

Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library

University of California
Berkeley, California

Ted Johnson

Rosie the Riveter World War II American Homefront Oral History Project

A Collaborative Project of the Regional Oral History Office,
The National Park Service, and the City of Richmond, California

Interviews conducted by
David Washburn
in 2003

Copyright © 2007 by The Regents of the University of California

Since 1954 the Regional Oral History Office has been interviewing leading participants in or well-placed witnesses to major events in the development of Northern California, the West, and the nation. Oral History is a method of collecting historical information through tape-recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of preserving substantive additions to the historical record. The tape recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. The corrected manuscript is bound with photographs and illustrative materials and placed in The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, and in other research collections for scholarly use. Because it is primary material, oral history is not intended to present the final, verified, or complete narrative of events. It is a spoken account, offered by the interviewee in response to questioning, and as such it is reflective, partisan, deeply involved, and irreplaceable.

All uses of this manuscript are covered by a legal agreement between The Regents of the University of California and Ted Johnson, dated May 30, 2003. The manuscript is thereby made available for research purposes. All literary rights in the manuscript, including the right to publish, are reserved to The Bancroft Library of the University of California, Berkeley. No part of the manuscript may be quoted for publication without the written permission of the Director of The Bancroft Library of the University of California, Berkeley.

Requests for permission to quote for publication should be addressed to the Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, Mail Code 6000, University of California, Berkeley, 94720-6000, and should include identification of the specific passages to be quoted, anticipated use of the passages, and identification of the user.

It is recommended that this oral history be cited as follows:

Rosie the Riveter World War II American Homefront Oral History Project: An Oral History with Ted Johnson conducted by David Washburn, 2003, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2007.

Discursive Table of Contents—Ted Johnson

Tape 1

Parents background, born in Sweden, married in SF—Swedish community of Alameda/East Bay, Jenny Lind Hall was meeting place, growing up with Swedish parents—Playing accordion, how he started—Taking lessons, Caesar Pizzollo in North Beach—Father worked unloading bricks from ships—Father invested in his musical career, buying expensive accordion—Why he took lessons with Caesar Pizzollo, took public transportation—What music he learned, popular music, learned radio music—Playing Swedish music, music ordered from Swedish newspaper (Chicago), first gig was at Jenny Lind Hall—Jenny Lind Hall, what it was—First steady gig 1932, played at beer joint in East Oakland after prohibition—Looking for a job at banks during depression—Making money playing music during the Depression—Playing music at beer hall, played pop tunes printed in Variety magazine, bought sheet music at Cresses (14th/Broadway in Oakland)—How he started playing country music with Dude Martin, describes meeting Martin, hired him for a radio show in Oakland, 1935—No experience playing country western before joining Dude’s band—Familiarized himself with country music through listening to local radio shows, discusses how hearing music is a good method for learning tunes—Listening to country on radio was indispensable, influenced by DJ’s tastes—Roy Rogers, Gene Autry, Bob Wills—Played live performances for KLX in Oakland, discusses instrumentation of band—Repertoire for Dude Martin’s Band. Johnson became head of group because, he was a more accomplished musician, knew how to write charts, discusses Variety magazine a source for music—Played KLX every night for an hour in the evening. Then got morning show on KSFO in SF—Booking gigs at local theatres in San Jose, Berkeley, Richmond, all over Bay Area, promoted show on radio—Describes financial relationship with theatres. Each got cut then split the remainder—Discovered that theatres were not as lucrative as playing other venues—Started playing for dance for fraternal organizations, local dance halls (1938-39), traveled all over Bay Area—Had to put up black curtains at dance hall in Petaluma at beginning of war to block the light, gas rationing made it difficult to travel to distant locales—Not an essential industry, so settled down at 4 dance halls that did the best—San Jose, Richmond, Oakland, Petaluma—Describes gas rationing, coupon books—Place that did the most business was East Shore Park in Richmond—Discusses more rationing, justification for it—Traded a case of liquor for tires, was illegal—Gigs 5 nights a week at East Shore Park. Describes the business there—Talks about shipyard workers coming to the country music dances—Describes the scene at East Shore Park, the dance hall, drinking—Discusses booking East Shore Park with the City of Richmond, \$50 a night, had 15 Richmond cops there to police—Shipyard worker and sailors didn’t get along, got in fights—Discusses buying the beer for the dances, had good luck b/c beer was rationed

Tape 2

The sailors and the shipyard workers didn’t get along at country dance, had to hire a lot of security to control crowd—Prostitution started to go on in parked cars outside of dance hall—Believes VD was traced back to East Shore—Hired lady police officer to clean up parking lot—Prostitutes pick-up men in dance—Describes the crowd: dress, 50% shipyard workers—Dress of the crowd, didn’t notice a difference between Texans and Californians—Mostly singles came to the dances—Dances were racially segregated—Discusses race relation during WWII, East Bay—Dress of crowd changed with WWII. Before war concert goers dressed rather formally, during war the “Dress class went down.”—Did not sense tension between pre-war crowd and

“Okies,” because they “Liked the same music, and came to [the dance] for the same thing.”—Music Dude Martin played at East Shore Park. Became danceable after Bob Wills introduced new numbers, bands got bigger, included more horns—Audience requested the music they heard on the radio—Had to play music that audience could dance to—Meeting Spade Cooley, Martin and Johnson never drank while playing music—Martin did not allow his band members to drink at concerts, not a way to run a business—Martin’s band was not hired directly by the Kaiser shipyards—Business increased as a result of the war, had the gas to East Shore Park, most of the band members lived closer to East Shore Park than any other dance hall the band scheduled—Crowds got bigger over time, hall could fit about 1000, dancers shuffled in and out of the hall, played up to 5 nights a week—How gas rationing affected the music business and everyone else. Travel was limited.—Worked on Navy base in San Diego during the war. Story about driving to pick-up beer. Discusses African American roles on the base; did all the work.—Believes rationing affected the music business more than others—People attracted to Dude Martin’s shows because they were well publicized over the air waves. Band had four shows on KYA, early morning, noon, and dinner time, and 9:00pm, and then Martin and Johnson disc jockeyed at 10:00pm. They advertised their dances on each show.—Martin’s band did not identify as a “hillbilly band.” They played “dance music.”—How the emergence of country dance music affected Martin’s band. Dance tunes became popular during the war.—The band played a set of the music they played on the radio, and also a dance set of tunes influenced by Bob Wills, included a horn section.—Band included “cowboy” musicians and “dance” musicians, many members of the band, including Johnson and Martin, were drafted into the military—Story of how Martin got started playing music. He went to Berkeley High and was discovered during a school talent show—Discusses Petrillo and the American Federation of Musicians. Petrillo ran union with “iron fist.”—Radio stations had to hire a set number of musicians, number was “classified” by the AMF union. Discusses how classifications were a burden to many Bay Area radio station.—Discusses the workings of the musician’s unions. Johnson was a member of AFM Local 6. For gigs in Richmond, which was Local 424, Johnson and Martin’s band had to pay their musicians top scale, which was Local 6—to which most of the band members belonged.

Tape 3

Discusses how Petrillo insured that radio stations kept a high classification.—Discusses Dude Martin’s abilities as salesman. Managers of local radio stations hired the band because of its ability to attract advertisers.—Played dances for fraternal organizations at Alvarado Park prior to World War II.—Continued to play dances throughout the Bay Area after the war—Sensed that his fan based got bigger during the war. “Okies” came out during the war and Martin’s band was playing the music they liked.—Made deal with radio stations and advertisers that the band would have two chances during each radio program to promote their dances in Richmond and other locations—Discusses crowd control, working with the City of Richmond to hire enough police to manage the concert-goers. Frequently there were fights—Band worked closely with the Richmond Police Department. One sergeant hired the appropriate number of police officers.—Did not remember any drug use going on at Martin’s concerts—Johnson composed many of the tunes that Martin’s band performed. Martin came up with the theme and often the lyrics, and Johnson composed the music. They created a Dude Martin songbook over time.—Martin’s band was able to hire the top musicians in San Francisco and Oakland because it had such a high pay scale—Martin’s background. He was from Plainsburg in Merced county.—Discusses photos captured on digital video tape.

Interview with Ted Johnson
Interviewed by: David Washburn
Transcriber: Matthew Schwartz and David Washburn
[Interview #1: March 21, 2002]
[Begin Audio File Johnson 01 03-21-02]

1-00:00:00

Washburn:

Okay, so we're reporting here with Ted Johnson. Today's March. I'm always bad with dates. Today is Friday, March 21, and it's an interview with Ted Johnson. He's being interviewed by David Washburn in Walnut Creek, California. So, I'm just going to start with some basic questions so we can learn a little more about your background. But, where were you raised?

1-00:01:00

Johnson:

I was born in San Francisco and moved to Alameda when I was six years old. And I lived there until I was married when I was twenty-one.

1-00:01:14

Washburn:

And so, can you tell me a little bit more about your parents' background?

1-00:01:19

Johnson:

Both of my parents were born in Sweden. My dad was a sailor. He came over on a sailing ship. Went around the Horn. My mother was born in Sweden. Her mother came to New York, then sent for my mother, and my mother came over and eventually wound up in San Francisco and met my dad where he had jumped ship. And they were married.

1-00:01:52

Washburn:

And so, in Alameda were you raised, was there a Swedish community in which you were raised?

1-00:01:59

Johnson:

No. There was a few Swedes around, but mostly I had a couple aunts and uncles. But, there was Swedish organizations in Oakland that met in Oakland at {Jenny-Lynn?} Hall. That was a meeting place for all of the Swedes. And I started playing the accordion there. That's one of the first places I ever played. {Jenny-Lynn?} Hall was still there last I know, but that was on Telegraph Avenue.

1-00:02:35

Washburn:

And so, just so we can go back, when did you move to Alameda? You were six years old, but do you remember the year?

1-00:02:43

Johnson:

I was born in '16.

1-00:02:44

Washburn:

1916? So, 22?

1-00:02:47

Johnson:

Right.

1-00:02:50

Washburn:

And so, obviously both of your parents spoke Swedish, and did you grow up speaking Swedish?

1-00:02:58

Johnson:

My folks and we had some aunts and uncles around and they would always talk Swedish together. But, my parents would only talk Swedish when they didn't want us kids to know understand what they were talking about. And I had a brother and a sister. And so, when you're not supposed to learn, you learn pretty good, because I listened to my mother and my dad, and I never learned to speak. But, I learned to understand. And I had an uncle that came over and he had a Swedish poem that he used to say. And I was I think seven years old, and he told me that if I could learn that poem he would give me a dollar. And a dollar in those days was like fifty dollars now, and so I worked, and I worked, and I got it down. [Proceed to tell the poem in Swedish] {Eezy gadeezy galunkt dann dunt, dann hint, lie morka, kook li korka, vest dann stilla, atalee tatalee pierce?} I got my dollar. {Laughs}.

1-00:04:12

Washburn:

And you still remember the poem? Do you remember what the poem meant?

1-00:04:17

Johnson:

I think it's more like when you're used to do, the kids used to count like Eeny-Meeny-Miney-Moe, and stuff like that.

1-00:04:30

Washburn:

You said you started playing accordion for the first time at this Swedish Hall on Telegraph. Can you remember why you picked up the accordion?

