

Roy Clark

A big “Saa-lute” to the man best known for hosting the long-running variety show *Hee Haw*.

Chapter 1 – 1:19

Introduction

Announcer: The son of two amateur musicians, Roy Clark began playing banjo, guitar and mandolin at an early age. By the time he was 14, he was playing guitar behind his father at local dances. Within a few years, he had won two national banjo championships with his second win earning him an appearance at the Grand Ole Opry. In the 1970s, Roy symbolized country music in the U.S. and abroad, guest hosting for Johnny Carson on The Tonight Show and performing for packed houses on a tour in the Soviet Union that sold out all 18 concerts. He used his talent to bring country music into homes around the world. As one of the hosts of TV's *Hee Haw* for more than 20 years, he picked and sang and offered country corn to 30 million people weekly. Among his many vocal hits are *Yesterday When I Was Young* and *Thank God and Greyhound*. Instrumentally, he has won awards for both guitar and banjo. He became an Oklahoman in 1974. Four years later an elementary school in the Union School District in Tulsa was named in his honor. Roy Clark was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 2009. Listen now to Roy tell his story, thanks to the generous support of our sponsors who believe in preserving Oklahoma's legacy one voice at a time on VoicesofOklahoma.com.

Chapter 2 – 9:35

Roy Discovers Guitar

John Erling: My name is John Erling and today's date is August 15th, 2011. Roy, state your full name please, your date of birth and your present age.

Roy Clark: Roy Linwood Clark. April 15th, 1933. I am 78.

JE: Where are we recording this interview?

RC: We are here in my office in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

JE: Where were you born?

RC: I was born in a little town in Virginia called Meherrin.

JE: What was your mother's maiden name and where she grew up?

RC: Oliver is her maiden name and she grew up in West Virginia and northern Ohio, on the line between the two states.

JE: Tell us about her. What kind of a person was she? Was she a musical person?

RC: I never knew that my mother played piano until I was in my early teens. I told her that I didn't know that she played the piano and she replied, "We didn't have one." This was back when salesmen traveled door to door to sell piano lessons to young ladies. My mother was one of those ladies that learned how to play piano that way.

JE: Was she encouraging to you when you showed an interest in music?

RC: Her encouragement was only that of a typical mother. My musical influence came from my dad, but because she played piano I guess you could say I have music on both sides of my family.

JE: What was your father's name?

RC: Hester Linwood Clark.

JE: Tell us where he was born and where he grew up.

RC: My dad was also born in Meherrin, Virginia. He was involved in music very early. I heard music at the same time I heard human voices. It was always there. I was going to say from the time I was in a crib, but we couldn't afford a crib, but as a baby lying in bed I heard music. It always struck me as odd that hearing music from a very early age that I was relatively old before I decided that I wanted to learn to play.

JE: What did he do for a living?

RC: My dad did everything it took to raise a family of five. I am the oldest of five children. My dad worked for the sawmill and he worked for the B&O Railroad, which took us to New York where I grew up several years. My younger brother was born on Staten Island. My dad took us to New York because of his job. I've often said that if I had the get up and go or the gumption that my dad had, I'd have been a big star years and years ago.

JE: Did your father sing?

RC: He didn't sing. To my knowledge he never had the desire to be a professional musician. He played because he loved it. He was one of those people that sat on the front porch of the old home place. He had two brothers that played and they would get together in the evenings in the summertime. When the other kids were out chasing lightning bugs and putting them in a jar, I would be sitting there looking at my dad and his two brothers play music. I was smitten very early.

JE: What instruments did they play?

RC: My dad played a tenor banjo, as opposed to a five-string banjo, which is very popular and has been for the last 30 or 40 years. He also played the guitar and mandolin. My Uncle Paul played the fiddle and my Uncle Dudley played the mandolin. They played mostly at square dances or round dances as they called them then.

JE: Tell us about your brothers and sisters.

RC: I am the oldest of five children. The second child was my sister Jean, then the third was my brother Dick, then my brother Dwight and then the baby of our clan is Susan.

JE: Were any of your siblings musical?

RC: My brother Dick had the ability. He played the mandolin a little bit, but he wasn't really that interested. He had other things that he would rather do. I know from listening to him that he did have the ability, he just didn't pursue it. A salesman came by one time and was selling lessons on how to play the accordion. My dad signed up my sister Jean for lessons in learning how to play the accordion. Jean got this little bitty accordion. She was starting off with learning the fundamentals. One day, when it was sitting there, I picked it up and starting playing the Tennessee Waltz on it. It broke her heart and she never touched it again. (Chuckle) I just played it by ear and she was learning to play it by reading music.

JE: She couldn't play it by ear?

RC: No, she was encouraged not to play by ear so she could learn the proper way.

JE: Did you ever learn to play by reading music?

RC: No, and I wished I would have.

JE: So your earliest memories would have been of watching your uncle and your father on the porch playing music?

RC: Yes, very much so.

JE: Do you remember the first school you attended?

RC: Yes, I do. It's a volunteer fire department now, but it was a school until 1954.

JE: How old were you when you began to pick out a tune on a guitar?

RC: Every time I think back on the age that I was when I wanted to learn to play, it was relatively late for me for having been raised around it. I was about 11. We lived in a government housing project in Washington, D.C. There were four units on each side and the doors were so close they were almost shared. I would be picking on my dad's banjo, which was very coarse sounding. Our neighbor heard me picking on this banjo and he said, "Have you ever played guitar?" I said, "No, I've never even held one." So he went in to his house and came back out with his guitar and let me hold it. I strummed down across those strings and that soft sound of the guitar flipped on a light switch in me that was loud and consistent. I had to learn to play. That was probably mid-season some time in June or July—about the time that we would get a Sears & Roebuck catalog. We would write our

names down next to what we wanted for Christmas. My choice that year was a guitar. I was about 11 or 12 years old. I came down Christmas morning and there was the guitar and a book that came with it called *Smith's 300 Chords for Guitar and How to Use Them*. I took it up to my bedroom and I sat down and started playing on it. I played it until my fingers actually bled. I found out that if you dipped your fingers in ice water, it made it so that you could really stand the pain for a while. Two weeks after I got that guitar, I was playing a square dance with my dad. I would sit back in the back so when I made mistakes it wasn't really noticed. I've often thought there's no one who got the schooling I got—because it was on the job training. I could learn different chords and I could use them playing at a square dances on the weekends with my dad. The more experience I got, the closer to the edge of the stage I would get. One evening, I noticed they had moved my seat up right to the very front and I knew I had made it.

JE: At 11 or 12 years old?

RC: Yes.

Chapter 3 – 7:11

Square Dances

John Erling: Did you bring any of that music to school? Did you play in school?

Roy Clark: I did, but I was not encouraged. We had a music department and I took music. I will never forget the teacher describing the different instruments to the class. She put them in different categories. One being brass, reeds, strings—she was naming cello and violin... one of my classmates said, “guitar?” and she said, “No, a guitar is not a stringed instrument, it's a threaded instrument. A pure stringed instrument is like a violin, cello or base.” That really hurt me. It was like she was just saying don't talk about that because it's not a legitimate instrument. To this day, it still bothers me.

JE: Do you think the guitar was associated with country music and she was putting it down for that reason?

RC: That could have had something to do with it, although it wasn't obvious at that time. She wanted to talk about the other instruments but she did not want to talk about the guitar. When she started putting down my guitar that really bothered me.

JE: However, you continued to play with your father at square dances?

