

Interviewee: John Carrick

Interviewer: Norie Guthrie

Date of Interview: 2020-04-28

Identifier: wrc15512

Interview Transcript

Norie Guthrie: My name is Norie Guthrie from the Woodson Research Center at Fondren Library at Rice University. I am interviewing John Carrick. Today is April 28, 2020. This is part of the Houston Folk Music Archive Oral History Project. Can you tell me about your early life?

John Carrick: Okay, my, uh, my memories start in the early 50s, uh, in Spring Branch, Texas. Our home was five houses inside the city limits. At that time, Wirt Road was the city limits. There was no I-10, we just called the Austin Highway. Um, and our home was a nice ranch-style home, uh, but all around us were huge patches of East Texas piney forest, and people had horses, and it was, it was not rural, and it was not urban. It wah, was, uh, interesting mix of both. I attended, uh, school in the Spring Branch School District, which was considered a pretty good one. Uh, my dad was a conductor for Southern Pacific Railroad, uh, and he made pretty good, pretty good money, so we weren't rich, but we never really wanted for anything. My, uh, my father lived through the depression pretty tough, and uh, he liked to refer to himself as frugal. We referred to him as cheap. Uh, like I said, we had everything we needed, but trying to, trying to talk him into stuff was just like pulling teeth, and uh, my mother was uh entrepreneur. She, she had different regular jobs, and then she always had some kind of business on the side. Uh, by the time I got to high school, I was a contrarian. Uh, in retrospect, I had a learning disorder that had not been noticed, and uh, I think I tried to cover up for that by being ornery, and I got real good at it, and I didn't have a lot of friends, no close friends. Uh, you know, I was in, in, in minor trouble a lot. Uh, and that's kinda what it was like growing up for me.

Norie Guthrie: Um, what first drew you to music?

John Carrick: One morning, uh, before school, those of us who didn't really fit in and smoked cigarettes, gathered in the parking lot before school to, to do that, to smoke cigarettes, and somehow it came up in conversation that I owned a mandolin, uh, that my uncle gave me, but I didn't play it, and there was a guy there, Les Pinter, he's the one that started all this, he had been playing, I guess, what later came to be known as rockabilly, it was just early rock and roll, and he had quit that, but he heard about the mandolin, and he said, I'm gonna come over to your house after school and play it, and he did, and he figured out three or four chords on the mandolin, and then he turned to me and said, sing something, uh, like "Cotton Fields," uh, some popular pop folk music song, and he played it, and I sang it, and then he started singing harmonies, and he finished the song, and he looked at me, and he said, you sing real good, we're gonna start a band, and at that time in my life, there was no one telling me that I did anything real good. Uh, uh, I was kind of a, I heard it phrased one time, I was a victim of unrealized potential, according to teachers and parents and stuff, so anyway, I was all for it, and Les, uh,

rounded up a cheerleader from Memorial High School, Bo Hatch, and from our school, it was he and I, uh, Bob Meineke and Tom Mace, and we started learning some songs. We ended up playing at the high school talent show, and we knocked 'em out, and suddenly people started talking to me, and inviting us to parties and uh, gah, it was kind of a social experience that I had managed to avoid up 'til then. That, that was very short-lived, eh, and me and one of the other guys in the band, I think it was Tom Mace, went to the Jewish Community Center in Houston on Sundays, uh, Mr. Lomax of the *Folk Songs of North America*, Lomax family, uh, had the Houston Folk Music Society gathering there every Sunday. While we were there, we met lots of interesting people, uh, old commies, people that did real folk music, and I think it was there that I met the guy that became my best friend for decades, Fred Maxwell. He attended Memorial High School, and he had a little trio and he asked if I would like to join that band, and I did, Fred was a hustler. Next thing ya know, we are, we are working, we're working almost every weekend and making grown-up musician money. Uh, you know, playing some pretty, pretty big shows, uh, the first couple uh Houston National Boat and Sports Shows, that was a big deal, playing it with name-brand folky acts and concerts with the Smothers Brothers and, and folks like, and playing all the clubs around town, and uh, uh, you know, people ask me about my music history and what I've done, I have this little story, well, you know, I, I played with, uh, Jerry Jeff Walker and Guy Clark, and Townes Van Zandt, and John Denver, uh, KT Oslin, Gatemouth Brown, Lightnin' Hopkins, Mance Lipscomb, and a world of other people, and, and then I graduated high school and got serious about music, and anyway, one day I, I looked up and I realized that Fred and all the other people in the band, who were all a year ahead of me in school, were gonna be going off to college, and I, I had gotten really used to, um, uh, the attention, the money, and some of the benefits that come along with being a young musician, and I didn't wanna lose all that, and I asked Fred, what am I gonna do, and he said, I'm gonna teach you to play guitar, and you can either start a band or go play solo, and so he began to teach me to play the most complex song that we did, which was, uh, "Don't Think Twice, It's All Right" by Bob Dylan, and we did a fairly complex version of that with lots of chord changes, and as I was almost had that learned, I said, what are we gonna do next, and he says, well, now we're gonna learn to do "Don't Think Twice, It's All Right" in another key, and that proceeded 'til I could play that song in about five or six different keys. Once I had all that down, he began to teach me how the chord changes, uh, eh, in, in that song was really all I needed to know to play that style of music, and he taught me how to listen to stuff and to imagine playing it with, without any kind of music or, or notation at all. I think he realized that I had some sorta, that I learned things differently, and so I started, uh, playing solo. I think my first solo show was at a, a place, uh, that George Massey ran. Uh, what was the name of that place? It was a little coffee house over on Louisiana and, um –

Norie Guthrie: Was that La Boheme? No.

