

Interviewee: Don Sanders

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 Don Sanders. Today is March 21, 2017. This is part of the Houston Folk Music Archive oral history project. Can you tell me about your early life in Houston?

Don Sanders: Uh, I lived a very limited life in many ways. My parents only approved of social life at the Baptist church and Boy Scouts was also part of my, my deal. But I would say it was very limited and limiting.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm. What first drew you to music?

Don Sanders: What?

Norie Guthrie: What first drew you to music?

Don Sanders: Uh, I suppose the Kingston Trio –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: – and the Limelighters and the Weavers. Uh, I enjoyed those acts. And in the early days what you did was adapt folk songs and create an act that relied on humor.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: But then I realized that you needed to be a songwriter.

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

Don Sanders: Because the companies made more money that way.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm. About what time did you realize you should shift to, to writing your own music?

Don Sanders: Well, when I went to New York early on people said you need to be a songwriter too.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm. When did you go to New York?

Don Sanders: Uh, that would have been in 68 or 69 somewh-, somewhere around there.

Norie Guthrie: Okay. And what did you do there?

Don Sanders: Well, I auditioned at a couple of clubs, at Gerde's Folk City –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: – and, uh, I talked to a couple of agents who recommended me to the It's Here in Chicago.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: And It's Here was on North Sheridan Avenue up near Evanston.

Norie Guthrie: Okay. And so did you, how long did you end up staying in New York?

Don Sanders: Well, not, not too long actually. Maybe a week.

Norie Guthrie: Oh okay. And so, and that was the point at which you decided to go ahead and start doing your own songwriting.

Don Sanders: Right.

Norie Guthrie: So before that you had, um, had, just so I can try to understand, for some of these clubs I can't understand exact the days, the time when they began and when they ended. 'Cause you know there was the Jester –

Don Sanders: Right.

Norie Guthrie: – and you played there. Um, about what time was that?

Don Sanders: Uh, 67 or 68 somewhere in there.

Norie Guthrie: Okay. What was the Jester like?

Don Sanders: It was, it was very dark.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: There were no windows and Mack Webster owned it. It was a, it was a good place.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: Guy Clark used to play there. Carl, Carl Phillips, uh, Frank and Kay.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: Frank and Kay, Kay Oslin became KT Oslin the country singer and Frank played a harp guitar sometimes. It had extra six strings, bass strings –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: – and he played the daddy banjo. He was, he was far too original to envy. He had a really rough voice and it was really, really interesting that he and Kay were teamed up. She had a very pure voice.

Norie Guthrie: And so, um, you, so around the same time, well I guess, actually I have some pictures of you that are dated 1965 and that you're supposed to be playing at Sand Mountain Coffee House.

Don Sanders: Right.

Norie Guthrie: Okay. So were you playing at both places around the same time?

Don Sanders: Yeah. Uh huh. But Sand Mountain was really where I got my education –

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

Don Sanders: – in folk music.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: Uh, Jerry Jeff would come in and play for a week at a time and he was already a skilled performer. So I learned how to string songs together –

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

Don Sanders: – from Jerry Jeff.

Norie Guthrie: And then, um, and what else did you, uh, let me see, so you learned from Jerry Jeff. Were there other people there that were a big influence on you?

Don Sanders: Yeah. Guy Clark and Jim Post who was a one-hit wonder with “I think it's so groovy now how people are getting together.”

Norie Guthrie: Oh, okay. Did you play much with, or interact very much with Townes Van Zandt while he was there?

Don Sanders: Oh yeah, yeah.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: Townes started just singing his poetic songs and then he learned to communicate with the audience.

Norie Guthrie: Okay. And so you kind of watched that progression.

Don Sanders: Yeah. Uh huh.

Norie Guthrie: Okay. And –

Don Sanders: And he, he became a skilled communicator. His favorite joke was, uh, what's white and crawls up your leg? Uncle Ben's perverted rice. I don't know how many times I heard him tell that.

Norie Guthrie: Um, and so, so you learned from Jerry Jeff, et cetera, kind of how to put songs together. Um, were you also kind of starting to think about how to tell more stories in what you did or?

Don Sanders: Yeah. Yeah. You know, uh, back in those days you tried to use humor to in-, to introduce a song.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: Uh, so you know we learned from the Weavers and from the, from the Kingston Trio those were the, and the Limelighters –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: – those were the big acts at the time.

Norie Guthrie: So, um, when you started writing your own material, um, do you remember what first song you wrote?

Don Sanders: Yeah. The first song I wrote was Coffee Song, uh, which was Jimmy, Jimmy Bonar called it almost a, uh, pop song.

