

Rob Wickson

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Victoria, BC

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MMS - Okay, here we are in Victoria, I'm talking with Rob Wickson and it's October 25th today in 2018. Thanks so much for doing this, Rob.

RW - My pleasure.

MMS - If I could ask you right off the bat sort of how music came into your life as a young man and just those early musical years.

RW - I'm a sixties boy, so born in the fifties. So when "The Beatles" came along, all our interest was piqued. But I remember years before that listening to the radio, listening to *Nat King Cole*, listening to *Louis Armstrong*, *Sinatra*, *Dean Martin*. All those guys were on the radio all the time, so I knew the songs. Because if I was home sick, we'd have the radio on and that's all you heard.

MMS - Yeah, where was home?

RW - Ottawa at that time. But "The Beatles" really turned me on. As soon I heard "The Beatles", that was it. "She Loves You" was my first record I ever bought and my parents said, "Oh, you'll never be able to buy that by the people who wrote the song." I said, "Well, of course I will." Never thought of it any other way. And I remember that. Then got to Halifax and in Halifax I got an interest in performing more. Because in Ottawa I actually sang in a choir in junior high school. So I was quite enthralled with the idea of singing. And I got to Halifax and some guys around the neighborhood, we decided to pretend we had a band. We'd get this one guy had a Bass and one guy had a guitar and I'd sing. Not very well but we'd give it a go and we had some fun and all the girls seemed to think that was cool, so that was good. So that'd be around 13, 14 those days.

MMS - What year would that have been then?

RW - It would be '65, '67 type of thing.

MMS - What songs were you playing?

RW - "Tobacco Road".

MMS - What?

RW - Yep. I remember that. "The Blues Magoos", "Tobacco Road". That was our big song. "Gloria", another one. Yeah, so a couple of standards. The three chord standards you could ... "Tobacco Road", sings. "I was born" ... I can still remember some of the lyrics. Anyhow, so I got to Yellowknife, so I had this music energy building. And of course Yellowknife, when I got there in '67, New Years Eve '67, '68

would be the year, people like *Tony Gilchrist* and *Wayne Bertrand* and *Tommy Hudson* was playing with the Akaitcho Hall Band and they were the two rival bands in those days. I can't remember the name of the Akaitcho Hall Band. *Tommy Hudson* blew me away. He's a singer. They had their own equipment. They had the "Traynor" amps. It's kind of neat that they had their own gear. Kind of special. But then there's *Gary Tees* and *John Tees* playing with ... Not *Norman Glowach*, his older brother.

MMS – *Larry (Glowach)*.

RW - *Larry Glowach*, as a drummer. And they had another guitar player. I can't remember his name either. Anyhow, so I can remember them playing the junior high school and the high school dances. We were Sir John, that's where we played. And then *Tony Gilchrist* came along. And *Tony Gilchrist* in the school hallway where the smoking hallway used to play guitar and he was very good. He had a great voice. And he played simple songs that everybody knew. And we all hung around the hallway, the smoking hallway, with no ventilation. It's just crazy. And it fascinated me. And I would love to have gotten into a band then. Never really quite made it even though I was always kind of looking around.

MMS - Okay. We'll hold you there. How did you come up to Yellowknife in New Years Eve of 1967?

RW - By car. My dad got transferred or left the Air Force in Halifax and got offered a job in Yellowknife as the chief of finance. So good money, I'll do that a couple years before I move home to Victoria, pay for the property we're buying and stuff like that. So we flew out to Victoria. They drove out in the little white car we had, little Renault R10. And then we drove, the four of us, to Yellowknife up the Mackenzie Highway in the middle of winter. With no experience of this. Just-

MMS - 1967?

RW - -adventure, right? Got roof rack on the car and the car has no heat. We've got these little plastic things on the window so we can see out. Just amazing. And we get there 8:00 New Years Eve and everything's closed. And they got us booked into the motel, the worst motel in the place. It had mold on the walls. It was just awful. The next morning, my dad woke up the deputy commissioner to get the keys to our house because we were not staying in the motel one more night. And that got us into Yellowknife. And I started Sir John Franklin a couple days later.

MMS - So you were just in I suppose grade nine or grade 10?

RW - Actually, I was supposed to be in grade 11 that year but they did some fiddling around. They put me half in grade 11 and half grade 10 because I wasn't interested in school anymore. I just was floating through. So they figured they'd teach me a lesson. Didn't work. Anyhow.

MMS - So what were those memories of those first few days and weeks and stuff like that in Yellowknife like?

RW - It was cold. We had these big parkas I thought were just, yuck but when I got to Yellowknife, they were pretty nice. And walking around and doing things and getting to know people it's very crisp, and the school was quite busy. Quite a few people in the school because Akaitcho Hall was there. So you had all that population mixed in with the people of the town and the town was growing very fast. So they weren't ready for it. When I moved there it was 3800 people. So we had a good time sort of getting to

know each other because we're all new. Everybody's just got there. All the southern people from the government ranks.

MMS - So they have a name for you guys?

RW - Well, we're the newcomers.

MMS - Newcomers. I was going to say ...

RW - We definitely, we're not the old timers.

MMS - Yeah. The old time families.

RW - *Wayne Bertrand* was an old timer. But he went to St. Pat's. Him and *Gary Tees* and *John Tees*. They all went to St. Pat's. So they were the band. They didn't go to our school but *Tony Gilchrist* sort of made that connection, right? We had the Akaitcho Hall band with *Tommy Hudson*, which is not bad. So that was pretty cool. I kind of liked all that. Now, I still wasn't a musician. But our next door neighbor *Andy Sears* had a guitar he let me have in my basement and that was my first basement cave I guess. So I used to wail away on that not knowing anything about what I was doing. I think he showed me two chords maybe. And then I moved out of home in '69, the summer of '69 and didn't have a guitar and didn't play much music and do stuff. I was learning how to live and being homeless for a little while and working for the government and all kinds of stuff I was doing. So it wasn't until I sort of left town for a few months to go to school and then came back that I bought my first guitar. And *Wayne Bertrand* helped me with that. Now I was always fascinated by *Wayne* because he could play good guitar. Steady eddy rhythm. So I got to hang out with *Wayne* and hang out with the bands that way. So my first guitar was just this cheap little acoustic guitar. But I started learning to play *Bob Dylan*, *Neil Young*, all the easy acoustic songs you can think of.