RC: Yes, and on local radio programs and local TV. Back then every sizable town had a live radio show. They had more live airtime than they had talent to fill it. So it wasn't too

hard to get on radio or television when it came upon the scene. I grew up in television. To this day when I look at a television camera, I don't see a mechanical device—I see a person. I performed that person, which is really a camera. I've always felt very comfortable with television shows, so when television shows started to need talent—I fit right in. Besides everyone in our square dance group was older. None at that time was noted to be singers are performers. So when it came time, whomever putting shows together thought we should have somebody sing a song and they asked me. It scared me to death.

JE: This was in the Washington, D.C. area and you attended high school there in D.C.?

RC: Yes. I found out that there was another boy at my school that played guitar. So one thing led to another and one day we had what we called Sadie Hawkins Day. It's where the girls pick out the guys that they went to dance with at the school dance. He and I brought our guitars and played at the dance and we were the heroes. That was the beginning of a guitar really helping me be accepted into society.

JE: That was your favorite instrument at that point in your life?

RC: Yes, because it was more versatile.

JE: The first song that you are performed on TV, do you remember what that was?

RC: (Laughter) Yes I do. Now keep in mind, I was about 15 years old. I played this song because it was so popular at the time. The song was called *One Has My Name (The Other Has My Heart)*. It was a song about infidelity. Later, I'm thinking what would a 15-year-old know about one guy that leaves his wife for another woman? It's always stayed in my mind.

JE: Why did you pick that song to perform on television?

RC: Because it was the No.1 song and it was so popular—that's why I played it. I wanted to do a song that was going to be accepted. Everybody liked it and everybody knew it and I fit right in.

JE: You were on television playing for square dances?

RC: Yes.

JE: Then you started playing in bars and other venues just about every night?

RC: When I was 16 years old, everything just sort of blossomed. I started playing Saturday night square dances. Then I started playing Friday and Saturday night square dances. Then it was Thursday, Friday and Saturday. My dad was upset that my grades in school were suffering because of my playing. I was sleeping on my school desk the next morning after I was out playing a square dance the night before.

JE: How late were you staying out?

RC: I was staying out until 11pm or Midnight. In fact, when I was 16 years old, I evidently was doing whatever it was enough people enjoyed, that I was offered all of these jobs. I was just a kid at 16 years old. I had to go and get a permit so I could play in bars, but I couldn't

stay in the bar. We would do a set and when we took a break, I would have to go outside and wait until it was time to play another set. I think the minimum age to play in a bar at that time was 16 years old. I remember going down to fill out these forms. I'm sure my dad had to sign them to show his consent. I remember the age of 16 being a pivotal point in my life because I went from playing just square dances to nightclubs. Nightclubs, radio and television didn't leave a whole lot of room for anything else.

JE: What about school? Did you continue on?

RC: No, and it always bothered me that I didn't. I remember I would miss a couple of days because I was tired. It was embarrassing that I wouldn't be in class. It got to the point that my classmates, a lot of them, didn't know who I was because I didn't show up that often. I remember the day I was walking from the bus stop to the school. I got halfway to the school and I said to myself "No, I don't want to do this. I want to play music." I turned around and went back home.

JE: So how did that go over with your parents?

RC: They didn't like it at all. I was torn between the two, because I came from a very, very close family. I didn't want to do anything that would hurt them. But they understood and they laid down some rules. I wasn't allowed to stay out all night. I remember that. I still had to live under the same roof.

Chapter 4 – 5:14

Grandpa Jones

John Erling: About that time, what music star was on the scene that you looked up to?

Roy Clark: Probably the one that made the biggest impression was Hank Williams. He was at the top of his career. At that point I didn't know about records, when I listened to music I heard what was on the radio and that was really what influenced me.

JE: So we are talking about the years 1947, 1948 and 1949?

RC: Exactly.

JE: Did you play on a show with Hank Williams as a young boy?

RC: Yes. He came to a show in Baltimore, Maryland at The Hippodrome Theatre, which was one of those beautiful, old ornate theaters with velvet ropes. It would take your breath away to see the beauty of these old theaters. This was back when they used to do a live show in the theater and then also show movies. They showed movies about three times a day and then in between movies they did a live stage show. Hank Williams was the star

of the stage show. We opened the show with a square dance. Then I would go sit in one of those beautiful boxes in the theater and I would watch every show. We did like three shows a day. I never missed a lick. I knew everything that everyone did. I could recite it. I was just in awe of Hank Williams. He was amazing. Elvis Presley had the same thing—it goes beyond talent. It's something that comes from inside. That's always amazed me when I think about Hank Williams. All he did was stand there and sing, but what came from within was evident in every show.

JE: Charisma I guess you would call it?

RC: Yes, charisma.

JE: We know Grandpa Jones from *Hee Haw*, but you knew Grandpa Jones back then didn't you?

RC: I did. I was playing mostly square dances. I had broadened out a little bit and was singing. In fact, I was copying Hank Snow because he was very popular at the time. He had a tune called *Movin' On* that sold millions of records. Grandpa Jones came through and needed a guitar player. They suggested that he gave me a lesson. I met him at the radio station and played for him and he liked what he heard. I rode with and did these little three or four-day mini tours and that was my introduction to working with a genuine star.

JE: What was his real name?

RC: Lewis Marshall Jones.

JE: He was a relatively young man then, but hadn't he started his grandpa act back then even as a young man?

RC: That was something that I found out later that was very prevalent in country music. They did a radio show out of Louisville, Kentucky. People kept writing into the show and asking them to let the old man sing one. Finally it dawned on them that the old man they were talking about was Lewis Marshall Jones, so he started called himself Grandpa. He would paste on his mustache and gray his hair. He finally said later that he grew into his part. (Chuckle) He didn't have to put the gray in his hair because it was there. He was the first star that I worked with. He made such a lasting impression on me.

JE: I want to reiterate how young you were, how talented you were with this God-given gift from birth. Adults must have been impressed with your talents and you must have received a lot of adulation because you were so young playing this music.

RC: You know, it never dawned on me. I was doing it because it made me feel good. The fact that people applauded and all this praise they were heaping on me didn't move me a bit—it was the music. I would have been playing if no one listened.

JE: So you didn't let it go to your head. You didn't think of yourself as a star or get cocky about it, you were just doing what you liked to do.

RC: Yeah. One thing that's a blessing to me is that I never looked at anyone with envy. If I was working and playing with someone and they got a standing ovation, part of that standing ovation was mine, that I had good taste and would be with someone that the people loved. It made me feel good. I didn't sit there and think that if it wasn't for him I would be getting a lot more attention.

Chapter 5 – 2:47

Baseball

John Erling: Music was not your only interest, because you also liked to play baseball.

Roy Clark: I was consumed with the baseball.

JE: So if you are consumed with baseball and consumed with music, there's not time for much anything else?

RC: Right.

JE: Tell us about baseball.

RC: It came naturally to me. I didn't know until a couple of years later, that that influence came from my dad. My dad would have loved to have been a baseball player. In fact, he said one time to someone, "I have three boys. I was always hoping that at least one of them would have gone into baseball." I overheard him say that, and I thought the same thing. I wished that I had found a career in baseball. I was a good baseball player.

JE: What position?

RC: I played in the outfield. I thought I was a pitcher one time, but they proved that I wasn't a very good one, so they moved me to the outfield. A baseball scout had come to watch a pitcher named Boots Panella, and saw me play just by chance. I had a very good day that day. I had a couple of home runs. He wrote down his name on a piece of paper and how to get in touch with him. He said that if I could go down to Florida they would give me a look. If I made it, they would pick up the expenses of my trip—if I didn't make it, I was on my own. I couldn't take the chance, so I never went down to Florida and I never pursued it. But because of money I just got aced out.

JE: Did you ever wonder about that decision?

