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University of California
Berkeley, California

Jimmy McCracklin
WEST COAST BLUESMAN, PROLIFIC SONGWRITER, PIANIST AND SINGER

Interviews conducted by
Caroline Crawford and Ronnie Stewart
in 2002

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Jimmy McCracklin at Eli Mile High Club, Oakland, 2005

(Photo by Caroline Crawford)

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[End of Interview]

Interview History

Bluesman Jimmy McCracklin was one of the most prolific songwriters on the West Coast from the 1940s until his death in 2010. His first hit, “The Walk,” was recorded by his band the Blues Blasters on Checker Records in 1958, and was later covered by the Beatles in their *Let It Be* sessions. Other hits followed, such as “Think,” “Just Got to Know,” and “Shame, Shame, Shame,” and McCracklin was soon booked on Dick Clark’s *American Bandstand*.

McCracklin was born on August 13, 1921, in Helena, Arkansas, where his family owned a farm and nine of the ten McCracklin brothers and sisters made up the choir in the church. In the early 1940s McCracklin moved to St. Louis, where he eventually trained to be a boxer. He joined the Navy and continued to box, subsequently moving to California, where he worked and lived with Archie Moore.

After a disabling auto accident in the 1940s, McCracklin turned to the blues. Taught to play the piano and sing by Walter Davis, he wrote explosive songs largely about failed relationships and recorded for a number of labels, including those of Bob Geddins, a signal figure on the Oakland scene. McCracklin owned and ran clubs in Richmond, Oakland and San Francisco and performed widely with his Blues Blasters, featuring guitarist Robert Kelton initially, and then Lafayette Thomas.

McCracklin owned several recording labels, including Art-Tone, and over the next decades wrote and recorded hundreds of songs, many of which were covered by Lowell Fulson, Los Lobos, Otis Redding, Salt-n-Pepa and others. His more than twenty albums have been reissued many times in this country and Europe. He recorded his final album, *Hey Baby*, in 2010.

Many of McCracklin’s songs were pirated before he learned about copyright protection, sold as demos to record companies in Los Angeles and elsewhere. An example is “The Thrill is Gone,” which McCracklin claims to have written, and B.B. King, who made it his signature song, acknowledges McCracklin’s authorship in the 2004 documentary based on the oral history entitled “Jimmy Sings the Blues.” [The documentary is available on The Bancroft Library website with this oral history.] McCracklin continued to press for song rights without success until his death.

Blues guitarist Ronnie Stewart and I interviewed McCracklin at the Richmond, California, home he shared with Beulah, his wife of more than fifty years. His many gold records decorated the space over the piano where he played and sang during the interview, and the first tape ended with some lines from “Hate,” a song in process. During the session he brought out photographs of T-bone Walker, Lowell Fulson, Percy Mayfield and Big Mama Thornton and other musicians he had worked with, and club posters advertising his Blues Blasters’ performances at Minnie Lou’s, Dew Drop Inn, and the Savoy. Of the blues he said: “Blues is a feeling. It’s all in what happened in my life or to someone else’s life, which is the true facts and a feeling. When you’ve been mistreated, you’re not the onliest one. Someone else in the world has been mistreated...that’s the blues. It’s all in your feeling and the feeling is a true part of life.”

The Regional Oral History Office was established in 1954 to record autobiographical interviews with persons who have contributed significantly to California history. The office is under the administrative supervision of The Bancroft Library.

Caroline C. Crawford
Music Historian
Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library
University of California, Berkeley
March 2014

Interview 1: March, 14, 2002
Audio File 1

01-00:00:08

McCracklin: Now what is this for?

01-00:00:10

Stewart: The Oral History Department of UC Berkeley is archiving people about Seventh Street, about the music. Today is March 14th and this is our interview with the legendary Jimmy McCracklin. This is in conjunction with—well, it is done actually by the Oral History Department of UC Berkeley. And we're going to be archiving all the history of great people like you, Jimmy. We specifically looking at the history of Seventh Street and the history of Oakland's blues. And we feel, from a historical standpoint, you are the man. You and Bob Geddins and a few others, is the most important people that ever come out of Oakland and also one of the pioneers of the West Coast blues sound.

What I'd like to do, Jimmy, we want to ask you—you get a lot of interviews, but I want to start back in Arkansas, even before that. I'd like to know your parents' name, where were you born? We want to go back as far as you can, even before you played music. Could you start off with where were you born?

01-00:01:37

McCracklin: First, what I would like to do, Ronnie, is to thank you and Caroline for coming by. And thank you for thinking what you think of me.

01-00:01:50

Stewart: Oh, absolutely.

01-00:01:52

McCracklin: I was born in Arkansas and raised in St. Louis, Missouri. August 13, 1921. My dad, he was born in Louisiana, I believe, and my mother, she was born in Arkansas. They passed away about fifteen or twenty years ago. And that's the size of it. My mother's maiden name was Emma Coldwell. My father and her got together, I think they were together for about fifty-five years. She passed away first and he followed her. Being honest about it, she passed away going home from out here in California. She had a heart attack on the train, and he passed away in Arkansas about two years later. So. In this world, you know, we all gotta go some day.

01-00:01:58

Stewart: How many brothers and sisters, before we leave Arkansas?

01-00:02:00
McCracklin: Well, it was three boys. The oldest boy, he deceased, he passed away. And I have another brother now, the older brother, he's living in Louisiana.

01-00:02:13
Stewart: What part?

01-00:02:14
McCracklin: Well, I believe Shreveport. He was living in California, so he decided he wanted to go to Louisiana. We have a few peoples down there in Louisiana, and that's where my father was born. So, he's back in Louisiana now, and I'm still out in California.

01-00:02:35
Stewart: Doing well, doing well. Did you have any sisters, Jimmy?

01-00:02:38
McCracklin: Oh, yes. It was seven girls altogether.

01-00:02:44
Stewart: Seven girls!

01-00:02:45
McCracklin: Yeah, some of them deceased. And right now, I have three living sisters right now.

01-00:02:53
Stewart: Did your father or mother, did they sing in church? Anybody musicians in your—

01-00:03:00
McCracklin: No, they weren't in the musical business. They were strictly—my father was a deacon, and my mother, she was a star, whatever you call it.

01-00:03:08
Stewart: Eastern Star?

01-00:03:10
McCracklin: Yeah, Eastern Star. So, they both are passed away, and they kept us in church. We used to sing in the choir. The facts are, it was almost enough of us together, just the family, to make a choir out of it. I was very young then.

I don't remember ever having a piano or nothing like that in church. We sang religion songs, and we'd just get out there and sing on our own. We'd use our hands for drums...and the whole church would be with us, so we didn't need no musicians. That's the Holiness church.

We'd do our own choiring and stuff at the house. My dad and mother, they would be the judge—they would sit back and listen and make sure that we did it the right way. We had harmony—we used to be beautiful, man. We would sing, and people would get upcited in the church and clap their hands. That's what I said, that was our music—our hands and patting our feet. That's the way we did it.

So...if you're doing it the right way and got the right harmony, you don't really need no big band or nothing behind you. At that time, there wasn't no such things as no bands in the South down through Arkansas playing church music and stuff. You didn't need that band! All you needed was voices. It was strictly spiritual.

Stewart: Did that help you in your singing today?

McCracklin: Well, it is still is in me, and I guess until I leave this earth it will be still with me. That's what I have to try to teach my daughter, and whatever, you know. She sings with me a lot of time I'm on the piano. Make sure she get the feeling in the harmony.

A lot of people don't understand, blues and jazz and all that stuff that come from the church, believe it or not. The church is what I would call the foundation. Whatever you put into music is nothing but a feeling. If you got the right feeling, you can get across with it, but without the right feeling...you can get across with it, but without the right felling you can't. What I feel, I gotta make you feel it. This is the way I see life. And if you don't feel it and I don't feel it, I ain't doing nothing. Just making noise.

So you got to have that feeling, and where I gets my feeling from, I do a lot of writing and it's about songs. Then I try to put the feeling to it with music that'll accomplish that particular song. That makes sense to someone else.

I have over 300 and some songs, that I've wrote in my lifetime, and it really gives me a good feeling to know that I have songs that have been covered by almost a hundred peoples. I don't just write songs for Jimmy McCracklin. I write songs for real life of peoples. I want my songs to connect with your life as well as it connects with mine.

