

Transcript of interview conducted May 18 2017

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Interviewer: JAREK ZABA (JZ)
Also present: JEAN BARNES (JeB)
Kingston-upon-Thames, England

Transcription: CLARE O'SHEA AND JAREK ZABA

[0:00:01.5] Jarek Zaba: OK, so it is Thursday the 18th May, I am Jarek Zaba with the Kingston RPM Project and I'm here with John Barnes. John, if you could just state your name and your date of birth and place of birth.

John Barnes: Right, John Patrick Barnes, born St Patrick's Day, 17th March '35 - so that makes me about eighty-two. And I was born in Kingston Hospital, like thousands of others, and er that's about it.

[0:00:40.4] JZ: Lovely, thank you John. Ok well you've already pre-empted one of my first questions really, because I was going to firstly ask you: what is your relationship to Kingston, the town?

JB: Oh I am a Kingstonian. Many years ago as a teenager I actually supported the Kingstonian football team, who used to play in Richmond Road. They had two pitches there and they were quite famous, they used to play in what was called the Isthmian League, and that is long gone now. But the Kingstonians were a real top amateur - they was amateurs, because there was only two kinds of football in them days, it was professional which was the big-time leagues from one to four, and the amateur leagues that were all over England - and the Kingstonians, I used to go as a kid, and I think it was about thruppence or sixpence to go in, I cannot remember. And they played at Richmond Road and the turf there, the playing pitch, was reckoned to be one of the best pitches in the world. For some reason it was perfection, because a lot of football pitches in them days - boy, it was like playing on a waste ground, even professional ones were dodgy, at times, but the Kingstonian one was good. So the Kingstonians used to play there and of course eventually they was sold up and it became houses, and they put a gas station outside for Shell which is still there today in the Richmond Road, and for six months I was the co-manager of the gas station. We won't go into why I left, but anyway I left there... [laughs] and became something else. But in the meantime I had worked at Decca three or four times and eventually I did actually go back to work at Decca's. The Decca Records were always there until, well I worked eventually at Radar and my wife who's sitting there she worked at navigator, in the electronics. I went on the maintenance, which meant I went to all the factories - all the roofs, all the rooms, everywhere - and Decca Records at that time had about... it must have been five places in London. I mean the headquarters was at Albert Embankment, still there but a different name, and I suppose now you want me to talk about when I first started when I was fifteen for Decca Records.

[0:03:31.5] JZ: So that's when you were fifteen years of age - was that the first time you were aware of Decca Records, or...?

JB: Well no, Decca Records had been there all my life really, they was always at Shannon Corner, forever, it seemed to be. One of my cousins worked there, and I was about eleven and I could still

remember - talk about memory - of her bringing a record home on the Brunswick label, of Frankie Laine "That's My Desire". Eventually Frankie Laine, of course, it was only for one time they issued this record, he became one of the biggest sellers in the world, and he sang a song "I Believe" that has never been beaten - seventeen times at number one in England. Which was, you'd never get that today... and she brought the record home. It just shows you the stupid people that used to run it, they just finished it and he became the big money-maker for Phillips - or, it was CBS in America. And it shows you the sort of people that ran Decca's, they were strictly there, and I know 'cause I went to the boss, who was er Sir Ted Lewis, in Chelsea. And I eventually went into the building side, and I was once asked to go and wallpaper - because I was at Ace Wallpaper by that time - to wallpaper his house in Chelsea, but I refused because they couldn't pay no money for me dinners and such, which was unusual really. They got a skilled man to do a job for free and yet they wouldn't give me the money for a dinner. They said something like one-and-six, which in Chelsea wouldn't let you in the door of a cafe, let alone buy you a dinner. So of course I said no, so I did know a bit about Lewis, and they were real stuffed shirts, that ran Decca's, really stuffed shirts... they weren't interested one little bit and I used to see it in the actual artists that sang. I mean, in later years when the Stones come there, they nearly jumped off of Kingston Bridge because they couldn't believe that they were such rebels. 'Cause they turned them round, without a shadow of a doubt, and yet sold millions for them, millions. But coming back to the fifties, I remember some of the stars coming there. I remember one particular one, he was big-time in the fifties, his name was Tennessee Ernie Ford. And he was a country and western singer from Tennessee or some place, and he had made millions for Decca's, and he came there in his sky-blue suit and big Stetson white hat, he took one look at the black hole and he said [laughing] "I'm not going in there boy!". Well the black hole was where they made the shellac, which came in bags, into biscuits, black biscuits. And the black biscuits went onto the press, where the pressmen - there was about a hundred of them, in different rows - and the heat in the press room was really, it was like Africa permanent. It was really shocking, stripped to the waist, and they were really sweating like anything, and it never stopped. They used to work every day, all night, sometimes Saturdays and Sundays before Christmas because that was the big rush. And that was er, the conditions then were pretty bad... but coming back to the black hole. Making them biscuits, because each biscuit was a record, they were shellac in them days, which broke easy, and anyone who's listening to this now would remember the old 78's and tennies - most of them were 10-inch - and there were also occasionally classical, which were 12-inch. They also, believe it or not, in the early fifties - 1950 - they actually made picture records, and they used to make the record and then put a picture on it, laminate it, and then press that, and they were for religious organisations all round the world, and they died out of course. And in recent years, in the late 90's and that, they suddenly put out pictures of Madonna on records and everyone thought it was wonderful and they'd never seen it. But in actual fact I saw them making those records in the 50's, and anyone listening or watching or anything like that, who was back in them days, would know that was true, so that was how Decca was... But the conditions were, you know, it's just like, one factory was like another. And as my wife would tell you, you could leave on a Friday and guarantee to walk in another job on a Monday. Or you could leave that job on a Monday and be at one on a Tuesday. Which my wife sitting here often done - leave on a Wednesday and go to another one on a Thursday, because there was literally, our area around Shannon Corner and New Malden, Kingston... there was hundreds, and I mean it, of factories making this that and all the other. Shannon Corner had loads of giant factories, from making Sheeher's fish paste, to anything that was going, that was being made in England. It was terrific. And that was before the bypass become, the freeway, er motorway, like which it is really now, the A3. And so that was one of my little things that I used to do at Decca's, but eventually I decided that the money they paid, which was not very good - I mean at the time, I was getting, in your language now, 5p an hour. Outside I used to get the most, two pounds, in this money, two pounds twenty to two pounds forty a week, and then I'd have to pay National Insurance. And now and again, if I'd done overtime, they'd even take a little bit of Income Tax out - talk about being a

