

Oral History Transcript: Mastrean
Originally Recorded

Eleanor: Okay. So I'll do my lead in for the interview. So today is March fourth 11am Pacific standard time 2pm Eastern standard time. I Eleanor is interviewing Mark Mastrean, and this is an online oral history. And we're going to talk about the Plattsburgh music scene today. So, first question is, do you consent to this interview?

Mark Mastrean: Yes.

Eleanor: Okay. The second one is how long have you lived in Pittsburgh?

Mark: Since 1982.

Eleanor: So, I know Deborah said that you took classes at SUNY Plattsburgh.

Mark: Yeah I came here in '82. I was a student for a couple years. I worked at the college. I started out as an admissions counselor and kind of worked my way up. Took a break and went to college at McGill up in Montreal for a short time. And came back to work in a different capacity and here I am at the library.

Eleanor: That's interesting. What were you originally studying?

Mark: My academic background is in English and history and religion.

Eleanor: I was a history undergrad.

Mark: Ha ha.

Eleanor: So, how long have you worked for the library?

Mark: Good question, I think, since 20-...I think I've been - well I wasn't actually in the library originally. We worked in a division that was known as library and information technology services, which essentially supervised included the library and all IT technology teams on campus. So I worked as Assistant Dean in that area, and I think I was in that capacity, since about 2017 or so. LITS as we called it broke up and now its Feinberg library, and ITS, and I do a little, I'm the assistant director of the library, but I still have a role in it as well.

Eleanor: Interesting. I know Deborah said you were the PR guy so that makes sense.

Mark: Yeah, well yeah, I guess I am, communications public relations marketing. Yeah, that's one of my jobs.

Eleanor: So, when did you first meet Tim Hartnett?

Mark: I actually met him in at '83, 1983. He was...I'm a drummer so I was interested in playing around town, so I stuck a note up at the music store and someone who knew Tim stopped by my apartment and said you got

to meet Tim Hartnett. So, it turns out, Tim Hartnett lived two doors down from me and he came over to see me and then...We, that was such a long time ago, but we ended up forming a band back in the 80s in Plattsburgh New York called Sez Hu spelled S-E-Z H-U and we were doing sort of rock pop dance music. Pat Benatar, Heart, Genesis. Quite a potpourri of stuff for people to dance to and the probably the interesting thing about that era was it was a time where bands could still play live in a lot of places. There was no such thing as DJ, there is no such thing as digital music, of course, and eventually the big change, I think that happened to musicians, was the birth of the DJ and DJ's used to travel around with huge cases of vinyl albums. So, Tim actually became a DJ. And he was known as Mr. Tim, was a DJ service, which was always my nickname for Tim, so he kind of adopted that as his DJ name and he was a musician and a DJ which was very unusual.

Eleanor: Well, I didn't know, when did the DJ come into the scene, like the 80s?

Mark: Yeah it was the 80s, we still had vinyl record shops in town and then in around that time that late period, you know we started to get digital we started to get...First there was, the way the history went there was vinyl records, there were vinyl records, I should say, and then tapes. There were old style tapes that were eight track tapes and cassette tapes. And the old eight track tapes went out of existence, and for a while we had records and we had tapes. Cassette, little cassette tapes and then in that era was the birth of the Sony Walkman was a big item where so people could go running with their and listen to their music. That was a huge revolution you didn't have to sit down with a vinyl record and record player and then right behind that digital came along, and then you ended up with CDs. And, of course, in the video scene we're starting to get that technology digital technology was coming in and they're moving out of video tapes VHS to digital formats for playing back movies. And yeah so eventually as time went on, even the digital world changed and now it's streaming and cloud services.

Eleanor: Yeah I remember cassette tapes when I was a kid, but I think that was at the end stages of it. So did you guys ever tour your band together or?

Mark: Well, the music scene, we were kind of just a little local band. Plattsburgh is a small town, so you know we'd all go play in clubs. Before I came to Plattsburgh I was living in Boston and playing in clubs in the city of Boston. And Boston was extremely different because it's not one of the big music meccas in the United States like Los Angeles or Nashville, but it has a had a really strong music scene. And it had it, an especially strong original music scene, which is a thing unto itself. So there were bands that played in different circuits, bands that were original bands that were essentially trying to land record contracts and write their own music. And then there were with what are called cover bands that played on a different circuit and different clubs and they they basically did versions of hit songs. And yeah so I worked in the city of Boston playing original music clubs, for a short time and then, when I came here got into the little rock and roll scene back in the day and there were still you know I think between the city of Plattsburgh and

the surrounding area, there was a good little group of basically bars that we could play and sometimes we would travel as far as Saranac Lake. Which is about an hour away or over to Vermont across the lake and play jobs over there, but mostly we just stayed around town and played bars.

