

Monte Bute

Narrator

Rob Hahn

Interviewer

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The University Club of St. Paul

MB: I'm Monte Bute. I'm a homeless guy. I sleep at the Dorothy Day Center. No, I'm Monte Bute. I'm a professor at Metropolitan State University. I'm 73 and still going strong.

RH: And I'm Rob Hahn. I'll ask the questions today. It's December 27, 2018, and we are at the University Club in St. Paul, Minnesota. Let's start with your initial impressions of Dinkytown, and what I think you told me was 1966.

MB: Well, I was a "hick from the sticks" in those days and had just come to the Twin Cities for the first time from rural Minnesota, after spending a year at a junior college. So, just being on the university campus was the most overwhelming thing imaginable. And then drifting off the campus into Dinkytown, it was just like the circus being in town. You never knew what you'd see and you didn't understand half the stuff going on. So, it was kind of a magnet early on for me.

RH: Let me take you through some of the haunts, if you will, and tell me your thoughts about them. Not only then, but maybe now as well. Let's start with Al's Breakfast.

MB: Al's Breakfast—I think I had my first breakfast there in 1966, and, of course, it was just a place to eat breakfast. But once you've had breakfast at Al's, it becomes your favorite place for life. I was a farm boy, and once I moved to the Twin Cities, my first meal of the day had to be breakfast. Often, I'd race to Al's by 10 minutes to 1:00 pm because they closed the doors then. And so, over the years, I was a regular eating breakfast at Al's. You never knew who you'd see in there—former governors like Wendell Anderson and Arne Carlson, Minnesota Gophers and professional basketball and football stars—but it was just the strangest place. Again, with my rural background, you didn't see things like Al's.

RH: Then there's Gray's Drug above which you lived for a while.

MB: Yeah. I lived right next door to the room that Bob Dylan had rented. I and my girlfriend were up there, and that was fantastic. Gray's Drug was also quite a magnet for

people. They had, I think, a 99-cent breakfast special, and I'd go down there and eat regularly and run into all kinds of people there, like Andy Kozak, a musician, history graduate student, and public intellectual. He was a Trotskyite who always gave me shit about my fondness for Emerson and Thoreau. Just how retrograde that era was, one of the waitresses at Gray's was the first woman ever admitted to the Boston University Medical School. So, Gray's was another primo spot.

RH: When you arrived in Dinkytown, the anti-war movement was really gaining steam. What was it in your opinion about the mood, the atmosphere of Dinkytown that lent itself to the anti-war crowd?

MB: Well, I think particularly because of the artistic heritage in Dinkytown, that was sort of there prior to a lot of politics going on. I think the earlier politics was more DFL-oriented young people and stuff, but it was just a natural place to gravitate. There wasn't much on the other side of the campus. And so, I think weird people congregated on the West Bank and in Dinkytown. In those days, you needed rapid transit between Dinkytown and the West Bank! But the West Bank was more the home of the hippie crowd, the alternative stuff, and I think Dinkytown was a mix of both, but I think the politicos gravitated more to Dinkytown.

RH: Tell me about your relationship especially as it applies to some of the anti-war protests and activities, your relationship with Bill Tilton.

MB: I got to know Bill in 1970. Bill was sort of the prototype 1970 large-university student-body president. He was clean cut. He was well spoken. He was a man groomed for leadership. And then, of course, the bottom dropped out with them being ratted out by one of the Minnesota Eight [they destroyed draft records at draft centers in the middle the night], and I think it changed Bill in all kinds of ways. I don't think if that hadn't have happened, he would've gone on to be an illustrious mainstream leader in the Twin Cities. I think that and the time in federal prison altered his life, and I think then he gravitated to working with many of the people around Wounded Knee and other causes. So, I think it altered the course of his life quite a bit.

RH: While he was in prison, I think that coincided with you kind of taking the lead on some of these anti-war activities.

MB: Well, it was strange. I remember he later told me that they were sitting in federal prison and watching me stir up a crowd on the national evening news. He still remembered that, but my story was a little different. I was never a character who was part of formal organizations and stuff. One of the odd things was I was at all of these things, but I was a little more than a foot soldier. Somehow, a megaphone fell into my hands one day—and a media star was born!

