

Johnny Landry

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MMS - It's February 1st, 2019. I'm sitting here with Johnny Landry. Johnny, thanks so much for doing this. If I could just start out and ask you when and where you were born and where you were raised?

JL - Like I was born at the mouth of the river by the lake, North Channel, by the Great Slave Lake, till I was six years old or something, and then we moved to town from there. Raised in the bush like, till six years old.

MMS - Living a traditional life?

JL - Yeah.

MMS - Can you talk about those years? Tell me about those earlier years, if you remember them, being raised on the land. Who was with you?

JL - Yeah, Like traveling to different time of the year, like fall time, when you shoot a moose, move there make dry meat. Move to where fishing places to make dry fish like that. Winter time, move to where we're going to stay all winter. Dad fishes. Everything was on the land. At the time, I don't think there was hardly, maybe there was stores but I wasn't allowed to go to town. I was young.

MMS - Would your parents or your relatives, I wouldn't say, go back and forth regularly but I guess if they had to-

JL - Yeah, for stuff that you needed and stuff like food, like tea, sugar, stuff like that, flour. Yeah.

MMS - Okay. Until you were six years old. And then your family moved into town.

JL - Yeah, I had to go to that mission. There was a mission there all the kids have to go in there. They go around, the priest goes around with the RCMP and make sure that, say you've got about three or four kids and if they're old enough, they got to go in there. Or else, you'd get charged or something like that. And so everybody has to move to a town and put their kids in there. So they put me in there when I was seven years old, till eight. Then I went to (Fort) Simpson for one year, too. Then I came back, nine and I stayed there till 15, 16 years old.

MMS - So, it wasn't a choice to move into town, it was the law.

JL - Yeah.

MMS - And your parents moved into town. Correct me if I'm wrong but that was so that you wouldn't have to stay at the residential school?

JL - Yeah.

MMS - You could live at home but you could go to school during the day and then just come back home at night.

JL - Yeah.

MMS - Okay. Transition must have been a little bit tough coming in off the land like that.

JL - One thing that really helped me is that first language I learned was my own language. I was writing songs and stuff like that and things like that. It kind of helped me work with the words, to understand the words and to say what you really, what you're saying with the language and the words. Kind of helped me because that was the first language I learned before English. Yeah.

MMS - When you were living out on the land, you were living with elders, your grandfathers and your grandmothers?

JL - Yeah, and my aunties. Yeah. My grandfather was always around.

MMS - And they would've been speaking the true dialect.

JL - Keeping you straight, talking to you about right and wrong and stuff like that. And positive, that was the thing.

MMS - The mission school, how was that?

JL - It was really hard because I only could talk my own language, Slavey and I couldn't talk English. It took a while to learn. But they never taught you how to talk English when they brought the learner to show you how to pray. Three prayers, Our Father, Hail Mary, and Glory Be to the Father. Those three prayers. It took me about one year or two years to learn that. It wasn't easy. Every time you did something wrong, you were punished and stuff like that. It was kind of hard for the start but till you know what's going on then you try to learn English so that you won't get hit no more.

MMS - That's a hell of a way to teach English, that's for sure.

JL - Yeah.

MMS - Big changes for you, those two things. And the other thing that I'm thinking of as well, even when you moved into town, the highway hadn't been put in there yet.

JL - No.

MMS - Can you remember when the highway went in and what kind of changes that brought to your community?

JL - It kind of opened a lot of things, the road. Maybe I was about 11, 12 years old when it happened. The stores, you had more. You could buy more. You could leave. You could go if you had vehicle. You could leave town if you want. Even now with the bridges, it gets more convenient because before, you were limited of going across that river. Now you could go 24 hours. It's different. That road was the same thing. You weren't only by boat or dog team.

MMS - The change. I'm thinking of people coming in from the outside but it would change the mindset of the people who are living in the community that way.

JL - Yeah.

MMS - Okay. Cool. How did music come into your life?

JL - My uncle was a song maker. Tea dance song maker. A lot of my uncles played guitar. We always had a guitar at home since I was a kid. I was trying to learn how to play it. I used to watch my uncle sing and play guitar. It was always there. At Christmas time, everybody'd get together and they used to sing. I used to watch them. My uncle was a song maker, like a tea dance song maker. He used to always come and sing. Yeah.

MMS - Good influences to have there from both sides. Like you say, your uncles who were the tea dance song makers...

JL - That song, like "Hinana Hoho" that's how they kind of helped me, like what it really means. "Hinana Hoho Hine" means we're the survivors of our people. Everything was so simple back then. It wasn't so complicated, you know what I mean, like now. It kind of helped me to do those things with music like that. Like, the stories, the values, those were values that I learned. Later on, that's how I wrote the songs, is from those values that I learned. The stories from all the songs I wrote is from values. Dene values like helping, respecting, loving each other and stuff like that.

MMS - So you were probably one of the last generations of young people to probably have that grounding in a traditional lifestyle before you moved into town. I mean, not even so much being born in town and going out on the land, you were out on the land and you came into town. The fundamentals were definitely imprinted on you at an early age. In those early years in Fort Providence, early and mid 1960s, can you describe a little bit about what was going on there?

JL - Mostly I was going to school, going to Fort Smith, like that. The queen went there in 1967 or something like that. As soon as they had that band there, "The Centennaires," *Tom Hudson* and them, that was a big inspiration to me when I was just young. To see them play, it inspired me like to, that's when I kind of started playing music more and trying to learn more from different people.

MMS - Did you have a guitar in hand by that point in time?

JL - Yeah. I had a guitar and everything.

MMS - Were you playing...

JL - It was acoustic, we were learning. Then we went to (Fort) Smith, and I was about 15, 16, and we used to play in a band there with some boys from Dettah and from Ndilo and another guy from (Fort) Providence.

MMS - But in that time before you left for school in Fort Smith and stuff, were you playing with other young people or other people in town?

JL - Just mostly learning.

MMS - Just learning. Yeah.

JL - Mostly learning how to strum and learning chords and trying to learn songs. Mostly *Hank Williams*. Those kind of singers.

MMS - From your uncle, your uncles?

JL - Yeah.

MMS - And who else would've been in the community playing? Do you remember the names?

