



more teachers than anything else, but some were in industry. Fred Grindrod, whose name you must've come across, he was one of the, I'm not sure if Fred was in it. Jane Morris was. They both worked for different companies who made cardboard boxes, packaging; one of them worked for Birmingham Box. So it was a mixture of people. So we did that and then Roy Palmer wrote a script I think for Charlie called The Funny Rigs of Good and Tender Hearted Masters about a carpet weavers' strike in Kidderminster. We did that in two or three places, starting in Kidderminster itself. Then Philip Denallen started making film documentary updates of the radio ballads, and he did The Big Hower, which turned into, I can't remember whether Philip still called it The Big Hower. But we took part of the original script for The Big Hower and then updated it to do it was a piece of theatre, and realized that the Birmingham Midland Folk Centre was not a catchy headline. So Charlie came up with the idea of calling it Banner, and that's how Banner came into being; we wanted a good name for Collier Laddie. That was the first big production that Banner did under its own name.

Q: Do you know the dates of when those things happened? My understanding is that the name Banner Theatre was adopted in 1974 and that Collier Laddie had started in '73.

JF: It could be. Maybe we'd done Collier Laddie and realized that if we were going to market it we couldn't, so Collier Laddie may have come before the name Banner. There may be in that box documentary evidence of this, which we'll have a look for after.

Q: The script of Of One Blood you showed me was from 1966. Was that the first one?

JF: I think that was the very first. We did that for antiapartheid at Dr. Johnson House.

Q: Who was involved in the first Collier Laddie?

JF: For Collier Laddie, Bob Etheridge, Dick Hamilton, Pam Bishop but I don't think Allan, Doug and Barbara Miller, I was, Doreen was, Joan Smith was, and Joy. Joy was always the narrator because she'd got such a good narrating voice. Joy could've worked for the BBC. Then Rhoma Bowdler came in; I think she probably came in for Collier Laddie. She'd heard

Charlie speaking at the college, did a bit of recording on her own, discovered George Dunn, and it led to some interesting field recordings of singers which are now commercially available. Rhoma was theatre trained so she started talking to Charlie and trying to persuade him that theatre could be something other than sort of talking heads, Under Milkwood sort of thing that you could see using documentary.

Q: Do you think Rhoma influenced the way Banner developed?

JF: Yes, she got the theatre into Banner you could almost say. Charlie got the documentary and the music but if it came to theatrical ideas Rhoma was an essential part of it.

Q: Can you give us some examples of the work that she did?

JF: In terms of staging and movement, positioning on the stage, not standing in the row. It wasn't that bad with Charlie but Rhoma had got better ideas and had people moving, so voices moved as the action moved and the centre of focus of things would move. Probably she influenced the lighting but I think *Of One Blood* when we did it in the theatre, because it had got a reasonable lighting setup. There was general lighting but for a couple of bits there was very sharply focused lighting. We'd always used sound effects I think but we didn't on *Of One Blood* or *Funny Rigs*, but certainly we were using tape on *Collier Laddie* because Charlie had got the original effects tapes from *The Big Hower*. We used stuff that, Charlie had got hours of tape of stuff that he had recorded, lots of it's in the Parker archive I'm sure. You want the sound of something down in the coalmine, Charlie got the tape of it, or going up and down in the cage, or the man riding cars.

Q: You talked about attending Charlie's classes. What were they?

JF: Charlie did classes for several years on English folk song for the WEA. He was doing them at the same time as they were doing the last radio ballads. So Charlie would come in late lugging a huge tape recorder, having thought about what he was going to do for the next two hours on the bus. He'd got lots of examples of stuff, and Charlie would just talk. People knew songs but he would introduce you to more material and you'd be sort of referring to

Cecil Sharpe's book on English folk song, Burt Lloyd's books, and he was very influenced at the time by George Thompson. So there would be a political analysis of what was going on based on George Thompson's Aeschylus and Athens. It's a classic Marxist analysis of classic Greek theatre. I've got a copy. If I'm wrong, I'll give you a correct title, but I'm sure that's the right title.

Q: What was it that attracted you to this environment?

JF: It was the music I really went for. I was buying records at the time.

Q: Records?

JF: Pieces of vinyl. Some of them were quite heavy and you had a special thing that went round and round 78 times per minute.

