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Oral history interview with Howard Finster,  
1984 June 11

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# Transcript

## Preface

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Interview with The Reverend Howard Finster conducted by Liza Kirwin in the Finley Conference Room at the National Museum of American Art and National Portrait Gallery building, Washington, D.C., June 11, 1984.

### Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape recorded interview with Howard Finster on June 11, 1984. The interview took place in Washington, D.C., and was conducted by Liza Kirwin for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. While we have made an attempt to convey The Reverend Finster's speech pattern and dialect, the reader should bear in mind that this is a verbatim transcript of spoken, rather than written prose

## Interview

LIZA KIRWIN: Mr. Finster, could you begin by talking about when and where you were born, and a little bit about your family background?

HOWARD FINSTER: Yeah, I'll start talking and you just break in when you want to because I never quit, you know. Just break if I talk too long. I was born at Valley Head, Alabama. It's about 42 miles south of Chattanooga and about 200 miles west of Atlanta. I was born there in Alabama. I stayed on the farm a good while-with my father and mother and farm. My first job was feeding the hogs. I'd feed the hogs and take care of them at, I believe, at seven years old. I remember plumb on back before I could crawl. Then I had my first vision at two years old.

MS. KIRWIN: Could you describe that, your first vision?

REV. FINSTER: Yes ma'am. This vision - I wouldn't have thought so much about it but it verified itself and it made a history to where, when I grew up, that I would know that the vision was not illusion, and that I would know when the vision was. It was all in the whole thing, the future and the present. We had a forty-two-acre farm on US 11 highway. They'd built a new highway and they built it with horses and scoops - we didn't have no Caterpillars and tractors. They come right through the middle of our farm and split it with the highway and that year we had two tomato patches. We had one patch of tomatoes below the highway, and we had a patch of tomatoes above the highway. I was fond of 'maters - I ate lots of tomatoes when I was little. I came in one day and asked my brother and sister where my mother was, and they said, "She went to the 'mater patch." They didn't tell me which 'mater patch it was. So I went below the highway to the 'mater patch down there, and she went to the upper 'mater patch. So I missed her. And when I got down a block or two away from the house in the ragweeds and an old mill road, I seen she wasn't in the 'mater patch and it scared me, cause I was that far from the house. And I begun to cry for her and I couldn't see her nowhere, you know. While I was crying for my mother, my sister that had just been dead a little while, I looked up and she was coming down from the north and you might say there was seven sets of stair steps. And as she come down three steps would just come in the front of her, she used them. And three steps would go way behind her. When I seen her coming down, I was up pretty high and she came on down in the middle of a mill road. When she got down just about as high as this table she started back up in the same angle - her coming down and going up was in a V type. When she started going back up, the steps would lead behind her as she used them up and they'd come before her if she needed them as she went up. And they looked the same color as clouds but they were just as smooth cornered as the corners of these posts here in the building - these perfect steps, more perfect than even the steps at the house. When she got up maybe about 15 or 20 feet high on the other side of the road, I recognized who she was, and I stopped crying for my mother and I called her name and started crying for her, cause I knew her. I didn't know anything about visions or nothing I just seen her and knew who she was. And I quit crying for my mother and started crying for her. And with that I know it was not an illusion.

When I called her name at up at where I seen her last, she turned around this a way and looked over her gown - she had a white, it was almost white gown, it was sort of the color of this room, creamish white or grayish white or a bluish white; anyway it was white. And when she looked over her shoulder, her gown come around, and when her gown come around I seen a checkered skirt that she wore at the house. Everything just told me that it was her and I knew her and I cried for her. And when I cried for her and called her name, then she was up so high she just disappeared, everything went away. I didn't have anything to do except just run back to the house, so I run back to the house fast as I could. When I went in, I told my mother that I seen Abby down there, and it scared her to death. She's superstitious. She thought something was going to happen to me, you know. People back in them days believed "don't go under a ladder," and "if a cat crosses your trail, don't go," and all this - I

don't believe in such as that, but they did. So she was uneasy about it.

After I grew up, she wondered about it all of her life, long as she lived she wondered about that vision and I did too. And after that I grew on up. My mother told me, "Howard," she says, "When you saw Abby, that's the year that I hit you with the tater fork." She'd go out and dig taters, you know for dinner, she'd just dig two or three hills and I'd run along with her and pick them up, you know. I run over the digger and she hit me, you know. She said, "Howard, the year you seen Abby was the year I hit you with the digger." All this was just historical fact, you know, after I grew up and come to be of age, everything proved to me, "Howard, that was not an illusion cause you wasn't thinking of your sister. When she come you was crying for your mother." And then it come to me how old was I? Of course my mother told me, "It was the year I hit you with the tater fork. You was three years old."

That vision followed me down through the years. And her name was Abby. Abby give me a goblet, a little toy goblet about as high as this glass, a little toy goblet made out of clear glass. And I still have that, that's my first collection. My second collection was a little fire wagon Santa Clause give me. That was before I would crawl and he set me up on his lap. And he set me up on his lap. And he give me that little fire wagon out of crystal glass and it had little colored candy pellets in it, it was beautiful you know. And then I remember before I would crawl - that same month I remembered the night I was born. They took me to a window and said something about white elephants, and it seemed like I see the white elephants going all around. I remember my sister took me out to crawl on the ground, and [laughing] she laid me down to crawl and I started picking up dried chicken droppings and going to my mouth, she'd shake them out of my hand and say, "Not that!" and just laugh and say, "You ain't supposed to eat that." She'd just laugh up a storm. I remembered all of that.

Then I wondered - I pastured churches about 45 years. I pastured nine different churches. And while I was pasturing I run tent meetings where I would get with all the different denominations. Of course you know how it is when you're pasturing a church you have to stay within the realms of its doctrines. And I didn't like to stay in no realms of no kind of doctrines. I like to feel free. So I'd go out with my tent and we'd set it up and we'd have Methodists, Baptists, Holiness, white, colored, and everything. We'd just tear the country up, you know, have sawdust under the tent, and we'd have some great meetings. We'd have 200 conversions sometimes, you know, in meetings. I've helped 84 at one time. I preached funerals. I pastured Chelsea Baptist Church about 15 years and three months, just before I started painting art. I run a survey one night that we had our trainin' union and then we had our junior choir and then preaching hour. I asked the audience that night what I preached on that morning, and from one service to another they all forgot what I'd preached on. This one fellow remembered the verse. I got to studying about it and I said, "Well, they liked me here, they've kept me a long time, and as far as they're concerned I'm a good pastor and everything, but they're not hearing me. They're not listening to me. I've become so familiar here that they just sing, and have a good time, and that's it - they don't pay no attention to what I'm saying. I asked them about building an amusement garden for young people on the church property. They had a big hillside, big pines, had a well there. I couldn't get it over. They wouldn't accept it. So I resigned pasturing. I went home.

I had a back yard, maybe an acre and a half and I started my environment in the back yard. It was a waste land, something like a swamp. At one time it had been a fishing lake. Doctors used to come hunt ducks on rowboats. I could buy land like that cheaper, so I bought it and had to start cleaning it up. People had just throwed everything there, like garbage, Christmas trees, old tin cans had been in there for years. And I started cleaning it up. It took me about seven years to clean it up and haul dirt with a wheelbarrow, just like you take exercise everyday and you haul some dirt everyday, you know. And it took me about seven years part time just to fill it in and to get all that garbage out of there, a lot of the garbage, I buried it. Some fellow found some gold there or something. He was an old gentleman. He dug that place up, it looked like a battlefield where you'd dug trenches, you know, or shell holes. I wore brand new garden tractor out filling up ditches that he had dug. And he didn't know how to drain it - he put slabs and things under there to try and soak the water up. There was too much water, you couldn't do that. And what I did, I stood on slabs and took and raked out a ditch all the way through it. It was about 200 and some feet, because I bought another lot joining it, and I bought another lot and kept on until I'd bought pretty good maybe two and a half acres. I'd stand on those slabs and wear boots and I opened a little spring branch all the way through it. And when there'd come a rain, it would keep washing it out and help me out, you know. That was the main thing - to get drainage, not to put slabs in there. I got drainage in and went ahead and leveled it, and I killed something like over a hundred snakes in there. There was all kind of snakes in there. It was sort of a jungle. And that's the way I started that part of it. And then, finally, after I'd got it where I could pour cement walks on it, I started the environment. Maybe about 12 years ago or something like that, or 15. And the whole thing maybe run 20 some years I've been working on it part time. And then I got to pretty well full time.

I had a hobby, even when I was a pastor I had a hobby of fixing bicycles. It was a hard time business - bicycle and lawnmower repair was a hard-times business. We had some hard times, especially in the 30s and 31s, back when Mr. Hoover was in office and everything was going bad and we had a drought and lost the crops. They made up a song, you know - cotton went down to 11 cents, and meat went up to 40 cents. This song it says, [he

sings], “Leven cent cotton an’ uh forty cent meat/ How in the world can a poor man eat?” I remember that song just as well! And on a T Model we’d haul eight bales of cotton to Trion, Georgia, you know, and they’d pass a dollar bill for hauling it. And finally time went on and my older sister got a job at a textile mill just over the mountain in north Georgia. And finally, then, after my father died and we wasn’t able to do much more farming, I moved over there. My sister got me a house over there and I moved over there and went to work making \$9.60 a week in the plant. They took out 11 cents for old age benefit; all that and just started. I built a little house there and got started there and built a little museum there. There’s a few pictures somewhere of that first museum I built. It was in my system and my feeling to do that.

MS. KIRWIN: What year was this?

REV. FINSTER: That must have been about the middle of the 40s.

MS. KIRWIN: Where was this?

REV. FINSTER: This was in Trion, Georgia. Summerville and Trion is sort of together, like. That’s just over the mountain from where I was born.

MS. KIRWIN: How do you spell that?

