

A Conversation with Vassar Clements
by Frank Goodman (Puremusic.com, 8/2004)

Perhaps like many who will enjoy the interview that follows, among my first recollections of Vassar's playing is the 1972 Nitty Gritty Dirt Band recording *Will the Circle Be Unbroken*. As long ago as that seems (and *is*), he'd already been at it for over twenty years! In 1949, although only 14 years old and still in school, he began playing with Bill Monroe, the father of bluegrass.

Aside from a few years off early on to check out some other things, Vassar's been playing music professionally ever since. He's recognized as the most genre-bending fiddler ever. "The Father of Hillbilly Jazz" is a handle that comes from several CDs he cut at that crossroads, but you can hear jazz and blues in any of the playing he's done. He grew up listening to big band and Dixieland, and still listens to a lot of it today. Vassar says that many of the tunes he writes or passages he'll fly into in a solo come from half remembered horn lines deep in his musical memory.

Between his beginnings with Bill Monroe and the *Circle* album, Clements did many years with Jim and Jesse and then years with the late and much loved John Hartford, a lifelong friend who gave him the legendary fiddle he plays today. *Circle* turned a whole generation of hippies and acoustic music fans on to his music, and the children of that generation are following him today, as his popularity continues to recycle. The *Old & In the Way* album of 1973 endeared Vassar to the global legions of Grateful Dead fans and many others. David Grisman's Acoustic Disc Records put out 2 more volumes of *Old & In the Way* in the late 90s (culled from live recordings in 1973) that many consider far superior to the original Arista release, they're called *Breakdown* and *That High Lonesome Sound*. Then in 2002 Acoustic Disc released *Old & In the Gray*, a splendid revisitiation. (see our review)

It was Grisman and co-producer Norton Buffalo who brought to fruition the idea that Vassar put forth about cutting a blues record, one of the few things he hadn't yet done per se but was doing all along. Maria Muldaur, Charlie Musselwhite, Roy Rogers, and Elvin Bishop are just a few members of the cast that make it real. A new Vassar Clements record is always cause for applause, but a telephone call with the legend is something special, certainly for this writer. We appreciate his time, and our friend Rob Bleetstein and Midge Cranor for hooking us up. And now, in his own words, we bring you a portrait of fiddle master Vassar Clements.

Puremusic: Hi, Vassar. Frank Goodman here.

Vassar Clements: Frank, how you doin'?

PM: Oh, fine. What kind of a day are you having?

VC: I don't know. I haven't been up that long.

PM: [laughs]

VC: I'll let you know if you'll call me tonight.

[laughter]

PM: Are you a night creature?

VC: Yeah. Well, for years I've had my days and nights mixed up. I've tried to change it. I've tried to go to bed at 10:30 or 11:00, but it doesn't do any good. I just lay there looking at the four walls in the dark, and I can't see a thing.

PM: Is this the life of a musician, or are you a night owl from birth?

VC: No, it's just from playing music all my life.

PM: Yeah.

VC: And I used to never go to bed. I'd always stay and jam. Sometimes it would be daylight before I went to bed. And over the years, I just got turned around. My daughter says, "Well, you got to get up. You got to go to bed." But I try it and it don't work. I get up and I'm still sleeping.

[laughter]

PM: I started counting back today and said, "Jeez, you've been listening to Vassar Clements for thirty-five years, man."

VC: Ain't that something? When I think of how long I've been playing, I think, "Golly bum, I'm getting old."

PM: [laughs]

VC: I look around and I say, "How many of us are left?" I can almost count them on one hand, seems like.

PM: And yet you look so good.

VC: Well, the good Lord is taking care of me some way or other, and for some reason.

PM: I'm sure it comes from your spirit.

VC: Well, that's one thing, because if you've got good people around you all the time and good players, you just go with the flow.

PM: And you still have that same remarkable countenance and profile that always made me think, “Damn, that guy should be on Mount Rushmore or something!”

