

Under the Rainbow: Oral Histories of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual,
Transgender, Intersex and Queer People in Kansas

Kristie Stremel
Oral History

Interviewed by
Tami Albin

March 3, 2009

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Kristie Stremel: Narrator
Tami Albin: Interviewer

TAMI ALBIN: All right so, today is March 3, 2009—

KRISTIE STREMEL: Yes—

ALBIN: And I'm here with Kristie Stremel. Thank you for being a part of this.

STREMEL: Thank you.

ALBIN: I appreciate it. So I'm going to ask you the question that I ask everybody to start off the interviews which is, Tell me where you were born and when?

STREMEL: I was born in Hays, Kansas, 1974. Yeah.

ALBIN: Okay. So what was life like growing up in Hays?

STREMEL: Hays was a great town to grow up in, but very conservative, very Roman Catholic conservative type place. But it was a great place to grow up just to be a kid.

ALBIN: So what was school like?

STREMEL: School—I wasn't very interested in school. I barely got through high school (laughter) but I don't remember it particularly being that hard. I mean all—you had to show up and—oh looks like a Chihuahua wants to come up here. But just very—very kind of Middle America. There was five of us, five kids. My parents were still married and it was just kind of a different time. We went to Catholic Church every Sunday. Wednesdays we went to religion class, every Wednesday night. So it was very like religion oriented. I'm a recovering Catholic now, (laughter) it took many years.

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ALBIN: So what was your life like at home with your family?

STREMEL: I remember it being very loud and rough and like fork throwing, fighting, just like very loud and rough. And I remember thinking that that was like even weird. And I remember like retreating a lot, like going to find my own place. And we never got to go out to eat. And I remember like one time we got to go out to eat and I didn't want to go in to eat because I just really wanted quiet and I wanted to sit in the car. But it was such a treat to go out to eat, but I was like I wanted the quiet. Like I remember that being a big indicator, looking back now, like I think I just needed some peace and quiet so I was kind of the one that would kind of run away to get that.

ALBIN: So is your family still like that when you get together?

STREMEL: (laughs) I don't know if I run away or not. I'm kind of still like that. Because playing in loud bars and stuff, like when I come home I kind of like quiet. I don't want—where my partner's the opposite. Like, she wants the radio going on or the TV on. I mean, I could sit here in complete silence and be perfectly fine.

ALBIN: So you mentioned bars. And when did you start playing music?

STREMEL: I started playing music in Hays. I started playing—my first garage band was called Downfall (laughs) which my mom was not happy about that name. She thought it—(laughter) I was fifteen or something and she thought it meant the devil or something. (laughter) But it was Downfall and we practiced in an old storage space in Hays, and we played at like this skating rink and we were really—we were really terrible, but we thought we were really good. And so that's when I first started playing. My dad taught me how to play when I was like twelve and I started my garage band and—and then my dad got a job promotion to Kansas City so my senior year we moved to a suburb—that's Karma over there. (laughter) We moved to a suburb of Kansas City, Shawnee and that's when I really started to kind of look for bands, like, Well maybe I should try to join a band or something. So that was kind of the beginning of I guess what later became a semi-professional career, (laughs) a local career.

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ALBIN: So what type of instruments—you said that your dad taught you how to play.

STREMEL: My dad played guitar. He played in a Polka band in Hays. He played in a Polka band in Hays, Kansas called The Hermanettes. And he was always a really good guitar player, and I think better than he knew. But he had five kids to raise. He couldn't go play with this wedding band all the time. But he taught me how to play and just kind of start out with this acoustic guitar and then I wanted to learn how to—then I saw Joan Jett play at the Ellis County Fair. She came out playing this crazy electric guitar and the amp was making all these weird sounds. And I was like, Oh I want one of those. So then that was the beginning of that, but kind of lost the question there but—

ALBIN: What instruments did your dad teach you how to play?

STREMEL: Yeah, it was mainly guitar. And then later on I kind of taught myself a few other things. I could hold down the fort a little—on a few other instruments, but guitar is my main instrument. And I never considered myself the lead singer, but in my garage band I got everybody in place, I got everybody to play an instrument so we're all lined up and I was like—I'm looking and I'm like, I forgot a lead singer. I forgot to get a lead singer. And then we were looking at who was going to sing and I was like, Well I'll just sing today but we've got to find a lead singer. Because I never considered myself a singer. So I think I kind of like got pushed into that and it just kind of stuck. I just kept singing. But it's nothing—it's really nothing that I seriously love to do today. I don't like love singing, but I like songwriting, and so that comes with it so I got to do it. And I got to try to do a good job. (laughter)

ALBIN: So does anybody else in your family play instruments?

STREMEL: See, my dad plays—my brother, Greg plays. He's an ex-Marine and he likes to carry around the acoustic and just—he's loud and obnoxious so he can play guitar pretty good. But nobody else really plays any. My mom likes to sing. She's a pretty good singer. My dad will be playing guitar in the living room like some Johnny Cash or something, Johnny Cash (unintelligible). My mom would come in (laughs) on harmony from the kitchen like she was June Carter. (laughter) And they would sing together. And that was a lot of fun. Like that was a lot of fun listening to your folks sing.

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ALBIN: Yeah, that's nice.

STREMEL: That's nice.

