

Oral History Project

Detroit, MI

Susie Wahl

Interviewed by

Kylie Gignac

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Detroit, MI

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Kim Schroeder, Instructor

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Brief Biography

Susie Wahl is a Detroit native who owned and operated the Café Detroit during the late 1970's and early 1980's. Café Detroit was a popular jazz and art club in the Cass Corridor.

Interviewer

Kylie Gignac

Abstract

This is an overview of Susie Wahl's life beginning with her childhood and going through her adolescence, the origins of Café Detroit, the musicians who performed at the café, and how the café was eventually sold.

Restrictions

None

Original Format

.wav file

Transcription

KG: Today is December 5, 2016 and I am here with Susie Wahl in Detroit Michigan. Could I have you state and spell your name please?

SW: Yes my name's Susan Wahl, and actually it's Susan Marie Bobrycki Wahl cause it's my married name but I'm no longer married Wahl. It's S-U-S-A-N, Susan, Wahl, W-A-H-L.

KG: Perfect, ok. So, first question, where did you grow up?

SW: I grew up on the southwest side of Detroit, around Livernois and Michigan in a Polish enclave, behind a Polish grocery store that belonged to my grandparents where they raised ten kids cause the house and the store were connected and, there's something else I wanted to tell you about that, oh yeah major thing, my

father was alcoholic so at age, well, at age three my mother, when I was three, my mother realized my father couldn't hold down a job so she asked her parents if she could take on the store, and she did. So she ran the Polish grocery meat market where we made our own sausage and that's how she supported us, you know, through our lifetime, well, not the whole lifetime, but the good part of my childhood. And I helped a lot there so that's kind of in a nut shell the background. So here's a picture of the store,

KG: Oh wow

SW: When my grandparents ran it and here are my grandparents.

KG: Aw, that's very sweet.

SW: A picture of the store after it was closed. It was called Bobryicki's market because my mother took my fathers name before that it was Slowek, you can see we had groceries and meats. So we made, you know we ground hamburger, we cut pork chops, we made, in fact, my grandparents made their own lunch meats.

KG: Oh wow, is it still there today at all, the building?

SW: No, it, and we would all, cause I had 35 cousins, we would all visit regularly, you know, at least go around it. My cousin owned it for a while, my cousin Billy took it over, cause no one wanted to see it leave the family, but it burned about, well several years ago, and everyone was going to get one or two bricks or something from it as a memento but it's so sad that it's not there because I thought it would always be there.

KG: Yeah. Where did you go to school?

SW: I went to school, my grade school education was at St. Stevens Catholic School, which was about five blocks away from our house, it was a walk, and I come home for lunch every day because I missed my mother.

SW: And I went to high school at Girls Catholic Central which was an all girls catholic school down here, it's now the St. Pats Senior Center. I'm glad they didn't

tear it down it's a great old building, and I went to St. Pats church up until, I think, what, a year or two ago when they closed it and I was devastated.

KG: Oh wow, aw.

SW: That they closed it. I just have this feeling it's gonna reopen because it's right in the heart of midtown. It was ridiculous to close it, so anyway. And then, after that my sister went, my older sister who's two years older and I have a younger sister eight years younger, there were three of us I am the middle child. My older sister, I did whatever she did, because I didn't really have a mind of my own and so she went, she started at Wayne she became a teacher and I thought well, I had no idea what I wanted to do, and so I just kind of followed in her footsteps and became a teacher also.

KG: Ok

SW: And then she went on and got several other degrees, one in counseling and another one maybe in sociology and I got my bachelor's, my major was speech my minor was English and my masters in education cause well, the education thing, that's a long story, so I'll wait for a question on that one later.

KG: At Wayne State you did?

SW: Oh yeah.

4:53

KG: Awesome. And how did you originally get involved with Café Detroit?

SW: Well, I let's see, how did this happen? And I know this story so well.

KG: Yeah, if you want to start with kind of post college, your journey, that's fine too.

SW: Actually once I got my degree I got a job teaching in my old grade school, St. Stevens.

KG: That's cool.

SW: Well, that wasn't my first job. Actually my first was at St. Kazmir's then I moved over to St. Stevens and the pay at that time was like 7,000 a year, it was really, really poor. And I was at St. Stevens for two years teaching and it was kinda neat because it was where I went to grade school, but the area was, had changed, a lot, well it has changed even more since. But it was mostly Hispanic children, and some Polish kids, but a lot of the people had participated in the "white flight" out of Detroit.

KG: Gotcha.

SW: And so anyway, I taught there and I also got married to Jerry Wahl and there's a long story on that I don't know if I should go into that part of it, but and my mother's health was not so good but she still had the store and so the second year I was teaching at St. Steven's she got very ill but at the same time my husband asked me for a divorce. I still don't know why, when I see him I'm gonna ask him, because I really don't understand what happened, but he kept bringing it up I thought well, you know, he said this once, he said "I want to live the life of a single person again" I thought is he kidding, and then six months later he said it again,

KG: Oh no

SW: And I thought, ok, he really means this. And I thought I don't want somebody who doesn't want me, that's fine, let's get the divorce. And my mother died at the same so all these, it was horrible, it was so devastating because the three of us girls were so close with our mother. My mother's death was much more devastating than my divorce, so at that point I thought I really don't want to teach, I don't think I really wanted to teach in the first place. I want to open a business like my mother because I worked alongside her hard for a lot of years, so my ex-husband who I was still on great speaking terms and am today, he said I have a friend who wants to go into business too, he says I'll introduce you if you're interested and I said sure, so this guy, and he also looked a lot like my husband, and I have some photos.

