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Interview with Emma Kelly

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Emma Kelly (K) interviewed by Esther Mallard (M)

March 30, 1988:

M: We were talking about your mother and your father having married.

K: Well, my mother was very talkative and she talked with almost every breath where she was correcting or explaining or making, trying to make it so you could understand things. She was always teaching even though she didn't do the formal teaching after she was married out here. She still taught music 'cause she was past forty and then had that huge family of children that she made all their clothes- she could sew.

M: A lot of energy.

K: Yes. Now my father was, and I get a lot of his, I think- he had what a big farm with a lot of little farms that other people worked. I never did see him hoe. Maybe in the garden, but I never did see him do a day's work so far as getting out in the field as a farmer. But he had a general store right on the premises but he didn't stay in it all the time. Sometimes he'd come over and they'd come to the gate and say hello. And then he'd go across and, 'cause it wasn't that busy except on certain days but that was and then he of course looked after it business-wise and he was very bright and beautifully. I often think I'd love to have some old but

M: What are your earliest memories?

K: Well I think my earliest memory was when my little baby sister was born and she's two and a half years younger and that's what- I can definitely remember people saying, "Now do you really remember it or were you just told?" But I can remember the doctor coming with the little bag going in. And she was born at home. And then the baby- I can remember the baby. But I can remember of course, my brothers and sisters who were there but they were enough older that pretty soon they were going and they had relatives on their mother's side that some would go here and go to school just as we did. One went up to Athens to go to school up there and married one of the teachers there, on my father's side. Now, my mother's children, except for the boys, stayed with their family when Mama came to the rural area- when she came to Georgia, or came to this part. And they were educated and looked after there. The boys came but one was already up at VTI (?) when I was a little girl. My first trip was up to Roanoke, Virginia on a train and then going over to Blacksburg to see my brother graduate. But they had good education, then the others went to school at Georgia Southern when it was the culture. They didn't say the agriculture.

M: They just called it the ‘culture.

K: And then they- I don’t think, I know my older sister, as I told you earlier, was the secretary of Dr. Hollis. I guess he was a doctor, but she might have called him Mr. Hollis, but I remember that was a household name because she’d come home and talk about it.

M: Did your mother have her music pupils come to your home?

K: Yes, uh-huh.

M: Did they come there for lessons?

K: Yes, uh-huh. And then she would teach these half-sisters of mine, try to, but they didn’t take to it.

M: Didn’t have any aptitude or

K: So it must have been Mama. And in fact, Papa didn’t have a piano, I don’t think. I think I asked my sister because we had a big nice piano and he said he got it when Mama came. So thank goodness he got a piano or else I might never If you don’t have an instrument around, you go unseen and unheard.

M: What, when did your mother start teaching, actually teaching you, or when did you find yourself playing?

K: Well, she started out, she was so busy with all these little children and she was a good step-mother, they loved her. In fact, they are closer to her than these others who were raised in more affluent circumstances and she was doing things for them and helping them because it was- you can imagine losing a mother with little children from, well an infant up to my oldest sister was twelve. And my grandmother lived nearby in a big house right down from us.

M: Now which grandmother was this?

K: That’s my father’s mother. And so she helped with them too, but when Mama came, they were a family again. So she was working with him, but after the piano, I must have gone right to it because she said as a little girl, when I could hardly get up on the stool I was playing, and not banging, but playing and playing, and so she discovered my out of tune. And then more and more so she said, “Well, I’d better- you better get her into the music before she just wants to play like she wants to do,” which was already too late, but she taught me a while and then when I started school I took with teachers in

the schools. And that one year I went over to Orangeburg. There was a good teacher over there, a cousin of hers. And I had other relatives and so I went over and went to school there one year, for the music. But I-

M: How old were you then, do you recall?

K: I finished high school at sixteen, so I guess I was about fourteen.

M: Already in high school

K: Already playing. In fact, I had the nicest surprise night before last. This friend of mine I was in class with, one of the most brilliant boys I'd ever known,, William, who was the first cousin of Mrs. Chick Jones, you know Edna and he, we both played the violin and I tell people I played the violin and they'd just laugh at it, but he was there and he was telling the ones of us there and some of the help was there and said, you know, one of the things I remember is when we were about twelve years old, going down to this tall bank building right up there and playing an ensemble, and so he verified that I actually did play the violin but I soon gave that up because the piano was easier for me. And when you play violin, play it well or forget it.

M: There's nothing worse than a bad violin.

K: A bad- exactly, exactly. Do it well or forget it. So I took another teacher.

M: Well, tell me something about your childhood apart from your music. Did you find that you wanted to spend all of your time at the piano-

K: No, I-

M: -or where you very gregarious? Did you spend a lot of time with other children?