ALBIN: That's really nice. So you were in Shawnee and you decided that you were interested in trying to do something—

STREMEL: Yeah. I just— had to finish my senior year in a new school and it was just awful. I didn't have any friends and my sister who was still living with us was my only friend and I just—I was miserable. And I was like, Well I should look to start a band. And around that time—I guess I was nineteen and I had just like come out and I was seeing this girl and she brought home a flyer and said, Hey this band's looking for a guitar player. And I was like, a flyer, what the heck? And it was all girl—a signed, all girl alternative rock band seeks guitar player or something. So I just saw the word signed. They had a record deal. So I called them up and it was Frogpond and—was the name of the band and I tried out. And it was between me and this other gal and I said, Well—they were going to do this other girl tomorrow night, try her out. And I was like, Well I really like you guys and I really like your music. I was like, I kind of need to know now because I got to let another band know. And I didn't even try out for (laughs) anybody else. It's like, I got to let another band know if I want to play with them. They need to know, but I'd really like to play with you. So they were like, All right. So they huddled in the kitchen. So I weaseled my way into Frogpond and went on the road with them for I mean a good two years. We did pretty good. We did a lot of different—we were an opening band for a lot of bands that were breaking, like Everclear and the Toadies. We opened up for No Doubt a couple times. All these bands were breaking around us, but we (laughs) weren't, but we thought we were at any second, like what is the deal?

ALBIN: So what's that like, being on the—

STREMEL: I was twenty-one and literally went on the road for two years. It was pandemonium, crazy. It was really hard. It was really hard on my body. I made it hard, I think, too. It was like a free-for-all, but at the same time it was like a good learning

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experience for me. I mean, who gets to go in and see exactly how the label works and how the record—and we saw it firsthand, good and bad. And I just loved like—it's a sense of self-employment. And I liked working for myself. I never liked working for anybody else, and I still kind of feel that way today. (laughs) But this could be I had some bad bosses. But, I don't know, it was just—it's such a learning experience, being a musician and on the road. It's like you're in the school of hard rock life, so—

ALBIN: So did you guys have a manager?

STREMEL: We did. We had a manager. We were signed to TriStar which is a subsidiary of Sony. So they released *Count to Ten* and Art Alexakis from Everclear produced the record. We did really well for a while and then it kind of—I got tired of it, four girls on the road was like—

ALBIN: It's interesting because whenever I mention your name people are like, Yeah, Frogpond. Like people—

STREMEL: They know the name Frogpond and they might know it was like, Oh yeah four girls, but then—yeah.

ALBIN: So did you write songs?

STREMEL: I own 20 percent of *Count to Ten*, but I think that the generosity of Heidi Phillips, our lead singer, because in my eyes I mean she did the majority of the writing of all the songs.

ALBIN: So how do you divide that percentage up?

STREMEL: That's a hard thing to do because I've been through like the gamut on this songwriting thing because I've had to divide some up. Some I didn't want to, but I just felt out of like—out of, You're my pal. But I—my theory on it is this—this is what I've come to is, if you can sit down with your instrument and play the song and make it sound like the song, you probably wrote the song. You know what I mean? Like if you just added your drum part or whatever, you can't go play that song for somebody or—

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it's unfortunate, but if you're going to be a drummer you're a drummer, you're probably not a songwriter. Unless you can drum and play maybe a guitar or piano or something. See it's really hard to do. It's really—bands break up over this stuff.

ALBIN: Right. So does that include the lyrics that go along with it or is that just the musical part?

STREMEL: It's hard because it's like—it's just too messy. It could be a lot of different things. But for me like even—Frogpond I don't consider it really—I didn't really start songwriting until Exit 159. I created that band after Frogpond. And it—and we were a band, but I wrote all the songs, I wrote all the lyrics. But I split it. It wasn't much to split (laughs) I mean, we didn't really do all that well, but we did some cool stuff. And—because that was a band. It was like Exit 159 there was three of us and so we just—we'll split it. And then I went solo and so that's mine. Like, I hired guys on to—I think I gave Scott Cameron and one guitar player some writing credit because he put—if you did something exceptional to the song that changed it dramatically into a good—something better than I could have like I'm going to give you credit because—but that's a hard one.

ALBIN: Yeah, because I'm thinking—so if I came to you with a list of lyrics and said, Here's a song and you did turn that—added music to it, what percentage—I mean (unintelligible).

STREMEL: That's something we'd have to work out. You got something? (laughs)

ALBIN: No, I don't, no, nor will I ever. (laughs)

STREMEL: You got a little poem in your pocket?

ALBIN: That's right. (laughter) This is my song, yeah. No—

STREMEL: But there are lyricists.

ALBIN: Right.

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STREMEL: Yeah.

ALBIN: Right.

STREMEL: And the arts—God bless the arts, just so wonderful.

