

# "Never Take A Job That Requires New Clothes" - The Bob Saporiti Journey

Posted by Charlie Treat - March 24, 2014 - Nashville

I call Bob Saporiti from the shade of the back deck of our house in Nashville. Lomax gave me the number. The instant he picks up I can tell he's a goofy and fuzzy but almost mischievous character. I explain the project. "Oh, cool! So you guys convinced a bunch of people to pay you to go on a road trip, go to shows and have the fuckin' time of your life?", he asks rhetorically, sarcastically. "That's bril-



Photo by Heidi Arc

liant!", he responds in full honesty. He loves that we're from the Boston area. "I had to lose my accent", he laughs, "I couldn't be walkin' in to the music biz talkin' like a 'Weymouth 'gang bangah, I pahked my cah near the hahbah' and all that shit. People would have run me out of town or run away. Plus, it was a tell tale sign: yankee!"

The doorbell rings at 9 a.m. on the dot, a few days later. All I know about Bob Saporiti is that he was the Sr. VP and General Manager at Warner Brother's Records' and the former GM of Savannah Music Group in Nashville. That and he's the first guy in our four months of documenting that wants to do the interview at our place. Linus, the pit bull that lives with



us, is jumping on the door, snarling through the panes of glass that are flexing and rattling from the barking, the barfing of slobber and thunder. Marie is asleep on the couch after another late night of editing video. I hold the dog back by the collar and Bob squeezes in carefully so as not to give the dog any room to drag me out of here.

He shows up in shades. He's a big guy, with a long white beard and an open grin. A big happy bear of a man, he's relaxed, restless and he's wearing a "Quit Work. Play Music" t-shirt. We go outside

to the backyard where my computer and recorder are set up. I make coffee and put it out for everyone. He's giggly, like the kind when you don't get enough sleep, and he's more interested in us and our project then he is in doing the interview.

"I wouldn't be able to do this if you were a New York Yankee fan", he chuckles. He's still got Boston in his heart. He tells us about growing up in Dorchester watching the subway station at Savin Hill get lit on fire every saturday night from his window; his backyard made of ashes and pink coal and Napier Park where the New Kidz On the Block grew up. "When the New Kidz On The Block hit it and made millions they could have lived anywhere in the world and they chose Braintree", he laughs. "If you grew up in Dorchester living in Braintree was like making it." He tells us about his ritzy 84 year old uncle who brought him to dinner in his home in Italy and sat on the other end of a 40 foot table with just Bob and his wife, then hit on his wife in the back of his limo for the rest of the afternoon while Bob had to chauffeur. He talks about the Bruins and their sudden loss in game six of the Stanley Cup Finals game the night before. "It was like the ball going through Buckner's leg!", he screams. He moves slow and cool, he's a kid at heart and he talks like Dr. John. The stories are coming and it's all funny and I haven't even started the interview yet.

Then, I ask him one question, "What got you into music?" and we lift off. With that one question a spark is lit under him and he brings himself a long way in, reaches all the way back in time and launches us forward through his story. With one question he leads us away in a giant adventure. With a mountain of ants crawling up the bottom of his mug,

over the table and up his sleeve and Linus the dog humping his pant leg, he launches into his autobiography, a Forrest Gump meets Gonzo adventure, the ultimate 1960's epic. This is his story, in his own words.



Savin Hill Subway Station, Dorchester, Boston

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# Part One: The Trip Out.

"Well I guess it was Auntie Mickey from Weymouth who got me into music. She played piano so we'd go over to her house. She also drank whiskey and smoked cigarettes. She was pretty cool, in her 50's. So we would go over her house and sing all night long. She was Irish. She was a big influence but so was the rest of my family. There was a lot of



9th Grade, East Jr. High, Braintree, MA

music in my family like dance hall kind of stuff and I've always liked songs. My father always liked Teresa Brewer. He played her records and Perry Como's. I like songs like "How Much Is That Doggie In The Window". I like funny songs so I'd say humor got me into songs as much as anything else. From an early age I was entranced by it."

"And then when Elvis Presley came along it was over and I was just gone in 1956. I was 10 years old and I was just blown away. He just absolutely did it to

me. I said, 'Fuck!' -I want to be Elvis so bad", he clinches his fists and craves like a child, "as did everybody. From there, that whole period, all those guys, Ricky Nelson, Bobby V, Buddy Holly, that whole rock 'n roll thing -it grabbed me."

"Then I really got into Chuck Berry and Little Richard. Back then they had race records and they wouldn't play them on white radio stations so I'd have to find them. I finally found out about these records through some older kids and

totally realized that these were the real deal and the white guys were bull shit, covering them, copying them. 'Bee Bop a Lula' ", he sings softly, excruciatingly pleasantly, "then Little Richard, 'Bee Pop a Lula!", he sings loudly and raspy shaking his head, "and I loved the contrast of the two. I used to listen to the black radio stations at the right end of the A.M. dial. My



Bob Dylan

theory with music is you start off with coffee as a kid with a lot of milk in it and by the time you become a sophisticated guy, you go to college, you're drinking espresso, then double shots of espresso and triple shots and so on. That's how I look at the music. The white guys are the cream and the black guys are the expresso. If you start studying where it came from, the roots, you know that music at this time was black no matter

who was singing. They never exploited them on radio until the 70's so this wasn't on in the 50's. All that rock 'n roll, I just loved it. I still do."

"After that I got into the folk thing pretty big. I started listening to all this kind of watered-down Kingston Trio and Peter, Paul and Mary stuff and then I heard Bob Dylan! I saw Bob Dylan for the first time in 1961 at the Cambridge Common. He was with Joan Baez. It was a free concert. My sister took me. We took the subway in. I'll never forget it. I guess he was 18 years old at the time. He had a little cap on, a Suede Jacket with a fur collar, boots up to his knees, jeans. He was totally different", Bob shakes his head.

