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Interview with Peter Rutkoff

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Interview with Professor Peter Rutkoff on November 11, 1998 in his office, Seitz House 10, at Kenyon College conducted by Michelle Demjen and Christina LeStage.

PR=Professor Rutkoff

M =Michelle Demjen

C = Christina LeStage

M: Alright. Just to start off, where did you grow up?

PR: New York City.

M: New York City? Could you describe your family, like the structure of your family, who you lived with?

PR: I was an only child who lived with a widowed mother.

M: OK.

(Momentary pause)

PR: On the West Side of New York.

M: Um, what role did Judaism play in your family?

PR: Uh, religiously not at all. Uh, culturally, I had three out of four European grandparents who spoke Yiddish...

M: OK.

PR: ...so it was a very strong force that way.

M: Were your grandparents very observant?

PR: Uh, none, none of them were observant...

M: OK.

PR: ...but they were all very Jewish. The houses smelled Jewish. The cooking was Jewish. Like I said, they spoke Yiddish.

M: OK. Um, why and when did you come to Kenyon?

PR: 1971 'cause I got a job.

M: OK. Um, and did you raise a family here?

PR: I did. Two children.

M: OK (pause)...Both male? Two sons?

PR: One...uh, Joshua and Rebecca, now 27 and 25.

M: OK. Um...

PR: Raised here, yes.

M: Raised here? Did you have...um, does your wife live here?

PR: Yeah.

M: And is she Jewish?

PR: Yes.

M: Um, did you...did Judaism play a role in your home here with your family?

PR: Yeah, the longer we were here the more we realized that the assumptions of this community were the exact opposite of the ones we each grew up in. That was as follows: From the New York area, our assumption was that everybody was different, and the assumption here was that everybody was the same. So we were always understood by the rest of the world to be not-Jewish, or...Actually, it was sort-of a double-edged sword. I remember one conversation at the bank where the woman said, uh, "Merry Christmas," and I don't know what possessed me, I had one of my kids in my arms, and I said, "Well, we don't celebrate Christmas. We celebrate Channukah. And she looked at me and she said, "Well, you can still have a lollipop for Christmas." In other words, she didn't understand...

M: Yeah.

PR: ...what that meant. Um, and so all of the celebrations in the community, meaning Gambier-Mt.Vernon, were Christian. They just didn't get it, that there were, at least from my experience. By the same token, there was another Jewish fellow in the department, Roy Whortman, we came at the same time. And for the first ten years we were here, everybody, including people at the college, couldn't tell us apart. In other words, they were the two Jewish guys in the history department.

M: OK.

PR: And we don't look alike. So, on the one hand, they all assumed that all the Jews were the same, and on the other hand, they assumed that we weren't here. That was my feeling. So, that's the background for a decision that my wife and I made to do something about giving our kids some kind, something resembling a Jewish identity and a Jewish, um, even a religious training,

although, I mean, she had some, I had none. It seemed to be important given this environment. If I had been in New York, I wouldn't have paid any attention to it.

M: OK. So it was for a sense of identity more than...

PR: Yeah, it was a sense of identity then, you know? Um, all these little things kept happening, like uh, you know, a teacher in fifth grade saying something to my son's class. Oh, "We just got back from Mexico. We had a great time Jewing them down," for... about prices. And couldn't get it, at all understand, that we were upset that she used that kind-of phrase. So, our sense was, live in a hostile environment and they're going to call you whatever they call you. You might as well be it.

M: Yeah.

PR: So...

M: Um, so your children were Bar Mitzvahed and Bat Mitzvahed?

PR: The children were both Bar Mitzvahed and Bar Mitzvahed, Bat Mitzvahed. Yeah, but more importantly, um, because there was no rabbi, and we used a synagogue in Columbus, but that was a real drag to go to weekly, we used Kenyon students. And there were almost always found a Kenyon undergraduate who uh, could speak and read Hebrew. And one guy in particular for three years tutored my son once a week, and worked him through the Torah readings for his Bar Mitzvah. That was quite wonderful. Um, also, because so many Jewish faculty here didn't identify as Jews, we felt at the time the students had very few adults among them that they could turn to. And there was more sort-of low-level annoying anti-Semitism on campus then than I THINK there is now.

M: OK.

PR: Um, just every so often we would have Jewish kids over and have them break fasting, the whole break fast.