ALBIN: And you said that when you were nineteen you were just coming out so how did that come about? Did you realize like when you were younger or was this—

STREMEL: Oh God. I think I knew when I was five. I was one of those people like, I didn't know I was—I didn't know the word gay but when I'm chasing a little girl around the playground like (laughs) that is like, What? But I knew I was different. I knew I wasn't like my sister who was just crazy about the boys, but I wasn't too worried about it either at the same time when I was little, because it was like, I was in the—that was such a small part of me. I was in a bunch of other stuff and—but boy there's no denying it when you hit the teenage years, like—and I'm making out with my boyfriend and all I'm thinking about is, God I wonder if I could get an electric guitar. I'm so bored. I'm so (laughs) bored. I'm thinking about—and I would only date boys who like played an instrument or like was really into music (laughs) because I just—I wanted a buddy, I didn't really want a boyfriend, but I was supposed to have a boyfriend and so I would go get a boyfriend. But boy, I didn't really like, it didn't really ding until I was like eighteen or nineteen, like Oh this is why you were so bored and this is why—it wasn't—it was like, I loved guys, I just—I was like—I had crushes on some girlfriends that I had in high school. And it wasn't until I moved to Kansas City and met this girl. Actually, I met her in my senior year. And it was like the first time I kissed her, I mean it was like stars and bells going off and it all finally made sense. And then boy did that open the can of worms of how hard this was going to be and—but that moment of clarity was like, How can you deny that truth?

ALBIN: And so is she—was she already out or—

STREMEL: She was out, yeah, she was pretty out. And I couldn't catch up with her and she was—she was just ready to roll and I was like, Man, I'm gay and what does this

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mean? But oddly enough it's like, I knew—like, I didn't want to lie to my folks and so I sat them down and it was probably like a lot of Catholic family coming out of—I can laugh at it now but it was just horrible. I mean, I sat my mom and my dad down and Kim, my older sister. They just happened to be around and that was who I sat down. I was like, Look I don't want to lie to you anymore. And they all thought I was going to tell them I was pregnant. I was like, Oh man. Later I found that out. And I just said, Hey I'm gay and I've always known and—and they had a horrible time with it. I mean, I thought my dad was going to have a heart attack. It's really—it really—and I was like, Why did—(laughs)—why? You should see the pictures of me. I practically looked like a boy growing up. Like it was that shocking? (laughs) Like seriously? It was that shocking? And it was to them. Like they just had no idea. And it was really hard. I just took a long time, just took a long time.

ALBIN: And so how old were you—like how long after you kissed this girl did you decide to tell them?

STREMEL: I think it was probably within six, eight months, yeah I just—when I knew like I didn't want to lie. And boy I told somebody back home in Hays and it took like two days to go around Hays, Kansas. So I knew I kind of had to get on it because my folks were probably going to find out, and I didn't want them to find out through a rumor, which is how my little sister found out. It went around the school we were going to and that really hurt her too, to find out from somebody else which I found out later it really hurt her and—and it's interesting because some kids think that's a bad thing because—I talk to my sisters a lot and wonder do my nieces and nephews know? Christian and Lex are like fourteen, fifteen—thirteen, fifteen. And when Lexi found out, my little niece, she had heard it from somebody and she goes, Stop saying that. Stop saying she's gay, like it was a bad word. And so that began the process of talking about what it meant. Some kids think that's a bad, naughty word. So—

ALBIN: And what about your brother?

STREMEL: You know, surprisingly—I don't really know what my older brother thinks about it. I don't think he really thinks about it. I know he's got his religion and maybe that's a block between us, I don't know, but—or block for him. But my other brother,

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Greg, who's like the ex-Marine, he didn't really have any questions. He was pretty okay with it and—which was surprising. But they're all—I think they're all very live-and-let-live and I appreciate—but it took a while to get there.

ALBIN: Right. So when you say it took a while we're talking like—

STREMEL: I mean, it took a good ten years to get to a place where—because my mom doesn't remember saying this, but she said—I heard her on a couple of occasions, you're going to go to hell with this lifestyle. And is she chewing on the cord here?

ALBIN: No, no, she's just cleaning her nails.

STREMEL: Okay. (laughs)

ALBIN: Little doggie pedicure.

STREMEL: Or insinuated that I was going to hell. And I think I whipped around with the, Well if I'm going to hell I'm going with a lot of cool people. (laughs) That's like as much as my 19-year-old brain could like come up with, but—because she has her religion and I want to respect that, but my spirituality. I mean, it's just all about respecting each other and—but I did—I was like, I had to come to a place where—I would come around and they would ask about—they would ask my sisters about who they were dating. And I would sit there on the bar stool and never get asked and stuff like that. And that really started to hurt. And then when they did ask me, I would just answer honestly, like, Oh well she's my friend but I'd really like to date her or whatever and they didn't want to hear it. So finally it was just like I didn't want to come around anymore. And so I just had to tell them, like if you want me to come around you're going to have to just get to a—I'm not even saying a good place, just get to a place with it, a respectful place. And they did. And—in turn, I have to kind of respect their religion too and that's hard. And I think that's where we're at now just on a global level is, We're going to keep hitting this wall with you. It's the gays and the Christians or whatever. We're going to keep hitting a wall, but at some point we need to like kind of come together. I think—I like what Obama said about, I think we can all agree that we all

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deserve equal rights. I mean, I can't even like—to think other than that it just blows my mind. It just blows my mind. But yet we still don't have them, do we? Do we Karma?

ALBIN: (laughs) So after Frogpond, you had Exit 159?

