

Fritz Plous: FP
Tracie Wilson: TW

TW: This is Tracie Wilson. I am in Chicago interviewing Fritz Plous who is a former member of the folksong club. It is May 23, 2007. So my first question is how did you become interested in traditional music?

FP: I can almost name the date when it happened. I had just arrived back on campus to start my sophomore year which would have been the fall of 1959. I checked back into my dormitory room which I believe was 217 Hopkins House. And unlike the year before, I heard music coming from down the corridor but it was not from a radio, it was somebody plunking a banjo. This was not the first day, it was several days after classes had started. It was during the evening and I was doing some reading, or some homework with the door open, and I heard the sounds of a banjo. And I went down the hallway to see where it was coming from, and I met this young man named Jarvis Rich, who had just checked in as a freshman. He had a five-string banjo with him, and I just thought the sound was very appealing. And I just started to talk with him about where he got this banjo and how he learned to play it and so on. When I was growing up in Kenosha, Wisconsin, I don't think I ever heard a person play a guitar, a banjo, or any other folk instrument. My background in music was being taken to concerts by an aunt of the Kenosha Symphony Orchestra, which I liked, I liked classical music very much. And my father played a lot of jazz around the house. He was very interested in the 1950s type-jazz, and I used to listen to his albums. I had no exposure to folk music, whatever, except when we were in public school and we had the songs we had to sing in music class were like "Camptown Races" or something like that. It was hoped-up Steven Fosteroid compositions, based on folk themes, that sort of thing. I never heard any sort of folk music, or sought, discussed, or read anything about it. I didn't know anything about it. And Jarvis started playing some tunes on the banjo, and started playing some guitar numbers; they were American, they were Appalachian folk music. And I thought that it was very pretty, I liked the music. Just musically, it made a lot of sense to me. I had never liked popular music, I had never followed any pop music trends, and of course back in those days, the pop music was not as interesting as it is today. And it was not all-pervasive; you did not hear it coming at you from TV commercials, and soundtracks in the store.

Nevertheless there was a very huge pop music industry; a lot of teenagers were immersed in that culture. I was not, I never cared for it. In fact, I was not very involved in, you know, the teenage scene, that did not appeal to me. I had a few friends and we pursued hobbies like model railroading, and model airplane building, and doing other nerdy geeky things. I guess if it had been 30 or 40 years later, we'd have been fooling around with digital technology, but did not follow any pop scene, did not care for the music coming over the radio, was never interested in that. So this music I heard, was like a revelation to me. It was not concert hall music, I had nothing against concert hall music, in fact I went to classical concerts and collected records. But the idea that there was music that people could make in their own homes, that was a very definite genre, you know, not fooling around music. It had some history to it, it had its own aesthetic, that appealed to me very much. I had always loved history, and the idea that this was history appealed to me very much, meant a lot to me too. So at some point later that year, or

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perhaps early in January of 1960, Jarvis told me that he had heard a folk music club was being started, and every second Friday they held a folk sing, where any folk musician, or anybody who was learning that type of music could come and perform. So I went with him to one of these folk sings, and I heard a lot of good music. I also heard some junk. The MC was a lady named Jackie Henry and I particularly remember that she was very funny. She was a very droll, humorous woman and I just enjoyed hearing her talk as she chatted between the numbers and introduced the acts. Some of the music, in fact a good deal of the music, was not really folk music, it was coffeehouse music: topical, political music.

