Dennis Coffey

Interviewed by
Samantha Keene
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Wayne State University, Detroit, MI

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- Description: Dennis Coffey describes his extensive career as a Detroit musician. From his time as a session guitarist at Motown Records to his experiences as a producer at Sussex Records, Dennis Coffey was an integral part of Detroit's booming music scene in the 1960s and 1970s.
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SK: Okay. We're here at Wayne State University in Detroit. Today is December 2nd, 2015. I'm the interviewer, Samantha Keene and today I'm talking with Dennis Coffey, a guitarist, producer, and all around general great Detroit musician. So, I'm happy to have you here. Um, let's start by talking about the sort-of beginnings of your career. You played a lot of you-know music halls, nightclubs, stuff like that in Detroit in the 60s. Can you tell me a little bit about that – what the scene was like, some of your favorite places to play?

DC: First, if we go back without going too far back, when I was going to Mackenzie High School I did my first record date. Right now if you go on YouTube you can look up a record by Vic Gallon called "I'm Gone" and you will hear me doing two guitar solos on that particular record that I recorded and I wasn't old enough to drive to the session – I was still only fifteen. So, that's kind of back in the beginning.

But a little bit of the genesis of the music and how it got to be in Detroit is back in the early days there was a woman named Mrs. Treauder and she put together about twenty bands and there was network of teen clubs all around the city especially on the Northwest side. And what we would do – I was in a band called The Pyramids. And we would play a teen club every Friday night and we would do a wedding or an event every Saturday night. So by the age of fifteen I was already working two nights a week. And what that did is – that was the beginnings of rock and roll. So rock and roll was still evolving. You couldn't learn that from any educator because they didn't know what it was. So we had to learn it the hard way, by taking it off the records.

So when I was on summer break from high school I used to practice guitar eight hours a day and I would learn songs off of records. And what that did, as far as the impact on the 60s, because this was in the 50s, is that you had a lot of musicians ready to work the bars because they knew all the songs and they had been already playing a couple nights a week for probably four or five years. So suddenly you had a whole, uh, bunch of ready players who knew all the songs and knew how to play rock and roll.

And it started actually, in the 60s, one of the places it started was Rose Bar on Vernor in Southwest Detroit. And there was also the Dixie Bell Bar was there. And there was also the Fort Street Tavern – the West Fort Tavern, which was on Fort Street. So that started as a mecca at least in that area, in Southwest Detroit, where these bars were country bars and they changed over to rock and roll bars. And I just remember coming to Rose's when I was on leave – I was in the 101st Airborne Division – and I came to the bar and there's my friends playing there. And I still was only probably 19. And the place was packed. You know, so, I ended up playing at Rose's and playing at the Dixie Bell, and West Fort Tavern with different groups.

And that was kind of the beginning of rock and roll in the 60s in the city of Detroit and the suburbs. And that's kinda – that's how that whole thing started and then that evolved into all these bands. And we were all playing – back in those days, you could play in a bar, put your amplifier there, and you could play six nights a week. For two years. You know, so that's kinda – or seven nights a week if you wanted to.

SK: (Laughs)

DC: And, uh, in 1962 is when I first started going to Wayne State. And my uncle - uh, his name was Howard Stewart - actually built the security system here. Because he was a retired lieutenant from the Detroit Police Department and he had a law degree. So I used to go visit him and he's the one that helped put the security force together here back in the early 60s. So, uh, I was majoring in Harmony and Theory because they would not allow me – they wouldn't recognize guitar. And they said, "You can't major in that. We don't have that." So, I took all the harmony and theory courses and, uh, did all that. So I ended up with a couple years worth of college at that point at Wayne. And then, I got so busy doing recording sessions and working that I just – I couldn't work in the club six, seven nights a week and go to school five days. I tried to do it for a year. I was a full time student and a full time musician and I just couldn't do it.

SK: Yeah, that'd be tough.

DC: Yeah, I had to drop out of the school. And, uh, and it just… but in the 60s, Detroit was just… you could play in one club and go play in another club and there weren't booking agents then. So usually, I think, on Monday nights you would have a jamboree and all the bands would play and all the club owners would come to hear all the bands. And so the club owners had to get directly involved in hiring the entertainment. So that's kinda how that started.

And there were just plenty of placed to play and they were always crowded. So that was what it was like and then at the same time I was in a band called The Royaltones. So we were already recording. And when I was in the service, uh, I was in the Airborne for about a year. And then I was transferred to an army hospital to work there in South Carolina and I was recording with, uh, Maurice Williams and some artists down there. And I actually had a single out myself under the name Clark Summit because they record company in New York thought that Dennis Coffey couldn't have a hit. (Laughs) Which he could!

SK: (Laughs)

DC: And Clark Summit just disappeared with that name. And a guy was in the Northern Lights Lounge last night saying, "Okay, fill out this here book that you have out" – which is *Guitars, Bars, and Motown Superstars* that's published by University of Michigan Press – so, I signed my name and for some reason he

wanted me to sign 'Clark Summit' on there so it's just… (laughs). That's kinda how that thing went.

But then I started doing sessions with The Royaltones and the first gold record I played with was "Handyman" with Del Shannon. We cut that at Bell Sound in New York. And Del of course was from … he was living Southfield then, I think.

SK: Mhmm.

DC: So, uh, then I just started doing a lot of Northern Soul sessions you know with bass player with Bob Babbitt. He was a Funk Brother. And we started doing all these -"Open the Door to Your Heart" by Darryl Banks and The Volumes - and all these sessions. So I was doing sessions back in the early 60s and that kept us busy.

And that segued into Golden World Studios where I got a call from Golden World, uh, I think it was a guy named Weems was his last name. And he says, "Well, we wanna hire you to do a session at Golden World." I says, "Okay, when is the session?" He says, "We're in the middle of it. It's right now. And the guys - the guitar players can't read the charts." So I had my daughter, Jordan, she was like three. I was babysitting her. So I took her and put her in the corner. And they had the charts there and I read the charts and then suddenly I was at Golden World everyday working with J.J. Barnes and Edwin Starr and doing sessions there.