1-00:04:41

Johnson:

My dad played fiddle. Fiddle is still hanging there. Well it's hanging here now. And he loved music. He played by ear. He made his first violin. And when he came to this country, he bought a violin in Germany, the shipped stop in Germany and he bought a violin and brought it to this country. He made his first violin, when he was a kid, out of

wood that he picked up with a pocketknife and what not. He liked music and he liked accordion. So, when I was eleven years old he asked me, “Do you think you can learn to play an accordion?” And I said, “Whelp, buy one and we’ll find out.” So, he found an ad in the paper, and there was an accordion in there in San Francisco for three-hundred and fifty dollars. In those days that was a lot of money. We met a fellow that was going to teach me at a dance; he was playing for the dance. So, we took him along, and I went my way down San Francisco. My dad was a laborer; he didn’t make a lot of money, but he sure knew how to save it. So, he pulled out the three-hundred and fifty dollars cash, and bought that accordion, when we didn’t know if I could learn a note or anything. He was a good father, I’ll tell you. And so, this fellow started teaching me, and I took for about a year from a fellow that lived in Alameda. And a friend of my cousin played the accordion. He came over and played for my dad and my dad said, “Where did you learn to play the accordion?” “I took lessons from Caesar {Pozzolo?} in North Beach in San Francisco.” So my dad had to get me over there. That was for sure, because that guy could really play. And so I took lessons from Professor Caesar {Pozzolo?} for about four or five years after that. And Caesar became a good friend of mine and he went into the accordion manufacturing business, importing accordions. I had at that time had gotten into the audio and radio TV and started a music store in San Leandro.

1-00:07:39

Washburn:

Let me go back before you start on that, because I think you brought up something really interesting that your dad—what was his job at this time, when he bought you the accordion?

1-00:07:51

Johnson:

His job?

1-00:07:53

Washburn:

Yeah.

1-00:07:53

Johnson:

He was a jack of all trades. The most work he worked along shore, he worked unloading ships, and during the Depression, when there wasn’t any work, you worked for the WPA, they made twenty-five cents an hour there. And, but he did study plumbing and he knew plumbing, but he didn’t like it. But the major job he did was unloading brick off of big flat barge. The bricks were made up in Vallejo, or San Rafael, and they would come down on the barge. And my dad, there was six they used to call them the Six Wild Swedes, and they would load those red brick; and if you picked up a brick you know how heavy they are. They take ‘em five at a time and load ‘em on a wheelbarrow and role them ashore and pile them up in neat stacks and sometimes with the tide out there was a twelve inch plank they’d wheel them on. They were wheeling up hill, and sometimes when the tide was in we went downhill. It was a wild-man’s job. They used to call them the Crazy Swedes.

1-00:09:29

Washburn:

So, he was a manual laborer? Mr. Johnson, can I get you to turn your chair this way? Can you actually turn the chair just a little bit that way that way. There. Perfect. Because it was facing out that way, you were facing out this way a little too much. That's perfect. Yeah, that's much better framing. So, investing three hundred and twenty-five dollars at that time was a really big investment in you and your musical career. Did you realize that at the time?

1-00:10:07

Johnson:

Oh yeah. My folks were really money conscious. We always had good food. We always had clothes like the rest of the kids. But, they were very frugal. He bought the house we lived in Alameda for nineteen hundred dollars. He was working for the Alaskan Packers, which was in Alameda and we lived in San Francisco. So he wanted to get to Alameda, so he could be close to Alaska Packers and where their shipping was when you went to Alaska. He found a house, an old Victorian, and it was nineteen hundred dollars, and my dad had nineteen hundred dollars. And so he was going to go to Alameda and buy the house, and my mother told me that she prayed all night that they wouldn't charge him more than nineteen hundred dollars, because if they wanted nineteen hundred dollars and one cent he wouldn't charge it. He wouldn't charge a penny. So that was one of his reasons we got along real well.

1-00:11:25

Washburn:

Did you realize at that time thought that you couldn't just drop the accordion the next week?

1-00:11:35

Johnson:

My dad was strict, but he never hit me. When my dad said something, he asked me if I could learn to play the accordion, and I said I think I could. He meant it, and I meant it. I never even thought of an option. I had to practice an hour a day. He didn't care when I practiced. I could get up and a lot of times the kids would be out front playing baseball or having fun. But, I had to put in an hour a day, and I loved to play baseball. And my dad said, well get up in the morning and practice the hour and then you could play all afternoon and have a good time. But he was very strict, but he never one time did he hit me. When he said something, I knew he meant it.

1-00:12:29

Washburn:

But, he made sure to get you to practice?

1-00:12:33

Johnson:

No, it was, I was supposed to practice an hour a day and I practiced an hour a day.

1-00:12:40

Washburn:

About this, so you took lessons from an Italian accordion player in North Beach?

1-00:12:47

Johnson:

The fellow I started with lived in Alameda. He worked for The Oakland Tribune. But, he taught on the side. And when that friend of ours came over that had this teacher in North Beach, Caesar {Pozzolo?}, the way he played, he was so much better than the teacher I was teaching from. My dad always had to have the best for anybody that he could possibly afford. So, I took this train in the middle of Alameda, I took the train, the ferry boat, the E Street Car, up to North Beach. I'd go on Saturday morning. I'd leave about nine o'clock and get home about twelve o'clock, at noon.

1-00:13:44

Washburn:

Wow. And so, what kind of music were you taught? And what kind of music did you play at this time? What kind of tunes did you learn?

1-00:13:53

Johnson:

My teacher started me with pop music. He wrote a little tune, a real simple tune called "Teddy's March". That's the first thing he taught me. Every place I took lessons I was taught by learning tunes. By learning songs. You know, just gradually going up, harder and harder music to learn.

1-00:14:23

Washburn:

Now when you say pop music, what do you mean? What is pop music?

1-00:14:28

Johnson:

What we call pop music, which was still there's a lot of standard tunes today that were popular when I was growing up like...offhand I can't think of it, but like the tunes, of course the tunes are not today like they were there in those days. Song would come out like "My Blue Heaven", or something. Everybody was singing it, and everybody was playing it. When I first started the accordion, all we had was a phonograph and we did have a radio. I think it was a crystal set at that time. When a tune came out, "Sunny Side of the Street", or anything like that, you'd hear people whistling every way. The whole was like a pop, hot tune.

1-00:15:29

Washburn:

So you learned music that was being played on the radio?

1-00:15:33

Johnson:

Right.

1-00:15:35

Washburn:

Now is this, now people talk about Tin Pan Alley, repertoire kind of music that came out of publishing houses in New York at that time. Is this the right way to describe some of the music you were playing?

1-00:15:53

Johnson:

Yeah, right. There was always a hit, well, I guess it was later years a hit parade. It was on Saturday night with big band, they played the top ten tunes. And most of the bands, the local bands, pick-up bands, Lincoln High School. We would play those same tunes and there would be maybe one good hit every two, three, four months. You'd hear people whistling and walking up and down the street, or they go to a party and everybody would know the tunes and you can sing them. And they were always easy to play, simple chords. Once in awhile stormy weather came out or something that had a little rough chords. And then the Western music, which I got into eventually, I never paid any attention until Dude called me on the phone and wanted me to audition for a radio show.

1-00:16:57

Washburn:

I want to get to that. I think we're gonna get to how you got involved Dude in a little bit. But, I kinda want to go chronologically for a little bit. But, did you play any Swedish music?

1-00:17:13

Johnson:

Oh, yes a lot. There was a place in Chicago that my folks took home the Swedish paper that was published in Chicago, and my dad would send for tunes. You could buy, I think, about six Swedish tunes for about a dollar, and then he would have my teacher teach me how to play them. That was the first place I'd ever played. I think I'd been taking a year or so, at {Jenny-Lynn?} Hall on Telegraph Avenue in Oakland. I guess you're familiar with {Jenny-Lynn?} Hall? Oh, you aren't? It's still—a lot of the jazz bands in later years worked there. It's still a—my God the Swedes aren't there, but it's a big dance hall that had meeting rooms for big organizations.

1-00:18:17

Washburn:

So, you did play a little bit of Swedish music. But, let's talk about when you started to play, become familiar with the accordion. Where was your first steady gig?

1-00:18:35

Johnson:

First steady gig was at when beer came in '32. I went to work in a beer joint in East Oakland. It was an open saloon. See in a saloon, you can buy it. What was it? The eighteenth amendment?

1-00:19:08

Washburn:

Prohibition.

1-00:19:09

Johnson:

Yeah, prohibition. When prohibition went out, there was a number of clubs that sprung up all around, I guess around every city. And we went to work for two fellows that opened a club. And {Mert} and I worked there, we always bragged, we worked there for thirty successful weeks.

1-00:19:41

Washburn:

So, you're saying prohibition had some negative effects?

1-00:19:46

Johnson:

No, it had great effect. Oh, prohibition itself. When there wasn't prohibition there was a lot of clubs that sprung up. It was good for the musicians because there wasn't hardly any work for musicians up until then. But my dad never wanted me to be a musician. He thought that was a lousy job.

1-00:20:14

Washburn:

Well, why is that?

1-00:20:15

Johnson:

Well, it wasn't steady. There, you couldn't be able to count on a weekly paycheck. That was his thoughts. But, he didn't object to me going into that club because I had graduated from high school that year, '32, and I wanted to be a banker in the worst way. I studied banking all I could in high school. And when I went out to look for a job after graduating, I was only sixteen, and I was a little guy. And I'd go to all of the banks in San Francisco, and I'd go looking for a job, and they would say, "Sonny, we won't be able to hire you for a long time because we laid off fifty people just the other day." You know with the Depression. So, I had to give that up.

1-00:21:12

Washburn:

So, you got your first gig during the Depression?

1-00:21:17

Johnson:

Say that again.

1-00:21:12

Washburn:

You got your first musical gig during the Depression, in '32. So why do you think you were able to make money at that time playing music?

1-00:21:30

Johnson:

Well, it's the first, well I was playing a lot of casuals, you know, organizations, especially Swedish organization, picnics and things like that. But, that was the first steady job, and then we had to join the Union, and the Musician's Union was strict in those days. So, we made good money for the times, and so then, from there, fifty-four {weeks} I think we worked there. Dude called me on the phone and that's changed everything.

1-00:22:16

Washburn:

Well, I want to adjust this plant behind your head, because I'm constantly distracted by it. If you could hold that for one second, I'm going to adjust this. This plant, it keeps

sprouting out of your head [Washburn and Johnson laugh], which is a little strange to say the least. We're going to put it here. There I think that's better. That's, it'll be less conspicuous that way. At least I think it will be. Yeah, that's a little bit better, it's not, it looked like it was coming out of our ears before. But, yeah, so I guess we could talk about how you, well I really want to talk about, briefly, working at this beer hall. What was, you were playing pop tunes there also?

1-00:23:10

Johnson:

Oh yeah. There was always a hit parade in *Variety Magazine* and we always followed that. It was just Bert and I. So, it would come out with the top tunes, and we'd go down to Crescent's in Oakland. It was on the corner of 14th and Broadway. Downstairs they had two girls who played the piano, and they had all of this sheet music. And if you wanted to hear a tune you just hand them one and they'd play it for you. You could get 'em three for a dollar. So, we'd always be playing the top tunes, plus all of the standards. You know like, "Cut 'Em Up A Little Close", all those old ones. "My Blue Heaven" and "Ramona" and all of those—those were standards.

1-00:24:09

Washburn:

That came off of Broadway?

1-00:24:10

Johnson:

Yeah. Well, people heard them on the radio. See radio came in, well quite a bit earlier. That came in around '21, '23 I think we got our first radio, crystal set. But the hit parade was the best sure bet to go with those tunes because they eventually came, and then I guess it wasn't too long that they had that band playing the top ten tunes every week. I forget which the real name band. So, people will listen to that. But, see in those days you'd hear people walking up and down the street whistling or humming a tune. Something you don't hear anymore. Of course, to remember what they call pop music now is difficult music. In those days it was real simple.

1-00:25:12

Washburn:

Yeah, the melodies are quite different. Okay so, why did you start, can you tell the story of how you started to start playing music with Dude Martin who led a country band for many years?

1-00:25:28

Johnson:

There was a fellow by the name of Al {Cappelli?} who had a recording studio down in a building in Oakland, and I went down there to learn play orchestrations, cause every time I ran into an orchestration with a group I got in trouble. So I took a few lessons from Al {Cappelli?} and in that building, downstairs, they opened a big beer joint and Dude, was working on the radio from 8:30 to 9:30. And then he would go over to Charlie {Tye's?}, and the whole group would go over there, and they would work until one o'clock in the morning. But Charlie {Tye?} wanted something to fill in while Dude was still on the radio. So it was Dude's idea to put in an accordion player there, and so he was working in

that building and he ran across to Al {Cappelli?} and Al {Cappelli?} recommended me to the job. So I went down there and used to play about an hour, hour and a half until they got off the air and they came in and then I was through. And then one of the fellas quit in the band and he was a singer. But, I guess Dude liked the sound of the accordion to, so then he hired me for the radio show and for sixteen years we worked radio at least. You probably don't want to go that far, or do you?

