

# Robert Symmonds Oral History

San Francisco Conservatory of Music Library & Archives

San Francisco Conservatory of Music Library & Archives  
50 Oak Street  
San Francisco, CA 94102

Interview conducted April 29, 2013  
Tessa Updike, Interviewer

## **San Francisco Conservatory of Music Library & Archives Oral History Project**

The Conservatory's Oral History Project has the goal of seeking out and collecting memories of historical significance to the Conservatory through recorded interviews with members of the Conservatory's community, which will then be preserved, transcribed, and made available to the public.

Among the narrators will be former administrators, faculty members, trustees, alumni, and family of former Conservatory luminaries. Through this diverse group, we will explore the growth and expansion of the Conservatory, including its departments, organization, finances and curriculum. We will capture personal memories before they are lost, fill in gaps in our understanding of the Conservatory's history, and will uncover how the Conservatory helped to shape San Francisco's musical culture throughout the past century.

### **Robert Symmonds Interview**

This interview was conducted at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music on Monday, April 29 by Tessa Updike.

### **Tessa Updike**

Tessa Updike is the archivist for the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. Tessa holds a B.A. in visual arts and has her Masters in Library and Information Science with a concentration in archives management from Simmons College in Boston. Previously she worked for the Harvard University Botany Libraries and Archives and the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley.

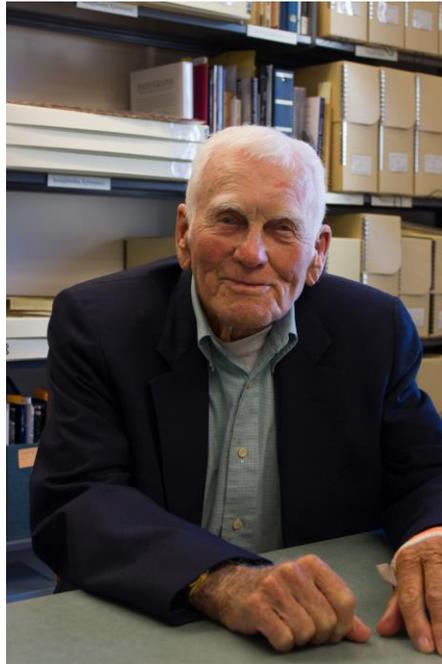
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San Francisco, CA  
94102

## Robert Symmonds



*Robert Symmonds in the Conservatory's archives, April 2013*

Robert Symmonds was born in 1921 in Seattle, Washington. His father was a stockbroker and a businessman, his mother a homemaker and amateur singer. Robert took piano lessons at the age of ten, but soon convinced his parents to let him take guitar lessons instead.

At the start of the Depression, Robert's father lost his job and his family moved to a small town in Oregon. Robert took over the job as breadwinner for his family, working a variety of jobs, including woodcutter and hunter. At the age of thirteen he began riding freight trains, both for the thrill of the ride and to work the fruit tramp, which he worked from spring through fall, sending money home to his family. Known as Guitar Whitey, Robert frequently rode freight trains and reveled in the freedom that came from this lifestyle. Whenever he could, he carried a guitar with him.

In 1942 Robert joined the Navy. He met his wife in Liverpool, England in 1943 at a dance. They were married in 1946, and now have four children. After returning to the United States, Robert took lessons from English-born musician Richard Dyre-Bennet in Aspen, Colorado, and then moved to San Francisco. Arriving at the San Francisco Conservatory in 1948 by recommendation of his voice teacher, Gertrude Beckman, Robert requested a full music education, including lessons in classical guitar. At the time, the Conservatory did not have a guitar teacher, and so guitarist Clarence Easley was hired for the purpose. Robert took lessons at the Conservatory until 1950.

Robert then moved to Southern California with his wife, where he continued to take guitar lessons. His teachers included Vicente Gomez, Frederick Noad, and Celedonio Romero. Robert also taught guitar for a number of years. He now lives in San Louis Obispo, where he still plays guitar when he can.

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**UPDIKE** Okay, so it is April 29, 2013 and we are at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. This is Tessa Updike interviewing Robert Symmonds. So Bob, could you start by telling us about your early years, about where you were born and where you grew up?

**SYMMONDS** I was born in Seattle, Washington, 1921. Went to John Hay grade school and Queen Anne High School. Dropped out in my third year because my father went broke and I had to take over the job as breadwinner. My father lost his house and everything, and we moved down to a little forest farm down in Oregon near the town of Gaston. I learned to be a woodcutter and a hunter. All the time I played guitar a little bit. I got my first guitar from Sears Roebuck in 1933. Paid \$3.89 for it. It was shipped from Chicago, freight-free. Can you imagine that? Those guitars, like the one I had, are now collector's items and they're going for big money.

Let's see. I learned to ride freight trains as a boy, thirteen years old. I started riding freight trains around the country just for the thrill. 'Cause I was a wild and crazy kid, you know. Let's see....

**UPDIKE** Do you mind telling me about your parents? What jobs they both had?

**SYMMONDS** My parents, sure. My father was Robert A. Symmonds. He was a stockbroker and a businessman. My mother was a homemaker and an ex-singer.

**UPDIKE** Was your mother a professional singer?

**SYMMONDS** No, never a professional, no. But a good amateur and she loved it. You don't want a whole story about me, do you? We could go on for hours. Do you want me to just hit the high notes?

**UPDIKE** How about I ask you some questions, and you answer them, and we'll move on that way. Is that okay?

**SYMMONDS** That's better. Because I'll go on forever if you let me.

**UPDIKE** Was it your mother who got you interested in music as you were growing up?

**SYMMONDS** No, no. My parents both tried to make me take piano lessons from about ten years old on. I had two teachers, and I was a rebel child. I didn't like to study piano, and I didn't like to read notes. I remember listening to guitar music on the radio. There were some cowboy songs and hobo songs. That I liked. So they gradually let me drop the piano and got me into the guitar. I took some lessons from a man named George Shelp in Seattle. He taught me the grand bar method.

