

**Roger Bryant**

Where: At his office in Logan, WV

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Date: March 31, 2016

Location: Logan, WV

Interviewer: Emily Hilliard

Transcription: Emily Hilliard

Length: Interview 34:55, songs 10:47

**Roger Bryant**

Roger Bryant (b. September 7, 1948), is a native of Logan, West Virginia. He is a county musician and songwriter, and is the grandson of West Virginia banjo player Aunt Jennie Wilson. He is the executive director of the Logan Emergency Ambulance Service Authority (LEASA) and is director of the Logan County Office of Emergency Management.

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RogerBryantInterview3.31.16

EH: Emily Hilliard

RB: Roger Bryant

00:00

EH: Tell me your name, where you were born, when you were born?

RB: Okay! My name's Roger Bryant, I was born here in Logan, West Virginia on September 7<sup>th</sup>, 1948.

EH: Could you tell me about your family?

RB: Well my mom and dad ran a jewelry and music business. My dad was a watchmaker by trade and not just a watch repairman. He could actually make a watch from beginning to end. So my dad was a watchmaker, my mom of course ran the—they had a local—well they had a couple of them over the years. First they had Logan Jewelry and Music Company, which had an entrance on Dingess Street and one on Stratton St. and when the coal mines mechanized in '58 that went out of business and they moved over across Stratton St. and opened up Diamond Jewelry and Music and it was there for a few years and lo and behold my dad got called back, back in the Army back in the Cuban Missile Crisis so he was gone for a year up to Fort Meade, Maryland during that time so that store went out of business and my dad moved into a small watch repair shop where he sold records out of that watch repair shop and he operated that until he retired.

And course my grandmother was Aunt Jennie Wilson (laughs) renowned folk artist and storyteller and she got quite famous. I guess got famous in the late 50s early 60s she got some fame, how that whole thing started out, the principal of the grade school Mrs. Batton had to do a project, she was taking an Appalachian Studies class from Dr. Pat Gainer from WVU and so part of the class was they had to bring in a guest artist of some kind. So she knew that my grandmother could play the banjo and sing when she was much younger, so she asked her if she would come to that class for her and of course she said yes. And she borrowed a banjo from I think from Howard McNeely and so she borrowed a banjo and went to that class and I mean Dr. Gainer just went—I mean he just went nuts, you know. He said “Oh this is what I've been looking for, this is the real thing, blah blah blah” so he started carrying her around from place to place and so we ended up – she ended up playing lots of fairs and festivals, particularly the Ripley Mountain State Arts and Crafts Festival at Ripley. And of course a lot of people got to see her there and from that it just kind of, it just kind of mushroomed. Course that was during the folk revival of the 60s so that was a popular kind of music for that time period and of course she fit right in because she was the real thing! You know, she had actually lived the things... she lived the music and lived the things that she was singing about so that's what people were looking for at that time. And so we ended up—we traveled as far west as Denver, Colorado and Texas. Oh gosh, I don't know, up and down the east coast, played a lot of fairs and festivals and that sort of thing.

I started out as the chauffeur—I was just driving her around. I didn't even play an instrument or anything so she had been after me. I sang a lot when I was a kid. When I was a little kid she had me here and there

singing and that sort of thing. So I think I was a—sophomore in college maybe and my dad bought me a guitar for my birthday. And he played—actually he was a very good musician. He played—he could play anything with strings on it because it calloused his fingers up and it was hard for him to work on watches. It was hard for him to hold tweezers and things you know, so.

4:31

He did play but he actually could play anything with strings on it. But he bought me a guitar for my birthday and taught me 3 or 4 chords and so from that I could second after her on the banjo and then I started singing with her and singing a few songs here and there, so that kind of took off. I was going to Marshall at the time so all of a sudden I was getting invited to parties and then I got invited to spaghetti dinners and that kind of thing and they said yeah, we'll give you 50 bucks, you know, to come and sing a few songs. And then from that I was playing a few shows and from that it just kind of blossomed into a full-time career for about 7 years, I guess.

EH: Mmhm. Was your—the music store was that just records or did they sell instruments there too?