JL - Other people that sang. You used to go watch square dance. After they have a square dance, they have a little break and someone used to sing *Hank Williams* songs. You'd see and watch how they play the chords and stuff like that. I mean, trying to learn, eh?

MMS - Early YouTube.

JL - Yeah.

MMS - Do you remember the other players? Who would've been the players that were playing the square dances and in the community at the time?

JL - My Uncle *Mitch (Landry)* used to be a square dance caller. There's another, *Albert Sambele* used to play fiddle. Different guys playing guitar. And in between break, some people used to sing. There's no microphone. There's no amplifier. Nothing. Just two guitars and a fiddle.

MMS - Was there electricity in the community at that time?

JL - No.

MMS - When did electricity finally get there?

JL - Maybe about the late '60s, I guess around there.

MMS - You weren't playing any electric guitars there until after.

JL - No. Just acoustic.

MMS - Okay. A lot of country and square dances. Right?

JL - And different bands. You know like that singer, *Smiling Johnny*, singers like that used to come around once a year from down South somewhere. They used to do shows. That music ...

MMS - What was the guy's name?

JL - *Smiling Johnny* or something. He came from Saskatchewan somewhere down that way. He used to come up with a band. Him and his wife and a guitar player.

MMS - Wow.

JL - *Wilf Carter*, I seen them when I was just a kid when they came up long time ago.

MMS - *Wilf Carter* came up here?

JL - Yeah. When I was just a kid. I say about 10, 11 years old.

MMS - Holy smokes. I'll have to check that one out. Yeah. You're really the first person. I ask people if they've-

JL - Yeah. And then they played in the school. They had two guitar players. One was *Peter Lafferty* played guitar with them. And then *Danny McDonald* or something like that, another guy was playing guitar. He had two of them with him.

MMS - Wow. That would've been inspiring.

JL - Yeah.

MMS - Man. That's really something. I'll have to check on that. There's not a lot of musicians that talk about musicians coming up here.

JL - I know. It was in the school too, when I was just a kid. My uncle used to go the Akaitcho Hall. He used to play in a band. They called it "Arctic Ramblers". He used to sing. Uncle *Tiny*. (*Leon Thomas*)

MMS - Okay. That was *Richard Lafferty* was in this band.

JL - Yeah, *Richard Lafferty*.

MMS - And *Nick Sibbetston*.

JL - And *Walter Doctor*. All those guys that were in there.

MMS - Yeah. *Alfred Lockhart* might have been in there, as well. Yeah, that was a pretty cool little group that was happening there at that time. I just managed to talk to *Richard (Lafferty)* about that a little bit.

Yeah, pretty neat what was happening at Akaitcho Hall. Before you left for Fort Smith, you were just basically like you say, just practicing, learning.

JL - Yeah.

MMS - You weren't necessarily out playing at any of the square dances.

JL - No.

MMS - At the same time, were the tea dances still strong with you at that time, as well?

JL - Yeah.

MMS - Even at that time, how did you get your music? Was it just from radio, or was there LP records...

JL - I think it was a dream. For me, it was a dream. When I was about four or five years old, I had a dream where I was singing. Everybody was holding hands and yelling at me saying, "Johnny, don't stop. Don't stop." But I couldn't hear what I was singing. I was drawn towards music like I was drawn towards it. The more I played, the more I could, it kind of opened my eyes and my ears and my mind. I was driven towards it through the dream. I dreamt of what I was going to do when I was about four or five years old.

MMS - Wow. That's a beautiful thing. Like a vision of what you were going to be doing.

JL - Yeah.

MMS - That's a gift. That's a gift, for sure. The music around you besides the live playing, if there was "new music" coming out, were you getting it from the radio or was there-

JL - Records, radio.

MMS - Okay. You had a record player in the family and stuff like that?

JL - Yeah.

MMS - Listening to a lot of country. A lot of country stuff.

JL - Yeah.

MMS - And the radio, were you able to tune in to Memphis and all of those different places?

JL - Yeah. Oh, yeah. That's where we all learned those old rock and roll songs. Yeah.

MMS - You get old enough to go to another school outside of Fort Providence. What grade or age would that have been that you had to make that choice?

JL - I was in grade 9.

MMS - Grade 9. Okay. So, high school age. You would've had a choice to go to Akaitcho Hall, which was running at that time, or to Fort Smith. You went to Fort Smith. Is there any reason why you chose that?

JL - Because, everybody was going there. All the boys from (Fort) Providence were going there. There was a place to go. A lot of them went to Akaitcho Hall.

MMS - As far as the majority of young people making the choice to go to Fort Smith, was there a particular reason? Was it a programming thing that was going on there or was it a warmer place to go?

JL - Hockey and stuff like that.

MMS - Okay.

JL - It was good. I spent about two, three years there.

MMS - What was the music scene like in Fort Smith? Because Fort Smith at that time was in competition with Yellowknife to be the capital, so it was a pretty jumping little place. But, what was the music scene like there?

JL - It was pretty wild there. The hostel where we stayed, that supervisor was *Robert Beaulieu*. He played drums. They had a band in town. Like once a month they have a battle of the bands in the school. Maybe about 10 bands in town. *Randy Daniels* and all those boys, like *Leonard Desjarlais* and all those boys. *Danny Bodvarson*. A lot of bands. We had our own band, too. Grandin College had their own band. 10 bands and once a month. Yeah. Battle of the bands.

MMS - Battle of the bands once a month. Wow.

JL - That was cool because we used to practice.

MMS - I would say.

JL - About four or five songs.

MMS - Yeah, get them real good so they could get ready. It's good incentive to practice, that's for sure. You were able to practice right in the hall?

JL - Yeah, they gave us a place where we could practice. It was good. Yeah, they kinda help you with music.

MMS - Did the college supply the drums and everything else?

JL - Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah. Some people had their own. Their own guitars and some had their own amps.

MMS - You would've been introduced to the electric guitar then probably at that time, right?

JL - Yeah. *Leandre Beaulieu* was there.

MMS - Yes, indeed. Yeah.

JL - When he was young he was a really good guitar player.

MMS - He still is.

JL - About 16, 17 years old. You know what I mean? That's all he did all day. He played.

MMS - That's a beautiful thing, for sure. Did you jump on the electric guitar?

