

Jim LaCross Interview

Begins with Jim playing the saxophone.

JL: This is a Kenny G song called "Sentimental" (plays song)...

That's enough. My chops are very weak. And on and on like Kenny G does –it's just, everybody says he plays the same song, and just changes a couple of notes or something.

CK: Good afternoon. This is Cindy Kus. Today is March 31st, 2016 we're in the Alpena Room at the Alpena County Library and it's my pleasure today to have with us Mr. Jim LaCross. That was him playing a Kenny G signed straight soprano sax. Thank you, Jim.

JL: Sure.

CK: Um, Jim has lived in Alpena most of his life. I know of some of the bands that he played with early on, through other interviews I've done. I know that he played with the High Notes, and the Monarchs, and rather than fuss around, I'm gonna let Jim tell his story, ah, how he got here, and where he's been.

JL: Ok, thank you. When people ask when my musical career started, I usually say, "Before I was born, in the womb." Ah, my father worked in a war plant, building bombers during World War II. I was born at the start of World War II and my mother was home with me all the time. And back in those days we could go to The Fox Theater, The Cinderella Theater, and you not only saw movies-

CK: In Detroit?

JL: In Detroit. You also saw bands. And back in those days, ah, all the Big Bands. But, ah, even before that, I remember my dad telling me, that as I was in the womb and I was, my mom was pregnant with me and my mom and dad went to the ah, I think it was called Trianon Ballroom or something in Detroit, and saw Benny Goodman's band and danced to them, so I said by osmosis I started getting that. Ah, as time went on, even as a little kid, I was inundated with Big Band music, jazz, swing, and so therefore, ah, I think when I was about 13, I started playing clarinet, um, because, I wanted to play something else, but my parents insisted I play clarinet, and played like Benny Goodman, so-

CK: Did you take lessons in school or?

JL: Yes, I –

CK: private lessons?

JL: Both. I did both- back in those days. I went to Catholic Central and I went to twelve years of Catholic school. Ah at Catholic Central the band teacher we had, I don't remember his name, he was a clarinet player, and very good, so he showed me a lot of stuff on the clarinet. Ah, in 1958, I put together my first band at age 16, ah we played a lot of jobs for- I never went to my own dances or prom because I played a lot of those. In 1959, at 17, I put together a Dixieland band and we went on ah, Talent Quest, a TV show.

CK: Oh? Where was that based out of?

JL: It was based, it was a syndicated thing; but we, we auditioned the first time in Flint, Michigan and then we went on TV in Lansing; but it was syndicated, there was a lot of places that had it. Even up here

at the time I think WNEM- TV had it too. And we won, we went back to the semifinals, and we won and as a matter of fact if I can find something here, I've got something, a little (showing newspaper) there's that. But anyway ah, the winner of that would go on to The Original Amateur Hour, ah...

CK: And you were called the Kombo Katz.

JL: Kombo Katz. Yeah.

CK: OK. I'm just gonna read a little bit of this so people will know who you were playing with.

JL: Right.

CK: It included Dave VanNocker on trumpet, Jim LaCross, sax and clarinet, Harvey Neumann, trombone and bass violin, Don Gappa, on drums and Joe Randall, piano.

JL: Joe Randall incidentally, was our band teacher from Boston, and ah, he played keyboards for us and coached us for that.

CK: Ok, so the Kombo Katz, they won.

JL: We won the semifinals, we were beat out in the finals. So we didn't go to New York for the Ted Mack's Amateur Hour. Some country guy beat us out and I always hated country ever since.

CK: (laughs) Oh, who was, what was the name of the 1957 band? Before the, before you did Dixieland, you said you had a band-

JL: That same, same band.

CK: Ok. That's the Combo Cats, ok.

JL: It was different guys, I can't even remember...um-

CK: And did you put those bands together? Were you?

JL: Yeah. I was always the one that led and you know, I, I archived everything and found the music, and did that. I mean, I was really young and I didn't even know what I was doing but I did it. Um, like I said, a kid that came from Alpena, twelve years of Catholic school, and pretty strict, conservative family, ah, the fall after I graduated from high school, I was playing with a trio of mine, Jim LaCross Trio, or whatever it was, and it just so happened, a, a band came through Twin Acres, back when they had like show bands, this was 1960. And, they had a night off, and somebody mentioned my name to these guys, it was called The Hal Wallace Quartet...and, uh,

CK: They're from Milwaukee, it looks like.

JL: Yeah. That's where their booker was. And there's another little thingy that talks about that.

CK: Oh! And it says that Jim LaCross left Monday to join The Hal Wallace Quartet, um, so, how did they find out about you? You don't know.

JL: I still don't know why.

CK: It says the band is now in Grand Rapids; but plans to leave soon for Texas. They entertain at night clubs, army bases and tour the country. Jim was a 1960 graduate of Catholic Central. So you got on the road-

JL: At eighteen.

CK: Wow.

