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PROJECT

**KBMF & BUTTE-SILVER BOW ARCHIVES**

**BOB KOVACICH**

**The Verdigris Project**

A partnership between KBMF 102.5FM and The Butte-Silver Bow Archives.

With funding from The National Endowment for the Humanities, the Montana History Foundation, members of the Butte America Foundation, and SARTA.

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## **Oral History Transcript of Bob Kovacich**

*Interviewers: Aubrey Jaap, Ellen Crain, Clark Grant*

*Interview Date: July 20<sup>th</sup>, 2018*

*Location: Butte-Silver Bow Public Archives*

*Transcribed: November 2019 by Adrian Kien*

**Ellen Crain:** Let's start with your life.

**Bob Kovacich:** My life?

**Crain:** Yeah. I want to talk about your life.

**Kovacich:** I haven't lived all my life yet.

**Jaap:** Alright. It's July 20th. We're here with Bob Kovacich and his instruments. And some of his renegade stuff. And Bob, will you start a little bit. Tell me about your parents. Who were your parents?

**Kovacich:** My dad was a miner for 43 years in the Butte mines. He worked the Orphan Girl, Emma, Leonard. He used to top the board all the time, on the . . .

**Crain:** Ouija board?

**Kovacich:** On the pay board. I still remember going down to the Leonard and all the miners used to be jealous because he used to make so much money on that. I started off . . . I was born in 1938 in Butte, MT in the old Saint James Hospital here. I'm 80 years old now.

**Jaap:** Just celebrated a birthday.

**Kovacich:** I just celebrated my 80th birthday, May 14th. I used to be a mean kid. Really a mean kid. Like my grandfather. He didn't like me too much. Because one time I climbed up on top of the roof and I waited for him (I was only about 3 or 4 years old). Climbed up on the roof and waited for him to come out of the house and I peed all over his head. We were picking potatoes once. I threw a potato and hit him in the head. Oh god. I don't know how he could have liked his grandson.

**Crain:** Who are your siblings?

**Kovacich:** I have - Joe was underneath me. And then Marilyn. And then Fred. And then Joanie. And there were five of us. I had one brother that died at childbirth. My brother Joe was pretty much an alcoholic and the vodka killed him, as it killed Luigi. Vodka does stuff.

**Crain:** Were your grandparents. Did your grandparents immigrate?

**Kovacich:** They came from Croatia.

**Crain:** When did they come, Bob? Do you know? When did they come?

**Kovacich:** They must have come. My grandmother died in 1930 from appendicitis. She had divorced my grandfather way back then. Her name was Lacey, after she got divorced. She was related to Fred Lacey and Mitzy Lacey and Josephine Lacey. My dad was a half-brother to them, because I don't know how many kids she had. She must have had 5 or 6 kids back then. I still got the suitcase that my grandfather came over from Croatia with. It says, "APO New York" and he came over to Montana, worked in the mines. But the mines killed him. The mines were pretty tough, working way back then. There was no safety precautions.

**Crain:** So did your grandparents move to Meaderville? McQueen?

**Kovacich:** We moved to McQueen. My dad moved to McQueen when he married to my mother. My mother was married Badovich. I think they got married in 1937. I was born in '38. About 5 years after that, my dad and three of his friends, Fritz Mazola, Donavich and Faicci, were all up at Delmoe Lake. It was April and a squall came up, kind of a squall. They had a little boat and all four of them, they all had mackinaws on them and boots, and, of course, the boat overturned and three of his friends drowned. Fritz Mazola drowned and Donavich drowned and so did Faicci. All three of them drowned. And that was one of the things my dad, he was always sorry for. He was with them and he was the only that lived out the situation.

**Crain:** Could they not swim?

**Kovacich:** They couldn't. They all had these big coats on. My dad said that when he went down, it was only 8 feet of water, he said. He said he got to the bottom and he kicked up and he said somebody grabbed ahold of his leg and he had to kick loose of him and he finally got to the top of the water which was only a foot or two. He saw the hull of the boat over about two feet from him and he grabbed that and swam to shore with the boat and then of course notified the police and everything like that. That was in the 40's. That was 1943. My dad, in 1950, his partner when he was down in the Emma mine. They were mucking down there, cleaning out a drift. A big slab came down right next to them. They had the Jimmy bars up there. A big slab come down and killed his buddy, or his partner, Mikovidrich. Hit him on the head. And he said, "Jeez, he was laying there." It was a horrible thing for him because every time his heart would beat his blood would come out of his mouth. So that was part of the mines at that time. Wasn't it, Al?

**Crain:** When you were little, when did you start playing music?

**Kovacich:** My mother had great intentions of me being an entertainer. And she gave lessons up there, singing lessons. I started singing lessons first. I used to go [sings some bars of music] for Margaret Nelka. I hated it. Then she gave me piano lessons. That lasted for about six months from Mr. Howe over here on Washington Street. That was in probably 1949, 1950, or earlier. And then I sang in the choir at the Holy Savior Church. I was an altar boy for a while. I never got along with the teachers or the nuns. They used to hit me on the head all of the time. I would go like this. They'd say, "Now, Bob you learn your ABC's." They had the placards up there above the blackboard - A - B - C. I used to study that. [Sings the ABC's] All of the class did it, but I

couldn't do it. I was dyslexic. I used to go like this, "Z, Y, X, W . . . [sings alphabet backwards]." Wap! She'd hit me in the head.

**Crain:** You had a tough time in school, did you?

**Kovacich:** Oh yeah. Nuns didn't like me at all. I had Sister Mary Charles at the beginning. First and second grade. Sister Predentia, she used to use her knuckle like that and hit me in the back of the head all of the time. We couldn't do that now, if we were teachers. Then I had in the fifth and sixth grade, I had Sister Averista. Now, Sister Averista, she looked exactly like Frankenstein. And she hated me. In sixth grade, I had Sister Veronica. In seventh and eighth grade, I had Sister Rose Gertrude who took me under her wing. She had me singing all the time. Then I went to Butte Central. I used to get beat up pretty well up there when the brothers used to get a hold of me. Brother Sullivan, I'll never forget in 1955, when Blackboard Jungle came out with Bill Haley and his Comets. He had me sit right in front of his desk.

