

COVER SHEET

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Transcriber: Amanda Fickey, PhD, Independent Contractor

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Interviewee: Steve Rigsby

Interviewer: Thomas Albert

Cinematographer: Sean Anderson

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Transcription Notes:

TA: Thomas Albert

ST: Steve Rigsby

SA: Sean Anderson

In some cases, words such as "um", "uh", "and", "so" and "yeah" have been excluded.

Time notations have been included at approximately 2-minute intervals.

... Indicates pause, delay in conversation, or, weak transition/no transition in themes.

The following names of musical genres have been capitalized: Bluegrass and Heavy Metal.

Attempts were made to verify the names of all musicians and geographical locations referenced throughout this interview.

0:00

TA: Well, would you like to start by telling us where you grew up?

SR: Well, I was born here in Rowan County. I grew up about a mile and a half from here. Morgan Fork.

TA: Yeah.

SR: On the old road over there. I think they've changed it quite a bit. Right there.

TA: And, clearly, you are heavily, musically influenced, and I've heard you say you were a music major at Morehead State.

SR: Yes sir. I started, not knowing exactly where I was going. I majored in undecided for a year, like a lot of students do, but I was going with the idea that I would probably be a music major so... Yeah, I was a trumpet player. I started that when I was in the fourth grade. I probably have done that longer than I've done anything else.

TA: Did you have family members who influenced you to play something?

SR: No, not per se. My father wasn't really what I would call a musician. He played harmonica really well, and he did play bugle in the army, so I guess that was my, you know, the thing that steered me toward the trumpet.

TA: Yeah.

SR: But it, it was like, after teaching instrumental music for twenty-seven years you see these kids go through this decision process you know, just like I did when I was younger, well that's only got three buttons on it, it must be easy to do. That probably had something to do with it.

2:08

TA: So after you got your degree in music you taught.

SR: I taught here. Well, I taught in Floyd County for a year. Then I came back here and spent twenty-six years in the Rowan County system. That was a lifetime ago. I retired in '98. And, you know, this has kind of been going on, you know, they overlap a bit, but I wasn't just going to hang around and wait to die. I needed something to do. This became real, my job now.

TA: Yeah, I heard you say that you really got involved with this after retirement, and also that you and your father was working on model airplanes. Did that trigger your interest in instrument making and repair?

SR: Well, it goes back farther than that actually. My grandfather was a blacksmith, machinist; fix anything you brought him kind of a guy. And my father was an automobile mechanic for all of his life. I mean, it's just genetically encoded to make things and to work on things with me. Starting to work on instruments... The first guitar that I ever had my uncle gave it to me and I worked on it about a week and played it ten minutes and then I'd have to work on it another week, and that was kind of out of

necessity back there, but I kind of got my interest along those lines. And then, when I was in college, they had an instrument repair class.

TA: Ah, neat.

SR: I don't think they do that at all anymore. I think that's kind of been phased out.

TA: And that was here at Morehead?

SR: That was here at Morehead. And they emphasized minor repair sorts of things on almost any instrument that a perspective band director or orchestra director would come in contact with.

TA: Yeah.

SR: String group and brass and woodwinds, and to do some minor things like that, and I really found out that I was pretty good at that. And, one of my best friends that I was in school with, he's done that for a living ever since. It kind of got him started too. He never taught the first day, but he's had a repair shop ever since and is still at it. But yeah, your influences come from, a lot of mine anyway, from real practical, from the practical side of it. I didn't just wake up one day and say oh, I think I want to be a luthier.

5:29

TA: Now, would you consider yourself more a luthier, or instrument builder or repairman?

SR: Yes. It's two completely different skillsets.

TA: Uh-huh

SR: A lot of people don't realize that, but it's, in my estimation, it's a lot easier to take a new piece of wood and make something than it is to have to re-make something that used to be an instrument and use the pieces. We were talking about Bill Monroe's old mandolin the other day. Now that's an amazing feat that went on with the restoration and that's one of the things that I've really gotten involved in. As I developed the skills to do it with restoring older instruments... There's a lot of somebody in the old guitar over there. You can tell that it's been played to death. The frets are pretty much gone on it. It's got the finish worn in all the right places. It's just been played. When somebody is passionate about the music that they're playing I think part of that goes into the instrument itself. It learns how to be an instrument from being an instrument, and I like to give them another chance to keep that going. That one is pretty much unplayable the way it is now, but it will live.

7:21

TA: Yeah that's pretty interesting work, being able to preserve an instrument.

SR: Yeah, we'll drop the neck out of that one and reset the angle on it and make it playable again. Make it just like new.

TA: I think when I first heard of you, you were working as the repairman for Chris' Guitar Shop.

SR: I did that, I actually was in residence one day a week there, but I also did anything that came in during the week. I still do several different stores. Actually, I had my own shop in a store in Lexington now; I had for several years. I do the local guitar shops here too. I work with a group of gentlemen from Winchester, KY, RS Guitarworks. They do some pretty incredible things too. They've built up a rather noteworthy clientele over the years, and I get to work on some pretty cool stuff from them. It's kind of cool to see something you've worked on when you are watching the MTV awards show and you're like, hey, I made those knobs. That was kind of a cool experience. And you see stuff that you've worked-on on the cover of magazines, in videos... That's probably more fun than working on the day-to-day guitar, but I'm not sure that it's anymore useful.

