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Kristen Gates: My name is Kristen Gates, and I am a graduate student at the University of Montana in the History Department. Today is Thursday, October 17, and the time is 1:12 pm. I'm here with Michael Purington, and I'll just have you introduce yourself.

Michael Purington: Okay. I'm Michael Purington, and for our purposes today, I was a member of the Lost Highway Band from 1974 until 1985.

KG: Great, thank you. Just to start off, how did you become interested in music?

MP: We actually lived in an outskirts of Seattle, a place called Kenmore, Washington. We used to go to Lake City, which is kind of a [unintelligible] older neighborhood. My brother took me when I was eight years old to see Elvis Presley in *King Creole*. When Presley would be—of course he was lip-syncing, but nobody knew that back then—he'd start singing a song, and the whole audience would stand up and start clapping their hands along with it and go crazy. Everybody there, I could see their focus was, oh I love him! I remember very clearly, 'I want to do that. I want to do that.' So, I started getting more and more interested. I played my first gig for money when I was 13 years old, which is 1965. I'm very old. [laughs] Yeah, a girl from across the road—her name was Carol Mings (?); she had a band, and I played saxophone in the school band. She needed something to do something sort of like bass, and so I played the 'bum, bum, bum,' whatever. Then I took solos here and there and all that, but then she showed me how to play guitar. From then on, I'd go down to the Music Center, and they had a rack of guitars. On each side of the rack, there was big long signs, 'do not take guitars off rack.' I would take a guitar and play. Finally, they figured out they weren't going to be able to stop me, so they showed me where they gave lessons, and there were amplifiers in there so I could plug the guitar in.

When I was 15—my mom had been telling me for a long time that I was incorrigible, and she was absolutely right—so I went down to live with my dad in Lewiston, Idaho. I didn't know anybody. I told him I wanted a guitar more than anything, and I had this old saxophone. So, he took me down to this music store, and they took the saxophone and 12 and a half dollars for this guitar called the Harmony Rocket guitar. I loved that guitar. It was a hollow-body guitar, so you could hear it when it wasn't plugged in. Then later I got an amp—this little tiny [unintelligible] amp, one of those corduroy ones, and it just sounded great. Because I was there and I knew nobody, I would come home from school every day, and I would spend all my time in my bedroom with the guitar and this very, very thick book that said *The Golden Beatles*. This was in 1966, so that they had every Beatles song up to *Rubber Soul*, including the songs that the Beatles hadn't recorded and other bands that recorded of their songs. So, I learned to play all

those Beatles songs. Then I started figuring out how to listen to a record and figure out what chords are playing. When I got back, my guitar hero in Missoula came back and sat down and listened to me playing in one of those rooms, and he asked me to join this band, which was called The Prism. I was totally honored. I was just amazed. We had a great time, and we played all that summer. We played.

KG: This was the late '60s?

MP: Yeah. The '60s were, like it was teen club. There's always a teen club, Peppermint Palace, and then it ended up being the Mad Hatter over where the Desperado—I don't know if they're still there on Russell. It was when, all of a sudden, everything got psychedelic, they have these amazing gigs at the ballroom at the UC [University Center]. Yeah, at the Copper Commons all the way upstairs, and that was 900 capacity. They had a light show. It was called arginal (?) lights. I'll say this because I don't care—everybody was dropping acid and smoking pot or hash, and it was kind of neat because there...No cocaine was around. There was a thing that everybody said speed kills, so people would smoke dope. When you'd go to something like that, you dropped some acid. It was astounding. This one big local band—probably the band that made it the biggest until Mission Mountain Band—they were called...oh, they were called the Initial Shock.

KG: Yeah, we've done some research on them in the class.

MP: They were actually playing in San Francisco on the bill with Janis Joplin, Santana—all these bands at the Fillmore West and the Avalon Ballroom and all that, so they came back to Missoula in 1968. The UC ballroom is supposed to be 900 capacity, but [unintelligible] more than that because everybody's kind of cuddled together laying down, just watching the things on the ceiling that weren't there. Those guys were a fantastic band. That inspired me so I wanted to really get something going. The problem was...The music I played and the way I like to play, nobody considered having me in their band. So, I got together with a friend of mine, and we started playing two-piece. Then he played harmonica and congas, and then we got a bass player and a drummer and we called that Bacon Fat. We were horrible. [laughs] We would drink too much beer and play a bunch of old crap. People would love to dance. That was still a time...I think you could probably still get away with it if you yelled, "Grab your woman. It's 'Louie Louie' time." Everybody'd get up and dance. Yeah, we did all the old stuff.

Then we got asked to join a band in 1973, and that was my first summer on the road playing bars. I didn't think it was go...It was everything I envisioned it would be, which I thought was a fantasy, but it wasn't. Everybody wanted you to have whatever they had, and there were women. [laughs] That was just part of the thing. By the end of three months doing that, I was just fried. Also, I was sick of psychedelic music. We had been playing very loud. That was the summer of "Smoke on the Water," and I was tired of it all. I used to sit around and play my acoustic guitar. In 1973 was when I committed myself to write songs every day, to really work on my songwriting. Yeah, I just went out once again to the Copper Commons, and I was sitting

down there in the bottom part with all the little bushes and stuff. This young guy came in. He says, "Can I jam with you?"

I said, "What do you play?"

