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John Paul Keith, 2012

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*Molly:* This is an interview with John Paul Keith, and I'm Molly Whitehorn with Professor Charles Hughes. The date is December 1st, 2012, and this is for part of the Echoes in Memphis portion.

*Charles:* All right, thank you so much for being here. Let me just start out sort of with the basics. State your full name and where you're from, and if you don't mind saying when you're from, when you were born.

*John Paul Keith:* Well my name is John Paul Keith. I'm originally from Knoxville, Tennessee, but I've been living in Memphis for about seven years. I was born in 1975.

*Molly:* Okay, so I know that you grew up outside of Knoxville. Right?

*John Paul Keith:* Yeah, out in the middle of nowhere.

*Molly:* So can you tell me a little bit about your childhood and what your parents are like and your family?

*John Paul Keith:* Well, my dad was a truck driver, and we had a real kind of old fashioned East Tennessee sort of family life.

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It's a disappearing way of life, I think, but I grew up in rural area, and – so I think that I have a different perspective on things sometimes because of that. My parents waited pretty late in life to have kids. So you know, I was the kid whose parents were older than the other kids' parents. My parents were just a little too old to be baby boomers, so I think that also contributed to me having a different perspective on popular culture than other people. I didn't hear boomer music until I was a teenager. It was just – that just wasn't played in the house. Like other people my age grew up on that. I didn't. I came to it later. I grew up hearing country music and gospel music.

*Molly:* So you ended up in Nashville. Right?

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*John Paul Keith:* Uh-huh.

*Molly:* And you played with The Viceroy's there. Can you tell me a little bit about your time in Nashville and why you chose to leave the group?

*John Paul Keith:* Well, The Viceroy's were actually a Knoxville band, and I would help start that band when I was 19. And I quit – it was we were, you know, it's like David Lee Roth says. Rock bands are like dogs that chase cars. They make a lot of noise, and they don't last long. But that's sort of – it's the same old story with most bands. We just – different directions, different opinions of how it should be. So I took off, and then I went to Nashville. I was there for about five years, I think.

*Molly:* And they were on Steve Earl. Is that right?

*John Paul Keith:* They were at the time. They changed their name to The **V Roys** when I left, and they signed with Steve Earl. He had a label called E Squared at the time, and they did a couple records for him.

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*Molly:* So then you eventually ended up spending some time in Birmingham, right, before you came to Memphis.

*John Paul Keith:* Yeah, yeah, I was in Birmingham for a couple years.

*Charles:* Just to go back to Nashville for a second, so when you went to Nashville, it's such a common story that people who go to Nashville kind of have to fit into the Nashville thing if they want to make it in Nashville. Like now, it seems to be that there are some other niches that are kind of blooming there. But with you, for your experience, were you able to make the kind of music you wanted to make in Nashville, or were you sort of – did you find any tension? Because that's such a common story.

*John Paul Keith:* Well, it was kind of weird. I mean I was trying to play rock music in Nashville, and there wasn't much of a scene for that. I mean there were guys doing it. There were actually a lot of guys doing it, but it wasn't – it didn't get much attention outside of Nashville.

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It really didn't get that much attention in Nashville at the time. But I mean I had some luck there. I signed with Sire Records when I was living in Nashville. I had a band called The Nevers, and Sire was a big national major label. It was a big deal at the time. So it wasn't like I got, you know, kicked to the curb. I had some success there on some level, but what I – the problem I had with Nashville is that even if you think – if you go there thinking, "I'm not going to be like these other people, I'm not going to be totally

corporate and middle of the road, and I'm not going to compromise what I do," even if you go in thinking that, because of the culture of the place, after a while, you still end up being like that.

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And I absolutely did that. So it wasn't that I couldn't do what I wanted to do. It's that I drifted into doing what I never would have done before. You know? And writing the kind of stuff that I would never have done. It's just I don't listen to really anything that I did back then. I don't care for it. So that was the problem I ran into. Just sort of a cultural thing there. But I think that has changed to some degree because when I lived there, there was no East Nashville scene at all. That's totally happened after I left. So now you have all kinds of things going on there. Nashville really is the recording capital of the world, and not just for country music.

The recording business is in Nashville. So it's totally different now. And I learned a lot in Nashville, so I'm not completely anti-Nashville, but I am anti-music row, and I'm 100 percent anti the country music industry, which I think is vile.

[0:06:04] CUT Begin Segment 2

*Molly:* So eventually, you wound up in Memphis.

*John Paul Keith:* Uh-huh.

*Molly:* Can you tell me how you ended up here exactly and what made you want to stay?

