten were

all that was left—and I was telling Roland that “I’m going to have to apply for this job,” and Roland basically, “Okay,” but I said, “You know, if you’d like to keep going, I’ll do weekends and summers and the whole bit,” and we did it for maybe one year like that while I was still at the school. So I got a job out there and started in August—or moved out there in August of 1986. Joe started in ’84; I started in ’86. At the time, as I’ve said, there was a big housing bust and oil crunch, and we had this nice house that was, in some ways, more than we should have had. Looking back on it, I think we paid eighty-five thousand dollars for it, which, back then, a fifty-thousand-dollar house was more normal, or even maybe thirty-five thousand.

AW:

I think when we moved back to Lubbock in ’79, we bought a nice four-bedroom house for forty, forty-five.

AM:

Yeah, so our house was eighty-five.

AW:

This was in Norman?

AM:

Yeah. I loved it. I loved that house. 201 Walnut. One of the real huge advantages of it, it was within easy walking distance to the OU baseball field.

AW:

Yeah. I was going to say, that’s right down by the campus.

AM:

Right. L. Dale Mitchell Field. I’d walk over and—really fun. Anyway, by then, Judy Hadley—are still very good friends with John and Judy Hadley—Judy was a realtor, and is a realtor now—and hadn’t been for very long, but we got her to handle our house. When we sold it she says, “You are the luckiest people in the world,” because the only person—because we got more than what we paid for it at a time when we should have gotten less. They call it underwater nowadays—should have been underwater, but she said “The only person who could buy this and do this has bought it. Who bought it was the navy ROTC for their incoming—he navy bought it for their incoming commander for the naval ROTC at OU, and they didn’t care—“How much is it?” That’s it.

AW:

Well, they were looking at whatever prices are in wherever—Washington, or—they didn’t care.

AM:

Yeah, and they said, "If that's what" —and I don't think they had negotiators that "Well, we'll give you this." "No, we'll take this." They just came in and said, "The commander" —or whatever they called him—"picked out the house. I want that one. How much is it?" and we said "A hundred and four thousand," and they said "Here." She went "Wow. You're the only house in town that's sold for what it's asking for," which goes to show you, location, location, location, because we were very close to the campus in a very nice neighborhood with doctors and lawyers living around us. I don't know how a banjo player and a barber got on the street there—how they let them in—but we had a real—I had a real good time at that house, and Rachel started first grade and second grade. She was in the third grade when we moved to Levelland—sold the house, loaded everything up, I went out to—when I went out to sign the contract and do everything, I went and found us a house to rent, and negotiated that, got it, came back, moved the family out there, and there we were in Levelland. I was to start teaching in the fall of '86.

AW:

So on the faculty then were John Hartin, Ed Marsh, Tim McCasland, Joe Carr, and you.

AM:

Yeah, and Randy.

AW:

And Randy, right.

AM:

Yeah, that was it.

AW:

Wow.

AM:

We'd have faculty meetings in John's office.

AW:

So before we put a cork in it today, just knowing Anne—and I don't know Rachel so well, of course, she was small—but was it tough getting her out to Levelland from Norman?

AM:

Well, you're asking the wrong person, but since this is my interview—she wanted to get out of Norman because she was afraid that I wouldn't have a job because—

AW:

Well, I mean we're always looking for job when we're in music.

AM:

Right, and what could I do? She forced me—and it was embarrassing to me—to go apply for jobs that I was not qualified for at all. One of them, just as an example—the Oklahoma Symphony was advertising for a tour manager, so she demanded that I apply for it, which I did. But I was so totally unqualified for it—it was an embarrassment for me to do that, but I did—never heard a word from them, because they knew—because what the tour manager also did was to indicate the bow—proper bow strokes on all the music, to where when an orchestra plays—

AW:

And nobody understood “Finger roll.”

AM:

Yeah—and all the fiddlers—violinists—look in unison is because somebody has marked the bow strokes on there, and that would have been part of the job. Well how in the hell I'd know to do that? I might have been okay as loading equipment or even driving the truck or even making hotel reservations, or any—you know, that part of it—but the rest of it, it was just totally ignorant, and I had no business at all doing that, but I did it. I delivered pizzas, to my huge embarrassment—because I'm from Norman, and I would go knock on the door, and there would be somebody I know, “What are you doing?” And I'm going, “Oh, it's Christmas, I'm trying to make extra money.” It was embarrassing, but I did it, and I did it every day that I had to. Roland, you know, if you're a musician, you do stuff, because you want to stay in the music. So she wanted to get out. She was afraid that we wouldn't be able to keep the house, that her barbering business was not going well—and if I had thought about it at all, or if I knew anything, I should have been concerned, also. But at the time, all I was feeling was sort of depressed from not being able to make the music go. Like I told Roland, “How come we don't play this gig? How come we can't play that gig?” so you know, I think part of my whole problem is that I never would go to Nashville. I think if I'd have gone to Nashville—not that—it just would have given me more legitimacy, and I would have been there among it, and there might have been better opportunities.

