

## Steve Ripley

A rock and roll legend in our own backyard who has worked with some of the greats.

### Chapter 01 - 1:10

#### Introduction

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**Announcer:** Steve Ripley grew up in Oklahoma, graduating from Glencoe High School and Oklahoma State University. He went on to become a recording artist, record producer, songwriter, studio engineer, guitarist, and inventor. Steve worked with Bob Dylan, playing guitar on the *Shot of Love* album and on the Shot of Love tour. Dylan listed Ripley as one of his favorite guitarists.

The term Red Dirt was first used by Ripley's band Moses when the group chose the label name Red Dirt Records. Steve founded Ripley Guitars in Burbank, California, creating guitars for musicians like Ry Cooder, J.J. Cale, and Eddie Van Halen. In 1987, Steve moved to Tulsa to buy Leon Russell's recording studio called The Church Studio. He formed the country band The Tractors and was the co-writer of the country hit "Baby Likes to Rock It." The first Tractors album sold over two million copies.

Steve Ripley was inducted into the Oklahoma Music Awards Red Dirt Hall of Fame, along with Bob Childers and Tom Skinner. Ripley currently is Music Archivist and Curator of the Leon Russell collection for OKPOP.

What you are about to hear is a segment from Steve Ripley's yet-to-be-posted oral history interview, but we wanted you to hear these chapters as he talks about his relationship with Bob Dylan, dining with the Beatles, and his friendship with Leon Russell.

### Chapter 02 - 10:45

#### Concept of The Tractors

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**John Erling:** Today's date, April 17, 2018. And we're in your recording studio. Explain again where we are.

**Steve Ripley:** Well, were here at the Ripley Farm, which is about a mile from the original homestead and this is Building One of the studio where I mostly do digital transfers and archiving of Leon Russell masters. But is the building filled with equipment? It's where I live my life, guitars and microphones and tape machines.

**JE:** We want to talk about The Tractors.

**SR:** I've heard of The Tractors.

**JE:** This is a band you put together, formed, I believe, in 1988.

**SR:** That's close enough.

**JE:** The name, why The Tractors?

**SR:** It really goes back in a couple of ways to Jim Halsey, the country music entrepreneur or whatever, impresario, that I worked for for a while. He hired me, first to build a studio—we were going to put it in the Church Studio, Leon Russell's old studio, but it had been sold, so I was just there looking for another building and he decided to have me produce a record on Johnnie Lee Wills, close to his heart and, of course, mine too. Because the very first things I remember in life are listening to both Bob and Johnnie Lee Wills on 78s when I was three or four years old, a little baby, and Hank Williams records.

And so, you know, that's great and this is my roots and I get to meet the Bob Wills guys, it was all just a wonderful experience. And I say that leading up to two things: They were all great in this band. The steel player's name is Gene Crownover. Gene, who had played with Bob and Johnnie Lee and many others, I guess, over the years, was one of my favorite players. He played old-fashioned non-pedal steel guitar—it's like slide guitar, bottleneck blues guitar, really, but he was a master at it.

And if he were here I would still say it, he was slightly hard of hearing. So he played louder than he would have played. He set his amp a little louder and he hunched it. So it was very rock and roll to me, I mean, it was just great. I fell in love with him and his playing and all of those guys, Joe Holley and Johnnie Lee especially.

But anyway, that stuck in my mind and I thought, "Someday I'm going to do a band," now, that would have been '77, I believe. We had moved back from California to Oklahoma in '76, '77, somewhere in there I went to work for Halsey and continued through those years and it stuck with me. Some of them would do a small kind of—I used to think of it as a small asleep at the wheel, but a kind of up tempo rock and roll swing something or other, or a shuffle, I would call it, but swing, same thing.

Went to California again to work with Leon and do all that stuff. Played with Dylan and I just kept this in the back of my head. And I would call Gene Crownover every once in a while, and I'd say, "I still want to do that band. How you doing?" You know, we'd just chat.

"I'm doing that, that would be fine, great, can't wait," says Gene.

So that's one of the things that indirectly has to do with Halsey, 'cause he hired me to make that record, is one of my great experiences, that Johnnie Lee Wills record.

And then went to California and I did this and that, including the guitar business, but always writing songs and recording demos. Jim Halsey's son, Sherman, as he did every once in a while, came by our house and I either played him some things that I had or gave him a cassette and he came back.

But he says, "I don't know, sounds like the tractors to me."

And I got it from my standpoint because it's Oklahoma music but it conjures up a working man kind of deal and roots kind of thing.

Sherman's gone now and I never quizzed him as to why he said that. But that's where the name starts is with Sherman Halsey. I think just adlibbing it, or perhaps not, I just don't know. So I had the name, I had the concept, and when we moved back the last time, then, in say, '86, '87, Gene had already died and we bought the Church Studio and set up shop in there. I started making the demos that would become The Tractors.

You know, I have to say, we came back because my mom had cancer and I just came back to be with family. Not just to take care of her but I knew this was going to happen over and over as we got older. And our kids were small and we just decided we'd rather be in Oklahoma with the family.

I had serious talks with myself about, "Okay, so here I am, what do I want to do? Should I just go back to school?" I called TU and talked about going back to school and getting a master's or something. Then I thought, "Well, I should give the music business another shot," because I'd produced some records, I'd engineered some records, I'd worked building guitars, I'd been in the studio with Ry Cooder and those kind of guys in Hollywood. I'd done the Bob Dylan thing but, you know, I hadn't concentrated on writing songs and stuff.

So I just thought, "Well," going back to something a professor told me at OSU, should write about what you know. And I would say, "Do I get in or out of the music business?" is this conversation I'm having with myself. And I said, "Well, I should do what I really like to do, not try to make a record for what they might expect, you know, the current pop thing or country thing."

It goes back to those first records as a kid with Bob Wills and Johnnie Lee and Hank Williams, for sure, Hank Sr., and then, of course, Elvis came along, when I was still little, '54, so four years old. So I just decided to start writing songs that had to do with my life, sort of autobiographical. And I always do that, I continue to do that if I'm writing a song.

But one of the things I loved about the Wills records and about Hank records, really, if you went through the lyrics, and Dylan and some Beatles, is this mixture of not so much love songs for me because I'm not really a boy-girl love. Well, I was a fan of that kind of

songs from other people but as an example, John Fogarty, the Creedence Clearwater, which I really loved at the time, I don't think he ever wrote a boy-girl song. It would surprise people but if you went back and looked at the hits they're about any number of things but they aren't "Hey, baby, baby."

I kind of held on to that and I just mixed it all up, never expecting too much. But we had the Church Studio and started making demos. And that became The Tractors.

I have a new song that I probably won't remember but let me make an attempt to say these lyrics. It's called "Farm Music." Country music, I don't know where that is. I remember Bob Dylan telling me, "Well, you know, when I was a kid it was country western music. Where did that go? You know, now it's this and that."

I get that, you know, where is country music that I loved? And it is out there mixed in but I thought one day a few years ago, "So what do you play, Steve?"

And even in The Tractors to say, "Well, we play country music. And then people call us country rock."

I get that but Walt Richmond, the piano player and co-producer and my co-conspirator, whatever, he really hated it and so I guess I took a little bit from that. But country rock, you know, that's not something I like. Southern rock, I really detest being called that. I don't mind Lynyrd Skynyrd having existed, but it isn't what we do.

So country music and through The Tractors that's what I would say, because we were under the country music umbrella. But it occurred to me in the beginning of this song, "What do you play while I'm a new genre of one?" It's called "Farm Music." I'm from the country, what do you play? I play farm music, whatever that is. And this lyric goes: We're from the country, we play farm music. Where you end up is tied to where you start. We owe as much to "Johnny Be Good," as we do to "Your Cheatin' Heart." It's the original cowboy rock and roll, shuffle, blues, be-bop, boogey, big band. Take a drink and sing along. It's Bob Wills and Bob Dylan, Merle, Elvis, Hank, Chuck, Buck, and the Beatles, Louie Louie and Louie Armstrong. Make it go 'round 'cause that's the deal so you mix all this together and you try to make it spin. You know, that's my idea. So it's Louie Louie and Louie Armstrong, which I really quite like and it's really autobiographical and it's really true for me. Make it go "round like a merry-go-round, make it spin with a sweet melody like I used to hear back when I was a boy, back when my mama was holding on to me.

Now it's twenty years later, but that still sums up, that's what The Tractors were about in my mind. It was a concept of sort of farm roots and working men and this mixture of, I used to say just banality or banal or unimportant but funny, maybe, quirky, mixed with some serious stuff. 'Cause I'd through in the politicians and all that stuff, put it to a good beat. Like my daddy said, "Keep 'em dancin'." That's the concept of The Tractors, that's a

rather lengthy response to your question but it does involve Jim Halsey. It directly involves the Wills Brothers and Hank Williams and on up through Elvis and Chuck Berry.

A lot of times I said, "It's James Brown meets Chuck Berry." And there's some truth in that, there's some R and B going on. And that's still what informs my life, are those roots.

One time I mixed it all up in a stew and stirred it up and, you know, it's like gumbo as opposed to having an entrée of, let's say, shrimp.

**JE:** Um-hmm (affirmative).

**SR:** Or an entrée of this or that, you throw it all in a pot and stir it up and then eat that and it's more like that gumbo, is the idea of The Tractors. I'm not inventing anything, at best, it's all derivative purposefully. We mixed it up and stirred it up and served this thing that is more like gumbo than the individual elements.

Lordy, Lordy.

**JE:** The lyrics you just recited, those are new words for you?

**SR:** Those are.

**JE:** You haven't put them to music yet?

**SR:** It hasn't been finished, anyway.

**JE:** All right.

**SR:** It's called "Farm Music, Make it Go 'Round."

## Chapter 03 - 8:30

### Platinum Before Playing

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**John Erling:** The Tractors, who were they?

**Steve Ripley:** Okay, the band that I liked the best formed around the church and there was a guy named Ron Getman, who is a guitar player, and he was partners with me in the Church Studio, and another guy named Glen Mitchell. Ron's from Fairfax, Glen's from Stillwater, his dad was head of the music department and I'd known them both since my first studio in Stillwater in '73.

