Jerry Atwood Interview Transcript

Members: Kevin Chu, Jiwon Choe, Elaine Chung

Kevin: Hi everyone, I'm very pleased to have Jerry Atwood here with me today. He is one of the local Houston LGBT activists, and we're very pleased to invite him on campus. This is Jerry.

Jerry: Good afternoon. I'm very pleased to be here. Fire away.

Kevin: All right. So, starting off, could you give us a brief kind of summary of how your childhood was like, and...

Jerry: Grew up in a conservative Texas city, very conservative, and um, around conservative parents, and um, very conservative upbringing, and there was no option of any kind of sexuality expression whatsoever, you know. I was very frustrated, very half-angry, and half-crazy... (laughs) And you know, your crushes were on the wrong gender, growing up, and you quickly realize that is like, not fine with your friends. Quickly, I mean, like, shut the door.

Kevin: And when did you discover that?

Jerry: Um... probably eleven, ten or eleven.

Kevin: Did you let your parents know?

Jerry: No, no no no no. My mother probably always had an inkling, because she was very perceptive, and saw that I was a little different from everybody else. But, I went through school and had some... all kinds of challenges, and I came out at the end of my, at the beginning of my third year at Lamar University. And at that point in time I had to really fess up to my close friends who were really... some were wonderful, and some turned out to be not so wonderful, and I found out who my friends were, and some of those became life-long friends, and others.. dropped away as many people do. And so I moved to Houston in '72, started working in engineering right away and had a great career for 38 years, worked for various consulting engineers and other entities, and made some money, and always played music. From the time I was two years old, until.. still doing it. But I always played music from the time I was 2 years old. I remember the first thing is I got to think about my family, and the possibility of being hungry, and the need to do all the things human beings need to do, satisfying basic living needs. And then considerations on music. Music has always been around me. I always listened, and I always wanted to make it. And I always wanted to listen to it. But mom, pretty good singer, but she could sing harmony, I could too. So I was beating a kid's piano, and was always frustrated because the black piano key paint was chipped off. So my mom got me a real piano, and I was off and running. Took piano for 12 years, but I always play by ear. Playing by studying was here, and playing by ear was over here, very different. And so I always love playing by ear, and
playing by studying was very laborious for me. So even today, I am still challenged at reading music today.

Kevin: So did you want to do engineering because you wanted to or...

Jerry: I grew up in a blue collar family. Well, first of all, I love sciences. I love taking things apart and then putting them back together. I love electricity. So my dad said, become an engineer. Engineers are bosses. uhhh, anyways, sort of. They can be but, so I went to engineering as they taught me. I needed to make money and save up in order to have a good time playing music. So I did, it turned out very well for me after all these years. And I got some extra benefits, got my foot in many doors and ways with music and had a great time, got some local notoriety and now still playing music to this very day.

Kevin: We are also interested in how you went from an engineer to a career in music, specifically the transition that brought you into the Houston nightlife. Or were you able to do engineering work and music simultaneously?

Jerry: The music was always around. I started making money with music when I was around 11 years old, playing for start-up shows. Started playing in soul bands, I did like rhythm blues music played with keyboard for bands that travelled around to then the black schools, because the schools were still segregated in '65 and then started playing in other bands and still did that for all these years.

Kevin: Specifically, we know of your long-time music partnership with Rick Comeaux, can you tell us a little more about that.

Jerry: We are on sabbatical right now, but we worked together for 26 years. We worked for a long time and he left and came back. We had a pretty good fame. Playing for men's society gigs and a few regular things to integrate us into the society set like postal grill and ovation in the Rice Village. They are there still, but the owner is getting a little tired, kind of, running a club. And then done everything else in the world from locally... now playing at one restaurant primarily and it's working out okay. It's not a lot of work and it's fun and it's comfortable. I work with 8 different singers in a course of a month. We are all very different, and I love that, I love the variety. I don't have to be accurate, I just kill it, play it and have fun. Laugh, make mistakes, stumble and run.

Kevin: You did a lot of charity events. Why AIDS specific?