JL: Like I said, coming from a very conservative background. I learned a whole lot about life quick. Also found out that I loved the music, but I hated the lifestyle. I, I was just blown away by the lifestyle. That was back in the days when you never heard of street drugs, and heroin, like you today, and things like this. That was jazz musicians, and beatniks, and artists, and those kind of people that were into that kind of stuff. So, I just went, like overnight, I saw this stuff, and I was scared; but I loved the playing. So I did that for about a year, and finally, I, I just got homesick. We ah-

CK: What kind of music were you playing?

JL: It was, it was a show band.

CK: Ok.

JL: We backed up acts, and it was all, if we went into a night club, it'd be a supper club. You just didn't play- you, you, there had to be a show. People went in there for dinner and a show, and ah, we had a little bit of our own show; but we backed up other people. Ah, ah, a girl singer and a comedian, and ah, Red Skelton one time was in there in fact. And ah, so, ah, when we did USO shows, here I am up there 18 years old, and there's 3,000 people in a giant hangar, just like you see on TV. It wasn't the Bob Hope level, there would be some kind of semi-known people; but it was the same kind of thing, on a lesser level.

And ah, so I was really thrown into a interesting life.

CK: Had you any clue that you were going to go in that direction? Did you imagine when you were in high school that you would be a professional musician?

JL: From the time I can remember, first remember, that's all I wanted to do.

CK: Ok.

JL: I always said to my kids, who were also musicians, and my brothers, we have a whole family of musicians, I told my boys when they were young, I said, you know, "I will help you with music, "and they've had bands of their own and stuff- I said, "Music is a two-edged sword, it's something that you love; but it's a dangerous proposition." And I says, "The thing is, when you get into music, there is nothing else that can ever fulfill that kind of thing. I don't care what kind of job you get, or how much you love your job, it can never be, it's, it's, there's nothing like that. And I'm 74 plus and I've done many other things, I finally realized, I needed to, you know do something more practical. And, ah, but all I've ever done my whole life is just think about music. I mean it's just, it's in my DNA, it's in my veins, and ah, but anyway...I got a, I did that for a year, I thought maybe going back, going to music school, would ah, that I would get into a better class of folks and stuff like this, so I went to Berklee School of Music, which was very prestigious.

CK: In California?

JL: Jazz school.

JL: Hmm?

CK: California?

JL: No, no, not that Berklee weirdass. No this, Berklee School of Music is in, ah, Boston.

CK: Oh yes!

JL: So this was-

CK: Yes.

JL: - my thing showing that I was accepted into that school. And it was not even an accredited college, it was a school, if you wanted to get a degree, you had to go to Boston University to get your other subjects and stuff like that – which I didn't do. When I was at Berklee, ah, I took private jazz studies from one guy, and I took private classic clarinet lessons from the ,ah, first chair clarinet of the Boston Pops and he wanted me to forget the jazz thing and go into classical and first of all I was not that proficient. To do classical clarinet, you're like a machine. And another thing is, I have adlibbing, and you know, and playing it my way. I never play a song the same way twice. Well you can't play that kind of way in a symphony orchestra, so I got, it was good because it got me proficient on clarinet and stuff.

While I was in Boston, ah, it's interesting, the, the ah, in the Back Bay section of Boston, two or three hundred year old places falling down, and the Berklee dormitory, ah was three stories and I was on the first one. And the only phone in the building was a phone right outside my door. And the people come and use it, you know, one of those thingies, dial phone. Well, it was interesting, because lot of times it would ring and I'd run out there and grab it; because I was right there. And because of that, ah, the first thing that I got, there was a guy from Harvard University, and he says, "Can you guys," everybody knew what Berklee was and it was musicians so, ah, he called and said, "Can you put together a band, pretty much background stuff, for ah, John Winthrop house, which was John Kennedy's, where he went to, you know it's kind of an elaborate frat thing. And so I'm thinking, I hardly even knew anybody there.

CK: Mmhh.

JL: So, I would just go say, "Who's the best bass player around here?" You know, you all needed money, and I would put it together and most of time I didn't know what I was doing; but I just picked people far better than me, and ah, this worked out cool, and I did that at, at Harvard, MIT. I was on a, a jazz, history of jazz thing at Boston University television, put together another band for that, you know, all different guys I, whatever, and so probably, I learned more about that end of the business there- even though I'd been on the road, and now I was doing it, putting it together. And here I am, very introverted, shy, nerdy kid out of high school, and I'm doing this stuff because I watched Hal Wallace do it for a year, so I picked up on that kind of stuff, and musicians, are, for the most part, the better they are as an artist, the worse they are at organizing. There life's a mess. You know, the old starving artist thing. And ah, and so I was, maybe, you know a notch above that, so I put that together. So that was pretty cool.

CK: And you, you were able to make some money from these gigs, right?

JL: I was, because ah, I had to save money before that to get in the school, it was very expensive. After that, I couldn't even afford it anymore, my parents could not afford to help me, they didn't help me- I mean I did it-

CK: Mmhh. How long were you at Berklee?

JL: Just a year.

CK: One year.