JL - I played bass. I learned how, they needed a bass player. I was playing rhythm for them first time and then I learned how to play bass. Played bass about three years with those boys. Different players.

MMS - Yeah, you mentioned some of them there. *Allen Daniels* and *Danny Bodvarson*. I think at that point in time, *Pat Burke* and *Tom Hudson* were probably up Akaitcho Hall.

JL - Yeah, they were over here.

MMS - Yeah. That's interesting. That whole thing of people going away and just coming back.

JL - They usually go over there and play sometimes, like for school dances, grad or stuff like that.

MMS - The guys from Akaitcho would come down.

JL - "Stained Glass Illusion"

MMS - So, they would come down to Fort Smith and play. That's good. They used to do a lot more of that back in those days than they do now, that's for sure.

JL - Yeah.

MMS - I'm still amazed at how they would just think nothing of booking a band for the weekend and chartering an airplane and you're on your way. But yeah, that doesn't quite happen. That sounds like a pretty exciting place to be as a young person, listening to music.

JL - Oh. Yeah.

MMS - The names of some of the other guys that you were playing with again? Sorry. In that band in Fort Smith.

JL - It was *Leandre (Beaulieu)* and there's *Ernie Lafferty*. He played drums. *Morris Martin* played lead guitar. He's from Dettah or somewhere. *George Goulet* played rhythm. *Morris Nadli* sang.

MMS - Oh, wow.

JL - *Leandre (Beaulieu)* used to play lead guitar. *Victor Constant*, he used to sing, too.

MMS - Do you remember what kind of songs you'd do? What songs-

JL - "CCR", (Credence Clearwater Revival). All those songs.

MMS - The guitar instrumental groups, "The Ventures", like you were saying?

JL - Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah.

MMS - Cool. Any women playing or singing or girls that were into singing?

JL - When we were in school, I never hardly seen, hardly any girls singing. Just lately. Just lately they start coming out.

MMS - I managed to find a couple. And maybe a couple more. I'll have 4 out of maybe 30 or 32 or whatever. But yeah, very few women that way, I guess.

JL - It's 'cause it's really hard. That's why. It's the hardest thing I ever done in my life. It is. It's not just like that. It's commitment. You've got to change. You've got to change and be positive. Change your life around if you want to keep on going. You've got to change. Sometimes I think it's impossible. The music, sometimes. All of a sudden you have to practice and work at it, work at it and then you get it. You don't just play it like that. You've got to earn every little note that you gonna play or a word. It's got to be earned. It's not easy.

MMS - It wasn't easy for you and you had...

JL - I had to change my life. I had to stay away from alcohol and stuff like that. Change back to positive. I'm lucky that I had a good woman and family that supported me and helped me, you know what I mean, while I was doing it. It wasn't just like that. There was a lots of up and down. Sometimes you think you just feel like quitting and not gonna play no more.

MMS - Been there. Lots.

JL - But the music helps me positive. That's the thing I learned from it. All the things I have, the music taught me that I had to earn it. The music taught me that. Whatever you put in, that's what you're gonna get out of it. You don't put nothing, you don't get nothing.

MMS - That's the bottom line right there. The cardinal rule.

JL - That's right. Yeah. It's how it is. Some people can't take that. You've got to work.

MMS - Especially these days, where everything is instant and easy and accessible.

JL - Yeah, it is.

MMS - And comfort thing and all the rest of that stuff. As you said before, it doesn't come that easy. It's a lot of work. But those lessons, like you say, can be pretty much applied to anywhere else.

JL - It kind of helped me too, the music, to stay positive. It helped me. Trying to figure out things, the more positive you are, it's easier, just figure out the music.

MMS - It sort of swings around both ways that way, too. Where I find if I don't play, I get really grumpy.

JL - Oh, yeah. Me, if I don't play, I go back down. I got to get myself back up here again. That's why I try to do it almost every day. In the morning, the first thing I do everything around the house then I get on the music. Working on songs. Got to stay on top of it if I want to finish it. You've got to keep on it. I start early, first thing in the morning 'cause when my mind's so fresh. Do about two, three hours of it. But sometimes, you get right into it and the time just flies. You don't know, sometimes it's twelve o'clock. You know what I mean?

MMS - Yeah. I know. I know exactly what you mean. For sure. When you were in school in Fort Smith, did you get a chance to go back home to Fort Providence for holidays?

JL - Oh, yeah. Christmas time, yeah. Summertime.

MMS - Did you play when you were back home?

JL - I went back home, I played with *Ernie Constant*, *Louie (Constant)*, his brother. Used to play in the bar there. Played bass for them. I was just learning how to sing then, just like harmony or singing along. That's all I did till later on I got into singing. Like after from school, I went back home then. That's when *Ernie* was there and *Ernie* moved here with (Yellowknife) with (GNWT Dept. of) Highways. That's when *Albert Canadien* came back. We started playing. But we never played in public for a long time, for many year. Learning songs. He said him (*Albert Canadien*) he went to singing school when he was in the States. I told him, "You should teach me how to sing." He said, "Well, just sing what I'm singing." That's how I learned to sing. It was from him.

MMS - Okay.

JL - Played in the band with him for about 10 years. Along the way, played with different people. Come play with like *Herbie Lafferty*, he played lead for us a couple times. *Tony Buggins*. And *Bill Carpenter*, that guy from Toronto.

MMS - I'm working my way up to that time here. When you went back home, and even going through school in Fort Smith, this is the one observation I have, *Tony Buggins* and I talk about this. The music was changing really fast. Rock and roll and electric guitar and guitar instrumentals. And around that time, mid '60s, late '60s and stuff like that. I ask how they kept up on those changes and whether they tried to learn the different styles of music. I guess they would have to. The different bands coming up and its "popular music," so that's what people wanted to hear at dances. Did you guys stick pretty much with the country music?

JL - Mostly rock and roll. Like "The Ventures" and ...

MMS - "Beatles" material?

JL - Yeah, "Beatles", like that. All the stuff like that. "Time Won't Let Me", "Pushing Too Hard", all those songs like that. Yeah. All those songs. "Beach Boys". We used to order records and write the songs down. That's how we used to do it.

MMS - Oh, okay. You'd be ordering records through mail order.

JL - They were only about four something a record at that time.

