Interviewee: Walter Spinks

Interviewer: Norie Guthrie

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Interview Transcript

Norie Guthrie: My name is Norie Guthrie from the Woodson Research Center, Fondren Library, Rice University. I am interviewing Walter Spinks. Today is October 26, 2017. This is for the Houston Folk Music Archive oral history project. Could you tell me a bit about your early life?

Walter Spinks: Sure, uh, I was, uh, born in 1950, February 26 in Shreveport, Louisiana. Uh, still a baby when my folks moved to New Orleans. Uh, that was 1952 and I, all my formative years were there. Uh, I grew, I lived in four different houses there, all – each one of ’em was no further than 1 block off of St. Charles Avenue in the Garden District. Uh, went to Catholic schools my entire time there. And, uh, well, I was, uh, very much influenced by the laissez faire atmosphere of New Orleans and the old-world charm and everything. And of course, I – you couldn't escape the, uh, you know the music scene there. Jazz, Dixie Land and, of course, it had a pretty vibrant pop scene with all the people like Fats Domino and Clarence "Frogman" Henry and Erma Thomas and uh, Huey "Piano" Smith, Professor Longhair. And you'd hear those, those things and uh, even as a child I could go down to the French Quarter. I mean, most kids were pretty independent and it was not like the atmosphere of fear for your children. So it was nothin' for my friends and I, as young as 9 or 10 years old, just hop on the streetcar and go down to Canal Street and get off and walk up and down Bourbon Street. And of course, we were getting' cheap thrills just by walkin’ in front of all the, the burlesque houses and everything. And you’d hear the music comin' out of the clubs. You can go walk past Preservation Hall and hear ’em just wailing away. And, uh, of course, you’d sometimes actually come across some of the, uh, the jazz funerals that were, are so legendary and, uh, it's really, it was really impressive to a young kid to be exposed to all of that. And, uh, while I was still there, of course, the big, the big folk revival came out. And of course with the real, real, uh, hardcore straight up and down folkies like Burl Ives and things like that singing “The Blue Tail Fly.” But also, of course, there were the people like Dave Van Ronk and Joan Baez. And Kingston Trio and of course PP&M, Peter, Paul and Mary. And, uh, my oldest brother was gettin' into that sort of thing so that's probably, I was about 11 or 12 then. And I really loved that kind of music and I really got into that. And of course, I listened to all the other stuff; the pop music, Elvis Presley and the Everly Brothers and all that.

Norie Guthrie: Uh, when did you – I guess, when and then later and why, did your family move to Houston?

Walter Spinks: Well my dad was a, a, corrosion engineer which is a specialty within the oil and gas industry, protecting buried pipelines from corrosion and rust. And also even, uh, uh, oil rigs out at sea. I used to go sometimes with him out on fishing trips which was always a mistake
because I've never taken to the water. Okay? I'm not a water person. But, uh, anyway, his home office of his company was in, uh, Houston. And I kinda, I really missed it because his office in New Orleans where we would get – is the exact location where the Mardi Gras Day parades originates. The corner of Felicity and St. Charles. And that's where all the floats would line up. So we always saw the very first when it went underway 'cause they had a big picture window in his office. And I was so sad to go away from that 'cause every Mardi Gras, that's where we watched it from. And, uh, we got to, my folks got to know a lot of the people on the floats and everything. And they'd always – even though it was the beginning of the parade – they'd still throw stuff because their notorious for being stingy at the early part of the route so that they have something left over for the end. But they'd always throw us stuff 'cause we let 'em come in and use the bathroom there. And always give 'em a cold beer 'cause they had tanks of cold beer and ice.

Norie Guthrie: And then you, when did you end up coming to, so you moved to Houston –

Walter Spinks: Oh, that was in 1963.

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

Walter Spinks: In the summer.

Norie Guthrie: Uh huh.

Walter Spinks: And we lived in Sharpstown which at that time was the prairie. We were one block from the fence that separated Sharpstown from Bob Smith's cattle ranch.

Norie Guthrie: Uh huh.

Walter Spinks: And, uh, I mean, it was the wilderness, coming from New Orleans where every street that we ever lived on was, uh, kinda like streets here around Rice University – just completely overgrown with massive oak trees on either side that made tunnels through the neighborhoods, practically. So it was always shady even though it was hot. And out there, I mean, it was just sweltering, hundred plus degrees, barren nothingness. I mean, the tallest thing around was a blade of St. Augustine grass. So there was no shade, and I hated it. And they – I went to, uh, uh, public school when I first started and then I went to Jesuit for 3 years till they kicked me out for being so irreverent. And then I finished up at Robert E. Lee and, uh, on the musical side of things, of course, I had a couple of very interesting classmates in my, uh, graduating class. Billy Gibbons from ZZ Top. And here I am showin' my age 'cause I can't remember the name of the fella that was – Ronnie Laws, Earth, Wind and Fire, were both in my, my class. I had some classes with 'em. But, alas, we weren't pals or anything.

Norie Guthrie: Um, how were you first drawn to music?

Walter Spinks: Well, of course, uh, I was, I had always loved music of all kinds. You know, rock, pop, jazz, folk music. And, uh, my brother, in '63 when we first moved there, he bought a little cheap, Spanish guitar, a nylon string guitar and he was a true left hander. And he restrung
the strings left handed. Well, when he got tired of it, he gave it to me and it was already strung left handed and it kinda felt natural for me to pick it up that way and do the fingerings with my right hand, which is my dominant hand. Although I am ambidextrous at most things. Uh, but, that just seemed like the right way to go. So I started learning how to play on that. Uh, started, of course the Beatles came out in late '63, early '64. And, uh, I glommed onto that pretty quickly and wanted to learn how to play all those songs. And then of course, Bob Dylan, you know. I was really intrigued by his lyrics, although I don't have a poet soul myself. I've written one song in my entire life. And, uh, but, uh, I really liked the quality of lyrics I was hearing and, like Dylan, Donovan, uh, Simon and Garfunkel. Lot of other folks in that vein.

Norie Guthrie: When did you start kinda going to different music clubs in Houston?

Walter Spinks: Well I went to all the, I went to a lot of the rock clubs, like La Maison and Of Our Own. My brother started working at Family Hand which, uh, wasn't so much of a music venue but they did have some music in there. And uh, I couldn't go to any of the drinking clubs, of course, 'cause I was still underage. And I found myself going to Sand Mountain and uh, and I started gettin' introduced to acts like Guy Clark, Townes Van Zant, Jerry Jeff Walker. And then, uh, Bill and Lucille Cade. Gotta say Don Saunders. A number of folks like that. And, of course, they were all writing very interesting lyrics and that was what I was always drawn to, even more than the musicality of the performances. And I said, well, that's what I want to do, even though I can't, I'm not, I don't feel qualified to write those songs. But I sure do like 'em. And everybody else was playin' those things, too, even though they were writing their own music. But they pretty much concentrated on the ones that were the, the big, the big number one songs off the albums. And I tended to concentrate on some of the lesser known ones. And, uh, so, like, you know, I wouldn't play, you know, Simon and Garfunkel's top tunes but I'd play their lesser known. Same thing with Bob Dylan or any of the others that I would try to emulate.

Norie Guthrie: So, uh, could you talk a little bit more about Sand Mountain? Things like your experiences there.

Walter Spinks: Oh, yeah. It was a great place to, uh, when you're 16 years old to take a date. 'Cause it felt kinda like a night club and they even had a two-drink minimum of their insipid, nasty sweet drinks and teas and coffees and stuff. And, uh, it was a good place to go in a hold hands and that sort of thing. And it was dark so you could maybe even steal a kiss or something. If you were discreet.

Norie Guthrie: Can you describe what it looked like on the inside?

