



James Michael Powers interview

June 12, 2015

Participants:

Subject: James Michael Powers (JP), percussionist

Interviewers: Rory Grennan (RG) and Katie Nichols (KN), Sousa Archives and Center for American Music

[PART 1]

JP: Yeah...having been for so long, a working musician, not drinking, alcohol, I always enjoyed having a smoke during the breaks. At least I had that. And I'm afraid if I...and I did quit smoking entirely for three days...I ended up coughing and suspecting that I...this is when I still have a route that I did, news cassette route, I suspected that I would get pulled over and asked to do the drunk test, you know, because I was puking in the car, because I was not smoking...

RG: Right, that can be...

JP: So it was like, fuck it – sorry, I tell it like it is. So that's it. I still smoke, and I have COPD, and it's crazy, but so is drinking. Damn crazy.

RG: Right.

JP: And there are times I admit that I feel like, "Fuck this", you know, thirty-three years sober and...get cancer. Not lung cancer! Which would make sense...but colon cancer, you know, so that led to...as it is, shit in my pants for like the last year. You know? Cause...combination of the actual thing, tumor, and then after that it was like chemotherapy. That chemotherapy is still in me. But it's just now about to come out. My body's fighting it. So...Okay, you began it...

RG: I want you to look this over, if could, or I can do it for you, check each of those boxes there...and then...sign your name at the bottom. It wouldn't be a university project without paperwork.

JP: Yeah.

[PART 1 ENDS]

[PART 2]

RG: Let's get this thing on...here we are. It is June 12, 2015, this is Rory Grennan, and I'm accompanied by Katie Nichols, from the Sousa Archives. We're at the home of James Michael Powers, percussionist extraordinaire, a long-time part of the Champaign-Urbana music scene. We're gonna talk a little bit today about his career, and about how the scene has changed over the years. Mr. Powers, please say hello.

JP: Hello, I would like to insert the fact that one of the things that I'm happiest about is that I was, after having been a, you know, local talent here at the cozy little...campus town, I did live, 9 years in Houston Texas, and that's where a lot of the heavy stuff happened in my life. So I just wanted to mention that. But I'm happy...this is my home. Oh my God, this is home. This is where I went to high school, class of '68, and my childhood actually was in Pekin, south of Peoria. I lived with my mother and stepfather, in my earliest years. Then my sister and I moved to live with our father, who lived in several places...suburbs, then Decatur, then here. And here, I did, I went...from actually, from Pekin and from Brookfield, I attended Illinois Assembly of Music, which was here, at Allen Hall as a child. Not really living here. But that was very important to my...discovering my talent.

RG: What year was that?

JP: Probably '64.

RG: How old were you then?

JP: Uh...about 14.

RG: What did your father do, that he moved around so much?

JP: He was a field attorney for the Veteran's Administration. While living in Chicago, he worked in the office, downtown Chicago. But as a field attorney, he lived first in Decatur, then here. And the fact is...shortly after we moved here, my father died. And that was big, a big part of my formative years. And then two years later, my mother died. That's a big part of my story.

RG: She had been in Pekin, still.

JP: Yes.

RG: Did you stay with anyone else at that time?

JP: I stayed with the singer's family, singer of the Finchley Boys.

RG: So you were old enough to be playing out by then.

JP: Yeah, I was still playing....I was in a soul band, actually, called Unit 4. We played at a place then called Club 45, later became a strip club. You know, it's really, simple straight-ahead experience. However, one of the biggest career things that I can mention is while in Houston, I did play drums for Bo Diddley, twice. And he actually made a sound on my cowbell, which I...

RG: That one right there.

JP: No, it's actually packed up in another thing. Now, I have several, I created several...basically, my story...I started out just being a drummer.

RG: Sure. What got you interested in playing the drums?

JP: Well, actually, there was a parade...that I was witness to a parade, and I just loved the way it sounded, but before that happened, my mother insisted I take tap-dance class...which I didn't want to do. But I went ahead and did it, and the piano player for the tap-dance class told my mother that I had rhythm, and I should--she should take me to see the band director. So that's...that's how it started.

RG: How old were you then?

JP: 14, I think...well, no, actually, there would have been, like 10, or 11...11, yes.

RG: And did you...were you able to take up the drums after that?

JP: Yeah, I started playing...and interestingly, the junior-high-school band director wanted me to play trumpet, and I said no, I wanna play drums, because I had heard how cool the drums sounded...in the parade, you know, I wanted to be a drummer, and truthfully, I thought playing a trumpet would be too hard. So anyway, that's how I got started playing.

RG: And how old were you when you joined your first band?

JP: The first band, actually, was in Decatur. Called The Rogues...well, no, actually, before that, technically was the Dixieland Band, in Riverside, Brookfield. I'm sorry, I'm gonna ask a favor –

RG: Sure.

JP: There's a bottle on the couch--if you could bring it to me it has some water in it, this one's almost empty. Yeah, that's it.

KN: Ensure?

JP: Yeah. Just...I put water in it.

RG: Would you like to trade? Do you want some water in that one?

JP: This will be okay. I just don't want to start coughing before I answer the questions.

RG: So the Riverside Dixieland Band.

JP: Yes.

RG: Had you been interested in....

JP: Riverside Brookfield High School. Dixieland Band.

RG: Had you been interested in Dixieland before that?

JP: I liked what I heard...truthfully, I hadn't heard much. But it was, you know, easy to play. Actually, the first song that we played was actually a ballad called "Laura." (sings a snippet) Not much drumming on that, but anyway...I did play a gig at a Veteran's Administration Hospital with that Dixieland band, and for some reason there was a standing ovation for me. Blew my mind! I just had like a little solo. In Dixieland, there's a time for a drum solo. So I did my little solo thing, and enormous applause. Took me by surprise. So that's how I discovered my talent.

