

Alan "Cathead" Johnston

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Thomas Alan "Cathead" Johnston

Alan "Cathead" Johnston (b. 1952) is a bluegrass and country musician from McDowell County, WV. He is a former bassist in Mel Street's band The Swing Kings and his songs have been recorded by Del McCoury, Tommy Webb, and others.

EH: Emily Hilliard

AJ: Alan Johnston

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00:00

EH: You should know the answer to (laughs)

AJ: I'll probably know the answer.

EH: Alright, could you tell me your name and where you were born? Where and when you were born?

AJ: My name's Alan Johnston and I was born across the street here...

EH: Oh wow!

AJ: In 1952. At Gray's Hospital. Hospital's not there anymore.

EH: And tell me about your family.

AJ: Well my mom and dad—my dad was an old-time fiddle player, and he played a little bit of bluegrass too and there's a difference between, you know bluegrass fiddle and old-time fiddle. He played...he was primarily an old-time fiddle player and mom was a homemaker, and probably the most thrifty person I ever met in my life. And I had 4 siblings. I had one brother, and 3 sisters and 2 of my sisters have died. I'm the baby of the family. And so we was, my dad was a coal miner and up until he had a lung taken out in the 60s and after that he didn't go back in the mine.

EH: Did he have black lung?

AJ: Yeah, he had black lung and silicosis. And they found a spot on his lung back in the 60s, I don't know if it was cancer—I don't know if they even knew, but they took his lung out. And so then after that he never did go back in the mine.

EH: And what were their names, your parents?

AJ: Daddy's name was Raymond Johnston, and mom's name was Hazel. She was an England before she married my dad.

EH: Uh, do you remember him playing with other folks?

AJ: Yeah. They... dad played with... back in the... my earliest remembrance of my dad playing was back in the early 50s he played with another local entertainer from around here named Cecil Surratt. And they played places like Wheeling Jamboree.

EH: Oh yeah.

AJ: And then they had a television show. Then it was WHIS television in Bluefield. Later became WVBA but then at that time it was WHIS and they had something there called RFD Jamboree or something like

that, and it came on once a week and I remember going there with my dad. And he played fiddle up there on that television show.

EH: Cool. Do you know how he learned?

AJ: What's that?

EH: Do you know how he learned to play?

AJ: He learned from... his mother was a musician. I can't remember... they both... his daddy passed away before I was born so I can't remember if he played or not, but seemed like they said he did. But his mother played an old clawhammer style banjo and my dad took up the fiddle when he was 4. (laughs)

EH: Wow.

AJ: So I don't know, he just had... he was really, really a good fiddle player. He won ribbons you know, in conventions they had around here, you know, fiddlers' conventions. He had ribbons that he'd won playing fiddle.

EH: Wow. Do you know what the conventions were around here?

AJ: There was one at Glenwood Park, I remember in particular that he won. He won—I remember he won second place, up there as an old-time fiddler. And then he was invited to play at John Henry Folk Festival.

EH: Oh yeah.

AJ: And this was all later on his later years in his life. He was invited to play at John Henry Folk Festival and he did something at... what is it, Vandalia?

EH: Yeah.

AJ: I think, I think he played there. And I'd love to know what happened to 'em, but there was a couple guys who came to my dad's house. One's name was George Jarvis...

EH: Okay.

AJ: ...he was a local artist here. He painted. And the other guy's name was Francis Pendleton, and they came and they recorded my dad and they were working through some organization out of Charleston. And they made several recordings of my dad playing he fiddle. And the old clawhammer style banjo and they took them back and they submitted them to somebody. I'd love to know whatever happened to those.

EH: Well I'll try to track those down.

AJ: It'd be good to know... I'd love to hear 'em.

EH: Yeah. Maybe we can find 'em online. Have you searched at all?

AJ: I hardly know where to begin... I don't know, I don't know what to ask!

EH: Right.

AJ: Like, I don't know what...

EH: (laughs) Yeah. So he also played clawhammer a little bit.

