

Shel Danielson
Narrator

Rob Hahn
Interviewer

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SD: I'm Shel Danielson. Today is December 6, 2018.

RH: And I'm Rob Hahn, and I'll ask the questions.

SD: Great, Rob.

RH: Let me start with some real basic and generic questions. Tell me, if you could, your first memory of going to Dinkytown.

SD: I can't give you the first memory, but I can tell you what it was about, what drove me there along with my friends. I was raised in a small Minnesota town. My parents moved to Edina, of all places, when I was 16. Edina, for me, was really a place of isolation. It was a totally different culture from the small town. It was bland. It was all white. The only thing to do was to go to Southdale Mall.

Dinkytown represented something else. It was a totally different culture. It was a chance to get outside of that box. Out of that suburbia blandness. I think that's what drove me there, and a few of my friends. It was a chance to see something that was more interesting.

RH: How did you hear about it? I mean, was there an article or a discussion? Was it in the news?

SD: Well, some of my friends were artists. We were all interested in reading. We were interested in poetry. And through osmosis, maybe through an article, maybe through an art gallery opening, that's what it took. We were over there, and of course once we saw the scene as it was then, we were 17 years old. And it was a way to get out of that suburban box.

RH: What was the scene like when you first arrived?

SD: It had a neighborhood feel to it, but it was more than just a neighborhood intersection of stores. It served the University. So it was a chance to see people from different cultures. People from different ethnic backgrounds. There were different foods. There were little Mom & Pop shops or individual proprietorships. You could see movies with subtitles. You could get food from Japan, Italy, and different places around the world. And then there were the people.

The people were all different. They dressed differently. There were people from Africa and from Asia. People you just didn't see in the town that I was living in. So it was pretty attractive and interesting. There was a little bit of mystery about it, too.

RH: What was the timeframe when you were hanging out?

SD: I'd say '58 to '60, '61, in there.

RH: Let's go through some of the staples, locations there, and tell me your memories if you would, specific or otherwise. There was The Scholar.

SD: There was The Scholar. The Scholar is probably the place that's remembered by most people. It was really a magnet. It would not be unusual to be in The Scholar having a cup of coffee, maybe a cup of hot apple cider with a cinnamon stick in it. Somebody might be sitting up on that little stage playing acoustic guitar. There'd be a couple of bearded people over in the corner playing chess. A few other folks would be arguing radical politics. That's what I remember about The Scholar.

RH: Vescio's. Did you ever eat at Vescio's?

SD: Yes, but the big memory for me about Vescio's was that they had music in the basement. And Connie Hector, Coleman Hector, had a little band. He was a drummer and a bongo drum player. He had a little trio that he worked with. On weekends, he and his group would play in the basement music room at Vescio's.

RH: I think you mentioned when we talked that there was pizza in Dinkytown. That struck me as so odd, but maybe you can explain why it was so unique.

SD: Sure. In the late '50s, pizza was kind of new. I know this is hard to believe for people, but it was kind of new, at least for me and my friends and the people I knew. I can even remember having pizza-making parties. This was a big deal. But there was Valley Pizza and Vescio's. They used real garlic and real sausage. I don't think they had the frozen pizzas available then, not like they do today. It was almost an exotic food back then.

RH: Another place that you mentioned during our phone conversation is McCosh's Bookstore.

SD: Yes.

RH: Tell me both, if you would, about the bookstore, and if you remember stories about the proprietor, Melvin, who was quite a character.

SD: He was. And there were other bookstores in Dinkytown, too. That was a big draw for people who loved to read. A typical bookstore would have new and used books in it. There would be shelves full of dusty books and there would be stacks of books. There might be classical music playing in the background. There might be one or two cats hanging out around the place, sleeping in the window. McCosh, as I recall, was a character. He had a bushy beard, as I recall, and it was almost like out of a movie to walk into McCosh's Book Shop.

RH: He was described by someone as a curmudgeon. Do you buy into that from your memories?

SD: Yeah. Yeah. It's not that he was friendly. Maybe he almost resented you buying some of his books, getting them out of there.

RH: Did you ever see Bob Dylan?

SD: I may have. And I do have a Dylan story. I do recall seeing someone asked to leave The Scholar because he was unpleasant and difficult to deal with, and not a very good musician. And I was told that the guy's name was Bob Dylan. Whether it really was or not, whether that's a real memory or not, I don't know. But that's my memory of Bob Dylan at The Scholar.

But I do have another Dylan story that's real. Across the street from The Scholar was a wonderful store called The Podium. They sold pipes and tobacco and sheet music and all sorts of instruments. They had music lessons in the back. And 12 or 15 years later, I got a phone call from a friend of mine who said, I'm going to be playing on a session with Dylan here in town.

He's re-recording an album called *Blood on the Tracks*, and he's going to be using Twin Cities musicians. Dylan wants a particular type of guitar, and he told me what it was.

