

TAPE INDEX

Jim Kirchstein
Mount Horeb, WI
March 27, 1992

Interviewed by J.P. Leary
Sony Walkman DAT TCD-D3
TDK DAT tape, R60

- 0.00 Announcement.
- 0.30 Jim Kirchstein b. in Madison, 1930s. Grew up in Sauk City. A "river rat," didn't like school and ran away often to sit by the river.
- 1.20 Got out of navy 1954, pilot in Korean conflict. Went to UW under GI bill. Needed some extra income. Worked in dad's store in Sauk City, set up record store in basement of brother's toyshop.
- 2.20 Got interested in late 1950s in trying to produce a record. Had tiny studio with Voice of Music recorder. Recorded Don Chambers band from Lodi: "I Overlooked an Orchid" b/w "Riding Down the Canyon." Sent tape to RCA in Chicago for production. J-1001. A couple of songs later, recorded the Fenderman, Jim Sundquist from Madison and Phil Humphreys from Stoughton. J-1003. Used to play at taverns like the Whippoorwill in Middleton. Recorded "Muleskinner Blues." On New Years Day 1960 Kirchstein got the idea of releasing the recording. Ended up selling about four million records after leasing recording to SOMA in Twin Cities. Took litigation to get his money, got only \$9,000 of \$50,000 coming, but enough to start a studio.
- 4.30 Early 1960s started a recording studio and continued for 16 years: everything from rock to blues to old time to "specialty music" like circus music and railroad sounds. Recorded six albums with Doc DeHaven in Madison. Did a lot of albums, ca. 150, of old time music.
- 5.10 Always liked old time music since high school days in 1940s. Used to see Uncle Julius in action at Fish Lake, with his moustache, waltzing around. [DHD?] Missed old time music while in the service, you didn't hear it much outside of WI. Worked hard on getting an old time catalogue started. Besides albums, recorded about 2,000 45s. Specialized in WI bands.
- 6.17 Got to know country artists like Pee Wee King from Abrams, WI, near Milwaukee. Pee Wee had a little Polish polka band. Autry was performing in the area and needed a back-up band. Liked Pee Wee so well that he brought him along to play country music. Got to know Pee Wee well. Bobby Bare used to come up from Iowa. Bobby Vee from Fargo, North Dakota, came. Had a hit then with "Rubber Ball." While in studio Vee heard song by Ron Barzick (sp?) of Milwaukee (aka Ronnie Premier) who had a song "The Night Has A Thousand Eyes," which Vee turned into a hit on Liberty Records.
- 7.43 Have specialized in WI styles of old time music, which includes Bohemian, Slovenian, Polish, Dutchman, and Swiss. Back in the 1960s a band in every little town. Bands had to guarantee they would buy 100 albums, Kirchstein would do the rest. Would have the graphics done, almost always in full color. Would generally press 300 albums. Initially had RCA press the records, but then bought lathes to do masters, eventually in stereo, ca. 1961-1962. Decided to do pressing in about 1964. Set up a pressing plant and electroplating operation. Could press records the day after recording. Could do several thousand albums a day and 3-4,000 45s at peak capacity. Had a crew of about 40 at the peak. Some in packaging, some operating the press, some watching the electroplating press, etc. All done with local people, young people and retired people. Had kind of a low key operation.

- 10.45 Got interested in building a radio station in mid-1960s. Class A FM station. WVLR (very live radio). Station is now in Madison, WMIL. The station took on stockholders and JK eventually turned it over to stockholders. Station has been sold several times. Tom Clark of WI Public Radio owned it for a while.
- 12.22 Had a lot of live performances on the station under JK, with live old time polka bands. Live radio was pretty much gone by then, but JK remembered Bill Forest's live radio in Poynette and loved that sort of thing. When station opened, had a sky diver talk over the air while falling. Would interview kids at Halloween, describe Christmas lights for the shut-ins. And especially interviewed old time bands.
- 14.10 Recorded a lot of blues music, with musicians from Rockford and Chicago, including Earl Hooker. That music has been reissued in France. A Frenchman, Sebastian Danson, has written a book on Earl Hooker and came over and interviewed Kirchstein for his work. Hooker has been reissued on the Black Magic label.
- 15.10 Has also leased some polka music to Japanese labels. In the mid-1960s "Wooden Heart" was a hit and was released all over the world. JK's version not by Joe Dowell, but by Dave Kennedy. Joe Dowell heard of the song through Bobby Bare who had been recording and producing at Cuca. JK also recorded 5-6 other versions of it. "Wooden Heart" is a version of the old German song "Muss I Den," which was performed by Elvis in one of his movies set in Germany.
- 17.16 Old time bandleaders "all were great people." JK never could play well, although he tried. Seems like good musicians are born with the talent. And many were characters. Had a laid-back atmosphere. "In fact, when Tony Rademacher came in . . ." the musicians' wives would play cards in the studio while the band was recording. Syl Groeschl was comical, Pee Wee King a great guy. Joe Karman from Denmark, WI, was quite ill in 1970. Kirchstein went to visit him.
- 19.16 So much of old time music is a family affair. Syl Liebl's whole band was a family affair. Liebl's band would just start all at once. Then would do another song. It was "good for the wax." With a rock band would sometimes work a week on one song. [DHD?]
- 20.10 David Bowie once wanted to come to the studio when in Milwaukee, but a group called Circus has the studio for a week and a half on one song. Never got to work with Bowie, but came close.
- 20.29 Uncle Julius was something to see. Ron Harvey had a big band kind of sound, but had a tribute album to Lawrence Duchow which really captured Duchow's flavor. JK met Duchow once after his return from having disappeared with debt problems. Duchow came into the studio with Roger Bright's band, sat in the studio with JK while the recording went on. Duchow a character you don't see too much nowadays. Small towns have lost their characters to nowadays. Mount Horeb and New Glarus have maintained their identity, Sauk City is changing in character. You lose something of a town's warmth and familiarity.
- 23.20 JK missed the big bands that played at the Riverview in Sauk City. Tommy Dorsey and Harry James played there. Fran Conway ran the place. JK was thrilled when in Korea when folks sent him a napkin signed by Harry James. Riverview has a long history of old time dance bands, as did Fish Lake. A place where wild dances like the Flying Dutchman took place. Sometimes the person on the end would fly into a table full of people, and there were fights there.
- 25.07 When recording old time bands, had to do special things for different styles. "Every style of band is miked quite differently . . ." Bass