STREMEL: I had Exit 159. I formed that group and we did two records and— independently and—another two years on the road in this groovy brown van that I had bought, this Chevy van. And boy did I replace everything on that van and sometimes twice. (laughter) We went all over the place. And we did some cool things like a Corona beer commercial and just some weird, odd things, and went out and played the Viper Room in California. We did some like—we played the Viper (laughs) Room to like twenty labels. I think there was like twenty record people were there. Not one of them signed (laughs) us. But we had fun. I think we were good. I think we were a good pop band at the time. I think it was just there was a lot of bands at the time. And we were starting to kind of crumble and fall apart. So when that fell apart I was like, Well I'll just go out and play my songs, just what I can do. And literally I just took my—I think we had an Exit 159 gig still in play and I—the band broke up but I went there and played just with my acoustic and just kept marching on. And during that time, or shortly after, I even got clean, I even got sober and after that happened really got serious about what I was doing. Because then it was—it was just sort of a big party. I mean, there was lots of work too but it was a working party (laughs) for quite some time. And then it was like, buckle down and actually like get serious about my songs and learn to be a better songwriter and learn how to craft my songs, and then when I get in the studio learn who to really record my songs, learn how to really sing and sing in the way that—I want people to understand what I'm saying. The lyrics are important to me so I better sing so that they understand. So it was like a lot of honing in and trying to learn some skills. So I constantly like surrounded myself with people that I just thought were brilliant which is like—I just think that's the smartest thing to do like no matter what you're doing. Like if you're a shoe salesman, go hang out with the best shoe salesman. If you're unhappy in a relationship, go hang out with somebody in a really good relationship and like see how they do it. And when I got sober I picked the person who—to help me, who lived this really awesome sober life to help me get clean. Like to me like that's like one of the best lessons I've learned.

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ALBIN: But you had said now with Frogpond it was—the traveling and everything was really hard on your body. And so when Frogpond broke up you then went on the road again. (laughs)

STREMEL: (laughs) Yeah, right.

ALBIN: Was that really hard on your body?

STREMEL: It was.

ALBIN: And what do you mean by hard on your body? You're standing?

STREMEL: Well hard on my body was I would come home off the road—we'd be like out for three weeks, home for one week. And I would come home and I'd swing by my folks and my mom would be like, How much do you weigh? Like, I would just be a stick because what you're eating on the road—it wasn't that I wasn't eating, it was just that I was drinking a lot too (laughs) and that fills you up and it's just—I don't know. It was just hard on your body. You're always sitting in a club wagon or on the bus. You're never exercising. There's never really anything good to eat unless you stop at like a grocery store and grab some carrots or whatever, but it's just like the way you do it's not conducive to a healthy life for your body. So thankfully I didn't damage like too much. And then we were just really active, just—I mean, I was a maniac on stage. I would climb rafters and like throw my guitar off and jump into crowds because it was that kind of music and it was just very lively and—so I was probably burning more calories than I was putting in. And now I'm nice and healthy.

ALBIN: (laughs) And so traveling and touring on your own, how different was that in comparison to having people like a band with you all the time?

STREMEL: It's different. It's—

ALBIN: Do we hear a car door?

STREMEL: Yeah, I think we did.

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ALBIN: Should I stop this?

STREMEL: So—

(pause)

ALBIN: All right, so—

STREMEL: What was that question?

ALBIN: It was, What is the difference or how do you compare being on your own as opposed to being in a band?

STREMEL: Going out—traveling with other people is just easier. So the traveling is a little bit easier when you have people, but going out by yourself, there's a little more of this. You don't have to (unintelligible) and pay for their hotel room and—I don't know. It's been a little more profitable, I guess. Because you learn tricks, too, to save money and all that stuff and when you're not out boozing it up. (laughs) You finally get a little bit more money too. But—I don't know, but I miss it too sometimes. Like, I miss having like the bass drum behind me and the bass guitar totally kicking my ass and—so I try—lately I'm trying to get a good balance of both. We did like an Exit 159 reunion which you were at.

ALBIN: Yes.

STREMEL: Which was so awesome. And like just still feeding my soul like what it needs musically, it's been fun. Because now I'm also going to school and that's a whole other element of—or whole other chapter in my life. But I was sharing the other day. It's like—it's been—I was sharing with one of my professors because I'm a nerd. I'm the nerd that talks to my teachers. I was sharing—I was like, It's so nice to be quiet and learn instead of like just broadcasting all the time. You know what I mean? And I don't need people to clap for me anymore. I think there was a lot of that going on when I was

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younger. It's just not that way anymore. It's like playing music because I love music and it's—because I have to. But yeah, (unintelligible) talking about now.

ALBIN: So when you were traveling on your own and performing, what type of venues did you perform at?

STREMEL: That was—this is, to me, the most interesting part of my musical journey was I came out when I was nineteen so I was out. And Frogpond, I joined them when I was twenty-one, and we played straight clubs for two years. And it never occurred to me to maybe, Hey we should play a gay club. I think we did one off just random like at Pride festival, just—I don't even know why we did it. I don't know if it was my suggestion, but it never occurred to me, Look we have all kinds of friends in here. Look at that. Look at that. Anyway, I got it stopped. Back on. (laughter) That's right. It never occurred to me to play a gay club. Exit 159, two years on the road playing straight clubs. It never occurred to me to go play a gay club. And we did a couple random things. But it wasn't until I like went solo. It was like, Oh well I'm going to try to maybe go down to the gay bar and play or whatever. Karma. I'm going to go down to the gay bar and play. And I made more money playing at the gay bar than I ever did playing (laughter) at any straight club. It was like—I remember going to play one—like a Kansas City Gay Pride festival one year and I'd never done anything like that before. It was St. Louis or something like that. And I sold like fifty CDs just like right after I got off stage. Like it was like my introduction to this world of people that supported each other no matter what. I mean, I really feel like I could have been selling like snake oil or something (laughs) and it would have been like—with a rainbow label and they would have been like, Good luck with your—but they would just support you. And they probably—I don't know if half of them listened to the CD or what.