1-00:27:23

Washburn:

Do whatever you'd like.

1-00:27:25

Johnson:

So, for sixteen years, I worked for Dude and for about six or seven years after I was with him. Well, we used to play theatres on weekends and the theatre business got bad. And so, I used to read the fan mail that came in. We got a lot of fan mail. And there was a lot of organizations that wanted to hire us for dance.

1-00:28:12

Washburn:

This is about playing theatres later on with Dude?

1-00:28:15

Johnson:

Well this was very close to the beginning with Dude.

1-00:28:21

Washburn:

I don't want to interrupt you, but I want to kind of keep things in a little bit of a chronological order. So when was this when you started playing with Dude? Around what year?

1-00:28:40

Johnson:

1932, 1933, 34...1935.

1-00:28:45

Washburn:

And so what did you guys call the kind of music that you played?

1-00:28:52

Johnson:

Country Western. And that went on when I went with Dude it was all cowboy music. Then later on as it got popular, they changed it to Country Western.

1-00:29:02

Washburn:

And so, what was your experience with cowboy music before playing with Dude?

1-00:29:09

Johnson:

Nil. All I thought there was was the “Home On The Range” and “Red River Valley.” I didn’t know that there was a thousand popular western tunes, Country, now they call it Country Western.

1-00:29:23

Washburn:

But, did you not, at this time ’35 there were some national Country Western shows on the radio. Wasn’t there national barn-dance in the Grand Ole Opry?

1-00:29:38

Johnson:

Yeah, I think they were there at that time. I’m not sure if they came a little later or not.

1-00:29:43

Washburn:

But, you didn’t remember hearing this music on the radio before starting with Dude?

1-00:29:48

Johnson:

I think if I went down the dial and ran across western music, I was always looking for pop tunes cause that’s what we were playing and I always believed in the more you hear what you’re playing, the easier it is to play it.

1-00:30:06

Washburn:

And so you wouldn’t listen to it on the radio if you came to it?

1-00:30:09

Johnson:

No. I thought there was only “Home On The Range” and “Red River Valley.” I didn’t know there was all of these western tunes.

1-00:30:16

Washburn:

And so how did you kind of familiarize yourself with that kind of music?

1-00:30:25

Johnson:

I listened to every Western radio show I could that was record shows. KLX had an hour a day, and on almost all of the shows, all of the stations had a show playing western music. So, I had a radio in the car, and I would listen to every western show that I could do, so I could learn those tunes. It was tough at first, because when you don’t know any of them go, we didn’t have any music to read. They’re so simple, two chords, three chords, four chords, five chords tune is about all we ever played. To keep them apart was the tough part because you worked that few chords, you don’t have too many options.

1-00:31:26

Washburn:

So, a lot of the progressions were the same?

1-00:31:31

Johnson:

It was always tonic, dominant, subdominant, tonic. Sometimes, supertonic. But, the biggest problem that I had was to keep the tunes apart. And did the hour radio show. We didn't have music. The only thing Dude had was a type written sheet with the words and guitar chords, and we had guitars, bass, {steel?} guitar and they all run off of the same sheet.

1-00:32:11

Washburn:

So, how did the other band members become familiar with cowboy music?

1-00:32:16

Johnson:

Oh, they all faked. Well most of them were interested in cowboy music, so they knew when we hired new men there were a lot of fellows that knew a lot of tunes that...there was only one fellow that we hired from the pop deal. He worked in the hotel with a big name band; I can't think of it now. But anyway, he would work like a son of a gun on a tune. Just a simple cowboy tune in the morning, when rehearsed in the morning and we would come back at night and he couldn't remember it, and he worked for this band and they had a big name. They were at the Lakeside Hotel in Oakland for years. And we asked him, "Well how did you learn popular music?" And he said, "Well, the band rehearsed the tune so long to get it down pat, I finally got it in my head." But, just learning, you know we had for the radio show we had run around twenty tunes, twenty-five tunes a night and of course he only had to sing two or three solos. But, come to think about it, he couldn't remember them. But, he could remember pop tunes. Just showing you that hearing is the main part of music. What you hear a lot, you play a lot easier and can remember, just like Swedish people, like Swedish music. The Italians like Italian music. It's what you heard when you were young.

1-00:34:00

Washburn:

How important was it for you to listen to cowboy music on the radio at that time?

1-00:34:10

Johnson:

Oh, real important! Because you know yourself now, if you want to learn a new tune if you've heard it on the radio a few times it comes easy to you. If you never heard it and had to read the spots, of course we didn't have any spots to read the music, so you had to get it in your head.

1-00:34:35

Washburn:

So, who were your influences then that you heard on the radio?

1-00:34:42

Johnson:

There was disc jockeys that were playing records. That's all that were. In this area there wasn't any live Western music beside Dude. Everything else was phonograph records. Disc jockeys. Roy Rogers. Who were all of the pop? Jean Autry was big. Bob Wills was

big. And that's when the Western bands started to make headway when the radio came in.

1-00:35:28

Washburn:

So, you guys would play—this was during the late '30s, you guys were on KLX in Oakland and so you guys would play live performances?

1-00:35:49

Johnson:

Right. When I went with Dude, Dude was on the air from 8:30 to 9:30 five nights a week and then he would come down to the club where I was working. One of the fellows quit in the band. So, there was an opening. Dude never had an accordion player on the radio show. So, I actually replaced a singer because they had three, four other singers, and they sand duets and trios and quartets for variety. And there was a fiddle player. There was always a fiddle player in a Western group, and when later on steel guitars got popular. And of course guitars were always the bass and the string bass.

1-00:36:58

Washburn:

So, for these radio shows, I mean, you said before when you played popular music, there was a repertoire that you learned from the radio. What was the repertoire that you guys played for the cowboy music? And also, a second part to that, you also composed some of your own tunes. So, what was the mixture that you guys played?

1-00:37:18

Johnson:

Well, with the disc jockey shows, the popular record that we had to learn all of those and I became actually head of the group as far as music was concerned because Dude was not, he could play a nice rhythm guitar and he knew a few chords. But, his forte, was his ability to sell merchandise and sing. He had a real nice, he hated his voice, but I thought it was great for a cowboy voice. Well, he recorded for Victor, so he had to had some kind of a voice. So, he kind of turned the music department over to me. And variety he used to have, I forget what they call them now. I guess they call them cowboy tunes in those days. I guess now it's Country-Western. So, I would follow that to for Dude just like a I followed it when we were playing in the club, so we always had the hot tunes. And we had all of the standards, "Home On The Range", "Red River Valley." Of course you can always play those over and over again. And we'd repeat maybe every thirty days, twenty-five days. Not repeat the exact same show, but take tunes from, and a lot of the pop tunes that were just coming out, we would play them every other night because people wanted them like when "Steel Guitar Rag", and things like that became real popular. "Salmon Toenail Rose" and those, we'd play every other night and people loved the tunes.

1-00:39:21

Washburn:

So you learned of the tunes you played for the radio, you got from *Variety Magazine* out of Los Angeles?

1-00:39:31

Johnson:

Yeah, I bought them off of the racks.

1-00:39:33

Washburn:

Variety was from Los Angeles right? *Variety*, isn't that a—

1-00:39:37

Johnson:

Well, it was a national magazine, but you could buy it in a cigar store and that had all, it was quite awhile later that they went into Country Western real seriously. But, they controlled the Pop market.

1-00:39:56

Washburn:

And so, how do you think they decided, which tunes to put on? To put in their magazine?

1-00:40:04

Johnson:

Oh, they would take polls. You know in those days when it came on the Pop side there was big dance bands playing in hotels, and they were on remotes from nine 'til one o'clock in the morning. That's where a lot of the big bands got their names. So they were playing. A lot of those fellows were orchestra leaders. They wrote tunes and they made them popular, and *Variety* would start to poll those magazines too. Poll—

1-00:40:46

Washburn:

Those bands?

1-00:41:03

Johnson:

Right, they would write to the leaders and tell them, "What's the popular this week." And I imagine that's how they got most of their information.

1-00:41:03

Washburn:

And so you said you were going to talk about booking gigs. You said you were doing the radio gig, weekly you were doing it huh? Once a week?

1-00:41:14

Johnson:

The radio?

1-00:41:13

Washburn:

Yeah.

1-00:41:16

Johnson:

Oh, no, we were every night.

1-00:41:14

Washburn:

Every night you were on the radio. Yeah for an hour. Sometimes an hour and a half. When I started with Dude, we were on eight to nine-thirty. Then from there we got a morning show at KSFO in San Francisco, which was a CBS outlet at that time. One thing that was strange about it when we were at KLX in Oakland we were on the top floor—the twentieth floor in the studio. And when we went to San Francisco for CBS, they were in the Russ Building which was thirty floors. So we had show in the two highest buildings, and the studios were in the top floor, of course. We were playing on the top of the world in Oakland and the top of the world in San Francisco.

1-00:42:13

Washburn:

So you said that you also played gigs at theaters. So can you describe how you booked gigs at theaters? And where it was?

1-00:42:28

Johnson:

In those day there were theaters, a lot of movie theaters and they all had stages. Most of them were old vaudeville shows. So, Dude would book these theaters. We'd go to San Jose, Petaluma, Vallejo, Richmond—where ever there was a theater. And we'd pack them in because we could advertise it on all our radio shows, see we had that, plus all the advertising the theater would do in the local town. We had a mailing list. Whenever we went into an area we'd send them cards to let them know we were coming. So we would pack the theaters. We never believed Dude. Dude was not a complainer, but we could tell he wasn't making any money and, of course, we were all union so we were getting union scale. And the theater was packed, we couldn't get them in there—waiting outside in the street. So, a couple of us in the band, kind of think, well maybe Dude just—you know, he'd kind of mention, he wasn't crying, but he'd kind of mention, you know that we're packing them in and we're not making in money. Well, one of his big problems was when he went into a theater he put on a real show. We had a roper, and we had a comedian, and we had a girls trio. He was show minded. Money didn't bother him, as long as he could get going. So, the what happened in {Niles?} Theater, I got, kind of helping Dude with a lot of things—writing tunes. The way Dude would work—the theater would get its first normal business. They were entitled to that. Then Dude would take so many dollars, and then they would split above that. About that time I was becoming his manager. So, we could almost tell that the managers in the theaters were coning him—conning him on what they call their normal business. So, I hired a kid to come in with a clicker to click the people as they come through the door. They do that in a lot of shows now days, I don't know if you know that. The people that in on percentage basis, they'll have somebody checking the door, so that they get their fair percentage. Anyway, the manager of the theater saw this kid standing in the lobby, so he wanted to know what he was doing there, and, of course, he found out that he had the clicker. I still have the clicker. Oh, that manager, he blew his cork. [laughs] Then, I was reading the mail all the time. Dude didn't pay too much attention to the mail. I read it because I enjoyed it. But there was a lot of organizations that wanted to hire us for dances. And Dude said, "I don't know anything about dance music." I says, "Well you don't have to worry about it, all you have to do is show up." So, we put together a dance group and

from then on we played dances instead of theaters. Then eventually theaters died anyway—Vaudeville went out.

1-00:46:50

Washburn:

So, about what time did you start booking dancehalls?