7:50

KG: What's his name?

SW: Greg Boerner, B-o-e-r-n-e-r, Boerner.

KG: Mhm.

SW: And Greg talked to me and he was interested in purchasing the Tartar House, which was on Palmer between Cass and Woodward.

KG: Okay.

SW: And it was just a small dive, but it was pretty popular because it would get the street traffic and things were different around there at that time, there were not as many Wayne State buildings, there were other small business, so I was game for it. It didn't take much, I said sure, yeah, let's do it. So my mother had left each child seven thousand dollars, so, from her insurance policy, which wasn't much but I ended up buying my home, putting a down payment on it, cause homes were cheap back then, down here on Peterborough between Cass and Woodward, and I thought I put that picture in here, maybe I didn't, and also putting a down payment on the restaurant. So we started the restaurant, we kind of, we kept the people who were there, because the cook was a great cook, people loved her cooking, and I think it's here.

KG: And what year was this?

SW: This was in 1977. We kind of kept everything the same at that time because we really didn't have a lot of money to do any renovating but then, and this was our, these are pictures of the opening, this is Greg and this is myself, and really, we were not involved you know,

KG: I believe you.

SW: Only in the restaurant. He had lots of girlfriends. We started working and running it and I jumped right in. In fact, I had two other waitressing jobs; one at this business, like businessman's lunch thing, it was called Bonaparte's. We had to wear leotards and the lighting was low. It was just open for a few hours but you could make pretty good tips. So I met this girl down there, Laura McGuire, and

she worked as a waitress so she told me about that place. She says come on, and you know I'll get you a job there and she did. And then I also worked at Porter Street downtown, well she did too, we both applied there so I did both of those: Bonaparte's by day, Porter Street at night and my restaurant in between. It was insane.

KG: That's crazy.

10:33

SW: It was insane but we were insane. And so let's see, then in 1977, that was 1977, we ran it for a while, I mean we did everything, we cooked, the cook taught us how to cook and each one of us took a week to actually be back there with her.

KG: Wow.

SW: So we were making breakfast, because we were open for breakfast and then we closed about, oh I don't know, maybe eight, I can't remember the original hours, but there was no liquor served.

KG: Right.

SW: But then we took on another partner. It was another friend of Greg's, Tim Parven. So when Tim came in, he was bringing a nice influx of money so that we could renovate and get a liquor license.

KG: Ok.

SW: So we did in 1979 and here's pictures of the renovations. We really did it up. We bought, Wayne State used to have like secondhand stores,

KG: Mhm.

SW: and resale places where you could buy I mean, beautiful antiques for almost nothing and so we bought all the wood, we bought cabinetry that we could cut down the middle. It served as our back bar and I'll show you that in a minute, so we put all this heavy duty oak all over the place. And we had the front window etched with our logo.

KG: Mhm,

SW: Which I named it the Café Detroit,

KG: That's an awesome logo,

SW: I was saying, Detroit Café, Café Detroit, and then we were all trying to come up with names but everyone liked that one so we kept it and,

KG: It began mainly as just a restaurant and then it turned into more of a night time?

SW: Then we got a liquor license that we bought, I think from the business that was right across the street where the new student center is.

KG: Yeah.

SW: And that didn't seem to be much of a problem, you know, at that time, but there were only so many liquor licenses it may still be that way today. So we got the liquor license and, here's the back bar, which was really a fireplace,

KG: Oh wow.

SW: a mantle but the people helping us do the work were very, very good carpenters but friends so the price of doing it wasn't that outrageous and we were helping with a lot of the work, and then we had our mirrors etched you know, and like I said we had the logo on the front, it was pretty gorgeous. Oh and we had the old marble bar which was the bar that became famous overnight because I guess Harry Truman sat there.

KG: Oh wow.

SW: I can't remember exactly I'm thinking it was on 3rd and something, but we got the marble bar.

KG: From a different restaurant?

SW: From the old Marble Bar so we had the marble bar inside of our place and we would share that story with everybody.

KG: Yeah.

SW: Then we also built an outdoor patio. We thought why not we had all this space in back so we bricked it, we did the work ourselves, and that was a big hit. In fact once we started, wait we also did some cooking out there and this is Loeb Wallow, who is a famous Detroit artist, he did a painting of the outdoor café, actually there were a lot of those done.

KG: That's beautiful.

