



## Interviews and Activities

### Walt Aldridge

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**Walt Aldridge** was born in Florence, Alabama and is an American musician, singer, songwriter, engineer and record producer. He has written dozens of hit Country songs including the Number One hits “(There’s) No Gettin’ Over Me” by Ronnie Milsap (1981), ‘Till You’re Gone by Barbara Mandrell (1982), “Holding Her and Loving You” by Earl Thomas Conley (1982), “Modern Day Bonnie and Clyde” by Travis Tritt (2000), and “I Loved Her First” (2006)—recorded by Heartland. He was recently inducted into the Alabama Music Hall of Fame as well as the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame. In the late 1980s, Aldridge also sang lead vocals in the band *The Shooters*, a country band that charted seven singles for Epic Records.

Additionally, he worked for 17 years at Fame Recording Studio in Muscle Shoals, Alabama as a producer, songwriter and back-up musician. Now, he teaches at the University of North Alabama.

**Chandler:** Walt, thanks so much for meeting me for this interview. Let’s get started with you telling where you grew up and what made you realize that music was your path?

**Walt:** Well, I grew up here. I would think my answer is going to be similar to a lot of peoples and probably yours, Chandler. I just was sort of a one-talent guy. It was the only thing I really ever felt that I had an acuity for especially. I had an interest in a lot of things, but I didn’t seem to have an acuity for anything other than music and music came easily for me. You know, I got the proverbial guitar for a Christmas present at age eight and just immediately could play it. I always jokingly say I didn’t pick music it picked me, you know? I just didn’t have much else that I felt that I could really compete successfully at.

**Chandler:** What was the music scene around here when you were growing up? Did you play guitar out?

**Walt:** You know, the scene was bleak. This was a small southern dry county, so there were no live performance venues. The studio thing was completely isolated from anybody. In fact, when I went to work at FAME years later, I was surprised to find some of the music that was recorded there had been recorded there. I didn’t know it. They didn’t attempt to advertise or publicize what was going on over there, because all it did was create traffic of gawkers and people like that. The recording industry here was sort of its own little empire that people didn’t know about. And so live music, live places to play- Wow. It was bleak. But that timed out well because I grew up in the time of the singer-songwriter when it was just a guy and his guitar. So I could sit slumped over my guitar in my bedroom and learn James Taylor songs and Neil young songs and Joni Mitchell songs and so forth, and that was sort of what suited me. The guitar is a great portable instrument that you can take to friends houses or to parties or campfires. So that’s sort of what music was for me rather than out gigging and trying to break in doing it. It was just sort of a social tool.

**Chandler:** You hear about these jazz players that came up listening to records and then of course radio came about. Music was really more accessible to people. Did you take lessons?

**Walt:** I took a few lessons for a little over a year, and then just sort of was off to the races. I was much more interested in playing pop music and rock music. My teacher was interested in taking me off into a classical and more austere and disciplined approach to music with reading and so forth. That just didn’t suit me well at age 10. I just immediately decided I needed to just do my own thing and learn my own songs and teach myself by ear and that’s what I did.

**Chandler:** Right. Makes Sense. So you mentioned Neil young and James Taylor. Who are some of your favorite bands or what were your influences growing up?

**Walt:** I grew up in the rock era. I mean obviously The Beatles were massive influence. I could play because I was primarily an acoustic guitar player. I could play the songs of those folk singer-songwriters. The Jackson Brown's, the Neil Young's the Cat Stevens- those guys. But, I was a massive, huge fan of rock and roll by virtue of the time that I grew up in. I hit high school right around the '70s. Those were the glory days for rock and roll and it was everywhere. I remember hearing John Kay with Steppenwolf one time. He came and spoke to one of our classes here and said, "labels didn't know what was good." A lot of those people were graduating into A&R positions from having done A&R for Sinatra or Tony Bennett, and so if you had long hair and a group put together, they said, "Well, let's do a record, put it out." Since it didn't take a million and a half dollars to try something, there was a lot more of experimentalism going on I think with music and- just a cool time. So yeah, I was into a fairly predictable rock and roll. Beatles, Zeppelin, Grand Funk, Sabbath- all stuff that I just love. Anything that had loud guitars.

**Chandler:** Did you start on Acoustic Guitar and then move to electric?

**Walt:** I played a little bit of electric, yeah, but I was never as comfortable with electric. Still not as comfortable as I was with acoustic. I'm not sure why. I think most keyboard players are that way. They either are better acoustic players or they're better organists or they're better electric players or whatever. They might be able to play them all, but usually there's something that they feel is their strong suit.

**Chandler:** For sure. Did you join a band?

**Walt:** Well, here's what happened. It was kind of odd. I was sort of tired of playing acoustic guitar. My senior year was right when the California country craze kind of hit- The Eagles and Emmylou Harris and The Birds and the Flying Burrito Brothers. All these bluegrass influences were sort of coming into popular music, and I ran into this guy at my graduating party when I was a senior who came up to me and said- because I had asked my parents and said I want maybe a Banjo for my graduation present, which they gave me a cheap banjo- And he said, "I heard you had some interest in bluegrass. I play Banjo. Why don't we get together and just jam." So I took my banjo over to this guy's house and it became obvious in a hurry he was really good. Alright, I began to be the accompanist. It wasn't long before we formed a bluegrass band and I started playing bluegrass music traveling around, and trust me it was the Chitlin circuit as they say. I mean, if you could pay for picks and strings you were lucky. But it was an interesting thing, Chandler, because at that time- Vince Gill, Marty Stewart, Keith Whitley, Ricky Skaggs- all of these people who were going to transition into mainstream country music were playing bluegrass music. It's a very accessible music where you can walk right up to these guys off the stage and there was no security or anything. You can talk to them and say, "Hey, could you show me how you play that particular song?" Or just get to know them and have conversation with them. There was a hippie factor that was going on. You'd go to these bluegrass festivals and camp out in your van and everybody, you know, would enjoy for a couple of days and just jam and play music. I did that for a lot of college. I'd play bluegrass. It became a weird hybrid of what I did between that and the music that I've grown up listening to- Jimi Hendrix and all that. It was somewhere in between, but it kept me sort of submitted in the acoustic realm, rather than getting more into electric music.

**Chandler:** Right. Well, you got a lot of people attribute much of this music to the south.

**Walt:** Yes.

**Chandler:** The blues, jazz, of course from New Orleans, the Gospel we have being in the Bible belt, all of these concepts. What do you think about the south's influence on genre?

**Walt:** I think that's a very interesting point because if you go back not that many years prior to radio- but prior to about 1920 or so, when it really became popular, you know, relatively speaking, not that many years- If you lived in the south or lived here in this town that I was grown in, there were no performance venues so you could only imagine what Enrico Caruso sounded like. You didn't ever have the luxury of traveling to a large enough

urban area to hear a symphony or to hear even popular music groups. Music was Aunt Roadie coming over on Saturday night pushing the furniture back and play in the upright piano with a piece of sheet music, or uncle Zedd's fiddle band. So, I think there's a lot of truth in that- maybe not only the south but in rural areas- of the impact that they had, and of course there were more rural areas in the south then there were in other areas. You just had to make your own music because it was so far with the technological challenges and financial challenges that people had in this area, and in that day and age to go and hear music prior to the point that they could turn on the radio and listen to it, I think the die was cast. I do think that it became sort of a tradition that music became a part of family events- It became a part of social events. I still see that. I've never had the objectivity of living in a big rural area and seeing if that happens. You know, if you go over to a cocktail party in Manhattan, do you bring your cello or whatever? I would imagine you don't as much as you do in the south. Somebody brings a guitar along lot and it's a hootenanny or sing along. It's a kind of social thing or you gather around the piano and sing songs and maybe they're gospel songs or maybe they're pop songs of the day. I think there's certainly something to that.

**Chandler:** Absolutely. You transitioned into songwriting. If you would tell us a little bit about that, and how that came about.

**Walt:** It was completely accidental. I never wanted anything other than to be a guitar session player. I figured out after going to work as an intern at the studio how good you really had to be, and I always laughingly say I wanted to go out and tie my guitar on the back of my car and drag it back to my apartment after hearing a real session player. But, I figured out that if I wrote songs, there were publishers. Now back in that day- you got to remember this is about 1980- there are no home studios to speak of. It is very cost prohibitive for a kid that's 18 years old to try to go into a recording studio. It's expensive. Interestingly, back then studio rates were very similar to what they are now. It was a lot of money, and so the only way that I could afford to go into a studio was if I wrote a song that a publisher liked that they wanted to do a demo recording on. That gave me a chance to go in and pretend I was a session player- pretend I was a producer and get into a studio, which is where I had the greatest fascination, because I'd grown up listening to records and reading the backs of them and imagining what it would be like to watch Russ Kunkel and Lee Sklar or whoever these guys, these names that I just saw and read on the back of these records. So it was. I always say it's sort of the holy of holies in terms of the temple- to get into the recording studio that not many people had a privilege to. I can't say that I just had this burning- a compulsion to write songs, but I saw that it was a tool that could get me into a studio to be able to practice my chops and do all that. Then I just, literally Chandler, blundered into writing a couple of songs that got recorded. I said, okay- well, if this is what the universe wants for me, it's a paycheck and I get to do music. So, I decided I'll write some songs and try to do the other things along with it. I'm not one of those guys, . . . I have to fess up, I'm not one of those guys who at age 12 was pouring his heart out writing songs and just kept doing it. It became a tool for me to be able to go in there and make music.

**Chandler:** Yeah, that's really interesting that you just stumbled into it instead of having a plan to be a songwriter, and I think that's possibly how it works for many people.

**Walt:** I think so too. I think most successful careers involve some stumbling. You just happen to stand in the right place at the right time and something smacks you in the head and you look around say, "who me? Okay, well sounds good."

**Chandler:** I know you're teaching this class about songwriting now here at UNA. The students love it, of course, being able to work with you. Where is it that you draw your inspiration, or where did you draw your inspiration from when you were first getting started? Can you tell us about your compositional process?

**Walt:** You know, my compositional process- I think it surprised a lot of people in that it's more analytical than you might imagine. I really approached writing songs more like writing a college thesis. The idea has to be original. It has to be compelling. I have to feel passionate about it. But beyond that, I can pretty much write the title down and say, okay. I used the example yesterday in class that if I wrote a song called I Don't Love You Anymore, that dictates that the first verse to me would say there was a time that I did love you and the second

verse might be more expositional, like it wasn't something you did or that you didn't do. It's just something that happened. So for me it's kind of- it really is kind of that way. It's the sort of fill in the blanks thing where once I get that idea, I feel like I'm looking at the box of the jigsaw puzzle. I just had to find where all the pieces go. I've tried writing stream of consciousness with some success, and I know people that believe in that, but for me it really is a lot more of a disciplined approach. The great challenge is having some idea that you feel excited about. I always, always rely on a quote that I heard by Kurt Vonnegut Jr about writing who said, "You know, if you'll pick something you're passionate about, that passion is more compelling than all the stylistic tricks and tips and techniques that you could ever learn." That's what people will be drawn to, is just the fact that they feel you're passionate. And so that's the big deal. It's hard if you do it everyday to feel passionate about it. I'm sure it's that way about any kind of art, whether you're painting or a performing musician or anything else- If you could do it every day, it's just hard.

**Chandler:** Sure. So you start with an idea?

**Walt:** Absolutely.

**Chandler:** Then lyrics come first for you?

**Walt:** It doesn't happen one way or the other. Sometimes it's one way. Sometimes it's another. Sometimes I'm playing and something comes out that leads a lyric. Sometimes I start with a lyrical bit, but usually there is an idea about what I want the song to be about. Thankfully, it doesn't have to always be an experience thing. Maybe it's an observed thing. You know, one of my favorite quotes- Tom Waits says, "You don't have to be a murderer to be able to write a murder mystery" and so it's that way, you know? You don't have to experience everything that you write, but you have to be able to imagine what a person experiencing it would be going through and feeling, or you have to have experienced it at some point or had a conversation with somebody who did. I think writing everyday- if you only write what you personally experienced, you run out of bullets pretty quickly.

**Chandler:** Obviously this area, the Muscle Shoals area, has got tremendous opportunities with Rick Hall's FAME studio that started here and just the musical scene that came up in this area. We're so close to Nashville, and I know that you go to Nashville a lot and work up there. You talked about the Chitlin circuit, so what is the area that you found yourself in the most? Was it Nashville?

**Walt:** It was. Although I've done some pilgrimages to other areas- and I really think the secret to anyone trying to find their way into music is to realize that in any large area there's going to be a variety of music in a variety of stylistic approaches. What you have to do is be committed enough to it to go enough times to find the safe havens for you. I went to Nashville a number of times and I thought, well, this is all Hillbilly junk. I just can't do this. Can't relate to it. Eventually I began to stumble into a couple of guys that were a lot more progressive minded. They're great musicians and they were doing things that was more relatable to me, because the frame of reference was the music they grew up with, a similar one I grew up with. And so, to any of the readers of your book, I would say that's the deal. Don't make the assumption that Nashville or Memphis or LA or New York or Miami or Atlanta or anything is one thing. Obviously there's a variety of people there, and there's going to be a variety of stylistic approaches and output. So you just got to be dedicated enough to keep pulling at threads until you find that place that you think, okay. I can do this. I relate to this.

**Chandler:** Have you ever thought about relocating to gain more business?

**Walt:** I did. I lived in Nashville for 10 years and it didn't suit me well. Because I grew up in Muscle Shoals, which is a bit more relaxed, you know, it's not as disciplined- ten, two, and six sessions and all that- I became sort of accustomed to doing music that way for the first 20 years of my career. Eventually I said, you know, I think that the whole business is shrinking and I thought, you know, I think I'll go to Nashville because it's time to get up there and put up or shut up. I moved up there for 10 years and it was a very sort of assembly line approach to songwriting into making music, which it has to be in the city of that size in order to get everything done. It didn't suit me. I didn't like that much discipline in my writing every day. 10:00, same room, different

face. I just never quite warmed up to it as well, and so I came back here eventually. I just enjoy it. I guess it's whatever you're accustomed to.

**Chandler:** How did you build contacts or find clients and people to continue to work with?

**Walt:** I was really lucky in that. Relatively, you know, so much of what our business is- and I always tell my students, you're going to have to work collaboratively. Nobody gets to make their music in a completely un-homogenized way. Most music and most creativity is done by committee of some sort. So the trick is I think finding those skill matches and being honest about what you're good at and what you're not good at. I always loved the studio. I had maneuvered myself into being a recording engineer and getting to play and sing on some sessions, but I was not good at the business part of it. The sales part. I had that fear of rejection, and I still have it to a large degree. I just had a guy that sought me out though. A guy named Tommy Brasfield who became- he was an older writer and mentor and his strong suit was selling. He was a promotion guy for radio stations, for record companies to radio stations, and so he loved the challenge of taking the songs that we wrote, running them to Nashville, and getting them recorded. It was just a perfect world for me because I can write the song, do the demos, and then he went off and did the part that I didn't like. And so relatively quickly we had a song that was a hit. When you have that hit, rather than having to seek the business out, the business seeks you. So I became very lucky that way. I had a lot of songs cut up to that point that meant absolutely nothing. Until that point, you know, I wasn't scratching much. Not much was going on, but when you have a hit, they began to see me. That was fairly early in my career and I had the luxury of being able to pick and choose some of the things that I wanted to work on. So, pure luck, purely. Purely very lucky.

**Chandler:** Success definitely breeds success. What was that big turning point for you?

**Walt:** Well, it was a song called No Getting Over Me, and it was back in the glory days of crossovers. This record went to top five on the pop charts as well as being a number one country record and the number one adult contemporary record. So it was a big hit for me, and by virtue of being a big hit, it was what everyone wanted- that crossover thing. They began to think, you got to go out of Nashville to do something like that, which is preposterous, but it maybe did have a little perspective that wasn't completely Nashville because it originated in Muscle Shoals. We had approached it more like a Sam Cooke song rather than a Merle Haggard. That was a very lucky thing for me that I didn't have to go knocking on a lot of doors, because I'm still to this day very shy about doing that.

**Chandler:** Right. Has there been a moment in your career that you're most proud of?

**Walt:** Well, it certainly was a cool moment to be able to go be inducted into the songwriter hall of fame this last fall. You know, Chandler, that's a hard thing for me to answer except that my pride comes from the fact that I've been able to see things come and go. There's so much supernova activity in our business. There are people who have incredible amounts of success, and two years later they're gone. I never had those supernova years, but I got to work at music my entire career, and that's something that not many people get to do. I came right out of school, went to work at a recording studio, and stayed there in the music industry as long as I wanted to. Not many people can say I got to have hits in four decades. So I guess for me, more than a moment, I would think I look back on things and say I'm proud of the fact that I was able to evolve or at least disprove anybody's accusation that, well that's total beginner's luck or luck. At some point when you've done it enough times over and over a long enough period of time, people have to say, well, he must know something to have been able to continue to get hired and stay after it that long.

**Chandler:** What do you most love about your job and career?

**Walt:** There is a feeling that I think is indescribable to anyone who has never felt it- when art is created and when there's that moment when you're in a room with others who feel that same spark happening. When you hit a track and everybody looks at each other and says, "this is amazing, this is incredible, this moves me." This makes me feel something. Those moments. I went out and toured for five years. For a lot of people, those moments come as a performer on stage, but for me, performing was more about recreating than it was creating.

I was trying to recreate the records that I'd already made. The creation points are when you go in with a group of guys in a recording studio and say, okay, here's a bare bones song and let's try to turn this into a song or record. When you hear that thing come together, man, it's just . . . I don't know how to describe that feeling, but it's a high that I had never experienced in anything that I've ever done before. When everything comes together and it feels good and it fully expresses what you intended it to express emotionally.

**Chandler:** There is a magic in creating for sure and doing it with other people. It is indescribable.

**Walt:** That's the thing that I miss so much about the way we make records now, because in the old days you'd cut those tracks and everybody would come up to the control room for a playback and you'd all be high fiving and singing and saying that's a great drum lick and all.

**Chandler:** So what do you think about the music industry today and where it's going? What do you see are the big changes? For example, we used to sit down and share records together, and now we stream things and create playlists over the Internet. We used to have to go in and have these high five moments in the studio whereas now people are doing a lot of things on their own.

**Walt:** Yeah, I think, you know, for anyone who experienced anything one way, when it changes you start saying, "oh well, it's not as good as the good old days." I try to guard against that dinosaur mentality of saying, "well, it's just not as good as it used to be." It's different, you know? It certainly is driving people into becoming, I think, better performers and more dedicated performers. Gone are the days of artists that don't even have to be able to perform. They can make a record, sell enough copies to just live for a year. Maybe that's the good news. The good news is that someone without a huge record company has the possibility of something going viral somehow and becoming successful or getting noticed. I think the disadvantages of music the way it is now is that there's a lot of unfiltered junk that occupies the bandwidth and it's just noise. Maybe radio stations and record companies serve a value purpose of sort of filtering some of the absolute junk- because there's nothing to prevent a seventh grade girl from posting her version of Katy Perry's latest hits or a selfie video of herself doing that and pelting social media with it now. All that does is just occupy space. It's not anything that anybody other than her wants to hear. I think that's maybe the downside. We have so much unfiltered music that it's difficult to navigate through it.

**Chandler:** There was a lot less music before when it was harder to release songs to the public.

**Walt:** Yes. How do I find my way through all of the quagmire to find the jewels and the good stuff. I think that's probably who's going to get fabulously wealthy in the future are the people who are the aggregators or the signposts for us- to find how I get my music to you and how you get to my music. That's our challenge now, I think.

**Chandler:** How about for people who are coming up in the industry? Do you have a bit of advice to give?

**Walt:** Yeah, two things. It's the music business and both of those aspects are incredibly important. Take the trouble to learn how the business works and not be preyed upon by those few people who are out there and are unscrupulous. But more importantly, we live in a day and time where Instagram filters make photographers out of almost anyone. In the same way, Garage Band and other recording applications can make very average and sub-average singers and performers sound pretty darn good. It's very tempting to take the shortcut and not worry about becoming a good musician. But at the end of the day, I think what was cool about when I grew up is that we woodshedded- we wanted to be better on our instruments and wanted our bands to be better and we really practiced. I think there's no substitute for that no matter how much time correction and pitch correction software there is out there. There's no shortcut for being a great musician and what that will open up for you.

**Chandler:** Yes, definitely. I agree. Well, thanks for taking the time to share all this with me.

**Walt:** You're welcome.

## Gary Baker

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*Gary Baker is an American country music singer and songwriter. He has written songs for John Michael Montgomery, Alabama and many others. He is currently producing a new Backstreet Boys album for release in 2018.*

**Chandler:** Where did you grow up and what got you into music?

**Gary:** I grew up in western New York. I have to say The Beatles and Ed Sullivan for me, because from that day on, it's all I ever thought about, ever.

**Chandler:** Was there anybody in your family musical?

**Gary:** No

**Chandler:** So it started with you?

**Gary:** Started with me.

**Chandler:** I know you're a bass player, but how did you get into making music?

**Gary:** Oh Gosh, you know where I lived. I grew up in a great area where music was very- I mean, there was everything. I probably grew up in a town of about eight thousand people. There was probably five or six bands in our high school. I started in one band as a guitar player, but this other band was a little bit better. Needed a bass player. So I went in that band, and then the band hired me because I could not only play, but I could sing. And after that, I was a voice. I could do that. So they were hiring two for one.

**Chandler:** Did you first start studying music in school?

**Gary:** I started in High School. I sang in choir all my life. So choir happened around the same as the Beatles, maybe a little bit later. I loved choir. Then I went from there to theory. I was generally a terrible student, but I was great in theory.

