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MOHAWK MUSICIANS

Sugar & Spice, 2019. Pete, Sandy, Jim Hoover, Terry Smith, Wally Hoover.
Photo courtesy Sandy Hill.

Recorded by Mike Kirley, transcribed by Mike Higgins

An interview with Sandy Hill and Pete Atkins—“from Ohsweken and Beyond”

Mike Kirley: Hello Sandy. I was thinking that the first time I met you was at River Valley. You came over to my site with your sister and you sang harmony with her. What was her name?

Sandy: LuAnn Hill.

MK: You sounded beautiful but I gathered that you had been singing together for awhile.

Sandy: Well we grew up singing because my grandfather played. He sang in the church choir and he would chord on the piano. We got it from him and my mom played piano. That's how we grew up. We haven't really sung together since then. You know how it is. We go

our separate ways and that's what happens.

MK: Was this on the Six Nations Reserve?

Sandy: Yes – at Ohsweken. We grew up on Ohsweken.

MK: Actually I've been there. I used to go to Shin's bluegrass parties at Chiefswood and it was a big deal. It was potluck and it was a lot of fun. (Editor's note: Shin Van Avery and her band "Echoes of Bluegrass" was very popular and active during the 1970's and 1980's.)

Sandy: But I never really got into Bluegrass before Pete started playing with us. I was playing with a couple of other musicians and

My grandfather played piano and sang

actually I wasn't even playing guitarback then. I never got into playing Bluegrass until about a year or so after Pete started playing with us. Then we started playing bluegrass about eight years ago.

MK: So did you find it hard?

Sandy: No. Not really.

MK: What some people say about this bluegrass music, is that it takes about 20 years to learn it right and by the time you learn that – you're too old. (chuckles)

Sandy: Well I know I don't play that well but I know enough to play and sing along.

MK: Well, I've heard you sing and it's really nice. Who would you consider your influences as far as singers go?

Sandy: Growing up it was Aretha Franklin, Janis Joplin. Later on, Bonnie Raitt and Alison Krauss – I love Alison Krauss and Patty Loveless.

MK: Patty Loveless – have you ever seen her live?

Sandy: No I haven't.

MK: She came to Ontario Place with Ralph Stanley and Ricky Skaggs. Alison Krauss, Del McCoury, and The Nashville Bluegrass Band were also there. They came right after the movie "Oh Brother, Where Art Thou". (Universal 2000) My wife took me down to Ontario Place as part of my birthday present.

She didn't tell me what we were going to be watching. I just started yelling. It was unbelievable.

Sandy: Oh, lucky you.

MK: They only sang three songs then somebody else would come out. To hear Patty Loveless with Ralph Stanley together – oh my god! So what about Rhonda Vincent?

Sandy: Oh yes – I really like Rhonda Vincent. I started doing a couple of her tunes. Like "Driving Nails in My Coffin" (Louvin Brothers). That's the first one of hers that I learned.

MK: Did you ever see her live?

Sandy: Yes, I did. At Tottenham. She's so good. A very hard worker.

MK: Just perfection from start to finish.

Sandy: My daughter played with her at the show that I saw.

MK: What about Dolly Parton?

Sandy: I have a lot of respect for her. She's a hard worker too. The songs that she's written. Song after song. Hit after hit.

MK: How about Emmy Lou?

Sandy: Oh, I love Emmy Lou. I went to see Emmy Lou in Toronto about four years ago but she didn't do any of her old songs. There was maybe one song that I recognized.

MK: I remember she put out a Rock album. "Wrecking Ball". (It won a 1996 Grammy for Emmy.) She had her hair all done up differently. She must have had a different manager. (laugh). But she did go back to her regular stuff. Yes, I like Emmy Lou and Dolly a lot. And Alison Krauss. I went to every Alison Krauss concert.

MK: Getting back to you now. Did your sister ever join a band with you?

Sandy: Probably not. She was three hours away. But we did get together for a "Missing Women" event and she did get up and play. That was at the Wahta Mohawk Reserve off Hwy 400 near Bala.

MK: There is the Curve Lake reserve near Peterborough. That's where I was raised. My wife and I went up north and taught Ojibway for about 10 years. I started off by myself. Then I met my wife when she was teaching Kindergarten on the Reserve up in Hearst. We went from there to teach in the bush, about 200 miles from Thunder Bay on the railroad line. They taught me more than I ever taught them. We took in a two year old boy for about 18 months when we lived in Armstrong. But it didn't work out because he was homesick. I later met him on Facebook and he had nine kids. He said: "I have a large trap line". He has his own language and calls me dad. We are well connected with the Ojibway – but not so much with the Six Nations. When we moved to Cambridge, we did a show for Marvin Laforme. He put on the Willow Park Bluegrass Festival in Mississauga First Nation and brought in "Gold

Well I've heard you sing and it's really nice

Wind “— an Indigenous band. They would wear full head dress on stage.

