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RUDY VAN GELDER
NEA Jazz Master (2009)

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Interviewer: Don and Maureen Sickler with recording engineer Ken Kimery
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Don Sickler: My name is Don Sickler. Today is November 5th, 2011. I am at Rudy Van Gelder's studio in Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey. Rudy

Rudy Van Gelder: Hello.

DS: You were born in New Jersey. Was there music in your house when you were growing up via the radio, or anything?

RVG: Always music, yes. Radio, records, and even my parents were in to music. On my father's side, they were always musical, they always had a piano at home, and all my friends were interested in the kind of music that was happening.

DS: So when did you get interested in recording?

RVG: Well that was all my adult life actually. [My] teenage years, I was always interested in how records were made, I was always interested in the aspect of musicians, and playing what the music was. My friends were the same way. I used to go to the record store and buy records, go home, and figure out how they made them.

DS: So even before that, you, what, got first interested in ham radio?

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RVG: Yes, I was a radio ham in my teenage years, and forward. Always interested in actual electronics end of that: microphones, radio stations, antennas, and receivers. I almost killed myself one day, fixing a receiver, with an A.C. in the back.

DS: So...

RVG: Sorry, go ahead.

DS: It's all right.

RVG: Well, it was just records, music, and radio.

DS: And you, as a ham radio person, how did that work? That was one of the first experiences with audio.

RVG: Well for me, I was never the talker, so it wasn't a question of voice communication. It was how the transmitter was built, how well it worked, and what would happen if I put music on it.

DS: And you were able to put music on it.

RVG: Well, it wasn't legal at the time but I was able. In other words, I was interested in the quality of the audio. And later on I got a little home disc recorder. Actually what happened [was] I got a comic book and on the back page there was an ad, a full page saying, "how to record your own voice." So I wrote away for it, it probably cost a dollar. What came was a cardboard disc with a black surface, just like a piece of cardboard. [It was] Round, with a hole in the middle, and a blank '78 record pressing, 10 inch, with just grooves. So, it was actually a pantograph, if you know what a pantograph is, its one thing controls another. You had this device, which if you played the '78, which has only blank grooves, lower this cutter head on this lacquer disc, on one turn table, and whatever you said came out on the blank disc and the grooves were cut by transferring them from this '78. That was my first recording machine, and you can figure how old I was.

Maureen Sickler: Did you have a microphone?

RVG: No, you actuate the—there was no microphone. How can I say it? There was a diaphragm, which vibrated when it got music. You'd put a radio with a speaker up to it

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and it'd copy the music. You could yell into the diaphragm, which made the needle wiggle back and forth.

DS: That must have been fascinating to see it cut into the groove.

RVG: It was. It was fantastic. The disc might still be in this building somewhere, I don't know how to find it. Anyways, that was the beginning and then the process began to get better.

DS: And at this time, once you actually started to get interested, how did you find equipment? You went to New York to...

RVG: Yeah, I mean, there was nothing commercial, there was no home recording instruments at that time; just the beginning of it. What I used to do, that time in New York City, Cortland Street, was a row of radio stores. And they sold equipment to hams and even to professionals. [They sold] everything from antennas to radio receivers to transmitters, and parts to. So you could go in there and wander up and down there on a Saturday afternoon, and buy all the parts you need to put something together when you went home. I spent many hours, many days, doing that.

DS: And then you were able to eventually go and visit what? A radio station first?

RVG: What happened then, this was later in my college years, I was studying to be an optometrist in Philadelphia. So I went there with some friends and we went into the control room, it was WCAU in Philadelphia. And the whole atmosphere was something that sort of overcame my feeling of where I was. It was something like this, there used to be speakers up there, you remember? That was the control room of WCAU. Anyways, that was the overriding feeling that made me decide that I wanted to be in that, other than optometry. I got a degree and I was in practice in optometry for a number of years, as an optometrist. But overall, my mind was in the recording industry.

DS: And this was when you were going to school in Philadelphia for optometry?

RVG: Yeah, exactly. Yes.

DS: Okay, then the next level from that would be to actually, physically visit a studio, because before then you hadn't...

RVG: What happened was, I would record in my parent's house. And my friends who were musicians, some amateur, some professional, and people in the neighborhood, they would come over and they would ask me to record them.

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DS: And what device did you use to record them?

RVG: I had a, well actually I had two of them, one was actually a Presto turntable, the one that goes around. Actually, there's an arm that goes over the disc, fastens on to the center pin, and has cutter head, and instead of a blank '78 for grooves, it had a threaded screw like a lathe. That's how the cutter would move across and allow the spiral disc to be cut. That's the kind of machine I had to record people. I'd get a blank disc, lacquer coated aluminum disc, record their singing, and give them the result, and they would go home and that's how it started.

DS: And they would play that on a?

RVG: On a '78 player. And there were many of those at that time.

DS: Just a regular '78?

RVG: Sure, and as it got better, the recording machines, the sound got better.

DS: So the next level after that machine that you recorded with was to go visit some recording studios?

RVG: Yeah, I used to go to all the places I could get in. I'd see the machines; the consoles were bigger and so forth.

DS: Was this still in high school?

RVG: No this was after high school, just. There was a place in New York City called Nola Studio, and I used to see the machines they had. And I actually worked there, that was my first job, I have my social security card to prove it. It's got Nola's name on it to prove it. So I worked there for a while and meanwhile, also recording at home was a hobby, the whole thing was a hobby at that time.

DS: But you were able to see what equipment they had and see what you like?

RVG: Right I learned to use it, and I used to walk for the radio store and drool when it was in the window.

DS: And the microphones they used to use back in those days were?

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RVG: Well in the early days they couldn't afford the real expensive studio types so they had the P.A type microphones, they used in the public address microphones, so I had a bunch of those. As time went on I acquired a bunch of professional microphones and a mixer.

DS: What was the...when did Neumann come into the picture for example?

RVG: Well that was, could have been later. The Neumann microphone, he was developing those of course in Europe, had refined it to a great degree, and they decided to sell it in this country. In this country they ordered two of them. One was for a film studio called Reeves Sound in New York, and the other was for me. Then I started using that in the home recordings that I was making.

Maureen Sickler: Whom were you recording then?

RVG: Who?

DS: Mhmm.

Maureen Sickler: Was it just your friends or were there some others?

RVG: Well it was some friends, and some other musicians would use the theatre in Newark. These bands would appear and a couple of people—a trumpet player, who I know, worked in the band, in one of the bands. So they would come in and visit me and they'd have a band. All sorts of people would come visit me, everyone from Benny Goodman's band to Jackie Cooper, the drummer.

Maureen Sickler: Oh so Jackie Cooper came to visit you?

RVG: Yes, all as a hobby.

Maureen Sickler: And he played drums?

RVG: Yeah. He just died not too long ago.

DS: And other musicians, is this about the time that Bill Trillian came in.

RVG: Yeah, somewhere around that time, I don't know exactly, I wasn't part of how that happened. All I know is that he came to record with me; you mentioned the names. So the phone kept ringing and I kept recording all those years.

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DS: And you encouraged them to, you weren't charging them for...?

RVG: Probably some minimum charge, not enough to sustain anything; you know?

DS: Okay, so then you would visit—another interesting thing to me was another of your earlier recordings. I think it was what you first said you got credit for was involved with Lennie Tristano.

RVG: Yeah one of the musicians, or Lennie, I don't know how we got together. It must have been one of the musicians who knew Lennie, and then Lennie called me and asked me to come over and help him record.

DS: And he was trying to make his own little studio at that time?

RVG: Yeah, he did. He actually built his little studio; my brother helped him put a wall up and all that. I went in and used to help him record, and record. I brought a portable Ampex, he bought one two at that time, and so we had two Ampex's together for the first time. And then we got into this overdubbing, which he really fell in love with. He loved to do that.

Maureen Sickler: And how did that work, the overdubbing?

RVG: Lennie would record tracks knowing that he was going to add something later. And then he would play back on one machine, mix it with the microphone, and record it on a second machine. No multi track; primitive overdub.

Maureen Sickler: Mono?

RVG: Mono, oh yeah. This was before two-track Ampex

Maureen Sickler: So you were the one doing the recording though?

RVG: Yeah. Sure. Yes, but he knew the structure of what he wanted to do so he 'd play lines and then play it back on one machine, and then he'd play lines on top of that and it really sounded interesting.

DS: And you said that on that recording that he made, actually released the '78 himself, that he credited you?

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RVG: Yeah that one was called, “Ju Ju”, ’78, single. “Pastime” I think was the name of the other song, and he started his own label called “Jazz.” He put my name as an engineer on the label, and that was first time any engineer gotten credit.

DS: Right, I looked up the record and it’s called “Jazz 101”, so that was the first record.

RVG: It never got to 102. (Laughs)

DS: Okay, so then what other musicians were... from Lennie Tristano you...?

RVG: Well the first commercial record I ever did, that wasn’t, and that was Lennie’s Record. The first one that I ever did, that was with Bucky Pizzarelli, a player by the name of Joe Mooney, and a bass player, believe it or not, by the name Bob Carter; not Ron, Bob Carter. He was very...I made the trio and we took it into New York to be mastered, and that was the first commercial record I ever made. A lot of people still have it, they tell me.