Jerry: Well here's the deal. AIDS came around and started affecting the people here in '82, '83. And all of my group of friends, the ones who that were the best looking, the best built, had the most money, drove the nicest car, most stylish were the first to go. That was the first set of people to be hit by the disease. They started disappearing because they didn't admit that they were sick. It was a terrible stigma, frightening stigma. When your friends start leaving and oh
you hear that they are very sick, and their family doesn't even want to talk to them. You know, it was one of the most frightening things to have ever happened in my whole life.

Kevin: Did you personally know anybody who suffered through the process?

Jerry: Oh yeah, heavens, I lost from the late 70s until the mid 80s, I probably lost 35 to 45% of one social circle. And there were others circles where I lost friends, but fewer. It was devastating. I mean, I went to so many funerals now that...phewt, another funeral...okay. It sounds crusty, but that's the way it is.

Kevin: Can you talk about Christmas Songfest and its effects?

Jerry: Every year since I got out of college, I had people over the house and I played the piano and we all sang the Christmas carol. So that kind of grew to about 250 people in a house that I had was quite big over in the bins here and that was in ’85. In ’86, I was busy working with Ricky Comeaux, playing music, I didn't have people over, and people got mad at me. People were sending mails saying "Why did you not have a party this year?" I said "well, I didn't have time." In ’87, I was asked for to play for the red beans and rice fundraiser for omega house which was a fairly newly established hospital here and there was only 3 beds at the time, and they needed 8 and they still had a waiting line for 20 at any given time. So, I volunteered my time for that, they made 1200 bucks or something like that and so I said, you know what, this is October, so I said that in December we can stage a fundraiser at a hotel and make some money. We did, passed out words to people. Sang Christmas carol, had food available and made 6300, the next year we made 9000, next year we made 13000, it kept going up from there. After a number of years, it kind of leveled off after so many benefits. We were all benefited out. Every week, there was like three to five benefits that we really wanted to go to, just couldn't spend all your money number 1, and number 2 we just got wary of them.

Kevin: How is the event now?

Jerry: Well it ended five years ago. Yeah, it was a struggle to get people to come because it was a very old event and very old. But it was a lot of fun. We had a silent auction at the beginning and we sang Christmas carols to all the participants, sometimes as many as 60 people on stage. We had a giant stage, and then after that was dancing, we do disco dancing with all the singers I work with. We would sing, and everybody would dance. Good old times. But it got less and less people, down to about 270 people. We decided we had a good twenty years, time to pass it onto someone else. We passed it onto another activist, made it private. She assumed our 501-C-3.

Kevin: During that 20 years span, what would you say was the biggest challenge you faced organizing the event?

Jerry: Doing it as all volunteers. No one was paid. We had to do everything by ourselves, the food was brought in. We didn't buy the food from the hotel, and one time we realized we couldn't
do that anymore, because we weren't making any money. And then we brought everything, and we were making much. We had a low cost. As years went by, cost went up percentage-wise, because we weren't making as much money. And we were not sure whether we should end it. But the 501C3 was still been used to do great things.

Kevin: As a follow-up question, what was the general public's perception of the charity event? How did they receive it?

Jerry: It was very well received. Everybody came, straight, gay, lesbian, bi. A lot of the community came. But I will say 15% or so were straight. Everybody loved it. It was a very festive event. Just over the top, giggles, silly, fun. Anything would go. When performers made a mistake in performing, people laughed. You had kids and grandmothers, it was really warm.

Kevin: The Diana Award, were you proud of it?

Jerry: Absolutely, the Dianas are known for trashing people. The same year they trashed me, and it includes saying a tons of horrible things about me in public, after all, I spent a decade as a gay man in the no consequences world. So I have a great old time doing things that I wouldn't be proud of now, and they trash me in a big event. Twenty years later they gave me their award for community service.

Kevin: Do you have any memorable stories about the Christmas Songfest? Was there one particular year that stood out to you?

Jerry: There were probably five or six in the peak years. People were absolutely ecstatic to be there, it was a joy walking in the front door. It was a joy conducting the auction. It was a joy enjoying the food. It was a joy seeing all your friends. Everyone was seeing their friends and themselves up onstage, making fools of themselves, singing when they couldn't. And we made the best of it, we have professional singers there as well, but at least 5 of the 8 singers that are working with me right now were there many of those years. And they really, 2 or 3 of them were particularly the lively ones who kept the spirit going while I was busy in the back keeping the synthesizers going. We had a lot of fun and drank a lot of alcohol and made a lot of money.

