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Interviewer: Coty Hogue

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COTY HOGUE: Today is February 16, 2006, and I am interviewing Laurel Bliss at her home. Thank you for letting me do this. I just want to make sure that I have your permission to record this and use it with the radio documentary.

LAUREL BLISS: Yes.

HOGUE: Great. We're just going to start out – I was going to ask you a few questions about your childhood and work our way through to the present, sort of focusing on the music. First off, I was hoping you could state your name for the recording and maybe tell me a little bit about where you were born and when.

BLISS: I'm Laurel Bliss, and I was born in 1951 in Seattle. After a year of living in Seattle, my family moved to Michigan, where I lived until I was in the ninth grade, and then back to Bellevue, Washington, for the rest of my school.

HOGUE: Tell me a little bit about your childhood growing up, maybe what was your earliest memory of music. Did you find that early or did you just grow up listening to it, or what was ... ?

BLISS: I remember my family taking us to symphonies. My dad played the piano with his left hand and the harmonica holding with his right hand because he had a right hand injury; he couldn't play. I remember listening to him play piano a lot. I started taking piano lessons when I was probably in the fourth or fifth grade.

HOGUE: So you started playing the piano. What kind of music was that that you played? Was it classical music?

BLISS: [Yes], classical music.

HOGUE: Is that what you continued with for a while?

BLISS: Yeah, I took piano lessons for about three years, and I was also taking some music lessons at school, flute and then string bass. I moved from the flute to the string bass; I think in the seventh and eighth grade I played the string bass. And then when we moved out here, I dropped everything, all the lessons.

HOGUE: When you were taking the lessons, was it a passion for the music, or was it something you sort of did?

BLISS: No, I loved it. I loved especially the ensemble playing, the orchestra and the band in junior high school.

HOGUE: And was that your main activity then to do?

BLISS: No, my main activity was gymnastics.

HOGUE: So you started playing music; you played the piano, and it was classical music, was when was it really that you took an interest in this sort of American roots music, the folk or bluegrass or old time music? Was it later?

BLISS: My sister was taking some finger-style guitar folk lessons when I was taking piano lessons, and I got interested. I remember she learned the *Spring Hill Mining Disaster* – I don't know if you know that song – with very intricate finger-style arrangement. She showed me when I was in high school how to play a little, and I started learning some Simon and Garfunkel songs and things like that in high school.

HOGUE: Was that type of music popular at that period of time?

BLISS: Yes. Yes, Beatles and Simon and Garfunkel, yeah.

HOGUE: And were those, do you think – Simon and Garfunkel, you mentioned – sort of a gateway into this kind of music? Who were some other people that got ...?

BLISS: Well, when I went to college, I had a roommate who played very good, very, very well finger-style folk. And she showed me how to do some pattern picking, right-hand pattern style, and turned me on to Joan Baez, and I really started to delve into the ballad singing and the finger-style arrangements of Joan Baez particularly. I really like Leo Kottke and John Fahey; I kind of went in that direction.

HOGUE: Where did you go to college?

BLISS: My first year was at the University of Colorado, and then I transferred to the University of Washington.

HOGUE: From that, doing the finger style and that style, how did you make this sort of turn into more bluegrass and old time music? What was the turning point there?

BLISS: Let's see, when I was in Seattle going to school, I took some classes in classical guitar through the Experimental College, and I think I realized that I wanted to play more with people, and everything I had learned on guitar up to that point was very solo oriented. I was at the University of Washington, and the Seattle Folklore Society had a clubhouse on the University Way, on the Ave, at 52nd, and they were offering workshops.

I just on a whim took a workshop on backing up fiddle tunes on the guitar. I took that class from a man named Rich Levine, who still lives in Seattle, and learned how to do the basic backup rhythm. From that, I just met so many people and heard about so many events, like Weiser, Idaho, the fiddle contest there, and fiddle tunes workshop in Port Townsend, and the Puget Sound Guitar Workshop, that it just sort of exploded at that point for me.

HOGUE: What years were those college years?

BLISS: '74, I think, was probably when I took that workshop, so '74, '75 was when I started listening to that kind of music, *Will the Circle Be Unbroken* was an album. That three-set album was really an influence on me. I hadn't heard of any of the people on the album when I got it: the Carter Family, Earl Scruggs, Doc Watson. It was all new to me. So that's kind of the turning point for me, was getting exposed to the old time and the bluegrass in one place on those records.