The Church Studio was for sale, we formed a partnership and bought it. So they were in the band, though Glen never played live. Ron and then Walt Richmond, piano player and cowriter, Ron co-wrote, but our main cowriter, Walt, co-wrote "Baby Likes to Rock It," and some others I quite like.

Casey Van Beek was the base player and Jamie Oldaker was the drummer.

**JE:** All five of these members had played for some very notable artists.

**SR:** They, we had five counting me, I guess.

**JE:** Right.

**SR:** Some of those articles that show up when you start researching The Tractors took the leap that's not true, which was session musicians, because you get a session guy, well, he's played with two hundred people, you know.

**JE:** Yeah.

**SR:** I mean, that's what they do. It's not that. Like, Casey was an original sort of Eagles guy when that was forming because he played with Linda Ronstadt and he played with the Righteous Brothers, he was the base player/singer. It wasn't like he was doing a date at one and then a recording date at five. So that's Casey.

Oldaker, of course, played with Leon and everybody around the church in the beginning of the Leon days but famously played with Clapton for like fourteen years.

And other people. I mean, the Tulsa deal, those musicians kind of reach out. David Teegarden, as an example, who has played on some Tractors recordings and at least one live show, he was most famously Bob Seger's drummer.

I, of course, played with Dylan and Ron in that group that I met when I had my first studio in Stillwater, Ron Getman and Glen Mitchell and a guy named John Crowder, who also was from Fairfax with Ron. They were really kind of a team and just fabulous, both of them. He was a base player, but they all moved to the New York area and they played with, I think Ron liked to say, "The folkies," Janis Ian and Leonard Cohen. They were on some really great records of those two and played in their bands.

After I played with Dillon those guys were still living in the Northeast somewhere and Leonard Cohen, who I was aware of as a wonderful songwriter but wasn't really a target on my radar, anyway, he came through and because Ron and John Crowder were playing in his band Charlene and I went to see the show.

Dylan was there and it was great but it was just astounding, another Okie influence, you know, one of the world's greatest bands that night in California somewhere at the Wiltern Theater, I think.

Anyway, so yeah, they'd all done that stuff. When I moved back to Tulsa Ron decided to come back to Oklahoma too from wherever they were living by New York City. I don't think they were living in New York but Pennsylvania maybe. They moved back.

Ron and I and Glen bought that studio and started doing this and that. Ron and I produced a Freddie Fender album that's really quite great from there and never came out. And then I was still on this deal of doing The Tractors records, and so just demos, just me knocking out songs.

And then Tim DuBois from Grove, he's down in Nashville doing bigtime stuff. Arista Records, which is Clive Davis's company, started a Nashville branch because country music because of Garth was exploding. You know, he told me more than once that he wasn't that interested in the job but Clive made DuBois president of Arista Nashville.

Legend would have it, I think it's true, legend in my own mind, I wrote him a letter. I had these little demos that I'd made. Arista Records originally was founded on the success of Barry Manilow. Clive Davis being one of the old guys of the record business that was still doing stuff. He's a little younger than the ancient guys like Ahmet Ertegun and those people but he's still one of the main cats, you know, he's really a real guy. He had discovered Barry Manilow or for whatever reason they had a partnership. Those Barry Manilow records were big and Arista Records became big.

So Barry Manilow, good or bad, blessing or curse, I don't know, I don't care, you know, it's not something that I would have been drawn to. You know, if you're drawn to Buck Owens you wouldn't necessarily sit around and listen to Barry Manilow all the time. Though I was always intrigued. But he also came up now and then in my life as an example of pop records that I don't care for.

The joke being, I wrote this letter to Tim DuBois, says something like, "Dear Tim," who I met in Stillwater, and that's another story, but I said, "Dear Tim, As much as I've ragged on," is really what I said in the vernacular, "Barry Manilow, I'm sure that disqualifies me from any Arista consideration. But here are these songs I'm working on. This band's called The Tractors."

And he just loved the whole deal. Sent me a little money and it took me a long time to get to the next time I sent him anything. But that's where it started, that funny letter to Tim that he probably still has, and there were many to follow.

But that's the beginning of The Tractors. And then we fought and argued about everything and it was up and down and up and down but we did really well. I don't think anybody, including the record label, I mean, they projected 40,000 sales, I know that, 40,000 units. It's a corporation, you know, the marketing company had to turn in projections and then the rest of their career based on how they do according to projections.

Well, they turned in 40,000 as projected sales and by the end of three months or six months we'd sold over a million records. It shocked everybody including us.

**JE:** So that was the debut album self-titled "Tractors," and they produced the single, "Baby Likes to Rock It."

**SR:** That's right.

**JE:** And it became the fastest selling debut album from a country group to go platinum. Pretty amazing.

**SR:** Yeah—

**JE:** I mean—

**SR:** ...makes all of us. Ha-ha-ha, we'd never played, you know, just in the studio, though everybody played, of course. I have people still saying, "Oh, yeah, I remember I used to see you guys in the clubs in Tulsa." Well, I have a bad memory but that's impossible because we never played.

And it was Ron that coined the phrase, "Platinum before playing," 'cause I remember we had started off as 35,000 records that first week and Tim said, "That's a pretty good start. If we hang in there that'll be good."

And then the next week was 80,000 and then it just went like that until 300,000 and we were on the *CMA Awards Show*. That's the first time we really played and we didn't really play, we just sang, but they used the track from the record, the instrumental part.

I had to get up there and we played like we played and I looked down on the front row and Chet Atkins was sitting down there. And it was sort of like, "Where am I?" And then it just continued on rather rapidly.

And "Platinum Before Playing," we would sell a million records before we ever played a gig. And as it turns out, we did it.

**JE:** Then that song was rewritten that "Santa Claus Is Coming in a Boogie Woogie Choo-Choo Train," and you sold a few of those as well.

**SR:** (laughing) It seemed like a good idea at the time, but I think it was.

**JE:** Yeah, yeah, of course it was.

**SR:** Yeah, so our second album ended up being a Christmas album. We were just riding on the bus because at that point we were playing, going down the road every night. I had a little very expensive but primitive Macintosh Notebook kind of computer and I started writing those words and they came tumbling out and it was pretty easy. I remember Getman really hated it but it was easy because we just re-sang it to the same track, put it on a record and it still does really well. Every Christmas. That's the thing about Christmas records, if you have a good Christmas record it keeps coming back every year.

## Chapter 04 - 8:42

### Baby Likes to Rock It

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**John Erling:** You wrote "Baby Likes to Rock It," with Walt Richmond.

**Steve Ripley:** I did.

**JE:** What was the very first moment the light turned on about it?

**SR:** (laughing) Well, I don't know that there's a moment. I'll throw in this that I virtually never even think about so I know I haven't told it too much, but my best friend from childhood was named Donnie Kaesee, K-a-e-s-e-e. And we played in our first bands together and we wrote songs and we recorded together at fourteen at Gene Sullivan's studio in Oklahoma City. And so he was my buddy our whole lives. He died about six months ago.

He comes to my mind almost every day because we were best buddies. And I only mention him because those are the first songs I wrote and they were really horrendous, you know. But he became an educated sort of fellow and a preacher. Got his doctorate, a doctor of ministry or something.

But about this time, when I had the studio, he loved to draw parallels between the two of us. For as a childhood love kind of connection, so we're always talking and I've got the studio and I'm trying to write songs. And he's trying to be an educated whatever he's going to be. I think getting his master's at OSU. He's studying literature because he's a writer, let's say, his ultimate would be back then to write novels and stuff, which is way beyond me.

All of that to say, he introduces me to a term called verisimilitude. I'd never heard it before, it may not even be exactly right, but the way I understood him to be telling me that day on the phone and I think it's the way he understood it, he'd just become aware of it from a class he was taking on literature. He's saying, "Instead of, 'We went down the highway,' make it real somehow. 'I went down Highway 51.' It's just like a trick, it's a devise to write with where you introduce a real thing to conjure up an image."

You say, "When is the first moment?" I can tell you, I said, "I'm going to give this a try, because what do I care, you know?" I'm making demos for a record deal that I don't think I'll get and the record will never come out. And we're doing Freddie Fender and we're doing some jingles and whatever. And I say, "I'm going to give this a try."

I start writing these lyrics and, well, I don't know when to throw this in, but about that same time I'd become friends with Walt. And he'd played on the Freddie Fender thing and some jingles and he was just coming around.

As it turns out, Walt's a genius. He came over wearing a straw hat that looked like when we were kids we'd call it plowed under. It just was, you know, here's Walt, very disarming the way he manifested himself or whatever. So he's coming around and I've been doing these Tractors thing that he's playing on and he likes it. He's showing me stuff, kind of like a teacher, just general talk. And then Ron's around some.

Walt, at that time, was playing Bonnie Raitt. And Walt came over, he was leaving at midnight. They were picking him up at the bus or he had a late night plane or something, he was leaving to go play with Bonnie. We were just trying to do stuff and I said, "Well, let's do a really fast shuffle."

When I say, "Let's do that," I don't want anybody to conjure up an image of, "Okay, we get the band together and we record a song." It's just Walt and I. These are the days of drum machines.

Drum machines have roots with both Kale and Leon but Leon, in some fashion, invented what we think of as the drum machine now, with an engineer at the kid, at the time, named Roger Linn. There's one over there, it's Roger Linn's machine.

He heard Leon talk about it enough, he went away and built it. What I mean by a very fast shuffle is more like Freddie King's "Hideaway," or something. "Ba-di-da-ba-dat-ka-chung, ka-chung, ka-chung, ba-di-da-ba-dit-a-bot-it, ta-choot, ta-choot, ta-choot, (singing) ta-the shuffle swing."

Walt says, "Let's do one like this." The Tulsa thing is not like it's only a Tulsa thing but it's to play swing stuff against a straight beat. You know, it's not like I'm a professor but it's kind of easy to explain, even to a non-musician because a straight beat, think of "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy," or a lot of songs from that day talk about straight-eights or eight-to-the-bar and stuff like that. And they mean, "Da-da-da-da-da-da-da," and it's going, "One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight." And a shuffle switches those eight beats so that they're not equal anymore, they all get an equal percentage of the time. It's one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, which is double of the bar, which is one—two—three—four, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight.

