Interviewee: Roger “Rock” Romano

Interviewer: Norie Guthrie

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Interview Transcript

Norie Guthrie: My name is Norie Guthrie from the Woodson Research Center, Fondren Library at Rice University. I am interviewing Rock Romano. Today is October 25, 2017. This is part of the Houston Folk Music Archive Oral History Project. Can you tell me about your early life in Houston?

Rock Romano: Yes, I was born right at the end of the War. I'm one of the original baby boomers and I was born in 1945 on Valentine's Day. And I was born Roger Francis Romano, and there, 'er we called it Romano back then. It's, other people in my life have changed my name to Romano and, and I haven't been able to do anything about it. So, I grew up in the, uh, on the northwest edge of the Fifth Ward in Houston. I was just across the Hardy Freight Yards, uh, which are that the north side of downtown. They're no longer there, but they were there. It was a huge, you know, Houston ran on trains, and, uh, I grew up just north of, of downtown, and so it was, the top edge of the Fifth Ward and it was more of a Latino neighborhood, and as I grew up it became more and more so. Uh, so I went to parochial catholic high school. I was encouraged from kindergarten on sing, because I just always had this gift of singing. And I wish I'd a known back then that there were things like The Voice. If we'd a had something like The Voice back then, I woulda just been a singer, I think. But, you know, I'm a Catholic school kid tryin' to figure out what's goin' on. My parents recognized very early that I had the gift, and they gave me private vocal lessons. I mean, we were poor. There were ten of us in one house, including my aunt, who, uh, lived with us, and there were seven kids, my mom and dad and my aunt in a three-bedroom house. Until I was 18 or so, uh, that's the way it was. And, uh, so anyway, we, uh, I've lost my track.

Norie Guthrie: You were talking about, um, getting private lessons, vocal lessons.

Rock Romano: Oh yeah, and uh, and so I was in the fifth grade and my, my parents gave me private lessons, and it was with the choir teacher of our church. And what was cool is I got to skip a class to go do it. And so the next year there were about six people takin' lessons from this woman. But I was the guy at that time. She taught me how to breathe and she taught me not to swoop my letters, that I wasn't Frank Sinatra and that I was gonna have to sing those notes. She taught me all these great breathing exercises and played scales and taught me to sing “Old Man River” and Stephen Foster songs and stuff, and my passion for music was already off the graph. I just always loved the way music, what music did to my emotions, and you know, when I was comin' up, as I was becoming aware, uh, the doo-wop era was on us, and when I started listening to the radio to switching channels to hear my favorite songs it was, it was basically, you know, I guess it was in about 1955 or '56, and then, and, uh, it was in '55 my, uh, my brother, Joe got a
little plastic ukulele for Christmas, and, uh, I essentially just stole it from him, and, uh, it had a little book on how to play it, and so I taught myself to play the ukulele, and so, you know, just like the Beatles I started off on the uke.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Rock Romano: And, uh, I learned to play every song, I learned to play “Hail, Hail, the Gang's All Here,” and then all of a sudden I was tryin' to play, but I could only play in the key of C, and I had no other reference. I didn't know that you could transpose to other keys, and even on the ukulele, and uh, and so my sister and I, who was 3 years older, my sister Rosanne, uh, is 3 years older than me, and so we became kind of this vocal duo, and, uh, and I would play the ukulele and if it was too high to hit the notes, 'cause we're in this, can only play in one key, so if the song's too high we would whistle. And so my sister and I would harmonize and that was guess my first band. And, uh, and so after that, you know, I, it was about '57 or so I ran into guys couple years later, I ran into some guys that were playin' the guitar and I was already just blown away by Elvis, and I wanted that real bad, and you know, Buddy Holly just floored me and it was like I grew up listening to my older brothers' albums and records. And so I have a foot in two cultures, on both sides of the generation gap, at least musically. And I can, you know, I still know the words to all these old standards and stuff, 'cause I just heard 'em over and over as a kid. And I'd walk to school, and I'd practice whistling, you know, [whistles] I'd be, I, I got really good at it, and then I would, would go over the lyrics of songs and teach myself songs. And I would, I'm embarrassed to say, I'm not really embarrassed, uh, one of the songs I learned was “Love Letters in the Sand” by Pat Boone, and it was like it has this great whistling lead in it, and I made myself learn how to do that, and when you start off you're goin', and at the end you're, and you can do all kinds of trills. But it takes time. Well, I had to walk to and from school every day for 8 years, 9, uh, 9 years really, 'cause a kindergarten too, and, uh, and so I would just practice on the way. And, uh, I taught myself a lotta stuff just then, but mostly I was just overwhelmed by what music did to my feelings and my emotions, and the freedom it gave me, and you know, our life at home was beautiful. It wasn't some kind of impoverished thing, I mean, we were poor, poor, but my dad made eyeglasses. And we'd a probably had a lotta money except he gave every nun and priest in town their eyeglasses for free, you know, so, I don't know about that, but, you know, he did that for sure. Anyway, he was, he was a gentle guy and the only time we ever got cross was for about 15 years after Elvis came along, and, but we made peace long before he died in his 90s. So, that, that was the first thing. You know, this woman, Mrs. Benerito who was our choir teacher. She had me singin' in the choir. I had photographs of me singing at my, with my kindergarten graduation outfit, and it was, those were my first gigs was playing for these May fetes and the fall festivals, and singing.

Norie Guthrie: Hmm.

Rock Romano: They'd let me get up there and sing. And so, you know, Ms. Benerito's the one who spotted my vocal talent, really, and I think she went to my parents, 'cause the next thing I knew they were giving me lessons. And it was just the coolest this that I did that for 2 years. And then I started playing with other guys my age, and I started a band in the north side with two guys, Bobby Ramirez and Richard Galindo, and uh, our drummer was named Jack, and when we finally got a bass guitar, the first real guitar I got was a, I ordered a gui, a bass guitar from Sears,
and I had to wait and wait for it to come, and had to go pick it up and I didn't play bass at the
time, so I gave that to another guy who gave me his 6-string. It was a neat little Fender, and so
we were off and runnin'. Once we got that bass we sounded like a real band, and we played a
lotta different little parties. And I, and I remember playing during the last few days of grade
school. I played in the auditorium to my classmates, but it was only one little gig, and it was like
nobody ever knew me that way until that moment, and it was already too late. I was moving on
to high school at that point. So, I stayed with that bunch a people, in an, in an associated group
of, um, musicians, young musicians, and we, uh, and I went to, uh, from Holy Name Catholic
School to, to, uh, St. Thomas High School. And the only reason I went, St. Thomas High Schools
are very preppy organization now, and it's real high tone, but I went because my four older
brothers went and I damn well better go. Some, somebody was gonna be in trouble, you know.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Rock Romano: So, I went to St. Thomas High School. I had some teachers that brought me along
that taught me to read and spell better, that taught me the, the skills that I needed, they'd take me
aside, say, man, you need to learn how to read, you know, and so, and this was actually later on
in my high school thing, but I was of course instantly in the poster club. I'd been an artist since I
was a kid too, I forget about that. I just used to love to draw. My brother, Jimmy, who was the
brother above my sister, uh, he was my fourth oldest brother, and he, uh, was, he could draw and
he was sorta didn't follow the family mold. He did, wasn't an athlete. My, my oldest brother,
Albert, there are pictures of him with Babe Ruth and, uh, I mean, you know, from cuttings from
the newspaper, my brothers, my first three brothers were baseball stars at St. Thomas, and St.
Thomas was a, you know, their ball teams have always been a force to be reckoned with, but this
was back when they were whoopin' up on everybody, and they weren't just in Catholic leagues
and stuff, you know, so anyway, I didn't, I was certainly any sports guy. My brother Jimmy was
more like my James Dean brother and, uh, I just looked up to him like he was, you know, James
Dean. And so I did every, I wanted to do everything he did, and so I, he drew, and so I was
drawing and I got a little art kit somewhere along the line for my birthday. Once again,
somebody's in my family's realizing something that I've got goin' on, and of course, I'm always
thinkin', these people don't understand me and everything, you know, and all of that. So, uh, I,
you know, I just followed the instructions and made some really cool lookin' stuff and people, I
don't, they probably were just pullin' my leg, but they'd be goin' you didn't do that, you didn't do
that. You know, and I'm, no, I did, you know, and so I always was an artist, just from the
beginning I believed that I was an artist, whether I was or not, I believed I was. So, music and
art. It's been the paths that I've followed all through my life. I mean, I have a degree from the
University of St. Thomas and art history and classical studies, and I've, Mrs. de Menil was one of
my best friends and she matched all my grants, because I would get hardship grants, and she
would match them so that I could keep goin' to St. Thomas. And what I have to say is, right after
high school I joined the seminary, of the, of the Basilian Fathers. I joined the, uh, Basilian Order
and I went to New, uh, to Detroit or to Pontiac, Michigan to do a for real novitiate of a year and
2 weeks living really in a monastery. And I, and of course by the end of the year, like the inmates
had taken over the asylum, and it was, uh, and it was, they were, you know, they were very strict
with us at first, and I'm goin' what have I gotten myself into? I brought my guitar up there, and
I'm crying at night, goin' I'm never gonna play again. And I was already a rocker. All throughout
high school I had a pretty successful band, and when I was a sophomore I joined this band that I
was sort of a consultant to, uh, and when I teamed up with them a lotta things changed. And these guys were all in my home room and we, we just all hit it off musically. And they, but as their consultant before I joined, I told 'em to name their band after their piano player and call themselves the, The Jim Askins Combo, and so that's what they became. And I joined a year later and it was hard for me to leave my band in the, in the, in the north side. We were soulful and we were playin' a lotta blues and Bo Diddley and that kinda stuff. But these guys, we did exactly the same material, only we threw in a lot of, 'cause I knew all these old standards. We would do songs like “Misty” and we, we were the best high school dance band in the Universe at that time, and we would split dances with a blues guy named Clarence Green, who was an established guy, and who later Trudy Lynn was the front woman for his band. He always had a beautiful woman fronting his band. He was a great guitar player. And so we would have these nights where we would split these high school big proms and stuff with Clarence. And then we'd play our own gigs, and so, we were really versatile and right at the end we went to KPRC Radio station and they, we recorded all of our material. And, uh, there's still a disk of that somewhere, and, uh, John Bonno, who was the bass player throughout these years, was also our archivist, and our accountant and everything else, you know, he was the guy, uh, that took care of that stuff. So, anyway, so we did a lotta stuff, and I ended up playing with most of those guys all through my college years, all through the pretty famous band that I had in the 60s, which was called The Six Pence, and, uh, later became The Fun and Games, and The Fun and Games Commission, and then when we signed to a major label, they charged it to Fun and Games. So, we, I played with those same guys from the time I was a sophomore in high school, you know, we were all graduated from college. And everybody went their separate ways, uh, one guy had to go to the service, but some of us kept playing and twistin' knobs in the studios, and during that time, you know, during the, so, lemme go back early years we're taking me through say high school.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Rock Romano: Uh, earliest years, you know, were just spent being overwhelmed by music being, I was totally the, the light gray sheep of my family, I could hardly call myself a black sheep, because my family was so good, and like, you know, it's one thing that I'm just so grateful for throughout my life was that I got some values, and it didn't all come easy, believe me. I was a bit of a rebel, and, you know, for, for when I, but, you know, it wasn't that serious. And it was a, at least in terms of the big picture, you know, it was very serious getting through certain hard times with my dad and stuff, but – and so I was Roger back then, and then I became Rock when I was a sophomore in high school. And it was because of a funny joke column in the, the sophomore column in the St. Thomas High School paper, where the guy, his name was Ed Furley, is the guy that gave me my name. And he wrote an article about the mafia on campus, and every Italian he put a little parenthetical name, you know, it was like Little John Bono, and all these guys that I was playing with, and you know, Mike Cemo has some kind of a name, and, and so we, and I was Roger Rock Romano, and so I started encouraging people to call me Rock at that point. And it wasn't until I got to college and really tried to stop people from callin' me Rock that I couldn't, you know, and it was just too damn bad. I was gonna call myself R. Francis Romano, the artist and musician, you know, and composer. No way, and it was like, you know, I could not become Rock, but there are many people that still call me Roger, and that's, even, you know, the, and I love it when they do, you know, 'cause I know they're really an old friend or they know some secret about me that, I don't know how they figured it out. Tommy Dardar, Got rest his soul, he
just died, one of the best Blues men I ever knew, and he would refuse to call me anything but Roger. And I don't even know how he knew I was Roger, 'cause he wasn't around me in high school, and, uh, and Sam Irwin from Duck Soup was in the Fun and Games and Six Pence, and all that with me, and he still calls me Roger, so a few, every once in a while, my brothers do, sometimes they will call me Rock, sometimes they call me Roger, so that's how I got my name was a joke, it was a joke, that I sort of promoted and then was really sorry I did. So, and now who cares, you know. I'll go, I'll answer to either one. So, playing through high school, we all got a lot better of course, at what we did, but we were all still really more influenced by rock 'n' roll stuff, by blues stuff, and it wasn't until toward the end of us, you know, it was actually wasn't toward the end, it was about, I guess it was right about the time that high school was ending for us, the folk revolution had started back in the 60 in early '60, you know, but in '61 it was really catchin' on fire, and Dylan and all that, and Dylan goin' rock and all that, and like the, all of a sudden it was Kingston Trio and the Lamplighters, and all these people and so I jumped all over that, and especially when I went to the seminary, I thought I was never gonna get to play again. I was in the custody of these Canadian, absolute progressive guys, you know, they let me, not only let me play my guitar, I taught seven people to play the guitar and two people to play bass. It was like became half of what I did there. And I had a guy teach me to play clarinet and, you know, it was like we had a little band there, and we had, uh, uh, a bunch of folks, we had a folk singer band, you know, and we, and we looked like the Blues Brothers, because our sort of casual outfit for the seminary was little Blues Brother hat and a white shirt and the tie, skinny, so we looked just like the Blues Brothers. But anyway, so that's when I sort of got into folk music, and then once I, I didn't last long in the seminary. They, I had to, I got to choose any Basilian college to go to, and they had the Basilian Fathers had places in Detroit and New Mexico, Rochester, Canada, University of Toronto, and I came back to University of St. Thomas because I was so homesick, I just wanted to come back home. And I don't know what would have happened. I don't think I would have been any less musical, I just think that my life woulda been way, way, way, way different had I decided to go to school up north. But these same guys, these, this Canadian priest, uh, there was a French Canadian guy, a, uh, there, and an old, a couple a old American guys, wheezer dudes, and they were just, you know, we're not supposed to talk at meals, they're supposed to be reading to us at meals, unless he rings the bell and we can talk, it's a special day. Well that lasted for maybe 3 or 4 months before chaos, you know, ensued. But it was, they would read us, you know, Ralph Nader books and Vance Packard's *The Waste Makers*, and they were teaching us right away about real progressive values, whether we wanted to know it or not. And so, anyway, they, it was a great education. I saw *Citizen Kane* for the first time. We'd have classes about movies. It was a really, like a finishing school for guys like me, who had a, a modicum of intelligence and a, and a, you know, if we wanted to work hard we could do it. Well, you know, we had a lotta free time there, and all I could, wanted to do was play guitar. And I just, what I did, I got books on tablature and learned to play jazz and slowed records down to figure stuff out. And then when I went to St. Thomas, uh, you know, to go, I asked to be released within 6 months. I ran into a real clash with the conservative powers that be at the University of St. Thomas, and I wanted out right away, and I, I won't name names, but it's, you know, I request, I got in touch with the superior general in Canada and he said, look, wait 'til the end of the year so this doesn't look like a scandal. So I went, I was, it was about January or February of the, of the school year anyway. It was already '65 and, and so it wasn't that big a deal for me to wait. And one of the coolest things was though we were still a bit at war, my dad came to pick me up and I just knew it was, I just was regretting it and not looking forward to it, and he
just never said a word about anything. My brother helped me get a car, my brother Jimmy, my
James Dean brother who became a mechanic, and uh, was maintaining the fleet for a oil
company, and, uh, he later became a genius boat guy, best boat mechanic in the world. But
anyway, he, he, you know, uh, I'm lost. I just got lost.