MMS - Through Hudson Bay?

JL - Yeah. Through mail. Used to write them down. *Robert Beaulieu* played drums. He was the supervisor there. But he helped us. He played in a different band too with *Tony Buggins* and *Phillip Constant* and *Ricky Mandeville*. They had a real good band, so he'd kind of help us. Encouraged us to play, like you know what I mean, to practice, how to play music, how to play together. So he kind of helped us, too.

MMS - Right on. So it wasn't just a music teacher up there trying to beat it into you. You had your peers in your age group there too, helping you along the way.

JL - Yeah. Helping you out.

MMS - Beautiful. Very cool. So when you finished school in Fort Smith, what did you do after that?

JL - I went to work. I worked down South for a while. I never played music. I just worked. Worked in (Fort) Simpson for about seven, eight years. Then I moved back home in the '80s, early '80s and started working there and playing music.

MMS - So you weren't playing music when you were down South.

JL - No. I had a guitar, but I never ... Just to myself, I just played.

MMS - Practiced that way.

JL - Yeah.

MMS - How about in (Fort) Simpson? Were you able to play with any..

JL - No, never but I used to go back home and play with *Ernie (Constant)* and the boys. Go back home and play with them. Like in the "Snowshoe Inn". We played there.

MMS - So now we've caught up to that time where you were talking about. I think, is it around this time that *Albert Canadien* came back to town?

JL - Yeah.

MMS - You're also very well known for writing and singing in your language, which is South Slavey, yes?

JL - Mm-hmm (affirmative).

MMS - What events helped or inspired you to write and sing in your language?

JL - As I was learning more about music, as I was learning more about it and I was listening to my uncle's songs and things like that, listening to elders. I was learning what all the words, what it meant. What the word really means. As I learned music and I learned how to put those together, the first song was "Hinana Hoho Hine". It's a simple song but it took me over one year to put that together. I mean, it wasn't just ... I went as I learned music, then I learned from *Albert (Canadien)* and stuff like that and from *Bill (Carpenter)* and stuff like that. Learned how the music works. Learned my scales and all that stuff like that from them. I went to school, playing music same time.

MMS - But at the same time, when you were growing up and playing all of that popular music, how much were you singing in your own language in those early years? Where you singing at all in South Slavey or was it all English?

JL - Yeah. Just in parties, I used to sing in my language. We had songs before. But people were really, it's like you weren't allowed. They were kind of scared to say things in their language because before, you couldn't talk your language. You know what I mean? When I first started, when I got to that place where I started writing songs in my language, there was nobody there. Just only me. So, there was no certain way that I had to do it. There was nobody there. I just used elders and my wife and us. I write a song or work on songs, work on something and then tell them, "What do you think?"

MMS - So there was nobody else that was doing it that you went, "Hey, I can do that, too," and then do it your own way. Again, that brings it up to the next one. Who are the elders or the musicians or the writers that inspired you to write and sing in your language?

JL - Like *Albert Canadien*, those guys. *Bill Carpenter* like that, kind of encouraged me, "You should write songs in your own language. I'll teach you how to write songs." My elders, too. The stories that they're telling, they were losing them. The young people weren't listening to them. So, that's what he said, "Try to write a song with the stories." There's different ways we could use. Even right now, I'm working on a song where he says, "Write a song where he's praying." So, I wrote a song, "Creator, Help me to be a Good Person." And he's singing and he's praying at the same time. Then this other elder told me, "*Georgie Jones (George Jones)* wrote songs about drinking. Why don't you write a song in Slavey about to stop drinking?" So I wrote a song in Slavey. I'll be recording it pretty soon.

MMS - Beautiful.

JL - That's mostly from elders. They give you words. Sometimes, especially in my language, I get to where I can't go on, I can't go on no more. It comes to be a hard place and I had to leave it alone for a while. I go visit elders and they got the words. They got that one word that I need. But I got to sit there and listen. I go out in the bush. I go camping and I go hunting, whatever, just to get that inspiration where the story's coming from. Go to that place and try to imagine how did those guys do it when they had nothing compared to now? Then you really understand what he's talking about when he's talking, that elder and you understand. Mostly values. It's just like the 10 commandments. It's the same thing. Everything is for out on the land, to preserve the land. That's how it is. All the things that I learn is mostly protecting the land and the woman and children and your language and your way of life. That's what it was. The values. That's what I learned. That's how I wrote songs. And even the river, for the river, that song was banned from us in the beginning, in the 1700s. Bringing that song back.

MMS - There's still people who are carrying that song.

JL - Yeah.

MMS - From a long time ago.

JL - Like before, they couldn't sing it because it was banned. You can't sing it. It was against the law. You know what I mean?

MMS - But it was still passed on in the oral tradition that way. Even though people weren't able to sing it in public or anything like that, the song was still being carried forward. Is that the only song? There must be other songs.

JL - There must be more songs. But you got to learn the history and stories of the people. What they done. Especially their way of life and their language. Everything like their songs. The one thing I learned too, is while I was learning all the stories and I was learning about myself, about being Dene and stuff like that, the one thing they did was that the connection we have is through dreamers. As we call them "naté", that has a connection up there, to him. And what they did was that when they first came said, "You don't believe in your dream." They don't want you to believe in your dream because that's your connection to the Creator up there. So, that you won't believe in yourself." So when you get out of that mission, they want you to think that you're a white man. Think like a white man. Not like Dene. That connection was taken off to the Creator up there. That's an elder that told me, he said when he was in there, he said, "No, people that work for God, they don't do things like that." That's what he said. They made him a different kind of person. Today, he has a hard time because of things like that. They brainwashed them. He had a connection before to believe in himself. That's what helped me to do what I did. I had to believe in myself, who I am. That's by praying, kind of helped me to, kind of guided me. Try to keep on that, even though it's hard to keep on that road. Being positive makes it easier. I found out that we don't come from negative. We come from positive. That's where we come from. We don't come from there. Once you know that, you could get out. Once you get out, you could a lot of things. You could see. Positive, opens your eyes and your ears, your mind.