JL: That was all, just a year. Did everything for a year I guess. Um, then after that I came back to Alpena and I put together a band called the Starlighters. A very good band, we played a lot at Wurtsmith Air Force base, we played tons of stuff there, because I knew about the, the military end of it, how, how it was done because I did USO shows. So we put a band together there-

CK: You got a lot of life experience in that one year of being on the road.

JL: Well, I'm just getting started. Um, what was I gonna say...ah, I could give you the names of guys in that band.

CK: The Starlights?

JL: Starlighters, yeah.

CK: Starlighters.

JL: Oh let's see, some place here. There's Don Davis on trumpet, there was Bob Moors. I don't know if you remember when he had Moors Music in town? He played keyboards. Don Dead-, Don Davis is deceased, ah, Bob Moors I haven't seen in thirty years. I have no idea where he is. Larry Sabourin was the drummer, he's gone buh-bye. Ahhh....somebody else, I don't remember, but that band was a pretty cool band, I played with them for quite a few years.

CK: What did you play?

JL: As far as instruments or type of music?

CK: Type of music.

JL: Swing, um, standards, that kind of thing.

CK: And you played sax and clarinet then?

JL: Mmhh. And sang.

CK: Oh and sang?

JL: Oh that's something I forgot to mention, that um, I was forced into singing when I was on the road with Hal Wallace. You know, you got to do more than this, you know, what else do you do? And so, I learned to sing. Then, ah, later on in ah, '63 and '4 I went to ACC, and I got into ah, I actually got a degree in business management for, because my dad said, "You should do something practical." I never did anything with it. But they had a great ah, teacher there that liked jazz, and ah, and he was from Boston. And ah-

CK: Do you remember his name?

JL: John Doharas. D-O-V- I don't know; but he was superb. And so, I took up ah, every singing thing I could do through the college, collegiate singers and Alpena Civic Singers, and if there was concerts going on , I would sing in it. Anything I could find myself in- church things, everything, used to just inundate yourself with it. And then at the same time, I'm playing with, you know, bands, and then, you know, I'm learning how to sing. Again, classical kind of stuff, which I would never do, but, I figured, if you can do that, then you can do pop stuff, you can do Frank Sinatra, you can do this kind of stuff. So, ah, when I was at ACC, then I was playing with Doug Allyn's band, now you must've known about Doug I'm sure.

CK: Doug stopped by here over the weekend-

JL: Did he? No?

CK Rather than – but he's coming back for an interview, yes.

JL: Yeah, well he's done nothing but play music his entire life- I don't know if he still is.

CK: Now is that DA and the Witnesses? Was that the name of that band, do you remember?

JL: Ah, that was, no, because that band was that he had, he, he finally, once he got out of ACC, he went down around, I don't know, downstate, Flint area or something like this-

CK: Mmhh.

JL: And played with him and his wife and his kid on drums, and I went down and heard him one time- they were really good! More of a rock band, rock-pop and they were superb; but ah, I played a little bit when we were both going to college there with Doug Allyn.

CK: Did your band have a name?

JL: I think it was Doug Allyn band or something- I don't know.

CK: Something like that, Ok.

JL: Yeah. Ummmm.....after that, about '65, let's see, what did I do here? No '64, doesn't make any difference, I played with the Electras, ah, and, all I did was a couple of jobs with them. Oh I've got a picture of them here someplace. Or do I? No, I don't.

CK: Who was The Electras? Who were The Electras?

JL: They, let's see. Oh! Incidentally, here's, you probably already saw that, with Al Zdan. That's The Monarchs.

CK: Do you remember Mr. Campbell's name? (Giggles) He couldn't remember his first name, he called him Mr. Campbell.

JL: Dick, I think, but I'm not sure.

CK: Any Johnny Rząd?

JL: Yep. And I haven't seen either of those guys for 50 years. So many guys. Oh, I forgot to show you these. Ultimate sax nerd. I don't know if anybody has been in here, because they're all dead now, that

played with The Bill Kuchemann Band, um, here's a picture of me playing the ah, Tray Club Dance at the Armory with the Bill Kuchemann Band.

CK: Oh my!

JL: Yeah, skinny and nerdy. Ah,

CK: Jim Twite?

JL: Tom Twite-

CK: Tom Twite.

JL: And the scary thing about it is, everybody is dead but me. Of course, I was quite a bit younger than them, too. But this is Joe Emerson on piano, ah, he played a lot around here. He, these guys played The Owl, the original Owl Café. And ah, Bob Rohn on guitar. R-O-H-N. This is Bill, what did I say his name was?

CK: Kuchemann?

JL: Kuchemann. Yeah, he died quite a long time ago. Tom Twite on alto sax. This guy was a really good friend of mine, he just died about three years ago, and that's Saul Saretsky, played drums. I played with Saul in and out later on, for quite a bit. And Torey Osgerby, I don't know how that's sp-

CK: I know how that's spelled because I've run into his name a few times.

JL: Ok. And then, this trumpet player is Bill Jerome. And this would be, I would guess, probably '58 or something like that. Here's the same band I guess we were on a float or some stupid thing. And again, that's like way, way back- '50's.

