

Barret Hansen, Dr. Demento
Narrator

Rob Hahn
Interviewer

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BH: I'm Barret Hansen, Barry Hanson for short, of Minneapolis, Minnesota. I grew up here in Minneapolis. I was born in 1941, and best known nowadays as Dr. Demento; that's the name I use on the radio, the syndicated show that I have had since 1970, and it's the reason why I'm dressed up like this. That became my normal garb when I make appearances as Dr. Demento.

RH: I'm Rob Hahn; I'll be asking the questions. Today is December 27, 2018, and we are at the University Club in St. Paul, Minnesota. Let me start generically as we talk about Dinkytown. Recount if you would your first impressions of Dinkytown.

BH: My first impressions of Dinkytown, it was a place with a couple of drug stores and some other stores and students and other academic looking people walking around along with fairly ordinary folk. It was a place where I could catch the streetcar, when I first came—they were still running trolley cars up to 1954, so my first couple of years commuting to Kenwood where I lived I took the trolley downtown and then transferred to a bus. I remember those old Harriet streetcars very well.

RH: We've talked to people who went to Marshall High or Marshall University. You actually went to University High when it was all by itself.

BH: Yeah, before the merger. Peik Hall on the campus—right inside the campus, 14th and University. It was a very short walk to Dinkytown. Along the way, however, I'd cross over the railroad tracks, which was probably more exciting to me than anything else I encountered in the neighborhood because I loved trains and they were still running steam engines at that time. I liked few things better than to stand on that bridge while a steam engine went underneath and I breathed all this noxious coal smoke. At age 13 I thought that that was wonderful.

RH: What are your memories of the interaction between students your age, middle school, high school, and then the college students particularly when you would catch the trolley in Dinkytown or wander in and out of the various locations there?

BH: To be honest I never had a whole lot of reaction with college students; I was always a loner. I didn't have that much interaction with high school students outside of school itself either. I was always somebody who amused myself at home with my records and books and other things. My folks were very much into culture, the symphony and the opera and a lot of reading and the art museums especially. I was into that. I did not hang out a lot with other kids. It's just the way I was. So, no, I did not have a whole lot of interactions with college students.

However, at U High we would have units taught by student teachers every year so, they would share the teaching load with the regular faculty. They were students usually seniors in the School of Education there at the University. I would meet those college students. Occasionally one who played for one of the sports teams—I did follow a little bit the sports teams because that was the biggest game in town at that time, the Gophers and basketball and football.

RH: You mentioned your records; tell me about your memory of going into a bookstore in Dinkytown. I'll let you tell the story from there.

BH: Just while waiting for the bus or the trolley I would occasionally wander around and observe what stores were there; I didn't patronize many of them but I saw I think it was called just something like Campus Books on Fourth Street a little bit east, a little up the hill to where the bridge is on Fourth Street Southeast. It was the last store before you got to the bridge on the left side as you walked up the hill. The building has since been torn down I'm pretty sure; I think it's where the McDonald's parking lot is now.

It was mostly a bookstore but they might have had a little sign alerting me that there were records inside. They had a large table with a cabinet under it that was all full of 78s. The ones on top of the table were 50 cents but many of them underneath in the cabinet—I had to sit on the floor and look at them—were a nickel or a dime; I could afford that on my leftover lunch money. I started buying things that looked interesting to me; maybe 10 or 15 at a time and I'd take them home.

I'd become aware of a limited number of old records because my grandfather gave me a bunch of them when I was seven years old. I was aware that there was music around older than what I heard on the radio. Most of the ones my granddad gave me were too old for my mother to really like; that was old people's music to her. However, they had music from the '20s when my mother was a teenager and I brought home a few songs that she liked. She'd tell me, "Oh, that was from the 1920s when they did the Charleston and things like that. A couple of songs she'd sing along with, there was a copy of My Blue Heaven by Gene Austin, one of the big hits of that era. She hadn't heard that in awhile so, she loved hearing that.

That store wasn't there for very long but as I took the bus home to Kenwood, I would pass in front of the Salvation Army, which at first I thought that was just a place where old men lived. Then they had a bookstore and one day they had a sign saying, "Special. Records half-price, two for a nickel." On my leftover lunch money and maybe going without lunch for a few days I'd have a stack like so.

