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# SOUTHCOAST Artists Index

*This story was collected through our partnership with the SouthCoast Artist Index, led by Ron Fortier.*

*These transcripts were produced using the Zoom transcription feature.*

**Interviewer Name: Ron Fortier**

**Storyteller Name: Carl Simmons**

**RON**

Alright, this is Ron Fortier with another episode of The Artists Index. And this is episode 106. That's quite an accomplishment if you look back on it. And I have a guest that I've been dying to get on th show for a long, long, long time. And that's all I'm gonna say about that. And before we start rolling, I want you to know that you are listening to the Infocus Podcast, brought to you by The Artists Index, graciously sponsored by the folks at Heavenly Spirits Imports, and supported by the Mass Cultural Council. And we're also working in collaboration with the New Bedford Whaling Museum's Common Ground Project, which is archiving all of these episodes, which is really quite a thrill. So without further prattle, I would like to introduce our guest. But, as per usual, I will ask them to introduce themselves and spell their name just for the record. And I'm getting a flashback to a 1950s or 60s television show, "What's Your Line?" "What's My Line?".. That's what it was! (Laughing.)

**CARL**

I'm Carl Simmons - C-A-R-L - Simmons--S-I-M-M-O-N-S.

**RON**

Good, good. Carl, you are an enigma and in many ways. And I'll get to that once you tell the folks what it is that you do. I mean, there's a lot of you. There's Carl, the artist; Carl, the historian; Carl, the intergenerational person that, you know, a person of your age, who is much older than your age..that kind of thing. So just tell us a little bit about yourself.

**CARL**

You know, I like calling myself an artist, you know, we go through a lot of time where maybe we feel like we can't or shouldn't do that. But, I feel comfortable in that, with that label nowadays. I, I spent a lot of time before I really snuck into my art making music. So, that was another part that was a big part of my creative life was music. And yeah, history. You touched on that. That's another thing I really enjoy doing. And I've lately, I guess, you know, I kind of have not figured out I've never, I've never figured anything out, I don't think. But lately, I've been trying to incorporate all those things at the same time in my artwork, New Bedford history, and my music, where I can and you know, the visual element that it naturally is photography.



**RON**

Let's go back to the music part. But just before, you know, it whenever I'm speaking with a guest, and the guest says something and it throws me into another sphere, another, another orbit or something. But it's funny, you're talking about mixing the music, the history in the art all together. The work that I've been doing lately, which is way beyond the abstract work that I've done for decades, one of the things that I've been wanting to do was...I, How do you do this in a painting obviously, I mean, it's all visual, but there may be a project there where you've got people singing hymns in a church while they're lynching people outside. You know, that's, you know, and I was with Don Wilkinson this evening, just before the podcast, and we were talking about art and and the pandemic, which is almost like the title for a book or an exhibit. And I think so many of us have become introspective or we found a whole other thing, but let letting that aside for now. Let's go back to your your beginnings as a musician.

**CARL**

Oh yeah, I mean, that's funny. I...That's one I don't own, the title of musician. But, um, yeah, that's, that was something I went to school for film, but then I met up with some folks who were really good at improvising music. And not improvising like jazz ,improvising folk music. My buddies, Dave and Shannon, who are from Western Mass. And they, that's when I just started getting more into getting, into writing songs, songwriting...when, I kind of got into it through the improvisation of just sort of like a cipher, like hip-hop, now folks do. I would do that, but you know, with this different style of music, and that was really exciting to me. So, I really just dropped any kind of visual art and just focused on music for a long time, recorded a few albums--just in my basement on a four track. Never went into a studio or anything like that. I was doing home recordings. And that's basically what I do now too, you know, my music, my films are home recordings, you know, with my iPhone. But yeah, I did that for a long time. And then, I don't know, I just, I don't love playing at bars and all the other kind of baggage that comes with trying to do music. Nowadays, you know, pre-pandemic, you know, I would play like once a year, or something at very well curated location.

**RON**

You don't like dodging beer bottles, right? (Laughing.)

**CARL**

I mean, I've had, you know, I played The Bullpen, you know, dodging knives, you know, especially what I was doing, you know, it was not, did not go over well (Laughing.) And, you know--

**RON**

Is at The Bullpen in Somerset? (Laughing.)

**CARL**

No, The Bullpen on The Ave.

**RON**

Oh,, because there was a Bullpen that was pretty notorious in Somerset as well. I guess any place call a The Bullpen has got to be notorious, right? (Laughing.)

**CARL**

(Laughing.) But, you know, I, you know, I'm a product of that. I don't know if you've heard much about the New Wave, Cafe open mic scene. But that was like, in my, you know, looking back rose-colored glasses, was a golden age of New Bedford music, in my humble opinion. Tom P\_\_\_\_ ran the open mic at the New Wave in the late 90s, early 2000s. That was just the most welcoming place, and I've never found a place as welcoming or as interesting in New Bedford, usually, now not to go down negative route, but it is Tom P\_\_\_\_ of, you know, Toe Jam fame nowadays...Did this open mic, that was just, it could be like, the goofiest act, and you know, get your three songs



or whatever he was--welcome to everybody.

**RON**

Was any of that documented by video or...obviously, audio?

**CARL**

\_\_\_\_\_ because, you know, before we all had phones in our pockets, you know?

**RON**

Yeah--

**CARL**

-- he recorded a lot off the board---he did. I think I have, you know, I have recordings.. I recorded constantly. And he recorded off the board a lot. And whenever I run into him, we kind of chit-chat about the archives of that, like, what would that, what does that look like? What is the digital preservation of that era? The possibilities there--

**RON**

I mean, part of the whole concept behind The Artists Index was to well, the theme of the old elevator speech was, you know, "So what is The Artist Index all about?" And it's like, "Well, we're building pyramids." And people didn't quite understand what I meant. And it's like, "Well, okay, well, pyramids are not tombs, okay, they're, they're vessels for memories." Because that's what it's all about. The Egyptian, Ancient Egyptians didn't feel that they were going to be able to get the Orion's Belt, which was their ultimate goal that was that whole of a life without memories, and they had to be surrounded by these memories, they have to be reminded by these memories. And, you know, as a little bit more than an armchair historian, you know that I mean, so much history is lost. And it's really, really important to preserve it because well, because it is.