But it was an introduction to this community that I thought I was a part of but was never really involved. I mean, I was a very—I was a very sideline gay rights person. I wanted it, but I didn't do anything to help. And it was my introduction in this community that was just like so gracious and like so supportive of each other, and supportive of people that were supportive of them and—I don't know, it was just like this really cozy finally good family feeling, unconditional love. If that sounds kind of corny then it is but—but it was. And so that—so now I kind of do both—I play straight clubs and I play gay clubs and it

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doesn't matter. (unintelligible) at the gay shows, I don't know. It was also my introduction into starting to help out with some causes and what we were actually like doing and finding out what was happening in the community. Because nothing lights a fire under your butt than seeing one of your friends hurt just because they're gay, I mean—or struggle or—because I was one of those kids, like I had—I did—I mean, I laugh about it now but I had such a hard time. I contemplated suicide. I didn't know—it was such a scary place to be in, knowing that you're gay and then not knowing—for that six to eight months of not knowing how I was going to tell my mom and dad or what they were going to say and scared that they would disown me. Like, I know what it feels like to be in that spot and I know kids like right now are in that spot and it's like—it's the most horrid place to be. And I like to think that it's getting easier for kids because people are starting to lighten up a little bit. I mean, everybody must know somebody that's gay. Everybody must know one person that's gay, and then how are you going to walk around and give them such a hard time, give gay people such a hard time? And when I say gay people I include everybody. I always forget that, the LGBT. And now there's a Q on there?

ALBIN: Yep.

STREMEL: Now they've added a Q so—anybody that's, I don't know, not straight.

ALBIN: So when you've played in these venues, like where have you played? Have you always stuck to Kansas and Missouri?

STREMEL: Oh no, I've played all over. I did a lot of gay prides like the San Diego and went out to Florida. Oh, and I played some gay cruises, some Olivia Lady Lesbian cruises (laughs) which is totally bizarre and great fun. But I mean if you can imagine like 2500 women on a boat of—

ALBIN: That's a lot of lesbians.

STREMEL: That's a lot. And it was the easiest gig I ever had in my life.

ALBIN: Wow.

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STREMEL: Yeah, they made it really easy. Because like I said, they're just all there like supporting one another. There was lots of other—the first one I did Billie Jean King was on talking about her—I mean that was like way cool—talking about her life and her story. It's a really cool cruise. They do some really cool things. All I had to do is sing my songs and they'd be like, Well Ms. Stremel—you had your own artist liaison. They'd be like, Ms. Stremel. Because see, you're out on the lido deck looks like today for twenty-five minutes, play a twenty-five minute set. So I'd just go out and play a set out on the deck when everybody's swimming or whatever and then maybe I'd have a show over in the lounge. I mean it was just like—it was way easy, easiest gig. And I enjoyed it because I was like, You know what, I've worked hard (laughs) to get to play a cruise. I've paid my dues many years on the road eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. So I enjoyed every minute of it.

ALBIN: Oh that's great.

STREMEL: Yeah.

ALBIN: And so for the gigs at like Pride event and the Olivia cruises, were you pitching yourself as like a lesbian performer or—

STREMEL: No. I mean, I—no. Sometimes it's written in—I'll put it this way—I'll setup a gig however like with a CD—with a promo pack and it's never me that says, A lesbian singer/songwriter from blah, blah, blah. But if the gig's promoting they might put it in or whatever, and that's fine, but I—being gay is like such a small part of me as like— You know what I mean? It has nothing to do with really my music, but I can see how it might hopefully help people like cross some—I don't know what I'm trying to say. I remember thinking it was so cool when people would write songs and the woman would be singing about a woman. It wasn't always like this boy/girl song. I can't even remember the first instance. I would imagine it was probably an Etheridge song or something, when I knew the woman was singing a love song about another woman, and like that was like so cool to me and such a relief to me. That little thing was a huge relief that somebody else felt the way that I did. And so I remember really thinking that I'm going to start really being honest in some of my songs. And there I was, twenty-six years old in the

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studio, I'd been out and I remember thinking, What is my mom going to think? Like, why am I still worried about what my mom's going to think? And it's just funny how that still kind of sticks with you.

ALBIN: Yeah. Well it's mom. (laughs)

STREMEL: It's mom yeah. But she likes my music, I think.

ALBIN: Oh that's good. I'm just going to change my tape really quick.

STREMEL: God I was blabbing.

ALBIN: You're doing a great job. It's very interesting.

STREMEL: You know what, I might put these guys over there because Karma's doing a awful lot of—

(pause)

ALBIN: Okay, so we changed the tape and now we've completely forgotten what we were (laughter) talking about because we had a bit of a break. I know we had been talking about you being a solo musician and performing in a lot of different venues. And you talked also earlier about liking to write songs when you go into the studio or trying to hone the skills as a songwriter. And—oh that was it and also like how gay was just like being a tiny part and then the lyrics, hearing lyrics where a woman was singing about another woman was really moving, and that you were trying to do that a bit more with your lyrics. So how—what is your songwriting process? Like how do you—how do you come up with your songs?