There was a huge demonstration against Cedar Square West on the West Bank, and they brought George Romney, Mitt's daddy, and he was going to inaugurate this hi-rise monstrosity. They had six-foot fences all the way around it, and there was such a protest

that the crowd smashed down all the fences. The cops were inside and they pepper-gassed us as we broke down the fences. My face was covered with blisters for a week afterwards. They pushed Romney into a limousine and he was rushed away. They never got to inaugurate the housing project that day, and afterwards it became guerrilla theater on the streets. The police battled activists up and down Riverside Avenue.

I had a gift for gab, a huge Afro, and wire-rimmed glasses. So afterwards, I realized half the reason I became famous long ago was because I was photogenic, the stereotypical student leader. I was also great at grassroots strategy and tactical moves. So, I became a field commander by accident. And then the next day, because of rioting on the West Bank the day before, we were in front of Northrop Auditorium and a crowd slowly gathered. Somebody leaked to me that Charlie Stenvig, Mayor of Minneapolis, and the university administration were in league to shut down the protests.

Charlie was a no-nonsense, right-winger, bust their heads kind of guy. There was a place where they towed cars to, Kohler's Garage. They stashed a huge tactical squad into that building, hiding them in there. Somebody got word to me that he had seen them going in. So, I immediately thought in the back of my head, "We've got to provoke those pigs," in the vernacular of those days.

So, we immediately took a crowd over to the recruiting office in Dinkytown, breaking windows and raising hell there. That didn't quite bring the tactical squad out, so another guy who was very active and helpful in this sort of thing—we picked up power in the streets—was Dean Zimmerman. We split the crowd and headed down to the ROTC Armory, which was maybe five or six blocks away. The armory was an old granite-brick structure, and it was surrounded by steel posts, cemented into the ground.

People started ripping those posts right out of the ground. Well, that was finally enough. Here comes the tactical squad swinging clubs everywhere, smashing heads indiscriminately. So, we had succeeded in the first step of provoking this into a real confrontation. From then on it was improvisational direct action. So, I certainly wasn't any formal leader. Dean and I was just activists with enough moxie to pick up power when we saw it laying in the streets, jumping in and grabbing it.

RH: What was the president of the University of Minnesota's reaction to these protests?

MB: Well, what was fascinating was that Malcolm Moos was the U of M president, and he was pretty cocky. His was one of the few big campuses that hadn't really gone haywire, and he bragged about, how his campus was peaceful. Well, he's out of town for three days, and his vice president—I think his name was Gene Eidenberg, later President Jimmy Carter's assistant to the President as the Secretary of the Cabinet—was in charge. Well, all hell broke loose under Eidenberg. I guess he was an example of the Peter Principle. What we did that day was perpetual guerrilla warfare. We would split crowds up and sent them off to new locations.

The police would close in on us at one place like the armory, so we sent a huge crowd down to Oak and Washington, completely blocking that intersection. Eventually there 5,000 activists in the street. The cops would come and we'd move people down in front of Coffman Union on the campus, and block Washington Avenue. And so, in their frustration, their first move was to call in the seven-county emergency police units. They had sheriffs' deputies and police departments from everywhere. They couldn't regain control. They just went crazy. So, late in the afternoon, God knows whose idea it was, but Charlie Stenvig had plenty of wacky ideas. They had been shooting canisters of teargas, and all of a sudden, they took a helicopter up and started dropping teargas, first in front of Coffman Union and then all the way up to Northrop Auditorium, the entire campus mall.

Then they went into Dinkytown. There were child care centers, all kinds of businesses, and here are teargas canisters coming out of the sky just blasting everybody in the area. Business people actually were coming out with wet rags to help people clean their eyes and stuff. So, that was the kind of day it was. Finally, Stenvig gave up. They could not control this crowd because of our maneuvering. They completely freaked out. At that point, the governor sent in 800 National Guardsmen. Stenvig had lost control, but the National Guard clamped down on the university and surrounding neighborhoods

RH: You spent some time in Berkeley and the Haight-Ashbury, both San Francisco and Berkeley. Compare Berkeley to Dinkytown.

