

Interviewee: Kathy Rote

Interviewer: Norie Guthrie

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Interview Transcript

Norie Guthrie: My name is Norie Guthrie from the Woods and Research Center Fondren Library at Rice University. I am interviewing Kathy Rote. Today is January 16th, 2019. This is part of the Huston Folk Music Archive oral history project. Can you tell me about your early life?

Kathy Rote: Well, yeah, ah, starting with the music part I guess it was '62. I was 12 years old and, ah, folk music just exploded all across the country I suppose. It was *Hootenanny* on TV and, ah, "Suddenly" instead of the "Purple People Eater" and things us youngsters were listening to. They were playing, ah, traditional music on the radio and, ah, made a big impression on me so, I started to learn guitar as fast as I could and try to play the songs I was hearing that really just, ah, they touched me more than other music had. And, about the first thing I can remember there was to do, was to go to the University of Houston where Carolyn Terry was, at the time that she hosted a show, a folk show, and, ah, her best friend, ah, Pete Wheeler and his wife Ann, would get a room every Friday night. Um, one of the classrooms they'd reserve that we could all come and, um, share songs and play round robin songs and pretty much everybody was there but they weren't famous yet. So, ah, Don Sanders and Guy and Carolyn Terry of course and, and Ed Badaux and Davy Jones and Gary White. Um, I was the youngest one being 12 or 13. They were all, you know, like grown up in my eyes maybe 18 or 19 at least. Had, ah, had a car, could go when they wanted to and I got to come, ah, if I made good grades and didn't get in trouble my dad would bring me. And, I just had to be home by 11:00 though, so. That was where we all pretty much went to sing thanks to Pete Wheeler, who taught um folklore at the U of A and was quite a focal artist and a musician. He was into child ballads and songs from the UK and, ah, the more people came, the more kind of music we'd be exposed to. Everything from old timey to blues, ah, whatever that person was trying to learn but we were all real novices. And, ah, other than the Jester where you had to be old enough to get in or have a chaperone, there were just a few, ah, kind of café coffee house places to go play and, and hear music and they were pretty rowdy, I mean there were lots of eating and drinking going on and people trying to connect and talking and visiting. So, that, ah, pretty much leads us up to Sand Mountain. And before Sand Mountain it was wherever somebody could get a, a church or a classroom and put out the word that there'd be a hootenanny or a song night and – well at the Lomax's house of course and at the Jewish Community Center. John Lomax, Jr. would have –about once a month he would get some kind of folk music night together and he would bring, you know, real headliners from New York City and Boston and very exciting to go and hear them and once in a while if you really worked hard you got to open for one of those people. So, we were all waiting for a venue where you would really have to learn, really have to stretch and do your best and have an audience that came to hear your music. If not you specifically they were still coming to hear, ah, traditional

musicians and songwriters and sit down and be quiet and drink their coffee and enjoy the night. So that was thanks to John Carrick and, and his mom, Momma C. that we had that place.

Norie Guthrie: So, were you, um, were you born in Houston?

Kathy Rote: Ah, no, I was born in McAllen.

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

Kathy Rote: I had polio a few months later so, my folks got me to Houston pretty quickly 'cause that was the closest place with a children's hospital. So, I pretty much grew up in Houston from, from a baby on upward.

Norie Guthrie: Okay. So you, you kind of covered a lot. Um, with that first question, I was wondering if we could kind of tease that out a little bit more.

Kathy Rote: Sure.

Norie Guthrie: Some of the different bits. Okay. So, um, how did you kind of ended up discovering that there were these, um, events at UH and, and kind of how the, like, local folk scene was. How did you – how did that kind of – who, who introduced you to that?

Kathy Rote: Well, ah, we, we would go to the local music store, which in those days was H&H Music downtown, was the one that really had guitars and strings and stuff. So, just asking a question there, are there other people that are trying to learn these, you know, Pete Seeger songs and all and, ah, they would usually have a poster that someone had put out that there was going to be a song night at the Lomax's house or wherever so, I tried to get to each and every one.

Norie Guthrie: Wow, that's very cool. So what were, um, let's start with the Lomax's. So, what, what was their house like? What, what were those events like?

