Oral History Project

Interviewee: Peter Werbe, associated with the *Fifth Estate* magazine, and with *Nightcall* radio show on WRIF.

Interviewer: Rebecca Russell

Date: December 15, 2015

Location: Purdy-Kresge Library

Russell: So today we are interviewing Peter Werbe. We are at the Purdy-Kresge Library on Wayne State's campus. It is December 15, 2015 and Peter Werbe is the longtime editor of the *Fifth Estate* magazine and also the host of the radio shows The Peter Werbe Show and Night Call so let see...

Werbe: The only correction I would make--

R: Okay…

W: Is that I am a member…for the longest time we've had what we either call an editorial collective or an editorial group, and so for the last 40 years I've just been just another member.

R: Just one of the guys...

W: Yeah, just one of the guys.

R: Okay.

W: Good gal.

R: So, you've been very political through your entire adult life. What was your upbringing and did that help spurn you into being a political person?

W: Well it did. One of the sort of typical sixties things is that you have these religious conservative parents but there's another phenomenon too and that's what's called a "red diaper baby" and these were people that were born into leftist homes, very frequently into parents who were members of the communist party. Whereas my parents were just very, very liberal and so back, it's 2015 I'm 75 years old, so my coming to consciousness came about in an era where there was still strict segregation and more racism than today if you can imagine that and my parents were always very anti-racist, antiwar. They backed a third party candidate for president in 1948, Henry Wallace, that ran on the progressive party, no relation to the guy from Alabama. So I have a very liberal-left background, and my parents were always very supportive. My dad at one time even took photographs for the *Fifth Estate* newspaper at big marches

R: Awesome, and how did you end up in this counterculture kind of community here in Detroit?

W: Well it's like a lot of stuff. It just sort of happened. It was, if you will, the zeitgeist. It was the spirit of the times. It happened everywhere, and although it seems when you look back on an era, like, I asked my mother one time was she a flapper during the nineteen twenties and she said, "What!" you know because certain things or people or lifestyles or subcultures become sort of iconic, but they don't represent everybody. The whole area that we're in now we used to call the Warren-Forest area, or what's the other phrase now forgotten, Cass Corridor? Oh yeah, now "The Midtown". Rebranded! It was there, and this area of course, going back at least until the 1930s were always where political leftist cultural-- workers, painters and writers and poets assembled and during the late 1950s its where beatniks, the Jack Kerouac/Allen Ginsburg types hung out and then as the sixties took off with the while support of the civil rights movement, the growing anti war movement, it was all right here. And we usually attribute the foundation of the *Fifth Estate* newspaper to one person, which he did, Harvey Ovshinsky, and he had the idea to do this. I didn't have the idea, nobody else in Detroit did, so in it's individual genius...but it only could have happened in the milieu that was already in motion and set in motion by what was happening in the rest of the country, in the rest of the world.

R: And how did you get involved with the *Fifth Estate*?

W: Well actually, I was an activist in what was called the Detroit Committee to End the War in Vietnam and it was located, we actually had an office on the corner of Warren and the Lodge service drive, now a parking lot.

(unintelligible response)

W: Where's that Wayne Preservation when we need 'em? And all of a sudden this, and I was always the oldest, so like in 1965 I was 25, and people were like in their late teens and early 20s, and this teenager came in, I think he was like 17 or 18, and said, "Hey I've got this newspaper, does anybody wanna help me on it, because if it doesn't, it's gonna go out of existence?" and everybody thought, "Nah we've got our hands filled fighting this war," that was growing all the time--and I was the person that said, "I think we could put a lot of antiwar information about meetings and our views that were contrary to what was in all of the mass media at the time. I mean, the Detroit News, the Detroit Free Press, the three channels that we had access to at the time (laughs) were all staunchly pro-war. It was necessary (cough) pardon me – to stop the march of communism in Southeast Asia, and so this to me was extraordinarily important work.

R: This is more a tangent than anything else, but since you were involved in this antiwar organization, how did you personally avoid the draft?

W: Well, that's a tangent that might take some time...

(laughs)

W: I, well, I actually wouldn't…you know what, don't put this in there, I'm trying to strike a couple of things out of my speaking...

R: I will strike it!

W: Actually, getting rid of *actually* and *kind of* and *sort of*…

R: Got it.

W: Take those all out of all of this because it…terrible. Yeah, I was eligible for the draft like all these war mongers like Cheney and Bush and the rest of 'em. Initially we had student deferments, but then as they needed more for the meat grinder that they were sending people in, and one time they had half a million people, half a million soldiers in Vietnam. Now I was 25, so this was 1965, so I went down to what was called the pre-induction center at Fort Wayne at the time, and you had to take all these tests. I don't know if you ever, there's a classic rock song, "Alice's Restaurant"? [note: "Alice's Restaurant" by Arlo Guthrie]

R: Yeah.

W: "You wanna know if I'm moral enough to kill women and children and burn villages?" So I went down there and caused an enormous commotion, almost got into fights with MPs [military police] and this was my intent, because I thought they would mark me 4F, unavailable for…

R: "Does not do well with authority."

W: Yeah, yeah, so I actually put that on form. They said any psychological problems, and I said I am absolutely unable to follow orders or respond to authority of any kind, of any manner, but it didn't work, so I filed a conscientious objector for conscientious objector status which meant you had to have like a relig—I'm a Quaker, and so I said, I just made up this crazy religion, the universal this of that and all that and filed it, and the appeals would have taken me beyond my 26th birthday in June of 1966, so I was home free. So I scammed out because I was smart enough and white enough and middle class which left the working class whites and minorities to fight the war.