1-00:46:56 00

Johnson:

Let's see. I went with him in '36, '38. [whispers] It must have been about '38, '39, I guess. We only worked theaters, maybe, the first year I was with him. And then we got our favorite dancehalls, of course. The organizations we worked good with, like Elks Clubs, and that kind of organizations. In every town there was always a good ballroom, at least one that could hold five hundred or more people. We would work with them where they took the first dollars—their expenses—and then we would take the next so many dollars, and then we'd split so many dollars after that. So it made it good for the organization. The more they promoted that dance the more money they made. Most of those organizations were all for charity, you know, like they are now. So, that worked out good. We were travelling all over. The first thing when the war came that hit us was—we were in Petaluma and the government made us put black curtains in all the halls, you know, that had windows because they were worried about air strikes. It was right after the war started. So, then instead of traveling we were traveling maybe to Sacramento, Salinas, and things like that. We just settled down in four dancehalls that we did the best, which one was in San Jose, one was in Richmond, one was in Oakland, and one was in Petaluma. So, we did that, and then finally we ran out of gas. We couldn't get gas or tires to get that far. I remember when tires were bad. One day I had four flat tires. You couldn't buy new ones unless you were an essential industry. They didn't consider our industry essential.

1-00:49:57

Washburn:

You had to watch how far you traveled?

1-00:50:01

Johnson:

Say that again.

1-00:50:01

Washburn:

So you had to watch how far you traveled?

1-00:50:04

Johnson:

Yeah, because you had gas tickets. You only could go so far, and if you were an essential industry, like working in the shipyard, you can get a lot of gas. But they didn't consider us essential industry. Everybody got the same amount of gas unless you had a reason to get more.

1-00:50:24

Washburn:

Describe that really quickly now that you brought it up. You got gas tickets. Can you describe—I don't know about gas tickets. Can you describe what a gas ticket is?

1-00:50:33

Johnson:

What do they call those books? A coupon book, like a coupon book. You go into a gas station so you could buy five gallons of gas with it. If you were in essential industry you automatically got them from the company. If you weren't in essential you had to go to the gasoline board and tell them what you were doing with it, and they would try to help you. Like they would give us enough money to get to a reasonable place to play a dance but they wouldn't give us the tickets to run up and down to Sacramento. They made it reasonable for us. But we had to settle down first in four places, I guess I mentioned that. And the place that did the most business was East Shore Park in Richmond.

1-00:51:35

Washburn:

Well, I want to ask you though. Why weren't you able to just buy more gasoline if you wanted to go to Sacramento?

1-00:51:42

Johnson:

There was only so much gasoline in the country, right? There was shipyard workers that had to have it. There was all the essential industry that people had to travel a long way to go to go to their jobs. They got it. But, they wouldn't consider us essential, which was fair. I mean there was nothing wrong with it. In other words, if you take a whole band down to San Jose that takes a lot of gasoline when gasoline is short. When maybe a tank is running out of gasoline over in Europe. You had a rationing book for gasoline, you had a rationing for tires. I think there was one I had four tires. I got so I could change a tire in nothing flat because the tires were no good, and I couldn't get any. I pulled a kind of a sneaking deal. When liquor was getting less—so, I bought up quite a bit of liquor, and had it in my basement. And when I ran out of tires, I couldn't get tires for my car legally, so I went to the gas station and traded a case of booze for some tires. [laughs] Oh, they were actually good days for us because we packed them in—settled down in East Shore Park. We were dancing up to five nights a week, packing them in. And we had a bar. We had a checkroom. We had the concession where we sold our records and songbooks and all kinds of western stuff. So we did real good during the war. In Richmond, we had all the shipyard workers and all the sailors. They would come from Treasure Island and Alameda. That dancehall was built for maybe six hundred people, and the biggest night we ran fifteen hundred and something through there. Because East Shore Park—it was a great big barn and it had four doors, one in each corner when they come in to begin with. And the people could bring their cars right up to the—. Well, that parking lot—there was nothing but parking in this great big lot. So, they would be outside half the time, out in their cars drinking being with their girls or whatever. Some men, of course, some would leave early and some would come late. We would run up some big crowds.

1-00:55:23

Washburn:

How much did it cost you to book East Shore Park? Do you know how much it cost to rent?

1-00:55:30

Johnson:

We had a lease with the City of Richmond and it was reasonable. I don't know. Because when we first started there, that was before the war, maybe it was fifty dollars a night. Of course, all money was different. The entrance fee I guess was only maybe fifty-five cents, not like prices today. We had a bar. We built a bar room onto the barn. Way at the top, when we were having all those people, we'd have fifteen Richmond police department working there. You know, they were working on their time off, they weren't working for the City of Richmond, we would pay them to be there. And we had Shore Patrol, and we didn't have many Armies. And between the Shore Patrol and the police officers we had it covered. Because the shipyard workers didn't like the servicemen, and the servicemen weren't too happy with the shipyard workers because they were making all the money and the poor servicemen were doing all the work. So, they would get in scraps all the time. We had so many cops around somebody raised a hand the cop have them out. [laughs] Wild days.

1-00:57:04

Washburn:

So you book it for like fifty dollars, and you book it through—who did you book it through?

1-00:57:12

Johnson:

We booked it ourselves. We booked through the manager of the theater, if you're talking about the theaters.

1-00:57:19

Washburn:

No, I'm talking about East Shore Park.

1-00:57:22

Johnson:

Oh, no. We just leased the building from the city.

1-00:57:24

Washburn:

It was city property?

1-00:57:27

Johnson:

Right. We had to do everything else. We just got an empty building from the City of Richmond.

1-00:57:36

Washburn:

So, you also had to hire bartenders?

1-00:57:43

Johnson:

Oh, yeah.

1-00:57:44

Washburn:

And buy the booze?

1-00:57:47

Johnson:

Yeah, nothing but beer. We were luck in so many ways. The assistant manager of KYA lived in Berkeley, he was a real good friend of mine and Dude's. We used to go out together with our wives and everything. And he was assistant manager at KYA. And so he managed the dance while Dude and I were both on the bandstand all the time, so he managed the dance. And he had a good friend that was in the beer business. And there was a time—from the legitimate beer companies, you know, they started rationing. When we first started we could buy all the beer we wanted, but they cut us down to five cases, four cases. {Horgin?} had a friend that was in the beer business, his folks owned, I think, part of Acme at that time. So, we got all the beer we wanted, which was a big seller in those days. Thrity-five cents a bottle I guess we got, or something. Maybe it was cheaper than that.

1-00:59:02

Washburn:

That probably made your guys' gig really popular?

1-00:59:07

Johnson:

Between the gate and the beer, and a we had a concession where we sold our books and records, and western regalia—a checkroom. We came out real good. Another thing, we had to be careful is that—we kept it under control, you know, as far as the police we concerned. And then beside all those policemen, we had a lot of Shore Patrol. They were glad to give us the Shore Patrol, you know, so the sailors could come out there and have a good time. And the sailors and the shipyard workers didn't get along to good together.

1-00:59:57

Washburn:

We have to change this tape because we're at sixty minutes, but that's exactly where I'd like to pick up.

[End Audio File #1]

[Begin Audio File #2]

2-00:00:10

Washburn:

So, let's talk about the crowd that came to East Shore Park during the war.

2-00:00:15

Johnson:

The crowd?

2-00:00:16

Washburn:

The crowd.

2-00:00:17

Johnson:

Okay.

2-00:00:20

Washburn:

You describe that there were sailors and shipyard workers.

2-00:00:24

Johnson:

Right. Just kind of naturally the sailors, you know, weren't making any money, most of them, what, twenty-one dollars a month, and shipyard workers were getting rich. And that was a little pressure and so at any little deal that happened a fight would start. The most policemen we had I think was on New Year's Eve, we had fifteen Richmond police people, shore patrol for the sailors. See they would watch it so carefully that if anybody raised a hand, boy they took them and the hall had a door at every corner, they would just them and throw them out. As they were fighting, according to the police and the shore patrol, if they were in the fight whose problem it was—they weren't just going after the guy that started it, they just threw them both out. And, of course, it added to that hall's capacity, for one thing. But with the cars parked right outside there—. Did I tell you about the hookers?

2-00:02:02

Washburn:

I'd like to hear the story again.

2-00:02:03

Johnson:

Ok, that's right. [laughs] The fact that the cars could be parked so close to the hall and it was such a big parking lot, we could put an awful lot of cars in there. The cops and the shore patrol kept that deal real down pat because we had so many there and then the hall wasn't that big, if somebody raised a hand there and looked like they were going to fight, boom, they just take them and throw them out. No excuses, nothing. So, then as another problem developed where with all the sailor coming in to East Shore Park and all the cars parked around it made it easy for the hookers to operate. So, we never found out any about it or I don't think the police officers knew, or if they did they didn't say anything. So, shore patrol came to us and—oh I remember why they came to us. Because so many sailors were getting VD, and they would, I guess, when they found a sailor that went to the hospital for help, I guess they wanted to try to trace it and find out it was. And I guess they traced it to East Shore Park. So, that scared us because boy if they closed us down we'd be in trouble. So, we settled for—one lady police officer, and she patrolled the cars, and she went around. And this {Horgin?} that was the assistant manager at KYA and

operated the door for us. The lady would find one of these gals working and get her—and she was a lady cop, she was tough—get her and she walk up to the front door, and she'd say, "I got another one for you Mr. {Horgin?}." [laughs] Horgin would call the wagon, and take them away. So, we cleaned that up.

2-00:04:43

Washburn:

So, describe what the car-parking situation was. Why is was so—.

2-00:04:52

Johnson:

Well, maybe a path. And then not only parked close the building that far so people could walk between the building, you know, get out of their cars and walk between the building. But it was so big, there's cars parked in back of, you know, all over that place. That was a big lot. I think the highest we ever ran up was fifteen hundred people, and I don't think we ran out of parking. Of course, that wouldn't all be at the same time, some would come early and some would leave.

2-00:05:32

Washburn:

But they traced back the prostitutes to East Shore Park?

2-00:05:42

Johnson:

Evidently that's how it happened. Nobody ever told me that, but knowing how many girls they were picking up there—and being in the navy, when you go in, if you've got a problem, they want to know where you got it, how you got it, so I just put two and two together there.

2-00:06:08

Washburn:

Was there an area were the men picked up the women?

2-00:06:23

2-Johnson:

No, they'd pick them up while they're dancing. See, we'd have a lot of single girls come and then servicemen. And, of course, there were a lot of single regular men too. But, no, that's where they—the hookers would come in to dance, and then they would sell them a bill of goods.

2-00:06:50

Washburn:

So, let's talk about the people who were there. There were sailors, and there were shipyard workers. I've seen pictures, and you can—. Well, describe how people were dressed.

2-00:07:06

Johnson:

Big nights we had maybe five shore patrol. They watch out for, you know, the servicemen that they'd have to stay in uniform. The hats got to be squared and everything. What was the question again?

2-00:07:27

Washburn:

How people were dressed? Sailors were dressed—.

2-00:07:31

Johnson:

And then the shipyard workers would come as you were. We not only had shipyard workers we had a lot of fans from our radio show. We had a radio out of there every night. So, it wasn't all shipyard workers, maybe fifty percent, sixty percent. And then, of course, we had our normal followers. We always did well every place we went. See in those days—I guess it hasn't changed much—there wasn't anyplace really for people to go after radio came in and see live entertainment. See then vaudeville went out. Before radio you had vaudeville for people to go and see. When radio came in people stayed home, and then that was a big part of their entertainment is listening to the radio. And they'd hear plugs for all entertainment performances, and that's where they'd go.

2-00:08:55

Washburn:

The concerts—so, we're talking about the people who were there. Of course, you could tell you was a sailor and who wasn't, but could you tell maybe the way somebody was dressed whether they were from California or from Texas, or something like that?

2-00:09:20

Johnson:

Yeah. I guess I never surveyed that too much. I guess they just must have dressed normal. I can't recall anybody we had to throw out because they looked like a pig. I think most of them—of course, especially the fellas that are out there looking for girls, they want to dress up. And the girls want to dress up. No, dress wasn't any problem. I never even thought of that.

2-00:10:00

Washburn:

Did you have kids coming to the concerts also?

2-00:10:05

Johnson:

I did hear that.

