

Steve Ripley

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

Chapter 01 - 1:16

Introduction

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, song writer, 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 the good guitarists he had played with.

Red Dirt was first used by Steve 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 Jimmy Buffet, J. J. Cale, and Eddie Van Halen.

In 1987, Steve moved to Tulsa to buy Leon Russell's recording facility, The Church Studio. Steve formed the country band The Tractors and was the cowriter of the country hit "Baby Like to Rock It."

Under his own record label Boy Rocking Records, Steve produced such artists as The Tractors, Leon Russell, and the Red Dirt Rangers.

Steve Ripley was sixty-nine when he died January 3, 2019. But you can listen to Steve talk about his family story, his introduction to music, his relationship with Bob Dylan, dining with the Beatles, and his friendship with Leon Russell. The last five chapters he wanted you to hear only after his death.

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Chapter 02 - 3:47

Land Run with Fred

John Erling: Today's date is December 12, 2017. Steve, would you state your full name, please?

Steve Ripley: Well, my proper name is Paul Steven Ripley, go by Steve.

JE: Your date of birth?

SR: Is January 1, 1950.

JE: And your present age?

SR: Sixty-seven, but sixty-eight pretty close, January 1st.

JE: Yes. Your first name, Paul, was that named after someone?

SR: It was, semi, after a guy my dad worked for when I was born.

JE: Why did you choose Steve to be called?

SR: That was the trend, we all went by our middle name. I have two brothers and it's been a little troublesome but I didn't choose it. I'm Paul when it's the banker or the highway patrolman or the doctor or whoever.

JE: Where are recording this interview?

SR: Well, we're at The Farm west of Pawnee, Oklahoma, north of Glencoe, Oklahoma, which is where I actually went to school. An hour west of Tulsa. This is the place where I grew up. About a mile and a half from here is the original Ripley homestead from the Land Run, the Cherokee strip. My great grandfather, Louie Scott Ripley, ran in the race and got started the Ripley location. He came down from Kansas.

Early on, I don't guess I need to start rambling yet, I'll ramble.

JE: But were you given stories about his experience, the past?

SR: Oh yeah. My great grandfather, Louie Scott, ran in the race. He came down from Kansas and it isn't so much that he was a Sooner but he was here before the Land Run, working lots of game, you can imagine, in those times.

Then the Land Run was going to happen and he had befriended the Pawnee Indians, especially chief of the Pawnee with the Pawnee Nation is in Pawnee, so eight miles to the east of our farm.

War Chief was his given name, at least among the white folks. They were friends and when they opened the land up the Indians were given whatever it was, 80 or 160 acres. It sort of had head rights except I don't think Pawnee really had head rights, but it's the equivalent thereof. Even for unborn babies. This Pawnee Indian chief had picked out a place on a nice spot on top of a hill for his unborn baby, turned out to be a son. And the baby was stillborn, so he wanted my great grandfather to have that place because he couldn't have that anymore, he didn't have that baby.

So the place was picked, it's getting close to Sooner, so my great grandfather trained the best horse he could find, he called him Fred.

One thing I loved all my life hearing is that the Pawnee Indians wanted to meet him halfway and switch with the tribes' fastest pony. And they couldn't understand why that wasn't fair. Now I love that part of the story. And then maybe the story has been told to prop up the Ripley name, I don't know, but the story would be that my great grandfather said no. And so he ran the race on Fred and staked a claim properly and it's filed and everything, though he already knew where he was going. So it was really a race to get there.

And then my dad had, I think, five brothers and they're all gone, well, everybody's gone now. But in those younger days, my grandfather was still alive. They started buying the land around them, around this homestead, which is like I said, as the crow flies, a mile away, so to speak. My dad and his brother started buying the land around it. Eventually my dad bought all of that from his brother.

So when I was growing up we had a couple of miles of land here, which we farmed and where I grew up on a tractor, really, myself.

Then by the time he died, he had sold it all off except for the twenty-eight acres, which is where Charlene and I now live.

JE: Yeah.

SR: It's a corner, right in the middle of that two miles. Didn't expect to ever get back here, but who says you can't go home again?

JE: Right.

Chapter 03 - 8:18

Uncle Elmer

John Erling: Where were you born?

Steve Ripley: I was born in Boise, Idaho. That always throws people, but my dad met my mom when he was in the army. And she's from Oregon, at least the northwest area. I don't have to rewrite history, I don't know the particulars, necessarily, but in my mind being a fine young fellow, husband, and son-in-law, he moved out there when they first got married and he got out of the army, to the northwest. And he did different jobs, one of which was a mechanic, I know. The mechanic thing flows through my family, you know, it misses me but my brothers can take a pile of metal and build a car. I think I do that same thing with the music I make. Mechanics, you see pieces of what has to be done, you put it together piece by piece. But anyway, I can't fix your car if it breaks down before you leave today.

JE: [laughs]

SR: So he's out there in the northwest and one of the people he meets, a guy names Paul Sparks, is in the stainless steel waterless cookware business. Not door to door but traveling salesman, where they sell this high-priced waterless cookware. Now it really is a great, great thing, it still is, we still use it.

Dad went to work for him and really found out he had a calling for that thing. My dad was, unlike me, six four, eighth grade education but read more books than I'll ever read and could pump himself up and he was almost perfect for that gig, I guess. He did that around Oregon and Washington and Idaho.

When my older brother was born in Vancouver, Washington, and then at some point in 1950, I was born in Boise, Idaho.

Just skipping ahead to '52, probably, so I was just a baby, they headed back toward Oklahoma, landing first in Wichita, Kansas, still selling cookware, now out of the salesman for this other guy, but on his own selling this cookware.

And then one of my first memories is driving up to The Farm just like you did, in that same spot. And Bailey was his last name, coming out to see my dad and I'm just almost three. And they're making the deal on this place when I was three.

We moved here, because I think the farmer in Dad, was always an equal calling to the salesman. And I don't know how much difference he saw in that, but we moved here. My older brother went to Glencoe, I'm three years old, my little brother Bobby was born. Scott's in the first grade, my older brother.

And then we moved to Tulsa for Dad to sell cookware for a year or two. Then we moved to Oklahoma City for a year or two where I started school, living in an area called The Village. It was a good time for me, you know, the coming of age, the first coming of age, when you're just aware of anything, six and seven and eight, up toward eight.

JE: So your father's name again is?

SR: Bob or Robert Ripley.

JE: And your mother's name?

SR: Mary, original name being Bonser.

JE: What was she like?

SR: You know, I'd have to say gregarious would be wrong, but there's a certain plow through it all that you have to have, well, to live with a Ripley, I don't know. But to live on a farm and be a farmer's wife. They both came through the war, of course, so you get that.

She was five foot one. My dad, as I said, is six foot four, and that's why I'm five foot ten, you know, the great balancer. She was great in my life for support and I think she supplied that for my dad. Up until they just couldn't do it anymore. So they were divorced in, I think, '66, because I was sixteen. It's easier to figure my age because 1950. But supportive of her sons.

JE: Did music come through either one of them? To you?

SR: Well, it's more than two tapes worth. But briefly put, first of all, I gave this speech in The Tractors days a lot, where I would say a lot of musicians, especially country musicians, have this lineage. They got together and all their uncles played and all that stuff.

JE: Right.

SR: You know, I didn't have that. The joke in my family was, "I can barely play the radio," would be what my dad would say. But I was nuts for it from a baby. Now saying a baby, though at the time, I can remember that and being just as serious about it then as I am now, or at least I was ten years ago.

So on the Ripley homestead that I've talked about and just to the east of that was the Schanzenbach homestead, a family of Germans. I think that figures heavily in everything. They're direct from the old country. What happened was the Schanzenbach girl and my grandpa, the young Elmer Ripley married and that's what started the Ripley family that I know of.

To answer your question, I didn't know about any of this until way later. And one of these Schanzenbach heirs or lineage people who had changed their name to Johnson and moved away during the war, found us because he's one of those guys that likes that lineage deal and was doing the genealogy. And so he'd track down his family, the Ripley part.

And I'm walking around his old house. He starts talking about the Johnsons, which are really the Schanzenbach, and they all played music and the kids had a family band and they were on TV. They'd moved to Alaska at some point and they were on TV and they had their own TV show and then they made their own records. I don't know how good they were but there is a lineage.

And then I want to throw in, up until I found out that, which was greatly interesting to me, but the Schanzenbach house became my uncle Elmer's house, my dad's brother, when I was a kid. And we would come down from Tulsa or Oklahoma City, especially Oklahoma City when I was eight, say, and spend the summer, pretty much, on The Farm. Uncle Elmer's house. Great house and the Ripleys were nuts for music though they didn't play it. They all went to the Bob Wills dances. They were normal young rebel rousers to set the stage.

I just saw a picture Wednesday of oil derricks in Oklahoma and they're in the Osage area and the Oklahoma City area. People can't imagine you look to the landscape and it's just as far as you can. So all of them worked in the oil fields. That was the job you did as a teenager, and later was to go work in the oil field.

And so, I'm again, not trying to rewrite history or even write history, my imagination takes me to a place where there are young guys in the oil field partying it up. But they went to all the dances.

So at Uncle Elmer's house, and it's just as I say to people, it's just one word, UncleElmer is a word. I'm fond of Elmer now because it's in my family, but I never thought of it as Uncle Elmer. I have an Uncle Joe, I have an Uncle Louie, or had, but UncleElmer that was one word, and his wife's name is Georgia. But she went by Babe. So UncleElmer and Aunt Babe. And that's where we'd spend our time. And they had a great collection of records.

I talked about my first memory of buying this place, or one of my first. One of my other first memories would have been at age three or four, at my Uncle Elmer's house playing those records. Now why they let me do that, I don't know, but they did, trying to get that 78 record of Bob Wills "Stay All Night, Stay A Little Longer," on that little spindle. In my

mind, the size I am now, it'd be a three or four foot record but I'm a little baby and I'm holding up this 78 record with a little tiny hole in the middle of it, putting it on that spindle so I can listen to Bob Wills or Hank Williams. And that's what caught me.

And then one of Uncle Elmer's daughters, one of my cousins, Mary Irene, in '54, fell in love and went nuts. I mean, she just went nuts for Elvis. So that big 78 thing of Bob Wills and Hank Williams shifted for me because of her, and the whole world, shifted to Elvis, and I've never recovered, I guess.

Chapter 04 - 5:39

It Started with a 78 RPM

John Erling: So you're four years old, about, when you're listening to that 78.

Steve Ripley: That's correct.

JE: And that was what set you off in the world of music.

SR: It is. It's the first thing in my life.

JE: So you went to school in Oklahoma City, elementary?

SR: The first and second grade. We moved when I was eight, back here to The Farm.

JE: And you went to Glencoe?

SR: Glencoe, yes.

JE: Then you went through high school.

SR: Glencoe High School and OSU.

JE: Some of the people you were listening to, your favorites back then, you said Bob Wills and Elvis. Would it also have been like Johnny Cash and Jerry Lee Lewis?

SR: Yes.

JE: And then in high school, some of the people you might have been listening to?

SR: Well, you know, I do love country music, but started playing guitar then as fast as I could. I mean, I got a guitar and couldn't play it but I started playing guitar at seven or eight or something like that. Elvis had hit. But anything with a guitar, any music. People do not understand verses today, the lack of entertainment, or whatever you want to say. I mean, it's everywhere now, and they go, "Well, ain't that great? It's everywhere now." Well, boy, it was the other end of the continuum, it was nothing, you know, there was nothing.

In Oklahoma City even we had three channels and one of those just came on maybe when I was eight. And we had two up until then, and they weren't on all the time. And Saturday morning you dialed in the cartoon. So almost anything that made it through as entertainment qualified and got me going. And I loved radio and TV and music early on.

So along comes Elvis, but all of those people, which weren't so divided up back then, Buck Owens was on the radio with Elvis and Ray Charles and bubble gum music and Mantovani plays or whatever.

Then the Beatles hit, of course, and everything changes again. Now playing with bands all through high school, well, especially later high school and then through college, there was a distinction because when the Beatles hit, then everybody was in a band. I never played with anybody after that had played music before the Beatles. Well, I had, that's not either bragging or confessing, it's just a thing. So in those first bands, I'm sure rather horribly, we were playing "Walking the Dog," and "What Did I Say?" in those early '60s semi-soul plus Buck Owens and stuff and that was the band.

And so were the Beatles, if you want to look at it that way, over in Liverpool. So I share a distant kinship with that. But then when the Beatles hit that changes everything just like Elvis did. Then I started playing and making a living by seventeen or eighteen.

But I did listen to all that stuff, every bit of it, loved it. I got a new song that says, if I can remember it, I call my songs new old stock, they've been around so long. But I'm trying to write an autobiographical song that I call "Farm Music" and I haven't finished recording it. But it's, "Bob Wills and Bob Dylan, Merle, Elvis, Hank, Chuck, Buck, and the Beatles. Louie Louie and Louie Armstrong." Which rolls off your tongue pretty good, I think it's pretty good, but it's true. You can throw in some more people, but it was those things that are life changing, that's the deal. I love that life changing thing. And I'm telling you, those 78 records with Hank and Bob Wills and Johnnie Lee Wills, I didn't know much the difference really, but there's some Johnnie Lee, which I later knew, that were important to me. That's a thing.