MMS - Where did you buy the guitar?

RW - At *Harold Glick's*. *Marc Whitford* was the salesman. So that'd be about '73. Maybe '74, early '74. And once I settled into my apartment, the new apartment I got, I also got interested in maybe having an electric guitar. So *Gary Tees* was selling his "Sunn Sceptre" amplifier and he had with it a "Vox" guitar. He gave me the "Vox" guitar as long as I paid for the amp. So I had this big huge amp in my living room and this guitar. You could never turn it up past two but I would do things with it. I had a little box to make it fuzzy because you can't make a "Sunn Sceptre" amp overdrive. It's just not possible. But then *Brian Killeen*, I'd met him a few years earlier, and *Wayne (Bertrand)* knew him as well because he hung around. *Josie*, his sister, was my girlfriend for a while. I got to know his family and everything else. So *Brian Killeen* came back to Yellowknife just about a year after me, the summer that year, with a new wife. And he was playing guitar and I had my new guitar and he lived across the street from me. So almost every night around 7:00 there'd be a knock on the door and it'd be *Brian* with his guitar and maybe *Wayne*. And we did this all the time. It seemed like three or four nights a week we'd be sitting in my living room just jamming acoustic guitars. That went on for a number of years. And about '75, *Wayne* and *Brian* decide to try a duo. And they went out ... Do you remember the little souvenir shop in the Yellowknife Inn right in the corner across from ... I forget her name. My mother worked for her for a while. But *Brian* and *Wayne* did a debut there. I forget the name, what they call ... I think they called themselves "Grey Owl" at time. "Grey Owl and the Beaver People" if they had girl singers. That was

Brian's thing. Anyhow, they did a gig there where *Brian* would switch off on violin. He played pretty rough but it'd be different, right? Everybody would say, "Oh that's interesting." In those days, you could get away with anything because it didn't matter if you had chops. As long as you were making the effort, everybody's cool with it. And the hairs were getting long and whatnot. But *Brian*, *Wayne*, and I were still playing at my living room all the time.

MMS - What kind of stuff would you be jamming on? Again, the simple three chord stuff? The (*Bob Dylan* stuff

RW - Yeah. Blues came in. We started getting into the blues and we'd learn songs. I can remember later on we'd pick up like *Bob Dylan* "Hurricane" and get the riffs all down and play a solid version of that. But we were always learning. We were always trying to figure out new things, listen to records. I got into *Doctor Hook*. So I was learning a few of their songs. Still play a couple of them actually just for the fun of it. So we're listening to different music. I think we tried "China Grove" (Doobie Brothers) and stuff like that but it never fit us. It wasn't our kind of tune. "The Band"? Yeah, we could do "The Band". "(The Shape I'm In)", those kinds of songs. We liked that. *Brian's* singing fit that. And I wasn't a singer. You had to sing backup and *Wayne* was a bit of a backup singer. But his voice was always ... He had a thin voice. He had a hard time singing because his lungs aren't that strong. And he's a smoker in those days. We all smoked. But we had fun. *Brian* was the strongest singer and sort of the lead of everything.

MMS - It must have been a bit of a mind bend for you to come into Sir John Franklin (High School) when you first moved up in '67 to be amongst the indigenous people at that time and the Inuit people.

RW - Oh yeah. To me, when I saw Akaitcho Hall, I understood the premise that there's no high school where they lived and needed a high school. That's what I thought of it as. I never thought of it as a residential school that you do today. I never knew what went on. I think I went to the odd dance there. It seemed fine. But there was definitely, at times you could see the two different sides. But in the school, I didn't. I never noticed that. And I know that a lot of the people in Akaitcho Hall were being taught more practical things than what I was being taught or the way I was streamed. I knew that but I always saw them. They were always in our basic homeroom classes and stuff together, we just went in different directions. We all went outside and smoked, bummed a cigarette. But we didn't hang out. I would hang out with *Andy Sears*, people I knew, the other government kids. And that's ... It wasn't always that way. I mean, eventually you just became part of Yellowknife, right? Whoever was hanging around was hanging around. You didn't notice any difference. I didn't. I never did. *Tommy Hudson* was there, *Gary Tees*. Anybody like that, I didn't notice any difference between us and them. They were people who lived in Yellowknife longer than I. That's all I knew.

MMS - So as far as that goes, your interaction with them was in school and it wasn't necessarily out on the street. And of course there, they had curfews and they can only be out in the town for so long and then they had to be back in the hall, right?

RW - Yeah. And people hung out with their own friends, right?

MMS - Of course. Yeah, OK, it's a social thing...

RW - High school is cliquy. So I never noticed that.

MMS - Especially one, coming out of southern Canada, two, coming out of a military upbringing that way-

RW - But we've been everywhere.

MMS - Yeah. That's true, too and probably had to adapt. So maybe a little bit easier.

RW - I lived in Gimli, Manitoba. I lived in Metz, France.

MMS - Yeah, okay.

RW - Ottawa was a bit different, mind you, but still. And I never ... That kind of life or those thoughts never entered my brain. I'm just not sensitive to that. Yeah.

MMS - Cool. Thanks.