MB: Dinkytown was kind of a mini-me of Berkeley. I mean, there was the huge magnitude of Berkeley—the bookstores, the activists, the history. Dinkytown was a smaller version of that is all. But Dinkytown was set in a major metropolitan area while Berkeley was off on the edge of Oakland. So, it was fairly autonomous. Madison was very similar, but had the same vibe. What was weird about the '72 event was that Dinkytown became the national focal point, while Madison, Columbia, Berkeley, and Ann Arbor paled by comparison.

In '72, the reason that there was a strike and all the students' riots were because Nixon had escalated the war by mining the Hai Phong harbor. Out of nowhere in '72, it's the University of Minnesota that's erupted, and that's what blew Moos' mind, that it happened at the U of M. In fact, after both of the two days of rioting, one day on West Bank and the next on the U of M campus, we went home and watched ourselves on the evening national news, and Eric Sevareid had a lead story one of the nights on what was going on in Minneapolis. Dinkytown was very much a miniature version of Berkeley.

RH: You addressed it subtly earlier, but I want you to pick up as it applies to Dinkytown. Kind of the politics of the new left versus the hippies—what do you mean by that and how did it manifest itself in Dinkytown?

MB: Well, I think it was kind of a cross fertilization, but at the time, there were people who were the—what was Timothy Leary's phrase? "Tune in, turn on, and drop out." They were much more a counter-culture that was around drugs, nonviolence but not in a political way, alternative lifestyles, much more into changing the world by changing

yourself. The New Left started off as sort of a reform movement, really, of young people, but it became more and more radical and political.

So, you had these two groups at the extremes and then you had maybe a third of the people that kind of move back and forth between these. So, you had national characters like Jerry Rubin and Abby Hoffman who were sort of passing back and forth between them, but other people were primarily on one side or the other of it. But there were enough common denominators that everybody felt themselves as part of “The Movement,” and the movement had both of these wings as central elements.

RH: When you think of Dinkytown and a guy named Marv Davidov, what do you think of?

MB: Well, Marv Davidov was an old activist—I mean, I thought he was ancient at the time. He must’ve been in his late 30s. Marv was notorious because he was one of the first people to go down South and was part of the Freedom Riders, was arrested, had been in the notorious Parchman state prison in Mississippi, and was a powerful convert to nonviolent revolution. And so, he became sort of a mentor and a guru at this time in Minnesota because there was this gap with no elders to guide us young radicals.

There weren’t many people that were still around anymore who had real significance experience, who had been radicals in the ‘30s. That was the last great uprising, until the Civil Rights Movement. So, we were in many cases children running in the streets without parental figures to help us, and Marv was that figure. He was just constantly teaching us, and we’d have nonviolent training sessions. We’d talk about history. He was just everywhere. He had this huge, fantastic mustache; sort of a Sam Elliott look, but Marv lacked the Elliott head-hair.

So, he was an instrumental figure. The other mentor was Mulford Q. Sibley. He was an elderly Quaker and a political science professor. He was in federal prison as a conscientious objector during World War II. He was a pacifist to the point that he wore tennis shoes because he didn’t want to touch leather or have anything to do with leather. Every day, he wore a red tie and he said it was to honor the blood of the workers. He was a democratic socialist and a pacifist, but he was a gentle, calming man.

I still remember, I had dropped out of school at times. He taught political theory, and I would just stop in during his office hours and I wasn’t a student at the university, and I would have read some theorist and he was willing to sit and talk with me about the reading. He made no distinction between student and non-student. But those two—and Marv particularly in the streets—were really important. He was running the Honeywell Project at the time.

The Honeywell Project was an activist group fighting the Honeywell Corporation’s making of cluster bombs, after it was uncovered that the U.S. was using them in Vietnam. They were indiscriminately dropping them from planes and were slaughtering women, children and animals. They were used just to clear villages, a form of genocide. Those

were the most hideous kind of bombs at that time. So, Marv's Honeywell Project had been going long before most of the anti-war stuff really got going.

RH: What's your take on—and maybe involvement as well—in the Red Barn protest?