Walter Spinks: Now, that I'm kinda, I'm kinda fuzzy on that. I just knew you went in and there was, Mrs. Carrick would be there at the door or her son would be there. And you'd pay your money to go in and then I think you took a left and went into the music room. It was an old converted house and I guess you were walking into the main hallway and then going to where they had probably combined the living room, dining room or something to, to make the music room. That's where I first met Bill and Lucille Cade. I felt like, oh my gosh, I'm talkin' to the stars. And some of those other folks weren't as congenial like Bill and Lucille or Don Saunders.
Like Guy Clark and Townes Van Zandt, they were already kinda on the road to making it so they were a little more standoffish.

Norie Guthrie: And I'm, I'm guessing that you were too young and also under age to get into the Jester.

Walter Spinks: Yeah, never went there.

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

Walter Spinks: No, and, uh, in the early days, and the Old Quarter was in existence too.

Norie Guthrie: Right.

Walter Spinks: But it was a bar and I couldn't go there either until I turned 18.

Norie Guthrie: Okay. So it was just mainly Sand Mountain, which is –

Walter Spinks: Yeah, and then of course, we could go, you could go La Maison or the Catacombs because they didn't serve liquor –

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

Walter Spinks: – or beer there either. And so I could go see the rock shows there which I also enjoyed quite a lot.

Norie Guthrie: Uh, so when you were going to Sand Mountain, who were some of the, like, if you had to choose like one or two people that were just crazy about.

Walter Spinks: Well, uh, probably Guy Clark and Don Saunders. And, uh –

Norie Guthrie: Why, I mean, you connected with them over, kind of over lyrics. Was that, like, did they have a performance style –

Walter Spinks: Yes, uh huh. Yes, and also Don was, uh, Don had a, had a, uh was more of a talker between his shows also. And, uh, much more so than say Guy Clark was. He'd pretty go from song to song, maybe a few words here and there about the song or something. But Don was more engaging with audience. He'd be, sometimes people would even talk back to him and engage that way. And I really liked that. And also I liked the fact that they didn't tell you couldn't talk when you came in, but, uh, most of the performers there could hold an audience. Because of the strength of their performance. And I liked that, too, because it lets you hear what was going on and lets you hear the lyrics and pay more attention to the, uh – and of course, that was also great for a 16 year old who was with his date and was tongue tied.

Norie Guthrie: It made, made everything so much easier.
Spinks Interview 5

Walter Spinks: Made things so much easier, right. You could sit there and hold hands. Communicate through the vibes of the hand.

Norie Guthrie: Can you talk a little bit about your early duo, Fat and Furry.

Walter Spinks: Yes, look at me know, you'd think, oh, that's the fat one. But, no, I was, uh, I was Furry because I was, you know, a lean kid and my partner, Harry Oswald, was the fat one. Although by today's standards even he probably wouldn't be considered too fat nowadays. But he was about, he probably weighed about 250, 240, something like that. Was a lot shorter than me. But we played uh, we played at some of the places. Of course, I had done all the garage band stuff when I was, you know, much younger – 13, 14, 15 years old – playin', you know, trying to play Rolling Stones and Beatles songs that we couldn't figure out how, 'cause they were much more complicated than the 1, 4, 5 progressions that you normally heard. And all that never went anywhere, we never played any place. But then, as I got a little older, I, and I met Harry – that's probably about '68 I guess – and we started playin' out at places and we would play some places like the Hobbit Hole or the Sunshine House or Green Room, which was right down the street from Sand Mountain. Never got to play Sand Mountain, though. And, uh, we had a paying gig, our biggest paying gig we ever had was at the University of Houston coffee house and got a real nice write up in the student paper and, uh, you know. I described our act. I said, uh, we play, obscure folk songs. And then Harry would do the rejoinder, you know, it was part of the act, yeah, that makes us obscure folk singers. And, of course, you know, we met Dalis Allen there who now, of course, has inherited the mantle of the Kerrville Folk Festival. And so, uh, she liked us and, you know, that was a great thing. Because she is a real, I look at her as a real giant of music, of folk music in Texas, not just Houston. But we, we played for a while and then we met Reb Smith. We would always go out – our biggest gigs were always out at Hermann Park hill and people would go there and play guitar. And we, you know, some people would set up in one part of the hill and we'd set up in another part of the hill and there'd probably be about 4 or 5 different jams goin' on at any given Saturday or Sunday late morning, early afternoon and early evening, you know, as long as the weather permitted. And our little, uh, sessions would draw a lot of people because we were really loud. Harry had been, had been opera trained and, uh, I – a lot of that rubbed off on me – so we would really sing out. And we were bangin' on those guitars. And we'd attract other musicians and sometimes we'd have up to 200 people or so. And maybe even a dozen musicians. And Reb usually would come over and join us. Of course, he was a lot better guitar player than either Harry or I was. And, uh, we met him and he start sayin', well where are you playin'? And so we started to say some of the places we were playing and then he said, I play some over at Anderson Fair. And this would be about, by this time, we were maybe 1970 and I think Anderson Fair had only just been open a few months or maybe, maybe a year. And we went over and he said, let's go over to Anderson Fair and see if they'll hire you over there. So we went, uh, met Pat Stout and Marvin Anderson. Marvin was one of the founders, of course, Anderson Fair. Grey Fair or Franklin Grey Fair was already, he helped open the place and then he left pretty much after it was over. So Marvin Anderson and Pat Pritchett who was the chief cook and bottle washer and inventor of most of the recipes that were used for the spaghetti – that's what I had heard. And they loved us. They thought, oh great, yeah, you all need to come over. But, you know what, we're getting ready to close for the whole month of August. So come back in September. So that's when we started playing. It was either September, I think it was September of '70 when we started playing there.
And we held our own pretty well. It was a pretty small venue but, uh, with our, the way we could project and fill the room with sound, of course, there was no sound system or anything. And we were not daunted by that in any way. And, uh, people would tip us. They had a tip can out there and we would make, we would do pretty good. And sometimes other people played and we would, uh, go hear them. Reb would play, we'd go hear him. And uh, over time we started playing more and more with Reb and we added another player, David Seemen, on 5-string banjo. And he was fairly accomplished already at his 5-string banjo playing. We started calling ourselves the New Lost Ozone Rangers. And we threw in a couple of bluegrass pieces, and a couple of old timey pieces. Of course, like we learned from the, the New Lost City Ramblers and Doc Watson. People like that we would add to our other contemporary, Dylan and Peter, Paul & Mary and Simon and Garfunkel, Joan Baez. Things like that. And, uh, that went on for a while and wasn't long, though, before more and more people kept coming in. And so our nights were getting bumped back and this leads in to when I started uh participating in Anderson Fair. I was volunteering, because it always had been a place that is operated with a lot of volunteers. So I started volunteering to help out on nights that I wasn't, uh, playing, or daytimes when they were servin' spaghetti and enchiladas and things like that. And Marvin decided he was gonna move away and leave the restaurant and, uh, he asked me, would you be willing to buy into my shares, and so for the princely sum of $250.00 I became a partner in Anderson Fair along with Pat Stout and Robbie Franklin, Sandy Mathis that we called Sugar Magnolia. And, uh, and so we were the, basically, the owners because Pat Pritchett had also left. Not too long after Harry and I just started playing there, she went on to do, do the things that she did and I never did keep up with her. We were not close. We were just friendly. We saw each other and said hi and shot the small talk and so forth.

Norie Guthrie: Could you talk to me a little bit more about Reb Smith?