M: OK. Um, well how...OK, I guess we already got into the importance of the Jewish community here for you. Um, how would you describe it here in Knox County, the Jewish community, and how it's changed at all?

PR: Well, there's a big...there's a distinction to be made between the Jewish community of Knox County, which is virtually non-existent, as far as I know three or four isolated individuals, and the sort-of ebb and flow of Jewish life at Kenyon.

M: OK.

PR: Which, you know, has gone through probably three or four different stages in the twenty-something years that I have been here. In the beginning, for example, there was a guy in the

religion department, name of Coleman. He's still alive. Do you know about him?

M: Yeah. We're trying to get in contact with him.

PR: Yeah. He's an incredible character, so...Uh, and he had some rabbinic something, function, training, I don't know. But he served as the rabbi. He was very sort-of particular about what he does and how he does it. So, for example, we only met in the basement of the church. And people thought that was really rather demeaning. Uh, and so, when he retired, you know, there was a chance to sort-of create a different kind of Jewish community. But at that moment, of course, there were also people who were still loyal to him. So, and it happened that a woman in the English department came who was married to a rabbi, and a very kind-of liberal, not reform but reconstructionist, I don't know if you know what that means, so that was kind-of interesting. And that's the moment, there was about six years, when I felt like a Jewish community here really flourished. People actually went to services because they were interesting. Um, and he was a, you know, a really good presence for the place. And then she left and so did he, and so it's back down to sort-of nickel-dime stuff again.

M: Yeah.

PR: I don't know if this confirms what you have heard so far, but...

C: Yeah, it does.

PR: Because to me those are the three periods. There was sort-of Coleman's period, then this guy Lenny Gordon's time, and then, since Lenny Gordon, um, of course, my kids and I have gotten older and I am less involved and less interested, so...that's where there's sort-of David Lyn and the people who are having children who pay more attention. But we don't have 20-30 people at services. Um, you know, we would get together and have a party afterwards and...

C: Were those people from Knox County, too, or just almost exclusively...

PR: Well, the nice part was that it was the Kenyon Jewish Community, but the three or four people in the county came pretty regularly then. Um, I think, in fact, he even did a Bar Mitzvah for the Robert whatever his name is, the glass blower?

M: Yeah, Coleman.

PR: Yeah, Bob Coleman. And Lois Hanson and her daughter, Rachel, used to come quite a lot. I think Lois is like the only Jewish person my age. Coleman is a little bit older even though he's got younger children, and then there's this woman, Cleighton...

M: Haven't heard of her.

PR: She's probably in her seventies. And Helen.

C: Yeah, Helen.

PR: So, that's it. It's a pretty rag-tag group. Um, and also, if you think about it, just in terms of the college, while I'm thinking about it, there have been only two Jewish administrators in the twenty-seven years I have been here. One was a woman named Joan Stramonis who was here in the late seventies and early eighties, and now Ron Sharp. That's it.

M: Um, we've only been able to talk to Jewish women. Do you think that there's a difference between the roles of Jewish men and women as far as the role that you play in the different services? Um, so the importance of having...I mean, I'm not sure if it's different in a reformed or reconstructionist service...

PR: I think when Coleman was leading things it was sort of the real old fashioned, European, this is for the guys to do and women don't have any role in it. But since then it's been shared just by non-permission, so I mean, I don't think there's anything gendered about the pattern of Jewish development in Gambier.

M: Oh no, I didn't mean that, but just if you...no?

PR: I mean, for example, Lenny Gordon always did services in gender free language and he used a Torah version which was free from he's and she's.

M: Yeah. I just mean that I think at different services different, um, there are different roles that men play, different readings and different things during the service. That's not...

PR: Yeah, but not, not not not in the services that I went to here ten years ago, so that's as far as I can go.

M: Yeah. OK. Um...

C: Um, as far as your own religious orientation, how would you describe it? Would you say you were reform?

PR: Oh, I would say no, I was eclectically agnostic.

C: OK. I understand. Just for...

PR: I mean, I f--You know, I've studied this stuff all my life...

M: Yeah.

