

UP002660 Oral History Project

Detroit, MI

John Freeman

Interviewed by

Michelle David

December 7, 2016

Detroit, Michigan

As part of the Oral History Class in the School of Library and Information Science

Kim Schroeder, Instructor

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Brief Biography

John Freeman is a musician and songwriter for a Detroit Area band called The Codgers, as well as playing in The Wagner Act, another singer/songwriter duo. Apart from his music career, he also writes and publishes poetry under the name Cal Freeman and is an English Professor at Oakland University.

Interviewer

Michelle David is a student in the SLIS program at Wayne State University.

Abstract

John Freeman is a musician, songwriter, poet and teacher. In this interview, he discusses his influences in his music and writing. He discusses his music in regards to the city of Detroit and surrounding areas, and how the area's history and geography play a role in his writing and music. He discusses how his family's connection to labor history in Detroit has influenced his writing. The city's constant evolution is discussed in regards to how it affects the Detroit music scene.

Restrictions

None

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Transcription

Detroit Musicians Oral History Project

Walter P. Reuther Library

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Transcript of interview conducted December 7, 2016 with:

John Freeman, Detroit Michigan

By: Michelle David

Michelle David:

Okay, can you tell me your name and where you grew up?

John Freeman:

I'm John Freeman. I grew up on the west side of Detroit in Warrendale neighborhood.

David:

Okay. Where is Warrendale?

Freeman:

Like Southfield and Warren avenue area.

David:

Okay.

Freeman:

Right on the border of Dearborn, Dearborn Heights.

David:

Do you still live in the area?

Freeman:

No, I live in west Dearborn. so about 2 miles from where I grew up.

David:

That's cool. Do you have any siblings?

Freeman:

Yeah, I have a younger sister.

David:

Okay. Is she musical as well?

Freeman:

No, not really. She studied some music in middle school and played saxophone but gave it up, so she doesn't really play anymore.

David:

So, do you come from a musical family?

Freeman:

No. Neither of my parents play music. One of my mom's brothers sings. But, no not a particularly musical family at all.

David:

So then, what inspired you to get involved in, what's your first musical memory? What do you remember first?

Freeman:

Well, I used to go with my parents to hear a local musician named Larry Larson. He used to sing in a lot of Irish bars. He still does. And, my parents were friends with him and they would go out and hear him play some kind of traditional Irish ballads and stuff, and so that was what kind of triggered my love of music and guitar playing and singing specifically.

David:

So how old were you then when you first decided you wanted to try something, like to play something?

Freeman:

Like really young, like a toddler, probably two or three. Yeah, I was super young, when I was I listening to Larry. So, my parents used to take me to the bar with them when I was (laughs) really young. It was for cultural purposes.

David:

Progressive parents.

Freeman:

Yeah right.

David:

That's awesome.

Freeman:

Yeah.

David:

So, how then did you learn to play the guitar, did you take lessons?

Freeman:

Yeah, I took a lot of lessons. So, I took lessons with Larry Larson when I was really young, before I was really old enough to do much with it, I'd say I was 6 or 7. Then I gave it up for a long time. Took some piano lessons from the time when I was about maybe 10 til 13. Gave those up at 13 in favor of the electric guitar, and kind of in my range of 14 to 17, I took a lot of guitar lessons at a place in Lincoln Park. A & R Music from this guy Mike Concepcion. He was a good teacher.

David:

That's good.

Freeman:

Yeah.

David:

Did you learn to play other instruments or did you stick with guitar at that time or?

Freeman:

I stuck with guitar for mostly after that. I still would mess with the piano occasionally but I mostly gave it up. I'm not, I'm definitely not what you would call a piano player. And when I was in my late 20's I got a mandolin, and I know how to play some chords on a mandolin, I'm not a particularly good mando player, though. So, guitar is definitely my primary instrument.

David:

Do you still prefer electric over acoustic, or?

Freeman:

Mostly acoustic actually. when I was learning as a teenager I was really into sort of punk rock and stuff like that. so i played really noisy music on electric guitar, like had a fender Stratocaster and a Marshall half stack and I liked to make a lot of noise with my friends. I was in a couple kind of noise rock bands. but then, really ever since I was about 22 I played almost exclusively acoustic guitar.

David:

Okay. So, who are some of your musical inspirations?

Freeman:

A lot of folk and Americana songwriters, going back to really what compelled me to start writing songs, was as a 13 year old in the 90s, like Nirvana, listen to Kurt Cobain and stuff like that. I really got into Bob Dylan and Lou Reed at that point a lot too. More recently Joni Mitchell is one of my favorite song writers, I like Guy Clark a lot. But mostly stuff in that folk Americana tradition.

David:

So you kind of stuck with that?

Freeman:

Yeah, definitely.

David:

Okay, so tell me a little bit about how you became involved with your current band The Codgers.

