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An Interview with Charles T. "Blackie" Hunt

An Oral History Conducted by Cork Proctor

All That Jazz

Oral History Research Center at UNLV
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University of Nevada Las Vegas

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All transcripts received minimal editing that included the elimination of fragments, false starts and repetitions in order to enhance the researcher's understanding of the material. All measures have been taken to preserve the style and language of the narrator. In several cases, photographic images accompany the collection and have been included in the bound edition of the interview.

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Preface

Charles T. "Blackie" Hunt, born in Pottstown, Pennsylvania in 1930, started accordion lessons at age five. He recounts learning from experienced musicians, then teaching others at age twelve because his teacher was drafted. He attended West Chester State Teachers College where, among other accomplishments, he put together a group with Nick Carlino as tenor sax player.

Blackie shares detailed memories of the many musicians with whom he worked and toured. They played in venues that included Harrisburg, Toronto, and Montreal, and eventually were offered a booking at the Sahara Hotel in Las Vegas.

The group that Blackie worked with in Las Vegas, Tahoe, and Reno came up with the name "The Characters" (backward 'e'), and the show featured comedy and music. It was during this time that he met Lorraine (stage name Lauri Perry), who had her own group. They were married after a couple of years and Lauri joined The Characters.

Blackie and Lorraine Hunt opened Blackie's Bar on Tropicana and Eastern Avenues in the seventies. He talks about the jazz sessions that took place and the musicians who sat in on them, and how he and Lorraine eventually decided to bow out of show business themselves.

The Hunts went on to open the Bootlegger, a restaurant/piano bar on Las Vegas Boulevard. They started a little comedy/music session called "Off the Cuff", in which local or touring musicians, comedians, and singers often participate. Blackie and Lorraine have been part of the vibrant history of Las Vegas and the state of Nevada for many years, and continue to make their home here.

Carmen, Freddie, Blackie, Johnny Riccobini, who started in the 50s and wound up working for many, many years in Vegas lounges. So here we go with Blackie Hunt, known as Charles T., currently the husband of our lieutenant governor as we speak, Lorraine Hunt. So this should be good, Joyce. Hang on.

Okay. Here we are with Blackie Hunt just returning from his beautiful well-tiled men's room in the Bootlegger on 777 --

Thank you for your indulgence, sir.

Yes. And both hands. Thank you.

-- 7777 South Las Vegas Boulevard, where the people from the Blue Diamond turnoff usually wind up in the parking lot upside down.

Actually it's 7770.

Oh, is it? I beg your pardon. Ah, too many sevens in there. Anyway, seven out.

So Blackie, I'm going to just let you roll. And you start from the get-go. I know we're in the same age frame. We don't have to talk about how many years we've been on the terra firma. But let's hear about the childhood and the brothers and sisters, siblings, and music. And you just go ahead on.

I was born in 1930, which makes me as of today whatever it is, 72, approaching 73. I don't feel any older than maybe 70 or 71.

Well, you certainly look good for your age.

Thank you very much.

I was born in Pottstown, Pennsylvania, which is right outside of Philadelphia. It's probably part of Philadelphia these days because the suburbs have moved out quite a distance. I went to school there. My first instrument was accordion. I still love the accordion, although at my age it's pretty tough to hold a regular-sized accordion. So in the act now I use a little bitty one. It doesn't play too good. Well, maybe it's me. I don't know.

It sounds fine.

I started taking lessons at age five. Everything went pretty good. I was never forced to practice. I gave it up several times. For some reason I was drawn back to it and just kept going back. And there were times when I used to time my practice period of a half-hour and couldn't wait until it

was over and then there were other times when I'd just run over because evidently I started to feel something that I had to complete at that particular moment. Anyway, I took my lessons and so forth.

I was about 11 -- I'm not too sure anymore -- either 11 or 12 years old. My teacher, accordion teacher was drafted. And I was taking lessons at a studio in my hometown, Bill Lamb Studio. They taught all the different instruments. And he had the local concert band. He was sort of my mentor, Bill Lamb -- not sort of, he was my mentor. In fact, he kept me in his house for, oh jeez, maybe about a year. And he was the lead trumpet player during the war, World War II. Mr. Lamb, Bill, was the lead trumpet player with the official U.S. Army Field Band, which was the biggest you could be. He was the best. In fact, after that he was with Fred Waring and the Pennsylvanians as lead trumpet. And he was just somebody I admired so much.

Was he a jazz player, Blackie?

No, he wasn't.

Just a good legit trumpet player.

A legit trumpet player. I mean he was just the best. John Philip Sousa introduced him at a concert and featured him. He was just a guy I learned a lot from.

Anyway, I was about either 11 or just turned 12 and my teacher was drafted. And I happened to be the most advanced student in the accordion area. And there was nobody else in town that played better than I did. So they asked me if I would consider teaching. And I said, well, yeah. I said but I don't think the parents are going to like that. Anyway --

When you're younger than the students.

Actually, the former teacher had about 12 students, of which I was one. Six of them didn't stay. But six of the parents gave me the okay and they stayed with me. In fact, one of the kids that stayed with me after I left town at about the age of 20 -- I left teaching -- he took over. And he was the accordion teacher from there on in. So I must have done okay as a teacher. I enjoyed it because I learned so much while I was teaching. It's just an amazing, amazing thing that happens.

I'm going to cut you off because your food is hot and we can come back to this. Blackie will return and tell us more exciting tales about his accordion teaching skills after he eats his beautiful linguini, which is steaming.

Now Blackie has finished his expensive linguini and clams. No shells, thank you. Lunching at the Bootlegger. So here you are. Now you're teaching. You're, what, like 13, 14 years old?

Yeah. Yeah. By the time I finished high school -- I had about 30 students I used to teach after school and so forth. Now, after that I didn't know what to do. I had been playing with dance bands and things like that and doing concerts because I was really probably one of the first guys that did the classics on the accordion. And if I had known then what I know today, things would have changed a little bit as far as -- I used to take the -- because I had access at the music store to all the symphonic arrangements. So I used to take particularly violin concertos and do the right hand, you know, the violin part on my right hand. Then I would study the accompaniment and analyze that and put that into the basses of the accordion. And later on people did do -- they call it transcribing I guess. But I didn't think about it at that point. Anyway, it's a part of my life where I didn't think fast enough.

But anyway, I didn't know where to go. So everybody from that area -- that Pottstown area was very music conscious. And most of the kids that played or were in high school bands, they all went to what was then known as West Chester State Teachers College. It's now known as West Chester University. And they had two majors there. They had the majors Phys Ed and Music. And, of course, there was always fun between the music soups and the Phys Ed guys. There was always that thing.

Sibling rivalry.

Sibling rivalry; that's a good word for it. In a way it was fun. For some reason I was able to get along with the Phys Ed people. I don't know why. I wasn't very hip or hep or whatever the term was in those days.

Hemp, H-E-M-P.

Hemp. But for some reason I was able -- I just sort of hit it off with them. And they more or less stuck up for me and protected me in a way. I had that same thing when I was a kid, come to think of it. A black boy befriended me when I was like nine years old. And this kid, he saved me many a fight because I knew his name, Howard Charles. That's all I had to say was Howard Charles.

Probably Sonny's father. Inside joke.

Right. Anyway, whenever I'd get into a little hassle or whatever or somebody was trying to do something to me, another black kid, I'd say you know Howard Charles? You know Howard Charles? Yeah. Ooh. Hey, nice seeing you, man.

That's funny.

But I've been lucky that way through my life. I really only ever had one fistfight. That was in school with another white kid that played bassoon. And for some reason I got very cocky.

You wanted to fix his lips.

Yes. Well, he fixed me, man, real fast. We became friends after that and so forth.

Anyway, I went to West Chester State Teachers College. I didn't graduate. During the first summer break I put a group together with a tenor sax player by the name of Nick Carlino, who was going to college there. Nick was with I think it was -- what group? They worked Harold's Club. Nick Carlino.

Oh. The Tune Timers. Tune Jesters. Why do I know that name?

It might have been the Coulter Twins.

Jenny and the Gallions.

It could have been the Coulter twins.

Yeah. Maybe.

Anyway, Nick died at a very young age. But he was on the group that had a bass player. The group was sort of Ernie Felice style. And for those of you who don't know Ernie Felice style, it was a Glenn Miller sound. Ernie Felice was an accordion player. And he used to make the chord but play the melody on the bottom. And the clarinet player used to play the melody on the top. Now, you couldn't double that top lead because it would lose the sound. Anyway, it was a sound that I fell in love with as a very young man. And I sort of styled a lot of stuff that I did after that, after Ernie Felice.

Can I ask you something right here while I think of it?

Sure.

Two of the guys that really impressed me were Art Van Damme and Leon Sash.

Right.

Were they recording and playing when you were growing up?

Yes, they were.

