A Conversation with Danny O'Keefe
by Frank Goodman (Puremusic.com, 8/2009)

A few years back, we had a good little recording studio on Music Row in Nashville, Puremusic Studios. A lot of interesting things went down in there, with Dan Spomer at the board and managing things. Our buddy Mick Conley would often drop in and loan us gear to check out or to engineer or mix something.

One day Spomer tells me that Mick is bringing in Danny O'Keefe to cut a record. My jaw about hit the ground. When you think of that whole huge '70s songwriter thing, all those great songs, it's hard to think of a better one than "Good Time Charlie's Got The Blues," if you ask me. When you're talking about an incredibly listenable, incredibly rememberable song, it has all the earmarks. If you like, you can have a listen right now.

We were living in the country then, and recording our demos out there at Thomm Jutz's place, so I didn't get to be around the O'Keefe sessions, but Danny and I did meet and we sat down one day for a long and enjoyable conversation. He and Mick were doing incredible tracks, and the songs were outstanding.

Danny's songs have been recorded by a list of greats from Sheena Easton to Nickel Creek, and from Jackson Browne ("The Road") to The Blind Boys of Alabama. Alan Jackson recorded "Sleep (Anywhere On Earth You Are), which Danny wrote with the recently late and forever great Tim Krekel, that loss still aches. Another fabulous maestro who died since this recording is the amazing Carson Whitsett, a beloved Nashville keyboard legend, to whom the record is dedicated.

Danny O'Keefe is not the kind of songwriter that continued to write around the same handful of progressions and basic chords his career long. He's a master of melody and went all the places musically that those melodies took him, and he's written and continues to write all kinds of songs. What ties them together is that they're always good songs, which you can so easily and quickly tell even by running through different CDs on iTunes without even purchasing.

His latest record, *In Time,* is like a missing link, adult folk pop or soft rock that gets jazzy, but in the way that Anita Baker does, for instance. It's beautiful, and eminently listenable, just like "Goodtime Charlie's Got The Blues." This artist has really got all the goods, and he's always had them. His co-writers here include a very hip list of Nashville treasures, and the compositions bear them out.

Lastly, we'd like to say how blown away we are by the enlightened production by our good friend Mick Conley, a very Zen character whose ego is hard to put your finger on. His above and beyond approach to things certainly does him proud here. Kudos also to his partner and siren Terry Wilson, whose background vocals were sublime.

Get back up with Danny O'Keefe. He's one of the greatest songwriters that America has ever had.

Puremusic: It's been a real pleasure, though I've not been on the scene, having you at our studio, Danny; it's an amazing happenstance, I think. Whenever I've heard your name over the years there's always been kind of a hushed reverence attached to it in the songwriting or the musical community. On the one hand, you're so highly regarded, on the other hand, it's not that easy to find out about you. There's a rather grand mystique around the man and the artist.

So I started getting acquainted with everything I could that was out there -- in cyber world, anyway -- and was very surprised by some few things that I found. But one thing I couldn't find, for instance, is accounts of early days, what kind of a family and a home you may have grown up in, and what you were like as a young boy, in school and so forth.

Danny O'Keefe: Well, the thumbnail bio is that I was born in Spokane in '43, war years. My father, to his endless sadness and dismay, I think, was 4F. He got through basic training, and then they drummed him out. I think he had lung problems, or had something that was going to be a serious problem, and probably was a contributor to his later poor health. And Spokane really was kind of backwater in those days, but still really beautiful country. We camped -- I didn't hunt that early -- but we fished and all that. In the late '40s we moved to a town on the Columbia River that was an orcharding community, fruit community, called Wenatchee. It was down the river from the Grand Coulee, the second generator that was being built, the second phase of the Grand Coulee Dam. So a lot of people who had been migrants got to get off the big L, right, of working crops from Texas on up to Washington, and then back home. So Wenatchee was a boom town in 1949. My father was an insurance adjuster, so the only place we could rent was a garage that previously had been used to house chickens in 1949.

PM: Unbelievable.

DO: There was literally nothing in the town to rent. And it was great because there were a lot of people from the south and the southwest who all played or listened to country music. So my father was a jazz collector. So those influences which are still predominant influences are the sound of early jazz and Hank and Lefty Frizzell, and all those people that would have been radio stars then, as well as the pop music that was playing, Rosemary Clooney and whoever else would have been -- Frank Sinatra -- would have been on the radio.

So it's an interesting sort of panoply of music contexts that are there, because you'd go play at kids' houses, and there'd be guitars, which at the age of six or seven was an iconic and magical instrument. At the age of 63, it still is.

PM: [laughs] Isn't that the truth.

DO: Yeah. I mean, I didn't get one. I probably would have gone on to something else had I gotten a guitar at an early stage and gotten it out of my system. But I had to borrow one at the age of 19.

PM: You mean you didn't have one until then?

DO: No, no.

PM: Were you playing something else before then?

DO: Well, I mean, in junior high school I played clarinet.

PM: It was very popular in that time period, right?

DO: Well, it was a way to learn music.

PM: Right.

DO: We had a piano for a while, but unless you have somebody that can ease you into the piano, it's a really formidable instrument. If you don't have some way to anchor yourself into it, which is either by song or something that continually rewarding and helps you grow, just playing scales isn't going to do it. So I like playing music, just because I love music, but it wasn't really rewarding. At least with a guitar within a fairly short period of time and effort you can get three chords. You can get five. And with five chords the world opens up to you.

PM: As long as you don't want F to be one of them, you can get five.

DO: Well, that's why God invented a capo.

[laughter]

PM: Because by 19 you were probably starting to see a couple of shows that would electrify you into the future.

DO: Well, I saw early rock 'n' roll. In Wenatchee, the venue was the D & D Roller Rink, which had a little small band shell in it.

PM: Excellent acoustics, no doubt.

DO: It was pretty good. I saw Gene Vincent and Little Richard and Fats Domino there.

PM: Holy jeez.

DO: At the age of 13, the first record that I ever bought was that Specialty record of *Here's Little Richard.* I still have that record. That, I think, is one of the greatest rock 'n'

roll records ever made, right in there with anybody you want to talk about. You can hear it today, and I don't think it could have been more than a 3 track machine, and probably not even a 3 track machine.

PM: Right.

DO: You hear Earl Palmer's sound on drums, and the way that whole thing is miked and recorded, it just *pounds*.

PM: Just a force of nature, Little Richard.

DO: Oh, yeah, he's from Mars. He'll always be from Mars. It just doesn't matter. But in that period, when he was sort of really insular, right, and he was just complete within himself, and he had that voice that was just straight out of some kind of church I never got to go to.

PM: Were you one of several children?

DO: I'm an only child.

PM: What was your personality then as a young person? Were you recessive, or an outgoing fellow?

DO: I actually was both. I was reasonably popular with the jocks and reasonably popular with the hoods. And that was kind of how you work both sides of the street and could have friends on either side, because they were both interesting. It was a small town. The primary avocation was sports, so you had to be involved in Little League, you had to play whatever you could play, because anything--

PM: And what could you play?

DO: I could play baseball. I wasn't bad at baseball. I was pretty light for football. I'd actually get abused in football because I was only like 135 pounds. Even when a 150-pounder hits you and you're only 135, it's still a big edge at that age.

PM: And basketball, no?

DO: I love basketball, but unfortunately I was not very good at it. It was probably the sport that I loved the most and had the least skill and aptitude. I mean, I don't really regret it, I just didn't have it. When I got to junior year I was able to play tennis a little bit just because I had a little bit of backspin. But I quickly got over sports and I was interested in beatniks.

