an exclusive On the Tracks interview

LEROY HOIKKALA

conducted by Lars Lindh

"an' I know I shall meet the snowy North again — but with changed eyes next time 'round I walk lazy down its streets an' linger by the edge of town find old friends if they're still around..."

—Bob Dylan, 11 Outlined Epitaphs

Yes, there is actually one old friend still around. LeRoy Hoikkala is the only member of Bob Dylan's early band still living in Hibbing. On the Tracks interviewer, Lars Lindh, met with him and his wife, Bette, in their home in Hibbing on July 2, 1999.

You were born here in Hibbing? Yes, and my parents are also from Hibbing. Well, one was from southwest Minnesota and the other was born in Hibbing, so they are local.

But you have relatives further back that came from Scandinavia? Yes, from Finland and Norway. That's my great-grandparents. My great-grandfather came from Norway and Finland. We don't do the "roots," we're Hibbing.

So you have lived in Hibbing all your life?

Right.

When did you meet Bob?

I knew Bob pretty much from school and everything. Growing up you see each other. It's a small town. You know, everybody knows everybody in town. How we got to meet was playing in a band was Monte Edvardson—who is a guitar player—who is very good. He still plays today, he is a natural guitar player—he worked downtown. Monte and myself, right across the street from school, we met each other and we walked to a little job, an after-school job. And Bob was just there one day. Monte and I had been messing around with playing drums and guitar. Just jamming a little bit. I had taken lessons for quite a few years. So, Bob just happened to say, "Hey, you guys going downtown?"

We actually walked from school to downtown, so we told him that we were playing. You know, just getting together and jamming around and playing. So, he said: "Hey, I'm playing piano, mouth-organ, harmonica and guitar. Maybe we could get together and kind of play a little bit."

We said: "Yes, sure." So we started playing in Bob's garage, that was attached to his house, that little garage. We jammed in there for quite a bit, and we got a couple of jobs. The first time he ever got paid to do anything was with our band, The Golden oldies.

Sometimes we'd go into the house to play, because he had a piano in the house.

Anyone else besides you, Monte Edvardson and Bob?

No. It was just the three of us at that time, I played drums.

Where did you play?

It was at the National Guard Armory.
a pretty big building. We hired the police department, because you had to have the police, we hired people to collect tickets, we sold tickets, made tickets. We hired someone to clean the place up and everything, and we made money. It was kind of fun. It was one of those things where you put a lot of money out and do something, try to fix a Saturday night stick opera or jam, and a lot of kids came. That was probably the first time Bob ever was paid to do anything musically.

Was it a dance or more like a concert?

It was a dance. There: was a wide-open area, no chairs, nothing, big stage, that’s all.

Was that a one-time shot?

Yes, that particular one. That was kind of how we got together and started playing.

Then we played that talent show, you know, where we actually won last lost, because the kids went crazy (but the judges gave it to someone else who tape danced). Bob was a little detached on that one saying, “We should have won, you know?” Because, in fact the audience went with us, but they gave it to someone else. We came in second. (He laughs.)

That was the three of us as the Golden Chords. The reason we called it the Golden Chords was because Bob was really the only really chord with the piano and the guitar, really chord beautifully. He was really a natural at chording. And my drums were gold, sparkling gold.

So, we said Golden...Chords, that’s how we got the name.

What tunes did you play?

All some of the Little Richard tunes, like “Jenny, Jenny.” Some of the southern type music, the blues songs, a lot of Little Richard, Bob loved Little Richard, so we did a lot of Little Richard stuff.

It was kind of new for the kids around here. We used to sit together with a reel to reel tape recorder at night and tape the AM stations that came in really good at night. We taped it so we could listen to the new songs that didn’t come along here. Music was kind of a backyard area. The last to get in.

So we listened to the songs from the AM radio, taped them and then Bob
would play them, because that was more the type of songs that he liked: the bluesy songs. We listened to Shreveport, there were a bunch of DJs down there that we listened to.

Was Bob kind of the leader?

Yes, kind of. But he wasn’t really close to anybody. I don’t think he ever had a best friend. He was kind of a loner, as we all were kind of loners. We’d hang around the motorcycles, the Harleys, and ride in our convertibles. He had a convertible like mine.

When we decided to play we used to go to Colter’s Bar-B-Q, Van Fleet’s owned it. On Sundays they were closed but they still had to clean up the place, do the potatoes for French fries and everything. So we used to go down there—it was right off the main street—and we’d bring our instruments in there, set up where you walk in, and leave the doors open. The kids could hear the music from Howard street when we jammed.

Was Bob playing piano then?

He played guitar and a little harmonica at that time.

What did kids used to do on weekends? Night in the summertime was cruise the streets with our cars. That was where the kids used to hear us when they were [cruising] out walking up and down the street. That’s one of the last things we did together.

Did Bob write any of his own songs by this time?

He changed a lot of songs. He listened to a song and he changed them. He didn’t like the way they read. Just like a lot of the songs that he’s recorded. I used to say that he wasn’t copying anyone, but he took the basic song and if he didn’t like the lyrics he just changed it to what he wanted. He was a natural. He is a great songwriter. Some songs he didn’t change, others he changed to his own thing.

Did you tape any of those songs?