Norie Guthrie: Um, you were at the university, -

Rock Romano: Oh right.

Norie Guthrie: -you had a little thing at the university.

Rock Romano: At, at the university, at the University of St. Thomas, when I first went there,
they didn't, well, and when I went for my sophomore year after I had been released from my
vows and stuff -

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Rock Romano: - they wouldn't let me have a scholarship. They made me pay for that year,
because they just thought, probably quite rightly, that all I had to do was study that first year I
was at St. Thomas, I made the dean's list and I was, you know, just, I had nothin' to do. I read my
biology book three or four times through tryin' to make sure I had the answers to all the
questions, and so I was a diligent student. I never thought I was that smart, but I worked real
hard. And in the meantime I started rehearsing my band. While I was still in the seminary we'd
get Saturdays off, so I'd go home and, and the guys would meet me at my place and we started
rehearsin' the Six Pence, so that by the time I got out at the end of the school year, we were
almost formed. And I got into a band at that time called the The Baroque Brothers that was a
rock band playin' “Louie Louie” and stuff, and we were the house band at this legendary place
called La Maison, that was over at McGowen and Bagby in an old church. Friend of mine
started. He wasn't my friend at the time, but I became one of the house band there. And so we got
to, you know, see other acts and we got to open for people and that was my first experience is
one time that band got to open for Jackie Wilson, who was the, one of the greatest soul guys of
all time, and it was in the, and it was in the Coliseum. And I remember being there and the whole
audience was black, and we're dressed in our Beatle outfits, you know, and we'd get up there and
we're scared to death, and after the first song, this crowd just went crazy over us. They loved us,
and it was, it was home free from there. And so it was, you know, that's, so, you know, in
college, once, once I started The Six Pence and we got that goin', Sam Irwin quickly kinda talked
me in for him replacing the falsetto singer with him, and that's what I did, and so the, it pretty,
got, much got set who the members of the band were for the next several years. And, uh, it was,
um, we were really good. We practiced before we ever played a gig. We could play, uh, we had
six guys in the band and five of us sang, and we all were pretty damn good, and so, you know,
we could do Beatles’ songs, we could do Beach Boys’ songs, and we did, I was comin' off of a,
you know, I was not until 10 years later did I become a fan of the, real fan of the Stones, where I
just thought their music was the best, and, you know, I mean, I always liked them, and I always
had their records and stuff, and I always had Cream records and Jimi Hendrix, but I didn't go for
that side. I've never learned a Jimi Hendrix son on the guitar. And it's just, it just wasn't what I
was doing, and it wasn't what I cared about, and I, I'm gonna say this word, that I called our,
what, the way we approach things like Apollonian rock ‘n’ roll, 'cause I was already into the classical thing at school -

