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Bobby Robbins

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

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Interview with Bobby Robbins
Interviewed by: David Washburn
Transcriber: Cameron Benson Smith
[Interview #1: March 29, 2003]
[Begin Audio File: Robbins1 03-29-03]

00:00:01

Washburn:

Okay, this is an interview with Bobby Robbins conducted on Saturday—today's the Twenty-eighth. No, today is Saturday, March 29, 2003, with David Washburn. (claps repeatedly) So, Bobby I'm just going to ask you some easy questions because I don't want you to feel like you have to tell me something that, or try and remember something which you won't be able—. Oh, let me turn this thing off. There you go. But I'm just going to ask you about music today. That's I guess second-nature to you?

00:00:47

Robbins:

Well, I mean—of course, I was a plumber. Actually, I was a plumber by trade. The music was a sideline—it was just a sideline.

00:00:56

Washburn:

Well, that's important to know, and that's why today I said today I want to talk to you about music, and then maybe another day talk to you about plumbing.

00:01:03

Robbins:

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

00:01:05

Washburn:

If you'd be okay with that. I can tell you're very humble because you've—.

00:01:12

Robbins:

Well, I mean. [laughs]

00:01:12

Washburn:

You've never been interviewed before?

00:01:14

Robbins:

No, that's for sure.

00:01:16

Washburn:

Yeah. Well, let me just ask you, when did you pick up the guitar?

00:01:21

Robbins:

Well I tell you how it actually started. My dad was a musician. He played the clarinet in the Richmond band. Now that's in the twenties! And he could play a little bit of guitar. But I bought a ukulele. I can't read music. I just play by ear that's all. Well you've heard me play, you know. I always loved the guitar. But I couldn't play one, but I had a little ukulele when I was about six years old, I played a little ukulele. So when I got to be, oh, I guess maybe ten or twelve, I wanted my mother to buy me a guitar so bad, and in those days money was, believe me, it was scarce. Five dollars was a fortune. So anyway, I knew a friend that had a guitar, and I told him, I said, "Hey Eliza, I'll give you all my marbles"—I used to play marbles. I says, "I'll give you all my marbles if you'll let me just borrow your guitar." That's how bad I wanted one. So I had that for quite a while. So finally my mother, she finally decided to let me buy one. It was about six dollars. Which at that time—. How I learned to play is I'd go over to somebody's house where he was playing guitar, and "Hey would you show me this? Would you show me that?" And through the years—now this has been a lot of years ago—I just picked up a little bit gradually to where I got—I can't explain it, because some of the other guys can't explain it either, how I do it either. How I can play damn near everything. Now I don't mean everything, but a hell of a lot just by ear, without looking at any music. If you notice the guys got music, I don't have any music. I play it. I can't explain it. But I can do it. I can't explain it, but I can do it. I can't read a note of music. But if I hear it—unless it's a real complicated—I'm talking about just the general tunes we play. Old standards, I can play most of them, most of them. Well, you hear me play, you know.

00:03:59

Washburn:

Yeah, I heard you play.

00:03:59

Robbins:

Well, I don't have to do anything. And that's how I learn. And you take George Schwartz, and Sammy Lico, we've been around here, and Jos Staley, since we were kids we've been playing together. We didn't just get together, we been—since we were kids, playing together. And we all love to play, and we belong to the union. Of course, the union now is just gone to the dogs. It's just terrible. It's a shame. But it used to be real strong—the union used to be real strong. Now if you went to play a job, you had to go through the union. It had to be a union job, or else there'd be scabs out in front of the place.

00:04:44

Washburn:

I want to actually ask you about that. Here, I'm going to move this lamp.

00:04:49

Robbins:

They'd picked the place, and the nightclubs had to have union bartenders. Everybody had to be union.

00:04:59

Washburn:

Well, I want to get to that in a little bit. But first I want to ask you, what kind of music did you start playing when you first started playing guitar?

00:05:08

Robbins:

Probably the simple western. Real simple western. Things you wouldn't even know what they are. "Strawberry Roan," oh, god. [laughs] Or {inaudible}. Real simple. That's how I started, because that's the simplest music, see. And then, because it's that simplest music. And then you start getting into jazz, and popular music, that's a little harder. That's a little harder, believe me, to learn all the chords.

00:05:37

Washburn:

The changes are—.

00:05:37

Robbins:

Oh yeah. And I just gradually learned it just going over to this guy's house, "Hey, show me how you did that." That's how I learned. "Show me how you do that." "Geeh, that good chord show me how you did that." That's how I learned to play the guitar. That's how I learned.

00:05:57

Washburn:

So you didn't—. Let me adjust something here really quickly. Sorry, about this I got to get the volume down a little bit here, mic level. Okay can you talk a little bit there? Can you say your name?

00:06:19

Robbins:

Yeah, okay. Yeah that's how I learned, just by going to other guys' houses—find out well he plays guitar, "Geeh, show me how you did that. Boy, that sounds great."

00:06:29

Washburn:

So you never took lessons?

00:06:31

Robbins:

No, not a lesson in my life. Sometimes when I—it happens to me all the time. I'm out somewhere playing with some guys, and you'll bring out a sheet of music, and I says, "Don't show it to me. It's just Chinese music. I don't understand it. I don't know it."

00:06:49

Washburn:

Do you know how to follow a lead sheet? Just chords, like a G7 or something, you know how—?

00:06:53

Robbins:

Yeah, yeah. But it's hard to explain. I don't look at music. I just play it. I can't—if you give me a bunch of chords. No, I just play it. I can't explain it to you. I just play.

00:07:12

Washburn:

I think that's great! I mean, as a musician I really can appreciate learning by ear.

00:07:16

Robbins:

Well, like I play with Sammy Lico, and Sammy. Now Sammy's strictly—he reads. Plays chord, and he reads. But all the tunes he plays I don't have to read them, I just play it. [laughs] You know.

00:07:30

Washburn:

What was your first steady gig? Playing guitar?

00:07:35

Robbins:

With Al Greeco's group. See I was a plumber, see. But when I was working at the shipyards, why he came along. Now, I had played a lot before that, just casual jobs, you know. But I was at the shipyards, and Al Greeco came in there—he was quite a singer, and an entertainer. And he came in there, to the shipyards, and talked to me. He says, "Hey, would you like to play with me?" I said, "Well, I don't know. Let's see." So, myself and Al and Leonard Barnett, there's got a picture here—Leonard Barnett. We formed a trio. And we went out to the, in El Sobrante, called the Trocadero. It was out in El Sobrante. See at that time there was lots of music going on. With the shipyards coming in, there was music everywhere. All up and down San Pablo Avenue, all the little clubs was music. And so he said I got a chance to get a job at the Trocadero three nights a week. So I thought boy that sounds pretty good to me. I thought maybe I can work at the shipyards, and I can do that too. Pretty busy, but. So anyway, we went out to Trocadero, and we played there for about three or four weeks. And we had to have a contract. You had to have a three month contract. That was the law in those days. And so we were out there for about a month, and we had the comedy act. Well you saw some of the pictures here, crazy hats. We did a lot of goofy stuff, you know. And we were really—we got to be real popular, because none of our musicianship—we played okay, but we were funny. We were a show. This was before television. A we were a show. So, Al was a promoter. He was a real promoter. He was always looking—we were put in somewhere, he was looking for another job. Always looking ahead. So, we worked at Trocadero. So anywhere, John's Rendezvous, which is on the corner of San Pablo Avenue and Nevin. It's Green's Saddle Shop. You know where Green's Saddle Shop? Right across the street. Not across San Pablo Avenue. Across Nevin. They opened up a club, called the John's Rendezvous. And Al says, "Geeh, I hope we can get that spot, because it looks like it's going to be a hot spot." So he was quite a promoter. So, he made a deal with the owner, and he was quite a talker. He was a promoter. And we went into John's Rendezvous, it was upstairs then at the time—busy. There's a picture of it in here. And, six nights a week! So then I quit the job at the shipyards, because this was six nights a week.

