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An Interview with Breck Wall

An Oral History Conducted by Nancy Hardy

Oral History Research Center
The Boyer Early Las Vegas Oral History Project
University of Nevada Las Vegas
2007

LAS VEGAS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Project Director: Clay D. White, University Libraries, UNLV, Las Vegas, NV 89155

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Produced by:

The Oral History Research Center at UNLV – University Libraries

Director and Editor: Claytee D. White

Interviewers and Project Assistants: Suzanne Becker, Nancy Hardy, Joyce Moore,
Andres Moses, Laura Plowman, Emily Powers, Dr. Dave Schwartz

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Project Director, Peter Michel, Special Collections, UNLV Library, 895-3252

Name of narrator: Breck Wzcel

Name of interviewer: Nancy Hardy

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Breck Wzcel 7/3/03

Signature of narrator

Date

3650 Tioga Way

Address of narrator

Nancy Hardy 7/3/03

Signature of interviewer

Date

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The transcripts received minimal editing. These measures include the elimination of fragments, false starts, and repetitions in order to enhance the reader's understanding of the material. All measures have been taken to preserve the style and language of the narrator. The following interview is part of a series of interviews conducted under the auspices of the Boyer Early Las Vegas Oral History Project. Additional transcripts may be found under that series title.

Claytee D. White, Project Director
Director, Oral History Research Center
University of Nevada Las Vegas

Preface

Breck Wall grew up tough and honed that toughness into solid business acumen. He also grew up talented and that talent took him to movie sets in Los Angeles and allowed him to produce shows in Dallas, New York, Tahoe, and Las Vegas. Though his family became nonexistent early in his life, he formed his own broad family from a group of faithful friends around the country. One special friendship makes this interview worth reading – the one with Jack Ruby.

Wall's talent though is the primary reason that this interview is good history. He did many shows and had up to five running simultaneously. The creative process was the fun part that allowed him to produce *Passion Extreme*, *Alias*, and *Night Beat* among many others. *Bottoms Up* is his signature production and has been at several venues in Las Vegas for the past 40 years.

Breck Wall is living a full and interesting life. A good example is a phone call from *The London Times*: “Mr. Wall?” I said, “Yes.” He said, “Are you aware that your best friend, Jack Ruby, just shot Oswald?” I said, “What?” I was in shock. I said, “No, I’m not.” And I talked to him very briefly, and I hung up the phone.” The phone continued to ring as calls came in from the *Dallas Morning News*, *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, etc, etc.

Today is July 3, 2003, and I am backstage at the Flamingo Hilton with Breck Wall.

The release form has been read, and it has been signed. I'd like to begin today by asking you where and when you born, and something about your childhood, your early life.

Well let's see. I was born in Jacksonville, Florida, in 1934. My father was a bootlegger, and I was probably not more than three weeks old when the cops were closing in on him and we had to split town. So they went to Texas and that's where I was raised. I was raised in Texas. My earlier, I don't know, it was just outside of Houston. My father became a welder, and I had through my lifetime, five mothers. There's no one surviving me right now. In other words, I'm it.

I've always had a love of theater and nightclubs and movies. It's always been in my blood. I followed my father wherever he went in Texas, and he would marry different women and what have you, and some were very nice and others not so nice. And most of them were jealous of me, because he'd pay all the attention to me, and it was not nice at times. But the last woman that he married really, really disliked me. I was probably about 14 years old, and we lived in Fort Worth (phone rings). We were living in Fort Worth and I was about 14 years old, and they were alcoholics. Both of them were alcoholics, and they would fight starting every Friday night, all day Saturday, all day Sunday, and then wake up Monday morning and go to work. And it was a very stressful time on my life. I just hated every weekend. And this particular weekend I was in my bedroom and they were screaming and fighting again. And then she hollered out, "Oh my God, he's got a gun, he's got a gun!" And it scared me to death, and I said, I just can't take this anymore, so I went out the window, and I ran down four houses down the way of a

couple that were married and had four children. And I always played with them and they were a lot of fun and what have you, so I stayed there. And of course, my dad came down and tried to persuade me to come back to the house, and I would not do it. So I got the idea of going to Freeport, Texas, which is just 60 miles out from Houston, to live with my father's fourth wife, who I really liked, and was very nice to me and good to me, to live with her mother. So I think the reason I matured faster than most people is that I put myself through – I mean I came from a very poor family. I mean, very poor. And I had to work all my life when I was young, and I think that's the reason I matured faster.

Did you go to school?

Oh yes, I went to school.

How did you do in school?

I'm going to get to that.

Okay.

So I went there when I was about 14 years old, and I did very, very well in school, and I worked during the days at different department stores. I know in my sophomore, junior, senior year, I worked for JC Penneys. And I was an average student, but I was extremely popular because I matured faster and I could take responsibilities quicker. I think we had 360 [students] in our class. And I was always the "Jerry Lewis" of high school. And I stayed with my grandmother. She really wasn't my grandmother, I called her. And I raised myself. I got up every morning to go to school, which I wanted to do. I went to work immediately after, which I wanted to do, and I was in charge of my life at 14, which is very unusual. And after high school, and I had a lot of fun. In fact, this coming October, we celebrate our 50th anniversary, so I'll be going to the reunion. And of course,

all the kids in school are very happy, and they come here all the time to see me. And I'm very, very close to my friends. Extremely close; and very, very loyal to my friends. It's just part – because my friends are my family, have always been my family, and that's my outlook on it.