RB: Yeah, now in the big stores they sold instruments. Down at Logan Jewelry and Music. But when they moved to Diamond Jewelry and Music and of course in the watch shop he didn't have room for any instruments, so basically they just sold records, you know, at that time.

EH: Yeah. And before Jennie Wilson was quote, discovered, was she—would she just play around the house or did she play locally.

RB: No, no, she went through, I guess... well she was in her late 60s when Pat Gainer you know, kind of was showing her off to everybody. So I guess from about... oh I'm guessing there was a 35, 40-year period, I don't think she played at all. At least I never knew of her playing the banjo you know, during that period of time, you know? I knew that she **could**, but I don't ever remember her having a banjo or playing or anything around the house during that whole period of time.

EH: Hm. And when she started to play again, what sort of songs did she play? What was in her repertoire?

RB: Oh gosh, she did a lot of songs that up until that time, I don't think a lot of people had even heard 'em. But she did traditional tunes, you know "Cripple Creek," "Sourwood Mountain," uh, gosh, "John Henry," "John Hardy," you know all the kind of you know traditional mountain banjo tunes. But then she did some other versions that I think were kind of unique. "Johnson and Dickson" and "I was Born in East Carolina," "Canary Bird," some of those kind of things that were a little different versions than what people were used to hearing. I think.

EH: Did she write her own songs at all?

RB: No, not that I'm aware of.

7:47

She, um, my grandfather was killed at a Slate Fall at Peach Creek and she pretty much, her life pretty much centered around raising 4 kids by herself, you know? And she lost one of those children to spinal

meningitis, I think, when he was about 8 years old. And so, so pretty much her life during that hiatus from music was you know, pretty much trying to survive and trying to raise 4 kids. She lived on a widow's pension, which I think was about 35 dollars a month, and she took in washing and ironing and my Aunt Virginia helped her. But they washed clothes for people and did ironing and things so really didn't have much time to play much music during that time.

EH: And that time early when she learned, do you know how that came about? Did she learn from parents or?

RB: I know what she's told me—she told me that her—she was raised with a bunch of brothers and they all played music and they told her that if she could learn to ride a horse, play the banjo and, I think.... Let's see, ride a horse, play the banjo, and something else I don't remember what it was... that she could be a boy!

EH: (laughs)

RB: (laughs) So she set out on that mission to learn those things, you know, so she could be one of the boys, and evidentially became pretty good at playing the banjo because she was really sought after from what the stories are. She played a lot of square dances and that sort of stuff when she was young. Then of course when she met her husband, uh, and got married and started raising kids, and she didn't play square dances and things anymore. She was born and raised down in what's now Chief Logan State Park.

EH: Okay.

RB: Down in what's called the Wolf Pen Hollow up the Right Hand Fork of what's now Chief Logan State Park.

EH: Ah, okay. What was it like traveling around with her? What was it like traveling around with her?

RB: There was never a dull moment. She had an opinion on everything and she didn't care a bit to share that opinion with ya and you know, she had a huge following of what at that time was hippie type (laughs) people as she referred to them. So she always had a comment about those kind of things. And she got by with saying things on stage and all that sort of stuff that most people would have been lynched for. She, you know, she chain smoked right up until she died—lit one cigarette off the other one, of course, if you were riding around in the truck or whatever you had to have the windows down all the time and I can remember—I can remember us going to Texas. We played, picked up a 15-day tour through Louisiana and Texas in August, of all things, and we were playing some afternoon shows and gosh, it was hot. And, of course she had to have the windows down and I was absolutely dying, you know, and she said, "Buddy, you know, this is the warmest I've been in years." You know... (laughs) It was just something all the time, you know?

EH: Uh-huh. So she was probably encountering other musicians too... she was probably meeting other musicians who were doing a similar circuit? Do you remember the folks—some of the people that you would play with and meet?