RW - But the school was a huge learning experience. Smoking in the frozen north was a pretty interesting thing and of course as a teenager, being a new smoker, that's a big priority, to figure out how to smoke in the cold. And I can remember, I don't know how it happened but we lobbied the school somehow and got ourselves a smoking hall. And they put it in the middle of the school, no ventilation at either end and everybody, whether they smoked or not, hung out there. Otherwise, we all stand outside in our shirtsleeves trying to smoke down a cigarette.

MMS - You talked about before, what did you call them, the student grants, or whatever?

RW - Oh youth grants.

MMS - Youth grants.

RW - Yeah. (*Pierre Elliot Trudeau*) came out with the youth grants in the early seventies.

MMS - So early seventies, and that was *Trudeau* who came out with that.

RW - Mm-hmm (affirmative). *Wayne Bertrand* got one. *Wayne Bertrand* ran this little coffee house kind of youth place. I think it was in the United Church basement. Somewhere like that.

MMS - I remember that, keep going.

RW - I remember going there a few times. It was pretty cool because you get food and there's tea or coffee on and it seemed like a cool place. I mean, still no drugs or anything going around. Maybe somebody would have a bit of booze one night or something like that but there's no scene like that. It was a youth scene but it was clean which is quite amazing. You're trying to be hippie, '69, '70, but it wasn't possible because nothing else was there. It wasn't until ... Well actually, sorry, '69, Christmas Eve was my first real experience with the new scene we'll call it. And I've never looked back from that point. I've had a different outlook on life since that point in time. And one that was, I thought, pretty mellow in many ways. And not afraid of the organic, the serendipity, the stuff that happens tomorrow that you don't expect. From that point on, Yellowknife became very important for the fact that I was ready to

explore. The frontier was there. I'll do it. "I need someone to volunteer for the Arctic Winter Games". "Oh sure, why not? Sounds like fun". "Let's go out to *Reggie Cagnoni's* and see if we can help him build his cabin". "Okay. Why not?" So that became my education and everything just came together. I mean, music was there, everything was there.

MMS - You graduated what year?

RW - I never really graduated, but summer of '69 I left school.

MMS - Okay. Okay. Summer of '69 you left school. Okay.

RW - You can see over here on the shelf behind you, over where that big stack of records. Well over here on this shelf there's five times as many and that collection started in Yellowknife and most of those records are actually bought in Yellowknife. I can remember working in the drugstore in '68, winter of '68. Or yeah, fall of '68. And all of a sudden this white record came in the collection of stuff that came in the order on Monday. And I looked at it. I thought that's strange, there's no cover on this. And then all of a sudden on the bottom it said "The Beatles" and I go, "That's mine." And I was the first guy in town to have "The Beatles" record. And was that ... I already had gone through "Sgt. Peppers" in Halifax. We had a big stereo. But when I got this, I went oh ... It tore my mind.

MMS - It took it to a whole other level.

RW - Oh yeah. So music became that mind expansion. I mean, things like "Moody Blues", "Crimson King," "It's a Beautiful Day", all these interesting bands that had intricate music. And "Pink Floyd" of course, the last album. "Deep Purple". These were huge, "Led Zeppelin", huge influences through that period. Couldn't play anything but loved hearing them, loved it loud, loved it just.... I could never expect to play music as well as they do. But then all of a sudden *Neil Young* comes along and I started to understand *Bob Dylan* a lot more and I could play those guys. So I got a lot more interested in music because I could start playing it. *Cat Stevens*.

MMS - It's interesting talking with you and *Wayne (Bertrand)*. Probably even at that time, as young as I was, I was cognizant that there was different musics that were coming out, different styles of music that were sort of coming to the forefront. And the other ones never left. They just sort of went on the back burner for a while but they just lost their turn. When you were talking earlier about "The Beatles" and "King Crimson" and "Pink Floyd", I mean those guys were in a studio and using all of this new sort of technology and multi-track recording.

RW - Well, "Sgt. Pepper" led them to it.

MMS - You didn't have a chance in hell of reproducing that on a stage, on a live stage. None whatsoever.

RW - Not in those days.

MMS - Right. Not in those days. I'm pretty sure there wasn't any recording studio in Yellowknife.

RW - Not when you had a column of eight speakers. That's all you could do with it.

MMS - So when the folk thing sort of came to the front and the blues thing as well and that acoustic music.

RW - Yeah, very much so.

MMS - Again, that resurgence of these old blues guys coming out and coming to the colleges and the universities.

RW - Because we all wanted to play what we're hearing but we couldn't.

MMS - Couldn't duplicate it at the live gig, so... And then that just sort of clicked for me when *Wayne* and when you're talking about that as well.

RW - But don't forget, "The Beatles" are still a foundation as far as we're concerned. So anything "The Beatles" did, *Lennon, McCartney, Harrison*, that stuff was still important. But so was "The Who". When "The Who" came out with "Who's Next" we went, "Wow. They've matured."

MMS - Yeah. And "The (Rolling) Stones" as well.

RW - Oh "The Stones" are still doing it. "The Stones" last blues album is one of the best they've ever done. So to my mind, I got into all that sort of scene through the records.

MMS - Yeah, I was going to say the conduit, the dealer was *Harold Glick* I mean, I spent thousands-

RW - Thousands.

MMS - -of hours and thousands of dollars in that store just on records. I didn't even buy a lot of gear off of them.

RW - No, no.

MMS - But man, it was like I was in there every ... I think the record shipment came in on Thursday or something and it was just like-

RW - That's right. Everybody's there.

MMS - And by Tuesday I'd gone through the whole thing. I knew every record in the store and I couldn't wait for the next shipment to get in.

RW - Exactly.

MMS - Yeah, it was nuts.

