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Linda Luchessi, 2013

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Molly Whitehorn: Okay, could you just please state your name and year of birth for the record, if you don't mind?

Female: My birth?

Molly Whitehorn: Year of birth.

Female: Year of birth?

Molly Whitehorn: Yes.

Female: How old I am?

[Laughter]

Molly Whitehorn: Just for the record. You don't –

Female: Is this a joke?

[Crosstalk]

Linda Luchesi, 1947.

Molly Whitehorn: Just to start off, can you talk a little about how you remember Simply Grand Music, when it was first started and what it was like back then?

Female: When it was first started, it was Sounds of Memphis, and my father and two other men, Paul _____ and **Stan Kesler** started in it, and I'm just finding out lately the way they built the studio was with the money from "Woolly Bully." When it became the hit record, they built Sounds of Memphis, and that's how it all began.

[0:01:00]

Molly Whitehorn: So, how did the publishing wing come about?

Female: The publishing wing was Beckie Publishing Company, and over at Sounds of Memphis, eventually it became my father's. Everybody wanted out of the music business kind of one by one, and he kind of got it, you know, it became his, and different people **ran it**, like **Dan Greer**, the Ovations were there, Barbara and the Browns, which was one of my favorites, and, oh gosh, so many. But Beckie was the publishing company, and Sounds of Memphis also was a publishing company, along with Il Gatto, and they started two labels, which was X-L and Pen.

[0:02:02]

It all began in the late '50s, and, in 1962, it was incorporated. Then, **Mike Curb**, who you all are familiar with – what year was _____, 1971?

Male: I think it was –

Female: I think '71.

Male: – **yeah**.

Female: They did a joint venture. It was MGM and Sounds of Memphis, and Mike Curb wasn't but 19 years old, and I remember meeting him because if he was 19, I might have been 15, and he was president of MGM Records, if you can imagine, and he was a musician. That's how he got started. When they formed the joint venture, that's when the Oventions, George Jackson, Louis Williams, all these people became involved, Dan Greer.

[0:03:14]

When you start a company like that, you have the company but you also have your publishing companies, too. So, Beckie is the one that's known for most of the publishing, and then, in 1982, when I bought – my father sold the studio, so I came in and bought the publishing company and all the master tapes, recordings under Simply Grand Music. I kept Beckie Publishing because the name, it's so well known in the music community outside of Memphis, and so then I started another publishing company called Memphis Town Music, and that was for ASCAP writers.

[0:04:11]

Simply Grand and Beckie are BMI companies, and recently we started a **wing that will host** the SESAC writers, and there was something else I was gonna tell you. Oh, we started a label, too, our Simply Grand Music record label. I've done a lot with my labels I bought from my father, X-L and Pen, because that's where all the older – I feel like I have two catalogs, the older one and what I call the newer one. The newer one has a lot of country music, still some soul music, and pop, all kinds, rock, heavy rock music, whereas the older catalog is mostly Memphis R&B and soul, and it's a great catalog.

[0:05:17]

I would say that the older catalog is right up there next to Stax in terms of the music. In fact, most all the people that recorded at Stax recorded at Sounds of Memphis, too. I can't think of one that didn't.

Male: Where was the studio?

Female: On **Rayner** Street, which is off **Lamar**.

Male: Do you have any memories of being at the studio?

Female: I do, from the 1980's. We took a lot of pictures, too. I have memories when I was a child going to Sam Phillips' place a lot, and I've been told that my father's first studio was near Sam Phillips on that street. I want to say it's **Marshall**, but I'm not –

[0:06:07]

Male: That's right.

Female: – is that it?

Male: That's right.

Female: That it was in one of the warehouses that's there. Now, when this lady told me that, I thought, "That sounds familiar," but I was so young. But I grew up in this business. He was always bringing Bobby Wood records home. Bobby Wood just got a note on Beale Street, and he's in Nashville now, and played piano on Garth Brooks and all the huge country stars, and a songwriter, wrote a lot of songs for Garth, as well.

Male: Can you talk about, and you mentioned – so it's the publishing company that sort of leads to the studio, I guess, is that correct?

[0:07:00]

Female: Right.

