

**LAWTON M. CHILES CENTER FOR FLORIDA HISTORY  
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

**Interview with: Jon Corneal**

**Interviewer: James M. Denham**

**Location: Florida Southern College**

**Date: May 26, 2020**

**JD=James M. Denham**

**JC=Jon Corneal**

**JD:** Today is May 26, 2020 and we are resuming our 3<sup>rd</sup> day of taping with Jon Corneal, and we are hitting the home stretch here today.

**JD:** Jon we were talking last time we parted about your time here in Florida after you had your career in Nashville and also California. You decided to come back to Florida in 1979. Go back and tell us a little bit about why you decided to come back home and your thinking along that line and what you had done up to that point briefly and how you decided or why you decided to come home.

**JC:** Okay, well at the time, I still had a house in Nashville. A big old Victorian home in East Nashville. When I look back today I never should have let that house go ya know, because I'd always have a place to stay in Nashville when I wanted to go. But anyhow, there's a fire hall where my house is now. I had been fighting a battle with the bottle for quite some time and finally got delivered ya know.

**JD:** Can you go into that a little bit?

**JC:** Well you know, I was a partying fool. When I moved to Nashville, everybody was older than me. Everybody I worked with was at least 10 years older than me. It seems like most of them was at least 40 ya know. I was 17 when I moved to Nashville, soon to turn 18. And I drank, my first drink I was with Hal Willis a French Canadian who I worked for then, entertainer. We went all the way from Nashville to Fort Lewis, Washington, in a Cadillac full of equipment. And we played the NCO Club in Fort Lewis. A lot of Vietnam guys went to Vietnam from Fort Lewis Washington. They would fly out there from the West Coast so everybody headed to the bar after the first 45 minutes.

**JD:** And you had just come from Nashville, right?

**JC:** Yeah! That was my first long trip. So the guitar player was the last guy in line ahead of me and he said, "7 & 7", and I said 7 & 7 cause I didn't want them to know how ignorant I was. I had no idea what it was but I liked it. Turned out it was Seagram's 7 and 7 up. It was Canadian whiskey and it was so smooth, oh buddy, man, I liked it. You know, actually as it turned out I got loaded we went to a party afterwards that night and I got loaded. In fact my boss had to carry me on his shoulder, I got loaded. Anyway that started a long, long love hate relationship with alcohol for me. Over the course of time I did my first DUI in 73 after I came back from California. Then in 74 I did another one that's when I tried to outrun a cop with a fifth of Canadian Mist and a 6 pack of beer and I hit a telephone pole, totaled my Olds Vista Cruiser Wagon, I mean totaled, it went to the junk yard and never left. I might have sold the motor. It was a 455 Olds, I hated losing that ever since

then I have had the thing in the back of my mind. One of these days maybe I will find one just like it, and I'll restore it. Anyhow, I did my third one in 76 and as it turns out, a month later, I had my last drink. Two days later April 9, 1976 and April 11 I went from the bed to my knees and I cried out to God and I told him that I couldn't stop drinking and the only way I would be able to is if he took the desire for alcohol away. Which is exactly what happened, when I got up from prayer that day I felt a heavy, heavy burden lifted off of me! It was just miraculous, and so far April 11, 2020 I have been 45 years without a drink.

**JD:** Without even one?

**JC:** Not one!

**JD:** Wow!

**JC:** Ya see I never could have one. One would just open up the thermostat man, if I got a taste or two.

**JD:** Well you would of also noticed and observed these other people and how it affected them and of course a lot of them died and a lot of them got ill and liver problems and everything else and so you knew that was on your agenda if you didn't stop it right?

**JC:** Yeah!

**JD:** When you were there in Nashville did you go to church a lot? Or did you ever go to church?

**JC:** Yeah! Actually I got delivered, I got involved in the church. Before I knew it I was teaching a teen age Sunday school class, teaching the Bible. The Pastor when he asked me to take over that class cause the kids didn't like the teacher [Laughter], they kind of identified with me a little better.

**JD:** What church was that?

**JC:** First Assembly of God East Nashville, Tennessee Brother Mac was the Pastor there, he was an old time preacher man.

**JD:** How many of the people in the music industry took the same path that you did or were there others kinda like you that quit and you could kinda of identify with them and hang out them?

