

Tommy Allsup

After a lucky coin toss in 1959, he became a successful western guitarist and music producer.

Chapter 1 – 1:16

Introduction

Announcer: Western swing guitarist and music producer Tommy Allsup was born on his Cherokee mother's allotment near Owasso, Oklahoma, the twelfth of thirteen children. The musical family moved to Claremore and in 1947 as a sophomore in high school, Tommy organized a Western-style band calling themselves the Oklahoma Swingbillies. It was after high school that he became a member of Johnny Lee Wills and All His Boys, performing at Cain's Ballroom in Tulsa. After meeting Buddy Holly in 1958, Tommy Allsup toured with Buddy Holly & The Crickets. In was the winter 1959 when Buddy Holly after a concert in Clear Lake, Iowa hired a pilot to take them to Fargo, North Dakota. Ritchie Valens had never flown before and flipped a coin with Tommy for a place on the plane. Holly and Valens were killed along with The Big Bopper on February 3, 1959, when for unknown reasons the plane crashed. Tommy led The Crickets, which included Waylon Jennings, and finished the tour. Along with his good friend Guy Logsdon, Tommy will talk about his career. Thanks to our sponsors, Tommy's story is preserved on the Oklahoma oral history website VoicesofOklahoma.com.

Chapter 2 – 7:24

Allsup Family

John Erling: My name is John Erling and today's date is September 8, 2011. Tommy, would you state your full name, your date of birth and your present age?

Tommy Allsup: Tommy Allsup. I was born in Owasso on November 24th, 1931, so that makes me 79 years old.

JE: You are coming up on your 80th birthday?

TA: Yes, the big 8-0.

JE: Joining us is your friend Guy Logsdon, Guy, it is nice to have you here. To mention your background, I would like to say that you were the Director of Libraries, Professor of Education and taught Oklahoma history at Tulsa University. You've dedicated many studies to Woody Guthrie. You have co-authored two books and with Jeff Place you've compiled more than a dozen CD collections for Smithsonian Folkways Records. You are more than qualified to be with us here today and we appreciate you very much. We are recording this in Guy Logsdon's home here in Tulsa. Guy, we have interviewed you as well for this website. How did you come to know Tommy?

Guy Logsdon: I don't know. Do you remember Tommy?

TA: Yes. In 1976, Guy sponsored a Western swing festival out at the fairgrounds.

GL: Oh yeah.

TA: At that time I had put together the original Texas Playboy Band with Leon McAuliffe and six of the original members. I did it so I would have a place to go and pay on the weekends. We came up here and played for his Western swing festival. I ended up that night going to Leon Russell's house and playing rock 'n' roll and putting it on a record. So I killed two birds with one stone that day.

GL: That was one of the festivals that the fairgrounds board supported. This was out at the Tulsa State Fairgrounds. It was a two-day event.

TA: It was a good show.

JE: Tommy, did you have many sessions with Leon Russell?

TA: Yes I did. He came out to California in 1961 when I was working with Liberty Records. He came out there to see me and we got acquainted. I got him a job and Dave a job playing at Relief Band, which is a club there in north Hollywood. We played around there for about three years before we moved down to Texas in 1965. I had just done an interview for a guy from Houston. He had something to do with Oklahoma. He was doing a big bio on Leon Russell. He sent me a contract. He went out to the union and he had really done his homework. He pulled out a contract. He was asking who this guy was and who that guy was. We did lots and lots of session-work in '61 and '62 and '63. I played with him until 1964 up through Gary Lewis when he got started singing. Leon arranged his first album.

JE: You said you were born on a farm near Owasso. Let's talk about your mother and her maiden name and where she grew up.

TA: Her name was Blakemore. She grew up down around Tahlequah. Her mother was an orphaned baby who grew up and married a guy named Bill Blakemore. He was my mother's father. He was part Cherokee, but mostly German and English.

JE: Tell us about your father.

TA: His name was Thomas Jerry Allsup. He was born in Marion County, Illinois. The Allsups came over the U.S. in about 1735. I got the date on that from Tex Ritter, who did some homework one time over in England searching out the family history of his name. He said the Von Ritters and the Allsups came over at the same time. He told me this in the early 1960s out in California. He said the Allsups dropped off in Tennessee and the Von Ritters came on to east Texas. Later on they dropped the “Von” off of it and when he was born his last name was just Ritter, not Von Ritter. He intrigued me. He told me, “I did some research on the name Allsup. Back in the old days they would hold up a glass and they would say, ‘Let’s all sup.’ That’s how the name was derived.” Of course I had a bunch of sisters that didn’t go along with that around the Tulsa area—but we had a lot of fun with it.

JE: Can you trace the Cherokee on your mother’s side to your great grandmother?

TA: Yes, I’ve got all of that stuff written down. There are some names I can’t even pronounce that go way back. My mother’s grandmother and Bill Cody’s mother were sisters. We found that out. Cody was spelled Coody back in the old days and then they dropped an “o” out of it later on.

JE: You’re talking about Buffalo Bill Cody?

TA: Yes. My mother would have been a first cousin to Buffalo Bill Cody. My mother was born in 1893 in Tahlequah. Bill Cody was born in the 1850s I believe. His parents came out of the Cherokee Tribe.

JE: Is it true that your great grandmother actually walked the Cherokee Trail of Tears?

TA: Yes. My mother’s grandmother died on the Trail of Tears.

JE: She never made it to Indian Territory?

TA: No, she never made it to Indian Territory. Her baby made it, that’s why she grew up in the orphanage in Tahlequah. The Cherokees had an orphanage set up at that time just for that purpose.

JE: You had brothers and sisters, tell us how many.

TA: I had a bunch of them. There were 13 kids in my family, six boys and seven girls.

JE: What did your father do for a living?

TA: He was a dry land farmer all of his life. He raised me through the Depression. I was born in 1931 and that’s when all of the dust was blowing. It was a big family. They all weren’t home at one time, but I remember when six of us caught the school bus. The year I started school, there were four boys and two girls all riding the school bus at the same time. We didn’t have any money, but back then I don’t think anybody had any money. Everybody was broke, so you didn’t know you were poor. Until you would call your dog to feed him and he wouldn’t come (laughter) then you knew you were poor. There wasn’t dog food back in those days.

JE: We should mention to listeners that your wife Nicole is in the room here with us. Then your family settled west of Claremore?

TA: It was two miles west of Owasso. We had the corner section of the land. It was 80 acres of Indian land. My mother had a couple of sisters and a brother that also had land in that same section. It was about two or three years after they got married. They got married in 1910. It seemed like the land came along in 1913 or 1914. They moved off of my uncle's land to the 80 acres that my mother received. That's where we all grew up.

JE: What does Owasso mean? It's an Osage word isn't it?

TA: End of the line.

JE: Supposedly it was the end of the Santa Fe Railway?

TA: It could have been, yes.

JE: That's how Owasso came about.

Chapter 3 – 7:28

Family Music – Will Rogers

John Erling: Do you have any recollections of music in your family?

Tommy Allsup: When I was really little I remember my dad and my brother Bill sitting around and playing. There would always be somebody coming by to play the fiddle. Of course, my dad went to bed when the chickens went to roost. They would come by the house at 7 or 8pm, which wouldn't be late in the wintertime. A lot of times he would get up and get dressed and go in there and play for an hour or two. Then they would go on. I remember that all the way back until I was three or four years old.

