**GREENWICH VILLAGE SOCIETY FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION**

**SOUTH VILLAGE**

**ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

Oral History Interview

MATT UMANOV

By Liza Zapol

New York, NY
May 13, 2015

**Oral History Interview with Matt Umanov, May 13, 2015**

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| Narrator(s) | Matt Umanov |
| Birthdate | 8/28/47 |
| Birthplace | N/A |
| Narrator Age | 67 |
| Interviewer | Liza Zapol |
| Place of Interview | Neighborhood Preservation Center, GVSHP offices<br>232 East 11th St, NY NY 10003 |
| Date of Interview | May 13, 2015, 10 am |
| Duration of Interview | 2 hours |
| Number of Sessions | 1 |
| Waiver Signed/copy given | Y |
| Photographs | Y |
| Format Recorded | .Wav 98 khz, 24 bit [Closed Files]<br>.Wav 48 khz, 24 bit [Approved Files] |
| Archival File Name | UmanovMattOralHistory.wav [2.09 GB] |
| Closed File Names | 150513-000.wav [2.15 GB]<br>150513-001.wav [1.29 GB]<br>150513-002.wav [913.9 MB] |
| MP3 File Name | Umanov_MattOralHistory.mp3 [144.9 MB] |
| Order in Oral Histories | 15 |

**Background/ Notes:**

In advance of interview, Umanov requested that interview would be 1-1.5 hours.

1 audio/ transcript redaction requested, and 1 additional transcript redaction requested.
All edits to the transcript are noted in brackets [].

Matt Umanov at the Neighborhood Preservation Center, May 13, 2015. Photograph by Liza Zapol.

**Quotes from Oral History Interview with Matt Umanov**

"…I was living in what is now called the East Village…We didn't call it that. It was the 'Lower East Side.' I lived on Second Avenue between 3rd [Street] and 4th [Street]. I also later moved to 10th Street between B and C. At any rate, my reputation had sort of been growing amongst friends and other people that I knew from the Fretted Instruments Store, Folklore Center, the music world, et cetera, and being a fairly gregarious sort. Once I left Gretsch, after about a year, I set up my own little shop at home. People just started coming."
(Umanov p. 6)

"This place became available on Bleecker Street at 276 Bleecker, which today is the second smaller room of John's [of Bleecker Street] Pizzeria, right across the street from me. I took that place, and it was astounding what happened. Bedford Street's kind of backwater. The only people who would ever come in [were] people who knew about it—recommendation, et cetera, et cetera. It was totally word-of-mouth, 100 percent. Nobody walked down Bedford Street in those years. The little restaurants that are there now did not exist. There was a wise guy bar on the corner. There was a real estate agent. There was a gypsy next door, and I was the only retail operation on Bedford Street…"
(Umanov p. 7)

"There are only five places on that segment of Bleecker, between Sixth and Seventh, that a) have been there for more than twenty-five years, b) have somebody's name over the door, rather than blah, blah candy company, c) that name is the person or the family of that person who still run it. What it is—It's four Italian food places, one Jewish guitar store. That's it. I'm the young guy."
(Umanov p. 24)

"What that place really is, in a certain way, it's like a giant pushcart. It occurred to me one day a few years ago, a spring day. I was doing what some people are wont to do on blocks like that—a beautiful day—take a seat outside my store and watch the traffic, watch people go by. The door was latched open. I turn around, look down. It's pretty deep. I look in, I go—I'm thinking about what used to be on the block, sixty years ago. I go, 'Holy shit. What I have got here is a giant pushcart. That's what it is.' I like running it that way. At a certain point, I was talking with my son about making perhaps some changes with his computer system, whatever, or some electronic something. He said, 'I don't know, Dad,' he said, 'You've got do a lot of stuff.' I said, 'Well, I suppose in order to get that thing done, I have to bring this place into the twenty-first century.' 'Dad, you've got to bring it into the twentieth century first.' [laughs] And you know what, he's right."
(Umanov p. 29)

"I'll tell you what's terrible—and we fought it, and it's still thankfully fought within other parts of the Village by GVSHP and various other shops—are noisy bars. Bars in general. Right at the corner where Ottomanelli used to be at Jones Street, that noisy place with the door open—I can't even remember what it's called, but it's right at the corner of Jones there. Boy, we fought them like crazy."
(Umanov pp. 33)

"…[M]y girlfriend, Daisy…she says, "What would you do without your clubhouse?" In a way, it's true, and to be perfectly honest, that is one of the few things that really, I enjoy. You never know who's going to walk in that place, and P.S., it doesn't have to be a celebrity. It could be like some incredibly fascinating person."
(Umanov, p. 38)

**Summary of Oral History Interview with Matt Umanov**

Matt Umanov (1947-) is a longtime resident of the Village, and the founder and proprietor of Matt Umanov Guitars, located at 273 Bleecker Street. Born in 1947, Matt grew up in Flatbush, Brooklyn. His mother was a talented pianist who aspired to a professional career, and attended the Juilliard School. Matt's father was a lawyer, served in World War II, and spent the post-war years working at the Board of Transportation, known today as the MTA. Matt's parents were both ardent music lovers, and surrounded Matt with music from a young age. Even before he began kindergarten, Matt was very technically oriented, disassembling and reassembling clocks and radios at the age of 4. Matt's first attraction to the guitar came out of a childhood love for the 1950's cowboy craze, when he wanted to "to learn to ride a horse, play the guitar, and shoot a colt .45 all at the same time."

Matt pursued his technical predisposition when he attended Brooklyn Technical High School, where he excelled at pattern making. Matt discovered in this class that he had a talent for working with wood, and convinced his teacher to allow him to create a banjo neck instead of his regular project. Matt then became obsessed with the creation and repair of musical instruments, and pursued this passion at every opportunity. While Matt's parents wanted him to attend college, Matt followed the tutelage of Marc Silber and Izzy Young (founder of the Folklore Center), and decided to go into the instrument business. Matt shocked his parents by returning after his first semester at Northeastern University, and moving into an apartment in the Lower East Side. He got a job at the Gretsch Guitar Factory, where he quickly rose through the ranks from assembly line worker to skilled repair man.

Matt left Gretsch Guitars after a short time, and began his own repair business out of a storefront apartment on East 10th Street, and subsequently two locations on West 22nd Street. He quickly became known as the "whiz kid guitar repair and restoration person in New York City." Matt met Danny Armstrong, an electric guitar aficionado and modifier, whom Matt regarded as very important person in his life. It was while performing his own repairs in Danny Armstrong's repair shop at 500 LaGuardia that Matt got to meet more musicians of note, including Eric Clapton, Steven Stills, and Carly Simon. Matt set up shop in a series of Village establishments, including the Folklore Center, and in Michael Gurian's secondary shop at 37A Bedford Street.

1969 was a turning point for Matt, as he got married, and opened his first guitar store with his wife Susie at 35 Bedford Street. Matt recalls that the street at that time was "backwater" and not somewhere frequented by shoppers, and that he had to attract his customers to the shop purely by word of mouth.

Matt then relocated his own shop to its second location in 1977, at 276 Bleecker Street. Matt refers to this time as when the Village "was world famous already." The move from Bedford Street to Bleecker Street was a notable business improvement for Matt, as the increased foot traffic on Bleecker was a boon to his shop. His new shop was a serious improvement, and provided Matt an opportunity to connect with his neighbors and Chubby Vesce at John's Pizzeria. This eventually led to Matt negotiating with his neighbors in 1982, for John's to expand into his space, and giving Matt a new space across the street. This store at 273 Bleecker Street is his current location, and also the spot from which Matt has observed the recent changes in the Village.

Matt acknowledges that the Village still possesses a prodigious amount of musical excellence, citing the Village Vanguard, the 55 Bar, Small's, and others. This cultural wealth is reflected by what Matt believes is a deficit of other businesses, namely bakeries, butchers, repair shops, and even pushcarts. He misses these other shops around him, and feels that the current age of "candy stores" lack the same neighborhood quality. He also regrets how much tourism has exploded in the city, stating that it has gone too far and is now more of a hindrance than a benefit, especially in the West Village. Matt believes Lower Manhattan has been distorted by the increase of tourism, high commercial rents, and ubiquitous luxury goods stores.

Matt discusses the successful attempts of Village residents to keep out businesses they were united against, such as noisy bars, "cheap" jewelry stores, and large chains. Matt is hopeful for the future of the Village, no matter how much he may seem to dislike some of the recent changes.

Matt reminisces about his friendships with a range of customers toward the end of the interview. Names include Dave Von Ronk, Bob Dylan, Johnny Depp, Buddy Emmons, Alec Wilkinson, the Campbell Brothers, Maple Byrne, Emmylou Harris, Steve Martin, Steve Goodman, Rodney Crowell, David Gahr, and Dolly Parton. Matt narrates several stories illustrating the atmosphere of the store, which engendered impromptu performances and photo shoots with celebrities, as well as meaningful conversations with neighbors and interesting people. Matt closes his interview with commentary on recent experiences at music venues and museums. He continues to own and work at his guitar store, Matt Umanov Guitars.

**General Interview Notes:**

This is a transcription of an Oral history that was conducted by the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation. GVSHP began the South Village Oral History Project in 2013. The GVSHP South Village Oral History Project includes a collection of interviews with individuals involved in local businesses, culture, and preservation, to gather stories, observations, and insights concerning the changing South Village. These interviews elucidate the personal resonances of the neighborhood within the biographies of key individuals, and illustrate the evolving neighborhood.

Oral history is a method of collecting memories and histories through recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of adding to the historical record.

The recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. All additions to the transcript by interviewer and narrator are noted by brackets []. Oral history is not intended to present the absolute or complete narrative of events. Oral history is a spoken account by the interviewee in response to questioning. Whenever possible, we encourage readers to listen to the audio recordings to get a greater sense of this meaningful exchange.

The views expressed by the contributor(s) are solely those of the contributor(s) and do not necessarily reflect the opinions or endorsement of our organization.

**Oral History Interview Transcript**

**Zapol**: This is the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation Oral History Project. This is Liza Zapol. It is May 13, 2015, and we are at the [Neighborhood] Preservation Center, and if I can ask you to introduce yourself, please.

**Umanov**: My name is Matt Umanov, and I have a guitar store on Bleecker Street, which I have had in that general neighborhood since the 1960s.

**Zapol**: If we can start, can tell me where and when you were born and a little bit about your family history, maybe even talking about music in your family?

**Umanov**: Yeah, there's definitely music in the family. Technically, I was born in Manhattan, but that didn't last long. I grew up in Brooklyn, in the neighborhood somewhere—more or less Flatbush. My mom was a musician. She had come to New York from Winnipeg, Canada in 1940 on a scholarship to Juilliard [School]. She had trained to become a classical pianist. That was where she met my father, who was a New York native. He was born in the Lower East Side, grew up in the Bronx, and they met at some musical performance—Lewisohn Stadium, I think, which is like Randall's Island or something like that.

They were married in 1941. World War II intervened with her musical career, and children intervened—basically my older sister. That was the end of the career, the desire to become a concert performer. But she did give piano lessons to children all throughout my life, which is something she had been doing since she was a teenager in Winnipeg. That's one aspect of music I grew up with, listening to my mom play and practice every day. Despite the fact that I've lived for the last fifty years, essentially, in the world of folk, country, rock 'n' roll, jazz, whatever, the earlier stuff, all the Chopin and Vivaldi and all that, every note is still in there in my head.

There's that. My dad did not play, but he did love music, and that was, of course, how they met. He was a great listener. Classical music was what my parents were into. It was all the Beethoven and the Mozart and all that stuff. My dad was born on East 4th Street and Avenue D in 1910, and his family moved to the Bronx. His parents had probably just come over from Kiev not too long before he was born. My mom's parents had come over from Odessa just before she was born.

There's a little interesting story there. This is the immigrant experience thing that kind of ties in with your Tenement Museum thing. My mom was the second youngest of five, and we were told all our lives that the standard thing was the man would come over. The husband would come over, try to make a little money, and eventually send for the wife and children if there were any. The story we were told was that the oldest—which was my Aunt Alice—that my mom's mom came over with the oldest, and then the next four were born in Winnipeg.