**JC:** Oh yeah!

**JD:** Who were some of the ones like that?

**JC:** I tell you one, I used to work for her, Connie Smith, she converted.

**JD:** So Connie use to drink a lot?

**JC:** No, No, No.

**JD:** I meant drinkers reform drinkers like you.

**JC:** Well I just assumed that most of them had some kind of problems similar to that ya know. But there was a place we use to be able to go, it's called the Lords Chapel. They had a minister there that taught you a chapter in the Bible every service and you could just sit and start learning the Bible with him and I loved that. A lot of the people in the music industry would come and sing. Terry Blackwood, from the Blackwoods, and then the guy that sang tenor with Elvis in the Stamps Quartet, Bill Baise, Ray Peterson, Pop singer on and on Connie would do a solo there too. Anyhow there were a number of people turning on to the Lord at the time. My first exposure to people, contemporaries involved in church after many years of running from it was at the Hollywood Presbyterian Church in 1969 when I lived out there. There were lots of Jesus freaks going on then. They were hippie looking folks, they loved Jesus, ya know. I got a free bus ride out to the Billy Graham Crusade in Anaheim Stadium.

**JD:** That must have been exciting!

**JC:** Oh Buddy! I tell ya what, at the end of his service 5000 people were singing, "Just as I Am" Buddy, I couldn't help it I had to go forward. That's when I got born again. But I didn't really get set free from the alcohol, because I didn't go that far with it! It's like its ok for the lord to save my soul but I'll handle this alcohol problem. But then I did my 3 DUI's and my method was not working.

**JD:** You were of the sort that you just couldn't let one drink, there was no such thing as cocktail hour.

**JC:** No!

**JD:** Ya know some people have one drink, and you are fine the next day. Like most people do they have a drink or two after work and then they have dinner and then they ya know, you couldn't be like that?

**JC:** No! I was envious of those people. They could drink, talking about drinking like Gentleman.

**JD:** So when you started out in the industry, everybody was drinking right?

**JC:** Almost, a lot of people, a lot of people.

**JD:** Back stage and stuff too?

**JC:** Oh yeah!

**JD:** You were telling about the Grand Ole Opry, Roy Acuff and all would have liquor around right?

**JC:** Yeah! You know in 71 and 72 I worked for the Glazer Brothers. We worked a lot of shows with Jerry Lee Lewis he was a real good draw. He was Country Music and he was having Country hits, like one of them was "What made Milwaukee Famous made a Loser out of me." He always has an attendant who kept his bar flowing. Ya know plenty of whiskey, those little cups. Nice if you want it, he set up the bar in Jerry's dressing room. I got to ride in his place on a twin engine turbo prop Merlin from Raliegh to Ashville because the night before a whole basketball team had gone down and crashed and he was scared to fly. He had a pilot on call, and he owned the plane too, he had a bus and a plane.

**JD:** Now who was that? Jerry Lee?

**JC:** Yeah! Jerry Lee. I knew his drummer, a guy named, Tarp Tarrant I met him in LA, when Jerry Lee was in LA doing "Touch my Soul" which was a Broadway play that they took on tour. So anyhow I ran into Tarp again, doing shows and he called me in the morning, he said, "hey man you want to fly up to Ashville with us"? He said Jerry Lees not coming and we got an extra seat. Yes Sir Buddy! We got up there, way, way early. I remember in his dressing room that night, Jerry Lee had a bar. A lot of people do, they were into excessive living. I guess that's what you'd call it. But any how I'm gonna try to move it forward here.

**JD:** We were gonna talk about Merle Haggard. We forgot to talk about Merle Haggard and you meeting him and did you ever play with Merle Haggard?

**JC:** I did a lot of shows with Merle.

**JD:** Tell us about Merle, what were your memories of Merle Haggard?

**JC:** He was so fine. He's so good, he had no reputation for being a jerk at all. He was just good people, he came up really the hard way. He played lead guitar for Buck Owens and he was a good lead player. I first started doing shows with him in the 60's like 66. He had his first hit but it wasn't near as big as it would have been if Roy Druskey hadn't had a hit on it called, "From Now on "All my friends are gonna be Strangers". So we did some touring.

**JD:** So let me get this straight, Roy recorded that song first, right?

**JC:** No, No, actually Merle did, but some record company in Nashville that Drusky was on thought that they could overcome. Merle wasn't a big star, he became. This was his first time out really as an artist and they were all traveling in a camper-pick up.