PM: Right. How did you get your first break?

DO: It's a wonderful story, I'd love to tell it.

Some friends of mine were in a band called the Daily Flash. And they were signed on Parrot. And they had a large following in Seattle. They were kind of like Seattle's answer to the Byrds. But they were more complex in some ways. They were kind of one of the first rock fusion bands. They played Herbie Hancock's songs like "Cantaloupe Island," and they played "Air Raid" by Grachan Moncur III. I mean, who knows what that is?

PM: [laughs] I never heard the man.

[learn more at www.grachanmoncur.com]

DO: No, I mean, they were very hip, and yet they'd still play great dance songs and all of that. The ones that are living are still good friends of mine.

So they had a deal, and they were all going down to L.A., so I rode in the car with them and went down there the first time, and stayed for less than a month. I was just so provincial in nature, L.A. was overwhelming, to say the least. And I didn't have a car, and I didn't have any money.

I came back to Seattle, and there was a local record company there, and somebody recommended me as a writer, and so we cut some singles. It's kind of where I got my early start. And then I went back to L.A. again with one of the guys who had been in that band, the Daily Flash. And he still had a relationship with Greene & Stone, who had been their managers. And Greene & Stone managed Sonny & Cher, The Buffalo Springfield, Dr. John, and Iron Butterfly. They were regarded in several ways as keen appreciators of talent. They were able to see talent pretty clearly -- certainly Charlie Green was. They were not considered scrupulously honest. But that's neither here nor there. They didn't take any of my money.

PM: Well, then, it's neither here nor there.

DO: That's right. So we would go and hang out with Charlie Greene in the afternoon. He was very much a character, just a classic New York street hustler, just really good at it. And one day somebody calls him on the phone, and we're just in there, we've been hanging the -- kibitzing with him. He was funny. And he said, "Get out your guitar. Get out your guitar. Go on." He said, "Ahmet, I want you to hear this kid."

PM: Wow.

DO: So I just played two songs into the phone. Charlie holds the phone, and I play the songs.

PM: He's on the phone with Ahmet Ertegun?

DO: Ahmet Ertegun, that's who he'd done deals with. That's how -- Iron Butterfly is on Atco, Buffalo Springfield are on Atlantic. Dr. John is on Atlantic, I think maybe the

Cotillion label or Atco label -- I don't know which. So he has a relationship with Ahmet. Ahmet was -- is still very much a very keen appreciator of talent and of the people who see talent. It's something of a generational thing, but it's also something that was specific to very few people in the music business who had the true A & R skill. Clive still has it. There were others that had it, that were really classic A & R men, who went out and saw talent and signed them and brought them in the studio. Ahmet was like that.

PM: What did you play him on the phone? Do you remember?

DO: Yes. "Good Time Charlie's Got the Blues," and "Steel Guitar." I don't necessarily think those are my best songs, but they seemed to be of a piece, in a sense.

PM: Right.

DO: And they were easy to play. So the next day Ahmet comes. And I don't know who he is at the time, but David Geffen is with him, and somebody else. And they think that we're a band, right? You know, the bass player from the Daily Flash and -- that we're going to be a band, and we want an advance to get some equipment, a van, and we want to go make a record and--

PM: Get on the road.

DO: Standard deal.

PM: Yeah.

DO: So Ahmet says, "Fine." Gives Charlie some money, which we don't see much of. Charlie gives us enough for rent, but I don't think he gave us much more than $500. And he probably got 5,000, or whatever.

PM: So he'd deduct his finder's fee right off the top.

DO: Right off the top. So that had nothing to do with us. I mean, that wasn't our business, and we weren't told about it. Unfortunately, one of the guys has a drug problem, and we don't have any equipment, we don't really have a drummer. So it just starts to fall apart.

PM: Right away.

DO: And I don't have any money. I can't stay there. So I come back to Seattle. A few weeks later I just get a wild hair, and I call Ahmet.

PM: Atta boy.

DO: And I said, "Remember, I played over the phone to you in Charlie Greene's office?" "Oh, yeah." He said, "Well, send me some demos. Send me some songs." And so I sent

him some stuff I'd recorded on a Webcor. You wouldn't want to be in the same room listening to that stuff now.

PM: Just you and a guitar?

DO: Yep. So I didn't hear back, and so I called back a couple weeks, three weeks later. And I mean, the great thing about Ahmet was that he'd always take your call.

PM: Amazing.

DO: I mean, he'd take your call if he knows who you are and it isn't a cold call. You never got that heavy screening and going three people deep to get to him. And he said, "Yeah, we listened to it. We didn't hear too much on it." I said, "Well, you heard 'Good Time Charlie' and 'Steel Guitar,' the same two songs I played for you over the phone." And off the phone he asked his assistant, "What were the songs that we said we liked?" The guy says, "Good Time Charlie" and "Steel Guitar." He said, "Okay." He said, "What do you want to do?" I said, "I want to make a record, and I need some money." He said, "How much do you need?" I said, "I don't know. Maybe about $5,000 or something." He said, "I'll give you ten, and we'll go down to Muscle Shoals and cut a record." Well, there are not very many people that understand what that means.

PM: That's unbelievable!

DO: A lot of people don't even really understand what Muscle Shoals was. It was just this kind of garage that had been turned into a studio with some of the finest tightest players that ever came out of the south, just -- they couldn't get out of the pocket if they tried.

PM: Right.

DO: And Atlantic had given them or sold them, or whatever, an eight-track Scully that was used gear for them. So they had an eight-track Scully, and they had players. And Muscle Shoals was funky. I mean, I don't even know anything about Muscle Shoals. I just went to the Holiday Inn and I went to the studio, and that was it. And two days later I was gone.

PM: And who was there when you got there? Who was on the scene?

DO: Well Solomon Burke was just paying his bill.

PM: Damn!

DO: He had just finished cutting his tracks and doing his vocals. And I think he was going to do horns someplace else. But yeah, he was just there, saying his goodbyes to Ahmet. And R.B. Greaves was up before me, and he cut a single called "Take A Letter Maria."

PM: Wow.

DO: And I'm on next. It was like one right after another.

PM: Damn!

DO: I mean, obviously Barry Beckett was playing piano, and Roger Hawkins and David Hood on percussion, and Eddie Hinton was playing guitar. I mean, I'm just this greenhorn from the northwest that -- I don't know anything. "Here's my song." "Okay."

PM: And you're in there to cut "Charlie" and "Steel Guitar."

DO: Yes. And the thing is that unfortunately that version of "Good Time Charlie" is not the single. When you hear it now, it's--

PM: That's the one with the flute, as it's called?

DO: Yeah, the flute. Where I ever got that idea, I just haven't got a clue -- except I think because we had a flute player in the original idea for that band, and he played along, and there was a conga player... That was kind of the arrangement that I'd had in my head.

PM: It was kind of almost a beatnik-y arrangement with the conga and the flute.

DO: Yeah. And it was a funny scene where Dan Penn and Spooner [Oldham] came in, and Dan Penn said, "You really need to put some vibraphone on that, some marimba on that." "Marimba? I don't think so." But he might have been right. It might have been a great sound on it.

PM: Did Spooner have anything to say?

DO: I just remember Spooner being there, but I don't remember him saying anything much, other than maybe just idle chat. But it was Dan specifically because he knew Ahmet and he had an idea.

PM: Right.

DO: They were just there briefly and they listened to the track, probably because Ahmet wanted--

PM: He said, "Come on down and take a listen to this."

