

MARCI COHEN: Welcome to the Berklee Oral History Project. We are meeting today with Steve Rochinski from the Harmony department. Welcome, Steve, nice to have you here.

STEVE Thank you, Marci, it's a pleasure to be here with you. Thank you.

ROCHINSKI:

MARCI COHEN: So we'll be working our way through your career chronologically, starting with when you were young--I'm not sure how young, but you grew up in Washington D.C., you were a self-taught rock and R&B guitarist. How did you come to the instrument? What drew you to that?

STEVE Okay, that's a good place to start. So, if we go back to when I was around the age of three, four, five years old, even at that very early age I knew the way I heard music, the way I perceived music, was probably different than the way people around me perceived it. And the way I gauged that was, basically, recognizing how I was feeling and how excited I was about it but how seemingly indifferent everybody else around me was. So I can remember that there were strong emotional, and even sort of visceral, physical responses I would get when I would--especially when I would hear certain types of content. And again, growing up at that age in the fifties, the pop music of that time was rich with great songs and great singers, and the rock 'n' roll thing was well on its way to gaining traction. But there was an awful lot of--you know, the great standards of the day were standard radio airfare in those days. My dad was a big music fan, and my mother, of course, she loved music too, but they didn't--the people around me just didn't seem to have the same response and attraction to that that I did. And of course the guitar was the thing that I was so drawn to. So there was a rather unfortunate circumstance in my neighborhood where this immigrant family had suffered a devastating house fire. And in fact I remember this gentleman's name, it was Mr. Mollassey, and he was the shoe repairman down in the Greenbelt center, and he had a wife and several children. And so their home had caught fire, and it was a total loss for them. And of course as a little kid my interest was to go see what all of the excitement had been about a couple of days after the fact, and you know, just to see what a burned out house looked like, I guess. So when I got to their back door I could see that both doors had been taken off, front and back. And as I stood looking into this door into the opposite yard, there was a huge pile of debris that had already been cleaned out, and I could see on top of that pile was a guitar. So the only way I could get immediately to that was to go through this gauntlet of this burned out house [Marci laughs], and it was really quite spooky, because it was dark, it smelled of smoke, and standing water. And so I very cautiously made my way--deliberately made my way through that, and got--and I climbed up that pile of junk and rescued this guitar.

MARCI COHEN: You took your life into your hands for the sake of getting the guitar.

STEVE ROCHINSKI: I took my life into my hands, right. And I grabbed that guitar and I ran home with it. And I remember laying on the couch for--it seemed the longest time, just [strums air]. And it only had, like, maybe three or four strings on it and it had been buckled from all the water damage, but that didn't matter; it was a real guitar. And I was laying there strumming it, and I remember my dad at the time worked on the railroad, and he had a night shift that he had to get to so he was trying to get some sleep. So of course I'm laying there just trying to make the sound come out of this thing, just strumming, just happy to be laying there strumming, and I remember he woke up and said, "Boy, you're gonna have to put that thing away." So it wasn't the most positive response, but the fact that I got a response was an indication that if I just get better at this, maybe people will continue to respond. So it was a: "Okay, I've gotten somebody's attention now."

They could never afford lessons, and in addition to this, my grandfather, my father's father, was not a trained musician, he was not a professional musician in any way, but he did have a penchant and a love for writing songs. And he did compose a tune--the lyrics, and I think the melody to a tune that eventually he collaborated with one of the Lombardo brothers, the Guy Lombardo family, collaborated with Carmen Lombardo. And they penned this tune called "Powder Your Face with Sunshine," which became a major hit tune in the late forties. So I knew I had that heritage, and he always kinda kept it a mystery to me, it was like, they never really kinda talked about that a lot. But I knew that I--so he was the only one who, ultimately, would support whatever. As I became five, six, seven years old, he was the one who would support this burgeoning drive toward wanting to get a guitar so he would take his royalty checks and he would go out and buy me a guitar. But never got lessons, they were never able to--there were very few people at the time, and where I grew up, where you could get formal guitar lessons. And they would've seen that probably as a waste of money anyway, so. And then of course, you know, the people in my family, other than my grandfather, never took any of that seriously, but that didn't deter me.

So, moving on through the sixties, listening to the pop music of the time, and especially the instrumental guitar music of The Ventures, that became a major motivation. And there were older guys in my neighborhood, guys who might've been four, five, six, seven years older than me who had developed some chops, and I would hang out with 'em and watch 'em play and listen and observe, and try to pick up little things. But as that continued on and I started making more sense of things--I didn't get my first real playable instrument, I mean, something that was electric that I could actually keep in tune, until probably around 1968. And then in '69, as I was widening my circle of friends who all played instruments and we would do the garage jam sessions and backyard jam sessions, then I got my first real instrument. So it was really those experiences just sort of broadened and branched out over all that time, and I would have these real quick bursts of growth, you know, these real quick upward moves of growth, very accelerated, very rapid, things were clicking, then I'd plateau out, and then they'd take off again, and plateau out. So I was aware of the fact that there was progress going on that was measurable and significant, so I just kept building on that, you know. I guess I still am to this day.

MARCI COHEN: So you mentioned The Ventures being inspiring with the instrumental guitar, so do you want to tell the story about the play-along with The Ventures' instructional record?