RC: Yes, I've wondered about that many times and still do to a degree. I'm one of those people that's so consumed with baseball that if I see a bunch of young kids playing sandlot ball and if I don't get in the way, I will pull off the side of the road and sit and watch them play. That's how much it means to me. But, I outgrew it. There was no place for me to play. I

played high school ball and then sandlot ball, but then sooner or later you outgrow it, and my guitar was always there.

JE: If you had a guitar in the left hand in a baseball in the right hand, and you could pursue either one as a career, which one would you pick?

RC: I would take both of them. (Laughter)

Chapter 6 – 2:50

Washington, D.C.

John Erling: You were still living at home at 16?

Roy Clark: Yes.

JE: Was that comfortable for you or did you want to leave or did you not think about living at home?

RC: I never thought about it on my own. Almost everything that I did was influenced by someone else a couple of years older. Two friends of mine, who were tobacco farmers, down in Virginia where I was born, came to Washington. A crop had come in and they had all this money and they wanted to start playing music. They knew compared to them that I was pretty successful. They just drove up one day and said, “We’re here to play. We need someplace to play.” I didn’t know how to rent an apartment, but they did. They decided that we would rent this apartment and all split the cost. So I had to go tell my mother and dad that I was moving out of their house and into this apartment. I guess by then they had read into what I was doing and knew that someday it had to come to this. They didn’t want me to, but they didn’t want me not to—because they saw that I was playing more and more and doing more. That was called being a success then, when you were on radio and TV. I was involved in every radio and television program in Washington, D.C. I just happened to fall into that bracket where there was a need. There was a need for someone young to sing and play.

JE: You were 16 going on 17?

RC: Yes. There was a lot of experience in that move from 16 to 17.

JE: Beyond just moving out of your house?

RC: Age wise, 16 is one thing—but 17 is like you made that giant step to adulthood.

JE: When you were 17, you made a major adult step—tell us about that.

RC: When I won the banjo contest in Warrington, Virginia. The prize was a cash prize and a trip to the Grand Ole Opry. This is a part too that has always made me feel a little odd.

I won the banjo contest. I won \$500. I immediately went to the music store and bought a guitar for myself. I thought that that wasn't a nice thing to do, to take the money that I had won playing banjo and to go purchase a guitar. Then I went to Nashville and spent about a year there playing shows with the Grand Ole Opry. They had all of these little road shows that went out and played. In fact, I would play with Grandpa Jones, with String Bean and some of the other talent during the week. On the weekends we would join up with one of the big stars.

Chapter 7 – 4:53

Comedy

John Erling: We know country music today and what it has become since the 1950s, but it wasn't all that big at the time was it?

Roy Clark: No, it wasn't. The country music of today and the country music that was played when I was growing up are totally two different worlds. We would make little jokes on the side. When you hear the No. 1 country song today, would Roy Acuff really think that that was welcome on the Grand Ole Opry? I use his name because he was very possessive of everyone messing with his country music back then.

JE: So you were playing country music and maybe some pop music I suppose and a variety of things?

RC: We were doing whatever the audience requested. There was no set number of tunes that we would do. Really, most of our money came from our kitty, where they would put in money and request a certain song. That's where we made our money. I was making \$100 a week. I couldn't live on that, but once you added what we made from song requests, I could. I was thinking the other day that one of the most requested tunes was *Sentimental Journey*. I got to thinking about why it was *Sentimental Journey*. A lot of the people that came into nightclubs were lonesome—that's why they were there was to feel some lively atmosphere or something. I never thought about that for years. Not that long ago, I started thinking about doing some things in our current show that we do, and that song just popped up out of the blue, because I must have played it a few thousand times.

JE: Being in those bars, you had a ringside seat to some bar fights I would imagine?

RC: (Laughter.) I shied away from them—but I saw some pretty bad ones. My theory was, I may not be the prettiest thing that you look at, but I don't want my facial features changed any

more than they are already. We did play some places where you had to pay your way in and fight your way out.

JE: While you were so talented with the instruments, you are also able to add a comedic side. Somewhere along the line that side of you had to start coming out. Do you remember why you started using it? Was it a defense mechanism? Why did you start being funny?

RC: Yes, exactly it was a defense mechanism. I had to be the first one to laugh at me. I didn't want to play something serious and have someone in the audience laugh. So I would play something serious and then I would make a wisecrack. One night, I played something and got a standing ovation. This guy came up to me. He'd been in the club several times before because I had seen him. He introduced himself to me and said how much he enjoyed my playing. He said, "You know, you play well enough that you don't have to try to be funny." It got me to thinking really? It struck a chord in me that I never thought of—except I didn't have the confidence. To this day, I'm not overburdened with confidence. I've had a successful career, but you are only as good as your next show.

JE: Do you think you worked maybe even harder at it because you didn't have self-confidence? I once heard an interview with Tony Bennett. He talked about that very same thing. He was asked what makes you so good? And he was saying, "I'm afraid I'm going to fail and I have this lack of confidence." That drove him on to greatness and apparently drove you on to greatness as well.

RC: You know, it's funny that of all the people you could compare me to, you mention Tony Bennett. He and I have not been around each other all that much. The times that we have been around each other, back when they had the jukebox convention where all of the jukebox operators would convene, we spent some time there. The last time I saw him was at the White House, but there was a connection between the two of us. As you well know, he does offer a warm nice feeling, just being in his presence.

JE: Yes. This point about you being funny and wanting somebody to laugh at your music playing... So you thought, all right, I'll be funny and if you're going to laugh at me, it'll look like you're laughing at my comedy and not my music. You didn't really have to do that, but because of the way your self-confidence was, you did it.

RC: Right. The self-confidence is what I did not have. To this day, I am not overburdened with it, but there is also a part of me that says you'd better be confident.

Chapter 8 – 4:14**Jimmy Dean – Elvis**

John Erling: Jimmy Dean though was a name we know—tell us how you came to be with him.

Roy Clark: I first met Jimmy in 1949. He was in the Air Force stationed at Boling Field in Washington, D.C. We both had bands playing. In fact, he was playing and he should not have been—because he was still in the service. He had a group and I had a group and we sort of met just by chance and one thing led to another. When he started growing in his career, I was still just playing. I was not thinking about anything that may happen next week or a year from now. But from the very first time I met and knew Jimmy, he was not going to be playing in clubs long. He had a local radio show and was getting ready to start a television show. He said, “Why don’t you come to work for me?” I said, “You’re not doing any more than I’m doing. I’ve got a group and it’s very good and you have a group.” He said, “I have a radio show.” I said, “Okay.” So this went on and he called me one day at a soft spot in my life. He said, “Why don’t you go to work for me? We are getting ready to start in 2 weeks on a local television show.” I said, “Well, how much would you pay me if I was to decide to join forces?” He said, “\$120.” I said, “I’m making more than that with my group.” He said let me call you back. He made his call and he called me back and he said, “How about \$150?” I said, “You have a guitar player.” So we started together in about 1954. He was the first one that knew where he was going. Everyone else that I had been around, we’d play local television and local radio and all the nightclubs in town and we were just doing them over and over. But with Jimmy, the more he did, the more he wanted to do.

JE: He had a business mind to in addition to being a musician?

RC: Yes. We would all hang out and have a couple of drinks after we would do a show in a nightclub. Jimmy may stay for a drink or maybe not. He liked to go home so he could get up early in the morning and contact the people he had met that previous day. While we were out the next day nursing a headache, he was up taking care of business.

JE: So it’s not surprising then that he got so involved with Jimmy Dean sausages and the business side of things.

RC: No, not a bit. In fact, the first success was his recording of *Big Bad John*—it sold millions of records. Herbie Jones used to joke, he said we knew that if you ever had a million-selling record that you would have to talk it. (Laughter) *Big Bad John* as we all know is more of a recitation.

JE: I suppose as you look back at Jimmy Dean there are two things that you would say: *Big Bad John* and Jimmy Dean sausages.