And then the same kind of thing happened down the road in the 60s where I get a call from James Jamerson - bass player extraordinaire and Motown Funk Brother - and I had done one session with him I think when he was moonlighting after hours. So he introduced me to Hank Cosby, which is Stevie Wonder's producer. And Hank was the contractor of the musicians at Motown. So he said, uh, "we're putting together this band upstairs at Golden World." Because Motown had purchased Golden World. "And we're gonna call it the Producer's Workshop. And we'll give you a retainer and we want you to work two-and-a-half hours, four nights a week. And this is to allow our record producers to come in and experiment and try new ideas without incurring studio time and union time for the musicians."

So I did that. And so we were doing that for a couple of months and then one day this producer Norman Whitfield who I used to see in clubs when I was playing at the ??? with Motown acts and stuff came in. And he had this arrangement on a song called "Cloud Nine" and he said, "I wanna work something out with this song so let's just read the chart and see what we come up with. And, uh, I happened to have this 'wah-wah' pedal with me in my bag of stuff. And it made the guitar make that 'wah-wah-wah' sound. So I put that on the front of that song and Norman heard that and he says, "That's it! That's what I'm lookin' for!" So here two weeks later I made history with the Funk Brothers and we're doin' 'Cloud Nine' for The Temptations. So, I put the 'wah-wah' pedal on the front and

the record takes off and then suddenly I'm there all the time 'cause Norman's doing all The Temptations' stuff. "Psychadelic Shack", we're doing "Cloud Nine", we're doing "Ball of Confusion", all that stuff. So, that was the Motown era for me.

SK: Mhm.

DC: And the tambourine player at the time – because Jack Ashford was the main guy but he left and then he came back – at that time on that session he wasn't on it. It was another guy, and I can't recall his name but he ended up being a director for public television. I did the American Black Journal and he was there. And he said, "You should've seen the look on the faces of the other Funk Brothers when you started playing that 'wah-wah' pedal on 'Cloud Nine'. They had no idea!"

And the whole – to set it up because people don't really understand – because then I became a Funk Brother and I was Motown generally everyday and we were doing two three hour sessions everyday. So how that would usually work was I would go to the studio, uh, ten or eleven in the morning and the sessions were three hours long. And we would sit down, uh, in front of an arrangement. And it was – we call it a master rhythm chart or road map – and that would have all the parts on it.

And basically, uh, the guys that were there working as Funk Brothers at the time. We usually had Eddie Willis on guitar, we had Joe Messina on guitar, and Robert White on guitar, and myself. But there was never hardly ever four of us playing at the same time. So you usually have two or three guitar players. And we would be sitting plugged into this, uh, box in the speaker so it went directly from our guitars right to tape. We didn't have amplifiers. And then James Jamerson was on bass, he'd be sitting across from me on a stool and he was plugged direct. And Earl Van Dyke would be sitting to my left playing a big acoustic piano. And then right in front of me would be Bongo Eddie playing congas and you'd have Jack Ashford playing tambourine. And then if you looked against the far wall you'd have Uriel Jones and Pistol Allen both playing drums. And one would be playing the kick drum and the snare, and the other would playing the fancy cymbal high hat stuff that you hear on records like "Cloud Nine". And then you'd have Johnny Griffith playing a ham and organ but not too far from the drummers. And then you would have in the overdub room a vibes player Jack Brokensha would playing vibes. And that was basically the Funk Brothers that I played with. And what we would do is we'd sit down and the arrangers, like David Van De Pitte, there'd be Paul Riser, Motown had great arrangers. And they would have the charts there and the producer would be there. And they would count off the song.

Our job was to read the chart correctly – we called it a road map – and we had to add a feel to it. The feel – you couldn't write a feel. The footprint for that song was the groove and we were the ones that create that groove. And we had to not only read the chart correctly, we had to add a feel, we had to add guitar licks, we

had – I did introductions like “Ball of Confusion” – made it up right on the spot. And we had to do one song an hour. And if you made a mistake, any of the eleven guys in the room, they had to stop the tape.

SK: Oh.

DC: So we had to do one song an hour with no mistakes and make them a hit. And we did three songs in three hours, sometimes even four. So that’s what we did there and people don’t understand because when you do that all the time you get very good. And we were very good.

You know, I remember at one point in time - because I was doing sessions also for Motown, and then I would do, uh, say six hours for Motown and we’d take an hour break between the six hours. And we’d go over to Howard Johnson’s – a restaurant on Grand Boulevard – and we would have lunch and we’d go back and do the other three. So three in the morning, three in the afternoon, and then by seven o’clock at night I’d be upstairs at Golden World doing that stuff. And then by ten o’clock at night I’d be over at – Holland, Dozier, and Holland had a label now, so they had Hot Wax and Invictus – so I’d be recording sessions for them and I’d do Freda Payne and all those hits for those guys. So that was kind of how our day went as far as recording sessions and so forth.

And at one point in time Motown called me in the office. And they were having a court battle with HDH because they were suing each other and they were leaving to go on their own. And Harry Balk was over there and he said, “Well, we don’t want you working for Holland Dozier Holland.” And I says, “Well, I think you’re mixing me up with the guys you’ve got under contract and that’s not me.” (Laughs.) And they go, “Well, we won’t call you anymore!” I says, “Well, that’s your prerogative.” You know, so I just walked out. And, uh, so they didn’t call me for two weeks and I guess I was on suspension or something. So after that I was still there every day and they never brought that up again.

And so I’d be working for Holland Dozier Holland, I’d go down to Muscle Shoals and work with Wilson Pickett. I would do The Dramatics up here, which was on Stax. So, I know for one year straight I was on three songs in Billboard in the Top 10, and ten songs in the Top 100 for a year straight back in the day. Detroit was so … hot, musically. And what happened – I was also working with a partner Mike Theodore and we were producers. And so we were working together doing production as well. And what Motown did when they were here in Detroit is they were so successful that if you were a producer in Detroit or you were an act from Detroit and you recorded and tried to get a label deal you got deals. Because just everybody wanted to do the Motown thing and everybody wanted that sound.

