

Seth Fein oral history interview, May 23, 2017

SF: Seth Fein

KN: Katie Nichols

[Audio begins]

KN: Alright, this is Katie Nichols of the Sousa Archives. I'm interviewing Seth Fein, F-E-I-N, at his home. It is...10:15 am on May 23rd, 2017. Hello, Seth.

SF: Hellooo, Katie.

KN: Okay, so to get us started, why don't you just tell me a little bit about your background. Where you're from, and how you got involved in music.

SF: I'm from Urbana, and...I got involved in music—that's...do you mean, when did I first, like—

KN: Was your family musical, what made you, uh, decide to—

SF: Okay. So I've been into music and the idea of playing in a band or recording albums, um, being archival, in, in some way, uh, since I can remember. Which is to say that my brother and I had our first band in 1984. I was born in '79. Neither of us played any instruments. We had a band name. We had a logo. The band was called Steal Faces.

KN: Okay, and you were five?

SF: Yeah, I was five and he was eight, and we were really into Casey Kasem Top 40, and at the time Casey Kasem Top 40 was actually filled with, you know, pretty, pretty good tunes! Was kinda like that, you know, the dawn of the butt metal era mixed with, um...the proliferation of middle-aged balding white men who could sing great pop tunes, like Eddie Money and Phil Collins and, uh, Robert Palmer and Steve Winwood and Peter Gabriel and it was a really unique moment in music history, I think, because these were like pretty ugly, balding, 38 year old men that were like fucking sex symbols, you know? Like, people wanted to bang these guys and, like, you think about pop music now it's like, yeah right dude. Like, get off the fucking stand.

Um, but we were, we were really into Tears for Fears and INXS and Depeche Mode, um, we were really into Brit—British, um, you know, post new wave, um, we just, my, you know, it was really my brother, um, who really had the ear for hearing great music and, and so we started, yeah, Steal Faces, steal as in theft, s-t-e-a-l. Uh, and as brothers are wont to do, we got into a fight and broke up. Adam went on to start Steel Faces, as in the metal. Steel Faces. And I went on in my solo project, and my band was just called Beast. Which is pretty fucking hardcore for a five year old, I think, you know. My band was called Beast. The songs were not as hardcore, I think I had a song called Party, had a song called Adventure, um, they were one-minute songs where I sang into the box, the little boombox recorder, and would, like, make musical interludes with my mouth. Dun-dun-dun, dun-dun-dun-dun. I still know the lyrics to those songs, too, and I'm not going to sing them. But I have that tape, I still have the tape.

KN: That can go in our archives.

SF: I don't know, man. I don't know.

(Laughter)

SF: Um, and...so, we've been in an, I, I, I feel like I've been playing in bands since, for 38 years, um, in some way. Because I don't see playing in bands purely as playing in bands, I think it's all part of a big ecosystem. Um...but really the only time—like, the real era of, for me, playing in bands, was 1995 to 2004. That's when I was playing in bands, like, specifically. Um, my mom could play the guitar a little, the piano; my dad could not play anything. Um, I don't know, we were just into music. MTV was, um, uh...more important than the Bible to us, um, even though we were being raised to read the Bible. Um, my parents, who were pretty...um...ultra-liberal politically, my dad in particular was really worried about what we were listening to. Um, you know, Guns N' Roses, Appetite For Destruction came out in '87, he was not down with that, started to get into Yo MTV Raps, wasn't really down with that, um, so he was an equal opportunity...um, hater on all kinds of cool stuff. Um, the song Dear God by XTC really blew his top because essentially positing that God wasn't real. He banned that song, weren't allowed to watch the video, weren't allowed to watch anything and ironically, uh, XTC is my favorite band of all time. As a lesson to us parents, you try to take it away, they will find a way to get it back.

Um, so...yeah, we were just always in to music. And, um, all different kinds. I mean I've really been into, um, bunch of different stuff over the years. What I like is good. You know? I know that sounds kind of...uh...broad, but I have a sincere belief and it's egomaniacal and I'm cognizant of it, but I believe that what I listen to is better than what other people listen to. Hands down, bar none. It's not up for debate as far as I'm concerned. All that said...of course I might be wrong. (Laughter) But I don't really believe that, I think that, I think that artists like Tears for Fears and early INXS and Depeche Mode and XTC and, you know, Pink Floyd were making better music than all the other bands. Um, Peter Gabriel, Genesis, um, they just had it. Um, so I, I've just always been really passionate about music, and um, yeah, I tried to play the bass, tried to play the guitar, didn't have the patience for it, wasn't very skilled, but somewhere along the line I discovered I could play the drums. Um, didn't have a drum set but, um, friend of mine did and I could, I could play it, you know, I wasn't good but I could keep a beat. Um, for whatever reason I just had that in me, I never took a lesson, I never was taught in any particular way, I just could do it, um...I played baseball. It was my obsession when I was a kid, um, certainly in the summertime and I was a pretty good baseball player but I didn't like the culture surrounding it and as I got older, um, I didn't like my coach, all the kids that I played baseball with were, um, I loved them dearly but they were conservative, weren't really into cool music in the same way that I was, some other friends, and I literally, I quit my baseball team sophomore year in high school and—uh, that morning, and then that night I went and bought a drum set from my friend Brad. And I decided that it, you know, this was when I was gonna start playing in a band. And I, me and my friend Tristan, who I played with for my whole time I played in a band, uh, we started—we actually started our band prior to that, uh, before I had a drum kit and before he had a guitar. He had a violin, his parents, you know, made him play violin, but we had started our band and had a name and everything...so yeah that was 1995, um, that's when I started playing.

KN: And what was that band?

SF: We were called the Dr. Johanson Band. Not the greatest name. Always kinda had trouble with the names of the bands, Absinthe Blind wasn't a very great name either, but that was my brother's creation, it—

KN: I like it!

SF: Memorable, but nobody knows what the fucking word “absinthe” is. Everyone would say, “Abs in the blind?” Absinthe isn’t really a well-known, uh, uh, beverage in the United States of America. It is now, more, but it certainly wasn’t then.

KN: At the time.

SF: No it was not. So it was Dr. Johanson Band and then that band broke up and my brother, who was three years older and had gone off to college, he had a band called Absinthe Blind, and then that band didn’t really pan out and then we joined forces and started our version of Absinthe Blind in 1996. Absinthe Blind played from ’96 to 2003, and then 2003 to 2004—2003 we kinda had a stop gap with me and my sister and Brett, uh, who is, was the bassist and keyboardist for Absinthe Blind in its final year. Tristan went and toured with Maserati, a band that we had toured with from Athens, Georgia, and while he was touring we started a band called Orphans, um, that played a few shows over the course of six or seven months. Tristan came back into town and we started Headlights and I left Headlights in 2004. So that’s my history of playing in bands and it’s broader than that so I’ll just wait for more questions.

KN: Okay, so, um, at that point then—well, let’s go back a little. You, you guys did some touring.

SF: We did. Not a ton. Um, it was Headlights that did the majority of the touring as a result of me quitting and becoming a booking agent. And I booked their tours.

KN: Aaah, okay.

SF: But Absinthe Blind did do some touring. I mean, we were always really focused on playing, um, and playing outside of Champaign-Urbana. I mean, there’s no other way to put it, um, sounds again like I’m stroking my own ego here but I’m going based on empirical evidence and facts, um...and I think it would be corroborated by people like Ian Goldberg and Ward Gollings, promoters at the time in the music scene here, but Absinthe Blind was the last time a local band was really selling, um, a lot of tickets to their, to, to shows. And they weren’t really tickets, more like cover charges, and we got up to seven buck, eight bucks by the end, but, I mean, we were putting in regularly 600 to 800 people in the Canopy Club. Which by today’s standards is like, “What?” A fucking local band is packing the Canopy Club? No fucking way. Mean, you get a hundred people out to a show you’re high-fiving each other like you did something, like, you know, miraculous, but it’s just not that way anymore.

KN: Why do you think that is?