[laughter]

VC: Oh, I never heard that before. I’m going to have to put that in writing.

PM: You’ve got the killer profile. Has anybody ever sculpted your head? Is there a bust of you around?

VC: [laughs] No, I don’t think so.

PM: Well, we got to get that done, Vassar.

VC: How do we get it done? I don’t know anybody.

PM: I tell ya, I’m going to look into it.

VC: All right.

PM: I’ve got some sculptor friends. “Come on, somebody get out there and do Vassar Clements.”

VC: I’ll tell you, I’m ready, and it would be an honor for me.

PM: Okay. I’ll make a note, I’m going to get that done. It’s my personal project.

VC: Oh, me.

[laughter]

PM: So, speaking of projects, how did this last one, *Living With The Blues*, come about?

VC: It came about over a year ago—maybe a couple years ago, time passes so fast—I mentioned to David [Grisman] that we needed to do another CD. I wanted to follow up on *Old & In The Gray*. And we just kept on talking about it. Once I said, “As much blues as I’ve always played, and it goes into everything I’ve played, I never have done a blues album.” He said, “You want to do one?” I said, “I’d think I’d like that, because I never have done it.” And all you got to do is tell David one time, and he’ll stay after you and remind you. That’s one good thing about him, if you ask for something, if he’s got it in his head, he’ll keep on it. So we did it, which I’m glad of. But if it hadn’t been for David I probably wouldn’t have done it.

PM: He’s a remarkable guy.

VC: He is great. Yeah, he is very remarkable.

PM: As you say, there was always a lot of blue-ness in the country playing that you did, in the bluegrass playing that you did, in the jazz playing that you did. Blues was always an important element.

VC: It was always there. I would notice it, and I had people tell me that no matter what I played, it seemed like the blues thing would come out.

PM: The guys who can put the blue in bluegrass really stick out beautifully—that's what Clarence White was really great at, he would play really blue-grass when he picked flat top guitar.

VC: That's what I heard. I've heard some of his playing, but I missed him some way or other. I should have met him, but I don't think I did before he got killed.

PM: You guys never crossed paths? Wow, isn't that something...

So how did the unique bunch of players for this album come together? Was that David's doing, or are these just your friends?

VC: David found them. I was going out there on a wing and a prayer.

PM: Wow.

VC: I had mentioned Maria Muldaur.

PM: Yeah.

VC: And B. B. King, if he was out that way. And of course Taj Mahal.

PM: Oh, Taj would have been amazing.

VC: Taj wanted to be on there, but he just wasn't around at that time.

PM: There's another amazing cat.

VC: Yeah, he is. I met Taj when me and Garcia and all of us was doing that stuff out there. So I've been knowing him a long time. He's my buddy. Only thing is, you could never tell it's him, because he's liable to have on a turban one time and a cowboy hat the next time, a baseball cap the next time.

[laughter]

PM: Isn't that the truth!

VC: A Hawaiian shirt, an African shirt, and then a cow boy shirt. So you never knew.

PM: He's a man of the world and of all times.

VC: He sure is.

PM: I interviewed him one time, and he came forth with such an encyclopedic knowledge of world music, it was flabbergasting.

VC: I'll tell you what, the man can remember things. He does a lot better than me. I can't remember nothing much.

PM: And he would tie in things from Europe and from Africa, and the Celtic influences, in a way that was professorial.

VC: Yeah. And he's been over there. Of course, I've been some of the places, but as far as remembering, it's just like, well, I know I was there and I did something, but somebody would have to remind me of certain things that happened, and then it might come to memory.

PM: Wherever you were, I know what you did: if you were there, you played something good, I know that.

VC: Well, that's all I did. And my mind, I guess, was always on playing, but I didn't know what I played after I left.

PM: [laughs]

VC: I've always been like that. I don't know why. My daughter used to say, "Well, I think you just remember what you want to remember."