SK: Mhm.

DC: But they couldn't get the Funk Brothers except for me or Bob Babbitt because the rest of them were locked down under contract. But they could get me and Babbitt and some other guys. So at one point in time the city was so hot that RCA and Columbia was gonna open up an office and a recording studio. But when they figured out they couldn't get the Funk Brothers because Berry had them signed, they decided against it. But that was kind of what was going on musically in town. And there were still a lot of clubs going on. And, uh, I was doing actually eighteen recording sessions a week, three hours apiece.

SK: That's a lot!

DC: Yeah, and it was funny because in the *Standing in the Shadows of Motown*, the documentary, they talked about Funk Brothers and I'm in that thing doing a little bit of it.

SK: Yeah.

DC: But the whole idea is, yeah, at the end Motown left and those guys were stuck here. But when Motown was at its heyday, which they didn't put in the movie, I was there. We were all driving Fleetwood Brougham Cadillacs and Motown didn't buy them for us. We bought our own, because we were making enough money! Except for, uh, Joe Messina had an El Dorado for some reason.

(Laughs)

DC: That's what he wanted. So, if you went over to Hitsville over there and saw the parking lot, that's all you saw were Fleetwood Broughams. And that was the musicians. So we did well, and that was the best paying studio gig.

And I think the Funk Brothers – in my mind anyways – and I've lived in L.A. and New York, and I've recorded in Miami and Muscle Shoals and Nashville – I think the Funk Brothers were the best studio band in the world. Period. That was kind of my, uh, - and that came from Detroit. And you know some of the impact is the Funk Brothers were playing clubs like – I think Earl Van Dyke and Uriel Jones and Jamerson and Robert White were playing at the Chit Chat on 12th Street at night and doing sessions during the day. And I was playing at the Frolic Show Bar with uh, Melvin Davis on drums and Lyman Woodard. So we were all playing at night and doing sessions during the day. So our music was molded by the people coming to hear us play, you know. It was very Detroit-centric. It was a regional sound that just went worldwide with Motown because Berry was, uh, as far as I'm concerned a genius to put it all together. And I told Berry Gordy a couple years ago, I says, "You were the first one to step up and realize the talent that was in Detroit, that was defined by the culture of Detroit and do something with it." And Berry Gordy told me, he says, "I could have never started Motown Records in any other city but Detroit because of the talent I found here."

SK: Yeah.

DC: So that, that's kinda… that's that whole Motown story and how it happened. And, uh, you know you can go any place worldwide and people know Motown. When I play in London or Paris or any place, they just… Motown's like gold over there. They just love that label. And then the Northern Soul music people, which is the pre-Motown, and the kinda, I call them, the makers of really big hits. They have a lot of people in London and the UK that play those records. And they have weekend soul things where they just play that music. And I've actually played one of those, too. And it was just… I had a soccer shirt on from one of the local teams. And it was in a place called Cleethorpes, which is a resort community kind of, and we did the whole night with the soul music stuff. So, there's so many things that happened. And you can go back to George Clinton and "I Wanna Testify" and I did the first *Funkadelic* album. And with The Volumes for Harry Balk, and all the other stuff, and there's just so much music heritage in Detroit. And there still is! Last night, at the Northern Lights Lounge the whole place was packed. The whole cast from the Jersey Boys were in there. You had people from 89X were in there. You had the – just packed all night long. I mean, the culture – and that's two miles away from Motown Museum. It's still packed. People support the music. If the people in the city of Detroit didn't love and support the music, there'd be no music here. That's how all the musicians got paid to learn their craft, because they could play in clubs. Because the people in Detroit, it's just the best audiences in the world. They show up and they support the music. That's part of the DNA of the city.

SK: So, how do you think it affected Motown's music once they relocated out of Detroit to Los Angeles?

DC: Well, you know what? I left. The scene in *Standing in the Shadows* where they had a note on the door that the studio was closed… Well, I already – Mike Theodore and I – we were staff producers for Sussex, Clarence Avant's label. And, uh, and I think by then I had already had "Scorpio", which was a huge hit record, you know. And I had a couple albums under my belt. And we were on salary for Clarence Avant, and Clarence let me do sessions all the time, you know. So Mike Theodore and I moved out to L.A. So we're out there and we're on salary and we're doing a couple projects for Clarence. So I'm sitting out there and I told Motown, "I'm here. I'm out here." You know, so… I didn't hear from them for a couple of months so I figured, well, maybe they're not interested. And then I got a phone call to, uh, to go to the studio out in Santa Monica. Motown had a big tracking studio downstairs and an overdub studio upstairs. I started at 10 AM in the morning doing tracking and they were bouncing me upstairs and downstairs. So from 10 AM I didn't get done until 4 AM the next day!

SK: Wow.

DC: And so I was doing all that. But what I noticed at Mowest - the Funk Brothers weren't there so the sound wasn't there. And I was the only one there. And then, uh Wah-Wah Watson, who came later in Detroit when I was on the road with "Scorpio" and he played on "Papa was a Rolling Stone". And I showed him how to use the wah-wah pedal and he gave me a brand new one about five years ago.

SK: (Laughs)

DC: So he did that one song and that was his deal with Motown. And I was unavailable because I was on the road, because I had a hit record!

SK: (Laughs)

DC: But the whole thing in - I think the heart and soul of the Motown sound began with the Funk Brothers in Detroit, which reflected the Detroit heritage and the culture of this town. Out in L.A. that went away.

SK: Mhm.

DC: And I think, uh, Motown lost its identity. Because the people they were using on sessions in L.A. were good musicians, but they weren't the Funk Brothers. And, more importantly, they played on everybody else's records out there. So the Funk Brothers, who Berry had under contract here, they just played on Berry's records. But out there, they played on everybody's records. So I think that was the beginning of the Motown sound deteriorating.

