

Madison Historical: The Online Encyclopedia and Digital Archive for Madison County, Illinois

Ron Holland Oral History Interview

Greg Kessler, Interviewer

July 9, 2018

Glen Carbon, Illinois

Greg Kessler (GK): The following interview is conducted with Ron Holland on behalf the Madison County Online Encyclopedia and Digital Archive. It took place on July 9th, 2018 at 7 Chaparral, Glen Carbon, Illinois. The interviewer is Greg Kessler. So uhm, I usually start out by asking just you to say your name, where you graduated from high school, and when.

Ron Holland (RH): Yeah I'm Ron Holland. I graduated from Granite City Senior High School in 1966.

GK: Okay. I think I'm going to move this closer because I... Okay. Uhm. Alright so uh when when did you get interested in music?

RH: Uhm. I was around fifteen. It was the first year that I couldn't play baseball. Didn't have a team to get on.

GK: Oh.

RH: And uh there happened to be uh my uncle's old acoustic guitar was in our garage and we didn't pay much attention. We played around with it a little bit more when we were younger kids but we never learned to play anything. And uh, a friend of mine could play a simple melody of "Tom Dooley" or some old folk song and he showed that to me and I started playing and I kind of thought well that's fun, you know. I didn't have anything else to do for the summer so I uh started playing around with that thing and took a few lessons and learned a little bit. And uh then kept on playing. Eventually got an electric guitar.

GK: What was your first electric?

RH: My first electric was a Dwight. It was actually made by Gibson but it was a more economical guitar that was sold out of Sonny Shields Music Store in East St. Louis.

GK: Okay.

RH: I went there uh the teacher I had taught me downtown in Granite City but he was worked out of that store. And uh, yeah, it was a Dwight. It was a double cutaway. Red. Nice guitar. I wish I still had it. I don't even remember what happened to it.

GK: Uhm. Who did you take lessons from in Granite?

RH: Uh, I can't remember his name because I was fifteen at the time.

GK: Uh huh.

RH: And well his first name was Keith but I don't know. And he played around a lot in St. Louis area.

GK: Okay.

RH: Uh, yeah.

GK: Uhm, so you started playing when you were fifteen. Uh, what was the first thing that you learned?

RH: Uh, I started learning uh when I took some lessons. At that time, lessons consisted of learning to sight read music. Which a lot of people don't do that eventually anyway.

GK: Right.

RH: So I only took lessons probably for about six months or so. But what I really learned from him was chords. So I practiced playing chords. I had a guitar exactly like that. That's not the same one but it's exactly like that.

GK: Okay.

RH: That's why I bought that. For sentimental.

GK: What was the first song you learned? Do you remember?

RH: "Tom Dooley."

GK: Oh it was "Tom Dooley." Okay.

RH: Yeah and then after that, when I got an electric guitar, well I started playing uh...I would go down to Jack Johnson's Music Store in Granite City and buy sheet music and I bought a song called "Abilene" and songs that were hits on the radio. That was kind of a crossover pop hit but really a country song. So I would learn that and it had chord charts at the top and it had the lyrics. And so I would try to play those chords and try to sing it. Uh or learn the melody and have somebody else play the chords to accompany it. So that's kind of how I got started was doing that thing. And then the Ventures were big then. This was pre- Beatles. Uh the Ventures were playing. This was somewhere around 1962. Uh started trying to play "Wipeout" and "Apache" and things like that, "Pipeline." Instrumental guitar songs. From there uh... from there I eventually tried to create a band. And so I have a twin brother, Don, and he liked my electric guitar and he wanted one too. So he got one so he didn't take any lessons but I taught him. I taught him chords so I tended to play the lead and he played rhythm for me. My younger brother, Gary, who was three years younger, he had already been taking piano lessons since he was I don't know, ten or so. So uhm we got together with another guy, Gene Hudson, who we knew through a church. He had been playing for quite awhile. He was a better lead player than me so I switched to bass. And somewhere along we picked up the drum. And the name of that group was the Dimensions. And we played a few little jobs, not much.