His desk was right here and my desk was right here. And I go [makes gesture]. He's up there lecturing at his desk. I was giving him this "chk, chk, chk" hitting his desk, irritating him. He got up and put my hands like this. On my desk like this and he goes, "CRASH!" Trying to get my fingers caught in my desk. I just pulled my hands out in time. I was a little faster than he was. He did that and I got up and I went [gestures]. "I'm going to get you now." He says, "Out in the hall, Kovacich." Oh boy he put me to the knees. He put my hand out. He had that big paddle and it went right across the hands. I went down on one knee. He put then the other hand. Can you get them for abuse now?

**Crain:** So did you finish high school?

**Kovacich:** Oh yeah, I finished high school. I think, Tom Lester who was the great football player for Butte Central back in '55 and '56 or '54 and '55. He and I were graduated the last in the class. I was number 70. He was 69. He ended up a college professor at Montana Tech in philosophy. I ended up a Butte English teacher in Butte at East Middle School.

Graduation, next morning. I looked in the mirror and said, "What are you going to do now?" You're out of school. So I decided to go to college. I asked my dad if I could go to college. He says, "Well yeah. I'll help you out as much as I can." But he was a miner, you know. I signed up for Western. I went to Western for two years. Sonny Ludvig and I. He and I roomed together all the time down there. We were hellions there. President Steele asked us both to leave college.

**Crain:** Did he personally knock on your door?

**Kovacich:** No, I had to go in there. He sat me down and he says, "Mr. Kovacich, you haven't grown up yet. Why don't you join the army for a couple years and come back to school." I said, "No, my dad wouldn't let me do that, sir." He said, "You got to do something about your behavior. You're in college." After I finished that semester, Teddy Mackle and Henny and I went to Chicago. My first two years at Western, I was in the play there. I was the singer at a cafe one time. When I got out of the service, I'll explain more about that. After I got out of the service, I was Marryin' Sam in *Lil' Abner*. I go, "Dearly Beloved, we are gathered here today . . ." Then

the chorus would come in. Old Ralph McFadden was the director. Then the next play I was in, I was Conrad Birdie in *Bye Bye Birdie*. I was Conrad Birdie. They wanted me because it was a spoof on Elvis Presley. I was Conrad there. We performed in Great Falls. We had our performances at Western in Dillon.

**Crain:** Was this your second round of college? Your second time back at college?

**Kovacich:** Yeah, after I got out of the service. I quit college after two years. Then I joined the 101st Airborne. I don't know how stupid I was or what. I was down there at boot camp. We had finished boot camp. Six months we were there in Fort Ord. I'll never forget. We had the meeting. They wanted 101st Airborne volunteers. I was in my wrinkled fatigues. I was sitting there like this. All of a sudden, this 1st Lieutenant comes in the room. He had an aura about him. Everything about him was pressed and starched. I couldn't believe it. I looked at him. He says, "We want a few good men to sign up for the 101st Airborne." I raised my hand like this [gestures]. I went up to sign my name. Shipped out the next day. First time I was ever in an airplane. I flew from Fort Ord to Texas and then up to Fort Campbell, Kentucky. I'll never forget how I had my uniform on and it was so hot. We landed in Kentucky.

[missing 18:39 - 18:55]

And then getting back to high school. That's the year, 1955 we beat Butte High. They beat Butte High in '53 with Sternod and Foggerty and those guys, '53 and '54. Mine was '55. We beat them in '55. I played that whole game. And Pat Carney, I intercepted the pass that set up our only touchdown. We beat them 6 to nothing or 7 to nothing. It was a great game, but we beat them. I intercepted the pass that set up the touchdown. Nobody even mentioned my name. It was Tom Lester. He ran in for the touchdown. Or Don James ran in for the touchdown. I never got any recognition.

**Jaap:** Now you have it, Bob. We got it recorded.

**Crain:** So how long were you in the service?

**Kovacich:** Two years. I was there and I met this kid from Detroit. His name was Dennis Coffey. He was only 18 years old. But he was an amazing guitar player. So we got together and we started practicing together. We went into Clarksville and Hockinsville which was right outside the base. We went to the American Legion there. The guy says, "We'll hire you guys as a duo." I went there Friday night and he and I played and we started doing all of our songs. There were about ten people that came. So Saturday night there were about fifteen people that came in and listened to us. The next week we came by and there about 30 people Friday night. Then Saturday night there were about 50 people. The third week came by and we had about a 100 people there Friday night and 100 Saturday night. The guy, the manager of the American Legion says, "You're getting too big of a crowd. We can't use you anymore." So that was our . . .

You know Nashville was only a hop and a jump from Fort Campbell. Did I ever tell you I was on the Gran Ole Opry, Ellen?

**Crain:** [inaudible]

**Kovacich:** I was roofing down there. I tell everybody, I says, "Back in 1976 at the International Hotel in Las Vegas, I opened for Elvis Presley." Everybody went, "Oh yeah." I says, "Yeah, I was the doorman."

**Jaap:** So did you and Dennis call yourselves anything? Did you have a name?

**Kovacich:** No, we didn't even have a name. But I know that he went back to Detroit after he got out of the service. He made a lot of albums. He went to Motown. He played for all those big shots. He made a few of his own albums. I see that he's got a daughter that's performing now over in Detroit. I always wanted to contact him and see how he's doing.

I loved that Airborne that was something else. You know jumping out of planes. You're 1250 feet in the air. My first five jumps were . . . You didn't even know what was happening. There's the green light and the yellow light and the red light. The red light is on and the jump master says, "Stand up." You stand up. "Hook up." You hook up. "Shuffle to the door." Then you go into the door. He goes like that. And boy I looked down and 1250. "Oh my god!" Then he goes, "Go!" Boy, and you go. You jump. You just don't know what's happening. You go back to where the riggers are. They're the ones who put the chutes together. They have a big sign that says, "If it don't work, bring it back." I mean, they can't do that now. I bet they took that sign down. They could never do something like that. Jeez.

**Crain:** So, Bob, tell us about the Renegades. When did you start playing music for real?

**Kovacich:** I got out of school in '56. I went to work for Harkins Wholesale. Harkins Wholesale was the local distributor for soda pop. All these different soda pops - Orange Crush, Dr. Pepper and all that. I bought a guitar, because I was tired of playing the broom. When I was in school, I used to play the broom, trying to emulate Elvis Presley. I'd grab a broom when we'd go to all the bars. Back then you could drink at 18, 17, 16. You could drink anytime you wanted. I'd go to Joe's Mirror Bar. You remember Percy Miller? Percy used to really sing all those songs like Dean Martin. He'd go, "Wooohooo." I used to get the broom and go, "Well, since my baby left!" I swung a broom, you know. When I was working, this guy says, "I got a guitar that I'll sell you." I says, "How much?" He says, "Six dollars. I'll you this guitar for six dollars." I says, "OK." I bought it. I practiced that thing. Holding my chords. Having somebody show me that. Finally, I got together with Cliff Champeau with the Renegades.