And so I wanted to go to the University of Texas, which I went to work there in a jewelry store. And I studied acting, but it was just too much for me because I was in my freshman year. I was voted – They have like 50 what they call “good fellows” which are popular people that are good fellows, you know. You can be a junior, senior, sophomore, and I was one of two freshmen that were elected. And when I was studying drama, there were people in my class like [Elizabeth] Ann Wedgeworth, Rip Torn. We had some wonderful people that became very well known. But it was just too much for me mentally to work. It was different from high school. And my teacher said, “You don't want to be a dramatic actor. You're a comic. You're funny. You should go to New York.” So I went to New York. And I lived in New York for three years, and I did different shows and different workshops and what have you. And I lived in a wonderful house, which is about seven stories high, called The Footlights Club. And the gentleman below me became very well known and very famous, and I can't think – Jimmy – it's awful. Awful. Let me think. Jimmy... He was on Broadway, starred in, Neil Simon wrote plays for him, and he was in *Man of La Mancha*, the movie. My mind is blank right now.

We can look that up.

And Neil Simon wrote like three Broadway hits for him. And he did *Man of La Mancha*, the movie. Jimmy Coco [James Coco]. I'm sorry, Jimmy Coco. And it was just a fun time for me. I loved New York City. I thought it was just, it was just my life. And I loved the

freedom. And I was a doorman at Luchow's [Restaurant], which is on 14th Street. And this was – probably it was one of the most exciting things in my life, because as a doorman, Luchow's was the number one restaurant for celebrities to go to. And one night alone, when Ingrid Bergman came back to get the New York Critics' Award, we had Ingrid Bergman, Rock Hudson, and Cecil B. DeMille. And every weekend there would be – Jackie Gleason would eat there every Saturday after his show, and Ed Sullivan would eat there on Sunday nights. And we would have at least 15 or 20 stars there a night. And it was so thrilling for me to just be able to wait on them and see legends, you know. And I loved New York.

And I got a job working in a movie with James Craig, who was an actor, B-actor, what have you, like that. And I did like three movies. I did *End as a Man* [based on the novel by Calder Willingham] in Florida with new people like Ben Gazzara and Pat – I want to say Pat Hingle. And from that, I got a little walk-across part with Tyrone Powell and Faye Emerson and Arthur Treacher in a touring show called *Back to Methuselah*. And we toured one-night stands starting in Orlando, Florida, and we would play city to city because the play was so bad. It was Bernard Shaw's play. It was horrible. It went on forever. It actually ran eight hours. I think they cut it down to 2-1/2 hours. It was so boring. But it was thrilling to be able to be in such company, you know? Tyrone Power, they gave him a Rolls Royce and he liked to ride on the bus with the show kids, so he would give us the Rolls Royce, like rotate it around so we could drive it in back of the bus. And it was a thrill because he was a wonderful person. And then when we closed, we went to the Ambassador Theater in New York City. It closed, it had two performances

body who gave the news, who used to be a performer, and this person and that person, and

and closed, that's how bad it was. Then he went to make a movie in Spain and had a heart attack and died.

I became very sick in New York City about that time, and the only person I could think of to back to is the people that I ran away from home and ran four doors down. They lived in Dallas [Texas]. So I went to Dallas because they were like my mother and father. And I got this idea for a show, and I had no money, so I went to a wonderful theater there. It was brand new in Fort Worth, called Casa Manama. And in the old days, in the '30s and '40s [1930's and 1940's], it was Billy Rose. He had a Casa Manama in Fort Worth. So they rebuilt it and it was spectacular, but they didn't have a full season. The summer open, and they played in the fall, so I got a contract for eight weeks for *Shoestring Revue*. That's what it was called. And we had wonderful people who became stars out of it. And when that ended, I had nowhere to go, so I went back to Dallas and became friends with the number one leading columnist of the *Dallas Morning News*. And he wrote on my ideas. I was a kid, and I was probably around 21, 22 by then. And he liked it a lot, so he went to probably the most elegant hotel in Dallas, downtown Dallas, called the Adolphus Hotel. And he made a pitch. He said, "Look, you have your winter season like Sophie Tucker, Ted Lewis, Abbot & Costello, all these people. But your summers close. Why don't you give it to these kids and pay them" like twelve hundred bucks for like ten of us, so we made like 80 or 90 dollars apiece. And I put pieces of *Shoestring Revue* plus some numbers that I wrote. And it was an enormous hit. You would not believe. We were sold out before we even opened like for three months. Before it even opened, because I was smart enough to take key people in Dallas: the news lady who gave the news, who used to be a performer; and this person and that person, and

it worked out just great. And we opened and it was just like a rocket. So the general manager, Andy Anderson, canceled the fall season, and we stayed there for a year and a half.

And we got so big and what-have-you in Dallas that we decided we'd open our own nightclub. Which was a good idea and a bad idea. The good idea is that we did very well there, too. But the bad idea is that I had to get up at five am every morning and order food, order booze, do everything, and it was just overpowering for me. So I did it for a year and half, and then this gentleman that I had become friends with was named Jack [Leon] Ruby. And he had a girlie club. Let me put it nicely: a girlie club. Because in Dallas we had no nudity anyways. Like bras and g-strings and everything. And it was called the Carousel Club. And he wanted to make it very elegant. He wanted to step up, because he was like a hood, like a two-bit hood. But a wonderful man.

How did you first meet him?

In Dallas, because the Adolphus Hotel is across the street from the Carousel Club. If I walked out my front door, I would walk into his club if I wanted to. And we became friends and had lunch every day at the same place, the Copper Cow. And we became friends, and then when the Playbill closed, he approached me and said, "Breck, come to my place and I'll change it. We'll make it a very elegant club. A private club." Because we didn't have drinks. You had to bring your own bottle. And so I went there. I said to him, "Look, we have a contract at the Adolphus Hotel for a club night. They pay us \$1,000 for one night. That's the only thing I have to do if you promise me that we can do it." And he said, "Sure."

So we opened at the Sovereign Club. He named it the Sovereign Club. And it was a beautiful hotel. And we went there and we were very successful. And then eight weeks, twelve weeks into the run, we were getting our clothes to go walk across the street and do an industrial for a thousand dollars, and Jack stopped us and said, "Where are you going?" And I said, "With the costumes. We're going to go across the street and do that industrial I talked to you about." He said, "Well, I want half of it." And I said, "No. You can't have half of it." And my partner, who was my best friend, we were actually on the third floor, equivalent to the third floor, and Jack, without any knowledge it was coming, socked him and he fell all the way down three floors. So I was so angry I just left.