**Chandler:** Right.

**Gary:** You know, if they had A.D.D. medicine back then I might be a brain surgeon, you know. I loved music class and our school was really good. We competed and we won a lot of events- choirs and men's choir and then mixed choirs and all that. It was really- It was so much fun. I'm really glad I did it. It's one of the key things that I did. I'm not sure when, I was a senior I think, and I got invited to play at this club in Niagara Falls. It was big- a big club where it was packed every night. A friend of mine knew of my nationality, and he said that the owner was the same nationality- he'll hire you. I went there and talked to him, and sure enough I put a little high school band in- we were playing up there four or five nights a week.

**Chandler:** Wow.

**Gary:** Those guys were in 10th and 11th grade, and I was a senior, I think. Then we got in with some older musicians, like five or six years older than us, and from that point on I knew- I guess it's going to be my life.

**Gary:** I had to struggle like every teenager does after high school. What am I going to do? What am I going to do?

**Chandler:** Yeah, It's hard to figure it out. You know, I love music. It's just so interesting the way it grabs you and won't let go.

**Gary:** I equate it to Mafia. See once you're in, you can't get out. There's only one way out.

**Chandler:** Yeah, that's right! So growing up you said the Beatles were influential. What were some of your other favorites?

**Gary:** I loved the Everly Brothers. I love this guy named Johnny Horton.

He's sang a song called North to Alaska or Sink the Bismarck. They were just big. They were country songs, but country work was pop back then; Johnny Cash and that. I liked, what's that guy that sang El Paso? I liked him a lot too, Marty Robbins. But the Beatles did it all for me, man. Once I got the Beatles it was then I knew that any Dave Clark five, whomever, was great. At the time I was loving them all. Yardbirds, etc. Then I got into realizing how it was working, you know, and playing. I was like, oh wow- that guitar player, I love that one in that band. And that band ended up like the Yardbirds had. They started with Eric Clapton. And then it went to, who else? Jimmy Paige, then Jeff Beck.

**Chandler:** Yeah, for sure. So the guitar was your first instrument after singing in the choir?

**Gary:** Oh yeah! And that's it right there. (referencing a guitar in the corner) Well that's a copy. My brother bought me a guitar when I was 10, maybe. You know, I figured out how to tune it just a little bit. We're playing Louis Louis, you know, and moving up. But it didn't work when we got to the B string.

**Chandler:** Haha, right.

**Gary:** But I taught myself everything. I never had anyone show me a chord. I don't know how it worked, but it just did. I clicked with it and it meant something to me and I meant something to it. So it was like, this is something I could do and love. No one wanted me to do it. Well my mother never said anything, but my dad did. I didn't know my dad very well, but when I first saw him, I remember him telling me- he asked me when I going to get a job, you know. Sitting here I used to hear that kind of stuff. It was hard, but it worked out, you know.

**Chandler:** Well it definitely worked out!

**Gary:** Thank you.

**Chandler:** After you played as a session player and played with bands, you went into songwriting. How did that first start for you?

**Gary:** I started writing songs when I was 18 too, and I wrote for awhile. I got in a band that got recorded and I had four or five songs on the record, but it was, I'm sure, garbage if you listened to it. I gotta back up a little bit, you know, because I played in a whole bunch of bands that traveled and did things, so that's how I moved. I moved around for a couple a years, but I played in a whole bunch of different bands that really had some cool live things going on. No recording type thing. When I was 18 and I was playing those clubs in Niagara Falls, the older guys , the 40 year olds. I'd see them come in and we'd all eat breakfast and they come in too and eat breakfast afterwards and I just said, I don't want to be that guy when I'm 40. I decided, you know, just get out and moved. I went to Texas and got to get a deal with a band there and we moved to Louisiana and worked in the studio for two years, putting the record together. Later, I brought some of my favorite players down from the Buffalo area and put another band together and then somehow I got in Nashville for a couple of a months, maybe six months tops. I met some great people there and got to sing and work on a couple of really big records.

**Gary:** Really cool records at the time, Eddie Rabbit and stuff like that because the producer David Malloy kind of took a liking to me. It was his dad actually, it was Jim Malloy. A whole bunch of us guys would eat dinner together a lot. Somehow in the band I was in, the keyboard player got a job here in Muscle Shoals. A lot of bass players came and auditioned, a lot. Seven, eight, nine. Tom said, "You gotta call this guy, Gary. Let's get him in from Houston." So I came in and I got the job. It was with a group called The Block and Car. And shortly after that we had a big hit, pop single. We toured the country, and everything was going really great. Then the band, like all bands do, they break up. I was doing sessions too here, not a ton but enough. There were a couple of years there that I survived off of playing bass and singing backgrounds on records. That started completely drying up too. So I started getting on the bus, Monday mornings I rode to Nashville on a greyhound bus! I just slept on couches and hung out. We're talking about couches- Vince Gil, Garth Brooks and they were doing nothing. So we're all kind of hanging out together and trying to figure it all out. Then on Friday, I take that bus back here, and my wife picked me up at the bus station over there. I did that for two years, almost every week and learned how to craft a song as best as I could.

**Chandler:** Right

**Gary:** And then started writing and getting some cuts here and there. Then I put a band together- The Gary Baker Band and it was really the best guys in town. Somehow I got the gig, right? I had a really tremendous band. And then I started writing songs. Finally got in with guys like Walt and wrote a song that secured a record deal for us. Co-wrote it with Walt. A song that secured a record deal for myself and him and the band. And then he put a band around me and him. So we were the lead singers and we found three other guys to come in that he met who were The Shooters; that all came about because I could co-write and write a song. But then through The Shooters though, we had some success, and we worked for a couple of years. It just became more evident that we weren't going to be big, you know, we weren't going to be really big. So, Walt disbanded the band, but I still met so many contacts there. One was Frank Myers, He and I started writing together a lot, and found tremendous success together.

**Chandler:** Right.

**Gary:** So through Frank, I really, really went to school when I would write a song. I got a really great publishing deal in Nashville, well not a great one, but a better than average writing deal, and then less than a year later, I had my first number one record. From then on it's really been just a blur almost.

**Chandler:** Wow! If you would, talk a little bit about like your compositional process. What did you figure out from all that going back and forth to Nashville and working with Frank?

**Gary:** I figured out one thing. If you don't have a good idea, you can forget it because it's just going to end up nowhere.

**Chandler:** Right. That makes sense.

**Gary:** So, the best way to familiarize songs is to have a great idea to start with. But sometimes that doesn't happen all the time. But Frank and I wrote a top five record. I just started with a guitar riff, and we built around it. But "I Swear" I had that idea that was just that. Richie brought me "I'm Already There." "Once Upon My Lifetime" was my first number one. My wife gave me that title. Well, it was "Once Upon a Time," and I just changed it to "Once Upon a Lifetime." And there we go. Frank and I wrote that together, and became a number one record. And that- that was a big day in my life. One of the bigger moments in my life. I was writing with this big writer, Wendy Waltman. Then I was like huge writer and producer and just like a female Mac Mcanally, you can imagine.

**Chandler:** Yeah sure.

**Gary:** And we're sitting on the couch there, right at the office in Nashville. And I heard my song playing through the door. That's the first time I've ever heard anybody playing with my songs. So I said I knew I had something because he was playing it for somebody. You know, so it ended up I had an artist deal at that time with RCA. Josh was my producer and I took him that song and he said, "We got it, this is the one, we're gonna be able to really go with it". Two or three weeks later, I don't know how many days later, I can still remember where I was standing. He calls me and says, "I've got an idea." And I said, "What?" He said "Walt, is thinking about letting me cut this song in Alabama, and you don't have to go out there and compete with Garth, and Vince, and all these other huge guys that are out there doing it. You can make some really, really good money. Because I'm telling you, I've got a number one on it." I said, "You think so?" He said "Yeah! Do it." One of the smartest moves I've ever made.

**Chandler:** Oh wow.

**Gary:** And then the power- because of the songs. All this has happened to me. So Frank and I, The third song Frank and I wrote was, "I Swear." The first two got cut as well, but third one was, "I Swear." I remember it was long before my- not long but several years- before the RCA thing. "I Swear" becomes a hit and Frank and I get offered all kinds of record deals as a duo. So we took it on. What occurred all happened because writing the song. Where I'm getting at, where I'm going to, is that I never knew if we could be big or not. I mean we started

having some really great success. But then, our second, third single kind of stayed there and floated around in the forties or whatever, you know. And then my manager, a great guy, really great manager. He says, "You know what, you need to write songs." I said, "You got it. That's a good idea." And then he says, "Look at the connections you made out on the road!" And he was so right. I made all these connections out there, and so I went to town and I drove Frank with me.

**Chandler:** Right. Where did you and Frank first meet?

**Gary:** I met Frank when I was writing at Fame, Mike Collinsworth, who is now my- who was my publisher through the A Day and again now my publisher, introduced us and thought it would be good co-writing together, and it just clicked. And that's how I met Frank. And we still- we haven't written in a while. We wrote one in January of this year, so we get our annual song in.

**Chandler:** Right.

**Gary:** But it just, you know, we've met people and then my company, Zomba, had all these pop connections. They own Jive records as well. So I wrote I Swear- co-wrote I Swear- And to them it was just as big ole pop record. It was a country song, always for me, and never nothing but. I can't sit down and try to write a pop song. I mean I can, but I don't think it's gonna turn out much. So because of that, when I signed with Zomba, even though they didn't have that song, they used it in a major way to promote me in magazines, all over the place, all kinds of articles to promote me as one of their top writers. And it worked. It really worked. Because I get a call from the boss Clive Calder, asking me to write songs for this group.

**Gary:** He sends me a video and it's the Backstreet Boys at 12 to 20, or whatever, 12 years to 20 years old. I didn't really- no one in the office did it but me. Me and this guy named Wind Perry. And so we wrote a really cool song and we send it to them and they cut it. We have a number one single on it. I mean, and it just blew up from there.

**Chandler:** What song was that?

**Gary:** It's called "Anywhere For You." It's on their very first record. So because of that- it is because of songwriting my life is what it is. I walk in to see them. The first time I ever saw them was in Atlanta. I walked in the auditorium, and they're onstage and they stopped and make a point of me being there, and they harmonize "I Swear" for me. So I mean that's how big that song was to them and to a lot of people I guess. So the boy band thing became a real big deal for me. 90 Degrees, Boy Zone, you know, especially the Backstreet guys. But then, because of my connection with Jive and Zomba, because I kept true to my roots, which is country, our boss Clive Calder kept flowing the pop stuff to me. If I would have left that and just tried to really ingest the pop stuff because it was so cool, he would have- he would look down on me. Because he wanted me to stay true. He wanted me to stay writing. He knew I could write. And if one could flip around there, flip it around and take it.

**Chandler:** Right!

**Gary:** Which is what happened. Some of my biggest successes, all of my biggest successes, are country songs. I don't care what anyone says. My biggest song on Backstreet- and even "Anywhere For You". There was a song, an album called "Back to your heart"- I always thought of it as a country song, but I demoed it as a pop song. And another one called "No One Else Comes Close," five chords maybe, you know, that is beautiful with an acoustic guitar only. But I kinda learned that I need to do what I know how to do. And that's co-write with people and produce and record things that I know how to produce and record. I think anybody, and I think you would agree with this, could listen to a track and figure out a way to copy it, and get the sound and all that. But those guys that are doing that and coming up on their own, that to me- I don't care if they're 18 or 40 or 50, they're brilliant to me. But I state still that you just can't do anything without the song. To me. Nothing. Zero. Somebody's got to have a song.

**Chandler:** Talk about how the songwriting and producing went together. Because I'm sure you didn't start as a producer. I mean you have the musical background, but writing these songs-

**Gary:** I'll tell you this- I started writing songs so that I could be a producer. So that I could get in front of a console. And that's really why I wanted to write songs so I can be in the studio.

**Chandler:** What was the draw of the studio?

**Gary:** I don't know man. It was just magic. I had to be in it. I don't know, I just wanted to be in front of the dials all the time. I guess it goes back from being very, very young and seeing it and being so taken by it.

**Chandler:** What was the first studio you were ever in?

**Gary:** The first one was on Pine Avenue in Niagara Falls- a guy named Buddy Brundo who owns Conway-

**Chandler:** Yes, in Hollywood. That's a great studio.

**Gary:** In fact I was doing a 98 degrees record. And the label just picked everything. So they picked Conway, when I didn't know at the time, but he owned it. I walked in, and he passed by me. It just was like, oh. I almost cried because you know I grew up there. I grew up in Niagara Falls. And Tommy Tedesco and all those guys playing all the time and listening to them. I was a little bitty kid, but I mean, Tommy was in the store. Buddy's dad, Vince, he could pick up a \$5 guitar and make it sound like \$5,000 guitar and instantly sell it. Pick it up, play, and they'd buy it. And this was crazy because they were so good at playing it. But I know I'm getting off here, but I didn't know Tommy's history. I really didn't. I knew he was great. Everybody loved him, and everybody grew up in- You know, "Tommy! Tommy's in LA and kicking the ass" or whatever, you know. Oh my God. I watched the Wrecking Crew. Watch the documentary, "The Wrecking Crew." There's even a lot of it filmed on Pine Avenue, and it shows Buddy's old store Brundo Music. I just love being in the studio when I do the demos and all that. I was the one who stuck my head between speakers from the front side.

**Chandler:** I like to do that too!

**Gary:** I can't count the hours I'm sitting here with Walt Aldridge or Robert Burrow or Alan Schulman- sitting there. Walt had a guitar over here and it's- "that's the lick! Do that one man, it's awesome!" And then that's how we built records back in those days. I wanted be on this side of the glass instead of the other side. I loved it. I started- I had a deal on Capricorn and before a lot of this I've had five record deals. I mean major record- major label record deals. None of them ever really clicked. But the record time that I did at Capricorn we did it here over at East Avalon. That's when I really started getting my chops down as an engineer. And Steve would let me- Steve Moore, the owner- would let me go in there anytime and work in there and I learned how to- what EQ made what sound right, it was all hands on. Then we'd make a mix- it was six, eight hands on the faders- and we all knew our job what to do, or learned all the little tricks about tape this tape that. Then I bought a little four-track cassette deck. It was a little bitty thing, but I sat in front of it all the time with a guitar with the Drumdrops. The record Drumdrops, you remember those? I ended up working a couple of times with the person who made those. So Tom and I were making demos by ourselves and I learned to really- if it took me two hours to do a killer guitar solo, well then it took two hours. I loved it. I just sat there and did it, and then that translated into an eight track Tascam. When I had that eight track Tascam in my basement, even Mac and Alan would come over when they couldn't get a place. I'd let them come over and cut whatever they wanted to cut because it worked!

**Chandler:** Right.

**Gary:** Maybe it's two- one EQ for high end, one EQ for low. You know where to put it, either go up or down. I don't know what the frequency was. But, I remember I was starting to get songs cut on a Rossington Collins band and I was writing with Gary's wife Dale. And so I'd go back and forth to Muscle Shoals Sound down at the river, okay? And you got to take four-wheelers. My son drove me on his four-wheeler or whatever to get there so I could hear my song. I remember talking to Jimmy Johnson. Jimmy telling me that, it doesn't matter what it is that you're in front of, it's what goes in here and whatever happens that comes out of here. That is all that matters. He said to me- because I said I wish I could get in the studio like this all the time. He said, "You're in the studio every time you sit in front of your console- four tracks, eight tracks, 6000 tracks. It don't matter what

it is, you're in the studio creating." That hit me. It hit me like, "Wow". He's right. So man, I've demoed three number one records on an eight track cassette- Tascam, cassette deck.

**Chandler:** Wow.

**Gary:** And that one of those, the "I Swear" demo, is on a songwriter compilation that Warner Brothers put out exactly like it was when I mixed it. And then that was transferred into ADATs, and then the Atari computer for doing drums or whatever. And that translated into a couple- another console. I can't remember what one. It was a big console, but it wasn't really a good one. And that translated- oh, before that I had the Akai 12 track digital recorder. Which, woah, that was big time man! Yeah, that was so cool.

**Chandler:** Yeah. This is funny because there is so much focus on gear, but like you said, it's not about the gear. I like that thought "You're in the studio no matter what you're sitting in front of."

**Gary:** Find a way to make it sound like you want it to sound. I mean, nowadays, I mean- you know what's it is like today. I love what stuff today has allowed you to do. I wouldn't be making this record right now if it wasn't for that. There's no way. It would be thousands of hours of vocals and stuff. But yeah, golly, listen to that- I started writing songs so I could be in the studio to demo them or write them or record them, I mean.

**Chandler:** What kind of things did you have to sacrifice along the way to make all this happen?

**Gary:** Oh Wow. Family. I did everything I could to make it work for my kids, and I was pretty good at it too, because I coached little league for 29 years in a row, every year. Then, I had a lot of pressure to move to Nashville. Let me just back up a little right here and try to make this not so long. The sacrifices for me- It was time away from my kids. Everybody here, even sessions or whatever- writers, whatever- they knew during a certain time that I'm going to be there during little league. I was going to be doing my little league thing, and I could tell you a funny story there. I wrote a song with Walt, I brought it to Walt as a matter of fact, and then my guy got it cut on Alabama's Christmas album. That was my first big record. My first check came in, it was almost \$10,000. You understand what that is from \$0? Right now to me- that'd be like getting a million almost or whatever.

**Chandler:** Yeah.

**Gary:** So the first thing I think to myself is, I can pay the bills and coach all summer, not worry about it. So that's what I did. I think the kids living here was hard at that time. I should've been in Nashville, I really should have. Would I have done better? I don't know man, because I wasn't going to sacrifice leaving my three kids here. I got a divorce and then remarried, then Amanda and I started looking for homes in Nashville and I fought it and fought it. She didn't want it either because her family's here, but my publisher Mike, he did. He set me up with all kinds of real estate agents. I put a deposit on a house, actually Dan Huff's house, and if I had bought that at that time for that money, it would have been a really good move, but I just couldn't do it. And I remember Mike saying when I won my second song of the year, which that's a big deal just to get one- to get any- when I got my second, the speech he gave was basically "Okay. I guess it's okay that you stay in Muscle Shoals."

**Chandler:** So what about California? Did you ever spend any time out in Los Angeles?

**Gary:** I did, and I loved it. You know, when I was a kid that's all I wanted to do. Graduate High School and get out there somehow and play music and be a Beach Boy. I loved the Beach Boys growing up. Oh my God, they'd be one of the top ones too. Meeting Mike Love years later in a professional situation was one of the highlights of my life. LA- meant a great deal. I really wanted to go there, and then some of my friends did. It just turned out that I stayed with these certain guys- couple of guys- and we just went to Houston for some reason and that translated all the way into Nashville to here. Just that little circle. A bunch of my buddies went to LA and most of them but one came back with their tails between their legs. The one that didn't, didn't do it in music but did it in Guitar Center. He started at Guitar Center when it was nothing. He rose to the number two man until he just passed away last year. A great drummer. So yeah, I thought about it. I really did want to do it.

**Chandler:** What is it you love about the south now?

**Gary:** Everything. Particularly right here, there's no better place to raise a family than right here, I think. I live in Sheffield, Alabama, right? We have a school system there. It's not a big school system, but I'm telling you it's a great school system. I have five kids that all started and graduated in that school. I wouldn't trade a minute of it- I could have sent them to any school I wanted to send them to, but we lived there, and that's where you go to school. And I think it was the best thing that ever happened to them. All five are, well Brett is playing- He's a catcher at UNA, but all five of them are successful. All of them. In life and in family. But the south, the food- I love the way people do things down here, especially in this town. I mean, if you say you got to meet somebody at 11:00- What does that really mean? It could be 12:00 easy. I mean, I'm not going to be late, but I mean it's like when we do sessions down here- no one looks at a clock to see what it says. We're done when it is right.

**Chandler:** Right.

**Gary:** I got lucky enough to start doing some things in my life and I bought a piece of land by that river that I wanted so bad and I put a house on it and I'm sure I'm going to die in it, you know what I mean? It's just- there's just something about looking at that barge, listening to it honk, and then watch it go by- slow, easy. See I'm from upstate New York, Buffalo area, and I love it there too. I mean there's no place like home, and I love going back. It's fast and it's exciting, but I'm always ready to come home. It's so weird how good it is down here. Musicians are different. Songs are different. Work pace. Maybe we don't have the high rises or the big whatever that some of the other places have, but the south has so much. I just spent three days in Cleveland, Mississippi and was blown completely away.

**Chandler:** What was going on there?

**Gary:** UNA was doing their Gulf South conference tournament there, and Norbert called me and said, "You've got to go see the studio. You got to go by." Oh my gosh. I mean, on the record off the record- you have to go see that.

**Chandler:** I'll go check it out.

**Gary:** There's a Grammy museum there, so I thought-

**Chandler:** Oh this is where Delta State is.

**Gary:** Yes. I'm thinking to myself, why do I want to go to the Grammy Museum? And I've got a Grammy. I made the Grammy- in LA and all that. Oh my gosh, have you been there?

**Chandler:** No, but I've seen pictures. It looks phenomenal.

**Gary:** It is unbelievable. I'm going to go down to an event for them. We're going to do a writer event for them, raise money out front. Norbert said, "You're there, I'm hooking you up with a couple of people. You've got to go." But the reason I'm saying all that is because I love that history. I love that. The Dockery plantation is two miles from town or wherever. The Crossroads is a half a mile walking distance there. The crossroads! Get down to those crossroads!