That was the beginning of my record collecting but really the very beginning was just a few visits to this campus store in Dinkytown. You could say that that was where I was first able to do trial and error—buy things that I didn't really know but that looked interesting, which is what I did for years and years after that, discovering all kinds of things.

RH: Amassing what sort of record collection at its height?

BH: Now it's certainly into six figures; at one time before I had to move it might have been closer to 200,000. Sometimes my publicist has said, "Half a million;" I don't know if it got that high. Many people are awestruck when they walk into the record room at the house. It really got built up.

RH: Jumping around now chronologically but I want to keep it in the music theme. Tell me about seeing Bob Dylan.

BH: I just graduated from University High and was going to Reed College in Portland; I came home for Christmas and my old friend Tony Glover whom I had known for a couple of years called me up and said, "You ought to see this new singer who's in town; he's great. His name is Dylan." So, I agreed that I would go to the 10 O'Clock Scholar; it was a weekday evening I think shortly after Christmas.

Tony picked me up probably in his '51 Merc and we drove to Dinkytown and went to see Bob Dylan at the Scholar; he was there. We got there right on time. He sang; he had not started writing yet at least not anything that he'd sing in public. It was all folk songs but certainly doing them all in a very unique way, somewhat like his first album, even a little more like the Minnesota Hotel Tape, which is circulating in bootleg form and maybe even legit form by now over a number of years.

That was what we saw; I was impressed. He was very different. I enjoyed it; he was full of energy. After the set Tony introduced me to him and the main thing I remember about his personality is after his set, he was really bouncing off the walls talking a mile a minute and saying hi to the people that he knew. The audience was 30, something like that; not a big audience but it was not empty either. I just remember the energy; he was very cordial. He was real happy to meet me; he asked me a couple questions about myself so, none of the sullen demeanor that he displayed on subsequent occasions. It was great; I was very impressed.

They didn't have any sign saying who he was at the 10 O'Clock Scholar so for some time afterwards I thought I had seen somebody whose name was D-I-L-L-O-N.

RH: You mentioned Tony Glover; talk a little about him and maybe about Koerner and Ray as well.

BH: Dave Ray was the first one of those I met. Tony Glover was a year older than I am, I think, from Richfield still living at home at that time. I used to go to the Melody Record Shop; I started doing that about ninth grade. I had gotten to like through various circumstances the contemporary R&B scene, especially the electric blues scene; people like Muddy Waters and Jimmy Reed, and Little Walter who were putting out new 45s at that time, maybe a new one every three months or so for each of them.

The Melody Record Shop was one place in downtown that always had those records; the owner would say, "I bring them up special from Chicago," which is where most of them were made. One day I walked in and the owner came to me and said, "You guys ought to meet," and he pointed out Tony who was still known as Dave Glover at that time. He said, "Come here," and introduced us to each other. "You two are the only young white kids who buy this stuff," referring to the new records by Muddy Waters, which their main audience I think was middle-aged or older black women. That's mostly who that music was made for.

We both liked it. To me it was exciting and loud as rock and roll but had more—it wasn't silly; it had more depth to it. It seemed very sincere though it certainly had its show-busy aspects too in a small way; it had more power to me than Bill Haley or even Elvis.

RH: The other two, Ray and Koerner?

BH: Dave Ray I went to high school with; he was two years behind me. He went to U High, my sister's class. I knew him slightly there; I mostly knew him because I was the DJ for the dances, the sock hops. I had the most records by the time I was a junior so, I would play them and I would mix in. They wouldn't dance to Muddy Waters but they would dance to Bo Diddley, so a couple of those became favorites for dancing.

When I'd play this record called, "Hey, Bo Diddley," by Bo Diddley, which came out in 1957, people would watch Dave Ray dance. He was the best dancer in the school. That's how he got the name "Snaker" because he would wriggle like a snake when he danced. People would gather around and just watch him dance sometimes with a girl or sometimes by himself. As long as Hey

Bo Diddley played, which was two-and-a-half minutes, he would dance and the kids loved it. I knew him a little from that.

He started playing guitar by then but I didn't really become aware of him as a musician until that same trip where I went to see Dylan. It was a different night where Dave Ray—he might have been at the Scholar when Dylan was there; I can't swear to that but he contacted me and invited me to come to his apartment where he played several songs for me with his 12-string. I was bowled over that this kid who I knew just as a dancer had become suddenly very much of a commanding musician and singer. I certainly followed his career at that time.