00:10:47

Washburn:

What year was this, do you remember?

00:10:51

Robbins:

Boy, '46 I guess, '47. I forget, '46, '47.

00:11:01

Washburn:

You were still working at the shipyards?

00:11:02

Robbins:

Yeah, but I quit. I couldn't play six nights a week, and work days time too.

00:11:07

Washburn:

Yeah. Well, let me ask you when did you join the American Federation of Musicians Local 424?

00:11:19

Robbins:

I guess about '38 or '39, I guess. Yeah.

00:11:23

Washburn:

And why did you join?

00:11:25

Robbins:

What?

00:11:26

Washburn:

Why did you join?

00:11:28

Robbins:

Well, because you almost had to. Because you wouldn't work if you didn't. You had to.

00:11:33

Washburn:

Well, explain why that is. I used to play music myself, and you know, play at restaurants, and weddings, stuff like that. We never thought about joining a union.

00:11:43

Robbins:

Well, of course, nowadays it's—.

00:11:44

Washburn:

Well sure. But can you explain what it was—for somebody who doesn't know, why you had to join the union.

00:11:49

Robbins:

Because all the guys that I knew, that played for a living at all, belonged. They all belonged. Now, it was supposed to be that you had to read music to get into the Union, but they kind of eased off on that, and so I went in with a group, just playing, we went out to the union hall and got a little Hawaiian group. It's in the picture there. I had a little Hawaiian group, and that's how I got into the union. Yeah. And, like I say, back in those days the union—. It doesn't mean anything. We're playing all kinds of places now. All non-union now. But at that time, it was strong.

00:12:40

Washburn:

Well, why do you think it was strong at that time?

00:12:46

Robbins:

Well, that's kind of hard to explain, because all the unions were pretty strong. Plumbers was—well, plumbers is still pretty strong now, but not as strong—. All the building trades are not as strong now as they used to be. They used to be real strong, boy! But the musician union—it's hard to explain. If you went out to play a job, and you played a scab job, the Secretary of the Musicians Union, he'd go in there and get you out of there. Yeah, yeah. So, but in some ways it was good because the scale, the union scale—now, I'm telling you what I know, some of these guys want to give you some malarkey, but I know, I was there. The scale in a nightclub—I'm not talking about a San Francisco hotels, I'm talking about the nightclubs—the union scale was five dollars for five hours. Five dollars a night for five hours. I worked and I know. Yeah. And I think if you played for a casual dance, it was a little more, maybe eight or nine. If you played for just a casual dance, a one-night stand, it would be more. But for five nights a week, or six nights a week, it was five dollars an hour. I mean, five dollars a night.

00:14:21

Washburn:

Was that good pay?

00:14:23

Robbins:

Yeah. In fact, the musicians—I'll tell you something—the musicians, the whole trade, it's gone right down the sewer. Now unless you're talking about Elvis Presley or somebody, that's different. I'm talking about the general—. We used to play for—in other words, a musician in those days, would get paid, what you might say, a day's wage. You worked for four hours, but that was considered a day's wage. Like the other guy working maybe in his {inaudible} would be eight hours, you would be considered a day's pay. Now, if you did that today, if you went by the same scale today, playing and you should get at least a hundred dollars, of which you don't even begin to get that. If you went by—.

00:15:33

Washburn:

Some musicians do, you know. But it's hard to get a regular thing where you're making a hundred dollars a night. That would be very difficult.

00:15:40

Robbins:

Oh, you still hear about the big stars, that's different. Hell, they get lots of money. I'm just one of the general guys. You know we do—and there's guys that I've work with like Bud, George, and Jos Staley—we just play for fun.

00:15:56

Washburn:

Sure. Well, let me ask you, what were your dues to the union?

00:16:08

Robbins:

Boy, that's going back that far I can't remember. It's real cheap now, it's only—. Well, see I'm a lifetime member now, so it's dropped way down. I think I pay fifty dollars. I don't remember now. Fifty dollars a year. It's real cheap. Because I'm a lifetime member. You know, I should go due. I don't know the dues.

00:16:34

Washburn:

Now, can you explain how the kind of contract system would work? How the union and the club and the musicians would kind of—how the contract worked, from those three?

00:16:48

Robbins:

Well, you had a contract that you got from the union. They had contracts of course, you know. And you went to your boss wherever you were going to—the club you were going play for, and there was a contract there. And the standard was three months. I guess you could probably change that around, but as far as I remember, there was always a three months contact. We're gonna play here for three months. So you sign a contract for three months through the union. That's the way it worked. Not now but they did then.

00:17:22

Washburn:

Now how did the union know when you were going to kind of sign a contract, or when you were going to start a new gig?

00:17:35

Robbins:

Well, you went to the union and got the contract papers, and you explained to them that you were going to go over playing in this club. And say, "Well, take the contract to them, and have the boss sign it." So they'd know, because you told them.

00:17:53

Washburn:

But you had to go out and hustle the gigs?

00:17:55

Robbins:

More or less, yeah. Actually the union didn't do very much for us, really. When you figure out. We really had to hustle our own jobs. It's always been that way. Yeah. In fact, the last few years, well, these last few years, we've been playing scab, you know.

00:18:17

Washburn:

Sure.

00:18:18

Robbins:

But before, like you say, the union got us very few jobs. We had to get out and hustle our own jobs. Then when we got the job, then we'd go to the union, and have them give us a contract.

00:18:28

Washburn:

But during the war there were a lot of jobs to be had. Can you talk about that?

00:18:34

Robbins:

Up and down San Pablo Avenue—. Oh, there was the It Club. Oh, there was lots of clubs, and they all would play six nights a week! Six nights a week, and all getting union scale. And there was lots of money in the town, because all the people coming to work in the shipyards, they all had money they didn't know what to do with. They were loaded! Some of those Okies never saw so much money in their life! [laughs] So the clubs were all full. They were busy. The clubs were all full of patrons, you know. It was unbelievable! You have no idea. When I think back now, we just took it for granted at the time, but the clubs were all full. Yeah.

00:19:34

Washburn:

So music was a big part of the life in Richmond?

00:19:37

Robbins:

Oh yeah. Up and down San Pablo Avenue there was, I can't even remember all the clubs. And then San Pablo had the {Ginger Burg's} Thunder Bird, and The Ox Bowl, and oh, there was a whole bunch of them. And there were all—. You see, you've got to understand, these people come from Oklahoma, and different places, and they come to the shipyards and they made all this money they didn't know what to do with it. Boy, they'd just spent it! Getting out and drinking and having a good time. So half of them were sleeping in somebody's shed or something, and at nighttime they had a chance to—.

00:20:23

Washburn:

They had a chance to what?

00:20:27

Robbins:

To go to the clubs and drink. And at Mare Island, you know it's closed now isn't it. Mare Island—we went out there—we were crazy {inaudible} I stop to think of it. We'd played a job somewhere here, in one of the clubs, and Mare Island was going, of course, Mare Island was going twenty-four hours a day during the war. And they had a swing dance at Mare Island, and we played for this dance from nine to twelve, and then get in the damn car, and drive out to Vallejo and play for another dance. This was crazy, you know what I mean? [laughs] I don't know how we did it. Of course, we're young, see, that makes a difference—when you're young. And play for a dance there for the swing crowd, for the swing shift. Oh god.

00:21:26

Washburn:

So how did—Kaiser employed all these shipyard workers, but Kaiser also gave a lot of gigs to musicians also. What gigs did Kaiser give to musicians?