*John Paul Keith:* Well, I ended up here because my sister was living here, and at the time, I spent a couple years in Birmingham, and I had a band down there, and that kind of – like they all do, eventually sort of we went our separate ways, and I was just hanging out down there with not a lot to do. My sister was living here. She said, "Why don't you just come up to Memphis for a while and give it a shot and be close to family?"

So I did it, and I really had no intention of playing because I'd been kind of burned out with being in bands and trying to make a go of it and being frustrated. So I wasn't playing, and then next thing I know, I was playing because Memphis is just the way it is, it's just like even though it's not on a lot of peoples' radar outside of Memphis, like you don't hear as much about Memphis anymore

as maybe you did when there was a real recording business here back in the '70s and '60s or whatever.

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But it is still very much an incredible music town, and the most incredible music town that I've ever been a part of. So it just really kind of snowballed from there. Next thing I knew, I was writing again, and I had a great band. I met Mark Stewart and John Argroves, and we started The One Four Fives, and I've played with those guys longer than anybody I've played music with. I mean we've been together for like – I mean the lineup changes depending on who can do the gig, you know, but I have been playing with those guys now for, I don't know, maybe five years, which is probably longer than I've played with anybody.

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And Jack Oblivion. Jack Yarber, I been playing with him for four or five years now, too. So...

*Molly:*

So what do you think it is exactly about Memphis that makes it different?

*John Paul Keith:*

I think it's a mix of cultures. I think that makes the music interesting. You know, you have a mix of black culture and white culture, and you have a mixture of regional. You know, a regional mixture. It's not really the deep south. In a way, Memphis is kind of in the middle of the country. That's obviously why there's some FedExes here because we're right in the middle of the country in a lot of ways. You know, it's literally a crossroads, and I think that's contributed to all these different elements meeting here and making the music interesting.

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But I also think there's an X-factor that you can't put your finger on about Memphis. Something I can occasionally get slightly mystical about it. It's – you can't put your finger on it, but there's something special about it. There really is that you can't quantify.

*Molly:*

So I know that BB King is one artist from Memphis that has been particularly influential to you. Are there any other artists from Memphis that you find –

*John Paul Keith:* pretty much all of them. I mean anybody that recorded for Sun Records or Stacks Records or High Records, or you know, at American Studios, Chips Moman, his crew. All those records. I mean all of those artists, and even before that, you know, the blues era, Bobby Bland. All of that stuff, I mean that – I would say if you went through my iPod, it's like it was ridiculous how much Memphis music is on there, and it has been that way for me always. I've always been into Memphis music long before I ever came here.

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You know, but and the stuff – you know, Memphis stuff that's happened in recent years. I mentioned Jack Oblivion. All of his bands, Oblivions, Compulsive Gamblers, Harlan T. Bobo, just a ton of great Memphis music. Jim Dickinson and all the different things he's worked on over the years. I just it's incredible the amount of really amazing music that's come out of this town.

*Molly:* Okay, so I know just from listening to music that a lot of it sounds like it \_\_\_ '50s and '60s and stuff like that. Is that like a sound you consciously try to make, or just like natural or authentic?

*John Paul Keith:* Well, it's a little of both. I mean I think my voice naturally just sort of falls into some of that. You know, I think my voice lends itself to that kind of music, and also, that is what I listen to a lot, so naturally, you are what you eat.

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So you know, if you listen to a lot of a particular style, your stuff is going to tend to sound like that. But also, you can be conscious of it, too. Like I am conscious of those things, so sometimes I go, "Well, we're going to go full on – let's go full on Charlie Feathers with this one," or okay, let's go a little more Buddy Holly with this one," or whatever. So it's a combination of it being natural, but also, you can be conscious of it, too.

*Molly:* So why do you think it's important to keep making music?

*John Paul Keith:* Well, you know, the world needs songs. The world needs music. It's one of the pleasures of life, and you can learn about yourself from music, and learn about other people and what they go through, and these are all important things.

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And you know, an important part of life. People need it. And Memphis is particularly good at it and has a particularly special way of doing it that you don't find in other places. So I'm, you know, not being a Memphis native, I always consider it an honor to be thought of as a Memphis musician, and I take it very seriously. Like I was lucky enough to get to know Jim Dickinson briefly before he passed, and he would – he was very insistent that if you travel around the world or around the country or whatever and go to other places playing music and you're from Memphis, you are representing an entire history of music from this place, and you need to take that seriously.

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And that's always stuck with me that even though I'm not a native, I'm a Memphis musician now, and I try to do right by that.

**CUT 00:13:16 -- Begin Segment 3**

*Charles:* Could you talk a bit about Dickinson? I mean I think one thing that is probably going to come up in the series we're doing is Dickinson. And just sort of talk about how you got to know him, what your – you know, what your reaction was to him and what he meant in your career, and also just in your identity as a Memphis musician.