RW - And you know, I can remember, I forget what record it's on, but the "Ballad of Hurricane Carter" came out. It was a June situation. Must have been around '76 because we were playing "The Gallery". And *Wayne* and I both like "Ballad of Hurricane Carter". It's just a nice riff and it had a nice roundness to the verse. So you could play a whole verse without playing three chords over and over again. It was kind

of neat. And I'd learn the Bass line and he'd learn the guitar line. We gave the lyrics to *Brian (Killeen)* and said, "You've got to learn these 25 verses." And we got it. In a couple weeks, we just had it nailed. And we played it very rocky. We all had electric guitars and we played it very strong. We went into "The Gallery" and for a week. It was *Brian's* last week playing music with "Sky Syrkle". He had his brother on his guitars.

And we played that gig and we opened our third set with "The Ballad of Hurricane Carter". And everybody went, "Wow, this song just came out two weeks ago and they're playing a powerhouse version of it." And we just made that place dance and that was awesome. That was one of the highlight songs that we learned that year. To this day, I still play the first verse of that song. It's 25 verses. It's a long song. And *Brian* did a great job of it. So I remember that distinctly. Records were what drove us. The music we heard got us going.

MMS - If I can hold you there and do some more rewinding here.

RW - Whatever you like.

MMS - So summer of '69 and you walked away from school.

RW - And home.

MMS - And home.

RW - Yeah. That was it. I was done. I was having differences and I said to my Dad, "I think this would be a good idea if I lived on my own this summer." I had a job working for "Aven's Aircraft Service" and I also had the drugstore gig. I could work there as well for (*Doug Finlayson*). So my dad and I sat down and I said, "I've got to live on my own." So he came up to me in the middle of summer and said, "We're about to move home to Victoria. Do you want to come?" And I said, "No." Took me 15 seconds. Best decision I've made. I couldn't have found a better place to grow up because I needed to grow up a bit. So '69 was the year that I struck out on my own and my mother gave me her record player. Little portable record player. So I had my records. I had just a few. What did I have? "Revolver", "Sgt. Pepper's", maybe a "Who" album, and a couple of others like that. And I took them with me and moved into the "Hardy House" that summer. My dad said, "We're going to leave town," so I had to do two things. I had to get a driver's license and a job. I got a job in the mail room of the government office. Right away they hired me, sight unseen almost. Got my driver's license after one driving lesson.

MMS - The good old days.

RW - I've never had to do a driving test since. Typical Yellowknife. Drove around the block for 20 minutes and cop says, "Practice that. You're done." Anyhow, so I guess he thought I'd only be driving in Yellowknife forever. Anyhow, so summer of '69 was interesting. I moved into an apartment. And about Christmas time, *Wayne's (Bertrand)* kind of semi-homeless because he's leaving home right around the same time I am. *Stan Dodman's* semi-homeless. And just after Christmas, they kind of move in and start sleeping on my floor. So, *Wayne's* out one night, band practice at the "Red House". I'm doing my radio show on CFYK Yellowknife.

MMS - You did a radio show on CFYK?

RW - Yep. Oh my god. *Brian North* got us together, and I forget the operator's name but *John* somebody or other. And they wanted to do almost a teenage show for an hour and during the school year, we did this. And then the summer time came. They said, "We want to continue doing this," but there's only two of us left hanging around. Everybody else had gone. So we did it, through the summer and that sort of carried on into the fall. And next thing you know in January, we're still doing this one hour show on Wednesday nights broadcast to the whole of the Northwest Territories. CFYK Yellowknife.

RW - What was the name of the show, do you remember?

MMS - I have no idea but I'd bring my records from home and we'd play those records. And I can remember being in this nice apartment in the high rise, third floor. Some of the early residents. It was a two bedroom apartment. The first time I shared with a roommate who's a friend of mine. Went along pretty good. But he wanted a bachelor apartment so he moved out. They moved this other guy in with me. I didn't know who he was. About 30 years old. And they just assigned me a roommate type of thing. Well, it was a clash straight from the beginning because here I am young teenager throwing stuff around and whatnot. And the girl who I did the radio show with had a boyfriend who was very jealous and the night we were doing the radio show, he broke into my room, into my apartment which I figured out later, it took me a while to figure out, and destroyed my room. Which was messy to begin with, but when I got home, it was even messier. We got home late, and my roommate of the day decided to go out and literally write a big, huge complaint letter about me. So the next morning, I get up to the sound of my boss and the housing officer knocking at the door. So, got kicked out, three days' notice, end of January and also unknown to me that, my last paycheck in January, they took off damages from the apartment I lived in for three months, saying it was all my fault even though it could've been the previous roommate or the roommate that was there. Just got charged to me. So, left me with a paycheck of \$4.80. No place to live, no food ... nothing. So, I figured out how to survive. *Wayne (Bertrand)* and I found a trailer in the car dump that's halfway down to Old Town it was parked there for the winter and we plugged it into the auto body shop next door. It had a heater in it about this tall. Was fed by oil, kept it warm. We lined it with tin foil, had two beds. Six of us slept in it. *Wayne* and I shared a bed for four months. We got the bed because we were the guys that did the deal and we got the bed in the corner in the back. Nobody could go by us at night. We went by them, if we had to get... No water. No plumbing, no water, nothing. We had to take our toothbrushes in our pocket to get some ... We had Coke in the cupboard. The cupboard was the cooler because there was no heat in the cupboard. We had a great stereo. I still have it. These are the speakers, right there. We had the records.

MMS - That's hardcore, man. That's the hardest-core story.

