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Interview Date: May 14, 2013

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Interviewer:	Debbie Harwell
Transcriber:	Michelle Kokes
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Abstract:

Radio personality Paul Berlin discusses his broadcasting career from his high school days in Memphis to his sixty-three-year (and counting) career in Houston. He discusses the changes in musical trends from the big bands and vocalists of the 1940s through rap and popular music today. The particularly emphasizes the 1950s and early 1960s as an era that produced the best popular music of all time with the greatest diversity until the drug culture of the mid- to late-1960s ushered in a change. Berlin talks about the openness of the radio studio at KNUZ, which invited high school students to come in and watch the show, make requests, and contribute the occasional school cheer. He mentions the many artists that he brought to Houston's music venues such as the Plantation Ballroom, the City Auditorium, Music Hall, and Coliseum. He explains how he selected records to play and how his choices impacted the careers of people like Mickey Gilley and the Big Bopper, J P. Richardson. Additionally he explains how the independent record shops were hurt by the larger department stores selling records as lost-leaders to get people in their stores. Lastly, the conversation takes up the absence of oldies stations on the radio, even in diverse, big-market cities like Houston and Los Angeles. Berlin explains that this was a product of advertisers targeting young, impressionable consumers.

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON
ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT

Paul Berlin

Interviewed by: **Debbie Harwell**
Date: **May 14, 2013**
Transcribed by: **Michelle Kokes**
Location: **KSEV Radio**

DH: I'm Debbie Harwell and I'm here today with Paul Berlin. It's May 14, 2013.We are in the studio at KSEV radio where he broadcasts on Saturday evenings. We are going to talk a little bit about his life and career and music trends in Houston over the decades. So let's start with telling me your full name.

PB: My full name is Paul Sanders Berlin.

DH: And when and where were you born?

PB: Born in Memphis, Tennessee, August 22, 1930.

DH: Oh you have a birthday coming up soon!

PB: Yeah.

DH: That's good. Tell me a little bit about your years growing up in Memphis.

PB: Very, very hot. I just, you know, I look back now and I think, God, how in the world did anybody grow up in a city as hot and as humid as Memphis with no air conditioning? Because I can remember waking up in the morning and I would be in a pool of perspiration. I'd get out of bed and go in to take a shower, and I would turn on the cold side, and the water would come out warm not knowing what it's like to feel refreshed from a good night's sleep and a good cool refreshing shower. I never had that in the summer time nor up until I moved out of that God forsaken city on the Bayou. No, we are on the Bayou; they are on the muddy Mississippi. Oh, it

was brutal. But I was happy. I mean I had a wonderful childhood. A bunch of hoodlum friends, and we played games, and we laughed, and we seemed to always have enough money to go to the Rosemary Theater on Saturday and maybe enough money to buy a popcorn or a Baby Ruth or something for in between. You know, back, well, I was born in 1930. In the thirties nobody had anything. So anybody that had a nickel or a dime was in good shape.

DH: That's true. Memphis was a great seat for music. How did that influence you early on?

PB: Well, most of these along the Mississippi River were influenced by music because music traveled up and down that river. So if you lived in a river town some of that music is going to get off. And a lot of it got off in Memphis and Saint Louis and New Orleans and like I say, think of any city on the river and you're going to have a music city.

DH: That's a good point. Were you affiliated with Sun Studios for a while there?

PB: Well, I knew, I worked for a radio station. I won a contest my senior year in high school, and I got a job as a summer time disc jockey and when the summer ended the program director said, "What are you going to do now?" I said, "Well I'm thinking about going to law school." And they had given me a one hour radio program for these three months, and I filed records and swept and gofer jobs. He said, "Well, how do you like radio?" I said, "Well, you know, how would you not like sitting down for one hour a day playing your favorite music and dedicating it to your hoodlum buddies who are all out there listening?" So, you know, it was a fun thing. I said, "Yeah, I love it." So, "How would you like a regular job?" I said, "What?" "Well, yeah, if you are interested we will give you a regular job." This is 1948. $55 a week. Well, I was young and single, and there were guys who were members of the staff who were married and had kids making $55 a week. Of course I never had that much money at one time in my life. So anyway, I was living at home and just having a wonderful time, and I started right there in Memphis until

I fell asleep one night. I was an all-night disc jockey, and I fell asleep on the air. Sunday morning the preacher came in, and I had my head down and I was "zz-ing," and he thought I had a heart attack and died. And he shook me and he woke me up. Man, I couldn't believe it. I looked up and this fifteen minute record that I had was going around and around, and it had been going around and around for an hour and thirty minutes, and that was Sunday morning. Monday morning the manager said, "You know, I can't let this slide. I've got to fire you." I said, "I understand." He said, "I got a station down in Biloxi, Mississippi, if you'd like to go to work down there." I said, "No, I don't want to go down there. I'd rather go west." "Where?" "Maybe Dallas or Houston. That's where I'd like to go." "Well, I got a friend in Houston that owns a station." He said, "I'll call him and tell him what happened and we'll see." So he called Dave Morris at KNUZ he told him exactly what happened. "I got a young guy here fell asleep on the air…and he said he wants to come to Houston." He said, "If you don't hire him somebody's going to." He said well, "Tell him to send me an audition disk." That's before tape. We didn't even have tape. I sent a disk that was fifteen minutes on one side and fifteen on the other. So I mailed the disk. And I got a call back. "You're here. You're hired when you get here." So that's the way I came to Houston.