He said, "Fiddle." At that time, it's what a friend of mine called the country rock scare of the '70s, but it was really a big deal. This kid—I said, "Yeah, but you gotta get a six pack." So, he went and got a six pack and brought it back. We sat down, and he was incredibly good, so we started working with him. He had a friend who played banjo and dobro; they ended up playing banjo, dobro, twin fiddles. The banjo player also played bagpipes, and so there's all these. Another thing about that era was we loved all kinds of music. We'd do "Mannish Boy" by Muddy Waters, and then we'd do "Sailors Horn Pipe" or "Mountain Dew"—a bluegrass song—and then we'd do "Night Moves" by Bob Seeger. It was a seven-piece band, so that was a lot of guys to have in the band, but I really loved it. In fact, I met my wife in 1979 on the 17th—on St. Patrick's Day in 1979. I met her, and we spent most that year together. It was unlike the thing where you wake up and she's gone. She was still there, and then later she came over and we started hanging around during the daytime too. I was with her for most of the year, and then we had to go back home. She was heartbroken, and I just felt really, really strange.

KG: Where was this at this time?

MP: This was in Fargo and Minneapolis and that whole area in the Midwest. What ended up happening was she emailed me in 2007, and we got married 30 years after the night we met.

KG: Oh, my goodness.

MP: We got married—we met in 1979, and we got married in 2009 on St Patrick's Day.

KT: Wow! That's quite a story.

MP: Yeah, it was amazing. Here's what happened to us—and this is something I want to tell you about—she started telling me about the band from an audience viewpoint. She knows a lot about music, okay, and it got me interested. I found this...we broke up that whole seven-piece band of 1980, but in '85 we got back together. We did a reunion, and we had a mobile studio, so we recorded it. I found a cassette of it. I took it over to Rick Kuschel at The Recording Center. He had this thing that took out all the tape hiss and everything and made it sound like a really big venue. Anyway, you could hear everything really well. I don't have any copies of that right now. It was more like for a souvenir. Friends and family and all that. But Rick Kuschel, I can call him and tell him to run one of those off for you because I don't have any copies.

KG: That sounds amazing.

MP: My wife has one copy, and she's not gonna part with it.

KG: I wouldn't even ask.

MP: I'll tell him to run one off so you can just...He's right across Pine Street from the Oxford.

KG: So, what was the seven-piece band at that time? What was your—

MP: Lost Highway Band. The Lost Highway Band—we used the name the first time in February of 1974; they had this thing called the bluegrass breakfast with a whole lot of pretty well-known acts. The Beach Boys—I don't know why they hired the Beach Boys. Missoula audience just stood there staring at them. I remember one of them went out front and was talking to this girl in the front, 'What's happening? What's happening?' because they were used to everybody knowing it was just this fun thing. Missoula has always had this—and I don't want to be calling people snobs or anything—but everybody was just so hip. They couldn't just listen to the Beach Boys and go, 'Surf music, wow! This is fun.' Everybody just kind of stared at them and went like this [gently claps] when the song was over. We got to play at like three or four in the morning. That was the first time that a big crowd got to hear the fiddle player and me, but we ended up with...We ended up working all the time. We just played. We didn't go on tour. We didn't know what a tour was. We were just playing all the time.

KG: I guess you kind of already answered a few of these other questions that I had. It sounds like in terms of musical influences, it ran the gamut.

MP: Everything. Yeah, everything I became a Springsteen nut in 1975. The thing was, my opinion of country music was country music was Hank Williams, Patsy Cline, Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings, and there's a lot mostly top-40 is chasing after fads. I've never really had much respect for that; although, there have been some great songs on top-40. We played, we tried to pick the greatest songs that had ever been. They didn't have to be well known.

KG: So, you were doing a lot of covers.

MP: Yeah, did a lot of covers, and I wrote a lot of songs. What we did was in the spring of 1974, I read an article in *Rolling Stone* saying Willie Nelson had moved to Austin because he was sick of Nashville and all that crap. Waylon Jennings were there, and we were big fans of Jerry Jeff Walker. "Up Against the Wall Redneck Mother." Anyway, we said, 'let's go to...we're going to Austin.' The banjo player and the fiddle player got in this old International Scout, and my buddy and I—he was playing kind of drums and harmonica at the time—we bought a 300 Chevy station wagon. We drove down there. When we got there, we were broke, so we went down to this street called Guadalupe Street. They called it "the drag", and we played there because we'd get enough money to eat. The most important thing was to be able to buy some Lone Star beer. Then we'd eat. Gradually we started asking people, we'd go to other people's gigs, and we'd say, 'can we get up during your break and play? We came all the way from Montana, and we just want people to hear us.' They felt sorry for us. Then we'd say—because we didn't have a

bass player yet—‘can your bass player jam with us?’ because it's just three chords. We'd get up there, and all of a sudden. We just had this chemistry so even then there's only the four of us with a bass player. It just exploded, and people started “Whoo-hoo!” and going crazy and everything. This poor band would have to get up there, and play top-40 rock after we played there. [laughs]

Anyway, we started getting hired, and we got some really good press down there. When we ended, five months later, when we ended up going back to Missoula we started playing these really good shows. We were headlining this one show and Mission Mountain Wood Band was on the bill when we were headlining because they were saying, “From Austin, Texas, the Lost Highway Band.” You can't help it. After you've been there—for me, it was a few weeks or a month or so, you start saying ‘y'all. How y'all doing tonight.’ Austin, Texas, and that was just...We really were...That was our birthplace. There was so much incredible and so many different styles of music. South of Austin there was this whole blue scene—the greatest blues artists would play there—Muddy Waters, B.B. King. We were based out of there for four years.