**Chandler:** We have so much musical history in the south and so much influence I feel like has come from here.

**Gary:** Blues

**Chandler:** That's right.

**Gary:** Look at Eric Clapton. He took it, and his life has been based off of that. The Dockery Plantation. You think about it, you know what I mean? There's a lot I could say about the south. I mean, I'm not like an Atlanta guy. It's a little too big, but in a lot of ways it's very deep south too.

**Chandler:** So, if you were entering the Industry today, knowing what you have been through, what would you do differently?

**Gary:** I told my son this 15 or more years ago- I would have been so much farther down the road if I had my mentality and had a music program to go to a college. Because I understood it, I would have flown through it.

I would have been a 4.0 student and I would've been able to- Now, this is one instance, just one person. I don't know if this could apply to anyone else but me, but I know for me, it would have taken 10 years off my career. I would have been done 10 years earlier. I believe if I had known and listened and heard some good things- even just contracts. How many contracts did I sign when I was young that- you know what I mean? Anything like that or how do you really craft a song? Oh, this is it. Oh my God. It's like a light bulb in my head would go off. Doing differently, I wish I would've been able to have gone to it. I wish there was a college that had an entertainment section to it.

**Chandler:** Right.

**Gary:** I could have learned a lot more about it, especially that. You know, a great drama class or something that would have helped me with my song writing. I don't know, just stuff like that. I wish I would've done that and I wish- there's a lot of things I wish, but my life took such a path that I don't know what I could change that would have made it any different. I grew up extremely poor, and when I got out, there was a way out for me. The guitar and music and bands was a total way out for me. I loved being a farmer. I loved everything about it. Last night I was riding my bicycle in Sheffield. I took a turn, and I smelled that hay. I was 12 years old again, just like that. I wish I could pinpoint something that was more significant, but is there anything more significant than a higher education in something that you love, right? I don't know.

**Chandler:** I think it's great the way that we've got these programs now in universities. I think one thing that's been difficult is for women to break into the industry.

**Gary:** Yes.

**Chandler:** And the old model of being an apprentice. Getting in, and working your way into an all male studio. I could see how that would be hard to do.

**Gary:** Unbelievable. I think it'd be hard for anybody though now. A lot of the guys that are running our business right now were in the mailroom when I signed my first deals- Walt and I or whoever, Mac. They were in mailrooms or they were running errands and they were cleaning out whatever. I can tell you for a fact, some of the low lying guys in mail rooms and all that, they went on. They're going on. They're still doing it and there's something to really be said about that because things that were done and said and heard- they just sunk in. They took the best parts of those and let the stuff that didn't work- they saw that too, let that go by the wayside, and they become better leaders. Better guys. Some of the greatest guys that I know in this business started as musicians and then ended up running labels. Or they are musicians or arrangers or engineers- like Scott Hendricks. He was one of the best engineers ever turned into a great producer and produced I Swear and all kinds of records. He's running Warner Brothers. One of my favorite men in the whole world. Jim Ed Norman started as a- I don't know what he played with The Eagles before they were The Eagles. He just went on to have this outrageous career as president of labels forever and a man of incredible integrity. It starts in a whole lot of different areas, but to tell somebody what to do to get into this business- I still encourage it because we got to have you. I will say this, if you're not passionate about it, forget it. And I'm telling you, if I'm in a room lecturing, I can find the ones that are passionate and the ones that aren't in two seconds.

**Chandler:** Right.

**Gary:** The ones that are really passionate about this- and I tell parents this too, just forget it if you're going to try to stop them from doing this because you can't. So you just gotta encourage them and help them and if they fall they'll know. If they don't, they're going to be successful. It's harder today than it's ever been, and in some ways it's easier than it's ever been. Anybody can get a song out there.

**Chandler:** That's right. You can put a song on itunes in a day.

**Gary:** That's exactly right.

**Chandler:** So what's next from you? What do you see?

**Gary:** Well this record I'm doing now is really turning it into a big deal for me. So that is turning- I'm getting a lot of calls to do other productions. I'm working with a couple of young acts that I'm excited about. And I'm writing again, which is really cool. I want to try to help, and that's why I built the studio to keep some of those UNA graduates here. I ended up keeping quite a few of them here, and helping them out as much as I could. I just want to see this place going. I think a good way for this place- to help this place go- is to try to find an act or two that comes out of here. It would be a Muscle Shoals based product, come from here. I just think that's what I really try to do. Next is that I do have a lot of productions that I'm- well not a lot, but I do have several productions now on the books that I'm debating on whether to do or not. A lot of things tell me to- like this one record, this Backstreet record. It was important to do because I've been with them for the whole time. It's got such an impressive upside to it, and then I love the guys, so that's why I'm putting my heart and soul into it. That's why they hired me because they knew I would. I really think the best way for me to do that is to write songs and to move forward. The future is to write songs with some of these young artists and work with them in a genre that I know about and let the chips fall. Using whatever influence I might have to help them further their career with management, labels, whatever that is. So that's really what I want to do now. I'm in for Chris too, because Chris has been with me since the start and he's mixing, recording and mixing everything, I know he's as good as it gets in the country, and he's a UNA graduate He's great, he really is.

**Chandler:** So what's the best piece of advice you've ever been given?

**Gary:** If you truly love what you're doing- no matter what anyone says, no matter how bad it gets or how bad they say something is- don't quit. Because I've had many people up there in higher ranks tell me I'd never make it as a songwriter. Never make it doing this or doing that. I honestly don't use it for fuel. I really don't, because I just thought, I wonder why they're thinking that? But I guess I proved them all wrong, right? Most of them anyway, I hope. And another thing about this business advice I would give is, I think this life is the same thing. In life it's the same. We take a step forward and then we take two steps backwards. I always say it's what I do or you do with those two steps backwards that's going to determine where you go or what you do with your life. I guess like, my cup's half full. I think if you're in the music business and your cup is half empty, you're done already. You don't even have an opportunity to do anything because people are going to see it.

**Chandler:** Right

**Gary:** You know, I want to be one of those kind of guys I always wanted to be. Believe me, I am one of those kind of guys that if I knock on your door, I want you to be glad to see me. I don't want to be one of those kind of guys that knocked on your door 50 times, has got nothing to say or nothing to show you or nothing to share with you, and just wants to be in your face. I don't want to be one of those guys. A lot of jobs- a squeaky wheel does get the grease. I'm not so sure about this one. If I want to see somebody in Nashville, I'm going to see them, but they know I've got a reason I'm going to be there. It's not going to be just to hang out and have a cup of coffee or a beer or something. I wanna do that too, but you know what I mean about attitude? Attitude is everything in our business, man. I mean, how can you create something great and something beautiful with a shitty attitude? I don't know. It can't be done.

**Chandler:** That is well said. Well, thanks Gary.

**Gary:** You know that I respect you a lot, you know that.

**Chandler:** I really appreciate it. I really appreciate everything that you do for me and for the community and for all of us.

**Gary:** I just want to leave it better than I found it, man. When I'm gone, I just want to do that. So I hope that I leave some things behind that will make this world a better place than when I found it. I know it's an old cliché.

**Chandler:** But you know, that's a good one.

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## Jerry Philips

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*Jerry Philips, son of Sam Phillips who created Sun Studios, grew up around some of the most iconic and influential musicians in history. His father is known for advocating for racial equality and was instrumental in breaking down racial barriers in the music industry. Jerry is now the executive producer of the television show “Muscle Shoals to Music Row” and carries on his family’s legacy with Big River Broadcasting in Florence, Alabama.*

**Chandler:** Happy to have you be a part of this. I want to talk a little bit about you and your history- your family’s history, the south, the influence of the south. I’ve got a bunch of questions for you. I especially want to talk to you about how the industry has changed. So, the starting point here is where did you grow up and what made you realize that music was going to be part of your path?

**Jerry:** Well, that’s a pretty simple question to answer really. You know my dad and my mother were both born here- my mother in Sheffield and my father in Florence. In 1945, he moved to Memphis and my brother and I were born— ‘45 for him ‘48 for me. We knew if we wanted to see our father- because he was working all the time, he worked at the radio station, WRSC during the day and he was maintaining the baseball parks, The Memphis Chicks PA system, and he’d opened a studio and he was working 18 hours a day just trying to feed his family- so if we wanted to go to see our father most of the time during those periods of time, the early 50’s and that kind of stuff- 50’s, mid 50’s, our mother took us to the studio. So we were surrounded by music and the struggle of music also, which sometimes gets left out in the story; what the real struggle is, and what chances pioneers in music really we’re taking, particularly in the segregated south in ‘57. So we were always exposed to the music thing, and I guess just by osmosis just really loved it, you know? And we realized early on it was key to our being able to eat and live, you know what I mean?

**Chandler:** Growing up, did you play an instrument?

**Jerry:** I got my first guitar at 12, and I played in bands all through my high school years. I did have, at Sun records, a group called the Gestures and it was Jim Dickinson in that band. You know it was an original record and at that time- when he came back that time in ‘66- Sam had kind of pulled back on the actual Sun label, because he’d seen the demise of independence coming. It was major labels who were buying the distributors. They were buying up independent distributors and they were really hurting the indie people. And so he saw the handwriting on the wall and decided to get out of independent record business. And he was right, you know. He sold his label in 1969 to Shelby Singleton over in Nashville. That 60s era our studio, the Sam Phillip’s recording studio- we cut a lot of records there- you know Wooly Bully and Jerry Louis- a whole bunch of people. So, you know, we worked very well. We pulled back, still doing some releases on it with the promotional effort behind it and all that. It was not nearly what it was in the day when Sam was on the road. You know, himself, 70 to 80,000 miles a year, stopping at every radio tower he saw.

**Chandler:** Right. Wow. Going and doing the hustle.

**Jerry:** Yeah.

**Chandler:** Yeah, I guess, I mean before the Internet and things like that, that’s the way you really had to hit the ground and get people interested and excited about it.

**Jerry:** Honestly he would ride to every radio tower. You know, he would do the south, Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi and that area there. And literally, if he saw a radio tower- one he didn’t put on his list or something, he’d just pulled in there with just records in his trunk and say “Hey man, I’d appreciate some airplay on this thing, you know?”

**Chandler:** Right? Yeah, it’s such a cool time in history. I guess the mid 50’s when TV came in, people started getting TVs in their house. The radio had such a stronghold ahead of that, and still did of course, so influential. Still to this day, I think now, you know, radio is changing with satellite and all these other things that were going on, but then also just the type of music that was happening. We’re talking about what was it in ‘64, ‘65 when

we really kind of got that change from folk to electric guitars starting to hit the scene. It seems like your family was right in the middle of all of that. Right in the heart of all those changes that were happening.

**Jerry:** Yeah, we were. Like I said, at that particular time we were very much a recording facility. We were recording everybody. I mean everybody. I mean every local good band was through. The Yardbirds was through there, Phil Collins was in there. We just had a really good working studio and it was mainly in production. Those years you could get pretty big budgets from record companies on production, \$250,000 to \$300,000 on an album for somebody.

**Chandler:** Oh Wow. Wow. Yeah. That's good. Which would be a miracle today even. It's kind of crazy because I have history of coming up in LA and working on some big projects with some decent budgets, but you know, you hear about it just drying up now. I think the big shift is where people are recording in their house, of course it's also so different from the idea of having a studio where people would come to get that vibe and be a part of a community project, you know, putting something together with a team of people. I think that was really a good way to make these things happen.

**Jerry:** I simply see that's the only way to make real music happen is getting in a room and play, you know, don't take six guitar breaks on Pro Tools and take the best lick out of this first one, and tag it on until you hit this one perfect one guitar break. We're not perfect. We're human. We're not perfect and I know that a lot of this in your interview here is about my father, but one of his favorite sayings was, "perfect imperfection is what we're looking for." It's not anything perfect, we're not looking for anything perfect, we're looking for perfect imperfections. You know, he's the same guy that left the telephone ringing in one of his- I think it was Junior Parker who's song it was, but the secretary was gone and phone rang and you could hear it on the recording and the guys in the band said, hey, we got to do it again. He said, "hell no, we're not doing it again. I'm not throwing away the best cut I got just because the damn phone rang and he said you couldn't have planned that. That's natural. That's what happens, you know?"

**Chandler:** Yeah. Vibes have got to win out, in my opinion.

**Jerry:** It's just a different way to look at things. I just think- I'm probably getting into preaching here, but I just think there's a lot of that missing in music today, man. Think about those guys the other night that you heard was so good. They were in a room playing. There was nobody tuning them. There was nobody- we weren't doing a retake and retake and retake. And that's why we do it live because we don't want to have to stop and go- "Oh God, oh, I made a mistake. Let me fix that." Well, you know, too bad.

**Chandler:** Actually. Yeah, Let's talk about that. You bringing up the show that you're putting on, or I guess it's like a showcase. It's really how I've been thinking of it is the Muscle Shoals to Music Row. You record it live, with a live audience at FAME studios right now.

**Jerry:** Stream it live that night and it's also on my radio station here at Kix 96, but it started at the Holiday Inn- the Old Holiday Inn, which is now the Fairfield Inn or whatever over there in Sheffield next to Outback, whatever that hotel was. We started over there 17 years ago as a singer songwriters showcase and we had one camera. I think we were probably the first people that were streaming music out here and we had to deal with the setup with ASCAP, BMI, SESAC- they would send three songwriters down and we would actually pick them up, treating them to the best restaurants, put them in best hotels. Just awesome. The songwriters just loved the hell out of it, man. We're getting treated like royalty here and we weren't doing it for any particular reason. It's just that we- my family is a family that believes in the song first- you've got to have a song or something- you can make a lot of noise but you've got to have a really good song first. So that's why I'm a songwriter, and that's why we have such a feeling for songwriters. They really appreciated how we treated them. So that was 16, 17 years ago and then we moved from there to the Marriott and spent six or seven years over there, which was a good relationship we had to get to that new hotel, because that really shows what we are saying when we put people over there. Then we moved to FAME because we had been working on the Alabama Public Television deal and that's an iconic place to originate out of.

**Chandler:** For sure!

**Jerry:** So that's kind of the progression of that show. And it's been a labor of love, believe me- trying to get sponsors and all that. Over these years it's been a difficult situation, because they'd always say when I'd go to the syndicators and they say, well, you know get Bill Anderson, or if you had Kenny Chesney, if you had some star hosting the show, we'd be glad to pick it up and you could show us you got a million viewers online, or wherever it is, we'd be glad to help you. And I'm saying, well, you know, we want to make our own celebrities out of our own people. We looked for somebody to help us do this, but easier said than done.

**Chandler:** I really think what you're doing there is great. I caught it on TV a number of times and then had the pleasure of being in the audience that time.

**Jerry:** Well, It's getting better now because we really weren't in the TV business, you know what I mean? But the stuff that you see when you stream it live, it's an unedited version and switched by the videos, which we go back in for the television act now. We've just recently really started doing that, three different cameras that we can switch to grab shots, so we're getting more and more deep into the actual post production of it and they're getting better and better and better on the post production level.

**Chandler:** Well, like you said it, you know, it all starts with the song and the acts that I've been seeing are slaying it with the songs.

**Jerry:** Hallie, my daughter, she's booking the show now. She's pretty hip on who's up and coming and who's good and- we really like to use that show as a stepping stone for new, good, real up-and-coming artists. And we like established artists too, but they come with some of those-

**Chandler:** Yeah those riders! For sure. So, going back, what are some of your- I know you're a song songwriter. What are some of your biggest influences and artists that you love?

**Jerry:** For me, blues was a big influence on me. You know, all the stuff my dad was recording and Howlin' Wolf is my favorite artist. I got a wolf on my arm. But he's sort of a rooster, but you know, all those guys, Junior Parker, even Rufus Thomas and Little Milton, all those blues guys were the first things that I was exposed to a real young kid. Then of course through the whole rockabilly scene was really in my bag. You know, Carl Perkins and all that. I mean I just loved it, you know? And I still do, I still have a hard time- unless it's got some kind of blues influence or the rockabilly influence or for some kind of influence like that- I guess it is feel that I'm talking about, that's what it all boils down to- is feel. I mean, if it doesn't have any feel I'm not interested in it- me personally in it. If it's got feel and rhythm, I don't care what you're saying. I just don't give a crap what you're saying. It's like The Kinks—you know they had Louie Louie, still nobody knows what the words to that song and it is still one of the biggest songs in the world.

**Chandler:** Yeah, you hear people who get lyrics wrong all the time. It's not about that, it's about the vibe and the feeling.

**Jerry:** But if you've got feel and good lyrics you've really got something going for you, especially if you're touching people's soul, what Sam said was the soul of a man never dies. That was Howlin' Wolf. When you are touching people's souls, you really are doing something that- well music can be just noise, it could just be just noise.

**Chandler:** So what do you think about how the south has influenced music? I guess that you would agree that the blues comes from this part of the country.

**Jerry:** When you get down in Clarksdale, Mississippi- and that's what happened in Memphis was- you know you've got Mississippi, Arkansas, and Memphis was just there in the corner with all these dirt famers, poor people, and the only kind of release they had was their music, and whenever they were listening to their music they really weren't- oh it was the blues. They really weren't necessarily all that sad while they were playing it. But yeah, I mean the south is such an independent area. Dan Penn said one time- they asked him about the Memphis sound- what was the secret of the Memphis Sound? He said, well we just don't let nobody tell us what to do. That's his answer, and that's a pretty good answer. And then we were at a party- my dad, my brother and I,

we all had a few drinks and there was this rock band there from London. I believe they were, I can't remember who exactly they were, but one of the guys came up to my dad said- Mr. Phillips, what's the secret of rock and roll? And my dad looked at him and square in the eyes and he was real nice about it- He said son, you've got to reach way down inside yourself and pull it out of your asshole.

**Chandler:** That's deep inside!

**Jerry:** What he was saying was you've got to go down and get this stuff. You can't just be surface and don't play for me what you think I want to hear. That's what he told all his black artists. Look, I'm white, I get it. But I don't want to hear what you think that I want to hear. I want to hear what you sound like. Don't compare yourself to anybody else. Just let me have just you.

**Chandler:** Right.

**Jerry:** I mean even me, and I'm not a greatest singer in the world, but I still remember that even when sometimes I'm thinking I'm not doing so well, I go, "You know what, Don't compare yourself to anybody. I'm not Elvis, or I'm not any other great singer. I'm not a great singer. But I do have something to offer." That's how he did every one of his artists was to get out of them what they didn't know how to get out of themselves. And once they realized it was okay to be me, some really good stuff came from that. Confidence is a big deal.

**Chandler:** You mentioned earlier the struggle. I think you just touched on it. Your family's known for taking all different types of people and all different kinds of music and finding the heart and soul in it and bringing it out to the world. What do you think gave your dad the courage to do that, or the impetus to be accepting of music without looking at who it was coming from?

**Jerry:** I think it came from when he was a kid, he actually was in the cotton fields. He was born in 1923, so he saw fields full of black cotton pickers, and white cotton pickers too, but he always said that black people had a little different rhythm about they way they picked the cotton- not that one was any better than the other, but they had a different feel about how they did their thing, and the way they sang- they sang in those fields a capella singing just to lift their burdens, and I think that he wanted to give people that weren't going to get a chance the chance to be heard. He loved the blues- in the 40's and 50's, the black people just had a certain style- it was know as "race music." With no white radio stations playing it. There on the Chitlin circuit or whatever you want to call it, you know, they couldn't go in any of the restaurants, couldn't do anything. He hated that. He never could understand all that. Maybe he could understand it, but he didn't ever like it. And around our house was never any derogatory talk or any of that kind of stuff because there just wasn't that kind of thing- he had a lot of respect for these people, but he knew that they weren't going to be able to be artists if somebody didn't do something about it. This music might just go away.

**Chandler:** Right

**Jerry:** The Howling Wolfs of the world. Think about a world without Wilson Pickett in it.

**Chandler:** Can you imagine?

**Jerry:** I can't, I can't. But then here's a white guy sitting in the Memphis, Tennessee and the word's out. There's a white guy in Memphis that you can go in there and audition for him, and if he liked you, he would put a record out on you . . . and he doesn't charge you anything. Of course the black artists are going- okay, where's the hook? I know there's a hook in there somewhere, there's got to be a hook there. But there really wasn't a hook in there, and he auditioned- I mean he didn't take money from people to come in and pay for a song. He wouldn't even want the money. But he was looking for talent, and he found it.

**Chandler:** Yeah, a lot of people say that the music industry in this part of the country was really the first to break down those barriers between race and that the color of a person's skin didn't matter in the studio.

**Jerry:** There's no doubt about it. I mean Memphis, Stax, and the whole deal. But Sam Philips, he and Elvis really busted those barriers down- the racial barriers, particularly in radio. But also in culture and everything.

Because Elvis was listening to Dewey Philips on WHBQ and Dewey was playing a mixture of blues and hill-billy and everything, a lot of stuff that my dad was recording, he was playing. like the Howlin' Wolf record and all that. And Elvis was listening to all that stuff, and that's why when he comes to the studio, he knows That's Alright Mama by Big Boy Arthur Crudup- whatever. He knows Mystery Train by little Junior Parker. He knows the words, the tune, and how to play it. His first big hit was "That's Alright Mama", which was Arthur 'Big Boy' Crudup's song. Elvis was steeped in blues, but he was as different as you could possibly be. It was not easy either, man. I mean my dad told me stories about taking Elvis on the road with him to promote his record with him and a lot of the white, regular stations would not let Elvis use the bathroom, because they thought his music was "race music". Or you know, it was gonna ruin their children. I mean, you can understand the thought process going on at that time.

