

Interview with Howard Bass

Interviewer: Deborah Altus

July 12, 1996

Q: . . . in an interview with Howard Bass, and it's hard for me to know where to start asking you questions, since I don't anything about your communal background, so maybe you can help me out by telling me some about where you've lived.

A: Okay. I don't know where to start either. In the late '60's I moved to Washington, 1967. I was in my freshman year in college, and my interest at the time was not being in college, but I was, at least partly, following the path I was expected to follow. And so after spending a semester being miserable in a sort of liberal arts program, I decided that if I was going to do anything in college it ought to be music, because I played music most of my life, and I had a great passion, especially for electric guitar. I'm working on a big program without electrical guitar right now -- my passion at the time was for classical guitar. I've got this electric guitar . . . and here in Washington I found out I could go to American University. It was one of the few colleges in the country that offered a program where you could major in music with guitar as your specialty. So I came here, still extremely unhappy about being in college at all. But, at the very least, the idea that I could do music was some comfort. So I came here, started in the program with American University in January, second semester of my freshman year in college. And that in itself was fine, I was really into studying guitar, but by 1969, when I was, I guess it was the end of my junior year, I met some people, I met one guy who was also studying guitar. He had just come down here from New Haven. And I guess in a way that changed my life. I kind of remember meeting this guy, Beau, I remember not so much meeting him, but a moment in time when I realized that he was a different person, different than a lot people I knew. It must've been the drugs, I don't know. Something strange caught my attention, I guess. And I started paling around with him, and that lead me to eventually meeting up with a whole group of people, mostly through Beau, and mostly through this connection -- he'd gone to Yale. And there were two or three other people, a cousin of his, and a former roommate of his, and in the Fall of '69 we all ended up living together in a house in Arlington. Before that, I had a place on my own for awhile, a little apartment, I shared an apartment for awhile with another guitar player. But in the fall of 1969, I moved into this group house, we started a group house, on Lee Highway in Arlington, 2620 Lee Highway. And that really was the start of my involvement with communal living, and a change in my life that in some ways go on. I'm still friends with a lot of the people, but in some ways I feel like that experience of moving into this house with this group of people lead me in directions that I never would have gone on if I hadn't met or seen Beau Laden outside the student union one day at American University, and had this sudden epiphany that getting to know this guy would be a real interesting experience, and it definitely was. I should give you his phone number, he's out in Ashland [?], in Oregon, if you'll be going there.

Q: Oh, actually, I will be going there.

A: In fact, he and his ex-wife both live in Ashland, and that would be a good place to end up. Anyway, we lived in this house, it started out just a bunch of folks kind of taking this old bungalow and turning it into a sort of a combination group living/ crash pad, real sixties bunch of people, none of whom had regular jobs as far as I can remember. Mostly, I was thinking of us at least well-educated, if not over educated, people, who had no sense of being in the mainstream, no sense that we should or wanted to follow the route that our parents probably would have much preferred us to follow. I can remember my mother coming to visit once, and sitting there, kind of legs together, purse sort of clutched under her knees, kind of looking around suspiciously like one of us was going to do something really awful, like

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steal her purse or something worse. And also, my father coming once and trying to get me to move out. It was pretty heavy we actually ended up -- I had dropped out of college, in the fall of '69, and I guess he saw me really going down the path of destruction. It was sex, drugs, and rock and roll, except that I was playing classical music on the guitar. So he just thought -- I'm not saying that's necessarily what it was in the house, but it was just, that was the image -- and I often have thought that the image, this idea of living in the commune, being a hippie, certainly as applied to me, was something people from the outside might have thought, but I never really, I wouldn't have said that I was a hippie. I met people like that who were hippies. But who knows what they thought they were. I think it was all definition, and the idea that this house, this was communal living in a sense, maybe in a fairly pure sense in some ways, but we weren't an intentional community like Twin Oaks. It wasn't people who had a particular philosophy, it was more in a sense based on a negative idea, like "This country is really screwed up, and let's get as far away from the mainstream as we can." Which, I think lead to living out in Bluemont, at Skyfields. That comes a little bit later.

Q: Okay. Did this place have a name?