REV. FINSTER: Trion, Georgia. There’s a cotton industrial mill there. They kept Trion, you know, and they got a big plant, started to call it Riegel’s Fabrics. My daughter used to have a Riegel’s Fabric store. It’s a wonderful fabric and Riegel’s Textile and they called it Tryon because the mill village kind of franchises a school and the buildings and they had their own houses for hands and all that, you know. Of course that’s changed since then. From that time on I done repair work and had a shop to build screen doors, and cabinets. I could do 21 different trades – no, 22 different trades, I could do any of them Riegel’s Fabric – plumbing, wiring, everything. One day I was out fixing a bicycle – I’d fix them and stripe them and make them look a little prettier than the ones that was new. And a lot of people, down and out, they was poor, they’d come and buy a bicycle maybe for \$15, you know, and they could afford it. Then next year maybe somebody would come and say, “I want one with trainer wheels on it.” They’d buy it and then the next year they’d bring it back and say, “Mr. Finster, he’s outgrewed this, we want a 20-inch.” The next year they’d bring it back and say, “We want a 24 or 26.” I’d just keep a pile of them in the back and take the part of them, and it got to be tons of them back there in my lot.

MS. KIRWIN: Where did you get them originally?

REV. FINSTER: I took them in on trades. You’ve sent these big car lots, you know. Well, they trade for cars and just take the parts off them. That’s the way I’d do. I’d trade for the bicycle, they’d bring in and trade one, use it a year and bring it back, something got wrong with it they’d trade for a reconditioned one, and I just would throw it on the pile. And the pile just built up and built up and built up. One day – how I got started in art – when I was 60 years old, after I’d retired from pastoring, my shop was over in the garden that I have, my environment, I found out that when something got scratched, you do a touch up job on it. Well I’d put my finger in the paint like that – I could smooth it with my finger much better than with a brush. I’d learned to do that. I took my finger and dipped it in white paint, and I looked to do that. I took my finger and dipped it in white paint and I looked at it and this white paint was a human face on the ball of my finger there. And while I was looking at it, just a warm flash kinda went all over me all the way down and said, “Paint sacred art.” And I said to it, I said, “I cain’t do that.” I said, “I know professionals can, but not me.” And it come to me again and says, “How do you know?” Then I asked myself that question. I said, “how do I know that I can’t paint?” I took a dollar bill out of my wallet and I taped it on a piece of plywood and went out in front of my shop. And I started drawing George Washington off that dollar bill. And the school kids got out along about three and they began to groom up behind me, you know, and watch me painting. That was a little exciting, and touching too, you know. I felt almost like an artist then. [Laughing] And then from that, then, I started painting. And my idea was, what I’ll do, I’ll paint ‘em and I’ll hang ‘em in my garden. I’ve painted all the bicycles with enamel and that’s what I started painting with. I’d just take enamel paint, use white paint as the basic paint, and I used black as a basic paint; the body of it is linseed oil or banana oil or something like that. It’s a smearing paint. You can’t smear acrylics, you know, it dries too fast. You can take a little linseed oil, and if you’re rubbing in tractor enamel and it goes to a getting a little stiff, you dip over into linseed oil and limber it up and just work as long as you want to. I learned all of that; it just come to me.

I got to making landscapes and clouds and all, just rubbing it in with my little finger. And they just look like a photograph; it was blended in so beautifully, you know. When you come down out of the blue sky into the sunset, you just dip a little yellow and just make a sunset in a few seconds, and then lighten it down – have a few little white shadow clouds under it, you know, and go on down and put your mountains, and go on down to you greens for the land and things. I got to where I could do a lot of them, you know, in a little while. I was at a place in Tennessee the other day – they had me there, there was 700, I believe it was, retired people, and they want me to come there and demonstrate art, show them how I painted. They’d get pieces about as big as that,

and about this big, and different pieces and I would rub in the background, would rub in the clouds and the sunset and sky, and if I wanted ocean I'd rub in the water. They had a camera on me, you know, and I was painting away. I'd paint one out in just a few seconds and I'd lay over here and a lady would take it and lay it over to dry. And she timed me. She said, "Howard, you've done 17 pieces in 25 minutes." [Laughing] Down here the other day at the gallery [Anton Gallery], you know - my work's in the show here [in Washington, D.C.] - they had at one time sold art supplies and they had some paint and stuff there. I had done a few backgrounds for them showing them, you know - they enjoy watching me to them backgrounds. It gives people new ideas and of course things like that they don't teach in universities because it's not really practical. I just learn it from working on bicycles and how to use enamel. And one good thing about it: I could put it on my fences, it would last two or three years. I wasn't intending to ever sell any of it. And that's when I come to realize, with my vision at two years old, that when I come to realize what she come to tell me was, "Howard, you will be a man of visions and you will address a lot of people." That's what she was telling me, and I wasn't to know what it was. My mother never knew what it was; she lived and died not knowing what it was. But, when I had this feeling and started painting sacred art, as I had this feeling to do, then it come to me: my problem is I'll get a lot of criticism and another problem is my work's not good enough to sell. So what I'll do, I'll paint my work and I'll put it on my fences and let people see it that comes through. If they don't like it then they just walk out.

So I started painting sacred art. I done the four beasties of the Revelations. I don't Eli Whitney and his first cotton gin. I done Thomas Edison and his light bulb he invented. And then I told the story on that about the imitations and images of God on earth. And I told about Edison inventing this light bulb and how that electricity was invisible you know, like God is, a spirit. And how that electricity can be millions of volts in it and you can't see it and it helps save lives and it does good all over the world. Couldn't hardly do without it. And right on the other hand it's deadly. It come to me that anything that a human used and had to have could be deadly also. Then I got down to the racket of publicity where people were fighting one another about - I don't want to be in Playboy, I'll sue you if you put me in Playboy. I don't want to be in this paper, I just want to be in this paper. And I looked that over, and it come to me, everything has good and bad in it, you see. The Bible has more murder stories in it than any book I ever read in my life. The good and bad's all through the Bible from one side to the other. And then another thing too, magazines are the same way, all of them, they've got some good in them, they've got some bad in them. You pick a religious book up, somebody thinks he's right on the dot and he's making mistakes all the time, he thinks he's right. He's doing something that he thinks his religion's right, and the Bible says when he comes to the end of the ways, that he'll walk up and say, "Have not we done many wonderful things in Thy name, Jesus, and cast out devils, and done miracles?" And Jesus will reply to him, "Depart from me, I never knew you." One time when I was pastoring over at the last church I pastured - I just took it for a year to dill in, help them out, I was really helping them out too, because Life Magazine came there and interviewed me in the pulpit and I never heard of them going to a church and interviewing anybody before. And then the University of North Carolina, Wake Forest, they came there and interviewed me in the pulpit. They even had my message and out it in a book from that church and showed me at the stand. Well there was a young deacon at that church, and he grumbled about these cameras coming into a house of the Lord. And I thought, Lord how awful that is, that you all go home - I told them, I said, "You all go home and look at the TV every night after church." I said "All that is is cameras." And I says, "If you ain't got it at home, you ain't got it here; you cain't bring it here unless you've got it at home." And I just quit that church. They tried to get me to go on an I said, No, if cameras wasn't welcome there - and I said "Our services they're takin' out here, you couldn't hire them to come here and take our services they're takin' out here, you couldn't hire them to come here and take our services out like that." And I said, "They're takin' our services out just free." I said, "That's wonderful." I just quit, I wouldn't go back. And I just started a church. I called it the World's Folk Art Church. I bought this old church. There was no deacons or pastors or anything.

MS. KIRWIN: When did you start that?

REV. FINSTER: I started that about three or four years ago. I tried to buy this church and I couldn't borrow the money nowhere. The guy that owned it, he had a church there. He was Church of God and he wanted to sell it and build a bigger and better church. So I told him that I'd buy it if I could borrow the money. It adjoined my garden. He said, "Well - " And he waited on me, you know. I told him, I've tried every bank and I can't borrow the money. I can't get it, you just go ahead and sell it to anybody you want to." And he told me, "Howard, I wouldn't see that for \$30,000 tonight. I'm holding it for you for \$20,000." He knocked off \$10,000. "I believe God wants you to have that church." And he held it. All I knew to do was start a faith fund. So I started a faith fund on the World's Folk Art Church. And it wasn't long until I had \$8,000 in that fund. He said, "Well, I'll take that down on the church and start my new church. And you can take up the payments on this \$5,000 and you can make a note for 12 months for \$7,000." So I stuck my neck out and done all of that which never would I have been able to pay for nothing like that, I just took a shot at it. And in about a year, the help I got and then I got started on this art and people come there. They started taking the art off the fences and buying it. They'd come there and just blow up on it, so I'd just take the crowbar and start pulling it off. And I remember Mr. Hemphill [Herbert Waide Hemphill, Jr.] from New York, he came down and I had some pieces on the front of the shop nailed in the cement, He just lov v ved them. "Ah, they is really something." And I was surprised, you know. He said, "I'll give

you \$100 for that one, Mr. Finster." They wasn't even framed, you know. And finally I got to studying about it. Well, that would be a way of supporting my garden, you know. And it seemed like God told me, "Howard, that's the way it is. You wouldn't never be able to keep your paintings, that's the way it is. So let 'em go." I don't even have one in my home. I've done 5,000 and what I done last night is 3,540 paintings." [He corrects his original figure he gave] My paintings been selling right off of the easel board. I don't even have no paintings of mine on display. But I represent other artists from all over the states - California, overseas, anywhere, like, if you're a artist and you got a piece of your work and you want the buyers and people to see it that comes there, you just send it to me and I'll put it on the wall with your address and you name and everything on it. There's one guy down there, he had painted all the presidents. He was an acrylic painter, he hadn't never sold anything, nobody knew he was in the world. I said "you bring one of your paintings down here and put it on my wall, the address and all. I believe people will like your work; I like it." He brought it down there and Dr. [James] Arient came by. He buys paintings from me; he's been buying from me two or three years, he and his wife [Beth Arient], they're wonderful people. He seen it. I told him, "This guy does acrylic. It's good. He's just a mill hand. If you'll let me, I'll take you down there and let you see his work." I took Dr. Arient down to his place, Mr. Pickle. And he bought everything Mr. Pickle had. It was \$1,010 he paid. And he'd never sold anything. He overwhelmingly rejoiced, you know. And from that, then he wanted to put two or three pieces in the chapel. I told him, "Well, now, you can put two or three in there but I can't do that for everybody because I'm going to try to put everybody's art in there."

MS. KIRWIN: This is the chapel - there was a photograph of it in the Anton Gallery?

REV. FINSTER: Yes.

MS. KIRWIN: Could you describe it please?