DH: So now on your disk was it something you recorded on air or was it a recording?

PB: Recorded songs. Some of it was taken off the air and records that were popular at the time. I did commercials, live commercials, so that they could hear me and hear me introduce songs and play like I was… Some of it was taken off the air. So it was pretty actual.

DH: Now did you ever have any formal voice training or anything?

PB: No. Well, I took speech. When I was having a thought that I might want to be a lawyer I did take three years of speech at Central High School. I figured if you're going to talk before

people it's better to say "just" instead of "jest" and, you know, "get" instead of "git." So I became speech aware or conscious. That's the only way you improve your speech. You've got to be speech conscious. Understand there is a difference in "just" and "jest" and "get" and "git." So that speech was the training that I had.

DH: That's good. My undergraduate degree is in speech communication. I'm always interested to know how people come by that.

PB: That's the best I can give you.

DH: So when you came to Houston what attracted you about Houston? What made you think you'd like it there?

PB: I don't know, maybe the Wild West. There was just something about the west and coming to maybe cowboy country or something, you know. I don't know. There was just some charm to me about and it had nothing to do with a guy that said, "Go west young man." That did not influence me. It was just the idea of going to Texas I think appealed to me.

DH: Even though it was hot?

PB: I didn't want to go north. I mean you know Chicago, New York. I'm opposed to frigid weather. I don't like cold weather or the idea of digging out of snow every morning. It had no appeal to me. So you know Houston, Dallas, that all sounded pretty good. Sunshine, Sunbelt.

DH: But before you left Memphis had Johnny Cash or Jerry Lee Lewis or any of those people starting making their marks?

PB: No, no. Because I came to Houston in May of 1950 so that was… Johnny Cash, well, Elvis '54…

DH: Okay. A little early for that.

PB… was the first year he made any kind of splash with Sun Records and all those guys followed Elvis to Sun. I knew Sam Phillips the owner of Sun very well. And I watched the growth of that label very, very quickly. It was amazing how he got all the talent that he got in such a short period of time. Of course Memphis is right in the hub of a three state area, Arkansas, Mississippi, and Tennessee all come together at Memphis so he had Arkansas, Tennessee, and Mississippi talent to draw from and they didn't have to go far to get to Memphis. Memphis was the mecca for young musicians in that time and period, especially when Sun Records came on the scene.

DH: So you came to Houston in 1950 to work for KNUZ. Let's talk a little bit about some of the trends in music. What'd I'd like to do, and I want you to tell me what you observed but I'd also like to kind of break it down a little bit decade by decade if we can.

PB: Well the first of all I'll say this my favorite decade of music was the fifties, and the reason for that is in the fifties you still had the tail end of the big bands. Tommy Dorsey, Jimmy Dorsey, and I booked those big bands in Houston at The Plantation Ballroom because the program director had a big ballroom and he brought all the top country acts to town. Bob Wills, Hank Williams, Ernest Tubb. So he had this place, so he said, "Paul why don't you take it Tuesday night and do pop music and do big bands?" Because I was doing pop music on the air. So booked Tommy Dorsey, Jimmy Dorsey, Artie Shaw… all the big bands that were still on the road at that time, I brought to the Plantation Ballroom. So we still had the tail end of the big band era, but then when television came that destroyed the ballroom and that destroyed the big band era because people stayed home and watched that little box. They didn't go out dancing anymore. Birthdays and anniversaries that was it. So anyway in the fifties you then had the great singers Peggy Lee, Sarah Vaughn, Perry Como, Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra, Vic Damone. You

still had all the great singers in the fifties. Doris Day, who was not only a great singer a beautiful lady, hottest thing on the screen. She was the number one box office attraction in America at one time in the fifties. So you had great entertainers, great talent, and then all of the sudden, '54, '55 here comes rhythm and blues. Guys like Chuck Berry and Fats Domino and The Drifters and The Clovers, and where did these people come from? They came through the cracks. As soon as the white kids started getting off to the rhythm and blues music it was over for Eddie Fisher. It was over for Vic Damone. These guys were absolutely picked up and replaced by black artists who were doing something with a rhythm and a beat that the white kids got off to. Which is what Sam Phillips is always looking for in a white singer. He said, "I want a white kid that can sing like a black guy!" He wanted a rhythm and blues singer and that's what he got in Elvis Presley. He was the answer to a prayer for him.

DH: I'm sure that's true.

PB: So anyway then like I say the fifties evolve and they continue to evolve, and rock and roll and Elvis and all the things that came in. So think about it. Look at all the wonderful music you had from 1950 up until 1959 and the variety. No other decade ever has a variety that the fifties had, never!

DH: That's true. So how did … I can remember my mother being extremely proud of the fact she was one of the first shops in Houston to carry Elvis Presley records and…

PB: What year did she open?

DH: Well they opened in 1945 but they were there until 1959 and I remember…

PB: Well Sun Records, Elvis's first record on Sun was '55 so if they were in business in '55 that's when they would get the first Elvis record on the Sun label. "That's Alright Little Mama"

and "Blue Moon of Kentucky" was his very first recording on the Sun label. Then a year later he went to RCA Victor.

DH: Now how did movies impact his popularity? For example, you mentioned Doris Day, and she was in a lot of movies where she sang, musicals, *Pajama Game*, whatever. Did Elvis see a similar boost in his music sales because of movies?