DS: And you were telling me that that radio disc jockey...

RVG: Yeah, that’s right

DS: ...picked up on that?

RVG: There was a radio disc jockey in New York City called Al Collins. Collins on a Cloud was the name of his program, everyday in the afternoon. It was wonderful; it was very cool, nice music. It was a popular program. And one of the songs that Joe Mooney did, it was, “Will Be Together Again.” That got quite popular, everybody loved it, and he used that as the background for talking between the albums, between the records.

MS: So you heard that on the radio?

RVG: Right.

MS: Broadcast.

RVG: Yes.

MS: That must have been exciting?

RVG: Yes. It was great.

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MS: Did you have a big radio? One of those...

RVG: Yes, a console radio at home. A lot of people did. I had little ones too; I always had some kind of radio happening.

DS: Another gentleman who had a label was Gus DeTerris. And he brought, either he brought, or Eddie Bert somehow found you, that was one of the early recordings.

RVG: Yeah, I wasn't partied to that, you understand, I wasn't present as to who said what to whom. As far as I know, I recorded it for Gus Deterris, for a label called...

DS: Well, yeah it was called Progressive.

RVG: Yeah, Progressive was the name on the bill, "Progressive Label." And that's what... we started recording groups

MS: That was like '51? '53?

RVG: It would have to be in there somewhere, I can't remember. It would be in the '50's, early 50's.

MS: And then what about Gil Melle?

RVG: Well Gil Melle recorded for Gus first, as far as I know. He had a band, played saxophone, he was a really great guy too. He sold that to Alfred Lion, who released that on Blue Note. So, Alfred wanted to make another album, so he took the first one that I had made, and took it to the engineer. At that time, WOR radio station had a recording studio, you could hire those facilities, and Al had been recording there up until the time he met me. So he wanted this guy, I used to know his name but I can't remember now, he wanted this guy to record Gil Melle for Blue Note. So he took the album to his engineer at the time and he said, "Can you make it sound like this?" And the guy listened to it and he said, "I can't do that, you better take it to the fella who made it." And that's what he did, and he came to me and that's what started a long time relationship.

DS: And just before that relationship, Billy Taylor came to you and you recorded for Prestige.

RVG: Yes, Billy Taylor for Prestige. I'm not sure Billy came through me, I'm not sure, and he might have come through Bob Weinstock, the owner of Prestige Records.

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Anyway, I recorded Billy Taylor a number of times, many hours spent in that living room, hearing Billy play.

DS: Well Billy said what he really appreciated was the fact that you really wanted to experiment with the sound and get the real sound.

RVG: We had the same ideas, which was what we wanted the finished product to be.

MS: Was that when you had the upright?

RVG: No, no there was a grand piano by that time, the one that I purchased from the New York Times ad.

DS: Okay, so before the grand piano you had an upright. And that's when you started to do the first of the Blue Note recordings?

RVG: No. That's when I first did my friends recording. All of that time was just non-professional fun type things for friends. We all liked the music; we knew what we wanted it to sound like, part of that was on an upright. And then I found this piano, which was a really good one, I bought that one used, it was rarely used. I got it out of a bad divorce and I got the piano. It was someone else's divorce, not mine.

DS: And so in the beginning, in the Hackensack recordings you were also doing classical recordings too.

RVG: Yes, there was a company called Vox Records, which I used to the mastering. They would bring in tapes from Europe and I would do the masters for the United States, which went on for a long time.

DS: But they also brought one of the prominent pianists to record.

RVG: Yes, people don't believe this. What was the name of it?

DS: Brendel?

RVG: Brendel, yes, Alfred Brendel. And he took one of the, either his own piano, or the concert department at Steinway, shipped out to Hackensack, and I recorded him. It did very; very well, I mean it's very famous.

MS: You were also the first to put the Beethoven 9th on one side...

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RVG: Yeah, that was mastering, the orchestra was recorded in Vienna, they sent me to tape and I was the first one to put it on one LP side. 32 minutes, something like that.

MS: At that time did you have your own lappet?

RVG: Yeah I had just got a Scully for that. It had been my idea to get a Scully, so I got a Scully for that. That's a machine that only Mr. Scully touched. There was no maintenance; he would comedown from Bridgeport and do what ever he had to do. He also built me a, I don't know if that was one off...

MS: Tandem?

DS: Tandem two?

RVG: Tandem, thank you. I was able to make from one source, two masters at once. The demand was growing, everybody wanted masters, and albums and I couldn't fill 'em. That helped me get through that period. I still have them in a closet over there. One over there, one over there. It's just there I don't use it.

DS: Several companies, even besides Vox were bringing you masters.

RVG: Yes. There were a couple of pressing plants that were doing things. Westminster was one of them. At one time there was a plant in Newark where I was mastering their whole output. Everything they were doing came from masters I made. That was really busy.

MS: And at the same time, were you an optometrist?

RVG: I'm not sure about that; it had to be in there somewhere because I stayed in optometry until 1960. When I finished this place...so it had to be...

MS: So you must have been quite busy.

RVG: Yes, I know it.

DS: But you realized the value of the whole operation, which was always what you were interested in.

RVG: The whole process, the sessions, and above all, the musicians who used to come to that place just for me to record them, I knew I was doing something important, I always

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knew I was doing something important. More important than politics, and the job I was doing for these guys, I considered it my first and most intense priority.

DS: And then following through the whole process throughout the mastering right?

RVG: Well that came out of... well I'm still that way. I don't take a session without doing the masters. Because I knew, I knew from doing all the different steps, I knew how important that step was. I don't think many knew that. Of course there was no mastering business as such either. The art of mastering, the business of mastering that developed in modern times, recently. "What do you do for a living?" "I'm a mastering engineer." No such thing. No such school in those days we were talking about.

MS: Well then how did you learn to record?

RVG: How did I learn the whole process?

MS: Yeah.

RVG: Mostly by making mistakes.

DS: But you had to build your own equipment.

RVG: Well I didn't build my own recording machine; I never got that far. But later on the consoles got beyond the tubes, and into components and solid-state components, so that was beyond home fixing.

DS: But from the beginning you just had to adapt.

RVG: I would get whatever I could afford, what was available to use for the recording machine: the console, and the...this is just an audio medium now. The first console had one meter in it, just one meter to do everything. Mix it down to mono, not stereo; this is in Hackensack, early Hackensack. Then we make the master mono.

MS: How many channels coming into the console?

RVG: Probably six or eight.

DS: Which means you had six or eight microphones.

RVG: Which meant six or eight knobs; count the knobs. I did a lot of re-dos like that too.

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DS: And you started, probably started, remotes from the beginning?

RVG: Well that was a demand from Alfred, he wanted to, Alfred from Blue Note, he wanted to be recording close. He said, "Good things happen at night." That was his way of describing the music (Laughs). He wanted me to record what was happening, that's what he was paying me for. So the band would appear in the club during the week, or whatever it was. They say, "We're going to be there this week" I wanted to start recording Thursday night. So Wednesday I had to take down the microphones, I couldn't afford a bunch of duplicate microphones, I'd take down the microphones out of the studio, pack them up, put them in the car, take my little recorder which was really a tricky business. I had one recorder specifically modified to do this, the other recorder I couldn't lift. So pack all of this stuff up, get the cables, bring the tape, pack it in the car, and drive it to New York, Birdland for example. What's the other club, with the lady who runs it?

DS: Vanguard.

MS: Vanguard.

RVG: Yes. Drive up to the club the day before, find a place to park, unpack the car, bring em into the club, set it up for the band with the microphones with the cables. Now at the table, where I was going to sit and mix this band, now a some clubs didn't like this idea cause it was taking away some of their income. Now Alfred, a master politician, he went in and straightened it out and finally the allowed me to go in. So I'd bring the equipment in, set it up at the table, I was taking two tables probably, then I had headphones, and the band was loud, headphones gotta get louder, otherwise you don't hear anything, and smoke. At the time they all smoked. Smoke filled rooms, sit there till two or three in the morning, everyone would go home, I had to unpack the microphones, put them in the car, drive them back here, unload the car, and set them up in the studio so I could use them the next day. That's the brief discussion, that's not to mention one of the clubs I had to go to in Newark. We went through that same procedure, drove to Newark, at that time we, and by we I mean I, hired a musician, he was a patrolman, and officer, a police officer, to be security for me while I was in this club 'till three in the morning. One of those gigs, not this particular one, but of those gigs, I remember going through to set it up, and I forgot the tape. Embarrassing moment. So what did you do right? You get in the car and you drive back to Hackensack. And you pick up the tape. (Laughs). Untold story.

MS: This is how you learned to be very careful

RVG: Yes.

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DS: So at the time you were not only doing Blue Note, we've touched upon Blue Note and Vox and classical things, but also Prestige we said came in. And another label was Savoy.