Was that the first time you'd known him to be violent with people?

No, because he owned the club and because of it being a girlie club before, he was real tough. Had to throw people out all the time because that comes with owning that kind of club. But he never bothered us. He loved us and he was very funny. He was desperate for money, and he was like a little hood. He was a little mafia, a little hood. So I left costumes and everything there. And the hotel, Adolphus, wanted us back. So I went over there and got a room for the night and went down to see Andy Anderson the next morning. I said, "We're available." He said, "I'll put you in three weeks, but you eat here and stay here as my guest." So we did, and we opened up the Adolphus, and again it was strong. It was probably the most popular show ever to play Dallas. I mean, it was like in the newspaper every day, of the celebrities and things that came there. And then Andy Anderson wanted us to close, and I remember going, "Okay, okay."

Tell me a little bit about what the show was like. What was the draw? What made it so popular, do you think?

The critic that I told you that helped us get there plugged us every day. I mean we were in the headlines every day. He made us a hit. The show was good anyway. I mean the show was wonderful. It was funny, it was different. It was like Burlesque and comedy. And we did political things about Dallas, and put-downs and stuff, and people absolutely – I mean we'd get a standing ovation every night.

Did it bear a lot of resemblance to Bottom's Up today [Bottom's Up stopped showing in Las Vegas in October 2004]?

Oh, yes. We still do one number in *Bottom's Up*. You just saw it: *Hold-Up*. You know, the robber. That's still from the original *Bottom's Up*. And we do things from time to time, we just change it a little bit, the storyline. But the punch lines are the same. *He Knows Mother* was done probably in the fifth year that was just an old joke that we worked on.

Were you doing one or two shows a night?

Only one show. It was an hour and five minutes. And we went on at 9:00 because they had dinner, dancing, and the show for an hour and five minutes, and then I was out by 10:30. I mean it was a breeze. Of course, we only made \$1200 for ten people, and that was, we're paying them, so the kids got like \$70, dancers got like \$70, but this was in '58, so they got like \$50, and some of the principals got \$70, and I got like \$120 or something like that. And is there anything else you want to ask before I proceed?

No.

Okay, so he said we need to close it down for a little while and then reopen with the new edition type thing. So we went searching, and again Tony Zapi, he's the columnist that was there, said, "I've got a friend down in Houston [Texas]. Let me try and get you

booked down there.” We went to a hotel called the Continental Hotel in Houston, and it was a private club, and we went there for four weeks, and because I was from Freeport [Texas] and Maxine Messenger was a columnist and she was a friend of Tony’s and she was on the front page of the newspaper every day, beginning of her column, then she was inside. Again, she was great to us, and she was powerful, and we were there twelve weeks, sold out, solid.

In the meantime in Las Vegas, there was a production show at the Frontier, or the Mirage – no at the Frontier. The Frontier Hotel. And it was called *Tokyo by Night* by Steve Parker, who was married to Shirley MacLaine. And it was a magnificent show. It was like all the French shows that were here in town, like *The Lido* that you were in, and the *Folies Bergere* that you were in. And so he did a turnabout with a different group, Asian. And it was a huge hit, and because Steve Parker was married to Shirley MacLaine, he made it bigger. But there was a little rinky-dink casino, which I’m sure you remember, called The Castaways. The Castaways opened a show, a take-off of that, with like six girls, two boys, and an act called “Panties Inferno.” And it opened opening night, and the owner of the casino knew he had a rigger. I mean he had a coronary when he saw the show because it real tacky. Because I saw the show, too. And the entertainment director was a singer friend of mine called Bill Norvis. It’s good to have friends. All this is because of friends. And Bill Norvis was the entertainment director, and the owner said, “Oh my gosh, we have to get something quick. I can’t have this in my casino. It’s awful. What can we do?” And Bill thought for a minute. He said, “Well I have this show that’s kind of different. It would be different for Las Vegas. I don’t know if it would work or not, but it’s very funny, and it’s called *Bottom’s Up*, and they’re in Dallas. Let me call

and see if they're available." He said, "I want this show out right now. I mean right now. As soon as you get the show, we'll close this show." So he got on the show, called the Adolphus, they said, "Oh no, Breck is in Houston at the Continental Hotel. Here's the number," and gave him the number.

So the phone rang and I answered it. And this was now in our twelfth week and doing great, and he said what his problem was and he said, "If we come there and like the show, would you be available to come now?" I said, "Let me go talk to the manager, because he likes us." So I said, "Oh my gosh, you won't believe this, they want us maybe in Las Vegas if we can get out of our contract." He said, "Oh Breck, take it. I'll let you out. Do it. That's a great opportunity for you." So I called Bill back, and I said, "They said we could do it." So they got on their private jet about an hour after they talked to us, flew to Houston: Joe, my friend and partner, picked them up at like 5:30. They saw the show at 8:00. They said, "We'll take you. Here's a contract. Sign it." So that was like on a Thursday. We closed on Saturday, drove all night, all night Sunday, and got here and opened on Tuesday. And we opened, we opened opposite an unknown comic named Redd Foxx. Jerry Lewis was in the audience that night with a table of twelve, and he was so rude to us. He never looked – I mean I've never liked him. Because here a bunch of kids onstage, and Jerry Lewis is in the audience, and that's what I used to be known as, Jerry Lewis in junior high school, high school, and here he was, just smug and just staring at us.

Patti Page, the singer, light skin girl that sang on Mitch Miller. She's a singing star. She was a big star, became a big star, singing, I can't think of it – [Leslie Uggams sang on the Mitch Miller Show.]

We can look that up, too.

Mitch, Mitch –

Sing Along With Mitch.

