Interviewee: Jack Saunders

Interviewer: Norie Guthrie

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Interview Transcript

Norie Guthrie: My name is Norie Guthrie from the Woodson Research Center, Fondren Library, Rice University. I am interviewing Jack Saunders. Today is April 3rd, 2017. This is part of the Houston Folk Music Archive Oral History Project. So can you tell me about your early life?

Jack Saunders: My early life?

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm

Jack Saunders: Oh, okay, um, navy brat so, uh, I was born in Southern California but I lived all over the place. Lived in Alaska, Rhode Island. Lived right next to the Newport Folk Festival.

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

Jack Saunders: Right down the street from that when I was a teenager. Lived all over the place, all over California. Uh, Arkansas, my folks are from Arkansas so we go back there quite a bit to Fort Smith, between duty stations.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: So that kind a shaped that new guy in town, every year.

Norie Guthrie: What first drew you to music?

Jack Saunders: Um, the Beatles.

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

Jack Saunders: Um, we were, you know, we had six kids so we were pretty poor. We didn't really have like, uh, like I said, my parents were from Fort Smith, Arkansas, and my dad was an enlisted man in the service. So, we had six kids that lived on a enlisted man's salary. So, uh, we, do, I was, it was a radio sort of thing. It wasn't really, we didn't really have records at the house so, luckily, the radio. I mean when I first, my first, you know, uh, exposure to music was, was all radio and it was pretty bland. You know, just, we would drive across the country from one duty station, the radio was always playing in the car and nothing ever really, you know, spoke to me. And then, all of a sudden, the Beatles came along and I saw them on Ed Sullivan in '64 and, and I was 11 at the time so, uh, wow, that was just incredible. So I thought, okay, I know what I want
to do now. So, that just kinda woke me up and all of a sudden, I really started loving music and, uh, so that was pretty much the beginning of it.

Norie Guthrie: So then, when did you take up an instrument?

Jack Saunders: Uh, I wanted to but we couldn't really afford an instrument, uh, when I was a kid and so I didn't really take one up until I got to, when I got to Rhode Island, we had a duty station – my dad had a duty station – in Newport, Rhode Island which is right down, like I said, down the street. We had, the naval housing was like a mile from the entrance to Newport Folk Festival.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: So, um, I when we moved there, I got my first job and so I bought my first guitar which was a 12-string Framus. But, um, that was probably when I was 14.

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

Jack Saunders: Yeah. I would've gotten one earlier if I could. That's for sure.

Norie Guthrie: So did you end up, uh, attending the festival and, since you were so close by.

Jack Saunders: I did. My girlfriend, uh, was actually really good friends with George, uh, their whole family was friends with George Wein who was the producer of, uh, the Kerrville Folk Festival and she worked there.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: So I got to see a couple of shows, yeah. But, uh, not, not, not a lot.

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

Jack Saunders: You know, not a lot.

Norie Guthrie: But were those still kind of influential? ****

Jack Saunders: Yeah, you know, actually, I was more into the rock thing back then and so.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: The folk music at that point, I mean, I think folk music is anything that's self-taught. I don't care whether you're Chuck Berry, or, or you're Hank Williams.

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

Jack Saunders: Or, you know, or you're the Ramones, you know.
Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: It's all folk music as, as far as I'm concerned but at, but what we called folk music back then was kind of straight laced, you know, and, uh, and it was pretty narrow. You know, there was a folk scene that was going on in the 60s and I didn't really like that, like the Lettermen and –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: – you know, Peter, Paul and Mary, were I, that's where I first heard a Dylan song but, you know, it, and I liked that song and I liked their version of it. But, I wasn't a big folk quote folk music fan like as folk was back then.

Norie Guthrie: Right.

Jack Saunders: Now, now blues, there were blues guys that would come there.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: And I loved those guys. You know, I was a big fan, so Sonny Boy Williamson and, you know, um, Howlin' Wolf and all the Chicago guys. So, um, they would come there and play.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: Um, you know, Mance Lipscomb who was from around here and, uh, so, any who.

Norie Guthrie: Okay. Um, so did you end up kind a taking any formal lessons or did you just teach yourself?


Norie Guthrie: Yeah.

Jack Saunders: Everything I've learned about music, about recording is all self-taught. Mainly because it really, when I was learning how to play guitar, you, unless you had like a really good teacher, and I was always in some new place.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: And you know, I never had a stable environment, it, it, you know, you couldn't take a course, you know, in music or songwriting. I have a friend who, uh, who has a scholarship, you know, for songwriting at Berkeley. You know, and I'm thinking, wow, that, that didn't exist. You know, those types of things. And, you know, a lot of people like David Grisman, the mandolin player, would say, hey, if you wanted to see a, somebody and learn
somebody's style, you had to hitchhike, you know, to some festival in West Virginia to see the guy play and talk to him and things like that. So there really wasn't access.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: So, basically, learned myself. Probably learned the wrong ways, you know, early on, just, you know, no one was there to show me the right way so I just kind a did it my own way and then 'til I got better and then I started cleanin' my act up.

Norie Guthrie: Um, what first brought you to Texas?

Jack Saunders: Well, um, my sister lived, and still does, in Garland, Texas, up north. I lived here one time, uh, for a very short time as, when I was a kid. I don't even remember what year it was but, uh, she stayed here in Texas. She got married to a, uh, a sailor and they settled down in, in Dallas area. So I was living in Alaska at the time in this little island called Adak which is 500 miles from Siberia. It's at the end of the Aleutian chain. It's the furthest west city in the United States and, uh, my dad was stationed there. And, uh, so, we were really isolated so one summer, uh, I came down after high school, my junior year of high school and, and I came down to Texas to visit her, just to get out of, you know, just to get there, around some civilization. And, um, and came down and met somebody, there was guy living next door to her who had the window open who was playing Buffalo Springfield songs and Neil Young songs and things like that and, and so I just came down for that summer. And all of a sudden, you know, started playing music 'cause I had just written my first song in Adak when I got there. It was like, get off the plane, what am I doing?

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: What am I doing here?  Write a song. And in Adak, there was nothing to do so you would have to invent your, sort a like you hear about these great people from like Lubbock.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: All these songwriters from Lubbock and I understand that totally because there's nothing to do there so you have to invent your own entertainment. And, uh, and so that's what happened in Adak. So I came to, I was playing a little bit and writing a little bit and I came down to Texas and met some people here that summer and, uh, there was a pretty healthy music scene around Dallas at the time. You know, in, in the clubs and there was a park there called Lee Park.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: That was a, back then in, in the 60s and 70s, these parks were, you know, like people would gravitate, musicians would gravitate to these parks and just jam and play and, or you just might go listen to somebody. People would come from out of town and so, um, uh, that's where I learned, you know, really got the bug was coming down to Texas that one summer.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.
Jack Saunders: And, uh, there's this one street called Bowser Street that was right of the, uh, park and there were four or five houses where people would just drift from house to house and they'd play all night and, uh, and a lot of people – I met some pretty interesting people early on.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: Around Bowser Street. You know, people like Ray Willey Hubbard that was around early.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: And, and I saw, I went, I went to some clubs in Dallas like Mother Blues and, uh, and some concerts, you know, uh, the Rolling Stones early stuff and, uh, Dylan with The Band and, Stevie Wonder and things like that that were happening early on.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: In the 70s, uh, they were in '70, I guess. Something like in 71. But, um, so, yeah, then I went back to, uh, Alaska and I finished up my high school and I thought, I know exactly what I want to do and where I want to go so I came back to Dallas. And I even got a song about, it's called “Bowser Street,” about coming back and all these people that I met that summer and, and they were from all over the place.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: And they were just, uh, just wonderful crowd and I came back and I said, I'm moving here. And I moved back and they'd already all, they'd already taken off. So I stuck around Dallas a little bit and I moved to Austin.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: And, uh, that was like '71. Something like that.

