**THE BILL AND SUE-ON HILLMAN INTERVIEW**

**Music and the Brandon Community Project**

**Brandon University Department of History Archive**

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**PREAMBLE**

**Introduction by Interviewer**: Today, is June the ninth of 2015. I am here at the home of **Bill and Sue-On Hillman**, at 41 Kensington Boulevard in Brandon, Manitoba.

**Bill and Sue-On**: Crescent. . . Crescent actually.

**Interviewer:** Oh, pardon me! *\*laughter\** Kensington Crescent. Oh good, thanks! The interview is for the class **Advanced Topics in Oral History**, and is for the project, **Music and the Brandon Community**. Before we begin, I’m here with **Bill and Sue-On** and you guys have read over the consent form, and you guys are alright with everything that is found within? Is there any…

**Bill and Sue-On**: Yes. . . Yes we have.

**Interviewer:** Okay, so no questions or concerns?

**Sue-On:** Not so far.

**INTRODUCTION :: FAMILY BACKGROUNDS**

**Interviewer:** Excellent! Okay, so without further ado we’ll get started with the interview. So, Bill you’re kind enough to start, so I’m just going to ask a basic question, who are you?

**Bill:** My name is **William Gerald Hillman**. I was born and raised in **Strathclair**, Manitoba. On a farm, south of Strathclair, born in 1943. And my parents are/were -- they are deceased – my dad is **Robert Gerald Hillman**, formerly of the **Royal Canadian Navy**, my mom was, **Louise Marie Campbell …Hillman**. I guess that’s a good preamble. Is that what you’re after for who I is?

**Interviewer:** *\*laughter\** Absolutely! And we don’t even have to go metaphysical with it either. So that’s good and straight-forward. Sue-On, you wanna, introduce yourself?

**Bill:** Who are you?

**Sue-On:** Oh! My name is **Sue-On Hillman**, I was a **Choy** before I got married. I was born in **China**, uh, do I have to tell you how old I am?

**Sue-On:** *\*laughter\** I was born in 1948, so, I just turned 67. I was born in China and lived in **Hong Kong** until I was 10, and then I emigrated with my mother to Canada, to **Newdale**, Manitoba. So I was there, until Bill and I were married in 1966.

**Bill:** Why did you go there?

**Sue-On:** Why did I go to Newdale? My father was there, and my grandfather before that. They were two of the early immigrants. They came over as workers so there is a long history there, too.

**Interviewer:** Okay, with the railroad?

**Sue-On:** My grandfather came actually as a merchant. And he had settled in different places in Manitoba before working as a cook for the first **Winnipeg Water Commissioner**. Made enough money, saved it and then bought his own business, and eventually brought different members of the family out.

**Bill**: Bought a hotel. With a restaurant.

**Sue-On:** Yeah, in Newdale. He’s one of the ones who had to pay the head tax, as well as my father, and so you know we were quite involved with the **Chinese** **Head Tax Monument** that was built here in Brandon four or five years ago -- out on the **Brandon Cemetery** grounds -- so, yeah it’s quite a history.

**Interviewer:** Yeah, absolutely.

**Bill:** I don’t know how familiar you or the archive are with the head tax situation. Only the males could immigrate to Canada, and they had to pay the equivalent of a year or two wages for the privilege.

**Sue-On:** 500 dollars, yeah, 500 dollars was what my father paid. My grandfather paid less.

**Bill:** And they couldn’t bring their families, so Sue-On’s dad went back to China every few years -- saved enough at the restaurant he had in Newdale to go back to China. And there was a new offspring after every visit. But he couldn’t bring the family over because of the immigration policy in Canada.

**Sue-On:** And it was 1958 when my mom and I finally were permitted to come to Canada and join my father. In 196. . . what year were we married Bill? 66?

**Bill:** *\*laughter\** Usually **I** forget!

**Sue-On:** *\*laughter\** So, I was at Newdale until we were married in 1966.

**MUSIC ROOTS :: THE ODYSSEY BEGINS**

**Interviewer:** Okay, how had you guys met?

**Sue-On:** I saw him on **television**! He was the big music star so you want to know about how music impacted our lives. I mean, he and my brother were school-mates, and they were coming into Brandon about that time. Bill was already performing for quite a few years and then he had a TV show, with some of his buddies from **Brandon University** [**Brandon College** at that time], and I used to watch him on TV, but his parents also had a **Marshall Wells Hardware** store in Newdale, so he was home for the summer, so . . .

**Bill:** Our parents had neighbouring businesses in the town. So I would come back for the summer and I met her a few times then.

**Sue-On:** Yeah, so, being, you know, a star on TV that was quite a . . .

**Bill:** *\*laughter, indiscernible comment\**

**Sue-On:** But it’s true. I was a very impressionable 15 year old.

**Bill:** Aw, come on! *\*general laughter\** The stars weren’t that big in your eyes!

**Sue-On:** Oh I don’t know, you know, I mean he was on CKX-TV and it was broadcast all over. And he was on every week so, yeah, that was the link. Brought me down! *\*chuckle\** The impact.

**Interviewer:** Okay. So maybe I should actually ask first, in terms of actual music, was it always something that was pretty big within your respective families? Or was it something that you kind of picked up later on?

**Sue-On:** Not in my family no. Not in the same as with Bill, I mean I was taking piano lessons. It was something every father and mother wanted their daughter to do, and singing in the church choir, but nothing prepared me for . . .

**Bill:** Well, before in Honk Kong, it was more of a British type music so you were exposed, if anything at that early age, to British pop like **The Shadows** and **Cliff Richard**.

**Sue-On:** Yeah, but not really -- I was pretty young. And I was pretty sheltered as a kid in a big city. In a metropolis like Hong Kong, at a young age you just don’t go out like the kids do here. But music played a big part in your [Bill’s] family, from way back to your uncles and your mom and dad, and your whole family.

**Bill:** My mom and uncles had a band in the Thirties. My mom played piano. And I was raised with their jam sessions at home. My mom played piano and my dad played sax and trumpet, so it was quite common to have jam sessions. I was exposed to music that way and they had a large record collection of all types of music on 78s. I listened to that and of course radio was the Internet of the Fifties. I surfed the radio constantly to find far-off stations. So I was very exposed to music and entertainment via that. They saw my interest in music so they gave me piano lessons, which I really didn’t take to. It wasn’t like **Jerry Lee Lewis**. *\*general laughter\** So my dad brought home a **Harmony guitar** from **Ray Hamerton’s** in Winnipeg one day and showed me some runs and chords. And so then it was a first love. **Elvis** played guitar -- he was a major influence, and all the **Sun Records** people. I played along with them and learned guitar.

Interestingly, my dad showed me a number of runs, from C to G to F and so on and one day he came in and he had just heard a song on the radio that played all those runs on this new hit song! By a guy named **Johnny Cash**. And it was *“I Walk the Line”* -- the same guitar stuff that he had shown me and that I was struggling with. And interestingly, my first real guitar lesson, from an outsider, beyond my uncle and my dad, was from Johnny Cash’s guitar player after one of his performances in Brandon, in the old arena, at a Johnny Cash show. Johnny did his thing and everybody rushed to the dressing room after at the back of the arena, but I stayed with the band. I was fascinated by the guitar. They were packing up and **Luther Perkins**, the guitar player, was in the process of packing and I naively asked if I could play his guitar or try his guitar. He said “Yeah, sure!” So *\*laughter\** here I am playing Luther’s guitar at the side of the stage and he was showing me stuff. You know he wasn’t really an accomplished player, but he had a great style that was imitated thousands -- to this day, but . . .

**Sue-On:** But your uncle, and your mom and dad, and your other neighbors had bands too. They used to play at all the different community functions and years later you joined them too didn’t you?

**Bill:** Yeah, I guess my first time on stage musically, would be with my mom and my uncle and some neighbour people who had a sort of reunion of the band they had decades before.

**Sue-On:** Your uncle was in it. What did uncle **Don Campbell** play?

**Bill:** He played guitar.

**Sue-On:** Your mom played piano, somebody else played fiddle. You know it was all these old country dances and country jams where a lot of the musicians came from in later times because they got exposed to all kinds of music.
Bill: There wasn’t much other live music exposure in that area other than a few country bands that came around. Except for some of the bands from **CKY**. It was very common for radio bands to do Saturday morning shows on CKY radio in Winnipeg. And then they’d come out to the country, and they were big stars then of course. They played the **Bend Theatre** in Strathclair. The first group was **Ray Little** and His Gang. He was followed by **Hal Lone Pine**, who had moved from Eastern Canada and settled in Winnipeg for a while. Their guitar player was their fifteen-year-old son, called Hal Lone Pine Jr. His real name later was **Lenny Breau**, who became one of the best guitar players in the world. He was recognized and recorded with **Chet Atkins** and everyone. And their singer, the young singer, was an Elvis impersonator. He was about fifteen too, and that was **Ray St. Germain**.

**Sue-On:** That’s probably all before his [Interviewer’s] time. *\*laughter\**

**Bill:** Well of course, you want the background -- this was **all** before his time!

**Interviewer:** Actually I am a little familiar with the name, Ray St. Germain.

**Sue-On:** I think you were exposed to the music at such an early age and continued it and you learned everything yourself really.

**Bill:** Well it’s a lot easier, a lot easier today, to learn music. On **YouTube** you see all the helps and the hints and everything you need to know, and the self-help books and it’s all there. When I learned guitar you had to really struggle. Once I got a multi-play record player, I would slow the records down to half speed. And you’d try to imitate what you heard. It was very different from today. My first guitar had strings high up, an inch or so above the fret board! And my fingers bled. You hear that story all the time, but they literally did! I later learned I could take the bridge out and lower the whole thing a bit and it made it a little easier. That guitar is in our basement studio now, with my others.

**Sue-On:** You still have all those guitars and the records that you learned to play from. **Elvis** and all those…

**Bill:** Um, stacks of 78s. I can show them to you later. I’ve just taken photos of the records by Elvis, his first records that I have on 78. And I put them on our website.

**Sue-On:** So it goes back a long ways for Bill, but for me, it was totally new until we met and listened to what he played. When we got married it just changed my whole life, right? Full disclosure! *\*general laughter\**

**Bill:** You know, that’s the problem with so many marriages with musicians. The men are on the road and the wife is at home and they’re separated a lot. And we were inseparable -- we wouldn’t have any of that.

**Sue-On:** So I went along, but I wasn’t just gonna sit back and just, you know, wait until he finished or sit in the audience.

**Bill:** *\*laughter\** I remember she sat on some of our parade floats, at first.

**Sue-On:** Yes, at the beginning!

**Bill:** The first summer, and you were with me at the **Austin Threshermans Reunion** and you were on stage just as a sort of decoration, I guess.

**Sue-On:** *\*laughter\** I played the maracas! And I played the tambourine! And those experiences were a good start. But uh . . .

**Bill:** But uh, you played some, you had piano lessons.

**Sue-On:** Yep. Well that didn’t prepare me at all for the kind of music I eventually got into with playing with the guys. Almost every kid had to learn piano, but it was always classical. You were lucky if you got a good teacher who could branch out and could teach you to do stride piano and play by ear, and listen to popular music. But uh no, my teacher wouldn’t have any of that. So, later Bill really had to teach me everything. How to play the piano -- how to chord, and

**Bill:** . . . and how to play drums.

**Sue-On:** Yep, at the beginning, right, it’s true.

**Bill:** So she soon became a major-hot, back beat drummer.

**Sue-On:** Well you have to keep strong to keep up with the guys.

**Bill:** So before long she was in the band and we were doing duets and a couple of solos.

**Sue-On:** I learned a couple of songs and just got into that a little. . .

**Bill:** And it went from there.

**Sue-On:** That was my first exposure to music and the music background. Mine was so different from what he had. So everything was brand new.

**Bill:** But in the early days, there definitely was a Brandon connection, because as I mentioned I saw Johnny Cash, in the **Brandon Arena**. So, occasionally we’d come in and see something like that. And at Brandon Fair, the **Royal American Shows** midway had girlie shows, which were fantastic because they had a *\*smacks table\** black girlie show and a white girlie show, both with hot bands. Like a Las Vegas type thing, and the blacks had guitar players playing through **Ampeg** amps, and really earthy blues stuff behind the dancers. While the whites had more of a **Vegas** pizazz with horns.

**Bill:** But the other thing out of Brandon was the TV. We didn’t get a TV until about ’56, but just before that there was TV in the town. The local electrician had a television set up in his window. And Saturday nights were a huge deal. I wrote about the impact of this phenomenon for a U of M university textbook. Saturday night in these prairie towns were just fantastic. People got together and roamed the streets and there’d be a huge crowd outside the electrician’s window. And he had a speaker, so you could see and hear the hit shows of the day **Jackie Gleason**, and you know all the early shows, the **Ed Sullivan Show**, stuff like that. And the **Honeymooners**. So we used to watch that. They had some local broadcasts, eventually. We were able to pick up CKX-TV Brandon. In fact, the father of a future musician of ours, **Kevin Pahl**’s father was the grain buyer and he put a big TV antenna on top of his grain elevator. People would go up to the top of the elevator to watch television! So it was a real struggle to see this new medium. There were live shows out of Brandon’s **CKX-TV studios**. The one that really struck me was a show featuring a guy named **Russ Gurr**. He was in a cowboy hat and he had the fringe and boots and everything . . . and a **Martin guitar** that he beat the hell out of as a rhythm guitar. I thought “Holeey!” *\*laughter\**

**Sue-On:** He had a band going and the show ran for quite a while didn’t it?

**Bill:** Yeah, he was with a number of others, uh, uh. Roy Brown, Albert Johnson, Gordie Carnahan and more.

**Sue-On:** Local musicians . . .

**Sue-On:** Yeah. So they used to do a show and they would come out to the country halls too, and they did **the Co-op, Neighbor Nights**, or was that later?

**Bill:** I don’t think Russ did the Co-Op shows, but they did play many shows all around the area.

**Sue-On:** I thought he did. Didn’t you do that?

**Bill:** **Barry Forman** and I did those shows for a number of years.

**Sue-On:** But they used to have a group on TV, and then they would come out, usually on the weekends to raise money.

**Bill:** Yes, they did many shows too, much like the shows I mentioned out of Winnipeg, that came around locally. But a few years later, when I was at university, I was staying in a basement room across from the university [Brandon College at that time], and my landlord said *“Hey I know that Russ Gurr guy!”* and *“I’m gonna call him over and introduce ya.”* I said *“Yeah, I wouldn’t mind meeting Russ!”* So he brought him over we got together and we talked music. Then a little later uh, a year or so later, **Barry Forman,** a college classmate, and I put together a **daily noon show** at CKX. And we were booked to play, I think, the first or second **Morris Stampede.** We needed a singer because neither of us were singing at the time. So we hired Russ to come with us and we performed out of the **Rothman’s Booth** on the Stampede grounds. Then, a couple of years later, Russ remembered that he had a contract with Federal Grain Company, to do a series of live shows across Western Canada, to all the major exhibitions. And so Russ hired our band, ***The Country Gentlemen*** which we later named ***The Western Union*** when Sue-On joined.