RVG: Right. Now that's interesting because that brought on...necessity is the mother of invention. The only way I could solve that dilemma. When there were more people wanting more time and I was only one person. Also that was a point of decision for me to get bigger or stay small. I could have hired some people to set up a studio, and it probably would have been pretty successful. But I decided not to do that; it wasn't for me. So I decided I'll go it alone. So what I did, I used to assign certain days of the week to certain companies. For example, I don't know exactly who was who; I remember Monday was with one company. Tuesday, Wednesday, was another company and Thursday, Friday was another company. Three companies, and all of them had their own specified days, which they paid for even if they didn't use it. On the other hand they didn't have to worry about having studio time, because it was always available, cause they know Blue Note was coming in on Saturday, or something to that effect. So he wouldn't have to go into the rather obnoxious routine of booking studios when I didn't have time for them all.

DS: But this is still the time when you're an optometrist.

RVG: I don't know about that. I quit optometry in 1960.

DS: Okay, but we're still back in Hackensack; at least my mind is back in Hackensack.

RVG: Okay, well some of it was.

DS: Because Savoy, for example, never came to Inglewood.

RVG: Well, very briefly, well, I don't know. No, but that's a good point. Well, the fact are that, and as I remember it, that Vox, which was a mastering client, they wanted two days a week for me to make masters. So they had Tuesday and Wednesday. Somebody else had Monday, and then Thursday and Friday would be Prestige. Or Thursday would be Prestige, and Friday would be Blue Note. I think it was structured like that. That would have been Hackensack.

DS: But also in Hackensack, I believe you said that your day off was Wednesday.

RVG: My day off from optometry.

DS: From optometry. So that day you focused on recording.

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RVG: What?

DS: You focused more on recording that day.

RVG: Oh absolutely. True, that was a big help.

DS: And then the other days you would do optometry during the day, and record a session at night?

RVG: Some of the days, some of them yes. That's the one thing that my parents objected to. They let me do all of the things with people coming and going in that house, but the one thing that they didn't like; I mean it was an imposition to record at night. I remember in the very early days the air conditioning wasn't working so the windows were open and the whole neighborhood complained. (Laughs). They complained about my be-bop band playing music, and everybody got disturbed, the next street over. I remember one of the ladies, she was the president of the school, the principal of Hackensack High School, nothing really ugly, but I knew I had to get out of there.

MS: You were there about five years working.

RVG: Pretty brief.

MS: Five years, but you were working many, many days.

RVG: Was it five years though? Was that the time? Five years?

DS: 'Till '59. From about '53 to '59.

RVG: Yeah, that's about right. That's a short time compared to here.

DS: Oh yeah. But you had Prestige, and Savoy, and Blue Note.

RVG: And of course CTI later on.

DS: Later on.

RVG: That's when it really got to be a big deal. There were a lot of musicians, for Precision they were parking; they had to be able to park. The place was full of string players, or the whole band; it got to be very active.

MS: You're talking about Inglewood Cliffs?

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RVG: Yes, here, Inglewood Cliffs. Are we out of Hackensack yet?

MS: How did you come to build the studio?

DS: Yeah, there's a transition period too, when we all know that you were still recording in Hackensack, up until mid-'59, and then started recording here. But you were building a studio at the same time.

RVG: Okay, so let's talk about that backwards.

DS: Good, yeah.

RVG: The first thing you do is buy property. Elvaho was my wife at the time; she was the scout for property. She went out while I was working and looked for property to build, for her it would be a home, for me it would be a studio. And that's the way it evolved. That must have been in '58. She says, "I have a place, come and look at it." And the place was a piece of property; it was a low, swampy area in Inglewood Cliffs right here. And I said, "I think we can do it there, how much is it?" So she told me the price and we talked about it. And I looked over and... what is my pressure to do this and one of the strongest was Alfred Lion and Frank Wolff with Blue Note. I considered them to be the rock steady client. Everybody else was sometimes here, sometimes not. Vox was good but there was an incident there that I have to tell you about, well I don't have to tell you about it but that shut off like a faucet too. So here I was and then Savoy left—We okay?

Ken Kimery: Good to go.

RVG: Well I lost Savoy and Vox. Vox was sort of a personal thing. Well, I'll tell you what it was. Within the culture of cutting masters, you're involved with the lathe, the master, it has to be electroplated, and it has to be converted into a stamper. And at a plant, it has to be given to a plant [to] stamp out the vinyl pancakes. SO that's the process, roughly. If from the time I send them a master, a lacquer master, very delicate, you can't touch it, you mail it in a box, you don't mail it, you carry it in a box with separators in between the disc so you don't mar the disc. Just a touch and you'll ruin it. In that process, something should happen, and it became unusable, I don't know how this thing developed. It wasn't just me. It was expecting that the mastering facility would replace the master at no charge. So I don't know who was relying on that to make a profit, I don't know whether it was a pressing plant, cause it was probably owned by one of the big companies anyway so they didn't care. And then there was the plating facility that made a living by electroplating these lacquer discs. So they always, if they goofed up, or did

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something, I had to do it over again at no cost! They expected that! Finally I said, “I’ve had enough. I can’t do that anymore. I don’t have enough time to do that.” I said, “Either you pay for them, or I can’t work for you anymore.” And that was the end of Vox. They expected me to do that and got very upset, for which I think is no reason, totally unreasonable, so he departed. Is that the kind of story you think is... Okay, good.

DS: So the other thing in, besides in moving, we gotta get back in to the moving between the two.

RVG: You’re talking about the time...

DS: Moving from Hackensack to a bigger environment. Another factor, you told me, was the musicians. I remember Gil Evans did his first session as a leader in Hackensack, “Gil Evans Plus Eleven”; there must have been a lot of...

RVG: That’s the one; do you want to start from there?

DS: Sure.

RVG: Neither Gil or myself liked the results of that one. Besides today, where people want to hear the results, musically, neither Gil nor I, sonically, like what happened on that session. So, that was part of it. I’m sorry I interrupted you. That was part of so I said, “I gotta get out of here” cause I wanted two Gil Evans. And the rest of it was the hours. Alfred was one that said, “Good things happen at night.” And he was a major client too, if not the major client. So, you see the pressure from everybody I work for wanted to move on to something bigger, and better. So then, you asked how to build a studio, the first thing is with that pressure you go to a bank and you ask, “Will you give me a construction loan?” That’s what they used to call it. It’s a loan given to build a place, and then you pay them back after it’s built. And I went, and I did. I got a loan and the next step was what do you want to build here with all that money. The first thing you need is an architect so that the town is going to let you build it. And I was going to put in a Lemonade stand on 9W, you know? (Laughs) That was a bad idea now. (Laughs) Okay, that’s how you do it, that’s how you start. Now the architect in this case, happened to be a student of Frank Lloyd Wright. And he actually, I believe he was in the commissary in the building out in Prairie, out somewhere in the Midwest. So he knew every trick that Frank Lloyd Wright used in building. He studied it for a couple of years, as far as I know. So, you say, “Well, why don’t you go get Frank Lloyd Wright himself?” The reason we like that style is because it seemed the materials he used, the way he used it, would make it possible for me to construct a building the way, and the amount I could pay for. Otherwise you end up with a magnificent work of art, and so what? You can’t build a building for that? We became practical. Lets hire this guy who knows everything we

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want. He knows the materials we want; he knows the size of the room, and let him build it, let him give us a price. And he did and we did. And everybody who worked on that project, the construction part of it, loved this place. They loved the neighbors coming out, they loved the idea, they were wonderful to work with. The only problem, at the construction end, there were periods when it was under construction that they would disappear on another job. So I would be sitting there with a big be-bop band coming in and there would be a roof being built. It was very aggravating. That was a low point because they didn't work continuously to the goal. So I was subjected to that from 1958 to 1960, when we finally got our certificate of occupancy. For two years I went through that. I also went, before this Wright thing, I'll have to back up a little bit, I went to another architect and I asked him to draw up a set of plans for what I needed: a studio, a house and so forth. And he did, and it looked terrible, it was awful. So we just, what's the word, not neglected...we disregarded that proposal. I got the drawings upstairs if you want to see them.

MS: Did you do that first? That was first before you...

RVG: That was a set of plans to decide what this building was going to look like. This other one was the fellow who I just described, who worked for Wright, working for years as one of his students, in like a commune out there. That's how this got together.

DS: But you drew up the specifics of what you were...

RVG: No, I told him the specifics. I told him what I want. I said I want masonry walls, masonry floors, wooden ceilings, I told him that. That of course, inside of me, I had already absorbed the rights and concepts of how to make a modern building. And there was a fellow who worked for him called Arman, Arman Gellio. He worked for the construction contractor and he came up with a lot of the designs and solutions. There is another story in here about this building if you want me to go there. This I'm more familiar with now because I recently went through this for a blind person from Oregon. What do you do with a roof? You want a masonry wall; you want a masonry floor, which is what it is. So what do you do for a roof? This first architect, you know it's a peak ceiling; he wanted to put steel beams up. So we took it to the building inspector and he said, "Oh it will never stand up." The weld, and the top will open up with the weight of the rafters. That was the end of that. We went to this other architect, the one I used, he's not really an architect he's sort of a designer. We went to a company called Timber Structures, in Oregon; I think it was Portland, Oregon. At that time, as the outgrowth of World War II, where they had to make hangers for blimps, they developed a laminated arch which is like plywood except its made of Douglass fur. They put it on a huge table and under heat and pressure; they compress it to make it one. And with waterproof glue it lasts forever. So they made beams, which you see out there now and they look beautiful,

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they sound beautiful. It was incredible for us to get a sound like that. I had the option of deadening it up if there was any problem like that; cause there was just the right amount of live-ness. And all that came from that Timber Structure. They contracted the whole thing, put the arches on a railroad car, and drove it through Canada, here to the site. That was all part of the adventure of the actual structure.