John Carrick: Uh, La Maison du Café.

Norie Guthrie: La Mais, yes, okay, yes.

John Carrick: Yes, and it was a real live coffee house and, and you know, there I played, it was like, Dan Hicks and, and all those other people I mentioned. Uh, and some really great Houston talent, uh, and, and, uh, you know, again, I'm, uh, I'm doing, people are telling me I'm doing good, and uh, I played a little bit at the Jester, which was where the, that was where the big kids

were, and it was an honor and a learning experience to be there, uh, and then the Beatles hit. Uh, and all those places where we had been playing, not just me, but all these other musicians, they just folded almost overnight, and there was, there wasn't any place to play, and I, I had a friend who had been the, uh, uh, manager at La Maison and, that was a friend then and a friend now, guy named Steve Gladson. He also later worked at Liberty Hall. Uh, and Steve and I got to talking, and we're both 17, right, decide we're gonna open up a club, by gosh. We're gonna open up a club for acoustic music, and we, we find a location at 1213 Richmond Avenue. It was a building that, it was an old house that had been, had a big hall added onto it, and I think it was where the Houston Opera rehearsed sometimes, that's why the add-on was there. The room sounded pretty good and it was, it was big enough, and, uh, we started doing little fundraisers and raised, you know, some hundreds, maybe couple uh thousand dollars, uh, and we rented the place. That was no problem, but then we needed licenses and permits and eh, they weren't giving those to 17-year-old kids, so my mom, entrepreneurial mom, saw some potential and stepped in and started taking care of that part and, uh, my friends and, and musicians, and people who loved that kind of music from all over the city, almost all of 'em kids. Uh, we got together and painted the place and made signs and did all that and we, uh, we opened up Sand Mountain Coffee House, uh, month, month and a half before I graduated from high school, and since we didn't sell booze, and it was the only place in town that had, still had acoustic music, uh, it was pretty much a hit from the first weekend we opened, and the first summer we were open, that summer which was, as I graduated from high school, you know, the place was full almost every night and local musicians that I didn't know started showing up and, uh, Guy and Jeff and Townes, uh, and buh, a world of other talented people who were not famous at all at the time, they were just good. Uh, that was, that was the regular crew there. It was pretty special. Who else was there? Uh, Vince Bell played there a lot, Kathy Rote was a really talented, eh, uh, I couldn't even begin to tell you all the, all the great people that played there, and uh, once school started again, uh, weeknights slowed down dramatically, but weekends were still good, and we just kinda, kinda kept going and so that's that part.

Norie Guthrie: Okay, so I wanna, I wanna rewind just a little bit because you talked about, um, La Maison and, um, the Jester, and I was just wondering if you could talk about either of those clubs. What were they like on the inside? What was the vibe? Are there things to, like distinct memories that you attach to those?

John Carrick: Uh, are you ready?

Norie Guthrie: I'm ready.

John Carrick: Okay, La Maison, the first club I worked at, it was an old house, uh, pretty much on the corner of Louisiana and Roseland, fairly close to downtown, and it was that. It was an, it, it was just an old house that George Massey, uh, had, had put together as a coffee house, uh. You, you got to park out on the street and walk up the sidewalk like you were going to a house, but when you came inside, you came into the living room area where there were tables, and then if you walked straight, you walked into another room, had no idea what it was used for originally, uh, and from both of those rooms, you could see into what I imagine was originally a sunroom, and that was where the stage was. In that room, there were low tables and cushions and, and you sat on the floor, and in the other two rooms, there were regular tables where, where

you sat. Uh, there were a lot of really bad seats where you couldn't see because of the support wall in the middle, uh, and as, as best I recall, the room where the stage was, was, was, was painted red. There was, there was nothing particularly weird about it, uh, it was just a, a kind of a nice place. Uh, and it, they had the original kitchen in the house where they made the coffee and the, and the different drinks and, and they brought 'em out and, I guess they had some kind of sound system. Mostly likely very unsophisticated. Uh, what else do I remember about that. A guy named Kurt, Harold Kirkpatrick. Everybody called him Kirk. He was kind of the manager, and, uh, uh, again, just a lot of really good talent there, nobody, I mean, Guy played there a little bit, I think Jeff played there a little bit, but I, I think I was just too young for them at the time. They were, they were in college and it was a lot of high school kids and, and I know, I, I don't know that it really called to them, but that's, eh, again, that's where I met Dan Hicks, uh, him and a buddy were just traveling the United States in a VW van and they just kinda landed there for 2 or 3 weeks and they played and that was a good introduction to that kinda ragtime blues that he did in his early career and, uh, so that was, that was La Maison. Eh, eventually, I, I got fired, and my impression was that, that the manger was, uh, mad at me because I, I ended up having a girlfriend that he wanted, uh, it, anyway, so the Jester. It was a commercial building. It was a betwah, on Westheimer between the railroad tracks and where the Galleria is now. There was no Galleria. Uh, and I believe that the Jester was the stepchild of a place over on Midlane, which we called Sin Alley, uh, called the Mac Jack Beer Garden. Now the Mack Jack had some acoustic entertainment with bluegrass and stuff. Uh, I think mostly on the weekends, and Mac Webster, I think, wanted to go more for that, so he opened up the Jester. Commercial building, set way back from the street, big parking lot, uh, I'm trying to remember where the front door, I think you went around to the back of the building to come in, so you go around the back and you'd come in, and the stage was on your right, and it was a, I don't know how to put it, it was a good stage. It was slightly elevated, uh, and it was nicely decorated and carpeted and had pretty good lighting. You know, there was a little drama to the lighting, and it was all tables, uh, no cushions, nothing on the floor. Uh, just a nice place. Not an elegant place, but a simply nice place and then the, if you were on the stage, in the back-left corner of the building, was where the, uh, it wasn't really a kitchen 'cause they didn't serve food, it's where they washed the dishes, uh, they had a dishwasher and stuff like that. It was also where you tuned up and left your cases and, and there was a, a, a door there that led out into the parking lot, uh, you know, where you'd smoke cigarettes and hang out with the other guys and, you know, drink wine and stuff like that. I remember there were always a lot of those guys, part of the culture was old Jaguars, so they would have XK120s, XK150s and sedans, uh, it was just something they did, and it was always, always fun to go somewhere with 'em, riding in those old beauties. Anyway, and, uh, that was the Jester. It was a, it was a nice place, very well done and, uh, that's the Jester. As –