And a swing starts giving more percentage to the odd beats. So you'd go, one—two, three—four, five, and so it goes, instead of, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, one and two and three and...and like that, and it's swinging. "Ta-da-pa-da-pa-da-pa-da," as opposed to "Pop-pop-pop-pop-pop-pop."

Well, The Tractors deal, not an invention but Walt was so fabulous at it was playing swing stuff to a straight beat.

**JE:** Hmm (thoughtful sound).

**SR:** Cha-cha-cha-cha-cha-shiddely-ba-da-ba-da-da-beadle-da-ba-da. Where the drums are going, "Tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat," the piano and a lot of other things are going, "De-de-o-do-ba-da-jaka." It lays together really well and it's it at the heart of Chuck Berry and a lot of those things.

So, long rambling answer to say Walt says, "Let's do one like this." I put on the drum machine pretty fast and he plays that piano part that became "Baby Likes to Rock It." Then he left to go play with Bonnie Raitt.

And it's just like a Chuck Berry kind of piano part. I don't suppose anybody thinks about Chuck Berry at all anymore, I don't know, but he's at the formation of rock and roll. As important to those records of "Roll Over Beethoven," and "Johnny Be Good," and all those records is the piano part as much as Chuck Berry. To the point, the guy, I think, eventually sued him, going, "Well, listen, you know, you were playing in my band when you wrote these songs." Johnny Johnson was his name.

So Chuck's playing, "Ta-known-da-junka-junka-junka-chuck," and Johnny Johnson is going, "Ba-diddley-bad-a-bead-a-bad-a-bit," all over the place on piano, it's very important.

So Walt plays this sort of a Chuck Berryish song. You know, I say this and I'll say it for the record, it's a little overstated, but Walt's the only genius I know from Tulsa. He did a lot for me in terms of instruction and just being around him.

But anyway, Walt, aw-shucks me to death playing this piano part and goes plays with Bonnie.

Next thing, now remember, verisimilitude, throw in real names and real places and conjure up images. That's one. Walt plays his piano part. I say, "Let's play a fast shuffle," and he says, "Let's do one of these." So it's just drum machine for time and a piano part. That's it and we got nothing else. No words, no melody.

And he goes away. Three. So now we're kind of buddies, again, I like to say coconspirator but it's just because I love that word. But we're now a good team, we're into this thing. We're kind of buddies, I guess.

So as a joke, he sends me a postcard of Samantha Fox, who was a pinup girl or something of that time. This would be '87, I suppose.

And I get a postcard of Samantha Fox, semi-racy but no big deal. I pinned it up on the control room wall. Then I started carrying around a cassette of Walt's piano part, 'cause I'm not really a cowriter like those Nashville guys get together and say, "Let's write a song," and they spend as much time as we spend here this morning, and they throw up ideas and throw out ideas, throw up, I think that was a Freudian slip. But they throw out ideas and then they go to lunch. And then this afternoon they write with somebody else. That's co-writing.

I always like to throw in Roger Miller's quote that I believe is true. They asked him about co-writing and he said, "It's like a cat having kittens. It's best to crawl up under the porch and do it by yourself."

So I love that and I kind of go with that. But, you know, I didn't co-write maybe because I never had anybody around, I don't know.

## Chapter 05 - 9:52

### Building a Song

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**Steve Ripley:** So here we are in a situation where the piano part, the music exists, and I have to write lyrics on top of that to make it go. I'm listening to this boogie woogie piano part and all I can think is, "Boogie woogie, boogie woogie." It says, "Boogie boogie woogie." So then comes the lyric, "Got the boogie woogie woogie spread all over the place, got it stacked to the ceiling, got it stickin' in your face." 'Cause it was just, "Boogie woogie, boogie woogie, boogie woogie," as I listened to this piano part. And then being the first

verse, "It's Samantha's on a postcard showing off her chest, she don't know what she's doin' but she's tryin' to do her best." And I thought that's pretty good. Here's Samantha Fox, the UPS guy is driving the truck, the farmer is plowing the field, Samantha Fox is on a postcard showing off her chest. That's what she does for a living.

So we got some verisimilitude in my mind coming in. Kale, you know, he wasn't, to quote from *Little Big Men*, they weren't just playing Indian, they were living Indian. Well, Kale wasn't just playing J. J. Kale, he was living, he really was this guy who was all things; regular, brilliant, like Picasso brilliant, in my mind, guitar guy. That's what we talked about mostly our whole relationship was about different pickups or whatever and he helped me with the first Ripley guitars.

A lot of the times, he just parked his motorhome at some, in this case, trailer park down by Disneyland. And he'd go to Disneyland too, I think. But one of the lines was, "J. J. is in a trailer somewhere out in Anaheim." And I'm just doing this verisimilitude to death, boy. Before the Church Studio my version of it came along, or the people we bought it from had a studio.

After Leon's days, after Shelter, you probably noticed the sign in the other room, it was TICADA, the Tulsa Indian Council on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse. TICADA, they did a lot of great work. They were there until they lost their government funding. But after they left and we had the studio, we had a lot of Indians. They were used to coming there every day and they closed that down and they still came. I became friends with several of them that would come to my door wanting some money.

In my rambling sort of way, one of my favorite things about the Church Studio making records or anything is the first time I had a real conversation with one of these guys that used to come to TICADA, through the door, three in the morning, and he's very drunk. He's saying, "I want to talk to the preacher."

And I'm saying, "Well, this is not a church, this is a recording studio."

That went on for I don't know how long but at least a minute or two. "I want to talk to the preacher. I want to talk to the preacher."

And I'm saying, "Well, there's no preacher, I'm not a preacher. This is a recording studio." "So, uh, talk to Leon Russell because he knows. He's jiving his own way."

And I say, "Well, Leon's gone."

So we have a discussion about a general confusion now because he's in a haze, of the preacher and Leon Russell. And he gets that neither one of those guys are there.

You know, I'm intrigued, we're having this discussion through the door. And he's going, "I—I—ah, I just want fifty cents." You know, the first honest statement that came out of his mouth.

I opened the door and gave him two bucks or whatever it was. That became my deal, it was two bucks. I became friends with a few of those guys. And I said, "I love that. When

you come to my door just tell me what's going on, don't give me this runaround." I mean, I'm not picking on him, I grew to understand how hard it is to live on the street. And I'll always say that I never had any trouble with those Native Americans or Indians. They called themselves Indians and I think it's back in vogue. But they are Indians. I have my Pawnee Indian name. Now that I had to ask for, you know, *Asâkâhîku' Irârî* (Uh-saw-kaw-hee-ka Ee-daw-dee) which means old dog brother. And I figured it's me and Porter, my dog's Indian name. And now everybody that I know, including you. *Irârî* (Ee-daw-dee) is brother. *Asâkâhîku'* (Uh-saw-kaw-hee-ka) is old dog, so old dog brother.

I'm just saying, not only did I never have any trouble from that group of people, whether they were drunk or not, it made no difference, they were genuinely sweet, deep people. Now maybe it's not politically correct or whatever but I would never open that door to some white guy out there. But all of those Indians were sweetheart, and if we had to go to battle they would go to battle with me. They were never after anything except that fifty cents.

Dino is the first one. I don't know Dino's last name. He was a giant man or a big man, a warrior and he was walking around going to people's doors asking for the fifty cents. I would see him walking. I could just go right back a hundred years and he would be like a warrior walking. He walked proud and he did art. You know, it wasn't very good maybe, whatever, but at least he tried to do a thing, you know, to get his money.

So Dino became part of "Baby Likes to Rock It." "Dino's walking up and down the streets all day, trying to make it pay. Now I had Samantha Fox, I had J. J., I had Dino and none of those things stayed."

The Church Studio has a basement, a main level where the studio was and some upstairs. And we were always so far behind on that Tractors record it took, depending on how you count, three to five years to finish that record from when Tim said, "I'm going to go for this."

And that means seven days a week, all around the clock. I slept on the couch and just worked because it seemed like it was failing us trying to figure out what The Tractors were. I made those first tapes almost instantly, but then trying to figure it out and make it go was terrifying to me.

Walt would come every day, basically, but I was there around the clock. That's why I talked to the Indians through the door because I was there all the time. My kids were little I'd go home now and then.

**John Erling:** When you said three to five years you meant?

**SR:** The album.

**JE:** The whole album.

**SR:** The album.

**JE:** But “Baby Likes to Rock It,” I took a piece here, and I took a piece here. It was like you were building—

**SR:** It was and that’s the way I make records.

**JE:** ...building a song.

**SR:** That’s true.

**JE:** Oh, that’s your, that is your style.

**SR:** It is. Some of them fall out. You can listen or read interviews with songwriters and some of them just fall out of your mouth or whatever. And some of them are really hard to come by. And it took a long time to work all this stuff in to become what was known as “Baby Likes to Rock It.”

**JE:** Bob Dylan had some times when he could write a song in ten minutes, it just came out of him.

**SR:** Yes. He could write a song. You know, Jerrod Gullhair that works with me now on the Leon stuff, we’re transferring a lot of stuff and we hear Leon going, “Na-na-na-na-na,” because he’s forgotten the words to one of his own songs.

And I said to Jerrod, “The only difference of Bob Dylan, if he forgets the words he just writes some more that are just as good, on the spot.” Not to say that he doesn’t work at them sometimes too.

So yeah, it took me a long time. I was going to say that in the basement was a kitchen and I’d work on around the clock and I was there by myself. It was a lonely, scary time and great time too. We didn’t have all this TV we have now. It was late at night and all you have on the TV are preachers and infomercials. Cook a baked potato faster than a microwave, you know, wait! Now what would you pay? So hucksters and then preachers.

I’m a religious guy and my dad was a cookware salesman in some part of his life so I like both of those things. And that’s what I would watch. Part of the deal was Jimmy Swaggart. It was the period where Jerry Lee’s cousin, preacher Jimmy Swaggart, had his meltdown.

But one of the lines that stayed in “Baby Likes to Rock It,” keeping with verisimilitude, was, “Jimmy’s on the TV, Killer’s on the stereo.” So I liked that. It had this guy in this song listening to Jerry Lee Lewis and his cousin Jimmy Swaggart is on TV preaching. So I liked that quite a lot and that one stayed in the song.

These other ones DuBois nixed a lot of that. Samantha’s on a postcard, he said, “Can’t you just take the girl dancing? How about that?”

