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Q: Could you tell us about your background before you came across Banner?

IS: I come from the northeast of England, which is fairly obvious. I was originally trained as a mechanical engineer up there. I met Electra, who I'm now married to, when I came down to Birmingham to meet a friend of mine who was at Birmingham University. Anyway, to cut a very long story short, I ended up moving to Birmingham in about 1971. We were part of a group that was intending to set up a free school. That has different connotations now. It's not like Michael Godfrey's free schools, it was much more a kind of organic local community based thing, like the at Fossil Heath Community School, that was the kind of idea. Anyway, what we actually did was we built an adventure playground which was on the grounds of Norton Hall which at that time was derelict. So Norton Hall was derelict and we just kind of moved in, cleared out some rooms in it, built the adventure playground, and ran that for a couple of years with quite a lot of involvement from the moms and so on. The kids had nothing to do, so the adventure playground was a really good opportunity. Out of that grew Saltley Action Centre, which later became the Law Centre of course, and in fact the trajectory of that is a little bit like Banner in a way. It started off as a local community based nonprofessional organization and turned into a professionalized I'm not sure what the word would be, but the kind of thing where local people just kind of get edged away from it, probably not deliberately but that's what happens, they feel as if they're not really part of it anymore. So that happened with the Action Centre. As part of being involved in Norton Hall and the action centre, one of the things that we did was that we ran a festival in Saltley. That included a lot of people. As I remember, and it may not be entirely accurate, but that was the first time I came across Banner. Banner actually did a production of the Collier Laddie at Saltley St. Peters Training College, which was a teacher training college in Saltley. I was very impressed by that because, as I say, I come from the northeast. My grandfather was a miner

and I'm very interested in the history of the mines. Also, I've had a longstanding interest in traditional music, so it kind of brought those things together. I wasn't aware of the radio ballads at the time, but rapidly became aware of them and understood kind of what Banner was about and what they were up to, but didn't get involved myself at that stage. Over the next two, three or four years I actually organized a number of theatre groups to come to Norton Hall, one called Timer I think. At the time there were a whole lot of what you might call alternative theatre groups around and it was a good opportunity to kind of put things on in the hall that used the building for things other than the kids' playground. I'm pretty sure that Banner would've done at least one show there, but I don't remember the specifics of it. So that's where I was at that time. Then for some reason, I can't remember what the reason was, I started to become involved in Banner.

Q: When was that?

IS: That must've been mid '70s, '75 or '76, maybe '77. The first thing I did was I was involved with lighting. John Fryer had always done lighting and I don't know if he wanted to kind of reduce his involvement or what, but anyway there seemed to be this opening. Or maybe I just went in and took it away from him, I can't remember; I hope not. But anyway, I found lighting quite interesting, having an engineering background and kind of not being interested at all in the actual acting side of it, but the technical side was interesting. So I started to do that and I think that probably the first show that I was involved with for that would've been The Great Divide. I moved on from there to taking more of a part in the musical side of it doing sound effects, music and so on. I remember The Great Divide was one where I took on the concertina part from Chris Rogers and guitar as well from, I think John Wrench used to do quite a lot of that. So I was kind of doing sound effects, guitar and concertina, which at times was a little bit tricky to get all these things together. For some reason, some of the concertina parts were really bizarre keys, like F sharp minor or something, which I wasn't a particularly good concertina player so I had to get my fingers on the right buttons to start with, but usually managed to cope with that. I was involved in those aspects probably for three or four years and I think the Saltley Gate show I was involved in those kinds of things. It's difficult to remember which particular shows they were. Then for some reason, and I think it was around the time when Frances turned up and

it became more professional, Bernard started to do the adman, he became kind of an adman person, so I spent quite a lot of time helping him with that.

Q: In what way?

IS: Well for instance I organized a tour in London, and I don't remember which show it was, but there were venues like the Drill Hall, which was quite a well-known venue at the time, and various community groups. I spent three or four days in London sleeping on people's floors and going around arranging this particular tour. It was the only tour I ever did because I didn't actually think it was something I was very good at. But I managed to do it and I think it went off quite well. I think that was about the same time as the kind of professionalism and the core group and the main group split came about. That was something that I really didn't feel particularly comfortable about. It wasn't the right direction for me because I certainly didn't want to be a professional theatre person. I felt as though it put a barrier between those people who were in the core group and in the main group, and I got the impression I wasn't the only one who felt that; I felt it was a kind of generalized undercurrent if you like. It certainly seemed from that point on as though the core group kind of went off and did its thing, and people just dropped away from the main group. Whether that's true or not, I don't know, but that's certainly the feeling that I had. As my own life was changing a little bit at the time as well – I'd started working in the computer industry – my job was more involved and I had less time to spend doing things. So I kind of drifted away from Banner at that point.