"Once I heard him I went from Elvis to Dylan and that's when I really started writing songs. I was playing guitar before. I had a guitar since I was 11 years old. I started getting into these folk groups and stuff and when I heard Dylan I really started creating song ideas of my own as a teenager. I guess along the way there were others that came with these

cats but those were the seminal people, the stars that gravitated the past to them and you find out about the ones that built them."

"Dylan led me to the discovery of the originals: the Lomaxes, Lead Belly, Lightning Hopkins, Mississippi John Hurt, Sleepy John Estes and The Tennessee Jug Busters. I got deeply into that and I'd go and seek those guys out. Fortunately, I was in Boston and Cambridge so I could go to Club 47 which is now Passim's or the Plow and Stars or the Unicorn Café on Boylston Street which is no longer there, or Ken's in Copley Square these were all the coffee shops. This was a coffee shop era between the beatniks and the hippies."

"It was the end of Jack Kerouac and the beginning of Ken Kesey and so of course I gravitated towards San Francisco. But I was in college. I was playing guitar anywhere I could around Boston and I was hitchhiking to New York City and playing down



Elvis Preslev

Mississippi John Hurt

there in Greenwich Village. I saw the Velvet Underground with Nico, The Lovin' Spoonful at the Cafe Wha?, Dylan at

the Folk Village and then Dave Van Ronk at the Gaslight, all in the same night."

"I'll never forget that night because I hitchhiked down to New York, I stayed at this girl's apartment and I slept in the bathtub because that's where she wanted me to sleep. On the way back from this night of going out to these clubs and seeing all these incredible musicians I bought this head cheese. Head cheese is meat and cold cuts and it's got all sorts of seethrough gelatin stuff in it", Bob says wincing. "It's gelatinous, horrible stuff. I don't know what it's made out of either. It's like the snouts and the ears and shit. Anyway, I thought it was cheese. I'm drunk and I go into a deli and I buy a bunch of head cheese thinking it's going to be cheese. I get to the girl's apartment and I get into the bathtub and I didn't really look at it. I just ate it and then I looked it. I threw up all over myself in that fucking bath tub!", we all burst out laughing together and Eric has a face of pure glee and amazement. "I'll never forget that night. And I had to hitch hike back the next day. That's kind of what my life was like back then", Bob says casually, summing his childhood up in one improbable New York city night.



Ken Kesey

"I was in school but I wasn't studying. I was playing guitar and doing LSD. At the same time Tim Leary, the guy who was the guru who started the whole LSD thing, was teaching at Harvard and one of my fraternity brother's father was a math professor there. Timothy Leary turned my friend's dad onto LSD. My friend's dad turned my friend onto LSD. My friend at Bowdoin College in Maine turned me on. This

was 1965 and it was still legal. It hadn't even broke yet. On

the West Coast it was Ken Kesey, the guy who wrote One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest and had that bus 'Further' out there. He was hanging out with Neal Cassady who was the character Sal Paradise in Iack Kerouac's On The Road. This is all history now but at the time it was just a bunch of crazy guys doing drugs."



Tim Leary and Neal Cassady

"On the East Coast everyone was into Ram Dass and finding God and you had a guide and you took your LSD and you were spiritual. On the West Coast it was like 'Let's do some acid and go surfing!", Bob celebrates. "It was totally different. Fortunately I got to do both coasts and that was very good for my wellbeing. If you're from Boston you are so



Ram Dass photo by Peter Simon

cynical by nature. You're just totally intellectual and you don't do anything physical except fight and play basketball or hockey. Whereas on the West Coast they were more sensitive and more fun and more playful and more physical."

"So those were my college days. Needless to say I didn't last too long in college. I got through two years. I was in a band at the time that summer called Park Street Under. We were doing really well. We were playing the Surf Nantasket and all these clubs around New England. It was a rock 'n roll band. This was 1967. Then...", he pauses and shrugs, "I got drafted."

"There was no lottery, no nothing. This is when they were taking everyone and sending them right to Vietnam. That was it, no questions asked. If you weren't in school, you didn't have a deferment and they were looking for me. They were waiting for you and I didn't sign up for college again because I was playing in the band and wasn't paying attention and I got my draft notice. I scrambled to get into some other school or get back to Bowdoin. Too late, they had me. I had two weeks to decide what the fuck to do. My choices were prison, Canada or the Army. At the time they wouldn't let you join any other services because they needed cannon fodder for 'Nam. The Navy was full, Air Force was full, Coast Guard was full and so you just went to the Army and that was it."

"Because everyone was trying to stay out of the service

all the kids were hiding out in college so if you had a college education, any kind of college education, they wanted you in the Air Force, the Navy and the Coast Guard. I was able to join the Navy eventually which worked out really well because my grandfather on my mother's side



had been a captain. In fact, that whole side of the family had been seafaring guys. I thought, 'Well this is kind of a tradition'. I joined the Navy in October 1967. On Columbus Day I was inducted. I went down to the Whitehall building in Boston and got sent to boot camp", says Saporiti showing the first signs of institutionalization and regiment.

"So of course the night before, we played our last gig as a band, we dropped acid. When I got to the Navy I was still high as hell. I was high for my first two days of boot camp. It was so cool", he giggles. " 'I'm digging this!', I'm saying, 'This is gonna be great, shave my head!' ", he commands. "And then it kind of wore off and I'm like, 'What the fuck have I done?' So the next thing I know I'm on a tanker, sailing around the world. I did that for three years and I got out. I met a guy from Hollywood when I was in the Navy. He said, 'When you get out come and stay with me.'"