Walter Spinks: Oh, yes, Reb was a very interesting character. He was an excellent musician, uh, and probably the, the hippiest hippie I've ever met because he really lived the hippie lifestyle, and Houston was just made for him 'cause he, uh, he almost never wore anything but a pair of black cutoff shorts or jeans cutoff shorts and a plain T-shirt and flip-flops, and that was pretty much what he wore. He went everywhere on a, on an American bicycle with no, you know, no gears, just pedals and pedal brakes and carried his guitar alongside, and held on with one hand and went bicycling everywhere. Had very, very long hair. Once in a while in keeping with his name, Reb Smith, he had a rebel cap, uh, that he would wear, uh, and he was, um, he was, let's see, he was an adopted Korean war orphan. Uh, he, uh, had grown up, I can't remember where in Texas. It might've been somewhere in the valley, down around Harlingen or somewhere like that, and, uh, it was hard to know where Reb lived at any given time. I never went to an apartment or anything that he called his. He had the most extraordinary luck with women. He always had several girlfriends, and at any given time, he might be staying with one or another of 'em. And, uh, and he was, uh, just as happy-go-lucky as you can imagine anybody to be. Uh, now, of course, later in life things got very different for him, but, um, he played a lot of other instruments. When I first met him, he was only playing guitar, and both, uh, just regular folk playin', and, but he also would play slide guitar. He was good with the slide. And then later on he started pickin' up mandolin, and of course he excelled at that, and then he got a Greek stringed instrument called Bouzouki, and he became a master of that. Uh, and he could really, really play just about any style of music behind anybody. Uh, he could play rock and roll music. If you put
an electric guitar in his hands, uh, and he backed up behind a lot of people. And, uh, I hope this won't sound terrible, but he fancied himself to be a songwriter too, and he wrote a good number of songs, but, to tell you the truth, they were all very sophomoric and of the moon and June and spoon variety, uh, not very creative, not very, uh, deep in the subject matter. It was all about being, even though he seemed to me to be a pretty successful man with the ladies, it was always about rejection. He'd been rejected and wounded in love. Every one of his songs was like that, and it was like, uh, when every, people would be sittin' around playin' and, uh, they'd be playing their own songs and people like me would play some cover song, and he'd come around and he'd play one of his songs, and everybody would just be kinda rolling their eyes like oh, Reb, oh, yeah, that's good, Reb. And the music that he played behind it was great, but the songs were just not something that you could really get into. Uh, and especially when it came to my time when I started becoming an owner of, one of the owners and I did the booking for the music, even in the old room, and he would always want to play a weekend gig, and it was hard to put him in as a weekend gig because he couldn't hold the people in. They'd listen to him for a while and get up and go after a few songs, after they'd finish their beer or their, or their plate of spaghetti or whatever, and they'd go. Whereas, a lot of other musicians would stick around, buy another beer or buy another beer after that, and tip big, and he didn't get a lot of tips either, and he, he really didn't understand why. He could not see why he wasn't as popular as some of the other people that played there. And, uh, it was kinda always a sad thing. And, uh, of course, after I left, you know, as he got older, he wasn't changing, and he started drinking more than just a beer every now and again. He started drinking harder liquor. He always had a flask of hard liquor with him, and then, of course, he started getting, you know, I heard, because I had already moved away in the late '80s, and then of course one day I heard, I got a call that, uh, Reb had committed suicide. And in some ways, I wasn't surprised because he was still, I mean even into his, uh, 30s and later 30s, I guess. I don't know exactly how old he was when he died, but he wasn't that much younger than me I don't think, and, uh, and he was still riding around on that bicycle in his flip-flops and T-shirt and he hadn't changed and the scene had kinda passed him by totally. And I can remember in those days when he was having those, all that angst about not getting as popular as the other folks playing, I kept saying Reb, you know you really ought to join up with a, as a guitarist. You could be the lead guitarist for any number of good groups that are needing one. I mean I see groups all over town that are playing folk music or folk rock or just pure rock and roll or blues, because he could play any idiom he wanted to. And I said you should just, you know, work yourself into, you could be playing every night and making money just being, you know, you'd be a hot lead guitar player, and that's not what he wanted. He, he fancied himself a songwriter, and it was really sad to see, uh, and when I heard that he had did what he did, shocking too because he, some years later, he witnessed, he was a first-hand witness to kind of an unbalanced fellow, and his name is slipping me [Bruce McElheney]. He was a young man who played slide guitar principally and was extremely good, and he had played Anderson Fair, but he had a lot of personality disorders too, and I'm sorry I cannot remember this young man's name, but Reb had attended a party and the young man came in, burst through the door and kind of said hey, everybody, and everybody looked up at him and he pulled a revolver and blew his brains out right in front of everybody. And I'm like I couldn't imagine witnessing that scene, but after witnessing such a thing, I can't imagine that I'd go ahead and do that to myself, so that was equally shocking when I heard what Reb had done to himself.

Norie Guthrie: So you had kinda started to take over some of the management duties or –
Walter Spinks: Yes.

Norie Guthrie: – the booking and things?

Walter Spinks: Yes, I was doing the booking, and we, very shortly after, we acquired the room next door to Anderson Fair, and at the time it was a residence, believe it or not of an architect named John Day and his wife, and, uh, of course what's the music room now, which is their living room, dining room, etc., and the part that's back stage behind that curved wall that you really can't appreciate it as much with the curtains in front of it, but it's a very interesting structure there, and that was their bedroom back there. And they moved out and so General Barracco told us it was available and so we took it. And I wanted immediately to expand the music room in there, but everybody else in the corporation, uh, Blue Squirrel Corporation, which Pat Stout had established, Pat and Robby Franklin had established the corporation, they all said no, no, it's too soon. We can't, we can't do it. So we, uh, sublet it out for 6 months to the Artist Co-op, which was a brain child of a local artist named Bob Riegel. Very noted for his most impressive airbrush paintings of Native Americans and western scenes and stuff like that. He was an extremely talented gentleman. And, uh, so he started his co-op, and I let him know in the beginning, I said, you know, I want to take that space over as soon as we possibly can. I let everybody in my corporation, I let everybody know in the Artist Co-op that, you know, it was not going to be a long-term thing. I said it's going to 6 months or maybe we'll extend you to a year. And, uh, after that we're going to move in there with our, our music room. And, of course, we did. And everybody was, acted very shocked when I finally convinced our people that we were ready, and then I said well, you know what, we're not renewing your contract, and it was like what, you know, and I became a really, I was a bad guy. You know, a lot of those folks didn't like me after that, and especially Bob Riegel, but that's another story for another day. But, anyway, we moved in and, of course, we, we, uh, relied on all of our own labor plus many, many volunteers and we busted through that wall and made the archway. We had to brick a good portion of the floor because only a small portion of that floor in there was brick. And, of course, we went out scavenging old bricks from everywhere we could and got enough and built, I built that stage. It's been rebuilt since because I was no construction genius, but, uh, it lasted for many years. It was after I was long gone before they're, had to, finally had to rebuild it. And, uh, and, uh, we moved in and, uh, I decided that this is going to be a listening club. Now, when I was younger, I had gone up and it was after high school, the summer after high school, I had gone up to New England with a friend I was performing with, uh, before I met Harry Oswald. I performed with a fellow named Billy Meyers, and he, uh, he didn't play much guitar but he was a good blues singer and a harmonica player, and we went up to Massachusetts and we wound up staying for a couple of weeks at a place called the Fort Courage Coffee House in Whitinsville, Massachusetts. And they were a dedicated listening club, so every, and they had music every night, 7 nights a week, and, uh, we were just flopped up in the hippie pad up above it. It was an old carriage house behind a mansion that had been converted, and, uh, uh, they let people know when you came in, there was a big sign, this is a listening room, you know, we do short sets so you have plenty of time in-between sets to converse with your pals, get up, get your beer, have your food, but when the musician starts, we'd appreciate your cooperation to keep a level of respect for what this artist is trying to do, and they were presenting a lot of singer/songwriters. They weren't exclusive to singer/songwriters, but they did get, because a lot of people did cover
material and so forth too, but it was so refreshing, and it was like oh, this is kinda like it was at Sand Mountain except that they're just telling you up front that, you know, please zip it up or maybe you need to go to another club where there's darts and pool. And I just always was impressed by that, and as we traveled around up in New England, we saw a lot of clubs that were, were that kind of a policy, and it was so refreshing 'cause well, you're listening to someone whose art is in their lyrics as much as it is in their musicality. Uh, it was very nice, so I said this is what we're going to do. We are going to do this, and we did. We even had little, little, uh, like advertising tents that you put on the table like, but instead of this is our drink special, it kinda said, you know, welcome to Anderson Fair. This is the only listening room in, in Houston, and, uh, we do appreciate, we're bringing you artists whose, you know, we want you to enjoy their craft and that's why we're here. And it worked. People caught on with the idea. And, of course, the musicians like it, you know, 'cause they didn't have to, uh, fight with rowdy crowds, and, and we were sustained. I mean the people that put Anderson Fair on the map, and we were already getting to be a good reputation when we were still just a little room, but once we start, we opened up to the big room, and we had a lot of people like David Rodriguez, Michael Marcoulier, Don Sanders, Bill and Lucille Cade, who had followings that followed, you know, that went to their shows wherever they were, and they really appreciated it, and those are the people that really put us on the map and allowed us to do what we did with bringing, introducing new audiences because their following liked the club so much that they we would say, they would say oh, who's playing next week, and we'd say well, you know, Joe Schmo is playing, and they don't know who that is, you know, but, uh, you know, we'd say Betty Elders is playing or something like that or, or Vince Bell is playing. Well, who's he, you know, and, well, come and see. And they knew well, you know, I'll come and see because they hired my favorite musician Mike Marcoulier so, and I'll say if you like Mike Marcoulier, well, you're gonna love Vince Bell, and so they'd come back, and they started becoming fans of the place, and they could trust us that whoever was going to be playing there was going to be a writer and performer worth coming to see. And, um, that's really what, what put us over the top and made us successful.