Male: In the early '70s, you talk about this partnership with MGM. Do you know how that partnership worked? Where –

Female: I do –

Male: – were things recorded, what was housed where?

Female: – because I have all the old contracts _____, and I would be happy to send **Molly** a sample, a couple of pages of the old contracts –

Male: That would be great.

Female: – where she could see my father and Mike Curb’s signatures, and she could put it on the site.

Male: That would be wonderful.

Female: – because I have all of those. What it was is their mutual friend, Eddie Ray, who is still living, he’s a friend of mine today, he gave Mike his first break, and he introduced dad and Mike. Mike liked what dad was doing, dad liked how Mike was such a young entrepreneur, and they decided to form this joint venture because Mike loved George Jackson.

[0:08:11]

He wrote “Old Time Rock and Roll,” and he just loved that guy, and Eddie told me the other one he liked a whole lot was the Ovarions, Louis Williams, because he sounded so much like Sam Cooke. That time they started, they had – you and I have had numerous conversations, and they had so many more artists than what we’ve talked about. I can send her a list of those, if that would be helpful to you –

Male: That would be wonderful.

Female: – because some of them became quite successful. Needless to say, “Wooly Bully” and Sam the Sham, and “Little Red Riding Hood” were by far the biggest, but the Ovarions did quite well, too.

[0:09:02]—CUT ONE-----

Molly Whitehorn: So, growing up, did you always know you wanted to take over the business, or did you –

Female: You know –

Female: – _____?

Female: – I didn’t think my father would ever let me, because I grew up in the ‘60s, and all he could think about was sex, drugs, and rock and roll, and he did not want us getting involved, and he knew I loved music, I always did. But then, as I got older and we began to be able to talk and communicate and like each other, I was living out west in Colorado and Washington State. My mother developed breast cancer, and my father wanted me to come home and help her out, and of course I wanted to. He said, “If you need work, I’d like for you to take over the studio.”

[0:10:03]

He had some guys running the studio who were less than favorable. They were taking advantage of my father and another investor, and, when I saw what was going on, I just fired them both and got new people to get involved.

Molly Whitehorn: Okay, so when you took over, what artists were working at the studio?

[Side Conversation]

Female: At that time, we started with new artists. I'm trying to think. Sam the Sham was still coming around, and we recorded 21 new songs of his, and who else was? Oh, we recorded – some new people were a guy by the name of **Demetrius**, who went on to get a deal with Motown, and just this year he died.

[0:11:09]

I think he had heart disease. Then, we had an artist by the name of **Tekelia Kelly**, and we had high hopes for her, but she got married and had children and it sort of ended her career at that time. Now she's trying to restart it more as a jazz singer instead of a pop singer. Then we worked with a group here in Memphis called The Crime, and **Ransom** was a rock group. Can you think of who else was out of Memphis?

Male: _____ **Michelle**.

Female: Oh, _____ **Michelle**, she was a Memphis artist who was part of the older era and the newer era, and she was doing quite well. She recorded with Willie Mitchell, as well as with us.

[0:12:05]

Molly Whitehorn: So, who are some of the artists that you're working with today? I know you talked a little bit about Ciera Ouellette.

Female: Ciera, by far, is one we have high hopes for right now. We've been meeting with, I told you, Universal, Warner Brothers, **Major Bob**, and a man by the name of Pat Higdon, and Dale Bobo, too, who is with Big Deal Music, and everybody is showing some interest in Ciera. They're having her come to Nashville to co-write with their seasoned writers, and we'd love to break her out in Memphis, but the deal will come from Nashville more than likely.

[0:13:00]