RC: Right, that was it.

JE: Andy Griffith came into your life. There was a play called *No Time for Sergeants*.

RC: That's when I was with Jimmy Dean. We were playing at the National Guard Armory in Washington, D.C. I was with Jimmy and we were backing the different acts on the show. It was like an all-day thing where people would come out. All of the different manufacturers were displaying their latest appliances. Andy was on the show. He said that he had just read a part for a play called *No Time for Sergeants*. He said, "If I was to get it, it would make me a big star, but every actor in the world is after this part, so the chances that I would get it are very slim." We parted ways. He went to New York and read for the part. He called Jimmy and screamed into the phone, "I got it!" That was my introduction to Andy Griffith.

Chapter 9 – 8:34

Dean Fires Clark

John Erling: Washington, D.C. was good to you in other ways because you met a young lady there. Tell us about her.

Roy Clark: Barbara Clark. I met her right after I met Jimmy Dean. We were playing a higher caliber of nightclubs, some pretty nice places. The power of television is so incredible. We had started our local television show, *The Jimmy Dean Show*. We played the TV show on Monday and Tuesday nights at 7pm. Then after the show on Tuesday nights we would play at a supper club. We got within a few blocks of the supper club and there was a roadblock. We thought there had been an accident. We edged our way closer and noticed they were all going into the parking lot of the supper club. The power of television for two nights was so incredible. We couldn't believe it. We looked around and all of those people were there because of us. The following week, we were established on television because we played it five nights a week. The second Tuesday we played, I looked out into the audience and there was this very lovely young lady sitting with another couple. I have always been very shy, especially with girls. That's where my guitar helped a lot. So I started looking at her and making cute little faces. I asked her to dance. I had on some very pointed toe cowboy boots. She had on nylon hose. When I got through dancing with her, her hose were dragging behind us on the dance floor. To this day she teases me about that. I said, "Why did you come out to see us?" She says, "There wasn't a whole lot to do. We decided to go see the hillbillies." I said, "I wish you would have called us country artists, but hillbillies got the job done." She had come out to see our show and we met and a little bit went a long way.

JE: Today, you have been married how long?

RC: It will soon be 54 years.

JE: Do you have children?

RC: Yes, I had been married previously and so had Barbara. We both had children from our first marriage.

JE: You were 17 when you were first married?

RC: Yes. I knew it was wrong when I got married the first time to begin with. It was a marriage that was really made by our friends. Every time we were all together they would say, "Well, when are you two going to get married?" The next thing you know I am standing in front of a preacher wondering why I am standing there. All of my friends were grinning that they got the job done—they got us married. It was my fault. I was still a child and I wasn't ready for it.

JE: Did any of your children pick up on music?

RC: My oldest son picked it up a little later in life. He always had the ability, but he is using it now. He's got a little group together and they are doing some pretty successful things like opening for different groups at the Wheeling Jamboree in West Virginia, which is a good step up.

JE: His name is also Roy Clark?

RC: I made a mistake. I named him after me. His whole life he's been saying, "I am not the Roy Clark that you see on television." I realized that it's not the best thing to do, to name a son after yourself. Actually, what I intended it to be was really Roy Clark II, but it became for all identifying purposes Roy Clark, Junior. I think he's gotten over it now, but it was a rough life for him. He would go to buy something on credit in the opening line was, "Your father has got all this money—you don't need a credit check." That used to really, really upset him.

JE: So is he playing today by the name Roy Clark?

RC: Yes.

JE: He would be in his 50s?

RC: Yes, he's in at least his mid-50s now.

JE: When you were in Washington, D.C. Harry Truman would've been in the White House did you ever go see him or visit the White House?

RC: I didn't make it then, although the group that I played with and my dad went to the White House and taught Margaret how to square dance. I don't know if it was because of my age or the number of people that got to go in, but I didn't get to teach Margaret to square dance. My dad did though and it made the newspapers.

JE: Margaret was Harry Truman's daughter?

RC: Yes. She was a singer. I know she was very successful at least in her father's eyes. He got into a big "to do" with the newspaper who didn't think too highly of her singing ability. President Truman jumped in and took offense and said, "You can pick on me, but you don't pick on my daughter."

JE: Somewhere in your life comes Wanda Jackson.

RC: Yes. After Jimmy Dean fired me for being tardy—that's back when I really had not grown up yet. If someone said, "I want you here at 8 o'clock." I figured if I was there at 8:10am that it was close enough. Anything after 10 minutes I would consider late. But Jimmy Dean, when he said 8 o'clock he meant 8 o'clock. So he fired me. He went on to New York and got into sausage, but he and I have never had a cross word. When he fired me, about a week later, I saw him. He put his arm around my neck and he said, "Roy, you are going to be a big star one of these days, but right now I can't afford you." Of all the people in my life, the one person who did the most for me was Jimmy Dean. We never had a cross word. He used me on *The Tonight Show*. I went back to playing clubs in Washington and got another band together. Then Wanda Jackson came in because she was doing a concert. Some mutual friends brought her out to where I was playing. We got to know each other. She said she was getting ready to open in Las Vegas and needed to form a band. She needed someone to front the band. She liked what I did on stage. One thing led to another and I said, "Okay, we'll go to Las Vegas."

JE: Where did you play in Las Vegas?

RC: We played at the Golden Nugget. They started in the morning about 11 o'clock and played until 7 o'clock the next morning. They had Bob Wills, Hank Thompson, Hank Penny—every country act there played at the Golden Nugget. First of all, the Golden Nugget was one of the very few casinos that played country music.

JE: You also met Jim Halsey?

RC: Yes. Jim Halsey was one of the managers of the Jacksons. When I started playing with Wanda, we did a series of concerts. She had put this band together—I didn't know the rest of them. So we played a couple of weeks working our way into Las Vegas—more or less to tighten the band up. That's when I met Jim Halsey, who was Wanda's manager.

JE: And he became your manager for many, many years and the two of you became good friends and you are so close to this day?

RC: Yes, he did and yes we are.

Chapter 10 – 6:34

Tonight Show

John Erling: Around 1960 or 1961 you recorded an instrumental album?

Roy Clark: Wanda Jackson was on Capitol Records. We went to Nashville and recorded an

album called *There's a Party Going On*. It was very unusual at the time for a label to let the artist being recorded use their road band on an album. They knew that playing in a studio and playing on the road are two different talents. But they let Wanda use her road band, which included me. Ken Nelson was the A&R man at Capitol Records. I was doing some crazy things and Wanda, as we all know, was recently inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. She was playing rockabilly music at the time. I adapted myself to fit with what she was doing. I did a thing with what they call a slide guitar, but I did it using a plastic bottle—getting a real funky sound. Everybody was raving about this unknown guitar player playing with Wanda. So Ken Nelson came to me and said, “How would you like to record with Capitol Records?” I said, “I would love it.” He said, “I will have to sign you as an instrumentalist because I have so many vocalists on the label already that we are needing to find hit records for. If I go back and tell them I just signed another singer, it will cost me my job. I know you want to sing, so we will work you into the lineup.”

JE: In this time period, Jack Parr was hosting *The Tonight Show* on NBC. He was getting ready to leave the show and Johnny Carson had been tabbed to be the next host. Here's where Jimmy Dean comes into your life again because they had guest hosts in between Jack and Johnny, and Jimmy Dean was one of those guest hosts.