I thought they were. Yeah.

Yes, they were. The funny thing is I was more of a -- somehow I got into big band sounds when I first went to see Kenton at the Academy of Music in Philadelphia. I drove down from college. It was just a wonderful, wonderful treat. But I've always been a guy that likes charts. Now, Van Damme did great charts and so forth, but it wasn't that big band sound. I was getting that big band sound from the Ernie Felice thing. Pardon me. It's my oxygen here.

Too much linguini. You're going to have to lighten up on the clams.

Right. Sash -- excellent, very good. You know, George Shearing was an accordion player originally, too. There's a lot of people out there, good players, I mean really good players. Unfortunately, the accordion took a bad rap along the way, which happened to the lounges in Vegas, too. They took a bad rap, Saturday Night Live, those guys, Bill Murray, mainly I guess.

Maybe deservedly so. I don't know.

Yeah, maybe deservedly so.

The bad players brought it on themselves.

Right. That's true. Anyway, I thought it was a funny bit and I laughed, but it sort of took the shine away from that era.

Yeah, of course. People don't realize how much effort goes into -- my wife is an accordionist. She's not certainly as accomplished as you are. But she could still pick up the axe and play. Unfortunately, her bosom precludes her getting inside the waffle-like accordion pleats. So you're not going to hear any screaming from our house.

I wouldn't have any trouble.

But it's a lot of work.

I wouldn't have any trouble even if I wore the accordion lower.

Yeah. That's a very, very inside joke.

Yes, it is.

Let me make a footnote here. You must have been working on your jazz chops because all that time you were teaching applied science. And you were not only getting paid to teach, but you were also playing while you were teaching. So that was good.

Right. Okay. Now, when I was in college, I would still go back and teach my students because the drive was only like maybe 25 minutes. So I could go back. And that's how I put myself through school. Then I used to go to work at night in Wilmington, Delaware, which was like another maybe 25 minutes the other way. And I'd work in a nightclub down there. There on night gig I played piano. I had a back show and played for some dance music. But I hardly got any sleep.

Anyway, I put this group together as I mentioned before. We called it The Four Buds. We laugh about it today. We went on the road that summer, the first summer off from school. We didn't do too well because I wasn't doing comedy then. And I'll get into how that occurred later. But we had some good gigs and people that liked good sounds. And we always ran into one deejay in one city wherever we went that used to love it and he'd, you know, promote it. So by the end of the gig, you know, we had sort of a following.

Developed a following. Yeah.

Right. So anyway, we all went back to school for the second semester. We completed that. Meanwhile we were rehearsing. At the end of that we went out on the road again. And we never returned. The group eventually broke up. One guy went with another group. I went with another group. I'm trying to remember. I went with a group called the Mary Johnston --

So now you're, what, 20, 21?

About 21 now. And Mary Johnston's husband, Lloyd Johnston was a wonderful sax player and did charts for the Boyd Rayburn Band, which people don't remember.

Oh, yes. "Celery Stalks at Midnight."

Yeah. I have to backtrack. You asked me about the jazz, how I got into that. I became a fan of Lenny Cristiano's. And I was so intrigued with it. And my ears back in those days were pretty good. I could transcribe. I took all of his (singing). "Wow" I think it was called.

And put it in the accordion.

Yeah. But it was just ear training for me. In fact, when I went to college, the dictation teacher -- dictation is where they play something on the piano and say, okay, this is -- let's see. What notes am I playing now? What chord? Well, I had no problem with that whatsoever. And the teacher picked up on that real fast. So what she did was she would give me another tonality. She would

say this is C, but she wasn't playing C. She was playing maybe E. So now I'm hearing it in E. So take the dictation. Now I have to transpose as I'm taking the dictation.

Good challenge.

Because I didn't have a movable dough. See, dough was dough to me, you know.

Dough is pizza is what it was.

Right. But it was a challenge and I learned a lot. All those little things that -- I mean she didn't do it to be mean. She just --

She wanted you to grow.

She wanted me to grow. Otherwise, I wouldn't have because I couldn't do that stuff.

You'd still be back there teaching if you hadn't grown.

Right. So what sometimes you think is somebody grabbing you a little bit, they're not. Just go with it, go with it.

A gentle nudge.

Yes. We all need that.

Anyway, I went with the Mary Johnston group. Later I left that group and joined another group playing vibes and flugelhorn. Now, I had never played -- I had played a little trumpet. And this guy I joined, Charlie Morrison in Harrisburg had the Dale "Muscleman," Dale Moore.

Remember Dale?

I remember String Moore. Yes. And Dale, I loved Dale.

Dale and I were on the same group, Charlie Morrison Group, for a couple of years. I learned an awful lot from Dale. Dale was a very funny man.

And a great player.

Right. But previous to that -- I should say how the comedy thing really started. I was working at a club -- I don't even recall where now. I think it was Harrisburg come to think of it -- with this good sound, the Ernie Felice sound and everything. And we're dying, just dying. And we were working opposite another group that had funny hats and couldn't play more than three chords. But they had funny hats and they were breaking it up.

They were entertaining.

Entertaining. At that point I thought music was all I had to do. So I got drinking that night a little

bit too much. And I told the bass player, I said, when I tell you -- the other group had just gotten off and they got all this applause and laughter. I said when I tell you turn on the spotlight, I'm going to do it. Now, I did a no-no. I took the guy's hat from the other group, put it on my head, told the guy turn it on, turned around, did what I thought was a funny face, which turned out to be a face that I've used ever since, as the dumb guy. And the people laughed. And then we did our set and they clapped for everything we did and I didn't do anymore. And all of a sudden it hit me, boom, boom, I broke the wall down. From that point I really started to leave music and head more toward the comedic area.

This would be in the early to mid 50s, Blackie?

Yeah. I would say that would have been about '51, '52, in that era. Now I spent a lot of time actually in front of a mirror to be honest with you. And I would make up just basic emotions and I'd try different faces. For some reason my face was adept to being able to be -- what do you call it? -- movable putty or --

Flexible.

Flexible. And all of a sudden I found a vehicle.

Well, from that point I left the group -- I didn't leave the group. I was in Florida starving with this group and we weren't getting paid half the time. The union was trying to run us out of town because they didn't want out-of-towners. Oh, all that stuff. And I got a call from a guy by the name of Carmen Baccari. Now, Carmen Baccari and Freddie Baccari were brothers and they had a group called the Noveliers. I hadn't met them along because we were booking through the same agency and they had seen me work. And I wasn't doing very many funny things at the time. I did a few. And they had seen me work. And their piano player was going to leave. They had just won the Arthur Godfrey Talent Show. But this guy wanted to leave. So they called me and said, oh, it would be nice to have an accordion because I was playing accordion at the time.

And they couldn't get Vick Berry. There's a name on the list.

Yeah. Right. Okay. So I'm in front and then he called me. And down there I was making when I got paid 80 bucks a week. And Carmen and Freddie called and said we'll make you an even split. You'll be making 150 a week.

How did they hear about you?

Through the agency.

Oh, they did? Through the mutual agent. You said that.

Right. And they had run into me. We had sort of talked one time and sort of had a little rehearsal on the QT. That was on the group that Dale was on. And Dale was upstairs and he knew what was going on. But I didn't leave the group at that time.

So anyway, I accepted the job. Drove back up. And we opened in Toronto, Canada. We rehearsed first in Philly where they were from, then drove to Toronto. And we only had to do like a short show -- no. Montreal, Canada. Downbeat. And we were part of a show, which had different acts. We only had to do maybe 20 minutes so I didn't have to learn too many things. At that point I was doing the upside down piano bit, what they call the upside down where I lay underneath the piano and reached up and played.

Very impressive.

And I did the nose bit. And that's always a funny thing. Definitely Pete Barbutti plays better nose than I do. But I didn't take it from him and he didn't take it from me. It was something that we just --

You fell into.

-- fell into. And we cared about it, whatever. Anyway, so we did a downbeat. Then along the way -- the group was called the Noveliers -- one of the brothers, Freddie, sort of got angry at me. I don't know how to say this. I was getting too many laughs I guess.

You were upstaging him.

I was upstaging him. And that's what I do. I mean for some reason.

Yes. And very well.

I don't know why -- I know why I do it, because that's what I do. Anyway, that's what -- when he left, when Freddie left we brought on a kid that we had run into in Washington, D.C. by the name of Johnny Ricco. Johnny Ricco was a wonderful singer, handsome kid. We brought him on. We still went by the name of the Noveliers.

Now, Freddie wants to come back after about -- and we're working in Toronto, Canada at the Prince George Hotel. But Freddie wanted to come back. So we took a vote and we all voted yes because we all liked Freddie. He came back. Now we had four guys.

