

Wilf Schidlowsky

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(Interview in K&W Bike shop on Kam Lake road while Wilf was repairing bicycles, with compressors etc. running in the background)

MMS - Tell me where you were born, your home country and maybe how you first got introduced to music or to an instrument?

WS - That is a long story.....

MMS - As long as you want to make it that way.

WS - I was born in Humboldt, Saskatchewan, in 1930, so I think it's showing OK there. I pretty well grew up in that area in the farming country, it was all farming. So it was no problem that way. I started playing guitar at about 11 or 12. My brother Rudy was going to St. Peters College and he had a special violin, a very expensive violin that one of the priests gave him, so he played the violin or fiddle as we called it. So I started out on the banjo first of all because it was easier to handle, from the banjo I eventually went to the guitar. I had one of those great big concert style guitars that was bigger than what you were. And we used to go to abattoirs, I don't know if you know what abattoirs were. TB was quite prevalent in Saskatchewan and stuff so what they had there, every Saturday they'd have an amateur hour and they would take, like you see on the TV where you give donations, you know. So you'd go up and do your little performance thing and stuff like that and then people would give money. If they liked you they give a little bit and if they didn't like you they didn't give you nothing, you know. But anyway we started that way.

MMS - So TB, you said, tuberculosis?

WS - Tuberculosis, it was Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, CJAB or whatever it was in Saskatchewan. And they had a radio announcer there he was, I forget what his name is but he was pretty good that way. He could really egg you on and get you going pretty good, so that's what we used to do, you know, maybe 2 or 3 times a year you would come to Humboldt, Carmel, Bruno and all these places so you would go there and see if you could get a little bit of a prize. You might win 5 dollars or something you know. Which was a lot of money at that time.

MMS - In those days for sure. Would you broadcast live?

WS - Right from the stadium, right from whatever the hall, a theatre usually. They would get a

theatre or something and that's where they were in there. So I got started and officially I started playing in a band when I was about 14, between 13 and 14 and that was an old time band. I think all we had was an Accordion, a Saxophone, Guitar and a Bass fiddle. That was the start of it.

MMS - What kind of music were you playing?

WS - All old time music.

MMS - What kind of songs?

WS - German songs, polkas, the odd fox trot and all that kind of stuff. There was no such thing as what you call jive nowadays or even Rock and Roll. But that was pretty good there. Then I went to teachers college in 1948 and '49 and we started a, at the normal school, it was called THE Normal school which is teachers college now. They had a pretty good band program there and I got into that.

MMS - Where was that?

WS - That was in Saskatoon. And that went pretty well there. Then you really got going into it. Before that I'd played with the Humboldt Collegiate Band and we had a 13 piece band or whatever it was and we'd pack about 5 or 6 into a car and go playing for dances. But that was the start pretty well. When I started teaching we got into some fairly good bands there. I played a couple of times with an outfit called *Clem Gallowitz and the Canadian Polka Kings*. That was the top of the band and they would play at "Danceland" in Saskatoon, they were on TV. I never got on TV or anything like that but they were all touring through there that was the big band. If you got in to them, you were pretty well going.

MMS - So, with that big band were you playing the jive music?

WS - No, it was all old time, there was no such thing as that swing band or anything like that. Don't forget, this was in the early '50s.

MMS - The early 50s but the whole Glen Miller, Tommy Dorsey.....

WS - I know. They didn't follow a lot of that. Don't forget, this was Saskatchewan. And the dances, if you played stuff like that, they wouldn't dance. People would say you have to play the polkas and the old time waltzes and your fox trots and stuff like that.

MMS - A lot of the people there, close to my home country there as well, but there was immigrant families, first and second generation there and so you would playing a lot of...

WS - Which part did you come from?

MMS - Rosthern.

WS - That's just north of Saskatoon, its all Mennonite country there.

MMS - So there was a lot of the ethnic music from the European families moving in and settling.