PB: Elvis didn't pick his own music. He had people that did everything for him. Colonel Parker told him how to wear his underwear and on what side to step in first. This boy made no decisions early in his career, none. It was all laid out for him. All he had to do was show up. He made a jillion movies with the most pitiful music in it. If you go back and listen to the songs in most of Elvis Presley's movies they were pitiful. He would do seven or eight songs in a movie of which one (maybe) survived. The other five or six you could forget about them. They were horrible. Horrible! And he later regretted so much that he had recorded all those bad, bad songs. But in those days everyone was shoving songs to him because Colonel Parker had his own publishing company. Owned half the rights to the songs, which they didn't write, but they'd get half the royalties for it. They were prostituting themselves and Elvis and the whole industry.

DH: Is that sort of similar to some of the pressure that I've heard was on someone like Hank Williams, for example, from promoters?

PB: Well Hank Williams he wrote 90% of his own songs. So he had no pressure except, "Hurry up, Hank, and write another one so we can sell some more records." He was the biggest thing that MGM Records had sales-wise. But he wrote 90% of the songs he recorded.

DH: A big difference between…

PB: Yeah, because he could write.

DH: …perform… right.

PB: This guy was a talented writer. His lyrics said something and meant something. He had something to say. "Today I passed you on the street, and my heart fell at your feet. I can't help it if I'm still in love with you." Now that's a great line!

DH: Yes that is!

PB: It's a great line.

DH: You mentioned about, as the black artists come in, in the 1950s and the white artists were pushed out, how did that, how was that seen in Houston say in some of the live venues or concerts and things like that? Because I don't think they were having very many integrated audiences in the…

PB: I booked a jillion concerts in Houston in the fifties. I brought them to Houston, and I took the City Auditorium, and I put the blacks on this side and the whites on this side. For the first time black people would buy a ticket and sit on the front row!

DH: That's good!

PB: They couldn't do it before me. And that's what I did promoting black and white rock and roll R & B shows with the top black artists available. Brook Benton, The Platters, The Coasters, The Drifters, Aretha Franklin, LaVern Baker. I can name one right after another that I had.

DH: How long before black and white audiences could sit together?

PB: Oh, I don't recall that.

DH: Just curious.

PB: I don't remember that. I don't remember that. Later on. Probably the seventies.

DH: One of my students this semester wrote on blues music and she argued that as white audiences became interested in black music that helped to change views on civil rights. Do you think that is true?

PB: Little girls dictated the popularity of a lot of the music in that era. Because they were the ones who would go spend. I had a record store on Holcombe Boulevard. Who were the buyers? 80% of the buyers were young girls. Eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen… they were the buyers and the boys would take that 89 cents and spend it on a BB gun or a down payment on something or a comic book. A little girl would buy records.

DH: What was the name of your shop?

PB: Paul Berlin's.

DH: Okay.

PB: Record Room.

DH: Alright. So what else about the 1950s did you think was unique about the music? Anything else?

PB: Boy, we talked about a whole transition. How the music industry turned absolutely around in the fifties.

DH: That's true.

PB: Big bands went out of business. The ballroom was closed. Along came three- and four-piece groups. Five-piece groups featured, as long as you've got a tenor saxophone and a loud guitar, you were in business.

DH: Speaking of tenor sax, did you play any jazz music? Like Illinois Jacquet?

PB: No not really. He was a Houstonian. No, jazz has never been a big seller. There are a group of jazz people who like it, but look at it. Give me any period in my lifetime or yours when you'd pick up the billboard top 100 and the top of the top 10 songs, three or four would be jazz tunes? Never happened. Never happened. I think Dave Brubeck's "Take Five" was the first

million-seller jazz recording ever made. "Take Five" by Dave Brubeck was probably the first and one of the few million-sellers ever. Ever, ever!

DH: That's a good point. Okay so how about the 1960s?

PB: Well the sixties the music started going downhill with the British invasion and rock music. But I can blame all of that. Not all of it but a lot of it on dope. This is when dope came into being. Marijuana became as common as Hershey bars and then psychedelic, the "try and fly me to the moon" era and people getting stoned. I never heard of anybody getting stoned in the fifties. What the hell was stoned? Dope controlled what happened musically in the sixties. Because you had to be stoned number one to stand the volume of the damn music it was so loud, you couldn't stand to be in the room with it. And it didn't make any sense musically. It was just some idiot playing a guitar and cranking it as loud as he could and seeing how loud he can make it and then doing gymnastics on a stage with it. You know flipping it up and down and around and doing all this cute stuff and letting your hair grow funny and seeing how weird looking you could become. You know it became a visual thing. Music became visual with the guys or the girls or whoever's performing it. The goofier, the weirder you looked. the better we like what you're doing. And if you look weird enough, it didn't matter what you were playing. You could get by on your looks.

DH: I always felt that my parents sold their shop in 1959… (well, the building was being torn down to make way for the City National Bank building), but I always felt like in retrospect that was a good thing because my parents would have never made it through those drug music years. They would have hated that. My mother would have never wanted to sell it, and if they weren't selling it, they would have gone out of business anyway.

PB: I'm not trying to package all the music of the sixties under one tent. You can't. The Beatles made a musical contribution. "Something" is a wonderful song. "Something in the way she moves thrills me like no other. Something in the way she…" that's a great lyric. "I don't want to lose her now." You know like "Yesterday" another great lyric. So these guys although they were students and musicians of the sixties, they made a contribution and it will be there forever. I think "Yesterday" is the most recorded song ever in the history of the industry.

DH: I think that's right. I think I've heard that.

