

"That's something else my dad said to me...."

Johnny V. Mills

interviewed by George W. Lyon

Johnny V. Mills's best known recording, released in 1996, is titled *If My Daddy Could See Me Now*. Despite the rebellious image which musicians are often burdened with, few musicians lack a regard for the past—for their own past or for that of the traditions they represent. Both pasts intersect nicely in Johnny's biography; his father not only taught him to play, but also encouraged him to make a career out of music.

Johnny V. and I spent an afternoon with my tape recorder in a pizza restaurant in Calgary at the end of August 1999. He's a tremendous raconteur, entertaining enough that I couldn't decide whether to regret we weren't draining a bottle of Scotch in some smokier location or to be glad that he didn't have that extra fuel: I'm not at all sure I could have kept up with him, had he been lubricated! His account of a Huck Finn boyhood on the streets of Toronto is worth the price of admission by itself.

More important for our present purposes is the portrait of Ontario music post WWII that Johnny offers. The combination of Continental music (some of it jazz-

tinged), jazz proper (*the three Louises!*—not to mention Lonnie Johnson, who ended his days as a most unexpected To-rontonian of them all), and the folkish blues of Lead Belly and company (and who-knows-who from earlier days, both on 78 and by virtue of the sidedoor Pullmans?) may well surprise many readers, though one surely expects that by Johnny's adolescence during the late 60s, Toronto teenagers were well acquainted with Stax, ? and the Mysterians, and the British Invasion and its San Francisco echo. Nor, of course, are we surprised that S.J. admired Hank Snow and Snow's model, Jimmie Rodgers.

Johnny continues this multicultural smorgasbord. He's become a favorite blues player in Latvia (and has recorded with Latvian musicians), and when this issue hits the mail will be on tour in Ukraine, Belarus, and Greece. We recommend that you keep an eye on his website for further adventures and releases:

<<http://www.johnnyv.org>>

—GWL

J: My dad, S.J. Mills, Stanley Jabeze....

Growing up in that household was never a dull moment. It was my mom, Nellie, and dad and six kids: five girls and me, and my dad referred to it as the Italian Circus. The music in the house was incredible. First off, my mom's brothers, my uncles, taught my dad to play. My dad knew my mom's family since he was a young lad, maybe ten years old, up in Copper Cliff, Ontario.

He grew up in Little Current on Manitoulin Island; my grandmother left my grandfather with all the kids when my dad was real young. She just left; she was one of the first emancipated women, I guess. She just was not about to be tied down to a family. That'd be 1925, '26, something like that. Alvina Bryant. She was pretty headstrong. I really enjoyed my grandfather. Albert was a real guy; he knew herbs and plants from the Indians. He made salves, my dad told me, for poison oak and stuff. He was a deep guy. I always thought, Why didn't my dad learn that from my grandfather? That's something that would be worth learning.

My dad, at ten or eleven moved from Little Current to Clarabelle Lake (just outside of Copper Cliff) to live with my grandfather. He went to Copper Cliff Public School—it was the typical story, you know, five miles, uphill both ways, through

the snow eight feet deep, from here to there. But I actually went out to that yard, saw the shack out at the Clarabelle Junction yard, the Algoma Eastern Railway Line shack that he lived in with my grandfather, and we walked those tracks, and I'm telling you, I was a young guy, something like ten or eleven, walking with my dad, and he said, "Come on, I'll show you." And we walked to Copper Cliff and back (about a three hour round trip). If it wasn't five miles each way, it sure felt like it. And I'm thinking the winter time up there, it's pretty brutal, northern Ontario, you know? He would walk on the railroad tracks because they were cleared.

He showed me the Canadian Shield, and the rocks where he used to try to ski. He would strap on boards and try to ski these rockpiles covered with snow and stuff. And he showed me the rocks where he would try to play the chord—he learned the one chord, the G chord, from my uncle Vic, my mom's brother, and he'd be up there on this rock, playing this G chord. Not changing the chord at all, but singing the melody all out of whack. Up on the rocks, driving the animals crazy. So that's where it all started. My dad's fascination with the instrument and music started then, when he was young, ten, eleven years old.

G: Before or after he met the family?

J: He met them, and then he started hanging out. They all went to Copper Cliff Public School. My Uncle Evo Romagna and my dad were in the same class at school and became friends. Evo's older brother Vic was a virtuoso musician. He's dead for years now, but there's tapes of him and Evo, who just died about a month and a half ago. Evo and Vic were like Django and his brother. It's heavy, heavy guitar playing. My Uncle Vic got to hanging out with a guy named Fred Dolci in the latter part of his life. Fred Dolci was a sax player, from around the Sudbury area. There are lots of tapes of Dolci and my uncle playing together. Sax and guitar. And I got those tapes—I finally tracked down the daughter of Fred Dolci in Vernon, BC (through my mother), and got them sent to me, and I made copies and sent the originals back. They're reel-to-reel tapes. I made copies and sent 'em to my mom because she wanted to hear her brother Vic play again. Even in the latter part of his life, with his stumbling fingers, you can still hear the brilliance in there.

There's another side of the family, which is the Espositos, I think my Uncle Fred Esposito is related to Tony and Phil, the hockey players. I can't say for certain because there are a whole bunch of them up that way, but I think my uncle Fred's brother, or cousin is their dad. Fred Esposito married my mom's oldest sister Olga and that whole clan are all living down in California these days, but are originally from Sault Sainte Marie and there's stuff there, too. Fred Sr. was a good sax player. His son's Joe and Fred Jr. (both in their 60s now) are closet musicians. Joe plays sax and double bass and Fred Jr. plays a jazz style of guitar.

But nobody's really professional. I'm the only one who's put on the boots and went for it. I think that, deep down, they're all kind of proud of me, but I remember the comments from the family, through the years, there was always, "Why don't you get a real job?" Blah blah blah. "Why don't you learn to read music?" "What are you doing, playing this blues?" It wasn't a negative thing, I think; it was more the Italian way of bitching just because you can. They wanted me to be more like Joe Pass or something. That sort of jazz—which is great music, and I love it. But it's not me.

My dad was cool in the stuff he played, the stuff he remembered, hearing it on the radio, and whatever 78s he could have; it was a mishmash, everything from Jimmie Rodgers to Woody Guthrie to Lead Belly to Son House to Woody to Hank Snow to Hank Williams to—you know, it was just this mishmash of, to me, Americana. Folk. Not to be classed in country or blues or in a category, you know; it was just, "That's a great song. Let's learn that song." My Dad called it "Meat and Potatoes Music." And that was the attitude in the house. My mom and dad sang duets sometimes, real good together—"Are You Mine?" You know, Myrna Lorrie? That was one of the tunes.