CK: And you played clubs and, or played special events?

JL: Ah, that band was too big to do clubs and stuff, you know, too expensive-

CK: Ok.

JL: Because you had so many. It was like a little Big Band. And we had arrangements and stuff and all we did was, ah like, big things, you know like, no, never clubs, no. Oh, I forgot to show you these. These are pictures of when I went on the road at 18 with Hal Wallace. We had to, because our booker said, you've got to have pictures by Maurice Seymour, who is the, did a lot of big entertainers and stuff and he said, "Club owners will look down here, and if it says Maurice Seymour, then they think, well you must have it together to be able to afford that." So we drove from, I don't know where it was, Cincinnati or something, all the way to Chicago, just to have these stupid pictures. And now they don't look like they're worth much to me, but...

CK: And that band was originally out of Milwaukee, right?

JL: Mmhuh.

CK: The Hal Wallace Band.

JL: Mmhuh. The guys in it weren't always, they were from all over the place. The drummer, as a matter of fact, played with the Ted Heath Big Band in London. He was British. He came over here, he was a very good drummer; but he had a drinking problem, so he had to leave the London area, because no one would hire him anymore, even though he was really good, um, a myriad of problems with those guys. Ah let me see, where am I now?

CK: With the Electras?

JL: Ok, we played the Battle of the Bands, and that's the first time I ever played for thousands of people, and that was – and I'll tell you who actually won the thing. It was Bobby Rigg and Donny Hartman before the Frost- they were called The Chevelles, and they won this thing. And that's helped to get them...we did not win it; but that's that thing, and there's the guys...

CK: Ok. And for you listening, "The Electra's of Alpena participated in the Battle of the Bands before 3,000 teenagers in Saginaw." And the Electra's were Richard Holmes, Jerry-

JL: Ludwiczak.

CK: Thank you. Dick Laney, Chuck Wozniak and Jim LaCross.

JL: I don't think I played with any of those guys ever since we did that, so that was just a short thing. Um, let's seeee...about '64 and '65, ah, we had a band called The High Notes and the only place we played was at The Adobe Room- and that was a hot spot then. That was a pretty good band. And ah,

CK: How often did you play there?

JL: Oh my gosh, I think we played three nights a week, I think they cut it down to two nights a week for like two years, I mean, you know, and we were quite well rehearsed. It was a good band.

CK: Who was in it?

JL: Ah, Bob Rohn, the guy that we saw over here, on guitar.

CK: Mmhuh.

JL: A guy called Dick Niemi, who is deceased. He played the keyboards. Jerry Rucyznski on drums, he lives in Florida, I haven't seen him in a long time.

CK: I did an interview with Jerry.

JL: Did you really?

CK: Mmhuh.

JL: That's amazing. Ah, in 1965, the Selective Service was on my butt, so I thought I would maybe join the Army Band, instead of going to- it was the height of Vietnam. So, the recruiter down here, drove me to Chicago, again, and I tried out for the Fifth Army Band. They, there wasn't the whole band there, there were just a couple of guys that heard me playing different stuff. And ah, it sounded like I could get in; but then on the way home, I said to the sergeant, whatever his name was, I said, "Now, if I get in the band, does that guarantee that I will not be, have a rifle..."

CK: In active duty-

JL: instead of a saxophone and go over in Vietnam.

He said, "Absolutely not, they can do whatever they want."

And I said, "Well, what's the point?" So then I kind of hung around, and I think it was Mary Bey that was the head of Selective Service, she was a friend of mine, she called me and she said, "You are it, you better do something." At that point, I went down and I um, there was an opening for the Army National Guard. So I got in the Army National Guard, I went to Fort Knox. And what did I do? Me and ah, this ah, ah, Jimmy Mathis his name was, he was a black guy. He looked and sounded like Ray Charles, played keyboards like that, and so we put together a band that was Jimmy Mathis and the Interceptors, I don't remember the names of any of the guys that was in it besides him. We played Ft. Knox area and Kentucky, ah, booked jobs in high schools. And it was kind of funny, because we would go play a high school job, and we've got military shaved heads, so that went over really well in the long-haired days-

CK: The Beatles days, right?

JL: Yeah, it was. Yes it was and ah, but anyway, did a lot of playing around there, ah, puh, puh, puh, puh...then when I got home from that stuff, I was ah, in several different bands, through from about '66 to '73, I played with several different Don Deadman groups, the Don D. groups. I played in a band with Larry Sabourin and Larry Sawasky, it was called The Cheerful Earful.

CK: That name has come up. You played at ah, The Thunderbird?

JL: Not that one.

CK: No.

JL: No. That's comin'. (laughs)

CK: Ok.

JL: No, that band did not play at The Thunderbird.

CK: Ok.

JL: That was more of a rockish sort of thing.

CK: Ok.

