

BYRON HILL INTERVIEW PART TWO

0:00:00 Blackmon: So yesterday we left off with you having your number one hit, your first big number one hit with Johnny Lee, and you were given a night to write it for a movie and you wrote it by yourself. What we didn't talk about and what I'm curious about is how that changed your life, what the experience was like to go from **tape copy (??) [0:00:27]** guy to song plugger, to number one hit writer. Can you just talk about that period of change?

0:00:35 Hill: Well, that song "Pickin' Up Strangers" actually only went to number two, but in my mind, there's not much difference between a number one and number two. But I remember it entered the record world chart at number 29 and back then, that didn't happen a lot. Records sort of came on and they went the whole, you know, they would come on in maybe in the 80s or the 90s or if it was really hot, it would come on in the 60s. But for a song to come in at number 29, it was pretty exciting. I never experienced anything like that before and people couldn't believe it. The song just kept on going and I remember, you know, I think mentioned earlier that it got on Johnny Lee's Lookin' For Love album, and the album had already been out, and they pulled the album back, remastered it, and put mine on there — one little sunny little sidebar to that is that I was concerned about the writer who got **(??) [0:01:48]** the album, because my song took the place of another song and it was written by Donny Lowery, who was a Muscle Shoals guy out of Florence, Alabama or somewhere down there. But anyway, and I always kind of mentioned it in my bio that I was kind of iffy when I ever meet Donny Lowery, I hope he's a nice guy. *(Laughing)* Because his song got bumped off the album and mine got put on. And you know, but they gave Donny the B-side of "Pickin' Up Strangers" and that was a time where B-sides were equally important when it came to sales because the 45 RPMs would sell. And so, finally, I met Donny and he turned out to be the nicest guy in the world and he said the thing I said about him and put on my bio and website a few times through the years it really amused him, he thought it was funny, but he turned out to be such a nice guy. He ended up getting some good royalties off of that deal, so it worked out pretty good for the both of us.

0:03:00 Blackmon: Donny is a super guy and just a side-note, he's from Junction City, Louisiana right by my little suburb of my hometown, Little Red Arkansas. So I grew up knowing about him because he wrote a big Alabama hit and was well known and then he moved over to the Shoals. So with the — your life changes, you have this numbering hit, you decide to go out on your own and last time we talked you said at some point, you sold that catalog that had some Kenny Rogers cuts in it and wanted to be a full-time writer and not a business owner, and where did sign?

0:03:42 Hill: Well, I signed at Collins Music, but then before then, prior to that when I was still at ATV, there were still quite a few things that fell into place for me, like the George Strait single.

0:03:54 Blackmon: That was at ATV?

0:03:57 Hill: Yes, that was. In fact, it happened pretty much on the heels of “Pickin’ Up Strangers.” “Pickin’ Up Strangers” was written in 1980 and charted in — you know, did its chart thing in ’81. “Fool-Hearted Memory” was written in ’81 and went number one in ’82, so it was right kind of behind all of that. The “Pickin’ Up Strangers” really sort of set me up for more things, writing more things for movies. ATV had these film connections, they were a big, big company and they were always getting involved in soundtrack projects, so after “Pickin’ Up Strangers” had happened, this company came and wanted me to come up with something for a film. So Gerry Teifer was a very old-school, clever publisher, and he sort of put together this idea of going down and talking to Jim Foglesong — who was the head of MCA records — about this new artist that Jim had signed. And this new artist was you know, starting to make some things happen, and his producer just happened to be Blake Mevis, one of my earliest co-writers, or friends in town that I had met. Actually, at this time, I had never co-written with Blake, but — so they decided okay, let’s take this young producer Blake Mevis, who’s producing this young new sign at MCA, and let’s put him with Byron, and let’s see what happens. Let’s see if we can create a single and an album — a soundtrack album cut that would make it into this bar scene in the movie and this new artist on MCA would be featured and it’s sort of — that kind of next step for an artist kind of made sense then because it was kind of on the heels of Urban Cowboy and all that stuff, so it was pretty popular to try and get a new country artist into a movie. And that’s what happened. Blake and I sat down to write a song for that specific reason, to get it into a movie called The Soldier. Now, The Soldier was not a big movie, it was just a kind of blood and guts revenge thing that — those were popular at the time too, I guess. It got George a sort of cameo role in a bar scene and it ended up being a single. That’s how all that came together, basically, because of ATV’s film connections and because the new act that was being signed down at MCA, that being George Strait. So George had had a couple of singles out at the time, but they didn’t go number one for him and they — it was just part of the growth that they wanted to do for George and it worked out to be his first number one, and really turned out to be my first number one as a songwriter. That song, “Fool Hearted Memory.”

0:07:27 Blackmon: And did you and Blake read any of this script prior to writing the song or were you just writing a song so that George could be in the bar scene, kind of?

0:07:37 Hill: Yeah, that was more of the order of the day and we just wrote a song that would work in a bar scene, that’s what they wanted. So Blake produced the track, almost immediately — actually Blake took the song home that night, the night that we wrote it, and did a wonderful little four-track acoustic guitar demo on it, and that little demo to this day is the roadmap for “Fool Hearted Memory.” The fiddle riff that you hear at the beginning which is a real, recognizable thing. Blake did that on guitar and on the work tape. He had a vision that was really laid out nicely on this little work tape that he did at home, and then that same similar feel, tempo, and sound translated into the studio the next week. So Blake really knew what he was doing and he had a great artist that he was working with at the time, and — none of us knew this would be historical, we just thought well, this is the next thing you do, you know. Try hard to come up with a hit for somebody. My goodness, it’s turned out to be — it was a life-changer for me, really.

0:08:59 Blackmon: Well that's one of his most recognizable songs and his, George Strait's, first number one. At the time, you know, now that we say, George Strait, he's called one of the first neo-traditionalists — in 1982, so you had heard a couple of singles by him that hadn't really happened.

0:09:21 Hill: Well, they did go top ten or something like that. They just weren't number ones.

0:09:28 Blackmon: Well I'm thinking like "Unwound" that was kind of a swing-type song, and did you guys take notice that he was not like — I mean, at that time in '82, was there anybody doing that sort of thing at radio? Was he kind of different?