HOGUE: Can you talk a little bit more about maybe that record, or some others in there, and maybe why that felt so much within you, doing that kind of thing? You talked about playing with people – [how was] that different from the other stuff that you'd started doing?

BLISS: After starting to listen to this music and learning how to play the simple backup style with a flat pick probably, I went to Weiser, Idaho, and hung out for that week, the fiddle week, and started playing music with people and realized that that was a big part of the music for me, was the communication of playing with people that I didn't know, having these common tunes that we could all play together. That just seemed like a community that I could enjoy getting to know more. I think that was the biggest draw, and also the music was pretty easy to learn off the record. I had classical training in that I could read music, but this kind of music at that point wasn't written down. I could learn it off a record, and so it was just easy to grow.

HOGUE: That's when you actively started playing with that kind of music and making connections with people, and that was in Seattle when you were going there. When did you actually move up to Bellingham, or were there times in between that that you were elsewhere before being up here?

BLISS: I was in Bellingham for a summer while I was in college, but I didn't have much music connection. I graduated in '75 and went to Whidbey Island for a couple years; that's my first job. I got into a little string band there, just kind of by chance, the Whidbey Island String Band, and played a little bit. It was more about getting together and playing, not performing. But I learned more about the backup style and started to sing with people, have some singing partners there. And from there, I came to Bellingham, after going to the Puget Sound Guitar Workshop and meeting Cliff Perry, who at the time was teaching a class. I took his class on – I think it was flat picking fiddle tunes class. He was in a bluegrass band called South Fork Bluegrass Band, which had a presence in Bellingham for over ten years in the Seventies and Eighties, more like almost

twenty years. He lived in Bellingham, and I just decided to move here to be around these bluegrass musicians that I had met at the Puget Sound Guitar Workshop.

HOGUE: So you moved up here for this music. What was so important about getting together and playing this music? What was the powerfulness of it for you?

BLISS: I think I was probably more comfortable socializing playing music than schmoozing and partying, you know. I never was much of a – I'm not really socially gifted, and I was more comfortable playing music, and that's what people did, you know. They had a good time, ate food, and played music and partied and went to concerts together, went to Weiser together, went to the Darrington jams once a month together, and it was just like a big extended family.

HOGUE: You met Cliff Perry at the Puget Sound Guitar Workshop and you moved up here. When did you actually start playing with South Fork Bluegrass Band?

BLISS: It was a few years after that. I only lived in Bellingham for a year, and then I went to California to do some more schooling. Then I moved to Seattle after that schooling and worked in Seattle for three years. So I connected with more people in the music scene in Seattle before I came ultimately back to Bellingham. That was in 1982, and that's when I started playing with South Fork. I picked up the dobro in '82, and I think in '83 I started playing with South Fork.

HOGUE: You mentioned the dobro. Can we talk a little bit about that instrument?

BLISS: Yeah, the dobro is actually a trade name. The Dopyera brothers invented what is called the resonophonic guitar in the late 1920s. It's a guitar that's played lap-style, and the action of the strings on the finger board is raised up about a centimeter, and you play it with a steel bar. It has an amplification system built into it. This was invented pre public system of amplification, so it was a built in speaker in the guitar. It's used in country music and bluegrass music and Hawaiian music.

HOGUE: What was your appeal to that? How did you start playing it?

BLISS: Oh, that's a good story. I had been going to the Weiser Fiddle Tunes camp contest for years, so I started, I guess, in '75. And in 1980, I met a woman from the Bay Area, and she was quite a bit younger than I was, but she had the prettiest voice, still one of my favorite voices that I've ever heard. I met her, and she was sitting cross-legged playing the dobro and singing beautifully, and I just thought, "I want to do that." You know, the dobro wasn't common in jam sessions, and so it's a welcomed instrument, an additional instrument to a jam session, where usually there were plenty of guitars. I just liked the way she played, and so I decided to pick one up, and I did a year or so later, and Cliff taught me how to play.

HOGUE: And was it challenging to do?

BLISS: Not really. The guitar is tuned in an open G chord, G-B-D-G-B-D. So it's easy to make chords; getting control of the steel bar in the left hand takes some work, but the right hand finger-picking patterns I was familiar with from finger-style guitar. I was playing in South Fork about six months after I got the instrument; whether that was a good thing or not, I don't know, but I was able to do it.