There was a widespread belief at that time, and it has persisted down to this time, that any person with an acoustic guitar in his hands, who is strumming and singing on that guitar, is a folk singer. Well as we proceeded further and our club got a little more serious, although the entire time I was there we did have coffeehouse singers, at those folk sings, they became more and more a minority. Of course the reason for that was Archie Green. Archie Green sat us down, sometime individually over a cup of coffee, sometimes have us over to his house for dinner, or sometimes it would be during meetings of the club. And he would point out the distinctions between true ethnic music that was originated and was being performed by people living in a real folk community. And he defined what that was, and he told us there were controversies among anthropologist about who, what was a real ethnic group and who was a real folk performer, was it pre-literate? Or was it okay if they knew how to read? And so on. But I absorbed that, and I suppose very early on me and my friends like Jarvis, we became 'authenticists,' which was a term that was not in use at the time, in fact I just made it up. But we were authenticists, we wanted the authentic five-star, bodily bond, aged in oak, traditional ethnic music. Not coffeehouse music, not political, topical humor; we had nothing against that sort of stuff, except we didn't like it being branded as folk music. And, in fact over the years, I think you'd find this true at almost any college folklore society that emerged at that time, there wasn't so much a war between the authenticists and the delusionists, as there was a constant war between the authenticists to out-authentic each other, and to develop more rarified and pure terms to define folk music. I think we all understood that, we'd joke about it a lot, but we knew what we wanted. And Arch helped us identify it, and he helped us get it. You know, he could sit down and play a record for you and say 'Here's what folk music sounds like, coming from its natural community, where it expresses the genius of that people, as well as the limitations of that people.' You know, here's when happens when the delusion comes along, particularly when the commercial values are introduced and again I can't attribute all these ideas to Archie. Some of these, I will tell you, are my own thoughts that have evolved based on what I learned from Archie, and also based on what I learned from visiting folklorists that he brought to the campus to talk with us. The way my awareness of folk music evolved was that even though folk music can be exposed to a modern commercial environment, as it was when the Carter family cut their first records, as it was when bluegrass first emerged and became a serious type of music that was on the borderland of the pop music world.

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There is a certain point at which it loses its virginity. And that point is when the music begins to be written the way American products are designed, that is with planned obsolescence. A real folk musician functioning in a real folk society creates music to last and to continue to reflect the values of that society, which they believe is going to endure, because traditional societies are ones in which change doesn't happen very much. In a modern commercial society, you don't design anything to last; Mercedes Benz almost went broke because they designed cars that nobody wanted to trade in, they were so good people kept driving them. Cuisinart went through a reorganization because they had such a steady product, nobody wanted to throw it out and get a new upgraded model. With pop music, the big thing is change, what is the latest thing; when a song lasts more than six weeks it begins to be called a 'cult classic.' Which means, it might actually be good, it might have some enduring values in it that might be relevant for somebody who didn't actually grow up in that culture. It might become 'classical music.' I found my daughter several years ago listening to the Rolling Stones, that's 30-35 year old music. When I was a kid nobody who was following popular music was playing the pop music of the 20s, it was totally extinct. So occasionally, in spite of everything, even though pop music is created to be perishable, something good turns out to survive. Well in a folk society, everything is designed to survive. Music which fails to meet the needs of the next generation just drops out and we don't know about it anymore. And because they had no way of recording the stuff electronically, we have no idea how many stillborn folksongs are laying around in the hills of Scotland or Ireland or Bohemia or Southern Poland, but we have because of the remarkable invention of electrical recording at the turn of the last century.

The ability to go in and seize and freeze and catch true folk music in the United States and in Europe as well, before it had the chance to be affected by the commercialism, and it was that that we were focusing, and we were focusing on it for the reasons that I am telling you, because it is very difficult, probably impossible to create that kind of environment, even very talented people can't do that, without the environment you just can't create this stuff. From what we can tell, a lot of folk musicians in a traditional society don't try to create a lot of new music, they want to hear the old music. And then they refine it and they work on it. A lot of this became clear to me sometime in the early sixties. Archie had a famous folklorist named MacEdward Leach come to lecture to us. We had him to dinner, I think Archie and Luanne may have served dinner to him, and I think maybe the board of the club, I think was at the dinner. And then he gave his lecture, and it was called the "Ballad and the Folk Aesthetic." And he talked about how in a traditional culture where the environment doesn't change much, the nature of life doesn't change much from generation to generation, the aesthetic doesn't change much either. There is not a continuing hunger for new sound, people actually want the old sound but better, more carefully expressing their aesthetic. And he showed how ballad writers over the years refined their work, to one that would fit the aesthetic of their society, and as long as their society didn't change, that aesthetic survived. Because the aesthetic rose out of the conditions of life for these people. And that made a tremendous impression on me, and it made it a lot easier for me to be an authenticist, and be an unapologetic authenticist. The one thing I've never understood

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about myself is why I should so enthusiastic about sounds that express the aesthetic of a society in which I do not live, and never lived and probably would not want to live in. The whole question of how occasionally, for a few people, an aesthetic that made perfect sense for a 19th century rural environment or a 17th century rural environment or for that matter in a 15th century monastic cloister can reach over into a totally different environment and mean something.