Norie Guthrie: Oh, okay.

Jack Saunders: So that was a scene.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: In '71. That was like the beginning of the whole cosmic cowboy thing and.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: And it was the cheapest city in America to live in, I believe, at the time. Can you believe that?
Norie Guthrie: That is interesting.

Jack Saunders: Yeah, some friends of mine that I was staying with at the time said, you, I want you to go see a friend that we're, uh, that I went to college with and he's just starting up his thing and it was Michael Murphy.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: And, uh, Jerry Jeff was really big with his, you know, about that time and Willie was there and Waylon –

Norie Guthrie: Right.

Jack Saunders: – and they were like just local guys, you know.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: Just kind of doing their thing and, I mean, they, of course, they were popular. They had had some success but they were like almost the new hippies, you know.

Norie Guthrie: Right.

Jack Saunders: Uh, in Austin at the time and Willis Alan Ramsey, folks like that were around.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: Folks like that were around and, and Austin, the Vaughns.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: Were just, you know, Vaughns were, I saw them in Dallas. You know, they had the Storm and, um, Stevie Ray and Jimmy, you know, they, they played at, when I got to Dallas, they played at this place called The One Night all the time and, uh, what was, uh, the Rome Inn.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: Another club there so, there was a lot. Freda and the Fire Dogs, uh, which, you know, a lot of, uh, Greezy Wheels.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: A lot of those early, uh, Austin acts were, were, uh, playing a lot in town so. Nobody was making any money but everybody was happy.

Norie Guthrie: What did you pick up from being in that scene in Austin?
Jack Saunders: Well, you know, um, I was so, it was so early on, um, I was more of a fan, a music fan.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: Uh, I loved Willie back then, uh, and I loved Waylon Jennings and I loved, you know, that early Jerry Jeff stuff and, and early Michael Murphy thing. I really liked that and, of course, Willis was a legend already. Um, so I was just a fan and I would go to clubs. Um, you know, Austin was so different then. If you wanted to go out to the Soap Creek Saloon to see Freda and the Firedogs, that was like, you know, traveling through the wilderness, you know, back then. And, uh, so just as a fan, I really wasn't playing that much.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: Um, but I was doing carpentry work and practicing a lot and trying to learn the craft and just being inspired –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: – by Austin and just the lifestyle, you know, just, just kind of relaxed college town. It was a very different kind of relaxed sort of college town. A matter of fact, it was, it's pretty different because when I moved there, you know, I had pretty long hair and a big red beard and I was this, looked like some mountain man. And, um, there were two parts of Austin. One, the north side was the safe side for like a longhaired guy.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: But if you went over the river to the south side, you could get your butt kicked. You know, there were rednecks over there that did not like any hippies, you know.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: We were kind of considered the hippies. So, so you stuck to your area of Austin, you know, right around the university where it was safe. You could go up to 45th Street or something like that but stay around the university. Watch it when you went across the river. Saxon Pub was there early on but it was out on the freeway. It isn't where it is now. It was up there on 35, around 34th Street.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: Right off the freeway. Saw a bunch of shows there. Saw Shake there New Year's Eve very early on. Just this was when I was, before I was playing a whole lot and he was with a group called the Ewing Street Times and that was with John Vandiver and Michael Mashkes and that was an early, uh, popular group that were playing there. So, uh, you know, I, I moved to, moved to Houston after that. Uh, first I moved back to Dallas, uh, and there was a guy named
Rick Gordon who was playing with Willis Alan Ramsey at the time. You know, I didn't know anybody that was playing with, you know, I, Willis was one of my heroes. He was one of everybody's heroes and Rick Gordon was playing with him. Umm, and plus, he would come to town and he would give me a call and we'd get together and play guitar some. He was probably the most influential guitar player for me, uh, because he was such a consummate musician. You know, he could play, he could finger pick like Paul Simon and he could flat pick like, uh, like Doc Watson.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: And, uh, and he knew a lot of songs and he was, he was a great musician. You know, better than anybody I'd ever met. So I would get together with him and play, and, uh, that was a lot of instruction and a lot of, we'd work up little solos together.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: And, uh, and that was, you know, I went, uh, from that, Rick and I, you know, built up a friendship, a playing friendship. And I was playing around Dallas at the time and he called me up and he said, you know, I just moved to Houston and there is a scene going on here. There's a, there's some clubs, a lot of musicians around here and a lot of gigs. And, uh, and there's this one place that I'm playing, he was playing a, with a, uh, he had, there was a duo called the All Meat Taco Band.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: And that was Ezra Idlet from Wheatfield who was really popular. Wheatfield was huge back then. I even saw them in Dallas. They were like, they were in another class. They were doing concerts, you know, when everybody else was doing clubs. And, um, you know, Connie Mims and Ezra Idlet. But, anyway, Rick Gordon and Ezra Idlet had a duo called the All Meat Taco Band.

Norie Guthrie: Ah.

Jack Saunders: And they were just playing steakhouses. It wasn't, it was a side project, is what it was.

Norie Guthrie: Hm.

Jack Saunders: You know, you did some cover songs. You did some original songs. It doesn't matter. You just, and, um, they'd feed you steak, prime rib, and you know, for a 21-year-old guitar player, you know, to, to go eat prime rib and, and salad and, uh, play a gig for $25.00 a note was like wow, okay, yeah. All right. So that was my fff, Rick said, you come down here, we, Ezra's getting tired of doing this and if you want to, you know, kind of move into that duo, you could do that. So I moved down here and, uh, Rick Gordon and I were doing the little scene with a couple, couple places like that and, uh, Refectory, these steakhouses. And we, uh, and then we'd go over to Anderson Fair. That's where I first, uh, heard about Anderson Fair. Uh,
Anderson Fair had this night Wednesdays where they would feed you spaghetti. It was spaghetti Wednesdays and if you went and played you could eat free spaghetti. So that was another thing that we stayed, uh, you know, kept us eating –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: – was to go play Anderson Fair and there were a lot of characters hangin' around then, too. And, uh, uh, so, that was a little scene, but there was a, a real rich scene goin' on at places like Corky's and Theodore's.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: And, Texas Opry House which was like the big venue. That was, I don't know how many people that seated, 6 or 800 or something like that.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: But the clubs, Theodore's and Corky's were always packed and, uh, there were always musicians. You've seen the calendars. There's tons and tons of, uh, great people that came through those clubs.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: And I met 'em then and that was, uh, that was the Houston scene. Uh, my first night, I walked into, that I got into Houston, I walked into Theodore's and Michael Marcoulier is playin' Shake's on bass. Uh, you know, uh, really good band, super tight band and real nice music scene and I thought, well, this is good. You know, I like this. And, uh, seemed like there was a lot of gigs around and a lot of, a lot of clubs in the real small area in Montrose.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm. Um, so when did you actually kind of, you started with some of the steakhouses like the Refectory and then, what did you move on to playing?