SK: Mmm.

DC: I mean, sure, they had – Stevie was still out there, and they had Lionel Richie, and they had the Jackson 5 out there. But I remember here in Detroit the Jackson 5 coming in and we did three tracks. Bobby Taylor was producing them. And they came in and Michael Jackson was just, I don't know, a little kid. And the whole family was there. And Joe Jackson, the dad, was looking at me playing all these special effects pedals and wah-wah stuff and he wanted to know what they were. And we did three tracks on them. So I sent them over to Capitol Music. A friend of mine, Joe Pedorcak, who taught Ted Nugent how to play guitar, owned that studio – uh, that music store. And he sold them a bunch of gear. And then what happened, after we did those three tracks, is then, out in L.A. Berry Gordy heard them, and I think he thought that those tracks were too funky for that young band. So they redid those tracks out in L.A. and that's what the records were. So he might have been right, but suddenly Bobby Taylor disappeared off the scene. He wasn't involved with that group anymore. It was somebody called the Corporation. So I don't know who those producers were, but Bobby Taylor somehow was, uh, off the scene on that group. So that was the beginning of it. And then I can tell with all the sessions that I did at Motown that they used some

of those tracks on the Jackson 5, because I get paid when they go to film, movie, or they go to commercial or something. I can see on my checks that I know I played on those records out there.

SK: Mhm.

DC: And then when I was out in L.A., I had just done a thing with Barbara Streisand with sixty pieces - a whole orchestra - which is really great. And then I get a call from Ben Barrett who was a contractor for Motown. And he says, "Well, they want you to do this big show with the Jackson 5." And I says, "OK" and that was the next week, and I says, "Well when's the rehearsal?" And they said, "Well the guitar player left." I don't know if he was fired or he quit. They said, "The guitar player left at the rehearsal so Motown wants you to play with the Jackson 5 -" and now it included Michael and Janet, "- with no rehearsal. You just gotta read the charts." And I said, "That doesn't sound like a good idea to me!" So, uh, he says, "You don't get it." He says, "We're paying union scale and a half," which they did, I was getting time-and-a-half for every session, and they said, "They didn't say, 'get a guitar player.' They want you to do it, period."

SK: Wow.

DC: So then I said, "Well, I guess I will."

SK: (Laughs)

So we got through it okay, only Janet was now out there in front of the group with a little gown on. And she's singing and Michael was singing with them, so it was the whole shebang. So it was interesting. You know, but, uh, I felt that the Motown sound deteriorated without the Funk Brothers and without the Detroit … just the whole thing, you know. So, uh.

SK: Hm.

DC: And I spent three years in L.A. and I says, "I'm not staying out here!" I came back to Detroit and then I struggled. Mike Theodore and I were trying to find some work here and we still couldn't do it. So I went to New York for a couple of years and I said, "You know what? I'm done." So I came back to Detroit and I've been here ever since, you know.

But I had to change up what I'm doing. You know I ended up… the big business for musicians was Motown. If it wasn't Motown it was the Big Three, so I spent twenty years in the automotive business because, uh, by then I had gotten a master's degree in Instructional Technology. And the last ten years, up until 2006, I was a Lead Manufacturing Consultant assigned to Ford Motor Company. And now they were sending me to Germany and they were sending me to Mexico. And I was going to all their plants. And I ended up being – Ford

Production System, which is their lead manufacturing system – I ended up being a coach and assessor of their plants. And the last, uh, in 2006 I had St. Louis Assembly was one of my clients and Kentucky Truck was another one of my plants. And then I had the, uh, where they make the Mustang in Flat Rock – Auto Alliance. Those were the three plants that I coached and assessed. So that's what I did.

And then I'd go get on the Ford corporate jet. So instead of being a musician on a jet, I'm on the Ford corporate jet going to all these plants. So, you know, so twenty years I made money in the automotive business. And, you know, I started working on an assembly line at GM at Mound Road, at the (something) axle plant hydromatic and I just worked from there.
And then, uh, my first job as a consultant started. I was a training and development leader and you had to have a master's degree to get the job, which I had at Wayne, luckily. So I started as a training and development leader at the Ford Stamping Plant in Monroe. And then I ended up at the Rouge office building up in Dearborn, and I stayed in that complex for nine years and then just went to all the plants from there. So, it was the two, uh, Motown music and then the automotive. And it was Ford for the last ten years before, uh, I got kicked out of the music business and I got kicked out of the consulting business because Ford downsized and got rid of everybody. So I went back to music.

SK: Ha! That's a pretty Detroit story.

DC: Yeah, it sure is. It worked for me, so I can't complain.

SK: Um, so let's back up a little bit. You mentioned some of your production work with Mike Theodore. So let's talk about this, uh, this mysterious musician Rodriguez.

DC: Okay, um. I'll talk a little backstory about Mike Theodore and myself.

SK: Sure.

DC: I ran into Mike Theodore at Golden World and I was doing sessions over there. And he was in there trying to scare up some work for himself. And he saw me in there - I was doing a record by The Holidays, "I'll Love You Forever". And I had written, uh, violins. So I hired some students from Wayne, cause I was, I met them in my music classes. And I wrote a violin part. So I said, "Well, I'm gonna do strings on this overdub." And Joe Hunter did the rhythm, you know, he was a Funk Brother. And so Mike Theodore sees me doing this string session. He says, "Dennis! Let me talk to you." I said, "OK." He says, "Look, I got this, uh, job to do. This thing for Scepter Records called 'Dearly Beloved' for Jack Montgomery and he wants horns and strings and rhythm." And he says, "I know how to do rhythm and horns and I know you know how to write for rhythm. But," he says, "I noticed

that you know how to write for strings." You know, and I didn't tell him it was my first time. I said, "I'm an expert! I got this! I can do the strings." (Laughs)

SK: (Laughs)

DC: So we wrote this session with horns and strings and everything and recorded it. And it came out and it was a semi-hit. So we started working together as arrangers. And then we made a deal with Tera Shirma Studios, with Ralph Terrana, one of the owners. And basically, he just gave us the keys to the studios and he gave us an office there. And he says, "You guys can use the studio all night long." Because Mike Theodore could do sound engineering, he could run the control board. And I could do the arrangements and I'd play guitar. So we just went around and all our friends playing the bars, when they got done at 2 AM we'd meet them at the studio at 3 and we'd record all night. And we learned how to be record producers. That's kinda how that worked.