K: I was gregarious, yes. I was a visitor and I had visitors because I lived- I went to high school down in Brooklet, not too far. I had a horse, a pony, from the time I was about eight or nine years old. Well I rode that pony to school as a young girl because we didn't have transportation. That was before I could drive. So I rode that horse daily. People still remember that pony that I had until I married. And so they'd come home with me just to ride the pony That poor pony would bring two or three of us. One would walk a while and then get up on the pony and ride. So I had the happiest time. And mother-my mother was- she loved having company, her home was always open. They used to have what the call surprise party. Well I was too young to really go to parties, but we had the big home and the piano and I played the piano and a

hostess that was always, so they asked if we'd have the surprise party. Well it would be no surprise to us. They would usually just go into a place and call it a surprise party. It was just a place to go to have a party. And we had those from the time I was about thirteen years old.

M: Did you dance? Was there dancing?

K: Oh yes. We had a big porch around, you know, like the old country home, and you could come from the window. The window was almost floor level and all the way across the parlor, we called it, and you could walk in from the window out there so they'd go in the window dancing or come around the hall dancing. Oh yes, we dance. That's why I

M: How about chores in the home? Did your mother have you all help her?

K: It soon got down to just the two of us, see, because the others were growing up and going to different schools. And I had a sister two and a half years younger. Well, she's the daintiest little thing to this day. She weighs about a hundred and five, has the most beautiful home and it's immaculate and I am the opposite. But during the early- all those years I loved cats. As you know, I love cats. I love dogs. I had a dog from the time I was about twelve 'til I married and it was named to that dog. And and I kept that dog and he died two or three years after was married but- so I would do the outside cleaning. I didn't like the cleaning up. I'd have to do it 'cause I'd have to wash and she'd dry or something. And we'd have to keep our rooms. She'd come upstairs, you know, Mama didn't come upstairs And if I knew she was coming upstairs, I'd try to scoot up there before she made it. but I was just never that domestic so it's carried through. I don't know if I would have been had I not had it easy. And so she gave me all the time to practice I wanted. I'd go in the living room and close the door, and I'd be reading something or doing something, you know how a child can be-

M: Yeah.

K: -and I'd play a little bit and then there'd be a long pause and she'd say, "I don't hear anything." I'd say, "Mama, I'm trying to figure this out." So I did a lot of shirking.

M: Well did you like to read even as a child?

K: Oh yes, my mother was a reader.

M: What were some of your favorite books?

K: Oh, she had all the Heidi and the Black Beauty and all the things That's what we'd get at Christmas. We'd get books and all the good old classics.

M: And she liked to read also?

K: Oh yes, and she read to my father every night. I can hear her now. He'd just sit there, smoked a pipe. He was quiet. He'd listen. was very religious-not overly so. And, but we didn't know the things like we need to do, I'm sure. But it was hard to keep even then all together.

M:

K: Oh yes, New Hope Methodist Church.

M:

K: Beautiful Methodist church right down there. That's where my and

M:

K: Yeah.

M:

K: That was the church that I grew up in. So I grew up I started going up to Church. I soon realized that

M: What did you do when you finished high school?

K: I went down to Miami. The way we would, as I say, we would have, whoever lived in a college town, that's where we would migrate to. Well, I had a brother who lived in Miami who was a Pan American pilot. That was in

M: Now was this a full brother or half brother?

K: Herb was See, he was Williams and the others were Thompsons.

M: I see.

K: And so I went down. I always knew and felt closer to the brothers anyway because they kept close to Mama whereas the others, the four girls, lived with their aunts and their grandmother, their maternal- their paternal grandmother, but they would come in the summer and it was just like a picnic because they all- for one of Papa's there was one of hers. So they all

were very close then. But they just had a picnic every summer because it was so different from the area. By that time they moved to Miami and that was after the Now my grandmother, and it wasn't my grandmother, it was theirs, but it was mine too- she was grandmother to me too. And she's buried at Bonaventure. So is my mother and all the aunts, in Savannah. But she had a big home right where the old theatre, right across from the old Savannah Theatre.

M: On the square

K: Right. And then after the crash we went to- he took my grandmother and went down to Miami. But education, I finished down in Brooklet. I came back from Orangeburg and went to Brooklet and went down in August and came up in and to go to the university Well I didn't He was about

M: Where was he from?

K: He was from right here.

M:

K: Bulloch County.

M: What was his daddy's name?

K: He- it was Frank Kelly.

M: Frank Kelly.

K: But we know nothing of them. He disappeared either before or just before when Kelly was an infant. So his mother was raised out in Do you know her?

M: I know that name,

K: A ninety two year old lady that's always at church every Anyway, I went down there and then he came down, he and my sister. Well I came home for Christmas and they brought me back. He'd bought her a new car and I was sixteen, I was seventeen Christmas. So in February they took me back. In February my brother was transferred to Rio.

M: De janeiro?

