

August 16, 2007

Larry Nix

CAROL DRAKE: This is just a little portable digital, recording... it's actually works pretty good. Just so I can remember a couple of quotes, that's all.

LARRY NIX: Sure.

CAROL DRAKE: August 16th. Larry Nix. [inaudible studios] We're gonna do a quick interview about your association with STAX. I know this has been documented, but just for the record let's just get it, and what it is that you're doing currently today.

LARRY NIX: Okay.

CAROL DRAKE: So, I know that your brother's Don Nix.

LARRY NIX: Right.

CAROL DRAKE: And both of you had worked at the STAX recording studio.

LARRY NIX: Right.

CAROL DRAKE: But tell me how you got involved with STAX recording studio.

LARRY NIX: 1970, my brother, I had worked a couple of years at night at the old [inaudible] studios in '68 and '69 and had done some working in 1970. My brother told me that there was an engineering opening there at STAX. I set up an interview on Monday morning and...

CAROL DRAKE: Who'd you interview with?

LARRY NIX: You want that whole story? [crosstalk] Actually I got real sick the Friday before, Saturday it got worse, Sunday I was real sick. Monday morning I got up and was taking all these antibiotics and stuff and I called a friend of mine who worked there, Bobby Manuel. And met him at the title house, left my car and he drove me in. So I went in for my interview that Monday morning and I walked in with Bobby, went up into Studio A, sat on the big brown couch. Ronny Capone was setting up to cut tracks. I sat down there waiting for someone to come and get me and lunch came along and we sat down and got come lunch. At the end of the day, I was still sitting there and went out and helped Ronny pick up mic cables and microphones. Oh, I'll try to get in tomorrow and the next day, pretty much the same thing. I sat down, only this time, Ronny came in and I said, Man you want me to help you set up your session? Yeah. So we started setting up mic cables and stuff and I worked with him on that session that week and at the end of the week, I got a pay check.

CAROL DRAKE: You didn't know?

LARRY NIX: Never knew. And I ended up, I never will forget, I got this check that happened to be for about three times as much as I had been making previously. And going in between studios in the tape vault and hiding, that's where we would take calls. And calling my wife and tell her, You aint gonna believe this. I just got a check for [inaudible]. And which was real handy at the time.

CAROL DRAKE: That's great. You showed me something once. Was it a check stub or you I.D. or something?

LARRY NIX: I got the I.D. and I got some check stubs, yeah.

CAROL DRAKE: So you just, you showed up and never left.

LARRY NIX: Exactly, they couldn't get rid of me.

CAROL DRAKE: That's great. Well, so eventually, I guess you know, the time at STAX in itself, were you there at the very end or had you gone on.

LARRY NIX: I think I left November 1, 1975. Now, I think the gates were actually padlocked in December of '75. The reason I left then was I got a piece of paper. Well, everybody knows the story. If STAX did not go down quickly, thus the thing with Jim the other night, we never got that. Nobody got to explain, hey this is what happened. Because over a period of time, it closed slowly over this. It actually started in '74 I think. I myself was first aware of it in January of '75. That things weren't right. But every Friday we would meet in Isaac's office and David Porter would come in and we'd sit on that big long leather couch of Isaac's and he's say, What's the least amount you could get along with this week? And they would pay cash. That's the way the year went and then we would get some, I remember I got one update that Al Bell called me from Switzerland, Zurich and said, Larry hang in there. You know, you're gonna have a great Christmas. He says, I can promise you that. He said, Not only will you get your back pay, we're gonna make it worth your while for staying and you've got my personal guarantee. So I hung in and on November the 1st, I got a piece of paper. I don't even remember, I still got it somewhere, but it was a form and it was typed in. It was like, You are no longer an employee of STAX records typed in and it went on. And so I thought, well that's it. I didn't understand until years later.

CAROL DRAKE: That you'd been fired?