Kathy Rote: Well, ah, well their house it, it, um, it always struck me as being like the Walton's house, on the TV show was, you know, the huge warm kitchen with room for lots of people to be there. And if the weather was bad, we'd usually be gathered there or, or in the living room and in the better weather, ah, sit out on the backyard and it was always a pot luck and they called it dinner on the grounds. And, I know now that, ah, a lot of that food that came was really important to a lot of the musicians who, you know, often just didn't even have a whole dollar in their pocket but were really trying. And, so many fine people came to their house, musicians and friends of and like that who made an effort to make it just really personal and, ah, also very exciting because you never knew who you would find at their house. The whole upstairs of it, which was huge or seemed so to me, was reel to reel recordings and, ah, interviews that both and John and, ah, Lomax, Jr. and then senior had been collecting American folk music and, ah, so many other kinds of music tracing it from, from England or Ireland or Scotland. You know, how a song would evolve. And so John would stand out. He just sa, he just sang acapella. He didn't play an instrument and he would tell us about some type of song, like railroad songs and, ah, some of the ones that came from, from the British Isles and how they had kind of mutated into an

American version and the same song that was hundreds and hundreds of years old. He had all that knowledge and lore and the history of United States, what was happening at that time. He'd stand up and talk about it and then he would sing a song acapella and is, I can't tell you how powerful that was.

Norie Guthrie: No, I, I can imagine. I've heard the recordings.

Kathy Rote: Oh, sure.

Norie Guthrie: He has a very, like, kind of strong deep voice.

Kathy Rote: Yeah, no, the great big voice and, I mean, I'm, I'm sure all of us from the Houston music crew, we thought we had discovered this, you know, wonderful thing called American traditional music but, that had been going on at the Lomax's house for years and years and, uh, people who, earlier people, you know, who had been performing the music even though there weren't that many venues for it, would come there and stay a week, a month, whatever and get songs from his collections. Now, if I went over there on a Friday night then, you know, Libba Cotten could be sitting there or Peggy Seeger and Ewan MacColl. And, ah, being able to meet those people who were just such balladeers, you know, true, true bards, no ego there. Just playing their music from such love. I think that, you know, kept me enamoured, I wouldn't have strayed off no matter what.

Norie Guthrie: Um, can you talk about performing at the Jewish Community Center?

Kathy Rote: Yeah, I think I was mostly an audience, ah, for most of that because these were headliners that were a bit more professional than any of us had yet become and, um, I did open a few times though and we had a few nights that John hosted a local talent. It was always an enthusiastic place. All the members and all their friends, Jewish or otherwise, were there and, ah, very sit down, very respectful and, and I'm, I just remember people bringing such great brownies and pie and cake and it was always a big food affair for sure. And, ah, –

Norie Guthrie: That's cool.

Kathy Rote: – and being – the experience of being there too, singing to a room full of people who actually came to sit down and hear ya, it was, you know, something else.

Norie Guthrie: Um, did you also hang out in the back room there at all?

Kathy Rote: In the back room of Sand Mountain?

Norie Guthrie: At, at, at the JCC I heard there's kind of an area where, um, Ed Badeaux would give, um, guitar lessons?

Kathy Rote: Right. Well, he gave, he hosted a song circle day that usually included helpin' the rest of us with our guitar. Um, I believe that's around Sunday afternoons. That was one of the classrooms or meeting rooms there at the JCC and, uh, oh, it'd go about two hours. Go round

until we learned as many songs as, as we knew to sing and, uh, again, there'd be different people who might be able to help you out if you were learnin' a song but couldn't quite play part of it maybe they were a little bit better, so a lot of us learned our guitar work there, for sure. And Ed, uh, he'd come from New York. My mom called him a beatnik 'cause he had been around the music scene before there, before it was called folk and all that. There in New York City, and I think he had come to Houston the same as Peter Gardner did because of the Lomax Family being there and of all the interest starting to generate around the music collection again and, uh, I know Ed was the editor and writer for Sing Out! magazine and he came there, uh, I think just to have a new exposure to, um, different players and things like that. He was an accomplished guitar player and singer and knew a lot of folklore, performed a lot of real traditional songs. And he gave lessons at his house formally, so, I went once a week to take a real guitar lesson.

Norie Guthrie: Oh, okay. What was, and what was he like as a person?