SW: It's time for another picture. Oh yes. Yeah, it is. This is, Barbara Greene, is a famous artist from Detroit, everybody knew Barbara Greene, and she actually lived at my house for a while. But, her stuff, people just loved it, and she would come and do paintings and drawings, well drawings that she would paint later, of the musicians and she had tons and tons and tons of them. And this is her take on the back bar.

KG: That's amazing.

SW: Yeah, it was pretty cool. Right now she has cancer. She's in Toronto and she had just I guess she just wrote a cancer book. She's wild and crazy; I mean she is really crazy. I think she got her lung cancer really from all the fumes from all the paints, so I'm hoping that she's going to be able to win this battle because they are finding more cures for lung cancer.

15:24

KG: So after you guys, you kind of merged into nighttime type activities, how did that go over originally?

SW: Oh that went over really well and people started coming in asking if they could be part of the entertainment.

KG: Mhm.

SW: And I was, I don't know how I, but I'm sure happy I did all of this, I loved booking the entertainment and then there were people coming asking if they could put their art up on the walls.

KG: Oh wow.

SW: And people asking if they could organize poetry readings and when people asked, if it sounded halfway decent to me,

KG: Mhm.

SW: then we were on, we were going to go for it and we did and everything just turned out just famously. I don't think Elvin's even had their, they didn't have their liquor license yet or their cabaret permit yet, and I remember we were kind of picking brains they came to pick my brain.

KG: Gotcha.

SW: It was really listening to the community talk to you and they told you what they wanted.

KG: Mhm.

SW: And if you, it's my belief that if you follow up on that you're gonna be successful and it was real easy to comply with it. I mean the hard part was money.

KG: Right.

16:52

SW: You know that kind of worked itself out for a while. So here we have the outdoor café at one time thirty two trombones played there from Wayne State because I approached Wayne State and, I cant remember the last director's name he died not that long ago, not that many years ago. I just can't think of it, too bad I can't write these things down. But I said can we do something with the jazz lab band.

KG: Mhm.

SW: And so we worked something out and he loved it because he could be exposed to you know,

KG: Right.

SW: people could be exposed to them. And then there were also private parties in the back and we had some, we had some pretty handsome staff, male and female. And then I also did, I decided I wanted to do this Halloween party where there was the most neurotic psychotic exotic, I cant remember the last one, costume contest.

KG: That's amazing.

SW: And now I'm seeing that repeated all the time and actually it was the French maid who won.

KG: And what year did you transition to the night after you did the renovation?

SW: In 1979 we started that.

KG: Ok.

SW: And then there were also people coming who worked at other venues,

KG: Mhm.

SW: Like The Circa, she was the bartender for years at The Circa.

KG: Oh wow.

SW: And her husband worked at, he was the cook at Lellie's, the chef I should say. They came in. It was their place to hang out. So there were a lot of people hanging out there and a lot of the local people, cause they were the daily people who come in for lunch and that was pretty crowded but in the evening you really got to know people.

KG: So you did stay open for lunch and breakfast?

SW: Oh yeah we were open from seven in the morning to two in the morning.

KG: Oh wow.

SW: And at one point it was seven days a week. And we also did Sunday we had live classical music with the New York Times, and the DIA does brunch with Bach

or they used to and I forget ours was something like that but it was, I don't know if it was Breakfast and Beethoven, I forget what name we gave it. And this is just one of the, this is probably several parties cause I see people, my sister, here's my sister Eileen, my best friend, my sister she's also the cook at the Circa right now.

KG: Oh wow.

SW: She's been there like 35 years.

KG: That's amazing.

SW: I swear she's been there forever. They called her because they knew she was honest because they were right around the corner from us.

KG: Mhm.

SW: And we all knew them, I mean when you're restaurants in close proximity you borrow from each other you know, we need buns? Do you have any hamburgers? And you know you pay back, do you have quarters we need rolls of quarters or whatever. So anyway that's some of the, those are some of the parties. And then we were also at the same time doing entertainment and I have this, my sister found this online, this isn't all of our entertainment, it's just I can't get the rest of it, I don't know how this got on there either, I have to investigate a little bit. But this is what, '80 and '81 I think, '80 and part of '81. And then '82 but we really had much more than this but these may be the ones they kind of sanctioned, whoever this website is, and they look like when I'm looking at the names these are probably the better known jazz groups in Detroit because we kind of settled on jazz eventually.

KG: I was going to ask you that.

SW: Yeah that's what happened.

20:58

KG: How did that happen how did you choose jazz?

SW: Well in the beginning we did a little bit of everything. We did, in this they were way out there, the Inside Outside Band with Mary Roberts and Ralph Kosierarski. He can play any style music,

KG: Mhm.

SW: he's a horn player and they did some wild things where they would be squirming on the floor, and the place was packed. I mean people really followed them. So we did a lot of that in the beginning. I don't know if this was one goes into Inside Outside, Don Tapper and the Second Avenue Band and I think that was more rock and roll.

KG: Mhm.