9:19

TA: Now to do work like that through a guitar shop, do you have to be certified by certain brands?

SR: Yeah, it depends on whether or not you are going to do warranty repair work. I am an authorized Martin repair center. It's not a terribly cumbersome process. We do interviews and some written evaluation of something... If this were wrong with this guitar how would you fix it? And then, when you do a repair or two for them they will actually... The first couple of guitars that I fixed, one of them was yours, they will call you and say, "How did it go?" So they check-up behind you. I've been with Martin for probably ten years or so, something like that now. So that's pretty cool. I get referred; they refer people to me from this area as a repair center, so that's kind of nice. Free advertising.

TA: Do you usually go somewhere to pick-up these instruments, or do people come out here?

SR: They usually bring them to me, or they can drop them off at any of the shops that I work for, but if it's a warranty issue they usually bring them to me. Usually. I fix it, Martin signs off on it, and I send it to them and they write me a check. They're a really good company to work for. Same thing with Fender and Gibson. I don't do quite as much warranty service for them as I do for Martin.

TA: Now you said it's not too difficult of a process to get certified. How do you go about applying?

SR: Well, I suppose originally it was through a dealer to put you in contact, but they've changed their, they've changed the business model quite a bit in the last few years so I'm not really sure how it would evolve now, but at the time we would have a dealer who is selling our product and we need to service that product and then, oh that would be me and then we started talking. Since that dealer is no longer a dealer that's no longer an issue because I, it was me that was certified and not the dealer. That worked out quite well.

TA: Well, would you want to talk about some of the tools that you use in your shop? I know when I've been to other shops I often will see a lot of hand tools and some people have the big electronic CNC machines. I noticed you've also shown me some homemade tools.

SR: Yeah, I'm kind of... If I were in a production mode, if I were building more guitars than repairing guitars, I would probably have a little more technologically centered tools. Coming from the time I came from, we were almost encouraged not to build things with our hands. You go to school and you get a good job you don't have to go out and work in a factory, you don't have to go out and be an automobile mechanic or whatever. You can have a desk job, and I think that's probably why some of our economic

issues have come up in the last few years. It was just an idea that well, we can get somebody else to do it quicker, easier, but with musical instruments, if you've got an instrument that was made by a machine, they can be very precise, and that's part of the problem because every one of them is exactly alike, just like the last one, just like the next one, just like the one two weeks from now, but the problem is they're made out of wood and god doesn't make wood just alike. It's all different, and you have to use your senses to tell how stiff is this piece of wood? What's its sound like? What is it going to need different than the last one that worked right? That's kind of why you need to, you know, you can make an instrument on a machine that looks gorgeous and it may be a wonderful instrument, and then again it may not. It doesn't have the soul of an instrument that was built by hand. Somebody put part of themselves into that instrument. It's like we used to put lots of our craftsmanship into everything that we did in this country and we don't do that anymore and it's not working to good now. We'll fix it though...

Tools. [Holds up hands] These are the most important ones. I don't have anything really, really fancy. I've got tools to turn lumber into guitar parts. Saws and sanders and things like that, but as far as CNCs and laser cutters and that sort of thing, no. I leave that; I'll let somebody else do that part.

15:54

TA: Yeah. I kind of got the impression that someone who uses a CNC machine, or a lot of technology like that, hasn't developed the skills that...

SR: Well I'm sure that, there are skills used that I don't know anything about. I don't know how to program a CNC machine.

TA: Yeah.

SR: It's just a different skillset. I think mine would probably work better for a musical instrument simply because of the variances in the material that you are making it out of.

TA: Yeah, well speaking of material, I know you said you mainly do a lot of repair work, but you've also built quite a few instruments.

SR: Yeah, probably two-dozen over the years.

TA: Are there any types of wood that you prefer to work with?

SR: Well, it depends on what I'm making. If I'm making an electric guitars... I don't build instruments to sit on the wall and say, "Come buy my instruments," because I don't really want to compete with the major manufacturers. If Thomas Albert needs a guitar that he can't find anywhere, or he wants something different that he can find, I'll make it for you. I do pretty much strictly custom work. I've built people some pretty bizarre instruments, things that there would be no... like an F style left-handed mandolin shaped electric base. I built one of those for a guy a couple of years ago... well, more than a couple of years ago now, but yeah, where are you going to find one of those? If I'm building, it's kind of what do you want wood wise. If it's an electric instrument, yes it is important what kind of wood it is, but I know what characteristics each of one them has and what you want it to do. You can use Ash, Alder, actually native Poplar is a really good tone wood for an electric instrument. We've got some of the most beautiful figured woods in this part of the world that I've ever seen. The Curly Maples and the

Spotted Maples and things like that, and woods that you don't really think about being exotic but depending on the way they are being treated like the quarter-sawed Sycamore, that stuff is gorgeous and it makes a fairly decent tone wood.

For acoustic guitars, the top wood is Spruce or Cedar. You got a choice of about half a dozen different varieties of Spruce and then you've got a couple of different varieties of Cedar that you can use. Back and sides are usually Maple. Locally, actually, Walnut is pretty good for making backs and sides. It's very similar to Mahogany. Of course, Mahogany, and then Rosewood, those are not too local. Koa, if you so like. I have some Koa, but it's not big enough for guitars. I've been building a few ukuleles out of it, which is kind of appropriate as it comes from Hawaii.