AJ: Yeah, he did it. He did um, he had a style on the clawhammer that not too many of the other clawhammer players had. He did this thing really, really well with his left hand. His noting hand. He did these things called hammer-ons and pull-offs?

EH: Oh yeah. Uh-huh.

AJ: And part of the melody that he got out of playing clawhammer banjo was with his left hand, doing hammer-ons and pull-offs.

EH: Uh-huh.

AJ: And he did it better than any other banjo player I ever heard. He just, he just had a knack for that.

EH: That's neat.

5:57

And his mother's name was—what was her name?

AJ: Her name was Clara. She was a Blankenship before she married into the Johnston family.

EH: Mmhm. Do you know how she learned at all?

AJ: Well her, her mother was a, was a Cline and she lived on Gilbert Creek and my mother had, I don't know what became of it, at one time she had a newspaper clipping of her playing the fiddle.

EH: Wow.

AJ: And it came out of a newspaper like back in the 30s or 40s or something and I believe her married name was Adkins, but I can't remember for sure. I could look it up. I did find a place to look that stuff up, but that's where that was handed down all the way through that, the Clines. And of course, the Clines are a well-noted musical family from down on Gilbert Creek. Ezra Cline, cousin Ezra Cline and one of the bluegrass pickers Bobby Osborne married one of their daughters so then all kinds of... and Curly Ray Cline. He played fiddle for Ralph Stanley.

EH: Uh-huh.

AJ: So the Clines, a lot of Clines were musicians from down on Gilbert Creek and my dad was kin to that family.

EH: Okay. What are some songs you remember your dad playing on the fiddle?

AJ: He played old tunes like "Cricket on the Hearth" and he called it "Hell Amongst the Yearlings." He called it that, but he said people didn't want to use that word and say "Trouble Amongst the Yearlings," but he called it "Hell Amongst the Yearlings." He loved to do hornpipes. That was one of his favorite things. If there was a new hornpipe he'd hear it, then he'd sit down and he'd learn that and he'd play and

play and play until he could play that hornpipe. And so he loved to do "Devil's Hornpipe" and that' show I learned how to play, by following along behind him, you know, on the guitar.

EH: Those hornpipes are complicated.

AJ: Yeah, they are but he could really play 'em well.

EH: So that's how you started, is just backing him up on guitar?

AJ: Mmhm. Yeah, when I was 12 years old they bought be a guitar for Christmas and that's where I started playing right there and just never did look back!

EH: (laughs) So after that did you start playing with people?

AJ: Well, I started playing the first paying job I ever got was in Bradshaw, WV here in McDowell County, I was at a theatre, had a movie theatre down in Bradshaw and they... after the movie on Saturday afternoon, the last movie they showed, then they turned the house lights up and did a country music show in there on Saturday nights.

EH: Cool!

AJ: And so that was the first paying gig I ever did. I did it with my dad's band and he played at the time he was a constable in McDowell County—his name was Archie Day, and Archie always had a band together and that's who my daddy played with well in about the mid-60s and that's when I started playing. I played some with them and then course going to school like I did, I got with other musicians there in school and we got a little rock 'n' roll band we started, we started, and we started doing that.

EH: And what year was that?

AJ: Probably 1967, '68. And then, then we started, after, the year I graduated I started a band and was my first really, what I would call my band. And we called ourselves the country four. And we went up to Bluefield, WHIS at the time, and Mel Street had a show up there called Country Showcase. So we went up there and auditioned to, to make a guest appearance on his television show and there's a little funny story about kind of that surrounds that story... we were sitting at a traffic light and the light turned red before we got through it and the guy that was driving the car, our guitar player Randall Burks decided he better not go on through that light, so he backed up. And when he backed up, he backed up into a Cadillac. And went bam! And we got out and looked and it was Mel Street! (laughs)

EH: Uh-oh! (laughs)

AJ: It was the guy that we was on the way to the TV station to audition. But he... he took it all in stride and he was real good-natured about it.

