

Pittsburgh Oral Histories
Pennsylvania Department
Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh



DP

Interviewed by Barry Chad

Interviewed at his home in Saline Valley, Pittsburgh

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Interviewer's Note

The man is his book; the book is the man. His life story, beautifully bound for his family and friends, is a massive enterprise on which he continues to work. It is titled Life—It's Not Easy: Autobiography of D.B.P: The First 40 Years 1954-1994. It is subtitled: It's a Comedy that Very Closely Resembles a Tragedy. And, it's 828 pages, complete with photographs. This literary work is a labor of love that complements his love of music and his devotion to that Someone, the Maker and Creator, for whom he now composes.

Interview

DP: There's so much material here. We could talk about each chapter for 90 minutes [the length of the tape], but there's 40 chapters here and there's another ten over there. So it has to be what you want to focus on—the good times, the bad times, successes, failures...it's all there....

bc: Well, my attitude is that there is, as Shakespeare says, a story in everyone's life. There are all kinds of family stories, of course; but, I suppose, what I'm going for is "living in Pittsburgh" and everything that's involved with that. For one thing, obviously, music's a big part of your life [an acoustic and two electric guitars are a presence in the living room]; religion is obviously important in your life [religious mottoes and Bibles are apparent].

DP: There is a church right across the street.

bc: Yes, what denomination is that?

DP: That's Greek Catholic. It was built by the immigrants who came from the part of what used to be Czechoslovakia, but it's Slovakia now...the minority called Ruthenians, the Ruthenian people...and if you are into his art work...his father, mother, grandfather, grandmother...Andy Warhol...are from that part and those Ruthenian people...and he happened to make it big in the art world coming up with his reproduction of the [Campbell soup] cans.... So this church building here...and I have records of people that were contributing when it was built...and it was just 50 cents, a dollar...and this was in 1900 something...like a hundred years ago when they put this together and people worked in menial jobs and usually in a steel mill. There used to be J&L [Jones & Laughlin] steel mill here along Second Avenue or U. S. Steel where my uncles worked. My three uncles worked across the bridge in Homestead where...all that was torn down.

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I lived most of my life here in Pittsburgh although I didn't start out here. But most of my life I lived here. I moved north to Franklin 'cause I got a job there, but then I came back down here. My first job as a teenager was here with Foodland. I don't know what has happened to them, but they were a chain of food stores like Giant Eagle. They were up on Greenfield Avenue by Calvary Cemetery.

bc: May I interrupt? You seem to be a certain type of Pittsburgher, that's very common in this town, in that you're a "local historian"?

DP: Yes, I like to find things out. Even reading a book. If I come across something, I put a question mark around that and then, when I have the time to go back, I'll go back and find out—even with words. That beat up little dictionary [by the sofa]—every time I read and a word comes up, like "supercalifragilisticexpialidocious," [he quips], [I ask myself], What the heck is that? And, when I look it up, I'll put a mark on that word: so it's, oh yeah, I've "been here before": I've discovered a new word; now I know what that means. So it's not just with words—but with people and events. And you might not have seen in the book, at the end of each chapter, I do include events, like world events for that year—something significant that would happen for that year.

bc: It puts things in perspective, in context.

DP: Yes. [For example], 1977: "Scientist Identified Previously Unknown Bacterium as a Cause of Mysterious Legionnaire's Disease." I throw that in there so I'm not just talking about myself. There were other things going on around. [We are interrupted by the cat "Mittens."] He's trying to tear up my papers. He doesn't know how to read but he likes to....

bc: I'm guessing that we're in what's called Saline Valley.

DP: Yes, a mountain there and a mountain there and this mountain is Schenley Park [behind us]. I can just walk right up there and I'm where the tennis courts are. And this property that my relatives had before the Parkway was built behind the house that went right up to Schenley Park. It was connected, but now it's cut off by the four-lane highway.

bc: You're not retired.

DP: No, I'm 52, I'll be 53 in April.

This is [he indicates the bound volume that is his autobiography] that part of the subtitle—It's a Comedy that Closely Resembles a Tragedy—because certain things happened while I was working in Franklin and then I got sick. [DP discusses family issues as well as his health.]

bc: What were you working at up in Franklin?

DP: I was a mechanical draftsman, drawing, making changes.... Joy Manufacturing Company was, at the time, (and they changed their name to Joy Technologies Center) one of the leading mining machinery manufacturers, manufacturing shearing machines, roof supports that hold up the roofs from collapsing on the miners, continuous miners—if you ever saw these machines that will cut the coal from the top and then scoop it up from the bottom and then it's

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sent on the conveying system.... So that's what I was doing there for a number of years until there was a slowdown...and then I got sick....

bc: Where were you born? Here in Pittsburgh?