GK: Where did you play at?

RH: Our first... our first job was actually at a grade school in Mitchell, Illinois. I don't even remember what it was but we played that job. We probably didn't make but five dollars a piece or so. And we played a junior high dance at the [YMCA] in Granite City which was on Friday night, Saturday night was the high school kids. But we played junior high and uh that's what we did then.

GK: So was that Teen Town?

RH: Yeah. It was. But Teen Town was referred more to the Saturday night.

GK: Oh okay.

RH: And we were playing for younger kids on a Friday night.

GK: Okay.

RH: And then on Saturday night, The Coachmen were playing for the Teen Town.

GK: How long did you have to play?

RH: You know, I think it was four hours.

GK: Really?

RH: Yeah.

GK: You guys had four hours worth of stuff?

RH: Uh, yeah. Yeah we did. We repeated a few. We always say that we had a request to do this one again whether we did or not. Everybody does that.

GK: Did you, was this still pre- Beatles or was this after?

RH: No, we were probably after that then.

GK: Okay.

RH: Because the Beatles hit we first started becoming aware of them late in '63 was when they started playing Beatle tunes in this country. So and that's the thing once they hit then oh everybody wanted to be in a band then. Even guys who hadn't started playing yet. We were forced in it because we had already been playing for a couple years. At least we could do a little bit.

GK: Uhm, how long ago how long did that band last?

RH: Uh let's see, I would say... probably three years. Three or four years maybe.

GK: Okay.

RH: But we didn't play a lot. We mostly just got together and had fun. Other than that at the YMCA on Fridays, that was kind of toward the end of that band. In fact we had a female drummer named Vicki Couch for awhile out of Granite.

GK: Really?

RH: Yes. We did.

GK: That must have been...

RH: Yeah. Yeah but then you know she left and there was a couple times when we had a booking and she had a date or something and said she couldn't play. Well, that was kind of the end of that. I don't know if I should bring that up.

GK: That must have been revolutionary in 1960-whatever. Have a...

RH: We just happened to know her through a church also. And then she admitted she played drums, and she was pretty good too. But anyway we ended up getting Chris Hamilos and he was a very good member. So I can show you a picture of that group.

GK: Yeah. Sure. So uh this band broke up. How many of the people stayed into the next band?

RH: This band. This band did not break up.

GK: It didn't?

RH: No. What happened was uh I graduated high school in '66 and that summer we continued to play the same band here. And then my brother, my twin brother, went into the service. He went in August.

GK: Okay.

RH: So we replaced him because he did most of the singing. And we replaced him with Jim Simpson. Who was I think in my younger brother's class, '68. Uh... so... that fall it was that group but Jim Simpson instead of my other, my twin brother. Uhm and then the Coachmen were playing the Saturday nights at the [YMCA], Teen Town, and they broke up around December. It was late in the year. November, maybe, of '66. And one of the people in that group was Rich Hodshire. And uh he needed a group because he was the contact with the [YMCA]. He kind of was the leader of that group I guess. He just approached us and said, "You guys want to play Saturday nights at the [YMCA]? We'll be a new band, we'll change our name, I mean you'll change your name." And so what we did was he joined our group. We had two keyboard players, which was odd, but I think Rich was thinking that I might not, you know, go if my brother who played keyboard, my younger brother, didn't come too. You know. He never really did ask me but I wouldn't have wanted to do that. So there for awhile we had two keyboards. And then he brought in a singer, Denny Henson, who was a really good singer. And that was the Rising Sons. Originally there were seven of us.

GK: Okay. So that's late '66? (09:57)

RH: That's that's December of '66 is our first job was in December. I just remembered that.

GK: And that's the that's the show at Teen Town?

RH: Yeah. That's right.

GK: Uhm were you playing essentially the same set or would you change it up to different things?

