

CWM Audio 14

Lee Stevens Interview, August 7, 2015

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT Part 1

Pete Shrake: This is a cam?

Scott: It is?

O'Donnell:

Lee Stevens: Recording.

Pete Shrake: Oh, it's recording.

Scott: Audio.

O'Donnell:

Pete Shrake: It is Friday, August 7, 2015. We are at the Robert L. Parkinson Library and Research Center. And this is an interview with Lee Stevens. Scott O'Donnell is performing the interview.

Scott: Thank you Pete. Lee thanks for being here for sure.

O'Donnell:

Lee Stevens: Good morning. It's an honor and a pleasure.

Scott: Oh, my goodness. Like they say in the Sound of Music, let's start at the very beginning.

O'Donnell: Very good place to start.

[00:00:30]

Lee Stevens: Wow. That's a long time ago.

Scott: I know it's a long time ago so think back-

O'Donnell:

Lee Stevens: I look good but that's a long time ago.

Scott: Look into the mirror ball and tell us a little bit about yourself. Where'd you come from?

O'Donnell: How did you get into this crazy business and why?

Lee Stevens: I was born and raised in Staten Island, New York. And the earliest recollection, my birthday was St. Patrick's Day and Easter was always in that two or three months ... Or week rather, time frame. So the big thing was always going to see Ringling Brothers at Madison Square Garden. And I actually remember the old Garden, which is actually the third Garden, whatever.

[00:01:00]

And it was just a big ... It was an all day event. It just went on and on. We had to take a half hour ride to the ferry. Get on the ferry, went to the subway, take the big subway ride, get on 51st street, or 52nd street, where it was stationed. And the minute the

doors opened there was 35 guys selling lizards, and monkeys, and fuzzy monkeys, and whirly birds, and all of that.

[00:01:30] And the stench in the subway was overwhelming. And I still have that smell in my head. It's something that doesn't go away. I can't tell you how old I was, four, five, six. All I wanted to do was be there and that's all I ever wanted to do was to be there. So that's kind of how it started and I had this powerful desire that someday, somehow, I was gonna be in the circus.

[00:02:00] And I didn't know there was any other circus 'cause I was just a little kid so that was the only circus I knew. And I got there. It was a long road.

Scott O'Donnell: Yes, you did. Yeah, so Let's talk about the long road. What was your first stop? How did you ... You didn't just arrive at Ringling Brothers. There was many journeys along the way.

[00:02:30] Lee Stevens: Yeah, quite a few. Lot of bumps, lot of bruises but, yeah, the first tented circus I saw I remember was Circus Barton. Came to a place called [inaudible 00:02:36] Stadium. It was a race track about five miles from my home. And I went to get a job. I think I was 14 and no, no, no, no, no. I was just a proverbial kid that was not running away from home but running away to join the circus.

[00:03:00] I mean, there was a difference. I wasn't leaving home I just didn't belong there. I belonged with the circus and anyway, they turned me down unfortunately. And the following year I saw a thing in the local paper that King Brother Circus was coming to [inaudible 00:03:07] for two days and they were doing this big tent raising ceremony.

[00:03:30] And all this publicity that never really happened. So I got there a little after five in the morning and they were still driving on the lot and the minute they parked, they just went to bed. And I just sat out on the seats of the racetrack. I don't know how far it was. It was quite a distance and I was trying to be as inconspicuous as I could 'cause I didn't want to get thrown out 'cause I was gonna ask somebody for a job but there was nobody to ask.

And I sat there, and sat there, for I don't know how long it was. Maybe four, five hours. I don't know to tell you the truth. And along came this little gnome of a person. Really just ... He looks like ... Really all he needed was a pointed hat and a white beard and it was Herb Plemont was who it was. And I didn't know what a circus fan was or anything like that.

[00:04:00] And he was asking me, " What are you doing here? And it's so early." La, la, la. And I just had stars in my eyes. I said, "I'm waitin' to get a job at the circus." And I remember him saying, "Why would you want to go into circus?" I said, "That's all I want to do. I don't know what else to do. That's what I want to do."