PM: [laughs]

VC: But I don't know. I try sometimes, and I can't remember things.

PM: What were David Grisman's and Norton Buffalo's roles as producers on the record?

VC: Oh, they kept it going. They would give ideas, here and there, of what instruments should do what, and if it sounded right on the particular tune that we picked out. And we did a lot of tunes. We worked on it about five days in a row, and there were a lot of tunes to pick from. So that was Norton and David's job.

PM: I see.

VC: Norton was helping David, and he was very serious about it. He'd get down everything with pen and paper and everything and write down notes. He played a big part in the album.

PM: And he played some great stuff.

VC: You always can depend on Norton: no matter what it sounds like, he's going to make it sound good.

PM: Yeah. And I love the numbers with a comparatively little known but fantastic country blues man of whom I'm a fan, Marc Silber.

VC: I know! And you know what, I knew that name and I knew that guy, but unless I see somebody at least once a month—and then don't see them for years and years, it just throws me. And then, of course, all of our looks change, and I see them and I think I've met a new person, but I know he looks familiar.

PM: [laughs]

VC: But we had met, yeah. And I don't never walk up to somebody and say I've never met them, because if I do I'm saying the wrong thing. They'll say, "Oh, yeah, I saw you twenty-something years ago back somewhere."

[laughter]

VC: It's a never ending thing, but I'm thankful.

PM: So who brought Marc into the mix?

VC: It must have been David or Norton. He was working together with one or both of them, I think. Because when I got there, all I really did was play. I didn't know anything about who was coming in. And even after I left, David said, "You're going to be surprised." And I was, and I am.

PM: Wow. So it was just like, "I'm not sure who everybody in the room is, but just count it off and let's play it." [laughs]

VC: Yeah, that's the way it was. And Bobby Cochran, I had heard of him, and I think I knew him, and we became good friends while we was there. But of course, I knew him before, I guess, but that's the way it is when you don't see somebody for a long time.

PM: Yeah. We all have different things that we concentrate on. You concentrate on the music.

VC: That's about all I've really got to concentrate on, play something good, that and try to do the right thing, you know?

PM: Yes. Some of my favorite players through life have been guys, probably like yourself, who you can tell when you meet them that their mind is on the strings, and it's on the strings almost exclusively.

VC: Yeah.

PM: It's a beautiful thing, really.

VC: I do love to talk to people, and they can bring things up that remind me of a lot of important things and good times. But when it gets right down to it, when you're by yourself, I'm often thinking about what I'd like to play.

PM: How come you didn't do any singing on this record? You've been known to sing sometimes.

VC: Well, the songs that hit the table, I really wanted those people to do them because there were some great singers on the scene, there.

PM: Yeah, it's true.

VC: So, I don't know, the tunes just didn't fall that way, you know.

PM: Right. When you write something, it tends to be on the instrumental side, doesn't it?

VC: Yeah, it's always like that. I can't make up any words.

PM: Now, as a famous and beloved instrumentalist, are you a song man, too? Are there any singer songwriter types that you like, for instance?

VC: For me, if the melody sounds good, then I like the song right away. I don't really hear the words. I just love the musical part of it.

PM: Got it.

VC: If I hear somebody singing something that's got a good melody to it, I just really love it.

PM: That's very interesting. Because, yeah, some people say that there's sometimes too much emphasis on the words these days.

VC: Well, I'm sure that most of the people listen to words. But being the kind of musician I am—and I've met some just like me who never hear the words, they're listening to the music. And David is one of them. He hears the music. He doesn't really listen to the words. Of course, if he sits down and he's trying to record something, he'll probably listen to the words. But mostly he's listening to the melody. Sam Bush is listening to the melody. Well, all musicians are listening for good melodies.

PM: How many years have you been on the planet?

VC: 76.

PM: 76, boy. So what's your secret, then, for the type of long and happy life that you're obviously enjoying?

