Unknown Interviewer: This is October 29, 1990, and this is a conversation with musician “Catfish John” Tisdell at the KUFM radio studio on the University of Montana campus. Maybe we should just start it off and have us tell you...or have you tell us a little bit about your musical background, about when you started playing music, and what instruments you started playing. And then maybe just talk about some...maybe the songs you perform and—

John Tisdell: I don't know if I'm going to remember all of that, you know. I can start off just telling you when I started playing and stuff.

UI: Okay.

JT: Take it from there. Started playing guitar when I was about 14 or 13. Now I’m 38. It’s been fun. Music’s been a good friend. I got myself a 12-dollar guitar, started strumming on it. Took me probably ten years before I started performing. Never performed in high school, I was kind of a closet musician until...I grew up in Great Falls, by the way. Moved to North Carolina, and there I studied banjo, fiddle-playing, and log cabin construction, and alternative lifestyle. [laughs]

Then when I started my first performance there...actually it was in Denver, on the way down there with my friend Richard. Amateur night at a hotel there in Denver called The Oxford, which was an interesting experience. Did about three songs, and I was nervous as hell. Me and Richard auditioned on the sidewalk for this thing. Climbed up on stage and sang some original songs and shakily climbed down off stage, but it was fun. So that's sort of...I learned a lot about playing guitar just from songbooks like Beatles and Crosby, Stills & Nash and stuff like that. Always was interested in becoming a musician, but afraid to, so it took me quite a while to finally work up the nerve to perform, and then finally, it’s been an interesting path to learn about myself through performing. Had to go through a lot of self-analysis, you know, just to kind of overcome my stage fright. But it’s been a worthwhile trip.

That's kind of how I got into it. I never had had much in the way of formal training. I did take a few classes when I was in college in Bozeman in about 1970 to ’73. Flunked piano. But I’ve always enjoyed guitar-playing, and then when I got down to North Carolina, I was in a kind of back-to-nature sort of headspace and got into living in a commune and playing fiddle and banjo and jamming with people, and got involved in doing some square dances and going to folk...
festivals. Got into playing on some of these folk festivals. So I got involved in other stringed instruments, and then moved to Missoula with a friend and started a bluegrass band about 14 years ago now. That was called the Great Northern Bluegrass Band, and that’s how I got to Missoula. So we played for a year or two.

I got into working at KUFM, and that was my introduction to...I have a degree in broadcasting, which I got through this university, and that was how I got started in the broadcasting at KUFM. Got involved in various different groups around Missoula, and that’s just what I do is I try to play with people and put people on the air. It’s just fun to do.

UI: Are you playing with a group right now, or concentrating mostly on the radio?

JT: Mostly on the radio. Solo performing, I’ve started doing a lot more. Been in a variety of different bands. Irish groups, kind of country groups, and mostly I’ve done solo performance. I think that maybe due to the—

[telephone ring]

You might stop it.

[Break in audio]

UI: You were talking about why you think it is maybe that you’ve been doing more solo—

JT: Oh, solo stuff. Well, a lot of the time musicians find themselves in a dilemma like most artists, trying to make a living with their art, okay, and so what happens is they end up compromising what they want to do. That’s not what I’m into it for. I’m into it in a creative expression, artistic thing. I do it because I want to do what I want to do. Not because I want to do it to make money. I decided a while back if I wanted to make money, I ought to get out of the music business altogether. It’s not the business to be in to try to make money. So I do what I do because this is what I get the most fulfillment out of.

So solo performing has been the most fulfilling thing that I’ve been able to do. It’s difficult to hold people together, too, in a band. Two years max is about the longest I’ve been in any group, and that gets frustrating. You can’t get the quality that I want to get by having to pick up jobs, you know, a gig comes along and so you grab a posse of musicians and run out and do the job to make the money. Then you ride away with the loot, and no artistic satisfaction, so...I don’t know, that...I guess that kind of is why I’ve done more solo performing. Also, because I can tour. It’s difficult to grab people and go on the road with them. Takes so much work to do that. It’s a lot lighter of a situation for me to take off on my own and travel around and perform by myself. So that’s why I think I’m playing by myself mostly.

UI: Do you write some of your own songs, or do you mostly just perform like—

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JT: Traditional?