SW: So we were doing that but then someone said, I said we really need somebody for our actual opening party, and a friend that was coming in, a regular, said you know Frank Isola this really famous jazz drummer he played with the Mazzellas, Ellison, Jerry Mulligan. With all these big names, he lives with Jack Corchran. So they said go over, he's over there go talk to him, so I did, and he was jazzed so we got to, we became very, very good friends and he died several years ago and I had put together, cause we were having a tribute to him, all these people wanted to have a tribute to him, I'm sorry.

KG: It's ok

SW: I had a whole series of articles which I didn't include because I thought well we don't want to just focus on that but he was, he really had a reputation and he was just excellent so, here are some shots of him.

KG: So once he kind of came on board as one of your good friends and started playing there you sort of centered in on jazz?

SW: Well people started coming out of the woodwork asking if they could play there and I started to really get into the jazz and I loved it. So that's basically what we did after that we just really focused, unless someone come up out of the blue and ask and maybe they did something different, but Elvin's was really doing, at that time, cause they finally got their liquor license and their cabaret license and

they were just down the block, and they were doing more of the rock and roll because a lot of the guys who worked there were also musicians.

KG: Ok

SW: And then we kind of focused on the jazz, it just kind of evolved and so all of these guys, Ken Kellett, I can't think of their names right now he died recently, but they played with Frank, Lamont Hamilton, Ron Jackson, all these groups. And so I'd book 'em, gave 'em a pretty decent wage, Stan Booker piano player, these people had great reputations I had to learn about them cause I really didn't know but I'm glad I did. Chloe Martin, Chris Peterson, who's a good friend, and Marcus who just died. Oh I'm so sorry I was sick at the time cause I missed the funeral and the memorials to him, he was wonderful, he was just great. We really became good friends.

KG: And what years did this kind of, the evolution to jazz, what year did that kind of start happening?

SW: That probably started '79 is when we got our cabaret, I would say, and looking back I could probably see that, I think it was '80.

KG: Ok

SW: It could have been '79 though and some of these papers actually didn't have a date on them. I couldn't believe it you don't have a date on here. So going to straight jazz I would say maybe late '79 maybe early '80.

KG: Ok

SW: Early 80's and,

KG: Did most people; cause you kind of said you went to Frank but also some people came to you, so how did you normally book people?

25:25

SW: I'd book people by the month. Was it by the month? Let's see.

KG: So one person would play for the entire month?

SW: No, no, maybe not, let me check that out. The art shows were by the month cause you didn't want people, this one does say every Thursday Marcus Belgrave. Ok now here's '81 so maybe things were more stable, oh no every week it might be a different person. Right, ok, cause May 1 and 2nd, Inside Outside, May, I can't even read that.

KG: That's all right.

SW: Usually it would go a couple days during the week. Yeah we were doing music almost seven days a week

KG: Wow, was it mainly people approaching you or did you go out and seek them out?

SW: You know what they were all coming in and asking and once they saw that Frank Isola was there, and he had such a stellar reputation, people were coming just I mean it, out of the woodwork. And wonderful people, so much fun and so easy to deal with. But I did pay a little bit better than other places cause they told me that. And I treated them with a lot of respect because they certainly deserved it and I mean the place would get packed. We finally started doing a cover too because my partners did tell me, you know we gotta make more money to be doing this music this often, so I got chastised a few times but a lot of the musicians, singers, artists would also come and work for me because they needed jobs.

KG: Oh wow.

SW: We will give it a shot and if it doesn't work I'll just tell 'em it's not working out. And like I said people were coming in to put their artwork on the walls and that would be on a monthly basis and this guy, what was his name, Bob McKewen. He took photos of a lot of really well known musicians probably downtown at Montreaux so then he did a show where he had all the photographs up and the stuff was for sale and it sold pretty well too, and I didn't take a commission. If they had, I'd say if you have a small piece that you wouldn't mind giving up, but otherwise I wouldn't take a commission because I just didn't want to do that but you can see some of the artwork on the walls.

KG: Oh wow.

SW: And it would, like I said, it would change monthly. And with the artists I really had to look at their work I didn't say, cause many of them I didn't know. I had to look at the work and this is pretty subjective but if it appealed to me I said sure. We had a guy who did t-shirts and the author who wrote *On the Road* and I can't think of his...

KG: Jack Kerouac?

SW: Jack Kerouac's wife was in town.

KG: Wow.

SW: And she came and she bought a ton of the t-shirts that were up there. The guy was so happy, it was great; it was great, really, most. Wynton Marsalis was underage and he snuck in cause he played with I think his father's a musician and his brother also and he would, and when he would play at Montreux later when he was a little bit older, Someone was interviewing him and he talked about how he snuck in to the Café Detroit.

KG: Oh my gosh.

SW: And would sit in, you know, and I mean, really you were supposed to be a certain age if you were coming in for but, we you know let him in and Hugh Masakeila and a few other people who signed our book people would come in to town cause they would hear about the café and the music that was. It was really the great well known jazz musicians like Marcus and Frank Isola and those names would just draw all kinds of people so that was a plus. And let's see, these are a lot of our regulars I'm trying to see,

KG: Who were some of the most of the most famous people who came in I know you mentioned a few?

SW: That would have been Wynton Marsalis, Jack Kerouac's wife, I'm trying to think.