-
- Molly Whitehorn:* So, how do you find talent you want to work with now? Do you seek them out?
- Female:* God, it finds us on our website. It really does.
- Molly Whitehorn:* Is that what happened with her, like she sent you in some stuff she had done?
- Female:* A guy I knew from Oxford, Mississippi introduced me to her, and what's so awesome about her, she has a unique, different voice, and some of the songs she's been recording lately, they're from some writers in Nashville, and one guy she co-wrote with. In fact, **Brandon's** been putting that together **lately**. Then another one I'd like to mention is a Memphis artist by the name of Kris Acklen. Do you all know him at all?
- Molly Whitehorn:* No.
- Female:* He performs all around Memphis, and we work with him, too. In fact, tonight, which show is Kris and Ciera gonna be doing?
- Male:* Delta Fair.
- Female:* Delta Fair. At what time, 7:00?
- [0:14:01]
- Male:* At 7:00.
- Female:* Okay, and then we have another one, **Ruthie Shaffer**. In fact, her father is a professor at Rhodes, in English. Did he ever come up to you and say hi?
- Male:* No, not _____.
- Female:* He said he's going to –
- Male:* Okay, yeah, yeah. **He's** –
- Female:* – because he came over to my house.
- [Crosstalk]
- Molly Whitehorn:* Oh, okay.
- Female:* Do you know him?
- Molly Whitehorn:* No, I don't, actually.

Male: He's an administrator **now** –

Molly Whitehorn: Oh, okay.

Male: – _____.

Female: Yeah, I thought he was _____ **up there**, and his daughter is really, really unique and good, and she goes to school – is it St. Louis, Missouri – so she's out of town right now, but a very different voice. In the summers we have a rock group. They're in the process right now of working with a new producer kind of changing their image a little bit, soften it from hard rock to a little bit softer rock, not too soft but a little softer.

[0:15:04]

Molly Whitehorn: So, what are some of the projects that you're the most proud of that you've gotten to work on or that your company has worked on in the past?

Female: In the past, I would say – let me mention Dan Greer is the latest CD we've had come out. We did a record deal with Ace records on the older catalog, and we've put out about 15 CDs with Ace of all the songs from the early '60s on to the middle '80s, and then, since that time, we've put them out ourselves through the Orchard on iTunes and Amazon. I think I'm really proud of the work I did with **Erma Shaw**.

[0:16:00]

I was really proud of the work I did with Tekelia, and now I'd have to say it's Ciera. I feel very strong, and some of the older people, Barbara Brown, by far. She sang at the Apollo _____ Chicago, and she was at Stax, too. It took me years to find her. People kept calling me saying, "Barbara Brown," and I finally found her through BMI. She was living outside of Chicago, and, once I got to start talking to her – she died last year. I hated her dying. At least she got to hear all of her stuff. Her grandchildren were saying, "Grandma, your records are on iTunes," and this was like 40 years had passed, so I was proud of that. She made quite a bit of money from that, too.

[0:17:06] **CUT TWO**

Molly Whitehorn: That's awesome. So, can you explain how and why Simply Grand Music decided to move to Nashville, and what that process was and how you –

Female: Okay, we –

Female: – _____ –

Female: – didn't move to –

Female: – or expand to Nashville?

Female: – expanded. The reason for that is because all of the big record companies are in Nashville. They're either in Los Angeles, New York, or Nashville. Nashville is the closest place to us. My music attorney is in Nashville, and one of my accountants for artists, the older artists especially, he's in Nashville, and they work with some of the major stars, like Blake Shelton, Miranda Lambert, Reba McEntire, Dixie Chicks. Am I leaving somebody out?

[0:18:03]

Male: Garth.

Female: Garth Brooks. I don't want to leave him out. They're working with just huge stars, and here, you can't go down the block and go into Warner Brothers or Universal, so I set up appointments because they have contacts going back 30 years, and I set up appointments, and, recently, they even let me bring Ciera with me. You can't walk in these doors. If you don't know somebody, you can't get in, and that's why: they're the closest to us where I have contacts and could expand. I don't want to leave Memphis, per se, and move to Nashville, because I feel like I'd love to see us have an artist **currently** come out of Memphis, so I'm trying to get these people in Nashville to – I'd like to be a liaison for music here in Memphis to bring to them, the new music.

[0:19:10]

They're the new sound coming out of here, and I feel, from talking to different younger people who are musicians and artists, that it's a combination of older music with kind of the roots to the older music, with a new rock flare to it, and it's sort of a blend. I think that's what we're gonna see come out of here. It's gonna be a little different.

Molly Whitehorn: So, I guess changing the subject a little bit –

Female: All right.

Molly Whitehorn: – **can** we talk about some of your other hobbies that you're involved with? I know you mentioned photography earlier –

Female: Oh yeah –

Molly Whitehorn: – _____.

Female: – I’ve always had a love for photography. When I moved out west to Colorado, it was in 1971, I believe, or 1970, and my father gave me a 35mm camera at that time – didn’t have digital.

[0:20:11]

I fell in love with the mountains and the streams and just the landscape, and that’s how I became a photographer.

Male: _____ the cabin _____.

Female: Oh, I don’t even know if I should say this, but I will. I lived in a log cabin that was built in the 1880’s, literally. I had to chink in between the logs. It’s called chinking, and that’s where you mix cement and put it between the logs so that you can’t see through it, or air can’t come through, or animals, and we had just a potbelly stove that went up to the top.

[0:21:02]

I’ve got pictures at home. I have a real big picture in my dining room of the cabin. I lived there for four years. It was 14,900 feet up in Conifer, Colorado, and we roughed it. No utilities, no running water, just an outhouse. I didn’t have to live this way. That’s what my father always said, “Why are you living this way when you don’t have to?” I wanted the experience. I was reading _____ and books like that, Ansel Adams photography books, and poetry by these guys, and Thoreau really inspired me from Walden Pond, that I’d like to see what that was like, and so me and another girlfriend did that, and we cut all our own wood and split it, and had our own firewood and had to go up the mountain to get water where it came out of the top of the stream.

[0:22:11]

The worst of the whole thing is an outhouse. I’m not gonna lie **about that**. When I moved back to Memphis, I was glad to see a bathroom. But then, I moved to Washington State and lived near the Hoh Rainforest, which I think the Hoh Rainforest, you might know, is one of the – there may be two rainforests left in the United States, and the Hoh – H-O-H – is one of them, and that was gorgeous, just gorgeous. I’ll tell you what broke my heart lately, Yosemite catching on fire. I’ve spent many days and nights in

Yosemite, and that just has been breaking my heart every time I see it on the news.

[0:23:01]

Have you all ever been? Those trees, those massive trees, they can never be replaced, never, ever.

Molly Whitehorn: So, reading your bio, it also said something about how you like to write children's books.

Female: I do. I didn't bring a book, did you?

Male: No.

Female: We forgot. It's called *Elmer the Elf*. I gave you one, didn't I, for your children?

Male: I don't think you've ever given me one.

Female: I will give you one.

Male: I'd love that, yeah.

Female: We'll be due for lunch soon.

Male: We will, yeah.

Female: It's called *Elmer the Elf*, and it's taken from one of the old songs, and I hired an artist out of Denver. The storyline is taken from the song. It's me coming up with the concept, but the storyline comes from the song, and the artwork is my direction and this guy drawing it.

[0:24:04]

It's really cute. I'll see to it you get one, too.

CUT THREE at 24:08

Molly Whitehorn: Okay, awesome. So, speaking of writing, have you ever been a songwriter yourself?

Female: That's how I got in the business. I was just thinking I left the biggest part out. That is how I got into it. I wrote poetry, I had several poems published, and, when I moved back, my father knew I was a writer, and he said, "You know, you could probably turn

those poems into songs and run the studio at the same time,” so for five years, that’s what I did. I wanted to point out, in my publishing company we have some famous songwriters from Memphis and Nashville. Bob McDill is one of them. He was ASCAP writer of the year for, oh, maybe four or five years in a row, even **recently**, and, like I said, Bobby Wood is a famous writer.

[0:25:08]

Dan Greer is a famous producer. George Jackson, they don’t come anything more famous than him. I think he’ll go down into the Hall of Fame one day, if I have to be the one to nominate him, because he should be. He wrote for Aretha Franklin, he’s written for everybody in soul music. But that was my first love.

Molly Whitehorn:

So, since you’ve been involved in different parts of the music industry, what’s your favorite part that you’ve been involved with, like what’s your favorite part of the whole process?

Female:

I’m gonna tell you, right now it’s meeting younger people and seeing what they’re all about, because I think it’s time for a change, especially in Memphis, because I think all the older people saw a heyday, and that heyday is over with.

[0:26:14]

Some of the musicians are still alive and they’re great. We have some of the best musicians in the world, I believe that with my whole heart, but now we have younger people that are into a different type of music. It’s more individualized. They don’t feel like they have to be all pop stars to make it in this business. They feel like they can do what they feel inside. Some of it is a lot of folk influenced, some of it is hard rock influenced, some of it is R&B influenced, rap, but it’s a mixture.

[0:27:01]

People who are doing it their selves, putting it on iTunes and selling it, not making a lot of money – digitally, you’d have to have a major success to get any big money digitally. You don’t get paid that much.

But I think this music is growing, and, in Memphis, I think if we could get the younger people on the boards and welcome a change, and bring in people like Brandon, like some of you here in this room if you wanted to, John especially, and Kris Acklen, Ciera, bring in these kind of people, the **summers**, who are younger

people – Ruthie – they could bring in these younger people who are trying to do it all by their selves. It’s hard to do it by yourself. It takes a lot of money, a lot of money, **that’s the bottom line.**

[0:28:05]

The most fun I had was like last night negotiating with this company in California, the **Music Supervisor**. I’m on the phone, Brandon’s on, he’s doing most of it, **Brenda** is on the phone, and we’re working against all these huge – the girl sent us everybody she sent an e-mail to, and some of them are topnotch publishers with huge catalogs, and there we are. We’re not as small as we think we are, or as small as some people in Memphis seem to think we are, because we’re up there with the big publishers, and we’re talking to them about our songs, and it’s gonna take a few days but we’re in there. I like doing that. Negotiating is fun.

[0:29:01]

Molly Whitehorn: Yeah.

Male: That was sort of a wonderful portrait of hope for the future in Memphis. I’m curious as to what would you like people to know about your business and your father’s business and its place in Memphis music, because it’s a story that’s not told as much –

Female: It’s not told.

Male: – as the other stories. So, what would you like people to know about your family’s involvement in –

Female: That we started –

Male: – _____?

Female: – when Stax started, John Fry started Ardent, Sam Phillips – because dad and Mr. Phillips were real close, and in fact, I have paperwork showing where he started the Grammy’s here in Memphis, and I’ve heard other people say they did, and I’m thinking, “Well, do they have this corporate paperwork in their **minute** books? I don’t think so.”

[0:30:00]

These are the original minute books. So, I feel like it was probably dad and Sam Phillips, and maybe a couple of others, but that’s what I’m saying. Well, they all started at the same time. I feel like Sounds of Memphis catalog is right up there with these companies,

and I hope I'm not leaving somebody out. Sun, Sam Phillips,
Sounds of Memphis –

Male: American –

Female: – American –

Male: – _____.

Female: – Studio, Stax. I don't want to leave John Fry's studio out, either,
Ardent.

Female: Royal.

Female: Royal.

Male: _____.

Female: – Willie Mitchell, I always talk to him many times. I hated to see
him die. Are you thinking about the two museums **that have**
approached us, because I haven't told John?

Male: Oh yeah, Rock 'n' Soul and Stax.

Female: Rock 'n' Soul wants us to meet with them next week, the museum,
and Stax – this is kind of strange.

[0:31:05]

Stax, those people want to talk to us, too, which we're glad, don't
get me wrong, but they hired a guy in California, **Rick Clark**, who I
already know, he used to live in Memphis, but they hired him to
talk to us here in Memphis to be in the Stax museum as one of the
top studios from back in those days. So, Brandon and I have really
created a lot of noise, and John has helped us by you guys being
here. So, I want them to know we were right up there with them, I
mean everybody that passed through one's doors was at Sounds of
Memphis, and "Wooly Bully" was probably one of the biggest
records to ever come out of Memphis.

[0:32:00]

I sold it to Sony a few years ago, about five years ago, the
publishing side. I still own the production side, that's part of the
original master. I also own a new master to "Wooly Bully."
That's all part of Simply Grand Music now.

Female: So, do you think we'll ever, like Memphis will ever have that industry that we once had, you know, in the heyday of Stax and Royal and –

Female: It'll be –

Female: – _____?

Female: – different. I'm trying. I'd like to see at least a couple of these companies from Nashville work with some of us, not just me but some of us, here in Memphis. They'll let me bring things to them, and right now the only thing they're showing an interest in is Ciera, and they're showing a little interest in Kris Acklen, too, so that's been good.

[0:33:01]

I haven't shown them Ruthie yet, but I think, because her voice is so different, I'll see some interest there. All it takes is one. If one of these artists starts making some noise, then they'll want to hear what's going on in Memphis.

CUT FOUR at 33:20

Male: I have a question sort of related to that, taking an artist to Nashville. One of the common narratives is that in Memphis, especially in the recording heyday and continuing now, is that point you brought up, it's so individual, right? I mean you could just sort of do what you want to, and in Nashville there is a system of things. Is that your experience, too, or –

Female: It is.

Male: – is that not true?

Female: I think what's going on there is a real kinship with each other. People are trying to help each other. Everybody knows what everybody is doing, and they say, "Oh, that's great, that's great," and they're all helping each other.

[0:34:03]

If I tell them, I said to them, "Garth Brooks' **founder** has taken an interest in Ciera and has her writing with one of his topnotch writers," this other guy who has two of the biggest writers in the business, country market, he says to me, "Oh, he's got Ciera writing? Let me give you a couple songs for her to listen to, and, if she likes them, we've got a writer here she can write with, too,"

and it all is like a domino effect. That's how it went, whereas here, it's like it doesn't seem like the right hand knows what the left hand is doing. There is a clique here, I feel, that they know what each other is doing.

[0:35:00]

We don't seem to be a part of that clique. I'm not really a clique person, that's not what I like to do. I like good music. I'm still in the business now because I know that I can help these people get a deal, so I'm not really thinking about myself anymore as much as I am how do we save Memphis music and grow at the same time? Did that answer your question or not?

Male: No, that was wonderful. I was just curious, as –

Female: It won't go back –

Male: – no, no –

Female: – _____.

Male: – no, no, that's great. The thing I was asking, though, is that when – all right, so when you take Ciera to Nashville, this is just something you hear, right here, is that –

Female: Okay.

Male: – there's a difference in Memphis and Nashville, and it's something we kind of hold in Memphis is that we don't conform here in Memphis, right?

Female: Yes.

[0:36:00]

Male: So, when you take Ciera to Nashville, do you find that you sort of have to do it the way they want, like in the songwriting and production and things like that, or is there a lot of room for individuality even in Nashville?

Female: A lot of room for individuality –

Male: That's good to know, yeah.

Female: – a lot, and it's laid back, very laid back. Now, they're professional. They want these demos to be professional, and I like that. I like what they're doing, so far. Now, some of these

contacts I've had for a long time, and the people I took Ciera to meet, they're in the business of making deals. Now, one of our songwriters, Paul Compton, he's a very good songwriter, I've known him all my life practically, now he went to Nashville; he didn't have the same experience that I had because he didn't go with me.

[0:37:06]

He went with a friend of his, and found they couldn't just walk in people's doors. Well, it's not like that anymore. You do have to have a meeting set up. I tried to tell him that before he went, and I think he thought it was still like it used to be years ago, but he found out it wasn't. Here, sure, you can go in everybody's doors, but I don't know who's gonna help you, except us, and I hate to be egotistical about that, but I'm gonna be honest with you.

Male: Yeah, Universal _____ all of these people, these major labels that she's going to, consider Simply Grand, like they don't hear from anybody else in Memphis –

Female: Yeah.

Male: – so they –

[0:38:01]

Female: We're the only one –

Male: – _____.

Female: – they're really talking to. They've talked to some others, but until they heard Ciera, they hadn't heard anything that caught their attention.

Female: So, looking forward for Memphis music, are you hopeful about it, like do you think it's gonna –

Female: Oh yeah, I –

Female: – improve?

Female: – really am. I think if I wasn't hopeful for it, my father would be doing _____ from his grave, like, "You better be hopeful," you know? I am. But one thing I see happening, Ciera's voice is very R&B soulful, like Etta James type of voice, but it's also very country, like who is it they compared her to?

Male: Patsy Cline.

Female: Patsy Cline, and she's got this roughness, like Janis Joplin.

[0:39:02]

Now, I could see something like that changing the face of
Memphis music, so it's not gonna go back like it was once but it'll
be something new.

[End of Audio]