

Interview with Al Zdan -August 27, 2015

CC. This is Carol Cadarette speaking. I'm the interviewer this morning ah, with Mr. Al Zdan and in the room with me is, ah, Cindy Kus. And what with that- good morning Al.

AZ. Good Morning.

CC. Um, start out with I know you're a bass player today.

AZ. I am.

CC. Um, any other instruments that you play?

AZ. I play regular guitar and ah, that's about it.

CC. Ok, how long have you been doing it?

AZ. Ah, professionally, about sixty-two years.

CC. Sixty two years.

AZ: Yes.

CC: Ok. Now, I understand that ah, you built your own guitar?

AZ. I did. We had, I built a double neck guitar, one was a bass, and one was a regular guitar.

CC. Ok, how old were ya?

AZ. Sixteen.

CC. Sixteen? Ok.

AZ. Electric.

CC. Yep. Ah, you played, you played for years, we've established that, can you just name as many of the bands that you played with?

AZ. Ok. Well, the first band we put together, we played in front of Long Lake Supermarket in 1953. That was Elwood Smith, who is now an illustrator, a nationally acclaimed illustrator, and Bill Wright, who is a chemical engineer, ah, retired now. And then our first job was at Jack's Tavern, as you remember Jack's Tavern?

CC. Yep, I do- out on 32.

AZ. That's correct. Which is now "Club 32" -

CC. Yeah, yeah.

AZ. - or something else now I believe. And that is, before it burned down then it became Club 32, and we played there for a long time.

CC. That was your first band?

AZ. That was the first band. Then we were with The Monarchs. Ah, name of the band was The Monarchs. The name of the first band I played with was, ah, The Nomads, Elwood Smith and Bill Wright. And then The Monarchs, a Mr. Campbell played bass, I don't remember his first name, we also had Jim LaCross on sax, Johnny Rząd on guitar, Larry Sabourin on drums, and I. And we played ah, around the area for a little while and we played at the, at the Posen prom at one time.

CK. What, can you guess - estimate what year that would've been?

AZ. That would have been about '60 - '57, '58 something like that. And ah, then I went with Johnny Woloszyk and The Harmony Boys and in that band was Johnny Woloszyk on drums, Ted Kapala on accordion, ah Jim LaCross played sax at one time, and Arnie Stump was in that band also with us, and Norm Seiss. So we had two accordions and a bass at one time, and drums. That was interesting, a lot of accordion, a lot of polkas, and we played around the area for a long time.

And then we went with ah, Jim Hardy, I can't remember the name of that band, but we played down at Wurtsmith's Air Force Base for the NCO Club and the Officer's Club, the AuSable Inn, and Jim Hardy and Charlie Wozniak and Larry Sawasky was in that band with me. And we had a lot of fun with the Beatles at that time. We had ah, put on our long Beatle wigs and we played quite a show with them, one whole set was a Beatles set- that was a lot of fun.

Then I went with the Belusar Family, which was ah, after I came back from Arizona. Ah, Shirley Belusar and her children, that was a polka band, we played that in 1973.

And we played a long time with the Electras, that which was with Jerry Ludwiczak, Dick Laney, Debbie Wiles, ah, Neil Madsen was in that band at times and we, we had quite a - that was an old rock and roll band.

CC: Mmhuh.

AZ: Then we went with Dennis and the Good Old Boys –Dennis Wodkowski, Bernie Purol, Neil Madsen, and I and we played a lot of country at that time.

Then I went with the Versatones with Frank Malenski, Bernie Purol, Dennis Wodkowski, ah, Neil Madsen, and I. We played there for a long time, long, long time. Polka music every Saturday night for weddings and, and whatever.

And then we went with the Hardy Boys: Jim Hardy, Dave Hardy, Dick Laney was there; Larry Sawasky was with us at times. And we played all over the place, ah, that was more contemporary music.

And ah then, Doug Allyn, I can't remember the name of that band, but Doug Allyn, Donny Gappa, and Arnie Stump and I, ah, went over to the Pink Ponytail over Petoskey area, we had ah, a lot of fun there, too.

CC. Style of music?

AZ. Style of music was more contemporary, rock and roll-

CC: Ok, ok.

AZ: - old, old country. Then we went with Ken and Donna Schalk. I don't know if you recall them, he played ah, sax and keyboard, and ah, Dick Laney and I ah, was with that group. We played at Club 32 a lot.

Then we had ah, AK and the Outlaws, with Al Kirchoff, Eddie Kirchoff, and ah, we had Tim Rowley, who was a member of the Steel Guitar Hall of Fame, *real* good guitar player. Steel man. And Freeman Colgar, who made his own guitars down in ah, Fairview.

CK. What time period was AK and the Outlaws?

AZ. That wasn't too very long ago, about in the 2,000's. 2000 . . .

CC. You're still playing in that group, aren't you-but basically gospel?

AZ. Um, Ed and Al Kirchoff? No, where we play a gospel, Ed and Al Kirchoff and I play a lot of gospel music and in church.