REV. FINSTER: Well, the chapel was a church about 40 feet long. After I got it, the chapel funds built up to where I got it paid out. And then I got enough chapel funds to build a solar heat room on the back of it, 40 feet long. And in the wintertime when the sun shines, it heats the chapel with solar heat. Enough comes in to heat my studio when the sun's shining. Even when its light clouds, it heats it up; you can work in there in the winter without any heat. I made that, and after I got that on there this old church had a sway in it, about a 24-inch sway in the middle of it and it looked bad. That's probably the reason I couldn't loan on it. But it was real strong, they'd made it that way, it wasn't swayed in, they just made it crooked. It had two by sixes in the top of it, and I got to thinking it over, how hard it would be to take that off of there. And one night I had a vision of this 16-cornered dome, big enough for people to walk up in through there. And I had a vision of that and I started that dome. I believe it's 38 feet across the dome. The dome goes out near to each of the gables, this way; and it goes out on the edge of the foundations of the church. It's 16 corners around it, it's almost round. The reason I made it 16 corners, that's the way I seen it. And then you have a window at every corner. That gives you just barely a flat place to put a round window. After I got started up on it a little, then it begun to take that sway look out of the roof, cover it up. Preacher's really not supposed to cover up mistakes like that, but it was the other man's mistakes. [Laughs] And I went on up with that thing. I didn't think it would take me a year to do that. But by the way it took me a year, from March till March of this year a doin' that. And while I was doing that, my ditches and my branches filled up and weeds grewed up in my garden and people just kept coming, going though it. It was sort of like going through a jungle. And now, since I've got everything nearly done to my dome except the top dome piece, I'm back in the garden now, working in the garden trying to get it ready because lots of peoples come there now. They come there from France and make movies, and they come there from Italy. Some of my work's in Brazil. And Robert Bishop [director of the American Folk Art Museum], he ordered a piece of my workout here a while back in New York, maybe 12 or 14-foot long on a big canvas. He's going to start around the world with it, you know. And he bought some more stuff. And they chose my work to be in a show in Italy somewhere.

MS. KIRWIN: The Biennale, in Venice?

REV. FINSTER: Yes.

MS. KIRWIN: And I have appointments, about all I can fill, going out to the universities, I've been to the University of Miami, Florida. I've had a show at the University of Georgia, University of Art in Atlanta, university in Denver, university in Boulder, Colorado, the State University in California. And I have a painting on peace in the world in the Governor's office in California. I've been on the Johnny Cason Show in Hollywood; and Philadelphia and New York.

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MS. KIRWIN: You were talking about where you worked

REV. FINSTER: Yes. My work begun to spread out. And calls to the universities begun to take me out of my garden, you know. I had a call to the University of Miami where I'd run a revival in 1950. And I had a call to Davis

in the University of California. And St. Joe, Denver, Colorado Springs. I had a week's workout with the students at the University at Boulder, Colorado. I came to the Smithsonian. I've had several shows in New York, and in Virginia - different places like that. I sung several songs on live 'casts, you know. I make up my own songs.

MS. KIRWIN: Could you tell me about your appearance on Johnny Carson's show and how that all came about?

REV. FINSTER: Well, yes ma'am. Johnny Cason's Show, you don't get on Johnny Carson show. Peoples come by there and they make video tapes to represent to TV stations; that's their business, they're professionals. A lot of them comes through there and they're making tapes all the time. Some make video tapes, some makes professional movies. Sometimes they'll take me out in the big trucks and show me the show, movie, before they leave. These folks came there and they made a film, and they represented it to NBC on Johnny's show, I reckon, and he accepted it, and put it on the air. And that's how you get on NBC. They pay your way, and pay you so much for being there. They sent me \$250 just for re runs sometime. That sounded pretty good, you know.

MS. KIRWIN: I wish I had seen it, I didn't see it.

REV. FINSTER: I've got some tapes of it. If you'll remind me sometime, I'll send you one. They're cheap tapes but I've got some I recorded myself. On Johnny's show: he's just a good old common guy. A lot of people call it a coincidence but a year or two before I went on this show I was painting one night. I paint in the night and work in my garden in the daytime. Sometimes I don't even pull my shoes off for six weeks at a time, except, you know, just to take a shower. I just take breaks between 24 hours a day, just a break now and then, it don't take me long to rest; maybe 20 to 30 minutes sometime, or maybe an hour. Anyway, on his show, a year or two before I went on his show I was drawing a painting one night and I was looking at Johnny's show - that's before he ever knew me. And I was a drawing the sun - you know where the Bible says "the sun shall go out and it shall be as black as coal." I was a drawing the sun right then and listening to him on the radio. And just the moment that I started to draw that black sun on the painting, he started mentioning that the sun would finally go out, wouldn't support the world with light. You know, Johnny talks about everything, and he was talking about that at the same time that I was painting. And I said, "Hey here, man, you're a long way from me - how do you know I'm painting this?" and then John Turner, he's a cameraman and helps run this big TV station in San Francisco, I forget the name of it, [KGO TV, News Department] anyhow he took me all through that thing, put me on the station; he goes all over the world and makes their pictures for them. I stayed about a week with him in his home in San Francisco. He give me about a four day tour there. He's a wonderful guy. He sent me to the Golden Gate Bridge, Alcatraz prison, the Chinese Garden - all of that, you know, and we had a world of fun and enjoyed ourselves. Things like that happened, you know, they just come from films that somebody takes. Johnny's show is more popular than I thought it was. And John Turner brought his painting that I'd done; he bought that painting about the sun, he bought that. He come down to Hollywood to spend a few days while I was there, to be with me, he made arrangements with them, you see, from this other TV station. So he was with me and everything and he wanted to get that picture on that program on account of that. I talked to Johnny's manager and he decides about the thing. You don't get anything you want on the show, you don't even sing the song you want to song, they tell you what to do. He was very nice fellow, Johnny's manager, and he made arrangements for me to see Johnny, speak to him after the show; very accommodating. And Johnny signed my little daughter's picture for me. He's just like you see him on the TV.

After I was on his show, this taxi driver - he brought me in in a limousine, I rode several limousines while I was there and I stayed at the hotel of the stars, sometimes the stars stay there. And when I went in, they asked me did I have a credit card and I looked at the lady and I says, "Lady, I don't even have no credit. I never have bought nothing on credit." She looked at me and laughed, you know, and says, "We'll have to make a deposit." That's a deposit on it to use something special. I told her, "OK" and that's the truth. If you don't have credit now, you cain't buy anything.

MS. KIRWIN: Um hmmm, I know.

REV. FINSTER: I never did buy things on credit, I always paid for 'em, because I can't see much difference in paying for something and just waiting a week and pay interest on it; that looks foolish to me. I just try to pay everything as I go. I had a right smart of fun meeting people in California. On the show, a little girl hollered out - I was telling them about settin' and lookin' out over Hollywood for two nights and days at the car lights and the beautiful things. I never did tell nobody back here too much about the oil wells - they don't never tell you there's oil wells in Hollywood, but they're out there. Yeah, they're out there just working like everything here and yonder. I mentioned on the show, "California, here in Hollywood, this is one of the beauty spots of the world." And I said, "Also, there's another one down in Georgia, in the beautiful green hills of Summerville." And a girl hollered out, "How about Beverly Hills?" And I thinks to myself, well, lady have me down there sometime, I haven't been there. [Laughs] I've seen the hillbillies down there. After I came off his show, the taxi driver just barely got me back to the airport. That's the most crowded airport I ever saw in my life.

MS. KIRWIN: Los Angeles?

REV. FINSTER: Yeah, in California. I was trying to get in my line, and I got in the wrong line. And people was hollering at me, "Hey, we seen you last night, on the Carson show." And me trying to find my line. I said, "Well, good, come see me some time, down to Summerville. And I run on. I says, "Lady, is this a [certain] line?" She says, "No, this is not your line, your line's over yonder." I had to step over suitcases and everything, that place is packed. When I finally found my line and got in it people still saying, "Hey, we seen you last night. That's good, we liked that." When I got on the plane and then flew on into Atlanta, there was several people going on to Miami, you know, and they stayed on board. I had to use the middle door. And when I turned around and faced them on that plane getting' off at Atlanta, they're still hollerin' "Hey Howard where's your fan jet? We seen you last night." And doggone it just seemed like everybody knowed me. And when I got home, people begun to congratulate me, and I get calls from Philadelphia and New York. "Howard, you made a hit on the Johnny Carson Show." Well, you know, of course, what does that. When you're publishing somebody and you want to go out, you put him in the TV Guide. I give that responsibility to that, as putting in the TV Guide. That's what really counts: if you're going on TV, to get in the TV Guide. If people knows you, they're going to look you up and they're going to be listening to you. People who never listened to his show, when they seen I was going to be on there, knew me, they never even listen to his show but they listened to it that night because they knew I was comin' on. And they didn't only listen at it but thousands of recorded it. And Johnny ought to have me again sometime and put it in the TV Guide a month or two ahead. And I'd cover him up with this, I'd get a lot of new listeners for him, you know. Of course, they don't see it that way.

MS. KIRWIN: Could you describe your garden, behind your house. You talked a little bit about how you prepared it, and the drainage of the swamp. Could you describe the contents of the garden, and what you're trying to do with the garden? And how you first got the idea of creating such an environment?