EH: (laughs)

AJ: but anyway, I started... so we got on that show a couple of times and then Mel's bass player quit and Mel contacted me and asked me would I come play bass for him. I didn't want to at the time 'cause I had my own band.

EH: Mmhm.

AJ: And then one night we was supposed to play... there was a pizza place here in Welch called Billy Boy's. We were supposed to play and a couple of 'em didn't even show and I got frustrated and I said, "you know what, I'm gonna go up there and play with Mel Street, 'cause he's asked me to play, I'm gonna go see if the offer still stands."

EH: Uh-huh.

AJ: And it just so happened they were taping that night. I went up there and he said "sure." So I played with Mel Street for probably 4 years as his bass player. And the band was called The Swing Kings.

EH: Okay.

AJ: They've been on a lot of different—people come and went through the Swing Kings, but they hung on to that name The Swing Kings on down through the years.

EH: Was it sort of like a Texas swing or like a country?

AJ: Na, it really wasn't. I can't... I don't know exactly how it started. My daddy used to call... he didn't classify it as bluegrass music or country music. He called it *string* music.

EH: Uh-huh. Yeah.

AJ: And he'd say... he bought me a little transistor radio and told me a station to listen to in Cincinnati. It's WCKY. And the, the DJ's name was Wayne Rainey.

EH: Oh yeah!

AJ: And he said, if you want to hear some good *string* music... He called it *string* music, you'd listen to WCKY and you'd hear some good *string* music.

EH: Well Wayne Rainey was a musician too, right?

AJ: I can't remember.

EH: I think so.

AJ: But he was a DJ on that WCKY. And so anyway um... that's what... where were we at? What was I saying?

EH: You were talking about playing in Mel Street's band.

AJ: Yeah, I played with him for about 4 years, I'd say. And then he went—He had a couple of big number ones. Well it was, one of 'em I think reached number 2 on the Billboard charts in the United States!

EH: Wow.

AJ: His first big hit was Borrowed Angel. It came in the top 10. And then he started going, he started going way out you know, places like the Savannah, GA and playing places down in Florida and stuff, so I went to a few of those places with him but he wasn't really big enough yet to carry a band. He couldn't have his own band, you know, 'cause you had to be pretty successful to maintain a road band.

EH: Right.

AJ: But every time, every chance that I got I did go with him and we went to a lot of places and then finally he, he... he did get to where he got a band. He came back and asked me about probably 1976 or '77 to go with him. He thought that I would just jump all over it because in 1972 I was gung-ho, ready to go. But by the time 1977 rolled around I had a family, and had a wife and had a baby and I just thought, no I don't wanna do that anymore.

EH: Yeah.

AJ: And so I actually turned him down when he offered me that job in '77. I couldn't believe I did it, but I didn't want to do it anymore.

15:17

EH: Yeah, that happens. So then were you doing music full-time before?

AJ: I never really did it full-time. It was just, it was a side thing. Now I will admit that back in the, during that time it was a big part of, I was newly, freshly married and everything and I did play enough music back then to, it became part of my budget you know, part of my... without it you know, it was really—I depended upon the money I played playing music to raise my family. So I guess you would call it semi-professional.

EH: Yeah, yeah.

AJ: But I still had a day job. (laughs)

EH: What did you do for that?

AJ: I've done everything just about in my day jobs. I've done roofing, installed furnaces, I've sold insurance, I taught school at a Christian school, I was a maintenance supervisor at the hospital, I was assistant manager in a grocery store, I worked on pinball machines, worked on jukeboxes and pool tables... (laughs) So I've done a lot of stuff.

EH: Cool.

16:41

And what about now—are you still working?

AJ: I'm retired.

EH: Yeah. Um, so you know about like '76 was that? Did you continue to play just on the side on your own?

AJ: Yeah, I was with The Swing Kings up until '77 and then Donnie Goins, he was our drummer, he announced to us one night that he didn't want to play anymore. He just—ain't gonna play no more music. And we just all looked at each other and then one of the other guys stepped forward and said, "Well then I quit too then. I'm not gonna play any more either." So that was like on New Year's Eve night.