**Chandler:** We've come a long way.

**Jerry:** We have come a long way and you can't deny that Little Richard and those guys were out there rocking before, but they weren't getting any airplay on white radio stations, it was all on black radio stations. Then when Sam and Elvis busted through- because a lot of the radio stations would say "we can't play that stuff, it just sounds too white," and the other stations would say "we can play that, it sounds too black." So there was a real dilemma. I mean, it was not happening. It happened in Memphis when Dewey played the first record like 10 times in a row the first night- just played it over and over and over, and it was happening there. But it didn't just happen. Elvis just didn't come along and do that. In fact Sam was just about bankrupt, almost. I mean he had an Elvis record climbing up the charts, but distributors weren't paying him but every 90 days, so he didn't have the money to press more records. So it was a vicious cycle, and that's when the sale came about, which he never put him up for sale. Tom Parker was out there saying he was for sale- trying to get somebody to buy him, and then when my dad was asked how much money would you want for him. He said, well he's not for sale. Well how much would you take if he was for sale? And he pulled his figured out of the air: \$35,000. I mean that's a big hunk of money at 1950, right? Probably like \$350,000-\$400,000 now, or more. I don't even know.

**Chandler:** Well, then you're living net 90- waiting to hopefully to get paid on an old invoice, because we're still doing that in the music industry right now.

**Jerry:** The independent labels, if they didn't think you had another record come behind it, they just wouldn't pay you. They would just say sue me- no one had the money to hire lawyers, you know. It was tough, man. All that stuff didn't come easy and my dad had two nervous breakdowns, I know it is not about what you want to talk about, but somehow in the mix. . . .

**Chandler:** No, this is exactly it.

**Jerry:** It is all a part of this southern thing. When my mother died she had saved all those letters that dad had sent to her when he was on the road and- you know, it's a real struggle what he was doing out there staying in the YMCAs because it was like a nickel a night or something, I don't know what it was. But then when he had Rocket 88 out there, he had cut Rocket 88 on Jackie Brenston and Ike Turner and them and leased it to Chess and it was a big record for his first big hit, and Lenard Chess was writing these letters- said, "Sam we got to have more product from Jackie Brenston; we need to get another single." And he was writing them back saying, "Well I don't have it yet. I've got some stuff, but I don't think it's the right stuff. I just don't think it's the right stuff. It's not fair to the artist, it's not fair to me, it's not fair to you- for me to send you something that I don't think is fantastic." Which was really- he was bucking the people that were making him money, but that's how true he was to the music. I think that's kind of a southern thing- just being true to the music. Truly being true to the music and the rest will come. It won't come by itself. Get the music first. The soul- get the soul first and feeling first. That's how he operated. He recorded a lot of people that didn't have any feeling or soul, but he didn't put a record out on them- and he did do a few records out for some of them. Not very many though. In every single artist, if you look back, that he recorded- usually as soon as they open their mouth you know who they are. You don't have to say, is that Tim McGraw or is it Kenny Chesney? Who is that, who is that? Kenny Chesney, I can

always tell when he's singing. He's got an unusual voice. I mean it takes a certain grit, you know, the southern man is just different breed of person. There's no doubt about it.

**Chandler:** So let me ask you about yourself and your songwriting. You've seen so much over the years and seen so many different amazing artists come up and craft their work- what is your compositional process like?

**Jerry:** It's two or three different things. I'm always listening for song titles. I have an iPhone full of titles. In what people say, if they say something. I wrote a song, it has been a year ago or so now, I'll Treat Her Just Like She Was Mine. It is a good example of how you can turn a song around. My truck broke down and a friend of mine's got a body shop and I asked him if he could come pick it up and fix it. And he said, don't worry about it, man. I'll treat her just like she was mine- and he was talking about my truck. I said, well, that's a pretty good title. So I turned it into a steal your woman song- when you wake up, she'll be gone, she was alone and I was alone, but don't you worry she'll be fine, I'll treat her just like she was mine. So that kind of process and a lot of the time for me, I'll get a rhythm pattern or chord progression so I won't know what it is, but I just like it. It's that rhythm thing. If I like it, I like it. And then sometimes start scrolling through song titles to see what this rhythm might fit. That's kinda really my process.

**Chandler:** Oh, that's great. You have got to have a concept. Where are you trying to go if you don't have a concept?

**Jerry:** And you can't write it all on the first verse. It's got to be a story that develops through this thing. And I've got simple songs. I've never been a hugely successful songwriter, but I think it's because I never tried to write commercially. I mean I've tried to get my songs cut and I have had a few cuts and stuff, but I opened a publishing company in Nashville called Power Diamond Music. I had a bunch of Memphis songs, a bunch of my songs, and I thought, man, I'm going to go over here where there's an actual music business here. You can walk down the street and there are labels. I got there and found out that they always said on the pitch sheet, send us something outside of the box. And believe me, I had some different sounding, good, stuff. Not just Weirdo stuff, but they really didn't want it. I like Nashville, but I'm just saying they really didn't want anything outside the box. We stayed there,

**Chandler:** Well, it's risky.

**Jerry:** Yeah. it is risky. So after I had been there about a year and a half, people started telling me, well man if your demos started to sound a little more like Nashville records, so they're shifting from the song to the production sound, whatever it might be more commercial. I resisted, I resisted, I resisted it. And then finally I kind of found myself, okay, I'm going to go use some of these guys in these Nashville demo studios and I'm going to try this approach and make my stuff sound a little more palatable. Did that for awhile, then one day out of the clear blue sky, my father asked me- he said, "Man, you're not over there kissing people's asses trying to get cuts over there?" And I was. I didn't realize I was, I didn't start out doing that. But that's what Nashville and cities like that will do to you. They'll pull you off your game, and all of a sudden you're doing the same thing that everybody else is doing. And you're in the same fishing hole as everybody else- so needless to say, my publishing company lasted about four years, and I had a little bit of success with it, but not much. But you know they ran Sam Philips over there too! He had a studio over there and he used to jee-haw with them, man. He just was too different from what they were doing. So I guess I'm a victim of that, and I've never been interested in doing anything that anybody else has done. And if I'm ever wildly successful, that'd be great. But right now my age and stuff, I'm trying to leave a legacy of good music so that when I'm dead and gone, my kids, grandkids or whatever can say, "Hey, he's done some pretty damn good stuff." I'm not doing music just trying to get cuts. I'm not, but I'm just now more focused on if it's an artist and studio or something like that, I'll pitch directly to them. I'm not going to see the Belmont grad that's on the front desk. No, no, no. The A&R intern. Sorry. That's why Bob McDill- and if, you know who Bob McDill is, He wrote all those, Don Williams songs. He had like, I don't know how many number ones and it's unbelievable. Then when he had to start having to drop his songs off to the front desk he just quit writing the songs and started writing books. I get so frustrated with all that. I've got some guys that I write with on a regular basis and we have fun. It is fun now.

**Chandler:** That's right. I always say, "It's called playing music, not working music." When it gets to be on the other side of the fence, you've got to readjust. And it sounds like that's what happened in Nashville.

**Jerry:** Yeah. Unfortunately, you know, they had no other income streams besides depending on writing songs as a songwriter, but I think if I had to do that, I mean I think I could probably get a lot of that. We have publishing deals- the companies ourselves, but I think I could probably get a publishing writing deal with draw and all that kind of stuff. And then, I mean it's just that pitch person that you gotta have, and then you got to have the song that they think they want.

**Chandler:** So for somebody who's reading this interview and that's what they want to do is to be a songwriter. Do you have any advice that you can give them? A tip or, or something to avoid?

**Jerry:** Man, you know Walt Aldridge and Mac MacAnally or anybody- they probably have a better answer for you on how to be successful. But I just think for me, my advice is just write what you like- now if you're not a very good songwriter, that plays into it too. I won't mention his name because he's a pretty big guy in Nashville, but he was just telling me to be a good writer- he was just telling me how miserable it is to go in every day and have to try to write this- you know what's happened today? Pop country, bro-country music for these bands that I got nothing against them. Anybody that makes it in the music business I am for them, because it's tough. But the stuff that you know, like you know, the Florida Georgia Line and stuff like that. I mean those guys, I've got nothing against them, but I mean that's not the kind of songs that a lot of people write. But if you're trying to make a living at it, you better come up with something that they're going to- you've got to sell your soul a little bit. If that's what you're trying to do. But then you got the Bob Dylans of the world, and the Waylon Jennings of the world, and the Willie Nelsons of the world and all them that didn't sell their soul. Well, Willie did sell his soul, but he was a successful songwriter in Nashville and all of that. But the outlaws have come along that hold their piece. You know what I mean? They don't want us to change the industry. And then all of a sudden the whole industry wants one of them guys. It started with Elvis before it- there was Fabian; after Elvis, there was Ricky Nelson, there was Dion, there was- all these other Elvis's getting in on that marketing.

**Chandler:** So I hear you saying be true to yourself. This something you said Your Dad said that you believe, and I think that's the key to be happy, really. Otherwise, like you say you are giving up a little bit of your soul to try and be in the business of it instead of letting the business come and find you.

**Jerry:** Yeah. And it may never find you. That's the chance you took. It may have never found my dad. When he came home and told my mother, "Hey, I'm quitting"- because he started radio here, the WLAY- and then from there to Decatur, which is how you do in radio. And then he went from Decatur to better paying job in Nashville to a really, pretty damn good paying job in Memphis. In the radio chain. And when he came home and said that he had to quit- he was working too much you'd have to- he had one of these things to choose to go to the studio or go to the good paying job. So where do you think he wanted to go? He left the good paying job to come tell my mother and his family that "I'm going to focus on recording black artists only," in 1950. Okay. That's pretty strong, man.

**Chandler:** How'd she take it?

**Jerry:** My mother doesn't get near enough credit for rock and roll music or whatever you wanna call it, but she said to him, but I've heard it out of her mouth and out of his- "whatever you want to do is fine with us. We have so much faith in you." Basically she was saying that we're behind you all the way- whatever he wanted to do. We know you'll be successful. So you know, she could have said, are you kidding me? The kids over here want to eat. Like I said, he rolled the dice, he put it all on the line, but for a reason: It was for the music. He was making money. I mean, he wasn't getting rich, but you know, he always had a nice car or whatever.

**Chandler:** It's a big gamble and it paid off.

**Jerry:** For sure. It could've just as easily not. But that's that independent spirit again. Southern independent spirit.

**Chandler:** Right now on your top list of people that you're interested in listening to- new artists. What do you like? What are you listening to these days?

**Jerry:** Well, I'll like Paul Thorn. I like the Chris Stapleton. I'm trying to think. No, there's not very many really new artists that I'm just really totally into the days.

**Chandler:** Well, let me, let me change gears then again. So you grew up in Memphis, but you've now decided to settle here in Florence. Well, what brought you back?

**Jerry:** Of course we had these radio stations since back in 72, and so my brother and I invested with our father in a radio station in Memphis and he got us involved in radio. He had always wanted a radio station in his hometown, so we eventually go these stations. So I was going back and forth from Memphis over here once or twice a week anyway, just kind of, you know, dealing with the state and all that. And then I got divorced in Memphis and lost my house. So we had a house on the river down in this small fishing place. And so I said, you know what, I'm just going to move down there cause that way I'll be halfway between here and Nashville too. And so I moved there 20 years ago and that's where I live now, which is about 60 miles away. It doesn't take long, but that's kinda how I ended up being here mostly. But like all my life I've been coming here because when I was a kid, my mother was coming to see her sister, and my father's coming here to see his brothers. I mean always back and forth. This area is much like home to me as Memphis.

**Chandler:** Well somebody just drew the lines of the map anyway. I mean really this is not a far commute between Memphis, Nashville, shoot, I'm from Atlanta, and that's only four hours away. It's really not that far at all.

**Jerry:** I told you about the river here and you got the river in Memphis, you know, they always say something about the river.

**Chandler:** I'm new to the town, but I love that river.

**Jerry:** Well Memphis and Muscle Shoals are sister cities. You know, we used to do a lot more. That's one thing my daughter is working on now and she's already done some. In the sixties and seventies, we were doing a lot of swapping off of musicians like David Hood and those guys will come back to the studio in Memphis to do some sessions. We'd send Steve Cropper up here and you know, and we've swapped Travis Womack. He came from Memphis to over here and we were just switching off musicians. It was a great, great combination of flavors because they all had the same feel, you know what I mean? He put those guys in a room together. You could count on them coming up with something, they'll come up with something and because it was coming out of their soul. I say Memphis and Muscle Shoals are the two closest cities I know of- that are really similar in soul, similar in locations, similar in river, similar in everything, humidity. As opposed to Nashville, which nothing against Nashville, but it's just different there.

**Chandler:** I've got to get over to Memphis, and spend some time up there.

**Jerry:** You need to; you need to come see the Sun Studio.—After Sam outgrew that place, he built this really cool building one block over and one block down from Sun studios, and I think dad started working on it in 1960.

**Chandler:** Yeah, I'd love to go check that out.

**Jerry:** Yeah. Well anytime you give me a heads up when you think you might want to go and I'll meet you down there if you know, we'll just kinda do the do, you know?

**Chandler:** That sounds like a lot of fun. Okay, Last question here. What do you see as the future of the music industry? Not an easy question.

**Jerry:** I see signs all around of things flipping back around, you know? With vinyl and young people discovering- having the experience of actually having to sit down and listen to an album, watching it spin around and reading the liner notes and also, I think people are starting to get back into a room and play again. I really think

that's coming because we've worked with some bands in Memphis that have only recorded in ProTools and one - I never forget this, one of the youngsters, young piano player in there and had headphones on and he heard the tape rewind. He goes, what's that noise? He'd never heard tape rewind. So that's pretty far removed from the, from the recording process. And on that same session we had, that particular day, we had some technical issues, a couple of two or three of the channels were out or something. You know how that stuff goes It boils down to me telling them "Guys, if we only have one track, we could still cut a record". You know what I mean? Quit depending on fixing every damn thing and depending on another track to put some bullshit on there. We've got a track. We've got tracking machine. We can cut. I mean we had more than that, but I'm just saying if we only had one. Some of the greatest records in the world were recorded mono. So there's no excuse.

**Chandler:** Just got to start with the song. I think you nailed it.

**Jerry:** It's got to start with the song, don't fix it, but yeah,

**Chandler:** I think people are going to get back into the craft and the art of making music, creating music. I mean, you got to go and talk to these bands and they want to come in the studio and record and I'm like, well why don't we meet at your rehearsal space? Let me hear you play. Have you played the song 100 times together? Like have you worked it out and do you really know what we're gonna do? They said, oh well we can figure it out in the studio. We'll try different stuff. Like you know, chopping things up and yeah, you can, you can chop stuff up. And, and like I said earlier, if you've got the vibe and it's great . . . It's amazing. Like the phone ringing in the background. Sure. You go with it, you go with it. You know, you gotta have the right song, you got to have the right melody, you gotta have the ability to perform and know each other. Like you mentioned David Hood and the musicians trading back and forth. Well, if we've got musicians that can play, put them in the room together.

**Jerry:** Then something's going to happen.

**Chandler:** You can get great stuff. So I think we're getting back to it. I think we're getting back to people learning their craft.

**Jerry:** I have great faith that it's turning around. So much of this perfection has been there, you know, so much. But I just don't think people really like that. Let me tell you a quick story. We were in Nashville with this really heavyweight record producer. He took us to someplace to eat. It had alligator and ostrich and just all we wanted was some damn steak and some taters. We went to this place that I didn't know what to order, but the whole time we're eating dinner there. He gets saying, Sam, can't wait to get you back to my house and play you some stuff. It's gonna knock you dead in the dirt, you know? He kept saying that. Dad said, "Well, great, can't wait to hear it. We just can't live here." And so this went on for a long time and then we got back to his house and the first day you didn't have a very good sound system for big, heavy record producer. It really wasn't very good. And then he put this couple tracks on and there was nothing just but wall to wall lead guitar basically just over the singer and just everywhere. First thing Sam said to him was, "first thing I'd do is kill that damn guitar player." And he was right. I mean he was just targeted, was all about himself. He wouldn't, he wasn't supporting the record or the act or anything like that, you know, and that guy didn't have much to say to him after that, but I mean Sam wasn't be mean to him or rude to him. But he started off well and he was, it was pretty Dang off. And it just goes to show you people like to thank those guys, get love. I don't know, I think they get a little bit of heady on some of their success and stuff.

**Chandler:** That Bishop Gun guitar player, Drew, he was just tasteful. I really liked what he played. He had a really unique style. His playing was a classical fingerpicking style, but on electric.

**Jerry:** He was great and we played in the room afterwards together. I love playing with a great guitar player. His name was Drew Smithers. Travis McCready was the lead singer. Ben Lewis was bass and Burns plays drums.

**Chandler:** Right. And Burns, he's an engineer. I talked to him a little bit. He knows what's going on. He's got a good mic selection, and he's the technical guy for sure.

**Jerry:** They're really nice. They're really appreciative and I think they're just kind of surprised at how well they're going over, but it's about their music and music and you know, of course Travis, he's got it all right, he's six foot five or whatever. Long hair plays, harmonica, things like that.

**Chandler:** He can sing his ass off. It's unique, you know, his pronunciations, the way he puts it all together is unique.

**Jerry:** They don't sound like Lynard Skynard rehashers.

**Chandler:** No, that's good. Solid. And then that Hey Jude, that was great too, you know.

**Jerry:** And that was out of respect for Wilson Pickett cutting that. But you know, like I said, I'm reluctant to say those people are going anywhere that there's a whole lot of other things maybe, but I do know like Paul Thorn, if those guys get out of the road and stay on the road, they will build a following. That can't be that denied.

**Chandler:** Well, I saw him at your place and then I went in Singing River the next night to hear him again. You know if I go to the same restaurant and eat two nights in a row, there's something to be said there.

**Jerry:** I know for a fact that particularly in the independent world, you got to be at your plate and you got to be able to build a fan base. You go out yourself or going to be doing that and you're good. You will get a following Paul Thorn he's got his own record label, own on publishing company, his own studio. They travel in, what the Mercedes van? But they could have a bus and all that, but their philosophy is when they go down the road, they wanna come back with money. You know, so they book themselves, not in cheap hotels, but they do priceline.com or whatever. Whatever they can do. They are very management savvy. Paul Thorns, awesome player off the syndrome from riders was building management, and they're partners and those, they play like 270 days a year. But I mean, you figure, I'm not sure what they're making now, but if you figured they're making 10 grand a night, 200 grand? I mean, because they wouldn't sign with a major label. I don't think they can do it because they lose control instantly. My advice to these bands, I don't know it all, but Sputnik Monroe, the wrestler used to a professional wrestler. I was too, for a little while, but when I was cutting records, he kept drilled into my head. These guys need to be out just like he was wrestling. Wrestlers had to wrestle everybody all the time to get a following. He was saying these guys need to be on the road playing all the time. I go, well no, we'll wait until we get a record deal, you know, and we'll have some support tour and all that. He kept saying, I'm telling you man, they just they just need to be out there playing. And he was right then and he's right now. These guys are waiting, waiting for the golden goose to come in a record company to sign. It's like the NFL hockey team for 12 something. There's only so many guys are going gonna make it. Three or four major companies control everything there's more independents now, but you know, you just gotta build your own following.

**Chandler:** Right. Well, and it's doable. Now you can release your own records. You can get on itunes. We can record something in here today and be on itunes tomorrow, you know? And then if we go out like your dad going from station to station, he'd go out and hit towns up and find those shows and hustle. Yeah, I mean I think that's good advice for people to take who want to be in this industry is to realize that you're going to have to really work hard.

**Jerry:** But he could walk in some, if you want a record deal, walk into, hey man, everyone we play with on eight, 10,000 people will sell this much money and merch and you know, we'd like to have a little tour support money here, that'd perk their ears. If that's what you're looking for, but you just can't sit around and wait from the side and even if you- I don't want to claim to be an expert on all this because I haven't really been in the record business for awhile now. But even if you get signed to a label- I mean I've had record deals where they signed it and then they changed record presidents. So all the previous stuff that the guy signed- gone. And you're still, they're still tied up, right? For two years or more.

**Chandler:** Well, then you hear deals where they sign you just to shelve you. Just to get you out of the way of another artist. It's a tricky business.

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**Jerry:** There's some really good people in this business, particularly musicians, you know? But there's some really bad ones too. I just think young people need to get a good band together and go play. That's it. You can make a living.

**Chandler:** Yeah, you can, I think. I believe you can. I think the you know, music industry is not going anywhere and people love music and we love music.

**Jerry:** Well, you know, we got a lay we're fixing to do- I think It's with John Paul White I hope, you know John Paul, direct to lathe, which I know is nothing new necessarily because I think what's his name- Jack White done it a few times, but people are interested in that stuff, particulaly young people when, you know, when Neil young came out and said vinyl was hip, and when Jack White said vinyl was hip- when some leadership position like that says, hey, this is cool. It changes the whole thing. And that's what's kind of happened. Different people coming out.

**Chandler:** Who's got a lathe Is anybody doing that?

**Jerry:** Jeff Powell runs a company called "Take Out Vinyl". I made a deal with him, gave him a room and I get a percentage of the business. We had the first two lathes in Memphis in 1960. We had two of some of the best you could buy, and I did a lot of mastering, but you can't hardly find them anymore. But I think Jack White is having some built I think and I know he had some kind of record pressing machine.

**Chandler:** It is different and it's magical. Vinyl is amazing. A lot of students haven't even heard it. I teach students that have never experienced cassettes tapes.

**Jerry:** Yeah. I know! I was in a restaurant the other day with an atlas. A young waitress comes up, just goes, "what is that?" And I said "this" I said some map. She goes a map? A roadmap. She'd never seen them. You know what I mean?

