Jody Stephens, 2014

Item Type	Moving Image
Publisher	Rhodes College
Download date	2026-02-15 01:42:08
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/10267/33542

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Interviewer: All right if you can just say your name just to get a sound test.

Jody Stephens: Jody Stephens.

Interviewer: Yeah, sounds good. So today is February 24th and it's an interview with Jody Stephens. I'm Molly Whitehorn.

Interviewer: And this is John Pass.

Interviewer: And so to get started can you just state your name then and your year of birth so it's accurate.

Jody Stephens: Jody Stephens, October 4th, 1952.

Interviewer: Okay cool so start things off can you talk about your childhood in Memphis, growing up in the city?

Jody Stephens: Sure I – well I – grew up over on Leatherwood Avenue over by Overton High School and I talk about neighborhoods and all the kids that were in neighborhoods and how you could field baseball teams and football teams and all kinds of, like, hide-and-seek things and lots of things to do outside

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just with kids in the neighborhood and we were lucky enough, too, that there were enough kids in the neighborhood to field a band who could play instruments and ____ like Tom Eubanks and Wendell Weeks and my brother of course and Jimmy played bass, you know so we could put a band together just out of the neighborhood kids. Kids were everywhere. I went to Colonial Elementary, 1-3, 4-6 Willow Oaks and then back to Colonial Junior High 7, 8 and 9 and then on to Overton High School but I don't know. I used to – also when I was growing up you could kind of do things as a kid that you can't really do alone as a kid now and one of which is on Saturday mornings occasionally in the summer and

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hop on the bus and take the bus downtown. I was, like, in the 8th Grade and just hang around downtown. I'd go through the stores on Beale and every now and then there would be a George Klein kind of event, I think it was called The Place and I don't think I

ever got in because I don't know that I was old enough to get in but it was something that would happen, like, at noon on Saturday or during the day but I could hang out, outside, and it'd be like a Battle of the Bands at the Orpheum from time-to-time or I don't know there was fairly frequently something musically going on downtown and I remember going to – I couldn't go to – Levy's. It was a girls' clothing store but I knew The Raspberries – not The Raspberries but The Gentries – were playing there and I could kinda hear 'em outside. They were up on the top floor of that building, which wasn't very

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high but it was good. It was a great childhood, you know, and I had a great time as a kid.

Interviewer: So could you speak a little bit about your family, like, were they musical or --?

Jody Stephens: My mom not so much but my dad played a little guitar, played piano, sang in the choir. I think at some point he had a little brush with Roy Rogers. I don't know whether he sat in on guitar or played with some of Roy's bandmates or – but it seems like there was something involved there but, yeah, there was either through dad's being in the choir or, you know, there wasn't much Rock 'N Roll. It's they would get their records from *Reader's Digest* and it would be, you know, *Read*

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er's Digest Presents Hawaiian Music or stuff to just kind of play in the background. They would have their bridge clubs so, yeah, dad was and Jimmy and I didn't really get the music bug as it were until The Beatles came around but it was prior to their February 9th appearance on "The Ed Sullivan Show" in '64 but we got into them but that just kind of cemented the whole that sort excitement about The Beatles and you just couldn't – I mean it was just really hard to watch The Beatles without shaking inside and there was some sort of energy that lights you up and even kind of manifests itself in a scream from some people, so.

Interviewer: So you were about 12 at that time.

Jody Stephens: Yeah, yeah. *[Crosstalk]*

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Interviewer: It was on ____ _____ but *[crosstalk]* --

Jody Stephens: Yeah, '64. Well, that was February of '64 so I was *[crosstalk]* --

Interviewer: 11.

Jody Stephens: I was 11.

Interviewer: So when did you first start playing the drums and how did you get into that?