DO: Yeah. He wanted to probably hear what Dan had to say about it. So I mean, the thing is that Ahmet is a force of nature. And I'm sure he would admit, that he probably was not a great record producer, because that's really not where his talent lay, and he just was too busy. To have him in Muscle Shoals was one thing, because it was fairly isolated, and it's many years before the cell phone. There was no way that everybody could get to him. As

soon as he was in L.A. -- and we cut half the sessions in L.A. -- then everybody could get to him. So he had phone calls stacked up. And L.A., he's at the Beverly Hills, and everybody in town wants to see him.

That first record was a really great schooling, a wonderful opportunity that was afforded me. We had a little bit of airplay from a song called "Covered Wagon." That was about it. I didn't know anything about touring. I didn't have a band. We kind of just went to the next record. The great thing in those sessions in New York was that he brought in Arif Mardin to help with some of the mixing, largely because he was too busy, and also because in Muscle Shoals they only had eight tracks. So for instance, on the drum track they put the piano. "Well, I'd like to hear some more piano -- no, not as much drums. Just some more piano." "Oh, thank you."

PM: That's a problem.

[laughter]

DO: So yeah, those kind of problems in those days, it's years from all the virtual tracks that you can bring to bear now. So that's just what we had. So they suggested after that that for the next record that Arif be the producer.

And at that point we really don't know each other. I think we've only just kind of met, right, and that's all. Not even any real conversations or anything. So I just meet him in Memphis, right? And we're going to record in American Studios, which is Chips Moman's old studio.

PM: Right.

DO: And all of those guys, wonderful players, Reggie Young and all those guys.

PM: Right.

DO: Mike Leech and everybody from that era, in that studio. I just fly down there and go directly to the Holiday Inn, and the next morning, whatever, we go to the studio. And it's just ping, ping, ping, back and forth. But again, really creative guys. I mean, I love that kind of thing, you just walk into a studio with guys that can play, and run the song down for them. I don't write music, so it's going to be head arrangements.

PM: Right, just run it down live.

DO: Yeah. And in a real sense, it is the essence of folk music, it's different instrumentation, but this is how we make folk music. We just start to pick, and somebody has an idea, and before we know it somebody says, "Hey, let's cut that." The great thing was that Arif, I think more than anyone else -- Ahmet may have suggested and known it, too, but we all knew that "Good Time Charlie" was a hit.

PM: Everybody knew that.

DO: I think so. We knew it originally, we just didn't have the arrangement.

PM: Right.

DO: So Arif brought to bear not only his arranging skills, but a sense of economy to it. He knew how to get it compact enough that it was right. And I mean, that is the great thing that he did for me -- besides *Breezy Stories* -- but just making it possible to go on, in a real sense, creating a real fit.

PM: Getting that totally right.

DO: Yeah. And the great thing about it was that it started in country, so it had some country respectability.

PM: Oh, it started as a record in country?

DO: Yeah. It started playing on country stations and got up above the 20s, but I don't know -- I have no remembrance of where. But it might have got to 18 or something, I think, at the most. And then they crossed it over.

PM: And to do that, they what, engaged a whole different team of promotion guys?

DO: This wasn't Atlantic at this point. This is in the era when custom labels...

PM: Right.

DO: And this to my endless chagrin, I had an opportunity to be one of the first artists to sign with David Geffen, and I didn't do it. I just chalk it up to bullheadedness and stupidity. I should have just had a lawyer and worked the contract out.

PM: You just got shown something and didn't like it and moved on, or--

DO: Yeah. I moved downstairs to a label that was run by Artie Mogul and Ron Di Blasio called Signpost. They were fine fellows, but they were not the visionaries that David Geffen was. And David Geffen had learned a great deal from Ahmet and others, right, but he was and remains one of the most astute people in the media arts.

PM: What was he like as a person back then? Was he a very aggressive guy? Very self-assured?

DO: Well, I think he was very self-assured. I think he's always been self-assured. I think that's who he is. I mean, he was an agent at CMA, and he was a great agent. He had Joni Mitchell and Miles Davis. I mean, he worked with the artists that he believed in and wanted to work with -- Laura Nyro -- great artists. But he was plotting and planning. And

I think that he and Ahmet had been plotting and planning, and Ahmet knew that he would be a good record man because he understood that generation of artists that was coming up in a way that maybe Ahmet appreciated, and maybe didn't. It's a generation of songwriters, so much different than the generation of rhythm & blues and jazz artists that had been predominant prior to that, that Ahmet and Wexler both really understood well.

Artie Mogul was a good record guy. He understood how to make a record and keep it moving. The problem was that he got in a pissing match with Ahmet, and that was a big mistake on his part, God rest his soul. Ahmet is nobody's fool, and Ahmet owned the company. Right? And Ahmet didn't give a shit if Artie Mogul had been band boy for Tommy Dorsey. It didn't matter. Ahmet was the son of the Turkish Ambassador to the United States.

PM: Was he?

DO: Yes, he was.

PM: Hello.

DO: In World War II. And believe me, that was one of the very important liaison positions.

PM: No doubt.

DO: The Dardanelles were very key.

So essentially, the single did well. I mean, it got into the Top Ten on both Billboard and Cashbox. The album was shelved because Ahmet basically told Arif to walk, and dropped the label -- or let him take the label wherever he was going, which I think was at Universal, where he found a home. But Ahmet wouldn't let him take the record. He said, "Atlantic owns that master. They only licensed it to you." So the record was gone. The album was gone.

PM: Damn.

DO: I mean, after that there was nothing but cutouts. There was no promotion after that. I think they tried to release "The Road" as a single. The thing I would say for David Geffen, that I certainly -- I didn't know well enough for myself -- David would have made that album -- insisted on that album being richer in so that, "Yes, 'Good Time Charlie' is the single, we know that, what's next? Can we be two or three deep?" Maybe not exactly in Top 40 radio, but FM was just beginning to become a strength.

PM: Underground radio, right.

DO: So what have we got that we can create a foundation for a career that radio will appreciate rather than just a one-off single, and goodbye. Right? So I mean, that's very important thing in a company. A lot of companies don't nurture artists anymore--

PM: Absolutely not.

DO: --because they don't have the interest, and it isn't how the system works anymore. You can get one or two CDs, and the group is gone. And if you made money, great, the group remains in debt, but the company made money, and "Bye."

PM: And that's all that counts.

DO: Yeah. So the music business, as you know, is a dangerous place, but it's a fine school.

PM: Right. And if you've got to have it, and if it's in your blood, there really isn't too much choice in the matter. I mean, you got to do what you got to do.

DO: Yeah, if you want to make music.

PM: How many versions of that incredible song ended up getting cut? Do we know?

DO: No, I don't. I mean, I certainly can cite all the ones that I know that are my favorites, from Elvis, to Willie, to Cab Calloway, to Mel Tormé, to Dwight Yoakam. Chet Atkins and Earl Klugh played a nice instrumental version of it.

PM: Together?

DO: Yeah.

PM: Wow. [here]

DO: So I mean, there's probably a lot more than I've ever been aware of.

PM: Right.

DO: I hope they keep cutting it.

PM: Yeah. I hope you get paid for all of them.

DO: Well, I do get paid for "Good Time Charlie." I don't always get paid for the records sold, but I get paid for the publishing, because I have good administrators.

PM: Who is your administrators on that?

DO: Warner Chappell. They've been very good over the years.

PM: That's a good company. I've always heard good things about them. There have been other significant covers, though, of your tunes. I mean, "Souvenirs," right?