KG: What years were—

MP: That was 1974 through 1978.

KG: Okay, because when I was doing some research on the Top Hat, there were some advertisements in the *Missoulian* around that time that was kind of I think welcoming you back to the stage and everything. I was just curious. How you became associated with the Top Hat?

MP: Oh, we had this guy—he wasn't exactly a friend. He was kind of a transient, but he had a guitar and he played the guitar really well. He knew all this music from Appalachian, old timey stuff and the Ozarks and all that. He called himself Moses. I said, “There's a place downtown called the Top Hat.” They had this little, tiny corner stage with this little fence, only there's no pickets on it. But there was just a railing kind of thing, and you could comfortably, you could sort of fit four people up there. We hooked up Moses so he could play. Then we said, ‘we should come down here with Chojo and Price. Chojo Jacques, he was half-Chinese and half-French. I mean, he really is the best fiddle player I've ever heard except for Vassar Clements or something. And Price Quenin, who played the banjo, was just amazing, and he was a good singer too. We started playing at the Top Hat in 1974, and all of a sudden they had Music Tuesday from...They started having music on the weekends, but they had us play Tuesday through Saturday.

KG: Every night?

MP: No, Tuesday through Saturday once every month. It got so we'd come in Tuesday at 8:00 to set up our stuff and everything, and the place would already be full. Then after we went to Texas for a few months, four months I think it was, and came back, it was insane. When we came back, they had built a...on the east...Well, the Top Hat, had built a bigger stage. Then they

built one on the west wall, and then they ended up expanding that when Steve Garr took it over and made a really big stage. But yeah, it was fantastic.

One thing I learned about myself was I didn't have this...I saw this thing in the eyes of people in Austin that were making it big. I got to sit down with Emmy Lou Harris. I've always loved her music; she makes me cry. When we sat down together—she's from L.A.—and she started telling me all about all these connections and then get a hold of so-and-so and you'll get your records, all this stuff. These guys are completely enveloped in this, and I wasn't like that. I loved to play music. I managed the band. I decided which songs we'd play, and I'd call out the songs at night and all that stuff. I reached a point...

No, no, I'll tell you when I knew I wasn't going to keep doing it for much longer. Bruce Springsteen was playing at the Coliseum in Seattle in October of 1980. We had six people in the band plus a sound man. Four of us bought tickets, so we were gonna play one night at this place down on Pioneer Square called the Old-timers Café. The next night we were gonna see Springsteen. Then on the following night, we were gonna play there again. We were getting our stuff all set up, and my buddy came over and said [whispers], "Bruce Springsteen is outside looking at our poster." I said, "Oh, bullshit," and I went out, and he was walking up the street with this entourage. "Hey, Bruce, Bruce!" We ran up there, and we started talking. Our guitar player bummed three extra tickets out of the show. They got the best seats in the house.

KG: You just went up to him on the street?

MP: Yeah. I said, "Why don't you come down and play some music with us?" because I was aware of the fact that every now and then, he used to do that a lot. He'd just show up and get up with a band and play. I didn't think he'd show up. The people in his entourage came right out and laughed at me when I asked him to come play with us. We had this drummer that was called Mr. Fun, and he was quite the prankster. He says, "Hey, let's do 'Badlands,'" which is a Springsteen song.

I said, "Okay," and then I said, "There's a young fella in town trying to get known, and so we're going to help him out, do one of his songs for him. His name's Bruce Springsteen; this is 'Badlands.'" I was halfway through the first verse, and I looked at the end of the bar and he was sitting down like this. We played that, and I played it and sang it the very best I could. Then I knew he was a real big blues fan, so we played "How Blue Can You Get" by B.B. King. He kept sitting a little closer and a little closer, and by the end of "How Blue Can You Get," he was at our end of the bar six feet away from us. He walked up; he says, "Can I play?"

I said, "I don't know. Can you stay in tune?" I said, "Sure, if you can stay in tune."

He goes 'heh, heh,' and then he got up and jammed with us, and we played "Route 66." The part where it says "go on to Missouri," and all that, he said, "go on to Missoula." Then we sat

down and talked for a while. I suggested a couple of songs, and I suggested "Midnight Hours." He says, "Yeah, let's do 'Midnight Hour.'"

There was an article next day in the *Seattle Times* that had that thing, 'sure if you can stay in tune.' It said, Springsteen's quote was—because he was this man of the people, man of few words guy, right—he says, "They were nice guys, Lost Highway." But what messed me up in a really good way—he was touring behind a double album called *The River*. He was three years, four years away from when he got enormous—"Born in the USA" and all that. He was getting ready to play "The River," he said, "This song is going out to the guys in Lost Highway." My bass player and I were in this motel room in the dark just laying there. My bass player said, "Well, that's about the most incredible thing that's ever happened to me in my whole life." I said, "Yeah," but what I saw in his show was he spent every second practicing himself, practicing with the band, doing sessions, doing interviews. Those guys that really mean it: 12, 14, 16, hour days. They're serious. So, yeah, that's when I went, if I was really gonna do this, I would have been doing that.

KG: All in.

MP: Yeah, I was having fun. I was having fun. Anyway, you can use however much or how little you want of this.

KG: No, no. That's an incredible story. Emmy Lou Harris and Bruce Springsteen.