slave - and I decided I didn't want no more of that. So I left after a year, and I went into the dream of my life, and I worked literally travelling London, on what we used to call 'on the building', where I suddenly went up to nineteen pound a week, which made me big-time USA. I was really doing well then. I carried on that for a few years and I actually went back to Decca's again, 'cause Decca's would take anyone, anytime, anywhere. And you'd do your term - I used to call it, it was almost like I'm going to prison - do your term, then you'd leave and [laughs] go do another job and then come back. I was actually there, in '53, June '53, when the Army kindly asked me to join them, for two years [laughs] which I did very reduct, I didn't wanna do that. Because I went from doing a wonderful wage on the building, I was getting nearly nineteen travelling and I'm doing very very very well... into for two years - some people call it National Service, I called it prison. For nineteen shillings a week, so you can tell it made me a very happy boy. So, er, that's a little story - do you wanna go over now?

[0:11:35.6] JZ: So many interesting things that I'd like to pick up on... -

JB: I'm sorry I went into being a bit of a Communist...

[0:11:42.3] JZ: No it's great, it's great. I just want to find out a bit more about the exact nature of your work at Decca. What did you specifically do, what roles did you have?

JB: When I worked there, the first job was, I would take the boxes... when the records were pressed they would go along rollers in boxes, and then all the girls in the sleeve room would put them into the sleeves and then they'd go into a cardboard box that held - how's this for memory? - thirty records. And then them records, I'd pick them up off the rollers and I'd take them upstairs and they would go in the big giant storerooms. The 78's would go one place and then the LPs, 10-inch and 12-inch, would go upstairs, I'd take them up there. And you'd put them in the different artists: the Louis Armstrong, Kay Starr, Tennessee Ernie, Vera Lynn, they'd all have a slot, and you'd put all their records in their different slots. Then they'd have pickers, men and women that went round and picked up for orders, and they'd be taken to the lorries downstairs by left, and they would take them out to the different shops that were selling them. And that was roughly the way everything was gone; they pressed them, the girls put them in the sleeves - they just put them into a plastic sleeve if they were 78's, with the word 'Decca' written on them, but if they were LPs they would put them in a plastic cover and they would go into the sleeve of their respective, like Louis Armstrong, as I told you... they would be going non-step. Oh well I did miss one little thing out. Before the girls actually sleeved them, they had a room called the edging room, and the records - boy were they slaves - the records would come out of the boxes from the press room and be jagged round the edges. And the girls would take them out with their right hand, they'd press their foot [slaps hand] and they'd get put in between these two rollers, it would spin round, and they'd put up a piece of sandpaper kinda stuff and that would take the edges off. Then they would open up, they'd take them off, still spinning, and put them on the spindle next to them and then a plate. And I can tell you, that sometimes them plates came off very fast, still spinning, and they used to cut the womens' hands open. I'd seen many a woman have her hand cut open - and you talk about slavery, boy they was really - and they used to earn something like so much a hundred. And you talk about drummers being fast with their legs, god, them women could really move, because the more they done the more money they done it was called piece work. And I'd often seen them get cut, they used to wear plasters, a lot of them. And that was slavery, they wouldn't allow that today.

[0:15:16.7] JZ: So it was quite dangerous working there?

JB: It was very dangerous working. Yet they'd let the women, young women - it used to be old women

they didn't care as long as they walked and could sit down there, or stand - at the edging machine that come in, spun the record, underneath, smooth, tchhh-boom!, take it out, still spinning. And sometimes it would cut their hand, put them on the plate and the next one they'd be... talk about Buddy Rich the drummer, boy they were really good. Looking back on it, it was an ordinary thing, because they didn't have such a thing as guards in them days, and the conditions - health and efficiency, or what they call it now - was never around. It was really tough. I mean, my wife, one day was wearing the press, doing a press on her job, and it pressed in and nearly took the edge of her finger off, because they didn't have guards. They never had guards in them days, and that's truth. Alright then, shoot again.

[0:16:30.7] JZ: First of all, how many people would you say you worked alongside, on any given day? How many other workers would there be in the factory?

