

Ronnie D. Blair
Prestonsburg Courthouse
September 10, 2004

Blair: ...Crowd was going to be here today. If I'd a known that I'd a rehearsed. Uh, my name is Ronnie D. Blair. I'm a videographer and artist who lives here in the area. Spent twenty some odd years out on the coast working in films and television and stage, working out at Jenny Wiley. I'll put in a plug right now – we're getting ready to do... "To Kill a Mockingbird" is gonna open at the MAC and at the Paramount National and it's your, a local – it's one of the most ambitious things Jenny Wiley's ever done, so keep that in mind.

They asked people to show up today, kind of get into the feel of things and wear clothes that were reminiscent of that time. I, not more than an hour ago, checked my college year book from when I was at Prestonsburg Community College down here. In 1968 I was a nineteen year old sophomore at that school, and I was the editor and chief of the college paper, the Big Sandy Review. And just about an hour ago at my mom's house and there's a picture of the newspaper staff and I'm wearing exactly what I was wearing! Not the exact same clothes, but this is the way I looked. I had not yet entered my hippy years. That was to be about three more years. Uh, but in 1968, I was the editor of the college paper, and of course, the big news in the, uh, around February of that year, was that Mr. Robert Kennedy was coming here to eastern Kentucky. So, I got the assignment, and being as I was the editor, I gave it to myself – I always got the good ones like movie reviews, editorials, and the kushy assignments – to cover this event. And it happened right here in this courthouse and thins courtroom. Pretty much like we are today, except people were standing shoulder to shoulder like sardines. You talk about standing room only and that's all there was in here.

I was with a lady by the name of Eileen Barnett Bittman. She later went on to become, she was on one of the soap operas, "Days of our Lives," and was an actress in Hollywood. She was the wife of the newspaper sponsor and the English professor, Mr. Samuel Bittman down here at Prestonsburg College. And so, she and I came up here to cover this event. Now, Mr. Kennedy, this was the last leg of his journey, and we found out from somebody that this was going to be his final destination here at the courthouse. So, rather than be outside with the other five hundred people who'd shown up waiting in anticipation and cheering and everything, we came up here and there was a podium at that time, back just a little bit beyond where this desk is. And I found out he'd be speaking there. So I set up a little cassette tape player. Now, I diodn't know I was recording history. I grabbed a cassette that had some bluegrass on it – it was a used cassette – and brought it up here, along with a Polaroid camera that I used to take pictures for the paper.

I set up my little cassette player, and within – it was a very short time – now here's a funny little story. They were afraid that there wouldn't be a good crowd in here – I don't know why they were afraid of that – Robert Kennedy was comin' to Prestonsburg. But they were afraid there wouldn't be a big crowd in here, so they went up here to the jail and turned out all the inmates and brought 'em down here to pack the house. So, Mr. Kennedy, he probably looked towards the back of the room and thought, "Well that bunch towards the back's lookin' a little rough. Anyway, we came in here and

when everybody filed into the room, I was pressed right up against, pretty much, the podium and he was maybe a foot, maybe a foot higher, or something, than me. In those days, when I took pictures, I had this Polaroid camera I was telling you about. If you remember those old Polaroid cameras, you took the picture, you pulled the picture out, and there was a little tube of stick 'em, or gunk 'em which you – I don't know what to call it – but you spread that over the picture. If you didn't, it would, the light would deteriorate the picture within a short time. So you had to prepare it. What I was doing was, while Mr. Kennedy was speaking, and all these people were behind me, I would snap a picture – chk – and I would go down like this. And out of sight of everybody, because I was gonna have to pull that little picture out and Eileen Bittman was on the other side of a table here, underneath it – I would pass her the picture. And then I would stand back up and get ready for the next picture. I did this maybe, three or four times, and I didn't want to make a big noise or scene or anything. I didn't want to interrupt his speech. The camera had a lens on it, that was a close-up lens, that was spring loaded. And it was a tricky little camera and I'd had problems with it before. Sometimes right when I was taking a picture, it would just pop off and when it did, it would shoot like six or seven feet. I took a picture of Mr. Kennedy – you're gonna see it here in a few minutes – and he was gesticulating. It was at the most important part of his speech, as he had his hand up and doin' this. And when I took the picture, I squatted back down and I barely brushed the edge of the podium and right in the middle of his speech that lens popped off, hit him in the chest, he jumped back, it hit the top of the podium, made a huge sound, the entire room went "OH!" and the secret service men went, "OH!", and I was standin' there goin', "Excuse me..." And he says, "That's quite all right. You didn't interrupt us at all." That quick. And then he went on to speak and then said, "You come up here again and I'll..."