Well, the story goes. When I got out of the service and we started playing together, he and I were supposed to join the service together going into the army together under the buddy plan. Anyway, we go up there to the Old Miner's Bank building, above Wieux's. That was the recruiting office. I went in there and took the test, the exam. They said, "You're good. Over there." Cliff goes in there. I think he failed the mental, the physical, everything. I can still see him there when the train was pulling out, bringing me down to Fort Ore and he's out the window laughing and waving at me. That was terrible.

**Crain:** Did you and Cliff grow up together?

**Kovacich:** No, I met him at the C.O.D. bar. One night I walked in there, I think I was about 19. He was about 18. He was playing rhythm guitar behind this lead guitar player and a bass player and a drummer. They said, "Come up and sing one." So I walked up there and I said, "I want this kid to play." Because he was young, you know. There's this old guy there, playing guitar. I says, "I want him to play guitar." So he got up and played guitar with me. Ever since then we got together. We were in the band together. We lasted until '59. We played the old Cactus Inn. We used to play in Dillon. We played in Butte, here. At the bars here. At the McLeod's Terminal Bar. Momma Grady's, what was that, the Majestic? The Monogram. Oh God, we used to play in there and sit on top of the table and play there, get paid for it. I did some stupid stuff. I never forget when I walked out of the Monogram bar and Tommy was the barber next door. Tommy Tomkins. I had had a few too many, of course.

He used to have a few too many. He was sitting in his barber chair like this, passed out. I told Lubick, who was with me that time we walked out. The door was open to the barbershop. So I went in there. I opened the door and went in there. Walked up and grabbed his razor. I put the blanket around him. He was out like a light. I put the blanket around him, turned the razor on. "BUZZZZZZZZZZZ." I shaved his head. If they'd of caught me, they'd of killed me the next day. They tried to find out. Momma Grady said, "If I ever find the S.O.B. that did this, I'll kill 'em." I'm there, "Not me." Oh God. I can't go through all of them.

**Crain:** So tell me, who all was in the Renegades?

**Kovacich:** These boys here. Well, first of all, after I left and went into the service, Cliff got together with a kid named Rip Fry and Floyd Collins. And they played the 919 Club until I got out in '61. They were the Renegades, that's according to that paper here. You know I got that paper here.

[Finds paper with pictures and describes it.]

This is the Renegades here. Cliff and this shows just him and Blankenship. This is later on, because Rip Fry started playing first of all with Cliff. Rip Fry was a musician. He was a bass player. Then we played when I got out for a while in '61. I came with the Renegades right away. I'll never forget when we were playing at the Eastside Athletic Club. Rip didn't like me because I was an entertainer. And I played rhythm guitar. I'll never forget, I said, "I think your bass is out of tune." He looked at me and he went, "I think your face is out of tune." I said, "Well, O.K." Played like that.

**Jaap:** How long did that original group play for?

**Kovacich:** He quit and then Cliff picked up Blankenship. We all started playing together.

**Crain:** What did Blankenship play?

**Kovacich:** He played the bass. He took Rip Fry's place. And then we were the Renegades. And then Floyd Collins and Blankenship and I played together until '65, I think. Until we made this



album here. Here is the Renegades after Cliff went to California. See that's Bob Bluit, Mike Campbell, that's me and Jim Blankenship. This is Jerry Emmett down here. One thing about Jerry Emmett - in '69 when we broke up. He went to Missoula. He was going to be a guitar teacher or a drum teacher. A music teacher in general. He started and got into the drug scene with a few of the guys from Butte. They were playing over there and they had their band over there. And a . . . This is "former Butte musician killed." They were all LSD, I think, he and his buddy. I'll read you the article,

"Former Butte Musician Killed - Former Butte resident, Jerry Emmett, 37, [he was only 37] who played drums and saxophone with many local musicians died Sunday in a Missoula hospital of a gunshot wound to the abdomen. His roommate, Fred Peters, 40, also from Missoula, was charged with deliberate homicide in Missoula Justice Court Monday in connection with the shooting death. Peters is being held without bond in the Missoula County jail. Preliminary hearing on the charge has been set for March 27. Emmett died about midnight Sunday at St. Patrick Hospital. According to the police the shooting occurred at the house where Emmett and Peters lived. It was his best friend.

Lieutenant James Oberhoffer, a detective assigned to the case, said Emmett was shot with a 30.06 rifle. The shooting was reported by Peters, Oberhoffer said. Authorities are awaiting the results of an autopsy. Services for Emmett are pending at Squire Simmons & Carr Funeral home in Missoula." Emmett started playing music in Butte when he was a teenager. "That's when he started with us. He was only 16 years old when he started playing drums with us. He and I played a lot together," guitarist Mike Campbell said Monday. "He was just a tremendous musician even at 16."

Emmett played drums and saxophone with the Renegades in Butte for a time and more recently he had played with Blind Boy Bug, a blues band in Missoula. And that of course was his downfall because he got on the drugs. They were sitting at the table in Butte or in Missoula and they had the 30.06 rifle there. Peters was sitting across the table from Jerry and he lowered the gun. I don't know the story because they were trying to shoot flies off the ceiling with the 30.06 and they put the gun down like this and Emmett who was across the table from him and he went "boom" and hit him right there and blew his guts out. Ed Brown even told me when he was unconscious from the time they took him to the hospital. That was his downfall going to Missoula to be a musician. So . . . He was such a great kid. He had such aspirations of being a teacher, a music teacher. That's what he was studying. He was really good.