DO: Well, I guess it's significant. I wish he'd put it on his own album instead of putting it on the Late Night Cafe of his record label. Jimmy Buffet is who we're talking about. I'm thrilled that he did it. When we let him have it, the implication was that he was going to put it on his own album as well as put it on that sampler.

PM: But that hasn't happened yet.

DO: No. I would have held it back, because I thought that song was a good song, and I thought that song could have been covered by a bunch of different people at the time, and it just... I didn't have much to say about it.

PM: And he did a good version of it.

DO: Yeah, he did, yeah.

PM: So why he wouldn't put it out on his record is a mystery. It was a good version, it's a great song.

DO: Yeah.

PM: Oh, and that was a tune with a guy I like a lot, Vince Melamed.

DO: Oh, yeah. One of my oldest, dearest friends. When "Good Time Charlie" had become a hit, and I needed a band and I needed to go out and tour, Vince and three other guys who have become some of my oldest, dearest friends, and one who I write with a great deal, Bill Braun, were in a band called the Mugwumps -- the other Mugwumps. And somebody said, "Here's a band. Why don't you go over and see if they can play your songs?" And so I went over to some club in Westwood in L.A., and they learned my songs, and off we went.

PM: "Sure enough, they can play my songs."

DO: Yeah. I was just about as green as a person could be.

PM: And Bill Braun went on to become quite a collaborator with you, right?

DO: Yes. He's one of my favorite musical people. He's very interesting, he's very hermetic. He was hermetic when he lived in Hollywood. He had one of my favorite houses in Hollywood. And then moved to Aspen, and still is one of those people that's hard to see, because he's just not visible.

PM: It's not usually the drummers that are hermetic.

DO: He's really a keyboard player. He loves percussion, and that's what he was in that band. But he really has a great sense of musicality and arrangement. He got some of the early synthesizers and sequences, and just learned them and started figuring that stuff out. I love writers that don't necessarily compose whole songs. They don't just give you a whole arrangement, and, "Here's the head, here's the tail, here's the bridge, here's the melody. Now write your lyric to that." Because that's like, oh, I don't think I can... I can do that, actually, but I don't like doing that.

PM: It's hard, yeah.

DO: Because I want to find that thing that allows me to sing as well. So he would just have pieces, right? "So, yeah, let's call that a verse, there's a chorus, there's a bridge, and let's put those together, sequence them. And now just let me go to the woodshed and burn that in." It's kind of like the way you do ads, that somebody gives you a jingle, and you just burn it into your head until you just can't get rid of it, and then it's like a mnemonic. Pretty soon you're just singing something that you don't know what it is, and it begins to get a phoneme or two, and then all of a sudden you have a word, and you're on your way. And I think probably most people who write love to write that way, because it is kind of an autonomic process -- the best songs are not calculated, they're gifts.

PM: I was amused when I saw that David Lindley had covered three songs. What did he cover? And what a cool guy to pick up three of your songs.

DO: Oh, yeah.

PM: He must be an old buddy, too?

DO: Old buddy, old buddy. I knew him when he was still one of the Lindley Brothers, when he was playing with Jackson.

PM: Was he playing banjo then, or what all?

DO: Well, no, actually, that's true, I knew him before, when he was in Kaleidoscope, which was an L.A. band. He played places like the Ash Grove and Troubadour, or whatever.

PM: And they were a wild act, right? What did he do?

DO: Oh, they were great. He would play things like -- I mean, I don't even remember what this instrument is called -- it's a Turkish instrument...

PM: The saz, yeah.

DO: He had been a winner of the Topanga Canyon Fiddle Contest.

PM: And the Banjo Contest, if I'm not mistaken -- both of those contests.

DO: Yeah. I mean, he's just a great instrumentalist. He has this great ability just to digest stuff, all kinds of -- I mean, he can go to Scandinavia and --

PM: And Madagascar.

DO: -- and go up there and play with the Sami up at the North Pole, and figure out what they're doing. And they're really complex.

PM: And get the essence of it.

DO: Yes, figure out the scales, and retune as he needs to, and play right in there with them. And they're very complex. They're kind of like European Indians in a way. They're a native people. We think of them as the laplanders, but they are the Sami.

PM: How do you spell that?

DO: S-a-m-i, I think. Yeah, very interesting people. But yeah, he's that way. He's a great absorber. He's not a true appreciator of the written chord.

PM: [laughs]

DO: I keep suggesting to him the chords that are in some of my songs that he's not availed himself of yet. But I owe him big. He did "He Would Have Loved You More Than Eva Braun." And he could actually get away with that song more easily than I can. He can just play it to every crowd he's playing in. I'm just a little more careful than he is.

PM: [laughs] That's funny.

DO: And he did me a great favor. I wrote a song with Dylan called "Well, Well, Well."

PM: And that's, of course, a story I want to get.

DO: Yeah. So he's the one that cuts that first, and Maria Muldaur hears it, and she cuts it with Mavis Staples, which is a wonderful version of it.

PM: Wow.

DO: And he teaches it to Ben Harper, because I think Ben Harper has learned a lot on his lap slide--

PM: You bet.

DO: Yeah. He learned a lot from David Lindley. They're booked by the same guy, so they obviously did some work together, and Ben paid some attention to what David was doing. So it's great. I mean, Ben cut it with the Blind Boys of Alabama.

PM: Damn!

DO: And he did a duet with Bonnie with her new DVD/CD release from a live concert for VH1.

PM: This is all "Well, Well, Well"--

DO: It's all "Well, Well," yeah. I can't get Dylan to say one thing about it.

PM: Like it never happened.

DO: That's right.

PM: [laughs] Well, I mean, he's not exactly a big co-writer. I've never heard of another co-write that I can think of.

DO: He had some co-writes, I think, in the '80s with somebody -- Jacques somebody, but we never figured out who that person was. There was a credit on one or two songs for somebody else. But no, I mean--

PM: He probably made it up.

DO: Maybe.

PM: [laughs]

[learn more here: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacques_Levy]

DO: But it isn't exactly like he needs to co-write.

PM: Of course not. [laughs] But what is the story of "Well, Well, Well"? How did that come down?

DO: Another one of those great stories -- glad that I have them.

I was signed to Dylan's publishing company, Special Rider Music, by Tom Snow's daughter -- Tom Snow, a great songwriter -- Tina Snow. She had taken a song of Dylan's -- it might have been "Forever Young" -- I can't remember what the song was -- and she demoed it with somebody else, so it didn't sound like Dylan. It sounded like the OJs or something. I'm not sure if she did it on her own or how it worked, but I think she was a friend of Carol Childs who was also a friend of Dylan's. And they gave him the tape or -- somehow they met -- I think they may have even got it cut, right? And then all of a

sudden the people there realized, "We have a whole catalog, the only thing that keeps people from cutting these songs is that they can't do them like Dylan. So let's demo them so they sound like demos. They're great songs. Let's rearrange them." It's a great idea. There's a huge catalog there of coverable songs.

So out of that she said, "Well, I'd like to think about signing writers." And I was the first writer. "All right. Great." They were very fair to me. I really loved working with them. So one day Bob sends a demo tape -- I'm not sure if it was something from the -- what was the band with George and Jeff Lynne and Tom Petty and -- who was that other guy -- the former Sun artist?

PM: [laughs]

DO: Yeah. What an amazing band that could not have been imagined except by the people who were in it. And Bob sends me an instrumental demo. It's like, "Wha? Huh?" And there's nothing much in it, it's bare bones.

PM: There's no melody indicated --

DO: No, not really.