Q: What happened after Collier Laddie?

JF: I performed in Of One Blood but I don't think I was in Funny Rigs, because I did the lighting and the sound effects. From the very early days I was just involved in the technical side, so I'd be setting up the lighting and the speakers and that sort of thing, and running stuff. Then we started adding slides. Centre 42 had bought a back projection screen. Centre 42 was this thing set up by Arm Wescar, it's clause 42 of the old labour party constitution promoting the arts or something, I can't remember. But there was this Centre 42 thing and they had a play called The Maker and the Tool that was written probably by Charlie, but I know there was a lot of Wescar input. They had a huge back projection screen, something like 16 x 10 or something like that, which you had to put up a huge frame and lace it to. It was like reefing a sail before the performance and lifting a huge wooden box, so transporting it was interesting. At the time, I was running a minibus, in fact it was a crew bus, the ones with the sideways seats which are now completely illegal. But it meant I could put all this stuff into the minibus and I could take all the stuff to performances. I bought it for school trips because I got so fed up with hiring a minibus to take kids from school, so I bought as a useful sort of thing. My involvement was going and building this framework out

of dexion so we could lash the screen to it. Then there were two projectors at the back which had come from Centre 42, they were old Elvis projectors which had a very complicated metal slide change mechanism. All the slides had to be glass mounted in metal frames in these metal carriers that jammed all over the place. Pete used to do them, Pete used to be behind the stage operating them. Then we thought, well this is getting absolutely ridiculous. We thought, well scaffolding might be better than dexion. At the time, Kevin Murphy worked for a firm and he actually designed scaffolding. So we told Kevin what we wanted and Kevin said, well we don't really do anything like that but I don't see any reason why we can't actually make it; they're nonstandard parts that you want, but they're perfectly makeable. So Kevin got us this frame, which was part standard self-assembly scaffolding components, the lightweight stuff for the amateur rather than the professional stuff, and then he had some extra long pieces made that you could just loop on. You couldn't carry the 16 foot so they were halved and there was a tube so you could join them together with a bolt and we could do this. Of course we didn't want it to look like a scaffolding construction so it was all specially sprayed black. He said he was just finishing this off when the manager came around and asked what was going on. Well it was a special order, they wanted it black. The customer asked for it black so we're doing it black. Oh, he said, that's fine, I'll have to remember that and offer it to other people in future. Then we were carrying a load of scaffolding around, which was very much quicker to put up instead of fiddling around with dexion and bolting everything and finding the right side. That took ages, whereas the scaffolding would go up in just a few minutes. Then we still had to lash the screen onto it.

Q: What is dexion?

JF: Dexion, it's slotted metal. They use it for shelving in warehouses and places like that. They're L-shaped pieces and you put bolts through, bolted together. Really it's for shelving but you can use it for other purposes.

Q: Kevin told us that when he produced the scaffolding rig you had a bit of a disagreement about the weight of the top bar.

JF: Probably we wondered if it could be done in aluminum rather than steel. I don't remember this, but thinking about it we probably, because they did it in an aluminum version as well as a steel version, because the aluminum stuff is a great deal more expensive. So there was probably a discussion on that, and we had the steel.

Q: Why was the decision made to do Collier Laddie?

JF: It was simply because it tied up with Philip's television thing. Philip had started doing new recordings with Charlie. Charlie was going out there getting new material and they were rewriting The Big Hewer. As I remember it, probably the last half of The Big Hewer was used for the first half of the television documentary and then with a new ending. Roughly speaking, we took that and Charlie, maybe encouraged by Philip... Philip certainly had, he was never involved with us directly but he was obviously talking a lot to Charles and they were bouncing ideas off each other, that this would make a good stage show. So Charles suggested that we should do it and so we did, and one thing led to another. I don't think there was any external thing, there was no sort of particular political event or anything like that led to it. Okay the situation was always ripe, but because they were doing the thing on the television and there was the possibility of a script and it meant that the folk centre could do something else, it was done that way.

Q: What kind of receptions did you get from audiences?