RG: I imagine that was a little bit of positive reinforcement.

JP: Oh, incredible.

RG: For a young musician.

JP: it was amazing.

RG: And so for those of us that aren't familiar with Dixieland music, were you playing a drum kit on that?

JP: Yeah.

RG: Okay. How many pieces?

JP: Well actually at the time, my first drum set was...junior high school bass drum, and one of the crash cymbals, and I had my own snare drum. And I played standing. So I didn't have a drum stool. But things changed after that, after we moved here, my father decided to give me a bass drum with a tom-tom. And I still had the cymbal that he had gotten for me one Christmas. Now...So that's like the talent part...the faith part, you know, that's quite an ordeal...it was hard enough playing gigs as a musician, very good gigs in Houston...but then going through divorce on top of it was like, whoa. So my faith was a very important part of staying sober. In '88, is when that happened. And, you know, it's like I played with a number of bands over the years, played with a number of bands in Houston too. The way I tell things, almost, that makes it easiest is lyrically. And it won't mean anything to you, the names and places but...(unintelligible). And when I was married, I could not be with her. But, I got divorced, I could, and I was. The highlight of my life. And so it remains. Sexuality is a very important part of playing music.

RG: Yeah, can you expand on that?

JP: What?

RG: Can you expand on that.

JP: Well...to play simple and strong, is like, I've learned the simple and strong, you know, and a big part of strength is sexual desire. The body unites itself around sex, you know, so if you're gonna play with strength, you've got to include sexuality to be strong. That's my theory. And it's what works. You know. If I didn't....I'm not saying I LOOK sexy. If I didn't FEEL sexy, I wouldn't...my playing wouldn't be strong. It's feeling sexy, not looking. Not that I think other people think I'm sexy. If I feel sexy, or, you know, charged with sexual energy, then I'm strong. And without it, I'm not as strong. I could be strong without it, and sadly, may have to be. But, you know, working through divorce twice...you know, it's not so easily done. You can really get way off and end up in a bad place. But so far so good. Does that answer the question?

RG: Little bit. How does one use this strength to the benefit of the music?

JP: Well, you just, you know, totally put yourself into it, whatever you're playing...totally. Be there. Be involved in what's going on. Like, the thing of "jam," the word jam used to mean, in pretty high-jazz circles, it means, like these great players were getting together and sharing ideas, and sharing their technique, and it was pretty fucking incredible, you know? The technique they had. And there were songs that are played so fast, like I'd just kick back and be like, "You fucking showoffs," you know. "Come on, give me a break!" I can't play fast very long. Next...

RG: And that's in contrast to your statement that simple is strong.

JP: Right. Yeah, these jazz players can get so complex and complicated....it's like, that's not what I do. That's not what I can do. But one of the greatest pieces, you know, venerated pieces of music is "A Love Supreme" by John Coltrane. And the chant part of that is (sings) "A love supreme, a love supreme," which is also (sings) "shimmy shimmy coco bop, shimmy shimmy coco bop, a love supreme..." You know, I feel the best thing I could do with what remains of my life is to bring A Love Supreme into the perception, with the understanding that when Jesus said, "Greater love has no man than this that he lay down his life for his friends," it's like, there's no greater love, so it's a love supreme. And the gospel and the love supreme are to me, the same. And hopefully I'll be able to present that at the market, as soon as possible. I'm giving myself plenty of time, because it needs to be good. And one of the miracles that happened...\$21,000 was raised for me on the internet. And you know, that, that's when, you know, I had no income, I could no longer work because of surgery, but \$21,000+ was raised for me, and it's a fucking miracle, you know, and I can say so, you know, and if I don't say so, then what's my problem? Then the problem would be fear of what others think of me. That's why Art Blakey, he's a drummer, a jazz drummer, that almost every great jazz player has played at some time with Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers. And truthfully, Blakey's drumming didn't blow me away like the drumming of others...so it's like, what he understands about the music. African roots. It's the history, it's what he knows. That...I'm presuming is what drew people to him. You know, all the jazz greats. And I, at one time, I wanted to be a jazz great myself. I have played jazz, blues, rock, and country, and a few musicals, including Cabaret. Two different times, married to two different women. There are so many seemingly coincidental things that have happened in my life that really tell a story. The story is fixed. How I tell it will change. And my identity, what I have, what I'm working with, proceeding with, is that I am, in fact, a jazz messenger. Laboring in the harvest. Doing the work of an evangelist. But hopefully I'll be known as a jazz messenger. Cause that I think you can get across. People are still like I used to be, which is pretty much just fucking drunk every day. That was my reality. But I changed. Interestingly, or worth mentioning, I changed because I knew I was going to inherit money from my father's death, and I didn't want to blow it on cocaine and then die, you know. It's like...that's not a life. That's a quick death. So...that's pretty much all my story.

RG: (22:14) Well, let's rewind a little bit. So when you first came to Champaign-Urbana, who were you playing with?

JP: Well, I came...leaving the band in Decatur which is called The Rogues, and I was playing with the high school band, orchestra, whatever. But I had this idea since I had already been in a band and had played at a party, I was like, "You know what? I'm gonna put sticks in my back pocket," because I had 'em anyway, you know, 'cause being in the band, and I ended up being asked to play with the band that was called the Finchley Boys. This was, however, the first version, that had Mark Warwick playing guitar.

Larry Tabeling was also with that group. Another guy played guitar, Harvey, uh...I just remember Harvey. And so it was right away, the Finchley Boys, when I got here.

RG: And how did you meet them? How did you come to be asked to be in the Finchley Boys?

JP: Well, the drummer that they had been working with had recently died. So they needed a drummer. And there I was with my sticks in my pocket, you know, clearly saying, "I'm a drummer."

RG: Had they known you previously? Or were you just literally walking down the street with sticks in your pocket?