Norie Guthrie: Can you talk a little bit of what like day-to-day life was like there?

Walter Spinks: Well, I guess the statute of limitations is over for most things or anything that we were doing there so. Oh, a typical day would be there, we'd get up and, luckily, I, I managed to, several of us lived right next door to Anderson Fair where you could go out the back door of the restaurant onto the patio and you could squeeze through a little spot in the fence and get to my back door, and just a few steps into that backyard and you're up my steps and that's where I lived. And, uh, I lived there. Another one of my partners lived there. Uh, and we would get up early in the morning, usually 7:00 or so and come over, and the very first thing we'd do is sit down and have coffee. We would crank up that coffeemaker and drain it, and it was a, a wonderful thing. It was called, the brand of it was a Diplomat. We'd always have a meeting with the Diplomat. We'd sit around and do crossword puzzles and talk about the state of affairs of the day. And then, uh, we would get started on making the spaghetti. We would, we'd have to make a batch of spaghetti every day, and we wanted it to simmer a while before we serve it. You know, we didn't wanna serve it if it hasn't stewed for a while. We would open at 11 to start selling all the spaghetti, salad and garlic bread you could eat, and it was like ridiculously cheap. When I first started there it was a buck and a quarter for all you could eat, and it was good. And we would, uh, we even had, and, and, of course, we had wines to go with it. We had a great wine, um, list,
Spinks Interview 10

uh, maintained by a wine salesman whose name was Max Porsche, and he was a European fellow, and he had excellent taste in wine, and so he could, he provided us with a wine list, everything from cheap wine that we could sell for fifty cents a glass all the way up to bottles of wine that we could get $15.00 for. And, uh, and we served beer in bottles, Shiner, Pearl, and Lone Star, Texas beers, and we sold beer for a quarter. When we first, when I first was there, beer was a quarter and then it went up to .50 cents, and it stayed at .50 cents for a long time. And we also, any of the musicians in town would come in and we'd feed 'em for free. If they didn't have any money, you know, come over and get some spaghetti, you'll pay us back some day, you know. You'll bring, you know, when you get famous you'll still come back and play and bring crowds in who are gonna buy stuff at regular price, and they did. That's the thing they did 'cause several players that played there went on to have really impressive careers from the genre that they were in, and, uh, but that was a typical day. And, of course, we'd always be sitting around the restaurant before we were open. We'd be smoking marijuana in the restaurant itself when no one was there, out on the patio when customers were there. We'd go on the back patio 'cause it used to be open to the public, but then we decided, you know, let's just keep the patio for ourselves. That's our breakroom, and that's where we can go back and anytime we feel like it, we can smoke pot back there. And, um, of course, we had, we would have after hours parties where there would be all kinds of consumption of marijuana going on. We had, we were famous for our hot knife parties. And a hot knife party would consist of, we'd get, we had a big ol' Vulcan commercial stove, gas range, six burners on top, and those things, we'd crank those up and we had these machetes and people would always see these machete, cross machetes on display on the wall in the kitchen. And, of course, they were all burnt up and, you know, really gnarly looking, and, uh, people always wondered what, what did we do with those knives. Well, we would, we would put those knives over the burners of those gas stoves and get 'em hot. We'd even take those little propane torches and light them up and we'd get those things glowing red hot. We would take this marijuana that was really poor quality stuff. I mean we used to call it Mexican dirt weed, and we'd take it by the handfuls and throw it on those blades or those knives, cross 'em, and it would just be billowing smoke filling the whole kitchen up. People standing around in a crowd with, uh, paper towel tubes so you could lean over the people in front of you over their shoulder, suck this smoke up through these paper towel tubes. Pretty decadent stuff. And we could, we could burn up a pound of marijuana in a night doing stuff like that. And, of course, they, it's all full of seeds so the seeds were popping and flying all over the place, landing on people's clothes, in their hair. One night Robbie Franklin, his hair got set on fire, and he had this bushy, bushy head of hair tied back in a ponytail and it caught fire, and someone poured a quart of chocolate milk on his head to put it out. It was, it was some pretty hilarious stuff, but, of course, we were so stoned, we were just making absolutely no sense, but, you know, so it wasn't all hard work and struggling to make the restaurant go, you know. We were, we were having parties and parties. And, you know, people would never understand why, you know, they're coming and knocking on the door, you know, and they'd be like there's people in there but they're not answering the door, but the sign says open, you know, 'cause nobody had remembered to put the closed sign up. So it was, uh, we were fairly decadent folks. What can I tell ya. Stephen Jarrard had the perfect summation one day. He said, you know, we're all having our retirement now. We're gonna all end up as decrepit old people that are working until we drop 'cause we're never gonna have a cent to retire on. And the place never made any real money. For a while I got pretty serious about, uh, when we, when we, after we opened up the music room for about a year, uh, and things were starting to go pretty smoothly, and the restaurant end of it was
suffering, and back when I was younger I had done a lot of work in restaurants, and I had even, I had worked a long time as a part-time employee at Howard Johnsons, the one in Bellaire, and they even wanted to send me to college. They said when you graduate from high school, you know, we wanna, Howard Johnsons has got a scholarship program, and they wanted to send me to the University of Michigan, which had the first school of hotel and restaurant management. Back in the late '60s they started that. And I just said ah, no. I didn't wanna do that. I wanted to go out and be a folksinger. I shoulda done it, but then I wouldn't have had all this fun. And so, anyway, but I got serious about the restaurant, so I handed off the music portion of the business to one of our newer members. The fellow's name was Roger Ruffcorn, and he was an interesting guy. We call him, when we first met him, we called him California Roger. He had come in and he had this most impressive voice. He, uh, also did a lot of radio DJ work, and while he was in California he also said, he said have you ever been to a porno movie and seen the advertisements for the coming features, no pun intended. Uh, and, and I said well, probably. And he says I did the voiceovers for all the porno movie trailers. And he said so many people have heard my voice, but he had that kinda of a broadcaster's voice. He worked for KPFT, did the Crystal Egg show, and very, very nice guy. And he, and he took over the music part, and I took over the restaurant part, and, uh, and while I took over the restaurant part we even expanded the menu. We went from being just spaghetti all you could eat. We started 6 nights a week we had a blue plate special sort of dinner. Some of 'em, we would have lasagna with appropriate trimmings. We had a Sunday roast beef dinner with mashed potatoes and green peas and dinner rolls. Saturdays we would have a full half of a barbecue chicken that we barbecued out on our patio. Wednesdays we had meatloaf and all the trimmings with that, and we had another one that was a special that Franci Files, one of the other owners at the time, it was one of her recipes. We just called it Franci's Oregon Special. It was sort of like a combination beef stroganoff wrapped in a tortilla basically. And, but we did well. We would start, we would sell out every night. We planned it so we could make 25 meals, 25 servings, and it always sold out every, every time. Now, I'm starting to wander, so I'm getting way, way off far afield here, so –

Norie Guthrie: No. You're adding, you're adding really good –

Walter Spinks: Bring me back to reality here.