STEVE ROCHINSKI: Oh, yes, yes, yeah. So there was a period of time there where I did not own a guitar, so I was either borrowing a friend's guitar and amp, or just kind of going without, but there was a period of time there where The Ventures had--their recording company had released a very early version of Music Minus One play-along records. So, one of the things that I had discovered was, in those days, we had department stores like Sears Roebuck and Montgomery Ward's, and they all had their own musical instrument lines. I think Sears was Silvertone and then I think Montgomery Ward's might've been Harmony, you know, Harmony brand. So whenever I would go to the Montgomery Ward with my mother, she would go off in one direction and I would always head over to where the guitars were hanging, and I'd go over and I'd pull one down and I'd sit there and start playing it. And because I could do a little bit of something, probably better than what the salesmen could do, they always saw that as kind of an attraction; here's this little kid sitting there making some minimal amount of musical sense on this thing and people would come over, pass by, watch it for a moment. So, anyway, going to Montgomery Ward's was a way for me to continue playing the guitar until I could--my grandfather could maybe get me another one. So, anyway, in the other side of the store was a record department. And The Ventures' play-along albums were right there in full display. So what I would do is go over to the other side of the store and I would surreptitiously open the--

MARCI COHEN: [Laughs] Yeah?

STEVE ROCHINSKI: --take the wrapping off, and I would open it, and I would get this diagram of how to play the first couple of bars to Walk, Don't Run. And I would memorize that, and I'd run back to the other side of the store and sit there and then work it out, and then I'd run back over and see it again, the next phrase, and then I'd run. So I had this commute between two ends of the stores going on. So what that taught me--what I realized from that is that I had this very, very strong ability for retention, for extreme detail retention. And I could remember things sonically, too. So, as I started getting the confidence to--memorizing this melody--then I can sing the melody and I'm working out the rest of the details based on the specific area in which the diagrams told you to play it. And then I was able to take it from there, just from what I could remember from having heard the tunes so much. So that was a very significant lesson for me in the value and the power of self-learning, of self-teaching, you know, that motivation to want to do it so badly that you'd risk possibly getting pulled into the back room for attempted shoplifting.

MARCI COHEN: Right, right.

STEVE ROCHINSKI: you know, or destroying the

MARCI COHEN: Destroying the merchandise! [Laughs]

STEVE ROCHINSKI: The merchandise, right. But anyway, so that--you know, and I'd have to take a bus, I would take a D. C. transit bus over there, ten-cent, fifteen-cent bus fare so it was always a real adventure. I always looked forward to when I could get over there to do that, yeah.

MARCI COHEN: So eventually you decided to make it a little bit more formal; you enrolled in community college and studied harmony and ear training.

**STEVE
ROCHINSKI:**

Yeah, that didn't happen until I was about eighteen. When I was sixteen there were two college-aged girls who lived across the hall from me, one of whom had minored in music. And at this point, in 1970, I had a pretty good amp and guitar, and I was always learning things off of records and what have you. So one evening I was over there, we were hanging out, and I notice this rather formal looking, hard-bound, kind of wine-red, burgundy book, and on the front of it it said Harmonic Practice. So I started looking through it and it was a harmony and theory book that was written by one of America's great classical composers, a gentleman named Roger Sessions. And this was the textbook that was used when she was taking that minor in music. And she saw how enamored I was with this book and she said, "If you'd like, you can have it," so I carried that book around with me for a good year and a half, two years. And still had it well beyond the time I had then enrolled into this two-year community college program. And I sat there with an oil pen trying to figure out all of these complex things that--I mean, I had no basis or background in terminology; for me to read music at that time I literally had to count lines and spaces. There was complex grandstaff piano notation. It was a real endeavor, a real undertaking. But I persisted with it, and I made as much sense of it as I could. And I had gotten to a point where it was like, "Okay, I can't-- I've reached a wall here. I need some help in translating." So that's what then motivated me to go into that, and that was a legitimate kind of conservatory-based theory program.

I wasn't interested in a degree because I was starting to work more steadily. I was getting into playing more and more complex music, and I thought, "Yeah, if I could learn that stuff, that might help me to figure out what is" 'Cause I could always hear, but I wanted to know deeper what it was that I was doing, you know, how does this stuff hang together? And I guess what I was seeking out was really the basic principles of syntax and grammar, harmonic syntax and harmonic grammar, how this system all kind of hangs together, tonality and all these things--that was sort of my gut instinct there.

As it turned out, it was a very worthwhile experience for me, and I had learned a lot, but it had its limits in terms of what I thought was relevant to what I ultimately wanted to understand. So being able to voice lead, or, let's say, realize a figured bass analysis of a Bach chorale melody line you know, it wired my brain in very significant, meaningful ways, but it did not help me understand how this Wayne Shorter tune or this Mahavishnu Orchestra tune or this Steely Dan tune hung together, you know? But the ear training part of it was really, extremely valuable. And in those days it was a rather clunky system of a graduated book of exercises where they would have you do--they would start you with abstract expressions of minor and major seconds, and that would cover a couple of pages. And then abstract expressions of minor and major thirds, and it would take you all the way up to the perfect octaves. And what you had to do was you had to take this tape reel that was relative to that particular chapter, and you sat down, and it was intervallic dictation. Well, I was very impatient about how the structure of the program was paced. So what I would do is I would sneak those tapes out after-hours, and I would grab a handful of them and I would take them home, and I would sit there with this old reel-to-reel tape recorder that this friend that I was rooming with at the time had, and I would just sit there all night with the headphones on, doing this dictation. Then I would--very early the next morning I would sneak them back into the room, the library where they had stored those things, so nobody would miss them. So, again, that was one of those things where I was proving to myself that I had a strong, kind of autodidact kind of motivation, to just, "You don't have to tell me what to do here. Just give me the resources, I'll figure it out." And so all of that was just along the entire continuum of what I had originally realized when I was five years old.

MARCI COHEN: And so while you were at the community college a teacher brought in Herb Ellis for a clinic who noted that Tal Farlow was one of his favorite guitarists, which was part of your exposure to Tal, which became a touchpoint of your career.