JL: In fact it's coming up. From '73, it's the best, fun job, I ever had in my life, ah from '73 to '76, I played at The Thunderbird Inn, week after week after week and I ended up, I started out with a band, I don't even know the name of it and it was – his dad owned Bolenz Jewelry, I can't remember the kids name- he played keyboards and Larry Sabourin, again, was on drums, and that was, a fun gig; because, that's back in the days when couples were lookin' for some place to have a good meal, and then, dancing. And that was classy, it was cool. You probably don't, you're not old enough to know that, so.

CK: The Thunderbird?

JL: I mean, you don't remember when it bands were there and stuff though.

CK: No, but I remember my parents' friends going there.

JL: It was a big deal. Sort of a kind of a Who's who of Alpena.

CK: Exactly.

JL: It was all businessman, doctors, lawyers and stuff like that and they would get all dressed up and think they were in another town and –

CK: It was a big deal to go to The Thunderbird.

JL: But we really worked on that thing and then after that-

CK: And what band was that?

JL: It was called, I don't even remember the name-

CK: Ok.

JL: The first one, the second band, I mean we just continued and then it was Jim LaCross and Company. And, I believe that was Bob Moors and Larry Sabourin, you know, a change of one person, then Bob Moors left, and, but I always had the job there, I just continued there, started with Earl Renaud who owned the place, and then it was Chuck, I can't remember, that bought the place and he continued the music-

CK: Schiefle?

JL: Yes.

CK: He was a friend of my dads.

JL: No kidding? Oh, say, who was your dad?

CK: Ed Kus, upholsterer.

JL: Ohhhh, my god. Wasn't there ah Kus Furniture thing, too?

CK: That was my dad.

JL: Was that on the main street?

CK: 23 North.

JL: Oh he did stuff for, for me and my wife, way, way back. Wow, that is, talk about nostalgia, my god ...um, ah, let's see, anyway, that's it for the Thunderbird. Now let's see where I'm going-ah, from '77 to 1987 I played with many bands in upper Michigan, Jim LaCross and Company-

CK: The U.P.?

JL: Ah-

CK: Or upper,

JL: No, the upper-

CK: Upper lower?

JL: Never, I, we might have, you know, Mackinac Island and stuff, and ah, then something we had for a few months, was, it was called ah, Jazz at the Owl. And that was the second Owl. And we used to kill that place, people literally would hang on the rafters, I mean,

CK: What year was this?

JL: Oh man, that was like, ahh, let's see, The Owl...

CK: Even roughly.

JL: Well I remember, that would have been early '80's, I think that thing. Anyhow, just a whole lot of local playing for about ten years. 1987, I got a call from Larry Wojcik, who is a drummer and booking agent out of Petoskey, and he, just out of nowhere. And he said, "Is this Jim LaCross that went to Berklee School of Music?"

And I said, "Yeah."

This is 25 years later. And ah, he says, "I'm Larry Wojcik, the drummer."

He says, "When you left Berklee, ah," and he lived in Warren, Michigan, or something like that, he also left after that semester and he drove me from Boston, in some junky car, all the way up to Alpena.

And he says, "I hear, that you've developed into a pretty good player and stuff." And he says, "I've got tons of stuff over here."

He says, "I've got music from duo to an eighteen piece Big Band. And, more jobs than I can handle. Sometimes I've got three different bands going at the same time. I'm playing on one, and I'm on the phone talking to others," and all this kind of stuff.

And he said, "But the thing I'm thinking of is because not too many guys double on clarinet," the saxes double on flute more, because the clarinet's very different.

And ah, he says, "The people in, the people in Charlevoix are having a shipbuilding thing, building a two million dollar paddle wheel boat, and it's gonna start this summer- this was several months before that, and they want Dixieland music on that riverboat kind of thing, *every day* for a hundred and some days, *every day*."

"Do you, would you like a piece of that or would you like to do it?"

And I'm thinking, "I don't know." So, anyway-

CK: Were you married at this point?

JL: I was married, I was married to a different wife.

CK: OK.

JL: Let's put it that way. (Laughs)

CK: I was just kind of wondering if you like, a kind of commitment to be in Alpena, or if you were-

JL: Well, I was a counselor for the courts.

CK: Ok.

JL: It was the stupidest thing, because, it was so lucrative, and I was hurting for money and I thought, "This is gonna be cool." I drove, I worked every day, I put a tuxedo in a thing and stupid hat and a Dixie thing and drove to Charlevoix-

CK: Every day?

JL: Every single day.

CK: I think out of a 110 things, I did 108 or something. Because my kid, my oldest son was going to a orientation at Ferris State, and I needed to do that. And something else. But anyway, that was an incredible thing. It was ah, when I think about it now, I think how stupid I was, I mean I just about killed myself. When I got there, sometimes I would be getting there and the boat would leave at, oh, whenever it was and ah, there's, you know, it's mostly tour busses that would come there from downstate and different places. And then they would do some kind of package thing and it was, it was a dinner cruise, with three hours of Dixieland entertainment. Very nicely done.

CK: Sounds like fun.

JL: Oh, it was awesome. And we played, you know, really good Dixie and stuff like that.