**Crain:** So how long did you guys all play together?

**Kovacich:** We played until '69 and then . . . I'll never forget Mojo - kid from back East came into town. Things were really tough. I mean, there wasn't much going on in Butte. I was on unemployment. Well, I had been teaching at that time. I started teaching in '65. We used to play around Butte when I started teaching. You couldn't have two jobs then. That was moonlighting. If you did moonlight, you had an extra job, right Al? And if you played, the school board didn't like that. I'll never forget, I had all this trouble. Telling them I wasn't drinking. I wasn't. I was not playing on Sunday nights before teaching. That was the story there. Jeez. They just wanted to . . . I had a hard time getting into teaching anyway. Clare Bly had to do some talking for me. And

Kevin Shannon finally gave me - got me the job. Do you know Kevin Shannon? Yeah, Kevin is the one who got me the job teaching back there when I first started teaching 6th grade. He even said, "You and Big Dan Sullivan were the hardest guys I ever got that I had to get a job for in Butte."

**Crain:** Because you were moonlighting in bars. So you were teaching and playing music on the weekends. Tell us about your personal life. You got married?

**Kovacich:** Oh yeah, I got married to Germaine LeCoure back in 1962. And we had 32 years of marriage. And I used to be a biker. I can't ride a bike now. But anyway, September 6th, 1992, on Labor Day, I think it was Labor Day, yeah, Labor Day, September 6th, 1992, and we left the Basin Bar. We were on a Poker Run. She said, "I want to drive the motorcycle." I said, "OK." So, we're coming over the hill here at Homestake and I was on the back of Milkolakovich's bike and he was riding me and she was ahead of us and all of a sudden she started gliding off to the right and she went over the guardrail. She hit the guardrail, went over and broke her neck. The bike went around on the highway. And I rushed and called the ambulance and brought her to the hospital. They pronounced her dead there.

And then after that I married my eighth grade student. Oh everybody's rolling their eyes now. She was 20 years old when I met her, but I had her in eighth grade. I didn't even know who she was, but when I met her down at Dano's bar. Yeah, den of inequity. I met her there. She was there with one of her friends. I said to Laurie DeFoy, "Who's that girl you're with?" She says, "You had her in class, Mr. Kovacich." Mr. K, they used to call me. And I says, "Oh, yeah, I know." She said, "Oh." I introduced me and that was the beginning of the end.

**Crain:** How long have you been married?

**Kovacich:** We've been married 25 years now. Yeah, I was 40 and she was 20. I'm 80 and she's 60 now. She just turned 60. Now she won't let me ride the 4 wheeler because she says I'm too old. We bought a side-by-side so she has to drive. And I don't trust her driving.

I graduated from college. That was in 1965. Then I went back to get my master's degree. I'll never forget, when we went to go in for our final for the master's degree. We studied the final. We knew what it was. I couldn't even understand it, reading it, and I was supposed to answer the questions. So Jack Allen, he was sitting way behind me and we studied the same test and we wrote down the final, the same words and they called us in. They said, "How come your and Allen's answers are exactly the same?" I go, oh my god, "Well, he was sitting way behind me. We couldn't have cheated off one another." Boy, we almost didn't get our degrees. It was one of those tests. I couldn't even understand it reading it. And they wanted me to try to pass that?

**Jaap:** But you passed?

**Kovacich:** Well, they let me through. I got my master's anyway.

**Crain:** So, Bob, I want to ask you, your 80th birthday party was at the Elk's and you had a lot of great musicians including Mr. Silent over here.

**Kovacich:** A great musician, Mr. Al James was there.

**Crain:** Tell us about that group and why you brought them together to play with you at your birthday.

**Kovacich:** Well, Bones Kasoon, he was from McQueen, I showed him a lot of guitar, but he surpassed me as far as guitar went. He tunes his guitars straight E. He can hear any minor, diminished, anything you want. He's just phenomenal. He said, "Yeah, I want to come over for your 80th birthday and play." And Steve Brody, you remember Steve Brody? Well, anyway, he was there. He came over from Coeur D'Alene along with Bones, that's his nickname, Bones Kasoon. And they got up and played guitar for three hours. And Bones's son, Josh Auber, from Bozangeles, he came. He's a great guitar player. He just came back from Nashville. He paid \$5000 to have his recording and he had studio musicians there. So I'm waiting for a cd from him.

**Crain:** And you had Al.

**Kovacich:** Al was there and he played. Josh brought a bass player over. Dave Lopez came up. Kenny Rich come in and played. And Sonya Batterman.

**Crain:** She played your guitar.

**Kovacich:** Did she? Yeah, that's right. I didn't see too much. They told me I had a good time at the party. Rex did one didn't he?

**Crain:** How about you guys? Did you and Al ever play music professionally together?

**Kovacich:** Oh yeah, we played for 10 years. Yeah, Al was our drummer. We were Tinkle Plunk and Boom.

**Jaap:** Tell us a little bit about that.

**Kovacich:** Tinkle, Plunk and Boom. Al James and I, we used to . . . Wilcox and I used to go . . . We'd tell Al . . . We used to say, . . . he used to be our bartender. He was our drummer and bartender. He used to make us our drinks. He'd hand them to us. He'd say . . . I'd say, "Don't forget, Al, you're making \$99 for serving Wilcox and me and a dollar for playing drums."

**Crain:** Did they pay you, Al?

**Al:** Oh yeah. No, I had to pay them to let me play with them.

**Kovacich:** We used to have so much fun with Al. Like the time we were playing for the softball party at the Racetrack bar. And Al's back at the drums there. I said to the bartender, it was a terrible trick, "Double vodka in the orange juice." Of course, he couldn't taste the vodka in the orange juice. And boy, he's drinking them down pretty quick. We were doing "Proud Mary" and he goes, "Kic, kic, kic."

**Al:** And that was it.

[All laugh.]

**Kovacich:** And we took him out like this. We had him by two arms. And we took him out like this and put him in his car.

**Al:** Five o'clock in the morning and I woke up and my teeth were chattering.

**Kovacich:** He was out in the car at five o'clock in the morning. Oh, we used to get him a lot. I'd go like this. We left Saint Ann's once and this guy wanted a liquor basket. Al goes . . . The guy's walking by me like this. And I grab a half a gallon, was it? A half a gallon of brandy out of the basket. He laughs. He says, "Oh hi Bob." Al goes up and says, "Well, might as well drink this." So Al goes up and asks for some cups. And the guy says, "Who the hell are you? Where are you going with those cups?" We finished that one gig down there. Down at Greg's.

Wilcox and I finished at 2 o'clock in the morning. We go in the kitchen and in the refrigerator. Grab a big hunk of ham and we're sitting there, eating ham sandwiches like this. We walk out and Al's setting up his drums and says, "Where did you get those?" "In the kitchen." "Oh, well, I'm going to go get one." So Wilcox and I sat there and ate our ham sandwiches. He goes into the kitchen and the janitor is there and he goes, "What the hell are you doing in here?! Get out! I hope they don't think I ate that ham!"

