

Neil Rosenberg: NR  
Tracie Wilson: TW

TW: Ok, there it goes. So this is Tracie Wilson. I'm speaking with Neil Rosenberg by phone on July 13<sup>th</sup>, 2007. This is part of the Campus Folksong Oral History Project. I'm in Illinois and he's in Newfoundland. Um, I don't know, my first question is very broad but it is how did you become interested in traditional music?

NR: Beg pardon?

TW: How did you become interested in traditional music?

NR: Oh, I got interested in folk music back in the early 1950's when I was a teenager living in Berkely California, and there were a lot of different influences at the time. I had friends who were playing and relatives who were interested in it, and it was, you know, it was a popular new music at the time.

TW: Uhm-hm. I see. And how did you become involved with the Campus Folksong Club at Illinois?

NR: Well, I was— by 19— In— Well, I went to college in Oberlin, Ohio at Oberlin College and was involved in folk music there and decided to, uh, do a graduate study in folklore and I went to Indiana University. And I started there in 1961 and it was at that time, around that time, that I got to know first of all Judy McCulloh. She was a fellow graduate student and then not long after that, maybe a year after that, she went to Illinois and at some point there I met Archie Green. I had been trying to remember how I got to know Archie, but I can't. I can't remember now. There was quite a close connection though, you know, between Urbana, and between Illinois and Indiana. And, Archie came over probably for some sort of a folklore event and we met. And then Judy was involved with the Archives of Traditional Music and uh— also though, we started a folk song club in 1962, and uh—

TW: at Indiana?

NR: At Indiana, that's right. And I was the chair of the committee involved with outside, other groups, outside groups. And I of course got to talking with, uh— I was just looking through my files and I found I have notes of a phone conversation with John Schmidt, who was the president of the club in the fall of 1962, and he gave me a list of forthcoming concerts and we talked about having an exchange concert. And we published that list in our newsletter and then I got a letter in November from Vic Lukas who was my counterpart with the Illinois Folksong Club. And Vic and I arranged exchange concerts. So that's how I got to know the club and some of the people in the club too. We gave concerts at Urbana on the 12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> of 19— of January '63, I can't figure out which date. We being our bluegrass band at the time, Pidgeon Hill Boys, Greg Hildebrand and Joe Hickerson. And then the following month a group came over from Illinois and gave a concert at Indiana. I'm not sure of the names— well one of the names was a bluegrass band, uh, what'd they call 'em? The Yankee Ridge Runners, and also

Neil Rosenberg: NR  
Tracie Wilson: TW

Doyle Moore, and I'm not sure of the other people but you know the, there was a review of it in the IU Folksong Club Newsletter, and, uh, you know, so that was the start of it. And, at that time, you know I was just looking at my notes again, Archie sent me a photostat of a letter he wrote to our guitar player's father. Our guitar player Mayne Smith, M-A-Y-N-E Smith, and his father was a well known scholar and head of the English Department at Berkeley. His name was Henry Nash Smith, and Archie sent a letter to Henry talking about Mayne, Mayne gave a talk as part of the concert on bluegrass music. There was a review in the student newspaper on the 15<sup>th</sup> of January by Fritz Plous and Archie sent those things to Mayne's father Henry and sent me a copy. So those are the early documents I have, you know.

TW: I see. So that was 1962?

NR: Sixty-three. That was January of 1963.

TW: Sixty Three, Okay. I see. So you were one of—were you one of the first folklore students at Indiana then? Or were there already some—

NR: Oh, folklore had been going at Indiana since the early, since the 1940's. The folklore program started at Indiana with Stith Thompson, and then, uh, by the time I arrived they already had a PhD program.

TW: Were there a lot of students at that time? I also went to Indiana, so I was sort of curious.

NR: Uh, there were a fair number of students, you know, like, Dorson had become the head of the program in 1957, and, you know, he'd been aggressively getting new students to come, and so there was a fair number of students.

