

California State College, Bakersfield

San Joaquin Valley Oral History Project, Bakersfield Sound

Recorded History

INTERVIEWEE:	Jelly Sanders
PLACE OF BIRTH:	Duncan, Oklahoma
INTERVIEWER:	Janna Jae (Greif)
DATE OF INTERVIEW:	November 22, 1976
PLACE OF INTERVIEW:	Sanders' home/Bakersfield
NUMBER OF TAPES:	1
TRANSCRIBER:	Kaye LeFebvre
FILE IDENTIFIER(S):	Jelly Sanders

JJ: My name is Janna Jae and I am here with Jelly Sanders at his home in Bakersfield, California.

Jelly has played an important part in the history of Country/Western music in Kern County and that is why I am here tonight to find a little bit more about his background and also some of his experiences with the early Country/Western music in Kern County.

Jelly, where were you raised and how did you get started on the fiddle, which is your instrument?

JS: Well, I was borned and raised in Duncan, Oklahoma. And then, when I was 17, I came to California and picked a lot of cotton and all that kind of stuff for a while and then I went to L.A. and started playing Country music. Of course, before I ever came here, I played a lot of country dances and stuff like that.

JJ: In Oklahoma?

JS: Yes. That was back in Oklahoma and (something wrong with the tape for about one minute.)

JJ: In Oklahoma then, you were playing quite a bit of fiddle.

JS: Well, yes. I started playing when I was five years old. And in fact, there's my dad, I played several different instruments. My dad had a Martin guitar. It was a B-28, and you know, they are pretty large. And I wore the back of that thing out dragging it around across the floor. That was my first instrument I played, incidentally. And then, shortly after that, I took up the fiddle, banjo, mandolin, different ones.

JJ: How many instruments do you play today?

JS: Well, I play **at** 14 different instruments. I play the best I can, you know. Banjo and the whole bit. Flexam, tenor, a little bit of 5-string, so it is hard, though, to keep up with that many instruments as you probably well know.

JJ: But, the fiddle. The fiddle is your main instrument. Right?

JS: Yes. Fiddle, I love! That is my main thing.

JJ: Right.

JS: And I played for a lot of Country dances back there before I ever came to this country. And that was a good source of income and a lot of good experience and everything, and something I love to do, of course. And then, I came to California when I was 17 and shortly after that, of course before I left here I picked a lot of cotton and learned to drive a Caterpillar and, you know, movin' dirt and all that stuff. And then, from there, I did that a short while and I thought that surely there was something better to do. So I went to Los Angeles and that is when I got started in the music, in more or less, the profession which lasted for many years.

JJ: Did you play in your own band down there? Were you working as a...?

JS: Well, I worked for different ones at different times. And then a couple few times I had my own group together.

JJ: Right.

JS: I worked, of course, for the union there. And we worked a lot of casual things with different artists that they would bring in, you know. They would do a show and they would need extra fiddle players or this or that and so that was a big thing. Got to work with and meet a lot of different artists that way.

JJ: Right. How did you end up in Bakersfield?

JS: Well, that's kind of a long story in a way. I was on the road with Ferlin Husky in 1953 and Herb Henson, who I had the pleasure to know and to work with for most of, I guess right at 12 years. I left him several times, you know, for a few months. You know how that goes. You got to kind of take off and rest up now and then. But he called the house just before I got in off of a tour. And he wanted me to come down and go to work for them. And so, finally, that is what I did for almost 12 years.

JJ: I see. And since then, I know you have done a lot of recording and worked with all sorts of different artists. But before we get into that too much, can you tell me what the musical scene was in about, you said, 1953, when you came to Bakersfield? What was happening, musically, in Kern County? Who were some of the people that were playing around here and who were some of the big names? I think there were dance halls or something going on.

JS: Yes, there were. Well, of course, Herb, by having the TV show, he was Number One. But for quite some time before that, Jimmy Thompson, whom a lot of people know, was the number one man around Kern County. Of course, Ferlin Husky (or he was known here as Terry Preston at that time) he also started here in Bakersfield, you know. Even before Jimmy or Herb. Different ones like that have gotten their start out of here.

But it was Country. And people, it was kind of a family affair, you know, like on Friday and Saturday nights, why people would bring their whole families and they really turned out.

JJ: Did you have, let's see, Bob Wills came through here and played sometimes, didn't he?