RW - We lived in that place until June, from January to June and every morning we'd go up to the Yellowknife Inn for breakfast and I'd have a two by two ... so, two eggs and two pancakes ... breakfast, every day and it was always ready when we got there. We had a booth, coffee, two by two ... so, it was a \$2 breakfast. Still worked in the mail room. Summer came. Things thawed out and we said "This isn't a very nice place, is it? It's pretty muddy." So, we moved out of there. Didn't have to really do anything, just took the stuff we had. Didn't have to clean. And then, I ended up back in the "Hardy House". This time, in the Hardy House, the guy gave me the front room and never assigned a roommate, so I had the room to myself. So, I got the cleaning stuff out and I cleaned it all, top and bottom. Shined, put wax on the floor, the whole bit. It was a buck a night. I probably was there 18 months and I might have paid half the rent I should've paid because I never had a buck. if you didn't have a buck, he didn't worry about it. So, I lived there. I had a place to lock my stuff up. That was good and I still had a great stereo. Little hot

plate, stereo ... I was good. Pretty wild times, land of the midnight sun. Single guy, 18-19 years old, still not drinking. No, I just ... I think I turned 19, summer of '71? Yeah, 19, summer of '71,

MMS - So, you said you were living at Hardy House and you were working in the mail room but you didn't have a buck?

RW - Well, if you're living in the Hardy House, you're eating out. If you're eating out in Yellowknife, your whole paycheck goes to food because I couldn't cook, there was no place to cook.

MMS - Were they taking ... you didn't pay rent. I mean, was the rent coming off your paycheck, or ... ?

RW - Oh, no. This ... the Hardy House was a buck a night. You had to volunteer to pay it.

MMS – Oh my God, OK.

RW - Yeah, so you get a lot of truckers going and staying there overnight, you get a lot of guys that, like me, just didn't have a place. 12 rooms ... two bedrooms on the outside, so, 24 guys. One bathroom, one laundry facility. It was home, in the sense that you're dry, you're warm, you had privacy. I survived. It didn't seem to be that much of a hardship, from my side. Now, I look back it and I say "I wouldn't want my kids going through that," but I understood the value of what I got. Then *Stuart Hodgson* found out I was in there. He goes "What the hell?" I told him the story and he was really pissed off. I should never have been kicked out of my apartment. I should've been given an apartment with privacy and they should've protected me a lot more as a young kid who was a valuable employee of the government of the Northwest Territories. He was outraged when he found out. He had his deputy phone the housing office and say "Get *Rob Wickson* an apartment," and they phoned me and said, "You're now on the list." I said, "Great!" I was all excited. They phoned me two weeks later and he said, "Have you got an apartment yet?" I said, "No." Got a call 10 minutes later saying "You're now sixth on the list." Next day, I get a call, "Did you get an apartment yet?" "No." 10 minutes later, I get a phone call, "We have an apartment to show you." They finally got the hint. He wanted it done now. He liked me. *Stuart Hodgson* and I got along great. He told me two things in life that I hold dear today. Number one: you don't have to know everything, you just have to know who to ask. Number two: never be afraid to make a decision. That's my life, right there, those two things. I'm not smarter than anybody else, I just know who to ask. You can ask Google, now and I've never been fearful of being in charge. So, these are huge lessons that I got and probably didn't really realize how valuable they were until I realized how often I was talking about them.

MMS - But there was these ... these older generation of men who were, even in the schools, like you say and they were influencing ... not manipulating, but sort of guiding ... they would recognize somebody's talent or somebody's skill and they would kind of go "He's not an academic, he's a tradesman, so what the hell are you trying ... ? He's obviously not doing well in academia. Let's just put him in the shop, shall we? He will shine, he'll get a vocation and he'll have a job for the rest of his life. We've done our job right there."

RW - *Stuart Hodgson* recognized that I was a doer, so he would come to me to help him do things. I remember one day, I get a phone call from his office, by this time, I was moving up in the rank. I was a clerk two at the government office and I had all the keys to the building. So, his office phoned me up. "*Stuart's* locked out of his office. Can you bring a key?" So, I brought the keys up. None of them worked

because he never handed out a key to anybody. So, I said, "No problem." Whipped out my wallet, got out my credit card, and I broke into his office. He went "That was good." So, whenever he wanted to get into anywhere, he'd come and see me.

MMS - You could've had a career as a B&E artist.

RW - But I was a doer.

MMS - You were a doer, yeah.

RW - I did things and I didn't realize that's what I was but that's what I did.

MMS - Very ... unique is not the word to use, but ... lots of other words but that's just the one that we'll use for now.

RW - It's one of my specialties.

MMS - A unique time where the town was small enough and lots of other people have said this over the years, to me and to you that way, where it was just like ... you're rubbing shoulders with ...

RW - *Mabel Brathen*, the gossip columnist of the town. How can you not get your name in the paper if you're hanging out with *Mabel Brathen*?

RW - *Stuart Hodgson*, *John Parker* ... all these guys.

MMS - ... Commissioners, it's just like ... you're buddies. You're just guys. *Alex Czarnecki* mentions this, as well: going to the Commissioner's Ball and there's the Minister from and there's the Federal Minister ...

RW - There's *David Searle* sitting there.

MMS - And there's the guy who runs the pump truck that comes and pumps out your septic tank. This is your living situation in Yellowknife, circa 1971?

RW - So, Polaris Apartments. I was right smack in the middle of them. That was my apartment. I used to go out with *Josie Killeen* and I got to know *Brian (Killeen)* a bit that summer. We were just starting to get into the music a bit more. It was another year later that's where things got a little bit different. It might've been earlier, actually. That's right. So, when I was living in Hardy House, *Wayne Bertrand* was living in one of his dad's houses at the time. It was called the "Gray House".

MMS - Yep, that's the one.

RW - *Brian* painted that.

MMS - Oh, nice and you got it. That's great.