Q: Do you know when that was roughly?

IS: I think it must have been around '81. I did a course in computer program, which was something at that time you could go on a three month or six month course. I did at that at Dudley Tech, and that was at that time, I think that was '81. I remember persuading one of the other people in that course to come to a Banner gig that I think I was still doing sound for. That would've been probably '81 but I don't remember for sure. The only other thing I remember, I have a distinct memory of sewing puppets, I think in your back room, and

Frances was kind of leading that. I couldn't quite work out why we were sewing puppets, I really didn't understand the concept.

Q: Were the puppets for On the Brink?

IS: I think it was a building show, the UCAT. I remember also doing some interviews for the UCAT show and also some for the British motor trade show.

Q: Housing Game?

IS: The Housing Game, that sounds familiar.

Q: In '81.

IS: Is that when it was?

Q: According to the Banner website, Housing Game was in '79 but you might have continued touring. But then the core group did Steel about the steel workers in Colby, so that took people like Renata, Fran Rifkin, Peter Yates out for nearly a year. Then there was On the Brink, which was the motor trade show.

IS: I remember doing the motor trade show and I remember interviewing people in the pub. I remember doing that with Dave Rogers and other people, sitting in there. That was when there were loads of strikes and things going on, so people were kind of coming off the picket lines and being interviewed.

Q: Tell us more about the process of creating a show with Banner.

IS: I can only give you what my impression of it is. As I understand it, certainly in the early days it was very much following the radio ballad format. It was the idea of using actuality, in other words interviewing people using their words rather than writing a script that was written by a professional script writer. It was taking what people said, people involved in the

actual situation that you were trying to document, and using their words to put together into a script, and mixing that with a lot of photographs and traditional based music as well. So it was kind of those three elements. In fact, the slides and the photographs were something that had been added after the radio ballads, because obviously if they're on the radio nobody would see them so it's a bit pointless. I always felt that that was a really powerful way of telling a story. Some of the shows really stick in my mind. The Saltley Gate one, I remember that one with Charlie Parker pushing little lorries about on the ground. This may be a totally false memory, but I remember they had props and one of them was these little lorries. He was the capitalist of course, as he always was, with his top hat and all the rest of it, and he was pushing these lorries about trying to get them into Saltley Gate. I remember The Great Divide because Peter I think was by far a better actor than anybody else who was in the group. I always used to actually be able to speak to him afterwards, because he always took the part of the Nazi and whatever, so he'd be standing up there spouting all this stuff and then we'd go to the bar afterwards. I always had difficulty in separating Pete the person from the role he was playing. I don't think anybody else was particularly convincing, shall we say, but he always was. So that was really good. But the process, I don't think I was part of the process to a great extent; I think I would kind of be dipping in and out of it. Things were generally fairly formed when I arrived, so I wasn't really involved in that. I remember rehearsing over a shop on the Soho Road. It was fairly near where Charlie Parker lived. He lived further up Soho Road on the left hand side as you're going out of town.

Q: St. James Road I think, yes.

IS: And his partner Rhoma, she was a teacher. We used to rehearse above this shop and I can't remember what the shop sold. But anyway, they had this big room upstairs and we used to rehearse there. I remember furious discussions about the fact that Charlie always just wanted to run through the whole thing, and other people thought we should concentrate on particular parts that maybe weren't working so well. So there was this kind of, do we just go straight through from beginning to end or do we concentrate on a bit? I think maybe that's when the kind of ideas of some of the more theatrical ideas were around, rather than just kind of bumbling along in the way that we did. Having said that, I

thought all the shows were very powerful, although quite often quite small audiences. I think a lot of the feedback that came from the audiences was very good, and people enjoyed them and felt as though they were contributing something.

Q: Why were they powerful, in your view?

IS: I think it was very much using people's own authentic words and getting that direct, unmediated view of a situation. The words didn't always kind of, it wasn't always kind of very consistent, but it felt as though you were in that situation, it really did. I think the slides really helped to do that. And the music, some of the music I think is absolutely superb. The actual Great Divide song I think is fabulous, and lots of the other ones, like Close the Gates, that still if I hear it or think about it is really, really powerful.

Q: Do you have any memorable events or performances?

IS: I remember playing in Shrewsbury to two people. I have an idea that that was a gig I actually arranged. It would've been at a local trade union branch I think. I remember going across there to organize it. The guy I met over there would be the branch secretary or whatever and he said, oh ya we'll get loads of people, don't worry about it. I gave him all this stuff and he said, ya we'll give it out at the branch meetings. Then of course we're sitting there waiting for everybody to turn up, and this guy arrived and probably one or two others, and that was it. We did the show, which at the time I was doing music I think. That sticks in my mind more because it was quite funny rather than it was a particularly dramatic or powerful event. All this was such a long time ago it's quite hard to remember details or even remember what I felt like about some of these things.