JE: Do you remember when an instrument became of interest to you?

TA: Yes, we had a fiddle that only had one string on it. It was the A string. I got to where I could play a song on that one string. I got my brother to Ken to play rhythm for me. That's when I started getting to like music was on that fiddle. When the boys all went away when the war broke out, I started playing for square dances with my dad, so I started learning chords on the guitar.

JE: How old do you think you would have been when you picked up that one-string fiddle?

TA: I was about 6 or 7 years old, 5 maybe.

JE: It just came naturally to you didn't it?

TA: It seemed like it did, yeah. I know it beat working in the farm. Later on, when I started playing for square dances, they would pass the hat around and you would pick up \$5.

Sometimes you would get lucky and you could make \$12 or \$15. Back in those days you could work all day and make 50 cents to \$1 working in the hot sun. It didn't make sense to me. I thought the guitar feels better in my hand than a pitchfork or a shovel, or a hoe, you know. (Laughter) I thought I had better start practicing and that's what I did. I have been playing more than 60 years. I have never done anything else. I had a job one time when I went to California. I had to transfer into a musicians union. You couldn't just go out there and start to work. They had a waiting period of like 6 months or 9 months, I forget. I went down to apply for my union card and then I went to work for General Motors. The first couple of nights I got blisters on the bottoms of my feet from pulling cars off of the assembly line and pushing the car bodies over to another line that went upstairs and then would drop them down on the chassis. The first week went by and I just thought I really don't like this. It was worse than farm work. So I went out looking and I met Jack Tucker who was from Ada, Oklahoma. He had a band. He had a brother named Herb Tucker who also had a band. Jack was pretty popular around southern California in the early 1950s. He took me down to the union and he told them, "I am going to hire Tommy to play guitar. He can sing and he can sing harmony. If they couldn't get a guy out of the Local 47 (union) then he had the right to use me. Until another guy comes along that's better (than me), then he could bump me off the job. But nobody came along to bump me, so I finally got my Local 47 Union card.

JE: Let's come back to the first school you attended. Was it a one-room schoolhouse?

TA: No, Owasso had a pretty good size school. The one through the 6th grade was in one building and 7th through the 12 grade was in another building. The grade school was two stories. They had six buses that ran at that time. It seemed like there were a lot of kids for back then, but right now it's a huge school out there.

JE: How about your first house? How big of a house was that?

TA: The house we grew up in had one bedroom, a living room, a kitchen and a back porch.

JE: How many did that accommodate at one time?

TA: Well, there were 4 boys and 3 girls at home.

JE: So where did everybody sleep?

TA: There were two beds in one bedroom and the boys would sleep in one bed and the girls would sleep on the other. We would put two at one end and two on the other. That's the way I grew up was sleeping like that.

JE: You never thought anything different—you thought everybody did that?

TA: Yes. That's how everybody did it I guess unless they had more than one bedroom. (Laughter)

JE: In the birth order, you were next to the youngest?

TA: I was the youngest boy. I have one sister who was born after me.

JE: Did you play in school? Did the teachers know you were musical?

TA: Sure. I would sing in all of the musicals.

JE: So you could vocalize as well as play instruments?

TA: I thought I could.

JE: Do you remember the first dance you might have played for?

TA: Yes. The first one I really got paid for was at Doc Glass, who was the head doctor at St. John Hospital at that time. Every year he would have a big Christmas party. He had a 27-room house out east of Owasso, which was a mansion back in those days. He had a beautiful downstairs library with marble floors and hardwood floors. That's where they would have the square dance. They would invite all of the nurses and the doctors that worked there at the hospital to their big Christmas party. That was the first one that I played for. It was a square dance. They had a guy that called it and my dad and I would play. They passed the hat around and it paid good money, man. We got paid \$12 or \$13 each. I've sowed corn for a penny a row out there. (Chuckle) This was in 1941 or 1942. I was about 10 years old then.

JE: So that was tall cotton as we say?

TA: You bet.

JE: Your father bought a house in Claremore?

TA: Yes, we bought a house in Claremore in 1942. I finished up the sixth grade and went to high school there in Claremore. When I got to be a junior in high school I started playing with the Oklahoma Swingbillies every Saturday night at the American Legion. That went well for a year or so and then I thought I should get my own band. I formed my own band and bought an old bus from Leon McAuliffe.

JE: How old were you when you were thinking this?

TA: I was 18. Once we got the bus we would play dances and we would play in Collinsville and Ramona and Vinita and Chelsea and Pryor and places like that on the weekends.

JE: Since you were living in Claremore, was the Will Rogers Memorial built?

TA: It was there. I don't remember exactly what year it was built. Guy, do you recall? It must have been in the late 1930s?

Guy Logsdon: The museum itself was created in 1936 I believe.

TA: I remember you took me out there one time when they took that guitar of his that he had gotten from CF Martin. It was handmade in 1897. It had been in that case since 1936. He let Larry Gatlin and I play it.

JE: This was a guitar that Will Rogers had?

GL: Yes. Not many people knew that he could play the guitar a little.

JE: I've never heard that.

TA: Do you know how much that guitar would be worth today and what one of these collectors would pay for it...a few million dollars probably.

JE: Where is it now?

TA: It's in the Memorial in Claremore.

JE: Did your family attend church when you were in Claremore?

TA: Yes, they belonged to the Baptist Church.

JE: Did you play in the church?

TA: Yes. I had some friends that played in a band at another church and I would go there and play.

JE: So it gave you an opportunity to develop your skill. Speaking of Will Rogers, does your family have any actual remembrances of actually seeing Will Rogers?

TA: Yes, they settled out west of Claremore. My dad was born in 1880. He was 12 years old when they settled out west of Claremore in about 1892. It was out on the Verdigris River up on a bluff out there. Will Rogers was born on that same river—just about six or seven miles upstream. My Uncle Bob and Uncle John knew him and my dad remembers seeing him around as a kid.

JE: Did they have any stories about him?

TA: Well, My dad told me one time that he got run out of a lot of schools for roping the girl that he liked to rope. He was a trick roper. He would rope the teachers and rope the kids and so they kicked him out of school. (Laughter) I don't know if they actually kicked him out, but they could have.

JE: Yeah, I think they did. I spoke to his niece Coke Meyer and she talked about how he was asked to leave school a few times.

Chapter 4 – 6:38

Cain's Ballroom

John Erling: There were many dance halls back then. No beer would be served in the dance halls, so this allowed families to attend shows.

Tommy Allsup: That's right. People would keep their drinking outside. The band would always get a break and go outside and have a drink. It went on that way for years and years.

JE: But it made for a good scene then at dance halls?

TA: Oh yeah. You could bring your kids.

Guy Logsdon: But that's also when the fights started.

TA: Yeah.

JE: Because they would all drink outside and then come inside.

TA: Yes. They would come back in and dance but if they went outside to drink they would have a pint and just turn it upside down and just chug-a-lug and then come back in.

JE: Yeah, you don't nurse the drinks out there do you?

TA: No. I don't know if I put this in the book or not. There was a dance that I played up in Dog Creek Hills for the Indians. Art Davis was a Cherokee Indian and a fiddle player. We agreed to go up there and play. But we said we didn't want any fighting. I said, "If you start any fight we are going to leave." We also told them they had to pass the hat before we started playing. So we drove four or five miles up into the Dog Creek Hills north of Claremore. We passed the hat and we did well. There was \$25 or \$30 in the hat. We hadn't even taken our instruments out of their cases and they started the biggest fight. I can say Indians because I am part Indian, but it was cowboys and Indians. They were getting it on out in that front yard. It was funny. I guess they did it to see who was the toughest. They didn't want to kill anybody. They were just fighting to see who was the meanest. We got out of there. Art had an A Model Ford, so we jumped in that little Ford and threw our guitar and fiddle in the back and took off.

