

KOSTAS INTERVIEW PART 1- REMBETIKA TO ROCK-N-ROLL

ODIE: So, the first thing I wanna ask you, is, would you tell me about your memories of Greece, and first just your memories of Greece, and your mom and dad and what they did? your family

KOSTAS: So, you want me to answer that now?

ODIE: Yeah, I wanna start from the beginning, and I'm gonna ask you about music along the way and different things, but I wanna ask you about your life, everything.

KOSTAS: Well, um, if we're gonna visit about that then I'll just start at the beginning. I think my earliest recollections go back to when I was possibly four, five right in that range because, I don't know, it's hard to know exactly where these images in my head come from. What date is it? Cause time was irrelevant when you're a single digit and closer to zero than ten. That's where I was. So, I can remember being a skinny little pigeon toad, funny looking little boy, and...being that young, still three or four, I placed in a...most of...I looked like Gandhi with his bib around his button. My mom had a diaper pinned around my ass. I think that's probably what I was wearing. And nothing else in these images, but I was hanging around five or six old ladies and some younger ones. And they were spinning bowl and cackling like chickens in a hen house talking and laughing. They would ask me just silly things just to make themselves laugh at what a child would say when asked certain things. Anyway, I remember Thessaloniki, my home city back in Greece. The broad streets with trolley's on them, and lots of Model-T's, I think. It was the ones where you had to crank something in the front to get the damn thing started. Those were the cars that were operating. Model-A's and T's in Greece at that time, there were no modern cars, would've been in '53 '54 '55. These are the recollections that I have. I remember my grandfather was a forest ranger for the government, and his territory was the mountains right above Thessaloniki. He would be up there day and night on patrol watching for fires and watching for thievery and break ins, things to that affect. Making sure that...He was the law basically. Then, my father, I remember, him sitting down with his little bouzouki, they call them baglamas. Anyway, it's a little Greek bouzouki. It's like a tenor bouzouki. The regular bouzoukis had a real long neck. This one's the same body style but has a real short neck and a higher pitch sound to it, and its used differently than the long neck bouzouki. It gives a nice affect. Someday I'll sit down and reveal the differences between the instruments to you if we have some Greek music to listen to, and I'll dig some up.

ODIE: I just looked it up and its Baglamas

KOSTAS: Oh, yeah, you're right. Anyway, he would sit there and play his little instrument and he'd be singing the blues in Greek. Now, in Greece during that time you had a different culture. Starting in the twenties there were about one million Greeks, or two million Greeks that were evicted out of Turkey and had to come back to Greece, and about one million Turks had to leave Greece to go back to Turkey. That was a part of a treaty between the two nations after they fought a war. So, you had this influx of roughly one-third of the population back in the twenties, or these new upstarts, they were Greeks, but none the less they were from a different part of the world you know? And they lived, where they lived since eternity. But they had to get

out of there because of the different religions and cultures between Greece and Turkey, one being Christian and one being Muslim. So, the influence of the Asia Minor or Occidental Greeks that came over from the orient. They brought their culture from the middle east, from Turkey, which meant that they smoked hash in their hookahs. Their style of music was different than the mainlanders of Greece that weren't part of the exchange. And the other part that added to the whole situation is that there was no work for these two million new refugees that came over. So, everybody was just holding on to something, anything they could hold onto to survive. So, everybody had the blues, because they were without work, there's no money, without money there's no food you're always hungry. With that in your stomach you're always looking across the waters or something else to find salvation.

Anyway, my father and my mother's families both came from Turkey in the twenties. They both had large families, meaning six kids to seven kids of which one or two died along the way, leaving in my mom's family six out of seven, and in my dad's family six out of seven or eight, who knows? My dad was the eldest in his clan. My mom was the eldest in her clan. During the early fifties right out of war after war after war in Greece. The nation was set back time and time and time again.

It went from one battle to the next, and even if they were on the winning side, they got the worst of it, cause the Germans up till '45. You had prior to them the Italians that invaded Greece, and it's the Germans that came to save the Italians because they were getting their asses kicked. The Greeks and Albanians never got along. It was the Albanians that let the Italians come use their ports from which they could drive their spear head into the mainland of Greece. It didn't go well for the Italians during that campaign, but still they had to be fought. So, you fought Germans, you fought Italians, you fought Albanians. Before that you had wars with the Serbs and Bulgarians, because they're our neighbors to the north, and they were all grabbing at each other's nothingness in order to enrich themselves. They were all struggling to gain more territory from the other countries. So, you had war with Bulgarians, Yugoslavians, and then you had the war with the Turks. I'm going backwards in time as opposed to when the actual conflict began, which was 1453; when the Turks invaded, or put siege to Constantinople and took over the city in the spring of that year in April and May. Since those days, 1453, there's been a Greek population in Turkey. The Turks allowed the Greeks to live in Turkey. They didn't massacre everybody. They let some of them live so that they could use them as people to do the farming and to collect food from and the tax and to use as conscripts in wars, and to take daughters from Christian centers and put in harems of Turks, that sort of shit. That's when the conflict began. That's where the Greek populations that my grandparents on both sides came out of. That's where the two million left Turkey to come back into Greece in the twenties. And there's still a sizeable population of Greeks in Turkey, but they didn't want to leave. They wanted to stay, and they're converts into Islam, they might as well be just Turks and that's what they are.

So anyway, that element of the Greek population brought with them the culture that they'd just been expelled out of. Which was like I said, honkey tonkin', which would be going to a tavern of sorts where you could buy a hookah for a half hour and get stoned. They would provide the hash, and they would also have ouzo or wine. No beer, cause Greeks never got into beer; mostly ouzo and wine. Those were the elements that made the blues happen in Greece.

ODIE: So, let me ask you real quick. The migration that happened in the twenties, would this have been your parents, or grandparents that made that migration.

KOSTAS: They both did.

ODIE: But your parents were either really young or not born when that happened correct?