TW: Let's see. Well, my next question might be— these questions I guess I wrote more geared for people here who were students at on campus, and I've tried to modify them a little bit, but I'll go ahead and ask you. Maybe you might have some insight or maybe you could talk about the role that the IU counterpart had on that campus. But my question is what role did the club play on campus at the U of I or maybe in your view at Indiana?

NR: I, you know, I think that from the point of view of how things worked at Illinois, and Archie, you know, the fact that Archie was there made a very big difference, and he worked— I noticed in our correspondence that when he came back— you know, he left in 1965 and went and did PhD at Penn and came back in '67. We corresponded about putting together, you know, a cooperative schedule and booked people like Jimmy Carlson. So, Illinois— because of Archie's contacts and knowledge of what was going on in the world of research, a lot of interesting performers were brought to campus there. Some of them came to Indiana too. Glenn Ohrlin was one of them.

Neil Rosenberg: NR  
Tracie Wilson: TW

TW: Right, I just interviewed him last week, actually.

NR: Yeah. So we had a very active club. Now, I wrote a little essay about the club that was published in that book that the guy, Ron Cohen did on, what was it, the Indiana Conference, I'm just seeing if I have that in front of me. Yeah, it was a little book called "Wasn't That a Time: First Hand Accounts of the Folk Music Revival" by Ron Cohen. Anyway, I wrote about that then, you know, the club started in '62, and it was the most active club on campus, the Indiana Club, in '63/'64 and then by '65 it was starting to lose steam because younger students were more interested in the Beatles and, you know, things changed as far as interests in music are concerned. So it sort of, you know, was very popular and then it kind of went down hill.

TW: And so are you talking about Indiana now? Or Illinois?

NR: I am, Yeah. But I, yeah, but I think things were a little different in Illinois because Archie was there and had enthusiastic followers and brought interesting stuff to campus. I was in a band that played there in '68 at Illinois called the, we called ourselves the Friendly Greasy Greens I think it was February of '68. So I think that activity kind of died out when Archie left there at Illinois. But at Indiana by '67 it had pretty much ended.

TW: Okay.

NR: One other thing that I should say is that at Indiana the folklore— some folklorist students were interested in music and played an important role in the club, but there was virtually no encouragement or interest on the part of the faculty. Dorson was very much opposed to the whole idea of popularization.

TW: Yeah, Judy McCulloh talked to me a little bit about that, but that definitely sounds familiar. So there were students in the folklore program that had interest, but the faculty kind of discouraged it, it sounds like.

NR: Yeah, they uh, in the case of Dorson discouraged it, but the others just paid no attention to it.

TW: And is that because they didn't have an interest in music in general? Or just that they didn't approve of this sort of popularizing force?

NR: Oh, I think a combination of those things. You know, it was a student thing, and I think understandable in terms of the dynamics of the relationships between student and faculty. You know, uh, there were also folklore students who didn't really have any interest or knowledge in the folksong bible.

Neil Rosenberg: NR  
Tracie Wilson: TW

TW: And I don't know when exactly the ethnomusicology component came along at IU, but were there people who studied music, maybe in the music school, who did have an interest? Or was that considered something completely different from classic—

NR: well, George List was teaching ethnomusicology there, and I took courses from him. And then in 1962 Alan Merriam arrived, so there was definitely the possibility of doing ethnomusicology courses, uh—

TW: But that might not have included sort of folk revival stuff, in their minds?

NR: Oh no, I, first of all there was nobody in the school of music that I knew that was at all interested in this and my first— to give you one example, I worked, I was working in 1963 as the manager for Bill Monroe's Country Music Park in Bean Blossom Indiana, and I wanted to do a paper on my experiences in this for Merriam, and he wouldn't allow me to do that, he said "that's too close to home" you know, "if you're interested in professionalism in music, you should study the professional musicians of Africa" you know, and he gave me a pile of books in French to do my paper for him. There was no— you know ethnomusicology today is much more interested in looking at home culture, but it wasn't then.

TW: Right, right. Do you know when this happened? Or was it a gradual thing?

NR: In ethnomusicology?

TW: Yeah.