JB: Well in there, I should say there was about six-fifty to seven-hundred people, men and women, worked in the factory. There was never less, and they kicked off at eight o'clock, at quarter to ten you'd have your break, you'd go in for your coffee and tea and maybe a dripping sandwich. We used to have sandwiches in there - dripping slice, with all the dripping on your bread, I know no-one eats it now but that's what they used to all love that - or marmalade. Then you'd come out and you'd work 'til half-twelve, and then you'd have an hour off, and then come back at half-one and work 'til half-past five. Whistle blows, and most of the workers would go but anyone on overtime would carry on for another two hours 'til half-seven, with no break at all. At dinner time, you could go in the canteen, and most of it was something like the hotpot in Coronation Street [laughs], there was plenty of stews in them days, it seemed to be stew every day, it was a bit like Oliver Twist in a way [laughs]. But the dinners were very good and the women that used to work behind the counter used to give you a good old spoonful of it, and a couple of dumplings chucked in it, and the food - to be honest, looking back - was very, very good. And it was only about a shilling for a dinner. It was done in a stage, some people would go in after the next lot, in the canteen. They also had women coming round at half-time, in the mornings, pushing a truck with coffee and biscuits and doughnuts and different things like that on. You could sit where you was working, and drink it and eat if you wished, you could do that. 'Cause a lot of them were too fatigued to get up and go to the canteen. Looking back on it, they really worked hard, the people then, they really did work hard. Just as a little trailer at the end of my speech here - just after Christmas, when the sale of records went right down and it was ready for the summer season, they used to sack around a quarter of the people. The reason was they didn't want them anymore. They would start them before Christmas, they'd use you for the Christmas season when it was really go-man-go, you know, really tough, and then when Christmas was over it was 'goodnight sweetheart', and out the door you went. And I'm afraid that was the story of nearly all the factories I ever went to, or knew of people at. After the Christmas, the sales go down and you went down with them.

[0:20:13.3] JZ: You've certainly spoken about how hard the work was, and the conditions -

JB: It was, it was.

[0:20:20.9] JZ: Were there any aspects to it that were enjoyable?

JB: Well, we used to have music all day in the mornings, they used to play music to keep them all happy. Of course, they played their own records. And if it was anyone's birthdays they'd say "Mary-Jane's going to be twenty-one today" and they'd slip a record in for her. One morning when I was sixteen - I'll never forget this - I suddenly heard on there "Oh Johnny Barnes is sixteen today" and they played Al Jolson's - I'll never forget it - 'After You've Gone'. It was a very famous record at the time. I quickly went into the

toilet as fast as I could and shut the door. Then another time, for a joke, 'cause they knew I was leaving, the girls were all friendly to the youngsters - because I was only fifteen, remember - and they played this record 'Oh Johnny, How You Can Love'. I straight away went in the toilet again! [laughs]. I'll not boast in any way, because I'm old and fragile now, you know, I'm long gone. But I er was a bit of a favourite with some of the girls! Well, they always called them girls even if they were fifty. You was a girl, weren't you Jean, even if you was fifty?! I'll never forget that time when they played that record, which was a very famous one, [laughs] twice I couldn't wait to get out and everyone laughing and joking and pointing. Boy, was I red! That's just a little story.

[0:22:13.2] JZ: So people would all make fun of you if you had the record devoted to you?

JB: Ah well, they'd all look and go "Wheeeey!" and all that, you know. But they used to put over the mike, you know, 'outing tonight on the weekend, would you like to get a ticket?'. And a couple of times, people bought me - this proved that I was popular - a ticket to go to the Palladium. I can still remember who I saw there, Frankie Howerd. That was a big treat. But they was always organising coach trips to some place, because it was their one way... people in them days were more together, if you understand? They all helped each other, if a person was ill someone would go round to their house, and all that. The companies never done very much, very little, but the people were more together then.

[0:23:08.9] JZ: I wanted to ask you about the social aspect, did you make many friends? Was it a very social environment to work in?

JB: I had loads of friends because that was at Shannon Corner and I lived in Middleton, just off of Mount Pleasant. I made a couple of... a couple of men there I used to be friendly with. But being as I was only fifteen, it was another life for me, weren't it? Come home and then sometimes go to the movies or something, which was only cheap in them days, as you know. I mean it's a day's money, it was only five pennies to get into any cinema in Kingston. 'Cause we had five cinemas and the Empire. And the Empire upstairs sometimes was sixpence and ninepence, which wasn't even tenpence in our money now, and you could see a wonderful show, believe it or not, in the gallery. But the times at Decca's... the people were very good, but they did work. I can't tell you enough. Looking back on it, the men and women worked bloody hard, they did, they worked hard. Oh you'll have to cut that out won't you, about 'bloody'. [Laugh] Looking back on it, they way they are of the day, I mean if you was late one too many times, not very many, you'd be gone. I mean I remember one bloke who come out the press room and he was so tired and worn, he was sat down, and he sat behind someone, and he fell asleep. I will always remember that old chap. And they came round, they looked at him - bingo, he was gone. There was no reprieve. They were very strict in them days because they wanted to keep you there. They worked you and then got rid of you after Christmas. That was a big thing.

[0:25:16.9] JZ: This brings me on quite nicely to where I was going to go next, because you have talked about the management of Decca, the actual people who were at the top.

JB: They never respected us in any way.

[0:25:28.0] JZ: Tell me about Sir Ted Lewis, what can you tell me about him?

JB: From what I could see of him... Looking at it now, I mean him and all his so-called comrades at Albert Embankment, that when they bought this company, they only called it Decca because he got a load of... when he opened it as a record company it was called something else. And they sent for a load of sheets -

