

Courtney Eskew: Is it recording?

LaKevia Perry: Yeah. Yeah. The light is on, so – is it supposed to be recording here?

Courtney Eskew: I don't know – there's just – there's a light on and the time is going so –

LaKevia Perry: Okay. Okay. So are you ready to start?

Courtney Eskew: Mm-hmm.

LaKevia Perry: Okay, on behalf of Crossroads to Freedom, Rhodes College, and Nicholas ____ I would like to thank you for taking the time to share your story with us today. I'm LaKevia Perry, a sophomore at Rhodes College and I'm honored to meet you and learn from your story.

John Fry: Well, you're very welcome. I'm glad to be here.

LaKevia Perry: Thank you. Today's interview will be achieved online at the archived – excuse me – only at the Crossroads to Freedom website.

Courtney Eskew: Can we do the –

LaKevia Perry: Do you want to do it?

Courtney Eskew: Yeah, I just want to make sure it's right.

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Courtney Eskew: Okay, so we're going to restart if you don't mind.

John Fry: Take two.

Courtney Eskew: Take two. On behalf of Crossroad to Freedom, Rhodes College and the Memphis Rock and Soul Museum, I want to thank you for coming here today and sharing your story with us today. We really appreciate it. My name is Courtney Eskew. I'm a senior at Rhodes College, and this is LaKevia Perry, who is a sophomore at Rhodes College. We're both honored for you to be here and to find out a little bit more about Memphis and music in Memphis. So today's interview will be archived online at our Crossroads to Freedom website.

John Fry: Excellent, glad to be here.

Courtney Eskew: So we're going to just start with some basic biographical questions. If you don't mind for the record, please state your name.

John Fry: John Fry.

Courtney Eskew: And if you don't mind telling us, what year were you born in?

John Fry: I was born on December 31st, 1944.

Courtney Eskew: And where were you born?

John Fry: In Memphis, and I've lived here all my life.

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Courtney Eskew: Okay.

LaKevia Perry: Can you tell me about the neighborhood you grew up in?

John Fry: Well yes, the neighborhood that I spent most of my time growing up in was near Central and Goodland. And that's considered East Memphis sort of today but it was really East Memphis then. When I was growing up, the city limits of – eastern city limits of Memphis were Goodland Street and anything beyond that was in the county.

And it was a neighborhood of mostly single family dwellings with lots intended to be larger. Because it was still almost considered being out in the country. Hard to believe that today, since Memphis has had such urban sprawl to the east.

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LaKevia Perry: And what high school did you go to?

John Fry: Well, I went to Memphis University School, which really was just getting started up now. It wasn't the size that it is today. And I went there for grades seven through twelve.

LaKevia Perry: So what activities were you involved in at Memphis University School?

John Fry: Well, I was pretty good at academics. I wasn't much in sports. And I graduated as valedictorian of my class. Then later when they heard that I was actually planning on going into music they said, "It's terrible. It's a disreputable occupation. You're wasting your fine mind." And I thought it's kind of funny today, which they never would have –

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John Fry: - had – I graduated in 1962. Today they have a recording studio in school and they have a recording music program. And certainly, that would have never happened in the '60s or the early '70s.

Courtney Eskew: Were you any part of having those outlets for musicians in high school be established at your alma mater?

John Fry: Well I was not responsible for establishing it. But I've worked with their program pretty consistently in terms of having the students, taking them on tours to museums and taking them on tours to our studio. And I got interested in music at a very young age. Music and electronics and recording were big activities for me. Those were kind of my extracurricular activities while I was going to junior high school and high school. I got my first tape recorder –

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John Fry: - when I was 13 years old. And gradually over time built a small home studio that was sufficient to – it was primitive but it really pretty good by the standards of the time. Everything was pretty different. Renaro machines and counsels _____. And me and some of my friends would record these bands from around town because that was about the period of time that every kid was going out and buying a drum set or a guitar or a bass, and they were all trying to start bands.

So we would record the bands and had 45s pressed and tried to sell them locally. And we actually had some success in doing that. The first ___ 45 was actually pressed in 1959 and I think I was I don't know, 14 or 15 years old.

Courtney Eskew: And where were you doing the recording of that?

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John Fry: In my parents house. I took over a room that had been my garage and it was closed in. It was nice, it wasn't like recording in the garage. It was heated and air conditioned internal. And I built a little control room and a little studio.

Courtney Eskew: How did your parents react to this activity? Were they supportive?

John Fry: They were amazingly supportive. You would think that a lot of parents would be horrified, and certainly their background – my father worked in the building materials industry, and was co-owner of a large company that did that. But it wasn't this sort of thing like, "Oh, son you must go into the family business," or anything of that kind. They really were good about saying, "Well follow where your aptitude and where your heart is leading you."

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John Fry: So they were pretty progressive in that regard because I would say 99 parents out of 100 in the early '60s would have tried to talk their kids out of their strain of musicality could.

Courtney Eskew: What kind of musicians were you recording in high school?

