RJ Spangler Oral History Project

Detroit, MI

RJ Spangler

Interviewed by

Veronica Johnson

November 28, 2016

Grosse Pointe Park, MI

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

Kim Schroeder, Instructor

Fall 2016

Brief Biography

RJ Spangler is a jazz and blues drummer from Detroit. He has toured internationally and earned many accolades performing with a number of local and national R&B and blues artists. He had led and continues to lead a number of jazz and blues bands and also managed international blues singers Alberta Adams and Johnnie Bassett.

Interviewer

Veronica Johnson is a freelance music writer, project manager and graduate student at Wayne State University majoring in Library and Information Science. Her work has been featured in Metro Times, Real Detroit Weekly, Model D, The Jazz Line, IXITI and The Michigan Historical Review. Her work on Detroit hip hop was published in the book A Detroit Anthology, which came out May 2014. She is also an advisor for the Detroit Sound Conservancy.

Abstract

RJ Spangler, a jazz and blues drummer from Detroit shares his experiences growing up in Grosse Pointe, details what the Detroit jazz culture was like during the 60s and 70s as well as recounts his work as a bandleader for the Sun Messengers and managing well known blues artists such as Alberta Adams and Johnnie Bassett.

Restrictions

There are no restrictions on this audio or transcription.

Original Format

Wav file and Mp3.

Transcription

Veronica Johnson: I'm doing an oral history interview with RJ Spangler. Today is November 28, 2016. We are at RJ's home in Grosse Pointe Park. My name is Veronica Johnson. RJ Spangler is a jazz/blues drummer/bandleader and manager from Detroit and has been on the music scene for many years. Thank you RJ for taking time out today to speak with me today.

RJ Spangler: Happy to do it.

[Family history 00:32]

VJ: So first off I just want to through a short bio questions, so first off can you tell me where you were born and raised.

RJ: Born in Lafayette, Indiana, my dad was attending Peru, I mean Purdue where he graduated. I didn't remember living one day there, I was a little baby. My parents are from downriver, my mom went to Roosevelt high school in Wyandotte, my dad went to school in Southgate and so I started my life there downriver.

VJ: Downriver

RJ: And my mom got divorced when I was eight and she got remarried when I was nine. And I moved from Grosse Isle to Grosse Pointe and I lived in Grosse pointe from nine to 18 years old and I moved to Detroit not far from where we are right now. And I lived there in Detroit for the next 28 years and I lived in Saint Clare Shores for 12 years and I moved here [Grosse Pointe Park] a year ago.

VJ: Okay, so city of Detroit, eastside, westside?

RJ: I always lived on the eastside.

VJ: Eastside, okay. And when you said your mom lived downriver, like what part?

RJ: My mom grew up in Wyandotte although she was born in Minnesota. And my dad grew up in Southgate which is right next to Wyandotte and he is from Wisconsin. My family like a lot of people their parents both came to Michigan for work.

VJ: So what's your background as far as ethnicity wise?

RJ: Sure, of course, my mom's side on her father's side they came over on the Mayflower. I'm a direct descendent of Richard Warren and I'm a lifetime member of the Mayflower Society.

VJ: Oh nice

RJ: And so I have a long history in America on my mom's side, she also part Dutch and the Vandyke line came over with Peter Stuyvesant when it was new Amsterdam before the English got it and turned it into New York Manhattan and he was an official there and he came to his… that part of the family came to Minnesota where they merged with the Norwegian side of my family and so yeah. My mom's side she is English and Scottish, Dutch and Norwegian which I think more Norwegian than anything else because her Dutch grandfather was also very much Norwegian. His mother was Norwegian and his father was Dutch. And his Dutch side, uh, is- he is a relative of Teddy Roosevelt.

VJ: Oh really wow.

RJ: Yes, so I guess I am too.

VJ: [laughs]

RJ: More diluted though, it's getting thinner as they keep going more, but yes um, they shared a grandparent, a great, great, great grandparent. And so, yeah my great grandfather, Arthur A. Vandyke was the postmaster general for the state of Minnesota, or St. Paul, Minnesota I should say, it was a political appointment that he got from Roosevelt as sort of a political favor, um.

[pause] A guy was running and, that's when they merged the Democratic Party with the Farmers Party and in the Democratic farmers party which is what Al Franken is, do you know who Al Franken is, the senator in Minnesota.

VJ: I'm not sure

RJ: He is and now he is a senator there, he's a member of the Democratic farmers party, which is kind of an interesting branch of government party and so he was that's my family. My mom's side also the Warrens are, were related to Elbridge Gerry, who was vice president under(President John Adams) Adams and that's where Gerry name comes from and so my grandfather's name Elbridge Gerry and my uncle's name is Gerry and my cousin's name was … Gerry.

We are very proud of the Gerry family name oddly enough, so you have heard the long story of my mom's family which is a very storied American family. Mostly Anglican and Norwegian and then my dad's side was mostly all German and they came over from Bavaria. We actually know where we came from not just like Germany or some spot but actually we know I have seen the town, I could show you the picture of the town I went to it, where we are from in Bavaria we came over during the Civil War. My mom's side fought for the north and her great great grandfather was a prisoner of war in Andersonville, which is a really tough place to be a Yankee, and he had his arm was lost. He caught part of a cannonball and lost part of his arm.

VJ: Oh gosh

RJ: And the Yankees retreated and he and his brothers stayed by his side and were prisoners of war for the rest of the Civil War and after a while and the tide turned they let them go and they walked back home where they were living at the time.

RJ: Yeah so there is a whole history that regimen, my great, great great grandfather's in the book.

VJ: Right, right, for sure, that's cool that you know your entire family history.

RJ: I guess I do don't I.

VJ: I couldn't tell you nothing about my family [laughs]

RJ: But that's kind of normal though you know, most people I know. I have friends of mine, I used to have roommate who would say "I know all this stuff about my family" and I didn't even know what we are I didn't know where we were from. Its one thing to have like slave ancestry. I'm fascinated by Henry Louis Gates, I watch everything he ever does…

VJ: Oh yeah I love him, he actually just did a documentary a couple weeks ago.

RJ: I have it "And still we rise." I'm a big fan, one of my dear friends I grew up a great sax player Salim Washington, he's from here on the east side, we've been playing together since we were very young guys. And he is a professor of jazz at University of Durban in South Africa. That was his mentor at Harvard.

VJ: Oh Henry Louis Gates, oh that's awesome.

RJ: Yes, my friend Salim is Dr. Salim Washington and he is a Harvard doctorate and that was his mentor.

VJ: That's awesome, definitely important to know your history, that's one thing I, when I get time, to learn more about my ancestry and it's important when you have, your relatives that are still around that can tell you where to find that. Yep, it's important.

RJ: Well yeah, so my family my dad's side are Germans and they came over from Bavaria during Civil War and so my ancestry, my DNA is a northern European.

VJ: Yeah you are everything [laughs]

RJ: I'm full Dutch, and German and Norwegian, they are all kind of related and even into England because the Saxons are Germans and Anglo-Saxons right, the sax part are Germans and the Norwegians they are kind of cousins to the Germans they are part of the Germanic people and of course Dutch even close to Germanic people. The languages are very similar and Dutchman can kind of understand what a German is saying and a German can kind of understand what a Dutchman is saying you know, their languages are not that far apart so yeah that. I'm a northern Euro monk.

VJ: [laughs] that's a good way to put it.

RJ: So that's my background, long answer, sorry.

VJ: No, no, its fine I'm glad.

RJ: It's a long answer.

VJ: The purpose of the oral history is to learn everything you so that's important.

RJ: it takes a long story with me because there's a lot.

VJ: Right, right especially considering the vast background of both your parents, presidents and stuff.

RJ: Yeah, yeah my dad were tavern owners in Germany and then my grandfather was going to be a brewer in Wisconsin where everyone in the town spoke German. Whole town and they had to stop that practice by World War I but they have been in America since 1865 and by WWI they were still speaking German in that town. People always talk about "these people need to assimilate in America." Well our ancestors took two generations to assimilate quite often, the Norwegians the same thing, you know. You go to a Lutheran church in North Dakota where my family is from too there and they come in and have a German, now Lutheran service and then they would have a Norwegian Lutheran service.

VJ: Wow that's crazy.

RJ: Yeah because people spoke the language of their old country for a longer time than people in America today want to admit, so yeah my grandfather, were brewers so yeah we like beer in

our family apparently, on the German side, no surprise there. And prohibition came along so he came to Detroit looking for work. And that's how we got here. So that's us.