NR: I really can't tell you, I guess it's happened in recent years, but I don't know the history of the discipline well enough to tell you.

TW: Okay, I was just curious. Another question I have is did the political climate of the 1960's have an impact on how people who were interested in folk music perceived themselves?

NR: Well, it's an interesting question. I think that a majority of the people that I knew were not so interested in the political dimensions of the revival, and were more interested in— what was happening that was of interest to us, and— you see this in the bookings and what Archie did, was we were interested in traditional performers, people who had grown up with the music. And who'd, you know, been involved in recording for hillbilly or blues or, you know, that sort of thing or who were, you know, came out of a traditional background themselves. So we weren't very interested in the political of the singer/songwriter aspect of the music. And in fact when the SDS started, well some of us got involved in, you know, helping with the political activism that grew starting in the early Vietnam era, you know '64, '65, in there, but generally speaking there was an overlap, but it was not a strong threat. There were some exceptions. This guy Greg

Neil Rosenberg: NR  
Tracie Wilson: TW

Hildebrand that came over and gave concerts at Illinois from Indiana was, you know, wrote protest songs and was known for that. And there were others as well, but generally speaking the politics wasn't very strong when the club was at its greatest.

TW: Yeah, this has been the kind of question that I— I get such a range of responses to because there are so many people that say “no it didn't have anything to do with the politics” and then other people who I think maybe have a broader definition of what political can include and say “oh yes, you know, we were the proto-civil rights movement” just because of their interest in blues, or you know, in, I guess, other ethnic groups, they see that as sort of a political act in itself, so it depends.

NR: Yeah, We're all aware of the political struggle of the time, its just that within the context of the Folksong Club— my experience at Indiana, you know, I can't say for sure about Illinois, but my experience at Indiana was that it was another sphere, and they overlapped, but it wasn't the same.

TW: Right, I see. How would you describe the impact that your involvement in the club, in this case either at Indiana or Illinois, had on you then or later in life?

NR: Well, you know, I was already very much involved in all of this before, and it continued on right down to the present, so, it was just part of— and I'd been involved as well in the Folksong Club at Indiana, at uh, Oberlin College. I was the president of the club there, you know, before I came here.

TW: So there was a club there as well?

NR: Oh, yeah. And that club was in existence when I arrived in 1957 and it was started by Joe Hickerson, who went from Oberlin to Indiana and was one of the founders of the Indiana club. So there was a lot of connections that way. So for me it was an ongoing thing, you know, and I would just say that by the end of my— actually in the middle of all this, I left the folksong club executive in 1963 because I became involved in my work at Bean Blossom, my work for Monroe and I didn't have time to do that, so my interest moved in that direction, into bluegrass and into, you know, that sort of thing, and a little more focused on that sort of thing, but certainly the whole business of running events and of booking people, all that sort of thing you know, that was part of my education and that shaped my perception of life and music, I guess that's the best I can do for you.

TW: Uhm-hm. I see. So it sounds like you shifted from being involved with the club at Indiana to more professional association with bluegrass music and being responsible. Was that something that many— a path many people followed? Or do you think you were kind of unusual in that sense?

NR: well, I was kind of the instigator and the promoter of the interest in Bean Blossom and the Brown County Jamboree in that context, and you know a lot of people, we

Neil Rosenberg: NR  
Tracie Wilson: TW

publicized the events at Bean Blossom and, you know, got a lot of people to come out from the university, and that had never happened before. So that was kind of a precursor, you know, of when the bluegrass festivals started there at Bean Blossom in 67. And those festivals still go on. I was just at the festival last month.

TW: Right, right. I just talked to— I interviewed Judy right before she was about to leave for that so—

NR: Yeah, so, yeah, I guess, you know, for me it was just a shift of interest, and not everybody shared that. A lot of people, you know, in the mid 60's a lot of people went from folk music into rock n' roll because all of the sudden rock music became okay, with the Beatles, the Rolling Stones and Bob Dylan.

TW: Interesting. So, uh, did you have this interest in bluegrass all along? Or was it something that developed being in Indiana?