He said, do you know how we could get our hands on a guitar like that for those sessions? And I referred him to the guy at The Podium who had one, and he was invited to sit in on the recording of *Blood on the Tracks* so that he could keep his eye on his guitar and get it back when it was over. That's my Bob Dylan story linked to Dinkytown, which is that I helped make *Blood on the Tracks* possible.

RH: Let's talk about the beat culture. There was certainly a beatnik element to the people in Dinkytown. How do you recall that aspect of the culture?

SD: Of course that was important because *Howl* by Alan Ginsburg was talked about a lot. It was a very important piece of poetry. The Twin Cities was a crossroads for people going between the coasts. They'd stop off. There were a lot of political people who would stop by. There was a lot of ferment. Various speakers, various writers, either associated with the University or stopping by.

I think I remember one summer, we probably wore berets because it was totally cool. We were 17, 18 years old. There was definitely a literary undercurrent to what was going on. The beats were a big part of it, with Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. That kind of attitude permeated a lot of the attitudes of people who hung out there.

RH: You mentioned politics. Did Dinkytown shape your politics at that young age at all?

SD: I don't know that it shaped my politics, but there was a lot of it. There were loud discussions about communism and socialism and civil rights and human rights and socialized medicine and a lot of very radical politics for the time. It was very normal to hear people in loud arguments over small details of politics. Radical politics, especially, because where else do you go to talk about that sort of thing except coffee houses and a university area? Certainly not Southdale.

In addition to The Scholar, there was for awhile in the early '60s a little coffee house called The Minor Key. Upstairs they served sandwiches and coffee and fruit drinks. Downstairs in the basement they had a performance area. John Koerner would play there on weekends. Bobby Lyle, who became a well-known musician got his first job there when he was 16. I know these things because some friends of mine owned The Minor Key.

One of the people that they hired to work on weekends was a standup comedian, a guy who did social satire. His name was Hugh Romney. Later he became known as Wavy Gravy, the official clown of the Grateful Dead. And a roommate of Jack Kerouac's in Los Angeles in the early '60s. That kind of thing was not unusual to run into people like that who were doing social satire, comedy, political commentary of all sorts. That was not at all unusual.

That was part of the attraction, I think. There was a lot of ferment going on. I've thought about, even the art from that era was abstract art. There were a lot of cross currents going on in the country at that time. Political, artistic, literary—a lot of ways.

RH: You mentioned John Koerner. Give me some of your thoughts on his music. Or him as a person, for that matter.

SD: Honestly, I knew Tony Glover much more than I did John. Of course, I used to see Koerner, Ray, and Glover together. All three of them are like a force of nature. Koerner had his own inner metronome going, his own energy, and always had his own thing. Even if you listen to the

Koerner, Ray albums, you'll notice how frequently he will have one song for him, one song for Dave, and then one song where they're all three maybe working together.

Very strong influence on music in the Twin Cities and throughout the country. I remember reading an interview with John Lennon talking about when he moved into his place at The Dakota to start setting up the apartment. To get in the mood, he put on the first Koerner, Ray, Glover album, which was one of his favorites. I think that album still sells internationally. It's a very influential album.

RH: Did you ever encounter students from Marshall University High School?

SD: I did. I don't remember any of them. But I did, and they were part of the whole scene, too.

RH: What was that like? They were going to school in the heart of Dinkytown. You're coming from Edina. Bourgeois suburbia. Was it fun hanging with them?

SD: I think they probably had a pretty good time. They were right on the edge of the action. They were across the street from Dinkytown. I'm not sure that we did much in the way of interaction.

RH: I want to use a sentence that you used during our phone call, and hopefully you can incorporate that into your answer and what you meant by it. I think you called Dinkytown quote, "the front door to an international university."

SD: Well, it was, you know. I was raised and lived in pretty much an all-white community. A very bland, apolitical, and it's like in the movie Wizard of Oz. The first several minutes are shot in black and white. And then the house lands and squishes the witch and she opens the door, and the world is in technicolor. That was the difference between the suburban existence and Dinkytown. Dinkytown was real. It had smells and tastes and unusual looking people and people who talked differently. It was alive.

RH: Let's talk about the racial diversity. You mention that it was much more—let me just let you comment on it instead of putting words into your mouth. Coming from the suburbs again, it had to be a bit of an eye opener, I would think.

SD: It was. And remember, this was like the front door to the university. So at any given time, you'd see professors or students from all over the world walking around the streets and talking with each other. They may be speaking different languages. They may be wearing more or less clothing from their area of the world. Men with turbans. Women wearing saris. This was unusual in the late '50s. In Minnesota it was. Might not have been unusual in New York or Los Angeles or London, but in Minnesota, it was. And you'd see people with different skin colors, different body shapes, different noses and hair styles and colors. It was different from the homogenous suburbs.

RH: How do you think Dinkytown affected your love of music and how was that applied in your career in radio?