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

John Carrick: – I recall it. There was –

Norie Guthrie: There were –

John Carrick: – there was, there was one other place. I, I take that back where, uh, that was a big folk music club, uh, for a couple of years, at the same time as the Jester, and it was called The Balladeer, and it was on, uh, Shepherd on that, that one-way section that when you come off of

59, you know, when you're headed to Richmond Avenue, there's an old shopping center on the left. Uh, and it sorta had the same vibe as the Jester, you know, and that was the, uh, uh, first place my little high school band with Fred, uh, that was the first place we played, and we were regulars there. And the club was, and we had called ourselves the Balladeers and then we saw this club open up called the Balladeer, and it was kind of a match made in heaven, so we worked there quite a bit with a lot of, again, a lot of talented people. So, those are the, the primary folk clubs that I remember.

Norie Guthrie: Are the, I also found that there's a place called, two places. One called the Peanut and the Levy. No one's ever heard of them, but I, I was able to track them down through *Houston Chronicle* ads.

John Carrick: Never heard of the Peanut, but the Levy was a, I don't recall it being a folk music club, it was one of those, uh, Dixieland kind of places.

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

John Carrick: Is, is what I remember the Levy being, and there were some, again, some, some very talented people there, uh, uh, who Gary Boggs, David, David, uh, David Boyce who later played with Boyce & Kramer, and uh, but that's what I remember. I never heard of the Peanut. uh now, there was another place, now that you mention it, called The Bird, and the –

Norie Guthrie: The Bird, yeah.

John Carrick: Yeah, The Bird was on Shepherd, uh, kinda where the original Leo's was, in that general neighborhood, and it was kind of one of the last beatnik style holdouts. They had, uh, a bathtub in there where you could sit with your date and, and, uh, you could sit on the floor or, uh, again, they had some live music, and uh, and La Carafe downtown on, uh, Market Square when Market Square was, was still, uh, pretty low rent. Hookers and drug dealers and pawnshops and abandoned buildings and stuff, but La Carafe had been there forever, and they had some st-, folk music there. I think I only played there once. Uh, so okay, more's coming back. That's what I remember.

Norie Guthrie: All right. Um, so you talked a little bit, um, you started to talk about Sand Mountain Coffee House, and could you –

John Carrick: Mm hmm.

Norie Guthrie: – just talk about what those early days were like?

John Carrick: Uh, I can only talk about what they were like for me. I'm still in touch with a lot of people who came there and a lot of people who played there, and it was, um, almost everybody who became a regular there refers to it as like a family of the audience and the people that work there, and the musicians, and my mother got the nickname, uh, her name's Mrs. Carrick, Corrinne Carrick, she got the nickname Mama C, and she was kinda like the mom to, to hundreds of people. You know, they could, they could talk to her about things they couldn't talk

to their parents about, and uh, uh, for me, as a young man and a young musician, it was, uh, it was just, um, I'm trying to say as tactful as I, it was a very wonderful place to be. Uh, eh, and I, I'll say this, if you ask people why they started playing music, you can probably get a million different answers, but if you ask a young man why he continued to play music, I think there's one answer that would be overwhelmingly common, uh, so yeah, owning that club and playing music, uh, was, was pretty wonderful, and all the people I got to play with and learn from, uh, just a whole deal, it's just really special, and it turns out it was really special for hundreds of people for, for different reasons. Several couples that met there that are still married. Uh, people who had told me that the years that they spent at Sand Mountain were the best years of their lives. Uh, I moved to Santa Fe, New Mexico two years ago, and I run into ten people here who used to go to Sand Mountain. It's, uh, it was significant in a lot of people's lives, and, and for different reasons. Uh, it was pretty cool, and we kept it, we kept it going. You know, we never, you know, and then people have tried to applaud me and mom for, uh, you know, for giving a home for the music and the songwriters and stuff, and for my mom, it was a commercial adventure, uh, and for me it was a chance for me to keep doing what I, what I loved, and you know, we never, never really thought of it as something that might be significant, but again, the people I'm in touch with, it was, it was so significant for them that, that it's, it's really touching for me, it gives me a whole different perspective on things, so there.

Norie Guthrie: Okay. Um, can you talk about, um, some, uh, who were some of the regular performers and if you have any stories or anything about them that you'd like to share?