STREMEL: I think—I've—it happens—I think it happens in all kinds of ways. Like maybe I'm in the car or something and I'll hear something going on, like a melody or some—or—like I heard a cool—somebody say something cool. It's like, Oh that sounds—that should be a lyric or something. I think it's like with any other writing like ideas come in and they kind of—oh what's the word I'm looking for, simmer a bit or—

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and then when it's done baking or when it's ready I think I just sit down with the acoustic guitar and see what comes out and sometimes even make myself sit down with the acoustic and—just to see what comes out. The best songs are the ones that—and I've heard this said before with other songwriters, it's like the ones that write—just fifteen minutes and you're done with the song. Like I've had a lot of those moments and I love those moments. And then there's not much else you really want to change when you get into the studio. It just is what it is. Because—I don't know, like sometimes they come really fast and sometimes they come really slow. And I have probably—I think I have like maybe fifty-plus songs in my catalog and I probably have fifty half-songs that I never finished or—So sometimes it's melody that comes first and sometimes it's lyrics and words. Most of the time I just rip people off for what they say. People say cool things if you just listen. The big lesson learned is writing it down right away. If you don't write it down you'll forget, it's gone.

ALBIN: So do you carry around like a notebook with you?

STREMEL: No, I just try to remember to write it down, whatever I can write it down on. So I—

ALBIN: And then you had also mentioned once again hearing the lyrics that connected you with hearing a woman singing about a woman. So what did you do with your lyrics to make them more out, open?

STREMEL: I just decided I was going to be more honest. Because I can go back and say I purposely changed things because I didn't want people to know. Like no more changing stuff because I don't want people to know. No more—just being true, just—write it like I want to write it. No more holding back or being scared or, What will my mom think? (laughs) That's so funny to me still. But—

ALBIN: And do your parents ever comment on your lyrics or your songs or anything?

STREMEL: No.

ALBIN: What do they think about the success that you've had?

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STREMEL: The—they're just very—they're very supportive now. Like we had a—we had a good show at the Record Bar and they both came out. So they can hang with the rock clubs and stuff and—I think they're proud that I'm doing something that I love to do and then also doing other things that I love to do. I don't think they were that happy when that was all I was doing. Like, it was kind of scary for a minute. It was scary for me. Like that's a total—I mean I might as well go play the Lotto or something if I think that's (laughs) going to work out for me. I mean, I have a better chance of hitting the Powerball than like getting a good record deal but—so I think that was scary for them and when I branched out and started doing some other stuff for my future, I think that, as a parent, made them feel a little more comfortable. But they do, they like—I mean, I'll catch them like—I'll find my CD in their van or whatever. My mom was telling me what songs she likes or—so they're pretty fun about it.

ALBIN: What about when you go back home to Hays, how do people react?

STREMEL: Umm—

ALBIN: No? (laughter)

STREMEL: Yeah. All my friends and family are just good friends and family, just like really supportive. It's a weird thing to do because it's like they come to what was my only job and cheer you on, but you don't go to their job and cheer them on. It's like such a weird thing. Like you don't go up to their office and be like, You're doing awesome, because it's such a weird thing. It's—and as a result it's hard to get people to take you serious, like—you also can't drink at your job. You know what I mean? Like I know you can—it's just a weird thing to do. So I had to go through all the weirdness of that and what it meant. I had like some local stardom and what that meant. You go through—be humble or you will be humiliated was like a good lesson that I learned, and it works in all areas. So—I don't know.

ALBIN: And so have you found that Kansas has been—like when you've played venues in Kansas people are supportive?

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STREMEL: This side of—the east (laughs) east Kansas, yeah, western Kansas—like I'll go back and play some shows in Hays—in fact, western Kansas, where I was from, no not so much like as far as like—I don't think they get enough live music out there. And then when they find out that I'm gay or I think people were scared to come out to a show out there. And I could be—I mean I could be making this up, but I don't think that I am. I think that they don't get enough live music out there, and when they do get live music and if it happens to be gay they won't affiliate themselves with that show because it's a small town and people might know that they were there and they could lose their job and they could lose their paycheck. So I mean on that—taking it to that level is kind of, I guess something I've never thought about before but it does happen. So of course me and Charles, my friend Charles, go out and play all these little small towns out here just to keep doing it. We're going to do it again this summer. Excuse me, I'm just getting over a cold and I'm still phlegmy. But—so we're just going to keep going out there.

ALBIN: And so who shows up at your venues?

STREMEL: Mixed. Both. Since it's not—since there's really no gay clubs out there, you play at whatever club's the most friendly and you get both straight folks, folks that don't care, folks that don't even know and people who love music and sometimes—you know, there is that sometimes people just come—there's the flip side. People come because it's the only gay thing that's going on for miles and they'll want to—people who are out and can be out come because it's a gay happening. And so I don't know. Music should bring people together. It shouldn't matter that I'm a lesbian songwriter or whatever because—but yet it probably does, I don't know.

ALBIN: In terms of like a GLBT community out in that western part of Kansas like are there communities or—

STREMEL: You know what I was—there's like KEC out there is my (unintelligible). KEC, Kansas Equality Coalition has the most members out in western Kansas than I think they do in Lawrence or at the Johnson County, Kansas City one. Just from my background being in the smaller towns and from having still a ton of high school friends

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out there is—and being on the road and seeing what I've seen, there is a ton of gay, GLBTQ people out in these small towns and—there's a ton. There's just a ton.