SF: Well...I don’t think that live music is appreciated in the same way it once was and the reasons for that are vast. Certainly how we ingest music is very different. Um, I also think that we have this endless opportunity to be entertained in more convenient and comfortable ways. I mean, I can watch movies on my phone. Um...sitting in my bathtub. You know? Uh, any movie I want. And so I can watch a concert—live at times, you know, streaming—in my bathtub if I want. I don’t really take baths but as an example. Um, and so I think that that changed things quite a—is changing things quite a bit and I think that the user experience is, um...you know, tired and old and of a different era. So I don’t--and I don’t think that, um, because we don’t have MTV as the coolest television channel in the world and nobody listens to radio in the same way, I mean I just don’t think that bands are as cool as they once were. Certainly the...you know...there’s a discussion about ProTools and the way we record music and there’s also the

idea that, um, you know, bedroom musicians have been able to put out really amazing recordings and never have to leave their bedroom. And they may never play live until all of the sudden they've got a YouTube sensation, it's like, oh shit! Every agent in the world wants to sign them and then they go up on stage, sometimes for the first time, to packed crowds, they never even played a fucking show.

So, um, I can't put a specific reason on it and I know that there are still music scenes that have enough people that they can generate audiences and, and, and some sort of scene but it's certainly not what it once was. And that's not me being an old man being like, "In my day there was all kinds of people hanging out," it's just different. It's just different now and that's, I think it's, I think it's okay. I mean, I don't think that it's, um, something to, to, to be angry about, it's certainly something that I personally lament because I think that there was something really, um, radical and cool and I think that also as a society we've, um...well, we've, we've, we've made rock and roll very tame and safe, um...which is, again, has amazing, you know, and important components to it. Rock and roll and the lifestyle has hurt a lot of people. Drugs, alcohol, non-consensual sex, these aren't good things. But it certainly was part of the culture that made it, you know, dangerous and appealing to the average, you know, kid growing up wanting to break free from their parents', uh, you know, rules. And I think that that has been stripped, um, from, from the culture. Um, I don't know, I don't know that I have the answer, I know that it's different. I know that the...yeah, I also think that bands don't put in the time or the work the way that they used to. Certainly in this scene one of the biggest problems is that it seems like every fucking person in a band plays in five bands. It's like, just choose your fucking band, just be in a band! You can, you should try being in a band and making that band really good first, and then you can have your side project once you've established that you're really good in this band. But nobody really wants to do it and the other big component is that, like, being in a band, being in a touring band, it is an impoverished life. It is an uncertain life. It is not comfortable. Touring is not glamorous. Um, and that's a decision, that's what ultimately had me quitting. Was that I didn't wanna—I'd met Justine and I didn't want to be away from her for months at a time, sleeping on random floors in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Um, I didn't want to, um, be broke and, um, I didn't want to...I, I just wasn't suited for it. I wanted to live vicariously and so that's why I became an agent and a promoter. Um, or I transitioned what I was doing.

But um, yeah, I mean I don't see—I don't know that there's any band in Champaign-Urbana right now that I can point to and say, "Oh those fuckers got it. They are committed, they are dedicated, and you can hear it and feel it onstage." I don't see it. Nothing.

KN: Has there been one at, at some point, that you can say that about?

SF: Throughout the history of Champaign-Urbana?

KN: That you've been, that you've been involved with.

SF: Definitely. I mean, I think that Absinthe Blind was that band. The Living Blue--the Blackouts were that band. The Beauty Shop were that band. American Minor was that band. To an extent Shipwreck, um, but again there was, you know, for some of the—yeah, not Shipwreck because there was the, there was full-time jobby-jobs getting in the way. Can't have a full-time job. You don't get to...you don't get to put your partner or your job before your band. Doesn't work. It just doesn't work. It's just, you, you get married to your band and that's the only way it works. Unless you become like internet buzz sensation and you have the financial means to be able to pick and choose. But it comes first. My sister, doing Psychic Twin and still to this day with living out in Brooklyn, would tell you the same thing. That comes first. Comes

above her relationship, comes above her family. Comes above everything. If there's a choice between the tour she's gonna be on or working her job, she's going on tour. She'll figure out how to make it work. Um...her boyfriend doesn't get to dictate the terms of when she's here or when she's not. She's gone. So I don't see that in Champaign-Urbana right now, it's been a long time since I've seen a band really fully devoted to their craft. I think the last one was Headlights. That was the last one.

KN: So in 2004 you transitioned to booking—

SF: Yeah, yeah, I booked my first show in 2002, that was really a function of playing in Absinthe Blind and booking our tours and needing to hook up bands in this market for hooking us up in other markets. And Absinthe Blind certainly could not play every one of those shows, but, um, I quickly discovered that if I could bring cool bands that other bands in town would want to play with then I could, um, use that as show swap. It's totally selfish, I never pretended that it wasn't, um, but, um...my thought was that I'm trying to bring in cool bands to Champaign-Urbana and um, yeah, there's personal gain and benefit on that, from, from that, from my own band, and then eventually I realized I could, I could make money doing it. Um, I, I, I learned that I could make money doing it when I booked Death Cab for Cutie by accident.

KN: By accident? Gotta hear that story.

SF: Absinthe Blind was on tour, and...you know, this was, I mean, email was still a—was starting, was definitely starting to be the preferred form of communication but it was still a lot of phone calls and press packets. And I'd been calling Tim Mays, who I'm still friends with, he owns and runs The Casbah in San Diego, really fucking cool 250 cap. room, it's been open forever. And always such a cool roster of bands playing and I, you could call him for two hours a week, on Tuesdays. Between noon and two. And I'd call, busy, busy, busy, busy, busy, I'd finally get through and I'm like, "Tim! This is Seth from Absinthe Blind in Champaign." He's like, "Dude, leave me the fuck alone," you know. Took me three years to finally get him to bite. And we had, we had developed more press, we had, we had put out albums and I could point to an interview in Under the Radar. I could point to, um, playing CMJ, and having our album reviewed in CMJ, positively. Parasol Records, we were signed to them and at the time Parasol was still, um, functional and, and, you know, there were people working, you know, they had a whole, they had a publicist, Michael Roux, um, and, and mail order and, and, and they were a, a viable functioning label.

Um...so we got booked at The Casbah and...to play with the Starlight Mints, who were a pretty cool band from Norman, Oklahoma, part of the, kind of the Flaming Lips-Oklahoma City-Norman scene. And we really hit it off, this guy named Andy Nunez, uh, played in Starlight Mints and Andy Nunez was the owner and buyer of a club in Norman, Oklahoma called The Opolis. And we had an open date on our way home on a Friday night and he went--he watched our show, he was like, you guys are fucking awesome, we were like, we think you're awesome too. And the truth is that by time we had become pretty awesome. We'd played in a band for seven years, by that last year we had become really tight and really figured out how we wanted to be as a band, you know, we got through the obsession with Radiohead and Slowdive and Spiritualized and finally started to kinda find out what kind of shoegaze act we wanted to be. And we were impressing people. Because people like Andy Nunez from Starlight Mints who owned a club watched the show and was like, "This is fucking awesome, you guys should come play my club!" And like, "We'd, we'd love to! By the way, I've contacted you before," he's like, "Oh shit, that's right! You're Seth!" Like, "Yeah motherfucker! I had to come all the way to San Diego to meet you randomly?" And that's kinda the way it works, it's like, you don't, you know, you only succeed by putting yourself

out there and like, making the connections and being in people's faces and constantly trying to do these things.

Anyway, we were out there and so we were, he's like, "What's your open date?" It was Friday, July whatever, August something. He was like, "I can't believe I'm saying this, but our, a band that is from Norman is playing a show that night, they don't, we don't have an opener yet." They wanted to do, they want to try out new material for their, their new album. Um, and he's like, "I can get you on, can get you on the show, you know, here's my number," whatever, blah blah blah, and sure enough we got—so we got booked with a band called Ester Drang, who were signed to Jade Tree. Really cool label at the time and was putting out a lot of cool stuff, Joan of Arc and Denali and uh, Jets to Brazil, and you know, so they had a good label, they had a booking agent and a guy named Trey Manney who was doing this agency called Arrow Booking at the time. We played the show at Opolis, great fucking show, packed, and we were two bands, us and then them, we played to a packed crowd, they fucking ate it up with a spoon, sold a bunch of merch and really connected with Bryce and James and the other guys in the band. Um, James and I really hit it off, he was their drummer, and I was like, "I'd like to bring you guys to Champaign." He was like, "Great, contact my agent, Trey Manney at Arrow Booking." I went, "Great, okay, great."