John Fry: Well, as it progressed, there were a variety. Most of the school bands that were around were sort of guitar bands that would play rock music. Some of them would play cover songs, some would try to write original songs. But then in order to play the dances and all that kind of thing, they had to learn the stuff that people would request. So they would learn a lot of covers of soul music. And the music I grew up listening to is the other thing that captured my interest besides –

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John Fry: - recording was radio and television. First all the technology and that worked, but then secondly I loved music. I do not play. I'm not a instrual musician and you would not want to hear me sing. But I was a huge music fan from the very beginning and would listen to the radio constantly and buy records and what you grew up on initially in Memphis was on the one hand soul music.

We would all listen to WDIA and – which had great air personalities who were true entertainers. Rufus Thomas was an air personality on WDIA. And a lot of people don't realize it, but he came from a background as a standup comedian in the reviews, in the clubs on Beale Street. Hence –

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John Fry: - the wit that he had, and then later when he became a recording artist he would do a lot of songs that had certainly a humorous thrust to them. But on the one hand, we would listen to that station. On the other hand, we would listen to the Top 40 stations and of course, the must hear in Memphis radio was Dewey Phillips, who was just a crazy man on the air. He was one of the first guys to play Elvis Presley's records and Jerry Lee Lewis's records.

And he became so popular at one point that he actually had two programs. One was in the afterschool hour, and then he had another one from like, 9:00 p.m. to midnight. And the one in the afterschool hour was actually simulcast on television. It was the first – it may be the first music TV in the country. I've never heard of anybody simulcasting a music radio show on TV but that was the –

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John Fry: - the popularity that Dewey Phillips, better known as Daddy O' Dewey had.

Courtney Eskew: How did you choose the name Ardent?

John Fry: Well, again I had sort of three of us who were doing the high school, junior high school trying to release the records. It was me, John King, Fred Smith – we were all in school together and then yes, it's that Fred Smith. The – he kind of got on the music thing when he went off to Yale and got involved in some fly by night airline package thing, turned out to be kind of successful.

But we wanted to start putting out these 45 records. And so we've got to start thinking about a name for our label. And we said, "What about Ardent? That has a nice sound to it." And we weren't entirely sure of the exact definition –

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John Fry: - so we went and got the dictionary and looked in there. And that particular dictionary which I still have said that the definition was hot, fiery, fierce, burning, passionate. We said, "Well, yeah, that's a perfect name for a music company." And that's why we chose it.

Courtney Eskew: And when did you leave your parents' garage as a studio?

John Fry: Yeah, and I don't want to make too much out of their garage because it was really – it was a room that once had been a garage.

Courtney Eskew: Okay.

John Fry: It used to be. But the thing was – the big decision was in 1966, they decided to sell that house. And they certainly didn't want a recording studio in some other house that they were getting ready to buy. And so that was kind of an event that caused me to need to make a decision. Am I going to do this professionally –

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John Fry: - and try to really make a go of it and go out and build a recording studio out of a commercial building? Or am I going to get a grown up job and forget about doing all of this? And I decided to go ahead with it and found a – our initial studio was a building that had been built as a store building. It was a brand new building, it was for rent. It had no walls, and so we could divide it up to make a studio, control room, offices, repair shop and so forth.

And that studio was at 1457 National Street. The building is still there although it is now a convenience store. And we were there from 1966 until we moved to our present location at 2000 Madison which was a purpose built building –

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John Fry: - and we moved there in November of 1971.

LaKevia Perry: So on your website, Ardentstudios.com, Jim Gain states that Ardent is like home family. How did you manage to create an environment where your musicians felt so comfortable?

John Fry: Let me back it up a little bit to kind of this 1967 because I always tell everybody when I opened that studio, I was 21. But as you see pictures of me from then, I looked like I was about 16 then. And almost immediately, the Stax Records people started sending us projects that they couldn't accommodate in their own studio. They just had one studio. They had so many artists, there was no way they could do the volume of recording that they needed to do. By that time, we were the longhaired kids on Nashville Street that didn't do anything but listen to –

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John Fry: - that British music. And so there was no reason for them to trust the longhaired kids, but they did. And if you go to the Stax Museum or look at any of the Stax histories, you will see that almost all of the early employees are talking about how it was family – it was like family. The orientation film for the Stax people, it was just great – they just keep saying that over and over again.

And it's true, it was like that. Because all those people started out and kind of worked their way up together. And as soon as we started working with the Stax people, we were immersed in that culture. And to some extent, it had been like family back in the home studio because there wasn't just a place where people came when there was a recording session. But there were a lot of musicians who would just come and hang out, who would be around. And that was –

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John Fry: If you went to the early Stax building and went down to McNamara Street, it was the kind of environment where there were musicians around, songwriters were around, artists were around, producers and engineers would be around. And there would be an interchange of ideas. And if somebody had an idea and the studio

was available, they could run right in and try that idea immediately. There was much more spontaneity than the kind of corporate ties the music business is today.

So I think some of that early exposure to the Stax model just transferred over into our business. Most of the people who became producers and engineers at Ardent were people who actually learned their craft there. Because there were no recording programs. You couldn't go to Full Sail or go to a four year college and learn how to be a recording engineer. If you wanted to learn that, you had to learn by doing and by apprenticeship. And so we had –

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John Fry: - young people we were training in house and they were growing in responsibility and growing their professional careers. And it's sort of always been that way. I mean I think we still have that atmosphere today. Or at least people tell us that we do.