Then you get to talk about a much more enduring subject which is aesthetic values, that somehow express something very deep in the human psyche that isn't all that much affected by changes in social environment. But anyway we all had our dormitory bullshit sessions about questions like this, and if it weren't for Archie and his organization of the club, we wouldn't have had them. And that experience provided me with a wonderful experience in listening, a wonderful experience in appreciation, and a wonderful experience in asking questions that I still use, and that I still apply to a lot of problems which don't necessarily have anything to do with folk music.

TW: Like what?

FP: The way we live today, and what's right and what's wrong about the way we live today. And the way we're going to live tomorrow, and how much of the way we live today are we going to be able to drag with us into tomorrow, and how much we're going to have to discard, and how bad we're going to feel about that. As you get older and as you realize you have less time, you become more concerned about what kinds of experiences are really going to have a high payoff for you, because you don't have a lot of time to sort and discard or have flat and meaningless experiences, you want really rich experiences. And the kind of questioning that I learned to do in the club, the kind of listening I learned to do, very much fitted me to be a critic of my society. And when you become a critic of your society, you have to give up a certain amount, you don't fit in as well as people who are less critical. But you fit much better in with other people who are critical. You know how to pick your friends, and you know you can talk about things that you can't talk about with other people. And to me it's a question of foregoing a certain amount of quantity in order to get a certain amount of quality. And I think that experience that Archie led me to, made me able to make many quality versus quantity decisions in my life that I have never regretted. I think I've lead a richer life because of the Folksong Club. I can't think of anything else that I would have been doing at that period that would have fitted me, to live the way I live now.

TW: Interesting. There's so many things you mentioned that I wanted to ask about. Your use of the word 'ethnic' because it's interesting. I think the way it gets used a lot now is to refer to anyone that's not white.

FP: Boy! I didn't know that.

TW: Well in academia.

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FP: Thirty years ago in the city of Chicago, ethnic meant Slavic. No, I just think that ethnic means referring to people of a distinct ethnos, a people. Related by blood, but also by ideas and culture.

TW: So the term ethnic music was used very much in that kind of way?

FP: I would have no trouble referring to the music of 19th century rural Normandy as ethnic music, because there is a distinct ethnic population there who are of Britannic and Norsk ancestry who settled in that area and who ended up speaking the French language and shaping French culture in their own way. And you, know when you get a society before the age of mechanical transportation, when most people stayed in pretty much the same place their whole lives, and only encountered other people who spoke the same language and practiced the same professions, that's an ethnos, in a way we don't have today, where people of various ancestries marry whoever they please, so blood no longer means anything, color doesn't mean as much as it used to. Many of us now are bilingual, certainly we get to hear lots of foreign languages. Ethnic, to me, suggests a certain amount of social isolation, and also physical isolation; I have no hesitancy, I know there are various academic fads and I don't partake of them. I'm not in the academic community, I have no career to watch out for.

TW: No, I think I get kind of frustrated, as someone who studies a white ethnic group Poles. When I see advertisements for ethnic studies, you look at what they really want, and it's someone who does African-American.

FP: Yeah you're on the ring, when I hear 'world music' to me that's African. When you listen to the so-called world music shows and you hear a lot of African and you don't hear a lot of Finnish music.

TW: And it hegemonizes the rest of us in a way that isn't really fair.

FP: Well, you know one of the things I learned, partly from doing folk studies, I learned to be more careful and more aware of how language is used and I became very aware, years before the term was coined, I became very aware of 'political correctness' as we now call it. And one of the things I found out over the years is you can try to force language into channels for political reasons but it will always wriggle back out. Now I will give you an example, back in the 19th century, when the settlement house movement became big in like Chicago, the lower eastside of New York and the other big industrial cities, had a problem with criminal young people, what we would call juvenile delinquents. And they were called "young criminals," and the young criminals were taken, they had no youth courts then, they were just dragged in front of the court like everybody else, and were given the same sentence like everybody else. And then of course, the settlement house ladies like Jane Addams got very indignant about this and they said no, these are not real criminals, they are just young people who unfortunately gone astray because of the economic and social conditions in which we live, and we

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ought to have a separate name for them, and a separate set of courts for them. And to make it sound lofty and academic they picked some Latin terms 'juvenile delinquents' okay? And that sounded better than 'young criminals.' Well, low and behold, thirty or forty years pass and 'juvenile delinquents' had come to acquire its own stigma, and now they're called 'youthful offenders.' But they're the same people, the stigma is now starting to attach to 'youthful offenders,' you can't use language to dodge an uncomfortable real world fact.