JS: Oh, yeah. A lot of the great artists were coming through. At one time they had, I think, there was three different dance halls. They had the old Beardsley which burnt down, I don't recall just what year. But it was shortly after.... No, I guess that burned just before I moved to Bakersfield. Which I had been here, you know, off and on, you know, before I ever lived here.

And then they had the dance hall out at the Plunge. I believe it was on Belle Terrace. And then, the Rainbow Garden, that was the hot spot.

JJ: Oh.

JS: That was out in....

JJ: How about Pumpkin Center?

JS: Oh, yes. Don't want to forget that! That was Cousin Ed and the Squirrel Shooters. They played at Pumpkin Center. That was a pretty hot spot also. They had quite a weekend deal out there and drew good crowds.

JJ: Well, did you work now with some of these people at some of these places? Or did you, or was that when you were working with Ferlin pretty much?

JS: Well, I was traveling with Ferlin, yes. But then, in '53, as I said, when I came back off the road off that one tour, why, I went to work with Herb. But in all the time I was working with Herb, I was working with different artists also. See, because the only way I did Herb's TV show every day.

JJ: Every day?

JS: Forty-five minute show, five days a week.

JJ: Is that right?

JS: And then it went from 45 minutes to an hour. But all during that time, in 1954, I started recording with all the big artists in L.A.

JJ: So, you were driving back and forth then?

JS: I went across those hills so many times, I could have drove it blindfolded!

JJ: (Laughs) Well, did you ever run into Buck Owens then? Because he said he was driving that hill, too, about that time.

JS: Buck Owens? Yes. Buck and I were the best of friends and Buck got his start, of course, right here in Bakersfield. I don't recall just when, I believe it was in 1955. But, I've got Buck on a session down there as a rhythm guitar player. Of course, at that time, Buck was playing lead guitar for Tommy Collins. And Mr. Ken Nelson who was A and R man for Capital. Knew Buck very well and liked him. But Ken was the type of person, that if you played lead guitar, you were a lead guitarist and nothing else. Or fiddle player, or what have you. He was that type person and one of the greatest you would ever meet.

But, anyway, he called me one day and he wanted us to do a station with I believe it was the Farmer Boys when they were on Capital. And so he wanted me to bring down a drummer and a rhythm guitar player and, oh, you know, three or four different instruments and so I mentioned Buck Owens' name. And he said, "But can he play rhythm?"

And I said, "Sure he can play rhythm." And so, from then on, Buck and Fuzzy Owen, Lewis Talley, Bill Woods, myself, we were all doing that a lot on different artists. We cut with Ferlin Husky, Jean Shepard, Gates McDonnell and you name them, we were on them.

JJ: Oh.

JS: This went on for a long time.

JJ: Yeah. I didn't know that. That is all. That is really interesting. So, in the beginning, then, Buck was playing rhythm guitar for some of the sessions that Ken Nelson played.

JS: Oh, yes. Buck even got in with people like Stan Freeberg and different ones like that, Ken liked his rhythm playing so well. Buck is a self-taught musician. And so, therefore, he was really well-liked by everybody and so he got in a lot of things.

JJ: He wasn't singing at that time?

JS: No, it took us a long time to convince Ken Nelson he was a singer.

JJ: Is that right?

JS: Oh, yeah. And finally, Ken signed him and you know what happened after that.

JJ: Yes. Well now, that is kind of to Bill Woods' credit, isn't it? That Buck actually started singing because he was working...

JS: Well, yes. Buck was working with Bill at The Blackboard and Buck wanted Bill guitar pickin'. And so, naturally, Bill needed help on the bandstand singing and he thought Buck had a lot of potential, so he kept hounding him about it. So, anyway, that is the way he started singing. And...

JJ: You were actually the one then that took him down to Ken Nelson the first time?

JS: Well as I recall, yes, I was. And I tell you another thing. I was a great influence on Ken signing him, because Buck had quite a time getting started.

He did some things for a lady who owned the label called Chesterfield.

And then we went down to a fellow by the name of Cross who had American Music. He was the publisher and he did a lot of promotional stuff like that. We cut dugs down there for him trying to get going and all. So anyway, Joe Maphis, whom you heard of and Johnny Mon? and Tex Ritter had a publishing company of their own, so they liked to write the books and material. And in order, see, they were going to get him on Columbia and to get, they would have gotten to publish his songs and stuff like that.

So I heard about this and I mentioned it to Ken Nelson one day at a session down there and so Ken went out into the studio and asked Buck if he would like to be on Capital.

JJ: Wow!