And then Elvis is a thing. And watching Jerry Lee kick his piano stool on the *Steve Allen Show*, which I watched in this same house where we live now. I remember that distinctly. And as I'm sure you know, some of the listeners would know, that for some odd reason the furniture stores like Mathis Brothers and all, especially in the Oklahoma City area, all had live TV shows. Mathis Brothers was great and I watched those shows. And on there sometimes was George Jones and Johnny Paycheck. I loved the Mathis Brothers just as well as those guys.

And then here comes Buck Owens who passed through that Mathis Brothers deal and thought, "Well, this is pretty good," and WKY was not only a great radio station and a big life changer for me, it was a great TV production place. So Buck did all of his *Buck Owens* TV shows and I hung around. That's through late teens.

JE: In high school you're actually playing gigs and you had a band in high school?

SR: Yes, of course.

JE: Then at Oklahoma State University your degree was to be what?

SR: My degree is in radio and TV, it's in journalism and broadcasting but I think of it as radio/TV.

JE: You were disc jockey on the campus rock and roll sta...

SR: I was a little bit.

JE: And uh—

SR: You know, John, as a legend, it's an honor to sit across the table from that voice of yours. But of course, the Vietnam War is swirling around us. We won't go into that, but none of that era is a simple thing. Here I am, going to school, radio and TV. You get through your first two or three years of taking the basic courses. And then I'd go up to the station, and everybody was talking like this [yelling in stilted language] and I don't mean on the air, I mean, just, "Well, hey, Steve, what do you got today? Psychology, right?"

And it just kind of annoyed me greatly. I did finish my degree and it's semi useless except that it became part of my life, so it's not useless, is it? So I'm proud of it, it's not that I'm not. But that, "Hey, baby, what's going on? We're on the air."

JE: So then when you did your show you cut all that out and talked naturally, more than likely? You—

SR: Well, it's hard to get rid of it, but yeah. Like we're talking now, try to be natural and talk.

JE: Right.

SR: Which you're great at.

Chapter 05 - 4:24

Cobras

John Erling: The band called the Cobras, was that one of your first ones?

Steve Ripley: It was, that's funny. Probably the first band, band, meaning play a gig, but we were just thirteen. And the beginning part of that band was no drummer even, just two or three guitar players. So it's hard to call it a band. But we played gigs and mostly instrumental. We were all learning to play, really. Then that turned into various other things, including the Innkeepers, which lasted for quite a long time.

JE: You've talked about Bob Wills, would Woody Guthrie, his work, have any influence on your work?

SR: Well, Woody is like water or something. You can't take it out. Even if you've never heard Woody you'd have to admit to a direct lineage if you are in the music that I love and play. But he did, so I'm aware of Woody Guthrie through those years, though it's not a band thing, as I see it.

You know, a part of not only me but to guys who really were great, meaning Leon and Cale and those guys, Jimmy Markham, you know, Blues Guy, well, all of those guys were kind of playing pop songs a lot of the time. And I wouldn't necessarily go that far as far as our band but I loved pop records. Like when we were younger we would call bubble gum music, I guess. I still remember, "One, two, three red light, light," it's like little crafted Hollywood pop songs. We played those in the band but my main contribution to my bands were kind of semi rocked up Hank Williams songs and Buck Owens songs and an Elvis song now and then. And then these sort of hits, because you had to play some hits.

JE: But you became a songwriter and had to then reflect on what Woody did and all the songs that he wrote—

SR: That's true.

JE: ...that were going through his head all the time.

SR: So when you get down to it, and for me, I came to it late, really, I discovered Bob Dylan.

JE: Yeah.

SR: Through that, then Woody Guthrie. Now I'm just a kid in Glencoe, Bob Dylan runs through my life and so Woody does. I didn't discover Bob until probably junior in high school. I think he'd already had his infamous motorcycle wreck. I don't think it was as bad maybe as we thought. But there were rumors that he was dead already. There were a lot of records, including the first records, which were folk music records and Woody influenced, in terms of both social commentary and then guitar playing and singing. I mean, the guitar playing by Bob is astonishing on those records and people don't think of him that way. But he learned that from that scene in New York and directly from Woody's cronies.

You know, it's like, let's say you find a guy who has never had a chocolate chip cookie, never heard of it. And you give him a chocolate chip cookie. Well, it's pretty undeniable, and so if he has an affinity for it at all, then he'll eat your whole box in front of you because it's just too, and it changes his life. That's reaching for it a little bit but discovering Bob early in his career, but he had four or five records, including the "Rock and Roll Highway 61 Revisited" album. I bought all of those albums at once and just listened to them every night, all the time. And started to try to write songs. Not to say I hadn't but really tried to be Bob Dylan. Ha-ha-ha.

JE: The Bob Dylan motorcycle accident, tell us that story.

SR: I don't really know the story other than that he had moved along with the guys that became the band to Woodstock and living in the woods, so I like that part. He had a Triumph motorcycle. He had a motorcycle wreck and I think it was a semi-serious wreck. And then he's a recluse already but he did really step away from the spotlight and lived in Woodstock, was learning to paint. And making that music with the band.

JE: That accident would have had some kind of an effect then?

SR: Well, I don't know. I think he couldn't go out and play and sing and rock and roll.

JE: Like he did?

SR: So he stepped back and then I think having little babies at the time, and all of that stuff that comes with that, plus living in the woods, [laughs] living in Woodstock, beautiful area, and writing new kinds of songs, it sort of changed his life. Whether the motorcycle wreck directly was responsible, other than making him step back.

Chapter 06 - 11:52

The Band Moses

John Erling: Your band Moses, who chose Moses as the name? How did that come about? And then, in that, your church background probably should be talked about.

Steve Ripley: Well, I grew up in the Baptist church, another one of my first memories is we'd moved back to The Farm after Tulsa, Oklahoma City, and had built on to the little house where we first lived when I was a baby. I mean, I'm still eight, you know, still a baby. But anybody driving up is entertainment too. We didn't have entertainment, so, gee, somebody's coming to see us. And it was the preacher from the Glencoe Baptist Church, doing what he does, outreach, going out and seeing people. Brother Ray Hart. He talked my dad and mom into going to church.

And the next thing I know, well, "Your mother and I joined that church down there," a week or two later. So we started going to church. There you go, life changing, really life changing. So at age nine I joined that church, still a member. Ray Hart is still my favorite preacher, just a fireball of a guy. A little tiny church, but did a lot "Woos!" And slapping the podium. They became pretty tight and my dad entered his, I don't want to say his religious period, but we were into it and my dad was into it. Great time for me. I loved it.

And the preacher, Ray Hart, started coming out here. He was an old fashioned guy, a really old fashioned guy. Wood stove, which I'm telling you, we have a wood stove, we can't wait until it gets cold every winter.

My dad was pretty tight, I guess, but when he bought something he tended to try to buy the best thing he could buy. Before he died he bought a great wood stove and Charlene and I love it.

I saw her this morning early as we were getting ready for you, and she's going, "I'm going to build a fire."

It worked so great, but anyway.

Ray Hart, seemed funny to me that a guy is heating his house with a wood stove. But he was and he would come out and cut wood on our place because we have lots of oaks,

you know, scrub oak stuff. He moved with a trailer that you saw when you drove up, a little trailer made out of an old Ford pickup. That's how he moved to Glencoe when he put his stuff in there and moved. And he would chop wood in it and haul it back to his house in Glencoe. Now that he was the preacher down there and they lived down there.

And then my dad bought that trailer from him. He carried it to sell cookware. And when Charlene and I moved here it's still here and it's just one of my favorite things.

So grew up in the church and never left me. And the Baptist hymnal really is country music, that's what it is. It's as close to it as you can get, whether you believe in the content, which I happen to believe in the content, or you don't. The music is great. Everybody is influenced by gospel music, be it white, sort of that quartet southern gospel singing, which is more like the Baptist hymnal, or black church, which Leon was exposed to too and then I was later. But I got it through Little Richard and stuff. It's not such a distant cousin from the Baptist hymnal.

So all of that is important and then along comes Bob, Bob Dylan. You know, he did have his famous Christian period, which is being talked about a lot right now because they just reissued those years of his Christian records, his gospel records. The music is valid even if you don't believe what's behind the music, which I happen to do.

JE: Right.

SR: The Old Testament is fabulous though for content and the poetry of it, filtered through England, I'm talking about the King James Version. So along comes Bob and we've got stories like "Frankie Lee" and "Judas Priest" and "I Dreamed I Saw St. Augustine." And on an earlier record he's got a song called "When the Ship Comes In," which I always thought was metaphorical for the coming of the Messiah, or the second coming, either way you want to look at it. One of my favorite gospel songs and there's no hint of it, I never asked him if he meant it that way, but that's the way I hear it. I'm pretty anti symbolic stuff. You know, I don't believe in covert plots and those sort of hidden messages. It's sort of a reactionary thing but through the '80s the term "backwards masking" was big because the preachers on TV were claiming that all the rock and roll records had satanic messages embedded in it and subliminal and backwards masking. And you play them backwards. I hate that stuff. I'm entertained by it but I hate it.

So back to Bob and Moses. I'm in college now. I've fallen in love, he's my teacher, Bob Dylan, in my mind. We didn't play that many Bob Dylan songs but I'm just trying to be in some fashion Bob Dylan. So I read everything, you know, Nat Hentoff and a lot of people famously wrote about Bob at the time. And I'd go to the library and dig it all up and do my own research.

The joke, I say the joke on me, but the joke on them too, you know, that thing of people writing their thesis on two lines of a Bob Dylan song, to overstate it, really got under my

skin. Because I clung to a phrase of Bob in an interview where he said, “My songs don’t mean anything. They’re just words that sound good to say.” And I liked that.

Now I know they have meaning, so, I, as a would be poet songwriter I then think you write something and you step back. Bob’s famous movie called *Don’t Look Back*. You don’t look back but you step back and then perhaps you do see something in it, whether you’re making it up or not.

I’m rambling but I’ll get to it. The monkey and the paintbrush where you give a monkey a paintbrush and let him have a go at the canvas, a lot of people can’t tell that from some Picasso or something. And then I’ll throw in a thing that is maybe a confession but it’s true, I would be apt to pick the monkey. Not picking on abstract artists but I not only see that as a true thing in life, I’m apt to pick the monkey and the paintbrush. So you step back and you can see a lot. And then philosophically, even stepping back from what I just said, you step back and you see a lot in life. You see how it comes together. And whether your brain is seeking to put that order out of chaos and make something up that isn’t there, I do not know. I just believe that I don’t, as a rule, and I don’t Bob did, as a rule, and I don’t think Woody did, as a rule, though more than Bob, sit down to say something and then just make it rhyme. I think the gift that Bob has that I aspire to, the rhyming or the songwriting or the thing that sounds good, the phrasing, whatever, then shifting that so that it says something people might want to hear.

A humanities professor sat me down one time and had read something I had turned in. And he said, “You want to be a writer of some kind,” he said, “you should write about what you are. You should write about Glencoe, write about whatever you are and quit trying to do whatever else.”

Whew, what great wisdom that was to impart to me. So that is running through me and running through the people I listen to and I’ve never strayed from it. Never hid from it. Never ran from it. Coupled with, “Gee, that stuff in the Bible is written so great that if I find an opportunity,” or just take advantage of it every once in a while, “to just quote something pretty much from the Bible, well, it’s poetry-wise or in some fashion going to be great. It’s already great, you don’t have to give somebody writer’s credit. I’d be happy to but the world’s full of people that will sue you for anything.

But anyway, there it is, so it’s a great trick, a great valid trick. And then, just perhaps, there’s that whole thing behind it, which I happen to believe in God, you slip it in there and it is your own, not subliminal message, but it’s direct. It’s just laying it out there for people to grasp.

JE: Right.

SR: Moses, it was the trend of the day. Bands had kind of one-name. When I was a kid my best friend had a band called The Coachmen. I joined a band from Stillwater, it’s my first time

of really leaving The Farm. The Innkeepers, they needed a base player and I played bass and then, to be honest with you, took over. But we're still good friends, the ones that are still alive. The Coachmen and the Innkeepers, that was the trend in Stillwater, I don't really know why.

Then Psychedelia came along and this and that and this and that. I remember when we're traveling in a car back from a gig in Shawnee and we landed on Moses, but exactly why I do not remember. One word encapsulated stuff, it was a shift to something bigger than the Innkeepers. We were on local TV a lot back then, *The Ronnie Kaye Show* on WKY, and like his version of American Bandstand. And also Danny Williams was a hero of mine and had a TV show called *Danny's Day*.

JE: I've interviewed Danny.

SR: Yeah.

JE: And he is on our website.

SR: Breaking off partially, as they said, in *Great Expectations* to point out, you don't have to put the whole knife in your mouth when you're eating. The guy's teaching Pip some manners. But you'll have to look that reference up. Only breaking off to say that I still have a recurring dream of Danny Williams. I loved WKY so much it so informed my life, I'm getting my degree in radio and TV. I'm on TV all the time with Ronnie and Danny. I'm going up to see them do the radio shows and a guy named Terry McGrew is on WKY and just one of those early radio disc jockeys that just, I just loved him. He was my brother, was a little brother, of course, but he taught me a lot and I'm hanging around and I still have a recurring dream. I drive up to WKY and the booth is, it isn't really, but the booth you can see from the parking lot. And I walk up and it's dark and it's three in the morning and Danny Williams is doing his show.

But Danny was good to us and so was Ronnie Kaye and so was Terry McGrew. So I'm hanging around all those people that just shifted from the teeny bopper thing to this, I don't know, '60s deal. And bands that were coming to Stillwater and play, I can't remember them now, had odd names. One of them was Large Trucks, was the name of the band. Odd name but I thought that's great, it's kind of funny and too odd for me, but we landed on Moses.