STEVE ROCHINSKI: Right, yes. That was where it started to become much more tangible. Because prior to that, as a kid, I had an uncle who played a little bit of guitar, you know, kind of country and western, what we in those days called hillbilly guitar. And I remember he mentioned a handful of guitar players' names in those days, Tal Farlow's name having been one of them, and then I heard other guys talk about that through the course of those exposures to these older guitar players. So once, in--I think it was in '75, '74, '75, when Fred Chaven--Herb had been in town, I think, with the Great Guitars, and he brought Herb out to sit there for an hour and do a little playing clinic, and somebody had asked him, "Who were some of your favorite guitar players?" and he said, "Well, there's this guy," and that's exactly how he referred to him, he says, "There's this guy who lives on the Jersey Shore who paints signs for a living who's one of the greatest jazz guitar players that ever lived, and his name is Tal Farlow," I went [Points to head] "Bing! Oh yeah, there's that name again." And he tried to play one of Tal's signature lines, and he couldn't quite pull it off, admittedly to him, and everybody else in the room, so that was, "Okay, now here's a very once or twice removed, but tangible connection nowokay. so now this guy is real, and this great player here is a fan of his."

MARCI COHEN: Holds him on a pedestal.

STEVE ROCHINSKI: Exactly. So, yeah, I filed that away.

MARCI COHEN: So, '77, you were struggling as a working guitarist and you came to Berklee.

STEVE ROCHINSKI: Yep, yep. In '76--'cause at this stage I had pretty much separated--I had divorced myself from the music I had grown up on. Because in the early seventies I had gotten bitten by the jazz bug. This was primarily through having heard Miles Davis on some of the old--I think I remember hearing Miles Davis on the old--what was that very first live television oh, The Midnight Special. Yeah, Miles Davis had appeared on The Midnight Special one time, and I was just absolutely blown away by it. And then I had--the guy who had brought Herb Ellis out to that community college also had exposed me to the Mahavishnu Orchestra of John McLaughlin. And as it turned out, John McLaughlin as a kid had been a big fan--Tal was one of his heroes as a kid, you know. And I remember seeing in a Guitar Player magazine interview that McLaughlin had sung Tal's praises, as many had, and still continue to, as this genius player. And I loved--what McLaughlin was doing was extremely complex, even to this day it still is; it's timeless music in its relevance and complexities. So it was from the McLaughlin period and Miles Davis that I started working my way backwards through the history as I was getting older, and I was starting to embrace the whole jazz thing.

So in 1976, the late, great Howard Roberts, the guitar master, Hollywood studio player who was one of the original members of The Wrecking Crew--okay, and so Howard, who was really just so brilliant in his ability to teach the guitar and all of the psychological pitfalls of becoming a really good guitar player, he took what he had started in the old Guitar Player magazine back page columns that he would do, those monthly guitar seminars, in print, and he took all of that material, and he assembled it and he started doing a traveling masterclass road show. Of course, when I heard he was coming into the D. C. area in April '76, I said, "Yeah, all right." 'Cause I was already in this working band, this regional band that was playing a lot of cover music. So I went and spent three days in this seminar environment, and it was absolutely transformative for me, because it was starting to now fill in a lot of the holes of what had been left behind in those earlier traditional chorale studies, the traditional theory and harmony. So he was filling in all of these holes and it was making a lot of sense because it was from a player's standpoint, but there was still a lot of theory there and I was able to blow through a lot of this stuff. So anyway, he did two of those three-day sessions that year. And as it turned out, that seminar material had become the basis for the Guitar Institute of Technology, which is now the Musicians Institute--

MARCI COHEN: Out in L. A.

STEVE ROCHINSKI: Out in L. A. Well, at that time that was Howard's baby. And he took all of those seminar materials and developed it into this brick-and-mortar location out there. And I was gonna go out there; I wanted to continue studying and learning from him, and getting to know him better. But a friend of mine had spent the summer of '76 here at Berklee, and he came back with this unbelievable report of this experience that he had had. So I was kinda torn between the two, and because Berklee was a degree-seeking, or a degree-awarding institution, it was easier for me to get financial aid.

MARCI COHEN: Oh, okay.

STEVE ROCHINSKI: So I made that choice based on the practicalities of whatever scholarship and whatever--what in those days were called defense student loans. So I got all of that basically taken care of, and so that's what brought me here in '77. So that's where that is.

MARCI COHEN: Any particular memories of your time here as a student?

STEVE ROCHINSKI: Yeah, oh, wonderful memories, absolutely. It was obviously a much smaller college then. There were only three majors. And a lot of what we kind of take for granted now here, especially in terms of the Film Scoring and the Music Synthesis programs, I was here at the time when all that was being developed by Michael Rendish, Dave Mash, and Don Wilkins and all of their partners in those curricular matters. So yeah, '77, I was just so glad to be here and I knew I had some of the greatest catalog resources--the Jazz in the Classroom series, which was a great way to sit and study scores by Arif Mardin when he was a Herb Pomeroy student, and Gary Burton, and Mike Gibbs! I'm trying to think of who else's scores--oh, Quincy Jones', his students' scores, you know, so you could sit and hear them played by this really, really high-level student band that was hand-picked by Herb Pomeroy, and you could sit and study those scores all day. So that was an incredible resource. The guitar lessons that I had here were really not guitar lessons, 'cause I could pretty much play, but I was still working on sight reading. So all I did with my guitar teachers was really just sit and sight read for a half hour, and, you know, really challenging things. We would read Bartók violin duets, and of course there was the matter of getting your jury requirements taken care of, but I took care of all that, these guys didn't have to sit and tell me to do--I knew what I had to do, I knew what I was gonna be tested on. So we just sat there and just played music, and that was a great approach to that, and it was a great way to continue to become a good sight-reader. Eventually I ended up being called to play in Herb Pomeroy's line writing band, which was not an easy chair to get, and it was a very, very challenging band to play in because all of the student music that we had to play and record, which was typically between ten and twelve charts in two hours--and these were roadmap, highly developed jazz compositions by these very, very talented hand-picked student writers that Pomeroy had taken under his wing. So again, that was--and, you know, with that experience, and then I played for Don Wilkins in his film scoring project bands. So my whole thing was, because of the influence of Howard Roberts, I was really heading toward leaving here and then maybe heading out and getting studio work. That was really my professional goal. So, some other highlights at the time I was here you know, I had gotten a work study job and I was one of the first stage crew that ever worked in the Berklee Performance Center. So I was on that crew--now, this was a crew, capital "C," I mean, some serious characters here.