0:09:46 Hill: Well, it was a very strange time in radio just prior to that, because you had a lot of artists in country music that were doing things that were — and I really hate to use this term, but I really don't know how else to explain it — that were kind of disco country? It was kind of on the hills of Urban Cowboy and it was sort of this disco-country vibe with artists like Razzy Bailey, and maybe to some extent, T.G. Sheppard had kind of this danceable thin going on in some of his tracks. So you had these people sort of stretching the limits of country to sort of a pop-ish kind of crossover thing for back then, and then all of a sudden, George comes along, and Randy Travis comes along right then, and it was like Woah, wait a minute, this is what we're supposed to be doing here. This is really well-grounded stuff, you know. And so it really changed everything, because I felt like country at that time was a little lightweight and a little light on the years and not really doing much innovative other than copying some pop sounds and some disco records and some things that were trying to meld together some success. But when George came along and Randy Travis, they were just super well-defined as country and nobody could question it and it wasn't relying on production as much as their records were relying on great songs. So that was a big sort of change, and I think most people would agree that we're here at that time and watching and working in the business would agree that that was a big change in the business.

0:12:01 Blackmon: So I guess that really submitted your career after having those two big hits back to back.

0:12:07 Hill: It did, and at the same time though, I was getting cuts with other artists, people like I think I mentioned Juice Newton earlier, Conway Twitty, Mel McDaniel. Margo, even a Reba cut came along on one of her early albums. I was not a single. So you know, that — I had enough other things going, but all of a sudden, when you have a big chart single, it puts you on the map, puts you on everyone's radar, people start talking. You get pulled into doing things, to do more projects and interesting — people take interest in what you're doing, you become the flavor of the month, and you hope it's the flavor of the month that lasts for more than a month.

0:13:00 Blackmon: You make a good point though, that back then, having those album cuts were a lot more important than they were now because they actually generated income and people paid attention to them more, is that correct?

0:13:17 Hill: Yeah, it did fund — I mean a publisher could, and this was so important back then and even more important when looking back on it now, but a publisher could finance their investment in a songwriter based on one gold or platinum, you were good. You could float, and the publisher could float your career. It would have to be one enough for you to build more activity on one big cut. Even if it wasn't a single, even if it just made it on a gold or platinum album, that would give the publisher enough money to recoup from and renew you for another year. It's all about momentum and keeping the momentum going. I have a gold B-side on my all that I'm extremely proud of, it was the Juice Newton B-side to "Angel of the Morning," which was one of her biggest — it was her biggest hit. My B-Side is gold and framed on the wall because it sold as many as the A-side. So that's one of those periods in time where thank goodness for physical products and mechanicals, it's just the way it was then.

0:14:47 Blackmon: And so, after this success in ATV, what was the name of your company that you started?

0:14:56 Hill: Well, I mean, it was immediately — when I left ATV I was faced with that decision of whether or not I wanted to go sign somewhere or whether I wanted to try my hand and signing writers and bringing and developing songs with other writers and developing production. So I had already been working with Kathy Mattea some, and so I felt like I could do it, make something happen, align myself with some new artists, and also, while I was at ATV, I got to know a lot of people in the foreign publishing offices in France, in Sydney, Australia, the ATV people I got to know. Well, when ATV broke up and got sold, all those people went elsewhere, they went to other companies and we had a mutual respect for each other so I started getting calls from Scandinavia, France, and especially Australia from those publishers going hey, what are you doing next? What are you going to do? Well, I'm going to start my own company, I've got a BMI company and an ASCAP company. One was called SongSource Incorporated, which was the ASCAP company, and the other one was Triage Music, and it's a BMI company. Both those companies still exist and still are in money, but these people in the foreign territories wanted to fund me, wanted to collect in their own territories — so they advanced me money which helped. You know, cumulatively those foreign advances on the catalog on sub-publishing we call it, it came to about thirty grand. That's not enough to run a company, but I also went to the bank and did a deal there, credit line deal to do whatever else I needed to do which was to sign a couple of writers and start producing things. One of those writers was Mike Dekle, who turned out to be a great friend of mine through the years, and I produced a record on him while I was at ATV, and he was free so I signed him and we ended up landing cuts on Kenny Rogers during that time. That was great, five cuts with Kenny, two of them were on platinum albums, and so that was mechanics recouped a lot of my debt, you know. Even in foreign countries, it recouped some of the advances I'd been given — one of those albums was produced by George Martin and the other maybe David Foster produced, I can't remember. But they were big albums, and I think I mentioned this earlier but to just tag this again, I got really tired of juggling the bank stuff so I got into some debt just trying to grow it and then I decided to sell the catalog — and so I did, I sold part of the catalog, I still own some of it, but I sold it to a company that ends up being absorbed by Polygram. I was a free agent again and I told my attorney I wanted to sign

somewhere and, to answer your question, I signed with Tom Collins Music. I felt like Tom was a company that was independent but was still producing acts and it was aggressive and I felt like I could maybe get in there and right for some of his acts. That's what I tried to do, his production had kind o calmed down by then, and so I started writing there, wrote in a handful of songs.

0:19:14 Blackmon: That's interesting that you talk about going to the bank and getting a loan to start a publishing company — even today, outside of a music city like Nashville, LA, or New York, that might sound kind of crazy. But in that time, it was pretty much music offices within the banks, was that weird to go in and get money for a music company?

0:19:36 Hill: Well, I learned that trick from a very good friend of mine and a guy I've written quite a few things with, and he was very much like me, Tony Hiller from England. Tony and I were friends and he said you know, you can either do a co-venture deal with a publisher or do a deal with the bank. Get the bank to pay for it and then you can have the credit line and tell the bank goodbye when you're done with them, but you can't tell that to a co-venture partner. A co-venture partner like a major publisher is going to own you, half of what you're doing forever, and probably have options on what they're going to buy, the remains on your catalog, and probably shut you down. But the bank couldn't do that, the bank loved what I was doing, and as long as I paid my note and made it go up and down and borrowed now and then, they were happy. That's the way the banks were back then, and maybe still are now. What Tony used to say is that the bank's your best partner — you can push them away when you don't need them and they'll bother again when you want them, and I thought that was pretty cool.

0:20:53 Blackmon: The — talk about Tom Collins a little bit. I know he's famous for, besides being a producer — I'm trying to think of the right way to say this — that he was not necessarily hard on writers, but he was a great place to coach and for writers to hone, and you had already had success so maybe that waste the same or you because you were already established, but can you talk about working with him and writing there?

