**Kelsey Smith** [00:00:01] So you could just tell me your name.

**John Barr** [00:00:03] John Barr. B-A-R-R. Come through?

**Kelsey Smith** [00:00:11] And today is August 3, 2012, and we're at Nighttown. So, if you just want to tell me where you were born and where you grew up.

**John Barr** [00:00:21] Born in Cleveland, Ohio in at St. Luke's Hospital, as a matter of fact, and stayed here until it would have been 1948 and left for the military. And then then it gets complicated and there's a long history there and I don't want to bore you with it so.

**Kelsey Smith** [00:00:55] Well, when did you buy the building and start Nighttown?

**John Barr** [00:01:00] Oh, I didn't buy the building, I leased. It was a lease at the time, it was called the Silhouette Lounge and this became available. I was working at the ski house up the street and this became available. I got it February the 5th of 1965.

**Kelsey Smith** [00:01:21] And what was it that made you want to lease this place?

**John Barr** [00:01:27] Well, I'd been bumming around the country for a good number of years and I was getting to the age where I figured I'd better do something productive, personally productive, and this became available and I bought it with fifteen hundred dollars that I borrowed from my mother and went into business.

**Kelsey Smith** [00:01:56] So did you start off as a jazz club then or?

**John Barr** [00:02:01] We had at the time it was just one unit and that's where the main bar is now. So we had a stand-up piano and we had a couple of musicians who would play on a catch-as-catch-can basis. We weren't noticed. Well, there was no restaurant at the time either. It was just a jazz-oriented following. And we had Bill Gidney and local and there was a couple of other fellows that would play, Ralph Krugal played here on occasions, and he had a group. But it wasn't until, let's see, actually, until years later when I got the next room over here, we went from the one storefront west to another storefront. Then we came east to that storefront and then this one. So it was a progression. As we got bigger, the acts got better. That's how it worked. And we didn't do much advertising in those days. It was primarily word of mouth and that seemed to work all right, and the restaurant helped. When we opened the restaurant, the first night we opened, we had I was the cook and we had six dinners and from then on it got slow. It was a very difficult thing to get off the ground, but it eventually did.

**Kelsey Smith** [00:03:54] What made you decide to start a restaurant?

**John Barr** [00:03:57] Well, when you're bumming around the country, that's, you know, you can get a job as a dishwasher. You know, you just work around in this industry. I was a ski bum for some time and we used to surf in the summer. And the only way you could get work, you know, keep body and soul together was to, you know, do some kind of restaurant or hotel work. That was it.

**Kelsey Smith** [00:04:26] So then did you cook somewhere before here or?

**John Barr** [00:04:30] Just at home, it was an experience.

**Kelsey Smith** [00:04:36] I'm sure. So when did you really start to see, I don't know. You know, when was the hay day I guess of Nighttown? When did business really start to pick up?

**John Barr** [00:04:49] Well, the bar, the bar was the key to the whole thing that started probably '65, probably in '66. And then we just got too busy for the one with a fire department would come here every weekend and close us. There were just too many people. And then the fire chief would allow if two people went out, two people could come in. And this went on, it's just was. And in those days also the ventilation was poor. We had a smoke here, which is not. And everybody smoked in those days. And then a small little vent in the front. And, gosh, it was just it it's almost cut your way through. It was not pleasant, but people still came. And in the summer we could open the door. But, you know, in the winter it was difficult.

**Kelsey Smith** [00:05:57] And I meant to ask you, who did you buy or who did you first lease the building from?

**John Barr** [00:06:03] He was in here the other night, he's a slumlord and I can't think of his name, Brendan would know his name he was and he didn't last long. And then the lady who owned a hairdresser shop, she bought the building, I think, from him. And she was a little better and landlords by nature don't get along with tenants pay.

**Kelsey Smith** [00:06:30] What were, what was in the other wings before you?

**John Barr** [00:06:36] The far one the furthest west was called Cedar Road Cafe and was a little counter restaurant that didn't do anything. And then it was taken over by a fellow from Atlanta, Georgia, called Fosdick, Fearless Fosdick. And, and he didn't last too long. And, and he was just sitting there. And so I talked over a lease with I I'm not sure who it was with. It was probably with the slumlord. And I added that to the lease here and then put in a one or two pool tables to help pay the rent and then would work at night and, and start working on the restaurant and the restaurant opened in probably '60, mid '66, I don't recall exactly. I never.