**UPDIKE** How old were you when you took lessons in Seattle?

**SYMMONDS** I started at age sixteen. Then at eighteen I took some more guitar lessons in a town called Bremerton, Washington where I worked in the Navy yard, just at the start of the war.

**UPDIKE**                   What year did you leave home?

**SYMMONDS**            I left home a number of times just to take freight train trips and go on the fruit tramp, which was the only way you could make a living in those days. Picking fruit from say, March through September and October, traveling all over the West Coast doing that and sending money home. I left home a lot, but when I finally left home for good was when I joined the Navy in 1942. I joined up in Seattle.

**UPDIKE**                   How long were you in the Navy?

**SYMMONDS**            I did four years. I was discharged in Bremerton, Washington in 1946.

**UPDIKE**                   What year did you first come to San Francisco?

**SYMMONDS**            San Francisco ... okay, I'll have to give you ... could I give you a little background to get you here?

**UPDIKE**                   Please, do.

**SYMMONDS**            I was on a ship crossing the Atlantic Ocean and I heard this music on the ship's radio. And me being an amateur guitar player, I was entranced by what I heard. I'd never heard anything like it. At the end of the program the announcer said "That was Mr. Andres Segovia playing the guitar." As luck would have it, my ship came into New York City and I was walking down the street and saw a theater called Town Hall. And it said on the marquee "Segovia tonight eight o'clock." So I ended up in the first row that night watching this man play. And I've been an aficionado ever since. I was totally hooked. That same year I went to a nightclub down in the [Greenich] Village in New York and heard a man play the guitar and play songs. His name was Richard Dyer-Bennet. That was a very interesting thing because this guy played classical guitar and sang these beautiful European ballads with marvelous accompaniments. I was absolutely stunned by this guy. Come to find out, he had started a school of minstrelsy in Aspen, Colorado that same summer. I applied and got taken to that school, which lasted all summer. There I took lessons from Richard Dyer-Bennet, who was a singer and guitar player. His voice teacher was teaching at his school and her name was Gertrude Beckman. When I came to the Conservatory I took lessons from her, too. She lived across, over in Berkeley or Oakland.

Richard Dyer-Bennet studied with a man called Jose Rey de la Torre, who was a fine Cuban guitarist who studied with Miguel Llobet, who was a guitarist of the caliber of Segovia and about the same age. That's where the chain started, and it went from that to Richard Dyer-Bennet, from Richard Dyer-Bennet and we came west – my wife and I driving an old 35 Ford Roadster. My voice teacher said "If you ever come to San Francisco, enroll in music there at the Conservatory of San Francisco. It's a marvelous place with an excellent reputation". And so that's immediately what I did. We came here in September of '48 and I immediately applied to the Sacramento Street house where the faculty was and asked for voice lessons, and I wanted guitar lessons, and a complete musical education. They said "We can do everything but we don't have a guitar chair

and we don't have a guitar teacher." But one of the ladies said "We know of a good guitar man in this town and we'll see if we can get him for you." And so sure enough, a week later they'd signed up Clarence Easley, who had never taught before but had played all his life. That was the start of my San Francisco career.

Another highlight of that time was Sol Joseph, who was also hired by the Conservatory that same month! He was an all-around musician and taught piano and composition – everything you could name about music, he could teach it. He was a marvelous fellow. His classes were overflowing, they were so popular. He was the one that told us – every student here – "If you're serious about being a musician, the first thing you want to do is buy yourself a piano." And so we all did – I got one for twenty-five dollars and had it for years. [laughter]

It took me two years before I figured out – I was a slow learner, evidently, because it began to dawn on me that I would love to be a musician, and I had the drive, and I had the resolution, and I had the determination and the love for it and a fairly good ear musically, but I lacked one thing – I didn't have the talent. And I didn't have much of a voice even though I took voice lessons. I finally realized I wasn't going to make it, and so I dropped out after my second year and took a job in a saw mill for Henry Doelger to build all those homes out in west San Francisco. So that's how it started. And then the guitar part – well, maybe I'd better let you ask me some questions.

**UPDIKE** Let's go back to your first year at the Conservatory. Could you describe the house on Sacramento Street for me, what you remember?

**SYMMONDS** Okay. It was in a little business block, but it used to be residential. There's this one house, you could call it a cottage or a two-story house with a placard on the top [that] said San Francisco Conservatory of Music. Most of the students there were veterans like myself who were studying on the GI bill because that's the only way they could get a musical education – because they couldn't afford it otherwise. It was filled with mostly men, I would say twenty-percent women students and about eighty-percent men who were out of the Army and Navy. We really wanted an education because we weren't the typical college age, say from eighteen to twenty-two, we were all older. I was twenty-seven at the time, and most of them were just about the same. Everybody wanted to work, and the classes were just jam-packed with people. Nobody was goofing-off. You didn't have the same attitude that you find in today's colleges where some people are there for work and the rest of them want to play, you know. The teachers were strict and they demanded a lot out of you. We didn't have so much as homework, but we worked hard during the time we were in classes. I can remember the Solfege lady, she would do anything in the world to get you to be able to sight-sing. The Composition [teacher] – Mr. Joseph – wanted you to learn composition and counterpoint. He was into music so deeply himself that he drew us in too. Everybody loved him. I don't know the names of the other teachers, but they were equally good. They were committed, dedicated teachers.

**UPDIKE** Could you describe Clarence Easley for me?

**SYMMONDS** Describe Clarence Easley?

**UPDIKE** His appearance and his character?

**SYMMONDS** Well, when I first met him, he was kind of sizing me up to see if he'd want to teach me, you know? This is the first week we got there. So he invited me to his house and we went up there – and he poured us a bunch of mixed drinks and we listened to him and his friends play chamber music. It was just marvelous stuff that they played. This man was about sixty-years-old, bald as a billiard ball, worked as a coroner's assistant downtown for the city of San Francisco. A heavy drinker, but always in control.