Norie Guthrie: – information. It's interesting. You're adding kind of a different aspect than the other people I've talked about. I do have, but I mean that in a totally positive way. Um, I do have one question. You talked about kind of the Diplomat –

Walter Spinks: Yeah, the coffeemaker.

Norie Guthrie: – and the coffee mornings. Is that about, what about, when was the time that musicians started to come in in those early periods in the morning and start kind of talking and sharing and –

Walter Spinks: Oh, sometimes, you know, people would come in because they hadn't been to sleep all night. Most of the musicians would start coming in around the time we actually opened to the public. Once in a while someone would be there early, just for whatever reason they had to be there. Like Eric Taylor used to come by early in the morning because he had a side job.
He used to drive a school bus for special education kids. He drove the short bus. And he would come by a lot and sit down and drink coffee. Uh, but, uh, he was about the only one of the musicians that came, would come by on a regular, fairly regular basis, come early, but then we'd have all kinds of people, uh, Dan Earhart, a keyboard player who was also known as Captain Macho on the radio KLOL, and he had done other radio gigs before, Jackie McCauley was another radio disc jockey who was also best friends with Sandy Mathis, one of the owners, and she would come by early sometimes and have coffee with us. But, no, most of the, most of the musicians would start coming in, like Reb would start coming in, uh, and I think we probably gave Reb a free plate of spaghetti at least four times, four times a week, if not more. So, uh, and other people would come by and, and, from time to time. If someone was going to play a show, an evening show, uh, which would probably start at about eight, you know, they'd probably come in early, uh, to get warmed up, smoke joints out on the patio and get ready to play. You know, a couple of hours early, and we'd visit. We'd talk the music business, and, uh, what they were gonna do, what their plans were. They'd tell us stories about whatever songs they were working on at the time, and most of the time musicians hung out though was after the gigs.

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

Walter Spinks: People would hang out 'cause they knew it was always a party after at Anderson Fair and everybody'd be completely smoked up, you know. Three in the morning or something, we'd wind up driving off, go over down Telephone road on the east side, go to Telwink and have chicken fried steaks or breakfast or go to the One's a Meal over on Gray by the River Oaks Theatre and do the same sort of thing. Get staggering home sometime near sun up or –

Norie Guthrie: Um, so if there's anything else you want to say about Anderson Fair before we move onto the booking agency time.

Walter Spinks: Uh –

Norie Guthrie: Anything else that you feel like needs to be covered?

Walter Spinks: Uh, no, not really. I mean it may come up. We may say something later down the road that will jog my mind to revisit.

Norie Guthrie: Okay. Well, then do you wanna talk about your booking agency.

Walter Spinks: Yeah. Uh, I had always had kind of a long-term plan that, uh, Anderson Fair would become more than just a restaurant and music venue. Tim Leatherwood had joined our corporation not long after Roger Ruffcorn did. Roger also had, with his radio experience he knew a lot about recording. Tim, of course, genius when it comes to recording and sound. Uh, and I always thought well, you know, why don't we start producing live records as a routine thing. I think, of course, I don't remember when it was, but Nanci Griffith made a, made an album, a major release album from there. Before that Don Sanders, we did a small, what was called an EP on a vinyl disc, four song EP, that was recorded there, and Peter Gorisch had been the principal engineer with that. I think Roger probably had something to do with it too, and, uh, maybe some other folks on the technical end that Don brought in from outside, and it's just like
why not do, start doing this, producing the records, live records for the people that were our regulars, that they could market, and why don't we, also, we had heard things about a lot of folk clubs are on what we call circuits that like, you know, four, five, six players who perform at your club regularly might wanna start doing an exchange with say a club in Austin and have some of their players come here, our players go there, do it even further. Go to Dallas. Go to San Antonio, out of state. Go to Michigan, New England, Georgia, California and try to get a network of, of musicians and affiliated clubs, separately owned, but affiliated clubs. I mean that's the kind of thing I was thinking about wanting to do. Grandiose and probably, you know, never workable even in the best of times. That would've never happened. But, you know, it was a great dream to dream when you're smoking pot and doing hot knives in the middle of the night. But, uh, anyway, so I decided I was going to, we had also taken on some other partners. We took on a lot of partners at one time. And we took a partner in, a guy named, his last name was Heller, and I'm having a hard time remembering his first name. He turned out to be a real mistake. Uh, and I blame myself a lot for it. But once he was in, he started trying to say that our food was crap and he wanted to change our menu. He wanted to make the place into a vegetarian restaurant. He wanted to do this and that. He didn't care much about the music, and, uh, I finally had had my fill of him, and no one could be fired, really, so I decided you know what, I'm gonna start, I stayed in it, but I cut back my activities and I started wanting to work with musicians and I had had the grandiose scheme of starting a booking agency and doing a sampler album that I would be able to use to, as a promotion piece to send out to try to book the acts, and I wound up, I had had originally planned to do it as a two record set and have not only the five people that ultimately showed up on it, which were Don Sanders, Eric Taylor, Lynn Langham, Bill Cade and Stephen Jarrard, and I had also intended to have Vince Bell, Lucinda and George Ensle. Well, um, by the time I got the wheels going, well, Lucinda and Vince Bell already had some other very tantalizing opportunities that, you know, way, way out of my league, um, so, you know, they were of course not pretty interested in it. And, uh, you know, realizing what actual costs were going to become for even a one record and the challenges of putting the five people I'd already committed to having five artists with three songs, 15 songs on a 12-inch vinyl disc, and I just, I never even really talked to George, and I think I might've hurt his feelings because of course he knew about the project, and I, and I had been friends with George for a long time. As a matter of fact, we grew up on the same block down in Sharpstown when I was 13 and he was I think just a year older than me or maybe two. I think he might've been in my older brother's age group. And I always felt guilty about that, you know, and, uh, and of course George is a good guy. He doesn't, you know, and he did very well without me. And like the best thing I guess I can say about the whole affair was I don't think I hampered any of the careers of those five folks because I was not cut out for that, but we had, it was a successful record, though, extremely successful I'd say. Bob, when we released it, Bob Claypool, who was not only just a local Houston Post writer, and he was the No. 1 reporter on the music beat in Houston for all types of music, he loved it and gave us an incredible review, uh, in the Sunday paper, a huge, huge review, and that gave us a lot of mileage, and we had really not much trouble selling all of the albums that were for sale. We had 1,000 records pressed and there was a few overruns that didn't have the, the cardboard cover on the outside, but they had at least a label telling you what songs were on each side. There was probably about a dozen or so extras. And over the course of things I gave away about 175 of 'em to some, I gave a couple to each one of the people on the record, of course radio stations, magazines, newspapers, and then also clubs all over the country I sent 'em out to. I went to one of those showcases for
colleges that they would, you know, all these colleges would go to, a big fair, as it were, a 3-day convention where they'd have live performers. I even got one of my players, Don Sanders, got to do a live show on the main stage at the thing. And we secured a few bookings out of that, but it was pretty hard. That's what made me realize how inadequate my efforts were going to be because I mean they were people that had a lot of savvy and a lot of advertising expertise and all of the paraphernalia that you need to, you know, posters and everything that you have for your artists, and I had virtually nothing. I mean I had one little brochure, you know, that encapsulated all five of the people plus the agency, and I mean that was like pretty pathetic, when you come right down to it. I just had no idea how deep the pool was I was getting into. And so it didn't take long for that, for the booking agency to fail. And, but that record was, wound up being pretty successful. It sold 825 copies in just a matter of a few months, all sold locally. Nowadays, I mean I've seen it on, I've seen it offered on eBay and places like that for as much as $450.00, you know, and people wanting it. I had, uh, one time several years, uh, probably about 15 years after the release, Huey P. Meaux contacted me, who was a fairly well-known record producer and he wanted to reissue it. The only problem was I lost the master copy of it. The tapes were gone. Uh, I have no idea what happened to them. I tried to, uh, we had a, there was a 20-year reunion, so actually it was even longer than 15 years, because it was after the reunion, Linda Lowe organized a 20-year reunion at Anderson Fair of the release of the record, and she flew me down from Tennessee to attend it. And part of what I did to help her cover the cost of my airline roundtrip was I brought, there was still some of those discs that had no cardboard sleeve, and so I brought all those and I told her she can sell 'em. And I had 'em in the original box, and that's, and I think it might've been the same box that I had the tapes in. I had put the tapes, you know, there was a cardboard sleeve, just a piece of cardboard stuck in the box. Before you put the records in and then before you close it, there was another piece of plain cardboard you put over the top of it before you seal the box, and I had taken two of those cardboards and the reel to reel tape was in a Styrofoam, thin Styrofoam enclosure and I put a piece of cardboard over each of those, and, uh, set 'em down in the bottom of the box and put the records on top, and I think they were in that box that I gave to Linda Lowe, but just lookin' at it, you might not know that's in there. After you pull all the records out, it just looked like a plain piece of cardboard. And she probably threw them away not knowing they were there even. And if that's indeed where they were because I can't be 100 percent sure that that's where they were. So, uh, so when Huey Meaux called me after that, it must've, it was several years after that event that he called and wanted to have it re, reissued and I said sorry. I said maybe Charlie Bickley, who was the, who used to own Red Shack Studios that Rock Romano now has, that's where we recorded it, and I said maybe he has some raw tapes that could be re-put together. And I said get in touch with him, and I never knew what ever became of it other than no re-release was ever done.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm. Oh, that's sad.