EH: Okay.

AJ: And so I thought well, I gotta play, if I don't play, I'll explode. I've got this in me, it's got to come out. (laughs) and so about, by February of 1977 I already had another band and I called it Fancy Free Band. And so I just—I don't know, it was about a month there I went without actually playing gigs and then by the time February rolled around, I was rolling again. And we kept that band together until 1980 and then I... I ceased to play with that band. I didn't want to. I didn't want to do that anymore for one thing. I got real busy at church and it was... it was interfering with me... I didn't want me... I didn't want to ruin my witness for one thing. I didn't want to go church Sunday morning and somebody say, "Didn't I see you coming out of Moose Lodge last night?" And I thought, it's not worth it. I don't want anything to do with that. So I just lost interest in it. I went from 1980 until probably 2004 and didn't play any.

EH: Wow. What church do you belong to?

AJ: I belong to a Mountaintop Baptist Church. I figure you don't have to be Baptist to go heaven, but I thought, why not go first class.

EH: (laughs)

AJ: (laughs)

EH: S then 2004 you decided to start playing again?

AJ: Yeah. But I knew then that... that I would never go back into the clubs or anything again. I had no desire to ever do that. So I kinda set a standard for myself: If it's somewhere I can't take my grandchildren, then I don't need to be there either.

EH: Yeah!

AJ: So that's, that's kinda the standard I set when I'm choosing a place to play. I say, "Well, can I take my grandchildren?" They say, "No, you can't bring none of that..." Well, I won't be there, then. I'm not gonna play.

EH: Yeah, yeah. And where were you playing before? Moose Lodges and bars?

AJ: Yeah, Moose Lodges... we had one steady gig from the time I started playing with The Swing Kings in '72, up until 1977 we played at a place in Bluefield called the City Auditorium. And they had a dance in there every Saturday night. And we alternated with another band—we played one Saturday, and then they played. And everything in between, we booked other places like Moose Lodge, and we played the Elks Clubs and the Eagles Clubs, and just places...you know, just bars and stuff.

EH: Yeah.

AJ: I didn't. I didn't ever want to do that again.

EH: Was that two-step dances? Or kind of like country...

AJ: Aw, it was just everything. We'd play anything from Stanley Brothers to Ted Nugent!

EH: (laughs)

AJ: And when you play a Moose Lodge, you've got a mixed crowd at a Moose Lodge, so there's a lot of people there like... back then... I don't know how they are now but during that time, they liked their

polkas, so you'd have to play some polkas, they'd even want a square dance so you'd play something for a square dance, and then you'd have a group there that wanted to hear some hard rock 'n' roll music, so you played some Ted Nugent and (laughs) and you had to be kind of... I played in the kind of band, at that time, like one weekend we played at a high school prom and then the next weekend we played at the Moose Lodge and go from teenagers to you know, no limit on the age.

EH: Uh-huh. So you had to be versatile.

AJ: Had to be.

21:50

EH: And so now you're doing more like the dance halls? Little dance halls or schools?

AJ: We play mostly, live shows here, like we been playing the county fair, play a lot of street fairs, they had one in Bradshaw, had one in War, and they had some festivals here in Welch that we played and just live stage stuff, that's all. That's the kinda stuff we've been doing.

EH: And what's that band called?

AJ: South52.

EH: Oh yeah, okay.

AJ: No I've had, we started off, back in 2004, 2005 and we called it McDowell County Project. And then we decided to change our name to South52. That was in about 2006. And we played all bluegrass. We didn't have an electric instrument in the band and we played you know banjo, dobro, had a fiddle player. I played upright bass. And then we decided a little over a year ago to add a drummer and we went electric. Now we're doing like classic country and classic rock 'n' roll stuff out of the 60s and 70s.

EH: Cool! Sounds good.

AJ: And then if somebody wants to hear some bluegrass we'll do that for 'em too!

EH: Wow!