- K:** Yeah, uh-huh, see he was And so he wanted me to go with him as a member of his family because he said chances are he would never go otherwise. Well I kept thinking about it. Well, I was a child and I was drive homesick for Mama and she'd had some sort of surgery at the time. So at first I was going and then I decided I'd come home. I went to
- M:** What had you planned to study at Miami had you gone?
- K:** I hadn't gotten in to it. I had not looked fat into it. I had just started it-foundation thing. So I came back in the middle of the quarter and all my friends were all in school. So I just had Kelly and so one night we just decided to get married.
- M:** Where'd you go to get married?
- K:** yeah, from here. We went over to
- M:** That was a popular spot.
- K:** Yes, well see, there was no- I had no problems there. "Kelly," I said, "you're gonna have to talk to Papa." Well he went and talked to him. Well, Mama was- I didn't realize it- but she was disappointed 'cause she wanted me to go on and And it did hold me back for a long time because I had to work hard. I had so many children. And I never did really get back out there to study some music at a college. But I kept thinking, "You got a family and children," it just didn't seem right at the time and now I'm so dense, I don't know whether I can go or not.
- M:** What about Pearl Bailey? Somebody showed yesterday where she graduated from college from Georgetown University, which is a pretty tough school in D.C., when she was sixty- she was celebrating her seventy year birthday
- K:** I remember something about that. That she went back to school. Yeah, her husband was a friend of mine. the drummer- he was in the band.
- M:** I see. Are they still married?
- K:** Yeah, father had a store in Boston. I used to get cards from him. he was a young single boy when I knew him. So that got me through that with my education except what I could here and there for myself. I took- I did get some after that, but I didn't get into it and we got married pretty soon after that.
- M:** Where did you make you home when you were first married?

K: Here in Statesboro, only Kelly's mother had a house and two apartments.

M: Did you work at all after you were married?

K: No. Yes, I worked for Dr. Brown, a dentist. I'd come down in the afternoon before the pregnancy started.

M: Did you have a piano?

K: I got one. They gave me the piano.

M: Your parents did?

K: And I would play out at the college band out there. The boys in the band were old friends of mine. In fact, two lived next door to me

M: What did you play for- college dances, primarily?

K: Yes, and so the way the

M: Is that c-a-r-r?

K: Yeah, it's c-a-r-r. She was at Sea Island Bank. She was just a great lady in our church. They had dance clubs here. They had five or six. She was in the Dance Club and she came over to me. I was playing in the assembly. That's how I played off at church.

(End of interview)

(Beginning of new interview)

April 20, 1988:

(Begins in the middle of a statement.)

K: ...during his early life was music. Well, the first thing I remember their saying- not Aunt Katie, but Aunt Mattie- said that when he was six months old, she'd hum to him and he'd hum right back. That was always one of the laughs of the family. But, as he was growing older, he was very interested in music. Even when he was six and seven and they said he was asking his brother Walter, who was a little bit older- half brother, rather- who the best songwriter was. Even at that very early age, he was making up new songs. And his brother said, "Irving Berlin." Now, Donnie's gone, Walter's gone,

Irving Berlin is still living. Isn't that something? And then, they say during his early life, that he....He had a first cousin, Walter (?) who was Aunt Mattie's son, that was his mother's...sister. And...but they would cross over the tracks at West Broad and to these black clubs- black record shops. They would allow him because he'd just sit over in the corner and listen, and they didn't mind at all because he was one of the best customers, he saved up all his little change to get those records. And Louis Armstrong was back then, and Bessie Smith, and all those that are just names to us now, we knew of them a great deal back at the time. So that shows that- and I meant to get a copy, and I'll get this for you sometime, but Mr. Mercer wrote, just sort of "To Whom It May Concern," about his son and about the way he got into that and that--

M: This is Johnny's father?

K: Johnny's father. And it was sort of...another (apology?) about his [...?], he had realized the abilities he had left him, and that was sent from up above. And it was a beautiful thing ...

M: And that's something I sort of wonder. A family that had such a strong tradition of education, professionalism and so forth--

K: Exactly.

M: I wonder how they felt about him slipping away--

K: Well, it was a piece like that right here in this column, Dean Carroll. He is a young boy that come over before he got into dancing, and we were having dancing classes over at the Center. He lived right across on Fair Road. Well, he'd come over and sit on the piano with me, that way he'd get in, because I just played the piano, and Marvin was the teacher, and he'd sit and thought, "Well, you just can't stay away from me." But he just loved to come there- and then I realized that it wasn't me at all. He was sitting and he was watching the dancers. He said "I would give anything" And I'm sure he had mentioned it, and maybe they thought he was trying to flirt. But then later, I said, "Look." I said "B..."

M: Is it "B?"