Kevin: So you mainly work in a restaurant right now. On top of that, are you also performing elsewhere either for work or for charity?

Jerry: Yes, whenever I am asked to play, I played recently for the bringing green event, for the Montrose counseling center, which was a fine, fine organization. As a matter of fact Montrose counseling center was one of the charities we donated to with a proceeds from the Christmas songfest. So it definitely has a special spot in my heart.

Kevin: Let's go to the more personal side of you. More specifically, your family. How was you and your family's relationship?
Jerry: It was horrible for years, got better, and then horrible and are now better. It got better.

Kevin: Do you have any siblings?

Jerry: I do have one older sibling, he's doing great. He has gone through some cancer issue, he's now a happy fellow now and is 64 years of age.

Kevin: How is his relationship with you now?

Jerry: Fine! I see him once every 2 weeks. Go visit my mom, she is 84, still loves the yard, still laughs a lot and we eat once a week or so. We eat, play crossword puzzles, and laugh and talk about relatives and other things.

Elaine: How do you go about organizing something like the Christmas Songfest?

Jerry: well, you have to have a cause, and you need to have a cause that you are confident in. And I knew this would work. I just knew people who would love it, who would participate, and help make it happen. I didn't know all the logistical things, like how much trouble it is, and how much it costs to print. We couldn't just run off and print 5000 pages back in those days. So, we had a printing company, ran by the activist I was telling you about, and owned a printing company and service us for cheaply, as a matter of fact her donation was probably the single most significant donation of any that we had over the years. And then food of course, always the challenge, all volunteers, but we, you ask your question was the events and I am wondering now, better stop right there. Let you ask other questions.

Elaine: I was wondering then, how did you spread the word? How does your cause grow every year?

Jerry: Well, the other big issue is getting in contact with people. You had to get your word out there, and we had trouble with that. We got mailing lists, and it was very laborious to get mailing list those days. We had people donating mailing labels to us, so we could send duplicates out. It was a big bunch of labor. Nowadays it's a bit easier, you can still collect one big data base, much easier to enter things in. Take things from business cards. You know it was a big challenge. And getting the 501C3 established, so we didn't have to operate the other charities, to which we donated, that was another big challenge. But, we got over the challenges and rock and rolled.

Elaine: So do you think if someone was to start a charity event today. Would it be easier do you think, than when you've started?

Jerry: I don't think it would be a whole lot different. You still need people with a bit of gray hair to guide you through. It's not an automatic process. So much research is needed that is daunting. You need to find people who have time to volunteer to get your charity event started. I even
wrote a book on Songfest and sent it to one of my friends who moved to Austin and he put together and did another couple of other successful events there, 15 years ago.

Jessie: So you worked as an engineer, as well as doing music.

Jerry: I was working in engineering for 38 years. I quit doing that 8 months ago, and have been doing music ever since. Thank heavens, at the age of 60, I have no debts, everything paid off, I had some savings, you know what, as long as I don't spend too much, I knew I was going to be happy playing music.

Jessie: Specifically, can you tell us about what kind of engineering job did you do?

Jerry: Buildings. I did much remodeling. Designed new buildings, with a team of people of course. On the rice campus alone, I've worked in many buildings in the medical district, many office buildings, schools, and institutional buildings all over the country, primarily in the Houston market. Blueprints and specs and it's put it out to contractors who build it. And we follow up with the construction administration side of it, and some projects would last a number of years, and others would be pretty quick. So, been inside a lot of buildings, including on this campus.

Jessie: My question was, working as an engineer, as a gay man, and working in music as a gay man. What would be the different experiences?

Jerry: Not too much. I still kept my sexuality to myself in the engineering world. People still perceive and figure you out, and don't say anything if they're your friend. Perceptive people figure it out and know many. It's all a matter of knowing, knowing a bunch of GLBT people before you're comfortable with them. And once you're comfortable with them, like, pchtt, pchtt [makes sounds and shrugs]. So people who are perceptive and figured it out, very comfortable and didn't say anything. Others who weren't perceptive, or who did figure it out and were hostile, there were a few of those. They weren't hostile, they let me know that they knew, and they didn't like it. But it didn't affect our work, and at no time did it affect my work relationships negatively, really at all. It was always something I could work through. I liked people and they liked me, so that was part of it. If I was, you know, if I was a curmudgeon, I would probably would have had more hostility. But I didn't keep it under wraps. And if someone asked me, I told them right away.