20:02

TA: How do you acquire your exotic woods?

SR: Most of the, well if it's Rosewood or Mahogany, something like that that's not a native, I'll buy it through a wood broker. A lot of the local woods, the Curly Maples and the Sycamore and the Poplar and things like that I buy locally or some of it I've actually, I've got quite a bit of wood that I've acquired over the years that I've followed the wood since the time that the tree hit the ground. It was cut and sawed. I've had possession of it since it started through the drying process. That's kind of neat, especially in the Curly Maples. We get a lot of really nice... I've got a couple of friends that are in the wood buying business. That's what they do for a living. They buy exotic woods for other big companies and they'll throw me a bone occasionally. I work on their stuff too...

TA: You were talking about older woods. Do you think there are any that are tone quality? Say Poplar that's hundred and fifty years old that came out of a house?

SR: Well, that wood is going to have some characteristics that are different than something that was cut yesterday. And part of it is the fact that it grew in a different environment than it would be today, and part of the fact is that I kind of wonder what a Stradivarius violin sounded like when it was new. You know? I'm sure they were good, but I'll never know what they sounded like new. But that instrument, the age of a piece of wood, if I make a violin top out of a piece of two hundred year old Spruce doesn't necessarily mean that it's going to sound like a two hundred year old violin. It has to be played. It has to learn how to be a violin and you know, that's part of that person that's gone into that instrument. I'm not meaning it to sound creepy or anything, but it's got to learn how to be a fiddle and guitars are the same way. I can even pretty much, I think even to the point where the guitar will learn a playing style. It will respond at a level that it is used to responding to. If a person plays Bluegrass on it and just really, it will learn to be extremely loud and very dynamic sounding. And if you are a finger picker I think they learn how to respond to that and I know, that's a 1950 model, I've got a '49 model that's just like it that's not in quite that good of condition. It's been played a lot more, but if you let it sit for a month and don't play it, it goes to sleep. It takes about an hour of pretty vigorous playing, and you can hear it, you can just, all at once it comes to life again, it's got a memory. A good instrument will always do that. I would much rather have an instrument that I owned, somebody playing it, teaching it, letting it experience being what it is supposed to be, instead of it setting in a closet someplace. I see that all the time, I've got Granddad's 1937 Martin, and you get it out and play it and it sounds just like a guitar, it's nothing special at all and yet you know if that guitar had been played since 1937 and had been on a few bus rides it would be a totally different instrument.

24:48

TA: I've heard a lot of people say that playing the instrument matters a lot and they even sell mechanisms that vibrate guitar tops.

SR: Yeah, well, you can buy mechanisms to emulate about anything you could imagine, but I don't think, it's just probably a small percentage. Yeah, it works, and a large percentage, yeah, gotcha ya. Play it. I left a, there is a little amplifier there on my bench that I used to teach electronics with. Well I'd been putting the pick-up in an acoustic guitar and I had it plugged into that amp and it was just sitting there and the phone rang and it was something that I needed to take care of inside the house. Well I went in the house. I was gone about ten minutes. When I came back that guitar was basically just jumpin' off the bench. It was feeding back through that amp with that pick-up in it. That guitar sounded a totally different sound. I mean, it woke it up like you wouldn't believe, and it wasn't a really expensive guitar. Just that kind of playing, you have to make the guitar vibrate from the strings out. I mean, I've heard all kinds of, oh, I set it down in front of my stereo speakers and let the music play through it. So. I'm sure it appreciates that, but it would be better off in the case. It would be happier if it was in its case, but it would be a lot happier than that if you were playing it.

26:48

TA: I've also heard some people talk scientifically about the vibrations of the guitar top. Do you think that it aligns the molecules in a certain way?

SR: Well, I do know this. They did some electron microscopy pictures of wood from a Stradivarius cello that had been repaired. They had some slivers of wood that they had made. And most all of the cell walls were intact but the internal structure of the cells was missing. They were all hollow. I don't know if that was so much a factor that it was that way to begin with, or if the playing over the years had actually broken down that and it had gone away. I do know that every really good acoustic guitar that I've ever played seemed to me like it weighed a lot less than a newer guitar and I don't know if it's the loss of mass in the wood because it's being played or that maybe it was just really light to begin with and that made it sound good. I don't know if it's cause or effect. But I know that there is a lot of science involved. There is a lot of physics. There is a lot of everything, you can explain all of this if you really want to, but I would rather look at it from the art stand point and let's make it work because, if we need the answers to all these questions that they are trying to answer with the science they would all be wonderful, but they're not. They haven't figured it all out yet. That's their thing; let them have at it. I'd rather use my pocketknife and sand paper, you know, kind of thing to try to change something. A good plane and a chisel.

TA: I think there's something to be said for musical hand tools.

SR: Well, that's what I was taught. I've got a block plane, a little hand plane over there that my grandfather gave me that's pretty much priceless to me because it's a great tool and we've been together a long time and it's like a family heirloom.

TA: Well, should we examine your instrument work? Take a closer look?

SR: Well sure. I was just getting ready to do a little work on this Martin here.