RB: Yeah, we... I mean here in the state we worked a lot with Frank George, Russell Fluharty, and you know, we played a lot of 4-H shows. At that time the extension office—WVU Extension Service and 4-H

services was doing a lot in trying to document and preserve Appalachian culture of all kinds—not just the music, but the dance and the religion and the...all of the different studies—the language and the dialect and just social, the total social community of Appalachia at that time. They were trying to document that and trying to preserve it, so we worked a lot of shows doing that and that was usually Dr. Gainer showed up sometimes, Dr. Mauer (?) from WVU, Jane and Frank George, Wylene Dial, and we did a lot of those things and you know, it's really kind of rewarding because I see those shows and a lot of young people that were at those shows and 4-H camps, and I see them doing the music and I see them even telling the same stories and even cracking some of the same jokes and things. So I know it had a positive impact and those were outgrowths of those 4-H sessions that we all did. You know Russell Fluharty, Frank George, Jane. Guys like Glenn Smith, Jimmy Kurntz (?), um, Elmer Byrd, oh gosh, I could go on and on and on. But there was a real close-knit community. John and Dave Morris, you know, played some of those things with us.

EH: Mmhm. Do you see that community still existing today or a different version of it?

RB: Well, you know, a lot of those folks are no longer with us, you know a lot of them have died, but I still see that same impact. I see that same emphasis; I see that same influence, that I think we had during that time. I know a lot of the artists that you hear now, you know out there playing the circuits and things, I think were influenced by that.

14:22

EH: Tell me about your career in music when you were doing that as a full-time gig.

RB: Well, you know, like I said, we were pretty much doing the traditional stuff then, then somehow I started writing songs and some of those started getting a little bit of traction, and so I ended up with a country music career. So I was doing the traditional folk stuff with my grandmother, but I was also traveling to Nashville, Chicago, and doing a lot of country shows, opening for country stars here and there. And writing some country songs. Ferlin Husky recorded “There Ain't Enough Whiskey in Tennessee to Drink the Ugly Off of You.”

EH: (laughs)

RB: One that I wrote, and of course, “Stop the Flow of Coal” ended up being... well it's on iTunes now on Folkways Records.

EH: On Folkways?

RB: Yep.

EH: I used to work there.

RB: Did you really?

EH: Yeah (laughs), before I came here.

RB: Yeah, well anyway, it's got a long bar—it's got the longest bar of anybody in that group, you know, so I'm kinda proud of that. But that song documented the nation's longest coal strike at, it was... I didn't

really mean it to be a political piece, it was just meant to document the coal strike about what miners were going through during that winter through the coal strike. But anyway, that country side kind of took off too, so I was playing some road shows. And then in 70, I think 76, 77, I was the artist-in-residence in Tucker County, working in the school system. It just so happened that it was the 2 big snow winters and they didn't have school from like the last of November until the first of April or something! (laughs) So I learned how to ski and ride snowmobiles and taught some guitar courses and that sort of stuff, but we did some plays and that kind of stuff with the school system. It was very educational for me. It was a lot of fun. But anyway, did that for 2 years. I think it was a program called "Artists in the Classroom." It was with the... matter of fact it was with the Federal Endowment for the Arts and Humanities. So I did that for a couple years before I moved back to Logan.

EH: Mmhm. And then you took this job?

RB: I did. I had an older daughter which I missed a lot of her growing up because I was traveling around playing music. Most of the things that I knew how to do required travel, you know? So I missed a lot of her growing up and so Tressie, my 2<sup>nd</sup> daughter was supposed to be born in November, so I didn't, I didn't well... let me back up a minute. I was at one point trying to teach school. And I was trying to play music too. And I was doing all kinds of crazy stuff, like I was going somewhere every weekend playing music and even trying to go on Wednesday night and maybe play Wednesday night somewhere. And I was teaching school full-time so I was late on Thursday and that didn't make the principal very happy and all that sort of stuff. So I think I was 23, maybe and I said I'm gonna play music 'til I'm 30. And that still gives me 35 work years to put into something. Well I actually did it 'til I was 31 because I was having a pretty good year and, but anyway, Tressie was going to be born in November so I didn't book anymore shows past the 1<sup>st</sup> of November and I started looking for a job and there was 2 jobs in the paper and there was this job—the director of the ambulance service, and county administrator. And so I applied for both of them and ended up in this job. And really I was only gonna do it for the winter until the construction jobs fired back up again but I kinda got into it and got committed to it and so, I was only gonna stay for the winter—that was 37 years ago, so I'm still here.