Yeah. And she was there, I mean all the stars. Forrest Duke was in the audience and Ralph Pearl and Joe Delaney, and they all just loved the show because it was different. Gave us tremendous publicity. You could not get near the casino. I mean, we were like in awe of everything. So we stayed there and then from there we went to Harvey's in Lake Tahoe for the first time in Lake Tahoe. We went to the Riverside, directly there to Riverside. We got a job in Hawaii, and we stayed there for six months. And then I went on the road with the Playboy Clubs, where we played New York City, Chicago, St. Louis, Phoenix, Dallas. While we were in Atlantic City – and Los Angeles. While we were in Atlantic City, the partner that I had stayed here because I wanted to make this my home. He became entertainment director of the Thunderbird [Hotel and Casino]. His name was Joe Peterson. And they got the idea to do an afternoon show, and I said, "God, I don't know if we want that" but they called Atlanta and said, "Get on the plane and get here." And Tony – I can't remember the president of the hotel, Anthony – it doesn't matter. He became the president – It's on the tip of my tongue. Anthony. Anyway, he said, "Yeah, let's do it." And there was a French show called *C'est la Boom* or something like that with a woman who was a star of the movie – Not *Sixpence*, but – *Oliver!* She was the star of *Oliver!* The singing star. Shannon, Shannon... So she was the star of a nighttime French show there. Shannon – just find me who the star of *Oliver!* was, the movie, and she was the star of the show. [He is trying to think of Shani Wallis, who played Nancy in the 1968 film, *Oliver!*]

And we opened, and I've got to say, in all my life, it was everything you'd dream of. Because Bruce Banky, who has since passed on, was the publicity person there who actually went to the Hilton and dealt with Elvis Presley and was at the Hilton for like 12, 14 years. But he did such a drive and such a push on us, the line to get in to see *Bottom's Up* went the length of the casino, the width of the casino and back down again. I mean my eyes – I would come in every day to come in and see that line. And it just overwhelmed me. And that's when I met this girl named Nancy Austin, and we were like partners, comedy partners and stuff like that. And it was just a rocket. It just went on – I think we were there like for two years, and we were so strong they moved us to the night slot, and we were in the night slot.

And then there was a gentleman in Dallas, going back to Dallas, that I became friends with, who owned a casino, a miniature version of Caesars Palace, and his name was Jay Sarno. And Jay Sarno was a big fan of *Bottom's Up*. So he built – he got the monies from the Teamsters and built Caesars Palace. And Dave Victorson was the entertainment director there, and Academy Award eve, I got a call from Dave Victorson backstage, and he said, "Breck, what are you doing?" I said, "Nothing." He said, "Well, my boss wants to bring you here to Caesars." Well my heart just probably nearly popped out of my body, and I went, "Caesars Palace." I can't believe that. Because they had a beautiful Nero's Nook [cocktail lounge, now called Cleopatra's Barge] there, and they had major stars there. I can't remember the comedy team that we opened with. They were three brothers, legendary brothers in their 70s. Slapstick comedy and things like that. Ritz Brothers. The Ritz Brothers. I played with the Ritz Brothers. I played with Ike and Tina Turner. All these people before they became famous. And he said, "So, would you like to

come get your Oscar tomorrow?" And I went, "Gosh, I can't believe this." So we went down, signed the contract, and one month later, opened at Nero's Nook. And that was in '66 [1966] or '67 [1967] for sure. And we had three years there, and we would take off in the winter, December, January, February, and we'd fly to the Bahamas for three years (sic) and play El Casino then fly back here with a new edition of *Bottom's Up*.

And again, I mean, there were so many exciting days and so many stars that came to see us, like Carol Channing. We used to have the family – what's the family in Utah, hundreds of them – they have a television show, the sister and the brother –

Oh, the Osmonds.

The Osmonds. The Osmonds were like six years old, five years old, in the light booth watching *Bottom's Up*. And then we'd have like – I mean I'll never forget this as long as I live – We had George Burns and Edward G. Robinson sitting together watching *Bottom's Up*. We would have a whole table one day that seated 12. Nothing but comics like Kaye Ballard from *Laugh-In*, the loudmouth, the big loudmouth, she's a good friend of mine, my gosh. I mean, all of them sitting there, and my eyes would just bulge out, and then they'd come backstage and see us.

So then Dave Victorson – Oh I'm sorry. Jay Sarno had a fight with the Teamsters Union and they gave them a pile of money. And he went and built another hotel, and that hotel was Circus-Circus. In the meantime, Victorson moved over to the International Hotel, which is called the Hilton Hotel now. So he took us with him, and we opened the showroom, the lounge. And we played there until – I know we played two years for sure. And Dave Victorson passed away while we were there. Had a heart attack and died. And then Bill brought Elvis Presley there. Bill Miller was the entertainment director here at

the Flamingo Hotel. So he brought us over here. And there's a plaque up on the wall behind you. I think we opened here in '71 [1971], '72 [1972]. On the gold one, see it? Flamingo?

Uh-huh. October 2nd, 1971.

When was it?

October 2nd, 1971. We opened before that. That was just celebrating how many performances we did – 10,000.

You've got a lot of plaques here.

I know. I'm old. And so we came here, and then we just, we played all over the country. I love playing theaters, and for many, many, many years, ten years, we would spend three months in Dallas at Granny's Dinner Playhouse, three months in Houston at the Windmill [Dinner] Theater, with the theater version: first act, second act. Then we'd fly back here and do six months, then go back there. Then we went to Australia three times. I've had a wonderful, wonderful, wonderful life.

You got around. How often do you change parts in the show?

We just changed not more than six weeks ago, seven weeks ago. This is a new edition of it. We opened with the other one three years ago, and it ran for three years. And we put in the new one. Except for the finale. The finales will be changed on the seventh and eighth of this month, and then we'll have a whole new show.

For the most part, Bottom's Up has been a daytime show?

Oh we played nighttimes many times. Many times.