MB: The Red Barn chain tried to put in a fast-food joint in Dinkytown. Again, I was a participant because I lived above Gray's Drug and it was just across the street, so I joined in. I stayed there a lot of nights during the occupation. Actually, the night of the police raid, I wasn't there when they came in just after 2:00 am, but I was there most of the time, active and talking with people and helping organize and stuff, but my role there was minimal. I was more just a foot soldier in that process. But just weird stuff—there was a sort of celebration-party atmosphere throughout the weeks of occupation.

Al Milgrom's film, *Dinkytown Uprising*, was about part of that period, and I still remember that there was a building that we were occupying that Al staged a scene to film. There was a cupola—I think that's what it's called—an opening in it with a door that opened and closed. Al said to me, "Why don't you go up there and look out the window?" So, I go up there and look out, and this flapping window was on my head and I'm wearing an army helmet of some sort with a big cigar Al gave me, wire-rimmed glasses, and this huge mustache. I looked like Groucho Marx. Somebody's pulling the strings, so the cupola door is bouncing on my helmeted head and it like a Marx-brothers comedy, and he shot that and he opened the film with that scene.

RH: Even though you weren't there, tell me what you heard about the night of the bust.

MB: Well, I went home about 2:00 pm I think because we were just across the street, and shortly thereafter came the police assault. They came in hell-bent for leather with the tactical squad, just rounding people up, throwing them in paddy wagons, and that was followed by dump trucks and bulldozers. They just plowed what was remaining of buildings down, tore up the People's Park and garden that had been built and planted on a vacant lot. So, by 6:00 pm, it was just like a bomb had gone off. There was very little of anything left. The timing of the raid was such that the mainstream newspapers had no reporters there when it started. Only a few of university's Minnesota Daily reporters were initially there and got caught up in the attack. The late Nick Coleman, Mike Gelfand, and others who were there just as reporters got arrested and thrown in the paddy wagons, too.

RH: Another person I want to ask you about is Kristin Eide-Tollefson. You said she's got a sense of mission.

MB: Yeah, particularly in the later years. You know they talk about the "grandma on the porch." Well, in her own way—she's certainly not that old—but she was sort of became the grandma on the porch in many ways about protecting Dinkytown, fighting developers, that there was something almost sacred about that space, and "Can't you just once leave something alone?" You know that old song, "Putting up a Parking Lot"? That sort of thing.

So, she owned the Book House, a used bookstore in Dinkytown, and more and more a cultural event center. I know I did two or three sessions there and put together panels, it was a place that wasn't just a bookstore. It was a place to hang out, a place to come and hear people speak and engage in conversations. Kristin was never a person that needed to be out front. She was the person behind the scenes who was trying to keep everything going and moving and protecting people.

RH: When you look back at your days in Dinkytown, how would you describe the impact it had on your life that followed?

MB: Oh, in many ways, it was my second home. As an isolated physical space, it was similar to the Mennonite colony in southwestern Minnesota where I grew up. That was a weird utopia in its own way. I never fit in. Mennonites are nice people, but they were too tight-assed for my tastes. So, Dinkytown became my home of choice. For years, I lived in boarding houses and a hotel in the neighborhood. In its own way, Dinkytown was a utopian community, but it wasn't just a physical space. It was a milieu. There was an ambiance about it that you felt when you were entered—when you went into that area, for me at least, it was like a sacred temple.

There were the bookstores; McCosh's was like an intellectual shrine. There were the music places like the Scholar. It was a place where people who felt out of place where they had come from—this was a home that replaced their original alien homes. It was a place for those who had no place, who were outside of the mainstream, who were misfits, were deviants, were creatives, but they never were going to be the kind of person who fit into mainstream society. Of course, that was why musicians like Bob Dylan and Koerner, Ray and Glover, or young political activists and intellectuals gravitated there. So, to me, I have fond memories of that era, and since then I have helped in any way I could to keep that ambiance alive.

RH: What do you think of Dinkytown today? Do you think it's lost the buzz?

MB: I can hardly go there. Kristin's bookstore was removed and is now just a shell of what it once was. I'm a book nut. I have a house full of books, and I would go at least once every two weeks to her bookstore (250,000 books), and it was an excuse to drive from Woodbury in the East Metro to Dinkytown because then I'd also go have breakfast at Al's, the same thing every time. I would have a side of Wally Blues and have just the most incredible smoky-cheese egg dish there, and it was a nostalgia trip every time. I haven't been to Al's in a couple of years. I stop by the shrunken, relocated Book House occasionally, but now Dinkytown is everything that's wrong with America -- where you can no longer have small enclaves of pluralism, of alternative lifestyles, of small neighborhoods local businesses.