After my mom died and after her oldest sister died, we came across their mother's passport, which said that she had not come across with one; she had come across with four. Only the youngest was born there, and the story finally came out, in later years, that they were living out in the boonies somewhere. She had just gone into town. "I need a birth certificate for this one, for that one." I have my mother's birth certificate, which says "Born in Winnipeg, 1914." In fact, her mother's passport says that my mother was born in Odessa in 1912 it's a story. [Zapol laughs]

At any rate, my dad grew up here in New York, in the Bronx—James Monroe High School, went to law school. My dad was more of an intellectual than—was hired to be a lawyer. It was the intellectual aspect of it. In fact, once he went into the Army, was drafted at the age of thirty-three. My mom was pregnant. A few months later my sister was born, and my mom went back to Winnipeg, so my sister spent the first two years of her life up there. My dad came back after the war, and he got a job with what was then called the Board of Transportation, which became the Transit Authority, which became today's MTA [Manhattan Transit Authority] trains and buses—just a tiny legal thing, some little cog in some department. Eventually he was with some law firm. He was never really interested in that. He was interested in history, interested in languages. He spoke five languages, all of which he learned. Music lovers, both of them. **[00:05:22]**

I was a very mechanical kid. Machines, parts, tools—I was the four year old who took apart the clock and put it back together, literally. One of the things that I got into—because it was basically a mechanical device—when I was very young, was radio, because you could turn the knobs and get different music. I started picking up, at a very early age, like four or five, on different stuff I would hear on the radio, which is how I got into Hank Williams, and I can—this is bizarre—but I can distinctly remember hearing a news report that Hank Williams had died, which was New Year's Day, 1953. I was five and a half and thinking to myself, boy, too bad. I

really liked that guy's— I picked up on that and Bob Wills' stuff at that time, but also the pop stuff of the day: Johnny Mercer, the Pied Pipers, all that kind of thing. Not to put too fine a point on it, but I do have perfect pitch. I've got a good musical ear, and all that stuff got retained. All different kinds of music. At some point, maybe when I was around thirteen or so, I got all steamed up over bluegrass and stuff. This was the early years of what we now call the 'Great Folk Scare'—1960 or so? Somehow or another, probably via my sister, got turned on to jazz—Stan Getz, Dave Brubeck. I mean, to this day, I am into—to use an inappropriate word—all the, many different kinds of music. It's not just one or another.

In terms of the instrument thing, I went to Brooklyn Tech High School, which in those years, it was all boys. Also, this was the early [19]60s, and we were still on, essentially, a 1930s curriculum there. Wonderful place. It had all kinds of shops, et cetera. The whole deal with Brooklyn Tech, as opposed to Stuyvesant [High School], in Manhattan, was Stuyvesant was the brainy kids—math and science, math and science, math and science. Well, my mother pushed me to go to Brooklyn Tech, because it was local. She thought it was the Stuyvesant of Brooklyn. Well, it was not, because Brooklyn Tech in those years, you had to study and do well in math through at least calculus, physics, chemistry, machine shop, foundry. We had a foundry, we poured molten aluminum there—patternmaking, which is accurate woodworking by hand to make patterns for casting stuff, all kinds of other manual stuff. If you didn't do well in everything, you got bounced out and had to go to your local school.

When I got there, first day—and I didn't even know what it was, because my mom had pushed me to go—I thought I died and went to heaven. [coughs] I really thrived there, I loved it. I loved the shops; the academic stuff, I was good at it. I didn't care much, but during that time, I had—via the folk music thing and all that—I had started playing guitar. If I can back up, my mom had, of course—My parents forced me to take piano lessons from my mom, when I was little. Well, I rebelled against that. It lasted three or four years, and then they made me take cello lessons, which—I didn't even know what the damned thing was, but I was good at it. There were other extracurricular activities that took precedence for me. I'm not going to get into it here what they were, but I bailed on that and the guitar thing. Starting from the age of seven or eight, I suppose, I wanted to do what a lot of young American males in the [19]50s wanted to do: I wanted to learn to be a cowboy. I wanted to learn to ride a horse, play the guitar, and shoot a Colt .45 all at the same time. [Zapol laughs]

I got into the guitar thing. I had to kick and scream to get a guitar at the age of eight [and] I fooled with it. I really got into it probably around the age of twelve, [the] little cheap acoustic guitar. I got into the folkie thing and the bluegrass thing, and I got all nuts over Flatt and Scruggs and all that, and I was dying to learn how to play the banjo—five-string banjo bluegrass stuff. I was all steamed up over bluegrass. I was about thirteen or fourteen. Of course, my parents refused to buy me one. No way. **[00:10:14]**

Well, by this time I was in the early years of high school at Brooklyn Tech, and there was some kid in my class who said, "You know, there's some old banjo in the closet. It was my grandmother's." I went to his house, and they sold it to me for twenty bucks or something, but it was a four-string banjo, which is like, New Orleans jazz, that kind of thing. You can't play bluegrass on [a four string neck.]

What do you do? You look around, try to buy [a five string neck to play bluegrass.] [I] wrote to the company. "Still in business. We don't sell 'em." [I] go to various music stores, exploring the first little folk places, guitar people in New York, "No, we won't make you one." I said, "To hell with it, I'll make one." I had both help and encouragement from my patternmaking teacher. This was a course that every kid at Brooklyn Tech was required to take as a sophomore. It is essentially using hand tools to make wooden patterns accurately, down to the thousandth of an inch. This is what is used in order to make a mold that molten metal will be poured in to do a little casting. [To] cast a big gear or something like this, you got to make an example in wood. You build up stuff around it. You take the wood thing out, then you can pour molten metal into it. I excelled in that class—I had lots of hand tool experience also from other people in my life. A friend of my father's when I was little lived around the corner. He was a shop teacher, and he taught me basic stuff when I was five, six, seven years old.

At any rate, my patternmaking teacher said, "Look, don't worry about the course. Blow this off," and he helped me to make that banjo neck. It took off from there. Within the next year or two, I was dying to get a Martin guitar, and I found a wreck in a pawnshop. I had what I have had many times. [I had an] absolutely unstoppable urge to take it apart and see what was in it. Now, this is not like a piece of machinery [where] you undo it with nuts and bolts. This is all wooden parts glued together. But [I was] fearless.

I learned a lot, and also in those years—well, there were two stores. There was the Folklore Center, which had been started by Israel Young—Izzy Young—which [was] a locus of

everything folklore-oriented on MacDougal Street, from the early ‘50s. He moved to 321 Sixth Avenue—right by the subway entrance there—in maybe [19]63, around which time a guy named Marc Silber —He was an early person being interested in old American instruments: Martin guitars, Gibson mandolins and banjos. He was from Ann Arbor. He had gone to Berkeley and gotten in with the people there, who were into that in the early ‘60s, and he came to New York and opened up a little store right next store to Izzy’s. They were connected—literally second-story adjacent buildings. I went there seeking information and guidance when I was fourteen, fifteen. Marc, I have to say, showed me the path. He said, “Well, look, this is this. Here’s what this is about. Here’s what these guitars are about. Here’s how these banjos are put together.” It was like my eyes were opened.

It took off from there. After high school, which I graduated at sixteen from Brooklyn Tech, there was of course the whole thing [of the] older generation, “You’ve got to go to college, you’ve got to go to college. You’ve got to go to college.” I lasted about twenty minutes in Northeastern University [College of Engineering] for a few reasons: one reason, everything in first- year engineering there, every single course, we had already gone beyond in Brooklyn Tech in high school. We had gone beyond their mechanical drawing—I had four years of it. We had gone beyond their physics, gone beyond their math—and bored silly. Plus, Boston in the 1964, 1965—hotbed of folk stuff, so I would hang out at the various clubs. There were a couple of guitar stores and shops, et cetera, et cetera. I was gone by like November, said, “To hell with this. Who needs this?”

Came back. Of course, my parents were shocked, and my father was outraged. “You have to get a job. You can’t stay here for free”—this old world stuff, older generation stuff. I looked around, and lo and behold, in the Brooklyn phone book, here’s a guitar factory. I vaguely knew of them, Gretsch Guitars, out in Williamsburg: 60 Broadway, which is now some giant co-op [or] condo. The whole eight-story factory building turned into you-know-what. Of course, Williamsburg it’s over already. It’s beyond hip. **[00:15:06]**

I was seventeen; I went there. It was a factory. They made electric guitars. I didn’t have too high an opinion of electric guitars, but I figure, what the hell. They were skeptical, but they hired me. I had to go to get my working papers. I remember going to somewhere in the Board of Ed—“Well, you should finish high school.” “Lady, I just dropped out of college.”

The Gretsch Guitar factory in those years was, I suspect, no different from any other factory in New York City or thereabouts that made anything at all.—made mattresses, furniture, didn't matter—in that the workers were almost all Puerto Rican. The foremen were almost all Italian American, usually second generation—some of them first generation. Management was all older Jews. That's just the way it was.

I was at the opposite end. I was a young Jewish kid who knew how to put guitars together. People in guitar factories, they're not guitar makers. They're workers who show up on time. They have good skills. They do good work, et cetera, et cetera. But I knew instruments. At first they were skeptical, they put me on assembling banjos. Within a couple of months they had me on what was called 'final setup': the last person between the spray booth and the shipping department. An electric guitar comes out of finishing, [you] install all the components, install the strings, the hardware, set it up, do the playability adjustments. From there, after six or eight months, they moved me into the repair department—me and three old Italians. I was eighteen years old.

In the meanwhile, I was living in what is now called the East Village, right here around the corner from here. We didn't call it that. It was the 'Lower East Side.' I lived on Second Avenue between 3rd [Street] and 4th [Street]. I also later moved to 10th Street between B and C. At any rate, my reputation had sort of been growing amongst friends and other people that I knew from the Fretted Instruments store, Folklore Center, the music world, et cetera, and being a fairly gregarious sort. Once I left Gretsch, after about a year, I set up my own little shop at home. People just started coming. By the time I was nineteen, or so—certainly by the time I was twenty—I was in a loft on East 22nd Street or something, living in the back, working in the front. I had a workshop set up. People would just come all the time. You wouldn't believe who came in there—Judy Collins, Eric Clapton. Unbelievable. A very common refrain was, "Where's your father? I thought you'd be sixty years old by your reputation." I was twenty, nineteen.

I was sort of the whiz kid guitar repair and restoration person in New York City. Whether you were amateur, professional or just somebody with a guitar, if you had a quality instrument and it needed serious work—it needed professional work—I was the only person to go to, literally. That was the start right there.

I went through a couple of different locations, having to vacate one and then another. I had gotten married in 1969. That's a whole other story, because that occurred at the Folklore

Center with Izzy Young. Fifty years after we first met, Izzy Young, who's been in Sweden the last thirty, he's coming to New York in a couple weeks. He's staying at my house. Izzy's eighty-seven now.

At any rate, Susie and I got married. She wasn't doing anything. She had a totally worthless college degree from City College. Political science—what are you going to do with that? Nothing. She said, "Look, I'm bored. There's a little storefront opening up down the block. Let's take it. Let's have a store. You fix 'em, I'll sell 'em." And we did. This was in 1969. The marriage broke up after three or four years. I mean, we were twenty-two years old. What are you—getting married at twenty-two, what are you—a lot of pot involved, et cetera, et cetera.

I continued with the store. I was there on Bedford Street, from [19]69 to [19]77, at which point, through various friends, I found out that there was a place becoming available on Bleecker Street. By 1977, this was world famous already. I mean, literally. I'd had this store for eight years. I was still doing repairs, by the way, but also morphing more into running it as a business. Actually, it was in that store on Bedford Street—Have you looked at that book, the *Greenwich Village Stories*? I wrote that little story about Bob Dylan coming in? That occurred there.

**Zapol**: Will you tell that story? **[00:20:24]**

**Umanov**: [sighs] I have to go through this again? [Zapol laughs] How about later for that?

**Zapol**: Sure.

**Umanov**: Bob would come in every so often, as did many people. You wouldn't believe who came in there! Yul Brynner. It was unbelievable. It just was extreme—and just people who like to play.