And we'd been doing the *Ronnie Kaye Show* and the *Danny Williams Show* as the Innkeepers. It's plagued me all my life, through The Tractors, it did, I'm the singer and everything but I liked the concept of everybody playing at once, like the band did with Bob, where you're just out there and the drummer is not stuck back in a cubicle. But they gravitated toward being Steve Ripley and the Innkeepers. I don't think the guys in my band resented it too much. The guys in The Tractors did, maybe, perhaps, I don't know.

They would tend to think I thought that was great. And the opposite was happening, I just hated it. So I thought, in my mind as, really, a young guy, Moses would be less likely to be Steve Ripley and Moses. Instead of Steve Ripley and the Innkeepers, that became a thing, you know. So let's put that to bed, says I.

JE: Plus you were grasping onto a well-known name.

SR: Yeah, so you've got a name.

JE: So you have the identification already.

SR: It's better than Large Trucks, sorry whoever's in that band.

JE: Right.

Chapter 07 - 6:30

Writing Songs

John Erling: What led up to the very first song you wrote?

Steve Ripley: I suppose, really, attempting to be a songwriter came for me in two ways. One was, you always have your teachers that are a little older than you or whatever, that have done something as a kid playing in bands. They were a little older bands playing, they were famous in my mind.

And the most famous in my mind was Jim Edgar and the Roadrunners. Jim Edgar's from Perry, still alive, arguably one of the greatest singers Oklahoma's ever had. Just never quite pulled off the national scene, almost. But great bands.

We were on the tail end of that thing, of Jim Edgar and the Roadrunners, and out of Kansas, the Red Dogs and the Flippers. In Stillwater, we had the Magnificent Seven, Shadow Lake Eight was a band. A lot of those bands were horn bands without fits and a girl singer. Pretty fast, I felt like. Their road they were on only took them to Las Vegas to be a Las Vegas act.

So I said twofold, but threefold. To be on this *Ronnie Kaye Show*, you can't put too fine a point on it, to be on the *Ronnie Kaye Show* and generally, the *Danny Williams Show* you lip-synced, just like *American Bandstand*. Meaning, you had to record.

Well, we're all bands, we don't have any records so we all went to Gene Sullivan's Hi Fi Studio in Oklahoma City, which is where Leon and Cale and David Gates and Markham and all those people had started their recording process or learning experience. And so did we. We went to Gene Sullivan's, so recording.

And then, you know, going back to those Bob Wills and Hank Williams records, records is what I wanted to do, recording. And it wasn't too hard to grasp that writing songs was

the thing. And it also was that period now, mid to late '60s, when singer/songwriters were starting to happen.

So we have recording as a thing. We have the Heroes and the Magnificent Seven, I think, which played a club in Stillwater called Spaz. They're the first experience I had of somebody sitting in a club and playing every week. They were the house band, that's what they did, that's all they did.

We were playing any gig we could get, mostly fraternity parties and high school proms. We played on the weekends but every Friday and Saturday was where we play on Ronnie Kaye's WKY what was called sock hops, dances promoted by the disc jockeys.

So I think it was the Magnificent Seven but Jim Edgar was also making records at Gene's. They were trying to make real records. Well, I was in a way, just recording so I could be on the scene. But I realized writing a song became important. I remember a song that I wrote and pitched to Magnificent Seven. I didn't even understand what I was doing but I was in the same game that people play today. Meaning, you write a song and try to get somebody else to record it and then at some point you record it yourself or whatever.

The song, I'm sure, is no good, makes no difference. That's the second thing. That began the mechanics of it, writing a song and pitching to, in a way, your heroes, because they're recording, they're putting out records. They're not just recording for TV like I was, they're making records, even if they're just local records and they sell them at the teen hops or whatever, they're making records, and you know, I couldn't quite tell any difference at the time.

So that's the second notch. And then the third one is Bob Dylan, that emulation or that desire to be Bob Dylan, you know. I mean, I still have it, student-teacher stuff. Just trying to craft something worthy of singing, and they were just horrible. I'm sure that they were just horrible, most of those songs.

But time's compressed. We've been out here on the farm, we moved from having the Church Studio and that whole deal and The Tractors and everything, I think, twelve years ago. It seems like no time at all. But the things that I've been talking about from Innkeepers/Moses, just changed their name really, and changed a couple of guys, through my first studio, which was in Stillwater, getting out of college and wanting to record so badly that I built a studio. It was just for five years, you know, it's a lifetime built into those things. There's no easy answer to when was that first song, but those three things had real import and you could throw in just trying to make a living. But when you couple that with getting a recording studio, then you're supposed to be doing it, you're supposed to be writing songs.

I remember my favorite guys, and they still are, coming to the studio, moving down to Stillwater from Tulsa to record. Probably because I was easy in terms of rates, but it was

a pretty good studio. But they relocated. We all had high hopes and they were great. But they didn't write songs at all. They just were a fabulous band. They were a little older than me and I remember a day when I lectured them and said, "You guys need to learn how to write songs."

"Ah, we love you, Steve," and they kind of ran me out of the room.

But I believe it. And I still do. Listen, my very favorite speech goes like this: Every once in a while there's a crack in the cosmos and somebody falls through. That's Bob Dylan or Elvis or Hank Williams or the Beatles or whatever. There's a handful of those guys that don't know what they're doing, they can't explain what they're doing.

Leon is one of those guys. He really did attempt to explain to himself, figure out what he was doing.

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound).

SR: But being with Leon for forty years, off and on here and there, I'm telling you, shaking hands with him you knew there was something different in those hands.

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound).

SR: An acoustic piano or an electric piano or whatever, when he, to use a biblical term, laid his hands on that keyboard something else happened that is unexplainable.

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound).

SR: And I say, the rest of us are just workers. There's these people, but does that invalidate me? I'm not including you in that, you're an icon of radio and I know it. But should I quit because I'm not Bob Dylan? No, I just keep trying to do it.

JE: Here's another term, when Leon and others lay their hands on a piano, there was an "anointing."

SR: An anointing.

JE: That's what takes place.

SR: When the Spirit falls on you.

Chapter 08 - 2:15

Red Dirt Music

John Erling: Red Dirt music, how did that come about?

Steve Ripley: Well, it comes about in my mind by just all the stuff I've already talked about, by growing up in this region and having all those influences including Woody and including Bob Dylan. You get all of that stuff and throw in the country music and the hillbilly and the gospel and you mix it all up, that's Red Dirt music. It's a region. Really, I downplay it a little

bit, they keep, you know, trying to plant that on me as the godfather of, or one of them, because Bob Childers may be the guy and Tom Skinner, but it's this area, it's Stillwater and they call their place the Farm. But it's after we left.

But when we did our first record, the Moses record, recorded live in Enid, and that really is red dirt country over there. The guy writing the liner notes combined with the guy doing the artwork for the label, and it's great, Carl Bruney and Mike Dugan was the writer. Carl Bruney is the artist. In conjunction with us. It's really Mike Dugan came up with this deal of Red Dirt music. Red Dirt Records was going to be our label. It had to do with the color of the dirt where we lived and recorded. A reference to being organic.

The thing that finishes off his liner notes of "Take this record home and make it your friend, you'll like it better than your dog," I think is pretty good.

Then along comes Jimmy LaFave, he has died last year and a good friend. Just a brilliant, brilliant singer and songwriter. He's the young guy for us like Jim Edgar was to me, you know, in a local level, then Moses was to him and the old guys. We're just a few years older but the old guys and Charlene and I were married in '76 and moved to Nashville.

But he says he went to sing in Europe, small-time or something, but they're interviewing him. And they said, "Well, what do you call your music?"

And he just flashed back to the Moses record of Red Dirt Records and said, "Well, Red Dirt music."

I'll accept that as the origin because I love that story. And being a part of it in any way.

JE: But it did start with you?

SR: Ahh, in some fashion.

JE: Okay.

Chapter 09 - 3:30

The Farm

John Erling: Let's talk about the Farm and the two-story, five-bedroom house called the Farm.

Steve Ripley: Well, I was never there. So...

JE: Never?

SR: Never. I know about it now, but Charlene and I moved from Stillwater, after having that studio. We were married, we moved away, and that thing started in Stillwater by Jimmy LaFave and Tom Skinner and Bob Childers. They and the Red Dirt Rangers were anointed as such. It was a real brotherhood and that's where it kicked off.

I've been out there later, to take a group picture. Again, I go, "Aw, shucks," at that stuff, but they keep pointing at me and, you know, I think that's great. I love it. But I also don't want to take any credit. I downplay it a little bit.

But they look back and point at me, but I didn't do the Farm. The Farm was probably, not communal in form but close to it, and just a lot of people that were broke and singing music and playing music and smoking and whatever.

And I didn't do any of that. My daddy, that I've explained, was half farmer, half traveling salesman, it's still what I do, it's what I've always done. I'm consumed more than those people generally were about the business that we're in. And it's not so much fun to me as it's what I do.

JE: But you were here, not far from the Farm.

SR: Our farm is The Farm. They call their place the Farm, and it's in Stillwater, it's west of Stillwater.

JE: Right.

SR: So it's twenty minutes from here.

JE: And you never went there?

SR: When it was happening I was already gone.

JE: Already gone, all right.

SR: Maybe that's why, well, I mean, I know that it is, to some extent why I'm given credit because I'm the older guy who moved away.

JE: Okay.

SR: And had that record and it was called Red Dirt Records. Had had some success.

JE: But it didn't seem like the kind of lifestyle you'd be interested in?

SR: Well, it doesn't looking back, you know, but I wasn't there. So I don't know.

JE: Probably the same for those who were there looking back too.

SR: Yeah, probably so. I'd been playing the role of naïve farm boy my whole life. I had close relationships with a lot of people who I don't criticize who had a lifestyle that I didn't partake in. I had my own problems, you know, I'm fat, I eat too much, I'm sorry, I thought I was on TV, no TV, we're on radio here.

JE: [laughing]

SR: But there's no criticism of any of that.

JE: Right.

SR: A lot of my very favorite songs by the Beatles or whoever and Bob were probably drug-inspired. I don't care, I don't care. Something illegal would be something I would not tend to do.

That sounds like I'm preaching, I'm not, I don't have any problem with any of it.

JE: That house on that farm burned down in 2003.

SR: Serves them right—no, I don't know. [both laughing] I have been out there because it's such a legendary thing, the Farm, and it really is where the community started. And the community exists and what I say about Red Dirt music is that there's a lot of would-be genres. To be a genre on your own, even a little one, like Red Dirt music, there has to be a community of people. And they have that. You can call something this or call something that but the Red Dirt people are a brotherhood and they take care of each other and they look out for each other. Sometimes it's like a bunch of happy boats on the ocean bumping into each other. There's not necessarily captains. I've been accused of that, of being the captain.

Chapter 10 - 6:27

Money to Tape

John Erling: Do you ever feel like you've been given a direction and you're following it and there are some people who don't have a direction?

Steve Ripley: Well, I might perhaps think that but not as a criticism to those people.

JE: Yeah.

SR: I think it's a blessing and a curse to know at three years old what you're going to do.

JE: [laughing]

SR: I mean, I know that it is probably more of a curse.

JE: Okay, you're into the music business and you took a like to engineering, operating the controls. It seemed to be something you enjoyed doing and not just playing.

SR: I do love knob-twisting, you know, I love noises, that's why I love those records and putting those records on the turntable when I was a little kid. The big 78s, it's the music but it's also just the mechanics of it.

I talked earlier about the songs and all about life to step back and then say, "Well, what that meant," that seems like to me looking back that I had an infinity for the mechanics, the machines, making the music and recording the music. It kind of goes like this: My dad had a big Webcor tape recorder that he had for his sales meetings and stuff. I mean, it was two and a half feet, probably, wide and not a bad recorder. I recently bought one, I can't find that one, it disappeared. But he would prop me up at five or six and have me sing songs and he would record them. So it's planted in me. It's his fault. You know, I said to him, "It's your fault." I don't know if he liked that at all.

And then that whole thing about recording at Gene Sullivan's, can't more of an emphasis on it than I have. Gene was so important to me, going to a real studio with real

microphones and seeing this guy who made his hits in the '40s on one microphone, back in the days before mixing, and listening to the stories of the Wiley and Gene hits. "When My Blue Moon Turns to Gold Again," and so forth. I got so I would just pay the minimum amount, which was fifteen bucks an hour. Fifteen bucks was hard to find extra, but I know I did at least two or three times go up with my acoustic guitar, pay Gene the minimum, sing a little bit, and then listen to Gene talk about those days, and try to learn.

When mixing a record was how far away you were from the microphone as Johnnie Lee said, he played banjo, as I suppose you know, on those early Bob records, some of them. They kept moving him back until he was in the other room, sometimes, because a banjo will cut through. But that's all great stuff.

And we have Gene's original equipment up here at The Farm. So that planted a seed.

And then is going to sound ridiculous, it just is true, that fifteen bucks is hard to come by to go to Gene's to record. And then to buy a reel of tape, which might have been twenty-five to fifty bucks, when you get into one-inch tape. Nobody ever had the money for the tape. As a matter of fact, Gene didn't. I think lots of stuff was lost because he would record over it. That's a thing in modern times, however good or bad digital is, you can keep everything. But there are lots of video and audio masters that have just been lost because the next week they just record over them.

I look for the Beatles on the *Tonight Show* every once in a while, and they're just horrible copies on there because Leo Durocher, the baseball guy?