Just another one before I leave the subject, this is something of a hobby of mine. After World War II, we had a lot of refugees, particularly a lot of refugees who couldn't go back to where they lived, because the communists had taken over. There were a lot of Polish people, a lot of Lithuanian people, a lot of Czechs who were living in camps in Germany. The United States had wanted to do something about these people, but already the word 'refugee' had acquired a certain stigma to it. Just as two years ago with Katrina people go "They're not refugees! That happens in Europe, this is the United States." But they're refugees, they're seeking refuge and they can't go to their homes, but they didn't want to use the word refugees. So somebody came up with, I think it was the UN who came up with the term 'displaced person.' Well that's a mouthful, so people began to call them DP's; within a couple years, DP began to mean some dirty, shiftless people from Europe who couldn't go back to their homes and were looking for charity in the United States. Today we've gone back to refugee, nobody will use DP. So there are certain facts which some people just find uncomfortable, so they try to make up new words to avoid the discomfort, but you know, if there's gonna be a stigma it's gonna attach to whatever word you use, eventually you'll have to go back and face facts. I have no hesitancy about using 'ethnic,' I use it all the time, in the original sense. You know, one thing people were rebelling against was back in the 50s and even in the 60s, we tended to use 'ethnic music' as a term for overseas music. 'Ethnic' meant *other* people. Even when we were talking about Appalachian music, and even about black music, and blues in the south, yeah it was folk, but those were our folks. So ethnic was already starting to mean overseas people. I wasn't even aware of the transition.

TW: So how did you end up at the University of Illinois?

FP: Oh, I wanted to get away from my family in Wisconsin. They had all gone to the University of Wisconsin, and as I looked around me I found people were already deciding which fraternity I was gonna be in, and which girls I was gonna date, and you know I just didn't want that, I fled. Also, I was always very interested in Chicago, and I was pretty sure I was gonna live there, and I wanted a very intense urban existence. I figured if I went to the University of Illinois, I'd meet lots of kids from Chicago, and maybe they'd invite me to their homes on weekends and I would start learning about the different Chicago neighborhoods, and that indeed happened. In fact, not long after I met Jarvis, he invited me back to his neighborhood which was Beverley, and introduced me to some of his friends who were also playing folk music, and beginning to attend the Old Town School of Folk music, and beginning to go to concerts at the Gate of Horn, and so on. You know, there was already a rich folk scene in Chicago, I wanted to be a part of

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that, and there was much better access to it from the University of Illinois, than there would have been from Madison. Although, I didn't know about folk music when I made my decision, but it turned out to be another right reason why I made my decision.

TW: You had a lot of foresight.

FP: Yeah, well I would think I was very lucky.

TW: Well, you already talked about how you got in the Folksong Club, in your mind, what role did the club play at the U of I?

FP: Well, it had a number of roles. One was that it gave a bunch of us students, a folk start, that we would have otherwise not have had, no matter what you're studying formally. Remember this, at the University of Illinois at that time, there was no 'folklore' department, Archie was the closest thing we had to a folklore department, so if you were seriously interested in folklore, and folk music, and folk culture, the club was the only place you could do that on campus. It was the only way you could get exposure to serious folk musicians, because we brought them to campus. It was the only way you could get exposure to serious professors and students of folklore, because we brought them to campus. Again, this is Archie, driving all of this and guiding it. Second, I think this was terribly important, we brought real folk music, and very exciting folk music performers to an audience, a huge audience, who otherwise never would have heard them. And I don't mean just the students. When we held our Flatt and Skruggs concert, which, what was that '61? '62? I can't remember, we filled the University of Illinois Auditorium. And as I think I explained to you over the phone, we did that through a network of alliances that our students and some of the faculty had built to people out in the countryside, including Uncle Johnny Buton at WJOW. I forget the name of the station out in Clinton, Illinois. And he gave us free airtime, and talked about how there was Flatt and Skruggs. The University Concert Board knew nothing about bluegrass. They said, 'If you want, who are those people? Give me those names, Lester Flatt.' And on the night of that concert, there were pickups parked all over the campus and farmers and their wives, dressed fit to kill, strolling up to the University of Illinois Auditorium, a place they had never visited, and the campus folksong club was the agency that was bringing these peoples' own music to them in a way and at a level that they otherwise would not have been able to access. Because there was no other venue around at that time who was having Flatt and Skruggs. Maybe the Illinois State Fair, I don't know, but this was a new thing. And for us to bring Flatt and Skruggs to the people around the campus, you know, to the farmers, to the rural people out there, was as exciting for us to bring it to our fellow students who had not known about this thing.