JE: That was the easiest money you ever made wasn't it?

TA: It was! We didn't play a note!

GL: When bands took a break, everyone headed for the door at the same time. That's when a lot of fights started, just trying to get out to the booze.

TA: Yeah, they were fighting to get a drink. (Laughter) We were playing down in Inola one night. I was about 17 or 18 years old. I was playing the fiddle that particular night. This guy came up to me and he said, "Let me see your fiddle!" He took my fiddle and just broke it over his knee. We were up in a hayloft playing. I had a bass player named Roy Clugsdon. Roy jumped off that bass and knocked that guy all the way across the dance floor. That guy was sorry he broke the fiddle. He took off running. (Chuckle) Of course, I went home and told my dad what happened. He said, "Did you make any money?" I said, "No, but I got our fiddle torn up." We finally got it put back together, but that's when I decided I didn't need to play fiddle and that I had better stick with a guitar. (Laughter)

JE: Did you decide at that age, or maybe earlier, that this is what you wanted to do for your career?

TA: Oh yeah. Things were really happening. When I got out of high school I played around here a little bit with Jimmy Hall. Then I went to work for Johnnie Lee. First of all I went out to New Mexico with Art Davis. It seemed like there was a lot of work if you were capable of playing. But you had to be sober. Bandleaders wouldn't hire you if you drank. You could get a reputation very easily. If you asked about a guy for the band, someone might say, "You don't want him he drinks too much." That was the big thing. I always had good jobs and good bands. I had the best band in Lawton during the Hank Thompson heyday and

the Bob Wills and Leon McAuliffe heyday. I had a band you could put right up there along with them. I furnished them musicians for four or five years, you know, right out of my band in Lawton. They would come there and hire them away. Paul McGee went from my band to Hank Thompson's, Donnie McDaniel, Billy Dozier, Tommy Canfield...but we had great bands. I always kind of liked that. I always figured if you had a good band you could do what you wanted to do.

JE: You were near Tulsa and the famous Cain's Ballroom was right there. Do you remember the first time you ever played at Cain's?

TA: Yeah. It was with Johnnie Lee in 1952, so I would have been 21.

JE: Was that Johnnie Lee Wills and All His Boys?

TA: Yes.

JE: You were one of all the boys?

TA: Yes, he had a lot of horns too. He had three fiddle players. He had Curly Lewis, Henry Boatman and Cotton Thompson. It was a great band.

JE: You probably went to Cain's before that just to watch the performers who would come through Tulsa?

TA: I went to Cain's when I was 16 years old. I would go down there and hang on the front of that bandstand and watch the bands.

JE: Whom would you watch?

TA: I saw Spade Cooley's band there. I saw Tex Williams and Tommy Duncan after he had left Bob Wills. I saw Bob there many times. I saw Johnnie Lee there many times, just whoever was playing there.

JE: You thought, if only I could play on this stage?

TA: I was determined that I was going to play on that stage. I told people, I said, "I am going to be up there one of these days." I never dreamed at that time, that was 1948 and 1949, Buddy got killed in 1958 and I went to California and started producing Bob's records just 12 or 15 years later. I always dreamed about getting up there and playing with them, but I never dreamed about being out there producing Bob Wills' records.

JE: So you first met Bob in California?

TA: I met Bob in 1949 in Claremore. That's when I was 18 and I had that old bus I got from Leon McAuliffe. Bob had a brand-new bus and he was playing for the Will Rogers Day Parade and Dance there in Claremore. It was November 4, 1949. He had his new bus in the parade and I had that old, ragged bus of mine coming right behind it. Tommy Allsup and the Range Riders. I had it loaded down with school kids too screaming out the windows. (Laughter)

JE: I would imagine Bob Wills who was really popular and making lots of money had a pretty nice bus at that time?

TA: He had just bought one from an oil company. That night that we went to the dance

we were parked right beside each other. I went over and talked to Lucky Moeller, his manager. At that time Lucky owned the Trail Ride Ballroom in Oklahoma City. He was managing that and booking Bob. I said, "I would love to see that bus." He said, "Come on in here and take a look at it." Bob hadn't got off the bus yet. I said, "I got that old bus over there from Leon McAuliffe." Bob said, "It looks like one of my old buses." He furnished the buses back in those days for Leon and Tommy Duncan and Johnnie Lee. I think it was his old bus because I've got pictures of it and pictures of some of his old buses and it looks like it. He had just bought his bus and Lucky Moeller said, "We just bought that bus last week from an oil company for \$16,800." (Laughter) I remember the price of it.

JE: Wow.

TA: I said, "Do you see that one sitting right there? It cost \$500." (Laughter)

JE: So you were introduced to Bob then, but when did he hear you play?"

TA: When I was playing with Johnnie Lee. He came up there when Uncle John died and went out on some jobs with us.

Chapter 5 – 7:00

Johnny Lee Hires Tommy

John Erling: But you were developing your own style of music about then weren't you?

Tommy Allsup: I had an idea of what I liked and of what I wanted to play and I was trying to get to it. You know, you've always got a goal to try and reach.

JE: Who would have influenced you back then?

TA: Eldon Shamblin and guys like T-Bone Walker, the Blues guys, Junior Barnard and other great players.

JE: When you said T-Bone Walker and Ernie Fields, they had a black club didn't they? They were black?

TA: Yes, right. Paul McGann and I used to go out there. Paul knew the man that ran it. We would go and sit in the back and look through a big fan that they had and see the bands. We never did get to go inside.

JE: But listening to them you were influenced by their sound?

TA: Yes, right. That was before I got my bus. That's when we were running around in an old van.

Guy Logsdon: This was down in Greenwood.

TA: Yes, in Greenwood at Love's Lounge, owned by Clarence Love.

JE: Oklahoma was segregated at the time, so this was kind of a big thing?

TA: It was, yes.

JE: If whites were seen there, would that have been a big thing?

TA: I don't think so, when they would have seen that it was a musician. When I went out to play with Art Davis at Hobbs, the trumpet player, Chubby Crank, and I used to go down to the Sunshine Butlers Club, which was a black club in Hobbs. We would sit in there—we would go with them on weekends. New Mexico shut down on Sunday nights, so we would go over to Texas and work on Sunday night. I played a few jobs with him at Big Springs and Midland back in those days. They were all super nice to me.

JE: You graduated from Claremore High School in what year?

TA: 1949. But I had to go back the next year for half a semester to earn some credit I lacked. It was probably algebra. It took me 3 or 4 years to get my algebra credit.

JE: Was it important for your parents that you graduated because some of the musicians dropped out of high school or they didn't even attend high school, they continued playing?

TA: Yes, they wanted me to finish school. Most of the kids in my family had a pretty good education. It was kind of a big thing to finish school because there wasn't any money to go to college in those days. So it was pretty important to at least get a high school education because it was free.

JE: You put together a trio and played in the Vinita area?

TA: Yes, we had a little 6-piece Western band, fiddle and steel, drums, bass, guitar.