And what are the differences? Do you have a preference what you like to do?

Afternoons.

You like to do afternoons.

I love afternoons, because at night you have to go there at 6, 6:30. You do an 8:00 show, 10:00 show, and you don't get home, by the time you eat, until 1. Here, I come to work. I'm one of the few people, I come here at 11:00 in the morning. The show's at 2. But I do all my office work here, I do all my phoning here. I just am comfortable here. And then I go out the door at 5 after 5. Go home and eat, go to a restaurant and eat, and I'm home, and I do all my work at home.

What are some typical problems that you face in a show that runs that long? Do you deal with boredom very much or...?

Boredom?

Mm-hmm.

Oh, no. No, I think you see that onstage. If it was a drama or the same thing, but we have the freedom in *Bottom's Up* to ad lib and have fun. We do lines to each other that we don't tell each other about. So it's always fresh. The kids in our show are wonderful. We have no temperaments. We have – It's fun, it's like a family. And now I'm able to see it probably for – we're in our 44th year. We actually started it July 1st of this year, but we're not going to celebrate until November, on my birthday. But I have three swing dancers so that the girls and the guys can do convention work and one-nighters and make anywhere from \$500-\$1000. So I give them that freedom. And I think because of it, it makes it happier. And also, I've never been able to take a day off from *Bottom's Up*. I mean, even when I was sick as a dog, when I had the flu and I was in Houston and they had a cot that they had fixed for me offstage, and I'd come offstage –

END TAPE 1, SIDE 1

-- I was in Houston at the Windmill [Dinner] Theater and I had the terrible flu, I mean really bad. I had a doctor there. I had a cot there so I'd walk offstage, they'd help me dress. I'd walk back on, and that is no more. I can take off whenever I want to, because all the four principals have learned different parts that you can cover. And you never know that person's gone. Never know I'm gone. Sue [Motsinger], my singer, one of the dancers does her part and it's brilliant. I mean she's brilliant. So we don't lose a laugh, they can take off when they want to, and I let them. It's a wonderful life and I have a wonderful time.

You're able to take vacations now.

Yeah. And besides doing this, I have shows elsewhere. I have a big hit up at Caesars Tahoe [renamed MontBleu Resort Casino & Spa in 2005] called *Passion Extreme*. I had a wonderful show that was just -- absolutely belonged in Las Vegas and we were coming here but it wouldn't fit on the stage, called *Alias*. Was one of the most exciting things you could ever see. I mean, people raved about it. And at the same time I had *Night Beat*. I do a lot of shows. I've had up to five shows going at the same time that my partner, Patrick Maes, takes care of. I will do the creating and having fun with it. He liked the business.

What is the process you go through to produce a show from conception to opening night? It starts in your head somewhere.

We make a presentation. They say, "Okay, we want you to make a presentation." We come up usually with three different formats. We put it down on paper, have drawings done, costumes done, just show them what our ideas are. I think it's because the respect that we have with businesses, because we're very honest. There's no one temperamental in our group.

Patrick is without a doubt one of the most wonderful people ever put on this earth. He's very honest. He stays in touch with the president, the entertainment director, at all times. They absolutely adore him. I'm the comedy part, he's the serious part. But he has his presence about him that you just – he's just incredible. So he represents me, and we go there, and if we make a deal and what have you, which we have played hotels over and over again because they like us and we – you know, a lot of producers go in and they roller at the stagehands. They cause a lot of dissension. They scream at the performers in rehearsal. You can't do that. And our group, our company is very well known, being respected and just being good. And we give them a good product. And consequently, we go back and forth. And so that's it, and they're usually really, really good shows. If there's something the hotel doesn't like, it's changed like this (he snaps his fingers). It's not immediately. I mean, right at that point. They say, "Oh, we don't like that." Gone. No arguments, no nothing, and everything's fine. Then we'll put another number in.

Besides the creative aspect of putting the show together, do you oversee deciding who the choreographer's going to be –

Oh, of course.

Who the dancers are?

Oh, of course. Of course.

And do you check in on the show from time to time?

Patrick does.

He takes care of it.

Patrick goes to Caesars, and *Alias*, I was in it for two years. So I was there at all times. In the one we have in Tahoe, Patrick lives in San Francisco, so he drives over every other

week and spends three days there. You just don't find people like that. They'll forget the show and go on to the next product. We don't.

Tell me a little about the backgrounds and various contributions of performers in *Bottom's Up* that have been with the show for a long time.

David Harris, the thin one in the show, was in going back to the Adolphus Hotel. He was at SMU University [Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas]. And he was there, he came to audition with a girl who was in *Bottom's Up* for 15 years, and she's still one of the best friends, and when we have our reunion, she was here, performed in it. She's brilliant, Suzanne Buhrer. She lived here in Las Vegas for a long time. And Dave has been with me ever since. And it's funny, because David Harris only weighs like 90 pounds, was an MP [Military Police] in a prison camp. And Sue Motsinger was a telephone operator in New York City. And we had auditions in New York and she has such a way of saying it, it's so funny, because we got a dance studio and had auditions. And we thought, "Well, we'll maybe get 50 or 60." We had 350 heavy girls come. She said it looks like the elephant burial ground. We have laughed so hard at it. And she wasn't going to come, and she heard about it at the last minute, came over, she was like 337th. And as it was, she was picked for the second company. We had a second company. We've had three companies of *Bottom's Up* at one time. So she was in the second company, and then Deeda Hymes, I don't know if you remember Deeda Hymes, who was here, she's married to John Nieland. Was married to John Nieland, the publicist at the Riviera. She passed away about six, seven years ago now. And Deeda met John and wanted to leave, and so Mots [Sue Motsinger] moved into our company, she's been with us ever since. And we've had some extraordinary, extraordinary experiences. Like we

were playing the Windmill [Dinner] Theater in Scottsdale, Arizona, and we followed Jamie Farr in, from *Stalag 17* – not *Stalag 17*, but *Hogan's Heroes*. No, no –

MASH.

