

It's more than 1,600 miles from Springfield, Mo, to Los Angeles, where Dave Alvin lives. Despite the distance, the Southwestern Missouri city has influenced his music as a solo artist. The Skeletons served as his touring band in the early 1990s and keyboardist Joe Terry and drummer Bobby Lloyd Hicks were musical cornerstones of the Guilty Men for more than a decade.

They are just one part of the city's rich musical and cultural legacy that writer/filmmaker Dave Hoekstra explores in his entertaining and educational documentary The Center of Nowhere: The Spirit and Sounds of Springfield, Mo.

"Of all the cities that size, I think it's one of the last undiscovered music scenes in America," Hoekstra said during a phone interview from his home in suburban Chicago. "It was a hotbed of music in its way," Alvin said during a film interview, pointing to such artists as Porter Wagoner and Wynn Stewart who had roots in the region. "Springfield was what American music was like before it was centralized in New York, Nashville, or Los Angeles."

Hoekstra traces Springfield's musical history with an informative look at the Ozark Jubilee, a nationally broadcast TV series hosted by Red Foley that aired from 1955 to 1960 and featured such stars as Brenda Lee, Johnny Cash, Carl Perkins, and Patsy Cline. The show brought country music to a national audience. Other segments of the film are devoted to the Skeletons and the band's bassist/producer/studio owner Lou Whitney and singer/songwriter Ronnie Self and songwriter Wayne Carson, who wrote or co-wrote such hits as THE LETTER, NEON RAINBOW, and ALWAYS ON MY MIND.

When Carson used his songwriting royalties to open a recording studio, he did so in Springfield, not Nashville, Hoekstra noted.



Dave Hoekstra and Brenda Lee

The facility became a magnet for young musicians in the area, giving them the chance to learn about the music business and the recording process.

"It's fair to say Wayne's studio resulted in Lou (Whitney) opening his own studio," Hoekstra said. Whitney joked that Springfield was the "Center of Nowhere" because of its location away from major cities. At 'The Studio,' his generic name for his recording center, however, he worked with more than 1,000 local, regional and national acts before his death at 71 in 2014. Performers that Whitney and the Skeletons worked or toured with include Jonathan Richman, Steve Forbert, Wilco, and Syd Straw.

In the film, Joe Terry observed that Springfield had the feel of a 'Midwestern Muscle Shoals' as he and the Skeletons worked with a diverse range of musicians.

"It's not really near anything," Robbie Fulks said of Springfield where he recorded his South Mouth album with the Skeletons in 1997. "Isolation is a pro and con," he added but he felt a sense of fun and camaraderie with the band.

Whitney made an immediate connection with those he worked with on stage and in the studio. "Right off the bat, you felt he could have had a weird religious cult in the Ozarks," Dave Alvin said in recalling Whitney's charisma and engaging personality. "He had the gift of gab."

The Center of Nowhere features interviews with more than two dozen people including Brenda Lee, Skeletons guitarist Donnie Thompson, singer/songwriter Dan Penn, Mike 'Supe' Granda of the Ozark Mountain Daredevils and country music legend Merle Haggard. "I think it's Merle's last interview before a camera," says Hoekstra, who spoke with him about his memories of the Ozark Jubilee about six months before his death in April, 2016.

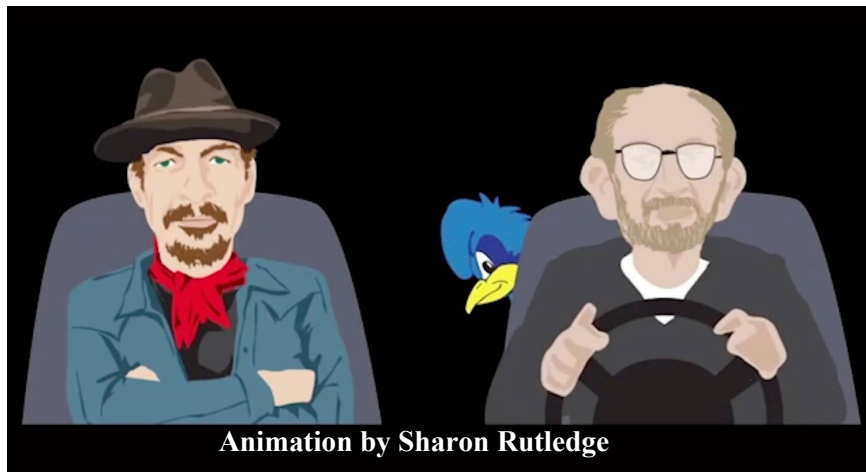
The Center of Nowhere artfully mixes contemporary and archival footage, but also includes the unexpected – close to a dozen animated sequences done by Sharon Rutledge.

"It's a nice surprise for people," Hoekstra said. "We used anima-

tion for stuff we didn't have footage of, such as Ronnie Self." One sequence involves a Skeletons/Alvin tour and a late-night anecdote between Whitney and Alvin on the University of Delaware's mascot.

While Hoekstra, 64, has spent eight years putting the film together and has screened the documentary in several cities to positive reviews, his work isn't complete. He's conducting a fund-raising campaign with the help of Chicago Filmmakers to pay his crew, which includes former 60 Minutes cameraman Tom Vlodak, and to cover the cost of using more than two dozen songs in the film.

"We're hoping to raise \$250,000," he said with the goal of getting the movie available via Netflix, Amazon and other streaming services. Donations can be made at www.songsofanunsungamerica.com/sneakpreviews/ and excerpts of the movie can be seen there as well. —~~AM~~



Dave Alvin: "I really liked the film. It's great to see Lou and Bobby Lloyd alive.

Springfield is a weird little town, but because of where it's located' it doesn't get the recognition it deserves. It's an important music town. Dave Hoekstra did a great job capturing it all - especially Lou Whitney who was quite a character."