R: Of course.

W: And get killed. Yeah.

R: That's good. Well not good...

W: Yeah, no I hear ya.

R: But good to have. Let's see…what's next…so just…you guys were around the Wayne State community. How do you think the Wayne State community contributed to the *Fifth Estate* and to kind of that anti-establishment culture?

W: Well, of course, a lot of the instructors were themselves liberals, progressives, or even leftists, and there was a man, in fact I was just gonna write him, glad to see he's still alive, he's probably in his mid-80s, Norman Pollack, and he wrote a lot about these populist movements of the 1890s in the south, integrated movements you know, that were taking on the big land owners and the banks and what have you, and it was like university and university districts always are. Even though the general culture is wearing crew cuts, you can have...a man can have hair to his shoulders or a woman can not wear a bra or all those things you think of when you think of the sixties without the kind of, I used that word, actually it fits there, without out the sort of criticism

you get…when I went to Ferris State in 1959 and my hair was shorter than it is now…and for the record, it's not that long.

R: No.

W: I remember this frat rat yelled out the window, "Get you hair cut! You're disgracing our school!" But the urban schools, certainly around Columbia, Allen Ginsberg and all those people and the University of Chicago, NYU—all of those were the milieu in which non-conformists, that was a word, I remember even getting interviewed in the sixties and someone said why are you a non-conformist (laughs) "Because conformity sucks it's bor-ing!" And what they want you to conform to is pretty awful and often pretty evil.

R: Right.

W: Yeah.

R: From other research that I've done, *The South End* was radicalized at the time, and that was another newspaper that was kind of being published right in this area. Did you guys have a relationship, was there any sort of you know…

W: Yeah. It was called the *Daily Collegian* and the last editor was a guy that would always have his photograph in the paper with his suit and tie on. These were people who used everything at the university simply as a catapult to careers in mainstream society, so he wanted to be, that's understandable, but we saw these papers all about...were changing the country, part of this mass movement that was questioning every part of American society. So someone who wrote for the *Fifth Estate*, Art Johnston, became the editor, changed it to *The South End*, and he didn't see it going too deep, but at the north end was the GM building, at the south end was Wayne State University. I wonder how many people know that, even that work on the paper today. And suddenly it became filled with information about demonstrations and music from the Grande Ballroom and poetry readings and just like the *Fifth Estate* was, and so we had features on art, and he, contrary to the last *Daily Collegian* editor, a photograph we ran of Art in the *Fifth Estate*, he was on his chopper wearing his leathers, so the times they are a changin', as somebody once sang.

R: And the other major historical community that was happening in the sixties, they went through a lot of names, the Detroit Artists Workshop, the White Panthers the, there was one other one, the Rainbow People Party?

W: …ah, the Rainbow People's Party, yeah.

R: What kind of relationship did the *Fifth Estate* have…I know John Sinclair worked on the *Fifth Estate* for a while...

W: John Sinclair was actually, there you go again that 'a' word, John Sinclair contributed to the second issue of the *Fifth Estate* even before I was involved in it and he brought this information about music and art and poetry and writing that was buried so deep because it never had any expression anywhere. The Artists Workshop admirably printed up their own little booklets on a process called mimeograph, and they would put together these books of mimeographed poetry or

other kinds of writing and they brought in different musicians mostly jazz, in fact all jazz at the time. He was, as we were, not very appreciative of rock and roll. I mean I thought the Beatles were so bad and so dumb and so stupid…I didn't and still don't have very much affection for Motown at all…it's just pop music…I don't know where your tastes lie now… but, I can't even think of a…what's like…Adele?

R: That's probably the higher class of pop right now?

W: What's that guy that's always getting in trouble?

R: Justin Bieber is what you're looking for…

W: Yeah! Bieber! Yeah, that was like Bieber stuff to us, where we were listening to…we were "too hip for the room", put that in quotes, and so we were listening to John Coltrane and Miles Davis and a lot of experimental music, what's called free jazz which is without any structure to it and people just…it sounds just like you're tuning up.

R: Right.

W: Have you ever heard that kind of music?

W: Good. Like they play now at what is it Trinosophies or Trinosopes, on Gratiot Avenue… [note: Trinosophes]

R: Not that cool…

W: So it was John who brought this all to the *Fifth Estate* and brought it all to Detroit. So there was this absolute intermingling of all…the Artists Workshop, the Rainbow Peoples Party, that was sort of kind of a footnote of John, but the White Panthers and involving the MC5 with that…they had this…they brought this revolutionary message to kids that came out to listen to rock and roll. I mean they expected that. I mean it wasn't that they were saying, "Okay, we're going to play you some tunes but then sneak in some commie message." It was bundled like that.

R: Yeah, I was listening to the MC5 on the way here, "The American Ruse" type stuff...