But 1977, this place became available on Bleecker Street at 276 Bleecker, which today is the second smaller room of John's [of Bleecker Street] Pizzeria, right across the street from me. I took that place, and it was astounding what happened. Bedford Street's kind of backwater. The only people who would ever come in [were] people who knew about it—recommendation, et cetera, et cetera. It was totally word-of-mouth, 100 percent. Nobody walked down Bedford Street in those years. The little restaurants that are there now did not exist. There was a wise guy bar on the corner. There was a real estate agent. There was a gypsy next door, and I was the only retail operation on Bedford Street—on that part of Bedford Street I moved, and the first day we're

unpacking cartons, and people are wandering in. Total strangers are wandering in. "Do you have this? Do you have that?"—little accessories. It blew my mind.

It took off from there. That was the point that I saw that it would be a wasted opportunity to not carry more than just guitars—old guitars, new guitars. Well, you could sell strings. You could sell books. You could sell capos. You could sell gadgets, accessories. I started taking on that stuff and making [a] display case for it. I was so intrigued by it, by the job, whatever you want to call it—of arranging all this stuff, finding space for [it], deciding "Do I carry more of those?"—placing the orders, doing the paperwork. I kind of likened it to collecting baseball cards as a kid. You're always rearranging them. People who do this know, "Oh, I'm going to put all my pictures together. Now, I have nine hundred cards. Well, now I'm going to do it by all the yellow cards, all the teams," whatever—fooling with all this stuff. Within a year, I completely stopped smoking pot because it was interfering with—I was having too much fun with this stuff. Fifteen years of pot smoking, gone! Never have touched it since, by the way. But it was fabulous.

We were there for five years By 1982, a situation came up where a place across the street—where I am now—was becoming vacant, and the guys from John's wanted my place. They knew the guy who owned this building, who knew a guy, who knew a guy, and so we did a trade. They got to take over my place, open the doorway between the two; I got a place three times the size across the street, and we've been there since 1982. There we still are.

**Zapol**: I'd love to hear from [19]82 forward, but I'd also like to hear in more detail from even the beginnings in the late '60s, or mid to late '60s on Bedford Street. That was also a very important time in music. There were a lot of shifts happening in music—

**Umanov**: We didn't see it that way.

**Zapol**: Yeah, tell me about what was happening—

**Umanov**: We didn't see it that way. We went to work every day. We had fun playing with our toys. That's basically what it was. We had a guitar store. We were having so much fun! We could buy old guitars, fix them, sell them. At a certain point, I started carrying new guitars as well—Martins Guild. No electric guitars, but we would occasionally sell older electric guitars. I

had gotten a great education from a guy named Danny Armstrong who is now sadly gone, but he was an important person in my early life, too. It's a whole other in-between story.

**Zapol**: He knew about electric guitars in particular?

**Umanov**: Oh, he was the guy in New York. Danny had come to New York from Cleveland. He was older than me. **[00:25:00]**

He was the first guy anywhere, first person anywhere—anywhere, on the planet—to do [and say] with electric guitars what people have been doing with and saying about acoustic guitars for thirty years already. [He would] say, "Some of the older ones are better than the newer ones, and I'm going to sell them for more money, as better instruments rather than just cheaper because they're used." People had been doing that with acoustic guitars certainly since the late '50s—and actually earlier, but that's another story—with the pre-war Martins and all this stuff. Danny, in the late 1960s, 1965, '66, '67, was saying, "Hey, those Les Pauls from the early '50s, they're blowing away the new ones. The early Strats [Fender Stratacaster] and Teles [Fender Telecaster]—" He was the first guy to do that.

He had a little tiny place on the second or third floor, on 49th Street in what was then the whole music store district—West 48th Street, Sixth [Avenue] and Seventh. All those stores, Danny was upstairs. All he did up there was sell older guitars and quote, 'repair electrics'—only electrics. As a repair person he was terrible. He couldn't do anything, but he was a hot rodder. He knew how to hot rod them up electrically. He really was the first guy to come up with the concept of having all different kinds of little electronic devices that alter sound. We call them 'pedals.' He was a very interesting guy.

At a certain point, around 1967 or so, he left that area and got a real storefront at 500 LaGuardia Place over in the Village. He had an enormous basement there. He put [in] his own repair shop—which he hired two guys to do for him, because he didn't know about it—in that enormous basement. Right at that time, I suddenly was between places. I had to vacate my repair space where I was, and Danny said, "Hey, take some space at my place." I said, "Well, I can't pay you rent." He says, "Doesn't matter. Anything that requires glue, my guys don't know how to do it."

It was through Danny, actually, that I met Eric Clapton before that. I met Stephen Stills there, when I was working at Danny's place. Stephen had old acoustic guitars, and Danny didn't

know what to do with them—and other people. There's more stories involved with Danny. He's a wonderful guy. I met Carly Simon there, because she and Danny were an item at the time. I still see Carly every so often to this day. She comes in and— I'm just like, that's forty-six years ago. More! Forty-seven, forty-eight.

I got sidetracked there with Danny Armstrong. What took—

**Zapol**: I was asking you about that time period in the late '60s being a shift in music—

**Umanov**: Oh.

**Zapol**:—and you said, "No, we were really just having fun,"

**Umanov**: What Susie and I were doing there on Bedford Street, we had a store. We were having so much fun! We would come into work—and it was a work thing. There were real hours there. We would get to fool around with guitars all day and talk to people. Meet people. Even back then—starting right back then—the minute we opened that place, it became a clubhouse.

**Zapol**: Talk to me about what the space felt like on Bedford Street—what it looked like and what [you] meant when you say it was a 'clubhouse.'

**Umanov**: It was a small store, 35 Bedford. I don't even remember. Interestingly, the guys I took it over from had had a short-lived guitar repair place there. They were basically amateurs, and they were there six months or so. Before them, the place had been a butcher shop, going back to the 1930s. The marble counters were still there in front, and a big walk-in box was still there. Walk-in boxes in those years were made of two-by-fours with twelve-by-twenty-four-by-two-inch pieces of cork insulation between. This was still there. We dismantled it to get more space.

I still have some of the cork. We use it as a bulletin board. The marble counters, which were as thick as this table—When we left, I couldn't take them with me—this was 1977. I gave them to Peter Longo. They are in his coffee shop to this day. That is his counter where the cash registers are. It's great. I love this kind of thing, like the continuance. It was a butcher shop, then it got left for me and was a guitar store. I couldn't use 'em; they go to Peter, the coffee store. His place has been there since what, 1907.

What was it like? People would drift in. Look, we were also smoking a lot of pot in those days, so everything was terrific. We didn't care about money. We didn't make a lot of money,

but we sure had fun. We sold a lot of instruments and met a lot of great people. I can't even remember who used to come in in those days, but ever so often somebody will say to me, "Oh, I was back there on Bedford Street." I say to myself, holy shit, who could remember? **[00:30:14]**

**Zapol**: Can—

**Umanov**: Musically, it was what it was. You're into—I hope that chewing gum is not a problem here—you don't love it?

**Zapol**: I don't love it. Would you like me to pause?

**Umanov**: No, it's all right. I'll lose it.

**Zapol**: Sorry.

**Umanov**: It's all right. I suppose as I talk more. I'll remember more things. I remember one day Clarence White came in, you know who Clarence was? Clarence White, Clarence and his brother Roland were a very modern type bluegrass group called the Kentucky Colonels in the early '60s, 1963, '64. I had seen them play when—[during] the brief time I was living in Boston—a place called the Club 47, which was a famous folk club. They were actually from Maine, but Clarence was the first really hot guitar player in the bluegrass world, and he had taken his cues from Doc Watson, who wasn't really bluegrass. It was a whole different part of country music. But Clarence was the hot guy.

That group eventually broke up, and Clarence joined the Byrds—Roger McGuinn, all that. Byrds with a 'Y'—all that "Sweetheart of the Rodeo." Clarence was the guitar player of the Byrds, and I remember Clarence came in one day and the Byrds were playing over at the Fillmore East around here on Second Avenue. I got invited to go. It was a great show, and, I assume it was. Who can remember? But I remember going. Unfortunately, Clarence got hit by a truck a few years later. That was that.

You ask who came in. I'd have to—Some of the people who worked for me—and I have one or two people who have been with me fifteen, twenty, twenty-five years—they remember more about this than I do—the last twenty-five years. Especially since for the last twenty, we've had the luxury of having the second floor above my store, which is where my office is now. I spent a lot of time up there. I'm not on the floor all that much. People come in, [and] sometimes,

my staff will tell me, “You know who was here? So-and-so was here!” I say, [sighs] either I never heard of them, or, “Gee, sorry I missed them,” or so-and-so, calm you down. There are times when people come in, and either I don’t recognize them, and they’re well known people, or I have no idea who they are.

I’ll give you—typical, typical. Four, five, six years ago, whenever it was, I was down in the store on the floor, and I happened to be sitting at the counter. I was filling in. A nice young woman comes in with a guy. Typical—the guy wants to fool around with guitars; she is bored silly. This is just the way it is. It’s a guy thing. He went to the back of the store, playing guitars, and I engage her in conversation. We talked for half an hour, whatever—a very nice person. After a while her boyfriend’s done—or the guy she was with. I don’t know if it was her boyfriend—comes up front. They leave together, and a friend of mine who was there happened to have been there at the time, says, “So,” he says, “how’d you enjoy talking to Jennifer Connelly?” I said, “Who’s Jennifer Connelly?” He says, “You kidding, she’s like this hot fabulous actress!” I said, “Really, what’s she, like movies?” “Yeah!” Said, “What movie is she in?” “Well, right now she’s in this movie called *A Beautiful Mind*.” “I saw that movie last night.” Whatever. Just come in, nice people.

Again, some of the guys who work for me, they could rattle down a list of people who were in last week, or month, or year, or ten, or twenty-five years. I can’t do that because I forget a lot.

**Zapol**: Talk to me about a time when your musical taste changed, or you might have shifted in terms of your interest.

**Umanov**: They never shifted. They’ve only increased.

You know what? It’s not even a matter of increased taste—maybe increased awareness. Typical: about five or six years ago, I was going through the Times Square subway station, and I don’t know if you know, but over by the shuttle, the Times Square platform—the shuttle platform in the Times Square station—there is a music store there. It’s a CD store. It’s called Record Mart or something. I remember them being there in the ‘60s. They sold basically Latin stuff—records. They eventually shifted to CD’s. The doors are wide open, so they have stuff blasting out in there. It’s mostly Latin stuff, as well as hundreds of DVD’s, of bad ‘70s TV shows, cheap electronics crap,—like an AC adapter that will probably break—some hats, but a

huge collection of Latin music on CD's. I stopped in there—and oh, Kung Fu videos! It's a wild place. At any rate, I'm in there, and I'm going through artists, and I see this name, 'Cal Tjader.' I go, wow, I remember that name from like the early '60s when I was thirteen, fourteen and had a brief introduction to some kinds of Latin jazz. He's a vibes—he was a vibes player. Fabulous I bought a couple of Cal Tjader CD's. **[00:35:57]**

Well, I would go back there for the next several months, and I must have picked up on fifteen or twenty Cal Tjader—For the next two years I'm listening to Cal Tjader like two or three times a week at home, in addition to whatever else. Also typical: in that same place, I rediscovered—and this is really rediscovering—Willie Colón. You know who Willie Colón was? Oh, you've got to know your New York— are you a native?

**Zapol**: No, I'm not, originally.

**Umanov**: Ah.

**Zapol**: My family is, though.

**Umanov**: Yeah, doesn't count. [Zapol laughs] It counts, but not in this sense, it doesn't count.

In my opinion, the only kind of music that one could really consider to be indigenous to New York City is that hot salsa stuff.

When I was a kid, maybe ten, twelve, fifteen, teenager—Whatever, into the '60s, most of the Latin people in New York were Puerto Rican—Dominicans too, but a lot of Puerto Rican. Willie Colón was the hot guy, and his singer was a guy that went by the name of, LaVoz, Héctor LaVoz. This was what you heard when you went into some of the poorer neighborhoods, the Spanish neighborhoods. This is what you would hear blasting out the windows. It was Willie Colón. It was Johnny Pacheco, people like this. It seeped in when I was a kid without really focusing on it. Here it is like forty years later, and I'm looking through in this place. Here's a Willie Colón [record]. I say, "Willie Colón, holy shit." I pick up a greatest hits. Man, I was on Willie Colón for the next six months.