HOGUE: Tell me a little bit about your experience playing with South Fork Bluegrass Band.

BLISS: Well, I loved the bluegrass music, and South Fork is very traditional. They played the old songs. As they said, "We're a traditional band; we play the songs we always play." I loved their repertoire, and I loved singing with Cliff, and we played a lot. We played at Darrington Bluegrass Festival, we played at Grass Valley Festival in California. They recorded an album prior to me being in the band. We played a lot in Seattle at the Harmony, what was called the New Melody, what's now called the Tractor Tavern, played there a lot. And it was a good time.

HOGUE: Was there any experience that stood out for you during that time?

BLISS: No, I think playing at Grass Valley was probably – that was the first time I really played out of the area at all, and that's a pretty big bluegrass festival. I mean, the other bands there were bands like Jim Eanes and Del McCoury and Vern Williams and national acts, and we were one of the local acts, but it was quite an honor to play there.

HOGUE: This was pretty much not even ten years after you started getting into this music. Had you done any performing before that? How was it going into performing at places? Was it nerve-wracking?

BLISS: I hadn't done any performing. Yeah, maybe a little bit; I think I was kind of in over my head. Learning to play the dobro – I mean, I was comfortable singing, especially with Cliff because we had a good match right from the start. But there's a mechanical challenge playing the dobro because you have to look down at the fingerboard. It's not like the guitar where you grab the neck and you can kind of feel without looking. You have to look at the fingerboard on the dobro, but you have to look into the microphone when you sing, and that mechanical challenge took me several years to work out. So I felt in over my head that way. But we weren't playing in very high-tension situations very often with South Fork; it was usually pretty laid back.

HOGUE: Were there any other bands like that in the area? Was it a big thing then, or was this sort of *the* band in Bellingham?

BLISS: Yeah, it was definitely *the* band in Bellingham. It was the Barbed Wire Cutters back two decades earlier. South Fork Bluegrass Band had grown out of a smaller band called the Hunger Brothers, and together, between those two bands, it was probably twenty years of the only bluegrass band in Bellingham. So, you know, when we would

play at the salmon barbecue or something in Fairhaven, you know, two or three hundred people would come usually. It was fun.

HOGUE: How long were you in the band?

BLISS: I was in the band till the band dissolved in 1990, so about eight years, seven [or] eight years.

HOGUE: Then afterwards, can you tell me a little bit about what you've done musically after that band? You've done a lot of old time stuff and working recently with Carol Elizabeth Jones, but in between that time – ?

BLISS: A couple years after the South Fork Band stopped playing, I was asked to play at a wedding, and I asked Cliff Perry if he would be interested in doing the wedding with me, and we did. We tried to find all the positive and happy songs we could find, and we did this wedding, and we decided to play out a little bit. So we formed a duet, and we made a recording called *Old Pal* in 1994 and did a little bit of touring in California and a little bit back in the Appalachian area. I did that for a while, I think about three or four years, Cliff and I played.

HOGUE: How was that dynamic, with just the duo, different from playing with this bluegrass band?

BLISS: A lot more work. With the two of us, we were both keeping rhythm, of course, but somebody was filling in behind the singing or taking a break during the parts of the music where there's no singing. Playing dobro and singing at the same time is really a challenge, not only mechanically with the microphone, but just the coordination of it. Playing a guitar and singing is a coordination that felt pretty natural to me, but not playing the dobro. So it was a huge challenge because you never could stop. But we got pretty good at it, and I like the sound of it, so it was rewarding in the end.

HOGUE: And then recently you've played with Carol Elizabeth Jones. How did that come about?

BLISS: Well, I met Carol Elizabeth Jones and her then partner, James Leva, at Fiddle Tunes, the Festival of American Fiddle Tunes in Port Townsend in ... I think it was probably around '94 or '95, and they were teaching there. I got to jam, to sing some songs with them a couple different times, and we were very attracted to each other's choice of material and singing style, and we kept track of each other. When Cliff and I went back to North Carolina and Virginia to play, we stayed at their house, and I recommended them to be hired for the Puget Sound Guitar Workshop, so they came out here and taught. We kind of kept track of each other, and then about three or four years ago, I just got a phone call one day from Carol Elizabeth, saying she was at a musical crossroads, and she wanted to start a new project and make a recording, and she thought of me, and was I interested. And I said, "Yep!" And so we just made a recording, having

not played together, and then we played pretty steadily for the next two years; [we] made another recording.