CC: Ok.

AZ. And then for country's and stuff like country music, we ah, add a steel guitar player, which is Tim Rowley, who's a very good steel man. He's in the Petoskey area. Not Petoskey, Pinconning area. And ah, I also play right now with Judy and her Suchey Brothers, which has Jude-, Judy Suchey, who is on drums; uh, Bob Suchey who's on sax; Jim Suchey, who's on the accordion, Mike Suchey's on trumpet, ah, Bill Suchey sits in sometimes on drums, ah, Tom Suchey, who is now deceased, he played sax, then we have Steve Gwost, ah, who plays trumpet also with us. And sometimes we have Ed ah, Siewiec, who is a member of the International Polka Hall of Fame, very good man. And sometimes Cal Lane sits in with us, who's on sax.

And then we play with Over the Hill Band at the present time with ah, Bob Wodkowski organized this group in his, uh, his garage. So, Bob was with us for a little while, now we have Gayle, ah Gayle and Wayne Bates, ah Jim Eller used to be with us, he's on steel and he's now in, in Tennessee. And Dick Laney, and Larry Golbeck, ah, was on steel for a long time. Now, John Marzean is with us and I. And ah, Don Wodkowski played, believe it or not with, with the band at the beginning in, in Bob's garage.

CC. Yep. So that's your history.

AZ. More or less.

CC. That is a long history- a very long history. And we've got a lot of names there, ah, Al. Um, we, we just touched a little bit, as you went through ah, um, those names of your bands, um, and you touched a little bit on styles – just, just tell me now, ah, country, polka band . . . did you ever play bluegrass?

AZ. Well, sometimes we played bluegrass-

CC: Ok.

AZ: - sometimes.

CC. Ok. Big Band?

AZ. Big bands?

CC. Big Band, did you do anybody that would be considered Big Band, or lounge music, or anything like that?

AZ. Well, I did play with Lorrie Morgan, believe it or not, ah, she was, she came up in ah, at ah, which is now, I can't remember the name of the place . . .

CC. Pappy's.

AZ. Pappy's, yeah.

CC. It was be Spratt Tavern at the time.

AZ. Spratt Tavern. They had Spratt Tavern . . .

CK. At 65 and Werth Rd?

AZ. Yes.

CC. Mm hm. She performed there – if you don't know who Lorrie Morgan is, she was quite, and still is, a wonderful entertainer. And he played bass, I'm sure, in the band you put a band together to play for her. Ok.

AZ. And ah, years ago we used to play with Mel May, who is Charlie May's dad-

CC: Yeah.

AZ: - and Lucky Smalley and . . .

CC. Is those names on this wonderful list you gave me?

AZ. It is.

CC. Alrighty, 'cause he's really given me a list. And the premise of this is to get all these names down and it's going to be lengthy, there's no doubt about it. Um, compare today's music with the music of yesterday – of, of, I believe when you started it was 78 rpms probably, and 45's,

AZ. 45's, yes . . .

CC. Then you went through the 8 tracks, and the cassettes, and now the cd's.

AZ. That's right.

CC. But as far as, as the music . . .

AZ. Well, I lean toward the older country right now, the new country is more or less the old rock and roll, if ah, if that makes any sense. But I don't really care for the new country.

CC. When, when this question was asked of me, and I'll ask it of you, because I've mulled this over in my mind, Cindy, the way I answered it wasn't necessarily the best way. When did, when did, your love of country music, when did it change?

AZ. When did it change? Probably in the late 80's . . .

CC. With, ah, can you name somebody? I did. I actually named.

AZ. Not right off. As I say, I really don't listen to the new country.

CC. I know you don't, neither do I. But it did change, there's definitely. Oh, sure, sure.

AZ. Oh, yeah.

CK. You said Garth Brooks.

CC. I said . . . God love you – I said Garth Brooks, it started changing about that – am I right?

AZ. I agree.

CC. Cuz I never thought, put a lot of thought process into it, but I think that's when it started changing.

CK. I don't listen to country music all that much, but in my mind, it became more like pop music.

CC. Pop & rock.

AZ. Right, exactly.

CK: You know the...

CC. Yeah, yeah. Do you think today's music, Al, is more about, about, the musicianship of presenting the song or the voice?

AZ. Probably more personality wise . . . I . . . I . . . as I say, I really don't listen to it.

CC. Ok. Ok . . . How 'bout places to play as to when you started and now.

AZ. When, when I started there's a lot more places to play then, than there are now because of the DJs taking over the ah, wedding scene and, ah, maybe the, in the bars, we now have karaoke, so there's not too much live music around. But back in the day, there's all the bars wanted live music, and weddings, and . . .

CC. Proms-

AZ: Yeah.

CC: - every party imaginable wanted live music.

AZ. Sure.

CC. Yeah. Ok.

CK. Can I ask . . . ?

AZ. And we do a lot of festivals now, and stuff like that, too. Play in the casinos, up in Brimley.

CK. I was gonna ask about Judy and her Suchey brothers –

AZ: Yes.