Jack Saunders: Uh, I wrote, I wrote songs so, you know, I, um, Rick Gordon and I had, uh, the All Meat Taco Band which, you know, we started putting the original material in it and like in the material that I'm giving you, there's, there is a, a KPFT Don Sanders is interviewing us in 1976.

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

Jack Saunders: You know, we had just gotten together. It's hilarious, really. And we're doing all these flat pickin' songs and, and I'm, we're talkin' about songwriting and, and those are the very first songs, you know, that I'm playing in public, I think. And so, uh, uh, that's how I got started doing my own thing.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.
Jack Saunders: And then I, um, Rick, Rick and I, um, we played together for about year doing that. He would know better, year and a half, not sure exactly. And I met this art rock band. Um, they were really great musicians. Full band and, uh, they were called Taxi Dancer, and, uh, I joined up with them. And then I started doing my, all my own stuff and, and the other guy in the band, Rick Poss was a songwriter and great guitar player so we had three singers. And it was, we played Fitzgerald's. We started, you know, really picking up some gigs and playing a lot of places.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm. Can you talk about the music that you guys put out like for Taxi Dancer?

Jack Saunders: Um, for Taxi Dancer?

Norie Guthrie: Yeah.

Jack Saunders: Taxi Dancer was fairly short lived. We never put anything out. Um, I have in my archive stuff, I've got the recordings. We were going to a recording studio and, and, uh, we did some, some fairly good recordings.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: Of about a half a dozen songs.

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

Jack Saunders: Um, there's a lot of live stuff we did. We were, the kind of stuff we were, I mean, it was, it might even be, you know, self-indulgent. Uh, I see bands, we struggled, you know, back then. We played Fitzgerald's all the time. We were like the house band at Fitzgerald's.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: We would play upstairs. Uh, we'd go to the library and find these old, uh, cartoons from the 30s and the 40s and we'd put our own music to it and that would be our opening act. So it was like this artistic kind of thing. And then we would get up there and everybody played so many different types of songs. I mean, from reggae to, uh, to folk rock, to, to blues and at that time, um, you know, Elvis Costello was out, um, and also, uh, Tom Petty's first stuff and so we were all influenced by that kind of beginnings of the new wave type of thing.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: And just kind of melding all these styles. It was, it was a total mismatch, mishmash of styles and, um, and so you couldn't really label us but we were really, really good band. Rick Richards was the drummer and he's like, I don't know if you know about Rick but he plays on all the top singer/songwriter stuff. He's, back then, he was a young rock drummer. Uh, the other guys, all the other guys in the band were from Bryan College Station.
Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: So they had navigated here and everybody was navigating to Houston because there was work, you know, and it was boomtown.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: So they had navigated here and everybody was navigating to Houston because there was work, you know, and it was boomtown.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: Oil was booming. Economy was going crazy and, you know, Townes was, I met Townes early on there and Lucinda and Blaze Foley and all those characters were around in the very early days.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: Yeah, and, you know, I had just missed that whole Old, Old Quarter scene that was, uh, that Townes had done his Live at the Old Quarter and, you know, there was a, there was a, uh, a pretty hardcore sort of famous folk scene that was, um, Sand Mountain and things like that, uh, that I had missed 'cause I didn't really get here 'til the tail end of that.

Norie Guthrie: Um, so what were some of your favorite venues to play?

Jack Saunders: Uh, Corky's and Theodore's and Texas Opry House were the –

Norie Guthrie: Those are the favorites.

Jack Saunders: – top ***** now, if you'll look at those Corky's calendars in the, you'll see that there are two artists, you know, a lot of times.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: On the Corky's calendar. So there'd be like four sets. So you'd do two sets and then the other artist would do two sets so a lot of times, what you would do, is you'd double book. You'd book Theodore's and you'd book Corky's.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: And then you play the first two sets here and then you run over to Theodore's and play the rest of the night. So, uh, those two places kept us hoppin' plus, um, I played bass, uh, I started off as a bass player.

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

Jack Saunders: Before I started playing guitar and writing songs. So, uh, I would pick up bass gigs with, uh, John Vandiver and, uh, you know, Danny Everitt or somebody like that. You know, I just, uh, I could go, or Shake, you know. Once in a while we would do something together. So, um, you know, you could pick up, uh, if you were, you could play guitar or bass
and there was another guy named Pete Gorisch that was doing the same thing. He could play guitar or bass and so when we weren’t doing own thing, we'd play with other people and supply the band stuff. So, those were two really great ones that just kept us rollin’. Um, and then there was the Texas Opry House. Now that was, that was the premier club. That's the place, the Menil owns it now. It's right there on, uh, Richmond Avenue and it's the place they keep a lot of their artwork and it's all been, uh, changed over but that was a really fantastic club. The way it was set up, it was set up like a rectangle, you know, like a club should be. You know, with the, at the very, at the short end, you know, there'd be the stage and so, it was really set up acoustically, was set up really great. And that place had the top acts, the top touring acts. You know, I mean, The Police, when they came through in a station wagon, they played there.

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

Jack Saunders: Uh, but we, we split the show. I got to see a lot of great people. Split the, opened up for like J. J. Cale and, uh, Steve Goodman.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: And there were just so many, Brewer and Shipley and so many really good, uh, national acts would come through and then, you know, Wheatfield played there.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: St. Elmo's Fire. They were really big at the time. And we would end up playing. John Vandiver, I played with him a lot. We would open up, uh, John, John, John was a big mentor for me. John was, uh, this great blues man that was killed in, it was 85 I believe and, and so, um, before he got his due – I mean guys like Bret, David Bromberg would come down and just, he adored John so there were, there were blues guys that were, you know, in love with John's music, 'cause he was the real deal.

Norie Guthrie: Right.

Jack Saunders: And so you know, John would go to hang out with Mance Lipscomb, uh, 'cause Mance was, you know, from this area and, uh, and, you know, and pick up everything he could. So did, uh, so did Ray Hubbard.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: You know, both those guys, kind a from the Oak Cliff. Oak Cliff in Dallas had a lot of great musicians like the Vaughns and, and, uh, Ray, uh, uh, you know, John Vandiver and folks like that. But they would kinda go worship at the altar of Mance Lipscomb and so –

Norie Guthrie: And probably Lightnin' Hopkins, too, I assume.

Jack Saunders: Oh, yeah, Lightnin' was around.
Norie Guthrie: Yeah. Yeah.

Jack Saunders: Yeah, and, god that was great. But they, but the, you know, Mance was more like the folk.

Norie Guthrie: Oh, okay.

Jack Saunders: You know.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: Lightnin' could go up there and play with a band and, you know, he could do both of 'em. You know, he, he did everything but, um, yeah, Mance was, he had that style that, that blues style that Vandiver really, you know, uh, perfected. You know, he kind a got from Mance Lipscomb. So I, I, I played a lot with, with Vandiver, too.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: And he was a big mentor, kind of everything I learned about, most of what I learned about blues, country blues and stuff like that and finger, finger style blues was from, from him. But we played at the Texas Opry House and, uh, uh, did a lot of shows there so that was a great place.