K: Yeh, they call him Bart now. But we called him "B" back then. But I realized he was really that tied up in it. I said, "B, if you really want to do it, you can catch up with me right off." See, he was- I said, "You just come (?), and dance at every chance." And I said, "he can't said dance (?), but you can- you know what you're doing." And so that's what he did. As soon as he got out of school, he was over there. He would go to every class. He knew what

time they would start and ended. He'd go up and he'd do the best he could with the others, and then he would work at it, and he became a very good dancer.

M: He became a professional dancer.

K: Yes. I've been out to Vegas and visited his home and his shows, and I was out there for a convention, so I had the feel of having gotten him started. I don't know whether he would have had the- it would have been later though, had that not been But that they...they thought real bad about it. That's not at all what he needed to do. He needed to get his education and go into some profession. But back to Johnny, I'm sure that was the same way, because this letter- now as you know, Mr. Mercer, he had died before, well, sometime before I got to know the family, but I knew the mother and her sister. But he certainly had that-

M: I would love to have a copy of that- all the memoirs.

K: I'll write it all.

M: Well, I can Xerox it for you. If you bring it all to me, and give it right back.

K: Well, I have it all somewhere. He gave me a copy and I don't know just where- I can find it. I can remember a lot of it.

M: I'll always remember the fact that when he became affluent enough, he paid off his father's debts that his father had incurred without meaning to- it was the result of the Depression, when everything failed.

K: He got indebted to the preparatory school but- now that I think I might have brought that And his brothers, I have a picture of Johnny and the two brothers and some other

M: Was there any keen interest in music among the other family members?

K: Well, I was about to say, I think- it was all Mrs. Mercer, and I think it must have been- now I never did hear this, but this letter made me kind of feel that. I think it was only the sister that decided. But I do know that Mrs. Mercer had a great voice, and his sister who had a lovely voice, but she was not into things enough to really control it. But she really had a voice.

M: You mean she just didn't have the discipline to sing?

K: Well, no. Julie had some- she just wasn't, as Donnie would say, she just wasn't self-sufficient. But she had the voice. If you'd let her sing, boy, she'd let go.

M: Do you know if he participated in any musicals?

K: In Savannah. That's where he started. He got into acting down there. And he went up to New York. It was more, trying to get on in acting. See, he went around to all these shows when he got up there, and had little bit parts here and there. And won-

M: Are you comfortable?

K: Yes, I'm fine. And he won some competition that brought him into exposure. And he went around to which was doing big shows, and was out there, and they said, well, they didn't need any actors, but what they really needed was songs. Well, he had been into writing little songs all of his life, but they didn't- I think they were just saying that because they needed songs, I don't know if he had said that he could write songs. But anyway, he went home and started writing on that cute little song.

M: So did he write the music and the lyrics?

K: Yes. He could do that.

M: So he just sort of did it by ear?

K: Well, he could pick out a tune. He tried two different keys for this tune. But he said there was something missing

M: That has always amazed me, too.

K: and you're playing, and you go up to another key and you don't even know it. He said, now-

M: Now was he a dancer, too?

K: He was a nice dancer, a very nice dancer. I actually loved to dance with him. But he wasn't a show-off dancer.

M: I just wondered in those early days in New York, if, you know, of course, he did a little tap-

K: He was in a little movie. I know there were pictures of him. One of them played ukuleles, and all the boys- it's a college song- "Rhythm," something. I'll look it up. That was the only movie I remember.

M: Which was later now.

K: After he had gotten to Hollywood, after his work caught on there. He did shows, but he never did have the success with shows that he had with movies. And of course he did the same good work, but he said when shows would come out, he didn't have the music. And when he had the songs, he didn't have a show. It just never did work out. But in movies, he did great.

M: For years.

K: Right. He signed a contract with – See, I don't remember these things, but I have it down. And so they did a lot of, we call "B" movies- quick movies. Just not much plot, but they'll entertain you. But we'd throng to the theaters to see it because it had-

M: Those were so popular.

K: And this went on into my married life. We had a friend that had a movie house. And we didn't have to pay to go to the movies. And all my children would just go in there. But I would go in and just hear the tune, and I'd read and do something and I'd try to time it, go back and I would learn the song. I think Mr. Mercer must have played down his music, he said, "You better get along with some serious studying," or something. I don't know but- not realizing the gift that the boy had.

M: And isn't it good that he lived long enough to realize it?

K: Because his oldest son never knew his father. He gave me his father's (?) volumes. Bet you would appreciate that. Otherwise they'd be thrown out. 'Course I don't read them that much.

M: You treasure them?

K: I treasure them.

M: I think what I wanted to do is ask you about you. What do you envision for your life at this point? I know you have your piano in Savannah. And how many civic clubs are you involved in?

K: Well, I would say four.