JF: Pretty good. I can't remember where we did it first, but we certainly took it to two miners' galas – we took it to the Yorkshire miners' gala and we took it to the South Wales miners' gala, where we discovered that you could not use back projection in daylight, certainly not with all these projectors. So we just did it with the screen as a backdrop, because we'd all set up and we just could not get it to work. We could get two television sized pictures but nothing that an audience could see, so there had to be a lot more thinking about that. Then we were asked to do it for other mining groups and we took it down to Canterbury and we did it at a miners' welfare in Astrid Gunmize or somewhere like that, as well as doing it for the more general trade union groups, I can't remember where. You remember the big ones but you can't remember all the small ones.

Q: What was the trade union connection?

JF: Having got it, I think Charlie then wrote to trade union contacts. It wasn't just Charlie, probably other people that did it on Charlie's behalf. In fact, I have a feeling I did some of them. But saying that we've got this, do you want to put it on as a fundraiser or just as an entertainment for a trade union group.

Q: Did you get paid fees, and what did you do with the money?

JF: I think there was some expenses came in. Most of the expenses that came in actually went to Charlie because Charlie had laid out an awful lot of money of his own doing this, and this was a way of Charlie getting some of it back. There were no fees to anybody performing and I don't think we ever got expenses. Sometimes we got accommodation and sometimes we got a meal, but no more than that. In fact, Charlie's relationship with the BBC was getting increasingly fractious and I think they pretty well threw him out, which meant Charlie wasn't earning any money and he was still laying out money on this. There was a thing called the Banner shares where several of us chipped in and we bought shares in Banner just to raise some money on the understanding that one day it would come back again. Well it never did. It led to a bit of difficulty because one person actually said that they wanted the money back for their shares. In the end we sort of finished up almost taking legal advice on where we stood on it, and he didn't get it.

Q: When was the share system instituted?

JF: I honestly can't remember; it was fairly early on.

Q: When was the dispute about trying to get the money back?

JF: Two or three years later, I think. The meeting where it sort of blew up was here. We were sort of sitting around the table in the breakfast room and someone was demanding it. We were going to have a meeting and then have a bit of a party afterwards, and I was

delegated to throw the person out who was being no longer welcome. Everybody's on speaking terms again but it was interesting at the time.

Q: What happened after Collier Laddie?

JF: There were then more shows. There was another race show called The Great Divide that I think might've been next. . . . The Shrewsbury one and the Chile one were much smaller shows and only involved, because they tended to be daytime anyway, the performances, so they tended to involve people who could go out in the daytime because they hadn't got fulltime jobs. So they were always centred around Dave and Charlie, Dave Dale maybe if they wanted a musician. Dave Dale was in right from the word go. Bob Etheridge I think maybe was retired then and he could go, Bill Shreeve possibly. It was almost the beginning of the core group. It wasn't the actual core group but it was the idea you've got a core group and a bigger group. I was never involved in the Shrewsbury one; I don't think I actually ever saw it, if the truth be told. The same with the Chile one. It was on street corners or in benefits but it was very much a daytime thing.

Q: There was almost one called Sellout of the Century, as part of a campaign against cuts in the NHS. That would've been a daytime show, presumably.

JF: Must've been. I have no recollection of that whatsoever. The big show of course was Dr. Healy's Case Book, that was a big show. And the race show, The Great Divide, that was another big one.

Q: The Great Divide is listed as '77.

JF: I can't remember the sequence on these things.

Q: Dr. Healy's Case Book, '77 and '78. Were you involved in that one?

JF: Yes, lighting and technical.

Q: Do you know how that came about?

JF: Dr. Healy I think we were approached by NUPE I think maybe to do something. It probably started with two or three singers going to a meeting and then it growing and becoming a full-blown show. Whether there was any sort of commissioning, I can't remember. Charlie had got hours of tape. Doreen may be able to fill you in more on this. By this time we'd had Nick so Doreen wasn't working, so she could transcribe tape and watch a baby at the same time. I think Pam Bishop had dropped out by then because of Polly. But Dave and Chris had got Katie, so there'd be one or two small children going, almost a creche at the side of the stage. Julian Roth came in doing the technical and they'd got Charlotte. So there were two or three little ones going there.

Q: How did the relationship with the trade union movement develop?

JF: To be honest, I don't really know. It was very much something that Charlie did. He'd got some contacts, probably Bob Etheridge and Bill Shreeve had got contacts. I wasn't really involved because the teachers' unions weren't involved that much with the NUM or whatever it was.