HOGUE: How was that experience, going into this recording process without having ever really done much together?

BLISS: It was different; it was an affair, you know. It wasn't a love grown out of a relationship; it was definitely kind of a one-night-stand feel. But we exchanged material on tapes, talked a lot about material; I flew back east to practice, she flew out west to record, and we practiced, and we did very well, but it was hard. We had to have a pick-up band from the Seattle area, and on most of the songs we had some help.

HOGUE: You mentioned twice this material, and I was just sort of curious: what draws you? What kind of material ... can you pick something out that would describe the material that you like?

BLISS: Well, foremost, something that is easy for me to sing, something that feels well within my vocal range of notes and something that is just easy for me to deliver. I think I think of that before I think of the actual content of the words, which is a bit of a fault of mine and, I think, comes from singing a lot of bluegrass songs that sometimes don't have a lot of substance but the melody is pretty, or Cajun music, which I also play, where the lyrics may not be pretty at all but the melody is pretty. Carol Elizabeth is a songwriter, so she's first thinking about the words and then everything else, so it was good for me to have discussions with her about material, but I think I'm drawn to the feel of the melody first.

HOGUE: Can you talk a little bit about the Cajun music? I know that you play with the Happy Valley Sluggers, which is a local Bellingham band; maybe you can talk about them and Cajun music.

BLISS: Well, I was exposed to Cajun music at Fiddle Tunes in Port Townsend the first year I went there, which was the first year it was, 1976. I went to Fiddle Tunes for five years, and pretty much the first five years studied Cajun music. They had Cajun music greats, like Dewey Balfa and D. L. Menard and ... just, you know, everyone they had there was just someone who was, you know, just the best. They're all gone now, of course, because that was thirty years ago. Also, when I was in California during that five-year period – I went down there to study for six months – I took Cajun fiddle lessons from a woman named Suzy Thompson who was in Berkeley, who is just the finest – my favorite singer, my favorite guitar player and fiddler in the world. So I got exposed to a lot of Cajun music from her. And then I didn't play much until the Happy Valley Sluggers were formed. I guess we've been playing ten, twelve, fourteen years – something like that – a long time now.

HOGUE: How did you guys meet and form?

BLISS: Well, my husband, John Cork, and I have been playing Cajun music and old time music and bluegrass together for a long time; we've been together for twenty years. But I think Mike Schway, who plays fiddle and accordion with the Happy Valley Sluggers, we probably met him through Fiddle Tunes and just the local scene, the dance scene, the contra dance scene, square dance scene here in Bellingham and found out he liked Cajun music too and played accordion, which was important.

HOGUE: Can you talk a little bit about Fiddle Tunes and how you found out about it, your experience with it?

BLISS: I don't remember how I found out about it, but I did manage to go from the beginning. It's an event at Port Townsend at Fort Worden, run by the Centrum Foundation, one of their many programs. What they strive to do is to bring together all the regional fiddle styles of North America that they can, and they try to bring masters, often elderly people, together to teach workshops and have dances and concerts. And it meets the week of the Fourth of July every year.

HOGUE: And how long have you been going to that?

BLISS: Well, I went for five years, and then it's been kind of sporadic since then. I took quite a few years off. I was working – I was going to the Puget Sound Guitar Workshop regularly and I was very involved with that organization, so I couldn't do it all because I had a job. I couldn't go to every camp and workshop I wanted to go to.

HOGUE: And can I ask you what you were working as when you weren't playing music?

BLISS: Oh, I'm a physical therapist. I'm retired now; I just do some teaching. But I was, yeah, working as a physical therapist.

HOGUE: What was the experience, going to all these festivals? I mean, I know there was this feeling of community and that, but what was the drive to just go to all these things?

BLISS: Well, I enjoyed the community. You know, you get to know more and more people; they become your family. You know people up and down the West Coast, and now I know a lot of musicians on the East Coast, and there's just this acceptance of you if you play music, bluegrass music, old time music. When you meet, people take you into their homes and have parties. It's just a great extended family. I think I enjoyed the teaching too; I started teaching at the Puget Sound Guitar Workshop after working my way up through being on the board and doing site coordination and stuff. I started teaching classes in, I think, '84, and I taught ... I don't know, I've probably taught twenty times since then, different classes, mostly on vocal repertoire or harmony singing or lately some dobro classes. And I think that when I teach, it sends me into my own repertoire, it sends me into my record collection, and I start listening more and I learn

more, and it's just all about getting familiar with the music and passing it on, and I love that about it.