23:31

(laughs) sound like my kinda band! Was Donnie, who you played with, Donnie Goins?

AJ: Donnie Goins.

EH: Is he related to Melvin—the Goins brothers?

AJ: Brother. Melvin and Ray's brother.

EH: Okay.

AJ: And they had a whole slew of 'em.

EH: And Melvin's still around right?

AJ: Yeah. Yeah, Melvin Goins and Windy Mountain, the name of his group is Windy Mountain, I think.

EH: Okay.

AJ: Yeah, we had a—they had, I think it was 2006 they had a Channel 6, they called it Legends Reunion up at Brush Fork Armory in Bluefield and he and Ray were there—that's the last time I ever saw Ray.

EH: Ah.

AJ: And they played at that and there was a lot of people. And that's the last time I also saw Cecil Surratt. And what they did is, they had a thing for all the people that had at one time played on Channel 6 TV in Bluefield. They had a reunion show for 'em and there were a lot of people up there. There was a lady that sung up—her name was Boots Collins. She was there.

EH: That sounds familiar.

AJ: And Eleanor Parker—she was there.

EH: Oh yeah. Do you know if she's still alive?

AJ: Yeah, she's still alive.

EH: I'd like to go visit her.

AJ: Her husband was Rex and he passed on and then Eleanor had a couple of her daughters with her up there at that Legends thing, but now that's 10 years ago, so I don't know what's happened since then.

EH: Yeah. I was wondering if she's still around. And I was talking to someone who said so, but they were trying to find her contact information 'cause I'd like to go talk to her.

AJ: I remember when they were on television—had a regular television show—Rex and Eleanor Parker.

EH: Oh yeah. Yeah, I think that's where I read about her. Do you know if there are any tapes from when you played on the TV?

AJ: No. There was a guy—he was the engineer, his name was Harry and I can't remember his last name, but he had some tapes at home, and I used to see him at Walmart in Bluefield years ago when I'd go in and he'd be there sitting and drinking coffee or something. They had a snack bar or something there at that time. But I didn't—I lost touch with him and then somebody said he's passed since then. And I never did—I'd love to see some of those. He said he had some at home and I thought, boy I'd like to see those, and... I don't know whatever happened to 'em now. Our piano player that was on our TV show with us, he had a, last time I talked to him, he had a VHS of... they used to do a thing at a TV station called Hard-o-rama and we played for that every year. Or Tele-rama, they called it Tele-rama, I'm sorry. Hard-o-rama was over in Richland. But they had a Tele-rama and I believe they did it for March of Dimes. Fundraiser. And we played for that every year. And he had some of our performances on VHS. He said somebody borrowed it from him to make a copy, and then gave him the copy and kept the original and then the copy was substandard. They did it like at a slower speed or something and then they hoo-dooed him on that one. But I don't know if he's still go that or not—I'd love to see it, though.

EH: Yeah, that'd be cool. Did you ever write your own songs?

AJ: Yeah, I have written several, several songs and I've had some—unless you're a bluegrass fan, you've probably never heard of the people, but I've had, I've had a handful of bluegrass acts record some of my songs. And probably one of the most notable ones is Del McCoury.

EH: Wow!

AJ: He recorded one called "Sweet Appalachia." It's on the Family Circle album. Don Rigsbee, he's recorded a couple of my songs and a guy by the name of David Davis and the Warrior River Boys—he's recorded probably 8 or 9 of my songs.

EH: Wow.

AJ: And there's a guy named Tommy Webb over in Kentucky—he recorded one of my songs. I know I'm leaving somebody out. Brand New Strings out of East Tennessee—they did one of my songs. And then most recently, it's not been released yet, but a guy down in Virginia named Jeff Brown—and he's got a band named Still Lonesome, and he recorded probably the last song that I wrote, but he recorded it and it should be out anytime now.

EH: I met Del a few months ago back when I was living in DC.

AJ: Met who?

EH: Del McCoury.

AJ: Oh did you?