0:21:23 Hill: Well going back to — signing to Tom was really like going back to boot camp a bit. He was pretty bold about what he wanted his writers to do, when he wanted them to work, and I sort of felt like I could benefit from that kind of discipline. I mean, I was not an undisciplined person, but he was very pushy like that, he wanted your output to be up there. An interesting thing was that he was always a good deal-maker. Tom knew how to put together a deal and Tom was clever, would always get the upper edge, and would make it successful too. So I remember when I signed there, he kept dragging his feet on schedule A, and for people who don't know what schedule A is, the schedule A is the songs that you bring in that you've written maybe just prior to the deal but maybe want to make them part of the deal. So they go on the back of a contract on a schedule A list. Well, Tom was dragging his feet and I had more songs than he wanted on — that I was willing to bring in. So he, before I signed my contract, I said why don't you just pick a dozen? Let's just come up with a number, ten, or a dozen songs that you want and I'll make those the schedule A. He never would make up his mind, and so some of the signs he would have to pay me back my demo cost on, so he was kind of looking at those numbers and

looking at the songs and he just sort of drug his feet on that list. I get a call one day from Mark Cat Stevens, a guitar player, and he had been out in LA and he says hey, we cut one of your songs on Randy Travis. I said you're kidding me! And he said yeah, it's really great. I blew the song, it was — I got a couple of them cut at that time, but it was on my schedule A that Tom had not decided yet. So I call Tom, and you know, I never want to do anything weird, I always want to be upfront, and I say, Tom, have you made up your mind yet? And he said I'm still working on it, but I think I'm close. I said, well, add the song to the list, make sure you put it on there, it'll jumpstart our deal. Turned out the song on Ready Travis completely jumpstarted the deal, it was on Randy Travis' Heroes and Friends album, and paid for the deal with that one song. A lot of writers might kick themselves for you know, revealing that before the deal was signed, but I don't know. I was always the kind of person that wanted the deal to work, I didn't want to lose a lot of debt on the table anywhere, I wanted it to work and to go for a while and for it to last long enough for me to prove myself. So that song did that, it enabled Tom to keep renewing me and recouped me rather quick. And while I was there and had plenty of time, plenty of contract room to stay there, I made more cuts for him. So you know, it's — it just worked out that way. I've always said that Tom is a lucky man, always made his own luck, he was old-school, had a lot of things going on that no one knew about, deals with people, with artists, with record people. He figured out early how it was done in New York and the Brill Building and how things happened. He knew how to make it. He wasn't up there, but that was his kind of thinking, it wasn't just about making your writers write songs and hoping and praying you get them cut, he always knew that there could be a business component behind it to make that song happen. That was the kind of guy that I needed to align myself with at the time, it really worked well. And he was so smart, so tough, and I had it out with him a few times. In the end, we still run into each other, and he's like an old college professor or something. I hug his neck when he lets me and you know.

0:26:33 Blackmon: When you told him about the Randy Travis cut, did that build some goodwill and make him — did you earn respect with him through that?

0:26:48 Hill: Well, you know, Tom had these sayings that said — I think his reaction was something like — oh, that's great, that's good news. You make money, we all make money. Of course, that was his kind of thing. So he — maybe he when he left the room, maybe he closed the door and sort of jumped for joy, but I don't know. I think that you know, Tom was just used to things falling together like that for him. He was very lucky. Did it change our relationship? I think some, it put me, it made him view me as something that — to contend with, I was worth something. I think he maybe tempered his tough ways sometimes a little bit with me because maybe he thought maybe Byron knows something I don't, and maybe he'll pull something off again. And so, but you know, he was a tough taskmaster, he had me in there working bright and early. He wanted the songwriters in there at eight-thirty, nine, and if you didn't come in, you could expect a phone call and the next time you came in, he'd say where have you been? So he kind of ran the place pretty tight and they expected writers to be present, they expected songs to be cranking in all the rooms. He would come around to the rooms while we were writing, and check in on people, and say what are you working on? So he was, it was cool too, it had a cool thing to it but sometimes you felt like he was standing over you. That's how he motivated people

and it was like being in college or being in school a little bit, he was the schoolmaster, which yes his background, he was a school teacher up in Maryville, Tennessee before he moved to town.

0:29:10 Blackmon: So writing at home or that kind of thing wasn't where it was at, he wanted people in the rooms, the energy in the building?

0:29:20 Hill: He did. I'll never forget one time, I was writing with Cactus Moser from Highway 101 at Cactus's farm out in Franklin, and we were spending a couple of days there, and I was next scheduled to write with Kenny Rogers in the Warner Brothers building on Music Row. So I'd go in and write with Kenny, Mike Dekle and I wrote with Kenny that day, and I had been gone from the office about there or four days, I hadn't shown my face around there. I had two songs in my pocket that Highway 101 might cut and I had the Kenny Rogers thing that Kenny Rogers and Jim Ed Norman said they were gonna cut it the next day. So I go to the studio, Kenny cuts the thing, and I'm in the studio actually standing next to Kenny helping him with the phrasing in part of the song — I'm not producing it, but I was in the room, I was welcome, they wanted me there — so then I come back over to Tom's office the next day and I get hit by the receptionist, who've you been writing with, Byron?

0:30:36 Blackmon: By the receptionist?