**UPDIKE** Did you have your lessons with Clarence at his house or at the Conservatory?

**SYMMONDS** At the studio. At the Conservatory they had a little attic room, or maybe you called it the third floor. Every Saturday morning at ten o'clock we would be there for a solid hour. He gave me the best he had.

**UPDIKE** Could you describe your lessons?

**SYMMONDS** Yeah – he had no more idea of how to teach than I do of how to play. But we kind of worked out a system. He would bring some of his own music – sheet music that he had copied, or gotten somewhere – and I would take it home and hand-copy it and learn from that. We didn't have any books or folios or that sort of thing, that came later. I gradually acquired quite a stack of sheet music for guitar that nobody would be able to buy, because it didn't exist. This was beautiful stuff to play. And he would bring me a new one almost every week. So we would meet up there, and we got to be good friends. He would invite me to his house up on the south hill. We would have a chamber music session either Friday or Saturday night, and almost every week there was something going on at his house, because he was known as Mr. Guitar of San Francisco in those days. He had two or three lovely guitars. I had a tubby old Martin that I had bought at Dyer-Bennet's school. Paid seventy-five dollars for a Martin Classic, which is a nice guitar but nothing like what he had. His guitars were made in Europe, in Spain.

**UPDIKE** When you started studying with Clarence Easley, did you already know – did you know the fundamentals of reading music?

**SYMMONDS** Well, I was just getting into it. I never was a really good music reader – sight reader, for the simple reason that I didn't have good eye-sight. I had to kind of crane up close to it to read it, and that's a set-back because you've got to be able to read it at arm's length and watch your guitar and your hands, and the whole thing. But I did learn – I got by. I never achieved a whole lot of success as a guitar player, but I knew my basics pretty well.

**UPDIKE** Were there other guitar students in 1948? Or were you the only one?

**SYMMONDS** I was the only one. There may have been other students around the area, but I never met them. There were a few people playing guitar down in the bars and the restaurants in San Francisco's North Beach. I'd run into a few of them, but they were mostly either popular guitar players or flamenco guitar players. I knew of not a single classicist in the

whole area. That went on for quite a while, but we found out that Clarence taught until 1957, wasn't it?

**UPDIKE** I think it was 1953 when he stopped teaching at the Conservatory.

**SYMMONDS** He was a good man. He was a totally dedicated man. I was lucky to have him.

**UPDIKE** Do you remember any of the other students at the Conservatory? Did you have friends who were studying there?

**SYMMONDS** I met a lot of them. I was good friends with a few, but when we left San Francisco, my wife and I went back to southern California after that. And I never kept in touch with any of those students. I wouldn't know their names at all. And except for Sol Joseph, and Gertrude Beckman and Clarence Easley, I wouldn't know a single person.

**UPDIKE** It was a long time ago.

**SYMMONDS** Uh huh.

**UPDIKE** Did you give any performances at the Conservatory while you were a student?

**SYMMONDS** Did I...?

**UPDIKE** Did you give any recitals?

**SYMMONDS** No, I wasn't that far advanced at the time.

**UPDIKE** Do you remember hearing Clarence Easley give a recital?

**SYMMONDS** No, I don't think he ever did. He played at home, beautifully, but I don't think he'd ever go out as a commercial player, I don't think so. He wouldn't be the type.

**UPDIKE** Do you remember the music that you played during your chamber music sessions?

**SYMMONDS** When he was teaching me?

**UPDIKE** Do you remember the music that you played? During the chamber music sessions that you had at his house?

**SYMMONDS** Oh, yeah. We played simple Bach, and [Ferdinando] Carulli, a little Carcassi studies – Carcassi had come out with a book of twenty studies and guitar players loved them. Progressively more difficult as you get through the thing. If you could get through that twenty studies, you were doing pretty good.

**UPDIKE**                   Where did you and your wife live when you were in San Francisco?

**SYMMONDS**               We lived at Haight and Ashbury. Do you know that district?

**UPDIKE**                   I do.

**SYMMONDS**               Well, when we moved into San Francisco, we got an apartment on Ashbury Street, three blocks up from Haight, a little top floor – third or fourth floor up – and you could look out the bathroom window and you could look into Kezar Stadium. [laughter] I loved that place because I parked my car on Ashbury, heading downhill, because my old Ford always had a dead battery and I could start my car by coasting. I remember that so plain. This was before the hippy days. Let's see, it was about ten years before that. It became infamous, that area.

**UPDIKE**                   What was the atmosphere like in San Francisco at that time?

**SYMMONDS**               San Francisco was a beautiful city. Oh, a lovely city. They were still running ferries. Let's see, the bridges had been built, but they were still running ferries across to Oakland. San Francisco was just so nice. I don't know if they still have it, but I was impressed with Market Street, they had four streetcar tracks. Do they still do that?

**UPDIKE**                   I'm not sure.

**SYMMONDS**               Market Street had four streetcar tracks with various cars running up and down by the minute. And of course they still had the cable cars, which they kept. And Ghirardelli Square and Fisherman's Wharf were big. And the Ferry Building – when they quit running the ferries it became a marketplace, which I think it is today, still.

**UPDIKE**                   It is.

**SYMMONDS**               It was great place to live, San Francisco was, in those days.

**UPDIKE**                   What were some of the things that you and your wife did? Some of the activities that you did in San Francisco?

**SYMMONDS**               My wife worked at the White House department store while I was going to school. We both ushered at the War Memorial Opera House. Whenever they had a function, which would be like two or three times a week. We got to hear all the operas for free, people like Isaac Stern – the greats. Yehudi Menuhin – oh, marvelous stuff we heard. That was part of the musical education. They would encourage you to be an usher if you were studying music, because that's what they wanted – they wanted dedicated people – that's what we were. The Opera House is still here, looking good too.