WS - That went pretty well there, I played with a bunch of small bands. Then we got into a, we sort of formed our own band. That was the "Harmony Pals". I still have pictures, I was going to bring a picture along and I couldn't find it. We all got nicely dressed up just to know... that was every Friday and Saturday we'd be playing, all over the country, you name it. Sometimes we would leave right after school at 4 o'clock, to get there by 10 o'clock, so that's a 6 hour drive. Don't forget the roads weren't all black top either. So, we'd get there and we'd do this, Wakaw, you must know where Wakaw is. Bonabadon (SP?) Beach we played there I guess for about 2 years straight. That was every Friday or Saturday, which ever one, you know. It didn't even have a generator or a power plant, they had a diesel generator and every once in a while the tubes blow out in your amp because they didn't have the voltage right. By the way, I was one of the first guys to use an electric guitar in that area.

MMS - I was just going to ask you, you were playing acoustic guitar, the electric guitar was finding its way into music at that time.

WS - I was one of the first ones that started. In fact, one of the amps is sitting right on top there.

MMS - How old were you or what year did that come about?

WS - That would have been about '54 or '55

MMS - When you got your first electric guitar?

WS - When I got my first electric, yeah. And that was, that wasn't too bad. It was a 'DeArmond' pickup and the damn wires would always break off where they go into the pickup and you'd have to take it all nicely apart and that was all hair thin wires in there, you would very gently and carefully solder them. We didn't have any plastic or stuff to put over it so you would put a little bit of glue over the top and hope it would last. And that would usually work, once in a while it wouldn't work so you had to carry the other guitar along too, just in case.

MMS - When you were doing these dances, were you getting paid?

WS - Oh yeah.

MMS - How much?

WS - Ten bucks a night per man. That wasn't just too bad but by the time you figure the trip and your time and everything else. In fact, I started teaching in '50 and about '54 or '55, by playing

Friday and Saturday I was making more money playing in the band than I was teaching. I made \$1,200 a year teaching and I was paying \$50 a month rent. And I drove a Model T and a Model A, you name it all those good ones. Now those things are keepsakes, eh? My old car is still sitting in the barn on the farm at home. Kevin, my Grandson, he's after it, He wants to take it into Calgary, rebuild it, eh? That should be interesting. So anyway, the "Harmony Pals" that went pretty good there. That was very nice, it was a good band. We had an accordion, guitar, bass and sax. *Gabe Lashinsky* played sax and clarinet and violin. He'd come back from the army so he had taken a music course so he was pretty good. We did play "In the Mood" pieces like that, just what they used to in the war, like, you know. Then '64 we came up here.

MMS - I was just going to ask you, you started playing just when the war was sort wrapping up and all of those guys were coming.....

WS - Yup, about that time, see in '45 I'd have been 15, just at the end of the war there a lot of the guys, the army guys would be coming back and stuff like that.

MMS - Did that change the kinds of songs that you played?

WS - No, it pretty well stayed the same, the old "Clarinet Polka", you know that one and some of the other ones, that was still the standard and stayed the standard too. The "Lichenstien Polka" and all those type which we even played here.

MMS - I remember playing those songs.

WS - They stayed all the way to this day.

MMS - When I came up here in '64, for the first while I didn't do hardly anything, I was too busy at the school. They were busy building the school because the school burned down on April 1st.

MMS - in '64

WS - In '64. When we came up there, old *Norm Byrne*, I'm sure you knew him, he was supposed to send me some money to come up and I waited and I waited and I waited for that and he never sent any money. So we came up on a wing and a prayer, I'm telling you.

MMS - Like lots of people at that time. So how did you find out about Yellowknife, did you know somebody up here, was there a job?

WS - A job application. I was Principal in Pilger (SK) for 4 years, eh? That's north of Humboldt, about 20 miles north and I saw an ad in the paper, "Teach in Canada's northland", eh? That was for four years and it was getting boring, you know. Look for something different. So I phoned *Norm Byrne* and we got hired, eh? Oh, I tried with *Norm McPherson* and *Gordon Devitt* and they were in Saskatoon and I went to interview them like they interviewed me and

they were going to send me out to Chesterfield Inlet, I said no thanks. He said there is a guy in Yellowknife by the name of *Norm Byrne*, we'll give you his number and you can phone him. He's always looking for somebody. I phoned him and right away he sent out the application and everything else and well, I got hired, that's the way... He promised me \$500 he was going to send me \$500 for, delayed the expenses, never did get it.