Norie Guthrie: Okay. Um, what was it –

Don Sanders: Jimmy Bonar was a painter –

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

Don Sanders: – who died a few years ago.

Norie Guthrie: Okay. Um, the, so was the song just about coffee or what was the song about?

Don Sanders: No, no, it was about falling in love with a, a lesbian.

Norie Guthrie: Okay. All right. Was that a, was that something that was taken from your life or just a, an idea that you had?

Don Sanders: Oh no, it was from my life, yeah.

Norie Guthrie: Oh okay.

Don Sanders: Yeah.

Norie Guthrie: All right. So you were also one of the early performers at Anderson Fair.

Don Sanders: Right.

Norie Guthrie: Um, can you talk about its early, early days?

Don Sanders: Well, Anderson Fair was a tiny venue at first. Uh, the entertainment area was to the left of the door and I don't know if you, you've been in there but it's, it was a room that was very small. And then they expanded into the, the performance area that's in there now.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm. Uh, what were the, the people that went there, what were they like, your fans?

Don Sanders: What were they like?

Norie Guthrie: Yeah.

Don Sanders: Well, people came to meet each other at, uh, Anderson Fair which I suppose you would say they met each other and got laid.

Norie Guthrie: Okay. So I've, I've been told that some of the different venues had their own personalities. So for example, um, Anderson Fair was a bit more political, um, a little lighter with, um, drugs. That Old Quarter was a little darker –

Don Sanders: Yeah, yeah.

Norie Guthrie: – it was kind of downtown.

Don Sanders: Uh huh.

Norie Guthrie: And so, um, if you're thinking of, so we've kind of, so if you're thinking about Jester, Sand Mountain and then the opening, uh, you know, the new kind of Anderson Fair –

Don Sanders: Mm hmm.

Norie Guthrie: – what were their personalities like?

Don Sanders: Well the Old Quarter, the Old Quarter was, when it began the owners thought it was good for people to mix with the street people.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: And then we discovered that some of the street people were very disruptive.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: And so Joy, who was the bartender, started sitting out next to the huge double doors –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: – and demanding a \$2.00 cover charge which filtered out the worst of the drunks.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm. Okay.

Don Sanders: There was a guy that hung out there named Sinbad, uh, S-I-N-B-A-D. He was a merchant seaman and Sinbad was so skinny that I thought I might damage him when I hugged him.

Norie Guthrie: That's unusual to think about him being a merchant seaman and then also just being a very thin man.

Don Sanders: Yeah, yeah. He, he actually kept a bottle of white port in his, uh, in his trench coat.

Norie Guthrie: Okay. So thinking about these early venues do you have any notable memories, 'cause you've shared Sinbad, any kind of notable memories from the different ones?

Don Sanders: Well the Jester was more formal.

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

Don Sanders: Was more formal in its approach to music. So you really had to have an act together there.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: And Guy Clark performed there a whole lot. He was singing folk songs at first.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: "Hard Times for Cotton Mill Girls" was one of his big, uh, big numbers. A lot of my early career was propelled by envy. I envied Guy's good looks, Townes's ability to write songs and Susan Spaw's, Susan Spaw had an ethereal voice that really mesmerized every male in the audience.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm. Did you, uh, end up hanging out, uh, with them when they were in Houston like at their home and stuff? 'Cause I –

Don Sanders: Not a, not a whole lot. No.

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

Don Sanders: Susan married Guy Clark ultimately and had a child by him.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: Travis. But none of the women that I envied ever forged a, a career in music.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm. Why do you think that happened that way?

Don Sanders: I think it was just too, it was too spooky. Uh, Susan became a teacher and then married Freddie McClain in Corpus Christi.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: And that's all I remember about Susan. Susan Crow Johnson was also a regular at the Kerrville Folk Festival. And, and, you know, in the early days at the Kerrville Festival the song gatherings were rather informal.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: Uh, so Crow and Bobby Bridger would have, uh, Bobby had a teepee where people gathered.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: And Crow had a campfire up on the hill. But over the years those campfires became more formal and Camp Stupid was established. Uh, that's where, uh, Ken Gaines hangs out regularly.

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

Don Sanders: And he hosts, hosts the Camp Stupid campfires.

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

Don Sanders: Ken makes, Ken is a very positive person and he makes things work for him.

Norie Guthrie: Yeah 'cause he, he runs the, um, Songwriters in the Round –

Don Sanders: Yeah.

Norie Guthrie: – at Anderson, yes.

Don Sanders: At, at, at Anderson Fair –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: – on Thursday nights, yeah.

Norie Guthrie: I had, I had read some place that eventually at Sand Mountain there was a, was it at Sand Mountain, there was a mural –

Don Sanders: Yes.

Norie Guthrie: – and you were part of the mural?