**Sue-On:** Well a lot of your early experiences had impact on the community. I mean you played the **Brandon Fair Summer Fair** for years. Every summer not only did you guys do the show on CKX-TV, but then during the fair you would do live broadcasts right from the **fairgrounds** from the **Dome**!

**Bill:** Yes the Dome is very much in the news now that it is being restored. Yeah, I’m hopping around a bit, but I’ll try to bring it back to Brandon influence. Barry Forman and I had formed a group around 1962 . . .

**Sue-On:** The Country Gentlemen? Was that them?

**Bill:** Yes – actually the reformed **Country Gentlemen**. We were doing live shows out of CKX-TV, daily noon shows that I had to get permission from my geography prof, **John Tyman**, to attend because I was missing all his noon classes! He gave his notes and stuff.

**Interviewer:** And when would that have been, roughly?

**Bill:** That would be . . .

**Sue-On:** Early 60’s?

**Bill:** Starting in ’62.

**Sue-On:** That’s when I used to watch Bill on TV. And when I went to the fair I saw him live.

**Interviewer:** Just couldn’t get away from him.

**Sue-On:** I know! *\*general laughter\** But you know that’s a long, long exposure. I mean, you know the people in Brandon all knew the guys because they were on every day and week and then to actually see them live. You see them on TV as different -- you know they’re local, but then you go to the fair and there they are every day, for I don’t know how many shows. Did you do one a day, two?

**Bill:** At the fair there were quite a number. They were live broadcasts on radio and television from as I said, the Dome and later on from an outdoor stage. We had guests come in and do the show with us, and sometimes the grandstand performers would come over to promote their shows. We even had a young guy from Ottawa just starting out -- he was a comedian and impersonator. Named **Rich Little**. *\*laughter\**

**Sue-On:** So pretty amazing isn’t it?

**Bill:** He got his start on our show! We’ve launched a lot of stars, I’ll tell ya! *\*laughter\**

**Sue-On:** But you know, out of all the TV shows then, and later after we married and I was on, we did weekly evening shows.

**Bill:** Well later, CKX actually built a stage, a concrete stage, there on the fairgrounds that we played on. It’s still there and it’s now the centre stage of the **Brandon Folk Festival**.

**Bill:** That was built by CKX and we were the first people on that stage, for live shows through the day and the evening. People forget all this stuff -- you know, it’s a different, era.

**Sue-On:** But through all that exposure with all the different communities that have access to the TV shows, we also did a lot of dances in towns all around.

**Bill:** Almost every place in Brandon.

**Sue-On:** Oh yeah. Well not just Brandon but in Manitoba

**Bill:** Well yeah, all over.

**Sue-On:** We would play all the small towns, but also when we came back to live in Brandon to go to university, we used to do the city pubs. We would do the whole circuit. We would go to university during the day and then go and play the bars at night. That’s how we paid our tuitions.

**Bill:** We had 8:30 classes in the morning, but we’d be doing these bars every night before. We backed the first strippers who come into Brandon, actually. *\*laughter from interviewer\** Sue-On played a stripper beat behind them during our ‘breaks’, some break. We had to *\*laughter*\* see the rear end of the strippers and play the bump and grind for them. But occasionally some of the girls came over for a supper and visit with us. They were from Italy, and interesting classy girls from all over the world at that time. Later on they started to groom the local girls.

**Interviewer:** Yeah, because it would have been that transition between burlesque to…

**Bill:** Yeah, it was sort of like a burlesque thing. They wore pasties and g-strings, and that’s as bare as they got. So again, a different time.

Our old **Country Gentlemen** band went from daily shows to weekly shows. And then we were picked up by the Co-op people, the Federated Co-ops. They sponsored us and hired us to do live **Co-Op Neighbor Nights** in all the towns that had Co-Ops. So we, the local ‘stars’ would come in and bring some of our guests off our TV show to help us out. And people like organist **Frank Woodmass --** his son’s our neighbor here -- he played many of the shows.

**Sue-On:** He was also the major organist at one of the churches and night clubs. Another long-time musician.

**Bill:** And **Chris Thor** played the organ as well. His sons went on to become pretty well known musicians.

**Sue-On:** You played with quite a few of the local musicians in various combinations. We had a bunch of physiotherapists from England and they were visually impaired -- one guy was legally blind. But you played in a band with those guys, for some time.

**Bill:** We were the **Blue Angels**. In those early days while at university, before we were married, I was playing with a lot of bands: a jazz band, country bands, jam sessions, rock bands and a horn band where we sat with music stands in front of us -- sitting down and reading music and we had to learn chords and arrangements.

**Sue-On:** So really, you know, different groups of people were exposed to all these musicians all over the community -- it goes back a long ways.

**Bill:** Our rock band, the Dovermen, were hired to open a show at the **Winnipeg Auditorium**. We opened the show, **A Galaxy of Stars**, and then we backed a band called the Newbeats who did “*I like bread and butter*!” in falsetto. It was a big hit. *\*laughter\** It’s still around as a Golden Oldie. Then **Roger Miller** came on. He had a whole string of hits at that time. He was actually billed as the star of the show because he had so many current big hits. But he was swamped by another more dynamic act that always closed the show and that was **The Everly Brothers**. They were just fantastic. In fact, I do the Everly Brothers website for their museum where I’ve shared all sorts of stuff.

**MORE ROOTS :: BAR WARS :: DANCE HALLS :: MUSIC TOURS**

**Sue-On:** Well music just goes through everything. Not just a matter of playing the music, I mean now Bill’s bringing all the stuff in, in the writing of his webpages and our book and everything. But all through, you know, even with the bars that we used to play. There are a lot of people that we know who still remember when they were the Country Gentlemen. Then I invaded the group and we had to change the name to **The Western Union**. We couldn’t be the Country Gentlemen anymore.

**Bill:** I was a fan of **Zane Grey** westerns, so when we found his book called *Western Union* . . . Hey, that fits! We were a union of four musicians at that time: Sue-On and I, Barry Forman, and **Jake Kroeger**.

**Sue-On:** Our music changed, depending on the crowd. You know we had to, depending on whether we were playing a dance or a pub. We were doing country, rock and roll, rockabilly, it didn’t matter. But the Brandon scene was really a good one for us. It took us into a lot of different things and gave us a lot of exposure and we met a lot of really great people. Even our professors used to come to the bar when we played and they were a great bunch.

**Bill:** And we played a lot of weekend dances and socials and things like that in all the major venues, and more formal things like weddings, anniversaries, and graduations.

**Sue-On:** Another thing too were all the **Lions, Kinsmen and Rotarian** functions. They had many big gatherings for conventions and they were always fun.

**Bill:** Yeah they were good too. The local service groups.

**Sue-On:** Music really put us through university and has given us a lot of opportunities -- to do different things in the community and in fact, all over Manitoba, Canada, US and everywhere.

**Bill:** And then eventually over to **England**.

**Sue-On:** Yeah. Yeah it plays a big role in our lives! Nearly everything that we’ve done has been opened to us through contacts with music, you know oversees, etc. Even the teaching. We used music when we were teaching in high school and at university. Bill did different things for the professors there because they don’t always have the resources to do different genres, so he began to integrate the history of rock and roll. Music really does everything for you if you give it the opportunity, if you’re given the opportunity to do that.

**Bill:** I mentioned that Winnipeg show with the Everly Brothers, and out of that came **a Western Canada Tour** with Canada’s Elvis, singer **Bobby Curtola** from the Lakehead. I mention that because we had some great shows with him in this area and we played the **Brandon Roller Rink** a lot – even New Years dances.

**Sue-On:** Now that was a very big gathering place for the teens at our time. We still have people, who remember it well. I think there’s the group called the Brandon Girls that talk about the music. Bobby actually did a surprise appearance with them. If you talk to people who are our age now about the **Roller Rink**, they all remember that time and what an impact it had on their lives. They didn’t have access to a lot of other kinds of bands, but Bill and the guys were doing music from the **British Invasion** in those days. Bill, was friends with Chad Allan and the guys from the Guess Who at that time and they came into Brandon often.

**Bill:** They weren’t the **Guess Who** then, they were **Chad Allen and the Reflections**. They played all the early Beatles stuff, which we were doing as well because of the blind physiotherapist that I mentioned – **Alan Jones**, who worked at the Assiniboine Hospital.

**Sue-On:** He was from England.

**Bill:** Yes, from England and his brother used to send over pop information and records by this crazy group of musicians with funny haircuts and stupid name called **The Beatles**. *\*general chuckling\** So, I learned the records and we did a lot of that in this area as well. I mentioned Bobby Curtola, well, after that tour with him, myself and the guys in our band all had careers and we couldn’t go on the road with him as a backup band. He wanted us to tour the states and Vegas -- he was in Vegas for ten years. So he picked up another Brandon band, and then another Brandon band after that. So, that was a launching for a number of Brandon musicians that sort of came out of that situation.

**Sue-On:** We had a big reunion with him a few years back when Bobby was in town. He lived here for a while starting a business, so we put together a **Rock ‘n’ Roll Reunion**.

**Bill:** He had the old Brandon bands, us and **The Martells** with Ray St. Germain as an opening act.

**Sue-On:** That was a big event in the **Keystone Manitoba Room** -- not quite the roller rink but it was an exciting venue in front of a huge crowd. It was a lot of fun.

**Bill**: I mentioned the roller rink. It was behind the old Brandon Arena that I mentioned earlier. I don’t know if everyone remembers where the **Brandon Arena** was located. . .

**Sue-On:** Which is now, the new **Police Station**.

**Bill:** Before that there was a **Safeway**. And now the police station.

**Interviewer**: Oh, on Tenth street there?

**Sue-On:** Yep.

**Bill:** Just off Tenth Street. But the roller rink was a large building behind that.

**Interviewer:** Oh wow, okay. I think that’s just on the south end of the police station?

**Bill and Sue-On:** It would be, yes. Ah, yes, yep, yep.

**Interviewer:** I think that’s just housing now if I remember correct.

**Bill:** Yeah, the arena and roller rink are long gone.

**Sue-On:** But they used to have a lot of dances.

**Bill:** The rink owner, **Fred Smith**, was our rock band’s manager for a while. Oh man, he used to bring great bands in. They had **The** **Ventures** – we were the house band so we chatted and got together with them backstage. They were the band that did *“Walk, Don’t Run”.* In fact the, **The Fireballs**, another guitar group, we had on our TV show. And they had blues bands coming in, and a country singer, or a rock and roll singer at that time, named **Conway Twitty**. *\*general laughter\** He became a major country star sometime after that. It was sort of a gathering place for young people and a place to expose young people to bands from out of town.

**Sue-On**: It certainly made an impact on him right? *\*laughter*\* All the music that he’s been doing -- all the different bands and influences -- all the way back, you know from his own family and then, coming into university and . . . music was his downfall really! *\*general laughter\** For university at least! But, it was taking him to other things …

**Bill:** Well, I took **Guitar 101** *\*laughter\** But eventually went to teach back in hometown Strathclair on teaching permit. And, then after Sue-On and I were married, we came back into Brandon-- finished the first degree and got a silver medal and two more degrees. And Sue-On earned two degrees.

**Sue-On:** The guitar was useful when he was teaching in Strathclair too. With his guitar background and playing in a band, he had a big group of students who wanted to learn guitar. What a great group. How many did you have -- about 12 or 13, 14? And you know, they would play every day. Every week they had a big group session together. Some of those kids went on to some big venues and all of them certainly learned a useful skill.

**Bill:** They pursued it -- a lot of them.

**Sue-On:** Yeah, and they have that as something of a hobby. So, that’s an impact. In schools you can use music to teach the lyrics -- it’s better than some of the old poetry . . . ah, poetry that we did with Shakespeare and great old stuff, but you know with the kids in school it’s often good to use songs they’re familiar with.

**Bill:** And then, of course from our immersion in the technology in, the electronics and stuff, I was able to integrate more technology into teaching. And eventually was drafted, uh, recruited by Brandon University, to the **Faculty of Education**, to work as a prof, teaching these integration methods to other teachers.

**Bill:** I guess we’re hopping across 50 years here, you need a timeline *\*laughter\**

**Sue-On:** I know, you need to maybe follow your guidelines a little bit here! *\*Bill laughs\** Because you know we can ramble on forever -- we’re, just going everywhere. But, yeah.

**Interviewer:** Okay, maybe we’ll just kind of take it back a little bit. So when was the first time you ever performed on stage, Bill?

**Bill:** It would be with my family band that had that reunion I mentioned.

**Sue-On:** In Strathclair?

**Bill:** It was in Strathclair Hall

**Sue-On:** And it would be in the ‘50s?

**Bill:** Probably 1960. I think I was in grade 11 then, just about to go into grade 12. My grandmother, **Katie Campbell**, later bought me my first electric guitar and it went on from there.

**Sue-On:** He hasn’t stopped . . . about 30 guitars later. . .

**Bill:** Yes, there are 30 guitars on the walls of the studio downstairs. *\*general laughter\**

**Sue-On:** I haven’t really stopped him, in fact I contributed to his addiction – many of our Christmases were Guitar Christmases. *\*chuckle\**

**Bill:** I did a lot of freelancing in those early university days and around that time, again my grandmother helped me buy my first really good guitar, a **Gretsch**, a **Chet Atkins Nashville Guitar**. And, in one of those freelancing gigs, the guitar was stolen out of the car after a gig. I had mentioned that I knew some of the guys in the early Reflections/Guess Who. **Randy Bachman**, who was a great Gretsch fan saw the guitar on Main Street in Winnipeg in a pawn shop. So I turned the police onto that and I got it back six months later.

**Interviewer:** There you go.

**Bill:** Something that never happen, you usually never see them again.

**Sue-On:** But he still has it.

**Interviewer:** So maybe that’s a question as well um, in terms of actually getting a hold of musical equipment, or just instruments even, were there any difficulties around this back in the day?

**Bill:** Yeah, it’s always a problem getting money for good gear. My first good amp I bought from a future music cohort, **Larry Clark**, at **Brandon Musical** on **Rosser Avenue**. **Mr. Ghidoni** owned Brandon Musical. His granddaughter now is **Chris Ghidoni** who’s a fine musician.