W: Well most of their stuff is not…that's like on the second or even the third album I can't remember…but their big album was recorded live at the Grande Ballroom and that, I don't think has any political songs. Maybe the "Motor City is Burning" which, great blues tune, was written by Detroit's John Lee Hooker, altered a little for their purposes but it was...the music was revolutionary in the sense that it broke through the Perry Comos and the well-loved and respected Frank Sinatra and the rest of those white guys, that kind of sounded almost like they were talking with a little bit of melodic tone to their voice, whereas these new bands appropriated black music and in many ways also appropriated the style of singing; that kind of gravely voice you think of, Bob Segers or people like that. It was all part and parcel, so at the Grande Ballroom you would have John Lee Hooker, you'd have BB King or a lot of white blues groups, Brownsville Station, you know people like that, and most of the music at that time was at least, to some extent, blues-influenced. I mean, I think that was probably what motivated the most rock and roll, things like "American Ruse", I'm not sure that had blues…stuff in it or not.

But, it was all part of a…we called it The Movement with a capital T and a capital M, and people would say The Movement is this... so it could be a concert at the Fillmore in San Francisco or the Grande in Detroit, it could be a march on Washington in 1967 or 1968, but we thought that we were simultaneously bringing about the Age of Aquarius and world revolution and some people, you know the hard-nosed politicals only were interested in world revolution, and they admired armed struggle against the support of the National Liberation Front in Vietnam and Cuba and Angola and places like that, and the Age of Aquarius people were like, "Wow man, we're all just gonna be high and naked and you know love one another right now," as one of the lines to the song goes. Which I thought a nice melding of it worked perfectly.

R: Right.

W: And in a way that's what the *Fifth Estate* was too.

R: So location-wise, where was the *Fifth Estate* located in Detroit?

W: In Detroit, a number of places. It was at 1107 W. Warren, which again is at the southwest corner of the Lodge and Warren, and right next to it at 1101, that's where the Detroit Committee to End the War in Vietnam was. The whole building was interconnected with corridors so you could…and around the corner on the lodge freeway, that's where the Artists Workshop was, so you could literally go from one to another and although some of the people overlap, maybe somebody like me the most, most everybody participated in all of it. So the Artists Workshop people would come to a demonstration against the war, the people from the Detroit Committee to End the War in Vietnam would write articles for the *Fifth Estate*, and it looked like the world was ours because we never... we used to joke that we hadn't gone north of 8 Mile in ten years, and barely north of McNichols, and so you would walk around that area and you would see another brother or sister, as we'd call everybody, and you would walk by a stranger and raise your fist and go, "Power to the people!" you know and that person would go "Power to the people!" It was similar to, in a way, what happened in Europe in the 1930s, where you would have these radical districts that were mostly trade union districts, and so the area, it wouldn't exactly be dual powered. So, in other words you'd have the power of the state but you'd also have these institutions that the rebels administered that also had an effect of daily life. Like, if something happened, somebody broke into somebody's house, they wouldn't call the police. They would come say "Hey blah blah blah blah blah took my box," which was a little stereo, and we would convene somewhere and people would go say, "Hey man, come on!" "Well, no man, he owed me nine dollars," you know, so you would work it out rather than the guy calling the police and having the thing go through that… I think I drifted from your question.

R: Well that was probably part of the anti-establishment thing too right?

W: Yeah.

R: Especially, Detroit police were likely very corrupted around that time.

W: They were corrupt. They were brutal. They were like the Chicago police are today. They killed a lot of people, they took a lot of bribes. They were pretty awful.

R: So, let's see, I know from, hearing from the Workshop that the hippies were not treated very well during the riots because they were part of that Detroit community. What was your personal experience of…though you don't seem like the kind of person that might call it the riots…

W: Yeah, I've been dealing with the Detroit Historical Museum people. Traci Irwin? Do you know any of those folks over there?

R: Yeah.

W: And they had to go through a whole thing. Was it a riot, was it a rebellion, was it an insurrection was it…they've decided to call it a civil disturbance. I said, "Traci, that's like calling torture enhanced interrogation." You know, I don't have any problem calling it a riot, but Frank Joyce, a good friend of mine and probably one of the smartest guys I know, he has a whole reason why it was a rebellion. I think rebellions are usually programmatic. People revolt and they say "we want" or "we are specifically revolting against this" and hence we're breaking all your windows or turning over cop cars. In a sense, every riot is a rebellion. A rock and roll riot is a rebellion, you're rebelling against…it's a transgression. Society puts limits on what you can do, you know? A hockey riot is a revolt, you know…but we covered it, Harvey Ovshinsky and I went out and the mayor at the time Jerome Cavanaugh said he was appalled there was a "carnival-like atmosphere" there, and indeed it was. Everybody was…it was like a loot fest. It was just…one of the things they had during the sixties were called "free stores", where people just brought stuff, and you could either bring stuff or take stuff, whatever you wanted, and it was part of like living outside of capital. You could sell *Fifth Estate*s for, ready, 50 cents apiece, and if you sold, I don't know, a hundred of them a week, you probably could get along okay, at some other little hustles and so it was like a big free store and people were even selective. They didn't go into the mom and pop stores, but trashed…they did some, everything kind of went on 12th Street, but a lot of places, people specifically said stay away from the little stores, and so Harvey and I were just standing in front of looted stores and we loved it. Integrated looting! I have this image, I think it was a Krogers on Trumbull just south of Warren and there was this white kid, the whole front window was broken out, people were pouring in and out taking groceries, and there was this white kid that had all these bags and as people went in he would snap them open and say, "Here's your bag!" So he wasn't even…it was this what's…Cavanaugh used the word 'festival'. There's something called the 'festival of the oppressed' that people, when certain pressure it either gets too great or its relieved, they explode, and a lot of times they don't do things that are very pleasant for everybody. Certainly there was…people tend to celebrate that rebellion, but there sure were a lot of negatives involved as well and if you ever get into, Frank Joyce has an amazing, you know, was that whites left the city after that and he says the other way around, the riot was caused by whites leaving the city, that by '67 services had collapsed. Again, the cops had gotten worse, all of that, so we were all up and down there. There's a whole, our headline of the July 1967 *Fifth Estate* says "Get the Big Stuff" in quotes, you know. I mean, it was over so we weren't telling people to go out and get the big stuff. And we had a lot of friends there, a lot of projects. Frank Joyce had a project called the Northern Student Movement and they did a lot of organizing of young African American workers on the east side and so we were all over on the east side during that and the only people he had to worry about were the