00:04:30

Freeman

Yeah, this would have been about 2005. There was a little Irish bar in my old neighborhood in west Detroit, called the Tipperary Pub, it's right on Southfield and Joy Rd. It's gone now, but this guy was running a music session up there on Wednesday nights, and while up there I met my friend Steve Cousins, who plays accordion in The Codgers. We would just get up during the open mic portion and kind of play new songs we were trying out. I was about twenty-three or four at the time, and I think Steve was about twenty-two, and we were just kind of drinking a lot and hanging out at the bar on Wednesday nights and there were a bunch of older musicians there. This guy Carl Henry who is a pretty famous Detroit musician. He's won the Motor City Blues Challenge a couple times, they sent him down to Memphis and San Antonio and stuff to play. So, he'd travel around the country. He'd show up there on Wednesday nights just to kind of like keep his chops up and try out new stuff. Terry Murphy was the host of that session. He's a local Irish musician and he'd just feed us beers if we got up and played. It became like sort of, it got to a point where we'd just go on late and just kind of be playing for other musicians in town and treating it like an extended band practice every Wednesday night. And then one Friday, someone cancelled on Tommy O'Halloran who owned the Tip, and he called me and said "yeah, you know, you can bring your fellow on the box and come up and fill up the Friday night for us, and I'll give you a hundred bucks". Fellow on the box was Steve Cousins playing the accordion. and so we kind of got, cut our teeth there. That was our first official paying gig as The Codgers.

David:

So, it was just the two of you at the time?

Freeman:

Well just the two of us at the time, but for that gig we roped Steve's first cousin Matt Balcer (check spelling) who's still the mandolin player in The Codgers, to come out with us with his mandolin, he was just learning it at the time. He's a really good musician, so he was a quick study. At that point I think we weren't really very technically proficient or that good at playing together, certainly not very good at arranging songs and knowing when and when not to play over the

sort of narrative of the song. But, I think people responded to the fact that we were pretty young and energetic and somewhat like, anachronistic just playing a lot of these old Irish rebel ballads and stuff that most people our age probably wouldn't even be aware of, but for some reason we had all grown up around. So, and it was cool too, this was on the west side of Detroit it was like a neighborhood I'd grown up in, but it was also a neighborhood trending downward, a lot of foreclosures, a lot of empty houses, a lot of blight, and so a lot of those songs from Dublin and Belfast by folks like Phil Coulter like "The Town I Loved So Well" reminded me of that neighborhood. I had never been at that point to Ireland so those songs really spoke to me on the level of "oh this song sounds like it's about west Detroit where I grew up." But, of course the kind of the dynamic there in that area kind of ultimately sank the bar. Because when I was a kid growing up there, it was mostly city workers who lived there. It was before they lifted the residency requirement in Detroit. So, it would be a lot of fireman, a lot of cops, a lot of water department workers in our neighborhood I remember. And, after they lifted the residency requirement all those folks moved and followed the sort of white flight patterns out to the suburbs and then just ditched a lot of their houses and let them fall apart, and that's kind of

David:

What happens.

Freeman:

Yeah, that's what happens. And the Tipperary was selling Guinness for 5 dollars a pop, and nobody's buying. Nobody has the money for that. So, they kind of went down with the neighborhood.

David:

So then, but you guys continued as a band?

Freeman:

Yeah, yeah and at that point, like around 2006 or 2007, Larry Larson, my childhood hero I was telling you about earlier, was playing at the Gaelic League every Friday and Saturday but he wanted to give up his Saturday nights so he recommended us to play there the first Saturday of the month. And, that became a standing gig for us so once a month we knew we were at the Gaelic League and then other things would just kind of pop up in conjunction with that. Someone would see us there and invite us out to play a festival or you know, we got a lot of gigs at other bars in the region through that. At that point we were playing mostly covers of old common domain Irish songs that we'd grown up hearing. We weren't really writing yet at that point but we had enough material that we could do passably to fill up a night in an Irish bar, and we were having fun doing it.

David:

So, then you started writing songs together? or did you write on your own?

Freeman:

Yeah, I think the way it started, I started writing on my own, and kind of showed it to those guys. We recorded one CD in I want to say 07 or 08 of just Irish covers, called *Are Your Dues Paid* but a friend of mine, Carl Henry said something to the effect of "you know I wish when I was your age, I was writing my own stuff. You know what's the point of doing "Dirty Old Town" again no matter how well you do it, you're not going to sing it as well as Paddy Reilly" or something, and I'm like "yeah there's a point to that." So started writing my own stuff and recorded a record called *Litchfield*, out at Dave Lawson's studio in Oak Park, and we sent that over, and those were mostly originals, I think we had like a one Irish cover on there, one Townes Van Zandt cover and one Guy Clark cover, but the rest of that record was all original stuff. I wrote most of the originals on that one. The accordion player, Steve Cousins wrote one of the songs on that one called "Reflecting on my Health", and at that point I would just bring the song to the table and they would come up with parts and we would all kind of collaborate on arrangements but I was actually writing the songs myself. Steve wrote his song himself. Then we recorded this last one *MASHR's Elegies* and put that out last spring, so it's I guess technically our third record, and this one's all originals. And

Steve wrote more of the songs on this one. And, those guys, our bassist Jake Dimmick helped out a lot on arrangements on *MASHR's Elegies* and he and Dave Lawson kind of co-produced it, kind of have gotten to a point now where we feel comfortable recording at Dave Lawsons. He's been around the Detroit music scene more rock bands for a long time. He's played in bands like The Sights. Now he's in a band called The Scrappers. And we got comfortable recording at his house, we'd get all the stuff kind of done at his house and send it over to Tempermill and Dave Feeny mixed and mastered our last two things for us and did a really good job on them.

David:

And its drastically different from the first one. I listened to a little bit of that one on Spotify.