1971 San Fernando earthquake

"It was Dennis Rosucci. So I did. I went out to Hollywood and lived with him in the La Fortuna Apartments off of Lancashire Boulevard, North Hollywood. I lived with him

and his wife, Suzi. I had only been there a little bit and all of a sudden there's a giant earthquake", he lifts the back of his hands an inch over the table and shakes them. "It was the biggest one to date that they had. It was 1971 in February. It was a huge earthquake and I just remember getting thrown off the couch where I was sleeping and seeing Suzi running naked out of the bedroom and right out the door. She was from Florida", he laughs. "I walked into their bedroom and Dennis is smoking a cigarette. He was from LA so he said, 'It's just an earthquake man. There is nothing you can do about it. Want a cigarette?" ", he says smoothly, arrogantly. "So I learned fast. Everyone was nice for one day. The day after the earthquake everyone was scared shitless so they were all nice. The next day: 'Fuck you! Back to business!' ", he growls. "That's the most superficial place, L.A., no soul whatsoever. 'Let's do lunch', they would say and then not show up. It's deep ugly, Hollywood and therefore a very interesting place to be."

"I was into trying to be a folk singer. However folk music had gone away while I was in the Navy and I wasn't aware of it. Funk was coming in and dance music. I was having a hard time getting any work because I just wanted to be a guitar player."

"So I said, 'Fuck it. I'm going home.' A guy I had gone to college with had bought a small castle in Ireland and he was going to open up a little bed-and-breakfast and he wanted me to run it. So I went to Maine to see him. It sounded pretty good and I was getting frustrated. I said, 'I'm not going to



make it as a singer-songwriter here. This ain't happening.' "

"I decided I go to San Francisco just to see it before I left. I was about 22 or 23. This is at the height of all the hippie shit so I hitchhiked up there with Dennis. I was in a club called the John Barley Corn, at the corner of California and Larkin. There were three guys playing acoustic guitars and bass and they

were really good. When they got done I said, 'Hey man, great stuff. You guys are really good!' They said, 'Well, I see you got a guitar case'. I was planning to leave from there to go to Ireland and give up my dream."

'Do you want to play a song?' I said, 'Really?' They said, 'Yes.' I said, 'Great' and they said, 'Come with us.' So we went out into the doorway", Saporiti says with suspense. "They said, 'Have you ever done cocaine?' I said, 'No.' They said, 'Well, you've got to try.' I said, 'What the fuck.'" He makes a little snort smiling. "I did some cocaine. I went in

there and I got my guitar out and played "Cocaine Blues", Dave Van Ronk's version of it: 'I woke up this morning, had a hunger pain. All I want for breakfast is that sweet cocaine", he sings in a gargling live voice, "and I played it like I've never played it before in my life! I



San Francisco, 1971

had never done cocaine before so I thought I was fucking King. The bartender Larry who owned the place hired me on the spot and I ended up living in San Francisco for ten years and never went back."



Bob and sonwriting partner, Tom Donald

"Where L.A. was totally competitive San Francisco was totally noncompetitive. It was all love, follow the heart. It was hard for me to comprehend being from Boston and having gone through the LA experience."

"I ended up playing a lot, getting gigs, writing a lot of songs. I even owned a recording studio in San Francisco all the way up until

the late 70's. My studio and songwriting partner Tom Donald was another frat brother from Bowdoin. He had avoided the draft somehow. I bumped into him in San Francisco and he played the bass so we started a little thing. We ended up with a four track recording studio called Free Spirit Studios."

## Part Two: The Trip Back.

"In 1974 Tom and I went to New York City to shop our songs. We took what was called the Hippie Bus. It cost 50 bucks to go from Haight Ashbury to Harvard Square. It had an elephant painted on the back and it was all psychedelic colors and they took out all of the seats and put down

plywood. You had to lie down in the hallway with someone else's feet on either side of your head. All you could see was this tiny bit of window because they put all the luggage underneath and they just packed us in like sardines."



The Hippie Bus

"I cut my hair and shaved my beard and I bought a suit and wore the suit on the bus for three days because that's all that I had aside from my guitar and a couple pairs of socks. Tom and I got on this bus and the bus was incredible. It picked us up at the corner of Haight and Stanyon street. We got on board and the guy on the intercom says, 'Hi, I'm Blue. I'm your bus driver. We're going to make one quick stop in Berkeley, California before we get going if that's okay with you.' "

"So we drive over to Berkeley, California and he pulls up to this house. We see him having this wicked fight with some chick on the porch", Bob smiles. "You know he was trying to get her to come with him and she wouldn't go. So then we drive for a while and six hours into the thing we're down in Needles, California and he goes, 'I'm getting tired. Any one here know how to drive a bus?' "

"The girl was gonna' be his backup driver but they had a fight. So some guy goes, 'Well, I drove a bus once.' We had an eight track player. The only music we had was "In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida" by Iron Butterfly and James Taylor's, "You Got A Friend". They played them over and over. It was psycho."

"There were chicks nursing. It was so hippy", he cracks up and his shoulders jump up and down. "People would get off wherever. The bus wound its way across the country and left people off at the closest freeway exit. It was \$20 to Idaho, \$30 to Michigan. They wouldn't go into the main cities. We wound around, went to Arizona, up to Idaho, Iowa, three days nonstop, 24 hours a day."

"I remember, we got to Arizona which was real redneck and still is and the bus stops and everyone gets out. I'm still in my suit with short hair and I remember going into the truck stop and looking and listening to all the guys with their guns and shit just sitting there going, 'Ya'll dang hippies' ", he drags the words real backwoods-like. "And everyone got off the bus and did all the perfect, most hippy stuff!", he laughs with his hands conjuring images. "They were doing yoga in the parking lot, nursing babies, eating granola and a lot of dope was consumed."

"Everyone was into all the spiritual stuff too. This was a time when there were gurus everywhere. I took meditation from Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, the guide The Beatles learned from, when I was in L.A. Mike Love from the Beach Boys was in my class."

"Maybe one of the funniest things I've ever witnessed happened on that trip. There was a guy named Maharishi G who was a little guru from Chile. He was five years old. He looked like a little midget", Bob puts his palm a few feet above the ground. "They had a picture of him hung up on the back wall. The bus was configured so there was a little wall for separation so that the dogs and the mothers nursing could go back there if they wanted privacy. There was no bathroom. It was just a little space in the back where people hung pictures and info up."