**Chandler:** Yeah. It's amazing the way the world has progressed.

**Jerry:** I know you're a great teacher, man. I'm glad you are here with us, and I've enjoyed meeting you.

**Chandler:** Likewise. Thanks again for talking to me today.

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## Brad Blackwood

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*Grammy award and Pensado award winning mastering engineer Brad Blackwood started recording in high school, working with several of his friends' rock n' roll bands. Even as he attended college he was drawn to music, selling hi-fi equipment at local shops. The more he learned about the reproduction of music, the more his desire to work in the recording industry grew. He chose to learn the basics at **Full Sail**, then moved to **Memphis** and began honing his skills as an engineer at the legendary **Ardent Studios**. After spending several years learning the ins and outs of recording and mixing, Brad turned his focus on resurrecting **Ardent Mastering**, a division which had closed years before. He now owns **Euphonic Masters**, a mastering house, in Memphis.*

**Chandler:** Where did you grow up and what made you realize that music was your path?

**Brad:** I grew up in Orlando, Florida, actually a little suburb called Lake Mary. Like most kids I think, especially in that generation—I was born '72, so this was the mid 80's, music was a huge part of our lives. I'm not sure it's that way as much today across the board like it was then, but still as most kids, it was a huge part of our lives. I didn't play an instrument, but several of my really, really good friends were in a band together, throughout high school. I would hang out with them, and usually they had little garage studio that their mom built, and they would practice out there. I would hang out there and help them record stuff with a four-track recorder, a cassette recorder . . . and do things like that. As years progressed, they built more intricate studios. They were kind of into that. Never anything like on a professional scale. Always in a bedroom somewhere with very little acoustic treatment. As we would amass more gear, we were able to do multitrack things with an eight track recorder. Those kinds of things. I just really enjoyed that. I really liked the creative process. I enjoyed being a part of it, even though I wasn't musician myself. I went off to college, went to University of Alabama, was studying in the pre-med program to get into physical therapy. I wanted to be a sports medicine physical therapist. But my heart just kept going back to that. Of course, right there in Orlando was the Full Sail center for recording arts. This is still, we're talking early 90's, a time period when the thought of spending a lot of money for something that wasn't a real degree was—well, my parents weren't sure about that. It was a bunch of money to spend and they would have to co-sign on the loans for me. They were just saying, "why don't you stay more traditional?" I just realized that I wasn't happy, I wasn't enjoying school. It wasn't what I wanted to do. I was doing it to placate my parents. Finally one day, my mom called up. She knew I was miserable up there, at least in my field of study and said, "You know, why don't we try this, let's give it a shot." So, I went to Full Sail and went through that program. It was amazing. It was the first time in my life that I actually enjoyed going to class everyday, going to the lab. It was a whole world. It was exciting and cool. That's how I got into it basically. It was just hanging out with bands, initially. I loved music, and hanging out with some bands and then just feeling like, hey, this is something I wanted to do.

**Chandler:** Yeah, it's really cool that you found your niche in the music industry without necessarily being a musician or having a band and playing an instrument. You're always on the technical side of things it sounds like, and obviously that part of it really interested you so much so that you went to school for it. How important is the school side of things, especially for those people who are interested in getting into this? Do you think that it really gives you a leg up to have the formal training and background that you got at Full Sail?

**Brad:** Absolutely, without question. It is really funny, but it's also sad. Online, we'd have discussions all the time on Facebook or on various audio forums where some kid will come along and say, "Hey, should I go to school, or should I just buy a \$20,000 Pro Tools rig and teach myself?" A huge percentage of the responses always come in and say, "Oh, Just buy the rig and do it yourself. You know, you'll screw up a lot on the way." So on, so forth. "There's lots of YouTube videos now, yada yada yada." Yet consistently the best sounding things that I get to this day are from people who went to school and had that fundamental training, or had a mentor working in a big studio for years. Back in the 50's, 60's and 70's, there weren't schools like this. People would just go to the studio and they'd work with the board; they worked their way up and they learned under talented long time engineers that understood gain staging, that understood all these sorts of things that you don't just kind of naturally pick up on your own. So it was worth it when they learned it at a one-on-one school, if you will. Nowadays more than

ever with the volatility of the industry, I would say that going to a school that offered not only musical courses but also offers you a chance to get a real degree is a great, great idea. Not only are they going to give you a better foundational education so you can hit the ground running in the music industry, but if you decide to change your mind down the road and do something else, you've got a degree that's going to help open some doors for you in other areas and other fields. Because the reality is, it's a tough industry. Out of all the people that I know that were in my class, something like 10 percent actually ended up working in the industry long term. It really is difficult to carve your way out. But even leaving that aside, the reality is the foundational knowledge that you get taught in a good program would take decades to try to amass on your own. Also, it's already presented in this great concise manner to train you. I would never ever encourage someone to try do it without school.

**Chandler:** Yeah, I think that's great advice. I've got a similar background to you and realized that school was going to be important to give me that head start on learning what I didn't know instead of fumbling around and trying to figure it out. A lot of the schools bundle in this internship idea and you touched on it. As you mentioned, before schools were teaching these courses, people would go and find a guru to study with where they would learn their technique and all the ins and outs of the industry. How important do you think the internship is or how would that solidify what you had learned in school?

**Brad:** I never really had an internship. I happened upon this, and things have probably changed a lot in the 27 years since I got out of school. When I graduated I went to the placement department at my school. At that time there was a pretty famous studio in town, Ardent Studios that only hired Full Sail graduates. Whenever they needed somebody they would put a word in and out of the next class that came along, they would look for one of the top people. I ended up getting a job with Ardent right out of graduation. It was like an internship, but then they paid us minimum wage. So it wasn't like an internship where people take advantage and don't pay you. It was really amazing though that the transition was really smooth and I think that's the reason why they only wanted graduates from that program. We came in with enough foundational knowledge. We understood the very basics, digital audio. We understood the basics of aligning a tape machine. We understood all the game staging, all these very basic things that obviously we could apply to that studio. So, I walk in and yeah I'm taking out the trash and making coffee. I'm sweeping floors and I'm tearing down studios after a session is over with or whatever, but at the same time you have all these engineers; it was a bustling environment. There are three big rooms with artists constantly flowing through there. Guys are pulling you in to maybe assist or be a second assistant or whatever on sessions.

**Brad:** It was really cool that I could understand what was going on even though I didn't know maybe why they were doing things. I knew what they were doing when they were doing them. You learn stuff at a rapid, much more rapid pace in that environment than I would have. I've said many times I've learned a ton in school. I learned more in the first six months working at Ardent than I had in all my time in school. I could not have done that without that foundational knowledge I got at school. It was rocket speed at school. That's the big thing that I encourage everybody to do. If you can possibly do it, go to school, get that degree, so you have a basic understanding of all the aspects, and then get on with somebody. Find a great place, especially if you can find a multi-room facility. There are not a ton of them left. Find one of those and go in and sweep floors. You're going to learn from multiple engineers. You will get a lot of experience working in those rooms. You can learn so much from those people- beyond just signal flow and gain staging. You can watch how they interact and interface with the clients. You can watch how they handle the business aspects of it. You learn things that you're just not going to learn from reading a book. So internships are really important.

**Chandler:** I think you hit on it exactly. I tell my students all the time that I think one of the best jobs in this industry is as an assistant engineer or second engineer. I like to encourage them to go find the best studio that they can put themselves in and stay there as long as they absolutely can stand to do it, because often what happens, as you know, is you get a good second engineer and the person who's coming in as the producer or engineer or even a label executive will try and steal them away from the studio and get them to become freelancers. I think that you really can hone and learn your craft in that assistant engineer position where you're working with all these different producers. All these different engineers and artists that change on a daily basis.

**Brad:** Oh yeah.

**Chandler:** Especially, like you said, with Ardent being a multi room facility. It's hard to know what you don't know that you don't know. It's easy to know things that you don't know yet, but it is, like you said, learning at rocket speed. The first six months of being in an actual working studio, you really get to synthesize what you learned in school with that ability to be a counselor and coach to the whole team that's involved, really picking up some of those interpersonal skills and working with others. On that note, how long do you think it took before you solidified what you had learned in school and honed your ear?

**Brad:** It mean it's not over a scale of months, it's definitely over years, and I'm not 100% sure that I'm not still . . .—in fact, I'm pretty certain that I'm still hearing things better all the time now. I think it's a constant. I don't think it's every "like, okay, I've achieved this level" or "I'm there". I think you are constantly learning to hear the subtleties and differences of things, no matter how long you do this. When I went from being the new guy, that didn't really know what I was listening for or listening to, to really starting to understand it- that's probably a couple of years, honestly. To really get to that point where I was pretty confident about what I was hearing, or if I heard something, and somebody heard it differently, I wouldn't automatically assume that they were right and I was wrong. I started to think "Well maybe. Are you sure that you're right?" That probably was a few years to when I really felt comfortable doing that.

**Chandler:** Right.

**Brad:** Really once I started mastering records myself, which Ardent did it sort of the "old school" way. I'd done some engineering stuff but really wanting to get into mastering and they had a label there, a Christian label, and so they threw it out there and they said, "All right, start mastering our artists for us". It was trial by fire in a lot of ways. I had only been out of school at that point for probably two and a half or three years before I started cutting records. It was right away, "Here you go." We did well, and it went really rapidly. We had a lot of guys there that basically live down there, and it was their full time jobs. They were staff engineers at Ardent, and so they were always around and they were really, really talented guys with lots experience and they would help me. I'd hear something, I'd be mastering a record that I would think sounds great. Then John Henson would pop his head in, listen for a few minutes, and then would say, "probably too much 700." I'd go and listen to it and then cut that back a little bit and say, "oh yeah it does sounds better!". There's a lot of that that would happen.

**Brad:** That happened for years even after I was pretty well established. They would stick their head in, or I'd stick my head in their room when they would say "hey Brad, come listen and tell me what you think." I'd look in and do a quick ear listen. "So it sounds a little this, there's too much here, or maybe squash some of that more there." There was constantly that feedback and some of these guys have been doing it consistently. They were a generation older than I was. They were doing it before I was in diapers, and they would still get feedback from me and vice versa. So I think it's a constant- I think it's a constant thing. We're always learning more and how to do better and honing our skills as a listener. And I mean this industry apparently drives me nuts because there's a lot of people, especially of mastering engineers, that try to convince people that they should work with them because they have this incredible hearing, you know, 25k and things like that. It doesn't matter to me if I could hear 20k; what matters to me is that I can I hear in a way that I could make records sound great. It's not hearing ability, it's listening ability. Does that make sense?

**Chandler:** It does!

**Brad:** Just because I hear a high frequency note, that doesn't mean I know whether it should be there or not or if i can hear a low frequency, or whatever. I think sometimes people get wrapped up in a hearing and they get focused on hearing, instead of actually listening. Listening is an active thing. You train yourself to do that. I feel like I'm still learning to listen every day. I sort of think differently over time.

**Chandler:** I think that there are a couple things that have changed in the industry, you know, in the last 20 years. And of course, the advent of digital technology and moving from tape machines to Pro Tools being a big one. Also the budgets and price of the gears dropped so dramatically. I find that a lot of students have

confusion with the idea of what a producer is. They tend to want to wear all the hats. Now that they've got their laptop and they've got their interface, they want to be an army of one. It's so different when you work in a multi-room facility and you have this team of people coming together. I think you absolutely touched on something important we're talking about in that someone who's been doing this even 10, 15, 20 years longer than you have would still ask for advice or would stick their head in and collaborate with you. What do you think about the benefit of that traditional model of the producer, the engineer, the artist, the pro tools operator, or tape operator, the runners, the support staff? Is that being a better model than the army of one, or do you think the times are changing?

**Brad:** I think it's a little bit of both. I mean think when you're talking about a recording studio, especially a larger facility, I think having multiple people who specialize is a great idea. But I think you have to have multiple rooms working and pooling those resources to be able to afford to do that nowadays. The budgets just haven't grown in the last few decades. Nowadays your average major label record, let's say, has a prejudice, I don't know, \$50-100,000 when they were doing that back in the 80's. That's without inflation. Back then it was a lot easier to afford to do some of these things. Nowadays, it's tough. I mean it's tough to carve out enough budget to be able to have an assistant and a Pro Tools operator. And not everybody, for example, I mean everybody that I know that's in the industry knows how to use Pro Tools. Some are more efficient than others obviously, but I mean that's such a staple of knowledge at this point that if you don't know Pro-Tools, then you're just not going to make an entry, period, unless you do something like mastering, where it's not common to only use Pro Tools. I think that it benefits the artist and I think it benefits the production overall if you have multiple people instead of one person trying to juggle everything. But I think the reality of modern budgets is that more often than not you're going to see one guy doing everything. And the real high end guys and next guys for example, that I know and work with, recording guys, they'll have this amazing engineer and they'll have their own personal assistant that helps them because they know they're set up and their routine and so on, so forth. And that's it. They don't have anybody else in the room, except for the band. Quite a few of those guys work on their own. They're all using a system where they're mixing to print and to bounce out the prints down and things like that.

**Brad:** In the Nashville world, I think that you're an organized person. It makes a ton of sense to be a one man show. That's what I am. And I've thought about expanding in the past. But, you know, clients really enjoy being able to speak directly to me and not have to go to speak to my assistant. And I always wanted them to talk to me regardless. So, they've enjoyed being able to directly communicate with me, mixed communication, more direct with me here. So in some instances it's definitely better for me because I'm really organized. I'm an efficiency freak. I'm able to do that without any problem. If I was not wired that way, I would probably struggle with it. If I was actually making records, where we're recording and I have to set up mics and move mics, I think I have that persistence. I think the days of having a big staff humming along, I don't think it works any more financially. I do think, like I said, that it works when you're working with a big project. It helps to spread the work out, but often it's not practical anymore.

**Chandler:** Yeah, budgets have definitely changed. In school, we divided up the industry into three parts. Pre-production, Production, and Post-production, which would be where the mixing and mastering took place. How separated are these fields now, and are you ending up with sessions that have a lot of stems? Are you having to do some mixing in your mastering sessions, or are you pretty much only working with two track final mixes?

**Brad:** I wouldn't recommend this attitude for everybody, but I'm at a point in my career where I've frankly been able to work with a lot of established people and I'm able to kind of set some ground rules myself, that I like and do. And one of those ground rules that I said early on was that I don't work with stems. I'm not a mixer. I tried it early on, and it changes in the way that I'm listening because I'm focusing on the relationships of the instruments, which normally, I'm not focused on. Normally, I'm focused on the overall energy of, you know, how it sounds, the impacts, the imaging, the depth, the field, those kinds of things. I'm not listening to the ring of the snare drum, because I can't do anything about that with the stereo mix.

**Chandler:** Sure.

**Brad:** And so if you give me stems, suddenly they're saying, well, "we think the drums might be too loud." Now I'm listening to the drums. "Are the drums too loud?" I'm trying to make that decision when that's not the way that I work. That's not the way my mind listens to music because that's not the way I spent 20 years training it. So early on, I tried stems out a couple different projects and decided I'm not going doing stems. If you want stems done, then I'm not sure you're my guy. Go somewhere else. What happens almost like 99% of the time, stems come up rarely, but when they do we give them that spiel and say, "I don't do stems. If you have that stems, then I'm not your guy," then suddenly they'd decide to give the full mix and all is good. I understand the concept that people have with stems, that maybe the mix engineer doesn't have a great room, or he's not experienced, or if something comes up, then you know the mastering engineer hears a problem, they can just fix it right then . . . So on and so forth. I think that there are mastering engineers out there I know that encourage people to use stems. I think the bad news is that it's basically not challenging the mixer or the producer to make decisions and commit to them. It's also not making them strive to get better. It's taking some of the workload off of them and getting to the master engineer which causes having some dependency if you will. So I'm not a fan of stems at all. In some areas, like for film and stuff like that, they're a necessity because that's how we work.

**Chandler:** Sure.

**Brad:** But for music, music production. I think it's just a bad idea, personally. I don't think they do anything to really serve the industry as a whole. Just pick a different mix engineer. If the guy can't mix the record, and he only wants to print stems, just find somebody who can actually mix the record.

**Chandler:** Right!

**Brad:** From the standpoint of blending mixing and mastering. There's probably more of that now. I have a couple of really sort of high profile mix clients who they have mastered a few over the years because the budget was tight or whatever, and people liked the way there's a record sound. And so, a lot of times people will try to get them to master their records after they're done, and they hate doing it. They don't like doing it. They like what I do better anyway. So, they don't actually incorporate that into their budget and pay out of their own pocket having me master the record for them. But there are some out there that don't want to do it all. I've had a few projects over the years where the mixer sent me, basically, what he thought was mastered- it was trash, it was super loud glam, some of them are distorted and this, that, and the other. So I mean the modern tools have made it a lot easier. The problem that people miss is that if you're a mixer, you've heard that song 100 times or more, and you're accustomed to all the awards on it. You're accustomed to all the weird frequency issues. You're listened in the same room over and over again on the same speakers, but the beauty and the benefit of bringing to it mastering engineer is we're- we have a more objective viewpoint. We are listening to it for the first time, and we immediately hear if it's too dark or if it's too bright or if there's some really weird timing issues with phase issues or you know, generally speaking, we have far better, more accurate rooms with bigger more accurate monitoring systems that can hear things you probably can't hear in a mix room. And all those things together mean that the whole reason why almost every production out there still gets mastered by someone else, is going to bring an objective listen and that you can't do if you've listened to that song 100 times. In fact, that's the reason why I don't touch people wanting to use it and say, hey, give us a listen and tell me what you think you're to master this next week, and I tell them the same thing. I don't. I don't listen to it ahead of time, you know. Denny Purcell, a great mastering engineer in Nashville (he died about 20 years ago) had a great saying that I still use all the time. "You only for the first time once", and so hearing it that first time, that's when I get this, depth, this visceral reaction to what I'm hearing and I can then objectively, hear exactly what's going on in the mix through that first pass and I make a lot of notes and make a lot of changes right out of the gate, just based on that. And after, you listen to it a few times. If you think about a record that you know, see if you start finding it sounds really dark and muddy on things. But with just a few listens or two minutes listening, your brain makes the adjustments and suddenly it sounds fine to you, right? You no longer hearing it muddy; it sounds fine.

**Chandler:** Absolutely

**Brad:** And it's only when you stop it, wait two seconds, and start over again, or you switched to something else that sounds incredibly brought in comparison that you realized that, Oh yeah, because your brain is massive DSP engine that's attached to your ears. And so I really, I'm really always critical of mix guys who do that. I understand there are situations when it's the only thing a band can afford or for whatever, but by the same token, if they really wanted to be the best it can be, they need that first listen by the mastering engineer that's not heard it before to listen to it because that's going to make a massive difference to the production, in my opinion.

**Chandler:** I think that those are great points and great advice. I mean, clearly it's working for you. You've had great success and lots of accolades from professionals in the field and lots of grammy nominated and winning projects and, you know, I think to me it does speak for the idea of the team, maybe not as detailed of the team as it used to be. That's still getting that for those fresh ears makes a big difference. Well, who was it that you said that quote you only hear for the first time?

**Brad:** His name is Denny Purcell.

**Chandler:** I've never heard that, but that's such a brilliant quote.

**Brad:** For mastering especially, you only hear it a first time once. This also applies to people who think "I'm not sure if I want to get it mastered or not." Now to be fair, very few of my clients are on the fence. We're not an inexpensive mastering house, so most of the guys that come here know what they're coming here for, the quality and so forth, but people use that quote before as well about like when you're going into where there's a team radio guys here, there's a clear channel there. They decide if we're going to put this in a rotation. They only hear for the first time once, and if their production is not up to snuff or doesn't sound as good as it can, then they may send it with A&R guys, you know, they're not going to sit there and listen to it over and over again to determine if they like it or not. If it doesn't grab them right away, it's going in the circular pot. So, there is foreign way of making those, of how your production is going to be perceived by people. They only hear it for the first time once, but this uniquely applies to mastering because our gig is to try to be objective and it doesn't take very long at all to be exposed to something before your brain starts correcting for all these little things and you suddenly aren't hearing them like you did that first time.

**Chandler:** Yeah, great. Now you're in Memphis now. And you grew up in Florida. What is it about the south? Why have you made your home here?

**Brad:** There're a lot of reasons. Memphis became my home because that's where Ardent was and when I graduated, I couldn't be picky when they had the chance to work at a place like Ardent, I jumped at it. So I moved up here and that was it. When we started, when I left Artist after 7 years working there, back in '03, I started at Euphonic. We stayed here out of necessity at that point. I couldn't afford to build a studio and buy gear- do all this stuff, and start this business, and move at the same time, and I didn't really want to. I like Memphis. It's a cool town. It has a great musical history. Nashville is right up the road, that also has a great musical history; it's different though. Between here, the Muscle Shoals area, Clarksdale, Mississippi—there's just so much history right here in this sort of Mississippi Delta area in the mid-south. That's a part of it. There's an appreciation for music here. It's not just one more thing. It's like there's a real focus on music from this part of the world. My wife and I love, the weather here. We don't like the cold at all- never really lived in cold, since I don't really like it.

**Chandler:** Sure.

**Brad:** I like the pace of life in the South. I think that alone has influenced music and southern music tremendously over the years. I'm kind of a southern boy. I'm not really like, you know, country person, so to speak. But that's what I'm wired to do. I just love it, and there's so much music within two hours, three hours, of where we live right now. So much musical history of all the great music seems like it comes from areas over the last few centuries that like I don't know that I'd want to live anywhere else.