police. I mean you didn't have to…people probably, I don't know how other people in the suburbs at the time looked at this, but the idea of quote "rioting colored people" closed quote, probably, as it always has in American history, scared the crap out of white people, and if I had told 'em I was walking down Kercheval or walking down Trumbull or something like, they would have thought that I'd taken my life in my hands, where the only fear I had were the police or the National Guard.

R: You even had relative safety from them because you white. Probably weren't getting shot by snipers in the streets…

W: One of the things I wanted to say, there were no snipers.

(laughs)

W: There were no snipers. No snipers, but that maybe is for another…those were all crazed National Guardsmen from Kalkaska shooting up in the air. The front page of the *Fifth Estate* from that issue I was talking about talks about armed gangs of negroes shooting at cops, pinning down whole police precincts and all that, and subsequent investigations said this was, they'd be shooting like crazy! The National Guard ran out of ammunition, then they brought in, finally, the 101st and 82nd Airborne. These guys were supposed to go off to 'nam and they ended up coming to Detroit instead. It like ended immediately, as soon as they came in…like I say I could go on a long time but really when someone says…you know I'm not being critical of you, if someone says there were snipers, I say give me your sources, because there's a lot of things that we say then popula**R:** snipers in Detroit, Vietnam veterans were spit on…and whenever we talk about that, like on my radio show I said, "What makes you think Vietnam veterans were spit on?" and then there's this blank because it's this social trope that people all believe because somehow it's gotten into their mind or it's become just sort of a metaphor for disrespecting veterans, which didn't happen either. I mean veterans were at the lead of…if you went to a big, I don't know, do you ever go to any demonstrations ever?

R: No.

W: Okay, well, it's okay. Yeah you might have a hundred people out there. Imagine in a million people, I mean any number of times this happened, right at the front would be active duty GIs, men, and once in a while, women, but almost always men, which could be subject to court martial for being, say this is 1968 or something like that, so there could be maybe 200 active duty GIs, then there could be maybe 2000 veterans of Vietnam, and there could be 5000 veterans of other wars, and then there would be other people. So the veterans were never disrespected in the way that's come across, unfortunately, down through American history, in fact there's something in here (referring to the current issue of the *Fifth Estate*) there's an article about Jane Fonda being called Hanoi Jane by this guy that wrote this book called *The Spitting Image*, and he talks about, at the time there's no mention whatsoever about a returning GI being spit on. In fact, in many ways, and I don't want to talk up all the time with it, it's almost logistically impossible for that to happen. Lonely guy walking through San Francisco Airport, some hippie comes up to him, spits in his face, right?

R: Right.

W: Isn't that kind of the trope? Yeah. Yeah right. Where's the music? But it's okay, go ahead.

R: I'll get to that in just a sec. I just want to make sure I don't lose the *Fifth Estate* here. The *Fifth Estate* was obviously very critical of authority and very outspoken. Were there ever any major threats, or you know, authority coming back on you?

W: Well yeah. There was something, and it wouldn't surprise me if they still have it, something they called the "Red Squad". Reds were communists, and these had begun in the late teens of the last century, that kept under J. Edgar Hoover, and they had what they called Red Scare, and they had one after WWI, and they had one, of course, during the 1950s –Joseph McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee—and they had all sorts of spies and infiltrators and sometime in the mid-70s there was this lawsuit filed against the Michigan State Police and against the Detroit Police to give up their records that they had kept on everybody for the last like 55 years or something, and they actually had to turn them over and so we, you know a lot of us that applied got them back, these huge files, which they were just trailing us everywhere. And a lot of it was just purposeless. To say that I was at a meeting at Central Methodist Church…but they actually had, I'm not sure this is exact, but like white radicals and white extremists, and the radicals, they actually tried to interfere with their operations, and this happened all over the country. They would go to our printer and say, "Don't print the *Fifth Estate*," which happened. They would break in and steal our mailing lists, 'cause what they were really in was about lists. And as you indicated earlier, being white and middle class, I'll tell you one of the things, when you said I was worried about, maybe I even said frightened, if I said frightened of the Detroit Police I would back that up and say I was a little worried, because there was certainly a white skin privilege that nothing could happen to me even though we knew what happened to black people and the same thing here, we sort of laughed at it, that they were collecting all our names and, "Look here! Mine—" how big is that, do you have to say, 3 inches, 2 inches? (holds fingers apart to show size of file)

R: 3, 2, yeah?