MASH, MASH, MASH. So they followed him, and I had the star apartment. It says actually condo. And I always had Mots live in the other bedroom. If it had three, I'd have any kid stay there. I don't like to be by myself. And so she and Dixie, who was company manager, we went into Scottsdale. So Jamie Farr got another condo because he liked it so much. Then we opened and played six weeks. And when we closed – I knew I'd go by it – Robert [Crane] – *Hogan's Heroes* – Robert – okay, he came in after us, but because – and he followed us around several engagement through the Windmill [Dinner] Theaters. So he would do bits in *Bottom's Up* the last three or four days before we'd close to get publicity for himself because he'd open in a play. And he was murdered in my bed two weeks after I left. Well, of course, then I didn't know. I thought, "God, that could have been me. That could have been me." But – Bob Crane. Bob Crane.

That's it.

So he was murdered in my bed, and his porno shop – remember, he did pornos. He'd get girls – I mean, he's the sweetest man you could ever – But what a different side. And the porno's where Mots lives, you know, the room in there where he had cameras and stuff like that as it ended up. But when they showed it on the television, they showed the room, and there was my bed and there was my telephone, and there was my bathroom and stuff, and there was a bloody – you pump a tire with it – jack or whatever it was. I thought, "My gosh," and I was really scared for a long time. Then it turned out, after years and years, that it was his manager that had gone out and gotten drunk.

It just took that long to find out what...

I've had incredible experiences during this.

Let's go back to 1963 –

No, I don't want to go back!

Yeah, let's go back.

Let's go to the future! No, what do you want to know?

Let's go back to 1963, when President Kennedy was shot. What were your thoughts immediately afterward?

I don't know if I mentioned this to you, but I got a call yesterday from Jennings –

Peter Jennings.

Peter Jennings. That they're doing a thing in November when he was shot, Kennedy was shot. And they wanted to know background of me, and which I talked to him for an hour, as I told you. And they called me back, and they're going to use me. I've also been on the History Channel. They came about three years ago on the anniversary and filmed. It was on for like six months. They had it like maybe six times a day, they went down to five, then they'd switch it over to their other stations the History Channel owns. But what happened was we were playing the Adolphus Hotel in 1963, and it was the day after my birthday. I was standing on the marquee when Kennedy – because I was listening on the radio, and he was coming down and he turned onto Main Street by Neiman Marcus. And he was going like five miles an hour until he turned on the street and he was running late to a dinner, to speak at a dinner at the convention center. So he was going like 15 miles an hour which doesn't sound very fast, but when you stand out in the cold for so long,

you want to see him. And he passed by and she waved, and he was sitting on the other side.

And then – now we're on the marquee of the hotel, so I had a dog, a puppy upstairs in my room which was I think like the tenth floor. So all I did was walk off the marquee, get on an elevator, go to the tenth floor. As we're standing there to put on our coats to go out to the airport and see him because I was a fanatic fan of JFK's, this television talk show was on because it was noon. And they were laughing. They cut immediately. They were laughing at what they were saying. Cut immediately and said, "Ladies and gentlemen, a bulletin. President Kennedy has been shot in Dallas. Please stay tuned." They went back to it and they were laughing, I thought, "How strange," because they didn't know that it had been cut in.

So I was in shock. And it was just like holy mackerel. And I never left my room. Never. So I was going to go down to the book depository which was only four blocks – five blocks, actually – from where it happened. But I think the whole city was like in a state of shock. This happened on a Thursday. Kennedy was supposed to be at the Army-Navy game on Saturday, so the president of the hotel, Andy Anderson, called me and said, "Breck, we can't do the show until after the funeral on Wednesday or Thursday." I said fine. So I watched it all night, all day the next day, and I go down to Galveston where Nonni and Pop, the people that I ran away in Fort Worth were, they had a home in Galveston. So Joe Peterson and myself drove down there. As I came in the door, Nonni said, "Jack just called you." I said, "What'd he want?" She said, "I don't know but he wants to talk to you. He's upset." I said, "Okay." Jack Ruby. So I called Jack and – actually, he called me, because she said I was going to be in around 8:00, 9:00, which I

was. He called me and he was ranting and screaming and hollering because when he owned the Carousel Club, two doors down was his competitor called the Colony Club. So he was furious because I was the head of AGVA [American Guild of Variety Artists], which is the union for entertainers, which was very big at that time. And he was ranting and raving [at] the owner of the club – I can't think of his name – Barney Weintraub – Weintraub is his last name. Weinstein, Weinstein. [The correct name is Barney Weinstein] And he would not close. Everything closed. I mean, the whole city closed down, and he stayed open and had the burlesque girls and all that stuff going on. He was furious.

Now this happened at 9:00, 10:00 when he called me, and I went to bed. Well they were going to transfer Jack [He misstated this name, it should be Oswald] Sunday morning, because I got there Saturday night, transfer him from the city jail to the county jail. Which is only equivalent of about eight blocks. So I got up in the morning at 7:00 because I think they were going to transfer him at 8:00, and everyone was watching. Here comes this figure that shoots Oswald, the back of his head, like this. I didn't pay attention to it. Not more than five minutes – of course, we were still in shock now. Let alone Kennedy, this. Not more than five minutes later, the phone rang, and it was *The London Times*. I'll never forget this. And they said, "Breck, it's *The London Times*. I went, "*The London Times*?" So I went, "Hello?" They said, "Mr. Wall?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Are you aware that your best friend, Jack Ruby, just shot Oswald. I went "What?!" I mean, I was like in shock. You can't even explain the feeling that you get. Your whole body just goes wet. And I said, "No, I'm not." And I talked to him very briefly, and I hung up the phone. Well, the phone rang like this (he snaps his fingers). *Dallas Morning News*, *The*

Washington Post, The New York Times. And of course Joe grabbed the phone and said, "We don't have to talk to anybody. Not anybody." They wanted to send a television truck down. Because all my friends were on, that I worked with, they were on about Jack Ruby, talking about him, the Carousel Club, went back to the Carousel Club after we finished playing there. And of course I was just shocked.