**CARL**

Because we say it is because we feel it in our (Laughing.) Yeah, I mean, yeah.

**RON**

I mean, I didn't realize that I had done anything in my entire life until you noted in some of your research that you found those forms, and I could never-it's just a 40-D forms--I guess?

**CARL**

Yeah, the Form A's--

**RON**

The Form A's--yeah. The Form 40-B's is that is , that low, low income housing. I never realized, I was working for the Office of Historic Preservation, but I never realized that what by doing so, I was also part of the historical context.

**CARL**

Of course, yeah. And it's, you know, it's that early too, that, you know, I was just looking at pointing the other room where I was, like, circa 7-1976, in my Facebook posts, to find photos, and they would be from those form, Form A's, you know, and that's, that's interesting, because, you know, we think a lot about 1876. But I'm more interested in 1976 lately. Not as a nostalgia thing, but like, we got to document this too, because everything is changed. A lot has changed since even those time periods or early 2000s. We're talking about the New Wave, you know, that's gone. Yeah. And--





**RON**

Don, and I were talking about the beers that our fathers' fathers drank. I mean, then, they don't even exist anymore. And that was within our lifetime. You know, Dawson Valentine--as a kid in New York, I, I don't think I ever heard the jingle in English, because it was \_\_\_\_\_ (Laughing.) Shaffer beer, right? And Knickerbocker, Rheingold and all those beers, they're all gone.

**CARL**

Yeah. That stuff is fascinating. The, the hyper, you know, hyper local, is very inspiring to me, in my, and in my artwork. You know, so much so that, you know, almost to a fault, but, or maybe to a fault. But yeah, I find that very, then all those things are lost. And they everybody knew them in this very small corner of, you know, the universe. But now it's, you know, but it's becoming a distant memory, it's becoming a once removed, you know, Virginia \_\_\_\_\_ will be once removed, at some point. You know, no one will have that memory of summertime--

**RON**

Yeah.

**CARL**

So why not really, like dig into that right now? It's our folk, you know, it's our folk history.

**RON**

Is it a little bit more than nostalgia? Or is it familiarity? Is it something, I mean, you know, people talk about the good old days. Well, yeah--depending on where you were on the economic scale or dependent on the color of your skin--it depended on a lot of things.

**CARL**

Like, especially, you know, we're talking about, we're very active in the Facebook group, and I have a difficult time with the "good old days" comments. I just kind of like turn, you know, I just scrolled past them--

**RON**

Right--

**CARL**

--because I, and I have a conflict--am I contributing some kind of thing that is, I shouldn't be, you know, but you know, I just got to do what I'm doing and hope it isn't having a bad byproduct. But, yeah, I don't like that I, those general ideas of the "good old days" or "nostalgia." That's I, I really think that isn't what I'm into. I'm, I'm into remembering and forgetting is fascinating to me, that we've forgotten. You know, my gateway drug for all this was Daniel Ricketson. And when I first heard about him or learned about him, like, that was, no one I would talk to would really even know who he was. And that was completely fascinating that someone like that could just be forgotten. And should be remembered--I think so. But beside that point, like just how we forget our histories in these small cycles is what really interests me more than history itself, more than like the what the thing is, were remembering. I'm really interested in the act of remembering. And the act of forgetting, you know, what that, what that's like to why did that happen?

**RON**

Yeah, I mean, working for the Office of Historic Preservation...There was talk about an incredible opportunity, we had to do a what was referred to as a "windshield survey." "Every edifice in the city proper prior to 1925--

**CARL**

Yeah, wow--



**RON**

--and the reason why I was hired it was because I had a Master's Degree in Fine Art and I had a heavy art history courseload, and they thought that, that kind of education experience and such would be valuable to the project, which it was, because as an artist, you know, we're taught to see, you know, that there's that standby, you know, artists are taught to solve problems, visual problems. But the part that they forget is, is that whenever you solve one problem, you've created another. And that's why so many artists can't finish a painting because it's never, ever finished, because they've created another problem, and in the course of trying to finish the painting, and you just have to learn how to just walk away. But the other thing is, primarily is being able to see patterns and trends. And I remember fighting with my supervisor about the importance of the mills in the cities in the city. And not just for what people, you know, thought of the mills, you know, with Wamsutta, this is the biggest weaving town and the East Coast, so on and so forth. But wherever you had a mill, you had housing, and what kind of housing would you have near that mill, the operatives housing. We had a couple of utopian villages in the city--Howland being one of them, I can't--I think Grinnell might have been the other one-- Oh, yeah, I remember hearing about Howland-- --And, you know, Howland is still amazing, but the way it was set up and such, but people say, "Well, why is that so important? They were just mills. They were just poor people from Canada and Portugal and England and working in the mills. Why is that so important?" Why is it so important, Carl?

**CARL**

Why, remember--

**RON**

--I'm going to throw it on you! (Laughing.)

**CARL**

Yeah, that's your question. Yeah, I mean, it is the actual people, you know, those are, that's what's important, not the rich people up on the hill. You know, that's what we, I feel like we focus so much on. The same I'm counting on Hawthorne and County Street and all these rich people who were like, not always the best people, you know, the \_\_\_\_\_ party, like things like that, like, you know, but, you know, it's important to just document these. You don't remember these people who are just actually the citizens of New Bedford actually, the people who, yeah, and they were the ones, obviously, that these fortunes were built on their backs. You know.

**RON**

I'm just thinking of a quote from the movie, "It's a Wonderful Life", when Jimmy Stewart, George Bailey is sitting with, in Mr. Potter his office. And he, I believe, that might have been part of that, that scene where you're just a twisted, twisted old man or something. But he said, "Yeah, there are people in this town who live and die in." And, in other words, it's about people--not status, not class, not ethnicity, it's people. Nothing more than that.

**CARL**

Sure.

**RON**

Now, how do you take all of this and roll it into your art? Now, would you be considered or label yourself? Because, you know, we all need labels because, well, you know, if we have a bunch of cans, vegetables on a shelf with no labels on them, we wouldn't have any idea what the hell we're buying. And so I guess labels are important. How would you label yourself?