W: …of files, and I would say of any real shockers or weird stuff there could have been eight pages in mine. I would say, knowing what a ream of paper is, it's probably 650 pages of it, ten pages of it, you would think would…but then you realize there was in infiltrator, an informant, that they had placed into our groups to keep track of what we were doing. And again, we used to laugh at it and if you go over to the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, you'll see a page from the FBI which describes me, and working on the *Fifth Estate* and belonging to the Detroit Committee to End the War in Vietnam, and there's another one that I have, because I have my FBI file as well, that says previous addresses, and they have my addresses going back until I was 8 years old, and again, you kind of laugh, and you're smiling now, and I always laughed at it. I mean it was almost like a badge of honor that you were an enemy of the state, and recognized by its most repressive apparatus, the secret police. But we know the function of secret police in other societies, so the list, although it never had any functionality, I mean people did, I mean this Red Squad would find out someone's parents and say, "Do you know your daughter's going out

with a colored man?" or, you know, call employers, "Do you know your accountant is a member of the Socialist Workers Party?" or the Communist Party or something like that, and get people fired. So that was white radicals. Then they had white extremists, that they didn't interfere with their lives because they saw them as potentials for prosecution, because they might be involved in some illegal activity and then the same thing, they had black radicals and black extremists, so yeah and the first issue of the *Fifth Estate* was refused by a printer because it had an antiwar cartoon, and you know just on their own, patriotic printers—I remember one time, first time we went there, this guy met us outside. He said, "Take this filthy piece of crap out of here and don't ever come back! You're lucky I don't set my printers on you!" and so yeah, and we had coin-boxes you know, you put a quarter in and you get a paper out of it? The Detroit Police clipped all of ours off of light posts and junked 'em and, I mean, one of the things that the society has realized now is that it's resilience, because of how powerful it's rooted in its economy and its basic culture, the ones we opposed then and I opposed now were so formidable that they can let you do anything. You can dye your hair blue, have tattoos across your face, you can transgender, you can be gay, you can be you name it, and you can put out the *Fifth Estate* and what do they do (taps promotion for exhibit) used to be they try to jail you and kill you, now they honor us.

(laughs)

R: Comes back around. While reporting with the *Fifth Estate*, what were the most important stories that you think you covered?

W: Wow. You know that's tough. I usually, in terms of specific ones, they're around the…I always tend to call it a riot—don't show Frank this—around 'the rebellion' was that we were out in the street giving a different point of view, but we tried to say why this was happening. Now, you know, "Wow, why are these colored people doing this?" You know, the fact that they had a lot of grievances and the grievances were so bad that this is how it was expressed. And a breakthrough of investigative journalism, this Frank Joyce that I keep mentioning, who was the news editor, did this investigative reporting of the type that really wasn't done by any of the dailies, and it was called "Who Killed John Leroy?" and it was something similar to what we see today. This man, you know, there was actually checkpoints in Detroit with armed…you know like in…I don't know…

R: East Germany…

W: Well more like in Ukraine now or something like that, and something happened, long story, and these guardsmen, you know all these white guys from upstate, just riddled the car with about 80 bullets and killed this John Leroy, but you know not a lot—as I've gone through lately, all 395 issues, for these exhibits, there's nothing that really stands out. It's like the totality. It is, I guess, you can swear on these things right? There's this poster that says "Fuck Authority" and that may seem a little puerile on the face of it, but what it's essentially saying is that we are still in rebel—we were then we are now still in rebellion against the dominant culture, the dominant economy, and the political apparatus that administers it all for, as the shorthand is called, the 'one percent' so that's funny, I was going to—I may have an anthology of what I've written, and there none of 'em like jump out and say "man this is the greatest thing I've ever written". I mean

I would write an article, these were later, maybe in the 90s, we used to come out once a week now we only come out three times a year, and I would write about the origins of the political state. Like we take it for granted, and you know we would like some reform. We might like Bernie Sanders better than Donald Trump in there and things…

R: Maybe!

W: But the political state has only been around for five percent of human existence, so this article, how did it come into being? Why all of a sudden do we have rulers and ruled? Why do we have this hierarchy? Why is there, I'm losing my word, why is there a patriarchy? Where did all this come in? Why did men rule, when in most societies were matriarchal and matrilineal? What happened here, and how is it related to capitalism that we think is you about on the verge of destroying the planet, Paris Climate Accord not withstanding? Sorry, not to bring you down…

R: Going from the *Fifth Estate* to radio, how did you make that transition?

W: Is there any, you know, I keep looking at, the water is there…

R: Yeah let me put this on a pause real quick. Alright, record…pause…

(Pause in recording)

R: Alright, we should be good. Yep.

W: We don't see a red…I don't see needles. (moves recorders to show light blinking)

W: Actually, oop, that was the 'a' word again, strike that, when early radio began it was WABX and that was the station that everybody listened to. What they called freeform. There wasn't a playlist, and as soon as the coolest record came out—LP—it would get on WABX. Well finally some of the bigger stations realizing there was a market there, and FM mostly was simulcasting their AM, and the Federal Communications Commission, the FCC, said if you're gonna have these public airwaves, you have to have independent programming. So they said, okay I guess maybe we'll do rock and roll, and then they told 'em you also had to have public service content. You couldn't just play music, that you had to have something that met the community needs and that's still true today, and that'—I'm the Public Affairs Director for the three stations of Greater Media in Detroit—so Harvey Ovshinsky, leading the way for Peter again, had this show that he called *Spare Change*, which was a way a lot of hippies made money, "You got any spare change man?" Even if you're a woman, it's, "You got any spare change man?" you know, and you give it to 'em or not, "Help your brother, spare change." And so he had this hour interview program and he left to become the news director of WABX, and they said well do I wanna do it, and I said well yeah, I've never done anything like that before. So it essentially became an extension of the *Fifth Estate*. I got my Artists Workshop friends and antiwar friends and people talking about social and political issues on the air for an hour on Sunday, and then I suggest to 'em that within the *Fifth Estate* there were all these departments like youth news, labor news, women's news, and I said, how about if we get somebody from each one of those and I said you'd get a big audience, and so we got different *Fifth Estate* staff members into each one of those categories and I became a DJ. I actually played rock and roll, but I always had a talk show at