VJ: Yeah, for sure that's awesome. So, first before I, I have this at the top of my list. What does RJ stand for?

RJ: Richard John

VJ: Richard, okay

RJ: My dad's name was John.

VJ: So Richard John, okay.

RJ: Yeah

VJ: Yeah, I was like I don't want to leave here and not get his full name. Yeah because I just know RJ you know. So Richard John and you say you were named after your father?

RJ: My middle name was after my father.

VJ: So, we just talked about this, what year were you born?

RJ: 1956

VJ: 1956

RJ: I turned 60 last Wednesday (Nov. 23)

VJ: Happy belated birthday. So we were just talking about your parents. Can you tell me a little about their professions what they did?

RJ: My dad when he went to Purdue, he studied forestry, wanted to be a forest ranger, but he had me and his family said “you’re not gonna go take your young wife and move out to the woods and be a forest ranger. You have a family to take care of” so he had a college degree so he worked as a salesman, it’s the only job he could get kind of a white collar job you could get with only your college degree and he worked in that because that’s, his father was a salesman, my dad didn’t like being a salesman and when the marriage fell apart, he went back and looked at all the science classes he had and kept counseling and he got a degree in Education and he taught science and he retired as a biology teacher at a high school. That was what my dad did, and my mom was a homemaker and my stepdad who really raised me from nine to you know, my dad died a couple years was a, an interesting fellow, really quite an interesting guy, he was from North Dakota and he was a German too and he literally ran away from home and went to Minneapolis where he lived with his what they would call his spinster aunt and he put himself through University of Minnesota at the same time he became —

He is in the first 1,000 CPAs, his card was in the 700s of being in the CPA and so when he had his college degree, he graduated from college by the time he was 20. He ran away from home when he was 16. He was the first born so he was going to inherit the family farm which he didn't

want to do. It was a two bedroom home, mom and dad in one bedroom, him and his sister and brother in the other bedroom. He didn't like that life so he ran away from home and he worked his way through college first person in his family to go to college and he got jobs as an account patroller, he would do accounts payable, he would do the bookkeeping, he'd be the head bookkeeper for corporations and he got jobs in Chicago, New Orleans and New York City before coming to Detroit and during WWII he would already be about 40 years old, or close to it by the time WWII came along so they sent him down to work for the Higgins boat company which made the landing crafts for D-day and he was the financial officer there and he would often take the books by train to Washington DC once a month and go over the books with the White House.

Andrew Higgins was a famous alcoholic and my stepdad was noted for helping keep the chip on course over there and Higgins would come, famous famous —Google it, you'll it's all there, and so he did that, and wherever he lived, he could teach because he was a CPA, so he taught at colleges at night school because the man was a workaholic and a German from the prairies of North Dakota and always wanted to work and make money so he would work a day job as an account patroller and he would go teach at local universities accounting and he did that in Chicago, New York and in New Orleans and then he came to Detroit where was doing account patrolling for a company called Kaufman Window & Door and he bought the company from the owner, Harry Kaufman who had, Harry Kaufman had invented the screen door and the screen window. He had the first patent on those items.

Then he also married Harry's daughter and he ran a company called Kaufman Window & Door and he began a money man he was a dollar and cents guy, he watched the way money went. He goes "well where do I spend my money to make my product." It was in aluminum, there was the parts that made the windows and doors so he bought the companies that made him the parts so he could get a better price and eventually people started having vinyl windows and doors and the aluminum windows and doors went out of style but it didn't matter because at that time, he owned the company that made the aluminum parts so he made the company that makes aluminum parts. That you say—Let's say you go to a greasy spoon and you see them take the little order they put the little load thing up there that holds it. They make those.

They make bus shelters, there's a bus shelter two blocks away that we made. And I worked in that family business until I was 25. I've never had a day job since, I just play the drums. But, between high school and age 25 I worked doing that in the aluminum business for my stepfather and I was a welder and a chop foreman and so forth. My brothers all have college degrees and they all work in, well not all, three of my brothers are in that business today. Two of them run one of the main businesses and the one has his own branch.

VJ: That's cool, so they took over the business once your father retired.

RJ: Yes, my stepdad lived to be 96 and died three years ago.

VJ: Oh wow, that's definitely an accomplishment.

RJ: He was quite a guy, ran home at 16, and built up a pretty good size business on his own you know. And now my little brothers Nick and Greg run the main business and my brother Bill has his own branch like I said. Bill makes bus shelters and Greg and Nick make all kinds of parts.

VJ: What's the name of the company again?

RJ: International Extrusions.

VJ: Extrusions

RJ: Two extrude aluminum is to heat up a piece of aluminum until it's soft and pressed into a mold that comes out shaped like whatever you want it to be.

VJ: And it's in this area?

RJ: It's in Garden City.

VJ: Garden City, okay sweet.

RJ: Yeah, that's the family business. I'm a little mighty owner of it because of my stepdad.

VJ: So you guys always have something to pass down generations, that business, that's awesome. So, tell me a little about your childhood. Growing up, born in one state, and eventually moving to Detroit.

RJ: Yeah but I don't remember living there, I've always been in Michigan.

VJ: Right, right you've always been in Michigan. So tell me about, growing up maybe downriver and eventually in Detroit.

RJ: I started in Grosse Ile and I lived in a little house in Grosse Ile. It was basically attached to my grandparents' house, my mom's parents had done quite well. It's an interesting story, my grandfather, my mom's father, was on a ship that went down in WWII and they weren't sure if he was alive or not and my grandmother, she had sent my mom and her little sister off to live with the Norwegian family up in northern Minnesota and left the one sister to stay with her stepmom and then she moved to Oklahoma and took my uncle, the one boy and they moved down there and she got a job, which was very rare for women back then. And by the time the war was over, grandma was not gonna quit having a job and so, and I grew up with my grandmother, she was vice president of an aluminum business and that's how my mom met my stepdad. And she was a vice president of a corporation in the 50s!

VJ: Oh wow that's definitely rare.

RJ: Oh yeah, when they came along with the equal rights amendment for women, I thought, I wonder why do you need that, my grandma was in charge of everything. I mean really, when she entered into a room, everybody sat up a little straighter, grandma was in charge. So um first we rented a little house on the same property that wasn't owned by her, but was on the same—Grosse Ile at the time was just an island with very few people living on it, right. And we literally, my dad would walk across the street with the dog and go hunting for pheasant, across the street, I mean he could be as close to that house over there, and he was hunting. We were in the woods. Where we lived there was just—my grandma she had this big house and she bought from the Fisher family of Fisher Body and she sold it to Heinz Prechter who was a big industrialist.

And then there was two other houses and then this little gate house. Then my parents got divorced and we moved into the house connected to my grandparents' house. My grandfather was a civil servant from back in Minnesota and Indianapolis and he worked for the government, he was what you call that, middle class income, college degree, but you know, government employee so not a rich man. Then the divorce came along and then my mom married and we moved here to a middleclass house in Grosse Pointe, not a mansion or anything just a middleclass home. My stepdad had four children from a marriage and his wife had died. Two of them were still at home, two were graduated from college. One was in college, one was at UM, one had graduated from Dartmouth, and I had a brother who was starting college two years after I moved in. He went to Cornell, and I had a sister at UM.

VJ: So what year did your mom and stepdad, what year did they get married?

RJ: I was born in '56, so it would have been '65.

VJ: 1965, okay.

RJ: Yeah, yeah, so that's my background as a child. And I moved here to Grosse Pointe. I lived here for nine years, and I played little league baseball and all the stuff you do. Grosse Pointe, the really rich people, the Fords and the Stroh's there's not many of them you meet in public school. Public school was mostly mid-level. Ford and Chrysler employees or guys like my stepdad who had a shop that maybe made parts that sold to Chrysler, you know. So it was an upper-middleclass existence at best for most people in Grosse Pointe. As you can see I live at the edge of Grosse Pointe, it's you know, middleclass, it's not a. There's no mansions here where I live.

VJ: Yeah, you are close to some.

RJ: Yeah my brothers a mile away, and he has a mansion. [laughs]

VJ: Yeah, some super close, yeah, especially going down, when I go to the Dirty Dog, I drive past some.

RJ: I grew up a block from the Dirty Dog.

VJ: Oh really okay.

RJ: That church that's behind the Dirty Dog, that's my church.

VJ: Oh really.