Jody Stephens: I you know just playing drums was kinda the goal and it didn't matter if it had to take the course of playing snare drum in the junior high school band, that's what they did so that's what I wound up doing, play snare in the junior high school band and in the 7th and 8th grades, actually. I wasn't great. I wasn't good at reading music although it's not like it was that difficult but I just wasn't quick enough at it and I'd always wind up being the 4th-chair snare player or 5th-chair, which is good because they would always start with the 1st-chair player and they would play whatever rudiment

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was charted out in front of you and by the time it got to me I could have it memorized, you know? I would just play it really from memory instead of reading the charts but, yeah, I got in. That's how I got in to playing snare drum and then my parents bought me a kit. It might be when I was in the 8th Grade maybe somewhere around there, yeah, that old Ludwig kit that I used actually on the first Big Star record.

Interviewer: Well, speaking about Big Star, can you talk about how the band formed and that all kind of came together?

Jody Stephens: Well, I got – I met – Andy Hummel when I was 13 or around that age and through a mutual midtown friend I would hitchhike, you know? You could take the bus or you could hitchhike and so I was 12 or 13 and I would hitchhike into town and my parents we went to First Baptist Church there are on the corner of Poplar and

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Parkway and I had met up with a guy named Mike Fleming and he and I became pretty good friends and he wound up – my brother Jimmy wound up playing bass in Mike's band. I think they were

called The Chessmen or something like that and Andy Hummel played keyboards in that band so I met up with Andy when I was about 13 and then kind of lost track but reconnected. I'd auditioned for the Memphis State production of "Hair." It was the first college production of "Hair" and I was still in high school and actually passed the audition. My brother and I had a band with a guy named Don McNatt and some other folks and Don McNatt wanted to play the lead role, one of the lead roles, Burger, in "Hair," and he said, "Why don't we audition as a band," and we did. I

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wouldn't have had the courage to, I think, had it not been auditioning for a band so we passed the audition as a band and so I – to make a long story a little shorter – you know at the end of one of the performances of "Hair," Andy Hummel came up and said hello and said, "Hey, were you interested in getting together to jam some with some friends," and I said, "Sure," and I wound up being at Chris Bell's house or his backhouse out there on Riverdale and so that's kind of how that kind of got started. It was good. It was fun. It was Andy and Christ and a guy named Steve Rhea and Tom Eubanks may have been there and Terry Manning was there I think so it was a good.

Interviewer: So how did Alex Chilton enter the picture?

Jody Stephens: Well, Andy, Chris and I became the nucleus of that little musical effort and people would

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sort of come and go and then Chris I think learned that Alex was moving back to Memphis. Alex had moved to New York for a little bit and was looking to move back and Chris was trying to recruit him into Big Star and then I think Alex came to see us in December of 1970. It could be early January. He came to see us at the BFW Club in downtown Memphis and we were playing – I think we were playing – as a 3-piece band under the name Tommy Tutwiler & The Twisters and it was a name that John Dando had come up with, kind of a takeoff on Derrick & The Dominos and I don't think we anticipated any longevity with that name. It was just – it was – fun so Alex joined soon after that and we'd become Big Star.

Interviewer: So how did the name Big Star come about?

Jody Stephens: Well, Ardent Studios was then --

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well I just introduced to John Fry in that period and John's the owner of Ardent and John actually would let Chris and Andy and me and Steve Rhea in the studio after hours. Chris and Andy had their own keys I think, which was pretty cool, you know? We were 17, 18 years old and we had this guy giving us the keys to this pretty amazing studio, kind of state-of-the-art thing at the time and so I've forgotten what your question was but I just wanted to get in the fact that we were kind of – we were – playing around in the studio all by ourselves.

Interviewer: Oh, so the name Big Star?

Jody Stephens: Oh, right, right, right. So Alex joins in and we kind of continue to do that and we're thinking we need a name and I think Alex and Andy and Chris or maybe it's just Andy and Chris went out in the side parking lot and there happens to be a Big Star Grocery Store across the street and

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I don't know – really know – who it's attributed to but I think Chris Bell had grand aspirations for the band and so he probably looked up and saw Big Star and thought, "Hmm, appropriate, you know? It's a go" so we'd become Big Star and our first record is titled *#1 Record* and it's not a reference to our first album, it's our tour position that we had anticipated.