"One morning I woke up and there was this fist fight going on in the bus! It was an actual fistfight which was ridiculous because everyone was lying down and WTF, it was all hippies! The Maharishi G disciples got really pissed off at these other hippie guys. We stopped the bus and I said, 'What the hell happened?' They said, 'Well, go back there. You'll



Guru Maharishi Mahesh Yogi with the Beatles

see.' So I went back and there is the picture of Maharashtra G -this little 5 year old midget looking kid smiling with white roses- with his advertising campaign above his face



Mickey Rooney

which says 'Who is Maharashi G?' and someone had written underneath it, 'Who is Mickey Rooney?'", he bursts out coughing of laughter and me an Eric are tickled by the spectacle alone. "Mickey Rooney was a child actor and he was only four foot ten. He was a little midget actor and it insulted the hell out of Maharashi G's people and I thought, 'Who is Maharashi G? Who is Mickey Rooney?' and it just hit me so funny. It was one of the funniest things I've ever seen in my entire life watching these religious people having this fight

with these hippies. So ironic and perfect."

"Finally we got to New York City. Everyone was off the bus except me and my partner. Blue looked at me and goes, 'Man, I don't feel like driving to Cambridge, Bob. I know we made a deal but I could go to Rochester. I have got a girlfriend up in Rochester. Or I could just leave you here at Port Authority?' I said, 'Well, a train ticket's 13 dollars.' That's how much it was at the time to get from Grand Central Station to South Station in Boston. I said, 'Give me 13 bucks back' and he goes, 'You got it.' He gave me 13 bucks back and I took the train up, saw my folks and then I came down to Connecticut where Tom's parents lived."

"We're in New York City to go to publishers and shop our songs. We didn't know what we were doing. We were kind of like you guys. We had no fucking idea. We were just going places. We thought we knew

but we didn't have a clue."

"At the time Tin Pan Alley still existed and the Brill Building still existed. You used to actually go in and play songs from sheet music on pianos. These were the days when cassettes and had just started. Some people were sill pitching their songs on



The Brill Building, Tin Pan Alley, Manhattan

acetates but we had cassettes. We went to a hundred different publishers and were consistently reamed out, New York style. 'Excuse me, can you tell me what time it is or should I just go fuck myself?", he explodes then appreciates the humor. "It was one of those situations where everyone was mean to us."

'We were heartbroken and out of money and we were

staying at this really nice house. My friend's parents lived in Cos Cob, Connecticut, New Canaan area, really wealthy people. They lived out on a lake. It was our last day there and Tom decided he would stay with his family.

"I said, 'Well, I'm gonna' go in. I'm gonna give it one more try'. I went in by myself", Bob says optimistically. "Lawrence Welk's company heard one of our songs earlier in the week and said, 'Yea, we'll take this song'. So I figured I could at least pick up the money."

"I didn't realize, I thought they just bought your song and gave you money. They don't. They publish it and then see if they can get a cut and then you make a contract and they give you 50% of the money. It is all down the road. So we said, 'Where's the money? How much are you going to give us for this?' and he said, 'It doesn't work that way.' I said, 'Well, fuck' and the guy goes, 'What's the matter?' and I said, 'We're broke. We've got to get back to San Francisco and we don't have any money. We're down to pennies, just enough money to get back to Cos Cob, Connecticut.' He said, 'All right, I'll tell you what. I will give you \$100 advance.' I picked up the check and cashed it. Now we had just enough money take the hippy bus back to San Francisco", he waves a happy goodbye.

"That night we had a party at Tom's parent's house and across the street is Jacques Cousteau's son Michel. They had a



Jacques Cousteau and his sons Philipe and Jean-Michel

boat called the Calypso and they would do these ocean related documentaries. They were going to do one soon. They were leaving Long Beach in a week to do one in the South Pacific and so Michel was bitching about it, as only French guys can do", says Saporiti suddenly putting on a snotty french accent, "about how he had to 'drive the car with all the equipment in it to Los Angeles and it was loaded down, it would take three days to

drive.' We said, 'We'll drive your car for you' so he says, 'Oh! Fantastique!' He leaves the party. We're all drunk. The next day Tom and I get into this Mazda and Tom goes, 'Ever been to Nashville?' I said, 'No.' He said, 'You want to go?' and I said, 'Why not? We got this car and it's on the way to California, kind of.'"

## Part 3: Nashville in the 70's

"We started going south and we went to Nashville. His parents had a friend who was a songwriter who had written some TV songs that did really well. He had moved to Nashville. Back in '73 Nashville had maybe 300,000 people in it. Now it has over a million and a half. This was like a little teeny cow town. It was a trip. It was a real southern city and do not forget, black people had just gotten the right to go to a diner and sit down at the counter less than ten years prior. It was an unbelievable time."

"This singer guy let us stay with him. He had a kid that was our age and they knew Dolly Parton and all kinds of people. So he introduces us and got us tickets to the Grand Old Opry. We did not realize that the Grand Old Opry was moving. We got tickets on Friday night. I still have the ticket stub. The ticket was three dollars. It was the second to last night at the Ryman Auditorium."

"They had built Opryland to move it there. We knew nothing about it, country music or anything. We were just having a blast. We went to the Grand Old Opry not realizing it and everyone's crying, it's like the end of an era, it's no longer going to be at the Ryman, it is going to be at the Opryland and we had no idea. We just said to ourselves, 'This is wild. These people are crazy about country! They're all crying.' "

"We went to that show. We saw Skeeter Davis and Roy Acuff. Then the next day Tom looks at me and goes, 'When are we supposed to be in Long Beach? Fuck.' We have been down here for four days. We have one day to get to California -a day and a couple hours. Better get going.""