So I, I had just taken a job working—being Ward's assistant. Ward--Cowboy Monkey had just opened so he was pretty overwhelmed between High Dive and Cowboy Monkey to try to get it all done and so I became his assistant but I kind of took the ball and ran with that and just started helping booking shows, not just going to Fed Ex or running for hospitality. So I went to Ward, I was like, "I'd like to put in this offer for Ester Drang," he's like, "Well, you know, email Trey," he's like, "Email Trey." So I emailed Trey and I probably wrote three paragraphs about why he should stop in Champaign, it's a super annoying email to get. Wrote this whole thing about why he should book Ester Drang, and he just wrote back with one sentence and said, "How about a Death Cab show on October 12th?" Didn't even mention Ester Drang, didn't even acknowledge the, the date or anything, he just, he was, he's a booking agent so he's, oh shit, this is a promoter from Champaign, I got an open date for Death Cab for Cutie. They'd just released Transatlanticism and I was like, and I literally wrote back—forwarded it to Ward, I was like, "What do you think?" He was like, "Dude, fucking A," you know? And so I wrote back, I was like, "Great, Death Cab, but what about the Ester Drang date, you know, what about..." Which was October 16th, you know, just four days later. So we booked the Death Cab show, Ward took care of kinda all the process of it, showed me how to write an offer that was appropriate, got confirmed and sold like 400 tickets and, um, I made a bundle. Um...and showed me, Ward showed me the proper and appropriate way to do it and it was like, oh shit, like, I just put on a show of a band that I really fucking like, that people really like, and I made like 600 bucks.

KN: And they played at Cowboy?

SF: No, no they played at High Dive. Death Cab played at High Dive.

KN: Okay.

SG: Ester Drang played later that week with our band at, uh, at Cowboy Monkey. Um, so they, yeah, the Ester Drang show did work out. And, you know...you know, when you're doing that stuff and you're playing in bands and you're booking shows and you're in communication constantly, you work yourself into the scene. So that was 2003, just two years later, here I am much further along and I booked Sufjan

Stevens to perform at Canopy Club and, uh, who's the drummer? It's James. James and I are still friends to the day, keep up, eh, couple times a year, see how things are going. He's still working with Sufjan and, but he's a family man, session drummer for the most part, you know? Like most people. It's like, I'm trying to raise a family, I can't go fucking tour. If I'm gonna tour, better be making coin.

KN: Right.

SF: So...that's how I booked my first real concert. With Death Cab for Cutie. And then from there I just kinda started like...was like it just been--kinda made sense. Like, oh, I can bring in bands. Anyone can do it. I don't have some special power. There's no—no, no. That's ridiculous. Whatever it is, the expression you just made on your face—(laughter)—what I have is ambition. What I have is, um, a fearlessness to risk my own personal money to bet on—it's gambling. You bet on an artist that will bring x number of people for y amount of dollars. And you bet on that. Um...and I did that for a long time. The laundry list of artists that I've brought through is, I wish that I was more of an, um...I wish I was more archival, cause I don't have the list of, like, the thousand plus shows that I've done. I've gotta do that at some point, is just like, is just like sit down and like look at old opening band's calendar and then also just like kinda go through the Canopy Club history and the High Dive history and like, think about all of the acts that I've brought through, just never got to it.

Um, so, yeah, that's how I brought my first concert through, that was like, 2003, October of 2003. And then right, right at that same time I started booking at, um, I was hanging out at Caffé Paradiso and I, I started booking shows there every Friday, and, um, brought a lot of cool shows through there over the course of, um, a few months. Mates of State, Joan of Arc, um, Explosions in the Sky, um...there's one other I brought through there that was really fucking cool. Then that job transitioned into, um, doing more of Cowboy Monkey and High Dive. Um, things got weird with the owner of Paradiso, um...fast forward, I met Justine, I didn't book shows there anymore. And—no no no. Before that—no, and yeah, I, I stopped booking shows at Paradiso because then Nargile opened, which is Clark Bar. And so we, me and Garren, who used to play in a band that my band played with a lot, uh, Absinthe Blind played with, a band called Jove, um, they opened up Nargile, they took over Ruby's Roadhouse, is what it was called at the time, and um, um, it became Nargile, a hookah bar but with a stage in the back. And I booked—

(conversation with Justine)

SF: Um, yeah, Nar--at Nargile, 2003—

KN: How do you, how do you spell that?

SF: N-a-r-g-i-l-e. I booked some really fucking cool shows there too. Um, Unicorns, Brian Jonestown Massacre, um...Bonnie Prince Billy, Joanna Newsom...but they didn't pay me. Yeah, for like six weeks no one, none of us got paid so we all quit. And, you know, I wasn't an independent promoter there, I was working for the club and so all the money from the door, you know, went into the bank. And so on that Bonnie Prince Billy show I just, I just took the money. Well, fuck them! I mean, not fuck them, they had their own struggles. But I hadn't been paid in six weeks so I, I, I wrote a really strong promoter-friendly offer, um, the agent for Bonnie Prince Billy wanted a flat guarantee of 1100 bucks, I did that, so, show sold like fucking hotcakes and so I think there was like, like 1300 bucks and I took that, went to North Carolina, quit the job, went to North Carolina for eight days, stayed at my friend's farm. Read the entire New Testament front to back. I was going through a thing. I'd gotten dumped recently.

KN: Ah. That'll do it.

SF: Yep. (Laughter) You really find God when they take the sex out of your life. Anyway.

KN: Okay, so that's the beginning of the booking. At what point did you—

SF: Yeah, it's like a hodge podge of, of, of different experiences. Sorry.

KN: Right. So how, how does that tie in, timing-wise, with, um—well, when did Smile Politely start, how did that all happen?

SF: 2007.

KN: Tell me about that.

SF: Well, I started writing an arti—a column for, um, for Buzz Magazine. Right about the time the Octopus shut down, Illini Media Company decided they were gonna recreate Buzz Magazine and turn it into more of a community arts weekly. And they really tapped into the community more than just the students. And I started writing a column about music called the Mendoza Music Line, kinda keeping up on local music, and then I started an opinion column called the Local Sniff and I really just started writing some pretty fiery shit. Throwing a lot of fucking shade at people. I did, I was not well-liked by some people as a result of that. But I didn't really have an editor! Nobody was telling me, like, "Ehhh you shouldn't say that, dude!" Like, "You're making an error in judgment." I was just writing and they're like, "Great! We'll publish it!" So that was 2003 to 2006 I had a column that was, you know, weekly. And then I decided, you know, I decided that they weren't, I mean they weren't paying me what I felt was appropriate for the num—for the kind of readership I felt like I had so I quit. And more than that, The Buzz had kind of transitioned back to being more of a campus paper and all of a sudden I was, you know, 25 years old and kinda writing outside of my own arena, to undergrads, and I didn't want to do it. So I stopped writing and then me and my friend Mason Kessinger, um, who's a designer and a coder, um...kinda came up with the idea for an alternative magazine, an online-only magazine, kinda saw where the world was going, I mean, it wasn't that, you know, clairvoyant, it was just what it was. And that was 2007. 2006 and then at the end of 2007 we kinda crafted it over four months and then launched it in December of 2007. So we're coming up on our tenth anniversary, which is just crazy. Yeah.

Um, but that was like, I was working at the Canopy at the time and it was something like almost totally separate from what I, mean I was booking tours for my own Nicodemus Agency, um, and at that time I probably had, you know, fifteen artists that I was handling tours for. I was booking shows at the Canopy, I had founded, I had started Pygmalion and was doing Pygmalion, um...I was kind of a maniac back then. I mean, with the amount of stuff that I was just doing and like personally handling, I didn't have any employees, it was just all me doing—but I was working—Justine was, had gone, she got a job, um, as a nanny and then she had gone to grad school so she was kinda busy, like as early as 7 am through 5 pm and I was just working, working, I had an office at the Canopy and I just work, work, work, work, work, work, work. But it never really felt like work, it was all kinda like project-based inventions of my own interests, so yeah, book—I mean, there was a—I remember feeling like there was a moment I'm booking twenty tours, booking Pygmalion, booking the Canopy Club, publishing the magazine, and like, planning our wedding. You know?

KN: Wow.

SF: I don't have a lot of patience for people who are lazy.