RH: No, it changed quite a bit. Because we had Denny Henson now who can sing anything. We would do some Beatles songs which we hadn't really. We did a couple but we could do more. You know but still those groups then especially us we pretty much did top forty. Popular songs we just learned how to play those songs.

GK: Where else did you play besides Teen Town?

RH: Uhm, you know we played at a place called the Castaway over in St. Louis. I think it was somewhere near the Loop. We played there two or three times. Uhm we played at the Rainy Days out west of St. Charles somewhere. Uhm then we would get jobs like we had a job down in Steeleville, Illinois. It was just some teen dance or something they had there at the high school. And those kinds of things. We didn't play all the time. We played most weekends but I don't know if there was that much work. Maybe there was more bands than there was work for them.

GK: What kind of money were you making at shows?

RH: No, it wasn't much at all. When we were playing at Teen Town, uh... I don't think we made more than twenty bucks a piece. Somewhere around there.

GK: What about these town shows like over in St. Louis. Things like that.

RH: Uh I think they paid a little better. We'd maybe get thirty-forty bucks there.

GK: Were those shows where you were playing by yourself when you were playing in St. Louis? So it was like four hours.

RH: No, I'm sorry. I take that back. Not the Castaway. The Castaway was uhm uh... sometimes there were two bands. Actually, the Allman Brothers played there and we played before they did but nobody knew who they were then. They were called the Allman Joys but it was the Allman Brothers. It was before they hit it big and they were playing the Southern Blues then. And we just watched them and were in awe at their musicianship. Uhm, but that's kind of hey we opened for the Allman Brothers even though they weren't the Allman Brothers then. You know?

GK: So what year do you think...

RH: Now we wouldn't have opened for them if they...

GK: What year do you think that was?

RH: I think that had to have been probably '67.

GK: Okay.

RH: Because our first job was December '66 so we played through '67 and then I played until August '68. August '68 was when I went in the service.

GK: Okay.

RH: And then they played for awhile after that but I was out of touch then in the Army. I didn't know...

GK: Did anything change in '67. '67 was seen as the "Summer of Love" thing and did the shows change? Did the crowds change? Or didn't St. Louis just continue on the way it had been?

RH: Yeah I didn't see much difference, you know. Because like I said, we were still playing whatever people heard on the radio.

GK: You weren't surrounded by people in beads and...

RH: No. Very few of those guys in this area. There were some, you know. I had a couple of buddies who joined right in that. Uh... yeah you didn't see as many people with long hair as you do uh in maybe if you went to St. Louis we saw a little more of that. More diverse crowd.

GK: Uhm, during this time did you, were you looking at writing originals at all?

RH: No.

GK: It wasn't even a thought?

RH: No.

GK: Uhm, why do you think that its? Was it just not...

RH: It's probably hard to do.

GK: Uhm, but it just never came up? It was never a part of uhm...

RH: No. I don't think we had any big ambitions, I think. Probably we were some what limited in the work we'd do. Plus with the circumstances with the war going on and people going into service, you know you were just trying to hang on you know.

GK: Did you and you actually just said, was there any thought given to taking this to another level? To packing up and going on the road? Or talking to record labels or anything else that...?

RH: No. Not that I recall. Now, you know, there's a little bit of history there. I don't know if you've ever heard of the Del Rays. The Del Rays were the band, I think, in this area. And a couple of them, Jim and Rich Lang, brothers, they were from Mascoutah. And they played at Collinsville Park Ballroom every

Friday night. Uh and uh they were very good. And uh I saw them first saw them at uh... Danny Thomas had a St. Jude fund raising money for his hospital then in Memphis. He had some Sam, the Sham and the Pharaohs and some other groups from the '60s I don't know if you recall that name. But uh I uh... I'm trying to think of a couple of there were a couple of big acts there and they played at the Keil over there and I went over and saw them and uh the Del Rays were actually on that bill because they were the local band uh who were associated with Nick Charles who was a DJ over in St. Louis.

GK: Okay.