Ul: Yeah, traditional folk songs or things that were maybe from like 20...or, how far back...you could tell us something about the traditional songs and things like that.

JT: Well, for your first question, I do write my own songs, some of them. But mostly I perform other people’s material; although, I would like to go more towards an original song writing. A lot of the material that I do perform that’s traditional dates back, really hard to say. Some of it goes back to the Irish traditional folk music which is mostly 100 years old, probably, some of these songs. But most of it’s folk music that goes back within the last 15 to 30 years or something. Some of the blues tunes I do are from the ‘20s, the ‘30s, too. So I’ve gone into kind of more of a country blues vein. Started off in more bluegrass music, and found myself playing Appalachian string band music, which is another strain of bluegrass music. And then Irish music, and [unintelligible] kind of blues. Which is a radical departure [unintelligible]. I started playing some blues when I first started playing guitar and I’ve always enjoyed it, and so I took a turn into the blues about five, six years ago. And that’s been satisfying.

Ul: Would you be able to identify anything you would say was really a primary influence on why you wanted to play, or was it something, I mean, as far as the musical style or something you listened to, or...because musicians always get asked that question about influences.

JT: Yeah. Are you asking me about my music influences have been?

Ul: Sure, I’ll ask that.

JT: That, yes? Because I wasn’t so sure about the question. Geez...

Ul: Seems very varied.

Ul: Or maybe it’s the people that you’ve been in contact with. Would they have had more influence? [unintelligible].

JT: Everything influences you as an artist. The artists that I’ve been influenced greatly by, I think, surprisingly enough because I don’t sound much like them, Crosby, Stills & Nash influenced me a lot in the ‘60s to play music, acoustic music. There’s the folk rock thing. So I thought, well, that’d be neat to play guitar, you know, acoustic guitar. So I started doing that. And Cat Stevens and people like that got me started on guitar, and then listening to blues and people like Doc Watson and Taj Mahal and some of the traditional guys like Blind Blake and Blind Willie McTell and just all the traditional blues men got me turned into a blues direction.

A lot of variety, especially since I’ve become a disc jockey here at KUFM, that’s been a good thrill opening up my musical horizons. So started learning about jazz. I did a jazz show for a
while. You know, people like [unintelligible], killer speed-picker jazz players. Just a wider variety, it opened up my appreciation because before I had a preconception of what I wanted...the direction I needed to go. Now I can appreciate all kinds of musical styles, and I really try to not limit myself musically. Although, I have....To completely contradict myself, I have limited myself in some respects as trying to pursue a concert-performing career, because you have to somewhat label yourself so you can advertise yourself as country and Delta blues musician [unintelligible]. So I've limited myself intentionally when I’m in my salesman...I got my salesman hat on to sell myself. But I do draw from as many as I can, both [unintelligible].

UI: [unintelligible] were you sort of asking the question, maybe why, I don’t know, what motivated you? Was it just this innate desire, or did you have family, relatives who were musicians or anything? Did you grow up around it?

JT: No, I didn’t grow up around it. It’s something that I came upon entirely on my own, I think. Not to say that there weren’t people that I knew that played some music when I was just starting out. But I mean, when I really think way back before I even bought my first guitar, what motivated me to play guitar is a difficult question when I’m looking at being 13 years old. I don’t know. [laughs] I don’t have the answer to—

UI: Yes, there wasn’t something obvious, would be a really possible answer.

JT: Yeah, it’s difficult to know at that age what motivated me to pick up that guitar that I did and start sitting in the basement strumming a few chords and learning how to play the thing.

UI: The other thing I was wondering is if you’ve kept up with the instruments, you’ve mentioned the banjo, fiddle, and guitar, if you’re still playing all of them or if you’re doing anything else. I assume [unintelligible] guitar.

JT: Guitar is my main instrument for sure. Probably the longest that I’ve played other instruments in order would be banjo next, fiddle, then mandolin. I have also a Dobro, which is a National steel guitar for bottleneck slide playing, which is another style of guitar. Play electric guitar, also [unintelligible]. I recently acquired a button accordion, so I’m fooling with one of those, and I bought a keyboard recently, which is something I’ve always wanted. So, that’s a—

UI: —big change.

