

Mill Valley Oral History Program

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BILL CHAMPLIN

**An Oral History Interview
Conducted by Debra Schwartz in 2015**

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TITLE: Oral History of Bill Champlin
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In this oral history, musician and raconteur Bill Champlin vividly recounts a life devoted to music, one fundamentally shaped by his experience growing up in Mill Valley. Born across the bay in Oakland in 1947, Bill moved with his mother and two sisters to Mill Valley when he was 12 years old. Rock n' roll and R&B were sweeping through Marin in the 1960s, and Bill describes his total immersion in the local music scene, even while still a student at Tam High, and in the broader context of the Vietnam War and the racial tensions of the time. Bill recalls many of the great musicians he has known and played with over the years; the development of his major band, the Sons of Champlin, which he started in the late 1960s; and his life as a songwriter in Los Angeles in the 1970s, a period of great creativity during which he received two Grammys. Throughout the oral history Bill evokes the adventure and camaraderie of the artistic life and the nourishment it received from the cultural synergy he encountered as a teenager in Marin County.

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Oral History of Bill Champlin
June 11th, 2015

0:00:00 Debra Schwartz: Today is June 11, 2015 and my name is Debra Schwartz. I am on FaceTime with musician Bill Champlin. Bill, thank you so much for speaking with the Mill Valley Historical Society Oral History Program person, which is me. And I really look forward to hearing about your experiences here in Mill Valley and the stories you have about growing up here.

0:00:29 Bill Champlin: Well, thank you. Thank you for having me. By the way, something I don't even know whether you know about: I received a Milly award maybe six years ago, five years, five or six years ago.

0:00:40 Debra Schwartz: Oh really? Well, we'll have to include that in some of your music —

0:00:43 Bill Champlin: At some point in the game, we'll have to include that in there. I got it right in the other room. I'll go get it and show it to you.

0:00:48 Debra Schwartz: Okay. Yeah, that's great. I can get a photo of that. So Bill, let's begin our interview with a little bit of history about your family. If you could talk a little bit about your parents, where they're from — if you could give names and dates of birth it is always helpful for anybody you're talking about.

0:01:05 Bill Champlin: Well, I think my mom was born in 1919. My dad was born probably, I'd say maybe 1910, something like that. My mom was born in Peoria, Illinois. Dad was born in, I think, Pittsburgh, California, believe it or not.

0:01:19 Debra Schwartz: Wow.

0:01:19 Bill Champlin: His family was — they have a piece of land. We actually still own some of the land up in Sonoma, right outside — right on 116 going toward Petaluma from the city of Sonoma. On the left there. It was the first land that was sold to a non-Spanish land owner by General Vallejo. They sold it to my family. So we had this land. I think they've, over generations, have sold out more and more and we're down to about 100 acres over there but —

0:01:52 Debra Schwartz: Wow. When was this first — the land sale originally? This must have been in the 1800s, of course.

0:01:56 Bill Champlin: Oh, 1850 maybe, something like that.

0:01:58 Debra Schwartz: Oh wow.

0:02:00 Bill Champlin: Yeah, it was quite a while ago.

0:02:01 Debra Schwartz: Interesting.

0:02:02 Bill Champlin: I wanna say 1846, I could be way wrong. But I think that was when, it might have been when it was first, the deed was first filed with — at the time, I guess they called it the county seat.

0:02:16 Debra Schwartz: So that would have been on your father or mother's side that would have been the recipient?

0:02:20 Bill Champlin: Dad's side, yeah.

0:02:21 Debra Schwartz: Your dad's side. There's a little bit of cutting out.

0:02:24 Bill Champlin: In this family, we're kind of more connected with Santa Barbara. And how my dad and mom got together I have no idea. Never got it. I know my grandparents met in — my grandfather and grandmother met in choir. So there's just been a lot of music in my family. Go back further and further and you find town drunks, village idiots, and musicians. [laughter] Covers it all, doesn't it? [laughter]

0:02:49 Debra Schwartz: So where were you born and when?

0:02:51 Bill Champlin: My dad went to the people that do all the — the thing where you find out all your ancestors and stuff like that.

0:03:00 Debra Schwartz: Oh yeah. Like 23andMe or something?

0:03:02 Bill Champlin: Yeah, like that thing. But the people that have done it and done it the best have been basically the Mormon Church in Salt Lake City. And he knew that — we had one guy that was — William Bradford, who was the first governor of Massachusetts is a great, great, great, great, great, great grandfather of mine. My name is William Bradford Champlin so we actually came over, my dad's family came over, on the Mayflower. When my mom's family came over, I have no idea.

0:03:36 Debra Schwartz: Interesting.

0:03:37 Bill Champlin: Yeah. So we were kind of — at the beginning of it in the US, and then kind of at the beginning of it when they raised the flag in California. So it's like, "Hey, we were here first."

0:03:51 Debra Schwartz: Wow, that is quite a long family history.

0:03:55 Bill Champlin: Somebody told me a story that when the Mayflower was coming over, the guy that ended up being Chicago's guitar player, he had a great, great, great, great, great, great grandfather that came over on the Mayflower also. But he got drunk and fell off the boat and my great, great, great, great grandfather turned the boat around and picked him up. [laughter] I was going, "Well, I wonder why he did that? He

shouldn't have wasted everybody's time. Should have let him stay in there." [laughter]

0:04:23 Debra Schwartz: Well, you wouldn't have heard the story if he hadn't saved the great, great, great, great grandfather.

0:04:27 Bill Champlin: Too many greats in there for my money.

0:04:30 Debra Schwartz: Well actually, it's really interesting. You come from a very — a long line of Americans, basically.

0:04:36 Bill Champlin: Yeah.

0:04:38 Debra Schwartz: Well, so you were born where, Bill?

0:04:41 Bill Champlin: I was born in Oakland. In Oakland, in 1947, and then I lived in Oakland. I actually lived in Piedmont for a while. My dad was, just, probably at the first maybe five or 10 years of his law firm in Oakland, Stark and Champlin, very staid law firm. I was about five and a half, my older sister was about eight and a half, my younger sister was about two and a half, when my parents were divorced. And my mother and two sisters and I moved to Santa Cruz for a couple of years, or actually Brookdale. And then, we went to Ben Lomond for a little while. And then, after that we moved to Montecito, which is right connected to Santa Barbara.

0:05:31: And we lived there from about half way through second grade until the end of sixth grade, at which point we moved to Mill Valley. We had visited Mill Valley, that's how we kind of discovered it. My uncle, Uncle Brad, had a little summer house in Mill Valley. I think it was in Tam Valley. We went over and used it a couple times and my mother just fell in love with the area. So we moved into the Enchanted Knolls area on Longfellow Drive, which at that time was brand new. Everything on that street was really new. It's been there a long time, so it's just a typical neighborhood in Mill Valley now but at the time, it was everybody kind of looked at it as like, "Uh-oh, here comes the nouveau kids. Anybody who lives there can't be real Mill Valley." It was classic.

0:06:21 Debra Schwartz: And this is probably coming right up to the '50s, early '50s, right?

0:06:25 Bill Champlin: No, this is late '50s.

0:06:26 Debra Schwartz: Late '50s?

0:06:28 Bill Champlin: I think it was — I think we moved in, I wanna say, '59, maybe '60.

0:06:33 Debra Schwartz: You were born what year?

0:06:35 Bill Champlin: No, it's gotta be before that. So, I was seventh grade. I

graduated high school in '65, so that means, I got into high school in '61. Seventh grade, '59, must be '59.

0:06:45 Debra Schwartz: Okay. So that's when you came to Mill Valley in '59 with your —

0:06:49 Bill Champlin: As you can tell, I probably flunked math. [laughter] I'm having trouble figuring out all these math quizzes.

0:06:56 Debra Schwartz: Hey, it's back in the day, it's been a few years.

0:07:00 Bill Champlin: Tell me about it.

0:07:00 Debra Schwartz: So, tell me a little bit about your experiences growing up in Mill Valley and how was it for you.

0:07:05 Bill Champlin: Well, at some point in the game, my first couple of years, I think, we were still living on Longfellow, and the Maguire Junior High was down the street. I had to walk down the hill and I was pretty much, pretty close to being there. And then, after that, we moved up to Bigelow Drive with the driveway was right on Blithedale, East Blithedale. And that kinda was a little more of a Mill Valley scene in a lot of ways. That was, I think, during high school, my freshman through —

0:07:37 Debra Schwartz: Do you remember what address that was on Bigelow, 'cause the houses are usually one side West Blithedale, the other side, Bigelow.