**Kelsey Smith** [00:07:40] Is the kitchen in that wing then the far one or?

[00:07:44] Yes, it was. And at the time, I was very naive and I didn't know really what I was doing. And I had, I had him make a charcoaled broiler that I stuck in there. And of course, the heat from charcoal is much hotter from, from the gas broiler. So it was hard-working back there. It was very, and of course, he had to keep putting in charcoal and I changed that as I got smarter. But that was a while and I had a little teeny refrigerator and. I didn't have much in the way of equipment, so I had to go and in those days I didn't know that you could have it delivered. So, you know, I'd have to go either West Side Market or go up here. In those days, Russo's was thriving in this community. I would go up there and get lettuce and limes and, you know, whatever I needed daily. But I did have the best meat purveyor in town. I went down. I can tell. I said I don't know what I'm doing, but I do know I want to serve the best product available. And he said, I'll tell you what he said. I work with. Hello. Hello. Punch another number, I'm not there, I'll shut this off. So his name was Nate Marki, and he was a wonderful man, and he had a little area set aside for Nighttown and that was our meat exclusively. Nobody could go in there and it worked out very well. He was a great man.

**Kelsey Smith** [00:09:56] Where was he at?

**John Barr** [00:09:57] Yeah, he was down on Bolivar. That was in those days, there was the meat and a lot of produce people down there it was, that and over on Woodland were the main sources of product. So.

**Kelsey Smith** [00:10:18] What kind of things did you serve at first?

**John Barr** [00:10:20] We had, there's a menu here somewhere. There was I think five things on the menu. We had lobster tail, we had a steak kabob, and three steaks. And that was it. That's all I could cook. And the menu was limited because of the result of me. And then we started to progress and a woman came in and asked if I, she wanted to get a she was a housewife and wanted a job just for lunch and stuff. So she, we opened for lunch and she ran the luncheon thing and that worked out well. And I just slowly, slowly got the restaurant business picked up and, and evolved.

**Kelsey Smith** [00:11:14] So I was wondering if you could tell me maybe about some of the more notable or memorable performances that you can remember?

**John Barr** [00:11:25] Well, as far as music?

**Kelsey Smith** [00:11:29] Yeah.

**John Barr** [00:11:30] Oh, gosh. I can't even think of the names now. I just heard her on the radio. Oh, there's been so many, I wouldn't know where to start there. You know, but I will say this as it progressed and they becoming more and more frequent, they became less significant to the people who are working in the place if you can follow me because it was so busy that you really didn't have time to sit down and really appreciate the music so. And. Oh, gosh. Well, I can't think of any specific.

**Kelsey Smith** [00:12:28] Brendan mentioned that you mostly stuck with strangers or it was a word something like that.

**John Barr** [00:12:35] Oh.

**Kelsey Smith** [00:12:38] It was a style of jazz. I was wondering if you could tell me a little more about that.

**John Barr** [00:12:39] Stride piano.

**Kelsey Smith** [00:12:41] Stride, that's what it was.

**John Barr** [00:12:42] Stride piano and primarily piano and in many cases, single performers. We've had some great piano players in here. And then then Brendan got Jim Wadsworth and he opened up the variety and of it everything from the spoken word to bigger jazz, because at that point we expanded over here so there was more seating and you could afford more higher, higher priced entertainment.

**Kelsey Smith** [00:13:24] What, can you tell me a little about, about the style of stride then? I'm not familiar with it.

**John Barr** [00:13:30] Well stride piano would be it's I think it's either oriented towards the left hand or the right hand, I'm not sure which. And it, it was popular. A lot of Dixieland piano is stride. Probably the biggest stride piano player now would be Judy Carmichael, who's out of New York. And she's a wonderful player, but she's got a big band and we couldn't put her in here. It's just too expensive and she's gotten too big, but. So stride is more of an [era] period piano than contemporary. It's totally different.

**Kelsey Smith** [00:14:21] And what, was that always one of your favorites?

**John Barr** [00:14:25] Yeah. Well, yeah. [I like] piano a lot and I like vocalists, I like the words. So we did more of a traditional jazz Billie Holiday kind of oriented jazz. But Teddy Wilson piano, and there's just a whole ton of them probably going back into the '50s and that it was again carried off in here. And then, you know, they're all dying off. So that new jazz is not I'm not really familiar with it to a great degree.

**Kelsey Smith** [00:15:18] Did you have any more questions about the music or anything? Okay. I just wanted to make sure.