Don Sanders: Yeah. There was a mural on the back wall that, uh, an artist used an overhead projector –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: – to sketch the murals. Uh, it was on the far south wall –

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

Don Sanders: – and guy was on there, Don was on there, uh, maybe Jerry Jeff.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm. How, how did that feel to be part of a mural in one of the places where you got started?

Don Sanders: Well, it felt, it felt good, you know, to be, to be muralized.

Norie Guthrie: So I'm not exactly sure what year, um, this started but you also became a DJ at KPFT.

Don Sanders: Right, right.

Norie Guthrie: Can you talk about your radio show and when that began?

Don Sanders: Well I think it began in the mid, mid to late sixties. And I played, I played acoustic music and interviewed songwriters. I remember especially the night that Lucinda came in and I realized that her father was Miller Williams –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: – a poet who I had been reading –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: – that, that, that day. And Miller directed the translation program at, at Fayetteville, Arkansas.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: He had worked his way up from being, I think, a chemistry professor and then got into literature.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: He also translated, uh, Nicanor Parra, uh, who was part of the Parra family in, from Argen-, or from Chile.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: Uh, Miller was a talented guy. I think he's, he's passed on now.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: And that was a profound moment when I realized that Lucinda was his daughter.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: Lucinda had a really hard time at first because she was doing blues covers –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: – and she didn't have a, she didn't have a great voice but she was, stuck to it and then when she started writing her own songs she got better and better.

Norie Guthrie: And so how, how long did you do the radio show at KPFT?

Don Sanders: I did it into the early eighties and then I was touring so regularly –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: – that I had to give it up.

Norie Guthrie: Okay. So in 1972 you began your own record label Mean and Low Records. What motivated you to do this?

Don Sanders: Um, my friends, Don and Pam, Don Gardner was one of the founders of KPFT along with Larry Lee, and Don encouraged me to make an album of my own. He, he, they had some money that they were willing to put up and that was the inception of the, of the label.

Norie Guthrie: Okay. And, um, how many, uh, 'cause you did a, I can't remember now. I actually, I actually bought some of them at Cactus. Um, there were three that you put out, correct?

Don Sanders: Right, right.

Norie Guthrie: Can you talk – mm hmm.

Don Sanders: Uh, the first one was, uh, had a long extended story on the second side.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: The second one had an etching by Bill Narum on the, on first side.

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

Don Sanders: And then the third one was an *Extended Play*, which is four songs.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm. So what did you learn by making your own records?

Don Sanders: I learned that it's really hard –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: – to make a good record. Uh, Clive, Clive Gregson did the last one for me.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: And it's really excellent. It's called *Limelight*.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: And he just was a superb instrumentalist himself.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm. 'Cause that came out in 2015.

Don Sanders: Uh.

Norie Guthrie: *Limelight*.

Don Sanders: Yeah, yeah.

Norie Guthrie: Yeah.

Don Sanders: Mm hmm.

Norie Guthrie: So you recorded, um, some songs for, uh, *Through the Dark Nightly*.

Don Sanders: Yes. Uh huh.

Norie Guthrie: Um, can you talk about that recording experience?

Don Sanders: Walter Spinks did that recording and he swore that there would never be more than a thousand copies of it.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: So he stuck by that. He won't even give me the tapes from that project.

Norie Guthrie: Wow. He's held onto those.

Don Sanders: Yeah, yeah. That was in the mid 70s, I think.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm. Yeah, it, it came out in 1976 so maybe –

Don Sanders: Yeah.

Norie Guthrie: Yeah. Um, how did it differ from the earlier studio work that you did for your own label?

Don Sanders: Well, it was different in the sense that I didn't have much back up.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: Uh, Charlie Bickley may have played bass on one of the tunes.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: And Charlie Bickley, uh, had the space where Rock Romano now has his recording studio.

Norie Guthrie: Oh, okay. Okay.

Don Sanders: So we went in there and cut, I cut three songs.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: It was a compilation album with, uh, Eric Taylor, Lynn Langham, uh –

Norie Guthrie: Bill Cade.

Don Sanders: Bill Cade, and Stephen Jarrard.

Norie Guthrie: Right.

Don Sanders: Uh huh. Stephen is married to Francie Files now.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm. And so did you, um, did that end up getting, um, pretty good air play in Houston?

Don Sanders: Uh, it got some air play but actually the song that made me famous was “Open My Third Eye.”

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: And Stephen, Stephen Nagle had a radio show on K101 that he played that on a regular basis.

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

Don Sanders: That, and, uh, “Roaches are the Oldest Form of Life That's Still Around.”

Norie Guthrie: And, are those two tracks ones that you had recorded through your Mean and Low?