A: We just called it "2620." What drew us together, what really made it seem communal in a sense was that we got, by about November of that year, we got into making bread and selling it on the streets of Washington as a group activity. And for the next six or eight months, until everybody moved out -- I mean this was a very short-lived experience here -- but until we left we made bread communally, anywhere from 50 to 150 loaves a day, and took it down in backpacks down to Georgetown, here in Washington. We walked around the streets, we got vendors licenses, I still have mine somewhere. And walked around the streets selling these loaves of very heavy, whole-wheat bread, for 45 cents a loaf. We were really successful at it. We were able to make enough money doing that to buy all the supplies we needed, and to pay our rent, and bills. Granted, the rent was only about two or three hundred a month, and there were about a dozen people living there. It was a funny house, it was an old bungalow, I drive by it every once in a while, that was meant to house maybe 5 or 6 people, maybe less. But I think it had 3 or 4 bedrooms. But eventually there were about a dozen or more people living there. A couple people lived in closets. One guy, it had a center staircase, and when you got up to the top, on the second floor, you went either right or left, and around the staircase to get to the other rooms, and there was a sort of banister railing. And this one guy put a platform over the railing, and a kind of tent over it, that was his bedroom, essentially. So people were living in all sorts of nooks and crannies in that house. We had about half a dozen cats, all female, and one male dog, named Dittlus [?], and all the cats were fertile females. So at one point it seemed like tomcat in North Arlington was surrounding our house.

Q: Were you politically involved at all?

A: Somewhat. Another sort of defining moment in November that year, was the national peace march, the first of the really big anti-Vietnam marches. And we housed a bunch of people, most of us went down to the march. I don't think we were actively political, like most people that we knew. We were certainly anti-war, none of us were -- that was the fall I had been a student, deferment, so by dropping out of college, I put myself right in the center of the draft pool, and that was the first year they did the draft lottery. So I was at risk of being drafted, high risk if I had a low number in the lottery. A lot of people were agonizing about that, "What would you do?" We'd sit around talking about strategies: go to

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Canada, act crazy, become a conscientious objector. What are you going to say if you are a conscientious objector: what would you do? What would you say? How could you justify it? Would you go to jail? Those sorts of things. I was going to go to Canada, that was my plan. But as luck would have it, I got a high number in the lottery, and never had to face the choice of what to do. But as far as actively political, I think most of us would just as soon not participate in anything. I remember going to demonstrations, I went to a lot. It was real easy. I remember going to the Nixon counter-inauguration a few blocks from here. It's very funny to think about what was going on then, and my attitude toward the government, and participation in the system, and now here, 27 years later, being a federal employee, and having a full-time job. I can walk outside of this building and look at a place where I remember dropping acid for the first time. So, it's kind of strange to see that. This very building, I can remember standing outside this building in the middle of the night and looking at this, you drove by it when you came in, there's this riviera [?] stainless steel art piece, it's called, it's the symbol for infinity, and it sort of twists, and I remember looking at that on acid in 1968. But, and coming the Nixon counter-inauguration, it was just like going to a party, I mean, it was just hanging out. And I did get picked up in the, this was a couple years later, early '70's when there was the big march against the Cambodian invasion, and there was a May Day thing, the [unintelligible] wanted to shut down Washington, blocked the bridges, and I was living out in the country at the time and I came in with a couple of friends. And although I didn't participate in the demonstration, trying to block the bridges, I did get picked up in the sweep, they picked up 10,000 people that day. And the first people who were picked up were actually arrested formally, and put in jail. People like me who got picked up later got put in sort of holding pens up near the football stadium, and then transferred to a hockey arena. And then the two people I was with, we escaped really early. So, political -- in a sense, but not -- going to demonstrations, but not, I didn't work, I didn't go to Chicago, I didn't go to Miami, I didn't -- I went to the demonstrations because they were here. And that was the extent of it -- it was in my own backyard, and partly out of curiosity, not with a sense that we would change anything. Although we used to say, "When the revolution comes," sort of a mantra. "When the revolution comes, all this will be different." I'm not sure I wholly believed there would be a revolution, and if there was I wasn't sure I would be a participant in it either. I think the group I was with envisioned we would be in some really rural place, away from it all, and be safe. Out in the country, self-sufficient.