RJ: The elementary school, that's my elementary school and the high school, that's my high school, they are all within a block of each other. So growing up there there was the toy store and where the dressing rooms are, that was the bank. That was the first bank account I ever had as a boy. And that was the toy store we would go in as kids and buy little matchbox cars and stuff. I grew up a block from there.

VJ: Oh okay, that's cool that you are able to stay close to where you grew up and all that.

RJ: I like it but not everybody does, at my birthday party last night a dear friend of mine, he said “it's amazing you're here and these people at this party and there's like there is a lot of them that are here that you have known from elementary school and high school.” He goes, "I don't have any friends like that, and I totally lost contact with all those friends from my life."

VJ: Yeah that typically happens.

RJ: I guess so, but yeah, I guess not for me, I have friends all over the world. I've traveled over the world playing music.

[Start of music career/Uncle Bud influence 22:40min]

VJ: That's awesome. Um so that kind of brings me to your music career, so I know that your uncle Bud Spangler, drummer, radio broadcaster, all that, is he the one that kind of influenced you as far as getting into the music business.

RJ: Sort of yeah. He was a great mentor to me in many, many, many ways and I loved him very much. He was my dad's only sibling.

VJ: I was going to ask you what side of the family, your dads.

RJ: Bud Spangler, he was you know, he was my dad's little brother, he was about 18 when I was born, so we weren't that far apart in age. He came of age of in the 60s and I came of age in the 70s right. And from that time, I was nine til 18 I didn't see my dad. I was cut off from the Spangler family. My uncle Bud was on WDET broadcasting, he had a radio show. And um.

VJ: What was the name of the radio show?

RJ: It was called Jazz Today and he was the music director too, so he hired people that became groundbreaking Detroit radio personalities like Judy Adams, he hired those people and he left to move to California in '76 but those people stayed down at WDET and built that station into really something important and he laid the groundwork for that. At the same time he was a great jazz drummer, really, really—when I was in high school I connected with him again and age 18, my senior year of high school. I heard him on the radio, we called him, my brother Greg called him on the phone and said "hey I'm your nephew, and so is my brother and I'm going to put him on the phone." We met up. He helped me get connected back to my dad. My uncle Bud was very important for all that stuff. We were totally estranged, my dad had moved to Brighton and—

VJ: So still in Michigan but moved farther—

RJ: Right, and you know but when you are in high school kid, Brighton might as well be in Atlanta. We didn't know where he was, we didn't have a phone number, we didn't know nothing, we hadn't seen him in. I talked to him on the phone the day my mom was getting married and I never saw him again until I was 18 years old. So, Bud brought me back into the Spangler family but he also—like I was liking I was following jazz and blues on my own. I got into it but part of that was I knew that my dad and my uncle were into that.

VJ: Oh so your dad was also into music.

RJ: Yeah, yeah I knew that they liked it. And so, it's not that I got into it because of them, but I think that when you're a little kid and you're thinking about the options of music that you are going to enjoy in life that you are going to get passionate about. I don't know how it is for you, but kids today don't they don't—like music was really important to us you know, I don't know it is for young people today. I spoke at a college a couple years ago and I took a poll of people in music and it didn't seem like they were as passionate as people were in my generation. But I think that people I know that are younger that are passionate, they are just as passionate if not more. But it seems like it's fewer of them. But the ones that are, are way into it. Then there's a whole lot of people that don't seem, they're not, there are downloads. Like we would buy records, we would study these jackets, we would— aww man, every week we would get paychecks from some little jobs, I worked at a restaurant and I would go up. Every Friday we would go to the record store and we would talk to the guys at the record store—

VJ: Why do you think it is, the new generation isn't as they aren't going to buy records, is it because everything is so Internet accessible?

RJ: Yeah I think that's part of it, but you don't get all the notes, so you are not looking at the records like we did. We listened to these records and we would look at this stuff and names and who are these people. We were obsessed, we were music nerds and that's how it was. But when you are young and you think about music. I think the average white guy, suburban kid. When I was in Grosse Pointe, it was really white. Now it's I think Detroit, Grosse Pointe, it's like 12 percent African American which is kind of like what America is, sort of—a great wonderful change. I don't think it's good to be really white. I noticed that. So when you're a kid from the suburbs like I was, it would be typical to listen to my generation maybe, the Allman Brothers band, my high school we had a band guys that played they were totally into Jimmy Hendrix. My buddies we liked Eric Clayton, we liked the Allman Brothers and that kind of thing. And there were others they liked melodic rock and they would be like Chicago.

Another band was into Grateful Dead. We had all these bands in high school, we had competitions and we would go to each other's band practices, we would go to each other's gigs, it was a whole community of people into music right. That was pretty typical. Not everybody liked jazz, jazz was always something kind of smaller group of people right. But to me, because my family, it was like I knew that my dad and uncle they loved jazz. I thought well maybe I love jazz that it might be something I like because it seemed like a possibility and then I would be listening to the Allman Brothers and they would be playing these blues. I'd look at it and I'd say who this BB King guy that they are playing this song. And I'd go and buy a BB King Record and next thing you know I like BB King. You're reading about all the—John Coltrane, well who is this John Coltrane? Next thing you know I have a John Coltrane record, next thing you know I'd buy a Charles Mingus record, next thing I have a Miles Davis record, a Monk record, next thing you know I like jazz. And that was how it was for me. So then I got connected with my uncle who hosted this radio show, and he starts telling me information. Of course by this time, I'm hooked up with a bunch of characters like me and we're driving to Ann Arbor, Lansing, Toronto, and Cleveland going to see concerts by jazz guys. Sonny Rollins, and all these guys. Chicago, you know we went to Chicago lots of times. Back then buying records was hard, like your store might have a jazz section, then after a year, you bought all the records in that jazz section that you wanted get. Maybe something new comes in and you keep an eye out for it.

But you go to Ann Arbor once a month and you save up some money and that's where you can really buy some great jazz records. There are a couple places in Ann Arbor. But then like once

or twice a year we save up some money and go to Toronto to specialty jazz store there or Chicago and do the same things. We would go places and buy records and then you meet characters like us at these places. You'd time it so that some artist you like is on tour and you go see him at night. During the day you go out and buy books and records and you talk to these guys in these record stores and so forth. That's how you are learning about the music. Remember my uncle was a broadcaster and a musician and he produced events to live concerts, concert series, things like that and records. He was the most important producer of jazz records by the time he died in the Bay area. Well my uncle being a broadcaster, had a great historical proclivity, you know. He would say, here's a record by so and so and he would be able to talk about it cuz he's a radio broadcaster. He would pronounce everything correctly and that was always important to him. So that rubbed off on me and of course all my friends listened to my uncle Bud too. Do you know Jim Gallert?

VJ: Yep, that's one of my mentors. [laughs]

RJ: Jim Gallert had a radio on WDET. You know the name of his radio show?

VJ: Jazz Yesterday wasn't it?

RJ: And it was my uncle's radio show.

VJ: Yeah so he took over after your uncle?

RJ: No, they were bookend shows, they were on at the same time. Jazz Yesterday and Jazz Today.

VJ: He was on, um, Eastern, like um—

RJ: Later on, he started at WDET, he was on WDET, 15 or 17 years. He was there when my uncle was there. MY uncle brought him in.

VJ: Oh okay.

RJ: So here's Jazz Today, Bud Spangler, here's Jazz Yesterday with Jim Gallert. They were bookend shows, one had earlier jazz, one had modern jazz.

VJ: Oh okay

[Bud Spangler jazz drummer/Tribe/Detroit jazz culture 31:55]

RJ: They were companion shows, yeah so Jim. I knew Jim since I was a high school kid too. He's a dear, dear friend. So being around guys like that, that know all the stuff about history, that's who I grew up around. And then in high school, my uncle being a great drummer. I mean much better drummer than me, he played in a band called Tribe.

VJ: Oh yeah, I'm familiar with Tribe, yep like Wendell Harrison.

RJ: Wendell Harrison, Marcus Belgrave, Harold McKinney, and my uncle Bud on drums. My uncle Bud came in after George Davidson left the group, and then when my uncle moved to

California George Davidson came back into the group. So I've known George Davidson since I was— 1976.

VJ: Yeah I met him at the jazz fest recently.

RJ: Great guy, incredible drummer and he's a really nice guy. Important guy. So that's how I got into jazz, that's my start with jazz.