The last night of the Opry at Ryman Auditorium

## Part 4: Back to San Francisco



"We had to drive nonstop taking turns switching on and off. The only time we stopped was for gas. One guy would sleep while the other guy drove and we made it. We got there like an hour before departure. They were so pissed off at us. An hour is not a long time when you are leaving on a trip to the Pacific for a month on a ship and we have all the equipment in the back of our car. Michel came out. He sees the car and he runs out with a couple big guys. 'Get out of my fucking car you stupid American pigs!' ", screams Bob back in his fierce Pepe Le Pew voice, "and I said, 'Man, we're here. What are you mad about?" ", sounding like the Big Lebowski. "He says, "I've only got one hour to get on board!' I said, 'Oh, okay. I hate to ask you this but we kind of ran out of money on the way. Do you think you could give us some money to get a bus to San Francisco?' 'Get the fuck out of here!' ", he yells. "So we had to walk out of the parking lot and hitchhike from Long Beach to San Francisco."

"We went back to San Francisco and we continued our songwriting stuff. We were doing soundtracks for porno movies

and we did a very famous one called 'Confessions of a Teenage

Peanut Butter Freak' with John Holmes. You know Johnny Wadd? The guy with the really big dick? We were having a blast. I was busking on the street for joints. We were writing songs. We did a demo for Tommy Tutone at our studio, '867-5309 Jenny'. Stuff like that would happen. We knew the Grateful Dead, the Santana guys, the Airplane. This was that period. We knew all these people and we were hanging around with these cats. It's hard to see who the stars are when music is your day gig."

"We wrote a song called "Funk Me Baby" in 1977 during the height of Parliament Funkadelic and that wave. I was



Tommy Heath and founding member, guitarist and cowriter Jim Keller of Tommy Tutone.



The Grateful Dead, San Francisco, CA

the one writing the lyrics so I thought to myself, 'What's a good move right now? How can we really stick something out there?' So I said, 'Funk it. Funk me baby!' "

"Everyone was dancing around it but no one had



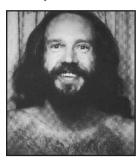
Parliament Funkadelic

anticing around it but no one had actually ever said it. 'Funk me, funk me, funk me baby. I heard that. Funk got its start in the heart of the ghetto!' ", sings Bob in full performance, snapping his fingers. " 'People struggle daily to be free' ", then he buzzes a trumpet line with his lips and hands for a few measures. " 'Funk got on out, spread itself about, beat the living

funk out of me. Funk me baby! Funk me baby! I heard that ", he sings finishing and casually continues.

"We did the recording with Johnny Lovett who was our mailman; his cousin was Andre Crouch -a great black singer; and in the background were the Lovettes: me, my partner Tom and our girlfriends – white people going, 'Funk me! Funk me!' ", he pulls his hands in and out. "It was Johnny Lovette and The Lovettes."

"I had been hanging around CBS Studios. They had come to town to record all the San Francisco stuff. Roy Segal and Roy Halee from New York City came to San Francisco in



the late '60s to cut Jefferson Airplane. They ended up also doing Simon and Garfunkel's "Bridge Over Troubled Water", The Pointer Sisters and all the Sly Stone stuff and in the studio upstairs. I was sweeping the studios for free just to hang out with this guy Roy Segal who was an engineer I wanted to learn from."

"He was a great guy. He used to tell me, 'You know Bobby, you're such an ass hole. Your parents spent

a lot of money on your Ivy League education and all you do is smoke dope and want to be a fuckin' musician. Why don't you use your brain and be a businessman or do something intelligent.' So he was really a hard task master."

"I would hang around him and I would get to be there for all these great sessions. Eventually I played him 'Funk Me Baby' and he said, 'That's pretty good.' We had recorded it in our studio so he said, 'I know a guy.' It was a small record company called ARC records. He said, 'I'm going to play it for him.' "

"The guy comes in to meet us and he says, 'I'll give you \$1,200 for the record. Do you have a B side?' We didn't so I said, 'Of course we have a B side' and he said, 'What's the name of it?' and off the top of my head I said, "The Fool Ain't Cool", Bob says emphasizing each syllable and laughing as he remembers his young self. "That night we went home and wrote 'The Fool Ain't Cool'. That was the B side. We split the money as all hippies do: evenly among all the players and there was none of this 'Well I wrote it or I produced it'. It didn't matter. I got \$200. Everyone got \$200. There were six of us and we split it evenly, 200 bucks a piece.

"This company put it out. They didn't really know what they were doing and they hired a company out of



Roy Segal, CBS Records

Nashville to distribute it and I got really frustrated because nothing was happening. So I started calling stations and going to black radio stations and that's how I learned to promote records."

"I went to Florida and I borrowed my cousin's car and I drove around Florida selling our record. I had a bunch of 45's and I would go to the radio station, the black radio station, and the guy would

call the local record store and I'd sell them there. I'd sell my promo copies right out of the trunk to make money, to keep going a quarter a piece selling records. I was getting all this airplay. We got up to Boston and they wanted to make it into a loop and make it into this disco thing. We had a shot of having a hit."

"The guy back in California didn't want to put more money into it though and it really pissed me off. He was into country music. So I came back and I was really mad at him and I told him he was an ass hole. He said, 'Well, I'll tell you what. I know you think I'm an ass hole but I'm really into country music and you've proven yourself. If you want, I'll give you a job, \$250 a week' which back then was fucking monster money. My apartment was only \$75 a month! I said, 'Fuck, this is great!' and he said, 'All you gotta do -I'm going



Nashville skyline view from Farmer's Market 1960"s

to fly you to Nashville and I want you to produce. I got a couple of acts.' I had never done a country record before but I told him I knew everything about country because I wanted the gig. I left for Nashville."

"I started coming to Nashville in the late 70's, cutting music and



that's how I met all the Nashville cats and I realized, 'I love this place. I want to live here.' San Francisco had gotten old. The fun days were over. The drugs had gotten hard. The hippie days of free love had faded. There was AIDS. It wasn't fun anymore.