MS: And they put the roof up.

RVG: Yes, and they made a slight mistake in the measurement of the dimensions of the roof versus the measurement of the walls. They had to add, I think they took out a ten-inch block and they had to put in a four-inch block. And you can see that, where there is a row of four-inch block. I have pictures of before it was that way, before the mistake was discovered, that wall over there. See the wall with all the block? By the way, they used techniques in masonry. You can see they wreek out the horizontal joint, and the strike flush the vertical joint of each block. The whole thing looks like horizontal lines but that's ordinary block. That's all from Frank Lloyd Wright. The one thing that saved me, it's the same thing on the inside as outside. It saved me; I couldn't afford it any other way. The rents pretty high. I think that's enough of that, but that's what happened.

DS: So the process at the time, how long did it take to build the building?

RVG: We were building, acquiring the property, and breaking ground from '58 to '59. '60 was the first full year, not full year, because we came in the summer, July.

DS: July of '59.

RVG: Right, that was when we got the certificate of occupancy. The date is on it. The first session was from Vox. That's whom I was working for big time, right there. They brought down a Glee Club from West Point.

DS: That was the first session?

RVG: Yes, and the others were my jazz pals coming in. That's the one with Idris, from Prestige.

DS: But all during this period of building, your scenario was running over here to see what was going on and running your optometry business and then recording.

RVG: Yes, so I was touring between be-bop, optometry, and coming to see how the building was doing. And it was really crushing when they weren't working that day. I remember very clearly, I expected to see the work.

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DS: And you came over and there was no one there?

RVG: No one there.

DS: So during, when Bethlehem was another label that did some things for you and that's when you met Creed Taylor.

RVG: Correct. Creed Taylor was running Bethlehem label and he was doing some interesting projects. He and I got along very well sonically. I knew exactly what he wanted, and he knew I could get it for him. Everything went swiftly from there after. Wherever he went, I went. There was a time when he used the studio exclusively.

DS: During the CTI period?

RVG: And then there was a time when I had to shut down because my wife got ill. Then it was dark for a while.

DS: So back to Gil Evans, he did the recording that neither of you were happy with. And his next recording was when he came here.

RVG: Yes, he came here. What was the name of that album, "Out of the Cool"?

DS: "Out of the Cool"

RVG: Yes, "Out of the Cool."

DS: That was for the Impulse label...

RVG: Yes.

DS: ...which was the one that Creed formed.

RVG: Yes, the sound that both Gil liked, and I liked, and Creed liked, you know the actually sound kind of smooth. It was just great. I knew then that I had done the right thing acoustically.

DS: But it was quite a different environment from, especially for the musicians who recorded in Hackensack and then would...

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RVG: Oh sure. Some of them, not many, they didn't like it; they thought it was too large for them. They were used to radio station type studios in New York. Good players too but you know...

MS: When you first moved in it was just all open.

RVG: Yeah, there were no isolation booths in the beginning, just a space. Then

DS: Benches?

RVG: Yeah, there were benches all along the periphery for them to sit. Often they'd come with deli lunchmeat and spread it all out on the benches and eat and play and make good records. There were no down lights either in the early days, just those up lights.

MS: They weren't reading music were they?

RVG: Yeah, sure they were. Great stuff, of course!

MS: So how long did it take to put in down lights?

RVG: Well Don Costa, I remember he did a couple of sessions here, he went out and he bought me stand lights. Don Coast bought me those! (Laughs) They couldn't see anything cause it was dark! It was a really... Talk about making mistakes (Laughs). Oh boy.

DS: So a lot of the musicians really enjoyed... talk a little bit about the relationships with the musicians. You know, your desire to get their sound, and their understanding that.

RVG: Well that's, of course, the fundamental of everything I do. I didn't come here to record just what I like; I'm not a musician. I don't play, but I listen to musicians all the time and I hire producers. That's another thing. There were producers with their own style, their own way of working, they always what I do within the limitations of what the musicians are doing. And of course as we knew each other through the years we understood how to get it right early on in the session. That's something that disappeared quite early in the game. The fact that if you like a particular musicians, I'm talking as a producer, and you like what he does and you want to record some more, you better record the hell out of him because it's not going to last forever. Alfred Lion always knew that, he knew he just couldn't record one guy and then... he always said it was like a series of how well the artist was playing at the time. That's a technique he developed which really paid off, I think, as a record label owner.

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MS: What about Weinstock?

RVG: Weinstock was different. He was like a easier going... Alfred knew exactly what he wanted. Blue Note came in and they knew what they wanted because Alfred knew what he wanted. They come in and make certain tunes they had rehearsed; he was never a stranger to what went on. Bob Weinstock was different. He'd hire a bunch of guys that knew each other, played well together, and they'd come in the session and let it happen. I happen to like that too, it's a different type of music you get, and it's a lot more fun. For me, it's a lot lighter. I didn't have to sweat out what was happening and get it right because they're going to go away; they're going to come back the next day. Alfred Lion would come in on Friday. Saturday I would have a headache from working for him. He was always so intense in getting what he wanted. Prestige was never like that; Prestige was a party. Where they put the microphones, where they stand but mainly it was easy going and he took what happened and he got some great records that way. So there's a totally different personality between the guy who ran Prestige and the guy who ran Blue Note. And, of course, I was in the middle and I had to keep both of them happy. I'll tell you one way I had of using that difference. If I were to get a bunch of Neumann microphones came in, and they were new to me, I would try them always on a Prestige date, never on a Blue Note date. Blue Note had to be a known quantity, and know what they were going to get and fight like hell to get it. If I knew I wanted to test out a new microphone I tried it on Prestige.

DS: And that was the same with Savoy?

RVG: Yes with Savoy that was a different story.

DS: What...a little bit about Savoy. Did you just happen to realize it, as we told you that we came today, that today is the anniversary on the 5th of November when you did "Introducing Lee Morgan" and the Hank Mobley date for Savoy.

RVG: I think that was produced by Ozzie Cadena. He worked for Savoy during the years that I did. He has much the same attitude as Prestige, rather than Blue Note, even though he worked for Blue Note too. Ozzie knew the music, he knew the way the guys wanted to sound, he got them here on time, and he was pretty definite as to what he wanted, sitting in here as a producer. We made some pretty good records. Some of them I didn't even realize, in retrospect, that Ozzie made them. You think of Savoy, you think of a blues, blues brown type of album. Ozzie put a jazz touch on that whole company.

MS: What about Bob Thiele?

RVG: I knew Bob Thiele before he came to run.

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DS: Impulse?

RVG: Yes, he went to Impulse. Creed Taylor had already established Impulse as major, and recognizable [label]. When Creed left, Bob Theil came in and we had been pals for a long time, I was like his guy to go to [to] do it remote. He had recordings in all different places. It was not jazz oriented necessarily. I would go in and record a lady, who had a shop on 5th Avenue, selling music boxes. I would go in there just to record music boxes. That's the way it was. I recorded Lawrence Welk at Madison Square Garden, that was a pretty popular album too. That was for Bob Theil. I was partied to all of that, I took the microphones. There was a little incident there when I put them up to record Lawrence Welk and—what's the big famous producer? Danny...Hollywood producer...Anyways, he came up here and he was big time, you know Hollywood. He took my microphones and he put them away from where I had put them. So I couldn't record when he was there because I wasn't recording for him, I was recording Lawrence Welk, the next act. What the hell was his name?

Maureen Van Gelder: Was it Danny Kay?

RVG: You're getting close. Anyway, never mind.

Maureen Van Gelder: I know who you mean; his daughter had a show later on.

RVG: He had a daughter or somebody, also who was famous. Anyways, never mind. He made millions.

Maureen Van Gelder: Thomas.

RVG: Danny Thomas was his name! Thank you Maureen! Perfect. Yeah he was there and he knew I was recording, and he didn't know me, but he knew it was being recorded, and he didn't want me to record that. So we had to add a little bit of confusion to all these guys on the stage and Lawrence Welk was perfect, he was so precise. Each musician, each section, he'd blend the...there was no mixing, he'd blend it so it was perfectly blended. It just sounded so beautiful. I wonder what happened to that record. That was one of the remotes. Got some more?

(Question is not heard. Maureen Van Gelder starts off with a prompt for Rudy.)

Maureen Van Gelder: What microphone, new echo chamber, new

RVG: You want me to talk about that?

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Maureen Van Gelder: Yes.