Interviewer: So can you talk a little about how y'all worked together because I know, like, that there was this Bell/Chilton dichotomy and so was it really like that? Was there, like, a lot of tension or was it just *[crosstalk]* --?

Jody Stephens: No, not really, you know? Not for the most part. I mean there were – it – Alex and Chris would – I think they would – probably bring song ideas in and

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then work with each other on them, Andy contributing some. Certainly on the first record Andy contributed "India Song" and may have contributed to other songs on the first record but primarily Chris and Alex and I think it was Chris' idea to do the

Lennon/McCartney thing and it didn't matter whether whey actually wrote a piece of it or not, you know? Both names would go out but I think they probably each contributed something to the songs on the first record.

Interviewer: So what else was going on with this music scene at the time? Were y'all, like, influenced by other artists in the city?

Jody Stephens: Stax artists in a big way for me because I'd gone from being in a British Invasion band, my brother and I, to when Sam & Dave and Otis Redding and David Port

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er and all those folks started – Staples Singers started – releasing – well, maybe not Staples Singers but earlier, earlier Stax things – you know it was you would really get this fever. It would just be this passion to do this stuff because it is so engaging and soulfully both The Beatles and the Stax artists that were coming out and so we put together a Soul band and would do covers from Stax and some other labels but primarily it's "Hold On, I'm Coming" and "Knock On Wood" and that sort of thing so that was a big influence on me. I think later on it seems like it was an influence on Alex but, you know, certainly the British Invasion and those bands – Beatles, Rolling Stones, Led Zeppelin – and Chris was a big fan of Led Zeppelin. Me, too,

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I was a big fan. Ringo Starr got me into drumming and Charlie Watts, all these guys, John Bonham; B.J. Wilson from Procol Harum, all these guys had a lot of character in the way they played. You could kind of identify them within a couple of measures and for me I thought, well, you know, I'll never technically be a great drummer. I could never do a drum clinic and be that kinda guy so I thought maybe developing some character would be the way to go and so I use these drummers as the role model not that I could achieve what John Bonham did but that power and that force that he had, you know, I could try to emulate and stuff and Charlie Watts and they just had this great dynamic feel for what they did.

Interviewer: Can you say a little about the band's breakup and how that happened?

Jody Stephens: Well, that happened over a period

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over a period of years because Chris Bell left the band after the first record and not so much through differences with any of the band members. Chris just I think felt like he would be living in the shadow of Alex because when we released that first record, which is really Chris was kind of the musical leader for that. It's not that Alex didn't make contributions. Of course he did but I think in general Chris kind of steered the production of that record to where it wound up and when that record was released there were a lot of great reviews but they were focusing on Alex because Alex had been in the Box Tops and which, you know, for me was a smart thing to do because it was more or less saying, "You don't know who this band Big Star is but you've heard of Alex Chilton through his singing 'The Letter'

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or 'Cry Like A Baby' or one of his hits," so I think Chris got a little bit of just not wanting to live in that shadow so he left the band and Alex, Andy and I sort of drifted apart for a minute and John King put this rock writers' convention together and Lester Bangs and Bud Scapa and, oh man, Cameron Crowe was there. He was like 17 and John King put it all together and these amazing music writers. There were, like, 100 of them and John King got us to perform because basically Rock writers were our audience. They were the only people who had the album and they were big fans of the band and so

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when we played for the Rock writers, May of '73, I think, it was the first time we'd ever played to a real Big Star audience. Everybody knew the songs. Everybody was kind of a fan of the band but – so there was that and so we got together. We kind of kind of came back together, me, Alex and Andy and to record "Radio City" and did and then Andy started to figure out that this wasn't going to be a career because it wasn't gonna put enough money in anybody's pocket to start a kind of life on their own and start a family and that sort of thing and so Andy quit and went to Southwestern, graduated from there and with an English degree I think and then he went to get an Associates Mechanical Engineering

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Degree and so that left Alex and me and we did the 3rd album together and then shortly after that was done then that sort of lifestyle was not really appealing and because it was kind of a dark time for Alex and so I thought, well, I'll quit and go into something else and finish school and so that's what I did.