00:21:47

Robbins:

I don't remember of Kaiser actually giving us any gigs.

00:21:49

Washburn:

Well, I don't mean Kaiser himself, but the shipyards themselves. For instance, launches.

00:21:53

Robbins:

Well now once in a while—I think there's one picture in there—once in a while we'd go and play for a ship, to launch the ship. Once in a while, but not—. In fact, I didn't get in on much of that. Maybe some of the other guys did, but I didn't. No. But what they did in those shipyards, really it's staggering when you figure out. I think you've seen them on TV, haven't you? What they did, it's just—I don't know how they did it. I don't know how they did it.

00:22:28

Washburn:

Yeah it's quite amazing. So I guess Sam Lico said he played for Kaiser banquets.

00:22:33

Robbins:

Sammy could have. I'll tell you where Sammy played for a lot. Brings back some memories. And I worked with him a lot. They had a U.S.O. hall where all the soldiers and sailors got together and the girls used to come in to dance with the sailors and the soldiers. There was one over on the South Side. And Sammy played for a lot of those dances. And we got paid—I guess we got paid from the union, I guess. I forget how we got—we got paid I know. But I think we got paid through the union. But Sammy did a lot of that work, playing for the soldiers and the sailors. And the girls would come in and dance with the sailors and the soldiers. And I worked for quite a few of those.

00:23:24

Washburn:

What were those like? Can you describe them?

00:23:27

Robbins:

Well, if you ever listened to KABL radio, that's the tunes we played. That's the tunes we played. And even back a little further. Even a little bit back further, a little bit further, that's the tunes we played.

00:23:44

Washburn:

Did people come to the U.S.O. dances with dates, or did they meet people?

00:23:47

Robbins:

Yeah, well, yeah. No, I'll take it back. They weren't supposed to do that. The girls were supposed to dance with the guys, but they weren't supposed to go—. Oh, I suppose some of them probably did, but they weren't supposed to do that. It was a dance. Yeah.

00:24:05

Washburn:

They weren't supposed to get romantic?

00:24:08

Robbins:

No. I'm sure some of them did. But just like I met my wife at a dance, you know. [laughs] At McFadden's Ballroom.

00:24:22

Washburn:

Right, down in Oakland.

00:24:24

Robbins:

That's where I met my wife. I used to go there every Saturday night, when I wasn't playing, I used to go there Saturday at McFadden Ballroom.

00:24:32

Washburn:

So that's where you met your wife? Can you tell a little bit about why you liked going to McFadden's?

00:24:37

Robbins:

Well, I loved to dance. I was a ballroom dancer. In fact, I guess I left that out, I mean, that's beside the point. But I was a very good—I shouldn't be bragging about myself, but I was a very good ballroom, smooth ballroom, not jitterbug, smooth ballroom dancing. I was very good. And I loved to dance. And that's why I used to go there. In fact we used to dance at school. We had a little—called the Union School, and everyday before school and during lunchtime, we would get together, some of us guys and girls, and dance by

records. Play records and dance. And I used to love to dance. I used to play guitar, but guitar's first, but the dancing was awful close to second. Yeah, and that's where I met my wife, at McFadden's. It was McFadden's, then it changed to Sand's, I think, and then it changed to Lind's. Of course, it's gone now. It's gone now.

00:25:43

Washburn:

Well, can you describe what a classification was for a dancehall?

00:25:49

Robbins:

For what?

00:25:50

Washburn:

A dancehall.

00:25:52

Robbins:

What do you mean a classification?

00:25:53

Washburn:

A classification for the number of musicians.

00:25:56

Robbins:

Oh, now that's another thing. Yeah. I guess, I don't know if I've got the paper on it or not. In those days, you had to have so many men—the union—you had to have so many for the size of the ballroom. And they were very strict about that. In fact, we were playing out in—where were we playing? Rossmoor. I think it was Rossmoor. Or no, it was Diablo Country Club. Do you know where that is?

00:26:32

Washburn:

Yes.

00:26:33

Robbins:

Diablo Country Club. So I did a lot of this nightclub, I mean country club work. I did a lot of it. Richmond Golf Club, Mira Vista Golf Club. I've been around, kid. [laughs] And, so anyway, we come in there, and we played—just a three-piece. But we used to play out on the patio on Sunday afternoons. Though this was at the Castlewood Country Club. Do you know where that is?

00:27:02

Washburn:

No.

00:27:04

Robbins:

So, we're playing outside, and it started to rain. So what were we going to do? We went into the ballroom, three of us, and the union found out about it. We're supposed to have ten men, I think it was ten men in there. That's how strict the union was. And our boss, the leader of the band, he got fined. We had to get out of the rain! But the union didn't care about that. No, you're not supposed to be playing in there with three men. That's how strict they were. Yeah.

00:27:46

Washburn:

So the classification was that each hall had to have a certain amount of—.

00:27:51

Robbins:

Bud Schwartz, you know George Schwartz?

00:27:54

Washburn:

Yeah.

00:27:55

Robbins:

Now George—I guess he told you about his ballroom?

00:27:57

Washburn:

I've heard of Schwartz Ballroom, Yeah.

00:28:00

Robbins:

Now that was a going concern, believe me they packed that place. But they told him how many men he had to have. In a way it kind of irked you because telling you what you have to do, you don't like that. You know? "You've got to do this, you've got to do that." But that's the way the union was.

00:28:21

Washburn:

Do you remember during the war, like you said, folks, you know, of course came here to work in the shipyards. Do you remember noticing an increase in the amount of musicians that were here in town?

00:28:41

Robbins:

Yeah, I guess there were a few more. Yeah I'm sure there were. Guys came in from other places, you know, like from Arkansas, Oklahoma. The Western music was always big. The Western was big. I never was in much—some of it. But the Western was—. Now like, Dave Stogner's band, it really wasn't—I don't know what you'd call it. It was just a mixed-up, a little-bit of everything. A Western Swing they'd called it.

00:29:13

Washburn:

Yeah, he called it Western Swing.

00:29:14

Robbins:

But he had a saxophone, and a trumpet. Ordinarily I associate a western band with guitars and violins, you know, things like that, and bass. But I really don't associate horns with a western. But of course, I know they were in there. But I don't associate that with western bands.

00:29:40

Washburn:

Well, let's talk about Dave Stogner for a little bit, because you know that I'm doing a history project on a couple things but part of it is the country-western. How do you remember meeting Dave Stogner?

00:29:57

Robbins:

I really don't remember. See, a lot of us guys, it's word of mouth. Word of mouth. "I know this guy down here, he plays the guitar, would you like." You know, it's word of mouth, that's what it amounts to—word of mouth. Not the union, word of mouth. It gets around.

00:30:14

Washburn:

So you think it was—. Well, why do you think it was word of mouth more than the union?

00:30:26

Robbins:

Because actually, the union—they ran a business, but as far as the music goes, we were on our own getting work. We had to go through the union, but we didn't depend on the union to get us jobs. We didn't depend on them. We went and got our own jobs, then went to the union and got contracts and signed. That's the way that worked. That's the way that worked. But I don't remember how I met Dave Stogner, I really don't remember just how I met him. But, see it was close to home for me. He was living—he was right there on Rheem Avenue and San Pablo, and I lived not very far from there. It was real handy for me.

00:31:13

Washburn:

That's where he lived or where you gigged?

00:31:17

Robbins:

That's where we played, on the corner of Rheem Avenue and San Pablo Avenue. That's where the—. I think it's a lumber place now. I think they make doors there and stuff.

00:31:29

Washburn:

Now you're a—

00:31:32

Robbins:

That used to be a skating rink. [laughs]

00:31:34

Washburn:

Sterling Hall it was called, right? Well, now how long did you play with Dave Stogner and his Western Swing Band?