MARCI COHEN: [Laughs] I thought you were gonna say like heavy lifting, I didn't realize it was more--

STEVE ROCHINSKI: Well, there was a lot of that, there was a lot of that. And of course with my built and buff physique of 125 pounds with maybe a twenty-six inch waist, of course, there were certain physical limitations that I had in terms of loading in and loading out professional acts. But I remember it was Dave Pelletier who was the--he was sort of the assistant manager of the theater--the theater was run in an entirely different way in those days. Jim Mavricos was the original theater manager there, and then eventually the late Frank Turziano took that over. But while I was on the stage crew, Pelletier decided that he wanted to groom me to become a stage manager. This was for the professional outside shows. So I had no idea what that involved; he said, "Well, all you gotta do is stand off here to stage right, you have headphones on, and when you get a signal from me, tell the house guys--the lighting guys to take the house down to half, and then take it down to full, and then tell whoever's standing next to you, 'Go.'" So that was the entirety of my stage manager career.

But I got to stand next to a lot of very household-name type people. The very first time I ever did that was for Robert Altman. I just said, "Okay, Mr. Altman, it's your time to go," you know, I'm standing there watching him do his thing with his home movies with him and Bob Newhart. Dinah Shore, got to stand there with her while a band was playing a tune, and I'm singing the melody, 'cause I knew the tune, and she heard me singing, so now she starts singing along with me, [Marci laughs] so we're standing there for a few minutes doing a little unison scat thing with the melody line of "Four Brothers." And what a wonderful, warm, gentle woman she was. She really was, 'cause one particular thing I remember--this was during the New England Emmys for--this was in the late seventies--the New England Emmys for the local newscasters. So they brought her and Gene Shalit in as sort of the em-cees for this thing. So while something is going on out there with an awards presentation or something, she's standing here with a bunch of three-by-five cards that writers had already scripted out for her. So I'm just standing there like a fly on the wall, and all of a sudden she says, "Gene, do you happen to have a pen on you? Because I would really love to clean some of this stuff up," you know? She wasn't a prima donna; she just saw what she had, she saw that it didn't work, and all she was gonna do was make some adjustments. So that, to me, was a real lesson in professionalism in show business. I thought, "Yeah, that's really the way you wanna handle yourself."

Virtually every act that I had seen in there, worked with in there, whether I was running a spotlight or working on the stage or whatever, with few exceptions, they all comported themselves with that kind of professional patience and grace and dignity. It was a great lesson in professionalism in this world, it really was. Whether they were comedians, or if it was Dizzy Gillespie, or whomever; it was a great lesson. The final story I'll tell about that experience is probably the most meaningful one for me. So I and a friend were sitting at the back door playing a game of chess, and Bill Evans, about a year before he died, had just played a brilliant, almost two full hour trio set for the--I don't know if it was a Boston Globe Jazz Festival event or if this was separate from that, but anyway--so my friend and I are playing chess, and Bill Evans comes through the back doors there, and he's standing there waiting for a cab to take him back. It was wintertime, because he was wearing a herringbone overcoat. So as he's standing there, not even the distance of that camera [gestures at camera] to here, and he's making me really nervous because he's watching this chess game. So in my nervousness, I look over at him and I said, "It's my move, you have any suggestions?" So he comes over and he gets right over my shoulder, leaning down the way he so classically would lean over the keyboard, you know, he kinda gets down on top of the thing over my shoulder, and he's looking at it, and he looks at it for a good thirty seconds. Then he backs off, and he looks me dead in the eye and he says, "The best advice I can give you is: the surest way to lose is to convince yourself that you're playing brilliantly." [Marci laughs] And then he took off, out the door--'cause at that time, the cab, it was like perfect timing: the cab had pulled up: he said that to me, the cab pulled up, he turned around, he had a Chesterfield in his mouth, and he walked out, got in the cab, he was gone, and it wasn't within a year that he was dead. So again, one of those--that was the greatest thirty-second private lesson I could have ever hoped to have with such a great master musician. You know, the way he just turned that whole thing into a metaphor was just so brilliant, it really was.

STEVE ROCHINSKI: I guess the other thing I would like to put on record is, again, going back to the importance of self-teaching and being self-motivated in this life, and especially in this professional world of music. I happened to be here, unfortunately, when the blizzard of '78 hit. Now, I'd finished my first semester, fall of '77, came back. Around my birthday in January, we had the first major snowstorm hit. And it really took a toll on Berklee's facilities, because again, in those days, the dorms and the food service thing here was probably a lot like what you would get in a Russian gulag. [Marci laughs] So things derailed, infrastructure-wise, very quickly. But they came back up and got things up and running again. There was relatively little interruption in instruction. Then, in early February, that big one came just a couple of weeks after that. Actually, it was about a week and a half after that. That second one came, and that's the one that just completely crippled the entire region and shut down the city, martial law had been declared by the governor, and Berklee was closed for the better part of a week. And the dorms, even the old emergency battery-operated lights, they were gone. The batteries in those things had died. There was no instruction. I said, "I've had enough of this," and I grabbed every book that I had for these classes, the old Berklee workbooks, I got an eighty-five percent refund on my tuition, I got on a train, and I went back to D. C. And I did all of the work, I did all of that stuff, even the ear training books. I did all of that work, came back in September, and tested into my third semester. So I never had a second semester, formally. I got credit-by-exam for everything. So that, again, I think it's a good lesson in--if you're willing to take responsibility for your own education, then you're gonna learn something.