VJ: Yeah I definitely figured your uncle was instrumental with that considering how big of an influence he was in jazz.

RJ: Oh yeah, imagine being 18 years old, high school senior and going to a nightclub not much bigger than this (house) and seeing your uncle play with Belgrave. And those guys because I was Bud Spangler's nephew and Belgrave he always lived here on the eastside. I spent 28 years living in Detroit on the eastside. Marcus sometimes lived within a mile of me, sometimes less. And so I wouldn't really go a week without seeing him. Restaurant, 711, bookstore, wherever. Everywhere and he would always sit and talk with me. I played some gigs with him over the years. Marcus all those guys of that generation they always treated me like they were my uncle too, which is a great thing. I got to hang out with Roy Brooks.

VJ: Oh yeah me and Charles were talking about him yesterday.

RJ: I took some lessons from him at his house, and I played with his drum choir and I got to spend some time with him and later on in life when I was a grown man playing lots of gigs he would come up to my gigs and hang out with me. And sometimes I would go to his and he would say "Rick come up here" someone's known me a really long time if he they call you Rick. If you call me Rick you have known me at least 40 years. So he would have me play the drums while he played the saw. His wife played the musical saw. He could take a saw, put it between his knees, hold it up here and take a mallet and he'd play it bum, budomm bum budomm bum bong bodumm—

VJ: Oh wow I didn't know that was a musical instrument.

RJ: He'd go bum, bum, bum... Badomm… And he could play "All Blues," the melody to “All Blues,” and he could play a couple songs the whole melody on the saw. A musical saw they call it. Google it, it's a thing. That was a great thing in my life to play drums with Roy. It's something I tell people today, young people especially and peers in my age group, when I grew up learning this music, learning it from guys like Belgrave, the masters of that generation passing that information on to us, it was as we say more like secret handshake shit. It wasn't academic like they make jazz a college course now. That was just starting when I was a kid. Most of my friends don't have college degrees.

It was a cultural thing, it was African American thing. You want to play jazz, you got to go to Detroit. Just remember, 1967 was the riots in Detroit, some of you call it a rebellion. And white flight started the next day as you know right. So here I am working in factories in Detroit for my old man and I also worked for his competitors I got mad at him one day and walked out. So I'm working with these guys, majority of them are white guys working in factories making— their journeyman, sheet metal workers and welder. These guys a lot of them lived in Detroit in neighborhoods that were still white. But they were all moving eventually. Some of them lived way far out in the suburbs and eventually they all moved to the suburbs and some

neighborhoods that were. They are all blight now. These were neighborhoods that people were living in, thriving neighborhoods. You could go to a little Italian market at the corner of Dickerson and Outer Drive and buy fresh vegetables and meat from Italians. They also sold Afro sheen because they were dealing with the neighborhood changing. It was it was a fascinating time in Detroit to grow up and get into this music. I would talk to them and they would say to me "so what are you doing this weekend." I would say "I'm going down to this club called Cobbs and I'm gonna a see this band, I go see them a lot on Monday nights called the Griot Galaxy, are you hip to them?

VJ: Nope.

RJ: Griot Galaxy was like an avant garde jazz band with Faruq Z Bey and—

VJ: Did you say Griot Gallery?

RJ: Griot Galaxy.

VJ: You said galaxy?

RJ: Griot Galaxy. There were an incredible avante garde band of the 70s. The bass player mentioned to me last year "Rick when we're doing this, we made $80 to 100 bucks a man at the door on the Monday night with an eight piece band. Tells you how many people were coming to see the band. And they were paying two to three dollars to get in.

VJ: Yeah back then that was a lot of money.

RJ: That tells you how many people were there on a Monday night to hear jazz. And all ages and all people. Back in the—when I first got into this music playing in clubs I would play at this place called Cobbs Corner, they had a blues band one night, a rockabilly one night, a jazz band one night, whatever. And any Friday night you could make a $1000 bucks at the door or more. $1500 on a really good night. And you look in the audience and it's a lot of white people but there's black people, but there's also 21 year olds and 61 year olds and they are all having fun. You don't have as much interage hanging out together now, it's more stratified. That's hurtful to me, and I don't like that. We would go out to college bars like in Ann Arbor or Lansing when we were college age guys to hear bands and one night a band was playing there like a main blues or main jazz band. Next it might be a punk rock band. And these bars would be full. People liked live music, it was important, a Monday night a Tuesday night. I would tell these white guys I'm working with at these factories, shops really job shops, they would say "what are you doing" And I would say I'm going to Cass and Selden and go to this bar called Cobbs Corner to hear this Griot Galaxy. And they would go "are you fucking crazy" and someone would use the n word at that point. And they just thought I was nuts. Cobbs Corner, it would be you know most of the time African American people, mostly. There might be some white people, maybe a lot of white people that one night, but the band was all black. It was and the audience was mixed or leaning toward being black and a lot of—If you wanted to learn about this music, you had to be intrepid. Not be worried about walking into a club and being the only white person there. Kids today don't get that that this music comes from the community. And guys my age, when we all read the Autobiography of Malcolm X because that's what your mentors talked about that stuff, and it was important to them, you wanted to know why it was important to them. And you knew the points of Kwanza. You could be some suburban kid from Grosse Pointe like me but you learned this stuff because your mentors talked about it and it was important to them. Music was a

culture and it was a community. It wasn't just an academic pursuit. And that's what I have to say about that.

[Detroit Jazz culture changing 40:08:07]

VJ: Yeah that's definitely a great point you bring up. I did an article a couple years ago for Model D about how like the jazz mentorship and how I was talking to Sean Dobbins because he learned from people like Marcus Belgrave and Kenn Cox and that's was his education. Nowadays it's become much more academic and me and Charles were talking about this too. The young people like Marcus Elliott coming up. It's like—

RJ: He's great.

VJ: Yeah he's awesome.

RJ: You can talk to him about the Griot Galaxy and he's knows about that.

VJ: Are they, their learning from the people who learned from Marcus, now Marcus Elliott is learning from Sean Dobbins who was taught by, you know it's kind of like the older generation is teaching the young—it's kind of like, its continuing on. It's a cultural thing you got to learn from them or you don't really know the background.

RJ: Yeah right.

VJ: So do you think that, in talking about the jazz culture, do you think it kind of changed after the riots with the whole white flight, do you think the music kind of, the culture died down after that, people stopped coming to—

RJ: White people, I don't know, these guys that I'm talking about that were working in these job shops, they weren't going to jazz clubs before the riots. They're the same people that go to sports bars today. They weren't interested in this music. This music, its everybody is invited to the party but not everybody gets it. It's there for you if you get it. It's not for everybody. No I don't think that it, I don't know. There used to be more clubs. I think a lot of things happened to disrupt the culture of working in bars.

VJ: What do you think about, I'm sorry to interrupt you, I'm just thinking about the Funk Brothers and how they started in jazz and when Motown—

RJ: They ended in jazz too.

VJ: Yeah, you said what?

RJ: They ended in jazz too.

VJ: Right, right.

RJ: Motown was a day job.

VJ: And they played in bands at night. Yeah do you think Motown moving kind of like affected because some of the people that were part of the Funk Brothers moved to LA. Do you think any of that had an effect on—?

RJ: Sure it did, it had to. I would imagine it had to because Belgrave, all those guys were doing those longtime sessions. It's what brought Marcus Belgrave here.

VJ: The Motown??

RJ: Yeah sessions and that kind of thing, he could, what was that guy's name, was it Dan Jordan, the bass player died a couple years ago, great guy. He was a white guy. He played with Grant Green on TV shows in Detroit. He, that guy would —

VJ: Are you talking about Bob Babbitt?

RJ: No, no, no, he wasn't a Funk Brother, Bob is a white guy too, but he wasn't a Funk Brother he was a full time a bass player, he was one of the bass teachers at Wayne State up until when he died. But this guy like he would play during the day on TV shows like there would be local TV shows that had like a variety show in the afternoon and they would have a little jazz combo that would play and that was a day show. They could play five gigs a week getting a paycheck doing that. Then they would go and do a couple car commercials because Detroit was a thriving—

VJ: Auto industry.

RJ: Yes and also around it Detroit was one of the biggest cities for advertising business and so there were guys doing ads all the time, playing in studios. Then they would go play a happy hour gig at one place and then a late night jazz gig at another place. They were sleeping four and five hours a night because they were working four gigs a day for decades!