REV. FINSTER: Yes, Ma'am. Well, basically, human beings have a feeling in their body - if a gnat lights on their hair or on their toe, they feel it. And then they have about 45 different kinds of feelings, which is like parts in an automobile - there's a carburetor and there's a filter and there's a tire and so forth. That's the way we are. And then we have a second atom, which is a quickening spirit, and that's what it works through me. See, all of these family feelings and these marriage feelings and these grandchildren feelings and this sex feeling and ever kind of feeling that you have, you know when I was borned again and become a Christian, I had a holy feeling that was different than all of them. And it says to try the spirit to see whether they've God or not. So all I have to do is just when that Holy Spirit says to do something, I know that's supposed to be done, regardless to anything else. But you don't really have the Spirit till you're borned again. I always followed it. It called me into repentance, it called me to the minister work, it sponsors my feelings to build a garden, and tells me what to do when I get in troubles. And it tells me - when I couldn't get no money, see, it said, "Start a farm." And the garden was full of all that stuff, it looked so pitiful, "Clean the garden place up. There's a lot of snakes in it, kill 'm, get shed of ." And it tells me everything to do. I just started working on the garden. And then my last, I started collecting the inventions of mankind, you see that covers everything, from a little bobby pin in your hair to that microphone, or automobile - everything we have has been invented by inventors. And I got to wondering if there was even a national holiday for inventors. And they're very important, you know - inventors should have some kind of recognition. I got to just collecting the things that people invented. Everything that people invented. And I started collecting the natural earth's creation, like creations of rock, the creation that God has, you know. And it come to me, the Spirit come to me, to write my Bible verses in my garden also. And put it all among the environment. "You been preaching it all these years and people wouldn't listen to it. Put it out there and enamel it. They forget it, Howard, today, they'll see it tomorrow." And I got to studying about that you know and I started putting Bible verses out there and started putting my paintings out there. And all this stuff I started putting the inventions of mankind, you have to get a little of everything you know. Like, I went up to the museum here in Washington the other day. The Wright Brothers plane and there it is an invention of mankind. I thought it was great up there. That made me feel proud of my country, to walk through that place, take a few pictures. But there's one picture I took up there that I wanted to take the ignition of one of those satellites that come down - I wanted to take all of them wires, you know, to show my grandsons. And when I took all them wires, my picture - sometimes the pictures I take they come out with something else on them. Like something that's not that. I was flying down maybe it's from Washington one morning, and I took a picture of the plane down towards the ground. And there's a ladder came from the earth and come up through the clouds and passed my airplane window. It went on up, on up above us. And it was a lady setting by me and she seen it and she begged. And she said, "My husband is an astrologist, he would like to study that." And I let her have it. I should have kept it. Well, when I took that engineer of this capsule that came back - this strange astronaut, I don't know whether you can see him or not, but he's right in the middle of them wires. You can see his brown hair, and his forehead, you can see his nose and everything. And he's right in the middle of those wires, looking out at me. And that wasn't in there when I took it. See, right here is the brown hair, there's the forehead, and there's his nose right under there, and his mouth right down here above what looks like black whiskers. And part of his face shows a little here - and that's wires across his face. He's actually behind them wires in a steel thing - I mean, just appeared there, and this is the fuel tanks here. And it's just things happens like that in pictures that I take. I took a picture for Victor Faccinto at Wake Forest University - he's a good friend of mine, he's the one that gave me that Cadillac, you know, to paint the pictures all over. And he was down there one day. I had a little house



photographer was going to take a picture of the overhead cast with the gardens – see, my flowers, most of ‘em grows up over top of where you walk, and you cain’t see them except looking up through them – sort of like looking through the moonlight part of a garden. I’ve growed big pumpkins and maters and everything up there. I growed a pumpkin up there one year I didn’t even know it was there until the leaves started falling off, and there the big old thing was laying up on top of the trellis. That wererra [wisteria] vine overhead, you know? And one day he took a picture of this building. Over the top of that building, in the air, there was something in that picture. And when he come down, I said, “Now, Victor, I’ve told you time and again there’s every once in a while something in my pictures that’s not really there when I take ‘em. I want to show you.” He came down. I says, “You see the picture here.” “Yeah.” I says, “Don’t you see that thing in the air above the house, up there where you’re standing on the porch?” He says, “Yeah, I see that.” I says, “Where is it up there?” He got to lookin’ and he went around there for seem like 30 minutes, and he couldn’t see nothing’. It was just up there, in the air above the building. It didn’t have no substantiation, no wires nor nothing’, it was just up there, in the picture. I don’t know, he never did tell me what he thought about that. But it’s thataway every once in a while. Building the garden, as I said, you know: if you collect the inventions of mankind, you gotta have all kinds of things and that turned me into a garbage collector. I was considered for several years as a garbage collector because I had all kinds of junk. Like buggy hub – who wants a buggy hub? Like old ox yokes – who wants an ox yoke? And finally – well, I go to the dump and they throwed beautiful things out there. Beautiful glass I could mold in and all kinds of stuff. And I used to go out there, and sometimes you know, when somebody lost their father or mother, they’d just throw the old trunks and everything away, there was jewelry. And a lot of times people when their parents die they sell what they got out at auctions and get shed of it and I’d grab a lot of that old stuff like that – old trunks and things. A lot of things that our children today don’t even know how we faired back then. They hear of it. But when they see an ox yoke and I show ‘em how it works and everything, they understand it. It’s worth a lot to everybody to go backwards and look at everything, and look at the present. That’s all we got – the past, the present, and the future. We cain’t exactly do without none of ‘em, we need the past, we bring it up to the future, and we bring the future back in the middle with the present and we compare ‘em, we need the past, we bring it up to the future, and we bring the future back in the middle with the present and we compare ‘em and arbitrate what we’re gonna do next. And people don’t look at it that way. My wife, she give me a fit too about garbage. She got to where she said, “Don’t buy any more stuff, you got more than you’ll ever need. You don’t need that kind of stuff.” She didn’t understand either, you know. And a lot of people – they put me in a little funny book; the kids brought a funny book in from school, a comic book. They said they’d gather all the garbage except the Finsters. And one of ‘em tells Finsters are vegetarians – we grew vegetables in the garden. And I was a laugh for a while, but it didn’t bother me because I was sure I was doing the right thing. If you have a holy feeling to do something, you couldn’t make no mistake by doin it. I never have. I been follerin’ it all my life since I was 16 years old and never no mistakes in that. The holy feeling: you can foller it. And sometimes when you foller it, you have to cross over your family, you have to disobey, sometimes, maybe the law, a little bit. Like I was supposed to have a permit, see, to build that. I didn’t get no permit. I got so far along in it a fellow came from the University’s architects man and he came by to see it you know and he just laughed all the time he was there. He said, “Howard, where’s the blueprint on this thing?” I said “sir, there’s no blueprint,” I said. “I had a vision of this thing and I made it. It’s got 16 corners on it. Could you tell me what you call a anything that’s got 16 corners? You know what four corners is, you know what eight corners is, but what about 16 corners? What would you call that?” And he couldn’t name it for a while, you know. And directly he twisted around and finally told what it was. And when he told me what it was it sound like foreign language, you know. I’ve forgot it already, but it has a name. And there’s not many 16 cornered structures. And that’s; so nigh around – you see, here in Washington, 16 corners is so nigh around they go ahead and just make it round. But I think it’s pretty 16 corners. And that’s the way I had the vision. I wanted columns like they got in Washington here, you know – straight, pretty, cement columns. And of course they’re so high, some of ‘em 26 hundred dollars – I couldn’t never stand that. And I had a vision how to make those columns. I just took a  $\frac{3}{4}$  shelving board, like this here, and took a paint bucket lid and laid it and drawed it around. And I stook the end of a two by four in that, and cut a hole which slip over the two by four. Then I took that two by four every so far apart, and toe nailed ‘em. And you can take any kind of ol’ lumber, just an ol’ barn or anything and just rip up lumber and deck that; it takes 28 strips to go around that. You got the strength of three two by fours. And you just take slate roofin’ and roll it out longways and roll that thing like a cigarette. And put one seam across it and turn it to the wall. And then you paint that slate with a good outside paint, and you got one of the beautifulest columns: you oughta’ see them. People thinks they’re cee ment columns. They look about as good as the columns some of here in Washington, and they’re so unexpensive, maybe ten or fifteen dollars a piece, you can build ‘em yourself. Of course I had to have lots of ‘em, you know.

MS. KIRWIN: Did this architect come to inspect your chapel?

REV. FINSTER: Yeah, they been going through there, everybody come through there – doctors, doctors of philosophy, psychiatrists. You know, I been accused – people call me crazy like they did Noah, you know. Some people think I’m insane, like, maybe a percentage like insane? And this doctor psychiatrist – he’s a doctor of philosophy of psychiatry, and he comes and buys paintings from me. His wife did a beautiful piece to go in my chapel for me. They donated me a Black Forest cuckoo clock. And I have peoples gives gifts like that, you know.

And they was out one day and I told Dr. Arient I says, "Dr. Arient" – he was walking around over the chapel, you know – "I've had several people that think I'm a little off. They don't let me know it and everything. But you bein' a psychiatrist and bein' philosophy in that," I said, "I would like for you some time when you get a chance to give me a thorough examination in that and go through me and grade me. I'd like to find out if I am insane; I would like to hear it from YOU." And you know, it just froze him up. He walked around in the church, pickin' him out some pieces, and he didn't say anything for a while. And after a while he come back around and he said, "You know, Howard, I might do that some time." [Laughs] So, you might hear the straight of it sometime. It's all been fun, it's all been spiritual, it's all been rejoicing, it's all been a sacrifice. It's been a hard road; it's been a easy road. It just been everything. And here in Washington, you know, of course a guy like me, a little artist, don't have much reconnition from celebrities. But I have celebrities come in here like Dr. Oppenheimer from [Richmond,] Virginia came down to be with me, him and his wife [Ann], they been messin' round this traffic two days just to be with me. And he's a specialist, medical doctor, and she's one of the main teachers at Richmond University. And they're fixing to put on a Finster festival there in Richmond University for me. And that'll be the first Finster festival that I've ever heard of yet.

MS. KIRWIN: When are they planning to do this?

REV. FINSTER: That'll be the last of October and the first of November, I believe. Give 'em an invitation. I don't know how to have an invitation but they invite, you know, most all of my friends.

MS. KIRWIN: How did you first get involved with commercial art galleries and selling your work through, for instance, Phyllis Kind Gallery in New York?

REV. FINSTER: Well, I started out with some small art dealers –

MS. KIRWIN: In Georgia?

REV. FINSTER: They really wasn't able to finance me and they wasn't able to handle all of my art and turn it over. And since they wasn't able to turn my art over, I sort of just switched off to Phyllis Kind, she's really my agent. She has a gallery in Chicago. She'll lean a way over to help a guy sometimes and maybe bend a rule a little. Like, she usually has to have a contract with people, you know, and I don't sign contracts. She took me on anyhow. And she sells my work and I think the world of her and I reckon she likes me all right, And she seem like a wonderful business person. She helps a lot of artists like me. She sells her work. She pays you sort of guaranteed salary, like – I mean, she'd take it out of your fund. She'll start a fund and put your part in the fund, and their part goes to the gallery of course, then she'll pay you so much a month. So you have something to depend on. See, if I don't sell nothing' his month, I'll get something anyhow. I think it's supporting and really encouraging to artists the way she does things. When I started out with her, she started me out on \$400 a month. She had a joint show in San Francisco with Ruth Braunstein out there in San Francisco. They went in together and had a show and she raised me to \$400. I had a show in New York up there with them. They raised me to \$500 a month. I had another show up there the next year with them and they raised me to \$550. I had another show and I reckon things got better and they raised me to \$700 a month. This year, not long ago, they raised me to \$750. So, you see you can build up in a thing like that.