*John Paul Keith:* Well, I didn't know him long. I first met Jim through Ross Johnson, actually, who you should talk to for this, by the way. You should definitely talk to Ross. Ross was doing some recording down at Jim's place in Coldwater, Mississippi at the Zebra Ranch.

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That's what he calls it. And Ross asked me to play guitar on it, so I went down there, and Jim was producing, and you know, Jim was really unorthodox way of – had an unorthodox way of working. The studio there at the Zebra Ranch, not to get too technical, but it didn't have a control room. The console, the board, was in the same room with the band. So they would have to monitor what was going on. Jim and his engineer would have to monitor with headphones while you're playing. They're in the room with you. That's totally unorthodox, but I loved it. It was great.

And the vibe of the place, it was like recording in an antique shop or a bar or something. It was really unusual, but a great vibe. You know? So that was my first encounter with Jim, and we hit it off right away. I think I do recall that one of the songs Ross wanted to cut was Crying in the Chapel, which was done by Elvis, but before that, it was done by, I think, the Orioles, I think.

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And I had listened to both versions to prepare for the session, and their cords are slightly different in those versions. And I didn't know which version we were doing, and I happened to mention that in front of Jim, and that seemed to impress him that I had listened to both of them and knew the cords were different. I think he sort of cocked his head over and sort of paying a little bit more attention to me after that. So we hit it off, and eventually he started playing with us.

The same band that was down there, it was me, Greg Roberson from Reigning Sound on drums, Adam Woodard from Jack Oblivion's band on organ, and I think Adam was there. Pretty sure Adam was there. Anyway, and Jeremy Scott, also from Reigning Sound on Bass. And that was the band, and we eventually started backing up Jim on a side project called Snake Eyes where we did a handful of gigs around Memphis.

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Because Jim had written these songs back in the '60s, these sort of garage rock tunes that some of them got recorded, some of them didn't, and the whole concept of Snake Eyes was for us to play those songs. So it was like Jim doing like a psychedelic garage rock kind of thing, which was really fun and really cool. They were great tunes. And but sadly, we didn't get to do it very long because his health started to fail. But we did a few gigs around town, and they were real special, and it was a real honor to get to do it. He was a really sweet guy, one of the best story tellers you'll ever encounter, and really, he was the ambassador for Memphis music. He knew more about it than anybody else.

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He could speak better about it than anybody else, and he was just a charming man. He just – he just had a great spirit, and it was just I'm really lucky to meet him. It was a – and it sticks with you. It sticks with you. Some of the things he would say would stick with



you, and his spirit, you know, you – he’s the kind of guy you want to emulate because when somebody is that kind and that knowledgeable and that talented, you want to emulate that.

*Charles:* Was there anybody else of sort of the sort of older generations of Memphis musicians who you found particularly supportive, or you have found particularly supportive of what you’ve done? Is there anybody like that who has done that sort of stuff for you?

*John Paul Keith:* Well, generally, everyone in Memphis has been supportive of me. That’s one of the reasons I’m here. You know?

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I’ve found that Memphis musicians are the most open minded musicians I’ve ever encountered. There is no such thing as genre in Memphis. There’s only two kinds of music here, good and bad, and everything else is irrelevant. So you know, it does not matter what style you play. If it’s good, people here will like it, and musicians will be open to it. And that is – I’ve never encountered that to that degree anywhere else. But as far as older musicians, any time I’ve encountered any of the old guard in Memphis, they’ve always been cool to me. We just started recording recently at Sam Phillips Studios with Roland James, and that’s been a total honor to meet him, and he’s just the sweetest guy.

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You know, and at Age 79, still has ears of gold. I mean nothing gets past him. No stray note. I mean he hears like you wouldn’t believe, and his arrangement ideas, and his perspective on the songs is always spot on. I’ve found that every time we tried his idea, it was always right. It was like if we were stuck on something and go, “Well, what should we do,” Roland is very quiet, chime in, “Why don’t you try it this way?” Every single time, he was right. It solved whatever problem it was. So – and he’s just a great, great guy. So that’s just one example of the old guard guys.

I knew BB Cunningham a little bit, who recently died, and BB was a total sweetheart. You know, just a great guy, hilarious guy, hilarious sense of humor. And Roland, too. Roland is hilarious. So it’s just I don’t mean to gush, but Memphis has been really, really great to me.

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I really think highly of the current guys working here and the older guys for sure.

**CUT 0:20:10 – Begin Segment 4**

*Molly:* And this is actually probably something I should have mentioned earlier, but when did you first know you wanted to be a musician? Was there a certain moment you had?