**Unknown speaker** [00:15:21] I'm a classical musician, so.

**John Barr** [00:15:24] Oh are you? You're biased.

**Unknown speaker** [00:15:25] I know music. I just don't know jazz very well. So.

**Kelsey Smith** [00:15:28] I really like this building. So

**John Barr** [00:15:37] Well, the building H\has had a lot of problems, and, you know, if you think about all the traffic that's gone by this building over the years, you know, and the vibrations, it just created a lot of problems. And I didn't I didn't buy the building until it had to be in the '90s. Prior to that, I just leased it. And then when, when Brendan came along and we got some stability in here, then I felt it was time to, to buy the building. And it worked out well but I used to own the Heights Rockefeller building. And, you know, it seems like every day something is going kabooty and it's just the expense. I never made a dime on the Rockefeller Building and I loved it. I still do. I live up there now. But, you know, that's one of the problems. And if you don't maintain it on a regular basis, then the problems compound themselves. And that's what's happened to a lot in Cleveland Heights and well throughout the city. And ultimately, they got to be torn down, which is again tragic. Know, I've always liked this building and it's unfortunate. You know, probably when it was a two-lane road coming up here, this was much more impressive than it is now. Well, all you have is people going by at 40 miles an hour, whatever the heck it is. And they're not looking. They're looking at the light, you know, not at anything else. So.

**Kelsey Smith** [00:17:23] Do you know anything about the history earlier history of the building? No or?

**John Barr** [00:17:27] No, I don't, it, unfortunately [I] don't think Cleveland Heights kept much of a record. And that's why this is probably a good idea to get something on, on record. One of the more frightening things, we had a wine store here for a while and one Saturday morning there were some kids over there on a skateboard and there was a man up here painting the windows on the top of the building. And his son was on the bottom holding the ladder while I was in the wine store and I was looking out this window and all of a sudden this kid jumped off the skateboard and a skateboard came out into Cedar Road? There's a car coming up here too fast, a big one of those old 50 cars. And he didn't know what to do. So he swung around, went through this driveway, knocked the man off the ladder. So he fell about three stories, landed on his head. And the kid is screaming. And this fellow never stopped until he got to the end of the building. And it was just nightmarish. And from then on, she didn't do much work around here on the building and it just kind of because it was traumatic. The fellow lived but he was permanently, permanently, but the series of events. It just and it happened so quickly. It was just and nobody was coming the other way. Crazy. So other than that, there used to be across the street, it was a title house. And prior to my taking this over, a fellow who worked in the title house, came over here, met a girl, took her up Shaker Lakes, and killed her. So that was my legacy was coming in here and everything. And the day we opened, we had two men who had run, held up a gas station down on Carnegie and they were heading for Akron. They stopped by here to have a drink on the way out and got in an argument in here. This was the very day I was to take over and there was guns on the bar and these people were ready to go to work. Fortunately, the two people that they got in the argument with, one was in Cleveland Heights cop and the off duty and the other fellow was just a tough man. And they just beat him up and, and called the, called the station. They came down and took him away. And I got a phone call from this fellow later on one of them, and he said, I'm coming down after I get out of here. Well, he wasn't getting out of there. And I left a 20 dollar bill on the bar and I didn't get any change. He wanted the change for his twenty-dollar bill. So that was my entrance.

**Kelsey Smith** [00:20:39] Wow.

**John Barr** [00:20:40] It's funny.

**Kelsey Smith** [00:20:40] It sounds like the neighborhood has changed.

**John Barr** [00:20:42] It has, it has this neighborhood at one time was just really going down. It was Russo's, the ski house opening, and the three churches St. Ann's, Fairmount Presbyterian, and St. Paul, that kept this neighborhood alive because it was really going down and nobody could figure out how to stop it. Well, then eventually I bought the building up there and then. But about that time, the ski house left. But they went up to Besting Company or up where that lady has the place. There's her coffee shop on the, on the next corner on Surrey, are you familiar with Surrey?

**Kelsey Smith** [00:21:38] Yeah.

**John Barr** [00:21:39] Yeah.

**Kelsey Smith** [00:21:39] I know what you mean.

**John Barr** [00:21:40] To the left there that.

**Kelsey Smith** [00:21:42] Okay.

**John Barr** [00:21:42] Yeah, that originally was a Besting Company. When I was a kid, this was really a good neighborhood. And then it, I think the war contributed to it going down. So other than that, you know, pretty much everything is the same in this. There was a little grocery store next to her which went out and then a tire shop came in. And then I hustled this fellow to put in the bakery in that place over there. And so it's all helped to get people to a little vibrancy to the community because there's a lot of vacancies and stuff. But that's pretty well changed now.

**Kelsey Smith** [00:22:35] I was going to ask, I know that Brendan, has collected some of the memorabilia on the walls but I know you've collected a lot as well. When did you start collecting?