Courtney Eskew: How long did you have this sort of partnership with Stax where they were sending you musicians?

John Fry: Well, for the entire time until Stax finally closed in 1975. They officially declared bankruptcy – they'd had a series of business traverses and they were just kind of overtaken by events. And so from late '66 and early '67, right 'til the very end we were doing all kinds of significant projects for Stax. And also in –

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John Fry: - the early '70s, Al Bell who was running Stax decided that they wanted to add a rock branch. Stax was primarily a soul music label. So since they had a relationship with us, they said, "Would you like to start Ardent Records up again and you can sign anybody you want, you can do the recording and creating and we'll do the marketing, commercial and distribution."

And so we made a number of records on the Ardent label that were distributed by Stax in the early '70s, some of which have attracted quite a cult following today. And one in particular – it was Big Star, they didn't enjoy a lot of sales success because of – at the time because of the distribution problems that Stax was having with Columbia. But it's since acquired a multi-generational following.

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John Fry: And sadly, just this month one of the original founding members of Big Star – a person who had been a friend since 1967, Alex Chilton, passed away suddenly in New Orleans.

Courtney Eskew: You mentioned a little bit about once you were producing music that was intergenerational, even if they didn't enjoy the sales success that they had a potential to. So how do you feel like the music you were making at that time has affected generations since? How has it affected your generation and my generation today?

John Fry: Well, I'm probably more familiar with the – say the Big Star story as a model because it's so unusual. Here you had records in the mid-'70s that hardly anybody heard but the rock critics. And the rock critics would hear it and write these glowing reviews and then –

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John Fry: - people would go, "Well, why can't I find it in the record store?" or "Why is the radio station not playing it?" And their music was dormant until about the late '70s. And I started to get reports from England like, "Did you know EMI had leased the masters to the first two Big Star records and put out a double fold-out bound release in England?"

I said, "No." They said, "Did you know people are paying \$75.00 a piece for the original vinyl in '71 if they can find them?" I said, "No, I didn't know that." So it almost went to the UK, caught up a following and then got exported back here to some degree. And finally, by that time a record company called Fantasy had purchased the Stax master catalogue, which included some of that material. So finally it was all reissued on CD in the United States. And then –

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John Fry: - I've gotten a chance to go to some Big Star shows recently because they formed a reunion band in 1993 with two of the original members – Jody Stevens and Alex Chilton and two guys from a Seattle band called the Posies, a guy called Ken Stringfellow and John Auer. And they would only play three to five shows a year, and a lot of them would be outside the United States.

And they played London in the summer of 2007 and again in the summer of – I'm sorry, summer of 2008 and the summer of 2009. And something just told me to go see those shows. And I went to

England specifically for that, and to have a little fun, too. And I'm glad I did. And I was watching the audience just to see what they were made up of. And they were made up of –

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John Fry:

- people as old or older than I am all the way down to young teenagers. And I can understand how that happens in internet age. But all the word of mouth about that music started long before the internet age. And how something sort of goes organic and viral that way and gets spread around, nonetheless – and of course there's a lot of music that has followed those patterns.

I think the songs and the music that tends to be enjoyed generation after generation – I can't pinpoint it. And everything – it's not mild, I think everything is not the same. But first of all, it depends on the quality of the song – the composition itself. Is it saying something that speaks to people and speaks to people about things that are issues –

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John Fry:

- emotional experiences, joys, triumphs, defeats? They're really going to be common to the human condition for many generations. That's one thing. And the other thing is for the music – the accompanying music to be original but not necessarily faddish. In other words, young people love to listen to Beatle records now. Probably fewer young people are going out and buying old disco records.

Courtney Eskew:

Okay. Well you were speaking a little bit about the impact of a band like Big Star in the UK. How did the city of Memphis influence who you were working with and what type of music you were producing? Because the members – were the members of Big Star all from Memphis?

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John Fry:

Yes, they were all from Memphis. They were all born here and they grew up here. Well, Memphis is – Memphis music has always been multifaceted. Without tending to be critical, you can kind of do Nashville in sort of one word – country, that's sort of it. But we've had blues, soul music - morphing into funk, morphing into rap – jazz, rock and roll of all kinds, kind of the southern sounding kind, and then in the case of Big Star, very British sounding kind.

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John Fry: All the people who would review Big Star records say it sounds like British musicians but with Memphis soul in the lyrics and the performances. But certainly I think everybody that grew up wanting to engineer or produce musicians, they were just influenced by what was going on around them, by the – for lack of a better word, vibe in Memphis. And Memphis – if you think about it, it's repeated so much that it's almost a cliché, but I think it's true. Memphis has always been a cultural crossroads or melting pot. It's a place where things that aren't supposed to fit together intersect, and somehow they do fit together.

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John Fry: And I am not a musicologist. But that had to do with a lot of things. It had to do with geography. It had to do with our proximity to the Mississippi Delta and all of the blues artists who came out of that kind of background. And then on the other hand, you had Beale Street was – it was urbane and sophisticated, and there were horn bands and there were – not crude blues music, but there was a different take. And all of that stuff got mixed together.