Kathy Rote: Oh, he was kinda crusty. Um, I think, it's hard to know, you know, when you're 13 or 14 everybody seems like they're really old. He was probably about 37 or 38 at the time, I guess and, uh, he was a nice man. You know? Really kind, uh, helpful guy. But he wasn't a talkative person or a showman in that way. You know? He didn't, uh, he wasn't an extrovert.

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

Kathy Rote: That I remember.

Norie Guthrie: Um, and you also mentioned some other places that were not The Jester that you said were kinda rowdy. Do you remember the names of those places?

Kathy Rote: One was referred to as the Bird and I think it had a bigger name. The Mockingbird or something. I remember goin' there several times for ootenanny night and bein' kinda overwhelmed. And let's see, I don't remember it, I just, impression is they were cafés that served coffee and pastries and had a little stage and, you know, they weren't really aiming to be a folk venue. It was just people like Don Sanders would say hey, can I play here? And they would say okay.

Norie Guthrie: Um, so, I guess maybe if we could, before kinda starting with Sand Mountain, um, Coffee House, 'cause I know that was an important time for you, um, well, actually let's, let's move forward and we can go to, um, to talk a little bit about "The Sampler." Um, so gosh, you were on it quite a few times throughout, like, fall of '65 through the winter of '66.

Kathy Rote: Uh huh.

Norie Guthrie: And, um, can you kinda just talk about, um, kinda different aspects of that experience, like, the house was like, what Peter was like. Um, your feelings about being on the radio at such a young age.

Kathy Rote: Oh yeah. I was usually mortified is what I remember. But, uh, their, their house was one of those great old craftsman house with the, you know, the tongue-in-groove plank floors

and all the woodwork and fireplaces and Peter would set up his radio equipment at a great big table in the dining room and, uh, we'd all sit around as well as we could fit in and other people would move on out into the living room. They always had lots of tables and chairs. Everybody, usually an audience was there to listen to the show as well and he'd just kinda go round robin with, with all of us that were so into playin' at the time and give us each a chance to play, two or three people per night. And, uh, we'd sit around the table there with our instruments and he would host it. And, uh, he was just one of the, I don't know, the warmest people that I've ever met. Uh, not an extrovert again but a very personable sweet-hearted guy who made everyone feel like, you know, their music mattered.

Norie Guthrie: That's really nice. That's really nice.

Kathy Rote: I mean, I mean, most of the songs I remember any of us doing except Don Sanders who was the only one who'd really written his own songs here, uh, the things on the record albums that would come out, you know, you'd wait and a certain album would, would be comin' out. You'd be so excited, a Tom Rush album or, or somethin' like that and we'd all get together at each other's houses and try to learn the songs on it and play 'em over and over and over again and then practice all week and learning two or three from, oh, it could be Judy Collins or, who knows, you know? And, uh, go into the house there to play that song on Peter's show, that just seemed like the, the ultimate music thing a person could do at the time

Norie Guthrie: Did those, um, you know, the show would only, there'd only be, like, a, like, it started out as the show would only, it would only be, like, it started out as a 30-minute show and then it became an hour long show. Um, how long would you guys play together throughout the night?

Kathy Rote: Well, usually I remember people getting there as much as an hour early, uh, some bringin' a few snacks and things, settin', helpin' to set up tables and chairs. And we might warm up for 20 or 30 minutes in the backyard or in the bathroom or somewhere, try to get tuned up and, um, ready to go.

Norie Guthrie: And then I assume that you guys would play until, you know, deep into the night, I guess?

Kathy Rote: Well, I think so. I mean, the radio show part of it was a set amount of time and then when it was over, um, I'm sure the older gang stayed around later. Uh, I usually had to be home, uh, if my dad would wait out front or, uh, somebody, usually Carolyn Terry, god bless her, she drove me clear out to Hobby Airport so many times, and Frank Davis, so I would be home in time. But I'm sure they stayed around 'til later, had a few beers.

Norie Guthrie: Um, okay. Well, cool. Um, it's really nice to know how that was set up because, you know, I can, you can hear the audio but you don't really know how it's being made on the other side and you're the first person who's given, like, some real, like, detailed description.

Kathy Rote: It was great fun.

Norie Guthrie: Um, okay. So, I guess let's move on to, um, Sand Mountain Coffee House. I know that one was really important to you.