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Rock Romano: - and I, I met Mrs. de Menil, I was walkin' around campus in my robes, my cassock and surplus, I mean my cassock and collar, and this woman walks up to me, says come here, and she may not have approached me had I not looked like a seminarian. She walked me upstairs, uh, above Jones Hall to her gallery that she exhibited at on the campus, and she had just taken over from Jermaine MacAgy, uh, who was a legendary woman that headed the art department at St. Thomas, and so Mrs. de Menil, one at a time, took me through this whole exhibit and showed me every painting, talked about it to me. Then we got outside some exhibits. She said, how, how do you think I did with this? You know, and I'm like, that's it, you know, and so I just, we became really good friends, and I've, I changed my major to art history instantly, and, and, uh, uh, I just wanted to be around her. And she, during that first year, she matched my grants during my second year of college. The first year I had to pay on my own. She helped me through that. And then I had scholarships, had academic scholarships after that, and so it wasn't, it wasn't as much of a deal. And, you know, I was talkin' to somebody last night how a band these days, if you make a hundred dollars a night apiece, you're doin' well, you know, four or five hundred bucks is all you're gonna get to go play in a club. And, when we were in our, you know, 19-20 years old we were goin' and playin' in clubs for a hundred dollars apiece, a night, so I'd make two hundred dollars for playing a weekend, and that'd be like makin' about twelve or thirteen hundred dollars for the weekend. So, music paid for the rest of my education, and, uh, you know, I had mates to play with. We hooked up with a studio, a local studio, and we went there because we were lookin' for a drummer. This guy, we went to see this guy who was a drummer, and he had just won his set of drums in a contest, so we look at this guy and Sam was blown away at the guy. He had me totally convinced that we needed to change drummers, and I kinda, you know, we were already recording by that time. Actually I take that back, we went to, I don't know how we ended up at Andrus Recording Studio. It, I remember, I, the first time I went there it was as a background singer, and me and two or three other people were singing background vocals, and then the next thing I knew my band was going over there and they signed us up for their management agency signed us up. We didn't have really a record contract with them, we had a managerial contract with 'em. And Walter began recording us, and he really liked my material, and so I started writing just for us to record. And what happened is I got real used to producing my own stuff and really spoiled by having my own way, and then in about, in the, about '68 our band was becoming less popular, and I hated what we were playing, because I had already grown my hair down to my shoulders and my Stones phase had already started and my, you know, and I didn't wanna be in a Beach Boy band or in a, in a band that was a soft core rock band anymore. I wanted to be doing, I wanted to be like The Band, like Bob Dylan's The Band. And his, and Bob Dylan's music had so influenced my writing, and so what happened is we got a chance to sign with this Hollywood producer, Gary Zekley, who had written some bubble gum hits, “Yellow Balloon” and couple of other things, and, uh, and he was connected in Hollywood, and he was connected with Uni Records, which was MCA. And so he promised us, I was all against doing it, because what I was gonna give up was gettin' to produce my own music. We were gonna be doin’ all a his material, and he's gonna be producing us, and I'm gonna say there was major friction between me and Gary at times. He kicked me out of the
studio once, and I left, and I wasn't gonna come back and he hada come back and git me. But it was like, I loved him, and I got to talk to him. We, uh, uh, we went through, we did our, uh, album with him here. In '68 it got released, in '68 sometime, and we had a couple of national charting singles, and they were both bubble gum songs, but one of 'em is “Grooviest Girl in the World” and it still gets, it was on Little Steven's top 10 rock songs of all time, you know, and stuff like that. So, 'er top 10 garage band rock songs, okay. It was not hardly the Kinks, you know, but it was like, anyway, we, so we went through all that. I was very disgruntled. By '60, early '69 I had a child on the way, I was, 'er actually I had a child, yeah, on the way, I was, all this stuff, I didn't wanna go be in a Beach Boy band. I was really hatin' where it was goin', but we got to go out to L.A. and record with the legendary Wrecking Crew. Well, it turned out to be the last days of the Wrecking Crew. The writing was on the wall for everyone, and if you watched the Wrecking Crew documentary, you'll see that all of a sudden about '68, everything stopped and everybody wanted, they wanted Fleetwood Mac playing their own stuff, and they wanted all these people playing their own material and not have studio bands doing it.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Rock Romano: And so, it was the end of the Wrecking Crew, and we were there right at the end of it, but man, I watched how Blaine and Joe Osborn, my favorite bass player, one of my favorites, and just like it was astounding, and they cut our tracks very quickly, and we had Jimmie Haskell doing the strings, it was like A-team all the way, and it was a beautiful – I'm proud of the job I did singing the record. It was called We, and it just flopped, you know, and it was Gary's big gamble, because it was Gary's song and... you know, before that, um, I, I was really disgruntled, and there were, uh, I had met a guy who was the best folk singer and writer I ever knew. His name was Mike Sumler. He still, I've produced stuff on him, I did the albums on him. To this day, I don't know another human other than maybe Townes Van Zandt, who's a better songwriter than him. And then, and I would sit up there and Mike would sit there and just blow Tom Paxton songs, playin' finger style guitar on the Martin D28, I just said, our, our guitar player had to go to the service, and so I got Mike and the band quickly, and, but he's a guy who is the most gifted writer that I ever met and a beautiful musician, really talented. He plays the piano now, not guitar. And he lives up in Arkansas, but he was the least self-promoting human I've ever met, and he really didn't wanna be in the spotlight. And even after did a killer record on him in the mid-90s of his songs, he went on the road for about 3 months and quit. You know, after all this momentum behind him.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Rock Romano: But he's, Mike Sumler, yeah, the best writer I ever knew. And a hell uva an artist too. But, so Mike and I were closely associated. He and a guy named Joe Dugan, who was a master piano player, he was a classically-trained pianist, and it was really fun for me to go tell these guys who were like ten times better than me what to play, you know, on my records and stuff, but that's kinda what being a producer was, is about. You're never, you know, that's what being in a band is about. You can do things that you couldn't possibly do by yourself, and you can fulfill musical ideas that you could never do by yourself. So that was all really fun to me, you know, and as I moved away from Fun and Games, we were moving closer toward The Band, where we'd been doin' old folk songs like “Banks of the Ohio” and stuff, and, but we would rock
'em up, and we, you know, we had our own kinda unique thing, and for some ungodly reason, in, in the late 1969, my son was a couple of months old, we moved our whole band to Santa Fe, New Mexico, wives, kids, two pianos, all this gear. We got out to Santa Fe and what are we gonna do now? And we called our band Skinny Minnie, Mayo Thompson named our band, which was, made me proud. I loved workin' with Mayo and I produced an album on his Corky's Debt to his Father. I co-produced with him and Frank Davis, and it's, it's a legendary cult album now, and, and Mayo teaches at Berkley or something and has become the grand old man of punk, you know, and it's like a Godfather of punk at Berkley. But, you know, that was one of the great things that I got to do as a producer, at Andrus, and of course when we finished it, Frank took it up to the people that we knew at Uni and they looked at this, and they said, man, we can't do anything with this sh, and I won't say the rest of the word. It was like, we'll say this crap, and the, and so we just got it pushed back in our face and Walter released it on his own label, and they only probably printed a thousand copies, and I'm one of the few people that has one. Actually, it was re-reduced like, it was re, it was redone later on. Mayo brought me some redone copies and instead of Texas Revolution Records, it was done on Drag City Revolution Records. They even made a special label for it, imitating the original label. But anyway, so it's '69 and I've moved this band to Santa Fe. We didn't have a drummer with us. Our drummer decided not to come. And so we did a canvas to find us a drummer. And I'm only goin' through this 'cause it's a funny story. The only guy we could find that could play worth a damn was this Indian kid named Danny Demis, I'm sorry, Bill Dem, Danny Demis. And he was a little long-haired Indian scrawny guy, and he was paralyzed. We'd have to put him on his drum stool, and he could just play the heck out of it, and he was great. And he was the only guy that we found in New Mexico. Well, so we sign him up. It turns out about 2 weeks later we find out that his brother, Bill, is the director of, program director of the rock station in Santa Fe. So we instantly, I took one of our Skinny Minnie demos that we had done at Andrus and went up to, uh, went up to, uh, Wakefield in Phoenix and had a cu, a 45 produced and we brought it back and we had a record on the radio. And then we were all living, believe it or not, in a big pink house off the square, off of Santa Fe. It was a huge house, and we were all living there. And some of us downstairs, we had suites of rooms. It was this giant place. And that wasn't gonna last too long, 'cause we'd get our food stamps and we'd use 'em all up in a week, and then we'd, you know, things were a little bit better for bums like us back then, and, uh, we, uh, didn't last long. And by 5 or 6 months we were goin' back to Houston, and old Sam Irwin somehow hooked me up with some people that needed a recording engineer, and so I went to this place called H & S Productions. And, of course, Skinny Minnie, we teams up with the old drummer of The Fun and Games, and we had a band, we started calling it Cats Pajamas. And that band did pretty well, and you know, I didn't mention, you know, but, but the Six Pence were one of the most popular bands in Houston. We were right up there with Neal Ford and the Fanatics, and with, you know, we were, and The Coastliners, we were one of the top three bands, and, and, you know, we'd see ourselves rising and falling in popularity depending on how much we'd been rehearsing lately, because once you go see a band twice and they're playin' the same stuff, you don't tend to wanna to go see 'em for a while. And so, that's the, that's really the bane of all bein' in a band. You gotta just keep rehearsin', and if you don't get stale, you get content, and it's hard to do that, because once you -- Six Pence, we rehearsed all summer, so when we had our debut in October or somethin' we blew people away. Well, you know, that happened for a while and people would talk about us, so we knew people...
would come every time, and it wasn't so weird to hear the same songs, 'cause you're hittin' your buddy in the ribs goin' how about that, man, you know, listen to these guys. And so, you know, it's a, and we played all over and, you know, they, but that, once again we got to open for great people. We opened for Herman's Hermits and The Animals, and, you know, big shows at the Coliseum. It was fantastic. So, and you know, on our resume we can say, I played with The Animals, you know, they're lying, sorta opened for 'em, you know. Well, I can't tell ya how many people I've opened for now, because, you know, that, that's a, that's a whole 'nother time of my life, but once I started my band in the, in the late '70s, Dr. Rockit, I opened for everybody that you wanna mention almost. So, anyway, I just wanna say that the folk thing was really important. Mike Sumler was a major folk singer, and he just, I just fell in love with what he was doin', and I wanted to be like him, and I wanted to be in a band with him and have what he did, support what I do, and so we, it was a good team, and Joe Dugan was a quiet guy, but he became more and more extroverted, the piano guy. We found ourselves, you know, we got back to Houston, started this bank, great studio band, you know, and we, I could keep us working just with studio gigs. We played, but we never had our dream of being like 'The Band. We were playin' covers, you know, we were playing some original stuff, but people would hire us and then they'd hate us because we weren't playing top 40, you know, in the current play lists of the radio, and so we couldn't keep a gig for very long. We've got a woman that was in the stable of, uh, Walt Andrus, uh, Diane Colby. She was quite the singer, and had a deal with Columbia for a while, and, uh, we got her to sing for our band, and then we replaced her with a gal named Tucker Bradley, and that band went to Montreal, we did some pretty cool stuff.

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

Rock Romano: And, uh, came back and just sorta settled in to bein’ this band. And then Mike and his wife, Lynn, decided to move to Arkansas to, to be part this domed community. It was, they all built geodesic domes. They own 180-acre plot of land, not counting the vertical bluffs and stuff. They been, what'd they call them, I can't remember now. But it's a, they, and Mike kind of really wanted to go, he's always wanted to go be there. He came back to Houston in the '70s and '80s, played home with Dr. Rockit, that whole time played keyboards, keeping to his quiet self, even though we were doin’ a bunch of his tunes. And as soon as he got a chance, he moved back to Arkansas and just, he's been there for about 10 years now, and, and, uh, he plays occasionally, but he's just passionately doing nothing and, and, uh, working on his cabin out in the woods. He's one of the few people that's whose domes didn't melt down into the Arkansas environment. Anyway, so I guess that gets me to the, to the early '70s. It kinda been about '72 that Mike split, and I was goin’ back and forth between Austin, Arkansas and Houston, and by that time, Steve Ames had hired me away from this little studio H & S, and he had just taken over Rampart Studios from a guy named Erath.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Rock Romano: And he just came up to me and said I want you to be my chief engineer. And, you know, I like, I know from engineering, well, I was really good, 'cause I had been a producer, and I found, I took to the, to the, um, to the whole logic of the console and the signal flow of microphone to recorder and what had to go in between to make it sound like you wanted. That was just all, you know, I could never add two numbers together, but I was great at logic, so all
those coin problems and trig problems and stuff, I'd get Ds on 'em, because the guy was nice enough to recognize the fact that I logically could set the problems up and when most of the math guys couldn't. And they had to sort of work to figure out what numbers to put where. Well, I would always know, I'd set it up perfectly, except the first time I added I was wrong, and it was like from my trig mi, my trig answer at the end of all that, my logarithmic answer was like miles away from what it should be. But the guy had at least recognized my logical skills. And I'm still; that way. I just, you know, I still type like this. Anything that involves that kinda thing, I still don't really read music, I know a lotta theory. I could talk music with you all day, in thirds, and fifths and major sevenths, and you know, I know how to talk to musicians in the studio. It's a whole different language than noted music anyway, you know, it's, it's a shorthand that studio cats just know and if you don't know you learn on your first couple of sessions. So, you know, I, I, there was some other stuff I wanted to get to about when I, when I was producing at Andrus. It was the late, it was '68 –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Rock Romano: - and '69, and I got to produce some stuff with Scott and Vivian Holtzman. I did stuff with the Fever Tree, I recorded Billy Gibbons coming in to play on other people's stuff. I, uh, you know, I was just their utility man. I was the first guy there every day and the last guy to leave every night, and it was like one of those jobs. And I found myself one day, Lou Adler is sittin' next to me, and I'm recording this band called The Children, uh, one of whom was, uh, Kenny Cordray who just died this past year, and he co-wrote “Francine” with Billy Gibbons and Steve Perrone for, and that was, you know, uh, one of Billy's first early hits. And, uh, I'm sittin’ there and Lou Adler's right next to me. It's one of the very first sessions I've engineered, so I know what I want, but I'm not sure what to do with it. And I had already helped Walter rebuild his studio twice. This is where I got the whole outlay of the logic of everything and how it all works. We had literally torn apart and rebuilt his studio, the control room part of it, twice. And I'm, so I know where the patch bay is at least, and I go, I go down, you have to crawl under the console to patch it, so I'd take the phone with me and I'd call Walter and I'd go, Walter, the sound's not comin' out, what do I do? Well, what have you done?

Norie Guthrie: Hmm.

Rock Romano: And I would say, tell him what I did, and then he would tell me what to do, and then I'd sit back and, Lou Adler never cracked a smile, he just sat there the whole time watchin' these guys record. Kenny's got a Les Paul guitar and he's throwin' that on the ground, he's all pissed off, this is a spoiled brat, you know, I love him so much and, you know, I miss him bad now, but, you know, he and I became such close friends later on, but it was just one of the craziest things I ever went through, you know, sittin' here with one of the genius producers of all, you know, and I mean, and he ends up runnin' Hollywood now, you know, so it's like, it's really a funny story, I think, but - there's I have too many of those to even, to go into but, I guess I’m sort of in the, uh, in the, uh, just at the point right now in the early '70s where my band broke up. Uh, my mutiny band broke up, and so I had to figure out some stuff to do for myself, and so I started, I talked Steve Ames into letting me work 2 weeks and to take 2 weeks off. And so, during that 2 weeks I'd go to Austin where I had a little apartment, it was a room in a big house, and, uh, or I would go to Arkansas to visit Mike. My son, at the time was living with his mother
in Austin, and so I would make this circle, it would take me about 6 weeks to do the while circuit, that I would, that I would constantly do that, or I would go off and produce people. I would meet people at Rampart and they'd want me to go to Oklahoma and record 'em and stuff, and so I did, I was freelanced producing and engineering for several years. I don't really know when I quite quit, but I remember tellin' Richard Dobson that I didn't wanna work on his record, and it was about 1979. He just forced me to do this record with him, and so this, we had already done In Texas Last December, which was the thing that we went all over Texas doing. We did it at my ex-wife's house, between two houses, between her house and the house that belonged to the, the band, the Shiva's Headband. I would set up a snake between these two houses, and, uh, one of the guys in the new Shiva's was, he basically took over the Armadillo World Headquarters. His name was, was Hank Alrich.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Rock Romano: And he, um, was well off, I presume, and he bought this Studer 8-track recorder, one-inch 8-track, and here we have it sittin' on my ex-wife's back porch recording between these two thing, recording Shiva's Headband. Well, so what we did is we took that machine over to the Armadillo, and we pushed it downstairs and we set up a little studio down there. And like, we recorded Buffy Sainte-Marie, we recorded Captain Beefheart, Freddie King, I can't remember all the acts we did there. Well, so what we did is we took that machine over to the Armadillo, and we pushed it downstairs and we set up a little studio down there. And like, we recorded Buffy Sainte-Marie, we recorded Captain Beefheart, Freddie King, I can't remember all the acts we did there. And I don't know what happened to all those tapes, but Hank and I are friends again. Last time I saw him was at Anderson Fair. He and his daughter have a folk group.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Rock Romano: Or a folk duo, and, uh, and, uh, that was the last time I saw him, which was about 3 or 4 years ago. They still go there to play. And, uh, so I am, you know, all through the '70s, I just had to survive. I was really trying hard to get my kid, and I was trying, you know, my ex-wife and I had a fifty dollar divorce. It was all amicable, we didn't, I'm sure there was heartbreak involved for me and for her, and for my son, I found out later on. And Steven and I have had a chance to talk in the last, since his mom died about 10 years ago, and, you know, I've had to learn some stuff, and some of my worst fears were true, you know, but somehow we made it all through and, and he and I have gotten a chance to excise a lotta that, you know, and he is a genius writer of fiction and he's, he's a musician too, and, and I just very proud of what he's done with his life. He has a comic book company that's successful, but he's had books published by Simon & Schuster and Little Brown and they're all kind of shock fiction and horror, not horror, but, uh, action stuff. -

Norie Guthrie: Yeah.