**Sue-On:** A popular blues singer and guitarist.

**Bill:** She worked for us for in our restaurant for a while and also played at many of our **Soo’s Saturday night Blues Jams**. She does amazing stuff.

**Sue-On:** You know, it’s the influence. When we had the restaurant we would have jam sessions in the banquet/showroom in the evening. Many Brandon musicians, including Chris’s dad, used to come in regularly.

**Bill:** **Vaughn Thorstenson**, son of **Kris Thor** who we mentioned earlier, also worked for us and was a staple musician at the jams. He was working in our kitchen.

**Sue-On:** Yeah, as sous chef.

**Bill:** Our sons also worked in the restaurant and were into music, so we had a little band called the **Soo’s Blues Wokkers***! \*general laughter\** W O K K E R. Now we’re getting up into the next century.

**Sue-On:** We bought things from other music stores in Brandon. There was another one? **P.A. Kennedy**?

**Bill:** Well a lot of our records came from the Kennedy building, where our son, **Ja-On** now has his **Reactive Massage Clinic**.

**Bill:** They used to sell records and instruments and all sorts of stuff. And they had a record booth there where you could go in and play the 78 RPM records before buying. Like was still done in England when we toured there in the late ‘70s.

**Sue-On:** Well there are still some places today -- bookstores where you can have a listen to CDs.

**Bill:** Well it’s a lot easier now.

**Sue-On:** Yeah. And then there was **Johnson Sound**, he had a place where he built amps and speakers *\*voices jumbled together\*.*

**Bill:** And he had a dance hall called the **Palladium**.

**Sue-On:** It was on Rosser?

**Bill:** Yes, it’s a church now. But when Albert started to make amps he used the Palladium space to build **Johnson Ampfliers**, and some of our first good PA speakers were Johnson speaker columns. I used to go in and see Albert quite often, he played a little bit of guitar…

**Sue-On:** He played in a band though didn’t he? A big band?

**Bill:** Oh yeah, he was a major, major musician. In the early CKX-TV shows he led one of the bands out of Brandon. So boy, we’re hopping around here! *\*laughter\**

**Sue-On:** Brandon has brought out a lot of musicians…

**Bill:** I’d drop in because he had always had some guitars in the window. And he had this stupid looking Hofner guitar -- an electric bass that looked like a fiddle. Later on, anyone familiar with the Beatles knows that Paul McCartney had such a Hofner bass and I have one now in our studio. Anyway, he got his Hofner guitars I think from Germany. They just weren’t selling too well, they weren’t considered all that cool at the time. But boy I sure came to love the bass.

**Sue-On:** You wanted one? *\*laughter\**

**Bill:** *\*laughter\** Well I didn’t want one then, but later on I sure did! *\*laughter from Interviewer\**

**Sue-On:** We also had the country music store, run by **Wayne Russell**. He had a big, record shop, on 10th street?

**Bill:** That was a few years later, the **Country Music Centre**.

**Sue-On:** You were able to get any kind of record there. I used to go in and order things for Bill for Christmas. I always went in to see Wayne! He wasn’t really a musician, but he really knew music. And I said *“Okay, what’s new? What would Bill like?”* And he would *\*laughter from Bill\** bring it out and then I would take it home.

**Bill:** Wayne was from Winnipeg, and he grew up near **Chad Allan**, the founder of the **Guess Who** and **Brave Belt**, which later became **BTO**. Chad was a major influence in all those. But Wayne had a contact in England and he used to have tapes sent over. All the early rock stuff and things would come over like *“Shakin’ All Over”* from England. It was the Guess Who’s first really big hit when they recorded it. But they had that contact through Wayne. He moved to Brandon and is a major source of music knowledge in Brandon. He’s written a lot of liner notes and all sorts of articles.

**Sue-On:** So that’s where we used to get a lot of music and new records that were coming out. If you were wanting to learn new songs or whatever, that was the place.

**Bill:** I mentioned the **P. A. Kennedy Building** that our son now occupies, and the record booths there. I was raised with 78s before the 45s and the LPs -- back when we had a turntable on top of our big ol’ Westinghouse radio cabinet. Well, then Elvis came in and there started to be 45s and LPs available and I felt, *“Boy if I could only play them!”* We went in to Kennedy’s one fall and my mom said *“Well here, why don’t you go play that Elvis LP*?” So I played it, and oh wow that’s fantastic – if only I had a turntable that would plaiy it. Little did I know that she bought it *\*laughter from Interviewer\** and put it away for Christmas. And my parents bought an RCA portable record player that played all 78, 45 and 33 1/3 speeds. That came out of Brandon you know, so, everything sort of comes back to Brandon in a way. We lived a hundred kilometres away, but Brandon was the big city.

**Sue-On:** Had everything there. *\*laughter from Bill\** How could we know that we would end up here in our later years? You know, it’s quite amazing.

**Bill:** But that was another connection with Brandon for sure -- there were the two big record stores at the time, P.A. Kennedy and Brandon Musical. And I used to hang out there anytime we came to Brandon. As I mentioned, I bought my first really good amp from Brandon Musical, and then the first LP from P. A. Kennedy.

**Sue-On:** Well you took one of your first music courses from the **BU Music Department** too, yeah?

**Bill:** *\*chuckle\** Yeah.

**Sue-On:** He never played the music he was supposed to play. He used to *\*begins to laugh\** take his own rock records in there. They had their own headphones and listening labs there. It was mostly classical, I think.

**Bill:** Well in the early days stereo was really just coming in on LPs, and I was taking a music course from **Lorne Watson** who was a real institution in Brandon. It was called **The History of Western Music**. But it wasn’t country/western or cowboy/western. It was a history of opera and classical music in the Western world. We didn’t know China existed -- it had been around 2000, 5000 years before, but our history books know nothing about China -- it’s all the West. Anyway, I access to the music building labs -- it isn’t the music building there now.

**Sue-On:** What is there now? I’m not sure, is it administrative? The one on the other side of the, Education Building and the Nursing.

**Interviewer**: Uh, the WMCA?

**Sue-On:** It’s just a one storey, but maybe it’s not even there any more, you know I never even noticed.

**Bill:** Anyway, I had license to listen in the labs with headsets. *“Wow, that’s something else!”* in stereo through earphones – quite an epiphany when you are so used to scratchy records and mono sound. So I used to take in **Dinah Washington** records and **Frank Sinatra** things, and **Johnny Cash** and -- just a real eclectic mix. Even a bluegrass record with **Don Reno and Red Smiley** -- my tastes covered the whole spectrum. I used to sit in there for hours and listen to *this “Wow, this is great stuff!“*

**Sue-On:** Well every once in a while you would play what you were supposed to.

**Bill:** Yeah! *\*laughter\**

**Sue-On:** Just before exams or whatever. *\*general laughter\** But he goes back a long ways you know in terms of the music in Brandon.

**Bill:** Well of course now the new **Music Building** is a much bigger place.

**Sue-On:** Oh yes it’s pretty amazing.

**Bill:** When the Guess Who were given honourary doctorates, I really pushed to have Chad Allan accepted because he had formed the Guess Who. But it didn’t work although he’s been inducted into the **Order of Manitoba** this month. Anyway, maybe it’s finally paid off.

**Sue-On:** The convocation is where they would have given it.

**Bill:** A doctorate for all the Guess Who members with Burton Cummings and so on. BU knew I had a lot of Guess Who records and memorabilia so I did a whole display of Guess Who records and tapes and pictures and all that stuff.

**Sue-On:** A lot of memorabilia.

**Bill:** In the show window. . .

**Sue-On:** Just by the front office there. When you go in.

**Bill:** So, sort of a Brandon connection I guess!

**Sue-On:** Well yes, I’d think so. You know there’s always something there. And certainly you know we have so many collections of different things that we can pull out for exhibits.

**Interviewer:** Oh yeah, especially with such a, broad taste of music too. So many different experiences to draw from.

**Sue-On:** It would be kind of neat to do something in the Dome building again you know, maybe go back to those days.

**Bill:** Because there had a studio set up in the exhibition building. I think it’s the one they are restoring now.

**Sue-On:** I think so.

**Interviewer:** The Dome building, yep.

**Bill:** I think it’s that one because they had something else in the other building. But the Brandon Fair used to be a big deal. Country folks would flock in -- I guess it still is a major draw a lot of country people.

**Sue-On**: But they don’t have as much of a local anymore, as they bring in big names from other places.

**Bill:** Well they have the Battle of the Bands -- the whole lineup with local young rock bands

**Sue-On:** That’s true.

**Interviewer:** Yeah it’s a lot of local bands that go to that actually.

**Bill:** I judged that event a couple of times.

**Interviewer:** Okay. Yeah some friends of mine actually just played in it this past year and got second so.

**Sue-On:** Yeah I didn’t realize that they had that at the fair I always thought the Battle of the Bands was a just Minnedosa Rock Fest thing.

**MEET THE KIDS**

**Bill:** Our kids have played with the **CP Express band --** all three kids have been through that **Crocus Plains music** program and they used to play in the big top tent on the fairgrounds.

**Sue-On:** Yeah our kids have been exposed to music right through and they’ve gotten into many different instruments. Our eldest, **Ja-On**, played the sax and our second son, **Robin,** played trombone and then he got into drums and bass when he played with us.

**Bill:** They used to come to our jams at Soo’s and there was an overabundance of drummers, so . . .

**Sue-On:** So Robin decided to play bass as well as drums.

**Bill:** He wanted to learned bass, so he did. So he’s our third guy in our band now. Through the years we’ve kept the band to a trio wherever possible and had numerous “third men.” They were a series of local guys. Two of them have been former students and they have gone on to excellent music careers.

**Sue-On:** And then our daughter, **China-Li**, she didn’t want to play a horn instrument so she took piano and harp lessons. Again, a local Brandon connection with her instructor **Ann Germani** and her music studio. There was another fellow that had a long connection with us and with Brandon: **Gordie, Carnahan.**

**Bill:** Gordie Carnahan was on those early TV shows with Russ Gurr as we mentioned. And Gordie’s wife, **Pearl**, plays piano. China was fascinated with the freedom offered by play-by-ear piano so she also took a second style of piano lessons.

**Sue-On**: Old style by-ear stride piano, so you know our daughter China had the exposure to Ann as well as to Pearl, so she can play both styles of piano. She also took up harp with Ann Germani, and then she took up bagpipes from a local fella who used to live down our street . . .

**Bill:** . . . **Don Roy**, a former **Black Watch** piper.

**Sue-On:** So she plays all these and you know when our kids and their partners come home, music binds them together.

**Bill:** We have pictures of everyone, but we don’t have many videos. China-Li did a television local access thing when she was very young. Gordie Carnahan played fiddle and little China-Li was chording behind him on the piano.

**Sue-On:** *\*laughter\** With her feet dangling. . .

**Bill:** Dangling off the piano bench. Sadly, Gordie has passed on.

**Sue-On:** But all this kind of music, you know influences, is great for kids if they have exposure. It’s not just listening to rap and much of the latest kind of music, but if they can get into all of these other styles -- and have access to some of the older people who can do this kind of music, it is great!

**Bill:** You know the Brandon schools have been good with their music programs. They keep big bands alive really with their training. Back where I grew up we didn’t even have a gym in the Strathclair school. We used to play football outside all winter! Tackle football out in the snowbanks!

**Interviewer:** That’d toughen you up real fast. *\*general laughter\**

**Bill:** Even the girls, came out. There was no real playground.

**Sue-On:** But you look at the music programs now that are offered by all the high schools and the middle schools, and they get to learn to play all kinds of different instruments. Not just band music, but they play some jazz and they play some pop stuff. The kids have much more opportunity to learn now and the kids are learning so fast. The schools bands have such a great influence on these kids. If they have a musical instrument they seem less likely to get into trouble. And they have a special friend for the rest of their lives. If they have an instrument in their hands they don’t need much else.

**Interviewer:** There you go.

**Sue-On:** They stay out of trouble, we hope. *\*laughter\** The musicians teaching these band groups all have specialties themselves, but they teach the kids to play every kind of instrument – it’s really quite a skill.

**Bill:** Our daughter China-Li had a great opportunity to pursue harp. There aren’t a lot of harp players around, or there haven’t been, and the symphonies are always in need of harpists, but now she . . .

**Sue-On:** . . . she doesn’t have the time. She graduated from the **U of M Medical school**.

**Bill:** She’s a real disappointment, you know. She could be playing in bars and all sorts of music places with her talent . . . *\*chuckle from Sue-On\** But, now . . .

**Sue-On:** She decided instead to become a doctor.

**Bill:** Yes, she’s a doctor. She became an MD, five years ago, was accepted into Medical school at age 20. And now she’s just finishing her five year specialist in radiology, you know, five years after the MD. She’s about to fly to Boston for a year on a fellowship at a Harvard hospital.

**Sue-On:** And she’s a Brandon University alumni. That says a lot about Brandon University.

**Interviewer:** There you go.

**Bill:** One of the reasons she was accepted so quickly was that she was working at a multitude of health care jobs, plus St. John Ambulance and working at the hospital cleaning instruments . . . but, also the university offered cadavers in one of the courses.

**Sue-On:** Here in Brandon.

**Bill:** One of the few around

**Sue-On:** One of two. . .

**Bill:** . . . that have cadavers. She had all this going for her plus very high grades and excellent interviews so they accepted her at age 20 into med school.

**Sue-On:** Our whole family is BU and it’s been a great experience for all of us.

**Bill:** All five of us, yep.

**Sue-On:** Even our daughter-in-law received her BN, Bachelor of Nursing, from Brandon here. She’s not into the music but she enjoys the listening. *\*laughter\**

**Bill:** Okay we’ve de-railed ya here, Richard. *\*laughter\**

**Sue-On:** Again.

**TOURING YEARS: PRAIRIES ~ USA ~ UK**

**Interviewer:** Hey no worries, I’m enjoying this immensely. Let’s take it back -- we maybe could go into your touring days, especially around the Manitoba area. Where were some of the big spots. I understand Brandon would have been one of the major areas but, did you do a lot of touring of the small towns too?

**Sue-On:** Oh, everywhere!

**Bill:** A lot of the arenas . . . a lot of arena dances and shows.

**Sue-On:** All of the graduations, high school and Winnipeg University graduations, exhibitions, -- we did so many of the fairs. We did music festivals -- we even did the one in Winnipeg on Portage Avenue, years ago.