Well, we had an offer to come to Vegas. No. Let me think there a second. We knew that Vegas would be -- because it was really starting to come up. This is around '54. We decided to change the name because there was a group in Florida called the Novelettes that was doing quite well, Frankie Carr and those guys. And the Noveliers was just too close. So we changed it to The Four Guys.

Well, Bill Miller, who was the entertainment director at the Sahara hotel here in Vegas, saw an Arthur Godfrey show right before our agent talked to him. And on that show was a group called The Four Guys, which consisted of two black guys and two white guys. It was not us. Well, our agent says, you know, I have a wonderful group back here, The Four Guys. Oh, yes. They book us for four weeks.

Well, we come out and Bill comes out. And we're setting up and everything at the old lounge at the Sahara. And he just keeps looking and he's looking around. And he says -- well, no, he didn't say anything until we did our first show. We opened on our knees, played a Toulouse-Lautrec song, (singing). I mean The Characters really did some strange stuff. And it was to get much stranger as we -- because we were fairly new as a group.

Taking chances.

Taking chances. We did pretty good. After the show Bill Miller comes up to us and he says, you know, the act I booked, The Four Guys, had two black guys. He said this isn't the same act, is it? Did you just win the Arthur Godfrey Show? No. The Noveliers did, though, previously. He says I evidently booked the wrong act, but I'm picking up your options.

Great. That must have made you feel great.

Oh, jeez.

Thank you, Jesus. Get off the road for a while.

Oh, yes. That was it. And we stayed six months. We had another job we had to go back to at the Prince George Hotel in Toronto. We went back and did that gig and then were supposed to come back out. Carmen decides he was going to leave the business because, as most people in the business knew, Carmen was a Jehovah Witness. He believed that the end of the world was approaching. And he decided he was going to give up show business. So he went to Atlantic Refining School, took a course, and he ended up managing a gas station. Meanwhile --

That's a career move to go from a guitar player on the road to running a gas station.

Meanwhile Johnny Ricco goes back to -- his wife's folks lived in Atlantic City, New Jersey. So he went back there and he started gigging around. Freddie and I tried to do a team. I'm there with my accordion and he's there with his bass. And nobody knew who the funnyman was. Anyway, it was sort of stupid. Anyway, we had a lot of laughs afterwards, later. So things didn't quite work out. The world didn't come to an end.

And the gas station business really got boring.

Right. So we got back together. And we contacted powers that be at the Sahara and said we're available if you have any openings. So they booked us again and we stayed. We came out here --

When did you change the name, Blackie?

The name was changed almost immediately. I mean there are different stories. One story is like Bill Miller said, boy, you guys are characters and then it changed from that point. But I don't think that's the real story. I think the real story happened when Stan Irwin was involved there. And Stan, who later became the entertainment director after Bill Miller, turned it over to Larry Sloan, who worked publicity at the Sahara. Now, Larry wrote the elephant joke books. That was his thing. I think the true story is really that he is the guy that came up with the name The Characters.

Great name.

Yep. And then it was me -- I have to admit this; I have to blow my horn -- that came up with the backward E.

Great. Good hook.

C-H-A-R-A-C-T, backward E, R-S.

Perfect.

And I became like the symbol of that E, the backward thing.

Good. Out of sync. You were always out of sync.

And if you look up here at Blackie's, you see the backward E.

I do. I noticed that in my drunken state the other night. I said, hey, what's the matter with that E? I'm dyslexic. So everything to me is backwards.

Oh, really?

Oh, yeah.

Anyway, then the group stayed. We worked a minimum of six months a year at the Sahara for 13 years. The rest of the time being spent in Tahoe and Reno, which was probably the biggest mistake The Characters ever made by never really venturing out of the state. We just stayed here, made the money, blew the money.

It's okay. Can I ask you something because most people are candid and I'm sure you will be?

Sure.

What's the best money you guys ever made at the Sahara?

The best money we ever made?

Best money you ever made. Before commish, the gross.

Okay. I think the final figure was 5,000. I think it was up about --

Was it? God, I thought you were making more than that. Of course, that was a lot of money 50 years ago. Yeah.

Well, when Frank Ross and I went out -- when I left The Characters, I went with Frank Ross from the Mary Kaye Trio. We opened at 5,000 a week. And there were only two of us. Plus we had to pay the band. So it was quite a jump. That only lasted two years unfortunately because I loved Frank dearly. Frank was a special kind of guy, very difficult to rehearse, which is -- everybody knows that knows the thing.

Well, you were both spontaneous. I think you're more the book guy.

Yes. I'm more structured.

Yeah, you are structured. But even so, you could still take a flight a fancy. But he was nuts coming out of the gate.

Right.

Frank would say anything or do anything or he'd light up a cigar on stage or -- and that was part of his charm. But you can't have two guys that are that disparate.

I could be wrong, but I really give Frank Ross credit for Vegas lounges as far as comics, how they worked it. I really do. I have to give him the credit.

Oh, he was really great. He made Mary and Norman look terrific. And they made him look

terrific vocally.

To me that was the greatest group ever, to me.

Oh, what a chemistry.

That's because it was musical. That's not taking anything away from Louis Prima. That was a stylish type of thing.

And a tight rehearsed band.

And very good. Very, very good. Nothing wrong with it.

Exciting, very exciting.

Nobody knew how to work an audience better than Louis. He was the best.

Go ahead. I broke your continuity. So now it's The Characters. Now you're doing pretty well. Of course, you're off the road and you're making a good living.

Well, I left and did the two years with Frankie Ross. Then I rejoined The Characters again.

This would have been about 1970, '71, '72, somewhere in there?

No, no.

Later?

I tell you it was -- yeah. About '70.

I saw you with Frank and Lauri at Harrah's in Reno.

Right.

So that would have been somewhere in there.

Yeah. I came back and then I rejoined them in Tahoe at the Sahara. And Sammy Davis used to come in and see us and he wanted to take us on the road with him, which we did. We went on tour. We went to Florida. We didn't do really good. Back in those days -- see, The Characters were a visual, all visual really. And they didn't have the big screens as they do today in the theaters. And particularly we worked the O'Keefe Centre in Toronto, Canada. When you got up to the back row, man, how could you --

You were an inch high.

Inch high. Now, how could you see a face?

It's like the Hollywood Bowl, 17,000 people. If you don't have binoculars and you're in the back row...

So anyway, we got panned in Toronto. And I'm going to tell you the exact headline. And this guy eventually got fired because the whole town went in an uproar. The headlines for the review of the show was "One-Eyed Nigger Jew." Swear to God that is the exact truth. Bad show or whatever. He called us, The Characters, pismires. The only guy -- Lorindo Almeda; that's the only guy he gave a good review to.

Guitar player from South American.

Yep.

The bossa nova, the beginning of the bossa nova.

Well, that got to Carmen pretty good and he decided he wanted to leave.

Again.

Again. And he did leave and that was forever. We brought in another guy by the name of Phil Palumbo out of Akron, Ohio. And Phil did a good job. I loved Phil. Phil and Freddie are two guys -- I just think about them and have to break up. They are wonderful guys.

Freddie had a great face. You're right visually, man. And they called him "Champ" because he had been a boxer at one time.

Right. He had a little crooked nose and all that stuff. Anyway, we worked with Phil as part of The Characters. And then things were getting a little lame. Freddie didn't want to leave town. So we accepted a job at the Hilton, which we had opened with The Characters with Peggy Lee. We opened the hotel with Peggy Lee in the lounge. I think it was Streisand in the big room I believe as the opening act. It was the International then. Freddie didn't want to leave town anymore. So we decided -- he decided -- he worked out a deal three days a week as relief. So we used to play the relief thing. And I saw the end coming.

But in the meantime, I had married Lorraine. Lauri Perry was her name. She had her own group and so forth. She was actually I guess you'd say the chick singer with Frank Cross and myself. We ended up getting married after about two years of association, working together. Where do we go from there? Oh, well, I saw the end coming. And then Freddie had multiple open-heart surgeries and he was afraid to move. And his doctor used to come in. I can remember he was a famous doctor from Phoenix that did all the big operations. And he'd come in and he'd pound him on his chest. He'd say, you're fine, you're fine. But Freddie could not get it through his

head.

Psychologically he was terrified.

So the act broke up. Now, Alice Schuppe happened to like Lauri because we brought Lauri in when Phil Palumbo left to go back. So it was just Freddie Baccari, myself and Ray. Plus we had the musicians in back of us, different guys at different times. Then when Freddie left Schuppe said, well, why don't you guys stay on? So we became The Characters with Lauri Perry. I was the last guy left. Well, we worked a gig. And we did sort of a poor man's Captain and Tennille or Sonny and Cher. Lauri wasn't like Cher.

She was singing great.

Yeah. Then we had some good charts together that we sang. And then she played straight on some of the clean things that I did. I always worked pretty clean in my period. Probably at this age I'm doing a little more off color than I ever did but not too much. I still do it like a little kid would do it or something.