Q: Had you all talked about getting a spot in the country?

A: Well, I mentioned Skyfields, in Blue Mont. That happened in the . . . fall of 1970. A few of us, this guy Beau and myself, and another guy who was also a guitar student with the same teacher, we all ended up in this place, it's about 60 miles west of here, right on the Blue Ridge, called Skyfields. And it wasn't, again, it wasn't very intentional as a community, it was just a place in the country at that time. Gradually, a number of the people who lived at this house on the highway gravitated toward that place as well. And a few other people came along who joined in, or maybe hadn't lived with us on the highway but were friends of ours. And so by about 1973 I guess, there was a community of people who wanted to be together and really were committed to being in the country, and committed to the idea that this was the start of a long-term relationship among all of us. Although at the time, I doubt that we would have -- well, maybe we would have said that, I don't know. It's really hard for me to remember that there was a real serious statement. A lot of it was unspoken.

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Q: Now was the name of the community called "Skyfields"? It wasn't the name of the town?

A: The town was Blue Mont, Skyfields was the name of the farm, and it already named that. It had been named Skyfields for a long time.

Q: Is this Virginia?

A: Yeah.

Q: Now what happened to the highway house? Did it kind of all apart?

A: Well, people just split. It was, I guess that was the spring of 1970. Everybody just wanted to leave the place, but a bunch of us got into a VW bus and drove up to Maine, where one couple who lived in this house would go in the summer. So we went up and hung out there with them and then decided we would drive across the continent to see a friend in California. So about half a dozen of us and a few dogs, and, I don't remember, I guess if I thought hard enough I could remember who was on the van. But anyway we drove up to Canada, across Canada to Vancouver, down to the Bay Area, and all along the way we got hassled by the cops. Everywhere we went, we got stopped.

Q: Even in Canada?

A: Even in Canada. In fact, as much in Canada if not more than the US. So we were real careful about what we were carrying with us, and we didn't carry anything that would put us at risk of getting busted. We did have to throw out a bottle of wine once. And one guy was rolling his own cigarettes, so he had rolling papers, and one time that almost got us into trouble. But we never got arrested, we just got hassled, but everybody with long hair was getting hassled, and everybody who rode around in a VW bus was getting hassled. And you just kind of accepted it.

Q: What was the scene like in San Francisco?

A: We didn't actually spend that much time there. What we did that was more interesting was that we went up north to Humboldt County, where this one guy, this is another connection to Beau and this Yale business, this guy named Albert Gordon was living in a place called White Thorn. And that to me seemed like a hippie commune. That seemed like a real hippie scene there, that there were people way the hell out in the country growing a lot of their own food, maybe collecting food stamps, which we did at some points to, that seemed like a common scam those days -- grow as much of your own food as you could, but also get food stamps so you could buy chocolate. It just seemed like people were living in basic conditions, and it just had the feeling of being so far out of -- at that time, I guess, I had yet to live in the country myself, so I just saw these people growing food, and living way the hell on the bottom. And it was pretty attractive, although it was a little hard for me to envision myself out there. But, I don't remember San Francisco very well. I'm sure we went into San Francisco, and maybe we went to Haight-Ashbury, I don't remember. I'm sure you've talked to other people who have been around there. Anyway, after, I don't even remember how much time we spent at this place, maybe a week, maybe a day, I don't know, it's just all a blur to me now. I can remember doing stuff there, and being there for awhile. If you ever get this guy Albert, he'd be an interesting person to talk to. He's lives on an island off the coast of Maine. I can give you a phone number.

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Q: So then did you continue your trip driving back?