Walter Spinks: It's sad, but that's the way it goes.

Norie Guthrie: I, I, I was under the impression you might still have them.

Walter Spinks: Oh, I wish. I mean I have my own sealed copy.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.
Walter Spinks: I do have one copy that I've never opened and, uh, I recorded onto a cassette, 'cause I mean cassette was about the ultimate in the technology those days –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Walter Spinks:– other than having your own reel-to-reel player, so I, I converted, uh, one of the spare discs. I went ahead and played it. Uh, it's initial playing, uh, take it, took it out of the little paper sleeve that it came in, and played it and recorded it on cassette, but that's so old now it's deteriorating.

Norie Guthrie: Yeah.

Walter Spinks:So if I'm gonna ever hear it again I'm gonna have to open up my sealed copy and play it.

Norie Guthrie: Well. Um, can you talk a little bit more about the, uh, the kind of the production side of Through the Dark Nightly?

Walter Spinks:Sure. Uh, we, uh, went into Charlie Bickley's studio, uh, Red Shack Studio, uh, which is now Rock Romano's place, and, uh, we tried to do it in as few takes as we could. We got some, uh, Charlie Bickley and Pete Gorisch, uh, were the engineers and the whole technical side of the production was all their work 'cause I have zero expertise in any of that sorta thing. And, uh, we did it at fairly bare bones. Pretty much the artists with their guitars and their songs. Um, I think we, uh, we, I know that Lynn Langham asked Shake Russell to come play bass on her tracks. Uh, Pete Gorisch, uh, played bass on Don Sanders' tracks, uh, and of course they had worked together on and off for a lotta years. Um, and, uh, we had a, and I believe Eric might a had, uh, some assistance, uh, some other and I just really can't remember to tell you the truth, uh, and, uh, we had of course the, you know, everybody, oh I'm unhappy with that track. I'm just like you, you're unhappy and I'm unhappy because that makes, cost me more money every time we're doing a track, and of course the thing went way over budget. If it hadn't a been for my parents backing me on the thing, and, uh, that, you know, it would a never happened 'cause I probably spent about $3,000 of my own money and I had probably had to borrow another thousand and a half from my folks, uh, but still that's, even in those days that was pretty inexpensive to pay only about 4½ thousand dollars to get 15 tracks, and a thousand copies of the record out. So, uh, it did make its money back 'cause I think they, most of the, they were selling for about $10.00 a piece, so we sold about, uh, 825 records at $10.00 a piece over a year, so I was able to pay my parents back, and of course that was all the seed money for getting the brochures and everything like that, and, uh, we had some videotapes made of them in performance which, you know, those, those had to be produced with a lotta help from, uh, Carlos Gabillo.