RC: I think the reason they did that was to break the image. Jack Parr was so strong, to run in an unknown like Johnny Carson—although he had a daily television show at the time, it was nothing that compared to *The Tonight Show*. So they got different hosts in to break that image. One of the hosts they got was Jimmy Dean. I was playing at a club in Arizona. I got a phone call on a Wednesday night because it took Jimmy that long to track me down. He said, “I want you to come to New York and be on *The Tonight Show*. I'm hosting it. The last show is this Friday night. I know you are in Arizona, but I've been trying to track you down for a week. Can you get here?” I said, “I'll give it a try.” So I chartered a little, single-engine airplane from Safford, Arizona to Tucson, then to Phoenix, then to Chicago and to New York City and took a cab to NBC. When I got there, I got to see Jimmy about an hour before we taped the show. He asked me what I was scheduled to play. I said, “I am supposed to play two tunes, and maybe a third one with you.” He said, “I'll tell you what... we'll do the two tunes and if that doesn't get it, we'll play two more and if that doesn't get it, we'll do whatever it takes.” People always think that we didn't get along because he fired me. We never had a cross word, I just wasn't up to his standards. But he had me on *The Tonight Show*, which was a fastball right down the middle.

JE: Was that a nervous time for you because Jack Parr had a big following? *The Tonight Show* was already established and it was huge hit.

RC: Yes, but I had nothing to lose. I didn't have a career of that magnitude, so I really wasn't concerned about flunking. I showed up and just did what I had been doing all along. I

didn't change anything. I played *The Great Pretender* and I did a guitar instrumental that I don't recall. Then Jimmy and I played a song together and I was tall hog at the trough.

JE: You talked earlier about the power of television and that was locally—this was nationwide. So at your next show, people must have just absolutely mobbed you?

RC: I went back to the club in Safford, Arizona called The Hotel Buena Vista where I had been playing when Jimmy called me. As soon as the taping was over I had to jump in a cab and go back to Arizona. You talk about a logjam. They picked me up at the airport and told me I was in trouble because they didn't know if I was going to be able to get to the little bitty hotel and the little bitty show room. It took us two hours to go a half a mile. People came from everywhere. We had to do three shows a night. At that time, that was the biggest thing that had ever happened in my life. I had a couple instrumental records that were fairly successful, but nothing to compare with national television, where they know your face and your name and they know what you do.

JE: And then your personality—I would imagine with Jimmy that the two of you bantered obviously. He was a great talker and so were you. You were more than just a great musician, you were a great personality.

RC: And we knew each other in depth. We knew each other's secrets and things we didn't necessarily want the public to know, we knew about each other.

JE: So on television, you were looking at each other thinking I know what you know...(chuckle)

RC: Yes, with a little smirk.

Chapter 11 – 4:29

First Hit Song

John Erling: But you hadn't really had a hit yet. Soon a song comes along that remained on the charts for about 26 weeks in spring of 1962.

Roy Clark: *The Tips of My Fingers*, that happened through a third-party as far as the record company is concerned. I had signed on as an instrumentalist and I got quite a bit of airplay. So people in the business were beginning to know Roy Clark. Joe Allison went to Ken Nelson the A&R man at Capitol Records and said, "Roy wants to sing." Joe really wanted me to sing, but he put it off on me saying that I wanted to sing. I was not in the position to make any demands, but he got permission for me to do a vocal session. Joe said, "I've got this idea for a tune that had already been recorded by the guy that wrote it, Bill Anderson. But I had an idea for a different approach, which was he hired every available musician in

California—every single one. (Chuckle) We had a string section that looked like the Boston Pops. We had a horn section and 12 singers. Joe got permission from Ken, but Ken didn't know what Joe planned to do. So the day was going to come for us to record. Hank Levine did the arrangement under Joe's direction. Hank said to him, "I don't want any false starts. I want everybody told. When you are ready, I want you to hit it from the first note to the last note—no stopping or starting, we'll do that later. We were standing in the middle of this big studio at the Capitol Tower in Hollywood. All of these musicians start showing up. Ken Nelson starts looking around saying, "I thought we were in Studio A today." Somebody said, "We are." Ken said, "I've lost my job! There's no way I can pay all of these musicians!" But he figured they were there and we might as well go on with it because he would have to pay them anyway. After they did the run-through, Ken came out and put his hand around my shoulder and said, "I was scared to death, but don't worry, it's a hit."

JE: And it was!

RC: Yes.

JE: What a thrill for you! You had never sung in front of that many musicians as a backdrop to you. This was a full orchestra. These are instruments that your teacher said were the only instruments in the world. (Chuckle)

RC: That's it and I didn't dare look at them. I knew how inadequate I was as a musician. There had to be 30 people there and they were putting sheet music in front of them and saying "I can do that" and I am over there still trying to learn the song.

JE: Was it a one-take deal?

RC: No. With all of those musicians in there they had to do several takes.

JE: But your part, once you sang with them, did you have to sing it several times?

RC: Oh yes. We did everything as one, which they did back then. These days in a recording session they'll do however many takes that it takes and then they'll go back and do however many takes of a certain instrument, if it has to be re-recorded for whatever reason.

JE: *The Tips of My Fingers*, why did that song come to your attention?

RC: Joe Allison sold the first bill of goods to me. He had me listen to it and because I had heard of it and I approved of it, then he went to Ken Nelson at Capitol Records and got his permission. He didn't tell him that he was going to also hire 30 musicians to go with him.

JE: What a way to go and that was your first time you charted a song?

RC: Yes.

JE: You were about 30 years old?

RC: Right.

Chapter 12 – 6:24**Johnny Carson**

John Erling: Johnny Carson then took over *The Tonight Show*. He was enormously successful.

As I recall, you were asked to be a guest host for Johnny Carson, so the two of you must have had some instant rapport, is that true?

Roy Clark: Yes, there was. I always felt that it was natural on my part because he was so successful if you count all of the different ways that the show was seen all over the world with the Armed Forces Network and everything. He and I first worked together at the Allen Town County Fair in Allen Town, Pennsylvania. It was called a county fair but it was one of the biggest in the country. He and I worked it together. There was this rapport between the two of us. Back then I was going through some pretty wild looking outfits. I had on a suit that was bright pink. It was fuchsia looking back on it. It was a terrible color for a suit. Behind the big stage was my trailer that served as my dressing room. Well, Johnny had a trailer across from me. He opened the door to his and looked out and saw me. He said, "You're not going to wear that on the show are you?" It was one of those break-the-ice kind of moments that he knows I'm here. It made me feel like he was glad I was there.

JE: That was your introduction to him personally. Then on *The Tonight Show* you were asked to be a guest host?

RC: Yes, after I had been a guest. I had been a guest on the show many times.

JE: With Johnny?

RC: Yes. He started taking off on Mondays and had a guest host come in. They asked me to be a guest host. I realized for the first time just how hot that seat is hosting *The Tonight Show*. My first guest was Bob Hope. What am I going to ask Bob Hope? How long have you been in the business Mr. Hope? He evidently saw that and really helped saved me. He started taking the answer and stretching it out a little bit for me, just so I could sort of get my feet wet. One thing led to another and then they asked me to host it for an entire week with Ed McMahon, Doc Severinsen and Bobby Quinn, who was the director. Evidently, I fit in to their way of thinking. It made them feel good to leave the show in my hands to hold down the fort until the week was over. So I had an open door there. They said that anytime I wanted to come, if I had a new record that came out and wanted to preview it on their show, they said to give them a call. If they had an artist on the show that was from California, it was no big deal for them to switch nights, whereas with me, they knew that I lived in Oklahoma. They knew that being a part of a hit record and previewing it on their show made them look good too.

JE: Could you relax on the show when you were a guest host? Did you have a good time?

RC: I had a good time because of Fred de Cordova. Fred was the producer. He had done everything from Jack Benny's show to you name it. He would come and talk to me during a commercial. He would say, "Okay. That's great. You're doing good." He would tell me who was coming on next and what they were going to talk about or what was new with them. He would tell me to relax and that everything was going good.