Then there was the gospel tradition. A lot of people say that soul music basically comes out of blues, gospel and a little country influence. There's a statement in the film where I saw Isaac Hayes making a statement. He said –

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John Fry: - they called it hillbilly music. He said, "That was the first music I ever heard." He said, "I was playing hillbilly music before I was playing R&B." So it's that intersection of cultures, the curves – I mean I was talking about geography again. We were essentially on the north-south transportation route, right? First Commerce on the river and then by railroad. And that sort of connecting what's going on in New Orleans to what's going on in Memphis to what's going on in St. Louis to what's going on in Chicago. And a sort of musical axis that you can look at that has to do with the geography. And Memphis I think is very dissimilar to Nashville –

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John Fry: - in that way. Although there were similarities. I always tell everybody that – I mentioned WDIA which was one of the first all African American formatted stations in the country. Very early, it was a very powered station – it was a 50,000 watt station so it covered lots of area. And I always tell everybody that WDIA was to soul music here what WSM Grand Ole Opry were to country music in Nashville if that's a meaningful analogy.

Courtney Eskew: You used a word, vibe, to describe Memphis. So do you feel as if the vibe was something specific to the period that you were talking about in the '60s and '70s? Or is it something that still exists in Memphis today?

John Fry: Yeah, I think it still exists. Obviously it's not identical. Some of the places are gone. Some of the cast of characters in the –

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John Fry: - play have changed. But, we still have people coming here – most leisure tourism here frankly is based on music in one way or another. And a lot of current, contemporary artists come here because they just feel like this is a creative environment. There's something about their creative juices that's going to flow better if they're in Memphis.

I don't know if it's something we put in the water or exactly how it works. But yes, there's a unique Memphis scene. And yeah, that can be good and bad because if you're doing – sometimes if you're doing innovative music, it may be hard to initially get commercial acceptance for it.

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John Fry: I have a saying, you can always tell the pioneers. They're those guys with all the arrows in their backs. So.

LaKevia Perry: I've read that Ardent had a relationship with Stax. How did that relationship with Stax affect Ardent before, and after all the problems that Stax had?

John Fry: Well, the initial relationship we had was just as a service provider. We were providing studio facilities and engineering and mixing. But that was a huge career break for me and the other people working there because it sort of catapulted us from recording tiny, little bands in my house to recording –

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John Fry: - artists who were already recognized and who were going to get commercial attention. So that was very productive. And it was just a pleasure to get to know the people and to work with them. Everybody there was great to work with. The early artists and producers and the people running the company were just – they were real genuine people. They were not egomaniacs and like, one of these artists that think that they're the center of the universe.

But – and certainly the opportunity to have the Ardent label and to get to make those records that ultimately became very successful for us decades later was a great opportunity. And –

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John Fry: - again, the fact that they encountered the financial difficulties and went out of business, it was a horrible blow to Memphis. Because it had grown to be a rather large company. I think they may have been employing 2 or 300 people. And back at that time, the general business community had no appreciation with what is the music industry and why is it important to have one in Memphis and so forth.

And so when they did encounter difficulties, there were a few people that understood perhaps the importance of keeping something like that going and what a worldwide ambassador Memphis music was to really draw attention to our community and –

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John Fry: - create worldwide interest.

Courtney Eskew: You mentioned that you were known as – or the Ardent label was known as the kids with long hair when that kind of relationship started. So in going back to what you were saying of Memphis being an intersection of cultures and different perspectives on music. Well, when Stax was sending you new musicians, was that a different type of music and a different type of music culture that Ardent hadn't really incorporated into its label before?

John Fry: Well, the artists that we were signing for the Ardent label were primarily rock artists for our bands because that's what they wanted. They wanted to – Stax wanted to broaden the dimension of the products they were putting out and I added some rock music to what had traditionally been a soul and gospel label. So the artists –

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John Fry: - that we were recording on the Ardent label were not the type of music that we were accustomed to working with. The artists that Stax sent us to carry out projects in our studio, that wasn't _____ familiar to me because we had – even back when we had the older studio toward the latter years when the equipment was getting pretty nice and fairly sophisticated, we would do our own sessions and things, and we had soul music bands and artists come in.

And we'd also do location recordings and we'd go out to some club. I remember doing a whole series of location recordings at Kern's Club Tropicana up at North Town Street and recording Ben Branching, the Largos, when I was probably about 15 or 16 years old. And it was a different world, then, too. I mean we didn't lock the doors –

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John Fry: - on our house at night. There was no reason to. You didn't think anything about going out to a club and doing a location recording if you were 15 or 16 to think, "Oh, something is going to happen. This is going to be bad. People are going to be mean." We didn't have the crime or anything else that you see today. It's hard to realize how different it was in terms of what people felt like they could do and where they could go and not be concerned with their personal safety.

Courtney Eskew: And as LaKevia mentioned earlier, and as you talked about, but Ardent was a home for a lot of musicians. And you talk about Memphis having a vibe. Well it seems –

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Courtney Eskew: - that there was also a little bit of magic in your studios, too. Because I read an article from the *Memphis Fire* awhile ago that Jim Davidson said that you always wore a coat and tie like the British producers. And that because of all of the black musicians would always say, "We want that white man, not Jake." So I was going to ask you what that magic was.