0:30:37 Hill: Yeah, yeah, I said well, I've been pretty busy, is Tom around? And then I see the plugger, the plugger says hey Byron, who've you been writing with? Then I go into Tom's office, hey Byron, who've you been writing with? It was like, okay, wait a minute, some kind of meeting happened and everyone's been told to find out where Byron is and what he's been doing. So I got really pissed off, I go into Tom's office and go look, I've been writing with Highway 101, I've been writing with Kenny Rogers, I've been in the studio over at SoundStage — not SoundStage, the one that (??) [0:31:15] owned up on Division Street. So we've been in the studio there and we got us a Kenny Rogers' cut. And Tom said oh that's great, but I like to see you in here some. But that's what I've been doing, you know? So anyway, without getting into all how difficult that moment was for e and how angry I got, we — it was a turning point for me and Tom because I kind of went off. It's not my thing to do that, but I did. So I went off on Tom and he said Woah now, close the door, let's talk. So we talk and that was kind of a nice turning point for us because I told him, look, if you just leave me alone I can get some stuff done. But he was — I understood where he was coming from because he had a lot of writers that didn't want to come in, didn't want to show their face, didn't pay attention, didn't listen to him or his calls, you know, And he found someone like me who was overly concerned with the right or wrong thing, you know. I fit perfectly into what he liked, someone who would respond and do what he wanted them to do. But as time went by, I was very recouped there, there was another song that ended up being a big impact song, and I did benefit from being in the office bright and early, and there was a song that I'd written with John, and I'd been pitching the song for a while and trying to get it around town — and Collins and his staff, he'd been pitching the song. But I was in there bright and early doing exactly was Tom wanted me to do, you know, be there at eight-thirty before the coffee's on, be in a room thinking about ideas. And I was writing with another writer that day,

and my co-writer that day looked out the window and said hey, that's Teddy Gentry. From the band Alabama. So I went running out to my car and I got a cassette of the one I'd been carrying around, ran out unto the street, and I gave it to Teddy Gentry and asked them if they would listen to it and they did. So they called back and said they love the song and a couple of weeks later they say they recorded it, and it turned out to be a big number one for Alabama called "Born Country." So I was, after that, I sort of complied with everything Tom wanted me to do when it came to coming to the office early and being there. I like to joke around and say I got the chair by the window just in case any more stars came by and my car was loaded up with cassettes. There's some truth to that, I really started getting paranoid that I was missing stuff going on on the Row and I could just keep my songs, the better ones, in the car and run out a tag people. We had a great little office there, it was right on the corner across from RCA Studio B, it's where the Word building is now, or the Lord building, whatever it is now. And that's, right there, where I pitched the song.

0:34:59 Blackmon: That really speaks to what the Music Row community was like back then too. You saw everybody, didn't you?

0:35:05 Hill: You really did, and their offices were everywhere, behind a building, up the alley, you knew where everybody's offices were. All up and down Music Row there were little houses and you knew where everyone was. Randy Travis' office down towards Belmont, you know, Crystal Gayle's office was right in the center of Music Row, sort of across from where Sony is now, or Belmont Studio is anyway. So you knew you could just walk out the door and go pitch songs and come back. I remember when I got my Mel McDaniel cut back when I was at ATV, I just went down and Mel was down there at Combine, and I just walked in and played it for Mel and his producer right there. They loved it, I was a real greenhorn at the time, and I ran all the way back to ATV and started jumping on the couch because they loved the song. Betty Sanford, later she became Betty Reed, she said calm down, what's going on? Music Row is like that, you could see anybody, it was great.

0:36:21 Blackmon: I don't want to spend a lot more time on Tom but I do because he's a legendary music publisher and you mentioned boot camp, can you talk about what was it like to play songs for him and for him to critique it as a writer?

0:36:39 Hill: Well I think that Tom's perspective on songs, it was always based on what he needed at the time for Ronny Milsap or Barbara Mandrell. Those were the two that he was still kind of working with when I was there. So I used to refer to it as a keyhole, and I would say that to him, I'd say, Tom, I can't possibly write for hits little keyhole and get my song to fit into that keyhole every time, you gotta give me more feedback on what you need, I'm just shooting in the dark. That's the way it was when we were pitching for those artists, you know, he had sort of a preconceived idea of what kind of thing he needed and if you didn't write it, pretty specific for that, you couldn't get on the project. Sometimes he would have Barbara Mandrell come into the office and listen for songs. She was so cool, she was like not the Barbara Mandrell that I thought she was, she was always a showman kind of a, you know, more like another Dolly Parton or

something. She was like, I always pictured her all dressed up. But anyways, she would come in, put her feet up on Tom's desk, be smoking a cigarette, and I remember I walked in to pitch her songs and she looked me up and down, smoking her cigarette, and said well, hey big guy, or something like that I'm thinking. Well, I got some songs for you, and she said good, let's hear them. She'd get the cigarette in her mouth and she'd turn around and plays — it was just a side of Barbara Mandrell that I had never seen before and it was really neat. I kind of thought wow, she's not on, she's more relaxed. But yeah, Tom was rough on songs, even when you'd go in and play the song you'd written, he was pretty cut and dry, whether he liked it, whether it was something to work on. I think he'd say good try on that one, don't waste your time on that idea anymore. Work on this one. He liked to be hands-on like that — I didn't like that because I felt like I kinda knew how to write a song and I felt like you either like it or you don't, you know? But he was helpful at times. I remember at the studio with Tom, he was big hands-on at the studio, and that drove me absolutely crazy because I'd already been producing demos and even some records for years. I really wanted to do my own sessions, but Tom had this — part of the thing was that Tom wanted his writers to compete, he wanted his writers to kind of compete in the building, it was sort of kind of like a coach and a team. You don't — you let people compete a little bit against each other and I guess that's a strategy that can work. But he would make these recording sessions, these demo sessions, you had to compete to get on these things. He would announce that he had a session coming up and would submit a song or two or three and then I wouldn't get on it and would go wait minute and have a talk with him. Why didn't my song get on the session? And then finally I put my foot down, look, Tom, I got a lot of experience doing this. Why don't we start having meetings with just me and your pick, helpmeet pick the top four or five things? Then I'll go in and do my own session, I think I've earned it. So finally he let me do that, but then he would show up at the session sometimes. That was never great fun, but sometimes he'd have great ideas, but sometimes he'd get a little controlling in there. He was a character, he was somebody people still talk about today, in good ways and bad ways, but mostly good ways. I mean, what he was working towards was success oriented, so he wanted us all to be successful. But sometimes he was a tough taskmaster.

0:41:31 Blackmon: And where did — you mentioned working with Kathy Mattea but we didn't really get into you getting her record deal and producing her. Where did that fall into that career, what time, and can you talk about that? Cause that was kind of your first big production deal, right?