So is it new for me? The last couple of years, what have I gotten back on? I was major on Jimmy Smith a couple of years ago and still am—Why am I blanking here—Earl Hines, a lot of the early piano players or the Hammond B3 players, like Jimmy Smith and Jimmy McGriff and the younger cats—

I'm just blanking here. Stuff I should remember, every day. This is what happens when you get older. Doesn't matter. This could be on at home at any time. Or [sighs] you never know what's going to come up. I listen to WBGO [Jazz 88.3FM] a lot, a lot a lot. It's on every morning at my house. You never know what's going to come on there.

Country music—here's something wild: strangely, I missed this for twenty years. About ten or twelve years ago, Steve Earle moved onto my block. Came up from Nashville. He left Nashville. He hated it politically. Steve's politics and Nashville, Tennessee politics are not exactly on the same track. He moved to New York, and he moved on my block. He came into my store. He was a guitar nut, and interestingly, I barely knew what he did. I don't know how I missed that. But I remembered when he first came out with his first album. In 1984, I got it, an LP, and I still have it. I forgot about it ever since then.

So somebody—it was actually the owner, the guy who runs John's [of Bleecker Street] Pizzeria, who's a guitar player. I was talking to him. He said, "Hey man, this guy is great. You've got to listen to him." He gives me a greatest hits. I listen to it—obviously spectacular songwriter, spectacular musician—and Steve came back in a couple of days later, because he just couldn't stay out of my place. For the few years he lived on my block, he was there three or four times a day, literally. He doesn't go into bars, so he needed someplace. "Hey, you're pretty good, man." That whole world got reopened to me, the singer-songwriters. **[00:40:05]**

Iris DeMent and Shawn Colvin and some of the male guys, all of a sudden reopened to me. Hadn't thought about that in some years. Stuff can always come back, the classical stuff. I forgot for seven or eight years to listen to Glenn Gould. You know who he was? Spectacular. I mean, he was the dude with Bach. You listen to him play—

It's all there. Not all there, but a lot of different kinds. There are some kinds of music I can't get with, but here's one for you: last weekend—well, let me back up this story. A month or so ago a woman came into my store—a woman of about my age, with a mandolin. Now, the older type of American mandolin is what we call a 'bawl back.' It has a big gourd. It's the Italian style. There were zillions of them made in this country from maybe the 1880s to about 1910, at which point a new design [was] built more like a violin. Basically, the Gibson [Guitar Corporation] company from about 1910 took over. Nobody played those things anymore.

Anyway, the woman comes in, and she has her treasured instrument, which was a pretty good one. She had dropped it, and everybody told her we were the only place to put it back

together. It suffered some horrible breaks. Well, it turns out that she plays mandolin in the Metropolitan Opera orchestra. Actually, also plays violin. We fixed it, and she was thrilled. It also turns out that she is first violin in the Amore Opera Company, which is the antecedent of the Amato Opera [Theatre]. If you remember over here, right on the Bowery, OK—that was a wild scene. I am not into opera. I have one family member who lived for it. I could never get into opera. Amato Opera—three or four years ago, it was obviously on the way out. A guy was getting old. [My girlfriend and I], we went. The building was ancient. I said, "Hey, honey, let's go."

It was a wild scene. It was run on a shoestring. You always felt like the props were falling. The place was small and cramped, and it almost felt like watching the Marx Brothers perform in the subway, but it was terrific. Several years later now, this woman comes in, and she says, "Oh, I'm first violin. I play first violin and a little mandolin in the Amore Opera," and she explains to me what it is. Some of the people from there are trying to keep it going. It's a labor of love. They're over in some old school building on East 4th Street. Daisy and I—Daisy's my girlfriend—we went last weekend. It's small. You're sitting right there, and it was *Don Giovanni*. This is only the second opera I've ever been to in my life. The other one was more amateur, but these people who are in it—both the performers and the musicians—a lot of pros, people from the Met, people from other opera companies. The conductor was some famous conductor from some other city, and they were obviously having the time of their life.

The whole thing, it was such an exciting show. It was a show. Musically, the singing and the orchestra, it was so exciting. That's the thing. It was exciting. You ask about what kinds of music. Music is music, you know? Great music is great music. It's an emotional thing.

**Zapol**: This story about going to see the opera in the school makes me think about music venues. [Please talk about] music venues over your time in the Village and how maybe a music venue that you really loved—and some that have stayed the same—have changed. I know there are many, but—

**Umanov**: Well, in the West Village, not that many. As you know, real estate is expensive. In the East Village, there are a lot of those places. In the Lower East Side, Arlene's Grocery, Mercury Lounge. It's not the kind of stuff I listen to, so I don't go there very much, if at all—or Rockwood Music Hall and all that. I've been to them, but only because people I knew were

playing, and I wanted to see what was going on. It's not the kind of scene, nor the kind of music, quite honestly, that I am generally attracted to. In the Village though, the amount of jazz, and actually the amount of jazz that goes on in New York City in general, is phenomenal and spectacular. There are other things going on as well, but here in the Village, in jazz of course, you have the Blue Note and the Village Vanguard. They've both been there forever. They're both tremendous. You get newer people like Spike Wilner, who is just—what a treasure he is.

Small's, over on 10th Street, just west of Seventh Avenue—there's an old-time place. It's folding chairs. Admission is cheap. There's no food. There's a bar, and that's it, and it's small. It could be avant-garde; it could be well-known people. It's wonderful. Spike has recently opened a second place up the street called Mezzrow, which is a piano bar. I haven't been there yet. I can't wait. Then there is the 55 Bar on Christopher Street. These are really the only old-timey—old-style places, I should say. Like real dedicated to doing it on a small budget place. **[00:45:38]**

We lost the Bottom Line here several years back. It was due in part to the monolith of NYU [New York University]. I am told it wasn't all that well-managed. I knew the people, but I wasn't really there much. I will say that an enormous asset has come up in the last several years to the downtown music scene in the form of the City Winery. I never remember his name. Mike—It's one syllable [Dorf]. I always forget it, but he is a terrific guy. It's impossible to overstate what a huge increase to the quantity and quality of music venues opening that place has been in Lower Manhattan. In Manhattan in general, in New York in general, but especially downtown. The quality of the acts is varied, the quality of the place, the quality of the sound system, the quality of the food—the whole City Winery, it started out as a wine-making classes [or something] with a little music, and it turned into—Its importance cannot be overstated. I think it is just like spectacular. The addition of that place has been just great.

**Zapol**: Where were some of your favorite places, favorite venues when you started out in the Village. Before you moved to the Village yourself, what were some of the venues you used to go to?

**Umanov**: I didn't do that a lot. I just didn't. For the short time I lived in Boston. The Club 47 in Cambridge and there were one or two other places, they were serious folk places. The line-up would be all those people: Joan Baez one week, Bill Monroe the next, whatever. But here, I just didn't do it very much.

I'll tell you what I did do. Back in the '60s, when Izzy Young still had the Folklore Center on Sixth Avenue, he would put on little shows there, up there on the second floor for almost no money—usually people who either nobody had ever heard of or he thought needed exposure. A lot of them you never heard of again, but some of them you did. Chris Whitley—would go there because I was involved with Izzy. Chris Whitley, who spawned whatever—

Other people who I saw there—one that I remember was a group called the Pennywhistlers, five women who did a capella Eastern European folk songs. I'm still in touch with one of them. Ethel Raim, she lives in the neighborhood, wonderful woman. That came apart, but she in recent years has been the major head of some major folk dance something society here in town.

I did not go to clubs here. There was the Cafe Wha? and the Gaslight and all that. I wasn't into it, I think in part for some of the same reasons that I'm not into it that much today. For one thing, you put in an eight-hour day—and in recent years for me, it's closer to twelve-hour days—you don't have the energy for that. For another thing, you're fooling around with guitars, and you're hearing at least little snippets of music all day long. What am I doing? I want to watch the Mets. I do go out occasionally, certainly when friends of mine are playing. If Bill Frisell is playing at the Vanguard or uptown, I will often go. If Steve Earle is playing locally, I will go. Buddy Miller, some other people, Bill McHenry, who's a tenor player. I still go, and in fact the last few years, I do it often. Washington Square Park—almost every day at this time of year, and certainly on weekends, there are some guys who have been there in the same spot for fifteen years. They call themselves 'Jazz Collective' or something. It's almost always the same crew, but it changes, and they're wonderful. Right off Washington Place on the west side there by MacDougal Street. **[00:50:03]**

But going out, I mean certainly [in] recent years, I just don't have the energy sometimes I will. What I don't do is large venues. Madison Square Garden, stuff like that, I won't do it. I don't like large places. I don't like large crowds. I remember once I got—here's a story for you. We must have been invited by Pete Townsend or maybe Alan Rogan, who takes care of all the guitars for all those Brit guys—for the Who and Eric Clapton—somebody invited us. The Who was playing at the Meadowlands [Arena]. He [laughs] said, "You've got to come, you've got to come." "I don't like large"—"You've got to come, you've got to come." I went with a friend. Somehow or other a large limo picked us up with a bar and all this stuff. Took us out to the

Meadowlands. We get there, and we had pretty good seats not right on the field, but slightly up. I see there, in the middle of this football field—I had to experience this. It wasn't that long ago, maybe fifteen years ago or so. There's like another ten thousand people on the field, and they're all standing in front of the stage with their cigarette lighters and the whole bit. Meanwhile, at a certain point—the Who, they're great. I was never into them and what they do. I could recognize the tunes, but it wasn't like I was a huge fan. Liked them, but I wasn't like nuts. I knew Pete Townsend. He bought some guitars here, but I hadn't really ever seen them perform. I'd maybe seen a video or two.

At some point into it, I'll never forget this, he starts doing his, I guess they call it the 'windmill thing,' with one arm up in the air, like this. All of a sudden, these ten thousand people, who are standing on the field there, their right arms go up like this. I got the shit scared out of me. You know why? You know what I thought? You know who Leni Riefenstahl was? Need I say more? I'm thinking like, I'm looking at Hitler youth here. Now, it wasn't literally that, but I see ten thousand right arms up in the air. I think, there are some mindless followers here. I never went to a venue like that again.

I don't like big places. One story I'll tell you, a friend of mine, Elliot Easton, he's a great guy. His band was the Cars, which I could not name a single tune. I couldn't even identify it. I wasn't into that stuff, but I knew Elliot. He was a customer; we became friends. He was a wonderful guy. He calls me up one day—this is years ago—he says, "Look, we're playing. We're back together again,"—they had broken up—"We're playing the Garden tonight. Why don't you come?" I say, "Oh, you know those big places, I don't like those huge things." He says, "Oh no, come on, come on, come on, it'll be fun." I say, "Elliot, I'm not into it." He says, "Come on, I'll give you a backstage pass. You'll come up. You'll come downstairs after the show. You can come backstage, and hang out." I said, "Elliot, I run a fucking hangout! I don't want to do this after work." [laughs] I mean it's like, why would I want to do that? It's like—

So do I go out much? Not a lot, but in smaller venues I will. Certainly if it's a friend playing, and even not. There are some people who just, so-and-so's there, we're going! Joey DeFrancesco, you know who he is? He is the B3 player today. He is a wild cat. I heard that he was playing up at Iridium; let me tell you, we ran. We ran to see him! Allen Toussaint was at the Vanguard, we ran for that.

**Zapol**: I'm interested also in Bleecker Street. You said that everything shifted when you moved to Bleecker Street—

**Umanov**: Business-wise it shifted, because we have people up and down the street, strangers walking in, as opposed to the only people who would walk in before that were people we knew.

**Zapol**: What was Bleecker Street like at that time? Who are your neighbors? What are some of the businesses that have stayed—

**Umanov**: In 1977?

**Zapol**: Yeah.

**Umanov**: That's pretty easy to tell you. Bleecker Street, as you know—or that segment of Bleecker Street between Sixth and Seventh Avenue—was the shopping street for the local neighborhood, most of which had been Italian American for already close to a hundred years. At that time—well, [coughs] excuse me. I can vaguely—and only very vaguely—remember the last few pushcarts on Bleecker Street in the mid '60s, but I didn't go there much. Even by 1969, when I had my store on Bedford Street, we didn't get around the corner to Bleecker Street so much. That's the way it is.