John Carrick: Uh, let's see, regular performers. Uh, well Jerry Jeff is one, and uh, when Jerry Jeff went on stage, it was like the temperature went up a little and the lights got a little brighter, and he was just, he was just so, so alive in his music, uh, you know, it, it was, it was really special, and he would play just as hard for a room with seven people in it as he would for, for a room with 150 people in it. Uh, you know, he, he was magical. He was very magical. Uh, Guy Clark, for, for the years that he was at Sand Mountain, which, which I'd say would be from 1965 when we opened, 'til, 'til he moved off to California, he wasn't really much of a songwriter yet, he was a folksy. I mean, he played all kinds of, uh, deliciously obscure stuff and he did it well, and he played it with heart. Uh, and, and it was, it was just great fun to, uh, to watch him, you know. Same thing, didn't matter who was out there. He was gonna be, he was gonna be Guy, and, uh, he had written a few talking blues songs. Uh, uh, you know, but everybody wrote talking blues songs. His were very clever, uh, and he was just good, and he's one of the guys I would, I think I originally met at the, uh, Jewish Community Center and the Jester. Uh, Townes was, again, a regular. Uh, not famous, just a regular, and uh, Townes started writing, uh, before most everybody else that, that was a regular, and he was writing some, some nice stuff. Again, he had some hilarious talking blues songs, uh, and he had, uh, he had a nice repertoire. He had uh interesting very laid back but effective presentation. Uh, one of the stories I remember was there's a beautiful song on a Judy Collins album, and it's called "The Whale Song," and on "The Whale Song," Judy Collins is singing acapella and in the background, they're playing those songs that the whales do as they go through the seas, and it's just beautiful, and, and Townes would get up there and he'd talk about how the whales were endangered, and he said, I, I wanna do this song, uh, and he started singing acapella, and when he got to the space between the verses, he would just kind of bellow and, and, and make these really annoying sounds, kinda like whales, sorta, and then he'd sing another verse, deadpan straight, and people in the audience had no idea

if he was serious or if he was joking or what, and we're all backstage, you know, trying not to crack up. He had a, a bizarre sense of humor. It was before his, um, his demons got bad, and uh, you know, uh, for a while he, uh, the club had an apartment upstairs, and we would let people live up there, and in return, they would come down and, and clean the club once or twice a week, and uh, him and his wife, Franny, would do that. Turns out, Franny did most of it, and, and again, uh, he was, he was the first of the, of the real songwriters in the bunch, and uh, let's see, Mickey Newberry would come in sometimes and he was, he was a songwriter from the get-go and had these beautiful songs, and, and uh, Mickey was just this beautiful man and, uh, all the women loved Mickey. Just, I mean, he didn't even have to say anything, but, Mickey, but, but when he sang, it was just his voice and the, uh, emotion he put into it was just, just stunning, and he wasn't a regular, but he, you know, he came in some and, uh, and the other regulars that, that I remember, uh, my friend Kathy Rote, she lives in Tucson now. Uh, Kathy had, she did sing like, but she had a voice similar to Joan Baez, just a crystal-clear soprano, and she played guitar like Doc Watson. I mean, she was one of the best guitar players that ever went through there, and she did real folk music that she had found herself. She didn't really do a lot of copy stuff. Uh, she didn't, also, like one of the last people in, in Houston to have polio, and she was on braces, and um, I think at first, everybody wanted to go, oh, let's be nice for, for the little crippled girl, and when she started singing, uh, all of that went away, and uh, she's still my friend, uh, today, and who else, regulars that I know will come to me, and then there were the occasionals, uh, that dropped in. Janis played there, I don't know two or three times. I met her at a place in, uh, that I worked at in Beaumont, and uh, that was a fun story. I, uh, they called me and asked me to come down there and play in Beaumont, well, I'm in high school at that time, and boy am I flattered, so I go down there, and I walk in and this woman on stage with her, with her hair in a bun and this kinda retro black dress and she's singing Joan Baez songs in a beautiful soprano voice. It was the, that style that, and it wasn't insulting, it was just a, a category, you know, she was perfect chick folk singer, and she sang a couple of songs and then she said, well, that's for mom, that's how, that's how mom likes me to sing, and I'm gonna sing like me, uh, and then she started doing some blues that just blew me against the wall and that was Janis, uh, and I was just overwhelmed, and shit, I think the, the second act was, uh, Johnny Winters who I actually met once before, and uh, I just thought, and I'm the headliner and, I was more than a little nervous, anyway, but, so yeah, Janis played there a few times and I mean, eh, eh, people passing through town. Doc Watson played there one time. We had, we had Mance Lipscomb play there a bunch and, and if you don't know Mance, go listen to his music, uh, uh, he was a black guy from Navasota who played the blues and had about as much dignity as anybody I've ever met, and he was, he was magical to me and, uh, gosh I couldn't begin to tell ya. Frank Davis, you know, played there some in the, in the early years. Uh, but just, just a host of people and, uh –

Norie Guthrie: Did he play there with KT Oslin or by himself?

John Carrick: I don't remember if KT played with him. I mostly remember them at the Jester, and like I said, we played at the Houston International Boat and Sports Show for the first and second show and one of the years, uh, there was this put-together band, and it was, it was called the Jesters, and it was all the regular performers at the Jester, and they only had to do one set. There was like 12 of 'em up there, kinda like the Christy Minstrels. Uh, but that's what I remember of KT from that time.