Crawford: Have you written gospel songs?

McCracklin: Oh, yeah. But I never released a gospel song on my own. But if I stay around I'm gonna do it. In facts I have a song now that I just wrote the last week. It's called "Ghetto City Life." I might do a little bit of it for you before you leave, see what you think about it.*

Stewart: Did you ever play church music on your piano?

McCracklin: No, no. After I come to age of about, I believe, nine or ten, I left Arkansas and went to St. Louis, Missouri.

01-00:03:45
Stewart: Now, was this with the family or just you by yourself?

01-00:03:48
McCracklin: Well, I just went to St. Louis by myself because I had an uncle there. My mother's brother was living in St. Louis, so I went to St. Louis, and that's where I made my home until I got up to about eighteen or nineteen. And I started all my activity in St. Louis.

01-00:04:10
Stewart: Okay, so that's how the St. Louis connection came in, because—

01-00:04:13
McCracklin: That's how the connection of St. Louis came in, yes. But I was born in Arkansas, and I feel proud of it, generally.

01-00:04:20
Stewart: Yeah, my parents is from Pine Bluff. What part of Arkansas were you born in?

01-00:04:23
McCracklin: It's called H-E-L-E-N-A. Helena.

01-00:04:26
Stewart: Helena! That's where they have the King Biscuit Blues Festival.

01-00:04:29
McCracklin: That's the King Biscuit Blues Festival, right?

01-00:04:31
Stewart: Did you ever listen to the King Biscuit's blues hour when you was a kid, or do you remember that?

01-00:04:35
McCracklin: Well, I used to when I was young, and Sonny Boy Williamson, and all of them guys—

01-00:04:39
Stewart: Right, it was on the radio.

01-00:04:41
McCracklin: But Arkansas—the last time I played there a couple of years ago, we had almost a hundred thousand peoples.

01-00:04:49
Stewart: At the King Biscuit Blues Festival?

01-00:04:49
McCracklin: Yeah, they reckon that Jimmy McCracklin was from there, you know. And they came out and showed their appreciation.

01-00:04:58
Stewart: Well, Jimmy, let me ask you this. What type of business—or was you actually from a farm, or was you from a rural area or was you actually out of the city around Helena? Was you living—did y'all have, like, a couple of acres?

01-00:05:11
McCracklin: Oh no, I was on a farm, you know.

01-00:05:13
Stewart: A real farm? Did you have animals, could you tell me?

01-00:05:15
McCracklin: Oh yeah, my dad had—I didn't have any of them! My dad had cows, hogs, chickens, and all that stuff.

01-00:05:21
Stewart: Oh really? So, you're a real farm boy!

01-00:05:24
McCracklin: That's why the record come in Arkansas. That's why I made "Arkansas" I made it to the true facts of actually what went down, when I remember, as I was a kid coming up.

01-00:05:36
Stewart: Did you guys slaughter your own meat? Did y'all have hogs?

01-00:05:39
McCracklin: We raised our own hogs and chicken. We didn't have to buy no meat. We raised our own corn. We did it all.

01-00:05:43
Stewart: Did you have greens and corn and peas and vegetables?

01-00:05:46
McCracklin: You name it, yeah.

01-00:05:47
Stewart: Oh, really? So, you said they wasn't yours, but I bet you your job was to feed them and slop the hogs.

01-00:05:52
McCracklin: Well no, we had to work. You know, the old man kept us working. And we learned how to work, and I'm proud of it now. Learned how to make our own living and everything. We didn't get nothing free.

01-00:06:05

Stewart:

This is kind of funny, but when you was like seven or eight, before you left, could you tell me your chores? I really want to dig into what Jimmy done on the farm. I mean, what did you do in the mornings before you go to school?

01-00:06:22

McCracklin:

Pick cotton and chop cotton, pull corn and pick peas, we did it all.

01-00:06:25

Stewart:

Did y'all grow cotton?

01-00:06:26

McCracklin:

Oh yeah. Oh yeah.

01-00:06:28

Stewart:

Oh okay. Well, how many acres did y'all have?

01-00:06:33

McCracklin:

I believe my dad had about eighty acres.

01-00:06:35

Stewart:

Eighty! Oh, see, I'm thinking like one or two acres.

01-00:06:38

McCracklin:

Oh, no, he had eighty acres. We've still got about seven acres down there now that was willed to my niece, after my mother and father deceased. We gave it to the niece, and we sold the rest of it and split it amongst the family.

01-00:06:55

Stewart:

Oh, okay. That's cool. Did your father work a day job? I mean the farm was a job, that was the sole—

01-00:07:02

McCracklin:

He was a farmer, he strictly was a farmer.

01-00:07:05

Stewart:

And y'all sold the crops, like the cotton, to the cotton gin company, or whatever?

01-00:07:10

McCracklin:

Well, he did all that. He carried the cotton to the gin and stuff like that, make the bales of cotton. I was just a farm boy. I don't pretend I'm a city man because I was raised on a farm, you know, in Arkansas.

01-00:07:27

Stewart:

This is interesting. You talk to a lot of blues guys from like Arkansas, Mississippi, Alabama and sometimes they'll say, "Well yeah, I had people in the country, but I was raised in the city." [laughter]

01-00:07:39
McCracklin: No. I was raised in Arkansas, and I feel proud of it.

01-00:07:44
Stewart: Arkansas here I come, huh? [laughs]

01-00:07:46
McCracklin: That's right.

01-00:07:47
Stewart: [laughs] Okay so, did you ever have to, like, wring a chicken's neck and dip it in the hot water and do all that stuff?

01-00:07:54
McCracklin: Did I ever do what?

01-00:07:55
Stewart: Have to wring a chicken's neck and pick all the feathers off it, you know? Did you have to do that?

01-00:08:01
McCracklin: Well, I've never really killed a chicken—that was up to the older kids.

01-00:08:04
Stewart: You just, what, fed the animals or am I reading into something here?

01-00:08:09
McCracklin: No, I never did no—I never plowed mules, my older brother was doing that and my dad. But I picked cotton and chopped corn and picked peas and dug up potatoes.

01-00:08:22
Stewart: Wow. So, did you have time to go to school?

01-00:08:25
McCracklin: Oh yeah. We went to school every day. They made sure we went to school, you know.

01-00:08:30
Stewart: Okay. Now, this is a funny question. Did you ever go bare-feet in the country?

01-00:08:34
McCracklin: Why do you ask me something like that?

01-00:08:37
Stewart: You know why I ask you something like that, because my mother, she's from Pine Bluff, and she said, "We never put on shoes until we went to school."

01-00:08:42
McCracklin: You want to know the answer if I ever went bare-footed? Okay, I'm gonna let you answer this for me: is an elephant heavy?

01-00:08:50
Stewart: Yeah—very! [laughter]

01-00:08:54
McCracklin: That's the answer right there, if an elephant is heavy. [laughs]

01-00:08:56
Stewart: Okay, because my mother said that they never really put on shoes until they went to church on Sunday.

01-00:09:04
McCracklin: Oh, we didn't go to church bare-footed. We had—

01-00:09:06
Stewart: No, they put on shoes, she said, that's the whole—

01-00:09:08
McCracklin: Just round the home, and in the fields—bare-footed was the thing, you know. At one time, you know, loved to go bare-footed. A lot of people still go bare-feet.

01-00:09:18
Stewart: You know, I would love to know, did you have overalls? I'm trying to get a mental picture. Did y'all wear overalls then?

01-00:09:25
McCracklin: We wore it all: overalls, short pants, and all of it.

01-00:09:29
Stewart: Well, Jimmy, how was the weather in Arkansas in the summer?

01-00:09:32
McCracklin: Well, it's just like anywhere else.

01-00:09:35
Stewart: Was it hot?

01-00:09:36
McCracklin: It was rough in the summer, that's all. I mean, hot in the summer months.

01-00:09:41
Stewart: And I presume y'all had outhouses and all that. Did y'all have inside plumbing or outside?

01-00:09:47
McCracklin: Well, no, we had—it was outside at that time.

01-00:09:51
Stewart: Everybody had them.