MMS - You had family at that time?

WS - I had two girls, *Laureen* was born February 14th, so she was 6 months old and *Gwen* was 2 years older then. Lucky for us, *Laureen* slept, I packed everything in the station wagon, made a little nest in the back for her to sleep in right above the seat there and that's how we came up. I ran out of milk at Fort Providence, there was no milk for her. I turned into Fort Providence and everything was closed and you couldn't get anything. I even tried the police station, they wouldn't answer. So I headed back into Yellowknife and she slept all the way in. Thank god for that. Finally just before I got into Yellowknife about 10 miles out, my windshield wiper broke, there was no more wind shield wiper. So you'd stop, there was water in the ditch you'd take some water with a hub cap, you'd throw it over the wind shield and then you would pull the windshield wipers to clean it off a little bit and hope there was no truck coming.

MMS - So what time of year did you drive up, was it summer?

WS - It was August 17th.

MMS - So the road had been in for.....

WS - 6 years and slippery.

MMS - It was still pretty rough then.

WS - There was hardly any ditches, just rock. You went there, you lose... Is Yellowknife never gonna come, never gonna come and you're driving and it's never gonna come. When I stopped in Yellowknife here you couldn't tell the difference, there was absolutely no paint on the car, it was just completely covered with mud. And you would never believe the first two people I ran into in Yellowknife. One was *Jack Adderly* and he just happened to be coming there and he says, you drink beer? And I says Yeah, sure I do. Well here's a case of beer, he was the Molson rep eh?

MMS - That's pretty amazing!

WS - The second one was RCMP, what the hell was his name now.....He lived next *Alec Glowach*, they lived in the same apartment there. I knew him, he had been in Humboldt, eh? And so I come around the corner and here's this RCMP guy and I says hi. And he says, "Schidlowsky, you son of a bitch you followed me up here", he says. He used to play ball and stuff, I'll think of his name later, I should have written all this down.

MMS - That's OK. So you came here the same year we did, almost exactly the same time too. So you got yourself settled in, teaching and all the rest of that stuff, what music was going on up here?

WS - To tell you the truth I couldn't have told you until we got started. But *Betty Stevens* she knew I played guitar because like, Michael and them they were going and Linda used to be our baby sitter. So she knew that I played guitar, Betty says would you like to come and try a little bit with us. Well, I says why not? So anyway, we got started with Betty and next thing was *Fred Henne* and his "Yellow bird" we would have to play "Yellow Bird" three times a night, and *Frank Wouters*. And so the four of us we wound up at the Legion on Fridays and Saturdays, in the basement of the old Legion. And it rained and there was buckets of water dripping through there and they'd be dancing around the buckets there and you'd be playing "Yellow Bird".

MMS - Frank was the drummer, right?

WS - Frank was the drummer. Before that what happened, *Marge Sudaby* was the music teacher at the public school and she got me started, we got together a little bit, I got to know them and stuff like that. So we made a couple of trips over to Hay River to play. That was *Bill Shaw*, that was the principal at the public school. That was William Mc...

MMS - William McDonald.

WS - *Bill Shaw*, myself and *Brian Purdy*, he played trumpet, *Marge* played there. So they flew us to Hay River a couple of times there and we'd do a stint there at the Legion in Hay River. But the thing is there, the one I remember the best was anyway. We played there the one night, it was getting fall, it was cold you know. Snow and stuff like that. So, they put us into the old "Ace Motel" in the old town. In fact the old "Ace Motel" wound up here but that's where they stayed and we were supposed to come back the Saturday night. Sunday morning we were supposed to come back at around 10 o'clock. So we sat down after the dance and we had a beer after the dance in the motel room. All of a sudden, there's a knock on the back door of the hotel room and pounded. I said to *Brian*, should I go and see, yeah OK. There's a guy comes in, comes in the open door. "God it's a long walk from uptown" he says. "Four miles, I have to fly some people back tomorrow to Yellowknife, guess who it was, *Bob Gauthier*. So, anyway, "Wake me up tomorrow morning at 10 o'clock and we'll get going." OK, so, I thought about quarter to ten, I'll wake him up, I went and knocked on his door, "oh yeah", he says "I'll be right with you, I travel light, pair of socks and a toothbrush". He took us back and we landed at the airport.