MS. KIRWIN: With your earnings from your works with Phyllis Kind, do you put this back into the garden and the folk art?

REV. FINSTER: Oh yeah, it all goes back in the garden. As for me, I'm just passin' through this planet. Like some people come there and they'll see me takin' a little money in and they talkin' about "what you goin' to do with it when you get rich" and all. I said, "Listen: you listen to me." I said, "A lot of people has come here and they've died and left mansions and millions. Howard Finster has not come here and leave mansions and millions. I'm going to leave something for the people but not mansions and millions. I wasn't to leave all the inventions of mankind with the people. I want to leave all the creation of God can find with the people. And then I want to leave all of the Bible with the people. The oldest book we have." You asked me a question putting it on the fence and why did I get into commercial art, I didn't really get into the commercial art, I didn't even choose to be an artist, I've never even asked for no kind of publicity or to be in a book. I never asked for this interview, I never asked for nothing like that. Because the Bible says, "Those he calls he qualifies." And I told God when I quit pastorin' "If there's anything else out there for me to do, if you will open the door I'll be there." That's all I do. Just when He opens the door I'll go. So the way the commercial art started is that people came in and started baggin' 'em off the walls. And I hesitated. Alan Jabbour [head of the Archive of Folk Culture at the Library of Congress]– he met me in Atlanta, I didn't know who he was when I met him. And he left there and I didn't know who he was. He called me one day. He heard me make a speech in Atlanta, Georgia, this big State building; our Governor and his wife was there. She come around and congratulated my work, she'd seen the show. Alan seen my show. And I done a talk there that night – it's a long story, I couldn't tell you all of it on a interview but I had to force that whole hundreds and hundreds of people, I had to force 'em to listen to me. The stage manager and quieting 'em all down and I done that, and the Governor and his wife there and they got real quiet. It's kind of

funny, the story about that is: probably Alan or somebody like that could tell you some time. But anyhow I got 'em quieted down and Alan Jabbour entered, he liked my speech - my speech was "The Hidden Man of the Heart." Like there's something in you and you hadn't never discovered it. Like me, you see. When it said "Do sacred art" well, it was in there, but I hadn't never discovered it. That's the hidden man of the heart. If the people on this planet Earth would bring out the hidden man of the heart, there's no tellin' what's in some of 'em. Some of 'em could have been a President and they've never been hardly anything because they never did bring out anything that was in them. Just like takin' a quart of milk and stickin' it in the refrigerator and lettin' it sit there till it spoils. That's the way a lot of people do - they won't try anything. And I found out that's the way you discover your talent and all is try things. I try everything. I was at a place in Philadelphia and they told me, "Howard, you can draw us a little painting in this hotel, if you want to." Well, from the bathroom window it was beautiful, you know. The light was shinin' out there, and I thinks to myself some time during that night, "I'll paint them a little piece in the window." I got to lookin' and I didn't have a brush to my name. And I found a drawer with some little birthday candles in it. And I took them birthday candles and trimmed the 'em down on them and used for brushes. And I put a painting "in Philadelphia hotel window, half window." I put clouds and flyin' angels and everything on there. And I took the little candles I done it with and taped 'em over the window. And said, "I couldn't find no brushed and I done this painting with these little candles." I don't know what they'll do with the painting or what they'll do with the candles. But it don't matter to me.

MS. KIRWIN: You seem to be able to make anything out of material at hand.

REV. FINSTER: Oh yeah. You see this watch here? One day I lost this crystal out of this watch. I was in bad shape since I didn't have nothing' to tell time with. And it just come to me: "Howard, take a half gallon plastic Coca Cola bottle and right below the neck of it, where that round shoulder is, you feel around and you get a think place, like. Cut it out, a little bulky like and lay it over your watch and mark it, and you can make you a crystal for your watch out of a round part of the top of a Coca Cola bottle. Yeah, you feel it: how hard it is. A wonderful crystal. Of course, I've got it beat up. So I just put it up here and marked around that piece, you know, and took a pair of snips and cut it out, put glue on it, just put it in there, And it's been on there ever since. Like these glasses. Before I come up here, you know. I run into a board and broke these things right here, and right there, broke this off - everything just fell apart and the glass fell out. And I laid 'em down and re built 'em.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 1

[Interview resumes in mid sentence]] about?.. [inaudible] Me and my wife, we've always been good partners. We've got along good. We've raised five children, happily. She's been with me in all of my revivals. I couldn't have never done what I've done without her. But anyhow, she's like everybody else, she didn't like garbage. I had of course clean garbage. My "garbage" was the inventions of mankind. It seemed as though everybody understood it. But finally I told her - I done a room in the wall on a mirror. I do a lot of mirror work, you know. I like periscopes. You see, I have a windin' step that goes all the way to the first floor up over the top of the church. And I put sample Plexiglas mirror in it to see what I could do with the sun. And I can bring the sun all the way around them steps and wind the sun around and let it shine on my piano and shine in my bathroom from the second floor. I can stand on the bottom floor and look up them steps and see out the windows and see the sun, and the sun shines right down there and turns all them curves. I can take the sun and bring it into this room, and take it out of this room and put it in all of the rooms. I can light this whole thing up with the sun. But the thing about it is it only lights it up for a few minutes till it passes over. And you got to have it where it just keeps lightening it up. I hadn't worked out a thing to do that with. Now, the technician could, but some day I think there'll be where they can have a thing on the outside of the window that follows the sun and light every room in your house in the daytime by the sun. I can do it for a little while at a time. When I'm building my dome in my chapel, and I had a vision - I've worked on perpetual motion and I haven't never give it up yet. I still think it could be done, perpetual motion. I had a vision of a un resist able windmill. I had a vision of a windmill like no one has ever built. It's one that don't have no resistance. It'd pull twice as much as the ordinary ones we have. I just haven't had the money to build it. It needs to be a pretty big thing, you know. I told my wife one day. I said, "I tell you what, honey. You take the front porch and take half of this house. I'll take the back porch and the other half." And we've made agreement: she took the front porch and she took the other side of the house, I took the back porch and garden. I have a lot more visitors on the back porch than she does on the front porch. And I have a lot of fun. My wife, she understands that. Well, the people does now. You look at a man on the Johnny Carson show. And that song titled "Smithsonian Catalog" that's in my book. And New York shows and all of that, you know. Well, I'm not really a garbage man no more. I'm not really a garbage collector no more. I've still got the same things, but I'm not a garbage collector because the garbage collector was a doin' a job he didn't understand. I found out what I was doin' and representin' the inventions of our own country, which that's no disgrace. I hope the inventors appreciate it. If they did appreciate it, you know they might could have give me enough money to have built the garden with out of the interest over a month. There's a lot of companies could have give me enough money to build that garden everything with just a little interest out of what they draw. But nobody knows about me. And another thing, I'm not incorporated. I've got a lawyer now tryin' to incorporate me. I'm payin' tax on something that I've never gotten anything out of. I'm payin' tax on something that's the people's. And I'm payin' tax on something that I've given my whole life - all of my life's vacations and

everything and my fishin' and sports I've got in that garden. And it's for people. And the people come there; they're the ones that enjoy. I do it from my own work, from my own money, from my own donations and friends. He's tryin' to get somebody to look into it to see if at least couldn't stop havin' to pay tax on something like that. I think the laws and government never set up where you wouldn't have to pay tax on something like that, but I didn't know what to do about it, but this lawyer's goin' to look into it. Of course I paid one lawyer to do that and he even forgot about it. Paid him down, right smart o' money on that and he even forgot about it the next year, didn't even know I'd been tryin' to get him to do that.

MS. KIRWIN: Could you talk a little bit about your work. For instance, you talked a little but about you use of mirrors. In some of the works at the Anton Gallery, you used mirrors in back of a box frame. This gives you kind of a different dimension. You talked to me a little about it at the gallery. Could you explain it?

REV. FINSTER: Yeah, mirror glass is a wonderful thing, you know. You can take a mirror glass and take just a thin box and you can make it five to six to seven times bigger. It's a kind of self multiplyin' thing - space. I went to the screen up at a show [the IMAX film "To Fly" at the National Air and Space Museum] here in Washington. And you see the whole congregation just goes right out over Niagara and all them places - you just go right out over it and follow the plane to see how the things it does. That's kind of the way of that mirror. You get it fixed just right and it takes you a way out yonder. And you can do it horizontal or you can do it different ways. And when you do it top and the bottom and the side, you can look out of sight every way you look, just out of sight. And that's what I'm a doin' in the center of the church. I'm doin' the floors, ceilin' and all. And everywhere you look you just look out o' sight. When the door's open, you can look right straight in that thing opposite from the yard and look out and see somebody hangin' clothes or something out there. I have a little ol' building you know and when you go in it you can see several dimensions of basement, and when you look up you see dimensions going up you know. If you get 30 people in there, you got a pretty good crowd. When I'm makin' lectures to these universities, I tell 'em I like that little building because when I run short a audience, if I can get three people in there I've got a good crowd. [Laughs] It tickles 'em, you know. I tell 'em another thing too. I can sorta watch my neighbors sometimes when I ain't lookin' at 'em. People like humor, most o' the people like humor. They come there one day and tested me for that. They investigated me, kinda what you're doin' - on humor, you know. And they quizzed me about it. What do I think about humor? "Has God ever laughed?" I says, "Yeah. He laughed at ignorance." They didn't think I knowed that. They says, "What about you? What d'you think about humor?" I said, "I have humor, I think everything has humor. All my life I've seen pigs and cats and little baby kittens and everything. They start playin' and havin' fun from the very time they're born. Yeah, I believe in humor. I believe in humor." You can go too far with things, you know. "What about when you're in church?" I says, "When I'm in big revivals, about the first thing I do a lot of times is get the people tickled a little bit, get their mind off everything; I get the message over to 'em." They wanted me to tell a little tale, you know - how I done one of my little church tales. I told 'em, I said, "Well we used to have one of the winnin'est preachers. And this Methodist church is runnin' a revival, and the Methodist pastor said, "I want everybody in this auditorium that never had a cross word with their wives - I want 'em to come stand across from this rostrum." A lot of them good folks come up and stood up there sayin' they'd never had a cross word with their wives. And when the preacher got 'em all up there, he looked back at the auditorium and he says, "I just wanted you to see what a bunch of liars there are in this town." [Laughs] That was one of 'em you know. And of course, everybody gets tickled; they get their mind off o' their troubles, and then you just bear down and preach your message to 'em. Sometimes you have to make 'em a little mad, you know. Sometimes I run up on a guy, he's kind of a know all fellow. You know, he knows everything, you cain't tell him nothing. I've crossed his trail and make him a little mad, like. I can stir him up a little, you know, and he'd get a little excited and start comin' out at me. Then I'll level off and just love up in his arms, you know. He's all right then; he'll listen to you. With some of 'em - you have to do it different ways. You can just look at a person and just tell just about what they will take, or if they're dangerous, or how much you can get after 'em. I can just look at and pretty well tell that.