MARCI COHEN: So 1980, you finished up, you got your diploma, you hit the road with Tony Tillman, toured a couple years playing and doing charts for the band.

STEVE ROCHINSKI: Yeah, I started out as his guitar player, and then, when his arranger up and abandoned us in the Midwest, he took off with--he got married overnight. Took off for Hawaii, and took every chart that he had written for the band.

MARCI COHEN: Oh, man.

STEVE ROCHINSKI: Plus he was the keyboard player and he was also the auxiliary trombone player on certain tunes. We were left high and dry. So there's when I started--even though we had a lot of those charts memorized, Tony still wanted to bring new material in, so I started doing arrangements, a lot of record copies for him. And then I took over as his musical director, because this guy who'd left us had--

MARCI COHEN: Created a vacancy.

STEVE ROCHINSKI: A serious vacuum there, that's right. And that was a great touring experience...great--I mean, real lunch-pail, blue-collar musician type of life. Because you got up, you went, you ran down new material, then you came, you showed up to the gig, you played any number of dance sets and then shows; then you went out, you had your recreation for the evening, slept that off, got up the next day, came back in, did the same thing. Then when you weren't doing that--see, fortunately with him, he was always in one place at least for a week at a time. Sometimes he'd be in a place for a month at a time. We were playing--

MARCI COHEN: So it wasn't quite as grueling as one-night stands.

STEVE ROCHINSKI: Right, right, in terms of packing up, getting out--right, no. That was--I had already done all that when I was living in the D. C. area back in the mid-seventies. So it was a real serious constant working environment, because, for example, in Panama City Beach, Florida, they would always book him in there around--about that spring break time. So we would be there playing seven nights a week for an entire month. We had no time off. And on the weekends we would do--typically we would go ten to four in the morning, and then we would do--at that time, because it was kind of a mixed bag in terms of the sophistication of the showroom clientele, and he would read the room pretty well, but usually it'd be like three dance sets and then three shows. And we would intersperse them, so it'd be an opening dance set and then he'd come out and do like a C-list show, and then he would do another dance set, and then a "B" show, and then he'd come out and do his "A" material. So where we were playing, and the clientele, typically would dictate the type of show that he would do. He was a very skilled--and he's still working, actually, he's actually still out there doing this--but he's a very skilled dancer and interpreter of songs. One of Tony's biggest downfalls was that he always thought he had a recordable voice. He always thought that he could sell himself on record, but he didn't translate well to recording. But in a live show, with this extremely high energy--he was like a combination of Ben Vereen, Sammy Davis Jr., and Lou Rawls. So you could take the Ben Vereen dancing thing--Sammy Davis Jr. really was probably his biggest model, and eventually Tony became Sammy Davis Jr. in the original Rat Pack show that opened in Vegas. And it was Bill Cosby who brought him out there. Cosby had seen Tony working in the Atlantic City casinos, this was after I'd left the band. And he was pretty taken by Tony's talent so he kinda paved the way for him to get out into the Reno-Vegas circuit. And eventually from that Rat Pack show he was approached by Davis' widow to become Sammy in a show called "Simply Sammy."

MARCI COHEN: Oh, wow.

STEVE ROCHINSKI: And that lasted for a little while. Who knows how many bridges Tony had burned in the business end of things in that particular thing, but eventually he--I think he's working primarily now just on cruise ships. But, for a guy in his sixties, he's still up there, doing that dance thing. He's probably doing less rock 'n' roll than he did in the old days, but he's still doing it. If I hadn't come back to Boston in '84, I'd most likely still be out on the road. Doing that--or maybe other things, but you know When I came here in '84, it was really to, kinda--I had kinda bottomed out, there were some personal things going on in my life I'd gotten entangled with in Elkhart, Indiana, and I needed to kinda come back here to kinda get back on the rails. So if I hadn't kind of fallen into teaching here at that time--I was not planning on hanging here long, and once I did get on faculty, I wasn't planning on staying here that long anyway, but I happened to meet my first wife who was working in the old Counseling Center at the time.

MARCI COHEN: So did you come back to Boston specifically to work at Berklee?

STEVE ROCHINSKI: No, no, I didn't. Nope, no.

MARCI COHEN: So how'd you end up coming back here as faculty?

STEVE ROCHINSKI: Well, while I was here kinda trying to get my personal life back together and regain some financial solvency, I came around one day, just kinda walking through the 1140 building, and I happened to run across Larry Monroe. And Larry I knew, not only--I had taken Directed Study with him in arranging--and that was a primary reason why I came to Berklee as a student, was to take advantage of the arranging curriculum, the arranging program. So I had studied with Larry, and I also knew Larry in my stage crew days, 'cause Larry was in charge of coming out and announcing all of the Berklee student and faculty bands in those days.

MARCI COHEN: So he's one of the people in the wings that you said, "Go on, now?"

STEVE ROCHINSKI: Right, right. So Larry, yeah. So I got to know Larry pretty well between that environment and having studied with him. So that one day in June of '84, I was walking through the 1140 building just to see if there were any people there that I might've known, and I bumped into him. So we were talking; I told him I'd been on the road, and I'd settled into Northern Indiana. And even while I was in Northern Indiana, that was a very fertile time for me in terms of working within the world of jazz, because I had gotten a call to work with Pete and Conte Candoli, the Candoli brothers, the trumpet-playing brothers. So I was starting to circulate throughout that region, as like a first-call player for jazz gigs, but for other non-jazz gigs too.