PR: ...in different ways. I am not a theologically oriented person. If you sort-of pin me against a wall and say, "You've gotta choose," I'd probably be a Buddhist. Um, but I'm not interested in those. It's really just not a part of who I am. But there's something really pretty amazing if you go to a synagogue in, say, Florence, and you step into a world and you know people who are

somehow culturally part of the stream that you're part of, been doing this for three, four thousand years. That's pretty awesome. You know. You say a certain prayer with a certain song behind it and even though you don't understand it, to be participating in this continuous flow of human expression, maybe that's as close as I can get to something religious. That's my feeling on it. So...historical, cultural, but don't ask me about big questions.

(Laughter).

PR: Or about...you can, but...

(Laughter)

C: I mean, I was just wondering, because you said before...ah...we were talking about community in New York and you came here and there was no community.

PR: Yes.

C: How was that for you? as we say...How did that...How did that...

PR: Oh, it was really strange, like landing on the moon!

C: How did you adjust to that?

PR: Slowly.

C: Very slowly. OK.

PR: Um, you know, I just couldn't get over the assumptions that people had that this was, that the world was simply, that everybody in the world was the same as they were. And I was absolutely used to exactly the opposite. The assumption when I meet somebody new is that they are different from me. The assumption here was, "Oh, which church do you go to?"

C: Yes.

M: Um, so then I've already talked a little bit about how right now the assumptions other people had about Judaism and the assumption that, you know, "Which church do you go to?" Do you think that has changed at all a little bit? Or do you think the fact that, um, people either have to come to Kenyon or go to Columbus to practice, um,...

PR: Things changed in Mt.Vernon? Knox County?

M: Knox County, I suppose. Centrally Mt.Vernon.

PR: I don't know. I don't think it's changed.

M: Yeah.

PR: I'm so used to the place now that it no longer startles me, so I don't register these kinds of things the same way anymore.

M: Would you say that...ah...could you envision something that if the -----(not clear) were to organize a meeting place outside of Kenyon...

PR: If who were to?

M: Other Jewish people in the area. I mean, not just...

PR: Other who?

M: Other who (laughing)? I mean, there are more. There are like seven or ten families or so that could, I mean, that just something that was outside of Kenyon. Do you think that would have a good effect in being closer relation to other people? I mean, if people see Judaism as something that just goes on at Kenyon, or they go elsewhere, I mean...

PR: No. I don't think it would change. It's instructive to look at, and maybe this is something that you should think about, doing something comparative, if you went to Wooster, for example, which is not much bigger than Mt. Vernon, maybe only 20% bigger, and it's a real farm town in some ways, but it's got a much more pluralistic sociology to it. It's got black families, it's got Hispanic families, and it has a little synagogue. And it's still got twenty-five churches and lots of fundamentalists and a lot, but it, it's just a very different feeling there and, you know, it's like Mt. Vernon is the town that time forgot. You know, the angel flew over it and it stayed the same.

M: So, it's not explainable in any way, it just, the difference...

PR: Yeah. Yeah, it really is. I think Mt. Vernon is just a really weird town.

(Laughter)

PR: I mean, in lots of ways, not just this way. It's very insulate...insular, insulated. Um, you know, there's still people, I'll encounter people who, oh, you know, it doesn't matter who this person is but he'll say things like, a guy my age, that says, "I went to Chicago last year for the first time, and, you know, I couldn't believe the traffic on Blacker Drive," or something like that. And so it's like, this is, you know, this is where they've been born, lived, went to school, and worked. That's the...they go to Myrtle Beach once a year. The experience is very limited. It's surprising.

C: Are you...do you think there are...I mean, I'm not asking you to bash Mt. Vernon people, but would you say that they are open...um...to new experience? Or that they just don't have the opportunity?

PR: I can't. It's too hard to speak of "them" that way, too. I mean, you're studying it...You know, I do have a fairly interesting sense of Mt.Vernon sociology and you know, it's a working-class town and it's relatively poor compared to other places of a similar size, like Marion or Springfield. I don't know if you are from any of these places. Or, or Wooster. So, you know, it's a bad town. It's kind-of dreary. And the rich folks don't play, don't play a significant civic role in it. That's why ---(not understandable). There's very little public giving on the part of the handful of wealthy people in Mt.Vernon to the larger good. You know, you don't see some benefactor providing for the Columbus symphony to come here for a free performance for everybody. That's just not this sort of small town. And other towns this size do that regularly.

M: OK.