KG: Anyone who played there like as a headliner?

SW: Yeah, Al Hibbler and I can't remember the name of the song that he wrote and played but he was a blind musician and I called him and I don't even know who gave me the lead but I called him, he was coming to town he knew where he wanted to stay my friend and myself picked him up and we transported him.

KG: Mhm.

SW: And he played at the café and I also tried to get Betty Carter. But because she played at Baker's she felt like she could not kind of break the trust,

KG: To do both? Gotcha.

SW: And play somewhere else and I understood that. So I would say probably, and then Marcus, Marcus played with you know, some of the greats, I mean he had such a reputation.

KG: Mhm.

SW: He really wasn't from here although he said he was from here cause he spent most of his life here.

KG: Right. What was his full name?

SW: Ray Charles, oh it is Marcus Belgrave, he played with Ray Charles' band for years and many other people, lots of Motown people and I don't know if you know Marcus Belgrave?

KG: I know the name.

SW: Oh yeah, he was, and what a great guy I know I have a million pictures.

KG: No I love them.

SW: Here he is, he'd bring his kids in and have lunch.

KG: Mhm.

SW: I mean people, these people who came at night started coming during the day also.

KG: So it was just a popular hangout spot.

SW: Yeah it was like a family you know, it really was a family. And there he is.

31:57

KG: Who were some of the more difficult people to work with? Is there anyone who gave you a hard time?

SW: You know what I really can't think of anyone.

KG: That's probably a good sign.

SW: Yeah that really is a good sign because I would say it was mostly wait staff but that's typical. I know cause I waited tables too. And then we were getting press, Herb Boyd who wrote quite a bit and I think he's still alive, he wrote, I love this article he did on me cause he really gave the place applause you know, and it really made me feel good. Oh, this is just a sample of somebody's,

KG: Poem?

SW: Poetry, yeah. But they, this is during the poetry readings that were going on, and people did plays there was a fashion show.

KG: Wow.

SW: And whatever, if people, the wilder their idea the more I liked it you know? These things would go over so well you could hardly walk in to the place. Rodriguez used to come in the time, Rodriguez who no one knew he was alive but then in South Africa it was the documentary.

KG: Oh wow.

SW: You know, that the guy did and then he committed suicide after that, not Rodriguez but the guy who did the documentary. But I met Rodriguez at the laundry mat and he was showing me his platinum album. He had them in the back of his car. He said come on I want to show you so I walked over and looked but he still did not know what fame he had and how people were crazy about him. Now, you used to see him walking up and down the street all the time and I never

heard him play. I think I may have asked him to play at the café and he would play with his back to the audience. He was very, very shy. I think this whole, this fame; I think it was really difficult for him. I think if I talked to him he would agree that it was, that it is, but now he's like touring constantly so,

KG: That's awesome.

SW: he's getting his fame late in life, it's kind of interesting. And then there are just other articles here on Frank, on the café, I just brought it along.

KG: Mhm.

SW: And there's Frank but I also have, someone even wrote a song about the café.

KG: Oh my gosh.

SW: So people did really love it and they still talk about it to this day.

34:36

KG: What was Frank's role? Did he just play there a lot? Or did he help you book people?

SW: Frank Isola?

KG: Yes.

SW: Actually, he and I were dating. We began dating even though he was a lot older than myself but no, no he didn't do that. He kind of rested on his laurels so to speak you know,

KG: So but he did play?

SW: Oh yeah he played everywhere really, I mean he was not just at my place. In fact afterwards, after my place closed in '77-'84, he was playing downtown in all kinds of venues just absolutely everywhere. I'm sure he was at Baker's too, but they would all these musicians participated in the Montreaux Jazz Festival and that's how I would kind of stay in touch with them but a few came to visit me

when I was recovering from my cancer. And it was so great to see them so I'm going to have to get back in touch with them because we really had close ties.

KG: Yeah.

SW: Back then.

35:52

KG: Who, yeah, so who was the easiest to work with would you say?

SW: The easiest?

KG: Who you kind of developed the best relationships with.

SW: I'm going to have to, it was most people but especially like Marcus who, the most positive people are always the best to work with because even if things aren't great you never know it, I mean, they're not the complainers, they kind of roll with the punches.

KG: Right, So Marcus?

SW: Yeah, yeah, for sure.

36:23

KG: What are some of the other, you said there were a lot of crazy different kinds of bookings you did there, what were some of those, you said the fashion show?

SW: Like I was saying the fashion show, and something, the fashion I think was called Calla lily and then there was also a play that someone put on.

KG: Mhm.

SW: And then like I said, the T-Shirt show, the 32 trombones on the back patio that was in the afternoon on a Sunday. We did Sunday morning classical brunch and then we did jazz on a Sunday afternoon.

KG: Wow.

SW: And the place would pack, it was great having sun streaming in and jazz playing.

KG: Yeah.

SW: And people loved it. So those were some of the more bizarre things, and then of course the Inside Outside band with the squirming on the floor in between people's legs.

KG: Oh my.