And that was happening, especially white guys because they could go places that black guys couldn't go but there were black guys who were working a lot. I know Johnnie Bassett, the great blues guitar player. He would say "We played these joints and like one time somebody got shot at the front door and died and he said I didn't even know until the gig was over because there were so many people in the club, the news didn't make it back to us."

VJ: Wow.

RJ: It was like that every night of the week. And this is what I was gonna say. In the 40s, 50s into the 60s, people were working and making money, people who didn't have college degrees were making middle class incomes and they had money to spend. There was no cable TV, there were only three channels on TV, maybe four. No color TV. There was no such thing as a disc jockey at a nightclub, there was no karaoke, there were no drunk driving laws. For real, I got pulled over by cops drunk off my ass and they would say "can you make it home." Yeah, okay. Then I would get back in my car and drive home!

VJ: [laughs]

RJ: My dad, all the stories he had. I mean, so drinking and driving wasn't an issue and people were out and about. The automotive plants were working 24/7 and people were getting paid and getting off at midnight and going to the bar and spending money. There were gigs, musicians

were working six seven nights a week. And that lasted until the 60s and I would say that sure, the white flight about that time that was putting the first big stake in the heart of live music in Detroit. The bar culture in Detroit took a hit because a lot of jazz guys didn't make a living playing jazz all the time, they played—Coltrane played R&B gigs before he was making money as a jazz guy. Jazz guys took gigs, you played commercial gigs, back then they had gigs in strip clubs. It was a gig. An organist, a sax player and a drummer and that was it and they are playing all night long, it was a gig!

VJ: Yeah I know Belgrave played with Ray Charles and all that.

RJ: Oh yeah, but the culture of working musicians. You might be a jazz guy at heart and play jazz twice a week, but the rest of the week you might be playing some gig where you're playing some other schlott you don't even care about, but you are getting paid and getting better at your instrument. But it was work! For a lot of people, black and white. All these things came along that derailed that. Karaoke wasn't good for us, disc jockeys wasn't good for live music, the drunk driving laws didn't help us, but it's probably something we needed to deal with, probably a good thing there. I would say as time goes on, the idea of going into a club at night and everybody being all 40 year age span drinking at a bar at night. Now there are old guy bars and there's not old guy bars.

VJ: Wasn't drinking the legal age was 18 back then.

RJ: I been drinking legally since I was 18.

VJ: Yeah so when they moved it to 21, I'm sure that put a damper on the bars.

RJ: It did, it did, and yes that's in there. So these are all the reasons why the making a living in a bar is tougher than it ever was.

VJ: Especially now, I feel like even musicians kind of have to have a day job on top of playing gigs.

RJ: A lot of my friends teach during the day.

VJ: Yeah, teach, yeah right.

RJ: What guys do today that guys of my generation didn't do so much is a lot of my guys taught, but a lot of my friends, we would say "well those that do play and those that can't they teach" you know that's old dictum. But you know there's guys who teach now, play and then they will also have a church gig at a white church and black church. But a lot of the guys make $100 to $300 at a good church every Sunday.

VJ: I think Gayelynn (McKinney) plays at a church every Sunday.

RJ: See what I'm saying. A lot of people both black and white are playing at a church every week, sometimes twice a week getting paid. I know one drummer that does two churches every Sunday, he does an 8'oclock service at one church and then a 10o clock at another one. And then I know a couple people that, some churches have a Wednesday night service so they do two. Then they will get paid to come and rehearse a choir. Between having a steady church gig, teaching a couple days a week and playing some gigs because it's hard to play gigs five days a

week now. Although I still do it a lot. I would say half the year I can work 20 nights a month and the other half the year I probably work 12 to 15. That's a, I'm a busy person.

VJ: Yeah I see you on Facebook and stuff you're always gigging somewhere.

RJ: I'm a busy musician. I really am I work hard at it. See I never taught and I never had a church gig, it wasn't something I was interested in doing. I learned how to play. I'm the guy from that old era when guys plays in bars every night.

[Blues manager role 49:40:03]

VJ: Do you think with you being in that manager role as well, you have a good business etiquette. I think you have to have a good business mind—

RJ: Yeah, I didn't become a manager until I was in my mid-30s. I was a drummer and bandleader from a young age. Then I was in the same band for about 15 years, same guys. Back then, that's another thing, everybody is a freelance musician now, but back then my generation we joined bands. You played 15-20-25 nights a month with the same four or 10 guys. Back then, like I said you could make a $1000 at any Friday or Saturday night at a bar, at a whole lot of bars. So having an eight piece band was a big deal.

VJ: Do you think there are a lot of bars now that have jazz bands or I'm sure it's kind of. You have Cliff Bells, Bakers, you don't have a whole lot of—

RJ: Cliff Bells, Bakers, Bert's and Dirty Dog. You just named them all. Jazz Cafe Music Hall.

VJ: Oh yeah Jazz Cafe.

RJ: That's five, a hand full. Then you have rooms and this where I have helped, this is what helped me make a living. You play at a bar that they have a live music every Saturday. The singer/songwriter white chick .Next week it's gonna be three guys doing bluegrass music, then the next week I come in with my group playing jazz, then they have a blues band, the week after that they have all original rock band. So it can be anything is what I'm saying and that's what helps a guy like me make a living because I find those joints like well they are hiring bands, I'll bring my thing in and do my thing.

VJ: Yeah because it's steady. And I think the fact that you also you play blues and jazz, you're multi-genre.

[Managing Johnnie Bassett 51:47]

RJ: Yeah all my managing experience was in blues. I never managed any jazz artists. All my singers I started working with a guy named Johnnie Bassett in my mid 30s after leaving my earliest band the Sun Messengers and I put together a band around Johnnie Bassett, and I got him some record deals, I got him a record deal in New York. Well first one in Detroit, New York, one in the Netherlands, then at a really good label in Minnesota and I was able to get a records of him to start touring. So with Johnnie, he and I drove through 48 states together, and I played about 35 of them. We went to Europe a good 20 times together, we played coast to coast in

Canada, we played eight provinces in Canada. We did it many times, not just one time here. We hit em all.

VJ: Can you tell me a little bit about how you first got into managing, how did you find Johnnie Bassett?

RJ: This is it, I'm telling you right now. It was at the Detroit Jazz Festival and it was a guy named Ben Baber, he was blind, Hammond B3 organist, and Ben had never played the Detroit Jazz Festival and he was old and he had cancer. They gave him a gig at the Detroit Jazz Festival and he brought up a band with all of his buddies. He had a bunch of horn players and he says "I'm a bring my guitar player up, he's a blues man" And Johnnie came up there and he sang blues, played the shit out of the guitar, and I said this is a guy I've been looking for all my life. This is the guy. So I hired Johnnie and this is an interesting story too because I got a phone number for him from Jim Gallert helped me get his number. Jim knew Ben Baber, so he called up Ben, and said "Hey my friend wants to hire your guitar player for a gig" and he goes "sure" so I called Johnnie Bassett and I hired him for a gig. A little bar, not too far from where we are right now. Primarily white joint called the Ye Olde Tap Room, it's still there. And I had him play in the group with some of my buddies and I know for a fact that was one of the first times he played where he was the only black guy in a band.

I know he was nervous playing in front of all these white people too. I assembled a regular group of guys from Johnnie who started working and he would find work for us too. So we would play like every Wednesday at a black club over on the westside. And then we'd play a white joint over on the eastside. We were started working a lot Johnnie and I were working 20some nights a month after a while. He would find some gigs, I would find some gigs, and we—and I learned his music and I did more of a percussionist, the conga player and so forth and so I'm now really working on playing drummer so I really learned how to play a shuffle and all the great blues grooves playing with Johnnie doing that stuff. And through Johnnie I started meeting other blues artists. One day I had a gig I was the chairman of the blues society and I together this blues event at a park in Detroit not far from here. I had all these great, black blues artists, really the top black blues artists. In blues you deal with postwar and prewar blues. Prewar blues is a guy with a guitar, Robert Johnson singing about the crossroads or whatever and postwar blues is Muddy Waters and BB King, guitars, bass players, drummer, piano players a band. Detroit had its own coodery of African American postwar blues men and women. Had Eddie "Guitar" Burns, John Lee Hooker, Eddie Kirklin, Johnnie Bassett, Chicago Pete and so forth.
I played with all of them. Every significant African American blues artist in Detroit I played at least one gig with if not dozens and so I'm playing this park over in Detroit with Alberta Adams well I'm not playing with Alberta but I hired someone and we're sitting backstage one time and she says "RJ you're doing great work with Johnnie Bassett, I see your name everywhere and you're really doing great" And I say "well thank you Alberta, it means a lot. Alberta had recorded with Chess Records. Are you familiar with Chess Records?