A: We started back, we got, in fact, Albert came with us, and we got as far as Reno, Nevada. We almost got arrested in Reno. We were in a parking lot. Some of us had gone in to buy some food in a grocery store, and the other people were out in the parking lot, and somebody called the cops and said there were a bunch of hippies in the parking lot, stealing stuff from cars or something like that. So I'd been in the grocery store. We came out, and there were about 20 cops, with our friends up against the van. And they held us there for at least an hour. One guy, I think Beau, had no identification with him. So I guess they were trying to run us down through the FBI. And I remember asking one of the cops why they were doing this when we hadn't been stealing or anything like that, and he said, "Well, you remember the Manson family. We've got to check you out." So they couldn't find any reason to arrest us, so they instead just escorted us out of town, just like a little parade, with the van surrounded by police cars and motorcycles. And we started out heading east, got about 50 miles or so, and the bus broke down, right near a place called Lovelock [?]. After spending a really miserable night there at a KOA campground, we decided to abandon the bus. The guy who owned it was in Portland, he'd stopped in Portland and decided to stay there. And so we didn't have the money to fix the bus so we just left it. I guess he came and picked it up. And we just, we all hitchhiked. After awhile we split up. I was with a girlfriend, and we went on our own, just got back East was quickly as we could. That was, I think, somewhere along there was when I decided to move to Skyfields, because I wasn't sure what I was going to do. But I remember thinking that was the only reasonable place I could think of. And maybe it was having been to this place Whitethorn, thinking, "Boy, it would be neat to live in the country!" And Skyfields was the country. Right on top of the Blue Ridge, beautiful place.

Q: Now as the land bought or rented?

A: Rented.

Q: And how many people lived there?

A: At that point, I think there were maybe 5. Five or 6. And eventually, a number of the people who lived on the highway ended up coming there and staying for awhile. And then a few friends. It turned into a place where people seemed to want similar things, but it had the drawback that we never really discussed it. I mean, there was the idea of buying land, and in fact, after awhile we started a land fund, and I think this was -- I always think of it as hippies trying to be capitalists, because we began saving money . . . this land fund. That was a time when there was a sense of commitment to staying together. We actually began saving money. The idea was that everybody would put in \$100 a month, or that was a goal. Some of us actually managed to do that. Lea and I did. And a couple other people.

Q: Did you have jobs?

A: Not really, well sort of, some jobs. I was teaching and doing some performing, and some people were doing construction jobs or carpentry jobs, and several people worked at least part time at the school at Barryville, Virginia, where Lea still works, a place called Graphton. So people were earning some money, and we were also growing a lot of our own food. This actually goes into the later '70s, I noticed the dates of your project, because this really extends to the mid- to late '70s.

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Q: Now it started around what? Seventy-two, '73?

A: I moved there in 1970.

Q: Okay, that early.

A: And Beau moved there at the same time, and a few of the other people came -- again, people were to some extent coming and going. But early '70's, but it's about a decade. I would say from '69 to '79 is the time when this particular group of people lived more or less together a significant portion of the time.

Q: That's a pretty long-lived group for the era.

A: But it wasn't constant. I mean, people were travelling, coming and going, and it was the mid-'70s that this sort of stronger coalition developed, that seemed to have a commitment to staying together. So the idea of buying land -- we considered everything from a remoter area in West Virginia, we looked at places in Vermont, a couple people all the way in British Columbia to look at places. Where it was hippies going capitalist, that was where things really, that sowed the seeds of destruction, because what happened was, somebody who we knew from around the area around Skyfields moved to northwestern Montana. And she wanted to have a house built, or renovated, and she asked a couple of people from Skyfields to come out there and help her with this house. A couple people did go out there. And when they got there, they saw what was going on there, which was there was a little boom going on. People were coming up buying land and wanting houses built, and they thought, "Wow, we could take our --" I don't remember, maybe we had \$15,000 saved at that time, " -- and we could turn that money around, we could buy land, build a house or two, and sell it for a huge profit, and then we'd have enough to buy a big piece of land somewhere." So, I remember they called us up, and talked us into it, taking the money out of the bank, and dropping it into this construction project. And then borrowing additional money. Money was borrowed from relatives and other friends, and eventually a bank to complete these houses, and then they didn't sell, the bottom dropped out of the market. It really -- some people stayed out there, some people got bitter, people had gone out there and put a lot of labor into it that hadn't put a lot of money in, some people like me had put money in but no labor. There was a real discrepancy, it was clear that it obviously hadn't been thought through, and I think the people that talked us into doing this felt guilty, and the people who let themselves get talked into giving the money into it felt stupid. "How can we be so dumb as to think this would work?" At that point, this is already 1979, obviously I skipped a whole lot, but that was where we fell apart as a group. Lea and I decided to get married.

