

Mark: From the beginning, I was in the lumber business and the construction business.

And I used to do work for **Mid-South** Concerts. And Mid-South Concerts used to put on shows for about 25 years here, **Bob Kelley**. He put them on in Ellis Auditorium. He put them on in South Coliseum, the Pyramid and he did some outside shows at the Beale Street Music Festival, not the original Beale Street Music Festival but later on. And he did the stadium, did several stadium shows, one with The Rolling Stones and one with –

William Shepherd: Just every act, man. He was a big-time promoter.

Mark: Oh yeah, he was the biggest promoter Memphis has ever seen. And he did about six shows at the stadium over the years, ZZ Top and some other ones.

And Kelley and I were old friends, running buddies, along with **Irvin Salky**, who we all ran around together and, you know, we're all friends.

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And what my role was Kelley could do all the inside shows. He'd do all the booking. The stage was already there. But, when we went outside, it was a different deal. All he could do was the booking, and he needed someone to do the physical stage, the physical security, the physical, you know, sanitation, concessions, the electric lines run in and whatever needed for the physical aspect of it.

William Shepherd: So you'd had some experience?

Mark: Yeah, doing these things.

William Shepherd: So how did the fire ignite that became the festival?

Mark: Well, Salky and I were friends and he'd been talking about it for years. And Irvin, you know, represented a lot of different musicians and show business people around town and nationally and internationally, also.

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So it was Irvin's idea he could all these people signed up to do this festival, but he knew nothing about putting on a festival. So he went to Kelley and Kelley wanted nothing to do with it, because,

you know, Kelley was more into bringing, you know, big super acts in. He wasn't into putting together a festival, you know, at this time.

William Shepherd: Could you say that again?

Mark: Well, if I remember, Salky and I were talking about the best way to do this and how it would be to come out with the best results. And I said get Mid-South Concerts to do it, knowing that I'd be the one who'd do the outside part.

And Irv went to Kelley, and Kelley wasn't really interested. It was just not his cup of tea. He didn't have the love for blues and jazz, and plus, he wanted big money, you know.

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Where Irv and I were also friends and Irv came to me. He said, "Will you do it, and how much would it cost?" And I said, "Irv, I'm with you on doing this." And, at that time, he told me he had to talk to Bill Shepherd, yourself, about, you know, filming it, and you said sure, you know.

And he came to me and he said, "Well, what about building, **Flannigan**," and I said, "Yeah, I can do it, but it's going to cost this much," you know.

William Shepherd: Okay, say that again.

Mark: Well, I told Irvin, I said, "Building the stage is one part. Building the security is another part. Then you have to have a crew that can handle sound and lights, just regular sound and lights. You need some type of stage crew." And that was put together by a fellow named **Friar Tuck**. [Phone ringing]

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Well, the way it originally started was Irv Salky I knew had been interested in putting on a – having a big blues and jazz festival here in Memphis to really honor all some people who were getting old in the industry, like Ma Rainey and Furry Lewis and different old people that were in their 70s and 80s, at that point. And Irvin wanted to honor them, and Irvin thought it would be a great thing.

And so Irv comes to me and says, "Can you help me," and I said, "Yeah, I can do certain things." So he was going to do all the booking and Bill Shepherd is going to do all the filming and I was in charge of all the physical plant we call it, which would involve

the stage and the sound towers and the switching board towers and the security fences, the stage crew, the construction crew, the ticket people and the concessions.

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And when Irv first talked to me about it, Irv just thought you built a stage and it'd happen, you know. But there's a lot of different things that had to be done, and Irv understood it, in the end.

So Irv went around getting his bookings lined up, and I went around and organized all these things I needed to do. And we had to start about six weeks early, which is really not early enough to put on an outside event with permits and supplies and whatever you need, logistic. But we got it together and it came off well. We were happy for be able to do it.

And, in the end, it was done. It never was like we dreamed about how it was going to be. It came out much better.