KOSTAS: Yeah, in other words, my grandparents and great grandparents were the ones that escaped out of turkey in the twenties and made it back to Greece. They then had children and my parents were that crop of kids. In the 1950's, in the early fifties they were in their late teens, meaning eighteen, nineteen, twenty, or early twenties.

ODIE: Okay gotcha, I just wanted to put that family, generational context on it. So, you would go to a...when you say you would go to a...I don't know what you call it...a hookah bar. What would you call it?

KOSTAS: Taverna-Tavern, that's the way we call them in Greece. Taverna. They would...in your bigger cities, and smaller cities too. There would be hookers there, there'd be sailors there, tough guys there. There'd be thugs there. There'd be guys trying to find a job there you know. They were just escaping in the hash and the music from the troubles. At night they would escape, and in the day, they would scavenge what they could out of what there was. They were day laborers bustin' they're balls to just eat a meal or get drunk or lose it to some hooker. Something to that effect, but there is a style of music that came out of the twenties and lasted through the fifties and sixties in Greek Culture. "Rembetika"...

ODIE: Rembetika

KOSTAS: Yea Rembetika, R-E-M-B-E-T-I-K-A, Rembetika, and that is music that came out of the middle east and back into Greece, and the influences of the middle east, there's no separating what came out of where. There's a long line of establishment there. The Greeks were established in the middle east in Turkey. All of Turkey. Since, you know, B.C. times, before Christ. 1500 B.C. there were Greeks colonizing Turkey and as far as Marseille in France, and Italy, and the north coast of Africa, because they were trading with everybody and colonizing as they went. So, those people way back then, fifteen hundred years, they had their style of music. Well another group of people comes and mingles with them, and they exchange everything from ideas of food, to astronomy, to music, and they incorporate these things they learned into their cultures; and that's the way it's been for the last five thousand years. So, what you're hearing today as Turkish or Arabic music has its influences in the byzantine world, and in classical before it; and roman world which came out of classical Greece anyway. So, you have this influence of the middle eastern music that comes back with these two million, and that is the rock and roll music of the culture of Greece during that time period, late forties all through the fifties. Everybody wanted to be that rebel, and everybody was that rebel. You know with...They were all tough guys, James Dean and Elvis. The term for these guys was Manga. M-A-N-G-A Manga.

ODIE: And what did they, did they have a certain look about them? Or was that just that they were rough around the edges.

KOSTAS: The look, oddly enough, is pretty universal. When I went to Vietnam in the seventies they had a similar look. Clean white shirt, black trousers, and whatever shoes you could find. And that was it, clean cut with a little thin mustache, kind of like Slim Whitman would have. And their hair was combed back like an Elvis pompadour thing. I've got pictures of my dad from that time period with his sunglasses on. They were all just trying to be cool.

ODIE: Well let me ask you this. The blues you heard your dad play on the baglama, was that of the Rembetika tradition? The blues you were talking about.

KOSTAS: Yes, the Rembetika is the Greek Blues.

Odie: Okay how would you explain that to me musically?

KOSTAS: Melodically it's some of the prettiest melodies I've ever heard, and I have to say that I draw on a lot of the melody of the times. The structure of their melodies made sense, and it was beautiful, and when you have the bouzouki, the baglama, the guitar, the piano, bass, accordion, and the fiddle. Then you throw in clarinets, and you have your classic rock and roll orchestra. Hellenic orchestra.

ODIE: Would it be a lot of minor keys? I'm just thinking with middle eastern music, would it be a lot of minor-key based tunes?

KOSTAS: Yeah, but you would have to study it to understand what it's about. The greatest singer of Rembetika was a cat named Kazantzidis. Then there was another songwriter singer named Tsitsanis. Then, there were composers of that style of music, and you can still find their music on two albums that came out on United Artists' label back in the early sixties: '61, '62, '63 right around there. The first album was an album called "Never on Sunday". The composer of those melodies and songs was Mikos Hadjidakis. And his second album following the first was "Dancing on Sunday". So, if you find those two albums and listen to them you will have a wonderful representation of what I'm talking about; of that music that came out of the coast of Turkey, modern day. And everywhere from Smyrna to Constantinople, that was just the music of that world. So, if you want to look those up Odie, you'll find those interesting.

ODIE: Okay I will. Let me ask you this...that's why I'm glad I'm getting these spellings and different things on here. So, like melodically, since you call it the blues, would you say the melodies would have the blues scale, as far as like a flatted third or seven in those melodies?

KOSTAS: No, I call them the Greek blues only in reference to where they came out of, pain and suffering. And that's the reference that I'm connecting to.

ODIE: Okay, the reason I wanted to ask that was, you were talking about Islam and the different cultures coming from all over the place. Someone played the Islamic prayer from Africa that predates the blues and basically, you can hear the blues coming from that. That's a whole other thing I think, but I was just curious...

KOSTAS: Only in reference to the lifestyle that came with the music. Guys were getting fucked up on a nightly basis. Guys were living lives of pain and crime, and murder, and thievery. Women were being abused by men every chance you could abuse one. So, what made it the blues was the suffering the music came out of.

ODIE: Yeah, I'm looking at, there's several ways to spell Rembetika. How did you pronounce it Kostas?

KOSTAS: R-E-M rem-be-ti-ka.

ODIE: Yes, just saying that's it's an urban popular song of the Greeks, especially the poorest from the late nineteenth century to the fifties. That's interesting.

KOSTAS: Yeah

ODIE: So, let me ask you this, those were your musical influences as a child...

KOSTAS: There was another element that came into that whole thing. As a child growing up in Greece, on occasion, you would hear things like this (hums tune). When I first heard "The Caissons Go Rolling On", it took me out of the fucking... I mean...It must've been memorable cause I remember...where did that melody come from? In other words, I was always intrigued with music that I heard. Even as a single digit toddler that's all I had to play with. That and my imagination. I had my underwear on. I had a pair of wooden clogs for my feet. I had no brothers or sisters. I was the first child to be born of all my brothers and sisters. My mom and Dad were married in an arranged marriage. In other words, she was the oldest of her family, he as the oldest of his, so their parents said "we're gonna hook you guys up, you're on your own, god bless you." The priest crowns them and off they go into the world to find a life. They never knew each other before they got married, and to suddenly find yourself in bed with your husband and not know who in the fuck he is must've been interesting. It was forced on them, they lived with it for my case, twenty-one years, and then the differences between them were too great for them to continue on the process. So, they divorced at that time.