RVG: Okay, well as far as equipment is concerned, I've always tried to obtain, and use and, maintain the best possible. That was always part of it. And I had some of the clients appreciated that, they know that if they come to me they are going to get top-notch equipment. And it was always like that I'd try to be at the top of my game with equipment. Because usually it was easier to use

Maureen Van Gelder: You had relationships with many of the people who were developing the equipment too.

RVG: Yeah everybody from Dr. Neumann, here. To...

DS: Scully?

RVG: Scully, yeah he's the one, the only person I let touch the lathe. And then, of course, years ago, there was a fellow that I knew. He was an electronic engineer. He knew which way the electrons flowed. We would sit together and talk about the items that would need to be improved and developed. The late hours at the diner, talking about the cutter head, talking about the Fairchild Limiter. Talking about a console built for me. That was his name, Rein Narma. He came to this country right after World War II and worked for Fairchild Recording and later on for other people. We spent a lot of hours talking about the technical part, but he knew everything. So he left, went to, I think it was Taiwan or someplace, and taught them how to make transistors. The rest is history.

Maureen Van Gelder: That echo chamber you have...

RVG: Oh, yeah. That was why I had the first one of those, that was a development of a Wilhem Franc out of the Black Forest in Germany. Just the idea, the concept was this big steel plate, four or five feet high, six feet long, and you attach a microphone to one end and the receiver to the other, and you would get a pure, beautiful reverb if you had a good one and you knew how to use it. I used that for years.

Maureen Van Gelder: Did you have that in Hamilton?

RVG: Yes. In the bedroom.

Maureen Van Gelder: What kind of bedroom?

RVG: What kind of bedroom? (Laughs)

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Maureen Van Gelder: It's similar to here right?

RVG: Yeah. That's right. You don't want to get near a thing like that. I have two of them. One of them is the first he made, and he told me he never made one to match it, quality wise. Cause every steel plate that you roll out, or whatever you do, is different. And the other one is—it's got a very nice sound. I've used that on a lot of successful records.

DS: Recording technique has changed drastically since multi track came in. Musicians now want to make fixes, and everyone wears headphones, excreta. Why don't you tell a little bit about the Blue Note days, I don't think the ever wore headphones.

RVG: No. They never wore headphones.

DS: So just describe a little bit, especially in your room here, a lot of times you would not set up right in the middle of the room, there were certain places that people liked to be located.

RVG: Within the room?

DS: Yes.

RVG: Well, there are two phases of that. One is that we set it up the way we think it should be, to get the best sound. That would be the first thing, and then what they are comfortable with. Those things are generally at odds. What is good for sound was not good for playing. Now, in the advent of multi-track, this is even before digital, analog, reel-to-reel, this was really the beginning of it. I thought that was fantastic to be able to do that. I could mix it later; make it better, if they didn't like something I could do it over again. That was heaven to me compared to what I was doing. Then what happened was that all the musicians caught on to that, and then when they came in and recorded, after having been in that environment for a year two, then they wanted to do it. They expected to be able to fix it, anything. That, to me, marked a decline of really exciting music. The very idea of that you could do it over really wipes out any feeling, emotionally, for me. That's the first step. Step two, is that the involving of the machines became so extreme that you could record with good quality in the palm of your hand, there's nothing to it. So, when that happens, when they make it easier to record, it detracts from the specialty of going into the studio and making a record, or certain music. What it really does, is it decreases the musical value of what they're doing, in my opinion. It takes away the spontaneity. You can artificially create that for weeks, and months, and try to artificially create that, make a very interesting presentation of a piece of music, and you can make it sound very interesting but it doesn't happen in the studio, at a ten-o'clock Tuesday morning with someone that you work with for a month. Someone said recently, I heard, a

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musician who was famous he said, “We can do two things. We can go in to the studio to record for two days, and mix for six months.” And he meant it. “Or we can mix for six months and then we will see how that...mix for six months.” It was just the opposite of that, there mix...oh “Play for six months and mix for two months, or we can mix for two months and play.” Did I get that right?

DS: I think you mean that you can go in and you can play for six hours.

RVG: Six hours?

Maureen Van Gelder: Two days.

DS: Two days.

RVG: One alternative is go in and play a six-hour day, maybe two, if you make it out. And then spend months mixing it to make presentable, that’s one way. The other way is to...rehearse, that’s true, in the studio, get all the music right and then mix for two days.

Maureen Van Gelder: Record.

RVG: Record, that’s what I mean. Right. Record for two days. Each is the opposite of the other, of the coin. You want to mix a lot or you want to play a lot. The results, depending on the music, what kind of music it is, if your music relies on improvisation, like jazz; you’ll never match it. If it’s other things like GTL rhythm, low end produced peaks, you can get that first and then...but there’s something... it’ll never be the same. Now I’m not judging that as good or bad, I hope you don’t think I’m judging that. That’s just the way it is, and I think those that require post-production in the extreme, have lesser value. The product has lesser value than something that happens spontaneously. You can hear that.

DS: I mean for so many years you recorded and mixing wasn’t even part of it, you’d mix it live.

RVG: That’s right,

DS: Isn’t that what your saying, that the musicians had to come prepared, ready to do it, and live with that for the rest of their lives.

RVG: Exactly, and that’s what disappeared. No matter what, you...Now, this what you see before you, I can do it with a two track tape. If the musicians can make something good of that, without it relying on that, coming back and fixing that over and over again,

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its not the same. I'll fix the details, but they won't fix, you can't fix the feeling. It's in my opinion only. As far as the recording machines, I already said how I feel about that. The fact that its small, cheap and it works well, that detracts from the value of a recording session. You have to have someone there who really knows, what who works, and what exactly what sound means, that's how you get good quality sound.

DS: Can you explain a little bit about--- the C.T.I era was totally, totally different. That was a

RVG: Yeah well Creed wanted to make popular records, more than what was happening in the jazz scene. You had the Blue Note type of thing, Creed wanted to go beyond that, with those musicians. He wanted to record it in a format, which would enable it to be appreciated by a larger area, larger amount, [and] larger type of person. He wanted to make popular records out of these other musicians. That's why the people who are jazz lovers don't particularly care for C.T.I because they know what that was trying to do. So, I liked it because of the ability to make great sounds. The limitation of the jazz improvisation, you know you play a great solo that's it. But if you want to hear an orchestra play intensely with good arrangements and well recorded, that's a whole different ball game. And Creed wanted to hire creative arrangers, people like Don Sebesky. I like that I liked doing it, it was always rewarding for me, the sound I played.

DS: And that's primarily because you didn't have to make split second decisions that would last forever. You can have time to control things the way you want to.

RVG: Exactly, well put. Not just me, Creed, and honestly to do what Creed did, you have gotta' have a studio. You can't just go in there and hire 'em on an hourly rate. So I actually worked for Creed exclusively for a number of years. Everything was his, whatever you wanted. So what happened [was] he would hire a bunch of people to come in good players, and it didn't come out that great. He'd scrap it and start it over again. Try that now.

DS: Right, right.

RVG: Don't like the drummer? Okay, tomorrow we'll get another drummer.

DS: So you could use the same track, but a different drummer?

RVG: Yeah, same arrangement, same everything. Maybe even he got something good on the first day, but something wasn't good. He'd throw out the stuff that was no good, and make it better. Always striving for, how can you say this? Not perfect, but successful performance. That was fun. I liked doing that. The difficult parts of it were a question of

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communication between myself and his company. How to do the next take, because its always changing, but those are minor compared to the results

DS: It was a totally different process. I think we definitely have to speak about relationship with John Coltrane because that was from a totally different perspective; there was no multi-track at that time. That goes back to Hackensack and maybe you could just, you know, say a little about your relationship with John.

RVG: Well I remember Coltrane when he first came to town and he worked at Prestige, I think as a sideman for Miles. So I never had any direct relationship, he was just another horn player out there. I never knew which way that thing was going. That was of course here, we did it in this building. During the time he was at Atlantic I built this place. And so, when he first came here he liked what he saw, what he felt, and what he heard. Considering the direction his music went, if you think about that, a room like this would fit exactly what he imagined, right? That combined with my two-track option, that was perfect for him to record. The right place, the right engineer, and the-- his right motivation, musically. One of my most favorite sessions.

DS: And there were different sections from the ballads and the Johnny Hartman sessions.

RVG: Right, I'm glad you reminded me of that. That was two-track, that was vocal. It's beautiful, I love that, its one of my favorite records.

DS: So again...

RVG: How are you going to get that!? Are you going to get from sitting in a booth and every couple of bars fixing the vocals? No!

DS: No.

RVG: You gotta' have a good singer, a great singer, you gotta' have good people. The other way, you could make ordinary people sound extraordinary.

DS: Giving them enough time to go over and over and over and over.

RVG: Right, saving them big money. Right. Parallel to that was the equipment becoming cheaper, more available, easier to use. Couple that with a home recording environment, and I can do that with my little X-Factor machine I got at Macy's. Anybody can be a genius with a...I forgot the name of it.

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Maureen Van Gelder: You have a very highly developed sense of humor, which is a sort of secret. Except during this more relaxed fashion, in the old days, did you used to play funny things for the musicians?