Freeman:

Yeah, yeah, definitely. Oh, thanks for listening

David:

It was just completely different from the newer stuff, and I wondered how that evolved, I mean it was all good, but different compared to each other.

Freeman:

Right, right for sure. Yeah, I think just burrowing deeper into the writing process. And, just kind of getting older and getting more fatalistic about stuff too really informed the writing on the last one. There's a lot of elegies for friendships and for people and places that are kind of gone now that were important to us. So, all the art on that last one is at the Tipperary Pub after it's been kind of boarded up and tagged and overgrown with weeds, it's tough.

00:13:18

David:

So sad. So living in this area then definitely inspired your music?

Freeman:

For sure. And especially, that area of west Detroit where I grew up, and some of the labor history in that area. You know, in west Detroit and east Dearborn. Our accordion player, Steve Cousins is a labor organizer for SEIU, so he's gotten us to go out and do a lot of Fight for \$15 actions. Some of our band mates have gone out and done that stuff. Done a lot of Right to Work protests and things. I wrote a song about my grandmother's first cousin on this one, a guy named Jim Sullivan who's part of the Rouge Strike in 41, and at one point during the late 30s, actually served as Walter Reuther's bodyguard so, I was always fascinated by him as a figure in our family history and in our Detroit labor history. So yeah, that area and its history definitely has informed a lot of my writing.

David:

That's interesting.

Freeman:

Yeah.

David:

Irish bands and folk/Americana bands at least in my area, seem to be a tight knit community. Do you find the same thing in this area? I mean, I'm from the Port Huron area and all those bands,

Freeman:

Oh okay.

David:

They're all friends they all know each other.

Freeman:

We played at Lynch's before up there.

David:

You have? Oh! I go there every week.

Freeman:

Yeah, that's a great bar.

David:

I was just there last night.

Freeman:

Oh, that's really cool. Yeah and I actually have a friend named Nicole Hayden, who writes for the newspaper up there, and she had me up for a poetry reading I forget, there was a gallery we read at last April for National Poetry Month.

David:

Probably that studio something

Freeman:

Yeah, yeah, that was cool. she's a really cool person. Yeah, it's definitely a tight knit community in answer to your question. We all kind of play at the Gaelic League, Terry Murphy plays banjo for us but he's also plays as a duo with this guy Frank Kennedy. All our band members tend to mix and match sometimes.

David:

I was going to ask you that, do you have any other projects that you're involved in, besides that one, that seems to be a common theme?

Freeman:

Yeah I've got a little duo with my friend Nick Mansfield who's in The Codgers, we play as The Wagner Act, and we write songs, we kind of treat that more as like a song incubator. We'll come up with ideas that we might use for The Codgers, we might use for something else, we'll kind of write together. And he's fun to write with too because it gets me out of my own head. He's interested in writing about things and on themes that on my own I would never think to explore.

David:

Do you perform together at places or just?

Freeman:

Yeah we played a lot together at the Lager House over in Corktown, played over at the Corktown Tavern, it feels like we always play in that neighborhood

David:

Area

Freeman:

But, yeah we're good buddies with all the Irish bands in the area, like Paul Brady from Stone Clover is a really good friend. You know he just posted something today where he was, we didn't know it, but I had just gotten a new guitar, so I called Nick Mansfield and said "hey meet me at the Gaelic League. you know, cuz its usually quiet there in the afternoons, so we'll grab a couple pints, I got this new guitar, pick some tunes" and Pauly was going there for a video shoot for Stone Clover. and he texted us from the parking lot "hey I'm doing this video shoot and I gotta buy some pints and do this and that, so why don't you guys meet me at the Gaelic League" and we're like "Oh we're inside man, we're breaking in John's new guitar." So, he came in and we made an afternoon out of it, while he was getting useful footage for his music video.

David:

That's awesome.

Freeman:

So stuff like that pops up all the time. We always do like the Motor City Irish Fest. And you know, at the end of the night, it's customary for all the bands to get up there together and do some songs and kind of just pack the stage, kind of free for all.

David:

I think that musicians love that I think.

Freeman:

Oh yeah, it's a good time.

David:

Festivals usually that's the end of the night I love watching that.

Freeman:

Yeah for sure.

David:

So you do consider your band then to be a Detroit band?

Freeman:

Yeah

David:

Do you play on the road? Outside of the area?

00:17:40

Freeman:

No not typically. We've had offers to do festivals and things outside of the area but since everybody's kind of got day jobs, it's just not real convenient for us to travel. Our mandolin player Matt Balcer's a creative director at Leo Burnett's so he's in the ad industry, that's a very demanding job. I teach during the week. So, if we're going to break out anywhere and do anything it would have to be like a weekend gig. You know, our accordion player Steve Cousins, is going to move back but he's actually been in Denver for the last couple years, so that's also complicated any hopes to travel. I think at some point we might take a couple trips together as a band and play out. But I think part of the reason the band's lasted for, it's been little bit over a decade now in different instantiations is just because nobody's taking it terribly seriously.

David:

Right

Freeman:

It's very much good creative release and sort of emotional release. Go out and play out a few gigs on the weekend, and it's just kind of a good vehicle for friendships and creativity as opposed to like a business and a serious attempt to make a go of it in the music industry.

David:

Okay so what is it about Detroit and Michigan that inspires your work, assuming that it does?