And you can get away with it because you're vulnerable and they like you.

Yeah. So meanwhile, Lorraine and I owned some property down at Tropicana and Eastern. Her father and I guess her mother wanted us to stay home, you know, give this up. Why don't we go in the restaurant business? Well, that was fine. And then I decided well... We used to go in the coffee shop on our breaks at the Hilton and we would discuss what we wanted the old Bootlegger to look like. Lorraine always liked to draw plans and sketches. We sort of worked together, although she did most of the stuff. But I would offer my little two cents. And sometimes she'd accept it; sometimes she wouldn't, which was okay. Everything worked out fine. So I guess it was all right.

So we built the place. And we were going to open Blackie's Bar. It was going to be called Blackie's Bar. We were going to have a little entertainment, which would have been Lorraine and me.

You had a fire pit by way of description.

Fire pit.

It was really very warm and had the whorehouse flock wallpaper.

Yes.

And it was dark and moody and smoky and it was great.

We also had the microphone jacks put in down by the pit. That's where the original thing was supposed to be.

Yeah, sure. I saw Pete Barbutti work there one night.

Yeah. But we worked in the other corner, up in the corner.

He wasn't in the fire pit?

No. We didn't do -- no. We tried that. We put a piano in there and it just didn't -- it was too hot with the fireplace.

Yeah. You're right.

We didn't have a stage. We just moved to another corner. We did that for about eight weeks, Lorraine and I, on Friday and Saturday I guess it was. And I was writing charts and we were getting some new things. And I had a drummer and a bass player. Then we had little jazz things. Pete Barbutti came in one night and did his thing, Carl Fontana and those guys. But we weren't getting out of there on Fridays and Saturdays until four or five in the morning. It was just killing us. So one night Lorraine sang sitting down. She looks over at me. I'm on "Fender Roads" at the time. She says I think we'll give ourselves notice. So we gave ourselves notice and we quit. And that was the end of the entertainment there except for special jazz nights once in a while we'd have. And then that was the end of show business for me. And we stayed at that location for 30 years.

Meanwhile about 20 years ago, maybe 22 at this point, Lorraine and I bought some property on the Strip, south Strip. We hadn't planned to develop it as soon because we felt it was a little bit ahead of time, which it didn't turn out to be. There was a rumor that a bar was going to go right next door to us. And if they had gone in, we wouldn't have been able to get a bar license because there was a gap there. And if we don't have a bar -- we wanted the machines.

And you mean right here.

Right here.

This location.

That's it. And in fact, we had to move our front door because there was another bar on the back street here. We had to be 1500 feet away. So we had to change the plans for this place just to get

our license.

Thank you to the zoning commission.

Well, anyway, that place is no longer there. I think it burned down. I wonder who burned it down?

I have no idea. Some couple. One of them was an Italian. The other guy was a funny guy. I don't know.

No, I don't know what happened. It was just like two weeks ago. I drove by and said, well, where is this place? And I go there all the time. But it not being there, I didn't look for it. And then I started thinking about it. It's no longer there. You see a foundation.

So now we're building the place. It's almost finished here, the new restaurant and the plaza, piazza plaza. Lorraine calls me one day and she says, Honey, I got a surprise for you. I says what? She says come on down. I happened to be at the house at the time. So I came down. And I looked and here is this grand piano. And I looked at her and I said do you want me to do this stuff again, huh? She says yeah. She says you've got too much to offer.

What a tribute to her sensitivity. And I always wondered the other night -- awhile back we gave Blackie an award. And at the same time we were giving him the award, I was thinking to myself it's a drag that he didn't keep doing what he was doing because when you have it and you have it that good and you do it well, which you do, you should keep doing it. There was a guy that came to town, Blackie, one time and did a seminar and he said do what you love; the money will come. But beyond that, he said, whatever you do keep doing it as witnessed by Bernie Allen, 87 years old, still hilarious. Timing is impeccable. And, you know, I understand when you're running a business it's really hard to do everything well. And most of the guys I know that have tried to run a joint and perform in it -- Don Randy, the jazz piano player who owns the Baked Potato. He's a friend of mine for a hundred years. Same thing; you just have too many things on your plate. Something has to suffer. Either the employees steal you blind, which is a given in a restaurant or a bar complex and/or you can't get up and perform every night because you're watching the bartender or some girl that is sleeping with the bartender and now they're going to be your partners. That's right. Yep.

So the piano was really institutional to get you back to working.

Yeah. I mean we had discussed the possibility of putting it in beforehand. It wasn't that complete a surprise, but it was a surprise. She had a guy go check out this piano and he said it was fine. As long as I keep it tuned once a week, it works fine, regardless of what Vinnie Falcone says. But Vinnie's a perfectionist as far as --

Yeah. And you know what? If the piano -- subject for the people that are listening or reading this later on in Vegas, pianos are notorious for being dry. And when they lose the humidity, the sounding board -- and I don't know anything about pianos, but I know a lot of piano tuners. And they all say the same thing. The sounding board gets real dry and everything pulls up a half step or down or it's just totally bent. And if you move the piano, God knows if you pick it up and even tweak it, even if three guys pick up one end -- and that's a mini grand, isn't it? Is that an eight-footer?

That's a seven-footer.

So that's about a 600-pound piano. So anytime you move something that big you immediately tweak the keyboard. You bend it. You shift it. Now everything goes outside of whack. So it's constant. I mean you just have to have a guy come and do it.

Every Thursday he's here. Right now we're -- well, actually we're running entertainment almost four or five nights a week. I forget.

Good. And it's going well.

Yeah, it is. Anyway, when we got the piano and we opened, Lorraine and I on occasion would get up later at night when just a few of our friends might be hanging out. And we'd go up and we'd just sing and play and have a little fun at the piano.

One night Sonny King came in. He was seated in the back. I went over and said hello to him. Hey, Sonny, I haven't seen you in a long time. Anyway, the piano lid was down. So he really couldn't see that close. When he got up to go to the restroom, he says, jeez, is that a piano up there, Blackie? And I said yeah. And he was putting me on because he knew I played. He says do you know anybody around here that plays? I says, yeah, I think I could find somebody. He says you want to go up and do a couple of things? I said yeah, why not?

Well, about an hour and a half later we came up and we started goofing around. And it

seemed to work. We said good night. Then Sonny called me the next day and said, you know, I had a lot of fun doing little stuff with you. He said would you consider hiring me if you work with me on Fridays and Saturdays? I said, ah, jeez, I don't know if I really want to do that again.

I thought about it. I didn't think too long. I said, well, wait a minute, I did have fun and that's what Lorraine wants me to do. And I said okay. So we got together and met and we talked over a few keys and so forth. And that's about the amount of it. Lorraine named it Off the Cuff. And that's the way we started really, off the cuff. It's been over two years. In the meantime, naturally you do bits that work and then you sort of build a routine out of it. And they're like our insurance policies. You can't ad lib the whole night.

Savers.

The savers. And it's been fine. We've gotten like all the older guys to come in -- well, I'm older too. But all the original Vegas starters, however you want to --

The usual suspects.

Yes. They stop by. I mean Cork Proctor's even been known to stop by.

And it is fun for what it's worth. And the other night Sonny made a comment that a lot of the fun had gone away from the principle part of the business we knew. Having been entertainment director of three major hotels, I understand exactly what it is because once you lose the creativity at the top, there's nobody down below that knows what to do. And you can't delegate the entertainment director's job to a 23-year-old girl that just finished with a marketing degree from UNLV. They mean well, but they really don't know how to fix anything. They don't know what is funny. Their idea of funny is getting a guy off Def Comedy Jam who's at the Apollo Theater and every other word starts with mother.

That's about right.

Well, it is right. And what you guys are doing is very creative because you're having fun. The other night it was Freddie Bell. I mean it was a cross section. Here's Frankie Randall, who used to be Chico Randall, who was Sinatra's protege. And Bernie Allen and Carmie and myself and everybody. And, of course, Sonny and Blackie were the linchpins to hold it together. It is a very good working scenario. As a matter of fact, it probably should be one of those things that ought to be videotaped and sent to the Smithsonian because it's the last

of an era. It really is. There's nothing else going on in Las Vegas of this caliber. And I tell you the truth.

A funny thing happened. I don't know if you've heard the Jimmy Hopper story or not. Jimmy does a hell of a job.

(End Side A.)

June 2003. We're just talking about the transition when Blackie Hunt, to whom we're speaking, and Sonny King decided they were going to get together and partner up. And then all of the sudden the joint became a place to hang out and people, including myself, started coming and hanging on Friday and Saturday nights. And now there's entertainment four nights a week. And it is fun. And you don't know who is coming. And you don't know what Blackie and Sonny are going to do in conjunction with each other. They have some savers. They have some bits that they do. But there's still a great deal of spontaneity. And the other night Freddie Bell from the old Bell Boys killed me. He was not only brilliant, he was so quick. There was a guy in the audience and Freddie alluded to his being gay. And then when the guy stood up and waved at him, he said, my God, I scored, which was pretty funny. Anyway, I was talking about Jimmy Hopper. Strange thing. Jimmy comes in at least a Friday or a Saturday night and sometimes Friday and Saturday. He comes in and he sits in. He thoroughly enjoys it and we enjoy having him.