Interviewer: So can you tell me a little bit about your involvement with Gold Smog and that time period is like?

Jody Stephens: Oh, yeah, it was just November of 1996 I think. I got a call from Maggie MacPherson and she said – asked me if I was interested in joining Golden Smog and I said, "Who's in the band," and _____ and Jeff Tweedy, Gary Louris

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and Marc and Danny Murphy and Kraig Johnson and I said, "Sure" because I knew most of those by name, anyway. Jeff was in Wilco and Gary and Marc were in The Jayhawks and so it took me about half a second to respond and of course and then I flew up to Chicago and sat in on a couple of songs at that date at – oh, I can't think of the name of the club but Jeff Tweedy's wife either managed it or owned it and so I sat in with them there and we all decided that they could fit and flew up to Minneapolis that January and when we came back down we all came to Ardent for about a week's worth of recording, maybe eight, nine days and it was such a good time. It's nobody's primary project

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so it's everybody can be kind of lighthearted about it and the cool thing about it was it was such a group-participation kind of thing. They kept encouraging me to write a song, which I really didn't. I never got around to that first sort of go-around at Ardent and then a year later we all come back to Ardent or they all come back and we do another week's worth of recording and they start encouraging me to write again and so that was '98 kind of early that year and the Winter Olympics were on and so I was watching the figure skaters and one of the biggest things for them to overcome was a fear of falling and so I sat down and I wrote a song called "Fear Of Falling," you know if you could just get over that fear

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It wouldn't – you know, then things would – things could – work out and you could achieve so much and so I wrote a set of lyrics

and handed them off to Gary and Jeff and they finished the song and, wow, I think we recorded it the next day so I got a song on the Golden Smog record and we finished that recording and I guess it got mixed out in California but we ended up doing some dates after that. We got a two-week run in the northeast and then a two-week run down the coast. That was kind of _____. It was an amazing time. It wasn't – it didn't – make any money on the tours because we had a bus and we had a tour manager and we had folks that set up our equipment for us, and they wouldn't even let me participate because they were real afraid I would hurt my hands or something so – but it was a pretty amazing time and some

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great music that was so easy to fall into and be a part of.

Interviewer: So you were talking about how you became a member of the staff at Ardent.

Jody Stephens: Sure well you know I was – I had worked at Ardent via Big Star as an artist and even as a day guy. I would help stuff albums into envelopes and do mailings and all that sort of thing so I'd done that and then really kind of drifted apart from Ardent in like '75 or '6 and came back to do a record with The Suspicions I guess and then finished up what was then Memphis State and in '84 I was on a 14-year program, started in '70 and finished in '84. I'm an incrementalist. I just – for some reason I just – I get things done a little-at-a-time but hell you can move a

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mountain if just kind of focus and do it a little at a time so, at any rate, got through with that and got a straight gig in sales and was looking to get out of that and turned a résumé in at a radio station, looking for a sales job and had put John Fry down as a reference and so I called him and talked to him. Hadn't talked to him in a couple of years and told him what I was doing and he said sure he'd make some nice things up about me and I think he hung up but he called back shortly after that and said, "Wait a minute we're looking to create kind of a marketing position here, somebody to raise the flag for the studio and solicit business for the studio" and the talent that was there, John Hampton and Joe Hardy and just not to really any great extent Terry Manning because he had somebody representing him at the time but he'd been you know

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pitched Jim Dickinson and some other folks and also to start a production company so – and develop local talent, you know, and pitch it to majors and find deals and so I went and interviewed. I interviewed three times I guess with a guy named Joe Dyer who had a coat-and-tie on and so I wore a coat-and-tie. It wasn't really a coat-and-tie position. I mean everybody wears uniforms and you kind of wear – you wear – the uniform of what others in profession wear and for musicians it's one thing and for guys in video departments interfacing with Federal Express executives and those you wear a coat-and-tie but the studio business you don't so I think and I interviewed with Joe Dyer and I'm not sure, you know? I mean, you know, obviously I wound up with the job. I started in