**CARL**

(Laughing) I guess, you know, an artist, you know,



**RON**

--just a plain old artist--not a performance artist, not a--

**CARL**

Yeah, I think just an artist, because it's so all over the place. You know, and I don't think I'm particularly, you know, I wouldn't call myself a photographer. There's so much I don't know about photography. I've never used an actual, you know, since high school and the SLR whatever, I haven't used like a good camera. I just use, available and I don't know, maybe that's like a self-effacing thing or whatever then, I, but I don't know. You know, I don't call myself do I call myself a filmmaker. I call myself an animator. I think artists is just a good umbrella--

**RON**

Okay--

**CARL**

--for what I do.

**RON**

Now, I generally retain this question for towards the end that podcast, but how, we'll especially, especially since we're both history buffs, and you know, you're a dyed-in-the-wool historian, a little bit more than an armchair historian, your your, your--there are people who go to a university and they remember things, they memorize things, but they have no concept of, of history, basically. I mean, I hate, I hated history courses that concentrated on you know, you have to remember, you know, the date, the characters in the battle. I mean, people have no idea how all these things were connected. So, as, in the future, when you leave your earthly shell, and people access the work that you've created... How will you be seen? How will you be remembered?

**CARL**

Yeah, I don't, you know, obviously, the answer is I don't know. But how would I...And do I want to even think about how I would like to be, you know, will I be taking digital work, you know, I might not be able to be accessed. You know, I did a show of watercolors, I did a show of when I printed out photos--o that's the might survive--

**RON**

Right--

**CARL**

--or the digital stuff might survive. But how? I don't know, you know...is it like so super New Bedford that it doesn't translate? I don't know, you know, um, but that's a risk I'm willing to take. It's very hard for me to answer that. I can't even do it now. Nevermind too far into the future. But, I, I try to be, you know, it's tough thing to say, but I try to be original in what I do. I wish I were more. I wish I were, I don't know, that'd be a funny sentence to say, I wish I was William Blake. But I think you know what I mean, you know--

**RON**

Yeah--

**CARL**

--like visionary-like--

**RON**

Right--





**CARL**

--you know, something like--

**RON**

--how do you know you're not? That's the thing, because, you know, in the historical perspective, you know, we've got our nose to the grindstone, you know, we're doing the nine to five, raising children, all that other stuff. And then years go by and you look back on your, on what you've accomplished, or what you didn't accomplish. You look back and you see, "Wow, I had no idea. I had no idea what I was doing. I had, but yet I'm kind of astounded by what I did."

**CARL**

Yeah. And, you know, right now, with the pandemic, I'm very, I'm going through a pretty rough year, like a lot of us. And I'm not, I can get inspired and get ideas, but I, it's really hard for me to ride to far, you know, to completion. Whereas before, you know, if one thing that could be said about me, I was prolific, you know, I was cranking out work, and but now in hindsight, when I'm scared that I'm not making work, I also can look back and think about putting together a website or whatever, or posting stuff on my V\_\_\_\_ and say like, "This is good work; I'm proud of I have a lot of work." I'm proud of that I've made relatively recently, you know, in the aesthetic I'm still in and I'm still happy with so, yeah, I'm grateful for that to have that. You know, I do have a lot of work and you know, the more I have though, there's a lot of stuff I don't love, but there are some some good pieces in there.

**RON**

What do you think people--artists or non artists-- in the future who trip across come, across access your work. What kind of vibe or concept or headspace do you think that they'll, they'll get from viewing your work? For example, especially around Christmas time, Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer by Gene Autry. I'm in the backseat of my dad's '59 Chevy Impala. We are on Bliss Corner where my stepmothers father worked. And I can see the glow of the Christmas lights, the big old bulb type things. It's the weirdest sensation, I mean to be transported back into time. I can, I can smell the pine, you know, of the tree in, you know, in the trunk. And all those things, I mean, art can nail a moment in time, it can create a space in your head that is almost like a complete menu. I mean, what do you think your work will do for people, not to them, but for them? Or maybe even to them?

**CARL**

How are those two things connect--I'm with you, and I'm following you---just memory--Bliss Corner. And you're wondering how I--

**RON**

For example, if I was to do a piece specifically about that memory of Bliss Corner during Christmas time and hearing Gene Autry on the car radio-- --it's this weird cocoon, it's this bubble, it's this space, it's this thing. And, you know, you can look at performance art, you know, film, you can look at, you can listen to music, and it's like, you get sucked back through time into this other warm and fuzzy, sometimes goeey environment. You know, in our family, for example, the memories of the farm in Canada are so profound, that we've all, we all can just close our eyes and walk through that farmhouse and tell you exactly how to get up the stairs. What you see when you broke through to the second floor. What, what bedroom was here, what bedroom was there, you know, as you turned around, it's you're in that space--

**CARL**

Yup-- Right--

**RON**

--you know, and good art. I really think does that. And I've seen some of your pieces. It's...



**CARL**  
And you feel like there is a connection to that, those types of memories and things, yeah?

**RON**  
Yeah--

**CARL**  
Oh, thank you. I think, you know, like, thank you. Yeah-- You know, yeah, sometimes that is the goal, to get to that space, that remembered... seeing The Dog House neon, you know, is one of those memories, wagging tail, you know, things like that, that are just and when they're shared memories like that, like I think those are some of our most important lost structures, are, you know, objects, those flashing neons and like you're talking about the Christmas lights, like that, you know, everyone remembers the smell of the warming houses, and the sound of skates on the wooden floor. I don't have that memory. But everybody talks about that with the park warming houses. Everyone talks about Sunbeam, the smell of the Sunbeam Bread and the smell of the peanuts, you know, and that's one thing that I just haven't tapped in my heart. Yeah, I do have daydreams of like, figuring out a way to bring the smell of bread back to the Coffin Ave like neighborhood and like, you know, that wafting through the air or--

**RON**  
You're welcome. --it was torture. It was torture walking from Collette Street--

**CARL**  
(Laughing.)

**RON**  
--to Earle Street, Immaculate Conception along North Front Street. And I still remember that the sidewalks weren't finished, it was the crushed stone near The Bluestone and had to go by Brownies Tavern, they can still see--Brownies' Tavern was between Collette and Earl on the east side. And that's all I remember is Brownies Tavern and the D\_\_\_\_\_ Oil Company was up on the left hand side on the corner of, which is the west, southwest corner of Earle and North Front. And those, those memories are very, very vivid. And there's other weird things too. You could always tell when you entered a French Canadian, I can't even say home. Well, home is a relative term--a tenement house, the smell of shellac. It was something about the smell of shellac with the French Canadians, you know, because, you know, they had all the woodwork was gorgeous back then. And even in these, you know, simple, simple homes. So, it's all these these things that I think the pandemic, and I don't know if you've been affected by it. I was talking with Don Wilkinson about this. I think the pandemic has triggered something off in people's heads that they don't even know what the heck has been triggered off. And it's not nostalgia, it's realignment, it's reassessment. It's a "re" something.. recalibrating -- I don't know.