RW - So, that house has a huge story around it. Years of story. For example, the time that the power went out for, like, 12 hours in Yellowknife. That was one of the only places that had heat because it's gravity-fed heat. Didn't matter if the power was out. We had candles. So, we had a hell of a party. Everybody got a day off work. "The Gray House" ... I remember having to have my turn at doing dishes, and I didn't live there, but *Wayne (Bertrand)* made you. *Wayne* said, "We're cleaning house today. You were here yesterday, so you clean today." No problem. I was part of that. My carpet which was a green carpet I had to buy out of the high rise, ended up as the carpet in the Gray House. I was still ... I didn't own a guitar but I was picking up guitars from around the room, trying to play them, figure things out and stuff like that. Never that serious about it but it's always there. Music was huge there ... people jamming all the time. Eventually, that's where *Sandy Wilson* made us ... it's not a harem when it's a man doing it but he had his own room with those ... there was a circuit of females floating through there on a regular basis, all very cute if I remember correctly. Anyhow ... I forget who lived in the other half because there was another half that had a room, going in the back way. There is one story about "The Gray House" I'll never tell so I'll just leave it at that but "The Gray House" has its own mystery. There's gotta be a song there, somewhere. I've got to figure it out one of these days.

That was a few summers that that house was around as the going-to place. *Wayne* moved out because he got a girlfriend and eventually just sort of went ... I think *Sandy Wilson* got in and other people got in and it became more derelict *JT (John Telgen)* was around when "The Gray House" was still around, so that was pretty cool.

So, that's how the living arrangements evolved. I ended up moving to Polaris. Quit the government, got them to give my job to *Wayne (Bertrand)* and they moved my job from where it was, a nice cushy office out into the bullpen, so *Wayne* got given a slightly different job than I had. More of an accounts payable clerk whereas I was a gofer. I did the accounts payable, I did this and I did that and I did all the stuff, plus they called me whenever they needed the keys, the Xerox fixed or whatever. I just did all that stuff. *Wayne's* job was more sit at the desk, process this paper. I guess they saw different talents. So, I came down here and went to school for three months. I realized that I really didn't like going to school as much as I thought I might and I didn't like having no money. So in January ... after three months, I went back. I was back 24 hours and I walked into the clerk of the council's office ... I said hi to everyone, I knew them all because I used to be the mail clerk. They said, "Are you looking for work?" I said, "Yep." "Can you start tomorrow?" A legislative session was coming on, they needed somebody and got me to work. I got an apartment within a few days and that's when *Brian (Killeen)* came up that summer. *Wayne* was living down the hall and we started playing together on a regular basis, all the time. If I wasn't playing with him, I was playing by myself.

MMS - So, that's when the trio started and you guys started doing the folk music and the blues music and the....

RW - Well, you know, I was never good enough to be part of the band, so they got *JT (John Telgen)* and *Gary Tees* to play with them and they started getting some gigs ... not a lot but they got a few. And then, *JT* got promoted to the (*Sandy*)*Wilson* band, and *Gary Tees* ... they needed a better bass player over there, so he went off. So, they had no bass player and they had no drummer. They both looked at me and they said, "Why don't you start playing Bass?" I had no clue, but I picked up this "Mansfield Gibson SG" Bass and I played through the "Sunn Sceptre". Of course, blew the fuse because you're trying to get it to overdrive and all kinds of stuff. So, then blew the amp and ended up buying that. I can't remember his name, but he was in town playing Bass. He had a fretless "Fender Precision" bass and he had the (Gibson) "Ripper". He'd just bought the "Ripper" and he decided he wanted to sell the "Ripper", 500

bucks. I'll buy that. Gave him 500 bucks for it. Don't know where I got 500 bucks but I'm sure music paid for it eventually. Of course, bought the "Fender", but that ...I got on stage and this is a true story: the day we were going to play, *Brian (Killeen)* and I went cross-country skiing. Came over a hill in School Draw and I landed backwards and jammed my thumb. This thumb. I'd been practicing bass for a couple weeks so I knew a couple of riffs and basic ... I could play "Heart of Gold", I could play "The Shape I'm In"... (sings) doot, doot, doot, doot-doot ... I could do that stuff. Really rudimentary. But, my thumb was now fucked. So, here I am, with my thumb not able to press against the bass, trying to get it to make noise by just using my fingers. Talk about under fire on stage ... if I had been the kind of person that is embarrassed, I would've been totally but I just didn't care. We played loud and away we went. And you know what? Eventually, I got to know the notes, my thumb got healed and away I went. That was my start of the "Sky Syrkle".

MMS - Wow. Okay, so, "Sky Syrkle". So, that's the first band that you played with...

RW - That's the first band, live, I played with. I played different things in different places but never as part of a band, just sort of-

MMS - ... part of a band, and...

RW - ... just ... this is the only shot.

MMS - ... So, this is like '73, '74 by that time?

RW - Yeah ... '74, getting toward '75, even because I'm back in Yellowknife now, working with the clerk office and *Bing Styles* is involved, *Bing's* starting to play harmonica a bit.

MMS - Tell me about *Bing* because people have talked about *Bing* and I never did know him. I can't even visualize him. I'm sure I might have heard him play, at some point.

RW - I'm sure I have a picture of *Bing* around here somewhere, but *Bing* was an interesting man. When he was born, he was born with scoliosis. So, his back was like a hunchback. They decided, when he was young ... he's a very little guy ... to straighten his back. So, they basically do surgery to straighten his back and put two rods in his back. He was basically in a body cast for 18 months. When they cut it off, they found knitting needles and all kinds of stuff inside because he was so itchy.