00:31:41

Robbins:

Not too long. Just a few months, I think. Not too long.

00:31:46

Washburn:

I've seen the paper. During 1945, you had a really long stint there at Sterling Hall.

00:31:51

Robbins:

Somewhere in there, I can't really remember.

00:31:55

Washburn:

Now what do you remember about how the band built its kind of repertoire? How you guys learned the tunes that you were going to play?

00:32:06

Robbins:

Well, you see, in those days, there was just, like I say, if you listen to KABL, there was just a general bunch of tunes that will all seemed to know. Just with our age group, there was a whole bunch of standard music that most of us knew. Now, some of the guys had to read, which was okay. But like I say, I couldn't read, but I could play it, anyway. It was just a whole different world. It's hard to explain, when you're going back that far.

00:32:44

Washburn:

Excuse me Bobby, can I turn this light on up here? How do you do that?

00:32:46

Robbins:

It's hard to explain. (turns light on)

00:32:57

Washburn:

Oh great, yeah.

00:32:58

Robbins:

Yeah, it's hard to explain, but there were just a bunch of tunes that we all seemed to know.

00:33:06

Washburn:

Hold on one sec here. I'm going to adjust this here. Sorry about the delay.

00:33:31

Robbins:

That's okay.

00:34:08

Washburn:

I need somebody to help me with the technical aspect and all this. It's okay. Now you guys were playing western swing, so you had to have had requests like say "San Antonio Rose", or something.

00:34:21

Robbins:

Well, yeah, yeah.

00:34:22

Washburn:

So how did you learn how to play "San Antonio Rose"?

00:34:24

Robbins:

Now that's a question I can't answer you, because I just, I can play it. I can't answer you. You know what I mean? I can just take my guitar in my hand, and say let's play a set, and I play it. But you know, Dave Stogner, actually he was a westerner. The band maybe played a lot of other stuff, but Dave himself, he was real western.

00:34:49

Washburn:

How did you know that?

00:34:50

Robbins:

Because of the way he played the fiddle, and I just know he was western. Yeah.

00:34:56

Washburn:

So now, you guys played at Sterling Hall. What were the dances like there? I mean, if I was sitting on the bandstand with you, looking out at the crowd, how would you describe the crowd?

00:35:12

Robbins:

Well, they were all in their, well I want to say in their twenties. Most of them. Of course the girls, they wore dresses, they weren't dressed like they do now a days. [laughs] They

were all dressed nice, you know. And a lot of the guys would dressed pretty good, maybe with a tie. Looked nice, you know. And there was no rowdy—everything was beautiful. I mean, we had a wonderful time. You never had to have a bouncer to throw anybody out, because people had a good time. Those days were gone forever, you'll never go back, and I'm glad I lived through them.

00:35:55

Washburn:
(Chuckles)

00:35:56

Robbins:
Really.

00:35:56

Washburn:
Sure. Now were these guys—. Who went to the dances? Can you describe them like—.

00:36:03

Robbins:
The working people. Just working people. The working people. Just the average Joe. Just the average Joe. That's what went to dances. And ballroom dancing was big. See, it's gone now. It's all water under the bridge. But ballroom dancing was big, believe me it was big. The hotels had—the Mark Hopkins, and Saint Francis, and Palace—they all had twelve [or] fifteen piece bands. It's a whole different world. And they had crowds going to those dances. Crowds!

00:36:39

Washburn:
Well, Bobby, I want to talk about Sterling Hall dances because I'm interested in that.

00:36:42

Robbins:
Sterling, we used to pack that place.

00:36:45

Washburn:
How many people could fit in there, do you remember?

00:36:47

Robbins:
Gee, I don't remember. I couldn't tell you that. But I know it was crowded. And I don't even remember what the admission was, but probably fifty cents I suppose.

00:36:55

Washburn:
Well, let's see here.

00:36:56

Robbins:
Does it tell you there?

00:36:58

Washburn:

No, it doesn't. We probably could find out there in all my stuff here. Well, were they Okie types who went? Were they shipyard workers?

00:37:12

Robbins:

Yeah, a lot of shipyard workers. Oh gosh, yes! And then other people too. There was a mixture of people. And everybody had a real good time. Those days—now, I look back now, I don't know how lucky we were. You know what I mean? We didn't have—you're afraid to leave the front door open now.

00:37:38

Washburn:

Yes.

00:37:40

Robbins:

Of course, see you didn't have television, see. And that made a lot—of course, you know I can understand that. But, people loved to dance.

00:37:52

Washburn:

Were people at Sterling Hall, was the crowd really dancing all the time?

00:37:59

Robbins:

Oh yeah, oh absolutely. Oh yeah! The place was crowded. I think it was Saturday and Sunday nights, if I remember right. Does it say on there?

00:38:10

Washburn:

I think it—maybe Fridays and Saturdays. No. Yeah, Saturday and Sunday, I think you're right.

00:38:14

Robbins:

I think it was Saturday and Sunday nights, yeah.

00:38:16

Washburn:

It says on the end of the thing, on my other—. Well, did you play any—were all of your numbers up-tempo? I mean, did you play all dance numbers?

00:38:25

Robbins:

Well, we played waltzes and foxtrots. A little Latin, but not much Latin. It was mostly foxtrots and waltzes. But it's kind of hard to explain unless you were there, you just can't—. When I think about it now, we had such a good time. We had such a good time. It's hard to {inaudible}.

00:38:53

Washburn:

Well, I'd like to learn about the band. Like, you told me who was in the western swing band, but—.

00:39:00

Robbins:

Well, I don't remember the guys names. I don't remember this, it was long ago.

00:39:04

Washburn:

But of the people that you remember, did many of them have a background in western music? What was their background musically?

00:39:13

Robbins:

I think most of them just about, more or less played like I did. Just, you know, it was all music on the side—it was a sideline. I don't think any of us really were what you'd call professional musicians, to just do that for a living. I don't think any of them were. I don't think they were. But they could play, and they weren't really what I would call professionals. I don't call myself a professional musician myself, because a real professional musician is one that can sit down and take a piece of music and read it right off. Read it just perfection.

00:39:52

Washburn:

Well, did you guys use sheet music in this western swing band?

00:39:57

Robbins:

I don't think he did. I don't think he did.

00:40:00

Washburn:

Now you say it wasn't so much country music in a sense. How would you describe the music you guys played?

00:40:15

Robbins:

Well, you know that the music you heard was played over at the Eagles. It's like that. It's like that.

00:40:21

Washburn:

But with a violin?

00:40:22

Robbins:

Yeah, yeah. And the numbers that he didn't know, he just sat there and he'd lead the band. But Dave was pretty good. It's going back so far, it's hard to remember.

00:40:38

Washburn:

Do you think it was more swing than it was country, or more country than swing?

00:40:48

Robbins:

I think it was maybe a little more Swing, I think. Because you got the saxophone in there and the trumpet, and the piano. I think I would call it a little more of a swing band. Yeah.

00:40:59

Washburn:

Who did the arrangements?

00:41:02

Robbins:

What the hell do you mean, arrangements? We didn't have any arrangements; we just played! We didn't have any arrangements. No. Here, you take the next chorus.

00:41:12

Washburn:

Well, the horns didn't have any arrangements?

00:41:15

Robbins:

No. No.

00:41:15

Washburn:

So what were the horn lines like? Can you kind of like, scat?

00:41:22

Robbins:

Do you know the way Al plays?

00:41:24

Washburn:

Yeah.

00:41:24

Robbins:

Does he have any arrangements?

00:41:26

Washburn:

No.

00:41:27

Robbins:

Well, there's your answer right there. There's your answer right there. They've been playing a long time. They can just play it. Now if you get into big-time, that's something else.

00:41:38

Washburn:

Big band music.