Eleanor: So you moved to Pittsburgh in early 80s, you said and before you were in Boston?

Mark: Yep.

Eleanor: What were you doing, I guess, besides playing in Boston, were you?

Mark: That's a great question. Because it's hard to make music or, sorry it's hard to make money playing music, so I was working, trying to work as a musician and get started, but I worked as a security guard to make ends meet, and I was a security guard in several facilities in Boston and around Boston. Boston Kidney Center was my main job site. I was working for a company called California Plant Protection.

Eleanor: What's that about?

Mark: Yes, well you know security guards, we're the guys in the if you watch the movies. We're the guys that gets killed in the in the first scene, because he has to go look in the, where in the, the funny noise in the storeroom. That, those are the security guards. I, at the Kidney Center I, this is off the topic of music, but I actually had to evacuate the Kidney Center with all the Kidney Center patients in the middle of winter, because we had a credible bomb threat.

Eleanor: Geez.

Mark: But security guards, they don't pay us to carry guns or anything like that so yeah, we basically call the police if there's anything major.

Eleanor: Yeah that makes sense. Yeah my boyfriend was just talking about that, last night, where his car got hit when he was on a college campus and like he had to do the security guard report and then also the police report too. I guess no communication, maybe.

Mark: And here in the State of New York at the state university campuses we no longer have security guards today. They're university police, they're actually real police officers. It was controversial at the time, but they did, they do carry guns yeah.

Eleanor: Yeah maybe that's more of a trend now, because I think University of Washington also has that. Like police. Let's see, you're a drummer?

Mark: Yeah.

Eleanor: And was Tim, I think Cass said he played a guitar? I can't remember.

Mark: Yeah Tim, you know. For the, professionally I just play drums I can play guitar a little bit on the side, but really I'm just a drummer. Tim could play guitar and keyboards. And he sings too.

Eleanor: Yeah that's right I think Cass said, like her and her brother would do duets together, I think.

Mark: Yeah I know she, he did him with his sister Shauna.

Eleanor: Oh yeah, right.

Mark: And they had a little, it was a kind of a more of a folky kind of group and Tim was an all-purpose musician. He liked to go around and play by himself, you know solo gigs and he would play with the sister Shauna sometimes. He began playing as a bass player on and off with a band called Zip City, a little blues band in town.

Eleanor: That's pretty fun and he also was a DJ?

Mark: And then he was a DJ too yeah. Very sociable person so nice personality for a DJ.

Eleanor: So do you remember any events you've been to at SUNY Plattsburgh? Like did you ever go to events?

Mark: I don't not a whole lot. I remember a few, we saw the Kinks here. We saw, I say we it's Tim and I would go. We saw the Pretenders they had...It was at a time, you know after they had a death of a member and they had slightly different lineup of but Chrissie Hynde the lead singer of the Pretenders was just starting a tour. Either a national tour or a world tour I don't know and her first stop I believe was Plattsburgh. Which might sound weird but, I think the logic and somebody else would know more than me that the story that I heard at the time was that a place like Plattsburgh being especially being close to Montreal was kind of a good place to just stop and play and kind of smooth out the routine a little bit before they went into the really big venues, and the night the Pretenders played they were not sounding very good. The acoustics and the PA system was not working in their favor and the the lead of the band Chrissie Hynde was visibly upset during the show at her bass player. Kind of there were kind of like a lot of dirty looks and things I heard later, something that could be looked up, I guess, I heard later that the bass player was fired from the tour before it hardly got started. But so they did work the bugs out a little bit at SUNY Plattsburgh.

Eleanor: Yeah I've noticed that with them some of the responses I've gotten from the survey there's one that said, like um something about how some of the people who were there to tour, they would be if they had an attitude of like about doing it at such a small venue than the audience could kind of feel that.