ALBIN: And why do you think they stay there? Like what is it? Because you were living out in Garden City for a while right?

STREMEL: I have this bad habit of running away and I got to just go somewhere. Like, I move around a lot. I think I finally feel a little semi-permanent here in Lawrence, but I—it's like—so I spent some time out in Garden City and I—God love them, but I felt like I stepped back in the 1950s. And I've got some good friends out there that—they can't come out and—I don't know—I think they stay there for the jobs. I think they stay there for their family. I think—I don't know why they—I don't know.

ALBIN: Yeah, I'm just curious.

STREMEL: But I kind of felt while I was out there it was kind of my job, my duty to me, to be out, out as possible and just be myself and maybe even stir it up a bit because—and I did, I stirred some things up. (laughs)

ALBIN: Yeah, I recall reading an article in the *Liberty Press* I think.

STREMEL: Yeah, I did because people aren't allowed to say stupid (laughs) shit. There was this—oh he was the county attorney, city attorney, giving a speech at the Community College about sex crimes or something. And he's pretty much—well he did say homosexuality is a crime in Kansas to a gym full of students. And he's the law of that city, and for him to go out and say that and totally talk about this law that's not even constitutional was just completely ridiculous. And so I made a wicked—as much as I could. I mean, I called everybody, I e-mail everybody, I put it up on YouTube, because that's stupid. There are still people that don't want gay people to exist and will tell them it's a law.

ALBIN: And so what happened after that?

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STREMEL: He still did not apologize. He still stands by his statement. There is a law in Kansas that says—it goes into the sodomy laws. And it used to be sodomy was illegal in Kansas, but then it was overturned in the Supreme Court back—I'm forgetting the year it was overturned. So it knocked out all the sodomy laws in I think thirteen states and so it's no longer a law. But according to John Wheeler in Garden City, Kansas, it's a law to him. And I said, Well if it's a law then why don't I go turn myself in to—maybe this lesbian does it sodomy style, I don't know. But I committed—why don't I go turn myself in, or why doesn't one of my gay friends go turn himself in?

ALBIN: Or a heterosexual couple.

STREMEL: Right, or a heterosexual couple. And why don't you like start prosecuting some sodomy if you really believe in your head that it's a law on the books in Kansas. It's there, but it's unconstitutional and nobody would ever try to do it. It would get thrown out so—but he still feels like he needs to go around and preach this law. It made no sense to me. And all I could think about was—I was sitting in that gym thinking of every—it's those years, those college kids years—every kid, any kid that might have been sitting there that was going through coming out or maybe had a parent who was gay or an aunt who's gay or uncle, brother, sister, whatever, you totally just smacked them in the face with what you—this untruth that you're out saying. And a lot of people—a lot of kids would kill—a third of suicides are gay and lesbian kids and it's because of untruths like that being said that fuels the fire in that. I was not going to put up with that anymore. I'm getting too old for that. (laughter)

ALBIN: And do you think that your reaction—like what kind of an impact did it have?

STREMEL: I got into—I wrote a letter to every newspaper in Kansas and I think three or four—Hutchinson printed it, Wichita—Topeka printed it. There's a few other newspapers that printed my letter, a couple student newspapers. I stirred up a little storm to let everybody know what this guy was doing. And I got a ton of feedback of, This is so unfair. And as a result too I got educated on what the law was and what laws needed to still be changed and why they're not changed. But if that's going on in Garden City I can guarantee you it's still going on in even smaller towns. And who knows what's being said out there, but it's not a law (laughs) to be gay in Kansas.

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ALBIN: Wow. And so what other locations have you lived in your—

STREMEL: Oh I (unintelligible) out. I lived in Springfield, Missouri for a while. That's where I did a lot of my recording. There's a studio down there that I like to use. Oh I just move anywhere and anywhere. Now I'm pretty—I don't know, I'm just, I guess, a nomad. Like maybe it was just in me, I just couldn't stay somewhere for very long. I lived in midtown Kansas City for a long time but I would always move around Kansas City—might be out in the suburb and the next minute I move in Brookside or—I just can't—I don't know what it is, I couldn't stay in one place.

ALBIN: Right. And so during the time when you're moving around, you're still recording and writing songs? And so how many albums have you put out?

STREMEL: Well there's a Frogpond *Count to Ten*, I did two Exit records, and I think I've done four or five solo CDs. They don't call them records anymore.

ALBIN: Sorry. I'm showing my age.

STREMEL: They do though, they do.

ALBIN: But you could. You could put out an LP.

STREMEL: I know, maybe I should.

ALBIN: That'd be really interesting.

STREMEL: Be great.

ALBIN: That would be kind of cool.

STREMEL: Would you buy one?

ALBIN: I would definitely. We have a turntable. I'd definitely buy one.

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STREMEL: All right.

ALBIN: So what do you think your next steps are because you've had—you know you've been doing music since you were twenty-one, in there somewhere, and so now—

STREMEL: I think I'm going to have to stop. What are my next steps?

ALBIN: So you've—

STREMEL: That's not a good question.

ALBIN: (laughs) But no, so you've been doing music since you were twenty-one, right, when you started with Frogpan—Frogpond, pardon me.

STREMEL: Frogpan.