EH: (laughs) Sometimes that happens.

RB: (laugh) Yeah, my... it's really, you know, had no idea that it would take off like it did. My first year's budget was 35,000 dollars and I had to buy 3 ambulances, pay my salary and the secretary's salary out of that. This year we'll probably do about 8 million dollars in gross receipts. So we've really grown in 37 years.

EH: Wow. Yeah. Have you continued to play gigs?

RB: Yeah, I mean I do all that I have time for. I do Vandalia every year. You know, I've got... I try to do one every couple months or so, you know. Nothing... that's really about all I've got time to do, you know? Yeah, I try to stay busy. And I do a lot of local stuff, you know, Chamber of Commerce and different civic groups and that sort of stuff, I do a lot of shows with them so it gives me a chance to still perform a little bit.

EH: Yeah.

RB: Do new songs. I won the Vandalia Award in 2014.

EH: I know, I know! That's amazing.

RB: So yeah, I kinda stay busy there.

EH: Um, do you continue to play with people—other people?

RB: Occasionally. Even when I was on the road, though, I worked single most of that time. You know, I was that guy with just a guitar going out there, warming the crowd up for the big stars, you know. That's what I did most of the time. Now I had some—I worked with bands from time to time if the job paid enough that I could pay a band, you know, then I would, I'd draw out the pieces that I needed, you know. But really I didn't make enough money to carry a band! (laughs)

20:52

EH: Yeah. That's the advantage of being able to just be a one-man band. Could you tell me about the albums that you've released?

RB: Well you know, actually the first album that I did, we did in a basement at Sutton, West Virginia.

EH: Okay.

RB: I had met some friends of mine, we're still friends to this day... the Cochran family. And the Cochran family was just dynamic—I mean there were just an awesome bunch of young kids. I mean little John was a fiddler—I think he was 6 years old—and could just fiddle up a storm. The oldest one of the kids was I think 13, 14. And so, anyway we decided we were gonna make an album together and so we did the Roger Bryant Phonograph Record in Bill Carpenter's basement. Of course, Bill did the dobro and he did the engineering and all that sort of stuff. That was the first one. And then when I finished the residency there we did a country album in Nashville with really slick, you know 18 pickers and that kind of stuff. That one was done in Nashville. A guy named Jimmy Helms actually produced that album and then I did "On the Banks of the Old Guyan," which was a collection of songs that are indigenous to the Guyandotte River Basin. And David O'Dell produced that album and played a lot of the music on it. And then had parts of other albums that part of the Mountain State Arts and Crafts Fair, with my grandmother, and then we did the Vandalia Sampler with her, just kind of parts of other albums. But those were the 3 main albums that we did.

EH: What are most of your songs about?

RB: Oh gosh—life. Things that I've lived, things that I've experienced, or things that I've imagined that I've experienced, whether I did or not. Yeah, you know... uh, that... most of them are of a country flavor, you know? The exception to that is probably Stop the Flow of Coal, you know? The rest are country ballads or some kind of humorous... you know, have a little humor in them.

EH: Do you still write songs?

RB: I do. Occasionally, you know, when I feel inspired. I'm not one of those guys who sits down 8-5 and starts kicking songs out. I have to... I'll think about something for 2-3 months but I'll sit down and write it in 20 minutes, you know, after I thought about it over and over and over again, you know?



EH: Cool. Do you have plans to release another album soon?

RB: Uh, yeah. You know, just trying to decide what direction I want to go. I got 2 or 3 projects in mind that I'd like to do and who I'd like to do 'em with, you know. It's just a matter of trying to decide. I mean, I'm not getting any younger, if I'm gonna do it, I'm gonna have to do it pretty soon. You know...

EH: Would you talk about them or are they secret?