JE: Do you remember the name of the club in Vinita that you might have played in?

TA: We played at the American Legion and then there was one up there called Club 66, right on Highway 66. I also went back and played that club with Art Davis. We were playing at that club one night when a fight started. Paul McGee had to put down his drumsticks and stop playing the cymbals and say, "Come on boys!" (Laughter)

JE: You were asked to come back to Tulsa to play on KRMG?

TA: That was before I was with Johnny Lee, the KRMG thing. We were on there 6 weeks with a guy named Johnny Leach, who was from Catoosa. We played there in the latter part of 1951.

JE: KRMG was just a young radio station then, it was just getting started.

TA: Right.

JE: I think the station actually started in 1949. We hear so much about KVOO, but we realize that KRMG also had live music. So you played swing music for them?

TA: They also had music on KAKC back then from Avery's Coliseum. They had some Saturday morning radio shows. The Clugston brothers were on there every Saturday morning.

JE: So then Johnny Lee Wills was looking for a guitar player?

TA: Yeah. Gene Crownover came to us in Wichita, Kansas where we had been playing at the Cowboy Inn with Jimmy Hall and they had gotten closed down. Bill Wimberly had a band there. Gene Crownover was playing with Bill Wimberly. They came out to where I was

staying and said, "Johnny Lee is looking for a guitar player." I was out of a job because they had shut the club down. They didn't know how long it was going to be closed because it was a liquor violation. So Crownover called Johnny Lee and asked, "Are you still looking for a guitar player?" Johnny Lee said, "Yeah." Crownover said, "Well, I got you a guitar player." Johnny Lee said, "Is he any good?" Crownover said, "I think you'll like his playing." Johnny Lee said, "Send him on down here and tell him to come to work." I went out and played that night with them and got hired.

JE: That must have been a thrill for you—because Johnny Lee and Bob were both quite famous by that time?

TA: Yes.

JE: How old were you?

TA: 21.

JE: You we're probably one of the youngest members of the band?

TA: I was the youngest. There was no doubt about it.

JE: What kind of money were you making with Johnny Lee?

TA: Eighty dollars a week.

JE: But Johnny Lee stayed in Tulsa, where Bob would travel?

TA: Yeah, we made more money with Bob—when you are out on the road like that. But playing for Johnny Lee, you got to come home and sleep in your own bed at night. We made one tour down through Texas in 1953. We went down to Laredo and played the Fat Stock Show. Other than that, it was all just one nighters around Tulsa.

JE: You were kind of tied to KVOO at that time?

TA: Yeah. We broadcast on KVOO every day. We played at Cain's every Thursday and Saturday night.

JE: So you could, maybe one night of the week go out on the road?

TA: Yeah, we would go to Stillwater or McAlester or Fort Smith, Arkansas, or Coffeyville, Kansas. They had a good booking area here.

JE: Thursday was always gospel music?

TA: Thursday's radio show on KVOO was always gospel, yes.

JE: That was pretty popular I would imagine?

TA: Bob started that when he first started there and they continued it.

GL: Until 1958 I think, when Johnny Lee went off.

TA: Yes. We wouldn't use the horns or the drums when we played gospel music.

JE: Not to play one against the other, but was it thought that Johnny Lee actually had a better band than Bob?

TA: There were times that Johnny Lee had a better band. There were times that they both had great bands and there were times that they both had bands that weren't great, you

know. It just depended on whom they had and what time of year it was. I've heard Bob with great bands and I have heard Bob with bands that weren't great.

JE: Bob was more of a showman wasn't he?

TA: Yes, he danced around a lot. He put on a good show.

GL: Bob had charisma. I was told one time that if Bob walked into a room with 1,000 people talking to each other, the minute he walked into the room everyone would stop and look at him.

TA: Yeah.

GL: But many of the band members he had, he took from Johnny Lee. They would start with Johnny Lee and Bob would hear them and then invite them into his band.

JE: That probably didn't sit too well with Johnny then?

GL: No. Bob was the head of the family. So even though the mother and father were there, it was still Bob with his charisma. He was the family leader and Johnny Lee never questioned any of it.

JE: You played for both?

TA: I never did work steady for Bob, but I've worked on lots of records. I played bass and guitar on a lot of records with him and done a lot of shows with him.

JE: General Mills became a sponsor for their products, the feed and Red Star flour that they would advertise.

TA: Yeah, everybody in the country around here bought that flour. They would buy them for their sacks and use them to make dresses for their kids.

GL: The whole thing was, eat the flour and wear the sack. (Laughter)

TA: Yeah, that was it.

JE: You stayed with Johnny Lee for about a year?

TA: Yes, a little over a year.

JE: Then you wanted your own band?

TA: What happened was we play down in Lawton and the club owner came to me and made me an offer I couldn't refuse. I doubled my paycheck. I jumped at that.

JE: Is that when you went back to Lawton then?

TA: Right.

JE: You stayed there for some time?

TA: Until 1958.

Chapter 6 – 3:30**Western Swing**

John Erling: How did the term Western swing come about? Do either one of you know?

Tommy Allsup: The story I've got is from Teddy Adams. There are a lot of stories. Spade Cooley had the name "King of Western Swing," but Teddy Adams told me that when they cut *Roly Poly* and *Stay All Night Stay A Little Longer*—they always called that one of Bob's better bands, you know, the Roly Poly Band. This was in 1944. That's when he had done *Hang Your Head In Shame* and *Roly Poly* with the twin guitars and Bob said, "Your band is really swinging today, I think we ought to call the music Western swing." That's the story I got. But I've never heard how Spade Cooley got named the King of Western swing, or when he started using it. I've gotten into a lot of arguments over it.

Guy Logsdon: I believe a DJ out in California, I forget his name, called Spade Cooley the "King of Western swing."

TA: Yeah.

GL: That was after the end of the war that's for sure.

TA: Yes, it was later after the war. Ted Adams I have no reason to believe that he would make up that story.

GL: No.

TA: I don't think he made it up, I think it actually happened, so that's what I have always told people. You know the guy that used to write the stories for the West Coast? He did a lot of stuff with Spade Cooley. He was a writer. I met him up in Nevada one year at a poetry gathering. I was there with Curly Lewis and Frankie McWhorter and we were doing a workshop on Western swing. He cornered me and he said, "You know, Bob Wills didn't invent that Western swing." I said, "I hate to beg your pardon." And then I told him the same story I just told you guys. He said, "Well, Spade Cooley was the King of Western swing." I said, "No, Spade Cooley was the Lawrence Welk of Western swing." (Laughter) I am not trying to take anything away from Lawrence Welk, but Lawrence Welk's Band wasn't like a Bennie Goodman Band or a Count Basie Band.

GL: Johnnie Lee told me one time that he booked Spade Cooley at Cain's. He had been down in Texas. He didn't go over in Texas, because his method of swing wasn't what Texans were accustomed to. He came up to Tulsa and Johnnie Lee had to loan him the money to get on home to California.

TA: Yeah, I was there. That's how I saw him at the Cain's. He had been out at the rodeo with Johnnie Lee and he came back up there that night.

GL: He wouldn't have drawn a crowd at all.

JE: What would have been the difference?

TA: It was a different type of swing. His fiddle players all read music, so they read everything they played. There wasn't any ad-lib fiddle playing. Everything was so precise. I mean, it was good music, but the rhythm just didn't swing like the Wills boys did.