Freeman:

Yeah it definitely does. well I think, I already mentioned the labor history. That's a big part of it. My grandmother's family, a lot of them lived in Downriver, Melvindale, Allen Park area, and a lot of them worked over at Rouge, or at Heublein, the liquor factory that's now gone over there. And they would tell stories about my great grandfather being a union steward for the Detroit street

railway, way back in the day. About her first cousin Jim Sullivan being Walter Reuther's bodyguard, being involved in all these crazy labor skirmishes including The Battle of the Overpass in 1937, and the Rouge strike in 41, and I always thought like it's a big Irish catholic family that kind of, they're good storytellers but sometimes the uh, voracity of the stories are questionable or at least there's some gem of truth but they're exaggerated. But, one day I'm watching this PBS special, and it's about labor history and they get to the ford strike and there's this guy Jim Sullivan on the special saying "I ran out of the plant yelling Strike Strike, and later that day I said to myself you did it Jim you shut down the Ford Motor Company' and I'm like oh wow this guy really

David:

It happened.

Freeman:

Yeah he does have a big place in our labor history. So that's huge. Also just the sort of geological past here and the geography of the area and the interconnected waterways and the great lakes. Especially more in the poetry writing, that's inspired me I think. I read a great book about seven years ago, I've read it a few times since then called *The Living Great Lakes* by a Traverse City writer named Jerry Dennis. And, that book is fascinating on a lot of levels. Its part natural history of the region, it's part human history of the region, its part memoir about riding on a ship through four of the five great lakes, part memoir about taking a canoe trip up on Lake Superior, and he's just a really erudite writer. He knows a lot about fresh water biology. He knows a lot about geography, and he also knows a lot about storytelling. So he really captured, he really excited me about this region when I read that book. So the last poetry thing I put out, this past summer, was picked up by a small press in London England. It's about, a lot of its about going down and walking along Ecorse Creek in south Dearborn Heights, and Allen Park and kind of discovering that that was at the end of my road, like reading up on it, realizing that it kind of runs out eventually into the Trenton channel, which eventually runs into Lake Erie, and just knowing that like you're indirectly connected to the St. Lawrence Seaway when you walk to the end of my road, like

really excites my imagination in a lot of ways, so that definitely, that connection to water, and the sort of implicit responsibilities of ecological stewardship that go along with that. That's a huge part of why this region's important to my writing, just paying attention to what's around you and noticing it, is a political act in a way.

David:

You never had any inspiration to leave this area, live anywhere else?

Freeman:

Not really. I lived in Bowling Green Ohio for a couple years when I was going to grad school, studying poetry down there. Which was a great experience but I definitely, a great experience educationally, but I definitely wanted to come back to Detroit, and Detroit changed a lot I think in the last decade even, and part of what I used to like about Detroit seems to be fading away in a sense. A lot of this kind of smaller, less known, less crowded places you could go, seem to be overrun now it feels like development journalism is killing a lot of what I used to like about Detroit. Here are the ten best dive bars in Detroit, and it's like damn it now you can't go to Jumbos on a Saturday night because its packed. Why'd you have to write that piece?

David:

Or the Old Miami.

Freeman:

Or yeah, that's completely

David:

We went once this summer and I had heard so many things about it being this amazing dive bar and it was packed. It was still a dive bar, there's a possum living behind the ATM

Freeman:

It's still cool.

David:

But it's definitely changed, the clientele I guess.

Freeman:

I know, yeah, we used to play there. We played there a few times, but back in the day we'd play there and it'd be kind of quiet, we'd bring a few people in maybe. The last time we played there it was like, people were walking in and paying the cover. We had a good contingent there inside near the stage to listen to us, but everybody was paying the cover and walking into the backyard. They didn't know there was any music going on. They gave us the gates, so I was like "cool, we're getting money for these people who don't even want to listen to music". It's good I guess on one level. It's some of those kinds of gritty yet true aspects of the city that you used to be able to find and pick out are gone now, so I stick to the old haunts. Like Gaelic League is very much a home base for us.

David:

Now where is that at?

Freeman:

That's actually in the heart of Corktown. but it's just maintained its old self, no sort of hipsters or pseudo hipsters really want to go there or anything so it's just kind of its own old school kind of thing.

David:

That's surprising there that it hasn't picked up.

00:25:52

Freeman:

Right, and its technically like a club, so it's not as much of a commercial enterprise as some of the other stuff around there, so it's like more people who just kind of want to come in for the music and for the atmosphere and for the spirit of it. I think it's an inscrutable place for a lot of people who haven't been there before.

David:

Is that down by Slows?

Freeman:

Yeah it's about a block east of Slows.

David:

We did walk past it once, but my girlfriend was underage at the time so we couldn't go in there.

Freeman:

Yeah bring her.

David:

Well she's old enough now, we'll have to come back down here one day.

Freeman:

That's the benefit of a club though, you know you can go in there with underage people because its cultural.

David:

Exactly. yeah, so you went to school for poetry then?

Freeman

Yeah.

David:

So how long have you been writing poetry?

Freeman:

Probably about 20 years off and on, I've really only been writing poetry on any kind of serious level for maybe about 13 years. But I did start writing it when I was about 14, 15. I'm 36 now so a little more than 20 years.

David:

What inspired you, or who inspired you to did you get interested in reading some?