**JD:** Did he write the song? Merle?

**JC:** Yeah! Oh Yeah!

**JD:** Because I know the song, I thought he was fantastic on it. I really don't understand your point.

**JC:** Roy Drusky, it was idiotic in the first place to even think they would do that because what it did was it split his big hit into half a hit because of it. So it split out the two different records basically. It wasn't like they worked it out. That's what happened it ruined his first hit. But from then on everything he did was a hit. That's pretty much the way it was.

**JD:** When was the first time you ever played with Haggard and when was the last time?

**JC:** We played a show in Iowa and I was with the Wilburn Brothers in 66.

**JD:** That was before he really hit it big.

**JC:** Oh yeah, all he had was a pickup truck camper to carry his band.

**JD:** Describe that, what was that like, pickup truck camper, was that in Bakersville?

**JC:** We were in Des Moines, Iowa

**JD:** Des Moines, Iowa but he started out in Bakersville, right?

**JC:** Oh yeah! This is a road show. He still lived in Bakersville. But anyhow later on his camper truck was in a wreck. I think he might have been flying that day and somebody must have been sleeping up in the top part, over the cab and it killed him. I had a friend playing bass for him a guy name Jimmy Gray, and finally he could afford a bus and I don't know how many busses he had after that. In fact the 2 busses he had when he was here in about 5 years ago in Lakeland then played at the Civic Center. He had 2 gold brand new Prevost busses; they were Canadian. They were beautiful, just gorgeous and one of them said, "Super Chief" on it and that was always the one, he was a train fan and he loved them. One of his busses was for sale here in Lakeland down on Main Street and central Florida Limousine it had a port hole on it like on a train. It was so cool, but anyhow they said he had a train in the early days in the 60's. A train that went all over his house, just all over.

**JD:** Like a toy train?

**JC:** Yeah, Oh yeah! Like a Lionel, one of those Lionel.

**JD:** Lionel train, that's cool!

**JC:** Then he got his own train. Not a big one, like a mini mini gauge outside train. You use to see at Carnivals like little kids

**JD:** Now did he live in Bakersville right on, where did he live?

**JC:** Well after he got way rich, he had a place up in Lake Shasta.

**JD:** Lake Shasta, Kern River.

**JC:** Oh yeah! I'm sure he did some fly fishing

**JD:** So when was the last time you played with him?

**JC:** Oh I don't know. One of the last times we played in Philadelphia with him. We did a matinee show too and I remember what cool boots; it looked like he got them at Nudie's they were pretty dark blue, soft really good stuff, ya know. Of course he always wore nice things. I don't think he started wearing a hat then he didn't really start wearing a hat until his hair started thinning out. He always looked cool in a hat. He'd trim his brim like I do some time instead of looking like a mushroom.

**JD:** Ok another question for Haggard, you know he always tried to explain it. He would do interviews and stuff like that. What is your opinion for "Okie from Muskogee" and also some of the other songs like "Fightin' Side of Me" that expressed the right winged anger, almost like the Trump kind of conservative. Then on the other hand, he could play with Bob Dylan, he could identify with the hippies to a certain extent. How do you explain that. Was it a commercial thing he was doing. The "Okie from Muskogee" and try to snag in all the commercial--the red neck crowd and sell songs for the red necks? He didn't necessarily believe it but he was being commercial. What do you

think about that?

**JC:** I think that's probably close.

**JD:** In later years he would explain it off and say, yeah it's kind of for my Dad and his group. He seemed to be embarrassed about it in his later years.

**JC:** In the later years it was tongue and cheek thing for sure.

**JD:** Because some of his older songs, for example about President Nixon lying to us all on T.V, and kind of also feeling of support for the Vietnam protestors and an element of support for the GI's that are stuck in Afghanistan and all that and that one song he did for example about getting out of Iraq. (I think it was one of his later albums.) So anyway it just seems to me that there is a lot of ambivalence dealing with Haggard to a certain extent. When I say ambivalence I mean, why did you cater to the red necks? Why did you do it?

**JC:** I think life is a process, when I moved to Nashville I was not the pro-integration police. It took me living and getting to know colored people that were nice to me and being their friends and generous to me before I started dropping the Jim Crow attitude. I hate to say that but that's where it was. Now this kind of thing, "Okie from Muskogee" ya know. "Beads and Roman sandals won't be seen," now that's the one, that's the line that gets me.