**UPDIKE**                   It is. And Isaac Stern and Yehudi Menuhin were both students at the Conservatory when they were young.

**SYMMONDS** Oh, is that right? I didn't know that. I've heard them both play, and they're both from San Francisco. Is Isaac Stern still living?

**UPDIKE** I don't think he is, no.

**SYMMONDS** I don't think he is either. And Yehudi Menuhin is not, right?

**UPDIKE** No.

**SYMMONDS** No. But they were the two greatest violinists you could ever hear in your life. You never wanted anybody better than them.

**UPDIKE** Do you remember specifically – performances that you heard them play?

**SYMMONDS** Not offhand, no. I couldn't tell you the years. It was a whole different scene then. You could go to the opera for a dollar. They had dollar opera. If you wanted to go out for dinner at night, you could go out to Lucca's in North Beach and get a six course dinner for one dollar each. And that was the most famous place – the line went halfway around the block, every night. It was so good. I don't even know if that restaurant's still around.

**UPDIKE** Do you remember going to smaller, local music performances? Were there other guitar players in the area that you went to hear?

**SYMMONDS** Not around here. I went to some of those down in southern California. But not up here. Do you want to confine this just to San Francisco?

**UPDIKE** No, we can talk about southern California.

**SYMMONDS** Well, the guitar player who's coming tonight, Pepe Romero – have you heard him?

**UPDIKE** I have – not in concert, but I've listened to his music.

**SYMMONDS** Well, after I left here, I moved down to southern California – Costa Mesa. And we used to go up into Los Angeles and take lessons from various guitar teachers. Because I was all my life trying to be a guitar player. I figured if I took enough lessons and practiced hard enough it would work out. I've had a lot of teachers. The big-gun guitar player at the time, I'd say about 1950, was Vicente Gomez, have you heard that name?

**UPDIKE** No.

**SYMMONDS** Vicente Gomez. He achieved worldwide fame when he played the guitar for the movie *Blood and Sand*. An old-time 1930s movie. He was a guitar player and everybody wanted to play like Vicente Gomez. So I took a couple of lessons from him. I asked him over the phone how much he charged and he said he gives you a course of lessons for seventy-five dollars. Fifteen lessons for seventy-five dollars. So, me being a laborer, I got my five dollars

ready and went up there and asked him for a lesson. He says “Well, I charge seventy-five dollars for fifteen lessons.” Well, here’s my first lesson, I gave him my five dollars. So what does he do? He gave me a lesson. He says “When you come next week, be sure to bring the rest of it.” So I came the next week and I still only have five dollars. And so he says “I know you want to play bad, but I can’t change my business ethics, so I can’t give you any more lessons.”

So I missed out, but the following year – this is still in southern California – I found a marvelous fellow who had just come over from England and played classical and flamenco guitar. His name was Frederick Noad. That was a turning point in my life, because this guy was the fellow that eventually wrote all those books – *Playing the Guitar* by Frederick Noad. Which were fabulous books. He was a little younger than me, but he became quite well-known in guitar circles down south. I studied with him for a solid year. He taught me flamenco and classic. He introduced me to a man just over from Spain with his family. “You’ve got to go up and take lessons from him because I can’t teach you anymore.” So I went up and took a lesson from Celedonio Romero. Celedonio had come over from Spain, where he was a guitar teacher. He had three sons who were also good players – Celin, Pepe and Angel. They first settled in Santa Barbara, but then they moved down to Los Angeles, and that’s where I met them. I was taking a lesson from Celedonio, and in the next room someone was taking a guitar lesson – in the next studio – I could hear this marvelous, flashing flamenco – rapid fire, machine-gun picato. And I says, “Is that Pepe?” “No, he says” – Celedonio says – “That’s not Pepe. That’s Chris.” I says “Is that his student playing like that?” And he says “Yeah, the student, that’s Chris.” And do you know who the student was?

**UPDIKE** No

**SYMMONDS** Christopher Parkening. Do you know that name?

**UPDIKE** I do.

**SYMMONDS** He became Segovia’s favorite student guitarist. He was playing in the next room from me! Eventually I studied with Celedonio for a few months, and then as usual I ran out of money and couldn’t take any more lessons for a while. I got to know Angel and Pepe and Celedonio. I had moved up to Spokane, Washington, in the meantime. They were coming there to give a concert in Expo ’74 – 1974. “The royal family of guitar”, the Romeros, were giving a full concert at a theater there, and so they left a ticket for me at the gate – at the box office. They did their usual marvelous things – the three sons and the father all playing beautifully. And the next day the youngest son, who was Angel, came down to my store – I had a store on Main Street in Spokane where I sold some guitars. He had heard about a guitar I had – I had imported it from Spain and it was made by Miguel Rodriquez. It was a marvelous guitar. He had heard about this guitar and he wanted to see it – he wanted to know if I would sell it to him. Well, I had just about quit playing by then. So I said “I’ll sell it, I think it would be worth about a thousand dollars.” So he came down one morning, and sat down and played that guitar, and I’d never heard that guitar played so well or so beautifully. At the end of the thing he says “I’ll give you five hundred dollars for it.” I was so entranced by his playing that I said “It’s your guitar.” So he walked away with my beautiful Rodriquez guitar, and I haven’t had a classical guitar since that time. [laughter] But those boys are just world-famous. Angel became, probably, the best guitarist

of the bunch. Way better than his father, and even better than Pepe, if that's possible. I hope I don't have to tell this to Pepe tonight. [laughter] He would only smile – Pepe was the kind of a guy – can I tell you a story about Pepe?