0:07:45 Bill Champlin: Yeah. We drove in the driveway off of West Blithedale, but the front of the house was on Bigelow. I wanna say 32. Does that sound — I don't even know. I have no idea.

0:07:55 Debra Schwartz: Interesting. I'll —

0:07:57 Bill Champlin: I spent top dollar on my memory loss, I'll have you know. [chuckle]

0:08:03: I'm not really sure what the addresses were. Actually, I think 32 Longfellow was the first address, and then it might have been like 18 Bigelow. I don't know. I can't remember. 42, I don't know. It's gone, that one's gone but I remember we used to ride my little sister's bike through the creek. That was always fun, completely ruined the bike.

0:08:24 Debra Schwartz: Miller Grove?

0:08:26 Bill Champlin: Still mad at me about that. [laughter]

0:08:29: But it was kinda cool 'cause, I mean, one of the first people I met when I moved to Mill Valley — I was already interested in guitar. I'd already had a few guitar

lessons in Santa Barbara. I really liked Elvis and that whole thing was really cool. I hadn't really gotten into it yet — and actually, when I was a kid, before my parents were divorced, I was actually already taking piano lessons. I took piano lessons from the age of about three and a half to five.

0:08:57 Debra Schwartz: Wow. Did you ask for them or did they think that you should —

0:09:00 Bill Champlin: No, they just figured out I had this — weird, I remember that my teacher's name was Mrs. Chamblin, with a "B". So that was interesting. And then when we got divorced, we moved to this house in Santa Cruz where we couldn't take mom's piano. The trucks couldn't get up the hill with the piano. They needed to have a big truck for the piano and the hill was — it was just this little small dirt road going up above. There's a famous restaurant in Brookdale where the creek runs through it.

0:09:35 Debra Schwartz: Yes.

0:09:36 Bill Champlin: We had a house on that creek, about a mile up. So we used to walk up and down that street. It was cool, very rural situation, it was a very nice house. But no piano so —

0:09:47 Debra Schwartz: So but your mom was a musician then?

0:09:50 Bill Champlin: Pardon me?

0:09:50 Debra Schwartz: Your mom was a musician.

0:09:52 Bill Champlin: Yes. She was a great singer-songwriter.

0:09:55 Debra Schwartz: What's your mom's name?

0:09:56 Bill Champlin: Betty Mee. Well, now she's no longer with us but she was — she married, once we were there in Mill Valley. I think, it was around my freshman year of high school, she married a guy named Jack Cheatham, so she was Betty Cheatham.

0:10:13 Debra Schwartz: Great. So, you were enthralled with music at an early age —

0:10:19 Bill Champlin: I was really interested in trying to get a band together. I was going to like sock hops and the Outdoor Art Club, different things like that, and seeing some of the local bands that were going on. And the biggest band was Kustom Keys. They were really before my time, I never even saw those guys. And then, there was a band called The Chord Lords with Dean Ferguson. Rob Moitoza played with The Chord Lords. Those bands were the bands that were really going on. The one, once we were playing, we were checking out when we were going to the little sock hops and stuff, was The Ramrods with Scott Hale and Bob Albachten, Steve Regalia. I think I remember all of them, pretty much the names. But there was one musician that I met.

0:11:03: Actually, there was a group called The Swingin' Deacons, which had John Cipollina on guitar, Steve Regalia on drums and a guy named Adam Fourman on piano. And Adam also played guitar, and Adam also played drums, and he was an awesome singer, and he was a really, really good guy. So, when I was really young, I kinda sidled up to him and he was just a sweetie pie, wonderful guy. When I was starting to get in to looking for bands, I remember walking with Adam right by the theater, and I remember somebody came up, Ed Booth came up and says, "Hey, we're looking for a keyboard player, you know anybody?" Ed was already, what, 19, 20 years old. The other guitar player in his band was 31. And Adam said, "You should get Bill, man. He plays great keys, plays great piano." So, the next thing I know, I was playing with the group called The Falcons. The guys that I was playing with were all in their 20s and 30s.

0:11:58 Debra Schwartz: And you're how old here?

0:12:00 Bill Champlin: I don't know, eighth grade/ninth grade.

0:12:03 Debra Schwartz: Oh my gosh. [chuckle]

0:12:07 Bill Champlin: But, I had some chops. I knew how to get away with what I needed to get away with. And also I did some playing. We had a little band that we had somewhere in that period of time, that we call the Royal Keys, which was actually me and Bruce Brymer. Do you know Bruce?

0:12:20 Debra Schwartz: No.

0:12:21 Bill Champlin: Bruce played with a group called Freedom Highway quite a bit later. His dad was one of the major plumbers in that area, and Bruce was a great singer. Really good singer and a good drummer. So Bruce and I played together for a while, and that's where we kinda ran into Ed and different people, and then we ran into a guy named Ron Arnsmeier who came in from out of town. It was another one of these great sax players. He was quite a bit older than us but he really taught us a whole lot of music. We got very very lucky in those days 'cause it wasn't — the age thing wasn't like 15-year-olds stay here, 20-year-olds stay here, everybody was going like that. I mean, there was so much wanting to start bands and do — rock and roll was taking over.

0:13:05 Debra Schwartz: You know, interesting, because I think of Mill Valley as being a very bucolic small town, not really active in the sense of like you might think of an urban musical area like San Francisco. But in fact from the interviews that I've compiled already, and from your stories, it sounds like this was a bit of a pulling — musician pulling, you know, here.

0:13:25 Bill Champlin: Well, think if you look at Marin County in general, maybe not so much, at least in the old days, not so much Novato — I always looked at Novato as being really just kind of southern Sonoma — it never really connected with me just 'cause I thought San Rafael was the end of it. And it's always been, especially in Mill

Valley, there's a certain level of kind of intelligentsia that's always been around Mill Valley, it's always been there. I know a lot of people that I knew were like U.C. professors that live there. And I didn't really notice it until quite a bit later, the beatnik scene was giant there. Up in the hills there was a lot of stuff going on, and that kind of wild craziness that goes on in that world, and went on in that world, and in the early LSD world and the whole thing. It opened everything up and music was just a natural — it was so artistic. If you look at the San Francisco scene, you go "Wow. That music just flew." Well, think about the art work. Think about the poster art and Wes Wilson and all these other guys that were — a lot of these guys were all Marin County guys. Marin County's always been an artistic area and it's just, I don't know — it's something in the water [chuckle] and I drank the water so there you have it. [chuckle]

0:14:51: It was really cool about the music scene in Mill Valley, especially there was Village Music there, right at the corner of Blithedale and — what's the street that goes down by where the theater used to be?

0:15:02 Debra Schwartz: Throckmorton.

0:15:03 Bill Champlin: Throckmorton. Right at that corner there, Village Music was a mainstay of that town and even after, long after I left it was still always on the front edge of coming up with records that nobody else gets and stuff like that.

0:15:16 Debra Schwartz: You mean John Goddard, the owner was —

0:15:19 Bill Champlin: I think even before John. I mean, I think he bought it from somebody or it was willed to him or something, but I remember a lady that owned it back when I was a kid. You know what I mean? I was hanging out with the Searles' family. Pete Searles was a really great drummer when I was in seventh grade, one of the first guys I met. And then one of the first guys I met was actually Charlie Deal, and I went and practiced with Charlie and even then I realized Charlie's a cool guy to know and he's a fun hang, but musically we're not going anywhere. [chuckle] I was already —

0:15:48 Debra Schwartz: Will you talk a little bit — you know his name keeps coming up in the interviews — will you talk a little bit about Charlie?

0:15:54 Bill Champlin: Well, you know, you're talking about just certain people. I look at Adam in a lot of ways was just a — he was a UPS guy, but he still worked a lot of dates, and he played a lot of music, and affected a lot of young musicians. And Charlie was just one of those guys that knew everybody. There's nobody that didn't know Charlie, and then it was many, many years later that Charlie came up with that whole toilet seat guitar thing that he did, which everybody just thought was so funny that all of a sudden the next thing you know you got big rock stars buying them. I've heard that Keith Richards has a Charlie Deal original toilet seat guitar hanging on his wall or something. [chuckle]

0:16:41: What it was, is like the San Francisco bands, once they got rich, they'd move

to Marin. Once they were making enough money, who the hell wants to live in Haight-Ashbury when you could live in Mill Valley?

0:16:54 Debra Schwartz: So who was living here when you were living here?