I had bought a house in San Francisco. I sold it. It was during the boom when you could buy a house for \$30,000. I sold mine for \$120,000 and decided to leave."

"I made a little profit and I took my cat Bessie Smith, two guitars and a couple pairs of jeans, got in my Datsun B210 hatchback and I started driving. I left August 7, 1980 and I got 20 miles outside of town and turned around. I went

back to my house and slept that night on the floor because I realized if I left the next day it would be August 8, 1980 -8/8/80 and I'd always remember the day I left San Francisco."

"I went back and the next day, August 8, 1980, I started driving. The



Mount Saint Helens. radio said Mount Saint Helens was Washington, August 7, 1980 t erupting for the third time! That's a once in a lifetime thing so I drove up to Washington to Mount Saint Helens and I got as close as I could. The hotel rooms were almost free because because no one was there. They wouldn't even let you in or near so I got as close as I could to the red line. I'm driving through all this ash and shit, me and my cat, and it took me about two and a half weeks to get to Nashville", he laughs. "I was driving along the border of Canada and having a ball."

# Part 5: Making a Home out of Nashville

"I finally showed up in Nashville and the only person I knew was the guy who distributed 'Funk Me Baby' and told me he was very impressed with my go-get-it attitude. He said, 'If you're ever in Nashville I'll give you a job.' He was in Hendersonville which is north of here and at the time this is where Roy Orbison, Conway Twitty, George Jones and Johnny Cash all lived on a lake in Hendersonville."

"Hendersonville was a town of maybe only 5,000 people and there was one motel, the Canfield Inn. I pulled in there and met this really cool guy, Ron Hooper, the manager and I said, 'How much is a room?' 'How long you need it?', he asked. I said, 'Well, I'm kind of looking for an apartment.' He goes, 'Well I've got some apartments but there's nothing vacant for a month but I can give you a rate at the motel for a month.' "

"So me and my cat lived in a motel for a month. When the luxurious garden apartments opened up they were next to the police station. There were hookers and drug dealers

and carnies everywhere. There was a guy who lived there, Cannonball Bob, and he had an actual cannon. That was his gig. He shot himself out of a cannon at state fairs and his cannon was parked right outside of my door, just staring at me every time I opened it."



Bob Saporiti Promotions, 1983

"I went to go see the guy that was going to give me the job and he kept his word, kind of. He said, 'Here's the job: you get on the phone and promote, keep two of my records on the charts and I'll give you a phone and an office and you can get your own work. You can use the phone and office on no charge' I said, 'I'm not sure that's the definition of a job. In a job usually you get paid.' He said, 'No, I'm not going to pay you. You get to work for me. You go get your own records from other people. I'll let you use the office and the phone.' So that's what I did. I was really good at promoting and it didn't take long. Within six months I had my own company, Bob Saporiti Promotions, in the same building that he was in."

"During this period I was having a hard time dating southern girls. I had just been living in San Francisco for ten years during the height of free love. Down here they wanted to get married", he complains, swiping it away with his hand. "So I was meeting these beautiful southern belles but it was like a lot of work. You had to date them. It wasn't the same as San Francisco."

"My wife became my secretary which was really funny because she didn't know anything about country music. She was born in Saigon, raised in Paris, educated in Boston and I met her in San Francisco. She didn't even have any sneakers. She only had high heels and the first thing she said when she got off the plane was 'But there are no sidewalks' ", he whines. "I took her out to Hendersonville. I thought I'd impress her. I said, 'That's Willie Nelson's house!' 'Who is Willie Nelson?' ", he drops himself to look defeated. "All she knew was jazz and shit. So it was like nothing impressed her. Then we went to the first mall in Rivergate. The mall had just been built so I thought that would impress her. We were driving in the parking lot and who was handing out pamphlets to everyone but the Ku Klux Klan in full regalia. So she goes, 'Oh, this is a very nice place you have brought me to.' I said, "Oh, fuck!' So she stayed and became my secretary but she didn't know who any of the people were. She wasn't very helpful. She's an artist anyway so she started painting."

"I had my little company. I started doing really well by '82. I had made enough money to buy a house in Nashville in one of the ritziest parts of town", he says indiscreetly about the upper crust, somehow amidst it and subverting it at the same time. "Houses were cheap in Nashville and for \$92,000 I was able to buy a house with an acre of land, a big old house. So I'm feeling pretty good about myself and by now I'm an independent promoter but I'm getting hired by all the major labels to promote the big artists. I'm doing really well. I'm promoting the Bellamy Brothers when they were really hot, Conway Twitty, Crystal Gayle, all these people and in 1984 on the same day the Bellamy Brothers wanted me to manage them Warner Brothers offered me the job of national promotions director."

"I wasn't sure. I could have made a lot more money in the short road with the Bellamy Brothers but it would've been kind of boring doing the same thing with only one act. Where as if I could get in with that company I could learn a lot so I took the less money and went with the record company. In '84 I went with Warner Brothers. That turned out to be a good call."

"I did promotions up until 1990 and I became the Vice President and then Senior Vice President of Promotions", he

says plainly. "I was Billboard's National Promotion Man of the Year four out of the five years I did promo. I did really well, had a shit load of number ones. I found or participated in the breaking of Randy Travis and Dwight Yoakum and a whole bunch of acts, Travis Tritt and Faith Hill. I



was doing great. We were hot as hell. Warner Brothers was the top label, bar none, worldwide, in every genre of music. We had 47% of the world's market share. We had everybody. We had Neil Young, Madonna, we had all the great pop acts: Prince, R.EM. We were rocking."