KN: I can see—

SF: I know that that sounds really horrible, I get that. Um, it does, because it sounds very judgmental and, um, snobbish to be anything but accepting, I think, of everyone's path, not everyone is...but like, I get really frustrated when I see people, like, not doing shit with their life.

KN: And expecting something.

SF: Yeah man, the expectations are what it is, you know, it's like, I don't see it as a millennial thing, I think the Gen X, Gen X had the same, similar issue and I'm sure that the, you know, the Boomers, the greatest generation saw the Boomers in the same way. Nothing new under the sun. But I also, you know, from a philosophical standpoint, um...you know, and I haven't read much Descartes, um, but enough to know that, like, we shouldn't, like, take our life for granted. That every day should be an opportunity to create and invent and, um, you shouldn't be bored. There's never, there's no reason to be bored. Um, you know, the issue is, you know, it's...this is a tangent. Um—

KN: We like those.

SF: Um, yeah, Smile Politely was born of something similar but different. Um, I've just, after I decided that I'm gonna stay here, um, Justine, Jus, Justine was the one that was like, "Let's buy a house here, I wanna go to grad school, we should buy a home." Then it was like, okay, well then if I'm gonna be in Champaign-Urbana, for all of its flaws it's got this amazing opportunities that surround it. Could do almost anything you want here because a lot of it's untapped. Um, so, yeah the festival and, you know, booking shows, um, in some kind of curatorial way, publishing a magazine, um...you know, those are all things that I think that are culturally valuable and uh, are appreciated even when they're, when they're hated or despised. You know. And I know that, you know, people hate and despise Pygmalion or, or, or Smile Politely for a variety of reasons, um, it's not to their taste but, uh, I'm okay with that, you know, it's like, as long as you're thinking about it I'm good with it, you know.

KN: Right. Right. It's—

AF: It's mostly just John Hoeffleur. He hates it.

KN: Does he?

SF: Yeah. Yeah. That's one of my like, most depressing and, you know, saddening, um, parts of my history is that, you know, John and I were friends, I saw him as a really good friend. Um, and then sometime, at some point he just flipped and decided he hated me. Every time he's, he gets a, has, he gets broken up with he comes around and apologizes and says, "I'm sorry I'm so hard on you," we go out for drinks and have a good time and then he gets back together with his girlfriend or he finds a new girlfriend and he hates me again. And it's really hard for me, cause I love him. Very much. But I'm not to his taste. You ever have a friend like that, you know, it's like, you really like someone, you just want 'em, you just want to be their friend? "I thought we were friends!" He doesn't like me enough.

KN: So sad!

SF: So sad. I'm, I'm talking about it in this interview! It's really affected me. Horrible. I had to promise Mel that I'd never bring it up again because it's like all we ever talk about. It's like, I won't bring it up, I'm sorry.

KN: This is your public declaration, he'll—

SF: Well, no, he knows, I've said it on Facebook and to his face a million times, it's just, whatever, he just, he sees me as, I think he somehow maybe sees me as like, um, exploitative. He's not totally wrong, I mean, like, there's an exploitation component to anything that you're doing that's within the capitalist sphere, you know. I'm putting on a show, I'm taking money, I'm profiting off of it, it's like, but like, I didn't create the system, I have to live within it. And those who are anarchist by nature and reject the system are, I think, doomed to live a life where they are going to not accomplish very much. Um...I'd rather accomplish shit and like, you know, accept my space within this structure of a world that I didn't create and try to do good stuff and kind of try to fight back against it in some...you know...frivolous way. Um, anyway, yeah, Smile Politely, 2007. Um, started that not as a...not as a, as a way to promote my own shows at all. Um, started it as a way for other people to promote other shows. Um, of course we do, you know, plenty of talking about the work that we do outside of Smile Politely but like, I don't know, you know, it's almost not...if you look at the 18,000 articles that have been published over the course of ten years, you know, it's such a small sliver that I think it's...it's not a blog. It's a magazine.

KN: Right. Right. And now, Pygmalion has been going for—

SF: This is its 13th year.

KN: Okay. And how did that start?

SF: Um...I noticed that there were some really pretty cool small Midwest indie festivals taking place, one in Bloomington, Indiana called Bloomington Fest, one in Ann Arb—close to Ann Arbor called Michigan Fest. Not the greatest names in the world but they are, they are what they are. And they were really cool. Bloomington Fest was the Secretly Canadian people just celebrating their own scene and trying to bring in their bands from out of town. They kind of did like a collection of club shows and it was a festival. Michigan Fest was more of a one-stage, two-day band after band after band after band, I remember seeing a video streaming, prior to YouTube, of !!! (Chk Chik Chick) playing at Michigan Fest and people just going crazy and having fun, I was like, well, we don't have that here. Why don't we have that here? We can do that here. I can do that here. I'm gonna do that here.

So I had a show booked for, um, Mates of State, Ida, and Saturday Looks Good to Me, a package tour that was playing on Friday, Saturday, Oct—Friday, September 30, 2005. All three of those bands at the time were signed to Polyvinyl Records. So it seemed like a great anchor to build around so I just started booking. On Wednesday I had Headlights and Maserati, who were on tour together doing their thing, and then on Thursday The Living Blue had their album show with The M's, another Polyvinyl band, at The High Dive, and then on Friday was the Mates of State show and then on Saturday I brought through the Appleseed Cast and I booked a bunch of other clubs. Iron Post, Mike N' Molly's, Canopy Club, um, Cowboy Monkey, yeah we had Lorenzo Getz play, it was just, it was, it was a big collection of club shows. I gave it a name, called it Pygmalion. It was supposed—had a first name, there was a name before Pygmalion. The Mosaic [pronouncing it as Mo-zy-ic] Music Festival. Mosaic. Mo-zy-ic. Mosaic. Yeah, Mosaic, not Mo-zy-ic. Mosaic. Like the web browser, the graphical web browser that Mark Andreessen,

NCSA, um, developed in 1992, the first functional web browser, changed the world forever, Mosaic. And so I thought that would be a really cool nod to the community, good alliteration, Mosaic Music Festival, and it was all set, it was all done. Mosaic Music Festival. Until Justine was like, you know, you should google that. Just to be sure. And would you fucking believe it, not only was there a Mosaic Music Festival, but it was fucking cool as shit! Like Tortoise was playing, and like, uh, Belle and Sebastian, it's in Singapore. Doesn't exist anymore, but it was Mosaic Music Fes—we went to—I googled it, like, can't fucking believe it! Mosaic Music Festival, you gotta be fucking kidding me! Had the design for the poster, I mean, you know, I was all baked and shit and I thought, well I'll have a poster of Moses—Mosaic—Moses holding the stone tablets—and I got that still. It just says Pygmalion Music Festival and not Mosaic Music Festival. So it was originally called Mosaic Music Festival and then when I realized that, you know, there was another one I had to—I mean literally we were announcing, I was, I mean I was, it was all done. I was like, I can't fucking believe it, the name of my festival is gone. I was like, well, what do I call it? I didn't want to call it like the Champaign-Urbana Music Festival, I didn't want to call it something that, you know...I don't wanna speak for the community, it's not my place. So Pygmalion, um, I tried to dig into something that was meaningful to me, um, and Slowdive as a band is, you know, one of my very favorites of all time, their, their, at one time their last record, until a month ago was, was Pygmalion. And I, and I love the Greek mythology behind Pygmalion, you know, the idea of creating something that you can't totally fall in love with, you cannot get reciprocity from, you cannot, um, you, you cannot, you know, uh, attain. Um...it's kind of like everyone's, you know, universal struggle, I think.

So I liked the concept, I liked the representation so, Pygmalion. It was Pygmalion Music Festival and it started, got to the end of the line that first year and it was like, "Well, that was fun." And um...made money. Made money doing it. Paid off my, uh, credit card. So that was the last time I was in credit card debt.

KN: Nice.

SF: Yeah. So that was a real big thing for me, was like, oh shit! Like...you know, I have this babe who's like living with me, you know? And like, totally out-kicked my coverage, like I gotta keep her around! I mean, she's not obsessed with money but it certainly doesn't hurt to be like, "Come on girl, let's go to Door County and tear it up!" She loved Door County. So that's what I did after Pygmalion that first year, I paid off my credit card, took her to Door County for a long weekend.