VC: I don't know. Doing what you love to do, going to church and the good Lord keeping you here above ground all these years. That's the main thing. I guess He's the main thing. And then us doing what we were meant to do. That's all I know I was here for. I try to do whatever I can. I try to help people. I don't hardly ever say no to anybody. I don't remember ever saying no.

There's been times I've been sitting up all night with somebody who knew just two chords. And some of those people will never forget that. I didn't look at it that way then, but now they come back, and they're a lot older, they remind me of what I did, and it's a good feeling.

PM: Wow. Yeah, it's a blessing for all of us that you grew up with a lot of jazz and swing, because I think that's the element and the sensibility that makes your virtuosity and your contribution so unique.

VC: Well, I think you might be right, because subconsciously, still, in anything I play or write, it seems like somewhere along the line I'll get something and I'll say, "Now, where did this come from? I didn't just think of this." And sometimes I might have thought of it, but a lot of times I have remembered a horn line that came from Harry James or Tommy Dorsey or Glenn Miller or something, and then I have changed it because I couldn't really remember it. And then time goes by and I'll remember something that this band or that person was playing, and it seems like it's part of that lick. I don't know, it could be a different lick entirely, but it reminds me of that, anyway. I'll put it like that.

PM: That's great. Are you finding the time lately to listen to much music, or are you too busy making it?

VC: No, I don't hardly ever hear any music. I should, I guess, but it seems like around this part of the country all you hear is the same thing.

[laughter]

VC: I don't why it is, they just sound alike.

PM: I heard that.

VC: Bless their hearts, they know it themselves. I've heard them say it here in Nashville, that country music is beginning to sound alike. Of course, I like to put the radio on the

big band station and listen to that, because those songs I've heard all my life. They're great. And I like listening to jazz stations, that's good. But the country stations, I just don't know, I can't tell one from the other.

PM: Right.

VC: Bless their hearts, I wish they'd change that.

PM: [laughs] That's a nice way to say it.

[laughter]

VC: But I don't know, I shouldn't say it. They're making money, I guess.

PM: Oh, you can't say it any nicer than that, Vassar.

In our interviews, we like ask people what they've been reading lately. How about books—do you like to read much?

VC: Well, I don't see well enough to read a lot. My eyes, all the words will go together. I do read the Bible. I read maybe a book or two out of that, and it'll take me about a week to do that because I try to absorb it as I go. There are so many different ways of taking one word, and it means something else. So I just try to decipher everything, and like that. But as far as just reading anything, no, not much.

PM: The eyes just got too sketchy.

VC: Yeah. And I wear contacts, and sooner or later I'm going to have to have an implant, and take the cataracts out and the implant in, but they still said they're not bad enough yet.

PM: So along with the bluegrass and the newgrass crowds, you've run for decades with what might have once been called the psychedelic crowd, the Dead, Old and In the Way, Peter Rowan, and so many of those other great cats.

VC: Oh, yeah.

PM: How did that happen? Was that just an accident, or do you share a turn of mind with that free-thinking group? Because your playing has always sounded so free of any convention.

VC: Well, they let you be free. That's the great thing about them. Actually, all my life I've been kind of free. Even when I first started, Bill Monroe didn't tell me what to play. He showed me a lot, but he never did tell me what to play.

PM: No kidding.

VC: He never did. And I've heard bands telling somebody, "Play like this guy that did it on the record." I never was told that. And I can say that I've been blessed for that, because I could do it like I wanted to. Of course, when you get into doing studio work, and they say, "We need to get three or four songs out in these three hours. Start that off like Tommy Jackson did, dom, dom, dom," that kind of thing, you might have to go through that. That's one reason I didn't record—I've recorded a lot over the years, but I never wanted to do what had already been done. And I'd get really depressed in the studio sometimes, years ago, because they'd want you to do the same kickoff, maybe the same style as somebody else, but not exactly like them. But the bands that I played with never told me what to do.