JT: Yeah, complete. I mean, I’ve always been a string player. I play harmonica, too, and that’s the only other thing besides a string instrument that I play. But the keyboard’s been fun to fool around with, so you were talking about influences and stuff, the keyboard is now the voice of the music of the ‘90s really. It’s the [unintelligible] stuff, if you’re familiar with that, I’m starting to fools with that drum machines and sequencers and synthesizers—

UI: Big [unintelligible].

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JT: —and it's real interesting for me to have effects, processors in playing all this electronic music and mixing it with traditional folk instruments, so.

UI: Be really interesting.

JT: Yeah, I feel good about having a broad spectrum of...being open to a lot of music. It feels much freer.

UI: Did you have any private instruction on your string instruments, or—

JT: Well, I took a couple of guitar lessons when I was in North Carolina. I would always just kind of learn from books. Get a songbook and say, “Oh, I know this song., I want to learn it. There’s chords up above the lyrics,” and strum the chords, but didn’t know much about timing or keys or scales or anything. So I took a few lessons, and my teacher there...like I took two or three lessons when I [unintelligible]. [laughs] He explained what a scale was to me, and I thought, wow, okay, and I...“Arkansas Traveler” and how to flat pick that [unintelligible] out of the C scale real great. And so that was...I really have to say, I haven’t taken many lessons, mostly because I haven’t been able to afford to take lessons really. Because they’re expensive. I know, because I’m a teacher. [laughs] I think lessons are a worthwhile thing, but you certainly can teach yourself how to play an instrument. I wish I had the time and the money. I’d like to go to like the Guitar Institute in L.A. at some point or some music school, so I could really concentrate on music, but I pretty much consider myself self-taught. A lot of the time I feel you can teach yourself about anything you want to learn if you set out and study it and get the books. It certainly is possible to learn music from books and tablature and recordings. It’s more reasonable to think we can learn music that way than riding freight trains and trying to find the music out there in the romantic vision of the folk musician, because I tried that and it wasn’t all it was cracked up to be. I can learn a lot more about music sitting at home in my apartment with my record player and my books, reading the music and the tablature and listening to the music...also talking to musicians and stuff. But I’m wandering way off whatever it was you asked me.

UI: Well, as long as we’re—

JT: Wandering.

UI: How do you compose your songs and—

JT: What inspires me to write, or how do I mechanically—

UI: Or how do you do it?
JT: —The process? Well, it will come in different ways. I read articles about this in magazines about how people approach music, and I guess it's...is it the chord progression first, or is it a melody line, or is it a lyric that comes to me first. Could be either one of those things. Mostly, it will be a chord progression on my guitar that I'll play. I may be inspired to write something for a particular reason. For instance, there was a song I wrote at one point because of the...I don't know if you recall the guy that sat on the railroad tracks in Los Angeles, or down in California, and stopped this munitions train that was running arms down to Central America. He got his legs...sat and tried to stop the train, his legs were cut off. I saw this on the news and it disturbed me, and so I thought, well, I'm going to...this guy deserves a song written about him. So I wrote a song, and that was motivated for kind of political reasons. I'm not a political songwriter. I don't consider myself to be one. It can come from an emotional place like that to deliver a message, and that's more of a poetic kind of a view, and then the lyrics will come. I suppose, though, I would say the most important thing would be the chord progression for me to come up with—a rhythm and a chord progression—and on top of that I'll strum something like that on my guitar and I'll hum a melody, and I'll free association into a tape recorder. Just saying kind of words that want to come out of my mouth. I'll try to connect with whatever emotion it happens to be at the time from the melody line that I can fit words into the melody line depending upon phrasing [unintelligible] the melody. That seems to be, close as I can tell, the mechanics of song writing.

Ul: Do you do your own notation, then, or do you work strictly with the recorder?

JT: Yeah, I don't work with written notation except for teaching purposes really. Most of my friends that I know that play guitar are by-ear, you know, play by ear. Don't read notation. They may read guitar tablature, like you saw in my book there. The difference between that and music notations—standard notation. But I learn songs from records. I put a record on, I'll determine what key it's in, I'll figure out how to play the song just by ear. I won't use any form of notation other than possibly writing out the chord progression with bar lines so I'll know what the timing is with the chord progression. Does that seem [unintelligible]?