LARRY NIX: No. It was so we could get food stamps. Because people were struggling who had families, houses, cars, you know. And I didn't know that. I just thought, well that's it. So I actually left and went to Nashville immediately. There was no other mastering in Memphis. Nothing here and went there and I knew a person at a mastering facility called Master Phonics. Went there, talked to him on a Friday and had an appointment for a second interview at Woodland studios who also had mastering with Glen Snotty. And I couldn't make that one because my flight to get back, but the guy at

Master Phonics, Evans, Mac Evans was the guy then. And he had already hired me and so I came on back home and was to go back to Nashville on Tuesday. And on Sunday night, John [inaudible] And he said, Larry would you like to keep, would you like to stay in Memphis and do mastering in Ardent and I said, Man yeah. And he said, Well what we'll need to do, he says, If you'll go and talk to Jim Stewart and tell him if we can put the lathe in Ardent that we would give them money every month like rent, you know? Well they'll be making that money, plus anything that they're doing now we would do for free. I mean, you know, keep doing their music.

8 minutes 34 seconds

CAROL DRAKE: Do the mastering work.

LARRY NIX: So the next morning I left and went over and walked in the studio. I walked in STAX and went back in Jim's office and God love him, he looked like he was just in a daze, you know. And I sat down there and I guess the last thing he wanted to hear was, you know, there goes, you know. But I explained to him and he said, he just looked at me as kind of a blank stare and he just said, Well, Larry what would you like to do? I said, Jim, I'd like to stay in Memphis. And he said, Take it. Like that. And literally we came with a truck and brought it out and put it between the studios there in that storage room where the organ is. They call it AB storage. And put it into that room and went to work on the mastering room and it took awhile to build it. We had to build it three times actually, and uh, just get the sound right and just, and uh that was the middle of November when we brought it of '75 and started mastering early in '76. In 1985, I went to John and purchased, actually purchased the company, not just the equipment. But it was a working company, you know. We had clientele.

CAROL DRAKE: Because you would need to... see if I've got this right, you would need to do the mastering for the tapes of things that weren't even necessarily recorded at Ardent or STAX.

LARRY NIX: Very little of it was recorded at Ardent here in those days. It was two studios then and only really one of them was being kept busy and that was B and that was Ron Capone had come here [inaudible] and he had his own clientele. You know, the Black [inaudible] Arkansas and all. And so, John, I don't know if you know it or not, is a pilot, and a good one. And John also had his own airplane and he was in partnership with another fellow who had an aircraft sales at the airport so that we had the privilege of having an airplane at our disposal. So, once a month, we had a FedEx pilot and an ex-Brannoth pilot, Brannoth had gone under. And if they weren't... whichever wasn't working, we would use them and we would set up interviews. I may go out for a couple of, two or three... They hit Texas, San Antonio, Dallas, Houston, [cross talk] and just jump around. We built a real, that came a little later. We kind of were doing the bigger records for record companies. I found out real quick, they sit on your money a long time. As long as, the bigger they are the longer it is, the harder it is to get money out of them. That was the first thing. And an artist for them, they do an album a year, and so you're the gold records [inaudible]. Okay, they look good on a wall, but it's not making us

money. So what we did, we went to record pressing plants. And people would send a tape in and say, I need a thousand [inaudible] records. They didn't have mastering. So I actually had seven pressing plants that would gather these up, box them, to where we were so busy, we ran 24 hours a day. We were, I mean night and day trying to keep up with it.

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CAROL DRAKE: With seven different plants?

LARRY NIX: Seven different. And working the other end to it, you know. The night guy I hired from Master Phoenix in Nashville, who came and his name was Al Smith, and Al, Night Al because he worked at night, would do a lot of the plant stuff and I kept the other going.

CAROL DRAKE: So that machine has cuts in Vinyl, hadn't it?

LARRY NIX: It has been very, very, I think you could push that thing off of cliff, crank it up and it would do just fine.

CAROL DRAKE: We won't try that.

LARRY NIX: But I mean, literally, very little trouble out of that piece of equipment.

CAROL DRAKE: Yeah, you'll see it Gerald. It's a great piece of German engineering. It's a beautiful, beautiful machine.