2-00:10:08

Washburn:

Did kids come to the concerts? Did families bring their children?

2-00:10:09

Johnson:

Oh, no. Very few kids, maybe a couple would, if the kids were interested in Dude Martin, might come and have the kids stand in front of the bandstand for an hour or something. So, children were no problem.

2-00:10:23

Washburn:

So it was mostly single—mostly couples, young couples and single people?

2-00:10:32

Johnson:

Mainly singles. More singles than young couples.

2-00:10:40

Washburn:

So were the concerts racially mixed?

2-00:10:45

Johnson:

Say that again.

2-00:10:46

Washburn:

Were the concerts racially mixed?

2-00:10:49

Johnson:

Something we always worried about. And it was only one time a black person came up to the box-office, and he was an older gentlemen, about fifty or sixty, I guess. And we had a real nice box-office girl. And he came up to buy a ticket, and the girl just told him that, “I don’t think you would be happy inside.” And he just turned around and we never—that’s the only black we ever had.

2-00:11:28

Washburn:

It’s kind of a naïve question, but for somebody like myself, describe why that was.

2-00:11:36

Johnson:

The black people that were originally in Richmond or Oakland—. They came out here—the railroad brought them out. And they worked on the railroad, you know, and they were all nice gentlemen. They never had any problems and, of course, it all depends the way you think, the blacks might be a problem, but there just as many whites—a problem too, like all these kids that are getting in trouble. So, I guess it wasn’t really a problem, but they hadn’t been integrated—people weren’t used to them. When I went to grammar school there was only one—was in my class. His name, you’ll never forget it. His name was Sammy {Kimbrow}. And he came from a family—his dad worked as a porter on the railroad. And nobody took exception to Sammy. See there wasn’t any around. It’s just when shipyard brought a big load of them out here. And, of course, they settled in Richmond, a lot of them, Richmond and West Oakland. But outside of that one deal, we

never had it. And I guess they just felt they weren't welcome or whatever it was, but something that always worried us, what we were going to do. Then it would have made the fights problem probably worse.

2-00:13:34

Washburn:

You guys thought it would cause a riot or a fight if something happened?

2-00:13:40

Johnson:

Well, naturally we had enough fights without them, but it would be more, we would guess. There was an awful lot of the community that always looked down on the blacks. It was not like today, they're almost—I treat a black like I treat everybody else. Well, I treated Sammy Kimbro—he was a good friend of mine. And my folks were exactly the same way. But there was a lot of people, you know, they wouldn't live next door to a black person, or like to go to a dance where there's a black person. Now, it's a whole deal different.

2-00:14:33

Washburn:

So, also who came out of the shipyards was—. Well, let me let you mention this. Could you tell the difference between your crowds before the war and your crowds during the war? What was the difference?

2-00:14:46

Johnson:

I think so. The dress would have been a big difference. Before the war, almost all the fellas and ladies wore all the—dressed nice, you know, in suits or good outfits. And gals dressed up. The dress class went down. Of course, there was a point there where you had a heck of a time even buying clothes, you know, during the war. So, I think that's the only place you could distinguish it. It was in their dress.

2-00:15:28

Washburn:

Well, could you also, just like you say that during the war a lot of black people came out to work in the shipyards, so did a lot of people from Oklahoma and Texas and Arkansas and these places. And people sometimes looked down on them. Did you sense any tension between folks who maybe labeled as Okies?

2-00:15:51

Johnson:

No, and I think the reason for that is those people were—the regular white people that came to the dances—they had a common interest, they both liked the same music. And they both came there for the same thing—for the music and the entertainment. And all your people from Oklahoma, and those Midwestern states, they had more of that music, more of western music, than we had out here. That's where the word country western came from. And the people that came to our dances were fans of the radio and they liked country music, and that's why they came there, otherwise they wouldn't come there. So they were all there for the same purpose.

2-00:16:54

Washburn:

Yeah, it makes sense. So did you play a different—. Now, you mentioned this before, you said you played the radio, and when you started playing dancehalls Dude Martin said, “Well, I don’t know how to play dance music.” What was the kind of music that you had to play at East Shore Park?

2-00:17:19

Johnson:

Well, we could play all the pop cowboy tunes, and once in a while we had a Dixie combination. We’d break it up once in a while with Dixie. The western tunes—when I first went to work with Dude, there weren’t too many tunes that were like danceable, good danceable tunes. But then, when Bob Wills came in with San Antonio Rose and those good tunes with a good beat that they could really dance to. And then also when the western tunes got with bigger organizations where we got horns and fiddles, and things—a lot of western tunes jumped over into the pop field. Like, “Don’t Fence Me In,” and think about it, there was a bunch of them that jump over, and was in both sides. So, the music when you—ask me that question again.

2-00:18:50

Washburn:

Did you have to change the kind of music that you were playing at East Shore Park to fit a dance format?

2-00:18:54

Johnson:

We had to play what we did on the air because they came—most of them came to hear what they heard on the radio. That’s why they were there. Just like Benny Goodman. When Benny Goodman came to town, everybody that liked Benny Goodman’s music was there. I was there the first time he came through.

2-00:19:18

Washburn:

And so, people requested tunes like San Antonio Rose and—.

2-00:19:25

Johnson:

They would request the things they heard us play on the radio or heard some other group play. We all played the same tunes, disc jockeys. It just like now and the pop station that have the pop recordings. If you want to go hear one of those bands you expect to hear what you heard on the radio, not a concert. The only thing we had to do, a lot of the cowboy tunes what worked—. Cowboy songs principally came from stories. A story was told over a simple melody, the melody repeats itself all the time and there’s a story. But even those tunes, you can put them into dance music, you know. [mimics a rhythm] Well, that’s got it in there.

2-00:20:31

Washburn:

So, did you mostly play up tempo tunes?

2-00:20:34

Johnson:

We split them. Well, we did all kinds of tunes. We do things like “In the Mood,” and some of those big standards that were good dance tunes. Because there was people that just came to dance. They didn’t care if it was cowboy or what it was as long as they could dance. We play tunes like “In the Mood,” and “Alexander’s Ragtime Band,” and things, you know, with a nice beat.

2-00:21:12

Washburn:

That’s what I want to talk to you about. I first heard about the Barn—that’s what people called that at East Shore Park, they called it the Barn, right?

2-00:21:22

Johnson:

Right

2-00:21:22

Washburn:

I first heard about the Barn from a gal who said she wasn’t really into country or western swing much, but she wanted to dance. And so, did you feel a responsibility to play music in which could dance to.

2-00:21:40

Johnson:

I had to, had to. Some of the cowboy tunes like “Strawberry Rhone,” that’s a waltz tempo. It’s telling a story about this horse and the cowboy, and the whole thing and it goes on in waltz time. [mimics rhythm] But outside of that, during those years, there was a lot of western bands around playing dances besides us. There was Ray Wade. Ray Wade was out in San Pablo. What was the guy down south, I can’t think of his name.

2-00:22:39

Washburn:

Spade Cooley

2-00:22:40

Johnson:

Spade Cooley, yeah. [laughs] He had a swinging band. I think he had three, four saxophones, and two, three trumpets, and we never had it that big. I’ll never forget, we went down to see Spade—Dude and I went down. I think we going down negotiating a record deal or something. And so we went over to see Spade Cooley, and he knew who we were. And so he invited us backstage. He let the band keep playing from backstage. But he said, “Would you like a drink?” Well, Dude and I both would take a drink—never when it had came to music. We fired quite a few for having a drink in a dancehall or coming with booze on their breath at the radio station, that would, just bingo! Anyway, so Cooley invited us back. He let the band—was playing by itself. It could run without him. So he asked if we want that drink. We went back in his dressing room. He brings out a bottle of booze, and he brings out water glasses. [laughs] You know, who can drink a water glass of straight whiskey? Well, that’s the way he drank. Oh, he was a drunk. But

he was popular. If had liquor on your breath or you took a drink during a dance with Dude, you're through.

2-00:24:14

Washburn:

Why was that?

2-00:24:16

Johnson:

You can't run a business and drink. And that's a business. All those musicians are—. Of course, the modern musicians, they all drink during intermission time. But when your going a radio show, we had radio shows out of those every night, you know, if a guy gets a few drinks in him he forgets himself, he might do something bad.

2-00:24:43

Washburn:

Could be embarrassing.

2-00:24:44

Johnson:

And Dude and I drank socially all the time, but never on a bandstand, in a radio station. You know, some of these guys—announcers in a radio station—they run down and have a drink at the bar or something. But all the years we worked radio, never, never, never.

2-00:25:08

Washburn:

But Bob Wills and Spade Cooley seems like were big drinkers.

2-00:25:14

Johnson:

Oh, boy. They were both real drinkers. Bob Wills, they used to have take him out and a lock him in the—no that was his singer. The guy that really had that leather voice. We heard stories that at a dance, they'd have to take him out and lock him up in the bus. He was drunk. [laughs]

2-00:25:45

Washburn:

So let's get back to talking about East Shore Park. You also played concerts for shipyard employees?

2-00:25:56

Johnson:

Yes.

2-00:25:58

Washburn:

Did Kaiser ever hire you out to play a shipyard?

2-00:26:01

Johnson:

No.

2-00:26:03

Washburn:

Because I've seen in the ads, there would be like, concert: benefit for shipyard employees. You never hired out by Kaiser?

2-00:26:14

Johnson:

No, we were never hired by Kaiser. [pauses] Actually, we didn't do that much shipyard work. When I was in the navy I did a lot of it in San Diego. No, I don't remember.

2-00:26:41

Washburn:

Okay. I've seen some of the maps, and I've seen that there's—war was all around East Shore Park. You know, big tracks of war housing.

2-00:26:52

Johnson:

That built up while we were there.

2-00:26:54

Washburn:

Yeah, so you saw it being built up. And so did you notice a change once people moved into those houses? Did more people come to your concerts? Were people hanging outside in the park during your concerts? What was the—.

2-00:27:07

Johnson:

I don't think we had any trouble with hangers-on. Of course, there wasn't too much, as I recall, there wasn't too much housing real close to East Shore Park at that time. I mean it wasn't in the next block. It was all country.

2-00:27:43

Washburn:

You didn't notice your business picked-up or anything like that during the war or because of shipyard employees?

2-00:27:50

Johnson:

It picked-up from the time we started 'till the time we ended. Well, we started there with once a month, and then when we couldn't get gas to go to these other three locations, we went to East Shore Park. See, we were only dancing on Saturday nights, and so then we went to East Shore Park for all four night because we had the gas to get to East Shore Park. But the other place we were going was Napa, San Jose, and Sacramento. And we couldn't get gas or tires to do that.

2-00:28:32

Washburn:

So you went for just Saturday night to—.

2-00:28:35

Johnson:

At East Shore Park. And most of us lived closer to East Shore Park than any other dancehall that we could rent.

2-00:28:45

Washburn:

How did it grow from just Saturday night?

2-00:28:47

Johnson:

Oh, man. I guess maybe—we went maybe from two, three hundred—. No, it had been more in there at East Shore—. Maybe, five, six hundred to, I think the biggest one we had out there was around eighteen hundred. And then in a dancehall that held around—I guess it could dance with a bar maybe, maybe a thousand. But people—half of them would be out drinking in the parking lot, or because they come early, leave early, late shifts come in. People come in there and just dance for an hour. And, you know, working hours in those days—people had all kinds of working hours. The guys that really wanted to make money would work overtime, and come late.

2-00:29:45

Washburn:

So yeah, you moved from Saturday, then you went to four nights a week, or maybe even five nights a week at one point.

2-00:29:55

Johnson:

Yeah, I think five was the top. We never danced Sunday or Monday.

2-00:30:00

Washburn:

And all of those night the place was filled?

2-00:30:03

Johnson:

Well, no we wouldn't. Of course, Saturday was the big night. How we did that is as the crowd grew on Friday night, and then, of course, we got better well known, and those shipyard workers worked all kinds of shifts too, you know. So then when Friday night, we were doing real good business. We opened Thursday, and we didn't open all at one time.