- M:** Plus your church- music. And you still do dates all around the country.
- K:** I do. In fact, someone just told me about New York for a wedding. someone in their Jewish group. But I'm not sure about that, because it comes right at time. So I wouldn't want to mess up that. But either that and they wanted, just things that- everyone knew, and they had a series of get-togethers, some of the family and some of the friends. And I just come up the week of the wedding.
- M:** Some people who met you? While they were visiting in Savannah?
- K:** Yes. And they came back a second time.
- M:** Isn't it wonderful to have someone remember you like that, but you can't go?
- K:** Yes. People have asked me so often, "Do you have an agent?" and I say no. And they say, "Well, how do you get these jobs?" and I say, "Well, if people are coming and they like what they hear- all the conventions-" I'm getting a little old for it now. One time I thought about just playing conventions. But that's so hard to hurry here and hurry there.
- M:** And it gets to be kind of lonely in a way, too.
- K:** You'll always have a few that you'll always remember. I like to hold on to people but that's just masses, so you don't get to know them, except these that I think are all the same ones over and over. It's like a class reunion- you see them over and over again.
- M:** Like, I know you mentioned the officers who had been stationed at Fort Stewart.
- K:** Every year. And they still come and they still remember- at Christmas time. I've gotten to meet the wives, and I knew a lot of them, but now I get to know their families because very often they like to come back to show them Fort Stewart. But to say what I want to do, I'm getting ... I tell you that fall I had sort of took a little lightning out of me. And really when I really get over it—now last night even, I was having some trouble with that.
- M:** Do you ever try to swim?
- K:** I have a pool right there, but I-

(Recording interrupted.)

K: You were asking about what I plan to do. I plan to continue as I'm doing. I don't- I'm supposed to do another record. I really plan to do that. But I have to get some work done on my throat.

M: Tell me about the book. Tell me the name of the author again, the young man that I met, came up for a stage performance?

K: Oh, John Behrent.

M: Spell his last name for me? B-E-H-R-E-N-T, isn't that it?

K: Yes.

M: Tell me about the book, and what inspired him to want to write the book? Can you tell me a little bit more about that?

K: I really don't know. Jim Williams.

M: Is this the antique dealer you are talking about?

K: Yes. That was the thing I think that caught his attention. Everybody was dealing in New York. But then when he started, he realized that wouldn't really make a good book. So then he started looking around for interesting people. I don't know where I came in or when I came in.

M: You don't know how he first came to know about you?

K: No, he came by. We were friends, but I haven't read it. But this friend told me the other day, John Thorson, said, "I'll bet you're gonna like it." So that's all I know.

M: Well, what did he do, just conduct a series of interviews?

K: Well, he got to know me. Before I even knew he was-

M: Thinking about it.

K: We would talk and talk. I guess that's one of the better ways, because you just talk what's on your mind. And he knew about the family, he would ask about that. Then, when I knew about it, he wanted to come and spend the weekend with me. And I said, well, you can. So he came, he wanted to go to church and everywhere with me. I was moving from one place to another.

M: Right. I'm sure.

K: And so he said, he had never lived a weekend but he enjoyed it.

M: It was certainly a variety of activities back then.

K: Because it was on Sundays, and I'd just go from one place to another, and usually on Sunday afternoons I'd visit my aunt, but that Sunday afternoon I was going to Vidalia for a wedding. And people from California were there- the groom's people. So it was an interesting wedding. So we had quite a time. I think I told you earlier. Not only the earlier assembly church, but we went to my Sunday school class and heard about all those ladies who were ill-

M: Oh really? All their complaints.

K: Who to send cards to. Just all of the things that go on. Then upstairs in the- I think it was two classes, for children. In the back of the church.

M: And he'd been in Savannah with you Saturday night?

K: Yes.

M: I'm sure he was ready for some rest and some sleep. He was worn out.
(Laughs)

K: He wanted to meet my aunt Elise (?) so badly. We got back and it was so late from- we had told her to be back. He met her at the church. But he wanted to talk to her. But we got back about 8 o'clock from that wedding and the reception. So her lights were out. And he said- he stayed at the hotel that night, "I'm going back, so you probably want to read two or three books or something." (Laughs) So I don't know how.... I've had so many interviews that, just like the *Georgia Trend*, I didn't even know that was coming out until somebody told me that that was coming out. Someone came and talked to me.

M: Was that very recent?

K: I guess it was in the fall, I'm not sure. It was about Savannah, but they had my picture. But I just never depend on it. And never even ask about it.

M: I'm not sure if that is among the things that you brought me. Was it published in Savannah?

K: No, it's Georgia, and Savannah is in it. State. It's just about people. But, it wasn't that much about me, it was about Savannah and Georgia in general-

M: I know, but it featured you. And you say it was in the fall of '77?

K: I can look it up. I have a magazine in my piano desk. I have an extra piano desk I put-

M: You know I carry this around. I hope this is it, here. Jack said I should give this to you. You will really enjoy this.

K: Johnny used to visit him and look at that-

M: It's a lengthy article.