JE: We could perhaps compare it to jazz couldn't we? It's actually Western jazz more than Western swing?

TA: Yes.

JE: Because you guys would really get into it and not know where you were going to end up?

TA: That's right and that's what made it good.

GL: The people were dancing all of the time also, and they weren't doing that with Spade Cooley.

TA: Fats Domino told Glen Duncan and me one time at Harmony Park Ballroom back in the early 1960s I guess, that he patterned his rhythm after the old man's rhythm. We used to call Bob back then "the old man." We were out at the Ballroom and there was a poster of Bob on the wall. He said, "Oh, this is where the Old Man plays." Glen Duncan said, "Yeah, he used to come down here a couple times a year." I said, "How do you know the old man Bob Wills?" He said, "Well, I patterned my rhythm section after the old man—he's got the beats and he has the rhythm." So that's good enough for me. I'll buy that. (Laughter)

Chapter 7 – 4:30

Tommy Meets Buddy

John Erling: Then you were out in Lawton playing?

Tommy Allsup: We ended up in Lawton for several years. We got a call to come out to Clovis, New Mexico to do some session work at Norman Petty Studios. That's when I met Buddy Holly.

JE: How did you meet Buddy Holly?

TA: I was out there at Petty's Studio recording with some other people. Buddy came by and asked me to play on some records. He said, "I like what I hear you've been playing with some of these records." He recorded a couple of nights and then we did some songs. They released one of the songs, *It's So Easy*. He called me and said, "That's going to be my next release and I can't play your solo, will you go on the road with me?" This was in July 1958 and so that's when I started touring with him.

JE: What was your first impression of Buddy?

TA: I thought he was great. Anybody that's original to me is good. You know, Johnny Cash is an original. There are greater singers, but Johnny Cash is an original. Kris Kristofferson, is not a great singer, but he gets to me because he's not copying anybody. He's doing his own stuff. Buddy had a lot of talent and a lot of charisma on stage.

JE: Was he a quiet sort of person?

TA: He was a quiet guy. He just looked like a star to me. He always dressed sharp.

JE: When he met you, he would have been in his early 20s?

TA: He was 22. You know, his birthday was yesterday. He would have been 75.

JE: Yesterday would have been September 7th and he would have been 75 years old.

TA: Yes. They put him on the Hollywood Walk of Fame yesterday.

JE: Have you ever tried to imagine what he would have become?

TA: He would have been a giant. There's no doubt in my mind. You know, the Beatles kind of copied what we were doing. He loved England. I think he would have gone to England and probably hooked up with McCartney and Lennon and wrote songs with them.

JE: He asked you to go on tour with him to the Summer Dance Party?

TA: Yes.

JE: Then he asked you to put together a little blues- rock band?

TA: Yes.

JE: How did Buddy Holly and The Crickets come about—the name?

TA: The story was there was a cricket in Norman Petty's echo chamber one night and that's how they came up with the name. I've heard two or three different stories, but that's the best story.

JE: Yeah. Norman Petty was a major producer at that time, right?

TA: I will put it this way—he had a studio at that time. I wouldn't say he was a great producer. He was a good engineer and he had a good ear for songs. What Buddy recorded was what Buddy came up with. He wrote his own songs and arranged them. A producer's job is to go out and find the material and put it with an artist and bring the artist in and hire the musicians to work up the arrangements and put the record out. That's what real producers do. Buddy would go in with The Crickets. They would go in there and cut and he would say, "I've got this song." They would work it up and Norman would put it on a tape and he was good at that. He was good at making deals. He would go to New York and he would make a deal for Buddy.

JE: So when you were on tour it was Buddy Holly and The Crickets and The Tommy Allsup Band.

TA: For the first tour, Summer Dance Party, yes. I had some horns. We would play about an hour and they would dance and then Buddy would come out and do his show. Then we would play about another hour. It worked out pretty well. I got to play with both bands.

JE: Was it Norman who would put together this big package tour?

- TA:** It was GAC in New York City. GAC stands for General Artists Corporation. Just about everything went through them at that time.
- JE:** What were some of the big names back then in addition to Buddy Holly and The Crickets that would be in a big package tour?
- TA:** Frankie Avalon, Jimmy Clanton, Clyde McPhatter, The Coasters, The Drifters, Bobby Darin and on and on.
- JE:** Dion and The Belmonts?
- TA:** Yes, they were there.
- JE:** That must have attracted a huge crowd wherever they went.
- TA:** We played those same places with Buddy Holly on the Winter Dance Party and we would have just as many people with just five acts. They would draw them in. The big package shows could raise the prices a little bit.
- JE:** So then everybody felt they were getting enough money. That was a lot of people to pay.
- TA:** Yes. The night we played The Surf they raised the price from 75 cents a person to \$1.25 because there were five acts playing that night.
- JE:** By the way, what was the last band that Buddy had?
- TA:** The Crickets, with me and Waylon Jennings and Carl Bunch.
- JE:** His last band was you three guys?
- TA:** Yes. The two original Crickets had quit and gone back to Clovis with Norman petty. Buddy had moved back to New York and so they had kind of broken up. So we hired Waylon and a drummer and away we went.

Chapter 8 – 4:40

Winter Dance Party

John Erling: Then you were out on tour in the winter of 1959.

Tommy Allsup: Right. It was the end of January, first of February.

JE: You'd been out how many days before Clear Lake, Iowa?

TA: Twelve days. Clear Lake was our 12th night.

JE: You were riding in buses without heat?

TA: Yeah, we had these old, ragged buses out of Chicago. They were broken down buses—old Trailways buses out of Chicago. The heaters would work just a little bit. Sometimes you would put your hand down there and feel just a little bit of heat. (Laughter) but when it's 30° below zero, it takes a pretty good heater to heat a big ole bus, you know. So we

were literally freezing to death on those things. They would send out another one, and another one. In those 12 days we had 5 buses. One night one of them was a school bus—we went from one city to another, and that was one night that it was warm. The heater worked well on the school bus.

JE: So you were up near Minnesota and Wisconsin?

TA: Yes.

JE: It just turned out that it was also one of the worst winters temperature wise?

TA: Right. The average temperature was around 25° below.

JE: You had to do it because you are under contract I guess?

TA: Yeah, Buddy had a contract. Waylon and Carl and I were backing up the other acts. We got to Chicago and found out we were the back-up band. We didn't know about that, but there wasn't any getting out of it.

JE: Along in here someplace, Buddy says that he is going to charter a plane?

TA: Right. The night before he had tried to get one out of Green Bay, Wisconsin. It was so cold that they weren't flying out of Green Bay. So he said, "We'll get over to Clear Lake, Iowa tomorrow and maybe we can get one." Clear Lake and Mason City are right they are together. It was really the Mason City airport where he chartered it.

JE: If there had been decent transportation and buses with heat on them, Buddy might not have had the idea of chartering a plane. Is that possible?

TA: Well, it sounded good to just get on up there and we wouldn't freeze to death. Buddy had some business with his attorney that he was working on. We were getting there just in time to play these jobs. We would play them and then get up and go to the next one. We lived on these buses. I think he would have gone ahead and chartered one, even if the buses would have been better. He had some personal business going on with Norman Petty. He needed to talk to his lawyer in New York City and he hadn't spoke with him. That day he found out some facts that he didn't believe, so he really wanted to get on up there so he could confer with his lawyer, Harold Orenstein. He was a big music attorney in New York, a very nice gentleman. I met him years later.