RH: For a Top 40 station. I don't recall the station. They were competitors with WIL and uhm so... Nick Charles probably got them back and I remember hearing them then and wow they are really good. And we ended up getting to play with them at Collinsville Park. And uh for I don't know for I think a month. And then we played with them in Godfrey. This was uh on Fridays also. Uh and we would open for them and they would play. But what I'm getting at is uh in February of '68, I just remember the month. I'm not sure. Denny Henson was our singer and uh the Del Rays broke up and they recruited Denny for a new group called the Guild. If you've heard of the Guild? Okay... Now they traveled and wrote original songs and were mostly regional but that's I'm just giving you a little evolution there, you know. Uh... maybe lost my train of thought there but...

GK: Was there anybody else from the sort of the local scene you knew who went on to do bigger things?

RH: Yeah. I'm kind of getting at that. Uh Denny Henson who I knew since grade school. He came with Rich when we formed the Rising Sons. When he left our group and went with the Guild, he played with them for several years and then he and another member of that band, Tom Kelly, went to California and wrote some original songs. I've got a couple of CD's that they recorded. They're really good. And then Mississippi River Festival up at SIU. Have you heard of that?

GK: Oh yeah.

RH: Okay. I went up there because Dan Fogelberg was there. Well Denny and Tom Kelly were with him. They were singing with him.

GK: Oh wow.

RH: Yeah. Yeah. So he so he is the guy who kind of made it there, yeah.

GK: Uhm anybody did anybody else from the Del Rays did they go on to do things or is that just those two guys?

RH: Uh not that I'm aware. I don't think they did. Because the Del Rays they still had Rich and Jim Lang who were with the Del Rays originally. Then the other members of the Del Rays went somewhere else. That was Thom Bowles. Uhm and uhm Don Biver and Denny Ambre. And Denny Ambre was their bass player for the Del Rays and was really good. I think he played with Chuck Berry on some song over at Blueberry Hill somewhere over there. Very good bass player.

GK: Uhm you said you said a few minutes ago that the fact the war was going on and people were at risk for being drafted, did that cast a shadow over everything? Was that something that everyone worried about while they were playing?

RH: No, not consciously. But maybe in the back of their minds. For me anyway. Because I was going to school at SIU but I wasn't a serious student. I wasn't attending enough classes to keep my grades up. So it was just a matter of time. I went on probation eventually got drafted. Ended up going to night school to finish after I got out of the service.

GK: Did other bands have that issue? Are there other bands breaking up and rotating because of the same thing? (19:36)

RH: You know, I don't really know. I would assume so... Really kind of had to be.

GK: But it wasn't like a topic of conversation that was going to happen at some point anyway?

RH: Yep, yep.

GK: Can you tell me about the other guys in the band a little bit more?

RH: Well uhm...

GK: What they did and where they ended up. And...

RH: Uh let's see.

GK: Their parts in the band.

RH: Now we're talking about the Rising Sons?

GK: Right.

RH: And uh. Yeah it was me, and my younger brother Gary who just past away in this past April. He...what do you want, what he...?

GK: Kind of what his involvement in the band was. Then what his did, sort of afterwards.

RH: Okay. Yeah, yeah. He was the keyboard player. Then he eventually went into the service also. He spent a year in Thailand. And he came home, worked a couple of different jobs. Ended up having a career as a cartographer for the Department of Defense over in St. Louis. Mapmaker. Worked there for thirty years then retired.

GK: Was the Rising Sons the only band he was in? I mean besides the band that preceded it.

RH: No, you know, he played with a couple of other bands. I don't recall the names.

GK: Was this after he got back?

RH: Oh yeah.

GK: Okay.

RH: Yeah. In fact, he played maybe ten years ago he was playing in a band and did a few jobs. He played up at Stagger Inn with Rob Canada.

GK: Oh really?

RH: And a couple... Yeah. A couple friends. He was that was just three or four years ago.

GK: Oh okay. What about your twin brother?