29:52

[**Interruption by videographer. Cut in filming.**]

TA: Well, I'd kind of like to talk about how you know when you've done a really good job on an instrument. Maybe some mistakes as well.

30:07

SR: Well, that's a good question. The first thing you need to understand is that you need to know how to evaluate what needs to be done and it really helps if you can play. I'm not saying that you need to be a great player to be a repairperson, but it certainly does help. I play, I worked, the whole time I was teaching I did repair work on brass and woodwind instruments too, and of course I was taught to play, I can play all of the instruments a little bit. I can play enough to know if I've gotten it right or not, and guitar is not much... I'm not a great guitar player, but there are such variances in, say like set-up on a guitar. The only way that you are going to know for sure is, you are going to have to have the owner play the guitar and say ok, tell me, is this what you wanted? You want something different? I'll fix it. You've got to communicate with the person that's going to be playing it. You can't... If somebody just sends me a guitar with a note that says I want this set-up, that doesn't tell me a lot. I can go by, if I look and see that there's something obviously out of specs on it, I can put it back to where it probably should be and most manufacturers do have a list of where they want them to be when they leave the factory. Some of them are, some of them aren't. Martin is really, really good about that. They will be so darn close it's not even funny, but they move, they change over time. And that's like with this guitar here, I mean it's spent since 1950 with the tension of all those strings pulling on it this way, well they tend to fold up. Now nothing comes lose, nothing comes unglued. The wood just gets compressed. It gets compressed in the top of the shoulder part of the guitar and therefore the neck moves forward a little bit. Well we gotta correct that to the action back down where it belongs and the way we do that is that you take it out and you recut the angle and you put it back in. It's happy again, but saying, who's going to play that guitar? Is it going to be a Bluegrass player that wants a taller action so they can really dig into it? How hard do you play? Now I kind of need to know that to know if I've done it right. So, the only way you can really tell is to have the consumer talk to you, especially on set-ups.

TA: So with set-ups there is probably some math that you use?

33:22

SR: Oh yeah, I've got numbers, I've got gauges, I've got, you know, I've got my eyeball too. I've got tuners. I can do things to make almost any guitar play better for the person who wants the guitar to play different than it is now, but I've got to know what that is. Maybe it's too low. Maybe it's dragging out. If you are playing your guitar and it frets out on the bandit you know, well maybe we need to change the radius on the saddles or something like that. I've got to know what you want before I can... So learning and communicating with the people, learning what it is that makes these things happen and finding out what they want and then do that. That is a good question though.

TA: You ever fix one or build one and strum it and think, uh...?

SR: Yeah, I've never really built one that was not what I expected, but if I'm working on something and I can usually tell what it's going to sound like before you get it done. It may have been a bugger to begin

with. You never know. We try to make them as good as we can, but you can't make chicken soup out of chicken feathers or something like that...

[Male voice off camera: That's a good quote. Can I quote you on that?]

[Second male voice off camera: You can't make chicken soup out of chicken feathers!]

SR: I had to clean that one up as I went...

35:52

TA: Do you belong to any luthier organizations?

SR: No I don't. No I don't and I probably should, but I don't know why so I don't. I know there are some good ones out there, and I know they probably do some good stuff, but I've never really felt the need so no I don't.

TA: Are there any periodicals or journals that you subscribe to?

SR: Music industry things. Trades and MMR and some of those... My son works for an organization that's a member of NAM. I go to NAM shows occasionally and I guess that's an organization, but yeah, I've been to a few NAM shows and that sort of thing. If it's like, just what I get online, like, we fix your guitar weekly or something like that, no, I don't get any of those.

TA: Is there anything else that you want to mention about yourself?

SR: No, this is your interview man. You ask the questions and I'll do my best to answer them.

TA: You were talking about some of the people, some of the rock groups and so on...

SR: Well, through the RS Guitarworks in Winchester, and I'm assuming that you guys are going to talk to them, if you haven't already.

[Male voice off camera: Actually we haven't... unable to discern rest of statement]

SR: Scott and Roy are both good friends of mine and I've known them actually longer than I've worked with them by far. They've built up, like I said, some fairly high level clientele over the years. They are kind of limited in time down there because they are doing so much building they don't have a lot of... if it's piddley and time consuming, I haven't got two weeks to work on this and nothing else kind of stuff, they send it to me. I've built parts for guitars for Joe Perry, Aerosmith and Joe Perry. It's kind of an interesting build because he wanted a guitar that was Old West themed and he actually is very knowledgeable about the Cowboys and Indians, well Aerosmith, go figure, and he knew what he wanted and we tried to make it, the quote was, "I want a guitar that looked like it belonged to somebody from the Little Big Horn." So, we came up with some elk antlers, and cut little buttons off of that and I drilled them out and put period correct shell casings, 38-40s, or 44-40s, I don't remember which on it was that I used, I'd have to go back and look at the pictures, in that for the center of the knobs. Then I put the center of a real knob in the bottom of it to hold it, but he thought that was totally cool because it was correct. He knew the different. We took the headstock of the guitar, it has a crack inscribed on it, it's not

really broken but it looks like it's been broken and we tied it back on with senue, like real senue, and then put some pitch on it to make it look like it had been done by some primitive and the guitar was totally cool and that turned out to be his favorite guitar. I repaired the headstock; actually I sawed it off and made a new headstock for Tom Peterson's base. Cheap Trick base player. I guess he's happy with it. He didn't complain. He's playing it again. That was his favorite instrument. It had been broken so many times on the road that there wasn't anything left to glue. It had been repaired at least four times. It had been repaired pretty well, but glue won't stick to glue. You've got to have wood eventually, so I ended up, I cut the neck off at about the fourth fret and just built the new headstock for it and took guys at RS. They did the finish, painted it, and you couldn't tell it had ever been touched. They do just absolutely amazing things with paint.