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Of course, I don't know if you were there. You there that last night, when they had that super jam session with all those people. That was something like I'd never seen in the music, and I've seen a whole, whole lot of groups over the years and that was something very, very unique.

William Shepherd:

What was the roadblock? Did something come up and you said, "Oh man, this ain't going to happen now?"

Mark:

Oh, we had all kinds of roadblocks. We had built the stage and done everything and all of a sudden we couldn't get enough power to power the electronic equipment, you know, the music equipment. And finally, at the last minute, it was the last minute, it was about –

Everything was great but we couldn't get the electricity. The last about two hours we realized that we couldn't get enough ampage that was needed for several things. We had the sound and the PA and all that and then all the speakers and the amplifiers, then we had the truck that was supplied by Channel 5 News was dragging power.

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So between all those power demands, it just wasn't enough. So we had to really slip and slide and beg and finally got the city involved with Memphis Gas, Light and Water and got them to come down

there and run us a special line to feed us enough power, because really there wasn't enough power on Beale Street on those regular lines.

And, in those days, I think we needed three-phase and I don't think down on that end there wasn't, I don't believe, three-phase power down on that end of Beale Street. And they had to run three-phase down there to keep all this, you know, sound equipment moving.

William Shepherd: What was it like? Did you meet opposition? Did you find people say, "Oh, sure, we'll do whatever you need, _____. We want to really have this festival?"

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What was the attitude and the atmosphere in 1977, when you did this?

Mark: Well, you know, we're in Memphis and everything moves slow. Everything goes at a snail's pace. If you think you're going to get something done in a week, it's going to take you two weeks. And we ran into a lot of that, a lot of getting these city inspectors down there.

We didn't get much political opposition, because politically we were all right. The city was all right with it. But as far as getting the city services, you know, was a different thing. And they wouldn't deal with our trash. We had to handle our own trash. We had to get, you know, our own trash containers and sanitation stuff. But it all worked out in the end.

William Shepherd: It was more a humanitarian event than it was a for-profit event. How did that work, you know, the naivety?

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Mark: Well, naivety was it was somewhat on my part, but on others' parts, also. I knew what I could build that stage for and what I could do my part for. But I'd done it before, so I knew where I was at.

But a lot of other people in the endeavor, they didn't realize what it all ensued, especially with the musicians and the support for the musicians, as far as hotels rooms and cars and meals and just the cost of the musicians themselves, where some of them volunteered, some of them got paid.

The sound people, the light people, the security people, the stage crew, the ticket sellers, the concession people, there was a lot of people involved in this whole thing. There was probably, shit, 150 people involved.

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William Shepherd: Did you get paid? Did you make money?

Mark: No, I didn't even try to make money. I told Irvin I'd do it for whatever it cost me. I build them for my materials. I didn't build them for my time. But I had people working for me. They all got paid, like the stage crew and my carpenters and the ticket selling girls and the concession people. They all got their money.

But I wasn't in it to make money. The same way Irvin wasn't in it to make money and the same I don't believe you were into it to make money. At the time, we just thought it was a good idea. And we also, all of us, we didn't think it was going to be near as complicated, as much involved, as it was by the time it was all finished and done with.

We weren't trying to make money ourselves. But we didn't think it'd be so complicated and such a drawn out thing and so many hurdles and so many roadblocks and so many surprises.

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And we had a great number of surprises, you know, that happened to us, whether it was electricity or people not showing up, people's airplanes late, just a multitude of, you know, little pain in the ass.

William Shepherd: But it was more of a family. I mean, it wasn't a business relationship, because you'd known Irvin for quite a while.

Mark: No, we didn't have a business relationship.

William Shepherd: Tell us about the close knit sort of ensemble it was.

Mark: Well, there's a lot of –

William Shepherd: You were neighbors, right?