And so we were recording all these different acts and we had a few records out, uh, with Harry Balk and Impact, because we had a couple things that came out. And then Harry Balk said, "You know, I got this guy Rodriguez. I'm gonna two songs on him and I want you guys to write the arrangements." So Mike and I wrote the arrangements and we cut a couple songs on Rodriguez. So anyways, the records came out and nothing happened. They weren't hits. So Harry Balk says, "Rodriguez is too hard to handle." So he dropped him from the label. So Rodriguez was – two records, he was done. So anyways, Randy Moore was his manager and I think maybe may have been his girlfriend. So she called Mike and I up and said, "You know, Rodriguez is looking for a new deal. He's not signed to Impact Records or whatever with Harry Balk. And he's looking for a deal. He wants to get another product. So, get some projects out."

So anyways they said, "Well, he's playing down at this place called The Sewer." So it was down by the Detroit River. So Mike Theodore and I drive down there and we go in. And its just a funky little dive bar, you can hear the freighters going down the river, and it's all smoky in there. And we look up and here's Rodriguez and he's playing guitar and he's got his face to the wall. So you see the back of his head, and he's singing and playing. And we said, "What's up with this guy?"

So we're listening to him and we realize, Mike and I, this guy's writing these songs and he sounds like an urban Bob Dylan, cause he's so good. So, uh, Mike called up Clarence Avant and says "You gotta sign this guy. We gotta do an album on him." So Clarence agreed. Okay, so we signed – Clarence signed him, not Mike and I – Clarence signed him with the label because Mike and I were house producers for Sussex Records.

So Rodriguez was so shy we couldn't get him in the studio right away. So we had to, we got him in the studio but we couldn't put a band in there with him. So we recorded the first four songs on the Cold Fact album with Rodriguez by himself.

And then when he went home the next day, we brought a band in and we tried to retrofit a band. That's how I ended up playing bass on one of the songs and some guitar stuff and everything. So after those first four songs, he got a little more comfortable and then we put a band together. And then it was, that was the "Cold Fact" album. That was the first album recorded by Rodriguez and that was produced by me and Mike Theodore. So we did that album. And then, nothing happened so much with that album.

So Rodriguez and Buddha Records decide, well, they're gonna throw Mike and I under the bus. And they go to London and record the "Coming from Reality" album with another producer. But they included a couple songs that we had did as well on that album. And that album didn't do anything. And so, you know, Rodriguez used to call me up in the middle of the night and say, "Well, I wanna do this and do that." And I said, "Man, I don't know what to do." You know, there's not much I could do for him at that point because, uh, Clarence ended up dropping him from the label because nothing happened with it. Two albums out and no one was interested. And Clarence Avant flew Rodriguez out for some agents to see him and Rodriguez is singing for a room full of agents facing the walls. (Laughs)

SK: (Laughs)

DC: So anyways, nothing happened and Rodriguez, I think, went to rehabbing houses and things like that. And so nothing happened after that for years. You know, and Rodriguez's life I'm sure was very hard. You know, being a guy working in construction and stuff. And then suddenly this whole thing starts. Mike Theodore started seeing things. I know it was the Internet or something. There was a big website that said Rodriguez was dead. Wow. And all this stuff was going on. And Mike looks at it and he knew that Rodriguez was not dead. He was living down by Wayne State! So, anyways, the whole thing had happened where the "Cold Fact" album in South Africa – I don't know how it got there – and, uh, the troops in South Africa just got into this record. And they just, uh, suddenly that became this whole protest about South Africa – what Rodriguez was singing about. So that whole thing took off and, uh, then suddenly I got a gold record at home for Rodriguez in Australia. But Mike and I never saw any money from it. But he was touring Australia and he was touring South Africa.

So then, all at once, you know, one day I get a call from this guy. A guy – Malik, a Swedish guy. And he's doing a documentary on Rodriguez. So he says, "Would you mind? Would you be in the documentary?" And I said, "Yeah sure, if it's gonna help Rodriguez I'll do it." So he comes over to my house. And at that time I was living in Farmington, and he had an assistant that was with the lighting, and he did the camera work. And so they, they spent a day at my house. And then I arranged for John Colbert, who owned Baker's Keyboard Lounge, which is probably the oldest jazz club in town, or in the country.

SK: Mhm.

DC: And he opened it up on Monday, when it was usually closed, so we could, so Malik could do some filming in Baker's Keyboard Lounge. So they did all the footage there. And at the same time he went to New York and Mike Theodore did a bunch of footage with him out there. And then, uh, okay, a year later Malik calls me again and says, "Oh, I wanna do some more voiceover." So he came back to my house and did some more stuff and went back to see Mike Theodore and did some more stuff. So then, okay, fine. And then, uh, so, what?

So then, down the road and I start seeing, woah, Sundown – what is it? – Sundance Film Festival. This thing's winning awards and next thing you know Sony's singing it up. And then I go to see the screening of this film and I said, "Holy cow!" You could tell what Malik did, just his point of view on that film, when you saw the film in the theater. When you saw the reaction, you just knew this was a big deal.

SK: Mhm.

DC: And the thing won the Academy Award and it was so funny because at the time – Dan Gilbert's a big guy in Detroit right now. Well, that's my wife's first cousin.

SK: Oh!