**Bill:** Yeah we did the forerunner for what is it now Folklorama.

**Interviewer:** Oh in Winnipeg.

**Bill:** Well, this would be in the…

**Sue-On:** Seventies?

**Bill:** ’70, ’71. We were hired to play the stage . . .

**Sue-On:** By Eatons.

**Bill:** They closed off **Portage Avenue**, and they put up a stage in the middle of the street and there were curb-to-curb, wall-to-wall people all the way down Portage. We played that and then we rushed to the **Peace River country** in Alberta where we had to play next day.

**Sue-On:** We were on tour with a company called Federal Grain at that time with Russ Gurr. We would hit every fair, exhibition and rodeo in every town and city that had a Federal Grain elevator. We would travel after the teaching year through July and August across Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta all the way up to Dawson, Creek, BC. We did this from ’66 to ‘73. But during **Manitoba Centennial** year I think we played a zillion small towns here in the province.

**Bill:** Manitoba Centennial – yeah – and every town had a parade.

**Sue-On**: We played on a float during the parades and then did shows after.

**Bill:** In some of the little places we’d go around three times. *\*laughter\**

**Sue-On:** We were working with Russ Gurr at that. We had a portable parade float that also converted to a stage. Russ had written a theme song for the **Federal Grain Company**, so that was the song that we had to sing, aaaaallll the way through every parade – non-stop. Every town! *\*laughter\** But it was fun!

**Bill:** They were good because there were many Federal Grain Elevators -- they are defunct now, taken over by Pool. The Federal Grain Company wanted promotion, so they would send us to exhibitions, fairs and rodeos and major exhibitions right across the West. And they gave us a bus and stage . . . and a whole lotta perks . . .

**Sue-On:** . . . with all the advertising with our names on the bus and stage and a new adventure at every stop.

**Bill:** The backdrop and the sides of the stage would fold down and we would stand on that for a parade, put it up and it would display **“Russ Gurr and the Western Union”** with all our names on there. We came into the exhibitions as **The Federal Grain Train**.

**Sue-On:** Of course every fair would have a midway with rides and everything. Portage and Brandon were two of the bigger ones in Manitoba and also Carman, McCreary, Dauphin, etc.

**Bill:** And Morris.

**Sue-On:** After the Grandstand show we would we put on our own show at the entrance. The Grandstands used to feature full variety shows in those years. People would come out and we would highjack them with our own show before they found their way to the Midway.

**Bill:** It would be dark by then and we’d have lights and . . .

**Sue-On:** . . .and a big sound system.

**Bill:** We would be at the entrance to the Grandstand so they would come out and have a free show and people would be hanging from trees, rooftops and everywhere. The carny people waiting for the rubes to come were just biting their nails out of fury.

**Sue-On:** Because they weren’t going to the…

**Bill:** . . . because we were taking all the crowd! *\*laughter\** And we did that for about seven years as a summer tour . . . as well as some agricultural promotional shows for Treflan – an agricultural chemical company.

**Sue-On:** For the Treflan shows the company would set up a stage and a barbeque for hundreds of farmers that they bused in, and we would do a show. That was the draw to bring farmers in and was part of their advertising. They would then show off chemical test plots in surrounding grain fields.

**Bill:** It didn’t have the pizzazz of the fairs.

**Sue-On:** It wasn’t quite the same…

**Bill:** After the Fairs and Exhibition shows we would jam with the grandstand entertainers and the carneys and local musicians. This was a good introduction to the grandstand circuit and led to our being hired by **Bardine Productions** -- American promoters out of **Portland, Oregon**. They were former vaudevillians who hired acts for all the Grandstands in Canada and the **American Northwest**. So they hired **Sue-On and I, and Barry Forman** to perform on grandstands in the US.

**Sue-On:** They had seen our shows and we got to be good friends with all their people so Cindy and Charlie Bardine asked *“Would you be interested in auditioning at an* ***International Fairboards Convention****?”* So we auditioned at the event in Lethbridge. Stiff competition from Nashville, Vegas and LA, but we did OK. We were hired to do Grandstand tours across NW America.

**Bill:** Yeah, Grand Ole Opry and Vegas show people and everything. It was fantastic!

**Sue-On:** Our tour started across Montana and all that area.

**Bill:** The promoters wanted to bill us as ***Sue-On and the Hillmans from Canada***.

**Sue-On:** Yeah.

**Bill:** Great tours. A former Strathclair student of ours, **Kerry Morris**, would play drums for half of each of the Canadian shows, but he couldn’t come to the states at that time. We wanted a drummer because we opened as a trio -- Sue-On played drums, and Barry on bass and fiddle, and myself on guitar. Then, halfway through the show, Sue-On would come up front and we would do our shtick together. And so we had to hire local American drummers to fill in.

**Sue-On:** But over all the years you know, I first started off with just chording on an electric piano. We bought a Hohner and started to learn songs. I remember debuting at I think a St. Lazare first of July celebration.

**Bill:** Yeah.

**Sue-On:** One of the first songs was ahhhhhh, must have been **Nancy Sinatra’s** *“These Boots Are Made For Walking”*. *\*chuckle from Interviewer\** And then ahhhhhh . . .

**Bill:** And you had the boots too.

**Sue-On:** . . . and a **Leroy Van Dyke** song. . .

**Bill:** *“Walk On By”.*  We had worked with him at the fair that year in Brandon.

**Sue-On:** So then, I learned a couple of songs by **Petula Clark**, and after that, when we came in to Brandon playing the bars we needed a drummer, so I went over to the drums and Bill showed me a few different rhythms, rimshots and things. Because we didn’t have room for a full kit on the small pub stages we started with a stand-up drum set-up.

**Bill:** We’d been down to the **Grand Ole Opry** in Nashville and they didn’t want drums on stage at that time, but finally they permitted . . .

**Sue-On**: One snare . . .

**Bill:** . . . a stand-up snare, with a high- hat and ride cymbal. So we sent an order to a music instrument wholesaler through my dad’s **Marshall Wells hardware** store. Then we worked on a back beat and different rhythms and . . . voila.

**Sue-On:** So that was what I played for a long time until we started to play for a lot of dances and we needed the bigger set. Adapting to a full kit served us well on the US and UK tours. When we went to England on our first tour we were one of the first country rock bands that toured over there. We couldn’t take many instruments with us on the plane so we had to pick up the equipment there. But from then on we used that original kit for all our North American gigs – for many decades.

**Bill:** You never went back to the stand-up drums.

**Sue-On:** It could never be, can never be. *\*laughter from Bill\** But that worked great for a start.

**Bill:** We mentioned Alan Jones, who worked at the Assiniboine, he was a blind physiotherapist from England who used to bring stuff over to us from England. Well, he had gone back to visit his family in Northern England one year and he “saw” a promoter’s office in **Middlesbrough**. He went in and said, *“Hey, I know some people who would fit quite nicely over here*.” So, before long we’d set up a full, 30 day tour in England in **workingman’s clubs** through Alan. So in ’56, we went over there.

**Sue-On:** ‘56? . . . nah. . . ‘76

**Bill:** *\*laughter\** Oh, *\*unintelligible\**

**Sue-On:** I wasn’t even here then! *\*laughter from Bill\** I was still in Hong Kong! *\*laughter\**

**Bill:** We had a fab tour, we were travelling about through the day and then . . .

**Sue-On:** . . . we played in workingmen’s clubs.

**Bill:** A different club every night! And the odd Legion and disco. It went really well, and then at the end of the 30 day tour we went down to London where I set up a recording session at Gooseberry Studios.

**12 RECORD ALBUMS: CANADA ~ ENGLAND**

**Sue-On:** The London session wasn’t our first time recording, so we had some knowledge about it all. I think, our first recording session was in Winnipeg a few years and about six albums back. Do you remember what year that was?

**Bill:** 1970 I think.

**Sue-On:** 1970? And that was a studio on King Edward Street -- it was called . . .

**Bill:** N,n,n,no!

**Sue-On:** Wasn’t it King Edward? Oh no I’m thinking of **Century 21 Studio**. *\*laughter from Bill\** Which one that was the first one?

**Bill:** It was a portable studio for **Galaxy Records**. He didn’t have a real studio -- he had a portable unit set up in a room at . . .

**Sue-On:** . . . the **Grain Exchange Building**!

**Bill:** The Grain Exchange on Lombard Street. We recorded it there. We weren’t too happy with it.

**Sue-On:** We were so inexperienced.

**Bill:** A Brandon connection there, too, because the **CKX photographer** took our picture for the album cover. We were standing in front of a CKX-TV camera in their studio. These records were distributed all over . . . they even reached stores in **Chicago**.

**Sue-On:** Well this guy had a lot of Ukrainian artists too, on his label . . . you know, Ukrainian bands. So, any place there was a large Ukrainian group of people he was able to distribute there. That was our first experience in recording -- we were really, really green! *\*laughter\**

**Bill:** From then on, we took complete control and financed and handled everything.

**Sue-On:** We didn’t have any control over that one. Yeah, we just went in and I think we got some records in exchange for the playing. We recorded 12 songs -- Jake and Barry, you and I -- we did three songs each. After that we decided that we wanted to do our own.

**Bill:** We have a total of 12 albums now and eleven of them we had complete control over. We’ve never had a grant, we’ve never had any financial assistance from anywhere – or any one.

**Sue-On:** We dood it all ourselves. The next album was at **King Edward Street** . . . was that **Oakwood Studio**?

**Bill:** The actual recording studio part was called **Century 21**.

**Sue-On:** Yeah. And later they built a huge, beautiful, new studio. We recorded albums there later. Each time you go in and record you learn something new.

**Bill:** We did three English tours and recorded an album over there at the end of each tour.

**Sue-On:** So we did the first UK one was in London and the guys were great. After our sessions in Winnipeg we sort of knew what sounds we wanted.

**Bill:** Yeah it was quite a good studio, there was nothing locally, nothing in Brandon at that time.

**Sue-On:** There are now, you know there are a couple . . .

**Bill:** Now both **Del Clark** and **Bill Starling** have studios here.

**Bill:** We have all our master tapes -- the two inch tapes, and the quarter inch tapes – some are 16 track, 24 track, as well as 8 and 2 track. When it came time to convert all these tracks from tape and vinyl to CD we took some of the masters to **Del Clark’s Studio One** where we mixed them to digital format and I sent them to Toronto for CD pressing. The first professional CD out of Brandon.

**Sue-On:** We used to bring our stuff back from England and remix here if we needed to and do the pressing here – mainly through **Columbia/CBS Records** in Toronto. We designed all the covers and promos and had them printed here with **Leech Printing**. A new experience for them.

**Bill:** **Terence Fowler** did some of the photography in his Brandon studio, but I did most of it

**Sue-On:** He did great, very, very nice work. We tried to use local businesses where possible. Most were excited to tackle this new and very specialized type of work.

**Bill:** All of our covers were pressed at Leech Printing here. They’d never done an album before.

**Sue-On:** *\*chuckle\** The first one they did had the wrong measurements.

**Bill:** *\*beginning to laugh\** For some reason they made it 12” by 14”! You know albums are actually 12” by 12” for the old vinyl. So they had run off 1,000 of these on heavy cardboard sleeves.

**Sue-On:** They were beautiful posters for us – we were glad we got them.

**Bill:** So, they said “Well, will you take them off our hands for 50 bucks?” So we got a thousand of these beautiful, colour placards. We had them slice them into poster form.

**Sue-On:** Yeah, they came in really handy.

**Bill:** We also had them do glossies, cards, promo sheets, 45 EP sleeves, all our cassettes and even 8-Track and LP labels.

**Sue-On:** Yes, all kinds of work.

**Bill:** And later they did all our CD inserts too -- this was all from Leech Printing here. So again, we’ve relied on Brandon quite a bit. And introduced a lot of stuff here. I think ours was the first CD back in the early ‘90s that Del Clark had ever worked on in his studio. And it was the first type of that stuff that Leech Printing had done in their print shop. So we introduced much of this locally. We’re off track again, well almost.

**THREE ENGLAND TOURS :: UK RECORDINGS**

**Interviewer:** *\*laughter*\* Hey like I say this is quite alright! Maybe we can take you back a little bit to your English tour. How did you find the crowds . . . were they really receptive to how you guys were performing?

**Bill:** Well they were leery of the accents. *\*general laughter\** “Damn Yanks!” *\*general laughter\** “ Aah, yaagh!” “Oh but we’re from the colonies!” “Oh. . .

**Interviewer:** *\*in a mock English accent\** “Oh jolly good, very good!”

**Bill:** . . . “Well then, that’s great!”

**Sue-On:** But everything was so different for us there you know. We picked up a sponsorship for the equipment from **Traynor** – a Toronto amplifier company -- because the AC power over there is different and we didn’t want to take heavy amps on the plane. I think you took your guitar over.

**Bill:** **Telecaster guitar** and **Hohner keyboard bass**.

**Sue-On:** We had to pick up our gear: amps, PA, drums, and everything after we got there. So we started in the southern part of England at **Bromley, Kent**. **Wing Music** store had the Traynor gear that had been promised us.

**Bill:** **Punk music!** We met a mob of popular punk musicians hanging out at the store. It was sort of a punk hotbed. . . HQ. Quite an experience since the punk movement was just starting and was rather strange for us at the time.

**Interviewer:** Right!

**Sue-On:** We packed the gear and squeezed into our rental van with all of our equipment and we drove away . . . on the wrong side of the road.

**Bill:** To the north of England where we played that night.

**Sue-On:** **Middlesbrough** wayyyy in the north. . .

**Bill:** . . . where we had to find our first venue.

**Sue-On:** They were nearly all **working men’s clubs** on the tour and this first one was upstairs.

**Bill:** And they were having an unusual heat wave. Much of the England vegetation was brown.

**Sue-On:** Which is really unusual.

**Bill:** Oh yeah, England’s supposed to have green grass! And a lot of the clubs were upstairs, with no air-conditioning. So we carried all of the stuff up. We had these big Canadian speaker bins from Traynor, while the Brits had these little compact things and were they powerful! We had to strip the seats out of our next rented van to make room for the bins . . .

**Sue-On:** . . . and we had to sit on them.

**Bill:** On the equipment.

**Sue-On:** The working men’s clubs start at seven at night. They would have a warm-up act. Everyone would be sitting around a little tables, and the place would be packed you know, 300 or more people.

**Bill:** 500 in a lot of places.

**Sue-On:** Yes, some of them were bigger. But they would have a warm-up act, opening act, usually a comic or a single musician, and then we would come on and do a three quarter hour show. And, then there would be a . . .