41:41

TA: No I've seen some of the work, and Jesse of course has one of their electric guitars, and you were recently telling me about a Clarence White model guitar.

SR: Yeah that's fairly new. They aren't actually building a Clarence guitar. They are building guitars for Marty Stuart that, since he owns Clarence, they went down and took very detailed measurements and drawings and stuff of Clarence's neck and stuff, but Don Rich had a "teley" (**unable to discern word**) that was very unique in color and had checker board binding and stuff, and they are actually making guitars. They've already made one complete round of guitars for all of Marty's band, The Superlatives, and they play them regularly, but for Kenny, Don and Marty they are building two very special Superlatives model guitars and Marty has authorized and has basically jumped on the band wagon with them making these available in a production model. They build about forty guitars a month, something like that. So they're pretty much stretched to their limits right now. I hope these don't explode in popularity. It's going to be a problem if they do.

TA: I'd like to get my hands on one.

SR: Yeah, me too. I've seen them from inception to they are in paint right now, they're drying in paint and the color is right on. The binding looks great. I'll show you a picture of them here later, but they're going to be totally cool and Marty really likes there stuff and so does Kenny and of course, Paul Martin is actually from Winchester and knew the guys, well, knew Roy in particular. Roy says, "Well, Paul is the one that taught me to play guitar." So, they had some connection there already, but that was totally cool that they've... and it's cool to get to meet and work with these guys that really appreciate what you are doing.

44:14

TA: Now you know Paul Martin.

SR: Mhm. Well I'm a not great friend with him, but I know him. Like I said he's from Winchester.

[Male voice off camera "Was that his daddy that had the studio there?"]

SR: Mhm.

[Male voice continues, "That was Paul Martin's daddy, right?"]

SR: Mhm. I think so. I think so.

[Male voice continues, “There are a lot of cases in Kentucky where father and son go right on down the line.”]

SR: Oh yeah. Yeah. Well I guess this is the kind of thing that my dad really wasn't into it, but my grandfather would have totally dug what I was doing. He just did a lot of it with metal. I've got tools that he made that are incredible tools still. I've got a knife over there that actually I use as a seam separator knife because I can't buy one that works as well as that one does. I've got a hacksaw that he made for my dad. You can't help but think of these people when you pick up a thing up and you remember where it came from. It's just a good feeling. It's not just a tool; it's a part of them. Hopefully one of these days' people will play my guitars and think the same thing. I don't know.

[Male voice off camera “I believe they are doing it right now.”]

SR: I don't know about that...

[Male voice off camera “But you see them on the television.”]

SR: Yeah I do, but...

[Male voice continues, “Where have you seen some of the things you've made?”]

SR: Well I guess with Joe Perry, since he's the most visible one. I did some inlay on the neck on a guitar, I didn't even know what it was for, and I had no idea. I had to do a little bit of research or I probably wouldn't have even remembered that one. It was Captain bars; a military Captain's bars inlaid for the fret markers. I stopped by the recruiting office up there and I said, "Ok. What size are these supposed to be?" They finally dug up some information and copied it down so I came home and it was Jason Hook with Five Finger Death Punch. They are a Heavy Metal band. They've built some guitars for him too. You never know, but yeah, I've seen some of the work I did on the Joe Perry guitar they've, I mean, I've seen that thing on the MTV awards show on TV. I've seen it on the cover of *Guitar Player Magazine*. I saw it on the *Premiere Guitar Magazine*. There are lots of pretty cool places that you can say, "I did that!"

TA: Well it seems like you've developed a reputation like your grandfather. People tend to come to you with those odd jobs like inlay work

SR: Yeah, that is right. Oddy, that was my grandfather; he worked over across the valley over here. It was Lee Clay at the time and he pretty much ran a machine shop over there and pretty much kept that place working and if they needed tools or if they needed a part they needed something that they couldn't find he would make it. He could be pretty cantankerous, but he would usually get the job done you know. I think maybe they having to do it everyday took some of the fun out of it. I'm not going to let that happen here. I get tired sometimes, but I'm retired. I can go in the house and sit down.

[Male voice off camera “Do you ever feel like you are living your dream?”]

SR: Well, sometimes it comes down to one of those things, be real careful what you pray for because when I retired I thought, I really want to get authorized an authorized Martin repair center, and I really

want to get a serious shop going. I built this building and it was like, I really want to do all of this other stuff and sometimes it will get ahead of you if you aren't careful. Like I said, this was going to be just something, you know, maybe a day or two a week to kind of supplement the different in what I was making and my retirement and I'm still not making that much money at it but hey, you know, I'm not dependent upon this. I would charge a lot different if I was, but I'm not and I think that's only fair. So, you know, it's a cool thing to do. I wish I had been able to do this all along but I still really would have missed the teaching too. I'm glad I did it the way I did it, but that allowed me to do this. And I think you are going to find several people who are doing this kind of work, whether it be luthier work or just a mom and pop kind of thing, are doing as their retirement job because retirement allows them to do that. We have an income and this pays for my habits. I like to buy guitars and model airplanes, guns and a few things like that so this kind of pays for that.