**UPDIKE** Please.

**SYMMONDS** Okay. There was a man named Logan Lockabee who took lessons from me, down in Costa Mesa. And I told him about the Romeros. So he went up there, and he took some lessons from Pepe – he wanted to learn flamenco from Pepe. He's reciting this story to me later on, he said "I said to Pepe – when you're playing a concert and you make a mistake, do you stop and go back and repeat it correctly, or do you just bull your way through and ignore the mistake? Pepe says "I don't make mistakes." [laughter] Pepe would say that, not in a bragging way, but just – "I don't make mistakes. Unheard of." And I thought to myself, 'Isn't it amazing that a man who played guitar all his life, from seven years old on – and was so adept at it, and so in love with it – that he'd never make a mistake.' Incredible! Incredible. That was one of the beautiful stories about guitar playing. I could go on forever about guitar students and what they used to say, but this is your interview.

**UPDIKE** How many students did you have, over the years?

**SYMMONDS** Oh, I've had probably hundreds of students of my own. I was a dedicated teacher. Never a good player, but they always said I was a good teacher. Why is that possible – is the fact that if you're a good player, you don't have any problems. It all comes to you so smoothly, and so easily, that you forge ahead into an artistic vein and you can't understand that some poor slob that knows his three cords – he can't play and doesn't know why. He's there for you to teach him! If you're too good of a player you won't understand his problems. So me being a hard-luck player, I understood their problems. And I could sympathize and help them through it. So that's where that was.

**UPDIKE** What were some of your favorite pieces to play? What type of music did you like the most?

**SYMMONDS** All the standards that Segovia and all those ... I tried to play all of them. *Magic Flute*, by Mozart, Bach Preludes, things like that. I've been through all the phases of the guitar, for example, my first love and my true love was classical guitar, but when I found out I couldn't make the stretches anymore I branched out into other things and I played flamenco for quite a long time. Even Hawaiian slack-key guitar, popular guitar – never electric guitar. Never. I just didn't want the electric guitar. I'd play country – I went from – as a boy I played mountain music, then into hillbilly music, then into country-western music, then cowboy songs, and then country, and into attempts at jazz. I've been on all the kinds of guitars that there are. It still intrigues me, and I just love to hear people play. I'm an absolute sucker at tipping the buskers, of which this town is full of them. I just cannot pass the guy – I have a good ear so I can tell if he's a guitar player or just banging away to make noise and drum up a few bucks. I can't resist tipping them – my wife hates that.

**UPDIKE** Do you mind going back to some of your earlier years, your earlier memories?

**SYMMONDS** Sure.

**UPDIKE** When you were traveling the country doing your pickers jobs, did you always have your guitar with you?

**SYMMONDS** Quite a lot.

**UPDIKE** Can you talk about how you carried it with you?

**SYMMONDS** Well, I was known for being Guitar Whitey. I always had white hair, and I had blonde hair before my hair got white. Whenever it was possible I'd always have a guitar with me. I had innumerable guitars, and I normally tried to carry them in a case to protect them. You know, Woody Guthrie never used a case. He'd carried a guitar through his whole life, and never had a case! Just a strap around his neck. I used to ride freight trains with a guitar, I'd always have the guitar in a case. Later on I graduated into a gig-bag. You know those? That's a soft gel case you can strap on your back and take with you. We'd sit around, if you could find another guitar player, we could sit around out in the weeds or along the railroad track – in a house or anywhere. Everybody had his own style of picking, and you'd try to find somebody who'd be compatible with you. When you did, it was just wonderful. You could pick all night long, you'd never get tired of it. It's a tough go bringing a guitar with you, so many trips if I was going to be gone a long time I wouldn't bother with it. I even had a guitar in the navy with me, four years in the navy I had a guitar with me all the time! It's tough to play on a ship, 'cause there's no room for you – you have to find room.

**UPDIKE** How do you get your guitar onto the train? If you're jumping on a moving train? Do you put it up before you?

**SYMMONDS** If you're going to jump a train with it? You run alongside and put the guitar in – you slide it in so it won't fall off, and then you catch the train. You'd better be good at it, or else the guitar will go away and you'll be left behind. I've seen that happen, too. [laughter] Never with me, but I've seen it happen.

**UPDIKE** Did having the guitar with you during that time in your life help you make friends?

**SYMMONDS** Oh, yeah. It draws people. Just like today, if there's any good buskers out there on the street – he'll have a crowd around him. Today even. Back then we'd never heard of busking, although there's a few guys back in Tennessee and Kentucky, which is a hotbed of flat top-box guitar picking. The Kay Company – the Kay Guitar Company – built a really nice, big, strong, well-built guitar. These pickers seized on this, because it was sturdy and you could play it in the sunshine and the rain, and it wouldn't warp on you. They called them Kay Streetwalker. I had one of those for years. In fact, when I broke my shoulder and couldn't play anymore, I gave

that Kay Streetwalker to my daughter. She still has it in Wyoming. She doesn't play but she loves the guitar. If it could only talk. The Kay Streetwalker.

**UPDIKE** How many years did you have it?

**SYMMONDS** Oh, I had it probably twenty years or more. Those guitars sold brand-new about 1940 for thirty-five dollars. A beautiful guitar.

**UPDIKE** Could you tell me when and how you met your wife?

**SYMMONDS** Sure. I met my wife in Liverpool, England in 1942 or 3 ... 1943. I was loaned out to the British Navy – they called it the Royal Navy. Brooklyn New York Armed Guards Center – this big ocean liner, which had been a fabulous ocean liner before the war, was now a troop carrier. It had come into New York to pick up five-thousand American GIs and take them over to England to fight – D-day – 1944. They were short of signalmen – so me and another guy were picked to go on that trip. It was just supposed to be one trip – over to Liverpool and back. Me and my buddy, we were treated so well on that ship, we liked it so much, we stayed there for a year. We went all over the world – that ship was called the Duchess of Richmond – that was the name of the ship. We finally came back a year later.