Ul: I see you made a tape. Do you want to tell us about the cassette?

JT: Oh, sure. Yes, I've got three cassettes that I've put...I produced myself. These two here were put together at the same time. This one is the best of my radio show, which features myself, along with other people, meaning that I've got two songs on here and these other people have their own songs on here. Although, I might be playing background with them in various configurations. But I went through, a number of years ago, and decided I've got a closet full of radio jamboree programs that local musicians that have come up here and recorded on the air. I listened back to them, I says, “God, there's a lot of good music on this,” listening back. I went through and picked the ones that I thought were a good representation of what my radio show's all about. Some of the musicians on here are pretty good cross-section of what's going on in Missoula, I think.

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I do feel good about my radio show, like you're archiving musicians, I feel that the same thing that I do is bringing people up here and recording them for posterity, whatever. Putting them on the air and letting people hear them, it’s non-commercial music. A lot of these people would never be heard if it weren’t for being able to come up and play on the radio. So I feel real good about that. That’s how that tape kind of grew out.

This one is one that I put together for myself, and it was done basically the same way. All the cuts are from my radio show, but it features me. That’s one that I’ve sold on stage, or around town, and I have little display boxes and tapes that I sell out of around the state and different places. So it’s something I use as a demo tape to sell myself, and a prospective person that might want to hire me to do something, perform. So that was that tape, and they both were produced roughly the same time. This is one here that I recorded at the university in a concert I did it at the Gold Oak Room in the University Center. So it’s just a live recording of a concert that I did.

UI: We should state the name. The second cassette tape he was talking about is called “Country Blues.” The third cassette tape is called “Live in Gold Oak Room.”

JT: And the first one is just “The Best of the Radio Jamboree.” I’m hoping to put out a new one. Current priority project is to put out a tape to go along with my guitar instructional book that I just did. So that, I feel, is probably the next most important thing for me to concentrate my energy on. Then I would like to make another tape, but it would be nice to find some financial backing. I’ve produced these on my own, and I’ve broken even, and in the music business, breaking even on a recording project is basically a success story. Most people lose money on it. Even big recording stars. They spend so much money in the process, they lose money unless they go gold or platinum or something.

UI: Seems like it could be especially hard when you’re distributing it on your own and producing it on your own.

JT: Surprisingly, it’s...If you’re doing it on your own, you can do it reasonably cheaply. It depends on how extensive you want to go with it. If you keep your runs down to 100 to 500 tapes, you can probably recoup your investment if you sell half of those tapes. Okay. So you can essentially produce 500 tapes for 1,000 dollars roughly, and you can put out...If you can sell 250 of those tapes at even four dollars apiece, you know, you’d get your 1,000 dollars back.

UI: I suppose one of the advantages for you is that it’s coming from your radio show. You don’t have to worry about studio time, or especially with the way you do, you don’t have to worry about studio musicians or anything—

JT: Exactly.

UI: —that might be a problem.

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JT: You could spend a lot of money in the studio, and I've been lucky to be able to avoid that. That's how I manage to get through cheap as I do. But it is possible for people. I encourage people to make their own tapes, and to do it on a grassroots level rather than go out and spend a lot of money trying to get your tape...trying to make a tape, first of all, and then spending a lot of money trying to get it distributed to a major record label. With home recording equipment becoming more and more higher quality and more accessible and cheaper, it's becoming a trend, I think, for people to be making their own tapes and doing it on their own. And I like that. I've always liked that. It's alternative to established stuff, and that kind of...the recording industry, you know, the big record labels have been just like broadcasting—having a degree in broadcasting—they call the shots and they...it's a negative spiral, it's the way I look at it lots of times. The way things evolve, the cause of commercialism. I mean, I'm on a soapbox, I don't want to run off and go on and on about this. But I do think that it's a good healthy sign that the power is coming back down to the people essentially, with the ability to make their own tapes and distribute their own tapes—an alternative distribution and stuff like this. Because it's all my doing. I'm making my tapes, I'm doing it. I don't have to sign anything.

Ul: You hear the stories about the label's demands. Take this song off, rewrite this lyric, or something.