Anyhow ... so, he was an old man in a little body and he's always a year or two older because he's behind in school. Deep voice, beard. Good-looking guy. Thin ... very thin. In high school, he might've been part of the drinking crowd but you never really noticed it. He liked his Coca-Cola and 222s. That was his thing. He and I worked together in the clerk's office. We worked together in the mail room. We knew each other through school. He came up ... his dad was with the forest service in BC. *Bing* was kind of the guy that seemed a bit more mature than everybody else, so he was given responsibility. He would be the supervisor. He was given the clerk three job. *Bing* never did anything. *Bing* was very skilled at being a nice guy and, obviously, the mature guy but he needed people right on him to get it done. I was a good partner for him ... perfect. I didn't mind going and doing stuff. So, we got along well. He lived in the high rise and used to spy on me, stuff like that... He started to get into harmonica because he really liked guitar but he was never a smooth guitar player. He noodled to himself. There's one song that I've written out of a noodle he had and I call it "Bing's Thing". I played it for him once and he started crying,

so I never played it for him again. He got good at harps and he got a collection of harps so he could play in any key. So, when we played places like the ... we called it "The Greenhouse" ... I remember we just set up equipment and played all day. *Bing* was there playing away with his harps and I can remember doing a song called "Blond Tokes" because that was what the market was right at the time. So, these ... had these hot knives going all the time and you'd put down your instrument, go and have a couple tokes and then come back and play some more. The music was going nonstop so the song, "Blond Tokes" went on for about 25 minutes. People would just come in, make up verses and maybe add a riff here and there. You'd go back and have another hit. So, that's the kind of scene we're at. So, when you get to weekends and days off, it was always looking for an opportunity to get together and have fun. We did that a lot. It wasn't about the gigs, it was about the music. "The Gray House" was a place to do that. This "Greenhouse" I remember it happened a few times. So, I was looking for opportunities all the time to play.

MMS - So, we're sort of beyond the youth grants here now, right?

RW - Oh, yeah.

MMS - We're way beyond that. You guys are growing up and ... government jobs, and all the rest of us, right?

RW - And there's lots of bar bands, and we're all hanging out because there's always new bands in town every week.

MMS - So, you would've seen that transition starting to happen. Can you sort of ... ?

RW - We started to see ... *Ted Wesley*, he got in "The Hoist Room". That was one of the first places ... good live music because it was clean sound. *Ted Wesley* had lots of songs and "The Hoist Room" loved him. You could sing along and he was very entertaining. I always liked his voice and sound. I think we started to get a lot more "Legion" dances and then the "Elk's Hall" picked up on that. So, you started to see "Stained Glass Illusion" and those kinds of bands playing those places. Of course, that opened it up for "Friends" and then us, "Sky Syrkle" and you guys after us. So, it really became a good little market. We walked into the "Elk's Hall" and we're basically booked all winter. So, we were playing from December right through the end of April, every weekend.

MMS - Every weekend ... two nights a week, or-

RW - Yeah. Friday, Saturday.

MMS - ... Wow.

RW - 250 - 300 bucks a night. It's probably the same pay scale today.

MMS - probably.

RW - 50 bucks a man.

MMS - If it existed, it would be but it doesn't exist so we don't have to worry about that. So, you're right, the "Legions" and the Elks were starting to pick up on that idea of the entertainment and all the rest of that stuff. What about...

RW – "Legion" was country, and we were more rock and roll.

MMS - ... What about the other clubs, though? Like ... I mean ... "The Trapline", "The Gold Range", "The Gallery" ...

RW – "The Trap Line" was renamed. It was called something else then but right around then, it got renamed to "Trap Line" and the stage got a little bit more formal. It wasn't a great stage, if you jumped up and down on it, your amp would fall over. It was a gig more for the guys that would come into town. So, you get these bands coming from Edmonton on the circuit and they'd come up for a week or, sometimes, two. Sometimes, they'd be really good. Sometimes, they'd be "The Cowsills". You'd have "The Cowsill Brothers" come up and that sort of stuff.

MMS - So, you got to see those guys?

RW - Oh, yeah.

MMS - ... Wow.

RW - So, guys like that, and some guys that were probably ... who knows, they're probably well-known bands now that I just wouldn't recognize from then. "The Gallery" was a new building and that opened up. They started bringing strippers in with bands backing them. Then, they got to having the house band and whatever band they brought in for the week be the backing band for whatever stripper they brought in. I can't remember ever backing a stripper. I think we were very close to having to back a stripper, and the stripper backed out. Something like that. But I remember this one lady who was, like, six feet tall, big voice and just ... she probably weighed 250 pounds. She was the entertainment but she did burlesque more than stripping. She was fabulous. She had great jokes and I think (*Sandy Wilson*) and the boys were backing her. They had a great time. Then ... "Gallery" for us was the pinnacle. If we can get "The Gallery" gig, that meant we were there. We had "The Trap Line" gig more than once, we had the "Legion" and we had "The Elks Hall" ... we had the high school. On a fairly regular basis, we could get those gigs but we never got "The Gallery" until the summer of '76, the last gig *Brian (Killeen)* played in Yellowknife in that lineup.

MMS - Oh, wow.

RW - We did a week, six days and that's when we had Hurricane Carter, "Ballad of Hurricane Carter" and we were basically really a tight band. *Wayne* had that big Leslie speaker. He just hit it for "Shape I'm In" and he'd play all that big rhythm he does and *Brian* just had a heyday over top, doing whatever he could with a harmonica or whatever instrument he could get a hold of. His brother came with us and he's a good lead guitar player so he just filled in perfectly. He actually looks a lot like you, except you're taller. Anyhow ... I just had the "Ripper" bass and I was just humming along. *Kim Ferrie* was getting better but we still wouldn't let him do a drum roll because he never quite came out of the drum roll properly. He could do a good back beat and it wasn't too bad if you didn't give him too many cymbals. You know

Valdy says; "How do you rescue a drowning drummer?" don't you? Give him his cymbals. Just a little one I threw in.

So, "The Gallery" was a good gig for us. Very good. We enjoyed it. *Brian* left, and we said, "What are we doing now?" Then, (*Terry Mercer's* floating around. Then, there's this other guy who liked to sing and he sang really well. So, we switched over and started doing songs like "Heat Wave". Different songs from *Steve Miller*, with the higher voice. That got to be a little bit more orchestrated, so we were hitting harmonies. *Mercer* was teaching us the harmonies. This note, this note ... he sung it right. The band, I thought, got pretty nice. We got "The Trap Line" gig for New Year's, which is a pretty big gig.