JP: Down the hall, at the high school. So I was like, assertive, you know, I was like, "I wanna play in a band." And that's what I ended up doing. It was the Finchley Boys from the start. (24:35)

RG: And how long were the Finchley Boys together?

JP: Oh...I did not play with them at all times. In fact, I moved to Boston a short time after high school. With a band that existed through mid-70s, I think. I'm not sure, you'd have to ask Garrett about that. The details of a band that I was not always with...it's like, what happened after I was not playing, no longer playing...I know a few things but the details are slim.

RG: Did you play on any recordings with the Finchley Boys?

JP: Yes. In fact, an album we recorded in '68 was recently, or relatively recently, in '10, it was re-released by Anaz...I can't remember the company's name [Anazitisi Records]. But a record company in Greece. Coincided conveniently with our 40th reunion gig at the Champaign Bicentennial, whatever...so anyway...

RG: That was the Everlasting Tributes?

JP: Yes.

RG: That's some fantastic cover art.

JP: Yes.

RG: Where was that photo taken?

JP: Right here in town. At the water tower. The old train station.

RG: Downtown by the old train station.

JP: I remember the day it was taken...it's funny. When I smoke, I seem to cough less.

RG: What took you to Boston after high school?

JP: Actually, Mark Warwick, the guitar player in the Finchley Boys, asked me if I'd like to come with him. They had brought their baby back to see the, you know, the grandpas and grandmas, you know...and they saw me too, and I was asked if I'd like to go, and I said sure, living in Boston would be cool. And so I was there for a year or so. And there, I played with a man, a wonderful folk singer guitar player who was very much like Richie Havens, in my hearing, and he actually worked in the village at the same time that Richie Havens did...so I met him in Boston, and was recently re-connected with him...

RG: Oh yeah?

JP: 'Cause I had wondered what happened...it turns out that he became an ordained minister, with a ministry called "Set Free Ministries" that was begun by a former Hell's Angel who found faith in prison, and when he got out tried to share his faith with...which is identical to what I wanted to do with what remains. So, basically, I feel like really strong, spiritually and musically, even now, my body, however, needs to catch up. So that's what I'm working on. And I acknowledge that one of the big errors I've made in my life, throughout my life, is neglecting the body for the spiritual and musical. Total neglect. You know, there was a period in my life that I don't remember eating anything. I guess the beer was enough. Believe it or not, I feel I'm being healed, right now. Any more questions?

RG: Yeah. What's helping you heal?

JP: Faith. And, for example...an extraordinary thing happened. I was given a shofar, which is a ram's horn, thing that Jewish people recognize. And given one to play. And I play it every day...I did for a while. It ain't easy right now. But the Holy One of Israel surely would not give me the shofar to play and then take my breath away, you know...so that's a real straightforward example of what I have, you know. I was given a shofar on the day of my surgery. You know...so it's like, calling out around the world, ready for a brand-new beat. The kingdom is near. The time is right. Turn, turn, turn. The gospel according to Michael.

RG: That's right, that's right.

JP: (coughing)

RG: Do you need some time? We can take a break. I mean, we can really be done anytime you like.

JP: Oh, whatever. I'm here for you.

RG: We're here for you. It works both ways. It works both ways.

JP: I can share...one of the important things I discovered, as a solo performer, it's like...you start performing, and people respond. And it's the relationship of the informant and response, that is the show, you know, that it's not what I do, that's not the show, it's the...you know. The event becomes something different once people respond.

RG: Right. Performance is not just a performer. It's also an audience.

JP: Exactly. And once that is established, people are drawn to this thing that is going on. It's no longer being drawn to my performance. But that is what starts it. You know...I never go to the market thinking of playing for kids. I always go to check out the women, you know? Heh-heh. And nobody'll get in trouble for, you know...artsy-fartsy cat calls, you know. Sometimes I've had to stop because they just look so good. But in fact, what happens is, kids respond to me, so then I gotta play for kids, you know. Which interrupts my primary... (laughter)

RG: Your cat calls?

JP: Yeah. Although they still get through, now and then...one of the easiest things to do is (sings), "She's a body mover, she's a body mover, hey, hey, what I say, she's a body mover." You know, depending on how I say it, I could offend somebody. But saying that, you know...and I used to, I would have...if I was still drinking, it would be totally offensive. But that's the honest to God truth. You know, I play for kids because kids respond to me. And I've never figured that out. The first time kids responded to me was

one time I took my drums to church. Because the pastor had been praying for a drummer. So I set up and played. And...with others, of course. And that was in Sunnyvale, California. And a friend from high school, lives next door, also lived in Sunnyvale, before he was married...so another extraordinary thing, you know. It's like the signs, signs everywhere, sign..."Just do it!" You know, you need to do it. Not think about it, "Can this be real?" And obviously, to what's happening...you don't let fear shut you down.

RG: Well, it sounds like you've never been afraid to move forward. We've talked about Boston, Houston, California...

JP: It did take a little courage to make those moves.

RG: I can imagine.

JP: But it was easy, it was like, you know, asked by a friend, "You wanna come along?" And, "Yeah!"

RG: So how long were you in Boston?

JP: About a year and a half, I think. It was at a time where I didn't keep track, you know. So I don't know exactly. It's a bit of a mystery. Fortunately, when I came back, I when to Parkland, so I got an ID, a Parkland ID with dates, you know, '72 is the year of, you know...my year at Parkland ended in '72, so that kinda time frames...that's the most solid time frame I have in my life.

RG: And then how did you come to be in Houston?

JP: Actually, my first wife was from there. Actually, fifty miles north, Conroe. That's where she was from. And she was a modern dancer, I was a dance accompanist. She thought she would find work, and did find work...she was offered a job at a theater company, actually. Teaching dance. So that's what got us there. That's the main thing.

RG: And it sounds like you...you did a lot of playing there.