As it turned out, that little cassette tape recording is the only surviving recording of that speech. And we're going to play it for you here today. I'm going to sit here, and at the point when it gets close to the time where that little event happens – now you have to be really quiet because the quality of the recording, uh – when Mr. Kennedy starts speaking, you'll be able to hear him better than the people who introduce him – but the quality of the recording isn't as good as...you know. It's thirty-five years old, this little tape. And I'll kind of stand up and give you a little cue, "Listen, this is when..." And you can hear all this go down between Mr. Kennedy and me. So, are we ready? And you're going to be seeing the pictures – there's only two that I've got of those pictures I took – so you're going to be seeing some pictures as it happened and the picture of Mr. Kennedy like this, that was one second before the thing hit him in the chest. So...are we ready with the recording? OK.

(Recording plays)

And that was, that picture was, one second later is when that thing, that lens hit him on the chest, that you heard on there. Later that day I was able to get his autograph. We followed him down to the airport down here, the little airport on old 23. And uh, I found out he was gonna wind up there and fly out from there and... He was such a person. He was down on the tarmac and there must've been another, you know, a hundred and fifty, two hundred people down there with him. He's getting ready to leave, a little twin engine

plane is uh, he's getting ready to get on it. And a lot of people from Johnson county had, had pulled up on the road, and if you know where that little airport is, there's a slope, you know, it sits down on the bottom, called Blockhouse Bottom, or Harmon Station. And there's a slope of about thirty, forty feet that goes up to the highway. And people were up there waiving at him. And all of a sudden he broke away from the crowd and the secret service men and he ran, all the way up that slope, my himself – well, almost by himself – there was one person with him – me. And I was snapping pictures as I ran along beside of him. Somebody stole those pictures, by the way. And he shook hands with everybody and then he came back down and I circled around behind the plane, and the secret service people were keeping everybody at bay. And he waived goodbye and I come around and I'm between the plane's wing – the wing is going out this way and the fuselage is here and the door is here and he's getting ready to step on it – he's standing here waiving to everybody, and when he turns around to get on the plane, he looks right at me and he snapped him picture. And that's when he dropped his campaign face. He didn't know anybody was there. And it was such a bone-weary look. I don't think there's every been a picture taken of Mr. Kennedy that looked like that. He was tired after two days. He had a slight case of strabismus – you, know, that's called 'lazy eye.' And, no body hardly ever noticed that, but in this picture, you can see it. His eye's driftin' – he was really tired. That picture exists somewhere and I literally tore my house apart to find it. I saw it about seven months ago, and if this video – if they do something with it – I promise you I'll find that picture and put it on there. I couldn't have it today. I was fortunate to be born in 1948. I got to see the birth of rock n' roll. It's just like a little baby that gets born. I tell kids today who listen to their music today, in those – comparing music to a baby – every three years that baby is so radically different you can't recognize it. If you only checked in every three years, it is so different. But somewhere around 18, 19, 21, it slows down and it's got it's full growth and then it doesn't change a lot. Except maybe for hairstyles and stuff for maybe ten years or so. Rock n' roll was like that. It reinvented itself every three years. And what was happening in this country was reflected in our music. And in 1960 – I'm not taking anything away from World War I or World War II or the Holocaust, but 1960 to 1970, those ten years were one of the most important times in this country's history because it was during that time that this country grew up. In 1960, for instance the music was Ricky Nelson and Chubby Checker. We didn't even dream of somebody from England coming over here, like in '62, The Beatles, thinking of the bad boys of the English invasion – Rolling Stones, The Who, then it switched back to over here, and finally culminated, I think, in the maturity of rock n' roll with Crosby, Still, Nash, and Young, right around 1969, '70. In the sixties, people, I mean, Presidents were assassinated – John Kennedy, then Mr. Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King – in the same year. In '67 was the summer of love in San Francisco, in '69 it was Woodstock. In 1960 we were listening to Chubby Checker and in 1970 we were marching in the streets and protesting the Vietnam War. We grew up in the sixties. And the 1960's, that ten year slice of time, America going into 1960's we were like JohnWayne in one of the movies – we were the heroes. And by 1970 we saw that sometimes, there can be an ugly side. And that that wasn't so pretty and that it needed to have a lot of work in order to do something about it. And Mr. Kennedy, had he lived, I have no idea what this man might have been able to do. I personally thought he was, had the most potential to do something for this country, even

more so than his brother. But that ten year slice of time, and I know you're getting warm, and I'm gonna sit sown here, but that, and I'm editorializing here, but that that ten year slice of time, what it represents to this country, was childhood's end. Thank you very much.