MP: Oh, we got to open for George Thorogood and B.B. King. We were on the bill with Jerry Jeff Walker down there. Actually, Willie Nelson—we're playing this place called the Little Opry House; we were playing in the bar and he was in the concert bar.

KG: Just to backtrack a little bit, could you identify the other members of the band at this time just so that we have it?

MP: Yeah, okay. There was Chojo Jacques. It's C-h-o-j-o and then J-a-c-q-u-e-s, on fiddle and mandolin. Then there was a Price Quenin, Q-u-e-n-i-n, who started with banjo and then he ended up playing banjo, dobro, fiddle. Those twin fiddle songs are so cool. They brought Celtic music into it, and I just fell in love with them and okay. Then there was Jeff Delongchamp; we called him J.D. He was pretty well-known around Missoula. He was an excellent blues guitarist, and excellent blues guitarists know how to play other kinds of music without overdoing it because they have the blues for a base. You can do anything from there. Then Chuck Hamilton played the drums. Yeah, that's everybody. Well, no, Paul Kelley was playing bass. He sang with me a lot.

KG: I think you've already, you kind of talked about this, but how was the experience different playing in Missoula than it was on tour?

MP: Our favorite town to play was Bozeman because Bozeman people, they were hipster music. They were aware of what...most of them knew where our music was coming from, and probably couldn't name which artist or the song was. But there were also a lot of people that just thought it was fun, and that was the idea. We used to play the Molly Brown, big club, the Cat's Paw. We'd play up at Big Sky, ski resort at Buck's [unintelligible] Bar. We had five or six places in the Bozeman area, we'd play. Missoula—once they gave in and decided they absolutely loved us, then it was just...I mean really...That thing about the bar filling up a couple hours before you start playing is, it's kind of scary. But yeah.

KG: I think you had mentioned this previously before we started recording, but who was the owner of the Top Hat?

MP: Well, initially, this guy named Harry Boskovich, and he wasn't involved with the music at all. A woman named Patti Lacasse (?), she started booking the music—she was the day bartender. Then what happened was Harry Boskovich was getting really old, and he wanted to sell it. These people came over here from Wisconsin, and bought it. The day bartender—that was the most successful day bartender in the history of this town—her name was Cindy. She's been a meter maid for a long, long time, but she was this beautiful day bartender. There were always bouquets of roses that guys brought in. She could make each guy feel like she was in love with only them. [laughs] She was good—huge tips. Yeah, so the Wisconsin people, okay. Then the guy called, Zermi (?), John Zermullen (?)—a lot of people call him Pat Jack—but he decided to buy it. The Park Hotel wasn't doing very good; it was doing real well '75, '76, '77. In 1978, when these guys bought...when the Top Hat started getting huge again, Jack bought the Top Hat at that point. He had it until 1986. The night that place closed down...You should try to find that article.

KG: Actually, I did find that article. It was front page Sunday paper, and then there was the whole lifestyle section too had the—

MP: There's a thing where they interviewed Cindy, they interviewed me, they interviewed a really well-known musician around here, Michail Story. I forget who else, but anyway it was that night...See, I had that front storefront office there, now and then, I'd just get my key and unlock the door and let a couple people in. Go in there and lock it. Buddy of mine got up and played—we both had these really long coats on, and we got up and there was already seven or eight musicians up there. We played some pretty well-known R&B music. The place went crazy. You couldn't move. It was a total fire hazard at night, but nobody cared. So, the Top Hat was closed from; it was closed '87, '86-'87, part of '86 and '87.

In '88 Steve Garr bought it and he completely remodeled it, but by the time it was full up with people you couldn't see all these ferns and this wonderful ornate carpentry he'd done. It was just the To Hat again. [laughs]

KG: The aesthetics weren't so important when everybody was packed in there. That kind of leads me to, I mean, how did the change in ownership or the bartenders or whoever was booking the music, how did that kind of change as new—the new phases and the new ownership?

MP: Well, the Top Hat became known as a pickup date. Not only that I also worked out a place in Billings, in Bozeman, Missoula, and near Spokane—there was a place called Gator McKlusky's. It was actually Post Falls, and it was close to, it was really close to Coeur d'Alene, and it was an 800 capacity place. I started bringing these people through, and they could have four dates across. I didn't do that many of those. Those were very difficult. You're calling up a bar owner who pays \$12, \$1,500 a week for a band, right, and telling them to spend \$2,000 for a solo act for one night. But once they did one, "When's the next one coming through?" Because your ticket sales would pay for the act, and then these ring-ups were just all free and clear.

KG: Pick up dates, in the sense that it was people traveling through, and then [unintelligible].

MP: Yeah, because otherwise they were going to have to put out...The way those tours work is there's, say, \$10,000 a week has to come in, right? Well, it turns into a lot of money if you have to stay overnight, pay for everybody's motel room, all this stuff. So, instead of paying out money, they all booked the date with rooms and meals and all this stuff.

Oh, let me tell you about Bo Didley. Bo Didley came in, and he had the most complex food things set out. There was ribs and certain special salads, certain vegetables, certain fruits, and all that stuff. He walked in he looked it all over, he says, "Yep, this is what I asked for." Then he stood there, and he says, "Somebody get me some chicken McNuggets." That's what he ate.

I said, "Well, Bo, what about all this stuff?"

