

TEMPE HISTORICAL MUSEUM  
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW #: OH-401  
NARRATOR: Walter Richardson  
INTERVIEWER: Lorraine Calbow  
DATE: August 6, 2014

WR = Walt Richardson  
INT = Interviewer  
\_\_\_\_\_ = Unintelligible  
(*Italics*) = Transcriber's notes

Side A

INT: Today is Wednesday, August 6, 2014, and this is an interview with Walter Richardson in Tempe, Arizona, at the Tempe History Museum reading room. The interviewer is Lorraine Calbow, representing the Tempe History Museum. This interview will be used to benefit the community through public access and possible publication and internet availability.

Please give your full name.

WR: Walter Richardson II (*the second*).

INT: I'm gonna start with what normally we would conclude with. What is your fondest remembrance of Tempe, in terms of the music scene, and what stands out for you the most?

WR: My fondest memories are in the area of like in the '80s and the '90s, where there was a lot more venues along Mill Avenue that you could perform at, where live performances were taking place. I remember the use of the Hayden Square amphitheater during the art festivals was just wonderful; there was a lot of concerts held out there in the off-season as well.

But that era, it seemed that it was, it was like right before all of the economic crashes and downsizing and all of that nature. People were out celebrating, and it was just a lot of fun. In fact, the whole state seemed like it was buzzing at the time.

INT: So much more that sense of community?

WR: Yeah. People would go out, people socialized differently then. They went out to meet their friends. They went to live venues to see bands, but they also went there to meet their friends. It was different. You didn't have sports TVs in any of the bars at that time. Basically, it was the bar, the room, if there was a stage or an area for the band to play, and that's what you were dealing with.

INT: And so today, how is that like today?

WR: Today, it's very interesting, because the shift I'm seeing is there's entertainment now in wine bars, where they're starting to be almost like the coffee houses in the day—they're picking up solo acts and small-group acts, and that's pretty interesting. And then there's coffee houses that are offering live music. And then there's still venues, the ones that are left, that are still keeping live music happening. But now, because the music . . . . There aren't as many venues as there were at that time, there's a return to kind of like this feeling like, "Okay, we need to have some live music venues, but how do we do this, how do we bring it back?" And I think that's an interesting question, because people socialize differently now than they did before.

You have a lot of sports bars that have TVs everywhere; I mean, almost every place you go, there's just TVs. And so they're trying to figure out, "How do we put a band in here?" Or, "If we did a band, what nights could we have it on?" That kind of thing, how it affects their clientele, because I think a lot of folks are so much, they're saturated with so much media, from cell phones, laptops, I-Pads, so much going on, that we still need to be able to socialize, connect one-on-one or as a group, that human connection is still needed. So when somebody does start to have music at their venue, it's kind of like a perk. I think there's a slow return to it.

INT: Do you think there will be a return to what you were describing on Mill Avenue? And exactly how would you describe that kind of human connection during that time?

WR: Well, for one thing, there weren't cell phones, cell phones weren't out as much. And so people were actually communicating with each other, you weren't just communicating through a cell phone.

I think that the scene would not be the same as it was then, because we've all changed, society has changed. But the new scene, whatever that is, will offer the same rewards and same benefits. Because there are tons of open mic nights around the Valley, where artists are playing original music, and these open mic nights are a way for folks to keep an original music alive, it's a way to keep an original music happening.

And so I think a lot of songwriters are finding, "Okay, let me do some open mic nights," and then from there, they get little club gigs. There are some really nice concert rooms that are here in the Valley, spread out, and that's another door people are using to showcase their musical talents or songwriting, and it's working pretty good.

INT: How would you say your music has changed over the different periods of time?

WR: Oh, it's gotten worse. (laughter) It's gone from bad to worse.

INT: How so?

WR: I don't know; I'm trying to figure that part out, it escapes me.

