Interview Transcript

Norie Guthrie: My name is Norie Guthrie from the Woodson Research Center, Fondren Library Rice University. I am interviewing Dana Cooper. Today is January 20, 2017. This is part of the Houston Folk Music Archive Oral History Project. What first drew you to music?

Dana Cooper: Uh, my father, uh, actually, uh, first, uh, I first heard music played on the radio and, uh, my dad was a big music lover, loved country music. You know I grew up listening to things like Hank Williams and Ernest Tubb, stuff like that and, uh, I think the combination of that. He took me to an Ernest Tubb concert when I was 3 years old and we had to go through quite a rigmarole to get there. It was, we lived out in the country. It was in Missouri about 60 miles from Kansas City. So we, we had to walk down to place where you could get on a freight train, got on a caboose, freight train and rode it to Kansas City and then he took me over to Kansas City, Kansas to see Ernest Tubb and I really think, you know, I mean I was 3, but I know it had a profound effect on me and he would get me to sing along with the radio. He, he was tickled by that. So and in that same year, that was 1954. He took me to see two movies that really, uh, really moved me and turned me on to different kinds of music. One was *On The Waterfront*, uh, an Elia Kazan movie, has, uh, music by Leonard Bernstein. Beautiful suite. I'd never heard anything like that and also that same year he took me to see a movie called *Blackboard Jungle* which had Bill Haley and The Comets, a great Texas band, playing rockabilly music. I think that year was just a, it really kind of set me up and it of course it was an ongoing thing. My father was always into music and love singers, loved songs. He'd hear a song on the radio and he'd go and that's gonna be a hit, you know, so, uh, and he had a very nice singing voice as well. So, uh, I was kinda stepped in it at an early age.

Norie Guthrie: Cool. Um, what instruments did you play, did you start out playing?

Dana Cooper: Uh, probably first instrument I had was a, was a plastic harmonica that my grandfather gave me, and I tried to make music with that thing and I was probably about 8 or something, but, uh, I got a guitar. My dad gave me a guitar when I was 12, a really cheap, funky, Kay guitar from Western Auto. The action was so high it played kind of like a cheese cutter. It was just awful guitar, uh, and I was very frustrated with it and, uh, I was always tapping on things and, and, uh, so by the time I was about 13 I, I was playing the guitar a little bit and started to write some songs, but I started playing, uh, drums when I was 12, in a, in a marching band in school on the snare drum. So then I sort of dreamt of being a drummer and I studied drummers and I'd go to the CYO dances and watch them. So drums and guitar were kind of the, the first things I really latched on to and it moved pretty immediately over to just the guitar.
Norie Guthrie: Does doing, kind of starting with drums in a way, do you think that that influenced your guitar playing?

Dana Cooper: Oh it definitely influenced my guitar playing and just, I think, my interest in rhythms and, uh, just my propensity for banging around on things and playing with poly rhythms and things I definitely incorporate that a lot into my guitar style and then of course a lot of guitarists that I heard coming up that I liked the things they did rhythmically. Pete Townshend was a big one of course, uh, uh, but then all the, uh, you know, I listened to things like the Hootenanny television show that came on. I forget how old I was, what year that was exactly, but it was, it was during that time but I was probably about 10 or 11 and that's when I started to get turned onto a lot of folk music and, uh, and sort of lot of world music as well because some of those folk artists, like Mariam Makeba, people like that using African influences and old blues influences and so, uh, those definitely kind of added to my arsenal of things I wanted to, you know emulate and learn so.

Norie Guthrie: Um, do you remember the first song that you wrote?

Dana Cooper: Yeah I, I, I vaguely remember it. It was a, uh, I was probably 12, 13 and, uh, what I call it something like between 32nd and 31st Street or something. I think there was a girl I liked in high school and she lived on 31st Terrace. And I didn't sing very well so I just kind of had this, it was just a, kind of a Lovin’ Spoonful-ish, uh, influenced, you know, teenage love song.

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

Dana Cooper: I hope no one ever hears.

Norie Guthrie: Um, could you describe some of the bands that you played with as a teen?

Dana Cooper: Yeah, uh, first band was just, uh, two brothers, uh, that I knew there in Independence, Missouri and, and, uh, they, uh, Bill and Paul they, they had a, one of them had built one of these Heathkit, um, guitar amplifiers. I had a snare drum and a little crash cymbal that I brought from another friend's father who had a junk store and an old Shure microphone that looked like a grill off of an old car and this great big thing is a straight mic. So I had to stand it up between my legs, played the snare drum and the cymbal and sing and we plugged the mic into the amp, and they each played guitars and we all put everything through the guitar amp, and, uh, played in the basement. We even played a couple of, uh, you know, picnic shelters and, uh, a couple kids' houses. You know, some of our friends at school and we were doing things like Dave Clark Five and Beatles and stuff like that you know.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: Um, and then that just kind of, kind of graduated on to, uh, I was in a lot of bands through high school, lot of different bands. Because I could sing, uh, I, I was easy to get into a band. And there was a shortage of good singers it seemed like. So, so I was in a lot of little local bands. We would play a few gigs and one reason or another they had to break up. Someone would quit and you'd get someone else and it'd just morph into a different band and completely
fall apart and that, that went on for a quite a while. Uh, but in high school I met Shake Russell 'cause he grew up around here, too, right down the street from where I, where I grew up and we had a mutual friend, uh, this girl named Angel. I don't know what her real name was. She had hair down to her knees, uh, uh, Native American girl and she would come to my concerts, folk, some folk clubs in town there, The Sign, The Vanguard, and she was a fan of Shake's band that he played bass in. And she kept telling me you, you gotta meet this guy. I think you guys would really hit it all off and that musically you have a lot in common. So he and I started, Shake and I started bands and we probably went through, you know, 20 to 30 personnel over a couple year period there. Same thing, you know, the guy's more interested in the girlfriends or the new car or something than the band and we were always very serious about it. So it was kind of a, that, that went on 'til about the time I graduated and we went separate ways. Shake went with John Vandiver's band, The Ewing Street Times, and I went to California so.

Norie Guthrie: Can you, um, talk about going to California? Why you decided to go there?

