

Interviewee: Kenny “Lance” Roberts

Interviewer Payne Roberts

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Transcript by Adam E. Tucker

Payne Roberts: This is Payne Roberts. I am in Norman Park, Georgia. Interviewing Kenny “Lance” Roberts who happens to be my dad. Tell us about yourself.

Kenny “Lance” Roberts: My name is Kenny Roberts. I was born here in a Norman Park Georgia in a farm community and was raised here most of my life. I have done many things and music happens to be the highlight.

PR: When did you get involved in music?

KLR: When I was eleven-year-old in 1951. I was singing in a gospel quartet with my two brothers and cousin. We sang at gospel meetings all over.

PR: Were you the youngest in the quartet? And what part did you sing in the quartet?

KLR: I sang first tenor in the quartet, and I was the youngest in the quartet.

PR: Who taught you what you know about music?

KLR: Mostly it was self-taught. My uncle showed me how to play the guitar and I picked it up from there.

PR: You said you had your brothers in the quartet, did any other of your family members play a part in your music experience?

KLR: Not particularly, they mostly stood behind me and backed me one hundred percent.

PR: You said you sang in a gospel quartet, what music inspired you to start singing the country pop?

KLR: Primarily Elvis Presley who came on the scene big in the mid-1960s to the late-1960s. I enjoyed it so much I was inspired by him more compared than any other entertainer.

PR: Did you get your band together and how did you get your band together?

KLR: I decided in 1956 to put a band together and sing Elvis Presley type music. I formed the band and played at parties, fraternities in Athens, and clubs around and enjoyed myself.

PR: How did you get discovered by the people in Nashville?

KLR: Boudleux Bryant who is a song writer who wrote sixteen consecutive million sellers for the Everly Brothers and other million sellers, his mom and dad lived in Moultrie, and I met him

through them. He got me into Decca Records in Nashville, Tennessee where I wrote my songs, recorded my songs, and released them and did quite well.

PR: How many recordings have you made?

KLR: Off-hand recordings I do not know, but for professional recordings I have made ten or twelve.

PR: When you were making these recordings were you living in Nashville?

KLR: No, I was living here, then later moved to Nashville to record there.

PR: Did you perform with any artist? Who did you perform with when you were there?

KLR: I fronted the show for Conway Twitty, Jerry Lee Lewis, Charly Rich, and numerous others.

PR: Can you describe the country pop style music?

KLR: What I consider country pop is the Elvis Presley type music such as “Love Me Tender”, “Don’t be Cruel”, Jim Reeves song “He’ll Have to Go”. That type of music is my type of music

PR: I’m going to record a few of your selections after the interview so we can have a taste of that.

PR: Have you written any of your own music?

KLR: Yes, I have none that you would know, but I have written some songs that have released a few songs onto the public market.

PR: Do you have any interesting stories from those days? Well okay dad, I’m giving you an open floor now and want to hear stories about your experiences, who you played with and who you met and just whatever you want to tell us.

KLR: Okay Paine, before I started recording, I would bring Jerry Lee Lewis to Moultrie, Douglas, Valdosta, and surrounding towns. I would open the show for him, in fact in Moultrie, Jerry Lee show had the hometown community of grandmothers, mothers and grandchildren in the show. They came to see him play and he started his shady type of action on stage and the whole auditorium, which was packed out, booed him off the stage.

KLR: I had opened the show, and he came out second. During the intermission he came to me and asked what was going on and I told him why he didn’t do that. That some of these people’s kids were out there and weren’t going to put up with that. He came back out and sat on the piano stool and they were booing him all the time. Till his second appearance when he ran the piano keyboard and started singing “You Cheating Heart”.

KLR: It was at that time they tore the house down.

PR: That was in Moultrie?

KLR: Yes, in Moultrie we went on to Tifton, Douglas, Valdosta and I'm not sure where all we performed on that tour. We had Conway Twitty here around several towns too. After getting to know him I found out his name was not Conway Twitty, but Harold Jenkins was his real name. He picked up the name Conway Twitty as a stage from a little town from Texas and the other from Arkansas that were right across the border from each other.

KLR: Conway, Arkansas and Twitty, Texas. He took that name as his performing name.

KLR: One time when I was in Memphis, at the Little Black Book Club, playing there Eddie Bond owned the club. He had a performance contest with a machine that gauges the reaction from the audience.

PR: The applause?

KLR: Yeah, the applause. The winner got fifty dollars and Mickey Gilley was on that show.

PR: And you were on that show?

KLR: And I was on that show, he was doing just as well as he ever did though he wasn't a big name at that time. I won those fifty dollars.

KLR: Charlie Rich, he's a gentleman and a fine fella. We played together at the Lamp Lighter club in Memphis for a month. Six nights a week from nine to two. Charlie would drink a little bit and would drink all night and would get so sapped he couldn't walk but he could sit down at a piano and play the prettiest songs and sing the prettiest songs you ever heard. I never figured out how he could do that, but he could.