0:16:56 Bill Champlin: Well, when I was living here, it was all just the guys. Huey Lewis was living there. I look at the Sons — and my band with Rob was the Opposite Six which was — we were kind of almost like a Vegas-y kind of band. Brocade jackets and razor-cut hairdos, and steps and the whole nine yards, was what we were doing when we were in high school. And then suddenly the whole music movement: Fillmore, Avalon, all that kind of stuff, it instantly affected Marin County. I mean, what we started with was when I moved to town, everybody was talking about the Kustom Keys. They used to play Brown's Hall all the time. It was a regular place for them to play and then right on the heels of that was the Chord Lords.

0:17:47: Some of the guys from the Kustom Keys played with the Chord Lords. Now, one of the guys with the Kustom Keys, and I think is maybe almost the father of rock and roll in Marin County, is John Allair. You're not aware of John Allair? Call Rob, ask him about John Allair. You wanna find out who is at the top of the food chain for Marin County Music, John Allair is up there. John Allair and Pete Lind was his drummer where they were the — what do you call it? That was the black hole. That was where it all just started for Marin County, for Marin County music. Before that there was plenty of musicians but nobody doing rock. John kind of broke open the rock thing. John's a great singer and an unbelievably great organ player.

0:18:36 Debra Schwartz: Mm-hmm.

0:18:37 Bill Champlin: We used to all go up to the bowling alley in San Rafael. And, of course, we were underage, we couldn't get into the lounge. John and Pete would be playing in the lounge, but John would be playing the organ with bass pedals, and then Leslie behind him, and Pete played drums. We would go in through the bathroom, the men's bathroom that connected to the bowling alley, which we could be in, and then there was a door to that same bathroom into the —

0:19:02 Debra Schwartz: Lounge, yeah.

0:19:03 Bill Champlin: To the lounge, and we'd all, you know — John would look up from the organ, and he'd see five faces sticking through the door watching him play. [chuckle]

0:19:10: Awesome, man. If you really wanna get down to who started this stuff — I mean, Moitoza was pretty close to the beginning, 'cause he played with all these guys right off the bat, but John Allair was really the guy that we all — I mean, I went to try to get lessons from him, and he kinda cold shouldered me. He's like, "Ah, some kid. I don't wanna do that."

0:19:30 Debra Schwartz: Well, Rob talked about being the backup bands, or working with traveling bands coming through.

0:19:37 Bill Champlin: We did that. The Opposite Six did that a lot. We played with Dick and Dee Dee. Somebody said at a Dick and Dee Dee concert, “Who’s Dick and Dee Dee?” And the other guy says, “I don’t know but I’m next.” Oh, well. [chuckle]

0:19:51: Then a girl named Donna Lauren, The Dovells, remember they did the Bristol Stomp?

0:20:00 Debra Schwartz: Mm-hmm.

0:20:00 Bill Champlin: Remember that?

0:20:00 Debra Schwartz: Mm-hmm.

0:20:00 Bill Champlin: And then Len Barry, he had 1-2-3, which is — he was a member of the Dovells. We backed The Coasters.

0:20:07 Debra Schwartz: Whoa.

0:20:08 Bill Champlin: Right? And I remember the day we backed those guys, it was at Santa Venetia, the VFW [Veterans of Foreign Wars] Hall. What ended up happening was weird ’cause it was right at around 1963, and for some reason there were — I mean, Marin County was pretty much primarily a white neighborhood. Mill Valley and Tam High School had Marin City — so we had blacks in our school, and there was some throwing fists, and there was some, what they called race riots, but they were pretty small time race riots going on at Tamalpais High School at that time in 1963. To the point where actually Rob Moitoza — and you gotta hand it to him, he did something really cool. He got a concert together with George Duke, the Opposite Six, and other little bands that were in the neighborhood, black groups, singing groups that we were backing up, and it was just his attempt — and we had it in Ruby Scott at Tam High, which threw the concert. The place was packed, and it was kinda that thing of like, “Hey, look, we’re all together,” and he called it Soulville 63.

0:21:16 Debra Schwartz: He called it what?

0:21:18 Bill Champlin: Soulville 63.

0:21:19 Debra Schwartz: Soulville 63.

0:21:20 Bill Champlin: It has washed whatever wounds were open. But at the time when we played with The Coasters, some local — I mean, there were whites and blacks at it, ’cause The Coasters were a black group. And we were backing them up, and there was some black guys that came over from Richmond or from Berkeley or somewhere in Oakland, and they were really, really much more, way more streetwise than Marin City

guys. You know what I mean? 'Cause even if Marin City guys are supposed to be the urban situation, come on, it wasn't East 14th by any means. You know what I mean? So there was some stabbing and some stuff going on at that gig. It was the first time I'd ever seen anything like that. And I'd just bought a new Hammond organ, and we were just — me and the manager of The Coasters were taking it off the stage. We've seen people getting carried out. It was pretty much of a scene. I don't think it made the news that much but it was pretty crazy to do that.

0:22:27 Debra Schwartz: And you're how old when this happens?

0:22:29 Bill Champlin: I was maybe a freshman in high school, sophomore at the most.

0:22:34 Debra Schwartz: Is your mother worried at all that you are —

0:22:36 Bill Champlin: No, I didn't tell her any of this stuff was going on. [laughter]

0:22:40: You gotta realize, I got married two months after my junior year at Tam, and in March of my senior year at Tam my son was born.

0:22:54 Debra Schwartz: That's pretty unusual for that time, isn't it?

0:22:57 Bill Champlin: Yeah, it was kind of a Chuck Berry song. [laughter]

0:23:02: You know, with the TV dinners, and ginger ale in the refrigerator, you know what I mean? And I made it through high school, I got my diploma, I did the whole thing.

0:23:10 Debra Schwartz: Did your wife?

0:23:11 Bill Champlin: Yeah. She graduated the year before I did.

0:23:15 Debra Schwartz: Oh, I see. Okay. And so you —

0:23:18 Bill Champlin: I got most of that out of the way. My last year of high school was — there were six periods a day, and during football season five of those periods were music. 'Cause in football season, the marching band would practice rather than PE. And this is my senior year. My first class of the day was orchestra, my second class was choir, my third class was Beginning Band. My fourth class was Advanced Band, my fifth class was, I think, US history, or Government, and my sixth class was either PE or marching band. It was pretty much just band, it was just music. In Beginning Band I was learning trumpet, and in Advanced Band I was already playing sax.

0:24:06 Debra Schwartz: Wow! You know, I interviewed several people — you know the guys that started the mountain biking here in the area? Many of them acquired —

0:24:15 Bill Champlin: [unintelligible] — and then Gary?

0:24:16 Debra Schwartz: Yeah, right. Gary Fisher, Charlie Kelly, my friend Steve Pots. Steve says that he acquired all of his skills at Tam High shop classes.

0:24:32 Bill Champlin: In terms of putting the derailleurs on the old bunkers?

0:24:36 Debra Schwartz: Just basically his skill as a craftsman. He said he'd learned so much, it seemed — when did you learn reading and writing and arithmetic?

0:24:45 Bill Champlin: School. From my parents' divorce until I was about 10, my sole purpose in life was to become either a fireman or a cowboy. You know what I mean, I was just acting like a kid, I wasn't just being little music guy. It wasn't 'til later that music started to kick in a little bit. And I had a few teachers — actually in Santa Barbara I had two teachers in a row that were telling my mom, "This kid's got some music going on, you should really — " She says, "Oh, yeah — " You know, I was reading music before I read English when I was little, so I kinda put it away after my parents' divorce and just didn't wanna deal with it for the most part. And then somewhere along the line I wanted to be a trumpet player and then eventually I kind of centered in on guitar and keyboards.

0:25:40 Debra Schwartz: Uh-huh.

0:25:42 Bill Champlin: At last count, I at least know how to play 18 or 19 instruments. I just don't play any of them that well. Jack of all instruments, master of none is what the guys in the band used to call me.

0:25:52 Debra Schwartz: Uh-huh.

0:25:53 Bill Champlin: They call me —

0:25:54 Debra Schwartz: Now they what?

0:25:56 Bill Champlin: They said "Champlin sings like a duck." I had a little lisp going on.

0:26:02 Debra Schwartz: So were you writing music when you were a kid?

0:26:05 Bill Champlin: Pardon me?

0:26:05 Debra Schwartz: Were you writing music when you were a kid? No?