JE: What about Ed McMahon?

RC: (Laugh) He was one of those that had a little twinkle in his eye. We both were pilots. He was a fighter pilot in WWII, so we had that little club that we belonged to. We had that in common that we could both fly airplanes. Doc Severinsen was just a jewel needless to say. What made that show last so long and so strong was that feeling that they all created and they let me be a part of it.

JE: Did you have much interaction with Johnny?

RC: We always would have something to talk about. He loved being put on the spot. He loved for you to just pull something out of the blue. We both invested in the DeLorean automobile, so we had that in common. But he thought that we re-invested by just putting good money after bad. When it all came out in the paper about the demise of DeLorean automobiles, they named Carson and me and Sammy Davis, Junior. There were other investors but they picked on us. They made it seem like we were part of the problem, but it was so involved. There were several things that we paralleled on just by chance.

JE: Johnny did not have the kind of personality where he was bringing everybody into his fold. There were just a few people that he took on as friends. You were just one of those few that he bonded with?

RC: I always felt like no one talked to Johnny before the show. A lot of times you could feel it when Mr. Carson was approaching his makeup room. He would just come in and go over and sit down in the chair. He would look over and see me. He would say, "Hey Roy, how are you doing?" I would say, "I'm doing great." Then he would start talking to the makeup guy. We didn't sit and have any really long conversations, but again they would say things to me like, "He must like you, because he doesn't speak to guests before the show." I think one reason he did that is that he didn't want to spoil anything that may be used on the show. He wanted you to talk about where you had been on the actual show.

Chapter 13 – 8:11**More Hits**

John Erling: You had signed on with Dot Records after being with Capitol Records for 7 years. Talk to us about the song *Yesterday, When I Was Young*, which was a really good song for you.

Roy Clark: I was getting ready to do an album. I had selected all the tunes. Again, it was Joe Allison that had brought me the song, *The Tips of My Fingers* who was producing this new vocal album. We were at the hotel with a friend of mine, Scotty Turner, who just recently passed away. He was also a record producer. We were just getting ready to walk out the door. We had selected all of the songs for the new album. Scotty Turner said, “I have a song. It doesn’t fit with anyone that I’m recording, but you could do it.” He started getting excited. He said I’ve got a reel-to-reel copy of this song. It’s a French song, but it’s just been recently approved for the English translation. He said, “It doesn’t fit with any of the artists that I’m recording, but would you like to hear it?” Joe said, “If you are that excited about it of course we would like to hear it.” I agreed. He went up to his room and came down and put it on this reel-to-reel tape recorder and played it. I literally fell out of my chair. I said, “It’s a smash. I don’t care who records it. Rin Tin-Tin can do it and it would be a smash.” My records prior to that were different, but it was to my advantage. A lot of songs that go to No. 1 will go to the air, shoot up to No. 1 and then the next week they are off the charts. The history of my records had always been that they would go on the chart and go up and go up. They may stay a week and go up another step but they were on the chart long enough for other disc jockeys and people to become acquainted with them. When my record came out and it started that climb, they took it to everybody to record—other artists. They wanted Frank Sinatra, Bing Crosby—who finally did years later, Dean Martin—you name it. Sinatra said a line that made me feel good. He said, “That’s a great song. I would love to do it. But I can’t afford to have a second record to Roy Clark.” (Laughter) It made me good that he felt I was strong enough that...

JE: He felt he couldn’t do any better. He never did record it did he?

RC: Sinatra didn’t. It’s in the last album that Bing Crosby did—he recorded it.

JE: Then you had the song *Come Live With Me*?

RC: Now I am getting some attention. Friends of mine named Boudleaux and Felice Bryant were two of the most successful country writers. They did all of the Everly Brothers songs. For years and years they did almost every song that was ever written out of Nashville. I got to *Hee Haw* one morning and Boudleaux Bryant was sitting in the producer’s office with a little guitar. He said, “I’ve been up all night writing you a song.” The first thought that hit me

was, Lord, what if I don't like it? How do you tell Boudleaux Bryant thanks, but no thanks? He played a little bit of it and I took the worry out of it and said, "That's a great song."

JE: It became No. 1.

RC: Yes, it did. It was my first No. 1 song.

JE: You were on the pop charts, but here you were a country star?

RC: Yeah, but I think a lot of that goes back to my upbringing in Washington, D.C. I was playing all of the different styles of music because you are there with people from all over the country. I was never one for saying "This is what I do take it or leave it." I try to fit in. That is my approach to making records.

JE: You were fortunate that you had the voice where you could do that. I could name some country voices that just wouldn't sound good on the pop chart. You had a voice that could crossover, so you were blessed.

RC: If what you say is true, that gets back to self-confidence. It was a long time before I felt comfortable listening to a playback of my voice. Even when I was talking, I would hear my voice on the tape talking and I would think "oh"...

JE: *Yesterday When I Was Young* is a real sensitive sound. Is it fair to say that Hank Williams couldn't do that with the sensitivity that you did?

RC: You're right. I can't see him doing that.

JE: Right.

RC: You'll notice that through the years all of the different songs had messages. They had a statement that I listened to when I listened to the possibility that I may consider recording it. Because I would go through a stack every time I would go into Nashville to record. You would send the word out and every publisher and every writer is going to meet at your hotel room when you get there. I would start off with a stack of records—demos for me to consider that would be a foot high. So you go through them and you listen to them. Your list of songs that you like starts getting shorter and invariably you are going to make a mistake. You're going to let a song go by that didn't strike you at the time. But two months later someone else comes out with it and you think to yourself, I had it! I had that song—and I let it get away.

JE: Also, did you ever record a song that you thought was going to be a hit and it never became a hit?

RC: There have been several of those. In fact, I was going to record an album of the B-side songs that never made it because they were on the other side of a mega-hit. My idea was to do an album of B-side songs.

JE: Another song with a message was *Right or Left at Oak Street*.

RC: That song, to me, I'm not through with it yet. I ran into a gentleman on an airplane one time, right after the song had come out. He introduced himself to me. He was a preacher.

He told me how much he loved the song, *Right or Left at Oak Street* to the point that he formed one of his sermons around the lyrics to the song. If you stop and think about it—it just plays on itself. *Right or Left on Oak Street* is a choice I make every day. Taking a right turn or a left turn can easily be put into a sermon about making the right choice.

JE: Do you recall who wrote that song?

RC: I just happen to know and I don't know a lot of them, but they were close friends of mine, Charlie Williams and Joe Nixon. It's by chance that I know that the top of my head because I was just sent back a music sheet about two weeks ago because they had autographed the lyrics to *Right or Left at Oak Street*.

JE: You mentioned a few minutes ago that you are not quite done with that song. What did you mean by that? What do you want to do with it?

RC: I'm going to record it again now that I've had a chance to live with it all of these years. I know that there is a different side to what I feel. Not that I'll change it, but the experience of having it and living with it all of this time will dictate to me how I will do it.

JE: You can put a different expression on it?

RC: Yes, expression and more believability. I don't know if that makes sense or not. It's almost like I'm asking the listener to pay attention, saying I want you to hear something, you know—I want you to hear this song.

Chapter 14 – 6:54

Hee Haw

John Erling: Somewhere in the late 1960s, television producers talked to you about a show that was similar to *Laugh In*?