JP: yes, I played, I played in several bands, but also played for all, all the dance companies that came to Houston. Over a period of nine years, that's pretty much all of them. I was the percussionist for their master classes, they called them. Because there just weren't that many people aware that you could do that, play for dancers, you know. I learned it here at the U of I first...Pat Knowles, who was my, the first dance teacher I ever played for, later became the head of the dance department.

RG: Here at the university?

JP: Yeah. She's a very special person. And an encouragement. She's often at...buzz every March, about what I do, what I did, what I used to do at the market.

RG: Tell us about your time at the University of Illinois. Were you ever--were you enrolled?

JP: No, I was never enrolled. I was just extra help, professional, as they called it...I just played classes, you know, Monday through Friday. I played gigs, you know, there was one day I had actual 8 hours of playing time, the class and the gig. So I...actually, literally worked 8-hour days as a musician.

RG: That's a thing all musicians swear not to do.

JP: Well, yeah. I've always had an admiration for those who, you know, find a way to live successfully, in a way that's more ordinary...but I admire them, I really do.

RG: How so?

JP: Well, you know, a lot of people say they can't play music...well, I can't do anything else. So I see you finding joy in your job and family, it's like "Wow, wish I could, but I can't, so I won't." You know.

RG: What are some other highlights of your time in Houston? You talked about backing up Bo Diddley?

JP: Not backing up, actually being the drummer with Bo Diddley.

RG: That was a regular gig for a while.

JP: Well, it happened twice. I mean, Bo Diddley would come. And of course, you know, ZZ Top was from Houston, and they were in the audience. You know, I had some gigs...jazz, a jazz five-player. And the sax player, I can't think of his name. And then a rock band called Chainsaw Party Dogs, hehe. Which was actually an odd name, I never liked the name, but it was really a good...good band. But still it remains that the solo stuff began in Houston. The solo stuff on the street. Basically taking what I did, cultivate it, and over the years, I have several rigs, that is groups of instruments. And one is just, you know, drummer, you know, I call that "Kit". The next is "Philadelphia," called Philadelphia because Rocky Moffat, a wonderful percussionist, once came to play a dance class with me. And when he was setting up I said, as it would be written in a drum magazine, you know, "Ah, the deluxe New Yorker outfit!" Referring to his instrumentation. And he said of me, "The Philadelphia."

RG: And what's that setup like?

JP: Basically, centered around tambourine. And played a tambourine with finger cymbals that were actually given to me by Pat Knowles, during one of my first dance classes that I ever played. After Kit, Philadelphia...and "Hand Band," I call it, know it's like the first thing that I could, the first solo performance on the street involved me playing harmonica with percussion. So I call that the "Hand Band" because everything fit on one hand. And I could play three bell sounds, and the harmonica with the shaker. Which I could still do, but I don't, really. And after that came instrumentation based around an instrument called "Doom-beck," and then a variation of the tambourine rig that was formerly called the Philadelphia. For a while I called it the Hilladelphia, because I'd rigged it in such a way that I could stroll, or walk around. You know, which wasn't advised at a dance class, but on the street, it was like--helped if I could move a little. So that tambourine band was different than the first. Then I have instruments focused around bongos...and then last, which I was working on for a long time, involved a field drum – the tambourine and the bugle. And it was like, I saw myself being a one-man...in the parade. You know, one-man-band in the parade.

RG: One-man military band, right.

JP: Yeah. A little bit. I could play, or get close to playing, "Stars and Stripes Forever" and "When the Saints Go Marching In." That's all you need in a parade. That's what the high school bands play. Then it's like...the last thing I say about that is, "Poof! I can't do any of it!" You know, I can still play tambourines for a short time, and sing. You know, but all my creative projects...I just can't do. Physically. I just can't do it. I need to rest too often. So I doubt that I'll ever be able to play a whole night at a gig, you know, because I'll be needing to rest before the song's over. And it's that way in church, too. I played in church

since '72 as part of a bible study. But I have my tambourine, somebody's playing guitar...I was like "Praise God, I don't have to live the way I used to." And it continues.

RG: But it sounds like you're still up to going out to the farmer's market. Those solo sets continue. What motivated you to do those in the first place? And what keeps you doing it now?

JP: To do the....

RG: To do the solo percussion performances.

JP: Oh, well, it was needful. It was...in fact, Jerry Lightfoot is a guitar player from Houston, and I ended up playing with him over the years, you know. I played with other people as well, but often Jerry would call and say, "Hey, I've got this gig somewhere, want to do it," and I said "Love to", and you know...but there came a time when it was like, "Okay, wow, here I am, still a working musician, still sober, but by God, add divorce on top of that, and who knows what's gonna happen. Shoot, I might even get a gun and kill somebody." It's like, not thinkable, but it seemed...scared the SHIT out of me, because I thought, it's possible, you know, and it's like...the way I heard a particular blues song changed...in the song, the lyric is, "Could be a spoonful of water, to save you from a desert sand, but one spoon of love from my 45, save you from another man." And it's like, "Holy shit." You know, that stuff happens every day in Houston. I realized that it could happen to me. It just scared me. You know, I didn't act on it, obviously, nor did I have any desire to, but it's like, it's in the realm of possibilities and it scared me. So...that's what motivated, you know, it's like, I remember telling Jerry. Jerry finally said, "Why don't you just play full-time with us?" I actually told him, "Jerry, I'm not sure I can play nothing but blues and stay sober." So it was like with that knowledge, it was like, "Okay, I take what I do in dance class, take it to the street." So I was a working street musician, and did play the blues with Jerry quite often after that. And I have a T-shirt, you know, Jerry Lightfoot and the Essential Band, and it's hanging on the wall. And I have a tortoise that helps me keep going. I bought this...I had a memory on Memorial Day of when I was a kid, I had a turtle. So I thought, why don't I get a turtle? Then I was at the Sailfin pet shop, looking for turtles, they only had two...and they were delightful, regular turtles, and they said, "Oh, we also have a Russian tortoise." So that seemed cool, because the bass player in the Finchley Boys who set up the website that raised 21,000 dollars for me...he's married to a Russian women. So I thought it'd be cool if I could say, "Yeah, hey, I got this Russian tortoise." And it was. It felt cool, when I said it. I also bought a bicycle, that I'm going to use in the market, as a prop. It's sort of like, I'm a biker.