Kevin: So that didn't affect your opportunities in the business? You were given fair treatment, no discrimination?

Jerry: Never. I only went to one job interview, really, in my whole 38 year—well two job interviews. The first one in '72, and then another one when I went to work in the medical center.
The rest of the time, there was a need and my reputation was around there. And they said, come on over if you can... we’re offering this much money and you’re ready to step in the door anytime you’re ready to quit over there.

Elaine: You said you grew up in sort of a conservative town. Very blue collar. What do you think of Houston as a whole?

Jerry: Well Houston is in the epicenter of Texas. As a metropolitan area it’s more liberal than the surrounding areas. But as a whole Texas is as conservative as it gets. Texas and Tennessee, that’s about as conservative as it gets. So, I’ve had more challenges here than probably any other place in the country. But you get through them all. You manage to figure out your environment and work within it. Houston’s been great to me, financially and socially, and I’m glad I’ve spent my years here actually. When I was in my late twenties, I was full of pee and vinegar, and I thought about moving away to California where a lot of my friends were going. But it’s a good thing I didn’t, because I could have been dead.

Kevin: Do you plan on staying here?

Jerry: Pardon me?

Kevin: Do you plan on staying here in Houston?

Jerry: Yes. Yes, yeah. My tap root grows to hell here. So I can’t pick up and leave.

Kevin: Excuse me for being so pointed, but are you in a relationship right now?

Jerry: Yes, for twenty years. My twenty years, yes Bobby’s a good boy. And we’ll remain that way.

Elaine: Did you feel like compared to maybe the reception you have in your hometown, do you find the LGBT community in Houston to be very supportive?

Jerry: There was no LGBT community where I came from. The only people when I was growing up that were obviously gay were so obviously gay that you thought, Oh my God in heaven I never want to be like that. That’s terminally nelly, you know, or just disgusting, they were just plain disgusting. So I decided I was not going to be that way. And became as manly as I could under the circumstances. It paid off. [Laughs]

Kevin: I guess, would you being willing to tell us your future plans?

Jerry: My future plans really have to do with going into retirement. I want to play music as long as my hand and my body holds up. I think I can do it well into my 80s if I hold up like my parents did, are. If I can make some extra money with my social security from my pretty decent career, I’ll do okay. If my parents had let me run the way I wanted to and become a musician, I
wouldn’t have had that option. I would have been really poor and really miserable right now, probably. Unless I just happened to hit the honey hole of success, which you know, one out of a thousand really fine musicians do. The other 999, they just kind of make it through life and that’s it. And I tell all my young friends, my advice number one to my young friends, you better save 20% of your take home pay from the day you start working, maybe after your student loans are over. 20% of your take home pay or you will not like yourself when you get old.

Kevin: Very wise.

Elaine: Is there, are there any good stories that you’d like to share with us? More things about the songfest you’d like to tell us about?

Jerry: One of the things I do need to interject about songfest are even though I was the impetus of getting founded, there were other people that were absolutely essential the whole time. They were all volunteers, they worked their behinds off for all those years. I was kind of the glue that held it all together, but there were many fine, talented, smart people that gathered around and saw the benefit of the cause, and really, I would not have been able to make it work by myself. I just didn’t have all the skills it took to communicate with large numbers of people, to write really finely worded documents when you’re in a pickle. [laughs] That sort of thing. There were just so many things to do. Food? Hey, food for 800 people, it’s a bit of a challenge. So the volunteers for songfest were magnificent from beginning to end. And even the little minor one for the BCPA, the Bayou City Performing Arts, which was the gay men’s chorus, the gay women’s chorus, and band, at the restaurant where I work, a very small thing, just a restaurant, it holds 100 people. Not too long ago in the Christmas season. And next year we’ll hope to have another one that’ll be more successful because we’ll have more time to put it together. But it’s an easy thing for me to stage. I just call all the singers I know up and say, who among you are willing to volunteer? And I’m willing to play, the music equipment is set up, the venue is there, all you have to do is show up and play and go home and you’ve done something good. They’re always willing to step up to the plate. Take your time, I’m not in no hurry so you can milk me all you want.