JT: Well there's all sorts of record labels, and there are those that I would love to get on. I mean, I would like to get on a record label. Don't mistake what I'm saying. I mean, it's just that they're very selective, and sometimes it's conspicuous in what their selection is. [unintelligible] what I'm saying. They follow the style. It might be stylish now to have effects processor on your guitar with the new folk music thing that's happening—I don't know how familiar you are with folk—but there's some things that are, I think...conspicuous. Conspicuous, the way that they pick their talent. So it's not the best musicians that get on, it's the ones that are saleable in the big leagues, definitely. Because you got to fight your way up through the minors and prove to be commercial before you get on the big labels. Then on the little ones, a lot of it is who you know, not how good you are. So that's a very true thing, I think, in terms of that. But I would like to get on a label. I really would. Sometimes I will send out my tapes to record labels hoping that they'll pick me up. Flying Fish Records is one that I think is a good record label, Rounder Records or Sugar Hill, some of the labels would be ideal for me. But unfortunately they haven't been interested. I've sent off my stuff, and I got a nice rejection letter from [unintelligible] from Kicking Mule Records. I mean it's understandable. It's a tough business too, so I can see their side of it too. But it's not to say that I won't continue and do it on my own. I mean, since we were just talking about, it's possible to do that on your own, and I think it's a worthwhile thing for people to make a tape at whatever level that you're at. If you're interested in doing it, make one and send it to your parents for Christmas. It doesn't have to be an official record. There's all sorts of degrees in there that we can operate with.

Ul: Yeah, how do you just go about...Is it pretty easy to find people to have on the show, the radio show?
JT: It's getting easier now that the show is becoming more known. It's been around a long time. I've been doing this for ten years. The Radio Jamboree as it stands, I don't think I've been doing it any longer than about four or five, something like that—I've forgotten exactly when it came known as the Radio Jamboree—but ever since I've been on KUFM, I've had musicians up to play and have played myself. To find my guests, I've been involved with a lot of the music scene around town, so I know a lot of the musicians. So every three months, I make one of these posters that are like that. I try to get on the phone and I call up all the people I know that play, and I say “If you want to play, why don't you come on up and do a little playing on the show?” I may run into somebody at Mammoth Bakery or something and say, “Hey, what you doing?” They'll say, “Yeah, yeah.”

I'll say, “Why don't you come on up and play on the show?”

So they say, “Okay.” So we nail down a time and schedule a session, and that's the way it happens.

Then there's people that will just call out of the blue, and I won't know them at all, because I do advertise on my show that if you want to play, then just give me a call at this number, or write to me. So then I asked them to send me some sort of demo tape. It can be as simple as just recording into a tape recorder like this. Just give me an idea of whether or not they can sing on key or keep a beat. If they can then I'm generally open to them coming up. I'm not necessarily terribly critical about how great these musicians are that come up and are on my show. I don't know how criticized I am for that, but I think it's important that amateur musicians have a place to go to be able to perform and have their music be heard. Because I think it's just as important as the people that have been playing a long time. We all got something to say.

UI: Are you on the road much anymore?

JT: I don't like being out on the road too much. I went for a six-week tour of the West Coast this summer, and I was trying to get more involved in playing in festivals. I'm pursuing a concert performing thing, and I haven't been playing in clubs much. Got tired of it. I used to play in them a lot more, and I just don't like being in bars very much, so. I try to perform for concerts or festivals if possible. This summer I spent six weeks on the West Coast from Port Townsend, Washington, and Seattle down to San Francisco and Santa Cruz and farther south. I was playing at folk festivals. I played the Seattle Folk Festival, Northwest Folk Festival, did a house concert in Portland, and went to San Francisco Free Folk Festival. Recorded some radio shows with various friends I have up and down the coast. Travelled with a recorder and did some jamming and recording of people. Ended up in Port Townsend, Washington, came back up the coast [unintelligible].
One of the highlights of this tour was getting an opportunity to meet and record a black blues fiddle player named Howard Armstrong, who was at a fiddle workshop in Port Townsend area. He was someone I've listened to on record for years and years, and he was at this fiddle workshop that I was at in Port Townsend area. I asked him, “Hey, would you want to record a radio show with me?”