MALE VOICE: It's built to last [inaudible]

LARRY NIX: Old man. The wiring and stuff is incredible.

CAROL DRAKE: 1970 this was built?

MALE VOICE: '70?

LARRY NIX: VMS 70 [inaudible]. It was, they were going from a VMS 68, which would have come out in '68. And that was the first of the new variable speed stereo with a cutter head and a very expensive piece of equipment.

CAROL DRAKE: It's actually one of my favorite things about this. He's shown it to me a couple of times and it's got a microscope on it where you could look in that and see the grooves of the record. You could see music. I just, whoa. Yeah, it's great. We're in the process of trying to acquire that and get that

[crosstalk]

LARRY NIX: And I didn't get back to you on that, because I had emailed John. I like to bounce everything off of John, get his advice and I don't know if you will talk about that [crosstalk]. But anyway, we had a good business built up from Atlanta, Louisiana, Texas, Missouri, all the way to Detroit, Michigan. All over. And it was built a lot on the being able to get out and see these people. I would get a new piece of equipment and I would cut a demo using it and one without it and then I would take it to these people and I would play it. Oh yeah, you know. And it allowed me to meet personally with all these people.

16 minutes 21 seconds

CAROL DRAKE: Did you ever, you said Detroit, did you ever do any work for Motown?

LARRY NIX: No, I didn't. I never did anything. I did Archers up there in Detroit. I did a lot of business. I think he's still up there. We did Westwood Records out of Detroit. It was Westwood or Westward, I forget.

MALE VOICE: Yeah, I remember them.

LARRY NIX: You remember them? A guy named Bernie, who was a very big man, we went to pick him up in an airplane, me and John. Twin engine airplane. And the man put him in the back and he [inaudible]. John would have to trim it. Every time he landed hard you could see John [inaudible].

CAROL DRAKE: That's hilarious.

LARRY NIX: Bless his heart, he died. But you know, it was a lot of, lot of great airplane stories in that. Oh, man. Taking off in Houston, I lost hydraulics in a storm, landed in Dallas in an ice storm with no electricity and the whole thing froze up. You couldn't see anything. Literally the guy feathered the left prop, the pilot opened the door and was going down the runway with his head out. That's great. Oh, I've got a million of those. A million of them.

CAROL DRAKE: Nerves of steel [inaudible]. So how, that sounds like, I mean you... How long was it that you were that busy?

LARRY NIX: Until Vinyl started. Here's my luck, okay? April 1, 1985, I bought Ardent Mastering from John.

CAROL DRAKE: April 1st?

LARRY NIX: April 1st. Sat down at this long table with all these bakers at Union Planters and passed around papers and more money than I've ever paid for anything, you know. Put my John Hancock on there and bought it then and five days, this is me okay, five days later this fellow comes in and he says, Man do you know they're coming out

with this disc about this big around that'll hold a whole album and you could even put video on it.

CAROL DRAKE: Five days later, April 6th?

LARRY NIX: Five days. I said, How long before that, you think that'll be? Man it'll probably be within five years. It was like two years, you know, and it was [inaudible]. And every morning I would listen to the news on the way [inaudible] you know. Today, Vinyl, I mean, CDs have taken 1/10th of the, you know. Then, I remember when it was ½ and I went, Oh. It's 1988, I went to Las Vegas to an NAB.

CAROL DRAKE: What's an NAB?

LARRY NIX: National Association... Where they sell equipment. The convention out there and I saw, for the first time, how they made the CDs and all like that. Now, I bought a, what they call, a 1630 Sony, 1630 which digitally, was my first digital, was a half inch Eumatic. And I got it for, used out of Nashville and was doing... You could not edit. I couldn't edit that. I wasn't able to. And I didn't really have everything I needed to do it right, but at the time I was able to offer it for those who wanted it, because it still was, you know. And the day that they said the CD plants were doing DVDs, and the day that they said, well we'll be able to actually accept a disc and clone that disc and press from it, I bought, I went out and bought the system, because then I could relate, instead of doing vinyl and doing a reference disc, I could do a CD and give them one to listen to, where I couldn't on that eumatic tape. You couldn't give them a cassette. No two cassette players even ran at the same speed, you know.