*John Paul Keith:* I don't know. I've always been involved in it. I mean even if it's just singing along with my dad's records when I was a kid. My dad wasn't a musician, but he sang in church, and my mom did, too. They sang in the church choir, and he constantly played records in the house, constantly. So – and I think he wanted to be a musician. He had a guitar in the house, and you know, for whatever reason just couldn't do it. So when I decided –

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I was I guess 10, 9 or 10, 11 years old, something like that when I decided I had gotten interested in the guitar and wanted to play the guitar, he was totally supportive and got me lessons. So I had an advantage over some kids that maybe didn't have that kind of support. I had all the support I could have asked for from music. In fact, he insisted I take lessons. He's like, "I'm not going to get you a guitar if you're not going to actually learn it the right way." So that was lucky. I was lucky to have that kind of support.

*Molly:* Okay, so I know we talked a lot about the Memphis style and how diverse it is and stuff. But what do you think is holding Memphis back from being the city it once was?

*John Paul Keith:* That's tough to say. For one thing, Nashville being three hours away has kind of – that's sort of the center of gravity now for anybody in music.

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So it's very hard. It's sort of a talent drain. A lot of people go to Nashville because there's so much industry there. There was a time in the '50s and '60s when Nashville and Memphis were about equal as far as a recording center. There were a lot of studios here, and they weren't clustered in one area like in Nashville, but there was a real recording scene here and a recording business here, but Nashville got just big enough that that became the talent train.

And also, there's a lot of economic factors here. Livability issues, I think, are a factor. Our standard of living kind of issues that would – if somebody was looking at Nashville or Memphis, I want to go to Nashville, you know? So there's some of those issues, and you know, like Stacks going out of business in the '70s.

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Or '80, whatever it was. That was sort of the last straw for like the big time sort of flagship Memphis recording business ventures or whatever. But and I don't think Memphis ever quite recovered from that. But even in recent years, there's always been – you know, Ardent has always been a world class operation, and easily McCain before it burned was definitely a world class studio. So it's still there, but it's way more underground now, you know, more under the radar. But you know, the music business is in such bad shape generally all over the world that it would be – I don't see Memphis becoming anything like it used to be any time soon.

Even just the basic fact of recording. Anybody can record now. The equipment – the technology is so different now.

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So you don't need the studio scene like you used to, which is a shame because that's a way of working that is lost when you have a group of musicians playing live together in one room. That is a – the results you get from that are totally different from the results you get recording on a computer one instrument at a time separately. So that's lost. That's one of the reasons old music sounds different than new music is because it was recorded in a completely different way, and we still record that way. That's one of the reasons we wanted to go to Phillip's and record with Roland. He doesn't have a computer.

You know, we're recording 100 percent analog tape. There's no undo button. You have to live with it, and it sounds different.

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You can't replicate that with a computer, and you can't replicate that over dubbing. So that, I think, is something that Memphis still has and can still contribute. I mean – and also, the one thing that Memphis can contribute is it has musicians that you don't have anywhere else in the world, so you can get a feel here if you're looking for a particular feel, particular sound, you can get it here.

You still get it here in the year 2012. That's something you can't get in Nashville or anywhere else, so Memphis has that to contribute. I guess what I see in Memphis as being sort of a boutique recording center would be the word I would use.

I don't see a lot of huge hit records coming out of here, but I do see great records coming out of here, records that matter that are classic or timeless or whatever. I think Memphis still makes those kind of records and will continue to.

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And you don't have to have a big recording industry to do that.

*Molly:* So looking forward, what would your hopes be for 20 years, 30 years, 40 years?

*John Paul Keith:* Well, I just hope people keep – Memphis people keep making great records and writing great songs and mixing styles and innovating. These are all things that Memphis has always done, and I think Memphis is doing it now. It might be a little sleepy at the moment. You know, things can come in cycles. But I totally believe that Memphis – that cycle will come back around, probably sooner rather than later, and I think there's a lot of good stuff going on here now, and I think there will continue to be good stuff. You know, I – it's been really good for me. I feel like I'm doing the best work I've done here, and I wouldn't have been able to do it anywhere else.

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Memphis has changed the way I play, the way I think about playing. I've learned so much here, and I know I'm not the only one that has that experience here. So I'm really optimistic about Memphis, about the future.

*Molly:* Any more questions?

*Charles:* I don't think so.

*Molly:* Thank you so much for doing this.

*John Paul Keith:* Cool, thank you for having me. I'm flattered.

*Molly:* Wait, were you going to say something?

*John Paul Keith:* No, just I'm flattered to be asked.

*[End of Audio]*