JE: Was Buddy always treated right by lawyers and moneymen? Or did people try to take advantage of him?

TA: That was the first lawyer he ever had really. Norman was taking care of the money. He felt like perhaps he wasn't getting all of his royalties, but I don't know. That was the first time he was actually using a lawyer was right then.

JE: So the Winter Dance Party, you had then out 12 days and you were coming into Clear Lake, Iowa. Let's name them. The Winter Dance Party included whom?

TA: Big Bopper, Richie Valens, Dion and the Belmonts, Frankie Sardo...

TA: J.P. Richardson, the Big Bopper, he was a disk jockey wasn't he?

TA: Yes, in Beaumont, Texas.

JE: How did he become known as the Big Bopper?

TA: When women would call into his show, he was well known for saying, “Hello, baby!” Then he would go into his little spiel. He thought, I need to make it a record out of this, so he did.

JE: That became known as?

TA: Chantilly Lace.

JE: It reached Number 6 on the charts?

TA: It was a worldwide hit. I never looked at the charts.

JE: The name Bop, didn’t that come from the dance?

TA: There was bebop music. They had a dance that was known as the Bop. The Big Bopper was more like a cool guy. He wore those leopard coats like the old bebop musicians used to wear with big baggy pants that were tight around the ankles. That’s the way he dressed. He dressed like a bebopper. They called them “beboppers” back then. Back in the early 1950s there were a lot of beboppers still running around from the 1940s. Paul McGee was a bebopper, he kind of came out of that school. (Chuckle)

JE: So in Clear Lake, Iowa, it was The Surf Ballroom that you were playing in?

TA: Yes.

JE: Tell us about the charter service?

TA: Jerry Maguire who’s become a good friend over the years, he says the pilot was very knowledgeable and a good pilot. They just don’t know what happened. They don’t know if he got vertigo some way or the other. Jerry is writing a book and he will tell his side of it, but a lot of people have blamed the pilot.

Chapter 9 – 6:07

Coin Toss

John Erling: Three guys were to fly to Fargo, North Dakota.

Tommy Allsup: Yes.

JE: The Big Bopper wanted to go?

TA: He had the flu. He told Waylon, “If there’s any extra seats on that plane, I’d like to go with you guys.” Waylon said, “It’s just me and Buddy and Tommy that’s going, but you can go in my place because I don’t care about flying anyhow.” The Bopper had bought a sleeping bag that day. He said, “You can use my sleeping bag when you get in that night sleep.” So that’s how come he was on it.

- JE:** Then Richie Valens wanted to fly? He had never flown in a small plane.
- TA:** No, he had never been in a small plane before.
- JE:** So he was asking you to trade places?
- TA:** Yes. He asked me two or three times if he could go in my place. That's when I flipped a coin and...
- JE:** You were actually in the ballroom when you did that?
- TA:** We went back in to check the dressing room to make sure that we have everything loaded. We were on our way to the airport. Buddy had already gone out and gotten in the station wagon and pulled it from the front of the building around to the back to the dressing room door. Buddy asked me to go in and check the dressing room. That's when I saw Richie and we flipped the coin.
- JE:** What did you say to him?
- TA:** I flipped a half dollar. I said, "Call it Ritchie." He said, "Heads." It was heads so I said, "You're going." So I went back out and told Buddy.
- JE:** Buddy had your wallet.
- TA:** Yes.
- JE:** Why did he have your wallet?
- TA:** I asked him to go to the P.O. and pick up a letter for me when I wasn't going to go. He needed some ID to do that. So I was standing there beside the station wagon and I pulled out my wallet. I was thumbing through it for my driver's license and he said, "Just give me your whole wallet." He stuck it in his pocket.
- JE:** So when the plane crashed...
- TA:** Yes, they found five wallets. There were five IDs and four bodies. They weren't really sure at first who the IDs belonged to.
- JE:** There were those that thought that you were gone too?
- TA:** They did, yes. In fact, one of the Tulsa radio stations reported it. A lady called my mother to tell her that she had just heard that I had been in a plane crash with Buddy Holly. My mother said, "I just talked to him and he's all right. He was supposed to be on that plane, but he didn't get on it."
- JE:** Did you ever get your wallet back?
- TA:** Yeah, I got it back. It's in the Hard Rock down in Miami, Florida. It goes around the world with the Buddy Holly Collection.
- JE:** The Tour was going to Fargo, North Dakota and you were going to play in Moorhead, Minnesota?
- TA:** Right.
- JE:** So you were on the bus and traveled to Fargo.
- TA:** Right.

- JE:** Then you went into your hotel. When did you learn that the plane had crashed?
- TA:** The day that we went into the hotel at about 11 o'clock in the morning. The hotel was actually right at the edge of Fargo and Moorhead in Comstock.
- JE:** What a shock then to hear that?
- TA:** Right. We walked in there and they were showing pictures on the TV. The road manager said, "I'm going to check in The Winter Dance Party." I told the guy, "Put me in a room next to Buddy Holly." The guy at the front desk said, "Haven't you heard? Those guys got killed in a plane crash last night."
- JE:** Oh my.
- TA:** Yeah.
- JE:** At the time, what were the songs that were big for Buddy Holly?
- TA:** Just before he died he had three songs in the Top 10. *Oh Boy*, *Peggy Sue* and *That Will Be The Day*. They were on Billboard's Top 10 list and that was the first time that had ever happened. Those were his three biggest records. He wrote *That Will Be The Day* and *Peggy Sue*, but he didn't write *Oh Boy*.
- JE:** Did Buddy write a lot of songs?
- TA:** Yeah, he wrote most of the stuff he did.
- JE:** How long did you stay in Fargo after you learned that news?
- TA:** We played that night and then left the next morning for the next show.
- JE:** So you played with Bobby Vee?
- TA:** He had a little band in high school there and he came out and did some songs.

(The following is from a phone interview with Bobby Vee.)

Bobby Vee: I was 15 years old. Let me just preface by saying that this was the biggest deal to ever come through my rock 'n' roll life, to have my tickets and I was anxious to see the show. I was in Fargo Central High and I came home for lunch in the noon hour because we lived close enough to school. I walked in and my mother was in the kitchen with the radio on and they were talking about Buddy Holly and Ritchie Valens and the Big Bopper. I approached the kitchen where my mother was and where the radio was and I could see it in her eyes that there was something wrong. Sure enough, they weren't talking about the show, but they were talking about the plane crash. That was the first I had heard of it. I went back to school at Fargo Central High and there was no more school after that because everybody was talking about it. They met up with the remaining acts that came in on the bus and they decided to go on with the show. So, that was a strange thing to do, but that's what they decided. Then Charlie Boone mentioned on the radio that they were looking for some local talent to help fill in the evening. Jim Stillman the bass player for us called up the radio station and said, "Yeah, we've got a band." And set up the whole thing.

They said, “Just come on down and wait in the wings.” And that’s what we did. We were doing rockabilly music. That’s what I was drawn to. I grew up in the Fargo/Moorhead area and it was country music, Lem Hawkins, but all of a sudden that changed very quickly, the format changed into rock ‘n’ roll. So I was listening to the Everly Brothers and Ronnie Hawkins and Carl Perkins and Elvis. You know, we went in there with sad eyes and hearts and did the best that we could do. We weren’t trying to start a career or anything, but that’s what you do when there’s a tragedy, you help out and that’s the spirit that we went into it with. At the end of the evening, Bin Bingson who was a local Fargo guy that owned the drive-ins came by and he said, “You guys did a great job. Here’s a card if you are ever looking for work.” And that was it—that was the start.