Don Sanders: Yes, uh huh.

Norie Guthrie: All right.

Don Sanders: Mm hmm.

Norie Guthrie: Okay, um, well that's, I mean that's good that you got the, that you got the air play.

Don Sanders: Yeah.

Norie Guthrie: 'Cause that was the, that was the point, right?

Don Sanders: Yeah, that was –

Norie Guthrie: Yeah.

Don Sanders: – that was great. Uh, that really established me in Houston.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: And, you know, I guess Houston is a small scene in a way. Uh, Lyle, Lyle managed to break out of Houston.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: And be, established a national career, but, uh, that's very difficult to do.

Norie Guthrie: I mean, it's, it's still amazing, though, the people that came out of the scene over kind of a 20-year period.

Don Sanders: Right.

Norie Guthrie: Yeah. Um, I was reading, actually, I saw, um, Tamara Saviano. She wrote the, um, the Guy Clark, um, biography that came out.

Don Sanders: Right. Right.

Norie Guthrie: And, she referred to Houston as almost like, like Greenwich Village. That there was that amount of talent that was here.

Don Sanders: Yeah.

Norie Guthrie: That was sharing material with each other and building off of each other to create, to write, and everything.

Don Sanders: Well, my first girlfriend, Kemo, always said that Guy listened to me very carefully.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm. What did she mean by that?

Don Sanders: Well, she meant he was kinda pickin' my brain.

Norie Guthrie: Okay. Do you think that that's what he did with most people or?

Don Sanders: Guy read, started reading poetry, uh, about the time that he started writing songs.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: And I think he was trying to figure out what would work in a song.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm. And so because you also were kind of drawn to literature, would you two talk about –

Don Sanders: Mm, we didn't, uh, Guy and I didn't, didn't talk all that much.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: He was a good guy. He came to stay with me in Berkeley when we were living there.

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

Don Sanders: And, that was, he and Susanna were already together.

Norie Guthrie: Okay. When, when was that?

Don Sanders: That would have been in, uh, the early, late '70s.

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

Don Sanders: Uh, I was out there – a friend named Corb Donahue, suggested the Bay area for me.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: But, he didn't realize that the singer/songwriter thing was over there.

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

Don Sanders: The big act in San Francisco at the time was, uh, Boz Scaggs.

Norie Guthrie: Uh huh. Mm hmm. Yeah.

Don Sanders: And Boz was doing things sorta like Barry White.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm. So a different type of music had kinda –

Don Sanders: Yeah.

Norie Guthrie: – come onto the scene.

Don Sanders: Yeah, uh huh.

Norie Guthrie: Yeah. Um, to bring it back to Houston, um, around the mid '70s, you protested, um, the proposed oil drilling in Memorial Park.

Don Sanders: Right. Right.

Norie Guthrie: Can you talk about the song you wrote?

Don Sanders: Uh, yeah, the song I wrote was called “Memorial Park.” And, it was really interesting to go to city council and sing that song because the city council people started bobbin their heads in time and they're, when the TV cameras were on them.

Norie Guthrie: Oh, okay. Yeah, we, we have a, at one point KTRU had two tapes –

Don Sanders: Right.

Norie Guthrie: – of that city council meeting.

Don Sanders: Uh huh.

Norie Guthrie: But the one tape that we have, the only one survives, and that is not the tape with you singing it.

Don Sanders: Okay.

Norie Guthrie: It's, it's some, a few random people, you know, lodging their complaints.

Don Sanders: Well.

Norie Guthrie: Yeah.

Don Sanders: I did it again when the Heights was trying to get certified as a historic district.

Norie Guthrie: Oh, okay.

Don Sanders: And somebody said this guy might be a crank, but he was really pretty good.

Norie Guthrie: So were you singing in support of making a historic district, or?

Don Sanders: Yeah, uh huh.

Norie Guthrie: Yeah, I see. Okay. Um, when, when other people kind of think of folk music sometimes they think of the political angle, and thinking about Houston, you know, how would you describe the level of politics that might have come, come out of folk music here in Houston? Kinda high? Kinda low? Other topics were more important? Kind of thing.

Don Sanders: Well, uh, in the early days, I sang “We Shall Overcome” and a lot of things that, uh, were overtly political, but if I had stuck with, with the political aspects, I would have wound up preaching to the choir.

Norie Guthrie: Okay. Okay.

Don Sanders: You know?

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm. That's, no, that's, that's interesting. So because the, because the fan base, the people who are going to shows were already more liberal –

Don Sanders: Yeah, yeah.

Norie Guthrie: – it gave you room explore –

Don Sanders: Yeah.

Norie Guthrie: – other avenues?

Don Sanders: Yeah.

