



## DOLAN ELLIS 1935 -

Honored as 2023 Arizona Historymaker  
State Balladeer for Over 55 Years  
History Preservationist



The following is an oral history interview with Historymaker Dolan Ellis (**DE**) conducted by Norma Jean Coulter (**NJC**) for Historical League, Inc., and video-graphed by Leonardo Buono on May 2, 2023, at the Center for Positive Media, Phoenix, Arizona.

*Original tapes are in the collection of the Arizona Historical Society Museum Library at Papago Park, Tempe, Arizona. Interview edited for clarity.*

**NJC** Good afternoon. My name is Norma Jean Coulter. It's May 2, 2023, and I am interviewing Dolan Ellis, Arizona's Official Balladeer. Good afternoon Dolan. Could you tell us a little bit about your early life in Kansas?

**DE** I was not born in Arizona, but I've died in Arizona many times on stage, *[laughs]*. No, I was not born in Arizona; I was born in the Midwest in Kansas on a farm. My life was like a little farm boy. I took my shoes off when school was out in the spring, and I didn't put 'em on again until I went back to school in the fall. That's the truth. I went barefoot all summer long. I was very lucky in that I was small, too small to really work hard. My older brother really worked hard in the wheat fields, shucking corn and that sort of thing; but I was a little boy. About the time I got old enough to be worked really hard in the fields, we moved to town because my dad got lung problems from the wheat chaff. So, I had all the joys of growing up on a farm without having to do all the hard work that's on a farm. It was a wonderful life. Our farm was a mile square, and it had everything on it from creeks to woods to fields to pastures, and orchards. It was a nice farm. And I could go anywhere I wanted on the farm, even before I was in school. When I was in pre-school, I had to be home about an hour before sunset. I could go all day long at five years of age. I could go to the creeks. I could play. I could build forts. I could let my imagination soar. And I think that helped me to bond with the earth. I think that's when I learned to be a part of it and it a part of me. I think it has a lot to do with the fact that I pursued being a songwriter as a career-- a singer and a songwriter.

**NJC** Were you interested in music then?

**DE** Well, I can't say I was interested in music. I've always loved music. I had an older brother whom I admired a great deal. He was ten years older than me and that's a big difference for a big brother. He was more like an uncle than a brother with that many years difference. But he was a great musician, and he was my hero. And he was a good big brother. He would let me listen to his old 78s of jazz and all of that, and he'd make me drums out of drum sets or out of cardboard boxes and such. So, I think that his influence in my life really channeled me toward being a musician.

**NJC** Did you have any other siblings?

**DE** I had a sister. Her name was Kay or Kathleen. My brother's name was Jay, James Lewellen Ellis. My sister was Kathleen Jean Ellis. They're both gone now. My sister, Kay, was five years older than me. We loved each other, but we didn't have the closeness that my brother and I did until we got older and then we were very close.

**NJC** And so you moved from the farm into town. Was it a big town?

**DE** We moved from the farm which was south of Lawrence, Kansas, to Topeka, Kansas. Topeka was about a hundred thousand people. To me that was a pretty big town, and a big transition for me because I really didn't have very good social skills. By this time, I was in upper grade school, 6<sup>th</sup> grade, I think. All these other kids had been going to Little League and that sort of thing. So, it was difficult for me when I first moved there because I couldn't shuck and jive like the other kids could, you know?

**NJC** And you had to wear shoes in the summer?

**DE** And I had to wear shoes. *[laughs]* But yeah, it was a big cultural change for me to move to town.

**NJC** And your education. Did you have higher education?

**DE** Yes. I went to Baker University, which was a private Methodist school, for two years. I was in journalism with emphasis on television, which was becoming kind of a favorite kind of thing for young people to do, like computers are today. Television was still black and white, but it was expanding, and it was a good thing to get into. Then I transferred to Kansas University up in Lawrence, because they had a really good television department. We would go live on WIBW TV once a week, which gave us live experience. The whole course was just a much better course, so I transferred there.

**NJC** While you were at Baker or at KU, did you get into music?

**DE** Yes, I earned a great deal of my college education with music. I played mostly rock n' roll bands because that was the music of the day.

**NJC** Did you play the guitar?

**DE** Played guitar. But I always sang the smooth songs. I would do the Johnny Mathis songs. I would do the Pat Boone songs, that sort of thing. There were other guys in the band that did the growling and the Little Richard stuff.

**NJC** But you learned to play the guitar in that time?

**DE** Yes.

**NJC** Did you graduate from KU?

**DE** No. I didn't graduate. I left with three hours to go for my degree. I was married and my wife was pregnant. I had landed a job down here in Arizona. It's kind of a long story, but I didn't get that last three hours. I thought I'd finish it up in a correspondence course, and of course, I got busy and never did.