RVG: Oh yeah. That was early on, I used to do that. Way back in the Prestige days, you know, with Philly Joe and all the people around on that. I used to do little bits with some comedians jokes, or punch lines, things like that. At the end of a take I'd play it back, and I didn't have headphones so everybody could hear and there were some funny situations created by that. They were icebreakers, and everybody felt better.

DS: Relieve the tension.

Maureen Van Gelder: Like the Eric Dolphy one?

RVG: Yes! I used to make fun of him all the time. I don't know if I should say all the time, not all the time, but that was one of my...

Maureen Van Gelder: They were so serious all the time.

RVG: Yes, he was a very serious person in the studio. So, at the end of a take I would—I forget one of the ones. This might be taken the wrong way, I gotta be careful. I don't want to get into that, you have to be there to make it funny.

DS: (Laughs)

RVG: In retrospect, I don't want to get into talking about that. It wouldn't be as funny I don't think either. Okay, musically where are we going from here? Where are we?

DS: Well, we've covered a lot of it. Maybe you can say a little bit about what it was like when you'd have some of these larger sessions, back before the booze when you would have Oliver Nelson come in with a bunch of musicians and maybe he's backing Jimmy Smith. About, you know, the challenges of...of—I guess it really wasn't challenges; it's just the way that what was called on for that day. To me it seems very challenging because there were a lot of musicians; you have to bring it into a two-track environment immediately.

RVG: Well we never had a large quantity of musicians on two-track. By that time I was in multi-track.

DS: Multi-track, yeah. I know, I just mean the Jimmy Smith dates Oliver Nelson, those are direct to two-track. No.

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RVG: No, the only two-track Jimmy Smith was at the remotes. I don't remember tunes with two-tracks. The ones from Blue Note, whatever he did with Blue Note was two-track. Whenever he came over to Creed we had multi-track, we used multi-track. I don't remember using two-track with Jimmy's band. I wish I had sometime. When I used to go on vacation...

DS: Okay we can scrap all of that then.

RVG: What?

DS: I'm just saying...Okay, cause I thought a lot of that was direct to two track.

Maureen Van Gelder: What about that Bill Evans recording?

DS: Bill Evans with Symphony Orchestra?

RVG: That's not two-track. I mean, that may not have been 24 track, but it was multi-track somehow. I don't know what I had at the time. That was during the period working with Creed, that I had the wherewithal and the motivation to develop multi-track for me. We started out with eight, and then we went to twelve, then 24, 48. 48 really tore it up, that really brought it all to a musical impasse. The fact that they had 48 tracks, what they could do with that. And now, of course, there's no limit to the tracks. That's a very anti-musical way to perform, I think. That's my opinion. Yeah, I don't like that, strike all that part its too negative, all right? Anything negative in there, just erase it.

DS: Mhmm. Let's see, what haven't we talked about?

RVG: So every session there is some kind of problem, alright? Everything from tuning the piano, to somebody coming in with some problem, what's wrong with that? That's the way it is? You have to have the tools to be able to match what the problem is, and that's what learning the studio is.

Maureen Van Gelder: You like to solve problems.

RVG: Yeah, I think that's what I do.

Maureen Van Gelder: What about talking about all these small circles, and individual people you recorded for?

RVG: What time period? In the early days or now?

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Maureen Van Gelder: So 60 through the 90's

DS: Through the 90's.

Maureen Van Gelder: You recorded for many individual people and small record labels.

RVG: Yeah, that's all I did. I always did. I never recorded directly for arrangers, except for the ones...Bob Theil and Creed Taylor label. Who were we talking about?

DS: C.T.I.?

RVG: Yeah, that's a big company. C.T.I was a small company with a lot of money but when it got to be Verve, that's a big company. I used to—its peculiar that they... When I got a date for one of these big companies, they'd sent me a purchase order for the studio time. Can you imagine what they asked me to do? I was supposed to guess how long they would be in the studio and put that in the fold of a printed invoice and send it them before I could get paid, before I could even do the session I had to know how much it was going to be. So if they come in and do a six-hour session and take eight hours, where am I going to get my two hours? It was really ridiculous. They try to make it work like a big corporation. You're references work like that.

DS: So maybe you can talk a little bit about how the RVG series got started.

RVG: So one summer, a long time ago, I got a call from Michael Cuscuna. Their Japanese arm of Blue Note wanted to re-issue all the masters. So a fellow by the name of Namikata decided to launch a series of RVG re-masters. First they agreed, the people who owned the tapes here, and that began a whole long process of which I made a couple of hundred or re-masters of their catalogue. And that sort of reawakened everything that was going on here, the music was going down, and then that started going up. I was doing small labels and all of the sudden I am faced with this gigantic order, taking all my time just mastering. And it was great because I was working just with the equipment here, nobody in the studio, just me and what I needed, and that was my job for a couple of years. It was just great, and it applied to some Blue Note catalogue too. And even...

DS: Prestige then?

RVG: Prestige, right. They were owned by...

DS: Concord.

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RVG: Concord, exactly. So, that was really a nice cycle. I enjoyed that.

Maureen Van Gelder: It was fun listening to the tapes you recorded several years ago?

RVG: Yeah. Several of them, I realized musically, hearing them for the first time, how great they were. During the session I had to be objective, you know? But when I hear the music comes back ten years later, boy, that sounded great. It gave me a second chance to hear it. The problem in what was happening is that during those early years from the 80's on, and the C.D. those re-masters, and those transfers to digital, weren't made by me, I had nothing to do with it. Particularly when they came out on Sony, I was not involved in any way with those masters. Everybody started to say, "Well I like the old albums better, I like the LPs" and what they were hearing was somebody's mastering of something they had never heard, had no idea what it should sound like, just totally disregarding the fact that they should understand the music they were dealing with.

DS: So you enjoy the opportunity to re-master those?

RVG: Oh, sure. I'd do it again.

DS: And every time you do it you approach it...

RVG: That's right, in a different way. I think its better that I have other equipment. I try to keep on top of things even if I don't use them right away, I know I have it and I can use it.

Maureen Van Gelder: You also have a passion for photography.

RVG: Well, that's a side issue. That's what I used to do when I didn't do this. It came in waves. Sometimes I was very interested, and totally ignored photography. In the early 60s I was taking pictures while this house was going up. But then later on, as things have slowed down, I switched my interest back to photography and I pursued that disciplined, with these pictures you see. So my connectivity...

DS: It again has a digital aspect to it too, different than when you started photography, and it was getting out chemicals...

RVG: It was a different world.

DS: And now you like dealing in a digital age?

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RVG: Oh, sure. It allows me to do things I couldn't possibly do before, and don't rely on. I don't get too gadgety, or too artificial. I try to keep everything real. Occasionally I go back now to my own old slides. If I scan them and do them just right, they look beautiful. I have a nice collection that I can work on. Is there a similarity between audio, sort of?

Maureen Van Gelder: It's sort of re-mastering your slides.

RVG: That's right, that's what scanning is.

Maureen Van Gelder: Did you ever play a musical instrument?

RVG: When I was a kid, trumpet, in high school band. I was terrible

Maureen Van Gelder: You played with a professional band once, didn't you?

RVG: No.

Maureen Van Gelder: Or you sat in the trumpet section? (Laughs)

RVG: Oh we also joked, "The night I played with Benny Goodman." (Laughs) It was in Newark, he was playing in Newark. And he got up and he said, "Come on up, play with the band," and he gets somebody's trumpet and hands it to him. He was sitting in the section! (Laughs)

DS: But the musicians, you know, I've been involved with so many of the musicians and they always love the fact that you were really conscious of them, and trying to get their sound. That's something that is a common thing, you know, that you weren't just getting the quote unquote trumpet sound. Freddie Hubbard told me that, "Rudy just always got my sound." That's always what you were looking for.

RVG: That was the goal and that's my reward. When you tell me stories like that from the musicians I respect, and when he says things like that, that's my reward.

DS: Just the night before last I was talking to Curtis Fuller, you know, "That's my sound, that's the sound that Rudy gets."

RVG: I try to understand them. I think I do. I grew up with them. Without them there would be nothing to talk about. I'd be a photographer taking baby pictures. (Laughs)

Maureen Van Gelder: I don't think you would ever be!

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RVG: I don't think so! (Laughs)

Maureen Van Gelder: Did you record Charlie Mingus, too?

RVG: Charlie Mingus?

Maureen Van Gelder: Yeah.

RVG: Sure. That was back in the days where Lennie Tristano was around. They were friends.

Maureen Van Gelder: And he had his own record label?

RVG: Yeah, called uh...

DS: Debut.

RVG: Debut, right. I knew Cecilia, too, his wife at the time. She was a very nice lady, or still is, I hope.

Maureen Van Gelder: And Eddie Byrd, remember him? He was on some of your earliest records in '53.

RVG: You mean about Debut. Yeah I used to make playbacks, acetate playbacks, and I had a bunch of labels I used to stick on so you knew what the label was, what the record was. I had a cart of them out here from the printer. Oh there is the house...jeez.