So, it's a Saturday night, I think and I can remember the dance floor was so hopping that all the beer on my amp fell off. So, all that free beer gone. Monday or Tuesday ... the gigs after that were dead quiet in the place. I remember *Terry (Mercer)* getting mad at me because I was saying "Well, yeah, but we've got a set to play," and he just didn't want to play because there were only four people in the place. I understood that. I should've been relaxed, but I got a little bit ... "Come on, we're contracted to do the job, we should do the job." That's the professional side of me. He got pissed off at me and that was the end of the band, pretty much. It was that spring that I left town. I didn't mind. It was time for me to move on.

MMS - Who was the singer that you picked up?

RW - There was two people we picked up. One guy not only sang but he played a ... I think it was a piccolo sax ... like, a real short thing. No curl to it. Great sound. He didn't last that long. He left town. The next guy we got, I can't ... he was young. He just had a really nice voice and he sang the high notes really well, so the harmonies ... we could all slide in low.

MMS - Come in underneath, yeah..

RW - Yeah, it was really nice. *Wayne (Bertrand)* might remember ... he's the guy that came on stage with a frigging beer on his hand.

MMS - Oops.

RW - I can't remember ... so, I'm on bass, *Kim's (Ferrie)* on drums, and *Wayne's* on guitar. (*Terry Mercer* on keyboards ... the Fender Rhodes which was just downright ... the amp he used on that Fender Rhodes ... you probably don't know this and *Wayne (Bertrand)* probably didn't tell you ... *Wayne* used to own it.

MMS - Talking about that big "Fender Twin"?

RW - Yeah.

MMS - That was a heavy amp, man. That thing was huge and it was loud, too.

RW - *Wayne (Bertrand)* owned that for a while.

MMS - I moved that amp a lot.

RW - Heavy sucker. Well, I have a (*Fender*) *Deluxe*, and it's heavy enough. The frigging "Roland" is terrible. I don't like moving it.

MMS - [crosstalk 00:33:31]

RW - I'd rather take the "(Fender) Bassman" because at least it's speaker is separate from the rest.

MMS - Other than "The Cowsills" and stuff like that, the other touring bands coming through that were really memorable?

RW - There were just ... when I think back on it, always entertaining, but I remember doing circuits ... going to "The Hoist Room" to see who's there, then I go over to "The Trap Line" and see who's there, and "The (Gold) Range" took a long time before they got entertainment. They didn't have much entertainment before I left. They started getting it the year I left. Country bands. "The Gallery" had entertainment for quite a while. "The Snowshoe Lounge" ... no ... Is that what it's called, up at the new hotel? What's it ... ?

MMS - "The Explorer".

RW - What do they call that room?

MMS - "The Snowshoe", you had it right.

RW - Yeah, "The Snowshoe".

MMS - You had it right.

RW - I actually worked the bar in the cocktail lounge and the restaurant for a year. I was the bartender in there, making some extra gig money. Actually, for six months, that wasn't a year. I also bartended at "The Hoist Room" for a little while.

MMS - Busy guy. Holy shit. That's ...

RW - I never think of that now, though but I've always had two jobs. I've always had something else to do. That's just been me. It's my life. I just have my own way of doing things, and that seems to work.

MMS - Well, your own way of doing things but again, in Yellowknife ... I mean, for myself and for probably hundreds of others and yourself included that way ... like you say, you get back to Yellowknife. Within 24 hours, you've got a job. You probably have a gig. It's just a matter of a place to live. Then, within three days, that's all taken care of and then it's like, full steam ahead.

RW - In the '70s it was very much like that. If you knew anybody in Yellowknife, you were set because they're always looking for somebody.

MMS - ... You weren't there when *BB King* came to town, right?

RW - Yes, I was. So, you want the *BB King* story?

MMS - Please.

RW - *Terry Mercer* was going to promote this. I don't know who else was with *Terry* but they're all in on it. *Terry* comes to me and he says "I need equipment." I said, "Okay, what do you need?" He says "I need the (Fender) "Bassman" because the Bass player wants the "Bassman". I said, "Sure, you can have it. I want a ticket." He did not like me for that. He wanted me to cough up the 20 bucks for the ticket. I did eventually but ... because I realized he wasn't making any money, I finally put my 20 bucks in the kit but I figured, you know, you're going to take my amp, put it in a frigging cold arena and it's a brand new amp, I think I want at least 20 bucks for it. That was a good gig. I mean, they wanted to originally take the ice out but they didn't have a floor yet. All they had was gravel. So, they had to leave the ice in. They put dirt on it. They just put gravel over top so people didn't kill themselves going to their chair. It was tin, so you can imagine the sound but at the front, it was pretty good. They used the "Shure" PA and they had a ... I forget whose amp it was. It was a "Twin Reverb" but six speakers. The same basic "(Fender) Twin" but they had six ... "Super Six" or something like that, they called it. I think the "Sunn Sceptre" was on stage, (*Sandy Wilson's* "GBX" was on stage ... I can remember all the gear and the band came with a horn section. And it was just awesome. *BB King* was just so smooth. You know the story about the accommodation, don't you? *BB King* heard that ... they paid money to bring him up and their gear and put them up in the hotel. He found out that they weren't making any money and he paid the tab for the hotel.

MMS - Whoa.

RW - (*Terry Mercer*) probably didn't tell people that too much but I knew that.

MMS - ... but in the time that you were working with him ... were you working with him in the mail room when he was working in the mail room?

RW - I got him the job in the mail room. I was working upstairs by then but I recommended him. I liked *Terry (Mercer)*. I liked his attitude, I liked his spice. When they told him to cut off half his hair, he cut off the front half. That was just one of the funniest stories I can tell. I remember all these stories. My memory ... it's not bad for this stuff. So, that's part of my story.

MMS - That's wonderful. Thanks so much for that.