**Bill:** Then they’d say “Okay, time for **housie**”.

**Sue-On:** A half hour of bingo. And then the warm-up act would come on again and we would follow with a dance set and everything would done at 11 o’clock.

**Bill:** It’d be about 11 o’clock because uh,

**Sue-On:** 11 o’clock because everyone had to go to work in the factories in the morning.

**Bill:** This was the event for every day of the week. They all worked at factories, mines, and such places. So they come in, have a few pints . . .

**Sue-On:** Play bingo…

**Bill:** . . . and sit around these little tables . . . tables just big enough to hold their pints or half-pints for the ladies – a great crowd.

**Sue-On:** The first song that we opened with was usually an uptempo **Ian and Sylvia Tyson** song. And then we would do a whole variety of different songs -- mostly country-rock things, but a lot of the songs that maybe they would be familiar with. After the first night we were sitting in the dressing room and the manager came in and shouted, *“Ah, you guys really bombed! Went down like a bomb.”* And I thought, oh my god. *\*laughter from Bill\**

**Bill:** We were worn out after driving all day, in a strange place and with a new crowd. A bit of shell shock!

**Sue-On:** And here’s a *“You went down like a bomb.”* We know in Canada that if you bomb it’s really bad. But there, it means you did a great job! They loved you. So thank goodness for that.

**Bill**: “Yeah, you’re a bomb!” It’s like when they say *knocked up* *\*laughter from Sue-On\** Over there they knock you up (wake you up) in the morning.

**Sue-On:** Knocked up is, yeah. Wake you up. So they were great. They’d come up and talk to us and they all danced and applauded. We did 30 of these on this first tour. One night we did a late-night disco after, because we had taken a weekend off to explore **Scotland**, so we had to make up with an extra gig.

**Bill:** We went around **Loch Ness** for a weekend.

**Sue-On**: Yeah. But the places we played were really fantastic you know we did one, a Country & Western club at **Whitby**, right? And everybody came . . . *\*laughter from Bill\**

**Bill:** . . . at Whitby, yeah where **Captain Cook** launched his expeditions.

**Sue-On:** . . . everybody came in Western wear.

**Bill:** They had gun belts and guns and fringe and *\*laughter from Interviewer\** cowboy boots. So we had to play a heavy dose of country stuff at that one.

**Sue-On:** We taught them the **Butterfly**, you know that, the dance?

**Interviewer:** Butterfly? I don’t.

**Sue-On:** Well it’s a **Prairies thing**. Three people link up to do a slow, hopping bit, and then go into a fast polka and swing their partners around . . . and repeat, over and over.

**Bill:** Swing around and then hop a slow thing again.

**Sue-On:** . . . so we showed them how to do it.

**Bill:** . . . and they kick out as they go around.

**Sue-On:** So in Whitby in the northern part of England, Yorkshire area, they know how to do the Butterfly. *\*laughter from Bill\** which is a real Canadian Prairie thing for them. But they were great experiences as we went back to England two more times.

**Bill:** After the third tour we did an album with that our friend, **Mick Sandbrook**, played in. Mick was a super bass player who had played on our previous album in **Newcastle**. They were called **Desperado**, an **Eagles show band**. So we set up quite an experiment. We all worked together on recording the bed tracks for about 20 songs. And then we did our vocals over these bed tracks and they did their vocals over the same bed tracks. We both ended up with an album off effort. *\*chuckle\** I never heard of it being done before!

**Interviewer:** Yeah, and I can’t imagine it can happen nowadays either.

**Sue-On:** But the main character, who was so important in that recording session, was a musician by the name of **Alan Clark**. Shortly after he recorded with us he was picked up by **Dire Straits. Mark Knopfler** recruited him.

**Bill:** He was on the **Brothers in Arms** album, and uh all the hits after for many years

**Sue-On:** We had chosen a little studio in . . .

**Bill:** . . . a **Row House** . . . **Guardian Studios** . . . in a village called **Pity Me**, just outside of **Durham**.

**Sue-On:** The fellow who owned it and was the engineer had been a guitarist for the **Carpenters**.

**Bill:** Yes, the Carpenters. And he saved up enough money touring with them that he built his own 24-track studio. He had spent a lot of time in London and was a real buddy with **Keith Moon** from **The Who**. So he had all sorts of stories, crazy stuff they had done . . . mainly down in London.

**Sue-On:** He had Keith Moon’s drum set in the studio.

**Bill:** Yeah, Sue-On played Keith Moon’s drums.

**Interviewer:** Nice! *\*laughter from Bill\**

**Sue-On:** So that was kind of neat. Met him in spirit!

**Bill:** He had bought Keith Moon’s drums in London and he bought **Elton John**’s upright **Honky Chateau piano** at an auction in France. And so we had that in the studio. Alan Clark did the keys with us. He had synthesizers and I brought in a **Fender Rhodes** electric piano for him, and a **Hohner Clavinet** – sort of an electric harpsichord. Stevie Wonder had used a Clavi on his hit, “*Superstition*”.

**Bill:** But he had beautiful synth, so he worked on all the backing tracks. He put on strings, horns and all sorts of layered stuff.

**Sue-On:** Pretty amazing musician.

**Bill:** On the session two years before we had used a very early synth up in a Newcastle studio. Synths weren’t used too much in recording yet. On our first records back in Canada, a local Brandon musician, **Larry Clark**, had helped with the bed tracks. Larry had worked at the university for a while.

**Sue-On:** In the Geography department.

**Bill:** He used to play keys in the Suburban Restaurant and got together with other musicians in a private jazz club. In fact, he was our first drummer on that early 1962 TV show we used to do. So, we recycled him later on down the road! We invited him to play a **Hammond type B3 organ**, and **Vibes** which were a bit unusual for recording, and **acoustic piano**. So we added these sounds onto our early recordings because there were few synthesizers around in the early ‘70s.

For later sessions, what would previously take a bevy of string players and a full complement of back-up musicians could be done by one musician on a good synthesizer.

**Sue-On**: Our synth player Newcastle did a really good job at that two years before. But when we had Alan Clark you could have almost any sound you wanted, he could sweeten it with anything. In fact Bill, showed him what he wanted on, *“Take It Easy”,* the 5-string banjo riff…

**Bill:** The Eagles had used a five string banjo with string rolls…

**Sue-On:** He did that on the synthesizer! *\*laughter from Interviewer\**

**Bill:** And I said *“Well can you do that?”* and he’s “Oh, I don’t know, what do you do?” and I said *“Well you do the drone note,* *\*Bill taps his fingers on the table*\* with one finger or your thumb, and then you, you roll the other notes in the chord with your fingers, like they roll on the five-string.” *\*laughter from Sue-On\**

**BACK TO PRAIRIES: GIGS :: TOURS :: AWARDS :: CBC**

**Sue-On:** He did a very good job. But getting back to Larry Clark. He became a forest ranger after leaving Brandon. He had been a geography prof at the university, and then he became the Brandon city planner, and then he gave all that up and became a forest ranger.

**Bill:** Over in the Whiteshell area. Later we visited him up in his forest lookout tower. He used to go up there and he would write songs!

**Sue-On:** But he had a solo record out too called **Uncle Smokey Campfire Songs**.

**Bill:** Uncle Smokey still has a big following.

**Sue-On:** So Brandon has produced a lot of people, a lot of musicians -- whether we remember them or not you know it’s been a big influence.

**Interviewer:** Yeah, it’s just that drop of water into the pond and just the ripples.

**Sue-On:** Yes, it goes and goes.

**Bill:** A lot of ripples.

**Sue-On:** Some of them big waves. Some of them whirlpools, I don’t know! *\*laughter\** But think about over even the last 10, 20 years, the different musicians that have come out of CP Express -- the people that have gone on to record and have done fairly well – **Angela Kellman** and **Amanda Stott** to name a few.

**Bill:** Amanda’s father was in our rock band back in the early ‘60s -- he played sax. When she won that first talent contest at Brandon’s **Trails West** **North 40** that launched her career, I was one of the judges.

**Sue-On:** Well “The 40” has done a lot, that was the **Orange Crush contest**, wasn’t it? We’ve known owner **Heidi Howarth** forever and have done a lot of judging for her. We even performed a few times on the stage for her.

**Bill:** It was the Orange Crush or the Labatt’s.

**Sue-On:** It gave a lot of the young people the opportunity to go ahead and form bands and to actually perform. That’s a good thing now. There aren’t a lot of venues available.

**Interviewer:** Yeah that was something that I was wanting to ask you guys about, comparison to venues nowadays compared to, back in the day.

**Bill:** Well, you often are expected play for nothing today. “Hey, we’re doing it for a good cause. You guys want exposure!? You come and play for nothing.”

**Sue-On:** We used to play so many dances and bars. Every week. And every weekend we’d be out playing for dances or shows. There was never a shortage of venues. And you got paid well for the time.

**Sue-On:** We used to travel a lot. We would drive for maybe three hours to go to a gig, take an hour to set up and then play for four hours – take down and drive home.

**Bill:** We often drove out of Manitoba -- played in Kenora, and all over Saskatchewan.

**Sue-On:** Yeah . . . one-nighters. Everywhere. But now, a lot of DJs have taken over in many of these communities, because I guess, they just can’t afford to pay or they don’t want to pay and they make lot more money.

**Bill:** Well if you have a good stereo system you can go out and you can often charge what a band would charge. This takes away many of the gigs.

**Bill:** I guess they’re giving people what they want!

**Sue-On:** The audience want all the latest songs and they want them to sound exactly like the originals. So you’re gonna have to have a DJ

**Bill:** They want over-produced stuff through a good sound system – and the DJ can instantly pull any song off the Internet . . . often royalty free.

**Sue-On:** So if you have a four-, five-piece band you can’t do all that.

**Bill:** And if you want it turned down, well the DJ goes *\*makes gesture of turning music down, laughter\**

**Sue-On:** Yeah, they always want it turned down! *\*chuckle\** It doesn’t matter how loud! Some of the places that we played at were just like a culvert, you know.

**Bill:** *\*laughter\** We played at a place near here where we went in and had to clear junk to get to the “stage.” The rink I tell ya was like a culvert, all metal and concrete. We picked up a board, moved it over and dropped it down and it echoed for five seconds! You know then that *“Uh oh, we’re in trouble!”* So, we set up and . . . *“Turn it down.”*

**Sue-On:** We went acoustic, and still got the *“Turn it down”* command.

**Bill:** Sue-On was just diddling on one drum with brushes, and I had a Fender Telecaster which is a hunk of solid wood, so I turned the amp right off. *“How’s that?” -- “Well that’s not bad…”*

**Sue-On:** *“Uh, could be down more.”* *\*general laughter\**

**Bill:** Strumming, you couldn’t hear anything over the crowd chatter.

**Sue-On:** That had to be the longest, longest gig ever. *\*laughter from Bill*\* Ever. And yet other places you know think that you’re finished after four hours and they say, “Come on, let’s go we’ll pay you for an extra hour. Gotta rock some more!” And then, you know you just go on and have fun.

**Bill:** Yeah we used to play **CFB Shilo** a lot, the **Country Club** and all the messes. Especially when the German Army was based there. Then that led to playing in many other places such as the base in Winnipeg . . .

**Sue-On:** . . . and military bases all over. . .

**Bill:** We did a pre-Grey Cup party for the **Princess Patricia Regiment** there. We had to carry the gear in through the kitchen area and through . . .

**Sue-On:** . . . the Snake Pit.

**Bill:** Most had been partying all day. One of the guys saw Sue-On and slurred: “What the fuck you doin’ here?” *\*general laughter\**

**Interviewer:** Oh, geez.

**Sue-On:** Yeah. I know.

**Bill:** So we go into the main club area there’s two guys brawling on the dance floor – one has the other by the testicles with one fist and is pounding him with the other. *\*laughter from the Interviewer\** We managed to set up, played our usual sets and they were really stompin’. I guess we won them over as they hired us to play two hours over-time -- they didn’t want to quit. When we finally packed it in they were still rarin’ to go. We saw them pile into cars and take off to somewhere.

**Sue-On:** Downtown.

**Bill:** We saw in the paper next day that they had done a commando raid on a hotel. They went through *\*laughter from Interviewer\** every entrance and they trashed it. *\*laughter\**

**Sue-On:** I don’t know if we were the cause of that . . . *\*laughter from Bill\* \*general laughter\**

**Bill:** Well, we had this strange effect on people sometimes. *\*laughter\**

**Sue-On:** Through all the years of music, playing all these different places, different venues, there are just so many stories. It’s amazing all the different people that we’ve run into. We often think all the way back to the Federal Grain tour times and all the elevator agents who used to invite us to their homes for barbeques and treated us so royally. We got to know so many different people in so many communities. Yeah, provided so many great memories and opened so many doors for us. It gave us the opportunity to go to so many places and provided so many experiences that we would never have seen otherwise.

**Interviewer:** Yeah, certainly.

**Sue-On:** Even going up to the **Peace River Country**, I mean, why would you even think about going up to the Peace River?

Bill: *\*laughter\** Yeah.

Sue-On: Or **Island Lake Indian Reserve**! We went up to **Island Lake** and played a weekend there in their school gym.

**Bill:** We flew in there over the rugged **Canadian Shield**. We landed on a primitive strip . . .

**Sue-On:** . . . on an island.

**Bill:** . . . and just missed an obstacle. The plane that had come in before had unloaded a fridge and then hit it with its propeller. The wreck of stuff was still there. After we jumped to the tarmac we asked *“Uh, where do we play?”* and they answered *“Way over there!” “Well how do we get across the lake?”*

**Sue-On:** *“Canoes.”*

**Bill:** They brought canoes over and we loaded our gear onto them. We had these big long speaker columns hanging out across the sides of the canoes.

**Interviewer:** Oh wow.

**Bill:** . . . and they take us across choppy waters with these speakers teetering over the edge. *\*laughter\**

**Sue-On:** So it’s really, you know, affected us in a lot *\*laughter\** of funny ways!

**Interviewer:** Oh I bet, yeah!

**Sue-On:** It was a dry reserve too, but it wasn’t.

**Bill:** Sue-On mentioned Peace River. That was where we did a show and a local DJ came up with his young buddy to chat. Much later we learned that the kid became a popular singer under the name, **Bim.** He’s done much recording and has made many appearances on CBC. Anyway, we got talking with the DJ. When he learned that I collected **old-time radio shows** and they were a big influence on our music, he responded: “Well, we have about 500 of the ETs -- big 16 inch discs -- in the crawlspace under the radio station. . .