MMS - What kind of plane were you flying in?

WS - I can't remember. It wasn't an Otter it was something else but there was four of us flying in it. But that was my introduction to *Bob Gauthier*. After that he got lost, he was out in the barren lands for I don't know how long. He was about 30 days he was stranded up in the bush,

got lost. You never heard the story, thought maybe you knew it, you'd better check him out. He was quite the pilot. So we did that for a while. But that was with, just before around the same time as *Betty Stevens* when that was going on.

MMS - So as far as any music happening in town, in Yellowknife, there was the Legion, was the Elks even there?

WS - The Elks was there, we would play at the Elks too. But mainly it was the Legion all the time. That was the big spot, eh?

MMS - The downstairs there. There was some playing down in the Old Town too, was there, there was different house parties?

WS - Oh yeah, there was all kinds of house parties but that was only 2 or 3 people playing down there. I can't remember, I'm trying to think of the name here. He got married to a Kortie(?) girl, she was a red head. *Albert Canadien*, he was quite going in there, they had a band going at Akaitcho or wherever it was, so he was pretty well into that.

MMS - I talked with *Albert* right around the same time where he was talking about playing here in town and the different people and stuff. Also *Archie Loutitt* was another guy I talked to....

WS - Archie, they were our competition. That was *Archie* and *Marc Whitford*, that was always our competition, *Brian Lyons*.

MMS - So "Northbound Freeway"

WS - "Northbound Freeway" they were back to back with us all.

MMS - So we're still talking late '60's here?

WS - Yeah, late '60's, early '70's. Then *Alex Czarnecki*, he moved next door to me. And he knew that I was playing in a band, he said well I used to play in a band. They were just young squirts at that time, we thought the same way too. He says well I play sax and xylophone and stuff, sax, maybe we should get a band together. So, that's when *Tom Wickenheiser* came in. Tom and *Alex*, we had *Penny Aumond*, *Penny Ballantyne* she was too young to go into the bar or anything else but she played piano for us. She was good, we had no problem with her.

MMS - So there was enough players kicking around that there was enough to put a band together?

WS - Oh yeah, there was no problem. The thing was there was actually too many players, eh? Like, after *Penny (Aumond)* and *(Tom) Wickenheiser* left, we got *Glowach*...

MMS - Norm (Glowach)

WS - No, no, *Larry (Glowach)*. He was too young to go into the bars too at that time and stuff, we would have to sign him in and stuff like that to make sure he got no alcohol. But I think the biggest thing was we had a really, really big show and that was New Year's party at the, what the heck's that bar right across from where the Bay used to be, the Gallery and that's when we sort of had a professional outfit and that was good then. That was *Alex (Czarnecki)*, myself, *Larry (Glowach)* and Screamin' Demon, *Randy Demmon*, and we played for the New Year's deal. So he played with us for a while. That's when we started to get into a little bit of the rock and roll and the other stuff. What the heck did he play, the "Night Fever", no, it wasn't "Night Fever", it was some other thing. It was pretty rocking....

MMS - But you were still doing the old time stuff?

WS - Pretty well the old time stuff, *Randy (Demmon)* only played for a while and then he went and joined the RCMP. *Larry (Glowach)* left. At that time, we broke up, split up, but *Alex (Czarnecki)* and I were still together. So *Alex* and I we got *Henry Undheim* on the accordion and *Gary Tees* played Bass and *John Tees* played guitar and sang but we had *Lloyd Dahl* in with the bunch of us too. Before that yet, he played Bass for us and the thing was we played up at the Explorer hotel, this was *Henry Undheim*, myself, *Alex*, *Lloyd Dahl*. I forget who the Bass player was and anyway here we played for the AA party. I gotta tell you this, this is a good one. So you know how the AA party was and everything else, no alcohol, no nothing there. So it was just about supper time and they were going to have a big meal. So I says well, we got to finish it off and then we're going to have something to eat. So, the introduction to what the heck was the name of that High Wine piece, not High Wine something "In the sand" Doesn't matter! Anyway, the introduction went something (sings) *Lloyd* gets up and sings "Tiny Bubbles". The introduction was the same for both pieces. He started in with that at an AA meeting but they didn't notice, they didn't say anything. We played every Friday or a Saturday either at the Legion or the Elks so everything was pretty well the same.