Q: What happened after Dr. Healy's Case Book?

JF: After Dr. Healy and the race show then there was Woman Kind, an all-women's show. It wasn't actually all women because Dave was in it and Pete was in it.

Q: Joy was in it.

JF: Joy was in it, Doreen was in it, Chris was in it.

Q: Did you tech for that?

JF: Yes, and that was the last show I did because then it got, you can take babies with you but toddlers like their own bed and two-year-olds can get very obstreperous and insist on

not going somewhere, and refusing to go to sleep except in their own bed. So Doreen carried on doing it while I looked after Nick.

Q: Did you continue your involvement with Banner?

JF: Yes. By now it was set up as a company, presumably a company limited by guarantee. I was on the board so I stayed with that for a long time but I wasn't involved in any of the performance stuff thereafter. Doreen was, because the women's show carried on with a group of women. Fran Rifkin came along and Doreen was driving the bus, in a state of total panic. Doreen hated driving the bus, too big I think. Someone had got to drive it and she could and there was no one else who could, so she got to do it but I don't think she was ever happy doing it.

Q: How long did you stay involved with Banner?

JF: I probably stayed, I mean the Banner committee, it never functioned as a proper sort of business committee ought to do. Getting enough people for meetings, you'd never have a quorum. Things would get decided and accounts would be kept and returns would be made to the company's house, the legal side of it always got done properly. We'd have administrators in who were employed people with experience. One fellow was very unhappy. Janet Spud might be able to tell you more about it. I can't remember the fellow's name at all.

Q: Robin Nestow is one of the names I remember, Mark Nevel.

JF: They're later, I'm going back further I think.

Q: The first one was Bernard.

JF: Oh Bernard yes, Bernard was fine. Bernard and Dots were involved and Bernard also did technicals, I think he took over the slides from Pete as I remember. So Bernard was fulltime

administrator and then somebody else came in and I'm sure it was Bernard's replacement that was, it was someone who came in completely from outside and he wasn't happy.

Q: So you stayed on the committee.

JF: I stayed on the committee, but when I officially came off I honestly couldn't say.

Q: Was that recently?

JF: No, it's probably at least ten years ago. I was probably on the committee in name but not actually attending meetings for some time before that, and I wasn't the only one in that situation.

Q: What was your personal motivation for sticking with Banner?

JF: I just enjoyed it. It was something good to do in good company most of the time. It had its occasional nightmares, but then all organizations do.

Q: Anything that comes to mind?

JF: Rehearsing For One Blood, it's about 2 o'clock in the morning at the Independent Theatre when Roy Palmer said he was freezing cold and he was going to put his overcoat on. Charlie said, you can't perform with that. Roy said, I've got to stay well because I've got to get up and go home in the morning, and Charlie throwing his script and having a tantrum throwing his script from one end of the theatre to the other. It was in one of those spring back files so of course all his entire script spread itself around the theatre. How we did it, I do not know, to work and rehearse until 1 o'clock or 2 o'clock in the morning, then take other people home on the way because I'd got a car, and then get up in time to go to school for a full day's teaching. Challenging I think is the official word for it – a challenge in school. I wasn't the only one that was teaching. Roy Palmer was head of modern languages/deputy head in a huge camp in Wilmly Castle. People had got a lot of work to do the next day and you can't sort of cruise on that.

Q: What do you think of the work that was produced then? Did it have an impact?

JF: I think it's had some impact. The trouble was, Banner was always preaching to the converted or mostly preaching to the converted. You've got the trade union audience who wanted to come along and, reassure is the wrong word, but someone to perform something and say things that they were going to agree with. Some things would make them think a bit more but they were in that sort of area anyway. I'm not sure in my time with Banner we ever actually went to much of the, occasionally there were things where the audience was very, came with the wrong frame of mind. Unpleasant things were shafted at people in performances. Didn't you get some at Telford? Didn't you get a mouthful at Telford? No, it wasn't you then, but somebody got a racist mouthful while they were performing. Obviously that person was not converted and wasn't likely to be converted at the time. But mostly. I suppose if you've got a conventionally FDSS folk song audience, politically you get quite a wide range of opinion. But if you've got the trade union audience, they'd be trade unionists. If it was a folk song audience, you do get a few right-wing ones, but how much in the end did you ever actually achieve I don't know. I don't want to knock it but I'm not sure it ever achieved that much.