K: We would go from here. We would take him to the train, and he would go to New York. He had a place to stay up there- a little apartment or something. Anyway, he had a place because he was- I'll look at it later--

M: I've given that to you and you can just take it home now and all.

K: Well, I'd hate to deprive you-

M: No, no, I've read it.

K: Well, I love things like that. I'll put it in with Johnny's things.

M: Did you get a chance to- you probably didn't contribute-

K: No.

M: You didn't? I didn't either. We were out I think the night that- I think we came in the last five or ten minutes. We were at some meeting somewhere, I think. I can't recall what it was, now. But we were not there.

K: So back to what I plan to do, Esther. I just try to keep on doing what I'm doing as long as I can. I enjoy what I do. But it's work. But I have...oh, I have the convention folks for the next...well, it was five years last year but next- four years now, because they give five years, some of them, at a time. I think I told you, I asked them, "Do you know how we're gonna do the"

M: It made no difference. (Laughs) Well, I'm trying to think of that Pablo Casals thing. Now he was still giving concerts when he was ninety, wasn't he? I wonder if he lived in New York. He's Jewish, but he's of Russian origin, as I recall. Rubenstein. My heavens!

K: Rubinoff was a violinist. He was rather late in life, but he came here one of his last concerts.

M: At the college?

K: Yes. The Kiwanis Club sponsored it.

M: Wasn't he a popular musical figure in the 1940's? Didn't he make guest appearances in movies?

K: Yes.

M: Very personable.

K: Oh yes. He was a violinist but he had a song that he really loved, and it was "Only You." It was a popular song in the '50s. But he had that on his program. Everything was classical except this one he played, "Only You": "Only you can make this change in me...."

M: And he played that on the violin?

K: Yes, he played that, and he played that really beautifully on the violin.

M: Did he say why it was his favorite?

K: He didn't say. He just said that he was going to choose one pop number at the very end. But another thing, he had a and believed he had anyone is to do something that you have achieved long enough or been following you all throughout their life. He had a beautiful Sunday night program, back in the '30s I would listen to it every time. I forgot the name of the program, but he would come on, they'd say..."Here's ...and now we have..."

M: Was it the *The Telephone Hour*?

K: "*Rubinoff and His Great Violin.*" I think just *Rubinoff*. But he'd start- la da da-da- he had the most beautiful theme: *Give Me a Moment Please*.

M: Can you hum a little bit more of it?

K: "Give me a moment please"-I'd have to hear it again. You wouldn't know the words-la da da-da da-da, la da da-da da-da (humming). I really think it must have been a little classical number, and then someone may have written the words after. I knew it just fine, the tune, and I picked it up playing. So he would draw his at the Kiwanis Club. So on the day of the concert, they brought him to our Wednesday meeting, so we really at that time. And as he walked in, I started "la da da-da," and he could not believe it. He came over to me, I'd never seen the man, but I knew who he was, he came over to

me and he said, "You really do remember." Because it had been some time since that had been on. I'm sure he must have played it at some of his concerts, but it really did get to him. And the same thing has happened with so many. Now, he came in and I played This was down at-downtown, he would be across at the civic center and later on come back downtown. He'd come into the little club out there. So he would come in and I would start playing his music, and every time because you were able to identify him. And that's just as though- if I were to go to a place and someone were to play something that I know-

M: Kind of like "At Calvary." Last time we walked in, said that you told the lady you'd already played "At Cavalry."

K: I would try to think of things that were just happy and would make your heart feel glad. And I said, "Well, Jack ain't here but I'm going to play y'all this song." So I had just played it, and he hadn't been there for a while, and here comes Jack in, so I told him I just played your song.

M: Well, we were at South Church in Houston in the 50's. We went to Atlanta in '59. In fact they had a marvelous minister of music there, and that was a- on Sunday night, he'd just sing one song right after the other. He'd have it set up with the audience, you know, he wouldn't announce it. And "Cavalry" was one of those that he just loved to sing. And that's where I became very fond of it. And it was full of joy. Emma, if you were around, now I want to be cremated, so I also want a memorial service, but there are a couple- Jack won't remember the songs, but there are a couple of things, if you'll remind him, one is "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing," which is an old Methodist- and I chose that for my mother's funeral.

K: That was one of my mother's. That was one of her favorites. And we were Methodists. I think I told you I was a Methodist until I married.

M: It's a happy song. In our church, where we had Momma's funeral and where Jack and I were married, at the funeral service they always have several songs that the congregation sings. And that was one that we chose for the congregation to sing. And then the other one is *Cym Rhondda*. It's the old Welsh hymn. Do you know it?

K: No but I'd love to know it.

M: If you remember the movie "How Green Was My Valley," it's the one that the Welsh chorus sang.

K: I remember that movie-

(Recording is interrupted.)