**Chandler:** Yeah, I agree. I lived out in Los Angeles for 15 years, and am happy to be back here in the Muscle Shoals area.

**Brad:** I don't know how you did that. I can't do it. I've been out there a few times for an award show and things like that. That's not my speed out there at all. (laughs)

**Chandler:** Well, you know, everybody always says if you want to be in this industry, it's tough and you just have to be persistent and not give up and we've all heard that, but is there any piece of advice that you've received or that you would want to give outside of the basic: "If you really got the calling, go for it, don't stop."?

**Brad:** Yeah, I always tell people, You're going to feel like it is impossible. You're going to have to just keep grinding, keep grinding, keep grinding. So many people want to do this. It is one of the few career that a lot of people want to get into and there's no certification requirement, no degree requirement, no, whatever. There's always going to be some guy that's willing to do it cheaper or even free, so it's going to seem impossible, but if you really want to do it and you're really are, then just keep grinding, keep grinding. Everybody has probably heard that. The other thing I say is be prepared to work outside of the industry while you're doing it. It's not unlike somebody going out to LA- going to Hollywood to be an actress. They're not just going to be able to be making money and being an actress or actor; you will wait tables, you're going to do whatever. When I started at Art the first three or four years I was there, even while I was mastering records during that period, I worked at a moving company here in Memphis, moving people all day long with big trucks.

**Chandler:** Oh wow!

**Brad:** About 3:00, I'd go shower, drive to the studio, and work late into the evening in the studio and then get up the next morning and start all over again. Get 80, 90 hour weeks for multiple years, and that's averaging 12, 13 hours a day, seven days a week. That's what I did for multiple years. That's essentially checked through that time. I know some young guys I know, some in particular that, you know, they come out, they get a job at a studio paying minim wage or something, and they struggled to get by and it's like, yeah, you can't just expect that you're going to live on that. You're going to have to work hard. You have to earn your place because no one's, no one's given a gig in this industry, you don't get it. Anything. You have to earn it. So yeah, you're going to have to grind. But I would tell people, people, be prepared, because you're going to have to probably work two jobs, maybe three jobs. It's going to be hard. It's going to wear on you, but that's how you get through to the point when you earn the experience to the point that you have a shot at actually doing something cool with it.

**Chandler:** Yeah, great advice. Well Brad, what do you most love about your job?

**Brad:** I love that people pay me to listen to music. That's all of the music industry. That's how I love to tell people, you know. They ask me "what do you do?" And I say, "I get paid to listen to music. "It's crazy to think about it like that, but that's exactly what I get. I mean, you talk about the easiest job in the world, but what I love about it is everyday it's something different, every single day. And I usually work on multiple projects during the day, and I would just take all day, just working on an album, on a couple of samples, or whatever. Somebody calls. Maybe you're printing some masters, but everyday it's something different. And what I saw when I was an Artist, was that was everybody's wired differently in this regard. Sometimes a band would come in and make a record. They'd be there for two weeks or six weeks or 10 weeks or whatever and it's like, it's the same thing every day. Yeah, one day they're overdubbing guitars and vocals or whatever, but you're listening to those same songs over and over for two weeks, six weeks, 10 weeks, whatever it is, and I just thought, man, that's terrible. Listening to a guy try to nail a guitar solo for three hours. I would off myself, I couldn't do that, so it's just not the way I'm wired. So, as I naturally progressed into mastering, that was one of the things I loved about it was it's, you know, I'll spend 20, 30 minutes at most, probably on a track when I'm doing an album, it doesn't take that long. You just listen to it three or four times. You get down in one. It's just this constant fresh flow of new things. It's every day, and I never know what I'm going to listen to, until I hit play for the first time, because I'm not listening to music at all. I know I generally know what kind of music the band is or whatever, and I hit the space bar or I hit play on a tape machine, and it pops out of the speakers and it is like, oh, that's cool. That's really neat. Neat vibe, whatever. And that's something new every single day. And I absolutely loved that. That keeps me fresh because I think if I had to do that, if I had to work in the studio, even as a mixer, it's just eight

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hours on the same song, six hours on the same song. That's not the way I'm wired, I get too tired too quickly. That's why I wouldn't- it is something fresh and new every single day

**Chandler:** Yeah, that is absolutely true. As an engineer and mixer myself, I really like singles, not albums for a number of reasons.

**Brad:** Yeah sure!

**Chandler:** Well Brad, I can't thank you enough. I mean, I really appreciate your taking the time out and talking with me. I think there's a lot of great information here that you've given. The students will get a lot out of it.

**Brad:** I appreciate that. I appreciate the opportunity. Sounds good! Thanks so much, Chandler.

**Chandler:** Okay, take care Brad.

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## Chris Hunter

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**Chris Hunter**—Midland, Michigan native and University of North Alabama alumni knew from an early stage that he'd have a vested stake in Hip Hop. After collaborating with his college roommate rapper, Translee, he founded Digital Native Culture (DNC) a management platform for performing artists and producers; which also represents producer and UNA alumni, Todd Marshall.

*After taking a leap of faith and relocating to Atlanta for an internship with Collipark Music, Chris gained steady ground and blazed a trail for his company; which in turn, lit the way toward a bright future. Currently, Chris continues to pursue his passions through engineering music, managing artists and producers, while focusing on his newest venture with T.I's Grand Hustle Music.*

**Chandler:** Hi Chris, give us a little bit of background about where you grew up and what made you realize that music was your calling.

**Chris:** Oh, okay. I'm from a city called Midland Michigan. It's about two hours north of Detroit. When it comes to music. I really can't pinpoint a time when I realized it was my calling. I've always been into music. I guess growing up the earliest things I could think of it, that pushed me in that direction: I used to listen to a lot of my dad's vinyls. So that's what sparked my interest. And then, uh, I think around seven I remember, at the earliest, I used to start like the groups and stuff with friends and it was always a thing I was trying to A&R different groups or put the groups together, and I was in them. I don't know where that came from, that that's kind of my point of I don't have a definitive thing or time period that happened—I knew music was what I wanted to do. It was just always there. .

**Chandler:** Was your family musical, or did anybody play an instrument when you were growing up?

**Chris:** That's the thing, they don't play instruments. They just have a lot of music in the house. You know, it's funny, I was watching recently Jay Z had done an interview with David Letterman and he said the same thing. I think he asked him that same thing and he said, you usually get into music either one of two ways. You come from a family that plays instruments and that's kind of how you get your interest or you're just around so much music at a young age that it kind of just becomes you. I think that that's more what I identify with. I was just around so much music. My parents just had a huge record collection and I literally at five or six years old sitting there and just going through vinyls, and it just really intrigued me. So I think that was their contribution to my getting into some music. But no, they don't play.

**Chandler:** I remember when I was little getting into the stacks of vinyl that I had around me growing up, and it was fun, and vinyl is so cool. It's nice that it's making a comeback now.

**Chris:** Exactly. No, it's crazy. I keep all my dad's vinyl now. So, all the stuff that I grew up going through and listening to, I have in my collection, I add to it. I'll buy new vinyl, if an album comes out. I recently bought the new Kendrick Lamar on vinyl. I collect newer ones, as well as keep the older ones.

**Chandler:** Yeah, it's definitely got a different sound to it.

**Chris:** Yeah, most definitely. And, as far as production goes with sampling, it's always great to go back to sample straight off the vinyl. You still get the original cracks and pops and stuff like that.

**Chandler:** Absolutely. So, you grew up in Michigan. What was the music scene like there?

**Chris:** There really wasn't any. It's crazy. The closest place that I would say any music that was I guess considered to be something real was going on was probably about 30 minutes to an hour away in Flint and Saginaw. So I knew a couple people growing up that helped me get into the business side and the more of the technical side as far as engineering goes. There was this guy named Lavelle Jackson. He used to live in Atlanta, and he had to deal with Motown at one point in time. He had a studio at his house and he recorded acts around the city. He went to church with me and was a significantly older than me, but he was the person that took me in my first, I guess you'd say, "Real Studio," and showed me how things worked. He made it a reality in the sense of knowing

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somebody who had actually pursued a career in music. He had connections in certain places. but the overall scene wasn't really anything. Detroit, yes, but I didn't make it to Detroit a lot growing up.

**Chandler:** I know that you're an entrepreneur and have started a couple of different ventures. Tell me a little bit about how you got into that side of the music business.

**Chris:** Yeah, yeah, absolutely. I'm in the business side but I'm actually also still into engineering. I do both. The business I kind of just fell in my lap, well, I take that back. The concept of owning a label and working with acts was something I was always interested in. I do artist management as well. That portion of it kind of just fell in my lap. The artists that I had been working with some time. I actually met him at UNA. We moved out to Atlanta some years ago, and that's how I started working with him is through the engineering. That turned into, you know, producing with him. and when I moved here, we had been working together for so long. I was doing an internship when I first got here, It was directly with management. It was a smaller company, so it was one of those deals where, as the manager, you do whatever needs to be done. You might have the manager here and during the day he's sitting there recording the artists, you know, just because they have their studio and you just do whatever needs to get done or needs to happen.

**Chris:** Just being around him put me more into the mindset of management side of things, the business side of things. I also continue to do engineering, like I said, but that's probably what would put me there. And being that I've been working with artists so long that I've been with, we just kind of developed that. , just the relationship where it made sense for me to, uh, start managing him. And I've been doing that I guess for, I guess seven, eight years now In the sense of the management side, so, so yeah, that, that's probably what put me more into it and I have a couple of artists that I met now and um, you know, it's a, it's a two way thing with that. In the sense of manage the business side and manage the creative side, I try to balance them out. It's difficult.

**Chandler:** Well, I'm sure as a manager you have to wear a lot of different hats—not only still engineering, but even psychologist, coach, and all sorts of other jobs.

**Chris:** Yes, Exactly.

**Chandler:** It's such a difficult field to break into, toughly how long did it take for you to feel like you were doing well in Atlanta?

**Chris:** Well, I guess the question has to be answered in layers, you know, it, it's different levels of how well you feel like you're doing, I guess I would say . . . it's funny because I kind of got lucky in the sense of how I moved here into the type of, internship I got . My internship was in the entertainment program at UNA, you have to end it with the internship. So that's what my internship was. My goal was always to move to Atlanta for that. I was always going back and forth to music conferences in Atlanta that catered to the genre that I was interested in being around. I met somebody, Mr. Collipark. His company is called Collipark Music. He is responsible for Yin Yang twins and Soldier Boy and numerous other productions, Jamie Foxx and Britney Spears—he's done a lot of other things . I ran into him and his brother at a conference a semester before I was supposed to do my internship.

**Chris:** So I was out there with resumes and, I was talking to people “like I'm trying to move down here in January and do an internship,” and so when I met them, they took to me in a way We just talked for a long time when I met him, and they told me come down in January and I can intern. So I got lucky in the sense of when I came here I was interning directly with the CEOs of a reputable company in Atlanta. So they were taking me around the city and it catapulted me forward out here in the sense of just being able to meet people and make the connections quicker than somebody who just was coming out here and trying to figure it out. So I guess that that would be considered to me a level of having success in it, in the sense of feeling as if I'm, I'm accomplishing something.

**Chandler:** Well that's an advantage for sure to be able to start off with them and have in with.

**Chris:** Yep. So that, that put me a little bit ahead of things and then um, you know, working over there, even after I interned, I stayed over there working just it, whether it's engineering, just helping out, you know, it's a smaller company. So it was one of those things where you just kind of. Everybody did everything, about two years over there. I got my artist, the one I've been working with, I, um, ended up getting him signed to the company. On more of a developmental deal. It was a partnership with me and uh, and him through, uh, through the label and it was more developmental, financial thing. Kind of got our feet wet out here Let him put a lot of his music out, some of his first music out. So that was another level of a , you know, a move up in the sense where I feel like I was accomplishing things..

**Chandler:** Which artists was that?

**Chris:** An artist named Translee. He's actually signed with TI right now.

**Chandler:** Oh, nice. Are you still managing him?

**Chris:** Yeah, I do. Yeah, I manage him. He's actually signed to myself and TI; we did a partnership deal.

**Chandler:** Translee is the guy that you moved to Atlanta with from UNA?

**Chris:** Yep. Yep. Absolutely.

**Chandler:** Very cool.

**Chris:** Like I said, he went to UNA as well. We met and we were working out of the dorms. That's where we first met. I had my equipment in the dorm. We just kept at it. After that situation, I had my own situation with some investors and it allowed me to really get hands on with things and not just waiting for a company to do it. I kind of learned enough on my own, and it put me in a situation where I could make moves and do things on my own and really be hands on. That situation turned into this most recent situation with T.I. and his company, Grand Hustle. So, like I said, it's been a journey. There hadn't been just one time where I'm like, okay, I made it. There are so many different levels of accomplishment.

**Chandler:** The focus of my book is the music business in the South and I'm just curious what is it about the South and Atlanta that made you want to go there instead of venturing out to LA or going back up to the Detroit area?

**Chris:** Yeah. Well, you know, it's funny, because I tell people now, since I've been here for almost 10 years now, I tell people now the same thing that I was telling them when I first wanted to move to Atlanta. It's funny because I always wondered how did I even know that's how it would be. I always looked at New York and LA . Obviously New York is more of the business of it, the corporate side of things. You know, you got your major labels there and things of that nature. And then LA, I always looked at that as what it is, a little Hollywood. It's better, to me, to go out there when you're not just got your feet wet, but your feet are in the pool. To me, it's not really a place to go to try to figure things out. People have done it, but to me it's not really a place to go to start.

You know, Atlanta was that middle ground to me. I was right about it, and I see it today. You know, people come here and when you and your label reps come here, they're almost more on vacation. You know, it's easier to talk to them. They go to events, they're more open to conversation. They come here looking for more talent. When they go to New York, they're there to do business. They already have the talent, they're there to go have meetings, and it's harder to get their attention in those places. Atlanta has just been a great middle ground for me, and you get to get your feet wet. There's just a lot of music coming out of here and a lot of opportunities to get in front of crowds of people and grab attention. That's what made me come to Atlanta.

**Chandler:** That leads me to two questions I've got for you. How do you get your artists in front of people that could be interested in them and what's your path for doing that?

**Chris:** Yes. In Atlanta showcases. Definitely if it's a brand new artist. It depends on where they're at in their career, but if they're brand new artists, there's a lot of showcases in the city. I always tell people to pick and choose the ones you participate in, because there's a lot of stuff that you'll just be spinning wheels with. There's

a lot of showcases out here where, you know, radio, these DJs and a radio program directors will be there just because it's a weekly thing, or label reps will be there just because one of the A&Rs at their company, or managers of their company, are doing the events. So it's really just a casual thing here. You can be in a showcase and L.A. Reid is just in there because he's in town and the person that's throwing it works for a company he knows. It's just something for him to do. That's what I mean by when people come here, they're more open to just go do things of that nature, and they'll just be in different places where you wouldn't expect to see them. So yeah, showcase definitely are good to get an artist out.

**Chandler:** I guess that's where you as a manager would come into things and help steer somebody who's trying to figure it all out. Basically sending them in the right direction. That would really give people an advantage. Helping someone come to Atlanta, if you're a beat maker or a writer, and then get connected is really, a great use of your skills to make a shortcut for people that you think might have a shot.

**Chris:** Exactly. Yeah. Yeah. Just basically saving them time. In the sense of exactly what you need to do—do this, don't do this. You'll see people get caught up in cycles out here of doing showcases or doing open mics, and they're going every week. They might not be doing the right ones, or getting in front of the right people. That's why I think a manager comes in to play. I'll tell artists all the time, they need to go elsewhere, since this is not necessarily moving them forward in the direction they are trying to go in with this particular event you've been doing. But it's easy to get caught up in a cycle out here. So it's a lot. It's a lot of artists, a lot of showcases, a lot of events, a lot of things you can participate in. So it's just getting in front of the right people, making sure you're spending time on the right thing.

Nowadays a lot of stuff is moving to the internet as well, so it is open. It's kind of good and bad, because it's opening things up in the sense of the same platforms that artists who moved to Atlanta used in order to get attention. It's spreading out pretty much to everyone, because you have artists now that they're in Atlanta and they're putting stuff on Soundcloud and putting it in the same streaming sites as everybody else. Somebody in Florence Alabama could do that same exact thing, and if he's working hard enough, get the same attention as somebody in Atlanta. You don't necessarily have to come to the same place as much as you used to.

**Chandler:** How is it that you build contacts or find new clients to work with? Are you using the internet or are you relying on something different?

**Chris:** Yeah, it's the Internet. Word of mouth too. Word of mouth is a big thing. The Internet is cool, but that usually comes after word of mouth. I'll hear about somebody, and then I'll go and look them up. But I've definitely ran across things just scouring Instagram, Soundcloud, or YouTube. I've run across acts, but most of the time it's a word of mouth thing. You hear people that mentioned certain artists or certain producers and then you go check their work out wherever they upload things to.

**Chandler:** I guess it's like dating. It's always better to be introduced to somebody then, I guess, to find them on Tinder.

**Chris:** Exactly, yeah, that works too as well. You know, it's funny, I have this artist I'm working with right now, and it's really a new thing. I'm really just doing some recording with her, just filling out what she's trying to do. But, it was actually a roundabout thing from Tinder. A friend of mine had met her on Tinder, and she's an artist and then he was like, "man, you gotta go check this girl out." (laughs)

**Chandler:** That's funny!

**Chris:** So yeah, so it can happen, you know, it's everywhere. That's what I mean that a kid in Florence can . . . you know it everywhere now. You don't have to fit in and say, I'm not, I can't do this unless I move here. It's like man, get on the Internet and get your stuff out there. Somebody will see it.

**Chandler:** I know that you're interested in hip hop, and I think that's what brought you to Atlanta. Of course hip hop has now become the popular music. It's infiltrated everything and you're seeing all these crossover artists that wouldn't be hip hop at all bringing in those elements. What do you think about these trends

**Chris:** Yes, exactly. It's funny, because I literally just saw a video before you called with the little Wal-Mart singing kid. It was French Montana the rapper, he's signed with Diddy, and he was in the video. At first it was him saying something, then they turned the camera and the little Wal-Mart singing kid was sitting there with him saying something like "getting this money," and it just made me think, man, hip hop is really influencing everything at this point.

**Chandler:** Absolutely. What's a typical day look like for you?

**Chris:** Obviously that depends. It depends on what we're working on. Right now, we're wrapping up Translee's next project, so usually a typical day is studio work right now. We're doing a lot of post production right now. Emails. I'll usually get in my email. I usually have different emails I have to reply to, if that turns into phone calls or a meeting, that would be a thing. Right now we're more in the studio working. That typically turns into, when we put the album out, promotions, which can be on the road if were on a tour or doing a lot of shows, or for example, last year when we were doing a lot of things with him, when he first signed the deal, we were back and forth from New York a lot, doing a lot of press runs and stuff. Like I said, I wear a couple different hats, so it depends on exactly where we're at in the process. I go from in studio to out in working in the field, in the sense of management. So it just depends,

**Chandler:** Maintaining a successful career takes a lot of work, obviously, and commitment. How much time do you think you dedicate towards work and what could you say to people who were trying to get started in this business about the amount of effort that needs to be put in?

**Chris:** I dedicate the majority of my time to it. People always get upset with me because the majority of things I do revolve around work in some type of way. Even when I go on vacation it's usually because I'm going somewhere because music's taking me there. I don't personally have a problem with that, but you know, people are always saying you need to take a vacation. I feel like I have been taking a vacation. But it does take a lot of sacrifices and the normal things that most people are used to: you know, you hear about somebody that just works at a nine to five, you know, you go to work, you get to work at nine, you get off at five and typically you don't have to worry about it until the next morning- or, you do the week and then the weekend comes and you're done for the week and then you don't have to worry about it. In this sense of things it never stops. I always tell people everyday is Mondays for me.

**Chandler:** What do you think are some of the biggest mental tools or habits that someone could obtain to be successful in this field?

**Chris:** Just really persistence in whatever you're trying to do. just have a goal in mind and just stay consistent in it and persist in whatever it is, I know that sounds like the typical thing, but I mean, that's really what it comes down to. You hear successful people say, "my secret of success was I never gave up," and sometimes that's simply just what it is. You just keep at something.

**Chandler:** I think that's great advice. I've got a question about the way things have changed. To you, what's different in the industry today compared to when you first started?

**Chris:** The overflow of artists that are out there because of the flood gates of the Internet opening up. There were a lot of artists when I first started . We were seeing the beginning stages of what's going on now, but just the concept that any artist can get exposure. That's a good and a bad thing. Prior to recently, it was almost like a quality control. You had the label, you have A&Rs, and they're still there, but they would filter what was coming through. Now you have , you have artists that are charting on the billboards off of Soundcloud. You've almost never heard of them because they just came out last week and all of a sudden the song's popular and on the hot 100. So that's a new thing that I'm wrapping my head around now. The concept of distribution in general now. It's easy to distribute. Anybody can do it. You don't have to wait on a label, you don't have to wait. You obviously need investors and money in this, but it really doesn't cost much to put your own music out now. To promote it, yes, but to get the music on the platforms that you need it on, you don't have to look far.

**Chandler:** That's true. We could write something today and have it out tomorrow probably.

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**Chris:** Yeah. Have it out tomorrow. Have a distributed by the end of the week.

**Chandler:** It's amazing. So, Chris, what do you love most about your job? What is it that keeps you excited about it?

**Chris:** I think just the aspect that it's something that has always been my goal. This has always been the sole thing that I have told people I've been interested in and worked towards. Music, it just keeps me happy. That's probably what it is. It is a frustrating industry, so I always tell people you literally you have to love this. There is no "I'm gonna start it and figure out." If you don't love it then you're going to quit. So I think that's the kind of stuff that keeps me going. It's just always been something that I've been interested in, and I've made up my mind that this is what I was going to do, and you just got to stick to it.