RB: Well, they're not secret, but I just don't have them formulated enough to really, to really talk about 'em, you know. I mean I've got some things that I've written that I've not recorded, you know, and I'd like to do those but I'd really like to do a... kind of a traditional country album—not necessarily of things I've written but just country standards. I've always wanted to do that and I've never had an opportunity to do it. I'd like to do that and then of course, like I said I've written some others. I don't have enough for an album yet, but I have written some pieces that I plan to record. And I'd like to do an album of just me and my friends that are left because, man, I'm losing them every day, you know? Lost Joe Dobbs last year and regret that we didn't get to do a project together, you know? We talked about it a lot but we never actually set down and did it. But yeah, I'd like to do a project with guys like Buddy Griffin and Robert Shafer and guys that I've worked with for years and years and years. I'd like to do a project with them before I... before I check out.

EH: (laughs) Nice. Are there other younger musicians in West Virginia whose music you like?

RB: That I like?

EH: Yeah, who you see sort of taking on the new scene?

RB: Yeah—you know, most of them are not doing what I did. Jeff Ellis, you know, I like a lot of Jeff's stuff. You know, I think he's an up and coming guy with a lot of possibilities. Very versatile, very good writer, good musician, has a lot...

EH: Where is he based?

RB: What?

EH: Where is he based?

RB: I think he lives in South Charleston, you know. But Jeff I think has got a lot of talent. In a lot of different ways. Oh.... Oh gosh, oh... put me on the spot! And of course, you know, guys that are already famous like Brad Paisley. I think he's—I think he's the exception to the rule, you know? He's one of those guys that would make it no matter what, you know? When I was serious, you know, and I was hanging out in Nashville and I was doing things, I sit down and I graphed, and I've always been kind of analytical, and I sit down and tried to find that road map, you know, so I graphed how each star made it to the top, kind of. If I could find that common denominator, I'd just follow the road map. Well, there was no common denominator, I found out. It's almost like hitting the lottery. The one thing I did learn was that talent's only that much of it. You know? And I'll give you a couple of examples. One thing I learned playing road shows, and I don't mean this in a vain way, so don't take it wrong. I was usually more talented than whoever I was opening for. Because I could at least tune my own guitar. You know? And every town we played in, without exception, there was some 14-year-old kid that was just way better than

anybody on the stage that was getting paid that night! So I learned from that that talent's really only about that much. I mean having a national hit record's almost like hitting the lottery. I mean the stars have to align. I mean everything has to line-up. But Brad Paisley's the exception to that rule. Because Brad Paisley would make it in anybody's market because he's the total package. You know he's the only guitar picker that ever made the cover of "Guitar Player Magazine." Chet Atkins never made the cover—there were stories about Chet, and he's that good. He's that good of a guitar player. He can make it as a guitar picker, even if he couldn't write songs and sing and do all the other stuff, you know? I mean he's the whole package, you know? He can make it as a songwriter even if he couldn't sing a lick. Because his songs are so commercial, I mean commercial as water. And he's got the stage presence, he's got, you know, the whole package. You know? He's up and coming. I'm kind of drawing a blank—I know there's lots of young people out there that are, that are really talented. Just, you know...

EH: I'm going to look back through my... What was the significance of the Vandalia Award for you?

RB: Well, I mean it... I mean... anytime you get recognized, you know, for a lifetime of achievements, it kind of validates what you hoped you were, you know?

29:41

I mean I... I don't know, it's really kind of funny because I never really took myself that seriously. Even when I was trying to make a living, you know, it was still fun for me and it was something I did for fun, and I never tried to take myself too seriously and I think if you talk to people who knew me they'd say, "yeah, that's the truth, he never took himself seriously enough!" You know, really. But I think I mean it really meant a lot to me, you know, because it kind of validated, you know, at least somebody else had thought that I had made some contributions and you know, when you've done something as long as I've been playing music and stuff, that kind of validation means a lot.

EH: Yeah, yeah. Well I also think that a lot of musicians when they've become professionals, they lose the fun. So it's good that you were able to maintain that.

RB: Well I can tell you that it's more fun now than when I was trying to feed my kids.

EH: Yeah.

RB: When you're trying to feed your kids...you know, what's the old joke about what's the difference between a musician and a large pizza? A large pizza can feed a family of four, you know?