Walter Spinks: I don't know if you know him. He's, uh, he used to be with Channel 2 News. He was an editor, uh, down there and of course he helped me make some fantastic videos of several of the artists including Don Sanders especially and, uh, anyway, it was, by the time I was in to the production of the album, I, I was through with, uh, Anderson Fair and, and, uh, and
Mr. Heller and I, I mean I washed my hands of it. So that was either late '76, early '77 I was
done and really I was sad to leave it, you know, I, I didn't like it but, again, uh, it was just totally
incompatibility there and he was definitely wanting to get rid of me and talkin' bad about me and
so forth and so I was like it's not worth it. And, uh, so it didn't take long for the whole, uh,
booking thing to, to fail but the only thing that kept, one of the things that kept it alive was
because I got a phone call from the people that ran Houlihan's No. 2 over on Westheimer and
they, they were a pretty raucous club, but they hired some of the same acts, so I went in, I said,
well, you know I have the booking agency and I said if you hire me here, I'm gonna be hiring my
own acts to play in here as often as I can and they said fine because a lot of 'em were already
playing there before I was in the agency and so they were all acts that they liked to have play, so,
and, uh, all of my acts liked to play there with, pretty much with the exception of Eric Taylor
didn't, didn't like to have to play in front of a noisy crowd like that but he did several times and
so that, that was the thing I think that kept that, the agency alive because I wasn't gettin' them
enough work and of course I told them, I said, you know, we got nothing exclusive. If, if I get
you the gig, I'll take my fee but don't hesitate to get your own gigs and you don't need to pay me
anything, obviously, uh, if you get your own gig. So, uh, I worked there for, I don't know, the
better part of, uh, maybe a year, maybe a little bit more and, uh, I really didn't like workin' there
very much. I didn't like the people that were my bosses there and, uh, one of my bosses had a
person who was just a lying crook and, uh, with a lot of insubordination problems there and I
said it's not worth it. And, uh, anyway, uh, one of the interesting, just a couple of interesting
things about it. It was a, like I said, it was a, it was another house that was, uh, converted, a big
old mansion on Westheimer. I can't remember the cross street that it was by but it was pretty
close to the end of Westheimer where Southwest Freeway had a entrance right there, maybe just
a couple of blocks and you'd walk it up to this porch and go through the glass doors with glass
deck lights on either side and, uh, you'd, there'd be a, uh, uh, to the left there was a jukebox and a
staircase that went upstairs which was, uh, sometimes open to the public and sometimes not open
to the public but there wasn't a whole lot to do up there. There was a, there was a overflow
restroom up there. I think actually the men's room was upstairs and the ladies' room was
downstairs. And, uh, uh, also the, the green room for the performers was up there. And, uh, at
the, after you've walked in, there's a serving window and kitchen. You could see a double
serving window and, and the kitchen where, and we served burgers and chili and they had a great
secret recipe for chili. I was never even allowed to known the recipe for it and, uh, the owner
came in and made the chili and, uh, uh, it was pretty darn good and they had great hamburgers.
One time we even got a write-up in the, uh, short-live, uh, magazine called *City Magazine* and
they had a picture of a big burger on the front and, and a story about Houlihan's inside. And, uh,
we sold a lotta beer and a lotta burgers and, uh, and we also had music. It's off to the right.
There was a, a room with a stage, uh, and there was a second room that also was, had a large
opening, it, further from the stage but yeah. So a good number of people could see, it, it had a, a
bigger seating capacity, uh, than Anderson Fair did by not a lot but it was a little bit bigger and
then it also had a patio outside and, and another side porch and then a front patio, of course, that
you really couldn't see the music or hear it. You can hear it I guess. They had speakers out there
and, uh, a pretty sizable stage. You know, so even, they could even have bands but we didn't
have a lotta bands and I guess the most memorable act I ever had there other than my own, well,
well we had several good ones. We used to have, Hardin and Russell came in which wa, uh, and
it was the original Hardin and Russell when the Hardin of the group was a lady named Patricia
Hardin and she sang. We'd play au, guitar, auto harp and harmonies and so forth and then later
on it was a fellow named Andrew Hardin, one of the hottest guitar players in the Americana scene, uh, and, uh, they were, uh, very consistently top national act that came in there but, uh, the real highlight was we had Red River Dave. I hired a fellow named Red River Dave who had the distinction of being the first entertainer to ever be on broadcast television in the New York World's Fair where television was introduced and other than a few, uh, politicians and, uh, people like that, uh, professors and so forth that would, uh, that had appeared on broadcast television. He was the first entertainment act and he had his hit song at the time was, uh, “Farewell To You Amelia Earhart, uh, First Lady Of The Air” and it was a big hit. It was shortly after Amelia Earhart disappeared and so, uh, I got to hire him as a, as a musical act to play and he was actually very good, uh, in a real folksy, folksy sort of way, and, uh, changed the jukebox from being a all-rock-and-roll jukebox to a, a jukebox where we had mostly big band American song book classic standards and then a lotta folk rock and, uh, Bob Dylan and Joan Baez and all that and the owners thought I was crazy to do that yet after we established that as the jukebox, the jukebox company said that that jukebox made more money than it had ever had in the past and, uh, even after I was gone they kept all that music on there. The number one song that got played there on the jukebox was, uh, “In The Mood,” the original recording.

Norie Guthrie: So how much longer did you actually spend in Houston around this time?

Walter Spinks: Well, I wound up, uh, leaving Houston. Oh, I got married in 1980, uh, and I had to have real work and I went to work for a company where I was, uh, delivering, uh, patio and pool furniture. I did that for several years and then the Reagan recession came along and that kinda got scaled back and, uh, I wound up out of that job. Uh, and I decided I wanted to go back and see if I could revive the restaurant end of Anderson Fair because over time, they shut down their food operations all together. They had no more spaghetti lunch. It was not even, not even open at all for lunch, and in the evenings when they would open up, all they were servin' was like, uh, chips and hot sauce and maybe, uh, bacon-wrapped stuffed jalapeños and maybe, uh, quesadillas or somethin' like that, just basically the most basic snack food for bars, yeah. And, uh, I thought, well you know, maybe I'd like to, uh, try to get back and, uh, revive that and, uh, by then, there were only two owners left and that was Tim Leatherwood and Roger Ruffcorn. Now part of the, uh, deal with the Blue Squirrel Corporation had been any ex-corporation stockholder who sold their shares out was suppose to be allowed to come back and rebuy their shares and I went to Tim and Roger and, uh, I asked 'em to come back in and, much to my, I was really brokenhearted, uh, they did not want me to come back and I was pretty crushed, uh, and, uh, that kinda created a little bit of a rift for a couple 'a years. I went, I found another job that I could work. I worked at a local hardware store for a couple years, and then lost that job and, uh, by then, uh, we had had a son who was born in 1983 and it was gettin' close to him starting to go to kindergarten and work was hard and I didn't want him to go to a Houston inner-city school. We lived in the inner-city and we lived in Montrose the whole time and, uh, I decided, you know what, let's, let's just leave Houston. Let's leave the big city and I went to Johnson City, Tennessee. And, uh, uh, also in '83, besides my son bein' born, I started goin' back to college and taking, uh, uh, part-time classes with the idea of becoming a teacher and, uh, there was a fairly low-priced college in Johnson City and I knew I was gonna be able to get in-state tuition, uh, even though I really was, you know, they didn't usually grant you instate tuition status just after you move there. You usually had to establish residence for over a year but I managed to wrangle it and that's another story but, uh, and so, uh, when I went back to, uh,
East Tennessee State University, they had a program, uh, of bluegrass music where their College of Music would allow you to earn a college degree with an emph in music with emphasis on bluegrass and old time music. Now, I had never had any formal training in music, so I couldn't even get ac, I could not get accepted to be a music major. There would be no way, but you could take it as elective credit. So I wound up for five semesters, uh, uh, starting in, uh, I guess that was '88, uh, no '87, I was, uh, the second semester of '87, both semesters '88, both semesters '89, I was in the East Tennessee State University Bluegrass Band and not that bluegrass had ever really been my forte, I played a little bit of it back with my, uh, the new Lost Ozone Rangers so I knew some of the songs that were standards and, uh, pretty much all I had to do was pass an audition that showed that I could play the guitar in a bluegrass tempo. You now? But not, I was never a lead player like I, in five semesters, I never took a single instrumental break but they, they, uh, they were happy to have me because I, I was, uh, I could sing and I sang out loud. Now all the other players in those bands could, could sing but a lot of 'em couldn't project the way I projected and they just didn't want to. All they would, they wanted to concentrate on their, on their playing. So, uh, the program was run by a fellow named Jack Tottle who had been an old folk musician and from, uh, the New England area, and we had a mutual friend, uh, Bill Staines, a very, very well-known, and he's a legend in folk music, uh, and, uh, they had been friends up in the Boston area and so, uh, uh, that helped my bonafides of what I wanted to get with the band. And, uh, then there was a Dr. Richard Blaustein who, uh, was also part of the, uh, uh, music program and he played fiddle and I got to play with some really fantastic musicians, uh, who in those, uh, in those 2 ½ years that I did that, I played with, uh, Tim Stafford who, uh, wound up headin' up the, uh, multi-Grammy-awin, award-winning band Blue Highway. I also played, uh, with Barry Bales who is the bass player for Allison Kraus and Union Station and he's also done several albums with Dolly Parton and, uh, a host of other, uh, fabulous, uh, uh, country and bluegrass musicians. He's one of the top, uh, studio, uh, uh, bass players in Nashville. Uh, and, uh, another fellow who got even more popular than any of them who, I got to say, I always thought I was pretty much the least qualified of any player in the whole five semesters of being on that bluegrass band except for one guy who probably had less talent than me, only one guy, and he became the most famous musician of all and that was Kenny Chesney and, uh, you know, who represents everything that's wrong with modern country music. It's kinda – there he is, Mr. Kenny Chesney – and the only good thing though was back then he was just a young fellow. He was 18 years old and he was as country, polite, yes sir, no ma'am kinda kid you'd ever meet and, uh, that's the only time I ever had any contact with him was, uh, in 1989 when, and both those semesters in '89, he was in the band and he was just as humble as he can be and I, I never saw him again in my life but I do know that he is not a humble and polite young man anymore. And I could tell a few other stories that I know about him since 'cause I've had other people that I know who have performed in his bands but, again, that's another story for another day.