**Al:** "I have to bring my lunch in a bag. I hope they don't think I ate all of that."

**Crain:** I didn't know you played the drums, Al.

**Al:** Oh yeah, I played the drums for a long time. Until the school board made it possible for me to play the guitar.

**Crain:** Oh how did they do that?

**Al:** Well, the school board came up with the big idea. The teachers left at 3:30. They used to leave at 3:00, but if they left at 3:30 they could help the kids that needed extra help. Bright idea. The only problem was that no kids ever showed up. So I'd go up to his room when he was trying to learn to fiddle. So he'd show me the guitar chords with him on the fiddle. That's how I started on the guitar.

**Crain:** So you taught him the fiddle and he taught you the guitar?

**Al:** No. He was learning the fiddle, but he taught me to play the guitar to accompany him. So that's how I started the guitar. Good old school board. Like I said, it was a great idea because no kids ever showed up.

**Kovacich:** Yeah, teaching was pretty much fun for me for my first 25 years. Then it started to get a little shaky after that when all these rules came out. I used to love to do that with all the kids when they'd first come in for the first day of school. They'd be sitting there like this. And I'd say, "OK, you kids are going to get some smarts now." I'd pick somebody out and I'd say, "OK, point your finger to your head like this." And of course they'd do that. And I'd say, "Give the abbreviation for the state of Montana." And they'd go, "MT." And I'd say, "That's right it's empty now, but it's going to be . . ."

**Crain:** "Full by the end."

**Kovacich:** I used to have them sing when they'd make a mistake. I'd say ok do these sentences and underline the subjects and verbs in them. You know the old grammar. The Heath's Handbook we used to use which I loved. That's the only thing I could teach out of. I loved that. And they would go like this, ok. "Underline not." I'd walk down the aisle and find somebody who underlined "not" and I'd say, "Front of the room." Another one, "Front of the room." And I'd have them move to the front of the room, like this. Alright, they'd stand up there and I'd play the guitar and sing, "N-O-T is never a verb! N-O-T is never a verb! N-O-T is never a verb!" I still get kids who come up to me who were in my class 50 years ago saying, "N-O-T is not a verb."

**Crain:** You must have been fun.

**Kovacich:** Oh yeah. I had a stereo. I carpeted my whole room like this. I threw a dance down there. There's Cherry Emmett. Wilcox. Blankenship. And 50 cents you get into the auditorium for every student. Mr. **Kovacich** is going to play. I got about \$600, playing there. I had a rug put in. Drapes put on my windows. It was beautiful.

**Crain:** What did the school board think of that?

**Kovacich:** They thought it was great. Nice and quiet. And I had a big stereo. I'd give a test and I'd have music playing in the background to soothe the mind. Al's son was there that time. He was chewing gum in my class. "Alright, James, front of the room. Throw that gum away. Put your nose up against that door." He stood there like this, petrified. Next the thing I know, he goes, "Blaaaaaah." And then Donnie Zimloc. How about Donnie Zimloc. I'm in a bad mood anyway. He raises his hand and says, "Mr. Kovacich, may I go to the lavatory?" I say, "Shut up and go stand in the corner." He gets up, sits in the corner like this. Fifteen years later I'm working with him at Blankenship construction, he goes, "You know that day you sent me to the corner? You wouldn't let me go to the lavatory? I peed all over the floor of your room, in the corner."

**Crain:** You'd go to jail now for that. So you guys have been friends for how long?

**Kovacich:** 1956.

**Al:** No. I think it was '58. When did you get out of the service?

**Kovacich:** When we went to college.

**Al:** What year did you get out of the service?

**Kovacich:** Al had just got out of a wreck. He was in a terrific wreck when he was over there in the navy. Tell them about the wreck, Al.

**Al:** Well, it was a bad accident after football practice. We were heading home and hay truck come around the corner. We tried to get around him and hit the soft shoulder. Away we went. Tumbling down the mountain. And everybody got thrown out except me and my right leg was caught under the front seat. Every time it rolled I just tore my leg more. So I was in the hospital for six months. Navy hospital.

**Crain:** Did everybody else live?

**Al:** Yeah, they all lived.

**Crain:** So was that before or after you got blown up?

**Al:** Oh, that was way before. I was only 17 at that time. Yeah, I was smarter than the teachers at Butte High so I decided to join the service.

**Crain:** So, Al, tell this tape and Clark and Audrey and I about getting blown up. That accident that you had.

**Al:** Oh that was July 7th, 1952. I had been working graveyard and a friend of mine, Joe Rich, had come to the house because he was starting a drum corps at Western College. So we'd been painting the leggings white on the white fence for the drum corps. Smoke started peering up over by the Diamond mine. And the smoke kept getting worse. Pretty soon the Centerville fire truck went up and it kept getting more darker and darker. I told Joe I'd better go up there. So he rode me up and I got out of his car to go talk and got half way down and Bob Melvin and Bonner, the supervisor of mines, met me halfway and asked me to go with them. So I went in and there were two valves.

He took one and I took the one here. The whole thing blew up, put him over in the ditch. Put me right through 3/4 inch board fence. If you can believe that. I landed on the Anaconda Road. Everything is history from then on. Bob Melvin, he was with me. He got hurt worse. He had part of his face taken off and part of his leg. I had my finger taken off and that was about it.

**Crain:** You've had some pretty dramatic incidents. Al tells this marvelous story about his father. You know in light of this cave situation. Tell us the story about your dad.

**Al:** Well, he was 12 years old and he was working in the Hodbarrow mine in Millom, England and the seawall came in and collapsed and flooded out the mine. He was just a young kid and they put him through to get the water and food into the trapped miners. You saw the picture there

of the Prince of Wales. Yeah, all the men are standing at attention. My dad is only 12 and he's watching the Prince of Wales and he's got short pants.

**Crain:** And he's jumping up and down.

**Al:** Yeah, he's supposed to be standing at attention like the rest of them.

**Crain:** Your grandparents had to sign for him to go to work as a child.

**Al:** Yeah, that's the Child Labor and Workshop Act.

**Crain:** It's a very pertinent story today with those kids trapped in that cave and the water coming in. And then they immigrated here.