**CARL**  
Yeah. Yeah. I mean, I think for me, it's a very like, you know, an existential crisis of some kind of just like what we know, what is what don't we know, and what can just disappear. What is normal...you know, the rug can just get pulled out from under our feet, you know? And, yeah, how do we move ahead with that in our minds and maintain hope, you know? I've had a rough mental pandemic, it's been, you know, I've been fortunate and what I don't have to do, but I've been pretty holed up for this whole time, you know, minimally leaving,

**RON**  
is that comfortable for you to be holed up? I mean, I mean, I mean, I live with, with with, you know, my wife is a physician's daughter, she's, I would call her a germaphobe, but she's very aware of things. And that's how things are done properly. She doesn't, she's not a, you know, devil-may-care, especially, I mean, this is serious business. You know, we both have memories as children of the polio thing. And I think, I think back on that constantly,





sometimes when I go visit her work at the Howland Mill, Howland Place, and I go by the \_\_\_\_\_ Vieira Community Center on Rivet Street, you know, right next door to Mount Carmel church, and I still whince, so I can still feel the polio shot in my arm. And I felt like it was like, every Saturday, I was getting a shot. And then there's the images of seeing, you know, in the newspapers, seeing the kids in the iron lung, and it was pretty much "Well, if you don't get that shot, this is what's going to happen to you."

**CARL**

Yeah.

**RON**

I don't know. I mean, who, was the words to that song, "these are the good old days?"

**CARL**

Right, right. Yeah. Those definitely the days of talking about. Or like, "Oh, what about polio?" is usually one of the examples. Yeah, so yeah, it's been, you know, I am, I think it's safe to call myself a germaphobe. Before the pan-- you know, the punch. My personal version of the joke was I started to go to therapy for like, my worries about Tripoli, you know, back when that ruined my summer when that was spiking, you know, I said, "Alright, I'm gonna go get this, talk about this." And then, you know, and you're, you know, I had my, had to go to the doctor because my hands were so dry from using hand sanitizer, from the previous flu season. And, and then the pandemic, you know, and it was, you know, it was common. Yeah, I count my blessings, for sure. But, for me, yeah, I was already a germaphobe. So this is--

**RON**

Yeah. I mean, you have to do due diligence. I mean, the devil-may-care attitude for some people, it seems like, it works for a while, and then, you know, somewhere somehow before you know, it, bang, you know, they're taken out of the picture. So, you know, personal responsibility, you know, germaphobia, I mean, there is an amount of, obviously, personal responsibility. But as an artist, and, you know, I know that, you know, the correlations and the parallels between the Spanish Influenza and this current pandemic. I mean, there were crazy people back then who thought it was a political ploy. Who, you know, and it was all along the same lines of thought, I mean, so...

**CARL**

Yeah, and history, history does repeat it. So, you know--

**RON**

Yeah--

**CARL**

People forget, you know, we see it all the time, you know, who's you know, on our page, you know, just the error, the amount of errors, like just right in memories, not so great. Especially remove, you're remembering someone else's memory or something you heard from somebody else--

**RON**

Right.

**CARL**

But, I mean, yeah. For me, the pandemic has been, I watched the New Bedford \_\_\_\_\_ thing. So I, you know, was interested in a lot you guys were talking about there. And, you know, it did like, you know, it helped in those back gallery culture that was interesting to hear about, just that, you know, the social. The, you know, chit-chat is what someone said, you know, and I had, I had big plans for my art. I was involved not taking photographs of me



anymore. I was sick of it already, you know, and now it's had to be me again for two more years.

**RON**

You're own...You're your own medium.

**CARL**

I, yeah, yeah. I guess I don't want to be all the time. Sometimes....You know, I know I'm available, so I don't have to make you know, do six emails back and forth.

**RON**

(Laughing.)

**CARL**

I like to create, you know, what I have worked with somebody else, it's through no fault of their own. It's a little hard, you know, I'm not so great at it.

**RON**

Are you ever motivated by something in history that pisses you off? There's no other word for it--pisses you off so bad that you would really love to, to visit that situation and either straighten out, things out or clear the record or whatever, I mean, like an atrocity...

**CARL**

Well, um, you know, one of my favorite pieces I did during the past couple years was called that something like "The Fact That That Place is Not Called the Sarah James Arnold Mansion is Completely Ridiculous" is the title, you know, so that's not the path, that's like a reaction to the way history is talked about now. That place is called the James Arnold Manson now is really goofy to me. And that should it still could be corrected, I think, and, and should be personally, it's what I think. You know, patriarchy just perpetuating this that is totally unnecessary to do and should be rectified. So that inspired me to make like this really get into the Arnolds, you know, and even just the questions of the Arnolds, like, you know, you know, not everybody's an abolitionist in New Bedford, you know, just because they're from New Bedford is not, you can't take for granted that they were all like, "Oh, yeah, helping the cause"--

**RON**

Oh, yeah--

**CARL**

--the abolition is even more worth celebrating, because they were really taken a hit. You know, so--

**RON**

Let's talk about that. There wasn't a lot if and again, it's, I mean, my daughter's gonna be 44. So it's been 44 years since I worked on that project. Cuz she was born in the middle of that project, working for the Office of Historic Preservation. And the historic building survey that was the official title of the of the project. And the, the, the idea was that Union Street was demarcator, first of all, it was called King Street. And then after the revolution, it was called Union Street, because a lot of cities and towns changed anything that had to do with Britain and the monarchy, they neutralized that are made a part of the democracy. But anyway, to the south of Union Street, where they were the Quakers. And to the north of, of, of Union Street, where the Congregationalists it was kind of bizarre. That's like having in our current times, it's like having all the Democrats on the south side of Union Street and all Republicans on the north side of the street.