PB: So you know. But, oh, there were some horrible, horrible, horrible stuff that came along. Horrible! Just horrible!

DH: So you would know as a disc jockey in that period because you were still on the air…

PB: Still on the air, and I was still playing…

DH: Playing that music.

PB: I was playing it and put it on and walk out and go down to the water fountain. I would get on the phone and talk to somebody. You know I lost 90% of the interest in being on the air when I was playing that music as I was in the fifties and the sixties.

DH: But you stuck with it.

PB: You know why? Because I didn't feel it. I didn't feel that music. It wasn't a part of me and I wasn't a part of it. Occasionally, I mean, there were some songs that came along in the sixties. You know Barbra Streisand was a product of the sixties. God, you got to say she was a wonderful singer, and she was. So I mean there are exceptions of people in all these eras that were fantastic talents and you know. I mean she's a great example. Who sings better than she does?

DH: Not very many people.

PB: Not too many! She wasn't bad at the box office either.

DH: Now KNUZ wasn't your format pretty much top 40?

PB: Yeah.

DH: …for competing with KILT?

PB: We went from, we turned and went to country. KNUZ went to all-country and that's when I went to the FM station KQUE-FM. I went over there as operations manager, and I programmed that station. I did a whole different bag of music on that FM station and the ratings were fabulous in a 35-plus segment. People 35-plus listened to that station like you wouldn't believe.

DH: Now that's when FM really started to take off isn't it?

PB: Yeah in the mid-seventies is when it really took off, yeah.

DH: Now did you see another shift in music in the seventies?

PB: Well, you still had rock and hard rock and you still had, you know, the way music was presented. Like today, if I turn on like *The Voice*, the show that's so big and so popular now, and I promise you can watch it tonight if it's on. And these girls fifteen, sixteen, eighteen come out and the minute they start singing, the moment they build, and the louder they get, and the bigger and better they project their voice, the audience builds with it. We've become a whole group of screamers. And I've never heard anybody scream, "I love you" when they were telling somebody, "I love you." But today you've got to scream, "I love you!" and they all yell and clap and applaud. You watch these young singers (especially the girls), boy, they want to get up and up and scream it out. Yell! And then the audience really reacts. They react to the noise and the volume and the louder they think that's better. Louder, better. It drives me crazy! It drives me nuts!

DH: I'm not far behind you. And I noticed…

PB: And I can't call rap music. Rap is not music! That's a bunch of childish words, hopefully that rhyme, that some guy with no talent can say and read quickly with some form of noise behind it. It's not music!

DH: I noticed, well, not only in rock and roll and top 40 music, it's very different from the music that I grew up with and even the music of the sixties. You can find, like you said, you can find pockets of music that weren't the yelling and screaming. But where I really notice it, I think, the most was in country music.

PB: Country music has really turned its boat around. Oh my, it's ridiculous! You can't separate country from rock and roll anymore. Or what we used to define as rock and roll. And they've gotten into the same bag that the louder they scream, the more they seem to appreciate them. The girl singers all (not Patsy Cline who used to sing a ballad like a ballad, softly and tenderly). Now today everything's got to be thrown at you and screamed at you and yelled at you. It's just horrible, horrible!

DH: It's very different, very different.

PB: I know it. I have outlived my era of music, believe me I have.

DH: Well not really because you're still on the air.

PB: Playing what I like the best and that's the only reason I'm on the air. I had retired for five years and Dan Patrick called me one day, and he wanted me to come down and be a guest on his program. So I came down, and I was a guest on his show and people were calling in. We were talking like you and I were talking. And he said, "Boy that show ended too quick." He said, "Berlin" said, "We got to get you back on the air." I said, "Ah hell, Dan, I'm through. I have already said amen! I have said what I have to say." "No, no, no. We've got to work out

something." He said, "Pick a time." I said, "I'll tell you what I'll do two hours. That's all, two hours, and I pick Saturday night from 6:00 to 8:00" (because it wouldn't interfere with anything else I was doing). So I've been doing it three years. I don't know how much longer I'm going to do it, but I'm enjoying it because it is the only time I can sit down, and I don't play music at home.

DH: You don't?

PB: No.

DH: That surprises me!

PB: It's the only time I can take and go up and grab a bunch of CDs and stuff and bring it and sit down and play it. Because I'm a mood guy with music. You know, my mood sets what I play musically. So, then people will write me, and I have a web page, and they comment and will suggest and ask me to play certain songs, which I do. So, you know, I tell you the formula for being happy: someone to love, something to do, and something to look forward to.

DH: That's a good formula.

PB: Someone to love, something to do, and something to look forward to. So I really didn't have anything to do of any consequence before I started doing this program. Something that I really enjoyed doing.

DH: So one of my questions that I wanted to ask you is…because I've listened to some of your broadcasts, and you have a very eclectic mix of music that you play.

PB: People ask me, "What is your format?" I say, "AOR." What is that? All over the road. All over the road because like you say, you haven't a clue of what I might play next because I like all kinds of music. I like all kinds of music. And I find no problem in country songs that I like. I love Dixieland music. I love Dixieland. And big bands, great artists. You know, and a lot

of the artists are people that I've met and maybe this may not be the time with your recorder on. I figured I'd even show you this. [He gets out a book]. This was a booklet that they did, I think, when I'd been on the air forty years. That's Don Cherry who had a song called "Band of Gold" and this was at the Golfers' Hall of Fame. I introduced Don Cherry who was inducted into the Texas Golfers' Hall of Fame when President Bush was. That's a very young Paul Berlin right there. Me and Nat King Cole. That's me at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland. Me and Fats Domino. This is the girl that did "Ode to Billy Joe." That's the guy who wrote the song. Mickey Gilley and Johnny Lee. The Crew Cuts that made, "Sh-Boom." This is at the Plantation Ballroom where I used to book the big bands. I had Woody Hermann. Woody Hermann there and Vic Damone came that night to bring a trombone player to Woody Hermann. That's me and Elvis. Look, he looks stoned, doesn't he?