Kathy Rote: Oh, to everybody I'm sure. You know, to meet people in different music communities and folk festivals and whatnot and Texas comes up, everybody thinks the whole deal started in Austin and that's where everyone came from, *Austin City Limits*. They just kinda magically, but years before there was even a venue there in Austin, um, it was happening at Houston and Sand Mountain was the main, uh, focus for everyone. You know, people came, like, Townes and Jerry Jeff and Janis Joplin, came from a long way away 'cause they had heard there was this coffee house that actually wanted, you know, people to come and play and, uh, so I remember it, it opening, um, John Carrick was a few years older than I was and we had a little musical crew of teenagers that we went to each other's houses too and so excited that he and Mama C had actually made this happen in this old house that's gonna be a real stage and sound system and just, the bee's knees. You know, so we were there it wasn't the murals that you see in later pictures, uh, but the walls were just kinda blank. So, all of us teeny boppers were there paintin' our very best, whatever we could paint on the wall and tryin' to make it into a, a nifty coffee house. It'd been a dance space, I think, before and then, uh, then the opening night, I was one of the people playin' that night. The room was full and I was so scared. I sat on a chair, oh my god, it was folding chair, is, all we had were those rickety wooden kinda folding chairs and I was tryin' to sit down and get my guitar and, and not, you know, make too much noise and I sat on the edge of it and it tipped over and I sat on my butt on the floor so fast. Uh, but, uh, I managed to do my set there and after that, uh, just more and more people were attracted to come to Sand Mountain so there got to be music more nights a week 'til it was every night but Monday night was Mama C's night off 'cause she sat there at the door every night 'til closing takin' money and, you know, overseeing everything. And most of us also just helped out 'cause we would've wanted to no matter what but it was kind of a little job. I'd take a turn in the kitchen, uh, for a couple hours whether that was washing dishes or, uh, puttin' on more coffee or waitin' tables. Things like that. That was kinda Townes's first job there at Sand Mountain was he lived upstairs and he was sort of the janitor, night watchman and come down before the, the place opened and put all the chairs down off the tables and, uh, get the kitchen ready to go. Stuff like that. So, we all took a turn and it was a local, even though people came, you know, from big cities and recording artists, it was very much a local venue where people grew up playin' the music that they ended up playin', uh, some of us for, you know, as long as we did. Some more for their life's passion and career. But that was home.

Norie Guthrie: Um, do you wanna, can you still remember what it looked like on the inside?

Kathy Rote: Oh yeah. Um, you went in a front door when it was a house, I guess that'd been a foyer. So, um, the little table for takin' the money was right there and then off to the left of that was a room maybe 10' by 11' but, you know, a small room and it was nice, nice and dark and smoky, you know, very exotic to someone like me from the suburbs. And people brought their pictures, uh, hung 'em on the walls to sell. And behind that part of the entrance was the famous staff room where it was mainly used to tune up and sometimes you could have a little private concert back there too. And the restrooms. Then the main room, uh, opened into, that little area opened down to the big main room which was a good sized venue with a stage and the tables and chairs, uh, kitchen behind that and, uh, upstairs was kinda converted into a little apartment.

Mama C used a room up there to keep her books and sometimes she'd sleep over 'cause it was a long drive home for her. And then it became an apartment where different people uh, stayed and brought their music to town and developed their music, for sure. And, uh, we often all would be up there visiting, you know, drinkin' coffee and with the Artie Traum *The Art of Folk Guitar* book just pouring over that like crazy tryin' to learn how to fingerpick really well. It was, um, it was like any other club. There was kinda night lighting. The room was dark but still well lit so the stage was better lit. The floors were hard wood and it was just an old, old Houston house, you know, brick house.

Norie Guthrie: Okay, cool. Um, so I guess, I think that it might be kind of interesting for kinda you to talk about some of the different kind of major players or characters. You've talked about, um, uh, Peter Gardner and Ed Badaux and, um, John, uh, Lomax, Jr., could you talk about other people in the scene that you, um, either kinda knew or you kinda watched from afar that you found were interesting that made an impression on you?