JS: That is primarily the way it happened. And Harlan Howard and I waited in the car while Buck went upstairs and signed his contract.

JJ: Now what was Harlan doing there?

JS: Well, Harlan, at that time, was trying to promote his songs. You know, that was before he got in a few of the goodies like, let's see, what was that first big one that Ray Price did for him? "Heartaches by the Number?"

And he had them all then. He had to have them for probably four or five years. But, you know how the business is by being in it. Until you get that one break, it is a little rough to get in songs or do what you have to do, you know. Or want to do.

JJ: So you were helping everybody else get signed and you were busy doing your own thing, but you didn't go ahead and sign yourself.

JS: No. That never happened. It almost did several times, but it seemed like always something would come up. And so it never materialized in that respect. But I was very thankful to be a part of this Country music.

JJ: Well, you still are. And everybody thinks that you all are banjos and fiddle. In fact, just this year, what was the title, "Instrumentalist of the Year?" That you were awarded?

JS: Yes, I was very happy to get that, too.

JJ: That is quite an honor.

JS: And I appreciate them thinking of me.

JJ: Sure. We were just mentioning some of the names of the people that Jelly had gotten started and worked with on recording sessions and he was saying that he was instrumental in getting Buck signed and also when Buck was signed as an artist, you played with who else? Who formed that early—who were the musicians on the early Buck Owens records that really got him going?

JS: Well, when he signed with Capital, Ralph Mooney played steel, I believe. Bob Morris, I think, played bass. And I don't remember who was on drums at that time. I think we used two or three different ones before Buck put his own group together. He got Willie Cantu, who was a fine young drummer. And we used, oh, the bass player that was with the Whippoorwills a long time. I can't remember his name at all. And he played bass on a couple three of them, I guess, when Bob couldn't make it. And just different ones like that, the better musicians of the L.A. area and, of course, from here.

JJ: When Don Rich--when Buck hired Don Rich, you and Don still did quite a bit of twin fiddle work, too, didn't you?

JS: Well, yes. And then I played "Rosaria Town" and a lot of Buck's stuff and different things. And the fact is I think I even played bass fiddle on a couple three of these tunes. But, we just kind of switched around. It was a pleasure working with Don. He was a very sharp musician. Buck got him, you know, when he was just a kid. And Don was very well educated in music, but he learned an awful lot from Buck. And, you know, he learned Country music and loved Country music and he lived Country music.

JJ: Well, I know, a lot of the twin fiddle things that you did were really, really nicely done.

JS: Thank you.

JJ: I really enjoyed those.

JS: We did one album, I remember one time, instrumentals, and we did "Boiling Cabbage Down" and four or five other instrumental things on it that I thought was very, very good fiddle work.

JJ: Really.

JS: It was so easy for us because him and I thought a lot alike and he was very easy to work with.

JJ: And it was apparent that you enjoyed playing with each other. And I know he was... that is one thing, I felt slighted I didn't get to know Don. I met him on the very last concert that he ever played. It was the first time I had met them. But, of course, we all know him through records.

Well, Jeannie Shepard was another one that you kind of got started. How did that happen?

JS: I wouldn't say I got her started. But I did give her her first chance to sing on the radio. This was about 1946 or '47. I had my own radio show on KTIP in Porterville. We did a live show

twice a day, an hour and a half in the afternoon and an hour and a half in the morning. And the morning show was at 5:00. That was for all the farm workers where they hear a lot of Country music. And so, Jeannie Shepard and a friend of hers who turned out to be one of the finest guitar players I ever heard in my life, a kid by the name of Gene Breedan, their parents brought them down on the radio show one evening and I believe at that time she was 12 years old. And that was the first time she had ever sung over the radio. And so the next thing I knew, it was Speedy West and Jimmy Brown and a few like that. Why she wound up on Capital. I think Bill Woods had a lot to do with this, too, as I recall. Or that was what I understand, anyway. Bill was always promoting everybody.

JJ: That is true. He still does, too.

JS: Yeah. He had, as we was talking earlier, he had a lot to do with Buck turning out like he did.

JJ: Right.

JS: So Bill is always helping everybody but himself.

JJ: (Laughs.) Well, in the process of helping others, he helped himself, too though, because, in fact, he got his name on the, what was that last record? Bill Woods from Bakersfield... Truck Driver's Heaven or something like that.

JS: Oh, that was Red Simpson's record. I understand that it is doing really well for Red. And I am glad. That is another boy that got started here in Bakersfield.

