

Indiana Hoedown IH045  
Traditional Music from the Hoosier State

INTERVIEW WITH SHORTY COOK

In his home (The Music Manor) in Fort Wayne, Indiana  
March 15, 1980

PT This is Shorty Cook. We're in his home in Fort Wayne, Indiana. And Shorty was a member of "The Downhomers." From when to when?

SC Oh, we started out in about 19--Oh, actually 19--about 1935. There was just two of us at the time. This guy called Utah Slim come up out of Nashville, and uh, I was working a carnival in, uh, out of Salisbury, Maryland. And he came to the carnival and caught me and the two of us went down to the new radio station and started a radio show. And it was just the two of us. We did a half hour a day. He played the fiddle and the guitar, and I was playing the steel and the guitar. So we just swapped back and forth.

Then along came another dude by the name of Guy Campbell, and he helped us along a little bit. And uh, that was quite a while before the war started, so we were in pretty good shape then. Picked up a couple of school kids to go out and do personal appearances with at night. And one of them would dance and the other'd sing a little bit. Two people didn't look like much of a show (laughs)

So then Guy Campbell comes along and we added the fiddle to the, to the band. And he played some guitar at the time. And a little later we went from, oh, we started in Salisbury, Maryland in a little station, WSAL. And after one year the government cut them off because they were..They ran a radio station and a newspaper at the same time, and that was against the law. So they cut the radio station off. So we had to move up to New Jersey.

And we added Don Crenshaw and we added Ginger Shannon. And at the time the service came in and grabbed up Utah Slim. That was the guy I started out with. So I teamed up with Guy Campbell after that.

PT What was Utah's real name?

SC His real name was Robert Trewell. And he went in the service and he got shot over in France. They blew him out of a, he was in a machine gun nest and they blew him out of it, and killed him.

And then we kept adding, oh three or four extra guys a year. You had to at that time to stay going because the army was grabbing them up just as fast as you could get one. And uh, we picked up Kenny Roberts, and we went with him there into Keene, New Hampshire. We were up there three years. And we went from there out to Waterloo, Iowa. And we stayed there for a while, and we went to WLW in Cincinnati, and got on there a while. Then we found out that they needed a band in Fort Wayne.

So we came up to WCWO. We were here '43, '44, '45, and '46. And then we heard of a good deal up in New England, up in Hartford, Connecticut. Kenny Roberts didn't want to go with us, so we picked up Bill Haley to take his place. And we moved with him and uh, uh, Bob Mason. And Guy just got out of the service. 'Course we picked him up. Five of us went up to New England. We stayed up there seven years. During that time, why Haley, uh, formed his own band and started the Rock and Roll business all over the country.

And we picked up Fusty Rogers and the Cox Brothers, Slim and Rocky to take their place. Then we went back to Cincinnati. Stayed there a year and a half. And uh, went on to, went to Europe after that. We stayed six months in Europe. Traveling for Ralph Bellamy and the US Camp Shows. It wasn't the USO. It was a completely different outfit. We were over there for six months. We got back, they wanted us to go for a year over in Asia. But we'd been gone long enough

that time, so we came back into Fort Wayne in 1954. And we heard there was a radio station opening here: Channel 15, which was WINT at the time. Now it's WANE. And we were there for, till 1962.

PT You mean TV?

SC Yea, we were on TV. Well, we were in New York, uh, the whole time we were in Hartford, Connecticut. We was up there from '46 to '53. And we did out network shows out of Hartford. And then a lot of out network shows, we had 339 stations carrying us all over the country. We went to New York and did a lot of them. Down at Radio City. And we made a lot of records. We made 144 transcriptions for M.M. Cole in Chicago. Then we made 50 for SESAC in New York. That's 194 of them. And then we made about 50 records, just regular records. Made them in New York, a big share of them.

And when we got back here to, uh, Fort Wayne, why in 1954; I opened up a store over on Pontiac Street. Then we bought the house here in 1959 and moved the store into here. Been in here 21 years now. Actually been here 26 years.

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SC Yea, we started the old steel guitar and country music together. Before that, uh, all the guys that played steel guitar just played Hawaiian tunes. But we started playing country and western tunes with a, with a steel guitar, and actually started it off in about 1933. And along about 1940, Gene Autry came in with "Back in the Saddle Again" using the steel guitar. But we were about seven years ahead of him on, uh, using steel guitar for play back-up for country and western, western songs.

PT When did you start doing the swing stuff?

SC Oh, we started that before we started the country. We'd, uh, we were doing swing way back in, oh, '28, '29, '30, we started playing swing music. And uh, I was playing with a, with a swing band. And the best you could make back then was two dollars a night playing swing. So a guy come along said 'you want to back me up playing a little square dance and country music, I'll give you four dollars a night.' That's when I, I converted over from the (laughs) from the swing and the swing music and went into country and western. 'Course we always mixed the swing in with it. All through our whole career, we never went straight, straight down the line. But that's a, that was where the money was at.

PT What about Bob Wills and Western Swing? Did you, did you copy from them at all, or did they influence you at all?

SC No, ours was strictly from uh, playing the standards like "Ain't Misbehavin'!" That type of music.

PT Uptown.

SC Yea, the uh, standards that are still the standards today. You can go out to the Coliseum and everything that Jack Loews plays on his, on the organ out there, with, with at least three quarters of the numbers, we played back in the late 20s and early 30s. And uh, that's where we got the background in that.

PT Now, uh, when did you take on the name 'The Downhomers'?

SC We took, took that on in 19--about 1939. When we were still in Salisbury, Maryland. And we needed a name that would, uh, that didn't put us in any one category, like the Cornhuskers and stuff like that. Then you really, you can't

get out of it and do swing and stuff. But with a name like 'The Downhomers' that could be anything under the sun you wanted to play or do. And it still fits the name.