Q: Was that a regular occurrence, playing to small audiences?

IS: No. I remember playing to quite big audiences, but it was quite difficult to know whether it was going to be a big audience or not. I remember the one I mentioned where I persuaded somebody from my course to come along, that was packed out. It was at a workman's club over Dudley way, and I can't remember exactly where it was but it was kind of in the black

country somewhere. It was absolutely packed, and I think that was a trade union branch again. So you couldn't really predict it, and sometimes it worked well and sometimes it didn't.

Q: What did your friend make if it?

IS: Actually quite impressed and actually immigrated to Australia, but I don't think the show had anything to do with that.

Q: How old were you when you arrived in '71?

IS: 22.

Q: And how old were you when you left?

IS: Left Banner? Early 30s I suppose. I would say I was only really involved for four or five years, and my involvement varied during that time as well.

Q: Was that the case for a lot of people?

IS: Ya I think so. I think a lot of people, obviously one of the sources for Banner was the Grey Cock Folk Club. I remember going a couple of times. I was actually interested in traditional music but for some reason I didn't like the Grey Cock. I felt it was a bit too purist and they'd taken it a bit too far. You had to be very quiet and it was all a bit odd. I forgot what the question was now. Was my involvement similar to other people's, I think was the question. I don't really know, because usually the only time I saw the people was rehearsals or gigs or whatever. I don't know whether other people were doing other things in between, I guess they were.

Q: How large was the group that was involved typically in a Banner show?

IS: I'd guess between 10 and 20, sometimes more than that and sometimes a bit less than that. The average show would probably about eight or ten actual people acting in it, and then there'd musicians and technical bits and bobs and so on.

Q: When you were involved in the playground and action centre, did the other people there intersect with Banner, or was that a completely different group?

IS: I think there was a lot of cross fertilization. There were a lot of people who I would know who I'd kind of see in other contexts, but there wasn't a direct connection. It was something that, because I was interested in playing music, that's probably why I got involved with Banner, because I was interested in the kind of musical side of it. There were other people I played music with. I played with Dave Dale a lot and Ian and I used to play in pubs, sometimes just the two of us, sometimes one or two other people. So we'd kind of do that sort of thing. We used to run, not a folk club but kind of musical evenings in the Havelock pub in Saltley. I don't know if you came to any of them. They were quite good, I enjoyed them. People like Pete came and John Wrench and various other people, and we used to put a little program together and we'd all have a good time. It's interesting that Dave Dale never showed any interest at all in Banner at that time. I used to kind of say, oh you could come along. I think he thought it was, he probably thought it was a bit middle class actually, which I think probably it was. Going back to the kind of core group main group, most of the main group were people like teachers and people who were quite well educated, and they weren't part of the real working class, if I can use that terminology. I don't know if Dave felt a bit uncomfortable about that, but I don't think I ever successfully got him to come out to anything. He was a great guitar player, he wrote some good songs, and I know when he started doing things with Dave Rogers they worked very well together, and Dave Rogers' guitar playing improved immensely at the same time. I haven't seen Dave Dale for ages and I don't even know what's happened to him.

Q: We went to record them about a week ago. They've moved, him and Miriam and some of the kids, to Portland in Dorset. Lucy still lives in Berwood so Miriam comes here at least once a year. It was wonderful to see them after all this time.

IS: Yes, because he used to pop in here every now and then if he was passing. It was really nice to see him. It was just one of those things that if there wasn't a reason then it just didn't happen.

Q: You've always lived here?

IS: For 30 years. We lived in Saltley, well when I first came to Birmingham Electra was living in a shared house in Bolsow Heath. Then we moved to Saltley and we were in a shared house there, and we were all involved with the playground and the Saltley Community Association at Norton Hall. Then we moved into a little flat and then we bought a terraced house, and then we moved here. It was kind of what people do.

Q: You said you played music – what did you play?

IS: Kind of folk based stuff – instruments, guitar, concertina; a little bit of fiddle, not very good.

Q: Did you sing?

IS: Occasionally. I never thought of myself as a singer, I prefer playing.

Q: Do you still play?

IS: Not in public and I don't play as much as I used to, which is quite sad really. I always thought when I retired I'd spend more time playing, but I don't.

Q: Did you feel that you learnt from Banner Theatre in the time that you were with them? Did you develop anything, and conversely, what did you bring to the company?