So now it opens with, “She likes to take me dancing on the outskirts of town. She’s still a go-go girl trying to do her best,” so that’s still in there, kind of, but he knocked out some of my verisimilitude.

Anyway, so “Baby Likes to Rock It” evolved over time, not too much time. And then Walt worked on it extremely hard at his house to change some of the music and the

drum machine stuff. Like I said, he's a genius and together that came to be the groove, the thing that it is now.

It lives in infamy. What is it? Oh, the humanity of the Hindenburg crashing, the blimp blowing up in the air as The Tractors as much as the Rock of Gibraltar or something. It does go on, it's going to go on, I hope it does. The checks get smaller perhaps but we have some little bit of, you know, immortality.

**JE:** The Tractors were nominated for two Grammy awards. One the *Country Weekly*, 1995, Golden Pick Award for Favorite New Group. I could go on and on all the attention you received.

## Chapter 06 - 9:13

### One Mic / First Take

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**John Erling:** Is it true that you achieved your distinctive sound in several ways? Like from the use of only one microphone? Recording a song on only one take?

**Steve Ripley:** That is true but it's not as simple as that. One of the things that we liked the best, we, meaning this group of folks or Walt and myself, are those old records where they really did record with one mic. Or even if it were three or something. Bob Will's records but all rhythm and blues records.

We're talking and there's a little mixer here for the microphones. I can see it's four channels and then some other miscellaneous stuff, pre-amps and levels and EQ. So it's a small mixer. Well, that did not exist, I mean, there was no way to mix things electronically. So the mixing in the old days, and I learned this from Gene Sullivan, who had Oklahoma's first studio and was my first teacher, really, because he made hit records in the '40s. He would talk to me about that.

Then Johnnie Lee would talk to me about that when I did his record. The way they mixed those records, mixer is an old term, you're mixing things together. But if the banjo was too long you put him further from the microphone. There's just a microphone and the singer is going to sing into it. And they have to get a level on the singer, then everything else has to fall into place. Whether they literally put Xs on the floor, which they did sometimes, or just moved people around.

You know, this guy Gene Sullivan who played guitar wonderfully and had a Martin that I still yearn for. Gene's been gone a long time but this prewar Martin guitar, one thing about those instruments like Stradivarius or something, they are beyond reason loud, I mean, people are trying to figure out how to do that. Whether they were flukes or not I

do not know, but Gene's guitar is just a small Martin that's really loud. He was a harmony singer with a guy named Wiley Walker. "Wiley and Gene" was the name of the act.

Gene would sing harmony and play the guitar. And Wiley was a fiddle player. It was like a duo almost, but like a little, tiny Bob Wills. That figures into my concept of The Tractors too, "Wiley and Gene." Funny songs, serious songs.

He wrote a song called "When My Blue Moon Turned to Gold Again" that became a standard and cut by people like Elvis. Gene would tell me about those old days. They made all their records, imagine the microphone and Gene singing close enough to the microphone to make a blend with Wiley Walker who was singing the lead. And Gene singing the harmony on this one microphone.

But Gene had to play with his neck turned to the right to sing into the microphone but his guitar was turned to the left because it was too loud for the vocals.

**JE:** Hmm (thoughtful sound).

**SR:** He had to point it away. And that's the way they overcame it. So a mixer is that thing now where we have them taking multiple mics and mixing them together. The records that we loved were these one-mic records. Again, it might have been two or three, but the fact is, the room, the air, the whatever did the sound part.

So how do you do that with a rock and roll band? Well, it's impossible, it's virtually impossible. People say we did it old school and were all there at once playing. I can dig that. You know, there's something about being all together and playing, that's part of the thing.

But I sacrificed that for this idea because when you do that, well, the drums are so loud on the vocal mics. Johnnie Lee would say, he played banjo on the early Bob Wills records, they had to put him in another room because the banjo cut through so much that they couldn't get him far enough away. And it's not a banjo joke, it's just the truth of it.

Also, if you have two guys or five guys there, it's hard to just go, "Okay, here's a song, it's in D, here we go. One, two, three, four, play." When nobody knows the song, nobody has ever heard the song, nothing. So that's an impossibility of some kind. You get in a studio with a band and everybody's there to do this old-fashioned thing of playing all at once.

Number one, you get a mix through the mixer, which now is as wide as this room, with a guy that's hopefully great doing the engineering, getting the sound on the snare drum and all of that stuff. And then you can't hear each other in the studio so you have to wear headphones. The guy has to create individual mixes for the players, that's laborious.

By the time the musicians learn the song enough to play, well, you have spent hours or quite a bit of time. The idea of it being fresh in a first take is gone away and it's not going to come back. So here's what The Tractors records are and the way I still make records now. Somebody has to go first. Somebody has to frame it out. What is this song? Like Walt

saying, "Let's do this one," well, he didn't know what he was going to play, we just picked a tempo, started the drum machine, and then he winged it.

Well, I'm telling you, he didn't know what the song was going to be. We just had a form, we kind of picked a key, or I think he just winged that, and he just played the piano. I might have chopped that a little bit but that essentially became the piano part. So it wasn't just a first take of some song you've rehearsed for a week at the rehearsal studio. This was the first time the song has ever been conceived of and he is playing the part that is going to be on the record.

That happened more than once but when I did most of the songs I'd have the idea of the song. I would turn on the microphone and, again, the drum machine for time, if nothing else, so I'm playing in time. I would start singing and playing my acoustic guitar and frame out the song. Even that is a first take, meaning, first take in the universe, not like I practiced and practiced and now I'm recording. No, I'm recording it by myself. And then you just build it up from there.

So in comes Ron to play some guitar. And I then can say, "This song is in F, it's a shuffle or it's not. Let's have a go at it." He has never heard the song at all.

**JE:** Hmm (thoughtful sound).

**SR:** And I'm telling you, whatever he plays anybody, anybody, whatever they play that first time is going to be the best in some way. There's going to be mistakes because he doesn't know the song, you know. It's not like we're talking some kind of sixth sense or something. There is some of that. By the time he plays it two or three times, and at that point he knows the song, whether it's Walt or Ron or whoever, the meat of it may come from the second or the third take. But the magic is probably going to come from that first one when he didn't know the song at all.

That's a Tulsa thing, in my mind, and that recording process, I'm not saying I invented it for the world but I invented for The Tractors. Because it was just an idea of, "What do we want? We want first takes. We want a sound of the room. We want the freshness of the first time you've ever heard a song. What are we going to give up?" Well, we're going to have to give up everybody being there at once.

There's the misunderstanding of when I say it's a one-mic, first-take record. It isn't that five guys were there. We did that some but most of it is like a sculpting process, a layering where people just come in kind of one at a time. But they get to be in that instance the guy in 1940s when they're just playing the one microphone. They don't have to worry about mistakes because I'm not going to leave any mistakes on there that embarrassed them. They just play and I go, "That's great, thanks," and it takes a long time. It's kind of tedious but you layer this stuff on. And even that is not some grand scheme. It's like when the bass is done, when the words are all on there correctly, when I'm semi-singing in tune, when

we've got some harmonies, we got the piano, we got the solos, I'm as relieved as anybody to say, "That's it." It isn't finessing for years. It's like when all these elements are finished, that's it, call it a record.

I'm telling you, it's very much like the joke of the sculptor, he's got a nice sculpture here of a dog. The guy says, "Well, how do you do that?"

And he said, "Well, I chip away everything that doesn't look like a dog and then I'm done."

**JE:** (laughing)

**SR:** You know, that's very, very much like The Tractors records.

## Chapter 07 - 6:25

### David Letterman

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**John Erling:** The whole Tractors story takes off and you guys must have been in some tall financial cotton.

**Steve Ripley:** (laughs)

**JE:** The money came...

**SR:** Rolling in.

**JE:** Rolling in.

**SR:** Barrels.

**JE:** How did you take the words right out of my mouth? Yes. Is that what happens?

**SR:** It is by no means what happens. It's a rough, horrible business and I don't want to dwell on it because it's like on the couch with a counselor or a psychiatrist. But a lot of money went rolling by and I can't complain about that. But the people that made the most money were the record company people and song-publishing people. The money that came in to me went back into making the next Tractor sing. So it's like feeding a black hole.

I don't want to dwell on it too much but it was very, very painful.

**JE:** Was money misdirected that should have come to you?

**SR:** No. Misdirected implies some kind of accident or oversight. Uh, they were directing as best they could. The record companies would never give me any money, never give anybody any money. That's their game. I don't fault them for it, but they will fight to keep from writing you a check. And a lot of time artists miss money, in a way, because by the time you make the record—they paid for doing that—you can't take that out. You know, they gave the money to make the records, so there's that.

Back then, music videos were big and, boy, you spent a ton on those. And record promotion and all that stuff. By the time you deduct all these things and it's a year or two

before that money from sales—if you happen to sell any records—starts coming in. Well, you’ve got such a debt incurred that they still never have to give you any money.

We just sold so many records so fast that they did have to write some checks. And we were very happy to get some money. And then it just kind of became a nightmare, not just with the record company, and with Tim DuBois, and with my band, you know, it looked like we were making millions of dollars. And the only logical explanation was I was keeping it from them, or whatever the story might be, because there just was distrust at every turn.

**JE:** So they thought you were keeping money when—

**SR:** I think so.

**JE:** ...the record company was—

**SR:** I don’t know, we fought all the time and...

**JE:** The record company was keeping the money, it wasn’t you.

**SR:** Well, you know, I drove a BMW and I had a big house, so...

**JE:** So it looked like?

**SR:** Well, you know, there was money to do that but it still was fancy income tax guy suggestions that made that happen. But in any case, I’m not griping about it all, I’m just saying that out of those millions of dollars that happened because of selling two million records, most of it just stayed in Nashville or New York, I guess. That’s my vision.

The Tractors was a concept, not a band. And then Tim loved the idea of The Tractors and wanted to call it The Tractors, not Ripley and The Tractors. That’s all fine, I liked all that and still think it was a great idea. And then these guys that were my friends became the core of the band. We’d still never played but we did that CMA show and sang, “Baby Likes to Rock It,” to already prerecorded music.

Then we did two songs at an AIDS benefit, really the very first time we’d ever played. We played the “Tulsa Shuffle,” and “Baby Likes to Rock It,” with various artists at an AIDS benefit in Nashville. And that was great and my first time to play in, I don’t know, fourteen years. So it was great fun for me.