**UPDIKE** Your wife was living in England then?

**SYMMONDS** Oh, okay! I got sidetracked there. So when it came into Liverpool, it had to go into dry-dock. So they took Robby and me and put us in the YMCA – no, the Red Cross. The American Red Cross in Liverpool – they had little places where you could sleep in a bunk, and a cafeteria and the whole thing. They had a dance there every week. They had bands from New York and Chicago – all the Americans were over there by the thousands. The first dance that they had there, I went there and I found this girl, and we got together and danced well together. That was the start. Then every time I came back into Liverpool, following a trip, I would meet her again. After a year, we were in love, and that was it. Let's see ... 1944. We got married in '46, I'd been in the Merchant Marine after the Navy, still on ships. I came into Liverpool and we got married. She came over the following year – she came over in '48 on the America – the famous United States liner. I brought her over first-class, she'd never been on a ship in her life. She was sick the whole time. Seven days crossing the ocean – sick in bed.  
[laughter]

**UPDIKE** So the first place she lived in America was in California?

**SYMMONDS** No, we had our honeymoon at the Saint George hotel, Brooklyn New York. And then I took her to Aspen, Colorado – where I went to that school with Richard Dyer-Bennet. We stayed there all summer, and by that time we headed to San Francisco to go to school. That was in September of '48. She's still with me, and we've been married sixty-six or sixty-seven years. The Conservatory asked me if she wanted to come up, and I said "My wife doesn't like to travel. She doesn't like to leave home." So she didn't make it. But ... that's the high spots.

**UPDIKE** Could you tell me a little bit about your children?

**SYMMONDS** My children! Oh, okay. I've got four children – we have four children. They're in different parts of the world. One lives in Grover Beach, California. That's my oldest daughter. She's married to a window-washer. She was a worker for the state of California for twenty years, she just retired last year. That's Irene. She'd be sixty-two now. She's thirty years behind me, and I'll be ninety-two in two weeks. The next one was my son Glenn, the one that you heard play [on YouTube]. He lives in Bethany, Missouri and works – he flies all the time out of Kansas City. He's the drummer with Eddie Money – a rock and roller – and also plays guitar with Eddie Money. So he's been doing that for more than twenty years. That's Glenn. He's the traveler and a real flamboyant, good-looking kid. Very talented. Much more talented than his old man was. He has one son, been married a couple of times. He's been on the road so long, and most of those marriages don't hold up, as you probably well know. He has one son, who's also going to be a musician.

**UPDIKE** A guitarist?

**SYMMONDS** He's going to be a guitar player and a sax player. He plays sax and bass guitar. Quite good, he's only thirteen years old, but quite good at it. He's heading in that direction. The next child is Lyn, my daughter, she lives in Wyoming. She works as a librarian there, and her husband is a professor at Casper College, which is a two-year college there in town. The next son would be Jeff, he runs a golf school in Florida. He has one daughter. He's a guitar player too, but he'd rather play golf than play music, so he didn't follow it up too much.

Three years ago I was hiking up in Northern California and I fell and broke my shoulder and right arm – a very severe break and I realized I wasn't going to be playing much anymore so I gave my guitar away, to my daughter. I was without a guitar for almost two years, and then just last fall Glenn says "Would you like to start playing again?" and I said, "Well, I thought about it, but I don't have an instrument." He said "Well, if you want a guitar I'll send you one." He had a deal where a company sponsored him – he's had sponsors with his drum equipment and drum sticks and all that, but he also has this guitar company that sponsors him. It's not too far from here, it's called the Boulder Creek – have you heard of that name? Boulder Creek?

**UPDIKE** No.

**SYMMONDS** He says, "I'll send you a guitar" and a couple of days later it arrived. A beautiful guitar, in perfect tune. I took it out, and it's just a gorgeous piece – I couldn't believe it, it was made in China. And of course, guitar players never like much "Made in China" stuff, but this one made a believer out of me, and I've still got it. I play a little bit, most every day, when I can. When I don't have a broken finger I play my guitar about a half an hour or so every day. The world changes and this country that has been sending us junk for so many years is now sending high-quality guitars. Unbelievable! The largest guitar factory in the world is in Bangkok, Thailand. It's the Samik – Samik Guitars. Not known for making really good guitars, but known for making lots of them. The Samik Guitar Factory. What else can I tell you?

**UPDIKE**  
elsewhere?

Do you have any advice for music students at the Conservatory or

**SYMMONDS** I'm really not in a position to advise people. But I'll tell you – if you've got the attitude and the persistence, it's worth it. It's worth it. If you have to give up everything else it's still worth it. I'll give you a story about this. The guitarist Les Paul – he died just two years ago. He was up in his nineties, and he was still playing jazz clubs in New York City, at that age. He gave up everything in the world to be a guitar player. He divorced his wife, because he felt like she was interfering with him being a guitar player. That was Mary Ford. They used to make recordings, which you possibly have heard. He gave up his family, he had some children. They wanted him to spend more time with them and he refused to do it. So you could say he was a very selfish person – probably was – but guitar playing was first to him above everything. He was in a car wreck, a very severe car wreck one time, and broke his right arm in several places. And so when he spoke to the doctor he said “Will I be able to play?” and he said “No, Mr. Les Paul, you'll probably never play the guitar again. Because you've been broken so many times you'll probably never be able to straighten your hand, your arm.” So he says “Okay, put my arm in a cast at a right angle so I can hold the guitar and hold the pick in my right hand. And even though I can't straighten it, I'll be able to play.” And so they did. And he still played for thirty years after that. That's an amazing story that you'll never hear, unless you've studied the books. There's the thing – if you want to play, then you'll play. You may have to give up everything else in your life, and you may never make much money. There's a story goes with that, you know, guitar players and money? The joke is – what's the difference between a guitar player and a large pizza? The answer is – a large pizza will feed a family of four. [laughter] The inference is a guitar player can't even feed a family, much less make a living. This is true. The guitar has taken a terrible beating in the minds of the public for years and years and years. But it's getting better now. There are places like this where a lot of budding guitar players are. For example, in the movies it used to be, if they wanted to type-cast a person to show that this person was a little bit flaky or may not a first-class upright, sturdy, red-blooded American, they would just show him in the movie playing a guitar, or carrying a guitar – well, there were several things that they used – long hair, wearing boots, riding a motorcycle – and worst of all, playing a guitar. That's not so true anymore. It never was true with classical guitar, because there are very few of them. Even today, out of the millions and millions of people who play guitar in the world, probably less than one percent play classical guitar, of which we have studios full of right here in this building. But they're very rare, like San Francisco, New York, Boston – that's about it – LA. That's where the guitar players are – Texas, lots of guitar players in Texas. Nashville. But one percent of them would be classical guitar players.