Actually, my music has changed along with how I've changed. To me, the songs, in a way, are almost like creative entities, as if it was a child. And when you first write it, it's young; and then after you play it for a while, it expands, it grows. And as you mature, the song, and how you present the song, changes. And some of these changes are like minute degrees of changing. But as you learn new styles of playing, that influences all of your material. And so when you go back through time, the songs grow, along with you.

And it's amazing how, in the beginning, the song felt light, and it felt, "Okay, I'm gonna throw this out here and see how people grab onto it." Then, as you grow and mature as a musician, you are paying more attention to things like its structure, you know what works in the audience, you know what doesn't work, and you lean to the things that work, and then you creatively add new parts to it, but it's still basically the same song.

I would liken it almost to the image of a house that you start building, and then you start adding rooms onto it. You still have that basic foundation, but then you start adding onto it. And pretty soon, you look up, twenty years, and you almost can't even remember where the original part is, but you like the whole creation as it stands in the present.

INT: Do you have any stories that you'd like to share with us?

WR: Ooh. Tons of stories.

I think one of my most favorite stories is, there was a drummer who was from Crosby Stills & Nash, who was playing music with Hans Olson, and Hans Olson was playing at Chuy's in downtown Tempe. And I'm trying to think of his name, I can't remember it, it might come up to me as I'm telling this story. But anyway, he had a little motorcycle that had a sidecar. And this guy was known for his craziness. One day he was standing outside, and I said, "Man, that's a nice bike you got right there; I love the sidecar." He says, "You want to go for a ride?" And I said, "Yes." And I got in that thing, and I'm telling you, we were zipping around all the little streets in Tempe—and back at that time, there was a lot of them—we were zipping around these back neighborhoods and little off-road areas and things like this; it was crazy. We got back to the club and I said, "You know what, note to self, I'll never do anything that crazy." His name was Dallas Taylor, that's what it was, Dallas Taylor. But I said, "No, no, no, no more craziness with Dallas."

But we have tons of stories about us playing at gigs up at Edsel's Attic. Ed and Sally are good friends of ours, and we just loved them, and they loved us. But Ed was always trying to cut back on money, so he was always watching his budget. Their place was

upstairs, so in the summertime, it would be so hot in there, and he wouldn't turn the air conditioning on until about like 7:00, 7:30. Gigs start at 9:00, we're in there at 4:00 or 5:00, loading in in that heat, and you had to go upstairs. So instead of calling it Edsel's Attic, we called it Sweatsel's Attic. "We got a gig at Sweatsel's, man, and then we got a gig at Chuy's tomorrow night, and then we're at Long Wong's the next night, but we're at Sweatsel's tonight."

INT: How are they different, the three places that you mentioned?

WR: They were different in a lot of ways. Character, one. Size, another. Sound of the room, another.

One room had a PA system in, the other two didn't, so you were bringing your own stuff in. Long Wong's was a small room, so you really couldn't bring too much PA in there, but you really didn't need that much; but still some people brought a lot, we didn't. Edsel's Attic, you needed your own PA system there, but you had to get it upstairs. It was a little bit larger room, and that was amazing. By this time, Chuy's had moved from being on Mill Avenue to upstairs, and they had their own PA system. They actually had their own PA system when they were on the street, too. But theirs was a real nice PA system.

So in each room, you sounded different. And we noticed the sound in each one of the rooms. We played the gigs because we just loved playing. And there were some rooms we thought we sounded better in than in others. But there would be people who were coming to see us, they would like . . . . What we found out is that bands have followings, and clubs have followings. So if you're playing in one club, like say, we play at Long Wong's, there's people that come to Long Wong's. But they won't come to Edsel's Attic, to see you at Edsel's Attic, because they're a fan of Long Wong's. They may come by there, but they think you sound better at Long Wong's. So you play Edsel's Attic, and some people think that's where you sound the best. And then you go and play Chuy's, where we felt like we sounded the best, and there's people that would be at Long Wong's, they didn't really like the sound of the band in Chuy's, because they thought that you sounded better in these other rooms. And it was just funny like that.

So, bands have followings, clubs have followings, and then you just mixin' the two of them together as you moved around.