Norie Guthrie: What was, um, Vandiver like, as a person?

Jack Saunders: Fearless.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: I mean, I have neh, and that's probably what got him trouble and why he's not with us anymore. Nothing scared him. Uh, I would, it, it was amazing to me and he had this thing where he would, uh, I had many good nights with him but very few people can get up as a solo act in front of 600 people and have them baby talking and singing and, you know nonsense.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: And Vandiver was like that. He was just like nothing ever fazed him. He could get up in front of anybody and be totally in command. So, he, uh, that's, you know, he's, he was great at that. He was a great bandleader and, uh, he just led by example more than anything else. The first, the funny story I have about Vandiver – I've probably got a few – but he liked to direct. But, um, the first night that I went to the Texas Opry House, Shake, the Ewing Street Times are playing. John Vandiver's up there just rockin' the house and there's a full band there behind him and my friend, Rick Gordon, has his 335 and he's playing in the band and he's trying to get me to, to where I know the guys and they know me and he says, sees his, you know, picks up his guitar and he says, you know, play it, you know. So, I don't know man, you know. Okay, sure, so
I pick up the guitar. You know, and I'm walking up there and these guys don't know me. You know?

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: I think I met Shake but John doesn't know me. First thing that John does is he walks up to me and he goes, don't play. And I thought, oh, my god, if I could just shrink. If I could just get off this stage, that would be so great. I can't believe Rick got me up here. And then, I, I'm sitting here going, oh, man, I can't play anything and he turned to me and he goes, now play. So, he just liked to direct. I thought he was just telling me not to play so. But he was like that. He, uh, and we played Corky's and he, he always made it this big show like, uh, second set one night he, he, we, he, he had the club owner put a couple a tables on the stage and put a couple a drinks right there and put a couple chairs up – we never sat, you know – but put a couple chairs up there and put our money under the drink and turn the PA off. So we did that, we played the second set and turned the PA off. And then he does this little thing where he walks up and stands up and the, the stage is a little raised and right about the, the same height as a table and there's people right up in front of you. And he has thing where he says, he's gonna kick walk, cakewalk into town and he shoots his legs out like this. And he doesn't look at all.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: And it's just flying by people's heads, you know. And, uh, but he, you know, he all, he, I don't know if he ever really kind, he's in his own little world but he knows exactly what he's doin' and where he's goin. So he, we do the set like that and at the end of the set, you know, he kind a does this thing where he's walkin' off the stage and gets all the band, or gets me to walk behind him and then gets the people in the audience to kind of do this little fah, you know, single file walk. So, uh, and he walks off to the backroom. So he's kind of always a showman. He was a great showman and a fantastic musician really. So, some of his stuff is available. I'm glad, uh, his daughter is putting out his, uh, his live recordings.

Norie Guthrie: Yeah there is, uh, I watched a video with him recently and it was just like, there, I think there was someone who was trying to get my attention and I was just like spellbound like, wow.

Jack Saunders: What, what a voice, too, huh?

Norie Guthrie: Yeah, yeah, a really great voice.

Jack Saunders: He's, he's got like, a, a Ray Charles kind of voice where I don't think he could sing out of tune, you know, it's just, just great, just great.

Norie Guthrie: Yeah, it was really cool. Um, so, I guess sometime in the 1980s you started playing with Shake Russell?

Jack Saunders: Yeah, um, after Taxi Dancer, um, I was playing, I started, I played with a lot of bands.
Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: And my whole thing was I didn't play with a band for like over 6 months.

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

Jack Saunders: I don't know why, you know. You want to learn everything you can from a band and then you want to find another band and the whole new wave thing was just kind a kickin' up and I played with Connie, uh, Mims.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: She put out a, uh, an LP, a record, a vinyl record at that time and, and of course, she was getting back into it 'cause she got away from St. Elmo's Fire and all that. She was getting back into playing so I started playing with her a little bit too, right about the time in about '82. Shake and I knew each other, uh, because when I first got here to town in '76, '77, we would do happy hours and he would always have me sit in and, whenever I walked up on a club, you know, indoor club, he would say, come on, get up here and we'll play. So it was always a sit in kind of situation. And he was playing bass with Michael Marcoulier. And so what happened was, people were requesting his songs so much.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: I mean, he was, he was the bass player and singing a couple of his songs but he was getting so much attention that he had to get his own band. People would ask him when are you gonna get your own band? And he, I don't really want to get my own band. Finally, you know, he did and he's, was getting really big and he got his, he wanted to get his friend from Kansas City, which was Dana Cooper down that he used to play with as kids. So he got Dan down and they, they were like stars. They were huge. I mean, some of the, I think I have one archive thing where, it's like a benefit concert for John after he died, after John di-, Vandiver died, at Rockefeller, see. And, wow. I'd forgotten, you know, how much, you know, uh, attention they were getting. It was, it was crazy. Uh, but it was. They used to rope off the front of the stage for those two. They, they were, they were big. And so, you know, we kind a, we were friends and all that but we kind a, the, we're in different circles.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: They were, they were, they got an MCA Records deal which is a big label, major label and, um, and they were playing big concerts and, and really, really killing it. And you know, we were in the clubs, you know. We were doing our thing. Uh, but then, he and Shake and Dana broke up about '82, '81 or something like that and Shake called me and said, you know, hey, you want to join the band? I was already in a band at the time and I told him no. I said, I can't, you know. Uh, and then that band fell apart in a couple months and I said, are still, hey, you still you want to do it. So this was '82 and, uh, he was doing a record at Gilley's. Gilley's
was that nightclub in Pasadena that was famous for, uh, what was the movie with, uh, John Travolta?

Norie Guthrie: Right.

Jack Saunders: *Urban Cowboy*?

Norie Guthrie: *Urban Cowboy*, yeah, yeah.

Jack Saunders: It was huge. You know, all over the place and Mickey Gilley owned this club out there that was so popular. And, and he also had a recording studio there, uh, Gilley's Recording Studio. So, the guy, Sherwood Cryer who is sort of like the, you know, this underworld character from, that owned Gilley's, you know, owned a lot of Pasadena, you know?