01-00:09:52
McCracklin: Yeah, that's right.

01-00:09:53
Stewart: Well, let me ask you something. Have you ever heard of Hope, Arkansas?

01-00:09:56
McCracklin: Oh yeah, that's right around the corner of Helena.

01-00:09:58
Stewart: Okay, now, you know Hope is the watermelon capital, probably, of the world. They grow the biggest watermelons in the world in Hope. Did you guys—

01-00:10:06
McCracklin: I never recall playing music in Hope, but I know where Hope is.

01-00:10:11
Stewart: Did you ever go pick watermelons there?

01-00:10:13
McCracklin: No. I left there when I was about nine. I never lived there after that.

01-00:10:19
Stewart: Why did you leave your family? I'm not trying to be too nosy, but— you was nine years old!

01-00:10:25
McCracklin: Well, I had a cousin. He was a lot older than I was, but he wanted to go to the city. I used to fool around in school and hit boys and knock them out, and he said, "You could be a good fighter if you leave."
[Laughter] So, I wanted to be a fighter, I thought I did, and inasmuch, I left and went to St. Louis and got started in the boxing game. I won, there, two Golden Gloves championship there—three, actually—three I win, three Golden Gloves.

01-00:11:02
Stewart: What weight, Jimmy?

01-00:11:04
McCracklin: Well, I started as a lightweight, went to welterweight, and up to middleweight.

01-00:11:08
Stewart: Go on, Jimmy.

01-00:11:10
McCracklin: I was training under a guy by the name of Pop Slaughter.

01-00:11:16
Stewart: Pop Slaughter, his name is pretty famous, ain't it?

01-00:11:18
McCracklin: Oh yeah, he was real famous. Well, of course, his son was the lieutenant governor of Missouri a few years ago.

01-00:11:27
Stewart: Oh.

01-00:11:29
McCracklin: I used to work with Pop Slaughter, and—

01-00:11:42
Stewart: And who?

01-00:11:44
McCracklin: Pop Slaughter, and all the fellows round the gym.

01-00:12:22
Stewart: Pop Slaughter. Now, he was your manager or trainer?

01-00:12:25
McCracklin: Well, he was a trainer. He owned a gym there in St. Louis on Bell Street. He used to train Sugar Ray Robinson and even Louis used to work out in his gym.

01-00:12:40
Stewart: Joe Louis?

01-00:12:40
McCracklin: Joe Louis, yeah—

01-00:12:41
Stewart: Did Kid Galahad ever—?

01-00:12:42
McCracklin: I got to know him real good. No, Kid Galahad wasn't around St. Louis.

01-00:12:46
Stewart: You got to know Joe Louis?

01-00:12:51
McCracklin: Oh yeah, very well.

01-00:12:52
Stewart: Oh okay. Now, you left Arkansas at nine, you wasn't boxing at nine?

01-00:13:00
McCracklin: I was just a young kid, boxing, you know—

01-00:13:02
Stewart: How old were you when you had your first amateur fight?

01-00:13:06
McCracklin: I started boxing when I was about seventeen or sixteen.

01-00:13:08
Stewart: Wow, Jimmy, you were real young.

01-00:13:10
McCracklin: Oh yeah, I was a young guy. That's when I met Archie Moore, he used to train there.

01-00:13:16
Stewart: Now, you and him became real good friends, I think—Archie Moore?

01-00:13:19
McCracklin: Yeah, we became good friends, because—

01-00:13:25
Stewart: Did he live with you at one point, or was that Sugar Ray Robinson?

01-00:13:28
McCracklin: Well, we lived with each other, Archie did. He used to live with me, and I lived with him. In fact, he the one influenced me in coming to California.

01-00:13:39
Stewart: Archie Moore?

01-00:13:40
McCracklin: Yeah, I came to California, and I lived in his place in San Diego.

01-00:13:46
Stewart: That's during the high point of his career, before he really became famous.

01-00:13:53
McCracklin: Yeah, that was during the time he was trying to get to the light-heavyweight championship of the world.

01-00:14:00
Stewart: Wow.

01-00:14:01
McCracklin: I was living with him then.

01-00:14:03
Stewart: He was very popular then.

01-00:14:06
McCracklin: Before that, he got awful sick. And he had a café up there. I used to run his café up there, take care of his home, take care of his family. I learned a lot from him boxing, you know.

01-00:14:20
Stewart: Jimmy, how many bouts you think you had, how many fights you had?

01-00:14:26
McCracklin: Oh, I did about close to thirty.

01-00:14:29
Stewart: Did you ever knock anybody out?

01-00:14:34
McCracklin: Not really. I only had twenty-one knockouts. It was all in the magazine—

01-00:14:39
Stewart: [laughs] Oh, man!

01-00:14:40
McCracklin: —it was in the magazines. It was in *Ring* magazine, and all of that, you know. I have records of it round here somewhere.

01-00:14:48
Stewart: You was in *Ring* magazine?

01-00:14:50
McCracklin: Yes, I was. Well, I can show you some records of it, if you want to look at it.

01-00:14:55
Stewart: We take your word. Wow, I didn't know that.

01-00:14:59
McCracklin: Oh yeah.

01-00:15:00
Stewart: You could have just as well become famous in the ring as you did as an entertainer and songwriter.

01-00:15:05
McCracklin: Well, yeah, well, I could, Ronnie. But I got hurt in a car wreck, accident. Unfortunate—I was coming from Los Angeles, I was trying to play music and fight, and I had a head-on collision with a tractor trailer.

01-00:15:21
Stewart: Wow. Were you by yourself?

01-00:15:24
McCracklin: No. I had a boy with me called—I hate to mention his name, because he died in the front seat, and I was fortunate enough to walk away from the accident. I walked away, and—well, that’s what you say when the good Lord’s in your corner. His name was Peter Morgan. He has a real famous brother, Joe Morgan, the ballplayer—

01-00:15:55
Stewart: Yeah!

01-00:15:56
McCracklin: Almost as young as his brother. Peter was a musician, he was a drummer.

01-00:16:01
Stewart: What? Jimmy, this is the first time—

01-00:16:05
McCracklin: Well, this is a big world, you know?

01-00:16:09
Stewart: Joe Morgan! Yeah, he was raised in Oakland.

01-00:16:12
McCracklin: Well, Joe Morgan is his brother, and Peter was Joe Morgan’s brother. He played drums.

01-00:16:21
Stewart: I never knew that.

01-00:16:22
McCracklin: He died in the accident, yeah. Right coming out of Los Angeles in the Grapevine. Just one of them things, you know. I was fortunate enough to walk away.

01-00:16:35
Stewart: You didn’t get hurt at all, hardly?

01-00:16:36
McCracklin: Not really, no. I got shook up a little bit.

01-00:16:39
Stewart: And you just decided to stop boxing then?

01-00:16:41
McCracklin: Well, I didn’t decide, you know. My shoulders got hurt, and I was advised by a lot of people, say, “You can sing until you get a hundred, you can’t fight that long.”

01-00:16:54
Stewart: [laughs] You know, Jimmy, it’s amazing. You so easy going. No one would never thought you’d be a boxer.

01-00:17:05
McCracklin: Well, I don't like talking about it. That's history. That's in the past.

01-00:17:11
Stewart: You really, excuse the pun, but you're a really dangerous person. You can really hurt somebody. You know how musicians always—[laughs]

01-00:17:21
McCracklin: Well, you know, once you learn, you can always take care of yourself. That's the greatest part. What happened is once I got off into music and starting writing songs and stuff, then I just got away from the fight game. I watch it sometime.

01-00:17:35
Stewart: And what—factors like that caused you to—you know, you hurting your shoulder and stuff like that, and your advisors, people telling you “Well, just go ahead and go into the music industry.” When did you start learning the piano because you're one of the few people who can play after hours. And you have to be a piano player to play after hours. When did you first sit down to the piano?

01-00:17:58
McCracklin: I did it like you did it— I just picked it up.

01-00:18:00
Stewart: Oh, okay.

01-00:18:02
McCracklin: Now, don't tell me you play by music. You play anything just by ear. So, I just picked it up. When I was around St. Louis, I was a kid. I used to watch this old guy, Walter Davis, and people like them. There was great blues singers.