JE: Yes.

SR: Was an oft-times fill-in host for Johnny Carson.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

SR: So Paul and John make a surprise walk-on visit to the Johnny Carson show. It's the theory, but I just know they just didn't bother with keeping those tapes. They wouldn't have been great tapes anyway. So it's lost, even that is lost. It's a great example of lost.

So I think Gene even recorded over and erased the masters of maybe Cale and Leon, certainly me. And I'd like to have me, just for historic sake, you know, not to listen to.

So you get up to a point, the joke being that I'm out of college. It was a desire of mine but part of it was it was actually easier for me to get an SBA loan and build a little studio than it was for me to repeatedly come up with the money to book studio and buy tape.

JE: Yeah.

SR: But even then, I had my own studio wide open, you could record as much as you want. And even then, who's got money for tape? It was always a problem. We got the Church Studio, we'd look at each other and go, "The time for making excuses is over. We got a studio, it's a world class studio, let's make records."

"Well, who's got money for tape?"

The first Tractor songs were recorded on used tape I bought from Coast Recording Supply in California. And it had been two-inch. One of them was the *Arthur Godfrey Show* and they'd record the audio on tape and they'd just use it once and then Coast would buy that up. And one of them was *The Winds of War*, I think, a TV mini-series with Rob Mitchum. I had to erase that stuff, which was funny. I dumped off some of Arthur Godfrey first.

JE: You listened to them first?

SR: I did, and dubbed some of it off.

JE: Then did that hurt?

SR: Yeah, it hurt.

JE: But you did dub some of it off?

SR: He was a multitrack, Arthur Godfrey, and his guests were Burl Ives and Lucille Ball, you know, are you kidding me? And it's on the first track of this record.

Anyway, the desire to twist knobs and stuff and it's a trap. And I tell young people, and sometimes it's a good trap, but I tell young people, "Those were the days when to have a studio you had to actually come up with some money. Because there was no cheap recorders to buy." And even though ours was a small place it was still a thirty or forty thousand dollar investment in '73.

But digital came along and everybody could have a studio. So the trap is this, you think, "Well, I'll get my own equipment and I can record all the time." The same reasons that I just gave for why I did it. So the reasons I think are valid. But I've now got this experience, even looking back twenty years ago, and telling people, I'm saying, "It's a trap. First thing you know, you'll be recording your friends for twenty bucks an hour and you won't be recording yourself at all."

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

SR: You'd record yourself more if you hadn't bought it and just saved up some money every once in a while and booked some time.

JE: [laughing]

SR: And that's what happened to me, though I did love it. I love the smell of tape and I'm still immersed in it. But in a way, it became easier to record and make a living than it did to play in bands.

Chapter 11 - 6:16**Leon Russell Tapes**

John Erling: We're sitting here in a free-standing building on your property. I see controls all over the place here.

Steve Ripley: Well, when we moved down here we refurbished this building that was here when I was a kid into a recording space, with a plan to grow into another building too. I record in this room; I had the Steinway in here and the B-3 and all that stuff. I like recording in the same room, as people would call the control room. So that's not something I minded, I like that.

At the Church, we had a huge big room and I not only recorded in with the equipment, I also mixed and stuff from where you would think of as the playing room, the big room where the musicians normally would be.

But then 2008, so coming up on ten years ago, is the end of a seven-year dialog with Leon, who I worked for since '76, off and on, about his master tapes. I always think it's now it's a bluff of him throwing them away, as he might say. But the real thing I know that was true was he was tired of moving them around. It's a bulky thing, it's a big mass of stuff. They weigh a lot, he didn't see the value in them, necessarily, that I did. I think the bluff was he started talking about disposing of them or what to do with them.

And I erupted on him, in a probably improper way, but yelling at him and stuff. And that evolved into a dialog about Charlene and I being caretakers for his master tapes.

Then I'm walking in the woods, it's about this time of year, I think.

JE: Winter.

SR: Because I don't walk in the woods in the summertime, there's ticks and copperheads. I'm walking in the woods, which I love to do, Leon calls on the cell phone and the quote, I believe was, "If you want those tapes you'd better come get them because I'm fixing to throw them away." He said it a little less of a bluff that time than the seven years prior.

So we dropped everything, as broke as we were, and headed to Nashville and brought back two semi-loads full of stuff. The tapes, and then why I think the other part was maybe a bit of a bluff, whatever you want to call it, for lack of a better term, was he finally hit on what I was getting at myself. This quote is, "If you ever want to do anything with those tapes, you'll need the equipment that goes with the tapes." Because a lot of Leon's stuff was recorded on forty-track, two-inch tape. Leon had two forty-track tape machines, but there were less than seven. We don't know exactly, maybe only three or four that were ever made and used. Leon had two of them, and you can't play them on anything else.

Then it became the tapes and the equipment that go with the tapes. Then some stuff to sell. And then just stuff for the museum.

So we brought back all that stuff and we shifted. It's been a gradual shift but this room that you and I are sitting in right now, where I did my little radio show, it was just a twenty-one hour shows. It is nothing compared to your career, John.

JE: Oh, stop.

SR: You know, it's not like I sit around listening to the John Erling show but I did when it was on and I'm driving.

So I did my little produced show in this room during that time period. But it shifted slowly over the last seven or eight years, working with the Oklahoma Historical Society about what to do with the Leon stuff. The goal became the OK Pop Museum where it was ultimately destined for. They fortunately made the deal that had to be done, we had to face that, Leon had to face that. So it now belongs to the state of Oklahoma, which is great. He did well with that. I don't know if he was ever happy about it because Leon didn't look back at all. He was a guy who just kept going. "Well, I can write you five songs right now, here we go." And that was his genius.

So for the last few years, it's not the only thing I do, but the emphasis is on transferring those tapes of Leon.

At the risk of running you out of disc, or whatever they are, let me tell you this story that I told to Leon when "they," meaning OHS, making the deal with Leon for the transfer of possession of the tapes. As a little kid here on The Farm, this building we're sitting in, is what Dad called the granaries. Now it's a throwback to some term I don't know, but I assume it was a traditional little barn kind of place. Dirt floors, half of this room broken into two more rooms, so a quarter of the space for two rooms. With wooden floors and little windows. And I assume they put grain in those, I don't know. And a loft, would be the way you did things for hay.

So on the farm, if there's not plowing to do or whatever that goes with raising wheat, which we did, taking care of the cows, there's always fence to build. And if it was raining then you kids, "You get out there and clean out those granaries. If you don't have anything else to do, put that guitar down and work on cleaning out those granaries."

Now the only other time anybody said anything to me like that was I've gone to work with Leon. When I first went to work for him, it's 1976, and we end up in Leon Land. And then at some point, I'm really engineer. He fired me once and then rehired me. So I'm not sure when this is, the second time, probably, '77, '78.

So we're out there, we moved back to Oklahoma and back to California. Fired and rehired. And he says to me, "If you have nothing else to do," I didn't take it as a criticism really, you know, there's things to do, as his engineer, I was his engineer. I aspired to be that and there I was. "If you have nothing else to do you can work on that tape library," because he had all these same tapes and they were semi-organized at the time. But that's what he meant was to further organize them, see what's on there. "You can work on that tape library."

So here I am in the granaries working on the master tapes from the tape library. It's really a bizarre kind of thing.

Chapter 12 - 8:25**Meeting Leon Russell**

John Erling: You talk about Leon as if you knew him forever. How did you get introduced to him in the first place?

Steve Ripley: It seems like forever, John, but when Shelter was going strong—

JE: His record?

SR: The record company.

JE: Yeah.

SR: With Denny Cordell, the guy from England, they had a partnership and Shelter Records. The Church Studio was the Shelter home-base studio, Shelter studio. More than Leon's personal studio. He had his personal studio at his house off of Peoria and he had a personal studio up at the lake. Not that he didn't record at the Church, but it was the label studio. And the office was there to the south of the building. And a friend of Denny's, Simon Miller Monday, ran the office. Based on the tapes that I made, which were not very good, I don't think, from Stillwater, from my first studio, which had closed. Charlene and I moved to Nashville, back to Oklahoma.

Based on those tapes, Simon Miller Monday let me record at the Church Studio thinking I might get signed. So I started recording there and did that for a while until—condensing things—Leon and Denny had a falling out and ended Shelter, as it was at the time. Denny took Shelter and he took all the equipment and went to California. The last thing he did was record Tom Petty and Mud Crutch but that was after it was shut down.

I was working there a Friday night recording, the next time I came back, to record my own tunes. Whether that was Monday, in my mind it was, the locks had been changed and it was over in the office and the house had been shut down. You know, essentially, Tom Petty and those guys, Mud Crutch was the name of their band at the time, recorded for a while in the Church and then they packed up all the gear, because Denny owned it now, and moved it to California, and that was the end of the Church Studio and the Leon Russell period.

But up until then I had been recording. How did we get to Leon? You know, I just loved Leon, the whole thing, that's before we moved. We moved back to Oklahoma and I need a gig. So I call Rick Spears, who was the engineer for me at Shelter and my demos. And he says, "Well, we need a monitor mixer, a stage mixer. I'm doing "Front of the House," and we need a monitor mixer."

And I got that gig. And that's when I first met Leon, and actually went out on tours. And there's stories, but Leon was, you know, an Okie, not frivolous in his throwing around money. So here are the roadies, some of which were best friends, went out and went all over the country and did those tours.

JE: This had to be a special deal for you to actually meet him.

SR: It was an odd, odd, bizarre thing.

JE: And then be with him.

SR: Yeah.

JE: So—

SR: So here we are, and I can't without visuals go into my favorite story, but we're playing one of those venues that's big enough where the buses are parked in the venue behind the stage. You know, you can't see them but they're down in there. It's after the show and we're packing up, the roadies are working packing up the stuff. And I look down from the stage and I see Leon and entourage walking toward the bus.

He looks up at me and he says, "You'll get it right someday, Mickey Monitor." So he didn't know me yet.

There's some pretty good stories in there, not wild stories, just good stories, of me being the stage mixer. It's a thankless job, it's a horrible job, I'm glad I don't have to do it.

JE: The stage mixer, tell us what that means.

SR: Yes, the stage mixer or the monitor mixer, hence the name Mickey Monitor, you're on stage and you're feeding everybody playing. And it was a big band, two drummers, and three singers, and Leon had married Mary McCrary, so it's Leon and Mary and then a couple of guitar players and the bass player and then Ambrose Campbell from Nigeria playing percussion. I'm sitting stage right, off to the right of the band behind the girls, looking out across them, and the monitor mixer or stage mixer's job is to provide individual mixes for those people, each guy, including Leon. And you're mixing the sound for that, you know, how much drums do you want in your monitor? And all that stuff. You can't hear it though, so it's just a horrible thing because you're making mixes that you can't hear. It's not like in a studio where you're listening to the speakers and, "Ah, a little more bass," you know. You're just theorizing that the bass player might need a little more bass in his monitors.

And then they look at you, and you see guys, even now, looking over across the stage and giving a thumbs-up or -down and pointing to the mic, meaning, "Turn my vocal up or down." So it's a thankless job.

We're at sort of the final gig and some part of me just wanting to go home. Some part of me it's great to be working finally with a hero of mine. And coupled with that is distraught, you know, the only thing he's called me is Mickey Monitor.

JE: [laughing]

SR: So one of the production guys, lighting guys, Fred Wood, he don't care, he's got no star-struck nothing, you know, bless him, that's great. I'm plagued with that. He says, "I'll take care of that," and Leon's walking by and he says, "Leon! Steve Ripley here would like to officially meet you."

And then my friend still, Bob Irwell, who's the guy who got me into the Jim Halsey Company, you can see him in the picture. Fred takes the picture, I think. It's a picture of me officially meeting Leon, shaking his hand. You can see I'm rolling my eyes, all caught up in the humor of it.

"Well, bless your heart," I'm sure he's saying.

So my first real meeting of Leon, because it's after four weeks of working for him, is captured with a little picture that we still have.

JE: [laughing] A little bit about him, the special person that he was. He obviously had soul, phrasing, arranging, all that, that you so admired. Also talk about his greatest work.

SR: Well, his greatest work would be hard to pin down, I think, but he was all of those things. And, uh, [big sigh] I went to work for him and just to use his words, again, bless his heart, I essentially affectively stalked him, you know. I wanted to carry this forward. I wanted to be his real engineer in the studio and thought we'd make history together and all this stuff. And his gifts are hard to pin down. For everybody, all of their influences come out.

But he had a gift that is one of those crack in the cosmos things you can't quantify. We have tapes here that I've found of his brother talking about Leon sitting on the piano bench with their dad when Leon was two or three, playing. Leon played the left hand and his dad played the right hand. So gifted from the beginning. Taking classical music lessons and just getting it all from the beginning.

It's a common story, more common than you think, Eddie Van Halen and a close friend of mine. It's the same story of he didn't really didn't "learn music" because he could hear it all and play it all the first time he heard it on piano or anything. So, you know, he fooled them. Eddie did, and Leon would have been the same way.

One piano contest and he never learned to read anything, he just played it.

JE: All by ear?

SR: All by ear, just absorbed it and out it came. So his greatest gift, Leon, is that thing that is the thing that can't be quantified, or whatever.

JE: Excuse me, did he ever read notes?

SR: Leon?

JE: Yeah.

SR: Oh, I think so, but not enough to get him in trouble.

JE: So it was mostly.