TA: Not only do you build instruments, but also I've seen some of the ammunition that you make. All kinds of specialized guns.

SR: Well, that's the only way that I can afford to... I target shoot quite a bit. It gets really expensive if you don't have to have a source for it and I like to roll my own as they say.

TA: Did you learn ammunition construction from your grandfather?

SR: No. No, they weren't into that. That's my contrivance completely. That's pretty easy to pick up. You've just got to be very, very careful and pay attention to what you are doing, and turn the TV off, and the phone and everything else and concentrate on what you are doing. It's really, it's fun and it's rewarding, and it's fairly safe if you care for it.

[Male voice comments "Are you happy?"]

TA: I'm happy. Are you happy?

SR: I'm... hot.

SA: I just need to get thirty seconds of room tone.

[30 seconds]

DVD Track 2 - 0:00

0:05

SR: Taking this fifteenth fret out and put that with the rest of the parts we've removed so far. And now we have to make a couple of holes for the steam, that's why we take the fret out.

[Demonstration]

SR: I felt it drop through into the void. That's good. Yep. And, we've already taken the fingerboard lose. Heat and a tool. So that's already lose. That's not attached. And we are getting ready to put some heat down into that joint. We are going to do that with steam. Move the catch pack up; let me get the water out of it.

SA: Now what is this procedure doing?

SR: I'm getting ready to... This is just steam coming out of this. We're injecting steam into the joint of the neck where it's put together originally and the reason we are doing that is we've already determined that we are going to have to take the neck off to change the angle. We will just let that heat up in there.

[Demonstration]

SR: We will let the steam do its thing. We've got a jig on here that puts some pressure in the right places. I'm going to move this back just a little so I can get my fingers in there so I can feel when that starts to come lose and now you just wait for a minute. Shouldn't take too terribly long. We will kind of alternate this from one side to the other. You can see the steam coming out of there. Yep. When you are injecting it into one side you should be able to see it coming out of the other, which you can. What we want is heat in there; we don't necessarily want the water. We don't want to get it wet, of course it will, but we are looking for the heat and that's the only way that we can get it down into the innards of the guitar so to speak. Sometimes you can wiggle it like that a little bit just to give it more... I feel it coming lose at the top, but it hasn't made it to the bottom yet so we are going to have to give it some time. Be patient with it. See it start to move?

SA: Yes.

5:07

SR: You can actually feel it. Put your finger right there.

SA: Oh yeah.

SR: See the neck and the body are moving in separate amounts. You can reach underneath it and you can feel how far down that movement is going. You don't want to rush it until it gets all the way to the bottom.

TA: Is it hard to get it all the way to the bottom?

SR: No, you've just got to be patient with it. Sometimes it takes five minutes. Sometimes it takes fifteen. Martins are basically designed to come apart. They are like a fiddle. That's why a fiddle is made the way it is made. That's why they have the oval hang all the way around the top and the back, so you can get it apart and this type of joint is the same deal. They want it to come apart because they are wise enough to know that they are going to be around long enough that they are going to need to be worked on. Some of the modern guitars are epoxied together, the cheaper ones especially. Well not necessarily the cheap. Some of the imports are epoxied in there. Actually some of the newer guitars are not glued at all, they are bolted together, which is not necessarily a bad thing.

TA: To remove the neck like that, does that require use of hide glue previously?

SR: Yeah, it makes things a lot simpler. Can you smell that? You can smell the glue.

TA: Yeah.

SR: That's hide glue that you smell. Hide glue stinks. I remember when you were a kid I used to say, "That's made out of dead horses." Yeah it is, in fact. It's in a dry powder form when you get it. I kind of cheat; I mix that up ahead of time in small batches in an ice cube tray with just the water and the glue and I put it in the freezer and then when I want one of them I will pop one out and stick it in the microwave for a few seconds and bring it out here and put it in the heater and I've got glue. It's always fresh and it's always ready to go that way... Yeah, we are getting close. I'm just trying to keep the water off of the fingerboard.

TA: After a job like that, do you have to do any touchup work to the finish?

SR: Yep. If I do it right, now. Sometimes, even if you do it right, you'll have some issues. Oh yeah, we're getting close.

TA: Yeah, wow. You can really see it moving.

SR: It's leaking out of the bottom now. I'm going to tighten up on that just a little now. You just gotta be patient, that's the... There was still one spot that was stuck.

[Guitar neck separates from body]

SR: And it's free!

TA: Wow.

SR: I'm going to get this out of the way.

9:29

SR: And you can see how it went together. That's actually the easy part. Now we've got to wait for about a week or so to let this all dry off completely before we actually take wood from here, we're going to move this angle back and in doing that change the angle of the neck. Then we'll add some wood here, tapered shim. I'm going to get some of this glue off of here, you can see that it's just gooey, but you can smell it now.

TA: Are those numbers serial numbers, or the date?