INT: Being that Tempe's kind of a strange city in some ways, in that it has the university, and then it also is part of Arizona, you know what I'm saying?

WR: Yes, I do.

INT: So, do you feel like, being a person of color, and your music, made you unique? It was a good thing, or . . . ? Do you know what I'm asking?

WR: Yeah, I think I know what you're asking. And I really would have a hard time describing that, from the inside looking out. I guess the answer would have to come from the outside in, from people who are coming to see the music. And as far as that level, in that aspect, we felt accepted everywhere we went, because we had a mixed band.

But one thing about Tempe that's familiar with my lifestyle is it's a transient place. Because you have the university, it's a transient place. And so if you're around the core of Tempe, say Mill Avenue area, from University to the bridge, that whole area, and the housing around it, within a radius of two to three miles, that's a very transient spot. And that's the area that I, to this day, still live in. So you've gotta figure on the average of every four years, you're gonna have a huge turnover, if people are going to school and they come in here as a freshman and they stay all the way to senior and finish up. So you have an average of four years, maybe five, that some of these people will be in town; others are shorter.

That being said, the reason I relate to that is because we grew up as a military family, so we traveled around the world, and military bases are very transient. So you're there for maybe two years, three years, maybe four at the most. As I grew up, we were in, let's see—I was born at Eglin (*Air Force Base in Florida*), went to Japan, went to Dover, Delaware, moved back to Florida, went to the Philippines, and then came back out to Florida, and then spent a little time in upstate New York, and then Arizona. So on average, if you average it out, maybe about three to four-and-a-half years in each place. But at the same time, every tour of duty that we were doing somewhere, we would get there and it might be at the end of somebody else's tour of duty or in the middle of their tour of duty. You meet people, you get to know them for about a year, maybe year-and-a-half, and then they're gone. You may see them again in your life, you may not.

So the military bases have to set up a form of entertainment on their bases. And being Air Force, you had the NCO Club, which was the non-commissioned officers, then you had the Airmen's Club, and you had the Officers Club. And each one of those clubs offered entertainment, basically every night of the week, but going towards the weekends, they had your musical entertainment. So they had to satisfy the tastes of everybody on the bases, so you may have country, you have blues, you have rock, you have all of this going on. And so I'm used to that feeling of rotation.

So that's why being here has that aspect of being on a military base. With that understanding, your crowd was basically shifting. You had eras of students that remember you in the '70s, they remember you in the '80s when they were going to college, and then in the '90s. Then they would take an understanding of your music, the experience of your music, and go back to Chicago, L.A., New York, or wherever they were from. But because you were there in their college years, they remember you as a part of their experience, their fun, their days of when life was free, before they got into their professions. And that's a pretty healthy place to be in with people, because they remember you for the rest of their lives out of that.

So when they come back to the Valley for some reason, the first thing they want to do is revisit all their friends, look up all the bands that they used to go hang out with, are they still playing, is that club we used to go to still there? And those are their markers.

So that's the unique thing about Tempe. So culturally, it's very diverse, and it's always changing, in the midst of being in the state of Arizona. The state of Arizona is no different than living in a country that, if you're living in Japan or you're living in the Philippines, all the rules of the Philippines apply, but you're living on this air base, and on this air base, you have some leeway on some things, but you're still in the culture, the politics, the life, of the Philippines.

Same here in Tempe. You have people coming into Tempe and going to school. Arizona has its culture, it has its political whatever you want to call it, stuff. But the people that are coming to college here, they're not really paying attention to all of that. They want to come in, they're focused on their degrees and they're focused on getting those degrees. And then they're focused on getting those ideas that they're coming up with into the world. Then they have to go places, China or Japan or Germany, whatever, to get started. They're not worrying about who's in office here at all.