**JD:** We don't burn our draft cards on Main Street, beads and Roman sandals won't be seen.

**JC:** Yeah!

**JD:** Along that line Charley Pride, tell me about Charley Pride did you ever see him or interact with him?

**JC:** Oh buddy, oh buddy!

**JD:** Did that kind of make an impression on you?

**JC:** Of course it did everybody.

**JD:** Tell us about what you thought when you saw him at first or met him, what was he like?

**JC:** Well in the early days?

**JD:** What year was that when he kind of arrived on the scene?

**JC:** Late 1960s early 1970s. In the early 70s he was as big as Garth Brooks got. He was the biggest draw in Country Music. He would pack the biggest and the largest Coliseum's and Auditoriums and they would turn people away. I got the privilege of opening for him with the Glaser

Brothers on many, many shows. We went up to Canada and played Vancouver, BC, ... Regina, Calgary. We played the Calgary stampede. Old Charley, he was a nice brother. He really was, it reminds me of a story I got to tell you this, you can either use it or not, you don't have to use it but the story goes, there were two oil workers in Texas and they were going into a beer joint in Texas and they had a bunch of country music records in the window, albums and there was a picture of Charley Pride in there and this guy says, who is this guy says, "Who is that Nigger", the guy says, "that ain't no Nigger, that's Charley Pride man." He was a nice guy, he was a very nice guy. He like to do sit in's too. We go to the big towns they always had some kind of nice country place. And we'd go and he'd sit in and sometimes we'd sit in too. But they always called him up and they all knew his latest hits. His records sold. Jack Clement produced a lot his stuff Cowboy Jack ... he's known in Country Music Hall of Fame too, what a guy! Yes! Charley Pride, he's from Sledge, Mississippi, we played his hometown Jackson...he's a big bear too!

**JD:** Now when you played with him, would the audience be all white or would there black people in there too?

**JC:** Mostly white I don't remember seeing too many black people, In fact I don't remember any at all.

**JD:** They said he was a great athlete, baseball player.

**JC:** Oh! he was a pro, he was a pro. He looked like he could probably play some pretty good baseball the way he was built and all.

**JD:** Okay, back when you were in Nashville, who did you consider were the best writers back then?

**JC:** Ya know it's really hard to say who is the best.

**JD:** Who are your top five that you would say if you had to be pinned down.

**JC:** Oh I don't know, it's so many good ones. It's hard to say. For me it's a battle to say what's better than the other. Cause back then I would weigh my own songs as pretty good.

**JD:** When did you start writing?

**JC:** About 65, I think.

**JD:** So you were up there not long before you started writing.

**JC:** Yeah! And I have to borrow guitars to do it.

**JD:** So when did you start playing the guitar, seriously, I guess?

**JC:** I don't know if I ever been serious, cause I'm a drummer. I'm not the guitar player that everybody else is. My rhythm, I keep good time, see that's the deal. My right hand is with it, my left hand sluggish my right hand doesn't always know what my left hand is doing if you know what I mean. But anyhow, I was borrowing guitars. I was home in Florida visiting and Granddaddy had written prose and poetry as a young man and I think my grandmamma threw all the stuff away when he went away for about 4 days, he had the same problem I did before he sobered up. He did sober up and spent the rest of his life sober. But anyhow, he said, "Listen, if you would like to get a guitar, I'll pay for half of it if you find one. I found one over at Carlton's Music Center and boy it was a deal too. It was a J160 E Gibson. Oh man, it was a good one. I ended up trading it off for another guitar because it didn't play good, easy and I should have had it worked on have ... fix it and make it easy to play. I wasn't smart enough, I was just young and impetuous. I let a great guitar go by. I have been looking for one just like it ever since.

**JD:** Okay, now we are going to look at your time, you had already talked about why you moved back to Florida. We've also talked about meeting and marrying Debbie of course. So what you are doing in 1981 – 1982, what your life was like at that point?

**JC:** Ok, well I came down in 79. I had been sober a couple of years I had a little sobriety under my belt. I came down here to make amends to my parents for embarrassing them and not being the son I should have been. I was a prodigal, ya know. Anyhow when I came I had old friends being very kind to me. Buddy Johnson give me a place to live in Auburndale and every time I'd go to give him some money. He would say, "No, you need it worse than I do." He'd seen a difference in my life. He was spiritual support, anyhow once I met Debbie I just got more and more involved before I knew it. We were getting married. I