He said, "Well, that's for my friends and the press and whoever wants to eat this kind of stuff. I don't eat this kind of stuff." And Bo Didley, he actually, it was almost like a tent revival—his show—because instead of god, it was all rock and roll because he was one of the original rock and rollers. It just, ah! He just did...some of those acts were unbelievable. Guy named David Bromberg, hugely popular in Missoula, and a lot of people wouldn't know him except on the East or West Coast. But people loved him here, and he came and played solo. Yeah, we sold it out before the night of the show. It got so quiet that because he was telling this story [whispers], and he was talking very quietly. It got more and more complex. He had this water bed with hot and cold running and Vaseline Intensive Care lotion and all that stuff. His road manager came up to me, he says, "The help is blowing the show." He pointed over to the bar, and the bartenders behind the bar, they didn't realize. They weren't in touch with what was happening out there. All laughing and doing all this stuff. I went up to Pat Jack, and I said, "You have to tell those guys to be quieter because the road manager just said they're blowing the show." So, Jack, I'm just going to tell you what he said, I thought he was gonna go, [whispers]

'hey, you guys have to be quiet. This is a national act.' He went up there, he stood there and they all kind of looked over at him. He says, "Shut the fuck up!" [laughs] That's all that was. Yeah, I mean this guy was such a master. If the crowd started getting a little bit loud he'd back off from the microphone, so you had to listen. You had to listen harder to hear what he was doing. He was just so amazing, and we kind of got to be friends. He was cool. I gave him a ride out to the airport, and he was looking around. He's from New York, looking around, and most people would say, 'god, I can't believe how beautiful western Montana is!' He was looking around at all this stuff, and he says, 'why don't they pave this?' [laughs] Only about half joking.

KG: Yeah, I lived in New York for a while so it definitely sounds like a New York response. I guess, how did you become involved in the booking process? Did John reach out to you?

MP: I booked my own band, okay, back when it was called Bacon Fat. I was doing my bookings, and the bar owners said, "Do you know any other bands? because all I'm getting is these Flathead Valley bands that are terrible. You guys aren't any great artists, but you keep them dancing and you have fun and everybody has fun." So, I started booking these other bands too, and I was making money doing booking. Then this thing about the pickup bands; I had known about that for a long time. When Jack had the Top Hat, I helped him bring in Vassar Clements and a couple other people—one of the greatest fiddle players in the world, but anyway. No, I came to him, and I said, "Listen, I'm going to cut down how much I go on the road," because I was just fried and the fiddle had quit, and we tried to replace him with this other guy. It was a disaster. I says, "I'm just gonna play with a five-piece, and I would like to take care of your booking and promote shows and actively go after these people." The secret was there's a book back then in the '80s, it cost \$125. It was billboard artists and managers, talent whatever. You could find anybody; you find—

KG: Like a directory?

MP: Yeah, you could find any act or band or their booking agency or their management, and I just started calling around. After a little while, people started calling me. Jack would say things to me like, he says, "Okay so there's this black guy named John Lee Hooker. Have you ever heard of him?"

I says, "You'd probably be impressed that he was in the *Blue Brothers* movies, but he is one of the top three blues artists of all time: B.B. King, Muddy Waters, and John Lee Hooker."

He says, "I think I can get him down \$2,500."

I says, "If you can get him for anything, get him!" I measured it like this, I'd say...Somebody would say, "What's been going on?" I'd tell them the name of the act that was coming in, and they'd say, "Oh that'll be good," or "Wow!" My favorite was when they'd say, "Bullshit." That's happened with John Lee Hooker and a few others; they didn't believe it. I said, yeah, and we

were charging \$7 and \$8 for the tickets. John Lee Hooker cost a little more, so we charged \$10 a ticket, whatever. It built from there. Everything that happened with Steve Garr, after he took it over, those people still had the Top Hat's phone number. So, they'd call, and god bless him too. I'm glad he kept that going because he kept bringing the same acts that we'd had. It was pretty cool. Anyway.

KG: When did the Lost Highway Band then officially break up?

MP: The thing was Lost Highway Band went very steadily and very hot from 1974 to 1980. There were three original members here in town, so we would play with two or three other guys and we tried calling it another name. People said, 'hey, it's all styling,' and so we just used the name. I kind of wish now, looking back, that we hadn't done that. We played our last gig with the seven-piece band—which to me was the real Lost Highway Band—in February of 1980. Then we planned a reunion in July of 1985, which is the tape I have for you. The CD I have for you. We were traveling around with this four-piece, just playing the weekends. Then I said, "I'm not gonna play anymore," because I was working all week doing this booking and promotion. I designed the calendars; I did all this stuff. Then the weekend would come, and we'd pack up this van, go play at some little bar in Superior. I had been doing that in 1971 and '72; I didn't want to do that anymore, but these guys wanted to make the money. So, I gave them like five-months notice, so the last gig I played was with the original Lost Highway Band. Then I stopped. I'll never forget that first weekend that I didn't have to go anyplace. My wife was pregnant, and I had no desire to do that, which takes us—

I'll just mention this real quick. You can ask whatever you want to about it, but I quit playing. Every now and then something would pop up, but I made a demo of "I Think I'll Quit Drinking Today," and the guy I was sponsoring said, "I didn't want to come to AA because it was all gloom, doom, 7-Up, and Jesus." I went, wow! Did a bluegrass song [sings] "Gloom, doom, 7-Up, and Jesus. Whoopee! That's my sobriety," like that. Then I made a demo of three or four other songs, and Rick Kuschel said, "Why don't you just make the CD and get it over with?" So, I got these four guys to play, and we recorded these songs. It was very efficient, and he kept the budget down although most of the CDs that people make, they're using a computer and a keyboard. These were full session in an actual recording studio.