TW: And so were Flatt and Skruggs known then to people from around the area?

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FP: Oh yeah, because they were listening to Grand Ol' Opry on Saturday nights, but it wasn't all that easy to drive down to Nashville in those days. And to have this concert brought right into there midst, it was a great thing for them, they liked it.

TW: Yeah, that kind of touches on something that Judy McCulloh mentioned, that having the club as this great, kind of democratizing force.

FP: Oh it did.

TW: You know, bringing different types of people together, which is really quite interesting.

FP: Yeah well, when I went away to the University of Illinois, I was not terribly aware of social class distinctions in this country, but when I got there I realized, you know, some of the kids came from very rich backgrounds, and some of the others came from very poor backgrounds, they were the very first generation in their family to go away to college. For all of us to meet under these circumstances, to come from various backgrounds, and just mingle and work at developing this institution, and for putting in all of this work and collecting albums, you know, that's a tremendous project. Very little of that had been done by students. One of the things I learned in that club was how to work collaboratively, you know, how to work on a board; I learned how to put out a newsletter. We had the largest newsletter in the folk industry, some months we were printing more words than *Sing Out* magazine was. And you know, with the technology of that time, we would have to take it up to the University Printing Office and have it mimeographed. And we would take the stacks of pages, and we would have a collating party, you know, we would put the pages around the rim of the table and each of us would sit there and accept a pile of pages from the kid next to us, and put our page on top of the next one, and staple kid would hit it at the end, and eventually we would have 500 hundred copies of the *AutoHarp* and somebody would start stuffing envelopes, and he would be delegated to take it down to the post office. It was an organizational exercise, which was very important to us at the time, because a lot of college kids probably wouldn't encounter a lot of organizational work on a serious level until they got out into their first job. And Archie organized all of that, he got it all happening.

TW: So where was the newsletter published at? And where did you print it?

FP: The University, in the Illini Union, they had an office with a mimeographing machine in there. And you know what we would do is we would hand-type the pages of the *AutoHarp* including whiting out our mistakes with a special fluid, then you would have to cut a stencil, you know, you would have to type all of this stuff on a smelly, blue-ish stencil. And if you hit the wrong key, it would leave an impression on there, and you would use the fluid to strike a new letter on there. Very cumbersome by today's standards, you can understand why they invented all this technology. Then when you had all your stencils assembled, you would take them up to the University mimeographing

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office, and for a certain fee, I don't know a quarter a page or something like that, they would strap each page on this drum, and then ink it and turn it on, and you know they would print out, 50, 100, 500 pages, whatever you needed. And then they would hand you your pages and you would take them over to this other room, I don't know I think we would always take them over to the School of Industrial Relations, Archie would always get us a meeting room there, and we would stand around and assemble the thing. We would usually do this on a Saturday morning, and then we would put stamps on, and take them to the post office. And everybody got their *AutoHarp*, you've probably read editions before.

TW: Yes, I've read quite a few.

FP: Well, we did a lot of work. We did a lot of work. You know work was harder, and it took longer then, because there were so few technologies to assist, and it was basically typewriters.

TW: Was there sort of a core group in the club that did a lot of the work?

FP: Yeah, and it changed with each year as people came and went.

TW: And so what year did you arrive? I know you said you got into this your sophomore year.

FP: I don't remember at what point we decided to start a newsletter. I don't remember when Archie decided to appoint me the editor.

TW: I think it was '61, from what I've read.