PR: Um, again, Wooster is an example. Rubbermaid endowed the high school with a recreational facility, but it has to be used and available for the whole community, swimming pools, basketball courts, theaters, the whole thing. Cooper's not done that for Mt.Vernon. So that's what I think about it, and that's why I say to you, if you're studying this kind of stuff, it would be fun to look at for you, bunch of ---(not understandable).

(Laughter)

M: OK.

PR: Anyway.

M: You've already mentioned just small incidences of anti-Semitism or just not recognizing Judaism as a religion. Um, could you elaborate on that a little bit? Or, ...

PR: Well, I guess the most famous example, um, I can't remember what year. It was when my kids were in like third and fifth grade. When they were both in the elementary school, and the principal was still there, and, uh, they had Christmas celebration every year, and, so I mean, you know, a big Christmas pageant party, whatever it was. And, um, we got together with a bunch of other families and we were the only Jewish people in this group, there was about ten other families, and went to them and said, "Gee, why don't you do it as a winter celebration rather than Christmas? And then, you know, you could do, you know, a Channukah and a Poland and you know, you just do a Pete Seeger kind of Christmas." And, um, and that got them all in a turmoil, and the newspaper, I think ran an ed--, Mt.Vernon news ran an editorial about the Jews in Gambier trying to subvert Christmas.

C+M (together): You wouldn't happen to know what year that was? So we could look it up?

PR (Laughing): I could figure it out...I guess this is the early eighties. (Pause). And the funny punch line to all this is that, so that, the next year, so they made it, they made a winter thing, until my kids got out of the school, and then they went back to doing Christmas. And the attitude of a lot of the Jewish families here was, you know, this is not the thing to fight about. Don't make waves. It just...brings trouble. So I was doing a good ACLU.

(Laughter)

PR: So, so the punchline was, I don't know if this was before or after but it all fits in, and this is one of the teachers saying to one of the kids, "Well, we're doing a song at the Christmas pageant this year, but I understand how you feel, you don't have to do it." So now as the Jew we'll just make you go stand in the corner. And we were saying why don't you have something that anybody can participate in, that's pluralistic. So that their reaction was, "Let's do it the reverse."

C: Um, I just want to ask you, the attitude of Jewish people to say, don't make waves...

PR: Yeah.

C: ...and let's go along with things...

PR: Yeah.

C: ...would you say that that has been a survival tactic for people here? Or would you say that...not that I am saying...

PR: Yeah. Yeah, that, it's, it's a, no, it's a, I mean, not just here, this is a tradition. I mean, this goes back to the German Jews in the 1920's and the 1930's which is assimilate, blend in. You are a Jew at home. It's private. Don't make a big deal about it. Don't make an issue about it. And even, you know, that would it's way into things like the, you know what the ADL is?

C: No.

PR: The Anti-Defamation League. The big Jewish civil rights organization has always been reluctant to publicize issues of defamation, synagogue desecrations, of, you know, tough kids going into graveyards and knocking over the stones, because they think it only brings out more bad attitudes. Mine is exactly the reverse, which is if someone acts like an asshole, you better expose them to public light. And you could see in your own world how this works, right? If you're black or gay or a woman, there's always the same argument, you know, "What do I do about some form of harassment? Suck it up and blend in, or do something about it?" And it's a hard, you know, I'm not saying it's easy, it's a hard decision. Jews been going through this for a long time.

C: OK.

PR: Make sense?

C: Yes, a lot of sense.

M: Um, how did your family, I was gonna say family, but your children, I mean like outside of this specific event at the school, but just in general, growing up Jewish in this area, I mean...

PR: It was great for them! I mean, they really got a sense of themselves and it put them sometimes in positions of discomfort, but they were there anyhow so at least it gave them some, you know, armament. Um, and I mean, a lovely thing happened. For example, my kids then started to bring, once they were Bar Mitzvahed and Bat Mitzvahed and learned Hebrew, they started to raise younger kids, like two of the three Fenigstein kids were tutored by my kids. And so we did, you know, it was a lovely way the tradition kept going and it stayed alive.

M: So, they're still...are they still practicing?

PR: Ahh, I would say no. But they know who they are and where they're from and, you know, like all the rest of us, you come and go with the stuff, depending on where you are in life. You know, you shouldn't confuse--I'm assuming you're not Jewish?

C: Right.