DP: No I wasn't. I was born across the ocean and the same background that I was telling you with the Ruthenian people.

bc: What's the difference between Ruthenian and Carpatho-Rusyn? Is there a difference?

DP: No. Two names for the same thing. And yes, I've been to the [Warhol] Museum a number of times when they've had celebrations and they've had people entertaining—people coming from Slovakia to sing or to dance....

And how this happened was: I'm a transplant. My aunt came over here who was already in her 40's in 1967 and she married Andy and this home, this place, at the time, was his mom's, who was still alive. He'd never married up to that point and he was 52. She came here in '67. They married within the next two months and then two years later, because of things that happened to them, to him (he had a heart attack), she said, I don't have anybody from the family here close; if you happen to get worse and have another heart attack and you pass away, I would like to have someone from my family. So, I was 15 at the time and I was one of the three sons (and we have a younger sister). So, it ended up that I was the one to come over here in August of 1969 and, relationship-wise, I was pretty much like their son although my name was different. My aunt was my mother's sister. My aunt got one of the nephews, me, to come over here when I was 15.

bc: What was it like for a 15-year-old coming from Czechoslovakia, from Slovakia, to the United States especially in the late '60s, early '70s? And, could you speak English?

DP: I could speak a little bit. I knew...See, I had a hint that that was going to happen when I was 13 or 14 so then I started taking lessons. There was a teacher there who [had been] in the United States. So, I had a book...I even had to write a letter in English as a part of even being considered to come over here and to have my visas and all that. Yeah, I studied for about a year, but it wasn't conversational English that I knew. I knew "ice cream" [he chuckles] and, you know, just here and there a little bit. And, even when I wrote that letter, for the most part it was the teacher writing the letter. *I* wrote it, but it was *his* input: "this is what you need to put in there"—to say that: I have this much schooling, I would like to come over, I would like to continue my schooling. When I came over here I was not ready to go to school. I finished ninth grade there, but, when I came over here, for one year I went to a school that used to be where the parking garage is below Mercy Hospital on Forbes Avenue. It was Forbes School, a big stone building. It's been knocked down. I went there from 1969 to 1970. Then I had enough sense to start tenth grade, high school, across the river, South High School. And, of course, ever since I've been building my vocabulary, practicing....

bc: So, you've basically lived here since you came to Pittsburgh.

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DP: For almost 40 years, yes.

bc: Was there a big culture shock coming from Europe to America?

DP: Isolation. Yeah, isolation is what it was for me. Because, first of all, everybody that I knew and had a relationship with was no longer there. They were left behind. And then, the other part of isolation was: I cannot communicate: what I want to say, I don't have enough skill, enough vocabulary, enough...to say how I feel, and to ask you questions. The only people that I could communicate with were just *here*: my aunt because she still knew the Ruthenian language and my uncle because he learned (but he wasn't proficient) broken Ruthenian from his mom who herself came over from Czechoslovakia in 1912 (or whatever that was). She was one of the twins; and because she was two minutes older [he chuckles], she was the one who got to come over here.

First year, second year...for a 15-year-old boy, you wouldn't think that, but there was a lot of crying. It wasn't because I didn't want to be here. I wanted to be here. They asked me, Do you want to go to America? I said, Yeah! I want to go! But, it might be like somebody that starts a marathon and, in the middle of it, they start crying because it's just too painful...it's a hardship.... Not because of anyone's fault. It wasn't because there were mean people here and things like that. It wasn't anyone's fault. It was just...and I already mentioned that word "transplant"—and, if you've ever done anything with plants, sometimes when a plant is transplanted, it actually wilts because of the shock of being taken up and the roots being taken up from where it was thriving maybe to a new place and conditions change and the temperature changes and the soil's different. So that's how it was. Somebody [once] said to me, If it is something that doesn't kill us, it makes us stronger. We go through a trial and through trouble and we make it through that—and I mentioned somebody running in a marathon—and I've heard of people that, just because of their desire to finish, they go through agony and everybody is done six hours before, but they're still running, they're still running in the dark! Just to finish it!

bc: Did you get into music when you got here?

DP: I got into music much more than before when I got here. But the musical part—with playing an instrument and a guitar started earlier. I just watched last night a tape of the movie "Help!" When I saw these people, these guys having so much fun playing music that sounded good to me even though I didn't understand it 'cause I didn't know English when I was watching the movie "Help!" with the Beatles—that was a big part and then my mom, for some reason (I don't remember asking her)—but she got an idea to buy me a guitar when I was twelve or thirteen. She bought me a guitar.

bc: In Slovakia?