And my dad loved Hank Snow. When Hank Snow broke, my dad went nuts for him because, he said, he was so much like Jimmie Rodgers, like he was the reincarnation of Jimmie or something. He played more Hank Snow—he even taught me "In an 18th Century Drawing Room" and learned all the guitar parts, and played rack harp and would play all these great fiddle tunes—"Crooked Stovepipe," "Pretty Redwing" and "Silver Bells." He knew them all.

I went and saw Hank Snow when I was five years old. There was a pedal steel player. Everything else was wooden. There was a drummer, bass player, upright, two guitar players, fiddle, steel player. Some background singers. I remember seein' him at the theatre that was right across the street from the new Toronto City Hall, on the south side of Queen Street, near Bay. My dad got me backstage to meet Hank Snow. Hank Snow rubbed my head, and my dad goes, "That's a sign. You're going to be a guitar player."

That's what he used to say. I never was into playing guitar until I was 11 years old. He never ever forced it on me. He never said, "You have to learn." He always said, "If you want to learn, I'll start you off." But he never said, "You have to learn." But I remember him telling me when I was five years old, when we came back on the streetcar, going back home after seein' that concert, and he said, "Hank Snow rubbed your head, boy. Don't forget that. You're going to be a gifted guitar player." That's what he said to me. I was, like, "Hey, you kiddin' me?" But I remember him rubbing my head.

G: Hank Snow wasn't a bad guitar player.

J: He was a cool guitar player. He had interesting ideas. For example, the solo in "Movin' On." Those double bass string solos is what turned my dad's crank. *Ang-ang-ang-ang, ang-ang-ang-ang, ang-ang-ang-ang....* He said, "They sound like train whistles. Like trains going down the track." 'Cause he grew up by the tracks. He'd say, "That's the real shit, the real McCoy."

Our house was kind of a way station for these neat drifters. Guys would come through and stay for a couple of weeks at a time. My dad knew them, he'd pick them up, he'd feed them—he wouldn't give them money, not money. My mom and dad would feed them and give them a place over their head and make sure they were comfortable. That was my parents' style. Dad said, "Don't give 'em money. If they're really about it, give 'em a meal, take them in and show 'em kindness. You'll get it back somewhere." That was his kind of thinking. He never got rich, but he was rich with kindness from other people. He was well loved, you know—he really was.

Alcohol got him. What do you do? He loved to party. Reading through his last bunch of works, writings and stuff that he gave me—you can see where he was a young man going into the Second World War. He was 19 years old in 1939, and he joined the Canadian army, and I think that being exposed to all the cruelty of mankind—that's where he learned to drink. I think it played on him, more emotionally than he let anybody know. He stayed pretty much pickled the whole time after the war. My mom said he was never like that before the war. When he came back from the war, I think he used to drink to black out stuff. His army buddies—there was a bunch of them who stayed in contact after the fact, and they all drank heavy too. And they were all hard working, blue collar guys, real dedicated, proud Canadians, family men and all that stuff. They weren't, like, welfare bums, drink the money and the kids'd go hungry. They were all trying to be responsible guys, but I think they drank to forget. I loved him. Not every day was a day at the beach with

the guy. I weigh the bad with the good, and I remember more good times than bad times. And the bad times don't seem to stick in my memory.

Lloyd McDermott would come to our house and play fiddle. And Armand Normandon, he was a blind banjo player from around Smith Falls, he'd come down to Toronto for a weekend and be playing this Silver Bell banjo. All this ivory and stuff, inlaid on it—beautiful looking. A blind guy, man, and he played banjo incredibly. They were other cats too, but I can't remember all the names. And they'd all get together. This old rounder named Red Key—he was a drifter, a friend of my dad's—I don't know how they ever met. Sometimes he'd stay at our house for three or four weeks at a time, and he'd be working down at Farb's Car Wash on King Street West in the day time, he'd come back, and they'd all get drunk together, and Red Key played the most incredible spoons you ever heard. One handed spoons—this guy could do rolls, with one hand, like [*Gestures and imitates sounds*]. I watched him; I remember him with two sets of spoons, like this, one set in each hand, and rolling. Not this way—not on the lap with the leg [*Gestures standard posture*].

G: Sounds like bones.

J: Yeah, spoons. He would just go into the kitchen and get the spoons and add the rhythm. He had incredible time. Then when the fall would be changing into winter, he'd get out of Ontario and go to the west coast. He'd hitchhike or ride the rails. Red Key was the guy who first turned me onto Chinese bok choy. Early 60s, couldn't have been more than about 1960. I was a young kid. He had this stuff from Chinatown that he'd brought back from the markets, looked like celery or something. He said, "Here, taste it; it's Chinese celery. Bok choy." I remember thinking, "Man, this stuff tastes good!" He said, "It's healthy. Eat this." He was just a wealth of information. This drunken rounder who was just this fountain of knowledge.

These house parties would last all weekend. Friday night, the boys would get off work. They'd all go grocery shopping for the week. After the groceries were in, they'd go get the beer, wine, whiskey, whatever they were gonna have, and then it'd be 9:00 at our house or 9:00 at the MacDermotts' place. It shifted from house to house in the neighborhood. Those parties would go on all weekend, George. Sometimes sleeping three and four in a bed with the neighbors' kids, and the women'd be cooking up—what are Denver sandwiches out here in Alberta, but are called Westerns back east—so they'd cook up, like, 30, 40 Denvers, you know, and bring 'em out on a big platter, and there'd be a bunch of other food come out. To me, it was some

of the closest family things to share, you know? The love in that house was incredible—the neighbors, everybody. It was a neat neighborhood.

G: What part of Toronto?

J: Lower Ward, which is right down by Lake Ontario in the original city of York. I could cross the tracks from my place and be in old Fort York. I was just blocks from the Canadian National Exhibition. The princess gates, the eastern entrance.

The original Toronto Maple Leafs baseball team, triple A baseball team, played down the street from me at their stadium. Molson's brewery was right down there too. Carling's brewery was just north of us, Rowntrees, Cadbury's, Neilson's, McIntosh Taffies, Laura Secord's. There was GE, Inglis, Massey Ferguson just west of us. It was a blue collar, workin' man's neighborhood. My turf was Spadina Avenue west to Strachan Ave. and from the lake north to, like, College. College would be really on the fringe.

Stanley Park is where I grew up. It used to be an army barracks,

Stanley Barracks, and it was made into a park. And King Street split the parks at Walnut Avenue, which is where I grew up. Right out my front door, right across the street: I could go skating in the winter time, 3:00 in the morning on the weekends. They'd freeze the grass, make a pleasure rink and a hockey rink. Eventually the soccer guys took it over. It got fenced off. We went and burnt their supplies when they were building it, at least five times. They had to hire private security to be there 24 hours so us kids didn't burn it, 'cause we were p.o.ed. They were taking our park away. It became a big soccer stadium for the longest time.