ALBIN: Frogpan.

STREMEL: That's going to be the reunion that's got the cover band. (laughter)

ALBIN: And so that's been fourteen years that you've been doing music—

STREMEL: I guess so—

ALBIN: —with bands and on your own. And so what—do you see yourself continuing with a solo career? Because you also said that you're in school now, and you've been in school on and off over the past few years?

STREMEL: I've been in school—the last three years in school full time, so I don't really know. I know that I need to keep feeding—I know that I'll always write songs and keep feeding that side. But I was sharing earlier with you, I don't know if it was—and with one of my instructors—it's nice to be learning and taking in information and not broadcasting

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right now. Like, it's nice to be in that spot. So I'm just kind of whatever. I'm not worried about it. It could end up I one summer write a record and try to put it out again. I don't know, not worried because I feel pretty good. I might go stir up some more (laughter) (unintelligible) western Kansas.

ALBIN: But do you see yourself potentially becoming more politicized as time goes on?

STREMEL: I see myself getting more involved, yeah, and taking the time to do that because I—for a long time I was that person like, Yeah I want gay rights but I did nothing to help. So I want to do more to help and everybody should have equal rights, it's just that simple. So I want to get involved and start giving a little more on a community level, because I think that's how I can make a difference.

ALBIN: And with writing an album and doing it in the summer, how would you do that? Do you just call your friends who have a studio and say, I want to make a record?

STREMEL: Yeah.

ALBIN: How do you—

STREMEL: I would call Lou in Springfield. He's got this great studio. He's sixty—he's got to be sixty-four now—64-year-old rock-and-roll man and I just book the studio for a couple weeks and rehearse the songs with some players that I'll hire on and go down there and do it. So—

ALBIN: And how do you—I guess my—how do you finance something like that?

STREMEL: That's—last time—a lot of times—like now a lot of independent musicians are doing like pre-sell records where people help you make the record, and then when the record comes out maybe they get the record plus maybe something else, a special bonus track or whatever. But it's the fans that become involved in helping you make the record. So that's one idea. Just, you get creative. Sometimes you put it on the credit cards and hope you break even or make some money or whatever. I don't know. You do whatever you have to do to rock it. (laughs)

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ALBIN: Is it Stremeltone? Is that what you call your—

STREMEL: Yeah, that's just my independent, and that's literally that computer and that printer is Stremeltone.

ALBIN: (laughs) That's Stremeltone right over there?

STREMEL: I might get a fax machine or something.

ALBIN: Right, right. Then this is (unintelligible).

STREMEL: And that checkbook on top.

ALBIN: Right. And that's the laptop that's dying, correct?

STREMEL: Yeah, my laptop's dying. So—

ALBIN: (unintelligible).

STREMEL: Yeah. But you know what, I own all my songs and that's good.

ALBIN: And so does that mean someone comes to you and says, I want to record your song that you've already recorded so you would rent it to them, negotiate a sale?

STREMEL: Yeah, sort of. That gets a little tricky. Anybody can record anybody's song but you've got to pay like a fee right off the bat and then you've got to work it out with the songwriter. But like if somebody wanted to use it in a commercial, parts of my song in a commercial or whatever, there's a fee involved in that. Like I own 20 percent of Frogpond and we had a couple songs on *Party of Five*, do you remember that TV show?

ALBIN: Yeah.

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STREMEL: And there was a TV Show called No—called—oh I don't remember what it was called but anyway, every time those air, a little check shows up so some residuals or royalties I guess I should say but—every now and then there's a little surprise in the mailbox.

ALBIN: Oh that's nice.

STREMEL: Yeah. So—

ALBIN: Wow, that's cool. That's cool.

STREMEL: So that's the great thing about still I guess to look on the bright side of independence. Like I own all my stuff and that's—not a lot of people can say that who went out and signed big contracts, it's all taken from them and more. So that's pretty cool.

ALBIN: And so you'll continue to do the music as you're finishing up school and—

STREMEL: Yeah, I don't know. I don't know what's going to happen. Just going to kind of let it happen. I'm enjoying being quiet and learning—learning ceramics, learning jewelry.

ALBIN: Centering the pots.

STREMEL: Centering the pots, getting my center, finding my center.

ALBIN: So is there anything that I haven't asked you that you may have wanted to add to the conversation?

STREMEL: Oh gosh. They've all met Ruby right? They've all met Ruby. Karma was down there earlier snorting. Yeah, I don't know.

ALBIN: Okay. I can always come back if there's—if you've got something you want to add or if I have a question or anything like that.

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STREMEL: Just that there's a ton of gay people everywhere and at some point we're going to need to just really get to a good place with each other and there's a ton of GLBTQ people.

ALBIN: (laughs) Someday you'll get the acronym—

STREMEL: Did I just say it wrong?

ALBIN: No, no you got it.

STREMEL: Someday I'll remember to say all of it but—on a global level we've really got to get to a good spot. I'm tired of kids—reading about kids shooting themselves in the head because they're gay. It's ridiculous. And just for kids to know that if you're gay you're perfectly normal. There's—what is it, was there 700 species of gay animals, and I mean it's okay and that should be the message. I think it's so cool that you're doing this.

ALBIN: Well thank you. Thank you so much. Well thank you so much for doing the interview. I really appreciate it.

STREMEL: (unintelligible).

ALBIN: Great.

[end]

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