FP: But I edited the newsletter. I don't remember if I typed stencils or if somebody else did that, a lot of it has escaped attention, but I was the editor of it for at least a couple years. And also, he appointed me to be the MC at the bi-weekly folk sings. And I guess the reason for that was in high school I was trained in public speaking, and in 1958 I was a member of the Wisconsin state championship high school debate team. We won all our debates that year, swept the state, and then in the state forensic league championships, I won the statewide prize for humorous declamation, which was reciting a passage from *The Education of Hyman Kaplan*. And so I had no stage fright, I loved to get out on the stage, and chat with people. So I enjoyed this, you know I, and other people, I don't remember who, we would book the acts and decide who would perform at each folk sing, and then I would introduce the acts, and talk a little, you know, ask people to join the club and tell them we need volunteers for the newsletter and we need volunteers to do work on concert preparation. You know, there was always logistics to do, if we had a performer coming in, you know, we needed somebody to pick them up at the airport, or pick them up at the train, there was always people to put the performer up, because we had them stay in our houses, and generally we would find somebody who didn't have too

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much to do that weekend who would be the kind of manager and the roadie for the performer. So it was my job to get up at the folk sings and solicit help for all of these projects.

TW: Sounds like you were really one of the key people.

FP: Yeah, I was. Although, there were others like Bill Becker who was, I believe an electronics engineer, he and Jont Allen did a lot of the work, oh and John Schmidt, the late John Schmidt did a lot of the work in the actual recording of these records. I mean we had people come in from the surrounding community, and from deep in downstate Illinois, and record for us, who were real folk musicians. Have you talked with Lyle Mayfield in Greenville?

TW: I haven't, I talked to Judy about it.

FP: You've gotta get down to see Lyle! He'll fill in a lot of the blanks for ya.

TW: Okay, I will try.

FP: I love Lyle. I'm gonna try to get down and see him and his wife on the 21st of July, there's a bluegrass festival in Greenville, and he will probably be performing there. Great guy, great guy. That was my first real persistent exposure to rural people. And Lyle is a very good writer, have you ever seen his book? I will give you a copy [movement noises]. And when he worked at the *Greenville Advocate* he published poems, and you can borrow that.

TW: Oh. I'll send it back to you.

FP: He's a good essayist. He's not bad in the kind of narrow genre in which he writes. A very articulate fellow, and he can give you, I mean Lyle is close to eighty, and he can give you actual insight into the folklore of Illinois when he was growing up down there in the thirties.

TW: I was talking to Judy yesterday too, and she was saying how it would be interesting just to get the kind of perspective of the performers from outside you students that were involved with the club, so.

FP: You know the first performer, I remember coming to play for us from outside our community was Joe Hickerson from Indiana. And he's still around, I saw him, not as a performer, but I saw him at the University of Chicago Folk Festival. Have you talked with Dave Samuelson?

TW: No, I've heard of him.

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FP: He's in Indiana over in Lafayette.

TW: Oh, Archie must have mentioned him.

FP: Okay, and Dave Huehner was last reported 25 years ago in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin. And Bob Koenig and his girlfriend Marcie, who I think he married, I don't know where he is, he did a lot of work in the club. And a woman named Binnette Rothman who was from Chicago, she did some writing for me at *AutoHarp*. And Professor Harry Oster, at Louisiana State University, probably dead now, he brought us some performers from down there. And Professor Bruno Nettle, who was an ethnomusicologist, and of course there was MacEdward Leach who is dead now, he was old when we brought him. And there was another famous folklorist, oh, he brought over one from Germany named Gerhardt Heilfurth, who lectured to us. I don't remember much about Heilfurth, but he was already an older man. But Archie was the first person who showed me how you bring scholarship to bear on aesthetics. Which, in the case of folk music, also means bringing scholarship to bear on society and on social issues, as well as on individual and personal issues. I was in journalism, and journalism is a trade school, it's not an academic pursuit. Some people have tried to elevate it into an academic pursuit, I'm not sure that's been successful. So what Archie showed us was, that's were I first got to see the application of academic research to aesthetics.

TW: So, do you think the political climate of the 60s had an impact on the club and how its member perceived themselves?

FP: Yeah, very much so. Because of the Civil Rights Movement, I think we became much more intensely aware of poor people, marginalized people, ethnic minorities. And as part of that awareness, I think we became more appreciative of what those people had to bring to the American party. And you know, that certainly was true for those of us in the club, and I think it became true for a lot of Americans. The troubles of the 60s left some ugly stains, but I think it made more Americans aware, and particularly their children aware of the diversity of this country. And within those pockets of diversity there was real value. I think a lot of us became aware that the white middle class in which we had been brought up did not have all the answers, certainly did not have all the experiences to some extent. There's a whole literature on this, it was viewed as 'anti-experience,' a deliberate effort to narrow experience. And for those of us who found folk music in the Campus Folksong Club, this was the, I don't like to use clichés, but this was the kind of personal growth experiences, and mind-expanding experiences that we had been looking for. For some of us, it did meet that need.