Mark: Yeah yeah. This is, this is, I haven't, I can tell you a brief anecdote I was at SUNY Morrisville when I first left high school and I was the entertainment guy on their college union board, so I booked the

acts for the college and we had booked Roger McGuinn, who is a fairly famous musician from the California folk rock days. Played with a band called the Byrds, but he was playing here as Roger McGuinn and I was running one of the big cannon lights that they have up on platforms. I just kind of got coopted into it, probably because they didn't want to hire more lighting crew or something but...So it was kind of a big deal to have a big celebrity name, but he was clearly stoned out of his mind for the concert and it was obvious that he was you know, he was not completely with the performance and so, as you say, the crowd picked up on it. And later after the event was over, we got a, in the college union board office he sent an autographed photograph of himself to the president of the union board with a note on it that said her name was Ellen he said he said something it was something like hi Ellen sorry I was stoned for the concert. So some documentation. Imagine that might be worth some money by now.

Eleanor: You know at least he acknowledged it or remembered. Well that's interesting I didn't know that, so have you been to a couple SUNY schools are just these two?

Mark: Just those two, yeah.

Eleanor: Nice.

Mark: Bands that play at colleges, you know they have a contract and they have all these little riders that they put in the contract that you have to comply with. And it'll be, it's not unusual to have you know, a certain amount of beer, for example, exactly the right brand, how cold, it has to be or what food has to be served and it'll put all these little things in the contract. So you know if you're student running these and looking at the contracts, part of the experience which is really good really professional. Is to see how the contracts are written and then have to do the legwork to come up to work with the employees of the college, you know student activities directors and things and make sure the contract is fulfilled.

Eleanor: That's interesting. So, is there any other anecdotes about that time?

Mark: Well, I was, I ran the coffee house at Morrisville. I guess I did more music at Morrisville than Plattsburgh. The coffee house that we called it was called the Inner Egg Cafe and I booked all the coffeehouse acts and I was, I was a little bit more involved in all in that world.

Eleanor: That's interesting. It's interesting about the contracts like, I've heard about you know those kinds of demands for like bigger venues. I didn't know they would do that for like college venues.

Mark: Well, when I first went to college the drinking age was 18 and there wasn't a paranoia about drinking on campus among college officials, the way there is now. So, for example, when the college hired a band even like a like a band to play in the in the club, there would be a bar on campus and they would hire bands to come in, not necessarily huge name X, but more regional acts that played. When they brought those bands in,

they would have tons and tons of beer for the students. I remember being at events where they would literally back up a truck a beer truck with spigots out the side of the truck so that students could just walk into the truck and fill their little red plastic cup. The days were different back then.

Eleanor: They still had the red plastic solo cups back then?

Mark: They still had those yeah. There's a trend.

Eleanor: Well that's interesting I didn't think about solo cups having such a long history.

Mark: In colleges all over the place, had bars in those days. Then the drinking age changed, and there was more of a sensitivity to you know, maybe helping students be responsible drinkers and whatnot. World is very different now, now the administration wouldn't even allow a legal age student to drink wine at a reception. We've even had that kind of pushback.

Eleanor: And I never did the crazy party scene, so I never really got the rules. Let's see, are there any other stories?

Mark: I don't think so. Tim really had all the best stories, and he...You already have all his information right of all the acts that are booked here?

Eleanor: Yeah.

Mark: Yeah, so you could see there were some big name acts that were even before Tim's time that were, playing college. They were probably playing the college circuits in those days.

Eleanor: Yeah I think we're gonna, Debra and Joshua and I are going to look at the survey responses and see if there's any that Tim missed because a lot of people mentioned like not random ones, but a lot of like small ones that we hadn't thought about.

Mark: The thing we're trying to track down that nobody's been successful is Tim knew a student who worked in the with the college entertainment here at the college and he was very interested in like becoming a promoter, a rock impresario or promoter or something and I remember telling Tim telling me he did go on to do that and we can't remember his name and I look even look through my correspondence with Tim, he must have been something he told me over dinner or something, but that would be very interesting to track down that person.

Eleanor: Yeah. That'll be interesting. Like, do you remember what era that was?

Mark: Probably would have been the 70s, I would think.

Eleanor: Okay well.

Mark: Going way back, but in the era when there were all those big concerts coming here.

Eleanor: That's true. Yeah and when did that end? Was that I don't know, I feel like the last survey responses, I saw were from like 2004 so.