So I was talking to Larry about all of these things that I had been doing since I left Berklee in '80, and he was talking about how they were caught unaware with this unexpected, last minute surge in student enrollment for September of '77--I'm sorry, September of '84. And I said, "Are you guys looking to hire people?" And he said, "Actually, we are. We've gotta hire thirty new full-time faculty members to deal with this surge." So he asked me if I was interested, I said, "Well, what do you have?" He said, "Well, you could work full-time or part-time. It's really your choice." I said, "Yeah, man, I'll sign on for full time," I mean, I wasn't working at the time, I was trying to get my life back together. So he very generously gave me this opportunity, so he worked it out with Barrie Nettles, and Barrie took me in to what in those days was the "Core department" and we all had to teach a thirty hour a week schedule, we had to teach across the curriculum. We had to teach harmony, arranging, ear training, and ensembles. So it was a serious, serious schedule. Serious commitment. And I've always loved talking about music; I've always loved it, from the time I was a little kid. Loved notation, I loved all aspects of it, so I thought, "Yeah, I think I can do this." So that's where it started.

Yeah, '84--I'm trying to remember who, some of those--so it was me, Freddy Lipsius, Tim Hagans, there was a whole contingent from Chicago that came with Warrick Carter, who was the Dean of Faculty at the time, who came in to replace, I think, Bob Share who had passed away; my history on that is a little foggy. But there was a whole contingent who had come with Carter from the Chicago--what we professionally referred to as the "Chicago Mafia," and Richard Evans was among them. So Richard and I became fast friends. So Richard was part of that, and--I mean, there's a whole list of people, many of whom didn't stay for thirty-some years, you know, they left pretty quickly. Timmy left around '86, right after the strike, and moved to the New York area and asked me to come with him. He wanted me and my wife to pack up. She was pregnant with our daughter, and he said, "Let's just go down there and we'll work together, we'll do all the bad GB [General Business] gigs and then we can start breaking into the jazz scene down there." And I mentioned it to my wife at the time, who was from Jersey near where Tal lived, and she said, "I will never live in New Jersey again." [Marci laughs] So I had to make a choice here, between staying married and raising a family, or divorcing her and moving to the Manhattan--the New York City suburbs. So yeah, so anyway, '84 was basically where the whole thing started here for me, coming back.

MARCI COHEN: So in this stretch of time, Bill Leavitt, who was then Chair of the Guitar Department, brought in Tal Farlow for a clinic. So what happened with you attending that?

STEVE ROCHINSKI: That was in the Performance Center. Tal had been in town playing at the top of the old Howard Johnson's in Kenmore Square, there was a jazz room, I think it was the Starlight Lounge, is what they called it. So he was up there playing with Dicky Van Eps. I think Jimmy Stinnett was playing bass on that gig who later recorded with me on my Otherwise album. So anyway, I went in and sat up in the front balcony, and watched Tal come out playing with John Repucci. Tal was not somebody who was really comfortable in a formal educational environment, because Tal was very self-taught and never learned to read--he could read well enough to write music, but he was not a, in real-time, facile reader on the instrument, you know, the way--not like Howard Roberts, or Jim Hall, or Jimmy Raney would've been. So Tal, in a very humble way, would always come into these situations and he would just sit and play, and then he would open it up for questions about what he was doing.

Now, on this particular day, I don't know if it was--he had just--I think--let's see, in '81, '82, I think is when Tal had stopped drinking alcohol. Tal had been a pretty serious alcoholic for a long time, and eventually he just cold turkey quit it, so it might have been a combination of maybe some of the hangover from that, plus being tired, and Tal was always kind of a--right out of the gate, was always kind of a nervous performer, but once he got used to the energy of the audience and the surroundings, then it was likethere was no holding him back. But he always had to kind of find his performance legs. So on this particular day, he was having a bit of a--he was fighting some of those challenges. But eventually things settled down for him, and it turned out to be a pretty good day. He looked back on it many years later when we were talking about it, and he said, "Yeah, I really wish I hadn't of done that, that day," he kind of regretted it. But he was extremely well received, because he was such a beloved individual in the world of jazz guitar, and in the world of jazz in general.

So, you know, he was a gentle giant who basically said, "Here's what I do," you know, that was his attitude, "This is what I do, take it or leave it." If you enjoy it, great; if not, maybe the next time. So it was a real eye-opening--an ear-opening experience for me, 'cause that was my first time ever seeing him play live, and I came away kind of with mixed feelings about it. I thought, "Wow, I really expected him to be more on top of things." But as I got to know him over time, then that reality of being kind of a nervous performer really started to become kind of like, "Okay, this is what he is, but I'm not gonna hold him accountable for a few moments of, kind of, stepping on shoelaces, because once he ties those shoes, forget it. Then he's gonna leave you. And he's gonna--hopefully he's gonna take you along with him." But it was an experience, you know. But I still wanted to make a connection with him, because I enjoyed who he was as a person, and as--in his place in history, and his accessibility, and the fact that he lived relatively close to where my first wife grew up. [Laughs]

MARCI COHEN: Yeah, so I would've said, next town over, you'd track him down.