Dana Cooper: Yes, uh, well I knew I had to get out of Kansas City and, uh, I had aspirations. You know, I was, I had an art scholarship, a painting scholarship to, uh, all through high school I had high school scholarships to the Kansas City Art Institute, and I had a scholarship to a Catholic college in Kansas City. Avila, and I went there for about a year, uh, you know, 'cause they had a scholarship and I felt obligated to go and, but I really wanted to play music. So I just quit and I did a tour of college, college coffee house tour around the states for about 6, 7 months and during that time I did a show, a, a party in Kansas City, a coming out party. These wealthy families, daughters, you know, and, uh, I showed up in jeans and roughout, roughout cowboy boots and a work shirt and long hair and, you know, I was the entertainment for the evening, and I'm standing there in this penthouse apartment in the corner playing. I did a lot of cover songs back then, too. Things like, uh, “Somewhere over the Rainbow” and, uh, uh, “Would you like to swing on a star” a lot of old songs from the 40s and 50s and there was a fellow there from Screen Gems Films from Los Angeles. He was a friend of the family. He introduced himself. He really liked what I was doing. Why you know you're really good. If you ever come to Los Angeles look me up and I loved the music coming out of California and had for a long time, you know, from The Byrds to Linda Ronstadt and Joni Mitchell and, uh, just Jackson Browne. All of this great stuff that was happening out there and, uh, seemed to be quite a singer-songwriter based scene. So this kind of made sense to me. It was like, uh, it took me about a year, uh, to get everything together to go out there and, uh, sold my entire record collection and one of the guitars I had and got an airplane ticket and arranged to stay on this guy's couch and his house there, his apartment in Hollywood. I just crashed there for about a week. I went out and immediately got a job, got my own apartment and it seemed like forever, but it was about 3 or 4 months later I, I had an offer from Electra Records, but that whole time was spent, uh, because this fellow, Bill Barnett, uh, I owe a lot to him. He was a great guy and he had a friend named Stan Farber who was a studio singer in Los Angeles in this core group of studio singers, and they did everything from Partridge Family TV shows, Sonny and Cher TV shows. Almost anyone who made a recording whether they were pop or rock or soul or whatever if they needed a group of singers these people were the, the, the A line people, and, uh, there was about 12 of these people men and women. In fact, one of the guys was the voice of Tony the Tiger [mimics Tony the Tiger]. He was the bass singer and Stan sang he's a tenor and he's a really good singer and he knew everyone in Los Angeles. So he met with me, heard some of my music, was really taken
with it and he said I'll take you in, I'll set up all the appointments. So he took me to every single record label in Los Angeles. Sometimes we'd hit a couple of 'em a day and we'd actually go into a guy's office, always a guy, go into a guy's office, sit there and I'd play for him and in various states of consciousness. So I was often under the influence of LSD or other things I would experimenting with at the time and no one seemed to know or notice. I functioned and, uh, so we, you know, I had some offers. Had an offer of, uh, this is, for a staff songwriter for A&M and they took me in to meet the other writer I'd be sharing an office space with. This guy named Paul Williams. He's a, a huge, huge songwriter, very short in stature, very big in talent and, uh, I really liked him and all, but I just, I didn't want to be a songwriter. Uh, I wanted to be an artist, uh, a songwriter is an artist.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: So I held out and nothing came back from anyone. So I finally, uh, because I'd been getting kind of strung out out there. I cleaned up. I went back home to Kansas City. Stayed with my folks, stayed with a girlfriend I had there in Lawrence, Kansas. I think I was home about a week and got a phone call from Marlin Green at Elektra and he said we want to do business with you and I was 20 at the time. So we waited till I was 21 so I could sing my contract and, um, prepare and went out there again and, you know, I got a little front money and enough. It wasn't much. Just a couple thousand dollars, but this is 1973.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: '72 and, and so I, I got a nice little apartment within walking distance of the studio and I'd get up in the morning and I'd walk about six blocks to Elektra and I'd go in and work all day with, you know, I got to pick my own musicians. So I picked Leland Sklar, Russ Kunkel, they were, uh, Jim Gordon who was probably the most in demand drummer at the time, co-writer of “Layla,” Joe Osborn, an old, uh, uh, famous bass player from, from L.A. A lot of great people, Milt Holland, uh, but anyway it was just, uh, I got to choose people and then Stan he produced the record for me and he also suggested people that I didn't know about and brought in really good people. That was the experience of a lifetime working on that project with those people at 20, 21. I was kind of blown away and, uh, it was a good year, year and a half, you know, and then, uh, I toured behind the record and then eventually was dropped at the bottom third of the roster of the label. They had made a big switchover, uh, um, when David Geffen kind of came in and took over, but yeah it was a, it was a lot of fun. It was a big crash coming out of that and pretty, pretty rough for about a year.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: Uh, but then I just went right back. I went up to San Francisco and lived for a while and then I went back and spent another year down there knocking on doors and a lot of close calls, but didn't snag anything. Just decided I'd had enough and moved back to northern California. So I spent about 8 years back and forth between northern and southern California.

Norie Guthrie: So what ended up bringing you to Houston?
Dana Cooper: Well that kind of goes back again to the John Vandiver and Shake Russell connection which, uh, Shake and John had moved here with their band Ewing Street Times. Uh, think they went down to Florida for a while after, you know, when I left, they had gone off. I think down to Coconut Grove I believe, and then they ended up back in Texas and John was from Dallas originally. And, uh, you know, Shake and I had seen John at a Love-in in Kansas City. The Ewing Street Times just showed up one day and, uh, Shake and I were with a drummer, uh, that we were working with at the time, uh, Tom, I can't remember Tom's last name, um, but, uh, and we saw this band and in particular this guy at the front of the band. This singer that was just world class, I mean, you know, I was like wow, who is this person? And they were doing songs by, uh, people like Jerry Jeff Walker and Michael Murphy, and some people I hadn't really heard much of and, just interesting collection of stuff. It was all new.

Norie Guthrie: Uh huh.

Dana Cooper: So, uh, so yeah I, uh, things were going kind of rough out on the west coast and I was in touch with Shake and John occasionally. I actually invited them to come out to record on my album on Elektra and they, they had their own thing going and they said you'll do better with the people you got and they were kind of self-effacing about the whole thing. So that didn't happen, but, uh, so it opened a door to go down there and so I went in '76, uh, I came down to Texas to Houston just for like a week’s visit to see what it was about and they both said yeah, there are a lot of clubs, a lot of a, a great scene going on here. So we went into KLOL radio station and did a live recording in there, and a couple of the songs from that got put together with some demos that they had been making with John and they put, out this album called Songs on the Radio which is songs on the radio and, uh, I just one day get this album in the mail in San Francisco and I, I didn't even know they were making a record.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: And, uh, my name was on there and a couple of my songs and, and I listened to it and I thought yeah, didn't sound very good, the recording quality of it. I was kind of appalled 'cause I had been working, you know, with, with really professional L.A. people –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: – a polished thing and, uh, but, but there was undeniably something cool about a lot of the tracks particularly tracks that they had done with John, things they had done in the studio and I loved them anyway. So well it just took off, became a very popular thing here in Houston. So I ended up coming down like another two to three times over, uh, in '76, '77 and I'd do shows with them and, and, uh, the crowds got bigger and Shake came out there for a while, lived, uh, in the, uh, house I was living in. We wrote some songs. Uh, he was out there about 5, 6 months. Kind of built up some demand for him to come back here and he did that, and then the audience was built even more and next time I came down for a visit it was, you know, we're playing the Opry House to a thousand people and I was like I've got to, I've got to move down here and do this you know. Uh, he was just nagging and I really wanted to play music so it was a good opportunity.
Norie Guthrie: So how would you, you said that there was a lot going on here. How would you describe kind of coming into the folk scene here?