TW: You've already gone into this a little bit, but I'm going to ask you to expand on it, how would you describe the impact that the club had on you then and later?

FP: Well, as I said it did change my life. It certainly expanded my powers of appreciation. It certainly enhanced my ability to discriminate between good music and

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bad music. I know it did that, I know not just in terms of folk music, once you learn how to have a refined taste you can carry it from one aesthetic to another. You can do that in literature, you can do that in architecture, you can do that in food; I mean, you can begin to discriminate between the mediocre and the excellent. You can learn how to allocate your time on experiences that will really be worthwhile and satisfying. And I don't think I began doing that until I was well into club work, and starting to listen to this music, and starting to realize that some of it was really good. You know, like when you heard Flatt and Skruggs, it was really superb musical performances. If you heard Mary O'Hara sing Irish ballads, you heard a superb voice with superb taste. If you heard Almeda Riddle as I did many times both down in Arkansas as well as in Champaign, you heard a genuine folk musician, with a real grasp of her peoples' aesthetic. And a real grasp of how to import it to people from outside that aesthetic. You'd think, 'Wow she was a genius.' I remember looking at the moon out on her back porch, she'd let us sleep at her house, she'd bring out seven feather beds, and put three down underneath us and three on top of us, and we'd sleep out there listening to whippoorwills, an absolutely amazing experience. Granny Riddle, and she would sing, you know, shade-note hymns with her elbow balanced on her knee, and her right hand going back and forth to the beat, and that was as deep, and as pleasant, and as rich and as satisfying a musical experience, as you could have in any symphony hall, or any opera anywhere in the world. She embodied not only a great talent, but a complete grasp of an aesthetic. When you heard her sing "How Firm a Foundation" you became a Christian, at least while she was singing that song. She was a wonderful lady, wonderful lady.

TW: One of the most interesting books I read while I was preparing for my Ph.D. was Roger Ebert's book about her.

FP: Oh really? I didn't know he had done that.

TW: Oh it's very interesting. I can't really remember much but that's amazing that you had that experience.

FP: Oh yeah, and sometimes when Jarvis and I we went down to the Smoky Mountains, and were looking for fiddlers and banjo players. And as a rule, you go into a rural community and you talk to the folk musicians, there's a good chance you may have found the most interesting and most intelligent people in that community. Some of them are really sharp. For one thing, in order to make their music take, they have to be pretty shrewd observers of their scene, and of their cultures, and as well of the cultures outside. I found some pretty sharp brains under those crude rural exteriors.

TW: Well I don't think I have any more specific questions pertaining to the project, is there anything else that we haven't hit on that comes to mind.

FP: If you see Archie again, tell him thanks. He opened an enormous vista in my life, and it has affected pretty much everything I've done since then.

Fritz Plous: FP
Tracie Wilson: TW

TW: Actually, Judy told me that the Library of Congress was planning to award him the “Living Legend Award.”

FP: He should have it, he should have it. And I especially like the ‘living’ part.

TW: That’s great, he’ll be able to get it while he’s still around.

FP: Thank you for bringing it out of me. I don’t get to talk about it a lot. I did tell my daughter about it when she was in high school, and she was just amazed. She was listening to this Johnny Hartford CD and she liked it. And she says, “Dad, you ever hear of bluegrass?” And I said, “Oh my dear, sit down.” Ha ha ha.

TW: Did she know about your past?

FP: No, I had never told her. One reason was, and this is kind of sad, an unfortunate personal note, for many years I did not have a lot of money, did not have a job, struggling along as a freelance writer which is a fancy way of saying you’re being supported by a Korean orphan. And during a lot of that time, I didn’t have the money to repair our stereo. I had this record collection, another reason is, my wife has never been interested in the same kind of music that I am, she’s a dear, dear lady. I love her very much, but her roots are in jazz ballads that sort of thing, and she didn’t go to college so she never had this experience. There’s no way I can relate it to her. So a lot of the time, I couldn’t even play my damn stereo, so I had all these wonderful records going back to the 50s and all of this wonderful music, but nobody in the house had heard it. Now, I mean later, we got money, we got a CD player and all kinds of stuff, but only recently did I get my father’s old Pioneer Stereo repaired, and I still haven’t got it hooked up. So the family hasn’t actually heard Red Cravens and the Bray Brothers, or some of the McPeake Family of Belfast, and some of these other records that I collected back then.