01-00:18:20
Stewart: You got to see Walter Davis?

01-00:18:21
McCracklin: Oh yeah, my father and him was buddy-buddy. I used to look at him play and listen to him sing the blues. It just got into me, and I said “Someday I'm gonna do it.” So, here I am.

01-00:18:35
Stewart: Did you ever get to perform at St. Louis when you was young?

01-00:18:41
McCracklin: No, I didn't perform at St. Louis at that time because I wasn't off into it. I was in the fighting business mostly in St. Louis. But I have performed in St. Louis several times.

01-00:18:55

Stewart:

Yeah, after you made it. So, I would presume that your first professional gig was in LA.

01-00:19:03

McCracklin:

I would say my first professional gig was in Los Angeles. We used to—

01-00:19:13

Stewart:

Did you know Johnny Morris and the Blazers and all them people like that?

01-00:19:19

McCracklin:

Yeah, I met Johnny Morris in Oakland up here. But Johnny Morris wasn't in Los Angeles at that time—him and Bob White and all them folks. I think my first professional gig, if I recall right, was in Los Angeles. I believe that was during either the late fifties or late sixties. We used to play for a guy down there, in a little place called Jack Biscuit. I couldn't hardly carry a tune so good then, but if I remember right—

01-00:20:00

Stewart:

Oh, you was singing then.

01-00:20:04

McCracklin:

Yeah, I was doing singing and playing too. Playing my way the best I could play. It fitted what I was doing, you know. From there on out, that's what I started doing, and Jack Biscuit was my first professional job. I believe that was around 1959 or 1957, it was in that era.

01-00:20:31

Stewart:

I thought it'd be before that, because you had records out—

01-00:20:33

McCracklin:

No. Not playing music. See, a lot of guys get one thing wrong. A lot of people think I've been making records since '45. I was not making records in '45.

01-00:20:47

Stewart:

Yeah, that's what I—everybody tell me you started—

01-00:20:52

McCracklin:

No, that is wrong. You see what happens is, one guy come along with a pencil, and he uses his own ideas. He runs it, somebody else sees it, they'll take it. She get it, she'll take it. That's what they all can go by. It ain't the facts that I wasn't making records in '45. All I ever did, when I actually started to try and make records was around 1949 or 1950, when I actually started to making records. But what I was doing, I'd make a lot of what they call dubs.

01-00:21:26

Stewart: Yeah, demos, dubs.

01-00:21:28

McCracklin: Demos. And Ronnie, and what happened is those demos is with people like Bob Geddings and stuff like that, and Brad Taylor and them folks over in San Francisco, they kept up with those dubs. They'd take it they self. They'd put the dub out and put whatever date they want to put on it. That's just the way all that started.

01-00:22:00

Stewart: You know, I'm so glad we interviewed you because you're correcting history here. Historians have you, I've seen you in books, Jimmy, recorded first in 1942 and then '45.

01-00:22:12

McCracklin: No, God, no, not in '42!

01-00:22:14

Stewart: [laughs] Yes, I seen it! I seen it! I seen a book out of England—

01-00:22:18

McCracklin: I didn't even know what a studio was back in that time. [laughter] I have to be honest about it. It was about 1948, 1949 when I started making all them dubs. We used to run to the studio, it didn't cost us but two or three dollars. I thought I could sing and play. Me and the fellas would get together. We'd run down to the studio and make a dub. I'd come up to an old man and say, "You want to hear this dub?" "Yeah, leave it here, I'll listen to it." You know anything, you got about twenty- or thirty-five dubs stacked up on there, and they'd take them dubs and sell 'em. They took advantage of it. When they wanted to—who cared about a date, you know?

So, this is the way all that stuff got started. So one guy, he'll write from that. Some other guy, he'll write from that. And then another one will write from it. That's the way it is. So, I just let it be. It can't hurt nothing.

01-00:23:16

Stewart: So, you didn't even have contracts, there'd just be dubs like you say.

01-00:23:20

McCracklin: I didn't have nothing!

01-00:23:21

Stewart: Demos—and they would take it and—

01-00:23:21

McCracklin:

And right today, someone has stuff that we was doing in '49 or '50, and all that kind of stuff? It's out on the market! People buying it as a record. Believe it or not, a lot of them like that old stuff. [laughter]

So, this is the way that you get all of that stuff out there in front. And a lot of them say, no, he was born in Oklahoma. You'll write Oklahoma, another one will write Oklahoma. They don't get the real facts about it. They don't care about it, they just want to write on you.

01-00:23:53

Stewart:

Well, see, I found out, as I started chronicle-izing the history and doing what I'm doing now, a lot of people from England, a lot of writers, they tend to make blues like some fairytale life. You sell your soul to the devil and all this Robert Johnson crap. It's kind of like, almost, they try to make some kind mystery story out of the blues. They don't want to really deal with the truth. Like Tin Pan Alley, they said that that was a real story. That's not—that's just some lyrics.

01-00:24:25

McCracklin:

I've heard that question a lot about the blues. The blues is the originator of jazz, gospel, and all that stuff. It's the blues. Because the blues—that's why I've been fortunate enough to be what you call a writer as well—because the blues is a thing that is a true facts in life. It's not nothing that you guess up on, or create to happen. It's something that's happening or done happened. That's what you write the blues for.

01-00:25:02

Stewart:

Through trials and tribulations of life.

01-00:25:03

McCracklin:

That's right. It's a real part of life. You can take rap, or whatever you might take it, all created from the blues as they called it the blues. And like I said, it's a God-given thing because it's happening in real life. It don't have nothing to do with the color or nothing else. It's the real part of life. So, that's what makes the blues.

01-00:25:35

Stewart:

When did you actually sign your first record contract? Was that with Bob Geddins?

01-00:25:40

McCracklin:

No, no, no. I never signed a record contract with Bob Geddins in my life. [laughter] To be all honest about it, he was a nice fellow, he knew what he was doing. But what happened with Bob Geddins is, Bob Geddins would take your stuff and run the hell away with it. He'd sell it and take your dubs—just like what we went over a while ago.

01-00:26:14

Stewart: So, he'd go like to Martin Records or—

01-00:26:17

McCracklin: Any record company because he knew how to contact them and who to contact. But as far as signing a contract with Bob Geddins or Bob Geddins writing this for me—that never happened, Ronnie.

01-00:26:29

Stewart: So, you never really had a recording contract with Big Town or any of the big labels he had?

01-00:26:37

McCracklin: Oh yeah, I had a contract with Mercury Records.

01-00:26:40

Stewart: No, but Bob had Uptown Records, Big Town. He had—the name escapes me of some of his record companies. Art-Tone—wasn't that his label?

01-00:26:50

McCracklin: No, of course, Art-Tone was my label.

01-00:26:53

Stewart: Oh, I thought that was him?

01-00:26:54

McCracklin: No, no. I own nine labels myself.

01-00:26:57

Stewart: You know, I've got a book that says—I'm glad we could get that straight. One of these writers say that Art-Tone was Bob Geddins' label.

01-00:27:05

McCracklin: Bob Geddins ain't had nothing to do with Art-Tone. He didn't even know Art-Tone exists. That's Jimmy McCracklin. That's the first label I ever actually owned myself. The reason I made up my own label after I got in to know about recording and doing that—what happened is you go to a recording company on your own, and they wouldn't do it the way they want you to do it. So you put your own label out.

01-00:27:28

Stewart: Right.

01-00:27:29

McCracklin: See? Twenty-five years or thirty-five years ago, you could make your own record label, you go over to the radio station and get it heard.

01-00:27:36

Stewart: That's changed since then.

01-00:27:41
Crawford: Am I making you nervous, Ronnie?

01-00:27:44
Stewart: No.

01-00:27:45
Crawford: Okay, I just wanted to get him in the video too.

01-00:27:47
Stewart: Yeah, keep rolling.

01-00:27:48
McCracklin: Yeah, so Art-Tone was Jimmy McCracklin, is still Jimmy McCracklin.

01-00:27:54
Stewart: Okay, okay, because I have a discography of Bob Geddins, and it had Art-Tone as one of his labels.

01-00:28:01
McCracklin: No, he had nothing to do with Art-Tone.