ODIE: So, you told me that Calliope met a chaplain there in Greece that helped you guys get hooked up with the family in Montana. Can you tell me about leaving...the want to leave Greece, the vision, and the process, just tell me about all that?

KOSTAS: Yeah so, my mom, after she had me, she went and found a job. She was working at a cigarette factory packaging up cigarettes. My dad was a plumber and a metal worker in a plumber metal workshop; where they would cut pipe and do things with that plumbing

business. He was also a soldier from '46 or '47 through '49. He was a part of the defense of Greece from the communist invasion from '46-'49. I asked him once how many people he killed he said six or seven he wasn't not sure. I said "I'm proud of you".

ODIE: So, when did they decide they wanted to get out and why?

KOSTAS: Well in the early fifties after I was born. I was born in '49. There was nothing for them. My grandmother took care of me while my grandfather was up in the mountains patrolling for the government. My dad was ether a soldier or got out of the army and had a job as a metal worker/ plumber. My mom went to work as a...rolling cigarettes or in a hospital cleaning as the cleaning woman in the hospital. So...what was the question again Odie?

ODIE: Well the inspiration to get out, and then the process of coming to America.

KOSTAS: Well the inspiration of getting out of Greece was...if hunger and poverty can be your inspiration, the whole country was full of it. We were lucky in the sense that all the children of Greece, in the big cities, were being taken care of by government run programs and schools. You brought your kid to the school in the morning, and the school would give them breakfast or lunch, teach them, let them play, be friends. At five or six at night somebody would come pick you up, mom or dad, or one of your aunts or your grandmother or somebody and take you home. So, I was a part of that social plan; put in affect through the martial plan. There was an American there. He may have been a chaplain, but I think he was some kind of school administrator or a doctor or politician, some kind of a bureaucrat to help that particular school in Salonica during the time I was there. But this man became aware of who I was, and I swear to God somehow or another he talked to me out all these thousands of kids that were in school, and some of them were my age. Some were fourteen-fifteen years old at the time. This would've been '53, '54, '55 right around there. We left in December of '56. It was almost 1957 that we arrived in Glendive, Montana from Greece. Anyway, and I don't know his name, I should've. While Bob and Ida Seeve, the folks that sponsored us from Savage, Montana; this little town called Savage in North-Eastern Montana, right next to Williston, North Dakota. The next biggest town over there. Anyway, so while they were alive, I should've asked them, but I never did. It never came up while they were still here, and they were here through the nineties.

ODIE: So, this administrator hooked y'all up with them and they paid your way over?

KOSTAS: Yeah, I mean, this fella would send me home. I remember during Christmas he dressed up as Santa Claus and passed out gifts at the school to all the kids he had presents for, and he gave me a little package to take home. Then, my mom in Greek, and him in English, maybe through their interpreters, would converse and got to know each other. They got to talkin' and they have probably a dozen if not more conversations over the next year or so. Mom asked him if he could possibly help us to get out of Greece and to...Would there be anybody in America? That's what I referred to in my speech "A place called America" you know and went through that primitive thought trying to talk like they would've talked. Anyway, he inquired back here that somehow, he got the name of....through the congregational church the word came back to

this little town in Montana, called Savage. In this little community church with maybe thirty or forty people, farmers from the area. This one family was all in tears to bring this family of a mother, a father, a son and the mother's sister, Tina, to the states at their expense, and...So that's what happened. This fella connected that family to my family in Greece. Those four individuals, my mom, dad, myself, and my aunt, and... it just happened you know? These people were farmers. They raise corn and sugar beets. They had some cattle, maybe twenty head of cattle. They milked their cows. They had their chickens. They had their farm. You know it was a small little farm, and they were a part of a community. There were two churches in Savage in 1956. One was the Congregational church, the other was the Catholic church. We were Orthodox, so we went wherever our sponsors were going. They were going to the congregational church. So, uh, that's how we got here. They invited us over here. They paid for our way. They became our sponsors for two years. They took care of us, provided jobs for my dad. He was a farm hand. My mom was a stay at home, fix dinner, take care of the family from the home front. Me, I went to school at savage, starting in the first grade. The first year that I was in school I was basically just trying to learn English. So, that winter from '56 through that spring, as long as school was still in session, I was learning school. At the ripe age of seven I was learning English. Two years from the date that we arrived in um... '59, we... by the way the law system was written up back then...after two years the immigrants can go to a new city. They figure your sponsor has taught you how to speak English, the first two years and you'd have a job. They took care of you; your sponsor did for two years basically. That's why I said in my speech, "now it's time for you to go home and do your own cooking" or something to that effect.

ODIE: (Laughs)

KOSTAS: Do you remember that?

ODIE: I do remember that. Yeah. So, did the sponsor family get any type of...

KOSTAS: No.

ODIE: They did that because they were good people?

KOSTAS: They were good, solid, American, Christian folk.

ODIE: Yeah, wow.

KOSTAS: I mean the blindly invited a family of four into their house, fed them and housed them for 2 solid years, and then released them into the world.

ODIE: So, you guys lived in their home with them?

KOSTAS: Yeah, we lived in the basement.

ODIE: That is beautiful, let me ask you this. How did you come across the ocean? Was it by plane or boat?

KOSTAS: It was a plane. Either It had two propellers on each wing. Whatever those planes were back then. I couldn't tell you...it was probably Pan-am, but we flew from... we took the train from Salonika to Athens. We flew out of Athens. We landed in England. From England we flew to New York. We got to New York in the middle of a blizzard. Had to fly out of New York, couldn't land there, so we went to Newfoundland. Parked there till the storm was over, flew back into New York. I have memories of me, my mom, and my dad, holding his or her hand, or my aunt's. Staring straight up into the sky trying to find the end of these skyscrapers in downtown New York City.