Rock Romano: - action adventure stuff. So, anyway, so what happened is I'm in, I'm in Houston. It's the early '70s and I'd gone to do some work with my brother at this little studio called the Musician's Recording Studio, but we always called it Magic Rat. A guy named Bill Wade had the place. He has a studio now called Wire Road in Houston, and he, uh, we record my brother and I recorded a whole bunch of stuff with a friend, Chuck Conway, who was a drummer and also a good singer and musician and it's, that's where that first bunch a demos of Joe's material comes from. And then he did recording later with Sam, with actually Asleep at the Wheel in
Austin performing all a his stuff. It's, it's not country at all, it was much more theatrical and James Taylor-like sounding folk music stuff. And, um, so I'm walk, standin' out in front of Magic Rat one day, got no car, wonderin' what's gonna happen next, and along comes Charles Helpinstill, who is now known as Ezra Charles. And I only call him Ezra now, but we called him Charlie back then. And he pulls over and he goes, you're Rock Romano aren't ya? And I go, yeah, and he said, I'm Charlie Helpinstill from Thursday's Children. I go, oh, yeah, man, so I get in that room kinda one of my favorite bands of the, in the mid-60s, you know, and they were, one of our competitive bands and, uh, he picks me up and he has designed this, he's a Rice student, as a matter of fact. Graduate engineering student here. And he had designed a piano pickup, something that would universally fit with certain adaptations, all grand pianos. He had begun selling them to Elton John and Leon Russell and some of the major piano guys, with, piano's kinda takin' over rock 'n' roll in around '74, around in then, so I kinda became his shop manager. He just hired me, he paid me, uh, he paid me a salary, he, he, uh, I helped him develop manufacturing processes to speed up, you know, little, I make a jig out of a 2 by 4 that would hold all the components so that I could solder them all together quickly, and you know, developed, I could have, step-by-step processes for getting them very quick. And so, you know, I did that off and on for the next 2 or 3 years. I worked for Charlie and I'd quit in a huff or he'd get mad at me and kick me out, or, you know, but he always kinda came to see if I wanted to work. Well, the second time I went to work for him, I ran into Herschel Berry, and I had already known Herschel because he was a big fan of mine in The Six Pence, and he was always kind of a, he was a young kid, you know, when I was startin' out and he always kinda, I had no idea, but he just was, I would, we would, the band would have thing we called the breakfast club at a, at a house over on Stratford where Guy Clark lived and, and Townes, all these people lived on Stratford Street, Frank Davis, and we would have this big Sunday mornin' thing where we'd all get together, and so Herschel and his friend, Mike Hollis, who is a great artist, um, from Houston, and they would be sittin' in their room listenin' to The Kinks or somethin' and we'd be downstairs partyin', so that's when I very first met Herschel, but I, when I came back to Houston after, uh, one of the things I did in the early '70s was I went out to L.A. and stayed with an ex-girlfriend and his husband while I pounded the pavement to get hired, uh, as a recording engineer. I went everywhere for maybe 3-4 weeks, and my resume was hot at the time in the 1971 or whenever that was, or '72. And I'm tryin' to get established so I can take Steven. My wife and I had di, you know, I was just gonna do as much as she did and that's the way it was gonna work. Uh, she didn't expect me to pay his child support, she expected me to take care of him half the time. And so, as I was trying to work that out, I went to L.A. I finally got hired. I left the next day over a woman that was beckoning me back to Texas, and I got here and we broke up within about a week later. And I can't believe I blew my whole recording career doing that. So, I got to be Dr. Rockit instead, you know, it was a – anyway, that was one of the things I did during this really, not so pleasant time of me being on the lam really, and on the road. But I wasn't exactly penniless or homeless, I had three homes and I went from these three different place. I didn't have a home in Arkansas, but I had friends that would take me in. And it was always a great creative time when I went there, 'cause I had other friends that were artists that were all communed there, and man, we would have a blast. I would bring a set of skills to their, to their deal where it would, you know, I could help them out with their stuff, too. But it was mostly just havin' fun. So, I wanna get past this. What happened is I started a little jazz band. I started hangin' out at Anderson Fair, 'cause I'd already been recording Don Sanders over at H & S Studios, I had recorded Richard Dobson at H & S Studios, -
Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Rock Romano: - I went to college with Richard Dobson, and, uh, he went to St. Thomas too. I don't know if he graduated, but he didn't need to, and he was a major friend of Townes. I gotta tell you this one other story too. This is out of context now, but when I was doin' that recording between my wi-, ex-wife's house, one of the times I went to my ex-wife's house, Townes was there. I had already met Townes and through Richard and, Townes is there and he said, hey, Rock come here, and he's sittin' in the kitchen, and he whips out a guitar, listen to this song. And he played “Pancho and Lefty.” And here, I'm the most guilty guy in the world, my marriage has just broke up, and I've, you know, you're talkin' about guilt and pride in this song, it's like I couldn't believe it, you know. And I found out later on that he played it for LeAnne and she liked it too, and he asked for fifty dollars. That was Townes for ya. You know, but anyway, back to the 70s. That was like, you know, that was part of all that too. Well, I came back and I just was accepted by the people at Anderson Fair. Lucinda Williams was there, Richard would come in and out, and just, I found people, I found a family all of a sudden. I slept on the floor of a guy who heard me play one night. Well, I had heard him play at the Texas Opry House doin' a little folk jazzy kind of a folk happy hour. I'd gone up to him and said, man, you play music, your songs sound just like mine. You know, we ought to get together, oh, yeah, yeah. Well, I didn't hear from him, of course. Well, I was playing at Theodore's over in the Montrose, and the, one of the great little clubs that was goin' on in, in the, uh, mid-70s, there, uh, Kent saw me play there and he comes up and he says your songs are just like mine. And I'm goin', hey, I tried to tell you, and this woman named Bonnie Brown was playing, and I had done like this sort of, uh, little guest set in between her sets. Well, Kent and I loaded Bonnie's piano. She's now called Basirah, she's a serious jazz player and, uh, and we loaded her big piano into her Volkswagen and uh, and all of a sudden we started rehearsing and that's how Smokin’ Fitz started. And we, called ourselves that because we would all, Kent and I smoked and she wouldn't let us smoke in the house, so she'd kick us outside, and so, that's when we were havin' our Smokin' Fitz, and so that's what we called 'em. 'Course we spelled it different. And I started usin' my art skills and I was really kind of copying an idea this guy, Bruce Henry Davis, who did some really great Townes Van Zandt posters, and, uh, for the Old Quarter. And, uh, I copied the guy's idea. Well, Bruce became very instrumental in Dr. Rockit later and he was an advertising guy, who really knew his thing. And he would, uh, he would back all these events that I would throw and advertise 'em for me, and we would, that was when Dr. Rockit was killing here. Lemme try to get through this quick. I started this little jazz band, which was almost all original material. After a couple a years of playing the same songs, we were losing our audience and we started tryin' to play parties, and so it was back to learning Chuck Berry songs and, you know, top 40 tunes, and so that band was doomed. Kent wanted to move to Austin with his wife, and they started, the Omelettry West and then they started the Magnolia Restaurants in Kirby Lane, respectively, and so they all, went off to become entrepreneurs, but Kent and, Kent never quit being a musician. He's a good piano player, too, and we wrote songs that were little jazzbo weird kinda jazzy rock. I kinda said it was like Steely Dan meets Dan Hicks and the Hot Licks or something, or Tom Waites, or something – mix all that together. And we were funny and we were clever, and it was an interesting band. Then we had some freeform stuff, we cooked on stage, we scrambled eggs, and passed it out to the audience, and stuff. So, we always had a, um, element of theater in it. Well, then what happened is I met Herschel workin' for Helpinstill. I go, went back there one of my times and
there's Herschel doing my old job, workin' on one of my old jigs, soldering a box together, and he starts talkin' to me, and he goes, man, you know Buddy Holly said that jazz was for the stay-at-homes. And it's like, you know, and it's like he talked me into startin' his band with him, which became The Natives, and finally we ended up, after some personnel changes here and there, we ended up with the band that became The Natives, but I was disgruntled because I, we kicked somebody out that I didn't want to leave the band. I was starting to have a new girlfriend and I was wantin' to str-, spread my wings and so that's when I started Dr. Rockit in late '79, so '77, '78, The Natives were just tearin' it up in this town. We played some of the first Houston festival gigs, and, and, uh, out in front of the Hyatt Regency Hotel, and the, and, you know, Herschel was amazing. He had already written 40 rock songs probably. He's written hundreds, probably by now, and I still have a band with him, and it's Herschel Berry and The Natives, you know, and so we decided just to call it what it was, since it was mostly the same guys in the – so after that I started Dr. Rockit. First I had one band in between called Metro Man and the Phantoms, and we played one gig for the blessing of the fleet in Galveston and got paid in a hot check. And so, that was it for Metro Man. I started Dr. Rockit, uh, the next thing I knew I wanted to, I was gettin' my girlfriend and a couple of other girls to come sing background vocals, and some of the guys in the band didn't like that at all, and they quit. And so I had to start a whole new band. I'm gonna backtrack just a little, okay, I'm – I took us up to the '70s, to the late '70s, but lemme go back. You know, I keep concentrating on the early '70s because that was a major transitional time for me. I was leaving a band that was signed to a national label, I was, you know, leaving the security of college, I was leaving, you know, beginning my life as a father with a, you know, I was just all of a sudden just everything was – okay, so I'm in the early '70s, I am workin' at this little studio called Andrus, I mean at, uh, early '70s I started working at this place called H&S Productions, and basically they had a big warehouse that was covered with foam all over the walls with K, K12 or whatever they call that stuff, all over the walls. And they had an arsenal of really nice mikes, and they had everything set up all wrong. And so, I had to go in and kinda of rewire some things, and then I met Scott Chambers, I met guys that I had worked with at, at Andrus, but one of the things that I got to start doin' when, uh, I had already known Richard Dobson from college, and he came to do some recording with me, one of the best writers of all time, man, he is a great songwriter. And he was doing some of his earliest stuff. Well, we got off onto this project where we went all over Texas with this 1-inch tape. We even took it up to Nashville tryin' to sell people on it, and we were virtually laughed out of town, except that was one of the most fun trips I ever had. I met so many people. I mean, I'd already known Guy Clark, because he worked at, at Channel 2, I think, uh, as an artist, and I would always just over the side and talk to him while we were waitin' turn to, the Six Pence were waitin' their turn to play on whatever show it was. And so, I, uh, anyway, I'm at this little studio that virtually, it's just, it coulda been my studio almost, 'cause, you know, I had guys that not wantin' to pay me anything to do this, but my band was making money as the house band and all that. Well, because of my, uh, knowing Richard, uh, Don Sanders came to work with me. And he had Pete Gorisch. Pete Gorisch was a son of a violin guy, uh, repair guy, and he was a cello player. He had this band, they were called in Rat Creek, and they were doin"', they were doin' rock 'n' roll. Well, Don Sanders is a well-known folk singer, but at the time he was trying to cross over into bein' a rock 'n' roll guy, so we did two records together, and one of the things I, well, you know, and about 3 or 4 years ago we go together and remastered a bunch of that stuff, and it was the same headache dealin' with it, except I didn't have as good a tools as Pro Tools back then to try to make it sound good. You know, you, this studio was kinda half good, okay, and it, we were limited by some
gear and stuff, but anyway, so he was doin' songs like “Heavy Word User” and stuff like that, which were really brilliant play on words, you know, “Open my Third Eye Momma,” which was a really biting, uh, social criticism, and, uh -

Norie Guthrie: Yeah.