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1987 but I'm not sure of it. I think John Fry override Joe Dyer, overrode Joe Dyer in terms of my getting hired but it worked out. We – God we – kind of tripled our business in those first few years and one of the great ways to do that is John Hampton and Keith Sykes were developing a guy John Kilzer and they had recorded some demos so I took a cassette and a few cassettes, hopped on the plane and started visiting A&R people at record labels, the folks responsible for signing an artist and I make it sound easy but it's these A&R folks probably get 50 phone calls a day from people wanting a meeting, wanting them to listen to something so you just have to be

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persistent but coming from Ardent was a really nice calling card because they had all heard of the studio and there was already some relationships in place and then having been in Big Star was a nice kind of calling card so some people I called once and I'd get an appointment with some A&R folks, and 1 person I called 25 times and finally got an appointment with him but so – God I keep getting off-point but so – I had John Kilzer's demo tape in-hand and I'm sitting down with people and I wound sitting down with Teresa Ensenat in LA at Geffen Records. Teresa was an assistant to Tom Zutaut who had signed Guns 'N Roses and some other folks and so Teresa said, "Yeah, this is pretty good. I don't know that it's there yet, you know? Yeah, I'll play it for Tom" but that wasn't quite there yet and then so Hampton and --

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John Hampton and Keith Sykes did another round of demos with John Kilzer and got on the plane again and sat down with Teresa and she listened and said, "You know, I think this is it. I think yeah I'll play it for Tom," and she did and they wound up wanting to sign and did and so it – the great thing about that opportunity is that, one, we get John Kilzer signed so that's wonderful for John. Two, both Tom Zutaut and Teresa Ensenat both liked the way Keith Sykes and John Hampton were working with John Kilzer so they got to produce the record and they got produce the record and they got to produce it at Ardent and then we had that pleasant ukulele music. *[Laughter] [Crosstalk]*

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God I meant to turn the thing off. *[Crosstalk]* So John Kilzer – so we now have a record deal for John Kilzer and we have production and engineering jobs for Keith and John Hampton and we have studio business and we had the start of a great relationship with the folks at Geffen

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who wound up with a couple of things like Steve Earle _____ who wasn't a Geffen artist but Steve wound up dating Teresa and they introduced him – he got introduced – to Joe Hardy and they hit it off and they did a group called Rock City Angels and Jim Dickenson produced and the next group was Tora Tora that I had shop and actually signed _____ Productions and they were 17, 18-year-old kids with – and – there was a lot of magic to the songs they were writing I think and appropriate for that time and they would put these shows on and Keith – Doug lost his dad's warehouse and they built a stage out of oil drums and just with plywood and they could have all their friends over and drink

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even though most of their kids – friends – were underage because it was at their dad's warehouse and so they had – so I have Tora Tora demos to shop and I go to New York and I sit down with a lady named Nancy Jeffries and Nancy – I don't know, Nancy's probably eight years older than I am and she listened to the band's music and their first comment was, "Oh, I don't even know that I could pretend to like that," and she kept listening and she said, "Well, you know, wait a minute, I'll introduce you to Loric Weymouth and he's in the A&R Department and we'll see what Loric thinks and sign that to Loric because he's Tina Weymouth's

brother, you know, Tina being the bass player for Talking Heads and then

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she was in the Tom Tom Club and so we go to the next office and I play it for Loric and Loric actually gets really excited about it and even to the point of saying, "We wanna come see this band next week" so they're making plans to hope on a plane to come see Tora Tora at their rehearsal place in the warehouse, and so I walked out of their office, walked down to the street and got on a pay phone – it was pre-cellphones – got on a payphone and called Bryan Huttenhower at A&M on the West Coast and I said, "Bryan, we have this band called Tora Tora and it looks like the folks that Virgin are coming, flying into Memphis to see them next week. I'll FedEx you a copy and we'll see what you think." Bryan – I'd established a relationship with

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Bryan because actually Keith sent the John Kilzer tape to no one in particular just the A&R Department at A&M and Bryan happened to be the tape listener, kind of the lonely position of tape listener, and Bryan heard it and really liked and wanted to come in to Memphis to have a look at Kilzer so there's another relationship but Bryan couldn't sign him. Bryan didn't have enough authority to sign him but we established that relationship. I'm sorry all this is so disjointed.