KG: Did you record here in Missoula?

MP: Yeah, we recorded with Rick Kuschel. Yeah, we had Tim Ishler, who died a while back, and Tim Ishler—well, to my mind—is the best musician who ever came out of this town or this area, period. He was playing with us too.

KG: I guess this kind of leads into it, but yeah, actually in that interview that you had mentioned earlier from 1986 from the closing of the Top Hat, you kind of talked about a culture that was prevalent during that era at the Top Hat and elsewhere in Missoula. I was just wondering if you could talk a little bit about that? Was that like everybody was doing it?

MP: Everybody was doing it there was at least a dozen night clubs that had music six nights a week. There was Top Hat, the Park Hotel, Luke's downtown. There was the Trading Post Saloon, later became Park Place, but that was rock and roll and then they tried country for a while and they switched back. It wasn't rock and roll. It was a heavy metal...or, spandex music [glam rock], which I, no thanks. Yeah, there were—I figured it up one time; I started counting it up. There was a place called the Big Barn out on Mullan Road. And I told you in Bozeman, that's not a big town, and we had six different places we could play there, so it was all over the place. In 1981, the Montana Tavern Association announced that overall revenues were down a third. I mean, that's catastrophe; that's disastrous. Somebody managed to get gambling legalized, which I have nothing against that, but they can make a lot more money with a lot lower overhead than, and besides they didn't want to have to trust musicians.

KG: I guess, just for you personally, what were the best years of the Top Hat in your opinion?

MP: It was definitely in the mid-'70s. Actually from '74 right through '80. It was. It was just Live Wire Choir. They were kind of out of Tahoe, I think. They're a California band, and they played fantastic swing music and some bluegrass. They were really good. I think the Lost Highway Band and Live Wire Choir were kind of on the same scale. Mission Mountain Wood Band, their leader was Steve Riddle, okay, and they got started in New York with Steve Riddle's brother who was a Broadway songwriter. So, he wrote some kind of Hollywood-country songs, [laughs] but they were brilliant. They really were brilliant. It was an act though. They typed up their patter, and they had it memorized what they were gonna say. They had everything choreographed for every song. It was great. I mean, here's these guys all standing around, looking like a bunch of Montana boys. In fact, you could see the piece of grass coming out of their mouth. Then all of a sudden, the drummer would be playing, the four other guys would walk right up to the apron of the stage and play for the crowd. Crowd would go crazy. I really had tremendous respect for them, and Terry Robinson, the tall guy, was the main guy in that band for me. He was very soulful.

We stayed up all night one night up at Bucks [unintelligible] Mission Mountain Wood Band and Lost Highway Band played together for 4th of July gig up there. Whoa! That was at least 1,000 capacity venue, and it was so full. The band stayed out in this bunk house. Me and Terry—gradually people kept falling down and stopping, and me and Terry kept going. We kept singing Hank Williams songs and all these different things. Sometime after the sun came up, we succumbed also. We had a little bit better than coffee to keep us going.

KG: Do you think that the message of music whether it was political or whatever, was that important in any way during this time in shaping the culture, or did people really just come out to have a good time?

MP: Well, we'd gone through the '60s, and the '70s I think reaped the fun of the '60s. Montana's always been 5 or 10 years behind the rest of the nation, and that's as it should be.

We're a small town. Everything just got fun. I would like to say that I probably wouldn't be comfortable with this written down, but it is a straight fact, okay. There was no herpes, there was no AIDs, all the women were on birth control, and also women declared that—there was a sexual revolution. A woman would come walk up to a guy in the band and say, “You're coming with me.” Yes, I am! So, there was all that going on. But it was adult, it was consensual, and nobody was worried about anything. Then all of a sudden, in 1985, people started dying, so put a little damper on things. But the '70s was just, everybody had fun. I'll never regret living that life, but I didn't want to...I think I probably would have died. The only reason I was okay when we were playing was we were one of those acts that once we got going, instead of playing four 45-minute sets, we played one 16-minute set and two 75s. It was like three shows, and there wasn't time between songs to drink. I'd have a beer and a shot maybe on the break, and then we'll play again. My doctor was amazed; he started asking me questions. I had a family doctor, and I told him what I'd been doing for all those years. This is in 1981. He did a blood test, he did a physical, and I told him...“What was weird,” I said, “by the second song, every night I was soaked all the way through sweating.”

He says, “You know what? You sweated out all the toxins from your system.” He says, “That's the only reason you're alive,” he said, “plus your organs are in good shape.” [laughs] That was the problem with stopping playing music, it was I had a lot of time on my hands. Gradually, it started going further and further, and you have to hit bottom. The revelation for me was that alcoholism is physiological too. Your body does not metabolize alcohol like a normal person does. What it does, it goes in there and it creates this—you have to have it. I started learning all that. Oh, another thing please don't mention AA. You can say recovery, sobriety, or anything, but AA is an anonymous thing.

KG: Right, of course.

MP: I don't want to tell people. They all know it, anyway. What's funny about those songs, there were AA people who got very concerned about it, and I said, “Okay, first of all, I don't mention AA. Secondly, anybody who's not in AA is not gonna have the faintest notion what the hell I'm singing about,” because it's about the steps and all the stuff so anyway.