Rock Romano: - and, but it was very folky, and so some of his stuff was folky and some it was [makes guitar sounds], you know, and that kinda thing. And he kinda, sorta had this cool rock thing goin' on, but I just don't think it suited his persona real well, and I mean, I'm saying that, it was his interpretation of rock ‘n’ roll and it was good, and he even had Rocky Hill in there playin' some badass lead guitar on “Heavy Word User,” on several of his tunes, and I'd forgotten all about that until we started remastering this stuff. We actually got the original tapes and transferred them to Pro Tools, and, uh, that which was a pretty cool thing. And, um, anyway, so that's where I met Don, was Don was a folk singer that was tryin' to cross over into rock ‘n’ roll, but he wasn't just doin' rock ‘n’ roll, he was doing some of the most beautiful, beautiful songs. And, so I did two records on him, and then I didn't do The Tourist, but I did the liner notes for The Tourist, and, um, Karl Caillouet did The Tourist and Karl Caillouet was my inspiration for my studio that I have now. He's a guy that had a studio in his garage and it was a real recording studio, better than half the studios that I've worked in as a freelance engineer, and, uh, you know, I knew I could do that. And I wasn't gonna take his business away, 'cause he was recordin' all the folk people, and I was gonna do somethin' else. Well, I ended up doin' all kinds of stuff, you know, but it was, that was the inspiration was Carl's studio. And that's, Carl recorded some great stuff on Mike Sumler with, uh, the way I really met Carl was I was going in to produce some sides on Mike, some rock ‘n’ roll sides and he was bringin' people down from Arkansas to play on 'em, 'cause he had already been to Arkansas for 4 or 5 years and come back. And so he was, he was, uh, you know, by the time I met Carl, which was later on, much later on, but, uh, I just wanted to say that. So, anyway, I met Don, I recorded with him, Richard Dobson's work was much more folky, and In Texas Last December is eclectic in every possible sense of the word, 'cause we recorded everywhere. We took the reel a tape everyplace, and, you know, and I did not get producer credits on it, uh, it was finished up at Buttermilk Studios, which happens to be the building that I have now. And I met, you know, I knew Charlie Bickley who had Buttermilk Studios, I knew him from bein' in different bands, you know, uh, he had a band called Deerfield, and they were a generation or so after me, maybe a half a generation. And he had this killer little studio over in the Heights, and you know, I would, somehow he ended up, I was finishing up some of, uh, what, what it was is he was doing the Through the Dark Nightly album for Anderson Fair, you're familiar with that?

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Rock Romano: Okay, well, he was, and Walter produced that, and Walter won't ever let that album be reproduced again, and maybe you can talk him out of it, but he, he put his foot down about having it re, re, a second pressing of it done or anything. And my girlfriend, Tucker, uh, from the Skinny Minnie band, she did all the graphics and the, all the hand lettering on it and stuff, and we went so all over the world with that, and for Charlie Bickley to get producer credit on it was not fair to me, because I produced that record. And I did a whole 'nother record on Richard called The Big Taste that I didn't finish. That's the one that Richard said you gotta do this
with me, and so I said, okay. And this was later on in the ‘70s, but it was still a great record, and *The Big Taste* – me and Lisa, my girlfriend, and my son and Richard sat there, color Xerox was brand new, so we had a big picture of Richard drivin' in his car and we color Xeroxed it, and we hand-pasted about, I can't remember, it was two or three hundred, maybe even more of these colored Xerox with, with spray cement onto this, onto these white record jackets.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Rock Romano: - and then we had to go get 'em shrink wrapped, and, uh, it was a hand done record. And the later pressings of it, they didn't have the hand done Xerox, they just had it printed on white cover. And so, that was a cool thing, you know, but it was like, talk about above and beyond the call a duty, and this was, you know, that was in the ‘70s, that was in the later ‘70s, but, but, you know, somehow Charlie ended up finishing that record too. And so, the two records I did with Richard, I produced them about 90 percent, but the *Through the Dark Nightly* album, I came in and worked a bunch on that record, and I don't know who gets credit on that or what you know, but it didn't matter to me at all. And I just talked to Charlie Bickley about a week ago. I hadn't, talked to him in a long time, and he's visited once, he visited the studio, and he was living in a, he was living on a boat out in Lake Austin, and they had just moved to Rockport, right before Hurricane Harvey.

Norie Guthrie: Hmm.

Rock Romano: And they lost everything in Harvey, and so he had a Facebook Go Fund Me, and I sent him a little money, and he called me to thank me and tell me some gear he had for sale and stuff, so we finally had a talk after a long time. And, uh, the studio is, looks different than when he had it. I have it set up differently, but he was, he knew what was goin' on, and he's somewhere he's got masters, 10 years' worth of masters on stuff, you know, and I can see why he wanted out of the room, since I have flooded over there, maybe a dozen times now, and -

Norie Guthrie: Oh wow.

Rock Romano: - Harvey was gonna be the end, but I had people step up and repair the place, so I'm, I'm goin' back in, and I hope it's, it's flood-proof now, we'll see. So, but, other, you know, and, and Don was, he taught me a lot about, and then Peter Gorsch used to talk, Pete Gorsch used to talk about Don and what a genius Don was, and how he would almost diagram his songs, so that he could make sure that certain words were rhyming and stuff like that -

Norie Guthrie: Hmm.

Rock Romano: - and he had definitely duly impressed Pete. And you know, what's funny is Pete, I don't know if he's, how much he plays anymore, but he just decided to become a truck driver, and that's what he's been doin' for at least the last 10 years. He sends pictures of beautiful sunrises and stuff all the time on Facebook, I said, Pete, why aren't you playing the cello? You know, he was a good bass player, and he played bass on most of Don Sanders' stuff. And, um, I went to Kerrville with Don, uh, and he took Mike Sumler up there. Mike said, Mike had gone the year before and he didn't win the new folk, but he won some kind of a, yeah. I think he did, he
won the new folk thing, and then the same year he went and won the, the Napa Valley Folk Festival, first place, and he's like 50 years old, new artist, right? We do, having just done this record in my studio, and, uh, but, anyway, Don, Don, Don, Don, Don, Don, I'm tryin' to remember about Don.

Norie Guthrie: Oh, we can go back to Dr. Rockit, 'cause we have ****.

Rock Romano: We can, but I wanted to finish talkin' about Don. Don, oh, Don took me to Kerrville, and that, and he featured Mike Sumler on his set and really angered a few people that were the powers that be at, ah, at the Kerrville Folk Festival, 'cause he just gave Mike two or three songs for free right in the middle of his set, and that -

Norie Guthrie: Oh -

Rock Romano: - that didn't set well with a few people, but Mike is so good they could hardly argue, you know. And I was playing bass for Don on that, and that's one of the two or three times that I went to Kerrville, and I was, uh, is it David Broza, is that -

Norie Guthrie: Yes.