Dana Cooper: Well it was really interesting, you know, from everything from just the physicality of this place, the geography of it, the weather. You know I, I the first time I came here from San Francisco I got off the plane, uh, at Hobby and, and it was, uh, in August, and there was a, you just got off and there was a, a, a stairway off of the plane and you step right onto the tarmac, and I stepped out of the plane and, and could barely breathe it was just so humid and hot. And I had, you know, I was so stupid. I had my jeans tucked down into my Frye boots, and, you know, I looked like a tin horn you know, cowboy shirt on and everything. And I was just thrust into this culture that was fascinating, kind of frightening a little bit to me, too.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: People called me a Yankee all the time. I, I'd never heard that you know. It was just so funny to be from Missouri that probably the heart of, of the Civil War really, went on after the Civil War right there with the James gang and everything. It was just, you know, but anyway, um, yeah I thought that was kind of funny, but sometimes it wasn't said in a funny way you know. I stepped into a lot of resentment from people in the audience sometimes. Uh, I noticed people in the front row sometimes would be yelling things and that, and we'd stop playing between songs and I hear 'em saying things like we didn't come to hear you and stuff like that.

Norie Guthrie: Oh wow.

Dana Cooper: It was this immediate sort of, um, because Shake and I were the front guys it be kind of, it was a competition to, it wasn't to me, but it was to some people in the audience.

Norie Guthrie: Hmm.

Dana Cooper: So it was, I'd never experienced anything like that. It was very, very odd.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: Uh, at the same time there were just amazing people around here, uh, writing songs and playing music. Townes Van Zandt who I'd meant before in Boston when I was on Elektra. We shared some shows up there, but, uh, Townes was here. Guy Clark, Lucinda Williams, somewhere along in there was coming up, Nancy Griffith a little later on, you know. Eric Taylor of course. People like Michael, uh, Marcoulier who had a rock band. He was great. He did a lot of work with us. Uh, um, Wheatfield became St. Elmo's Fire who I loved then. They were some of the first people who kind of embraced me, really took me in, were very nice to me. Danny Everitt, uh, was another one that we did a lot of gigs with at Love Joys, Corky’s, places like that. UH, there was just a, it was a place, Blaze Foley, he was another big one. I loved Blaze. Uh, Ron Crick who was an old friend of ours who we'd known in Kansas City. Uh, there were a lot of sort of these paths that cross over the years in interesting ways, uh, but I, I it was obviously a very vital scene and a lot of great bands, you know, uh, they Cold Cuts and oh gosh just so
many really cool bands, and I loved the, uh, the influence of the old blues music, uh, Cajun music, um gospel music, all these things that were very particular to the south and that had kind of bled into this town, uh, I was, uh, really I was, it was an interesting combination, being invigorated by it, feeling I didn't fit in at all.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: Uh, but then also being really embraced by a lot of people and, uh, the whole time I lived here, the whole 8 or 9 years I lived here, it was, uh, or it was 10 years. Yeah it was uh, it was interesting. I never quite felt that I belonged here completely.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: Um, and some of that obviously is self-imposed or you know it came from within me, but some of it came from that thing being an outsider coming into a place and, uh, and I always wanted to try to do something a little different, so that became more of an issue later on once I quit working with Shake, but, uh, yeah. I, I owe a lot to this town because I mean really I was just languishing out there. I was going back to college studying horticulture and, you know, thinking, working a job, a full time job, going to school full time, coming home and gardening at night with floodlights and then I realized one day it's like I'm just, I'm just filling my time up so that I don't have to face what it is I really wanna do which is to go out and play music.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: It's funny to wrestle with that all those years, finally, you know, realize okay.

Norie Guthrie: Um, what were some of your favorite clubs?

Dana Cooper: Favorite clubs?

Norie Guthrie: Yeah.

Dana Cooper: Oh, well, yeah. There were a lot of 'em. I loved, uh, well, you know, Corky's is a mainstay. That was, and, that was a, a funny little place. Uh, Corky's, I liked Lovejoys, that was a neat setup. Those were a couple of the first places I played. Houlanah's was another funky little place I actually enjoyed playin. But, you know, it was wonderful, uh, we spent, and, of course playing the Opry House, that was the pinnacle right there.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: That was the biggest place around, and, uh, I enjoyed that, and enjoyed the shows there, uh, uh, been to a place like Steamboat Springs, which I also like that place, 'cause it was a little smaller –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.
Dana Cooper: – but still a good size to turn the house. We'd fill the house, and then, do a show, and they'd empty it and fill it again, and we'd do that 2, 3 nights in a row. It was just crazy.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: You know, so, I mean, uh, again, I l-loved those gigs, uh, but, I was just saying this the other day, you know, if I were to step into one of those places now –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: – that, if they existed now, and I wanted to play a show, it would be such a challenge 'cause those audiences were, uh, you know, we were a band, and we kind of, however you classified it we, we rocked.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: And we were kinda, you know, we could crank it up a little bit.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: So, an audience was roaring loud, which it always was. Uh, we could at least sort of hear ourselves. Sometimes it was hard to even hear yourself –

Norie Guthrie: Wow.

Dana Cooper: – uh, plugged in like that, and –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: – and turned up. So, I see that a lot now when I go to Austin, um –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: – for instance. This music city, and you go there to the concert, and virtually no one is listening to anything these world class people up there play. And, well, maybe some people listen, but mostly, you know, people drinkin' and yelling and talkin', and, and it really isn't about listening to what's goin' on. It's more about being part of the scene, and I think that was really, uh, that is a big part of it. You know, now I have people come up, hadn't seen you in 30 years, and since the old days, with Shake and all this other stuff. Well, first, say, you should get out more often. And, we all do this. Every generation does this. You cling to that, what you, what you were into when you were young, when you were a teenager and a college student.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: That's always what you have, uh, some mentality for, uh, your attraction to it, and you're always so drawn back to those good old days, you know. Uh, but, uh, I loved the fact that
we had audiences to play for, but it's funny, uh, to think back on it now, and realize, you know, I'm not sure how much, obviously people heard something, –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm

Dana Cooper: – but, but, uh, you know, I'm not sure what exactly.

Norie Guthrie: So, do you prefer now to play, like, in listening rooms a bit more?

Dana Cooper: That's mostly what I do play, and, and, yeah, I mean, uh, I love, I loved rockin' it out, always kind of balance this thing of folk and country and rock n roll and pop. I've always, uh, along with lots of other kinds of music as a writer I’ve always wanted to incorporate as many things as I can, and, and work to do so, and, and, uh, but, there is something really cool about being able to get up, tell your stories, sing your songs, and people are actually, really listening –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: – to what you do. And, especially if, if you spend a lot of time honing that craft, and, and really working on your lyrics at all. Oh, there's another friend of mine who recently posted a thing I saw. He's, he's, a, a music writer, and he was, he made an observation. He’s been, he'd gone out to a club, and, and he'd heard this little trio, and it, it sounded great. He said it had a really cool, interesting sound, and easily drawn to it, but he seemed to realize he wasn't really listening to what they were singing, what they were saying, lyrically.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: It was just the sound of the voice, the sound of the instruments, how it all worked, and he wondered how much people, and this is in a club setting, and he goes to a lot of house concerts, and so you wonder how much people really pay attention to lyrics, uh, and that, and that's such an important thing for a songwriter to be able to play house concerts.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: Concerts are just because people are there for that. They want to hear the message as well as the music, so, yeah, I really like it. It, it kind of intimidated me at first. We went from the band into doing house concerts on my own. Uh, because you are pretty vulnerable. It's, it's, uh, not very comfortable doin' it. But, I can get up in front of a noisy audience, and I’ll occasionally still do a bar gig somewhere, to pick up a gig, and, and I'll just get up and, and do it, and it doesn't really bother me. Um, and, if you're in a band, uh, I think it's sort of, it is different. You don't necessarily want to get up there in front of an audience just to sitting there and staring at you.