Roy Clark: I was a guest on *The Jonathan Winters Show*. The producers of that show were two gentlemen from Canada, John Aylesworth and Frank Peppiatt. They had an idea for a show that was like *Laugh In*. They said it would be slapstick comedy, but then also some good country music. They had talked to Buck Owens about doing it. The idea was to have two hosts on the show and they asked me if I was interested in doing it. In this business you say “yes” to everything. I said, “Of course!” It was about September 1968. In January 1969, Jim Halsey my manager called me and said, “They are getting ready to do that show.” I said, “They are getting ready to do what show?” He said, “Well, they are calling it *Hee Haw*.” I said, “They are calling what *Hee Haw*?” He said, “It's obvious they will come up with a better title in time to do the show.” Thinking back on it, what better title could you come up with than

Hee Haw? So the show went on the air in June 1969 and the rest is history. CBS did not have room for it. In fact, it was because of the Smothers Brothers' falling out with CBS that there was even a time slot for it. It was supposed to be just 13 shows during that summer. Finally, when it was so extremely popular—they knew that they had this smash hit but they had no room for it on their schedule. The first show that didn't make it in the fall season...we would get that slot. We ended up coming on the air in midseason 1970.

JE: Then how many shows did you do?

RC: We did what turned out to be 13 shows. We went in twice a year in June and in October and did 13 shows each time for that coming season. One of the main reasons I think the show lasted so long was because it was fresh. We didn't sit there and get burned out week after week after week. So about the time that you may be getting a little edgy... I know that I sound like I might be patronizing, but we never had a serious problem on the show that I was aware of. Someone may have raised a voice a little bit, but that was it. The time that we were getting a little edgy we were through for the season. We would go out and do our concerts and play until it was time to record the show again.

JE: Were some people concerned that the show would be bad for the image of country music?

RC: A lot of my dear friends said that we had set country music back about 20 years. My answer was wait a minute. I'm talking about people that I knew and loved. I said, "I've worn bib overalls. I grew up in them. I also have two tailor-made tuxedos." But it didn't change my ways and my beliefs in what is country music and what is not. Roger Miller who was a dear friend of mine said that he would never do the show *Hee Haw*. So one day we were doing a duet fiddle tune together. I looked over and I say to him, "You'll never do it huh, Roger?" (Laughter)

JE: But because of his popularity...

RC: Yes. Oh everyone...if you look at the artists that are mega stars now, almost 99% of them got their first national exposure on *Hee Haw*.

JE: Can you name just one or two of them?

RC: Garth Brooks, Vince Gill... You give new life to Minnie Pearl and Roy Acuff.

JE: Then there was Junior Samples.

RC: I am always asked about Junior. I say this with love and with sincerity. Junior had a third-grade education. He's the only one I've ever known that came out of the country to the city—not only did he not learn anything, he actually digressed. (Laughter) He was from a little town called Cummings, Georgia. He said to me one time, "Roy, how did you get in this?" We were sitting back in the dark waiting for our turn to go on camera. I figured he wanted to know how I built a career in country music. So I started telling him. I got about 15 or 20 minutes into it and he said, "Well, wait a minute. You did all of that? All I did was tell a lie about a fish and here I am!" (Laughter)

JE: That lie about the fish—what was it?

RC: Part of his kin went down to the Gulf and caught this fish that was like a Sea Bass. It must have weighed about 20 pounds. He cut the head of it off, threw it back in his pickup and went to a racecar meet. He used to drive a dirt car. Everybody asked, “Junior where did you get that fish?” He said, “I caught it at Lake Lanier.” It was a freshwater bass. (Laughter) Word spread around. They sent somebody down from the radio station to interview him. They wanted to know what kind of bait he had used to catch it. The next thing you know, the government was sending people down to check. If the fish was as big as they say that it is, it had to be some kind of a hybrid fish. Finally, he realized that he was getting in trouble, so he had to confess that the fish was caught in the bay and that it was a saltwater fish and not a freshwater fish like he said. But then they made a record of it and they put it out and it became a hit. (Laughter) So that’s how the people on *Hee Haw* became aware of Junior Samples. Archie Campbell is the one that brought Junior up to the show. They put him on camera and everybody said, “Hold it! Stop! This is it. This is *Hee Haw*.”

JE: So that record then was him telling the story about he caught the fish, so he was obviously humorous and telling now and so it was a big hit. He was just a natural comedian.

RC: Oh boy, yeah.

Chapter 15 – 6:22

Russia

John Erling: Your Oklahoma ties came in 1974, because I believe that’s when you came to Tulsa?

Roy Clark: Yes. I had played in Tulsa many times. I was living back in the Maryland and Virginia area. Every time we started a tour, it started in California and ended in the state of Washington. I went from Maryland to California to start a tour—play out there for a week or two, then go all the way back to Maryland to end the tour. Jim Halsey said, “If you were to live somewhere in the Midwest, with the same schedule that you have, you could have an additional 25 or 30 days a year at home.” So it got me to thinking. I’ve never been one to want to move. I’ve got roots and all of my family and friends are there. I never considered moving anyplace else but Tulsa. Through the years I had played several times in Tulsa and made a lot of friends. A friend of mine who was also my attorney had a beautiful home here. He showed it to me and I said, “Boy, if I could find a home like this I would move here in a minute.” He said, “I’ll keep an eye out.” Three months later he called

me and he said, "I found a house for you." We went to the Soviet Union in 1976. We took two years to redo the house. So when we came back we had them move the furniture into our home in Tulsa. So we left living in Maryland and ended up living here in Oklahoma.

JE: This was a very old home that you purchased?

RC: It was started in 1929 and finished in 1931 by an oilman—back when that's what they did to show off their success. I've never been one to need a big house, but my attraction was the beautiful workmanship—the beautiful woodwork and the molding. They just don't build them like that anymore.

JE: You still live in that house here in 2011?

RC: Yes, I have to. The house is so big that I would have to get six houses to hold all of the stuff I've accumulated.

JE: Your trip to the Soviet Union was a big event for you in your career and probably for the United States as well. It opened up some relations I believe with the Soviet Union. The Soviets liked your personality and your country music and they were very interested in you.

RC: A group came over to study our way of farming and machinery and all of that. Someone had interviewed them and asked them if there was anything that they didn't get a chance to see that they wanted to see. One of them was Disneyland and the other was Las Vegas. Jim Halsey and I got to thinking, what would happen if we were to invite them? They couldn't just go out, they had to have a reason and an invitation. It's very involved how that all went with their hotel and stuff. But we were in Las Vegas and we invited them to be there. The hotel put them up in rooms. The Gaming Department gave them each \$25 in chips to gamble with. We had a big luncheon for them. They said, "You'll have to come visit our country." So one thing led to another and we went to the Soviet Union. We had 18 sold-out shows. When we left to come back to the States, the State Department people took us to the airport and said, "We have never witnessed anything like this. You have caused something that you will not know in your lifetime with what you've done. While you were still here, you got the whole back page of the newspaper. They don't ever do that. If they mention you at all, they say Americans come, they played, they left." But we got the whole back page. He said, "You brought people together at your concerts that when we tried to get in contact with them for official business we could never get a hold of them. Now that we have mingled with them at your concerts, they told us to call them and they are going to meet with us on Monday."

JE: They must have bonded over your sense of humor. Did they have interpreters when you were speaking to them?

RC: Yes, they were very talented interpreters that could take all of my country slang and interpret it. So we got two laughs on every joke because the ones that spoke English would laugh at it because they understood it and then the interpreter would explain it to the ones that spoke Russian.

JE: Didn't you take the Oak Ridge Boys with you?

RC: Yes. We left from Las Vegas where we had been working together before we went to the Soviet Union. Jim Halsey was also their manager.

JE: It was so successful that you went back in 1988?

RC: Yes, 1988 turned out to be a blessing for us that we could see the difference between 1976 when the Iron Curtain was there and 1988 when it had been lifted. People were talking with each other. They didn't do that in 1976. If you were an American in 1976 you were a danger. They had been told to stay away. In 1988 they wanted us to mingle with them. They could tell we were Americans, too.