**Al:** Yeah, him and his brothers.

**Crain:** Why did your family immigrate from Croatia, Bob? Do you know why they came?

**Kovacich:** No. But they say that name, Kovacich, is like Smith in this country. In fact, that soccer that was just played, the World Cup. There was a Kovacich on there. So it must be a pretty popular name over there. A few people wanted me to go to Croatia, but I don't think I want to go.

**Crain:** So your grandfather, who didn't like you . . .

**Kovacich:** Well, he probably liked me, but I was just a mean kid, you know.

**Crain:** Did he ever teach you music?

**Kovacich:** No. Nobody in the Kovacich family, other than my mother who played a little piano, did anything.

**Crain:** Did your grandfather play for you? Did he play the piano for you?

**Kovacich:** No. I think he just brought it over.

**Crain:** Very interesting.

**Kovacich:** Yeah. All I'm playing now is the rest homes. I played Lincoln last Sunday. No, I got to play there September 15th at the car show. I was supposed to play in Lincoln last Sunday, but I was at the fiddlers there. And I do songs, you know, like [starts to play] for the rest homes. I tell the people there, I says, "Now, you've got to figure out which word I'm going to say. Let's see how smart you are." [plays the piano] So I go, [sings and plays piano]

There once was a farmer who took a young miss  
in back of a barn to give her a

lecture on horses and chickens and eggs.  
Told her that she had beautiful  
manners that suited a girl of her charms.  
A girl that he wanted to take in his  
washing and ironing. Then if she did  
they could get married, raise lots of  
sweet violets  
sweeter than all of the roses  
covered all over from head to toe  
covered all over with sweet violets.  
The girl told the farmer, he'd better stop.  
She called her father and he called the  
taxi which got there before very long  
cause someone was doing his little girl  
right for a change.  
And that's why he said,  
"If you marry her, son, you're better off  
single because it always was my belief,  
marriage will bring a man nothing but  
sweet violets . . .  
sweeter than all of the roses  
covered all over from head to toe,  
covered all over with sweet violets."

The farmer decided he'd wed anyway  
started in planning for his wedding  
suit which he purchased for only one buck  
but then he found out he was just out of  
money so he got left in the lurch  
standing in waiting outside of the  
end of this story just goes to show  
all a girl wants from a man is his sweet violet,  
sweeter than all of the roses,  
covered all over from head to toe,  
covered all over from with sweet violets.

**Jaap:** That's great.

**Kovacich:** You know that song was written in 1920.

**Crain:** Your voice sounds great, Bob, still. That's wonderful. A lot of people who sing, their voice gets a patina, they say. Well, you play, how often a week do you play?

**Kovacich:** Well, you know, last week from, I think I played, I played at the rest home Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday I played the country club. Saturday, I played the country club.



Sunday, I went to Lincoln, played there, fiddle. I didn't play Monday. I played Tuesday this week. Wednesday. Yesterday, I played, Thursday. And I'm here today.

**Crain:** How often do you play, Al?

**Al:** Oh not much anymore.

**Crain:** How often do you play?

**Al:** I do every day at home.

**Kovacich:** He plays with his son a lot.

**Al:** Yeah, at home.

**Kovacich:** He gets to play with them. In fact, I wanted Al to do one of his mining songs.

**Crain:** OK, I think we can work that out. I wanted to know if Clark has some impressions.

**Grant:** I was curious if you were going to play guitar.

**Crain:** Clark's a musician as well.

**Kovacich:** Well, he recorded my "Butte City Ballad". I gave you those words.

**Grant:** We recorded at Len Waters.

**Kovacich:** Did I ever give you the words?

**Grant:** I have them on the wall at Len Waters.

**Crain:** There are two times. You know I went to an event one time where I was the speaker. And you were the entertainment and my father was the MC. And by the time you two were finished, I said, I'm never going to follow these two again. I was just a complete flop. So are you guys going to sing?

[Piano plays.]

**Al:** [Sings]

I met you in a hot box  
In that good old town of Butte  
You wore your mucker suit  
Dumpin' rock into the chute  
Bill Callan was the shift boss  
And he used to raise all Hell  
When we wore those dirty old mining clothes

When I was a miner, a hard rock miner  
Deep in the Mountain Con Mine  
The hashers all caressed me  
The chambermaids, they blessed me  
My contract was paying fine  
But soon [inaudible] me eyes were getting blurry  
Me lungs were wheezing all the time  
So to dodge the undertaker  
I turned to moonshine maker and gave up the  
Mountain Con Mine  
Yes, I gave up the Mountain Con Mine  
When we wore those dirty old mining clothes

**Al:** There we go. That's a mine song.

**Crain:** My father used to sing that song.

**Kovacich:** He did, huh? This is a song that Gordon asked me to play for you and it goes like this:

Let's see now.

**Crain:** You're cleaning it up.

[All laugh]

**Kovacich:** I got to think of it now. Let's see. What the heck is it? When your mind goes like that. When you're 80 years old. I know so many songs.

**Crain:** You guys are really great. You really are doing physically really well and mentally really well. The fact that you're out all the time engaging with the world is truly remarkable because not a lot of people do that at your age. A lot of people are kind of in their rocker.

**Al:** You should have been at my class reunion. Last weekend. All the star football players.

**Crain:** On their walkers.

**Al:** One guys on the cane pushing his wife in a wheelchair. Oh God that was depressing.

**Kovacich:** Are you ready now for your song?

[sings]

I'm going to get a dummy model  
From the mannequin factory  
And take it home with me  
I'm going to get some clothes like the ones you wear

I'll even get a wig that will match your hair  
Going to sprinkle it with perfume  
The way you do and put on lipstick too  
And when I'm done, I'll bet you ten to one  
She'll be a lot more fun than you

**Crain:** That's exactly what my uncle would say when I was making him leave last night. "Let's go. Let's go."

**Kovacich:** That's what Gordon said. He said, "She'll be a lot more fun than you, the dummy model."

**Crain:** So, Bob did you get pictures of these guys?

**Jaap:** Yeah, Clark got all the wigs.

**Crain:** Alright. So you're happy with the way your life has turned out?

**Kovacich:** Oh yeah. There's nothing you can say. Everything. We had a good time didn't we, Al?

**Al:** Oh yeah, always had a good time.

**Kovacich:** Wilcox, our piano player, now he was only . . . he died about five years ago now.

**Al:** Yeah about five or six years ago.

**Kovacich:** Great piano player.

**Crain:** Do you still see Cliff Champeau? Cliff's still around isn't he?

**Kovacich:** Oh yeah. But he can't remember anything.

**Grant:** Still driving the Cadillac?

**Kovacich:** Yeah, he's still got that Cadillac. He drives that. He's a typical grumpy old man. That's no lie. Now, he's quitting the country club down there because he goes down there at six in the morning and they're watering the lawn and he doesn't want them to water the lawn because he wants to golf. So he's quitting. He's hollering. He's fighting with them down there. He says, "I can't go out in the sunshine because I get cancer in the skin."