0:41:48 Hill: Yeah, this goes back to about '81, '82, I was at ATV and a friend of mine named Jay Wild, a songwriter, he also worked there in the tape copy room. I was plugging and writing and was working in the tape copy room — well Jay and I kind of became lunch buddies, you know, we would go down and eat at the Gold Rush or we would go somewhere down there to eat, and TGI Friday's was right down there on the corner, and we walked in one day to eat there, and this waitress comes up to the table. The waitress, she had a 45 RPM record, her hair pulled through the record, you know, the waiters and waitresses at TGI Friday's used to dress up and wear funny stuff, kind of part of there thing, Kathy was wearing a 45 RPM record and I kind of, I said to her, that's cool. If I bring one of mine down here, would you wear it? I thought I'd get a

discount flirting with her or something. I didn't know who she was. And she said sure, bring it, what record would that be? And I said well, Pickin' Up Strangers, Johnny Lee, I got some extra copies, I'd be happy to bring you one next time you come down here. She said she'd be happy to wear it so I said okay. So anyway, she said do you work in the music business? And I said yes, and she said well, I'm a singer, and I said I'd love to hear what you do. She said I do demos around town and I've been doing some demos for Combine music. I said, well, we're looking for demo singers all the time. So she gives me a tape and back then, Anne Murray was the big deal. To get a cut with Anne Murray was going to be an earner if you could get a cut with her. Other people, other writers that I knew, Rory Brooke and Charlie Black, we were getting cuts with Anne Murray and we all wanted just from Anne Murray. But I listened to Kathy's voice and I thought dang, this sounds perfect for Anne Murray demos. So, we started hiring her, and going back to Gerry Tiefer again, Gerry Tiefer being my boss at the time, he knew Frank Jones at Mercury. Frank who was the head of Mercury Records, and Frank Jones was Canadian — Frank Jones had actually signed Anne Murray to her first record deal at Capitol. So I'd gotten to know Frank Jones and so I called Frank Jones and said hey, I think I've got your next Anne Murray. And of course, he just lit up and said really, can you bring her over? Sure, let me put together some recordings for you. So I called Kathy and said hey, I gotta put together a group of recordings because Frank Jones wants to hear your stuff and he signed Anne Murray and, you know, help me pick out some things. So we did, I picked out four or five things, put them on a reel-to-reel, and went over there. Frank was an interesting executive, never had anything on his desk. He had a briefcase on a side table. What I thought was that he was so pro that he was ready to leave anytime the company closed down or whatever. He had everything in his briefcase off to the right and the only thing on his desk was a pencil and a piece of paper. So I played it form and he loved her, thought she was fantastic. He said I gotta meet her, bring her over, and we start having meetings. The first thing was to find her a producer. Well, I wasn't her producer, I was just at ATV, a writer, plugging songs, trying to get activity for everybody. So we went around to producers, I took Kathy around to several of them, one that stands out in my mind is Brent Maher, and Brent was with us at ATV so Brent — I think he was just too busy at the time, but he didn't really hear it, didn't really want to get involved with it. So then I took her to a couple of other people, can't remember who they all were, but we ended up back at the record company for a meeting with Rick Peoples who was the A&R guy, and Frank Jones and Kathy and me. Well, we're in Rick's office and Frank sticks his head in the door and says, well Byron, I think you'd be the guy to be the producer. And I said well, Kathy's smiling, and it's pretty clear to me they've already had to conversation, so Kathy was smiling. I said well, I'll give it a try, sounds good to me. Then he turns and he says yes, you are Rick Peoples should be able to handle this song, this project really well, so you and Rick Peoples co-produce it, and course at that time I was just happy to give it a shot, I had never co-produced with anybody. So Frank leaves the room and Rick Peoples leans over his desk and says look man, you drive the car, I'll sit in the passenger seat, let's just make this work, I'll yield to whatever you think is good, and throw in my two cents worth. I said okay, let's do it. Kathy was happy, we were all happy. Rick kind of understated himself because he knew what he was doing too, but great guy, great guy Rick and we had a terrific time working together. Plus, he was with the label, so he could do a lot of inside talking the project up, it all made sense to me. So we went in and produced her first album and

none of us really knew what she would ultimately want to be and I don't think Kathy knew either — she was just happy to have a record deal. So jokingly now well, we made all the mistakes. The record sounded great, but Kathy didn't know what she wanted to do at that time and was starting to think that this wasn't really the direction for her. So, it all worked out though, it all worked out fine. So Kathy moved on and went through a few producers to try to find her way, but I had introduced her to some really good players, Rick and I did, and she ended up using some of those players down the line, and still to this day, Kathy and I are friends — recently she was in this interview with Bill Cody on Circle TV and they were walking down Music Row, in fact, it's airing right now, it was just on last week. I saw a segment on it and her and Bill Cody are talking about me, and getting her the record deal. So it's great when things work out that way and someone recognizes what you did for them and Kathy and I will always have that.

0:49:49 Blackmon: That's great when they remember it, not everybody remembers the folks that got them started.

0:49:57 Hill: That's right, they may, but maybe they're not in the right situation where they feel comfortable talking about it, but Kathy always talks about it, it's great.

0:50:08 Blackmon: So, jumping back to the Tom Collins days and “Born Country” happens, which is like a huge career song for Alabama and you at the height of their career — where do you go from there?

0:50:25 Hill: Well, by the time that happened and I'd written other things, I had another Randy Travis cut there and some cuts, all that were doing okay. And I was totally recouped, so every morning about that time was starting to get hip to co-publishing, writers were really starting to ask for co-pub deals. All my friends on the Row were getting co-pub deals because the money was coming in, physical product was doing well, everyone was putting a lot of platinum and gold records on the wall, this was early 90s. I was signed with Tom in 1988 and I was independent for a couple years, a few years prior to that, but signed with him in '88 so by '92, I mean, the record business was on fire. We were selling physical product and getting paid for it.

0:51:25 Blackmon: And country music was probably at its height right? I mean that's the boom, the golden era of country music, right?