Norie Guthrie: Right.

Dana Cooper: So, I like to see people move and dance and stuff too, so, uh, it's all just a simple matter of, of what you want to do. I would really miss having a band. I, I, I love doing the solo
thing, but I, occasionally put a band together in Nashville, uh, and I even auditioned, and did one
gig with a 60s, uh, classic 60s rock band here last year, and I was excited about that. I thought,
this could be a lot of fun to do this on the side, and it, the band just didn't, it just didn't really stay
together to do the gigs, but, um, I enjoy that energy. But, as far as my mainstay and what I'm
doing as a writer, it's, yeah, it's, it's, uh, I put a lot of thought, a lot of work into what I'm writing
and saying, and, and I like for people to, to be moved by it, or –

Norie Guthrie: Right.

Dana Cooper: – you know, entertained by it, and…

Norie Guthrie: No, that, that totally, you invested the time, and say you want –

Dana Cooper: Yeah.

Norie Guthrie: – the band to also reciprocate.

Dana Cooper: Yeah.

Norie Guthrie: Um, so you talked a little bit about, um, working with, um, John Vandiver.

Dana Cooper: Mm hmm.

Norie Guthrie: What was he like?

Dana Cooper: He was a hoot of a guy. He was real serious, uh, about, he, what he was doing
musically. Uh, but he was a, you know, he, he, he made a real transition. When I first met him,
when he was in Ewing Street Times in Kansas City, I got to know them a little bit, uh, he and
Michael Mashkes, particularly. Michael played guitar in the band, and, uh, his girlfriend ended
up being a fan of mine, and, and introduced me to Michael, and, of course I'd go see them all the
time. They, they, they kind of did a residency at a club there, in a coffee house, the Vanguard
Coffee House in Kansas City, which is a folk place. But, occasionally they'd bring bands in
there, and, uh, they played there a lot, and I'd just go and study them, and, and, just was blown
away by 'em. Well, I got to meet John, and he's very, uh, intimidating. Very serious, uh, he'd,
you know, he had this wild curly hair. He looked kind of like a biker, and, uh, he wasn't
particularly friendly to me. Um, and then, later on, when I started going to Texas, and they were
down there, um, and we'd done a couple of gigs in Kansas City over the years when we were
both in town at the same time. Couple of things just sorta happened, and, I got to know him a
little bit better there, and once I moved to Houston, he'd kinda gone through some, some things
in life, I think, that, uh, he'd mellowed a lot, and he was very friendly, and, uh, Shake and I both
really looked up to him as a, he was a mentor to both of us, uh, I know, probably more to Shake,
because Shake was really around him more.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.
Dana Cooper: But, uh, I always really respect John, but he's very jovial, funny, funny guy, wise cracking guy, and, uh, you know, always had a big spliff, about that big around.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: And, he was just a, and he'd just get up and sing his heart out. I mean, he was really one of the most soulful, uh, singers I've ever been around, and a great guitar player, and he sort of, uh, he sort of took on a persona of, of an old country blues guy.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: But he really could’ve done, I think, anything musically. He was, that was what he was really in love with, and did a great job. He was a really good guy, real generous fellow. Um, that was a sad terrible, terrible loss.

Norie Guthrie: Um, so you, one of your bands here was called DC3

Dana Cooper: Uh huh.

Norie Guthrie: Um, what was that band like?

Dana Cooper: We were a power trio. I played electric guitar, and a base player and a drummer that beat the heck out of the drums, and, we were not playing folk music. I came out of the band with Shake. Uh, I, I, I don't know, I just started writing these songs that were really kind of urban, and, you know, hard time signatures some of them, and, it didn't really fit with the sort of country rock, folk rock thing we were doing. And, the band would work, we worked some of these things up and did them. But I felt there was a real, uh, there was almost, kind of a sudden change. I don't know really what, uh, what prompted it, but, uh, while I was listening to, I was just kinda listening to other stuff, and, and, uh, I was pickin' up on a lot of the punk music that was going on. I liked a lot of it. I thought it was, I loved the energy of it, and, uh, the chutzpah, you know, -

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: – that was pretty cool. So, I, I think I was sort of imitating some of that a little bit I guess, and going back to my teenage years or something, and, rebellion, and I started writing these edgy things that just didn't quite fit. So, at some point I just decided, you know, and there were a lot of other factors. I just, I wasn't happy with where the band was going in a business way either. So, I just, uh, quit one day, 'cause it was, I really wasn't happy any more.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: I woke up one day and realized kinda important to be happy. Well, people in town just thought I'd lost my mind, -

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.
Dana Cooper: – and venues that we played, a lot of them, most of them wouldn't, wouldn't book me, wouldn't book my new band. Again, there was this real, recoil kind of thing that happened.

Norie Guthrie: Right.

Dana Cooper: But there were a few places, Anderson Fair was one of them that, that would book DC3. We went into that folk club and played, you know, louder than anyone had ever played in there, I'm sure. It was real, uh, so dance oriented, uh, we ended up, in about a year I ended up, uh, I took on my own booking, and I booked us in a lot of college clubs.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: We played for a lot of young people, uh, so they danced to the band. And, so, I was writin', you know, two, three songs a week for a while there, for a year or two. It, and we'd get together two or three times a week and rehearse, and, every week we'd have new songs to add to our list. We did some Elvis Costello, and some Nick Lowe, and some odd things, uh, as well, cover songs as well.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: So, it was, it was a real nice chance to experiment with different time signatures to the electric guitar, which I hadn't messed with in a long time. I really didn't play acoustic for a few years, much at all.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: I was even writin' all my songs on the electric, and, a completely different look, the way we dressed, the energy of the show. It was just a different thing, kind of new wave, punk kind of thing.

Norie Guthrie: Pe, maybe power pop?

Dana Cooper: Probably power pop would be more, yeah, that's probably –

Norie Guthrie: Yeah.

Dana Cooper: – a bit more accurate description of it.

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

Dana Cooper: And then, you know, I, I began writing some other stuff so that that band went through quite a few personnel in that band as well. It was interesting trying to find who would fit in the band and who would stick with the band.

Norie Guthrie: Okay.
Dana Cooper: So, I had a, a bass player who I'd known in Los Angeles, down in Al Billings, and he, he came on board very, the very first of it. We started the band. We auditioned a bunch of drummers. We hired a young guy, Vic Godinas. Nick lasted for, I don't know, maybe 5 or 6 months or something, then, and he, he had to bow out because of his girlfriend. He had to, he had a, we ended up hiring, you know, had a woman drummer for about a week, had woman bass player for a couple of weeks, and, people just would kind of flake out. Um, we ended up, uh, havin' a, a trio that lasted, uh, we were together at least a couple years, and then we replaced the drummer. Eventually, Al left too, and I, I got a completely different base player and drummer. So, it was, it was, like, uh, I guess about 6 years that band was together, uh, in one form or another. We made a single. We did a, a cassette tape in my living room. We recorded and released that, then a single. Then we recorded an album project, and went to LA and did some gigs there, and had it mastered out there, and, that was “Perpetual Man,” and, and then it morphed into a four-piece group for a very short time, called Nuclear Family, –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: – and we put out one album. And, uh, and during that time I'd been writing some other things on my own go the acoustic out, picking up some house concert gigs to make some money, and, and just kinda ventured into that avenue and really, really enjoyed it. It was like, oh, okay. This, this, like, kinda go back to my roots again, and, and I did that, did the complicated stuff project, and that was when I just, kind of, disbanded the group finally.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: But, it was a fun, fun 2 years there with that band. It was, really got to experiment musically with all the things that I kind of had felt restricted about, and a lot of it now, I would never necessarily want anyone to hear. I don't really do many of the songs anymore, but, –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: – but, uh, some of them I do. Some them have lasted.