By the time I moved there, in the mid '70s, here's what was still there: five bakeries. There was Zito's, which had been there since whatever. There was Trio French Bakery, which wasn't French at all. There was Zampieri. They made breadsticks and stuff on Cornelia Street. There was a couple more. I can't remember. There were two fish stores on my side of Bleecker. There was this old guy Nino, two doors from me at 269. Bleecker Street Fish and the other place, If It Swims, We Have It, further down Bleecker. Artie Bosco was still there. Bosco was an Italian style deli. It had been his father's place [on] my side of Bleecker, down the block. Butcher shops, there were three at least. Well, there was Faicco's, which is still where it was, god bless him—a pork store. There was Ottomanelli, who was on the corner at that time, at Jones [Street], but moved further down for reasons that don't matter. They're still there, the Ottomanelli Brothers. There was Durando Meats [phonetic] [00:56:06]. Durando was wholesale to the trade, but they were out there on the street every day, carrying meat in and out, right on my corner of Bleecker and Cornelia. What's now there is some—pardon me—dumb candy store, sugar plum [Sugar and Plumm], some crap. **[00:56:24]**

There was the guys we called the Portuguese brothers—they weren't; they were Brazilian. Down Bleecker Street, at the corner of Carmine, it was a fruit and vegetable place, stuff out on the street. What's there? They had to leave because the usual: rent tripled. That GROM ice cream place where tourists line up for eight dollar ice cream cones—it's like, believe me, nobody who's not a tourist goes there. Wait in line for ice cream? I don't see it.

There was Lewis' Children's Clothing Store. What's there now is Murray's Cheese Bar or whatever it is. After Lewis' went out—and they had been there for a thousand years, and I think Lewis' family still owns the building—Aphrodisia, the herb and spice store, was there; it was their third location. That was started by a very dear friend of mine over on Carmine Street. That's a whole other story. But that went away. They were not original, but it was sort of a very neighborhood-y place.

Other places that were there: on the other corner of Cornelia and Bleecker, which is that sushi bar that's run by Koreans that used to have that ugly blue tile roof which fell off last year. For a thousand years—I don't remember the name of it—but it was sort of women's clothing and what they used to call 'foundation garments.' One woman I know who grew up in this neighborhood who, she's my age, said, "Yeah, I used to remember going there for underwear with my mother when I was a kid."

So on and on. Old guy named Matthews [phonetic] [00:58:02] had two furniture stores. One of them is now a Starbucks. It's been several things, and it goes on and on and on. All this was here in the mid-'70s; I was sort of a newcomer—a guitar store, holy cow. I took over where somebody had an antique store, which failed because he was not a good businessman, but before he was there, it was Mandaro's Cheese, and if you're a preservationist, you should know about this—the Berenice Abbott photographs. OK, you know them. The whole WPA [Works Progress Administration]—one of them, the two most well-known ones are a famous photograph of Zito's bakery with the bread in the window, and the other one is Mandaro's Cheese. Mandaro's Cheese, with the salamis hanging, that's at 276 Bleecker. That became my store. When I took it over from the jewelry guy, who had only been there five years, all the old encrusted bathtubs and sinks in the back they used to make cheese in were still there. We got rid of all that stuff. We restored the two show windows. We restored the woodwork, the parquet flooring and all that. Somebody who shall remain nameless, after I moved out, wrecked all that. They covered it all up.

We were a newcomer with a guitar store, sort of, or we were a nontraditional type place. Aphrodisia, which had already been—They took over when Trio French Bakery went out, and that's the place where that restaurant—There's a sushi place there now. Next door was Al and Anne's Luncheonette. They had been there since the '30s. I remember going in there with the old stools with the soda fountains. He went out and somebody—the same person who shall remain nameless, who wrecked the beautiful restoration windows we did—wrecked what was left of Al and Anne's—ripped out the barstools, ripped out the old booths, turned it into someplace that didn't last. It eventually became what is now that restaurant Fish. There's still a couple of remnants over there, of the old, but not much. The tile floor, they wrecked it. **[01:00:07]**

So that's what was there. Again, I was sort of a newcomer in terms of style, as was Jimmy Adelson with Aphrodisia. I can't remember what every single storefront had at that time, but that's what it was like.

**Zapol**: What were your relationships with some of these neighbors? Do you have a story about kind of interactions with some of these—

**Umanov**: Oh, I got millions, but—

**Zapol**: I'd like to hear one. One or two.

**Umanov**: Well, here's the deal. Here's the deal: we were next door to John's Pizzeria, OK, technically in the same building. Now, I am a fairly friendly and gregarious type. John's Pizzeria, at that time, was still run by sort of the original family, the Vesce family. It was run by a guy named Chubby Vesce, him and a bunch of his brothers. His brothers were gone. There was Blind Louis, who lived upstairs, and Joe from Staten Island, his brother Patty One-Leg that died—This is neighborhood stuff, right? Now here's the deal: Chubby, Chubby Vesce, who ran the place, but he knew how to run the business, and he was one of these guys who would give you the shirt off his back—always pick up the check at the restaurant, whatever.

So the deal is, they opened at noon every day. We opened at eleven, but we were there at ten to set up. The thing is, Chubby was also—Again, he'd pick up a check in a minute. He was a check grabber. He'd give you the shirt off his back. But when it came to running the restaurant, he's long gone, you got to understand. He was as cheap as could be. Now, understand, they have a coal oven there. None of this new fancy designer wood-burning horse shit. This was still coal

from the 1920s. They had to stoke the fire every morning with wood they would pick up like old pallets from the street, whatever it was—

**Umanov**:— and when we moved into 276, there was still this old wall separating the front and back. It was falling apart. It was what they call 'lathing,' like wood strips. It was a semi-circular wall from floor to ceiling. It had a thousand coats of paint on it, and we had to get rid of it. We're still setting up in there. We'd moved in but hadn't opened up, and we're taking down these long pieces of wood, and we're cutting them up into like two or three-foot pieces of bundling there for trash. Chubby comes in from next door, he says, "What are you doing with the wood?" "We're going to get rid of it." He says, "Give it to me. We could burn it! We could use it in the morning to start the fires!" "Fine."

So we became friends, and it also turned out that I am—one guy was with me, we were good mechanics—We could fix anything. I mean anything, literally—electricians, carpenters. Then being—no other word for it—a real cheapskate, their equipment in John's Pizzeria back then was ancient. His dough-mixing machine was running on DC current. I don't know if you know what this means, but there hasn't been DC current in New York since the '30s. But ConEd [Consolidated Edison, Incorporated] was still supplying it to his building. The machine would break or something, so he would come, "Matt, we're coming to see if you can fix our refrigerators!" We became very good friends. What this is leading up to is they opened at twelve. Well, before twelve every late morning, every day, that place was a coffee klatch for certain neighborhood people. We were part of it. It was a constant cast of characters. Not the same ones every day, but coming in and out. I still see Paulie Durando, from Durando Meats—which is long gone, that's a whole other story about how I found him. But Paulie would come in, maybe Charlie or Julie Zito from Zito's bakery. Of course, Chubby's brother, Blind Louis, who lived upstairs, he'd be down there every morning with his cigar, because what else did he have to do. There was Charlie Barberi [phonetic], who lived around the corner, almost mindless, but he used to, back in the '60s send away for pictures of astronauts there. To this day, if you look in there—all the headshots they have up in John's, they're autographed pictures of astronauts. Where does this come from?

A lot of the nicknames these guys had for other neighborhood characters would today be considered offensive, so I'm not even going to repeat them. But it was a constantly rotating cast—some people from out of the neighborhood, typical. They got their coal delivery—they and

Zito's both had coal-fired ovens. There's no coal in New York anymore, but there's some, and it was delivered by a place in the Bronx. I'll never forget, Gassman [Gassman Coal & Oil Company, Incorporated], with two s's. These guys would come in with the coal truck once a week, and you always knew that sound of coal going down the coal chute. Of course, it would be two black guys in the truck. They got to do the dirty work. But every so often, the old man Gassman would show up himself in a Cadillac. He was about ninety, dressed to the nines with the cravat and the three-piece suit with somebody driving his Cadillac for him. He would come in and join the coffee klatch, maybe once every three or four months. It was a rotating cast, you know? **[00:65:14]**

Almost everybody to this day is dead or gone. Chubby's nephew, Bobby Vittoria, ended up running the place after Chubby died. He has since moved to Florida, and his stepson Mike Frank [phonetic] runs it. I see Bobby every so often. He's up from Florida, but most of these people from the coffee klatch, they're all gone. Oh, some of the Ottomanelli boys would come in. Peter, Frankie [phonetic], and of course, I go in there and I see them. The Faicco crowd, they were Brooklyn guys. They just weren't part of it. People from the block, or who lived on Jones Street or Cornelia or Leroy Street, or came in to be part of the pizzeria, or whatever—so this was great, and it was interesting. It was five years of it.

**Zapol**: So, wait, you were the younger guy in this crew. What was—

**Umanov**: Yeah, but everybody—

**Zapol**:—your role in that?

**Umanov**: We'd, no—

**Zapol**: What would the conversation be?

**Umanov**: We'd go in every once in a while, if I had the time in the morning, I'd go in. We'd shoot the shit—whoever showed up, showed up. It could be me. Some of the other guys, whoever's going to show up. We'd just shoot the shit, that's all it was. Was I a younger guy, yeah, but I was the same age as his nephew, Bobby Vittoria, who was helping him run the place. Bobby was a Bay Ridge guy, but he was in there every morning, and I speak Brooklyn. It was just—it was like that.

The only one of the Ottomanelli guys who would ever come in was Joey. The youngest one. But of all those people, the only ones that are left—Bobby, I see him when he comes back from Florida, and Paulie Durando, who [sighs]—I'm not going to get into it. For one reason and another—and not for a bad reason, for a good reason—he seems to have a lot of time on his hands, so he works at Ottomanelli's—literally in a dirty apron, carrying loads of meat. He can afford not to do this. He's bored every so often. I go into Ottomanelli's, and, "Paulie, how you doing?"

P.S.—it was not all Italians. There was an Israeli, who at that time owned the pizzeria that was up on 23rd Street and Eighth Avenue. It was definitely a cast of characters. It was a lot of fun. But here's the point—through attrition, today there are only—and it has already been this way for twenty years, more. Oh no, it's been this way since Zito went out. And by the way they did not go out. It wasn't rent or anything like that. They just got tired of it. Charlie Zito died, his brother Giulio was running it, Giulio's son didn't want it, so they're gone.