Kathy Rote: Uh, well oldest and dearest is John Carrick and, uh, we went around a lot together before he joined the Marines and, uh, he was always real good to me even though he was several years older and there were lots of exciting parties for, for guys like him to go to. He, he drove me to and from lots of stuff and we sat down and, and learned songs. He was an accomplished player by then 'cause he had been in a rock and roll band in high school. So, he was used to bein' on the stage and wasn't the least bit shy either. And, uh, he was encouraging to everybody else who was playin' whether they were just learning or, uh, really good. He wasn't, uh, selfish with any venues or, or jobs he had. He'd always tell ya, come on down you know I'm playin' and you'd get up and do a spot too. So, there was him. And, um, Carolyn Terry I think stands out the most. She was, uh, a person who not only did her radio show and she was always there early to help with whatever venue even if she was just comin' to hear the music that night. She would be there settin' up chairs and talkin' to people, really hosting whatever went on. And, uh, we hung out quite a bit. She was a character for sure. Um, she drove this old Metropolitan car. Do you know what they were like?

Norie Guthrie: No, I don't.

Kathy Rote: Well they, they were the tiniest, you know, true car, real car on the road. It kinda looked like the car that mini mouse drove in.

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

Kathy Rote: Little tiny thing. The wheels were about, you know, maybe 14 inches in diameter and Carolyn was pretty close to 6 feet tall, tall and lanky. And I was 4'8" so we were a pair. And then we would get into this little car and she was so tall that the top of her head, she was a flaming red head too, would be touchin', you know, the, the ceiling of her car and we would go to wherever, you know, kind of folk festival or thing was happening and, uh, she had a, a great voice. She excelled, you know, doin' songs with a whole lot of range. She was a soprano and that just, just funny as hell. I don't know how I can explain how goofy this woman could be but, as close as I could come to, to the personality might be Carol Burnett. You never knew what Carolyn was gonna do or say but it would be genuine from the heart and, uh, not what anyone

was expecting either. So she was a school teacher. Kids were, just thought she hung the moon. And, I can't really remember goin' out for any kind of musical event that Carolyn Terry wasn't there.

Norie Guthrie: Yeah, I'm, I'm really sad that I wasn't able to connect with her before she passed.

Kathy Rote: Yeah. Yeah, 'cause she stayed there in Houston. Did music as long as there was any place to do it, I think.

Norie Guthrie: Right.

Kathy Rote: And, uh, my other BFF as they call 'em now, was Susie Spaw, who later became Guy Clark's wife, Susan Clark and, uh, she was a few years older but we were two high school girls who loved to go to the junk shops, you know, down on, uh, oh what, where was the long strip of places with Goodwill stores and you could find anything from a record album to a, a cowboy shirt. West Gray, probably Westheimer yeah.

Norie Guthrie: Westheimer or West Gray. I can see that it could be at either place.

Kathy Rote: Yeah. That was really fun. We'd go along there and try to find glad rags to wear out to play and sing and hopefully look like Joni Mitchell then. And, uh, she would often be at home alone and, you know, she was pregnant too, first baby and a young woman. So she would be there and I would go stay at her house over the weekend if Guy was out playin' somewhere. And we would have a great time colorin' each other's hair. We'd do hers blonde. She was a beautiful blonde anyway, but, you know, the, the highlight stuff and we'd do my auburn. And, uh, just do girl stuff, you know, talk about the various guys on the scene and, uh, I think of all the female musicians I knew there, Susie was and probably, and still is for that matter, one of the most eloquent musicians. She was real well schooled, a real musician. The rest of us couldn't read a note of music but Susie could. She was very accomplished even as a teenager and had this lovely sweet singing voice. Lots of texture and character to it. And when she came to sing everybody just, total silence even if people were having fun in the corner talkin' and all, 'cause she was just so sweet and so pretty. So, I spent a lot of time at the Clark's house that way and, um, most of the rest of my buddies were from Peter Gardner's efforts and, and Mr. Lomax's to some extend and Ed's, they would try to make, uh, little concert tours or routes that people could go and do a house concert of some kind and, uh, meet a new audience and move the musicians around, so to speak. So, little towns from Houston, like Navasota, College Station, uh, went to Sul Ross one time, even way out there but usually not that far, Baytown. And might played at JCC or at somebody's house or whatever that, people in that town that loved the music, whatever they had to invite people to and so we would go out two by two and, uh, do a night's concert shared between two people. And, uh, I did that with Guy and Carolyn, of course, and Don and mostly with Townes. I guess, people liked a combination 'cause we were nice, uh, what would you call it? Just, uh, very different sorts of musicians.

Norie Guthrie: Right.