So going back a ways, Kennedy was going to the football game, the Army-Navy game on this following Saturday. It was postponed immediately. It'd be played after the funeral which would be the following Saturday. So Andy Anderson called me, the manager, and said, "Okay, we're going to open Friday." I said okay. So Friday, we opened Friday.

Saturday I was in the room watching the Army-Navy football game. Of course, it was a very sad time. My phone rang. "Breck?" "Yes." "This is Sheriff Decker," who's the sheriff of Dallas. "Yes sir?" "We have a major problem here." And I went, "What is it, sir?" He said, "Well, Jack is real – they will transfer him Sunday" to the county jail. He said, "We have a bad problem. Jack is really, really depressed. I mean really depressed. He keeps asking for you because you joke and you have fun, and we need for him to brighten up." And I said, "Let me make a phone call and I'll call you back."

So I called – in the district attorney's office there's like 32 assistant district attorneys. Well one of them is a good friend of mine, Phil Burleson. So I called him and I said, "Phil, Sheriff Decker wants me to come down to the jail, and I'm terrified." You know, because there's like 20 people deep, reporters, all the way around the block. A city block, waiting for anything. Anything, just for news. He said, "No, you can go ahead and do it." I said, "Come, go with me." He said, "No, I can't. I won't be allowed to." He said,

"You go do it. Nothing's going to happen to you. You'll be fine." And I said okay. So I called Sheriff Decker back – Oh, and then he said, "But do me a favor. Ask him to let me represent him with Texas laws." I said, "Why can't you ask him?" He said, "Because I have to be requested by him." I said, "Oh, okay," not knowing what was going to happen in the future.

So they sent a patrol car after me on – I forgot what day it was. I think it was that day. My heart was about to jump out of my chest. I was a nervous wreck, because here's a police car pulling up. Policemen get out. I have to get in, and they said, "Breck, it's better that you lay down in the seat as we go in." Because they took you in where you arrest, in the basement type thing. I can't tell you how scared I was. So they took me in. They took me up to the third floor, fourth floor, I can't remember, and he was in a tank. Like a tank. Not a cell. And it had bulletproof glass, so you could see about this much of him. I could see him. And you talked through here. And he was so happy to see me, of course. "I can't believe it, you're here. You're here," he said, because the only people that were allowed there was his immediate family. So my first words out were, "What on earth have you done? What did you do?" He said, "I'm going to be a hero. I shot the man who shot the president." I said, "No, you're not a hero." I said, "You have more people angry with you than you think you have fans, because he didn't confess. He said he didn't do it. He did do it, but he didn't confess. So instead of going to trial or anything, you took his life." He said, "Why don't you become my fan club manager?" And I went, "Jack, I can't do that. I just won't do it. I can't do it." So we talked, and I don't know how long we talked for, just, it was for a while. They came and got me and they took me back. Oh, in the meantime, I said to him, "Do me favor." He said in the conversation, "I have

hundreds of telegrams from people all over the world. I have hundreds of telegrams from lawyers that want to represent me." I said, "Oh, do me a favor. That reminds me. Ask for Phil Burleson. Ask for Phil Burleson, because he knows the Texas laws." He said, "That's who you want?" I said, "Yes." He said, "You've got a deal."

So through the time, it was Melvin Belli out of San Francisco. It was Racehorse Johnson from Texas. And then it was a couple other attorneys, and then it ended up be Phil Burleson. And Phil Burleson handled his things until he died.

Two years later, we came back to the Colony Club, his competitor, Jack's, to play for two weeks for Christmas, because I wanted to be there for the Cotton Bowl. Phil came opening night and said, "I want to tell you something. I have good news for you." I went, "What?" He said, "Jack is dying. He won't probably be here for a week." And I said, well, whatever day it was, I said, "I'll see him not tomorrow but the next day. We'll go at noon." He died that night. Which I have the news story, a clipping. I'll give it to y'all at the library. It's the news clipping from the *Dallas Morning News*, and in it, it says the last person he talked about was an entertainer called Breck Wall.

That's quite a story. What thoughts were going through your head when you first found out what Jack Ruby had done? Did you understand what his motivation might have been because you were friends with him?

I was too shocked. I didn't think anything. I told you, I was at Nonni's house. And I saw it happen, but I had no idea who it was, because he had a hat on. I wouldn't even have known anyway, but he always had that same hat on. But when I got the phone call from *The London Times* and they said who it was, it was like – I'm surprised I didn't probably fall over dead. That was how shocking it was. My whole – you can't describe it. It was a

feeling that I've never had before. My whole body just went limp. And then from *The London Times* and then it was terrible after that, because people wanted to come do interviews with me, and I was his best pal and his best friend, and this man who shot the – It was not a good feeling. And then when I had to go through this crap with the guy in Louisiana – I can't think of his name – but I really disliked him. I hated him. I hated him.

Had you discussed politics very much with Jack Ruby?

Jack and I and Joe – when Kennedy was running for president – he came through Dallas a couple of times, and one time – because he was a big fan of Kennedy's and I was too. I was a fanatic. It was such a beautiful family. It was like Disneyland. There was – what a difference between he and the other one. But so we went. All three of us sat on the floor in the convention center, the Dallas Convention Center, looking up at Kennedy running for president. So he was a huge fan of Kennedy, as I was.

How were you first approached by the Warren Commission?

They called. We were playing *The Castaways*, and they called and said, "We need to have you come to Washington to do a –"

Deposition?

Deposition, thank you. And at that time, I said, "I can't." I said, "I can't come there." So they actually came here. A few of the members flew here to the FBI office or the post office, which is downtown, the old one. And we went there. I think we went to the FBI office. And they took Joe in and did an hour with him or something, then took me in and did an hour with me.