Down the street was Canada Packers and their abattoir. They would be bringing in the cows and the pigs and the sheep, whatever, and sometimes we would go jump from the roof top, down onto the backs of these cows and ride them in and be dodging the whips and prods from the handlers. They'd be, "You kids...!" We could have gotten killed in a heartbeat. But we were riding the cows!

I remember once stampeding the pigs. They had 'em all in a pen, and we dropped a bunch of balloons from a roof vent. We were up on the roof, and we blew them up and dropped them through the air vents and they floated down into the pigpens, and they got between the pigs and popped, which panicked the pigs, and they busted the gate open, and I'm telling you—I remember chanting something like

Piggie, Piggie, escape your fate,

Don't become dinner on somebody's plate!

or something. We were cheering for the pigs, man! We were saying, "Get up there!" All those little oinkers were going, run-



He played rack harp and would play all these great fiddle tunes...

ning up through the streets of Toronto. It was hilarious. One of 'em was actually loose about eight-nine blocks away at St. Mary's schoolyard. 'Cause we would hear them at night, man, you know, when they're comin' up on the killing floor, and it was an awful feeling, man, just an awful sound of death. And the smell from the hides when the wind blew from the lake was enough to knock buzzards off a shitwagon. It was just, God, rank.

We used to go play in the John B. Smith Lumberyard. We'd jump the lumberpiles. Kids actually got killed there. My mother was terrified. She always said, "I'm glad I only had one boy—you were enough for ten." She used to tell me that all the time. In the wintertime, it was the most treacherous because we'd go play *The Last of the Mohicans*, *Hawkeye* and *Chingachgook*. We'd bury ourselves in the snow between the lumber piles and pretend we were the last of the Mohicans, with our BB guns and air rifles. Climb these piles, which were covered with ice and snow. We'd fly along and jump to the next pile; sometimes you'd miss 'em—you'd grab, you know. Nobody I was ever with died, but we heard tales of kids up there jumping and missing and getting just busted up. The boards would be sticking out from the ends of the piles, and they'd just be smashing their ribs and everything on the way down. Some of the piles were maybe 30 feet high. We were kids seven to nine years old. What do you do? You're kids, right?

The main Union Station train yard was right there, about 12 tracks, maybe more—you'd come from my front door, walk half a block, you'd walk down through where the abattoir was, and right out to the tracks. You'd be right there. Then you cross the tracks, and you're at old Fort York. We used to jump these trains. We'd jump 'em and ride 'em to like Burlington, or Hamilton and back. One time I was real close; I actually had two trains, one on each side of me—laying between the tracks—they were going over the top of me in opposite directions. I'm telling you, George, I was terrified. I was down like this with my head down and buried.

G: How did you end up like that?

J: We were runnin' across the tracks. I saw this one train, but didn't see the other train coming. And when I got there, and I looked, there was a train, and I dropped. Right away, I dropped. It was me and some friends—John McKniff, Mike Shields, maybe Jimmy Robinson, I really can't remember, but everybody made it. It was a quick reaction on my part—I could have been dead in a heartbeat. We laughed about it. We laughed. I think we were too stupid to be scared or to say, "I'll never do that again." Not likely. I'd be right there again—in ten minutes I'd be back there. "Come on, let's go!"

Or walking the bridges. That was the stupidest thing we ever did. We'd walk the bridges going across the tracks on Bathurst Street and Strachan Avenue. You're up, God, I mean you're 'way up above the tracks, and we used to walk the handrail. It's 40 or 50 feet straight down to the tracks at the Bathurst Street bridge and maybe 30 feet at the Strachan Avenue bridge—and three feet to the sidewalk, no problem. Like, "Yeeaaaahhh." Daring each other. My dad, he knew we were

doin' this stuff. He knew, but he never said nothin' about it to my mom. He'd take me aside and say, "You aren't fool-in' anybody. I was a kid, too."

He was a cool guy. And he wrote some cool tunes, too. He just wrote the coolest songs. He could describe stuff—well, you've heard "Depression Blues," how that paints a picture. ["Depression Blues" was printed in *Bulletin* 32.1, March 1998]. And there's songs my dad wrote that paint those pictures. I can remember seeing him, like, at four and five in the morning, drunk out of his gourd, and he would have 15 pages scribbled out. Scribbled through—great verses scribbled through, like, "That's not it." And he'd finally get it—he'd finally get it like he wanted to say it, you know. I remember reading through the stuff he was discarding and going, "Damn! It's good!" But it wasn't right. He'd be, like, "Nah, that's not it. Not what I want to say." He'd have the dictionary out, be sifting through the dictionary for the right word.

I have some last minute recordings of my dad (1971 and 1972). I can remember him singing the tunes he wrote for the boys. When you're a kid, you don't remember 'em. When I came home when I was 18 or so, thinking, "He's never been recorded." All these tunes, and he's got 'em up here in his head, but they're not anywhere else. My sister, Kathy, the second oldest, actually typed out all the lyrics that she could find, so I have those. And she catalogued 'em for him. But I remembered him singing certain tunes as a kid, but then he didn't sing 'em because he's writing new ones.

And so I got a few of them. Some of them were love ballads. "Blue Water and You" is a beautiful tune. And "The Locket of My Heart" is another one. Then he wrote a tune "The Ballad of Johnny Eadie." Johnny Eadie was from Little Current and died early on in World War Two. I can't remember, but I'm thinking he was a milkman from Manitoulin Island, I think there's a statue in Little Current with his name on it, and he may have been a decorated hero with the Victoria Cross or something along those lines. My Dad wrote "The Ballad of Johnny Eadie" to preserve his story. And then there's "Childhood Dreams" where he tells of his childhood adventures on Manitoulin Island and names the kids he grew up with, where they were, what they did, all the little incidents. My dad had an incredible memory.

He wrote "Take Me Back to Dear Old Canada" when the war ended and he was going home in August of 1945. It's Canadiana on a more blue collar, personal level than a pop hit tune like "Four Strong Winds," or something. It's maybe not for everybody's taste, but for me it represents the working class iron men of Canada. That, to me, is the important part of my dad's writings. And I'm sure there's tons of guys out there, too, that nobody knows about. When he drove a garbage truck in the early 50s, the open backed garbage truck, he wrote "The Garbage Man's Song." And when he took to driving semi-trailer, and he wrote "Semi Trailer."

He used to say to me, "You can't talk about it until you've been there." He said, "These people that write about something they've never fucking experienced, can blow it out their ass. 'Cause they weren't there." He used to read stuff on the war, and he'd highlight passages and go, "Bullshit, bullshit." In the

back of the book he'd tape little memoirs about what really happened. He was nuts about inaccuracies in history.

A guy named Gordie McDermott, Lloyd MacDermott's son, whom he taught to play the guitar in the 50s, had a little band around Toronto in the late 50s and 60s. Gordie was a trucker, but he had a band around Toronto. He'd do two or three of my dad's songs live on stage, all the time.