SR: Yep. That's the serial number on the neck of the guitar. They're built from beginning to end as a unit and yeah, it is indicative of the date of the guitar because Martin in particular used one continuous set of serial numbers from the start to the finish. We're just getting the glue out of there because we don't want any of it left.

TA: Is that a piece of tape?

SR: That's a piece of tape. Yeah. I don't know why they did that, but some of them have that. You can see the T-bar that's the reinforcement in the neck. We lifted just a little bit of the outer layer of the wood there. Actually I'll take that off and glue it back on just to be neat so that the next person that has this off a hundred years from now won't make fun of me. My hands are sticky. They've got that glue on them.

TA: That's stinky.

12:22

SR: Yeah, it's kind of stinky. Poor old dead horse, but he served another purpose.

TA: At least he wasn't Jell-O.

SR: No, he didn't make Jell-O.

SA: You made a joke about the neck there being repaired a century from now, but do you have a sense of that? A certain continuity?

SR: Oh yeah. I mean, when you are working on the inside of an instrument or something like that, things that nobody will ever see until somebody else has to work on it later on, you betcha ya. You better take care of it and do things the way that you would kind of want to find it. And the reason, one of the reasons that I'm kind of sensitive about that is I see so many instruments that I'm working on that someone has done something to in the past that just makes my job three times harder. And sometimes it makes my job almost impossible. Someone had the neck out of the guitar before and glued it back in with heaven forbid epoxy or something like that, you know...

TA: Would you be able to get a neck out?

SR: Epoxy will soften with heat, but not like that. We would just be getting started. You'd have to steam and steam and you stand the chance of a joint coming apart someplace that you don't want to joint to come apart.

TA: Yeah.

[SA: I've got to change the battery here.]

14:32

SR: You probably don't want to take apart center seams. Anytime I'm putting something together that may have to come apart, you want to use hide glue. It's a little more trouble but, you may have to fix it again later and you know...

TA: Well some people say that it has superior tone quality.

SR: It does. It bonds on the sub-molecular level. Actually, since it's an organic, it gets down inside the pores of the wood and makes it basically as if there was no joint there. This stuff has its purpose, but it's all, it's sort of like gluing something together with a piece of rubber in between them. It doesn't really get hard and crystalline like the hide glue does. Well take a look at this stuff and you'll see what I mean.

[Demonstrates]

TA: Oh wow.

SR: It's little crystals.

SA: Tilt that toward me a little bit.

SR: They are quite hard. Well here [reaches in and grabs glue with hand].

TA: Yeah that is...

SR: That's one of its wonderful characteristics, the fact that it is quite hard. I mean it's very hard. It is water-soluble and it is heat sensitive and that's why we could take that neck out in five minutes or whatever it took. If that were basically any other kind of glue that wouldn't happen, so sometimes the old technologies are still the best.

TA: Yeah.

SR: For some things... The lacquer finish on these, it's not very durable but it breathes. It lets the instrument do what it needs to be. It is very thin unlike some of the newer polyester finishes that are a lot faster to put on. They have UV cured polyesters and even UV cured acrylics right now and you can shoot that stuff, hit it with UV light and in twenty seconds you can handle it. You can sand the thing almost immediately. You can sand a guitar body in a day. With a conventional, a real cellulose lacquer finish, you are talking six weeks at best. Every time you put a coat of finish on this, of lacquer, it's what they call a hot finish. It melts it all the way down to the wood. That's why it bonds so well.

TA: Yeah.

SR: And that is the fact that makes it able... I can go back and spray in a repair a patch and it becomes part of the original finish, it will never show. With a urethane finish, you can't do that. You'll always be able to see a little halo around it. It doesn't actually bond into the original finish. So, it has its good points and it's bad points. Now the urethane finish is pretty much impervious to all the bad stuff you know, sweat and perfume and hand lotion. I washed a magic marker signature off a guitar the other day that had a urethane finish on it. I used lacquer thinner on it; it didn't even bother it. It took the permanent magic marker off. Somebody decided that they really didn't want that fella's signature on it.

TA: Now what do you think about varnish finish? I know it's not as durable as lacquer. Some people prefer the tone quality.

SR: Well it depends on the instrument. It's not traditionally used on guitars. It is on mandolins and fiddles.

TA: Yeah.

SR: And that's a great... Well, there are basically two kinds of types of varnish too, there's an oil varnish and there's a spirit varnish. The oil varnish is actually pretty durable. It's more than you would think. The spirit varnish is basically shellac. They both take, unless there is a dryer put into the oil varnish and finish, a siccative dryer of some sort, it takes longer than the lacquer does to dry. It actually never really completely polymerizes. It's kind of like oil paints. It's the same sort of thing, but it's a really good finish. Some instruments were traditionally finished with that. See, the guitar is basically a fairly new invention.

Steel stringed guitar anyway. So it doesn't have the hundred and hundred and hundred of years to evolve into what it is now. It's still in that process. Did you know that this is not a tempered scale instrument? Every piano, sometime in the sixteen hundreds as best as I can remember anyway, is actually, if you play middle C on the piano, and mathematically, the C above that should be twice that, but it's actually moved up two and a half cycles. For every octave you go above middle C it goes sharp, and for every octave you go below middle C it goes flat. That means that the piano will play in any key that you want to play in with even temperament. You can play in any key you want to and you don't have to retune the piano, unlike back before that when you did. The guitar is still on the other side of the sixteenth century as far as the tuning goes. That's why you can tune the guitar to play perfectly in the key of E and you play an A and it's not in tune. Well, it's a guitar. There are several things you can do to make it better. There are several tuning systems that have been invented since then to make it overcome that somewhat, but I mean if you are playing in a band that has a keyboard, it will drive you crazy when you are changing key. You almost have to retune every key change you make. But it's still pretty primitive, but it works. That one really needs a fret job too.