**CARL**  
I'm gonna correct you here. Because it's not really Union Street, it was the Kempton line--

**RON**  
--it was, it was the Kemper line, not Union Street? Okay--

**CARL**  
Union Street, the Kempton line, which changed at some point, you used--to speaking of Arnold--

**RON**  
Right--

**CARL**  
--the Arnold's oak that was in the front lawn of the Arnold...you how the Arnold has like a little jaunt out?

**RON**  
Yeah, yes, it does--Yeah. Yeah.

**CARL**  
At that jaunt out was the Arnold's oak. And Kem--the original Kempton line went to the water east from there.

**RON**  
So what streets of the Kempton line follow?

**CARL**  
It didn't follow a street--

**RON**  
It didn't follow street--

**CARL**  
--it's like the back lots of like Spring Street, south of Spring Street. Okay. But now, but then the Kempton line became what was, you know, across from, you know, Hathaways Theater, the now it's the drive-in, abandoned drive-in bank teller thing?

**RON**  
Right, right, right--

**CARL**  
There's a curve there now, that is the law--that parking lots curve. That's all, that's kind of the Kempton line. I'm nerding out a little bit but, that's like an physical existent version of the Kempton line that still exists now. And you can see it on maps on property lines--

**RON**  
Right, right, right--

**CARL**  
But yeah, north of that line, I think is what they're talking about when and it's that everybody north of it works for everybody south of it, right? Yeah, that was, you know, and how how true that is, you know, that's, you know, that interests me too. Like how much of these things are like soundbites that we pass a long, and how much can





we really like, find out, "Is that really true?"

**RON**

Yeah, right. I mean, then again, too, even though the memory may be correct, the source of the information may have been erroneous or may have been a romanticized version of it or something. But-

**CARL**

Right, right.

**RON**

Well, I don't remember his first name, but Mr. Perrington was one of the curators of the Whaling Museum. And he was regarded as a cantankerous old Yankee who didn't like anybody, and it was very difficult to get along with. Well, for some reason, I've always had this knack of dealing with people like him. And I made an appointment to see him and he tried to scare the crap out of me as much as he could, but I wouldn't budge. And I think he, he took heart to that. And he basically looked at me said, "Okay, I know you're here because you want something, because that's the only reason why you'd be going through this. So I'm going to tell you, I'm an all horse trader. I'll give you whatever you want, if you give me what I want." And I said, "What is it that you want?" He said, "I want any and all information that you come across on the Duffs." And I said, "Why Mr. Carrington?" Now this man smoke Pall Malls, filterless Pall Malls, and his, his finger and thumb, his index finger, middle finger and thumb, were about as yellow and loaded with nicotine as as you could imagine. (Muffled background talking.) I don't know why, but Alexa just went off by herself--

**CARL**

(Laughing.)

**RON**

And I said, "Why?" And he said, "Well, there are some people in this town who think that they are so above it all, that they will do anything and everything to protect that image. And look, I am not a racist. I am not a racist. And I am not here to uncover anything but the truth. But it really ticks me off, that there are people in town who refuse to accept the fact that there were people of a darker color in their families." And that was one of his goals. That was, I guess, in retrospect, now with BLM and all the things that we know of in the past five years, especially, that was quite a jaw drop.

**CARL**

Yeah-yeah.

**RON**

You know?

**CARL**

Yeah, he thought that it was about time that people recognize--

**RON**

Right. So--

**CARL**

Is this 1976ish?

**RON**

This was '75, '77, '78. Yeah. Yeah. And so, this is a man who's trying to set the record straight for about 150 years-



worth of history. Now, I mean, he's a curator at the Whaling Museum. He's got this incredible library, he has all this information around him, and yet, he has this one particular goal..that he, it's a crusade for him. You know, so that brings me to crusades. What is your crusade?

**CARL**

Oh, I don't know--

**RON**

Do you have a crusade?

**CARL**

No, I don't know what that really means.

**RON**

You have a thing, an event, a moment, a question that you want to bring into the light. You know, like with Ricketson, for example, for Ricketson, and in Thoreau, it's still amazing how many people don't know about the Shanti at the north end, they still don't know about the connections between them. It is a story that has to be told there.

**CARL**

Sure. Yeah-

**RON**

--it seems to be something that triggers you off. And I mean, that in a good way. (Laughing.)

**CARL**

(Laughing.) I mean it does and it, and it... You know, I've been through it, you know, do I..."How much do I care anymore?" is a question I asked myself too. "Does everybody need to know about Daniel Ricketson and the Shanti?" I don't--if they don't want to, I can't make them care about it. You know, I'm not interested in, if, it isn't for everybody, you know, we did the Ricketson Festival there for three years and she had lower attendance you know, people kind of got it you know, after a while. And you know, I as far as a city telling their story? You know, and New Bedford telling its story? It's one of our coolest stories. I think, you know, that there was this crazy dude up in, you know, the wilderness of the north end, who hung out with Henry David Thoreau, and Henry David Thoreau on out here. Ah, it's just interesting. You know, if you're gonna, you gotta at first think this stuff's interesting. You gotta make that jump, that, you know, this type of history is interesting. And, yeah.

**RON**

For people who don't think it's interesting, well, there's nothing you can do about them--

**CARL**

Yeah.

**RON**

And then there are other people who don't know that they were interested in it until they heard it.

**CARL**

And for those who are like, yeah, you know, as I said, I studied, I don't know if you know, Bob Maker, but he's sort of, if anyone is my teacher, he's one of them. You know, there's a \_\_\_\_\_. And Laura was another one of my, I would call a friend and a teacher. But, you know, he, he's taught me not to make these assumptions and the soundbite versions, you know, like the Shanti Society. I don't know where that phrase comes from. But we all



hear it when we hear about Ricketson. And, you know, there was just, I'm very interested in if we're going to talk about this story, I'd love to talk about it in as much nauseating detail as humanly possible is like, I guess, my crusade.

**RON**

Yeah--

**CARL**

--to really know it, you know, and, like, really know what we can. And, you know, I did an archeological dig at the Shanti site. You know, we're really looking for a piece of the true Shanti, you know, and we found, you know, pieces of wood and the physical form. And, you know, for years, that was my finding the Shanti itself was, you know, it was an obsession. I don't know that word has such a negative connotation, but

**RON**

--yeah, it does. It sounds like you're creepy (Laughing.)