Freeman:

Yeah, you know my dad kind of got me into reading and writing, he's an English prof, so he teaches at University of Detroit Mercy, and he's like Renaissance lit, and Shakespeare and stuff like that. So when I was in 8th grade, I wasn't particularly engaged in school, and I was more interested in playing electric guitar and what these musicians were up to. And so, he thought I might find Jim Carroll and Allen Ginsburg interesting because they had been connected to different rock musicians. Jim Carroll played music with Keith Richards and Allen Ginsburg was on Bob Dylan's Rolling Thunder Revue Tour and stuff. So he gave me some poetry books by them. He gave me a book by Jim Carroll called *Living at the Movies*. That was one of the first books of poems that I really loved and then he also gave me Allen Ginsburg's *Howl*. He had like an old school City Lights edition of it.

David:

Awesome.

00:28:16

Freeman:

So those were two huge reading experiences for me. it's a woeful cliché but changed my life so to speak. And then going back though even as a kid my mom's got a really uncanny ability to memorize things, acquire new languages. Like she speaks a number of languages. She's got this through the roof verbal intelligence and she used to recite Poe and then a lot of the old schoolhouse poets like Eugene Field when I was a kid. So, I think that, I still hear a lot of those cadences and hear my mother's voice when I'm writing a lot of times. So, both my parents were big readers of poetry. My dad became more of a scholar than a poet, but he used to write poetry when he was a college student.

David:

So, when you went to school was your intention to teach, always?

Freeman:

Not really. I think, I went to school just kind of, the main reason I went to college was because my dad taught at UDM and it was free. So, I was like, "well I'd be dumb not to go, this is a privilege and an advantage that not everybody has and college is really expensive I should, I probably have some responsibility to just go do this" and the only thing I really could imagine studying was reading and writing. So, I just became an English major, and I wasn't real worried about career stuff, at that point, so I just took classes that I liked and did well at them. Got interested in a bunch of different modes of literature, and then kept writing the whole time and applied to grad school kind of got this teaching fellowship down at Bowling Green and just went to that, they had a poet down there named Larissa Szporluk who I still admire, one of my favorite American poets, so I got to go down there and the whole time and I know this isn't everybody's situation and I know it's like I try not to take it for granted but the whole time, school is free, because of going to UDM where my dad taught, because of the teaching fellowship at Bowling Green. So I was in a privileged position not to have to worry about "okay what am I going to do with this", so I got back here and needed money and just started teaching part time. and I teach out at Oakland university now kind of wound up there a friend of mine became chair of the writing and rhetoric department out there which was a new department back in 2007 and

asked me to come out and teach for him. I tried it out, seemed to fit in, and liked it so I just kind of stumbled into what I'm doing, just kept doing different things and just always, the whole time reading and writing though is just something I kept coming back to, and anything that would facilitate that financially for me I kept taking on.

David:

On the OU website I noticed that you're influenced by a few different educators, including John Taylor Gatto.

Freeman:

Yeah.

David:

I unschool my kids, so I was wondering how you came upon that and how you use it in your teaching now?

Freeman:

Oh that's cool, yeah, gosh that's a great question. My wife has a master's in curriculum, so she was really interested in Gatto and Paulo Freire and stuff like that when she was doing her masters. So I just remember that I thought *Dumbing us Down* was a cool title for a book, and picking up my wife's annotated copy of that and reading it and just be like "wow this guy's right about everything" and just I guess for me, just getting students to, I'm not so worried about the product students are producing in my classes. I'm more worried about things like effort and just kind of awakening the imagination. If I can spark something in someone to respond to writing in a way that's going to get them to view it as personally useful or personally engaging, I guess I'm more concerned with that than whether they've mastered certain skill sets. I don't know if that's true to Gatto or not, that's my memory of Gatto though.

David:

That sounds about right.

Freeman:

Yeah, just using the educator's role to make sure you're kind of opening doors and pathways for exploration rather than closing them with punitive grading metrics and stuff like that. So I'm concerned with students staying engaged with the course and kind of keeping them going, wherever that going is.

David:

That's awesome. Do you have someone in your life that encouraged or influenced your songwriting and poetry?

Freeman:

Yeah I got a couple people. But Clair Crabtree at UDM when I was studying there was the first person who made me feel like I was a real poet who has things to say. She was a huge influence. Another professor there named Hugh Kulick who's now I think over at Macomb. He was great at just being enthusiastic and making you feel like there is a community of writers that cared about what you were doing. So those two folks. You know, songwriting wise, I think there's a local songwriter who's actually, gotten a lot of national recognition as well. Don Duprie, who's a great songwriter and a really great friend who I'll just, if I'm working on something I always like to get his ears on it. I'll just send it over and he'll tell me if he thinks it's good or bad or be real straight with me about it, and he's got a lot of knowledge and just a really brilliant mind when it comes to understanding song structure especially so he's really helped me and encouraged me. And you know, Larry Larson got us our standing gig down at the Gaelic League and that's given me a venue where I can actually put forth original music so that's been a huge thing too.

00:35:02

David:

And you still play there weekly?

Freeman:

Yeah.

David:

Not weekly, monthly?