EH: Oh yeah. (laughs)

RB: When you're trying to put food on the table, it's a lot of pressure on you, you know? But it's the same no matter what you're doing. Doesn't matter what you're doing, you know, I mean when your kids are looking to you for, you know, survival, support. Yeah, it puts pressure on you. Now it's much more fun playing music now than it was when I was trying to make a living.

EH: Yeah, well is there anything else you'd like to add?

RB: It's just been a great ride. You got to remember, I'm 50 years of doing this now. You know? And the one thing that I think is really that I appreciate the most is that music has given me a life that I would have

never had. It has allowed me to go places and meet people—some incredible people. I've met so many fantastic people and I would not have met those people had it had not been for the music. So it has afforded me going places and meeting people that have just met so much to me during my life that I would have never have met, you know? Or never have had a chance to go there had it not been for the music.

EH: Yeah. Are there any people you met who were particularly exciting for you or I don't know, important?

RB: Well I mean the more significant people in my life were not the big stars or not the famous people that everybody would think that that would come to mind and I don't want to mention one or two in particular cause I don't want to slight anybody, but I have met so many just fantastic people, you know, that were just so interesting, you know? That every one of them had a story to tell. And just so many characters, you know? Just... guys like Russel Fluharty, Frank George, I mean those guys have just really had an impact on my life. You know? They... and I could go on and on and on and I don't want to because I don't want to slight anybody.

EH: Yeah, I need to go talk to Frank while he's still around and still able to hear me.

RB: Aw yeah, have you met Frank?

EH: I haven't yet, no.

RB: Oh, you have got to... you gotta do it and you got to do it quick. Frank and Jane could tell you more about the traditional scene in West Virginia than anybody I know. You know? And Frank's—I mean I dubbed him "Music Man of the Mountains" years ago. You know? Because he's... he can play all the mountain instruments—anywhere from bagpipes to penny whistle to fiddle, banjo, guitar, anything. You know? And does 'em all... he's a master of all of them, you know?

EH: Yeah, I've seen some photos of him in his kilt. And pipes.

RB: Yeah, you definitely have to go and meet Frank George.

EH: Yeah. Well would you play a song for me?

RB: Sure!

EH: Okay. Put these headphones on... pause it...

RB: Anything in particular?

34:55

END OF TAPE

RogerBryantInterviewSongs3.31.16

3 Songs by singer-songwriter Roger Bryant at his office in Logan, WV

March 31, 2016

EH: Emily Hilliard

RB: Roger Bryant

00:00

RB: When I got out of the Marine Corps I spent the days with my grandmother and she watched soap operas every day. \_\_\_ prayer (?) for all the sick people on the shows and all that kind of stuff, so... So I sit there with her so long I got to know pretty much what was going on and who was catting around with who so one day I wrote this little song about it. It did get a little airplay around the country

Plays “Daytime Television”

3:05

EH: Nice. And what’s that one called?

RB: Daytime Television!

EH: Cool. You do one more?

RB: Oh, gosh...

EH: You can do two more if you can’t decide...

RB: What?

EH: You can do two more if you can’t decide.

RB: (laughs) No, it’s no matter of that...

Plays “Valley of Canaan”

5:39

RB: About to sneeze—hold on

EH: Uh-oh

RB: (resumes playing)

7:15

On the verge of a sneeze and I can’t sneeze

EH: Uh-oh. So did you write that when you were in Tucker County?

RB: Mmhm. Yeah, they had plans to flood Canaan Valley once upon a time to build a big hydroelectric power plant. And Canaan Valley is one of the most unique places I've ever visited.

EH: Yeah.

RB: And to put a beautiful place like that underwater just seemed like a real shame to me. You know? So I wrote a song about it.

EH: Well thank goodness they didn't do it.

RB: Huh?

EH: Thank goodness they didn't do it!

RB: Nope. Well I think the only thing that stopped them, it ceased to be feasible after a while I guess.

EH: Well do you have time for one more?

RB: Sure! This one hasn't been recorded yet.

(Plays "Shades of Gray")

10:34

EH: Nice! So will that one be on the next record?

RB: It'll be on the new one.

EH: Nice. Thank you very much!

RB: Oh, you're welcome.

EH: Actually I might take your photo while you still have your...

10:47

END OF TAPE