**Sue-On:** They were going to throw them out! They were used for the armed forces weren’t they?

**Bill:** The **AFRS -- Armed Forces Radio Service**. These **electrical transcription discs** contained shows and music and were sent around to broadcast stations. After the war it was common for the military just to dig big trenches and bury them. They’re kinda rare now, but I’ve got about 600 of them.

**Sue-On:** Well we had to load them up into our **Volkswagen camper**, and we were way up in the Peace River country *\*laughter\** and we had just finished a tour. Then we had to go load those up about what, three o’clock in the morning?

**Bill:** No, he had the morning show so it was at five or six in the morning.

**Sue-On:** Well eh…

**Bill:** But they were great -- I couldn’t pass that up! Because I have thousands of old time radio shows on reel to reel, disc and MP3.

**Sue-On:** So we slept with those all the way back from . . .

**Bill:** You never know what lies ahead on these gigs.

**Interviewer:** Yeah, what treasures you might find.

**Bill:** But we didn’t tour after 1980, ran into some problems and just lost interest in touring. We didn’t record after then either and so, what we did was stay closer to home with the kids. We did do Boggy Creek years, though.

**Sue-On:** Music festivals.

**Bill:** **The Boggy Creek Mountain Music Festival --** for about seven years and brought in major acts from the states. In 1980 we won the **Manitoba Entertainers of the Year**. I don’t think there’s been another Brandon band that’s come close to that one. We still proudly display the trophy.

**Sue-On:** Yeah. Much of it came out of a song that you wrote too, so you know it was kind of neat. And everything is so Winnipeg, you know, **Perimeteritis**.

**Interviewer:** Yes.

**Sue-On:** No one really knew what was happening out in Brandon. But we had a song, *“One Night Stand”*, and it was being played all over. . .

**Bill:** It was charted.

**Sue-On:** Yeah, and the DJ’s loved it, and they promoted it.

**Bill:** And we had done quite a few shows around Winnipeg, all kinds of shows around the University of Winnipeg.

**Sue-On:** But we, and I think everybody, were surprised when our names were called and we won the award. Ray St. Germaine had been winning all the time so it was a bit of a surprise.

**Bill:** It really was a thrill to come out ahead of Ray because he is a music legend in Canada!

**Sue-On:** Well just to be nominated . . .

**Bill:** To be nominated was thrill enough.

**Sue-On:** But it just blew everybody away. The crowd was expecting Ray to win it again and then, when we won it, I mean the house just came down.

**Bill:** And we were on the **CBC National News**. They ran a clip of the presentation of the award.

**Sue-On:** We sang numbers on the **Opry North Show**, live appearances all during **Country Music Week**, and the **Canadian Country Music Awards** broadcast. It was run on all the **CBC stations** across Canada . . . everywhere except in Brandon.

**Interviewer:** Of course…

**Bill:** Yeah it was a major network show and featured all the top Canadian country artists backed up by with a 30-piece orchestra on stage at the **Winnipeg Centennial Auditorium**.

**Interviewer:** Geez…

**Bill:** Anyway, the taped show was broadcast and shown right across Canada a number of times, everywhere but Brandon. CKX just played an old movie or something. So I went in to the studio on the night it aired and I had them tape it off the network. So I got the tape from CKX. Even though they didn’t broadcast locally it had still gone over the network – they just didn’t pick it up to air.

 Then, a few years later, CBC did a full video documentary on us. Their camera crew followed us around Brandon and our Strathclair home, into my classroom, into our Soo’s restaurant, our Brandon home and to one of our shows at **Elkhorn Ranch** at **Clear Lake**. CBC showed it annually for a few years as “Couples Special” for **Valentine Day.**

**JAM SESSIONS: SOO’S RESTAURANT :: CANTINA**

**Sue-On:** We had a **Soo’s**, a 265-seat Chinese Restaurant in Brandon for 10 years. A popular feature of the restaurant was our **banquet/showhall room** where we presented music and shows. The **Strathclair Drama Club** came in and did a couple of shows – one was a **Remembrance Day** tribute where they performed all the old wartime songs. And then we had a **mystery theatre**, a **dinner theatre**, **Blues Concerts**, **New Years parties**, **Dim Sum** with **Karate demos**, and we had bands come in. We’ve mentioned the **Saturday Night Jam Sessions**. Drums, PA and amps were left set up permanently on the stage. Musicians would come in around 10 or 11 o’clock. We’d have something to eat, and everyone would cut loose till 3 or 4 in the morning. It didn’t bother anybody because it wasn’t not a residential area.

**Interviewer:** Precisely.

**Bill:** We had the restaurant for about 10 years -- where **Westoba Credit Union** headquarters is located now. They built their whole large complex at our Soo’s location. It was a good chance for us to sell because you really don’t often get a chance sell such property in downtown Brandon.

**Sue-On:** Another popular Brandon jam place was the Cantina, a few miles west of Brandon. Bill jammed there almost every week for decades years . . . and I would go out there occasionally.

**Bill:** BU psych prof, **Ken Daniels**, lived on a rural small holding near Kemnay. It was a large piece of property and on it and some distance from his main house, he built a straw house, just for music – Ken is a bass player and singer. It was made of reinforced straw bales covered with stucco and topped by a metal roof. It was a musician’s dream – a large stage fully equipped with a huge PA, lights, amps, drums, Hammond and keys, etc. The room had tables and chairs, a bar, projection TV, etc. and was decorated in a Mexican theme – **Ken’s Cantina**. Musicians visited from all over the continent. I, and a regular group of buddies, would join Ken there once a week to belt out old rock and heavy blues. But Ken retired from University and he and Faye eventually moved to **Niagara-On-The-Lake**. House and Cantina were sold – the end of an era.

**Sue-On:** That was a great place where so many Brandon musicians used to visit for rehearsals, jams and parties. It was a sad day when Ken moved away and it was sold.

**Bill:** I mentioned we had worked with Canadian music legend, Bobby Curtola. He’s still performing at casinos and special functions. He brought his manager and another business partner out for a Cantina jam one night. They’re all fairly heavy now, and near the end of the night we were really getting carried away. The three of them were gathered around one mic, bouncing up and down and singing some good ole rock and roll when they broke through the stage. *\*laughter from Interviewer, then laughter from Bill\*.*

**Sue-On:** Luckily it wasn’t that high a stage but they crashed right through it. No one was hurt.

**Bill:** It was hilarious, hilarious. *\*laughter\** Bobby and all of us signed the huge slab of stage and hung it on the wall. We have photos of the event on our Website. There are Cantina stories galore. Ken personally paid for the building and upkeep and never charged for the use of it. A wonderful gift to the Brandon music scene.

**Sue-On:** We still have Ken’s big stand-up bass in an honored spot in our basement studio. I was always wanting to play it, but aww - my fingers just aren’t strong enough.

**Bill:** Oh, you’ll do it eventually.

**Sue-On:** *\*laughter\** I don’t think so! Much easier just to sit down at a drum kit and beat the heck out of it. *\*chuckle from Interviewer\**

**Bill:** Now where are we -- have we gone past the first paragraph there? *\*Interviewer had sheet of questions in front of him\**

**BOGGY CREEK CALL OF THE WILD FESTIVAL**

**Interviewer:** Oh absolutely. Um, actually, maybe take you back to the whole festival scene -- for instance because you mentioned a festival . . .

**Sue-On:** The Boggy Creek one? Yeah.

**Interviewer:** Um, were there many other festivals that you guys toured around and played with?

**Bill:** Well, the, the Boggy Creek one was pretty big for a start. **Lewis and Linda Kaselitz** had come up from somewhere in **Tennessee**, and they had dreams of starting a mountain music, bluegrass type festival, up in the wilds, up near Swan River at Boggy Creek. Lewis and his family homesteaded an area that was heavily wooded, they cleared the woods, they made an airstrip so they could fly back and forth, and they used the logs to build a really large, nice log house, and then built a covered log stage high above a dressing room, at the bottom of a natural amphitheatre. They also poured a cement dance floor. I was on the board of directors for a long time. We missed his first festival – we were touring England that summer – but we performed at the next seven festivals.

**Sue-On:** They brought up many **Nashville acts** and country and bluegrass bands from all over the continent. A number of media personalities such as veteran broadcaster, **Lee Major**, were involved as guest MCs.

**Bill:** The festival ran for most of a week every July.

**Sue-On:** There would be thousands and thousands of people sitting on the grassy slope of the amphitheatre slope, roaming the stalls and having jam sessions all over the campground.

**Bill:** I don’t think there any other Brandon bands, but there were a lot from Toronto . . .

**Sue-On:** . . . and Winnipeg, California, and the deep south.

**Bill:** You probably aren’t familiar with most of the country artists so I won’t mention them all, but they are well known in fan circles. . . .

**Sue-On:** It was a real fun time with a huge line-up of entertaining acts.

**Bill:** **John Anderson, Kitty Wells, Doc Watson**, many **Grand Ole Opry** stars and on and on. One year Lewis hired a motorcycle gang for security because there were a lot of rowdies in the camp ground area. They took their job a little too seriously at times and bashed a few heads. *\*laughter\** John Anderson and his tour bus were supposed to arrive for a late show. He had some big hits at the time, *“Swingin’” ”Seminole Wind”* and there was a huge crowd waiting to see him.

**Sue-On:** We heard the bus was at the grounds entrance but we waited and waited.

**Bill:** I was MC-ing that night. I filled in and we filled in with a bit of music and it got to be about one o’clock in the morning. And then the bus finally came in, I guess they visiting with the motorcycle gang and they got into their weed at the gate. *\*laughter from Bill and Interviewer\** The band climbed to the stage, plugged into our amps and pumped out a really hot show.

**Sue-On:** You just wonder, is my equipment going to survive this onslaught. *\*laughter from Bill\**

Lewis died of a heart attack after about seven or eight these festivals. The sad end to a fine run.

**Bill:** But speaking of such medication substances . . . we just never got into that kinda stuff. We were high school teachers, and you just don’t mess around -- our other careers would be on the line.

**Interviewer:** Absolutely.

**Bill:** And for nearly all the gigs we drove to we would have to take long drives home after.

**Interviewer:** So you couldn’t even really drink.

**Bill:** Sue-On doesn’t drink at all. I would have a beer during the breaks and sweat it off on stage. *\*taps table with hand\** three drinks over four hours -- one for every break and then sweat it off. We’d then take an hour to pack up and start the drive home. I’d go through bushels of sunflower seeds just to stay awake or stop and get out and run around the van *\*chuckle from Interviewer\** even in 40 below weather and then back to the wheel and the sunflower seeds.

**THE BLIZZARD**

**Sue-On:** Winter time was always hardest. *\*laughter from Bill\**

**Interviewer:** Oh yeah.

**Sue-On:** Sometimes the weather would just suddenly kick up so badly. I have nightmares over the time we played at **Pilot Mound**. A really bad blizzard came up, but we decided to try to make it home. We should never have tried it . . .

**Bill:** It took us an hour to go about 10 miles.

**Interviewer:** Oh wow.

**Bill:** Sue-On looked out her side window and I looked out my side. You’ve probably been through this type of situation but we couldn’t see a damn thing. Finally we reached nearby **Crystal City** and we pulled in there, but the hotel was locked up.

**Sue-On:** There was a guy out there trying to get in to his room and we had to let him into our crew cab.

**Bill:** Our keyboard player, **Kevin Pahl**, was also with us. Kevin is a former student of mine, a crop-duster as well as a fine musician. Kevin spotted a phone booth and phoned the local RCMP: *“Hey, hey can you help us out here? I mean it’s a howling blizzard and we’re stuck and we can’t get into the hotel.”* The Mountie replied, *“Well, run your vehicle, roll down your window and . . . “*

**Sue-On:** *“. . . don’t go to sleep.”*

**Bill:** “*You’ll get carbon monoxide poisoning so don’t go to sleep.”* And Kevin says *“Well, uh, don’t you have a jail or something you could put us in?”* But no, no way.

**Sue-On:** Wouldn’t let us in to the office or anything.

**Bill:** So, we shivered and napped through this till daybreak came, and we took off again into the still howling blizzard.

**Sue-On:** It was a complete white-out.

**Bill:** And we got as far as **Mather**, the Mather turnoff . . .

**Sue-On:** And the truck froze up.

**Bill:** The truck froze up, wouldn’t go any farther. So I left Sue-On and Kevin in the truck which was really cold without the heater running. I started to run into this blizzard to look for help.

**Sue-On:** Couldn’t breathe – almost like being in a vacuum.

**Bill:** I went past two farm house approaches -- couldn’t see them. And then I saw a road sign “Mather” that way, so I turned off there to try to get to **Mather** off the main road. By that time my hands were frost bitten and I was just freezing everywhere, really in agony. Then I saw school sign by the road, so I knew there was a school coming up. But I had to lie down under the sign in the ditch and just rolled in agony trying to get warm and to breathe. I finally carried on, reached the school, and I broke a door window to get into the school. It was a country school type building. It was heated. I rolled on the floor – again in agony. Then I finally saw a phone and phone book and called for help.

**Sue-On:** By chance he reached the Harms family who lived nearby.

**Bill:** They came and we tried to find our truck in the whiteout. Made a few wrong turns but finally we all were rescued. We stayed with these folks for a day and a night until the storm subsided.

**Sue-On:** They were able to tow our truck in and thaw it out. So you know when you go on the road like that there are so many unpredictable things. But we’ve been really lucky, we’ve only had one serious accident on our own. We were our way to a gig when we rolled our van on an icy curve past Clear Lake golf course. But another time on the road with the Federal Grain we were passengers when the driver rolled a big house trailer we were towing. *\*chuckle from Bill\**

**Bill:** We’ve hit a few deer and jack rabbits – with minor damage

**Sue-On:** Yeah. Other than these mishaps we’ve been really lucky on the road.

**FESTIVALS :: HISTORIC MUSIC VISITS**

**Bill:** We were talking about festivals but got sidetracked a bit.

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Bill:** We actually did quite a few over the years. **The Folk Festival** here in Brandon.

**Sue-On:** With our daughter one time.

**Bill:** Our daughter **China-Li** played harp,

**Sue-On:** She also played the bagpipes.

**Bill:** Actually electronic bagpipes that we could plug into the PA.

**Sue-On:** Son Robin played bass.

**Bill:** We put together a program: **“History of Different Folk Music Genres”**

**Sue-On:** We did, another session for them featuring singing couples and original songs. There were two other couples with us.

**Bill:** Popular Brandon folk singer **Mae Moore** and Lester Quitzau were one of the other couples.

**Sue-On:** That’s always fun to do. You know what you can promote.

**Bill:** We did the **Cowboy Poetry Festival** on the BU campus. That was kind of fun. We did *“Someday Soon”* some Ian Tyson songs, cowboy stuff.