Elaine: I’ll just keep the camera running.

Jerry: That means I’ll need to hold my gut in. Oh, one of the things that is kind of funny, interesting, was that we had a mayoral candidate years ago, Louie Welch, back in the 80s, that made a gaffe on the news camera while it was running. One of the photographers said, “Mr. Welch, what do you think we ought to do about the homosexuals?” He said, “Shoot the queers.” And this T-shirt was from that era. It says “Louie don’t shoot.” I still have a lot of old activist T-shirts from the old days. We proceeded to have a march from Montrose and Westheimer to City Hall that night, which is where we went to protest.

Kevin: You were physically there?
Jerry: Yes, oh yes.

Elaine: Are you still involved with a lot of the activist movements?

Jerry: Not so much anymore. I do keep up with the ones that I can. Right now I'm really trying to build the music back up on the localized level, working at one place. You know, playing at restaurants you don't make much money but you work a lot of the nights. When I worked big charity events, we made 4-6 times as much money per night, and then we wouldn't work for a week or five days or six days. I'm trying to get this established and keep it rolling in a challenged market. You know, right now the restaurant industry is, they're either busy as hell or their business is flagging, so I'm trying to build things up and get it honed to where I want it to be. And it's working.

Kevin: So a lot of charity events, they think they're doing something that's nice and they think people will come and support. But in reality, a lot of these charity events have to fight with other charity events in order to get a good amount of people. Did you have to face this kind of challenge?

Jerry: Absolutely. Every charity has to compete with other charities, both for the clientele and the causes. We had many conflicts and there was a community calendar in later years that we tried to get registered on. Some other big organizations that knew us and knew about us and knew that our event was x day every year would put their event on our day and our people weren't happy at all. So there would be less attendance at both. Competing charities are indeed an issue when you want to time something. You have to be careful not to tap the same market twice in a week.

Elaine: You've been in Houston for a long time, right?

Jerry: '72, but hung out here all through college. We came here to party from Beaumont. Not much to do there.

Elaine: What kind of changes do you think you've seen in Houston between then and now in terms of acceptance?

Jerry: Well, we're no longer afraid to, well, we're not really afraid to leave bars late at night. Well, except the criminal element, which is always going to be there throughout time. In the old days, we had to worry about police harassment. I never had it personally, other than a kind of abusive traffic stop but it wasn't obvious to the officer, I was just in a suspect location, down there around Pacific Street. But yes, we had to worry about it, we had to worry about raids in the bars. I never experienced one of those, but a lot of my friends did. They would find a few people just to take out for the heck of it, usually for not having an ID or something. It was always kind of a scary thing. Plus society in general was a lot more hostile than they are now. You couldn't really be out, except in your community, or you would feel really very, almost
threatened in some places. You’d be going to the wrong mall, wearing your hair shooting up, and the wrong clothes. You might get a cat call nowadays, but nobody’s going around trying to do things to you, so it’s a very different world.

Kevin: So what do you hope to see currently? What do you hope to change about Houston, what’s happening now?

Jerry: I’ve probably done most of the changing I can change. It takes a lot of youth and energy to really get out there and pick a cause and spend the time and energy that it takes to get it done. When you get old, you don’t have as much energy as you used to. I’m still pretty energetic, but you don’t have the drive. You’ve done it, and you remember how much effort it was, and now, do I still have that much energy to go out and tackle something else? I will always volunteer my time, my music, or lending advice, or something. But as far as trying to run anything, I’m done.

Kevin: What would be advice you would give people who are still in the closet right now?

Jerry: Well of course, the big cliché is it gets better, no doubt about it. But your environment determines what you can and can’t do. If you’re in a place where... I do not advocate coming out to your family, until you are comfortable, very comfortable. Even if you know it’s going to be traumatic, that’s okay too, as long as you know the end result is going to be good. When you put yourself out there too soon, it can do damage actually. There’s a time, if I had come out at work for instance, I would have probably would have lost some jobs. It’s not that they say, “Oh, he’s gay. Let’s get rid of him.” It’s just kind of like, you start to have less leverage. You know, you start getting assignments that are less juicy, you start having to work for people that formerly were your peers. There’s all sorts of ways an employer can put you in the backseat and make you want to change jobs. I’ve never had that happen, that you Lord. I’m very grateful for that.