CK: -what venues do you play in with them?

AZ. Ah, well, mostly festivals. Ah, we, ah, play a lot in the casinos up in Brimley – that's in the UP. We play ah, Alpine Fest in Gaylord, and over at the Boyne Falls and

CC. Brown Trout

AZ. Brown Trout, the Rogers City festival -

CC. Rogers City.

AZ. –recently.

CC: Yeah.

AZ: We've played at Mackinac Island for their Octoberfest . . . and it's really cold playing on, on Lake Superior and it's October.

CC. Yeah, I can tell you, he can play bass with, with jersey gloves on.

AZ. Yeah, I had to learn that. Those bass strings are pretty thick and cold when you're thumpin' on 'em.

CC: Yeah.

CK. Do you play at any bars now?

AZ. We play at ah, ah, Little Town Lounge right now.

CC. And Maplewood.

AZ: Every other Sunday.

CC: And Maplewood.

AZ. And with, with Carole.

CC. Maplewood, Friday nights. Alice filled in for me, since this.

CK: Mmhuh.

CC: Ok, ah, what were your influences, Al, when you began?

AZ. Well, Chet Atkins, I just loved his music. And then the Beatles came along and I got interested in, in Rock and Roll.

CC. Ok . . . ok. And along the way, there was ahhh all the other styles mixed in between. What do you think that your basic um, love of music encompasses right now?

AZ. Country. Old country.

CC. Ok.

CK. You mentioned gospel, too. You were playing with a group...

AZ. I really like gospel music, also, yes. We play at, ah, several churches around, ah...

CC. We, meaning the Kirchoff's?

AZ. With the Kirchoff Brothers, yeah.

CK. Would you name them?

AZ. Ah, Ed Kirchoff & Al Kirchoff.

CK. The churches-

AZ. Oh, the churches – ah . . . oh, wow, Beaver . . .

CK. Beaver Lake Community Church

AZ. Lake Church some . . . And then we go down to St. Paul's Lutheran Church here quite often. Ah, the one . . .

CC. I went to one out in Spratt.

AZ. Spratt.

CC. A Methodist church- Spratt Methodist, was it?

AZ. I believe it is.

CC. Yeah, I think so – that's where I saw you. Yeah. So, ah, you do, at least, I'm aware of, at least a couple of times a year that you're out there, and two or three times a year that you're doing a gospel show.

AZ. Yes.

CC. Ok, ok.

AZ: And we've got one coming up very recently at St. Paul's.

CC: Ok, ok. Um . . .well, Cindy, you got anything . . . I think Al has really given us a lot to go on, especially with the names of the bands and...

CK. I am interested . . . because you started at such an early age, what, was your family musical? Was there . . .

AZ. No, actually my Dad used to play sax, as I understood, but he's never, I've never heard him play.

CK: Ok.

AZ: But that was it. No, nobody in the family played anything.

CK. Was there music in school? Was, was there listening to the radio?

AZ. I had a class in maybe the 7th grade, but that was nothing at that time.

CC. Do you read music, Al?

AZ. Slowly.

CC. Just enough to get you by?

AZ. Very slowly. It's normally just, just – wing it.

CC. Yeah, yeah.

CK. But, so, you lis- . . . it sounds like you listen to music.

AZ: Oh yeah.

CK: You heard music, you heard the country music and you wanted to, you wanted to play music . . . ?

AZ. Pick it up. If I've heard it, I can probably play it.

CK: Mmhuh.

AZ: And that's just a God-given talent. I don't know where it comes from. I've been asked many times, "How do you do that?" And I can't answer it.

CC: (whispers) Me neither.

CK. So, when you built that first guitar, did you have . . . did you take another one apart? Did you . . .

AZ. No. I ordered a fret board from Carvin Guitar Company and the pickups, electric pickups, 'cause I couldn't make those, but everything else was made by hand.

CK. It was an electric guitar.

AZ. Oh, yes.

CC. Do you have it, Al?

AZ. I still have it, and it still works.

CK. We need to take a picture of that.

CC. We need a picture of that, for sure. Mm, hm.

CK. Ok, Al, when you started, started playing music, you were sixteen years old, you played with the guys out at Long Lake, in front of the supermarket . . . How did you find people to play with? How . . . what was the circuitry that was going on in the community at the time?

AZ. Well, sometimes you just settled in front of the store and played a little bit, and people'd come by and well, "I can play this", and "I can play that" and they sort of joined in, and sort of a jam session type situation.

CC. Did you, did ya know people from school, Al? You went to Alpena High . . .

AZ. Went to Alpena High, ah, sure, in school, but none of those . . . well, Elwood Smith, actually, and Bill Wright- we rode the same bus together to school . . .

CC. Ok.

AZ. We sort of got started that way.

CK. Where would you practice?

AZ. At the store, ah, in Elwood's cottage – they rented cottages at the time and we had an extra cottage over there and we'd get together in there.

CK. Ok. Well, I want to say thanks and we may be back on the recorder at some time-

CC: Ok.

CK: -some later date.