In fact, if anything, like when you go to different military bases, there's a transition period where your allegiance is to the last place you were stationed at. So, if we came from Florida to the Philippines, we're gonna bring stories about Florida to the Philippines, before we get used to the Philippines. Well, same here. If people don't like the politics of Arizona and they're going to school here, they're thinking how things are where they came from, in Iowa or Chicago or New York or L.A. "We don't have that kind of problem; we do such and such and such and such," and then the conversation keeps flowing. But nobody's gonna go out there and vote and try to change things, 'cause they're paying out-of-state tuition and they want to get the job done and leave.

INT: How is that kind of dynamics, in the military and obvious exposure to lots of things, how do you think you synthesize all of that and come out with your own sound?

WR: When you're in different cultures, it's immersion, and you learn. You learn how to get along with so many people, in so many different ways. And then you find the common thing that's among all of us, and once you find that common thing, you can walk almost in any land, basically, and connect with the people. And that common thing is respect. If you respect the culture, respect the religion, that respect is powerful. And you don't have to agree with it, you don't have to adopt it, but if you respect it, and you're kind and you're open, that respect goes a long way. Then people feel like they're sharing an experience with you. That gives you this overall picture of humanity.

And then when you're exposed to all the musical aspects of each culture, you're listening to instruments that you've never even seen before, and you're hearing them being played, and you're hearing the scales and the rhythms, and you're understanding how long it took for these people to master some of these things and make it look like it's simple to play, that's very fascinating.

I think the biggest part of traveling, it puts you ahead of the game. And the biggest part that my parents pushed all of us in, is to be leaders. And in order to be a leader, you definitely have to be an individual. And so my music is a blend of the things that resonate with me. A little bit of this, a little bit of that; it's like cooking. If you live in the Philippines and you use tilapia, you get a little bit of this and you sauce it up. You go to Japan and you get used to some dishes from Japan. You might take a little bit from the Philippines and put in a little bit from Japan, and put in a little somethin'-somethin' from your Southern cooking, and come up with your own dish.

So basically, that's how I play music. I like a lot of the Caribbean, and African, and am heavily influenced by the folk rock scene during the '60s, all the social movement that was going on, and the soul movement, the R&B, Motown, and all of that, was just off the chart. All of that influences my music.

But the main thing that influences it is some kind of message, some kind of something that gives people something to relate to, especially if it's gonna inspire them, or heal them, or help them out in a little way, give them something to relate to. That's what I hope the music offers.

INT: That makes a lot of sense.

You were recently honored into the Arizona Musical Hall of Fame?

WR: Right, the Arizona Music and Entertainment Hall of Fame. Yeah, I was inducted on January 18 of this year, 2014. And also, my birthday was falling a few days after that, so we celebrated my 60<sup>th</sup> birthday at the same time. It was a lot of fun, because we pulled kind of like a mini-reunion of the Morning Star band. And I got a chance to see the impact that the music has had on the lives of so many people in Arizona, and that was very gratifying, it was very gratifying. And I still, to this day, I can sit and absorb what I felt from that day, on that day; it was very powerful.

INT: Does that also involve . . . you're doing some charity work involved with music, with your sister, or education, something?

WR: I've always done a lot of benefits along the way, helping different causes, because I just feel like it's so important. People ask you to come play because they want to raise awareness about something, and it's coming straight from their heart, and I feel that, and I want to go there to help them get their message out, or help heal the thing that needs to be healed, and that's very gratifying.

What I've been a part of, the band and myself and my sister, we were part of the Arizona Commission for the Arts for a long time. And we would go into the schools and do workshops and residencies, and that was a lot of fun.

INT: Is there any stories you want to share from there?

WR: There was one, this was funny. We were playing an elementary school in Nogales, I can't remember which one it was, and it was my sister and myself. And this is in the afternoon, and we had second, third and fourth graders, I think it was something like that; they might have been as much as fifth grade. But we were closing the show out, and we were talking about "You can be anything you want to be if you put your mind to it." So we had this little sing-response tune that I'd picked up along the way years and years ago, saying something like, "I am young and beautiful," and they would chant that back, "I am young and beautiful." Then, "I am young and smart," they'll say, "I am young and smart." Then I'd say, "I can be . . .," and they'd say, "I can be . . . anything I want to be." Then you'd repeat it and say, "I just might be the president," and we'd go through several occupations.