**Chandler:** Very cool. What's next for you? What, what can we expect from you in the future?

**Chris:** Well, I'm developing more on the production side of my company and developing some of the producers that I have; Also, working with more artists outside of Translee as well and continuing to build that side of things—working with more artists. Obviously this is kind of a piggyback industry. You know, when one thing starts working for you, it's wise to have other things that are already in the works. That's what I'm working on in the background right now. Those things are more on the lines of production and developing more talent. The artist side of things could go either way, but the definite part of it is production.

**Chandler:** Right. Have you thought about managing engineers and producers as well as artists? Are you already doing some of that?

**Chris:** Yeah, I manage producers, and I have not looked into managing engineers. That's a good concept right there. You might actually might actually spark something, but.

**Chandler:** When I was out working in LA, I had a manager. He rarely ever got me gigs and he took 15 percent.

**Chris:** Exactly

**Chandler:** But it was nice to have somebody on my side, so that I didn't have to do any negotiation about money. If somebody wanted to work with me, I would just say, "yeah, go talk to Steven and then he'll work it out." I'd tell Steven to make it work with their budget, and then of course I also didn't have to chase down the money either. To me that was worth the 15 percent just to keep out of that.

**Chris:** Yeah, exactly. You don't get caught in the middle of that. That's also a managers' job as well. You have different managers that obviously work harder than others, but really, at the end of the day the manager is there just so you can stay creative. if you're a producer and artist or engineer, you don't have to get tied up. Sometimes it gets weird when you start talking about money with the same people you're supposed to be doing music with.

**Chandler:** That's right, it sure does. I thought it always worth it to cut him a little piece off to stay out of the negotiating. He would drop by the studio on the first day and on the fifth day and say hi, making his rounds. I always thought that that was an interesting job. I thought, at 15 percent . . . if he had eight of me working, he's pretty much got a whole job, a whole business into and of itself.

**Chris:** Yeah. Oh yeah, absolutely. Working on percentages, people, they don't really realize how much some of these managers are making. It's just the workload. The more you take on, it gets stressful. I'm at the point where I'm starting to tell myself , not to cut back, but I'm starting to see, that you can only take on so much at one time, especially when you're dealing with artists. With artists you're dealing with actual people and feelings. Just keeping up with that is a lot. Producers are a little bit different. Producers are a little easier in the sense of, my focus is more placements and things like sending music out to different connections.

**Chandler:** Right. is there any additional advice you can offer up for somebody who's looking to get going in the industry?

**Chris:** Man, you know, it's funny. I always say "don't."

**Chandler:** Laughs

**Chris:** The reason behind why I tell people “don’t,” because it’s not really good advice, but the people that are successful in this business are people who never listen to the people that told them not to do it.

**Chandler:** I love it!

**Chris:** That’s what will keep you sane and keep you moving forward. That goes back to you have to love it! If I tell you don’t do this and you do it anyway, that means you’re supposed to be here.

**Chandler:** Chris, that’s great. I can’t thank you enough. I really appreciate your taking the time to do this with me and share so many of your experiences.

**Chris:** No, Thank you.

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## Todd Mouton

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*Todd Mouton is a native of South Louisiana and a longtime writer, record and concert producer, and advocate for a cultural economy. He has received numerous awards for his work in non-profit agencies, including the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities Public Humanities Programming Award, a Hearbeat Award from Offbeat magazine, a Louisiana Governor's Arts Award, and numerous Addy Awards.*

**Robert:** What region does Lafayette belong to? What makes the music scene around there so unique?

**Todd:** We're talking about the South. Louisiana, from New Orleans all the way across. We inherit a lot of music down here, you're born with it. There's a lot of repertoire to choose from, including blues, jazz, Cajun, and Creole music, there are traditions to be part of. A lot of the music is social. It's really designed just for getting people together. It's OK to call a lot of it "background music. It's loud for a reason, because you're expected you to talk, drink, dance, and court, and do all the things you do over it. It creates a framework and soundtrack for the different ways of living and the rituals of just being a human, a social being.

You've got an inherited repertoire, this social basis, and then, more recently, this tourism phenomenon, which is everything from casual folks dropping in and just wanting to get a little skim-the-surface kind of experience, to people who are looking for a transformational experience. It's changed their lives. It helps better them. I've seen a lot of middle aged people become attracted to what we have down here. The music's attached to these things.

**Todd:** How did you get involved doing cultural work?

**Todd:** I was a music journalist for about 10 years. I had a radio show playing all varieties of Louisiana music, including music about Louisiana or influenced by it. It was an interesting time, there were still record labels, and so there were opportunities for bands to record music and get distribution. There were opportunities for journalists, radio stations, and the like. There were a lot of touring opportunities. There were more and more festivals starting up particularly the U.S., and a lot of them featured roots music. There were also blues bars booking a lot of the zydeco bands in the 80s and 90s. A lot of it was piano-accordion based and more bluesy in its style. There were many little pathways where folks could get out and build careers. There was a vibrant sort of folk singing and regional indigenous scene, which is partially because of the geographic isolation of our region for so many years. These pathways led to new audiences. We also had an opportunity for people including professional musicians to come visit, and we had people writing new songs and creating new music.

There were a lot of things at that point that got me interested in trying to connect those little slivers and to try to make a little bit bigger piece of the pie. And I think that today, a lot of those conditions have changed, but the dynamics are still similar. There are places in there where folks can build careers as an entrepreneur, as artists, as performers, entertainers, and touring musicians. We play a lot of accordions, sing a lot in French, and play fiddle, but I think that the opportunities are not different from other regional music scenes and other cultures. We just have gotten a lot of press and done pretty well with it over the last few years, In the last few decades the tourism community has jumped on the bandwagon and recognized that folks love the food down here, but the music kind of goes with the food, and it's constructed similarly from a wide range of influences and component parts.

**Robert:** After the collapse of the record business, what are musicians doing as entrepreneurs to make a living?

**Todd:** One of the challenges we have here locally now is that there are about six or seven regular free concert series and several free festivals. So on the one hand, it's tough to charge a cover and go play in a club when you're going to be exposed to folks basically for free several times a year. But on the other hand, that's a lot of opportunities to get out in front of people, especially for up-and-coming bands. The Internet killed the record industry, but now these musicians can teach lessons via video conferencing technologies like Skype, can host folks in their home studios, and offer music camps and intensive workshops.

The culture has evolved and matured. There used to be a time a couple of decades ago where, whenever a musician was booked for a words-and-music style presentation, you would typically hire a facilitator or presenter

or interviewer or host. It didn't take very long for these bright artists to figure out how to tell their own stories and put the history together with lecture demonstrations and stuff like that. Academia is another place where artists are finding opportunities to present their work and connect with audiences, like in the traditional music program at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette and in other places.

It's definitely fragmented and arguably harder for artists than it was for someone like Beau Jacque during the heyday of Rounder Records and Cajun and zydeco music in the late 80s and early 90s. But by the same token, Rounder was putting out maybe 10 or 12 records in south Louisiana every year or two, but less than half of those bands were touring regularly. There's always going to be this aspect of trying to climb to the top of the pile. How do you get there? You can send an email to anybody in the world, but will they see it? Will they open and answer it? It's still a tricky business.

**Robert:** Some people are saying that we're moving from a products and services economy to one offering experiences and transformation. You mentioned that some middle-aged people are interested in workshops and camps. Do you think that that's a direction to go in the future for people who play music with a strong cultural tradition?

**Todd:** I think definitely there's an opportunity there. I think those are the fundamental principles of why people come here. If you want to have an experience, stop in Louisiana. We have the landscape that gave rise to the food, and the people and cultures that gave rise to the music. I'm not a fan of the word "authentic" because it's overused, but I think that there's a great opportunity for people to visit a place like south Louisiana and have a very real and meaningful experience. These traditions are real, and many people do incorporate them by learning some dance steps, catching these bands out on the road, and visiting Louisiana regularly. There are definitely thousands and thousands of people who support this culture in a lot of different ways, for natives, but particularly for non-natives. I think there is sort of a transformational or rebirth experience where you connect with this music and find meaning out of these old melodies and these rhythms that have been tested for years.

I think there's definitely an opportunity for this music to stick around. First of all, even here locally, you'll see bands come and go. You'll see crowds come and go. So many people today are starting into their phones instead of observing or participating in what's going on around them. We're offering an opportunity to turn off their devices and connect. We live in a place where dance is really important, and there are plenty of bands and dancers around here. There may be less than there used to be, and there may be fewer real dance halls, but the music is generally designed to dance to and socialize to. That's kind of our bedrock foundation. The cool thing is obviously that, from this base of traditional music, artists can go anywhere they want to in terms of improvisation, adaptation, and coming up with new things.

**Robert:** Why are people so happy in south central Louisiana? My understanding is that the Cajuns settled there after getting repeatedly kicked out of other places, in the swamp where people left them alone. Louisiana is towards the bottom of some desirable things and towards the top on some undesirable ones, but I've seen surveys that say the people there report high levels of happiness.

**Todd:** I believe you've got to consider everything when you look at something, and I think that you could certainly argue that people in south Louisiana have been through a lot, and in response to the hard things they've endured have adopted a little bit of a devil-may-care attitude. But I think that the dynamic that's probably much more dominant is that we're down here at the mouth of a great river, and a great plentiful estuarine land where there's all sorts of seafood. Yeah, it's hot, and you have terrible mosquitoes and things like that. But this is a place where a lot of things are coming and going. There's a lot of cultural sharing, a lot of things that come in and out. It's not a really buttoned-up culture. People are going to be sitting on the porch, talking slowly, drinking cold beverages while getting to know one another, and I think this celebratory aspect is definitely something that we have somehow come up with. Whether that's a defiance against hard times, a "I just don't care anymore" attitude, a "Thank God we're finally here" attitude, or "Wow! Can you believe all the cool stuff that is here and going on around us?" process, I think that we've got all that working for us. It's a result of being coastal, at the mouth of the river, with lots of commerce and exchange of ideas and concepts.

I think that culture's an additive process. If you smell something good being cooked in your neighbor's yard, you're going to probably go find out what it is, and if you like it, you're going to make it. And similarly, if you hear a lick or a rhythm or a melody, you're going to make that your own. I think it's like a pretty powerful stock or broth, it's very rich and has certain characteristics. Within that, there's not just joy. There's pain and heart-break and sorrow, and the music and its traditions are not only what sustains the culture and society but also the individuals through the hard times. There's a real sense of identity and a sense of meaning, and the music can bring that to everyone in every setting. Down here we're lucky that it's very pervasive.

**Robert:** I think live music and dance evolve together. Bands observe what gets the audience on their feet and makes them happy, and naturally do more of that. It's something that is missing in the music produced today in studios, where you have teams of people putting together grooves and laying lyrics on top without ever seeing the audience. What connection do you see between the style of dance and the style of music in south Louisiana?

**Todd:** Most of the dancing that we have in south Louisiana, especially down around south central Louisiana, is couples dancing. Back in the day, the dance hall was the place where you might meet a perspective boyfriend or girlfriend, courtship rituals would take place, and parents would watch you. There'd be little kids, there would be a whole family setting. There's a little bit of pride in learning how to dance, coming up with your own style, and then yeah, once you're out there on the dance floor, it's an instant feedback loop for the band and the musicians.

A great simple example is two of the most popular forms of Cajun music are the waltz and the two-step—one is slower and in a  $3/4$  time signature, and the other is faster and in 4. The order of songs that a band will play will depend on the audience. In some dance halls, you'll play two-step, two-step, waltz, two-step, two-step, waltz, and in others you'll play waltz, waltz, waltz, two-step. That's partially based on the place and how it's normally set up, but it's also depends on what happens when the crowd gets out there, and whether they want more fast or slow songs. Some people say there are only two songs in Cajun music—the fast one and the slow one. Sometimes the audience is caught up in the moment and just want more of a particular thing, and someone will simply request more fast music. But there is a rich repertoire of tunes and melodies, and people really do know them. There're a ton of songs, and there are a lot of new songs that are continuing to come out even just in those two song forms. Some that had been lost that are being revived thanks to recordings.

**Robert:** How did you choose the era to focus on in your book?

**Todd:** My book was an attempt to memorialize the baby boomer wave, the Buckwheat Zydecos, Zachary Richards, Sonny Landreths, and Michael Doucets, and some that came before and some that came after. They were a generation that came out of the 60s, who discovered or rediscovered their roots. It was a form of rebellion. In the book, Michael Doucet says he got into the music because he liked it. because it wasn't popular. It was kind of the folk scene of the 60s. So these baby boomers who left such a big imprint on the culture globally in so many ways, they came in and really did a lot with the music. The purpose of the book was just to show that it's all connected and everybody has a piece of it. You might read about this Dewey Balford person in one chapter, and later you might read about this woman, Christine Balfa and realize that, "Oh, gosh, they're related. And he was a big influence on this particular person." And she actually was an influence on this particular person. There's a landscape beyond the book. The book was sort of like a core sample.

That is the process of culture. It's just like good old cells and organisms just piling onto each other and connecting and reconnecting. There are cycles and waves. From what I see it seems to still be going on. Whether it's millennials or X'ers, or whatever we've got out there, there are new bands forming and putting music together. There are new recordings coming out. There's new material in French, new material in English. I don't know if we'll ever get to the point where people feel like we're not in danger of losing our connection to all this music in this past, but I think that for many years now, people have felt like it's in pretty good hands, and the ecosystem around it is fairly healthy. In the 80s and early 90s there were maybe 40, 50 musicians from Lafayette out on the road touring in bands on a regular basis. That number might be slightly smaller now, but it seems as though there're more bands here at home putting out their own records, playing around, touring occasionally, and flying out for the occasional festival or workshop. I think a lot of it is that we live in a fairly enlightened age fueled by

the Internet and having access to information, but there's still a need to organize the information and sequence it to reach a goal.

**Robert:** It's good to see musicians taking control of their own business.

**Todd:** Yeah. It's good you're writing this book. The world needs it. There's a lot of great historical material locked up the folk music archives at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. Unfortunately no one got the musicians to sign release forms when the recordings were made. There are a lot of resources on the music industry out there, but someone's got to sequence it and explain to you how to go from A to Z. The good news is that it's as good a time as any to be an artist, probably better in a lot of ways.

**Robert:** Why is that?

**Todd:** Because of the tools to record, mix, master, and distribute your music. You have to get your vision out there and connect with people that share it and want to support it. Those are the only things that have ever taken it farther. There are so many opportunities today to document your music and share it with people who want to help.

**Robert:** Nobody wants to pay for music anymore, and there's too much of it out there. It's just overwhelming. I think the way to add value is to curate, to find the good stuff, and make it easy for people to get to. I'm looking forward to the time when there's a format to distribute multi-track recordings to civilians, to let people record themselves and remix their own, like the 11 seasons of the *Louisiana Crossroads* series that you recorded.

**Todd:** That's a great point. I hadn't actually thought about that, but you have to believe that's coming.

**Robert:** It's an example of the type of edutainment products that I think will be popular in the future. Trying to make hit records and sell recordings is just not going to be viable anymore. One opportunity in music is to help people participate, not to just entertain them. There's such a wealth of interesting cultural experiences from south central Louisiana that I think people would enjoy. It's a goldmine!

**Todd:** You're exactly right about opportunities in helping people to participate. I was talking earlier about the landscape that gave rise to the raw ingredients in the cuisine, that gave rise to the celebrations that the music was created for, and the dance steps go with and all that. Down here, pretty much everyone participates, even if you're just tapping your foot or nodding your head, you're probably participating. People say this all the time, that it seems as though everyone down here is either a chef, or a musician, or both, or a dancer, or all three and more, and I think that also goes to something that's interesting. Imagine that you lived in some kind of a bubble, and you could get a music book, and you could learn how to play an instrument, and you could create your music and do your thing. I'm sure that could happen, but in this kind of era of access to global traditions and sounds, the thing that we have in Louisiana has wide application.

I know dozens of people like myself that you could call a researcher, or writer, folklorist, scholar, musician, composer, producer, promoter, and teacher. We have all these different labels that can be applied. In our context you have to be all those things. In the modern world, that's how we all participate, by being a little bit of a scholar, a little bit of an active participant, we're a little bit of a documentarian. I think it's important for people to be aware that not only can you do all those things, you have to do all those things or some version of all those things, which of course parallels writing, recording, promoting, distributing your own music. You have to create your own cover and a favicon for your website.

**Robert:** How well is music from your area represented on Spotify? How does that experience compare with local radio?

**Todd:** Good question, you're talking about curation again. That's one of the biggest issues for me. I have a lot of friends who listen to streaming services like Spotify, but I think there is inherent weakness in relying on algorithms like they use. I grew up with real radio with real DJs who had freedom over the playlist. In fact, our public radio station here, KRVS, is full of locally produced shows that are very curated and adapted to what is going on locally, regionally, and in the world. It's great when a DJ can tell me that the last song they played was

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by Sydney Bechet, and how it is related to the song that came before it. What do I want to hear and need right now? What are my preferences? What's going to fit my mood? I really don't feel like they've cracked that yet. It seems like when someone puts on Pandora or Spotify or something, and it starts off with a song or an artist you know or love, and then, three or four songs in, something comes on that I don't want to hear. I relish the fact that in my iTunes library or my personal musical library, I can arrange my digital files in the playlist to suit my moods, needs, and events. Radio provides a human, personal touch.

**Robert:** Besides KRVS, what radio stations would you recommend?

**Todd:** I really like WWOZ in New Orleans. They're hyper local. They're maybe even more local than KRVS. A lot of the DJs volunteers, or are paid just a few dollars an hour to do this stuff. They're generous and have a little spare time. You would think that that sort of expertise would be more in demand, and people could maybe get more compensation.

**Robert:** What's the difference between New Orleans and Lafayette musically?

**Todd:** There's a lot of ways to try to explain that. Obviously, New Orleans is a large port city, and we're kind of a rural country town. But one thing Lafayette has going for it is it's known as the "Hub City". It's in the center of a much larger region, so that's a lot of commerce in and around Lafayette and going through it. It's sort of like the comparison of Professor Longhair with Clifton Chenier. They were both African-American men playing keyboard accordions. In Clifton's case, he came up speaking French in a very rural environment, where a real loud, stomping downbeat and a loud singing and accordion style were what you needed for a house party. Longhair was playing in taverns and clubs around New Orleans, in intimate, up close situations. He didn't necessarily need to shout to be heard. If people wanted to dance, you could do some more elaborate rhythmic things. In New Orleans, there's plenty of that and a demand for it.

Clifton was intertwined with our traditions, like Mardi Gras. Down here it is a horseback kind of affair, with smaller-scale parades. In New Orleans, Longhair was like the anthem at Mardi Gras in New Orleans and stuff like that. Both artists interacted with what they had in their environment. It might have started off as house parties. Clifton's toured a whole bunch, Longhair not as much.

**Robert:** Do you think the music in New Orleans is more for tourists than Lafayette?

**Todd:** I think both towns have a tourist-facing side. New Orleans has just got so many more musicians, it's just so much bigger, there's such a bigger landscape. You have plenty of blues bands and R&B bands, and lots of bands working in different genres. The New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival is going to be 50 years old next year, and that means it will have eclipsed most musicians' careers. Even in New Orleans, where people play into their 90s, there aren't that many musicians that have a 50-year-old career. This year at the jazz fest you didn't have Allen Toussaint, Fats Domino, the Meters, the Neville Brothers, or Dr. John. For many years, those five kinds of groups and all their offshoots were essentially Jazz Fest, or certainly a big core piece of it, and now it's not there. And so you think, "Well, gee, is it going to continue?" It absolutely will, because unlike a lot of other festivals in the modern era of the Bonnaros and Coachellas, this festival comes from a culture, and the younger artists are doing their best to do their part and add their piece to the story. There are plenty of people tending the flame of New Orleans music in all its various styles, from Mardi Gras Indians to Dixieland to street parades, all that sort of stuff.

**Robert:** Can you see any sort of general trends or unique opportunities for musicians in the south as compared to other parts of the country?

**Todd:** Again, "south" is a pretty broad term. You've got a lot of different market dynamics, and then cultural bases to work from. There are opportunities for touring and finding audiences. I think it's interesting when you look at the history of the music business, particularly like in south Louisiana, Mississippi, those kind of places, you had a lot of entrepreneurial activity over the years. There were small labels pressing their own vinyl singles and records. Maybe touring would happen. What you had was just tons and tons of local musicians, many of whom could find work in bars and saloons, dance halls, and restaurants, and stuff like that, but never that many

who toured or capitalized on song writing or publishing. The big success stories, like Fats Domino and Dave Bartholomew, those are really the exceptions. It really has been more of a commoner's trade like so many others. To be a big star like Britney Spears or Hunter Hayes, you would need someone to catapult you out.

In many ways, it's similar to what you'd find anywhere else. We're far from the two coastal hubs of the music industry, but that's less important now that things are becoming decentralized. C. C. Adcock said that now that the great tall ship known as the music industry has come firmly to rest on the bottom of the ocean floor with a giant thud, up at the top of the last two feet of mast sticking out of the water, there are a bunch of rats. They're called TV and film publishing. It doesn't mean there's no opportunity, but it's not the old, "Oh, I'm going to get a major label record deal," "Oh, I'm going to get a major management firm," or "Oh, I'm going to get a major booking agent, and he's going to hook me up with all the major festivals in Europe and beyond, and boom, that's what I'm going to do. I'm just going to do that."