01-00:28:03
Stewart: Maybe because you recorded with him, and they thought that—

01-00:28:06
McCracklin: I never recorded with him. What happened, Ronnie, I keep telling you. The way Bob got in possession of Jimmy McCracklin's material is I'd go to the studio, on my own, with my musicians, we'd make a dub. The cat at the bar "Man, listen to this." Said "Aw yeah, leave it here. I want to listen to it." This is the way Bob got in connection with me, and I've told a thousand people this, which is the truth. I don't have no reason to lie, because lying ain't proving anything. Bob didn't write nothing for me— I've been writing my own stuff ever since I got into it.

01-00:28:45
Stewart: Well, Jimmy, let's talk about the most important record ever out of Oakland, ever. A blues record, there ain't no question, historically speaking, with the longevity and the long-life. You know what I'm gonna say, "The Thrill is Gone." "The Thrill is Gone," on the record you see Geddins, Hawkins, and McCracklin. I've seen it Geddins, Hawkins, and McCracklin. I've seen it Geddins, McCracklin. I've seen it Hawkins, McCracklin. I've seen it three or four different ways. Could you tell us the story about the most important record, ever, out of Oakland because that record had two lives" It had B.B. King, and it had M.C. Hammer. Now, them two was, again, B.B. King's used to be "Sweet Sixteen," until he done "The Thrill is Gone," and that's his most popular—

- 01-00:29:34
McCracklin: To be all honest with you, I wouldn't lie. Roy Hawkins, Bob Geddins, had nothing to do with the writing of "The Thrill is Gone."
- 01-00:29:48
Stewart: What about the music?
- 01-00:29:50
McCracklin: Well, the music is always the same thing. All of it was one weight. There's one artist that has something to do with the writing, that's Jimmy McCracklin. I wouldn't lie. Bob Geddins had nothing to do with "The Thrill is Gone." The first lyrics and the sound of music—all Roy Hawkins had to do with it was learning the lyrics and singing it. At that particular time that we did "The Thrill is Gone," we did it at Sierra Sounds right here in Oakland, in Berkeley.
- 01-00:30:27
Stewart: Sierra Sounds, I thought that was done in 1949.
- 01-00:30:34
McCracklin: That was around '49 or '51. It was definitely between '49 and '55.
- 01-00:30:39
Stewart: Okay.
- 01-00:30:39
McCracklin: This is where I paid for the section. I and Roy was good partners, you know. Roy was hurt in an accident—he only had one hand. He played with one hand on the piano, and I played the bass part. Roy's left arm got paralyzed in an accident.
- 01-00:31:04
Stewart: A car accident.
- 01-00:31:05
McCracklin: A car accident. Roy played the lead part on the piano, and I played the bass. I wrote the lyrics, every word that's in there, "The Thrill is Gone." Roy sung it. I paid for the musicians: Ulysses James, Floyd, whoever was on it. I paid them. It wasn't that worse to pay, ten or twelve dollars all we was paid.
- 01-00:31:29
Stewart: Can you remember the musicians?
- 01-00:31:31
McCracklin: One guy was named Ulysses James. He was a guitar player.
- 01-00:31:35
Stewart: Oh, it wasn't Lafayette?

01-00:31:36

McCracklin: No, it wasn't Lafayette. See, a lot of folks be—you know, until you find out exactly what's happening—

01-00:31:41

Stewart: That's what we're here for, yeah.

01-00:31:43

McCracklin: And we had another horn player, it wasn't—it was another horn player on it. I can't recall. Those guys have died now.

01-00:31:50

Stewart: It wasn't Lovey Lovejoy?

01-00:31:53

McCracklin: Lovejoy? Oh, no, no, no, no. Lovejoy didn't exist. And the bass player was named Floyd Montgomery. Whatever the other guys was, it wasn't more than four or five of us.

I did this thing at Sierra Sounds with Roy Hawkins. He sung it. Why he sung it, why Jimmy McCracklin didn't sing it, at that time, I couldn't sing that type of thing like Roy could have performed it. I even, right there in my player, I got a tape over there to show you the day we cut it. Right in that box, I could show it to you now. I'll show it to you before you leave here. And the way Bob Geddins come into possession, have any kind of name put on "The Thrill is Gone" was, we took him the dub.

01-00:32:46

Stewart: There you go, here's where it happened, okay.

01-00:32:49

McCracklin: This is where it happened. What Bob did, we wanted to try to get on a label. We didn't have the knowledge, or the connection, the know-how to go to major labels like Blues Time and deal with folks in there. We go to Bob because he was educated in that business. He was a master when it comes down to making deals and getting yourself in there. I give credit where it's due. Bob took the dub, he goes to Modern Music down in Los Angeles.

01-00:33:19

Stewart: Modern Music?

01-00:33:20

McCracklin: The Bihari Brothers.

01-00:33:22

Stewart: The Bihari Brothers?

01-00:33:23

McCracklin:

The Biharis. He leaves the dub and everything with them. They say, “Yeah, we kinda like this.” So, what they did, they put it out, and they didn’t get the worldwide exposure or the big sales on it from Roy. They took a shot on it, they put it out.

Bob had his name on there, he didn’t have his name, but the way Bob would go down, when he’d get to make a deal “I wrote this, I did.” He ain’t wrote nothing! But we didn’t care. All we cared about was getting our name on the record and getting out there to try to work, make some money.

This is the way it happened, man, you know. So after Modern put out the record later on, I’ll say ten or twelve years—see, a lot of folks get the wrong idea about B.B. I didn’t actually write that song for B.B. The way B.B. got this song, he heard it on the record that we took to Modern and Modern put into a record. This is the way B.B. came into it. And he’ll tell you today, he know I wrote it. He admits that it’s myself.

But what happened is, B.B. heard the record, and he kinda switched it around and “This is what I like!” so he puts out there and all of a sudden, boom!

Stewart:

Huge hit. Big hit.

01-00:34:45

McCracklin:

Yeah, it’s a platinum for him, you know. The greatest thing he ever did. But what happened is, after B.B. got the record out there, Roy called me from Dallas and told me, said “Man that thing that B.B.—” I said, “What record?” I couldn’t even remember it.

01-00:35:01

Stewart:

What?!

01-00:35:02

McCracklin:

I couldn’t remember it, because—

01-00:35:05

Stewart:

Hold that thought, hold that thought.

01-00:35:07

McCracklin:

I hope it’s doing you some good because I’m telling you the truth.

Getting back to “The Thrill is Gone,” this is the way that B.B. got a hold of “The Thrill is Gone.” He got it from the record.

01-00:35:36

Stewart:

So, he somehow heard Roy Hawkins.

01-00:35:40
McCracklin: He heard the record that what I did with Roy, me and Roy did.

01-00:35:53
Stewart: How did Modern get it from Bob Geddins? How did they steal it?
How did they get the rights?

01-00:35:57
McCracklin: They didn't steal anything. Bob didn't steal it. Let me explain. I go through the same thing.

01-00:36:02
Stewart: How did they get the publishing then?

01-00:36:04
McCracklin: They had possession. We knew nothing about copyright and publishing and all that stuff. So, this is the way you gets it. You know, people don't—back in them days, you know—

01-00:36:16
Stewart: Forties and fifties.

01-00:36:18
McCracklin: You don't know how to protect, a writer, or get the writer's credit. In them days, ninety percent of the average black musician, blues singer trying to get out there and get a name for himself, all he really cared about was getting his name on the label.

01-00:36:39
Stewart: Right.

01-00:36:41
McCracklin: And see, people like Bob, and Bihari Brothers, and all them folks already in the business, this is where those folks became multimillionaires. Not only Bihari Brothers, mostly nine out of ten record sales. What they'd do, they'd take the black guy's stuff, put it out, put their name on theirs, publish it, sell it as in-house publishing, while we didn't know how to do that.

01-00:37:07
Stewart: And they took all the credit.

01-00:37:08
McCracklin: They'd take everything!

01-00:37:10
Stewart: The publishing, the writing. And that's all the economics of the record.

01-00:37:14

McCracklin: And we be walking up down the street, smoking a cigar, like we done did a great thing. We have, for somebody else. But until you learn, it costs you, you know?

01-00:37:23

Stewart: Yeah, okay.