S.J. Powerful guy, too, George, powerful guy. I've seen him do things, strength-wise, amazing. Just amazing. Lift a dining room table one time—full of food—by one leg. Came in—used to dress up for dinner—Sunday dinner, he'd always be dressed up. You didn't come to the dinner table scraggy. And there'd be no talking at the dinner table. You're there to eat. I remember him comin' in one time, the dining room table it had two leaves in it, six, seven feet long and maybe three feet wide—came in, squatted down, grabbed the one leg, lifted the whole fucking table up, put it down, never spilt a drop of water, nothing. He says, "Yeah, still got it."

G: You spoke of Lead Belly and Son House. Are you sure about those?

J: Absolutely. He heard them on the radio. Absolutely. He would play a blues, like, for example, a talkin' blues. You know, "The Talkin' Blues":

*If you want to get in trouble,
Let me tell you how to do it,
Get yourself a wife,
And you're right into it.
You go from there to the Promised Land,
Right into the Devil's hand.
Throwin' dishes.
Always fightin'.
She's hard to manage.*

Then it's,

*I got a gal, her name is Jane,
This old gal lives down the lane.
Won't take a bath, not even a rub,
Afraid she'll fall through the hole in the tub.
She's long and lanky.
Won't keep clean.
Hard to manage.*

What's the next one?

*Behind the turkey pen the other night,
It was awful dark, I had no light.
I reached around, took a hold of a goose,
I heard the neighbor say, "You better turn 'im loose."
Well, I jumped gullies,
I rode the bushes.
Dodgin' buckshot.*

You know this tune? Well, the original one was I think from "The Preachin' Blues," or "The Preacher's Blues." With Woody Guthrie, Lead Belly, and Sonny Terry re-released on a Library of Congress album, but recorded 'way back in the 30s. And my dad said, "This is a tune I heard on the radio when I was a kid called 'The Talkin' Blues.'" And I don't know who did it; I've been looking for it for years. The closest I've found is a Magic

Slim recording with those lyrics that he claims is his tune.

It's got these little weird half-bar things that happen that throw the timing off unless you know how that tune goes. And then it rolls, it just rolls. And all these guys that were in the livin' room, all knew the tune and how it went. This wasn't my dad's arrangement or something; these guys knew and remembered that tune. When he was playing blues, I'd think his timing was off. No. He was playing like he heard. First verse might have this extra half-bar because of the lyric; second verse might not have that half-bar; it might be over here now at the end of the tune or somewhere else.

And that's how he used to play, just like he heard it. And I realized it years later, after hearing people like Son House and Lead Belly, you know, Tampa Red, Blind Blake, those guys—not that he played that elaborate, like Blind Boy Fuller or somebody, but to hear the phrasings, I knew that he had to be listening to that. During the Depression, the US hoboes would ride the rails right through that yard, right there. I mean, they would be on the train on their way looking for work during the Depression and it would be stopped, and my grandpa was cool, man—my grandpa would lay out some food for these guys. My dad remembered these hoboes. They came right through there, right through the Algoma Eastern Line's yard—it's not that far from Sault Sainte Marie, Michigan, right across the border and down the tracks a ways. So he remembered; I remember hearing him talking.

And just the way they'd, say, "Let's play some blues." And it was this old style, with these old intros. And me, trying to chord along, thinking, "That's not 12 bars. It's supposed to change now." And they'd go, "No, wait. Listen." When the voice would change, this way, the thing would change. But that's what you'd listen for. Or when whatever was playing the melody, you know? As the melody moved, you'd move. Not, like, precisely laid out, after two bars, after four bars. No. It was total feel-playing. Total feel. For my feel, and playing, and ability to understand melody and play that way—I give my dad total credit for that. Because what I heard was instilled in me as a kid. And I eventually came back to it. So you'll hear tunes that I write that are weird like that. They'll just have these extra half-bars, extra little thing here and there. And to me, it's normal. But other guys go, "Oh, cool trick!" That was what he gave me.

Plus he had just a wicked right hand—oh, God, he could flatpick like Doc Watson. And he taught me that, all this double pickin'. He'd say, "Whatever you can pick going down, you should be able to pick comin' back up." Back stroke. Like a violin. He'd say, "Pick it all down strokes. Now pick it all upstrokes." Then he'd say, "Close your eyes and pick it all downstrokes. Close your eyes and pick it all upstrokes. Now close your eyes and pick it all down and upstrokes and see how much easier it is...." Goin' down and hittin' the string on the way up to get the next note. He used to make me close my eyes all the time. He'd say, "You got it? OK, close your eyes, don't look. Now play it." And he'd say, "Go practice that." And he got me doin' little bass line runs with chords, move to the next chord and how to do a bass line with the chord, with a pick, with a flatpick.

I mean, you talk to Tim Williams, and Tim Williams will tell you that I can do things with a flatpick that no man should be able to do. That's a fact. I can make it sound like fingerstyle guitar. Because I didn't know any better. I'd be listening to records years later and thinking it was a flatpick. I didn't know this [*Gestures like fingerpicker*—I never saw this thumb and finger thing until I was about 18 years old, was the first time I saw it and went, "Damn! That's how that's done!" Since then I've been trying to get that together, but I've been locked in a pick for so many years that I can literally play bass lines, moving bass line, and grab the melody stuff with my pick. Ask Tim. He'll tell you. He said it. I said, "You got the finger thing; I got the picking thing. That's what makes us two playing together so unique." Plus I got weird voicings around his normal voicings. I'll build the next inversion and do a weird voicing with it.

G: How'd you get into that?

J: Well, playing with other guitar players and trying to stay out of the way. It made me rethink how to play, working with another guitar player. So I would watch and learn all the stuff they played and say, "OK," and then go home and woodshed a whole other thing. Then come back and go, "Let's try it." Nine times out of ten, it'd work like a million bucks. Sometimes you'd get real sour notes and whatever.

G: You started playing guitar when you were about 11?

J: Yeah. I remember being 11 years old, my dad, me going to him and saying, "OK, I want to learn." I just woke up and knew, "I want to be a guitar player." And I've held onto that my whole life. It wasn't about being a star; it had to do with being a killer guitar player. Later in life I realized that I'd better learn how to sing a little bit because there's a million killer guitar players out there. And working with prima donna front singers turned me off totally, so I started just, out of necessity, trying to learn how to warble through tunes. That came 'way later in life, like 'way later. But I worked to be a deadly guitar player forever.

G: What year were you born?

J: '53.

G: So this was '64.