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: Uh, the boss. He was wanting to, he was, uh, at that time, he was the manager, I think he was Shake's manager and, uh, we were cutting an album there and we got Craig Leon, the guy that produced The Ramones, was producing our record. So my first week in the band in '82 was right into the recording studio.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: Where I was playing bass and guitar. Shake and I were splitting bass duties and I was playing electric guitar. And so, uh, right off the bat before I even knew the songs, you know, boom. You know, I'm in the recording studio. So, and then we started doing some gigs. I learned the material. We played at, uh, the Balinese Room, you know all over, all over Texas. Uh, he was really popular at that time and he was trying to reestablish himself as who he was. So I joined him in '82. As the bass and then we eventually went to me just playing bass because it made the band, band more stable. We had a big band Riley Osbourne, I think, was the keyboard player from Austin. We had drums. We had, uh, two guitar players. We had a, a company, a sound company we traveled with. So it was a, a big operation and, uh, and I ended up kind a playing bass all the time just because it was easier than us switching around. So I ended up being the bass player. Shake started, he was a real generous guy and, uh, he, he knew that I wrote songs so he, he wanted to incorporate those into the band so he started singing. He would do that. He was great.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: He was really generous and great about that. Because there were some really good people in his band and everybody wrote songs.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: So he'd take a song by everybody in the band and he's sing it and which was really nice. And it, so he started singing a couple of my songs. And, and we played a lot of gigs.
We went through some different iterations in the Shake Russell Band until about ‘89. Right about that time, the band split up. We had Rusty Burns from Point Blank and Buzzy Gruen from Point Blank which was this big arena rock band.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: And they were in our band. They were in the last Shake Russell Band in like ‘88. You know, ‘89. We did a couple a records. And, um, so we split up in like ‘89 and, uh we formed a duo where I started playing more of my songs and we were splitting it and it was a duo and we kind of had this Everly Brothers thing where we were singing harmonies on a lot of stuff. And we would start writing, co-writing, oh, you know, everything to where it was kind of half and half.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: And this, and then we, we were really popular, uh, from like the time we were together from like ‘89 to ‘96.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: And so we put out a record a year. Put out a CD a year.

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

Jack Saunders: And, uh, we were hardworking songwriters and performers, uh, for that whole time. And then so we split up in ‘96. And then I started, I, I had been working on a solo thing for a while so I pretty much immediately released that.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: I just kind of did my own thing for a long time but, yeah, the Shake Russell was starting in ‘82 and went to about ‘96 altogether.

Norie Guthrie: So can you talk about the music that you wrote and recorded with, um, Shake Russell?

Jack Saunders: Um, at first, um, it was just my writing.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: Whatever would fit his voice when the band was first formed, when I first joined the Shake Russell Band. So, um, that's the way it started and then it got to, like in the late 80s, it got to the point where we would start writing songs together. Um, I think, well, actually we did a record called Denim and Pearls, um, that was with Buzzy Gruen and, and, and Rusty Burns which was that arena rock band I was telling you about, that Point Blank which was a big popular band. Uh, they joined us and, and, uh, and that was probably the first song we wrote
together. Uh, that was a song about, you know, a horse race, you know, in Louisiana and the winner of a horse race was Denim and Pearls was the name of the horse. So we, we wrote that together and that was the title track of, of an LP that we did right before we started writing together all the time. So, um, that's how we got the ball rolling. And he's a real easy guy to, to write a song with. His, his craft is really good. And, uh, so we started, since we were doing the duo thing and that Everly Brothers kind of vocals and, uh, he was really encouraging the songwriting, so we got together and just, uh, just from a craft standpoint, we would start, uh, just, just writing songs. Get ideas from wherever we could. At the same time, uh, Clint Black, uh, was, he was opening up for us at the time. He was just a local kind of a kid, you know.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: At the time and he and Shake had a friendship. And, uh, he would open up for us all the time and he, all of a sudden, Shake was saying, well, you know, this guy from ZZ Top, he was thinking about signing him and making him a, he needs a country star and so he, you know, I, I never saw Clint with a hat on back then. He was doing more kind of James Taylor-y kind of things and.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: And, uh, so, he got, he was opening up for us and so, uh, he got really big. So, you know, he got, he came up with that first record and it was huge. Um, the reason I mention this is because we had the same, uh, publisher, music publisher in, in, uh, in Nashville. So we would actually kind of write songs. We would meet with the publisher and he would say, well, you know, uh, this type of song, you might consider, you know, writing something like this or there'd be a, a local songwriter that was, uh, like Ralph Murphy who'd written tons of hit songs and he, they, the publisher put us together with Ralph Murphy. So we just kind of got into this co-writing thing where we would just write songs. Whether they would end up – just for the joy of writing songs. It didn't really necessarily have to have a point other than just to write a song. Let's pick a topic. 'Cause that's what Nashville songwriters do.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: You know, they have this thing where, they have two or three sessions a day. They have a morning session and an afternoon session and maybe an evening session and if you can't write a song in that 3 hours that you're together with that songwriter, then, you know, you're not really, you know, a songwriter or something, you know, where, that's not the way we do it in Texas. You know, we mess with it. We rewrite it, you know, but it's very fast and, you know, almost formulaic there, but it's good for the craft. So, um, we started writing all kinds of songs and the songs that we liked, out of all of it, we would keep on the records, you know, so.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: We'd have a lot to choose from. Sometimes we'd just write a song because the publisher would like to pitch it and it was with Ralph Murphy or somebody like that. But most of the time we were just trying to come up with good ideas and write songs for ourselves that we
could use in our act, you know, uh, duo. So that's how it got started and it just got to be where we
get together on a regular basis or we would write on the road 'cause we'd be driving all the time
and –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: – eat up the hours like that so.

Norie Guthrie: So, in 1996, you opened White Cat Studios? Why did you decide to open –

Jack Saunders: Actually, I opened that –

Norie Guthrie: Oh –

Jack Saunders: – here, well, let's see. Um, uh, you know, it was a little bit later, uh –

Norie Guthrie: Oh, okay.

Jack Saunders: – I was, the thing about recording records, and this was a great thing about doing
a record every year with Shake for –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: – even when we were in the Shake Russell Band, we did records almost every
year, and so you were in that process of recording, and you're learning the recording arts as you
go.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: I have, I have a recording, a home recording set up, and that was my hobby. I
loved it. I just loved the whole, you know, process of, you know, creating something and then
adding a guitar part and maybe putting a drum part down to it, and harmony vocals and
overdubbing and things like that, so that was my hobby, and then we would go into the studio
and we'd go to the real, you know, really good gear, and um, and so I could not just have my
little home setup, but I could, uh, you know, had that experience, and so –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: – after doing all that, right after we, I mean, I put out a record, but it wasn't in my
studio. At 96, the first record I put out was in someone else's studio –

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

Jack Saunders: – that let me have carte blanche –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.
Jack Saunders: – so, I set mine, I started setting up a studio and my first release, I think, was *Blue Shadows* in ’99.

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

Jack Saunders: And that's kind of the start of White Cat, uh, John Evans, I produced a record for him in ’99, his debut record, and, uh, so that kind of launched it, and then I moved, it was in my house at the time, and I moved it to the location that it's still in in now in Garden Oaks. So, it's been there 18 years. Yeah.

Norie Guthrie: Um, so what are some of the successes and challenges that have come along with owning your own studio?

Jack Saunders: The crazy thing about the studio is that I've never advertised. It's all word of mouth. People know who I am, or they know that I make records, and it just snowballed from there, because people would, like, even today, if s-, I've heard other studios say, well, you know, if someone wants to make a, a singer, songwriter record, they're gonna hear that, that Jack does it, and they're gonna want to talk to him about, you know?