Um...and then I just kinda like started—but I didn't even get started on the next one till like March or April. Because I didn't know what the fuck I was doing! Um, but, you know, I learned pretty quick on how to do it, and it's all in--the name of the game is getting financial support, applying those funds to booking the acts and selling tickets to make it profitable. Um, and so that, you know, Pygmalion, um, really, you know, was the beginning, I think, of a, of a career. You know, modest but functional. I mean, you see my house. It's lovely.

KN: It is!

SF: It's small and old.

KN: It's perfect.

SF: We love it. Totally affordable. Um, no aspirations for anything bigger. No, I want a, I want a house close to the beach. I want a vacation house.

KN: There you go.

SG: For real. I fucking hate the winter.

KN: Oh, I'm with you.

SF: The worst. Where you from?

KN: I'm from Northern California.

SF: Oh shit, like Arcata?

KN: Like even further north. Mt. Shasta.

SF: Whoa. Fuckin' A.

KN: Yeah. So we have winter. But it's—in terms of cold, it's nothing like this.

SF: Different type of winter. Different type of winter. You have a coastal winter.

KN: We get snow, it's, it's the mountains, but it's, it's--

SF: You do? Oh, it's in—it's inland!

KN: Yeah.

SF: So it's on the way to Ashland.

KN: Exactly. I lived in Ashland before I lived—moved here. Lived there for six years, I love it, it's home, I want to move back.

SF: Okay. Ashland's got kind of a cool scene. I used to book shows there.

KN: Really?

SF: Yeah, I can't remember what that woman's name was. Uh....Ashland. She was fucking crazy. In a good way.

KN: Was it, was it a venue that you're talking about?

SF: Yeah, hold on. Ashland...Oregon. What was that girl's name. Let's see...Ashland, Ashland, Ashland, Ashland, Ashland. What was that fucking girl's name? Oh, this is old. These are emails from like 2006. It's so much fun to go back through this shit. Uhhhh.....I don't know. Go ahead. Anyway, you were saying—

KN: Uh...now I'm totally, I'm

SF: Uh...oh, winter. I want a vacation home.

KN: Yes.

SF: I gotta figure that out. Somehow. Um, fuck. I really wanna know about this now. Um...Ashland. I know I booked shows there, I booked shows there. Or I tried to.

KN: Was it one place or just—

SF: No, it was a promoter. There was a band called Ashland, that's what I'm getting convoluted here.

KN: Right.

SF: Um, anyway, go ahead. Sorry.

KN: Well, let's see. We've, we've touched on how your things—

SF: I mean, I'm really just vomiting here.

KN: Well that's, that's kinda what we, that's what we like. That's how we want it. Um...what else is there? Are there things that I ha—that, you know, things you have going that I probably don't even know about. You've got Nicodemus, you've got—

SF: Well, Nicodemus, I stopped booking tours in 2015. 2014 really, but 2015, so I don't book tours anymore. Um, it's extraordinarily time consuming and there's not a lot of money in it and the moment you have an act that is really starting to blow up, generally they leave for a bigger agency, and, you know, it makes sense, more power to 'em. And frankly an agent should not—I did, I did sign—I was playing Iron Man in that I was both booking tours and promoting shows and it's really hard to do both of those, you have to kinda choose a side if you really wanna be successful. Um...I am, I am pretty solely focused right now on making Pygmalion into something new. Recreating it to a certain extent. Um, I know for a fact that, um, I've aged out of my target demographic. Katie. I'm 37. I've got gray hair in my beard. I got infant poop in my fingernails. I, I'm not young and listening to new music, I don't even know what's cool anymore. I mean I do, but I don't. You know, it's like, like the acts, like, that I have confirmed for Pygmalion this year, I've had to be introduced to. I didn't already know—I knew their names just by reading music magazines, but I didn't know them and I have to be introduced to it and I have to do research. Whereas when I first started to book Pygmalion it was just like, [snap] I know it all. I know it, and at the time, indie rock was cool! It's not cool anymore. Not so cool anymore. Um, so, I'm trying to-- what I'm, my, my, my, my goal is, my goal is to pass off the, you know, booking and producing Pygmalion in pretty short order. I mean, I'm grooming Patrick Singer, um, to take it over.

KN: Is he young? Younger?

SF: Yeah, he's 28. Um, and, and single. No family. No kids, you know. A girlfriend, but, um, yeah, I'm vesting him into the company and will theoretically, um...give it to him. Hopefully—I think I'm gonna try to book Pygmalion for two more years, and then at the 15th anniversary, the 15th anniversary of Pygmalion, you know, a month after the 15th anniversary I'll turn 40. And I think that's it. And I think that's good. Which is to say that I don't believe that a 40 year old should be booking a festival whose primary target demographic are undergrads. It needs someone younger. Doesn't need somebody who's an undergrad, it needs somebody who's maybe a decade younger. And so that's my goal. Um...

KN: You'll still be involved, though, in the festival.

SF: Yeah, I mean, I'll always—

KN: Cause there's so many other—it's not just music.

SF: That's right, right, that's right. I mean, it'll give me a chance to continue to explore other opportunities for the event as it grows, and you know, the tech and lit and food and hopefully a kid's component, I mean that's really the big one that I want to do, is add an educational and interesting, um,

component directed at kids that shows them what I believe good art to be. Again, ultra-pretentious of me to say, but don't believe that what a lot of kids are shown, like the kids music that like, the, like the kid's bands? Come on, man. I mean it's not bad but like...man, I didn't grow up on that. I grew up on fucking Depeche Mode. I grew up on Guns N' Roses. I grew up on Peter Gabriel. I grew up on challenging, interesting music that inspired me to think big. Kid's songs, it's fine, there's nothing wrong with it, I like Daniel Tiger songs. I do! But I don't think that that should be the end-all, be-all, the pinnacle of what we're exposing children to. All that safe stuff. I want my kids to hear that, hear songs about love and about death and about fighting and fucking and all that stuff. You're not gonna be able to keep them away from it for very long, so just embrace it and talk about it and let 'em experience it. So that's how I see, um, the kid's component, it's not—if you, if, if, if people are expected to bring their kids and having this like, really, like, um, you know, sterilized, safe environment...they're not gonna find that. Sorry. You know. Not you, but. Question is can I find a sponsor that will fund it and not bring like, you know, the boring staple kid—I don't really wanna bring Ralph's World or Laurie Berkner and pass that off as a kid's show. It is a kid's show, I don't want a kid's show. I want a fucking cool show that's promoted to kids. That'll be a challenge. And that's the type of thing I'm gonna be able to dive into if I'm not primarily responsible for booking the entire—

KN: The entire—yeah.

SF: Festival, exactly. So. Yeah, that's my goal. And then, I don't know, I, I, I, I don't know, I...I want to keep booking club shows, I want to keep bringing bands in but, um, it's hard. The ticket-buying audience has dried up. People don't really buy tickets to concerts the way they used to, certainly not for the stuff that I like. And so I'm trying to be really careful and choosy about what I do and what I don't do. So.

Um, I don't know. You're...you ask me questions, I'll answer' em.

KN: So—

SF: You got anything else?

KN: Yeah, um, going back a little to—it sounds like you, you two made a very conscious decision that you were gonna stay in this area?

SF: Yes.

KN: And do you want to talk about that a little, what sort of informed that?