John Fry: Yeah, I saw _____ sadly he's – he passed away last fall. We've had a lot of Memphis music pioneers lost here in January this year. But well first of all, I didn't always wear a coat and tie in sessions. There are some pictures of me doing that. Usually the pictures where I'm all cleaned up is where we did a lot of work for the big general companies – a lot of times they would do recordings of big bands and large ensembles. And a lot of times the –

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John Fry: - clients would attend the recording sessions. And so sometimes I'd get a haircut and put on the coat and tie for those. But that – after awhile we got out of that kind of work and I didn't do that. But yeah, I think there's a little magic in the studio. We always tried, and still do, to maintain a high technical standard for one thing, which was a little unusual for studios outside of the major cities to be very carefully about the maintenance and alignment

___ and so on. And we just do it because we want to get things to sound as good as they could. And then nothing succeeds like success, there's no advertising so good is your name in the –

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John Fry:

- tiny letters on the back of an album that people really like the way it sounds themselves. And so in addition to the Stax stuff, there's a Memphis guy, producer, writer, that actually was a Stax artist producer and writer, but he also got relationship with Leon Russell and a lot of these west coast session players. And Leon had a label called Shelter and he was ___ with Shelter people, and he did tours like the Mad Dog in English tours and they started bringing a lot of work to Memphis that they could have easily done in Los Angeles. That was great.

Starting in the early '70s, we started doing the ZZ Top records, all of the ____, all of the ZZ Top records which were really fun. Particularly at the outset – again when they were –

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John Fry:

- doing much more – doing quite much more like a stage show, like a band all playing together. Some of it after a certain ____, some of it kind of drifted off into sort of programmed electronica records. But we were blessed to have some really innovative artists that retained our facility and liked what we did and wanted to come back.

Courtney Eskew:

So kind of to shift gears here. If you've ever seen the film here at the Rock and Soul Museum, you know what one of the things that musicians who we interview talk about is the impact of the assassination of Dr. King on the music community. Do you feel that things here in Memphis were different –

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Courtney Eskew:

- after his assassination?

John Fry:

You know, that's alluded to a lot in addition to the film here – it's alluded to frequently in the orientation film at the Stax Museum. Steve Crocker comments on it, Richard Thomas comments on it, Isaac Hayes comments on and so do other people. Of course, backing up a little bit, I'm old enough that I clearly can remember as a child growing up in an environment where segregation was the rule. You just saw that.

But then you got into the music community and it was just completely different. Even when I had the home studio, my parents are all –

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John Fry: - they're conservative reactionaries and all that kind of – they didn't care what race musicians I had to come in and record. And certainly Stax was unique in that it was a fully racially integrated company at the time when there just weren't very many of those. But there were some in Memphis. WDIA was the same way. A lot of the early owners were white business guys who had been roughly contemporaries of my dad's, but you had a completely integrated work force.

And it was all just suits. I mean, nobody paid any mind or any attention. And after Dr. King's death, well first of all the '60s –

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John Fry: - you stop and think about it, that was the age of assassinations, right? And you just kind of wondered every time something happened, you just wondered, "Well what in the world is going to happen next?" And it ranged from everything from John Kennedy and then Robert Kennedy and then the attempted assassination of George Wallace when he was trying to run for president, and then Dr. King in Memphis.

And the initial days, I remember I was at the studio and I didn't know what had happened. And the phone lines all must have got jammed. And I remember my father tried to call me at the studio on the telephone, he was still living then. And he couldn't get through. So he went to a payphone to call me and told me what had happened, and that –

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John Fry: - they announced there was going to be a curfew. And basically two or three of us loaded every valuable master tape we could pick up and get out of the building into several cars and took them all to somebody's house, figuring you didn't know what was going to happen and how long it was going to be before you came back.

As far as personal relationships, if there's anybody that I had worked with and knew, and had a friendship with prior to that, nobody ever treated me any differently. But particularly like in the Stax organization, it was starting to expand and there were a lot of strangers coming in who didn't grow up in that family. They didn't grow up in corporate culture.

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John Fry: And there were times in dealing with some of those people that you could sense some tensions. And all of Dr. King's philosophy was based on peaceful activity. After his death, you heard a lot more other militant sounding rhetoric, some of which could be intimidating. And you heard it from a lot of people that they were out the rather extreme polaritis position of what they thought ought to be going with racial relations here.

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John Fry: To me, what was going on in Stax was a perfect model of what ought to be going on. If that had just been duplicated in the larger community, we would ___ way down the line ___ in progress. But it was – it had an effect.

Courtney Eskew: Did it affect music? You mentioned a rhetoric that was coming out of both poles, but did it affect music any?

John Fry: Well yeah, I think it did affect the content of music somewhat. For example, you started hearing like some of the staples singer songs sort of - and I love the way Al dealt -

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John Fry: - with film interview that I saw. He said that a lot of the writers and artists unconsciously started reaching over and picking up the baton. So they were sort of trying to carry on that message. And he listed some of the content of some of their post – the ___ content in some of the post-King assassination songs and they talk about places where a future time and a future place where there's not going to be tension between races and where there's not going to be a lot of these things that are going on. So yeah, there was a good content ___ I think that came to _____.