2-00:30:42

Washburn:

Did other acts perform with you guys?

2-00:30:44

Johnson:

No. Like now the good singers go around and perform in hotels and things like that. In those days the performers weren't traveling. The reason was everything—gas and getting there. Like before the war in the dancehalls, like Benny Goodman would come to

Oakland, all the big dance bands, because they were travelling. But as the war came on people had to settle down because they couldn't move without gas.

2-00:31:29

Washburn:

So gas rationing really affected the music business.

2-00:31:34

Johnson:

Oh, it affected everybody. The shipyard worker would get so much gas, but then they couldn't—if they had a relative in San Jose they couldn't run down there and see them. Or if they have save on their gas for quite a while, save their tickets. You can't remember gas rationing? [laughs]

2-00:32:00

Washburn:

So it seems like for, let's say your fans, how did public transportation fit into it? What was the importance of public transportation? For your fans, let's say in Oakland.

2-00:32:13

Johnson:

You know, that's a good question, because I don't think there was any public transportation near the hall. I guess they just didn't travel far. I never even thought of that. Although, I know that we got fans from San Francisco, Oakland, Alameda, they'd come out. But, you know, you had a little recreation gas, almost everybody had a little recreation gasoline. It all depended on how you handled the gasoline, and what situation you were in. When I was in the navy, I was working on a recreation base and I was working with colored fellas—colored crew. And we used to go down—one of my first assignments was to go with them down to a brewery and pick up beer. And so went down there and this, I think it was Budweiser, this beer deal, and I was on a base where the blacks did all the work—they were the crew. And so they had a truck to go down and pick up the beer where they made the beer. And they had a fountain—I think it was Budweiser—and they had a fountain right out in front of their front door which had beer in it. And these guys—a crew about five or six guys—would go in there and carry out the beer. And, you know, as every time they went in they had a little sip, and every time they went out they had a little sip. And so we got to the base with the wagon, and my commander says to me, “Jesus Christ you didn't take very long.” Oh, and then after that, they drove—and I didn't know San Diego—they would drive all—. We were just down the coast a little ways, but they driving all over town before they went back to the base, because if they got back to the base they had to work, you know. So I went with the boys. The commander when we came in says, “Boy that was a quick trip.” And I says, “Commander, if you get me a drivers license to drive that truck,” I said, “we can do it in about a third of the time.” So he did. [laughs] And I drove the truck. We were just up the coast a little ways to go and get the beer, but those kids I guess, before he sent me with them, he knew there was something wrong, you know.

2-00:35:30

Washburn:

Because they had the truck, so they decided, “Well let’s go stop off and see our friends or something.”

2-00:35:35

Johnson:

Yeah. Well, they didn’t stop off at any friends but they just drive around town—kill time—because if they got back to the base they had to go to work.

2-00:35:46

Washburn:

How else do you think rationing affected the music business at that time?

2-00:35:54

Johnson:

Oh, I would say it would affect music business more than almost any other business because when ordinary person goes to a dance or where music is being performed has to drive their car. So gas rationing cut down on everybody.

2-00:36:20

Washburn:

So what would they do? Maybe they’d stay home and listen to the radio or something.

2-00:36:27

Johnson:

Well, most of them were working a lot. People were working long hours. Things were hard to get if you wanted to go shopping. You had, you know, rationing for everything. And actually, the entertainment they had—of course, we didn’t have TV—any little entertainment they had, you know, they went to it, if they had the gas to get there.

2-00:37:07

Washburn:

So, let’s ask. There were other shows going-on on Saturday night when you guys were playing.

2-00:37:14

Johnson:

Oh, sure.

2-00:37:14

Washburn:

Stuff at Sweet’s Ballroom or Ray Wade was playing. Why do think people were drawn to your show, rather than?

2-00:37:22

Johnson:

We had the publicity. We had the radio stations. See, we were on the air during the war. Dude and I had on KYA, I think we had, a one time had five shows because it was hard for the radio station to get talent too. We had an early morning show. We had a noon show, and we had a show at dinnertime. And we had a show at nine o’clock. And then we

had a show at ten o'clock called "Night Shirt Jamboree," just Dude and I played phonograph records. We had five shows on KYA in a day.

2-00:38:14

Washburn:

So you had the ability to publicize.

2-00:38:17

Johnson:

Then we had the ability on every one of those shows to advertise our dances. We didn't take a show unless we got that. And most radio stations—actually it helped the radio station too, because if we're advertising people to get to the dance, and when we get to the dance we advertise our radio show to pick-up listeners that are there that are not from the radio show. Works both ways.

2-00:38:47

Washburn:

To generate an audience for the radio station. But you've told me you guys called what you were playing cowboy music, but you didn't identify as being a hillbilly band. Why didn't you identify as being hillbilly band?

2-00:39:10

Johnson:

Hillbilly was all different kind of music. Cowboy music—. See there was a lot of tunes we would do on the radio that you couldn't do at a dance. Out of our library we just would take the danceable tunes. You know, some of your cowboy tunes or hillbilly or whatever you want to call, they just tell a story. You know, it's verse after verse after verse to the same two chords, C and G seventh. So those you wouldn't play at the dances, and the people didn't want them, if they come they come there to dance. Sometimes somebody would come—. Well, we had a lot stand and watching the band all night. But they would ask for a tune that wasn't danceable, but we would try and sneak it in for them some way. But, what was the question?

2-00:40:18

Washburn:

Why you didn't identify as being hillbilly music or a hillbilly band?

2-00:40:23

Johnson:

I would say hillbilly was the bottom and county-western swing was the top, and then there was all these recording in between where the groups just did all your "Strawberry Rhone" and—. See when western music first started it was all stories. The guys would sit around the fire at night, horses, riding the range, and they would sit there and would make-up these tunes. And that's where it started. And Beverly Hillbillies were the first one's that I remember, and I think they were the first one that made their kind of music popular. Only difference being that we would take the tunes and turn them into dance music. The Beverly Hillbillies were the most popular, I don't think they ever played a dance. Oh, I know what they did. There would be in the dancehall, there would be some

kind of a group. It could be even a pop band or anything, and they would entertain during the intermissions and things like that. I think that's how they got started.

2-00:41:56

Washburn:

I think I've heard that story also. So dancing really affected the repertoire for country music. Did you even notice this in your time playing?

2-00:42:11

Johnson:

Oh, yeah. Because there wasn't hardly any tunes you could dance to prior to the war. You know "Strawberry Rhone"—all of them tell a story. You know, they go on, they have six, seven verses with about a sixteen bar chorus, and there just telling these stories. And to understand that story you can't put it in dance time, you know. It wouldn't make good dance music.

2-00:42:55

Washburn:

So was it true that, before the war, when you were playing a theater, were people dancing?

2-00:43:00

Johnson:

Playing where?

2-00:43:01

Washburn:

At theaters?.

2-00:43:03

Johnson:

Oh, no, no. At theaters we were on the stage and they were like any theater.

2-00:43:12

Washburn:

So when do you remember the atmosphere changed to more of a party, to more of a dance atmosphere?

2-00:43:22

Johnson:

Did I tell you the story about reading the fan mail and these clubs wanting us to come play for their dances?

2-00:43:32

Washburn:

Right, right.

2-00:43:33

Johnson:

And when Dude started saying that, you know, he'd go to these theaters and couldn't make any money. And we'd get offers for cash for good deals to go play a dance. And

Dude finally told me, “Well, I don’t know anything about dance music.” And just said, “You don’t have to worry about it, you just show up.” And I remember the first time we had a rehearsal. We had trombone, I guess an alto sax, and a trumpet. Yeah, we had three brass. I know how we first got started. Because I played nothing but dance music, so we used to play dance sections, right. And then like intermission for the dancing, Dude would get up with all the rest of our gang and sing the stuff that we were doing on radio that they could dance to. But then as time went on, and Bob Wills was a big part of it, you know “San Antonio Rose” came out, and that’s quite a while ago, and that had a real dance beat. And got more and more tunes that you could dance to. So finally, that first dance we played, we hired, I think I told you that, a trumpet, trombone player, and a clarinet player, or whether a sax player. But then that’s I’d done before. So the bass player in our group was good enough to play the stuff, and we had a guitar player that could handle pop stuff. And then Dude and the rest of the gang just kind of put on a show in between, instead of doing the whole dance. So then it got so Dude really liked to play the dance music, so all the musicians we hired could play dance music.

2-00:45:57

Washburn:

If they were going to be in the band they had to play dance music. So the kind of stuff—the yodeling and the more cowboy music that you and Dude played on the radio was saved for intermission or some other time?

2-00:46:13

Johnson:

True. But as we went along we would find that a lot of those cowboys musics had a beat. You know, Cowboy Joe, “Ragtime Cowboy Joe,” do you know that? [mimics melody of song] Good beat. Good dance time. And there became more and more of those tunes, so that the repertoire went into the dancing.

2-00:46:39

Washburn:

Did you have horns that took solos?

2-00:46:43

Johnson:

Oh, yeah sure.

2-00:46:47

Washburn:

So there was improvisation going on.

2-00:46:52

Johnson:

I can’t remember the name of the guy that—. All I hired, I think, was the front line—trombone, sax, and trumpet. But the trumpet player that I hired became a great big name. I wonder if Eleanor can remember it. I can’t remember his name. Dixieland—he was the most popular Dixieland player in the Bay Area. I can’t remember.

2-00:47:30

Washburn:

We'll ask her later.

2-00:47:34

Johnson:

She remembers a lot of things I can't remember.

2-00:47:38

Washburn:

What were the musicians' backgrounds that you played? I know your background from this interview. How did they get into this music?

2-00:47:55

Johnson:

To begin with, we have to separate them. There was cowboy musicians and there was dance musicians. You know, like there were a lot of popular cowboys that sang good and strummed on a guitar, but, you know, they couldn't play a beat or things like that. As you're changing your men it's just through attrition. Men change going in the service. Boy, during the war we had a lot of them go. Finally they took me and then they took Dude. [laughs]

2-00:48:32

Washburn:

For instance, what Dude's background—what was his background?

2-00:48:33

Johnson:

Dude's background he was raised on a ranch down in the valley. His father, he was big shot in Standard Oil. They came to Berkeley. Dude went to Berkeley High. They had, I guess, like variety show, and Dude, at Berkeley High, put on western show for the audience. And I guess there was a bunch of acts and he had one of the acts in there. And fortunately for him, the manager of KLX—it was the only Oakland radio station—was in the audience, and hired Dude, while he was still in high school. So, Dude had a daily show for a long time before I got with, I never even heard of him. He called me on the phone—that guy had recommend me for accordion player. He had been on the air quite a few years, and then he had a good reputation, people knew, you know. So, we he says, "This is Dude Martin," I guess he thought I would know who he was. Cowboy music—if I was going on the dial on a radio in the car or anything, I never stop at cowboy music that's for sure. So I didn't know who he was. And I told you how he got a hold of me. So I went down and auditioned, and he hired me. And, of course, it was staff job. It was the best musician's job in town. See in those days, Petrillo had control of music. Have you ever heard anything about the Petrillo story and musicians?

2-00:50:49

Washburn:

No.

2-00:50:50

Johnson:

Petrillo was the head of the union, the national union. And he had his fist, boy on everything. In other words, a radio station couldn't use commercials unless they had union musicians. Which eventually is what took the musicians out of radio, because radio couldn't afford to hire the musicians. But they gave classifications to—not all the stations, but the top stations, like KGO, and then it was KPO. It was three major stations in San Francisco. They had staffs of sixty people. And if they didn't hire union musicians then Petrillo would go to all the sponsors who—most of the unions were strong in those days. If the station tried to break the union they would have lost the sponsors. Like say KYA, where we worked, was a small station, and their classification was thirty men. When we went in there, we went in with eight, and then. See what KYA was doing with those thirty men, were putting on concerts on the radio, you know. On KYA they would be playing for an hour, an hour and a half, concert music. Well, who's going to listen to concert music for an hour and a half, and they come back with concert music. And then they had a lot of commercial—to fill air they had those shows where people put on these plays. What do you call them? They're still popular. In the daytime all the women watch them.