TW: Well it’s great that you have a turntable still.

FP: Yes, I do, I have a very good turn table. I have a very good amplifier and some speakers, I just got to hook them up and then we’ll party.

TW: My husband is from Poland, and he actually doesn’t appreciate bluegrass music. I mean I’m probably not into it quite as much as you, but

FP: Well bluegrass is appreciated all over the world, they appreciate it in Japan, they have bluegrass bands in Russia, they have it in New Zealand.

TW: He doesn’t dislike it, he just doesn’t understand it. I don’t know, maybe it’s because he doesn’t understand the lyrics, as much or something.

Fritz Plous: FP
Tracie Wilson: TW

FP: Now, for some people that doesn't bother them. In fact, lyrics don't mean anything. I found out something that, like who understands the lyrics in rock n' roll, it's like grand opera, it doesn't matter, that's not what you go for. It's interesting to me, that when they sell CDs these days, and they sell music players, they talk about how many songs it will hold, and they assume you're going to be listening to songs. Kids don't listen to instrumentals these days, even when they go to dance, they dance to music that has words to it. Now they don't dance to the words, the words are irrelevant, but all music is now called 'songs.' And my daughter and I even got into a bit of a little fight over this, whether you can call something a song if it doesn't have words to it. Well I said of course it's not a song, if you're not singing! It's an instrumental, but that decision has been lost on the current generation. But I happen to not care for vocal music very much, I tend to find most of it not good. I tend to like very frantic ethnic dance music. I love Irish and Scottish music, very fast, jumpy Irish and Scottish music, I love Slavic, I love Middle Eastern Arabic, Turkish type music. I love Balkan, Serbian and Greek type music. Anyway, that's just my personal taste, and it doesn't have to have words with it.

TW: Interesting, you don't play an instrument yourself?

FP: I used to play the fiddle, but then one day I realized I don't have very much talent, and this sort of thing ought to be done by people with talent.

TW: Was that something you did in college then?

FP: Yeah, yeah, I used to play with pickup bands. And Lyle Mayfield has some recordings with me.

TW: Really?

FP: Yeah, the funny thing is, I have a pretty good singing voice, and I have a pretty good sense of pitch for somebody who wasn't trained, and didn't know how to read music. But there's only so much of oneself that should be inflicted on helpless other people.

TW: Just two other things, in passing, I was emailing Vic Lukas. And I guess it was Archie who mentioned David Whisnant is at the University of North Carolina, do you know? I think he spent some time at U of I in the mid-sixties. I think he taught there.

FP: I don't remember that name.

TW: He wrote this book called *All that is Native and Fine about Appalachia*. And Vic just suggested I ask you because it didn't ring a bell.

FP: No.

Fritz Plous: FP
Tracie Wilson: TW

TW: And Judy yesterday wanted me to ask you if you knew of anyone who was doing research on the Stanley Brothers. She has a student.

FP: I don't know of anybody doing research, I know of Preston Martin down in Dallas, used to be a big Stanley Brothers fan.

TW: Maybe what she asked me to ask you, specifically, was if you had any recollection of some party they were at, at the Chicago Folk Music Festival back in the 60s?

FP: No, but I can give you the number of somebody who might be able to help you, and also be able to help you on other aspects. And that's Mike Melford. Has that name come up?

TW: It sounds kind of familiar.

FP: Okay Mike Melford was a guy who was raised in Glencoe, Illinois and came down to the University of Illinois for one semester, and did not do well in school and was not really interested in school. But he hung around because of the bluegrass scene. He loved bluegrass music, he was extremely talented on the mandolin. His hero was Bill Monroe. He later went to Boston and worked in this bluegrass band called the Lilly Brothers, and finally he decided after not making much of a living as a bluegrass musician, to go respectable, and to go clamber back into the middle class from which he came. And he went I think to Pacifica College back in Sacramento, got a law degree, and now he's in Boston, and he's a show business lawyer. And among his clients are Magliozzi the Tappet Brothers on NPR, the car guys. In fact he is, Dewy Cheat-em and How. They always say that their law firm is Dewy Cheat-em and How.