00:41:39

Robbins:

That's another ballpark. Like Lawrence Welk and stuff like that. That's another ball of wax. We're called just amateurs. Even Dave Stogner's band, the whole band was more or less amateurs. They weren't real—.

00:41:56

Washburn:

So how much money did you make from those gigs?

00:41:59

Robbins:

The reason why I went there, boy that was big money. We got fifteen dollars for the night, and boy that was good.

00:42:09

Washburn:

Hi. That's your wife there.

00:42:12

Robbins:

Oh, that's my wife Maddy.

00:42:13

Washburn:

Hi Maddy.

00:42:14

Robbins:

This is Dave, Dave Washburn.

00:42:17

Washburn:

Nice to meet you.

00:42:19

Maddy Robbins:

Did you offer the kid a drink or?

00:42:20

Robbins:

You want a Coke?

00:42:21

Washburn:

I'm okay for now. We're going to take a break here. This tape's almost done.

00:42:28

Robbins:

He's got a tape going here. He's got me on the spot. [laughs]

00:42:32

Maddy Robbins:

You're really into this, aren't you?

00:42:33

Washburn:

Yeah, I am. Do you want to take a break right now?

00:42:36

Robbins:

Yeah, okay.

00:42:38

Washburn:

Let's take a break right now.

00:42:39

Robbins:

Alright, just shut it off.

00:42:46

Washburn:

Okay we're recording again. And that's back on there. These are real easy cameras. (claps) Let's talk about the musicians who were in Stogner's band.

00:43:00

Robbins:

Yeah, now that I think about it, Jimmy Peterson was playing there the whole time, yet he's not in that picture. But Jimmy Peterson was—.

00:43:07

Maddy Robbins:

Oh yeah.

00:43:08

Robbins:

In fact, you know what, the last time I saw him was out at what's his name's party out at the Lake of the Pines.

00:43:17

Washburn:

Where does he live, Jimmy Peterson?

00:43:19

Robbins:

Oh, he's probably gone now.

00:43:21

Washburn:

So did you just play rhythm guitar in Stogner's band?

00:43:25

Robbins:

Yeah. At that time, yeah. I learned lead later.

00:43:30

Washburn:

So were you just playing just quarter—just on the beat?

00:43:35

Robbins:

And Jimmy Peterson was playing the lead, yeah. But now I play lead, now. You know you learn it just gradually through the time you pick it up. Since I retired as a plumber, I have more time to sit at home and practice a little bit, you know. Since I retired from plumbing.

00:43:56

Maddy Robbins:

Did you read the nice article on Emma {Myer Gibbons-Branson}

00:44:01

Washburn:

In the *West County Times*?

00:44:01

Robbins:

Well, honey he wouldn't

00:44:02

Maddy Robbins:

Of course, that's a different type of music.

00:44:10

Robbins:

Well, honey that's got nothing to do with this.

00:44:11

Maddy Robbins:

And Oscar Franzen was a pianist in Richmond who grew up with Bob.

00:44:18

Washburn:

Hmm.

00:44:19

Robbins:

Yeah but Oscar was a fine piano player, but he's gone too.

00:44:22

Washburn:

Well Bob, do you remember the classification for Sterling Hall?

00:44:28

Robbins:

I don't remember. But whatever was there in that picture, that's probably it.

00:44:36

Washburn:

Now Stogner was a member of the union?

00:44:40

Robbins:

He must have been. He'd had to be, sure.

00:44:47

Washburn:

Now, I think Ray Wade—all these country guys—.

00:44:50

Robbins:

Ray Wade, he had his own group. I'm sure of it.

00:44:54

Washburn:

What do you remember about his group?

00:44:56

Robbins:

I don't remember very much because I never played with him. Now I'm sure he must have belonged to the union, because at that time, the union was strong.

00:45:02

Washburn:

Well once you were playing with Stogner did you ever want to go out and see any of these other western swing acts to kind of—?

00:45:09

Robbins:

No, not really. No, not really. I liked the popular music, is what I liked. Like you've seen at the Eagles, that's the kind of music I like.

00:45:21

Washburn:

But at Sterling Hall, you said there were requests for tunes like "San Antonio Rose"?

00:45:28

Robbins:

Oh, yeah. Yeah.

00:45:30

Washburn:

Did Stogner ever play any real down home kind of fiddle music? Something like that?

00:45:37

Robbins:

Yeah, he could do that. Oh yeah. He was a fiddler. He was a kind of western fiddler.

00:45:44

Washburn:

Now do you remember him doing that during the concert?

00:45:47

Robbins:

Yeah. Sure.

00:45:48

Washburn:

So when he played those western kind of tunes, would you just sit out?

00:45:54

Robbins:

Oh no, I'd play with them. They're all simple. Most of your old western stuff was fairly simple—two or three chords—very simple. But that was, like I say, it was a Western Swing band. It wasn't—.

00:46:10

Maddy Robbins:

It wasn't real lousy western. It was good western dance music.

00:46:14

Robbins:

Yeah, but they played popular tunes. They didn't play all western tunes. They played mostly popular tunes of that day.

00:46:25

Washburn:

Now when I look back at Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys.

00:46:29

Robbins:

Well, now he was a western.

00:46:32

Washburn:

But he plays stuff like "Dina", something like that. And he'd kind of western it up a little bit.

00:46:37

Robbins:

Yeah, but he was a western man though.

00:46:40

Washburn:

But the sound with Stogner, it wasn't like that with Wills?

00:46:46

Robbins:

I wouldn't say so because Dave Stogner had the trumpet and the saxophone and the piano.

00:46:56

Washburn:

Well, let's read what he says here. He says, "I had two"—he wrote this in his memoir here—"I had two fiddles, a piano, a steel guitar."

00:47:05

Robbins:

I don't remember a steel guitar.

00:47:06

Washburn:

You don't? "Drums, rhythm, guitar, bass, and to make this sound full I added horns."

00:47:11

Robbins:

Yes, that's true.

00:47:12

Washburn:

"Trombone, trumpet, saxophone and clarinet."

00:47:13

Robbins:

Well, I don't even remember the trombone. Well, what you saw in the picture, what I remember was the trumpet and the—.

00:47:20

Washburn:

I mean, his memory might not be so good at this point.

00:47:21

Robbins:

Well, maybe he played somewhere else and did this.

00:47:26

Washburn:

"Now I had my own western swing band. I named it 'Dave Stogner and the Western Rhythmairs' ".

00:47:33

Robbins:

Well, it could be.

00:47:33

Washburn:

I don't know what that is.

00:47:36

Robbins:

But that picture you had, that's when I played with him. That's the only thing I remember about him, was that band. That was the one thing I remember.

00:47:44

Washburn:

See here, it says, "I started on a small scale with eight musicians. That was the lightest I felt I could do it right. We started making our own arrangements. We all played by ear."

00:47:56

Robbins:

Yeah.

00:47:58

Washburn:

"And had it in our heads, how we wanted it to sound. We were not playing country music, or country western. We were playing western swing."

00:48:08

Robbins:

Well, I don't know what the hell you call western swing. I don't know. [laughs]

00:48:12

Maddy Robbins:

It was danceable. It had to be swing.

00:48:18

Washburn:

That's why they call it western swing, because it was danceable?

00:48:19

Robbins:

Yeah, I guess so.

00:48:20

Washburn:

Yeah.

00:48:21

Robbins:

But even your regular western is still danceable.

00:48:28

Maddy Robbins:

But they do that little step like {inaudible}.

00:48:31

Robbins:

Well that's different. That's not ballroom dancing.

00:48:35

Washburn:

Some people call some of this music at this time "hillbilly music".

00:48:40

Robbins:

Well, mostly "hillbilly" is going way back, even before our time even. That's "hillbilly music"; fiddle and guitar. Mostly fiddle and guitar, that's "hillbilly music". We weren't playing "hillbilly music". We were playing western swing. That's the only way I can explain it to you.