RH: Uh, he uh. After the service, no he never played out again. He worked for uhm... He worked for a printing company. In fact he went out to Oklahoma. He's still out there now. But he's retired but he was the he was the uh customer service rep for Rolling Stone magazine. He actually, they printed that in Oklahoma.

GK: Okay.

RH: So he got a couple trips to New York because of that.

GK: Did he continue to play on his own?

RH: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah he still does. He goes down to... He belongs to the Elks or one of those fraternal groups and takes his guitar down there and plays and sings a little bit, you know. Just for the heck of it, you know.

GK: Uhm so and what about your drummer?

RH: Chris Hammels? He's deceased now. I had heard that he uh... He actually auditioned for a local production of Jesus Christ Superstar and I think he got the lead. He's a pretty good vocalist. And uh but he I think he ended up getting into IT or software as he moved to the New England area. And he was there for several years. Pretty talented guy. And the lead guitar player he worked steel mills here locally. I still see him on occasion. He's retired. That's Gene Hudson.

GK: Did he end up in the service?

RH: Uh no I don't think Gene ever made it into the service.

GK: Is he from Granite?

RH: Yes.

GK: Is he from the Hudson family? The Hudson Jewelers people?

RH: Uh I don't think so.

GK: Okay.

RH: No.

GK: You just hear that name in Granite and that's what you think.

RH: Yeah Jim Hudson down there with the pawn shop. I don't think he is.

GK: Okay so uhm you're playing and its you played with the Allman Brothers and you played at these out of town shows and stuff. How long between you found out you got drafted and you stopped playing?

RH: Uhm it happens pretty quick. I think I only had a couple weeks notice, you know... So I just said sorry and you know that's when they got Jim Harper.

GK: Did you play one last show? I mean did you have a...

RH: I can't remember what my last one was. I don't really know. I don't think it was the [YMCA] because... I think when Rich left our group, Rich Hodshire, we didn't play at the [YMCA] anymore. I don't remember who replaced us. It's been a long time now.

GK: Did you seem them at all after you left? Did you go and see them once Jim Harper joined the band?

RH: No. No didn't have the opportunity. I was in the service and don't get home much.

GK: They and they didn't pay out typically. Took them awhile to get things going.

RH: Yeah. Probably probably. I don't know I don't know how quick they had a job between the time I left and Jim replaced me. Probably pretty quick. He played the bass. Because he cause Jim was also a guitar player. A lot of bass players are guitar players also. So he could kind of follow. Watch the guitar player and record his own.

GK: Did your younger brother stay in the band?

RH: Uh yeah.

GK: He did?

RH: Yeah he did. He stayed in the band until they dissolved.

GK: Okay. Did he talk about shows or anything? Or what they were doing?

RH: No. You know, I don't recall. I think he thinks that the band sort of after I left was kind of going down a little bit. Not that I had anything to... I think maybe we had just maybe run our course.

GK: Did you know, do you know was did it change after that? Were they or was it just... I mean bands do. Bands just sort of peter out.

RH: Well I think over the course of time there's more and more bands and more competition. Maybe there's fewer jobs. I don't know. I'm just guessing now.

GK: Did you have any desire to play when you got back? To start a new band or?

RH: Uhm no not initially. I didn't. I happened to meet a guy I still play because I still play today. I play a couple hours every morning just for relaxation, you know. I like to do that. I play whenever I got a chance. It wasn't a lot. But occasionally there'd be a guitar. But uh uhm I happened a guy... he put an ad in the paper looking for a guitar player. There was just two of us, you know. And we did more just kind of what you can do with two guitars and two voices. And we I don't know we played uh the Grog Shop over in St. Louis at the in the basement of a hotel over by the river. We played out at the Airport Inn we've we have like a five-week gig playing six nights a week. I couldn't believe it because we weren't that good. We weren't bringing anybody in. But it was amazing.

GK: Was this right after you got back?

RH: It was around, no it was four years after I got back.

GK: Oh okay.