There are only five places on that segment of Bleecker, between Sixth and Seventh, that a) have been there for more than twenty-five years, b) have somebody's name over the door, rather than blah, blah candy company, c) that name is the person or the family of that person who still run it. What it is—It's four Italian food places, one Jewish guitar store. That's it. I'm the young guy. I'm only there forty years. There's me, there's Eddie Faicco, and that's been—he lives in Brooklyn, but he took it over from whoever. He runs it. It's been a family place since 1900, I think. There's me, there's Faicco, there's Ottmanelli on Bleecker Street. There's Rocco's Pastry, and there's John's [on Bleecker Street] Pizzeria. That's it. Every other business on that whole block are newcomers. I include Murray's [Cheese] in that because there hasn't been a Murray's since the '40s, and that place is Rob Kaufelt's, which is a whole other story. You look around. There's a stupid candy store, there's an olive oil store, and whatever. It's not quite like the west end of Bleecker, which is nine Marc Jacobs places, Coach, Ralph Lauren, single-unit places that are whatever. All the neighborhood places have been pushed out of there years ago. Case in point, case in point: Biography Book Shop, which was at Bleecker and Charles [Street], maybe, Chuck and Carolyn [Epstein], wonderful people. They were paying, granted, below market rent. Their lease was up. They offered their landlord something like market rent, which would maybe have been about $15,000. "Sorry, Marc Jacobs offered us $30,000." What did Marc Jacobs put in there? A bookstore. Fortunately for us, they moved to my block. This was

like the one bright and shining light. When they opened up on our block, we have, oh my god, a bookstore opening up here, not a candy store, or crap plastic jewelry or something. So we're thrilled to have them on the block. We are. They're the only other what I would call 'real people'—It's two people who run a store. They're in their store. It's quality stuff. It's not stupid doughnuts or some shit like this. **[00:70:33]**

**Zapol**: When did you start to feel the shift happening away from family businesses?

**Umanov**: It was gradual. It was gradual. It just happens by attrition.

**Zapol**: Yeah?

**Umanov**: I blame, correctly or not, and there's no proof of it. During the Bloomberg administration, when a lot of people were saying horrible things about him, I thought there were a lot of good things he did for New York. One terrible thing he did for New York was turn it into high money only, the one-percent thing. But also, when it's the start of his administration, the number of quote, 'visitors' to New York by some official calculation—which means people who don't live here who come here, either for vacation, for a day or a week, or for business for a day or a week, whatever, just visitors to New York—I believe it was something like thirty million. By the time he left, it was fifty-five. This is what feeds the thinking of people who are going to open some stupid fucking store, like doughnuts. They're nice people, the Doughnut Holes [Holey Donuts!], but the chain. The what is it called, [bisou, ciao] Macarons, over there. We're smart people. We'll pay triple rent because we think we can make it with something dumb that the tourists will buy, or, if you go to the west end of Bleecker Street, gee, paying $40,000 a month for a store that would normally be $15,000, or $20,000? We don't care. We don't care if we never sell a thing. We could put in seven shoes, and one moron, no staff. We don't care about what's called shrinkage—which is stealing, whatever—We don't care if nothing ever sells, because for the $40,000 a month—plus maybe $2,000 salary, for one person—$42,000 a month, the exposure we get on that little cool-looking end of Bleecker Street, versus what we would spend on print ads that end up at the bottom of a bird cage? It's chicken feed.

There's that, but I think even more important, on our end of Bleecker Street, we're all—the bakeries are gone. The fruit and vegetable places are gone. The fish stores are gone. Granted, it's capitalism and free enterprise, and a landlord could charge whatever he wants, and there is no

commercial rent control, but I don't blame the landlords for getting as much rent as they can. I blame having attracted so many goddamn tourists to this city. Yes, it brings a lot of money to the city. But at what expense to the people who live here.

**Zapol**: Can you talk about any difficult times that you've had in the store, or even times that you've thought about moving?

**Umanov**: Why would I want to move? [laughs] Here's the best quote I ever heard on that—Dave Von Ronk, you know who he was? He was one of the seminal folk singers. Somebody once asked—he lived over on Christopher Street—somebody once asked, "Dave, would you ever consider living anyplace other than Greenwich Village?" He says, "Why should I go anyplace else? I'm already here." As far as I'm concerned my location is on the best block of the best segment of the best street in the entire city of New York that I could possibly have my store on. I wouldn't want it on any other block of any other street. I love it there. I love it. It's great.

**Zapol**: Do you have any stories about difficult times you've had? Conflicts, or moments where you've had to make some difficult decisions in the business?

**Umanov**: Such as?

**Zapol**: I'm thinking of recessions, or moments where it's been—**[00:74:40]**

**Umanov**: Oh, business-wise? Yeah, it's difficult. The end of 2008, when everything tanked—everything went way down from there, and it came up some. They've gone down more for me in the last few years. It's not easy to be perfectly honest, keeping that place afloat financially. There is the Internet. Yes, we have a website, and it's a great one. It's extremely pro. People rarely click and buy on it, but all day long, people come in, "I saw this on your website," or "I heard about you forever, and I looked at your website," or "I searched," whatever. This goes back to—not all of it, but part of this goes back to the story about the kid with the check. This kid with a check, who had never seen one—like I said, since the day he was born, practically, he looks at screens. He looks at LCD [liquid-crystal display] screens, a phone or a tablet or a computer, that's all he knew. To him, that's what shopping meant. Going into a store, what's that? What we always said—

**Zapol**: I don't think I heard that story about the kid with a check.

**Umanov**: Oh, I didn't tell you this story?

**Zapol**: No, I'd love to hear that.

**Umanov**: This happened like a few months ago. Kid comes in, twenty-one, twenty-two years old, wanted to sell his guitar, a nice guitar. Bright kid, obviously. Goes to Cornell Medical School—obviously a bright kid. He'd made arrangements, he emailed in—"I have this and this I want to sell," so he brought it in. I did all the work I need to do. You've got to fill out a book for the police department, check his ID, all this. I write him a check. I hand him a check.

You can see this—you won't see it on the tape, but you can see it like this, holding the check, so I'll describe it. He holds it, He's looking down at it for thirty seconds—not a word—staring at it. Finally, he looks up at me, and he says, "What do I do with this?" He had never seen one. I am not being facetious here. He didn't know what it was or what to do with it. His entire life— now, my son is in his thirties. He's been fooling around with computers since he's ten, and in fact, computers have a huge part in his business life, but it's not like since the day he was born. This kid, he's twenty-two. It's all he knows. To him, shopping means looking at an LCD screen, that's what it means.

We used to say when the whole Internet thing started happening, fifteen years ago or so, "Oh yeah, but with guitars, people, they want to hold them. They want to really play it. No two are the same. They want to hold them, so they'll come into stores—bricks and mortar, bricks and mortar." The last ten years, that has changed, with the Millennials. How old are you?

**Zapol**: Thirty-six.

**Umanov**: There you go, so you're not it. You're the same category as my son, my daughter-in-law, all this. Kids that are ten or fifteen years younger than you, it doesn't occur to them that there's anything, that there might be anything—it's not even thinking. I mean there are some, of course, but not many—It's not even thinking, oh, I want to hold it first. Some do, but an increasing number of them, it would not occur to them that there's any other way to shop but looking at a screen and clicking. This has affected us.

There are other things that have affected us, too, that just don't bear going into. There are some things—greediness of the city trying to fill its coffers. I'll give you a typical thing: I got busted by DEP [Department of Environmental Protection] for not having some sort of equipment

on the sprinkler system in my building. It's a tiny building. It's a tiny sprinkler system. It has to do with the unlikely event, god forbid, some water that's in my pipes goes back into the city water system. It ain't gonna happen, but some zealous whatever, "Oh, you have to have this. You have to have that," $25,000. I can't afford this. Yet I have to do it. How am I supposed to pay my staff? How am I supposed to pay my suppliers? If it was applied universally, that would be one thing, but I spoke to the plumber who was handling this whole job, and all the permits, he says, "No," he says, "I got the same shit in my building. They haven't caught us yet. It's random."

I'll give you another one: I had a guy come in several years back from the fire department. It was a sprinkler system thing. He's doing an inspection, and I knew he was making shit up. He was not too bright. It wasn't like a uniformed fireman. It was someone like off the truck and into a desk. I said, "You're just dead plain wrong." "Well, what am I going to tell my supervisor when he sees everything blank? I've got to put in"—I said, "No." **[00:80:01]**

He wrote it up. I get all these fines and violations. It would have gone through, except one of my former staff members had, through a whole situation which is too complex to explain, ended up after leaving the music business—because she didn't want to have anything to do with it anymore—ended up being the indispensable right hand to someone very, very, very high up in the fire department. I called her up, I said, "What's going on?" She says, "Let me look into it." So of course I got a phone call from some chief an hour later, "Please pardon us, this will be vacated." But what was it? If I didn't have that connection, there would have been no way I would have been able to fight. We're doing so, like $50,000 worth of stuff because of some schmuck who was directed, "Write more violations."

This is difficult, you know?

**Zapol**: I can imagine, as you say, trying to run a business now and having that kind of squeeze from the city.

**Umanov**: Yeah, there's more. There's taxes—there's all kinds of stuff.

**Zapol**: What do you hope for the future of your business and for the future on your block on Bleecker Street?

**Umanov**: I have no control. We are powerless—sorry—over what's going to go on there. Despite my being involved with GVSHP in whatever way I can and some involvements with CB2 [Community Board 2]—small.

In terms of my business, my son, who would be immensely capable of running it, is not interested, and I can't blame him. I told him when he was in college, which was like ten years ago—he's out of college—I said, "Yo, you want it?' He said, "No, I don't want it." I said, "Well, I could be ready in a few years." [He] said, "I don't want it." A couple of years ago, I said, "Yo, you want it?" He said, "No, I don't want it." For some stated reasons, which are totally valid, he says, "Dad, I got my own business. I'm having a lot of fun with it, and I love it. I don't want to give it up."

Some unstated reasons, I suspect: He has no desire to fill his old man's shoes. Also, other stated reasons: He's not interested in handling merchandise. He doesn't want hard goods. He fools around with clicks. Actually, he does other things, too. He's a good salesman, whatever he has to do.

What that place really is, in a certain way, it's like a giant pushcart. It occurred to me one day a few years ago, a spring day. I was doing what some people are wont to do on blocks like that—a beautiful day—take a seat outside my store and watch the traffic, watch people go by. The door was latched open. I turn around, look down. It's pretty deep. I look in, I go—I'm thinking about what used to be on the block, sixty years ago. I go, "Holy shit. What I have got here is a giant pushcart. That's what it is." I like running it that way. At a certain point, I was talking with my son about making perhaps some changes with the computer system, whatever, or some electronic something. He said, "I don't know, Dad," he said, "You've got to do a lot of stuff." I said, "Well, I suppose in order to get that thing done, I have to bring this place into the twenty-first century." "Dad, you've got to bring it into the twentieth century first." [laughs] And you know what, he's right.

I mean yeah, we have computers. I got a very complex website. It's extremely professional. We keep track of stuff. This is not a sloppily run business. You cannot run a business that size and be sloppy about it. But in a lot of ways, it's very old-fashioned. I like it that way. It's fine. I'm too old for change. I don't want to. I like it.

**Zapol**: Can you give an example of how it's old-fashioned?

**Umanov**: Yeah, my cash register was made in 1953. You know what? It works in a blackout, I could stick a crank in it. You know what else? There's no little screens and lights and shit like that to go out. It doesn't blow out. There's no rebooting it. It's a nice National. Once or twice, it's had some mechanical problems, and being a good mechanic, I have opened it up and fixed it or called Bernie Faerman, who is ninety-three years old and the last guy remaining on the Bowery of what used to be all cash register repair places and restaurant equipment. Nowadays it's mostly Asian restaurant equipment. There used to be tons of those guys. The signs would say, "Globe Slicing Machines and Cash Register Repair." He's the last guy left. "Bernie, what do I do?" When he was ninety he would still come over to my place and take a look at it, because—so that's an example. It's fine.

**Zapol**: [laughs] That's a great one.

**Umanov**: It works out at the end of the day. The wheels [turn], and the bell goes bang, so—

**Zapol**: Can you talk about any ways that you've mentored other people, in terms of a next generation in craftsmen? **[00:85:11]**

**Umanov**: There was never really a conscious effort on my part to do it. I can think of one guy who was in my repair department for many years, who was very good when he came in and had a lot of skills and a lot of knowledge. He left for personal reasons after about ten years, but he did, I think, gain a lot from me in terms of learning how to look at instruments and see stuff. It's hard to explain—

**Zapol**: How would you explain it?

**Umanov**: The best way I can explain it is, I meet a lot of people in quote, "the vintage guitar business." When I go vintage shows, they're selling stuff. They're almost always amateurs; they're hobbyists. They always want to know, "Well, how can you tell that this has been done, or that's been done? What do you look for? If it has this, then you"—no. You don't look for that. You don't look, say, "Well, if it has this color, then it must be that." No, no, no. You don't look at it for that. You look, you say, "I'm looking at an object. What am I seeing?" It's hard to explain this without having something in front of you and pointing out like finish blemishes and stuff like that, but I'll tell you, when you say 'mentor,' I never really thought about that.

Just last year, there was a guy who came to work for us with almost no experience other than he seemed to be a very nice kid and very eager, when he was nineteen—just had nothing to do with his life. He came up in sales, and he was a very easygoing kid. Nothing fazed him, and it turned out he had skills, like when we needed some carpentry done and also when it came to dealing with certain suppliers—The business end and organizing stuff, he was terrific at it. He worked mostly in sales. He was very, very good at it, and he just came up, and he was terrific.