some time or another, and in 1972 ABC, which owned WRIF, this all happened on WRIF, I don't know if I said that, it began as WXYZFM, it became WRIF. They felt they weren't, they didn't have enough public service programming, so I had a full time, four hour a night talk show on a rock station, except it went like different times: midnight til four you know, two am til six am, and that lasted for about three and a half years, and then they decided it was overkill and they could do better by playing rock and roll, so I got into it through the *Fifth Estate*.

R: Earlier in the interview you mentioned that the whole movement wasn't into rock and roll. How did you guys make the evolution from the more beatniks that only listened to Miles Davis and John Lee Hooker into becoming a rock DJ?

W: You know, I always liked rock and roll didn't I? Not as much. I was independently into jazz quite a bit, but if I could remember, like I didn't like the Beatles at all. I just thought they looked goofy. They had their little teeny short hair little bangs and all that and they were a pop band and they sang and they're white guys singing black songs and why couldn't…because a lot of their albums, I found later, they loved American R&B and rock and roll, Chuck Berry, they did a lot of Chuck Berry songs, so I can't exactly remember. It's odd that I remember through somebody else, Sinclair criticized the MC5, and they said, come to one of our concerts, smoke some reefer like you always do, and come to this, and he was absolutely won over 100%, and there's some pieces on the MC5 album, I think on that *Live at the Grande* one, where it's called "Black to Comm" and that is just free jazz, and this was the influence that he brought to the movement, Joseph Jarman and the Chicago Free Art somethin-or-other [note: The Art Ensemble of Chicago], you know that, so it just, the fact that I'm stumbling here means that it sort of happened almost organically. It was John Coltrane and then suddenly it was The Doors and The Who and all the rest of these classic bands that have kind of gotten to be clichés now, you know?

R: What did you find yourself playing a lot as a rock DJ?

W: Well that's interesting, because I can't remember, is the most interesting… (laughs) One of the things I liked to play was long songs, although I never was high on the air, there was something about these long songs like "The End" by The Doors or things like "Won't Get Fooled Again" by The Who, which is about 7 or 8 minutes long. But I always had a sense differently, for instance, than people on public radio. They were all, "You should hear this because it's very cool," whereas I always thought more, "What do you want to hear?" I didn't want to keep playing, like now WRIF and WCSX where I worked, were wildly popular and they play pretty much expected songs and yet I would play songs that are just a little off the center. So I'm not real radical there, and I guess if I was hard pressed to think of a lot of songs I played, I don't know, maybe unless you were, at your age, unless you're a classic rock aficionado, you probably wouldn't know any of these songs, but for a while on WCSX, I and others had this show called *Deep Tracks* and we would play songs, not completely free form, but songs that people that were from, I don't know, 40 to 110, when you played 'em it wouldn't sound like muzak the way the main channel sounds now, but you'd go "Oh wow!" and that's what we always called the wow factor. I wanted to get things on there that the audience would go "Wow, you know that's so cool!" that I'm not gonna play, I'm trying to think of an example, Steve Miller Band, "Take the Money and Run", ugh! Which plays, like on a classic station they play it

like 250 times a year, whereas I would play it 0, and play some Steve Miller tune that I don't know, like something like "Motherless Children" or something like that, that you might not be aware of but you know that somebody that was in that era would go "oh wow" so, and in the same way, I didn't wanna write a newspaper that I was…I wanted to give people information that I would think they would be appreciative of getting that they might not get from another source.

R: But you seem to always kind of, talk radios always kind of been your focus, talking to people.

W: Yeah, yeah. I mean I would go back, I almost suggested a Deep Tracks format to sell nationally, and long story, but it didn't work. So I love the music. I'm not that deeply knowledgeable of it all. I know what people like and I am like just like maybe a step and a half above the audience, whereas somebody like Doug Podell is like ten steps above and who could put together a good show, I'm not trying to say that, but I've never read a rock biography ever. I mean it seems so boring! I never listened to interviews with rockers. I couldn't care less what—"Why'd you write that song man?" you know? Who cares! You know so…let me get the question back in my brain…I'm sorry, what?

R: Talk radio.

W: Talk radio! Yeah, but talk radio has always been foremost, because it's political ideas that motivated me, things I learned actually at Michigan State rated(?) when I was like 20 years old and had this inchoate radicalism but had no ideas whatsoever other than I hated going to high school, I hated teachers, I hated cops, I hated patriotism and all that and I couldn't even tell why and then all of a sudden I go, whoa! And so when people tell me, your program has been so influential on me, it's not like a power thing It's that I know that people have been able to move out of the mainstream where they anchor their ideas and go to another place of ethical validation if you will, and maybe that's dressing it up too much, but to some extent that's what it is.