RH: I got back in '70. This was around '74. About that time. And so for a couple of years I played with this guy. Then we met another guy who was a pretty good singer. He was from New York. Upstate New York. He happened to be here working at the [YMCA]. He was the Youth Coordinator or something there. And uh we got to know him. He happened to meet the guy I was playing guitar with and so we kind of got together. Then we picked up a bass player. We had, you know Rob's dad, Bobby, I've know Bobby for a long time. He's a pretty good bass player. We wanted him come over there were just three of us. Three guitars really. I played also banjo and mandolin to try to mix it up a little bit. And we wanted to have a bass and it sounded so good with the bass we said well we'll have four guys, you know. We'll make a little less money but we'll do that. So for about from '77 until '80. Somewhere in '80 we played you know like I said...Ground Round, Jacks or Better, Stagger Inn...

GK: What was it called?

RH: Whiskers.

GK: Whiskers?

RH: And we all had beards except for Bobby.

GK: Is that the last time you played in an organized thing?

RH: Yes. Yes. Yeah. I can show you a picture of that group.

GK: Yeah. I mean just for the heck of it.

RH: Yeah.

[long pause]

GK: Uhm so okay so uhm uhm... Did you do you keep in touch with the guys you played with in the Rising Sons? The ones that are still around?

RH: No. I don't really. Let's see who's still around? Gene Hudson's still around. Chris and then my brother are deceased. Jim Simpson lives in Florida. I saw him cause he was up here when my brother passed. But no, I don't really keep in touch. But you know you always have a connection with them and when you see them it's like, you know, you're forever friends, you know. But we don't keep in touch. Everybody gets busy with their families and...

GK: I always described being in a band as all the worst parts of being married. Your family regardless of how annoying they become. So I guess there's never been a talk of playing together?

RH: No.

GK: Just setting up and...

RH: Yeah.

GK: Uh.

RH: Now I, you know, before I mentioned the Guild well they had a reunion and they played from let's see I guess '68 through a lot of the '70s. And they had a reunion in the '80s at the Panorama in Belleville.

GK: Oh the bowling alley?

RH: Yeah.

GK: Okay.

RH: In the basement there. And they used to play there a lot. We played there too. When we were the Rising Sons. I kind of forgot about that one. But uhm they had a reunion and a big crowd showed up because they were very popular in the really the whole Metro area. They could do Beach Boys and, you know, anything. And uh I've got that on DVD if you've never seen that.

GK: Did you go?

RH: Yeah I went there.

GK: Did you see a lot of people you knew? Like people from other bands?

RH: Yeah, you know, that's the first time I had seen Denny Henson for quite awhile, and I said hello to him... and they did a good show. And then I saw them again at Mississippi Nights. They were doing a fundraiser there. And that was a few years later. That's the last time I saw them.

GK: Did they play originals? Were they...?

RH: No, they didn't play originals. They might have had two or three. I'm guessing now but I know they played mostly pop hits, played oldies, things like that. Things that had been big hits. I don't think Denny and Tom who were two of the guys who then split and went to, I think, California and started writing songs. I don't know if there was much writing going on in the Guilds. There may have been.

GK: Were there any other bands that were playing their own stuff at the time? Even one or two songs?

RH: Uh...

GK: Or was it just not...?

RH: No, I can't. I can't think of that.

GK: It just wasn't part of it?

RH: No. no. I don't think people started trying to write unless they had ambitions to get signed to a label. And that was still albums, you know. There was no streaming or no Youtube or anything like that.

GK: And you think most of the bands around here were doing it for fun, they weren't looking to...?

RH: Yeah.

GK: ...they weren't looking for the...

RH: Because because if anyone's really serious about it, they may have left the area, you know, and gone to the coasts. One of the coasts.

GK: One or the other?

RH: Yeah. That's my guess.

GK: And it really doesn't, people don't start, local bands don't start writing until the 1970s. That's my...

RH: Yeah. I was just a kid playing in a band because it seemed like a fun thing to do.

GK: Okay. Thank you very much. I appreciate it.

RH: You're welcome.