Norie Guthrie: Yeah.

Walter Spinks: And I don't want any lawsuits. So, uh, yeah, the great, then I, I always tried to play, uh, and I've, I've, I had a band up in Johnson City, Tennessee where I lived and, uh, we were called Little Trout which was my childhood nickname when I was in elementary school and, uh, and, uh, we had a lotta fun but we never really played much anywhere and, uh, as my family grew older, mm, my son went off to college at University of Tennessee and became an engineer, bridge building, and bridge construction engineer, uh, with the State of Tennessee
highway Department and he, and his wife gave us, gave my wife and I a grandson, uh, in 2012 and, uh, just less than a month before I turn 62, so the day I turn 62, my wife and I retired and moved to Nashville to help raise my, my grandson. In the last couple years, I have been spending, uh, going out and, uh, now that we don't take care of, of the grandson, uh, as much because he is in school now, uh, I go out sampling the music, uh, that Nashville has to offer and I don't pay anything, pay any attention really at all to what goes on on 16th Avenue and Music Row because it, it ain't much to put it bluntly. Uh, bro-country is not my cuppa tea and that's what's popular on the radio; although the do have a wonderful little bar down there called Bobby's Idle Hour that, uh, has a lot of the old, old timers show up there to play, these old geyser that are even older than me and can barely hold a guitar anymore but it's still a pleasure to go see 'em. Plus, a lot of new acts. Uh, some Texas acts come up there. I've see, uh, Chuck Hawthorne, and Libby Koch, uh, come up and play occasionally there and I loved to go see 'em and there's a lot of great music comin' out of East Nashville, the other side of the river from Music Rowe and it's a lot of great stuff happenin' there. I can just mention a few names, uh, uh, Bee Taylor and, uh, Cody Brooks, Aaron Lee Tasjan who spent about a half a-year, uh, ba, uh, opening up shows and playing in Ray Wally Hubbard's band, uh, Jon Latham, a fellow that I met playin' just as a solo act about 18 months ago and just last week he was, uh, performing as a backup guitarist and vocal harmonies with Elizabeth Cook at the Ryman Auditorium. Uh, and, uh, so I run into a lot of great talent and a, a whole of record label called, uh, uh, Cafe Rooster Records, it's, uh, has a whole table of people that are very good, uh, Sally Jaye and the Ladies Gun Club and her husband, Brian Wright who, uh, run the label, and they have Darrin Bradbury, uh, on their label, and several other great up-and-coming performers on there label. And a f, there is also a fellow on his own label named John Byrd who is, uh, sometimes he plays as a solo, sometimes he's with aact called Byrd's Auto Parts, the most country man playin' in Nashville today because he sounds more like, uh, Merle Haggard than, than, uh, than he sounds like Kenny Chesney. Okay? He's everything that Kenny Chesney ain't which makes him real country. Well, uh, and there you have me in a nutshell except for the things that I can't remember anymore.

Norie Guthrie: Then why do you think Houston generated such a unique folk scene?

Walter Sparks: That's a good question which is, uh, I learned in speech communication, that's what you're suppose to say when you don't know what you're gonna say; that's a good question. I'm glad you asked that. But I don't know. I, I really could hardly tell ya, that if there's really a reason or whether it was just serendipity. It just happened that a lot of people were comin' together and they did it Houston. They did it in Austin, uh, which between the two, uh, made the Houston music scene. Uh, and so, and it wasn't just the kinda music I was most interested in. We had everything. I mean look at ZZ Top. Uh, look at, uh, you know, the great, I mean even more modern. You know? There's a bunch of, uh, a bunch of big stars that are from Houston. Uh, uh, what's her name?

Norie Guthrie: Beyoncé?

Walter Sparks: Beyoncé, yeah. And so not my kinda music but I mean you can't deny that she excels in her genre. You know?
Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Walter Sparks: Uh, it's just always been a great town, a lot of great blues comes outa here, uh, you know, via people like, uh, well of course somewhat more East Texas but, uh, Mance Lipscomb, Lightnin' Hopkins, uh, and, uh, we just, I just can't really put my finger on, on a, uh, so I'm not really glad you asked that question 'cause now you're making me look kinda like a idiot.

Norie Guthrie: No, no.

Walter Sparks: But I don't know wh, what caused it but I'm just glad that it happened. I'm glad that I was able to at least be not he periphery, uh, somehow of that scene and, and to have met all the great performers that I've met, I kinda feel like I'm livin' a, a, you know, a Forrest Gump-kinda life, all the people that I've got to, uh, to be with and I didn't even mention the fact that, you know, one of my heroes from when I first started listenin' to folk music, Doc Watson. When I was with the bluegrass band, I actually got to, we opened the show for Doc Watson and Doc Watson had us come on stage to play two songs with him. We played “Mama Don't Allow” and “Will the Circle Be Unbroken” and here I am on stage right next to Doc Watson singin' harmonies on those two songs and I mean and a person of as little talent as I think I have in that area to be able to do that, there's not a lotta people that could say they did that. I'm pretty, pretty stoked about it any time I think about that but no. Why did it happen here? Why did it happen in Austin? I don't know. Why did it happen in New York City? There's a lotta people.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Walter Sparks: You bring all, you know, you get, you get a couple a-million people in one spot and you're bound to have a lot of good musicians come out of that and there's just a lotta tradition. There's always been a lotta good music, uh, happenin' in Houston. You know, from before I was ever born, uh, there was great music happenin' here and in Austin.

Norie Guthrie: Okay. Do you have anything else that you want to cover or talk about?

Walter Sparks: Uh, just in case I've said anything too disparaging about, uh, about, uh, uh, the current owner of Anderson Fair who, uh, Tim Leatherwood who owns it now. The one, you know, again, we have, I, I did allude to some friction that had happened –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Walter Sparks: – between us but I, you know, I, I do have a, a respect for, for him in the fact that he, he kept the place true to what I always wanted to see happen. I mean he doesn't have lousy acts come and play. He never turned it into a comedy club. He never turned it into a, a disco. He never, he kept it as a, uh, a, format that's a listening room for singer-songwriters, uh, who can bring their talent and original music to an audience that wants to hear it and he doesn't promote the place very much. He's, he seems just as happy to have five people in the audience as he does to have a packed house. I don't think he, he, and obviously he doesn't do it for a living. He has other areas where he earns his money and pays his rent from and, uh, so I wouldn't want, uh,
anybody to think that, you know, Tim and I are enemies. I do have a lot of respect for his abilities and, again, keeping it true to what it should've been and I got, and now, when you're adult you get over that kinda stuff. You get, you have heartbreaks and you get over it. You have lost loves and you get over it. You know?

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Walter Sparks: And, uh, I'm just glad that Anderson Fair is still there and I hope it'll still be there long after I'm gone and Tim I gone. I hope there'll be somebody else that will pick up the mantle. I would love to see it turn into a public trust, even; to see it become a charitable organization with a board of directors, you know, who will keep it goin' for generations to come and I would just, I, you know, I, I've never talked to Tim about it, of course, we don't talk business. You know, we have a, you know, we get along. I go to see him. I've seen him several times since I've, uh, been down here in Houston this time and, uh, you know, we're fine. We worked fine for a couple 'a years.

Norie Guthrie: Well, I want to thank you so much for coming in. Uh, this is really great.

Walter Sparks: Mm hmm.

Norie Guthrie: You had provided a lot of wonderful information.

Walter Sparks: Well I was, I was pleased to be here. I'm very proud to be able to help out this project. I think you are doing wonders for the reputation of Anderson Fair.

Norie Guthrie: Ah.

Walter Sparks: And I know you're one of the many, many volunteers who goes down there and –

Norie Guthrie: Uh –

Walter Sparks:– serves beer to folks.

Norie Guthrie: Thank you so much.

Walter Sparks: Okay.