MS. KIRWIN: What do you think is the most powerful Biblical verse? Is there one that you use frequently in your work - that you think is most powerful?

REV. FINSTER: Most powerful Biblical verse? Well, my favorite verse is - you know, Elvis Presley, after he died he appeared to me in my garden. I had a vision of him, you know. The last one you talk to when you're dyin', - and even when you die your brain lives for 15 minutes. I had a vision of him, that God was the last one he talked to in this room. And then I read in the Bible, it said, "In the last days, whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved." That's what the Bible says. The Bible is a lie, or the Bible is true. [Speaking slowly for emphasis] "And those that call upon Him, in the last days they shall be saved." He didn't say you to join the church or go to the altar or do this or that. He said, "In the last days, whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved." And there's another verse of it said, "He that knoweth these sayings of mine and believeth them, he shall never see death." You see, you have an in des tructible seven dimensions of your body which is a second Adam, which is a quickening spirit, which didn't come from clay, it comes from the breath of God. And that part of you is in des tructible, invisible. That's they part of you that can go around the earth in three minutes. That's the part of you that can walk into Hell and look it over. That's the part of you that can go millions of miles and just as a thought. That's the second Adam, it can penetrate walls or anything, nothing holds it back and still it's

real. It's the same seven invisible members you have in this body. It goes in another body. There's no flesh and blood shall enter the Kingdom of God, but when you get enough bodies it's forever. This body is corruptible body. Everybody, when they pass away, they turn to corruption if they ain't treated or something; that's the body we're in. That's not the body we really should choose. We should choose to live in a celestial body, which is the second Adam. You see, the second Adam come from the breath of God. The first Adam come from His hands forming clay. He turned into a ceramic artist there for a little while and made Adam out of clay. Now, when our artists make clay things they'd bake 'em and harden 'em and give 'em durability. When God made ceramic clay, he made a man. And out of his mouth he pumped breath into him and he become a livin' soul, which is the second Adam, with his seven invisible members. So that's the way it is.

MS. KIRWIN: How do you describe your message in your art? You have a particular mission when you create work of art.

REV. FINSTER: Well, as far as I'm concerned, I'm not here to live a normal life. I'm sent here on a mission. I was fore predestined for this planet, just like Henry Ford. He was sent here to answer the prophecy of Ezekiel. Ezekiel speaks of horseless chariot. Henry Ford come to fulfill that verse. And I don't know as I ever heard anybody tell but that's it. And then John the Baptist came here, he was fore predestined to introduce Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ came here for a lamb, for a sacrifice for the sins of the world. Isaiah the prophet he come to earth to prophesy of the last war. He spoke of two wars. Isaiah said over two thousand years ago, Isaiah said the present war with us here now, he said this was confused noise and garments rolled in blood. That's what he said - the battles we have, now. But he spoke of another in the future. He says, "This battle, it shall be with fuel and burnin' of fire." Well, what he said, he was sent to say it. And two thousand years from then you're supposed to read that and see whether he's right or not. Well, you can look around at the hydrogen bomb and atomic bomb and very well say that a prophet two thousand years ago that told us about 19 and 84 and we're living to see it with our own eyes. Then if we can't see that, it's because we don't read it, or it's because we're fools. Because he said, "The fool hath said in his heart 'there is no God'." That's the way that is. I came here as a man of visions. I was sent here as a man of visions, like a second Noah. I'm not a Noah but I'm here as a second Noah. I'm here as a red light is in the street. Always behind a red light is where the death comes - on the beaches, on the bays, everywhere. If you run them red lights, you're a goner. People don't just keep puttin' red lights out there, they just put one out there. If you run it you're gone. But God, He just sends all kinds of red lights. He sent one commandment and they broke it. Who broke it? The birds? No, the people. And He sent man more commandments - Ten Commandments, and they broke them before Moses got back from. And then He sent the prophets and the prophets done miracles and so help me God they killed the prophets; stoned 'em. And then He sent Jesus Christ here and they killed him for raisin' the dead and for healin' bodies.

[Interview briefly interrupted by someone at the door]

Another thing about my work is, you know the cost of publicity is high. When they come from New York to do a story on me, it costs about \$792 to fly up here and back. It costs about \$1,500 for anybody to have me just for the show. Well, that's very expensive. And I've told several of 'em that I would give 'em a story on the phone, if they wanted one. So they got to doin' that. I lay samples of things. Like I done a workout at Boulder, Colorado with the students. Well, I think it's goin' to break out a little bit, I think there's goin' to be others do that. I say, "Why don't you get the story over the telephone?" So they're doin that. There was a lady from New York, I believe. She called in to make arrangements to take a story off the telephone at a certain time, you know - make engagement with 'em and do a story on the telephone. Well, you can interview me for a story here on the telephone any time; just call me and get an appointment ahead. That way it's inexpensive. You get it on the tape and then you can write it down and can even talk on what I'm sayin'. And then people can question you about it, things like that. When I'm showed anythin' of this holy feelin', this holy divine feelin' of God, when it shows me anything, I don't go around sayin' "I think it's this-a-way." I hear people sayin' - like our greatest evangelist sayin' "I don't understand this" "I don't understand that." Well, if they don't understand it, they oughtn't try to explain it. Because if they do, it's just givin' ideas. When I have something and know about it, I tell 'em, "this is the way it is." That's the way Jesus talked.

MS. KIRWIN: Do you think your work is political, about environmental issues and the arms race?

REV. FINSTER: Well, our political world should be together. Our political world when it's divided it cain't stand. That plainly tells you. I draw houses divided; a tree growed up in 'em. I drewed 'em over and over. A tree grows up in it, it's a divided house, it cain't stand. Well, that's the way the Democrats and the Republicans are two parties. And of course the Independents. As far as I'm concerned, you might say I'm an Independent because I'm for the man that has a policy that the people needs. It doesn't make any difference to me what they call it. Now, some people are called Democrats, some are called Republicans, some are called Liberalists and so on and so forth. If they all set down and drank some coffee and this guy wants his with cream in it, that guy wants his and the whole thing in it, this guy he just wants it plain. Well, that's the way it is. They got different ideas of lookin at things. Any kind of party, even before the Civil War started, if the two parties would have got together and arbitrated it and worked it out, they could have avoided that war. What happens, you know, hate, and malice,

and jealousy works things up like that and gets people to think we can win. The other side, they say, well, we don't want to fight, but if they goin' to come in on us, we have to. That's the way it is today. There's nobody in the United States wants war. That's the way it is today. There's nobody in the United States wants war. And the citizens in the other countries, they don't want war. It's just that two old goats get mad, they goin' to lock horns. And when they lock horns, all of their little babies is exposed. And all the wars we've ever had, and all the hell we've ever had, is on account of some old hard goat heads lockin' horns. It's not the general run of the people; they don't want their children sent off to the battlefield. I got a grandson right now in the Army; lonesome and blue. I just and one of my grandsons come out of the Marines. I don't want 'em to have to fight and die for no reason; just because of two old hard goats lockin' horns. There's no reason for any wars we ever had on this planet. There's no real, legitimate reasons. Now there is reasons for defendin' yourself. Every time that we've ever fought, we fought to keep from bein' destroyed. We've never started a war. And we never took a nation that we didn't just put it back on its feet and free it. Because this is a free world. And people that ain't for that, I don't understand 'em. I'm supposed to just go to the college and show the artists my work. But nearly every class in there will have me to show my work, they're not even artists. Sometimes I'll put on four shows, to four different classes' and half of em are not even artists, they just want to see it. I was down at John Lawrence's place, and John Wesley, there's a bronze statue of him behind the university. It's probably what you would call originally a John Wesley college. And I was down there and put on four slide lectures for 'em; stayed a day or two. I really enjoyed it. I got to stay in the old building where the Civil War major stayed one night. I was in there that night, and I could feel the spirit of the Civil War. I could hear the guns. Everything went on that night there that went on and has happened. I found myself a preachin' to them people in that war and all that - tellin' 'em, "This is the wrong way to do it." If you ever go to Atlanta, be sure to of through that big cyclorama or whatever it is - that thing that shows that. You go into a globe and it comes off of the wall right into the real things. Like you look up there and things are painted and directly you'll be settin' here. It just goes together and you can't tell things from the real things. It's wonderful. And out in the back of John Wesley's college, I was standin' around near this statue. I stayed around there right smart. Seem like I could pick up his spirit. I could find him, you know, when he was havin' his hardest crisis. Then I could find him when he was just really levelin' out, you know. I was standin' with the statue and John or somebody took a picture of me standin' there. The limbs on them trees I'd say are at least 50 foot high. And when he took a picture of me standin' with John Wesley, them limbs come down to my knees on that tree, standin' there by John Wesley. I've had a lot of experiences.

MS. KIRWIN: You mentioned that you had a vision of Elvis Presley when he died?

REV. FINSTER: Oh yeah. He appeared to me in my garden.

MS. KIRWIN: What was that like? Could you describe it?