I mean, it isn’t like I don’t like to play gigs. Then, truthfully, the first real show biz thing that we ever did as a band was a *David Letterman Show*. We were the fastest country group to go platinum.

**JE:** Yeah.

**SR:** Meaning a million sales. Dave says that on the introduction, I’ve seen it similarly recently. That Dave publicist and whoever did that, the hook and the opportunity to get us on the *Letterman Show*, which was great.

**JE:** Was it a fun experience to be there?

**SR:** It was.

**JE:** And he interacted with you prior to the show or not?

**SR:** No.

**JE:** He wouldn't talk to you before?

**SR:** No, no he didn't do that, I don't think.

**JE:** Right.

**SR:** He was pretty famous for not talking.

**JE:** Yep.

**SR:** I didn't see him talk to Paul. He was up in his office. But to be honest with you, I think he had the flu, it's what they told me.

But it was a good show and—

**JE:** What about Paul, did he come around and talk to you?

**SR:** He did, it was great. They were the yin and yang or something.

**JE:** Yeah.

**SR:** They had done this so long. And they, in those days, especially, did skits. They'd do that in the afternoon.

**JE:** So then after the appearance on the *Letterman Show*, that must have kicked in the sales like crazy.

**SR:** Well, it helped. I didn't ever really see any. We were selling so many records that, you know, I didn't see any big bloop, but it was a good thing.

**JE:** Did you get invites to appear as a group, out of that?

**SR:** Yeah, it was all one thing, though. To separate it out's not fair to the story, I don't think. We were just on fire.

**JE:** Yeah.

**SR:** And I did probably an average of three or four interviews, be it press or radio or whatever, every day, at least four or five days a week.

I remember Tim DuBois left a message, no cell phones yet. I think I called him from a pay phone. He knew I was reluctant to play live. They'd had this invitation to do the *David Letterman Show*.

You have to remember, we'd never played a gig. And I'm reluctant to do that, maybe more so in his mind. I had created that myth of myself more than it really was, but I remember him saying, "Come on, Steve, get some balls and do that show." Something like that, you know. "Be a man, you got to do this one, this is too big not to."

**JE:** Um-hmm, um-hmm (affirmatives).

**SR:** The core group started to solidify because of the things that we did. Everybody always plays on everybody's recordings around town and everybody's hoping to get the break or get a song cut or something. And so The Tractors actually, to all of our astonishment from everybody, kind of took off.

So here we go, we've got a career. We're on the *David Letterman Show*, by God.

**JE:** Right.

**SR:** Now I've got a manager and I got a business manager, I, meaning The Tractors, but really me. And I've got booking agents and a personal manager. The crews around me were stacking up faster than I could count.

## Chapter 08 - 4:20

### Brooks & Dunn

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**Steve Ripley:** And we get the offer of thirty-five shows with Brooks & Dunn. The Tractors essentially, with me just being the engineer recording the deal, had made the demos of Ronnie Dunn that got him the Brooks & Dunn thing with the same label with Tim DuBois.

I always liked that thing of same musician, same studio that made Ronnie Dunn's "Boot Scootin' Boogie," and a couple of his songs that later became Brooks & Dunn hits. Made it to church. Tim told Ronnie, "You have to move to Nashville to do this."

And he told me, "We have to stay in Tulsa to do this," because it was a part of the song called "The Tulsa Shuffle," and, you know, it was just like some weird thing to them. So that's pretty wise.

Then we get a call from my manager Alan Brown who says, "We have an offer," meaning The Tractors, "to open the show for Brooks & Dunn. Thirty-five guaranteed shows. Seventy-five hundred dollars a night."

I think we were in the studio rehearsing or something but we were there. And I remember thinking real farmer Ripley style the story all my life has been you can't make any money on the road. That's always interesting because it's always thrown right alongside somebody saying, "We can't make any money making records, you have to go on the road."

That's the truth, you can't make any money on the road and you can't make any money making records. If you do, you're lucky. So here we go. Just imagine that, that somebody who never had any money whatsoever, the Dylan year was pretty good for me, not rich folks, but nice. Seventy-five hundred dollars times thirty-five.

And I say to the guys, "Don't tell me you can't make any money on the road. Last time I really played in the band was back at OSU and then I put myself through college playing for two or three or four hundred dollars a night for the whole band. So don't tell me this is going to be fabulous."

We rehearsed it and we went out with Brooks & Dunn. About twenty shows into that Brooks & Dunn year, which is the first year, '95, records are selling, all that stuff, I realized that we were really, Charlene and I, were in debt two hundred thousand dollars. I don't

have any money. Those shows paid seventy-five hundred dollars a night but I realized when I had all these manager people sending me detailed stuff, it cost twelve thousand five hundred to show up. So we lost five thousand dollars every show.

**John Erling:** Hmm (thoughtful sound).

**SR:** Plus miscellaneous, on average.

**JE:** Hmm (thoughtful sound).

**SR:** We had a bus for the band, they insisted on that. We had a bus for the crew, so we had two buses. We had a small equipment truck. I think there were sixteen people on salary. Everybody had to have their own hotel room. We had to keep up with Brooks & Dunn. Simplified, it's that's story.

A lot of times the record company would just pay the opening act to take the opening act because it's a big tour. You want to get out there and play for half a million people. But whatever it pays, and this time, Ronnie Dunn, we knew him and it was generous of Ronnie. We get seventy-five hundred dollars a night, well, that'd be okay if you're in a van—

**JE:** Um-hmm (affirmative).

**SR:** ...traveling down the road. But we had to keep up with Brooks & Dunn, they might be playing in Mississippi and then Idaho. Everybody goes together, it costs a lot to do that.

**JE:** Seventy-five hundred was for the entire band.

**SR:** Oh, of course.

**JE:** Then you split it up, yeah.

**SR:** Right.

**JE:** So you were losing money all the time.

**SR:** I was losing money, kept losing money, to the point of saying to the booking agent, "This is just not going to work."

And then one time, Walt sort of quit, was a bluff or not, but that booking agent ex-Halsey guy I'd known a long time, says, "If you quit and cancel these shows you'll never work again."

It was a real threat.

**JE:** Um-hmm (affirmative).

**SR:** Kind of a mafia kind of a deal. I felt thuggish. I don't know that I should because I loved him and maybe I did forgive him but I didn't like that very much. He left me no choice.

**JE:** So you quit?

**SR:** No, we kept playing.

**JE:** You did keep playing?

**SR:** 'Cause I didn't want to have that. So Walt kept playing and we finished out that year. We won the CMA Award you're talking about and we were nominated for two Grammy's. There was good and bad stuff.

**Chapter 09 - 3:52****The White House**

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**John Erling:** You were also invited to play at the White House.

**Steve Ripley:** We were, it was the end of that year so it had to be '95. Actually, twice, and we didn't go. I mean, it's the end of '95, I was way in debt. As soon as the tour was over, it was October or something, Jamie went to work for, I think, Peter Frampton. It wasn't his fault. Jamie was already working with somebody else because we were through, at least for that year if not period.

And then you can play at the White House, that had been great, I loved being asked. We were invited to play for Hillary's fiftieth birthday party. Was one of them so you could just back up, find out what year that was and that's the year. One of the two was '95. We'd been playing and we were on the *CMA Awards*, this time getting the Video of the Year Award, whatever it was. I think Jamie and I are the only ones that went. And, oh, you know, it's great to be asked, like I said, but you have to pay your own way. The taxpayers aren't going to pay for The Tractors to come to Washington. So it would have cost that twelve five, or whatever it was.

**JE:** So you didn't go?

**SR:** We didn't go.

**JE:** You didn't have the money to get yourselves there.

**SR:** How? It was an impossibility. And then we were invited again, this one was for a barbeque on the lawn, I think, for the Senate or the congressmen.

**JE:** Man.

**SR:** That was a different time.

**JE:** Bother you that you missed that opportunity to play?

**SR:** Hmm (thoughtful sound).

**JE:** That would be an historical play.

**SR:** You have to know me. Well, I do love to play but I'm very insecure.

You know, if Bob Dylan called right now, on the way, "Bob, how's it going?"

"It's going good," you know. "My guitar player quit, I need you to come play."

I cannot tell you what I would do because I only could do that with Bob back then 'cause it sort of unfolded bit by bit, number one. But I was younger and I had more nerve. I don't have that nerve.

So getting invited to play the White House is a great thing and you can't take that away from us, me, whatever. Not having to do it is really a plus for me.

**JE:** (laughing)

**SR:** So you know, it's a double win, or at least it balances out. Now, I would tell you, I wish right now that we had done it.

**JE:** Yes! The pictures.

**SR:** Because it'd be over and it'd be like the *Letterman Show*, we did it, you know.

**JE:** Yeah.

**SR:** But if I got a call that said, "You can be on the *Tonight Show*," I'd just go, "Well, I don't know how to sing a song. I'm not going to go be on the *Tonight Show*."

**JE:** Your first action is to say no to all these things. But then after you've said no, maybe you start thinking it through and think, "Well, maybe I can or I should have."

**SR:** Maybe, but there's not that many times. DuBois told me to be on the *Letterman Show*. It's like the booking agent later in some fashion but I really couldn't say no to that, and I wanted to do that.

**JE:** Sure.

**SR:** The White House invitation came at the end of that horrible nightmare year when the guys all hated me and whatever the deal is. We fought all the time and we finally kind of came to the halt on that year and to get them all together again.

But that's not the reason. I would have done it.

**JE:** If you had—

**SR:** I would have done it.

**JE:** If you had the money.

**SR:** If I had the money and Jamie wasn't out playing with somebody else. Because he was booked on that night, I checked.

**JE:** Yeah.

**SR:** You know, Clinton played the saxophone, he probably didn't know anything about it, but there was the White House Social Coordinator or whatever, she liked The Tractors and we had been to the White House on different times. Boy, we walked all over the White House and the Oval Office.

**JE:** You got a tour of it, you just never played.

**SR:** Yeah. Didn't met anybody and I didn't have anything to do with that except we were just in the ethos or whatever.

**JE:** Yeah.

**SR:** This person knew about us and so we didn't do the first one. So they invited us again and we didn't do that. By that time, I just don't think it was realistically a possibility. But there was always a lack of funds.