**NJC** Was your first job in television down here?

**DE** Yes. I was with KOOL television. Back in those days, we would get little penny postcards and we would send them out to all the television stations between Kansas City and Tucson. I had a job offer in Albuquerque, and a job offer in Tucson at Channel 4. But Channel 10 in Phoenix offered me an interview. I took the job at Channel 10 because I could feel Phoenix was a buzzing city. You could feel Phoenix was booming and growing. Albuquerque had lots of poverty; and Tucson was, back in those days, kind of sleepy. I think a young man needs to be where the action is, where the energy is. And so, I got hired at KOOL Television. I did about everything a person can do at a television station. I was a cameraman. I was a floor man. I ran teleprompters. I ran sound. I was a video switcher. I even did some technical directing on the weekends. But after I'd gone to all the trouble to get that education, I wasn't thrilled with the television industry. It's a very "on time" industry. If I missed cutting into Johnny Carson, if I missed the first note of the band coming, dah-dah-dah, you know, the phone would start to ring. "You were two seconds late." And I'm going like, two seconds, who cares? So, it just didn't fit my personality. I'm a little more laid back than that.

At that time, I auditioned at a place called the Green Gables. They had a big white horse out front with a knight on it. He would help to park cars and all that. I auditioned of course, but it was a dinner house. They wanted violins and cellos and that sort of thing. And I'm getting up singing John Henry. The guy that auditioned me was very, very nice. And he said, "You really did a nice job, but this is not what we need to hear at this restaurant." But he said, "I know a guy that is opening a really, really nice European coffee house out in Scottsdale called Portofino's." He said, "If you would like, I'll recommend you to him." I said, "Sure, that'd be great."

So, I went out and I auditioned and got the job. Portofino's back then was a little tiny place. It probably seated 30, 35 people. It was just a little coffee place. But the after-theater crowd used to love to come in and listen to me and I was just packin' this little place for the owner. We did so well, got so much attention around town that he expanded. He like tripled the size of the place and it was just really beautiful. Then he started bringing in national folk acts. And I became the house act, and the opening act for all these national acts. And it was the greatest learning lab that I could be, working with these professionals. I would get up and I'd do my opening act. Then I'd go back to the dressing room and put away my guitar. By the way it is this same guitar. I bought this guitar brand new in 1958. [Dolan brought the guitar with him.] This is a Martin D28. So anyway, I'd put my guitar away, go around back and sit in the back of the room. I'd sit there with a pad and pencil and if they'd said something or moved their head in a certain way or made a certain gesture or something, I wrote it down.

**NJC** Like a college class.

**DE** Yeah, it was like a college class for me. Then I'd go home, rehearse in front of mirrors, practice and learn from these people as they came in.

**NJC** So at this point you've shifted into folk music?

**DE** Well, yes. Even when I was with those rock n' roll bands, I was doing ballad work, you know. I didn't do the really hard singing stuff.

**NJC** Hard rock n' roll?

**DE** But yes. When I was at Kansas University, because I was in the journalism department, I had access to the FM station. And the FM station had a fabulous collection of 78 rpm records of all of these old folk singers from Lead Belly to John Jacob Niles, to Pete Seger, to the Weavers, to all of these early folk people. So, I just pored over this stuff because I loved ballads and folk music. So, when I started singing folk music professionally, back in those years, all the kids were running out and learning all these folk songs. I already knew most of them because I had been interested in it earlier. So, it was very natural thing for me. And I was very lucky actually that folk music became the popular music because it was the music that was in my heart.

**NJC** At Portofino's, is that where you met Randy Sparks?

**DE** No. I met Randy when I started traveling nationally. When I was working with all these national acts, they told their booking agents about me and so it was kind of my entry to getting a national booking agent. I started working in Denver, St. Louis, and Salt Lake and west of the Mississippi. We all kind of got to know each other. Randy had the Randy Sparks Three, and when he put the group together he called me and wanted to know if I was interested in throwing my hat in the ring. I thought it was a great idea and so I did, and I ended up moving to the West Coast for a couple years. We had great success with that.

**NJC** This is the foundation of New Christy Minstrels, correct?

**DE** Yes, that's the beginning of the New Christy Minstrels.

**NJC** Now New Christy Minstrels had success early on?

**DE** Oh, we exploded. I think the first month or two we sold over 400,000 copies of our first album. I mean, we just exploded on the scene. Then we got booked as regulars on the Andy Williams Show and that really gave us the exposure because we had 80 million people a week listening to us across the nation. And we became a household word. Then from that we got the Grammy in 1962 and a couple of gold records and so it really was that success that cemented me into the world of being a musician.

**NJC** And the New Christy Minstrels toured nationally?

**DE** Oh yes. We toured all over. They toured the world, really. I didn't because I quit very early on. It wasn't what I was looking for in life. But yes, the Christy's were huge.

**NJC** Looking back were there advantages to doing touring?

**DE** Well certainly there were advantages to being a successful musician. It helped to open other doors. When I came back here, Phoenix was a very small place, and I was with one of the most popular folk music groups of the nation. So, when I came back home again it was kind of a big deal. It gave me the opportunity to go through doors that I probably never would've been able to walk through otherwise. It probably was from the attention that I became Arizona's official balladeer. Sam Goddard was Governor at the time. He used to bring his family in to see my show before the New Christy Minstrels. Then when I came home, he sent a member of the House of Representatives to me. I had just recorded my first album of Arizona songs. He said, "How would you like to be Arizona's official balladeer?" There'd never been an official balladeer of

any state in the United States until Sam Goddard thought up that title. And I thought, you know, that's exactly what I would like to be; that's exactly what I'd like to do with the rest of my life. And that's been 57 years ago. And I'm still Arizona's official balladeer after 13 governors have renewed it.