Mark: Yeah, I'm not in touch with the students in this way enough to know the answer, but you know from someone who's you know seen this sort of a few decades go by, the students don't seem to be interested in concerts the way they once were. You know, we don't see, I don't know if it's because they don't have the money, I mean they did after a while they started bringing you know there were some rap acts that came here and some more contemporary kinds of things. But they they were bringing like comedians and hypnotists and things like that, but I didn't see them, bringing the big name shows, but I don't think that's completely the result of a change in the students, I think that's a change in the music industry.

Eleanor: What do you mean, like?

Mark: Well, in the 70s, like just like take New York state as just an example. Syracuse New York is in the middle of the state and there was a thriving little music scene, that was emanating out of there where there were promoters in Syracuse and there were people that would put bands on the circuit. So, there would be bands that were just like a little bigger than like a little local band, but they were doing, they were doing regional tours and they were booking out to places like Buffalo and Syracuse. I think, especially after the DJ era, so much so much dried up and, in this day and age too musicians have to deal with copyright infringement which we didn't have to deal with that all we could play any song we want anytime anywhere. But now the music is copyrighted through a BMI or ASCAP and club owners have to pay a fee to basically be able to book acts that are going to play other people's music. You can see artists who are you know vloggers on YouTube who are blocked all the time, the minute they start playing copyrighted music. So there's been a huge crackdown on copyrighted music that did not exist, back in the 60s and the 70s and 80s, even though music was copyrighted. But because of the ease of reproduction and redistribution of material that is written and owned by artists, the industry has evolved to a whole different kind of set of protocols.

Eleanor: Yeah, I guess I do go on YouTube and I do, you know see those like little blurbs that people do on their videos now like this is copyrighted by the...I didn't know that club owners had to do that, though, like, I guess that makes sense yeah.

Mark: Yeah, even Tim was going up to Lake Placid or Saranac Lake I can't remember. In recent times before he died. And I think he was going up to play, possibly with the sister, but maybe with another outfit and he booked the job and the club owner called him back and said, I have to cancel you because he just learned how much he would have to pay, I think they have to pay by month. And he just said he didn't want to pay it and he didn't want to take the chance of doing anything illegal so he, even a little, little kind of almost insignificant local act. The club owner was

too nervous to book them. I have no doubt there aren't a lot of club owners that ignore the policy, but they could technically be sued and maybe lose a lot of money.

Eleanor: Like even if they're not like doing a video of the performance just if they're playing it live?

Mark: Just playing it yep. And I'm not an expert in this, so I would fact check all that but that's the story Tim told me.

Eleanor: Geez. There's like reporters I guess now in clubs.

Mark: Yeah, who knows. My last band was a little jazz blues band that we played in local, a local club here in town and I never heard any mention of the copyright issues, so I don't know if they were being ignored or they were they were just not being mentioned to the musicians. Now bands can play music, that is out of copyright, that is free domain, which would not be an issue, but if you were to go on there and play Adele or something you would be, you know more liable.

Eleanor: That's interesting because I guess I didn't really think about those kind of issues with live music before.

Mark: Yeah maybe an old time blues number that's not in copyright anymore or something, that wouldn't matter but certainly if you started playing the hit songs. You might be in trouble.

Eleanor: So, are you part of any band now or?

Mark: No I've been kind of laying low I don't know if I'll be playing again, who knows. Drummers have the disadvantage of having to carry a lot of heavy equipment around and you get to the point in your life, where you just feel like staying up all night and carrying heavy equipment.

Eleanor: Yeah that's fair. So anything else you want to talk about?

Mark: No I'm sorry we lost Tim my good friend, he would have been such a wealth of information to you, he, he you know, had a history background and he had an archival brain. And he was incredibly social, everybody knew Tim, you couldn't go anywhere with Tim without you know 10 people saying hi to Tim. And he played widely and he knew a lot of musicians and you know a lot of the local history so unfortunately I'm not up to that, but yeah so we miss him in that regard, very much.

Eleanor: Yeah, I know, I've heard a lot about him. This has been really helpful, thank you.

Mark: Well, I'm very happy to help you, such as it is, and I wish you well, with your project.

Eleanor: Thanks. I'll send you the recording after I look at it and view it, I'll send the transcript too and the release form.

Mark: Sounds good. Thanks, Eleanor.

Eleanor: Thank you have a good weekend.

Mark: Take care.