DH: Yeah, he does!

PB: Me and Teresa Brewer. That was the first record player I think that played 125 records. Me and here is Patti Page at the disc jockey convention. This is the girl that did, "Cry me a River." There's Johnny Cash, very young singer at the time. Me and Stan Kenton, who I brought to town. Me and Johnnie Ray at my record store. You recognize this girl right here?

DH: Let's see…

PB: Mary Tyler Moore.

DH: Oh boy, it sure is!

PB: She was nineteen years old. Nobody knew her name. She was a saloon dancer in this thing. That was in *77 Sunset Strip*. Steve Allen and his wife. That's the girl from West Columbia that married Bing Crosby. Rowan and Martin from *Laugh In*. Me and Danny Thomas. Me and Bob Hope and Mitzi Gaynor. Me and Peggy Lee. Debbie Reynolds and Eddie

Fisher back when they were America's sweethearts. Steve Lawrence and Eydie Gorme and my mustache. They are a wonderful couple.

DH: That must have been the seventies.

PB: They are a wonderful couple by the way. Steve and Eydie. I love those two people. I emceed the opening of Champions Golf Club. Bing Crosby, James Garner was there for that. Here's the Hunter, Berlin. Tenth anniversary of the Astrodome I interviewed Mickey Mantle at home plate.

DH: Oh boy!

PB: I was getting pushed around the New York Polo Grounds. Me and Dizzy Gillespie. These are congratulatory letters on my anniversary, Frank Sinatra, Doris Day, Phyllis McGuire, Frankie Laine, Dan Rather. Letters from President Eisenhower and Bush. My five boys.

DH: Oh wow! Big family.

PB: Wedding pictures of me and my wife. We've been married sixty-one years. There we are, but anyway.

DH: That's terrific!

PB: That gives you an idea of some of the "whos" I've been around.

DH: All the "who's whos" of entertainment.

PB: Some of the people that I've been exposed to and with and, in most cases, very, very enjoyable.

DH: So who has been your favorite singer? Do you have one?

PB: Well when you say singer, I've already just told you I'm a mood guy so it depends on the mood I'm in for who I want to hear. You know people always say well who were the jerks? I don't want to talk about the jerks. I haven't really been involved with that many. Doris Day

may be one of the nicest human beings I've ever met. I had lunch with her, and Jack Benny came along while her husband…she was married to a guy named Marty Melcher and before she was married to Marty Melcher he was married to Patty Andrews of the Andrews sisters. Divorced her and married Doris Day. Anyway we were having lunch and who walks up to the table but Jack Benny! Now all my life Sunday evening at home as a kid, sitting on the floor listening to Jack Benny, now here he is. I was thrilled. I can't imitate him, but he said, "Doris, Mary and I just got back from the Isle of Capris. All my life I've heard what a wonderful place the Isle of Capris is. Well it's terrible. Mary and I went to the hotel we checked in. We got our room, we went up the elevator…" and he said, "I want you to know when I walked in the room I turned on the light and the room got darker." He said, "That will give you an idea of how it was." Well he was wonderful and she was wonderful, and that was one of my most memorable days. Steve Lawrence and Eydie Gorme, terrific, terrific people. Stan Kenton, one of my personal favorites. Frankie Laine, another personal favorite of mine. Peggy Lee, outstanding, outstanding lady! I spent about four hours in Miami at a convention talking to her and listening to all of her troubles. I couldn't believe she was unloading, but she was in the mood to tell it all. But anyway I've had some wonderful times.

DH: That's good and much better to remember those people then the jerks.

PB: Oh, I don't…forget the jerks. Life is too short for jerks.

DH: That's true. How about some of the Houston artists? I'm sure you've helped some Houston artists get going.

PB: Well I can remember Kenny Rogers when Kenny Rogers made…well he started out making $40 a week at a place… a guy named Paul Fenberg [phonetic] had it, and it was over on Holcombe Boulevard down past The Shamrock. And he worked there with…oh boy, I'm having

a senior moment. Piano player and a drummer named Don Russell and a piano player, I'll think of in a minute. But anyway they worked at The Showbiz was the name of it for $40 a piece a week. This was in the fifties. And then they got up to $75 a week per person. Then they couldn't afford to pay them anymore and they left. So Kenny Rogers, I remember when he was… he sang all the high parts in a trio, the falsetto way up there stuff. He did all the falsetto harmony and played bass. So I saw him grow up. Kenny and a sweetheart Johnny Nash. I watched… you know, "I can see clearly now…" [sings] Johnny Nash I watched grow up. His father was a chauffeur for a wealthy couple in River Oaks. One of the nicest human beings in the world. Johnny Nash grew up right like his daddy taught him to be a little gentleman, and he was. B. J. Thomas from right down the road a piece. I didn't know him as well as Johnny Nash or Kenny Rogers. Mickey Gilley. I wrote the liner notes on the first album he ever did and I was watching, I was watching King, what's his name?

DH: Larry King?