**Sue-On:** And then we were quite involved with **the Lt. Gov. Winter Festival** for a number of years -- the **Chinese Pavilion**.

**Interviewer:** Oh right!

**Bill:** I was freelancing for a few years with a **Christian Rock group – One Body** -- headed by **Mo and Heather Karrouze** here in Brandon. We did a number of **Gospel Festivals**.

**Sue-On:** We also did a number of **Blues Festivals**. One of them was almost rained out but we moved to the **University Dining Hall** and it continued on.

**Bill:** And of course there was that Portage Avenue Festival I mentioned earlier – the 1972 **"Getting Together with Winnipeg Festival"** and we played the **Neepawa LilyFest** a few times. There have been others over the years but I’d have to pick my brain a bit more.

**Sue-On:** Too many things to remember. *\*chuckle from Bill\**

**Interviewer:** Well especially with a life filled right?

**Sue-On:** Well, it’s been 50 years, you know. 50 years of different venues and different opportunities. Bill’s had over 50 years, I’ve had 49. *\*laughter\**

**Bill:** Yeah we’ve had a long, long career and a long marriage.

**Sue-On:** The whole music scene for me started when I met Bill. Got married and boy, it’s just got me into all kinds of trouble since then. *\*laughter\**

**Bill:** We’d do those summer music tours and then we’d take off to the South.

**Sue-On:** And just travel.

**Bill:** And we’re still doing that. Travel all around the states for thousands of miles and over to Europe, S.E. Asia and China. And music plays a big part in nearly all of those adventures. We played at a convention in **Pocatello**, Idaho and we’ve done **Blues Jams** in **Chicago** and California.

**Sue-On:** We would go to so many museums that are music related. **Graceland**, Buddy Holly’s hometown **Lubbock** and studio in **Clovis**, **Grand Ole Opry**, **Nashville** recording studios, **Music Row**, **New Orleans jazz spots**, all the **Beatles**’ early haunts in **Hamburg** and **Liverpool** . . .

**Bill:** **Sun Records** in **Memphis** where **Elvis** recorded - also **Johnny Cash, Carl Perkins, Jerry Lee Lewis, Ike Turner and Roy Orbison**. I even stood on the X behind a mic where Elvis sang *“That’s All Right Mama”* and *“Blue Moon of Kentucky”* his first, record. I have that 78 disc. It goes on and on. . . I guess we’re music obsessed.

**Interviewer:** Oh wow.

**Sue-On:** It’s kind of nice when you can and it means so much more when you know the music background in all these different places.

**Bill:** When we were first in Graceland in Memphis, Elvis was alive and we couldn’t tour the house. But his Uncle Vester was at the gate, so we chatted with him, and though we couldn’t get in we walked around and took pictures from outside the perimeter. And, then went to the front gate and I stole a rock off the wall. *\*laughter from Sue-On\** We did get to see him later in Las Vegas, though.

 **Sue-On:** The wall fence is still there. I wonder how many people have done that?

**Bill:** *\*laughter\** It’s covered in graffiti now. Years later we did get to tour all of Graceland. I even put together a virtual tour on our Website. [**www.hillmanweb.com/elvis**](http://www.hillmanweb.com/elvis)

**Sue-On:** We also visited the Everly Brothers hometown and museum in **Central City, Kentucky** and Buddy Holly’s place in Texas – great fodder for our Website. [www.hillmanweb.com/everly](http://www.hillmanweb.com/everly)

**Sue-On:** There was a Buddy Holly tribute show in Brandon a while back.

**Bill:** Yes, a local trio did something

**Interviewer:** Yeah that sounds familiar.

**Bill:** They came out to the Cantina and rehearsed there one night.

**Sue-On:** What else would you like to know Richard?

**Interviewer:** Well I think this has been a really good . . .

**Sue-On:** You’ve got a life story, I don’t know . . . *\*laughter from Bill and Interviewer\** Maybe you’ll want to censor some of his stories I don’t know about his vocabulary?! *\*chuckle\**

**MUSIC AND EDUCATION**

**Interviewer:** Bah, just adds colour. *\*laughter from Sue-On\** Actually, at this point what I’m thinking I’ll maybe do is get opinion questions from you guys. Kind of do a tie in to nowadays. . . or actually I have one more question. I think we covered this earlier but, what sort of influences did you like, and what influence has music had on your teaching experiences? Because you guys had mentioned teaching school for many years.

**Sue-On:** Well Bill did a lot of music with his students.

**Bill:** I integrated music into my teaching in high school and university classes, but it’s been the impetus for our travel as well as we’ve done a lot of travelling throughout Asia. We were, in Indo-China last month. Music from other cultures is always a draw.

**Sue-On:** But in school though you used to use music. You would use lyrics for interpretation and for communicating with and inspiring students.

**Bill:** I mentioned Asia because, when we were in **China** I remember there was a group of musicians . . .

**Sue-On:** Oh gosh!

**Bill:** . . . setting up in a **Shanghai** park and they brought out these strange instruments. So I was asking about them and they wanted to know if I wanted to play one. I said “No thanks, you go ahead.” And they went into playing “Jingle Bells” in Chinese – I sang along in English *\*laughter\** In the middle of summer.

**Sue-On:** Musicians In **Vietnam** did the same thing.

**Bill:** That time I got up courage to try their instruments in Vietnam and their singers sang *“Jingle Bells.”* And that was in Vietnamese. It’s a big hit over there! So there definitely is an international link with music . . . and especially when we teach foreign students.

**Sue-On:** I guess they figure it’s a song that Western visitors would be familiar with.

**Sue-On:** But for me, when I was teaching EAL down at **Westman Immigrant Services**, I was trying to use some song lyrics, to teach pronunciation, and I had a lot of adult Korean students there who loved **The Eagles.**

**Interviewer:** Oh yeah.

**Sue-On:** They said “Could you bring some Eagles songs?” so we would bring *“Hotel California”,* and they knew all the words! They knew the words better than I did – even some of the ones who could barely speak English! But it was always something like that was good for our pronunciation, so I used it a lot with my EAL students, the adults. But you never know with the young people at the Brandon University now – I’ve taught with the BU EAP program for about ten years. But they don’t know the music unless it’s right in their age group and their genre. I mean I mention Elvis Presley and they say “Who?” And I say the Beatles and they say, “Who?” And those are great songs if you want to learn pronunciation and looking at the words. I’ve tried to throw things like that in every once in a while.

**Bill:** English is really an international language, though. And music is so much a part of our culture, certainly in Brandon. It’s the background to our culture. Whether it be in church or politics or businesses or the home . . .

**Sue-On:** Well you’ve got music all around . . .

**Bill:** . . . in earbuds or cars going by with the subwoofers shaking the ground.

**Sue-On:** Oh my goodness.

**Bill:** And it’s everywhere! There’s music of some sort everywhere . . . off satellite, muzak in elevators, in the stores and it’s everywhere!

**Sue-On**: Well you hear the students, with my students at least, they’ve always got the ear buds in, until they come into the classroom. The thing is they’re just listening to their own music of the day. They’re not exposed to other styles. Sometimes you just want to say, “Okay, we’re just going to take this class period to listen to music from my time.” But . . .

**THE MUSIC SCENE TODAY :: RECORDINGS & CONCERTS :: IMPACT**

**Bill:** I think you’ve got to realize and question about how the music has changed. The thing I’ve noticed is that music is so disposable now, there’s just so much . . .

**Sue-On:** Comes and goes.

**Bill:** Thousands of songs on MP3 and on your tele, your **Internet**, your **I-phones** or whatever and it’s just so disposable! It’s gone almost like photos -- they’re so easy to take and are very disposable. We took 4000 pictures last month in Indo-China. I’ve shared over 2000 on our Website and I’ll probably get them all up with notes -- doing something with them anyway – great memories -- but for many people so many photos are just stored away and forgotten and eventually lost or trashed. When I was a kid, back in the “good old days,” *\*said jokingly\** we’d save up money for a single 78 record and you played that until you wore it out. And you had this quest, thirst, for music on the radio. You’d hear something and you’d go to out to find it, buy it, and you learned the song. It, was all within reach and special. But now it’s just so fragmented, everywhere, and so disposable, that’s really changed people’s perception and really I guess, a love of music.

**Sue-On:** What I find though is, people my age now are going back -- they want to hear the songs that they grew up with. And I was doing something this last winter and spring. I took some training in a program that’s called **Drums Alive**. It’s an exercise program that you can use in school for kids. They can learn math and even English using drumbeats, rhythms and songs. But I was designated to work with seniors so I took part in a training program. I then held a bunch of demonstrations for groups of ladies and some of the guys within my age group. We listened to music and I would lead them doing drum beats on an exercise ball. And…

**Bill:** . . . and do exercise routines to old classic rock music.

**Sue-On:** They knew all the songs, so they were able to drum to the beat, and I would make up different routines where we would move around in different workout combinations. And it was great because it was with songs that they knew. They had a beat and words they could remember, and so it’s also such an aid for memory because it helps recall. And so I did that for about three months?

**Bill:** Yeah, in our son Ja-On’s massage and acupuncture workout hall in downtown Brandon on Rosser Avenue.

**Sue-On:** His little gym in his **Reactive Massage** facility. It was a perfect location. We had old rock music booming out . . . we played Elvis, The Eagles, CCR and all . . . music with a beat. We even played our music -- it had a good solid beat with words that they could sing along with. So it really promoted body and brain co-ordination. They still enjoy the music . . . the older people enjoyed every number. I just wonder with the new music, whether today’s young people will actually remember many the songs that they are listening to now many decades into their older years.

**Interviewer:** It’s kind of hard to say, especially the stuff that gets thrown through the radio and it’s on that continuous loop where you’re hearing the same song you know five, six times a day sometimes.

**Sue-On:** Can they remember the words to any rap? With so much of the rap music can people actually sing with it? Maybe, I don’t know. But it’s certainly a whole different perspective in terms of music that’s not really music – no melody and very few chord changes – if any.

**Bill:** Most of the drums are computer loops. They’re not even drums anymore they’re heavy dance beats. A difficult time for live musicians and bands.

**Sue-On:** I tried to use synth drums, because they’re so much lighter to carry around.

**Bill:** Yeah we have a set in the basement.

**Sue-On:** But I just can’t! You just don’t have the dynamics -- you don’t have that feel, so it’s not the same -- I guess I’m just old.

**Bill:** There are people now who do whole movie soundtracks in their basements – on computer. There’s a big market for that. You can just do so much on synth.

**Sue-On:** For me, using music in education with the seniors has been great and I know you used a lot of music in your classes. It was certainly great in EAL in terms of lyrics and pronunciation. I’ve tried to teach them some Canadian songs. Christmas time is always good you know – you can teach them Christmas songs. Most of them know the melodies, but they know the words in their own language and then to learn them in English is always interesting.

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Sue-On:** I have to always try to learn some of their language too, but it’s so hard, *\*chuckle\** so I can sympathize with the problems that they would have with our English. Yes, music plays an important role in the education of kids – pronunciation, interpretation, memory retention and physical development with rhythm and beats. A teacher just has make the effort to do it.

**Interviewer:** Yeah, exactly and it’s an easy way to get them engaged too, I’m sure.

**Sue-On:** Yes! Yes.

**Interviewer:** So I guess another question would be in terms of just general access perhaps. Like what would you say is the main difference between today and when you guys were kids?

**Bill:** I already sort of covered some of that -- it’s just so accessible now, music of all forms. And there’s really no excuse for saying: “You know I don’t have anything that I like to listen to.” It’s all there, I mean, you can go back a hundred years or you can go to some of today’s new bands and singers. There’s something that is bound to appeal to you, there’s music for everybody.

**Sue-On:** When TV came in back in our day it certainly was an exciting thing. And when I got my first record player and my Beatles records, and watching the Beatles on TV, but now, you can get it anywhere through computer and other sources. In some ways the thrill is gone.

**Bill:** It’s just overload. But it’s great to have the choice.

**Sue-On:** Right, there’s just so much choice.

**Bill:** For sure but, there’s something lost in not having the rarity of searching and just finding a few special songs.

**Sue-On:** Now of course even news and old vinyl is a big thing with some newbies and collectors.

**Bill:** Well for some people, CDs are just about gone.

**Sue-On:** But everything is MP3s or the kids have card for downloading songs?

**Bill and Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Bill:** **I-Tunes** and **Apple** have just come up with a whole new system that they’re trying to push – streaming is so popular . . . and of course, you can find almost anything on **YouTube**.

**Interviewer:** There are a couple of companies that are like that. I think the big one now is called **Spotify** and that’s actually what Apple is going up against.

**Sue-On:** Yeah. But everybody is saying “Well you know you can’t just download for free and it’s not…”

**Bill:** Oh you can get anything for free if you know where.

**Sue-On:** Well on YouTube they’ve got everything. But artists get few royalties anymore. Fortunately for us there’s a radio show out of Winnipeg that plays old rock music every Friday night. And they play us quite a bit – the **Greg Gardner Show** on a nostalgia station.

**Bill:** . . . and there’s also **University of Manitoba FM** and Internet . . . and CBC – broadcast and online -- is very good

**Sue-On:** They’re all good promoters of the local.

**Bill:** There are many nostalgia networks that play a lot of ‘50s, ‘60s, ‘70s, ‘80s music.

**Sue-On:** But, a lot of the times you know you just get used.

**Bill:** So good to hear that they play our stuff when the royalty sweeps are on.

**Sue-On:** Yeah, so you might still get some royalties for the songs, which is kind of nice.

**Bill:** That’s another thing. CKX guys used to play our music when the sweeps were on – sometimes all night behind the test pattern. They’d play whole albums from midnight on just so we would be picked up by royalty collection surveys.

**Sue-On:** That promotion of locals certainly helped us out. So you know we’ve had a long association with CKX through all the TV shows that we did. It was always kind of fun while I was teaching up in Birtle and we were doing the evening show. Tuesday night was when we did the show and on Wednesday the kids would all be talking, *“Yeah we saw you on TV last night!” \*chuckle from Bill and Sue-On\**

**Bill:** Well, our other shows, the noon shows anyway, back in the early ‘60s were all live. But then, CKX got a video tape recorder – a huge thing -- it covered a wall. So they’d record our shows and we could do it at any time of the day or the week and they would broadcast the show off this black and white video tape.