Norie Guthrie: Well then, maybe this would be a time. Do you want to play one of those songs, or one of the songs that you would have played when you were with, um, Shake Russell?

Dana Cooper: I could do that. Um, yeah, I. I don't really, I don't think I remember any of the songs that I'd do with DC3. I mean, I could dig around and recall one of them, but, um, yeah, maybe, uh, maybe I'll do a, this song that, I'm just gonna tune this while I talk for a second here.

Norie Guthrie: That's cool.

Dana Cooper: Got a little tuner on here. This song I actually wrote, uh, a long time ago. I think I wrote this, uh, um, maybe right before I graduated from high school or right after.

Norie Guthrie: Oh, okay.
Dana Cooper: And, it ended up bein' a song that we recorded, Shake and I recorded, and on the album cover, it’s mistakenly credited to Shake. And, uh, uh, the record label made a booboo.

Norie Guthrie: Is that the one with, um, –

Dana Cooper: Yes.

Norie Guthrie: – so, there's the, there's the one with a, so, it's listed as, like, Shake Russell, Dana Cooper, um, Marcoulie, and, um Vandiver, I think?

Dana Cooper: Yeah. That's *Coming Home*.

Norie Guthrie: It's *Coming Home*. Then there's the other one that's kind of got green and red on the cover?

Dana Cooper: Yeah. Yeah, it's on that one.

Norie Guthrie: Okay. Okay.

Dana Cooper: It's an MCA record, yeah. Yeah, uh, that's, Shake Russell/Dana Cooper Band. And, this song's on there, it said. This is it. This came out of a, I worked my way through, through catholic high school, with jobs to pay my tuition. I was a janitor at the school, and a dishwasher at the school, and, and I was a sign printer and janitor at Katz Drug Store. On Independence Square just three blocks from my school, and there was an old guy, an old blues musician all his life, and been shot and stabbed by his wives and girlfriends and stuff, and had these amazing stories, and, uh, he was kind of tickled by this little, white, skinny, high school kid. He was sweeping up the store I guess, and, so, uh, I actually was inspired by him to write this song, and, uh,

 Well, I'm going down Judah  
Going down slow  
Going down to Judah let the river man row  
Going down to Judah  
Going down slow  
Going down to Judah let the river man row me down?  
Down, down, going down, down down

 Well, the next one will cost you a dollar boy  
Oh the first one you got is free  
Well, the next one will cost you a dollar boy  
How does it feel to have your soul bound to me?  
How does it feel to have your soul bound to me?  
Going down
I’m going down Judah, going down slow  
Going down to Judah let the beggar man row  
Going down Judah, going down slow  
Going down to Houston, let the beggar man row me down  
Going down, going down, going down  

Dear Ruthie come down from your castle  
Dear Ruthie come down from your throne  
Dear Ruthie come down from your dying bed  
Damn your eyes and leave your poor man alone  
Damn your eyes, don’t leave me all alone  
Going down, I’m going down  

Well, I’m going down Judah, going down slow  
Going down to Judah, let the river man row  
Going down Judah, going down slow  
Going down to Judah, let the river man row me down  
Down, down, down, going down, down, down  

Ain’t it hard to believe in the Father  
Ain’t it hard to believe in the Son  
Ain’t it hard to believe in the Holy Ghost  
Some black widow tells you three are one  
Some sister of mercy tells you three are one  

Going down, whoa, going down  
Going down, going down  
Going down, going down, going down  
Going down, going down, going down  

Norie Guthrie: Thank you. So, in 1988 –  

Dana Cooper: Uh huh.  

Norie Guthrie: – you moved to Nashville.  

Dana Cooper: Yeah.  

Norie Guthrie: Um, how, I'm, I'm guessing that you probably moved because, um, you were ready for a change.  

Dana Cooper: Yeah, definitely. I was ready for a change.  

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.
Dana Cooper: I had some friends there who had actually been pestering me for a few years to come there and check it out. Josh Leo was one of 'em. Josh was a guy who played with Ron Crick, who I mentioned earlier, in Kansas City back in the 60s in the same coffee houses I've played, and we're sort of competitors. And Josh I ran into again in an unemployment line in LA at one point out there, and, uh, we kind of reconnected. Well, you know, he, he had moved, he, Josh has had quite a career. And he's produced a lot of great artists, played a lot of people, uh, back then he was working with, uh, with, you know, he started with Kim Carnes, and J. D. Souther and people like that and, uh, Jimmy Buffett. So he had moved to Nashville, and he kept telling me you gotta come down here. It's really a cool scene, and, uh, and then I had another friend Jerry Vadiver, who was also a song writer from Kansas City, uh, and same thing he said yeah, you wanna come over here, you know, you can stay on my couch and check it out, go meet people. So I started doing that, and, uh, kinda like I did my forays to Houston, I did the same thing from Houston to Nashville –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: – it took, uh, like it was, uh, moved there in '88. I guess probably about '86, '87 I went over there for the first time, checked it out, and I was immediately embraced by a lot of people there, um, that really liked, I took complicated stuff I just recorded a cassette project. People loved it. I'd meet with somebody, and they'd, they'd, you know, I mean I had representative of BMI there at the time, and he turned me onto different companies, and, uh, Bud Music I'd work with also, met with them there, and they'd set me up with writers, and I'd co-write with people, and, uh, kind of that was a different thing. I wasn't super comfortable with that, but, you know, it was interesting and, uh so it took a while, but, but, uh, I think it was a year or so, my wife wanted to, she working at Pennzoil or had been for a long time, and she wanted to get away from the corporate world, and, and, uh, she'd kind of gone as high up, you know, she could go there, and, as a woman so, uh, I took her over to Nashville for a visit, and we stayed at a friend's place. Next day we went down to Broad- Broadway went down the hill to downtown by where Tootsies and all that is down there, and this is 19, uh, you know it was '80 – '88, and it was just, that town has grown a lot since then, and she started kind of crying. I felt so terrible. She's like we're going to move here? It's like a, it's like a hick town. She grew up in Pittsburgh and lived in Houston, and it's like well, you know, give it, give it, give it a little time, and, uh, I had been coming over and playing open mics and stuff and meeting a lot of great up and coming people, songwriters and made a lot of friends, uh, before we even moved here. So we kind of plugged into a nice group of people and somehow one, one of the people we knew worked for Rodney Crowell and Rosanne Cash, uh, and she, uh, my wife auditioned for a job as an assistant to them, but in the meantime while she's waitin' to hear from that, she got an offer to run an art gallery there in town. So it was, we were kind of, and she's a painter, and so she plugged in immediately to the art crowd there. So we were very fortunate in that, you know, between the music connection and the art connection, uh, we were sort of plugged in in a way that, you know, you might not normally be. So it was a real struggle. It was, it was, you know, I, a lot of what I was going back and writing kind of fit what was going on at the time. One friend of mine called it the integrity scare.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.
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Dana Cooper: It was when the, uh, you know, Dolly and Emmylou and Linda Ronstadt Trio, and there was k.d. lang was there, and of course Rosanne and Rodney, and The Okane’s and Foster and Lloyd, and all these interesting things were happening, um, that were out of the norm for what country music was doing before that, and so that was all real encouraging. And then literally it, we were there about a year, it was kind of like the door just slammed, just that went away.