SR: Yeah. Glen Campbell, they were all in the Wrecking Crew. Glen kind of got him going in that and James Burton, that guitar player. So Leon's playing these sessions. I didn't know Glen Campbell but I love this story of they're playing Beach Boys or Frank Sinatra records or whatever, and Leon, early on says, "Guys, I don't know what to play."

Glen wouldn't be a reader either and Glen just said, "Play that stuff." He played growing up and never even heard anything like it.

So that was kind of the heart of what he did. To say that he couldn't really actually write sheet music and read it, I'd be overstating. I don't know. I never saw him do that.

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound).

SR: But he would do that more than I did. He did take lessons for a long time.

Chapter 13 - 3:35

Leon, Session Player

John Erling: Mentioned the Beach Boys, he played the Beach Boys' "California Girls."

Produced and played recording session for Bob Dylan, Frank Sinatra, the Rolling Stones.

Steve Ripley: It's all true, it's quite a thing, really. He was a session player, part of the Wrecking Crew, and they just made record after record after record after record. That's when he's apt to play on a Beach Boys' song. And then that afternoon play on a Frank Sinatra record. Because they just played on everybody's records. It would be a studio full of musicians and two or three piano players. The Phil Spector days, Phil Spector, not Phil Spector, you know, Sonny and Cher, whatever, Leon was one of the piano players making the wall of sound.

At some point, Leon decides to pursue songwriting and recording on his own and kind of quit that recording session thing. We have some tapes I've discovered. We've only begun to transfer the stuff but early on, when he was starting to work with Joe Cocker, that's an introductory thing to him moving on. But he made his first records and turned his house into a studio. And all the Tulsa guys are hanging around.

That grew into recording a lot of that first real album, his most famous record in England, but credits are very thin. We don't know who played really on what. So he's meeting the Beatles and recording with them and the Stones and everybody. And then George Harrison, famously looks to Leon for the Bangladesh Concert.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

SR: So Leon's kind of the band leader. At least after George for that. Everybody looked to Leon back then. It's hard to overstate it.

JE: Kind of a Grand Lake person?

SR: Yeah.

JE: I remember back in the cove we'd see that big grey house sitting right on the water. If it was two feet more it would be in the water.

SR: [laughing]

JE: And that was Leon Russell's place. You've been there many time and he actually recorded in that.

SR: Yes. It was a studio, one of the two main studios. "Carney" was done there. But that's kind of before my time. I have been there but I was not there hanging out with Leon in those days.

JE: Yeah.

SR: Which is fortunate for me because, again, lifestyle, I, inadvertently or God's hand, missed some of that stuff that Leon was above or outside of in a way. You know, he didn't let it get in the way too much, that thing. But it was the '60s and the '70s.

JE: You say he was above, what do you mean?

SR: Well, the problems of the lifestyle, drugs and rock and roll.

JE: And he didn't go there.

SR: Well, I don't know to what extent that he did, but even if he did he still was this other thing as a guy that would have not having severe problems or anything—

JE: Yeah.

SR: ...with that stuff. He was always, I think, part of what I aspired to. He was always good at the business picture and putting together the puzzle. Instead of just being a piano player. That's what it takes.

What does it take to be in the music business? Well, as Buck Owens told me as a kid, hanging around, when I was hanging around him at WKY, "What does it take, Steve? It takes whatever it takes." Those are good words.

Buck also was actually astounding at the business management. I don't want to go as far as some kind of genius businessman, but at the same time, seeing the big picture, seeing the puzzle, a lot of what we do in this business is like you're putting together a jigsaw puzzle but you don't have that picture on the front of the box to show you what you're supposed to be putting together. You don't even know what it's supposed to be.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

SR: So it's one piece at a time.

JE: Right.

SR: And you don't even know where you're going with it.

Chapter 14 - 3:22

Hank Wilson

Steve Ripley: He did the Joe Cocker, Mad Dogs and Englishmen thing, major, major thing. And the concert for Bangladesh, major thing. His own records were doing well. Then he takes a left turn and goes to Nashville with the same sort of momentum that has pushed

him through those other things. And he takes on the name Hank Wilson and does a lot of country famous covers, and does it mostly, had a great studio, Owen Bradley's studio called Bradley's Barn, and with the A team plus J. J. Cale and Carl Radle, there was Hank Wilson.

I wanted to say that because several things. Number one, that record came out when I had my studio in Stillwater, '73, '74, somewhere in there. Kind of changed my life. A lot of people probably beat him up for making this country record. It's a great country record.

Over the last year or two I've been transferring the Hank Wilson stuff into the computer, listening to it and making mixes of some of it. We hope to have a release of the outtakes, or whatever for OK Pop for Flagship release on Leon, the first thing. There's a lot of stuff that's never been released.

You can't overstate my admiration for the guy and, again, student teacher. And just like Bob, a belief in him. Then I listen to this Hank Wilson stuff with the A team players in Nashville. They were like the Wrecking Crew, they were the Nashville guys. They just played session after session and recorded a million songs.

So here they are: Leon sometimes plays piano and a lot of times he doesn't. The sort of famous, if not infamous, blind guy, Pig Robbins, played piano, you know, after Floyd Kramer. Floyd took off and had his own career.

Pig Robbins is still alive and still playing great and became the eighteenth piano player. And he's on a lot of them, which is great because it's always great.

And they're in the studio and it's all live, there's no overdubbing, there's no fixing and Leon's young, he's probably thirty to thirty-two. And he's just singing down these standards one after another and it's just virtually flawless. And so for forty years, as much as I admired the guy, I was just astounded because it's just song after song. "Well, let's do this one. Here we go." It might be a ballad or it might be a funny song or "Rolling in My Sweet Baby's Arms." Or "Legend in My Own Time," or whatever that song is, and just great.

So that's the Hank Wilson thing and he never turned loose of that. I wish, that's what's bad, whether it's your parents or your teachers, I no longer can ask questions. Death, there's a finality, at least for us left behind. Okay, well, what did you do then? You know?

John Erling: Yeah.

SR: And I think part of the reason that Bob and Leon both let me hang around and Cale was that I didn't bother them with fan questions. I stuck with working whatever we were doing.

Looking at it now, he didn't seem to ever turn loose of that. I mean, I know that he loved that Hank Wilson deal and that persona and being somebody else, in a way.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

SR: Because there were masses of that with Willie Nelson, famously. I'm transferring a lot of that stuff now and some of it is goofy, but most of it is breathtaking.

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound).

Chapter 15 – 12:12**Elton and Leon**

John Erling: Near the end then, he, and Elton John, did a tour. Elton and Leon met here? Do you know how that—

Steve Ripley: I think here.

JE: They went on tour. I saw him then in Tulsa at the BOK Event Center. Elton John had that same reverence that you seem to be talking about yourself.

SR: Yeah, I think so. Elton came over here in '69, I think, and did his first real American tour.

First I'd say that when Leon came around, after we got his stuff, but even before that, every time he would come through, Charlene and I would pick him up at eleven thirty at the bus and we'd go eat. A famous Leon quote, "Well, we like to eat." And we'd talk about whatever.

And then after we'd brought the stuff and were trying to figure out what to do with it, Charlene was doing the research but Elton John's at the top of the list. Because she rediscovers or discovers all this stuff from those early days when Elton goes to see Leon at the Troubadour, I think, one of the Hollywood clubs. And then they go on a tour. Elton is blown away and Leon is blown away.

I'm going to skip ahead now to seven or eight years ago and we pick up Leon. And we're trying to figure out what to do with this stuff. So a tribute record is a good one. Elton is at the top of the list. Fundraising for the Leon Russell Foundation, Elton's at the top of the list. And I don't know Elton. I still don't know how to get to Elton to ask him these things.

So we're driving around and Charlene's done this research and we know Elton loved him. I say to Leon, "What about Elton John?"

He says, "He waxed me."

And I said, "What?"

He said, "He waxed me." In Leon's mind, when they did that thing back then and he'd see Elton's show and Elton was Mr. Show Business, but Leon was dancing on the piano and stuff. But in Leon's mind, Elton sent him running to the house with his tail between his legs. He was blown away. Waxing me, that the term for "he showed me up."

We're doing history here, aren't we? Let me tell you the straight part of this. We keep trying to find Elton for all these reasons. We enlist Hanson.

JE: Addison?

SR: Hanson, the band.

JE: The Hanson Brothers.

SR: Yeah, we're all part of the family here. They're really feeling the oomph-ba power and they're going to be on the *Letterman Show*, which we've done and we knew that Paul was a big Leon fan, which he should be. So was Letterman. Leon had been on Letterman early on.

We enlist Hanson. We don't know we're doing the OK Pop at all. We're just trying to see what to do with the Leon Russell Foundation or what to do with this stuff. And can't get to Elton.

Bob's office, which was great to me and the guy that runs it, I say Bob's office, it's Bob Dylan, so Jeff Rosen, you know, post playing with Bob Dylan. They're very helpful. Well, I need this and I got the Leon stuff and Bob loves Leon and Leon loves Bob and everybody knows that. I need to get some film transferred and, "Oh, well, we'll do this." He's very helpful.

"Well, I need to find Elton John."

"Well, I don't know how to do that."

So I couldn't even get to him that way. So Hanson, they're going to be on *Letterman* and they bring it up to Paul.

JE: Paul Shaffer.

SR: Yes. I don't think that gets us anywhere. But then Elton comes through town and plays the show earlier than you're talking about. And Hanson goes down to see Elton and they're famous, you know, they're young and they get backstage.

When you're young you have more nerve. They're talking to Elton and they're talking to him about Leon. And, "Oh, yeah, I love Leon." You know, it didn't go too far. Still, we haven't made the connection, we're just trying as hard as we can.

Then a friend of ours, Dr. Greg Holt, he's an athletic surgeon kind of guy, a great guy, and his partner Bart Williams, at the time, in a fundraiser by dinner with Elton. There's three or four groups of people, they're going to go fly somewhere and have dinner with Elton. It's a fundraiser that Elton's doing. The way I remember it.

So I arm Bart with all this we've been talking about. "We have the Leon tapes here and we're just looking to figure out what to do. Maybe it's a documentary."

Elton walks in and in his cute little accent and says, "So who's here from Tulsa?"

And I go, "We are."

He said, "Tulsa, the home of my hero Leon Russell." And they just start filling him in with all this stuff. Elton's partner, David Furnish, I think, makes note of this. He knows who Leon Russell is but not like Elton did. But he sees the affection that Elton has and has expressed in a grand manner, Art tells me later.

Now skip ahead to what was told during this period of time you're talking about when he saw them at BOK. Elton and David are on safari, as Elton tells the story, in South Africa. He's shaving and he wants to listen to something and he doesn't have an iPod so he borrows David's.

Well, David, the way I believe it happened, because of that dinner and who's Leon, put a bunch of Leon's stuff on his iPod. But the way Elton tells the story, I'm not picking on anybody here, but this is the truth from Charlene and Steve's point of view. And it isn't

anything except a little bit of “can’t get no respect,” you know, Rodney Dangerfield. There’s a little of that that creeps in but it isn’t like we need any kind of gratification or thank you for it. But there’s a little of that because the story then, famously, for the next two or three years, just starts at they’re on safari and he hears Leon in his earphones while he’s shaving. And he breaks down and starts crying, and says, “Find Leon.”

I believe we finally got to Elton but nobody knows that. David does and Bart does. And it makes no difference except that then a guy named Johnny Barbus, who’s like a manager but Elton’s guy in America, one of them, and an old Shelter guy. Johnny Barbus finds Leon, you can see the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame induction. Leon liked myth-building as much as anybody. I learned it from him.

You know, rescued me from the bar ditch of life, I think is the way he puts it. But, you know, Leon never stopped touring and traveling in his bus. That’s what he liked the most.

So Elton scoops him up. All those times, every time he came to town we would eat with Leon. And sometimes if he’s there for a night, we’d have dinner at our house and we’d get the old guys, I say guys but the first one that comes to mind is Emily. Sweet Emily, Emily Smith. And then Larry Bell and Gaylord, Mazepa, and whoever, Jimmy Markham.

We’d say, “You want to see this guy?” and he hadn’t talked to those guys in forever. So we played matchmaker or re-matchmaker. The last time we did that for real, Leon was in town, we spent the day with him, we bought a gift for Elton. We ate, as he liked to do, two or three times in his favorite places. We ate at Water Burger and we start off at Wild Fork, which is our deal. But somewhere during the day we might work in Coney Island and we might work in Water Burger and we might work in whatever.

JE: Just Leon?

SR: Yeah, just Leon. This is normal, normal Steve and Charlene and Leon day.

JE: Okay.

SR: We went to eat at Wild Fork and we had Jerrod Campbell, another one of the English people but ran restaurants and was a waiter, and as Leon said, “There’s a million-dollar accent.” You know, English folks have so many different accents, and he was beautiful speaking.

And Emily, we had them both.

I’d just got my first iPhone. There’s a couple of pictures just because I had my iPhone and my son, Elvis, took some pictures. We went to buy some luggage for him. My daughter, Angelene, runs Hide or Red, owns it now but then ran it. So we went down there and picked out some Oklahoma stuff to give to Elton. We had a great day.

Leon bought me a hat, I’ve just about worn it out but I love it. And Indiana Jones kind of hat. I don’t wear hats but, you know, I wear that one.

And then he got on the plane to go have dinner with Elton in Vegas. And truthfully, in a way, that’s the last we ever saw of him. Because he hit the big-time, once again. And not picking on Leon.