01-00:37:24

McCracklin: See, that's why you said nothing beats experience.

So, this is the way Modern got the record. Modern put it on their house, as a publisher. They put their name and Bob's name on there as a writer.

But now what happened is some fellow up in Seattle, some older white fellow, I guess he's eighty or ninety years old. But what I want to say is this. He even got credit for "The Thrill is Gone."

Ronnie, anybody with common sense would know back in the forties and the fifties or the sixties or the seventies or the eighties, there's no white person out of America could sit down and write a "Thrill is Gone." Now, let's be honest about it.

01-00:38:16

Stewart: [laughs] I have to laugh.

01-00:38:18

McCracklin: But what he is a record collector. I don't even know the guy. He's a record collector, and he got credit for it.

01-00:38:23

Stewart: No, what he is, Jimmy, I found out about that. He's really not a record collector in the sense—he's a publishing collector.

01-00:38:30

McCracklin: That's the same thing, Ronnie—

01-00:38:31

Stewart: —like, Modern Records, yeah, he's a record collector—

01-00:38:32

McCracklin: Don't cut me off while I'm thinking.

01-00:38:35

Stewart: Go ahead.

01-00:38:35

McCracklin: So, what he did, he would go out and collect all them old guys' records and stuff?

01-00:38:40
Stewart: He'd check the copyright.

01-00:38:43
McCracklin: He gonna take it. He sends it in to see if he can get a clearance on it, and if you ain't paid by public demand to keep it going, he get a claim that he's a writer!

01-00:38:54
Stewart: Yeah, it's his now.

01-00:38:56
McCracklin: So, this is the way I'm thinking, this is why we still in court on this. I'm gonna get my song. But, like I'm saying, this is the way that I have a problem with "The Thrill is Gone."

01-00:39:08
Stewart: So, you found the guy, y'all found him. He's in Oregon?

01-00:39:11
McCracklin: Yeah. Oh yeah, they're searching over there, because he gonna admit "I didn't write it." All he did was—

01-00:39:18
Stewart: Re-copyright it.

01-00:39:19
McCracklin: He got it copyrighted.

01-00:39:21
Stewart: He re-copied it. When it became public domain.

01-00:39:24
McCracklin: It was never copyrighted from Modern. They didn't ever take the chance on doing it the right way.

01-00:39:29
Stewart: You mean, they didn't even copyright it?!

01-00:39:31
McCracklin: They didn't do nothing. They didn't copyright— they didn't say who wrote it.

01-00:39:34
Stewart: Oh! See, when a lot of record companies go out of business, somebody about all the publishing—the whole publishing house of their whole catalog. They might have had, say, fifteen artists. Well, all the publishing on that, they have these sales and people just buy them up. So, it wasn't even that. Man, I mean, I'm more shocked—

01-00:39:50
McCracklin: Modern Music never even copyrighted it.

01-00:39:51

Stewart: It went through they hands!

McCracklin: They didn't give Jimmy McCracklin, no Roy Hawkins, nobody credit for nothing.

01-00:39:57

Stewart: They was stupid to themselves!

01-00:39:59

McCracklin: This is regardless of what you might think, but this is the way it went down. What they did, they put the song out in a 78. They sent it to the radio station, the song didn't catch on with Roy. They threw it on the shelf, "To heck with it," you know?

Then, twenty years later, here some guy come along, that picks up all that old stuff, he sends the copies and everything, and if you don't pay my public demand or you ain't got it copyrighted, that's his song! This is the way these people come buy them things. There are people out there like him, that's all they do to survive, you know?

01-00:40:42

Stewart: Is look for records?

01-00:40:43

McCracklin: They look for that stuff, where what you call the weakest link have fouled up, and didn't take care of it.

But see now, how can you take a Jimmy McCracklin song now? Look at the money and the stuff that I've lost and things that I went through to learn all of that. Look what it cost me! It cost me a lifetime almost. I had that same problem with a song called "The Walk." I'm the original from every note to every verse.

01-00:41:13

Crawford: Great song.

01-00:41:18

McCracklin: Oh, thank you. I had that problem with "The Walk" with Chess Records in Chicago.

01-00:41:29

Stewart: Leonard Chess or Phil Chess?

01-00:41:31

McCracklin: Both of them, all of them. But what happened is, they took fifty percent from me for about fifteen or twenty years as part-writer and all of that stuff. They took all the publishing because I didn't have the knowledge of doing it.

01-00:41:46

Stewart: Did you ever get that back? Get full control?

01-00:41:48

McCracklin: No. I never will get the publishing back on that. But I did get—

01-00:41:52

Stewart: They made a lot of money off that, didn't they?

01-00:41:55

McCracklin: Oh Christ, well, "Walk" was a platinum at that time. However, I did get credit for one hundred percent as writer. Yeah, through the people that clears all that stuff up that's working on "The Thrill is Gone." I haven't given up on "The Thrill is Gone." But what I'm saying is, they took twenty percent as writers from Broadcast Music, collectors and everything. I couldn't do nothing about it.

01-00:42:21

Stewart: God! What snakes! Jimmy, I'm sorry, these are outright crooks. You don't take advantage of people's knowledge, I mean in that sense. They knew they was ripping you off—

01-00:42:34

McCracklin: Well, if you don't know—I'm just one in a thousand of them. There's thousands of them, the same thing happened to them. You know. If you don't know how to go about protecting yourself, you get hurt.

But see now, the guys coming along now, what they calling these days, they got peoples out there protecting them before they even get started. That don't happen to them. They don't know what we went through, man, you know.

So, I don't have no grudge against it because I've learned, and I have what you call accomplished an awful lot by learning, by giving away and giving up so much, by not knowing. So, that's just the way the music business was, you know? And it's the same thing in boxing or anything that you got to have other folks doing it for you. If you don't know how to protect yourself, they gonna get you.

01-00:43:32

Stewart: So, you don't have no ill will against the Biharis—

01-00:43:35

McCracklin: Why should I?

01-00:43:37

Stewart: —or Leonard Chess—because they took advantage of you?

01-00:43:38
McCracklin: No, I don't have no ill will against nobody but Jimmy McCracklin. But I didn't know, so I don't have no ill will against him, really.

01-00:43:44
Stewart: Yeah, so they say, ignorance of the law is no excuse.

01-00:43:47
McCracklin: Hm?

01-00:43:48
Stewart: That's what a lot of attorneys or establishments would say: "Ignorance of the law is no excuse."

01-00:43:55
McCracklin: That's true. Well, speaking of attorneys, it's just like one of these big record companies take your stuff, and you want to try and clear it up and get it up back.

At the modern cost of these days, it costs you—if you ain't well off, it costs you so much money to hire peoples to go in there and clear that stuff up. And if you ain't got the money to do it with, then well, them folks going to keep it, because it's just like trying to fight the government, you know? You can't buck the government, and you can't buck them big companies and things.

It's like putting out records these days—I've still got my own label. I got Art-Tone, I still got Voice, I still got Premium, I still got Oak City Records label. That's my stuff.

01-00:44:43
Stewart: Oak City.

01-00:44:44
McCracklin: I own two publishers, yeah. But like I'm saying, I could put my own record out tomorrow. But getting it exposed and doing it like it should do, I can't buck these big labels. I don't care how good a record you got, if you don't get it exposed and people don't hear you right, you ain't got nothing. Did you hear my—that latest CD I did?

01-00:45:14
Stewart: No.

01-00:45:15
McCracklin: Everybody here says it's a monster, you know? I got Oak City Records, but I haven't moved with it yet, because I got several people is trying to get it.

01-00:45:24
Stewart: You got to get a distributor, right?

01-00:45:26

McCracklin: Distributing ain't the hassle to it. You can get a distributor, and still can't get the exposure, the promotion behind it.

01-00:45:32

Stewart: Oh yeah, that's what counts, the promotion, the marketing.

01-00:45:35

McCracklin: Yeah. But the big record companies and the big companies, they've got it sewed up. See, and eventually, you put out there and get enough action for them to hear, and they'll grab for it.

So, that's the name of the game now. You can't buck them folks, you know. It's just fortunate enough, like when B.B. came along and took "The Thrill is Gone," he was fortunate enough to get a guy, the guy picked him up, what they call a hippie guy, picked him up as manager. B.B. had no manager. And you can't do it yourself. He picked him up, and he had money.