Kathy Rote: Nothing similar about what we did, or said or how we looked and, uh, so I got to know him. So great, drivin' along the road talkin' with him. And, uh, we talked about all kinds of stuff, you know, philosophy and life, how weird people are. Things like that. He was a real gentleman. Always, always aware of other people and how they felt. He was one of the few people that I knew that didn't withdraw, you know, if somebody was upset or hurting or defeated, he didn't pull away from people, you know, that had scary things about them.

Norie Guthrie: That that makes sense.

Kathy Rote: Yeah.

Norie Guthrie: That makes sense. You've talked a little bit about, um, Don Sanders.

Kathy Rote: Yeah.

Norie Guthrie: Yeah. Could you go into a little bit more detail about him as a young man?

Kathy Rote: Sure. He had the crush on my big sister. They went to high school together and that's how I first met Don was he came out to pick up my sister and I had this old Sears Robuck guitar that somebody gave me to try and learn to play and he, you know, spotted that right away and, and said what ya doin' there, you know? And invited me to some of the early efforts to get folk music goin' in town, uh, often over at his house and, uh, you know, he looked, up until, you know, he passed away recently, had a few lines but he looked exactly the same year after year. He was an elf.

Norie Guthrie: I have referred to him in exactly the same way.

Kathy Rote: Yeah. Yeah. He was a lively person and, and a bright one and he was the first person to sit down and say well, I can write a song and, uh, gosh his songs were so unique. He didn't, uh, try to sound like anyone else or, he just, uh, let her come out however it did. And I was so impressed by that, uh, would often, he was one of the people my mom and dad approved of so I got to go to his house 'cause even though he had a long blonde ponytail which my mom was sure all communists had, uh, he was, he was, he knew how to be around your parents, for sure. You know? And he also was a totally trustworthy, great guy but, uh, we used to go hang out at this place near Sand Mountain called the One's a Meal, it's open all night and for a dollar you could get a basket of terribly greasy food, but it was great. It was a big old place. I don't know how many tables it held. Just noisy, it was usually full of U of H students and especially after a game. And we just kinda had our own resident table. Don lived near there as did Guy and Carolyn and a bunch of us so if you wanted to find anyone you went down to One's a Meal and sat at that table for a while and pretty soon everybody'd come in or out and we'd ask him something. Nobody had cellphones. Don held court there quite a bit. You know? He was a great favorite with all the waitresses who otherwise were pretty crusty and sick of young people, you know, demanding this and wantin' that and runnin' your legs off. Oh, they loved Donnie Joe. You can imagine.

Norie Guthrie: Can you talk a little bit about, uh, since you've spent a lot of time at his home, uh, about Guy Clark.

Kathy Rote: Well, I mean, um, when I knew him he hadn't written any songs. He wasn't famous in any way. And, um, he wanted to be, you know, he was really focused on that more than anybody I've met since, I think. Um, he was pretty aloof, um, to me especially 'cause I was so much younger and I walked on crutches and braces and I think he was one of those people that gets real uncomfortable around anyone disabled or sick. So he didn't make a lot of effort to get to know me and I felt pretty shy around him as well 'cause he was just an instant hit with people even when he could hardly sing a note in the bucket or play guitar worth a damn. He just kinda commanded a room. When he came in a room, people just deferred to him instantly. You know? Uh, including myself. So, um, I went a couple of times out on one of those little tours to play at a place at a house concert and I just remember, you know, enjoying seeing him play and sing. Uh, didn't have a lot of connection with him.

Norie Guthrie: And that, I, I've read the same kind of thing, that, yeah, there could be some distance. That makes sense.

Kathy Rote: He put himself out for people that were, um, really involved in the whole folk music scene.

Norie Guthrie: Right.

Kathy Rote: Kinda had a bad habit of ignoring waitresses and people who helped to put on the show that night and brought the coffee. He didn't tend to get to know them very much.

Norie Guthrie: I have read that he ended up meeting Townes at one of Peter Gardner's events at his home.

Kathy Rote: Oh sure, yeah.

Norie Guthrie: Okay. Um, I wasn't sure if you were around for anything like that 'cause it seems like maybe Townes started to play around October or November of '65.