ODIE: Wow, how old were you?

KOSTAS: I was six and a half.

ODIE: Wow

KOSTAS: And this would've been December the sixth, seventh of 1956. So almost January first, New Years. So, there we were, strangers I a strange land. In the middle of some night, staring at these silent streets. Staring straight up and watching snowflakes come down and not seeing the end of those buildings. And this was my first encounter with America. Was in New York City looking straight up, and just... I mean I might've well have landed on the surface of some planet; you know because it was so alien, everything was. So, we were at the train station in New York City, and looking around there waiting for our train, that's what that whole vision was about. So, we got on a train in New York. We go across snow fields form New York all the way through Pennsylvania, through Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Minnesota, wherever. Across North Dakota, and into Glendive, Montana. There, that was as close as the train would get us to Savage, and Glendive from Savage is maybe a hundred miles away. So, the family, our sponsors, the Seeves, Robert and Ida Seeve, and their kids: Bobby Lou, Alice Kate and Craig met us. and into their car we piled. We didn't have much luggage. We had two suitcases. One was made out of wood, and I still have that one down in the basement somewhere. Um, and that was it. We had the clothes on our back that we had and headed for the farm. Lived there for two years with the Seeves. Dad was a farmhand. He milked cows, plowed fields. He wrangled and he fixed broken things. He was a great handyman.

ODIE: Were those happy times for you family to...I'm sure it was scary to leave family and your home, but do you remember that as happy times? Your first two years in America?

KOSTAS: Well...we were...it was...secure times. And security translated to me, back then, as happy times, because I got to see my dad every day, and I got to hang out with my mom all day, and my aunt was there, but we had no other Greek people hanging around us. We would get packages from our relatives back in Greece once every three or four or five months. And it would be a can of Tsipouro that they smuggled. It would be like an olive oil can.

ODIE: Uh huh

KOSTAS: But these were the big olive oil cans, and somebody would put a little pin sized hole on the bottom of it. Drain it of olive oil, fill it up, somehow or another fill it with ouzo. Then seal it back up with a spot of solder and send it over in that fashion to us. My dad had a can of that shit with us on the train, and he would get one of the black guys that were porters, he would get them wasted every night, and the porter in turn would give me Babe Ruth's and Hershey bars.

ODIE: You said New York was like landing on another planet. What were some other cultural differences you noticed as a boy early on making that move?

KOSTAS: Well I noticed how big America was, even though it didn't mean much to me. It took two or three days sittin' on the train to get from New York to Montana, maybe longer I don't remember. I'd never experienced snow, it was cold, and in Montana, yea it was definitely the middle of winter. The language barrier was, um, it separated us.

ODIE: And no one in your family spoke English at the time, right?

KOSTAS: No, so we had to learn the language and we were in the beginning, especially in school, some of the people were rather critical and cruel of this family of strangers. Cause there were no other Greeks, I guarantee you, in Savage. Probably the nearest ones would've been in Billings, or Bismarck, or somewhere, but we ended up finding a colony of Greeks, a Greek community in Billings, and that's where we ended gravitated and moved to in '59. Culturally, everything was different. I mean, unthinkable different because...in order to...you can't make something out of nothing, and nothing was all I knew about America. So, everything I encountered was brand new. And as such it was strange, fascinating, and delightful.

ODIE: What's your very first memory of being exposed to American Music? Was it in Greece before you got here, or was it when you got here?

KOSTAS: Well as I said back in the old country, along with the Greek melodies that I would hear, I would hear melodies that come out of military bands. (sings tune) That melody stuck in my head from when I was in Greece, because (sings tune) Anyway it was different, and there were other melodies that were foreign that I had heard, but I didn't know what they were. They weren't Greek that's for sure. My first influences of American music were probably from the radio stations that we could receive. There may have been a radio station in Sydney, which was twenty miles north of Savage. And Sydney was a town of two or three thousand people back then, it's not much bigger now, but there might be ten to twelve thousand now. Um, maybe Williston, North Dakota had a radio station or two. In any case, there were radios in the house, and people could turn on a radio station, my mom would, just to have background noise while she was doing her work. And the three kids upstairs. Craig was exactly my age. Bobby Lou was, if I was seven, she as eight or nine, and to my seven, Alice Kate was fourteen or fifteen at the

time. Alice Kate being the teenager in the bunch upstairs, she was listening to teenage music from 1956-'57. That would've been songs like "Young Love", "Gone" by Ferlin Husky, Elvis Presly, all his songs from that time period. Perry Como singing "Catch a Falling Star" and "Put in in your Pocket". Kay Starr singing "Rock and Roll Waltz". It was just the songs of the late fifties.

ODIE: Would, in Montana during the late fifties, '56-'57, would you hear black music there like little Richard and Chuck Berry? Would that make it on the radio at all, were there any race radio stations at all?

KOSTAS: They, if they were being...if "Lucile" was being played, it was the Pat Boone version.

ODIE: Well that's what I was curious about, so y'all probably didn't get like a Chicago radio station or..

KOSTAS: Nope nope nope, we weren't quite that in tune. I was just a single digit kid you know, and I didn't know the differences of what was going on in the neighborhood back then. It took another six years up in until I was twelve-thirteen before I knew who Chuck Berry was. And he was probably the first black guy that I heard the music of. Him and Lloyd Price, and whoever was singing at that time. The Platters, they were a black group from that same time period.

ODIE: I can see how they would be considered more sophisticated where you might've heard them. I was just curious about the times, and geographically what you were getting there.

KOSTAS: I was getting the milk and white bread version things.

ODIE: Of Rock and Roll. But you were getting pure country, the country stuff straight-up right?

KOSTAS: Straight up, and the rock and roll of that time period was just a degree or two of difference between the rock and the country.

ODIE: Yeah, sure

KOSTAS: Because Rock came out of Country.