Norie Guthrie: Hmm.

Dana Cooper: And Lyle and k.d. lang and all these people that couldn't really get it going there, they went elsewhere, and, uh, so, but we stayed on there and really a few years into our stay, you know, we've been there now for what is it 26 years or something now. That's a long time.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: I've never lived anywhere that long, but the thing that's kept us there's been our friendships with people, the community that we've tapped into there, and, and Linda's work. She's always had a job she enjoyed. She works at Vanderbilt now as a graphic designer so, um, I can live anywhere really. I don't have to live in Nashville –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: – but it's been an interesting balancing act there, and it is for everyone, you know, because, uh, I've seen a lot of change over the years there, and initially it was just you have to co-write with people –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: – you have to choose whether you're a writer or whether you're an artist –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: – and I never, again, I just, I never was one against that. It's like I'm not going to choose anything. I'm both. I'm going to do both. I've always had my touring and my own recordings to, to kind of eek out my living –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: – and haven't had to rely on, you know, getting a hit country song or something, and I would have nothing against that. That'd be great, but it's just not what I've really pursued.

Norie Guthrie: Right.

Dana Cooper: I mean I did a little early on, but I realized I can't really, I can't really do that, you know –
Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: – and keep my sanity so.

Norie Guthrie: When, when I, I don't know if it came up actually during our oral history –

Dana Cooper: Mm hmm.

Norie Guthrie: – but in talking with Richard Dobson, he talked about when anybody goes to Nashville, the way that they write a song changes. He can, he can always tell like that person's been in Nashville.

Dana Cooper: Right.

Norie Guthrie: Do you feel like when you went to Nashville that it kind of changed the way that you wrote, it changed your music?

Dana Cooper: Uh, it, it, it did. Um, and, and what I, it's funny because another friend of mine there, Rick Beresford who had had some success earlier on, uh, a couple, uh, George Jones’ songs and, and I heard him one night at an, at an open mic thing, and it's like well this is the guy that wrote that song. Gosh, I love him. So we, we, we struck up a friendship, and one of the first things he told me, and this was earlier, and he said don't lose the thing that you have, don't, don't lose that –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: – 'cause you can't, it's hard to get it back, and this town will, will kind of impose that on you. So that's always, even though without that I was a little guarded about it anyway –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: – and, um, I certainly wasn't going there as a novice or anything so, but it did as I co-wrote with people, of course we would, we would approach songs in a different than, that I would on my own, and what I found was that over a couple years’ time there I was writing all these songs, going to the offices and writing songs, and none of it was a very natural process, and, and what we'd end up with was a song –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: – but it didn't, none of them ended up being a song anyone else did, and neither of us would do it.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.
Dana Cooper: And, uh, with an occasional exception. Um, and I actually woke up one day, and I was like, you know what, I'm going to quit doing this now. I'm gonna go back and re-learn how to write a song on my own, but I just hadn't been doing that for a couple of years.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: And, uh, and not write a song with any agenda, I'd write a song. So wrote a whole album's worth of songs that year –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: – uh, which became Miracle Mile which Josh Leo produced. He's this you know prominent figure in Nashville.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: But we did a, a pop, this was a pop folk album, uh, that didn't fit in anywhere in Nashville. Now the songs fit in in –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: – Nashville, but that felt like I really accomplished something, just in the writing of the songs and, and the, and the project itself was a blast. It was just so much fun to do. All down there in Nashville –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: – with mainstream or, or musicians that play on mainstream country records, but the thing that's also true there is that there's a hunger there amongst musicians and songwriters and artists for something different. So all the proj, uh, I record a lot of projects there now, all in Nashville, and they're all different and they've all been exciting and a lot of fun and musicians are just impeccable and they always, you know there's, you, you sense that they're really, uh, excited about the project –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: – 'cause they're not just going in and doing the same old thing all the time. So, um, yeah, it's, it's been an interesting convoluted sort of process there. Uh, I was sucked into that, that mainstream Nashville thing at first and then just pulled out of it and then managed to, I can still go and pitch songs to people in Nashville though. They'll open their door to me. They don't say oh not that guy, and occasionally I have a song that just sort of naturally seems to me like it would fit someone –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.
Dana Cooper: – in Nashville so I'll pitch that but, um, yeah, I watch a lotta friends there, songwriters, many of them aren't really performers much so they're just, uh, absorbed in that, in that scene there, all the rejection comes all the time to them from publishers and artists –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: – record companies, and I don't know how someone deals with that. Even when I was in the middle of that, uh, and I'd write something that I thought was cool and get it all put down and –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: – I'd go out on the road and I'd play that song for an audience and they'd love it.

Norie Guthrie: Right.

Dana Cooper: And I'd have that. It's like I'd take it back to people there and say people love this song, don't you get it. It resonates with people. I mean I pay attention to that. If it doesn't, I'm not gonna do it anymore, and, uh, that means something doesn't it. It's like well yeah. It's not the same as the music business so.

Norie Guthrie: Do you wanna play something from Miracle Mile?

Dana Cooper: Um –

Norie Guthrie: If you'd like.

Dana Cooper: Yeah, I could do that. Um, yeah, I could do that for sure. Let's see here. Um, yeah, this was, uh, it's called “Standing in My Own Way” and, and this song actually ended up being recorded by a couple of people, not, not Nashville people. That's also funny how a, a song that you think might be for a particular artist or – I had the experience of Laurie O'Connell got a hold of me one time, said I heard this song of yours and I can't remember what it was. I, I really wanna do it but I can't remember what is was and, and so I started sending her songs you know –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: – no it's not that one, it's not that one. I must have sent her 20 things and, uh, she'd men, she said, I remember, she remembered a, a phrase from it and I was like oh, “Hit the Ground Running.” Was that the song? And it was, it would've been, if there was a song it would've thought anyone would, would be interested in doing you know. It's a very personal kind of obscure song –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: – but, uh, this song, “Standing In My Own Way” is, uh, is on there, on Miracle Mile.
There goes me
Giving in easily
Trying too hard to please
Soft in the middle

Faithlessly
Chickening out on me
Blaming the big machine
Hurdling riddles
Frightened and little
Standing in my own way

Here am I
Questioning where, how, why
Watching my life go by
Man, I don't want to blow it

Contrary me
Begging to disagree
Making mistakes in threes
I'm wrong and I know it
Too proud to show it
I'm just standing in my own way

Standing in my own way
Doomsayer
You and that satisfied grin
Out of my way betrayer
Don't be so darned sure
You'll win

We are through
I no room for two
I'm stepping right over you
Open that front door

Cause here I come
Banging my broken drum
Chasing that grinning sun
I'm winning this soul war
There will be no more
Standing in my own way
Oh, there will be no more
Standing in my own way
There goes me
Standing in my own way
No more standing in my own way
Woohoo, standing in my own way

Norie Guthrie: Thanks. Um, so we're actually getting pretty close to the end. Um –

Dana Cooper: Okay.