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: So, I've kind of had that word of mouth going from being an artist, and a recording artist, and, and all that, and to where people have the, the reputation is there. So, I've had it fairly easy from that standpoint. Um, I've even had people come in from out of state, like Susan Gibson – um, not from out of state, but from out of town. She would drive in from Austin and do her record. And I had, um, you know, I'd have people coming in from, and all my musicians were living in Austin, I think, that I would use on a recording. So, I wouldn't use very many Houston people, as far as that was concerned, and so we still had that big Austin connection. Um, so I, I, the challenges are just learning the art form. It's sort of like filmmaking, you know? It's, it's pretty comprehensive. A friend of mine once, you know, Michael O'Connor, said –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: – people don't realize how much work it is to make it sound like you're just hanging out –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: – and really, just tons and tons of work, and you really have to like detail, and you have to have a, uh, sense of patience, and you have some people skills, and you have to try to inspire folks, and you have to get really good musicians, and you have to learn your craft of recording something, and making it simple, and then –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.
Jack Saunders: – trying to make it sound like music. So, that, to me, is the challenging part, and it just keeps getting better and easier and easier, even though you have to prove yourself on every record, because you have to make thousands of new, creative decisions –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: – that are, you know, gonna make or break the record. At least you have the process down, and then it's just throwing paint, you know, uh, constantly, and, uh, trying to come up with ideas, and that's, that's been the, the most enjoyable thing, so, when, I stop performing a lot because it's really tough out there. I admire so many of my friends that go out there and do this for a living, but it's also really hard on you. It's really, it's a really tough lifestyle. Um, it's hard, hard on your relationships. It's hard on your, uh, health. You don't eat. You don't sleep.

Norie Guthrie: Hmm.

Jack Saunders: You know? It's, um, it, you know, some people are just made perfectly for it. I'm not one of those people, uh, so I kind of gravitated towards the studio, which has its own set of problems, you know?

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: Working too hard, and, but I, I try to balance it all out, but, so I kind of, after, at, you know, from the late 90s and the 2000s, even though I'm gigging, and I'm bouncing out with mostly the studio stuff and, and gigs, and playing with a lot of other people, because I ended up playing with Ray Willey Hubbard. I'd take a break from doing my own stuff and playing his band for a couple years.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: You know, play with Susan Gibson, play with Hayes Carll, play with all these folks, so that they, the studio is challenging every time you go in it, but I love it, so, it's, it's a really good challenge.

Norie Guthrie: How has, kind of, recording changed from the late 90s until now?

Jack Saunders: Technology's changed.

Norie Guthrie: Right. Has, uh, also, I mean, I guess also, then for the artists, I'm assuming the distribution is now moving away from the CD.

Jack Saunders: Oh, yeah.

Norie Guthrie: Yeah.
Jack Saunders: It's totally, this is what's happened in the last two years. This has been the, THE most challenging time I've ever had. I've been, it's been really easy, uh, just incredibly easy. I've had more work than I can possibly do for 15 years.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: And then, all of a sudden, a couple years ago, as soon as streaming st-, really started picking up, the whole financial aspect of this is what's a problem is where an artist may come in and go, okay, I'm gonna spend $20,000.00 on a CD. By the time they promote it and they print it and they master it, they hire the musicians, they hire, they have a studio, uh, everything that's, so if they, if they give themselves a $20,000.00 budget, and they think, okay, I'm gonna print up 2,000 CDs –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: – you know? If you're, if you're doing better than that, that's great. If you print up 10, I know some people that print up 10, but, uh, typically, it's a couple thousand CDs. And they think, well, if I can make $10.00 back on my CD, and I sold a thousand of ’em, you know, uh, maybe if I sell 2,000 CDs, I can break even on what I put into it and finance another CD, and the, when I make money off that CD when I'm traveling around, I can put that into the band. I can put it into the gas and hotels and stuff like that. Well, that whole financial aspect of it's gone now.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: Because, streaming pays nothing, and no one's really buying CDs anymore. So, now it's changed, you know? People are still doing albums.

Norie Guthrie: Right.

Jack Saunders: You know, which is a collection of songs, ten songs, but are you selling a physical record, you know? Uh, basically you're not. You know? You, if you go out and play a lot, they're souvenirs, and people will buy them –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: – but only, but young people a lot of times won't, you know? I mean, you can't, you can't buy, there are, a lot of cars don't have CD players in 'em. Most computers don't. You can't go to Best Buy and buy a CD player. So, yeah, I'd say it's dead, you know? Except for people who still have CD players and have one in their car.

Norie Guthrie: Right.

Jack Saunders: So, it's changed. The whole financial aspect of it is totally upside down, and I don't know if it's settled yet.
Norie Guthrie: I've noticed that some people will do, um, through their web site you can download –

Jack Saunders: Right.

Norie Guthrie: – the album. Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: How many people download now? You know?

Norie Guthrie: Yeah.

Jack Saunders: Most people just want to stream it, you know?

Norie Guthrie: I know. I know. Yeah, I don't know. I haven't talked to anybody and asked them, like, well, what happens with that?

Jack Saunders: Right.

Norie Guthrie: What are the sales with that? I don't know.

Jack Saunders: I don't think, I don't think there's much. You know? Like, in Europe, I still get people buying CDs and –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: – but, um, you know, streaming is what, the way things are going. What, what was it, that Pharrell made some ridiculously small amount for 4.2 million streams of “Happy.”

Norie Guthrie: Right.

Jack Saunders: You know, he made $30,000.00 or something. It's incredible. The money isn't there anymore. It used to be, like, Susan Gibson, when I recorded with her, or even Shake, Shake had some big hits –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: – and they financed, that financed some records for a while.

Norie Guthrie: Right.

Jack Saunders: And Susan, she, she split the, um, royalties with her band mates for a while, and everybody, you know, uh, that was the biggest selling country music song of all time, you know? “Wide Open Spaces.” So, you could make real money –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.
Jack Saunders: – um, yeah, that, it's really less, the artists get squeezed and squeezed and squeezed and squeezed, making less and less money, and then if you live in a place like Austin, where you know how expensive it is in Austin. I remember when I lived there it was the cheapest place in America to live. Now it's probably one of the most expensive.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: So, um, it's really, it's really hard, uh, for artists to make it, and I don't know what the financial incentive for recording is anymore.

Norie Guthrie: Right. Um, so, you kind of touched on this a little bit about the idea of doing session work while you were running the studio or taking breaks.

Jack Saunders: Right.

Norie Guthrie: Um, so to use the term side man –

Jack Saunders: Yeah.

Norie Guthrie: – what is it like being a side man?

Jack Saunders: It's nice. It's like a vacation.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: You know? You don't, because, like, when you're a band leader, uh, you worry about whether you have enough money to pay everybody like you would like to pay them.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: You know? What they, if all the expenses are gonna work out, or that you're gonna lose money occasionally, because you want to take care of everybody, and you want to make sure that you, you'll hire the best people and that, and they're all taken care of. Uh, but when you're a side man, when I go play with Ray Hubbard, you know, he worries about all that stuff and, you know, I can go on stage and, you know, there's Willie Nelson next to me at the, uh, you know, at his picnic or something, or go play and let someone else worry about the booking and, uh, everything else, and I show up with a bass amp.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: It's ea, I'm the first one done at the end of the night, you know? I have no, no worries. You know? I can just have fun. Side man is fun. Not everybody can do the side man thing. Hardly anybody can –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.
Jack Saunders: – you know? Do both.

Norie Guthrie: Right.