2-00:52:57

Washburn:

Soap operas.

2-00:52:58

Johnson:

Soap operas, yeah. That was the beginning of soap operas. But then, if the station would come up to the classification, Petrillo would call the musicians—often they didn't care. But they had them by the throat, because on a commercial where the radio station was making its money, all had union shops. So that would dump all the sponsors off of the radio stations. So the radio station was stuck with that union music. Took a long time to knock Petrillo down on that. KGO, we used to have a show on there on Sundays. Their staff was, I think, fifty-five men. And KPO was the other big one out of San Francisco, had about the same amount of men. You know what an expense that was to the radio. But Petrillo, if you've heard of Petrillo, he had them. Because if they didn't hire the musicians, they would lose the sponsors, because all the sponsors were running union shops in those days.

2-00:54:20

Washburn:

So what local were you?

2-00:54:22

Johnson:

Six. See Richmond has their own union.

2-00:54:26

Washburn:

What local was Richmond?

2-00:54:27

Johnson:

Richmond—I don't remember. Nineteen, I think, or something.

2-00:54:30

Washburn:

[Local Union] 424.

2-00:54:32

Johnson:

Oh, it was 424.

2-00:54:33

Washburn:

Here's 424. But when you played in Richmond during World War II, did you have to pay 424 some dues. For each gig that you played at East Shore Park, how did the union thing work out?

2-00:54:46

Johnson:

It was a certain percentage—. You had to go in at the top scale. Like Local 6, where we were, was always higher than Richmond. So if we played Richmond, we still had to pay the men Local 6 scale, because they belonged to Local 6. If we went out to, say Alvarado Park, and the classification, you know they had them all classified. If the classification was set by the union was ten men, if we went in there with five we'd have to hire five standbys, and pay them. You should read the Petrillo story. He had this country locked up on music, and that's actually how we got to KYA. They had, I think, thirty men—all classical music. They just let them practice, they hardly ever put them on the air. Who was going to buy it? Who was going to pay for them?

2-00:56:02

Washburn:

So you were hiring musicians. Did the union has positive or negative effects—how would you describe your relationship with the union?

2-00:56:13

Johnson:

The union was great for us. Because, like KYA, they had thirty men, and advertising agency man talked to the KYA manager, where I think they had thirty men, they're not making a buck off them because they're sitting there and play that music, and no money coming in. Where this advertising agency sold a friend, who was the manager of KYA—bring in an act like Dude Martin. See Dude was a salesman. His whole popularity was built on the fact that he could sell merchandise. That's one of the best commercial announcers that there was. Every time we got a sponsor we'd keep them for six, seven years. And sponsors are what pay the radio station's overhead. Without sponsors the radio station goes broke. And so, when this fella talked KYA into hiring Dude Martin, we replaced, at that time, I think we replaced six or seven of that thirty that they had then. Then, the radio station learned that if you get somebody that can sell merchandise, like Dude, and make money on it, instead of these guys sitting there playing the fiddle, nobody is listening to it. It was all classical music they were playing. That what kept us in

business, because Dude could always get under the classification. When the radio stations just stopped music—they stopped music for a certain length of time, I forget how long. They couldn't play any phonograph records. They couldn't play anything. I guess they must have had all talk, but they could play, what do they call it? I think a tune that's been published more than thirty years. Oh, public domain. They all public domain music there for about two or three months when that strike was going on between Petrillo and the radio stations. And, I can't remember the tune, but there was only one good tune that was in the classification. I think the copyrights run out in twenty years or something. We had to find out where it was published, who was the writers of the song, and turn them into the radio stations all the time, because Petrillo checked that.

2-00:59:33

Washburn:

We have to change this tape again.

[End Audio File #2]

[Begin Audio File #3]

3-00:00:00

Washburn:

You said the union was great for you. But I didn't quite understand how—it seems like you came in, and what was more great was Dude's ability to sell sponsorship, or to get sponsorship.

3-00:00:23

Johnson:

Dude would be more than the music. Dude could have made his money without a guitar, just as a salesman on the radio.

3-00:00:35

Washburn:

How was the union great for you?

3-00:00:36

Johnson:

KYA had thirty union musicians before we went there, and all they did—. Petrillo made them work so many hours a day. They came in and practiced. And then the station would give so much radio time—all dog time. Because they were sitting there playing classical music—how many people. And if you want to hear classical music you can hear some real artists on phonograph records. How many people were listening to KYA while these guys are sitting there playing that classical music. No personality, no nothing. But when KYA classification was thirty, and then they got it down—and finally what ended our deal at KYA was the classification went off.

3-00:01:37

Washburn:

So I still don't understand how the union helped you. Did it help you get the job at KYA?

3-00:01:42

Johnson:

No, they didn't help us make the job. We got the job, but we could do something for management. In other words, instead of paying a union musician twenty-five dollars and no return, you paid Dude Martin twenty-five dollars, and he gets on the air and he can sell merchandise. You know, he was like all these good announcers around here, he was good. He was one of the best salesmen on radio in San Francisco. That's why we always had sponsors, and sponsors aren't easy to keep. You either produce for them or you don't. And a good sponsor can nail you down. An automobile agency, which we had a number of those. Of course, they ask everybody when they come through the front door, "How did you come in the door?" "Oh, I saw an ad in the Chronicle." "Well, a friend of mine bought a car here." Or, "I listen to Dude Martin, he was telling me about this place." That's why you pitch it. Go down to see Joe {inaudible} the Chevrolet dealer, so that we can stay in business. Be sure to tell him who sent you.

[Changes battery on recorder]

3-00:03:27

Washburn:

So back to Richmond. Where else did you play in Richmond, other than East Shore Park?

3-00:03:32

Johnson:

Alvarado Park. I know we played some dances up there. I'd forgotten about that until I saw a picture the other day. I don't think we played any other place.

3-00:03:46

Washburn:

Do you remember the difference between the two—Alvarado Park and East Shore?

3-00:03:52

Johnson:

East Shore Park was much bigger as I recall. I've got a picture of it in there, on Alvarado Park. But it's just a picture of the bandstand. It was, as I recall, it was up on the side of a hill. Wasn't it or something? This was years ago. It wasn't half the size of East Shore Park, and I don't think it had the parking. East Shore Park had everything for a dance band.

3-00:04:23

Washburn:

And Alvarado Park was also through the city?

3-00:04:26

Johnson:

Say that again.

3-00:04:28

Washburn:

You booked Alvarado Park through the city also?

3-00:04:32

Johnson:

I don't quite understand.

3-00:04:34

Washburn:

The city ran Alvarado Park.

3-00:04:40

Johnson:

No, we never ran a dance there. We played for organizations. Remember me telling you about reading the mail, people sending in—want to hire us. That was under that deal. That was before we actually in business for ourselves. We just went out for a flat rate.

3-00:05:04

Washburn:

So let's kind of talk about the times when you stopped playing concerts at Richmond. What happened as the war ended and why did you stop playing gigs in Richmond?

3-00:05:27

Johnson:

Well, I'm not sure we stopped. I don't think we ever stopped.

3-00:05:39

Washburn:

So you continued after the war?

3-00:05:42

Johnson:

Oh, yeah. It went on exactly the same. We had our spots. Mainly, when you think of what was a population in the—like Sacramento was good. San Jose was good. Mountain View was good. In San Francisco we had Edgewater Beach. I don't know if you remember that. That was a big dancehall out there on the beach. So we just picked the spot where we wanted to go. But we had a chance to go to more spots, during the war we were anchored, you know. You've got a better chance to keep up a big crowd going to different places. If we went to San Jose every Saturday night, pretty soon there wouldn't be anybody there.

3-00:06:45

Washburn:

They'll get tired of you. Well, do you remember being aware that while playing in Richmond you had a good thing going on? I understand that you had gas rationing and these kinds of things. But were you aware that this is something unique? That there's sailors that are coming, there's shipyard workers that are coming, and this wasn't like it was before the war.

3-00:07:16

Johnson:

Right. But we went the only business that that affected. That affected almost every business where you had like a Richmond, where you had all the sailors and all the shipyard workers. So to that extent the people were there, and when you have people you got a good chance of getting them. Does that answer your question?

3-00:07:43

Washburn:

Well I'm just kind of curious. Did you sense that your fan base got bigger during the war?

3-00:07:53

Johnson:

Oh, sure. Because there was more people here to begin with. You had more to draw from. And the other thing is there was an awful lot of Okies that came out here, and we were playing the music they liked, which was another big advantage. A pop band couldn't have done the same thing.

3-00:08:16

Washburn:

So in a lot of way you were in the right kind music at the right time.

3-00:08:19

Johnson:

That's right.

3-00:08:23

Washburn:

So did you target your advertising at these folks, maybe it was sailors or at shipyard workers? Do you remember targeting your advertising?

3-00:08:36

Johnson:

Actually that's another place that we had a big advantage, because we had the radio shows. During the war we had morning, noon, five o'clock, and ten o'clock. We had all that advertising. So that's what gets people out.

3-00:08:56

Washburn:

Do you remember—I mean, I know its kind of specific—but do you remember that you were advertising to folks in Richmond?

3-00:09:04

Johnson:

I sure we had ads in the Richmond paper, if that's what you mean.

3-00:09:07

Washburn:

I mean on the radio. Such as Dude was saying, "Hey shipyard—."

3-00:09:11

Johnson:

That was one of our deals with every sponsor and every radio station we worked that we'd be able to have two plugs, at least, for our outside work. So, radio stations brought in the big crowds, sure.

3-00:09:42

Washburn:

Well great. I think that's about it. I mean, let me just go over my note here and make sure we covered everything.

3-00:09:47

Johnson:

Take your time. [pause] You ask some good questions.

3-00:09:58

Washburn:

Thinking back—. Well, here this is a good question. Looking back in the old papers, the city, I saw, did a lot of things to try and control the crowds that were in Richmond at that time. They tried to limit liquor licenses because they thought that there was too much—that there were too many places and there was too much drinking going on, and it was kind of getting to be a kind of uncontrollable scene. Did you notice that the city was worried that dances at East Shore Park would get out of control? What was there involvement it that?

3-00:10:47

Johnson:

We had no problem with city because anything the city asked us to do, naturally we did. And we run a real clean house to begin with. But, say that again.

3-00:11:10

Washburn:

How they were trying to control the drinking and fighting?

3-00:11:12

Johnson:

Oh, well they had to control it, because, you know, when the shipyard workers and the servicemen got together it was tough. But we had so many policemen and we controlled it. We were really careful. I remember we had one cop, who always hired the other cops. I think we only paid them seven dollars a night or eight dollars a night, something. Of course, in those days you can't think how cheap that was, but that wasn't bad in those days. A lot of guys were working for five dollars a day. There was one cop that hired all the cops. See they worked on their spare time. They had nothing to do with the city. We paid them. Cutshaw was his name. And the cops loved to come out there because they made overtime, you know, they made some more money, and they were happy. So, as far as the City of Richmond—the only time I can remember there was even any problem was when it came to the hookers. And then we did everything the city wanted us—and the Navy Department, they were the ones that started it. The navy had a lady out there. Of course, I think one of the problems in Richmond could have been that—the same things happened in the same music and dancehalls, especially with so many shipyard workers out here that are single, and girls—the same thing would happen at Maple Hall. And maybe if they didn't control it then the city would get down on them or tell them what to do. But anything the city asked us to do we did it.

3-00:13:27

Washburn:

Well that's what I'm wondering. Did they require you to have a certain amount of policemen out there?

3-00:13:39

Johnson:

We had Cutshaw—was on the force. He was a sergeant. And he was really a neat guy, and he hired what he thought was necessary. So we had that taken care of. He never had ten cops there on a Tuesday night. He only had three cops on a Tuesday night. I think the most we had one night, counting the Shore Patrol, I think we had sixteen officers.