I forget, I can't think what they're called in the office, these sheets to write everything on - but they bought them secondhand and they had the word 'Decca'. So him being a cheapskate, he decided don't change the name on the top, we'll call ourselves Decca. The actual beginning of Decca came from Germany, a man from Germany thought it up. And you can get on the Internet now and see that's a true statement. Anyway, Ted Lewis, all of them in the Albert Embankment, they looked down on the workers as simply workers, they didn't have any respect. If you get on the Internet and find when Prince Philip came to Decca, they filmed it, and it's now on YouTube. You can see Lewis and his comrades, as I call them, standing behind him as he went round and met all the ordinary people - Philip was quite a nice bloke - you can tell by their looks they didn't have any interest in the workers at all. And many years later, after coming back from Korea, I went to Decca's again and I see other big-time people - you know, royalties come and go there, visiting - and they fell over to bow to them but they had no time for the workers. But the union became bigger. Once the union got bigger in the early seventies and all that they started to change because the union was beginning to show a bit of power and a bit of respect for these workers. Because also the men that worked at Decca's, things had changed from the fifties to the sixties and seventies, men were starting to feel a bit of power. But Lewis and his boys... and this is a fact, I was reading a book the other day, fella gave me I'm lucky, he gave me a book on The Rolling Stones... and it's the story, it seemed to be true, everything they said... that really, the Stones when they went to the studios and that, they went to their own studios, they didn't wanna know Decca's own. They were making millions, and I mean millions of pounds, for that firm. The records went all round the world, just like lots of other people in the past, but they had no respect for them. They had no time for them. They called them lots of names behind their back, said all silly things like they smelt and that, when really the Stones were just ordinary fellas that became talented with their instruments. As time went on they became very popular and sold millions of records, all round the world we're talking now. But I found... being what I finished up doing on the maintenance... I went into the offices, close up, so I was now close to all... if someone broke a window, I'd be in that office. I'd be listening to what the hell they carried on and I'm telling you, they had no time, no time at all for the people that were doing the work. I know it - I can't prove it, I don't need to prove it and you may not believe it but that is how, it was really true. And of course they used to come out with their big smiling faces but they looked on the workers as 'You're there to make plenty of money', and that was the ballgame. I finished up maintenance at Radar but the people who worked there were just the same situation. I went to thirteen of their factories, which I could name, but it's boring. They used to send these people to all the factories to run them, and keep them, keep them under the thumb, and they would try any trick really. I mean, alright, they did give us cheap food and the canteens were done lovely, there was cheap food and we did get overalls and that. But that was to keep you there, to keep you happy, I mean a happy worker does more work. But over the time I found out that they didn't have any respect, and I see it more than ever coming back to the... What was it when we all got kicked out? A firm called Raquel Electronics took over the whole of Decca and I went to their offices, and boy, they was really there for the money, they was asset strippers, and they was there. And some of the men - I wouldn't stand it for it myself - they would like to talk to you like you was nothing. I wouldn't have it myself, I had many a row. Leave the job, I'd leave the job a couple of times, I'd leave the position and say 'I'm not having them talk to me like that, you'd speak to me properly'. I always talk to everyone in the world the same, and I've met some big timers, make no mistake. I've travelled the world, met men big as anything you'd like, I rode in the President of America's car when we was in Los Angeles, from the airport. When they had the big earthquake. I was there with the bodyguards, and my wife was, and they give us a lift, and that's a fact. So I've met some big people and none of them ever looked down, and was treated the way some of these people treated us [the workers], or looked on us as though we was nothing. Right, I've said my bit.

[0:32:16.3] JZ: No no no, it's all really interesting -

JB: I'm sorry, I haven't offended you have I?

[0:32:20.4] JZ: No, absolutely not -

JB: I'm telling you, I could tell you more, it shocked me at times...

[0:32:25.5] JZ: No it's really interesting to hear about how, maybe things were different because you didn't have the unions' sense of rights or -

JB: No, the unions lifted us, to be honest.

[0:32:25.5] JZ: And roughly when would that have been? When the unions really started coming into play?

JB: Well the unions started coming - as a kid I was never in the union, and not even when I came out of the army - the unions were still... I think it was when Wilson came in [that] they started getting a bit of power and people were beginning to understand more. [In] the sixties they suddenly realised that they weren't gonna be pushed around so much and the unions gradually came in. Not all the unions were good, some of the things they done were wrong but basically a lot of the union leaders were good men at heart. They were learning as well because a lot of them used to do negotiating and all that - they'd never done it before, so they were all learning. All this business you see on the television about us union people being Communists and that - they didn't call themselves anything, all they wanted was a better deal to live and that was the basics of it. It's the same as the politicians now, can't they come down off their high horse in Parliament and have a look at what the ordinary people are doing? That's what we want, the ordinary people. We don't want these big highfalutin speeches and running around in coaches... all a lot of bollocks that is. Oh, sorry...

[0:34:00.3] JZ: So we're going to get back to the music a bit later because I think that's important -

JB: I'm only gonna do about another fifteen minutes...

[0:34:12.6] JZ: But before we get back to the music - we're touching on it now with the unions and stuff - but I'm just interested in how you think society is changing since the fifties and sixties? In particular Kingston but also more widely, how did things change for you and wider society?

JB: What, because of the unions? Well I don't think it's changed at all because of the unions. Looking back on it, I think from the late sixties, or even in the sixties, people, ordinary folks, were going abroad. Fares to... I mean, you must realise, I'm only guessing now... that the majority of people in the fifties and sixties never even had a passport. So they'd never left England - about the only time they'd ever been abroad was to go to the Isle of Wight [laughs] about the only time they ever went across the water. I think the point of people going abroad and seeing places that they'd seen on the movies and seen on their television, and they were actually going there and seeing other countries, and their minds were becoming broader. I think that's one of the biggest causes. Plus, the teenagers, as regards music and things. The sixties did open up lots of things. The teenagers were now big-time, getting money, and pushing their styles and clothing styles and that up. Things were changing, you could feel it changing in the seventies. I was saying to Jean the other day, you know, how they came to us [laughs] one day in the seventies - and I'll never forget this one [laughs] - they said "You will all work overtime tonight" and one of the old boys