ODIE: Yea

KOSTAS: The very same people, the first ones that did rock and roll were also doing country. So, it was just an attitude in the beginning. Rock and Roll was an attitude that separated the children from their parents. Rock and Roll, in the beginning, was just a way of flipping your dad off, you know and your mom, because you didn't wanna clean your room. Rock and Roll means to never have to say you're sorry. That's what Rock and Roll is. It's an act of rebellion. So, um...

ODIE: So really that music, the Rembetika you spoke of had some of the same elements on Rock and Roll.

KOSTAS: Yes, exactly, that's why I call it the Greek blues, Greek Rock and Roll. It came out of the same mindset. The only difference is the instrumentation. The music that was coming out of Greece didn't get amplified till maybe the early 60's. In the 50's every time you would get a band together, everything was acoustic. So, you had a piano, maybe a drummer, but everything else in there, the violin, the ude, the bouzouki, the baglama, the accordion, all those instruments they were just done acoustic in the room. The singer would just stand up and face the crowd and sing. It was just, they didn't have PA's and instruments. Well the sixties brought all that into play, and so it went.

ODIE: So, you told me before you were a shoeshine boy, and you sang to customers, I think. How old were you, tell me about that?

KOSTAS: Well now when we first arrived in Billings in '59, it would've been the spring of '59 somewhere in there. And upon arriving there we rented an apartment from an old Greek fella who had a couple of apartments adjacent to his home. His name was Pete Sodus. And he was an old immigrant who came to Montana back in the early 1900's when he left Greece and came to America and got a job working from the railroad, the North Pacific. Then settled in Billings, along with the rest of the community of Greeks that were there: Restaurant owners, and uh, businesspeople, small businesspeople. What was the question? I spaced it out.

ODIE: Well it was about you being shoeshine boy and singing songs to customers. I wanted to ask how old you were and about the songs and all of that.

KOSTAS: Well alright so at nine, when we moved to Billings and lived there, the house we rented was maybe seven blocks away from downtown. five, six, seven blocks away from where the Billings Gazette was, and that was the local newspaper at the time. There were two newspapers in Billings: *The Gazette*, and the *Yellowstone News*. So, it just came natural to me to go downtown every evening after school. So, around 4-4:30 you were standing in line with little white, black, Mexican and some Indian boys, standing in line with about a dollar in my pocket; getting this fella named Carl who would give us whatever we want as far as newspapers, whatever we could afford. We would pay two and a half cents a paper and sell them for five. So, we were doubling our money. So, for a dollar you could buy...I don't know if it was fifteen papers or whatever it was. I'd go out and sell those. Once I got my papers, got in line and got my papers, made friends with the kids that I was then friends with for the rest of my life. The either friends or enemies, a lot of those street kids were also my enemies. They would pick on me. I was always the foreigner, but they knew who I was, and I didn't back off. I stood my ground and got in fuckin fights every night of my life back there. Sometimes I'd get thumped, and sometimes I'd do the thumping. I wasn't afraid to take it on when it came. Anyway, I would take my hand full of newspapers in my paper bag, and I also noticed at that time that there were shoe shiners in different locations on the streets. Mostly in the pool hall. There were about three or four of those guys. So, I bought a shoeshine kit. I bought you know, your basic colors: black, brown and neutral. I got some brushes and rags and by god I knew how to spit, and I would give you a shoeshine. I would hit all the damn bars on Main street, 1st avenue,

Minnesota avenue, and so on, wherever all the bars were. I would go in there and there would be lonely men on barstools drinking little glasses of red wine or beer. I would go down the row and say "Shoeshine? Paper?". They would say "Yeah, but you gotta sing a song". So, I would sing a song for these people, and the song that I sang to them primarily back there was "He's got the whole world in his Hands". And it just would've...I guess it warmed their hearts enough to where they would reach in, buy a newspaper, tip me a quarter, and then on I'd go to the next guy. So, by the end of the day when I'd get home, if I hit the streets after school, say I was in the second grade in '59, I would go downtown in the winter times after school. I'd hit the streets selling my newspapers and shining shoes and walk back home that night maybe at around 8. Sometimes I'd be out till around eleven or twelve doing exactly that. Most of those nights were done in the summertime, and back in those days your mom and dad didn't worry about their little son who was ten or eleven years old at the most. They didn't worry, there was nothing to worry about, there was the craziness back there that there is today.

ODIE: So, let me ask you a couple of questions about that. Did you hear any music in those bars?

KOSTAS: Absolutely

ODIE: What were you hearing in them?

KOSTAS: The jukeboxes. There were two forms of music in the bars: jukeboxes and bands. Bands played primarily on weekends, and they would play Friday nights, Saturday nights, and Sunday afternoons. The bands would play on Sunday maybe from one or two in the afternoon till five-six that night. Then they'd go home after that cause they had to get ready for going to work on Monday you know. All the women were in those layered petty coats that made the dresses look like they were...uh...just...I don't know... just row upon row of this undergarment, that made they're dresses bloom out sort of, you know what I'm talking about?

ODIE: Yes, yes, so there was still kind of some western stuff going on? Is that what that is?

KOSTAS: It was, it was, along with their boots. The boys they wore their Levi's, or black slacks. Even their shoes, or boots, cowboy boots. Most of your cowboys wore boots. Most of the people wore boots out here. The women wore boots too. And I would shine women's shoes too. Boots were fifty cents, because you had to do the tops as well as the bottoms.

ODIE: So, you said there were bands and jukeboxes. What kind of music would you hear from the bands and jukeboxes?

KOSTAS: They were doing traditional country and western music of the forties, fifties and early sixties up to that moment wherever I was.

ODIE: So, would you hear western swing out there?