**Chapter 10 – 7:09****Bob Dylan, the Gospel Years**

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**John Erling:** Let's talk a little bit more about Bob Dylan. Robert Allen Zimmerman, born in Duluth, Minnesota, grew up in Hibbing, Minnesota. What year was it that you played with him?

**Steve Ripley:** Mainly 1981.

**JE:** I suppose like anybody else he could be talkative, he could be up, he could be down?

**SR:** He was pretty stable the years that I was around him, and maybe the mystic factor was down a little bit, 'cause it was the gospel period. He was disarming and if he were here right now it'd be like a regular guy talking, you know. There was some of that, sometimes he wouldn't, but mostly with me he was a regular guy.

**JE:** So this mystic that he liked to project of him being reclusive—

**SR:** No, he's all of that.

**JE:** He—he is all of that?

**SR:** Yeah. He's just like that other story in *Playing Bob Dylan*, he's Bob Dylan. And I don't know what that's about. You know, the blind man feeling the elephant reference, it's old, old fable or something, whatever you call that. There's five blind men and they don't know what an elephant is, and so they're going to show them an elephant.

And one guy is feeling the side of the elephant, he's going "An elephant is like a wall, it's big, you know, kind of a hard wall."

And one guy's got the trunk and he said, "Well, an elephant, it's like a hose, like a fire hose, that's what an elephant is."

That story is so great because that's the way we live our lives, we're just blind men feeling a part of the elephant. Getting the whole picture is really hard.

**JE:** Right.

**SR:** And so I just saw part of the elephant. I know the Bob Dylan I know and it was a great period to know him.

**JE:** Yeah.

**SR:** Because everything was straight ahead. We prayed before the gigs. He loved music and he loved Oklahoma and he loved Leon and he loved Kale. He didn't like the slick anything and all of that you might imagine Bob Dylan to be and he was all of that.

I think he loved me, I believe that he did. And I believe part of what he loved on the gig is that, you know, you either choke or you swing when you get up to bat, and I have choked at times. But I intellectually or consciously was not going to just cower or not do it. So when he pointed to me, I played. I'd turn up loud and play. I'm not a great musician and I think part of what he loved was I was apt to make a mistake at any time. You know, I was not the regular...

Now Fred Tackett had played in the band, session guy, played with a million people. He never made any mistakes.

**JE:** If you made a mistake did Mr. Dylan get on you about it or did he laugh about it or just ignore it?

**SR:** (laughing) No. I don't even know that I did, I just know I stepped up and played with authority.

**JE:** Yeah, you probably didn't make any.

**SR:** Well, I had to. You know, they just released the Gospel Years. Every once in a while a company puts out massive compilations, they call them bootlegs. There's a recording of every Bob Dylan appearance since he was a little kid.

**JE:** Yeah.

**SR:** They're such fanatics. You can find them all. To fight that they started making official compilations entitling them "Bootlegs." And we're up to Bootleg 10 or 12 or something by now. And whether they called it Bootleg, I don't know, but that's what this is. And it's the Gospel Years.

I was in one of those years, that's '79, '80, and '81. By the time I played, he was playing the old songs too, so it was a perfect time. He was straight ahead as a guy and as a band leader and as my friend.

**JE:** You said you prayed before every concert. Is that when he had been converted to Christianity?

**SR:** This is gospel period, yeah.

**JE:** Doesn't he refute that later on that he never was born again?

**SR:** No, no, I don't think so.

**JE:** You don't think he refuted it?

**SR:** I've never read that or heard that.

Some friend of mine called me and said, "Well, I've got a video I was going to send you. It's about Dylan made a deal with the devil."

And I said, "Yeah, I know, those are out there but I don't want to see them."

And he said, "Well, yeah, but they say, 'Look, Bob Dylan disappeared for a while and he had this super human power.'"

And I said, "Well, that's just a bunch of crap and I don't want to hear it and don't mention it to me again." But yeah, you can get on YouTube and follow some rabbit hole stuff of how Bob's a Satanist or something. It's just nonsense. He's just a regular guy. He absorbed stuff. He's always been religious and there's been a religious nature to his songs since he started. Some of them in characteristically Bob Dylan way are less transparent than those gospel years.

But the way I would think about it, and I didn't know Keith Green, but there's a top of the heap of the Christian songwriters, not like Andraé Crouch but a hip to the jive

kind of guy. Bob Dylan met Keith Green and he started going to those Bible studies with Keith Green.

Bob's not much for going at something halfheartedly, but he's Jewish, of course.

**JE:** Yes.

**SR:** You know that Jesus was as well?

**JE:** Yes. (laughing) Yes.

**SR:** So you laugh, but if you think that some big overwhelming percentage of people in those mega churches really believed Jesus was Jewish you are kidding yourself. They believe Jesus was a white guy from America.

**JE:** Wow.

**SR:** And he was not white at all, he was Jewish.

**JE:** Right.

**SR:** And they nailed him to the cross for being all those things. I'm a really religious fanatic kind of guy, but it was a gospel period. And when I joined they'd already done two years of him getting booed where he did nothing but sing Christian songs that he had written and essentially preached from the stage.

When I joined the band, it was more like he's going to sing like a Rolling Stone again, mixed with the gospel songs. I watched him write some of those gospel songs. We had the gospel singers with us—they're not fooling. It isn't that they hired some singers to get up and sing some gospel style parts, these are people out of the church. So we prayed as a group.

**JE:** He must have liked that about you too because—

**SR:** No.

**JE:** ...that was not new to you, that was your growing—

**SR:** That was a perfect time for me.

**JE:** Yeah.

**SR:** Say God's hand.

**JE:** Right. And so the two of you had that natural bond.

**SR:** I think so. The joke was I'd come to rehearsal and say, "Bob, what's happening?" in a vernacular, stylized way.

And he'd say, more than once, "I don't know, Jesus is coming back, that's all I know."

**JE:** (laughing)

**SR:** "That is what's happening."

**JE:** Right.

**SR:** He would probably deny that right now, but, you know.

**JE:** You think he strayed from all that now?

**SR:** No, I don't. I think he realized like me, he's older than me, it's a much bigger picture than you think of when you're a young kid. I'm telling you that I'm sitting here on this farm and

when I was a little kid on this farm my relatives, I have people still alive that thought God was right up above the clouds. Little old white man sitting in a little chair, sitting on his throne up above the heavens, you know? You start to realize how vast the universe is.

But anyway, so Bob Dylan, religious period, perfect time for me to be with him.

## Chapter 11 - 9:26

### Dylan Writing

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**John Erling:** Did you see him composing any songs?

**Steve Ripley:** I did.

**JE:** What stood out about his methods? Was there a routine that he did or how did he do that?

**SR:** No, just the genius just comes out of nowhere. He's sitting and playing at the piano and singing and he changes the words.

I'll tell you this, because it's one of my favorite stories. For those who don't know, a studio in a traditional sense has—I just call it the big room, where the musicians play, in a simple traditional fashion. The musicians and singers set up and give their performance. Then the microphones go under the floor, through the walls, or in my case, under the ground, and they get into what's called the control room where the equipment is and the engineer is and it's isolated. The point is it's isolated from that other room so the engineer can really hear what's going on and he gets the mix that we talked about and records it.

We'd been out in the room playing one these songs we'd recorded. And then in an also traditional fashion historically, "Oh, I think we got it. Let's listen."

"You want to listen to that? Okay."

We come into the control room and we're listening to this. Bob's over in the corner where you come into the control room where the door is. Then there's a recording console and all of us are gathered around this control room listening to the song we just recorded.

Bob's over there writing, which turned out to be some lyrics, but I can see Bob writing.

My thought actually is, "Boy, that's amazing." Because if one song's playing I can't think of another song. And I thought what was amazing was Bob had shut out the song that was playing and was working on a new song.

**JE:** Yeah.

**SR:** I thought, "That is really astounding." Which would be for me, but no, when the song finished, he gave it a nice thorough critique of what had just played.

**JE:** (laughing)

**SR:** Meaning he'd heard it great. Then we went out in the studio and recorded the song that he was standing there in the corner writing.

**JE:** Absolutely. Is he the most brilliant musician you've been around?

**SR:** I think when you reach that level there's no hierarchy. I have, as an engineer, recorded Leon when he just started playing and singing with no concept of what the song is going to be. He writes the words, writes the music, meaning he's playing and singing a song that has never existed. And it is the voice and piano that's on the record. So it's just, "And here we go."

Bob and Leon shared that. You know, other people forget the words on stage and just go, "Na-na-na-na-na." Bob would just write some more and that'd be great too. You know, he'd just make up a whole new thing.

**JE:** So you put Leon in the same category as Bob Dylan?

**SR:** I do, I do because I think when you reach that level—Kale as well, for me. I call it the crack in the cosmos.

**JE:** Yeah.

**SR:** You know?

**JE:** We should say Bob Dylan's archives resting now with the University of Tulsa, Gilcrease Museum. It's nice to have them in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

**SR:** You betcha. What's up with that, huh? The greatest, craziest thing in my adult lifetime.

**JE:** I was listening to Bob Dylan singing some of the standards.

**SR:** Yeah?

**JE:** And how his voice is so different and he just slows down and sings some Sinatra songs. I enjoyed listening to him do that.

**SR:** I saw one of those shows and heard the records and they're really good. And he's adhering to the melody and everything, really being a crooner and singing those songs like they're of great import, which people would say about his own songs.

But then his own songs, he takes great liberty with everything, from the words and the melody and character and everything.

**JE:** Yeah, but he stays true to those standards.

**SR:** But he really sings those standards like this is the song. He told me one time about his own songs, he didn't play here often and he'd come through Oklahoma and we'd go to the show. And pretty much every time I'd get the message, "Bob wants to talk." Which is great.

So I'd go back and talk to him for a little bit and it'd be just one on one. You know, it's just like a gift, I'm telling you.

When I'm no longer in the band then I revert kind of to student and fandom, so to speak.

**JE:** Um-hmm (affirmative).

**SR:** But he says something that I've said before that seemed a little out of character for him, after we'd go as a family and blah, blah, blah. Sincere but that kind of regular folk stuff. He

says, “Well, we’re just out here serving these songs,” I think was the quote. And he means his own songs in that context. They are the thing and what can I do now except try to do them justice? We are serving the songs.