Norie Guthrie: Uh, let's see. So, you kinda talked about your mom, 'cause she is, when, you know whenever I've talked to people about Sand Mountain, they always have stories about her. Um, kind of like how she was real focused everybody, kind of, um, following the straight and narrow, uh, that's –

John Carrick: Okay.

Norie Guthrie: – at least that's the, one of the stories I get.

John Carrick: Yeah, she didn't, she didn't want any, any drinking, and I, I've, I'm not so much sure that it was, I mean, she didn't, I don't think she really disapproved of drinking. I don't think she approved of, uh, illegal drinking, and she didn't wanna put, you know, our licenses and our business, which was profitable, put it, put it at risk. Now, Townes and a bunch other people, we found out later after we closed, they would put wine outside the backdoor, the greenroom in the place was in the back corner of the building, and they would come around there and put wine outside a window in that room, and run a little rope up into the greenroom, and they would pull the wine in and, and drink. You know, and, and often time, you know, when we closed at night and we went to clean the place, we would, you know, we would find bottles in there, you know. People were drinking, uh, so yeah. I guess until 1972, there was, there was no alcohol there. Now, now here's a story, uh, my mom came to understand that marijuana was, was not necessarily evil, but she, you know, she didn't want it around the club or something. At night, when we would almost always go to, go to someplace nearby, the, the Ones-A-Meal or Cokin's or some all-night place, and you know, have a little breakfast before everybody went home and, and just hang out, and sometimes she's get in the car and, and I remember one time, and I could not tell you who, somebody lit a joint in the car with my mom. Oh, oh, oh, this, this famed horror, but then it became commonplace, when she rode with somebody else or a bunch of us in the car, she would go, you all aren't gonna smoke one of those marijuana cigarettes are you? I think, I think she wanted to breathe the secondhand smoke, but uh, I, I'm not absolutely certain, but I know the story is true. Yeah, and she was, uh, she had, uh, great compassion, you know, to this day, and I know people that said they were closer to my mom than they were to their own moms, that they could talk with her better. It was a, there was a kind of uh odd thing. Uh, my mom didn't have a lot of friends, but these kids, you know, she'd get, she'd get to kinda mother 'em, and she would help 'em through difficult times, and my guess is she probably helped some of 'em financially once in a while and stuff like that, but once, once they didn't need her, she'd cut 'em loose even though they still wanted to be her friend. You know, she'd, she wasn't rude or anything like that, but she seemed to operate best with the ones that were needy. Uh, uh, I always thought that was kinda odd. But, uh –

Norie Guthrie: It is interesting.

John Carrick: Hmm?

Norie Guthrie: I said, that's interesting.

John Carrick: It is interesting, it is interesting, and that, you know, and then somebody that, that she had helped and then didn't need her. I mean, I can think of a couple of people, uh, later on in

life, when they became needy again and needed some comfort, uh, they kinda got back in the loop, so I, I, I've often wondered if, eh, uh, 'cause she's told me, when she was growing up as a kid in the, you know, she was born in the Indian Territories in New Mexico. Uh, the women, as children, were really held in low esteem. They weren't mistreated or anything like that, but it was, it was really about the boys, and uh, eh, eh I think that affected her greatly, I'm pretty sure it did.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm. You know she's, I feel like, what it is, I think it was Lyse Moore.

John Carrick: I know Lyse, yeah.

Norie Guthrie: Uh, Lyse talked about, um, riding around with her in the car looking for Townes Van Zandt. That, you know, she, she was worried, worried about how things were going with him and that he was going down a wrong path, and, um, yeah, that, that she just had, she seemed to have a lot of concern.

John Carrick: Right, that would, that would fall in line with, you know, wanting, wanting to help people. The, uh, not feeling worthy of, of love, that people can be only be around her if they needed her.

Norie Guthrie: Right.

John Carrick: But, that's, that's really speculation. I'm not a shrink.

Norie Guthrie: But you thought of that. That's it, she was your mom –

John Carrick: Yeah.

Norie Guthrie: – so, um, so you, um, were kind of, you, you helped open up Sand Mountain, then you ended up leaving Houston. Um, could you at least kind of mention, you know, when you left and then came back?

John Carrick: I left in, uh, 1969, uh, at the invitation of the Houston Police Department. Uh, they suggested that I might want to radically change, uh, certain parts of my life or get out of town. They, uh, had me in a situation that could have been really, really serious for me, uh, and, and I still, I still remember it. They, uh, they pulled me and my friend over in front of a, I guess it was Woolworths, uh, on, uh, Main Street, and he and I had been down collecting what we needed to make our day okay, and these two police officers, without seeing our I.D.s, knew our names, knew where we lived, and they knew that we both came from Spring Branch, and they said they've spent their lives putting away northsiders and Black guys and, and Hispanics. They used different words, and uh, they just didn't know what to do with kids who came from good families and good neighborhoods, so what they had decided was they were gonna give us one warning and, uh, you know, said, when we get ya again, you know, if you keep doing this, gonna go down hard, so I was, uh, I was outta town within a week. Uh, my friend just moved around in Houston and ended up dying, which was really sad, but, so anyway, that's why I left and, uh, when I was in Austin, I would, I was still playing acoustic and electric by that time, and I, uh, I