VJ: Yep.

[Managing Alberta Adams 56:21]

RJ: She recorded for Chess Records but that was in the 50s and now here it is, 1991 or so and she's kind of doing what she can do. But I know she's a heck of a performer, I know she's great. She says "RJ I want you to be my manager." And I go, your manager is Famous Coachman, Famous Coachman was a black disc jockey at WDET every Saturday night, great character,

owned his own record store on Manelli and Kercheval. Great character and I loved him. It actually said on his driver's license first name Famous last name Coachman. And when you'd talk to him I'd say "hey Famous" and he'd say "Hey RJ" Great guy, real character. Well she said "no don't worry about Coachman" so I talked to Coachman, I said Alberta wants me to book her some gigs. And he goes "you do that RJ, you are doing good job for Alberta for Johnnie Bassett, so you'll do a good job for her too. "

So I got permission to do it, I didn't want to piss off Coachman, I like Coachman. I said I can do this, Alberta recorded for Chess she's got a story, there's a story there. So I started booking Alberta and that went really well. We did a lot of great stuff with her and I got her signed to some record deals too. We sold some records and I put some nice chunks of money in her pocket. I helped her in a lot of ways. I represented her and was her drummer and bandleader for over 20 years and I loved that woman. She was through thick and thin she was there for me. We never had an argument. She was always in a good mood, she was a great trooper. I remember driving ten hours in a day to get to a gig and she would get out the van beat and see the audience and light up. She just give them the goods. She was a great woman, she was a dear soul, I loved her. That's from the chapter of that book. (Heaven was Detroit).

VJ: Yeah I read that.

RJ: Oh did you read it?

VJ: Yeah I read it. I bought the book so it kind of works out how I read it before.

RJ: Oh wow yeah. I took her back and we played the Apollo Theatre after she hadn't been there in 50 years.

VJ: What year was that?

RJ: Oh, 2009 I think.

VJ: She passed not long after that right?

[Managing Joe Weaver 58:44:03]

RJ: Yeah she died a couple years ago. But she was great, she was my second person that I managed. Then from there I picked up Joe Weaver, who had been Johnnie Bassett's bandleader in high school and after that in the early 20s, and Joe had his own story to tell too. Then he made some important records and he had played with the early Motown acts. He's in the Funk Brothers movie, you see that Standing in the Shadows of Motown, they'll show a picture of Joe talking and it will said Joe Weaver, blues singer.

VJ: So he's a blues singer?

RJ: Well he was more than that, he was an R&B piano leader. He was a Funk Brother, like Bob Babbitt, and Uriel Jones and all those guys. The Funk Brothers, I would meet them and they would say to me, with Joe sitting right there, "RJ we all played in Joe Weaver's Blue Notes band before we were Funk Brothers, we learned how to play with Joe. There wouldn't be a Funk

Brothers if it hadn't been for Joe Weaver and Blue Notes and Joe was from down south, he was like all these guys, Johnnie Bassett was born in Marianna, Florida which is like 40 miles from Alabama and 40 miles from Georgia. It's right there it's the deep south, it's not like Florida like Miami it's the deep south and Joe Weaver is from outside of Mobile, like a lot of the guys in the Temptations are and Mobile it had a Mardi Gras before New Orleans did so it's got that funky, Caribbean culture there and black community. Joe brought that north with him, that groove, that funky southern groove that he played. That influenced the Funk Brothers and his first cousin was Benny Benjamin.

VJ: Oh really, wow.

RJ: Yeah yeah and they all went to high school with James Jamerson and James Jamerson played with them.

VJ: Oh so they came up in that whole era.

RJ: When Benny Benjamin and James Jamerson got inducted into the Rock 'n Roll Hall of Fame, James, Benny Benjamin didn't have any kids and neither did— so Joe went up to accept the award. They brought me along to keep an eye on Joe and help him out.

VJ: At the Rock n roll Hall of Fame?

RJ: No, in New York City they put us in the Waldorf Astoria, they flew us out on a private jet and put us up in the Waldorf Astoria for a couple days and it was a big deal for a couple small town guys from Detroit like me and Joe. It was a heck of a weekend. We got to meet all these famous people and Joe got up and talked and knocked it out of the ballpark. He was always a little halfway drunk and he still kicked ass up there talking. Elton John comes up afterwards and Billy Joel and he goes "I don't know that guy was but he's great." Oh man people wanted to meet him. John Mayer came up to us, all these people wanted to meet Joe Weaver. It was really quite a day.

VJ: Yeah he is definitely unsung, he should get more—

RJ: So Joe and I, Joe was just like Alberta he was as loyal to me as he could possibly be. He was the most beautiful man.

VJ: Is he still around?

RJ: He's dead, yeah he passed, he had a stroke we were working on a new record for him, putting a song in order for our new—it was a rerelease of all his old records. He made a lot of old 45s in the '50s and we had a label in Pittsburgh that wanted to put out a record and he had artwork ready to go and all this stuff. And we were at a meeting to go over all that stuff and he had a stroke and died not long after that. He was just—

VJ: When was this, was it recently?

RJ: No, it was, I'm not sure, I'm like, some of my friends could tell you years like that. I'm not like that. Yeah you could Google it, Joe Weaver, it will tell you. Things like that are sad for me I don't try to memorize.

VJ: Yeah I understand you don't want to memorize.

RJ: I loved Joe, I loved Joe. Anyway so I worked with him and managed him. Those were my three main guys: Joe, Alberta and Johnnie Bassett.

[Managing other artists and the Sun Messengers 1:02:29]

Then I picked up two more of Joe's guys. He invited me to a party one time with all these doo-wop singers and found two other guys and put them together in a group and I called them Detroit Rhythm and Blues Pioneers. We took them to Europe and we took them across the United States one time too. A lot of funny stories from that trip. We made a good record with that group. Then a couple other smaller guys I had affiliations with I took them to Europe, we did gigs, so yeah like the first part of my life was playing in the Sun Messengers where I got to back up a lot of great New Orleans guys. They'd come to town and we'd be their band. And I got to be the bandleader for guys like Earl King and Johnnie Adams and if you ever check out those things you'll find out that they were seminal New Orleans Rhythm and blues artists. Great, great, great men too. I loved them very much. Eddie Bo, aww man I had a great relationship with Eddie Bowe for, I was his bandleader in Detroit for 20 years. So, first part was Sun Messengers and kind of learning about the music business. Then I took the business I knew and I had Johnnie Bassett and I started learning how to get record deals and book international tours and book national tours. I took that information and did that and then until all those guys died off.

[Jazz background 1:04:00]

RJ: So that brings me up to my 50s and I thought, now what am I gonna do. I've done these different things right, and so I went back to what I did with the Sun Messenger really started in the jazz realm so and I have always played jazz things on the side of all my blues gigs. Now I play blues gigs on the side of my jazz gigs. I just turned it around. I flipped the script as they. So now I'm—

VJ: Were you still playing when you were managing these bands?

RJ: I was the drummer on all of those bands.

VJ: So you were always the drummer?

RJ: I was always the drummer, bandleader and manager. Always.

VJ: So you were like a triple threat.

RJ: Yeah I did all that stuff and sometimes I would have my artists going out without me. Like I would have another band. I had a band in Columbus Ohio, and another band here in Detroit and they would back my artists if I was out on the road with one of the other ones. I was getting successful enough that I could have two different bands on the road at once sometimes. I wasn't always making a lot of money but we made a little money, a made a little chunk of money and we got to make some great records and we got to see a lot of places. I played the Apollo, I played the Monterey Jazz Festival, I played the Chicago Blues Festival a shit load of times. Festivals in San Francisco and got to play great gigs in Key West. New Orleans Jazz Festival.

I got to do a lot of stuff. So then I just figured, this is the next bringing me up to more toward modern times. I started, the Sun Messengers started as a 10 piece band that played some New Orleans, played swing music, and played modern jazz. So I kind of took all those ideas and I said, you know that being kind of morphed into what it is now which is a very polished kind of 70s R&B group. They do weddings and events and they make a living and it's a, they are my dear friends, but when they went in that direction I didn't want to play weddings, it wasn't my—they wanted to make a living so they wanted to take the gigs that paid the best. Casinos, weddings, whatever. I still want to play for an audience. I'd rather play for an audience and make $100 on Saturday night than play for 60 people that aren't listening to what we're fucking playing rather than make $300 at some wedding. I never made a lot of money in this business, so I don't, it doesn't matter.