**John Barr** [00:22:46] When I could afford it, you know, it was probably, I don't know, probably a couple of months after I opened.

**Kelsey Smith** [00:22:53] What did you start, like what kinds of things did you start with?

**John Barr** [00:22:57] Whatever I liked I picked up and, and I guess most of this stuff I bought, but I used to travel a little bit to find if I ever heard of an antique show or something, I'd go out there and negotiate a bit and see what I could get for a price. And it just kind of somehow in the back of my mind when I was going, you know, but every time we take over another space, it was another, you know, walls to cover. So it was kind of never-ending that and, you know, the high ceilings and everything. So that kept me kind of busy. A lot of the stuff that I got, I got in here, the price has gone way up. Yeah. Because just not available anymore. And that was that.

**Kelsey Smith** [00:23:55] Do you have any favorite pieces?

**John Barr** [00:23:58] I do, Brendan took it home though. Yes, it's called the Farewell Toast, and it's, the artist is in Benaze and it's two women holding up a champagne glass and it's about a five-foot big painting. And I just loved it. But it's at least it won't get well, no smoking anymore, so it won't get, won't take a beating, so.

**Kelsey Smith** [00:24:29] Are there any other pieces that stand out to you?

**John Barr** [00:24:35] Well, I like the French posters, they always and I also like the Father, Dear Father, the Saloon advertising. I was getting a haircut up on Coventry and I got talking to the barber and and he said, you own Nighttown? I said, yeah. And he said, well, you know, I got a couple old posters that I've been laying down in the basement, and they were those two posters and I think I paid seventy five dollars apiece. I don't know what they're worth currently. But, you know, word of mouth helped them in getting this stuff and also a desire. And I just you know, once you start this, you've got to continue, you know, it's a lot of wall space. You know?

**Kelsey Smith** [00:25:35] That's very neat.

**John Barr** [00:25:35] Yeah.

**Kelsey Smith** [00:25:37] Brandan was telling me about the Tiffany window.

**John Barr** [00:25:40] Tiffany, my ear, that they were going to tear that building down. Did he tell you?

**Kelsey Smith** [00:25:47] Which building was it?

**John Barr** [00:25:48] It was a house, it was on Bellflower, and we and I went everywhere in the university. I said, I want to buy that window. And so I thought in my department you'd have to go over here and say, talk to them. And it just spun me around and finally I said, the hell with it. And the Saturday, it was due to be torn down on Monday, me and this other fellow went down. We put on the big overalls and went up there and took it out. You know, it was better, you know, to be somewhere than to be destroyed. And that's what they were going to do. It's amazing how much stuff is in Cleveland that has been destroyed. Which is unfortunate as well. So other than that it's been it was an exciting run.

**Kelsey Smith** [00:26:41] I'm sure. Do you have any other Cleveland pieces? I know.

**John Barr** [00:26:53] Well, you know, I did have I bought the innards of the bishop's house at Trinity Cathedral that they tore down and I had three marble fireplaces and a whole bunch of other stuff out of that. And then I got sick and I was in the hospital for a while and I had it stored on West 6th because I was going to Frankfurt Road downtown. I was going to open a place down there. And while I was in the hospital, somebody broke in and took it all, which was kind of shocking. And and so I didn't open downtown for a lot of reasons. It's too early for one thing, but other than that. No, but a lot of this stuff came from dealers in Cleveland, June Greenwald, they did a lot of work with and a fellow on the West Side on, on Lorain. He's, he and June Greenwald, I consider the two top in the city. But other than that, I can't take of Cleveland stuff other than some stained glass that I got out of old houses. Yeah, well, I lived in I was ski bumming in Aspen and there was a place out there called the Crystal Palace, and he had, he had deeper pockets, certainly, than I ever had. And he had a beautiful paintings and antique posters and stuff around. And that's what gave me the idea that I had to fill in with theater cover, covers and all kinds of stuff. I don't know.

**Kelsey Smith** [00:29:00] Alright. Well, I got, I don't have any more questions. I don't know if you?

**Unknown speaker** [00:29:02] I don't have anything either so.

**Kelsey Smith** [00:29:02] Alright.

**John Barr** [00:29:05] And I have nothing to provide other than vignettes, and that's.

**Kelsey Smith** [00:29:13] I like the vignettes.

**Unknown speaker** [00:29:14] And actually there for the site, they're more useful.

**Kelsey Smith** [00:29:17] Yeah, they're neat, you know, when you can click down to the little story. Yeah.