HOGUE: How have you built the repertoire up? Where does that interest go? Are there any particular people that stand out for you?

BLISS: Well, there's a man here in Bellingham named Gene Wilson, or the Earl of KUGS, he was known as. He had a show for eighteen years on KUGS called *Basically Bluegrass*. It was on Thursday nights from 7 to 9. He has an enormous record collection, and I would go up with him to his show and not really help with the show – I flubbed a few times – but the one year I was in Bellingham in the Seventies, he lent me his record collection. He would say, “Okay, take all of my Bill Monroe records, and when you're done with them, come back and I'll give you all of my Flatt and Scruggs records or all of my Doc Watson records.” I built up a big library of tapes of music. Then when I moved to Seattle and had a real job and started making money, I started buying records like a maniac, so I have a really large record collection now. And that's where my repertoire comes from, listening to my records, pretty much.

HOGUE: I want to talk a little bit about Puget Sound Guitar Workshop; you've been really involved with that. How did you first hear about that?

BLISS: I don't remember. Maybe through the Seattle Folklore Society? Probably likely. I think the first year I went was the third year that it happened. I don't remember how I got there, quite honestly. I remember being very intimidated and scared the first year I was there because I hadn't played music with people, and it really was a challenge to sort of let down my expectations of myself and just play. That's the first thing I learned there, that you could really just play at the level you are capable of, and it was okay. So I just grew from there and just kept going back and back. It's a lot of fun.

HOGUE: Maybe you could talk a little bit more about how that experience of feeling like it was okay to be at the level where you were at and be encouraged by that, and how that environment at that camp, or maybe other places as well, has allowed you to continue on with doing what you're doing.

BLISS: I've been very lucky that I've been able to play music with people who are more talented than I am, more experienced than I am, all along the way. As intimidating as that is, I really encourage people who are playing to seek that out because, you know, most people with experience want to encourage people to play; they want the tradition to continue, and there's a lot of nurturing that goes on. It's more about your own expectations of yourself that might limit you in those situations, so I found myself exposed to very, very good music right from the beginning. When I could get my ego out of it, that was much more comfortable.

HOGUE: At the Puget Sound Guitar Workshop, you started out just as a camp goer. How did you get more involved with it as the years went by?

BLISS: I decided to run and be on the Board of Directors, which helped plan camp and staff. And then we decided that a site coordinator was in order so that the organizers didn't have to work during the camp week, so I did that for a few years, and then I decided that I could teach, so I started teaching.

HOGUE: I know you mentioned that's how you met people from Bellingham, like Flip Breskin who was helping start the camp. Were there a lot of Bellingham people that came down with that?

BLISS: Yes, there were a lot of Bellingham people. Some of those years, I was living in Seattle, and there were also a lot of people from Seattle there, so I can't really separate the two out now, but I know that the South Fork Bluegrass Band being in Bellingham was the draw to get me up here when I had the choice to move.

HOGUE: So you have been working with that camp for many, many years. How do you think it has sustained itself and continued to be a viable camp?

BLISS: Oh, I think that the people who go there, many, many of them want to return because of the community and because of continuing exposure to new musicians, both teachers and students alike. I mean, the musicianship at that camp, many of the people who go there as campers are as experienced musicians as the people who instruct, and that just makes a very nice environment. And it's like summer camp, except that it's guitar all the time and other instruments as well, but it's in a beautiful place over by Bremerton with a lake to swim in and walk around. It's a very nice setting.

HOGUE: You've mentioned a lot, talking about that and other things, is the sense of community. What do you think makes the community so strong in this kind of music, or maybe in any kind of music or field in general?

BLISS: Well, I think in the case of music that there's a certain vulnerability that happens when you play music with people. It's a communication on a level that's so much more personal than just having a conversation that there's a trust that goes along. So if you have an experience with someone – maybe you've never met them – you get to a level, if your phrasing works and your blend works and your humming ideas work, you get to this level in a relationship with them that could take a really long time to get to if you were just having a conversation. It's a special, intimate way of communicating, and I think I just thrive on that feeling when the music really feels right to me, when I have that connection with people. It's like a drug, especially with singing, for me. I guess I just need that; it's part of my life need, is to have that connection musically with people.