PM: -- it's just a track.

DO: Yeah, there are some chord changes, but there's not a lot of that. And at one point you hear a voice off the microphone say, "Well, well," and they go to the change. Right? But it doesn't have like regular verse respect chorus, anything, it's just that. It's like an interruption of a band.

So I know I'm never going to get another shot at a co-write if I don't make some magic here. I mean, I just sort of took it as a joke in a way. And I just took that "Well, well" and I added another "well." You know, "You heard about three holes in the ground, didn't ya?" And I made it a song about ground water. Right? What bigger issue do we face, particularly in the West, but in the world as a whole. Ground water is going to be a lot more expensive than oil or gold or platinum or diamonds. I mean, you'll beg somebody for a five-dollar pint of water at some point.

That's basically it -- I sat and figured out a good pattern for it that had interesting chords, and gave them a demo and I sent it back. I sent Lindley a demo somehow, and I can't remember how that happened. I just sent him a tape of songs I had, and he jumped on that one. It fit into his style. I never heard from Bob's company, never heard from Bob. No one ever said that they think it was a good song or anything.

PM: Nothing?

DO: Nothing.

PM: Nothing! I mean, it's great, all the great things that happened to that song, but that just sucks that there was absolutely no communication from the... When it began with them sending an instrumental version, I mean, it's like, "Come on, you started this."

DO: But I thought it was perfect. I mean, it was the continuation of the enigma. The demo was enigmatic, and the reply was, of course, expected, and enigmatic.

PM: The perfect punch line to the riddle.

DO: Yeah, yeah. It was good. And I hope someday that he gets to someplace where he cuts it. But I don't have any real anticipation of that happening.

PM: Yeah, I mean, one wonders, does he have any recollection of the song. Did he ever even hear what came about?

DO: Oh, he knows about it, because I think he and Maria talked about it.

PM: Oh, great. So you know that at least.

DO: Yeah. I think he's well aware of it, he's just having his fun.

[laughter]

PM: I'm enjoying his current reinvention of himself.

DO: The history of our artists, regardless of who you're talking about, whether it's Walt Whitman or T.S. Eliot or anybody you want to talk about, he has a unique place that will hold itself through time. He will be someone who is referred to as having been important.

PM: Absolutely.

DO: And that's a very special thing. There's a body of work that when you finely digest it and decide which are the ripe apples and which are the ones that you're not going to keep, there's still going to be a lot of material there that will hold itself.

PM: And Jesse Colin Young is an old friend that you wrote some songs with, right?

DO: Yeah. Still a good friend. I don't see him much because he lives in Hawaii. But I communicate with him, don't necessarily talk to him. But yeah, an old dear friend. I love him.

PM: We might touch upon him again in the coffee part of our conversation. [Jesse has an organic coffee farm in Hawaii.]

You've known in your time and toured with so many cultural luminaries. Who among them are still close friends, some of the -- all the big names you've gigged with and toured with, who, when it all trickles down are like, "Oh, yeah, I'm still tight with them" -- because you know how those things come and go.

DO: Jackson and Bonnie. They were dear friends before we ever played, or before I ever played, opened for them, or was on the road with them or whatever. We did benefits. But I knew them -- Jackson was the first artist that David Geffen was going to sign to a label that had not had a name or funding. But Jackson was his first artist. And so that album that is really just called Jackson Browne, but which is always referred to as "Saturate Before Using" has always been a funny idea -- so I heard that in its demo form, and I thought was very good. I always remember I particularly liked "Song For Adam," which I still think is a great song. I think Bonnie and I worked together at the Troubadour, which is where I met her. And gosh, she worked for Warner Brothers, so everybody was kind of in the same family. I knew Lowell, and everybody was friends with Lowell. We all kind of knew each other.

PM: He must have been a very unusual kingpin on the scene.

DO: He was great. Lowell was a lot of fun. I'm sorry I didn't write with him. I mean, I know now how to write with people, but in that early period, I really only wrote by myself in sort of my own strange convoluted way, and I didn't really understand that and all the reciprocity that you need in collaboration. There were a lot of people -- I mean, I wish I'd written with Donny Hathaway. I wish I'd written with Hall & Oates. All the people who were open to that, I just didn't have a clue.

PM: How did you interact with Hall & Oates?

DO: Arif was recording them. They were doing *Abandoned Luncheonette* in Atlantic Studio. At the same time Bette Midler was in there cutting a record.

PM: And they were open to co-write and--

DO: Oh, yeah, they wanted to write. It's like I'm too thick.

PM: "I don't do that," yeah.

DO: I didn't actually understand how to do it. That was a skill that I learned from doing a few ads. I finally realized that there is a systems approach that one can take so the creative process doesn't have to always be this blind stumbling through the dark.

PM: When did you start to co-write, to have the first positive co-write experiences that led you to the understanding of that systems approach, for instance?

DO: Right. I think it's with Bill Braun. I don't think I knew that he was a keyboard player. And he had a synthesizer, and he had these bits and pieces. I can't remember what the

first song that I would have written... that would be interesting. I'll have to go back and research that.

PM: Because it's such a milestone, the first song that really works with somebody, that isn't just a diluted version of what you started with, it was something that happened.

DO: Right. I think it's on the first -- after I left Warner Brothers, it was a mutual agreement, they kind of didn't know what to do with me, I didn't know what to do with me. And I'd made a record called *The Global Blues* that nobody had a clue...

PM: Was it a political record? What was it, *The Global Blues*?

DO: Well, no. I mean, it is kind of a pastiche in some ways, unfortunately, because it has all those -- again, those influences, there are country influences as well as jazz.

PM: Ah, yeah.

DO: I mean, Tony Williams plays on it.

PM: Wild!

DO: Yeah. Roger Calloway plays on it. I mean, there are some really interesting things on it. It was a lesson, in a sense, that in those days -- I mean, we had a budget of $125,000. I'd give a digit -- not a finger, but a digit for a budget of $125,000 in this music business, the state of it is today. If we had stopped at $75,000, we had some rawness in it that was very attractive, kind of those board mixes, the first stuff that comes off and you go, "Mmmm, we got some muscle in that." But then part of the problem of having enough paint and canvas is that you just keep throwing paint there.

You know that movie of Picasso, where it's in two halves. And in the first half he's using emotions behind a screen, and he's just sitting there in his shorts and just painting with these ink -- emotion. But then the second half of it he's actually doing the painting. And it goes in stages. And in that painting there are at least five exquisite Picassos, right? Just gorgeous. And in the end, he finishes it, and it looks just like a Picasso. But he says, "I put too much paint on it. I ruined it." I'm not saying that I had a Picasso, I'm not trying to imply that. But I put too much paint on it.

PM: Yeah.

DO: And that's part of the thing that you have to learn is that sometimes the bones are more interesting than all the flesh.

PM: Yeah, much less the makeup, right.

DO: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Sometimes just a champion pig is what you want to look at. You don't need all that lipstick and rouge.

PM: [laughs] And along the way, I was surprised to find there were no less than ten records in your discography. Six in the '70s, two in the '80s?

DO: Six?

PM: Yeah. There's *Danny O'Keefe,* right?

DO: And then *O'Keefe.* Then *Breezy Stories, Harry Truman, American Roulette,* and *Global Blues.*

PM: Yeah.

DO: I'm amazed.

PM: And then *The Day to Day* is '80s.

DO: That was the joke. They didn't want to put it out as *The Day To Day,* so I said, "Well, let's just call it *Redux."* And then *Running From the Devil* [released in 2000].

PM: And so in the '90s you were doing something else.