KOSTAS: You would hear everything from Hank Thompson, to Hank Snow, to Ernest Tubb, Kitty Wells. You'd hear Wanda Jackson. You'd hear Ferlin Husky, Jim Reeves, Eddy Arnold. These were...that was the pantheon of country artists for the forties, fifties and into the early sixties. They were all going strong. They were all, during the summer times especially, the big stars would travel in these cavalcades and would come into town and print up posters that they would put in the businesses: "Johnny Cash and June Carter", "The Jordanaires", whoever the headliners were and the other acts along with them. Then, they would probably use one band, and then all these artists would get up and do their segment. You'd see them at the Shrine Auditorium, at The Beacon Club, The Armory, wherever there was enough room for a big crowd for two hundred to five-hundred people, because that was a big crowd. A hundred was a big crowd. Five hundred was a big crowd. They would also come during the fair and entertain people during the fair. So, it was just the beginning of that booking enterprise that would then, from those early days, turn into those William Morris and the rest of those agencies that book all the different groups back then and still do.

ODIE: When you were in the bars shoe shining, either hearing bands or jukebox, did you hear other music like Polka music or any regional music? Were there other influences other than country in those bars?

KOSTAS: Absolutely, the same people that listened to country and western music also listened to Polka music, would also listen to folk artists like Burl Ives, and Jimmy Driftwood, who is a great writer. They would also listen to Jimmie Davis, uh, who I thought he did "This Old House".

ODIE: What about Woodie Guthrie? I know that was a different era, but would that kind of stuff still resonate?

KOSTAS: Woodie Guthrie came a little bit later, so somewhere around '64, '65 I started to hear more of the Guthrie influence, because he was more political in his...where he found a listening audience. He...

ODIE: Well...

KOSTAS: Oh, you go ahead...

ODIE: No, you go ahead I'm sorry...

KOSTAS: Woody Guthrie was in your Junior High to High School days they would have hootenannies on the weekends at the Eastern Montana College, and at Rocky Mountain College. You would go there, and all the kids would play their Chad Mitchel Trio, and the Kingston Trio, and uh you know that sort of... you know...The New Christy Minstrels. That sort of...

ODIE: So, Guthrie got revived in the sixty's folk revival.

KOSTAS: Yeah, he got kicked up with “This Land is Your Land” and all the rest.

ODIE: Alright let me go back and ask you before we move on about these bars you shoe-shined in and sang. You said you’d go in during the week and it would be mostly lonely drinking wine or beer. Was there a shortage of ladies in Montana? Or they just didn’t at that time go to bars as much unless they had dates. I’m just curious about that.

KOSTAS: The only time you’d see a woman in a bar was when she was going in to grab her man off the barstool and take him home. (Laughs)

ODIE: (Laughs) So, it wasn’t lady like

KOSTAS: Yeah, I’m serious. The weekends is when the women would come out. They would come out in group of two or three, maybe four. The guys would probably be solo or with their buddy. So, the girls it was a promenade. They would strut their stuff in front of each other, and they’d ask each other to dance, and buy each other drinks. Then they’d get to know each other, and then they’d go home together, meet the next night or do whatever they were gonna do. During the weekdays, in most of the bars, it was lonely men with their head in a black cloud sittin’ on a stool.

ODIE: So, you said little glasses of wine or beer, and I always pictured the west as guys drinking whiskey at the bar and all. Is that just kind of a...what’s that about I’m just curious.

KOSTAS: Well the deal is this. Most of the guys in the bar...a glass of red wine...they weren’t in those tumbler glasses. These were straight up little round narrow round and maybe five-inch-tall glasses. And you would get your...I don’t know if it was some Rosé... like uh who are some of those Italian...Rosé, where you could buy a bottle or jug for five or six bucks. You know...table wine.

ODIE: Yeah

KOSTAS: Well that’s basically what they had. That’s where the “Winos” were...you know...You could afford a glass of wine for... I don’t know if it was a dime, twenty cents or a quarter, and beer was the same. Back in those days if you should be lucky you could find an eight-ounce glass, for which the top of the glass mushroomed out from its base, and sometimes the beer manufacturer’s logos would be on the glass. So, you would have “Lucky Logger”, or “Olympia”, or “Great Falls Select”, or “Highlander”, or “Sheridan Beer”. Those were local beers from around here. “Hams”, “Greenbelt”; All those were different popular beers in those days. So, for a quarter or twenty cents you could buy a bottle of beer, and they would either have the short ones or the long necks. And then for an added dime you could get yourself a little can of tomato juice and get your vegetables while you were getting your alcohol.

ODIE: Let me ask you this about those times. I remember in your acceptance speech at the hall of fame that you mentioned that you grew up seeing cowboys in Montana, and then you said, “real cowboys”. (laughs)

KOSTAS: (laughs) yeah

ODIE: And it tickled me because there’s Ronnie Dunn with “cowboy” tattooed on his forearm, and Dwight Yoakum with his cowboy hat doing his thing, and all that funny stuff. Tell me about growin’ up around real cowboys, because that’s something I know nothing about.

KOSTAS: Well Montana is a rural state in the northwest, and it was originally settled by ranchers, agrarians (farmers), foresters, or miners. All four camps are basic pillars to who Montanans are; if you’re not a native American. So, Montana was at one time you know.... I mean cowboys ran the state, and cowboys then branched out and went into trucking businesses where they would...at one time you know you would have the Chisholm’s trail or the Santa Fe or the Bozeman trail and bring your herd of ten thousand cows up here. Now you have semi’s, so you got into the trucking business as well as the ranching business. Well then you know along with trucking businesses you became an oil person. You know, because if you were successful at being a cattle man then you branched out because they found oil on your property or coal. So, a lot of industrial people were also cowboys up here. I mean people that branched out into other fields besides ranching. They were still cowboys at heart. And all the business they got into ran through each other. They were a part of what made that particular business work. Ranchers up here in Montana, the cowboys, the ranches... you know there’s ranches that are two hundred and fifty mile square. Big enough to fit Delaware or Maryland into one ranch. So, within that ranch you’d have maybe fifteen to twenty cowboys working as hands, taking care of this section or that section of ranch. Anyway, so the state, Billings in particular, was a hub for transporting cattle and sheep. So, it would bring livestock in, and it would bring livestock out of the state to go to market. Chicago, Oklahoma, wherever, Texas, Colorado. It became where cowboys would bring their cows to market. There was a feedlot, and livestock commission was in doings. The fairgrounds was all about cattle and sheep and farm animals and all that sort of stuff. There was just a degree of separation between a rancher and a farmer. They both lead similar, if not the same life. So that’s what Billings was full of. Even the truckers wore boots. During the months of May through August the guy got laid off on the ranch, so he took a job in town as a truck driver. Then, later on he got on a farm and was working, you know. Doing something related to the farming side of things. It was all about being rural country, and white., and I don’t mean that in any negative way. It’s just the way it was. Montana was absolutely as white as white could get, with the exception of The Crow, The Sioux, the Cheyenne, The Arapaho, The Cree tribes, the Blackfoot. So, you had that element, you also had a Mexican element. There were...So, if Billings back in 1959 or ‘60 might’ve been twenty-five thousand people. Of that twenty-five thousand people four thousand might’ve been Mexicans.