And then as the song is going, my sister gets a wireless mic, and she starts going through the audience, and people raise their hands, and we say, "What do you want to be?" "I want to be a baseball player!" "All right! What do you want to be?" "A school teacher!" "Oh, okay!" "I want to be a doctor!" "Oh, okay!" And we're going through this, and singing. And we get to the back, and this little kid's been raising his hand, and she says, "What do you want to be?" And the kid stands up and says, "Border Patrol!" And every head in the place turns around and looks at him, the staff in the kitchen heard it, they were all leaning out, we were dying laughing. I was trying to keep a straight face while I was playing; I couldn't. Janitors were standing over there, leaning up against mops, and they were laughing. Oh, my goodness. All I could think of was this kid probably has a relative, maybe father, uncle, that he sees in that Border Patrol uniform and that looks sharp, and he's, "I'm gonna be just as sharp as him, man." Border Patrol! That was hilarious.

And then we were at another school down there in the same area, and I used the song "Beautiful Morning" as they exit the cafeteria, because they're singing, "La la la la, la la la," we keep that going, and the place is getting quieter as each class is leaving. And there was this one last class leaving, and they were first graders. And it was just me and my sister on guitar, and these kids had a great time. And this last guy in line, he just looks up to me and he says, "You guys are the best band I've seen my whole life! You can come back to the school any time!" I said, "Okay." "My whole life"?—he's in first grade! (laughter) Oh, man, the things that come out of their mouths, that was beautiful.

INT: How about thinking of some more stories that you'd like to share with us, in terms of anything in regards to your time as a musician in Tempe?

WR: Let me see. Some of these stories I don't think should be on tape. (laughter) If we were doing an MTV kind of thing, I could put these stories on it, but this is families walking through here, listening to me talk, and I want them to walk away with the same impression they walked in with, or something better. I can't offer some of that stuff, we can't go there. (laughter) This is for the movie and the book.



INT: All right, then. I think I'd like to return a little bit more to how do you know . . . . Can you give me an example of when something resonates for you, and you know at that moment that that is something that you need to incorporate?

WR: In terms of the music?

INT: Um-hmm. Or the message, because sometimes the message . . . . However that comes to you, because I would imagine they could meld, right?

WR: Well, that can happen anywhere. It doesn't matter whether I'm near the stage, or on the stage, or out listening to another band. There's a mechanism I think we all have inside of us, that when we recognize something that truly resonates in us, we can feel it. And I think for each person, it might be a different kind of sensation. But for me, it's something that I can feel in my gut and in my chest, and I have this little kind of like sound that goes, "Aha!" And when I have that little "aha," it's usually because there's something that I'm trying to do or get across, and something that I've just seen or experienced gives me the vehicle to be able to do that. It's like maybe somebody says something, we're in a conversation in a coffee house and somebody says something, and the way they phrase it, it kind of clicks with me, and I say, "That's the way I need to say it, to be able to get what I'm trying to say across." So it's everywhere. Heck, I could be talking to anybody—kids, brothers and sisters, friends, people that you love and care about—sharing things with you. It's all around. Or I could just be sitting still, and something comes up inside. Those are the moments.

So being self-aware is very important. And I don't think it's just important for me, but it's important for life, period. If there's one thing that I could offer the planet, it would be a way, through music and through the humanities itself, I feel that's our way of being able to bring in the best of who we are. And what I mean by that is it doesn't mean it's always the good stuff. It's the good stuff, and the dark stuff, that we are about. And when artists and authors and poets can put it down in a way that you can look at it and observe and say, "Oh," and observe it in a way where it's creative; not destructive, but creative.