CK: And then you'd finish, turn around, and come home at night.

JL: And come home at night. I didn't get to sleep til about three in the morning and then get up and go counsel. And anyway, dumb. Ah, af-, after that season, because the guy that invested in this, even though it was full all the time, he had payed, like, say, two million dollars for this boat- he outfitted it with every best thing, had all these people working on it, finally realized that with, even with what they were charging people and stuff like this, they were going down the tubes. So that boat is now in Toronto. It was so cool.

Ah after that, up until about, that was '87 I think- from '87 to 2002, what is that, 15 years or something? I played with every kind of music, every place with Larry Wojcik's bands. We did the Grand Hotel all the time, we did Cherry Festival, Alpenfest, ah, downstate festivals, ah, jazz festivals, super nice ah, one of things that was pretty cool, I mean, we played for the upper crust kind of thing. We'd play a lot of stuff ah, up in Harbor Springs. And people like the DuPonts, the Heinz's, I mean, seriously, these people are wealthy and always hard to get along with because they saw us as the help, even though they loved us.

"No, no, no, sir, don't use that bathroom, there's one for the help over here."

And I thought, "Oh come on man, it's like the caste system." But ah, but I played tons of great, great, great jobs.

CK: So, Larry Wojcik is a promoter? Would you call him a promoter?

JL: He was a promoter booker, ah and a drummer also.

CK: So he was with you, he was playing with you?

JL: Yeah, I was playing with him, you know. He just hired me-

CK: Ok.

JL: - to sit in. He put me, I would go over there, sometimes I didn't even know who I was gonna play with. He'd say, "It's gonna be a five piece band, we're doing an upscale wedding, with, you know, ice sculptures, harp playing in the background, and all this stuff, and this is the kind of music I'm gonna want, this and that, this and that; but I'm not gonna be there, because I'm playing with a Big Band in another place."

So he would use me as a contractor, like a subcontractor.

CK: Mmhuh.

JL: And I would go there, and maybe out of four people, I would know two or three, but the keyboard players were changing all the time, because ah, a lot of really good people, from LA, and different places like this, would, a tremendous amount of people spend time in Traverse City and those places, you know, tourist kind of thing. And also, so, a lot of the people were ah, instructors at Interlochen, which is pretty close. Lot of people from, really good musicians- teachers, not students, obviously. And, finally the thing that I did, that was the biggest thing that I ever did, so to speak, was ah, I became a vocalist for the 18 piece Big Band. And the way that worked was Larry could see that my singing, sometimes he would hire me just to sing, and I did a lot of Tony Bennett and Sinatra and stuff, a lot of, you know, kick butt kind of stuff, and he says, "You would sound great with a Big Band."

And that was one thing I'd never done before. I played in Big Bands, but I've never sang with them. Well he had a girl that was ah, his Big Band singer. She was a vocal teacher at Interlochen. Pretty girl, you know, put gowns on and she was very good and everything.

Well, he hired me and said, "I'm gonna have a girl singer, and a guy singer." We can never find a guy singer, you know, and ah, so we would do duets and different stuff, and Steve and Edie kind of things, and that kind of crap. Well, even though she was far prettier than me, I would get more applause and stuff and she was a diva and she was ticked.

So she told Larry, she didn't say anything in front of me, she was really nice to me, she told Larry, "Either him or me, pick."

And he said, "Bye." And that was the end of her, she would never come back again.

So I, it was ah, the Big Band thing, like I said, that was the highlight. I'd never done anything like that before and it was scary because here's a fast moving arrangement, and I'm used to playing with a combo, where I'd get to sing and say, "Go back to the bridge, you know, slow it down, do this, do that" as I'm singing, and this thing is, you better be there, (snaps fingers), because it ain't gonna stop. It's an arrangement and the trumpets are screeching behind you and better go, bam, you know, but it was, it was nerve-racking but thrilling to me. And then ah-

CK: Where did you perform?

JL: Huh?

CK: Where did this band perform?

JL: A lot of Mackinac Island stuff, um, concerts, like ah, concert in the park Traverse City, Cherry Festivals, ah, they weren't playing every week, because it was very expensive for that band. You know, imagine-

CK: 18 pieces.

JL: Yeah, super good people. The last time I worked with him, he had, ah, Harry Connick's ah, trumpet, first trumpet player, ah, that plays with Harry Connick's band. But he came up here also to take a couple of weeks off, and Larry knew who he was, Walter White his name was, and he said, "Will you do a concert with us?" And we did a concert in the park in Charlevoix.

My god, oh my god, I was just thinking all of the stuff that I did. But here's this guy behind me, (sings) "Come fly with me, WOW! come fly away." And it was just, and I would get off there going, "I can't believe I actually did that." It was just, it was somebody's gonna find out I'm a fraud or something like that. Finally, because I just was getting older and I could still play; but I just finally, I said, "I can't drive back and forth all the time."