HOGUE: Many people have found this community with this music, and I think that it's especially strong here in the Northwest. Can you talk about maybe what has kept that thriving?

BLISS: Well, I think it's sometimes the Puget Sound Guitar Workshop and Fiddle Tunes and Weiser, Idaho Fiddle Week Campout. I think these things keep people coming

together. I mean, there are people that go to Weiser – I went myself for about twenty years. I haven't been going in the last ten years, but people from California and British Columbia and Washington and Idaho and Montana that go every year, and they've seen each other have children, and the kids grow up and leave the home, and it's just a big family. I think that just promotes the music.

HOGUE: Can you talk a little bit more about that sense of family. You mentioned how people can just invite each other into their homes and how important that it for people, maybe today, to have that sense.

BLISS: Yeah, I think that is more important today than ever, that people have this feeling of safeness, you know, that there's this unspoken acceptance of them because they like the same kind of music and they play the same kind of music. It happens to me time and again when I go back east to North Carolina and Virginia, even though I'm not from that part of the country. When I play that music, when I interpret that music, people are just welcoming me as if I were from across the street or across the hollow or something. I don't know, maybe it's true in all forms of music, but it seems very true in old time and folk and bluegrass music, that people are very accepting of you if you play the same kind of music that they do.

HOGUE: Do you have any idea why that may be within that particular genre?

BLISS: I don't know ...

HOGUE: Any opinion?

BLISS: It's such an accessible form of music. You don't have to play technically well to enjoy it or to join in in a jam session, so it's more the people's music. I guess that's partly folk music too; it's just so accessible. Maybe that's why; I don't know. I have never really thought about it.

HOGUE: I think recently there has been more resurgence in interest in this kind of music. I don't know if you've felt that, or maybe you have felt that it's always been there, but what do you think about that and maybe why there has been this sort of new interest in it?

BLISS: Well, I think a lot of people are drawn to simplifying their life and making their life less stressful and less complicated and less commercial and less glitzy and less produced and ... I mean, I think that when I was in my twenties and thirties, and actually pretty much my whole life I've always felt that way, but old time music, I think, especially the people that I see in their twenties playing this music, in their thirties, that they're really embracing the noncommercial aspect of it, the non-glitzy aspect of it. That's an attraction that it's not popular, that it's not glitzy, or you don't hear it on commercial radio, not that it's underground, but that it exists for the love of it. It doesn't exist to make money or to be famous or successful, and that's always appealed to me too. I don't know if people are just more drawn to those "values" now because the world is

spinning out of control on a lot of levels that we can't control, but we can control our own lives to that extent and being less consuming and less commercial and having less impact on the planet and stuff. I think that has to do with the resurgence in old time music especially.

HOGUE: Can you talk a little bit maybe of what exactly stems from old time music, or what is the classification of old time rather than say it's bluegrass or folk or ...?

BLISS: Well, I think old time music comes from – it's all country music to me. It's just different forms of country music, and old time music is maybe more the original that grew out of the Scottish and English and Irish fiddle tunes, unaccompanied ballad singing that came over to the United States with immigrants. So old time music was a vocal tradition early first, and then the banjo and the fiddle came in. The guitar is a recent addition, you know, in the last hundred years. I think that it's often dance music; the old time music was to provide fiddle or banjo or just one or the other, both together or one or the other, for dance music in peoples' homes. I think old time music was very much an entertainment that people – they made their own entertainment. They didn't have commercial – before radio and television existed, they made their own music for entertainment, and there was a lot of local music in the southeastern United States especially, where this music really grew from. I think bluegrass grew out of old time music and the first bluegrass music was really in the late Thirties, early Forties, and it was just old time music, kind of hyped up old time music with a little more speed, a little more finesse. When Bill Monroe first played Mule Skinner Blues on the Grand Ole Opry at lightning speed, people just couldn't believe it, and that's sort of how bluegrass started, just more pep and more emphasis on tighter singing arrangements and instrumental arrangements, whereas in old time music, the quality of the singing isn't really important; it's more the spirit. I think the spirit of the singing and instrumentals are often played – everybody plays at the same time. You don't take turns and take instrumental breaks, so it's not so much instrumental prowess going on; it's more shared. That's the main difference between the style bluegrass and old time in my mind.