SF: Um...it was really, um, a function of...a combination of necessity and, um...livability. Fact is is that Justine's family situation is—it's not bad, it's just not all that tight. Her mom and dad are divorced. Her dad is, um...I have to stop being so ableist. I'm gonna really work on that. Um, he's not well. He's not dysfunctional but he is pretty dysfunctional, he didn't, he didn't provide a very good, um, backbone as a father for Justine. Justine's mom is not—she's depressed, alone, no ambition, no...it was very clear to her, to Justine, that I wanted to maintain a close relationship with my family. I was willing to move to Chicago. We broke up for just a little bit and Justine decided she wanted to take me back after four days. A harrowing four days. Um, and Justine decided she wanted to go to grad school, in uh, art education. So she started taking classes at Parkland and working and applied and got in to the University of Illinois. And so at that point we were gonna be here and so we bought the house. During that same time is when I developed the initial arc of Nicodemus Agency, Pygmalion Festival, and Smile Politely. And so by

the time she graduated in May of 2010 we had successfully launched all of these projects. “We” being a partnership, me being the one that did it. She was focused on school. She finished grad school, she did her student teaching and promptly decided she was never going to teach public school, ever. Like, great! Now we got a bunch of loans. Uh, she took her graduation gift from her mom and bought a camera and started shooting weddings for free. To build a portfolio. Because, be—because, like, because unlike a lot of people, young people, she or I don’t believe in this concept that you’re automatically entitled to professional wages just because you’ve decided that you are something. Just because you bought a camera doesn’t mean that you’re somehow a functional photographer that’s worthy of professional wages. You have to prove yourself and showcase that you are one, and until you have a portfolio that people are saying, “Damn, that’s fucking good. I want to hire you!” If you’re seeking the work and you’re asking people for the job, you’re not really in the position of a professional. It’s until it flips, that’s when it happens. So—yeah that really creases me all the time, I see posts about that on Facebook, it’s just like, “You should never do work for free!” It’s like...depends on how you see work. Depends on what you see—I mean, I did a lot of shit for free, just to put me in a place where I can be more valuable to the next person that wants to hire me.

Um, yeah she shot a bunch of weddings for free, like five. And built a website and a portfolio and people at that wedding took those photos and were like, “Damn, these are fucking good!” And then, you know, some cousin was like, “I want her!” She built a rate card and as time went on she kept raising it and she’d become in demand. So she’s built a nice career for herself being a wedding photographer simply from—I mean, she was a photographer since she was a kid, um, she did, shot photos, um, um, in high school and then went to school at University of Illinois, she had a full ride to ISU but all of her friends went to U of I so she took out loans instead and came here, like an idiot. Um, but whatever.

Um, so her career as a photographer has really, um, been a really, um, wonderful component to our, to our, our, family-owned business. We each have our place, we each bring income in and, uh, we have, we have separate accounts so that we can’t get up in each other’s shit when it’s like, “I’m gonna buy this thing!” And it’s like, that’s the fucking stupidest thing. And she can’t say, like, “You spend all your money on cigarettes!” It’s like, eh, I make the money, I’m gonna buy the cigarettes. Um, so we’ve worked that out pretty nicely. Um, but yeah we both co-own the company. Theoretically we both co-own everything but in Illinois it’s a no-fault state so if we were to divorce it would be 50/50 anyway, there’s nothing you can do about it, so. Um...we stayed here as a result of the opportunity that presented itself and just walking through the door. Working hard. Trying to develop relationships and a business model that, that, that was functional and not overly demanding or painful and that’s one of the things I am thankful for, um, pretty much on a daily basis is that I choose when I work. I choose when I take meetings. I never take meetings on Mondays. Mondays are clean. It’s just a chance for me to catch up on emails, and I sit and I do emails. Sometimes if I’m really, really ambitious or if I’ve been drinking on Sundays, I’ll do all my emails on Sunday night. All my emails on Sunday night and then I wake up in the morning and I’ve got space to breathe, work in my garden. Check in on my emails and do my business. Only take meetings Tuesday through Thursday. Which I think is a pretty nice work week.

KN: Sounds like it!

SF: Yeah. Yeah so that’s part of the motivation for me is that, um, work real hard, and define my own schedule. And so that has kept us here. And you know, there’s a lot of things in Champaign-Urbana I hate. Um, it suffers from a significant lack of culture, despite what people would have you believe.

There's good stuff, but not enough. Um, there's some good restaurants, most of 'em suck. Um, or aren't memorable. Uh, it's not very beautiful. But we got this home, we got this—there's like, a lot there, you know? We have two pieces of property, 819 and 821. That's what I really wanted to buy it, is cause we had this whole, like, space and so now we've done this whole garden and mulched out a bunch of stuff, and you know, to the day we're planting shit every year and building new stuff and doing the deck and I don't know, doing all kinds of stuff, you know. So. That's why we stayed. My parents are here. My brother is here. My sister was here. Aron knew Erin. They worked at the Post together. And that was right when Erin and her ex-husband Tristan, who is my best friend, Tristan who has played in my bands, um, that's when they divorced and so she moved to Brooklyn. But, um, yeah there was a long time here that we, we were all here. Um, but yeah, my brother and his wife and their boys are here and, yeah, I think the big thing about Champaign-Urbana is it is what you make of it. It's what you make of it. I don't sit around too much stewing about all the things we don't have, I try to engage and appreciate, appreciate the things that we do have, you know. Or I said that wrong way, I don't think about the things that we DON'T have, try to appreciate the things that we do have. So. It's always getting better and kind of getting worse. Depends on how you look at it. I think I like Urbana more than Champaign now.

KN: Oh really?

SF: Like, I used to like Champaign more than Urbana, but now Champaign's kind of boring. Well, what is there to do in downtown Champaign?

KN: Drink.

SF: That's it. There's no art to look at. There's a little cool shopping, Furniture Lounge, Exile on Main Street, you know, um, Circles if you're into...you know, if you're a woman. Um, who can afford really nice clothes. Um, there's nothing to do in Champaign. Urbana's got funky stuff. Weird stuff. You can still go on any night, most of the time, pop into the Iron Post, you're gonna see jazz. It's great. You know? And Paul's surly but that's, that's part of the charm, isn't it?

KN: That's exactly—yeah.

SF: That's part of the charm. You can go into Rose Bowl, watch a country music show, hang out with some locals. Um, you know, IMC does interesting programming. Um, I think Urbana's got a real opportunity to kinda split—hey, look at that.

KN: Awwww.

SF: Zonked out. Um, yeah, I mean, we're, we're, we're staying. Not going anywhere. Um...I kinda have an exit strategy. I gotta figure out how to afford this vacation house.

KN: Yeah, yeah, beach house.

SF: I think vacation house—I mean that, like, in the most literal sense, “to vacate.” To literally—I'm thinking about it literally. Not like, “We're going on vacation, turn up!” It's more like, no I need to vacate. My life and this town. Um, but I think that that's something I, I mean I sure would like to be able to aff—I mean that's like, I gotta figure out how to like, if I could like do it in a, like, do it as a rental house, you know, and like rent out the house on VRBO? 'Cause like I rent houses on VRBO, just this weekend we're doing it with friends, in like Mammoth Caves, Kentucky, right? Well they have a, some

family has this house and they rent it and they probably pay their mortgage off the strength of the rental. So I want to do that! And so that at the end of the line when I'm 55, 60 years old and my kids are all grown up, it's like, "Goodbye! I'm vacating! I'm going to the home that was defined as a vacation—a vacation, to vacate this life." That's my big goal.

KN: That sounds like a good plan.

SF: I think so too. Um, I don't know, do you want to know more about my history of playing?

KN: I do!

SF: So...you know, we started our band at a time when Champaign-Urbana was like, really hot shit. In the national music scene. Um, huge signing spree. But the music scene was lit then. Mabel's and, you know, before that, Trito's Uptown and Trino's and the Blind Pig in downtown Champaign and all kinds of bands coming through all the fucking time and then you had this really powerful local music scene, between Poster Children, and Hum, and Hardvark and Honcho Overload and Mother who became Menthol, and then like, other scenes like Moon Seven Times, all of them touring and all of them being signed to major labels and, you know, get, you know, getting out there! So we came up in the shadow of that, you know, and there was the house party scene with Braid and Sarge and um, you know, bringing in bands, and Oblivion and Cap'n Jazz and there was just always music, there was tons of house parties in Urbana, there were tons of shows and venues, I mean you couldn't turn around, there was fucking shows everywhere and there were kids all over the place, going to shows, obsessing about shows, it was cool as fuck to go to shows and then to play in bands and to be super pretentious and ultra-snobby about it. And that appealed to my sensibilities. And I was never into punk music I still don't like punk music at all. Bunch of fucking hacks. It's okay! You can say that shit out loud!

(Laughter)

KN: But it's not about me.