It has become this huge money-making monstrosity of hi-rise apartments and chain stores. Anybody who can recall Dinkytown from the last half of the 20th century and went there today, it's like a sci-fi horror movie, a futuristic dystopian novel. The way they have taken out the House of Hanson grocery, all those unique small businesses, and

it has been taken over by almost inhumane dimensions and ways of life. So, to me, it was something of a utopian community—and it's been turned into the absolute worst possible example of a sci-fi horrific future and where the country is headed.

RH: What would you like to ask? Anything?

Unidentified Speaker: Ed Felien and the Varsity Theatre.

MB: Oh, Ed. Eddie was a character. I didn't have a lot to do with Eddie during that Varsity Theatre era, but Eddie was a major figure in all of these kinds of events, and he had later the Modern Times Cafe in South Minneapolis, which in its own way tried to recreate some of the Dinkytown atmosphere. He put out a newspaper back in the day, and he was doing it on the West Bank. It was called "One Hundred Flowers," and it was to Minneapolis' New Left and counterculture what the "Berkeley Barb" was to Berkeley and the "Village Voice" was to the Village in New York City. He had a commune out in the country, so Eddie was one who moved back and forth between the politics and also the countercultural aspects of the movement. He was in his own way a real leader, and a lot of young people gathered around Eddie. We haven't hit anything much about Milgrom. I've got a story to tell you about Al.

RH: Okay. Go ahead.

MB: Al was a very precarious instructor in the Humanities Department at the U of M, hired year by year. I was an undergraduate student in the Humanities Department and then a teaching assistant. Al was always working an angle, teaching courses on film and running the Film Society.

RH: This was Al Milgrom.

MB: Yes. And he literally, at the time I didn't realize it, in the late 50s, early 60s, Al was the American impresario for foreign films. He knew everybody in world cinema. I was one of his gofers, the guys who would go around Dinkytown and staple fliers on every telephone post, run errands, and all of that kind of tasks. He was sort of short-tempered. He could be pretty grumpy some days, but he was doing all this groundbreaking work. One of the funny stories about Al, me, and a guy named Bill—I can't remember his last name anymore—is when we were preparing for Al was bringing in Jean-Luc Godard and his new film on the Rolling Stones, "Sympathy for the Devil."

It was a large event. We booked Northrop Auditorium. It was such a big deal that I think we sold 2,000 tickets. It got close to the event, and he assigned Bill and I to pick up Godard at the airport. Well, Bill came up with this zany idea. At that stage, Godard was in his Maoist phase--he was "Redder than thou." We cooked up this scheme with an abandoned house, and we were going to plant hidden cameras in it. After we got him from the airplane, we were going to drive him to the house, hold him hostage, and film while we interrogated him for not being "Red enough" because he was actually a bourgeois sellout.

Well, Al got word of it and he put the kibosh on that. He was mad as hell. But it turns out, Godard, when he hears the story when we're out having drinks with him, is pissed off at Al. "Why did he screw that up? I could've made a movie out of that alone." Because of that, he and I became friends. He had a co-director who was traveling with him and the next time he went came to America, they came and hung out with me and my girlfriend. He once asked me to come to France and join his film troupe. I had a tin ear and could never become proficient in French, so I said no. That is one of my few regrets in a wild and crazy life. That was the kind of world Dinkytown was back in the day.

You never knew what international filmmaker was going to show up next, but Al was that kind of character. He was what Bill Graham was in San Francisco—you remember Bill Graham; he was the impresario for Sixties music—that's sort of what Al was for international films. He brought people in nobody in Minneapolis and St. Paul had ever heard of, and then when they realized who they were: "Oh wow, that's who Godard is!" So, Al is a figure who I don't think until the history is written will get his due for what a quirky, brilliant man he is and the important role he has played in the arts and culture of the Twin Cities, and foreign cinema in America.

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**CLEAN
WATER
LAND &
LEGACY
AMENDMENT**