MMS - Not only for yourself, but for other people like you're just describing, who are having a really hard time because that connection's been broken. You're so fortunate to have that place. You have the river is there. You have the land, for the most part that is, in the same condition that it was when your ancestors were on it. And like you say, you can go back to those places and touch them. They're there. You can experience that, I guess the power that's in those places or the history as well, to help you to feel grounded and stuff. So yeah, very fortunate to have that in the place where you live. I would imagine there's lots of places where even if they have the desire to get back to that place, it's gone. It's paved over or it's a condominium or something like that. Can you tell me a little bit about, I call them, we call them songwriters, you call them song makers of your people. Can you tell me a little more about that?

JL - He had 24 songs, my uncle. He had the song for Aboriginal Day. Like when I used to remember, just young, that they used to gather June 21st. They had a song for the sun, too. He had about 24 songs. He knew that's what I was going to do. He knew when I was just about five, six years old. When he sang, he always wanted me to be beside him. Then when his oldest daughter got married, he told his older daughter that he's got 24 songs and he's got it from the fire, from the fireplace, feeding fire and praying

like that. That's where he got it from heaven, those songs. He said that, "If nobody's singing my songs, my songs are all going to go away." He said, "But my brother's son is going to carry on the singing." That was me that he was talking about. To carry on the Dene songs. "My brother's son is going to do that." He knew.

So every time he came to town, he always lived in the bush. He never moved to town then until he got really old. Every time he sang, he always wanted me beside him. "Come over here. Sit over here." He always tells me that. And then he sang. He always wanted me to, "Listen to what I'm singing." One of the songs I wrote, "Undaa Gogha" that's one of the first songs I wrote. That was from in a dream that he was talking to me in a dream. He told me that, "I can't help you if you're drinking. You've got to stay away from alcohol if you want me to help you." He taught me how to feed fire and how to pray. How to stop. He said, "Just ask me to help you and I'll help you. I could help you with music."

So I told him, "Why did you make songs?" He said, "I made the songs to lift up the spirit of the people." I told him, "What kind of song could I write so I could help them?" And he said, "(Slavey language). It means that if we all help each other for the future, things might change. So, I wrote that song, "Undaa Gogha". "Undaa Gogha" means for the future, let's all help each other. I wrote that song, that first song I wrote. If I'm in a dream, those things kind of came to me as I was straightening out my life. Trying to work on the good road, learning how and being positive. All these things start to kind of click in what they're saying, what they mean. You've got to figure out what the elder tells you something, you've got to figure it out yourself. Nobody's going to tell you this is what he means.

In your lifetime, as you're going through your experience of life, you're gonna figure it out. Oh, yeah, this is.... Like even the last, about four years, I learned that you can't hit a woman or argue or talk back to a woman. That was a Dene value. And here, they're wanting to hit our women when they first came here. It's not right. We lost our value. Right now, I'm working on trying to write a song about women, about don't hit women. Things like that. That's the things we've got to learn. It kind of makes me try harder to write a better song to help them. The things that they forgot, like the values that's going to help them in their life. Especially don't hit women or argue with them or don't talk back to women. That was a Dene value. It was ours. It's not the white man's one. And someone made us to forget it. We've got to relearn. Maybe through music we could kinda help them, too. Get back on track.

MMS - Or at least, like you say, there can be one part of it there to remind people and to help them back, to remember.

JL - Yeah. To remember things that we lost along the way. It's like that. It's not perfect. You know what I mean?

MMS - No. Thanks for that. One last question just about your uncle, and the songs, and the 24 songs. He wanted him beside you him when he was singing those songs and just the repetition and all the rest of that stuff. It's probably playing back in your subconscious there all the time. But it wasn't as if he, correct me if I'm wrong, did he actually sit down and teach you the songs, make you sing the songs back in the standard or conventional way that we think about learning a song?

JL - No, he just told me to sit down and listen. Never told me to sing. But the other songs I learned, like that river song, like "Deh K'ero", I had to do that with an elder. I had to sing back to him to be sure that I was singing it right. I had to do that. It took me six months to learn that song and what every word

means. I went to school with an elder every day and almost every night I'd buy some tobacco for him and go and visit him. He always says, "Johnny, there's a dance at the bar. Everybody's going over there. How come you want to listen to old stories? You should go down there to the bar where everybody's having a good time. Here you are listening to old stories."

MMS - Okay. Thanks for that. We'll let that go then. Well, maybe it's all related...

JL - It kind of helped me to, the music, it kind of helped me to open my ears, too. You know like, to listen. That was the only way I could learn. I didn't know how to write music. But I learned by ear. So it made my ears, I could hear things some other people can't hear. You know what I mean? It helped me that way too, to listen to what my wife talked to me.

MMS - Don't let her hear that one. Yeah.

JL - And what I found out too is that, you know the Dene, the language has lots of humour. That's a funny thing about it. It makes you laugh and laugh and laugh. And when we played music, it was laughing, it was a lot of laughing because it was a lot of humor in the language. It was fun.

MMS - I've had this kind of a discussion with *Jesse Gon*, *David's (Gon)* younger brother. He would be speaking T'licho and to me it was just magic, musical. The words have this flow, they have this phrasing, but they also have notes. It's the same thing with yourself. I find languages, other than English, maybe German which is a pretty succinct kind of a language, I'm sure there's others. But for the most part, foreign languages, they have this musical context or sound to them that we don't have in the English language. Some people do. But I find in the Indigenous languages it's just, I can turn on the radio in the afternoon and just listen to the sound of the language. I don't understand a damn thing. It's country music but it's just the sound of your language being spoken.

JL - The one thing that when I went to *Randall Prescott* one time, I went to recording down there in the studio. There was a guy there. I don't know what was his name. He works in the studio. He does harmony like that. When I was singing those songs the Creator helped me, he knew what I was singing about just by the feeling of the song. He knew what I was singing. When I went down there, he knew. He asked me and I said, "You're right." He knew it just by the feeling.

MMS - Wow.

JL - It kind of shocked me. Holy smokes. He said, "This is a really powerful song. This is about the Creator, eh?" He said that to me. It was "Creator, Help Me to Be a Good Person." That's what it means. He knew just by the feeling. I didn't have to explain to him.

MMS - But he knew because it was coming through you but you were obviously, I was going to say kudos to you. Because, I mean, you obviously delivered that whole thing even without him understanding your language, he was able to pick up on that.