J: Yeah, exactly. I remember my dad and uncles taking me down to see Lonnie Johnson that year and the year after in Toronto. He had a little cafe. He also had been playing, I think it was at The Penny Farthing, was the club he was playing at with a Dixieland kind of band. But he had opened his own little cafe. And my uncles and my dad said, "Want to see a guitar player? Come here." I remember seeing this guy, and I only saw him twice, that's all, but I remember seein' him and blowing my mind. Thinking, "How can one man make so much music out of a guitar?" And sing so great, and make all these chord and melody things, and make it all work. Like, nothing was missed. No, you didn't need a bass player, didn't need anything—he needed him-

self, his guitar and his voice and that's all. And it was deep, George, it was deep. I was, like, "Damn!" That set me on to the belief that I could play rhythm and lead together and get away with it. So that's what I adopted—my whole style—it's a rhythmic lead style. That's why moving into a trio format with a bass and drummer was so natural for me. It was just like, "Yeah! Perfect environment!"

G: Do you consider yourself a blues guitarist?

J: You know what I consider myself? I consider myself a musician who happens to express himself through the blues venue. But I love all kinds of music, and I play all kinds of music. I love good music, as opposed to bad music. I don't care what the category is. I'm very much like my dad was and my mom was: if it's a great tune, it's a great tune. Who cares if it's called whatever? It's a great tune. It's got a beautiful melody. Moves me inside—it touches me.

I sort of detest categories, and I think of them as a marketing ploy more than an artistic endeavour. Years ago, my dad would play what he called "country music" and is now called "traditional music." And now "country music" is something else. To me, if you had to categorize it, he was sort of a country-blues-folk guy. All mishmashed into one. I think the marketing guys at record companies and whatever have got so hung up on trying to make a buck and categorize stuff that they've ruined music. "Music business" to me is like a whole oxymoron in the first place. They don't jibe with each other at all.

G: The old guys like Son House and Charlie Patton didn't just play blues.

J: They played everything.

G: But the guys who were making the records needed to sell something, so they broke it down into *gospel* and *blues*.

J: Blues guy, gospel guy, who cares? They played great tunes. Where do you fit the "Spanish Fandang" into all that? Or Elizabeth Cotten's "Freight Train"? Where do you fit that into the puzzle? Is that country? Is that folk? Is that blues? What is that? I've heard country guys play the shit out of "Freight Train." "Oh, it's a *crossover* tune, that's what it is, yeah!" [*Laughter*] "Let's get a new word in there!" Get out of town! It's the New, Improved; it's the Extra Vitamin C, you know? It's the New, Bigger Box.

G: But the whole blues thing—there's all that schtick around it.

J: Oh, yeah, and it's ruining it. It's ruining it because the real guys that are out there are not even getting the recognition. For example, let's take Johnny Winter's recordings that are 30 years old. White blues guys, right? Johnny Winter's stuff today—that's 30 years old—played today, it still stands. Still stands solid, like a rock. Will Kenny Wayne Shepherd's and Johnny Lang's stuff stand later? Solid like a rock? That's my question. That's what I get upset with. I don't care if the guy is a valid

young newblood, and he's playing—and this holds true with the black artists, too, man. I mean, *Living Blues* magazine is promoting all these new black newbloods who ain't the shit, either. They're not really lookin' for the major talent, they're just trying to promote and make some money. Sell a magazine, sell a record, whatever. Bullshitting the public and making them think this is the new blues.

A lot of people accuse me of being a bitter guy, and I'm not a bitter guy, I'm a very real guy. And I'll give credit to cats who are real. I don't care what age they are. I will be right there to tell 'em, "You are the shit." But don't get on that stage and bullshit me. You get on that stage and bullshit me, and I'll tell you, "You're full of bullshit." And I'll leave. That's how I've been, my whole life.

G: Tell me more about your mother's family. Uncle Vic.

J: My uncle Vic and my uncle Evo. Romagna. Their dad was Salvatore. Salvatore Romagna came over from Italy with his wife Cira. My Italian grandfather, he was a short little guy, well over four feet, you know what I mean? He was about five-one and a half or something. My mom told me this story about my grandfather being a young little boy in church, about 8 or 9, and he had to fart. So he passes wind, and I guess it stunk to high heaven. And there was some sort of uppity, rich sort of, better-off-than-him kind of lady sitting beside him. She kept looking, sneering down at him, right? He looked up at her and said, "That's OK, lady, you can blame me. I'm only little." [Laughter] Eight years old! Eight years old! Are you kiddin' me? Everesto, the oldest son, the one born in Italy. The rest—Olga, my mom's sister, might have been born in Italy. They land in Canada, they settle in northern Ontario, you know, so it's a little general store in Dogpatch, a little mining town near Copper Cliff. This would have been just after the First World War. My mom was born in '23.

They used to play cards, the boys from shifts. So the two bosses from shifts would play a three-card game, Scat, I think. They'd all put money in the pool for the beer. And whoever won, the shift that won, the guy, the main boss of the shift, would give out the beer. So all the way through this, my grandfather would get ripped off, you know, no beer. So finally he wins one time. He takes a cap from the beer and fills it, then says, "Here, 'atsa for you."

Vic would play cards with his dad, Salvatore, and cheat on purpose just to get a rise out of the old boy. Salvatore would get so mad after losing 8 or 9 straight that he would tear the cards up and say "That's it, I'm not playing cards with you no more!" Then the next day he would buy a new deck and ask Vic to play

again. My mom says he bought 3 and 4 decks of cards a week. Vic would also go to Jim Rossi's house, the neighbour, and play cards all night there with the boys, and of course cheat in order to win all the matches they were playing for. Many times in the morning Mrs. Rossi wouldn't even have a match to light the stove with.

Vic was a practical joker. He didn't mean any harm; he was just that way. All through his life, he'd do things to scare the shit out of my cousins who lived in northern Ontario. Vic would get more pleasure out of telling 'em a ghost story and then later, playing a trick on 'em, just to get them screamin' and yellin'.

Vic was a guitar player extrao-dinaire, no question. He worked in the mines at Inco for a while, but I don't know a lot about him. We lived in Toronto, and he lived 'way north in Ontario, so we nev-er got to see him a lot. He was hanging around with Fred Dolci, and they had some kind of a little orchestra, but I never got to hear them live. Just heard the stories.

G: So Vic is where it starts on that side of the family?

J: Well, I think that there was music in the family before that, because my mother told me about her mom's dad in Italy. My mother's grandfather, Mr. Tamborini, on her mother's side was a full time violin player and he died on his way to a wedding in Italy at a very early age. My mom doesn't recall all the details, but said her mom told her that he was a very good musician.

Vic taught Evo to play the chords, so he could play the melodies. And my father came on the scene. They were both a little older than my dad. My dad was about 10. He met them at school, at Copper Cliff Public School and was taken home by them. Actu-ally by Evo, who befriended him and took him home to the family.

That's the first time he ever ate pasta; he never saw that food; he had a very English background, you know, meat overcooked and potatoes overcooked and everything overcooked. And then he gets there, and it's all these beautiful meats and cheeses and pastas, and cookin' pork chops until they're just—you know, my grandfather, Salvatore, he used to cook incredible pork chops. He would keep them on the rack, but cut this way, ready to go, and the big fat cap—and he used to put all these gauze bags with his special seasonings, garlicks and parsley and whatever, between them, and he'd wrap it tight and bake at like 200, all day. And then open it up. My mother said the smell and taste was phenomenal.