REV. FINSTER: Well, three days after I visited his mansion - you see, John Turner is a TV man; he gets pictures all over the world. And he constantly sends me pictures from places. Well, Elvis Presley's place is not far from here and he come here to o up there to interview his home. And he took me with him. He wanted me to be with him at the interview of Elvis's home. So I went up with him and interviewed his home and seen all the things that Elvis had - see his rooms and all of it, you know. And I came back home and about three days later I was down in the garden workin' and he just walked up, you know. Elvis. He had on a dark blue suit and a light blue shirt with the collar open; no tie. I was down hunkered over a workin' in the flowerbed and he walked up behind me. I turned around and seen who it was. And when I seen who it was, I just sorta hung my head down and said, "Lord have mercy." I was talkin' to him about how about managin' to stay awhile with us, you know - stay awhile. And I looked around and I thought I heard him say, "I'm on a? [hesitating]?" he said he was on a tight circuit or whatever you call it -

MS. KIRWIN: Schedule?

REV. FINSTER: Yeah. I looked around and he was gone. I painted lots of pictures of Elvis. His fans and friends that wants one, you know - they demand for me to paint 'em a picture of him and they like that one when he was three years old. When I was at the University of Colorado. I was in a workout there - you see they built their whole college just out of mountain rocks. Beautiful site. And they took me up in the Rockies and everything; they was so good to me there. When I was havin' this workout, I had a little paper dimension I made of Elvis at three. I make paper dimensions of anything I do, that's my first art. And I make it into a dimension, and then you can lay it down and trace around it, and then get the real picture and lay it in there and fill that in and pose it. That's where I do so many paintings - I do my dimensions first; I always put 'em in a file.

MS. KIRWIN: These are sketches, on paper?

REV. FINSTER: Yeah. The sketches are the real thing. You see, you can take a rule and come up and just measure your eyes from here to your eyes and measure your two eyes from where your nose is. And you can just measure a person and make a dimension of 'em as far as that goes. But it's more difficult that-a-way. The way I started off doin' it is to get a pencil that has the rubber in it, and a piece of white paper. And I start drawin'

something. Well, if I get the nose wrong, I just run it out and change it, you can do it 10 or 15 times. The eyes, the hair, everything. You might work on it three or four hours till you get it just like you want it. And you just take a razorblade and put it on a firm piece of wood and just cut it into a stencil and put the age and everything, and what history book it's in, and what page it's on. Then you just put it in a file. Well, if I want to draw George Washington four foot tall and big as this table, I got a dimension of it that I made years ago. That dimension is my art of it. I just take that and lay it down on the wall and mark around it, and look at his picture and just fill it in. A dimension's like an empty bucket that companies makin' for five or six different kinds of paint. There's nothing wrong with using dimensions: dimension is just the empty bucket you fill. That saves a lot of time, you see. If I can do a \$500 painting in eight hours, and it takes me three or four hours to make a dimension, and I get another call for it, I can go in there and pull that dimension out and make it for half the time; cause I got a dimension of it to start off with. And that's a good way to teach the children art, because they can pull that dimension out and just keep paintin' and paintin' and after a while they don't have to pull the dimension out to paint at all. And that's the way I get on sometimes - you have to start off with a dimension and first thing you know you're paintin' without any dimension. That's a good way to learn. You know, when they took visual art out - that's one particular reason that I'm passin' through this planet. Visual art is very needful. It's advanced society. When I was a little boy, when a speller, we called 'em spellers in school, primary school, in the first and second grade, when you went to the speller, you spelled words; they give you out a word and you spell it. Well, in a speller where it said "fox" there was a fox settin' there. Well, that little girl could spell fox and never know what it was. Well, when she spelled "fox" there's a fox settin there. When it spelled "rain" there's a little girl holdin' an umbrella and it rainin'. That was visual art. Our society took it out. Why? And a lotta other things they took out - why? And now, when the government's goin' back on visual art trainin' the soldiers and things - but I been doin' visual art seven years. And if I was to influence the world back to visual art, they wouldn't give never give me no money for it, because I'm a sixth grade student; I don't want no money for it. But I say, in America you need to get back on visual art. I been tellin' 'em that seven years. And every once in a while I run up on some of my influence. I run up on some of my white clouds that somebody done. I run up on things that I do in my work. I know that people's getting' ideas from them, that's all I need, I don't want no honor for anything. Cause I don't have anything, everything I have is given to me from another world. If I was to go a-holdin' back things that help people, I wouldn't be no good for this place. I turn everything loose. I have an invented book. It's got slide leaves in it. You can read both sides of it. I put it up in the chapel. Instead of getting' a patent on it, I put it up in the chapel where people can make 'em if they want to. I done this tape, and I make reproductions of it, like "Just a Little Tack in the Shingle of Your Roof" [45 rpm vinyl record]. I made that up here in the Library of Congress, in Alan Jabbour's office. Made it up and sung in it while I was interviewed. The Wake Forest University, they produced the record and give me my share and they took theirs. They sold theirs and got their money and I sold mine and got mine. I didn't have nothing to do with it, didn't pay nothing on it, wasn't my idea, I just sold the ones they give me and they sold the ones they had. They're all gone. They done a album that-a-way. And I done a newspaper, a one man collection newspaper. I done a 20 feet newspaper [for Jeffrey Camp's American Folk Art Company in Richmond, Virginia]. And now I've got a book out. I had 1,000 of 'em made myself and they'll soon be gone.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 2

BEGINNING OF TAPE 2, SIDE 1

MS. KIRWIN: How did you get the idea to put you visions in a book?

REV. FINSTER: Well, I had this vision. You see, some people don't understand. The Bible says, "In the last day I will multiply men of vision." I was in San Francisco and a lady kind of got hard on me. She says, "You think you're the only one that has visions?" I says, "Lord no. Anybody's liable to start havin' visions. The Bible said they would multiply the men of visions." I said, "You might even start havin' visions!" But I had visions, one day, that a whole book can run across my eyeballs in a few minutes. I mean a whole big book. I was layin' on my bed one day, restin' - I have a rest bed, and I have a bed where my children if they want to lay down there they can, if they want to play on that bed they can play on it, that's what it's for. When I was a kid, I wanted to lay down on a bed a lot of times; they wouldn't let me. And if they caught me jumpin' on the bed, usin' it for a trampoline, they'd get onto me. So I have a rest bed that's perfect for the kids to play on if they want to. Well, this vision come on me and it was like a TV screen rollin'. There was whole mountains turnin' over and thousands of horses and men at one time bein' covered up with dirt. They was just a-rollin', this whole thing, it was the terriblest thing I ever seen in my life. And it got to movin' around like that just like a television screen and I even forgot where I was at or who I was or what I was or what I was here for, in that vision. When it sorta died down, I had to reach over and get one of these square things, you know, little ol' puzzles and started workin' with that thing to even tell who I was again. And, like that book: I had this vision about me and one of my best friends, that we got to studyin' about it, and that we wanted to contribute ourselves to showin' the world what was out there. And that when we went out there, we was not goin' to return, and we was goin' as far as we could go. And if we had any kids born, they was goin' as far as they could go; if they had any kids born, they was goin' as far as they could go. And we was goin' to dedicate ourselves and all to tell the world what was out there. So I had this vision, and the government helped us with it. I just quite painting. I didn't do nothing, just worked on that book. I

just sat down and wrote it, put it together, took me about five days. Put the vision together. Now if I had been a studyin something up to say or studyin up a book to write, it coulda took a year. But when you have a vision, that's it, you know. If your mind, your brain cell is a good recorded, you sposed to train your brain cell. It's like a gigantic warehouse of Henry Ford's, you know - like, there's a carburetor department, there's a hood department, there's everything, a thousand departments. Well, you go leavin' all the doors open, you don't see the numbers on 'em and you get it messed up where you can't never fine anything. It gets all out of order. Your files the same way. A secretary can be lousy. And that's the way your brain cell is. The subjects are divided in your brain cell and there's millions of 'em . I've never known of anybody to get 'em all filled. They keep a-learning things. There's still more room somewhere. It's sorta like a computer. And then when you leave an ol' subject loose - leave a door open - frettin' around about it and you're on your job, you gotta learn to shut that door. When you lose one of your family, go ahead and weep over it naturally, like everybody else, and then just close it up. Say that's it, and go on. And you're on your job and somebody's tryin' to get behind your back and cause you to lose your job, and you get worries about that, and you go to messin' up on your work, close that door, shut it tight, and just have a little faith and say, "I don't to even think about it, it's not that-a-way. Forget it, go on and do what you're doin.'" If everybody would concentrate on what they're presently doin' there wouldn't be no deaths on the highway. The only accident I ever had was havin' my mind on something else besides drivin'. I've had a few little run ins. I've never had a traffic ticket, nothing like that; but there was a fellow was parked on the road one night. He run outa gas and left his car on the road and I run up on this thing in the dark before I realized I was goin' pretty fast and by the time I slowed down and hit him, I hit him hard enough to knock me up on the dash and knock his car about 200 feet.; it started rollin on out. I seen right then that if I'da been on the alert and a-watchin', I coulda seen the shadow of that car enough to keep from hittin'. And I found out that's what's the matter with my grandchildren. I can tell one of 'em some time to do something and 15 minutes he never even picked that up, he forgot it. You tell him again. I have told people three times about something and their minds are away off. And you know, people will get down on their knees in church, and they'll pray a long drawed out prayer, just a-tryin' to think something up for somebody to think they're really something. And they got their mind on something else. And people come to church and set there and think about their corn growin' up or something or think about their business or think about a good haul o' money they made while the preacher's preachin'. They ain't payin' no attention, they got their mind on something else. Well, what I'm actually doin right now, I'm sposed to shut my brain cell offa everything except what I'm into. And that means physically and spiritually. When you're into anything, put your mind on what you're doin and just shut everything off. And people go about worryin' about tomorrow. Maybe atomic war and all that stuff, that's a - God's people and people that understand should never worry about that. Like today, I'm a-livin' today. Well, I shut all my brain cells off except 19 and 84 on this particular day and keep them all closed except today and just concentrate on today like it would be like this forever and enjoy this day, get everything I can out of this day. It's like the old song, "Just Live One Day at a Time." If people would do that they'd be better off. If atomic war comes anyhow, I'm gonna do all I can. And if atomic war comes - if I worry about it and suffocate over it six months afore it comes, I've done went through it two or three times, it shouldn' make any difference to go through it again. And it's sorta like that. Somebody has cancer, or something. They'll worry and die again, and when they do die, it's the easiest part of it. The dyin' they do thinkin' about it is the worst death. Dyin' is not hard at all. I've seen a lotta people die. That's easy, that's when your feelin' starts leavin' and you become unconscious with this body movin' out into another one. It's something. I've seen people smile at death. They've just suffered so much they is glad to welcome it. I've seen people want to die. They've had all they wanted. Anda lot of people, it's the way that they do that causes everything to be so bad for 'em. You're supposed to concentrate on what you're presently doin'. Like flyin' a plane or eating or married sex or food or water, or anything. No matter what it is you're supposed to concentrate on what you're doin'. I was in a school one time, these children, you know you could look at 'em and tell some of 'em was on drugs. That's bad. And I thinks to myself, if you get on to them kids, they won't like it, because they're stuck on it. They're not stuck on it; they don't know anything about what they're into. They're just happy and they're not much more happy than they would be on their physical happiness and feelings. And I look at 'em and I think to myself, what could I say to those kids that's on some kinda drugs? And it just come to me what to say: it said you get up there and you tell 'em and I got up there and told 'em. I said, "Well, kids, a lot of people question me and say, 'Howard, where you get all your strength? I give out afore you do, where you get all that strength?'" And I said, well, where I get that strength, one thing is, when I was like you all, and young, I took good care of myself. I didn't use tobacco or smoke, didn't use no tea or coffee or nothing. It's like a new car, takin' care of it. When I was young like you 'all, I took good care of myself. Until you get 35, you're mature when you get to 35. After 35, you've just about made your maturity, you're grown, ain't growin' anymore. Now then, I'm so old I can take all the dope I want to it won't kill me. I'm done too far gone."