MK: Let’s get back to bluegrass. I want to ask you this question. In your life, in bluegrass music and before, have you ever experienced racism?

Sandy: Not through bluegrass people. To me they ‘re the nicest people you would ever want to meet. So willing to help you and share things. But yes, I have. Going to school and even after — like when they first had that occupation at Caledonia. There was a lot of animosity towards the Natives. I experienced some in high school but not too much for the most part. But yes — I have experienced it.

MK: The movie “Billy Jack” influenced me to get involved with teaching Ojibway. He got himself a motorcycle and drove all around the reservation. The first thing I did when I got up north was to get a motorcycle like Billy. (laughs). At five thousand dollars a year I was living the dream up there.

MK: Is Pete there? Can I talk to Pete for a minute?

Sandy: Yes Pete’s here.

MK: Hi Pete. How are you? Good to hear you. How’s the banjo playing going?

Pete: Oh, still picking it up now and then.

MK: Not like before the pandemic. I just picked up a Gibson Master-tone Earl Scruggs. gold plated 1985 banjo. I never thought I would. I had a 1976 Stelling which I got from Brian Pickel. I had it for about 30 years. But it was getting too heavy. Then I heard from Darrin Parise who offered to trade me anything I wanted for it. That was a banjo that he played as a teenager on stage with Brian Pickel and he played Foggy Mountain Breakdown on that banjo. I saw an ad on Marketplace for this gold banjo and it was him. So I phoned him right away and asked if we could make an even trade. He hesitated and I said I think I will hang onto this Stelling for awhile. But he called me a few days later and said: “OK — we’ll trade”.

MK: Where did you learn the banjo?

Pete: I learned it on my own. I start-

ed listening to Scruggs, a lot of Denis’ records and Alan Munde.

MK: Yes — because you do a lot of the melodic stuff up and down the neck. Don Reno single string stuff you do too?

Pete: Yes- I’ve put a lot of energy into smoothing that out. It takes a lot of time.

MK: Yes - the muscle memory really has to take over.

MK: When I first met you I think you were in “The Spirit of Bluegrass”. Don Couchie had asked me to play mandolin. Do you remember that?

Pete: Yes I remember being at the park that day.

MK: And I kept worrying about a set list. I said, “what’s the set list?” And he said “meet us behind the stage “. Well 10 minutes before you went on, Jimmy Young was with you too — and he said “ well let’s just run through a few ” - and you guys ripped off 2 or 3 tunes back stage before you went on and I just managed to keep up. I asked them if that was it and they asked me to go out and read the crowd. He said: “I’ll just tell you what song we’re doing — and away we go “. (chuckles). But I must have done alright because they asked me to fly up north to the Arctic to play with them. I guess the grant funding never came through for that so we never did get to go there.

MK: What can you tell me about Marvin Laforme. Did he influence you at all?

Pete: Not really. He always asked me to go and play music with him. He got a lot of party jobs and a lot of Legion work.

MK: Well, they like to drink at the Legion. My father was a bomber pilot in the war. He flew Wellingtons and Lancasters. I’d say: “Dad — why don’t you go down to the Legion?” He said:” No — all they do is drink down there”. (chuckles). But our Club* is at the Legion in Galt and I think I’ve seen you there once or twice.

[Editors note: Waterloo Wellington Bluegrass Music Association]—Ed]*

I listened to Scruggs, Denis LePage and Alan Munde

We opened for Bill Monroe at Larry Matson’s Hamilton club

Pete: Yea – I’ve been there a couple of times.

MK: It’s a pretty good Club. There’s some serious banjo players there –Larry Johnson and John Dorlas.

Pete: I like to go there and just listen. You don’t necessarily have to play. I get a kick out of just listening now.

MK: There was another time. You were playing with” Peace River”. Tony DeBoer was putting on a show Hamilton.

Pete: Yes – we opened for Illrd Tyme Out.

MK: And you guys were on fire. I got so excited listening to you play – especially when Mary Lou Fitzgerald got up to sing. She was American right? A schoolteacher. She sang” Mule Skinner Blues “- and I’d never heard any woman sing that song before.

Pete: I was always quite impressed the first time I heard her sing that too.