STEVE ROCHINSKI: Right, there were all these converging motivations here for approaching him, and it took me a while to kind of get up the nerve to do it. I was more afraid to call him than I was to go over to his house. [Marci laughs] That was--I could never wrap my mind around that, you know? Maybe because I thought--because it would be a disembodied conversation over the phone that he could blow me off pretty quickly you know? Whereas if I'm one-on-one, maybe--you know. So maybe that's what I eventually came to terms with. So I did, I went over there one day, unannounced, and knocked on the door. At the time his wife Tina was still alive, but in very declining health. [mimics knocking on door] and then eventually, there comes this man, dressed like he was--I had just interrupted him changing oil in his car, or doing a spark plug job on his car. I said, "Mr. Farlow, my name is Steve Rochinski, I had sent you a recording that I had done sometime back" He thought about it, and I could tell he was distracted, because I think his wife was in need of some help, and he was very gracious; he said, "You know, I would offer you to come in right now, but right now my wife is not feeling very well. Maybe we could set this up some other time." I said, "Great, I'll call you," because his number was always in the Jersey phonebook. So I did; the next time I was coming down with the family I called him, and I set up my first lesson with him. That was it, I finally got to be knee-to-knee. So what started out as a kid, as this [gestures] thing in the air, this name, this distant name, and then over all that time, eventually I got to sit in his living room. And it was one of the most meaningful experiences that I ever had, it really was.

MARCI COHEN: So it became more formalized at some point; you had the 1993 Jazz Fellowship from the NEA, which resulted in your book, so what was that whole process? When did you start studying with him more regularly, to, "We have a specific output we want from this"?

STEVE ROCHINSKI: Right. So that was in '93. '92, I think, is when I got notification that I had been awarded this grant. And what it enabled us to do was it enabled--first of all, it gave him a very nice chunk of money to be available. And what it enabled me to do was to travel very easily without out-of-pocket costs to basically have carte blanche access to him, because Tal was not very busy performing in those days, his gigs--he was a homebody. He was very happy to be at home painting signs, changing the oil in his car, whatever, taking care of his sick wife, playing his guitar every day in the living room. If he was doing that minimally, he was a happy man. And I always tell people, Tal Farlow never had to ask for a gig in his life; everybody came to him. So he knew that, you know. If there was something out, he could be choosy, he could be picky.

So I was able to take the Amtrak down there on a pretty regular basis, and at that time his wife had died, I think, by then. Maybe his wife was in a nursing home. But he had started seeing, with his wife's blessing, the former girlfriend of a very old musical friend and associate of his, and they eventually became married after his wife died. And she had a condo in Manhattan, so I would always go down there, take a cab up to just next to Lincoln Center on Tenth Avenue, and he would always ride me back down to the train. And we would sit there and just play, and then I would kinda pick his brains about things, because again, going back to what I said before, Tal was not comfortable in expressing the technical and the theoretical things behind how he made music and how he perceived music and what those closed systems entailed.

He told me a very, very funny story in relation to a previous attempt of somebody to write a book--'cause I knew that there was a vacuum there, there were a lot of people out there who wanted to really get inside this guy's head, because he had such a unique approach to how he got around with the instrument, and the way he thought harmonically. I knew there was a vacuum waiting to be filled. So when we were in the process of organizing the outline of the book, he told a story about how a writer from Guitar Player magazine some years back had approached him about wanting to do a book on Tal. And he said, "Yeah, all right, I'll do it." So Tal said this guy shows up to his place in Jersey Shore at Sea Bright, and he's sitting there with Tal, and Tal's sitting there and he's playing his guitar, and he's not five minutes into playing, and this guy leans over and says, "Stop. You can't do that." [Both laugh] "You can't do that on the guitar." And Tal, flummoxed as he was, just said, "Okay, I think we're probably done here." [Marci laughs] So this guy leaves, and gets on a plane and heads back out to California. So that was the beginning, middle and end of the first attempt of somebody to write a book on how Tal Farlow negotiated the instrument. That's one of the funniest stories I've ever heard, it really is. [Both laugh]

MARCI COHEN: I would think, yes, if he can do that, he can do that.

STEVE ROCHINSKI: Yes, he's doing it. What are you not getting here, man? What reality do you think you're living in? And again, even in the close, unlimited access that I had to Tal, there was still a lot of stuff that he kind of left up in the air. I had to kind of figure a lot of stuff out on my own based on what--I had to extrapolate a lot of things from the limited way in which he expressed what he understood he was doing. Now when I say limited, I don't mean limited necessarily in some linear sense. What I'm talking about here is that he had such a condensed and compressed way of thinking about things, you know. He had this distillation of everything down basically to two chord shapes, and the way he would play off of these shapes would be how he carved out his lines. And then his approach to reharmonization, which had been so richly informed by Art Tatum and Bud Powell; he was a great lover of the impressionistic composers, he loved Ravel; so, like so many of the jazz musicians of his generation, he brought all that to bear, the impressionistic thing, you know, in the way he approached harmony. But yeah, I had to come to a lot of my own conclusions but eventually, once everything had been written and was ready to go to press, I ran it all by him. And he looked it over, and I guess to whatever degree of understanding he had with the terminology I was using, he gave it his imprimatur and it was done.

MARCI COHEN: Yeah, so Jazz Style of Tal Farlow came out in '94, it's still in print.

STEVE '94, yep.

ROCHINSKI:

MARCI COHEN: Has it been in print continuously, I assume?

STEVE Yeah.

ROCHINSKI:

MARCI COHEN: So '94 was a busy year for you.

STEVE It was a very busy year.

ROCHINSKI:

MARCI COHEN: Because you had that, you had your first album out, Until Further Notice, and then you also did the Harmony 4 textbook.

STEVE ROCHINSKI: I was writing the Harmony 4 textbook at the same time as I was writing that Tal book. And they both had nine-month print deadlines. Plus, I was my own editor on both of those books. I mean, I ran the Harmony 4 book by Barrie Nettles who was the chairman at the time, you know, he made comments, he made suggestions. I ran it by some of the faculty members at the time in the Harmony department; I didn't get a whole lot of helpful feedback from them, unfortunately. They all just sort of, "Yeah, okay." They had other things on their mind, I guess. But they all wanted input, but once they got it, I didn't get back what I had hoped to get back.