I think that really then can apply to his singing those standards. He has put them up and paying proper respect. And wants people to understand how those go. And I think he would, in some odd thing that can’t be described, downplay his own deal.

**JE:** Yeah.

**SR:** While recognize it. Famously, on an interview on *60 Minutes* or one of those guys, he says, “I don’t know how I did that. You try writing those songs.”

That seems like a little too much “aw shucks” right there but there’s some truth in that. You know, how did I do that? I don’t know.

**JE:** Yeah.

**SR:** You try doing that.

**JE:** He said this, “Years ago they said I was a prophet. I used to say, ‘No, I’m not a prophet.’ They say, ‘Yes, you are, you’re a prophet.’ I said, ‘No, it’s not me.’ They used to say, ‘You sure are a prophet.’ They used to convince me I was a prophet. Now I come out and say, ‘Jesus Christ is the answer,’ and they say, ‘Bob Dylan’s no prophet.’ They just can’t handle it.”

**SR:** (laughing) Uh, that’s pretty great. Yeah. Well, that’s Bob Dylan being Bob Dylan but I think there’s real truth in that.

**JE:** And then John Lennon recorded a song, “Serve Yourself,” in response to Dylan’s “Gotta Serve Somebody.”

**SR:** He was just being funny, John Lennon, you know. They’re all being funny, John Lennon, if nothing else he’s a comedian, you know.

I refused to take any negativity about the Beatles or Bob Dylan. I just don’t bi—I don’t believe it. I always tell people, “I remember when I was a teenager dating somebody.” I can’t remember anything about it except her mom was a John Bircher, boy a different time. But I’m reading this John Bircher pamphlet that just lays it out in a very convincing fashion that the Beatles are all communists. I know rock and rollers aren’t communists, but you see the evidence.

It’s sort of like Bob Dylan made—he sold his soul to the devil or something. You see the evidence and people can see it if they want to see it. But the fact is—those are not facts.

**JE:** Yeah. A Bob Dylan quote, “Let me ask you one question: Is your money that good? Will it buy you forgiveness? Do you think that it could? I think you will find, when your death takes its toll, all the money you made will never buy back your soul.” –Bob Dylan.

**SR:** You find any fault with that?

**JE:** Not at all.

**SR:** No.

**JE:** I wasn't reading it to find fault, I thought it was good.

**SR:** No, I know you weren't.

**JE:** Right.

**SR:** Yeah, it's just great. He's rhyming up a storm.

**JE:** Yeah.

**SR:** And, you know, all of that. Songwriter-wise, Bob Dylan-wise, but he totally embraced it and there are many of those gospel lyrics that are as good as can be.

**JE:** We won't go into it much more but let's remember the Nobel Prize committee announced that he would be awarded the Nobel Prize in literature. That was October 13 of 2016.

Then there's all the stories about when he did and when he accepted it. The point is—

**SR:** Yep.

**JE:** ...he rose to that level.

**SR:** Yeah.

**JE:** And he's still with us. It's not we're talking about, George Bernard Shaw or anybody like that.

**SR:** And I knew him, you know, shoot. Yeah.

**JE:** We're talking about a man who's still with us.

**SR:** Yeah, all the stuff that I've been lucky enough to do and be around, it's all an adventure to Charlene and I. We say the adventure continues. But it's been pretty much hard the whole time and broke almost all the time. But all these things that I've been lucky enough to do, in The Tractors too, it all pales looking back in comparison to, "Gee, I was really in Bob Dylan's band. Shoot." I just think it's just flashing in my mind.

Just a few days ago, and I didn't even look at it, but I saw a promotion for something or just randomly came through the YouTube stream, Jerry Garcia, I'm not really a Grateful Dead fan, I am a fan but it wasn't like I was dedicated, I'm not a deadhead, but I watched it go by. And Jerry Garcia is laughing about how much success they've had and whatever.

And he just said, "And I met Bob Dylan." And he just laughs with pure joy because they made a lot of history and they changed lives and they changed the world. But really, when it gets down to it I knew Bob Dylan. Are you kidding me? I can't even believe it now.

**JE:** Yeah, and he still likes you (laughing).

**SR:** As far as you know. I don't know.

**JE:** I'm sure he does.

**SR:** I think he'd give me a big hug if he happened to wander through. Just—

**JE:** But, you know—

**SR:** ...unfortunately getting so late in life that one of us is going to be gone, at least one us before too long, and I'm glad to have had it.

**Chapter 12 - 10:35****Dining With the Beatles**

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**John Erling:** Because of Bob Dylan you dined with some of the members of the Beatles.

**Steve Ripley:** Well, it's a good story, I don't mind going down that path but it isn't like I knew the Beatles. But I did a couple of evenings. We played six shows at a big place in London called Earl's Court. One of the shows, one of the last shows, George was there with Clapton. It's on this new release of Bob's, I don't listen to that stuff. But I'm all over it and it's got a whole CD devoted to Earl's Court.

When I tell you about playing loud when he pointed at me, I'm playing up a storm. When it first came out a few months ago Charlene listened to it. And I can't stand to listen to it because I still have the feeling I'm not going to make it through, like a solo or something, I'll blow it.

**JE:** Right. What's the name of it?

**SR:** It's called "Trouble No More." And there's different versions of it. The deluxe version has a movie that they made.

**JE:** Okay.

**SR:** And I wasn't in the band at that time. From the first year, when he really went gospel. And anyway, a lot of live recordings from that 1981 band, which was arguably one of the best bands in the world, even with me in it. Jim Keltner and Tim Drummond and the Gospel Singers, just a smokin' band and Bob was great. Sorry, folks, singing his ass off.

People that say he can't sing now he's older and he's on the never-ending tour, as he calls it, you lose your voice and your vocal chords suffer and he just keeps doing it. But go back to this 1981 period and listen to those and he is singing crazily great. I mean, it's just astonishing.

So it's a venue so big that the buses and the crew and everybody is parked inside the buildings. In this case, unlike some places, our buses and then dressing rooms were trailer houses, mobile homes, inside this back stage of this arena. I'm the only one in the dressing room at this moment and open the door and it's George Harrison.

And he's saying, "Well, who's playing lead guitar for you now?"

And he said, "Well, it's Steve Ripley."

One of the times Sherman Halsey came to see me back in California he said, "I've just been to England and punk rock's the deal. The punkers," or whatever he called them, "all wearing leather jackets and they have a lot of buttons, everybody's wearing buttons." And he said, "I brought you this button." And it was a Beatle button, had the four Beatles on it, just a little button.

He's handing me that button in my living room in California. The news comes over the TV that John Lennon has been shot. Boy, is it a coincidence.

Okay now, skip ahead just a few months. So we're in England, I'm wearing my Beatle button on my Harley Davidson jacket. These stories are no good because I can't do George Harrison's accent. But Bob says, "Steve Ripley," and then here he is. And he says, "So what's all this then?" and he points at the Beatle button, flattered, and it was nice.

One of the next nights or maybe after the show that night we go to Ray Cooper's house, who is the most famous percussionist from England. He plays with everybody. Quirky guy, great guy. His place is on the river Thames, and I mean, the water is flapping up into his front porch. It was a party with, of course, Bob and a few of our band, and then Julie and Lennon was there with his mom, Cynthia, and George and Eric. That's all great.

Then the next day or two, somewhere in there, I think we'd finished with Earl Court performances. Bob is going to spend the day at George's place at the famous castle kind of thing, Henley-on-Thames, it's called. It was an old school that he bought and started redoing.

And I get the call to go. It's a dinner party. His wife's from California and she's made a nice semi-Mexican casserole of some kind. I mean, it's all blur. But it's Keltner, Jim Keltner is this drummer from Tulsa who got me the Bob Dylan gig and got me the Ry Cooder gig, you know, world's greatest drummer, in some fashion, and he's on everybody's records. He's from Tulsa.

For whatever reason he's always helped me and he was helping me then. He was probably the reason I got to go. Tim Drummond, the bass player, legend, he was there. So it was Keltner and Drummond and me, I guess.

I always felt bad about Freddie Tackett because he would have loved to go, but anyway. So I'm there and it's George and Clapton had come, and Ringo. We had our dinner. I know Ringo was sitting on my left. When I say it's hazy it really is because it's unbelievable that that happened. I talked to Ringo. I said, "Aren't you going to eat?"

"No, I'm just going to watch you eat," he said in his Ringo accent.

I remember we talked about shoes. He said, "I just got these shoes, they're wrestler's shoes. I really like them." I don't know why that sticks in my mind but they were some kind of no-sole kind of soft shoe. It was a whole day.

**JE:** Oh my.

**SR:** So we wandered all over the grounds. On one of George's records, probably "All Things Must Pass," he's got a sign he had made that said, "Don't keep off the grass." And that's on his grounds.

There's a song called "Cracker Box Palace." There's a sign, "Cracker Box Palace." I had my Canon 35 millimeter and I just propped it up places and took selfies, I guess. Decades before that was a term. With both those signs. And you know, I love those pictures still. I

set the camera on the ground looking up at George's house and there's a picture of me and Keltner and Drummond in front of George's house. I have pictures priceless to me in front of the house and in front of the kitchen where, in the day at some point, George is making us tea.

And one of my favorite stories is he says to me, "Do you take milk with your tea?" And he sees the Okie farm boy going, "I don't know what the answer is to that."

He says, "Well, you'll want milk with this tea." And he didn't mean anything funny about it other than it was strong tea.

**JE:** Um-hmm (affirmative).

**SR:** He didn't wait for the answer, you know, they made tea, they made tea in George's house and he made tea for me, just me. That was pretty great.

And then we had the dinner and then we went up to his studio. So we did talk music at some point. And he played his latest thing that he was working on in his studio. The whole group is in the control room there, but I'm sitting at the console, I mean, I'm a recording engineer. I'm sitting at the console with Ringo. Again, I can't do the accents. And Ringo has a really severe accent, English, there's so many accents.

**JE:** Um-hmm (affirmative).

**SR:** And they all sound a little different from each other. And Ringo as only Ringo could, asked me, "Do you know how to run this thing?"

And I said, "Well, yeah, I guess I do, you know, it's what I do."