You have all kinds of music. Some of it seems real dark, but some of that dark music speaks to people that are in that mental frame for that period of their life, and it helps them move through it. Then there's other people that like the classical. But when artists, human beings, allow themselves to be creative and put out great books, write great plays, great performances, great operas, all of that, it's a way for us to see how beautiful we really are, it's a reminder. And so if a person likes to read, they can probably pick up a book and go, "Wow! This has helped me." A person that likes to learn things by hearing, they can pick up some music and go, "Wow! This music changed my life." Some people are visual, they can look at sculptures or paintings or architecture, and they just have an "aha" moment, they go, "Wow!" And it just makes a difference in their lives.

That's what I hope the music that I'm . . . . That's why I participate in the music, so there can be those "aha" moments. Because what I have seen and experienced in myself whenever I've had an "aha" moment, it's always information that I can use for the greater good of myself and others. It doesn't even matter if it's dark information, I can use it so I can be better, you know what I'm saying? So that's what's interesting.

So my big push through everything is this mission, "arts for the healing of humanity," that's the big push behind what I do. If there was an organization that would put together, that would be the legacy of my life, it would be "arts for the healing of humanity." And I include science and technology in that, too, because as you get with all the latest science behind brain research, heart research, the electro-magnetic field that the heart puts out, the chemicals that the brain is producing, the regenerative properties of the mind, we're really walking miracles. And the thing about it, we're probably only tapping into one percent of that miracle. And if art can make you say, "Wow, I can achieve it," or "I am beautiful," this is cool. And you have that little moment, it could be a defining moment that just sets the tone for the rest of your life.

INT: I think we should end there, don't you? (laughter)

WR: Sounds good to me.

INT: Unless you have something else you'd like to add.

WR: You know, all of the behavioral issues I see on the planet, all the differences that I see on the planet, they're not things that are written in concrete; they're things that are passed down from generation to generation, some of them. But you have to agree to them, you have to agree to be intolerant or tolerant. You have to agree.

That idea of agreement, I don't think you're sitting there going, "Oh, yes, okay, I'm agreeing to this." What I'm saying is that when you come into the world, you don't come in preset with any kind of ideology or religion or political background. But by the time you're like six years old, seven, eight, you've heard all these things, you've heard relatives talking and things like that, so you relate to all the things your relatives like and what they hate, you hear it. But that's stuff that we've created on the planet and written on the planet; a baby doesn't come out espousing all these things, it doesn't. Its brain is absorbing everything in the immediate environment so quickly so it can survive, that's what its basic first five, six years is about—absorb it so you can get into it and survive.

What we forget to do is that okay, if it's something that is there, we can examine it. We forget to examine it and then say, "Does this serve me or not?" If it doesn't serve you, then why hold onto it? Why not find the thing or expose yourself to the thing that does serve you in your highest place?

Now when you get to that, now you're talking about a whole different creature. And a lot of times, it's later on in life before we find that we've been set with cultural codes, we're set with belief systems, and all those things, and we believe that we can't change them.

But that's not true; we can change everything about ourselves if we choose to. And that's what it comes down to, is choice.

There's a lot of people who know they have some kind of issue going on, so they go somewhere to correct the issue—it might be a financial issue, it might be a health issue, it might be something else—but they go somewhere to seek help. The person that's advising them says, "Okay, you need to drink more water, and exercise, and lay off of the such-and-such." Okay, they do it for a little while, but then they go right back to it. "Oh, you need to quit smoking." They quit for about a year, then they go right back to it. "If you just put this amount of money aside for this, this, and this and don't touch it, you'll be fine." Well, they start putting it aside, then they go, "Well, I want to buy something," and they grab it up again.

What are those? Those are habits. And how do those habits, what's with those habits? Every time we're doing things and thinking things, we're getting a chemical match of that thing in our body, and it's kind of like a reward, even if it's not a good reward. And so smoking and all that, we're basically talking about addictions. So the discipline is in taking up the responsibility of what kind of thoughts are going through your head, do they serve you, do they serve mankind, do they hurt you, or do they hurt mankind?

I think when we get ourselves in a place where we can quiet down, we get a chance to observe that, but we don't quiet down that much. I venture the only time we really quiet down is when we get to a level where we have either a car accident and we can't move; we get so sick from stress that we've got the flu and we just can't go to work, and some people will still try to and they get sent home; or you get fired, and there's nothing in front of you for a minute. And we have this catastrophic event that takes place that makes you examine, "What are you doing with yourself?"