JL - Yeah. *Dana Cross* is like that, the things I'm doing with him now, he gets hooked on there too, sometimes. There's some songs, he kind of relates to it. It's true. What he feels. It's what that song means. Even the love song, I wrote that song from the old lady. I told him, "What do you sing about when you say, (sings) you know that love song they sing? Those old ladies? They're singing about their

husband hunting. She's by herself and she's singing about him. She misses him and she feels lonely when he's gone. They live from the land, that's why he has to hunt. I hope he gets something. She prays that nothing happens to him. She loves him with all her heart. I wrote a song out of that.

MMS - It's like you were saying before, the difference between prayer and song is pretty faint there sometimes and sort of moves around a little bit that way.

JL - Yeah.

MMS - When you're doing these songs that come from legends or come from a very old and deep place, how do you know when it's okay to go out and perform them, to record them? Is there a permission that you have to sort of get, or blessing of kind?

JL - Kinda work, I work for it. I work on it till I feel comfortable enough I think, I could do it now. I mean, that takes me a while, like maybe six months. Depends how much I work on it.

MMS - So, it's not so much permission has to come from outside or blessing. It's you know it inside yourself when...

JL - I work for it and then put it out.

MMS - Wow. Beautiful thing.

JL - All the songs I wrote, I worked with them. I never wrote them just like that. It never happened like that. Every song I wrote, I had to work for it.

MMS - Yeah. Okay.

JL - Some longer, some year, some one year, some six months. Sometimes I leave them, I go back to them later on. I've got maybe 30 something songs. 39 songs, 37 songs. I've got some more ideas. I'm going to write some more songs too of what happened and trying to work on stuff like that. Try to do it like with up with today's music, maybe a little bit of rap or maybe rock and roll, so the young people know what happened or what's going on.

MMS - Yeah, use some of the modern sounds.

JL - Yeah. With the modern beat and whatever.

MMS - I mean, you were almost, I can remember back to the mid '80s, and you had come out with "Hinana Hoho Hine" and "We Are Standing". It was on a 45, and there was these synthesized sounds and electronic drums. I was going, "Holy smokes. This is incredible." And you singing in your language. How did that all come about and who were you working with?

JL - With *Bill Carpenter* ... I played in a band with him for four years. The last two years, that's what I did was, went where he lived and he showed me how to write songs. That time we were using cassettes. We were using two cassettes. We were jumping them, using electric drummer. He showed me how to write songs and how long they should be. For two years, we were working on it. After that, that's when I

wrote those songs. It took me about two years. Changing them and listening to it and changing it. Didn't like the way it sounds, change it. Things like that. And he showed me how. How to dissect your song, write it down. Don't like it, you could change it.

Positive. People don't like to hear negative. So I was writing a song called "Mother Earth". At one part, I said, "When are they going to stop destroying Mother Earth?" I changed it to, "When are they ever going to see the beautiful Mother Earth?" Instead of saying that, changed things like that. I learned. As you go along, you learn. Every time you listen to your song, in your mind you think that I could write a better one. It kind of inspires, you inspire yourself by listening to yourself sometimes. To drive you to write a better song.

MMS - Yeah. For sure.

JL - Right now, that's what I'm trying to work on is trying to write a country song, if I could do that.

MMS - Just for the challenge.

JL - Yeah. Challenge myself.

MMS - And learn. Yeah. What kind of work was *Bill (Carpenter)* doing when he was in Fort Providence?

JL - He was doing music. He was teaching music in the school there.

MMS - He was a music teacher.

JL - Yeah.

MMS - Okay.

JL - He had a music degree.

MMS - So, they had a music teacher there in the early '80s.

JL - That teacher was there, you know *Tyler Hawkins*?

MMS - Yes.

JL - Him, too. He was there, too.

MMS - Oh, okay.

JL - After *Bill (Carpenter)*.

MMS - I didn't realize-

JL - I played music with him, too. He was a classical guitar player, man. We played in a band together, me and him. Learned lots from him too, music.

MMS - It sounds like between, right around that time anyways, in the early '80s up to the mid '80s, *Albert Canadien* had come back. So you were getting a hit from *Albert*, and you were working with him plus *Bill Carpenter* was in town. So, it was-

JL - Yeah, we all had a band together. We had a real good band.

MMS - Oh, is that right?

JL - Yeah. *Bill Carpenter*, me, *Albert Canadien*, and *Louie Constant*.

MMS - Wow.

JL - And everybody sang. We had to sing all your scale. You've got to sing on your scale. That's what we'd practice at night. We used to hang around together. The one rule that *Albert Canadien* had was no drinking when you're practicing and no drinking on the stage. There was a rule. That's how we played. That was pretty good, too. It was lots of fun.

MMS - That sounds like quite the band. You get a chance to record any of that? I imagine you would have, eh?

JL - I think some of them, yeah.

MMS - Live recordings? Good for you. Yeah. That was a time, for sure. You were working with *Bill (Carpenter)*, and you're working on your song writing. How did the opportunity to record the 45 come through?

JL - *Ethel Blondin-Andrew*, like, she got some money from somewhere to record those four songs. We went to Ottawa, no, Toronto to record it with *Bill Carpenter*. Me and him. Hired different musicians. Had to hire that steel guitar player. Someone just approached me about that song, the first song, that "K e' aq". That one with the steel guitar on there. That song says, "Let's go back." He wants to use it for pollution. Things like that, so that we could go back to the way we were and start cleaning up. Time you leave, you camp, you clean up. Things like that. You know what I mean? In all the songs that I wrote before, now they're all coming alive now because a lot of people they start to understand what I'm saying, what I'm singing about.

MMS - Yep. And how important it is now. It was important back then but yeah. I understand for sure. Right around that time, you were recording. We're in the mid '80s. You've got your 45 out. You were obviously playing. Again, you were playing in a band with *Bill (Carpenter)* and with *Albert (Canadien)*. What live playing or performing opportunities were happening for you at that time in the mid '80s?

JL - We went to Midway Lake in the '80s. That was the first one at Midway Lake. Went to Inuvik. Played in Inuvik, too. With those young boys in that picture you have there. You know those young boys?

MMS - Yeah.