HOGUE: I wanted to turn back a little bit to that community and focus more on the Bellingham community in general. There's definitely sort of maybe two different sectors: there's 'folk music' and maybe there's more old time, bluegrass style music, but do you think that – I mean in a lot of places, there's sort of a big rift between that. Do you think that's here in Bellingham, or have they been able to maintain a pretty good connection?

BLISS: Well, when you were asking this question, I realized I don't know the answer because I ... My friends that play folk music I mostly know through the guitar workshop, but I can't say that they're people that I hang around and jam with very often, save a few people who I won't mention in case they don't want to have their names on the air or something. But I know that there's an active music circle at the Roeder Home; that's not something that I've been involved in, so I don't feel like I really know the folk scene in Bellingham as maybe you do.

HOGUE: But within the scene that you are involved in, where are some places and people in the past and in the present, where did they get together and play and build that community or hear music?

BLISS: Well, I think the Roeder Home, the Whatcom Homemade Music Society, has been a gathering spot. I did go to the music circles when I was first learning and playing more folk-oriented material. I think there were some clubs, as there are now, that emphasize string music and acoustic music. They're of course completely different now. I think that's the way people connected often was at these clubs. But I think I just sort of glommed onto a group of people that I'd met at the guitar workshop and ended up pretty much hanging out with them. I think nowadays there's so much old time, stringband, bluegrass music here in Bellingham that people can hear and get exposed to that ... You know, the Subdued Stringband Jamboree that's been happening for the last four years out at the Deming Logging Grounds is a great gathering place. I've met a lot of people, mostly of your generation, out there playing in bands and stuff, and it's great. There's just so much activity right now, it's spawning lots of great bands and lots of participation.

HOGUE: What's the importance of participation for this kind of music, do you think?

BLISS: Well, I think that when you participate in the music, you just feel it more, you understand it more, you want to go out and hear performers as well as, you know, playing on your own, and you get inside of it in a way that, you know, if you're not interested or not capable of playing ... I mean, listeners are very valuable, but when you play it yourself you just get inside of it in a different way, I think.

HOGUE: Maybe do you think that's why this music can include so [many] people because it is sort of easy, there's not a lot of difficulty?

BLISS: Yeah, I think so, and I also have an experience when I've gone to parties with people in their twenties mostly, that the level of acceptance of the music is just "anything goes." That's not really my memory of when I was at that age and learning, and that could have been a projection of my own insecurity, I don't know. But it seems like now, really, anything goes. People can play whatever instrument they want at whatever level, and they're welcomed and it works. It's like there's no judgment; it's really wonderful. It's just so nurturing, and I think that just encourages more and more people to play and take up and make bands because the acceptance level is just perfect right now, I think, for the music.

HOGUE: Why do you think that is – just an evolution of that?

BLISS: I don't know. I don't know.

HOGUE: So there is so much stuff going on, the Subdued Stringband Jamboree, there's all these places that have this kind of music going on, there seems to be a lot of activity, and there seems like there always sort of has been this activity with music here. Where do you think that that comes from here?

BLISS: Having a college here is, I'm sure, a big piece of it. I think people at college age are just listening to lots and lots of kinds of music and open to experiencing lots of things, and I think as the tradition continues with the threads like the Whatcom Homemade Music Society – you know, every Wednesday something is happening during the school year – and Western having their own musical programs too, and I think it's a destination now. I think people can move to Bellingham if they like this kind of music and know that there's going to be a community in place, much like Portland or Berkeley. Back East, there's many communities like that, but I bet there are people who are relocating here just because they know the music scene is happening.

HOGUE: That brings up the future. Where do you see the future of this music going, here or nationwide, and the community?

BLISS: I just think old time music will always grow because it's always been there and it's just always going to be ... it's always going to appeal to some people because it's accessible and now it's very easy to acquire the music through the internet, all of the file sharing and things. It used to be that it was hard to get; I think there was a time where it was hard to get recordings, and if you didn't have those recordings, those old 78s of these fiddle players and these LPs that were out of print, you didn't have access, and now the access is there. So it's unlimited what you can be exposed to and what you can learn. Satellite radio, you can listen to the Grand Ole Opry if you want to. You can listen to old time radio stations back in Appalachia if you want to, so I think that's going to encourage people to keep listening and playing old time music and bluegrass.