Rock Romano: - yeah. I saw him for the first time, it just blew my mind. It was somethin' else. Anyway, so after that, when I came back to Houston in the early '70s and decided to live here and just, I was sick of trying to go other places, this is it for me. I tried to go permanently live in Arkansas and that was a big, big, big mistake, so I moved back here and said forget about it. And I started hangin' out at Anderson Fair. Well, I started playin' spaghetti lunches like everybody else, you know, and I play for spaghetti. And that's what I'd get paid, and I had a whole little thing worked up with acoustic guitar and sometimes I'd play electric guitar to do it, but I would do a, some Mike Sumler songs, some Mayo Thompson songs, a few of my own, and a few old standards, maybe a Dylan song or two, or somethin' like “The Weight,” or somethin' like that by The Band, and so I actually spent, you know, about a year or maybe longer going over there to do, when it was my turn I'd go do spaghetti lunches, you know, and that was, Francie was still there, the whole old crew was still there, and it was a easy bunch a people for me to get along with. I didn't find out 'til much later what a clique it was and how hard it was to get close to those people, but I guess they must have seen raggly old me as a part of their group or something, so I definitely did a solo thing. I was tryin' to be like Mike Sumler and try to be able to pull off, you know, when you're, when you're in a band you got all this support. When you sit here and you start playing and you think you're hearing all this stuff, but really what's coming out is what you're hearing, not what I'm hearing, you know, and so it's kind of a, it's kind of, I had to learn to play what I expected people to be hearing and seeing. So, anyway, that, I did have my folk singin' day there. I was, I moved into a place with Lyse Moore, who was one of the grand dames of Anderson Fair, and she stayed there for a little while, and then left, and she was the chimpl lady, you knew about her, right? Okay, well, uh, and she had Lili the chimp, and, uh, she went off to do that, and I ended up having this big 'ol house in the Montrose at Crocker and Fargo Streets. Well, it be, just became the launch pad for The Natives, for Smokin' Fitz, for The Natives, for Dr. Rockit, for Metro Man and the Phantoms. It was just, it was the most creative space you've ever seen. It was a big 'ol house with a bay window. We actually put a stage bay
window in toward the end, 'cause we were havin' so many parties there. And I did my first Spend
the Night with Dr. Rockit Party which Bruce Henry Davis helped me promote. It was like insane.
I had a shopping cart full of liquor, and like it was just wild for a whole night. It was, stayed up
all night long just partying. Well, that became a tradition, to where every year we'd throw a
Spend the Night with Dr. Rockit Party, and eventually 6-, 700 people were coming to these
things, you know, and I, we would find any excuse, Dr. Rockit would find any excuse to do a
party, and we were, we had a promotion machine, before she was even in the band, Lisa would
go around and collect names for a mailing list. Well, of course there was no Internet and there
was no email, and so we had just hard copy lists. And before it was over we had about a 4 or
5,000 name list, and sending out a mailer was hell. We, we finally got us a bulk mailing permit
and stamps and stuff like that, but still, even if you do a postcard, sending out 4 or 5,000 things,
it would take 2 days to get a mailer together.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Rock Romano: And often we could expect 500 to 600 people to come to these things, so it was
totally worth it. And there was no other way to get the word out, you know, you would take out
an ad in the Fitz Herald, in the, in the, oh, that was a funny thing. I remember Sara and G.B.
Fitzgerald coming to my door over on Crocker Street there, and knockin' on the door and say, we
just started this club called Fitzgerald's. We thought Fitz at the Fitz would be really good, I still
had Smokin' Fitz, you know, and so that's how I met Sara Fitzgerald. She was knocking on my
door. And I think I pissed her off right off the bat, you know, so, we've been great friends ever
since, and we've been, you know, she's been in a managerial and agent type and we, I've had to
be on the other end of that, so, but for a while there, her agency booked Dr. Rockit and got us
around the country a bit, so we could stay out of town, at least 3 weeks out of the month, and
we'd come back and people wouldn't be bored to death seeing us at every little club in town, and
we'd come back and people wouldn't be bored to death seeing us at every little club in town, and
we would play either Rockefeller's or Fitzgerald's, and so, we had a pretty good thing goin' for,
until I guess about '85 things started falling apart, and, uh, we did a bunch of great stuff, though.
We opened for so many people, and even since the girls left the band, I kept Dr. Rockit goin', uh,
but I got married again about a year later in 80, late '87 I got married again, and that wife was not
gonna let me be on the road and she wasn't gonna let me have the Sisters of Mercy around
anymore, and it was kind of like, I felt like solo on ice for a long time, but I got to do a lot of
other stuff. I got to start my recording studio, which I did in 1989, took over this old building
from Charlie Bickley and the house up front, and it was, you could tell it had been underwater at
that time, you know, and the place was this high, 3-4 feet high with junk all over the whole
building. There was spools of recording wire when they used wire in recording machines. They
would use a magnetic wire instead of tape to record onto.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Rock Romano: And there was spools of recording wire with Charlie Bickley's baby talk on that
his dad had done. His dad had built that room in 1958 and I think he may have converted another
building and added something onto the front of it, and then there was one mic input, and he had a
photography studio in there too, and when I first got to the place, we went through all the attics, I
found a bunch of the old man's photographs and stuff, he played a upright bass. He was a jazz
guy. When I started hangin' out there he was this 'ol ghost haunting this house that wasn't paint
up front, and stuff, and, and, uh, but he played cello in the symphony such as it was, I guess back then, and he, and he, uh, taught at Reagan, taught band at Reagan High School, which was only a few blocks from the studio. And so I would see him walkin' around, but the, you know, so that was my introduction to this place where I've been ever since. When my wife, uh, my wife, after we had been together 6 or 7 years, she went to, she had gone back to University of St. Thomas and graduated tops in her class at 50 years old, and was given a free scholarship to Emory University, uh, Law School, and so when she got back from law school she didn't wanna live over on Tulane anymore, so we moved to a higher class part of town, and Mike Sumler and his girlfriend rented my house for about 10 years. And they finally moved on, and so I got the place back right after Hurricane Ike. Alaina had had it with floods and stuff at the house, and you know, we had this emergency flood drill that everything comes out of the studio into that house as soon as it looks like anymore more than a hard shower. And so, uh, you know, she moved and so I jumped at the chance to get back in, 'cause I had been divorced about a year and I'd been living in people's back rooms and I was finally renting a suite of rooms in the back of a guy's extra house, and that's when I'd started painting, and that's, I painted almost all the stuff that I, that I'm known for now. I mean I've been an artist forever. Ms. de Menil fostered me, she gave me a, a 3-man show at one of the bigger galleries in town, the Louisiana Gallery back in 1969, and that was the last show I had until I was 69. And, uh, and that was about 4 years ago, so it was 3 years ago. And, uh, and I sold all my paintings and had to go get more. It was the most thrilling thing I ever had, and the first person in the preview show was my art history professor from the University of St. Thomas, Bill Camfield. I almost cried, I couldn't believe it, and he liked my show, which was really cool, you know, he wouldn't a stuck around if he didn't, I don't think. But he went, I swear to goodness, I'm sittin' there with Bill Camfield. And so since then I got known in the art community a little bit. I've written some stuff for Ron Hartgrove's catalogues, and I have not had my second show. It's a lot harder to mount a second show than it is the first, and the truth of it is, about 5 years ago I got involved with this blues label by, that was owned by Steve Crase, who is the guy that I'd been recording for many years, for 15 years, but he wanted to come bring Trudy Lynn and all these other blues artists to my place, and I am a lover of the blues, I, I just – as soon as I got a chance to start playin' it again, I did. With Dr. Rockit, that was my getting back to my roots, and, you know, we didn't play too many folk songs. We played Mike Sumler's songs, but, but we were a rock band, and we opened for everybody from Bo Diddly to Clifton Chenier in that, in Fitzgerald's and Rockefeller's, everybody, and you know, so I've had a chance to brush shoulders with people, but I'm just one of those people I, I got interviewed by a guy that had a, a retro label. When Sugar Hill was still in operation I went over there and, because I had been in Andy Bradley's book about Sugar Hill, called House of Hits, and he interviewed me because certain layouts of the building, I was there in 1960 about 2 or 3, I was still in high school and I was getting calls to go do sessions, and I had done a session there that I, with Huey Meaux producing and I'd remembered the setup and how we were all in a circle under one microphone, and when it was time for the sax guy to come, he'd run under the microphone and then we'd back out. And I was playing bass, but I was playing on a 6-string guitar and making it sound as bass-y as I could, and I remember the name of the song and everything, and Andy was all interested in this. Well later on this guy, Al - oh what he told me, what Sky Alex told me was that there is a guy like me in every town and that's the guy he's looking for. He's not looking for the famous cat. He's not looking for the guy, you know, who got in it and out of it. He's looking for the guy that's dedicated his whole life to it, money not being any kind of object, you know, money not even being a consideration. It's just I had no choice but to do what I did.
And that was just full of all kinds of information about Andrus, about different things that he -
and especially about Sugar Hill that he wanted to know. And before I even heard about Andrus,
it was - I was a junior or sophomore or junior in high school, and I was starting to get calls to go
do sessions and I don't know how the word got out, and I went and I'd get calls to go sing with
jazz bands because I knew all those old standards. And so they need a vocalist. I could just do it.
You know? And so I was doing both of my things. Both of my musical things, you know. So,
you know, that pretty much, uh, uh, I did Dr. Rockit. I rode it hard. We had some of the greatest
times. Two weeks ago I went and played one of my Sisters of Mercy up in New York. I went and
played a birthday party at this little club that she does a gig at every month. It was like Dr. Rockit
all over again for half a set. It was really ass kicking. And it was - I'm sorry, I hope I'm -

Norie Guthrie: You're fine.

Rock Romano: - if I can't say that word.

Norie Guthrie: You're fine.

Rock Romano: But it was butt kicking. And, uh, and so, you know, that's what I am. I'm the guy
who, as time goes on, fewer and fewer people know who I am, and my fan base is all moved
away or dying or off or whatever, you know. And I, you know, I've just done this all my life just
because I just didn't really have much of a choice. You know? I just - uh, right now I'm mad at
myself because I've got this - my exit strategy, right, was gonna be to become a painter. I knew I
had the goods, but I just needed a connect. And all of a sudden, this guy is loving my work, it's
got a legit gallery and we're selling my works to real collectors and stuff. And so I've got the
whole thing wired, Arlington Museum of Art gave me a commission to do one of these outdoor
stars, bigger than me, a 6-foot wide, both sides, just like - and then Steve Crase comes along with
Trudy Lynn and I'm going we're gonna make history. And I swear everything we've done on
Trudy has made the billboard top ten charts. One - it num - first one we did was No. 1 for
10 weeks, um, and I mean that means no money, but it means a lot of people are playing those
records.

Norie Guthrie: Right.

Rock Romano: And they're actually seeing real activity in the marketplace, you know. So,
excuse me. Uh, so all of a sudden I'm all, all with this music again and it's taking me away from
my exit strategy and the fact that I wanted to be a painter and it's become way too easy just to
come in exhausted from the studio and just walk right past that easel and go turn on Antiques
Road Show or something. You know and so it's kind of like - I'll paint again. I will paint again
and it's, you know, I've got several things started right now but I just can't do it at the pace that I
was. I just - part of it may be that I'm getting a little long in the tooth but it's, uh, part of it is that
I'm just doing music about 80 percent of my life right now and I just, I'm getting ready to go to
New Jersey to play again next week. One of Steve's artists, on his label, who is a good friend of
mine, I've cut vocals in, his name is Bob Lanza. And he sort of holds court up in New Jersey and
I'm going up there to do a live record with him and Trudy and Steve. So, you know, that doesn't
give me much time to paint this weekend and so it's kind of just that's the way it is. And I don't
think that's the total component. There's an emotional component about painting and about need
and about - you know, I brought the little guitar today that I may not play. But that little tiny guitar, it's a Taylor. It's a beautiful sounding guitar but I only paid like $400.00 for it. And I got $100.00 off 'cause I knew the guy that was, you know, with the music company that's selling it. Well, it's a fantastic little guitar and the reason that I bought it is I had, I was - it was 2012, January, and I'd just got my heart broke so bad that it put me back into being a teenager again. I was - could've been 13. I was destroyed in a way that I had no - I understood what every lyric of every song that I could hear on the radio was all about now. All those sad country songs and all those broken heart songs. I knew what everyone, everyone of 'em meant. And I said, you know, I can't handle this. And I just went over to Fuller Guitars and bought a little guitar and started writing songs and playing again and just getting my chops back together, you know. And so music, that was the first time, you know, I was, I was one, when I was 12, I was a disenfranchised youth, you know, and my family thought that I was weird and so when it would get bad between me and dad, I would just go into the bedroom and play my guitar. You know? And it was like what I had to do and, you know, the other thing that my folks gave me. I didn't mention this and I want to. Besides giving me the singing lessons, and the art kit, they gave me a thing that was made by the AC Gilbert Company that made erector sets and American Flyer electric trains, and it, and it was called an erecronic set. And it was, it was a box full of components that were on these little peg cards and a little peg board. And you put a sheet on there and plug the components in, and you took these little alligator clips between the components and you could make anything. You could make radios. You could make tuners. I made - I took the microphone and glued it to my guitar, my ukulele, 'cause I was still playing the uke then. And, and so I could play through the radio. I could broadcast it -

Norie Guthrie: Ah -

Rock Romano: - through the radio and heard myself amplified for the first time. And so, you know, this, uh, it's a, and that's what I do too. So music, art and this electric, electronic thing. You know, I don't, I don't know about components and I couldn't service - I might be able to service a guitar or amp, but, you know, things are so complicated now and there're fewer and fewer components that are this size that have a, a billion little switches on their little organic, you know, microchips on there and stuff. It's like forget about it. You know? And I gave up on that way. I never wanted to be a technician. And I would hire people in the early days of my studio when I was running analog recorders and big 1-inch machines and stuff. I wasn't gonna fix that stuff. I didn't know how to calibrate those cards. I would just - I could do certain things but I would hire people to do that. But it was the logic part of it that made sense to me. Of how to get one component to talk to another to - so maybe that had a lot to do with me kind of intuiting that stuff. And I've thought about that over the years. So no matter what I think about, you know, the hard years that I've had with my dad, the one-a, the greatest times I ever had, was we were over at my sister's house, some family party, and me and my dad sit down and we had the talk. We were probably both schnocked pretty good. And like, I told him, you know, I'm never gonna be what you wanted me to be but everybody loves me because of what you taught me. And so what can I say? You know. That was my connection. We never looked back from that point. And we'd been close and friends - and I got to take care of him when he was too old to take care of himself, you know and took my turn every 5 weeks it was my turn. My sister was exempt because, uh, because she had lived closed to them and was getting called all the time. But I'd have to go take him to mass and to Red Lobster or wherever we were going that day and spend the day with him.
You know, once every 4 or 5 weeks and so. That was a good, that was a great closure for me. So, what else?

Norie Guthrie: Um, I kinda want you to think about - having done studio work for so long -

Rock Romano: Mm hmm.

Norie Guthrie: - can you talk about some of the changes that you've experienced?

Rock Romano: The things I had experienced?

Norie Guthrie: Yeah, like the changes.