DO: Yeah. I mean, in the '90s I wrote for Dylan's company. I wrote for a company here for a year called Bluewater Music.

PM: Oh, you wrote for Bluewater?

DO: Largely based on Bonita Allen signing me. I loved her. I thought she was a really good appreciator of songs. I still think she is.

PM: And were you writing whatever you chose to write? Were you writing for the country market, or what were you doing?

DO: To be honest with you, I don't think I ever understood how to write for the country market.

PM: Right.

DO: I wouldn't understand how do it now. But I was writing with other people.

PM: Were you writing with Jim Lauderdale or Al Anderson or those kind of guys?

DO: No, I didn't write with those guys. Those guys were Bluewater writers, and I didn't write with them, for whatever reason, I think just because Lauderdale and I just didn't have a chance to get together. We talked. We met.

PM: He's a hoot.

DO: Yeah, I liked him. I still like him. I just wasn't here. I mean, I just would come for two weeks and furiously work with whoever. I liked writing with Vince Melamed, Fred Knobloch -- and oh, a bunch of different people. A lot of it isn't country. It has to be what's moving. I don't look at the charts. If it works out that it's a song that somebody can cut and maybe even rearrange to their taste, great, go ahead on. I mean, my favorite version of "Good Time Charlie" is Waylon Jennings.

PM: That was a great version. I heard that this morning.

DO: He just plays it like Waylon. Right? It's a Waylon record.

PM: Totally different groove.

DO: Yeah. I mean, that's how I thought that it ought to be. I remember somebody calling me up -- it was on like Midnight Special or one of those shows, and somebody from the East Coast called me up and said, "Be sure and watch this, because Waylon just sang your song."

PM: Sang the hell out of it.

DO: Yeah. I thought it was great. And that's how I got to know him. He was playing someplace, the Palomino or someplace in L.A., and I just went out to see him to thank him. I didn't see him enough after that, but he was a friend for that brief period of time.

PM: Wow. And so what was it like meeting him?

DO: He was great. He was absolutely regular, a regular human being. Probably took a little bit too much uplift, but he was a great guy.

PM: [laughs] Yeah, I heard he did.

So we ought to talk about Jon Vezner and Mick Conley, who just walked through the studio, and the part they played in your return to recording in the new millennium.

DO: Yeah. I had written some songs with Jon, somebody put us together. But Jon remembers meeting me in Minneapolis when I played a club there. And we went and had some coffee, and he wanted to know about the music business. And he recalls that I was particularly down on it, and just tried to do my best to discourage him from ever getting into it -- which is what I pretty much tell everybody.

PM: [laughs]

DO: "If you want to climb this mountain, you get your own gear and you figure out your own maps, because it will break your heart if you're not careful."

So however we get together, we end up -- the first song that we write -- I have an idea called "Nanna and the Gambler," which is about my grandparents. And I have it fleshed out kind of as a story.

PM: I'm sorry, it's called…?

DO: "Nanna and the Gambler." Yeah, my grandmother, she would not be referred to as "Grandma." If anybody called her "Grandma" they would be likely to get in trouble. "Grandmother" was just a little bit too much, so Nanna. And I never knew my grandfather, but he was one of the last of the independent livestock brokers. He was an interesting man. Had been a cowboy in the late 19th century. He was a man who could put a herd together, so he was a livestock broker. But hardly anybody knows what that is anymore, because you don't see anybody put herds together. But it's an art.

So in that discussion of reading the lyric or whatever, discussing it, there was some line about hard words. And Vezner said, "Hard words are easy to say." Well, there you go. And then we were off. And it's a great song. My hope is that somebody will cut that song and make it their own.

PM: A great idea.

DO: Oh, it's a beautiful song. It's one of those songs that it just has resonance in the audience that everybody knows.

PM: Right. You get it right off.

DO: Everybody's got those pictures on their walls that they still say I love you to those pictures, and they wish to hell they'd sent them to the people that were there when they were alive. We all have that.

PM: So did "Nanna and the Gambler" ever end up getting written, or did it turn into "Hard Words"?

DO: It turned into "Hard Words."

PM: Wow. I love that about songs, it starts here and it goes there.

DO: Yeah. And I think I had the line in it that, "I love you were the hardest words of all," right, which unfortunately, they are. We say it too infrequently.

PM: And when we do say them, it doesn't mean as much as the places where they truly belong and go unspoken. They're said more casually than in the crucial instances they need to be said.

DO: Right. Because in that emotional bridge, that is the place that it's most often difficult to say anything. It's a tacit understanding, if it is understood.

PM: And somehow your co-writes with Jon led to Mick Conley.

DO: Mick Conley was Kathy Mattea's engineer. And Jon is a fan of new technology -- which I'm not. I'm the most primitive person in the world when it comes to technology. And he had had somebody build him a computer, and he had found a company -- I think they were from Minnesota somewhere -- that were making digital recording equipment. I don't even remember what their names were anymore. And we had enormous problems. And Mick had never used a computer in his life, and he learned. And so we were just in Jon Vezner's basement, and I'm not figuring it out, I'm just--

PM: Watching.

DO: I'm just playing.

[laughter]

DO: And I had some demo tracks that were still kind of recoverable, the basic tracks in them were kind of usable. And we cut some new tracks. We went out to Hendersonville -- Mick could tell us the name of the studio...

PM: Oh, Paul Martin's studio.

DO: Paul Martin's studio, yes. So we cut a bunch of stuff there that was really great.

PM: Clubhouse Recording. [cat’s amazing, check it out here]

DO: That was just Paul Martin's basement, but it was just -- the great thing about Nashville players is that, first of all, there is a wealth of them. And for the most part, they come to play. And they have an economy of playing, but they also have a wealth of creativity that often doesn't get used, if they're just being asked to play stock charts. So you add an augmented chord and maybe a couple diminished here and, and more than a minor or two, and all of a sudden they start to blossom. So you can have a lot of fun. I love to make records that way. Instead of walking into everybody's favorite session band that gets the call all the time, let's see what these guys got to bring.

And those sessions were fun. We had trouble with the computer, which was a source of aggravation to all, but in the process we got a good recording out of it, which unfortunately got picked up by a company that went out of business almost as soon as it opened its doors, and then the parent company went bankrupt, I mean, I think as -- well, I can't say that it was theft, but...

PM: But it seemed a little shady.

DO: It seemed wrong, in any case. Right? So that record got buried for five years, which was really unfortunate. I'm hoping that I can find somebody that is interested enough in redistributing it.

PM: And which one was that?

DO: It's called *Running From the Devil.* And I love the songs on it. It was the first time since 1984 where I'd actually been in the studio with new material -- and that was 1999.

PM: Right, because Redux was just simply that, right.

DO: Yeah, there's nothing new on that, yeah. And in fact, those aren't even remixes, because we had lost the original 32-track tapes from *Day To Day.*

PM: Ouch.

DO: They had been awarded somebody who was owed money by the people who financed it, and he walked away with them or lost them or something. But even if we had the money he didn't know where they were, and we could never recover them.

PM: Unbelievable.

DO: And unfortunately, it was largely made on a synthesizer package, so the drum machine and the whole thing and all -- I mean, you hear it now -- I love the songs, but I can't stand to hear some of the sounds. You know, the Linndrum sound from--

PM: Yeah, the early digital days were pretty painful.

DO: Yeah. So I'm actually going to retire that record, I think, and hopefully re-record some of the songs.

PM: But it led to more better computers and much better experiences with today's technology and recording with Mick Conley, and which brings us here to our studio today.