NR: It started when I came to Oberlin, but when I came to Indiana and discovered that Bill Monroe had this park, you know, where I could hear and meet and play music with the top people in that music forum, you know. That heightened my interest and involvement.

TW: And when did his music festival begin?

NR: In 1967

TW: Sixty-seven. Wow, okay.

NR: But shows there went on every Sunday from April until October, and that had been going since back in the 50's.

TW: Oh, really? Wow, interesting. One other question, this is I guess a bit unrelated from the stuff we've been talking about so far, but I'm actually an East European specialist, and one interest I have is in East European communities within the United States, or East European ethnic communities. And so one thing that's intrigued me a bit is this strong interest that many Jewish youth had in the 50's and 60's in folk music, and I was just wondering if you might have any insight into that.

NR: All I can say is that I, you know, I was surrounded by older relatives that were interested in folk music as a popular music, and I met, of course, a lot of Jewish people at Oberlin and I guess at IU too, but why— I don't know, it's not an easy one to answer.

TW: When you say you had older relatives who were interested in folk music— I mean what kind of folk music? Was it—

Neil Rosenberg: NR  
Tracie Wilson: TW

NR: Oh, it was the sort of the popular stuff of the day. Burl Ives, uh, you know whatever was on the go that was popular, and, you know, in the late 40's and early 50's. And records that were produced by Asch and Folkways, and you know, Josh White. My folks had Josh White— had an album of Josh White and so on. And I— my sense of it is these are second generation Jewish, Eastern European families who were born and raised in the United States and it was part of the fashionable left wing focus of the 30's and 40's and just part of the fashion of that time. And I— you know, I was just talking with one of my cousins about this, we didn't hear anything in Yiddish. You know, we knew a few Yiddish words and we heard lots and lots of dialect jokes, you know, and told them and so on and so forth, but we didn't sing anything. Now, on the other hand with some of my Jewish friends, Theodore Bikel was very, very popular.

TW: I'm sorry, could you repeat that name?

NR: Theodore Bikel.

TW: I've heard of him, I'm just not sure where.

NR: It's just amazing to me that people don't know about Theodore Bikel today, because he was a big name. If you go to the Elektra records discography website you can see all the records that he's made. He's an actor. He was in a lot of different movies— *The Russians are Coming* and so on.

TW: Did he sing?

NR: Oh, yeah.

TW: Okay.

NR: Oh yeah he sang, and he sang Israeli folksongs and Jewish folksongs and a lot of other things and he was very, very popular.

TW: Uhm-hm. I wonder where I've heard of him.

NR: B-i-k-e-l. So he was popular, and he was sort of the symbol of Jewish music, nobody had ever heard of. I have and I didn't hear of it 'til the 70's.

TW: And so when was he really popular would you say?

NR: From about 1955 through 1965.

TW: Wow.

Neil Rosenberg: NR  
Tracie Wilson: TW

NR: On Elektra records, a very, you know— I don't know if anyone's written about him as a musician, but I can tell you that he was really something big.

TW: Interesting. Yeah, it seems like there's more of an interest now, maybe this was— maybe at the time there was more of a push to assimilate into mainstream American culture, but it seems like now there's more of an interest in among Jewish musicians in rediscovering their own roots than maybe back in the 50's and 60's.

NR: Oh, definitely. Definitely. The interest was in learning this stuff, and it was a way of sort of embracing American culture I guess, though it didn't seem like that to me. I didn't grow up in a family that was like, you know, lit candles on Friday nights. We did celebrate Passover, and I was in the temple youth group and, you know, stuff like that. But contemporary Judaism is not the same as it is or was then.

TW: Well that's all the questions I have, is there anything else that we haven't touched on that you think it's important for people to know?

NR: Um, I think that one of the things is about these clubs is that they're sort of rehearsals for getting involved in various sorts of organizations later in life, you know. You learn how— that you've got to have a budget, and you've got to be able to negotiate with people and so on and so forth. And that was a lot of what we ended up doing. Also, there was a strong— in our club in Bloomington, there was a really strong service orientation. We gave workshops and lessons and you know attempted to spread the word, and I think that's an important part of it. We felt that we needed to let people know what was going on, and if people did know then they would be interested and would come around.