SW: And tables, it was bizarre but people just loved it, they ate it up, in fact you saw that flyer didn't you of them.

37:29

KG: Mhm, yeah. What kind of people normally came in? Was it everybody?

SW: Everybody you can imagine. People who lived close by, we got a lot of law students, a lot of social workers cause the Cohn building right across the street.

SW: Mhm.

SW: A lot of social work classes, sociology classes, were held there, and so they were coming through. And then of course once people came for the entertainment they, you know, kind of, they felt comfortable there and they just started coming back regularly but the local people, local artists, local musicians, you know.

KG: Mhm.

SW: The poets and all of those people cause they knew that they were welcome, you know.

KG: Right. And you said it only lasted till '84, what happened?

38:27

SW: Right. Well, we realized when the economy got bad in the '80s and it really got bad.

KG: Mhm.

SW: One of my partners wanted out, Greg Boerner, so Tim and I bought Greg out and Tim really had to take another job because we weren't really taking any money we just couldn't and maybe in the end some of the things I did, some of my decisions might have taken money away from the business. I don't regret that I did them though. But anyway at one point, so Tim was a steward for the airlines,

KG: Ok.

SW: so that's how he made his extra money, and at one point he said you know, this won't sustain both of us, he said I think it would sustain one of us but not both of us so what are we gonna do? Do you wanna buy me out or am I gonna buy you out or what will we do? Think, the economy was even getting worse and people weren't coming out. I mean people were still coming out but they didn't have that extra money to spend.

KG: Right, just come for the entertainment versus,

SW: Yeah even the lunch time crowd which was always a big crowd you could see, it was there but it was not like it was when the economy was good and so I decided, I loved the café. I was so invested with it emotionally, I said I'll buy you out and I was only twenty seven and I wasn't very savvy money wise.

KG: Mhm.

SW: So when I told them I'll buy you out I paid him everything, it's not like I paid him monthly.

KG: What year was this?

SW: This was in '84, maybe it was '83, and I really, I was pretty broke then and I remember Barney Sirowitz from Elvin's, who bought Elvin's from the original Elvin, who had quite a reputation and even eventually went to San Francisco, Barney Sirowitz said 'Susie', he was always giving me advice, whatever you do, he says, pay the government first, he says, you have to pay them first, you can make

other people but they must be paid first. Well I didn't do it that way, I paid my employees first because they were closes to me and they worked the hardest.

KG: Mhm.

SW: I paid the musicians, the vendors, I paid all them first and then there was never any money for the government.

KG: Uh oh.

SW: So eventually, and I could have bargained with them but I wasn't sophisticated enough to know what I was capable of doing. I didn't have an attorney; I grew up in a poor family. When you grow up rich or wealthy these things kind of, you get them through osmosis you know, that knowledge, and so I, when they said you know you're gonna have to find a buyer I did that.

KG: Oh.

SW: Instead of fighting with them over it, I didn't even know I could to tell you the truth.

KG: Right, right, and you were young

SW: I found a buyer for it, and then the proceeds from the sale were supposed to go to pay the back taxes.

KG: Right.

SW: But, the people who bought it, didn't pay the back taxes so when I quit, well when I sold the café,

KG: Mhm.

42:24

SW: I really didn't get any money for it so I started working downtown. After a brief hiatus I got a job downtown. Somebody told me about Skipper's and so I went, my friend worked there and he introduced me to Skipper and I became Skipper's bartender for a few years.

KG: Ok, that was a restaurant?

SW: It was a bar that served food but not, maybe hot dogs, chips.

KG: Right.

SW: You know, really they did not have a kitchen.

KG: Ok.

SW: But it was very popular, especially amongst the Canadian kids.

KG: Mhm.

SW: It would just get jammed and so a lot of the music was at the café. Frank played there a lot of the same people came over and played at Skipper's, so it was like a lot of my former life moved with me to Skipper's and Skipper was very open to it. It was great, only he was much more savvy and he only did it once in a while.

KG: Right.

SW: And so I worked for him, he really liked the way I bartended because I could work hard and also not steal.

KG: Right.

SW: You know you have to worry about people but eventually I met a guy there who I fell in love with and he said, you have a teaching degree? You should be using that. And so I kind of thought about it, you know, I said maybe you're right. So I went back in to teaching but this time I got certified for; well they put me in an elementary position. I went to work for Detroit public schools cause,

44:09

KG: Mhm.

SW: They paid much better and then someone said well you know if you're gonna go back to school and get re-certified get your masters cause all of these classes will count toward your masters so I did that and I taught first grade for twenty years at Spain Elementary School. And I loved it, every minute of it. But at one

point the government was garnishing my pay checks. And it was because of money owed that was never. And you know what I should have been on top of it but I thought when the deal was done. And an attorney represented me and the buyers and I said isn't this a conflict of interest, you represent, and he was a local attorney, I'm not gonna use his name, but I was really later, I thought how could you do this to me?

KG: Mhm.

SW: And these guys they took everything down that we built inside, all of this beautiful oak and they made it the McDonalds of the Cass Corridor cause someone called it that.