JE: That had to be a great thrill for you to know that your music was bringing countries together?

RC: They didn't understand all of the lyrics and stuff—but they understood. I can see the expressions on their faces now. They understood the feeling that I was projecting. They knew *Yesterday When I Was Young*.

JE: What do you mean?

RC: They maybe didn't understand the language, but they knew the feel of it. In fact, before we went on in 1976, the *Voice of America* opened up and the Soviets for the first time didn't garble the signal of the *Voice of America*. So that's how they knew we were coming.

Chapter 16 – 4:29

Roy Clark School

John Erling: Something else in your musical career, in the early 1980s, Branson, Missouri came on your radar screen.

Roy Clark: My CPA and a guy that was in the hotel business in Springfield and Branson were buddies. They were getting ready to build a theater in Branson. My accountant friend suggested they call it The Roy Clark Theater. The other man agreed. He said, "I don't know anything about show business—but I do know about hotels." There was some property that he owned on Highway 76 in Branson in the heart of what is called Music Row. They had done some research and knew how much traffic went by that property. They thought it was a pretty safe bet that a certain amount of the traffic would turn into the theater if they were to build it. I had heard Branson mentioned before, but I didn't know anything about it. They said the best way to describe Branson is Las Vegas without the gambling. So I went over and looked at it and decided to go into a partnership and build this theater. It was called The Roy Clark Celebrity Theater. The other theaters there were run by

families, but we were bringing in big stars. All of the stars that came to play at our theater when I wasn't there, said, "Why am I playing in Roy Clark's theater when I can build a theater of my own?" So that started going Glen Campbell, Loretta Lynn, Andy Williams and others. They all at one time had worked in our theater and saw that the future was to build their own.

JE: So you started that trend didn't you?

RC: That's what they accuse me of.

JE: Today, that concept still works in Branson doesn't it?

RC: Yes, it does.

JE: I now you've performed presidents. You've performed for President Carter in Ford's Theater?

RC: Yes.

JE: You've performed for the senior George Bush?

RC: Yes.

JE: In 1974, here in Tulsa, you started the Roy Clark Celebrity Golf Tournament, with proceeds going to benefit the Children's Medical Hospital. That had to make you feel good because you brought a lot of big stars to town.

RC: You could just hang out a sign and the big stars in Hollywood are the first ones there. Bob Hope and President Ford came out and played golf. I asked, "What's in the golf cart that's about 4 groups behind us?" These golf carts had two or three people in each one, with these obvious boxes and things. The guy that was riding with me said, "If I holler, 'Duck!' you hit the ground because there's going to be some action. That was a golf cart back there guarding the president will level this golf course in five seconds. I said, "Oh, it never dawned on me that they would have security." He said, "Nothing is going to happen."

JE: You raised a ton of money.

RC: That was a great experience. I raised it, or it was raised with my name associated to it, but so many people worked so hard, like the volunteers. If it wasn't for the volunteers— this world would just stop moving.

JE: You've then honored in many ways. I don't know if I even have time to mention them all now but in 1987 you were made and member of the Grand Ole Opry. In 2009 you were inducted into The Country Music Hall of Fame with Barbara Mandrell and Charlie McCoy. It had to make you feel good. Did it give you some confidence? (Chuckle)

RC: (Laughter) Well, not really because they waited a long time before they inducted me.

JE: In 2011 you were honored by the Oklahoma House of Representatives. In 1978, an elementary school in the Union school district in Tulsa was named Roy Clark Elementary School.

RC: That was the thing that made me so proud because I am so attracted to kids. I think it's because basically I am still a kid at heart. It was voted on by the kids to name it the Roy

Clark Elementary School. The proudest feeling you can get is to have one of these little kids come up to you and say, “I go to Roy Clark School.” It doesn’t get much better than that.

JE: Yes. By the way, you are up against a heavy hitter, literally—because Mickey Mantle was the other name that the school could have been named for.

RC: Yes, he was.

JE: They voted on the two of you and you won.

RC: Probably the exposure of *Hee Haw* had a lot to do with that.

Chapter 17 – 4:34

Mickey Mantle

John Erling: So, as you look back, what do you reflect on?

Roy Clark: That I could have been a lot more. But I rationalize and realize that you can’t do everything. I think I may have mentioned that if I had the get up and go that my dad had, I could have done a whole lot more. He was one that made it work when everything was against him. I, on the other hand, let it work when I had a lot of people helping me. He didn’t do all of it by himself, but he went where there was opportunity. I was sort of met halfway.

JE: Let’s suppose you had a chance to sing your very last song, what song would it be?

RC: Oh. Oh boy, I don’t know. Maybe it would have to be something like *Thank God and Greyhound She’s Gone*.

JE: (Laughter) Why did you pick that one? I was thinking you were going to pick some real tender song. (Laughter)

RC: It’s because you would imagine that I would pick some sensitive song that I did pick *Thank God and Greyhound She’s Gone*.

JE: You sang gospel songs also during your life?

RC: Yes, I did. Almost every country artist I have ever known started singing in church. That was my case. I was the little boy that was called on Sunday to come up with a new song.

JE: Students will listen to this interview. Do you have any advice to give students whether they are interested in music or starting out in life or whatever? There may be children listening to this that attended Roy Clark Elementary School. What would you tell them for advice?

RC: That’s hard because there are so many things that are possible. My dad said something to me one time. He used to take me and let me listen to the National Symphony Orchestra in Washington, D.C. All the service bands had orchestras and they would give free concerts.

You would think being from the part of the country that my dad was born in, which was very rural, that he wouldn't necessarily make it a point to take his son to hear a symphony orchestra. But he said to me one time, "Don't ever close your ears to good music until your heart hears it." In the back of my mind and in the front of my heart, I have always heeded his suggestion. In other words, it may not be exactly what your first choice would be, but evidently enough people love it or it wouldn't exist. My advice would be, don't turn your ears off until your heart hears it.

JE: That's pretty good advice. I want to thank you for giving us this time. I appreciate it very, very much. The legacy you have left is very important for the oral history of Oklahoma. You are definitely an Oklahoman, now. (Chuckle)

RC: I have been accepted, yes.

JE: Is there a phrase or two from one of these tender songs that you would like to sing to end our time together?

RC: For all of the things that it says, and because Mickey Mantle had me sing it at his funeral... It started out as, not a joke, but we would do different golf tournaments together. You always get up and do an impromptu little show about whoever was there. He started off saying to me, "I want you to sing that at my funeral." I would laugh and he would laugh. I said to him, "What makes you think that I am going to be here?" So every time that we got together, he would tell me this. I have it on videotape where he said to me, "Don't forget, you are going to sing *Yesterday When I Was Young* at my funeral." So it always became part of Mickey Mantle and Roy Clark. I don't claim exclusive rights to it. He asked the doctors when he was very, very ill, "How much time do I have? Don't put me on—tell me." They said, "About five days Mick." He said, "Somebody ought to call Roy." So he never forgot and neither did I.

JE: Did you sing it at his funeral?

RC: Yes I did. It wasn't the easiest thing. (Singing) *Yesterday when I was young, the taste of life was sweet as rain upon my tongue. I teased at life as if it were a foolish game. The way the evening breeze may tease a candle flame.*

JE: Very good. Thank you Roy. That was fun. I enjoyed it.

RC: Great John, thank you!

Chapter 18 – 0:29**Conclusion**

Announcer: Roy Clark has just told you his story of a talented young boy who became an international success as a vocalist and instrumentalist. Be sure to consult our For Further Reading section and our Bookstore for more information. Please tell your friends about this interview and other stories on the website. Special thank to our generous sponsors who make these interviews possible. Our mission is to preserve Oklahoma's legacy one voice at a time on VoicesofOklahoma.com.