But we don't have to wait for those moments. We can do it every day, for fifteen, twenty minutes, re-examine what we're doing, and then make a course correction. It's not that difficult. But it is difficult when it's not a part of our upbringing.

INT: So these are the kind of messages you want to put in your music?

WR: These are the kind of messages that I feel are offered in the music, because when people come to listen to the music or they're sitting there, some people say they feel better, they feel healed, they feel all of these things, and they say, "Your music did this." And I accept the compliment, but I don't believe my music did it. What I believe I did was provide an atmosphere with the music that they felt comfortable in, and then they started relaxing and their own body started healing themselves. The only part I did was just like set up the room for them with the vibrations of the music. And the more love I put into that music, the more intention I put in that music, and just focus on that alone, and leave the rest of it to their interpretation.

That is one of the things I had to learn, is how to get out of the way of how people interpret my music. Yeah, I want them to feel it this way, but when they would come up

and tell me what the song meant to them, it would be like, “Wow, that was not even a part of it.” And I found myself wanting to bring them to what I felt, and then I realized, I’m taking their experience away from them. So I would just smile and say, “Wow, that’s interesting,” and look at it from a perspective that I’m unable to see until I open myself up and hear the words differently, then I can say, “Oh, I see how they could see it that way.” And that’s the beautiful thing about art, because even the creator can stand back and see it a different way ten years from now, that they never saw when they were originally intending the creation.

So that’s our beautiful side, that’s our unseen side, that reflects through the seeing part of us. And it’s very powerful, it’s very powerful. And it’s very nurturing, it’s very kind, it doesn’t have any judgment, it doesn’t stop because a person has a different color or a different culture or a different tolerance. It moves right through that, so that some of those people in the room that might not agree with each other, they walk out feeling fine, because their systems have relaxed and their own healing mechanisms in their system got a chance to operate, and they’re probably feeling it for the first time, because they relaxed.

That’s what I see going on. I feel like I’m a provider, if you will, a facilitator. Because it’s doing the same thing for me, but in a different way, ‘cause I’m enjoying playing. And even more when I get paid, and get paid a lot. I’m joking. (laughter) When it’s a paying gig, oh, it feels so much better. No, I have felt this way whether it’s been pay or no pay.

But I will tell you something interesting, if you want to hear a story, this is really interesting. I was working with the Mayo Clinic, and they have a program called Humanities and Medicine, and what they’re doing is having musicians, different types of musicians, flute players, harp players, myself a song writer, go around and play at the bedside of these people who are in palliative care. Palliative is the stage right before you go into hospice. So . . .

*(end of tape)*

### Side B

WR: So palliative is the place that you’re in right before you go into hospice. And a lot of these people may not even know they’re in palliative care yet. We would get the list out; so, we were trained in how to approach all these. But we would go to the bedside and you’re singing to these people, they’re laying there.

The song feels different than when I’m in a room or in a concert singing that same song. It has a whole different approach. And I was talking to one of the performers about this, I said, “You know what, I’m singing a Cat Stevens song, and I’m singing it by the bedside of someone who’s palliative, it feels completely different, the song flows differently than if I’m singing it in a night club.” And she said, “The reason is that because when you’re in a night club, you’re entertaining; when you’re here, you’re ministering.” And it dawned on me.

So there was people that I watched get out of bed and start dancing in the room while I was singing. And not only that, if the door was open when I'm doing this, nurses and doctors could hear it, and then they would come in for a while and stand by the door and listen to a song or two. And this one guy, he was laying in bed, he had all these tubes in him, and I sang a song from his era, which was a Brook Benton tune, one of my mother's favorite tunes, and his wife is standing there beside him, he's laying there, and I start the song. And he looks up at her, and he says, "You want to dance?" And he got up out of bed, and they danced. And a nurse happened to be walking by and saw it, and the next thing, I looked and there was these nurses and doctors looking into the room, watching these two dance. And then after the dance, he says, "Okay, that's all the energy I got, I can't dance anymore." But you saw those kinds of miracles.