would find talent and send it back to Sand Mountain. Uh, and about that time, I'm not sure why, I don't know if acoustic music was falling out of favor or my mom started squeezing the eagle a little hard to try to cut corners, and I'm not sure which came first, but the business started slowing down a lot, and the, the great talents. The, the ones we had Guy, Jerry Jeff, Townes, blah, blah, blah, all those guys, you know, they were, they were having careers away from Houston, uh, and Anderson Fair had opened up and because they served uh, not just because they served booze, they ran a really good show there. You know, it was a, it was a really nice place. Uh, and there were more places around town that were having a, uh, acoustic music, uh, Corky's Theodore's, uh, uh, just, La Bodega, Houlihan's, I mean, there was just more acoustic music everywhere and it really kinda sucked it off from Sand Mountain. The business was going down, and uh, so I finally talked my mom into, uh, into selling beer and wine, and we did that, and I also started sending down kinda, kinda cosmic cowboy acts, uh, from Austin, and then we had some good ones like the Dogtooth Violet. Again, it's a, a, a big six-piece electric, uh, country-ish hippy country band, and they were real good and it, it started bringing the crowds in again, bigtime. It was, it was different. It wasn't, it was a lot of songwriter stuff, but uh, you know, and we do some acoustic stuff, but it was, it was those bands that started making the money, and then, you know, I opened up a club in, in Austin the first of the new clubs on Sixth Street, uh, and started finding more and more talent to send down and, uh, anyway, my partner in that business was a Texas oil man. Once I got the business up and running, he had way better lawyers than me, and uh, you know, he just took a big piece of my life and, and all the money I'd invested and sent me down the road, and I went back to Houston and started running the club, and I still, still had the same problems that I had when HPD asked me to move, and uh, so we were still making a lot of money, but I was spending a lot of money, and uh, mom got sick and eventually, her and I couldn't, couldn't be in business, artistic differences, uh, plus my issues, and she decided to sell the club on payment, and, uh, got screwed out of it, and, uh, that was the end of Sand Mountain, '76 or '77, so there's that.

Norie Guthrie: 'Cause it turned into a dance studio, correct? I thought.

John Carrick: Wah, uh.

Norie Guthrie: 'Cause I think, I thought it turned –

John Carrick: When, what I mentioned earlier, that that big hall in front.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

John Carrick: I can't, I can't really remember whether originally it was built as a rehearsal studio for the Houston Opera or for the Houston Ballet.

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

John Carrick: And what happened to it after we closed it, uh, I don't know. I bet it went through several incarnations.

Norie Guthrie: I, I think I was told by Craig Calvert of Wheatfield, that his parents ran their dance studio out of there, out of Sam-, Sand Mountain. I might be wrong. Like, out of that building. Um –

John Carrick: I don't know. Once it, once –

Norie Guthrie: Yeah.

John Carrick: – it was gone, you know, I, uh, my lifestyle demanded its own attention.

Norie Guthrie: Right. And so how –

John Carrick: ****.

Norie Guthrie: – did you progress out of that?

John Carrick: Well, I, uh, you know, times got tougher and tougher for me. Uh, it was my fault, and uh, I really kinda hit a bottom and my, my father got me a job working for Southern Pacific. And all this time, I'm still playing. I'm still playing quite a bit, and so I went to work for the railroad and things just got worse and worse, 'cause now I had a regular source of income and, uh, uh, it just got worse and worse and, and, and finally the railroad kinda busted me, and they said, you know, you, you don't have to do anything about this thing, this problem you have, but you can't come back to work unless you do. So, I went and got help, and I, I, I'm one of the fortunate few, you know. Uh, I haven't drank or anything in 34 years, and I'm still playing music here in Santa Fe, and uh, when the town didn't shut down, we played real regularly. Uh, I play with some real good guys, very talented, easy to get along with. Life's pretty good. A lot cheaper, too.

Norie Guthrie: So, you, um, how much longer did you end up living in Houston before you moved onto Austin and then onto Santa Fe?

John Carrick: Okay, uh, after, uh, the railroad helped me, uh, get my shit together, well, I hope it's okay to say that.

Norie Guthrie: It's fine.

John Carrick: I worked for the railroad for about another 2 years, and then I came to the conclusion that I had hated that job when my dad had it because he was gone so much, and when he was home, he was asleep, and I was in the process of, uh, of getting custody of my daughter. I'd been, I'd been playing a lot in California, uh, for a couple of years and I was right on the verge of, of moving to a level where I was actually going to be making a living wage, pretty good, and uh, I needed to get custody of my daughter, and uh, I came back to, I gave up on California and came to Houston and after a while, I opened up a, a vintage guitar store right next door to Rockefeller's and the Satellite Lounge and uh, that wah, that was pretty successful.

Norie Guthrie: What was that like being next to Rockefeller's?