0:26:10 Bill Champlin: I didn't get into doing that until I was maybe a freshman in high school. I started writing blues and some stuff. The thing is about Mill Valley is that there was one AM station out of Oakland, KDIA, which was all R&B. It's a black station and that's what we were all listening to when we were kids. This really kinda upscale white neighborhood and the only music we're listening to is Jimmy Reed, and Lou

Rawls, and Ray Charles, and just nothing but R&B. And that's kind of some of what started I think is one of the things that got that particular line of guys really involved in music. Listen to Huey and the News. Check out, "It's Hip To Be Square," check out the track on that. That's a full tilt R&B track. That's what's going on with those guys really. Got the horns, they got the whole thing. It's R&B band. I don't care what anybody says. With a great front man who plays harp like nobody's business. It was just pretty cool.

0:27:16: We were all kind of influenced by that Oakland thing. Maybe because there was, you know, in serious full tail white suburban America, there ain't a lot to hang your hat on. You know what I mean? That has any kind of heartfelt touch to it other than, "Hey, you should get an MBA and become a lawyer or something." Now all of a sudden you turn on the radio and here's this insanely great music and you're going, "Oh, Jesus. I gotta —" I remember where I was in the morning, doing dishes, doing my breakfast dishes, about to go to school, when I first heard Otis Redding on the radio and I just went — it changed my life, just absolutely changed my life. And I didn't know what it was. I thought it was a period piece from 20 years before that. I didn't know who this guy was, or where it came from, but you don't find that too much in white neighborhoods.

0:28:14: So that music, I think really, really did a lot to change all of — Moitoza was an insane R&B freak. We used to go — we'd take Tim Cash with us, who was at that time on crutches, and still is, and we'd take Tim with us and go to these James Brown shows in Oakland, just insane shows. What are we doing here? We were about as lonely as fish in trees, you know what I mean? But nobody would give us any shit because Tim was — we had a guy with crutches. So we sit in there watching the James Brown band. We're talking 1964, '63 or '64, when it was the major Chitlin Circuit. But having seen those bands in those days was like — you see kids now that are into hip hop and stuff and you say, "Hey, what do you think of James Brown?" "I don't know him." "What do you think of Sly Stone?" "Never heard of him." What do you think of Earth, Wind, and Fire?" "Have no idea." Whoa, you know. We were really lucky. We had Stax-Volt on the radio everyday on our way to school. It was insane. That was just great.

0:29:21 Debra Schwartz: For some, I think music in the '60s and '70s, well, I think music in any era, will really root you into your life in a way that few things can. There's something about it that puts you where you are in the continuum of life. Music has a capacity to do that, and that era in the '50s and '60s and '70s, there were some powerful music coming out.

0:29:47 Bill Champlin: Yeah, it was.

0:29:47 Debra Schwartz: Yeah, transformative. You eventually started your own band. Now, you've played with all these various groups, you've played with your schoolmates, you've played with older people as you're describing. Tell me about your own band.

0:30:03 Bill Champlin: What happened is that we were really diggin' playing with the Opposite Six. But at the same time this was going on, the Vietnam War was happening,

and the draft was going on. So everybody was worried about “What’s gonna happen with the draft? How are we gonna deal with this?” In the newspaper right around that time, I’d say in ’65 — ’64, ’65 — around that era, people were being drafted more from poor black neighborhoods, poor white neighborhoods, but poor neighborhoods, and not so much from rich neighborhoods, ’cause rich neighborhoods had lawyers that could figure ways around it. And suddenly this was hitting the newspaper every day on a regular basis. This is like “Well, they’re only drafting poor people.” And so the Draft Board just went “Well, we’re gonna prove that that’s not true, and we’re gonna wail Marin County, and we’re gonna prove —” and Burlingame, and certain places that were pretty well known for having money. So I think what happened is that the Draft Board went after Marin County with a vengeance.

0:31:15: So we had guys in the band, and what the move was at that time is if you were drafted, you had a two-year, what they call a “bid.” You know a bid is usually a jail sentence, but let’s just call it a two-year bid. But if you were drafted, you were gonna be a grunt, you were gonna be on the front line. That’s how it went. If you joined, it was a three year, but you had a better shot at getting in the band, or in the microwave technology section. Even Tim Cain went to his draft physical and they passed him right up until the last guy. The last guy says, “Let me see your medical records.” And out of a shoulder bag he drops medical records with Jonas Salk’s name on the front. And he said, “What are you doing here?” He says, “I just wanted to see how — ” He says, “You almost got drafted, man, get outta here.” And it was just a joke, but the joke almost turned on him.

0:32:14 Debra Schwartz: And he’d had polio then as a child?

0:32:17 Bill Champlin: He was the 1956 polio poster boy for the March of Dimes. I remember seeing a picture of him and Anita Ekberg [laughter] together. Why do I remember that?

0:32:29 Debra Schwartz: Well wasn’t she the girlfriend of one of the Stones?

0:32:32 Bill Champlin: I remember it ’cause like here they are, Anita Ekberg, right?

0:32:37 Debra Schwartz: She’s a very attractive woman.

0:32:39 Bill Champlin: That’s a Dick Cavett joke that pertained to Jayne Mansfield, but it still holds.

0:32:47 Debra Schwartz: So the draft has suddenly increased tensions and —

0:32:52 Bill Champlin: Well I was cool because by the time I registered for the draft I was already married and my son was already born. They drafted guys married, but they didn’t draft anybody with kids. I think my draft number was 3A, so I managed to get out of it.

0:33:10 Debra Schwartz: Wow.

0:33:12 Bill Champlin: That wasn't my lottery number, it was just 3A meant that you couldn't be drafted.

0:33:18 Debra Schwartz: Right. Oh yes, it went with the lotteries. The lower the lottery number, the greater chance —

0:33:22 Bill Champlin: If you were under number 18 or whatever — so what happened is that our drummer, Dick Rogers, I think he got in the Army band. Moitoza got into the band somehow, and I think Rob might have gone into the Navy —

0:33:37 Debra Schwartz: Yeah, I think so.

0:33:39 Bill Champlin: But I think he got in the band somehow. And who else? There was one other guy, Don Irving I think, went in. Don Irving had played with the Opposite Six, but he bailed from the Opposite Six because he got a gig playing with Beau Brummels when they had a hit. But I think on the heels of that, I think the draft might have started catching up with him. So all these guys that were in the Sons, basically — not the Sons, but in the Opposite Six, basically joined rather than getting drafted. 'Cause if you were drafted it was two years front line. You're gonna be in a foxhole rather than in an office. So those guys opted for three years, so the band pretty much broke up. So that's when we started the Sons, which we didn't even have a name for, we called ourselves the Master Beats. Isn't that charming? Nobody would hire us with that, and at the time I was already married and had a kid, so the guys were just jokingly calling me Father Champlin for a couple weeks there, and that's when we named the band. So it ended up being The Sons of Champlin. That's as close as I can get to how that all came down. The stupidest band name in the history of Rock and Roll.

0:34:45 Debra Schwartz: I disagree, I disagree.

0:34:48 Bill Champlin: Memorable, it's memorable.

0:34:49 Debra Schwartz: Yes.

0:34:50 Bill Champlin: And it did wonders for me when I got to LA because at least I had a little bit of "Oh, I've heard of him." Whereas if I was in The Boinks, who would know? It would be harder. And when I moved to LA, by the time I got here I was pretty much a full-fledged session guy. When I got to LA, I did five years with pretty much nothing but dates.

0:35:16 Debra Schwartz: So you stayed in Mill Valley for how long?

0:35:21 Bill Champlin: I stayed in Mill Valley — actually in my senior year at Tam High School I moved to San Anselmo 'cause I was living with my wife and kid. And we couldn't find a place in Mill Valley that was anything we could even come close to

affording. We found a place right on, I think what ends up Third Street, the street that just goes right from San Rafael to San Anselmo, where you're almost to San Anselmo. There was a little side road, and we were up on that street in a one-bedroom guest house for \$74 a month. You can't rent an ashtay for \$74 a month these days. You know what I mean?

0:36:00: But we just kinda lived there and I would just drive to school from there. And it was my senior year. I remember one point in my senior year, something that came down that was really weird, is my music teacher, who's a lot of people's music teacher, Bob Greenwood. He was an unbelievably great guy, sweet, but he's still hanging, man. I think he lives in Corte Madera now. He's still there. And I see him every once in a while, he's a really good guy. Actually, he and I were doing dates. We're doing casuals, and he was playing the society music and I was playing the rock and roll.

0:36:36 Debra Schwartz: Wait. Wait. I have to say this out loud. You were doing gigs with your high school music teacher?

0:36:42 Bill Champlin: Yeah. Yeah.

0:36:43 Debra Schwartz: That's nice.