Now, it was maybe six months ago somebody was in here from a record company. I don't know why they were here to begin with. They weren't here to see Sonny and me. I think they just came in to eat and happened to see a show. Anyway, Sonny and I did our stuff. And then we brought Jimmy up as one of the performers. And he did his thing. The guy got in touch with him. This guy really flipped out over Jimmy. Now, the guy calls his boss at the record company. I forget. It's a big company. I forget. Jimmy told me and I forget.

Sony. Somebody.

Yeah. One of those. And he says I found this kid, wonderful, dada, dada, dada. He says where is he working? Well, I saw him at this place called the Bootlegger Bistro, but he does work the Bellagio in the lounge. And the guy says we don't sign lounge singers.

That's Vegas.

That's Vegas. Well, this guy was so insistent. He says I don't care what you do. Please come down. You've got to see this guy. Well, they came down and they signed him.

Sure. What's not to like?

They didn't find him in the hotel. They found him here.

Having a spontaneous moment. And for those of you that may wonder later on Jimmy Hopper is probably going to be a big star because he's handsome, he's charming and he also works one of the lounges at the Bellagio. He's kind of a house guy there, which is good. He's got a steady gig and he's there and it's great, but that isn't a career move.

No.

It's a day gig. It's like The Characters were at the Sahara.

That's right.

And you can get locked into that and you can be there forever.

Anyway, I'd like to have you tell some great stories that I know some about and some I don't know. And I don't mean necessarily -- but the challenge of management. Stan Irwin was your manager at one time?

No.

No, never was.

Never was. A friend.

Matt Greggor.

Matt Greggor.

Anyway, we were interrupted briefly by some customers thanking Blackie for a complimentary lunch. And his wife, of course, is a fine singer, whom I saw here when you first started doing the jazz nights. Sharon was one of the first singers.

That's right.

Excellent singer.

Yes, she is.

Anyway, so there are a lot of stories that have always followed you through the business. And I'm going to bring this up because it's one of those things. It's like a rocket. And when The Characters were very, very successful, they had an organist named Bill Dixon.

Right.

And Freddie Baccari had a pretty violent temper.

Yes.

They were playing golf and somehow Bill Dixon really pissed off Freddie and Freddie broke his nose. And the entire town --

Freddie broke his jaw.

I'm sorry. His jaw, which was even worse. And I saw him about a week later. He was back playing. I was always curious -- did Freddie pick up the tab for that? Did he sponsor the reconstruction?

You know, I don't know. I really don't know.

I don't know either, but I hope he did. It would have been a nice gesture. Freddie was a tough guy. But we all said the same thing: Why Bill, this nice passive organ player? I mean if he would have slapped him with an open hand. But I mean what did he do to justify?

At this point -- I did know.

It was a golf game.

It was a golf game.

Yeah. And they were at the Sahara Country Club I think or somewhere. Yeah. You guys played free there.

Well, you know something? I think I recall in my mind -- see, I had left the group at that point. And Bill Dixon was a pretty close friend of mine. In fact, we roomed together once in a while.

Is he still alive?

Yes.

Good player.

Doesn't play anymore. He went into construction.

Living here still?

He lives down near Laughlin, one of those towns down there. I think Freddie might have put me down because I left the group or said something. And Bill being --

He defended you.

Yeah, he defended me. And I think that's about it.

Plus they were probably both drinking while they were playing golf.

Oh, I'm sure.

Get down in that golf cart and get that martini. We need that extra martini for the back nine.

Right. Bill later left the group. I wonder why, but he did leave.

My question is, which I kind of alluded to earlier because having watched you over a long, long span, 20-some-odd years, what do you think it was that kept you guys from great success? There was no doubt in anybody's mind that up there with Mary Kaye and Louis Prima and you guys, I mean there were no better acts around? There were a lot of knockoff acts -- The Tune Timers, The Happy Jesters. They were great acts. I don't mean that they weren't good. And The Happy Jesters with Kenny Cornell and so on and so on. But the thing is what do you think precluded The Characters from going on and doing great things? You were a television act. You worked extremely clean. I couldn't fault you for anything. And musically it was great. I mean the vocals, Johnny was a wonderful singer and your accompaniment. I don't even know how well Carmen played. For all I know he was limited. But I did hear him play on occasion when he sounded awful good. But, of course, when you're rehearsing every day or every week or something and you've got the tunes down, you can shuck your way through about anything, you know.

Right. Right.

So what do you think? It was just management, or lack thereof?

That answer is very simple. We were our own worst enemies.

Thank you.

Very simple. How do you explain that? I don't know. But somebody told me that one time and I'll never forget it. You're your own worst enemy.

Oh, I've shot myself in the feet so many times, Blackie, I can't even water ski anymore because the water comes through like Swiss cheese.

Well, a couple of things attributed there. Carmen, because of his religious background, didn't want to travel.

Well, that kills you right off the bat. You don't want to fly to New York to do a television

show?

No. Oh, he would never fly. He would drive.

So that pretty much limits you right there.

Right. And Don Rickles used to say this act could have been great, but Carmen doesn't want to leave town because he's got to fix his kid's bicycle. And that's the truth. That was the truth. And I love Carmen. Carmen was like my second dad.

Very personable, charming man.

Right.

Saw him when his son got in all that trouble. I stopped one night and he was just coming back from the joint visiting his boy, who's probably still in the joint.

Yes, he is.

He'll be there forever.

Yeah, he will.

Never give an angry young man a knife.

That was so sad.

I know.

I remember when Carmen first found out that his son was on drugs. He just completely fell to the floor and cried like a baby.

Oh, of course, especially when you're a very spiritual religious guy, which he was.

He had gotten a letter from his son, who was at that point in Los Angeles. And he says, Dad, I've got to tell you I thank you for everything, but somehow I got screwed up and I'm still screwed up. Whatever. It was just sad.

Can I ask you something about the personalities along the way?

Sure.

And I'm not going to bring up uncomfortable things. But along the way except for Carmen, I think you had been married once. Had Freddie been married once or twice?

No. He was only married once. I'm the only guy that got divorced.

The only outlaw.

Yeah. Black sheep or whatever you want to call it. Yeah, it did happen to me.

So overall I guess the assessment would be that you guys went about as far as you could.

Yes.

You had a steady, great gig. You had tremendously loyal fans including me, you know, who was at one time the lifeguard over at the Sahara. That's Sonny's great introduction. Hey, I met him when he was a shmuck and he's still a shmuck. The only difference is he's not in a bathing suit, but he's close. He's got on a Hawaiian shirt and shorts. So what I'm thinking is the same thing that people always say, well, how come this happened or how come that didn't happen? There's always a pretty valid reason behind why didn't this work. Well, if the guys aren't collectively moving in the right direction -- and Matt Greggor was a pretty good manager.

Yes, he was.

Pretty good.

Yes, he was. I remember his first line. He says I'm here. I have the white chair and the whip because we had white instruments at the time. Even my accordion was -- even the black keys were white. Everything was white. Freddie had a white bass. Carmen had a white guitar. Now, later on I really switched more to piano and did more like maybe one feature number on the accordion per show. Freddie didn't play bass at all because we hired an organ player, which that helped. That helped us move ahead because it loosened us up. I didn't have this accordion and I could move away from the piano.

You had more freedom. You could do more comedy. Sure.

Right.

Then you started playing, what, the clavinet, the little guy that you blow into?

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

I remember that.

I shouldn't tell stories like these, but they're endearing to me.

Go ahead. Yes.

Freddie and I used -- he was like -- how could you explain? He was like a Lou Costello type. He had this face that you could not resist. Then I had this other kind of face that maybe you could resist. I don't know. But a lot of stuff we used to do nose to nose. And we had one particular

routine called Chicken Little, the sky is falling. And Freddie would tell me this story and he would be like the bigger brother telling the little brother this story of Chicken Little. It was a completely asinine story, had nothing to do with the original story, just whatever would come to mind. Of course, the routine built and built. Another saver.

You added stuff. Yeah, sure.

So now we're in Akron, Ohio, Phil Palumbo's hometown. Phil was in our group at the time. The only fisticuffs we ever had in the group was between Freddie and me. And it was in the restroom -- no. It was the dressing room at the Tangiers, the name of the club, in Akron, Ohio. Well, I was in the midst of a divorce. And he said something derogatory about my present wife. And then I came back with a shot at him because I'm known to do that. When I get attacked I'll attack and I hurt. I hurt. That's an unfortunate thing. It's one of my faults. And it will be my undoing.