Jack Saunders: Gurf [Morlix] does it really well. Uh, Jeff Plankenhorn's great at it.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: Michael O'Connor is great at it. Um, but they're all, most song writers can't do it.

Norie Guthrie: Right.

Jack Saunders: You know? So, um, learning all those different things to stay alive, the thing of, when the music business, when I first started came up, come up, I, I decided to play bass and guitar and write and play lead guitar, and sing and learn the recording art so I could do a little bit of everything and always find some kind of work –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: – and keep a balance in there, but, uh, so, going out and playing side man is, is the easiest thing. You know? I could still go out and do that all the time. I did that Saturday night, played guitar. I did my own set, and then I played guitar with Danny –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: – Everitt. And then I played with Scott McGill. So, I played bass with Scott McGill. So, I'm gonna do that to, I'm gonna go play guitar with him tonight. So, you know, it's, it's nice. It gives you more options.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: And it's a lot less pressure. You know? Leave the pressure to the, the guy that runs the band.

Norie Guthrie: Um, and you, you've also been doing solo work. Um, so what is your song pro-, writing process like?

Jack Saunders: Um, my process these days, the, the older I get, the more I want to write narratives and I want to tell a story, and, so to me, that's the highest form of songwriting. When I was younger, um, I would write a song just because I wanted to write a song, uh, in a certain style or I wanted to, you know, just exercise the craft, you know?

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: Whatever, for whatever reason. I'm putting out a record. I need five songs. I need six songs. You know, I mean, uh, that's good, you know? It forces you to focus. Um, now I don't
worry about that. Um, so, my process now is, um, just trying to write the best song I can, get the best idea I can, and –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: – don't mess around with anything else, you know, than the best song and the best idea I can take up.

Norie Guthrie: Are you a person who kind of listens for phrases or, you know, kind of draws on something from real life and then kind of turns that into a song, or?

Jack Saunders: I do that.

Norie Guthrie: Yeah?

Jack Saunders: Yeah. Um, probably they say write what you know, and lately, I think what I've been writing is, you know, I've been thinking about, not with nostalgia in any sense, but different periods of my life and trying to think is there a song in there, you know?

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: Is there a really good story there, and, um, whether it's me or whether it's somebody else, you know, just observance.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: You know? Uh, which is songwriting. That's what you do. You're a voyeur, you know? You, you, uh, you kind of, you know, eavesdrop. You're a good –

Norie Guthrie: Right.

Jack Saunders: – eavesdropper. And, uh, so, sometimes you have to eavesdrop on your own life and kind of figure out what, what am I not, you know, addressing there.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: You know? What didn't I address at the time. What's kind of interesting, you know? What, what would be worth a song?

Norie Guthrie: Do you have anything like that as an example to play?

Jack Saunders: I do.

Norie Guthrie: Okay. Would you like to –

Jack Saunders: I can play one, uh, a story song for you?
Norie Guthrie: You can play a story song, yes.

Jack Saunders: Okay. I'll play the re, the most recent song, okay? So, the story behind it this is, uh, when I was, uh, 17 I ran away from home. I got into some trouble. And I was living in Newport, Rhode Island, and, so, I had a friend in Stores, Connecticut, who lived right across the street from the University of Connecticut, up on this hill, and it's the only person I knew was out of state, and I just ran away from home, and I looked him up, and I said, "Man, I need a place to stay." And he said, "Well, I've got this old car in the driveway." And it was this ancient car. It was beautiful. It was a '47, 1947 Chrysler Windsor, and, um, anyway, I s-, um, I thought, well, you know, I could sleep in that, you know? I mean, it didn't drive or anything like this, but it had a great history, and he told me about it, so I don't know if I can remember all the lyrics –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: – to it, but, um, that's what this song's about. It's about that, it's about that car. It's called “Windsor ’47.”

_I said I’m lookin’ for a hideaway_
_Is there someplace that I can stay?_
_Anynwhere to keep me from the cold_

_The gypsy set me up as all_
_I was green and took the fall_
_And you’re the only stranger that I know_

_He said the only shelter that I’ve got_
_Is sitting up on cinder blocks_
_In the shadow of my mother’s door_

_That car she’s had since I was born_
_No broken glass, it should be warm_
_If she comes out just get down on the floor_

_He said you wouldn’t know to see it there_
_But it was once a grand affair_
_To roll along the road in such a style_

_After dinner, we’d pile in_
_Dad would drive and mom would sing_
_It was the only time that I recall her smile_

_And at night we would ride in that Windsor ’47_
_High among the hills that rose above the town_
_When I closed my eyes we’d go all the way to heaven_
_In that Windsor ’47 we would fly_
For me it was apple wine in the afternoons
Cigarette smoke like faded tunes.
17 was half a man and half a child

The dorm room girls would call to me
With passion’s curiosities
That always left me feeling twice as wild

And at night I would ride in that Windsor ’47
High among the hills that rose above the town
When I closed my eyes I’d go all the way to heaven
In that Windsor ’47 I would fly

Well I guess that I turned out okay
Not bad for a runaway
Though it was another place and time

Ever if I lose my place
I try to find a quiet space
As darkness falls I’m back there in my mind

And at night when I ride in that Windsor ’47
High among the hills that rise above the town
When I close my eyes I go all the way to heaven
In that Windsor ’47 I can fly, I can fly

Norie Guthrie: Very nice. Thank you.
Jack Saunders: Mm hmm.

Norie Guthrie: So, you also brought a harmonica.
Jack Saunders: I did.

Norie Guthrie: So, do you, um, how do you incorporate that into your –
Jack Saunders: Well, when you're doing a solo act, I mean, it's nice to be able to, kind of livens it up if you can finger pick a little bit –
Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.
Jack Saunders: – um, but when you strum, you know, it's, um, it can get awful lonely up there, you know? Unless you have another guitar player or something, so.
Norie Guthrie: Right.
Jack Saunders: And that's why Woody Guthrie, Bob Dylan, Neil Young and all these people, started incorporating a harmonica, so that when you're strumming, so you can get that going.

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

Jack Saunders: See.

Norie Guthrie: All right. Do you want to play something?

Jack Saunders: Sure.

Norie Guthrie: Your harmonica and strumming?

Jack Saunders:

Well, I knew a girl who couldn’t make up her mind
Between saying what’s in her heart and waiting for another time
She didn’t know where to begin
And that’s why I was cueing Dixie in

Had a love so big brought her so much pain
With all these mixed up feelings she couldn’t explain
She didn’t know where to begin
And that’s why I was cueing Dixie in

Cueing Dixie in, cueing Dixie whoa
That’s why I was cueing Dixie in

Says she wants my advice, said here’s what I think
Better find yourself some courage, pour yourself another drink
Stop stumbling around, walk straight up to him
She needed a shove, I was cueing Dixie in

Cueing Dixie in, cueing Dixie whoa
That’s why I was cueing Dixie in
Cueing Dixie in, cueing Dixie whoa
That’s why I was cueing Dixie in

So she turned round to me, looked me straight in the eye
Said ain’t no doubt about it, you’re the only one that I
Want to be with, so here I am
She needed a shove, I was cueing Dixie in
Said it’s me that she loved, as I was cueing Dixie in

Cueing Dixie in, cueing Dixie whoa
That’s why I was cueing Dixie in
Cueing Dixie in, cueing Dixie whoa
That’s why I was cueing Dixie in

Norie Guthrie: Thank you.