Kevin: Are you religious?

Jerry: Not really, I certainly respect all people who are. You know, I just don’t have that thing in my soul. Some people have a strong sex drive and some don’t. It’s much like that. Boy, the religious people will come down on me like stink on poop. But I really do believe that, that you have a strong spiritual drive or don’t, or you have something in between. It’s the same way with sexuality. I’m firmly convinced that a lot if these right wing people who don’t understand sex just don’t have much sex drive. They just don’t have much, so they don’t understand being driven. Who was your first crush? I had a good friend, very close friend, very straight man. One night we were kind of in our cups and he said, “You know, I just don’t understand this gay thing.” I said, “Well, let me ask you this. Who was the first person you had a crush on?” He said, “Oh, Billy Sue” or something. And I said, “Well mine was Billy Joe.” Now, if you’d have had this first crush on Billy Joe, what would you have done? He said, “Ooh, I don’t know.” I said, “Do you think you could have changed? First of all, do you think if the world would have been all gay and there was a small minority of straight people, and you had a crush on a girl on a
girl... You were going to not do what you were going to do with her, whatever you were going to do, get married, whatever, do you think you would have stopped? He said “Nuhh.” [Shakes head strongly] That’s what he did. And I said, “Don’t expect me to change.” And sure enough, he’s still a great, great, great soul mate.

Elaine: So, do you think there’s a good way to convince people that it’s not something strange?

Jerry: I think nowadays the media is so full of GLBT imagery that it really... If someone’s in the closet and feels totally guilty about it, it’s because of their upbringing, or because they dread telling their family, or coworkers or something. Because once you’ve seen Lady Gaga, everything else out there... I mean you’re welcome, it’s “Hey, it’s okay, I’m not worried about it.” I imagine, maybe it would be, it wouldn’t have been different for me. If I had seen all that comfort, all that other people, see, I didn’t know anybody else. I didn’t know anybody else when I was coming out, I didn’t know a soul. Except for the ones that looked obviously sick to me. It was a very lonely feeling. I mean, suicidally lonely. There was a time when I thought I certainly could kill myself. This was a very lonely place to be, nobody sympathizes with me. I can’t have sex, I can’t come out. It’s just maddening! [Shakes fists] My god, what am I going to do? But then, I befriended to extremely effeminate gay guys on Lamar campus. One was about (indicating with his hand) this tall and snow white with black hair, and the other was about six-foot-four, (again indicating with his hands) this big around, and black as the night, and very black culture, and both hilarious as hell. And they, they kind of, they talked to me a lot, and late at night, when nobody else was around, I would be singing with them. [Laughs] They accommodated me on that, and then they introduced me to someone that I eventually came out with. So that was... and then after that, I was out to at least all friends. So... starting point, a group knew.

Kevin: What did you think of Lady Gaga’s latest song, Born This Way?

Jerry: Great, um, it kind of beats it into the ground, but yeah, it’s great. I mean, it’s out there, and it really is, and of course that’s the ultimate statement. Of course we’re born this way, silly. You think growing up in Texas City, with all the... that I would have... I didn’t have to be that way, or I would have changed, but if I could have changed, I would have changed when I was eleven years old. I knew I was attracted to males as soon as I remember anything. As soon as I remember anything. I remember just, I didn’t know what I wanted to do with them, I just, you know, hey, you know. I’m gravitated towards males. And I didn’t know what it was going to lead to until I was eleven or twelve, and I began to see my friends start dating, and I thought, well, gee, they can do all this stuff, why can’t I? Of course you cross the, push the line a little bit and you realize, uh-uh. Quit. Okay, you’re different. Go figure it out, and shut up.