PM: And especially that crowd, Jerry Garcia and—

VC: Oh, no. They want you to do whatever you wanted to do.

PM: Take it as far out as you wanted to.

VC: Yeah. Because Jerry, oh, man, when I'd play with them, that was something. They'd play a tune for an hour. And Jerry would motion to me, "Come on, let's go." We'd go to the back and do whatever we wanted to, and rest for a while and then go back out, and they was still playing the same song, and then two more would take a break or something.

[laughter]

VC: That was a lot of fun, and there was a great feeling in that bunch of people.

PM: Jerry was a beautiful guy.

VC: Oh, he was great.

PM: Was he a good friend to you?

VC: Yes. I've never seen anybody so humble and so wanting to play music all the time. Jerry wanted to play all the time.

PM: A musician through and through.

VC: Yeah. And I never heard him say anything bad about anybody. I've never seen him upset. I never saw him any way except just like Garcia always was.

PM: Wow. And he was a great banjo player.

VC: He was.

PM: A lot of his fans don't even know what a great banjo player he was.

VC: I'd say, "You need to do this." And he'd say, "Vassar, I'm going to have to practice on this banjo now about six months."

[laughter]

VC: He always said that. That was the funniest thing. I said, "No, you don't never forget that." He said, "No, I don't forget, but I got practice on that thing."

[laughter]

PM: What about Peter Rowan? What kind of a guy is he?

VC: He's great. Pete's got his own ways, and maybe some people don't understand it, but I do, and I just love him to death. All of them, I do.

PM: Yeah, just a great bunch of guys.

VC: They are. I feel just more at home when I'm doing that. I feel free, I feel relaxed, no pressure, no nothing. We just go out and play and have a good time.

PM: And who would have think it, probably, as your life rolled on, that there'd be so many fans of yours that would be just these free-thinkin' hippies?

VC: I would have never thought it, I'll tell you that.

PM: But the hippies love Vassar Clements.

VC: I know. And now they've come around again, it's an eerie feeling. I see the same faces, the same dress and the same movements and the same age and everything. And I say, "What in the world is going on? I've done this before." And I've had some of the kids come up to me and say, "Did you know you're starting all over again?" And I said, "Well, I appreciate that, and thanks for being here." I said, "But how did you get into this?" They say, "Well, I grew up with it, with my parents and stuff." It's amazing how it is handed down and handed down.

PM: And to see your popularity get recycled.

VC: I know. That's what's amazing to me, because I just wondered, where did they all start liking this stuff? And they tell me.

PM: "I keep getting older and my fans keep getting younger."

VC: Yeah, yeah. It's like a rerun.

[laughter]

PM: I've read some of the history of that amazing fiddle that you play, but since some of our readers may not delve into it, maybe give us a little bit about the story of that fiddle in your own words. What's known about that?

VC: There's not a whole lot known about it. We're pretty sure it was made by a guy by the name of Gaspar Duiffoprugcar in the 1500s. And from the part of the history that I can get, which is very little, he was known for making the first violin. And I'm not sure, but I think he used to make lutes, and he got this idea of making a violin. Now, if I've got it right, I have; if I don't, somebody can correct me. But the ones he made were a little bit larger than a violin is now, today. And he wouldn't sell one. He would make it and give it to somebody who was playing in big events like the Queen's Ball or something like that. Or that's what I heard, that back in those days he never sold them. He would give them to these people.

And the way I got mine was through John Hartford. John said, "You take it, Clem." And I said, "Well, let me pay you for it," because he bought it from George Gruhn at the Bean Blossom Festival years ago, in the 70s. And I said, "I'll pay you back when I get to Nashville." It didn't have a thing on the fiddle, not even the fingerboard or the tail piece or nothing, no strings, no pegs. But it had that nice carved head on there. And I said, "I'll hang it up on a nail and let people that come through the house see it."