**Crain:** So how about Mike Campbell?

**Kovacich:** If you see him, like Clark, I was telling Clark, if you can talk to him, you're doing well.

**Crain:** Clark, you did, you talked to him. So how about Blankenship?

**Kovacich:** He's going over today to Missoula to get operated on. I don't know what the heck they're going to do. He still plays handball, tennis. But, he's got that cancer. I don't know what it is. They took a piece out of the back of his head here and then behind his eye. Oh that's what I wanted to tell you. I have to talk about Evel Knievel. Here's these two rings. You see Evel Knievel and I were pretty good friends. He gave me that ring 30 years ago. And he said, that's after he hit Mort Saul over the head with the bat. And then, of course, the government wanted their tax money and he had to get rid of everything. He had these made for . . . He gave that to me down at Dano's bar. He gave this one to Blankenship and Jim on my 80th birthday comes up and he says, "Here. I'll never wear this. You can have this ring."

**Crain:** And you'd wear it.

**Kovacich:** Yeah, I wear it every time I go out. I'll wear it when I play the piano. See I can be like Liberace.

[Plays the piano]

Mr. Sandman bring me a dream  
Make her complexion like peaches and cream  
Give her two lips like Polyacci  
Give her wavy hair like Bob Kovacich  
Sandman, I'm so alone  
Don't have nobody to call my own  
Please turn on your magic beam  
Mr. Sandman bring me a dream

**Crain:** So Evel Knievel and you . . .

**Kovacich:** He was something else. Like some of the antics he pulled. Like when we used to hunt together. When we were out by the slough out by Whitehall. We were shooting all these ducks. We shot two boxes of shells. That's when shells were . . . This was 1955, '54, somewhere in there and we shot all of our shotgun shells and he goes, "Let's go down and get some more shotgun shells." I said, "OK." So we go to the sportsman's, a sporting goods store in Whitehall. And there's this old mom and pop guy that comes out. He's the old guy and he comes out and he says, "Can I help you boys?" "Yes, I need a box of 12-gauge shotgun shells." He says, "That's a buck forty-nine." I pay him. He goes in the backroom and Knievel is sitting with me, or standing with me waiting for him to come back with the shotgun shells. I'm waiting and looking like that. He comes back with the shotgun shells. He hands me the shotgun shells. We started walking out the door and Knievel walking out in his hip boots, straight-legged. We get out in the car and said, "What the heck did you do to your leg?" He pulls out a brand new 30-30 carbine rifle out of his hip boots. Oh, here I am an accomplice for a crime. I get in the car. I had an old '40 Chevy. I push the starter in and it goes, "Uhm no. Uhm no." I said, "Push this thing back." I was scared. I was sweating bullets. I went out and I pushed it back and he helped me. And we got it going a

little bit. I jumped in and stuck in second gear and it kicked over. Oh. We went back hunting. But I don't know if that guy ever realized that he stole it. Or when. Because it was never reported or anything like that. Another incident. He used to do stuff like this all the time. He went into Snitch's bar. Do you remember Snitch? Marsinictch?

He went into his bar and there's a guy sitting in there. The guy's pretty well to do. He goes back out and takes a brand new. He's got a brand new truck. He takes the spare tire off, rolls it into the bar. He says, "Anybody own a Chevy truck around here?" This guy, "Yeah, I do." He says, "I got a brand new tire here." He goes, "Yeah? How much you want for it?" Knievel goes, "Twenty dollars." "Oh, I'll give you twenty dollars for it." He peels off a twenty-dollar bill. And this was back when twenty dollars was like a hundred now. Hands him the twenty dollars. He bought his tire back. Can you imagine what he did when he went back out?

**Crain:** He must say some really nice things about Bobby Knievel.

**Kovacich:** Yeah, jeez. Knievel and I. Then he stole the elk out of the guy's . . . at the 19 Mile Inn. Them guys were in there that shot the elk. They took the elk and tagged it and everything. He used to be, he used to really be bad.

**Crain:** Did he ever get better?

**Kovacich:** Yeah. He did in 2007 when he died.

Grant: Bob, all these venues that you used to play at like the Rumpus Room, now that they're gone, does that sadden you?

**Kovacich:** Yeah, you see this, Chris Martin is the one that really got us going. He was the one that hired us back then at the Ranch House. He used to put up this. This is one of the things. One of the signs that he used to put up. "Rockin' Roll Parties" You can pass that around. I got a lot of them. And this other one here. See the Rumpus Room. OK. I don't know. They got these out of the Archives.

**Crain:** I'll take them the way you got them. I'll just take one of each. Bob, tell us who Chris Martin is.

**Kovacich:** Chris Martin and Eddy Grimes, Al paid for Eddy Grimes for a few years. Eddy Grimes was a piano player, a jazz piano player, really a great piano player. Al was the drummer. Did your uncle?

**Al:** Billy? No. It was before. Eddy and I played at the Ranch House first.

**Kovacich:** Did you have a bass player?

**Al:** Jimmy Grimes in the beginning, but he left town. Just Eddy and I. Piano.

**Kovacich:** Eddy Grimes and Chris Martin became partners in the bar business and they started up at the Ranch House, pizza there. Where City Hall is now, right next to it. It was a really going

places. In fact, Eddy Piazzola who owned it, if he would have started a pizza franchise, he would have been a billionaire today. But he didn't he just kept it locally. When they left the Ranch House, we played there a few times. They bought the Rumpus Room which used to be the . . . What was the name?

**Al:** Arrow

**Kovacich:** That was right below the Rialto. It's underneath the bank now. Anyway, they opened that up. And oh, good god, we played that for years. Then he moved up to the Rumpus Room which is right down on Park Street now. Room 71. We used to keep that open. He used to bring different bands in up the stairs. Go down the alley into the Room 71. It was upstairs, the alley down here. It was really a going place, but times were tough in Butte then. If you played, you made, if you're lucky, you made 10 bucks, 25. That was pretty good.