Do you remember what you were asked?

We were asked just simple questions: how long have you known Jack? Probably everything I've told you now: when we first met Jack and how much fun we had and we played volleyball and just had a whole fun relationship. He was a two-bit hood. But he was a funny hood. He was like a character of a hood. He thought he was so tough. And he had a violent temper that would just flare up like this, and we'd learn later down the road when he punched Joe how violent he was. But he still loved us as a friend, and we still loved him. You know, it got over with.

And did I tell you that he went and took a loan on his car to – When we left and went to the Adolphus Hotel, going back, Joe – you gotta remember, he punched Joe in the face.

Yes.

But his business is right across from where we were, so Joe came upstairs to the room, said, "You're not going to believe who I saw in the street." And I went, "Who?" He said, "Jack." And I went, "Oh, crap." He said, "No Breck, you won't believe this." We were like short \$1200 for the costumes. And Jack said, "What are y'all doing? You going to open here now, you'll be my competitor." He said, "Yes." He said, "Well, is there anything I can do?" He said, "Yeah, we need \$1200." He said, "I don't have it. Let's go to the bank right now and get a loan on my car." And he did. To start our friendship up again.

That's how he managed to remain friends after punching Joe.

I'm surprised I remember all this stuff.

You're known in Las Vegas as a very benevolent and generous, spirited person. And –

Who told you that? That's a lie. (He laughs.)

I heard that. Tell me a little bit about your involvement with Golden Rainbow [provides housing and direct financial assistance to people affected by AIDS/HIV in Southern Nevada] and how Golden Rainbow came about.

Oh, Golden Rainbow was created by them, and I had nothing to do with it for many years because we worked in the afternoons and we couldn't do anything anyway. I never even saw it. And then they came one day and said, "Would you be involved with it?" And I said, "I'll think about it. But I can't close the show for one day and lose money and stuff." But I did because I had so many friends that had passed away of AIDS and stuff, and *Bottom's Up* has always – ever seen us in it? *Bottom's Up* in the show? I loved doing it. We loved doing the choir number and putting down all the shows and stuff, which is just fun.

I thought it was a standout – two years ago I saw the show.

Oh, it's still being done. It's still being done. And we do it each year with new shows. This year, probably the two funniest things that we did – it's old biddies, old biddies sing this choir number, and you know what we say. Which we can't repeat here. But we do – the big show at the time was *The Lido*, and we would go, "F--- the Lido, F---the Lido" but we'd actually say it. This year, we were on PG so we didn't do it, but we did get really funny laughs with things like:

(To the tune of *Old MacDonald Had a Farm*)

Old Las Vegas had one Cirque.

Ee-ei-ee-ei-oh

And then came another Cirque, da-da

Ee-ei-ee-ei-oh

With a Cirque-Cirque here and a Cirque-Cirque there

Here a Cirque, there a Cirque

Everywhere a Cirque-Cirque

One more Cirque, I'll go bezerk

Ee-ei-ee-ei-oh.

The show stopped. I mean, the people went crazy. We did it all the way through and ran over the first day, but we stopped. Everything is a takeoff of Amazing Jonathan [John Edward Szeles]. But I love doing Golden Rainbow now. I'm really involved with it, I love it. I think it's a great organization. They raise a lot of money for AIDS victims, which we all have friends that have AIDS. But now, Senator [Harry] Reid is coming to see us tomorrow in Atlanta, and I'll probably be doing cute shows for him to raise money, you know, like before he speaks or something, a cute little number or something like that. And I love doing community stuff.

What do you think about some of the shows that are on the Strip today? Do you go to see the shows, and...

Well I write a column. I write a column for *Callback* [Las Vegas magazine geared toward professional entertainers], so I go, like this week, I'm going the 8th to the fiftieth anniversary of the Stardust, and on the 10th I'm going to a dance contest or recital that a girl in *Bottom's Up*, going way back to Caesars, and her name is Vicki Anthony and she has a dance school, and she does this big thing where people come in from all over the country, and I'm going to that. I just judged a contest in Dallas last week, 450 people, for three days. I had a great time there. I love seeing new talent and stuff. In fact, one of the boys in this show I saw in a talent show and he's only 19 years old, little short guy. The one that did *He Knows Mother*. His mother and father came to see him for the first time the first show today. So I let him do – that's actually Wes' part. But I don't do as many community things as I should. But because I write a column for *Callback*, which is the paper, the newspaper that Mark Tan created, who is my best friend. And it's just a little gossip column. It's kind of fun to do. It was biweekly, as you know. And then I do a

radio show once a week on K-News [airs on Las Vegas radio station 970 AM] that we tape on Tuesdays, that's played on Saturday and Sunday nights. So I keep kind of busy.

Tell me about the format of the radio show.

It's Gary Campbell, who's the voice of the news in the mornings. He has a beautiful speaking voice. And next week I think we're doing an interview with the Utah Shakespearean Theater. Last week we had Tony Orlando, and it's just fun. And then we do community stuff, you know, for maybe eight minutes, nine minutes, people that have charity event or something like that to explain, then we have a star. It's quite fun. I don't do that much really; all I do is talk, which as you can see I do well. Gary Campbell puts it sort of together.

What do you see for the future of Bottom's Up? How long will you keep doing this?

Well I am 68 and I'm beginning to feel like I'm 68, and I'll be 69 in November, and I would like to do it. I just have a feeling when I go it's going to be when I'm still doing it, you know. Because I'm clean as a whistle. I don't smoke, I don't drink, I really don't party that much, I never did, because I find that life is too important. I mean, I can't even ever think of staying late or doing any of that stuff. I just don't do that. That's not my – I guess because I raised myself. And I just don't find that fun. You know, I go to bed at 11:00, 12:00; I get up at 7:30. I love what I do, Nancy. I really love it.

You've had an incredible life, and I thank you for sharing.

Thank you.

[END INTERVIEW]

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