KG: Definitely sounds like a decade of hard living.

MP: An old friend of mine who was a woman. She was not a girlfriend, but she said to me, she always really loved my process or my progress I was making musically in the songwriting. She said, “Yeah, you wouldn't have made it; you wouldn't have made it.” The time came, and I quit the first time in '84. I didn't drink for four and a half years, but I wasn't going to meetings hardly at all so I ended up going crazy and started drinking again. Those last three years I just, oh! You feel like...I mean I felt like I was a husk. I started doing every single day because my girlfriend was gonna kick me out of her house. I didn't want to freeze to death. So, I tricked myself really because it took over. Then there are all these catch phrases and stuff, and people would say,

'where do you get these ideas for these songs?' I said, "Sit in a meeting and listen. People say these amazing things." I ended up doing that.

KP: Wow. Well, definitely, I'm glad that you're still here.

MP: Yeah, it's 20—I'm coming up on 26 years.

KG: Wow, congratulations.

Let's see, just kind of to pivot back a little bit. How important do you think the sense of community was at the Top Hat? Did people go there to see friends? How were the interactions between patrons and staff?

MP: Yeah, there were...I was very aware of that. I'd walk up to a guy sitting by himself, and I'd talked to him and shake hands with him. The next night, he'd be sitting there with four other guys. I'd talked to these women, and if a bunch of women show up, a bunch of guys are gonna show up. So, we'd go into a town cold, and Monday night there'd be hardly anybody there because there's hardly—on Monday nights in the nightclub, forget it. But on Tuesday night, it would be about half full. By the end of the week, it'd be cooking. Then some nights—we'd usually play two weeks when we first went in. The second Monday was packed from the time we started. Had a lot to do with the style the music we were playing. It was a lot of energy; it's incredible sounding music. It's all 16th notes [mimics sound]. Everyone would just jump up and down and scream. [laughs]

KG: You could go there kind of by yourself, and then leave having met a bunch of new—

MP: Yeah, yeah. Everybody's welcome on the dance floor, whatever you wanted to do. And yes, the message. I heard it recently there's a movie called *Lucy* with Scarlett Johansson, but Morgan Freeman is a scientist in the [unintelligible] We, as human beings, are more interested in having that being, so there was this huge—it was a little bit underground—there was this huge spiritual search going on. I found spirituality in music; I also read every book I get my hands on from *Black Elk Speaks* to the *Bhagavad Gita* to the Bible. I didn't care what. Then actually when I got into AA, all they did was water down all the basic beliefs of religion into something that a drunk could use to keep themselves from dying. But yeah, there was a lot of...There was community. There was these different communities and cliques, but then there was this mass of people that were the Top Hat people. Oh, it was so...It was astounding how close everybody was.

KG: Could someone from the outside just passing through town, or could anyone just kind of go in there and be accepted?

MP: OH, open-arm. Open-arm. Yeah, yeah.

KG: What role do you think independent venues like the Top Hat play in developing local music scenes? Are they very important?

MP: Yeah, yeah, of course, they are. It's just that we never would've...I played weekend bands. I did that for years before I started going on the road, and there's no comparison. After three weeks, let's say, of playing together six nights a week, I mean, everything's just so tight. In fact, you have it so tight that there's room to improvise, and you'd have this arrangement for the song. Every night somebody would find a little extra thing to put in there. Pretty soon all these little goofy things we did on one night were part of the arrangement, so we had all these amazing things going all the way through.

KG: It'd be spontaneous and riff off of each other?

MP: Yeah. It was just, yeah. Open-minded, people were very open-minded about music. They were. They just wanted to experience music.

KG: So, that was an evolution that you saw in your time where went from the snobbery to [unintelligible].

MP: Yeah, to just loving what was going on.

KG: This might be kind of a really broad question, but what do you think the Top Hat's legacy is for this town?

MP: It's the best music. Always has been. Still is. I don't go there anymore. I don't go out, and I don't...First of all, I don't drink, so. I tried playing in a band when I wasn't drinking, and my god! It was grotesque. I got people to get down, do the Gator during "Louie Louie," and there was beer and mud all over the dance floor and these perfectly...First set, I'd meet these perfectly nice people, and by the third set they were animals down there doing the Gator. Mud all over themselves. I think it's really kind of healthy for me because I got to witness. These were not alcoholics, necessarily. They were just people going out to have a good time, and they had that fourth or fifth one instead of just two or three. Anyway.

KG: Anyway, what's your favorite memory involving either playing music in Missoula or the Top Hat specifically or—

MP: [pauses] Out of any music I played?

KG: Yeah, sure.

MP: Well, I told you before, I got to go to New York, California, Indianapolis, Florida, all over the place. These CDs—it was crazy. I ended up having six CDs. I had five CDs plus that collection there. I had one of those PayPal things you have to...They just pull out their credit card. Boom!

They started buying in sets. "I want six sets." I had six CDs, and they'd do six times six. They got all over. When I decided to quit doing that, people set up these places you can go, and they let people know it's underground. They go there and they can download it for free. I go, 'that was my intention.' I want it to get around as much as possible, and I don't ever...I'm never around all these people at once, so I don't have to worry about my huge ego messing with me. [laughs] I'm really glad that, and there's tons of this. In Nashville they have AA literature, and then they have all the CDs of sobriety music up there too. So, it's fairly well established now. When I started doing it in 2001 I couldn't find anybody else doing it on the internet. But later, it got going.