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

Don Sanders: And, I sang “If You Miss Me at the Back of the Bus You Won't Find Me Nowhere.” That was, uh, that's actually been recorded in, by Mocedades in Spain and by Victor Jara in Chile.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: He also recorded, Victor Jara also recorded, recorded, uh, Malvina Reynolds' “Little Boxes on the Hillside.”

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm. So it seems like, especially, uh, considering one of your, uh, later, uh, CDs that *El Mosquito in My Kitchen*, that you like to do music both in English and in Spanish. Is that correct?

Don Sanders: Right. Right.

Norie Guthrie: What, um, inspired you to write music in Spanish?

Don Sanders: Well, I got a graduate degree in Spanish, a master's degree, and you know, you just try to actualize yourself.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm. So are there, are the themes that you write about in Spanish different from those in English?

Don Sanders: Yeah, the songs that I sang on that *El Mosquito in My Kitchen*, I collected from a, a book called, by Victor Mendoza, uh, that was all folk songs from Mexico, and I expanded on them –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: – a little bit.

Norie Guthrie: What did you, what did you do, just kind of add more lyrics, or?

Don Sanders: Yeah, added more lyrics, yeah.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: Uh huh.

Norie Guthrie: Did you change the arrangements?

Don Sanders: No.

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

Don Sanders: No. I pretty much followed his arrangements.

Norie Guthrie: Okay. All right. Um, in, in the late '70s, I think it's the late '70s, you began working in public schools.

Don Sanders: Yeah, I was, uh, I got some residency work –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: – through Texas Commission on the Arts. Uh, I worked at Gatesville School, uh, the boys' prison –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: – initially with Rick, uh, with my friend, Rick, who subsequently became the head of the Texas Commission on the Arts. Uh, Rick sent me to China ultimately.

Norie Guthrie: Oh. What was that like?

Don Sanders: That was, uh, in the early '80s, I think. Uh, you know, and it was like being, it was like being a star act over there.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: We sang at a high school. Uh, and it was like a rock concert.

Norie Guthrie: Was it kind of just a short visit?

Don Sanders: Uh, well, it was very odd because we sang at maybe 4 o'clock in the afternoon, which was like being up at 4 o'clock in the morning for us.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: So it was, it was rigorous.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm. How many shows did you perform?

Don Sanders: Uh, maybe 15 or 20.

Norie Guthrie: Wow.

Don Sanders: Yeah.

Norie Guthrie: Was it just one like day after day after day?

Don Sanders: Yeah. Uh huh.

Norie Guthrie: Wow. That's a lot of work.

Don Sanders: Yeah.

Norie Guthrie: Yeah. Have you, have you been back there since then?

Don Sanders: No.

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

Don Sanders: I have not been. China is, China is just too far away.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: It's kinda like getting to India. You know, my wife has been to China several times because her brother studied there.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: But, I don't know if I'll ever go back to China. It's just, it's a long way.

Norie Guthrie: Yeah.

Don Sanders: It's halfway around the world.

Norie Guthrie: Right. Yeah, I assume it's probably a 15 to 16-hour plane ride?

Don Sanders: Yeah.

Norie Guthrie: Yeah.

Don Sanders: Yeah. I, I've, well, we flew first to San Francisco and then it was 13 hours from there to Beijing.

Norie Guthrie: Okay. Yeah. That's a long trip. That's a long trip. Um, so when you were working in the public schools, um, is this what later inspired you to make the, uh, the, the, to do the album *El Mosquito in My Kitchen*?

Don Sanders: Yeah. I actually thought that that was gonna be my big breakthrough.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: Because, uh, at the time, in the valley there was a big concentration on doing, on bringing children into the language, the English language, through their native language.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: And now they're more interested in mainstreaming kids.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm. And so did you ever end up writing specifically just children's music?

Don Sanders: No. That was, that was a limited project.

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

Don Sanders: Mm hmm.

Norie Guthrie: Can you talk a little bit about your, um, about your writing process?

Don Sanders: My writing process is to come up with an idea for words that sound good together.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: And then to try to create a melody to go with it.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: Uh, I'm not, I'm not a great melodist. But, you know, who really was, was Townes Van Zandt. Townes was better, I think, I was better at, at folk melodies than he was at words.

Norie Guthrie: Hmm, interesting. Um, what was so special about his melodies?

Don Sanders: He based them on, in folk, folk music.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: And, that, that's what I would say was his contribution was he, he used folk melodies just the same way that Woody Guthrie did.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: Woody Guthrie, the song, "Tom Joad" –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: – is basically, is basically an old folk song.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm. But just with new lyrics?

Don Sanders: Yeah. Mm hmm. And they, you know, Woody would admit that. He'd say, yeah it does sound kinda like that, doesn't it?