MMS- Did you get to play out in the mines?

WS - Oh yeah, down at the Giant mine, played there quite a bit and Con, New Year's Eve, places like that. I can remember a fight out at Con on a New Year's night. There was an Italian and the German guys got together, they were after one another with tire irons. It was pretty serious stuff.

MMS - There used to be some pretty serious partying or dances or whatever out at that hall. If the walls in the Rec Hall could talk it would be pretty amazing.

WS - *John Tees* was good, he was excellent, like I taught him, both of them at the school anyway. I didn't teach Wayne (?) but I taught John pretty well how to play the guitar and stuff, he got better than I was anyway.

MMS - When you were picking the tunes to do in your band, I guess as different people came into the band they brought in their songs and you would learn those tunes.

WS - We tried to learn some stuff, we had a couple of real good girl singers. We had one of them as an addition to the band, eh? *Juliet Duncan*, she was a little French girl, small and pretty. Everybody loved her in the dance, "When the sun comes up....." that's what she brought in. Then we had, I forget what her name was but she was a secretary at St. Pats, she was blonde and she was a pretty good singer too and everything else and finally she married a Mountie in town here. But that's when we got the Abba pieces, "Take a chance, Take a chance" and "Fernando". And all those. So that's about the style we played in and we still played the polkas, *Henry Undheim* with his accordion and.....

MMS - He played around here for a lot of years, I grew up with his son, actually.

WS - He was a good accordion player. He's still playing, you know, He's playing in Fort Saskatchewan. See after everything split up, I quit, when "Night Fever" came out. I says, "this is bullshit, I'm finished!" I couldn't handle it. So that was it, my hands were bothering me anyway.

MMS - But the disco was too much?

WS - It was too much.

MMS - What year would that have been?

WS - I haven't got the faintest idea.

MMS - '75 or '77.

WS - That was the end of her. I played for a little while after it but I wouldn't.....

MMS - But you were still teaching at that time?

WS - Oh yeah, I taught 'til '88, in fact I taught 'til last year, to tell you the truth. I wasn't teaching full time, I was teaching on contract. So, that covers it.

MMS - That's a lot of history there.

WS - You know *Frank (Wouters)* he wasn't much of a drummer but he was always there you know. He always said *Fred Henne* needed that 10 dollars worse than anybody else. This is all the chords we used to do, it will give you an idea.

MMS - "Country Roads", "Never on a Sunday", Tango, lots of Paul Jones in there.

WS - That's some sets we used to do, eh? "Cotton Jenny" and

MMS - "The Beer Barrel Polka", "Delta Dawn", "Five Foot Two". Oh ya, all the hits!

WS - "Nickel Song", "Cheating Heart"

MMS - Some Beatles in there too. You have Latin, polka, swing, rock, waltz, fox trots, schottische, butterflies. Holy Smokes, that's a lot of music. That's great!

WS - sings, "Kansas City", "Midnight Mood"

MMS - Right on, so you hung onto the old song book there, that's great.

WS - Every once in a while, you would come up with a bloody chord that I didn't know so you would have to look it up.

MMS - That's great! You say you got some pictures of some of the old bands?

WS - Not really pictures. The real old, old ones from back in Saskatchewan, you know who's got tapes, I forgot to mention here. After Larry (*Glowach*) quit, we finally got a hold of *Normie* (*Norman Glowach*), that's where *Normie* fits in. He was way too young to go into the bar but we could get him in there, promise that we weren't going to get him any booze. And he got really, pretty good, in fact he lasted the longest of the whole bunch of us. So, I guess that's about it!

MMS - OK, I'll let you get back to work here.

WS - We have to take a load of bikes in here pretty quick and I said about 2:30

MMS - Enough talking. Thank you, Wilf.

WS - Hope I helped you out some.