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CAROL DRAKE: So you, but essentially you kept up with the technology.

LARRY NIX: I tried. I was pedaling as fast as I could after putting my name on this one big note, paying that, and trying to keep it updated. It was tough.

CAROL DRAKE: So the digital age was starting to lap the vinyl?

LARRY NIX: Oh, absolutely. Almost immediately.

CAROL DRAKE: But there's still, do you find there's still, not just nostalgia for the vinyl, but

[crosstalk]

LARRY NIX: He called me awhile ago. Are you officially, you still officially out of the vinyl business? I said, Yeah. As of November of last year. I had to put a stop, you know. There's got to be a stopping point, because the blanks got so expensive if you carry an inventory of 25 discs, like I said was 1,200 before they went up for how long it

would take me to use them, you know. And I just, I needed to be, I got this new CD system that I put in, in February and I knew that was coming and I just had to stop.

CAROL DRAKE: So what was the last album that you mastered on the [inaudible]?

LARRY NIX: Album? The last thing I did on, you know Jimbo Mathis?

CAROL DRAKE: I know the name, yes.

[crosstalk]

LARRY NIX: He and his wife Olga. Jimbo put one of him on one side of a 45 and put his wife Olga on the other. And that was November of last year and we took pictures of it. Cut [inaudible] even shot from above. And actually cut him the last thing and took a lot of different pictures. There was some magazine here, where he had gotten here, I don't know. You know Jimbo. But that was actually the last thing that's been cut on it.

[crosstalk]

CAROL DRAKE: We would like for that to happen.

LARRY NIX: Oh, yeah. That, I do have a blank and I've saved enough back to make that happen.

CAROL DRAKE: Okay, great. Okay. Well, so you have a, like I said, the whole idea of the exhibit, you know Here and Now, you know, as people go through the museum and they see your photograph in there and they read about you, or they read Bowman's book or something and they want to know what it is that you're up to now. So that's what we're trying to do, is just answer that question. So how would you sum up what you're doing?

[crosstalk].

LARRY NIX: I am, uh, I am in the Twilight of a mediocre career. My son Kevin is doing, probably, the majority of the work. I still sit in there and correct him when he needs to be corrected and he corrects me all the time. But, I, you know, I still love doing it. I still love the music. When I die, if I could die in that room, that would be the way I would love to die. You'd have to carry me out. Drag my feet, by feet first, because I mean, what other job can you say that you made a living listening to music, different, all kinds? I love music, you know. So, I've gotten to, we were just talking with a client in there and they were talking about the heat. He said something about, I'm glad I don't have to be working outside in this and I tried to work everyday and I said, Thank you Lord that I can work in heat, air condition, a perfect 72 degrees and listen to music. And make that music sound the way I think it sounds best. And people for the most part agree with me.

CAROL DRAKE: They do. They do. You're being very modest [inaudible].

LARRY NIX: It's the greatest, absolutely the greatest job I've ever had and it was because of STAX. I mean, I was part of that group that just got a chance. You know? Come in there, they see, Oh yeah, he knows, he can do it, you know, yeah, pick up on it. Fine, you know. And gave me the chance. Right place, right time, whatever, I was there.

CAROL DRAKE: But music has always been a big part of your life, pre-STAX?

LARRY NIX: Oh, from the days growing up. Now, I've got a sister. She's 11 years younger, but it was my brother and I, we lived in a little two bedroom, one bath house, and we shared the same bed. And he, when, back when a dance party here was [inaudible] Martindale. He won a dance contest and they gave him a lot of little things, little gifts. But one of the things they gave him, now this was a big deal, a little red transistor radio with a little antenna. Now that, that was huge.

CAROL DRAKE: How old were you then?