Interviewer: No, no.

Jody Stephens: So I get Bryan on the phone. Bryan says, "Yeah, no, no, FedEx me a copy and we'll do it" so the next day Bryan gets the tape and flips, loves the band so Bryan and maybe one other A&R person, A&M person made plans to come see Tora Tora at Zero and so we have these two record labels coming in and

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the band set up at their little rehearsal place with the plywood on the oil drums and they had, like, 300 fans there, and they start up and people are singing along, know the lyrics and then there's this "Phantom Rider," which is kind of a ballad, you know, kind of a big ballady kind of song and you see 300 BIC lighters go up because it's before they had BIC's on cellphones and you just hold your cellphone and it was amazingly exciting because you knew

that both of those record labels were gonna walk away wanting to sign that band and they did both wanted to sign the band but they – to cut a long story short – they wound up signing with A&M and then the next artist I had was Eric Gales Band, a three-piece, and wound up signing with Ele

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ktra and got a couple of different folks involved in that but that was providing work for Jim Gaines and Paul Ebersol, one of the staff producers at Ardent and Paul was involved with Tora Tora's ____ is John Hampton maybe and Joe Hardy but – so we're getting these bands sign and we have participation and publishing and we get so it's none of 'em are milling million-selling artists but we're generating hopefully career paths for them and we're generating studio work and work for Hampton and Keith Sykes and let's there's Jolene signed to Sire Records, Seymour Stein's thing and then the group

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that I pitched that actually went platinum was Skillet and pitched them to Atlantic Records and a guy named Andy Karp over there and Andy had been following Skillet for a while, had been sitting down and playing Skillet music for him and he said, "You know, I think this record, I think this is it," and so Atlantic wound up signing Skillet and they went from selling maybe 120,000, 130,000 records for us, each release, which was huge for a little, bitty record label like ours to signing their first release was 250,000 to 300,000 with Atlantic and the second was over 500,000. The last record that we did with Skillet together with Atlantic was – sold – over 1 million.

Interviewer: That's awesome.

Jody Stephens: So yeah that was. That was great so I – that's what I got hired to do

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and pretty much do anything, any time, whatever it takes. That's kinda what I do. A lot of maybe diplomacy and being an ambassador and keeping a lid on everything, you know, still soliciting business with the studios.

Interviewer: Okay, cool so you talked a little bit about songwriting earlier. Can you talk about your process a little more exactly, like how you go about writing a song?

Jody Stephens: Well, up until recently I would just write a song or a couple of songs. I know it's under the encouragement of Jeff and I had written a few songs with Van Duren in the mid-'70s and then a friend of mine, Gary, Gary Miguel and I sat down and wrote a song together but it was not

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so much a focused effort and the one Golden Smog song and I get a call to sing some Big Star songs for the Big Star documentary but believe me I'm getting the song right and so it's a vintage theater out in LA and they didn't have a budget to bring musicians so I called up a friend of mine, Luther Russell and Jason Hiller, and we got together an idea anyway to do that but wound up opening for the film at the Grammy Museum and KCRW and Amoeba so Luther's saying, "Hey, let's write some songs together so we can continue to do this and it's not strictly on the basis of doing Big Star songs" and he

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was really encouraging and now when I talk to people in any kind of walk of life in any kind of business you kind of have to be fearless in any kind of creative moment or environment or position and you can define creativity in different ways but it's hard for people to overcome that, being fearless and just throwing ideas out there because you think, "Well, people are gonna think that's stupid or it sucks" or – and then it's – God it's more personal when somebody thinks your idea's not that good, you know? So you really kinda have to be fearless and you have to surround yourself with people that make comfortable being fearless and Luther Russell was that guy for me and he said, "You know even if it's – it can a melody line, it can be a lyric line, it doesn't matter, just