00:49:07

Washburn:

Now how do you think the union—I'm interested and I want to talk to you kind of in detail about how the existing music community like yourself and Schwartz and these guys and Mac Macauley, you know, how the existing guys who were here before the war, who were in the union in '39, how they came in contact and started to play with the kind of cowboy types like Dave Stogner and Ray Wade, who formed bands during the war? How people met and formed groups?

00:49:42

Robbins:

Well you see a lot of the guys, I assume, a lot of the guys came from well, I guess Oklahoma or wherever you want to call it, Arkansas or whatever you want to call it.

00:49:52

Washburn:

Yeah, I think Ray Wade came from Arkansas.

00:49:53

Robbins:

Did he? Yeah.

00:49:53

Washburn:

And Stogner came from Texas, via Fresno.

00:49:56

Robbins:

Well, that sounds right. Well, they wanted to form a band, and that was the kind of music that we played, so we just kind of went along with it. That's all that I can tell you.

00:50:07

Washburn:

No, but it wasn't the kind of music that you played. You didn't play—.

00:50:09

Robbins:

Yeah, but it's simple. In those days, anybody could play any of that western stuff, because it was simple. See, we play our stuff, and we could also play that because it was, you know, fairly simple. So that's why we didn't have any trouble getting along, because the tunes that they'd play that we didn't know, we could learn them quick, easy, you know. Yeah. But it's hard to explain, but if you just—

00:50:43

Washburn:

Well, how did those musicians meet and come across folks like Mack Macauley and yourself? You said it was by word of mouth, but how do you think the union and—. I mean, Sam Lico said he met Ray Wade one time down at the union hall and they talked and all. How do you think the union contributed to you guys meeting?

00:51:04

Robbins:

Well, I don't see where they contributed really at all. I mean, we had to belong, but we got our jobs on our own. We got our jobs on our own. Now Sammy Lico, he's one of the few, believe me, few last ones that—I guess he's just quit playing not too long ago, Sammy's quit. But he's one of the very last of the mohicans to play union jobs. He's just about one of the very last.

00:51:47

Washburn:

Let's talk about the music community then. I mean, you showed me this picture of the union hall '39, all you guys sitting there at dinner. To me it seems like the union—. Well, how important was the union in forming the music community? I mean, you say you met the country guys just through word of mouth, but how about before that, how important was Musicians Union 424, for letting people who played music meet each other?

00:52:30

Robbins:

Speaking for myself, the only way I met—now I didn't go down to the union hall—and I have met some guys down there, but I don't count that, because the guys that I knew were just guys around the area that we played together. We had to belong to the union, but the union didn't get us together.

00:52:53

Washburn:

So how did you meet most of the people then?

00:52:58

Robbins:

Just word of mouth. "Hey do you know this guy over here?" You know. And Gay's Tavern, I think was on Twelfth and Macdonald, Gay's Tavern. That was the union hall. At that time, that was the headquarters. Just the bar. They didn't have a hall. They got a hall now. But they didn't have a hall.

00:53:26

Washburn:

When was Gay's Tavern the union hall?

00:53:29

Robbins:

The late thirties. The thirties.

00:53:32

Washburn:

And when did you get the hall?

00:53:34

Robbins:

I don't remember when they got—. They've still got the hall, it's down on Fourteenth street. It's down on the south side.

00:53:43

Washburn:

But, so during the war Gay's Tavern was the union's headquarters? And where was that located again?

00:53:49

Robbins:

I think it was Twelfth and Macdonald, I think.

00:53:55

Washburn:

Okay.

00:53:56

Robbins:

I think it was Twelve and Macdonald. He was the Secretary of the Union, Gay Vargas. And that's where you went in and paid your dues, and got your contracts. It was a bar. He had his little office in the back. That's where we—. And I'll tell you something; we had a little Hawaiian group. The picture's in here. This group here. This is the only group, as far as I know, that ever played in Gay's Tavern. I think we're the only ones. [laughs] Yeah, that's back in '39, I guess. I don't know, '38. '38 I think it's '38.

00:54:36

Washburn:

Now do you remember sitting back there in Dave Stogner's group and talking with some of the other rhythm musicians about what they thought about playing in a kind of quote unquote kind of country band? Do you remember what you and other folks said about that?

00:54:59

Robbins:

Well, I don't know exactly what you mean.

00:55:03

Washburn:

Well, what I mean is, you weren't kind of a cowboy yourself?

00:55:06

Robbins:

No, no I wasn't. No.

00:55:08

Washburn:

And yet you were playing kind of cowboy kind of music?

00:55:11

Robbins:

Now when I was a little—. When I was younger, first learning, I did play a little bit of cowboy, because that's all I knew. But when I got to playing a little better, I got away from that. So I'm not a western player.

00:55:29

Washburn:

So what did you think about being in a western band?

00:55:31

Robbins:

Oh, it was okay because they played a little bit of everything. So that was fine. That was okay. But as far as going into a western band, I wouldn't fit. I just wouldn't fit. I wouldn't fit.

00:55:46

Washburn:

A more strictly western band?

00:55:47

Robbins:

Yeah the strictly western band, it's not my bag. It's not my bag at all. I'm just kind of in the middle of nowhere. If you want to figure it out, I'm just kind of in the middle of nowhere. Because I don't play modern jazz either, see. I don't play modern jazz either. So I play the old conventional music. Traditional—. Well, like I say if you turn on KABL, listen to KABL a while, you'll know. That's the type of music I like.

00:56:18

Washburn:

Yeah, I've listened to KABL quite a bit.

00:56:21

Robbins:

Yeah.

00:56:22

Washburn:

So how do you remember promoting your concerts there? Do you remember who promoted the concerts at Sterling Hall?

00:56:30

Robbins:

Gee, no.

00:56:30

Washburn:

So what did you do? You just showed up for the gigs?

00:56:35

Robbins:

Yeah.

00:56:37

Washburn:

And when did you have practices?

00:56:40

Robbins:

We didn't have any practices.

00:56:41

Washburn:

No practice? Why didn't you have practice?

00:56:46

Robbins:

Well, you see, in those days, a group of us guys that played, we all more or less knew the same tunes, more or less. We didn't have to practice, because we already knew the tunes. We didn't have to have any rehearsals. There was no such thing as a rehearsal. Now, I say that in one sense. Now, when I played with this Al Greco, you know we had a trio, now that rehearsed because we had comic acts. And we had a comic act, and it worked out the same way every time, identically. And then we had to rehearse for that. And we played Vegas, and we played a lot of clubs around here. But you see, what's tough now for musicians, if you got an act—. In those days, you could use the same act, and you could go to all different clubs with the same acts. On television, you do it once and you shot your wad. That's what makes television cruel. Television just devours material. Just devours it.

00:58:16

Washburn:

Because everybody will have seen that act? Yeah.

00:58:20

Robbins:

See, we'd go into a club for maybe three months, and then move to somewhere else, where nobody's heard us. Like I've said, now if you have a group, and you travel around the country with your group, if you're on television on a primetime, there will be more people seeing you than if you travel the rest of your life on the circuit. There will be more people that will see you that one night.

00:58:50

Washburn:

Yeah, yeah.

00:58:52

Robbins:

Yeah.

00:58:53

Washburn:

We got to switch this tape real quick here. I'm going to switch this tape here.

[End of Robbins 1]

[Begin Robin 2 03-29-03]

00:00:02

Washburn:

Here we go, recording again on tape two. (clap heard)

00:00:05

Robbins:

You see, like you take a guy like George Schwartz. He had a band right in his family. His sister played the piano; she's gone now, bless her heart. She's a nice piano player. And he had Macauley's. And they played—that's where they played. I think they played about four nights a week. But with me, it was different. I played around at different places.