## Part 6: Time for a Change

"In 1990 I decided I'd had enough. I went to the president of the company, Jim Ed Norman, and I said, 'I think I'm going to quit' and he said, 'Why?' I said, 'Well, promotion is a young man's game and I'm in my 40's now and I just don't have the drive. Last night we had a number one record and I went home.' He said, 'So what?' and I said, 'I've never gone home. I always have to get carried home after a number one", cries Bob. "I always go across the street to Panama Reds and get so fucked up that they got to put me in a taxi. Last night I didn't even give a fuck. I've lost the fire. There's no fun. I can do this in my sleep.' "

"He goes, 'I don't want you to quit man.' I said, 'Alright.' He says, 'What are you going to do?' 'I don't know.' He says, 'I'll tell you what. Why don't you become the liaison between the city of Nashville and the country music community and you can be our representative to the downtown people and get involved in charity and try to get some more respect, to build up the industry.' I did that for a year. It was kind of fun

but it was kind of bull shit too because it was a lot of charity type people and I had to hang out with really rich people and it was getting boring."

"At the end of that year I said, 'I don't want to do this anymore' and he says, 'Well,



Mike Crowley, Quincy Jones, Jim Lauderdale, Joe Ely, Butch Hancock, Jimmy Dale Gilmore, Kevin Welsh and Bob Saporiti at Birth of the "Western Beat" Montreux Jazz Festival early 90's.

what do you want to do?" I said, 'Well, here's what I want to do. There's never been an international department for a

major label out of Nashville. It's always been handled through LA or New York or random other branches. I can travel to Europe a lot because my wife is a French citizen.' So I go over there and visit our offices overseas and I can tell you, we were not getting served well because the people in the rock 'n roll world there not only hated country music, they made fun of it. It would be better if we didn't have anybody representing us than to have these guys. I said, 'Let me open the first ever international department.' He said, 'Okay.'"

"So I got a ticket and I went to Amsterdam and I met up with Emmylou Harris. I started bringing Nashville acts over to Europe and working with the BBC and working with my label over there. On the Faith Hill record Breathe we did a dance mix and it became a worldwide hit. So I was doing all this cool stuff! I did that for the next 10 years. That was really

fun because then I got to hang out with all the international cats and every year we would have our marketing meeting in Montreux, Switzerland and go to the jazz fest. I produced three shows at the Montreux Jazz Fest and I brought Johnny Cash over the last year and I was having the time of my life."



Bob reflecting back on the Warner days. (Michael Martin Murphy, Randy Travis, Bob and Roy Rogers in the background.) Photo by Denise Fussell

"Then in 2001 AOL merged with Warner and because of the culture of AOL they said that everyone there over 50 that was a senior vice president or above, and I think there was 43 of us worldwide, could leave with this package. The package was stupid. 'Here's a shit load of money. Now, get the fuck out of here!' That made themselves look good, like they were good guys and then they started getting rid of everyone else without having to spend any money.

"I knew that I had one shot. If I didn't take it they would've made life miserable and I had about had it anyways because it was getting so corporate. Record business had changed. In the '80s and '90s it was wild and it was CD's and it was all about music. Then it started to go digital but no one knew what the fuck was happening. Records weren't selling anymore. The music started to decline -too much marketing and not enough music. I wasn't digging it."

## Part 7: "Retirement"

I took the package in 2001 and bought a house on Music Row so I would have a place to write. I had a studio I built above my garage but my kids took it over and I didn't feel like fighting. I had enough money so I bought another



house and now I have this cool house on Music Row and I can go to either place", he says unabashed, proud of his accomplishments but also encouraging us to find success with as much freedom.

"I cut a record. My first record was me as Reckless Johnny Wales on an album entitled It's Not About The Money. \$15", he laughs. "I had all my friends:

Skunk Baxter the legendary lead guitarist of the Doobie Brothers and Steely Dan band and all these other famous people that I knew. They wanted to give me a retirement party and I said, 'Don't. Just play on my record for free.' So we did. We cut it in the studio that Garth Brooks owns because my friend John Lomax III was friends with the recording engineer Mark Miller. I spent two weeks in the studio. The studio back then was known as Jack's Tracks because it was Cowboy Jack Clement's studio. Later it was

owned by Garth's producer Allen Reynolds and recently it was purchased by Garth Brooks and renamed Allentown Studios. That was so much fun. I did that record and just started writing songs and playing out again."

"Another record company offered me a job. They were going



Photo by Denise Fussell

to start a record company called Sea Records. I took that job as president and was building it, hiring and signing artists. I had hired all these people and then they went out of business. The company shut down around me and I felt so bad", he says still smiling, seeing the humor and guilt in it, "because I hired so many people. I had taken all these people away from their jobs. I had all these big time people working for me and then the company just went 'poop'. It was a huge lawsuit, a horrible mess. I kind of said, 'Fuck it, I'm not going to do this anymore."

## Part 8: The Parables.

His story ends and me and Eric are baffled from laughter and belief and from going through the journey ourselves. We feel affirmed. Bob climbed his way to the top of the music business and he somehow did it all like Cheech and Chong



Bob on guitar with Audrey Auld, Nashville. Photo by Denise Fussell

delivered their van – happily, casually, with excitement, almost obliviously slipping out of harms way and into glory's.

"Since then I've gotten involved with a couple young artists, helping them", Bob adds. "I help young writers. I mentor. I do mentor classes

for students where I teach kids about the music business." He pauses for a moment trying to summon what he stresses in class then tailors it into something broader. "Don't ever quit. That's my main advice."

"I remember when I was struggling in San Francisco. One day I woke up, I only had 37 cents so I went across the street to the Cala Foods store and I bought a head of lettuce for 10 cents, a loaf of day-old bread for 10 cents and a jar of generic peanut butter for 17 cents. I spent 37 cents on lettuce, white bread and peanut butter and I lived off lettuce and peanut butter sandwiches for the next three days of my life while I figured it out. If you don't quit, you"ll always be okay. The only time it's over is when you quit so I just never quit", he says simply. "I tell people that no matter how hard it gets, even if you're down to your last 37 cents, you'll figure out a



way to do it. Just eat peanut butter", he ends grinning, seeing the wisdom and the oddity at once.