I've lived with it all my life. I've watched it – there used to be a program on the radio – KOMO Seattle – when I was a kid about ten years old I would dial in and get this cowboy singer who would play for fifteen minutes – they didn't even have a half hour. They'd give him fifteen minutes from 11:45 'til noon, and he'd do three or four cowboy songs. He was called Cowboy Joe. I'd listen to him religiously. He'd play pick-style guitar and had a nice voice. He was on for years and years – I never did find out who it was.

I remember I was teaching – I had this music studio in Costa Mesa, California. This lady called up. She sounded like an older lady. She said “Mr. Symmonds, I want to see about taking lessons.

How much do you charge?" I said, "Well, our rates are fifteen dollars for a month's worth of lessons. Fifteen dollars a month." She says, "A month?! I didn't want to take them for a month, I just wanted to learn how to play Wildwood Flower." [laughter] So you see, you're dealing with what we call the uninformed public. They have no conception of what it's all about, but they just got the idea they'd like to play Wildwood Flower. If you take a lesson, you can learn to play it, you know? There are lots of musical stories I could tell you, I could go on all afternoon and all evening about what students have said to me, and what happened. [laughter]

**UPDIKE** Would you like to tell a couple of your favorite stories from teaching?

**SYMMONDS** Teaching stories? Well, one of the ones my son loved to hear was this guy dressed like a cowboy came in, and wanted to see about taking guitar lessons. I said "Do you play now?" And he said "Oh, yes, I play professionally, but I'd like to learn something else about it. But before I take lessons from you, I want to see how you play." I said, "Okay, fine, sit down and I'll play two or three bluegrass songs. Just simple bluegrass tunes, three chords in G." And he says, "Three chords in G?" I said "Yeah." He said, "What are they?" [laughter] There's a story dear to a guitar player's heart.

And the kid that came in because his mother wanted him to take lessons. Say, about fourteen. He had a nice guitar and everything. His mother wanted him to take lessons. He didn't want to play. So the first lesson he just made no response – "I can do that. No, I can't do that." – "Well, try it." – "No, I can't do that." – And so, the second lesson, the same, he made no attempt. I had already committed myself to four lessons. So the third lesson, I just sat there and played scales and paid no attention to him. And the fourth lesson, same thing. I paid no attention to him, I didn't try to teach him anything, just played until the half-hour was up and he could go home. So I thought, "Well, we sure didn't do any good on that kid." And so lo and behold the next week, he shows up. And he had the check in his hand for fifteen dollars. I said, "What, you want to take another fifteen dollars worth of lessons?" I said "Is your mom there" – he said "Yeah, she's out front." I said "Come on with me." I took him out to the front of the studio and handed the lady her check back and I says "Your son doesn't want to take lessons, so he's wasting my time and your money. So here's your money back and I'm sorry I can't do anything for him." She says "Can't you force him to play?" I said "No, it doesn't work like that. It doesn't work like that. If you don't want to play, there's nothing we can do, if he doesn't want to play." So that was the end of that. So what else do you want me to talk about?

**UPDIKE** Well, you've done a lot throughout your life. You've had a very interesting life. Do you want to think back and pick out some of the high points from your life?

**SYMMONDS** My life? Well, it's been interesting. My whole life has been a series of failures and adventures. Probably the closest I could describe myself – I was a ne're-do-well. Do you understand that term? That's an old-fashioned term. Whatever this guy tries, he don't do good at it. He's a ne're-do-well. So, that's mainly – I was always a rebel. I never wanted to settle down anywhere, I wanted to travel constantly. Always with a guitar. My wife, she realized that a guitar player will never put food on the table. So ... "Why don't you try something else?" So I would try everything under the sun and still go back to the guitar.

I made a trip to South Africa about fifteen years ago. I made a trip to South Africa to ride steam trains, because there were two countries in the world that still ran steam trains. South Africa was one, and China was the other ... and maybe India too, so there were three countries. I went down there and spent one whole summer – in the wintertime, because it's reverse weather – and rode steam trains down there. It was just so great, it was just marvelous. Time turns back, you know. I had never seen that country before, so that was a high point.

Let's see, what else can I tell you? Every winter, usually during the month of January I would take a month off and ride trains around the United States and Canada. Continuously, I'd never come home. These things, when you've got a wife and family, you don't usually do. So this shows you what a hairpin I was. But somehow or another, I had emerged in my later years from being a failure to being a victor. Everything's come my way. This is a good day, for example. I didn't know it, a month ago, that I would be invited up here, all expenses paid, to help celebrate their Guitarrada because I was the first student at the Conservatory in guitar. I used to give talks at a high school down in Paso Robles, California. A man wanted me to talk about trains and stuff, and the Depression era. I started doing that, and I did it for five years. The kids loved it, I had no idea. So I used to tell them, I says, "I've been a failure all my life. But the reason I have such a good reputation now is because I have outlived all my detractors." And the kids just loved that.