Courtney Eskew: Were there any other events or contemporary events that were happening in Memphis that may have influenced -

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Courtney Eskew: - the type of music that the city was producing, whether it be Ardent, whether it be _____? Just any sort of social event or –

John Fry: Well, I – one big thing for us, and of course this was primarily a '60s event, was the British invasion. That was hugely influential on me and my approach to engineering, on all these people and their approach to playing. So we weren't entirely in a bubble or in a vacuum. I may be overlooking some, but I can't think of a lot of

other major sort of social stuff, if that's what you're looking at that would have affected –

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John Fry: - Memphis music. Of course, music – I think all music is – most music is to some degree a product of its times. And the times influence the subject matter, they mold the artist and then the artist molds the music. The British invasion was huge for me because it was – I was doing some work in radio programming and so forth in the early '60s, and at first even Beatle records were not released in the United States. The first two Beatles singles that we got came in on Vee Jay which was primarily a soul label. Now EMI – the Beatles record company in England –

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John Fry: - owned the Capitol Records, a very large company in England. And Capitol said, "This material is uncommercial and will never sell in the United States." And so they licensed the first two singles to Vee Jay who had people like Jerry Butler, like the Staple Singers back when they were gospel act, before they became kind of a soul/pop act. And I got this 45 in and I looked at it and I said, "The Beatles? That doesn't sound like an artist on Vee Jay. Who are they?"

And I put that thing on and was just floored. And I said, "We gotta find out where this music is coming from." Because we didn't know anything. All we could do was look at the two songs and say, "Well, we can hear the accents. It's probably coming from England." But there was no publicity. There was nothing. So we had again in the pre-internet age, we had to dig around like little beavers to find that information. And we found out how to subscribe to an English music magazine called *NME*.

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John Fry: We got an airmail subscription. We were clever little dudes. If we wanted to find out about music, we'd stop at nothing. So we got that thing as soon as we did and opened it up and look at the pictures and all that, and said, "Here's a whole new world that's invisible to us." And we found a mail order record shop and started ordering the records from England long before anybody was putting them out in the United States.

And Capitol didn't come around and put out a Beatles single until '64, right before they were getting ready to come to the U.S. I remember going into the Capitol distributors office here and of

course, I had known about everything about them for two years already. And got a counter system. “We got this word on this strange new group they’re putting a big push on it. But I don’t know, it sounds kind of weird to me.”

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John Fry: “Do you think this is going to be a hit?” I just laughed out loud in his face. I couldn’t do anything else. I said, “Yes. It’s going to be a hit.”

Courtney Eskew: And did you ever have that reaction to music that you were producing, where you had had a record and you just knew that this song or this group was going to be a hit at Ardent?

John Fry: Oh, I had that reaction. Sometimes I’d be wrong, too. But I felt that way about the Big Star music. It’s just that I had to wait about ten years for it to start to become a hit. But you’d hear all kinds of things, and the process was generally speaking so much faster. What the song was going to be would very quickly unveil itself.

A lot of people today use recording techniques where they want to do things like record one instrument at a time –

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John Fry: - and do it very meticulously. And in the ‘60s and ‘70s it was usually an ensemble of players playing in the studio. Sometimes we had at least a pile of ____ so it was kind of like a _____ you had a real good idea of what this thing was going to sound like when it got done. And I think that – and we see some of that coming back into music today, which is encouraging to me.

I think when the big corporations – the big international corporations became so dominant in the marketing and the distribution of music, and then when so many of them started to be run by people who were basically not music people, they started to be run by people that were essentially finance oriented –

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John Fry: - it was the bottom line. And I think they were trying to do a lot of what I call sort of pluck-plastic, pasteurized, pre-processed music. And I think that the listening public in any case is reacting to that by _____ and sending them ____ other form of entertainment. And to me, the more organic and spontaneous music is the more interesting.

Courtney Eskew: You said earlier that music is a product of the life and times kind of behind the music. So what is it about Memphis today that's influencing the music that's coming from Memphis?

John Fry: Well, Jim Davidson made an interesting comment once. I was on a panel with him and for some reason –

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John Fry: - this had never dawned on me. But he said, "Memphis has always been a recording town. It really hasn't been much of a live music town." And if you want a live music town, it's like go to Austin where there's 250 venues or something like that." And we have venues here, and we have live music performance that's going on all the time.

But I am sure the ___ musicians would like to have that more depth. But that's what creates the scene in neighborhoods like Cooper Young and South Main and even Beale Street, although a lot of the music that's presented there is legacy music that's designed to appeal to the music tourists, though certainly not all of it.

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John Fry: And there are people in professional studios and now with the advent of reasonably priced recording equipment, some are working in an ___ environment that were creating a lot of recorded music that's coming out of here again, in a lot of genres. It's amazing the level of interest that people from other parts of the world have – people from Europe and the UK, Australia, Asia. We see their journalists coming here all the time to music events. A lot of tourists showing up. And they in some way document the city and even themselves by their presence sort of become a part of the city.