MARCI COHEN: So was this sort of formalizing what was being taught informally without a specific text in the classrooms?

STEVE ROCHINSKI: Well, what had happened was, these were not textbooks, per se. These were workbooks, and they've always been called that. And, without getting too much into the history of how these pedagogical materials were developed over Berklee's history, Barrie ultimately had written--rewritten had the Harmony 1, 2 and 3 books, and the late Alex Ulanowsky had written the Harmony 4 book. And after Alex had died, Barrie had a lot of problems with the readability and the presentation of what Alex had done, despite his musical acumen and brilliance. Unfortunately, Alex was a serious, raging alcoholic, and eventually that's what killed him at a very early age of fifty-one years old, I think, among other things. But putting that aside, Barrie wanted that Harmony 4 book rewritten, and he didn't want to do it. So he asked me to do it. And I said, "Okay, but I just want to tell you that I am also under contract with Hal Leonard right now to write this other book," he said, "I trust you'll do it; if you run into any problems, let me know." So I took it as a challenge, and, you know, it turned out okay I guess.

MARCI COHEN: Well, you've been teaching at Berklee for thirty-one years now.

STEVE ROCHINSKI: Thirty-one years, yeah.

MARCI COHEN: What are some of the highlights, big changes that you've seen over time, as we're starting to wind down a little bit?

**STEVE
ROCHINSKI:**

Well, the biggest change came about probably as a result of that strike in '86, because until then, Berklee, for all of its strengths and weaknesses, had been run essentially as like a small family operation, you know, people might refer to it as a mom-and-pop sort of business. And it was a difficult schedule to keep, because most people who worked here at the time were still professionally active. So if you're out there maintaining your credibility as a professional musician, then you have to come in here and teach these very, very grueling thirty hour a week schedules, that was a real test of time management, it really was. So after the strike, the internal bureaucratic and administrative structure underwent significant changes. And it started to take on the appearance, now, of a more traditional sort of college environment with a very specific administrative structure and then a sub-administrative structure, and then the academic standing and categories of the faculty, you know. They started in with the--there was no such thing as a full professor or an associate professor here before 1986. So once that had all been settled, then everybody was starting to get slotted into--based on what your background was, you know, your initial academic ranking was either gonna be instructor, or assistant, or associate or full professor. So I came in as an instructor plus three, and then I went right up through everything; assistant, and then associate, and then I've been a full professor. I was actually functioning at the level of full professor while I was an associate, but because of contractual limitations in terms of these timelines, they rarely would ever do early promotions for people. But I was, measurably, doing everything in the criteria that a full professor would have to do to be a full professor, while I was an associate. So I took my time moving from that into the full professor rank. So I think I've been there maybe since 2005, maybe 2006. So I was at the associate level for a really long time, and then moved into that.

Other changes--and I know we're probably running out of time here--but other changes obviously have been the diversification of musical styles here; Berklee was always primarily a jazz school and an arranging college. For better or for worse, there are other things here now that are being taught, I think, in terms of contemporary music. I mean, I live and work in a lot of different worlds, although my primary artistic identity is that of a jazz musician, but I'm also a writer; I compose music that's used in television and movie productions, although I'm not a film-scorer; these are source cues. So the diversification of the styles has been, I think, generally a very positive thing.

There have been a lot of pedagogical changes that the school has undergone that I have not necessarily been in lockstep with or in agreement with, especially within my department. Because one of the--this is one of the other problems as a result of that strike: prior to that, we were all teaching across the curriculum. But once everybody had been departmentally pigeonholed--and I was one of the fortunate ones who was actually teaching across departments at the time, I was still teaching performance things as well as--I was given the choice to either be in the Performance Division or the Writing Division, and because Barrie and I had a good working relationship, I stuck with where he was. So through the breakup of the Core department, and with all of these other structural and pedagogical changes that were going on between the Arranging department, and the Harmony department, the Ear Training department; all of these core areas started to kind of take on their own little island identity. And so there was this sort of separation, and the cross-the-curriculum changes. I don't think--taking that away, as a requirement to work here, to be able to teach all of that and to be able to bring all of that together in a solid, unified way, I think, is one of the real downsides to the changes that this place has undergone over the years, I really do. If there's some way they could bring that back around in a formal way--'cause they've sort of nibbled at the changes of that, you know, they'll selectively pull a couple people out of this department, cross-pollinate them with the Ear Training, or with Arranging, or what have you. But all of that is emblematic of all of the priorities that have created these changes in the broadening of the majors, now--I think they're close to somewhere near twenty majors, maybe, now in this place.

MARCI COHEN: I think we're still at twelve, but there are a lot of minors now.

STEVE Twelve? A lot of minors? Okay, so we're in the double-digits now, at least. In my day, and even up until probably
ROCHINSKI: the strike, I mean there might've been the same three, or maybe five at that point, I don't know. I can't remember. So, anyway, just to give you sort of an overview--I mean, I could talk about this all day long, but I know obviously we don't have--

MARCI COHEN: Maybe we'll do another interview.

STEVE Maybe we'll do another interview at some point. But anyway, that's probably where I would leave that, in terms
ROCHINSKI: of reflecting on that time and where we are now.

MARCI COHEN: Okay. Well, thank you so much, I think we'll wrap it up.

STEVE Okay.

ROCHINSKI:

MARCI COHEN: And maybe we'll get together again and talk some more.

STEVE I would love to, anytime, I'm at your beck and call.

ROCHINSKI:

MARCI COHEN: Thank you very much.

STEVE Thank you very much, Marci, I really enjoyed spending time with you today.

ROCHINSKI: