



## Don Schlitz, 2010

Item Type	Moving Image
Publisher	Rhodes College
Download date	2025-03-23 07:54:21
Link to Item	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10267/33728">http://hdl.handle.net/10267/33728</a>

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*Emma Fiandt:* I'm Emma Fiandt, and I'm a junior at Rhodes College.

*NeNe Bafford:* And I'm NeNe Bafford, and I'm a senior at Rhodes College.

*Emma Fiandt:* On behalf of the Crossroads to Freedom Project and the North Carolina Music Hall of Fame, I want to thank you for taking the time to share your story with us today. I'm –

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Okay. I am Emma Fiandt, and I'm a junior at Rhodes College.

*NeNe Bafford:* And I'm NeNe Bafford, and I'm a senior at Rhodes College.

*Emma Fiandt:* On behalf of the Crossroads to Freedom Project and the North Carolina Music Hall of Fame, I want to thank you for taking the time to share your story with us today. I'm honored to meet you and learn from your inspirational story.

Today's interview will be archived online at the Crossroads to Freedom and North Carolina Music Hall of Fame website.

*NeNe Bafford:* So we're gonna get started with some basic biographical questions. Could you please state your name for the record?

*Don Schlitz:* I'm Don Schlitz. I'm from Durham, North Carolina, originally. I was born August 29th, 1952.

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*NeNe Bafford:* Okay. Could you tell me about the neighborhood you grew up in?

*Don Schlitz:* Well, I grew up in a working-class neighborhood in West Durham. My mom was a lifelong resident of Durham, and my dad had grown up in Ohio. He moved to North Carolina when he joined the Marine Corp, and met my mom at Carolina Beach. Legend has it, the way I heard it was on the first day he told her that he was gonna – it was a blind date, and he said, "Well, I'm gonna marry you." And she thought, "Yeah, right."

He had to go back to Camp Lejeune the next day. And momma spent a week down at Carolina Beach and came home, and there were a stack of letters from this young Marine. And that was my dad and my mom.

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*NeNe Bafford:* Okay. Could you tell me how – what was it like to grow up or how your neighborhood – growing up in your neighborhood?

*Don Schlitz:* It was a great time. I lived – I had a Norman Rockwell family. My father was a policeman. My mother histology technician in the pathology department at Duke Med Center. We called it Duke Hospital back then. It's where I was born.

And we had a succession of homes as they saved up and our family grew. I have a younger brother and a younger sister. And it was a time where kids could get on their bicycle and ride across town. Durham, I think, had about 89,000-90,000 people at the time. It was a pretty small town compared to how it is now.

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And I would ride on my bicycle. I went to Powe schools. Went to EK Powe, George Watts, Brogden Junior High, and Durham High School – same schools my mom had gone to 22 years before. I actually had a lotta of the same teachers. She had been a very, very good student, which meant that I had to be a good student, or had to answer to her and her teachers, who were my teachers.

It was a wonderful time to go to school. A lot of my classmates were sons and daughters of either Duke University grad students or professors or medical students. They were very bright. And that was my peer group, very smart kids. We were interested in the same things everybody else were, the other gender and sports and hanging out and seeing what we could get away with.

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They were just very bright people, and it was a time of wonderful ideas. It was, of course, growing up in the '60s, a time of great change. And when – and in Durham, which was a wonderful multicultural city, and exciting things were happening in Durham, one of the first places where the Kresge's and the Woolworths downtown where my grandmother used to take me to have a ham sandwich. And we'd ride the bus downtown.

Well, suddenly something was happening that I didn't understand with being four or five years old and people were – students were

coming in and sitting at the lunch counters. There was a place we went to that actually closed because –

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I didn't know why at the time. Said, well, that's just things were. And then you started realizing that as you get older, that I was witness to when there were whites-only water fountains and whites-only restrooms. And I had schoolmates who were the first people of color to come to that school, ever. And the really brave people – brave little kids – we didn't know. And I got to grow up with those people.

It was a wonderful time. That was just a wonderful time. And by the time I was in Durham High, Durham High Bulldogs, I graduated – was graduated in the class of 1970, we were a more diverse school. Not to the point where we needed to be –

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but we were on the road. And it was a great, exciting place and time to grow up. And I played baseball and I played basketball and I lived and died for Duke basketball, and had a girlfriend. When I was I guess 16, wrote really bad poetry. And when I was 16 – well, yeah. Let me back up for a second.

When I was about 11, I'm growing up and music's great. Now back then, the radio had everything on it. You could hear Frank Sinatra and then you heard Jim Reeves and Dean Martin, and then you'd hear a whole lotta Motown and you'd hear a whole lot of – you'd hear Tennessee Ernie Ford singing. And then the Beatles happened, and the Rolling Stones, and the British invasion. And pop music came over.

[0:07:00] CUT – begin Segment 2

And they amalgamated all these different types of music – oh, and Johnny Cash and Bobby Darin, and the people coming out of Nashville. We didn't really separate music into a million little shards the way it is now. I grew up with all that music. And I've lived and died for the radio. The little six-transistor radio that I would sleep with under my pillow.

Then I started writing bad poems and starting playing guitar when I was about 12 – actually, I was able to – my hands were big enough when I got 15, to start making chords and started trying to

write songs when I was 16 years old. It was Valentine's Day, it snuck up. I had girlfriend, didn't have any money. I worked as the kid that took tickets the theater. Sometimes – yeah, I don't know if you've ever seen a theater –

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that just had one movie playing at it, but that's what we had back then. I worked at the Northgate Theater and the Rialto Theater. Didn't have any money to buy any flowers or any candy, so I wrote her a song. And it had three chords in it. That was the first song I ever wrote.

And I got what I think was an equivalent number of hugs and kisses, as if I had bought candy or showed up with a dozen of the most beautiful red roses. And I think there something in my head that went off like, "Okay. Somebody writes songs. These don't just appear out of thin air. These parentheses that say, Holland-Dozier- Holland, or parenthesis that say, Linda McCartney, or parenthesis that says Jagger/Richards, or the parenthesis that says Bob Dylan, this means something."

Started writing songs, and started thinking, "This is what I was should be doing." Of course, at that time, I thought –

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I thought that writing songs wasn't just it. You would go and you would be the singer, too. A certain level of uniqueness in my voice prevented that from happening right away. I did not really know anything about singing or performing, and I didn't really ever really learn the songs. I just wrote more. I wrote more, and wrote more.

After Durham High School, I briefly attended Duke University, my hometown school. I didn't live on campus. But I was working outta Duke by this time as a computer operator, a clerk. And so I'd work at night and go to school during the day. Now in all –

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honesty, I missed more classes than one should miss. Did I mention the girlfriend? I blame her. I blame myself. I did not take full advantage of the educational opportunities that were offered. And after three wonderful freshmen semesters, I was at a crossroads, and the crossroads for me was well, I was gonna hang around Durham for the rest of my life. The girlfriend, by the way,

broke up with me. Hence, we will not be mentioning her name.

Or as my boss said over at Duke at the computer center – and this is way before laptops, way before personal computers, way before WiFi.

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This is – all those old pictures you see of people putting up tapes and lifting up these heavy disks and putting in 'em in and reading boxes and boxes of cards, that was me. It wasn't programming. I wasn't Bill Gates. I was just the guy that was in there running the programs for the sociologists and for the mathematicians. It was a great job. It was a great time. I have more computing power in my cell phone now than we had at the computer that Duke, Carolina, and State shared. Amazing time to watch things grow.

My boss out of the computer center shoed up one day over at my apartment on Claredon Street where I was living, and said, "Well, if I didn't have any responsibilities, if I didn't have any kids, if I wasn't married, and I played guitar and –

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"wanted to do what you wanna do, I'd go to Nashville." And about a week later, I got on a bus and my daddy waved and my momma cried a little bit, I went to Nashville. I had \$80.00 and a guitar, and I thought I knew someone who went to Vanderbilt. It was Good Friday, I believe, and when I – 6:00 in the morning when I got to Nashville on the bus.

Walked up to the Vanderbilt campus from downtown. It was way before anybody was awake. I found where my friend lived. Somebody was getting in from a late date, and the first coed dorm on Vanderbilt. And she said, "Yeah, he lives on the third floor, I guess. You can go up in and sit in the commons room," which I did, and out walks my friend, Dennis Bryan, to get orange juice, and looks over at me. I'm sitting over there on the couch with my guitar and my bag –

[0:13:00]

of clothes. He says, "Hey." That dorm kinda took me in for a while, for the rest of the school year. And that was my entrance into Nashville.

I got a job as a computer operator at Vanderbilt. Kept that job for

about five years. While I knocked on doors and wrote songs, I lived in less than palatial surroundings, made a lot of great friends. Lived in my car for even a summer, and wrote a lotta songs and knocked on a lotta doors.

that brings us to Nashville.

**CUT 0:13:51– Begin Segment 3**

*NeNe Bafford:* Okay. Could you tell me a little bit about your family life? Are you married and do you have any children?

[0:13:58]

*Don Schlitz:* My family life now, I am married. My wife, Stacey Schlitz, and I are about to celebrate our second anniversary. I've had a full life, and I am fortunate enough to have three wonderful children. They in age – they're all full-grown now. I have Casey, Casey Wilson-Burke is my eldest son. He's an attorney in California via University of Michigan and UCLA Law.

My daughter, Corey Schlitz-Dixon, is finishing up her last year of nursing school. And the youngest is Pete Schlitz. He lives in Tucson, Arizona, attends –

[0:14:59]

Piedmont Community College. He's a musician. And as I like to say that I have anywhere an attorney, a nurse, and a musician. And so that means someday in the future there'll be the voices of my children saying, "We have the right to pull the plug. I know how to pull the plug, and here's a little song about how it was to pull the plug."

[Laughter]

*Don Schlitz:* They're all terrific. I love them very much. My wife, Stacey, is an attorney in Nashville. She is from Ohio, went to the University of Texas, and went to Cardozo Law and Georgetown grad after that. And she has a firm called Schlitz Law, schlitzlaw.com. And she is also a wonderful singer and musician, songwriter. And we have a wonderful time playing music together. And she's my attorney as well. So I have in-house counsel, which means that if I ever get thrown into the big house and I'm given one –

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phone call, I can call my attorney and my wife at the same time.

NeNe Bafford:

Okay. Now we wanna hear a little bit about – a little bit more about your story with music, and how it intersects with the story of North Carolina. So you said that first got interested in music when you were really young and started writing songs. How did you get into the industry from where you ended up in Vanderbilt – or at Vanderbilt. What was your big break? What was the step from there?

Don Schlitz:

Wow. The big break is a lot of little steps. The learning process of reading and writing and figuring it out, figuring out what worked. There used to be these magazines that would have *Country Song Roundup* or *Hit Song Roundup*. And you could actually – you wouldn't have to go on the Internet to see lyrics. You could get these magazines and see how lyrics were laid out. So you start learning there are forms of songs.

Even if you're sitting in church and reading the hymnal and trying really hard –

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to stay awake, you'll start looking at the forms of the song and looking at the little numbers at the bottom of the hymns and they'll have these numbers. After a while, I think at about eight or nine years old, I figured out those numbers were the numbers of syllables in a particular line, and if it was to have eight, eight, eight, eight, six, six, eight, six, that was the number of syllables in each line.

And, therefore, those lyrics are interchangeable with other melodies. If you look in the back, which was a pretty – I don't know if that's based in European hymn writing or whatever. As I said, my influences were varied. They were terrific potpourri of everything. There's only two types of music. There's good music and there's bad music. And you can either listen to it and feel good about yourself and uplifted, even if it's a sad song, knowing that you're not the only one that ever felt that, or –

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you can feel nothing. I wanted to write those songs that touched people. I found that that worked best when I sang a song that I



wanted to sing. I wanted to sing not from source material where so much of American music come from – or – yeah, it was like writing opera or whatever – writing musical theater, which I eventually did. But writing about yourself and being revealing to the point where that which you are ready to reveal which is most private about yourself, is shared by everybody else. So the most personal songs can touch people. Also, you realize there's like only six songs. There's a history song.

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There is a requited love song. There's an unrequited love song. There is the joke song. There's what I like to call the Guy de Maupassant song, which is the trick ending. And there's the passage of history and wisdom song. That's about it. You can – if you can't find a category for a song out of those six, then quite possibly, you're listening to an instrumental and you have to see what that says to you. *[Laughs]*

So I learned to write. I learned to write by writing. I learned to write by reading. I learned to write by being around a lot of young songwriters who had gravitated to Nashville. It's kind of the post-Kristofferson year, 1973. Kris has just had a huge year, and here's somebody that looked like us. Well, he didn't have a nudie suit on. He didn't have slicked-back hair. He didn't look all show-bizy. He wrote real honest songs.

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“Help Me Make it Through the Night,” “For the Good Times,” “Me and Bobby McGee.” These were songs that we could relate to, that the people of my age at the time – I was 20 when I went to Nashville. Started writing songs like that. Yeah, Dylan didn't seem too weird. He'd gotten a country record and said things in a new and different way. Then you start listening to all the types of music that you'd listened to forever and realize, wow. This is now country if we want it to be.

Smokey Robinson is now country if we want him to be. Church music is now country if we want it to be. The Beatles are now country if we want 'em to be. The Rolling Stones are now – if we want it to be. If we do that – if we do it well and work within certain confines, work within certain time restraints. Go in and get on the radio. That's how you reach people. So you wanna keep it under three minutes 'cause radio's about one thing, selling advertising. So you want people not to change the channel –

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the station I think we call that. And like I said, a lotta things were on one station at a time, so country music, or what we were doing in Nashville, whatever you wanna call it, was amalgamating all these different types of music. And people that loved all these different types of music were all coming to Nashville. We were all trying to write “the best” song. And so was I. And I was watching my friends.

I was living in these \$89.00-a-month apartments. And I was working from 11:00 to 7:00 at the computer center at Vanderbilt, going home, sleeping a couple hours, and then either getting up and writing or going and knocking on doors. And I had all these friends that were getting cuts or they were getting songs on hold, and I would do anything to get a cut. I was just a little bit out there, just a little bit too far out there. Well, I had this one song that this one guy would see him. His name was Bob McDill and he was originally from –

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Beaumont, Texas. He’s – I didn’t realize this at the time, but at that place in Nashville history, this was the person that really was the best a going to work, going to work from 9:00 on Monday morning until 5:00 on Friday afternoon, and sitting and writing. He had been in the military. He had been – he’d worked in banks. And this is how he was determined to do it. This was a great old tradition from Tin Pan Alley, but he brought that to Nashville. You didn’t have to go out and fish.

You didn’t have to go out and be drunk. You didn’t have to be heartbroken because you just wrecked your pickup truck and your dog ran away with your – I don’t know. You didn’t have to do that. You could actually reflect on your life and see things that you shared with everybody. McDill listened to my songs. For a few years, he was the only person who would listen to me. And he said, “Well, yeah.

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“Keep trying. Keep trying. Keep trying.” I had hair about down to here, and you could imagine, 1973-4-5, that wasn’t the look that was happening. I got better. I got better because I got rejected a

lot. I worked at night, so I had my days free. *[Chiming noise]*  
That's probably my telephone \_\_\_\_\_.

NeNe Bafford: Oh, okay. *[Laughs]*

Don Schlitz: It's okay. That means I have to go for an interview now.

*[Laughter]*

**CUT 0:23:36 Begin Segment 4**

Don Schlitz: No. I worked at night, so I had my days free and I'd knock on doors. And I had met people. Go play at a little Writer's Night where you played three songs and then you'd spend the rest of the week wondering about what three songs you were gonna play next week.

One day, I was more or less blocked. I hadn't written anything for a little while.

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And I went to McDill and I said, "I don't really know how to get outta this." He showed me the open tuning. That's where you tune the guitar strings the way there's a bit of a drone going on. Didn't have a car. I walked from Music Row, over on 16th Avenue to my apartment on Fairfax Avenue, and I heard that drone in my head. And I started making up a story that out of the whole cloth – outta nothing. And I got home and I had a LC Smith typewriter, and I typed it up. I had everything but the last verse. *[Plays guitar]* I got home and I wrote it out, typed it up, put it aside.

*[0:25:00]*

A few weeks later, I was sitting with a man named Jim Rushing, a wonderful songwriter. And he was a little bit older than me and listened to my stuff. And I had a stack of songs about like that, and I played on after the other. He said, "What else? What else? What else? What else?" I finally got the bottom of the stack and I said, "Well, I got this one other thing. I don't know how it's gonna end. It's way too long. It's real linear. There's no love interest in it." He said, "Well, play it."

So I sang him what I had of this song and it was five verses and a chorus, story, and – he said, “That’s the one you oughta finish.” Well, I didn’t have any idea how to finish this long little story song. I thought it was gonna take five more verses and nobody would ever touch it. And having written in about 20 minutes, I then spent six weeks trying to figure out how to finish it.

[0:25:59]

And I remembered the stories of O. Henry and Guy de Maupassant, the lady or the tiger, I believe was the one that came to my mind. I thought, “Wow. You know what? You can let people listen and let people decide for themselves.” So I wrote eight more lines and the song was done. Everybody loved this song. Everybody said, “That’s great. Nobody’ll ever cut it.” And nobody did. It took a couple a years. Finally, a publisher Audie Ashworth and Paul Craft got interested in. Audie cut a demo on me, pitched it around. A couple other new artists tried to make records of it. Nobody would pick up mine and put it out, so Audie put it out on his own little label. He produced a guy name JJ Cale. And they were –

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happening big time. And so he puts it out and sends it out to the radio stations and it starts getting some airplay and making some noise. And suddenly, there’s three songs – three records with the same song. I’m still now working as a Vanderbilt computer operator. And a guys signs – comes over here and gets pretty excited about it. And eventually stands outside his boss’ door at Capitol Records and says, “I’m not gonna leave until you let me sign this guy. That man was **Chuck Clud** and he signed me to Capitol Records.

Well, my record came and went of this song. And I’m still working at Vanderbilt and I get a call from my ASCAP representative at Performing Rights Organization representative named – a guy named Merla Littlefield, who all along’s been playing this song for big acts.

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And he calls me one morning on my landline in my little efficiency apartment and says, “Well, Larry Butler, the producer, cut your song on Johnny Cash last night.” The next morning, I get a call, waking up after about two hours of sleep, “Well, Larry Butler cut your song on Kenny Rogers last night.” I’m like, “I love waking

up like this. This is good.”

A couple months later, he calls me into his office, and I go over and see him. And he plays me this song, the record that Kenny Rogers did [*Plays guitar*]. And while the Johnny Cash record came out and about eight or ten other versions came out ahead of it, it was by Kenny Rogers, and the chorus of that song is [*Sings*] “You got to know when to hold ’em, know when to fold ’em, know when to walk away, and know when to run.

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You never count your money, when you’re sitting at the table. There will be time enough for counting when dealing’s done.” So the song that nobody would touch for two years becomes a very key song for the career of Kenny Rogers. He has this wonderful persona which matches it perfectly. So the song that’s too linear, that has too many verses before it gets to the chorus, that has no love interest suddenly is this song. And it was my first song that ever had cut. It was nice little way to get your foot in the door.

It’s not really unusual. I think a lotta people get their entry pass with the best work, or the most recognized work they’ll ever have. Fortunately, that’s not the end of my story.

[0:29:58] CUT Begin Segment 5

*Emma Fiandt:* What’s your relationship with that song today? Do you still enjoy it? Do you – are you glad that that was the first one, or ...?

*Don Schlitz:* Oh, I’m so glad. I love that song. It’s – I love what it says. I was 23 when I wrote that song in August of ’76. I had – I don’t – I can’t sit here and tell you what it means. I can tell you what I think it means. I think it’s a song about discretion, which I think is a lesson that I learned from my parents. By that time, sadly, my father had passed away. I never got to see what happened with me as a songwriter. But totally was supportive, as was my mother and my family.

I am very grateful that I was the person that heard that son first –

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and for all the good teachers that I had, the Bob McDills, the Jim Rushing, the Audie Ashworth, the Paul Crafts, the Chuck Clud, those people were all very important to me. And then to have

someone as wonderful and as gracious as he's been to me over the years is Kenny Rogers, sing that song and to take it to heart and do it in a way that was very radio-friendly, very television-friendly, and also really very TV movie-friendly. It's been real blessing.

What it really did for me is it gave me the freedom to do – to go to work for the rest of my life, which was something that I could have either sat around and said, “Hi. I’m Don Schlitz. I wrote ‘The Gambler,’” which we kinda say as a joke sometimes, or I could say, “Hi. Can I sit down and work here?”

[0:32:00]

The state motto of North Carolina, I don't know if you guys, being from Memphis, know what it is. And I'm probably gonna mangle the Latin. It's esse quam videri. My eldest son was a Latin scholar. It's always spelled videri, but it think it's pronounced videri. In English, it's “To be, rather than to seem.” Yeah. Don't put on heirs. That state motto may seem like a self-serving or silly thing to say, “I'm from North Carolina. And our state motto is to be, rather than to seem. Don't put on heirs.”

[0:33:02]

and it's had a big effect on me. I've tried to pass that along to my children. I've tried to let that permeate my songs and to be plainspoken and not to try and be something that I'm not. I love that song. I do. I play it every night. I'm happy when people sing along. I do it a little bit differently because Kenny's version is so universally known and passes age groups and demographics beyond what you could ever believe, what I could ever hope for.

And I didn't wanna seem like a bad karaoke singer. So I changed it a little bit musically to fit my unique vocal stylings. *[Laughs]* and my limited vocal skills.

[0:34:00]

So a verse for that for me *[Plays guitar]* instead of being up tempo, all major version that Kenny does, if I can just play one little bit of it, *[Sings]* “On a warm summer's evening, on train bound for nowhere, I met up with a gambler. We were both too tired to sleep. So we took turns a staring out the window at the darkness. The boredom overtook us, and we commenced to speak.”

There's a whole lotta walk ups. So I enjoy playing it like that, and

it makes it new and gives something to people that didn't come to hear a karaoke singer.

**CUT 0:34:51 Begin Segment 6**

*Emma Fiandt:* You talked a little bit about North Carolina already, but are there any ways that –

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like what does the state mean to you? Are there any ways that the local music or the local culture have influenced you on a greater level?

*Don Schlitz:* I think the ways that North Carolina music's influenced me is the way it's influenced everybody. I come from the hometown that produced John D. Loudermilk, who – one of the great country songwriters of all time from the town that – the birthplace of Clyde McPhatter, one of the great R&B singers and pop writers of all time from where there was Pettigrew Street and the Blues that happened down there which is rivaled in my mind only by that which happened in Memphis, and possibly New Orleans.

There was a great musical culture. I come from the home state of Doc Watson. Is there ever anyone who was more plainspoken, honest –

[0:36:00]

and the personification of to be rather than to seem then Doc Watson? I come from the home state of James Taylor who took popular songwriting to a – in a personal way by writing about things he felt, touched an entire generation by people walking around saying, "That's about me. Yeah, don't let me be lonely tonight. That's about me." He gave that to everybody.

Yeah, I'm very proud to be from Monique. It's the land of the longleaf pine, and I think there's music in those trees. I don't know. I don't know how and why.

I also believe that – I kid my friends that Tennessee was founded by North Carolinians that just couldn't make it here, like myself.

[0:36:58]

And if they couldn't make it in Tennessee either, they'd go down to Texas. You can look it up.

*[Laughter]*

*Emma Fiandt:* Okay. In what ways do you think that the music you were making at the time affected your generation?

*Don Schlitz:* Wow. To be a part of some of the wonderful singers' catalogs of my generation, to have been in a room and had the opportunity to write – Paul Overstreet and I wrote some songs for one of the great country singers of all time, Randy Travis, to write, “On the Other Hand,” and “Forever and Ever, Amen,” and “Deeper than the Holler.” And Randy and I wrote, “Heroes and Friends.”

I think that changed the course of country music. Randy did, and we got to be part of that because we were going –

*[0:38:00]*

because we were going in not trying to write what was a hit last week. We were trying to write the song we wanted to hear. In fact, “On the Other Hand,” the first song that Randy put out, we were writing another song and we got into a discussion about lines, a couple guys sitting there playing guitars in an office, a little cubicle about seven by seven. It wasn't fancy. And I don't remember which one of us said – we got to discussing a line and he said, “Well, on the other hand,” and the other one said, “There's a gold band.”

And the other one said, “To remind me of someone who would not understand.” This – you're able to do this if you've written a zillion songs and you talk like this, and it's almost a parlor game. But you go like, “Whoa. What was that? We know what that is.” We have a legal pad. We're writing it down. And the song took less time to write than it does to sing. “Forever and Ever, Amen,” came from something that I was –

*[0:39:00]*

courting my children's mother. She lived in California. We were talking on the phone and she said, Casey – who was at that time about two and a half years old said, “Mommy, I love you forever and ever, amen.” I said, “I gotta go.” *[Laughs]* I drove over to Overstreet's house and we sat on the porch and wrote, “Forever and Ever, Amen.”



Tell you the story about how that works. Sometimes you can end up writing a song and doing your best to write a song, and if you trust your co-writer – and I’ve been very fortunate the people I’ve written with – give you an example. “Deeper than the Holler,” was a big hit for Randy Travis.

We were almost through with that song and I knew everything about that song except I had to look up that Paul Overstreet.

[0:40:00]

About 80 percent of the way through that song, I said, “Paul.” “Yeah.” “What’s a holler?” I was a kid from a little town in North Carolina. I didn’t have a holler in Durham. We hollered out the back door, maybe. And that led to other things.

Paul and I wrote a song that I woke up in the middle of the night with this chorus for – and usually in the middle of the night, if you just sit there and you try to say something over and over and over again until you remember it and you’re sure you’re not gonna forget it. And you go back to sleep and sure enough, three or four hours later, you wake up and you have no idea, except the vague memory that you had an idea.

**CUT 0:40:46 Begin Segment 7**

This particular night, I did stumble outta bed and find a legal page and wrote down [*Plays guitar*] the chorus that went, [*Sings*] “The smile on your face –

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“lets me know that you need me. There’s a truth in your eyes says you’ll never leave me. A touch of your hand says you’ll me whenever I fall. You say it best, when you say nothing at all,” which is a song a lotta people sing at weddings. The great Keith Whitley sang that. Then Alison Krauss sang it. And then a fine singer named Ronan Keating sang it. And suddenly, Ronan told me once that – he said – he’s Irish. I can’t do an Irish accent. He said, “Man, I was in Thailand and had 20,000 people that knew every word that don’t speak English.” I’m like, “Okay.

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“That’s great.” That’s the power of music. That’s the power of – to be a small part of that is amazing. I met woman in a parking lot,

and we had the same business management, the same management. And we got to talking and liked each other. We had similar interests in books and she was just – and humor, and just a delightful woman. And we – she was a songwriter and a singer. And she was starting to have a little bit of a career.

We went and wrote some songs, and her name was Mary Chapin Carpenter. And wrote, “I Feel Lucky,” “He Thinks He’ll Keep Her,” “I Take My Chances,” “Not Too Much to Ask,” four songs that were on an album called, “Come On, Come On,” that were all hits. And it’s like, “Okay.” And she’s stayed one of my best friends.

What effect does this have on a generation? I think that music has an effect on everyone. The music that people – that my parents loved, which is not necessarily my music –

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was the soundtrack of their lives. But they would find what they liked in those songs and they would let their emotions go there. They would let their thought processes go there. The people of my generation – before I was a writer, we had the – the music very much reflected what was happening in America. And so we were really working on – the music of my generation, before I was a songwriter, really reflected what was happening in America. And so you’ll have a different type of music than the more “stiffer” music of the ‘50s happening in the ‘60s.

[0:44:00]

In the ‘70s, you can watch what happened with a nation that was somewhat in crisis trying to find an identity. In the ‘80s, you look at music of a me, me, me generation. It’s all about myself. And I was starting to write then. We – that’s about where we came in with writing songs for Randy Travis. Also, a great North Carolinian, named Ronnie Milsap – wrote a song for him called, “Houston Solution.”

Very simple, almost retro country songs, which took country music back from, “The Urban Cowboy,” mode and back into, okay, how simple can we possibly be? How plainspoken can we be? It was based on folk music, based on the Blues, based in the simplest of the simple.

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I listened to my children's music. Don't always understand it. I'm not supposed to. It's not for me. I listen to the music of – where the pendulum swung to the victory of rhythm over Melody, you're like, "Wish I could do that." But it's not for me. My job is to go do what I do, and to reflect – not so much to consciously reflect what's going on at the time, but just to tell the truth about what's going on with me, and to trust that my innermost, most private feelings/thoughts/truths are shared by you and you and you, and everyone, and enough people. And even if it's a sad song, even if it's a song that doesn't seem to have any hope –

[0:46:00]

and I try and have a little bit of hope in everything somehow – there's somebody out there that says, "Hey, I'm not the only one who feels like this." You write an awful lot of songs, and not very many of 'em get recorded. Not very many of 'em ever get played even by me, and I play all the time. I play a little club called the Bluebird. I go out and play events all over the country. There are an awful lot of songs nobody ever hears. That's how it's supposed to be.

There's an awful lotta songs that never make it to the bottom of the page. That paper gets torn up and tossed aside. And a lotta song like Buffy Sainte-Marie once said, when they ask, "What's your favorite song?" she said, "The next one." Yeah. I truly believe you write a lotta songs in order to get to the next song. If anyone ever asks –

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and they constantly, "What words of advice do you have for any songwriter?" one word, "Read." Read, read, read. Become comfortable with words. Become comfortable with the way words fit together. There's music in everything you read. There's music in every conversation you hear. There's music in the silence between the words you hear. In fact, I'm a firm believer that the music is the sound between the notes, and the meaning is the thoughts between the lines that are written.

My job is to stay out of the way, to have good time, to write those six kinds of songs, depending on how I feel that day, and to get onto writing the next one.

[0:48:00] CUT Begin Section 8

Emma Fiandt: Okay. I think that's about all that we have. Is there anything that you wanna add?

Don Schlitz: I'd like to talk to you about Amway.

Emma Fiandt: Okay.

[Laughter]

NeNe Bafford: You got some products you could sell us. [Laughs]

Don Schlitz: Yeah. I have a carful.

Emma Fiandt: Oh.

Don Schlitz: [Laughs] No, I don't. You know what?

Emma Fiandt: How 'bout your current project? Didn't you just put out an album recently?

Don Schlitz: Well, yeah. You can – I – trying to stay current with the times, just like you kids, I have a website, of course. It's donschlitz.com. This is 2010, and for the first time in 30 years, I've went into the studio. I recorded an album of new songs called, "Allergic to Crazy," and I recorded an album of hits called, "Greatest Hits." It's somewhat – it's totally fun to be able to say, "I got a –

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"Greatest Hits album." Now these aren't the ones that you – the singers you heard singing 'em. But they're my songs. They're all my songs. They're not my children. My children are my children, and nothing touches that. It has been a wonderful journey. It's not over. I've had the opportunity to see things I never thought I'd see. I've had a musical on Broadway based on Tom Sawyer. I got to learn how to write from source material.