TW: Did the club at Indiana— was it also very large the way the club here was at one time?

NR: Yeah it was. In fact, one of the little things that I noticed in the Folksong Club newsletter in March '63, they said that the University of Illinois concert at Bloomington resulted in 24 new members and 70 admissions and 40 students for instrumental workshops. So, you know, it was one of the biggest clubs on campus at IU in '63, between '62 and '64. And it— we got into a fight with the administration because they wouldn't let us book Joan Baez to raise some money. I don't know, all of this stuff is in the newsletter there, but you know, they didn't like the fact that we were going to raise money, you know, which is what we wanted to do. The way these clubs worked is that we would try to get someone who was popular to make some money so that then you could pay for someone that you really wanted to hear.

TW: It wasn't her political background that they were concerned about?



Neil Rosenberg: NR  
Tracie Wilson: TW

NR: Well the administration was I think nervous about her politics, but that was before the Vietnam thing which is where Joan Baez's name really got associated with extreme politics.

TW: Uhm-hm. I see. Was there any rivalry between the Illinois and Indiana clubs that you were aware of?

NR: No, none. None. I would say, you know, we were really happy, you know, that they were doing things. And it was really nice, you know, that Archie was over there because he, you know, he had contacts and he had good ideas and he was, you know, he worked very hard to encourage people.

TW: I don't know is there anything else?

NR: I can't—I can't really think of anything else. I mean, it's been along time.

TW: One thing that I've encountered 'cause I'm kind of—I've been winding down the process because I'm getting ready to leave—is that everyone mentioned how important Archie was to, you know, their perceptions of music and cultivating their esthetics, tastes and just getting things done, too.

NR: Well I overheard a conversation at Bean Blossom between Tom Adler, who was a student there, and I think Dave Samuels, and they were talking— Samuels was talking about running into Roger Ebert, who was a member of the club, and it was interesting to hear these 2 old guys talking about, you know, talking about a mutual member of the club, you know, cause there's kind of a fellowship—

TW: Yeah, I actually contacted Roger Ebert, and he said that he would write something for our project, but I haven't heard back from him, so we'll see. But yeah.

NR: What will the project end up having?

TW: Well the focus is that it will be a digital online project that will be audio of the interviews that I'm conducting and images hopefully from club events, though it seems like there haven't been many that have remained. At least every person I've interviewed said they don't really have any photos, so I might have to go with some from the student newspaper here, which the quality is not gonna be great 'cause it's just gonna be stamped from the papers and stuff like that.

NR: Yeah, I'm thinking if I have anything. Somewhere I have some very bad shots from the Flatt and Scruggs concert, but I do have the posters from the Flatt and Scruggs concert. It has a private place in my collection of posters.

Neil Rosenberg: NR  
Tracie Wilson: TW

TW: Right, I think that the newsletter for the CFC here was bound, and I think there was copies of that in there and I think that's been digitized I think so that's good. But yeah, so it's mainly sort of an audio project. I've been taking pictures of the people I interview and in some way I hope to incorporate that. That was actually one thing I wanted to ask you about was that because I can't take your picture if you might be willing to let me use one that's available online, of course I'd need to get permission from like, I don't know, I looked at, I found one on the memorial website, but if there's another one that's preferable to you that'd be fine as well.

NR: Yeah, it's okay with me, whatever— there's a couple of pictures of me in Bluegrass Odyssey, and you know, whatever you can—

TW: I think I came across one that was of you from the 60's playing somewhere, so, but— I don't know.

NR: Oh yeah, there is one on the Bluegrass Boys website.

TW: Yeah, maybe that was it. I could do both.

NR: Yeah that picture was taken at Bean Blossom.

TW: Ok. Wow, great. I'm trying to think— I'm probably going to go ahead and just turn off the recorder right now.