Mark: Yeah, Irvin and I were neighbors. We lived down in Victorian Village. And it was people like **Percy Brown** and **Brenda Oppenhauser** and **Joyce O'Conner** and **Danny Graflin** and Friar

Tuck and O.J. Mitchell and Toto, Dennis Freehoff, Dennis Brooks.

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There was just a lot of people who have always been involved before and since in the Beale Street scene of some sort.

But these were the early days of Beale Street. Beale Street wasn't even developed yet. None of those clubs were there. B.B.'s wasn't there. Blues City wasn't there, 152 wasn't there, Silky's wasn't there, Alfred's wasn't there, the Park was there. They'd just built the Park.

William Shepherd: I remember something. A city official walks in to Handy Park, the stage is going up and says, "You can't build that there," and someone saying, "Yeah, we can. We're doing it. There it is." Was that really happen?

Mark: Yeah, that did.

William Shepherd: Tell us that story.

Mark: Third Street there is not just a road. It's not just Third Street. It's also a national highway.

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William Shepherd: Kick your shoes off, will you.

Mark: We had trouble with the state road people. And the way it came down was Third Street right down there, running north-south, is actually, I believe, it's Highway 61, I believe. It's Highway 61 right there.

And they came to us and they told us that just because the city gave us permission and the state gave us permission that we needed federal permission, because it was a federally funded – you know, it was an interstate road. It wasn't just a road owned by the city of Memphis or the state of Tennessee.

So we had to go to our congressman, who was, at that time –

William Shepherd: Okay, hold it right there.

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Mark: We had to get Congressman Ford's office to get with the federal highway department and get permission, because the stage, if you can remember, sat exactly on Third Street, a little cockeyed, but it sat right in the middle of street. And that's what their beef was, but through the congressman's office, you know, they waived that, in the end.

William Shepherd: Did the other people understand the importance of this not just to Memphis but to the world of music, you know? So many, Ma Rainey, Sleepy John, Big Sam, Gus Cannon. Sonny Criss died right after, this was their last recorded performance.

Did the people here understand not only that, how important it was?

Mark: Well, I'll tell you, Irvin understood it.

William Shepherd: Take it back.

Mark: Irvin Salky understood the importance of all these blues singers being on their last hurrah, so to speak.

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And he mustered them all together. And most of them – Irv Salky understood that this was a dying breed of musicians and they were the last real connection to the generation before them and the generation before that, which was all verbal, you know, communication. People just – a lot of these guys had very little stuff recorded, you know, compared to big stars.

And Irv understood this. He represented some of them, and that's how he had the connection with them. But he had a great love of jazz and blues, mainly jazz. Irv's a jazz nut.

William Shepherd: So he was the burning ember, the powerhouse behind this?

Mark: Oh, well, he had the political connections and he had the connections with the musicians. And if you're going to put a festival on, the first thing you need is a place to put, which is political.

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The second thing you need is who's going to be the show. And Irv had those two things. What he didn't have was how to do it physically possible, and that was sort of my role to put together the

physical end of it.

William Shepherd: You know, looking back to that time, when you say, gosh, and B.B. got on the stage and said, “By golly, we did it. You know, we did it.” What was your sense of personal accomplishment in the realm of the historical and cultural significance?

Mark: Well, what was going on was Memphis and Beale Street were a big thing, at that time. There was one part of Memphis that said the hell with downtown redevelopment. Another part of the local government said, we want downtown redevelopment.

And Beale Street was an integral part of that and these musicians were what Beale Street was about.

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Now, they may have been gone there for 50 years some of them, but to them, all those musicians, Beale Street was like the mecca. Even though it was in shambles now, it was still the mecca to them.

And they were so proud and so glad to see that there was a movement going on in Memphis to not just honor them but to keep the spirit alive, the spirit alive of the tradition of black musicians who most of them or a lot of them came from Memphis and came through old school, old black school system, where you had music high schools and where it was like they all knew each other, all these musicians. And the reason they all knew each other they all went to these couple high schools here in Memphis and they learned how to play music together.