PB: Larry King one night and he had Mickey Gilley on. He said, "Mick," he said, "How did your career get started back in… where are you from Houston?" "Yeah." He said, "Well, really Pasadena, but Houston." He said, "Well you know I made a record back in the fifties and" he said, "There were two stations that were playing the kind of music that I recorded. One of them was KILT," and he said, "I took my record to them and the program director listened to it and he said he won't play it. Then I took it to KNUZ and a guy named Paul Berlin." He said, "Paul listened to it and he played it. And he made a hit out of it in Houston." He said, "So if it hadn't been for a guy named Paul Berlin," he said, "I may not be sitting here tonight."

DH: That's quite a compliment.

PB: That's what he told Larry King on national television. But he has since made me cassettes of him saying all that at his theater up in Branson, Missouri. So it… so I watched Mickey grow up. That's about the size of the big ones isn't it?

DH: Well tell me about the Big Bopper? I remember reading that *Chronicle* article…

PB: The Big Bopper, J. P. Richardson, was a disc jockey over in Beaumont, and he called me one day, and he said, "Paul my name is J. P. Richardson." He said, "I've just made a record." He said, "It's really getting tremendous response over here in Beaumont." He said, "I wonder if you would do me a favor and listen to it?" I said, "J. P. you said the right word 'listen to it.'" I said, "I promise you I will listen to it. I won't promise you I'll play it. But I promise I will listen to it like I would a new Elvis record." He said, "That's all I want you to do." Well I listened to it. "Hello baby!" [sings]. The funny thing is about two weeks later I was going to go on a tour of American Army Bases in Western Europe. Ten disc jockeys from the ten biggest cities were going to go on this tour. And each guy was to take the number one record of the hottest record in his town with him to play for the troops. Well, I took the Big Bopper's "Chantilly Lace" and none of these other guys had ever heard it. These guys from the other nine cities had never heard the record and of course when the GIs heard me playing that, "Hello baby!" well the reaction was… I got more reaction with "Chantilly Lace" than anything they brought, and they were, "Where'd you get that? Who is that guy? Where'd you get?" They all wanted it so when they got back home they could be playing it. So I really got that record off to a good shove by having nine other guys from the top markets in America interested in playing it when they got home.

DH: That's terrific.

PB: So that's how that happened.

DH: So tell me a little bit about the disc jockey's role in selling records?

PB: Well the disc jockey's role in selling records is first of all to be smart enough to know a winner from a loser. And if he's smart enough to know a winner from a loser he can separate the great… because when you get a stack of new records (which we used to do) you've got to go through them, and somebody's got to decide which ones do I play. You don't play them all. It's like shopping for a new suit. You don't try on all the suits. You look at them, and the ones with eye appeal are the ones you grab. You listen to a record, and the ones with ear appeal… those are the ones you put aside. So I would listen to a stack of new records and the ones that grabbed me… My first criteria, if I don't understand the lyric, forget it. I don't want to say, "What the hell are they singing? What did he say?" If I don't understand the lyric, forget it. That's criteria number one with me. So I take a stack of records, ear appeal… oh, I like this. I don't like that. So I'd separate them. Then I'd get it down to a small stack, and then I'd put the small stack on the radio. Then after a while you'd get reaction or you didn't get reaction. And they after all, you can't be right all the time. But if you are right a lot of the time, then you are a disc jockey with influence. You can influence…hey, if I only expose you to what I want to expose you to, you don't know about the rest of it, do you?

DH: That's true.

PB: I'm kind of hand feeding you.

DH: That's true.

PB: If I'm only giving you Jell-O you don't know about chocolate ice cream. And the chocolate may be the best, but I'm only giving you Jell-O. And somewhere down the line someone else may put the chocolate. You say, "Paul, hey, why don't you play the chocolate. I never hear you play the chocolate." "Where did you?" "Well another guy is playing that." "Oh

really. Maybe I overlooked one." So being a good judge of music helps you be a good influential disc jockey.

DH: So did you often, too, go by the number of requests you were getting from listeners or were you impacted also by what you knew was a best seller?

PB: Well you've got…

DH: What is selling somewhere else in the country and you start playing it?

PB: You know I wasn't so concerned a lot of times with what was popular in Chicago because there were a lot of things that were popular in Houston that nobody in Chicago were ever going to like and vice versa. But I mean there's some… Elvis Presley's "All Shook Up" was going to be a hit wherever it was playing. It was a hit. "You Sent Me" by Sam Cooke was going to be a hit everywhere it was played. It was just one of those songs, the minute you heard it you loved it. You just kind of got to go by your own pulse. We had in those days an open studio. I had a studio with a control room and there was a room to seat about fifty kids. We had a Coke machine in the back. And every afternoon San Jacinto High School, Saint Agnes Academy would pour into that little studio. Mostly girls, and I'd let them come into the control room, request songs for their boyfriends. Do cheers for their school, whatever. People would drive in off the street and come running in, and cheerleaders would do cheers, get back in their car and run off. It was an open house. By listening to what they wanted to hear and what requests they had most often, it didn't take me long to figure out what they liked. So an idiot could have had a pretty good pulse there. So I had a live audience, requests and national charts and what was selling at record stores.

DH: That's local.

PB: Yeah, but a lot of the sales at the record store were influenced by what was being played on the air.

DH: Sure. I forgot was that studio down on Caroline?

PB: Caroline and Blodgett. 4701 Caroline.

DH: Okay I remember having passed by it.

PB: 4701 Caroline.