PT Did you have another name before that?

SC Oh, we had a lot of names before we got into that. We, we were the original 'Vagabonds.' We called ourselves the 'Vagabonds,' and we didn't think that was good enough. And another band came along and picked it up later, and called themselves the 'Vagabonds.' And we went, uh, just two of us for a while there, and we went by the name of, uh, 'Tramp and Pushcart.' And another time we went as 'Sandy and Wendy.' Two other, I was with another guy at the time. We went as 'Sandy and Wendy.' We just kept changing our name till we found 'The Downhomers,' and that seemed to hit the spot better. And we wrote a theme song for it. And, and we used it for about 30, 35 years.

PT And you came to Fort Wayne from WLW in Cincinnati? Does Fort Wayne was more big time than that for you?

SC Much bigger for us, uh. There was too much hassling and arguing and uh, it's like the reason I never went to WSM because, uh, all you'll ever be on there, even if you're a big one, you'll be a small pea in a big pod. And I'd rather be a big pea in a little pod. (laughs) Big frog in a little pond than be the little frog in the big pond. And that's the reason we came here. We could pretty well be the big frog. And that's exactly what we wanted to do.

PT You were on the Hoosier Hop weekly. Did you have you own show too?

SC We were on WCWO every day, two or three times. Every radio station we were ever at we were on at least two or three times a day.

PT And how about when you were at WANE-TV; what did you do for them?

SC We did about three shows a day. We did an hour show, a 45 minute show, and a half hour show, the same day. And that continued for several years there. And we had to keep bringing in new stuff every day. We did a lot of comedy and so forth. Trying to make it as, well, it was very much like the show they're taping at Nashville. We had a lot of comedy and stuff.

PT What kind of comedy did you do? Did you all have characters?

SC yea, we all had our characters. I was Cecil Blossomose for about 30, 35 years (laughs). And we had, we had a good time. We made up a lot of times for it. Wear the silly hats and the big pants and the red nose and the freckles on the face. With me, I could raise my eyebrows about half to three-quarters of an inch, and because they're blonde, and they couldn't tell it. It'd look like my eyebrows and make me look sillier. Had an old coonskin cap with a big tail hanging on it. Only I brought it out over the front so it was a little sillier. Had the big pins in the pants: the six inch pin down to the littlest pin you could get, about fifteen of them down the front. Oh, we all had some kind of little gimmick so we'd be different. We had lots of comedy.

See, I was, uh, I got my college education with, uh, medicine show. I was four years with medicine, uh, before I actually started playing on the radio. And that's where we learned all our comedy. Same place as Abott and Costello and Red Skelton and those guys learned theirs. We were working the same circuit.

in Hartford, we had WBZ-Boston carrying us. And we had Providence carrying us, and we had, uh, Bangor Maine, Portland, Maine, WGY in Schenectady. We had a lot of stations that were carrying us at the time.

PT When you were on the radio, you, did you do a, what do they call it, sustaining, where you were just on the air and you really get your bread and butter from public appearances.

SC Uh, we got all our bread and butter from public appearances. We were, we were a traveling (laughs), uh, show that carried a lot of souvenirs. A lot of things along to pick up your gas money and so forth. Sold pictures, sold books, and sold albums, photo albums and the whole schmeer. You had to do that if you were going to survive. Otherwise you'd starve to death.

PT You were getting a weekly wage at WOWO.

SC Uh-uh, at WOWO we didn't get any weekly wage from them either at the time. we, uh, worked the Hoosier Hop for them on Saturday nights, and we got paid, got paid for the Hoosier Hop. I think we got 50 bucks apiece.

PT So your programs on WOWO were, uh,

SC Yea the programs were non-paid. You had to go out and play personal appearances to get your money.

PT It was good publicity.

SC Oh my goodness yes. You couldn't find a hall big enough to hold them most of the time. Then you get, uh, because of the fact that we could do so much advertising, even if we didn't even show up for the show, a lot of times, uh, like it was fairs and stuff. We advertised the fair so heavy that you got hundreds of thousands of people knowing about the fair and what days it was on and so on. And places like that, we got pretty near all the fairs, and we played for, for all of the political stuff. When the governors were running and so forth, we'd go around along with the governors and get big crowds. We did that out in Iowa. Did that in, uh, Massachusetts. Did that in Connecticut. And they liked the free publicity. We could give them a lot of it.

PT Do you miss it at all?

SC No, it was just too much road work. When I quit I was making more money than we ever made. But uh, it's just traveling six, seven hundred miles a day was just too much. And I got sick of that. And I found out that I could, didn't have to have it, so I just quit. Give it up completely.

PT Where, where are you from originally, and why did you decide to settle in Fort Wayne?

SC Well, I was originally raised in Maryland. And that's the reason I started on Salisbury, Maryland down there. And uh, we just kept going from there till we finally got on the networks over here at, when WOWO had their Hoosier Hop network. It was good money here too. We knew that the territory was good. It was back in the early '40s. Then when we came back from overseas, uh, channel 15 was just opening and we heard they needed a band. And we got paid for that show, we got paid, we got paid pretty good for that, for all those shows. That's the reason we did so many shows a day.

PT Fort Wayne was just where you ended up when it was time to get out. Well, I can't think of anything else to ask you. Is there anything I've missed?

SC I might be the only ASCAP member in Fort Wayne. I say I might be the only ASCAP member in Fort Wayne, Indiana. I don't know I never heard of any.

PT How many songs have you written?

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PT How many songs have you written?

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SC Oh, I've got about 600 of them published.

PT (laughs) Well, thank you.

SC Half those songs that we do on there, (on the tape) I don't remember the tunes or anything.

End.