0:36:44 Bill Champlin: Well, and the way it works is a lot of times there would be Ernie Heckscher or Al Troby, or there's a handful of different guys that were what they called contractors. And they would hire musicians to go play these parties and different gigs around them. They're all union, they're all musician's union dates. And sometimes the union came up with these dates, but Mr. Greenwood was a string bass player, played five-string base, and he was a great reader. For him, moonlighting was going out and playing casuals. And then a lot of times what they'd do is they'd put a regular band on doing the casuals, regular music, Frank Sinatra stuff, they'd do it for half an hour, and then they'd put a rock band on for the kids, right? So I would be in the rock band, and he would be in the straight band.

0:37:35 Debra Schwartz: So the word "casual," I don't know this word.

0:37:39 Bill Champlin: Casual is — it's a one-nighter, at like somebody's house, or at a wedding — like a wedding would be a casual. You're going to play a wedding reception. That's a casual. In other words, just a one-time gig, just one night. But I guess, I actually just call it "one-nighter," but that's what the union has called it for years. I mean, we joined the union when I was 15, I think, something like that.

0:38:01 Debra Schwartz: Uh-huh.

0:38:02 Bill Champlin: And I'm still a member, which is crazy. They haven't really done anything for me, but what the hell? So, at any rate, where was I? Oh, sure. He got really sick. Apparently, he had something at the snack table that I didn't eat, but he got real, real bad food poisoning. And I didn't even know about it. I went home from the gig, and on Saturday night, spent Sunday with Elaine and Brad, next morning I went to school

and he wasn't in the class, in the second period class. And the principal came in with this guy that I didn't even know and says, "Well, this is what's happening. Mr. Greenwood has had a really, really bad case of food poisoning. He's gonna be out for a good while, and this is gonna be your substitute teacher, but he's not a musician. Mr. Greenwood asked if it was possible for Bill to take over his classes" [laughter]

0:39:00: Just while he was sick, he just said, "Have Champlin take over all my classes." So I taught high school. It was insane. [laughter]

0:39:06 Bill Champlin: I was going, "Wow. Talk about learning how to swim by throwing you in the pool." I'm sitting there trying to read scores of all of these band scores and conduct at the same time. It was insane, but it was probably one of the best things that ever happened.

0:39:19 Debra Schwartz: And that's your senior year?

0:39:20 Bill Champlin: That was my senior year, and at the end of my senior year, they gave me a Bank of America award for doing that. I think it lasted three weeks, almost a month.

0:39:30 Debra Schwartz: Wow.

0:39:31 Bill Champlin: 'Cause he got pretty sick. He was very sick. He lost about 25 pounds. Whew! It took him a while to get back up to his normal thing. Really good guy. That's one thing about Marin at some level — and I'm not even gonna give Marin credit for it — I'm just saying Robert Greenwood really, really meant a lot to a lot of people. He taught me enough music for me to learn some music and he knew that, he's just "music's like DNA, it's just gonna come to you as time goes by." But what he did teach me is just that "You've got the makings of being a good band leader," so he taught me a lot of stuff about that, which I thought was kind of cool. And in a lot of ways my dad was the same way, my dad always said, "I had to hold down three jobs in law school so I barely got through, barely passed the bar. But all the guys that I worked with are all in the top 0.5 percent of the country."

0:40:31 Debra Schwartz: Mm-hmm.

0:40:32 Bill Champlin: He says, "I just make sure that these crazy guys all have the legal pads and pencils that they need." [laughter] "I take care of the office itself. I obviously take cases, I am a lawyer, and I know how to do it, but these guys are research lawyers." His partner, Frank Stark, was one of the brightest lawyers in the country. So, dad had that same kind of thing. He says, "You gotta kinda learn how to herd cats." You gotta herd cats 'cause this was basically is what it is, 'cause they will stampede if you don't watch 'em, you know?"

0:41:08 Debra Schwartz: Same with musicians.

0:41:08 Bill Champlin: The more talented they are, the harder it is to keep them all in line and straight ahead. And I've always worked with musicians that were really good, but that leaves me with the situation that they're all gonna be a little quirky and eccentric. And people think of me as being eccentric, and I'm actually the guy who's trying to keep everything in line and moving forward, you know?

0:41:30 Debra Schwartz: So you taught at Tam High in your senior year?

0:41:35 Bill Champlin: Yeah, for just a couple of weeks. It's three weeks maybe.

0:41:38 Debra Schwartz: And this is what year? You graduated, you said, in '66?

0:41:41 Bill Champlin: '65.

0:41:42 Debra Schwartz: '65. And so then you ended up leaving Mill Valley?

0:41:46 Bill Champlin: Well, even then when that was happening I was already in San Anselmo.

0:41:51 Debra Schwartz: I mean, you know, leaving Marin, I should say.

0:41:53 Bill Champlin: Yeah, and I stayed in Marin for the next — until my daughter was born which was like four years later. At which point, right around then, in '70 we moved to Santa Cruz for a short period of time. And then, my daughter was born in Santa Cruz and then we moved up to Russian River for a short period of time, kind of between Forestville and Guerneville, on 116. And then, later on we moved to Inverness. For a little while we were living out in Inverness and that got to be — that drive got to be more than it was worth. Then, moved into San Rafael after a while. Lived in two houses in San Rafael and then it all came down to, "I'm done. I'm outta here." We just, we realized The Sons were kinda stuck in what I used to call the Jekyll and Hyde circuit. We were playing bars and you know you got to keep playing strong R&B to keep them dancing, to keep them thirsty, to keep them drinking, and then you get the gig back. But, you find yourself stuck in what we call the Jekyll and Hyde circuit. The Sons had great music, really, really different music, most of which we weren't even playing anymore. We were just playing dance music just to keep — you know, we were kind of over R&Bing it — just to keep working. We'd had records and we'd done all that. It all just seems like a flash now, it was always just too big a band to get on the road and be able to afford to be on the road.

0:43:30 Debra Schwartz: Well, how many people were in the band? Talk a little bit about your band.

0:43:35 Bill Champlin: Yeah, we seven, sometimes eight guys. So, moving eight guys from point A to point B when you're going to be second lining somebody and then the second-liners were starting to get less and less and less money, because they were becoming less and less and less important. What I kind of liked about the San Francisco scene is that at one point there, they were all light shows and everything, and the band,

and the audience, were all part of the same thing. Suddenly, I think, probably the English group said, “Hey enough of this light show bullshit, we want spotlights on us so that we can do our thing.” Suddenly the light show started to go away, and then it was all of a sudden back to the fishbowl thing, where the audience is looking at you and you’re performing for the audience. And it’s suddenly acting and not music.

0:44:20 Debra Schwartz: Yeah, right. I remember those beautiful light shows. Did you know Bill Graham back then?

0:44:25 Bill Champlin: We worked for Bill all the time. Skippy, we called him Skippy.

0:44:32 Debra Schwartz: Skippy?

0:44:34 Bill Champlin: Skippy. He didn’t like that. [laughter]

0:44:36 Debra Schwartz: Why?

0:44:37 Bill Champlin: He kind of prided himself on having a little bit of a gruff approach and a reputation for being, that guy. Skippy’s not the name of that guy. [laughter]

0:44:51 Debra Schwartz: So, an oxymoron name, no?

0:44:53 Bill Champlin: We called him Skippy just for kicks. I remember one time we were at the Winterland, and Bill thought of himself as being a really great ping-pong player. But he hadn’t come near Geoff Palmer at some point. Geoff Palmer, whatever he does turns to gold. Our keyboard player. Keyboards, and vibes, and tablas, and bass, and drums, and you name it. This guy is one of the most amazing musicians on the Earth. Geoff was in the USO [United Service Organizations]. He did the USO shows when he was in the service. So that means that they were hanging out playing ping-pong all day long in the Orient. So he learned how to hold a paddle like this guy.

0:45:36 Debra Schwartz: Hanging down.

0:45:37 Bill Champlin: At one point we said, “Hey Bill, how about you and Geoff go on three, you know, best two out of three, double or nothing on how much you’re gonna pay us.” At some point in the game we were all standing around and he realized he was being hustled, he says, “No I’m not gonna do that. I know what’s going on here, but I’d like to play him.” And it was, you know, Palmer just skunked him 7-0, 7-0, 7-0, just right off the bat. It would have cost him a little bit of money, and he never really paid us very much anyway, so it wouldn’t have made that much of a difference.

0:46:09 Debra Schwartz: So, did it, was it —

0:46:10 Bill Champlin: That’s just Graham. I actually liked Bill. I got along with him

pretty good, in a weird sort of a way.

0:46:14 Debra Schwartz: Yeah, and Charlie Kelly was your roadie, right?