R: You've interviewed lots of people over the years. What do you think your most important interviews were?

W: You know again that's just like the *Fifth Estate*…

R: It's the whole…

W: It is the totality of it, and some of the best interviews have been like an Associate Professor of Sociology at Loyola or something like that, because again it's more of the ideas. People say, "Oh, you interviewed Frank Zappa!" or you interviewed this person or that person. The only one of the famous people, and again his fame may not have even reached you, is Pete Seeger?

R: Yeah.

W: I mean, that was such a joy. I mean, that almost, as soon as I think about it, it starts tugging at my teardrops. He said, and maybe this is what's happening to me too, he says, "How long is this for?" and I said it's 25 minutes he said, "Pete," he called me Pete too, he says, "I don't think I can do it. I'm an old man, my voice is giving out"—at 30 minutes he's singing in this broken voice, you know, he said, "Oh my voice is terrible but I wanted to sing that for ya," and in many

ways I've never really gone after real famous people because people want to hear it because the person's famous. I want to get a guy on the air that's written a book called *Angry White Men* for instance. Why are these guys…what's their deal? I mean why are they going into Planned Parenthood clinics and shooting people up, and that's not even what it is. Why are they brutal towards women and children and why are they in fights? Why do they think they have to ride motorcycles to, which I have, to assert their masculinity and all of that? So it's always been about the ideas, and I always feel like I'm letting people down when I don't say, oh I interviewed, I don't know, president somebody-or-other or something like that, so no it's about the ideas always.

R: So you've been doing it about 45 years you said?

W: Yeah it, started in 1970, right?

R: Have you found yourself changing in the radio business over the last 45 years or do think you're the same kind of interviewer you were 45 years ago?

W: You know…oh, interviewer?

R: Well you were gonna say something, so go with that.

W: No, I don't know, what I was gonna say was it's hard to tell. Getting to be 75 years is a long time. Once in a while I see a photograph of myself and think—oh is there one of me in there (referring to issue of *Fifth Estate*) no, good. But you change without realizing it and you realize—I played something from like five years ago and I was thinking, god, my voice is getting into that godfather old man voice, you know, but I don't think that's what you mean. Yeah, I'm sure my skills have picked up, but one of things that I do, and it probably isn't the best, I'm sure you've probably listened to interviews, they're very fast. The guy or woman always breaks in after the person is about two or three sentences, and I don't know, I usually let people go on quite a bit, which is not a modern mode, but again, I'm not interested in showing the audience I'm there and I've got really cool questions. I mean, I want this person to finish their thought. I want to find out what this example is of, I'm trying to think, who do I have…I don't even…what this is about, Cynthia Rutt, *To Die in the Anthropocine* [note: actual title is *Learning to Die in the Anthropocine* by Roy Scranton], this is, I'm interviewing somebody on that tomorrow. I don't even know what the book's about. I mean that's one thing you could, I could that, I mean I'll look at the book and read through it a bit tonight but I could go in there and do it and say, what's your book about, and because I have a base of general knowledge that I can ask questions that would bring the show along and also what I do is I try to ask questions that I think the audience would like to hear answered. Not even to let this guy express himself, because I will say, "Look, I understand what you're saying and I agree with you, but I think a reply to that, that if you didn't use military force something like ISIS is just gonna grow, so why not just take 200,000 U.S. troops, land there, wipe 'em out and then end of problem, solution, dealt with," and then they would say why they wouldn't think that would be a good idea. So I often try to put myself in the place of the listener.

R: So this interview's gonna go to the Reuther, which is one of the main Detroit archives, so let me bring this back to Detroit for a minute. The *Fifth Estate*, for a while, was not published in Detroit. About ten fifteen years ago something like that, it was moved down south to…

W: To Tennessee, yeah.

R: And then you're currently doing your radio show out of Ferndale correct?

W: Well the WRIF/WCSX offices and studios are in, they're actually in Royal Oak Township, but they're on the north end just west of Wyoming.

R: Is there something important that held you, as well as the *Fifth Estate* and the counterculture and all of that in Detroit and is there a reason that it has since left? And then transition that into, you made a joke about the 'Midtown' movement…

W: Right!

R: How do you feel…

W: Rebranding!

R: Yes.

W: Well in 2000, we were going along in the nineties, I think we even used to come out every, we had about six issues a year maybe even twelve, I can't remember. I mean there's different iterations of it, but I got a full time nationally syndicated talk show myself and my current on-air partner Juline Jordan and plus I kept my RIFF show, so I was doing talk radio six days a week and I was totally miserable. For once in my life we're making an extraordinary amount of money, which I'd never made before because I usually only worked part time. We didn't have any kids, my wife and I, and we're not—capitalism would collapse if consumers operated at our level, so you know we were always doing just fine. And so at one point I don't think the *Fifth Estate* maybe didn't come out for ten months or something like that and so this colleague friend who had moved to this farm, this, what do you call these damn things…

R: Communes?

W: Thank you! Why…I should know…communal farm called Pumpkin Hollow, which I'd visited a number of times, that he said, well look I and some friends down there, he was from Detroit and he'd worked on the *Fifth Estate* here in the nineties and he said, I'll put it out down at Pumpkin Hollow, so he did and did a marvelous job from 2003 to 2007/2008, and for a lot of reasons he couldn't do it anymore and so it shifted back here, but the whole time we were all involved and I went down there a couple of times while they were doing the design, the layout as it used to be called. We said, you know, born and raised hell in the motor city, and just for a while it took a little rural Tennessee diversion.