John Carrick: Well, I mean at the time, you know, eh, if those acts that weren't in a coliseum but were still playing larger venues, that was, that was it in Houston. You know, that was the place, so every, every day, uh, it would be BB King, it would be Merle Haggard, it's be the Pointer Sisters, the Muscle Shoals Band, Subdudes, uh, you know, you name it. You know, they were, they were doing one or two nighters at Rockefeller's and of course, they'd get there early for sound check and would end up wandering into my store I mean every day, and it was a, it was great. I got to meet a lot of my musical heroes, uh, meet people I'd never heard of, you know, and uh, it was, it was great. We had a, we had just had rule there, kinda, uh, don't, don't bug the musicians. You know, they're in there, they're in the music store to mess with guitars just like you are. You know, leave 'em, leave 'em alone. I remember one of my, one of my favorite stories is regards that, uh, one of my employees told me this, but uh, Billy Gibbons used to come in sometimes and I, I'd known him, we played shows with him in the early, uh, early days of ZZ Top. My guitar player knew him from high school, anyway, so he'd come in and, and uh, Billy's quite an artist, a graphic artist. He does uh, a lot of kinda retro stuff, and he would come in, and I'd say something, and he'd go, well, maybe you could do it like this, and, and he'd sketch it out and, and one day, and we had a big piece of, roll of butcher paper we probably tore it up for packing, and we'd put some of the floor, and we're down on the floor, and he's doing stuff, and I'd say, hey, could you, and then, and then, and we're doing that, and somebody comes in, they go, is, is that Billy Gibbons on the floor yeah, yeah, he is, don't bug him. What's he doing? He's, he's drawing pictures. Oh, and that was it. You know, it was kinda fun. I got another story. Billy and the band are doing a live recording at a club down the street, uh, on Washington Avenue, and, and they were in there working on sound for a week or two. They just rented the whole club, and to do that, of course, there's recording engineers and monitor mixers, and guys that deal with all the wires and overhead mics and the lights, they're shooting, shooting live videos in there, too. So, there's a pretty big crew involved in doing this. Well, one day, Billy brought a bunch of guys from the crew down to my store. You know, and they, and, and they came in and, and, uh, they're looking around, and, and these guys are, are looking at what I call little treasures. Oh, look, here's a, here's an old hand-painted ukulele, you know, how much is that. I'd say well, that's 150. Can you do any better than that? Well, yeah, I'll let you have it for 120, and doing a bunch of stuff like that. I, I don't know if you know Billy, but there's two Billy's. There's the Reverend Willy G, that guy, uh, the persona, uh, so he's in here, and he's got a couple of his guys with him, you know, his, and Billy goes, uh, boys make my pile over here, and he's going and getting a couple of nice guitars and an amp and some stuff like that, so all these other guys check out with their little treasures, and then Billy comes up to the counter, and he gets out a checkbook and he goes, uh, John, uh, what's my total here. Billy that's, I'm just gonna make up a number here, I go, Billy, that's \$1,000.00, and he goes, well, how much is it with the discount. I said, well, Billy, you don't get a discount. Well, at that point, the Reverend Willy G falls away and it's just me and Billy, and Billy says, how come I don't get a discount? And I said, Billy, 'cause you got all the money, and he sat there for a second, and then he went, you know, you're right, and he wrote out the check, and that was, it was just a really, really human moment, and I really, I'll always remember that. Now, the, if that's –

Norie Guthrie: Uh okay –

John Carrick: – You see –

Norie Guthrie: – um –

John Carrick: – like, I didn't tell ya how I slept with Janis.

Norie Guthrie: Oh, okay.

John Carrick: Okay, so, uh, it's, it's like, uh, maybe the second time I go down to Beaumont to play, that club I told you about, the Halfway House, which was, by the way, Mike Condray who later had Jubilee Hall and Liberty Hall, uh, anyway, so, so we do the show and when the place closes, you know, Beaumont, in the 60s, not a lot of night life, so everybody piles in their cars and we go to some remote place on the beach and we're just gonna drink, you know, uh, well, everybody had sportscars. We just, remote part of the beach, we buried every one of those cars in the loose sand, and we're drunk and we're drinking and we, you know, dark and we can't, we can't get 'em outa the sand, you know, so we determined that the thing to do is to go up in a sand dune and, and, and dig up a kind of a hole, make a nest and all of us pile in there to stay warm and we're, we're in a pile, like a, like a litter of kittens or something in there, and we're just, we just pass out, so I slept with Janis, and about seven other people, but that's all we did.

Norie Guthrie: Okay. Um, so then, um, what finally took you away from Houston, you know, and I, I guess, I, selling off the business, I assume?

John Carrick: Well, uh, Guitar Center and Mars Music had, had been coming at each other from the east and west coast for years, and they, the final battle, it turns out, was in Houston. It seemed like they opened up, uh, five Mars Musics and three, you know, Guitar Centers, uh, in 1 year, and all those discounts and stuff, and it, I just didn't have the pockets to stay in business, and I'd started doing stuff on the internet anyway, so I, I closed the guitar store, um, 'cause I just couldn't make it in a brick and mortar store anymore, and uh, uh, my daughter grew up, you know, wanted to go live with her mom, uh, I'd had custody since she was about 6 years old. I said, okay, you go do that, and my wife at the time and I were free, and we thought, you know, we'll make a decision here. Either, if we decide to stay in Houston, uh, that's probably what we'll do or if we wanna move, you know, we can have a, kind of a second run at life. And uh, you know, I had connections. I was gonna be able to, to make it in Houston, and my wife was a, a ICU nurse, and we decided to move to Wimberly, Texas, and uh, we moved up there kinda, kinda just 'cause we could and bought a little log cabin on the banks of Blanco River and ran into some people, of course, and started playing music. Uh, uh, and life was really good and then she died, and then, uh, I moved into Austin and, uh, played music, and uh, you know, no, I thought, I thought my, uh, married life, my romantic life was pretty much over when that wife died, and after 4 or 5 years in Austin, uh, I, I, I met the, the woman I'm married to now, and we, you know, we stayed there and just, one day we went on a big trip with no destination. We just had a, a hole in time out in front of us, and we were gone for about a month or 5 weeks. We came back and, uh, well, you know, Austin has certainly changed from the town that, that we grew up loving, that we always wanted to live in, and if we were gonna move, where would we move, and at first we thought we'd move to Boseman, Montana, and then we thought about winter there and, uh, nah, Boseman won't work, and uh, and then we'd been through Santa Fe and spent a couple of nights there with friends and found a couple of those old Sand Mountain people, so eh, it was, let's try

Santa Fe. We tried and liked it and sold our houses and moved to Santa Fe. So, that's, that's where I am now.