ODIE: And did you hear any music from the Mexicans as a kid?

KOSTAS: I did, because I was friends with a cat named Chan Romero, and in 1959 or 60, right around there. The first wave of rock and rollers were Elvis, and Johnny Burnette, and all the...Cochran, and whoever else was on that train. You know, Carl Perkins and, what was that..."Pretty Woman"...who am I thinking of?

ODIE: "Pretty Woman"...Rock and Roll...Well you said Wanda Jackson already. Lorie Collins?

KOSTAS: No no, well... The Collins kids were a part of that. No...uh...he did pretty woman, who am I thinking of?

ODIE: Oh, Roy Orbison!

KOSTAS: Yeah Roy Orbison. The class of '56 I think is what they were known as. Um, after them, in the mid-fifties you started to see black labels appearing: Chess, Specialty, Jewel and other small labels that would release artists like Lloyd Price, Little Richard, Fats Domino on Imperial. So, you've got to hear those cats coming through the airwaves in the late sixties, or not late sixties, the late fifties. So, say from about '56, '57, '58 with the advent of every latter year in the fifties, more black artists were being heard by white America, even in Montana. So, one of the most popular black artists back then was Little Richard, and whatever that guy came out with, some white cat would cut a white version of it, and it sucked, but they still got rich doing it. That would be your Pat Boone's, you know. So, Little Richard was coming up with these songs like Lucile. When Little Richard did it, I mean he rocked the fucking thing out. Lit the fuse and off it went into the solar system. Along come the best white version of Lucile to come around, was done by The Everly Brothers. Their version of Lucile was prettier than Little Richard's, because of the production and also their voices. One of my favorite licks of all time is in the sol of that and I think...what's his name?

ODIE: Chet...

KOSTAS: Chet Atkins was playing the guitar. But, it's just a lilt on a guitar. (sings lick) right there. Anyway, it stays with you. We dissect these things and look into them and love them. Anyway...

ODIE: Well, let me go back and ask you. You mentioned the Mexican population in Montana and started to tell me about what music you heard as a boy from that group of people.

KOSTAS: Okay well so I was telling you. Here's the connection. Little Richard comes out with Lucile in the late fifties on specialty records. A young Mexican kid in Billings by the name of Chan Romero hears the song and is inspired, because Chan was, and is, a great musician. He's a great songwriter. He's a great guitar player. He plays the blues, Mexican style blues, but he feels that shit because he's a natural. So, Chan, upon being influenced by, I'm thinking his hero of the time, or heroes. He grows up in the south side of town. That's the poor side of Billings. That's across the tracks. That's where all the Mexicans and blacks and trailer whites lived. So, there relegated to live on that side of town, and the rest of Billings lived on the other side of the tracks. So the white kids from the goodie side of town would go to the southside and hang out

with the Mexicans, the blacks, and the poor white's, and party with them because they partied a lot better than we did, because they were not as regulated as we were by rules and by laws. So, they snuck in weed, whites, and wine and mixed it all together. Their jukeboxes were full of soul music and the rippin' rockin' shit that was being put out by every other color of people besides the whites. Their food was soul food you know, and they all lived under the radar because that's where the hookers were. That's where the pimps were. That's where the kids that wanted to be rockers would go and hang out and listen to the jukeboxes in those joints. So, Chan Romero grew up on the southside. He was a poor Mexican kid in a white town. Um, but he was born to be connected to the music. And his influences were the black music and the Mexican music that was coming out at that time. So, at that time music by Mexicans, that would be Ritchie Valens primarily. And there might've been a couple of other Mexican artists that were starting to make noise back there. In any case, Chan's hero was Little Richard and he patterned and wrote this song called "The Hippy Hippy Shake". And if you listen to it and listen to Lucile and study the way the two songs are constructed, you'll see where Chan was basically rewriting "Lucile", but

ODIE: Wow that.. I was just looking at him online, and I know the Swinging Blue Jeans version, and the Georgia Sunrise version, and the Beatles live version at the Cavern Club. So you...you knew him as a teenager?

KOSTAS: Yeah I did.

ODIE: So, he was a big influence on you then I would say songwri... I mean you knew somebody that could actually do...that could actually do it.

KOSTAS: Well not only that, but I recorded a 45 in 1966 on his label and anytime he would put out a new 45 it was nothing to create your own label. So, it came out, my 45, produced by him, was on his label called Warrior Records. The song was, one side of it was called "Jane". I wrote that song, and there really wasn't much to it at all. It was garbled up nonsense from beyond, except that it also revealed that I was intrigued with melody. You might be able to find that online under my name. and you might be able to hear that particular rendering. So, in any case I did a 45 with him when I was a junior in high school, and...yeah that was interesting. I was selling 45's out of my locker like you wouldn't believe man.

ODIE: And then was Jane before "Something We Called Love"?

KOSTAS: They were both at the same time. Yeah that was the record.

ODIE: I never knew about that influence on you in your own town. That's huge man. Don't you think, I mean, you knew somebody that write a song that would get recorded by other people?