says - because we used to go home at half-five - and one of the old boys said "What? And miss Flipper?!". Which was a cartoon every day [laughs] on the television, it was about a dolphin [laughs] and he used to watch it, he said "What? And miss Flipper?!" [laughs] ... so he wouldn't work overtime! So, they were beginning to get the power. Well not the power, but they was having their voice heard for a change, which I thought was good. And you could feel it in the sixties - the late sixties, it was very late - things were changing in the music world, and the seventies were probably the best of all 'cause there was lots of other music from all around the world coming in. But the whole point, people were seeing on TV more things, more broader things from America, Australia - we was getting Australia movies on there; Australian travel films and all that kind of stuff - from all over the world, we was getting them. TV in a way was forcing people's brains, opening them up, and I've always felt that the TV actually opened it up more than you would realise. Because you can't show people something and hope that they don't want it - but they do want it. You understand? It's all right telling them, you keep your place and you're happy, they suddenly started seeing another life that was different to theirs and they wondered why. Which is probably, coming back to the present right now, that's why the immigrants are coming here. They're living in the desert in right crapholes, and they're looking at TV and seeing England, green and grassy lands and everyone happy and laughing - that's a joke. And so of course they're coming here because it's broadening. You can't show a human being things and hope they don't want it. They're gonna want it. In the seventies you could feel it coming, the unions were very powerful in the seventies, very powerful. When I worked at Decca's they were showing the boss who was running the place - the workers were running it, not the silly buggers sitting up there with their secretaries on their knee. It was the men and women, women especially were coming out. I mean there was more women in factories than you could shake a stick at, and there was money coming into the house. Right, there you go...

[0:39:07.8] JZ: So, you've spoken about how travelling abroad can impact on society, TVs impact on society - how did the music scene impact on society in the fifties, sixties, seventies?

JB: Well the music, you see, it was very... like I told you, at Decca's, the story about Billy Cotton and all that kinda stuff, and the TV, and the music was ballad singers. You never heard anyone really rocking and getting into it, you never heard jazz hardly - ever, ever, ever - on the tele, and you certainly never heard any of the blues. In the sixties, you got people like the Beatles wanting to talk about the Motown and the Stones were always on about the Chess record company in Chicago with Howling Wolf, Muddy Waters, Sunny Boy Williamson. They were suddenly appearing, these records, in England and people were beginning to buy them and decide 'oh well, we like this, we're gonna try and play it'. And all the kids were getting guitars and bass and drums and they were starting up their little groups, which is how the Beatles started. But long before that the spectrum of music was widening. Throughout all this jazz music, starting off in traditional had come to England with Chris Barber and Ken Collier, and all people like that, and they were gradually pushing it into the pubs in Kingston. In the whole of England, actually, and Wales and Scotland and Ireland. People were beginning to listen to other things and so the music was really - instead of being just flat, the usual old someone singing 'Pennies from Heaven' night and day - it was gradually broadening out. We was getting rhythm and blues and all these kinda people, they were coming into the life. Then, in the '54 - I'll always remember this one because this is a true story - I had come back from Korea and I stopped at Hong Kong. And I met some fellas in the Natham Road Hong Kong and they said "Oh, come into this bar here, Johnny" and they played this record. This was in '54, no tell a lie, it was about just after Christmas, it was January '55, and they played Bill Hailey's 'Shake, Rattle and Roll'. "What on earth is this? What kind of music is this, I've never heard it, What is it?" And this bloke said "This is really good. It hasn't got a name, but it doesn't half go, dunnit?!" 'Cause we'd never heard of rock and roll as a name. And I said "Cor, Bill Hailey?". And then when we got home people started saying "Yeah there's a bloke playing" and then suddenly a film came out called 'Rock Around The Clock'. They'd

opened the gate then, the kids was - the teddy boys and all the girls with the short skirts and everything - they'd opened the gate. They didn't realise but suddenly the kids had some music that was really something, it was rhythm and blues and blues and rockin' blues, we had all these Muddy Waters, Sunny Boy. They were all coming over, and people were saying "Oh well this is it, boy. We're in these clubs, Kingston in Kingston." They had lots of big-time blues men coming here, we had people like Clapton and that in the university, learning different chords and gradually finding out this music. And they were buying the records - country records, Robert Johnston, and Blind Lemon Jefferson and all this kinda stuff. And they was thinking "God, we can play this" or "We love this". So the whole spectrum of music became so big and then, gradually of course, as the years went on it became rock music and - I bailed out then, I didn't wanna know that because I was always a jazz and blues fan, and rock and billy... when Elvis come along all the girls went mad and it was a kinda... all Elvis was was rockabilly, a kind of rockabilly, and r&b and a bit of country pushed in, and he was a handsome-looking cat at the time and the girls went for him. He didn't only become a singer, he became an industry. I know, I've been to Graceland, I've seen what it became. He became an industry - he didn't realise then, he was just an ordinary kid in Memphis tryna sing, which he wanted to do. But that's how music went, and of course all the teen they loved it, and everyone who heard him. Because he pushed the music of rock and roll more because he came very popular on TV in America - Buddy Holly and all that, Jean Vincent - they all heard and they all started their own version of it. Music changed the most, I'd guess, in the late sixties. That's when the big change came and the Beatles come along. But of course for us the Beatles were really songwriters, good poets and songwriters. Being a good poet, which Chuck Berry was, is made to measure because he was a poet first and lots of his songs are the same chords and same tunes over and over again, but with different words. And he latched onto the teenagers with the different sayings - 'cause half of them, you must think, didn't even know he was black, and they didn't know that Elvis was white or black, they didn't know till he was on TV. There was a kid shaking around, a good-looking cat in America, and of course that was the ballgame. There's your history of blues and jazz, all in one. Is that enough?

[0:45:56] JZ: Yeah, Yeah, no, that's great. I mean, you mentioned there that the, you went to the Kingston clubs and the music, the jazz, the blues, would be playing in the Kingston clubs. What sort of venues or clubs do you remember going to, what were some of your, your old haunts?

JB: Well Jiggidy knew more, can remember more than me. There was the fishes.

JeB: The pubs.

JZ: Yeah.

JB: But the Dolphin had good singers, the Fishing Dolphin.

JeB: Dolphin's every Saturday.

JB: And that one round the corner had loads of singers. Just, just this road here. There little one next to the alley. That was...