put her on the band stand. In fact I put her on the bandstand with me before we got married. Before long she was part of me, she was part of what I was doing for a long time. For three years she played in my band until the economy went terrible in the 90s. I had sold a piece of property in the early 90s and I lived off that money for 5 years. Virtually no work, no work so fortunately I had something to eat. And then if we ever did work, they didn't want a band. We did it as a duo and played the American Legion, which it ain't what you think it is. Its' a bunch of drunks around the bar, and they controlled everything. They are not nice enough to ask you to turn down, it's like, "turn that son of a bitch down" and mean, they were just mean. Anyhow she finally gave up. She said, "Hey I don't want to deal with this anymore," and that's when I started singing at Jackie's Café. In 2014 I was already at Jackie's so it must be more than 6 years when I went to the Florida Folk Festival. I'd pretty much given up trying to find players who would work with me under the basis I had to work with. Nobody wanted to pay any money. In Florida, central Florida there used to be bands everywhere that worked five nights a week in places, in joints and they changed the DUI laws. Oh yeah, the one man bands came along first and took everybody's work in all the joints and then Karaoke. These absolute amateurs up there working a machine and getting people who cannot sing out to try to get some applause. They took all of the rest of the work and then they took all of it. Before long there wasn't even the one man bands it was like Karaoke, you could have a big showroom and you've got people doing karaoke.

**JD:** And they are playing music and background and playing like they are singing.

**JC:** Yeah! It's awful, it's terrible.

**JD:** It's garbage

**JC:** So, musicianship don't mean a hill of beans in the state of Florida. There are some locals, and they are members of the union. There is Orlando union and there's a lot of people that are working for Disney playing for union scale and I am proud that they get too but I never could plug into that kind of stuff. And back when we were prosperous in the 80's we did major convention work. We did major conventions for major companies. Oh lord I don't know how many I did for IBM. I did Red Lobster's annual party, in fact the guy, the VP from Red Lobster handed me his card and I couldn't even keep it because of the contract that I had signed. I couldn't even solicit, in other words I couldn't even call that guy, and in other words call me!

**JD:** But all that kind of dried up in the 90's?

**JC:** Yes! It sure did. So we were doing real well before that and then the bottom fell out and we found out about the commodity cheese. Ya know I had a friend that would get those 5 big pound chunks of clear field cheese, it must have been from Wisconsin, and it was so good! We had Macaroni and cheese, grilled cheese sandwiches and just about everything you could do with cheese. It's a miracle we could even use the restroom that day. One of my buddies we had he got commodity cheese and he didn't realize he needed to eat fiber bread so it wouldn't stop him up like it did. So he started giving us his cheese. We lived on his cheese that one summer in the 90's. So we had been eating New

York Strips 3 times a week. It's kind of funny, the lord must have a sense of humor we walked out of the place where we had just had a 8 oz. strip and a nice salad bar and choice potato or spaghetti and we walked out the place and Debbie says, "I'm getting sick of steak." It wasn't long after that the bottom fell out. We had no work, we weren't going to be getting steaks anymore. In fact I couldn't tell you the last time I took her out on my money. I had people be kind enough to treat us to a steak now and then, ya know, but God bless them. We don't buy steak in the restaurants anymore. In fact if I cook a steak at my house, it's probably pork steak, the way it is these days. We don't get to eat much beef because it's just gotten sky high. So anyhow I was by myself. If I was lucky I got some players. When Jackie's Art Café in Haines City closed, the bottom fell out for me, the bottom fell out. I said, "What am I going to do"? Back then my days at Jackie's was Thursdays, for the next three Thursday's after they closed, I was there. So instead of cooking lunch, Jackie sent out for it because she quit cooking. She had just had it with the cooking. It was great food, nice place to play and all. It just all disappeared so I had to roll with the flow. So I heard about this nice coffee house [Hillcrest Coffee] in Lakeland. Well I had driven by but I never stopped. So Gene Owen and we were talking about it and said, "Let's go see it", so he went with me and thinking that we might have to do good talk, bad talk kind of a thing. Trying to get our presentation together, but anyhow as it turns out Brian Goding, owner of the business already knew who I was and I didn't have to do all that preliminary sales. We totally agree we were real nervous about getting a playing job cause if I had to do that then I'd go, "baa baa", and I'd stutter and I'd come out not a winner. Even though we had good music but to try to use my skills to sale, was not that great. Anyhow as it turned out, Brian gave me the Friday, noon to 2 and now we've done over 2 ½ years.

*Jon Corneal concludes the interview by discussing the difficulties of continuing his playing during the Covid pandemic. Currently he is playing live performances at Hillcrest Coffee in Lakeland (119 Hillcrest Ave). These programs are available on through live-streaming. Corneal and his band are reaching audiences throughout the US and world-wide.*