So the next two years or whatever, are for Leon's life, consumed with Elton John. They made the record together and they did the tour that you saw, and we were there. Elton loved him still, and would still.

Somewhere in that time before they hooked up, really, there's a TV show with Elvis Costello as the host, but Elton John is the producer of it and the money, probably. So he's the first guest on that show. He starts talking about Leon and he cannot stop. That's the first piece of that puzzle.

I called Leon, and he just answered the phone with, "I've been on TV," meaning, I've done this before, I know what you're calling about. Meaning, that's that.

JE: Was he kind of forgotten up until the time that Elton brought him back again? Were there forgotten days of Leon Russell?

SR: Um, in some fashion there were forgotten days. He never stopped. It wasn't like he never wrote any songs, he just wrote a lot of songs and recorded a lot of songs. And played on the road and the venues got smaller and smaller, I guess.

JE: Yeah.

SR: But he never stopped playing and the band was almost always grey. That's what he sought to do. At our house in Tulsa before we moved out here, The Tractors had already happened, he looked at me across the table and said, "So, Steve, how is it you're not always on the road?"

And it wasn't like, "How did you escape it?" or anything, it was just like that's what you do. He never stopped doing that. You know, when I would speak to the guys at OHS, as an example, and say to them, "You know, it's a little eggshell walking because I know Leon and what he thinks about looking back at the old Leon and all that stuff, preservation. He wants to keep moving forward." But we've got to make the deal at some point, he's got to sign off on this stuff.

Now he had kind of signed off to us, to Charlene and I, starting the foundation or whatever, but that's before OHS. But now OHS and before OK Pop was starting to take place, we're going to have to make the deal. Whatever the deal is, so that we have all this stuff, but we have it under the guise of rescuing it or being caretakers, not doing something with it. So it's not like we're acquiring any rights to anything, all of that is the same as it always has been.

JE: Yeah.

SR: But possession of and utilizing it. So they got down to that, and I would say, "I dread the moment," because I'm Leon's friend and I'm on his team or family or whatever it is. But I would say, only half-jokingly, "At some point, he'll need a new bus," or "His bus will break down," or something, "and he'll be ready to go."

Sure enough, there was a point when we needed to make it happen and his bus was broken down in West Virginia or something and it was up to them then, to be honest with you. And then Jeff Moore was talking to him, just starting to talk. So he, it's more complicated than this, gets the call. "Was there something about ..." whatever the amount of money is because they needed a new bus or to get the bus fixed. And that's the way that it worked out.

JE: You helped him with money then, to help him get that—

SR: Well, the stuff being here and being the evangelist for Leon, it became the impetus or whatever, the original prime mover for, I think, OK Pop, or one of them.

JE: And when you say OK Pop, that's what we're hoping to build in Tulsa?

SR: That's what will be built in Tulsa as a museum dedicated to pop culture and not just music. But in terms of music, it's Leon and Bob Wills, probably, as the focal point. We, meaning OHS, OK Pop, have those collections and we just—

JE: And we should give a lot of credit to Bob Blackburn who has driven that story.

SR: Driven it.

JE: And the OK Pop in Tulsa for many, many years.

SR: Right.

Chapter 16 - 7:21

Steve Preserving History

John Erling: Then we should just say about Leon, he did die then November 13, 2016, of heart related issues. They must have been coming on, that concert that we referred to with Elton in Tulsa, he seemed to be moving pretty slow. So was that heart related?

Steve Ripley: He had some heart problems. But he moved slow because of his birth defect when he was born. Some people lay it as polio or something but it really was some sort of birth defect.

JE: He had a leg that was—

SR: Yeah, his whole right side was not functional in the right way. He said to me, "I spent my whole life just learning how to walk to keep from making a fool of myself." Now he's overstating, but he's saying that this thing he had to overcome, just in simple terms, just walking around was not normal. Then playing, because his right hand was not what it should be, not what his left side of his body was. So he created a distinctive style that became his thing.

Now could he play the piano? Listen, I'm telling you, just three days ago we're transferring tapes. Jerrod Galahair is a new employee that I've known forever, a Tulsa guy that works with me out here to study what it is I do. I dreaded that because I work alone, you know. And it's been just fabulous. And he's supposed to come figure out what it is I do, so that five years from now if I'm retired or dead somebody else can do it. A lot of moving targets here and pieces of the puzzle that just break all the time. And it's tricky. Got to clean the tape, whether it's mold or just stickiness. You got to take apart each reel of tape and clean it and bake it sometimes.

But sometimes there's a gem, a lot of time there's gems. So a few days ago we find a tape, and I don't have high hopes because it's from '81. That's a little bit later than my favorite Hank Wilson stuff, '73, '74, whatever. So we put on this thing called demos and we do not know what it is. And I still don't know why it's called demos or what the demos were for. But it's Leon just playing piano and singing and Sam Bush and John Cowan from New Grass Revival singing harmony. They're not playing or anything, it's just Leon playing piano and singing down some songs, most of which I knew, I think, probably all of which I knew. Four or five songs. They're doing "demos" for some reason.

And can he play the piano? Boy, can he play the piano. It's an acoustic piano, which I like. He's just playing these songs and they're singing and it's stunning, it's stunning! A lot of times record making gets in the road of that stuff.

JE: [laughing]

SR: And we had also a tape along those lines that I found early on in this game. A one-inch 8-track master of his effectively, I think, first night in the studio with Joe Cocker. Denny Cordell who is producing Joe Cocker has brought Leon in to write songs for and coproduce Joe Cocker. It's just one tape.

The first thing on the tape is the Leonard Cohen song called "Bird on a Wire," and it's just great. And then you hear the guy on the talk-back mic from the control room. Talk-back mics make a horrible ker-plunka when the guy flips the switch, irritating noise. English accent so I don't know if it's Denny or just the engineer. "Leon, did you have one?"

So Leon sings something, one of the famous songs, I don't know, maybe "Delta Lady." For the first time anybody has ever heard them it's just Leon playing and singing and it's just great.

The next time the talk-back goes, "Whoa," you know, they're kind of excited, and, "Well, you got another one?"

And so he says, "Well, this one is a little bit quieter," or something. And he does this song called "Hello, Little Friend." "Hello, little friend, it's good to see you back again." He says stuff like, "You're real special to me and if that slips my mind, remind me."

Well, that is Leon Russell, even back then. And it's my relationship with Leon Russell because he already knows writing that song, that's the way that he is. This would be '69, '70.

And then the talk-back mic goes on and there's applause from the control—they're just like wiped out, you know. And then he does "Shootout on the Plantation." You know, um.

To be honest with you, John, I do not why we went down this road.

JE: I don't care.

SR: Yeah.

JE: You told us something that you just discovered three days ago.

SR: Yeah, it's—

JE: And how exciting that had to be.

SR: That's this thing of doing it for OK Pop, we're all distant for OK Pop and I try to share in such a way that they get the tedium, is that a word?

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

SR: Get the fact that it's tedious. So from that standpoint, it's not so much fun, but at the same time, it's at least equally balanced by hearing stuff that hasn't been heard in thirty, forty years.

JE: Yes.

SR: Since it was put on the shelf. Some of it is famous, some of it I've never heard. And it's gems. And the truth is that people, even like Leon, without some sort of preservation in mind, they will disappear and only be footnotes in history.

You asked a while ago, Patty kind of quit or disappeared.

JE: Forgotten.

SR: Or forgotten. And he was in a way, because if he was not, he'd still be selling out arenas. Which he did a top-grossing act in '72.

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound).

SR: But he drifted, Charlene and I both, and now the OHS guys feel the worthiness of this. Because it's been hard, we put all our eggs in this basket and that's what we do essentially.

I'll move sideways, but along comes Dr. Bob, Dr. Bob Blackburn and Jeff Moore and a guy named Larry O'Dell. They're doing an exhibit at the Oklahoma History Center, which is fabulous up there, it's where I met you, at one of those gatherings that they have every once in a while. And we try to go up there and show our support. The History Center is a great place.

JE: Yeah.

SR: They're doing this rock and roll exhibit back in 2008 or 2009 or something. We share some machines and stuff to put in the exhibit. And that prompts a visit to The Farm, for the first time. They've been out here many times since then.

Dr. Bob is totally invested in it now, as our Jeff and Larry. And they're the trio I look to. I sometimes say, I would say it to him too, "You can whip me easily, just say, 'Well, I don't like that shirt you're wearing,' and I'll just retreat." You can't do that to Dr. Blackburn, you can hit him in the head, hit him in the head, hit him in the head, and he just keeps smiling.

JE: Yeah, right.

SR: You know, just coming at you from a different angle, working at it a different way and getting it done. And I just go home.

JE: Yeah. I've enjoyed his support for this project, by the way. We're fortunate that you were such a great musician. But to be an historian on top of it, it's a combination in one person to know the value of what needs to be kept. So you have played and are playing an enormous role in the state of Oklahoma.

You have all of this going in that mind. I don't know if you're writing today or whatever, but you've been so creative and now you're preserving. We're really fortunate. I'm not ending this, but it is fortunate.

SR: That's nice of you to say.

JE: That that happened to you.

Chapter 17 - 10:45

Concept of The Tractors

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 18 - 8:30**Platinum Before Playing**

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 19 – 8:42**Baby Likes to Rock It**

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 20 - 9:52**Building a Song**

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 21 - 9:13

One Mic / First Take

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 22 - 6:25

David Letterman

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 23 - 4:20

Brooks & Dunn

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 24 - 3:52

The White House

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 25 - 7:09

Bob Dylan, the Gospel Years

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 26 - 9:26

Dylan Writing

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 27 - 10:35**Dining With the Beatles**

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.

Chapter 28 - 4:50
Advice to Musicians

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 29 - 3:58

Lessons from Leon & Dylan

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 30 - 10:51

Finale 1 - Prostate Cancer

Steve Ripley: Now I'm going to tell you something, only after we say—

John Erling: Yeah—

SR: ...you agree that this part is not part of the story that's published anywhere or in the library or Tulsa TU, whatever it is, online, this part's not going to be a part of that as long as I'm living.

JE: You've stated it—

SR: This is a verbal contract—

JE: Yes, it is.

SR: And I'm going to say that if it shows up, even by mistake, without my permission, then I have the right to pull it all down. It's all—

JE: Right.

SR: ...going to do down. Give me the copies back, it's not going to happen.

JE: You can take everything away from me then. So I will not do that.

SR: Because what are we doing, I guess? We're doing Voices of Oklahoma; it's a historical thing.

JE: Okay.

SR: So, I have prostate cancer. I'm not going to cry about it—I get the cries now and then— I was diagnosed a year ago. I will not be here...who, they don't know, two years from now. So after I'm dead and if you're still alive, you can add this to the thing where I say on April, what is it?

JE: Seventeenth, 2018.

SR: Seventeenth, 2018, that I have Stage 4 cancer and we're treating it and I have good days, bad days, but I'm dying of cancer. There's no fixing it, there's no nothing. I just thought that might be an important thing to say on the record—but not for the record while I'm alive.

JE: I hear you. And thank you for sharing that.

So, how are you handling this? You—

SR: Poorly.

JE: You said two years, are they giving you two ye—

SR: Six months, they don't do that like some TV movie. They don't do that. I mean, I've got a big, giant team of doctors who all just run from that, you know, statement. Now, the truth is, if you're going to have cancer it's a man-prostate cancer, it's not a bad one to have, I don't know.

On the other hand, if you had some kind of specific cancer they know just what to do. They can cut it out, do radiation and chemo, you know, there's specific things that you do. And in a lot of cases these days, then they fix it. But prostate cancer is different, it's not as drastic as brain cancer or something, but it's also not fixable like that, well, not when it's this far along.

So, that's my story. And I have good days and bad days, but...

JE: How did you handle the day the doctor said to you?

SR: I was flipping about it. I had to tell my family, of course. I've not told anybody, really, a very few close friends, so it isn't just that I don't want this as part of your deal until sometime later, if you decide to do that.

JE: But—

SR: Also, I don't want you telling anybody.

JE: No.

SR: You know, you got to tell your wife anything you want to tell her, but—

JE: Yeah.

SR: ...I'm saying, don't go telling other people at all. I'm trying to keep it quiet. But like I said to my family, you know, "I don't want to be the only one not running around with his hair on fire." You know, it is what it is.

JE: What's your treatment now? Is it chemo or radiation?

SR: No, I don't do chemo yet. I haven't, I hope not to. Prostate cancer feeds on testosterone, so virtually from the day or the week of the diagnosis, which has now been a little over a year, they started giving me these injections that kill testosterone, like chemical castration. It worked really well for a few months and then it kind of stopped working. I still get those monthly injections. So I do that. And then we've added some drugs, some pills that are beyond reach, you know, Medicare and also good insurance so it doesn't cost me nothing,

but it paints a picture of the healthcare system, because both the one I'm on now and the one I started were somewhere in the ten to twelve thousand dollars a month range.

JE: Hmm (acknowledging sound).

SR: So it's beyond normal people stuff. I take four pills every day and it's like four hundred dollars, you know, I could buy a new car. Well, I could buy a car every week.

JE: Yeah.

SR: But some odd things; the first thing that hits me a lot of times, it's just I'm overwhelmed by what's left undone. And I think that's probably not unlike a lot of people that as Frank saying, or whoever did, "Face the final the curtain."

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

SR: So, a year ago, when deciding to do this or do that—

JE: Hmm (acknowledging sound).

SR: ...I'm saying, "What's the prognosis?" And they give you charts and studies, and they're sincere, but I couldn't get anybody to say, "Well, you have four months if you do this, you have six if you do that."