00:00:33

Washburn:

Well, let me ask you a little bit more about the concerts at Sterling Hall, if I could. You said there was a lot of shipyard workers. Do you remember any sailors coming in there?

00:00:44

Robbins:

Oh, hell yes. Sailors and soldiers, marines. Oh yeah! The place was crowded. Every Saturday and Sunday night it was crowded.

00:00:58

Washburn:

Now, I talked to some guy who played at East Shore Park quite a bit.

00:01:02

Robbins:

Oh, I played there that's—. But I never played too much there. Is that place still there?

00:01:07

Washburn:

No, I think it burned down. And he said he had to have a lot of policemen out there because there was a lot of tension between the shipyard workers and the sailors.

00:01:15

Robbins:

Well, maybe. Of course, I never worked out there that much.

00:01:19

Washburn:

Now you said there weren't too many fights at Sterling Hall.

00:01:22

Robbins:

No. No. I don't say there was never any, but I never remember of any fights. And yet, you'd think around sailors and soldier you think there would be.

00:01:39

Washburn:

But Sterling Hall, it was not racially mixed?

00:01:45

Robbins:

No.

00:01:46

Washburn:

Just white people?

00:01:46

Robbins:

Yeah, mostly. I don't think there were any blacks at all.

00:01:51

Washburn:

Can you describe why it was that way in Richmond at that time?

00:01:54

Robbins:

Well, I'll tell you, in Richmond in those days, North Richmond was mostly black, and they kind of stayed by themselves. I can show you a picture of our class here at Grant School. There was no blacks. I don't think—. Well, even McFadden's. I don't think there were any blacks.

00:02:26

Washburn:

In McFadden's?

00:02:28

Robbins:

I don't remember any blacks.

00:02:30

Washburn:

What about Sweet's?

00:02:31

Robbins:

Well, maybe a handful but I would say no. I would say no. And like I said, there might be a handful. But generally speaking I would say no. Because I don't think the black people were that much for ballroom dancing.

00:02:47

Washburn:

But they were into swing music.

00:02:51

Robbins:

Oh yeah!

00:02:51

Washburn:

Basie and Ellington.

00:02:54

Robbins:

Oh yeah.

00:02:54

Washburn:

But Richmond at this time was very racially segregated.

00:02:58

Robbins:

What?

00:02:59

Washburn:

It was racially segregated, Richmond was.

00:03:02

Robbins:

More or less. Well, do you mean before the war? Oh, pretty well, yeah.

00:03:08

Washburn:

And during the war.

00:03:09

Robbins:

Yeah, more or less. But we had lots of Okies and Arkies coming. But the blacks seemed to kind of more or less stay in their own neighborhood over on the—.

00:03:22

Washburn:

The north side.

00:03:23

Robbins:

North Richmond, yeah. Which I guess they still—. No, they're all over the place now.

00:03:27

Washburn:

Now as a local, do you remember the Okies and Arkies coming into town?

00:03:35

Robbins:

Oh god, yeah.

00:03:37

Washburn:

How do you best remember noticing that these people were from another state?

00:03:43

Robbins:

Well, you could kind of tell the way they talked, you know? You know, they had their own little lingo, you know. And they were mostly, they were good people. They were nice. But you could tell just as soon as they opened their mouth, you could tell, you know. [laughs]

00:04:07

Washburn:

So, let's say, why were people—it's kind of a simple question—but why were people drawn to go to Sterling Hall to see Dave Stogner's band on that night rather than going to see some other band?

00:04:23

Robbins:

Well, I'll tell you about that, as far as I know, they did. But there were so many people here, that they went everywhere. It wasn't just Sterling Hall, they went wherever there was a dance, they were there. And the nightclubs along San Pablo Avenue, I can't remember the names of all of them, but most of them were all full, with Okies. And of course they liked to drink, you know? And the hours, on account of the war, the curfew—see it used to be from nine to one, your standard dance. Nine to one in the nightclubs. Five hours. But, when the war came along, it was eight to twelve, curfew. Eight to twelve, closed down at twelve o'clock. Which was fine with me, it's great to get home at twelve o'clock. But that was the standard. That was the law.

00:05:28

Washburn:

And if you were open afterwards?

00:05:34

Robbins:

Well, you weren't supposed to be—I don't know what they'd do to you, put you in a jail or what they'd do, but that was the law.

00:05:34

Washburn:

There were after-hours joints, though?

00:05:37

Robbins:

Maybe there were, I don't know about them. Maybe there were. But as far as I know of any clubs I played in, was eight to twelve.

00:05:44

Washburn:

See here at Sterling Hall, it says you ended there at seven-thirty to eleven.

00:05:49

Robbins:

Is that right? I don't remember that, see.

00:05:54

Washburn:

Let's see this one here. How late does it say you're going until?

00:05:59

Robbins:

The old standard before the war was nine to one.

00:06:06

Washburn:

Nine to one.

00:06:08

Robbins:

Yeah. For five hours for five dollars. [laughs]

00:06:12

Washburn:

For a worker. So now you said you were a plumber during the war. Why didn't you try to make a living playing music?

00:06:21

Robbins:

It was too hard. You can't.

00:06:25

Washburn:

Describe why it was too hard. Describe your thoughts of why you couldn't do it.

00:06:31

Robbins:

Well, in order to make a living at it, now this is generally speaking, there's exceptions to everything, but generally speaking, you had to be a first class musician, and maybe playing over in the hotels in San Francisco. You had to be able to read, and be a first-class musician. And, just the general person like me, and most of us guys, we were just

hobby. Just the hobby. And if we could make a little money at it, fine. But to make a living at it, no. We all had other jobs. All of us, we all had other jobs, no matter what we were doing. That was just the sideline, all it was. Because in 1935, there was no work for workmen. There was no work. But, it's funny how that is, as bad as times were with no work, when I started on trying to learn the plumbing trade, I could belong to the union. Before I got in the union, I got into a shop—five dollars a week. And I was non-union. I finally got into the union, then it was more. But I'd started off five dollars a week. That's—boy, I'll tell you. And Standard Oil workers, my dad worked at Standard Oil for forty years, and he got eight dollars a day. And that was considered good. Good money. Eight dollars a day, yeah. See in those days—.

00:08:23

Washburn:

But what would've you have to do to make it playing music?

00:08:29

Robbins:

Well, you had to be darn good to start with. And you had to be able to read music and most of your good work was in the hotels. That's where the elite played, the big bands. But even then, they would have got scale. Even then, no matter, even—. But, scale was real good money for being in the hotels. It was real good money. Because for four hours, they got as much as somebody else working on the outside, working as a laborer or a carpenter for eight hours. They got for four hours, see. So that's why the music business now has just absolutely gone to the dogs, because like I say, if you did a comparison to what it was then, you should be able to make a hundred to a hundred and fifty dollars a night now. And you couldn't begin to get that now! You couldn't begin to get that now.

00:09:41

Washburn:

On a regular basis?

00:09:42

Robbins:

Yeah.

00:09:45

Washburn:

Yeah, when you play weddings you could definitely, but no restaurants going to give out four hundred dollars to three band members for a night of music.

00:09:53

Robbins:

Just for example, I know a group called The Hot Club of San Francisco. The group is called that. They got a name. And, believe me, maybe I can't play very good, but I think I've got a hell of a good taste in music. If I want to brag, I'll go ahead and brag. But I know good and bad, believe me. And this Hot Club of San Francisco, those guys are marvelous. They've got three guitars, and a violin, and a bass. And I mean, they're too good. The general public wouldn't like them because they're too good. Now, I'm telling you the truth. I went down to a club in Point Richmond, what's the name of that club in

Point Richmond? It's a little club in Point Richmond. And those guys played there I think once or twice a month. And there's five of them. What's the name of their club? I should know it. I can't think of it. But they play there. Oh, are they good. I'll bet you those guys—I'll bet they ain't making twenty-five dollars a piece. I'll bet you because it's just a restaurant. It's just a restaurant. And it's a bar. But that's an example of your music business.