Then I got to thinking I wanted more people to see that, if I could get a sound out of it. And I got all the pegs and tail piece and everything and strung it up and worked on that thing for a couple months, trying to get the sound post in the right place because it would sound like it would be off in a barrel somewhere. And I thought the sound was in there because the wood looked old to me. I said, "Any piece of wood that's good has got to have a sound there somewhere." And I finally lucked out one day. I was about forty years old. I noticed my eyesight started going while I was sitting at that sliding glass door trying to move that sound post. So I had to be forty. And then I got it strung back up, and that was the sweet spot.

PM: That must have been an exciting day when you got the sound post in the right place.

VC: Oh, it was. I'll tell you what, I couldn't put it down, and I've been playing it ever since.

PM: And the sound post is not glued, it's just positioned?

VC: It's just positioned, yeah. You can move it around just a little bit, just a little bit, and it'll change the tone. It just took a long time to find the right place for the tone. And then it needed playing on, of course. I've played on it ever since, and the more you play it, the better it sounds.

PM: And John never would take any money for it?

VC: Never did. And I remember Acuff had it at one time, before Gruhn ever got a hold of it. Roy Acuff had it in an exhibit of old instruments and stuff out at Opryland, the old Opryland. And I remember, we were playing a show together, and my wife and him was standing at the edge of the stage on the ground. She said, "Roy, do you ever regret getting rid of that fiddle?" And he was looking with his arms folded and he said, "Only when he plays it."

[laughter]

VC: And I thought that was a good comment, that nobody thought the fiddle would sound good. People had tried it, and it didn't sound good. And Hartford, until his last day, he said that fiddle was just made for me, and nobody else could do anything with it. When Hartford had something in his mind, that's the way he'd keep it.

PM: Right.

VC: That's what he said. He said, "That's yours."

PM: Wow. And there's another golden personality. What an amazing bunch of people you've known.

VC: Oh, yeah. It's mind boggling. I couldn't even put the names down, there's just so many.

PM: And do you know John's son, Jamie, well?

VC: Oh, yeah.

PM: He's another great player.

VC: Yeah, he is. Me and him used to sit around all the time. And John would tell me to help him because he wouldn't listen to John. So he'd come over to the house, and we'd practice. And he'd let me show him stuff. He wanted to play with me, he wanted to practice with me. I got along with kids real good anyway. And you know how kids are, they don't want to listen to their parents as much as they do somebody else.

PM: It doesn't matter who their parents are.

VC: I know.

[laughter]

PM: Doesn't matter if they're Stradivarius.

VC: That's right. It don't matter who. "Dad, I ain't going to listen to you. I'm going to go over here and play with this guy."

[laughter]

PM: Oh, it's so true.

You just mentioned her, and this album is dedicated to Millie Clements' memory. I saw some beautiful photo galleries of you guys on your site. Could I ask you to share a little bit about her with us?

VC: Oh, she's the one—the reason I'm playing. Not the reason I'm playing fiddle, but the reason that I go out and, thank the Lord, make a living out of it, because I would have never went out by myself. I'd never have got a band. I never done anything except play with somebody else, and this was along the time I was telling you that I was kind of getting depressed with the studio work because they was wanting me to play like everybody else. And I went home one day, and she saw that I was feeling bad. She said, "Well, you can go out on your own." I said, "Are you kidding?" And she said, "No." She says, "I'll put a price out there. If they don't want it, you'll just be playing with somebody else. If they take it, well, you can go play with somebody else or get you a band." And she did, and they took it.

PM: Wow.

VC: And that scared me.

PM: [laughs]

VC: And ever since then I've been trying to do it. First I would go out and play and I wouldn't talk. I'd just say maybe, "I hope you came here just to hear fiddle, 'cause that's about all you're going to do is hear fiddle, because I don't know nothing much to say, and I'm not good at talking, so we'll just play."