DP: Yes. It was an acoustic guitar like this with the steel strings and I got into it. And there's a part there that I wrote about: that I didn't even know how to tune it! And I knew somebody miles away who played in a band and I would take my guitar and I would walk to his house and he would tune it up for me and by the

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time I got home, it was out of tune again, you know. So then I learned how to tune it by ear. I could tell [he mimics the sounds of guitar strings]. I didn't even have to have a pitch pipe or anything. I still tune it that way because I know exactly E sounds this way and the other strings follow in that way. So I got started there and when I came here, I had two things that I brought with me: one was the guitar that my mom bought for me and the other one was a suitcase that my dad got for me which I had handkerchiefs and socks in there. That's all I had. I came with a guitar and with a small suitcase with some socks and a couple of shirts. That was my trip, that I was leaving for good. And I have never gone back—all these years, almost 40 years. My dad's still living there. He's going to be 80-years-old.

bc: Do you keep in touch?

DP: Yes, mostly by letters.

bc: Has your musical interest changed over the years? You started out being impressed by the Beatles; what are you into now?

DP: I listen to all kinds of music. I'm not pigeonholed. There is good music, classical. And there's some classical music that, to me, it's not so good. There's some pop music that is good; some of it it's not so good. Rap music: [it's made to seem] as if it just sprung up, but it's not so. [It has origins.] I've heard music: "The Hot Rod Lincoln"—where the music is playing, but the guy is rhyming, you know, the verses to the music. He's not singing it; he is rhyming it. And he goes on with the music, rhyming it.

When I started with music, it was as everybody goes into it. Everybody starts by emulating somebody—so that's how I started, but it didn't take me too long when I started writing my own music. That is, I wanna say what I wanna say and I wanna sing about what I wanna sing about. I'm not going to sing about what somebody else has written because of what they went through and the experience that they had. So early on I started writing my own lyrics and putting together chords that would go along with that: my early music had to do with...mostly with girls. And then, later on, I started writing music for someone who I cared for...the girl that I loved, and I proposed to, and I married. I wrote music and songs for her, then for our kids....

And then I really was not in any way into religion. I really thought that that was a waste of time and kind of superstitious, a silly thing...especially when I saw...it's usually older ladies with babushkas...and I said, this is not for me; I don't know what this is, but I don't like it. Until, until I hit a wall at full speed and I came to my senses and I started to question things...and questions like "Why?" and "Where did this come from?"

The first car that I had was a Ford Falcon and then the second car was a Ford too; and I thought about it: this is something that does something; there's a design in it; and there is someone who made it—the Ford Company. And then I looked around and...what about a little creature like that [Mittens the cat who is half

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asleep on my lap] that is much more complicated than a car. Where did he come from? to put whiskers on him and a pink nose and “mittens” on his paws and this kind of fur on him—there’s got to be hundreds of thousands or maybe a million or more little pieces of fur all over him.... When I came to that road...the sun comes up every morning...how? So then it was a different show; I had a different attitude. If a car has a manufacturer and a maker, what about all these complicated creatures--and human beings themselves. And so, that was the change in my music. Then I started to write music instead of for people and for family, I started writing music...you’ve heard about the Psalms (“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want”)...that was not written for a person; that was written for the Manufacturer of it all. So that was my change....

bc: Did you come up with your own lyrics? or did you put the Psalms to music of your own?

DP: I started with putting Psalms to music, but paraphrasing them because the Psalms themselves...there’s no rhyme or meter...so I had to shift things around and use different words which meant the same thing...and that was like the beginning.... But then again I came to the same place as I did with imitating pop music and the Beatles and the Rolling Stones and all that.... I came to the same point that I don’t want to say what he said in the Psalms in the Bible; I want to say what I want to say to God, that Someone whom I recognize as being important, most important in my life.... These tapes [shelved on the wall] and these songs up here are all personal that I was personally writing songs for my fiancée, for my wife, for my children. These tapes [shelved on another wall] are all personal but now written for Someone else, for God, whom now I recognize as being most important in the whole scheme of things and in my life.... Human beings are so impressed by art work, by someone putting some paint on canvas...and he, Mittens [my cat], and your cats...this is God’s art work. This is an artist at work. And God’s signature on Mittens is life...that’s in this cat. We can’t do that...make something out of matter, as Mittens is, and put our signature on it in the way that the signature is life. A cat is a proof that there is a Maker, a Creator. And so are we. We don’t have that power or ability to give life to inanimate objects.

bc: Where did you get your experience in mechanical drawing?

DP: I went to Triangle Tech which used to be on Smithfield Street downtown and I got my Associate degree in mechanical drafting there for two years. [When I graduated from Triangle Tech,] I was one of the speakers. (Do you remember Paul Long? Well, he was the keynote speaker at the graduation.) And, when I graduated, then I got that job in Franklin. We moved. That was, what I would call, the height of my professional career. That was the best job that I ever had—up to this point.

bc: Obviously religion was important to you prior to your health issues.