JL - They're from Meander (River), those boys. They're called "The Midnight Drifters", those boys. Hooked up with them and we started playing together. Playing all those songs like that. Traveling, going

to (Fort) Rae. Playing all over the place. (Fort) Wrigley. We still go there. We still play there. Like when they have hand game tournaments. We still go and play with them. Like Slavey songs, like that. Then they really understand. It's slowly picking up. The music, some places I go, some guys are, start to get into the music, in their own language and it's good. It's an inspiration. You just got to go there and show them it's not impossible. It's possible. You know what I mean? All you've got to do is work for it. That's all. It's not free. You've got to work at it.

MMS - Again, when you started talking about doing this, you said there was nobody else doing this. It wasn't as if you heard somebody and you went on and said, "I'm going to sing just like he does or she does, in his own or her own language." But, the people that you're talking about, that you're sort of a role model for them. I'm sure you are even for the *Gon* brothers (*David and Jesse*) that way, or were, for them to be singing in their Tlicho language, as well. That's a very cool thing to have happening. The one example that *Jesse Gon* talks about is when "Kashtin" came out, it just exploded. They're singing in Montagnais and it's like nobody up here understands Montagnais. But still, it was such good music. He talks about the summer that album came out and that was just huge for him.

JL - Even *Ernest Monias*. Inspiration to a lot of people.

MMS - Yep. For sure. What other playing opportunities did you have in the mid '80s?

JL - We went down to Cape Breton with *Louie Goose*. Went down there with, and *Louie Gordon*, *David Gon* played down there for 10 days. We went to PEI with *George Tuccaro*, *Lee Mandeville*, his dad, (*George Mandeville*) and played over there, too.

MMS - Nice.

JL - Where else? We went to Expo '86 too, with *Albert Canadien*, me, *Bill Carpenter*, and a drummer. We hired a drummer.

MMS - You went down there with that band.

JL - Yeah.

MMS - What time of year, what month were you down there?

JL - July.

MMS - Okay.

JL - That was pretty cool. That was good.

MMS - I'm sorry I missed that. I was there in May and June. I was there for almost a month.

JL - Oh, yeah?

MMS - With two different groups. That was sort of toward the end of May or the beginning of June. I think it was kind of early on in the whole Expo experience. I think you guys landed right in the middle of it.

JL - Yeah.

MMS - That would've been summer holidays and international travelers and stuff like that.

JL - Yeah. People just come running. Yeah.

MMS - Beautiful.

JL - Yeah, had lots of fun there. It was pretty wild.

MMS - Yeah, I did, too. It was a good thing to have happen there. Coming back from that in the mid '80s, and '86, and the different playing that you were doing, I guess we're moving into the '90s. You got a chance to play with *Kole Crook*.

JL - Mm-hmm (affirmative).

MMS - Can you tell me a bit about how that came to be?

JL - He was about 19 or 17 when I met him. He played fiddle. He kept on coming over and started practicing with him. He said, "Let's go travel down to Sahtu, down there, Tulita, those places." So one winter, we put a band together. We went down there. Went to Tulita first. Then went to (Fort) Good Hope two nights. Two nights in Norman Wells, then back. Then two nights in Deline and came back. That's when he started his fiddling, *Kole Crook* Fiddling Association, whatever. That's when they first started it, by helping. Some communities, we'd stop and teach fiddle. So, helping music chord for him, help him to teach kids. Went there a couple times me and him, mostly playing. We went up there twice, I think. We went up two winters in a row, went up there and played.

MMS - This was when he was in his late teens or early 20s.

JL - Yeah. 20. 19, 20. That guy could play, man. Holy smokes. I never ever seen a fiddle player like that. The guy could play. Square dance, anything. It was pretty wild man, when we went up there. This one place, it was between Norman Wells and (Fort) Good Hope, on the winter road when we were going up there. The first time I'd ever been up there. There's a big space there, where the winter road goes between there. We had an old man with us from Tulita. Told him, "What was that?" It was a big beaver dam. When the giant broke that beaver dam there, it happened Noah's Ark on the other side of the river, of the world. The music brought me all to different people, different elders like that telling me different things about music or about the land and stuff like that, things like that.

MMS - That sounds like between you and *Kole (Crook)*. I didn't get to know him as well as I could've or should've but it seemed that was very much his way of life.

JL - Yeah. He was real good in the bush that guy. Could do anything. Fix moose hide. Anything. Yeah.

MMS - And go and chop wood and haul water for elders.

JL - Lived in the bush by himself. He done everything by himself.

MMS - A pack sack and a fiddle.

JL - Yeah. He never took money. He never hardly take money from anybody. That kind of guy. We used to go and play, used to give him money, he'd just give his money away to kids. When kids are around, give them all \$20 each. He said, "All I need is about \$100 for something. That's all. Just for tea, sugar, whatever. That's all." People used to like him, man. He was a good guy. Play anywhere. Yeah.

MMS - Playing the really old traditional fiddle music. Right? The old time songs and all the rest of that stuff.

JL - Yeah.

MMS - He studied with different people as well, too and just traveled around. How long did you get to play with him?

JL - About four or five years together, me and him.

MMS - Wow.

JL - Almost up till the time he died. A couple years before he died maybe, before then.

MMS - Formative years for him.

JL - Yeah.

MMS - To be playing with you and learning from you.

JL - Yeah. We used to pray every time we played. All the whole band used to get together and before we start playing we'd usually pray. It's how we played. My youngest son was with me that time, *William (Landry)*, he was playing drums. About 12 years old or 14 years old.

MMS - Thanks for that. What songs and CDs have you gone on to write and record since that time in the mid '80s, and that first 45 that came out?

JL - There's quite a bit of songs that I wrote. When I started learning how to write songs. Then I wrote about nine more songs. Then with recorded with *Randall Prescott*.

MMS - Sorry, was that a CBC, was that a Northern Service recording?

JL - No.

MMS - No. Okay.

JL - My own. Recorded nine songs with him. Recorded some songs with *Dana, Dana Cross*. Doing some more again. Doing nine more. Going to do some more. That's where I'm at right now.

MMS - Nice.

JL - Trying get a CD cover. I got *Archie Beaulieu* before he died, he drew me a cover. He said, "If you make a CD." The CD, I want to call it "All Along the Big River". It's called that, that song that's banned. I told you that. I'll call that CD. He drew the cover. I got it at home. It's almost done with *Dana (Cross)*

MMS - You just keep working on the songs and the writing and playing in the community and stuff?