JeB: The Jolly Brewer.

JB: No, that pub there, I forget the name of it.

JZ: No, I'm not sure.

JB: But that was a very popular one. And along the river behind where we are sitting now, no we're not in, behind the Rose now, which was the Odeon, on that alley there, there was a couple of boats they used to play things on. Rockabilly and jazz and blues and all kinds of stuff. I mean I can't remember this but they said Little Richard came down once, but whether that was true I don't know. And, but I do know that the Grenada had, 'cause I know I was there, had Gene Vincent, Eddie Cochran, there was Cliff Richard came into his own, he was at the Regal. And there was loads, all the stars were, in them days, the big singing stars, done the cinemas, you see.

JeB: Yeah, the Grenada especially which is a big one that is now the Pryzm.

JB: Because there was nowhere else to go was there. And they were theatres weren't they really. If you figure it.

JeB: They opened all the chains the clubs[?].

JB: Oh, the Fighting Cocks had a little bit of music, but there was hundreds of pubs. I mean, you don't want to get me started on that, there was loads of pubs all round Kingston. And they, just over the bridge there was the one where the Yanks used to go, what was it, the White Hart and all that, where the Yanks go. But the Yanks weren't very popular in Kingston, to go in clubs, they wouldn't, they'd long gone, they'd gone by the 60s anyway. Bloody good job too.

[0:47:59] JZ: Tell me more about the, the U.S. army presence 'cause they were at, were they at Bushy Park, yeah?

JB: Oh they was at Bushy, oh Christ was they at Bushy Park where the girls would like that. 'Cause they came in with all the swank and of course, being Americans, they had cigarettes; gum; and handed round chocolate to the kids; polos or they were called life savers in them days, life savers and all the chocolate was Baby Ruth, and what a memory for a boy of my age. And when the Yanks came in o' course the girls all went mad for loads of 'em. Because don't forget they, every, every American that came over, didn't live in a shack in the middle of Tennessee, every American that came over was a film star and lived in a giant and lived in a giant house with a swimming pool and a big Thunderbird car and more money coming out of his pocket than he could have a shake at. Of course, some of the women, as I said to you before, they managed to take back all the ugly ones, found they was living in a shack in the middle of Minnesota or some, Montano or something. The story changed when they got over there. Which is why half of the American women, women that married Americans come home, because these Americans wasn't really multimillionaires and film stars with big Mustang Sallys, with pockets put full of money. They were just ordinary fellas like we were. But they happened to be in a foreign land.

JeB: I was saying, live the dream.

JB: But all the women had been so suckered into believing it, that they went with 'em. Over the bridge, to Hampton Wick, I weren't the person who went because I wasn't that kind of bloke, but the women just poured over there, and they actually come in by train didn't they. From all round here, to hook up with the Yanks and try and marry one I think.

JeB: Well some did, yeah, I had two friends that went back to the states.

JB: Well, my, well, in my family.

JeB and JB (over each other): our ex-brother-in-law his three sisters Yanks

JB: and went back. And, they, well they're dead now, but they, one of 'em married a black man which was, you couldn't believe it in England, that she'd married a black bloke. I don't think their marriage got on very well in America either, but at the time. But, they all went back. But the American base, they did have do some good but, as I told, as I was gonna say to you, my uncle worked for the publishing and the distribution and of book and magazines for the American army throughout Europe. And he got hundreds of magazines, which were over and never sent out, and he brought 'em to me of all people, I don't know why he ever, I'll have to ask, I don't know why he didn't give 'em to his own sons, who were roughly my age. And of course, from 15 to, and he even sent the to me when I was in Korea. The book I got Saturday evening post and all the magazines and laugh at it now but he used to give me the two negro magazines, 'Ebony' and 'Jet,' they were for black people only. Well he give 'em to me. And you're looking at me now, I wasn't a black man, but I used to read 'em, and so I grew up Americanised. And he gave me loads of the American comics with Captain Marvel and Superman and all that kind of stuff, Popeye and all that, and that was good. But, the Americans being over did put a lot of ideas into people.

[0:52:01] JZ: And would that have a, clearly music as well, would they have brought...

JB: Well they had bands that weren't allowed in England, because of the musicians bardom. And the bands would play over there, so jazzman could come to England but they could, they only played, well most of it was Country and Western with the American army. They'd play at bases, but of course they took all the women. Which, which let, they would scour Kingston for all the young girls and take 'em over there. Which, really made the English, fellas in England, very please in deed to see all the girls going to the American base. That really put the cat among the pigeons 'cause there was, there lots of fights. Can you imagine it? All, as I say, and I love this one, they took all the ugly ones. [Laughing]

[0:53:04] JZ: But their, but their presence wasn't always popular?

JB: It was never popular. Never! I don't think they was ever popular was they?

JeB: No, they had a big base in Norfolk, didn't they? As well as Bushy Park.

JB: There were big bases in Norfolk that we say. But they was never popular over there, not really and honestly. 'Specially among the young men, because as I say they was, they was impressing the young girls with, you know.

JeB: Pall Mall, all their cigarettes.

JB: With their cigarettes. of course even then their cigarettes had to be bigger than anyone else's. [JeB laughing] There was us smoking the Little Waits[?] about two inches long, and there was them with their Pall Malls, a bloody great four inch cigarette, even their cigarettes were bigger. So, the whole thing, the whole thing went down like a lead balloon, I'm telling you that.

JeB: And Jack Daniel's Whiskey, the Jack Daniel's.

JB: But I was, I didn't care myself, 'cause I was only a young fella, young I mean, that bit of it didn't bother me, I was well happy in getting the American stuff. So it, that bit of it, pleased me. And I was well, I was Americanised by then. And little did I know that I would eventually go there and tour America with my wife. I said to her, I made three promises: that I would take her to Broadway, and I would take her to the Grand Canyon, and I would go to Hollywood and we would go up Sunset and we would go to the Chinese theatre and I's done the whole three.