Kathy Rote: Yeah, I, I met him first, I remember him coming into Sand Mountain, uh, as a new musician lookin' for somewhere to play, lookin' to see what was goin' on.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Kathy Rote: And, uh, talkin' with Mama C and, uh, it was a open mic night so he got up and played and we were so loud you know, um, and I'm sure he was at almost all the radio nights at Peter's house. Everybody was. That was just the place to be. And, uh, whether Guy met him there or at Sand Mountain open mic, I don't really know.

Norie Guthrie: Right.

Kathy Rote: But it was probably right in that week.

Norie Guthrie: Yeah. That, that makes sense. And then did you, um, did you know that in the very beginning he didn't bill himself as Towns. He went as John?

Kathy Rote: Yeah. Yeah. I hadn't thought of that for a long time. I don't know why.

Norie Guthrie: Yeah he, um, I didn't know that but, um, in one of those, uh, Peter Gardner's recordings someone starts talking about him and refers to him as John who plays that KKK, or the karate one of those talking blues songs that he did.

Kathy Rote: Yeah.

Norie Guthrie: And, um, refers to that and then, um, so then I started I was, like, oh, they're, they're talking about Townes but they're calling him John and then I looked up and I could find in the *Chronicle* that there are a few ads of him playing at the Jester as, as John Van Zandt.

Kathy Rote: Huh.

Norie Guthrie: Yeah.

Kathy Rote: I wonder if Townes was his middle name and that just sounded better.

Norie Guthrie: That's, yeah, no. I, I think, yeah, I think he, he is a John Townes Van Zandt so yeah, I, I think yeah, Townes sound a lot cooler than, than John.

Kathy Rote: Yeah, there were lots of Johns.

Norie Guthrie: Yeah. Um –

Kathy Rote: Sure.

Norie Guthrie: Was there anybody else that you would like to, um, talk about from that time period?

Kathy Rote: Well, let's see. No. I mostly remember the people that I mentioned there. Those were the people that I was runnin' around with and saw.

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

Kathy Rote: I can tell ya a sweet story about Townes though if there's time.

Norie Guthrie: Yeah of course.

Kathy Rote: Typical story. Um, we've gone to Baytown to play a house concert and came back with this terrible fog on the freeway. It was just, open the door and kinda find your way. So we

made it back into Houston. I was supposed to spend the night that night at Susie Spaw's and, uh, their light was out and we didn't know where everybody went so we went to the One's a Meal of course. And it was, oh it was rowdy horrible night. It was a game night. Guys were screamin', yellin', and there was a waitress there. She was quite old, probably had to be in her mid 70s. Anyway, and it was, you know, 1:00 in the morning. It was really late. And she just looked more exhausted than anyone I've ever seen and, uh, got finally over to our table and apologized and that. We ordered coffee and, uh, Townes looked up and he said now, are you okay, ma'am. And she said oh, I'm all right, son, I'm just tired. I'm just tired. He said well you sit down here and I'll go over there and get that coffee, uh, you just take a little break. And there was some students yellin', hey doll face, you know, somewhere over here and, uh, he, he got them some coffee too. He brought us all coffee from the tray, you know, they used to have sittin' out, a service tray. And this lady was just sitting there, I'm sure she was embarrassed and worried that, you know, the owner might be lookin' out wonderin' what she was doin'. Then she was just too tired, I think, to go much further. He sat down and he said now, what's somebody your age doin' workin' in a place like this full of such rude teenagers, you know, and she said oh well, I'm just, I'm widowed and I've got to have a job or I'll lose my house. And so he talked to her for a minute and let her rest and, um, she went on her way and we got ready to leave and pay up and I went back to the table to when I had some change to put a tip and the man had left his \$50.00 under the cup that he had made that night for her.

Norie Guthrie: That's really nice.

Kathy Rote: Yeah, anyone that knows him that'll make perfect sense.

Norie Guthrie: Yeah. Well, you had all of these experiences in kinda middle school to high school, um, then, um, I remember when we spoke before that you kind of, you, you left Houston to attend college and you really never turned, is that correct?

Kathy Rote: It is. Yeah. I came out to Tucson in about, uh, 60, late '68 and, uh, went to a semester of school out here, of high school. And then I came back to Houston for a bit in '69 and ultimately moved out here to go to the University of Arizona.

Norie Guthrie: And then do you wanna take a moment just to kinda say, like, where your life ended up taking you?