He went to all the foxholes he could get into, and got it out there. B.B.'s my buddy, he's a good friend of mines. But like I'm saying, every time he comes to Oakland, he comes here. In fact, he's stay overnight with me, and all that stuff. But what happened is this. If he don't get that exposure, he'd a still been in the same position that he was in forty years ago.

But he got that exposure. That don't mean that B.B. is no better guitar player than Ronnie Stewart, or whoever. It's the world who know him and who heard of him. They ain't ever heard of Ronnie Stewart. Ronnie Stewart might could play all around him. But who is Ronnie Stewart?

01-00:46:57

Stewart: Right.

01-00:46:59

McCracklin: B.B. don't play no better, maybe not as good. So, this is the idea of exposure, and you cannot take a small record company and buck those big record companies and get exposure because that's the way ninety percent of the DJ's of the TV and the radio stations and all that stuff makes their living is payoff. They'll never stop payoff.

01-00:47:18

Stewart: Yeah, they claim they did, but they ain't.

01-00:47:20

McCracklin: Oh yeah, well that's just something to try to calm—

01-00:47:23

Stewart: Put out there in the news, yeah, to calm the public.

01-00:47:25

McCracklin: They'll never stop that, man, because if that was the case, it would be just like it used to be. Anybody could play you a record, and you could get your record played. You could go to a radio station now, and in order to get your record promoted and played, you got to pay for it, and if you don't pay for it, you don't get played, you don't get heard.

01-00:47:44

Stewart: Well, where's that at now, Jimmy? Actually, where are you at with "The Thrill is Gone," as far as the law side. Are you close or are you still where you were at five years ago? Are you still where you were at ten years ago? In other words, the development of you getting your just dues, how far are you from that? Is there a court date and will there be a court date?

01-00:48:03

McCracklin: On what?

01-00:48:05

Stewart: On "The Thrill is Gone." Have you been to court about it yet?

01-00:48:08

McCracklin: Well, it's over a year now that they've been holding it up and waiting to go ahead to make a movement on it. You see, the people out of Chicago, the Cameron Organization, they are the ones handling it.

01-00:48:17

Stewart: Scott Cameron?

01-00:48:18

McCracklin: Yeah. So, you know, and so many of them. They've got thousands of them things going on, and you just have to wait until your time come. You can't push it, you can't rush it. So, when he get the right position to make the right move, then he gonna move. Actually, what's happening out there now, Ronnie, I guess you understand it. Money is what running the country. Money used to didn't run the country, the best thing was running the country, but now it's money. It's like a lot of folks say, I don't like rap because rap did me a lot of good royalty wise, you know. About sixteen different guys cut my song on the rap, you know? They've got platinums and stuff off it. But a lot of people don't know that Jimmy McCracklin created and wrote that stuff and did all that. All they know about is who they heard it by.

01-00:49:14

Stewart: That's it.

01-00:49:16

McCracklin: See? Just like the Salt-N-Pepa. They biggest record was "Tramp." Lowell Fulson's biggest record was "Tramp." Lowell didn't write one word of it or produce it. I did all of that. But I was just fortunate

enough to know how to get my percentage off it, and give Lowell a piece for doing it because Lowell started it. Otis Redding—they had the biggest record they had was “Tramp.” But like I’m saying, look at the money that I lost before I was able to protect myself.

01-00:49:48

Stewart:

God, man, if you could have got the royalties to “The Thrill is Gone,” man, you would have had millions.

01-00:49:52

McCracklin:

It’s tough, yeah, it’s tough.

01-00:49:53

Stewart:

I bet you “Thrill is Gone” has made almost a million in royalties.

01-00:49:56

McCracklin:

Oh, not almost. “The Thrill is Gone,” you see, what you look at, you don’t look at as one person. Look at the different rap guys, and the different peoples cutting. You know, you don’t have to take one guy to sell a million. You can take fifteen or twenty different peoples, then put it out. You sell a million records. A million records ain’t a lot of records to sell, when you think how big the world are.

01-00:50:18

Stewart:

Right. That’s right.

01-00:50:20

McCracklin:

A million records ain’t nothing to sell. You’d sell a million records—it’s just like if you pick up the newspaper, look at the television. Ninety-nine percent of the people that you see there getting Grammys and all that kind of stuff is because of the connections and money. It’s not that they’re that great. And see, what can you do about it. Nothing, but hope that you can get somebody about you to give you a shot like that. It’s just like I said. B.B. King might not play no better guitar than you play. You a hell of a guitar player.

01-00:51:00

Stewart:

Thank you.

01-00:51:01

McCracklin:

But who know Ronnie Stewart? He never had the exposure that B.B. King got. But you play just as good or great as he do. So, this is what I’m saying. Until you get to that position that what they call to “get into the clique,” you just at a standstill. I’m just fortunate enough to get out there long enough and have so many records out there. They can’t hardly deny me, you know?

01-00:51:25

Stewart:

Speaking of that, how did you come up with “The Thrill is Gone?” What inspired you because you know blues is an art form of expression. How did you write it?

01-00:51:32

McCracklin:

No, no it ain't that, Ronnie. It's a true life thing. It's true, it's just true. Just like folks have questioned me how you come up with “I Just Gotta Know” how you come up with Think. It's the same thing. Blues is all in life. It's real life happening. Otherwise, you was in love and “Thrill is Gone” is simple. At that time, you could thrill each other, anything was beautiful. Then, you fall out “The Thrill is Gone,” ain't nothing there no more.

01-00:52:03

Stewart:

No more love.

01-00:52:04

McCracklin:

That's the whole song. Huh?

01-00:52:06

Stewart:

All I can do is wish you well.

01-00:52:08

McCracklin:

Yeah. Wish you well, hope you get back to somebody else.

01-00:52:10

Stewart:

I'm free.

McCracklin:

It's all the same thing.

01-00:52:13

Stewart:

I'm free from your spell.

01-00:52:16

McCracklin:

Yeah, you free. You don't have to worry about worrying about what they do no more. I'm going out there and getting me something new. It's down man, it's just come alive. It's just like “Think.”

01-00:52:26

Stewart:

Did that take you long to write, “Thrill is Gone?”

01-00:52:28

McCracklin:

Oh, no. It don't take me long to write no song. I get my mind made up, I see that my life and other folks' life, I'd write a song within two days. But see, writing a song ain't all of it. The meanings of what you writing, and putting the right melody to is what counts.

01-00:52:44

Stewart:

Sure do. The words, but the melody gotta go. “The Thrill is Gone” is very haunting. It’s minor, it’s in a minor key. It’s almost kind of gospelly. You talkin’ of “Well, I’m free.”

01-00:52:58

McCracklin:

But what about “Think?” I just got to doing all them songs. Do you realize how powerful “Think” lyrics is?

01-00:53:04

Stewart:

I know. Yeah, I know. I always think about that.

01-00:53:07

McCracklin:

“I can give up my woman, you can give up your man.” Well, that don’t make no kinda sense really in the world to take a chance before you think. See, a lot of things would never happen to you if you think in front. You gotta think, see, it’s just common sense, see?

01-00:53:24

Stewart:

You better think. What would we do?

01-00:53:27

McCracklin:

Yeah. What we do later on? Down the road, later, you find out both of y’all was wrong, you are in trouble.

01-00:53:32

Stewart:

Yeah, you’d a made a mistake, huh. You’d a made a real big mistake ‘cause you didn’t think.

01-00:53:38

McCracklin:

That’s the way it goes, you know.

01-00:53:39

Stewart:

Well, in them songs that you just thought of, they wasn’t just like, I want to sit down and write a song. This was something you saw happen to somebody, or happened to you, or happening—

01-00:53:48

McCracklin:

It’s just a real life thing. You see life, man, you know? I got a song on this new CD called “Hate.” Once I get the exposure on it. I’m supposed to meet tonight with an outfit. They is talking about exposure. You never heard “Hate” did you?

01-00:54:12

Stewart:

No. We get to hear it before the world.

01-00:54:15

McCracklin:

I’m gonna play a little bit for you. Want me to?