Don't do it to me because I'm on good behavior today myself.

Okay. All right. And it's probably my undoing, as time will tell. But that's the way it is.

So you threw Freddie a line. And then, what, he hauled off and popped you?

Yes.

He wasn't real good about self-restraint, was he?

No. I mean he really popped me.

Did he knock you down?

Yeah. And I couldn't fight back. I was never a fighter.

Well, he already psychologically dented you because now you're on your knees. Luckily he didn't kick you.

So we had another show to do. So I went in the restroom. And I was bleeding from the nose. So I cleaned up as best I could and I stuck Kleenex up my nose -- toilet paper actually up my nose. I went out and did the show. And guess what we did? Chicken Little, right? Nose to nose.

Oh, what a great story.

And still broke the place up.

Yes. Well, that's professionalism. That's the ultimate professionalism when you're so angry.

And I know that everybody in the business -- you know, when I was on the Kings Four one

night I wanted to kill George Werth, the bass player. I mean it was all I could do. And I'm not physical either. But if I'm provoked, if you keep poking me in the chest -- and, man, I went out in the alley with him. And Billy said you guys can't get into this. And I said, well, you better tell him to lighten up then because one of us is going to go home in a body bag. And that was 1960 at the Saddle and Sirloin in -- no. I'm sorry. It was somewhere, I don't know, in Texas.

Now, the ironic thing about that story is Freddie didn't really know Lorraine at that point. He hadn't met her. Later on we had dinner over at my house. We had all the boys over and their wives.

Did he ever apologize for that?

No.

Nothing?

No.

He was just straight ahead.

Yeah, straight ahead. And I forgave him. I look back and laugh now.

Well, you're a gentleman.

And I'm sure he looks back and he's sorry -- if he could. He's gone now.

That's probably what gave him his heart problem -- all of that anger.

Sure.

You can't be mad all the time at everybody.

And I know why he had the anger. I know why. And it's very personal and I will not go there.

No. That's okay. We'll leave that suspect.

Anyway, it's a funny thing. All three of my partners -- Freddie, Carmen and John -- really fell in love with Lorraine.

I don't blame them.

They fell in love with her. She pulled us all back together even after we had broken up for years. We got back together. We had the best time. We played old tapes. And she was the master at doing those things. I'm sure that Freddie, if he's thinking at all wherever he is -- he's going to be in heaven.

How old was he when he checked out?

Seventeen. No. I'm trying to think.

He wasn't very old, 56, 57.

Yeah. Around there.

I know he was young because when he died it really surprised me. I heard about it.

Well, he went out to holler at the pool man one day at his house.

Another burst of anger.

That's right. And he had a stroke and he went into a coma. I visited the hospital every day. I'd go over and talk to him. He didn't hear me, of course, I don't think.

Maybe.

Maybe he did.

When I see him, I'll ask him.

Okay.

He's up there with Louis and all those other guys.

But I tell you I miss him. As many arguments as we had, I miss the man.

I know. Well, it's like a bad marriage. I mean we all have some experience with women or other guys. You know I discovered something that you know. Every relationship can't stand on its own forever. There's always a change. The change is the most constant thing. People get mad about this and mad about that and we're all dragging a lot of baggage from our childhood. We have those demons, man. We have to deal with those.

Other stories about The Characters -- a lot of them I can't tell.

Well, that's okay.

A lot of them I can't tell.

Tell the ones that are funny.

Those are the funny ones.

Well, I mean, granted -- by the time that people come to hear this tape, you and I will have moved into the big piano bar in the sky.

I think so. Yeah.

But you don't have to -- I know there are certain things left unsaid. There was a book here,

Dick Odesky, *Fly on the Wall*. And he worked for Morris Lansberg at the Flamingo. He left out an awful lot of stuff. And I understand why. Because he was afraid the second and third generation was going to hear about it. But if you were here in the 40s, 50s, and 60s, everybody was connected to somebody. There was no, oh, I didn't know that. Oh, gee, Mr. A. Oh, yes. He's from Chicago. Oh, how did you meet?

Everybody that had a Mr. G or a Mr. A, any letter of the alphabet --

And they're in the cement business. Oh, good. Well, then be careful.

Did you guys ever get any overt threats when you were on stage? I mean because you never did a lot of inside stuff. You did what we know is generic stuff that worked. But I didn't see you in a position where you would say something to piss somebody off in the audience. And you must have worked some mob joints.

Yeah, we did. And Freddie was very able to do that.

Because he was Italian.

Yeah. He would put the guys on. I remember one time in Harrah's Club, seventh floor room in Reno, the big guy from Phoenix -- now, I don't know whether it was Mr. Z or Mr. G or whatever, one of them.

Mr. B. It was probably Joe Bananas. That was the guy from Phoenix.

Anyway, he was in the audience. Freddie was kidding with him and saying, you know, Mr. B, whatever the initial was. And the guy was just breaking up, just breaking up. Those guys used to love to hang around us.

You were fun.

We had little offers. You know, we could do this for you.

Oh, no, no.

We never did that. Never went there.

But you must have done some benefits. I did some benefits. Everybody did them.

Oh, yeah. Sure.

When you got a phone call, I mean it's like -- whether it's you, me or Sonny or somebody. I mean as a courtesy. I did stuff for guys I didn't even know. And they said he's dying; we need to do a party for him. I'm like good, sure, whatever. But I never asked them for

anything either.

Speaking about Italians I've got to tell you this story. Years and years and years ago -- yeah, I'm going to say the name -- Sam, the accordion player --

Melchionni.

Melchionni was associated with the Italian American Club. Now, we used to do a lot of benefits for the club. So they gave everybody in the group honorary membership but me. I said to Sam, I says, Sam, I work these things too. He said but you're not an Italian.

Oh, Sam. Sam married one of my high school dream girls.

Oh, did he?

Oh, yeah. Sure. I've known Sam since the 50s, way back in the early 50s.

Anyway, they tried to make it up later.

I love Johnny and I see Johnny periodically. But Johnny had his bouts with Jim Beam and all those things. Do you think that it was very difficult sometimes when everybody was drinking too much, that that may have hurt you too?

Yeah. Oh, sure.

Because when you're juiced everything changes perspective, man. I don't mean drunk. I never saw you drunk. And I never saw any of the guys in the band. And Carmen didn't drink, did he?

Yeah. A little bit.

Moderately. But he was pretty conservative. And he always looked like -- he did look like the Godfather. He would do those takes. He would just do those funny takes. I mean he was a handsome guy.

Jeff Chandler.

Yeah. And he looked so poised with the guitar. Carmen Baccari had stage presence that guys would kill to have. He did.

That's right.

And you had it and Freddie had it. And everybody was so unique. And the chemistry, man. I mean it's just a shame that somewhere along the way you couldn't have jumped into a TV show because it would have been ideal, ideal. I mean it's like casting on "Barney Miller" --

Jack Soo, Steve Landesberg and so on and so on and what's his name? Miller.

We came close several times to getting stuff. I remember June Allyson really used to come and see us all the time and loved it. And she was going to do a remake of all --

I had to take a rude phone call. I apologize. So now Blackie is telling stories about the things that happened.

Well, one time didn't you guys have a car wreck coming back from Lake Tahoe or somewhere? Or was that Sam Guitarra?

No. That was Freddie.

He rolled a Chrysler, the four-door, the black one or something?

No. It was Freddie's Buick. Jerry, used to be with that vocal group that worked the circuit, Jerry, Jerry --

I know who it is, but I can't think.

He was driving and evidently he fell asleep.

He was going way too fast.

I wasn't in the car.

Well, you guys used to do -- for the --

Oh, yeah.

Everybody, me included, did the marathon trips. I drove home to Reno on my day off when I was with Deedee and Bill. And I know you guys did because you wanted to see your wives and it was expensive to fly. So you would get in the sedan. And Sam Guitarra rolled a car and broke Morgan Thomas' neck.

Right.

So I remember when you did that. But luckily it seemed to me -- did anybody get hurt?

No, nobody got hurt.

Oh, amazing.

It rolled the car and everything.

Were you guys all asleep?

No. Now, I was not there. I was not there.

No wonder you didn't get hurt.

Good point. Well, Freddie and this Jerry, who was driving Freddie's car --

You were at the lake. I think it went down the back way.

Yeah, I think that's what happened.

And everybody was driving a hundred then. That was the standard.

Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

They would go as fast as the car would go. Get home and have breakfast.

And what a nervous -- by the time you get home --

Oh, yeah. Horrible, horrible. I did that. I had a Corvair, you know.

Sonny did it too. Sonny King used to do that all the time. We all did.

Everybody did. I think for the benefit of --

We should have had a bus or something.