Jack Saunders: Mm hmm.

Norie Guthrie: So, thinking about kind of over how, how, kind of what you kind of think about how you have changed as a musician over the years.

Jack Saunders: Um, you know, um, the weird thing about being, I think, probably an artist in any way, uh, in anything is that you're constantly trying to reinvent yourself.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: So, to me, I always think, you know, um, I could definitely be a lot better. So, I always kind of discounted anything that I did. Like, as soon as I would finish it, I would think, you know, I got to, I got to accomplish this and I got to accomplish that, and I got to get better at that and get better at this, and I always think, yeah, I'm not that good here, you know? So, I'm always thinking of getting better and getting better and moving forward and reinventing, and then, like, you know, like, with this project, I've had, I've never listened to these tapes.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: I'm listening to stuff from the late '70s, and I'm going wait a second, you know? This is actually pretty good.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: I mean, it's naïve for whatever, you know? So, maybe eh, it, it, maybe you have really fully formed, but there's some good seeds there. So, um, when I think back about what you do, what I do is, uh, I think I just, uh, kind of broaden more than I move up, you know? I just –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: – kind of get better at, all, everything that I do –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: – you get better at being a guitar player. You get better at finger picking, you get better at strumming, you get better as a lead player. You understand music more. You understand your voice more and your range more –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.
Jack Saunders: – you have more confidence in your writing and your approach to writing, but there's still, it's really kind of moving sideways. You know? As opposed to, you think that you're doing this, but you're, really, you're just kind of that, that's why, when you had mentioned, like, a song that you might have played a long time ago, I don't really look stylistically like I've changed that much. I've expanded, but –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: – I just tried to make the songs better and tried to be better at every aspect –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: – of it, you know?

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm. And so, since you have stayed in Houston, basically –

Jack Saunders: Mm hmm.

Norie Guthrie: – since 1976 –

Jack Saunders: Mm hmm.

Norie Guthrie: – how is the Houston, you came into the scene.

Jack Saunders: Mm hmm.

Norie Guthrie: And that changed obviously.

Jack Saunders: Mm hmm.

Norie Guthrie: How, just how has, how has it changed over the years?

Jack Saunders: Um, it's really not a very good music scene here. I hate to say it, you know? We're the fourth largest city in the coun, country, maybe gonna be the third.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: And, you, you would think there would be a lot healthier music scene. There was a lot healthier music scene. It was a lot better. There was more people when I first came here. You know, and that's, history is kind of, pointing that out, you know? With the people that have made their mark, you know, even back then. But, and there's some talented people, and I see 'em in my studio. They, a lot of them come through.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.
Jack Saunders: But, the scene is just, I don't know how people hone their craft. I told you about all the work that I did. You know, I mean, when you go out and play in clubs, if you can go out and play five nights a week –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: – boy, you can get really good at something. I mean, say you want to be a better electric guitar play, or you want to be a better bass player, or you want to, you know, or you want to, you want to make sure that you have your songs down really tight, if you go out and play five nights a week, you know, all over the place, well, you're gonna get really good, and there’s, uh, you're gonna get those repetitions –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: – you know? That you need. I don't see that. It's really hard. A lot of young groups, you know, try, struggle to find gigs. Uh, there aren't really, there's not an infrastructure, you know? Um, if you get in a, on a touring sort of situation, and you get, uh, you can travel around like that, it's a hard life. Like, we talked about it before.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: And financially you get squeezed more and more, because you can't sell CDs a lot of the times, you know? Um, that was a big source of income to help supplement your traveling expenses.

Norie Guthrie: Right.

Jack Saunders: So, uh, those po-, that's the same everywhere.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: I mean, I, I'm, whenever I talk to an artist, the first thing I ask them is, hey, how's it going with you, and –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: – you know, what are you seeing out there on the road? Um, and so, the Houston music seen is pr-, and I know it's picked up a lot. We've got a lot more clubs now, um, here recently, um, so that's helped.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: But, as far as the homegrown artists, most people take off, you know? Like, Gordy Quist, you know? He came in and did his record and he's gone to Austin, and then they do well when they get to Austin. Uh, a lot of people, they just don't stick around, you know? Uh, in Houston.
Norie Guthrie: What do you, what do you think happened in the '80s to, did that, because my thought is maybe that kind of happened in the '80s. Like, what do you think shifted? What changed?

Jack Saunders: Uh, you know, I think it was still pretty healthy in the '80s. It was different –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: – but there still were places to play. I, I think –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: – what happened is people have more, um, they had more options.

Norie Guthrie: Yeah. Okay.

Jack Saunders: And when you think about it culturally, back then, if you wanted to go out and see a band, you know, you couldn't YouTube them.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: You know? It was this mysterious, you know, thing. Wow. I really liked that band, or a friend of mine loves that band. We got to go out and find them and see them. So, people would go out more.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: But now, I mean, I mean, television, golden age, you know, why, a lot of people just go off this, stayin' with my 65-inch television, and, you know, watch a movie or, or I could YouTube somebody or something like that. So, there's just more options than –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: I, I don't think music is as special to – it is, to a certain crowd, definitely, uh, but I think it's just one of many things, you know, that, for entertainment, and, uh, people have to dig. If you grow up, uh, listening to music and listening to the radio like I did, I kind of felt like there was a lot happening on the radio. I think there's a lot of the same happening on the radio now.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: It's controlled more corporate ways, you know, so that, um, there's not as much, you have to have a lot, you have to have a curiosity. You have to have an intellectual curiosity –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.
Jack Saunders: – to seek bands out. Now, a lot of young people do that. A lot of people in college, you know, age, they do that, you know, and that's great, and, um, they go out and see bands and it's a social thing, too, and then they have kids and then that changes, and, uh, and that's, that's part of the natural thing, but that's always happened, but I think that there's just fewer, there's fewer situations for bands to be good, you know? I think –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: – because you have to get the, what was that, Gladwell talked about getting your 10,000 hours in –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: – and the Beatles did that, you know, because they played all the time, and, and, um, you know, executives did that and they worked hard, uh, but, you know, how do you get your 10,000 hours in? You, it's real hard to do, so, the scene is, there's just not as much, many, not as many places to play.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: And it's, everybody's doing it, you know, because it's so much fun. It's so good that it just kind of deletes, you know –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: – it seems to me.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: Everybody wants to do it, because it's so fulfilling.

Norie Guthrie: Right.

Jack Saunders: You know? And, uh, they want to do it in the studio. They want to create, whether it makes any money or not. You know? Um, they want to go out and start a band, and, and play in a club.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Jack Saunders: They don't know what it used to be like. They don't care. You know? Uh, it's harder, but it still is fulfilling, you know? And it still is special for everyone that does it, you know?

Norie Guthrie: Right.

Jack Saunders: So, and that's, that's what drives the whole thing.
Norie Guthrie: Well, thank you so much for coming in to, to talk about your career and everything.

Jack Saunders: Well, thanks for having me here.

Norie Guthrie: All right.

Jack Saunders: Thanks, Norie.