After we had been together five or six years or so, he said, "You know, I've got to start working part-time because I need to change my schedule because I'm going back to school. I want to go to engineering school." In his late twenties or something—mid-twenties. I said, "Sure." Eventually he got his degree. He said, "Look, I been doing this. I can't work in a guitar store forever. I'm really interested in this engineering thing, and I can get a job." Very low-level at a technology company.

When he left, on his last day, he said the nicest thing. He said something to the effect of, "When I came in here I was aimless. I was nineteen. I didn't know what the hell I was doing," he said, "I feel like I grew up here. Like I learned how to grow up." Because we gave him responsibilities and all this stuff, and it was a very nice thing to have said, so. He comes by occasionally. This was only a couple of years ago, so it's really great. That's a good story for that.

**Zapol**: I wonder if there are other stories. I know we said we were going to comeback to the Bob Dylan story, the iconic Bob Dylan story.

**Umanov**: I've had to tell it so many times. I have a much better answer to that: Buy the damned book. [Zapol laughs] Go online. Buy the book, either from the GVSHP website or from Amazon, because two things will have been served: one, since the amount of money from it goes to support GVSHP, you will be giving money to GVSHP, and two, you will save me from having to tell you that story again. It's a great story, but it's—you know.

**Zapol**: Is there another story about the Village that you'd like to share, or something that you thought you might share today that I haven't asked you about?

**Umanov**: To tell you the truth, I put absolutely no time into thinking about that. I just figured it would come. If I sat here for another three days, another thousand stories would come up.

**Zapol**: I believe you.

**Umanov**: What did somebody ask me just the other day. I can't remember. They come up sometimes in conversation, "Oh yeah, that reminds of the time that whatever, or whoever." Nothing that comes to mind specifically. **[00:90:07]**

**Zapol**: Well, I like this image of you sitting in front of your store and kind of thinking of it as a giant pushcart.

**Umanov**: Yeah. Well, you know who David Gruber is? David was the chair of CB2 for several years, and he lives around the corner from me. I know him. He's a local guy. He walked by one day. I was sitting out there—I don't do it often, if I do it like once every week or two it's a lot, for a half hour. But he walked by one day. He said, "I thought only old Italians who owned their buildings and have nothing to do sit in front of their store." I said, "Well, David, you learned something." I tell you, it's the stream of people going by there. It's interesting, the different times of day. Around five, five-thirty, you'll get people who you know live in the neighborhood, or you suspect live in the neighborhood, as opposed to people who you know for a fact are tourists. If they've got a gaggle of slavering teenagers with them they're from New Jersey. I'm sorry, they just are. Or they got cameras around their necks, I mean, come on.

What annoys us here are the tourists who walk in—and believe me, there are crowds of them—on weekends. It forces us to have more staff, just to deal with them. One of my guys will be sitting there, dealing with a customer, showing them guitars, and it happens more often than one might think. Some tourist will walk in and just barge into the conversation. Like loudly start asking, like, "Where can I find this or that?" [laughs] For a while, at the height of it, Danny, my store manager, he put a little sign on the side of my cash register, which is halfway back in the store, that faces the door. It's a little sign. He made it this big, like two by three inches, with an arrow pointing on it. It had one word over the arrow. "Magnolia." Like, get out of here. Go back, watch *Sex and the City*. Leave us alone.

**Zapol**: Yeah, it's amazing what you say about the tremendous number of tourists and how that has shifted in your time.

**Umanov**: Oh, it is a flood. I can see how because it happens to me when you live there, and you can't walk down your own block. Obviously there's nothing to be done about it, et cetera, et

cetera, and one can always say, "Oh, gee, it didn't used to be this bad," but it doesn't mean you're not going to be annoyed by it.

**Zapol**: What do you see as the biggest issues facing your block right now?

**Umanov**: There are no issues facing my block other than the five of us who remain are not going anywhere. I think the block is in a—when you say issues, that has a negative connotation.

**Zapol**: Well, I don't mean to. What comes to your mind?

**Umanov**: Well, I can tell you about changes that I see coming very slowly. The in and out of various small stupid business, that's just a rotating carousel. This is in all the other little streets around Manhattan—it was frozen yogurt places. Well, that's over. Then it was nail salons. Well, that's over. They got replaced by nail salons. The nail salons got replaced by places with dumb sweets. That'll go to the next thing? That's just a rotating—What I have seen happen, literally, on our segment of Bleecker Street is a major chain, Starbucks. Right on my corner, at Jones Street, a place that was many places for years—right at that corner, some international makeup chain has had a sign in the window, "We're on our way moving in" for over a year, and the place has been empty. That's going to be another little anchor.

Up at the corner of Seventh Avenue, was a music store, Pagani Music, [phonetic] for a thousand years. That became a bunch of restaurants. It's OK, I mean it's—I'll tell you what's terrible—and we fought it, and it's still thankfully fought within other parts of the Village by GVSHP and various other shops—are noisy bars. Bars in general. Right at the corner where Ottomanelli used to be at Jones Street, that noisy place with the door open—I can't even remember what it's called, but it's right at the corner of Jones there. Boy, we fought them like crazy. There was a fight to keep out Boots and Saddle, right across Seventh Avenue from us, where the theater used to be. Success. Kept them out! Further down Seventh Avenue at Barrow [Street], on our side of Seventh, where there have been some Chinese restaurants, some other bar tried to get in there. Some noisy, whatever—Some neighborhood coalition or other—I don't know if it was one of them, block association or whatever—kept them out. But that's awful. That's awful. **[00:95:49]**

**Zapol**: Because specifically—

**Umanov**: Oh, Tiger-something. Tiger over there.

**Zapol**: Specifically the bars would be awful because—

**Umanov**: Because it's throngs. It's noise. It brings more. That [NYC] Santacon thing, I cannot tell you how many people who live on our block were just wishing for fully automatic weapons. [Zapol laughs] Thankfully that's gone, but I mean—actually, I saw this. Where the hell was it? Daisy and I were walking—I know where it was.

The other night on 4th Street, right next to Ruth's Place—the little Village silversmith—there's a bar there. Fourth Street, there are some noisy bars. Right there, next door to her, there's some horrible noisy place. As we were standing there, talking to Ruth about eleven o'clock, ten o'clock at night—which is when she's there—some fat, loud, drunk suburbanite—trust me, this was a 'bridge-and-tunnel' person; this was not from Iowa—comes staggering out, large, shouting at the top of his lungs how drunk he is and how he's in Greenwich-fucking-Village, and, "Come and get me." It's like, [sighs]. Ruth puts up with this every night.

**Zapol**: You were talking before—

**Umanov**: That coming to Bleecker Street—

**Zapol**:—about—

**Umanov**:—we do our best to keep that out.

**Zapol**: Yeah, and also about this Ruth the silversmith. Tell me about her shop, and—

**Umanov**: It's a tiny little place. It's literally in what had been an alley between two buildings. It is not much more than the width of this table—

**Zapol**: Where is it, and what's it called?

**Umanov**: It's called the Village Silversmith. The address is something like 129 ¾. There's a big sign over the door. It's on 4th Street. Technically, she's between Barrow and Jones on what you would have to call the south side of 4th Street there. Right next to it used to be Jimmy Day's, and then it became Boxer's and all that, right down there? She doesn't open until like nine at night or something. She's feisty. The place is narrow, and you can't even barely walk in. She doesn't care

much if she sells stuff. She has somebody sitting out there, so stuff doesn't get stolen, and she's been there since 1961. Come on! There is nobody else in all of Greenwich Village who has been running a business as an individual or even an individual with help. There are no other businesses! If you forget the places like Ottomanelli and Faicco, I'm one of the oldest at forty-six years. There are a few others that have been around since the '60s. I don't think there's anybody who's been there—let alone as one person. What she deals in is not tourist crap. She deals in the same thing she dealt in then, which is stuff that's considered [of] the Village. "Let's go to the Village. It's artsy." Ruth K-U-Z-U-B. Go by there some night. Just talk to her.

**Zapol**: I will.

**Umanov**: She's a character. She's great.

**Zapol**: So, I'm mindful of your time. I don't want to take—

**Umanov**: Yeah, I've got to go.

**Zapol**:— too much more of your time, but I want to thank you for it today—

**Umanov**: You're welcome.

**Zapol**:— and thank you for your stories.

**Umanov**: And fun.

**Zapol**: Good, I'm glad.

**Umanov**: Yeah. Fun.

**[BREAK]**

**Umanov**: Yeah, I could go on like this here, [laughs] the people and et cetera et cetera.

**Zapol**: Do you now live in the Village? Do you live—

**Umanov**: I do, I do. I wouldn't leave. Like Dave Van Ronk said, "Why should I go anywhere else? I'm already here." I love it.

**Zapol**: Right.

**Umanov**: I totally love it.

**Zapol**: Did you have any encounters with Dave Van Ronk?

**Umanov**: Did I have any—

**Zapol**: With Dave Van Ronk?

**Umanov**: A very dear friend!

**Zapol**: Yeah. **[00:99:43]**

**Umanov**: I still have hanging up in my kitchen some paperwork from his memorial service. His wife, Andrea—wonderful woman. She, for the memorial service—I remember running into Mary Travers there and so many other people. God. For the memorial service—one of the memorial services—she baked cookies in the shape of a cartoon moose head, because that was one of his nicknames, 'Moose.' I still have that cookie wrapped in cellophane, hanging up in my kitchen. Dave was a wonderful guy, a terrific guy. He was a dear friend and musically a hero before I knew him when I was a teenager.

**Zapol**: How did you meet him?

**Umanov**: Like everybody else, he came into my store. How I meet anybody, these are like—Katie Couric—I could go on like this.

**Zapol**: You knew of his music before—

**Umanov**: Yes. My friends and I, we were nuts to learn that style of guitar, the whole folk thing, 1963 or so—[19]62, [196]3, [196]4. David, his guitar playing was at the top of that. We used to play the records and try to slow them down to learn it all. The interesting thing is that all this occurred for me up to the age of—just at the tail end of sixteen when I was finishing high school. Within two years, I had done a complete 180-degree reversal. I was part of that world, as opposed to looking in, like, oh, hero worship? I was part of it!

By then, 1965 or [196]6, I was the guy they came to. It was great.

**Zapol**: You said you're a pretty gregarious guy. As those people came in, were you ever stumped with this hero worship thing? How did you approach it?

**Umanov**: What do you mean 'stumped'? Like stumped as to—oh, the Jackie Gleason 'hum-a-nah-hum-a-nah-hum-a-nah' thing? [laughs] What I'm talking about, I will tell you. Hum-a-nah, hum-a-nah—it's happened, I'm only able to think of once in my life. To me, everybody puts on their pants one leg at a time. Everybody [that] comes into my store, you put on your pants one leg at a time. Bob Dylan comes in? 'Hi, Bob.' Johnny Depp? 'Hi, John, how are you?'

There was another one recently. I can't remember who it was, but the only one that stands out in my mind is somebody you would not know, but people in the music world surely do: Buddy Emmons.

You know what a pedal steel guitar is? Buddy Emmons is the king. He didn't invent it, but early on he was the real creator of all those licks that got used in all those country western records and the player of the instrument who took it into jazz—wild! [He was] a player of—I can't say Glenn Gould proportion because Glenn Gould interpreted Bach. Buddy Emmons interpreted and then expanded. You can't compare him to anybody.

Buddy Emmons came into my store. I was speechless. Not for long, but this was like the 'holy shit' moment. It's like, wow. Musical heroes, yes, especially when you're younger—if you're eighteen, nineteen, nothing's going to faze you. In later years, then you don't care anymore, but there are certain people who come in who I respect tremendously.

I'll give you a great one: there are a few people who've been customers over the years—just came in as customers, and I got to know [them] somewhat, who are staff writers on *The New Yorker.* Some of them I got to spend some time with and got involved in a few articles. One of them was a guy named Alec. I can never remember if it's Wilkinson or Wilkerson—Wilkinson. You're a *New Yorker* reader?