0:51:30 Hill: Oh yeah, and when I looked t my wall, you know, and I see the plaques and things, most of them came from that period, the early 90s all the way up through the late 90s, and to think we actually got paid on every unit sold — I mean, that's something that people can't even grasp now because of the way things have changed. But yeah, we got paid on everything, writers were getting deals, it was left and right, they were all of a sudden able to ask for co-pub — some of my friends were getting 80, 85,000 a year plus co-pub. I always kept my draw low because I wanted more time with the publisher to try to prove myself or get something in the pipeline, we used to call it, to pay back the publisher. So it never was in my — I guess it's got a lot to do with how I grew up in the business, being — working in the publishing thing, I never wanted to leave

debt with a publisher, I wanted to be recouped because I knew that would be important later to my career. So everywhere I was, again, I was recouped. So I told Tom, I said Tom, I gotta have co-pub to resign. So I was three and a half years into Collins' deals and his deals were always like this: he would sign you for half a year to determine whether he liked you, and then the thing would start going year by year. So I was down to three and a half years there, and I told him I had to have co-pub. I wanted to stay, but he would have to give me co-pub. And so he drug his feet on that for a while and then finally we had the meeting and he said I can't do it. And Tom was old-school and he wanted all of his, he wanted to own it all, he wanted to own all the pub — which I get it, I know how that works, if you own it all you can license — it creates less licensing problems, all that. So he was very smart that way. But he was also strong and could say goodbye to someone like me and wish me well. And that's what he did, and so I moved down the street to MCA and they gave me a co-pub deal. Actually, I came in through a co-venture, it's kind of maybe too complex to describe here. It made it very easy for me to sign here at MCA and have 50% of my publishing and getting the same advance I was getting from Collins. So that's the way it works, I went across the street and started cranking songs there.

0:54:22 Blackmon: Who signed you at MCA?

0:54:25 Hill: Well, when I mention the co-publishing deal, here we go back to ATV again, the guy who ran ATV in Toronto was Frank Davies. Frank Davies and I remained friends and so Frank, when I was talking to him about what my plans were, I told him I'm trying to get ATV, I mean trying to get MCA, to sign me. And I was talking to the guys over there at the time, at the time it was Steve Day and Dave Loggins and gosh, well, Brad Daniel was there — anyway, they were talking to me about this deal and Steve Day said, you know, I'm having trouble just trying to get this thing together, he said keep looking, let me see what I can do. Well I was talking to Frank Davies who had a co-venture with MCA, and I was telling him about my problem and I said, is there anything — can you nudge them, tell them how good I am or whatever, and maybe they'll work on it? He said well why don't you come in through my co-venture? He says I can get that done for you tomorrow, and I said really/ And he said yeah, I'll give you 50% of your pub and you'll be at MCA here and you'll also have the advantage of me working your stuff too. So I said let's do it, and so we did it. And when I called Steve Day and I said I got a new way we could do this if you're interested, he said what's that? I said I'll come in through Frank Davies' co-venture. He said you would do that? And I said yeah! Good, we got a deal. It was that quick. And so they designed it and put the paperwork together and in no time I signed there and started getting cuts. And it just really came at the right time for me, it was really, really productive. I worked hard there and no one was telling me to come in, no one was telling me to be there at eight-thirty, but I was a hard-working dude so I just came in there and started working, cranking songs, and it worked out, it worked out really well. John Micheal Montgomery cut, two of those or three maybe, several Tracy Byrd cuts, Sammy Kershaw hit, you know, quite a few things started happening. Tanya Tucker. It was a good, it was a really good thing.

0:57:11 Yeah, that was a really prolific time and successful time in your career. You had a big hit with Larry Stewart, the lead singer from Restless Heart with "Alright, Already." You had the

huge Tracy Bryd hit “Lifestyles of the Not So Rich and Famous” and this is during video time, so there’s a lot of CMT, and videos are really big.

0:57:34 Hill: Yes, that’s true, that helped line everything up for sure.

0:57:38 Blackmon: One of the memorable videos that I remember is High-Tech Redneck by George Jones during that time, great comeback for Jones, and I have to say just because I was there and remember this happening — you and I were writing one day and the pluggers, I believe Lynn Gann called you up to his office and George Jones was cutting High-Tech Redneck and they — this was a lesson for me in not being precious in lyrics or being accommodating to artists, but you had the name Ronnie Milsap in the song and they didn’t like that. On the spot, or it’s either that or you had Johnny Cash and they wanted to change that.

0:58:24 Hill: Right, it was the other way around. Yeah, he asked, I guess he was friends with Ronnie Milsap or liked Ronnie and wanted him to be on it so we just agreed, you know. It was fine with me.

0:58:40 Blackmon: But at that same time you had “Over You” with Anne Murray and the huge “If I Was a Drinkin’ Man” by Neil McCoy, and the Sammy Kershaw song you mentioned, Politics, Religion, and Her, I mean it’s just like one after another, wasn’t it?

0:59:54 Hill: Yeah, and I was — I really felt great about being part of a company, I mean it was, there were other great writers there at the time, I mean I didn’t write with all of them, but they were there and it just felt, it just felt good being part of a company where you had people like Gary Burr, Rob Crosby, gosh, the list just went on and on and on about people that were there writing. Jan Crutchfield, Mark Nesler, did I say, Russell Smith?

0:59:28 Blackmon: Russel Smith, yeah.

0:59:28 Hill: Yeah, yeah, and it — every day we were passing each other into the hallway and it just felt like I was part of a successful team, and we had a nice little studio there. So I was there for five years, something like that, and saw three regime changes, which really was rough. I saw things get ripped apart over there in ways that I guess are typical but when you’re in that situation, it can really change the course of your career.

1:00:10 Blackmon: How did you navigate that when you’d have a new regime come in?

1:00:15 Hill: Well, it was like starting over almost. Your momentum could be going pretty strong and then when the team leaves, you kind of wonder, who do I have to get close with now to show them material, who do I have to impress now to be their minds? So the problem is when pluggers — when they change pluggers and they get rid of the people who believe in you is the new pluggers come in and they will immediately say things like, and this is, I don’t know if it’s — it’s pretty typical I think, they say well look, I didn’t sign you, you’re not one of the writers I signed,

but I want to see if I can help your catalog, help you out. So there's this feather in their cap thing that most pluggers want to immediately establish when they walk in, they want to sign new people, they want to be responsible, they don't want to — this isn't a rule, shouldn't say it as a rule, but it is human nature I think, when a plugger wants to go to work somewhere, they want to find that new, hot thing. They want to find that writer that they can develop, they don't want to continue to pitch something that someone else signed two years earlier that's on someone, even if they're on fire. And some companies allow that kind of thing, allow it to go that way other companies are different, where when they hire a plugger, you have to take care of all the writers. But at MCA, I found that the regime changes pretty much meant that unless you were really lucky, I had something really high on the chart at the time, the risk was that you were going to get forgotten really quickly with the new regime. Some of that happened to all of us and I remember when people started asking out their deals, and it was a lot of writers asked out of their deals on one particular regime change they had. Because the regime change was not just local, it was systemic all the way through MCA, they changed on the west coast, and they changed everywhere. So it wasn't the same company anymore. So if you weren't part of the new regime's signings, you were kind of forgotten, because it didn't get the new people any recognition unless it was a writer that they had found and a river that they had nurtured. It's not a good thing, and if I ran a company, I would make sure — I would try my best to make sure stuff like that didn't happen, but it did happen. So a lot of us left, I could start naming names, I mean I know which ones left but I know it's probably not fair for me to do that. They went on, many big names that we talked about already here left at that time and moved to other deals, and some of those turned out good, and some of them didn't.