(End of phone interview with Bobby Vee.)

JE: Did you play as The Crickets?

TA: No, Waylon and I played, just the two of us. I think we might have had Carlos on drums. But yeah, we just did it. It’s kind of like a blue haze to me, but I know we played for about 30 or 40 minutes.

JE: Was the place packed?

TA: Yeah, oh yeah.

JE: It was probably a pretty quiet crowd?

TA: It was pretty solemn, yeah.

JE: You played a number of Buddy Holly songs?

TA: Yes. Waylon knew a lot of them and we just peeled them off. We just did them. We did that for the rest of the tour with Waylon singing Buddy’s songs.

JE: You have to be admired that you went on and did that for the crowd.

TA: Well, we called Buddy’s dad that day and Mr. Holly said, “We’re having trouble getting the bodies flown back here. You guys go ahead and finish the tour because that’s what Buddy would have wanted you to do.” Of course, the guy from New York called and, you know the old adage “the show must go on”...if you and Waylon leave, there goes our backup band so you know. We stayed on. Plus, they promised us more money that we never got. (Chuckle)

JE: How did that effect Waylon? Did it have a long-term effect on him you think?

TA: Well, I don’t know. I kept telling him on that tour that people were going crazy over him. He was getting applause like Buddy used to get applause. I said, “Waylon, you are going to be a star one of these days.” He said, “Oh no, that’s just sympathy applause.” I said, “No, a certain amount of it is sympathy, but most of it is because they like what they’re hearing out there.” Waylon had a lot of charisma. He’s like Johnny Cash—he had that sound in his voice that people liked.

JE: He had character to his voice I guess you could say?

TA: Yeah.

JE: I know you've been asked to tell this story hundreds of times and I appreciate you telling it here again. What about you? What kind of an effect did it have on you? And to think that it was on a flip of a coin.

TA: You are just blessed every day when you get up that you're getting up. Yes, I think about it.

JE: Even all of these years later?

TA: Yes. I still think about it every day. I'll be in Clovis, New Mexico playing the next couple of nights and Sunday morning and they'll be rehashing the same thing. I'll be doing some of Buddy's songs. But I like doing it and I'm glad I can still do it.

JE: Yes, and that you thought so highly of Buddy that you want to keep his memory alive.

TA: I'd like to, yes. We have a lot of problems with his widow at times you know.

JE: With rights to music and playing you mean?

TA: Well, not really, she gets the royalties, but there have been a lot of nails in the road trying to stop people from doing things when she should be glad people are doing them. She should be encouraging people to do it. She's quite a stumbling block. You now, she stopped Lubbock again this year from having a Buddy Holly Birthday Celebration.

Guy Logsdon: You can't use the name Buddy Holly without paying her.

TA: Yep.

Chapter 10 – 2:33

Buddy and Elvis

John Erling: Didn't Buddy Holly have big plans for Lubbock?

Tommy Allsup: He sure did. He purchased some land out there. He wanted to build a music store and a recording studio and the whole nine yards. He had Artie worked out a production agreement with Decca Records and Coral Records. They were going to pay him so much money for anybody he would go out and discover and then want to do a session with them. We were ready to start working on that as soon as we got off that tour.

JE: Even though Buddy had been living out east in New York?

TA: Yeah, he had only been up there for a couple of months.

JE: There was some thought that, oh well he's gone and he's not interested in us anymore?

TA: They thought that, you know it took them 40 years to start honoring him out there, which is a disgrace to me.

JE: Maybe it's kind of like Okemah finally honoring Woody Guthrie?

TA: He put Lubbock on the map. They are there all of the time, year-round people come from all over the world to see Buddy's grave and his museum.

JE: Even to this day?

TA: Yes, to this day.

JE: Amazing. In Lubbock there was The Cotton Club and Bob Wills and Hank Thompson would perform out there?

TA: Buddy played out there. Elvis played there.

JE: Is that when Buddy first saw Elvis?

TA: Yes, that was the first time he saw him was there at The Cotton Club.

JE: Did Buddy talk about Elvis? Did he draw anything from him?

TA: He had been singing country music with Bob Montgomery up until that the time. He saw Elvis and he said, "We need to get into this rock n' stuff." So they started using drums and started writing some different types of material.

JE: So Elvis influenced Buddy Holly's music from then on?

TA: Yes. Of course, Buddy liked Little Richard's stuff and he liked Fats Domino. He liked most of it. I think he really liked Fats Domino most. He liked Elvis too, but that's what really got him going on it.

JE: Do you know if the two of them visited—Elvis and Buddy?

TA: They talked.

JE: Do you know the inspiration for the song *That Will Be The Day* and how that song came about that Buddy wrote?

TA: Yes. He went to the movie *The Searchers* with John Wayne. Every time somebody said something to John Wayne in that movie, John Wayne would say, "That will be the day." That's where he got the title.

JE: It seems like when you look at sheet music or whatever that there are more people than Buddy Holly who claim to have written that song?

TA: Jerry Alison wrote a lot with Buddy, but Norman Petty's name showed up on all of those copyrights too later. Norman was the publisher on most of it, so he controlled the copyrights. That's the way the cookie crumbles. Back in those days, you signed contracts that were 50-50 deals. They had the studio but you had the talent. They would use their studio and put their time in, and I would use my talent and we would roll it up into a ball and split it right down the middle. That's how that all came about.

Chapter 11 – 6:29**Don McLean & Others**

John Erling: Don McLean was best known for his song *American Pie*. You knew Don McLean?

Tommy Allsup: Yes, I know him well.

JE: What drove him to write that song *The Day The Music Died*? Was he a big fan or how did that song come about?

TA: They said he was just a fan.

JE: Being a fan was the inspiration to write that song?

TA: Yes. A lot of people don't realize this but when those three boys got killed, Chuck Berry was in prison, Elvis Presley was in the Army in Germany and Jerry Lee Lewis had got run out of the country. Little Richard had retired from rock 'n' roll and was preaching. Who's left? There goes the Buddy and The Big Bopper and Ritchie Valens, you know?

JE: So they were all gone, there wasn't a star on the scene?

TA: I hadn't thought about that. I'll have to see Don and ask him if he was thinking about that when he wrote that.

JE: That it was bigger than just Buddy Holly you mean? It was that all of them were gone in the song *The Day The Music Died*.

TA: Yeah. There was nobody there to do rock 'n' roll.

JE: You were in New York, but you didn't like New York and working there?

TA: I was usually up there on business meetings when I was around record labels. I was up there a lot with Buddy. We worked out of New York. After Buddy died we stayed at there—The Crickets and me. GAC said they would book us, but we waited around there at about 6 weeks and nobody was booking. I told them I was going back to Odessa and they could stay up there. They couldn't get any bookings for us, as The Crickets, because there was no Buddy Holly.

JE: What did you do in Odessa?

TA: I went back to that same club where I was working. Moon Mullican was still there. I would go down there and played between tours. I stayed down there about another year.

JE: You built a studio there?

TA: Yes, about five years later.

JE: Didn't you produce or record for Zager Evans?

TA: Yeah, they came in in the late 1960s. They had a duo and they would play at Holiday Inns. They put out songs and we'd put out 45 records for them and they would sell them at their jobs. But they came in one day and they sang one of their songs, *In the Year 2525*. I said the next time they came back that we needed to record it. We did.