DH: Many times. Tell me about some of those… I'm going to talk a little bit about live venues that were popular. You mentioned The Plantation Ballroom earlier. What were some of the ones that going into the fifties and sixties that were big?

PB: Well the Dome Shadows was a very popular nightclub in the shadow of the Astrodome, that's why they called it the Dome Shadows. It was on Buffalo Speedway. It was a very… this was back, you've got to remember, the nightclubs were fairly limited in those day because of mixed drinks had not arrived yet. It was still beer. So people sold beer at most all the clubs. Country-western clubs were more dominant than the pop clubs were. But there were several clubs that had pop bands, The Dome Shadows had like a seven-piece live band in there, and there were a couple of spots on Westheimer where they had a disc jockey playing records. But there was more of that prior to mixed drinks, but then when the mixed drinks came in, then it opened up the avenue of more profit. You can make a lot more profit selling a mixed drink then you can selling some bottle of beer. So that's what opened up the venues as soon as mixed drinks came in and that came in 1971 here.

DH: For the big, big concerts did we have anything I can't remember us having anything besides the Coliseum?

PB: Well you had the Music Hall. The Music Hall seated 2,900 people and that would be more like Herb Alpert the Tijuana Brass I brought them to the Music Hall. Concerts like Aretha Franklin after she became a major star and appeared by herself, I brought there. I later brought Herb Alpert back to the Coliseum because he sold the Music Hall out in half a day. But, you know, you had The Stan Kenton Band or the Four Freshman or legitimate groups. Singers, Peggy Lee, Sarah Vaughn, they would do concerts in rock and roll venues. But the Music Hall and the City Auditorium both handled about 3,000 people. I had a show. I'll give you an example, at the old City Auditorium. Sonny James had the number one song, "Young Love." Johnny Cash had, "I Walked the Line," which was like number five. Jerry Lee Lewis had "Great Balls of Fire," which was like number seven or eight and Jerry Wallace had a tune called, "Primrose Lane" "Life's a Holiday." I put all four of those guys: Sonny James, Johnny Cash, Jerry Lee Lewis and Jerry Wallace all four in the City Auditorium for a show.

DH: That had to be a sell-out.

PB: That's where that picture of me and Johnny Cash came from that you saw that night.

DH: I remember going to a few concerts at the Music Hall and in the Coliseum. I went to see The Beatles at the Coliseum. It was fun! How about the Larry Kane show do you remember that?

PB: Larry Kane, the television or radio?

DH: Television.

PB: Oh sure it was very, very popular. Larry worked at KNUZ.

DH: Oh did he?

PB: Sure.

DH: I didn't know that.

PB: Yeah, he went to San Jacinto High School and was going to law school, and when he got out of high school he was kind of trying to make extra bucks, so he had like a couple-hour radio program while he was going to law school. Then he also did the TV thing at 13. You know he died when he was very young. Harry Lieberman was his real name.

DH: Oh really?

PB: Harry Lieberman yeah.

DH: Huh. Did they come to people like you or radio stations and ask opinions on what they should be playing for their program or they just went by what was selling?

PB: Yeah.

DH: What was selling?

PB: Yeah.

DH: So I want to go back to the record business for just a minute. We started to talk about this earlier about the demise of independent record shops.

PB: Well the thing that happened. Let's say a big department store like Foley's. Let's say Elvis Presley had a new record. Foley's could run an ad and say, "Elvis's new recording of 'Hound Dog' this weekend fifty cents." Everybody else had it for eighty-nine cents. Foley's would use it as a leader item. They didn't want to make any money on it. They wanted it is as a traffic creator. So they would give you the record at their cost. Just to get you in there because you might buy something else with it, and you probably would. So when you start running into this situation The Jive Hive and other little record stores can't compete with it. They need a new Elvis record for traffic. That's what they want. That's where they get their traffic. Well if Foley's is taking it away from them you're not only missing the sale of the eighty-nine-cent

record where you're going to make a paltry thirty-nine-cent profit but you're also missing out on what else they might buy while they are there.

DH: Right.

PB: So it was the big guy knocking out the little guy with traffic items. They could put them in there and you couldn't.

DH: How about…

PB: They could out price you, out merchandise you.

DH: Right and they can buy in volume. They were probably getting a better price to begin with anyway on it.

PB: Right.

DH: How about the switch to digital music and…?

PB: Well of course the sound is a huge, huge thing with music and the digital created a better sound. And anything that sounded like… like men buying a new razor. Hell, if it's smoother with this razor, I'm going to get rid of my old one because this is smooth. This doesn't cut my face. And if I get a new digital record player, I'm going to get rid of my old one because, man, listen, "boy that sound is so good!" So it's the sound.

DH: There's not much of a market for old records.

PB: Well there isn't, not like old stamps because old records unfortunately scratch. And the minute you've got… we're back to sound. When is the last time you wanted to listen to a scratchy record? You ain't done that since you were a kid, I promise you!

DH: That's true.

PB: And you're not going to.

DH: That's true.

PB: So that's the problem with old records.

DH: It does sometimes surprise me though that they did not become a collectable.

PB: Well some of them are.

DH: Some are, and some of them the sleeves are collectable.

PB: It's the condition of everything no matter what it is. It's old, it's the condition that's going to determine. But unfortunately records don't have like a stamp catalog where you can go and get… now you might have a catalog where everything is in pristine condition. What's pristine anymore about records? You might find one or two every now and then that's never been played but rarely.