MS. KIRWIN: How old are you?

REV. FINSTER: I'm 67 - I think. My mother said I was borned in 19 and 16, but when I retired, they didn't find that number. They give me another number than she did. So really it don't matter with me, you know, when I was born. But sometimes between '16 and '18, somewheres in there.



MS. KIRWIN: Would you like to add anything more? I think we should probably –

REV. FINSTER: Well, I could tell you stories, sing you songs and everything – you know poetry, and sing – they ain't no end. I could just make a series, or a volume, you know. Just keep goin'.

MS. KIRWIN: Are you going to be singing at the Library of Congress this afternoon?

REV. FINSTER: Oh, I don't know. If they ask me to, I'll sing. When I was in Philadelphia we was standin' belly to belly and back to back. And these Froggiwog singers or what they call, I forgot the name of 'em, they come down and sung for me, I had a show up there and they had 250 pieces of my art in that show. It was amazin' it was hard to believe. You know, some of the pieces I'd forgot doing. If it hadn't had my name on it I probably wouldn't even have realized I'd done it. And some of 'em, when I done 'em, I was in kind of a spirit to do 'em. And later, two or three years you see 'em and it seem like you try to be embarrassed about it. But really, when you get to readin' it and everything, it'd come back to you "that's right" anyhow. These singers come – they said they was the best singers in Philadelphia. And they heard me yodel on a record. There was so many people there, and several of the pretty ladies asked me to dance with 'em. I told 'em I was sorry, I hadn't never learned to dance yet. Prance around a little you know. So I got down on the floor and sat down watchin' them sing. When they got through then, they said, "We want Howard Finster to yodel." I says, "Me, Yodel? What are you talking about?" And I stop and think, they heard me yodel on a record. And I went on up there, boy, and I yodeled! You know, they're loud, but boy I brought that microphone up and I drowned them out, I'm tellin' you, I tell you, boy, I was louder. [He yodels, ending with a laugh] And that crowd went crazy, boy, they jumped and hollered and cheered, you know when I got up there. They'd never hear a preacher yodel before. Well, that's not so bad for a preacher to yodel, is it? I don't know whether my wife ever heard me yodel. But the people I Philadelphia heard me yodel. I told them singers, you – they're friends of the R.E.M.s [musicians]. They are fans of mine; I made them a cover for their record –

MS. KIRWIN: That's right; didn't you use your garden for a video?

REV. FINSTER: Yes ma'am, they come down there. They was down there a while back, they stayed three or four days. They like the garden. They rest, even work in the garden. They pick up glass and stuff and help clean up places. They was there the other day, workin'. I told somebody, I always wanted just to see stars, there's four stars right there now workin' in my garden.

MS. KIRWIN: You said a while back you painted a Cadillac.

REV. FINSTER: Well, Victor Faccinto is a good friend of mine. He's had me to several shows at Wake Forest University; that there is New Salem University. We're real good pals, we like one another, and he had me to shows. He's an artist, and he has the same agent that I do in New York. So we're together right smart. He was gettin' another car, and he probably couldn't get too much on his Cadillac. Cadillacs are big cars, you know, in every sense of the word, and he was goin' to get him a better car. And he says, "Howard, I'd like to give you that Cadillac, just to drive around the house with." He gave me that Cadillac just to drive around the house, and I think to myself, what'll I do with this car? I'd like to drive this car and everything; it's pretty expensive to operate. And I thinks to myself, I know what I'll do, I'll start puttin' my fans' pictures on it. And I started drawin' pictures all over that car – people like George Washington, Eli Whitney, all them, you know. And after you get two or three thousand dimensions of everybody in the country, you know, all you gotta do to cover a car is just take 'em out there and start slappin' 'em all over it. You put everybody on it in a little while. I haven't had a chance to even work on it in a year – I just got it started, where people could see what I wanted to do. And it's fadin' out right now, what I got done on it. Sun's fadin' it; I need a garage to put it in. And then, when I get through with it, if I ever get through with it, there won't be nothing on it that ain't painted. I paint people right up to one another and there's a little gap between the people, I put little landscapes and moons and stars and flyin' saucers and everything. And then if somebody important comes along and they didn't decide they wanted to be on it to start with, then they decide they want to be on it, then if you want to put 'em on it, you could put them in those little places about like your thumb.

MS. KIRWIN: What about people that you most admire? You mentioned that you've painted Eli Whitney and Elvis –

REV. FINSTER: Oh, Well, a question like that to me is like you would ask me, "Howard, which part of a Ford car do you like?" [Laughs uproariously] See it took all of 'em to make us. It took all of 'em to put these beautiful castles all over this place. In fact, I wouldn't have no difference between 'em – Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, Eli Whitney, the Wright brothers – I wouldn't make no difference in none of 'em. Because it's just like part of this great government. The astronauts you know, I got a picture of him yesterday – the first man that went to the moon. He just one of 'em, yeah, he just one of 'em. With me he registers with George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, the Wright brothers, and he registers with me just like all of the other great men. I think it's a sin to have respect of a person. The Bible said it is. Like if somebody comes in and he's a president or

something, you know, and you have respect to him and give him the high chair and everything. And the little farmer that made that president and all the poor people come in that's payin' his salary and you say, "Y'all go back behind the curtain here," that's a sin. That there's a sin. That's one thing that's wrong with our people here.

MS. KIRWIN: I want to thank you, on behalf of the Archives, for telling me all these great stories about your work, and your garden, and your religion.

REV. FINSTER: Well, I'm the same way about different religions. See I have infidel friends, atheist friends, Buddha friends. I get along with all of 'em. You see, we have a right to our beliefs. And if anybody's honest in their belief, you can't make a black snake out of a rattlesnake, you can't make a religious man out of an infidel, you can't make a Baptist out of a Buddha. You gotta live with 'em. If they ever see where you got something better than they have, and have 'em come over, then that's good. But that's one of the worst things we got today is religious people meddlin' with one another's beliefs. That's not our Constitution. Our Constitution is for people to have their beliefs here, and to be free, and not be scolded and bushed about it. When you go tryin' to proselyte people and get 'em all in your church away from all the other churches, that's wrong. And then when you go to criticizin' everybody but yourself, that's wrong. You just live your religion, and keep it, and let everybody else live theirs. If you don't do that, you're selfish. I think I can convert lots of infidels through the years, you know, livin' with 'em, talkin' with 'em, bein' friends to 'em. I don't condemn anybody for anything. Jesus never did. He said, "My words which I speak, the same shall judge you at the end of the way." You see, if people's livin' right, they have to come before the Judgment but they won't come under condemnation. Well, there's so much, I would never get through?.

MS. KIRWIN: I'd like to come down to Georgia and see your garden and the chapel.

REV. FINSTER: Oh yeah, like to have you some time. You can bring your tape.

MS. KIRWIN: Some time when I get down that way I'd like to have another interview.

REV. FINSTER: OK. It's a good idea to get interviews of all different kinds of people and put them together and see the difference in 'em and see who's right and who's wrong, and decide what you want to be. That's my whole lifetime - decide what am I goin' to be, where am I goin' to go, how's it goin' to be with me? And that's the same way with every young man and woman. They got this lifetime, however long it may be, to say what they want to be, is what they're gonna be what they ought be. Is: what am I gonna be paid? Is what am I goin' to be worth it? You know, everything. They asked me that question, what was the most important thing in the world. And I told them students, I believe understanding was the most important thing in the world. If everybody understood, they'd never have been no wars. If everybody understood everything, they wouldn't have robbed that feller; they wouldn't have robbed that bank if they understood everything. I think insanity and understanding - understanding is the great thing we need, the greatest thing we need is just understanding all of the things like they really are. Like if you go into a pantry and start pickin' up [inaudible word], you might get a hold of rat poison, or anything - you might die just takin'; a little of this and a little of that. You're supposed to understand what you're doin', and understand what you wanta be. And set down and get you a foundation and build on it. You know, a feller started a pump house one time, and he had got it started crooked, and the blocks had been set up. He had me down there and wanted to know what to do about to. I said, Brother, there's nothing to do about that. The thing is tear everything away smack clean and start over. And if you had to start over two or three times, it's better to start over. If you get something that will be a livin' laugh, or a plague - disappointin'. Like a little boy, you know. When he was young, he wanted me to mold his tonsils in the wall. And I molded 'em in. Now he's grown, probably got kids, I bet he wishes he hadn't had 'em molded in, don't you? Of course, I didn't put his name, nobody knows who he is. [Pause] Yeah? That's the way it is.

END OF INTERVIEW

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