KG: What did it, was it called Café Detroit then?

SW: It was called...

KGL So they did change the name and everything?

SW: Yeah they did change the name, now it's Biblo something or other but, oh god I can't think of it, I just saw it.

KG: That's alright but it wasn't a jazz club anymore or anything?

SW: No, no. they were still serving alcohol because they got the liquor, oh no actually the Cass Café has my liquor license so they must have brought in their own liquor license somehow got their own liquor license in there.

KG: Oh that's cool.

SW: Yeah the Bereche brothers. I'll say their name because that was such a big disappointment and they have had other restaurants since but really they were more into the cooking portion of it.

KG: Right.

SW: And not into the entertainment portion and I was going to say that, so I called the IRS and I said to them, when does the statute of limitation end on this? And that was back when they could really abuse you.

KG: Right.

SW: You know? And the agent I talked to was very abusive and she said you have no right, this is something you should pay, blah. And I said well I just need an answer and she had to give me an answer and so she told me it would be like another month or so and I was so thankful because I really felt like that was not money I owed any more but the whole thing should have been handled differently.

KG: Mhm.

SW: Much differently, but anyways so I was really happy teaching at Spain Elementary. I loved it. I never would have quit but I was diagnosed with cancer and then I had to because I had to undergo radiation and chemo and all of that so my life has changed and then once the cancer was gone,

KG: You beat it.

47:31

SW: As it is right now, I mean hopefully you can never really say that it could come back, so I just thank god for every day I have. But then I thought well now I can do what I always wanted to do. I have my old 1890's house on Peterborough and all the time I was teaching I was so involved in the teaching I think my cancer may have been a product of that, but I decided I was gonna finally renovate my home the way I should have and I wanted to get my sister to come back and live there with her boyfriend.

KG: Mhm.

SW: And possibly even my other sister so I want to do separate living quarters for all of us.

KG: Right.

SW: And so then pretty much ready to go this Spring.

KG: Awesome.

48:26

SW: I have people coming in but then I find out in February that they're going to three young men are building a shipping container, five restaurants and two bars, ten feet away from me, right next door. And I will say this name, Sue Mosey from Midtown, is the one who directed them there and this was before the houses were knocked down one by one, there was not an empty lot on the block it was definitely residential. And now she's, in fact it's been spot zoned which is illegal, but no one would listen to anything I said. I went in front of the council. I did my research. I went in front of the committees. I said this feels like a slap in the face cause people said get out of Detroit Susie, it's terrible. I stayed through thick and thin and I said I'll never leave Detroit I love it. I love my home. One day I'll be able to retire there and really bring it to it's full glory. And I said it feels like you people are slapping me in the face and they listened to me for a moment but then the deal went down, you know the deals gonna go through. The bottom line is money and I found that out and that was a rude awakening. We fought several of us this past,

KG: Mhm.

SW: whole summer was taken up with that.

KG: Wow.

SW: And I did not want to fight but I went in there fighting. I had to get it together cause I wanted to finally relax you know, and forget it so now I'm on a mission.

50:11

KG: Yeah. Kind of a little back to Café Detroit in the last few minutes, how do you think it contributed to Detroit and its local musicians cause jazz is such a big part of Detroit?

SW: Oh, I think that those local musicians not only did they have income coming in from it.

KG: Right.

SW: At a time when there wasn't a lot of work for them cause they would tell me these things so I know this to be true.

KG: Mhm.

SW: And it also kept the jazz alive you know. People could find places where they could hear live jazz so it was a real blessing all the way around, and it was great for, for the legacy of Café Detroit.

KG: Yeah.

SW: That we were so involved in it.

KG: Why do you think so many talented musicians come out of Detroit?

51:06

SW: I think it's the town, it's a struggling city.

KG: Mhm.

SW: And I think you see a lot, and not just musicians but artists, people in general you know, blue collar workers, white collar workers, people work hard and they're big givers too. Detroit always has had a reputation as a big donor city very charitable.

KG: True, yeah.

SW: I think it's those things that really bring up the best in people sometimes.

KG: Yeah. What do you think the most gratifying part of owning Café Detroit was, for you personally?

SW: I think it was seeing all these people being able to express themselves artistically. And I think it really meant a lot to them, the artists of that time that

put their work on my walls. I'm gonna have to go and see it. It's part of Wayne State's collection that they're going to put up at Smiley Brother's.

KG: Ok.

SW: It's not called Smiley Brother's any more but it has a name and you know the building? You know the building I'm speaking of?

KG: I'm not sure.

SW: It's between Ferry, and I think its Ferry and Palmer on Woodward. It's a huge mansion and attorneys were there but then Wayne State got it. Then I read this article when I was looking for an architect to come and look at my house so I could get historic designation, because that was taken away from me by Sue Mosey, and I found that out later when I talked to some people so she must have had designs on that block a long time ago. And I could go into a lot, but the work of these people, Brian Tillman being one of them, but so many of them Stephen Goodfellow, Loeb Wallow, Barbara Greene, so many of these people were already known when they put their stuff up. But some were not known but they are part of the Detroit corridor artist movement.