My favorite thing that ever happened. I went and played this little Al-Anon Club in Coeur d'Alene, and it had 75 capacity. These people were celebrating their sobriety. They were hollering, and yet they were listening to every word of every song. [mimics crying] Or they'd cry. It was just...There was a thing though if you played for the good band, and you had a good gig the next day. First of all, I didn't want to work for a living; that's a drag. That walking on air, that's the first time that I ever actually felt that way was having a really great gig the night before, playing good music with good musicians. But that thing that night, I never felt so close to people. First of all, the AA message—let's just call it the alcoholism recovery message—it's so powerful, and then music is so powerful. You put those two together, wham! So, it would be between that and that whole Bruce Springsteen thing probably.

KG: Very cool, very different. Obviously very different times in your life, but I can see why. I know you said you don't still perform live, but do you perform for yourself at home?

MP: Oh, yeah. I pick up my guitar; I'm probably doing more songwriting now than I ever have. My wife, at one point, she said, "You're not making any more CDs, are you?"

I said, "No."

She's, "Well, you're still writing these songs."

I said, "I'm a songwriter. I'm still eating food and breathing too." [laughs] I love writing songs. Sure enough, this guy that insisted on paying me to record my songs. I finally said, "Look you can record my songs for free, and if you want to donate money to keep my music going, it's okay." It just got very loose, and he was just this wonderful guy. He's 75 now. He made these CDs, and he uses my songs. Then I suggested to him that...I said, "Wouldn't it be cool if you had a CD of a bunch of my songs that I have never recorded, and nobody else has ever recorded?" So, I'm in the middle of that right now.

KG: He's going to perform them.

MP: Yeah, yeah. Bob Dylan early on in '65, '66, right around there. He did the most incredible interviews. He get really, seriously ugly with somebody because he was so insulted, and then

he'd say all these cryptic things. This one college journalist said, "When you write songs like 'Positively Fourth Street,' [begins to sing], 'You got a lot of nerve to say you are my friend.' are you trying to show them the error of their ways, or are you trying to lift them up spiritually."

He says, "I'm trying to needle them." [laughs]

Then he said, the same guy said, he says, "Do you see yourself more as a latter-day poet or a prophet in the wilderness?"

He says, "I see myself more as a song and dance man." [laughs] But one thing he said one time—he'd slip in these real answers every now and then—he says, "Which covers of your songs do you like?" and he mentioned a few. "How does it make you feel when you listen to the cover of your song by somebody you really respect?"

He said, "It's really a heavenly kind of thing." Isn't that nice? I hear people recording my sobriety songs, and even if they weren't particularly good, it made me so happy. Isn't that nice. You butchered my song. Thank you. No, it wasn't that bad. I used to love it when I'd be on a bill of sobriety music, and right before me there'd be some young girl singing in one of those soprano voices [mimics soprano voice] about god and heaven, and that's why I to work the steps. Then I'd get up, and, [sings] "Gloom, doom, 7-Up, and Jesus." Everybody'd go, whoo! You should be able to have fun. Why would an alcoholic suffer up if they can't have fun? No, wait, I'll tell you.

Three of us, no, four of us played at the WATCH program [Warm Springs Addictions Treatment & Change], which is, they'll tell you, they'll say, 'you can either serve out your three years, or you can do one year in the WATCH program.' You have to work the steps and do all this stuff. There are guys, believe it or not, that actually say, 'no, I just want to do my time and be left alone.' But we played this WATCH program. At the beginning of it, I noticed this really, really young kid. He just looked so lost and so devastated. By the end of the thing, there's this woman that had taught them to line dance, and I had them...I'd tell them words and they'd sing along, so they were singing and dancing and doing all this stuff. It just rose up to...It was just fantastic. When we got done, this same kid who looked like he was zombie or dead, came up to me all excited, sweaty, with his eyes glowing, and he said, "If I'd known I could've had this much fun sober, I never would have drank anyway." That made me feel like it wasn't about me, it wasn't about me.

KG: Reach people.

MP: Well, if you can help somebody that makes you feel better than anything. That's a hard thing for human beings to learn. I still haven't got it. Believe me. [laughs] I try.

KG: It sounds like you do a good job.

MP: You smile at people, maybe say, how are you doing today? Nobody talks to me.

KG: Yeah, just [unintelligible] acknowledgement. Wow! Well, I guess just to close, is there any aspect of Missoula or music culture here that you feel like people would be interested in the future or now to know about that we haven't covered?

MP: I read somewhere once—it was some pretty famous musician, but it could come from anywhere. Is that, he said, “Right now, there's some kid who's living with his parents, and he's in his bedroom with a guitar, and he's writing stuff like nobody's ever heard. In about five years from now is he's gonna blow everybody away.” That's one thing that can still happen. You can't grow up to be president. It takes a billion dollars to become president, but you can make good, playing, especially with the internet now. You don't have to go get a label, do your own crap.

KG: Reach people through your music.

MP: Yeah, you can, you can, anybody. It great. I love it. I love what the internet has done for music

KG: Well, thank you so much for taking the time to talk with me, and I feel like that was...I learned a lot of very interesting things

MP: I kind of feel like I just did a speaker meeting—an AA speaker meeting. You stand up for an hour and you tell your story—hour, hour and a half, whatever they do. But it feels good because there's stuff that's been just sitting in there.

KG: Well, I'm honored then to hear it, so thank you, thank you so much.

[End of Interview]