DP: Yes, but, as Jesus said, Life is what happens when you’re planning something else. And my life was not going according to my plan! So now I need help; and who can help me? And so that’s where the turn came into religion and seeking

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help that I was not able to get from people: I mean, I had no answers; and people had no answers either.

bc: What was your involvement with Peoples Oakland?

DP: [Peoples Oakland provided help and direction.] There were workshops about employment. There was a workshop about learning computer skills. (My book was a [result] of that—learning computer skills.) I said to them that this was my desire--to put together a life story because I would like to share it with my kids, who have missed my life for ten, twelve years. Then they [Peoples Oakland] said, Great! So this is what I was doing for a year, maybe longer. I would go there and I had a commitment: when I would go there, I knew why I was there. And they knew why I was there. That was '93/'94/'95. [In '95 Peoples Oakland moved from Atwood to Bates.]

bc: Since Peoples Oakland leads into the book, let me ask you some questions. This book is obviously a great level of commitment and a labor of love on your part.

DP: This was an inspiration...see: for every chapter I have a quote, [an epigram], that has something to do with the chapter. Each one of my sons have their own chapters in the book for the years they were born—1976, 1982, and 1985. Each one got their own personal copy of the book inscribed in gold lettering on the front cover: "To my Son ----- with love from your Dad. [He shows me photographs, some color, some black and white, that form a part of the book and which include photographs of some of Andy Warhol's relatives.]

bc: So this volume is up until '94 and you're working on....

DP: That, handwritten, is the next decade from '94 to 2004. Most of it is done.

bc: I ask D.P. to play one of his songs on his acoustic guitar. He explains the song's significance.

D.P. Here's a song that I wrote that has to do with a quote that is in the Bible-- that a life is more than [what you eat, drink, wear and possess.] The more "stuff" I have, the better off I am; but, I've found that that's not necessarily true because things don't make me happy. I cannot have a relationship with a telephone, with an amplifier [he laughs].... You know it's between people...that's the satisfaction that there is a relationship between people or those who are convinced that there is a Creator...then, that kind of relationship too is where satisfaction and happiness come from. [He plays.]

bc: Have you performed in public? Whereabouts?

DP: Yes. I started when I only knew about 3 ½ chords. [He laughs.] With three other guys—one on drums (and, of course, this was the standard setup), one on drums, one on the lead, one on the rhythm, one on the bass guitar, patterned after...who? We played at a school function, a school dance...in Slovakia. Here, when I started attending, when I became a part of...a baptized member of the Worldwide Church of God, then I played as "special music" at the church service because there was a certain order of what happens at a church service. But then,

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once in a while they would put in extra music—so I played there and I played songs that I wrote. I played songs that had to do with something that was a lesson that would [prove] worthwhile to the listeners. There were usually a couple of hundred people attending the church service because the Worldwide Church of God used to meet at the Soldiers and Sailors Hall [in Oakland], and that was almost filled. But since then it's mainly me, playing and writing, for Someone that, as I said before, that's very important to me and to the scheme of things. Personally, I usually play when nobody's here. But I know that there is Someone listening to me (I know that God hears, that God hears me play for Him) and that's who I play for—that is why I do what I do and why I write. If there is somebody who happens to listen, it's okay, but it's almost like I would sit here and watch a painter paint: I don't have anything to do with that—it's he who is doing it and he knows why he's doing it; I'm just here as an observer.

All these songs, and this song, that I just played and that I write and wrote for God, is a part of those songs—most of them no person has heard, but that's okay because they're not written for people.

bc: In your Autobiography, you have one chapter early on that's titled "The Russians Are Coming." What's that about?

DP: 1968 was a change politically in Czechoslovakia where the Communists were being replaced by the moderates and, of course, Czechoslovakia was a satellite of Russia. So were Poland and Hungary and there was a revolt in Hungary in 1956 and the Russians came with the tanks and crushed that. And that's what happened in Czechoslovakia in 1968. [Alexander] Dubcek was the guy who was the leader replacing the hard-line Communists. And there were changes happening: censorship was taken off.... And the Russians got whiff of it and they just smashed it all up. So that [was the reason for the title] "The Russians Are Coming." That was the year—and I remember when it happened (and I happened to be very sick that day) when the news broke that the Russians came with the tanks and the Warsaw Pact (it was their equivalent of NATO). They came in to Prague and to other cities and they said, This is not going to happen. And so, all those politicians that were in the movement of making changes to go more pro-Western and democratic, they were all removed....

bc: Was it easy for you to get out of the country under these circumstances?

DP: There was an American embassy that I went to and I had an interview and I had to have my shots and I had to have my passport and [legal] papers [and those papers that I still have copies of] some are in the book. The only problem that I had was me...that's the problem that I had. When the day came to leave and I knew I wasn't coming back. And it's still true to this day—I have never gone back. When the day came and it hit me....

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