KG: Oh wow, mhm.

SW: You know what I saw what this one, this man and his wife they're very wealthy people they amassed a collection of these works I thought maybe they bought them at the café cause you could get these things at the café.

KG: Probably someone did.

SW: If they were someone else, if they were up at Mocat. They spent, the price is going to be double.

KG: Do you have any final exciting stories, something that sticks out in your head?

SW: About the café?

KG: Yeah.

SW: I think I told you most of them.

KG: No particularly fun night?

SW: People came in I have to think for a moment.

KG: That's alright.

SW: Well actually after the café, in its heyday,

KG: Mhm.

SW: When all the musicians were playing especially on a weekend let's say a Saturday and this might be before we were doing the Sunday music.

KG: Uh huh.

SW: So many Sundays we were closed then but we were still doing the Saturday I would just invite everybody back over to my house and we would just party all night long. And I was younger then so I could stand it. Now it doesn't take much and I'm done but those were just great times I mean I really made friends with people.

KG: That's awesome.

SW: It wasn't just a employer/employee kind of thing. It was more than that, which made it harder to work sometimes but it was very gratifying because when I see these people now, I mean we're like even though we haven't seen each other in many years it's like we're all deep down friends.

KG: Mhm, are you still involved in the music scene in Detroit at all?

SW: Just really listening and I haven't been out that much.

KG: Mhm.

SW: But I would like to go out to Montreaux again, I would like to reconnect with these people wherever they're playing.

KG: Mhm.

SW: That would be a great thing to do but I'm just really getting my feet wet because I had this struggle since February.

KG: Right.

SW: Then I finally just had to give it up I did I gave it up I wasn't winning and I thought, I'm not giving up my house.

KG: Nope.

SW: I'm gonna live here but it would be nice to reconnect, so I've reconnected with a few old friends and its been, it's time consuming it's like how am I gonna break myself up to do all these different things and work on my house at the same time?

KG: Right.

SW: But I'm gonna do it by the grace of God cause I've strengthened my faith, I mean god has strengthened my faith, but to the ultimate level. So I'm really happy about that cause I don't know how I did it before without him but I was given six months to live.

KG: Wow.

SW: And cause I asked and they said you should have been dead by now they said we don't know what it is I said I do.

KG: Aw. Are you still close with, I know you said you haven't kept in contact with a lot of the same people, but are you still close to any of them today?

SW: Well what's happened is I never got on Facebook and teachers were telling me that's the way you do it get on Facebook then everybody can know your condition, how you are, what's going on. And I just got on Facebook a few months ago and my cousin was the one who did that for me, and I'm still learning. I don't even know how to do certain things on there and so I'm still learning but through Facebook people are contacting me and it's really been great. And reconnecting

KG: Oh yeah, like who?

SW: Well for one Laura McGuire my old friend she worked at my place but we also waitressed together at Bonaparte's and Porter Street.

KG: Mhm.

SW: She and I, it's like we didn't lose a day, we didn't lose a beat and we almost went to Noel Night together but we both had things to do so we're going to, the guy who owns Elvin's, or who used to own Elvin's, Barney, is having a party on the 17th of December way out I don't know if he's in Algonac or where he's at but she asked me to go she said think about it I said I thought about it I'm going cause I want to see these people.

KG: Aw, yeah.

SW: And then Anna Kroll is another one we were good friends and she is friends with Laura also, and so we'll have to connect and I know I'll see other people if I start going out to these venues. Laura Sharpe, Mary, I can't think of his name but he did all the famous posters during the 70's and 80's why can't I think of his name that's terrible that I can't think of it.

KG: What kind of posters?

SW: All, like with the MC-5 he did, what's his name well he died not that long ago and so Laura Sharpe I think, I heard that his funeral was something else I think they were dancing around the coffin.

KG: Oh my gosh.

SW: I mean it was really wild and crazy, Gary Grimshaw, a very well-known poster office all over the country not just in Detroit, I think he may have even done a Beatles poster.

KG: Wow.

SW: He really was quite the guy and a really nice guy and she knows a lot of people, I'd love to see her again so wherever she would be I'd probably run in to a bunch of people and my sister works like I said the night cook at the Circa and some of the Café Detroit have continued on at the Circa.

KG: Aw.

SW: In terms of a place to go.

KG: Mhm.

SW: It's become their bar so occasionally I'll go in there and run in to a bunch of people who used to come in to the café. Regulars and stuff like that. You know a lot of people moved out, I stayed and a lot of people moved out but there are still people down here, Carol Baker and her husband Mike, and they're kind of movers and shakers down here and Joe Landy, who is doing the Scott mansion on Peterborough. He's renovating it and that place looks like it could never be but he takes on big projects, goes in front of the city, gets the approval, and he's even helped me during this whole fight that I had, he was great. And I knew he was busy but he would say Susie any time you need me. What a great guy he is, he's been responsible for so many things going on here well before the city decided to turn things around.

KG: Well that ends our time thank you so much.

SW: It was a pleasure, I'm glad you asked me questions.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

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