SF: Yeah. I don't like punk music. Boring as sin. Boring as fuck. Not sin. Sin is not boring. Um, it's, yeah, it's boring to me. But I love the scene, I love the ethos. I love the scene. I would go to the shows, at like, upstairs at McKinley or in the basement at the Red Herring and I'd see like Back of Dave from, uh, St. Louis, and, um, go see shows at the Rocket House over on Illinois and like, I wasn't--Rainer Maria, I saw at Rocket House. I was not into the music, I was into what it meant. What the scene was. Um, that ethos stuck with me. The music not so much. Um, and so there was like this really huge boom moment in Champaign-Urbana, and it, it, it exploded like all things do, and it's never come back. Everyone always talks about, "Well, it ebbs and flows, you know?" And it was ebbing and flowing in the '60s and it would go down in the '70s, then the '80s had this really—John Isberg is obviously doing this amazing documentary about Champaign-Urbana music scene, and he's ending it at 2000 and good, because you wanna know what? Since 2000 it's really not been shit. But I don't think that that's just Champaign-Urbana, I think that's indicative of like a national, cultural movement away from that type of engagement. So, um, when, when we first started we were really, um, bright-eyed and starry-eyed about bands like Hum and bands like Braid. And, um, had, um, all of these—Poster Children. Had all of these heroic figures to look up to. That when, inspired us to do this, to do it the right way. You practice your fucking instrument. Play in your band, just your band. You practice and you play and then you practice and you play and you get better and you record and you put up an album and you tour on it and

you try to find anywhere that will let you play. We would play fucking anywhere! For better or for worse we played anywhere. And that's what made us into a band. I don't subscribe to the idea that just getting together and playing some songs...uh, having a show at the local venue, I don't know that that puts you in a band. It makes you part of a project. Something fun. And it's nothing to be ashamed of, but I think that there's a big difference between really playing in a band and making it your primary focus and your goal, and just having fun. Nothing wrong with having fun, but don't expect to be awarded any accolades, don't expect to be impressive to anyone who's really listening. I think that there's a reason that a lot of people don't come to see shows, local shows. Bands aren't that good! They're just not that good. And the ones that are good—and there is a couple right now that I think are really good—but we'll see if they—all of them have members that are, they have jobs or family or something and cannot pursue it in the way that they would need to pursue it. You know what Braid did? I mean, Braid is a name not just because they were—they were a good band, it's chicken and the egg. They were a great band because they put their band above everything. They worked at Silvercreek. They worked at Silvercreek or they—I can't remember where, um, Todd worked...they worked, all worked jobs where they could leave at any time and come back and have the job. They designed their life so that they could make money when they were here, waiting tables, bartending, barista, whatever it was that they needed to do, and they'd fucking work doubles when they were here. And they'd work and they'd work and they'd work and they lived together, they lived cheap, and they'd tour and tour and tour and tour and tour and tour and tour and they'd come back and they'd do the same thing over and over again, and over time they got better and better and better. You look at the trajectory of Braid, look at their first album, *Frankie Welfare Boy Age 5*, or whatever it was, then *The Age of Oteen* when they signed to, um, when they were signed to Parasol, then they made the jump to Polyvinyl for, um, *Frame & Canvas* and they got better and better and better the whole way through. Because they were devoted, devoted to their craft and you can see it and you can hear it and there was a reason why they were selling a thousand tickets two nights in a row at shows in Chicago by the time that they ended. It wasn't just by accident. They got really good and people noticed that and were like, it was no longer just like, ah I'm gonna go to this, do this social thing where I might meet a boy or a girl, it was like, I'm going to watch this band because they're fucking awesome! And so, um, we came up with that. We saw, we had people to point to and be like, they're doing it the right way and I'm going to emulate them. And I don't know that, and, and, and, I don't...and that doesn't exist really anymore. But we got lucky in that we came on the tail end of that. Um, but we were never as good as those bands. I mean, I think we got to the place where we could have been, but, like as far as Hum and Menthol and Braid and stuff, we were...we ended up—my brother, you know, he chose the job. And the, the house. And, and, and the wife. Good choice. Solid choice. But that's why Headlights, you know, Headlights, if you look at the trajectory of Headlights now, Erin and Psychic Twin doing really well; and Nick, their bassist, is now, um, you know, one-half on Sylvan Esso, who are fucking huge.

KN: Oh! Yeah.

SF: Yeah like, their whole tour is sold out, they're gonna be—Sylvan Esso will be...they won't be headlining Coachella next year but they will be top undercard. And that's Nick from Headlights. Yeah. So that's somebody that John needs to talk to, really, is Nick. Um...but Nick's more Milwaukee scene than Champaign, he just played in this band, played in Headlights.

But um, yeah we...we really took it as seriously as you could while going to school. Um, we practiced twice a week and sometimes three times a week. And that was not negotiable. You couldn't say, "Hey

guys, I've got a test to study for." You fucking were at practice. And there was no, like, "Hey guys, I can't tour, I can't go out and play these shows." Not an option. Band rule. You're either in or you're out. You can stay in or you'll be out. And we were all in. And that's what ended up—you know, we--when we released Rings in 2003 we toured, that was the biggest, most we toured, I took over booking from my brother and I went hog wild on it. And we did—Absinthe Blind in 2003 did four tours, um, a total of, I don't know, 60 dates. And midway through the third leg of the tour it basically became like, okay we're going to make a choice. Either you're...either we're in or we're out. You can't have a full-time job. I work at—I worked at Piccadilly, at the liquor store and I umped, uh, softball games. Baseball games. You know, everyone work as bartending shifts or at a bakery, Tristan worked at Mirabelle, we all just put our lives together in a particular way that was designed to allow us to tour. And the ultimatum was on my brother, Adam. It was like, you gonna do this or not. And he ultimately chose not. We were gonna move to Athens. Georgia. That was the, that was the plan. Uh, we were gonna move to Athens, Georgia, and, um, he chose to not do that. And so then Headlights started and they, they toured, I mean, Headlights, in between 2004 and 2010 when they stopped playing...I mean, I think that Headlights probably played...400 shows. Shit ton of shows. So many fucking shows. Um, and that came, that was born of the ethos that we came up around. The Champaign-Urbana music scene was like, really an amazing place to find...other musicians who were interested in doing that type of work. Um, yeah, the more I talk about it right now the more I really lament it. It's kinda hard to be functional as a promoter of music when you know in your heart that there's not that much from which to choose. Um, I mean, I'm barely booking any locals on Pygmalion this year at all. Almost none. I mean I've got like, maybe ten. And...I think that's all I'm gonna do. And it's not me trying to be mean as much as I'm just like...I don't know. It's just...not hearing it. I feel bad feeling that way. Maybe it's just my age. There's other people I've talked with recently that say, that disagree with me strongly. Like, there's a bunch of great bands, like, you're just not listening. It's like, well, we disagree.

Yeah. There are some cool bands but again I don't see anyone who's really committed. Really committed. It's like, Luke Bergkoetter's a great, amazing drummer, right? He plays in like five bands! Keep telling him, "Pick a lane! Stay in your lane! Just do Bookmobile. Just do Bookmobile!" And, you know, Trevor's in a position to do that. Jared's in a position to do that. Just fucking go—just be Bookmobile! And go fucking hogwild. Cause Bookmobile's really good. Really fucking good, I don't, I don't, I don't even like punk music, which I can—I hear what's good and what's not. I feel like I do. And they're fucking really good. I wish that they would just, like, that Luke would—that they'd all kinda like, make the announcement, be like, we're only in this band and we're obsessed with the idea that we're going to make Bookmobile into, like, something big. I think it could be successful. I think people really respond to them. They're fun. That song, (sings) "Oooh, I don't like you! Ooooooh I don't like you!" (Makes guitar sounds) "So lyric lyric lyric lyric lyric lyric lyric lyric lyric lyric," I dunno what he's singing but it's like catchy as fuck, you know? I really wish that they would do that. I hope that they do that, you know. It would be great.

Um...and then the ones that do kinda get, like, the, the, the, the bug—they move. The Leadership was awesome. And then Jonathan Childers moved and now he's in Blank Range out of Nashville. Big, big fucking time agent, and um, really doing big shit. But he, he could see it! He was like, I gotta get out of here, I gotta go to Nashville. Um, I don't think Tara Terra is a very good band at all, um, but they work hard, um, it seems like they work hard but they're, they, they're a Chicago band. I don't see them as Champaign anymore. Um, I think that they could get—I think that they have the opportunity to get

better, um, with some growth. Um...what I think of them is pret--is pretty irrelevant, you know. There's a lot of popular music out there that I don't like. But um, but then, but Emily moved to Chicago. And so that makes them a Chicago act and not a Champaign act. And so...yeah I don't blame bands for moving at all. Get the fuck outta here. Go somewhere where there's like people who might come see your show. So. I know.