Elaine: Um, so, how did you, how did you come to move to Houston again?
Jerry: Well, I graduated from college in ‘72, and I came right to... well, I went back a little bit to live with my mom and dad because, um, I graduated before the summer session. I thought I was going to have to go through school summer session. I didn’t keep up with my credits, I just had all these courses planned out, I was going to take every one of them. When I went to see the dean in the spring semester, he said, guess what? Oh, this was like the day, the last day of classes. And, the dean said, do you know, you have all the credits you need to graduate. I was like, what? Haha, okay, cancel that lease! [laughs] Ao I moved with my folks and started shopping for a job in Houston. I didn’t want to be in Texas City. I was still... I didn’t want to be out in Texas City. So I moved here, and... and, gosh, I had an engineering job, was making great money, for the first time I had no debts, I had a car, I had a nice apartment, living by myself, that was like heaven. [Laughs] Out and young and pretty and yeah, I was having a blast.

Kevin: Are there anything that you would like to add to the interview?

Jerry: Let me think for a minute. How much long do we have?

Elaine: Uh, we could have, yeah, about 20 more minutes.

Jerry: Gosh, [laughs].

Elaine: Well, I guess ...

Kevin: We don’t have to fill...

Elaine: it doesn’t have to fill up to an hour. It’s pretty difficult to talk for an hour.

Jerry: It will be hard to edit all this. Good grief guys.

Kevin: Yeah...

Jerry: Is there anything you want me to do over, so everything is, anything that I was talking was just totally too fast...

Elaine: Maybe, at the beginning, when you were talking about the songfest, if you could, I guess...

Jerry: How it started?

Elaine: How it started again?

Jerry: Okay, okay, let’s see. Well, I, um, I always played music, and always had people over at Christmas time for a party. That was just what I did and I’ve always played piano, and they always stood around the piano and sang. And I did that for many years until it got to be about probably 250 people in a big house that I owned over here in the bins. And um, it was crowded, it was crazy, and everybody had a blast, and that was in ‘85. And in ‘86 I was getting my career
started in music with Ricky Comeaux. We had a very long run of successful music business, and I didn’t want to stop and have a party because it was a lot of labor. I did everything myself, the food and all that. And people got mad at me. They would literally, I mean, accost me and say “why didn’t you have your party this year?” So in ’87, right before that, right before the time of the party, 3 months, I was asked to do the Red Beans and Rice Benefit for Omega House, our local AIDS hospice, which had just gotten started, and was very underfunded, and needed three times as many beds as they had just to accommodate a reasonable waiting list. And so um, I did the Red Beans and Rice Benefit for Omega House, at the Chatteau De’Jean, apartments over at Galleria, outdoors, by the pool, with all my music equipment, Ricky singing, people donating 20 bucks, and having red beans and rice, and they made um... I don’t know, some good money, so I said, you know what? Ricky Comeaux and all my other friends, we can have a Christmas music sing-along. We went to a local hotel, booked a room, I mean, 3 months ahead of time for a Christmas event, hey, doesn’t happen nowadays. Haha. And we had about 250 people in it, and made about 6000 bucks, and then decided to keep doing it after that. And we just did it under the, we collected the money under the charity to which our proceeds were going, 501C3, so people could write a tax-deductable check. And over the years we got our own 501C3 off and running.

Elaine: Could you, I guess, sort of tell us, sort of describe how maybe a typical songfest would be like? You said they had a silent auction...

Jerry: Right. It was a full charity event. We had, um, people walked in for a cocktail hour, the silent auction opened. Then there was some entertainment going on of some kind, there was either some professional entertainers, and while people were eating and going to silent auction, lasted about an hour and fifteen minutes. Then, we, everyone had a songbook, the program that had all the song lyrics in it, and we would have people sign up on a big board. Sign up for, here’s the songs that are in the book, sign up for these songs and you, individually, your table, your organization, can come up and sing this Christmas song, all at one time. And then so people would file up and people love to sing. They just love to sing. You know, it’s like, before karaoke was around. [laughs] And so that was their outlet, you know, come to Christmas Songfest and sing. And drink, and eat good food, and have camaraderie within the community. And then people would file up on stage, one at a time, ten at a time, sixty at a time. And it was goofy, antics, and you know, deer antlers and Santa Claus drag, all that kinds of crazy stuff that people would do. And people in the beginning years, it was a very formal event, and they would wear tuxes and evening gowns. As it grew an older event, people got more less formal, which is okay too, it worked out just fine for everybody. But it was really a dressy event, very elegant, got some old videos running around somewhere that were really, really fun. Then we, then at the end, these officially, when this audience participation seemed to end, the professionals would come out and do disco dancing. They were all the, all my singers would sing disco songs, or country western or something, we’d do something that people wanted to dance to, they filled the dance
floor, and would go for 45 minutes till this auction closed out, and then sent everybody home. Full, happy.