Q: What did you get out of Banner?

JF: To be honest, I never really quantified it. It became a way of life. Sunday night there was the club, Monday night you went to Pam and Allan's for a workshop, then there was another night in the week where you'd be rehearsing and putting stuff together for the club on Sunday. Then there'd be another evening or two where you'd be rehearsing for the next show, which we'd be doing on either Friday night or Saturday night, then you went around again. So you didn't have a chance to think about any alternatives.

Q: And then there was going away on holidays.

JF: Yes. Fifteen of us went to Turkey in '69. We used to go camping at Talabonds, in back of the pub there, White Heart. Then there was a cottage near the coast where you could stay

and go walking. There'd be a wider group go, it wasn't just Banner and the club. Joy would take the Alexiu brothers, for instance, Dmitri and... George Thompson's daughter Margaret, Meg Alexiu, she and Chris Stars had twins who were born brain damaged or certainly not born normally. Dmitri, whose 50<sup>th</sup> birthday is coming up shortly because we've just had an invitation, is quite autistic and his brother Petros lives in a home for a different speciality somewhere in Lancashire. At the time, they were both in Birmingham and Joy would bring them in the car so they could come walking. It was a wider group like that.

Q: How many people were in those community shows at the time involved in and around Banner?

JF: There's probably be at least 15, probably between 15 and 20 – maybe a dozen on the stage, three or four backstage; it varied. Of One Blood started with five singing Stewarts. There was a little Caribbean insert in that and the Stewarts did it. They lived just around the corner from the old Banner office in Finch Road, the house with the big gateposts.

Q: Were there any other particularly memorable performances or events?

JF: You remember odd incidents but they're not necessarily particularly important. We did a gig of race show in Coventry I think and we did some setup rehearsing and we all nipped out for ? and chips. I was walking down the road with George Gordon and Bagat. Bagat was quite a short Asian guy. We weren't sort of walking in line, the pavement was narrow so were just walking along not terribly closely together. There was an English guy coming the other way who deliberately walked into Bagat. He deliberately wanted to start something because Bagat obviously was Asian – giving him a mouthful, why didn't he look where he was going, that sort of thing, obviously trying to provoke him. Suddenly he looked up and realized that George was standing on one side of Bagat and I was standing on the other, and the three of us were together. So he sort of looked at him, well be more careful next time, and scuttled off, because he suddenly realized he was completely outnumbered. Well I don't think he was very worried about me but he was certainly worried about George. Sometimes you get little things like that.

Q: George certainly has a lot of memories about the race show.

JF: George used to have some policemen's truncheon under his seat while he was performing, or the equivalent of a truncheon. If there was an invasion of the stage, George was all ready for it. John Wrench used to say, George, I don't know why you bother, because if they invade the stage they're not going to go for a walking skip like you, they're going to go for the skinny eight stone weakling who plays the guitar.

Q: Any other memories?

JF: No, nothing else.

Q: What about Rhoma and Renata?

JF: Rhoma came in through Charlie. I used to see more of Rhoma in a way because she was working unhappily in a junior school at the time and she wanted something different. I was teaching at Wattville Secondary at the time and we'd got a class that needed a teacher. I think the year had been split into three groups. There were two that were more or less able, and they were big groups, and there was a small less able group. The less able group, I think they had three teachers in the year. The one thing kids like that want is continuity. Peggy Bounfield, who was the head at the time, said, I've got to find someone. I was just gossiping with Rhoma and Rhoma said, it might be interesting. So I introduced Rhoma to Peggy Bounfield and they got on like a house on fire, so Rhoma came and started working at the secondary. We were colleagues for a long time, must've been a couple of years at Wattville. Wattville then closed and became Holyhead with Rhoma as deputy head and eventually chairman of the governors after I'd gone. So I was seeing Rhoma every day and we were doing stuff in school with the kids as well as Banner stuff outside. Then she and her husband split, so she moved to that house back of the police station or next to the police station on Holyhead Road. St. James Road, that was it, just around the side from the police station, very close to the school. She moved there for a bit.

Q: What was she like?