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Call me and I'll let it go to voice mail and you can sing it or say it into my voicemail and so we're 2,000 miles apart or whatever it is out to LA and I'm singing melody lines and lyrics into his iPhone and that's how we got started. I had ideas for a couple of songs, pretty much a verse and a chorus and melodies and we finished those together and then it was just kind of back-and-forth with

ideas even to one point I bought a Cube in a little bookstore in LA and, on it, it had carnival kind of characters. I think it was made to look old. I don't know that the Cube – it may have been 20 or 30 years old but it was just the paper was real kind of ambery and so I just – Luther kept saying,

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"Well, come on, let's write this song about the Cube and those carnival characters and stuff" and I couldn't really come up with anything so I just took what was on the Cube itself, like Fifi, and the picture was a woman's body and she was headless and she had her head in her hand and there were other kind of characters and then just describe 'em and whatever the Cube would say and I sent him all that and then I came across some other things like, well, you know it would be preachers and unbelievers should somehow work into there and some other things and there's El Hoppo the Frog Boy and all these. I mean I kind of Googled carnival folks and there was an actually an El Hoppo the Frog Boy and then learned a little bit about them and how – you know they weren't really freaks, *per se*, they were people that

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per se, they were people that felt comfortable in that situation because they were around other people in similar situations and it became this kind of support community for some of 'em so I thought, "Well, that's kind of a cool aspect of that" in that they were – all the while they're still some mother's child and trying to add some sort of humor now and then so I'd just send this to Luther and Luther would put melody lines to it or even make just preachers and unbelievers into a lyric line and so it was a real kind of collaboration, back-and-forth, between the two of us and we got 12 songs done but I did. I had some regimen to it. I said, "Luther, we need to get together every Monday night on the phone so I have something, some obligation,"

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and so that's what we did so I called him up on Monday night and we had exchanged ideas in that sort of thing.

Interviewer: Awesome so I'm kinda curious what you thought about "Nothing Can Hurt Me," what you think about how it portrayed Big Star.

Jody Stephens: I thought they did a great job. I think they certainly -- they – had to have the heart for it and the passion for it because it was six

years in the making, maybe seven years from the idea. I mean Danielle McCarthy and Winston Eggleston were sitting at the Lamplighter and they said, "Wow, somebody should do a Big Star documentary," and I looked at her and said, "You should do a Big Star documentary," and she was kind off-and-running, called John Fry and she had to have a couple of references. Robert Gordon was a reference and of course Winston

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Eggleston and so it kinda made John a believer and Danielle's a sweetheart and you can tell her heart's in the right place for that, you could tell for that, this thing so even to the point of I think John rented a van, met him at the airport, picked him up and took him to all of these Big Star sights and places and set up interviews for them and then it kinda rolled along and it was this little, bitty project but as they kind of looked at it and the scope of it, they kind of kept ramping it up a little bit and then they did a Kickstarter but I think Danielle and Drew DeNicola and Olivia and the folks that worked on the film did a great job, kind stuck to it and kept making it better and better and I'm grateful for that, you know? How often do you get somebody to spend six years putting a video scrapbook together for you?

Interviewer: Yeah, so

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how do you think there became such a big revival of Big Star and, like, how do you feel about it?

Jody Stephens: I told this story a couple of times but I went out to visit my mom and she's in an assisted-living place called Belmont and her friend was at the table and I said, "Oh, I'm going to Australia to play Big Star's Third live," and her friend said, "How do people in Australia know who Big Star is," and I'm thinking, well, you know, it took 18, 19 years for it cross the pond but it didn't really because I found that people knew about Big Star in kind of the later '70s in Australia and they found out about Big Star because rock writers got those records and wrote about the band and

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then turned other musicians on to Big Star and those musicians liked it and would talk about it in interviews, like Mike Mills and Peter Buck of REM. I still – I played with Mike in Big Star's

Third Live so the folks like that and Bobby Gillespie of Primal Scream and Greg Dulli of the Afghan Whigs and a bunch of folk and, again, The Replacements of course did a song called "Alex Chilton," and that's how a lot of folks got turned on to Big Star and I think it was just some people just shared the music, I mean, in a real kind of analog, real-time way. They would sit down together and share it. There would be a moment and it was like their best-kept secret and I think was Ken Stringfellow or someone said it was like a secret handshake that people would, you know, share

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this thing about Big Star and I mean there wasn't a big marketing campaign around it so it took years so, you know, and it just keeps going, people getting turned on to Big Star and so when you look in the audience at a Big Star show you see 14, 15-year-olds and you see people my age, older folks.