Rock Romano: I'll tell you what. Something that'll -

Norie Guthrie: Like tech -

Rock Romano: - rat me right back to the folk thing.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Rock Romano: Once - one of the guys that used to sing at Anderson Fair was Eric Taylor. And Vince Bell was another guy. Lucinda Williams was another person. I remember early on in the studio being at the console and Lucinda, we never called her Lucinda Williams, we called her Lucinda. And she comes walking in and her boyfriend was named Clyde Woodard and he, uh, he was the guy that named Metro Man and the Phantoms. He was one of the craziest men I ever knew. And he was dying of something. And I think it was cirrhosis and Lucinda came in all in tears, busted up about Clyde. I remember that. And then one day Eric Taylor comes along and I don't know how it happened, but I started working with Eric Taylor. And I have to tell you, and Eric you might see this someday, but I didn't, uh, I thought Eric was a bit presumptive and a little bit - I didn't think, I thought his stuff was way too serious and it was why, what he done know what he's talkin' about and singing about all this prejudice and stuff. Well, once I did a record with Eric. It changed my whole thing about him. Eric was an abrasive and could be abusive guy back in the day. You know? He was famous for getting in your face and he dealt with, you know, we all drank too much and did other things, you know. And so, and Eric and I were kind of rivals in a way. You know? We had a few of the same girlfriends and stuff and so we kinda, you know, it was that time, it was those times. And so when I'd re-met Eric in the early '90s, we did a record together and I decided that he was really one of the most genius guys I'd ever met, songwriter-wise. And he is sort of evolved into this storyteller. He really wanted it to go this way, where he'll sit there and he'll play about four songs in an hour, maybe two and just sit there and tell stories the whole time. He adopts this sort of strange old man manner and he's an old man, but he adopts this character kind of to do his talking and it's like pretty cool. And it's, and you know, but I've done half a dozen albums with Eric now. And I was scared to death of him. Okay? I mean, he's a great, big guy and we gotten in - I got up in his face back in Anderson Fair before and he's like I could crush this guy with my thumb, you know, but it's like, it was never about that. And it
was, uh, I'm so scared of the guy that he walks in one day and I just jumped all in his shit, you
know -

Norie Guthrie: Huh.

Rock Romano: - all in his business and, uh, he goes good grief, what side of the bed did you
wake up on this morning? You know, it's just like preemptive strike, you know. He could be a
hard man to work with. We tried all kinds of ways to record with a click track - ain't gonna work.
So Eric's gotta get his stuff live. And so I would set up a skyscraper, and I still do whenever he
records, set up a, this skyscraper of microphones. Different pairs picking up the guitar. One to be
over here to pick up his voice when he looks this way at his - one down here to pick up the net
but I gotta have a special screen on it so he didn't pop the P when he's singin' down into that
guitar mike. It was a, an intense thing to hook him up to record. Well his guitar sounds like a
piano, just anyway and if I didn't get his guitar right, I'd have to hear about it for days. So it was
like he and I, we were a great production team. He learned, I have to give him credit, he learned
how to punch in. Okay? And how to listen to it coming along. If we have a mistake there was no
way I could just fix the gui, a guitar mistake because all this sound is going into all of these
different mics so he would have to perform it, sing along with himself, and I'd just punch him
out at the right time. And we got to a good M-O working that way where he didn't have to
sacrifice - he didn't wanna play to a click track. And he didn't wanna lip sync. He didn't wanna
do any of that stuff. And so, you know, I had to learn how to record a folk guy for real and like
had to deal with - he had to learn how to deal with the recording process and it was a great
compromise and we've done - his album Scuffle Town is one of the things I'm most proud of, of
my career and that was one of the maybe the first one that we did. It was hard. And, you know,
like, no, it wasn't the first one. And then we recorded some albums on Denice Frankie with him
producing. And, uh, these were all purely folk things. And not much of any kind of production.
Eric has - any kind of electric guitar, he would put it on himself and I'd warp him through a vex
so it would sound like whales or something in the background and, you know, it was beautiful
stuff that we did and very slight piano, Mike Sumler, different people. So Eric and I really got a
thing going and have produced some of the best folk music albums out there, I think.

And, uh, you know of course I did the album with Mike Sumler. I'm trying to think how much other folk
music I've actually recorded. And the revelation was with Eric. You know? Also, he was with me
when I was first started Pro Tools. And we had James Gilmer who plays, who was the Anderson
Fair conga player, but he also has been Lyle's percussionist and road manager for years, Lyle
Lovett's. And we had him over doing some parts and I didn't know anything about the computer
and I accidentally threw the parts away. And I had to figure out all of the sudden about Norton
and about retrieving stuff that you'd thrown away twice and stuff and about saving stuff and
about never, ever doing that again. And stuff, you know, and so it was my early days of digital
and it was the thing you feared the most, of course. You know. You had it on tape, and you had a
physical representation of it. Well, there wasn't an intermediate way of recording in between
there, an interim way that was a step between tape and digital and the computer, which was these
things called ADAT machines. And they, it was a super VHS cassette that, that recorded encoded
and decoded eight tracks of digital audio. Well they were clumsy and they were always freaking
out. You had to do things to the machines and they were very difficult to deal with but you could
stack three or four of 'em together and make a 24-track recording and have a controller that
worked with that. Well, that was a hard thing to, to deal with. But it was still on tape. Even if it
was dangerously stored on something that might stop working any minute so you were always making safeties of the copies. Well, Eric was very upset that I lost James' part. I was only able to get half of the audio back. He took me outside and was fixing to read me the riot act. And I said, Eric, look, I'm an artist. I'm not a technician. I'm an artist and I'm trying to figure out something I've never done before. But I'm an artist just like you. And it just stopped him dead in his tracks. And he's reminded me of that conversation many times now. He just needed to know what I was going through and that I wasn't just some tech guy that would - that screwed up. That this was something that I was trying to figure out for all of us in the future, and it, so he was way cool about it and he let me slide and, you know, we just did what we had to do to get through that. And so it was a, so you know, I saw every side of Eric Taylor. I saw him when he was an abrasive guy that I didn't even wanna be around to the guy that I loved almost more than you know, I loved him as much as anyone that I've ever known and more than most people. You know? And I can tell him things that I couldn't tell anybody else. So, you know, that's, that's one of the great things that happened to me in the studio. I had, you know, I have gone through series of types of recording. And I always kinda chalked it up to what my rates were at any given time. As my rates raised, I would lose whole chunks of my clientele and I would just have to bite the bullet and let those people go. You know, it - early on I was selling my time for $25, $30 an hour and I could afford to record demos on bands and John Carrick folk singer came over, recorded with me some of my very earliest stuff. And, you know, off and on I've done a lot of folk stuff, but I've done garage rock for - early in, those early days, man, I was doing all kinds of young bands. And when these ADAT machines came in, what it meant is that guys like me that were running these little podunk studios, which I had gotten the idea from another cat to put a studio in a garage. Well this was the ideal place to do it, you know. And how I got it, it was funny, because I was setting up a studio in my home and didn't have a place to put the stuff. And Charlie came over one day going you wanna buy this mic? Hey, you wanna buy this? He kept comin' over and then finally one day he came over and said you don't wanna take over my building, do ya? And I got on my knees and begged my wife and that's how we ended up over there. You know, she let me do it, and so she didn't have to worry about me for another 20 years, you know, until we started cratering it for some other reason. You know, she would just go let me live in my world, and I just, I did all kinds of stuff. You know, real funny, I have a, I just found a picture, I've been going through all these pictures because of, uh, a celebration of life I'm doing for my brother, and so I've been going through bags and bags of old photographs. Well, I found a picture of my old patch bay, and it's in my first studio, and it's about that big and it's full of wires. There were something like 500 patch points in my patch bay, and every one of 'em went somewhere so I could hook up different pieces of equipment, and then I took a picture of my current patch bay, which has one patch bay, and it has nothing plugged into it. It's all done in Pro Tools, you know? There's no patch bays anymore, there's nothing, and a lot of people do work a hybrid 'cause they do want to be partially analog, and of course, I still have a lot of analog equipment, but I haven't used any of that stuff since the earliest days of my Pro Tools and I still felt like I needed to have this certain compressor on the vocal or the bass or it wasn't gonna be right, and so I finally had to learn to trust other parts of the digital that I might screw up, and of course, I had some pilot projects at the beginning where I worked with other engineers that would teach me stuff like hey, guy, go get a subwoofer, you've got all this low-end garbage on your stuff that you're not hearing when you mix, and, you know, so, you know, people were always helpful in that way, you know, and wanted, they just helped me out, and just, you know, there were individuals that came and helped me wire stuff up and it was like, ADATs, when the
ADATs came along they were ugly to work with but they gave even little studios like mine the opportunity to compete in the digital marketplace. Once it's 1s and 0s, it's 1s and 0s. You can go put it in a computer then, you can, it's digital, and it sounds noiseless, and all the old things that I hated about analog, I love digital. There's a lot of people that hate digital and think it's brittle, but, you know, they've done things, they've had 30 years to work on it now and they're getting really good at it, and, and they've, they've, uh, they, their sampling rates, the audio pixelization of stuff is so much more refined and stuff now that, you know, I could never hear much of a difference, and I liked it 'cause it was quiet, but there, there are people that thinks it makes, makes, digital makes people go out and kill each other and stuff because it's so brittle and abrasive on our hearing, sampling 44,000 times a second instead of 33 1/3rd times you hearing that pop 33 1/3rd times of these switching noises that they have filtered beyond the range of human hearing, but there are certain theorists that feel like they still, that we can still feel that stuff, and so, a lot of people don't like digital for not just 'cause they don't like the way it sounds, but 'cause they think it does something bad to us, you know, so, it's, you think that a digital TV is any worse on ya than a, than an old TV with the cathode-Raytheon tube or whatever they were called, cathode ray tubes? I somehow don't think so, but, you know, who knows? So, I'm the old guy now who has lived through so much stuff. I personally have lived through all this art and music. I've lived through a lot of being poor and hardships. I've lived through some fat times, and I talk about what might have become of me had I gone to some other school, but I'm pretty happy with the way things turned out right now. You know, I have my health, I have my genes workin' for me, you know, my parents were both real old when they died. My, um, I've only had two brothers that have died, but it took 'em a long time, both of 'em, and, uh, so, you know, I hope to still be here pickin' strings and punchin' buttons and twistin' knobs for a, um, I don't know, if you've got any other specific questions, I'd like to answer them if I can.

Norie Guthrie: Um, let's kind of like a last one 'cause you're kind of thinking and being reflective. Um, you've seen the music scenes change in this city over a wide span of time. Um, what do you think it says about Houston in the way that it, music seems to form here or the way that, you know, the kind of ebb and flow? Does it seem, are there times where it sometimes seems like what's happening that's special?

Rock Romano: Well, of course that happens, and I don't like to hear people complain that Houston is not a good town to get their music noticed. You know, what's it gonna take to get a gig here or what, you know, and it's like, I've always been a if you build it they will come kind of philosophy. I just started playin' and people started likin' it, from when I was in high school, all the priests in the, you know, they didn't want my band playin' at the fall festival at first, we were these rockers, you know? Well, I mean, we were just a bunch of Catholic kids playin' rock ‘n’ roll. All of a sudden they realized that where the whole crowd is, is over around our booth, and so they wanted to start utilizing that instead, and so they started harnessing that to the, you know, and the guy that probably talked me to going into the seminary was a priest who just loved us, and man he would pump our rock and roll whenever he could, and he would, you know, they would use that instead of thinking that it was something to be feared or, or, you know, the band or something. So, that was way cool, you know. I, I can't remember the question now.

Norie Guthrie: Um, kind of just –
Rock Romano: Oh, the different stuff I've seen, yes.