KOSTAS: Well the fact is. When I think about it today, as to what I was thinking back in that time period. Chan became an instant star at that point in time. Not on the basis of other groups that recorded his songs, they came after. Chan had a regional minor hit. It was more than

regional. It was you know, Pan-American. It went from one coast to the other, but it was a small hit, but it was one of those things that got shipped over to the European continent as records would weekly go...whatever current new singles were comin' out of the states were being shipped over to England and Germany, and the kids over there were picking up on it and thinking it was cool. The bands over there, like the Beatles, who were just staring out and playing in Hamburg, and did a cover of "The Hippy Hippy Shake". That began the process by which Chan lived for the next forty or fifty years, and still does, off the royalties of that one song. He never had any other big hits after that. He had his deal with United, but was that the label I told you he was on?

ODIE: Well, he owned Warrior. You didn't tell me what label he was on though.

KOSTAS: Well, when he...so in... whatever year it was '60 or '61 he came out with the "Hippy Hippy Shake", and he pretty much based his song off of, in my opinion, off Little Richard. T that same point in time. Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens, The Big Bopper...that airplane ride they took was...that happened at about a year before Chan...or somewhere in that same period of time. You'll have to go back and see when those cats got killed.

ODIE: It looks here like he put out "Hippy Hippy Shake" in '59 on Colombia. So, it should of been around the same...it all kind of happened here in the same time.

KOSTAS: Yeah so with Ritchie Valens no longer being around; he was dead. They had to find a new Ritchie Valens, and when Chan came out with that new song record moguls knew that there were as many... in the country they were trying to direct songs to each camp of people that existed. There were Mexican kids that wanted to hear more Mexican kids and their rock and roll. And Chan was the next big Mexican artist after Ritchie Valens with his song "The Hippy Hippy Shake". Which was a regional; hit, and then it died, and then Chans career disappeared as well. He came back to Billings, and in '64 '65, and prior maybe '63 '62, I was shining shoes and selling papers, and that's how I got to know him. He hears me singing "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands" somewhere on the southside, and you know he befriended me. I mean he was a little older than me, and so I started hanging out with him to whatever extent and was influenced by him. Not necessarily by...um...any direct influence. It was more that he was one of the neighborhood kids and he did what I wanted to do. I was um...the only thing we had in common was that I had the desire to...his...he having the...he had the ability, because he was older, so he knew how to play the guitar better than I did. He understood music better than I did, but we both have a love and a hunger for this thing. You know, I worked with him on that little record that we put out back there, and so that was...Chan was an influence...but he didn't influence me in his style...

ODIE: Right

KOSTAS: and what I did...

ODIE: I'm just saying to be in a small town and actually know someone that would write a song and get some notoriety or someone who's been to LA, that'd be a window to look through.

KOSTAS: When he went to LA, he lived with Ritchie Valens wife and Mother. They adopted him because they thought....they were heartbroken, number one, and to find this young Mexican kid who did what their son did, or their husband did. We were all into Rock and Roll and you know we were just crazy...white...or crazy young kids setting out to be you know...everything we saw in Rock and Roll that we wanted to be you know?

ODIE: Wow

KOSTAS: Before rockers had long hair, they had that Baptist hair due that Elvis...you know...that comb...that unicorn that comes out...that black shiny unicorn that would come out seven, eight, nine, ten inches. As far out as you could get it out front of you.

ODIE: That's funny, Is Chan still in Billings?

KOSTAS: I think he goes there at times, and tother times I think he's in California. He turned in to a Pentecostal preacher kind of guy, and he talks like this (in an imitative voice) "Kostas I'm telling you, you got to come to church man, Jesus is gonna save you, you're running with the devil."

ODIE: Oh, that's funny. I just looked up a thing where it says he lives in Palm Springs, but it looks here like back around in 2014 McCartney was coming through Montana to play and Chan was trying to hook up and do the "Hippy Hippy Shake" with him.

KOSTAS: Yeah Mcart...He didn't have time for that. I don't know that they hooked up but...

ODIE: Well its cool that he wrote a song that...if he never did anything else that's pretty cool.

KOSTAS: Absolutely, because that one particular song...first of all it was a hit for Chan. Then come along the Swinging Blue Jeans and recorded it in '64 I think.

ODIE: Yep

KOSTAS: And then whoever you mentioned some spandex...

ODIE: No, the Atlanta, Georgia rock and roll band The Georgia Satellites did it on the soundtrack of "Cocktail", which was a huge Tom Cruise movie in the eighties.

KOSTAS: Mhm

ODIE: And then I would say that when the Beatles anthology came out in the nineties; their Star Club version was on that. That anthology sold really well.

KOSTAS: Mhm yeah

ODIE: I had a star club record when I was like nineteen that was...there was... and I'm sure those were bootlegs I don't know...but there were vinyl records of The Beatles paying star club years ago. I don't know if those were bootlegs or not, but I bet the anthology paid well.

KOSTAS: I'm sure but off of that one song, Chan lived from 1959 through the current year; whatever amount of years it's been. Um, '59, '69, '79, '89, '99, that's fifty. '09 is sixty, and '19 is seventy-one years.

ODIE: Shit

KOSTAS: Or is it '61

ODIE: I don't know but ats a copyright man! (laughs) That's pretty awesome!

KOSTAS: Oh my god one song, and Chan, he still goes to England and Europe and Australia and does their summer tours. The Cavalcades that Alan Freed shit that used to... you know...The Shirelles and Bobby V and all the rest of them they get together and...Yea...do their wang dang doodle.

ODIE: This is a lot of fun Kostas.

KOSTAS: It is for me too.

ODIE: I'm gonna save these recordings, this is really cool man I appreciate you just hanging and visiting with me about all this. Like, there's a lot here I didn't know and some I did, and it's just...its really cool.

KOSTAS: Well Odie, I appreciate someone wanting to delve into what I recall of it all. I appreciate it too. There isn't much left to do in life except to just keep on living one day at a time. Having your memoirs taken a look at is a lot of fun, especially with you, because you understand the nuances and the lenses that we're looking through. You love the music; I know you do, and I appreciate the music that's in you. You know you are one of the last of the real songwriters that there is around today that is influenced by the old school stuff you know...