KN: Well-

SF: Um, I don't know. Do you, do you have any—

KN: I mean, do you have--we kinda hopped all over the place—

SF: I mean, I'm just vomiting—

KN: And, and that's great—

SF: I don't know, I don't know how to do this, you know?

KN: There's no—like I said, no, no real structure but do you have any--

SF: Are you taking this and like breaking it down, like creating a clip, essentially, just like—

KN: We'll, we'll post a clip on, on the Sousa page. But, you know, the whole thing will be available in its entirety for, you know, research. At some point. Um, any awesome stories from, from any point in time—in bands or otherwise—that you feel need to go on the record?

SF: Well, I dunno. You know, eh, for, for me, it's just—there were two really distinct moments for me as a player, where I felt like there was something familial about the music scene that I was in. Probably wasn't as dynamic or big as what the—Hum and Poster Children and Menthol and all those guys and girls were going through, but, um...right when we first started in 1996-97, we weren't cool at all. Like, we were 'on the outside looking in' of the cool scene. The cool scene was more the Parasol Records, 12 Inch Records, like Castor, Braid, Sarge, they were cool and we were not very cool, but we weren't very good and I don't totally, I don't blame them at all for being like, those kids have good ideas but they totally suck. Um, because we kind of did. Um, but instead of just kind of like pouting about it and being bummed out that we weren't accepted by the cool kids, we found our own little group and we had a, we started a music collective, a band collective called Toast Music. And that album got put out, it was a Toast Music collective, that's how I met John Hoeffleur. Um, cause he joined the band Jove. And it started off as four bands: Absinthe Blind, Jove, Token, and Marble. And we would get together every week and talk and drink and smoke weed and smoke cigarettes and drink coffee and plan events. We'd do events, and we'd do a round robin. We'd do a show at Blind Pig, we'd do a show at Chubby's Pub, did a show at, um...Chubby's Pub, Blind Pig, um...oh, house parties. Um, and we, some band would open, second, third, fourth, and then you'd switch it up, and yeah everyone had to open, everyone had to close. And we, and we filled and packed the place every time. Cause you got four bands! Total of...you know, eighteen members, all with disparate social scenes, and we all promoted the fuck out of it, to no end because we were passionate about it. And Toast Music, and then the collective grew, ended up being a thing of like, twelve acts. And put out a sampler, CD sampler, remember those?

KN: Oh yeah.

SF: So we had a CD sampler called Toast Music. Toast, as a result of a quote from a, Sam Shepard play called True West, still one of my favorites. Um, Toast Music. And, uh, we put out a sampler and we played and played and played. And then that kind of just dissolved. It was never like a bad break up or anything, bands—people graduated college, went away, went to medical school, you know, and, but we're all still friends to the day, you know, everyone kinda knows each other still through Facebook and it's great to, you know, see everyone, how everyone's lives has developed. And so that really felt familial and then somewhere around 2001, 2002, 2003, American Minor moved to town. They're a band from West Virginia. They were like real southern roots rock. And they were, like, ready-made and they were signed to Jive Records. They had a big-time manager and they had a big-time lawyer, and they were like, a band that was really talented and, but by design, being promoted in the same with The Strokes and The Hives and the, the uh, who's the other one, The Hives, The Strokes, um, oh Kings of Leon, you know, like all those kind of like, throwback, um...straight rock and roll bands, and they were one of 'em. But they just got off the ground a little too late and it never really popped open. But they were like hanging around in the scene forever. Bruno their bassist lived with me and Justine for the first year that we lived in the house over on Ells.

Um, and The Blackouts were just at the top form and The Blackouts just got so fucking good. I mean they started off, came to town, they moved here from like a little tiny town called Odell, Illinois and they were fucking atrocious. (Laughter) They were terrible! But we—it was just like Absinthe Blind, it was, we were all kids, nobody could play their goddamn instruments! But they just kept playing and playing and playing. But the difference with The Blackouts, and Steve and Joe and Pat and Mark, the difference with them is that they had swagger. They didn't give a fuck. I mean, we were all self-conscious about, like, all kinds of things, you know, from press photos and album artwork, I, who know fucking what. They didn't give a fuck. They were so raw. And so devil may care, fuck it attitude, and they also got so good. That album, um...Living in Blue...is a fucking 10. That is a fucking perfect album. I listen to that shit all the time still. And you could just—and we, we became friends! We played totally different kinds of music and there was definitely like, competitive shit and like shit talk because we totally played different types of music, but as friends we became friends. We really respected each other's ethics, work ethic. We were all in our bands. And we all toured and we were all trying to get signed, and try to get on a tour and try to get an agent, and we—Champaign-Urbana was our home, and when we'd hang out we'd hang out at Mike and Molly's or wherever, and we'd drink and we'd talk shit and we'd go to each other's shows and we'd go to other shows and we'd talk shit about that, and it was fun and it was really familial. And there was a moment there, there was like a scene. I remember when Headlights went out on tour, um, the last tour I really went, big one, 2004 with The Living Blue, they changed their name cause The Blackouts were like an old band and they couldn't use it. Living Blue, Beauty Shop, Headlights, and a band called The Situation, this kid named Luke who was really fucking cool too, wonder what happened to that dude. Um, The Situation was really fucking cool. That four—shit, it was a Sunday night in August—a Sunday night in August! Fucking sold out the High Dive. Packed to the gills. Just swarmed. And so there was this, like, this like moment where it was just like, and like that was as a result, it wasn't because, I mean, it wasn't a result because, like, we were all like dashing handsome. Um, it's because we all played really hard and we really took it seriously and I think that the people in Champaign-Urbana who were interested in music could tell that it was being taken seriously and you could hear it and you could see it onstage. And that was the last moment where I think it was really...there was a scene, and, and it—there was a scene and then like, there were bands that weren't in that scene and they were pissed. Cause they weren't fucking in the scene. And it would always kind of like—I remember Steve Ucherek,

um, the lead singer of The Blackouts, and I talking about it and I'm not going to name the band that was pissed—we, we, we, we, we got word that this particular person in a band was pissed that they weren't invited onto our, they weren't part of our reindeer games. And Steve was just like, maybe you should play more. Maybe you should take more time and maybe you should keep writing better songs. He's like, we didn't just show up yesterday. We've been doing this for six years. We practice and play, and practice and play. And that's what I think, I think this thread that I keep going back into is like...it's like anything. It's like, baseball player, ballerina, you know. A plumber. Yeah! It's like, if you don't do it, if you don't take it serious, you're not really gonna put out good work. And it's no different in music, I mean, it's like, we see rock and roll as being, like, something different than like, symphony orchestra, but it's not. It's like...professional violinist or...um, flautist, they pla—they, they, they play and they practice and they play and they practice, they get better and better and better and better. And that's why they become, you know, become part of symphony orchestras and are paid for their services because they're the best. And I think that that's what peop—that's what, that's the argument that I have with, um, this kid that I love so much who works for us, Boswell, um, he's the, Tara Terra's manager. Um, he believes there's like, a great music scene. I'm like, no dude, there's not. It's like, if the pinnacle is like, 94 paid at the Cowboy Monkey on a Friday night, which is like, I don't know, what, you know, like, there's a reason for that. If they were really that good, there'd be a lot more than 90 people there, I assure you. We were in Bloomington, Indiana last year promoting Pygmalion, and one of the bands that were playing Pygmalion, Hoops, um, had their album release show that night and they're a really, really good band, you can just hear it. You can tell they just get it. And um, it was on a Wednesday night at The Bishop, which is a 250 cap, cap club, and that shit had 300 people in there, it was just fucking packed to the gills. And like, that's why. Because people know that it's really good. Cool, fun show with a band that really takes it serious, who are touring and putting out albums and...starting to become, um, redundant. Sorry.

KN: That's okay!

SF: Um. What time is it?

KN: Close to noon.

SF: Okay! What do I have next. I'm so sorry that I totally fucking biffed that.

KN: No, no, it's fine! Here, I'll—if you're—if you think you've if you've said everything that you need to say, want to say, I will turn this off.

SF: I feel like I've have.

KN: Okay.

SF: I don't really know what I'm supposed to say.

[Audio ends]