And so in my old age, I have blossomed out and become a citizen. And I've been invited places. And people want to talk to me, and want to sit down next to me and take me to lunch! This has all happened through nothing that I did, just that I happened to last this long. It's one thing to arrive at old age sick and in a wheelchair or incapacitated, but it's another thing to arrive at age 92 and still be able to do this. It's marvelous. It's a thrill and a pleasure that I'm able to do this, and I'm ever so grateful.

**UPDIKE** Well, we're very grateful that you could come here. Very grateful. This has been wonderful, I think it's been perfect.

**SYMMONDS** Has it been good?

**UPDIKE** Is there anything else that you'd like to add? I think this has been a wonderful interview, if there's anything you'd like to add I don't want to stop you, but I think that was just perfect.

**SYMMONDS** Let's see. I should tell you more about my wife. When I went to this minstrelsy school in Aspen in 1948, she got kind of interested in it. She's from England, and she knows English folk songs and all that – but she didn't know the Americana songs. She got interested in that, so we started singing and we developed a guitar – a singing duo. She would play four-string guitar, tenor guitar, and I would play regular guitar. We called ourselves the Balladeers. We were together doing that for about thirty years, on and off. We did a few gigs where they'd pay us, most of the time it was for free, but we made a few paying gigs. She had this knack for harmony which was just wonderful. But she didn't have the gall and the drive, and she would be so retiring and I'd have to force her to sing and get with it. Finally, I let her off the hook and said "You don't have to do this anymore." [laughter] And so she went in with the

barbershop quartet singing – lady’s side of it, you know. I forget what they call it – they still call it barbershop. She loved that, she joined a barbershop chorus down in southern California – no, where we live now – San Louis Obispo. She sang with them, and toured the country, with her group. She quit on her own – we both decided it was time to quite because we were practicing together one time in the kitchen – it sounds better in the kitchen, you know, when you’re playing guitar – and all of a sudden we looked at each other, and she knew and I knew – we weren’t in tune. We were fading. I says “We’re slipping.” She says “I’ve noticed it. We can’t sing in pitch anymore.” I said “Does this mean we should hang it up?” She says “Yeah, I think we’d better hang it up.” Another thing – the last year we were singing – we’d get a few gigs and I developed drooling, out of both sides of my mouth. [laughter] When you’re singing, or talking, you’re not aware of it. You’re not aware that’s happening. So she would – singing next to me – she had a little system – she’d tap me on the shoulder behind my back and then I’d – surreptitiously I’d do that [wipes face]. So I said “I guess it’s time we quit.”

**UPDIKE** She sounds like the perfect musical partner.

**SYMMONDS** Oh, she was just great. Just marvelous. I wouldn’t have my life any other way, but that just was the way it went, and I appreciate the fact that you’re sitting here listening to me and asking these good questions. I wish I had more to say about the Conservatory, but it’s been sixty-five years and I can’t remember hardly a thing about it anymore.

**UPDIKE** Did you ever visit the Conservatory in its second location, on Ortega Street? Did you ever see that building?

**SYMMONDS** Where?

**UPDIKE** On Ortega Street?

**SYMMONDS** No, the only one I knew was on Sacramento Street. How many places have they been?

**UPDIKE** This is the third location.

**SYMMONDS** The third one. No, I’ve never been to the second one.

**UPDIKE** You had a tour of the building earlier today....? Did you walk through the building?

**SYMMONDS** She took me – Makela [Clay] took me through the whole thing – except the lowest basement. Is this it?

**UPDIKE** This is the lowest, yes.

**SYMMONDS** This is the only place she didn’t take me.

**UPDIKE** How does the character of it feel as opposed to the house on Sacramento Street?

**SYMMONDS** Well, I don't think it could compare with it, really. I was one of the ones there and the attitude was – this is your chance, this is your chance to learn. That was the attitude. And do it. I don't find that imperative now – I don't see it. I think today, the students, for the most part, are more casual. They're younger and more casual. Probably tons of talent here, but I don't know how far they're going to go. But I think this is probably the best place you could ever go if you were interested in furthering your career. How else could you beat it, you know? At a big university they have these departments of music, but it's nothing like this. In my town – where I'm living now – we have Cal Poly with a huge music department. Nothing like this. This is hands-on, and the teachers are all dedicated teachers, and that's all they do. And you're the archivist. What's your background?

**UPDIKE** I have my masters in library science, with a concentration in archives management. I worked – before I came to California I worked for the Harvard Botany Libraries and Archives for a couple of years.

**SYMMONDS** Did you?

**UPDIKE** I did. I started here about two years ago, working part-time and just became full-time recently.

**SYMMONDS** A full-time archivist. That's marvelous, just marvelous.

**UPDIKE** It is. The school has such an amazing history.

**SYMMONDS** They have a fine reputation. Those early ladies who started this thing – you know, I told you, almost all of the teachers when I was first here were almost all women, and only one – Mr. Sol Joseph – was the only man teacher at that time. He couldn't teach enough students there, everybody wanted to get in his classes, he was great. He made us go down and join some kind of a club near the school at that time, where we could listen to records. This had a great classical musical library where you could go in and sit for hours and listen – and in those times those were all 78s. We used to hear Brahms symphonies – we had to listen to them for a full year, every week. Every week, for hours on end. He said “When you finally get so much of that music absorbed into you, you'll begin to understand it. You'll never get with casual listening, here and there. This is the guy that Joseph was. He's the same guy who wanted me to buy a piano right away.

**UPDIKE** Well, this has just been really wonderful, I really appreciate you doing this with us. It's been a pleasure, I really appreciate this.

**SYMMONDS** I'm happy to do it.

**UPDIKE** We're honored to have you back here.

**SYMMONDS**

Well, thank you. Thank you.