Q: Were you able to get any money out of the --?

A: Now we do. It took almost 15 years before we saw any money back. Those of us who put some money, real money in, are getting some money every year now. We get this little Christmas present of a few hundred bucks. At least it's something.

Q: Yeah, but too late to help you then.

A: Yeah, it was a disaster as far as our desires to buy property together, but maybe it never would've worked. I try to think there was a reason why. For me, the times when we lived together at Skyfields,

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that was some of the greatest years of my life. I really loved being there. I loved what we were doing, which was raising food. I spent lots and lots of time in the garden. We had a lot of animals, we acquired a whole menagerie of farm animals, bees. And I really loved the sense of commitment that we had, even though a lot of it was unspoken, I really felt like it was a way that I wanted to follow. And I think I could go back to that. I really do think I could go back to that kind of life. I think you asked, you said last night, "What did you learn?" For me I learned that I could work in a group better than I can be in a marriage, for example. I think I do better in bigger groups than in smaller groups. I think what I do well in my job here is be part of a collective, part of a team. I guess either I learned that being at Skyfields, or I was already inclined toward that. This just follows it along in a different way. I learned a lot about living in the country.

Q: Practical skills?

A: A lot of practical skills. Gardening and animals. And I'm hoping that I haven't forgotten it all because I do think I'll go back to country living someday. I just moved to a house, I bought a house this year, and it has garden space. This is the first time I've had a garden in 7 years. And I'm still friends with most of the people, I still have really good feelings for most of the people, even though there were some very unhappy times. One of the things that was a real drawback to that group is the inability to talk about differences of opinion. There was a feeling that everybody should just agree -- what people referred to as "nonverbal communication," that we shouldn't have to talk about things, we shouldn't have to articulate our philosophy or differences, we should just be. We should just be, be together, have a good time, work together, and to some extent that was true. There was a real virtue in the work we did together. We cut all our own firewood, and that was a collective effort, that was a group effort, that everybody participated in. And there, I remember clearly the sense looking after a day of being out in the woods, and hauling all this wood back and stacking it, thinking how good we felt, and then eating a meal of food we grew ourselves. I just remember loving that sense of a kind of family feeling. And I think we did think of ourselves, although people from the outside might have defined it as a commune, I think we thought of ourselves as a family. And that this, for most of us I think it's true, we had some kind of unhappy family situations. I know it was true for me, that this group of people was your family, and you got what you needed from. In actual fact, I don't think we did get everything we needed from that, because there were conflicts that grew up that might have been resolved had we known how to discuss them and deal with them, but instead, people would keep the differences to themselves, and then they'd blow up at each other, and I think it lead to some negativity.

Q: I'm curious a little about some of the nuts and bolts of how Skyfields worked. I take it you weren't fully communal in the sense that you didn't pool all your income?

A: That's true.

Q: So you'd contribute, like you said, about \$100 a month for land, and maybe also . . .

A: Well the \$100 a month was for the land fund. Other bills, . . . I don't know. I suppose we just took every bill that came in and just split it equally. But I don't remember the mechanics. What I do remember is that we grew a lot of surplus food, we had animals that produced eggs and milk and that sort of thing, and so we didn't -- we sold some of that surplus to our neighbors, so that brought us in

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some money, which I'm sure just went back into buying food for the animals. But I frankly don't remember any formal arrangement about bill paying. But I also don't remember any conflicts about how we did it. So there must have been something that seemed equitable.

Q: Right. Did you have some sort of work-sharing system?

A: Not a formal system. It was not like say, I guess Twin Oaks had that.

Q: They do, a labor credit system.

A: No, there was nothing formal about that. When it worked well, it was because the people who were there all had a pretty good, strong commitment. I remember somebody, a friend of ours, somebody who didn't live there, after we split up, saying how they always felt like the thing that was most together at Skyfields was the animals and the garden thing. I imagine there were times when there were resentments about somebody doing, not pulling their weight. For example, I loved being in the gardens. And if other people didn't participate in the gardens, I don't think it bothered me that much, because for me, I was happy doing it all myself. But people did want to do it. Now there may have been times when I was out weeding and I thought, "God dammit! How come nobody else is out here, I'm the only one out here in the hot sun doing this?" But in my memory, and I may have idealized it over the years, in my memory, most of what happened about animals and work that needed to be done was shared. That included cooking, that included very extensive preserving of food -- freezing, canning food, smoking bacon, all those kind of farm stuff that we learned as we went along.