"You don't have to have all the shit!" Then, taken by a new wind, a greater insight, something hits him as obvious and big."Money has to mean nothing to you", he shifts in his chair and splays his hands out. "Don't ever do stuff for money because that is a false idol boy", he says in stride. "Money

follows success but success does not always follow money. There's a lot of rich ass holes out there who aren't happy so it doesn't really have anything to do with money. If you do art

for art's sake, you'll always be okay. It's all the reward you'll ever need."

"What else do you need? I mean you don't need a bunch of things if you're doing art! I'm so happy just playing my guitar. It's all I want to do. They say, 'I can't play' ", he puts on a dopey whiny voice, " ' How do you play your guitar all the time? I don't have any money. I can't play all day' and I say, 'What else have you got to do? I mean you're so lucky to not have any money because now you got nothing but time to play guitar. If you play guitar enough you'll get so good that people will pay you!"

"That's what happened to me!", he levels with us happily. "Seriously, they ended up giving me millions of fucking dollars to be a crazy guy!", he laughs astounded, "to just go around and listen to music and tell them it was good. I put it out and it was good. It isn't very hard to do. You just got to love music and be able to enjoy yourself. That's my advice. Don't quit. I mean you guys are in the perfect position right now: You're at that crossroads 'Well what am I going to do?' That's always a good question to have to ask yourself."

I tell him about my aspirations to write songs. He gives harsh, wise advice and perspective for people trying to make it here in Nashville. "Look at it this way: the best singer in every state is here", he says. "So there's 49 other people that are as good as you. The best singer in every town is here so there's 50,000 other people as good as you. Every one of their

grandma's thinks they are the best singer and it doesn't really work that way. So you gotta' be the best singer in the United States to make it here. Look at the odds. Do you want to do that? Then roll up your sleeves and practice your ass off. That's all there is to it and you can get so good if you have that attitude. Because the good people will hang with you and they will help you out and teach you if you've got it because they respect talent."



Reckless Johnny at the Bluebird Cafe. Photo by Denise Fussell

In a singer he believes above note placement, above tone, above warmth is two things: relatability and above that, honesty. "It's doing intentionally what you're planning on doing, that's what good singing is. You can always tell if it's contrived. You know right away if the person is just making up some bull shit." He mentions the authentic types: Dylan, Cash, Lennon."Do they have that beautiful operatic voice? Well no but boy when they tell you a story you believe it", he nods. "Those guys could carry a whole sound and orchestra in a box."

He talks about songs of his own that he's writing right now and he sings them to us. He sings "Mama Scared the Hell into Me" then "My Sugar, She's Sweet" which he dug up from 1971 and a reggae song called "What Do You Believe?". He talks about the irony of songwriting. "I've actually had more cuts in the last year than I have had in a while simply by not trying so hard. I think I was trying too hard before. The trouble with trying too hard in music and writing is if you listen to other people's work, if you're listening to the radio and hear a song and you try to write a song like that, by the time you wrote it, it's yesterday's paper. They're already on to the next thing. You really can't listen exclusively to other people's work. You just gotta' be you. People will attract to that."

He reflects on his personality and explains his own mojo and offers advice bigger than music. "To get like 'this' ", he puts his palms up thanking the universe for his spirit, his style, his own Dude-ness, his comfort, his success." 'This' took a long time until I was really just myself. I think in everybody there is all sorts of greatness. If you relax and allow life to be fun then you can have that coolness. But to try and get that broom out of your ass that society shoves up there is difficult. You got to go through a whole lifetime first,

unless you're lucky and you just don't give a fuck. Some people do have that natural ability. But worrying about what other people think about you is what keeps you from being yourself."

"Accept people for who



Bob Saporiti, AristoMedia CEO Jeff Walker, Country Music Hall of Fame Museum Director Kyle Young, Tamworth Mayor Col Murray, Nashville Mayor Karl Dean and Entertainment Edge CEO Rob Potts with Australian performers Mark O'Shea, Clare Bowen, Jay O'Shea and Morgan Evans at the Sister Cities signing ceremony, Photo by Denise Fussell

they think they are", he clarifies "and forget about how they are. Accept everyone for who they think they are", he reiterates. He knows it's a famous quotation but he's too caught up in the moment to figure out who said it. "That's all it is. You think you are something. You've got an image of yourself and it's always false because you can't be that. You can only be yourself. So once you stop thinking about who you are and just be yourself you're the coolest person that ever lived. You can't miss."

He contrasts this type of free form person with the pretentious characters in T.S. Eliot's poem "J Alfred Prufcock". Bob recites, "'Women come and go/ And speak of Michelangelo. I'm old, I'm old/ I wear my trousers rolled", cherishing the



poem. He is rare. A former big wig for Warner Records, a poetry geek, a Bostonite and yet he grew up on acid trips, the hippie bus and raunchy music fueled adventures and still wears all the grunge and flare of the time. He never finished college. Every-

thing he earned he won with raw charisma, will power, persistence, trial and error, learned savvy, humor, a lose purpose and bold conviction.

He is a self made man and series of incongruities. He knows how to be an individual without being exclusive, wealthy without being pretentious, successful without sacrificing even a gram of fun times or originality. In fact, he found a way to make a business, a life, out of having a great time. He is real and knows how to connect with people and influence those around him. He let America pour into him, from California to New York, a dozen times over and fill him up with all of its character, nuances, contradictions and possibility. He didn't take a class on it. He jumped.

"Don't ever worry about being legitimate", he smiles with certainty, adding his last piece of advice. "There is no legitimate. It's all made up. You can make up whatever you want to be. Whatever you want, you can have it, no matter what. If they say, 'It's not really a job.' Good! Isn't that a great way to live your life? Not having to work? If you get an opportunity to get by doing what you want to do, take it every time. Thoreau said, 'The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.' 'Never take a job that requires new clothes.' I've always lived by that."