**Zapol**: Yes.

**Umanov**: OK, so, Alec Wilkinson, we've done some stuff. He had come in a couple times, put my name in "Talk of the Town," all this. One day last year, Alec walks into the store with five of the largest guys I have ever seen in my life, and he says, "These are the Campbell Brothers from Rochester." You know who they are? OK, well, I'll tell you who they are in a second. He says, "They're in New York. They're playing at Lincoln Center this weekend, and the magazine asked me to do a short piece, so I just thought I'd come in here as a place that's conducive to doing an interview, if you don't mind our hanging out for a while." **[104:54]**

The Campbell Brothers are one of the two leading proponents of a small corner of the gospel music world called 'sacred steel.' What it is, they use the pedal steel guitar. It's really the only place outside of the country western world where the pedal steel guitar is used. Before the pedal steel was invented, in the late [19]40s, early '50s, there were people doing that with what's called a 'lap steel'—the same instrument but no foot pedals for changes.

Of course, I knew who they were. [coughs] Alec is doing his interview, and meanwhile they're sitting around, and they decide to set up. A guy had his instrument with him. A couple of them did, two of them. They just did an impromptu performance, about a half hour of their stuff. I just stood there, saying to myself, "This is what makes it all worth it." [coughs]

Music can be a very emotional thing for me. I don't often lose it, but occasionally, just thinking about getting older. Everybody's been doing this such a long time. What the hell am I doing? All the problems, working hours that I shouldn't be working at this point in my life and just struggling, quite honestly, with keeping the whole thing afloat, the whole place. But something like that—

Quite honestly, my girlfriend, Daisy, who is elsewhere in the arts—she's an accomplished and well-known artist, painter—she says, "What would you do without your clubhouse?" In a way, it's true, and to be perfectly honest, that is one of the few things that really, I enjoy. You never know who's going to walk in that place, and P.S., it doesn't have to be a celebrity. It could be like some incredibly fascinating person.

A guy walked in some time last year, older guy, and I was sitting and having a conversation with someone. Some guy walked in and just broke right into the conversation, but in a very pleasant and humorous way. Older guy. I forget what it was. Oh, he was looking for a banjo ukulele or something.

The way that he did it was so fascinating, I just got into a conversation with the guy. It turned out that he owns a company way up in Greenpoint, which is industrial. There's the whole Newtown Creek, which I have been up several times in the tug[boat]. Greenpoint has some Polish neighborhood aspects to it, but still, there's a lot of industrial stuff. He owns this little company that does exotic gold plating—not of jewelry but for industrial electronics. Sometimes certain stuff needs to be gold-plated. He had taken it over from his father. This guy was in his seventies! We just got going into the conversation, and he was just a fascinating person to talk to. The whole way he did it—in music, they say *con brio*, right? It was like, wow. It was great, just

listening to this guy and talking and actually sort of sparring with him verbally for a while. It was fabulous. It made that day.

**Zapol**: Wow. I'm interested in how you would describe the sound of the Campbell Brothers.

**Umanov**: This is the twenty-first century, dear. Go online. [laughs] They're a gospel group with an incredible amount of energy. Their instrumentation is a guitar and a lap steel guitar and a pedal steel guitar, and I guess a bass player. I don't know what else they use on stage, but I have seen them perform. Separately, Daisy and I went up to Lincoln Center, where they were the opening act for—I will not say whom, because I was not too interested in the main act and left—but they are a-live! It's gospel with a lot of movement to it.

**Zapol**: What happened in the space when they were just having that impromptu session?

**Umanov**: Oh, they just played some. It was fabulous. It's one thing to catch this stuff from the back of Damrosch Park [at Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts]. It's another thing to catch it from close-up to a stage. It's another thing to catch it from literally as far away as you and I are, standing in an enclosed space literally three feet from us, being in the middle of it. **[110:25]**

Interestingly, [I have] rarely in my life been in the middle of an immersive musical performance; I'm usually on the edge. Here it is in another clubhouse moment: yesterday, a guy named Maple Byrne—Maple has been, for twenty-five years—if not more—the person who keeps Emmylou Harris's shows together. Physically keeps them together: makes sure the instruments are there; they're in tune; they're where they're supposed to be; they're on the bus; they're on the plane; the equipment is there. He keeps Emmylou's tour together, and he's a dear friend. I first met Steve [Martin] when I was next door to John—Maple, rather [not Steve]. I was next door to John's Pizzeria, back in the late—somewhere between [19]77 and [19]82. He came in with Steve Martin. Before the *Saturday Night Live* stuff, Steve was a comedy act, the guy with the arrow through his head. He was a stand-up guy—solo—and Maple was his assistant on the road. He came in, and whatever, and I sort of got friendly with Maple. I really got friendly with him years later. When Steve went on to other stuff, Maple worked for a guy named Al Bunetta.

Al was a manager, and his two main acts were Steve Goodman, who wrote "The City of New Orleans," and John Prine. To this day. Maple used to come around with Stevie Goodman, and Stevie and I became good friends. Baseball stuff and all this. In fact, in later years when he

was dying of cancer and getting treatments in New York, he used to come for treatments at Sloan Kettering [Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center] and stay at my house. It's another story. At any rate, so I know Maple from that.

Stevie died, and Maple continued with John Prine, and somehow, went away from that and got on with Emmylou. Maple's a major guitar collector and a wonderful guy. I hadn't seen him in a year or so. He stopped by yesterday, he said, "Well, we're doing the [City] Winery next week, we're doing a live show for FUV [WFUV 90.7 FM]—" I said, "The whole band?" He said, "No, no, no. This is with Rodney Crowell and—" who I also know. He used to be married to Rosanne Cash, who's another friend somewhere else, and her dad and all this. It goes on, but he's just, "It's Emmy and Rodney and maybe one other person. It's an acoustic set." So I'm going to go to the City Winery in the afternoon for a live show next week, and I'm excited about that.

**Zapol**: That brings it around to what we were talking about before—City Winery being a wonderful new venue.

**Umanov**: Oh, yeah, it is. It's a huge boon to the New York musical scene, qualitatively.

**Zapol**: The sound is really wonderful.

**Umanov**: Oh, great! Yeah.

**Zapol**: It's hard because sometimes people are eating or whatever around you.

**Umanov**: Yeah. I got into it last time I was there. I forget who we were seeing, but it was some woman with her larger-than-cellphone device recording it, and the damn light was—she kept it like this. I asked her to stop, and her companion was large, stupid, and drunk. Let me say that he was dealt with, and they did not get to see the end of the show. Mmm. They won't put up with this shit.

**Zapol**: Yeah, yeah. Well, it sounds like when you choose to go out, you want to really be able to really be able to experience it, right?

**Umanov**: Oh yeah. I'm there to listen. I'm not there to see and be seen. I'm there to absorb music. The whole thing with the opera last week—with the Amore Opera—was a great reminder

about what absorbing music and absorbing a show, whatever it is, is all about—whatever it is, just absorbing a performance.

**Zapol**: Can you expand on that?

**Umanov**: No. Just sit there, open up, and let it all come in. It's interesting because since being with Daisy—Daisy Craddock, my girlfriend-artist, who is also a painting conservator. She's also in major galleries and major cities. She got two careers there. Since being with Daisy the last ten years, I have learned how to be open to appreciating visual art—paintings, colors, shapes, and all that. I always saw stuff, [but] I never really saw it. I just opened up to being able to look at something and appreciate that kind of art, which I never really came— **[115:10]**

**Zapol**: I imagine kind of opening up in a similar way as sound to the visuals. Is there a particular piece that you think of when you talk about that?

**Umanov**: I'm sorry?

**Zapol**: Is there a particular artwork that you think of when you talk about that?

**Umanov**: No. But do me a favor, if you can, pause that?

**Zapol**: Turn it off?

**Umanov**: Just for a minute.

**Zapol**: Yeah.

**Umanov**: With—

**Zapol**: Hang on one second.

[Interruption]

**Umanov**: Particular artwork? No, but Daisy and I go out to see and hear music together. Actually, she's got a great ear, too—Memphis girl, she grew up with music and knows more than a lot of people I know. She gets to experience a lot of music she wouldn't get to experience, and sometimes we'll go to museums. She's got the 'experts' card,' so we can zoom right into places and cut the lines. We went to the Matisse show—the Cut-Outs show at MoMA [Museum of

Modern Art], which I knew almost nothing about, just didn't. I got to see this stuff, and it was fabulous! The colors, and the shapes, and all this—there's so much art that she has turned me onto, like a guy named [Charles E.] Burchfield. You know who Burchfield was? Man, that stuff is fabulous, a whole other world. I see it in much larger ways than I ever would have seen it before, which is great.

The opera thing was fabulous—just let it in.

**Zapol**: That's also visual and sound—

**Umanov**: Yeah, yeah, it's that too. It's a combination and all that, yeah.

**Zapol**: —although it sounds like that space wasn't allowed to be the big thing that—

**Umanov**: It's intimate, and I'll tell you what: they're losing that space, the Amore Opera. They've only got one or two more weekends left. If you're at all into it, it's in an old schoolhouse over on East 4th Street between A and B, maybe? Go online. It's going to be this weekend, three or four shows and maybe the next weekend, and they're done. They've got to find a new home. If you're into it, two or three hours, it's fabulous.

**Zapol**: That sounds fun.

**Umanov**: Yeah.

**Zapol**: It sounds also fun because it's just this collection of so many different people—

**Umanov**: Oh yeah!

**Zapol: —**doing it. It seems just for fun.

**Umanov**: So many pros. After the show, the little lobby outside the auditorium in the school—this is like an 1890s building. It's some hard floors and old metal walls and stuff, and it's like maybe a little bigger than this room. It's noisy, and like three minutes after the show is over, the performers and the actors and the orchestra members, half of them are out there in the lobby, eating cookies still in costume, and wow, it's great.

**Zapol**: It sounds like a Village story in a sense, because, as you've talked about on your street—on Bleecker Street and on Bedford Street—this mix of people who are amazing musicians, amazingly capable, just kind of—

**Umanov**: All kinds of people! I'll tell you one more story, and then I'll go. It's a great story. When we were on Bedford Street, [there was] a very well-known at the time photographer named David Gahr—G-A-H-R—who had taken every picture that ever was taken in the '60s of everybody in the folk world: of Bob Dylan and Joan Baez, of everybody—a very well-known guy and a major character, whom I knew.

He comes by one day with Dolly Parton, and he says, "I want to do a photo shoot around the city with Dolly, and I thought we'd come here. " He took a million pictures, "Oh, I want everybody in there. You've got customers in the store? Get them in the picture, too!" He took all kinds of different pictures. One of the people who got in the picture was an older guy who was born and raised and still lived at the time on Carmine Street—Italian American guy—whose little career, job, little business was repairing commercial refrigeration, like stuff in local restaurants. He learned this trade after the war, and he loved us. He used to hang out at our place all the time. "Oh, I love you kids. I love what you do," because he had lots of time to spare. In fact, it was he who gave me my old cash register.

At any rate, so Mikey was there. His name was Mikey DiGiovanni. We called him 'Mikey,' and wearing his—whatever, those greaseproof shirts, like garage mechanics wear. [coughs] Dave happened to snap a picture. He said, "Oh, get in the picture with Dolly!" He takes a picture of Mikey and Dolly. Just when Mikey's hand is out, like this—

I have the picture. It's hanging up in my store. His hand was out because he was saying, "Don't tell my wife," right? I have this picture hanging up in my store since then. I've got it to this day, OK? It's in a showcase with a whole bunch of other photographs and some guitars. Several years ago, an older guy from the neighborhood—not a musician, just a neighborhood denizen, who I sort of knew. He'd come in and say hello every three or four years. He comes in; he looks around. He looks in the cabinet. He looks at this picture, he says, "Who's that in the picture with Mikey?" [laughs] He didn't know who Dolly Parton was. **[120:30]**

**Zapol**: Who's the celebrity in the picture? Who's known?

**Umanov**: Yeah. Yeah.

**Zapol**: That's awesome.

**Umanov**: I've got to get. I'm going. I'm going.

**Zapol**: All right, OK.

**[END OF INTERVIEW]**