RG: Okay.

JP: And also, it helps me, I can ride a bicycle over...with COPD, it's like...if I do a certain thing, I feel like I can take 21 steps without pausing. So that's the way you gotta do stuff. 21 steps at a time, and pause, gather, and 21 steps...the only way of walking, you know. There's always a chance that I'll just be totally envious of other people's health, and, you know...but it's not gonna happen. So I'm on my way. I actually--see, the bicycle works as a walker. Oh! While I was at Carle Hospital, you know, I was amazed...it was the most humbling experience. 'Cause part of what I needed to do as recovery from surgery was get a little exercise, you know, walk the halls using a walker. So I was walking the halls using the walker, with an assistant, and she yelled at me, "STOP!" You know, and she had recognized that I was way off-center from the walker. And it was like, I had to stop, the way she said it. But it was like, I had no idea that, sure enough, had I taken another step, I might have fallen. And then, who knows what, I'd break something falling. You know, I don't feel 64, but I am. And what is happening...it's like, I've

ended up as a retired person, about to receive Social Security. It's pretty cool. I mean, musicians don't get there, that easily. Cause as a musician, I'd just blow everything off. Stop playing. So...and, in some ways, though I've been dealing with cancer and chemotherapy, and COPD, in some ways, it seems like...because I'm forced to do only what is essential, the best is yet to come. So for example, like...see, most people, when they read the Bible, they don't see how incredible it is, what's being said in the Bible. And the most extraordinary thing, and I have lyrics supporting this, you know...a clear Egyptian name is Mustafa, and a clear Israeli name is Benjamin, so what the Bible says is, "Hey Mustafa, hey Benjamin, you're both driving the bus. Mount of Olives Bus Company. Shalom Shalom. Peace to you." That's what it's about. That's what the Bible is about. It's about peace on earth, good will to men. It's what's needed.

RG: Those are my favorite parts.

JP: Yeah. So anyway...and there are many who do understand it, you know, there's a move on. And I got a part to play. So...see if I can play the shofar... (coughing) I'll go ahead and say it. Joe the Jezrael.

(LOUD) Shofar plays

JP: So if nothing else, I can do that, and that says something to me. Yeah, I got COPD, but I've got a shofar to play.

RG: Still a shofar player.

JP: It looks a little like a pipe. So I can play at John's Pipe Shop, I hope, on a Wednesday night, they have a thing. And John's got this place there that I miss the most. That and the Deluxe. May have existed before your time. It was...

RG: The restaurant on Green Street.

JP: Yeah. It's now called something else, I'm not sure what it's called. Definitely not the Deluxe. But it was a pool hall...and I had a few gigs there, they'd have music sometimes.

RG: I wasn't aware they had live music.

JP: Eh, not very often, but they did, occasionally. In the back there's like an open-air place, that's where the music happened.

RG: Open to the outside? Like a beer garden?

JP: Yeah. Though in my history of bars, I started drinking...actually, the first beer I had was at (?). First beer I bought. And...but later, it was convenient to drink at the Wigwam, because it was not also a restaurant. Seems a little...we couldn't really hang out drinking beer at a restaurant without being conspicuous after a while. But (unintelligible) is where I would eat so I could keep drinking. You know...so that's about it. Not much more to say. But I'm interested in any questions that you have so...

RG: Sure. So you talked about taking it down to just what is essential. And you feel like, these...performing as a percussionist is essential.

JP: Yes. One of the first words I heard in the...from the Bible, "Praise God with timbrel and dance." Timbrel is tambourine. So, you know, my heart was really way into this. It's like, people don't understand, but here I was with the tambourine, and my wife was a dancer. You know, let's do it. Praise

dance with timbrel and dance. And for seven years, we did it. I was married seven years to my second wife too.

RG: What is it about the market that keeps you going back there? Getting in front of people.

JP: Oh, I love the market, it's like, when I was doing it, I mean, there were times, it was like, I go to the market and play, and I leave and I feel like I'm loved in this community. I'd be in tears sometimes, because it was so strong, so real...so it was like, and I think it continues, I still am...I was only able to play twice last year, because of my illness. But each time, I was given an instrument. One was bells, and the other was a flute. And now I can play the flute and bells at the same time, offer thanks. Wow, you know, it was close to time, my sister thought I was gonna die...but I didn't die. There's a reason. The Lord has sustained my life that I might share. You know, a lot of great musicians, they didn't make it, they died. Janis Joplin comes to mind...Jimi Hendrix, Jim Morrison. Those were the big three, when I was living in Houston. I mean, Boston. That all happened and at the same time I was really taking cocaine. But it was like, somehow, I had the sense to like, "Okay, I gotta stop. I can't continue this. Nope." And I did. Came back here, played again briefly with the Finchley Boys...but there was also a band called Hound Dog Moses that briefly asked me to come back and play with them. So I played with Hound Dog Moses...but also, got involved with the State Street Strutters, Parkland's Dixieland band. It's like, you know, as a musician, you do what you can do, which is to play with particular people or not. Like, the chances of me playing with a punk rock band are very slim. But I've played one of the...we actually had 365 gigs over the years, you know...bass players like to keep track of things.

RG: So this is with the Parkland group.