Maureen Van Gelder: Tell us what it was like.

RVG: A friend of mine knew and artist.

Maureen Van Gelder: And that's a sound wave huh?

RVG: Yeah he was pretty famous and he drew for the newspapers. If I mentioned the name you would know who he was. He lives in Connecticut, or did live in Connecticut. I cant remember. So he asked to design the label for me, and he did. That's the one with that little one sound wave line. Oh, here! So he did that and I used to put that on all of my playbacks. An amateur would come in and record and then hand him a disc and that was the end of it.

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DS: We touched on the overdubbing process but it's kind of built up to one particular artist for me, in my discussions and that Bobby Sherwood. Maybe you can tell a little bit about what that was.

RVG: So early on, um, in the development and the use of tape recordings some musicians realized that you could play the instruments, play an arrangement, as if you were the individual musician in the band. So you'd end up with a whole band playing the piece and one person would be doing it. First you record a basic rhythm, then you put something else on it like a piano, then you put something else on it, and you end up with a chorus. Les Paul was the one who originally popularized the technique, this idea of overdubbing upon an original track.

DS: That's done with two machines right?

RVG: Two machines, you needed two machines, right. Les Paul went beyond that; he devised a way of doing multiple tracks on one machine. He had an 8-track machine built by Ampex especially for him. He could lay down the rhythm or whatever it was, and lay down the sequence he did. He ended up with a full, rich, beautiful guitar sound as if 8 people were playing or singing. The whole world knows the records he made, right. During that time, maybe even before that time, a fellow by the name of Bobby Sherwood was recording for one of the Decca labels, Coral. How's that?

DS: Perfect.

RVG: So Bob Theil, who I knew, Bobby Sherwood's motivation, he could play violin, he could play drums, he could play trumpet, he could play all those instruments. So they decided lets make a record and overdub it. So that was all done in Hackensack on two machines.

Maureen Van Gelder: And he was the whole band?

RVG: He did the whole band! Did you say you found that?

DS: Mhmm.

RVG: I wonder if anybody alive actually has that.

Maureen Van Gelder: And they did a...you did a Downbeat blindfold test.

RVG: Oh yeah.

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Maureen Van Gelder: Leonard Feather was the interviewer.

RVG: Oh yeah, I know what you're talking about. Leonard Feather, he had a column in Downbeat called "Blindfold Test" and I did it once. What was the record though?

Maureen Van Gelder: He played the Bobby Sherwood one.

RVG: Oh yeah. He knew it was an overdub, Leonard Feather knew it, but he didn't know I did it. So he's sitting there trying to catch me with the blindfold test (Laughs). And it was the last one of the tests. So he says, "Listen to this Rudy, tell me what you think it is." So he puts this record on and I laughed. I said, "I made that," and he didn't know that. Somewhere here there is a copy of that, not the record, the issue. I'm sure it's in the Downbeat files. You made reference to that.

DS: I'm looking for it. Here it is.

Maureen Van Gelder: 1954

DS: 1954 Bobby Sherwood, "One Man Bad." Bobby Sherwood: four trumpet parts, mellophone, trombone, vibes, piano, guitar, bass, drums, and four vocal parts.

RVG: Right, I forgot the vocals! (Laughs) So we did that, and Leonard Feather played that back to me, expecting I don't know what. I started laughing. I'm glad you remembered that, I would have forgot.

Maureen Van Gelder: So Bobby Sherwood was the one who brought Bobby Sherwood to you?

RVG: Bob Theil, musically, he was like the A&R man.

Maureen Van Gelder: So did he do the session, or was it just you and Bobby?

RVG: Just Bobby Sherwood came out. I'd love to have a copy of that. That's a wonderful book you have there.

Maureen Van Gelder: Yeah, well of course the subject of that is Rudy Van Gelder

RVG: You put that together, I'll bet.

DS: Right.

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RVG: I'll take twelve copies. (Laughs)

DS: So why don't you say a little bit about the Sauter Finegan band? That was something.

RVG: Well, this was during the glory years of band recording. During the glory years of the studio in New York, what was that? Oscar Hammerstein?

DS: The Hammerstein Ballroom.

RVG: Yeah, there were recording for RCA as a studio location. So, also at that time I knew Larry Elgart who had a band, a working band. Some of the musicians who played for Larry were on that session. Trumpet players, beautiful sounding trumpet players. Rather than talk about it, I wish you could hear it. I have a copy. So they asked me if I wanted to come into the session. So I went there, and this was for a couple of days.

DS: This was at the ballroom?

RVG: At the Manhattan Center. So I went there and I watched what was going on. I hear the beautiful music, hearing it live is nothing like the way that record sounds. With all the percussion effects, and beautiful brass players. So, I was at that session and I notice, this is a semi-technical comment; for RCA it was remote. They had to go in there with portable equipment. At that time this was all tubes. This was before transistors. So you know tubes have a filament and they have a plate. You have to put voltage on the filament to make it work, the little red thing, it glows. So I looked at there equipment. I said, "What the hell is that?" They wanted to do it really clean without any hum. So they used car batteries! They brought in car batteries to light the filaments of the tubes of their remote equipment. Isn't that amazing?

Maureen Van Gelder: So they wouldn't be tied to any electrical ground hum or anything.

RVG: Right, and also instead of having an A/C variant it was a steady no-hum. It was a great idea; it worked. That band was recorded with car batteries powering the tubes. Nobody in the world would know about this except the guys at RCA. Nobody would notice it. That's still here. Why did you mention that?

DS: I just asked about the Sauter Finegan and that was leading into Larry Elgart.

RVG: Yeah, well I don't want to talk about the Larry Elgart.

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DS: Okay.

Maureen Van Gelder: What shaped your concept of what things should sound like.

RVG: Now comes the question. A couple of things, some of this I still don't want to talk about. Alright? Go to a place like Symphony Hall in Boston. Stand on the stage; I was doing this for Vox when I was recording some solo stuff for Vox records at Symphony Hall, so I was there for a week. You stand on the stage of a place like that and you hear the sounds, not all musical, just little sounds. Shuffling your feet, clanking your music stand. The way sound is spread into that room, I fell in love with that. That's an example. Alright, I think that's...I haven't been around the world. You know, I never leave New Jersey. That's the greatest sound I have ever heard in my life, what happens in Symphony Hall in Boston. I don't know what they've done with it. But RCA went into record in that place. There's no audience, there's just chairs. They used to bring a blanket in to imitate, as if there were no chairs, to get the sound they wanted. Totally opposite to what the concept was, they wanted to deaden it up. I just threw that in, that's an aside. You ask me what I listen for? That sound. I try to create part, or some of it, or little minute reminders of that, of what I'm doing at the moment. That had nothing to do with the insight about why I do what I do for a living. What my concept is what I'm trying to do sonically. That's reflected in this place. When Columbia built that 30th street studio, they didn't build it, it was a church I think. Some engineers decided they like that sound, too. That place was magic, too.

Maureen Van Gelder: You were there?

RVG: Yeah, a couple of times. My friend invited me to be there. Originally the control room was in one place and they moved it to another place. I have a photo of the console by the way.

Maureen Van Gelder: That you took?

RVG: Yeah--No. This was a secret...what's the word? What do they call these guys I'm thinking of?

Maureen Van Gelder: Spy cameras?

RVG: The guys that caught Bin Laden? SEALS, this was a SEAL operation. (Laughs) I had a client who used Columbia for their facilities. They were recording there, classier music. They could go there anytime they want; they were Columbia's client right? But he was a pal of mine, and he loved photography too by the way. He had a 4X5

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Speedographic. I gave him the camera and he went in there and as a client he took a picture. I said, "Forget about your session, take a picture of your console," and have that, I found it. You saw it, you complained about the switches on the wall, how cheap they looked. Remember?

Maureen Van Gelder: Yes.

RVG: That's gone too.

Maureen Van Gelder: Do you want to talk about the Colonel?

RVG: Well, yeah. I don't know its kind of minutia. Colonel Ranger and his Ranger tone. I don't know why anybody would be interested in that. After World War II he came with a machine and tried to sell them, I don't think there is enough guts there.

DS: Well I've run into a blank myself.

RVG: Are we through, we could be through.

DS: Ken, you have any questions?

Ken Kimery: I mean, moving it to the present, with groups coming in here that you've seen the full spectrum of. Those young groups coming in here, what's your impression was how these young musicians are gracing this place with their music or not? How are you handling this, the transition there with them coming in? They're creating different ideas about presenting music.

DS: Yeah, I know what you mean. I don't want to mention any names; I don't think it's a good idea.

Ken Kimery: No, but just overall...

RVG: Of course, well I remember my fundamental laws of existence, its not me to make judgments. When they come in here, and I think I'm good at that, I know what they're trying to do and I try to give them what they're trying to do. That's part of what I do. I don't see any problem, any being judgmental about that, that's not what I do. I don't do that. So its easy if a trumpet player comes in and he plays like somebody else I know. I don't compare him. I accept it whether its good or not and try to make it sound good, no matter what. I did a date that I really enjoyed, beyond what I just said. All the young people, Chris--

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DS: Christian Scott.