Norie Guthrie: Um, so when you are, when you write a song, do you, um, you said you come, come up with words that sound good together and then try to establish a melody. Um, do you like to kind of work on songs for a long period of time, trimming them down?

Don Sanders: Yeah, sometimes it will take me a month to write a song. Uh, "Tourist," Tourist is one of my better songs, I think. And that one is a minor key melody.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm. How long did it take you to write that one?

Don Sanders: I don't know.

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

Don Sanders: It took me, it took me a while.

Norie Guthrie: All right. Do you ever, um, try songs out at, um, on stage and then tweak them afterwards or?

Don Sanders: Yeah, yeah. Mm hmm. Yeah.

Norie Guthrie: Do you do that with most of the songs that you write?

Don Sanders: Well, no, once you get a song to the shape where it should be performed –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: – then it's pretty much set in stone at that point.

Norie Guthrie: Okay. And then, um, when you were learning to – we actually didn't, I didn't ask you anything about when you were first learning to play the guitar. When did that start?

Don Sanders: I started when I was, uh, 12 years old.

Norie Guthrie: Oh wow. Okay.

Don Sanders: Yeah. I started learning to play guitar and, uh, playing banjo, too.

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

Don Sanders: But I never developed as a banjo player.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: Because it seemed clear that guitar was a more versatile instrument.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm. Did you take lessons with someone or did you teach yourself?

Don Sanders: I taught myself.

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

Don Sanders: I would watch other people what they were doing. Uh, I learned to slide from watching Duane Allman.

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

Don Sanders: Duane would, uh, come in and play at the Old Quarter.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: Sometimes. And they would, they would base themselves in a hotel in Houston and then tour to other towns outside of here.

Norie Guthrie: Okay. Um, who else did you learn different techniques from?

Don Sanders: Uh, I watched Guy and Jerry Jeff.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: Jerry Jeff when he wrote “Gypsy Songman,” that was a really nice song. Have you ever heard that one?

Norie Guthrie: I, I, I might have, but I don't, I don't remember.

Don Sanders: Uh huh.

Norie Guthrie: Yeah.

Don Sanders: "I'm Gypsy Songman. Yes sir, you'd like to hear a song."

Norie Guthrie: Okay. All right. And so, um, so did you, did you kind of like his, what were, like kind of specific, uh, techniques that you liked of, of his when he was playing the guitar?

Don Sanders: Well, "Promising Boy," I made up.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: I was sitting on the beach in Puerto Rico one day, and I thought you were such a promising boy. Whatever happened to you?

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm. So you've talked about, um, traveling to New York, uh, living in, um, in the Berkeley area, um, but you mainly stayed here.

Don Sanders: Right.

Norie Guthrie: Um, you know, as, over the years you saw people leave Houston for Austin and Nashville and other places, why did you stay in Houston?

Don Sanders: Because it was my home. Uh, I bought a house in the Montrose –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: – in the late '70s, and was about to move to New York when I met the woman that became my wife, yeah.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: Uh, so, I've lived a more or less normal life being surviving in Houston.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: So it's, it has been, uh, very pleasant to be able to play in Houston.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm. Right, because I mean there's still places that are here with Anderson Fair and then do you sometimes play in the Old Quarter down –

Don Sanders: Yeah.

Norie Guthrie: – in Galveston?

Don Sanders: Well, and the Kerrville Festival –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: – actually did me a lot of good.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: Uh, I remember Rod always wanted to make it, to divorce it from a hippie love fest.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: And Rod would counsel us to make it family friendly.

Norie Guthrie: Right. Yeah. Yeah, I think I've, um, in one of our collections, I've read, uh, how someone was disinvited after a, a rowdy year. He couldn't come back for a few years to play.

Don Sanders: Right. Right.

Norie Guthrie: Yeah. Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: Well, Rod did not want it to be a, a marijuana fest.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: Because it was in Kerrville, Texas –

Norie Guthrie: And why –

Don Sanders: – which is, which is a conservative town of, of retirees and, uh, HEB –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: – started there. Uh, Schreiner College –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm. And so it just, it made sense to keep it a little bit more tame.

Don Sanders: Yeah, mm hmm.

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

Don Sanders: But, you know, that put me in a bind actually.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: Because a lot of my songs were, at a more urban sensibility.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: And, I guess I shouldn't have been so nervous, but the first time he had introduced me on stage, I played several songs at just breakneck speed, but, but even so I was featured on the front page of the newspaper the next day.

Norie Guthrie: When was that, um, when did you first perform there?

Don Sanders: Uh, '74.

Norie Guthrie: '74.

Don Sanders: I think that was the first time I played there. Uh, Allen Damron sponsored me.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: And so did my manager.