Yes, but I don’t have them anymore. Too bad! You know, Bob was just my friend and he still is. When he became famous it was like a different person. He had his life and we don’t communicate now. We were friends and we played in the band and all of a sudden he went ...and now he’s a different person.

One of the big things that we really enjoyed was James Dean. We went to Stoewer’s Grocery and Confectionery to look at all the magazines of James Dean; how he got killed in that car accident...

Did you go to Lydia’s Theater with them?

Yes, we went to movies related to music all the time. James Dean, Brando
Select Finalists In
Frolic Talent Contest

Finalists in the Ribbing Minstrelsy contest consisting of the
Memorial Talent Contest were: Gussie, Bill Gillie, John Linnard, and
Memorial Balloon Thursday after-George, Teenie, Bernice, and
three,
When was this?

Ah... when we were 16.

Anyway we used to park the Harleys right in front of Crippa's and go in and check the records out. They used to have booths, so if you bought a record you could go and try it out.

We spent a lot of time there. We bought picks, sheet music and whatever.

Drums, guitars, Harley-Davidsons.

Where did you get all that money?

I don't know. I worked after school. We used to go to Chuck Crippa, and if you had a job—for $500 dollars you could get great drums. At that time, now it would be $2,000 dollars probably—Chuck would say, "Ah, give me $200 dollars a month." And that's how he took care of it. That's how Chuck Crippa was. He took care of all the kids in town that way. And Harleys, well used Harleys were pretty reasonable at the time. You get a nice little Harley for $500 dollars. The convertibles... Bob had a '54 Ford convertible. I had one also. They were used, but nice little cars. They were not expensive cars. We didn't have new cars.

We used our cars to promote our dances or rock concerts. We would get these big speakers, horns and two big amplifiers on top of my convertible and we would sit there playing, to advertise our dances. You don't see that anymore.

We had to earn all the money ourselves, as my family didn't have a real lot of money. Bob's mom and dad, because they had a business, had a lot more than we did, but he did earn it.

What did your father do for a living?

He worked at the mine. He was a locomotive engineer which was a good paying job, but there were a lot of strikes and layoffs. There was always good food on the table, but we didn't have a lot of extras.

Where did you live at this time?

We lived in the 2100 block, about four blocks from Bob.

Were you with Bob when he had his near accident on his motorcycle here in Hibbing?

I was there, right. I think my cousin was with us and maybe some other driver. There is a little place called Winona. There used to be two train tracks there. Bob was kind of a nervous person, he just couldn't sit still. He was kind of restless. My motorcycle was getting warm so I shut it off while the train went by. As we were waiting and waiting for the train to go by, Bob got really restless, and as soon as the caboose at the back of the train went by Bob took off. Another train was coming from the other direction and you couldn't see it from where we sat. However he did, so he took his bike and threw it down—he had to change sight of the train with the corner of his eye. He never even mentioned it again. Didn't say a word, picked up his bike, didn't talk about it and started his motorcycle and took off.

Did you meet his mother and father?

Yes, I knew his mom and dad for years. In fact, his dad owned Nick's Electric with his brother. He had super parents, really nice. He was maybe a little overly rebellious or hyped because of his parents being a little overprotective. His parents were quality people, really nice people. His mother was making jokes all the time. His dad was more of a businessman, more quiet and
serious, Bob's brother, Dave, was also a nice guy.

Did Bob work in the store?

He worked there; he'd help. In fact he helped replenish things when people couldn't pay. He worked there once in awhile, but not really a lot.

Have you been in contact with him since then?

No, but I used to go and talk to his dad just after he started in the music business. I'd go talk to his mom and she would relate things. I never saw him after that.

Did you go to the same high school classes as Bob?

I think the only one we had together was Study Hall.

Did you know Ebo's girlfriend?

Oh, yes. We used to go out to where she lived, right out of town on Highway 73, and listen to records. We used to double date, and go to the movies. She was from, a pretty girl.

When did the Golden Chords band split?

It was when Bob went to UCLA to play.

One recollection that came to me just now is that there was a colored DJ in the Virginia, Minnesota area, and he had a record collection of all kinds of music, and Bob borrowed some of it. That was the kind of music you couldn't get around here.

Do you have contact with the other members of the band?

Bob and I have came here a few years back. Monte, I have seen him quite a few times, last time just a couple of years ago.

Monte is still playing in Colorado in a band at casinos and bars. He was probably the best guitarist on the whole range.

We played a lot as the Rockets, not the Golden Chords but right after that. We played one or two nights a week at least. We played for a local club at the time rock n' roll started. We played there for many, many months. Almost every Saturday night. Chuck Crippa was the president of the union at that time, and he said, "you guys play a lot, you had better join the union," and we did. We were actually union-member musicians for many years.

What did you do after high school?

Monte said, "Let's go to California. My uncle has a business there with decent jobs," so we took off. I had two jobs. One was in a Recruit's and Development department and I also did TV service work on the side. I came back to Hibbing after about a year. Then I got drafted. I was in the service for two years.

What work did you do here in Hibbing?

I just retired. My last job was with US Steel Corporation.

Bob's brother, David, was he even involved with your type of music?

Dave was younger and more involved with classical music. He was a choir director and piano player. They are really two different people.

Lars Lindh, Bob Dylan addict since the early '60s, is a 49 year old, self-employed financial consultant and father of two currently living in Sweden, although he's also worked in Canada, USA, Mexico, Colombia and India.