Freeman:

Yeah. Monthly. The first Saturday of the month, and then once a month it's usually the third Thursday of the month I also host a songwriter's night there. Where we do like 1-2 featured artists who play half hour sets of original music and then a bunch of songwriters around the city come in and there's like an open mic portion. But I know sometimes people cringe when they hear open mic but this one. Everybody who shows up is just typically outstanding. A lot of people who don't really need a venue to play in they all get paying gigs everywhere on the weekend, they just come out to try out new songs and to sit in with each other it becomes a very collaborative experience. So, it's been a really cool thing. My friend Roxanne La Puma is, was the president, now the vice president of the Gaelic League has allowed us to host that there. it's been a great thing. it's become an important resource I think for a lot of local songwriters and singers too. They like coming there.

David:

Do you maintain a social media presence?

Freeman:

Yeah I've got Facebook. That's mostly what I use. I had Twitter once and it got hacked so I kind of shut it down and got a little spooked by that and stopped using Twitter. But I do use Facebook, somewhat compulsively. It's impossible to do music and promote live music without Facebook as a platform I find. The Codgers have a Facebook, Wagner Act has a Facebook, I've got a personal account that I always post my shows and events to, so, it's an important thing.

David:

It's almost impossible anymore not to.

Freeman:

Right. and I got it on my phone. Of course you just look at it all the time. When I'm standing in line for coffee or something, kind of addicted, sad to say.

David:

It's also easy though to find music and find stuff that you like to hear I think.

Freeman:

Right, and its only as good as your friends on it are. So, people complain about Facebook but you know, my friends write cool poems and post them on Facebook, though and my other friends post music to their SoundCloud and like Reverb Nation pages that I can listen to via Facebook so, I log in to keep up with what people are doing with their art mostly. Occasionally sound off about politics.

David:

Especially lately.

Freeman:

Yeah oh geez.

David:

Yeah I think it's interesting to me, like ten years ago, some of that stuff wouldn't even be possible, the interaction and community fan base.

Freeman:

Yeah totally.

David:

I think it's interesting.

Freeman:

Yeah, and digital technology has really changed the songwriting process for a lot of us too I think. Just having these...what is this... audio memo on this phone, I'll look and find out, just being able to record this and, Voice Memo it's called, just use voice memo and send it to someone else, in a text message and be like "here's a new song" and the microphones on these are pretty good for rough demos of stuff and send it off. I send Don Duprie stuff that I'm working on all the time and I'll send Codgers band members stuff I'm working on all the time and just be like "what do you think of this". To be able to do that and not have to carry your guitar case over to someone's house or bust it out. I suppose there's something, we still do that old school stuff too but when you're not in a position to get together physically its good to just be able to do that, send it along, get feedback.

David:

For all the people that complain about it I think there are so many benefits.

Freeman:

Definitely.

David:

In that way for sure.

Freeman:

I'm sure I don't have to like type and carbon copy manuscripts.

David:

Well I think it helps people get access to your art and your work too, because I think some, especially poetry I would think is harder to get out there.

Freeman:

Absolutely. Nobody's buying journals that your poems appear in, but if the journal posts a hyperlink to their website you can share that, it'll get more readers inevitably.

David:

And then you do readings too you said?

Freeman:

Yeah. I usually do probably around half a dozen readings a year. I just did, my last one was at UDM which was cool to go back to my alma mater. I read with a former student Amy Thomas who's got a book with Sundress Publications. She's got another manuscript that's been a finalist in a couple contests that's probably going to get published pretty soon.

David:

That's cool.

Freeman:

yeah so I read with her there. And September I went down to Bowling Green and did a reading at Prout Chapel on campus there just part of their creative writing program's reading series. And then I'll host readings. I always do a National Poetry Month reading at the Gaelic League in April, and typically it kind of depends on who I can get on the bill. But I've had Michael Lauchlan who's got a great book with Wayne State Press it's actually called *Trumbell Avenue*. Mariela Griffor is the founding editor of Marick Press who put out my first book. She's a great internationally renowned poet and translator. So we've had some really great people at the National Poetry Month Reading at the League too. That's the cool thing about the Gaelic League, is just that its, they're receptive to putting events like that on, and because it's not a commercial enterprise, if it's something like a poetry reading the attendance expectations aren't the same as a music night, and they get that. They like that there are smaller intimate poetry readings there and they feel like it's culturally important so they support it.

David:

Detroit has produced some incredible musicians, what is it about this area, do you think, if there's anything that kind of has helped grow such amazing, the talent?

Freeman:

You know what? I think people who love live music, there's something about this region its really good for people that love live music and maybe that's part of the working class culture is this idea that you work hard and you need to do something to blow off steam and maybe that's an escape and maybe that's been carried over into our current postindustrial situation, but there seems to be, even in pockets where you're playing to a room of 12 people. They're 12 people who are really listening and like there's this intense listening audience in a lot of venues across the city. I think that's a big part of it. People have always been engaged with music in Detroit. And I think the relative the fact that the city's always been a relatively inexpensive place to live, this region's relatively inexpensive too, I think that's good for artists, I think people who haven't made it or maybe are more DIY and part of their ethos is that they're not even interested in those sort of terms for what constitutes success, can get by here, doing what they do and finding inexpensive spaces to kind of host what they do. And I mean that's going back to Barry Gordy using FHA loans to do a recording studio.