And that's why we've always been a hub jazz, because, I mean, I grew up in Washington D.C. We had no music school going on, you know. But Memphis –

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William Shepherd: Not in public education.

Mark: Not in public education, where Memphis did. And those guys on that stage, like B.B. and Slim and all these different ones, they knew that Memphis had something different going than any other city in America, where it was a breeding ground for black musicians in the part of music of jazz and blues. Because they came from this area, they kept blues alive. But most of them were

jazz heads, you know. They liked their jazz.

William Shepherd: What is your personal significance with this festival? What did it mean to you, and what about your pride and being involved in it?

Mark: Oh, I got pride on being involved in it. I think I helped do something, you know, that was good for the city. And it wasn't a monetary thing for me. It was more of a because I'm a blues guy. Jazz is all right, but I'm a blues guy.

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And I just wanted to see it – I wanted to see Beale Street come back and this was going to be part of Beale Street. And I never envisioned what it would be like today, with 300,000 people coming to the Beale Street Blues Festival, you know, because we were just down on one corner down there with maybe a couple thousands people at most, you know.

But we had more entertainment than most blues festivals since. You know, we had the crown jewels of them right there, and there's never been a blues festival, whether it's been in Memphis or New Orleans or whatever, what had that combination of people bringing the old into that new generation, even though the new generation 35 years ago. You know, now we're into another whole new generation.

But that bridged the gap and that's what I'm proud of being involved and bridging that gap.

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William Shepherd: Would you tell us, you know, all the work and the culmination and then the Sunday morning this, you know, we found out we could do it and we did it and the preacher was talking and you had a sunrise cocktail or something, didn't you?

Mark: Oh, it was Silky ____ that came up with a bottle of champagne right in the middle of a religious gospel performance. It must have been about 7:00 in the morning or 8:00 in the morning. And Silky comes up on stage and pops a bottle of champagne and the cork did something. I forget what the hell the cork did. I forget. The cork did something. It flew up and came back down and hit somebody or something.

But anyway, is the one who did that. Because he's always been – this was before he even had a club down on Beale Street, or

dreamed of having a club down on Beale Street. Silky was involved in that. You know, we were all friends.

William Shepherd: So that was a celebration and we did it, man. We did it?

Mark: Yeah. Yeah, Silky just wanted to come down there and say he supported it and he was behind, you know, the whole thing, which he was.

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William Shepherd: Okay. Is there anything else that come to mind you want to share today?

Mark: Well, not just pops in mind, but I think that what you all are doing is preserving the history. And I had a part of preserving the history, at one point. And now, it's a whole different day, you know, video and Facebook and Tweeter, Twitter, and everything else. And I'm just glad to see everything being brought up to a modern stage where people can listen to these things that were around, like that film that was made by yourself and other people, that's a piece of classic history, you know.

William Shepherd: And so what about your pride and humility, as being a part of this, and is it something that was important in your life that you look back on as an achievement?

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Mark: Well, yeah, I consider it an achievement.

William Shepherd: Personally?

Mark: Yeah, personally I do.

William Shepherd: What does it mean, let me ask you this, Mark, what does it mean to you?

Mark: To have been involved in it? It means to me that it just shows that you can get a bunch of people who don't have a lot of money but want to get something done and whether it's a heritage group in the neighborhood or Greenpeace people doing something or any type of nongovernmental movements that are more closely related to what's going than governmental movements. Because governmental movements, by the time it gets there, it's all politics

and money.

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But Memphis has always been a town where there's so many underground movements going on of things and issues and causes that are supported, basically, by our – we're lucky to have the education system we do here in all these different colleges and universities we have here, you know, tech schools and the cotton school and the lumber school.

Memphis is a bigger education hub than people think. And, when you've got an education hub, you got people who they're educated and they'll speak up and say what they want to say and they want to do something what's right, whether it's what happened here with the Civil Rights marches, what happened here with us and the Beale Street Blues Festival.