Q: So you weren't vegetarians, I take it?

A: No, we were not vegetarians.

Q: Did you try to eat a whole foods diet though? Were you interested in health and nutrition?

A: Yeah, I think so. We were interested in eating well. Food was important to us. Eating well was important, cooking was important. The meals that people prepared were just awesome. And a lot of it was with our own food. I remember making croissants there, for example. We made all our own bread. But we went to pretty extensive lengths at times to make real gourmet kinds of things. Food was real important to us. We were totally omnivorous. We had our own pigs. We had cows, goats. We got really good at raising chickens for meat. We had turkey, geese -- it was quite a packed barnyard.

Q: It sounds like it. Now, did you all live in a farmhouse together?

A: There was a big-ish farmhouse, but people began to branch out into the property, in a couple cases, taking old sheds and converting them into living space. One couple had built a small cabin, and Lea and I put an addition onto it, and that became our bedroom. We also had a room in the house. So some people were just in the farmhouse, and there were a few out-buildings that people built or converted.

Q: And then the people who lived in the out-buildings, would they come to the farmhouse for their meals?

A: Yeah.

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Q: And did you have regular meetings, scheduled meetings?

A: We had occasional meetings, I think. I can remember some. They were probably about pretty practical stuff, like the gardens. In fact, if you ever do talk to Albert Gordon, he'll probably say he got so sick of talking about the gardens, he never wants to hear another word about gardens! I can't remember that we had any formal process in that sense.

Q: Like, did you have a way of making decisions? Like did you follow consensus, or would you vote on things?

A: Yeah, we probably did. It probably tended to be consensus. But I think what we had were a few people who were pretty strong personalities, and other people who were willing to let what they thought, rule us. There was no single personality that dominated, but I think that there was a sense for people who weren't living there that a couple people had the stronger voices. In my mind, we were all fairly individualistic, and would've thought that we all had an equal say, potentially, in what went on there. Frankly, I don't remember if we had votes on things, we probably did. I don't remember if we had serious disagreements about anything, we probably did, I'm sure we did. I couldn't -- it would take me a long time, maybe I never could drudge out a single example of us voting on anything, but we must have. Because things had to be decided. Maybe if you talked to somebody else.

Q: I was going to ask you about a shared ideology or philosophy . . .

A: As I said before, if anything it was "Let's get away from the rat race, let's get away from the 9-5 job, let's get away from the lifestyle that our parents brought us up in, the middle-class, suburbia, perfect lawn, country-club, two-kids and a garage . . . " you know. That existence didn't appeal to us. I think every though some of us ended up in jobs that are very consuming, and even end up working for the fed, there's still a feeling that we're not [tape ends] . . . walk into the house, the farmhouse, turning around saying to me, "Wouldn't you rather just have a nice apartment in the city?" And I didn't know what to say, I just was so stunned that she would even think that. And I've thought about that over the years. I think that my parents came out of -- they were second generation Americans, their parents had grown up in Eastern Europe, in a sort of, from what I know of my ancestors, they were peasants, they were people who lived in the country, or in small towns, and had very little. And I think in some conscious or unconscious way, my mother must've seen me sort of reverting to what she must've thought of as a savage existence. And it was horrifying to her.

Q: Did they ever feel more comfortable about it?

A: I don't think so.

Q: So where they happy when the group broke up and you left?

A: I suspect they were happy when Lea and I got married and moved to our own place. Even though I still didn't have a real job, and it was still out in the country.

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Q: Are there things from your communal lifestyle that you bring forward into your life today? You mentioned your garden.