Sometimes he would put me and my wife up someplace. If we did the Perry Hotel, in a Petoskey, we'd stay there. Or ah, Bay View Inn, all the Stafford places, stuff like that. Very nice and everything; but we um, well we didn't want to do that either. So I, I finally, just left. And I didn't play for a little while, and then I got ah, Steve Tongue came to me, see if I, here we go. Back in Alpena now, Steve Tongue, piano player he was leader of the group Jazz Planet, you've got to remember that name.

CK: Uhhuh.

JL: And all we did was concerts. We did concerts in the park. Concerts at the college, concerts in different little cities, towns around, and that was jazz, it was not any popular stuff, it was jazz. And that was a really, really tight group.

CK: What year? I see the date, January 24th, but-

JL: Ah, I think it was about, I don't know what year that was. About 2002 to 2007, so, for about five years we played. They actually had been playing before me. One guy that was playing trombone went to college and so then I came in. And there was ah, Casey Makela. I don't know if you've heard that name probably wouldn't come up- she was an incredible female vocalist and we did some good stuff together. We used to do ah, ah, bugle, Bugle Boy, da da da da da da da, da da dant uh dah....

CK: Bugle Boy of Company C-

JL: We used to do that kind stuff too and that was a really fun thing, and just when it was going beautifully, and Steve Tongue was the keyboard player and the head of the group, he was a plant engineer at ARMC, and he got a call and he was really very good at what he did. And he got a call from the CEO at Munson Hospital.

CK: Traverse City?

JL: And they said, "If you tell us what you make, we will make it well worth your while, we, a guy here, something happened, this and that, it's a tough job, we know about you this and that, this and that. They didn't even get a resume from him. I'm sure they did afterward. So, he probably told them he made more than he did, but he said, "Jim, it's almost double." He says, "I know Traverse City is

expensive, but, you know, and his family is very much into cultural things and everything, so, so he left and that was the end of Jazz Planet, and that was pretty much the end of my playing then. I, you know, late 60's and everything...what am I going to do now? And then to try to find people now, that's a lost art, lost generation and stuff. Played a few jobs with Greg Adamus once in a while, ah, it's like fire and water with us, but. So um, so for quite a long time, the only thing I've done, for, for years, is to play in worship teams in church. And in church I did play a soprano and an alto, the opposite of what I play on a gig and stuff like this. And I still do that. Um,

CK: What church?

JL: Ah, Word of Life. They have a great worship team.

CK: Does Don Deadman play?

JL: Yes! He played there for Easter. Yeah, yeah. Don is older than me and he still, I mean, He says, "I'm gonna fall over one of these days." But he did it. Yeah, yeah he did. Yeah, that's, that's not my church background, but I just, because I'm a musician, I went and heard their worship team and I thought, "Oh man, there's some really good players on that team." And I liked it; but it's funny, because I originally come from a Catholic background, then Pentecostal. Pentecostal, so Pentecostal going to a Baptist Church, you know, it's pretty vanilla for me. That's ok. I mean, I like that and I like the pastor, and I have an opportunity to, it's not playing a gig, it's playing for the Lord and everything, but; I like that too. I think that it's a gift I should use it if anything.

And that's pretty much it. Except, you'd asked me, ah, what am I doing now? Where am I playing now? Well, three weeks ago, I was ah, still not playing; but just about three weeks ago, I got a call, and a guy, I think, well, Larry Sawasky he's playing keyboards, and that's a guy I played with in Cheerful Earful, and there's five or six other guys that I never heard of, because they're all, they're practicing down in Alcona County, one guy comes from Grand Rapids, but he has a place in Oscoda and another one's in Mikado, and another one's in Rose City and I never knew any of these guys. And they said, "We're putting together a swing band and it's called Swing Town, and were going to do Swing and Big Band exclusively. I thought, "What!" I've been looking for guys for years and years and years, could never find anything.

So here they got keyboard, bass, drums, ahhh, trumpet, female singer and me and we're practicing and we're doing, like, you know, Ellington stuff, do, do, do, do, do, do, Take the A Train, stuff like that, and, I'm just blown away.

CK: That is great!

JL: Like it came out of heaven, man; because I was actually, you know, I, because it is, even at my age you think, "Ok, just give it up, you know, my god." But it's such a part of me, and, and now I'm retired, I did, I worked until 71 man, and ah, my wife is younger than me and she, she works at the hospital. And ah, so I'm kind of like house sitter and take care of things like that, which is ok, and my big doggie and stuff like that. But then I look at, I open a closet, and here's tons of horns. And I think, and I look at those guys and I used to do this, but I don't do anything anymore. But this thing is pretty cool, it's just in the beginning stages; and ah, but already they've have booked a couple of things and we are not even ready for it yet. I mean the guy that's got it, he's a bass player and ah-

CK: Where will you be playing? What kind of events?