**CARL**

Yeah. And I certainly was creepy about it in a way, you know, crawling under buildings at the city yard. For you to some people, but for me, it was a blast.

**RON**

Yeah.

**CARL**

And that's what this whole history thing for me has been. ways to have fun, ways to get in to excuses to meet new people. That's the biggest part \_\_\_\_\_ maker, I wouldn't know these people if I wouldn't have known Paul Sears.

**RON**

Oh, god bless his soul. Yeah.

**CARL**

You know, and Janice Hodgson was--

**RON**

Yeah--

**CARL**

--she was more my era of the library...was the interim...

**RON**

Right.

**CARL**

--of the third floor--

**RON**

Yeah--





**CARL**

--that's when I--

**RON**

and Joannie was there too, Joannie...Barney--Joannie Barney--

**CARL**

Oh, yeah! Yeah--

**RON**

Yeah. So Janice, yeah, yeah.

**CARL**

I don't want to call that the Wild West, but I called it the Wild West in my head when, it was just like, I" want to look at the New Bedford scrapbooks today. Okay, let me go get them"--

**RON**

You know--

**CARL**

--and now things are much more organized. And thank goodness, for some ways, you know, things, they are what they have. Now there's an archivist, there are people doing that, but back then it was, you could get more access to things on a moment's notice, which was nice. And that was--

**RON**

--you could go through the James Shea Ottoman prints, you could just pull it open the drawers and, and pull out the prints by yourself. You know, with a reference from as we have to step up a couple of steps. It was on the left hand side. It was, it was crazy--

**CARL**

I mean, you could--

**RON**

--the access--

**CARL**

Yeah. One day, I sort of wanted to look at that William Bradford book, like, there's a one of these in the universe, you know, and I said, "Okay, you know, give me a give me 20 minutes to get it out."

**RON**

Yeah.

**CARL**

And were looking through it. And that really fueled my passion, just having that quick access with my--

**RON**

--as an artist-and some time historian-you've, you've become an inspiration for me, because, you know, my work now is historically based. And who says that, you know, that, that, that history can't be art. And we're not talking about, you know, the, the grand, the grand, you know, Washington crossing the Delaware you know, you know, all those great epic myths basically. We're talking about things in this area that still boggle my mind because,



you know, Kevin Bacon's, what is a six, sixth -- six steps of separation or whatever it is. Um, New Bedford is kind of like that. It is amazing how many parts of the world New Bedford's touched. Yeah, and it's also fortunately sad that for probably, I don't know, maybe it started right after World War II, but you know, this is the city that lit the world. And I always used to say, and somebody put a bushel over it until the last couple of years, they didn't want that light to shine. I mean, look at where we fit in, on, on history, black history...look at where we fit in. Now, of course, you know, whaling, in conservation, and in the environment and ecology. It's not a pretty picture, it was a lousy, crappy, murdering job--

**CARL**

Yeah, absolutely--

**RON**

Exactly. And then you look at the mills and how the mills were developed. And, you know, one of the, I always considered New Bedford the second most abolitionist city, second only to Philadelphia. And what is, what is our product--it's cotton goods--where those goods come from. So this is an irony there.

**CARL**

Right.

**RON**

And it's just so much more to it. But then you have the C \_\_\_\_\_ and the F \_\_\_\_\_. And it just goes on and on for one city.

**CARL**

But yeah, that's why, it's just endless, you know, and like I said, Ricketson was my gateway to this stuff. But then it taught me how to find answers, how to find sharp, you know, and sharpened my skills of finding answers, and just like curiosity, but yeah, then it was just, wow, it's ridiculous. You throw a stone at a directory, and you're gonna hit an interesting name, you know, it's just, everybody's, everything is interesting.

**RON**

Yeah.

**CARL**

Just, you dig, and you get pulled off in all these tangents. And I don't know that my medium is the best, you know, what is the medium of \_\_\_\_\_? And that's what I like about photography, and Instagram and social media, like just being able to do these things pretty quick. I set out to make a documentary about Ricketson. Like, an normal person. Any minute documentary-- --it turned into a lifetime -- the Ricketson festival...it turned into an archeological dig, it turned into, you know, you know, doing plantings of names, native species \_\_\_\_\_. And it turned into this other thing, which, I guess maybe, but to go back to the crusade, a personal crusade is just how to tell the stories in an, in a way that interests me, not, not, it doesn't need to be interesting to somebody else. And there's, you know, I am, I am avant garde, and I guess I am experimental, and I don't want to just do you know, I've done...you know, dress up in something that passes for the clothing of the time period, and that doesn't interest me. But I use a lot of plastic bags or heads, you know, like blur these ions of what I have now, modern props with trying to tell stories of history. That's I guess, I wouldn't use the word crusade, but that's my, you know, what I'm after that not I'm trying to \_\_\_\_\_ it to me the first day we met, but about Thoreau. But, you know, that's what I'm kind of after is how to tell these stories in a way that interests me that is like, Verner Hertzog this idea of the ecstatic truth, he doesn't want to just make a documentary about what's happening, you know, he'll make up some stuff, or he'll add some, something that interests him because he feels like the ecstatic truth, this visionary version of the truth is more interesting. And what he's really interested in, rather than just recording facts. So that's, you know, where I'm at now. Yeah, the history stuff. Yes. But um, I know it's impossible



too and that bothers me, you know, I know the shoes are going to be raw over the, you know, if you try to do a period piece and things like that, and you make all these we lowered the bar in trying to get these things right or whatnot, and I, you know, I just throw, try to just throw that all out and use what's around and you know, but it has a symbolism you know, being--

#### **RON**

Yeah-yeah-- --I understand exactly what you mean, I would like a walking Daisy, you know, we live next to Fort Phoenix, and I sometimes stand on a fort and and I just imagine what the scene must have looked like with the Nimrod, the HMS Nimrod off, you know, within cannon shot, coming up and those, those, you know, they had those troop transports which are made shallots, shallow ups, shallow, shallow ups, shallow ups, the low draft, they're like big plywood skiffs piled on top of each other, almost like fishing style. And there's just loading it with 20-20 guys, 20 soldiers in there and then coming across the water. And of course, they're red uniforms and such. And then I look and I see the Rodman guns and it's like, well, you know, I'm not a historical painter, and really, I don't care. It's not that I don't care. The point is, is that I'm at this place. I'm imagining what history looked like unfolding. And even though the Rodman guns aren't period correct, even though the Fort, as it stands now is not correct. That's not the point. The point is, I'm here. And it's okay, for these two things to exist the exact same time. I can see the invasion of, you know, 18, in 1814, and I can see the Fort as it is, and thank God, we've got that much of it. And it doesn't really matter. Because it just sort of...it doesn't, like you said.