00:11:28

Washburn:

Well, let me ask you about the {inaudible} relations with the other musicians. Who were you good friends with in the music community? Who were your good pals?

00:11:35

Robbins:

Oh, Bud Schwartz, Jos Staley. We grew up since we were kids, playing. Jos, he's kind of fouled up now.

00:11:46

Washburn:

Now did you make friends with any of the folks who you met playing in the western swing band?

00:11:55

Robbins:

Leonard Barnett was a real good friend of mine. He was about the only one actually in there, and Sid {Wolver}. I worked a lot with Sid {Wolver}. But the rest of the guys, I didn't know them too well, I'd just see them on the job. You know? And play with them. But I weren't real good friends with them.

00:12:18

Washburn:

Now you and Stogner didn't hang out afterwards?

00:12:22

Robbins:

No, no. Dave was a real nice guy, but I never, like I say, I never hung out.

00:12:35

Washburn:

Well, let's talk for a bit, I mean, we have the time to talk about working as a plumber. When did you get a job there at the shipyards?

00:12:48

Robbins:

Well, when the war first started out, whatever year that was. '41, was it? Or '40? Now, there's a case with the union. The plumbers union was strong. Now I say I kind of knocked the musicians union. Well, I really shouldn't knock it, because I still belong. But as far as getting work, the plumbers union took care of me. I never looked for a job in my life. Now I'll say it. Now, you talk about union, I'll go the other way with the union. The plumbers union—when I first started out, I think I was getting fifteen dollars a week, I

think. I forget now. But anyway, here's the way the plumbers union worked. You're an apprentice—you have five years as apprentice, and every six months, you got a raise. Now that was the union rules that you didn't argue. I didn't have to go to my boss and say, "Hey, I want a raise." Every six months, I forget how much raise it was, but every six months you got a raise, up until five years when you turned out as a journeyman. Now I've worked for a few different shops. Maybe a shop would get slow, get out of work. I'd go down to the hall, the union hall. It was down on Fifth Street, I think. If I remember right, but that's going way back. And they'd send me somewhere else. So I never had to look for a job. And when that would run out of work or something, they'd send me somewhere else as an apprentice. I was apprentice. But they'd send me to another shop. As long as you did your work—you had to do your work. But they took care of you. Boy oh, boy.

00:14:53

Washburn:

What was the local you belonged to?

00:14:54

Robbins:

159.

00:14:57

Washburn:

Plumbers—. What was the umbrella group? It was the Plumbers Union Local 159.

00:15:00

Robbins:

Local 159.

00:15:01

Washburn:

Now it's the American Federation of Musicians, what's the plumbers union national? Is it American Plumbers Union? I'm not familiar with it. What's the title?

00:15:15

Robbins:

It's our Local 159, but we've merged with I think there's about three other locals we've merged with.

00:15:23

Washburn:

So you were in 159.

00:15:25

Robbins:

159.

00:15:26

Washburn:

Now can you describe what it was like to become a member of 159?

00:15:31

Robbins:

Well, it's hard to explain. I had to go to work every day at a shop, and pay my dues. Now I don't pay any dues now because I'm retired, after fifty years. Oh god, I must have had sixty years in now. More than that. But I don't pay any dues anymore, because after fifty years you don't pay anymore dues. But, the plumbers that are working, they pay dues. I don't know what they're dues are. Probably pretty high. But it's still a pretty strong union. Like the musicians union isn't, forget it.

00:16:11

Washburn:

159 cover everybody, even those who worked in the shipyards?

00:16:22

Robbins:

Well, I'll tell you, the shipyards—there was a little difference for the shipyards. When we went out there—I don't understand just how it worked—but we didn't get the full scale of a union plumber. It was a little less when we went out to the shipyards. But we were working six days a week, ten hours a day, so we were getting pretty good overtime, you know. How I ever did it all, I don't know. I was working six days a week, ten hours a day, and I was playing four nights a week. I don't know how I ever—. Well, when you're young. It's different when you're young and healthy. I was playing four nights a week, and I was working in the shipyards ten hours a day. Six nights a week.

00:17:12

Washburn:

You had a lot of energy. So you joined the plumbers union in '39? Oh, you built the shipyards, so in probably '40, '41?

00:17:25

Robbins:

You know, actually they don't have the records exactly right. See here's what happened, I was in the plumbers union—. Oh god, it was way back in the thirties, in the late-thirties. And then when the war broke out, or no, it was after the war. No, it was after the war. After the war I got playing with this group six nights a week, and I dropped out of the Union. I took a withdrawal of card. I didn't drop out I took a withdrawal card. So for two years, I just played music. For two years, I dropped out of the plumbers union, for two years. And then after two years when the music got bad—it got real slow—I went back into the union. So I lost a little bit of time on my pension because—. But gee, I—.

00:18:31

Washburn:

Now were you ever involved in organizing in the union?

00:18:33

Robbins:

No.

00:18:35

Washburn:

Okay.

00:18:36

Robbins:

I used to hate to go to the damn meetings. God, I used to hate it. Martinez. But the union's still strong, I mean, it's not as strong as it used to be, but we get our pension, you know. It's still strong. But like I said, the union, the plumbers union, boy it took care of me. Boy, it sure did.

00:19:05

Washburn:

Well I want to write down some stuff so when I come back I can talk to you, I can have some set questions like I have here for the music. So your first job out of high school, what was it there?

00:19:14

Robbins:

Apprentice plumber.

00:19:17

Washburn:

In '36?

00:19:19

Robbins:

Yeah, I guess it would be '36.

00:19:22

Washburn:

Okay.

00:19:24

Robbins:

Yeah, I guess it was '36. Yeah, I guess it was.

00:19:29

Washburn:

And then you worked for the shipyards in the forties, during the war?

00:19:35

Robbins:

Yeah. I worked the shipyards, and then I worked for the housing.

00:19:41

Washburn:

Who was that?

00:19:42

Robbins:

It was the Richmond Housing Authority.

00:19:43

Washburn:

Richmond Housing Authority.

00:19:44

Robbins:

All those apartments.

00:19:47

Washburn:

During the war also?

00:19:49

Robbins:

Yeah.

00:19:53

Washburn:

Okay, great.

00:19:56

Robbins:

Yeah. All through the—. Well, then I finally quit the housing to go play music.

00:20:02

Washburn:

You just told me that.

00:20:02

Robbins:

Yeah.

00:20:05

Washburn:

Okay. But it was Local 159?

00:20:09

Robbins:

Yeah. But the 424 was the musicians.

00:20:15

Washburn:

Right, 424 was musicians. Local 159, and you joined in '36, right away?

00:20:20

Robbins:

I think so, yeah.

00:20:21

Washburn:

Great. So when I come back next time we can talk about the plumbing. The reason why—. I'm going to turn this stuff off. Oh, I need to ask you quickly, the stuff that we've talked about, about the music, can I have your permission to use it to write a paper?

00:20:42

Robbins:

Oh yeah, sure. It's no secret.

00:20:43

Washburn:

You're not going to sue me?

00:20:44

Robbins:

[laughs]

00:20:48

Washburn:

I mean, I'm going to have to send you a waiver form. But the university we have to have an agreement with the person that you understand that I'm using this interview.

00:20:57

Robbins:

Well, I hate lawyers and suing.

00:20:59

Washburn:

Yeah, okay, well just so you understand.

00:21:02

Robbins:

I want to show you something.