EH: Yeah! (laughs)

AJ: I'd like to meet him. I met his, I met his son—we played at the IBMA. My daughter—she's trying to break in to, you know, music and she had a showcase at IBMA.

EH: Nice.

AJ: And so I met—his son was walking through the hall down there in the hotel there where we was playing at in Nashville and I recognized him and I said, "Rob McCoury, right?" and he said, "Right!" and I said... McCoury, McCoury, however you say it... and I said, "Y'all recorded one of my songs this month." And he said, "Oh, really?"

EH: (laughs)

AJ: And I said yeah, and I told him the song and he said, "Huh!" Well, I won't say what he said—it's a curse word!

EH: (laughs)

AJ: And I said... he said, "You wrote that!" And I said, "yeah," and he said "Good song!"

EH: (laughs) Nice. So have you recorded them? Do you have CDs or anything?

AJ: Just at home. Home recordings. I got... I got a little thing that sits on top of the table about that big? And it's a multitrack recorder and so we recorded a CD, but we did it right there at the house. Mixing in house, printed it in house. Everything we did, did it right there at the house, on the computer and that tabletop mixer.

30:07

EH: Yeah, I'd like to hear that. So when people record your songs, how do they find out about them? Just from playing?

AJ: Well I had a friend who has also published some of my songs—his name's HR Cook. He had—I'm all the time pitching 'em to him—pitching 'em, sending him songs, sending 'em to him and a lot of times he would call me and say, "So and so's thinking about recording your song, he's listening to it, thinking about it." And I'd say, "Well that's cool, I hope he does." But they work different with Del McCoury, he done recorded it and he'd already recorded it and it was coming out the next day. So there wasn't any... wasn't any waiting game for me to find out. And then his bass player, I was... I was friends with him through a message board for bass players, and he just so happened to send me a message and said, "I think we recorded one of your songs, man!" I said, "really?" And so I found out just about the same day that it was released, that he'd recorded my song. And then, then I saw this band that had a song posted called "Merry-Go-Round" on the—actually I believe it was Myspace at that point in time. And I said, "I'm gonna listen to that and see how it stacks up against my song that I wrote called 'Merry-Go-Round' and I was listening to it, and I listened to the kick-off and I said that sounds... that would work actually on my song, you know "Merry-Go-Round." And I listened to it, the guy started singing, I said, "That's my song!"

EH: (laughs)

AJ: And they recorded my song like that in one day before I found out that they were gonna record it.

EH: Well I hope they...

AJ: I was just like—I got on the phone, I called my publisher and was like, "Man, there's somebody on Myspace ripped my song off!"

EH: Right!

AJ: But they didn't rip it off, they did everything just exactly the way—but I didn't know that they were gonna record it. And they just caught me—that's a crazy way to hear your song!

EH: (laughs) That's funny. So what does your daughter—what's her name and where does she live and what does she play under?

AJ: Her name's Stacy Grubb. And she lives in Beaver right now. Beaver, WV. And she went down into, she went to Nashville—I can't remember the year now, but she went down there and tried to make a long story short, she recorded a project down there at Hilltop Recording Studios, and she had, I'm talking about the big names on her CD. She had Ron Block playing banjo. Ron Block plays banjo for Allison Kraus, and she had a guy named Aubrey Haney on the fiddle and mandolin, and Rob Ikes played the dobro—and these are all big names in Bluegrass. And a guitar player, now I have to admit at the time I'd never heard of him. But after I got home I Googled his name and the guy has won Grammys after Grammy and the most most sought-after guitar player in Nashville, and his name is Brent Mason. He played on her project and then we have some friends—they've been hugely successful in bluegrass

music—Daley and Vincent and they came and recorded some harmony on one of the songs. And she did 3 of my songs on that project. And I played bass on 3 tracks. She did 2 of my songs. She did 2 of my songs and I played bass on 3 tracks. And so... but it was kind of a... the guy that played bass for Mel Street that I replaced, his name is Ronnie Cochran, and he's the one that produced that album. And he didn't produce that album as a bluegrass—it had drums and electric guitar and all that stuff in it. But it also had banjo and you know dobro, and it's a really nice mix of music.