R: So how do you feel about the Midtown kind of rebranding and the loss of kind of the Cass Corridor…

W: I don't mean to sound like some whiney old guy that's not down with the new program, but what's happened of course, and in a lot of ways it appeals to my white middle class sensibility, it's you know nice clean safe everything like that, whereas a lot of times walking down Cass Avenue you had to watch yourself. It was an area with poor people, poor people as always have pretty much been driven out. And last Saturday I was walking on Canfield and I just couldn't believe it I mean Traffic Jams, five dollar parking, suburbanites galore and I'll tell you, a couple of years ago, even just like two years ago by most people, and I still get this a little when I talk to guests from out of town, this was conceived of as a disaster zone and a black city with a black mayor, corruption and poverty galore, and now it is almost flipped in terms of virtually conceived of as a white—even though that 80% of the residents are still African Americans. There's a white mayor, and you know everybody from artists to cooks from all over the country are coming here. Well, I'm of that social class, so I relate to these people and when artists come that work on the *Fifth Estate*, a guy moves here from Poland, Hawaii (laughs) well, and works on the *Fifth Estate*, that's pretty cool. And there's all this energy and you go into Hamtramck and there's galleries on every block almost and music galore and Jack White opening up stuff and Shinola, and they still don't know shit from Shinola I'll tell ya, but whatever. I mean that row looks like something, not really off of Fifth Avenue in New York, but almost gave me that same vibe, and that's what happens with the bankruptcy that helps the city get back on its feet. It screwed the pensioners and now poor people. Some are even moving out of the city. There's this whole movement towards the closer-in suburbs of very poor people, where it's actually cheaper to live, although there's a lot of areas still that the only people that live in those areas are people that have no way to get out. I mean, I don't know what to say. I mean do I like it better when it was down and dirty and funky? To some extent. A friend of mine, Ben Hall, who runs the Russell Street Deli, and he's an artist and he had an exhibit at, the guy always has the address, 9278 I think it's called, on Campau right by Holbrook, and we walked down south to the Yemen Café. You ever been there?

R: No.

W: Oh, amazing! And I was saying, man this feels like the Cass Corridor 30 years ago, you know. It's hard to say. It's better for a lot of people, it's the same or worse for others. I mean, but it is bringing in people that have no consciousness about the process whatsoever. They just think it's 'nice'. "I got an idea dear, let's go down to Midtown," you know?

R: Right. On the way to the Fisher, where you can kind of stay isolated. Well, we're getting toward the end. Considering the career path you've had, and all of the things you've done against authority, and you know, trying to evolve culture, how successful, do you, and by you I mean the *Fifth Estate*, your generation, you yourself, how successful do you think you were in moving culture along and trying to work against the political…

W: Well there's actually several questions in there. I mean obviously we've changed the culture incredibly. I mean as I was saying earlier, 60 years ago if you didn't have a crew cut or weren't wearing a skirt and nylons and high heels you were thought to be terrible. Now, I mean you look on television and there's guys with three and four day old beards and shirts out. I mean, it would be, "Young man tuck your shirt in!" or "Young man take your hat off!"—who takes their hat off

anymore? So anything goes. The librarian down there has purple hair, right? Was I saying that on the tape about the resiliency of the system? No, maybe we were off?

R: We might have been off.

W: But the system is so resilient that it can take any superficial, and I don't say that disparagingly, any superficial resistance whatsoever, as long as you don't mess with the economic and imperial mechanism of the society you can do it. Like I said, you can if you're a guy you can marry a guy, you can wear purple hair, you can wear your hair to your ass, you can wear tattoos around your neck; it doesn't matter. They thought that if you said 'shit' in public that the whole system would crumble and that's what totalitarian regimes are, you know? You say one word against it, you're in jail. I mean, we brought it along sure. We formed the terms of people that are still resistant to the dominant culture and the dominant economy. Think about just recently in 2011, Occupy. Say, oh well that went away pretty quickly. Well the whole idea about disparity of wealth is, in common discussion the 'one percent'. I say on the air, it used to be a very, I don't know if it's a Marxist phrase or not, 'the ruling class', I talk about it all the time, the ruling class, and that there is a class of rulers that have their own class interests that are inimical to the rest of us sometimes. Like I say, if you're white and middle class, well positioned, it's not even guaranteed you do okay. I mean if you're below that, you're kind of screwed and most of the rest of the world gets kind of screwed by it all. So I would say as a person both in terms of what I wanted to accomplish I'm very…I'm very pleased with myself. I'm very pleased with my life, what I've accomplished. Would I have wanted to accomplish more? Would I want to have a newspaper with this message that had a 100,000 a week? Sure. So in that regard, if you even measure it up again *The Nation* magazine, I think they have about 45-40,000 a week, yeah this is a failure. We don't have a mechanism that can pay people that could sustain them within radical journalism. But I would say overall, yeah I'm happy with what we did. I think we ended the war. I think we were among white people a real force against white racism. In terms of gender equality, we've done what we could for that, against the patriarchy and on the whole list of awful things that society, and the other thing someone said, Janet Jones at Source Books over there on Cass, she said, we've all done the best we could. And I think we have.

R: I think that's a good place to leave it.

W: Do I have a sense of show business?

R: Thank you so much.