JJ: That is right. Well, who were some of the other people that you worked with on your sessions? Let's see. Wanda Jackson.

JS: We used to do a lot with Wanda. She was a real fine person, easy to work with. And, of course, I worked Can?? Party for a long time. And she worked with John and Joe Maphis and Tex Ritter and at that time, Bobby Bear was just trying to get started and of course, the Collins Kids was on there. In fact, I worked their first session they ever did with Columbia. And I did several others with them after that. And they were two fine kids, still are.

About three years ago, I met up with them up in Lake Tahoe and got up and did a couple of sets with them.

JJ: Oh, did you?

JS: Yeah. And they're fine people. They had a fantastic band up there.

JJ: I bet.

JS: So, I enjoyed that immensely.

JJ: Right. And then I had Red Fallon. You worked with Red Fallon and Keith McDonald. (Dead space on the tape for about a minute.) Your work with Herb Henson, now. You came in 1953 and Herb hired you. What, exactly, did you do there for Herb?

JS: Well, when I first came to work with Herb, he wanted me to play fiddle, of course, on the show. And then we was going to play dance clubs out and so I kind of, more or less, managed and booked the band. At that time there was three partners in the deal as far as the dances were concerned. There was Bill Mize, Bill Woods and Herb. And so, I took over the booking end of it and, well, I don't want to say booking, but managing. And I set up, we used to play all the surrounding area of say 150 miles. Like the Flame? Avenue, Fresno, Porterville, you know, all the towns around the Woods Valley. And we did real well. And I did that, I guess, for about the first year or year and a half I was with him. And then there was a fellow by the name of Snead took over and so then they was just the one. They dropped Bill Woods and Bill Mize as partners and so there was only Herb, and then, of course, Joe was the booker. Of course, then we all went on the salary as to do the show, you know, so many nights a week.

JJ: Well, then, didn't you have your own TV show, too, for a while?

JS: Well, I believe it was in 19 and 59 I started the Hacienda Circuit. Yes it was 1959, October 5 because that's one day after my birthday and we played this one here for a little over 18 months here in Bakersfield. And while I was there, I had left Herb's show and, as I said earlier in this interview, that I quit several times, but always came back. And so then I started my own show on Channel 29 which was another network here and we had quite a run on it. And so then I quit that and I was still playing the Hacienda and I finally went back on Herb's show while I was still working out there.

JJ: So, you and Herb worked together for quite a while then.

JS: We were the best of friends. Everyone admired Herb. I did. And all the rest. And, so, you couldn't say "No" to Herb. When he wanted you to come, why, you went.

JJ: There is another big name that everybody all over the country knows, besides Buck Owens from Bakersfield. It is Merle Haggard. Did you work with Merle, at all?

JS: Oh, yeah. We worked some of the clubs around Bakersfield here together. And we would put stuff on tape, you know to try to get him going. When he first landed back in Bakersfield after his bad experience there, well, he used to come up to my house quite often and so I took an interest in Merle. I liked him very well. And he was a good singer. Of course, at that time, he sang a lot like Johnny Cash and Lefty Frizzell. That was his idols. So, I told him, you going to sing like Merle Haggard? So anyway,

JJ: That was good advice, I'd say.

JS: He had a lot of talent, really, and still does. He is tremendous. Every time I hear something he does on a record anymore, it is amazing. You know, because he is always coming up with something so much different and everything and everything seems to sell, regardless of what he does.

JJ: That's for sure.

JS: But anyway, yes, I helped get him a couple of shots on Herb's show and then between me and Fuzzy Owens and Johnny Barnett we got him a relief job out at the Luxury Spot playing out there with us and a few things. Of course, he worked a lot of the other places around town here when he wasn't out there. And, you know, different joints. But, I had a lot of influencing trying to get him to get him really going. I helped him all I could. Of course, at that time, I was so busy, I couldn't do too much, but then Fuzzy Owen took over and Fuzzy kept on until he got him going.

JJ: He worked for a while with Buck, too, didn't he?

JS: I believe they did a few tours together.

JJ: It seems like played bass or something and sang as part of the show for a while.

JS: I don't really recall. I believe he did go on a couple of tours with Buck. And then, I know at one time, he went to Las Vegas and worked with Winn Stewart up there. And that is another guy I used to do a lot of work with, too—Wynn Stewart. He was a fine guy and he was on Capital, of course, at that time. But anyway, Merle went up and worked for him for a while. And that's how he got into the song...what was it? Wynn wrote it. "Sing You a Sad Song."