SD: It let me know I was right. In my head, I always knew that there was a greater world out there. So when you walk into a club or a bookstore and you hear jazz, or you go to a place like the basement of Vescio's on a weekend and you hear some very interesting jazz-oriented music with bongo drums and the flute, this was not what was being heard on popular, top-40 radio. Intuitively, I knew that this was right, and that was kind of a nice affirmation.

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

SD: I think that an important part of Dinkytown, what it did for me at least, was it was a crossroads for ideas, politics, art, cultures, and for a white kid from the all-white suburbs, it was a chance to not only see the world through a different window, but to climb through that window and start to participate in that broader world.

RH: I have a question. When you moved into album rock and you were able to do your controversial shows and you brought in Native Americans, did some of that come out of Dinkytown? And talk about your doing that at KQ.

SD: At KQ during the early '70s, we knew that we had to really reach out and serve our audience. We knew that our audience was a little bit different than the typical radio audience. So we stressed that all of our public service announcements and all of our public service programming would be as inclusive as possible. When we did public service announcements, we promoted the collectives. We promoted communes, vegetarian restaurants, venereal disease clinics, many little theaters that were around, and even various street protests that were happening.

We really tried to serve our population. Because of that, we thought let's just take it a step further. So we had Bill Tilton host a program called KQ Scope, which was a telephone talk show. He took calls from people and he had guests who were nationally known speakers, and we also had the American Indian Movement hour, or I'm not sure what it was called. Clyde Bellecourt was the host of the show. We made that program available to him, and it was the only shot that AIM and those people had to reach out and get their message in front of a larger audience. Nobody else in town was going to give them any air time.

So we did that, and I think that was important. That all goes back to the openness and the ferment that was engendered in a way in Dinkytown back in those early days, where you started to see that there was a bigger world and more than one way of looking at things.

RH: It's interesting that you mention—the Bill Tilton you mention, is that the attorney?

SD: Yes.

RH: Okay. So it's interesting that you mention him and Clyde Bellecourt, because they both have some connection to Dinkytown. Bill, largely during the war protests. And Clyde had the Heart of the Earth School, and I think the American Indian Movement might have had an office for short period of time in Dinkytown. So there's that common thread, and it's interesting how X number of years later, it would manifest itself again on KQ.

SD: Yeah. I tell you, in the Twin Cities, there are layers and layers of interaction between people over the years. Not that it's a closed society, but if you're active in the arts, you're going to run into the same people again and again.

RH: Basically, Dinkytown was the origin of counterculture, at least in the Twin Cities. And KQRS seemed to spread that counterculture. How did that work? How it just disseminated over a period of four or five years, it just exploded.

SD: Well, it didn't happen by accident. John Pete, another program director at KQRS, and I were living above The Free Store on the West Bank in the early '70s, so we pretty much had our ears to what was going on in the street. We practically lived in the street. Our roommates were members of the New Riverside Café Collective, and that was an extension of the Dinkytown era.

A lot of those people came over to the West Bank from Dinkytown. That was a movable culture, moving from that side of the Mississippi to the West Bank.

I was probably more plugged into needs of the people, if I can say that without it being taken the wrong way. I knew about people who had a lot of problems. Lived on the street. People who had drug problems. There were a lot of issues in our society, and at one point, I think we were saying, if we don't deal with these things, who will? And we did it straightforwardly. We were honest in our presentation, and I think that resonated with our audience that what we were doing was real. It wasn't to get ratings. We really were trying to serve our audience.

RH: Were there a lot of drugs in Dinkytown when you were hanging out there?

SD: There may have been, but I didn't participate in them. I was never asked. I was never invited. I'm sure I probably would have been interested in exploring them. The drugs came later. Talking about the West Bank and the transition from the Dinkytown area to the West Bank, times were changing. Rents were increasing. I think that there was a lot more real estate available on the West Bank for students.

People like Bill Teska moved over to the West Bank and was a founder or an enabler of the New Riverside Café and some of the other collectives in town. There just was a shifting of people. Instead of hanging out at The Scholar, which had been replaced, I guess, by the McDonald's, people were getting older. They were starting to hang out at The Mixers up on Seven Corners. It was just like the whole scene shifted.

And then there were a lot of people who wanted to live over on the West Bank. It was really affordable, and you were with your own folks, kind of.

RH: Tell us about Maury Bernstein.

SD: I mentioned Reverend Bill Teska who moved over. Red Nelson shifted over there, along with his friends, and some of the musicians did, too. I remember Maury Bernstein. Maury was a wonderful radio guy. He used to do radio shows that were really cool. He played accordion. He was a multi-linguist, and a teller of great stories. He loved Scandinavian music. He loved all kinds of music.

I just had to mention Maury as being one of those really interesting characters. You couldn't live on the West Bank and not know Maury. He was the kind of guy that, if he saw you on the other side of the street when he was walking down the other side, he'd cross over the street and start talking to you. He would keep talking as long as you let him, until you had to go someplace else. That was Maury. He was a great guy.

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