But that's where my dad learned; he heard Vic playing and got turned onto guitar. And he wanted to learn. So this is my uncle teaching my dad: "No! You put your fingers here!" He used to smash his fingers. [Gestures] "You stupid, put it right there!" That was Vic.



"...look like a goddamn pork chop."

My mom and my dad were childhood sweethearts. They got married after the war, but they were sweethearts since my dad was like 13 or 14 and my mom was I think about 10 or 11. They didn't fool around or anything, but they really liked each other. My mom liked my dad because he was a real sensitive guy. He was a real heartfelt, sensitive kind of guy. And that's what she said—after the war, after he came back, he wasn't the same guy. That sensitivity was still there, but it was being masked by the alcohol. She thought that probably the war really took its toll on him.

G: Well, I don't think the war was like it looked in John Wayne movies...

J: Uh-uh.

G: ...handing chocolates to cute little Italian kids.

J: No. My dad told me about a kid getting shot—digging through the garbage at an encampment and getting shot. Dead. By mistake. Whoever was on roving picket heard the noise—*poogh!* He wrote a tune called "The Old Olive Tree," which was all about a young girl who was sneaking back from raiding the garbage, and somebody saw the figure, the shadow, by this olive tree and yelled to stop four or five times, in German and Italian and English, and she just kept running, and they shot her. It turned out to be a young Italian girl. The song goes on to tell of the soldier going to meet the parents to apologise. It tears you up inside when you read those lyrics. I mean, he paints the picture of their feelings, his feelings, the guy who did the shooting's feelings, and— "The Old Olive Tree."

G: Do you have that one?

J: I have the lyrics, maybe some of the tune. I don't know; it's been a long time since I heard it. Like I say, when I came back from the navy, I thought, "We don't have any of this." So I'd try to record him; we'd get drunk together, and I'd get him up to where the tape recorders were, and he'd say, "Ah, we'll just talk and play." So we'd talk a bit and play a bit, and I'd say, "C'mon, play this song for me." Or "Play this song." "Jeez, I don't know if I remember that one." Then he'd stop and say, "Did I ever show you this here?" And get sidetracked. I didn't want to pressure him into things, but I tried to get as much of a record of it as I could. I got some of the stuff, but I don't have all of the stuff.

I got his "Space Song," which was the last thing he wrote before he died. It's all about "drifting alone in this capsule of stone." And God reaching down from the throne and telling Jesus on the right hand side, "Now, unlock the door as you did before, man wants to leave his home." He was fascinated with space. From the minute the first Sputnik went up, he went, "OK, we're on our way."

He was a deep guy. I'm not saying he was something extra special. He's my dad, and these were the things he taught and shared with me, his thoughts and inner beliefs and feelings on things, you know. Some of the last writings—you know the

poem about the Village Smithy, "by the shade of the whatever the Village Smithy stands"? He rewrote it, the Village Smith sits now, not stands, and "his arms are like cherry pits, big strappin' guy he was," and I'm sure he was writing it about himself. You read through this thing, and it's like a depiction of him before and after—after alcohol. And the next whole page is his ramblings about *don't ever drink*. "Look what it's done to me." And it's three or four pages of him 'fessing out that he knew 20 years ago that this shit was comin' on, but he loved to drink and party. There's good lessons there, him laying out who he was, no hiding anything, no punches pulled.

And there's stuff in there my mom never knew about my dad, and she was married to him her whole life. There's stuff that he shared with me because we were "the men"—"You're carrying on the name; you got the seed!"—that he never shared with my mom. "Because she's a woman!" There was that mentality—there's certain things you shared with your wife—you do all this stuff, but there's other things you share with the men. There's two different breeds; he'd tell you that. So I would tell my mom stuff, and she'd go, "What?"

She never went in that book—it was his private diary or something. My mother would never pry into that stuff. She just respected that space—he could leave it right out there on the table, and she'd never look at it. Same for him; he would not go near anything of hers. You know what that stems from? It stems from an absolute trust. An absolute bond of trust between the couple. A belief and a respect in each other.

G: You said your mother sang around the house?

J: Yeah, she played a little bit of guitar. But only in the key of D. "Dirty old D." That's what she used to call it.

G: She didn't want to learn an F chord?

J: No, but I'll tell you, the amount of tunes they could play in D was incredible. My mom and my dad playing together and singing harmony. Or she'd chord and he'd pick. That kind of stuff. She had good timing, man. She used to play the guitar kind of half-sloped, not all the way up, like this [*Gestures*], on an angle. She could nail the G, A7, and D chord, and she knew the G7, you know—could make the D7 before the change. She's cool. She's still alive. I doubt that she could play now because she hasn't played for years. But she was right in there. And good harmonies. That's something.

My mother was turned on by, like, well, they call them the three Louies, you know—Louis Armstrong, Louis Prima, and Louis Jordan. She was turned on by those guys. She actually paid big money to go see Louis Armstrong. Armstrong played Sudbury, and she came with her girlfriends in the 30s or 40s. She loved that guy. So she was the modern jump-swing influence in my musical upbringing. My older sisters all had the Stax, Motown, Atlantic, sort of modern, R&B soul stuff happening around the house, so I got exposed to that. And that's how I basically got in, through the back door, with the blues.

I would hear all this stuff, from my dad and my mom, and I knew—there was this missing link somewhere. I knew it. And

then at school we had this music teacher named David Mills, oddly enough. No relation whatsoever. David Mills would have, in grade seven once a month or once every two months, I forget exactly, he used to have music appreciation day. And you could bring in the records of the day and play them. You had to give him a list, and he would go and get the originals of most of these tunes and bring them in. That's when I first heard Slim Harpo's "I'm a King Bee." I'd heard the Stones's "King Bee," right? Then I heard Slim Harpo's "King Bee," and that's where it all started. I went, "Damn!" And then I said, "Could I borrow the album?" He wouldn't let me borrow the album, but he let me sit in the class and listen to it. He'd say, "Oh, if you like that—that's New Orleans style blues. There's all kinds of regional blues." He was so cool, man. He turned me on to Muddy, turned me on to John Lee Hooker.

And that's where it started. I was 12 years old. I had my first little band, Fuse, when I was 13. They all wanted to play the pop tunes, and I didn't want to do that. I didn't want to play "99 Tears" and all that shit. Whatever. I didn't want to have nothing to do with it. I was sent Hendrix's stuff from England before it ever broke in North America, Cream's first album, John Mayall, all this stuff I had. And that's where I'd get turned on because I'd see the authors, and then I'd go down to Sam's and see if they had the originals. "Got any Otis Rush? Got any Muddy? Got any Howling Wolf? Got any whatever?" That's when I found out that Chester Burnett was Howling Wolf because it was listed as Chester Burnett, and I'd say, "Got any Chester Burnett?" And it'd be, like, "No." I'd be looking, and somebody in the store would say, "That's Howling Wolf!" "Howling Wolf? Who's that?"