Norie Guthrie: – kind, kind, kind of the different scenes and –

Rock Romano: Well, that's kind of the funny thing I was talkin' about in my studio is I raised my rates, all of a sudden couldn't do garage bands anymore. They couldn't afford, once I got above $35.00 an hour, and once I got about $40.00 an hour I lost all my rap business, you know, and then once I got above $50.00 an hour I lost all my gospel business, and I mean, I went through big long chunks of time where I was doing exclusively almost rap and the occasional garage band would come in and stuff, but I think that, you know, a lot of these were, they were all, except for one instance, all my hip-hop stuff and rap stuff was either people doin' demos for their band to get gigs, or individuals that were trying to make it from the ground up, and then once I got to a certain point, they couldn't afford to come work with me anymore. If it wasn't a label payin' for it, they couldn't do it, and so, I've seen all kinds of different music, you know. I've been, like I said, you know, I grew up before I knew what was going on I was listening to Glen Miller and to Ray Anthony and to Harry James Orchestra and all this Dixieland and Frank Sinatra, every record Frank Sinatra ever made and Four Freshmen, all this old standards music, you know, that was, it was all the stuff on TV when I was a kid. I grew up, we got a TV in 1950. I was 5, and so, I was one of the first TV guys, and I was a Mickey Mouse Club guy, and I went, lived through all that, and when I went to high school I had less time for that stuff, and all of a sudden it was music and playin' for dances and girls and all of that, you know, and, uh, and then once I got past high school it was hey, we better start gettin' a little more serious about things because, you know, you gotta, you can't flunk out of college and all this stuff, you've gotta go do something, and by that point, you know, and I had two other brothers that went to college that my, uh, that my oldest and third oldest brother, my second oldest brother died of a heart condition, uh, about 15 years ago, but the two brothers that, around him became an optometrist and worked together for 50 years that's, as the Romano brothers, man, and they kept doin' what my dad did of giving all the glasses away and, you know, eye exams to all the priests and nuns. So, anyway, they both retired recently and, in the last few years, they both worked into their 70s and my oldest brother until he was 80 when he got cancer and had to quit, or he would still be working there, and, uh, my dad worked until he just they made him quit when he was about 82 or 3, you know, he just didn't want to quit. Boy, he didn't want to quit drivin'. I'm not gonna like that part when that comes . . . but I felt like I was out of it. My second marriage, I learned a lot from television. I learned a lot from people coming through my studio, and I performed but only in a very limited way. I'd play with Dr. Rockit for private parties, and I'd do the occasional gig with friends of mine, but I was really out of circulation, and I started playing again kinda toward the last 4, 5 years of my marriage with Big Al Bettis, some people that were hiring me to go play bass for 'em, and so, and I'd already had the studio. It was rockin'. Well, you know, the studio started in '89, so it was, uh, during that time, between '89 and sort of 2005 when my marriage finally dissolved, it was, uh, I just sort of second hand learned, you know. I would go play a lot of, some places I'd, uh, but mostly I was going and playin' the Hyatt Regency and big, big money paying gigs. I had sort of turned Dr. Rockit into a party band, and so, you know, until after my wife and I separated, actually the year before and part of the reason is that I had a, I, I called up the girls, got them to quit fightin', got everybody in the band all back together and we did a reunion, and it was the 25th anniversary of the Urban Animals, it was the, you know, who were real supportive. You know, all these private parties that we would do back in the 70s, the
Urban Animals were half of our audience. They would be, I knew every one of those people, we'd go skate with 'em. I skated many a, shot many a 10-story parking garage, uh, ramps and stuff, you know. We'd go up the car ramps, we would skate down them, and about this, the first year of my marriage I hit a wall a couple of times and my whole right side was black and blue and my wife made me quit, and so it was kind of like, my doctor did too. He asked me nicely to like stop doing that, you know, and so anyway, the Animals, and they, uh, I lost myself. I was in the present and went back for a second. So –

Norie Guthrie: Um, you were talking about the Urban Animals and doing work with them, yes –

Rock Romano: Oh yeah, what happened is I was doing a reunion gig –

Norie Guthrie: Right.

Rock Romano: – with Dr. Rockit, and it was 19, I guess '83 or 4, and, uh, it was '80, it was early '84. Well, that was the 20-year anniversary of Dr. Rockit and the Sisters of Mercy breaking up, and it was the 25th year of the Urban Animals starting, and people came in from all over the place. We had about 800 people in Fitzgerald’s. You couldn't move in Fitzgerald’s upstairs, and we did it for another 3 years in a row at Fitzgerald's and had very successful, and we got down to about 350, 400 the last time, and then I had a, we, I moved it to the Continental Club for certain reasons and we only did about 250 at that show, and I figured it was time to quit while we were still almost ahead just slightly behind, and so, I mean, we were only behind in terms of our own numbers, and so I didn't do another one until my drummer died of ALS, and we did a benefit for ALS at the Art Car Museum, and we played for free, and we auctioned off paintings and we had donations and we raised a bunch of money in the name of Smitty, our drummer. Well, the whole universe showed up for that gig. Of course it was free and all the Urban Animals were totally there 'cause Smitty was a charter member of the Urban Animals and matter of fact, I was wearin' his damn skates when I hit the wall twice, I didn't have my own skates that day, and, uh, and, uh, so we decided to do another one until my drummer died of ALS, and we did a benefit for ALS at the Art Car Museum, and we played for free, and we auctioned off paintings and we had donations and we raised a bunch of money in the name of Smitty, our drummer. Well, the whole universe showed up for that gig. Of course it was free and all the Urban Animals were totally there 'cause Smitty was a charter member of the Urban Animals and matter of fact, I was wearin' his damn skates when I hit the wall twice, I didn't have my own skates that day, and, uh, and, uh, so we decided to do another one, and we did one more at the Magnolia Ballroom a couple of years ago, and that was, uh, and, uh, I can't remember, it was 3, 2½ years ago I guess, on my birthday, 'cause we had decided that these big parties that we would throw that we would have a Valentine party every year, so they became a big party, important. We called 'em different things, but the Heartbreak Ball is what they ended up being called at the end, and, uh, we kind of combined the spend the night with Dr. Rockit with that, and we'd have all these parties at the Magnolia Room, at the Magnolia Ballroom.

Norie Guthrie: Mm.

Rock Romano: It was owned by Bart Truxillo who became a good friend, well, he rented me that room real cheap for this last party, but it turned out that there were a lot more rules now than there were back in the late 70s when we did that in the early 80s, and I had to have the police, and I had to have security, and I had to bond things, and I had to hire all the alcohol, and it was like, it was one of the few parties I ever lost money on, 'cause I could only get 300 people in, and that was a violation of the fire code by about 50 people as it was, so, I had to totally manage the list of who got into that party, and I want to throw one more wide-open party, but I don't know if I'll ever quite be able to do it, 'cause of health issues of people in the band and stuff like that, so, I
don't know if I'll ever do another one, but we definitely got our, uh, you know, we got out comeuppance in the best possible way. It was just like really knowing that it was real and, you know, seeing the girls back together, Cindy and I getting together last month was just outrageous. She's still so off the graph with it . . . I feel like I can go stand up there with the big rock star and be proud. I mean, I'm not famous, you know, but I'm real, and I'm famous to a few people that give me that, enough of that feeling to satisfy whatever it was that motivated me in that direction in the first place. I never particularly cared about wantin' to be rich and famous, you know. I've never cared about bein' rich, which is why I'm not, and I, you know, and I wanted to be famous, you know, I wanted to be the Beatles or I wanted to be, you know, I wanted to be, one of my first visions were smoky lounges and me playin' jazz and, and, uh, you know, but it was obvious from the beginning that I was stung by rock and roll, just, I was gonna do that mostly, and so I get a chance to do it all now. Whatever you want to bring me I'll be a part of it, you know? That's always been my philosophy as a producer, you know, as that, I mean, and I'm the de facto producer to almost every session that comes into my studio. I can't tell ya a handful of times when I haven't been the guy sort of calling the shots for people, not just because people were first timers or something, but because of somebody like Eric Taylor. He gets the production credits for his records, and he really is the producer, he's the thought man and the guiding force, but I'm the guy that works to get it from here to the tape, and I watched many good producers, really good producers when I was first in the game that taught me what I know about it, taught me what I have to be and what I saw Lou Adler do was the thing that I do as a producer, although I got more feedback than he does, I watch him when I watched Walt Andrus do. He would let us do our thing, he liked what we did, so we were, I know we were teachin' him. He had a hit record in the, in the early '60s and he took his money and got out of that game with all these cutthroat dudes, I could name a bunch of names of the early Houston music scene that were all just a bunch of crooks, and he got his money from his gold record and he went and started his own place, and that's when I met Walter, and he was, he talked the way I talk now. You know, I'm talkin' with love and almost philosophically about the things I've been involved in and have done in my music life, but he and I used to sit there and talk about things that came to pass 30 years later in the recording business of how soon one day we're gonna be able to, you know, pick up on our TV and talk to somebody on the other end and stuff like that, and he was a visionary, and he let people do what they want. He was of that whole mind of, you know, you let the band do what they're doing and if they're slipping off the rails, you kind of just help 'em back on and tell 'em why and that you're not trying to tell 'em what to do, and most people want you to tell 'em what to do. You know, some young band comin' in there spendin' their folks’ money and not wantin' to, you know, whatever it might be, and so I gotta be set up to work quick, and I also have to be set up to listen to what they were doing so that I can get to what they were trying to do real quick, or else I'm just sellin' them a sales pitch, and I just, you know, there was a time at which I thought that's all I was doing is that I was ripping off all these people that didn't have enough money so that I could make a living, and that was the bottom of the way I felt about myself and as a sound recordist and as a, uh, as a knob twister, which is a term I stole from the first engineer that ever recorded my band at Sugar Hill. His name, whew, his name was Doyle Johnson. He was one of these silver-haired pompadour'd guys sitting there at the console, and I went over to him and said you're the engineer, right, and I'm here 19 or something, and he's goin', he looks up at me, no, son, I'm just a knob twister, and so I told him he had a duplicating place a few blocks from my studio, and he was still alive 10 years ago and I'd go duplicate cassettes over there, you know, maybe it was 15 years ago now, and I had to tell him, I said Doyle, I stole one
of your lines from 30 years ago, and I've been using it ever since, I'm no engineer, I'm a knob twister, you know. That's, that's what it is. I'm an engineer in the sense that I get something from Point A to Point B, I'm a problem solver, and I'm good at solving problems in a lot of other areas besides music, but I'm more of a MacGyver kind of a guy. If you, if you come to my studio you'll see what I mean, you'll see how things are put together, which makes it not so bad when you're havin' a flood just to take things apart, put 'em back in the kitchen cabinet or whatever, you know, so, I've had a good time with it. There have been times when I was as low as you can get when I thought that I'd ruined my life and I probably did, and the songs that I was writin' when the first marriage broke up were really sad and reflected a part of me that I had to give up, but things change, you know, and, uh, you become who you become. I wouldn't be who I am now if it hadn't been for everything that happened, so. The name of that song was “Some Things Change” as a matter of fact, and it's, you know, I'm glad to be what I am, who I am, and I'm glad I am today, anyway, 'cause I'm glad you're not interviewing me tomorrow 'cause I might be really upset with myself. What else you got?

Norie Guthrie: Well, I think that we have covered so much, yeah.

Rock Romano: I mean, I haven't been able to even scratch the surface of the people I knew and the things that I've done. The last time I did this it was emphasizing all the blues stuff that I've done –

Norie Guthrie: Right.

Rock Romano: – which in the last several years, 4, 5, 6 years have been mostly what I've done –

Norie Guthrie: Mm.

Rock Romano: – including the music that I'm playing, but I've been playing the blues for 20 years now, or have gone back to playing the blues, but those old songs started out like folk songs too, and I brought my guitar and, you know, I could show you what I'm talkin' about, but it don't take much to play a blues song. It's the easiest thing you can do on the guitar.

Norie Guthrie: Oh.

Rock Romano: You go, bump, ba, bump, ba, bump, ba, bump and that's all you're movin' two, one string back and forth, and it sounds like music.

Norie Guthrie: You've lived a very extraordinary life.

Rock Romano: Well, thanks, thanks for having me here, it's, I, uh, some of us are lucky in a lot of ways. You know, some of us are rich, some of us are rich and lucky, you know, and some of us, you know, just get to be part of things that it's just amazing, so that's what my life has been. I have not been a fly on the wall, I've been a willing participant in everything but I've, you know, I've just gotten to do all this stuff I love, and sometimes you pay the price and sometimes you just get to do something like this where you get to be proud of all the stuff that you've done.