TA: I was looking at that.

22:44

SR: Yeah. This one actually belongs to a dealer so that's up to him. Looks like the nut has been filled in. It needs a new one. There you go. The neck is out. I'll fill in these two little holes here and put the fret back in it. You shouldn't be able to see anything there on top. You shouldn't be able to see anything period once it goes back in.

TA: That's awesome.

SR: So, there you have it. It's not magic. You need the right tools.

SA: Earlier you were talking about holding the tools that your grandfather made.

SR: Yeah.

SA: And that connection you felt, I guess. Yeah. When you were, when you get an instrument that goes back however many years, and looking forward to the next guy that may have to fix something you work on, do you think about it in that sense of that you are holding something that has been passed down?

SR: I had a little guitar come in about two years ago from a Lexington store and it was a little parlor-sized Martin and it had no serial number on it. I knew it was old. Very old. Wooden coffin-style case. So, I called my guys at Martin and I knew it was a 21, but I didn't know how old it was. So I called them up and I could hear them literally not on the computer but turning pages in a book, their records, what is this thing it doesn't have a serial number on it and I described the appointments and so forth and he said, "Ok. Get a mirror and look on the inside of the top between the hold and the bridge on the treble side and there was a date written in pencil on the inside of the top. 1895."

TA: Oh my gosh.

SR: It had been back to the factory and been repaired in 1900. The repairman had signed it and dated it, April 2nd, 1900 on the inside of the top where he had made some changes on it. You see something like

that and you think, now that's cool. And here I am messing around with it now. I was putting a bridge on it. Somebody had put steel strings on it, which it was never designed for and popped the bridge off of it.

TA: That was probably like a double or a single outside?

SR: Yeah, probably the closest thing they would have would be a single out. I asked them did they want to see some pictures and the case and they said, "Actually, we've got all kinds of pictures of the guitar, can you send us some pictures of the case?" They were more interested in seeing the hardware and the way that the case was made than they were the guitar because they've probably got half a dozen of them in their archives some place but the cases didn't survive.

TA: I've heard a lot of people say that those really old cases are extremely valuable.

SR: Well this one was in really good shape, but this one extremely ugly. It was very angular, but the hardware wasn't stanchion metal, it was brass fitting and hooks and hinges. It was extremely well made. It's just a lot more fun to work on stuff like that than it is to work on the average everyday ordinary two year old whatever. Because it has a history you know, and you can see it, and you can smell it like the hide glue. I don't know what they are using now, but it's not the same. I actually had to do this same job on a guitar that was only six years old. It had been abused to the point where I think it had been left in a hot car and you know, some stuff had come loose on it. I had to take the neck out of it and it was a lot harder to get out than this was because of the glue they were using now. It did come apart though. I think they've got some kind of glue that's actually ultrasonically cured. Glue two things together and they hit this radio frequency, microwave kind of thing and it bonds immediately, but it doesn't come apart as easily as this does.

28:18

TA: The UV light glue that you were talking about reminds me of going to the dentist.

SR: Oh yeah. That's basically the same kind of thing. They use that little blue light to cure that stuff. The dentist I used to have, if I had this one already changed, if this one had its original ivory nut in it and it needed re-filling, I could take it to my other dentist and he would put that same stuff that he puts in your teeth in here and fill it for me and I'd re-slide it. That's not quite worth it. That's a plastic one that someone has put in there. There again, somewhere along its life somebody changed the nut on it and instead of using a good piece of bone that's plastic. Sometimes they need to be smacked, but you never know, that may have been what the customer wanted. So now we put it back in its little box and we let it dry out for a week or so and then we can actually start doing some measurements and some repair work on it now. And it looks like that's about all that this guitar needs. It's in pretty good shape otherwise.

TA: Yeah, it really is.

SR: I see one little crack here in the side, but I think it's already been repaired. It doesn't seem to be open.

TA: You said it's a '51.

SR: '50.

TA: '50.

SR: I didn't check, that's what the tag said; It was a '50.

TA: I know someone who has a '53.

SR: Well, this is not a real complicated outfit here. It's a piece of hose and paint can. I like that better, I've got one that I made out of an old pressure cooker, but it takes about three times longer to get it hot than it does this one, so that's why I use this thing because it's almost instantly gets hot. I did put a pressure release valve in it as the screw goes down here there's a spring on the back of it and a nut so it can't build up pressure. I mean, I want a little bit, but... That's just a paint can. When it gets rusty I just get a new bottom. That's a hot plate. Looks like that \$4.35, yeah, that's been around a while. It probably came from Perry's hardware in Morehead in about 1960.

TA: Ok.

SR: That's all that I can do for this right now.

TA: Yeah.

SR: We have to wait for it to dry.

SA: Ok, that's good.

TA: I think you all got some good footage to incorporate with the interview.

32:19

Filming stops

32:24

End of video