JJ: Oh, yeah.

JS: That was one of his better records, you know, on Tally Records then. And I think after he got on Capital, he re-did it. But he done a tremendous job, you know.

JJ: Well, what about I know that you play all these different instruments. Have you done any teaching?

JS: Well, yes. Two or three different times. I taught, first of all, for Gutcher Music here in Bakersfield. Fred Gutcher and I were real good friends. And then, Gene Coleman was General Manager there and Gene and I were good friends. And he wanted me to teach there, so I taught for a while and then I had so much other stuff going on that I had to drop it. And then, later on, there was a gentleman who used to work with Jimmy Wakely, by the name of Jack Rivers. He was teaching at Parlor Music then. It is ?? of course now. But anyway, he had all these students that he was teaching and was teaching classes—6, 7, 8 in a class. And so he was going to leave town. He had a deal in Seattle he was going back to. And he wanted to know if I would come over and take over for him over in Parlors. And so I did. And I think I was teaching like about 114 students and doing all this in class and stuff like that. And that lasted for a while until I got too busy with everything else.

JJ: Too tired.

JS: Well, yes.

JJ: Your ears get tired.

JS: It becomes work. You, know, after so long a time. But at least I hope I learnt somebody something.

JJ: I am sure you did. I am sure you did. Well, you certainly are an important musical figure in Kern County and I know right now, in the present day, since I am relatively new to Bakersfield, and I have only been here for a couple of years, I remember first hearing about Jelly Sanders through records and then when I came to Bakersfield, your name was all over the place because you are doing a lot of --. You have your own band now. And you are playing—What are some of the things you are doing now?

JS: Well, anymore, we don't work anywhere steady. We just do casuals. We work for the Country Clubs here in town. And the Elks Club. And different cities. And then we had the pleasure of playing at the Cattlemen's Association this year over in Santa Barbara and at the Biltmore Hotel, which was quite a deal. And, you know, we just take our pick of the gigs that come along that are real..., you know.

JJ: It is really nice that way.

JS: Well, it is a pleasure to work that way, you know, because as I told you a while ago, if I said how many years here on this tape, everybody would know how old I was, but I was in it for a long time and I played the clubs for a long time. Of course, it was a great experience and a great life. If I had it all to do over, I doubt very seriously that I would change very many things. There would be a few I would change, but as far as playing music, I wouldn't change a thing.

JJ: That is great. One last question. What do you think about Bakersfield being called the Country Music Capital of the West? How do you think that got started? And is it, do you think that is correct? Do you think we really are the Country Music Capital of the West?

JS: Well, yes. I think it could be very definitely so. Now you take just a few years back when this got started and there still is a lot of good Country musicians in Bakersfield, some of the best, in fact, I think.

But now, at one time you had the cream of the crop here in Bakersfield. And all-around musicians who could play anything, do anything. In fact, for about seven or eight years in Hollywood, say at Capital and Columbia and all those studios down there, Bakersfield musicians were being used.

JJ: Right.

JS: Because they were Country and they knew what it was all about and everything, so yes, I very well think that Bakersfield, with the right promotion, a person really take that finance could do it and everything could make another Nashville out of Bakersfield.

JJ: It's not probably ever going to be the proportion that Nashville is, but maybe we are glad to keep it a little bit smaller, because Nashville is almost another big city like L.A. or New York or Chicago.

JS: Right. Right. And Country music probably did this. And, too, you have to give everyone credit where credit is due. Nashville. I remember listening to the Grand Ole Opry when I was a kid back on the farm. We had a battery radio. And we had a wind charger. It kept the battery up

on that. But the main thing is that we listened to the Grand Ole Opry on Saturday night. That was a big thing then. And that came out of Nashville. WSN. And so Country music has been a thing there for a long time and will continue to be from now on I am quite sure. And it seems like it just keeps getting bigger and bigger, you know. So there is no way that anyone is ever going to take over the first spot from Nashville.

JJ: We can't catch them, but...

JS: We can be second.

JJ: We can be their West Coast rival.

JS: Right.

JJ: Well, you certainly play an instrumental part in that and we really appreciate your taking time to put your ideas and your historical background down on tape for us all to enjoy.

JS: Well, it has been a pleasure, really. And I hope that I have enlightened someone on a few things.

JJ: You certainly have.

JS: It's been a pleasure talking with you.

JJ: Okay. Well, thanks so much.