RVG: Christian Scott, trumpet player. That was pleasure from beginning to end to do that. He's a good player, a good band, well rehearsed, got a nice sound, very stiff on the balance with an arranger, we really gave him what he wanted. It was perfect. I think it was today, and it was close enough.

DS: And he also wasn't wearing headphones right?

RVG: Yeah, maybe that's one of the reasons I liked him. That's right. I thoroughly enjoyed doing that. The record sounded good. They got some kind of award in Switzerland. That's how I handle a good modern group if they come in. Unfortunately, they couldn't do an extra one because of my health.

Ken Kimery: Are you still keeping very active studio time or your kind of being more selective?

RVG: I would not characterize it as very active studio time. I mean the studio is up to snuff, you know technically. I think its every bit as good as it ever was. You know Don is working here...

DS: But there's less—you know the industry has changed so drastically. There's less work, there's less recording going on by far. Many of the major studios that used to exist in New York are gone. Clinton, those studios, are power stations. They're all...

RVG: The Manhattan Center is probably back to doing...

DS: They do film things and film soundtracks.

RVG: The acoustics are meaningless. People don't understand, they fight it; they change it. There is nothing good as far as activity that I can't think of.

Ken Kimery: I asked Maureen about this. She mentioned that you're always looking at the latest technology that comes in and I asked a question about Pro Tools. That's something that you ventured into, dabbled into a little bit?

RVG: Pro Tools became the de facto standard for editing. But frankly, I never liked it. I never used it. There is something about it that's negative to me. I have a system that I used that's very comfortable. In two areas, both systems I have are comfortable in two areas. On neither Pro Tools nor... I mean understand me I am heavy into editing and still

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getting better at that too. But Pro Tools is not the answer for me. What did you say when you walked in here and saw my pictures?

Ken Kimery: I, because I absolutely love photographs, I was absolutely quite stunned by the images of the birds.

RVG: That's not what you said. Tell me what you said.

Ken Kimery: The specific one?

RVG: Yes.

Ken Kimery: I said, "Did you use Photoshop?" (Laughs)

RVG: Right! (Laughs)

Ken Kimery: Cause I know I would have to, to be able to capture a shot like that.

RVG: You see how deep that is? It actually destroys your belief in photography.

Ken Kimery: Well, it goes back to what you're talking about, the whole idea of being able to lay tracks and go back. So you don't know what you're really getting. When you go out and you find yourself paying \$100 or so to see this artist live, you realized, "Wait a minute."

RVG: That's exactly what I mean. That's exactly the same thing.

Ken Kimery: One thing Don mentioned also which is, we won't go into the technical side, but I noticed that there is a wonderful setup in your studio where he is able to manage his part of being a producer and not get in your way, and vice versa. The way the room is laid out, it seems to be very methodical about lets be successful.

RVG: That's different from anybody else. All of the other agents work in somebody else's facility, either at home or some kind of for hire place. Everything I've done is relevant to this room, Hackensack and here.

DS: But you left space in your recording studio where the producer can be comfortable and sit in an environment that he can hear exactly where your sitting, but in his own environment, not crowded around you.

RVG: Part of the original design was that.

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DS: That's what he was alluding to.

RVG: That was very thoughtful, very carefully considered. This thing overhangs the rest of the building. You can see where it divides, the triangular divide for the control room.

Ken Kimery: I notice, and Don mentioned this too, being somebody who in recording settings when you have to use headphones it's just uncomfortable as a drummer. I noticed in your booth, where you actually have the capability of taking the windows out--

RVG: Oh sure, that's right.

Ken Kimery: ...which is fantastic. It really allows that connectivity.

RVG: We do that, too. It depends what the requirements of the project are. If they want to come in and fix, we leave them in. If they just want to come in and play, we leave them out. Excuse me. Its hard to believe it was that long ago.

Ken Kimery: Have you had a chance to tally up the volume of recordings?

RVG: No. People ask and I kind of come up with 20,000. What do you think?

DS: I don't know. But just from the standard record sessions, there is a tremendous volume of them.

RVG: Is there a count in there?

DS: You know, and again, another thing that you've had to face is a lot of times—the frustrating thing—you look in some books and it just says New York is where they did the recording and its actually here.

RVG: Terrible. Someone wrote a book and they misplaced all them. The whole book, practically, said certain sessions were done in New York City. That's not true, they were done here. And I, among other people, complained to the person who did that. This was connected to a label out in California where the girls were typing out information to put out on the albums, from that book, which was wrong. So we finally got him to make another version. So listen to this, you know what they did? They made a paragraph in the—what do they call the beginning of the book?

DS: Introduction.

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RVG: [They wrote] “All mentions of New York City should be construed as recorded in Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey.” That was their solution.

DS: You were in Hackensack!

Ken Kimery: Oh you’re kidding me! So they left it all in there except for that little bit?

RVG: If you want to see it it’s in the book. You’ll believe me anyways.

Ken Kimery: Yeah, well this is exactly why we are doing this.

RVG: Right! Thank you very much! We can end it right there. (Laughs)

Ken Kimery: (Laughs)

DS: Well, Rudy, everyone always thinks that you’re going to be able to tell all these fantastic musicians’ stories about what was going on but your concentration wasn’t on that.

RVG: No, of course not, I was totally unaware of what was going on.

Maureen Van Gelder: What were you concentrating on?

RVG: I was concentrating on whether the equipment was working right, whether there was noise on channel 6, if there is a dirty contact on channel 20, whether I’m overloading the tape, is the tape running. Which period do you want talk about? Earlier on: was the tape running at the right speed? Is it going to be sharp a half a step or something? That’s what I worried about. I worry about if everything is working correctly.

Ken Kimery: Do you have perfect pitch?

RVG: No. No pitch. (Laughs)

Ken Kimery: And how were you able to discern if it was sharp or flat?

RVG: I have perfect pitch reading machines. I have a little gadget you never saw in your whole life. You push it against the tape and you can see the lines move forward or backward, without any kind of electronics. I can tell whether it’s working or not. I can put that at the beginning of the reel of the tape and it will show one speed, and at the end of the tape it will show another. This is true. Which is the truth. No tape machine ever ran the same speed from the beginning to the end. So the pitch would jump. I’m glad you

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brought this up. Everybody says, “Oh well I like analog tape.” It’s a different speed at the end of the reel than it is at the beginning. The same thing applies to discs.

Ken Kimery: So how was that rectified or do you just live with it?

RVG: I live with it. I know about it. It’s rectified by ignorance. (Laughs)

DS: But you know, like for example, didn’t a lot of other studios, when they would record, they knew they had to give it to a different—somebody else was going to have to mix it or master it so they would put like—what did they call them? Bell tones? Or they would put some kind of tone on the....

RVG: Not bell tones, just tones, plain old tones. (Imitates sound of tone)

DS: But you didn’t do that. You were going to master them yourself.

RVG: I didn’t do it, I’ll tell you why. That is absolutely necessary if you’re going to a no introduction process like Dolby. Most of the time they never get it right anyway even if they have the tones. I don’t need that, I know where I put the master, and I know where it’s supposed to be, so I don’t even bother with tones. I do occasionally for a European if they request it or something like that.

DS: But if you didn’t get the chance to re-master something or do something later and somebody takes those tapes they can mess it all up right?

RVG: Oh sure, most of them do. They just put their own tones on based on what they think it should be. Absolutely. I really didn’t care about that; I’m not a team player. When it goes down the line, I don’t care. I know it’s going to sound not right anyway and this doesn’t help. I don’t contribute to the catastrophe.

Maureen Van Gelder: But every project you do, you carry through from beginning to end.

RVG: That’s right, that’s why I do it that way. For years it’s been like that. If I can’t do the master, I don’t do it. I wish I had gotten in earlier on this C.D. thing but...I wish I had gotten in earlier on the transfer to C.D. There is a lot of stuff that is out there that I never got a chance to re-master by the way. There is one, I just did 20 for CTI to be released in Japan somewhere. I’m not even sure it’s going to be there, I think it’s going to be someplace else through Japan. That’s the only thing I regret about that. I don’t think if I were really putting all that other stuff, it wouldn’t have been any different. You know, what they do to it. Do you understand what I’m talking about?

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DS: Mhmm.

Ken Kimery: We're done?

RVG: I think so.

Ken Kimery: Well I just want to say on behalf of the Smithsonian Institution and as an agent, somewhat agent for the NEA for the Smithsonian, we really, really appreciate and thank you for letting us come into your studio, your home, and document you for the historic record here. This is something that will be available for generations to come.

RVG: Thank you. I appreciate the opportunity to get some things straightened out.

Ken Kimery: That's what we are here to do, straighten it out. If there is anything you want to straighten out after this, just let me know. We will continue to straighten it out.

RVG: Okay!

Ken Kimery: 'Cause we're the forever business. We're going to straighten those things out.

RVG: I like that, that's nice. (Laughs) That's great. I am too you know.

Ken Kimery: You are too, that's absolutely correct.

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END OF INTERVIEW

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