For the benefit of the listener or something -- or a chartered plane -- people don't realize these are the kinds of dos that kill you. They literally wear you out because it's like what's his name, Chapin's son, Harry Chapin, who was on the road all the time and had a million wrecks and finally got killed in a car. And you say to yourself, well, what's so hard about the road? I'll tell you what's hard about it. It's like Cal Jater said. It's the bass player that didn't bring the right amp, it's the drummer that forgot his foot pedal and it's the guy that booked your tickets and they got you a day behind where you're supposed to be. You have to be in Cleveland tonight and you're not leaving until tomorrow morning. And that's what makes an old man out of you.

Yep.

And Cal Jater, wonderful musician and vibraphonist. He said that in the Rolling Stone interview and about two weeks later he was dead. And the stress is probably what killed him because he had all those gigs and those guys were showing up and they didn't want to play the tunes, you know.

Who called the tunes with The Characters?

Carmen did.

Did he?

Yes, he did.

So by that point you were all wired together mentally. So you just look at each other --
Right.

-- and the minute he hit that first chord, you knew where you were going.

Yeah. Or what he'd start to say, we'd know where he was going. And if you don't think that was a cause of many arguments between Freddie and his brother, Carmen --

Well, sure, the power of being able to make a call.

Because sometimes you don't feel like doing a particular routine, you know. As a comic you understand that.

Oh, yeah.

It's very difficult. Well, Carmen didn't have to worry about getting the laughs. Freddie and I had to worry about it. And I used to get bugged too once in a while. I just didn't feel like it.

Nope. You weren't in the right frame of mind.

Nope. But he called. Then they'd get into arguments. We were in shows where they were actually arguing in between lines. They're saying -- nobody even knew it.

No. It's still working. You've got them mesmerized. They don't know where the pea is under the shell. What's going on up there?

You know, one story I've got to tell. We were booked into Butte, Montana.

There's a career move.

I don't know. We were on the town with a radio deejay by the name of Stan something. He used to broadcast out of Duffy's, which is on the corner there right across from the Stratosphere. It's no longer there. It was a tavern. Anyway, he used to broadcast out of there and a lot of people used to hang there. He left Vegas and went up to Butte and had this radio show. And he got us booked into a club up there. Well, somehow the opening date got mixed up. We got there actually a day late. But the day before they had the high school band on the welcoming committee and everything and the train pulls up. Nobody gets off. I see that picture of those people and they're looking --

Now they're offended because you didn't show up. So they're not going to come see you.

Right.

They're going to go, hey, those guys didn't show up when they were supposed to.

Oh, we've all had a little story like that I guess.

Did you ever get fired, the band ever get fired? Probably not.

I came close. Of all places, Elko.

Commercial?

The Commercial.

Boy, I know that gig.

I mean for them to want to fire us?

I know. You were too good. Was that Red Ellis? Was that Commercial? Yeah. Red Ellis.

Uh-huh.

I worked there. Roger -- what was Roger's name, the manager, real sweet man? Roger?

Oh God, I can't think of it. I think what we did was we compromised there and resigned and left early.

Well, that was a terrible stage and one light. Oh, it was horrible.

I used to do a funny humorous little thing on the William Tell Overture. It was an accordion solo.

I came in riding a horse, man, right in front of the bar. Speaking about horses --

Okay. Now, we've paid the bill, we've tipped the girl and we're doing fine. And you've got all the time you need here. I must have jogged your memory at the risk of taking you off focus. But you never got fired. You compromised in Elko.

Right.

So what was your favorite gig I mean of all the rooms you worked?

Of all time it had to be the Sahara lounge.

Yep. And a great venue.

Yep. It had to be the Sahara.

And you worked it when it was a crappy one-way stage. You had to walk up and get up on one end of the stage.

That's right.

Ramsey was the bartender.

Right. One time we got in trouble at the Sahara with Don Rickles. I forget who came up with the idea. I think it was Johnny Ricco who came up with the idea because Don Rickles used to do like

the Ku Klux Klan or something. So Johnny had his wife make us all these hoods. So unbeknownst to Rickles during the act we just started walking up through that passageway. He got so flustered.

He must have freaked.

He freaked.

Oh, yeah. He thought they came to get him.

And we got talked to quite heavily by the --

Joe Scandori, his manager?

Well, it was also Stan Irwin I think who said you shouldn't do that stuff, you know.

Yeah, but you should because Rickles was pounding everybody. It was payback time. And I know the maitre d' was Eddie Molasky. Do you remember Eddie?

Oh, yeah.

Because part of this, not to relate and get on your glory thing here, but part of this I was out at the pool every day, you know, to a degree. Anyway, by then I was a fan and I had been hanging. But a lot of guys can't stand it when you bounce it back to them. And I think the thing is it probably scared Don. I mean literally he probably thought, shit, they're going to come up and lean on me.

This is not book worthy, but I've got to tell you. There was a guy who used to come in dressed as a woman. And we knew it. We talked to him, met him -- met her -- him. It was --

It.

It. But he used to sit down at the bar all the time right in front of us. And we used to watch the guys come up and put the make on her. And it was our entertainment while we were watching this going on. It was hilarious. Those are the funny things. Like Parz and Penny (phonetic).

Sure. I remember them.

That would be Vikki Carr.

Yes. And Ron Carducci I think was the drummer who is now the psychologist for the Denver Broncos.

Oh, you're kidding?

And his E-mail is shrinkducci at AOL dot-com. So if you want to have fun, I know you're a

computer guy, there's Ron, man. He went back to school in his 30s and matriculated. Isn't that amazing?

Wonderful.

Yeah, I talk to him once in a while.

We both were in the Parz and Penny or Parz and (indiscernible), however you want to say it, in The Characters. We were in Tucson. And we all had gone out to eat --

Marty O'Conlin.

Yeah. Yeah.

He was an accordion player.

Right.

Not a bad accordion player either.

That's right. So we went out to eat at one of the little spots. It was like a chain-type restaurant, like an Arby's -- not that --

Anyway, back to Mr. Charles T. Hunt. I have a question for you. And you can tell me the truth because you've got a solid marriage. Did you guys get hit on? Did you get a lot of propositions when you were working -- from women?

Oh, did I?

Well, everybody. I mean, here you were very popular, very personable and very funny. I mean in tuxedos and looking charming. And what's not to like?

I probably get hit on more now than ever in my life.

Oh, timing. Timing is everything. But I'm sure Carmen and Freddie and Johnny -- Johnny was -- here's a picture of him. We're sitting here looking at a picture in the Bootlegger. It's interesting you didn't turn the E around on the caption.

Yeah. This is before it was turned around that picture was taken. Now, some of the others I had them turned around. But I neglected that one.

But everybody we knew -- and this was the era of the rock and roll bands, the Freddie Bells and what's his name? Joe King and the Zaniacks and Frankie Brent and Wayne Newton and everybody. And I mean, boy, there were always groupies. I had my share of them, too.

Well, you know, it's a funny thing. This is during my first marriage. I didn't really get hit on that

much. I mean some of the other guys, yeah.

Maybe you weren't interested. You weren't sending out those kinds of vibes, you know.

I think I looked untouchable because my personality offstage was much more staid than it was when I was on stage. So they'd meet me offstage and they'd expect to see this goofy, gooney, jump-around guy and here I am Mr. Whoever. I was me, you know. I was not the actor, but me.

Big difference.

Yeah. And I really didn't -- in all these years I have never been hit on by an actual hooker. And it just happened in my second marriage -- not just happened. It happened in San Francisco. I went on a trip with my wife and a banker friend of mine and his wife. And we get out of a cab in front of one of the good hotels there and a hooker comes up to me. Only time in my whole life. Never been approached. I used to sit with them at the -- I didn't even know. I was a naïve kid. I really was stupid, stupid.

That's okay. It's sometimes better to be that way when you don't know what you're doing. Sometimes it's just better if fate intervenes and says no, no, no, you're not going there; no, you're not doing that.

Did you work the Fairmont in San Francisco?

No, I never worked Fairmont. In fact, we were working San Francisco -- and I forget the name of the club -- when Kennedy was assassinated.

Facts? Were you working Facts for George Androis?

No.

Or the Bimbo's?

No. I worked Bimbo's with Frank Ross.

Bimbo Ginatoli. How are you?

I worked Bimbo's when Frank Ross and Marvin Gaye were headlining. That was a good gig for us. We did good up there. It wasn't called the North Shore. But what's the name of it?

San Francisco?

Yeah, in San Francisco.

Was it down in the district there with all those other places?

Yeah.

The Condore?

No, it wasn't the Condore.

No. It was Anne's 440 Club? Remember? That's where Johnny Mathis started.

No.

Anne's 440 Club. Oh, God, I can see it. I can't remember it.

This was right up the street from the Purple Onion. And I'll tell you who used to come in all the time and see us -- I presume he went there a lot other than to see us -- but Hoss from the TV show.