Norie Guthrie: – you, um, keep a really active touring schedule.

Dana Cooper: Yeah. Uh huh.

Norie Guthrie: Has this always been the case? Um, has the touring scene or gigs changed since the '70s which we kinda touched on a little bit, the venues have changed.

Dana Cooper: Yeah, yeah. It's all, yeah, it's all really, really changed. It's interesting. Of course back then, there was this whole coffeehouse circuit –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: – which went all over the States and even around the world and, uh, I kind of, I, I tapped into that a little late, uh, but I did get to play a lot of those places with tour on Elektra. Um, a few of them are still left out there you know.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: The co, the company's nonprofit sort of historic sites that have been preserved basically, you know, and, and, uh, but that scene really, really changed a lot and of course, uh, just gosh so many times. I mean the time I had, I’m on Elektra and that was again sort of toward the end of that little era of all these singer songwriters that were, were doing things Harry Chapin, James Taylor, Joni Mitchell and Jackson Browne and all those folks that were, uh, kind of in the mainstream as singer songwriters and then disco came in.

Norie Guthrie: Right.

Dana Cooper: Yeah. And, uh, those people who were established in Paul Simon and people like that they kept doing their thing but it got really hard for emerging people and that was kind of how, I mean it was interesting. I, I sort of bypassed that, uh, I, I, not immediately but there a couple years and then I joined the band with Shake and we just had our own thing and I, we didn’t have to worry about disco or anything else. We did our deal and people came out so it was fine.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.
Dana Cooper: But then I saw even in, you know, the paths I took changing my musical directions along the way but always kinda going back to the singer songwriter thing and now it's, you know, I, uh, I notice that, uh, every year it's about the same, you know, about the same number of gigs. Play all of the same places. They'll have me back in a year or two and then there's always the new emerging coffee houses or, or house concerts, concert series and, uh, and this year going in, this year I noticed there's a big, uh, change. There are a lot of openings in my schedule.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: They're starting to get filled in but this year looks like it's gonna be a little more challenging to, uh, to fill in as many dates as I normally do.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: And we're early in the year so it's hard to say but I think, you know, well, to go see a big concert used to be the good ole days. You know you go to see a concert you could afford to see a concert. You might see several concerts in a year.

Norie Guthrie: Right.

Dana Cooper: Now I mean to go see a big major act that's coming through town a lot of people that's where they'll spend their money on entertainment for the year.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: They'll spend $100.00, $300.00 to go see, you know, U2 or the Stones or somebody coming through and, uh, that's really, that's hurt live music a lot. I think the same is true with, with plays and, you know, in New York you, you have to spend a lot of money. It's like it's entertainment has been geared for people who have money.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: Not people who don't. So that's an interesting environment that we live in and kind of deal with. Uh, but I'm fortunate that I have such a history. Uh, on the one hand sometimes I feel like maybe it impedes me a little bit because I'm, I'm getting older now and old white guy playing the guitar is not necessarily the most in demand thing but, um, I think the experience that I bring and the stories that I have, that all kind of makes it something a little different.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: And, uh, uh, I think there's gonna continue to be a place for me to do that but sometimes now you have to sort of create your own venues. Like I encourage, I go out to my, my fans and I say look anybody interested in doing a house concert. You never done one we'll help
you figure it out and more and more people are stepping up and doing that. Uh, the audience is getting older.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: And that's, uh, that's a concern to people my age. You know, you want to stay pertinent and you wanna keep appealing to the younger people, um, that gap I don't, I haven't figured out how one, uh, bridges that gap. It's just there, exists. I know that when younger people happen to show up in an audience they're usually really taken with it and like it, uh, but on the broader scale, you know, 'cause everything, radio, the music business itself, how music is delivered, uh, from wire to vinyl to cassette to eight, 8-track tapes slight and then, you know, to CDs and now that's going to become obsolete and what will, what will artists sell?

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: Uh, you know, there, there are a lot of concerns, um, for people like myself out there. I mean I think that older people definitely will have to learn how to download music and a lot've ‘em just resisted.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: People like to have a CD at the show. That's where I usually sell 'em and gives us a souvenir of the fact they were there. And if you were there you autograph for 'em. It's kind of a thing, you know.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: But when that goes away I don't know what, what they'll be but I've always really, I've always tried to think ahead and think outside the box a little bit and, uh, find ways to keep, keep it going.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: So, so far so good, you know, keep, uh, keep playing who, to whoever will listen.

Norie Guthrie: When you think back over the music that you've written over the years can you talk about kind of the changes that's gone through your different kind of lyrical themes that you've been attracted to at different phases, have you changed the way that you play?

Dana Cooper: Uh, yeah. Yeah, all that for sure. I, um, the writing part, the, uh, you know when I first started writing songs I'm pretty sure I wrote lyrics off first, write a poem or something and then I find a way to put music to it. Uh, occasionally, that would be the case but it's all over the place now how I write a song and I take more time with songs –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.
Dana Cooper: – often now. Uh, occasionally, well it just happened and I'll write it in a day or a few hours but, uh, very often, um, I'll have an idea. Now I get a lot of musical ideas and I'm always capturing those on my little recorder or whatever, uh, and then I'll kind of review those but that whole writing process has definitely changed and kind of continues to. Um, so, uh, and the themes themselves of course, uh, have gone from teenage love and teenage angst to it's all love, it's all angst and, and, uh, I, I tend to, uh, I'm not sure how much I'm really conscious of this but I guess I am. I try to write songs that, uh, are uplifting to people and sometimes I'll write just a depressing song and, but I do, I want to, I want to invoke some emotion in people and I want it to be something they can relate to personally so I think the songs, my songs have gotten more and more personal, uh, you know, from the viewpoint that I'm writing them. Um, I, I really want to, I'm kind of, I'm getting to the stage where I wanna write more story songs. I've done some of that but I really wanna write about some other characters.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: Uh, and, uh, not necessarily from my point of view and, uh, I enjoy doing that. I, I'm, um, making a point of doing that, uh, coming up here but, uh, a lot of the stuff is yes it's real personal. It's from my own personal viewpoint and I think if, uh, the songs I like of other writers, uh, Joni Mitchell for instance is a huge influence on me, Paul Simon, too and I think they're songs are that way. They're very, they're not necessarily story songs. They're very much from inside themselves.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: And, uh, but other people can relate to that so that's always kinda what I'm after and that the playing part of it really has changed a lot too because, uh, I went back and listened to – this was quite a few years back now – but I went back and listened to some very old early recordings and I started out playing with thumb and fingerpicks.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: And that old kinda folky fingerpicking style and, uh, I don't even remember when I quit doing that but it was pretty early on when I was playing coffee houses. I started, I, I listened to some flatpicking, uh, players and so I wanted to, to learn that so I started to do both.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: And it sort of morphed into thing where I, I don't really never use some of the fingerpicks. I have some of them at home and occasionally I'll put 'em on and I'll play and it just feels so natural to me 'cause I developed my own thing and I'm comfortable with it. So I just use a flat pick and then I can fingerpick as well and then sometimes I'll, you know, palm it and then I'll use my thumb and fingers for a softer sound for dynamics but those are kind of unconscious things that just happened –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.
Dana Cooper:– uh, over time and, uh, I can't go back and, and, and play the way that I did in the beginning.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: Uh, so it's kinda interesting and of course, uh, I've learned a lot over the years. There's plenty to learn, but I work with a lot open tunings which I started out with the intention of never doing that and then I started playing with a couple of them as I did I'm just gonna limit this. I'm not gonna get tuning independent and I'll play gigs sometimes for, I could play all night without ever playing in standard tuning.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: I do still write songs in standard tuning too but I have so many now and so many different tunings –

Norie Guthrie: Right.