He said, "I just don't understand it at all," basically. He said, "The only thing that is important is what happens when the blokes," and you have to imagine the accent, but he did say blokes, which I'm so thankful that he did, "the only thing that matters is what happens when the blokes get in the room." Meaning, they get out in the big room and they start working with each other. "That's what's important, this knob-twisting and all that stuff, I don't know anything about it."

That's a great memory. The last George Beatle night cherished story I'll tell is that George is playing the music from his tape machines of a sound track for a movie called *Time Bandits*. He just started working with the Monty Python guys and famously became a not normal but a film producer. If nothing else from lack of funds. But then he got into it. They needed help and he helped them and then he got into it. He'd been a producer on this movie called *Time Bandits*, which is really great. If you've not seen that it's a time travel kind of thing. There's a lot of little folks playing some characters and he's written this music. But he hasn't done his vocals yet.

Everyone's digging the music but there's no vocals. So he says, "I want you to hear what this song does." To me, he's saying this now! I don't know that anybody in the room knew anything about it. So he sang to me in my ear because it's pretty loud. George

Harrison put his mouth two inches from my ear and sang me the lead vocal for this music that he had done that the vocals hadn't been done yet. And the vocals are kind of nonsensical, like if you picked an outer space language or something, so they're nonsense syllables. "Elam-moi-com-plow-mo," whatever it is, don't mean anything but it's sung with conviction. In some fashion, it doesn't get any better than that.

For a farm boy, you know, I was a long ways from home then.

**JE:** For a farm boy to connect with Dylan, George Harrison, Ringo Starr, what is it about you, anyway?

**SR:** Yeah. I sometimes wonder if it's a combination of God's hand and then me just wanting it so badly and then stalking them or just one thing leads to another.

Keltner's a big part of it. But my other favorite, I forgot to say, we're walking around the grounds and mainly I'd have to say George is showing Bob some stuff. Like there's some underground caverns or something. I didn't get to see that.

George and Bob went off for a way. We're all walking around the grounds. I know I have a picture, at one point George is walking with Jim Keltner and his wife, Cynthia, and I took a picture. And he said, "Don't let this picture out. But if just want it for your scrapbook that's fine." I remember him giving me that speech.

But we're all walking around and I assume Bob sees that I'm a little gaga at the whole thing. He sees I'm in the middle of circus, you know, and, "Isn't this great?" He says, "See, Steve, stick with me." Like, you know, "I brought you here. This is what you get when you stick with me. You get to meet Beatles."

**JE:** Yeah.

**SR:** "You see, Steve, stick with me."

**JE:** Were the Beatles ever in the audience as you were playing with Dylan, at all?

**SR:** That one night, George and Clapton.

**JE:** That he—

**SR:** We did a really bad version of "Here Comes the Sun."

**JE:** (laughing)

**SR:** I mean, it was pathetic. It's what I remember being pathetic. But Bob don't care, he said, "Ah, 'Here Comes the Sun,' anybody know that one?"

**JE:** Oh, how funny.

**SR:** Yeah.

**JE:** Yeah.

**SR:** It's probably on these recordings. I don't know if it got released or not. I don't have a hankering to hear that.

**JE:** Yeah.

**SR:** Well, I mean, you know, I wasn't singing, what do I care? I guess I do.

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**Chapter 13 - 4:50****Advice to Musicians**

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**John Erling:** If you ever saw a musician performing in a bar or a club and you were moved by that performance and they asked you, “What was the best advice you heard when you were starting out?” what would you tell them?

**Steve Ripley:** That’s a pretty good question. I’d say that thing that professor told me, which wasn’t about songwriting but writing, “Write what you know.” And then I would say, “You have to look down the road ten years. Can you see yourself doing this?” And I don’t care whether that’s truck driving or playing guitar. “Can you see yourself doing this in ten years? If you can’t, you should quit. In the end, life is going to be short. You won’t see that now but is this what you really want to do?” That’s number two.

Three, sort of like that, I would try to talk to this person and see what passion is there. And that has to do with looking down the road ten years but being in the music business there’s so much to do that doesn’t have to do with learning how to play guitar or sing a song. It’s so many other things. But part of the rise to the top is the passion for it. There’s only one reason to be in this business and that’s that you just can’t do anything else. It’s eating you up.

**JE:** Yeah.

**SR:** This is all you can think about. If you meet that criteria or whatever, then perhaps this is worthwhile. I think as dumb and trite as it you’ve got to be true to yourself and you have to have a focus. If you’re just doing this for fun, I think that’s a great thing ’cause it’s not been fun for me or these other people that I am lucky enough to play for. Not that there’s not joy in it, but it’s not fun like I’m going to go play Saturday night and Monday I’ll be back at work doing something else. That’s great for those people.

But if you want to do this for a living and you know as a professional in the business, though not a singer/songwriter that every day is something else. If you had a string of days when everything went smoothly, then you should just be thankful for that because it’s not going to be that way very long. Because every day something else...that’s my own personal experience, and it is for everyone.

You know, right in the middle of everything going swell your three-year-old breaks his arm. I mean, I don’t know, who knows, because it’s something else around every corner.

So to be in this business, I’m saying it’s not so different than a lot of things, but I say, Steve Ripley style, “Art ain’t easy, it’s hard and it’s rewarding.” But I don’t even know if I have any talent. The only reason that I tell you these stories, as you’re a professional gathering stories, the only reason that I can rationalize that being worthwhile is because

I've seen so much stuff for a farm boy. I've seen so much stuff and done so much stuff, surely I know something and I am not being any kind of false anything, I mean, I'm no Bob Dylan or Leon Russell, I'm just a guy working. But I tried really hard. It isn't like I've learned this and I've learned that and let me tell you what I know. It's that looking back now, I have to say, "I must know something." It isn't like, "What is that? I don't know." But surely, I know something.

**JE:** Of course.

**SR:** So I get up the nerve to say yes and talk to you. It's not like I do this at all anymore and I guess not patting myself on the back, I have done that. I've done that in a show biz way, interviews and stuff. But I'm doing this in a, I hope, a non-show business way. It's about show business, but, you know, we're just talking.

**JE:** We are. And I've enjoyed talking a lot, not to bring myself into this. You talked about the passion. I had a passion for radio when I was in my teens and I was in radio for forty years. But the passion was, I couldn't drive by a radio station unless I got inside that studio and stood there with a live microphone on.

**SR:** That's great.

**JE:** I had to do it. And I thought everybody knew what they wanted to do. I was fortunate that I did.

**SR:** That is so exactly my story.

**JE:** Yeah.

**SR:** I thought everybody felt this way.

**JE:** But you know what? You met the Beatles. I played the Beatles, and there's the difference. (laughing)

**SR:** Well, I don't know. I mean, you know, meeting Oral Roberts, which you told me about. If it's sort of like meeting the Beatles then, isn't it?

## **Chapter 14 - 3:58**

### **Lessons from Leon & Dylan**

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**John Erling:** What did you learn overall from Dylan? What did you learn overall from Leon Russell?

**Steve Ripley:** There's no way to answer. I could send you my notes that I made for speaking at Leon's funeral services.

**JE:** Yeah?

**SR:** What do you call that when somebody gets up and gives the...?

**JE:** Eulogy?

**SR:** Eulogy, that's a fancy word for me. But people said it and, "Oh, yeah, Steve did the eulogy."

**JE:** That would be nice to have those notes.

**SR:** They're both on YouTube. One from Nashville and there's one from Tulsa. And Tulsa was a little better but Nashville I cried more than I talked. I wouldn't listen to it, it's painful, but I have the notes that I strayed from somewhat. But they kept going back to, "I learned a lot from Leon." And the way I wrote it, "I learned a lot from Leon..." and then I'd talk about something. I learned from Leon that writing a song for one person, you have a better chance of having ten thousand people identify with it than if you try to write a song for ten thousand people to identify with then you're lucky if you get one person to go for it. That's a big lesson.

**JE:** Yeah.

**SR:** I learned from Leon the Colonel Sanders method of selling chicken, is what he called it. And that is that you conjure up without thinking.

Even now, I suppose the Colonel is dead, is he not? I suppose.

**JE:** Yeah, yeah.

**SR:** Probably wasn't at that time but it makes no difference, he's long gone from the organization. But even then you suspend disbelief, whatever that thing is. When you're eating that bucket of chicken the idea is that you think the Colonel really cooked that chicken just for you.

**JE:** (laughing) Right.

**SR:** And that was his shtick of selling this chicken. I was that way about Fender guitars. My Fender guitar is right there, I played my whole life. I thought Leo Fender made those guitars just for me. That's the Colonel Sanders' method of selling chicken, and I liked that, and Leon liked it. He wanted to be that Colonel Sanders figure on making these records and be that. It's almost like a guru kind of deal. I learned that from Leon, or tried to. I learned stuff he tried to teach me.

Those are good things. Dylan, you know, it's so much to grasp, it's so much grasp. It was the teacher and the student as much as Kale was to me and Leon was. And I'm passionate about them more than they ever were about me, but that's okay.

When I was with Leon in those days before Dylan, I made a record for Leon's company and Leon dissolved the company so that record never came out. But I gave Bob a cassette or something of that record. And that was bold of me to do, but he really liked that record.

That was just like a teacher's approval. Playing guitar for him is something but, you know, he was, "Did you play all the guitars on this? Whoa, and I like this song."

I had one called "Living on the Edge," he really liked and I had a song called "Gypsy Blood," that he really liked. This is not an answer to what did you learn from Bob Dylan but it does paint the picture of it was a teacher/student thing and it was an ongoing learning

experience. But with Bob it was never A, B, C, D, and you get to E and F. Because it's just like a total thing at once. It was the gestalt of the whole thing and you're just in it. It's hard to step back and even watch it happen and learn something because you're just part of the experience. That's a great thing.

**JE:** Yep.

**SR:** That's a great thing. I don't know if I learned anything at all from Bob but I got that from him.

**JE:** Well, this was fun, Steve. Thank you very much.

**SR:** Thank you.

**JE:** You're very thoughtful and very giving. I appreciate it very much.

**SR:** Don't turn it off just yet, let me think for a second.

**JE:** Yep.

**SR:** To myself.

**JE:** Yes.

## **Chapter 15 - 0:33**

### **Conclusion**

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