IS: I definitely learnt things, I learnt technical things. For instance, I was talking about playing the concertina in odd keys. I was pushed into doing things that I probably wouldn't have done. There it was in F sharp minor or whatever it was, and that was to suit

somebody's voice so that's what it had to be. There were bits of guitar parts that were quite challenging, because quite often they would kind of come out of nowhere, so there would be silence and then I'd have to play into the silence, which is quite a hard thing to do. So technically yes. In terms of lighting, I actually went on a lighting course at the arts lab in Aston, and that was really interesting. But I don't think I ever really used much of what I learnt there. What I found astonishing was how you could use light to move the focus of the action and kind of bring it up on some areas and down on others. If you do that subtly it can just make the audience look at different places, and I found that quite fascinating. But I never really took it any further. I suppose what I brought to it was just the skills that I had already. Like I say, I don't think I was ever really involved in developing the shows. I would kind of add bits to it but mostly in a musical sense rather than anything else. I'd kind of say, well we could do this or we could use this other instrumentation or we could do that – those kinds of things.

Q: What about the politics?

IS: I tended to keep out of it. I don't remember there being particular political struggles, although I'm sure there were. It was quite a disparate group. You had Charlie, who was quite autocratic. Then you had guys like Dave Rogers, who were not autocratic but had particular views in a particular way. It's interesting because we all have very definite views but I don't remember ever thinking about Banner as being a place to expound them. I don't know why.

Q: The perception that it was middle class – did that ever change?

IS: I don't know. I think it went into a different trajectory with the professionalism and kind of took it away from that, because I suppose it was middle class because the people at the time to get involved with that kind of activity generally had a job that allowed them to do it. Those were kind of middle class jobs, in a way. If you'd been working on the track and Leyland you probably didn't feel like going out in the evening and pretending to be somebody else. Or maybe you did, because there were people who did. But it always felt to me as though the bulk of the people who were in it were kind of almost like middle class ?,

who had sound political views but they weren't coming from the community that most of the shows were about.

Q: I get a sense that the main group felt ownership of the company.

IS: Definitely, ya. I don't think I ever felt as though it was hierarchical, although Charlie was fairly autocratic I didn't feel he was the boss. I think he had a definite influence and his background in the radio ballads and working with Ewan MacColl and all that kind of thing were clearly strong influences. But I don't think that people deferred to him particularly. I think it was quite a democratic feeling group.

Q: What was your motivation to being involved?

IS: I enjoyed doing it and I thought it did have a contribution to make. This was the '70s where we had the IMF coming in making all sorts of demands, and the ? government caving in, and ? doing various things that none of us were particularly happy with. Mind you, the ? Thatcher, it was better than it might have been. One of the shows I remember is Dr. Healey's Casebook about the cuts, which was around that time. That was one that I was quite involved in, which I'd forgotten all about actually.

Q: How were you involved in that one?

IS: I think I was doing mostly lighting for that.

Q: Do you remember if it was '77 or '78?

IS: No.

Q: What were the challenges of a show that used back projection?

IS: I never felt it was particularly a difficult thing to do, because the actual action on the stage was in front of that. It could be that I was totally doing it wrong, I don't know, because

in that course I went on I hadn't had anything to do with back projection. I don't know, so I can't really answer that.

Q: Did you have to train anyone else?

IS: I don't remember doing so, no.

Q: So you don't know who might have replaced you?

IS: No.

Q: What do you remember about Renata or Pete or Bob?

IS: I don't remember Renata very well, and Bob only peripherally. I always got on well with Pete, I liked him a lot. He always struck me as really a superb musician and a very good actor and a nice person. I was absolutely shocked when I heard he'd died, that was quite devastating. He was somebody I had great regard for. Charlie I always thought was a bit more distant, partly because of the age difference so he always felt a bit like a father figure in a way, plus his background commanding submarines in the war and things like that was a bit alien to me. But I always respected him certainly and liked him. I always thought it was quite funny because he used to try and imitate my accent sometimes, which he was very bad at doing. I always thought, well he wouldn't do that if it was a Pakistani accent, because it would be seen as racist, but he was quite happy to do it with a northeastern accent. I never actually said that to him, I just was sort of quietly amused by this. But ya, they would be the two people who I would remember more than the others. I don't remember Renata at all really; that's the first time I've heard her name for decades.

Q: What about Rhoma, did you work with her?

IS: No, I remember meeting her occasionally but didn't actually work with her. . . . I'm really interested to see the whole thing because I think it'll be fascinating. What'll be interesting is

different people's perceptions of probably the same events, because I'm sure they'll all be quite different.

Q: Did you keep in touch with Banner after you left?

IS: Not to any great extent. If I saw there was a show going on, I'd sometimes go to it, but not in touch in the sense of actually having anything to do with it. In fact, the first time I'd spoken to anybody for ages was when you told me about the modern computer system, which was about three years ago. That was really quite interesting because that was something I could do. It was worthwhile and I enjoyed doing it. It was nice to get back with Dave again.

[END]