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

SR: What it looked like to me was they encouraged me to do chemo, in addition to these injections. We've had some evidence that if you start it right away—it's an old-fashioned chemo but it works well with prostate cancer, just in some percentage of cases. I mean, they've got no concrete thing. It isn't like, you know, you wear this cast for a while and your broken arm will be okay. It isn't any of that.

So, it looked like to me and Charlene—she's there for every instant of it—that if you did chemo a year ago, if you do chemo six months it's going to be hell, you know, it's rough. Not for the hair falling out and all that stuff, it drains you, your fatigue is off the charts. But if you do it there's some evidence, there's some charts they gave me, that show you take that four or five or six months that you did this this year, meaning last year now, and whenever the end comes, two years from now or one year from now, whatever it is, you've probably gained seven or eight, maybe, months. You gain a little bit, like at the other end you gain something.

So, there's so much to do for OK Pop and for the Leon Project, all of our eggs are in that basket, really, in some fashion. So for OK Pop and Leon and then "I Am a Guitar, Mad Scientist Guy," I had an idea I wanted to do and I'm working on that now. But do I give up all of that with the chance that the end of my life might be prolonged by this? I won't be able to do this stuff that I did last year and I'm doing now, like the Transfers, and all that stuff, because I'll be whipped from the chemo.

JE: But it would be for a period of time, it could be six months and then you could be good to go back to do these things you want to do.

SR: It's true, but not fixed. There's no fixing this, I have to reiterate.

JE: Yeah.

SR: So if I had given up six months last year chances are right now, towards the end of my life, which is just a year or two or three, I might have stretched that out by more than the time I gave up. But it seemed like last year was when I needed to be doing stuff, not three years from now. If you got optimistic about it. I made that choice so far. So if this pill I'm on now doesn't work, and I won't know for two more weeks, at least, then I may have to do chemo or something like that, to try something else. It just looks like to me that the joke on me is that I handle these drugs pretty well and it works pretty well but not very long.

You see those things on TV, all those side effects.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

SR: You know, they give you ten seconds of what this will do for you, then they give you thirty seconds of, "This will ruin your life," but I've been pretty lucky on that. Having zero testosterone my get-up-and-go has got up and gone, or whatever you say.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

SR: I have no get-up-and-go.

JE: Energy is gone.

SR: Nothing, it's gone, and sometimes I am just pooped by the time it gets to four or five. But I enjoy this and it is show business enough doing this, and in my particular environment, that I've done this not because I'm dying but because it does lift me up a little bit, you know, something to do.

Working with Jerrod lifts me up, you know, he's great, and we're doing this stuff for Leon that I can rationalize as important. And I'm able to do that. Jerrod comes two or three days a week. He's been hired by the state to study what it is I do.

JE: To help.

SR: Because I'm not going to be here and to help me too.

JE: You're digitizing the Leon Russell material.

SR: Yeah, and we just talk about, "What did you learn from this guy?" or "What did you learn from that guy?" or "What would you tell that guy in the club?" There is so much to learn that has been astounding. I'm just overwhelmed at times by the stuff I will not get done. There's no possible way. I mean, I have guitars, I have all these guitars, but that's nothing compared to the Ripley guitars that I was making in my days of extensive wiring and tricks they did. I don't hardly remember how to do it, you know, it was just a thing I went through.

But Ry Cooder is still playing his and Eddie Van Halen is still playing his, and it's now been thirty years. I never imagined they'd last that long. And in a serendipity fashion I have ended up with two or three of those extremely, let's say, fancy but extensive wiring guitars that are like the ones Ry has and Eddie has. Mad Scientist stuff, and they need fixing.

So if I don't stop for a few days and figure out how to fix those two, three, four guitars, they are worthless because nobody can.

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound).

SR: Nobody would want to try to figure out what that is. I'll have a hard time figuring it out. So if I do fix those up so they're sellable, they're worth five to ten thousand dollars apiece. Well, Charlene could use that, so could I, even though if I'm gone then that'd be great. If I don't, they're just like dumpster material, unless they just hang them on the wall at the museum, because there's lots of knobs. And some of the guitars I've made are hanging in the Hard Rock Café. It's a shame because I spent so much time making those guitars and tricks and stuff, but they're just hanging there and they'll never be played again. So there's art. There's that, you know?

JE: Yeah.

SR: So there's overwhelming stuff.

Chapter 31 - 8:56

Finale 2 - Fear of Needles

Steve Ripley: And the other one that I find interesting, when I see my kids, who are adults now, I mean, I have a grandbaby, first grandbaby, that's—

John Erling: And your kids' names are?

SR: Elvis and Angeline.

JE: Yeah.

SR: Angeline married Johnny and they have a baby, Mickey, who is just great. But, you know, I'm a family guy. When I think about Elvis or Angeline, when I think about that there's an odd thing, it's like I'll be gone and will not care, in some fashion, whatever it's going to be, and I know they will miss me. But when I am in my dark period or get the cries, it isn't depression but it's weighty, it's more like I reverse that and I'm the one left without them. It's a hard thing to explain.

JE: Yeah.

SR: That's enough about that.

JE: You talked about your faith—what does your faith play in this?

SR: Well, [laugh] there's a guy named Loudon Wainwright.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

SR: His son, Rufus Wainwright, is really an amazing singer, but Loudon is the guy that gave us "Dead Skunk in the Middle of the Road," and marvelous funny songs like that. That's one

I didn't mention, Janis Ian, Leonard Cohen, and Loudon Wainwright. Ron and John and those guys, they were the band for Loudon for a while. It was just great.

But Loudon has a song, it's about fear of flying, it might be called "Fear of Flying," I'm not sure. Basically the idea in some of the lines are, "I'm not afraid of dying, I'm just afraid of crashing." That kind of sums me up. My faith is secure in whatever I was taught and that little church is with me and I surely don't believe I'm headed for hell or separation, so whatever it is, I'm fine with that. I'm not afraid of dying.

JE: Yeah.

SR: Afraid of crashing. And that's really what got me. You can second-guess all this stuff a lot but I had a fear of needles, a full-blown phobia. Every time I said that to any doctor they said, "Oh, no, I know what you mean. Everybody hates needles, I hate needles."

Well, that's not what I'm talking about, I'm talking about somebody with claustrophobia and you say, "Get in that dark closet and shut up. Everybody can do that." And if you've got claustrophobia you can't do it. So I had a real phobia all my life about needles and placing needles in my veins. I don't know if there's a phobia word for that but that's what's caught up with me, 'cause I didn't do any blood work for several years.

JE: You were told you should be doing?

SR: Of course, every time.

JE: You mean in normal checkups?

SR: Yeah, every time you get life insurance or anything like that they send a nurse around and I'm always healthy and everything's fine. But...

JE: You could have caught this sooner, is what you're saying.

SR: Yes. Then you can second-guess because I have a really good friend that has just been diagnosed and they're talking about radiation or removing it or any number of things that didn't come up with me. Because by the time I was diagnosed it was already gone.

JE: So no removal or any of that talk of that.

SR: It's gone, none of that, there's no fixing this. We come to live here and, you know, everybody needs a doctor and I'm fifty-three or -four or something.

So in Pawnee, there's a doctor that I knew as a kid and his dad was the doctor my mom went to. I go, "This is great. I'll go to Dr. Riemer." I had high blood pressure at some point, it kind of hit me all of a sudden.

So we monitored and it was great. He started me on the lowest dose blood pressure medicine and all that's fine. And he'd say, "We got to do the blood work."

I said, "Yeah, I'm working up to it."

And he understood, and he said, "That's fine. Let's do that in the fall," or whatever it was.

And at some point, it had to do with my neck, pinched nerves in my neck. It was about four years ago, and it was debilitating. I couldn't function and it had to do with those

nerves that go through your discs in your neck. They're big long nerves that go down your arm, through your shoulders, and down your arms. At some point, I couldn't get out of bed, I couldn't do anything. I couldn't lift my left arm and it was horrible, horrible pain.

I went to see Dr. Rodgers that owns Cain's, but he's a surgeon and we did an MRI and all that. All that to say, I remember the day I called my doctor in Pawnee, after not doing the blood work, after not doing the blood work, I said, "I need to get in to see the doctor."

She said, "Well, he's booked up today and then he's leaving tomorrow for..." something or other.

And I said, "I understand, but I can't put too fine a point on it, I am suffering."

What he was doing was his last day, cramming everybody he could in to, and, of course, I didn't have an appointment. Because he had cancer and then he died of cancer.

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound).

SR: I was working up to getting that blood test, and then my doctor died.

JE: So—

SR: And then we had another doctor and that didn't work out and they all say, you know, "We got to do this."

So now we have this lady who is actually just a Physician's Assistant, Mindy Mcgee, and she's brilliant and she's great and she took over this office. I have to go every once in a while because my blood pressure medicine, I got to get it renewed. So you have your regular checkup and she does all the stuff except the blood work. She said, "We've got to do this blood work."

I said, "I know. I kind of had a deal with Dr. Riemer. And I got a phobia."

And she said, "I understand. Okay, I'll see you in six months." Then she says, "How you doing?"

And I said, "Well, I've been sick in my stomach and my back hurts."

She said, "Well, something's going around." She said, "The stuff going around can make your back hurt. Or your back can actually get thrown out or something and make you so sick you're sick at your stomach."

I said, "I think I'm getting better." It was on Tuesday and I just went down.

And the next Tuesday I was there, going, "This didn't pass, I'm sick."

Then it was the big joke of the office, "Stevie's going to give blood."

I'm literally running the halls, Marx Brothers style.

JE: Wow.

SR: Bless her heart, she takes my blood. The next meeting is the results that come in and the PSA, the range is zero to four. You hear about people 5.8 or something and they're worried and they're talking about surgery to remove it. Mine was 1100.

JE: Um-hmm (agreement).

SR: So...and as it turns out, that is not as rare as you might think, but she had never heard of it and she was shocked.

Dr. Rodgers got me into this neurologist in Tulsa that's great and he says, "Well, I'm not going to sugarcoat it. Your prostate has gone like this." He had just felt it.

I said, "Is it kind of crusty?"

And he said, "Yeah, it's crusty."

Then they did the biopsy a week from then. So it's like Tuesday, Tuesday, Tuesday, Tuesday. To do a biopsy they're so afraid of infections when they do that, because they're going in and they're clipping little pieces from all over your prostate. Twelve cores. Just puts a different frame on everything. You know, here I am, needle phobia guy—I'm sure over that now.

They gave me that shot of antibiotics because they were going to do the biopsy. And it was truly an Oral Roberts kind of deal. I'm saying it just because it whipped whatever was going on inside me. It was like a switch was flipped and all the pain and suffering was gone.

It started to come back, just less than a week, because I was there the next week for the diagnosis. And they gave me my first injection of a drug called Firmagon, which is the anti-testosterone thing.

I think I've figured out that everybody that has prostate cancer, even Stage 4, doesn't necessarily get as sick as I was sick. I couldn't lift my feet, I spiraled downward, lost twenty or thirty pounds. I liked that part, actually, but the Firmagon, that anti-testosterone thing was the same thing—by that night, I felt great. I ate a ribeye. Never been as sick as I was that three or four weeks before I was diagnosed.

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound).

SR: So I'm thankful for that. I have good days, bad days, but mostly it's fatigue. I don't feel good, you know, I'm never going to feel good again, but I have my new normal.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative). Do you feel like doing any work?

SR: Yeah, I do, I work, I mean, we work.

JE: Yeah.

SR: I'm going to work as soon as you leave.

JE: Yeah.

SR: And Jerrod's already here doing something. I gave him some assignments.

JE: Yeah.

SR: And I record some, but it's just I'm so whipped. I'm not asking for sympathy, it's just Jerrod gets here at nine thirty or ten in the morning and we go at it semi-hard but consistently. He leaves at four thirty or five or something and I'm just out of it.

JE: Yeah.

Chapter 32 - 7:04**Finale 3 - Blue Dot Picture**

John Erling: We have friends and I always think they wake up every day and they've got this cloud over their head. Do you wake up with that every day? You thinking cancer?

Steve Ripley: Not in the way you mean. The things that hit me are separation from my kids, but then that's silly. It's philosophical, perhaps, because I'm not going to miss them, they're going to miss me. And when I say that, the weight of it is not an empathy for them, because I don't want them to have to go through that. I do have that, but know it's this trick—you can think about this when you're dying, we're all terminal, it's what one doctor told me; my thing is sincerely like I get that flipped around and it's not like they're dying. But at the same time, it's they're going to be gone from me. And perhaps that's what it will be in afterlife, but I don't think so. That's a dark thing that I go through once or twice a day maybe even.

But I get up around seven every day and take my bubble bath or my swirly bath, sort of healing waters. And it's mostly just to think about stuff. It's liable to be about this, but more than likely it's about songs and whatever. I still do my normal stuff.

JE: But you've got that to work for and that's a blessing to you right now.

SR: I guess, you know.

JE: You've got that.

SR: So it's a negative when you think about how much there is left to do.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

SR: And I'd hoped to get it done but I know that I can't. But my faith is intact. It doesn't enter the picture, it probably should in a Baptist way, but it doesn't to me. Because I think God is so big nobody understands what it's really about. And the best Jesus can do, or any prophet, is speak in parables and speak around it, and/or speak literally. But even when my literal self being here as God is beyond anything that you can understand. And perhaps, I don't think I'm going to be struck dead, perhaps more than he possibly could understand.