VJ: You do it because you are passionate about it.

[Living in Grosse Pointe and Detroit 1:06:32:04]

RJ: Yeah see when I was young, my parents said to me one day when I was 29 years old, they said why don't you move back home. I had at this point, I hadn't lived at home in 11 years. I was on my own since age 18. They said why don't you move back home and save some money. You don't pay rent and we'll match it so I saved $5,000 and they gave me $5,000 and I bought a house and I put $10,000 down on a $29,000 house in Detroit. I paid it off on a land contract in ten years. My house payment was $265 a month.

VJ: Wow, that's crazy.

RJ: I had two roommates who each paid me $250 bucks a month to live there, so they not only paid the house note, but they paid the utilities and insurance.

VJ: You had a rent free house.

RJ: Right so I haven't paid rent since I was 29 years old.

VJ: Wow I wish my parents would do that for me.

RJ: [laughs] well you could buy a house cheap back then. And it was ensured and the neighborhood actually went up in value.

VJ: What part of Detroit was it?

RJ: A mile outside of Grosse Pointe off 94 by St. John's hospital. In 2003, August 14. Can't forget about this date, it was a big blackout. I'm sitting in my house, no heat, no air conditioner, it's hot, summertime. I'm sticky, I'm uncomfortable. I'm unhappy in the dark. I had a whole bunch of family members back in Grosse Pointe, so I went by my mom's house, and sure enough eight to 10 of them are there. We're sitting around, my brother's got a crank up radio, we're listening to the news. You know we're lit candles, talking, having a good time, you know. I wake up at 9am and I go I better check on my house, I come home it's a smoldering pile of bricks.

VJ: Oh my gosh.

RJ: 5,000 records are burned into one giant vinyl mess. These kids that lived behind me broke into my house, they took the littlest one, they bashed up my basement window, they lowered him in through the window, and he came and opened the side door up. There's three of them, they went around my house stealing my stuff, two of them had flashlights, other one had a candle. The one with the candle went into my office where all those books and records and papers were, I had 100s of books on jazz on blues. They took all that stuff and they left the candle burning there. They burned my house to the ground. And these were not even like criminals these were mom and dad had good jobs. They were nice people and these were what I call wannabe thugs. I was one of many houses they broke into that day.

VJ: I guess because of the blackout no alarm system all that didn't work. Oh my gosh that's horrible.

RJ: We were in court with those kids and I'm sitting with these other victims of their crimes and this African American lady next to me she said “I feel like I was raped. They took all my mother's jewelry.” She was like 85 years old and she was just despondent over the whole thing. I told them you guys really think you are slick and all that stuff. I gave my life to your music and your culture. Their mixed race kids, their dad was white and mom was black. I looked at their mom and I could see her face, the pain on her face from her kids doing this. I lost that house, but it was ensured for $90,000.

VJ: Oh wow that's a blessing.

RJ: [laughs]

VJ: You didn't lose out that much.

RJ: So I was able to buy a condominium and so here I am today.

VJ: Right that's a blessing in disguise. [laughs]

RJ: So I never needed to make a lot of money because I have a low income, I have a low overhead. As long as I'm you know keep the lights on and the cable pay all my insurance.

VJ: Yeah because you never know when you are going to need it.

[Playing wedding gigs 1:10:47]

RJ: Right, right. But anyway, so I never needed to make a lot of money and because I didn't want to play weddings. If someone calls me for a wedding gig now, I tell them I don't know any of those songs that people play at weddings.

VJ: They are kind of like Top 40 songs.

RJ: Right I don't know any of those songs, I'm not gonna find you guys that know those songs. I don't want to play those songs. If you want me to play your wedding it’s because I come and do what I do. We call it an event band, an event band can play a Top 40 they know all those songs. I met this guy named Simone Vitale, he pays all these guys three to $500 a gig for weddings.

He's a wedding bandleader. Plays guitar and runs a band. I met him one time and I said tell me about your, what's your life like doing this wedding thing and he goes, "I wake up in the morning and I look at the charts and I see what songs are hitting this week and I start like maybe working on chords to some of these songs and the arrangements together maybe sending out clips to the guys in the band to learn the song for this wedding on Saturday. I check with event planners in Chicago, Lansing, Detroit, Traverse City, Grand Rapids because he works all those spots and he starts working on generating contracts. It's a whole business. And he's very successful and I admire his professionalism, but I like I said I'd rather make a $100 and play at some bar for 60 people that get what I'm doing.

VJ: Yeah, exactly definitely because at a wedding they don't, they're not into jazz they don't understand the significance of it.

RJ: So these event guys they make the big money in the weddings, then you have guys like me that have a specialty band. I have a swing band, so people will have me come in and it's fun to have a wedding with a swing band. Nine guys up there with horns, music stands and everything and we play. Have you ever seen Planet D?

VJ: No I haven't that's definitely on my list. I wanted to come to the gig on the 23rd, but I didn't get a chance to.

RJ: You should come and see us, it's an interest phenomenon what we do. So we would come in and play from seven to nine at a wedding and then the DJ comes and plays all the stuff they want to hear. We give them a little pizzazz, with our suits and ties and we're playing swing music, Benny Goodman.

[African American swing bands 1:13:13]

RJ: My band specializes in the great black swing bands, but you see Fletcher Henderson, since you went to Rutgers and studying jazz history. You know who Fletcher Henderson is. He all those charts he wrote for his own band he sold to Benny Goodman, so a lot of people hear these songs by Fletcher and they think they are Benny Goodman tunes so I can—

VJ: But like it was Fletcher was. I think that happened a lot back in that day, like a lot of the black band they were arranging music for the white bands.

RJ: Sy Oliver, he wrote for Lunceford, and he wrote for the Dorsey's. Jimmy Mundy, a lot of those guys the black arrangers. Your pen didn't have a color. You could make a decent living writing songs. Eddie Durham, great Kansas City guitar player and trombonist, he wrote Glen Miller's "In the Mood" arrangement.

[Managing, playing in all his bands 1:14:26]

VJ: That's awesome. So we talked about your career, which you've definitely had a vast career. So maybe talk a little bit about how you kind of created all these different bands, you have Planet D nonet, RJ and T-bone, RJ's Kansas City Six. How do you juggle all those bands?

RJ: That's a modern day phenomenon, like I said when I was a kid coming up everybody played in one band that was it. You might have an off band you play with some guys once a week but still it was a band. In modern times I've I'm an older guy I'm 60 and so about five years ago I

started putting together this bucket list of things I always wanted to do and the different interests. I had a lot of different things. I have friends of mine who are great at doing one thing, so incredibly well. I'm almost jealous that they can do one thing so fucking well because, excuse my language.

VJ: You want to do everything. I'm the same way

RJ: I want to do a bunch of things. Can't tell me I'm gonna be as great at one thing as they are. I know I won't be but I want to do a bunch of different stuff and I have a good time doing it. See I'm a guy who I think you understand that I have a passion for this music. I'm historically oriented person so whenever I'm playing people walk away they know more about this music then they knew before they came to the gig.

Harold McKinney, Gayelynn's dad he called that edutainment because I'm educating and entertaining. Guys in the 70s that's they taught me so you always pass on some information. I learned back in the early days of the Sun Messengers, this is a fascinating little side story here. When I was I guess I was 25 we had a sax player named Lou Barnett in the group, he was 65. Lou Barnett had played with Billie Holiday. Lou Barnett had played with being a history person, I'm gonna test you a little on this one. He played in Paradise Valley, he played at the Flame Show bar, Club 36s, Club Sudan, Club Congo, he played with Maurice King and the Wolverines, he played with Todd Rhodes and his Toddlers, he played with all those great black groups. He recorded and played with Paul "Hucklebuck" Williams. You know who Paul "Hucklebuck" Williams is? Paul Hucklebuck Williams when he had a song called "Do the Hucklebuck" his biggest hit.

VJ: Yeah I heard that song, I didn't know who that was.