So I had this power trio like Cream or Hendrix type of rockin' blues at 13 years old. Doing these old tunes, doing 'em my way. I was arranging tunes my way so I could try and sing 'em from day one. Because I could never sing like these guys could sing. I just didn't have the pipes or the mental pallet to sing that way. So I would sing it the way I could sing it and arrange the tune so I could make the tune work with my voice.

G: You're not a bad singer now.

J: Well, that's what people say, but I still hear the greats in my head, and I know that I'm not—I want to be like them. That's the little ring I keep reaching for. I don't have a great range, but I try to keep the tune in the realm of my range, and I sing from my soul. I sing honestly. That, I think, comes across. More than a great singer, it's honest singing.

G: You also have to be an intelligent singer—you know what your voice can do, and you know what you want to communicate. The obvious example is Dylan. No pipes at all.

J: His lyric content was killer, and his phrasing was killer.

G: To turn his limitation into an emotional statement. That's grey cells.

J: I think it's using emotional soul cells. I sing strictly on feel,

man. It's my soul guiding my voice at that point when I'm singing. It's not a head-y thing. To me, it's more a spiritual, emotional thing.

G: Some people are born with a voice that just immediately responds. The rest of us have to work at it, but some people don't know how to work at it.

J: Also, it's like anything—the more you do it, the more comfortable you become with it and the more you're going to take a chance. Where you wouldn't, say, ten years ago, you've been singing for ten years and you think, "Oh, try that inflection. Try that. See if I can make that work." Or all of a sudden, you hear something you didn't hear ten years ago. I use the analogy of a painter's pallet. When you first start off, you had just these three colors. Now it's ten years later, and you've mixed up all these really cool colors! And not only that, but you actually know where to use them! But every so often, one color runs into another on the painting, and you get this really neat thing, this cool color right there, and you go, "Damn!" To me, it's like a vocal pallet or a mental palate or an emotional pallet, or a spiritual pallet. And it's all how it evolved, the more you work it. That's how I sort of guide myself.

You must have gone through this: you buy an album for a couple of tunes. And there's three or four tunes on the album you thought were slugs. At the time. But 20 years later you put the album back on, you go, "Damn! That's a good tune!" But at the time you couldn't give two shits about the tune. You weren't ready to hear it, and now you're ready to hear it. Now you've gone through whatever to be able to hear that for what it was. There's old jazz ballads that I love but could never play and definitely could never sing. Definitely didn't have the pipes or the vocal vocabulary to pull it off. But I've always kept it sort of mentally logged, and go back to them every couple of years and see how I'm doing. They're my reference. Lately I'm doing pretty good. I got a bunch of them down. I would never play them live because I don't feel confident enough to play them live, but just the fact that I can sit at home and actually get through these tunes.

I'm trying to figure—now I got the chords, and now I see how the melody works against these 8,000 chords, two per bar, or three, four to the bar, you know, I'm starting to learn how Lonnie Johnson played. That's what I'm starting to learn these days. That's my big kick. I'm starting to learn how to put all these weird little chords, instead of single note things, now they're chordal things. So I've been taking single note runs I've been doing and trying to figure out how to play the chords against 'em. Counter melodies and stuff are starting to come to me. This is what's startin' to happen.

My musical evolution is starting. I go through phases where, ever since day one, I go on a learning curve, and then I go on an application curve, and then I get into like a bored curve where I think I'm not learning anything, and all of a sudden, bang!, I'm back to the learning curve. All this stuff comes on board again. Sometimes you'll evolve and you'll lose, like your bag only holds so much and you have to give up some to make room for new stuff, you know? And I don't want to

lose a lot of the old stuff because I think a lot of the old stuff is really cool.

To get back to my uncle Vic. That's where my dad started. He heard my uncle Vic play, and he was totally floored.

G: What kinds of tunes was he playing?

J: My uncle Vic was playing jazz tunes. Jazz ballads and stuff. And traditional Italian tunes that he took and arranged, stuff like that. My dad wanted to learn Jimmie Rodgers and that kind of thing. My uncle definitely knew that, and he would say, "Sure, here. When you get good with the chords, then you play the melody, like this." And so my dad taught himself after that. After the first few years of my uncle showing him, my dad went off on his own and learned.

And he also taught himself rack harp, how to blow fiddle melodies on a rack harp while chording the tune. Which is—man, I can't chew gum and tie shoe laces! When I saw him in action, my dad, I was just, "Damn!" You know, you don't realize how difficult that is until you start trying to do it. I actually put a rack harp on a few times and tried to play a melody and chord along, and it was clusterfuck! The only way to describe it.

So I just call myself a guitar player. I got my hands full with guitar. But I have a good concept of guitar playing these days, you know. I know I'm not the greatest guy around, but I know I've got a good handle on it, and I know I've got a very unique, personal approach to playing that you can tell 20 blocks away that it's me playing. Good or bad, you can tell it's me.

G: Mostly good, Johnny, you know that.

J: It's my style. And it's very much drenched in a blues style. But nonetheless it's me. I've taken all my woodshedding and everything to make it sound like me. A lick starts, and you think that might be the start of a Freddy King lick, but it never ends up that way. And I know what I'm doing. I know where I got that lick. I know that I'm playing it at the V chord, where Otis might've played it at the I chord or something. I got it over here now. I got it phrased to work that way. It sounds totally different, yet it sounds familiar. I worked hard on that.

I stopped listening to radio about 1975. I just stopped. That was it. Stopped playing records. Stopped everything and started developing my style. I went by myself, to be with me, to not be influenced by anybody. To take all the stuff I had learned up until then and now apply. And play differently and write differently. That's what I've been doing. There was a point that I was—Laurie Lightfoot, who was with me 1980 until about '83, I remember her coming home about 1981; she said, "There's some guy, Stevie Ray Somebody, on the radio. I just heard this guy, he's stealing all your licks." I had a real blues-rooted kind of thing, but a Hendrix-y kind of sound to it. Which is where Stevie Ray came from. And I stopped my whole style—I threw everything into the garbage can and started again. That's exactly what happened. In 1983 I left Sidewinder and went back to my roots, Rockabilly stuff, to get myself back into a space of rebirth. To start from there again and developed my own little

things. Anything I heard Stevie Ray do that I used to do, I stopped playing. And started doing it elsewhere.