3-00:14:11

Washburn:

The Shore Patrol came out with the sailors?

3-00:14:15

Johnson:

The Navy sent them out.

3-00:14:23

Washburn:

How did the Navy know that there were sailors going there?

3-00:14:28

Johnson:

One of the ways they knew was the VD, is one way. I guess it could probably come through the police department. Other words, if I had a bar and there's a bunch of sailor that are coming my place, and my place is attracting venereal disease and what not. Well, then the cops are going to come down on me.

3-00:14:54

Washburn:

Did the cops not have authority over the sailors?

3-00:14:58

Johnson:

I don't really know who had control. I think with Cutshaw, who handled all the police department, he would have just done whatever—he was talking to his boss. I mean the government was a bigger boss than Cutshaw. I would say he would do anything the Navy told him to do.

3-00:15:28

Washburn:

Did you have a sense though, that if they weren't there it would have been an unruly scene—if the policemen weren't there?

3-00:15:38

Johnson:

Without the police? Oh, we wouldn't last an hour. [laughs] Maybe two hours. You know, they get a few beers, and then the shortage of girls. Lots of sailors, few girls—one of the problems.

3-00:15:59

Washburn:

So they'd fight over women?

3-00:16:04

Johnson:

Even in just little local bars people have a few drinks and some guys just says some little ridiculous think, and boom the guy wants to fight. And, of course, a lot of those sailors were in better shape than ever been in their life. They were ready to fight anytime.

3-00:16:26

Washburn:

There was drinking, but do you remember hearing anything about drug use?

3-00:16:30

Johnson:

Never.

3-00:16:32

Washburn:

Any marijuana or anything like that?

3-00:16:35

Johnson:

In that period of time, never heard of it. The only time I ever heard of that, they used to say that some of the big bands used to use marijuana, or whatever. Krupa, I think was accused of it or something. No, I was never involved, never thought of.

16:59

Washburn:

You brought up that there were fights. I've heard about people would, you know, fight over women because, like you said, there was so few.

3-00:17:20

Johnson:

That's the only thing they ever fight over. Of course, booze leads to it.

3-00:17:22

Washburn:

So you remember of the crowd there being—. What do you think the percentage of women was to men you think?

3-00:17:32

Johnson:

Oh, boy, that's a tough one. You know I never thought from an angle like that. Sixty-fourty, maybe.

3-00:17:49

Washburn:
Sixty-forty.

3-00:17:50

Johnson:
Yeah. Sixty-forty—women.

3-00:17:56

Washburn:
And you guys had discounts. Women paid less money to get in the concert.

3-00:17:59

Johnson:
I don't think so.

3-00:18:05

Washburn:
Let's look in these old ads here. I got my proof here.

3-00:18:10

Johnson:
That's one I didn't think of. [laughs]

3-00:18:12

Washburn:
“Gents—.” Here's the ad here, “Dude Martin—let's see if we can show it on here—Dude Martin and his Roundup Gang. Gents seventy-five cents, ladies fifty-five cents, children ten cents.”

3-00:18:34

Johnson:
So we did that.

3-00:18:35

Washburn:
So dances nine to one. Women were cheaper.

3-00:18:41

Johnson:
I guess that's the reason we did it.

3-00:18:45

Washburn:
To what? To encourage more women to come?

3-00:18:47

Johnson:
Normally thinking, in those days men always made way more money than women. Now, see since the union—unions were strong, but the women workers were always paid, no matter what the jobs was. If like at a grocery store or anything, a man and a woman doing the same job made less money.

3-00:19:10

Washburn:

Yeah. See here it says the show was at 8:30 and then the dance starts at 9:10. So at 8:30 what would the show—the show would be more vaudeville kind of styles?

3-00:19:20

Johnson:

Exactly. You know, almost everybody in the group—. We'd think of that when we hired the musicians, you know, that could perform. That could either sing or—. Like I had three or four acts with the accordion. And of course, you have to change the show a lot. And all the fellas in our band, like when we went theaters, they were all show people, they were either in solos or trios. Comedian. We always had a comedian. We had a roper.

3-00:20:03

Washburn:

To do some specialty act?

3-00:20:06

Johnson:

Beg your pardon.

3-00:20:07

Washburn:

Some specialty acts?

3-00:20:08

Johnson:

Right.

3-00:20:15

Washburn:

I guess that's about all the questions I have.

3-00:20:18

Johnson:

I've forgotten an awful lot of things.

3-00:20:20

Washburn:

No, your memory is great. I know it's kind of strange. That's probably a smaller part of your career than I realize.

3-00:20:28

Johnson:

No, East Shore Park, those years we were there was a big part of my life.

3-00:20:39

Washburn:

You composed a bunch of your tunes also.

3-00:20:43

Johnson:

I guess, oh, maybe thirty, forty of them we had published.

3-00:20:48

Washburn:

So let's on an average dance at East Shore Park, how many of the tunes you think were originals of yours?

3-00:20:56

Johnson:

In our dance library we probably had—some of them were real cowboy tunes, weren't good danceable tunes. So, we also had about five or six. We didn't over bear it. And it's like any dance library, almost every night you play the same tunes.

3-00:21:25

Washburn:

Well, if you mind me asking. What was your inspiration for the tunes? I mean, knowing more about your life, you know, you grew up a Swedish family in Alameda. What was your inspiration for writing cowboy tunes?

3-00:21:41

Johnson:

Dude was the one mainly with the inspirations. Most of them were cowboy tunes. And he was brought up on a ranch. But he didn't know anything about phrasing. When I first went to work with him, you know, I tried to write the music down so that I'd be able to play it. Well, he would have five and a half bar phrases. You know, he didn't understand that music comes in four bar phrases, most of it.

3-00:22:22

Washburn:

Right.

3-00:22:24

Johnson:

So to write it down he wanted to put a songbook together. Which I have the cover I think in there. And so, I had to write his tunes down, but I had to write them down musically, you know. Thirty-two bars, or sixteen bars, or four bars to phrase, or two bars to a phrase. And he just with a guitar—he wrote the tune, you know, and sang it. So, I had to teach him. And then, of course, he understood right away, but he didn't realize when he was writing that tune one line had two bars or music, and the next line had five bars of music. [laughs] So he learned a lot too. And that songbook, the first songbook we had written, he wrote most of the tunes. I helped him with some of them. I think there was sixteen tunes. Anyway, I did them all by hand, with piano scores. And I handed it to him, gees I had worked like hell. Piano, three staffed piano, just like a song copy. And I wrote every note by hand, all the words by hand. He came in one night and he says, "You know Johnson, I lost that music you gave me." I wrote it all over again. [laughs] But he was a good boss.

3-00:24:11

Washburn:

Now, did you use any of your inspiration for musical—where did your inspiration for the musical phrasing come from?

3-00:24:16

Johnson:

Well, it was the technical part. In other words, you can't write a tune that has five bars in one phrase and seven bars, or six and half bars in the next phrase. Which, if I had written what he wrote and sang before I got there, there would be some measures that have one beat and some measures with four beats and some measures three beats. You know he just plucked from a guitar and sing, and you know, if you're not musically trained. All the cowboy songs were like that before, before somebody come along and straightens them out. They would just sit around the campfire and sing songs with a guitar.

3-00:25:05

Washburn:

Now I noticed in looking at the names on the band, I think you had some guys Pearl, and Cohen. You had some Jewish guys, I guess, in your band.

3-00:25:13

Johnson:

Yeah.

3-00:25:14

Washburn:

And so, you guys are coming from a lot of diverse backgrounds playing kind of a country music. Did you ever think—.

3-00:25:22

Johnson:

We got the top music out of San Francisco—top musicians. Being in the symphony was the only place I think they could make more money than being with Dude. Because, see KYA—all the radio stations—were controlled by those unions, the scale was high. But when they put in Petrillo's music, there was no way to capitalize on it.

3-00:25:51

Washburn:

So the band's name, before it was Dude Martin and his Roundup Gang? What was his band's name? It was the Nevada Nightherders.

3-00:26:06

Johnson:

That was the original name. It was the Nevada Nightherders when I went with them. And the reason for that name, he had a radio show from 8:30 to 9:30 on KLX, where they made it just like he had a fireplace there lights underneath it and they played around, like the campfire. And they had the audience out there. So that was really cowboy music.

3-00:26:30

Washburn:

But why did he choose Nevada? Was he from Nevada?

3-00:26:35

Johnson:

No, he was from a county down by Yosemite. I can't think of it now. That's where—.

3-00:26:47

Washburn:

Tulare.

3-00:26:48

Johnson:

That's where he was born.

3-00:26:49

Washburn:

Kern County.

3-00:26:50

Johnson:

Beg your pardon.

3-00:26:51

Washburn:

Kern County. Some where down in the San Joaquin Valley.

3-00:26:53

Johnson:

God, we used kid him so much about that county.

3-00:26:57

Washburn:

Tulare.

3-00:26:57

Johnson:

No.

3-00:26:59

Washburn:

Oh, man this is geography here.

3-00:27:05

Johnson:

I'm thinking of the city.

3-00:27:06

Washburn:

Visalia?

3-00:27:06

Johnson:

Maybe Eleanor will remember the city and the county. It was down by Yosemite.

3-00:27:12

Washburn:

Okay. So why do you think he chose Nevada as a name for the band?

3-00:27:19

Johnson:

That one I never asked him. Nevada was country, you know, in California. There was nothing but sand up in Nevada in those days. Nevada wasn't was it is now. We're talking about a long time ago, long time ago.

3-00:27:35

Washburn:

Well, I think that's about it. I think we should get some lunch. Yeah, let's get some lunch. Thank you very much Mr. Johnson.

3-00:27:45

Johnson:

What town was Dude from?

3-00:27:46

Eleanor Johnson:

Well, you asked me that the other day, and I can't remember. It's an odd name.

3-00:27:48

Washburn:

Did you say Salinas? Visalia?

3-00:27:52

Johnson:

No, it was very small town.

3-00:27:55

Eleanor Johnson:

I think it was near Visalia.

3-00:27:58

Johnson:

Yeah, I think so too.

3-00:28:00

Eleanor Johnson:

I think we used to say he was from there, but then he used say, no I'm from this other place.

3-00:28:05

Washburn:

Where were his folks from? Do you remember?

3-00:28:08

Eleanor Johnson:

I guess his father—they were from there.

3-00:28:14

Washburn:

They were from there.

3-00:28:20

Johnson:

Dude, I think grew-up down there until he was, I think, around sixteen when he came up here.

3-00:28:25

Eleanor Johnson:

Well, he went to Berkeley High.

3-00:28:26

Johnson:

Yeah, he went to Berkeley High.

3-00:28:27

Washburn:

His folks weren't from Texas or something.

3-00:28:31

Eleanor Johnson:

His dad worked for Standard Oil.

3-00:28:34

Johnson:

He was a big shot for Standard Oil in San Francisco. I never even thought of how that all worked. I never liked to even talk to Dude about his family, because he had a very unhappy family—an unhappy life.

3-00:28:49

Eleanor Johnson:

They lived in Berkeley because that's where, you know—.

3-00:28:54

Johnson:

I think they farmed Dude to one of the—two of the aunts down—.

3-00:28:59

Eleanor Johnson:

His parents did live in Berkeley though.

3-00:29:01

Johnson:

Yeah, but when Dude was growing up in Merced County—. Plainsburg! Plainsburg.

3-00:29:08

Washburn:

Plainsburg, in Merced County.

3-00:29:11

Johnson:

Maybe they farmed him down to one of the aunts. And yeah, but the father was a big wheel for Standard Oil. In those days he was making a thousand dollars a month. And that was a lot of money. The average bank president was probably making two, three hundred.

3-00:29:34

Washburn:

Well, I want to thank you.

3-00:29:35

Johnson:

Thank you. I hope you didn't get tired of listening to me.

3-00:29:41

Washburn:

No, of course not.