PR: You shouldn't confuse observance with commitment.

M: I know, because...

PR: Well, observance and identity.

M: Yeah. I guess the big question of the interview at the end is always just what does being Jewish mean to you? I mean, I guess we touched on it in different ways, that it's more cultural, or more the heritage behind it.

PR: It means, it means being different. It means being proud of where I'm from. It means being a little bit vigilant. Ah...it means being aware that there is, ah...you know, in ways that you never know and can't anticipate and um, are always surprised at, ah, hostility. It comes up every once in awhile, and part of being Jewish is knowing how to deal with it. And sometimes having your antenna too sharp and then sometimes you make mistakes, and then it goes the other way around. You know, because prejudice always has, in the polite, educated world, is always in codes. And sometimes you don't always read the codes right. Usually you do.

M: The other thing that we usually ask people is that if they have been to Israel. Have you ever been?

PR: No.

M: No? Would you like to? Do you plan on it?

PR: Sure, but no more than lots of other interesting places. I don't connect my identity with Israel.

M: OK. Yeah.

PR: I suppose if I were thirty year older, I would. Like my grandparents used to always say, "I'm not a Zionist, BUT..." I come from the secular, left-wing trade union party Judaism.

M: OK.

PR: Does that mean anything to you?

M: Um-hum.

PR: My parents and grandparents were union people, and socialists, and to them, that was an expression of Jewish ethics, that you should believe in human social equality in the work force.

C: Yeah, so just one little thing. I know you said, I don't want to harp on the religious part, but, um, about the food.

PR: Yeah. What about it?

C: About keeping kosher and all that. I mean, that's not really possible here and I know maybe kosher wasn't important to you religiously, but just not having...

PR: Never has been part of my life.

C: Yeah. But about Jewish food, like you said the house...

PR: I do it symbolically.

C: smelled. I mean, it is different.

PR: Sure, it's Eastern European. Well, Jewish food is really Eastern European food and if you were Jewish from Iran, you know, potato pancakes wouldn't mean anything to you. So, it's really eastern. Most American Jews are ----(not clear) and that's corned beef and borscht and potato pancakes.

C: Yeah, because I was just wondering because there's not really a grocery store around here.

PR: No, but Columbus actually has a pretty nice one. Um, and so it's not as many. Over the last fifteen years, that's easy. That's not hard.

C: It's getting better.

PR: Yeah. Well, see, also, I mean the Columbus Jewish community is pretty substantial. Even though it's small in numbers, it's got six synagogues and it's a prosperous community and it's got lots of diversity and every branch of the family has some representation. Um, so that's not, you know...

M: Um, just is there anything else that we haven't brought out that you'd like to add or...

PR: Yeah. I really, I really, what are you, what are you after?

M: What are we after? Um, just give people a chance to just talk about what they'd like to teach the community about being Jewish and what it's like to be Jewish here, and also to other Jewish people in the area.

PR: I know, but what's the larger...

M: The larger? Um, we're studying many different groups in Knox County, the Hispanic community...

PR: The who?

M: Hispanic? There's actually quite a few.

PR: Really?

M: Yeah.

PR: You gonna put any Phillipinos on it?

M: Um, I don't think they did. Everyone's from Costa Rica, Mexico, um, El Salvador.

PR: I mean, obviously not lately the, you know, the least typical part of Knox County is Amish.

M: Yeah.

C: We're doing Amish.

M: Yeah. We're doing the Amish as well. And the people who trace their roots back to Native Americans and the African-American community.

PR: Yeah. Well, those should be fun. What's the final project going to be?

M: Ah, do you know about the Looking Glass section of the Mt. Vernon News? It comes out once a year and it's just focusing on the identity of this area and the history as well and they are going to give us eight pages each, for each group, to put it into The Looking Glass.

PR: Great. So it's going to be very public.

M: Very public. And we're hoping to also run it in the Collegian and then also turn it into basically a newsletter.

PR: You know what you should do. I don't know how much time you have, but you should talk to some of our kids.

M: Yeah. We've talked to Hannah Sacks and Zeva Levine.

PR: Ah, talk to David Fennigstein. Do you know him?

M: Un-uh.

PR: He's a graduate of Oberlin but he's back here doing, ah, finishing his second undergraduate degree in physics.

M: OK.