Norie Guthrie: All right, and Santa Fe's a really lovely place.

John Carrick: It's, it's real cool. It's, it is not like Austin used to be, but it, it, it has a heart, uh, a creative heart. Uh, it kind of feels the way Austin used to, used to feel.

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

John Carrick: The, eh, now we're concerned that it appears that after the plague has subsided, uh, it looks like a lot of people are gonna leave major metropolitan areas, and Santa Fe may be one of the places a lot of people come and, uh, I know nothing stays the same. I get that, but you don't always have to like the changes. We're, we hope Santa Fe doesn't change so much that the changes, uh, are like what happened to Austin. Our son lives in Austin, and, and, and he loves it, but you know, he loves qualities that are different from what we loved.

Norie Guthrie: Okay. And so, I kinda just wanted to ask you a, um, a reflective question –

John Carrick: It's okay.

Norie Guthrie: – um, and so, how do you think that the Houston folk scene changed over time?

John Carrick: I, I think eh, if anything, it, it kinda only changed stylistically. I think there's a, you know, I bet if you go to Anderson Fair tonight, tomorrow night or on a weekend, you know, that there are very talented people, uh, doing good work in music. Uh, but it would be far different from the ss, the style of acoustic music, uh, that me and a lot of the folks I mentioned grew up with, 'cause when we came directly out, out of folk music, you know, the, the real deal, *The Folk Songs of North America* book, you know, that's, that's where we came out of, and we evolved that, you know, and I guess it depends sometimes, eh, I think it really depends on roots. You know, we came from there and, and I do not mean this to be negative, it's just an observation, I think a lot of people that are doing it now, Americana for them is Guy and Townes and Jerry Jeff, and those people. You know, uh, that's what I think. And it doesn't mean that they're copying 'em, but that, that that is their, their influence as, as opposed to those of us who came up doing, doing the old stuff that's, that's kinda, kinda like, uh, I love Johnny Winters, uh, and one of the things that I think that separates Johnny Winters from a lot of other really, really great blues men is, if you ever sat down and played with Johnny or talked with Johnny, his depth in traditional blues and Chicago blues and stuff, his knowledge of all of that is just so deep, uh, and so the people that come and their roots are Johnny Winters and Eric Clapton, you know, and Jimi Hendrix, and nothing wrong with it, it's just different. Uh, you know, and there's, there's great ones out there, but I, you know, I think the stuff that I enjoy most is, uh, something that has very deep roots, and it doesn't mean it's better, it's just what I like. That's, that's my observation.

Norie Guthrie: Um, that totally makes sense. The, the point of reference has changed for the different generations, and so it's harder for them. It's a, like a, it's like you have to interact with

what came immediately before and then it's like, then you have this whole other catalogue that comes before that, but you're a bit more removed. So, yeah, it totally makes sense.

John Carrick: Yeah, I don't know if it makes sense or not, it's just, that's what I think.

Norie Guthrie: I guess um, well, is there anything that you want to talk about that you haven't talked about?

John Carrick: Uh, let me think. One time in my high school band, uh, they had a hootenanny contest at the University of Houston, and, and my band came in second, and Guy didn't place. On that, perhaps another interesting sideline, back in the day, me and Guy, I mean, Guy was taller than me, but we were both fairly lean and dark-haired, and we came from sorta the similar cultural background, and we dressed a lot the same, and we both played guitar, and we both sang, and uh, the, there was sometimes some confusion about who was who, and I think, uh, I think Guy and I both benefited from that.

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

John Carrick: I don't know. What else ya got, lady?

Norie Guthrie: I, I don't have anything else. I just wanted to make sure that you didn't feel like you were leaving something out. I mean, of course, everyone feels that they leave something out at the end.

John Carrick: That's it.

Norie Guthrie: But, ya know, I just wanna make sure you felt like all the bases were covered.

John Carrick: Yeah, just, you know, uh, I guess one other thing is, is that thing I, I talked about kinda cavalierly about why young men continue to play music, there was that and there was, eh, eh, this is me, and I, I wah- I wonder if you can extrapolate from me to a, to a larger group of people, uh, like I mentioned, I never, early on, never fit in very well, and, and I really needed attention and approval and, uh, I, I think that probably affected my music, and sometime, about 15 or 20 years ago, something shifted and I got a whole new appreciation of music for that magical thing that happens, it happens for musicians and it happens for audiences, when the, the connection is made, and for a few minutes, the musician or the band and the audience are, are, are kinda all in the same mental space and the audience is as important in that moment as the people making the music. It's just, it's, it's just a magical, I'm sure you've had that as somebody in the audience, and uh, so I, I don't need approval. I don't need acceptance, okay. I do uncommon stuff when I play. Uh, I do stuff I love and hope to find people who will enjoy that, but that, that moment, kinda when you finish the song and there's this pause before whatever's gonna happen. Before people applaud or cry or laugh or whatever it is they'd done, duh, that's the, that's the moment that I live for, eh, musically. So, so there.