#### **CARL**

Yeah. And that's, you know, along those lines, I, you know, one of the things in my head is like, the idea of throwing a thought back in time you think back to that time, it bounces off that thing and comes back in between there and back again, you can use in your telling of the story, you know. And, yeah, that's kind of fueled my idea of that, we're not going to get this right. And we'll never get it. That was what always bothered me about historical reenactments or pretending I was really \_\_\_\_\_ did on a cemetery tour. And like, I don't know, and I don't want to fake it, and I'm not an actor. And now, you know, we've been through a pandemic, and we've been through, you know, before that it was 9-11. And, Rick-, you know, there's something in my eyes that Ricketson didn't have because of that. And I didn't know what it was, I'll never know what the Civil War was really like to those folks that were like, heartbroken by this was happening.

#### **RON**

Yeah.

#### **CARL**

And people that, you know, were like, you know, they had to weigh if they thought John Brown was a bad guy, or good guy, like, they really lost sleep for weeks about this stuff. And, you know, so I'm not going to put on a fake, you know, coat is too big, two sizes too big for me--

#### **RON**

Right-right--

#### **CARL**

--And Daniel Ricketson, you know, put a plastic Saltmarsh bag over my head and something and just say, "Yeah, you, you get it?"

#### **RON**

...suspension? Yeah, no, no, no, no, you're, you're absolutely correct. Because, you know, I'm thinking of Ken Burns, who did so much with so little. I mean, now, there's a camera move called the Ken Burns Move, which is basically if you've got still photography, how do you make it move? Easy, you move the camera. And, and I think there was that one poignant moment, that one moment, that universal moment, Dear Beulah, and, you know,





that violin track, I think it was a wall soundtrack. They said, America was weeping when, at that moment, that was, that's art. That's no longer a documentary. That's pure art, you know?

**CARL**

Right.

**RON**

And, and sometimes, you know, when it becomes, when art becomes, too, you know, when you're dealing with factual reality, unfortunately, it becomes the illustration. And there's a big difference between an illustration and a painting. There's a big difference between film and documentary. That's all I'm thinking.

**CARL**

Yeah, I mean, I want to have my room, you know, and, you know, how much do I give over to this history? And how much do I try to say, "Hey, I'm here, I'm involved," you know, I am a creative person. I want to give me, you know, put me in this thing too, you know, and I don't mean that totally as an ego thing, but also like, yeah, like, I'm, I'm, I'm here. I'm the one making the, I'm the one remembering it. I wanted to show my hand.

**RON**

Yeah. Exactly.

**CARL**

--me, but I want to be, you know, show the creative hand and it was really my struggle, that I'm a schmuck trying to, like, make this thing--

**RON**

Right.

**CARL**

You know, bring this thing across.

**RON**

Right.

**CARL**

And uh...

**RON**

I mean, your hand, your imprint, your signature, your soul, that, that's, you know, you get 10 people doing the same subject matter, and it's all going to be different, because you can't not put yourself into the piece. I'm so, you're going to start winding this up, but wrapping it up, but what is, what is your next thing? I mean, I don't know about you, but I'm two-three things ahead of where I am now. Because for me, that's just the way my brain works.

**CARL**

Yeah. My next thing is, I don't know, you know, try to get out back into the world is my like, you know, psychological next thing. And, you know, I want to, I'm looking forward to picking up where I left off pre-pandemic. You know, where, you're right before it hit, I had done a piece with three people, you know, actors and friends that were great. And, you know, I want to get back to doing that. I want to read, you know, I SERCA is kind of my sponsor if, I'm, you know, Chris is



**RON**

Chris is Fantastic!

**CARL**

--angel comes to my art, you know--

**RON**

Yeah, yeah--

**CARL**

--me and supports me so much that I want to get back into.

**RON**

It's Chris Duvall folks from Circa Antiques, who was pretty much a ensconced in the Masonic Building and Fairhaven. And he took over what was once Baker Printing on Court and Union Street. And from repurposed, we, you know, whatever the latest term is, for old clothes. He's gone Hollywood, literally.

**CARL**

So, yeah, yeah--places. Yeah. Fallible. That yeah, you know, not to downplay New Bedford-

**RON**

Right--

**CARL**

--but places exists in New Bedford.

**RON**

Yeah--

**CARL**

--you have Chris, you have Ira's Bookstore, we have these phenomenal places. You know, and I want to get back to that. And right, also, before I, the pandemic, I had gone to the Baptist to maybe shoot in there, and things like that, like, I want to feel safe and feel good going into places that aren't my living room to make my pieces.

**RON**

Yeah, yeah. Yeah. I mean, we are history, these are for good old days, a couple of years up the line. So, I think what it really comes down to is, you know, before the internet, now, my sister-in-law was the first black woman to be admitted into the Daughters of the American Revolution, because she traced her family history, found a patriot. And that was her, her key to unlock, you know, regardless of her color, she could get in, she had to get in, she had to be allowed. But she did it the hard way, in a way, because, you know, there was no ancestry.com You know, she had to go through Registries of Deeds, you have to go through birth records, you had to go through microfilm and all that other stuff. But you know what? I think those days were much more documented with the technology they had, which was primarily print, you know, printed the, you know, like newspapers and such, like they had to legal ads, and so on, so forth. And then all of the records - birth death, marriage records - were kept meticulously. Um...And I found that it's much easier to find people 200 years up the line than it is to find a contemporary from 50 years ago.

**CARL**

Oh, yeah. Yeah, I mean, that's something I've said, as like, for all this time I've been into this is we know more about the 19th century than we do about the 20th century, which is a soundbite but yeah, we don't think about



remembering it. We don't think about - where's the picture of Tthe Dog House neon sign? I, like I we don't have one. You know, that is amazing-- Somebody has to have one-- Yeah, exactly--

**RON**

--it's got to be in somebody's photo album. It's got to be in a shoebox in the attic somewhere.