JL: Well, the first thing we're going to be do, it's, it's actually a fundraiser, it's The Thunder Bay Folk Society fundraiser at the VFW in Alpena, and they've got a variety of all kinds of bands. And it's a fundraiser, I, I don't know how it works, I never had any thing to do with it and nothing to do with the folk society or anything. But, that'll be the first time we play and we're just gonna do one set. And it sounds like they're going from two in the afternoon 'til midnight. And we're on at ten...and I said, "Ten! Ten, man!" So anyway we're doing that-

CK: At least you don't have to drive to Charlevoix.

JL: No, I don't. All I've been doing now is, we meet at ah, the ah, the leader's church, and ah, it's south of Hubbard Lake, it's hard to find. It's New Life Lutheran Church or something, they let us practice, it's kinda cool, a really nice place. And ah, oh after that I think ah, I'm sure things will come up because we're startin', people are starting to hear about it and ah, I think we're playing ah, in Comins, there's a place called Skyline-

CK: I've heard of that.

JL: Yeah, there was a big log place there, they used to broadcast Michigan, not outdoors, Michigan something –

CK: Michigan Magazine?

JL: Yes! Out of that thing. And it was built by the guy that owns the saw mills and stuff around there, I don't know if he's Amish or what he is, really nice log place. Well somehow, it's a nonprofit now, they got, you know, ah, grants and different stuff. And they put on, they have their own blues festival there, they have acts, we're doing something there, doing an outdoor concert. It's not til summer, or something like that.

CK: I saw recently, I think The Little Alpena Band, Bobby Rigg and-

JL: Oh yeah.

CK: Danny Ager, and Wayne Kendziorski were going to be playing there-

JL: Yes.

CK: And I was trying to figure out where that place was, so it is the Michigan Magazine place.

JL: Yes.

CK: OK.

JL: It's just right out on the main thing in Comins, whatever that is- 33? I don't know, that's where it is.

CK: Yeah.

JL: And then, the reason that this band decided to get serious and do something, they were just four of them, and Larry and a singer and me were not, were never heard of before. And they were messing around Harrisville and stuff like that, and the guy who's the, from Thunder Bay Arts Council, must have a cottage around there, whatever it was, but anyway, he came over when they were practicing in the guy's garage or something-

CK: Mmhuh.

JL: And he says, "I didn't know this stuff existed anymore. And so he said, "How'd you guys like to do the dinner dance for Thunder Bay Arts Council?"- It's not til next winter or something like that. And I think they had Wayne's band do that last time.

Well, you know, the leader of the band says, "We're just screwing around, man."

He says, "This will go over, I'm telling you, I know. I know music, I know what's going on. "He says, "Why don't you try to do this, it'd be cool if you had another horn and if you had this and stuff."

I don't know the guy's name that did that. But anyway, that's what's happening now and it's kind of the end of my, my spiel.

CK: Well that, it's exciting.

JL: Yeah

CK: Because I- when I heard you say that you don't play much anymore, and when we started out this whole thing and talking about that that was what you were meant to do from the beginning.

JL: I put this together when I first talked to you. It must have been the day after that or something, as I got down to here, and that was the end of it. And all of the sudden, it was like present, Swing Town, and I think didn't even exist. Didn't exist in my life.

CK: That's so cool.

JL: It really is and I, I wouldn't see it as professional as some of the groups I worked with, you know, out of Traverse and stuff, but I think it's good, I think it will be quite good. I have reservations about that band playing the dinner dance for the thing and 500 people though, I'm thinking, "Man, I don't know about that." But that's a long ways away, I just told them, I said, you know, they're asking me, "What do you think, you've got more background and stuff?"

And I said, "It needs work." But it's potential.

CK: Mmhuh.

JL: But if you want to and you listen and you work at it and stuff, so ah, it should be kinda interesting. I wouldn't be surprised if we don't do a thing in the park or a, I don't know what else it would be...maybe here at the library.

CK: Maybe here at the library.

JL I just thought of that.

CK: That's a great idea. I will mention that to our um, the person who does the music promotion here.

JL: You know it was a-

CK: It'd be a great thing for Alpena. Sounds like. There's a void in that, in that genre for sure.

JL: Well how long have you, ah, been around this area? Your whole life I suppose. How long has it been since you heard swing and big band era music live?

CK: Not sure that I ever have.

JL: See. That's what I mean, it's a rarity.

CK: Yeah.

JL: Then again, I think about, well, a lot of that generation's gone bye-bye. I don't know if there's an audience anymore. You know?

CK: I think there is. I think there's a resurgence for that style of music.

JL: Well, there was. We did a lot of that kind of stuff in Traverse and stuff like this and it's kind of the "in" thing, especially Yuppies and stuff like this things like this they go to, you know, they go to Arthur Murray and they learn how to dance, and that's that kind of music, sing stuff, and there's no, no music today that you can really do that to anymore. But ah, but I don't know where it's gonna end up, but it's fun anyway. I'm glad there's not, you know, like this dinner dance thing is in the next month or something, I would just say no. I don't want to be part of it.

CK: You've got time. You've got time. Well thank you so much for coming in today.

JL: Sure.

CK: And sharing your story with us. I really appreciate it.

JL: It was fun, thanks Cindy.

CK: Mmhuh.