1:03:52 Blackmon: It's the nature of the business.

1:03:53 Hill: Yes it is. It's musical chairs, we call it. I moved on from there after being there for more than five years, I think. I moved on and went over to Reba's company because I followed one of the pluggers that was at MCA, Mike Sebastian wanted me to come over to Reba's company. And so I found a way to hang on to a plugger who believed in me and followed Mike over to Reba's company.

1:04:33 Blackmon: Before we go to that transition, something else really big happened, or two things and they kind of go together. One is that you went to work as an A&R executive for BNA Records and at the same time, sometime around there, you discovered Gary Allen. Can you talk about those in the order they happened, because I know maybe you were trying to sign him to BMA before you got him signed elsewhere, but you know, it's a big deal. You had been a publisher, you'd been a hit songwriter, and then you become an A&R exec and discovered talent, so can you talk about that?

1:05:16 Hill: Well, yeah. I have to back up a little bit and say this: a couple of years earlier, Keith Stegall and I and another writer or two, I think there were four of us, we hired a guy named Gary Overton to plug songs for us — this was before Gary Overton had become an executive in the business. Gary was an independent song plugger and he was working for us four writers, we

were kind of splitting his fee, so Gary was really an up-and-coming guy. Well, Gary ended up being head of A&R at BMA while I was at MCA, a staff writer at MCA. Gary and I were friends, you know, we just always stayed in touch and I would try and help him some and he would try to help me some. Well, he called me one day and he said, hey, do you want to — would you consider taking this job over here? I think you'd be really good at it, you got the background and everything, as head of A&R? I couldn't believe the call, you know, it's one of those things, I guess it's something that I thought I might try and do someday, work at a record company, but I wasn't sure — but then I got a call from Rick Pepin who was head of the label, and he said hey you gotta come over, I'm hearing great things about you, you gotta come over and talk to me, don't change — don't make up your mind until you talk to me. I saw okay, and so I go over there and Rick and I hit it off. Rick was head of the label and kind of came from an accountant background and so he needed a sort of creative guy over there. Next thing I know I'm on a plane, going to New York to meet with Joe Galante, and me and Rick flew up to New York and, so I made it really clear to Galante, you know, I'm a staff writer at MCA. He says, well tats fine as long as you keep everything in check and don't let that get in the way of what you got to do for us. And I say well, okay, and he says well, go downstairs and get your credentials. Pick out your 401K. Yeah, it was that quick. And so I — and he said to come back up here when you're done. So I did all that, went through all that New York, you know, I was just kind of nervous about the whole thing and you know, next thing I know I got an office at BNA the next week, I've got an assistant, I'm in meetings, meetings, meetings. I used to say we have meetings to decide when to have meetings, I've never been in so many meetings. So anyway, all of a sudden I'm the head of the A&R department, and we've got this roster of artists and producers and managers that all of a sudden I'm thrown in with and have to jockey their projects through and watch over budgets and make sure that the songs are right and make sure that everyone's getting along. You know, the thing that I didn't really know and wasn't really warned about and didn't really get was their roster was quite full of artists that weren't exactly thrilled with the way things were going on over there. So you had Lorrie Morgan, John Anderson, Turner Nichols — I'm gonna miss someone I'm sure — but it, I'll think of others as we go down the line, and then there was a project, Keith Whitley tribute project that was in the works that Gary said was his pet peeve when I took it over, he says this my pet peeve, you've gotta see this through for me if you will, the Keith Whitley Tribute Album. So it was just in, baby stages, it wasn't ready yet. But anyway I had all these artists that I had to work with, Marc Beeson was one of them, others will pop into my head as well talk. So I was thrown into this chaotic world of managers having problems with this and that, producers angry at the label over this and that, and artists who were always uniting attention and wanting some kind of problem straightened out. So it was a new world for me, I was just a songwriter, an independent producer guy — I was way over my head a bit, I mean I could do that work, but I didn't really understand all of the elements that were going on over there. I didn't really understand the timeframe of what was going on there, that eventually Joe Galante was going to come back to town, so — but it was a great lesson in a lot of things, but one of the main lessons I learned was that I don't want to do that again.

1:11:06 Blackmon: One thing, that Keith Whitley tribute album you mentioned, that kind of launched Allison Krauss's career into a whole other world with that album, didn't it? When she recorded "When You Say Nothing At All."

1:11:22 Hill: Yeah, it was really, really a — that was fun working with her and her manager at the time, Denise Stiff. So that was cool, and then Randy Scruggs was involved deeply in the production. Randy was a real great guy to work with, I mean just a mild-mannered musical genius. Nothing seemed to ever rattle him, he was just always fun to work with and — excuse me, dry throat — but he — it was a really fun project and it got a lot of accolades, I'm not sure if we couldn't have improved, I think we could've improved the acts maybe, had a few more on there or maybe a few less, but it was good. It put me real close with Lorrie Morgan and that was a real pleasure because working with her and her mother, we just really hit it off. The job also put me in touch with a lot of other people that were more difficult, so that's something that I think in the record companies, it's pretty common, that people who choose to do that for a living, A&R, it can be pretty brutal just dealing with people and decisions on songs. It's not as much fun as it sounds, you know. Sometimes it can be kind of contentious, you know. No, it just went easy for me.