RJ: Okay he was a Detroit sax player. When that song hit the charts it was what they called the race charts. Now you know about that. The race charts there would be Duke Ellington, a doo-wop band, a blues band, flat-out low down blues band. All the same chart, just all black. The only they had in common is they were black. They weren't really—so then they started delineating different types of music and so when Paul Hucklebuck hit the charts it was on the race charts. It was the first R&B hit because while it was on the number one spot for 46 weeks I believe it was. When it ended it run as number one it was the number one R&B hit. It was an instrumental almost it had one little vocal, "do the hucklebuck." So that's when they created the R&B charts and Lou Barnett played in that band. He played tenor sax. Paul "Hucklebuck" Williams was a baritone player, playing parts leading the band like I'm a drummer leading the band. Solos were often by Lou Barnett and Lou, the nicest damn guy and here he is playing with a bunch of kids 20s, 40 years younger than him! White kids, and couple black guys in the band, they were kids like me. We were all in it together. Mostly like six white guys, four black guys kind of thing, mixed group I guess and, but one guy 40 years older than everybody else. Rick our—my coleader he transcribed some of these old songs from Lou's old records and we started playing them. I remember I'm in my 20s you know. I'm a modern jazz guy, Coltrane's my guy. And I'm hearing this old sax man. When Lou played Body and Soul it sounded like fucking Coleman Hawkins is on stage with you. It was amazing, so I started learning about that older music. Now remember I was already tight buddies with Jim Gallert.

VJ: And he knows everything about jazz.

RJ: Right, he knows everything and my uncle while being a modern jazz guy like I was he had a strong history he knew it all too like Jim. So I'm on stage and I'm playing with this guy who's 40 years older than me and I got the bug I started, what is with these black bands from the 40s and the 30s. These guys are incredible. I still love modern jazz, you got Coltrane right there on my wall. But I'm just telling you I got—playing with a guy like that, and so that's kind of one of my vents. I looked out for a whole bunch of great black R&B and blues singers like kind of giving them a great last hooray in life. They spent the last 20 years of their lives doing shit that they never planned to do. Like I said when I picked up Johnnie Bassett he never played for a bunch of white people. He didn't know there was a blues scene for white people.

That you could go out and play and there would be a tour and gigs and big giant crowded buying your CDs. He didn't know that would ever happen. So I was able to do that for all those guys, but I come from this era where you lot of things are DIY, you do it yourself, you create things from nothing. I've always been that kind of guy. I always wanted to impart knowledge to people but I've always hired a lot of younger musicians and taught them about this music. And that's what I'm trying to do because I want to be what Lou Barnett was for me. Here I am sitting here telling you right now, I know you're not 30 years old, you're somewhere in your 20s.

VJ: Yeah.

RJ: You're gonna say "well I met this crazy old white guy named RJ Spangler who played with these great black musicians 40 years ago. And he was connected to that era." I want people to be able to say 35 years from now yeah this guy taught me something about that.

VJ: I think that's an important part, you always have to pass it on to say you can pass it on the next generation so they can tell the other person. Kind of like the whole griot culture.

RJ: Yes exactly and that's what I learned from that's what I come from. I tried to always hire young guys to teach them to get them passionate about this stuff. They'll come to me and they'll know all about modern jazz today and I'll say yeah okay but you want to play some gigs, you want to work, because how many modern jazz gigs are there gonna be this Saturday in Detroit. How many are there, how many are playing modern jazz and getting paid to do it this Saturday in Detroit. We probably named all five jazz spots. And we know that the Jazz Cafe Music Hall isn't gonna have jazz every Saturday night. How many jazz guys how many clubs are playing modern jazz tonight, one day a week in Detroit? Are you gonna make a living doing that? So you want to have 50 students you teach a week, a church gig one day a week to play your jazz. And maybe not even once a week. There is only one Marcus Elliott doing every Tuesday at a jazz club doing that. So there's so few opportunities but guess what you can play with me and we can work ten gigs a month and you can learn about music and you're gonna play a whole bunch of tunes and its gonna serve you the rest of your life that you learned all these tunes playing with me. You're gonna learn more about jazz, a deeper understanding of jazz. Where it comes from.

[Staying in Detroit 1:23]

VJ: I think the players who know the music, you can tell their seasoned because they know the background behind, they aren't just playing to play it. So last question I got a ton of questions I, you probably went through most of them. I guess what is it about Detroit that made you want to stay here because I'm sure with your immense amount of talent you could have went anywhere.

RJ: I thought about it.

VJ: What made you stay in Detroit?

RJ: It's funny I'll tell I think about this. Over the years I have been to all the great cities in America. I've had some great times in Seattle and San Francisco, and LA and Minneapolis, Chicago, and New York City and Philly and Atlanta and New Orleans. Played all those places lots and lots of times and had great times in all of them. They are great cities. And all jazz guys like me you go to New York and you think wow any given Saturday night in New York there's 100 gigs. 100-150 gigs playing modern jazz every Saturday night. There's a place to work you know. But that's the biggest test right, you go to New York, are you gonna make it. You want to do that. We think about romantically, that would be exciting and then New Orleans, I love New Orleans.

VJ: Yeah I went back in August, it's amazing.

RJ: Yeah I love it, I've been there many, many times, played there many times. I'm considered an expert on that type of music here in Detroit. Every year during Mardi Gras I do a whole bunch of gigs, playing that music. I love that music!

VJ: You go to New Orleans and play Mardi Gras?

RJ: Never played Mardi Gras, I've been to Mardi Gras twice, but I stay in Detroit and play Mardi Gras. Somebody's gotta have that concession here. I have that concession here. I have some standing gigs here. I've played every Mardi Gras, Fat Tuesday out in Rochester. Nice gig with an eight piece band, we have a ball. I've done that gig 12-13 years now. And then I squeeze other ones around it. I know all the tunes and the repertoire of New Orleans music. I love that so that's another place. New Orleans is a place where there's 150 gigs every Saturday night. They're not all modern jazz gigs, that's fine I don't, I'm not looking for that, but there are gigs. People are working, people are working there.

VJ: Go down Bourbon street there 100 bands, bars.

RJ: Frenchmen Street,

VJ: Oh yeah Frenchmen Street it's crazy.
RJ: Oh yeah so I thought about both those places and Chicago. Because it's not that far, I thought about Chicago too. I have a sister there, I could stay there. But you know, I never lived—one time I was dating a girl in Royal Oak and I said to my sister, we have a lot of fun in Royal Oak I could live over here with her. And my sister goes "you never lived more than a mile from our mom your entire life, you're not going anywhere." "She'd kill you!" And I said maybe you're right I never thought about that one. I'm a family guy, I like my family, and financially since I was 29 years old I stopped paying rent and had two roommates to pay it for me. [laughs] So yeah I mean and then my uncle he was my entry into knowing Marcus Belgrave and all these guys so they have always been really good to me. So I always felt like I was connected, part of the community. So here I am, I have a family, a musical community, I have an economically viable situation. Where am I going?

VJ: Yeah what more can you ask for. [laughs]

RJ: Yeah where am I going, I love it here. I represent Detroit, people talk to me and I can tell them all about the history of Detroit.

VJ: Yeah not many people can do that.

RJ: I live it every day I wake up and I'm one of the guys that you go to. People say "we need to get a quote about such and such, better call RJ Spangler" I'm on that list of people they would call, the Detroit News or the Free Press.

VJ: Yeah it's usually a quote or something Detroit something big happens in the city with music, you need somebody that knows it.

RJ: Yeah. I'm that guy that knows this kind of stuff.

VJ: That's a good enough reason for me.

RJ: My family's right here.

VJ: Right right, yeah that's what's most important.

RJ: It is.

VJ: Especially you go off to all over the world but you it seems like it's easier to blend in there because it's so huge but here it's like you are kind of like almost a star.

RJ: Yeah big fish in a small pond. Yeah that's probably true.

VJ: Well thank you so much for letting me talk—

RJ: Yeah I'm a talker.

VJ: Yeah I'm always learning from people like you and Jim and Lars are my mentors so I'm always Jim talked to me for four hours about jazz. I'm always learning something so.

RJ: Yeah Jim and I have a project we work on every year. I do an annual Spring concert with the Planet D at the Scarab Club that's got big funding and Jim was just over here last week going over all the—I have a ton of CDs in my office that he gave me because we are working on the Kansas city jazz right now.

VJ: Oh nice, working on songs from-

RJ: My band’s gonna play a retrospective of Kansas City jazz from the 20s, 30s, and 40s.

VJ: Oh wow, yeah Jim had me read a book about Kansas City jazz, I had no idea about the history of that city.

[End of Interview]