Kathy Rote: Yeah. Not where I thought. Um, I did, you know, played professionally for several years and, uh, then needed a real job when people weren't too interested in acoustic music anymore and, uh, was workin' around Tucson at what I could, um, it turned out to be a job at a place that served people with mental disabilities. It was, like, a sheltered workshop and, uh, I hated, I hated the whole treatment of, of everybody that was there who were just a little bit more disabled than myself but were persona non grata on account of it so I was tryin' to find somewhere, something to do that would be human services but, uh, more like it ought to be and about that time the Disability Rights movement that started in Berkeley and resulted in the Americans With Disabilities Act, um, it was all goin' on out there and I had a dear friend who was there, also a paraplegic woman and she just came to town one day and said drop what you're doin' 'cause you have to come join us. This is where it's at. So, I spent pretty much, what, the

next 18 years out there, um, workin' on a notion of independent living for people with any, any kind of disability and, um, the laws, you know, we, we worked to change the laws to get kids mainstreamed in school. Like, when I was a kid even though I was very physically able on my crutches, I, the school could legally turn me away which they did. And, uh, so that was, ended up being my life's work but, I did a lot of music around Berkeley and the Bay Area for a while too and got to meet a lot of cool people and go back and forth to Kerrville with them, you know? And I kinda dabble at this point. I sent you some songs from probably the last CD I made a little while ago. And **** be one of my first loves. I never did like to perform so, um, I don't think I'd ever pursue it that hard again. I pursued it when I needed money. It was my main pursuit. Otherwise, I just much prefer, you know, the backyard area, living room concert space with friends and, uh, people sharing their music. I think overall, you know, the Houston scene and everyone I met there and what we did together, um, was all about community in the end.

Norie Guthrie: So, can you, um, can you take a moment to kinda tell me about your own song writing and perhaps, like, your song writing process?

Kathy Rote: Oh dear. I don't know. It's, it's a, a nemesis for me. I either can write a song or I can't. It usually tends to come out when I'm doin' something totally different at the laundry mat or something and I'll, I'll have a song and have it finished within an hour and that doesn't happen at all. Um, and I don't know how that happens or where it comes from but any time I sit down to pursue an idea or write a song 'cause I think I need one, absolutely nothing. I don't think I'm as schooled as some of our other folks.

Norie Guthrie: But, but you have a, you, you have your own unique way to do it and that's okay.

Kathy Rote: Yeah, it just doesn't happen as often I would need to really keep on recording and out there doin' it, you know?

Norie Guthrie: Right. So kind of, um, looking back on kinda the getting short period, um, of your life, really, um, in the –

Kathy Rote: In Houston?

Norie Guthrie: Yeah. In Houston, um, what kind of an impact did it end up having on your life?

Kathy Rote: Oh, I'm tempted to say, you know, everything because, uh, especially in the '60s in suburban, you know, Texas. Especially if you're a minority of any kind and I realize, a polio survivor which a lot of people feared, you know, anybody that, um, that looked like they might've had it. There were people that wouldn't let me play with their kids and restaurants that didn't want me to come in and things like that. So, that was the only me that I knew before I found out about the music and that started happening. I was just gonna live with my parents the rest of my life and, uh, I don't know, get a job bein' a telephone operator or somewhere. I just didn't see a place for me and, uh, the whole music scene, most of the people I met there, uh, they were broad minded people way ahead of their time in so many ways there simply was no, no prejudice of any kind and, uh, people who understood the diversity is where it's at, I would have to say, who welcomed me into the circle of musicians and there was every kind of musician you

can think of there so it wasn't about what style you do or whether you're part of the bluegrass world, this or that, uh, there was a welcome there for anybody who loved to play or who loved to listen as well. And that, I think, gave me the, the feeling that I could go be whoever I wanted to be and be okay in the world 'cause even though I didn't like to perform, you know, have to sit up there and say something to people when you're playing music and it, uh, it eased me into a place where I felt like oh, you know, I could have a job. I could have an apartment. I could go to other towns. I could do just like anyone else does. I don't have to listen to these folks. And, you know, the naysayers. So, yeah. I'm not sure if I would've just ended up being some lonely cat lady with a boring job. You know? If I hadn't a run into John Carrick, Don Sanders, people like that.

Norie Guthrie: Okay. Well, thank you. Thank you so much for that and thank you, um, thank you for, um, letting me interview you.

Kathy Rote: Oh, my pleasure. I hope there's something, somethin' new there.