and snare drums and blaring trumpets important in Polish, but have to be balanced against "a little concertina." [DHD?] Some bands would advise JK on what he did wrong. Ed Stein, Doc DeHaven's drummer, told JK he wasn't miking the drums right. JK resisted at first, but then listened. They got a good sound and he gained a good friend.

- 27.02 Reverb as important as miking. JK had a reverberation plate shipped over from Germany that gave a sound that was important to the "dance hall sound." "Prior to getting that reverberation plate, I used to create my own echoes . . ." Ran microphones into a cistern at his folks place to get a reverb affect. The "only problem was you could hear water dripping in every once in a while." [DHD?] First Verne Meisner and Roger Bright LPs have the cistern. Also used it with a group of priests, the Beck Brothers, three of whom were at the seminary in Oconomowoc. They eventually made seven LPs that were sold with proceeds going to the seminary.
- 30.46 Another thing JK did was create a unique ceiling. Got an acoustics degree, with coursework in electronics, at UW. Did a three-layered ceiling with the capacity to absorb bass frequencies. That ceiling was adopted in Nashville. A person who helped JK set up his studio was from Nashville and took the idea down their. A good studio important for creating good sound for old time bands. Recording is a trade-off between acoustics and electronics. Lots of studios nowadays rely on electronics because they can't afford the big space to get good acoustics. JK's studio designed for recording. Floor was 30' x 40' and ceiling was 24' high. Got no standing waves. Splayed the walls so they would zig-zag, and added moodlights. Bright colored lights for old time musicians, soft blue lights for blues musicians. "The rock bands could pick what they wanted." Experimented with isolated musicians using headsets. Didn't work well with old time musicians, but worked well for rock music.
- 30.15 Would often use just one or two mikes for an entire old time band. Tubas would put out the bass by themselves, but had to close-mike the string bass. With old time bands, the good sound was achieved with few microphones and took advantage of the good acoustics in the studio.
- 35.30 On Gospel groups. Started when JK was recording Earl Hooker about 1964. EH had tuberculosis, sent in friends from Chicago to listen to his recordings. Jimmie Dawkins came, so did a nurse, Minnie Skinner, who was involved in a gospel group. Thereafter opened up his studio on Sundays at no charge. Gave the groups the tape. If anything was released, this done "on our own." Allowed the groups to buy records at 25 cents apiece. Ended up recording 40-50 gospel groups from Milwaukee, Racine, Rockford, Chicago. Mostly unreleased material. The names included "The Fantastic Seven," "The Supreme Beings," or named after their church.
- 37.55 JK has been recently trying to develop a music program in Milwaukee to help out young people. Has recently been meeting with Sherry Hill in the governor's office on this matter.
- 39.48 The gospel groups JK remembers from Milwaukee were often church groups, used accordions, lots of guitars, drums. All ages. Mostly their own materials. Quite often a sermon in the middle of a song. Had one that went on for an hour and a half before they returned to the song. The spirit was there and you never knew what was to happen next.
- 41.15 Cuca is the nickname of one of Jim's cousins from New Mexico. He needed a name for the label in a hurry because RCA would not press his records with the first name he proposed (he doesn't say what this name was). The name just stuck.

- 42.34 In 1968 when the campus at Baraboo was being built, the dean, a Merrimac native, asked JK if he would work for the University part time. A year later he was asked to go full time. At that time hard to get petroleum plastic for the pressing plant and the nickel needed for plating was being rationed by the government. Looked tough for a small operation. Turned the radio station over to stockholders, phased out record operations by 1972.
- 44.24 Still doing a little recording, but mostly working with people to reissue some of the old material. Has had many inquiries from Europe. Earl Hooker material originally out on English Red Lightning label, then on the Black Magic label from the Netherlands, then to France and Sebastian Danson. Also interest from the Dutch in Rockabilly, including performances by Marv Blihovde and Ed Cree from the LaCrosse area (now in Nashville), and by Bobby Hodge. Interest too in rock music singles which show up all over the place, probably from companies to which JK leased the original. The royalties are almost nil.
- 46.58 JK has published about 500 songs. Songs had to be "published" before they could be released. This pretty much amounted to securing a copyright and getting the publishing copyright through a form. Then you are legally published so you can charge royalties and "mechanical rights" to people who want to use your material. Publishing rights run out if not renewed and material ends up in the public domain. Royalties in the record business are hard to get. And in the "rotton record" business, a distributor can go bankrupt overnight and leave you set back. JK once had 16 distributors nationwide.
- 50.35 Pfau was a small Milwaukee label. Mr. Pfau was an electrician who made records on the side. Before tape, so recording done right onto the acetate. When JK got out of the navy in mid-1950s Pfau had died from an injury. JK was looking for equipment. Widow interested in selling it as well as all his masters. JK has about 300 of original acetates. Some polka music from the 1940s. Pfau catalogue was about 40 total releases. JK has acetates for about half.
- 52.35 Some interest resurfacing on early Cuca rock recordings from the 1960s. JK has had some interest from people in Los Angeles.

END OF SESSION