JF: A very good teacher, very good colleague, very good with the kids. She had really down to earth but good ideas about the theatre and getting things done, except she could be wildly impractical at times and we had to explain the laws of physics to her. In the middle of Collier Laddie there's a scene where Richard as the young lad aged. What she wanted to do was have a vertical pillar of light to come down on him and then at the crucial point stop so that it comes part way down but it doesn't come right the way down to the floor. Rhoma, unfortunately you can't stop beams of light like that. But somehow we've got to do it to show that he's aging. I can remember facetiously suggesting we should cast Bob Etheridge instead. She said, well how can you do that? I said, well you can do it with makeup. I said, you can make Bob Etheridge the young lad, cover him with makeup so that he looks really young, and at the critical moment you can wipe off all the makeup and become the age he is. Bob was not impressed with the suggestion. But we did have some amusement at the time. Getting Rhoma to understand things like that sometimes could be a big difficult, but Julian and I could always get around to it in the end. There are limitations on what you could do, and this is it. She was always full of ideas, it was great. She didn't need sleep I don't think either, because she'd work all night on something. But then if you associate with Parker then you work all night on something.

Q: Did you work with Renata?

JF: Oh yes. She was in Women Kind, wasn't she? Very practical. I remember her doing something with Bill Shreeves with his trousers. Renata being the German housewife had got a sewing kit in her bag, so Bill bends over so that Renata can sew up the seam down the back of his trousers. It's just about to start when Bill turns around and says something like, I hope you realize, Renata, that I didn't blame you personally for the Second World War. Bill had got that wonderful sense of humour. You had the mining jokes in The Collier Laddie where the old miners were sitting together, and Bill would always find some lovely stories, pub stories between men, not sexist but funny, heading towards the edge.

Q: Do you remember them?

JF: There was one about a chap gets on a train and there's a couple of well dressed men in the compartment. They get talking, and all the time he's scratching and scratching. Eventually the chap who's scratching gets off and the chap says to his colleague, your friend seems terribly afflicted. He said, what do you mean? Well he keeps on scratching. He says, oh no no, he's a collier manager, doesn't know his ass from his elbow. Now that's a Bill Shreeve story.

Q: Did you work with Pete?

JF: Yes. Pete could always get the sound equipment to work, he could always get the slides to work. We started with some very dodgy equipment then bought better stuff, bought the Kodak carousels. Pete was great because he'd be out around back operating a pair of machines, and things always worked. If anything went wrong Pete would get it sorted. He was a real good bloke, Pete.

Q: In what way?

JF: He was good company. He always did his stuff, you could rely on Pete. Then he'd regale you afterwards with the stories of what had gone wrong and how he'd fixed it – the application of a big of chewing gum or whatever it was. There was somewhere we set up and Pete had to go around the back early on and then he was trapped behind the screen for ages. I can't remember why, but when it was all over Pete sort of emerged around the back with a pint glass and disappeared towards the loo. What had happened was that he'd had a pint beforehand and he couldn't wait to go to the loo, so he used the empty glass during the performance behind the screen, and was removing the evidence. But the cast on the stage weren't aware of anything happening, let alone the audience.

Q: Is there anything else you'd like to tell us?

JF: Nothing I can think of at the moment. If I think of anything else, I'll tell you. But there's all the early scripts there, I think there's both versions of *Of One Blood*. There's all the lighting scripts there and probably the sound scripts. We each had our own scripts, so I had

the technical one. But also there's some Banner committee meeting documents there and there's some very early stuff there. Charlie sometimes gave me copies of stuff when he was sending it out. So in the long winter evenings when you've got nothing better to do, there may be some treasures in there. The scripts are filed under the scripts but some of the loose papers, when I was going through looking for something else I thought, I'll pass these on.

Q: I'd definitely like to copy them.

JF: Well I'm not sure I need them back. Certainly the old Banner history I don't want. Whether some of it ought to finish up in the Parker archives, I imagine they've got most of it but not necessarily some of the Banner minutes and that sort of thing. There may be the odd copy of a letter when Charlie was writing applying for funding, which actually gives a detailed history of Banner in his applications sometimes. He's tracing it back to The Maker and the Tool and the Commedia dell'arte and the principle on which he's working. Charlie used to put that in the letters. What was the Brecht group called, the theatre in Berlin, the talking newspaper or something like that. Charlie would cite all this stuff. I've boxed it all up so that you can take it with you.

[ END ]