KLR: When I was in Nashville recording and in the music business, I rubbed a lot of elbows with the stars. In the Columbia studio we would play ping pong. I played with Hank Williams Jr., Grady Martin, Floyd Cramer, and guys like that. The first recordings I made with Decca Records; I went into the studio just a little boy from South Georgia. Who didn't know anybody and didn't know anything, and I heard of Grady Martin the guitar player, Floyd Cramer the pianist, Buddy Harman the drummer, and Lightin' Chance the bass player walked in there with the Jordanares and Anita Kurrs and all of them were in there.

KLR: It was like someone shot a gun at a rabbit; I was scared. I didn't know what I was doing, and they had me named as the leader of the session. I didn't know nothing about it and Grady Martin the guitar player saw that I was frightened and took me into the break room and said, "Let's go have a cup of coffee first." He got me settled down and we went back in.

KLR: My band had practiced at night up at my mamma's house we would practice and practice getting ready for a show somewhere. When I went into the first recording session of these professional musicians, Floyd Cramer gets me to the piano and sat beside him on a stool and wanted me to go over a couple bars of the song. I sang probably half of the song and he said that's enough. He started calling out numbers of the chords and (unintelligible) and I didn't know about. They went over it a couple of times and they were ready to record. Just like they had played it all their life. They did a fantastic job.

KLR: It just knocked me flat out and I couldn't believe that anyone or any human being could be that talented.

PR: That must have been really exciting.

KLR: It was really exciting and the experiences like that is something that most people don't ever have. I was lucky enough to have some of the experiences. Speaking of Eddie Bond, he lived in Memphis and owned the Little Black Book Club, he and his band came to Adel. They played in the gymnasium there and my drummer at that time went back to Memphis with Eddie Bond. Morris Tenner was his name, he went to Jerry Lee Lewis and then played with Little Richard and a few others. He mainly played with Jerry Lee Lewis and others, and he was the finest drummer I ever heard play.

KLR: He lives in Sparks now and is a carpenter.

PR: Right down the road from us.

KLR: Yes, right down the road. One time in Memphis Eddie brought another guy and went over to Elvis' place at Graceland and we got into Elvis's old black van, and he had on a black hat and black leather jacket and went to an alley behind a restaurant because he called first and ordered hamburgers and we had hamburgers and Pepsi cola in that van on the way back to Graceland.

PR: In Elvis's van?

KLR: In Elvis's van. Not many people have had the opportunity to meet Elvis. I fell into some very lucky spots in that business. I was very fortunate, and Elvis Presley was one of the finest young men I have ever met.

PR: That's just cool.

KLR: Scotty Moore who is Elvis's guitar player became a good friend of mine in Nashville. He quit playing for Elvis and I asked him why he quit playing and he said, "Well when you've done it all what else is there to do?" Any guitar player or musician would have asked why did you quit playing for Elvis and to him it became old hat. It was nothing big anymore, it was just another job. Scotty was a nice fella. He got himself a recording studio in Nashville and is now making tapes and CD's.

KLR: After I got out of the performing end of it. It became old hat to me too. It was a rat race and one of my friend's Carl Friend, he was from Arkansas. We started producing records for people and had an office on 16th Avenue in Nashville. In the same building was Johnny Cash's office, George Jones office, and several others. Billy Sherill who is the epic record man. Johnny Cash was right next door and one day his brother Tommy Cash came over and asked, "Can we help him look for Johnny."

KLR: Johnny Cash had been missing for two days and nobody knew where he was. We went with him, and he said he thought he knew where he might be at. An old house on the edge of Nashville, there was snow on the ground and the wind was blowing and it was cold. We went out there into that old house and you could see the ground through the cracks in the floors. Johnny

was laying on the floor passed out with just a t-shirt on. It was a good thing he was drunk because he would have frozen to death if he hadn't been.

KLR: We took him to the hospital, and he checked out alright. We then took him to the Andrew Jackson motel and put him to bed. Things like that to me don't seem to be a big thing, but if I hadn't done it would have seemed like a big deal to me.

PR: That would seem like a big thing to me!

KLR: I've had a lot of experiences in this business, and I went over to Hot Springs, Arkansas and Tyler, Texas with the Southern United Artist records and I've been all over the United States doing shows. I was up at a club opening in Denver, Colorado at one time it was so cold I about died. We moved around a lot and got to appreciate the talents of the big artists and people. They are the same as the little people, they put their pants leg on one at a time. Though they seem to be different the superstars, they are just people. They are just talented people and once you get to know them you realize no man is bigger than another. It's the man himself is what makes him what he is.

KLR: Elvis Presley was one of those kinds. It was in the early 1960's when I met him and ate a hamburger with him. He had already made Elvis what Elvis was already. He was a very nice fella, and I couldn't find any fault even if I was looking for faults. He was my hero at that time anyway.

PR: You loved your hero, and he still is your hero.

KLR: Oh yeah, we have had a lot of experiences with Jerry Lee Lewis, Charlie Rich, Conway Twitty, Hank Williams Jr., and all the other big musicians in Nashville. Presley in Memphis and Scotty Moore who is a friend of mine. Even Johnny Cash was a nice fella who just liked his booze. I like to smoke cigarettes now and I don't know which one is worse. It has been a good life in the music business for me.