PM: [laughs] Now, in those early days, who would you take out on the road with you to play?

VC: Well, we had to get a band pretty quick. I went one time and played a gig by myself. It scared me to death. Of course, they told me that there'd be a band there of two or three people to back me up. But they were just telling me that to get me there. And my wife told Nancy Talbot, I believe was her name, it was in—oh, where that school of music is—

PM: Boston?

VC: Boston, yeah. And it was at the college. And that place was packed out. And I couldn't understand that, because I said, "Who's ever heard of me?" So my wife told Nancy, she said, "If you get him out on the stage, he'll be too embarrassed to leave."

PM: [laughs]

VC: And like I said, that was one of the most scary times ever—the other time was the first time I played the Opry. But anyway, she got me out there. And they kept saying, “Well, the band is a little bit late, but we’ll send them out there as soon as they got here.” I said, “Nancy, what am I going to do? I don’t know what to do out there.” She said, “Well, just play anything. Just start off with something and then the band will be here.” And I went out there and started off, and that’s what I said, I said I hoped they was there to hear fiddle. I said, “These guys should be here any minute.” I said, “I don’t do much talking—I don’t do *any* talking, really.” And they all started clapping—and I looked behind me, I thought the guys had showed up, and I was wondering who they was clapping for. And I couldn’t figure that out, and then I got more scared. I thought, “Oh, lordy, what am I going to do? These people are here to see me, that’s ridiculous.” But they felt sorry for me. They went along with me, man.

[laughter]

VC: And the whole time, nobody showed up. I think I just played, and when I couldn’t think of something, I’d just move the bow across the strings until I could think of something.

PM: [laughs]

VC: And I did that probably for 45 minutes. And they give me an encore. I said, “No, Nancy, they just feel sorry for me. I can’t go out there and do another one.” She says, “They want to hear you.” If I remember right, I think I went out and tried to do something else. But anyway, man, they got me out there, and I didn’t let them forget that.

PM: Well, your wife was right, you were too embarrassed to leave the stage.

VC: I was. I was too embarrassed. Monroe told me that, too. When I’d play with him, I didn’t know the tunes ’cause he’d write a lot of them, and a lot of them put the melody to. Because I was brand new, and I didn’t know very much. I knew his tunes I’d learned from Chubby. But when he’d come up with a new tune or something, he’d just pull it on me. He’d have it made up with the boys in the band, and he told them, “When it comes time for him to take a break, y’all all move back from the mic.” And so he taught me real quick not to leave the mic. And I think that’s where I got it from, because I was scared, and I said, “Well, I don’t know the tune, but I can’t leave the mic. Nobody’s out here.” I don’t know why I had that in my mind, but I just stayed out there and fumbled around.

PM: [laughs] Oh, that’s funny.

VC: I’ve done that all my life, I guess.

PM: You’ve had such an incredible life and musical journey. Are there things you haven’t yet tried musically or otherwise that you’d still like to check out?

VC: I'd like to try some Indian music, and I'd like to do maybe some of the Canadian music. Of course, that's been done real good, so I don't know what would come out if I did that. See, usually the music I play is going to be different because I don't feel it the same way that anybody else does. And about Canadian music, maybe I would feel it different, I don't know. But things like that I want to try. And I want to do another big band thing. I miss that a lot, and I think that would come out good.

PM: And it's a dying art. I mean, the guys who really feel the big band thing should all make a record.

VC: I think so too, because let me tell you, those tunes will never die. You play them for kids nowadays, and they'll go crazy. They thought I wrote "Night Train."

PM: Really?

VC: I did that years ago, and they thought I wrote it. I said, "No, I think Duke Ellington or somebody else played it."

PM: Right.

VC: I said, "That's not my tune." But they won't take no for an answer, they keep saying, "That tune you wrote, play that one." And I says, "I didn't write it." "Well, play it."