01-00:54:18

Stewart:

Yeah.

01-00:54:20

McCracklin:

I want you to hear this. This is the idea that I—right outta my basement. [Plays piano and sings]

Someone in heaven / Please help us on this earth. / Take away that hate / And make a first. / If we don't stop that hate / And our voice is not heard / Hate, oh hate will destroy the world. // There's so many people / That can't get along / Because that old devil / Is hanging around their homes / If we don't stop that hate / And our voice is not heard / Hate, oh hate. [piano solo].

01-00:59:02

McCracklin:

[laughs] After hours! Here's a song here that was did by Percy Mayfield. His wife begged me to do it, so here the way I did it on. [plays piano]

Interview 2: March, 14, 2002

Audio file 2

01-00:00:02

Stewart: What about legends like you, B.B., and Muddy? You think the people will always relate back to you guys and use your songs to inspire?

01-00:00:12

McCracklin: Well, I might think that way, you know, but there's always gonna be somebody who will copy some of your stuff, you know. I don't care who it is, how long you're gone, somebody will always have a feeling for what you're doing, and they'll use it because you cannot just ignore that originated stuff.

You asked what other artists covered "The Walk": Oh Lord, I don't know. Man, it's been covered about between eighteen and twenty times, from different artists. Some of them put an instrumental like the late Freddy King, for instance, he got a song called "Hideaway" which is a transition of "The Walk" and I get credit for it, as a writer. So, You name em. I don't know. Just a lot of people.

Rufus Thomas, He recorded "The Walk." And the Beatles, they recorded "The Walk." I can't name all the guys that have cut "The Walk." I have a list here somewhere I can show you a lot of the guys that recorded "The Walk." Los Lobos, Elvin Bishop, all of them cut my stuff. Yeah, Rufus Thomas, the Beatles. I had almost a hundred people cover my stuff.

Bonnie Raitt done "Think." Linda Ronstadt done "Think."

Crawford: Jimmy, can you say something more about what made you start writing, what influenced you?

What influenced me—supposing I would know a friend and I would see that friend as doing all he can in doing the right thing, and someone maybe he's in love with is using him. That coulda been me. It coulda happened to you.

So the ideas I'm writing about there, it's just like a journalist or something, you got to have something to write about. So if it's happening in my life or in somebody else's life, that made me want to write about it.

01-00:00:37

Stewart: The real treasures will always be there. Okay, so we winding now.

01-00:00:44
 McCracklin: I'm gonna give up on Buddy Guy. [McCracklin is looking through recordings]

01-00:00:49
 Stewart: Don't worry about it, we'll get there.

01-00:00:52
 McCracklin: No, I want you to hear what he was doing [trying to play a tape]. Doing a good job, his way of doing it.

01-00:01:06
 Stewart: It must be nothing on that tape.

01-00:01:08
 McCracklin: It should be on there. You can put your hand on right here. I got it on now?

[more attempts to play cassette]

"The Thrill is Gone"—You've been talking about that a long time. Bob Geddins didn't write nothing. If he was sitting right in here, I'd say the same thing. Sheila—I did a couple shows with her. She was the one that gave me their lifetime achievement award.

01-00:02:16
 Stewart: She helped you get it from the Blues Foundation?

01-00:02:19
 McCracklin: Yeah, that's right up there, see that thing in the middle of that green one? That's from Sheila.

01-00:02:24
 Crawford: Would you talk about that? What that means to you?

01-00:02:28
 McCracklin: Well, anytime you can get a lifetime achievement, it's gotta mean something to you.

[still attempting to play the tape] I can't even find Roy Hawkins things now. Jimmy Morello.

01-00:02:54
 Stewart: Who?

01-00:02:58
 McCracklin: The one behind him. That's McCracklin. I thought that was Morello. [laughter] I must say, I've gotten a bit older.

01-00:03:24
 Stewart: Oh, Roy Tyler. That's the gospel guy.

01-00:03:28

McCracklin: Oh, no wonder I couldn't find the Roy Hawkins. This is the wrong one.

01-00:03:32

Stewart: I knew that was Roy Tyler, that's the Gospel Hummingbirds.

01-00:03:39

McCracklin: That's Roy Tyler, I thought it was Roy Hawkins.

01-00:03:42

Stewart: [laughs] You got the wrong Roy!

[tape plays "Arkansas"]

I don't want no city woman / She all too fast. / Give me a slow country girl / With a lot of class / So I'm going. Chorus: It's just a hop, skip, and a jump / Arkansas, here I come! / Chorus: It's just a hop, skip, and a jump / Now, if I can't live independent / Why live like a bum? / Chorus: It's just a hop, skip, and a jump.

Stewart: Who is that in the background Jimmy?

01-00:04:14

McCracklin: That's the band.

01-00:04:18

Stewart: This isn't your current band—who's that on piano?

01-00:04:39

McCracklin: Jimmy McCracklin.

01-00:04:41

Stewart: That's you?

01-00:04:42

McCracklin: I'm in all my songs. What you think, Ronnie? I reckon that was me. Well, I can't play like I want now. [song still playing]

Now when I get to the countryside /where I made a start / I take my girl / I love her to her heart / I'm going / Chorus: It's just a hop, a skip, and a jump / Arkansas, here I come / Chorus: It's just a hop, a skip, and a jump / Now, if I can't live independent / Why live like a bum? / Chorus: It's just a hop, a skip, and a jump // Now when I get

*to the country / gone buy me a house and fence / Me and my little
girl / won't pay no rent. / I'm gone / Chorus: It's just a hop, a skip,
and a jump / Arkansas, here I come / Chorus: It's just a hop, a skip
and a jump / Now, if I can't live independent / Why live like a bum? /
Chorus: It's just a hop, a skip, and a jump [song stops]*

[McCracklin now playing the piano, live]

Stewart: Jimmy, play "Arkansas."

01-00:06:32

McCracklin: [plays and sings]

01-00:07:00

Stewart: [sings the Chorus] [laughter]

01-00:07:54

Crawford: Thank you, Jimmy.

01-00:07:58

McCracklin: I gotta get outta here.

01-00:07:58

Crawford: Okay.

01-00:07:59

Stewart: [laughing] I love that song.

01-00:08:02

McCracklin: [plays more piano] I'm gonna show you something. They called me for my next section. They want me to do this thing that Little Milton did. [plays and sings]

*Now, my momma told me this morning / She woke me up from a deep
sleep / She said, "Jimmy, I just gotta tell ya / That something may
hurt you / But won't hurt me". / She said, "I got to leave you, baby."*

Listen. Now, hear the tempo. Here it really go. I'm gonna cut this, listen.

*Now, my momma told me this morning / She woke me up from a deep
sleep / She said, "Jimmy, I got to tell ya something / May not hurt*

*you, but it's gonna hurt me" / She said, "I got to leave you, baby." /
 Then she began to cry / She said, "Honey, you're not doing your
 homework. / When you try you don't satisfy." / That was too much
 for me. / That's why I walked her back straight and cried / "Why you
 have to hurt me so bad?" / To hear my baby say goodbye. / She said,
 "You ain't giving nothing to me. / You've been good as a man could
 be. / But baby, hugging and just kissing / Don't do a thing for me."
 She said, "Jimmy, you the judge and jury / And the warrant to decide
 the case." / She said, "You can keep me or let me go, baby." / And I
 won't be replaced. / I gotta tell you that was too much for me /
 That's why I walked her back straight and cried / "Why you have to
 hurt me so bad?" / To hear my baby say goodbye.*

Crawford: [laughs] Fantastic, Jimmy!

01-00:13:25

Stewart: Oh boy, she feeling it.

Stewart: Jimmy, tell me something. How would you describe the blues. We talk about West Coast blues, Delta blues, Chicago, blues. Tell me about blues.

McCracklin: Ronnie, to be in all honesty to you, I've told you before and I tell you again, there's no West Coast blues, no Arkansas blues, no Southern blues. Blues is a feeling. It's all in what happened in my life or to someone else's life, which is the true facts and a feeling. When you've been mistreated, you're not the onliest one. Someone else in the world has been mistreated, even though they might be right and they been mistreated—that's the blues. It's all in your feeling and the feeling is a true part of life.

[End of Interview]