In doing that, I spent about five years studying musical theater, studying the history of musical theater, studying the history of American music, and becoming a – what the last year has been about for me is one thing. I'll tell you this. I'll try to make this as short as I possibly can.

I had a dear friend in the '70s named Tom Benjamin, and he had a couple hits. And we were living –

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In these little apartments in terrific Americana poet named Tom House that happens to be my cousin, had moved out to Nashville. He was living with me over here where Tom Benjamin and Hugh Moffatt and Gill Frances were living. Also, people came through there, Steve Earl and Townes Van Zandt, and all these guys. We were all living – \$89.00 a month apartments, and that was cheap then. And I was working as a computer operator.

Tom got a few cuts and some songs on hold. I was so jealous. I was so envious. He got a record deal on RCA. And I to go hang out and meet all these people because I was Tom's friend, and everybody kinda liked me 'cause I was kinda quiet – hard to believe – and would sit in the corner and not get in the way, and be polite. That's always – people talk about the politics of the music business. The same Latin root is polite.

[0:51:00]

If you're polite, you eventually get a shot. They wanna hear what you do. Everybody's looking for something good to happen. They weren't finding it me, but they were finding it in my friend, Tom, and my friend, Hugh. And they found it in Steve and Townes.

Anyway, I just kept plugging along. I was kinda the last in line. And when "The Gambler" happened, well, my life took a turn. A lotta my friends, they got some action and then not. Well, Tom went to work at a video archive, the TV news archive at Vanderbilt University. Very famous place back when videotape was all new. They were the people that recorded all the news shows. So if you saw a piece of tape on the evening news, chances were good they had retrieved it from the Vanderbilt news archive.

Well, he always did a class in teaching kids with special needs.

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And he kinda liked it. And he was very good at it. And he had left law school in Nebraska to come to Nashville and be songwriter, for Heaven sakes. And they said, "If you'll study this, we'll pay for your education. And if you can finish your master's, your teaching degree, if you'll each for a couple years, we'll get you your

masters.” Well, it seemed like a good idea at the time I guess to my friend. We kinda drifted apart.

He finished his masters, got his teaching degree and he went and became a high school teacher with kids with special needs, and a basketball coach. And he spent about 15 or 20 years doing that in a little suburb outside of Nashville. And then he and his wife retired from that, not really retired. They found an opportunity to go to Hawaii. He got offered a job out there teaching people how to teach kids with special needs.

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And then they finally said, “Well, you know what? We really need one more degree for you to have this post we want you to have,” so they put him back in school to do this dissertation. He’s no Dr. Thomas Benjamin. Long story short, Dr. Thomas Benjamin is in charge of teaching the University of Hawaii system of students who are learning to teach kids with special needs for that state.

Well, here comes Tom to Nashville. He’s visiting. He and his wife come. I’m going like, “Okay. I’m not sure how it’s gonna be.” We go to the *[Skip in audio]*, and four hours later we look up and we haven’t stopped talking. He’s still my best friend from the ‘70s.

So we get together that night and we decided we’re gonna play some songs just like in the old days when we’d sit around and play. And he’s still writing songs. And sometimes his songs go on for six minutes now and they – it’s like there are certain type of songs that very reminiscent of what he as writing then, and I’m – I’ve kinda gone off in –

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different directions, and I have all these hits to play. This is last winter. And I would play a song – I’d listen to his song and be like, “That’s great. It’s great.” He’d listen to my song and he’d do this. And I thought about it later, and this man whose life had taken on a very different role, who is doing very important work, I said, “Why is he doing that?” And I realized totally why he was doing that. He still loves music. He still loves a song. He could still hear a song for the first time. Part of me had gotten a little jaded by the business. Part of me was sitting in and analyzing a little bit too much. Part of me was not letting music wash over me.

This year has been about me trying to regain what my friend, Tom Benjamin, still has. What my friend –

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Dr. Thomas Benjamin, has in his heart, I'm striving to find. Being able to come back to my home state, being able to examine a life – a body of work a little bit from a distance is helping me do that. If I can walk away from that stuff that I've had a part in creating and sit back and listen to the good work that others have done, and the good new work that others are doing, then I feel like I have a chance at some point in my life to be able to do this again.

*Emma Fiandt:* Okay. Well, thank you for sharing your story with us.

*Don Schlitz:* Thanks very much.

*NeNe Bafford:* Thank you for participating in the Crossroads to Freedom Project. It was nice interviewing you.

*Don Schlitz:* Thank you very much for doing it.

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Thank you very much for doing this for the state of North Carolina. And –

[End of Audio]