Dana Cooper:– uh, but I like that as a solo person and I have my limitations as a player. I, I found that it's really helped me, uh, to, uh, to write songs, to find different voicings that I just wouldn't find in, uh, standard tuning and uh, it's a little bit of a pain to go in and out of those things but then I've incorporated that, that's a good time for me to tell the story or, you know, it takes people, I don't have to stand there and concentrate on tuning for 5 minutes.

Norie Guthrie: Right.

Dana Cooper: And, uh, so that's all, yeah, it's all just kinda evolved into, uh, into what I'm doing now. It's, it's kind of interesting to dissect it.

Norie Guthrie: So is there kind of anything else that you would like to talk about or anything else you feel like you need to put out there?

Dana Cooper: Oh, I don't know. I'm not sure what it would be.

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

Dana Cooper: I don't have any real pearls of wisdom for anyone. Uh, I do, you know, it's interesting I, I remember when The yirds came out doing Bob Dylan songs.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: And they were pop hits. I remember, uh, McGuinn, uh, someone was asking that because he called it folk rock and, and talking about the purity of folk music, you know, and, and he said, uh, it's all folk music. Folk music is music with the times.

Norie Guthrie: Mm.
Dana Cooper: I thought that was interesting perspective on it all and in that sense you could say pop music was definitely folk music and in the true sense of the history of folk music being socially conscious and, and that aspect of being political and all that, uh, yeah, it really was. It really was folk music. Uh, and, uh, but, you know, I've always kind of up butted up against that where I felt like that's just always been an issue is where what I do fits.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: And it was an issue when I was on Elektra Records. It's always been an issue with record labels through the years. Well, but yeah but it's too eclectic. You're doing this and then you're doing that and then you just need to do this.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: And I, I'm just, I get bored. I don't wanna do that. I want, I want to do other things so, uh, for some of the folk purists out there, uh, I've not been impressed by a lot of them over the years.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: And I'm actually, the next recording I'm making I'm making all acoustic. There's not gonna be any electric instruments on it at all.

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

Dana Cooper: With this idea, well, maybe if I do that maybe folk radio what exists if it's still out there –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: – will embrace this maybe.

Norie Guthrie: Mm.

Dana Cooper: And, uh, but I, I don't know plus I've just, I've wanted to do that for a while and, uh, I'll tell you what it's hard. It's hard for me to do that because I, part of me kinda bridles at it and it's like yeah but, you know, I want to put some electric guitars to these songs and, but, uh, I think we make an acoustic record that has an edge to it –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: – but is still acoustic. It's gonna be an interesting experience and, uh, I've just never been too concerned with what it was called, you know, the style of whatever it was. It’s…
Norie Guthrie: Would you put yourself like, um, in that kind, kind of that broader genre that kind of popped up in the 90s called Americana?

Dana Cooper: Well, a lot of what I do does get classified as that.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: And, uh, but then this last record I did, I, I, you know, we pitched it to Americana radio and about a third of the stations played it.

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

Dana Cooper: Uh, so I don't, I don't really know. That again is just the problem. Is it Americana? Is it? I haven't thought of it as folk music for a long time.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: But, uh, I think probably with categories being what they are Americana probably does, probably fits there as well as anywhere.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Dana Cooper: Uh, but then I'll throw a curveball and, you know…That’s not Americana.

Norie Guthrie: Okay. Well, um, I guess we can leave with, if you want to play something from the upcoming album if you feel comfortable.

Dana Cooper: Yeah, I could do that.

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

Dana Cooper: Yeah, I could definitely do that.

Norie Guthrie: All right.

Dana Cooper: That would be fine. I sure appreciate you doing this, um, and, uh, you know, this, this might be a good one to do. It's, uh, well, you know what? I'll do a, instead of that one I'll do this other one that's also going to be on the new record because this is, I, I, I kind of like that this is kind of a rallying kind of song to me and therefore short of fits into the folk and the brother and sisterhood and, especially since we're sitting here on inauguration day. The end of world. It's raining toads outside right now. Flames are leaping up from the ground but, uh, yeah, this is called “I'm a Traveler, Too” and, uh, it came out of something I heard this homeless lady say one time we walked by and heard in the parking lot, very shy and she looked down at the ground and she said do you have a dollar for a traveler and it really touched me and, and just, you know, such a, that idea that we are, uh, all, you know, like Steinbeck said, all part of one big soul, all
part of the same plan and no matter what we believe or think of one another we’re here in this time space, this place together that’s very special that we all kinda take for granted and so.

*It’s a cloudy old day*
*But the sun’s shining in my heart*
*I got a smile on my face*
*But the mirror says I’m falling apart*
*You know I gave everything away*
*What else could I do?*
*Now my clothes are all frayed*
*I got a shine on my worn out shoes*

*Hello unraveler, I’m unravelling just like you*
*Hello traveler, oh I’m a traveler, too*

*All these folks in a hurry*
*Bouncing down that bumpy road*
*Oh we’ve all got trouble and worry*
*Following us wherever we go*
*When I found myself stranded*
*Broke down and busted flat*
*Some poor soul pulls over*
*And reaches out a helping hand*

*Hello unraveler, I’m unravelling just like you*
*Hello traveler, oh I’m a traveler, too*

*One act of kindness can make me start to cry*
*But that don’t mean I’m blue*
*One thing that defines us in uncertain life*
*Is the love that resides inside me and you*

*I’m a traveler, too*
*Oh—*

*Now the road up ahead*
*You know it’s shorter than the road behind*
*If there’s something to be said*
*Right now would be a real good time*
*Ain’t it a funny old life full of wonder joy and pain*
*We all get weary sometimes*
*Waiting for someone to say*
*Hello unraveler, I’m unravelling just like you*
*Hello traveler, oh I’m a traveler, too*
*Hello traveler, oh I’m a traveler, too*
Hello traveler, Yes, I'm a traveler
Hello traveler, Yes, I'm a traveler
I'm a traveler, too, whoa

Norie Guthrie: All right. Well, thank you so much for –

Dana Cooper: Yeah.

Norie Guthrie: – coming in and doing this oral history.

Dana Cooper: Thank you.

Norie Guthrie: Really appreciate it. It's been a really great experience.

Dana Cooper: Thanks, thanks. Me too. Appreciate it.