Courtney Eskew: Well, given this change and this new presence, what do you see for the future of Memphis?

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Courtney Eskew: What's next for the city?

John Fry: Do you mean in a music context or in general?

Courtney Eskew: In both – music because it's what you know, and in general.

John Fry: Well, and again I think this is going to be hard times for a long time. And we're taking this in 2010, but I think that we've had just being entirely frank, I think up until very recently that in our city

government, we have had some structural problematic areas that maybe have hindered the progress of the community. And I think we have some new administration and some good people coming in. And I expect to have totally different results – I think that that's – I think that that's great.

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John Fry:

As far as Memphis is concerned, one thing that you've got to realize is that particularly with respect to recorded music, and then with live ____, we're working in a global context. What's happened over the last approximately ten years is that well over 30 percent of the worldwide revenue in the recorded music business has disappeared. Some of this is attributed to non-legal internet peer to peer file sharing and other things, CDs and so on and so forth.

Some of it I think you can attribute to consumer disinterest for the reasons that I just mentioned a little while ago, some to competition for new media. There are robust things that are competing for people's attention –

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John Fry:

- and music is just one of many choices that somebody is going to make about what they're going to do with entertainment dollar. And when you can – if you don't care if you get a cheap MP3 file if you can just go online and steal it then that's a pricing model that's hard to compete with.

But so, since – and the old – a lot of old music business models are in fact failing and shrinking and disappearing. What used to be the big record companies, first of all there are fewer of them. They've drastically cut back the number of people they employ. And they don't have sort of the strangle holds on the industry that they used to because the big bottlenecks used to be –

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John Fry:

- distribution of physical product. A conventional record store is just like a grocery store. It has shelf space, and it only has so much of it. There's a finite amount, so it's like which titles are already in stock? The ones by the major artists that they think are going to move. It's just like which corn flakes are going to get the most shelf space? The most popular brand.

Well, digital delivery and even online retail of physical CDs has eliminated that. Even if you want a physical CD, or even a vinyl which is coming back and is a growing format among young

people, shelf space at Amazon.com is unlimited. They can carry as many titles as they want. If you ever buy products there, you see that some of them they actually physically handle and have in their warehouse, and –

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John Fry: - many of them, they just facilitate the transaction. And it comes to you and shows up on your doorstep from another vendor. And obviously additional delivery like iTunes or the Amazon digital service, again there's absolute unlimited shelf space. You can offer as many titles as you want to. You can keep and print something that only sells ten a year. There's a great book on this that came out a few years ago by Chris Anderson, who is an editor of *Wired* magazine called *The Long Tail* – not tale. It is tail, it's not tale.

It's the long tail. And he's referring to the fact that the future is selling – having this kind of infinite variety of products and it being practical to do that.

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John Fry: And then he's written some follow-up books since then that he's got a revised edition of *The Long Tail* and then he's got a relatively new book called *The Power of Free* meaning – and this applies to music. I mean a lot of people now – record companies and bands – are glad to give away a little free music for a certain amount of time in hope that you'll take it, you'll listen to it, maybe and spread by word of mouth, you'll tell somebody about it and then maybe you'll come back and elect to buy some.

Radiohead is one of the most interesting recent experiences. They put out their album. They offered it digitally for a month. And you could go in – there was no label associated, it was their own website. You could go in and you could have it for whatever you wanted to pay. If you wanted to pay nothing, you could pay nothing. If you wanted –

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John Fry: - to give them something, you could give them something. 32 percent of the people, I think, paid something, and they paid an average of \$6.00. 68 percent paid nothing. Well, I calculated the numbers up and I figured it had one ___ for people that paid them, they brought in well over \$2.5 million in revenue at zero cost.

I mean, they didn't have to manufacture a CD or do anything else. So – and I'll bet you out of the 68 percent that didn't pay, they

were people that were just planning on buying a CD or something later. They were real fans but they wanted it in digital form sooner. But they went from that extreme – free – all the way up to offering a premium product that was almost \$100.00 and had this nice little book in it. And I think it had three CDs and a double vinyl package.

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John Fry: And people who were real fans, they'll pay for a premium product. We just put out a Big Star box set. It carried a list price of \$68.00 or something like that – it's four CDs on ___ transfer ___ and I've been amazed at how many true fans will buy that when you can get a better price on Amazon for \$42.00 sometimes. But it's still – yeah, it's an investment but the true fan will still buy a premium product.

And then at the other end of the spectrum is somebody that cares nothing about the artist or their welfare. They just want to get the song. And I don't care anything about you, I want your tune. Give it to me. And folks have gotta understand about that – you got all these people, "I want these free." And I call them sort of the –

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John Fry: - the extreme internet anarchists. They've got to think about these folks have to make a living somehow. And if they can't make a living, they don't necessarily have to get extremely wealthy. But if they can't make a living playing music, you may still have some music but it's not going to be very good music because there are very many that can do it well that get discouraged and give up.