DC: So Gary Gilbert has Gilbert Films out in L.A. So he was getting married. So here, the wife and I are going to Gary Gilbert's wedding out in Los Angeles. We're out there and at the same time I'm over at Gary's house the day before when the family's there and everything, and you know, we're doing all this deal. And at the same time, I'm in this documentary that just won an Academy Award! So, it was fun. But it, just, you know. And then, like, last year, uh, Malik apparently was suffering from depression. And the guy was only 36 years and he was creative to do this Academy Award winning film, and he jumped in front of a subway and killed himself in Stockholm.

SK: That's horrible.

DC: So it was just like… man…

SK: Wow.

DC: Unbelievable… So that's the Rodriguez story. And last year I went and opened up for Rodriguez in Birmingham in the UK. I think it was about a two thousand seater. And then in London a place - I think it was called the Apollo something, in London - that was a five-thousand seater and they were packed

both times. So, uh, that was the whole deal as far as Rodriguez goes. But he's always been a secretive kind of guy so I don't really speak to him that much.

SK: Mhm.

DC: His daughter sometimes – Sandra - came in with her husband. And Eva, from South Africa ,came to Northern Lights and I talked to them a little bit. So he's still out touring or whatever he does. And I'm just going about my business and working on different projects. And Mike Theodore are working on an album that we recorded back in the 60's live with me and Melvin Davis on drums and Lyman on keyboards. And he's, uh – we're hoping to get a deal on that one when we finish it. So, still playing in the clubs and that's the deal.

SK: Yeah.

DC: That's what I'm doing.

SK: Well, um, why don't you tell me a little bit about recording "Scorpio" and how it felt to have it be such a huge hit?

DC: Sure, okay. The idea – Mike Theodore and I were doing all these orchestrations. I mean, we'd look in the union book and find a stupid instrument and say, "Well let's get this guy and see what that is and we'll hire him to do this goofy sound lick." You know, that kind of stuff.

So we would do, uh, we were writing in Highland Park at Mike Theodore's house. We'd have these huge score pads and we would write like for a string section of twenty strings. Viola, cello, and first and second violins, and then we'd write eight horns and a rhythm section. So we'd be writing for like forty pieces. And get a copyist, you know, to copy the things and make them legible.

So anyways we were doing that. And I was sitting in my basement one day and I said, "Wow. You know, I think I'm going to – instead of writing for horns and strings – I'm gonna put a little fuzz tone on guitars and I'm gonna write for a guitar band." So I wrote ten songs. And I had a Sound-On-Sound tape recorder. So I put my ideas of guitars doing string parts and horn parts and the ten original songs all together. And I called Mike Theodore and I said, "Come on over, I have to show you something." So I played him the ten songs with the horns and strings and I says, "I have a concept for Detroit Guitar Band. And I wanna do an album." So Mike says, "Hey, that's great! Let me sell that idea to Clarence Avant." Which he did. And Clarence came up with the money.

But before that happened, there was one song. This was even before the Detroit Guitar Band. I was playing in the clubs with Lyman and Melvin, and before "Scorpio" I did a song called "It's Your Thing" – a version of the Isley Brothers vocals. And I did an instrumental that was very funky. And Mike sent that tape of

that instrumental that I recorded to Clarence Avant and I handed a copy to, uh, to Motown – to Hank Cosby. And I said, you know, "This is a single. We wanna get a deal." So Clarence gave us a deal, but back then he was helping MGM with Venture Records. He didn't have his own label yet. So anyways, he offered us a deal and we went and did an album called *Hair and Thangs.* So we got the deal up and the money's here, and then Hank Cosby comes and says, "Berry Gordy loves that record. He wants to sign you to a contract." I says, "Hank, I'm already signed. You guys took too long so I'm doing this thing over here." So we did that *Hair and Thangs* album which – nothing really happened with the album per se. I think "It's Your Thing" was a big hit in Detroit but that was all. So that – that was the setup for the next thing.

And then Clarence – Mike got me signed to Sussex Records now, with Clarence. And that was the *Evolution* album. So what I did was, uh, on that album I wrote and did the arrangements. And then I wrote out... the rhythm section on "Scorpio" were my buddies the Funk Brothers – except for Jamerson because Motown was really watching him now and he couldn't play for anybody. But my friend Bob Babbitt was available and he and I had worked for years. So anyways, on "Scorpio" I learned the art of breakdown from Norman Whitfield with The Temptations, so I put a breakdown in the middle of "Scorpio." And, uh, I used Jack Ashford on tambourine and "Bongo" Eddie on congas. I used Earl Van Dyke on keyboards, Bob Babbitt on bass. I didn't use any of the Funk Brother guitar players because that's what I did. So I was conducting and playing rhythm guitar at the same time. And in that breakdown we just let them guys do their thing. You know, I had Uriel Jones and Pistol Allen, two Funk Brother drummers, on that. So it was the whole, you know, band except for the guitar players I guess, for the most part. And then, uh, the breakdown they just did their thing and Babbitt does this killer bass solo on this thing. I said, "Oh my god!"

So we get the record done… and it's interesting because the hidden story to that record is I was majoring in music at Wayne, so in the middle of the song I put this five-eight strange thing in the middle of it that was like a waltz. So Mike Theodore and I are mixing this album down at RCA in New York and I hear this middle thing of just a killer groove and then it goes, "BOOM nah nah, BOOM nah nah…" So I put my producers hat on and I says, "Mike, we gotta take those eight bars out of the song. It's killing the groove." So I took my own eight bars worth of work and threw it on the floor and said, "that's outta there." So now we just had the real "Scorpio", so then it came out on the *Evolution* album. And nothing happened for a year. I said, "Wow." So in the meantime Mike Theodore and I started another album project on me called *Going for Myself* and we got horns and strings again, no guitar band because we figured no one's interested. So we got the album about half done and I get a phone call from Ron Mosley, who was Sussex's national promotion guy in New York, and he says, "Just stop what you're doing on that album!" He said, "The dance clubs in New York are killing 'Scorpio'." He says, "They're going nuts!" He says, "I'm gonna re-service 'Scorpio' so just stop what you're doing and let me do that." I said, "Okay." So