[laughter]

VC: And it's like with the Dirt Band, when we played that first *Will the Circle Be Unbroken*, well, I wasn't the only fiddle player on that. I'd play some dates with them. And it was embarrassing to me, I'd be walking along with John McEuen, and they'd tell me, "Man, I like that album of yours."

PM: [laughs]

VC: And I says, "That isn't my album. This is a Dirt Band album." They said, "No, that was your album." You know how kids are.

PM: Yeah, I mean, as far as I was concerned growing up, that was a Vassar Clements and Doc Watson record.

VC: [laughs] That's what they would say, yeah. What was that tune? Da, da, da, doo, doo—

PM: "Tennessee Stud."

VC: Yeah, they—that's all I heard everywhere I went.

PM: [laughs] Yeah, I still like to sing that song, and it's that version I sing, too. I mean, that was a great one. Are you and Doc old friends?

VC: Yeah. But that was the first time we met, on that *Circle* thing.

PM: Wow, jeez. And do you talk to him once in a while?

VC: Yeah. I played his festival—well, it's not his, actually. They use Merle's name.

PM: Merlefest.

VC: Uh-huh. And I saw Doc, and we played Cerritos in California in February.

PM: How's he doing?

VC: He's doing good. He's doing real good.

PM: His health is okay?

VC: Yeah. For a while there we was wondering. But he seems to be doing good now.

PM: He's one of my favorites, too.

VC: Oh, he is a good man.

PM: Now, what about places? Are there some places on the planet where you like to go and spend time sometimes?

VC: I like it out there in San Francisco. There are a lot of places I like, out of the way places.

PM: Have you done a lot of traveling abroad in your life?

VC: Just Germany and Japan and New Zealand, and oh, let's see—that's probably most of the places I've been.

PM: Did you like that international stuff?

VC: I enjoy it. I don't like to stay months, but I love to go because they treat you like a king, and it's good to see another part of the world.

PM: Yeah.

VC: I want to go to the Scandinavian countries, I want to go to the Asian countries. I want to see that. But I don't know if I'll have a chance or not. I just never did really pursue it, but maybe there'll come a time.

PM: They'll love you wherever you go, I know that.

VC: I met this guy from Ireland—this was in the last two days, when I was down here teaching at the Blair School of Music. And he said, “Mr. Clements, the first American I ever heard when I started was you. I've been listening to you ever since.” I said, “Well, that's an honor. I didn't have any idea.” He said, “You're the first American that I heard play.”

PM: Because he grew up an Irish fiddler strictly listening to Irish players?

VC: Uh-huh.

PM: Wow.

VC: And that really made me feel good. In fact, the bass player, Vic, with Bela—

PM: Victor Wooten.

VC: Right. Somebody brought him over to the Station Inn. Kurt Story bought him by there. He always brought people by that was just starting in Nashville. And Vic come up. He said, “The first tune I ever learned on the bass was ‘The Lonesome Fiddle Blues.’”

PM: [laughs]

VC: It's things like that that really make you feel good.

PM: Ain't that something.

VC: Grisman, I used to get on to him, “Can't you get out of a minor key for a while?” He'd say, “Hey, man, you're the one who started the minors.” I said, “I ain't started no minors.” He said, “Lonesome Fiddle Blues.”

[laughter]

PM: So, last question: Can you tell us some little something about yourself that your fans might not ever know?

VC: I really don't know anything much except go to church and you'll feel much better. I just love people and jamming and trying to make up licks and put them together to make something sound good.

PM: What a kick it is talking to you, Vassar. It's been a wonderful conversation.

VC: Listen, Frank, I appreciate you calling, and if I ever get around you I want to see you and talk with you.

PM: I hope we sit down and play us a tune sometime.

VC: Well, let's do that. We'll get Grisman to do another album, and you can go over there and we'll play.

PM: [laughs]

VC: Okay.

PM: Thanks, Vassar. It's great talking with you.

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