JP: No, this is with the country band. State Street Strutters. Was meaningful, because that was sort of like, connected with school. And see, technically, I'm a high-school dropout. Never graduated from Urbana High School. And that's...that's not a good thing to live with, being a dropout. So I went...I applied at Parkland and they let me in. I got straight A's, the first quarter. And that was because...I went to Parkland because my girlfriend was going to U of I, and she suggested that I go to school, you know, and it's like, "Nah, I'm a musician, I don't need school." Some real attitude. But it was like, "Oh, you're just afraid you won't do well." So I had to go and do well, you know. Just to show her.

RG: Show her up.

JP: Right. So I did. And, you know, it's like, Ernie Hoffman was the director of that band.

RG: He was the director of that band for a long time.

JP: Yes, many, many years.

RG: Probably thirty years after that.

JP: Yeah. And I had a gig about a year ago at the Iron Post, and Ernie came to the gig, and it was so wonderful. And so...and I would see Ernie at the market, you know...the market, it's a place where I hear what's going on, you know, I mean, this way or that a friend of mind had died, or I hear about people are getting married, so I hear about funerals to go to...life in Champaign-Urbana as it is. It's...the market is where I get in touch with it. Which is also connected with Lincoln Square, which is, you know, a big part. Lincoln Square, moving here from Decatur...it was impossible not to notice Lincoln Square, you know, it was a big thing then. It was like, there weren't malls at the time. Lincoln Square righted that.

RG: And how did that impress you, as a teenager?

JP: Oh, you know, I just enjoyed it, and dug it...you know, I felt a little bit...oh, they also had a whale inside Lincoln Square. It was later moved to –

RG: Whale?

JP: Yeah. A big sculpture of a whale.

RG: Oh, a sculpture of a whale.

JP: Yeah, that you could actually get inside of it. And I think they moved it to Crystal Lake Park. I'm not sure what happened to it. But one thing I can say is that townies will relate to is...I was around when Lincoln Square had the whale.

RG: That's a temporal landmark for people. The whale era. I'll have to remember that one.

JP: Also uh...very important place in my personal history is, what used to be McBride's on Lincoln. Drug store.

RG: Okay. Where was that?

JP: Near Lincoln—Allen Hall. You know, important...my girlfriend lived near there. So it was like, all in the neighborhood. It was like, Illini Grove, I think it was called, a little park. That on one side and McBride's on the other. You know, Illini Grove was like the place to make out, you know...

RG: I had no idea.

JP: Well, it's just...one of the places...we chose.

RG: what was important about McBride's?

JP: Uh, I was able to meet people. They had a small little restaurant. People would hang out and drink coffee.

RG: Drink counter.

JP: Oh, U of I luncheonette was also right across from the Alma Mater...that was an important place too. That along with the Deluxe and John's Pipe Shop. Those are the places that, when I was in Houston, those were the places I missed.

RG: And it was because of the people.

JP: Yeah, and the memories of making important contacts. Especially at John's Pipe Shop. This pipe was sold to me by Louise, I think is her name. Or Lorraine. Anyway...it's like, something I love, you know...I mean, obviously I have a lot of instruments that are almost all bagged up. Drum set is still out, I can still play...two tambourines that are on the toy piano...but that toy piano, it's like, that's the center of my life now. I can learn...you know, play piano on the keyboard...or I can just pluck out things on the piano. And, okay, this pretty much wraps it up, as far as I'm concerned. Not that I don't want to take any more questions...but here's a way of describing what the gig is for the rest of my life. (Sings: Oh oh oh, Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so.) Be the royal blues...it's only royal as Jesus is my King. That's what I said. That's all I got, thank you very much.

RG: Thank you, goodnight.

JP: I lived for about 7 months with a colostomy bag, that is, my bowel movements went into a bag that was hanging out, attached to my...so all I gotta do to be thankful is that (slaps abdomen) intestine was restored. Not so easily done, by the way. You know, a lot of people live with a bag all their lives.

RG: They do.

JP: And, thank God, you know...so I just go to the market and slap my stomach, figure, everybody will understand...of course, they won't.

RG: The original percussion instrument.

JP: Yeah, there you go! Now, this is something that I latch onto. The T-shirt you are wearing this very day, it says Man-child on it.

RG: It does.

JP: One of my favorite books that I have read is "Manchild in the Promised Land." Which is all about jazz and blues...

RG; Yeah? I'm not familiar.

JP: It's a good, it's a wonderful, wonderful, wonderful book. It's kind of like...by the time I read it, it was like a glimpse...the manchild in the Promised Land, the Promised Land is Harlem. You know...and life of a real black, Harlem, out-of-work person...that's what the book was about. So it gave me a glimpse of being black in the real deal way, in Harlem.

RG: And who's that by?

JP: Claude Brown. You're welcome to go check out my tortoise if you want.

RG: We will. We will.

JP: Cool.

RG: Well, we talked about some different musicians, and things connected to jazz culture that have been influential on you...what else? What other musicians?

JP: Bob Watson was a guitar player who has played in Memphis, and...I'm spacing on the name, this guy that I love dearly...Brian Wilke, this guitar player. Now, okay, there's an extraordinary thing. While in Houston, I had a meaningful connection with a jazz guitar player named Kenny. And also a more important connection with Murphy, who played sax. Now...Kenny died. Murphy spoke at his funeral, and died at the funeral. And I was notified of this. So the people who were my main connections in Houston, they died at the same funeral. "I can't believe...that doesn't sound..." And I get to hear from it from a person who was a dancer in Houston, but also lived in Riverside, Brookfield in his youth. And...it just keeps, you know, flashing... "What are you fucking waiting for?" You know...and I'm sorry about all my cussin'...honestly, I feel like it makes it more real...you know, it's like I'm not making this stuff up, I'm not pretending to be something that I'm not, it's like, this is what I...what I used to be.

RG: Wouldn't want you to do anything else.

JP: Oh, good. Thank you. I've even started letting myself cuss in church.

RG: How does that go over?