then, “Scorpio” when he started pushing it – the only guy that heard “Scorpio” would be a hit was Quincy Jones when Clarence Avant played it for him, before it was even… before the record came out. Quincy Jones said, “That’s gonna be a hit record.” And when I played with Quincy Jones on the *Body Heat* album he said, “I remember, I told Clarence that was gonna be a hit.” And he was right. So anyways, the thing was so hot I was listening to WJLB in Detroit. And “Scorpio” was… I think it was fifteen on the charts. So the next week I’m out in the car, at some bar at Eight Mile. Mike Theodore and I, we went there after a session or something. And I said I’m gonna go out in the car and listen to the countown on WJLB and I’m gonna see where it went from fifteen.” So I’m listening, and it was like, fifteen and fourteen and I don’t hear it. So, it’s going down the charts and I don’t hear it. And I said, “Oh man, it probably is done. It probably fell off the charts and it’s not happening.” And then suddenly it went from fifteen in one week to one. Number one! I said, “Oh man!”

SK: (Laughs)

DC: So that was the whole deal. And then the record took off and it was over a million-seller. And I went to New York to support the record. And we’re playing at – gonna play at a hotel in New York, in Brooklyn or the Bronx. Probably the Bronx. And, so we pull up with the truck and equipment and the guys in the van. We got our rider truck we rented and everything. And we go into the hotel clerk and say, “Okay, well, we got this truck here. Uh, you guys have a valet or somethin’ to park the truck?” And the guy says, “No,” he says, “The guy who does that, somebody shot him with a shotgun yesterday. He’s dead.” He says, “So we don’t have anybody doin’ that.” So he says, “Why don’t you back the truck up against the cement building and take out your distributor cap and chain your steering wheel, and your stuff will be alright.” (Laughs) So we did that and I remember there was this big ballroom, two thousand people. And we’re playing there and I went into “Scorpio” and I looked and there was a conga line of two thousand people just dancin’, coming toward the bandstand. I said, “Whoa!”

SK: (Laughs)

DC: So that was the “Scorpio” story. And then what I did with that record, is before I put it out, after I did the rhythm, I got my buddy, uh, Ray Monette from Rare Earth, guitar player, and Joe Podorsek, guitar player, and I wrote out the charts for the guitar band. So I’ve got nine guitars playing the melody in sections on “Scorpio” so that was the guitar band piece of it.

SK: Wow. Um, so why don’t you tell me a little bit – who were some of your favorite people while you were in the music business to work with?

DC: Well, I liked working with Del Shannon back in the day. You know (coughs) we did a lot of stuff together. I played on a lot of his records. And, uh, Motown I think my favorite producer was always Norman Whitfield because he made sure I

played there all the time and he always just said, you know, read the chart and show me your “bag of tricks” he’d call it. And, “show me what effects you have” and we’d pull this out and pull that out and we were off and running. So, he was a big advocate, especially in Detroit, for all the Motown stuff. So I had a lot of fun working with Norman. So he was probably my favorite producer. And The Temptations were my favorite group over there. You know, I remember doing an in-concert show in L.A. with The Temptations and they had a lot of technical problems in front of a live audience and it just, it went on for five hours. It was a very grueling day. And then two weeks later I get a letter from The Temptations and they’re sending me a thank you note for rockin’ with them on that show and they all signed it. I says, “Man, they’ve gotta be my favorite group.” And that was The Temptations, so that was nice.

SK: Um, so as we start to wrap up a little bit…

DC: Sure.

SK: Is there anything that you want to share, particularly about just being in the music business in general?

You know the one thing… you know my mom told me that I could name every song on the radio when I was like, two years old. And, uh, my one of my mom’s sisters, as my mom could play keyboards and sing. I had an aunt, Auntie Seiloff, at ninety-six-years-old she could sit down and read ragtime music and play piano with no mistakes, at ninety-six.

SK: Wow.

DC: So the music was in the family. And then, you know, what I did musically was I just practiced and practiced. And I went to Wayne and majored in Harmony and Theory. And I was always in pursuit of excellence. That was my whole idea, was to be the very best that I could be in music because I had the passion for it. I never decided to make a living out of it. But then it just happened. You know, I did the first session, I started doing all this, and people would call me up and I’m in this band, I’m auditioning all the time for bands, I’d get the gigs, I’m doing all this stuff, and people are calling me up for sessions. So, I’m making a living and I said, “wow!” You know, but that, I just still had the passion for it. So, you know, if you can have the passion for something, but you have to work hard at that something to be the very best you can be.

The record business is changing so much now I have no idea how it’s gonna end up or what it’s gonna be. I’m sure some young person genius will find a new way to make it more profitable for the creative people like the musicians and the artists and stuff, and all that. Somebody will figure it out. I mean, you’ve got the guys doing Facebook and all the other stuff, you know. So some young kid will come up with a way to make it profitable again, I’m sure. But that, that’s the only

advice I had. You know, and I go through life with all the great musicians I've played with in Muscle Shoals and all over the place. And we have fun. The Funk Brothers we were all friends. You know, we just had fun making music. And that's the whole deal. I mean, you don't work with people that aren't gonna have fun and that are gonna be jerks because that's no fun at all. You know, so that's the way I always did it. So I always had fun in the sessions, but I had more fun doing sessions in Detroit than any other place.

SK: Yeah.

DC: You know, so, that's why I'm back here. I'm back here because this is a great place to live. And that's the whole idea for me. I like the culture, I like the environment, and I like the people here. And I like this whole area. So, I came back from New York and that's it. I never left. I'm still here.

SK: Yeah. Is there anything else you want to share with us?

DC: I don't know, unless you have any particular questions. Uh, well, one thing people probably don't understand is how a record's made. So I'm gonna explain that a little bit.