0:46:19 Bill Champlin: Charlie was our roadie for, really a long time. We always considered Charlie the heart and soul of The Sons, you know.

0:46:27 Debra Schwartz: Really?

0:46:28 Bill Champlin: We had one one-time where something went wrong. I needed some water or something, and I said like that, and Charlie ran over with a glass of water, or for something, to find out what was wrong, and kicked out the power cord of every amplifier we were playing through on his way over. He just got caught up and ran, and Bill Graham saw it and he went and he plugged everything up, threw Charlie out of the gig. And Bill did the equipment for us for the rest of the night. I mean, Bill, one time he was standing behind our band and we were playing, I think in Winterland, and he said, “I just don’t get it. Look at these guys. This is the best band on the Earth. These guys are unbelievable. They write great songs. Champlin sings his ass off. They look like they hitchhiked to the gig.” So I immediately got a camera man and a rent-a-tux, and I had my guitar, and I got them to take a picture of me hitch hiking with a tux on.

0:47:25: That’s one picture. The next picture was me with the tux on getting into the back of a pickup truck filled with horse shit, or just dried up cow splot, getting into the thing. The next picture is me getting out of it with my guitar, getting out of that thing in front of the Fillmore. Next shot. And this is all with a tuxedo on, a rented tuxedo. Then the next shot was me on the stage with just whatever, jeans and a t-shirt, all I could find, you know. And I sent it to Bill and I never got a thank-you note or anything. In other words, yeah, I heard you said we looked like we hitchhiked to the gig, well we did.

0:48:08 Debra Schwartz: Did you? But I loved that you said that Charlie Kelly was the heart and the soul of the Sons of Champlin.

0:48:13 Bill Champlin: Charlie was and is the best friend we’ve ever had. He’s just the sweetest guy. You look at him and you go, “Well, this guy’s just a roadie and this, that and the other thing.” This guy is packing some gray matter. I mean, Charlie is anything but — what is the word for it? There’s nothing about him that’s pedestrian. He is a smart, smart, smart person. Great writer. When he was writing his book, the one that he just put out —

0:48:42 Debra Schwartz: *Fat Tire Flyer?*

0:48:43 Bill Champlin: Yeah. He wrote a couple of chapters and sent it in. They said, “Well, you know, send us something, and we’ll get you with a ghost writer. We’ll get you with a co-writer who can actually write this stuff.” And they called him back and said, “You don’t need one. You’re writing fine.” I mean, both him and his brother Jim are very good at English. They really know what they’re doing. He’s the greatest. He’s just, in so

many ways, one of the most selfless people I've ever met. And it's just that I love him to death, always have.

0:49:15 Debra Schwartz: That's very nice to hear. It does seem that your time in Mill Valley helped to establish lifelong friendships.

0:49:22 Bill Champlin: Yeah. I think everybody has a certain age when you share certain things with certain people. My family situation wasn't that happy. My mom was an alcoholic and would slip in and slip out pretty regularly, as was her husband, I think. She had been clean for a long time when she got married to him. She started drinking again. It was like, "Well, that looked like a smart move."

0:49:50: So, I kind of stayed off of it, and so I kind of traded in my family for my band. You know what I mean? Terry Haggerty and I are joined at the hip and have been for hundreds of years. We don't play together very often. Sometimes, we do. But we almost don't even need — we don't even need to say hi. He's just a really, really close friend. Tim Cain is another guy. He's just this close friend. I went through high school with this guy. I've known Tim even longer than I've known Terry. And hey, Tim still plays with the Sons. We still play gigs.

0:50:33 Debra Schwartz: Yeah. Let's talk about your band.

0:50:35 Bill Champlin: Tim Cain, I mean, that tone on his saxophone is still as awesomely big and fat as it ever was. Great, great player. I mean, there's plenty of guys that'll play jazz circles around him. He's not a jazz player, by any means, but he's always melodic and he always says something, and he always takes you on a trip on his solos. It's a gas to play with him again. We didn't play together for 36 years. And then, I went — I did a solo gig at the Throckmorton in Mill Valley. I was just by myself, playing piano, and Tim, banging a couple of songs.

0:51:12 Debra Schwartz: This was Lucy Mercer's place at the new theater?

0:51:14 Bill Champlin: Yeah.

0:51:14 Bill Champlin: And when was this?

0:51:16 Debra Schwartz: This was, I wanna say, maybe five, six years ago, and I just did it. I don't think it was sold out, but we did pretty decent business. I just said, I said, "Hey, Tim, you wanna just bring your sax and play on a couple of songs, and I'll just play the piano? Gimme a song for you to sing." We played one or two of the Sons' songs and we played, and we had such a ball. Just the two of us playing together. I just said to him, "Dude, you wanna play in the Sons?"

0:51:45: 'Cause right then, I think the sax player that we had was getting — it was Johnny Beaumont. Johnny was playing with Huey's band, and I wanted somebody that wasn't playing with Huey 'cause Huey — it seemed like every time the Sons get a gig,

Huey goes out, and we'd lose Johnny and we'd have to get somebody else. So I figured, "Hey, Tim, a lot of this music is his arrangements, anyway, to start with. So, perfect guy to play." And he said, "Yeah, let's do it." So, he's been in the band for, I don't know, three years, four years.

0:52:14 Debra Schwartz: And so, Sons of Champlin is alive and well?

0:52:17 Bill Champlin: Absolutely. Smokin'.

0:52:19 Debra Schwartz: Smokin'.

0:52:20 Bill Champlin: We just lost our drummer last year, a little over a year ago, to melanoma, Preston. He'd been with the band from '72 to 2014? I think 2014. So we got Alan Hertz. The place where we were rehearsing was in Charlie's practice hall up in San Rafael, and two doors down there's this drummer that we'd known off and on. He's a great engineer and producer, also, and asked Alan if he wanted to play. And Alan said, "Yeah. I'm in."

0:52:58 Bill Champlin: So we replaced Jimmy pretty quick. Not quite the same as with Jimmy. Jimmy had a certain groove that was way cool, but every musician brings a different thing to the band. That's just the way it goes. Just to put that whole part of the conversation, it's just kind of a cool thing to be connected to these guys still, having gone through this really early age and here we are, on the other side of the coin. They have 17-pound Hammond organs now [chuckle] compared to these big — although I like the big one, to tell you the truth. Just I don't need any more hernias, thank you very much. [chuckle]

0:53:41 Debra Schwartz: [laughter] Well, that's what the roadie guys are supposed to do.

0:53:43 Bill Champlin: Put those things up now. [chuckle]

0:53:45 Debra Schwartz: Yeah. So, would you have thought of your experience here in Mill Valley as a small town experience, even though you're so close to San Francisco? How would you describe the general ambience of your time here in Mill Valley?

0:54:00 Bill Champlin: Well, in Mill Valley the ambience was just trying to get through high school, really. That's really what was most important at the time. But during that time, I started to become aware of bands — and this is long before Bill Graham had the Fillmore — just that the early rock and roll thing — and then we were listening to some R&B, so we were kinda getting into that kind of stuff too. It was a great time for me to be involved in music, for sure, and Mill Valley is one of those — I mean, as much as I've had problems with my mother and so on, she was very much supportive of my wanting to be a musician, which is really important. That's huge, very huge. So as crazy as she might've been, this was a good thing. It was a good thing 'cause she was — then at some point in the game [chuckle] all of a sudden she's taking credit for everything I was

doing.

0:55:01 Debra Schwartz: Really?

0:55:02 Bill Champlin: I get on the phone with her, I say, “Mom, I gotta go. I got a gig. I’m singing on an Elton John record.” “Well, can you put it off for a little while? I just wanna talk to you some more.” It’s like, “Let me call you back.” [chuckle] You don’t show up late for these kind of dates. Are you following me? [chuckle] And then after that, I got Donna Summer and after that I got Boz Scaggs or whatever. Somebody handed me a discographies — I did 719 songs on radio that got on records.

0:55:34 Debra Schwartz: Really?

0:55:35 Bill Champlin: Yeah. I fell into the Los Angeles studio scene when it was just slamming. It was the renaissance. Toto was just starting to happen. Steely Dan was just starting to break really loose. Oh man, Earth Wind & Fire were kicking. I mean, stuff was going on. Suddenly, LA was really kind of the place to be. The guys that were playing on the records, mostly guys of Toto, Jeff Porcaro and all those other guys. Suddenly I’m on these records with these guys, David Foster. David Foster and I wrote songs together and he produced my first two solo albums, one of which, we took a song, threw it off our album and gave it to Earth, Wind & Fire, and it was the biggest record they’ve ever had.