And all this piracy stuff, they think it just affects the fat cats, the big record company. Well, every time a retail record store closes, all the kids that are clerks in there, they lose their jobs, right? If it's a rented building, the landlord loses his tenant. It filters all the way down to the street. And in Memphis, all the cats independent stores have closed now. Popper Tunes – the classic –

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John Fry: - store where Elvis Presley shopped – is closed. Our Tower Records downtown is gone. I mean, you look around and you won't find too many standalone retail record stores left in Memphis. And that's going on in other communities as well.

Courtney Eskew: What advice then do you have for the future music industry, whether that be Memphians who are musicians, Memphians who love music? What advice would you offer?

John Fry: Well, for Memphians who love music, let's take that first. Because it's easy to give advice to the record companies and musicians, everybody's giving up some kind of thing. But if they're people who love music, get out and support musicians. Go to a show. Buy a ticket. Buy a local musician's CD –

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John Fry: - or order a local musician's ___ digitally. Use music in your functions. I talk to ____, this is something they've been very successful in doing in Austin. Their conventions districts bureau, any time they hear an event is coming or a local Austin company is ____, they try to talk to them about how they could incorporate music into that event, thereby creating more work for performing musicians.

So buy some recorded music. Hire a band or a musician. And show support. I always tell people that I'm serious about this – Memphis and Memphis music is thought of better everywhere else in the world than it is by our own people right here in Memphis. We generally speaking in the local community don't have the appreciation –

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John Fry: - and don't honor the tradition and try to support the current up and coming people the way we should. And then you go to London and you can't get people to shut up and stop talking to you about it. They know more about it half the time than I do. And I've always found that paradoxical.

As far as the advice for the musicians and the music industry – as I mentioned, the old music business model is going away. And there's certain features of the new model that I think are developing. But my crystal ball has never been 100 percent accurate. But as I said, one of the things that's helping – it's easier for independent companies I think now to get some visibility for an artist if they've got good music. For one thing, the ease –

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John Fry: - of getting music into visible distribution, the ease of getting it into online physical retail and not even worrying about trying to force Wal-Mart to take a title that they don't want because they're not going to take the title of the band, they're going to carry the hits – 5,000 titles is all they'll have ever.

And so that's helping. The other thing that's helping is the – I mentioned distribution has been kind of a stranglehold that big

radio companies had. The other stranglehold is radio. For years, radio was the primary means – convention transfer to radio was the primary means for people to discover music. And that was the way that I discovered music when I was growing up. But the difference is that those radio stations – again, they have a lot of individual people and individual disc jockeys deciding what they were going to play. You didn't have a thing –

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John Fry: - where Clear Channel owned 1300 stations and had somebody sitting somewhere and telling every one of them what they were going to do. And you go to City A and you listen to the station, and you go to City B and it sounds exactly the same. I mean, when I was growing up, radio in Memphis was way different than radio in Nashville or even in New York City.

And as kids, we would even try to listen to signals from other cities saying what we would discover. There was a station in Chicago – WLSU – we could very plainly hear.

And we'd hear bands that they were playing – were coming out of the Chicago area long before they would ever get on down here. And again, what you got into for radio programming was it became – it went into this kind of narrow casting, where you had these very narrow formats. And it was just like, one genre and every record would –

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John Fry: - the first record would sound like the second record would sound like the third would sound like the fourth. And radio in the '60s and '70s was much more eclectic. It was a mix. And I think the limitations that come into conventional radio have caused a lot of the audience to sort of get blinders on.

Whereas if they were exposed to more genres, they might find that there is a much wider range of artists in music that they actually enjoy. Now what's countering this is the growth of internet radio, the growth of sites like Pandora that help you find something new where if you like this artist or this song, you might also like this artist and this song because – the problem with internet marketing and discovering music on the internet is there's –

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John Fry: - so much of it. And you need some kind of intelligent – what I call intelligent search engines or digital engines that help turn it from being just static into something where you can actually find

and seek out artists that you might be interested in. Social networking, obviously, has had a tremendous impact. Because again it's the old fashioned thing. It's like, word of mouth – you hear a record you like or a band you like and you tell your four or five friends at school.

Well it's the same thing except if you've got 1500 friends on Facebook and you hear some music you like, you can click and all of a sudden you've told 1500 people. It could be all over the world. And that's very powerful, I think, and it's just going to get more powerful. I think anything that puts –

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John Fry: - spontaneity, anything that puts the listener back in the position to discover music that they like easily without being dictated to in that regard by some media gatekeeper, I think all of those things are going to be healthy for music in the future. So I would advise new model record companies and new artists to learn as much as they can about all those tools, and to try to learn how to use them effectively.

Courtney Eskew: Well, in wrapping up I just wanted to say thank you again on behalf of Crossroads to Freedom, Rhodes College, and the Rock and Soul Museum, for sharing your story with us today. It's really great to have somebody who is from this community and who has spent their life –

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Courtney Eskew: - and career in this community and in this specific industry and kind of help us learn a little bit more about where we live and the history where we live, so –

John Fry: Yeah, I always tell people I'm starting my 44th year of a life sentence without parole.

Courtney Eskew: - well it has to be a little bit better than that.

John Fry: It's better than that. Thank you for having me, I enjoyed it.

Courtney Eskew: Well, thank you for being here.

[End of Audio]