M: I'm going to get that "How Green Was My Valley" to you. I'll call you sometime Monday.

K: It wouldn't take me long to get it.

M: I'm going to tape it.

(Recording is interrupted.)

K: ...and the roofs and these birds in these 10-gallon hats. And they're all around out in the shade or somewhere that they a four-gear or a car, you know, and then they drive around in a four-gear or a car. He was sort of let down with that, he wrote the song about it.

M: Well, you know in all the years we lived in- well, not all the years, about seven years we lived in Houston, east Texas, I only saw one cowboy herding cows. And he was a black cowboy.

K: Well, Ft. Worth was sort of the area, I guess.

M: "Too marvelous for words." -Richard Whiting, Margaret Whiting's daddy.

K: Margaret was a little girl and we used to go to Mr. Whiting's home. That was one of the earlier boosters.

M: That was 1937.

K: She had a good voice singing. He said, "Now wait till you grow up!" But her father- she was just an early teenager when he died. But she was always very close to John.

M: "Hooray for Hollywood." I never realized. Did he do the words for that?

K: Yes. It was spectacular. If you see anything about Hollywood and you hear that background music, that sets you- that gives you the setting.

M: Right- always. And "You Must Have Been a Beautiful Baby."

K: That and that Hollywood sign.

M: On the side of the hills.

K: Put you in the right area.

M: Harry Warren, "Jeepers Creepers."

K: He said he had heard- Gary Cooper some time in his life, in a movie, say, "Well, jeepers, creepers," and he was a just scribble things off, and he had a big drawer that he would just put things in, and maybe not get back to them. But he kept that, "jeepers, creepers." And then some of them were barely music. See it wouldn't have a title, it wouldn't have words, it was just music. But then he would try to, he would look through and try to get things from some of those ideas he'd put away. And that just seemed to fit in with whatever.... "Jeepers, Creepers," I can't remember who wrote that.

M: Warren.

K: Harry Warren.

M: The same year as "You Must Have Been a Beautiful Baby," both in 1938. "And the Angels Sing," Ziggy Elman.

K: Ziggy Elman was a Jewish guy. He wrote that for a Jewish, I believe they call it. The kind of...I guess...it wasn't a ballad.

M: Kind of staccato.

K: And in the record, Elman does (imitates the beat of the song), like that.

M: You noted that on his tombstone at Bonaventure they put "And the angels sing." Who chose that?

K: I was just about to say he never did mention that. Who knew that he would be- the last time I had talked to him...

M: Was his death sudden?

K: No. He came and- they sent him out to (Arizona?)...was it Mike Douglas or what's that other man that was so rich? He had a talk show? Mike Douglas and- you know he's very rich.

M: Is he short?

K: Anyway, he was, they had-

M: Griffith. Merv Griffith.

K: Merv Griffith. They had a show in- he brought the show to Savannah. Alright, already now, Johnny had been to Europe- went to London. He was never the same when he came back.

M: He had fallen.

K: I had correspondence from him from the hospital. He was in an old tram or streetcar and fell, but I never did know whether it was something that was already there caused the fall, or the fall caused the beginning of that, I never did understand that. But I just knew he would never- just like I said, I hadn't been the same since- just wasn't that zip I had known before.

M: What age man was he when he died?

K: He was 66.

M: Young.

K: Oh yes. And so they came here and did the funeral right out in front of that big home. I have a big picture of it, on Bull Street, where this antique dealer lives.

M: On the square. cooked his oyster pilaf or whatever it is. I remember having seen part of it.

K: Johnny came, and his son-in-law was a piano player. He wasn't his son-in-law because he and Mandy were divorced, but he played for him for a lot of things, so he couldn't travel by himself, he was unsteady. You would think he was drinking. He just couldn't keep his balance.

M: What year did he die?

K: 1976.

M: And how long before that had he had the accident?

K: It was in October of '75. No, the accident was on up in- I can't remember. I will have to go back to the records. But the last time I saw him was at the hospital out in Pasadena.

M: You went with his sister?

K: I had been with him twice before on his birthday. And so he came for that show, and he did the show from there, and he told me that his doctor told him he had a brain tumor, and needed surgery. and so this was in October. Early October. So we all went to the train station, and Julie and the others went in different cars and he was with me. And that's the last time I really saw him 'cause he was living out in California. And he said that- he was talking about the having a convention in Vegas from the 9th through the 13th- there was a certain something, I forgot. Anyway, I had about three days, but he come on over to have a birthday in California, in Los Angeles. So I kept thinking, "Well, I have a feeling he'll be all right. And he thought so, too. 'Cause I got one card from him and he said, "We're in the hospital Sunday. Surgery scheduled for Thursday. So please send me a prayer." And that was in the closing. And then Bonnie said, "Don't forget November 18th. Don't forget to pray for him."

M: Now what month was this that you're talking about now? I know the birthday was in November. But what month was this?