Norie Guthrie: How did the sponsor, how did that work? Just, uh, to kind of help to pay the fees to play, or?

Don Sanders: Well, Cheryl Nelson was my manager at the time, and she, uh, she talked me up –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: – really good. And I even played in front of Ten Years After at Hofheinz Pavilion and in front of, uh, Procol Harum –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: – one time.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: And then I played in front of Mott the Hoople.

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

Don Sanders: Which was a disaster.

Norie Guthrie: Oh, why is that?

Don Sanders: Well, they didn't go on.

Norie Guthrie: Oh.

Don Sanders: Because the promoter didn't have the money to pay them.

Norie Guthrie: Oh, gosh. So, at, uh, what venue was this?

Don Sanders: Uh, that would have been in the late '70s.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: That was sponsored by K101.

Norie Guthrie: Okay. Oh. So did they, so they were there and they were ready, they just decided –

Don Sanders: Yeah, yeah, they were, they were faced off with the promoter –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: – backstage.

Norie Guthrie: Wow.

Don Sanders: You know –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: – “All the Young Dudes.”

Norie Guthrie: Right. So what was, so you went out and performed.

Don Sanders: Yes.

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

Don Sanders: I performed, but it was a disaster.

Norie Guthrie: So did the fans know at the time?

Don Sanders: No.

Norie Guthrie: Well that's good.

Don Sanders: They did not know that Mott the Hoople was not going on.

Norie Guthrie: Okay. 'Cause I would –

Don Sanders: They were back there –

Norie Guthrie: Right.

Don Sanders: – in their platform shoes –

Norie Guthrie: Uh huh.

Don Sanders: – and their shaggy haircuts faced off against the promoter.

Norie Guthrie: Wow. That must have been very uncomfortable.

Don Sanders: It was. My bass player said, let's get out of here.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm. You also did shows at Liberty Hall.

Don Sanders: Yeah, yeah.

Norie Guthrie: Yeah.

Don Sanders: I opened for Robert Klein one night.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: And that was, that was actually, that was actually a really good gig.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: Uh, people listened.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: And were on my wavelength.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: Because it was a, it was a comedy show.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: So, uh, I actually did a show for – we staged a Saturnalia show.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: At KPF – at, uh, Anderson Fair.

Norie Guthrie: Okay.

Don Sanders: And I went out and wore a blue jean skirt and a bolero jacket.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: And a huge Dolly Parton wig. And the people from Liberty Hall saw that –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: – and wanted me to repeat it, but I didn't want, I didn't, even though, uh, "Take a Walk on the Wild Side," was, was, uh, popular at the time and David, Davie Bowie was, uh, making his Ziggy Stardust deal, I didn't want that taking over my career.

Norie Guthrie: Right.

Don Sanders: I wanted, yeah.

Norie Guthrie: That's interesting though. So, yeah, so then, um, I assume it was, um, Ryan Trimble or Mike Condray, or ?

Don Sanders: Yeah, yeah. Ryan Trimble and Mike Condray. I don't know if Mike is still alive or not.

Norie Guthrie: He, he passed, um, I think it's March or April of last year. Um, so what are you working on now.

Don Sanders: I'm working on a memoir essays. So right now –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: – and, uh, I just wrote about my early childhood.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: And, you know, we, I grew up on a street called Covern Street, which was the combination of two people's names –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: – and we did not have city services at the time. We had a water well –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: – and a septic tank –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: – that spread its arms into the front yard. And the grass always grew greener over the, uh, over the septic tank.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm. What is that, um, what kind of process are you going through to write the memoir? You kind of starting at the beginning, or you just, um, –

Don Sanders: I'm hitting important events in my life, yeah.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm. Has it been an easy process, or difficult?

Don Sanders: No, not, not especially. Uh, when you write a memoir, you are the character. So you have to reveal unattractive things about yourself.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm. And so –

Don Sanders: Which is okay. I don't mind, I don't mind doing that.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: It's just not, it's not easy.

Norie Guthrie: Right. How long have you been working on it?

Don Sanders: Uh, maybe a year.

Norie Guthrie: Okay. So kind of looking back over the scene that happened in Houston, um, and your own music and how that's changed over the years, can you, can you talk about how things have changed in Houston and in your own music?

Don Sanders: Well, I went through a period of, uh, of really liking Latin American music.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: So, I tried to create some things that fit in with that, and then I, I wrote a show called “Peregrino” –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: – that debuted at Main Street Theater.

Norie Guthrie: Oh, okay.

Don Sanders: And it included songs and stories –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: – about an alcoholic travel writer.

Norie Guthrie: Okay. When, when was that?

Don Sanders: That would have been 1980.