**Sue-On:** They’d play it again and again and again!

**Bill:** Yes, they started to play the shows in rerun after rerun -- mixed blessings there. So I have a lot of early audio tapes, recorded off air in the ‘60s. Then from the ‘70s I have Sony U-matic ¾ inch video tapes – an early colour video system that came out using large cartridges. CKX-TV used that format for quite a while. These are all part of my video tape and disc collection: over 4000 video cassette tapes, about 2500 old time radio shows on reel to reel stored in our country home. Also thousands of DVDs and hard drive files recorded off satellite, cable, and Internet -- movies galore.

**Sue-On:** He’s a collector of all things.

**Interviewer:** Yeah, makes sense. *\*chuckle from Sue-On\**

**Bill:** But uh, you know it largely it comes out of music, music is the core. And a lot of it has come out of Brandon.

**Interviewer:** Yeah. And actually maybe that’s another question too, um, just in terms of overall interest in music. In the general area would you say it’s, kind of, like anybody just comes by and has that basic interest or do you feel it kind of caters to a certain niche group within the area?

**Bill:** I don’t, know … that’s difficult to say. Music and venues are so diverse and so widespread. So many of the bars and clubs promote a heavy dance beat -- it’s the beat more than the music really! *\*chuckle\** They’re there to dance and drink! And pickup. But if you go to a wedding, a grad or something more formal and you want something more subdued and sentimental you sometimes go back to the old tunes even something from **Peter Paul and Mary**. *\*chuckle from Sue-On\** Stuff like that and ballads. I don’t know -- I don’t have any handle on it.

**Sue-On:** It’s kind of neat though I know, the North 40 sometimes brings in some fairly well-known bands It’s great to go see **Johnny Cash’s old Tennessee Three** after so many years. Even **Westman Auditorium** and the **Keystone** have brought in quite a variety of acts -- unfortunately they don’t always attract the crowd that they should. We were just at the **Colin James** concert and it was really kind of sad to see they didn’t fill the place.

**Interviewer:** Oh really?

**Bill:** The thing is he was unplugged -- he didn’t have a band . . . you’re asking for trouble if you don’t come in with a full show or opening act . . . or proper promotion.

**Sue-On:** *\*chuckle\** I know. But look at the **Tennessee Three**, when they came in the place was full – I guess it’s people like us who would go to something like that.

**Bill:** That was part of Johnny Cash’s old, back-up band.

**Interviewer:** Okay!

**Bill:** The **Luther Perkins** guy I mentioned (Cash’s original lead guitar player) died in a house fire. They weren’t going to replace him. But then a few months later a young man showed up at one of Cash’s gigs and his girlfriend said *“You’ve gotta hear my friend he knows all your stuff.”* And he did. He had it all note for note. So . . .

**Sue-On:** They hired him. **Bob Wootton**.

**Bill:** . . . they hired him and he was Johnny Cash’s lead player through all the big years. Well, he and Cash’s original drummer, **WS Holland** were in the band that came to Brandon. Back in the ‘50s, Holland was in Sun Studios playing drums on the famous **“Million Dollar Session”.**

Producer Sam Phillips let the tape recorder run during an informal jam in the studio. Elvis had come back after he had made it big. He and **Jerry Lee Lewis**, **Carl Perkins** and **Johnny Cash** all sat around the piano were all singing for an hour -- all off the cuff.

**Interviewer (02:00:31):** Oh wow.

**Bill:** That session is out on an album and was recently the basis of a new stage musical. But behind them was Carl Perkins’ drummer, and then he was picked up by Johnny Cash. So it was he and guitarist Bob Wooton who fronted the recent Tennessee Three appearances in Brandon – along with his wife and daughter. Wootton even did a pretty decent job of singing Cash’s vocals. But he now has health problems and has stopped touring.

**Sue-On:** Many of these acts often draw a big crowd because people our age still go to these shows, but I think young people are a bit more fickle. And, they have to be real head-banger bands to draw people in.

**Bill:** Well they don’t have the timeframe of memories and experiences we have. We go back 50 years and many of them go back five months or so.

**Interviewer:** Just about, yeah.

**Sue-On:** So it’s very hard to know what’s going to happen with a concert situation. Brandon just isn’t big enough to draw some of the crowds that Winnipeg might get. We’ve driven in to Winnipeg for concerts that we really wanted to see and the places was packed, but similar concerts here in Brandon are often much less successful.

**Interviewer:** And that’, kind of something I always kind of wondered too. It’s almost gotten to the point where people in Brandon are so accustomed to going to Winnipeg for events.

**Sue-On:** And the distance, it doesn’t seem to make any difference to people anymore.

**Interviewer:** Yeah it’s a two hour drive, and, you know…

**Bill:** That’s why so many of the small towns died. They come to Brandon.

**Sue-On:** And then Brandon goes to Winnipeg, you know, so it carries on. It’s too bad because it’d be so much easier just go downtown to where the concerts are rather than having to drive.

**Bill:** Well half a million people as opposed to 50,000. Risky for local promoters.

**Sue-On:** Yes. It makes a difference.

**Interviewer:** Yeah even if it’s big-name bands like **KISS**, **Motley Crue** or **ZZ Top**. Even they didn’t sell out the Keystone. And that’s maybe, what, 5000 seats? Like, but then again you know when they have it on a Wednesday night too, it doesn’t help matters.

**Sue-On:** Yeah, yeah. Weekends you know, but these acts actually stop in Brandon just to in fill their tours.

**Bill:** But we have seen some good people here. The casinos are really taking over in so many places.

**Sue-On:** Winnipeg’s Regent Casino now has stadium seating. We just went in to see Boz Scaggs – it was sold out.

**Bill:** Yes, they really expanded.

**Sue-On:** We’ve seen Chris Ghidoni and others play out in the **Sand Hills Casino** near **Carberry**. It’s not a huge room, but they’ve featured some pretty good acts.

**Bill:** Sue-On was guest chef out there for *\*laughter from Sue-On\** for their **Chinese New Year Celebration**. They had people lined back into the parking lot.

**Interviewer:** I know that casino is getting to be a draw for people especially in the area so.

**Sue-On:** Yeah, well it’s an unusual place for it way out there.

**Bill:** Yeah it’s not really quite accessible enough.

**Sue-On:** But once people get to know it then it’s different, they’re willing to drive out there. They’ve have a bus shuttle too.

**Bill:** They’ve gotta keep them coming.

**Sue-On:** **Frank McGuire** is another musician who is the entertainment manager up there. He’s quite a performer.

**Bill:** He’s played drums with us a few times.

**Interviewer:** Oh really? Okay.

**Sue-On:** And he’s a popular radio DJ as well. Now he’s into this other career. But he’s a good musician. Ours is a different kind of music from what he normally plays, but I think he enjoyed it.

**Bill:** These were more recent gigs we did, community reunions or homecomings.

**Sue-On:** In big arenas.

**Bill:** We played a number of such reunions over the years in packed arenas . . . a lot of fun. The crowd would bring up old albums and photos for us to autograph from decades back.

**Sue-On:** **McCreary** was one of those gigs. We played there soooo much over the years, often for their **Ski Club** when they had the ski hill there, as well as for the **Kinsmen**, and even political parties *\*chuckle\** We used to play there once or twice a month.

**Bill:** We’ve done political rallies for all the parties!

**Interviewer:** Really?

**Bill:** **Conservatives** and **Liberals** were good events but didn’t pay us. They think you’re doing yourself a big favour by helping them out.

**Sue-On:** **NDP** were the only ones who paid us. Lookin’ out for the working man, I guess. *\*laughter from all\**

**Sue-On:** When **Sterling Lyon** was running for **Manitoba Premier** we were playing quite a bit with Russ Gurr at the time – Russ had been quite involved in provincial politics so he had asked us to help out. Barry and Bill and I did the big rallies in the **Winnipeg Arena** and the old **Winnipeg Auditorium**. We led all the rally songs.

**Bill:** Then we all moved over to the **Marlborough Hotel** and set up in the lobby. Sterling Lyon, the candidate, stood on the back of a sofa leading the crowd. The whole lobby was packed and we were playing backing music. *\*laughter\** Political rallies can be kind of fun. But we’re really apolitical and areligious.

**Sue-On:** Just as long as they wanna hire us. NDP always, hired us for their events, up in Winnipegosis and Dauphin and all those places and they always paid us.

**Bill:** So, any snippets there that we might have missed? *\*referring to the question sheet in front of the interviewer\**

**Interviewer:** Oooh, ahhh, you know I think we pretty much covered the bulk of everything that I have on here.

**Sue-On:** Your tape hasn’t run out yet, or the battery?

**Interviewer:** Oooh I hope not. *\*leans over to check recording device\** Oh no. it’s still going strong. Um, well you know what I think -- I maybe have one more question here for you guys. It’s kind of like a general overall sense. What do you feel the impact has been on the Brandon community in terms of, like what music has done to it?

**Sue-On:** Well just look at the multi-culturalism right now. Talk about a broad range of music. When they have these events with the music I think it really brings the community out.

**Bill:** It’s the bait . . . and the glue!

**Sue-On:** Everyone enjoys the music. It doesn’t matter what kind of music it is now, because it’s multi-cultural everybody wants to participate. So you know it certainly has brought the community out and together. School bands have brought many families together that you maybe never would get to know. The kids perform at all these big events and they also have the **Jazz Festival** at the university. People come in from all the different communities and the neighbouring provinces and states. That’s a big impact -- not only do people get exposed to the different kinds of music and cultures, but there is also an economic impact.

**Bill:** The **Folk Festival** is another such event. I can’t think of any event that doesn’t have music at the forefront or background. It pulls people in. It’s the reason to be there in many cases or a reason to make people stay and a reason to take their money.

**Sue-On:** *\*laughter\** Well, you know there’s always an economic impact.

**Interviewer:** Absolutely, especially in terms of tourism -- especially if it is for festivals, stuff like that.

**Sue-On:** And the Brandon Fair’s got music so it brings people in from the farms. It always bring people together. It’s even brought you here. *\*chuckle\**

**Interviewer:** Certainly! And I’m very thankful for that! *\*general laughter\**

**Sue-On:** Well we’re glad you came.

**Interviewer:** Thank you very much guys for your time. I’ve, pretty much spent all the questions I could think of. Is there anything else you guys might like to add?

**Bill:** If you peruse our online [**book of music memories**](http://www.hillmanweb.com/book/) you might find a little things you might want to pursue later. Our [**general website**](http://www.hillmanweb.com/) features a lot of pursuits that we’re interested in

**Sue-On:** Yes, it might be of interest for anyone pursuing topics such as military, cooking, gardening, travel, martial arts, history, photography, collections, art, and on and on. . . not just music: [**www.hillmanweb.com**](http://www.hillmanweb.com).

**Bill:** For years, Sue-On has shared dishes that she’s created and cooked in her kitchen. She takes photos of them almost every day and posts them on her Facebook page and then we collate thousands of them all on our Website. And every year’s garden photos are quite spectacular.

**Sue-On:** And I listen to music and sing to my plants. Some of them die. They don’t like the songs that I’m singing, I guess.

**Bill:** Oh, but it’s been proven that plants like music.

**Sue-On and Interviewer:** Yeah. *\*laughter from Sue-On\**

**Bill:** People like music. It’s hard to find someone who would admit to not liking music of some sort. *“I don’t like this, I hate that but I love this. I hate that, hate that, but . . .” \*laughter\** all music streams you know? Man, it covers so much territory when you say “music.”

**Interviewer:** Oh yes.

**Sue-On:** It’s good for everything. Kids like it . . . lullabies . . . kiddie songs . . . play songs . . .

**Bill:** That’s the way it works.

**Interviewer:** Serenades.

**Bill:** I, can’t imagine being in a car without putting the radio on.

**Sue-On:** Can’t imagine being deaf. And not being able to hear. You know? You lose a lot.

**Bill:** In the car it’s a companion and the background to many a thousand mile.

**Interviewer:** Oh yes. And it helps with the memories too.

**Bill:** Oh yes, you often flashback to where you were or the lifetime event when you heard that song? *\*taps table with finger\** That song? That song? You know it triggers all these memories. Gosh, we were doing a live TV show when **John Kennedy** was shot. They interrupted our noon show on CKX-TV with a flash news announcement. We rushed through the show and went to the teletype room in time to see the confirmation that the president was dead. When **Elvis died** we just finished our tour . . .

**Sue-On:** . . . Mmhmm, in England.

**Bill:** Yes, we were at a bed and breakfast in **London** when we heard the news, then a terrific storm hit and flooded the tube system and . . .

**Sue-On:** They never had such a rain as that evening.

**Bill:** . . . our landlady was crying and . . .

**Sue-On:** She was a big Elvis fan.

**Bill:** . . . the **BBC** played Elvis’ *“How Great Thou Art”* as their sign-off.

**Interviewer:** Wow.

**Sue-On:** And it gives you a revealing timeline of your important lifetime events.

**Bill:** You remember where you were when **John Lennon** was killed . . . you know *\*bangs table\**

it’s all part of one long life’s scenario set to music. We were *\*chuckle from Sue-On\** on a music tour in North Battleford when astronaut **Neil Armstrong** stepped on the moon. We watched it on a little blurry screen . . .

**Sue-On:** A little portable TV in our tour bus.

**Bill:** . . . and just before we went on stage! Yeah.

**Interviewer:** One small screen for one small step. *\*chuckle from Interviewer, laughter from Bill and Sue-On\**

**Sue-On:** It was a big step really! Fit on a small screen! It was a little Sony portable.

**Bill:** It was so good when TVs grew to wall size and now they’re shrunk \*laughter\* back to a few inches! Trying to watch a movie on a smart phone is a bit frustrating.

**Sue-On:** Yeah, hard to do.

**Interviewer:** Too hard on the eyes. Alright well, once again thank you very much guys for your time here. I really appreciate it.

**Bill:** We mentioned the guitars, I’ll show you our studio and the guitars before you go. Our pride and joy. [**www.hillmanweb.com/guitars**](http://www.hillmanweb.com/guitars)

**Interviewer:** Excellent! Alright and I’ll just shut this off so thank you very much guys.

***End of Interview - (02:13:31)***

**Interview Date:** 2015-06-09

**Narrators (interviewees):** Hillman, Bill and Hillman, Sue-On

**Interviewer:** Bee, Richard

**Location:** Home of Bill and Sue-On Hillman in Brandon, Manitoba

**Transcribers:** Bee, Richard and Hillman, Bill

**Date Transcribed:** 2015-07-15 to 2015-08-10 and 2015-10

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**Most of the tall tales recounted here . . . and many more . . . are featured in the Gig Notes section of our online book. We’ve also shared thousands of career photos, many related links, and 100 of our recorded songs (downloadable) there.**

**HILLMAN GIG NOTES (10 CHAPTERS):**

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