DO: Yeah. For the people that don't really understand the growth -- I mean, you can see it in your own personal computers, where a megabyte used to be precious, a gigabyte was unheard of--

PM: Right.

DO: -- at least in personal computing. And now you go down to the store, and, "I'd like to have a 200 gigabyte hard drive, please."

PM: "And I want it cheap, too." [laughs]

DO: Yeah. So the system that we're working with here, the Nuendo system, and this room, we never had that. And it isn't that it's necessarily faster, but it gives you this incredible ability to enrich the sound. I mean, I think that what we have is a fairly basic recording that sounds really rich.

PM: It's unbelievable. I've been listening to the tracks you've been working on, and it's so lush and so orchestral, and so really complex without sounding complex. And I see now going back through your work that that aspect of your work was there from the very beginning, even though there was a kind of rootsy, rock 'n' roll, folky guy at the beginning, that compositional complexity was there right from the top, because as you say, the jazz influences, for instance, were always a part of where you were coming from.

DO: Yeah. That's still what I listen to. I mean, for the most part, I don't listen to peers -- I mean, I'm happy for them, but I'm not interested in being influenced by them.

PM: Right. When we first saw each other, and before I turned the machine on today, you were telling me that Marty Stuart came over last night for a session.

DO: Yeah, how great.

PM: How did that go?

DO: Oh, it was wonderful.

PM: How did that come to be?

DO: Again, Mick Conley. It's all this close circle of friends. Mick Conley does sound for Marty, and has recorded some stuff with him. We heard a track last night that Marty had recorded with Mavis Staples that Mick had engineered, and it sounded great. And I think that Mick had mentioned to Marty that we were doing some stuff together, and maybe played him a taste or two or rough mixes, and Marty, just out of his generosity said, "Well, if I can be of help, I'd love to be involved." And Mick said, "Well, in that case, why didn't you come on over and bring your mandolin?" And we just sat down together and played a song last night.

PM: And so what did you play?

DO: A song called "The First Time." It wasn't on the original dozen songs that we had planned to record, but it's a song that whenever I've played it, people have come back afterwards and said, "Where can I get that?" And it's kind of a biography in a song -- not necessarily mine, could be anybody's biography. But it's a biography in however many verses and a chorus and a bridge. And it's a good song. And we just played it very simply.

PM: Did you play it on guitar?

DO: Yeah. He played mandolin, and I just played acoustic guitar. And it's a live recording, in that sense. We sang and played it three times, and the third time was the one we liked the best, but the first one was okay, too. We just decided to go with the third one. And Mick's wife, Terry Wilson, who is a wonderful singer, was the person who is singing all the harmonies on this new record, and she's a great singer.

PM: She's fantastic, love her.

DO: Yeah. She's incredibly inventive. I mean, I didn't tell her anything, I just said, "You just sit, and whatever you come up with will be fine." And so she and Mick just worked at their house on the computer. And every once in a while I'd get something and it was like, "Whoa, that's nice."

It's a luxury to be able to work with people that you have complete trust in the kind of decisions that they'll make, and just let them be musical. Don't have preconceived ideas. And that's largely where you get the nicest tones and hues.

PM: There's one more thing I would like to touch on with you, and that is: One of the fun conversations I've had just passing through while you're working was that you were telling me recently about roasting your own coffee with a $10 popcorn popper and a voltage regulator.

DO: Yes.

PM: Can we pick that back up for the benefit of the readers?

DO: Oh, that's a good one. It's a good one. What I have done from 1997 until this year, I started a nonprofit, just because I had to start a 501C3 in order to make the project work. It was called the Songbird Foundation. And I think we're going to sunset it this year, because it's largely been successful. You can go into virtually any supermarket, and certainly any coffeehouse, and find organic and shade-grown and Fair Trade Certified coffees. But in 1997, you couldn't.

PM: Ah, so you were at the beginning of that movement.

DO: Yes, with others. And what we had begun to recognize from the work that the Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center had done was that populations of birds were declining because their wintering grounds, which are in coffee country from southern Mexico all the way down into Peru, Latin America, that the forests of those countries that were the habitat for the migrating birds and many other species, were being cut to put in essentially crop coffee, produce higher yields, it was a hybrid that did all right in the sun, but it took a lot of fertilizer and a lot of pesticides to make a thrive. It's the basic American farming model, which I'm sorry is as corrupt as anything that exists.

So I knew that if I wanted to work with the coffee people that I better understand coffee at least to some degree. The beautiful thing about the coffee people, particularly the

specialty coffee people, like the guys in town here that run Bongo Java, and those kinds of specialty places -- not so much Starbucks, although I have nothing negative to say about Starbucks. I think that they have done a remarkable thing in waking up an awareness and a palate in people for an appreciation of coffee that did not exist before.

PM: That's true. They get pooh-poohed, but they did that.

DO: Yeah, they deserve great credit. And they had listened and they have responded to the environmental and social justice concerns, and I think that they are doing a great deal of good. The people in coffee are very passionate about coffee. Coffee is not like selling chinos or shirts and shoes and stuff. It's a passionate thing -- maybe because it is stimulant in nature, but it is part of our cultural diet, it's a very important part of it, as everyone admits. So it's like with musicians, if you're going to talk to them, you better know something and care something about the music they care about.

I knew that you could roast coffee -- somebody had told me, and I can't remember who it was, I hadn't seen it done -- but somebody said you can roast it in a hot air popcorn popper. You don't have to have any kind of fancy gear to do it. Westbend used to make these little hot-air popcorn poppers, everybody used to have one. Green coffee beans can be bought online. In those days there was a company called Sweet Maria's that still exists, but there are others now. So I just got some green beans and just started figuring it out. I didn't have the voltage regulator to begin with, and I didn't know anything about it. But there was just something great about roasting coffee.

Coffee is a complex experience, but it's not particularly difficult to roast. It goes through two stages, they're called cracks. And that first crack is kind of like the finger pop sound. And when that's done, there's a little resting period as the heat internally builds up in the bean, and then there's a little rice crispy pop, a little [makes popping noise], and that's about where you shut your machine off and pour your beans into a colander, and stir them to get the heat down, and there you got the freshest coffee in the world. And that's not too dissimilar to how they used to do it in Ethiopia, where they'd just put some beans on a skillet and put it over the fire, and roast them on up, and there's your fresh coffee.

So as I learn more about it, in roasting beans, you learn where they're from, you learn the conditions, the elevation -- all of the things that go into it, the variations of the coffee, whether it's Arabica or bourbon stock, or what's called "tipica," which is slightly different, but they're the older forms, and those were largely shade-grown. They were organic by default, if not certified. And I began to know a lot of the coffee people. And through that it led me to people who were involved in cooperatives and who were the farmers in particularly Costa Rica, but I know people from Mexico as well. So just this great learning experience about a commodity that is one of the biggest commodities that's traded in the world, and one that a great many economies are dependent upon. Costa Rica, I think it's 20 percent of their economy, at least. So it's been a great sort of trajectory of learning.

And the beauty part is that you get as fresh a cup of coffee as you can from some of the finest beans are grown in the world. So I mean, every week I roast up a couple pounds of fresh whatever -- could be a Yirgacheffe from Ethiopia, or it could be one of the nice rich chocolaty coffees from Guatemala. Or we were talking about the Lake Atitlan coffees, which are some of my favorites, Sulawesis -- I mean, there's a world of coffee that is a delight. And when you get really fresh coffee -- and you don't need cream and sugar. It's a lovely drink. Most of what American coffee drinkers drink is stale coffee, unfortunately. And they don't know that.