SK: Yeah, sure, that'd be great.

DC: Uh, the whole idea of how a record gets made is you usually have a song. Songwriters or artists have to write songs. Then what you usually do is you have to have an arranger or musicians to play the song, but it's usually a band track. It's just the instrumental version of the song without the singer. And what happens is, as musicians at Motown, we got very good at playing guitar fills and things, but it was always on the offbeat. It was never on the main beats because we knew the singer would be there. So we got very good at noodling little licks that would support the singer, but leave room for the singer to sing. So we got good at doing that even though the singer wasn't there. So, uh, we would go in and – multi-track. Right now you can record twenty-four tracks. You might have six tracks of drums, and the stereo tracks, the keyboards, and different tracks of guitars. And you'll have- so you go in and you lay out the basic band track. And you might, you know, use eighteen, twenty tracks, you might be – I'd say twenty-four tracks. So you would just, maybe, you could use twelve tracks to do the rhythm section or something like that. Once that's done, the next step in the process is you have to bring in the singer, or you can add horns and strings. Usually you might, let's bring in the singer, let's get this. So now you've got the singer on top of the band track. So you've got the band track and the singer. The singer usually is on one track. You know, because the singer is gonna be the center of the record in the stereo mix. So then you're gonna add horns and strings, which is the sweetening. So you'll have X amount of that. And then, usually, if you do keyboards in the rhythm section, those are in stereo. Horns and strings you're gonna spread them out so you get a stereo image. So now you've

got the sweetening. Next thing you're gonna do is the background singers. Background singers are gonna be in stereo, so you're gonna have two tracks for background singers. You probably have two tracks for the string section, so they'll be in stereo. So when you get all this recording done, and you might add percussion, you might add a guitar overdub. All this stuff gets done, so you're gonna probably fill up at least twenty-four tracks of instruments, singers, and sweetening. Then you sit down with the twenty-four tracks and you have to mix down each track, which means the amount of reverb and echo on each track. You have to figure out where they're in the stereo mix, because you're gonna take all these twenty-four tracks and you're gonna mix them down to two-track stereo. And that's what a producer does. The producer is like a creative director. And Mike and I were producers for twenty-five years. We used to find the talent, we used to record the talent and do all this stuff, and even okay the test-pressings on it. So we did everything from beginning to end. When we approved the test pressing, the record came out. So we did every step in between. So anyways, you would mix these things down to two-track stereo and you would have a stereo image in front, out of two speakers – left and right. And you would have all, everything mixed out with the amount of echo, the amount of equalization on each track. All that stuff has to be done in the mix-down. Once that's mixed down, then it would go to a mastering lab. And the mastering lab would take it and balance the volumes between cuts on the album, and maybe soup it up with a little more EQ or something and master it. And then from the mastering process you've got two-track masters. Then it would go to the CD manufacturing process or it would go to vinyl.

SK: Hm.

DC: So that's – those are all the steps. When you see TV, where everybody's in a room, and the whole band's in there all live doing everything at the same time… it usually doesn't happen that way because you'd get too much leakage on other tracks. And then, if you've got horns and strings and all the other stuff – Frank Sinatra could do that. Normal people can't do that.

SK: (Laughs)

DC: Because think of the charts. You can't have any mistakes, even in a violin player. If you've got a live singer, like Frank was very particular and he had the best cats and the best arrangers so they could read that stuff. And they could do it without making mistakes. But the more people, the more chance of a mistake. And then you have to equalize everything to make it make sound good. So that's – usually, at Motown or any other session I've done, very rarely was the singer ever there unless they were observing. Or they might sing a little bit with the track to give us a little flavor. But generally speaking, you know, we did the tracks with the producer and the arranger and cut the tracks and then they brought in people to finish up the record.

SK: So, as part of that process, can you ever tell, like, as you're making it, this is the one, this is gonna be a hit?

DC: No. They pay people more money to do that. Like, Quincy Jones knows that. I remember doing "Still Waters Runs Deep" with the Four Tops and Frank Wilson was the producer. And to me the groove sounded backwards. I said, "Man, this is so strange." Because Frank had it on the offbeat, it sounded backwards. I said, "Oh, man." Thing was a big hit!

SK: (Laughs)

DC: I didn't know. You know, that's the whole idea. And Motown had a quality control group of their producers and what-have-you. And they would meet every week and they would listen to the records and they would say, "This record's good enough to come out." Or they'd tell the producer, "No, it's not and here's why. Go fix it." And so that was their quality control. And Berry had – he had the pattern down. He knew what he was doing and he had everything in place. I mean, when you look at what he did with a loan from his dad's, his family's co-op. You know, it was his dad, and everybody was entrepreneurial in his family. What he did ended up starting off with making a few records and then he built this just conglomerate powerhouse record company. It was amazing. And it was in Detroit. So it's still – the stuff's still here. The talent's still here. Everything's still here. And now, Jack White just opened up a thing over there on, uh, I can't think of the street it's on. It's next to Shinola, I think, over there.

SK: Mhm.

DC: And so you've got things happening again. And that's the one thing – the main thing that was missing in Detroit is you didn't have any big record companies here.

SK: Yeah.

DC: So that's the whole thing. But maybe it's starting back again. So, you never know. That's the only thing. That's the process. And the talent is still here because it's in the DNA of this town. You can always find the best players. And I'd put these players up against any other city. Best jazz players, R&B, funk, everything, you know. And you've got Kid Rock, and I met Kid Rock. I have not met Eminem, but I was at one of his studios, I think, before he sold it. But, Luis Resto is a keyboard player, he plays with Eminem. And he's playing on my albums and I've played with him before. But you just look – Bob Seger – Detroit still has the talent – Motown and everybody else in between.

SK: Yeah.

DC: So, the next thing you'll see. But it's part of this city and it always will be, I think.

SK: I think that's a good spot for us to land on, don't you?

DC: I think so.

SK: Thanks a lot Dennis.

DC: You're welcome.