0:56:20 Debra Schwartz: Which song was that?

0:56:21 Bill Champlin: “After the Love Has Gone.”

0:56:23 Debra Schwartz: Say it one more time, you cut out.

0:56:25 Bill Champlin: “After the Love Has Gone.”

0:56:26 Debra Schwartz: “After the Love Has Gone.” How’s that song go?

0:56:28 Bill Champlin: “After the love has gone. Da, da, da, da, da, da.” There’s a part in the middle of “Something happened along the way.” Remember that?

0:56:37 Debra Schwartz: “Da, da, da, da, da, dat” Right, Oh! I love that song.
[chuckle]

0:56:42 Bill Champlin: I wrote that, me and two other guys, and then the next thing you know, I’m writing with Jay Graydon and Steve Lukather, who’s the guitar player of Toto. Next thing you know we’ve got a hit with George Benson and that’s a —

0:56:54 Debra Schwartz: Which one was that?

0:56:55 Bill Champlin: “Turn Your Love Around.”

0:56:57 Debra Schwartz: How's that go?

0:56:58 Bill Champlin: [sings] "Turn your love around." That was all. That was George. I did all the background vocals on that and co-wrote the song. So, we had two R&B song writing Grammys of the year within two years of each other.

0:57:15 Debra Schwartz: It's not bragging if it's true. Why don't you give me a little list of some of the awards you've received.

0:57:21 Bill Champlin: Well, the Milley. I got a Milley, that's the one I'm really proud of. I got a Milley award. From the City of Mill Valley. I got an MVP for background vocals from NARAS [National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences]. And I got the two R&B songs of the year.

0:57:37 Debra Schwartz: For which songs?

0:57:39 Bill Champlin: 1981.

0:57:40 Debra Schwartz: And, so what was the songs that they were honoring?

0:57:44 Bill Champlin: Well, those were "Turn Your Love Around" and "After the Love Has Gone." And then I had another handful of hits. "Is It You?" by Lee Ritenour. I wrote some stuff for Johnny Mathis and Dionne Warwick and a lot of different stuff. I fell into a really great period of time in LA where it just happened. I got really lucky. I moved to Nashville and nothing happened like that. I told my kid, I says, "Man, Nashville's real clique-y." He says, "Hey, so's LA." I said, "No, no it isn't." He says, "Dad, you were in the clique, so it didn't feel clique-y to you."

0:58:16 Debra Schwartz: [chuckle] Is that why you moved to LA with your family? To be in the music scene?

0:58:21 Bill Champlin: Oh yeah. I mean I wasn't making any money with The Sons. When I was saying before, we were in the Jekyll and Hyde circuit, we were just playing club dates, and we'd just seem to not — we had had numerous records, very few of them flew, and we were just — the rent's going up, income's going down. And then some point of the game I started becoming friends with, actually, David Foster, who's a giant producer at this point of the game. But right when he was just doing dates playing piano on these dates, we became really, really good friends. Actually, he was hired as a string arranger for a Sons album, "A Circle Filled with Love" album.

0:59:03: We just became instant friends, and we were just starting to work together. So, he started his career as a producer and started hiring me regularly as a background singer. He'll come in and help arrange and put down background vocals for all kinds of people. And then as his career went up, so did mine. He brought me in as a ringer for the Tubes' big album, and you know those kind of things were, they were just really, really lucky for me to find. Like I say, I fell in the middle of the renaissance in Los Angeles, and San

San Francisco has always had one band at a time really hot. Huey was there for a while, Metallica was there for a while, Green Day seems to be hanging on pretty well. Creedence Clearwater, there's always one band at any given time that's kicking out of San Francisco. Out of LA, five or six were kicking so it was the place to be.

1:00:01 Debra Schwartz: How many albums did Sons of Champlin make?

1:00:04 Bill Champlin: We did seven regular ones. Somebody made one called "Minus Seeds and Stems," which was just like a home-recording thing, so that's eight. And then later on we made, one, two, two more, so eight or nine, 10 maybe.

1:00:27 Debra Schwartz: That's a lot of work.

1:00:29 Bill Champlin: It is. It is a lot of work. Somebody in England has just now, just lately, in the last year, they took the first three commercial Sons albums, and remastered 'em, put 'em on a two-disc, actually on a one-disc reissue. And then they just finished doing the next four, which were all the big-label things. The first three were Capitol Records, the next was CBS/Sony, and the next three after that were Ariola Records, which was actually a splinter of Capitol. So those have all been remastered and they're kickin'. They sound great, they really made 'em sound better. So, nice to see that. There's always that kind of thing of where the retro keeps coming back. It's like, "Hey, we kinda like this. We're kinda like last generation's bell-bottoms. We're gonna — somebody's gonna buy us for a minute." [chuckle] Never throw them away, they're gonna come back.

1:01:29 Debra Schwartz: Yes, that's for sure. Bell-bottoms are still looking good, but not as good as they looked in the '70s though.

1:01:35 Bill Champlin: Yeah, I hear you.

1:01:36 Debra Schwartz: Yeah. So, regarding your musical career, you're still going. You gonna continue to keep on rocking? Is that the general plan?

1:01:49 Bill Champlin: I'm not as young as I used to be, but I definitely like to play. We've got two or three gigs coming up. One of them is gonna be at Rancho Nicasio, big afternoon barbecue. Last one we did was insane. It was really fun, had a ball. And that's gonna be on Labor Day. So we still play. We still connect to that neck of the woods. This last May we did three gigs. We played at Yoshi's in Oakland, which is a really nice venue. And then we played a place in — the Sierra Nevada Brewing Company up in Chico. Then a couple weeks later we played a big building in Folsom. So it's kinda picking up again for some odd reason, and I'm not gonna ask why. And while it's going, we're gonna take the gigs. Usually we do five, six Sons gigs a year, and if we can get it up to 10 that'll be a great year.

1:02:48 Debra Schwartz: So there's gonna be people of all ages that are gonna be listening to this interview. Some of them are gonna know you from back in the day, and

some of them are gonna be the children, or the grandchildren even, of the people that you grew up with. And you've had a full experience in your career, and as a teacher —

1:03:08 Bill Champlin: Tamara's and my son Will was just three seasons ago on The Voice, the TV show The Voice, he got up to the finals. He [unintelligible] on The Voice, to the point where they gave him a car, which was nice, which he gave to his wife which was not smart. [laughter] He should have sold his car and just taken the car they gave him and would have been one less monthly payment, but he didn't think about it at the time. So people probably know him. He made a lot of noise on that show. He wasn't part of the plan. He was the spoiler. And he's a Berklee grad, not Berkeley, California; the Berklee School of Music in Boston. He's got way more education than I do. He's got a BA in Music. His is a Bachelor of Arts, mines a Bad Attitude, pretty much. [laughter] It could be Bare Ass, but we're not gonna go there.

1:04:10 Debra Schwartz: But when you look back at the expanse of your career so far — there's more to come — and you think about the various waves that an individual can catch or miss, in the scope of one's career, any words of advice to anybody entering into music or in any way that you can think of, life advice for others?

1:04:36 Bill Champlin: Well I think what it comes down to is, first of all, "creative" is, I think, the key word to anything. In Los Angeles I fell into the middle of a renaissance and it just carried me. I didn't have to do anything other than just do what I do, go into the studio, arrange vocals, knock 'em off, go to the next studio, do the same thing, and while I'm at it, "Hey, I just wrote a song, what do you think?" "Wow it's great, I'm gonna have this artist cut it." It was that easy, it's no longer that easy. Now, you'd have to find a new model. In those days, you'd drive down the street and there's Tower Records, you'd drive down the street further, there's Warehouse Records. There's no place to buy product anymore.

1:05:20: The music business is doing well, it's kicking, but there's usually — it used to be that there would be the big hit band or artist that they have on the label, and they'd be working the next 10 people to be the bench, basically, so when that person kinda starts to slide, we're gonna have somebody else up there. The way the entertainment field is working now, that person's not gonna slide, so there's no reason for the other 10. So when there's a signing, there's one signing, there's not 20, there's not 10. So, getting signed and doing that is very hard to do these days.

1:06:01: They're not even really signing so much, the artist, as they're signing the manager of the artist. There's what, maybe five real managers left in the whole country, in the whole world for that matter. If you look at the top 10, you'll realize that five of those people are managed by the same guy, and another five is managed by another guy. It all ends up being in that little strata, so it's a way harder nut to crack than it was when I was starting. Also, with me, even when things started to slow down with me as a writer, along came the gig with Chicago. They called me. The drummer called me and says, "Hey man, we'd love to have you as a member of the band." I said, "Man" — and I knew they had sidemen, guys who were just hired guys. I said, "I don't do sideman gigs, man,

it's not happening." He said, "No, no, we want you as a full member of the band."