Then the most interesting one was when as I was walking one of the floors, filling out the paperwork, I was asked to come, by some people that saw me, to come sing for their father, who was actively dying. So I went in there, and I'm thinking, "For someone who's actively dying, what do you sing, what songs do I have to sing?" So I'm getting into the room, I pull my guitar out, and he's in that state where it's kind of like gasping, he can go at any minute now. And so I started thinking, "Okay, I'm gonna sing this Bob Marley tune, 'Three little birds, every little thing's gonna be all right,'" and I started singing it. And as I'm singing it, in my mind's eye, it's like he was kind of like standing there, through the bed, he's standing there—he's laying here, but he's kind of like standing there—and he's kind of like smiling. I could see that in my mind's eye as I was singing that tune to him. And I only sang one song, I just came in there to sing one song. And he was hanging in there until his son, who was in traffic, could get there.

So by the time I walked out of the room—you have to write all these down—so I got out of the room, I was at the nurse's station. One of the people wanted to hand me some money, and I said, "Nah, nah, nah, I'm not gonna take any money for this; this is not that." And I was filling out the information, and I saw this gentleman, frooh, rush by, and I go, "Well, he made it in to see his father."

And just recently, my father died, in March. My father was a Tuskegee Airman in the United States Air Force, so he has a very historical legacy in terms of that. And growing up in the military, moving around to all those different bases, and with a father that powerful—he was Dad to us, and always will be Dad, but in the community, he was a great man, he did so much for the community, he did so much for the Air Force as well. So when I think about life, I think about all the great examples that I've had around me. I'm standing on pretty solid ground, and I don't really have to worry about too much.

The only thing that I could get caught up in is, because the ground is so solid and because I don't have to worry, the sense of becoming, it's easy to kind of like sit back and become complacent, become . . . not lazy, but because it's all laid out so easy, that you have to remind yourself, "Okay, get up, do, get the energy going," then you're moving. But it's easy to sit back and coast, because if you don't worry about anything, you don't have anything to worry about, it's a lot different than if in the back of your mind you're

always waiting for the shoe to drop, and you feel stressed all the time. But when you're not feeling that stress, you're basically watching the world rush by you, people rushing by you, going back and forth so fast to get things, you're sitting at the coffee shop going, "What's everybody in a hurry for?" (laughter) Then you kind of remember, "Oh, I'm supposed to be doing such and such right now," and you get up and go do it and have fun.

But life itself is very simple. You only need to breath, basically make sure you're breathing and you get basic nutrition and water and some sleep, that's easy. All the other stuff is things we pile into it, that a lot of it is unnecessary, very unnecessary.

INT: But somehow music was your calling from a very early age?

WR: Yeah, music was interesting, because I . . . . The story is, when I was in the womb, being the first-born, when I was in the womb, my mother and father would go to the NCO Club or the Airmen's Club and they'd listen to music. And while the music was playing, the musician was playing, I'm kicking, and when the music would stop, I'd stop. And they would actually be able to put their hand on my mother's belly and feel me moving around in there to the music, that kind of thing.

It runs in our family, genetically. My father, my great-great grandfather, my grandmother, they all had beautiful voices and a lot of talent toward the music. My brother who lives in San Diego is a very talented musician. My sister who lives in North Carolina, she's in the business world, but she's got a beautiful voice and sings in the church choir and things like that, a very beautiful, powerful, operatic-sounding voice. And everybody in the family sings, basically. And then I've got nephews now that are picking up the guitar and playing and getting their little songs together and stuff like that, I'm helping them out a little bit. And I've got a grand-niece that just feels, she's a natural on the guitar, and she's just turned five, so I'm showing her how to hold a guitar and strum the chords and everything, and she's coming along okay, so we'll see what happens.

*(end of recording)*

Transcribed by Susan Jensen  
October 2014

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