AW:

Well, instead of pizza, you would have done session work and that sort of thing.

AM:

Possibly. This is a whole different attitude nowadays, but to go to Nashville, it wouldn't have been for me—it would have been to keep the band together—to have a band. So anyway, what was I going to say?

AW:

Getting around to Levelland, yeah.

AM:

Oh, yeah—and she would say this, and I sort of held her up to this later on, when things got worse in Levelland—she said, “Any place in Texas is better than Oklahoma,” so by God, here we go to Levelland. She did not like it. It took her a while for it to sort of bubble to the fore, but I don’t think she ever really liked it.

AW:

No, I remember her telling me how relieved she was to go to Lubbock, and I thought, Well, it’s just a bigger Levelland, really.

AM:

You know what? Somebody would—and you’ve probably heard this—we were talking to somebody who lived in Lubbock, and told us, “You’re so lucky you live in Levelland.” I says, “Why is that?” He says “Because if you live in Levelland, you can go to Lubbock.”

AW:

I love it.

AM:

Meaning, if you live in Lubbock, there’s nowhere to go—Dallas—three hundred miles—and Joe would always laugh and would say, “You know, the great thing about Lubbock is you’re three hundred and fifty miles away from everything—or anything.”

AW:

What was it one of my friends suggested when they were having one of their interminable and innumerable campaigns to get a slogan for the town, and this person suggested “Lubbock: Where every trip is a vacation.” Obviously, he didn’t win, though.

AM:

You know, Joe always laughs at Levelland—they’re always trying to come up with “Levelland” Duh-duh-duh,” and one of them one year was “Levelland: Lubbock’s gateway to the mountains,” and it’s like you’re thirty miles from Lubbock and two hundred miles to the mountains, but Levelland is the gateway. So anyway, she—I think for good reason—for financial reasons and security and all those sorts of things, she was right. To take that job was the right thing, but it was in Levelland. Now, for me, I had a job, so I was focused on the job.



AW:

And you're still playing music.

AM:

I'm still in music, exactly—and I've got the summers and weekends, and just other stuff to do—and Rachel was having a hard time—I shouldn't say a hard time, because she's a bright girl—but was having a difficult time in school at Norman, and it's hard for me to figure, but in the first and second grade she had kind of a hard time. When we got to Levelland, she was starting the third grade, and she was incredibly fortunate—and I'll think of her name—at school, there was a history professor who—I admired him because he knew history, had been around a long time—but he was really a curmudgeon and conservative and kind of an asshole. I didn't like him for those things, but I liked him because he knew stuff—Billingsley, Mr. Billingsley—his wife had gone back to school and become a school teacher. The year we got there was either her first year or maybe her second year of teaching—and she was great. Rachel loved her, and you know, I think she was old enough and mature enough—not Rachel, but Mrs. Billingsley—and wise enough to have a sense of what's important and what's not important. Rachel really took to her, and after the third grade, Rachel never looked back and never had any trouble in school with teachers. She ran into teachers she didn't like—and it's real interesting—they're all teachers who had color for their names. So there was Mrs. White, Mrs. Black, and Mrs. Green—

AW:

—and didn't like—

AM:

—and didn't like any of them. So she took that to mean any teacher with a color name—

AW:

So she stayed away from classes taught by Professor Brown, or—

AM:

Right. So she did really well. I think Rachel did really well in Levelland, and really liked it, and to this day speaks highly of Levelland, and, I think, could live there. I don't think her husband could, but she just kind of knows it—what it is and what it's about.

AW:

Well you know, I think that's—because I make fun of Lubbock all the time, but I'm still there, and I get something out of it I wouldn't get somewhere else. So you have to recognize that kind of stuff and be able to balance it out, and then leave town when you can't stand it.

AM:

All right. Well let's draw to a close there.

AW:

Perfect, yeah.

AM:

And then we'll go eat.

AW:

That's a good place to stop. Thank you.

*End of Interview*



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