EH: Cool.

AJ: And real string orchestra—he got an orchestra to come in and...

EH: Wow.

AJ: Do some... On 3 or 4 songs. It's an extremely impressive project.

EH: Nice. I'd like to hear it.

AJ: And it's called... she called it Hurricane after the... that was the title. That was one of the songs she did on there that I wrote.

EH: And is she still playing around here?

AJ: Well, she... yes and no. She just had a baby this month. So she's been pretty tied up with that.

EH: Yeah.

AJ: But she... and she played in my group for a long time, sang in my group, but she didn't want to be tied down to that. She wanted to do things her way and do her own thing, so that's what she, she didn't, she just let me know that she was gonna try to do things herself. And she... she's one, she got booked down at Wheeling Jamboree, and then, she's a member now of the Wheeling Jamboree, she got inducted into the membership of the Wheeling Jamboree. Well it was about the year 2010, we were down there and she got us to go down there to back her up and accompany her at the Wheeling Jamboree. And one of my other daughters named Jessie, so we went down there to help her and accompany her and it was a real—it was a real nostalgic moment because we were there and 50 or well let me see, 2010, 60 years prior to that, to the year, my dad was at the Wheeling Jamboree playing. With Cecil Serratt. And so it was, it was a real good moment for us 'cause there I am, performing at the Wheeling Jamboree with my 2 daughters, 2 of my daughters, and then I thought about 60 years ago my dad was doing this right here, you know. Wasn't on the same stage, but it was still the same venue. You know, in the same thing, Wheeling Jamboree. So we, that was really, that was a proud moment for me.

EH: Yeah. Well I'd like to get her contact info to see if she might talk to me too.

AJ: I'm sure she'd be glad to.

EH: Great.

AJ: She's, she's you know... most recently she got up with a guy named, I don't know if you've ever heard of him or not, he's won a Grammy—his name is Clay Hess and he's got a band called the Clay Hess band.

EH: Okay.

AJ: He played music with Mountain Heart.

EH: Okay.

AJ: He was a guitar player for Mountain Heart. And then he played... he played with... some with Ron Block and Sierra Hull. But he's another one, he's trying to do his own thing, I guess. He's got the Clay Hess Band.

EH: Mmhm.

AJ: And so she got tight in with him a little bit, and they did a lot of things together. Played down at Outer Banks, some kind of festival down at the Outer Banks...

EH: And is he in West Virginia?

AJ: Yeah, she lives up in Beaver.

EH: Yeah. Is Clay? Clay Hess?

AJ: No, he lives in Ohio actually.

EH: Oh, okay. Um, do you feel like you're part of a music community here?

AJ: I don't really... not like I'd like for it to be. You know we don't—there's nothing really like interacting between bands and stuff. If that goes on, I'm not aware of it. That would be nice, you know, to be like, you know, have a band here and a band here and 2 or 3 or 4 or 5 bands here in the county and all of us kind of interact and do this, but I don't—that doesn't go on that I know of.

EH: Do you think, are there enough places to play? Has it changed or anything?

AJ: I don't think there's—we... my friend and I, Charlie Davis, I've played music with him for years and years. And he and I have done several things here recently just us, just us two. I take guitar and then he brings his banjo and dobro, and we've been performing for, there's some mission groups that comes in up in Elkhorn at a place called SWAP, I believe it stands for Sharing With Appalachian People and they're a Mennonite group and then come and there's a great big boarding house up at Elkhorn and they come in there, 20 or 30 of 'em and they do things, do work here for people in McDowell County and so while they're here, Charlie and I have gone up there probably a dozen times or more and performed for them. And, and then most recently, less than 2 weeks ago we went up to Mount View High School and performed for the Middle School, the whole Middle School up there, because part of the... I've got a friend that teaches up there and he's—he's wanting his, his students to learn about music and try to appreciate music and so we went up there and we sang and played for about 30 minute and then we had a question and answer period, so they... and I thought, I thought they'd just all sit there and look at each other, you know, when they... but man, they fired them questions off, they was begging for the mic!