HOGUE: That's sort of a funny dichotomy between the technology and the – [laughs]

BLISS: Yeah, that's true. It's true; I hadn't thought of that. Yeah, I was at a jam session recently, and one of the fiddlers said, "I can never remember how to tune scales, but on my iPod I put the first four measures of all the tunes I know so it can kick start me." I was just thinking that ... technology. It's helpful. I don't use it myself very much. I'm always about twenty years behind in technology; I still play my LPs all the time.

HOGUE: I think there's been a – I don't know. My friends and I, we've all bought record players and we have records. There is a new interest in going back to the records by a lot of people. So ... what is your drive to keep playing this kind of music? What keeps it going?

BLISS: Learning more songs, meeting more people that I can share the music with and talk about the music with, and teaching more, having those moments of connecting with someone when I'm singing that are just perfect. I had a lot of those moments this last year; I was very lucky because I was able to teach at some different music camps and meet new musicians. It's just this real magic communication that gets kind of addictive after a while, and it's what I like to do the most.

HOGUE: Is there a sense of passing on what you know to others?

BLISS: Yes, and as I get older, I realize that is my role because I've had exposure to a lot of this music that people – they may not have heard the original version, they may not have heard until the fifth generation version of a particular song. Maybe they are interested in the original version, maybe they're fine with the fifth generation, but I tend to have studied more the source of the songs, and I think that that's important to pass on.

HOGUE: I want to go back just to a few little things that came up, and ask you... You mentioned how important vocal harmony is for you, and I was wondering if you can talk about how you got into singing with the harmony style and what that does for you?

BLISS: Just singing along with records probably, you know, like everybody else in junior high and high school, singing along with the Beatles records and learning those parts underneath the melody that were so interesting that the Beatles sang. I think that's probably how I got started, and trying to actually sing with someone and seeing that that was a lot of fun.

HOGUE: Did you ever go to Folklife?

BLISS: I go to Folklife every year.

HOGUE: There are a lot of festivals that go on around here; one of them is Folklife. Can you talk a little bit about that festival, since it is so important here in the Northwest, and your experience with that?

BLISS: I started going to Folklife Festival when I was in college at the UW, so probably around '73, when it was a small event. Probably the first time I played at Folklife was with the South Fork Bluegrass Band some time in the early Eighties, probably. Folklife was always the kicking off of the festival season: it happened on Memorial Day weekend. There would be a stage, pretty much now a stage devoted to stringband music, so all the old time bands, Irish bands – well, no, the Irish bands usually played at the pub. But old time and bluegrass and maybe ragtime and stuff would play at this one stage, and so you'd pretty much see everybody who was playing because there weren't that many bands. So there might be, over the course of those three days, because it didn't start on Friday then, there might be thirty or forty bands, and it would be pretty much all the bluegrass and old time bands from the Northwest. It's not quite the same anymore because there are so many more bands. So it was kind of like keeping track of who's who and what people are sounding like.

HOGUE: I just want to finish this up by thanking you for doing this. Was there anything that came to mind or that you wanted to add in at the end of this interview before ...

BLISS: No, I can't think of anything.

HOGUE: Great. Well, I just want to thank you for doing this; it's been really helpful.

BLISS: You're welcome, Coty.

[TAPE STOP AND RESTART]

HOGUE: Tell me a little bit about – in this kind of music, there's a lot of dances that go on. There's square dances, contra dances; maybe you could explain what the difference is between the two first.

BLISS: Well, they're all social dances that are done by couples, and the contra dance form is lines where you face your partner across the line. There's figures that are called by the caller while the musicians are playing. In contra dancing, you're moving up and down the line and changing partners pretty much with every figure. In square dancing, you're in four couples, so there's eight people in the square, and you dance with those eight people the entire dance, so there's not quite as much mixing. Contra dancing tends to be a little less physical than square dancing, and I think that the scene in Bellingham started out as more of a square dance scene, kind of moved into more contra dancing as we all aged, and now there's a new square dancing venue at the Fairhaven Fire Hall the last Sunday of every month that is all square dancing, and a lot of people are coming out for that. That's a little more energetic than the contra dancing can be.

HOGUE: Do you think that's a way for people to be involved with the music if they don't necessarily play an instrument?

BLISS: Yeah, dancing to live music is really different, a lot more energetic than dancing to recorded music with recorded calls. Some people had that experience in junior high school, at least when I was in junior high school. We all had square dancing in P.E. to recorded calls, but this is live music, and it's really energetic and fun.

HOGUE: Great. Thank you.