JP: Well, actually I shouldn't say at church, but with people I know from church. They come visit me here. The one thing I need that I don't have...is eggs. That's an important part of my diet. That's how the day starts. And the eggs...it's like everything else, I can easily provide for myself, or people will bring by...but the eggs sort of...and I can do that too. See, I actually...I'm looking forward to when I can actually ride my bicycle over to Schnucks. I drive now. Was actually...I felt so weak. I mean, we're talking weak feeling that you cannot believe. The way I described it is, you take a step...but it's like, there's a fog so present that you can't hardly move through the fog. You know, it's like...you just can't move.

RG: You're feeling resistance.

JP: Exactly. Physically restricted. You know. So that...I know I need to eat, it takes two steps from where I'm seated to the microwave, to cook an egg. I can't do it. I can't take those two steps. That's the worst that it's been. But I made it through. I forced myself to do it. And so far, so good. Or, as I like to say, SHOFAR, so good.

RG: Shofar, so good.

JP: Oh, and I was given an actual prayer shawl, you know, a heavy-duty Israeli prayer shawl. And of course, the appearance on her TV show...her name was Betty Graham, by the way. No relation as far as I know to Billy Graham.

RG: Friend doing some work outside.

JP: My landlord, I think...usually is. He has someone working with him.

RG: Keep an eye on the noise. So you played a lot of different kinds of music.

JP: I have over the years.

RG: what's your favorite? And what kind did you never get, have you not gotten around to so far?

JP: Well, you know, I always wanted...I aspired to be a great jazz drummer. Never quite made it. End up with, the gigs I would have would be blues, or country. And jazz gigs, I had a few...and it was always, by the time I get the jazz gig, it was like, then I'd be all worried. But not really being able to fulfill what it is I really want. So I end up...often the jazz gigs would be the gigs I would feel most frustrated about. Because the fact is that I can't play, I can't do...I mean, I could play jazz and play it well, you know. But like the real fast cymbal ride, I didn't have it. Because in my youth, tempos were always pretty much established by me, in whatever band I played in. I'd count a song off.

RG: Common role for a drummer in a rock and roll setup.

JP: And it's almost always the same tempo, which is basic 60 beats per second. And another very important thing...now being in retirement, when I listen to music, I no longer have to prove that I can do the same thing. And I no longer have to worry that, wow, yeah, that drum sound is better than mine. What do I gotta do to change that. Now I just accept that, well, we're talking about one of the greatest drummers who ever lived, you know...Max Roach, or...Rory Ames...Billy something...Cobham...so I no longer worry.

RG: You don't worry about it anymore. Why is that?

JP: I just listen and enjoy it because, you know, I can't do it. I don't have to prove that I can, if I can't, you know. I'm just accepting that I can't. There's some pain involved in that...a little bit of letting go. But the more the time goes on, I see that, man, riding a bicycle is again a major joy in my life. Having a tortoise is a major joy in my life. And who knows, I may get...I may get hooked up again with someone who's really important. Who knows. And this is the way I say it lyrically. There might a be-bop (?). How the hell would I know? I only know I wanna be up beyond there when I go. You know, so I don't have to be married. I've had this suspicion that I might in fact get hooked up with someone that's gonna be good instead of, you know, instead of always making it clear what I don't do, you know, such as paint the house, and mow the yard, that kind of stuff. Raise kids. Things most people, most women look for, I don't do it. I can't do it. But I don't have to. So I'm still going to the chapel. I don't have to be married. So I'm going to the chapel to love. I may be hooked up with someone eventually who like accepts that, OK, I don't need to point out what he doesn't do, I can say what you do do is cool with me. And I'll help you do it. And, you know, that's what most men find. Their wives are happy to have them as their husband, because they do what the woman needs. And they express their happiness, and that's...what a joy. I've never had that. It's always like, what I don't do. In marriage. Jimmy crack corn, I don't care. You know, so it's like, I can listen...drumming sound is great, it's like wow, you're doing it, you're doing what I wanted to do, but can no longer do, you're doing it wonderfully. And just enjoy it. Ideally. And I think I can do that. Yeah.

RG: Once you've taken the pressure off yourself, you can just listen and enjoy.

JP: (1:31:08) Exactly right. So it's like...whatever. That's the thing...musicians are thought of as, well, they're just lazy-minded fools with nothing better to do, you know. But it's like, they're actually working all the time. There's always music happening. So they're, you know...comparing themselves with music that they're hearing. It doesn't stop, you know, cause there's always some song coming on. It doesn't matter what—if all styles of music are theoretically possible. There's nothing that you hear that...you can't think "As a working musician, I've got to be able to do that too." Oh, fuck. And there's such great, phenomenal percussion happening...but here's an example of when one of the thing, the Day of the Drum happened at Krannert, then there was this wonderful group of percussionists that played together, there were several of them, and their rapport with children was perfect. They got kids involved...and someone that knew me from the market came up and said, "Yeah but they don't have a toy telephone." Which is something that I use, a toy telephone. It involves people. So the fact that someone at the market probably recognized that, I was feeling blown away...by what it, like, my favorite thing to do. And I think intentionally tried to cheer me. And it worked.

RG: Where is this toy telephone?

JP: Oh, it's bagged up now, but I have one that's on the mailbox, everybody used at the market...the one I used before is one of the boxy little things, has little smiling eyes on it. I use that, it's memorable. And I take a monkey hand puppet too. So it was like, I'd show up at the market, and if I didn't have the puppet and the toy phone it's like, "Where are they?" "I didn't bring em today," you know. Wanted to focus on playing. Just--she really is about a mover, hey, hey. "Pretty little thing let me light your candle 'cause mama I'm sure hard to handle."

RG: So what are some of these other toys we've got sitting around here? Oop, sorry. Everything's an instrument.

JP: Yup.

RG: Is this the toy piano we were talking about?

JP: No, the toy piano is front and center.