Kevin: Who would you say were the people who attended the event?

Jerry: Um, we had a pretty even... In the early years it was more gay men and their friends. As it grew older there were far more straight people, far more lesbians, far more transgendered people, and just really a wider community. It was a fairly expensive event, it got to be 50 bucks ahead for the in, in the old days it was 20, it grew throughout the years to cover the expenses. And we had a very broad session of, we had whole families, straight families bringing their kids. Nothing dirty going on, no. [Laughs] It was a lot of eating and drinking and having fun.

Elaine: So it’s, it’s called Christmas Songfest. But was it ever a bit of a religious event?

Jerry: No, the religion was in the songs. We did have an invocation and a prayer. For many of those years and sometimes we didn’t even (the sound is interfered). But we said our prayers and sang the songs. And the songs varied all the way from the very reverent to the silly stuff. So it was and those reverent stuff when everyone bore down on A Holy Night and all those beautiful songs, a whole room of a thousand of people or 800 people or 600 people singing... awesome. Chill bumps back down the spine. That’s why (sound is interfered again). But the verbality was outrageous, with some of the entertainers that were emcees, we had Mattress Mack as emcee one year, we had, um, Frank Billingsley was one of our emcees one year, and then usually our professional singers in later years became emcees and they were outrageous and zaniness kept things moving... it was a wonderful, upbeat event. People smiled a lot. The jaws hurt at the end of the time.

Elaine: I guess this is sort of unrelated but we, we sort of met Mattress Mack. He was a, um, I guess a speaker at our, we had like an associate’s night event within our dormitory, and he was our speaker last semester.

Jerry: That was, was it related to GLBT in any way?

Elaine: Well, no, it was just, um, just an interesting speaker who had, like, a really great story to tell.

Jerry: Yeah, yeah, he was a wonderful talker, and I think he was probably more hung up the year he did our event than anytime. He was visibly nervous. And I don’t think it was because he feared anything. It was just, it was out of zilch. If he’s selling furniture, or doing something at one of the charities that he knows a lot about, he’s okay, you know. If the other emcees knew a lot about the charities and would make jokes and that but he didn’t even know that stuff. So I really felt so sorry for him. He would look over if he’s nervous and would smile and like, what do I do next, and I was just, you’re doing fine, keep on plugging. [Laughs] It was very good of him to come around to do that. There were some wonderful people who have emcee-ed the event,
and then many others subsequently, we quit trying to get big names to come in and emcee our events when it started getting smaller, and just used our totally wacky, fun, organized, smart professional singers who work with me. They are some wonderful, zany people.

Jerry: Let me see if I can think up of anything. Let me just kind of pick my brain for a minute… you got so much there that I don’t know how you’re going to boil it down to 15 minutes. [Laughs] So… um… I can’t think of other interesting social or charity thing that has happened through the years… of course the Anita Bryant thing was always fun. She came out very anti-gay and then everybody boycotted her orange juice brand…

Kevin: Sorry, who is this?

Jerry: Anita Bryant, she was a popular singer, kind of a middle-road singer in the 70s, and she made some very right-wing statements very publicly, and boy, the gay community came down on her like crazy and boycotted her brand and they had to kick her off as their representative, their face. And we had another big march from Montrose to City Hall with candles… it was a serious thing, because you know, this is the mass media. And the whole world is seeing this. It’s going all over the U.S. and probably outside there on national programming, and we felt like, we worked really… made us feel paranoid that the world has arrived to come and do something to us or treat us bad now. So we had to do something to make a statement, and we did. I don’t think I got a t-shirt for that one though.

Kevin: I really wanted to ask you to play a bit…

Jerry: Oh, if you had let me know, I could have. I would have been glad to. If there’s a piano somewhere, we could fire one up. I don’t know what I would do, I know some all kinds of different music I don’t know what the heck I would pick…

[Afterwards, we went to the Shepherd School of Music together, and Jerry Atwood played a wonderful piece of music for us.]