PR: What I meant was, talk to the kids of my, or our, generation of parents.

C+M (together): OK.

PR: Because you can get their perspective on the story I just told you.

M: OK. That's a good idea.

PR: I mean, you could talk to my kids, too, but that's a long distance phone call. David's here.

C: Right. Um, yeah, so the project kind of, like I was talking with Professor Dean-Otting the other day and I was trying to say that um, we don't, we're not trying, we're trying to focus just on what it means to be Jewish in this county and I mean, whatever comes out of that, be that um, the pluses, the negatives, and what it is here, simply, and letting other people...we want...the idea is not for us to impose...we're trying to impose as little as we can on that and let the voices come out. That's all the idea is.

PR: When you're through, can I see it? That would be fun. That's a great idea. Now, I did have a student, if I can find it, I'll send it to you, who did a really nice term paper about ten years ago on Jews at Kenyon.

M: Oh, OK.

C: Yeah.

M: That'd be really neat.

PR: And sort of the anti-Semitism that's not too far under the surface here. I don't know if you're dealing with that.

C: Well we are, because that's an element. I mean, we don't want to focus on that...

PR: Because I mean, you know, it's a weird thing for me, and it always has been, to march at public collegiate processional events under the banner of the Episcopal church...

(Break in tape to flip sides)

PR: ...all the symbols, and the ritual upon ritual. And I don't know how you, you know...it used to be that I would get kids come talk to me about sort-of feelings of anti-Semitism that they felt were extant in the student body. I don't know if that's true anymore. I don't wanna mess around with it.

C: About the just being ignored. Would you say that's a form of anti-Semitism from your perspective?

PR: Well, visibility is always an up shoot of minority people. "How come you forgot to take me into account? Again?" And sometimes the little things, you know, like I remember, this was a long time ago, one of my best honor students, a big shot lawyer now in New York, called Nancy Howell, she comes, she was a senior, she said, "You'll never guess what happened." I said, "What?" She said, "Well, we got invited to the president's house for Sunday, Sunday brunch. It was some Jewish holiday and they served us, you know, ham and eggs."

M: No.

PR: Yeah. Nobody meant anything by it.

M: No.

PR: But they also never thought about it.

M: No.

PR: Now, I'll eat that stuff all the time. Except I'll also find I'm getting offended if it's served to me in the wrong circumstances.

C: Yeah. Of course.

PR: You see what I am saying? Maybe that's not fair, so I don't make a big deal about it, at least not all the time. That's not one of the places I get publicly annoyed. Calendars, holidays, all that stuff...

C: Yeah.

PR: College Christmas trees.

M: Um-hum.

C: All that stuff.

PR: Yeah.

C: Um, would you say for students' academic-social level, did you ever hear anything about them feeling lost?

PR: Yes. Yes. Absolutely. Um, they ---(not clear) and sometimes there would be an actual sense of hostility. Things like, you know, walking away from a conversation and all of a sudden there's something about "Jewish," and they are suddenly going, "Oh." And they suddenly realized these people who they thought were their friends had suddenly just identified them in a way that's uncomfortable. This is a long time ago. You know, I'm not sure, I don't know if this exists at all anymore. On the other hand, Kenyon had more Jewish students here twenty, twenty-five years ago as a portion of the student body than I think it does today.

M: Really?

PR: Yeah.

M: We're trying to separate Kenyon, but you can't. I mean, because the main point of this project was to, especially for people at Kenyon, to realize more about the area and also for people to think about different groups around from outside of Kenyon. Because oh yeah, of course there are black students at Kenyon and Jewish students, but realizing there are people living with them as well.

PR: Well, there's lots more blacks in Knox County than there are Jews. And there's lots more Jews at Kenyon than there are blacks. That's something to play around with. And each one is mutually invisible to the other.

M: Do you think something it would be beneficial to...I mean, something like this project, just continuing that, bringing, like creating a relationship between the different minority groups.

PR: You know, I used to think so. I'm not sure anymore. We used to have a counsel here that we sort-of relevant, of non-majority folks to get together and talk about things and maybe we are even resurrecting it, but I'm not sure. The needs are also so very different.

M: Well, that's about it.

PR: I'm cool. But stay in touch, I'd like to see what you do. It was fun talking to you.

C: Thank you.

M: Thanks.

END OF TAPE