There's a ton of opportunity for music for moving pictures, with all these new content producers like Netflix and Amazon. The entire south have a regional identity and style going for us. When they need music for something specific like a country fiddle, a bluegrass guitar lick, or a Dixieland jazz funeral, they're going to be looking for composers and people with access to and libraries of that kind of music. We are sitting in or on a goldmine in a lot of ways. But the tricky part is refining it, as it always is in the music industry, and then distributing and selling and monetizing, and trying to accumulate some wealth based on the power of the creations.

**Robert:** What's the best time to visit Lafayette

**Robert:** I think Lafayette makes a good side trip from New Orleans. You don't want to come on Sunday, Monday, Tuesday when the town's pretty dead, but if you come for the weekend, it's really easy to find out what's going on. You can find a little bit more rural, accessible, down-home kind of a scene. We don't have the number of restaurants or venues that New Orleans has by any stretch, but I think we can hold our own in terms of the food and the culture.

**Todd:** The city's premiere event is Festival International de Louisiane, which takes place each year at the end of April. It started as a brilliant concept, to bring the music of all the French-speaking world here. It's a little exotic. You might have heard music from Canada and Belgium before, but here's a chance to get to know bands from Guadalupe and Barundi. It helps maintain awareness of our heritage, keeps French alive, and serves as a spring board for commerce, travel, and exchange. The Festival also kind of helps reconnect with the story of the far-flung Acadians—French colonists of maritime Canada who were brutally exiled by the British and kind of scattered to the wind, and eventually made their way down here to the swamps that was a Spanish territory at the time. They were really just a few people when they got here but are now kind of a dominant cultural force.

When you talk about the French-speaking world you are inevitably faced with issues of colonialism, which wasn't necessarily a good thing. There have been many terrible atrocities that happened as part of colonialism over the years. But getting together for a week to share food, music, dance, and stories is cathartic, instructive, and healing. I think that's why it gets a lot of attention, because it gets a lot of international press.

The Festivals Acadiens is held during the second weekend in October. It features bands from here who are playing locally and doing a really good job. It's much more of a deep dive into local music than a broad survey.

**Robert:** What led from doing cultural work to your position at the Pugh Family Foundation? How well are you able to separate your work in education from your love of the culture and friendships with musicians in the community?

**Todd:** I've done a wide variety of jobs and was always trying to raise money. At one point thought, "What would it be like to work for a funder?" In the case of the Pugh Family Foundation, they work in public education and are mainly concerned with getting folks to read and write. But if you can read and write, you can do everything. The cultural identity we have here is not in the forefront of what we're doing right now, but it's in the background of some of the strategies we're going to use to just communicate with people. In the south, we have the great stain of slavery and racism and so many things, so many challenges. We also have a history of working together in spite of a lot of those things, and I think that's a real strength that we can lean on. So hopefully the

work we're doing is going to help create some great musicians and cultural ambassadors and chefs and all that. But we're working on the more fundamental levels. It's a little bit of a broader challenge, but one that will hopefully help build a rising tide to lift all the boats.

I mentioned that it's very much a participatory culture down here that comes out of either familial or quasi-familial bonds, just like anywhere. You always hear that the punk scene in New York in the late 1970s was the same, that it was like a family. Down here, we have a lot of families that have been around a long time, large families, so you have all these relationships. I'm not very good at saying no, or maybe I'm just I'm good at saying yes, but it's hard to resist the chance to participate when someone calls you up and says, "Hey, look, I've got a record coming out. Could you help me write a bio?" Or, "I need something for our website," or "So-and-so musician passed away. Can you help me write something?" or "Would you help me promote this?" It's just really hard not to jump in and help your friends, especially when you have some experience.

For example, I produced a show last Thursday night. I was the junior producer on a show with C. C. Adcock, Ani DiFranco, Keith Frank, Tommy McLain, Marcia Ball, David Torkanowsky, Irma Thomas, Tiff Lamson of the Givers and this woman Princess Shaw. We did a brunch on Sunday that was a tribute to David Egan. We had about a dozen songwriters including Zachary Richards, Kevin Gordon, Kristin Diable. They all played one of David's songs and one of theirs. It was amazing. I'm sure I'll be back to the music. It's in my blood, and it's what I love. If I can help things go a little bit, I'm certainly going to do that. I'm going to definitely keep doing things that fire me up and keep me enthused, and hopefully it can help push things forward a little bit.

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## Ariel Hyatt

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*Ariel Hyatt is a leading public figure in music marketing. She is generous with the information she shares through her newsletter, website, and online class, concepts that she applies with many clients with her Cyber PR company. The best way to learn more in depth is reading her books Crowd Start, Cyber PR for Musicians, and Music Success in 9 Weeks,*

**RW:** The power of your branding accomplished its purposes in my case. I subscribed to your newsletter years ago, and through repetition I have developed the habit of opening your mailings because I am always rewarded with interesting and useful ideas. Why do you put so much content online for free? Are you just a generous person, or there also a win-win in there for you?

**AH:** It's half and half. Part of it was because very early on in my career, which was before the Internet, artists would call me and they wouldn't even know the difference between and publicity and publishing, and would ask lots of crazy and I realized they didn't know anything. I started with one article, and told people, "Hey, I'm really busy with a career, but you can read this article. It's about how you can do PR. I hope it helps." I wanted to differentiate myself from the other hundreds of other publicists out there, and I thought that there would be no better way than by educating people. I felt so frustrated when I was trying to work in the music business. It was a world of "No." I had a degree in theatre and wanted to be in the record business. I thought that if I wrote articles I could help people.

**RW:** Have any of the clients you take on worked through your materials and come in being a little bit savvier?

**AH:** Very few of them of them. There are two types of people—those who want to learn and read, and others that just want to pay you to do it for them.

**RW:** How do you divide your time between doing the work of your PR firm, and marketing the service through all your different channels? Do you have a time management system, certain blocks in the day or days of the week where you do one or the other?

**AH:** I wish I could say that I did. I'm not actually that disciplined.

**RW:** It's probably so fluid that it depends on the day.

**AH:** That's right. When I'm writing books, I tend to like to go away, lock myself up for a few days at home, the beach, or even a resort and sit in my hotel room and write. Some years I feel more motivated than others to put a lot of content out.

**RW:** How do you decide what to do when you wake up in the morning? Do you already have a plan in mind from the day before?

**AH:** One thing I do is to set aside times on certain days for phone calls. Other days, when I'm with my team, I'm concentrating on whatever we're building.

**RW:** I liked the automated sign-up system you use for picking a time on schedule for a phone call. It is very efficient.

Bobby Owsinski told me that one doesn't make a lot of money writing books, considering all the time and effort it requires. The real reason for doing it is to establish your credibility. Is that the same case with you?

**AH:** One hundred percent. It's like music. People think that an electronic book should cost 99 cents in the Kindle Store.

**RW:** I'm a teacher with a music creation background. I'd like to be more entrepreneurial and move forward and restart my art, but am always bogged down with work. I read your *Music Success in 9 Weeks* and started one of your online classes, but never sat down and did the work. Just reading about it doesn't help much, you have to actually go through the process. Do you think promoting a band is like a chain that is as strong as its weakest

link? Do you have to take care of all the different aspects that a record company would handle? Is there one among all the things that you suggest that would be most helpful by itself, or does it depend on where you are and where you want to go?

**AH:** You've answered the question in the question. Unfortunately you do have to do so much. It's so unfair. This is what I would say to an artist: "Don't be the only one in your band to do everything." I've seen it happen so often, there's one guy in the band that tries to handle everything while everyone else just drinks beer or whatever it is they do. It's better when there are multiple members, and one person takes Instagram, one takes Twitter, one writes the newsletter, another books the show. That's a much more efficient way of doing it.

**RW:** Do you think that bands that aren't signed should give up on going for the big time and set a more reasonable goal, resign themselves to having a regional presence, and doing it 20% of the time while holding down day jobs?

**AH:** Everyone needs to define what success means to them. Some people don't feel like the day is a success if they don't have a guitar in their hands. They don't care if they're playing a wedding or covers in a bar. To them that is a good day. There are other people that only want to play their original music. I think they suffer a little more. If you can be happy playing 20% of the time and have a day job that pays you a nice salary and can afford to make music and are not always living hand to mouth, that's not a bad thing.

**RW:** It seems to make a good income from music you'd have to do it 100% of the time, and an additional 150% of the time running the business side of things. The math from that shows that you could end up running yourself ragged. A lot of musicians don't have enough income to hire professionals to handle the parts they can't cover.

**AH:** We see that so much. It's really tough. One approach is to save up, and when it's time to make an album pay other people to help do it right. Then they go through the next cycle.

**RW:** We're in Muncie, Indiana and are trying to figure out what our unfair advantage is—what's unique and special about the Midwest. There are a number of different aspects that go into it. I think from living in the Rust Belt we've seen the collapse of the Industrial Age and are already a ways down the road of accepting a lower standard of living than our parents had. Necessity helps breed an entrepreneurial spirit. We may be less jaded and a friendlier audience since life in our neck of the woods is not as rushed and crowded as major music centers. We invite bands to come and grow their act in front of an audience that is representative of the rest of the country, which they can later extend to any other audience. Frank Sinatra went to New York to prove himself. We say: "If we like you here, they'll like you everywhere." Being in the heartland we are proud of Chance the Rapper, and resonate to Dylan and Mellencamp's Americana genre. The cost of living is also lower, and there are plenty of cities that are closer to one another than in the wide open spaces out West, making it more affordable for bands to tour here. Does all that square with your observations about the Midwest / Great Lakes region?

**AH:** I think everything you just said is true. I want to kill every artist that shows up on my door step saying that they want to move to New York. I wouldn't do that, living in a ghetto and sharing a place for a thousand dollars a month with four other people, it is just off the rails. It's not a great way to set yourself up for success. That's why I moved my business to Boulder, Colorado. I was born and raised in New York—when I got there I couldn't believe how inexpensive things were. The thing that I observed about the musicians in Boulder was that everyone was out every night at the bar or club, and they all collaborated. The bluegrass guys would jam with the hip hop guys, the rappers were jumping up on stage with the rock guys, everybody knew each other. Everyone had the luxury of coming up together. That's the reason for living somewhere where the cost of living is low. It helps your creativity. I had a huge house with one housemate, with a swimming pool and a parking space and a giant basement that I converted into an office, all for \$400 a month. It was amazing! I didn't have to work very hard to make that rent. Granted, that was 20 years ago, but it was *possible*.

**RW:** It's important for bands to have the time to collaborate and interact, in order to come up with a new kind of music.

**AH:** I hate bands that don't like other bands. You get so much more out of a community, when other people are pulling for you.

**RW:** Half the people I've interviewed for this book say that the music is a cut throat business, the other half says that it's a big family. How about you?

**AH:** I see it both ways, but I've always had the philosophy that there's enough work for everyone. There are enough bands in the this industry for every single one of us to have our share of work as service providers. There are players that don't see it that way. They come at you, and it's very painful to build a business, and then have someone observe what you've done and try to undercut you. That just starts a race to the bottom, and music publicity becomes a commodity. The same problem exists everywhere. One of the first jobs I had was in licensing music. At that time you could get \$10,000 for a placement of your song, but today you might just get \$200. At first people were able to monetize being on YouTube and make a couple grand, then all that went away. Whenever there's a model that's been proven that seems to be working for somebody, greedy people will come along and figure a way to take it away. It's a big nightmare for everyone. When I was a booking agent you could get \$500 and some pizza playing music on a Tuesday night, and \$1,000 on a weekend. Now it's like all door deals, or pay-for-play, or "I'll give you 75 bucks." Artists can't survive on that.

**RW:** We have a project at Ball State called Middletown Music to promote music of the Midwest. We've started to build a database of small to mid-sized clubs rated by bands to make it easier for them to find places to play, that are close enough to each other so that they the band can fill up their gas tank and make it to the next music oasis. If we don't find a way for bands, venues, and audiences to get together the whole thing could collapse. I like Katy Perry, but I get tired hearing the same over-produced pop songs coming out of the radio.

We have a Facebook page, YouTube channel, Spotify playlists, Twitter, and an Internet radio station. The students are reaching out to people and asking them to follow us, but we'd like to find other ways accelerate the process. Students are making 30 City Music Guides about the music scenes of the most populous cities in the Midwest, and trying to help connect customers with service providers. I guess there's no quick fix, it's just a matter of continuing to chip away at it.

**AH:** I think you're right. When I was in Colorado a lot of what I did was to try to start a database of everything necessary for musicians: venues, people who make merch, record stores. It's needed because it is hard for people to find the information.

**RW:** What are some sources of information that you would recommend to learn more ways to promote the music scene in the Midwest?

**AH:** Martin Atkins wrote *Tour Smart*. He lives in Chicago and is an academic now, but he used to be with a band called Public Image Ltd. He's one of the most dynamic individuals on the planet.

**RW:** I have his book and picked up a lot of good ideas from it about touring. He writes with authority, and he and his contributors help communicate a taste of what life on the road is like. I'm going to be talking with Randy Chertkow in a few days about *The Indie Band Survival Guide*. I like the way their book is so logically arranged.

**AH:** Randy and Jason are wonderful, and the book is just brimming with information. I threw their first book party here in New York. Bob Baker in St. Louis would be another good person to talk to. He is the grandfather of how-to books for musicians. He owned a fanzine back in the day, is a huge music enthusiast, and wrote *The Guerilla Music Marketing Handbook*.

**RW:** I've read his book. It's been a while, but I remember appreciating his out-of-the-box hi- and low-tech ideas, like putting a sign about your band on the side of your van, and then parking it across the street from a venue where a band is playing a similar style of music. I especially liked his idea of selective cleaning, where you use a stencil to clean a pattern with your message on the sidewalk. Evidently you can't get arrested for *cleaning*.

**AH:** I also know a wonderful entertainment attorney who also lives in St. Louis named Daniel Friedman. He is wonderful and has been at it for as long as me.

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**RW:** I'd like to talk with him. It sounds like the jazz scene in St. Louis is cool, that it's for locals instead of for tourist like in New Orleans. They seem to be growing a scene that includes contemporary traditional jazz.

**AH:** Look at Ari Herstand's book *How to Make It in the New Music Business*. He is one my best friends until this day. Eric Sivers says that Ari is the younger version of himself. Ari has a column called "Ari's Take", a website, and a fabulous book that is a guide musicians. He does write for Digital Music News, but don't hold that against him, because they can become little bit sensational. Ari is phenomenal. He lives in Los Angeles and is always doing stuff.

**RW:** For people who want to go into marketing, do you recommend just starting off at any kind of marketing company to get some experience, and then later specialize in music and do your own thing?

**AH:** That's one way to do it. I always say to young people who are interning for us "If you want to do it, just go find a band, and if they have to pay you in beer and pizza, so be it. Have them pay you *something*, even if it's 50 bucks a month. I don't think bands appreciate your work if they don't pay for it, even if it's just a little something. Just say "I want to do your marketing" and is the band agrees, start doing it. You'll learn by trial and error. If they don't have anything going on, there's absolutely nothing to lose, right?

**RW:** I'll let you know how the book comes out, and what headway we make with our project. We think promoting Midwest music gives the students an opportunity to develop some skills while doing something practical, and that it could play a small part in developing the music and entertainment industry in the region. A rising ocean floats all boats.

**AH:** I think that's the most wonderful quote ever. I'm delighted to hear about what you're doing.

**RW:** Thank you so much for the conversation and for the opportunity to talk with you.

**AH:** Of course, you're welcome.

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## Time Log

List the five most important things in your life:

- A. \_\_\_\_\_
- B. \_\_\_\_\_
- C. \_\_\_\_\_
- D. \_\_\_\_\_
- E. \_\_\_\_\_

Now list your activities as completely as possible for each half-hour during the next five days.

(A.M.)	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5
6:00					
6:30					
7:00					
7:30					
8:00					
8:30					
9:00					
9:30					
10:00					
10:30					
11:00					
11:30					
(P.M.)	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5
12:00					
12:30					
1:00					
1:30					
2:00					
2:30					
3:00					
3:30					
4:00					
4:30					
5:00					
5:30					
6:00					
6:30					
7:00					

*Continued*

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<b>(P.M.)</b>	<b>Day 1</b>	<b>Day 2</b>	<b>Day 3</b>	<b>Day 4</b>	<b>Day 5</b>
7:30					
8:00					
8:30					
9:00					
9:30					
10:00					
10:30					
11:00					
11:30					
<b>(A.M.)</b>	<b>Day 1</b>	<b>Day 2</b>	<b>Day 3</b>	<b>Day 4</b>	<b>Day 5</b>
12:00					
12:30					
1:00					
1:30					
2:00					
2:30					
3:00					
3:30					
4:00					
4:30					
5:00					
5:30					

You might be surprised how you actually spend your time. Also, you probably forgot to record some time periods. If you are surprised or if you believe that it was not a typical five days, try another five days and then another five and so on until you are convinced that it represents how you spend your time. Now, begin changing the way you use your time by spending more time on your five priority items. Unless, of course, you have discovered by now that what you say and what you do are so different that you need to reassess what you want to do with your time.

If you decided to reassess, then list your (new) five most important activities below:

- A. \_\_\_\_\_
- B. \_\_\_\_\_
- C. \_\_\_\_\_
- D. \_\_\_\_\_
- E. \_\_\_\_\_

Using either the first or second list of 5 priority items, start spending a little more time on each of them.

On the following, list all the reasons why you cannot spend more time on what's important to you.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_
7. \_\_\_\_\_
8. \_\_\_\_\_
9. \_\_\_\_\_
10. \_\_\_\_\_
11. \_\_\_\_\_

Now carefully go back and reassess. You might have to make another time chart and record your behavior again. Now you know the way to proceed—continue.



4. Create a budget for rent, electric, cable/internet, insurance, food, gas, etc. based on your top job and housing choice to determine the minimum you need monthly to survive. Come up with as many expenses as you can think of to list below the essentials.

Rent = \_\_\_\_\_

Electric = \_\_\_\_\_

Cable/Internet = \_\_\_\_\_

Insurance = \_\_\_\_\_

Food = \_\_\_\_\_

Gas/Transportation = \_\_\_\_\_

Entertainment = \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ = \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ = \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ = \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ = \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ = \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ = \_\_\_\_\_

Total = \_\_\_\_\_

5. Attach a copy of the resume and cover letter you would send to a potential employer.

## Job Opportunities Assignment

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There are many exciting jobs that serve the music industry.

**Choose 3 jobs within the music industry from this list:**

- Composer/Songwriter for Film and Television
- Composer/Songwriter for Advertising
- Music Programmer
- Arranger for Hire
- Film Studio Vice President/Senior Vice President of Music
- President or Vice President of Music (Film Studio)
- Music Supervisor (Film Studio)
- Executive Vice President/Vice President/President of Music Clearance and Licensing
- Mastering Engineer
- Mixing Engineer
- Recording Engineer
- Music Editor (Film Studio)
- Game Audio Designer
- Foley Artist
- Chief Executive Officer/President/Vice President/General Manager (Major Music Publisher)
- Chief Executive Officer/President/Vice President/General Manager (Independent or Smaller Music Publisher)
- Publishing Company Creative Manager/Song Plugger
- Professional Manager/Vice President Creative Services (Music Publishing)
- Vice President Film & Television Music Licensing (Music Publishing)
- Legal and Business Affairs/Finance/Head of Finance/Administration (Music Publishing)

Research the jobs you have chosen and answer the complete the following questions. Do not use the same professional for more than one job.

**The following websites can help you research the different jobs for your presentation:**

<http://us.music-jobs.com/jobtypes/job-descriptions.php>

<http://www.musiceducationmadness.com>

<http://www.careersinmusic.com>

<http://www.entertainmentcareers.net>

You may also use the campus library, Wikipedia, etc.

1. **Job:** \_\_\_\_\_

Description of the duties involved in this job: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

List the specific skills, experience, and knowledge needed for each job. (Many websites will say “no particular skills needed.” Do not say this. Explain how you would go about getting this particular job. What would you need to know? What would you study? What types of experience would you want? How would you find such a position?) \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Identify a real professional that has performed the job that you are researching. The professional should be someone who has achieved success in the industry by winning an award or by working on a well-known project. Explain their background and how they got into the position you are reporting on. Do they have any advice to give? Do not use the same professional for more than one job. \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

2. **Job:** \_\_\_\_\_

Description of the duties involved in this job: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

List the specific skills, experience, and knowledge needed for each job. (Many websites will say “no particular skills needed.” Do not say this. Explain how you would go about getting this particular job. What would you need to know? What would you study? What types of experience would you want? How would you find such a position?) \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

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Identify a real professional that has performed the job that you are researching. The professional should be someone who has achieved success in the industry by winning an award or by working on a well-known project. Explain their background and how they got into the position you are reporting on. Do they have any advice to give? Do not use the same professional for more than one job. \_\_\_\_\_

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### 3. Job: \_\_\_\_\_

Description of the duties involved in this job: \_\_\_\_\_

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List the specific skills, experience, and knowledge needed for each job. (Many websites will say “no particular skills needed.” Do not say this. Explain how you would go about getting this particular job. What would you need to know? What would you study? What types of experience would you want? How would you find such a position?) \_\_\_\_\_

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Identify a real professional that has performed the job that you are researching. The professional should be someone who has achieved success in the industry by winning an award or by working on a well-known project. Explain their background and how they got into the position you are reporting on. Do they have any advice to give? Do not use the same professional for more than one job. \_\_\_\_\_

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