DH: Not very often.

PB: Nah.

DH: So tell me a little bit about your career. Okay we talked about after you left KNUZ and you went to KKQE which was the FM transition.

PB: All I did was walk across the hall. It was all of the same building.

DH: Was it really?

PB: Yeah.

DH: Okay.

PB: Yeah, I just walked across the hall that's all I did. But I was doing something that I always… you know, there were a lot of days I didn't feel like going to work, but there was never a day that I didn't want to go to work. Big difference. I always loved what I did.

DH: Now how did your family feel about your career? Obviously you're married sixty-one years…

DH: They accepted it as, "That's what daddy does." And "That's the way it is. We'll see him when he gets here." Because I was out a lot.

DH: I'm sure.

PB: I have seen a jillion shows. I was a judge for this and a judge for that. I promoted this and promoted that, so I was void often. Often.

DH: Well, I would think they would have enjoyed coming to some of those shows?

PB: Well, I don't remember them doing that not really, nah.

DH: Kids tend to, I guess, accept whatever is your responsibility for work it's just…

PB: I guess if your dad's an astronaut, you know everybody talks about it at one time or another but while he's up there going round and round there's not much focus on him and most of the time there wasn't a lot of focus on me. I was just going around and around.

DH: Introducing all the people in the spotlight.

PB: But they knew I tried to make it up to them in my way.

DH: I'm sure they did.

PB: I think they all grew up loving me, put it that way.

DH: You can't ask for better than that can you?

PB: No.

DH: So I have a question about how people look at radio today. This morning I was thinking about, I looked on my phone to see what stations in Texas have an oldies format. And there are only… on the iHeartRadio app (that's what I was looking on) they only have three in Texas and they are in Beaumont, Corpus, and Waco. And I just don't understand why a city of four million people can't support some kind of oldies radio station.

PB: Well, it boils down now to demographics. The goal or the number one target audience for advertisers nineteen to thirty-four, eighteen to thirty-four the "Pepsi, pizza crowd." That's who they want. Those young minds that they can carve and turn around the way they want to. I'd probably have a hell of a time selling you some make up that you've been using for thirty years. I don't care what a good salesman I am. I would beat my brains out trying to get you to switch. But I got a young girl that is undecided, boy, I can sell her Ruby's rouge right now. She's got $1.98 in her purse. So you want that young, easy target. And when you're talking about oldies. I had Steve Lawrence and Eydie Gorme have a woman manager, and the last time I talked to her she said, "Do you have any idea how many radio stations there are in the Los Angeles area?" I said, "Oh my God, Los Angeles, there must be 150 in all that mass of." She said, "About 158 or 156." She said, "Do you know there's not one that you could turn on and hear a Frank Sinatra recording?" I said, "You're kidding? You're kidding!" "Not one," she said.

DH: That's just hard to imagine.

PB: And that's because the people that want to hear Frank Sinatra are somebody a little gray around the temple a little something around the middle. A few little hairs in their ears and on their face. And this is not the target. Not the target. That's the reason. That is the reason period!

DH: It's frustrating.

PB: To people your age and mine.

DH: It is.

PB: But go to some nineteen- or twenty-year-old and see how frustrated they are that there are only three oldie record stations in town. See if it bothers them.

DH: No it doesn't bother them.

PB: Absolutely not.

DH: But it just seems like, that just floors me that in Los Angeles it's the same thing. I mean because that's twice as many people as we have here in Houston and still…

PB: That's right.

DH: … you would think that, I mean, there's a market for that. There are people that want to hear that music on the radio and they are looking for it, but it's not there.

PB: No ma'am.

DH: It's not there. It's at 6:00 to 8:00 on Saturday nights.

PB: There you go.

DH: Well, is there anything I haven't asked you that you want to tell me about your career or about music trends in Houston?

PB: No because when we start talking about the music ("quote") today, most of it isn't music as I know it, and all I do is get frustrated. You know I love the story. I love the story if you've got a minute. Sitting at the airport waiting for a plane and this young kid about nineteen walks in, got his hair parted down the middle bright orange on one side, bright purple on the other, got a red goatee and all these rings in his nose and ears, and a guitar, and he sits down. Well I couldn't take my eyes off him. Finally he said, "Mister, are you staring at me?" I said, "You know, I guess I was, and I'm sorry. I really didn't mean to." He said, "Let me ask you a question. When you were young didn't you ever do anything wild and crazy?" I said, "Yeah, as a matter of fact, I did." I said, "One time I made love to a parrot and I was staring at you because I thought you might be my son." Now that kind of tells the way it is today.

DH: What kind of reaction did you get?

PB: Oh that's a joke…that didn't happen.

DH: Oh, I thought you were serious!

PB: No, no, no that's a joke, but I love it.

DH: I was impressed that you would… not that you made love to a parrot, I didn't buy that part…but that you would tell somebody that. I was thinking, "Okay."

PB: I love to tell that story.

DH: I could see that guy who is that guy that plays basketball they call The Bird.

PB: The Bird? Larry Bird?

DH: No, no, no. Not Larry Bird. This is somebody that plays recently and he may… I'm not sure he was still playing this year or not since I can't get any Rockets games at my house. Anyway there was a guy with this really flamboyant hair kind of wore it up in spiked things and he has all these incredibly colorful tattoos and they call him, "The Bird," and he would fit your description quite well. Well, I'm going to turn these off.

PB: I can't think of anything that I could add. Debbie, I just don't know where else to go from here.

End of Interview