PR: Hard work for sure, but I'm sure those were fun times.

KLR: Charlie Rich when we played in the Lamplighter Pub for a month there were two or three times, he could not go to the Tennessee Hotel, which I was staying at as well. I would help him to his car and drive him over there and get him to his bed because he didn't know where he was. But if I had put him in front of a piano, he would still play the prettiest piano and sing the prettiest songs. I still cannot figure out how he did that. If I got drunk, I would forget the name of the songs.

PR: (Laughs) He couldn't walk but he could play?

KLR: He couldn't walk but he could certainly get it done.

PR: Got anything else for me?

KLR: Not right off hand. There is a lot of stuff on my mind such as that type of entertainment and people I dealt with. When I was disk jockey convention at the Andrew Jackson hotel in

Nashville and I did that for three to four years. Seeing how the companies and the representatives of the companies would deal with the big disk jockeys from all over the nation radio stations.

KLR: I met Tom Parker who was the manager, met him and his cigar. He was a nice fella and the best promoter God ever let breathe.

KLR: At the disk Jockey convention at the Andrew Jackson Hotel, it was before my music career. Eddie Arnold had gotten off the ground and become popular and the other disk jockeys from the radio stations, such as the Andrew Jackson hotel, the record companies were trying to get them to play their music with contracts and wining and dining.

KLR: Tom Parker didn't do that, and he was the most effective of any of them. When he was handling Eddie Arnold, he pulled up a full-grown elephant to the front door of the Andrew Jackson hotel at the disk jockey convention with a cape over it that on both sides said play Eddie Arnold. Those disk jockeys went back and started playing Eddie Arnold. He didn't try to con them into it or wine and dine them. He simply told them to play Eddie Arnold with that big old elephant.

KLR: Colonel Tom knew how to do it. The girls screaming, they done that to me when I was on stage several times. One night in Moultrie that police had to escort me home because I was playing a football rivalry at the youth center in Moultrie during homecoming. I was sixteen at this time with my band playing Elvis Presley songs. I was following him so closely that if you turned your head, you couldn't tell if it was him singing or me.

KLR: Moultrie was playing LaGrange they were big rivals much like how Valdosta and Moultrie are now for several years. We started playing and these girls ran on stage and started screaming and hollering and cutting the fool. After we got through, two policemen had to come up on stage to keep the girls off the stage. I was a scared sixteen-year-old, the girls were screaming and the whole place was full with heads stuck in windows and door ways with no standing room inside. The police escorted me home and I felt like big stuff, but I was still scared.

KLR: The thing of girls screaming and pulling their hair, throwing their shirt on the floor, and that kind of thing. When Colonel Tom Parker first started with Elvis Presley and started promoting him, he would plant nine girls in the big auditoriums. He paid them to do this, which when Elvis got on stage and started playing, they started screaming and running up and down the aisle. That's where this came from, Colonel Tom Parker was a genius. He would get these nine girls to do this in the auditorium because he hired them and then picked up on this and everywhere Elvis went there was just a bunch of screaming girls. It was planted and done by the genius of the promoter, Colonel Tom Parker.

PR: I never knew that at all!

KLR: That's where all of this started, and he was such a promoter that you heard Elvis Presley's name before you heard him sing. Even I was the same, I heard of Elvis Presley before I ever heard him sing. It's because Colonel Tom Parker put it out in front and said, "Be heard a lot, be seen a little." He was on the Ed Sullivan show after all of that and everyone thought that Elvis couldn't do anything else but shake his leg. You try to keep up with him singing and see it, I

tried to keep up with him and never could. He was a good singer and a good guy. Ed Sullivan made the claim that they filmed Elvis from the waist up because he would shake his leg. Now this won't be done, but at that time it wasn't ridiculous.

KLR: Ed Sullivan stop the show and said, "Ladies and Gentlemen, I want everyone to know that Elvis Presley is a fine young man." He was a fine young man.

KLR: Ed Sullivan was the biggest thing on Sunday night television.

KLR: These big people are the same size as me and you and everyone else. They just have a lot of talent and a lot of good breaks. I commend people who get breaks, legitimately, and these people are very, very talented. I just wish I was just as fortunate. My first record by Decca Record named "Everything You Got," which was written by Boudleuax Bryant. It sold 236,000 copies of it and I didn't have Colonel Tom Parker to promote, which would have been a lot of help. Though I did well and did enough to satisfy myself. I was very happy with my past in the business.

KLR: Now I am a car salesman at Robin Hudson in Moultrie, and I enjoy that. We sing at church; me, my wife Pat, and you. We sing at church and funerals, weddings, and stuff like that for our own entertainment and the other people's benefits. We do what we can, and all that music got old hat to me and I don't get excited like I did. I'm very happy and proud of the experiences I had and that's about it.

PR: Okay, thank you dad for having you. I learned things I didn't know but thank you and that's my course project. My father's stage name is Kenny "Lance" Roberts, and this recording is on November 10, 1999.

Summary: Kenny "Lance" Robert's country pop songs "You got Everything" and "The Man in the Moon Showed Up."