A: Yeah, but in my everyday life here -- a lot of what I enjoy here is being a part of a group of folks working together toward a common goal. And I, as I said before, I don't know whether I just had a natural inclination to that kind of existence. A certain amount of what I do in my work here is stuff I do alone, but most of the projects I work on involve other people. And that includes my work as a musician, being in a group. Groups are important to me. How much I really learned from the experiences of living at Skyfields and the place on Lee Highway, I don't know. I think I learned some things about the give-and-take that's necessary to function in a group. And I think that I still have a kind of idealism that predates even joining groups. I think, I mean even now, I bought this house, but I've got housemates, and I find I can deal with that, I can do that. And I like it, I like being able to share things with people. I mean I guess if I had to sum up any kind of philosophy, I think people can work well in situations where you can give to other people, and maybe hope that that comes around to you too, that people will share experiences and share work and share, I don't know, share experiences that will lead to better cooperation between people instead of struggling with people. I think that's what it was about, being in a communal living situation. I think it was pooling efforts, and not everybody out for themselves kind of thing. I don't really think that's necessarily basic human nature. But, I think it's important for people to learn that. We'd be in a lot less of a mess if more people understood that.

Q: As a final questions, if a group of people were going to live together communally, what advice would you offer them?

A: That's a tough one. I was going to tell you, I had forgotten to mention an experience that predated living together on Lee Highway, which is I spent about four months living on a kibbutz in Israel.

Q: Oh you did? What was that like?

A: Well, that was a real commune. That to me was the pure communal spirit. And maybe that was part in answer to your question -- that to me seemed like a kind of existence that people ought to be doing. That was, people who had commitment to living together, who in fact, in a way, had not other viable way to live in that particular environment. Communal living was, for them, essential to survival. It equated with survival. And I found myself really caught up in it. Now this was 1967, it was right after the 6-day war, it was kind of a golden period in Israel, and although I was not particularly religious then, and I'm definitely not now, I felt a real pull to be a part of that and to be, that this is where I belong, that this was a right thing to do and a right place to live. But I didn't stay. I wanted to, but I didn't. I don't know what advice I'd give to people. I'm still trying to learn about communication and how to be open, and I guess that could apply to any living situation, if you're with one other person or you're with a group of people. There's no way to be successful unless you know how to communicate. But that's easier said than done. Most people in most situations are inclined to keep a lot to themselves. Art of compromise? There's a lot to be said for communal living, I think. As I said before, I could go back to it. This guy Beau that I mentioned to you a couple of times, he was here a couple months ago, and we started musing about what it would be like. Here we are, we're now 50-ish, I don't know how much longer I would stay in this kind of work. And if I left a regular job, what would I do, where would I go? It's interesting to think about what it would be like to gather a few people together, find some land. In a way, I'm stuck in this

Interview with Howard Bass

Interviewer: Deborah Altus

July 12, 1996

idealized vision I think that I still have, the good times we shared, closeness that we shared. What it would be like to go back to it, I don't know, but I think I could do it. I really do. I think -- a friend of mine, I have a really good friend in New Mexico that I've talked this over with, this idea of -- New Mexico's a place that I'm really drawn to, spend a lot of time out there. And I've talked to him about the idea of getting land in New Mexico. Maybe not necessarily a group house kind of thing, but shared land, held in common by a number of people who've shared an idea of cooperation, an ability to work together when it's necessary, respect for each other, respect for the land. That sort of thing. It's funny, a lot of my work here has dealt with tribal people, Native Americans, and I remember that when I first met the people that ended up at Skyfields, there was this introduction to Native American music, and again they kind of idealized it probably. I don't know. I think group living is fun, it really has a lot to be said for it. What I couldn't do would be to move to a place like Twin Oaks, where there's a philosophy that's been established by a previous entity.

Q: Is it because you didn't have a part in designing the place?

A: Maybe. Maybe if I were to do it I would rather go into it fresh. With just a sense, I think I have a pretty good intuition of other people, most of the people that I trust. If I could name half a dozen or so people, come together with them, and move to New Mexico, somewhere, New England, I could see it. I could see trying that. But maybe it will never happen. A lot of people who come here, like I did, thought they'd be there for a few years. Now it's ten years. Maybe 20 years before I know it.

Q: Oh I hope you follow your dream though, it's wonderful. Are you talking like around the Taos area?

A: Well, I don't. There's so many people in Taos. It's much more crowded than it used to be. But I have a lot of friends in New Mexico. A lot of my work here has taken me out there. Who knows.

Q: Thank you so much for your time.