Because I only visited Minneapolis during vacations, I didn't really see Koerner, Ray & Glover develop but the three of them were playing locally. I think it was a place over by the Campus Theater on the other end of campus—the little coffeehouse there. That's where I first saw Koerner, Ray & Glover. Of course their record came out about that time, Blues, Rags and Hollers.

RH: Did you like that record?

BH: Very much; I loved it. To me it was the best white blues I had ever heard. Maybe a little bit better known nationally was John Hammond whose first album came out right around that time but I loved Koerner, Ray & Glover; they were the best young white kids at doing blues at that time.

RH: Let's go through a couple of the businesses and you could share your recollections of spending time there: Grays Drug.

BH: Grays Drug was mainly I'd wait for the trolley or the bus in front of there. Sometimes I'd have lunch there or have a soda or something like that. Once in awhile I'd splurge and put a nickel in the jukebox, which was not really loud enough to enjoy but if there was a current hit I really liked, I could hear it there.

Occasionally I'd by some notions or candy bar or something like that or some odd school supply. I'd certainly wait inside for the bus if it was 10 below outside so, that's the place I remember and the lunch counter. I had dinner sometimes, a hamburger and fries and such either there or at the other drugstore kitty-corner from them which had a very similar lunch counter.

RH: And then there was Bridgeman's.

BH: Bridgeman's, a place to take a date or occasionally a few kids after school. I didn't regularly go there just for the ice cream but it was pleasant enough when I was there. Mostly it was a place for special occasions.

RH: Dinkytown was known for its bookstores; you alluded to the one where you bought your 78s. Then you had Perrine's and McCosh, too.

BH: Perrine's was if I needed school supplies, that's where I'd go for that. McCosh's, I went in there only a couple of times because I really wasn't buying books on any level until after I got to college. My folks had all the books I needed to read. I was aware of it and other students would tell me about it and what a character Mr. McCosh was. I remember his appearance but never had much contact with him. It was certainly a place that I remembered along with stores that sold all the other stuff you'd find in a little neighborhood store.

This is out of order but later after I graduated school, I went to the Needle Doctor, which started there. They moved to St. Louis Park, but it's a pretty well-known nation-wide business selling

top end stereo equipment, turntables, and such. It was called, “The Needle Doctor,” because you could find a needle for any record player there. My mother needed a new needle for her record player so, I’d heard of a Needle Doctor. We went over there and I was fascinated with that place too; that was later. I don’t know when they started.

RH: You mentioned that you attended your sister’s reunion a few years ago. What was your impression of Dinkytown compared to what it was when you were growing up going through high school?

BH: It had evolved; you could find a greater variety of places to eat there and places to hang out and places that served alcohol, which was almost off limits during my high school years. They had this thing in Minneapolis called, “the liquor patrol limits,” and they had established right at the end of prohibition a law which specified that hard liquor and wine—anything stronger than 3.2 beer—could only be sold within the liquor patrol limits, which was downtown and some other commercial areas that weren’t too close to the tonier residential areas. I think the idea was to keep saloons out of the nice parts of the city. The liquor patrol was downtown, up into parts of the north side and down to Lake Street. There were saloons on Lake Street.

Dinkytown was outside of the liquor patrol limit so, maybe a couple of places had 3.2 but certainly no place that served like a complete restaurant menu and no bars. The west side was inside the liquor patrol limits because that was not in such a nice area. It was close to the old main drag of Scandihoovia. What’s the name they used to call that?

RH: Snoose Boulevard.

BH: Snoose Boulevard, yeah. That was within the liquor patrol limits so, that’s why the club scene flourished over there more than in Dinkytown because Dinkytown just had coffeehouses; it had the Scholar. It was really the only place until much later that I ever heard any live music around that area.

RH: What am I forgetting to ask about Dinkytown that you want to add?

BH: To me it was just like another neighborhood residence, a place where there’d be drugstores and places to buy stuff that you needed but with the college students being there. The Scholar opened probably when I was a junior in high school. Seniors at U High used to be allowed to go off campus for lunch; other students could not. Some of those would go and have lunch or some sort of refreshment at the Scholar or maybe some other place. I was never part of that crowd though.

I was always a loner; I had my own amusements. I’d go any place where I could find records cheap as time passed.

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