David

I often wonder if it's like that other places or if this is just a unique situation

Freeman:

I think it's a unique situation. I don't know that that's a good causal explanation of it, but, I think this area always has Kairos for some reason, and I think a lot of it, is just this convergence of geography and industry, you know you've got these waterways that run through the region that have made it easier to do things like export steel and automobiles and set them on freighters and stuff and bring in the raw materials to make cars, and it just kind of this connection between those two things always makes what's going on here timely. So, whether it's in economic

terms, when the economy starts going south feels like you can look at this region and predict it's going to go south, 4 or 5 years out ahead of when it hits the rest of the country and world. And so, this place takes on an importance in the minds of audiences. It's got this ethos that has to do with grit and determination and things. I think it's applied to it because of where it's situated geographically and because of the way that geography has caused industries to come here and die here and revitalize here.

David:

It seems so different from other Midwest states I think, that when you visit them I think that this is such a different dynamic.

Freeman:

Definitely.

David:

Than like most of Ohio or Indiana, I just think its grittier I think is a good word.

Freeman:

Yeah, for sure. and maybe I'm not, I mean, I guess I play a lot of music in the city, but I'm not maybe even best person to even answer that question because, my upbringing has always been kind of unique in that you know my dad was an academic, my mom was a nurse. Both pretty educated people but my dad always lived in working class neighborhoods. So nobody else in Warrendale, had a PhD or taught at a university but, the old professor district, north of UDM there was a little more, little too expensive for his taste. So, when Warrendale got rough he moved to Southgate which is not known for being an academic area, it's very gritty, downriver, white working class so it's like

David:

Is that how he was raised? is that what you think maybe

Freeman:

Yeah, probably. He was raised in Dearborn Heights, in just a pretty basic ranch house on a cement slab. His dad was a butcher and his mom worked at an ice cream and candy shop on Ford road for her whole career Truans candy. So yeah, it's probably what he was comfortable around, but I'm appreciative for that, because I felt like I got to know a lot of people from different socio economic and class backgrounds and different racial backgrounds too that I feel like that made me a better person in some ways. Certainly, like precluded me from ever being a bigot because growing up in the area I did, you lived around black people you lived around working class people. Living in Dearborn now you live around Arabic people so when people say bad things about those groups you know they're not true.

David:

You get so defensive.

Freeman:

Right, right.

David:

We moved to a small town like 12 years ago, and that's culture shock to me. Living in Detroit you just that's you know that there's diversity here and you appreciate the diversity and the culture and then you move someplace like that, where everyone you see is white and they don't even know any different and just the prejudice there surprised me, I don't know.

Freeman:

Yeah and it's a shame, you still post those great pieces of legislation in the mid 1960's still haven't found a way to desegregate our society, and I think it's tragic and at the root of a lot of our problems.

00:47:57

David:

It seems like a cycle that just comes back around.

Freeman:

Right, right, yeah.

David:

So who is influencing you these days, anyone different, anyone new?

Freeman:

Yeah, these days. I'm trying to think, Jason Isbell is a songwriter I really admire.

David:

I've seen him.

Freeman:

Yeah, he's great, so I've been really into him. On the poetry end, she's an older poet but, she's dead now, but she's an older modernist poet that I somehow never got to, I've been reading Muriel Rukeyser and loving her work, a poet named Terrance Hayes, just I always come back to, there is a Detroit based poet named Francine J Harris, who's got a couple books, one called *Allegiance* with Wayne State Press, and another one called *Play Dead*, I'm trying to remember the press that came out of, anyway Francine J Harris, is one of my favorite poets anywhere, she's, I just actually reviewed one of her books for Stateside, on Michigan Public Radio, I just think she's top notch. I can't write like her, she just, you almost can't paraphrase what she does, but, I couldn't imitate it, but I just admire it. And when I'm reading her, you're just locked up in that world like you can't, it really sticks with you, it's like an intense reading experience.

David:

Do you read anything else? Just strictly poetry or do you ?

Freeman:

oh yeah, I read fiction, and I teach a creative nonfiction course at Oakland University, so I teach a lot of memoir and read a lot of memoir. I just got done reading Maggie Nelson's memoir *The Argonauts*, which is a really cool book, she's getting, she's a queer writer who incorporates a lot of kind of really highly intellectual queer theory into the language of memoir, so she'll be writing a story about her and her partner, but she's also incorporating ideas from Judith Butler into the work, and she's just wicked smart, and brilliant, and so she's a memoirist, and she's actually started as a poet I guess. She's more known now for her hybrid works that are like these sort of lyrical prose memoirs. Then Rebecca Solnit is another creative nonfiction writer that I think is great. Rebecca Solnit is one of my favorite living writers.

David:

Do you think that the, I don't know what the right word is, revitalization is the wrong word, is going to change the music scene around here? I mean, I know that I prefer local musicians that I've already heard, but I mean, I know that bigger bands are coming to these smaller venues now and doing smaller shows. Do you think that that's part of this whole, whatever you want to call it, that's happening around here?