But it's been 14 years, 15 years, and in the last nine years, I've definitely got a style unto myself, a signature that most people don't ever get to put on something. You can listen to something and know, "That's a Buddy Guy," or "That's a B.B. King." You can tell. You hear it. They play it exactly where they heard it. That's something else my dad said to me. He said, as I was learning the first chords and stuff from him, "You have a choice right now to be a craftsman or an artist." And I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "You can paint by numbers on somebody else's picture, or you can paint the picture yourself. That's how it is." So from that moment on—the first tune I learned was "Mockingbird Hill," the first tune I learned to pick—and I made it into a samba or rumba. *Bump-a-da-doo-doo dump pa...* My dad laughed. "Whadaya doin'?" It's not a samba." I said, "That's me." He would never play it for anybody, but he and I would fool around with it.

G: What did he think about your power trio stuff?

J: Oh, it was total rejection. I was banished—banished to the badlands. "Electric. Goddam hippie. Psychedelic!" He used to say, "Am I hurtin' ya? I'm standing on your hair!" Things like this. [Laughter] My dad hated electric guitars—it had to be wooden. "They look like a goddam pork chop. That's not.... Listen to this. They don't sound like a goddam guitar." He always thought it should be natural.

There's other guys, too, like my uncle Bill, my dad's brother, played a little bit. And my dad and him used to get together and play. But my dad's side of the family is a strange English breed. It was a competitive thing. "Oh, you can do that? I can do that, too." My uncle Bill had a little bit of money, so he went out and bought the beautiful Gibson guitar. He couldn't play like my dad could, couldn't play close to my dad. And I remember my dad, "That fuckin' cocksucker bought that Gibson guitar; he's tryin' to show me up. He can't play a fuckin' lick." But it was true. He could get through tunes.

I remember after my dad died, my wife Debby and I took a trip to Sudbury because my uncle Bill was getting close to passing. We went to see him and stayed at his place, and him and I played a little bit of guitar. And it was cool—it was kind of like looking at my dad. And the other brother, Frank, who is in England, when he came to Canada, it was like really eerie, it was like looking at my father. No question, these guys were brothers, even down to little mannerisms, like sipping tea with their legs crossed a certain way. They loved each other, they really did—it wasn't like a hate thing, it was just that competitive brothers thing. Oneupmanship.

But the coolest part of that visit was when uncle Bill phoned up a bunch of the old guys that were still alive from when they were kids on Manitoulin Island, who were living up in the neighborhood in Sudbury, and we all met down at this little tavern, and I got told some unbelievable stories about my dad. One was—this was my dad—he's in the service corps in the war. Truck driver. So they're filling gas cans to take out to the front.

Filling jerry cans. And there'd been a guy who'd been ridin' my dad's ass forever. "Eh, you fuckin' northern Ontario guys, you're fuckin' dummies, you're this, you're that...." You know, that typical northern/southern Ontario rivalry—you know, all the Deliverance guys come from northern Ontario, all the university professors come from southern Ontario, or something. So my dad—this is my dad—he waited forever. Finally it's him and this guy fillin' jerry cans, and my dad pulls the nozzle out and sprays this guy with the gas and lights his zippo lighter and says, "Who's the dummy now?" Think about it. This is my father. Patient. Planning. Very well thought out. Nobody else was around. Guy never bothered him again ever. That's scary. What you gonna do? "It was an accident." I thought about it later in life, being a kid and knowing my dad. "Yeah, that sounds like my dad all right. Sounds like him."

G: Did your mother's brothers come to play in those home sessions?

J: No. They would come to visit. When Vic came to the house, he very rarely played. He would come for a visit, and you couldn't get this guy to play. "I play all the time. Came to visit." And, you know, being a player, I can relate with that. You get visiting people, and they want you to play, and you don't want to play, you want to visit. You do this all the time. But in the back of my mind I still remember being a little guy and wanting to hear him play. So sometimes at people's places, I'll get out an acoustic, and I'll play a little bit.

Evo and Vic were not real drinkin' guys. Uncle Evo was a very successful business man in Montreal. He was a roofer. He's the guy who brought Flintkote to Canada and had the exclusive rights. He's a very smart guy. Great roofer and a great family man. Guitar and stuff, that was his pleasure. I would vis-it, but not a lot. In later years, after brothers and sisters started to die, my mom and Evo have always been close but they made more visits back and forth in the last ten years than I can remember in all the years I was a kid. They were both busy rais-ing families and were hundreds of miles apart.

And I missed that. The Italian side—it was just unbelievable. Good times, lots of love and screamin' and yellin' and—that's just the way it was. You'd get with the English side, and if you asked for something a little too loud, you'd be.... Or, if you were a kid, Heaven help you. I never did get used to it. "I don't want to go there." Consequently my dad—not by choice,

but just because us kids because we had a way better time on the Italian side of the family—said, "OK, we'll just go there." My uncle Bill would come to Toronto and stay at a hotel. He wouldn't come to stay at the house; he'd stay at a hotel down the street. And my dad and him would hook up, but they wouldn't come to the house.

G: Your daddy asked you to take the ball....

J: Absolutely. This was before he died, about a week and a half before he died. He made me promise. He said, "You have the talent. Promise me you'll pursue it." So I made the promise. I did. But it took me another three years to get serious. It played on me for about three years. I never thought I was ready. And then I thought—I moved to Alberta. New life, new place, new faces. "I'm going to go for it. I'll see. Either I do, or I don't. Fall on my face or stand up. But I'll try." And that's what I did. So since 1979, late fall, '79 is when I started getting serious.

Up until then it was like ten years of flirting. Get a day job, play for a while, quit the day job, get another day job, play for a while, quit the day job. And learning. That was all growth and then finally, I moved in '79, I thought, "OK, this is a good enough place to be. There's no real blues out here. It's a perfect place for me to try and do what I want to do." I started playing what I coined *Rockin' Rodeo*, a beefed-up country rock, which is what Nashville is doing now. I was doing it in '79 and '80 and '81 and getting total rejection. They eventually came around. Sidewinder was a good band. Sidewinder was a serious band. And then I made the Club 21 Lincolns, a rockabilly band. I had that for about a year, and then I said, "Nah, I'm doing my blues thing. That's it." I backtracked on my roots a little bit and got myself known as a guitar player and moved through a couple of styles of playing and got some notoriety and recognition, and then said, "OK, I'm making my own band now." And didn't look back.

When this is printed, send a couple of copies to my mom. I want her to know that what my dad did his whole life outside of working, the stuff he did outside of working, was special. It was a cool trip—the childhood I had was really cool. It wasn't always beautiful—I don't want to paint a picture, but it was the blue collar workers. It was really cool. Over the years, I get to talking to people about their childhood, and it wasn't real normal—it was real different. But to me it was normal.

Triple Threat, an acoustic ensemble Johnny formed during the early 90s with guitarist Tim Williams (at right); this version of the group included Bo Travis, harmonica. Photograph by GWL. All other photos courtesy of Johnny V. Mills. Thanks, Johnny! Several of them are to be found at his home page. For another shot of Johnny's dad, on the eve of his departure to WWII, see Bulletin 32.1.2