[0:54:39] JZ: Excellent work.

JB: And I really done it.

JeB: Plus San Francisco.

JB: And o' course we, Jean's family by that time had ended up in, near, California, San Francisco. It was getting bigger and bigger, the family and friends, so they were branching out. So that was it. Oh and I said and don't forget when I'm there we'll go on the Queen Mary, and we went on the Queen Mary. Believe it or not [JeB in background: Long Beach] it's, it's just outside of Los Angeles.

[0:55:10] JZ: So, just rewinding a bit and going back to Decca. Did, did working there at the plant give you any exposure to artists you might not have otherwise heard? Because..

JB: No, no. It was simply work.

[0:55:23] JZ: Simply work.

JB: And, and it was, they didn't have air conditioning. Not really. It was, looking back on it, you wouldn't get away with it today. Conditions were not that good, I don't know what this other woman said, she might say, she might have said completely different to me, but.

JeB: But it's better later years.

JB: Pardon.

JeB: Better later years, they had aircon.

JB: Oh, that was in the, but the years in the 50s and early 60s, [JeB background: early, very bad] that was still primitive. It was a, all the factories were primitive to be honest. They used the men and women, and the young kinds, 'cause you could leave school at 15, to make the product and once they made the product, they didn't give a monkeys. Most of them never even had a social club. Decca eventually had a social club, which was started by the men theirself. Men and women that worked there started a social club, which became a beautiful club, Decca's at the Toby Jug. And that was beautiful, I spent many many times, many many hours of dancing and all the rest of it there. It became very good, if it was big enough for Brazil Football Team and Fulham Football Team, it should be good enough for me. But it was good there.

[0:56:43] JZ: So the, so did Decca, sorry. So Deccas had a link with the Toby Jug, did they? It was, it was...

JB: No, no, that was all started, that club, by the men who worked there.

[0:56:53] JZ: Right, right, got you, sorry.

JB: They got themselves a little hut and started a social club and it gradually got bigger, as the factories got bigger. But the actual firm of Deccas, they didn't, they wasn't interested. Were they Jane? They wasn't interested.

[0:57:11] JZ: So do you, do you get the impression they weren't, they just weren't interested in the music in general, they just wanted to...

JB: No, it was money. That big word money. And by God did they go against anyone who was, went against them. They was complete, I mean, when they. that fella Row kicked out the Beatles, I heard that tape, they were just, they were just as good, they were just the same as Rock and Roll bands that were playing in Kingston. So you couldn't really go against him for that. But when the Stones done their, their demo and got in there, they didn't take a chance, they signed them and thought well we're gonna get in on this. And it so happened that the Stones, culturally and musically were really ten times better than the Beatles. And I know 'cause I, I sold record, I had a stall at one time, and I sold loads of records, hundreds, thousands of CDs, records and that. So I, I was, I was well into it. Decca, they took so many, they did really get some beautiful stars, and they, by God they made some money out of them. Tom Jones won 'em, earnt 'em millions. Humperdinck, Tom Jones, Gilbert O'Sullivan, 'em three earnt 'em millions.

JeB: Franky Lane, Johnny Ray.

JB: Well Franky Lane left them later he was, they didn't, weren't interested and so he went to CBS and became the, one of the biggest in the world in the 50s, but they was only interested in that day, was he big at that time, they was, it was money from start to finish at Decca Records. They was the, all stuffed shirts as they used to call 'em. It was definitely money, and they used these people that could sing. Well, if you read the book of the Vantham[?], he despised them. But, that's a terrible word, but they wasn't interested, they looked on these young kids in the 60s. Is he making money for us? And they gave 'em terrible contracts. Terrible, they gave 'em contracts that were, just about a ha'penny a record, or something, it were really terrible. Some of 'em didn't even get that. But they made millions for themself. A load of 'em ended up broke anyway.

[0:59:45] JZ: I'm interested in the fact that you had your own record stall. Where was that?

JB: Well we travelled, Jean and I, we had, we sold, we went, when I got. I'd been doing it all my life for nine year old. I'd always had, I gotta be a bit careful here, but, as the time got on, I did meet and know lots of, I call it naughty men. And as the years went on, over the time, say when we got married, I, I, I always sold, bought and sold things. And I did meet certain people that were, that became, putting it in a, very famous for being naughty, done naughty things. And over the years, o' course I knew what was going on, and I made money out of it. And then when, a biggest time was, say just when I was at Decca Radar, went to Decca Radar, and I met, I was work, I was beginning to get connected to certain people, who done naughty, I could tell you this is, a show on the excitement about the Kray type of people and people that were naughty. They done things, of course they did, and the stuff came out but what we're going to do with it. You had to cut that clean and have someone the other side of the wall who could do it, and get rid of it. You're looking at him, and his wife. She had, at one time 2000 customers, in a money making factory. So anything she got for women, she could sell. And the time went on, we went into jeans,

socks, clothes, everything you wore, everything a woman wore. And the stuff used to come, sometimes to my house. It whacked, one time we had so much stuff I had another garage. And the stuff used to come in, you'll have to cut this out. And the, and we used to get rid of it. And I'll never forget, I could tell you a million stories about it, Jean sold so much stuff, at the factory, of two. How many women worked there Jean? Thousands. Thousand women, but she couldn't carry it into the women who wanted all the dresses, and the shavers, and the everything she was selling; which were one quarter the price of the shops. For the, you can tell why. So she couldn't get 'em in the, 'cause the factory was secured, 'cause it was making pound notes. So they went to the union in protest, the union chief said you're going to have trouble with these women. And told the police to let her in, and they was carrying the stuff into the factory. For the women to buy, so the police were carrying it in because the women were picking up. And the union chief said, we don't want a thousand women crying, we're in trouble. So, and she sold so much. So, we used to go [knock knock] and of course the door would open and in come a lorry load. And I can tell you - this is a true story - I gave up smoking one day, it was in the 70s.