Dan Blocker.

Dan Blocker, yeah.

I can't think of the -- I know the club, but I can't think about it. They're all gone now. I think the Condore is still there.

No, it wasn't the Condore. I can't think of it. Anyway, for some reason we didn't like working that particular club. There was something. I think the stage was too high. It was one of those situations where they had --

Did you work New Orleans?

Never did.

We worked there with the Kings Four, the dream room on Bourbon Street. The stage was about eight feet off the ground. It was like the Royal Inn, Debbie Reynold's Theater, now the Greek Island.

Right. Boy, that's the worst. It's the worst.

It's tough for a comic. People don't understand you're working across the bar. Rickles made it work and then they built him a ramp. But, you know, it was really tough. I mean Louis' band was so successful in there and they were all spread out over about a 20-foot place. I used to look at them and --

Which is much better than the Commercial in Elko, which was spread out about 50 feet.

With one light. I used to do jokes about it and say, look, the train's coming.

Oh, boy. Did you ever work the El Capitan in Hawthorne?

Oh, sure. Are you kidding? With Kay Stevens.

I won't mention who. But somebody that I know that I worked with, an Indian was after him.

Oh, yes.

Because he was fooling around with his squaw.

Well, that can happen and unfortunately it does. And some guys deserve it when it happens. There's a rule of thumb I think that says you don't mess with somebody if they're married. I don't know. I just have a different set of values than most guys.

So if you were going to build a group today -- and I'm going to end this because I can take up your whole life here if I stay here long enough. I have lots of tape left. If you were going to build a group today and you said I want to put something together like *The Characters*, do you think you could find guys that would take direction and listen even though they know what you did, but if they didn't see you do it, they might not appreciate it? The only way you could do that is if you were to start with four young hungry kids or start with four professional professionals. You see what I'm saying?

Sure.

A lot of professionals are not professional professionals. They don't want you to step on their line. They get bugged. Tell you off right on the stage. I've been there. I know. I know what it's about. And unfortunately those things are catching and then you find yourself starting to do that. And then you say what the hell; let's not go through this crap again. Yeah, I did that. I won't do that no more.

We had a guy that we were here watching one night. And you had hired him. I'll just use his first name. His name was Nick. And Carmie sat down with him and tried to explain to him this is what you don't do. And he went right back on stage and did exactly what Carmie told him not to do. And I said he's doomed. He will be at Cappizoli's working for doo-doo money forever because he doesn't want to grow. He doesn't want to listen to somebody that's already done it and made all the mistakes.

Well, he's doing an impression. I mean that's fine. You'll get applause, sure. But where do you go with that?

You don't go anywhere. You move to Branson with Bob Anderson. You go get a theater that seats a thousand. You make 20 bucks a head. And you cross your fingers.

Well, that's okay.

Well, yeah. But now we're back to why some guys succeeded. And our friend Bob Anderson -- and this is Blackie's interview and I'll make a comment here because I know Bob. And I love him for 25 years. And he saw what was coming when he lost that money at the Sands. But he refused to accept it. Now, he finally got up one day and said I'm 52 years old and I can't keep doing this; I can't keep funding mistakes out of my pocket. How long do you want to do that?

When you have guys come in here -- I know there are some people that you really like. I don't mean the old guard. I don't mean guys like me and Carmi and Grecco and Frankie Reynold. Have you seen somebody in here that really made you go wow, good? Have you seen a couple?

Yeah.

You've been open, what, almost three years now?

No. About two -- it was two years in April. So it's a little over two years. Yeah. I've seen a few people come through. There's a girl coming through right now by the name of Taiya.

Oh, killer.

Wonderful.

If somebody gets a hold of her and guides her down the right path, she's going to be wonderful. If they misdirect her, they'll ruin her. I loved her. She was singing so professionally and the selection of tunes, her poise, her body language. I went, man, get this girl a manager, Stan Irwin, somebody. Even if he didn't want to do it, get her a guy that knows somebody that can do it.

Kelly Clinton works for us. I think she's a wonderfully talented, talented person. She hasn't found her niche. She just hasn't found it. She doesn't have an act. She has an act, but she doesn't have an act. She hasn't put it together. And unfortunately some of them require costume changes, which she doesn't have to do the impression. She can just do an act and then occasionally slip into it. And she probably doesn't have to do all the -- I mean it's nice that she puts on the Cher. I do Sonny and Cher with her. It breaks up every time.

Oh, yeah. She's great. Would you say that at this juncture, the 30th of June, 2003, that Vegas is not the be-all end-all that it was and that the people that are being exposed here,

including the Jimmy Hoppers and the Kelly Clintons, this may not be the right town for them? It's good for a while, but I'm not sure they should stay like The Characters did for 15 years because you get up one day and all the working --

I don't think any act can really make it out of Las Vegas. I mean you count them that did.

Rickles and Wayne Newton. Next case. Everybody else is --

Shecky did a little bit.

Yeah, but he also tied himself down.

Of course, Louis Prima.

Yes. But then they tried to put Louis in the big room at the DI and that didn't work.

Nope.

Nope. I don't know. I mean I'm asking you because you're certainly knowledgeable and you've got the chops.

It's easy to say no, this is not the place to be discovered. They used to say that way back, you know. But where is the place to be discovered? I guess it used to be Hollywood. But I don't know where it is anymore.

I don't know that there is a specific place. And Jimmy Hopper may get lucky because somebody saw him here. And that's a freak thing. You know, it's a freak thing somebody came out here and went, wow, look at this kid. And he is great. He deserves to be discovered.

Well, I'll tell you a lot of these sitcom stars now are coming out of the comedy clubs. I mean I can go way back when I used to see Steve Martin. He was balloon man, blowing balloons and making --

I know. Silly stuff. And the arrow through his head.

Yeah. I mean this is way back.

But even he said you can only do that for so many years and then you just burn out. He didn't want to do it anymore. He didn't want to open for the Tower of Power where everybody's throwing beer bottles and they're so loaded they don't know if he's saying anything.

That's interesting. The only vehicles to stardom these days are either record or TV. Those are the

only vehicles.

Yep. And if you need both, then it's a different thing. But if you get lucky, if you get on Star Search or something -- but even so, the percentage --

Look at -- I admire Clint Holmes. I love Clint Holmes, okay?

Great talent.

How many people in the world know Clint Holmes? Now, he's getting all the backing that anybody could ever ask for in this town.

Somebody likes him a lot.

A lot, a real lot. And maybe rightfully so. Okay. But he's not going to become a household name.

Nope.

He's got to get a hit record.

He's got to get out of here. He's either got to get a record or he's got to get a TV show. And you know it was a waste for Clint Holmes. Joan Rivers had him on that show. And if she had used him correctly, Blackie, the way Johnny Carson used Ed McMahon or the way Regis Philbin -- well, even back when Joe E. Bishop had that ill-fated show and Regis was his right-hand guy, she never used Clint. Once in a while she'd let him sing. And I thought, you bitch, why don't you give this guy a shot? Here is this multitalented guy, handsome, great singer, great chops and personality. But what I fear for Clint is what I saw with Bob Anderson. You stay here too long; they take you for granted. And not only that, there's not enough exposure. You could be the hottest thing in the lounge. And you were. I never was. But you could work 25 weeks a year in a lounge. And you know what? It's like you don't get any national exposure. You're still a lounge guy.

That's right.

You know, I don't care how good you are. And Clint's got his own room now. I grant you that. But the thing is --

That room is smaller than the lounge at the Hilton I used to work.

I know. Sure.

It's weird, you know. There is something I wanted to mention to you here.

Something about the venue, about the room?

Oh, you know what is so strange? Well, Sonny and I just -- well, Bravo was in about four weeks ago, three cameras. They were filming Sonny and I and a couple of the other acts.

And you got paid I hope.

Well, as soon as it's finished.

Yeah, okay. Good.

Then they called us back and we did a personal interview, each by ourselves up at the Rio. They had a suite up there. So we did that. So Bravo, that's in the making. E has already done something. We've done something for the Biggest Cook Show. Well, Sonny wasn't on that one. It was just Lorraine and her mother and me. I was doing a shtick in the kitchen.

Did you play or you just did faces?

No. I just stood back there. But if any one of those -- and they reshoot these things over and over and over. I mean who would -- when we were young to get a shot like that, it was unheard of. I mean it's tough. It's tough. The only thing that made you back in those days was Ed Sullivan and Johnny Carson. But still Sullivan was the --

But even now going on Letterman doesn't mean anything if you don't do it a dozen times.

Steve Martin said he was on Carson 22 times before people said, oh, you mean the guy in the white suit with the arrow in his head. That's how long it took them to identify with his name. But you go on a TV sitcom like Laney Kazan, a great talent who is now on my big fat Greek thing with what's her name. And all of a sudden --

(End Side B.)