Freeman:

I think there are, I think there are a couple of things going on there. One of the things with touring acts coming to play at places like the Lager house, or the L Club or UFO factory or something. I think a lot of that is just again with another famous musician like Jack White kind of like, coming out of here, making Detroit seem like this essential stop, and so a lot of these bands are coming and wanting to play places. The revitalization narrative is tied up in some of those venues too I forget, there's some show that went to the Lager House and, while they were having a band play, and that gets out nationally and then it's like, that's a stop. And then I think one of the ways the revitalization might change the music scene for the worst, my fear anyway is that it may not always be good dollars and cents business to have live music at a venue. You've got to want to have the music there. You've got to have a connection to the music, otherwise you could just put

on football games and sell craft beers and probably be okay, like maybe you'd be better off. So, where trendier startups are more about food and kind of like these kind lifestyle places for lack of a better term where it's like you know "I'm like a petty bourgeois individual because I like this kind of craft beer or this kind of craft cocktail" and there's this kind of place that's popping up more and more and more in some of the old hot beds like musical activity like Corktown and the Cass Corridor, now rebranded Midtown, like those kind of places don't strike me as good music places. So I think the more of those that get opened at the expense of like some of the older school Detroit places that actually celebrated live music. I think that could have a damaging effect on the music scene. So that's a fear definitely.

David:

I think that I don't know if Detroit's the only city that's like that but they have a lot of the old theaters turned into venues I think that's interesting, to me, the sound there is interesting, I think that's one of the appeals to the music scene here. I've seen a couple shows at the Fillmore, St. Andrews, it's just an interesting, I don't know

Freeman:

Yeah, St. Andrews is a great place to see a show. That's a place that I've never played that I'd love to play sometime. St. Andrews Hall. I used to go there every St. Patrick's Day as a kid cuz Charlie Tayler would play there, so my parents would always go hear Charlie with my grandparents. Charlie was my grandparents' favorite singer. And then, so I saw like Drive By Truckers there, and in the basement, after that show, Drive By Truckers were touring for *The Big To Do* which I don't really like that much so it wasn't a great Truckers show, but in the basement, Don Duprie, was having a show with his Inside Outlaws songwriter collective and that's the first time I saw Don Duprie, and Alison Lewis and some of these songwriters I've really come to admire, in the Shelter area.

David:

Oh yeah The Shelter. That used to be a dance club when I was in high school/

Freeman:

Oh really? nice. Where did you grow up?

David:

Roseville first, and then we lived in Ferndale for a while, Detroit for a while.

Freeman:

I bet you saw some shows at The Palladium, back in the day

David:

No.

Freeman:

No?

David:

I think I was either too young or I missed the age range for that.

Freeman:

Yeah that's funny, that used to be like, I went there once when I was young, with an aunt, to see an LA Band called the Geraldine Fibbers at The Palladium, that's the only time I ever went there. That used to be a big place for shows.

David:

The Ritz was another one.

Freeman:

Oh yeah I never went to that one.

David:

That might still be around. I think they might have moved with a different name. There was a lot of rock shows there that we I think when I was younger though I

didn't have the nerve to go to local, Like I saw big shows, or whatever my parents took me to see John Denver at Cobo Arena.

Freeman:

Dude that's awesome. I'll bet you that was a really good concert.

David:

That was my first concert and it was a really good concert. The Starland Vocal Band opened for him.

Freeman:

Never heard of them.

David:

You probably did, That *Afternoon Delight* song.

Freeman:

Oh yeah okay, gotcha. That's a riot.

David:

That was their only hit. but I was probably 6 or 7 when I saw them. but that was cool, but I think it was just

Freeman:

John Denver's written some great songs, you can't take that away from him.

David:

But my parents were always into music, we didn't do a lot of concerts, but records, always records just buckets of records.

Freeman:

Oh that's cool, nice.

David:

Just probably the past 5 or 6 years I started really getting into seeing local music.

Freeman:

Oh that's awesome.

David:

I think being in the Port Huron area there's just a few bands, but they have a huge following and we just kind of follow them all around and that's when I started coming, you know they'll do a festival around here. We ended up at the Lager House for one show, I'd never been there.

Freeman:

That's a cool place.

David:

They have a record store in the basement.

Freeman:

It's a cool place.

David:

Yeah awesome, it just makes me excited to see that energy happening.

Freeman:

Definitely.

David:

I don't know if it's always happened and I just wasn't around for it or if its new.

Freeman:

I'm not sure. That's a good question. I think the variety you've got, like Detroit used to be a real like meat and potatoes rock and roll town and I think the variety of live music you get in the city now, some of the more Americana stuff at the Lager House, indie rock over at the UFO, or something you know, like it's cool jazz at Bakers it's just, it's cool that you can see different genres, there's a place I've never gone to that my friend Jim Carney keeps telling me about, and Jim's an old die hard Cass corridor person, gets pissed off if you refer to it as Midtown, he goes to The Raven which is like in east Detroit, not east Detroit the town but the east side of Detroit I should say and I've never been but I gotta get there with him it's like he goes every Thursday they have this blues jam, it's all these old guys that played on these old Motown records and stuff are just these world class musicians like playing in this small club, so you can see anything, man. People don't like we need you times 500 cuz a lot of people don't get that. They don't understand that you don't need to spend 50 bucks on a concert ticket to go hear good music.

David:

Sometimes you don't even pay a cover.

Freeman:

Totally.

David:

You could just be in there having a beer and there's an open mic and you hear this fantastic musician and you're floored.

Freeman:

Right, yeah, almost all the shows at the Gaelic League are free, if you like good folk music.

David:

Yeah we definitely do we'll have to make a trip down for that.

Freeman:

That will be awesome.

David:

Okay well thank you very much for your time.

Freeman:

It was great talking to you and meeting you thanks for reaching out to me.

David:

You too.