K: This was October.

M: The month prior to his birthday.

K: Yeh, so we thought, you know, that if he couldn't do much, he could do that. So they went in and they just- 'cause he didn't anything. So he was in the hospital. And at last they just let him go home. So that was the next year.

M: So he lived that long, next year.

K: It was just a long, drawn out, horrible, miserable

M: Was he conscious much during that period?

K: No. He could barely move.

M: He was kind of vegetative.

K: There was no real after his surgery. But I've often wondered about that fall.

M: It seems like that more than likely would have resulted in a blood clot rather than a tumor- causing some pressure there.

K: Oh, it might have just been purely an accident. But he just didn't talk that much about the fall, but he was just not right, he was just different- maybe the other trouble had already started. He couldn't fly. In fact, his son-in-law

had to go back to Los Angeles. He flew back out there and then back, I would say two weeks, and flew back and then rode with him on the train.

M: He didn't travel on the train by himself.

K: No.

M: "Skylark" took about a year to complete.

K: Yes, that's one he said that he couldn't get it together quite. And I think I told you about this song. Now, he didn't tell me.

M: Didn't Margaret Whiting sing that too, "Skylark?"

K: She might have. I don't know.

M: Ella Fitzgerald, you know down with the men, but "Skylark." It was something Parker or maybe with Harry James Taylor

K: I think, about Margaret Whiting, I know she did "I'm Old-Fashioned." something of hers.

M: And "Tangerine."

K: Well, that was just some of them. Some of my- so many of my very favorites are not on there because, you might not- now I did mention some, like "Early Autumn." But I was just trying to think of the people who-

M: "Laura." I didn't know he wrote "Laura."

K: Oh, that was one of his top three. See it was in a movie but just as background music.

M: And what he wrote fitted that. Do you remember there was a portrait of her? Do you remember the theme of the movie? She disappeared, and everybody described- they had this beautiful portrait everybody kept describing. Dana Andrews was the male lead and everybody kept describing Laura. Everybody adored her. And he found himself falling in love with this woman who was missing.

K: And he had never seen her.

M: Never seen her.

K: But they described her.

M: They described her. The portrait and all the lovely things everybody-

K: The words sort of fit the song.

M: Yes, so they fit.

K: He had such a feel for things like that, really-

M: Sensitive. Very sensitive. Real poet.

K: He wasn't just getting rhymes together, and love songs together. And "The Days of Wine and Roses." When you see that movie, and you see that--

M: I remember the old- was it *The Philco Playhouse*? What was the *play house* that they used to- that was the first one on that...ninety minute playhouse? Do you remember that? They did some marvelous- but it was first done on that. Jack Lemmon made the movie, and Lee Remick. In the movie, I think Barbara Ryan did the- *Playhouse 90*. That's what it was- *Playhouse 90*. It was first done there, and I guess they took it out to Hollywood for it to be adapted to a movie. Now tell me about "Moon River." Is it really "Moon River" down around Savannah?

K: It was Back River. But see he had a home out there. I never did hear him say that he had.... I know he had another name, I wish I could remember what it was, for "Moon River." And it wasn't Back River. It was some kind of river, but then he learned so he called it "Moon River."

M: But there's a place down there they call "Half Moon River," or something like that.

K: Well, they call it "Moon River" now. They just started calling it "Moon River." I wanted to tell you about-

M: "Autumn Leaves." I didn't know he wrote "Autumn Leaves." "The first of Johnny's three adaptations of French songs."

K: See that was already an existing French song.

M: It's like Walter Huston's "September Song."

K: I heard him do that not long ago. A record, and I didn't remember about--

M: Nobody sings it--

K: And that's when I was telling Johnny Mercer I can't sing and he says, "Oh sorry." I said, "I'd love to sing, 'cause I love the September Song." And truth is, I mentioned I loved-

(Tape ends in the middle of a statement.)

(Beginning of side two of tape)

M: ...A good actor. You stop and think about ...

K: ...they have the right gestures ...

M: Yeah, and the feeling, the emotion! It's really what sets them apart.

K: You could just hear that-

M: ... And Rex Harrison, in my opinion.

K: Yeah, right.

M: And Richard Burton in *Camelot* ...

K: Incidentally, I have the- if you'd like to borrow it.

M: The records?

K: The VCR.

M: Oh, you do have the VCR?

K: ... But I was trying to remember just how that was about "The Days of Wine and Roses." Johnny took it in and did the words for it, and they had the director and Jack Lemmon, and I've forgotten who else now. And he was up on the stage alone with the piano playing, and just the lights on him and singing., they would say the same thing. But they turned the lights on him.

M: Oh, he was very sensitive about that.

K: ... when you think of the story, the drama.

M: Yes, they start off with such delight, such joy. And so light and gay and perfect and the music expresses it so well. It will never come back again.