EH: What were they asking?

AJ: They were asking stuff like, what got you, what made you interested in wanting to learn how to play music and really intelligent questions you know, and really—it surprised me, you know. And they were good questions and then Charlie, he worked in the coal mines for 25 years so I said if anybody wants to ask Charlie anything about working in the coal mines, you know, and some of 'em asked him, you know,

what was it like down in the mine and all that stuff. And they—they—we ran out of time before we ran outta questions, I don't believe everybody got to ask their questions, but it surprised me. But I really enjoyed that!

EH: That's great! Do you see young people playing music around here?

42:00

AJ: I, I don't see 'em. They could be and I wouldn't know it. But if they are, I don't... there's a few. My wife's nephew, he plays music and maybe a couple more, but I'm not real aware of it.

EH: Yeah. Can you think of other musicians or people in the area who I should talk to who are playing old-time, country, bluegrass music? Blues, anything like that?

AJ: You mean live here?

EH: Yeah, yeah. At least in West Virginia, but...

AJ: Just people that probably I have played with in the past. I'm still in touch—we had a girl that played the banjo and her husband played the guitar and they moved off down into Virginia and we still keep in touch through Facebook. And I can see what they're doing, you know they post things on Facebook like video that they made of people that they're jamming with down there. We'll see that. And I'm... but I couldn't name you, I couldn't name one old-time or bluegrass band around here right now. I really don't—there was another one--My friend Barry Clevenger that lived in Yeager. But he moved to North Carolina so that all busted up. They called their selves Second Generation and that's not around anymore, so I can't think of a—I can't think of a bluegrass or acoustic music band around here right now. I don't know of one.

EH: Hm. What about country?

AJ: There's a band called The County that I know of that's here local. And they just call themselves The County, and I know all of them pretty well.

EH: Okay.

AJ: Really good, talented musicians. They've got a good sound. Their singer is Brock Whitt and he's in—I think he's a DJ on J104 up here in Bluefield.

EH: Oh cool.

AJ: Really good singer.

EH: Nice. Well I'd love to hear some of your music sometime.

AJ: I'll get your address and... or I can send you some mp3s through Facebook.

EH: Yeah, that'll work.

AJ: Instant gratification that'll work.

EH: (laughs)

AJ: Or however you want to look at it—pain and suffering.

EH: Yep, and you should let me know next time you guys are playing. Maybe I could come down.

AJ: Okay, I surely will. We’ll be in touch through Facebook.

EH: Sounds good. Well is there anything else you’d like to add?

AJ: Nope. (laughs)

EH: Well thanks very much—we can go have some lunch.

AJ: I’d like to say—I will say this, I’d like to say that I really appreciate my wife for tolerating me. All these years—it’s something to tolerate a musician because I’ve done things like we’d be at a drive-in theater and I’d get a call at a snack bar and I’d think well, I gotta—somebody in my family’s died. They call my name, tell me come to the snack bar, I got a phone call and I thought oh that must be something bad, really bad, and I’m just praying all the way to the snack bar, and I get down there and they’re all, “We need you to come and play bass for us tonight” and I say, “I’m at the movies!” you know with my wife, “Yeah, yeah we know!” and I said, so I’d just go off and leave her, you know, they’d come at the entrance and pick me up and I’d walk over and leave her sitting at the movies to go play music. You know, so it’s really, you know, I’m just really appreciative of her that she tolerated me through all these years and... but I can’t, I also can’t say—end this up and not say how thankful I am that the Lord saw to hunt me out and save my soul and in spite of who I am and in spite of all the things that I’ve done, he’s, he’s saved my soul and I just love the Lord and I just want to please him and I wouldn’t take anything for that.

EH: Nice. Well thanks so much.

AJ: You’re very welcome. We’re gonna go up...

46:52

END OF TAPE