MK: She had the right feel for it. And I think she also sang one of my favorite songs – a John Denver number called “Mathew”. But who was that funny guy on bass?

Pete: That was Danny Moretti on electric bass.

MK: He was a real character. He used to make me laugh when he came out. He’d pretend he was taking a huge break on the bass. But that’s the night I decided I wanted to start writing about bluegrass. No one was writing about these Canadian bands and it was a good band so I got your CD and reviewed it. When I was writing the review, I thought I should write what needs to be improved. So I did one or two sentences about this particular instrumental.

MK: You had a guy named Bill Vickers on mandolin. I could listen to him all day. He played with

Norm Paul. ((Ed. note: Norman Paul - 1981 with Shin Van Avery in Stoney Creek Bluegrass)

Pete: Yes, I did too.

MK: He made me laugh too because he was a left-handed player. He had a daughter who played bass.

Pete: I remember when I played with Norman Paul. We opened up for Bill Monroe at Larry Matson’s club in Hamilton.

MK: But Bill liked the blonds. There was a blond girl there and he just walked over and hugged her.(chuckles). And the bar had the TV on in the ceiling with a hockey game during Monroe’s set. I couldn’t believe that.

MK: Well I didn’t know who you were

entry level guitar. It was a Korean guitar – a Cort. I wanted to sing him a song and asked him if he would lend it to me. He looked at me, thought about it and he said:”nah - I don’t think so “. (chuckles). How many years was that band together?

Pete: I would say from 1980 to 2005.

MK: That’s quite a stretch. 25 Years. Did they ever put out any CD s?

Pete: Not publicly. But we had one made for us. Sort of like a demo. We went to the studio and cut a bunch of tracks.

MK: You should be in there cutting another CD. Make it a banjo CD.

Pete: I’ve been thinking about it. And use my new banjo – a Fender Artist.

MK: I think I’m going to leave you now Pete. Can I have Sandy back?

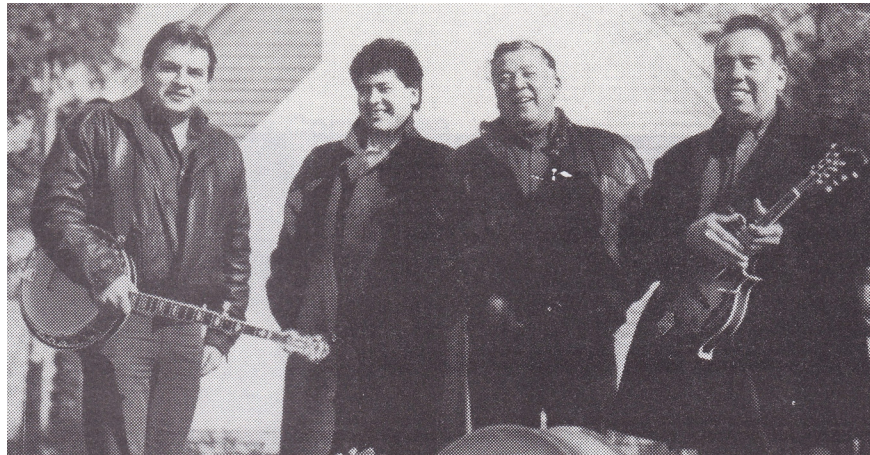
Pete: I just bought myself an F style Eastman mandolin last week.

MK: Yea - they’re great. About \$1,200? Mine is a John Doerr. I finally got a good one.

Sandy: I remember the other Rhonda Vincent tune that I do: “Don’t Tell Me You Love Me”.

MK: You did that

at The Moonshine Café. I recorded it and put it on Facebook. Well, I had a great interview with Peter. We’ve been around all the same bluegrass places. Thank you so much for this Sandy and Pete. I’m glad I got you at home today.



Grand River Bluegrass Band from Carlisle program, 1988. Photo courtesy archives of Mike Higgins.

back then Pete but I know who you are now. Can tell me who was in the “ Grand River Bluegrass Band”?

Pete: Sure – there was Bill Maracle on fiddle, John McNaughton on bass, Clifford Lickers played guitar and mandolin, Leonard Lickers on guitar and me – Pete Atkins on banjo. A lot of times Jeff Powless was with us.

[Editor’s note: The Grand River Bluegrass Band were a featured group at the 1988 Bluegrass Canada festival at Carlisle.—Ed]

MK: I saw you guys at that Jam that was held down around Lake Erie. Jeff was a really good guitar player. And he had what I thought was a fairly