PM: Right. And over-roasted.

DO: Yes. For all the people who are coffee drinkers out there, if you see oily beans they're already done, they're not really drinkable anymore. So you want a browner bean, rather than the darker oily beans that have no flavor.

PM: Wow. Now what part does the voltage regulator play in the home roasting process?

DO: Popcorn poppers used to be readily available. I think they've been discontinued. But there's still some variation of them around that you can get at yard sales or whatever. But the voltage tends to vary to a degree on them, just because they're made for popcorn and they're cheap. So you can buy a $50 machine, a voltage regulator called a Variac. It's kind of a big weighty thing, but it's a great tool. And it allows you to dial the voltage down so that you can -- it's a way that you can kind of regulate your roast. So if it's starting to go too fast, you just dial it down, and just let the beans take a little bit longer. So you get a longer roast, and it's a more thorough way to roast, and you get more flavor as a result of it. And different beans, depending on the moisture content and some other variables--

PM: So they're all different, every bean wants a little different time to cook before that first crack, for instance?

DO: Yes. And the other thing, too, is that in some coffees you will see careful picking. You won't know it when you see the green beans, but as you roast them, some will remain lighter through the roast. And they were greener picked. You see a lot of it sometimes in the wilder coffees, the Ethiopian coffees, because those will just be -- they're essentially as they were in the beginning, they're sort of wild strains that people go out when it's harvest season and pick everything. I mean, they don't necessarily live out there. And it's time to pick, and then maybe you get another $500 a year if you go out and pick coffee and sell it. So they're trying to educate them a little bit more, but it's still a hard thing if you just don't have that time and you're not getting that kind of profit from it.

PM: Right.

DO: So you'll see those kind of variables. And you can tell the ones that have been more carefully picked, because they'll have a uniformity and more sweetness in the cup. But the wild coffees, the Ethiopian Yirgacheffe, using the Harrars, they have other notes in

them, more floral notes and citrus notes that are really unlike any other coffees. I mean, they're my favorites. They're more complex than some people like, but they're great in a blend. They would just bring top notes to a blend that are quite lovely.

PM: I worked at the original Peet's on Euclid, on the north side of Berkeley.

DO: Oh, with Alfred Peet?

PM: Yeah.

DO: Oh man! There's the guy that started the dark roast.

PM: Truly. And I think I learned as much talking to you about coffee as I did working there, although it was a privilege, it's a wonderful place.

DO: I mean, he's the guy that influenced everybody. There were coffeehouses in New York and whatever, but Alfred Peet really got into it. And roasted dark largely for espresso. You do kind of need a dark roast to cut through milk if you're going to serve cappuccinos and cafe olés and those. And I think he was influenced by the Italians, the Italians tend to roast dark, largely for that reason. He influenced Jerry Baldwin, and some of those people that originally started the very first Starbucks, which was a different company than what this Starbucks that we know. Howard Schultz also -- I may not have this story exactly right but I believe Howard Schultz went to Italy and noticed that people would stop at a little kiosk or little outside coffee bars and just have an espresso and shoot the breeze for a minute and be off on their way, and they would do that several times a day, and thought, there's something here. And I think that those three original guys had tried to leverage their Starbucks, which wasn't an espresso store, they just had the coffees of the world available. And that was an unusual thing at the time to be able to get something other than Yuban or--

PM: Right.

DO: So I think that was what their idea was, though I'm not positive of that, that they were going to take coffee stores around. And I think Howard, what he saw was that there was a coffeehouse concept that hadn't been sort of homogenized for everybody, that here's a place where Grandma and the grandkids can go as well as people who just want to have a nice safe appropriate place to be in. And it was a revolution of a sort.

PM: Absolutely. Well, I was living in Shanghai recently, and there were 60 Starbucks there.

DO: Yeah. And I think Starbucks should be rightfully credited with this: England was a tea drinking country, right, Great Britain?

PM: Right.

DO: United Kingdom. It's now a coffee drinking country.

PM: Is it?

DO: Absolutely.

PM: Oh, I didn't know.

DO: Ireland and England, both, they still have their cup of tea, of course, it's a traditional thing. But there is a great amount of coffee that's being sold and drunk. India, you think of tea. India grows an enormous amount of coffee. And India is quickly moving into a coffee culture -- it's more than a niche. It's becoming a true social beverage, as it is in China. That's a pretty amazing thing. You think of the Chinese as drinking tea. Chinese are drinking coffee cup after cup and think it's a wonderful thing. I'm thrilled for him. He figured something out. Everybody else can carp about him if they want, but that's a pretty amazing thing to figure out how to take a model and globalize it.

PM: So what's on the horizon, career-wise, now that you're back to recording in a solid way? You're just going to keep writing and recording? Are you going to look for new labels, look for new publishing deals, or do it yourself?

DO: Probably not publishing deals. Most of the songs that I've had recorded were either because I gave somebody a tape or somebody heard a song on a record. I've never particularly had success with publishers running material.

PM: Right. And few people do, I think.

DO: They tend to be banks, banks and holding companies, as much as anything. And that's a very important service for a writer that needs that yearly stipend in order to be able to continue writing, it's important. I mean, it's not that I couldn't use it, it's just that I don't think I would do that again. I want both my masters and my songs for myself.

PM: Yeah.

DO: It's not a selfish thing, it's just they're mine, I don't want to give them away if I don't absolutely have to do it. As I said, I've really enjoyed doing nonprofit work for the last eight or nine years or so, but I think that what we set out to do with that organization has largely been accomplished, and there's no reason to keep reinventing it. And what I've missed enormously is being able to play for people, with people, and the luxury of being able to record my songs. I have another couple projects, one about the Nez Perce, that I would love to be able to make into a DVD, as well as a CD.

PM: I'm sorry, about the…?

DO: Nez Perce. Are you aware of Chief Joseph?

PM: Not really.

DO: Okay. Nez Perce were who greeted Lewis and Clark when they came up over the Lolo Pass and were starving to death. And the Nez Perce took care of them, and took care of their horses. And when they went down to Columbia and came back the next year, gave them all their horses, or the equivalent, and were -- and still are -- very gracious great people who were and have and continue to be abused by the government of the United States, which is us. It's a very sad story. It is a very moving story, a very heroic and courageous story. It's something I've been working on as a suite of songs since 1968 when I came out of like almost a dream state with the words "Looking Glass in Oregon" -- one night he had a dream, and that's the beginning of the tale.

PM: Wow.

DO: So there are a wealth of photographs that would be very interesting to put into that. I would love to have a little bit of live footage of what that country still looks like. It's that tri-corner area of Washington, Oregon, and Idaho, kind of where Hell's Canyon is, and the Wallowa Valley, it's still exceptionally beautiful country -- except you still have the people who took it from the Nez Perce who are still very racist.

PM: And they're camped out there.

DO: Yeah. They won't give it up.

PM: Yeah.

DO: Yeah, their mascot is the "savages" -- they still regard the Indians in less than kind terms. So that's the next project I would like to record. I have a bunch of songs, and I'm writing new songs. Who knows? I hope someone likes it well enough, hope that there's a label or a distribution company or somebody that's interested in working this record, because I love this record. I've been listening to it ever since we started to get the beginning of finished mixes here. And I mean, it isn't ego, it's just I like to hear what's there.

PM: Yes. It's a great bunch of songs. It's unbelievable -- and a great bunch of tracks. Thanks, Danny. It's really nice talking to you.

DO: Thank you, Frank. Yep, a pleasure.