LARRY NIX: Oh, Lord we were, he's two years older than me so if he's in high school, I'm probably junior high, and every night we would get whatever we had to, to get batteries for that thing. And at night, we would put it between us and turn it on and listen to *Red, Hot, and Blue*, Dewey Phillips. Oh, man. And, I don't think we ever got caught, but until we couldn't listen any longer, you know. But every night we listened to that transistor radio, to music. And I would go and buy records at Parks Belk at Getwell and Park, I'd buy records. And if you bought nine, you'd get the tenth one free. But I couldn't afford anything but 45s. And my brother, we didn't even have a television, but when he got old enough to get a job at an old TG&Y, you remember TG&Y?

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CAROL DRAKE: I do, the department store. Yeah.

LARRY NIX: And he went and bought us a record player. And we started getting albums and we had all kind of different music in there that we bought. But yeah, we always listened to music and enjoyed music and of course, he became the one who played music and was bored directly in that part of it. Being around him in the studio, I got interested into the other side.

CAROL DRAKE: Don Nix is your brother?

[crosstalk].

LARRY NIX: The side that don't make money. Don had a house up here on Cox with an elevator and telephones in it, four Rolls Royce, and I'm going, what happened.

CAROL DRAKE: That's just, that's so amazing though, that two brothers, I could just picture you there with the transistor radio and you're still in the business. Both of you are.

LARRY NIX: Oh, it's, again, being there with Jim Stewart the other night, you don't know what, to hug that man and just say, Jim, God love you, thank you. Anything. If you want it, I'll kill for you. Whatever. There's nothing I wouldn't do for him. It was just, nothing he had to do, man. It was just, and on the little film thing, I said, He enabled me to raise a family, to put kids through school. I've got a son that's captain of an MD11, jumbo jet for FedEx. And then I've got another one that's, it will be his business, that's very good at what he does.

CAROL DRAKE: Kevin's good?

LARRY NIX: Yeah. He's very good at what he does. And as many people call and ask for him as me if not more. Of course, he's got those young ears. A lot of time I turn, I look at him like. Somebody will say something about top end. I probably don't hear above that 12K hardly anymore.

CAROL DRAKE: Yeah, that's the way it should be.

LARRY NIX: I'm proud of both of them. [crosstalk]. And like I say, I've never been rich. I don't think God gives you any more than what you can deal with so he probably feels, You couldn't deal with it boy. And we're just fine, but you know, I've been comfortable and I've done something. The job I had before that, I literally was going to the doctor, because I would eat and couldn't keep anything down and it was pure dee old nerves.

CAROL DRAKE: What'd you do?

LARRY NIX: I worked for an automotive paint supply company. Man and [inaudible]. I actually had a talent then for matching paint, and I got, you know, like Winfield Rockefeller has that museum over in Petty Gene Mountain with old antiques?

CAROL DRAKE: Um hm.

LARRY NIX: They would bring me [inaudible] and I would match paint and stuff and it was horrible in that it was dirty, smelling the fumes. It wasn't good, it wasn't healthy, and it wasn't fun. I couldn't.

CAROL DRAKE: Alright, well thank you for bringing us up to speed here. Letting us know what's going on. What about the future? What's the next step? Keep on keeping on?

LARRY NIX: I want, when I leave, as part of, when the lathe goes over to the museum with the cabinets and all, I want to put in the latest, there with the latest setting, a console,

with all the stuff that I have that wasn't at STAX. I'll take out my outboard gear and have the room redone. I'm gonna have the white floors and I want, what they call a surround sound, everything. The equipment I've got is capable of doing everything that DVDs, everything that is available now. I don't have the room to finish it out yet, and when I leave, or when I just hanging out, a place to get up and get out of Sheila's way in the morning and come down here. But I want it to be a state of the art mastering facility and leave Kevin. I'm trying now to sell it, the business, to him for a dollar. And let him take it from there and see what happens. But that's the future and like I said, I'll probably, as long, I know as long as my health and I can throw a foot off the bed and stand up, I'll come down here. If not to just hang out with John and all the old guys hang out and tell how it used to be. We may get a checkerboard or something, I don't know.

CAROL DRAKE: Alright, thanks Larry.

LARRY NIX: Not a problem.

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