**Jaap:** Were you guys unionized? Were the musicians unionized? Talk a little bit about that.

**Kovacich:** Yeah, we used to always. Union. That was something else on the unions. They used to have the musician's union here. Three pieces in our band. We used to always have to pay for five if we played for something like the Ramada Inn or something like that. Any venue that was large, we had to hire five pieces, including ourselves. We used to get old . . . can't think of his name. I can see his face. He used to sit there with his accordion. We'd say don't play anything. Just sit there. And the other guy, just sit there. Don't play anything.

**Al:** Don't play. You can play when we take a break.

**Kovacich:** And we had to pay him \$32.50.

**Al:** Right. For sitting up there with us. But then we got in trouble, remember? We didn't really get in trouble. Caused a bunch of trouble for us. We could never figure it out. The union was mad at us because we were charging too much.

**Crain:** To have them listen?

**Al:** No. To play.

**Crain:** Oh really?

**Al:** Yeah, they were getting \$32 a shift and we were getting about over 80 to 100 whenever we were playing. So they brought the international man in to settle it. He said it was the most ridiculous thing he'd ever heard in his life - members were charging too much. Isn't that hard to believe?

**Crain:** It is.

**Al:** He'd come to the Acoma. We were playing at the Acoma and he come over after the union meeting. He stayed there all night. The guy from the international. From Chicago. Brought him all the way over from Chicago to Butte.

**Crain:** So you both mentioned the Rich's. When we look at the musician union records, there have been Rich, the name Rich is in the records from the beginning. They're Cornish. The Rich's are still playing music today around town.

**Kovacich:** Is that Joe Rich?

**Al:** Yeah, Kenny's kid.

**Crain:** I mean it's just interesting to me that you have multiple generations of musicians.

**Kovacich:** I don't remember if Tony, did he play anything?

**Al:** Not that I know of.

**Kovacich:** Tony is the one. The son of Joe Rich that was over by Livingston. They were climbing up the . . .

**Crain:** The mountain. Or the wall.

**Kovacich:** And then some kids rolled some rocks down and a rock hit him on the head and killed him.

**Al:** Yeah.

**Kovacich:** Getting back to Sony Ludwig and I. I should say Sony Ludwig and me, being an English teacher.

**Jaap:** Yeah, shouldn't we make you get up and here and sing something to fix your mistake.

**Kovacich:** Anyway. Ludwig and I were playing baseball for Western back in 1956. No, '57. Billy Connors was up to bat at practice. He hit this big fly ball. I'm in centerfield. Ludwig is in left field. I'm running full blast this way. He's running toward me, full blast and we hit heads. That's what disfigured his whole face. And we spent . . . Oh we went to the hospital. What an excursion that was. Put the two of us together in a hospital is like putting monkeys in a cage. So were there. His head was all bandaged and everything. I was there. I'll never forget the time that old guy, I think his name was Martin or something like. He was having the DT's. Delirium Tremors.

It was about five in the morning and he was screaming in his room. He said, "I'll get you! You S-O-B! I'll get you!" He's screaming. So Ludwig and I went out into his room. We said, "Martin, what's wrong?" He said, "Look at those rattlesnakes up there. They're all trying to get me." I looked at Ludwig and he looked at me. I says, "Yeah, get that one up there! Oh, there's

another one over there!” Seven o’clock. He died in the morning. And Ludwig. Then we were there for about two weeks. He’s in the wheelchair and I’m pushing him. We’re up on the second floor. The elevator is over here and we go to the elevator. I says, “You don’t want to take the elevator down anymore, do you?” He goes, “Oh no.” So I pushed him down the stairs. Jesus Christ. The chair, wheelchair rolls over like this. He lands on the landing. He’s lying down there like this. Nurses are screaming. “What happened?!”

**Crain:** Does he talk to you still?

**Kovacich:** And then when we were ready to get out. We got those gowns on, you know with no backs to them? Let’s go get our clothes over where we changed before we had the accident. We were walking across the highway. We both got our backs, holding the gowns together. We got nothing on at all. Some tourists come by. “Two people have escaped from your place!” They thought it was an insane asylum or something.

I love to sing this song to all the people that are at the rest home.

I stepped out of the shower  
I got a good look at myself  
Pot-bellied, bald head  
Man, I thought it was somebody else  
I caught my reflection in the mirror  
On the back of my bathroom door  
I just don’t look good naked anymore  
So I’m going upstairs, take the bedroom  
Mirror off the wall  
I stuck it there when I was trim and tall  
I stand and strut and flex and smile  
Until my arms got sore  
But I just don’t look good naked anymore  
I used to go out with the girls  
I loved them one and all  
Now they don’t get very close to me  
They’re afraid I might fall  
I went to my doctor  
For my annual medical exam  
I stood there in the buff  
Suddenly he said, “Man.”  
I said, “What is it, doc,  
Some fatal disease?  
I want to know the score.”  
He said, “Bob, you don’t look  
Good naked anymore.”  
Now me and my wife  
Had a dance routine  
Everybody said it was unique



Now it's only when we're back to back  
That we're dancing cheek to cheek  
I went to a nude beach to have a little seaside fun  
I stretched out in my birthday suit soaking up the sun  
Some wise guy yelled, "Hey, there's an old white whale  
Washed up on the shore!"  
I just don't look good naked anymore  
My arches fell  
My chest went to hell  
My butt's dragging the floor  
I don't look good naked anymore

That reminds me of my friend Al and I. When we were kids at Canyon Ferry. We were in our swimming suits, right Al? He comes up to me. I'm on the beach, lying back. He says, "Kovacich, how come all the chicks are coming around you?" I says, "Come here." He put his ear up to me. I says, "Get a potato and put it in your bathing suit." He goes, "No kidding?" I says, "Yeah. Women will come around you all the time." So he goes and he's gone about an hour. He comes back. I look at him and say, "How'd you do?" He says, "All the babes are running from me. All the broads are running from me." I looked at him and I says, "You're supposed to put the potato in the front."

**Jaap:** Poor Al.

**Al:** I'm just sitting here taking it. I'm just trying to make his day for him.

**Crain:** Alright, Clark, do you think we have enough story?

**Grant:** Yeah.

**Kovacich:** I know Clark said, I can't take anymore.

**Grant:** Done.

[END OF RECORDING]