JL - Yeah. We used to play where they want us, we'd go over there. Now, they want more Slavey songs, so we go. There's no other band plays that, plays this music what I'm doing. There's nobody around. But you travel, too ... You have a four piece band, you're going to travel, it's not easy. You've got to get all the equipment and all the players there. Make sure they're going to play. You've got to get all that together. But I kind of all through these years, learned how to do those things like that.

MMS - True.

JL - All the equipment and everything. You've got to haul all the stuff. Sometimes you've got to use two trucks. Depends where you're playing.

MMS - How long it takes to get there. Whether the stuff can fit.

JL - I like to go one day early. And then just relax. That way's better.

MMS - Yep. That's pretty much your musical "goals." It's getting the CD out, and keep writing music.

JL - Yeah. Getting more ideas of what you write about. Actually, practice more, the ideas come. As you work more at it, all this time it was just right there. I figure out something like that. I've got to earn it to figure it out. You know what I mean?

MMS - Yeah.

JL - It's there. It's not impossible but you've got to work for it. I leaned that anyway. It's fun. Make it fun. Some other boys, they want to learn so they come around, bring their guitars. They just follow me then. I'm practicing, writing my song, they just play along. They make it fun. Sometimes we laugh. They get interested in it. Because, you know, holy smokes they didn't know I could do that. Music, it's a different ... You're in a different world.

MMS - Yeah.

JL - Even playing, it's like that. Playing music when you're on the stage. You've got your space there, that little space that you have. You can do anything you want to do in there.

MMS - You said it before, you get out what you put into it. It sounds like you're in a really good place. Again, the land, the river, your people, the language and all the rest of that stuff. But I mean, to have

younger people coming over and you interacting with them and them playing along and you're working with them and you're playing gigs with them. You're, in essence, handing the torch over to them and turning them on to good music, which is another thing that I find. I mean, they could be listening to just garbage coming out of the radio all the time but if you're turning them on to some good music that way that they can play and find that enjoyment then that's a huge thing for them to be able to do, as well.

JL - Yeah. Like some people get healed from those songs. Before, they never listened to the words and now, they understand. It helps them in their own life, what they're going through. One thing is to have a good family at home supporting me, helping me at home. That's the thing. Everybody has to work together. It's not just by myself. Yeah, I know it's better that way. And it's fun. My son plays. The other one, the oldest one plays. Whenever he's around, he wants to play. It's fun. I don't have to drag anybody anywhere. You know what I mean?

MMS - You don't have to make anybody do anything. What a wonderful connection to have between a father and a son.

JL - He always wants to play.

MMS - Hungry for it.

JL - Yeah. They want to play. Getting ready, carnivals are coming up, so we'll be traveling around there again. Doing stuff like that, carnivals. In summertime, hand games I got to go play. That's where I get the inspiration from and getting words from, by going to those places. And mostly, it's elders. They're doing Dene things. You get inspiration, inspired from those things. It makes you want to go more with the music. It gives you ideas what you could write about.

MMS - Well and for the people that way too, there seems to be fewer bands. I'm just talking about in Yellowknife here. There used to be at least six, five or six local bands that could go and play at the drop of a hat anywhere. And now, it's like two, maybe, sometimes.

JL - That woman phoned me, and we used to go to (Fort) Wrigley. I gave her my price, and she said, "I'll phone you back." She said, "Oh, I didn't know there was no bands around here." You know what I mean?

MMS - Exactly. Yeah.

JL - Yeah, there's no bands. I told her that, there's no bands. It's hard. It's not easy to have a group together and go and play. You can't just go play just like that. You've got to know ahead of time.

MMS - And practice and turning songs over.

JL - Work on what you're going to do?

MMS - And sometimes people in the group change. It's a really hard thing to sustain it and keep it going and keep it going and keep it consistent.

JL - It's hard work.

MMS - That's for sure.

JL - You've got to be a leader to do that. You have to lead them. You've got to lead them in a positive way so they want to go. That's why I had to stop drinking. I couldn't drink no more. I had to stay away from stuff like that. Just to play music. But you've got to love music to play. That's what I say. Do anything for it. That feeling that I get, there's no drug in this world. I can't get that feeling from that. There's no drug in the world that can give me that feeling that I'm gonna get when I'm playing. When it all kicks in together, that feeling that you get, holy smokes. I can't describe it. It's a feeling that takes a while to come down from those things. You don't come down just like that. It takes a while. About two or three hours, maybe longer. Depends. A lot of times that happened to me, when it depends, it was just lots of people. More energy. You've got to harness that energy together. One time I went to play with *Kole Crook* was with me that time. I went to Fort Good Hope to the "Wood Block" (Festival), the first time they had it. There was 800 people in that circle. They were talking about it for about two months. About four or five people, they got healed in that circle. 800 people. Holy smokes. That's a lot of energy, holy. In that big field in (Fort) Good Hope. The *Louie Goose* Band was there backing us up.

MMS - Oh, wow.

JL - Yeah. He had a good band that time, *Louie Goose*. That guy could sing.

MMS - Yeah, still can. I'm sorry I missed that one. That would've been a great festival. With those bands there, for sure. It's important ... work is the wrong word but I can't think of another word, thing, that you do, we do but you do in your language here. And it's not only for the Slavey people down here. Like you say, you're going up into Sahtu. You're traveling all over the place that way. It's really important that you do that. It's really important that those people in those other places that you travel to come and get a hit of that, even if they've never heard it before. Or, because they're of a generation where they missed out but there's generations of people that do remember things that happened a long time...

JL - Sometimes they call me when they have something happens. Bad happens, they call me. I go over there and I play there. Kind of change things to positive. Trying to lift up their spirit. I do that, too. I do that, too.

MMS - Again, it's an important ... It's spiritual. It's spiritual work is what it is. For healing or for celebration or for any of that kind of thing. I'm glad that you're still here doing it and look forward to hearing your new material. But, thank you very much for your time here today. I really, really appreciate it.

JL - Thank you very much, man.

MMS - Yeah, for sure. Thank you so much, Johnny.