1:13:06 Blackmon: It's interesting that you take about the regime changes at MCA when you're a songwriter with the executives and pluggers, and then you get this gig at BNA, and then you are kind of a part of a regime — not a huge regime change — but all of a sudden they have a new head of A&R. One thing that I knew, not that I knew a lot about, was that you inherited two acts there, an act named Dale Daniel and Jesse Hunter. You didn't sign those acts, but you were responsible for them I guess, and those are acts that didn't happen. What was it like to inherit those acts that you had nothing to do with signing and nobody knew who they were?

1:13:53 Hill: Right. Well, what happened was I did the best I could for them — in fact, Jesse Hunter and I were on the road doing some radio tour stuff, I went out with him, great guy. You know, sometimes you had really good moments, but the problems were really coming from above. What I didn't realize at BNA is that the roster was going to be changed when Galante came back to town, and they were going to take a rake to the roster and let some people go. They had already reached this sort of level with some of those acts at BNA where there was nothing I could've done to kind of elevate anything because they had already had some shots. It just wasn't working out, and you know this is a revolving door that every label has with their acts, so I never even got involved in the process of who got dropped and who got signed. Certainly, no one got signed when I was there because the roster was full, and then the people that ended up leaving were already predestined to be let go before I even got to my job — it was pretty much just waiting out contracts on things and — I just found out really quick when I got in there that I wasn't going to be able to effectuate anything that had to do with new signings, so.

1:15:34 Blackmon: Were you made aware of those people who were going to be dropped or did they already know that the company would do that?

1:25:41 Hill: Well, these things would come up in meetings, about what the plans might be and whether they were going to put out a new single on someone or whether they're gonna let a project rest a while or whatever. But, I don't think I was in there more than six months before I was pretty aware that Joe Galante was coming back to town. So we knew that Joe Galante would be making a lot of the decisions, not us. So we were kind of, it was kind of a lame-duck situation. I remember bringing Rhett Atkins through there, I wanted to sign Rhett Atkins. And Rhett was a valid act at the time, but the radio, head of the radio department Chuck Thacker said, look, I know you keep bringing us out to these showcases to see these people, you want to sign somebody, but don't have any room, we can't do anything with what we've got. That was really the prevailing disappointment for me there, that there was no room and there were a lot of acts there that they didn't do anything with that they should have. I always felt that Marc Beeson had a shot. Several of them really, that they wanted to get behind but couldn't because they were just stretched so thin. The money was being tightened down and Galante knew he was coming back, so everything was in a sort of state of change, but we couldn't say anything about it. When that change happened for sure, I had been in the job — I had a two-year contract and I'd been in the job a year. That's when HR came to town, they went through RCA, Arista, and BMA, and had meetings and people were packing up their desks, it was that bad. So I just, like I tell people, I just put my stuff in a box and walked back across the alley to MCA music to a peaceful, better world. That's the way I kind of looked at it. I learned a lot there, I learned a lot doing the BNA thing.

1:18:07 Blackmon: Speaking of learning a lot, you mentioned working radio and going out on tour with Jesse Hunter. Can you talk about radio tours? The — I can't think of the name right now, the DJ convention — but I saw you work it a couple years. But working radio and being in a label, what's that all about?

1:18:35 Hill: Well, I had the pleasure of going out on the road for the Southwestern rep for BNA, we went out on a talent hunting tour, even though — it was the right thing to do, always keeping our eyes and ears open for talent, but we, both of us knew it wasn't likely to bring anybody in because the roster was so tight. But I went in with Scott, the Southwestern rep, on this brutal radio tour with him. I got to hang with him, that was kind of a mission, I would ride shotgun with him and go around to his radio meetings during the day. I would talk to some of the radio about some of our acts and he would do his normal promo thing. Then at night we'd go and hear things, we called it the I-10 tour. So we started in Houston and different radio stations set up shows for us to see in towns like Lafayette, Baton Rouge, and in Houston for us to check out these acts. So we were burning at both ends, we really had a rough ride. So I found out that the radio tour thing was not for me, that is a hard gig, those guys are monsters. They go up, they get up in the morning, the radio rep, with a hangover usually, and they go buy birthday cakes for people, they show up at the radio station at the crack of dawn, drop a birthday cake on the front desk, start talking about the new singles, what's coming out, what's going on with concerts coming to town and how many tickets do they need, all this stuff. Then it's like, see you all later! And I'd get back in the car with the radio guy, say where we going now, I'm ready to put my feet up somewhere. Then they say oh man, we have three more stations to see before lunch. So, go to another station and it would be the same thing. Go buy some teddy bear for somebody whose

mother was in the hospital or whatever, he knew all these things. This guy knew everything, everybody's name, and you'd be going into these radio stations that were so run down they would have books under the corners of the couch holding up the couch and we'd go back, the chairs had holes in them — these stations were barely hanging on. It was just rough. So did that, and that was a very hard tour, and I really didn't love going out and doing that, and it really wasn't any of our guy's job, but they felt like radio would love to meet an A&R guy. I get that, so we did that some and then I went out with Jesse Hunter some and did that same kind of thing. It turned out to be a part of the business that kind of, I thought was not what I would be in the business for. Buying steak dinners for the table at night, dropping birthday cakes on the table in the morning.

1:22:04 Blackmon: Sounds like a pharmaceutical sales rep.

1:22:07 Hill: That's exactly what it felt like! Yeah, and you know, those pharmaceutical people, they come in with stacks of pizzas — well we did that too! And we had to stay out man, that was the hardest part, you had to stay out till one or two AM listening to acts and then go to the hotel and get up again at six. You know it's crazy, they're so unhealthy, those promo guys if they did it like Scott did, he was an animal. I remember Kim Hill, we had a singing — Kim was signed there, Christian artist but she was trying to do the country thing, but we sent her out with Scott down in the southwest area and she wanted to take her baby on the road with her. So I had her calling me on one phone, I was back at the office, her calling me on one phone saying this guy's an animal, I can't do this! And then I had Scott calling me on the other line, this isn't a baby tour, no more babies out here, we can't take the babies on the radio tour! So it was like I was in this strange position where I'm having to calm both of them down and get them to get along together, you know. But it was a different world man, so I was very happy to pack up my stuff when HR came to town and closed up that RCA and Arista and BNA and put it all under one thing called — I don't know what it was called, something like record label group, RLG — a lot of us were gone. Thom Schuyler was gone, Garth Fundis was gone, Tim DuBois. All of us kind of went in different directions then but I went across the street back to MCA where I was writing songs and I was a lot happier.