JeB: [inaudible] It was snowing

JB: Snowing. I said I'm never gonna smoke again. So I shut down on the Sunday, on the Monday night someone gave me - very good of 'em weren't it - a quarter of a million cigarettes. I filled the house with cigarettes, the bathroom, the hallway, cos we gotta get rid of em. What a temptation! Anyway I never - I still managed to give it up. And we got rid of em of course which we would. But Jean went into leather coats which came from a certain place. And then we - when we went to Spain there was selling our leather coats in Spain! Our coats! And Jean said these are our coats! [Laughter] I did laugh. And we - and do you know that time we had so many people at our house buying that they were queuing? And Benny the Blood who was the boss he said to me we can't have this, in future everyone come don't wear a coat. See? And then you'll wear the one you buy out. [Laughter] And that's what we done! And one day the cops came down - I never forget this, I was terrible - I said Benny the cops are out here, he said they'll have to wait their turn the same as everyone else! [Laughter]

[01:05:06] JZ: Amazing.

JB: So - and then we got records of course. And CDs - and then we started our stall going around. Because all that finished because I was no longer with em. They were all connected and they were gone. So with what we'd learnt we'd managed to do our own thing and get our own stuff and then we started travelling all of car boots.

JeB: All the markets

JB: Bits of this. Markets, a fete. We'd be in there. And we done that for twenty odd years.

JeB: Sunday markets.

JB: And do you know when I gave it up I had letters from senior citizens saying - and people sending their wires saying how choked they was that I'd stopped. Cause I used to say if you're a senior we cut something off. You alright? Say it was £10, £9. And she would instantly - Jean would instantly pound off. And of course they love it. And they used to say the seniors when we arrive in a town go to the British Legion and say I am here. Come over to me. Go along the Broadway, pick out any nice padded coat you can see at £40 [Pause] £10.

[JeB laughs]

JB: And of course they came. And I used to say to em cold? I'll fit you up from top to bottom. Thermal pants. Long ones. Do you remember the silk ones? Everything thermal. Look after the seniors. And they loved it. They loved it. But - and then course sometimes in the certain - we'd use to do certain things and people would try to what we call move in. But being connected I was - I would threaten them with - don't, you know - they didn't mess around. Cause there was no doubt about it, you might not think now, but we could use ourself. But Jean had a lovely technique, when the old boys used to come along she used to put her hand on their back and pull em in. Pull em in out the crowd. See? She knew how to work em didn't ya? This way, Sir, you're shivering, I'll get you a padded coat. [Inaudible] You must have put this on ta - [Laughter] - or I'll be done!

JeB: They certainly got em at a good discount. You know, we'd buy the gear at a price and then sell it on.

JB: Yeah.

JeB: So it was

JB: She bought John Lewis's once. The bedding company. She bought all the John Lewis, she bought em. All their stuff and you had to cut the labels, she had to cut all the labels offa the bedding. So you mustn't put all that on there. [Laughter]

[01:08:07] JZ: Well unfortunately it's - it is on there but yeah yeah. Yeah I mean -

JB: I'm pretty old to put in prison I think. [Laughter]

[01:08:15] JZ: Yeah. Um. Yeah I do have to say, any illegal activity that is discussed - it will be on the tape. We are not obliged to report it in any way.

JB: No.

JeB: No.

[01:08:26] JZ: But if someone comes looking for it - which is not gonna happen - then...

JB: Well all I can say is we were Robin Hood. Though really we was the Sheriff of Nottingham. [JeB laughs] I believed in helping people that needed a hand and if that was wrong Jean and I were wrong. But we did - we were fair - I like - and you don't see that today. Helping each other. That's something when we need to with this lot going in if Mrs May gets in and starts her performance, you're gonna need - blokes like you are gonna have to do a bit of trying to get, y'know? She's gonna - make you pay.

[01:09:11] JZ: Yes, yes. An interesting thought for the future. Right OK, I think we're -

JB: You've done enough ain't ya? You know what I was really like.

JeB: The market stalls and then in later years it set up with the records and then we in the car boots. We done for many years. Me car boot sales. Records, all the families, whatever you don't want, we put it in for sale and -

JB: Yeah. Oh I can tell you some things that I see people do because we didn't have any prejudice. Some of the people that was alongside us in the Indian territory - you switch that off now.

[01:09:52] Uh well - I'll have to - well, only say anything you're comfortable with saying on tape. I will switch it off shortly, I was just going to have one more question.

JB: Yeah cause this is - this is - these men are still around. And they was -

[01:10:07] But yeah don't say it on tape if you don't want it on tape.

JB: Oh it doesn't bother me. And I said to this fella well they were all coming here for their - they were all queuing up to me son. Because he said to me if you get any trouble with your phone - he was an Indian fella - he said - they all used to all help each other. I'll help you out. So I said why are they all coming to you then? He said - well look he said - if you get this little chip or something he said, and I put it on your phone, you'll never have to pay another bill. [Jean laughs] I never knew that went on! So that was one thing wasn't it? And another one - remember that stall they were all fighting to get at him? And I said Bobby, what you - he said - and it was all cigarettes under the counter! [JB and JeB laugh] He said we're not paying any - nobody paid any tax. The IRS they come after us we're in trouble. We got nothing now. We've spent it and it's gone. But we've had a good bloody laugh. And a bloody good laugh at life.

[01:11:11] Amazing, amazing. I actually think I've got everything I need for this now.

JB: Cut that out.