He said, “Sure,” he'd do it. He was being kind of ushered around by this woman, and we had arranged to meet at this little party. I got to the party not knowing whether or not he really wanted to do it or not and they were expecting a concert, and so we ended up sitting down and performing a house concert together and recording this thing. It was just wonderful to be able to meet and communicate with this guy and record it and put it over the air for people to listen to. So that was a real nice thing that happened to me simply through being able to do this radio show. It's offered me some good opportunities to be able to play with a lot of different musicians and meet a lot of them, interact with a lot of musicians. I consider myself pretty fortunate to just be able to be involved in something that I've enjoy doing, and hopefully people out there are able to benefit some from what I do too.

UI: Is that planned when you go on the road? Do you have that planned ahead, or do you just have to [unintelligible].

JT: Yes. You have to book anywhere from six months to a year, year-and-a-half in advance to do a tour. This is how organized you have to be in the music business to actually go on a tour. It's very difficult for most musicians to be that organized. Most of us are not as organized. We just don't seem to have what it takes to do that booking. (phone rings) And I include myself in that category.

[telephone rings; break in audio]

UI: Let's see...

UI: We were talking about touring. Do you have any special memories you'd like to share?

JT: Touring?

UI: Aside from the—

JT: Well, living in the vandominium. [laughs] What I call my van. I got it rigged up pretty good, and it's just great to be out on the road traveling. I mean, I do enjoy traveling, and I think it's fun to tour. Once the leg work's done. Like we were talking about the booking end of things before, and I don't take to that very well. It's telephone solicitation, and I don't think most people are involved in music to become telephone solicitors. I mean I think they want to play...
music. But that's one of the necessary things if you want to be a professional musician, which I don't really consider myself. I think of myself as a semi-professional musician. I'm also a disc jockey and a board operator here at KUFM, and a guitar teacher. Everything I do is kind of music-related. I used to do carpentry work before this, and I was a television cameraman for a while and various different things. But I do like touring. I like playing music, and I dabble at it at the level that I feel comfortable with, that I feel I can get the most creative fulfillment out of it. And it isn't being out on the road 200 days out of the year, which I know a lot of people that are being professional musicians, that's what they're doing. To me, that doesn't sound like a good time. That sounds like work. It sounds loneliness. I'm more of a homebody than that. I like to like to hang out at home and have my comfort, and it's difficult traveling a lot. So I'm not cut out for touring a whole lot. What I want to be able to do—some of my goals—is to be able to tour a couple of times a year. The traditional touring time is fall and spring. I'd like to go out for about a month in the fall and a month in the spring. It would be great if someone else would do the booking part for me, but that's not too likely for some time.

Nothing seems to be jumping to mind when you ask me about any special memories or anything like that. I mean, there's an awful lot of things that have gone down the road [unintelligible]. Maybe something will flash up later.

UI: Can't really think of anything more to ask. Noticed in your packet, about on your way through Europe, were you doing music then?

JT: I have played music in Europe, but not in a pre-booked arrangement. I wish that I could, but it's very difficult to get work visas and things like this in Europe. Although, I've done street music there, and have done some performing in the pubs. A little bit in kind of a spontaneous sort of thing, which is the...I don't know, it's as real to me as the pre-booked touring, although I would like to do that. I think of it sometimes as traveling the low road and the high road. You can hitchhike around and play street music, or you can fly around and perform in concerts. There's got to be a gray area in-between there. I hope that I'm heading out towards the high road from the low road, but I certainly travelled the low road. [laughs] Some good experiences have happened there. But I do feel...I'm getting together, I'm getting more together all the time. Understanding the way it works. The way you have to discipline yourself to get on the phone and arrange that stuff. It's real hard to do the booking for me, is the thing I have to say. It's probably the most difficult thing for me is to just get those jobs lined up.

I am doing some concerts around the state. The next one will be in Butte [Montana] probably, like December 1, I think. I'm working on a show there, [unintelligible]. One of the latest projects has been recording Radio Jamboree concerts around the state. I did one in Bozeman at the music recital hall there, and had two groups play. I opened up the show and had [unintelligible] and Roadkill come on and play and a group called The Wheelhouse (?), which is an excellent bluegrass band out of Bozeman, and recorded that show and made radio shows out of it. Came home and edited it up and put it on the air. They're being sent to KGLT, and my shows are now in Bozeman so they air over in Bozeman also. They used to go to KEMC, so my show used to be

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aired all over Montana and in through Wyoming. As far as the Radio Jamboree concerts, I did one in Helena at Second Story Cinemas also. So I've got one more in Butte and I'll probably...may do one in Missoula, I'm not sure. But I was...I've been working on four of these Radio Jamboree concerts for the time being. I think about music projects—it's like this is one, my new tape would be one, so I take things kind of in segments.