Interviewer: So how do you view the music industry now, like, where do you think it's going? Do you think it'll ever return to its glory days?

Jody Stephens: I don't know. The whole music industry in general is kinda trying to find its way in how it can continue to be an industry and artists can make money because I think it went from a few artists making a lot of money, which I mean there are indeed some positives to that because

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When a record label would have success with an artist and they would sell 10 million records, the label would go out and sign 4 or 5 other bands and they'd have production budgets and the bands would get kind of singing bonuses and publishing companies would give them bonuses and it helped make for a real industry where you could potentially make a career out of it and then it went to – well for Ardent as a studio I guess there are a couple of things. One, bands stopped having budgets. Very few bands have those kind of budgets to at least in their mind afford a place like Ardent. Our rates have come down considerably but – so it – I don't know if you ever read the --

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well it's *The Long Tail*. It's a book about the democratization of distribution of the music industry and how you can get it recorded

because you can now get your laptop and record music that way in your living room or wherever so you can record it, you can distribute it through your Facebook or whatever, CD Baby or – so there are outlets but you don't really make any money doing that, you know? There are tens of thousands of people with music up on the internet now so it's just gotten harder to get anybody's attention but people do but it's still hard to have this kind of success people were having, you know, that -- and that could be way off in these figures but they're at least ballpark,

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you know? 20 years ago the Top 10 albums may have sold 18, 19, 20 million. Now the Top 10 albums maybe have sold 8, 8 or 9 million maybe so it's people sharing music and not paying for it to some big extent but I think now at least with Spotify and online radio stations there's some way to get artists paid for performances and so we'll see what happens. People in some cases have to record in their living rooms because they aren't making any money so there's no budget for the record and in some cases they want a studio experience so they come to Ardent and they

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Have a little bit of a budget and we're usually pretty good about working with people with their budgets so it's – I don't know it's interesting. It's a lots of jobs have been lost in the music industry because kind of that reduced amount of revenue but I mean there are lots of other opportunities, not to paint a gloomy picture or anything but I think we'll kind of work our way through that and find our way back to it, people really being able to make a living at it, you know? The other things that have changed, too, is the price of gas has gone up considerably and accommodations and so bands trying to tour and establish audiences that way, being on the road, it's gotten really tough

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because of the cost of doing that.

Interviewer: Just to sort of follow up on that, being in this space, where Elvis lived for a while and with your career, with Big Star, in the '70s, do you think Memphis, Memphis musicians have a role to play in where the music industry's going? I mean or is it just so widespread now?

Jody Stephens: I think of course Memphis has a role in where it's going, you know? Memphis has continued to do that over the decades, you know, with W.C. Handy and the Blues folks and Furry Lewis and I – the Stax folks and certainly Sam Phillips and the folks over at American Studios and Stax and John Fry at Ardent and, yeah, and it's – it's

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you know, even – you know, I can't think of – Skillet really was borne out of Memphis and Ardent so there's a pretty big act there and Andrew VanWygarden with MGMT is out of Memphis and of course there's the Three 6 guys and Yo Gotti some other folks and a lot of indie artists that are out there and far beyond the borders of Memphis and so, yeah, I think we definitely have a role to play and we still make a really good impression on people being from Memphis. I met McCartney in 1978 and he asked me where I was from and I said, "Memphis," and he was, "Ooo, you're from Memphis?"

Interviewer: *[Laughter]*

Jody Stephens: So.

Interviewer: That's cool, are we good?

Interviewer: Mmm-hmm.

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Interviewer: All right.

[End of Audio]