1:06:56: So I was a full member of Chicago for 28 years. That's one of those bands that just seems to be bulletproof. It just stays, basically because of that management. They have great, strong management. When they have an off year, that management can still keep them at a certain level, never below any certain level. It's kinda cool. I mean, I'm glad I'm out of it. I'm way glad that I'm out of it, but it was kinda interesting to see things from the inside of that thing. And all of this stemmed from this same period of time that I refer to as renaissance, where, for some reason, I didn't make things happen, they just happened. I think now you gotta make them happen. That's what I think kids that are starting, they got to understand. Some of them do. There's a group out of Sweden called Dirty Loops that they started taking — they're very, very good musicians. Their piano player, he sings like Stevie Wonder, plays like Herbie Hancock. He's an amazing musician, and very, very jazz oriented, can be jazz oriented.

1:08:04: They took covers, they rearranged covers of Britney Spears and Justin Bieber songs and record them, and really produce them well, and then put them on YouTube. They ended up getting two or three million hits on YouTube on this stuff. It's really made things happen. Then they signed with a label. I think they've almost gone away the minute they signed with a label. They were doing better just on the YouTube thing. They actually signed with David Foster, who's gone from being a really great piano player and arranger to the head of Verve Records. They made him the president of a record company. Some point in the game they just flip you from the recording room to the booth and then to the office. I mean, there's certain guys that are not necessarily working in the studio all that much anymore like Jimmy Iovine and different people like that. They're such giant businessmen that they don't even need to anymore.

1:09:07 Debra Schwartz: But don't they want to?

1:09:08 Bill Champlin: In David's case, I think he wants to. He's just one of the best musicians I've ever met, one of the most creative human beings on the Earth. Plus, he plays so well, he's just ridiculous. I learned a lot from — I worked with David regularly for four or five years. I learned a whole lot from him, just about music and how to produce records and how to pick out a section of a song and go, "That needs something. What can we do?" Knowing what is one thing, knowing where is another. Where is really the important — that's the important thing. This part of the song needs something. Then you can start fooling around until you find something. Now, I'm just getting into the nuts and bolts of producing records, which is something you kind of got to know how to do if you're gonna do it. But I think now, it's getting back to where the better gear you have, the better it sounds, and you know — it just goes on, and on, and on. I could go on forever and it doesn't really mean anything. There's always a luck factor involved.

1:10:30: Moving to Mill Valley was a lucky thing for me 'cause there was so much music there, and I just caught up with it. I got caught up in that little, forward motion. And then moving to LA, I got caught up in that forward motion. I've just been lucky enough to fall into it. I go to Sweden and I've looked out there, playing songs that most

people don't know about, and I look out in the audience, and it's packed. I don't know. How'd that happen? Japan, I've done well in Japan. For young kids that are trying to do it, just try to find where your strength is and parlay it as much as you can. I'm watching Will go through all kinds of stuff, even though he had the really — I mean, he was on television two nights a week on probably the top-rated show for that time slot, for what, eight weeks? Maybe six weeks? Six to eight weeks? People knew him, they knew Will all around the world. If anybody ever gets that kind of stuff, parlay it better than Will did. Then, at some point in the game, because you were on one of those shows, then you gotta live it down. There'll be a backlash, "Oh. You were on The Voice. Forget it. I know what you sound like." Well, they don't. They have no idea what he sounds like.

1:12:00 Debra Schwartz: I'm gonna close with a couple of questions, okay?

1:12:03 Bill Champlin: Yeah.

1:12:05 Debra Schwartz: Normally I close with one question, but in this particular interview, I don't know why, I feel like asking one more after. Okay?

1:12:18 Bill Champlin: Okay.

1:12:18 Debra Schwartz: So the normal closing question which isn't this time is: Is there something in this interview that we haven't talked about that you wish we had, or something that you would like to express that you haven't so far?

1:12:35 Bill Champlin: I may have rambled a little bit away from Mill Valley and what Mill Valley's about, and as an English major, you wanna stay a little closer to the subject, but I ramble a lot. That's just kinda who I am. One thing leads to another and maybe that's why my music's always been that way. [chuckle] "Okay, we're gonna go here now." No, I think you got enough of a vibe of who I am and what I'm about, I think, for anybody to go, "This guy. Yeah, I know this guy."

1:13:04 Debra Schwartz: Okay. Then we pretty much captured what you'd like. Now I'm gonna ask you something a little different. In a life, in a day, in a career, sometimes there's a moment, just one moment, that stands apart from the rest, and who knows what that moment is? But there's something that happens that just matters to an individual. In your career, at any time in your life, or with your music or whatever, is there just for whatever reason a moment that really sits apart from the others?

1:13:43 Bill Champlin: I've told people this. There's three things that happened to me in a career move. One is that we were playing a gig with Yardbirds, B.B. King, and the Sons, and B.B. was supposed to use our Hammond organ with his organ player who had brought a set of base pedals. The organ broke right on the end of our set, and B.B. needed a bass player. And our bass player went to grab his bass. It was an Ampeg fretless bass, and I went over to him. I said, "Al, have you ever heard of B.B. King?" He said, "No." I said, "Can you name me one of his songs?" He said, "No." I said, "Gimme that." So I went and played a gig with B.B. King when I was 21, 22, something like that. That was a

big moment in my life.

1:14:32: And then I've got two songwriting Grammys. Those were big moments in my life. But in terms of really just personally in what I do, and what I'm trying to say, and what I'm all about, I was writing a song. A friend of mine handed me a tape with some music on it that him and his wife had put together. It was a guy named Bruce Gaitsch. And I was handed a song and I was just writing. I was out in the studio. I was doing an album so I was in that mode where I was just writing regularly all the time. Usually with an album, I'll start with three songs, get the album going. Then I'll write the rest while I'm doing it, and everything just leads to more of itself, and I get a groove going. And there was a song. It was a shuffle. It was a really cool song. Not the Moitoza shuffle but a regular shuffle. And it was a really cool song, and then all of a sudden, I started to introspect on the lyrics on it, and at some point in the game I just wrote a lyric for the chorus called, "He started to sing of love just to find it."

1:15:34: And Tamara came out to the studio, and I said, "Tam, let me play this for you." And I had a little cassette machine. I wasn't even using the big speakers and the board. And I said, "What do you think of this?" So I sang the verse and then I got to the chorus. I looked up, she was crying. She said, "You just told the story of every single singer ever." And it just sort of came out. "He started to sing of love just to find it." And she said, "My God!" And I think in some ways that may have been the apex at some level. I said it all. I've written pretty deep songs over my career but that one just seemed to hit, just that one line really hit really well. I think maybe that may be, at least in terms of creativity and being able to put into a small amount of words — which is a songwriter's thing, a small amount of words — the largest thought that you can have, the biggest, and the most of what you are.

1:16:39 Champlin: And that one seemed to nail it. So I don't know, whatever that means, to me that was a great moment. And I didn't even know it at the time. It took my wife to go, "What, are you nuts? Listen to that." [chuckle] "Oh yeah, you're right." One of those. So usually I'm so caught up in forward motion that it's hard to notice anything other than what I wanna do tomorrow. It's like my son, when he writes a song. There's songs that he wrote when he was in Nashville, 10 years ago, that are such great songs, but he didn't write them this morning and the only song in his mind that means anything to him is whatever he wrote this morning. I heard a guy one time say that, "What are the three best songs in the world?" He said, "Amazing Grace, Bridge Over Troubled Waters, and the song I wrote this morning. [chuckle] Those are the three best songs in the world." [chuckle] So I guess that's it. I'm always in that group of three though, if writing this morning.

1:17:47 Debra Schwartz: Bill, perfect ending. Thank you so much for your time. I really, really appreciate it, and for your stories.

1:17:54 Bill Champlin: It's great, but go move the car. It's time for the Moitoza shuffle.

1:17:58 Debra Schwartz: [laughter] People listening don't know what the Moitoza shuffle¹ is, but I'll write a little bit about it, when I have some information I include in your interview.

¹ Interviewer Debra Schwartz's Mill Valley home was previously owned by the Moitoza family. Before going on to musical careers of their own, Rob Moitoza and Bill Champlin played together in the high school band the Opposite Six. Early band practices were held at the Moitoza home for a number of reasons, one being that several cars could park there. The Moitoza shuffle is what the family and visitors used to call it when cars had to be rearranged so that people could get in and out.