Norie Guthrie: Oh, okay.

Don Sanders: Approximately.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm. And so, so you, you know, you kinda started out with like traditional folk, you started to write your own music, and then you began to have a, a Latin American influence in your writing.

Don Sanders: Mm hmm.

Norie Guthrie: Um, I guess, where do you see yourself now?

Don Sanders: I see myself at the end of my life.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: Uh, my son is, uh, 27 now.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: Uh, I'm gonna try to hang on for a few more years, but, uh, you know, Kenneth Threadgill was an inspiration to all of us. He hung on for many, many years.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: Did you ever see him?

Norie Guthrie: No, no I haven't.

Don Sanders: No, no.

Norie Guthrie: Mm mm.

Don Sanders: Threadgill had Threadgill's Service Station on the north side of, uh, Austin.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: And that's where Janis went. Janis, Janis Joplin came to the Sand Mountain to audition one time.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: And, she was really shocking and transgressive.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: Uh, she opened with Jelly Roll Morton's "I'm a Whining Boy, Don't You Deny Me My Name" with a, a brown J model Gibson strapped around her shoulders. She was wearing a, a bell sleeved minidress that shimmered under the lights and Mrs. Carrick was not impressed. She said, you know, I could put you on stage, but I wouldn't be doing you any favors. So, she offered Janice a job as a waitress.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: And Janis passed on that and went on up to, went on up to Threadgill's and hung out there a bunch, and then went out to San Francisco and became a star. And I didn't realize what a good singer she was until subsequently –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: – she was really good at phrasing.

Norie Guthrie: So did you, at the time when you saw her sing, did you realize that, did you think that it was kind of notable or was it something that later on, oh yeah, I remember her when she came in and

Don Sanders: Yeah, it was not– it was notable.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: Because she opened with "I'm a Whining Boy Don't You Deny Me My Name." Uh, a Jelly Roll Morton song. And, you know, she was transgressive in the sense that she sang from a male's point of view.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: Uh, I said that to someone who, uh, wrote a book about Janis.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: And she was a shocking act.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: You know, her unruly brown hair, she would start sweating, and her hair would stick to her face.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: And in those days, girls were still singing English ballads.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: Uh, so she was, she was a real wild card.

Norie Guthrie: No, it, it makes sense how she would be different. Especially if you had, as you mentioned, like Susan Spaw was –

Don Sanders: Yeah.

Norie Guthrie: – singing and, and –

Don Sanders: Uh huh.

Norie Guthrie: Yeah. It would have been a lot of different.

Don Sanders: I'm gonna have another sip of water here.

Norie Guthrie: Of course. So, I guess as kind of a final question, do you, let's see how I phrase this – you watched a lot of people come through Houston over the years, and you watched the scene change.

Don Sanders: Yeah, mm hmm.

Norie Guthrie: And, um, what was that like, you know, kind of, you know, watching Guy Clark and Jerry Jeff Walker and Townes Van Zandt playing and then moving on to do other things and, uh, seeing Nancy Griffin and Lyle Lovett and kind of – what was that like, kind of watching them and seeing how the, the scene changed over the years?

Don Sanders: Well, it was a little bit depressing in the sense that I couldn't figure out a way to break out of Houston.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: But, it was good in the sense that I saw a lot of people.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: My first wife badgered me into, into performing for the Christy Minstrels, and the guy was gonna offer me a job, but \$150.00 a week was what he was offering and, uh, \$20.00 per diem for food –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: – and I couldn't imagine being trapped in a hotel room with somebody that I didn't know.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: And then she signed me up for the Johnny Desmond Talent Contest.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: And I won two tuxedos and two weeks of performance at the Shamrock Hilton Lounge –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: –and then at a lounge in Beaumont –

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: – but I had to get arrangements written for the, the combos that were there. So the deal wound up costing me as much as I made.

Norie Guthrie: Hmm. So was there anything else that you would like to talk about?

Don Sanders: No, I don't guess so, although, you know, I'm 73 years old and I hope I'll be around for awhile, but, you know, we're at an age where a lot of people just drop dead.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: So, Chuck Berry just died. James Cotton just died, uh, last week.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: James was living in Austin. You hope that you can still be, make a contribution.

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: It was very kind of Lyle to record “Bayou Song.”

Norie Guthrie: Mm hmm.

Don Sanders: Yeah. But thank you. Thanks a lot.

Norie Guthrie: I, I will say that I think that people always look at you as being a person who has been here for a long time, but mentored others and you know, did, did make a contribution.

Don Sanders: Yeah.

Norie Guthrie: Yeah. Well thank you very much for coming in.

Don Sanders: Thank you, Norie.

Norie Guthrie: All right.