JE: Because you sensed it could be something?

TA: I thought it was something and I was worried that something would happen with it because it was so different. We recorded that song and pitched it to every label from Nashville to LA—but everybody turned it down. It broke out in Minneapolis/St. Paul in the distributor of their ordered 5,000 copies. Of course, when he did RCA came along and said they wanted to release it. It ended up being the biggest record of the year in 1969.

JE: So you got in on that financial action because you recorded it and promoted it?

TA: I should have, but I didn't.

JE: Did you get a flat studio fee?

TA: No, I had partner out there that got the fee. He got the mine, and I got the shaft, as Jerry Reed would tell you. That song made a lot of money.

JE: You've worked with many stars. What one or two people had an impact on you?

TA: Walter Brennan was one of my favorites. I always enjoyed being around him. And Chill Wills, I loved Chill Wills. I produced an album on him and Bob Wills. I had the pleasure of producing a lot of great artists and I played with a lot of them. Julie Andrews was great—and Andy Williams.

JE: You did meet Elvis though didn't you?

TA: I met him a couple of times.

JE: And you visited about music back and forth?

TA: Yes.

JE: Did you meet him early on in his career?

TA: I did meet him until the first time he played The Southern Club in the mid-1950s. Then I met him in Beverly Hills after he got out of the Army.

JE: You talked earlier about Bob Wills having charisma. With Elvis just standing in a room—did he have charisma? Or did it happen when he was on stage?

TA: He had it all the time. A lot of people are like that you know. I think Buddy had a lot, because when Buddy would show up in a room, he looked like somebody.

JE: Let me just mention some names here...George and Tammy Wynette.

TA: I worked a lot with them in the 1970s. They were great talents and great to work with.

JE: Glen Campbell?

TA: I worked tons with Glen. We did hundreds of sessions in LA. He came back and played on one of the albums I did with the Texas Playboys. He's still out there working. He's still great.

JE: It's now sad because he has Alzheimer's.

TA: Yes, it's sad, it sure is.

JE: Merle Haggard?

TA: He's just always there. He was great when he started and he's still great.

JE: Ray Price?

TA: He's another one. He's in his mid 80s and still singing great.

JE: And all these are people that you played with and recorded with?

TA: Yes.

JE: Jerry Lee Lewis, was he a wild man all of the time?

TA: He wasn't when I worked with him a year ago in Clear Lake. He was kind of sickly, but he still does well and played well and sang well.

JE: In other music worlds, did you meet Frank Sinatra?

TA: I sure did.

JE: Do you have a story about how you met him?

TA: I went to a studio where Bobby Vee was cutting in Studio B and Sinatra was in Studio A and his manager came in and said, "Do you all want to listen to Frank a little bit?" Snuff Garrett and Bobby Vee and I walked into the control room and he was in a big studio with a bleacher set up and 150 people sitting in it and he was singing to them. He had the orchestra behind him just like on a stage. He was doing an album, but he's got a live audience but they were as quiet as a mouse. There was no applause or anything. He just had people he liked and that liked him. That's the way that he liked to record. He liked performing live.

JE: Wow. I didn't know that. It obviously boosted him.

TA: I don't know how many sessions he did that way, but he did it that way when we saw him. During the session, Hoagy Carmichael came in and didn't say "Hi" to anybody. He just said "Hi" to Frank and sat down at the piano and spreads out his music and plays this song. Frank said, "I like it." Hoagy said, "Okay, you got it." And he folded up his music and left. He didn't say "Hi" or "Bye" or anything—that's Hoagy Carmichael.

JE: Paul McCartney. You met him didn't you?

TA: Yeah. I met him and played with him in New York a couple of times.

JE: He knew your name?

TA: Yes, he knew who I was. He said, "I've been a big fan of yours."

JE: Wow, what a thrill eh? You played with him a number of times? What kind of a guy is he?

TA: He's great. I hope I get to play with him again. She's working on it.

JE: He seems like such a down to earth guy.

TA: He is. He's a great guy.

Chapter 12 – 3:11

End of Western Swing

John Erling: Western swing...in 10 or 20 years is it going to survive or is it going to die out? What do you think? The young people—are they interested in it?

Tommy Allsup: It's never really been alive since the mid-1940s. It's alive in some dance halls in Texas. But it's never been a big force of music. Yeah, it's slowly dying out. You can't get it played on the radio. Not many guys can play it. My theory is that if you have to teach somebody how to play Western swing, they are not going to be a great Western swing player.

Guy Logsdon: People don't dance the way they used to dance. It was a dancing style.

JE: So, is it safe to say that you feel it's fading away?

TA: I think it's safe to say that it's faded away. It's barely hanging on by threads right now. There's an old song that nails it. *It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing)* You know, that's the way Western swing is. You've either got it, or you don't have it. People love it, and they all want to record it, but nobody will promote it.

JE: You've done many, great Grammy performance Recordings, the record *Spring* by Clay Hart that you produced and was nominated for a Grammy. *For the Last Time* album and some of the early Asleep at the Wheel music, you were nominated for awards, you did an instrumental, the hits of Charlie Pride.

TA: Yeah, I forgot I did that.

JE: You were nominated for Grammy in 1969?

TA: Chet Atkins beat me out with *Snowbird* that year. (Laughter)

JE: You found this on the song Old Rivers for Walter Brennan?

TA: Right.

JE: That song won just about everything.

TA: It did. It won just about every category of music in the world.

JE: So as you look back on your life, you're 80 years old. You have 20 or 40 years left to go?

TA: Yes.

JE: It must make you feel good to think of all the things you've accomplished?

TA: It does. I feel good listening on the radio to these old stations—they play some songs. You hear something you played on, and you say, "I remember that song." It's good memories. They are all good.

JE: How would you like to be remembered?

TA: I don't know, just as long as they remember you, no matter what they remember you for.

GL: One thing when you talk about Western swing, he's the one that produced the *For the Last Time* Album by Bob Wills—that collection of songs, in a way that may have been.

TA: That kind of names it. That's Bob's Swan Song in 1973. It's the best thing that's been out there. They still sell it and people still buy it.

JE: Thank you, both of you for doing this.

GL: Thank you!

TA: Thank you John!

JE: Nicole, now you are leaving us to go Clovis, New Mexico.

TA: Yes. I've got my own show that we work in there. The Fireballs will be there tomorrow night along with the Beatle Band. They are showing the Buddy Holly Story Play on tonight and then I'm on Saturday night. Then Sunday I do a gospel program Sunday morning.

JE: That would be wonderful to hear. Are you signing too and playing?

TA: Yeah, she's got me singing Bobby Darin songs.

JE: If there was a song that you would just break out into right now, what would it be?

TA: *Big boss man, why don't you hear me when I call?* (Laughter) I've got to save it for Saturday night. (Laughter)

JE: Well, thank you that was fun.

TA: Thank you John.

JE: It was very kind of you. Thanks Guy!

GL: Thank you!

Chapter 13 – 0:21

Conclusion

Announcer: For more of the Tommy Allsup story, please consult our For Further Reading section of the website. Our bookstore features the book *The FLIP of A COIN* by Guy Logsdon. We want to thank our Founding Sponsors for sharing our mission in preserving Oklahoma's legacy one voice at a time on VoicesofOklahoma.com.