UI: Seems like that way you could get a different, wider variety... maybe not a wider variety of people, but you’re getting a chance to get new people that wouldn't be able to come to Missoula to do your show.

JT: I feel good about going to the communities and trying to get a representation of the community’s music up on stage. And then bringing it back and putting it on the air. The places I’m going, aside from Bozeman, are places that carry the KUFM signal. And I think it’s important that people realize that music is something that happens all around them. It’s not something that comes over AM radio. It’s not on the top ten. It’s something that’s happening in the room next door to you. Some kid strumming on cords and scratching his head and feeling like his girlfriend left him, and so he writes a song about it. I mean it’s a think that I feel is...like with my tapes, it’s a grassroots thing, and it’s real important, I think, for people to connect with it at home, in their backyard, rather than thinking of it as something that the big record labels feed you. That commercial TV stations feed you. Taking control of our own entertainment, so to speak.

UI: Can you describe your audience as being...in general—

JT: Demographics? [laughs]

UI: [laughs] Yeah.

JT: You know, I—

UI: Do you find the same kind of people that like folk music [unintelligible].

JT: Well, I would say generally the age group would be from somewhere in the mid-20s to mid-30s roughly. But I think music is a nice thing to bring all different types of people together, and I like that sometimes they'll be older people that will show up for shows. I'll go out and do a concert like I went to Hamilton, I think, to play a concert at a little coffeehouse that they had called The Frozen Logger (?) down there in an old church, and quite a few older people came. A little unnerving for me because I was used to playing for younger, kind of mid-30s to 20s, 30s group. But I brought out my National steel and played the “Old Delta Blues” for them, and they didn’t know quite what to think of it. [laughs] But it was something different for them, and they didn’t throw anything at me, so. They paid me and—

UI: It was a success. [laughs]
JT: But it's neat to play. I've played for kids, too at grade schools. So it's nice to have a wide variety. But generally, the people that come to my shows when I play are in mid-20s, mid-30s, you know, maybe into the 40s a little bit. A little older now that I'm getting older, pushing 40 myself. I guess, they can identify with me.

[Break in audio]

I was going to say about...I think it's important to get as much out of your life as you can, because you aren't going to be around for very long. So if you don't do what you dream of doing, that's it. Got one life to live, so. There was a song I came across by Steve Goodman who was one of the renowned folk singers of this century. He recently died, and he wrote a song called "You Better Get It While You Can." He wrote this about an old guy named Carl Martin, incidentally who used to play in a group in a jug band with that man Howard Armstrong I was telling you about, that I recorded—the black fiddle player I recorded with. He was in the band Martin, Bogan and Armstrong. Well, Steve Goodman wrote the song about Carl Martin, and it was called "You Better Get It While You Can." And it's very true. I took Steve’s song and reworded it a bit to myself, and that's something I do from time to time, is just put my own thoughts into the songs. I take bits and pieces and elaborate on them. I think that's the folk process. But that's something that I've always felt was very important was to follow your own beliefs and your own path, even though it might not be the mainstream. It might not be the main [unintelligible] that other people have. My life has been very much an alternative, I think, to a lot of people's. A lot of the reason is because I haven't followed [unintelligible] things so much. You know, seems like an awful lot of people are motivated to...out of insecurity, trying to find some kind of solid security in their lives. So it's just real important, I think, to identify our values. I'm not saying it's not important for college kids to go and take business courses and learn how to be successful. But I think it's real important to be able to put a value on other things like music and whatever you feel like doing. It might not be what mom and dad wants us to do, or it might not be what society puts the stamp of approval on, but I think it is what our values are that's important. So it's real important just to go out and do those things while we've got the time to do them.

UI: That's great.

UI: This concludes our interview with John Tisdell. “Catfish John” was interviewed by Rob Lindsay, Bill Stellmach, and Patty McCarty.

[End of Interview]