**CARL**

And yeah, and it's not in attic yet. Still, it's still in the entertainment system--be buried on a videotape that someone took over their garden down the street or something.

**RON**

My stepfather's fishing boats, I can name, I believe I've got pretty much all of them memorized. Wooden Trawlers you know, Easter Rig Wooden Trawlers. It's amazing how few photographs - although there's a new Facebook group called "Wooden Trawlers" I think it's called "Woodn Haul Trawlers" or something like that. And basically, the, the coordinator, the author of the. of that group site, it's, I asked him about, gave him the list. He's like, "Nah, nah, nah - I just put the photographs up. You've got to dig through all of the photos"--

**CARL**

Yeah--

**RON**

I mean, it will come with the wave of when all of our newspapers get digitized. You know, I think we will be an information wave. We are far, you know, that, I think, to me, is the most important "Preservation Act" we could, we could make is to bring eyes to our New Bedford newspapers, and especially the 20th century stuff, you know. I was-that's my first, that's my go-to, the Fairhaven Star-- (Laughing) exactly. But again, there's an industry that, you know, this was, this was the industry that, you know, we talked about whaling, we talked about textiles, fishing. And I guess, the apparel business were kind of like side by side because they were run by foreign people by immigrants primarily, and immigrants who made out quite well in those businesses. But even the names of all these mills, the ones, the places that my mother's a floor lady, she, she worked making samples for some of the finest design houses in New York before she returned back to the city. Who knows about D&J Frocks? Who knows about Eastern Sportswear? Who knows about, where, where's this information? You know? Yeah.

**CARL**

--will talk about something in New Bedford, you know?

**RON**

(Laughing) Well, you know, it's, what's really, you're talking about newspapers in such a \_\_\_\_\_ advertising. Some of the newspapers when you go through the microfilm from the 70s and 80s...I've seen my ads go by one of the ads that I created for clients, you know, which is kind of bizarre.

**CARL**

Yeah.

**RON**

And, and then that brings me to Chris ,got me in contact with, with Heidi Lewis, whose mom, Vivian Lewis, was a graphic artist. She worked for about 10 years for Jordan Marsh. And then she was the art director for the Bradley's department stores, which are more well known towards Fall River, west of us rather than then in this area. I don't think there were any Bradley's in this area. And unfortunately, Mrs. Lewis, is in the early stages of dementia. But there were so many people - the only person she remembered was her neighbor, Milt Healy, who lived across the street. But there were so many other graphic artists. Some of them were also artists, like Frank





Rapoza, was one of my old art instructors in high school. And there were several others, but there were these people who created the cuts for those newspapers. Milt Healy, for example, with telling me that a an average day at where he worked would be a guy would come in with a box of lady shoes and put it next to his drawing table and he had to hand render each one of those shoes with pen and ink for the newspaper--

**CARL**

Right!

**RON**

And I saw some of Vivian's, I think I, I messaged you about. I saw some of Vivian's illustrations. Oh my god--

**CARL**

Yeah-

**RON**

--they are art!

**CARL**

Right. Yeah.

**RON**

You know...they're no different than a painting. I mean, some of them are exquisite. I mean, the woman with a pillbox hat and the little veils? I mean, they're just gorgeous, gorgeous, gorgeous. But what is it? You know, "you don't know what you got till it's gone?" Apparently, so put up a parking lot.

**CARL** Right. Yeah. But, you know, history keeps moving on becoming, like, you know, keeps creeping up on us. And, you know, remembering that era and preserving what we can, you know, when they uncovered the patent \_\_\_\_\_ signs, like, hopefully, they just got covered again and didn't get thrown away. But Pat McKenna, that whole era of, you know, ends up apparell places. That's what New Bedford was to so many people--

**RON**

--locally owned businesses, the money stayed here. And that's a whole nother show, which I always tell people. This is once you're on the show, that's it. Okay, that's it. You're welcome to come back anytime. Some people are just one page. Some people are a chapter. Some people are an entire volume, so people are complete set. Okay, I consider you the complete set. I'm gonna start wrapping this up, but I'm gonna ask you the final question. I

always call them the "Barbara Walters questions." How would you like to be remembered , Carl? Or let me let me do a little more, more 50s- 60s: "Carl Simmons, how would you like to be remembered in the future?"

**CARL**

Yeah, I mean, older you know you want to be we look at a lot of these heroes. And you know nowadays we can learn a lot more about them. And it's pretty disheartening a lot of times, but I do just, I want to be a good dad, to my, my daughter, and you know, a good husband to my wife and a good, you know, brother to my siblings, you know, that's gonna be a good person still, I think comes first and then I'd like to be known as an artist who did his own thing.

**RON**

And someday you may be, and I know that feeling. Someday, you may be a person that is referenced, "According to Carl Simmons" (Laughing.)



**CARL**

Yeah, I think about that nerd, that me 100 years from now, you know, I dig deep into things. So, you know, is that going to happen? "What's up with this guy's weird, way-off portrait of Joseph Russel? you know, this doesn't make any sense."

**RON**

Yeah.

**CARL** :11:00

And, you know, I think it will make someone laugh in the future and maybe be an inspiration. You know, that is what, to me the art, it's an inspiration, we'll you know, just keep it, you know, keep inspiring others to push it or yeah, just to keep, keep painting--

**RON**

--keep treading those wheels--

**CARL**

Yeah.

**RON**

Well, Carl, thank you so much. I'm gonna take it out. Hold on. This is Ron Fortier again with our guest. Now I'm gonna gush. I have been trying to get Carl on forever and a day, we've actually threatened Carl's friends-Chris Duvall, Michael \_\_\_\_\_ - we threatened to actually go to his house of physically kidnap him (laughing) in order to do this, so I really, really thank him for being here. So we end another episode of the Infocus Podcast brought to you by The Artists Index, which is graciously supported by Heavenly Spirits Imports, and supported also in collaboration with the Mass Cultural Council and the New Bedford Whaling Museum's Common Ground Project and let's not forget our co founder Jeff Wattons, Spectrum Marketing Group that the crazy idea that I had, Jeff said, "Dammit, let's do it." And that's it's been a while, so it's been great. Carl, thanks so much, folks. See you next time. Bye-bye.