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You know, what happening today with the criminal justice committee, what the ACLU does, what the Memphis Botanical Gardens does, what's happening in our zoo. You remember our zoo 40 years ago was a piece of trash. Now we've got one of the best zoos in the world, all because of civil involvement from people like **Thomas Boggs**, and they got **Knox** and some other people. They turned the zoo around. Brooks has been turned around. The Levitt Shell has been turned around. The **Lichterman** family with their center and the Dixon Gallery and the German Town Performing Arts.

I mean, people come to me and go, "Oh, you heard so-and-so's going to build a new place," like Minglewood Hall. And I said to myself, "Goddamn, they ain't enough venues in this town yet?" I mean, this town's got more venues than any place I can dream of per capita.

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And that just shows you how much faith people have in the arts and that's important, you know, to keep the arts alive.

William Shepherd:

When you look back on your life, does this festival, it's an important thing that stands out as an accomplishment in your life?

Mark:

Yeah, I was glad I was involved in it. I haven't been involved in for years, you know, the present-day Beale Street Festival. But I was involved in for the first two years, and I truly enjoyed it.

Then after that, as you know, it was basically stolen from Irvin Salky by the Memphis in May people and they took it over and undercut his funding. And where Holiday Inn was the original funder of the festival and then Memphis in May stepped in and all of sudden Memphis in May was the recipient of the Holiday Inn money.

William Shepherd: And the whole –

Mark: Festival changed.

William Shepherd: How did the festival change?

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Well, instead of having Irv Salky and his people putting on the festival, Memphis in May put it on. And Memphis in May, by that time, it was a lucrative or there was a possibility of being lucrative.

Our friend Bob Kelley stepped in and he ran it for 15 years, you know.

William Shepherd: Yeah, but it took on a whole different flavor and ____ ____ ____.

Mark: Oh yeah.

William Shepherd: Tell us that.

Mark: Well, the difference in the flavor and character between Beale Street today and Beale Street festival –

William Shepherd: No, the festival, the first festival.

Mark: Yeah, the festival difference was if you look at the flyer this week and see who's in the Memphis in May this year, it's a bunch of musicians and I bet you not 10 of them are from Memphis. Where that bunch on the stage, in 1977, that bunch was 90 percent from Memphis or within northern Mississippi or western Arkansas and west Tennessee or eastern Arkansas, that's where they came with.

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This was going to the roots of the blues and the roots of jazz.

William Shepherd: And gospel.

Mark: Yeah and gospel. Yeah, it went right to the roots. And it was a local roots, between this is where it's bred out of. This is the part

of the country that all that like flows up out of.

William Shepherd: Then all of a sudden, it became a moneymaking –

Mark: Yeah, __ ____, you know, became money –

William Shepherd: Tell me that.

Mark: Well, when Memphis in May took it over, they made it a moneymaking deal. They got Bob Kelley to instead of having, you know, Ma Rainey or Prince Gabe and the Millionaires or Little Laura Dukes or people like that, they had, you know, all different groups from all around, Boz Scaggs and they had just, you know, national groups, you know.

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William Shepherd: A bunch of carpetbaggers.

Mark: Yeah, a bunch of carpetbaggers, which really twisted the whole idea of the festival. The idea of the festival was to honor and promote and push, you know, the local, that was our deal. We wanted to get Memphis music on the map, or bigger on the map, because we're on the map, because, man, you go to Chicago or you go to New York or you go to Washington or you even go to Paris or go to London, you know, they talk about Memphis music.

And they all talk about Elvis, that's a different story. But they talk about Memphis Slim. They talk about B.B. King. They talk about Furry Lewis. They talk about Stax Records, surprisingly. Stax Record, I was in Sweden a couple of years ago. I never realized how big Stax records was over there. And this is all Memphis music.

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William Shepherd: Great.

Mark: And that's what I like to support. Right.

William Shepherd: All right.

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