I mean, did Jesus know the Earth was round? We think he probably did because I think people had kind of accepted it by then. He was a man, half man, but if he wasn't a normal man than it all was for naught. He came to be a man and suffer and die, in the way they taught me. And I don't have any trouble accepting that. But it's beyond explanation.

As soon as I turned loose, a long time ago, of God is a little, old, white-haired, long-bearded man sitting on a throne, then I turned loose of everything like that. So I don't know, I don't pretend to know, but I also don't believe anybody else knows. They may be closer to it.

Do you know what the Blue Dot Picture is? We have these things, they're still out in space, they're two things but they're probing space. What is that called? I'm sorry. One thing that I have, it's not from cancer, is I search for words. I have a brain fog, probably more from the medicine than from the cancer, I'm pretty sure.

JE: Um-hmm, hmm (thoughtful, maybe affirmative).

SR: But I have a certain brain fog, I can't remember anything. So I can't remember the name of that spacecraft flying into space to explore space. It's like *Odyssey* or something like that. It's about to pass out of communication as it heads off into space. I mean, they're still going. It left our solar system about five years ago. There was big news about because it's the first manmade thing that left the solar system. Because it's been traveling all these decades and still within our solar system.

And that guy who was on Johnny Carson all the time, that "millions and millions," that guy.

JE: Yes, yeah.

SR: I can't remember that guy anyway, but you know who I'm talking about. At his suggestion, I believe, this is in Wikipedia, you can just look for Blue Dot, he had them turn the cameras towards Earth and shoot some pictures or shoot a picture. So the Blue Dot Picture is from this picture that is so vast you can't comprehend it. It's just hardly a glimpse of the universe, but it's everything this spacecraft could see. And way, way, way down in this mass of things is Earth. And it is so small.

JE: Yeah. Yeah.

SR: You can hardly see it. And that's where we are. We're on this Blue Dot that is so small it would take a God so big to even know about Steve Ripley or John Erling.

JE: [laughing]

SR: I mean, there's the power.

JE: Yep.

SR: If you want to go there and believe that it would take a supernatural power to be able to find either one of us on this little piece of land on this little, tiny Blue Dot in the universe.

So, I turned loose of that stuff a long time ago for me. I also believe what I get from Bob Dylan, this guy, that guy, I think the danger we have to contend with is that everybody has ideas or glimpses of something or epiphanies, let's call them, and some of them can be powerful. At least for some of us, I've had epiphanies that are really strong. And I think not that I should stop and go preach or teach. I think people have ideas come to them. Steve Ripley says, "I think our history is filled with people that that was such an overwhelming experience that they dropped everything. If they did it as a little kid, they dropped everything and devoted their lives to try to tell people about this thing. They studied it. And the more they studied it the more they made it be true for themselves."

Now, whether that's about God or a way to build a house or whatever it might be, I don't laugh at that, but I do, kind of, because I don't want to say ideas are a dime a dozen. I'm just saying that epiphanies are not rare but a lot of people go down that path and they devote their lives to trying to convince people of this thing that might just have been a little, you know, like in Christmas Carol, the third ghost comes up, or it may be the first one, and he says, "Are you really here or are you just some part of roast beef I had at lunch?" You know, meaning, I ate too much and I'm having some kind of out of body experience. That's what I get from it. I mean, maybe this epiphany was a little shot of electricity that sparked off of something. Didn't mean nothing but our brain went like this, "Maybe it's true! Maybe those people are right to stop and devote their lives to preaching this one sermon."

Chapter 33 - 9:21

Finale 4 - Rev. Carlton Pearson

Steve Ripley: You know, maybe Carlton's thing was the epiphany or revelation that he had, but the more years go by, I see him not as simple as that anymore. I mean, I was there at church when he preached about people are saying, "I don't believe in hell. You know, there's a hell, there's a lot of people I know going to be in there." Making jokes about it. I'm not faulting that, I'm just saying he was dealing with it. But in no longer simple—when you're telling a story there's devices to tell the story, and especially movies. I loved it and I thought it was a good movie. And if I had any fault with that movie, they just used device after device to tell the story. Is the story the most important part? I guess that it is. Is it based on true stuff? It is except they just kept—like Reggie, I think, is the organ player/song leader. I never knew Reggie. I knew all the song leaders and I loved them and I still do. But as far as I know, there was none of that went on.

John Erling: Um-hmm (affirmative).

SR: I think that it's used that—I don't know if I'll ever ask him because it's a blind man feeling the elephant. Did that really happen and I just missed it? Well, it didn't happen as one of his song leaders because I was there and I know those people.

David Smith is one of them, he's still doing it at Higher Dimensions. There's one that's in Owasso. All three of those guys that I knew that were through this whole period we're talking about were wonderful guys, wonderful musicians, happily married, family guys, who just moved on for whatever reason or not. But they're all still alive and I know them and I still talk to them.

Alvin Fruga is credited, so we have David Smith, Alvin Fruga, and Willie Davis. They're just some of my favorite people that I've ever known. Just like Bob Dylan. I digress but some of my best memories in life are they're coming in to record the fixups for the "Live at Azusa." Or sometimes we just did albums, but the choir is assembled and all three of them it's the same story. And there was a fourth guy too, I don't remember him so well, but the story was the same. The choir, be it twenty people or whatever it is, is gathered around the Steinway and they're just warming up. I have recordings of that, I don't know where they are but there's church for you. And it was so weighty and profound.

So that movie's filled with devices. Part of the story is the acceptance finally that gay people are not condemned to hell. I have a feeling they just wrote that cleverly or very good fashion into the story to tell that bit. So they made that guy to—it doesn't make any difference to me, I love Carlton, and I've told him many times.

And I don't get into the subject with you, I haven't and I won't this time, but I'm a Democrat. And really a Democrat because I'm a Christian. So I have personal family members and friends that can't understand that. They would say, "I'm a Republican because I'm a Christian." There's some irony there but for a while there, Carlton was a Republican. That's been five or six years ago, but it was five to ten years since all that happened.

And I said, "Carlton, I didn't have nearly so much trouble with your doctrine as I did with you being a Republican."

JE: [laughing]

SR: "That was really hard for me to grasp."

He said, "Yeah, I don't know what I was thinking."

Anyway, I have rambled, I've shared my deepest secret—that doesn't matter, you know, we are all terminal.

JE: No, it does matter. As you made this confession of your cancer, you lived with it for one year.

SR: Yeah. I probably was sick for several years before that and it was growing.

JE: Okay.

SR: There's a trend to pull it out of there. And if you Google prostate cancer what would come up a lot would be robotic surgery. I hate to be cynical, I never want to be cynical, but I am at times, and I just get the feeling that they figured that out, they sold a bunch of machines, whatever it is, and there's people that push this, they just go to that first. Just pull it out of there.

And I know of a couple of friends of mine that are dealing with all the issues after that. There are a whole other set of issues. Doesn't mean they're going to die of cancer like I am as quickly, but a lot of them are going to die of cancer, even though the prostate's gone, because it spreads. And even if they don't think it's spread, it's already spread. The

odd thing is that prostate cancer when it spreads is still prostate cancer. So if it's in your bones, you don't have bone cancer, you have prostate cancer in your bones. And it starts producing testosterone.

It is funny, I'm telling you, it's funny in some odd, quirky fashion. "So, Steve Ripley, how do you get to play with Bob Dylan?"

I don't know, I'm a weird guy. I don't know how you do that but it's just like me to have these things work and then don't work very long. And then the cancer inside me figures out some other way to do it.

JE: Yeah.

SR: I mean, it's just so like me. The drugs I'm taking now, besides the original injections that I get every month in my belly that are pretty serious, I got to tell you, these pills, what they're doing is attacking testosterone in other places, including wherever the tumor or the cancer has spread, I guess, it's making testosterone. Because prostate cancer feeds on testosterone, so you kill it in your testes and then, lo and behold, you know, well, I'm a smart fellow, I'm going to make some testosterone over here. Something like that, pretty weird.

And chemo, I knew when my mom was dying and we moved back to take care of her and I watched her go through that, chemotherapy, I guess, God bless it, I mean, I'm not finding 1 percentage point of fault in it, but really what they're doing is killing as much as they can without killing you. There's just killing everything they can.

JE: Yeah.

SR: And hopefully, they'll get the cancer and you won't die. And then you can start to come back. Now, there's other things like taking your own blood and they process it in some way and then they put it back in you. That's a thing that goes on and something to explore.

JE: Well, you know, you could be here five years from now.

SR: I could, probably not, so I deal with that optimism coupled with it's not probable. Things can go south at any moment, take a turn for the worse, and that moment could be the next doctor visit, when I get my PSA taken again on May the 3rd, or whenever that is coming up. If my PSA is at 600 or something, it's at 110 right now. It got as low as around 10, down from the highest of 1600. So that's great. And then that drug stops working or whatever it is and you start going back up. I'm hopeful for that and for some years left.

Now if any of these three things that I've done had lasted an average amount of time I would have moved into the two-year, three-year thing. But mine just lasted two months and three months and then we'd try something else. If this drug I'm on now works for me, there's people that have taken this drug, Zytiga, it's called, for years.

JE: There's that hope right now.

SR: Yeah, but that's like saying I could go to the top of this building out there and jump off and perhaps I'll fly. You know, it's about like that. It's not probable.

JE: Well, you were brave to share all this right now.

SR: It seemed like it ought to be part of the record. I know your hope for this is this goes on more than five years or ten years. It's there, Voices of Oklahoma.

JE: Thank you for sharing what you're done now.

SR: You're welcome.

JE: Someday this will be played beyond you and me.

SR: That's—

JE: People will be interested how you were handling that.

SR: And then they, and then they can see what the whole story was.

JE: Right.

SR: There's a final chapter to it.

JE: Yeah.

SR: You know, to be honest with you on an optimistic note—you can turn it off or if you want, leave it roll—but it's a fascinating field and these guys are giddy, in a way. They don't spend too much time being giddy because they are working all the time. I mean, they're not just cancer doctors, they're urologists, so it's a lot of stuff. But there's a lot of drugs coming down the pipeline. So the hope for me is that this drug now or the next one, if it works long enough for another one to be there, then you start the opposite of dominoes, you start stair-stepping your way into—

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

SR: ...two or three or four years. Huh! That's funny, isn't it?

JE: Easy for me to say, but if you can keep that hope going that gets you through. Thank you, Steve.

SR: Well, it helps.

JE: Thank you.

SR: I'll tell you for your own sake, you know, it's like I was trying to tell you a while ago, this stuff lifts me up. I dread it before it but I also know intellectually that it will lift me up. I don't sit anywhere for three and a half hours.

JE: Yeah.

SR: Because my butt hurts and my back hurts.

JE: [laughing]

SR: But three and a half hours is a good thing in my life.

JE: Yeah.

SR: I like to think.

JE: Good. Thank you, and I like it too.

Chapter 34 - 2:18**Finale 5 - How to Be Remembered**

John Erling: How would you like to be remembered?

Steve Ripley: Oh, I don't care if I'm remembered. You know, it's through my kids. They have tried to induct me into the Oklahoma Music Hall of Fame year after year after year. And I used to say, "Me go into the Music Hall of Fame before J.J. Cale? Are you kidding?" Well, I knew Cale, I was talking to Cale, he wasn't going in. And then he died, and then they put him in.

And I said, "Well, I'll stick with that model. Put me in after I'm dead." I'm not bragging or anything, it's just I'm just trying to make a living, that's the truth. I mean, I'm lazy, I have to work pretty hard, meaning hours and sometimes not, but I don't want to do anything. I just want to sit and watch TV.

JE: [laughing] Yeah.

SR: Write a song now and then. Make a movie.

JE: Yeah, I'm sure inspiration comes even then, doesn't it?

SR: Yeah, I'm recording. Again, NOS, I might call the album because a lot of them made those records you talked about but the record that I made for Leon didn't ever come out. And I wrote songs and recorded some all that time. Some of them are weird. Now that it doesn't matter what they are, I'm reviving some of those and writing some new songs. I have twelve-minute songs and four-minute songs. But I don't record much on my own.

JE: Can't you see someday that you'll be long gone and, all of a sudden, somebody will find a song that you never brought out to the public, and, bingo, it's Steve's hits.

SR: [laughing] Well, then.

JE: I want to thank you in being so forthright in giving to the interview, is what I like to say. Thank you very much.

SR: Thank you, John Erling. Again, it's a sincere great thing to sit across the table from that voice. I dreamed last night, of course, it's subconsciously in my brain, but I woke up, I'd been having a dream about a wingding we were having, as we call them. And I'm walking in from one building to the next. And there's a gravelly-throat guy talking.

I said, "Well, who's that?"

And they said, "Well, that's John Erling."

JE: [laughs]

SR: And I said, "Oh, well, I knew from the Tractors days it's so much harder on your voice to talk than it is to sing." Because I would have to do phone interviews all day. But I woke up with that dream, it's kind of funny.

JE: Well, as we shake hands, thank you.

SR: I had a good time.

JE: Thank you so much, and so did I, believe me.

SR: Thank you.

JE: And so will the listeners.

Chapter 35 - 0:33

Conclusion

Announcer: This oral history presentation is made possible through the support of our generous foundation-funders. We encourage you to join them by making your donation, which will allow us to record future stories. Students, teachers, and librarians are using this website for research and the general public is listening every day to these great Oklahomans share their life experience. Thank you for your support as we preserve Oklahoma's legacy one voice at a time, on VoicesofOklahoma.com.