RG: Oh, that's in my line of vision. And we've got...what is this drum here?

JP: it's a Bodhran. Irish drum.

RG: What's the proper way to play that?

JP: With a mallet, actually.

RG: Is it close by?

JP: Hm?

RG: Is it close by?

JP: Oh, the mallet is actually on the cymbal stand. The music stand near the light.

RG: I don't see it.

JP: Well, it's a double-headed mallet.

RG: It's a sneaky way of trying to get you to demonstrate some things for us.

JP: I'd be happy to. Go in and say hello to the tortoise, and I'll get myself ready.

RG: We'll do that, we'll do that.

JP: You can fold up that stand.

RG: I will. We'll move some things out of the way.

RG: There we go. We're back with J. Michael Powers and his drum kit.

JP: (plays drums)

JP: That's all I got, I'm sorry.

RG: (1:37:13) That was beautiful.

JP: Sorry, I haven't done this in years. Or it seems like forever.

RG: Couldn't tell. Couldn't tell. No, if that's all we get, we're glad to have it. What are these...what are these chimes that you were favoring us with?

JP: They used to be...these are like wind chimes, but they're lined up. (Plays chimes) Okay...sorry, I want to do a little better.

RG: Whatever pleases you, pleases us.

JP: (Plays chimes and drums)

JP: Ah...close enough for a second. (Continues drumming)

JP: Oh...you got me wanting to practice. Used to on a daily basis...there are a few things (plays chimes) (sings scat) (Drums)

JP: You got the gist of it.

RG: (Sings)

JP: Yeah. Give my final demonstration with a toy piano, because that's like, center...you know, it's like...Whoa! See? I don't have the balance.

RG: Take your time.

JP: (Plays toy piano) That's the way a child would play it, right? Also just a song that I'm just learning. (plays new song) Just the thing I need to do, do what, with nobody watching, I do easily...but you notice where somebody's they're listening, making observations, you know, comparing this to...jazz piano or whatever, but...(plays piano) See, the same notes are..."A Song For My Father", by Horace Silver and...can't think of the name...uh... (plays piano) "A love supreme!" Oh, check this out. This is one of the things that i feel like I need to do. "The Lord gives unto His people, the lord bless the people with peace. I will greatly rejoice in the lord, I am one of His people...you? Yes or no, it doesn't matter. I'm just a whosoever, whosoever, you can be a whosoever too. Whosoever believes in the Lord shall be saved. A love supreme! A love supreme!"

JP: This is why I need an assistant to maybe be reading a psalm or something. Yeah, can't find my stick...

RG: What can we find for you?

JP: Here it is... (plays tambourine) (sings)

JP: That's it. Thank you...so did you all see the tortoise?

RG: We did, we did.

JP: See, I'm so pleased that came to mind to actually have a tortoise...you know, it helps me keep going because, you know, I gotta feed the tortoise, you know, something I do every day, you know, that keeps me going. And you know, it's only one thing...you gotta wake up for, you know. And it's gonna work. And dear people like Dan Perino, and...I think...his last name is O'Connor, I'm not sure what his first name...really heavy-duty, you know, people involved with the university for years, they both recently—relatively recently have passed on...but it's like I get to consider myself as like, a colleague, in a way, or become like a colleague of these wonderful men, you know, who I know as, well, one was a band director at the Illinois Assembly of Music, a guest director. And also came to my high school. And great musicians, locally, Ron Dewar is a great sax player, he lives in Chicago now...and Chuck Brougham was the drummer with the U of I jazz band, just an incredible big-band drummer, just perfect. And I can think of them as colleagues, you know, in this new way of being I'm able to think differently about others. And it's a joy, a big-time joy. So I can't wait until I...now I feel like practicing, getting this really down, you know.

RG: Well, that's two things to wake up for.

JP: Oh yeah. The second as I described is it...but see, it's like, it's been with me so long that it's almost...you know, well, if you can't really do it then why fucking bother? You know? Sovthe tortoise comes in handy, you know, but this is actually the joy of my life, you know? Offering, you know, again, the first word...oh, I had an extraordinary experience that I somehow forgot to mention. Mitchell Brown, when I was in Boston, happened to mention the Dead Sea Scrolls, and I had never heard of them. Well, I went on this Holy Land tour and was...found myself in the Shrine of the Book, which is where the Dead Seas Scrolls are kept. And it was like, "Whoa, Mitchell, you won't believe where I'm at." So extraordinary, you know. And not for no good reason. (Plays toy piano) "Lord knows I don't need whiskey, Lord knows I don't need gin, I found my mellow, I found mellow in Jesus, scat sing over everything." So that's...I got somethin', so it's in its...there's opportunity for it to come out. Thank God. And I also got—"Sometimes we're not prepared for adversity. When adversity happens, we're not quite sure how to handle it." Julian "Cannonball" Adderly says, "I got some advice from my piano player, Joe Zawinul, and it sounds something you're supposed to say when you have that kind of trouble, kind of problem. It's called mercy. Mercy. Mercy." So yeah. I go back over here and this'll be the final thing, then I gotta lay down.

RG: We can leave it right there if you like, we're running out of time.

JP: No, I wanna do this!

RG: Okay.

JP: I wanna see if I can play on flute, it's over here...that's the only reason I'm coming back. Aw, fuck!

RG: You're alright. Everything seems to be where it was.

JP: (Plays pipe)

RG: It was wonderful. It was wonderful, thank you.

JP: Play it every day and it sounds good. But people watching...it's a different flute that I play every day. It's one that I keep in the car. This one is really different. Yeah, it's different. Ah...mercy, mercy, mercy.

RG: Mercy, mercy, mercy. Well, thanks so much for your time this afternoon. We've taken up enough of it, I think. And we've got plenty of good stuff.

JP If you could put that back...

KN: Yeah.

[PART 2 ENDS]