**NJC** Tell me about starting Dolan's in Scottsdale.

**DE** Yes, I opened Dolan's in Scottsdale, which was at the corner of Scottsdale Road and Camelback. Location, location, location. I'd rented that corner and building for \$400 a month. It was a little building built by a Frank Lloyd Wright student and it was all stone and kind of angular and it was real creative looking. The reason I opened it was because when I came back here I could not find a venue that I felt was set up properly for professional entertaining. A lot of the coffee houses were pretty limited in their sound and lights, and you might be in a corner. There might be a post in front of you. I opened this place kind of as self-preservation. I wanted to be able to present my music properly. I had developed some really good professional skills when I was in the big time. And I wanted a place where I could express that talent and do those things. And I couldn't find it anywhere. So, I opened my own club to do that. And we were very successful with it.

**NJC** Okay. Who are some of the other musicians that you played with at Dolan's?

**DE** Well, I hired John Denver for \$175 a week. How's that? *[laughs]* John had not hit yet. He was just traveling and working like the rest of us. He played my club, and we were pretty good friends. It was kind of a unique thing because in my little club I had a hard liquor license. I was the first folk music venue where people could get a real drink rather than a cup of coffee, and we were all no longer kids. We were now getting older, and we wanted a little something more than coffee. I opened it with a liquor license. Everybody enjoyed it because they could have a glass of wine or something, while they were watching the shows.

So, my place became a stopover for national acts when they were traveling across the nation. They'd stop in to say hi because they were friends. So, the Kingston Trio might come in and do a guest set at my place. Or the Limelighters might come in and do a guest set in my place. Who knows who might come in. John Denver might come in and did a couple songs as he was comin' through. Phoenix was kind of the stopover before that last trip on over to LA, back home again. So, we had a lot of wonderful talent come through there.

Because I had been on the West Coast, there was a lot of wonderful talent over there that you never heard of because they weren't lucky. And I knew those people. I could hire fabulous talented musicians and singers and songwriters that would come over here with no big name. But people learned that what I would bring in there would be quality entertainment and the venue got its reputation as such, They'd come to see one of these acts, and it didn't matter if they knew

them or not. They knew that they were going to see a good show when they got in. They knew they were gonna hear something special. So, it worked out really very well.

**NJC** How long did you have Dolan's?

**DE** I didn't have it very long. That's kind of an interesting story. I rented that building. Well, I was young and inexperienced. And we were doing a land office business in there. I mean, we were packed to the rafters every night. The landlord, you know, he saw all this money coming in the front door, so after the first year, I got this letter, and he quadrupled the rent on me. I went to see him-- I won't mention his name--and I said, "Well Mr. So-and-So, you know, if you raise that rent to that, nobody's gonna be making any money except you. You know, that's no good." And he said, "Well son, it looks like to me you've got two choices. You can either pay it or get out." And that was a good education right there. *[laughs]* So I said, "Well, I'll pay it, but I'll be looking for a way out because this makes no sense." About two weeks later, somebody came to me and wanted to buy my club. He said, "Is it for sale?" I said, "Well, I don't know." He said, "Well, if it was for sale, what would you want?" "I just threw out a big number that I didn't think anybody would ever pay any attention to. Son of a gun, he didn't even bat an eye and bought it from me.

**NJC** Wow.

**DE** So, *[laughs]* I sold it and went and did other things. And then I opened a couple other places, too, after that.

**NJC** Were they named Dolan's?

**DE** No. I was part owner in The Hungry Cowboy. Maybe some people might remember that out at the Scottsdale Airport. And then I had a place called The Tuba City Truck Stop and Country Club. Back then it was kind of in the back streets of Scottsdale, over by Don and Charlies, back in those days.

**NJC** That's a great name.

**DE** It was named after one of my songs that had done well. Leroy VanDyke, who was a big country star, recorded my song and put it on the top 40. And it did real well for me. I thought, that's probably the best well-known name that I could use. Better known than my name. So, I named it the Tuba City Truck Stop and Country Club. Course it wasn't a country club at all, and it wasn't a truck stop either. But *[laughs]* it was a showroom with a restaurant. A lot of people are not aware of the fact that my partner in that was Crazy Ed, Ed Chilleen, who had Crazy Ed's, which was such a popular restaurant over on the west side. Ed and I got together and opened that place.

**NJC** And then did you go back into touring?

**DE** Yes. I went back into touring again. It's hard to remember the order of things, but yes I did.

**NJC** But Arizona was still calling you?

**DE** Oh absolutely! Arizona has always been my home. Even when I haven't lived here, I've always owned a home here. I'd never live anywhere else. And the fact is, today, I don't care if I ever leave the state again or not. I don't care if I ever get on another airplane. I love it right here.

**NJC** Let's switch from music for a few minutes to go into hiking and your very famous dusty old Jeeps. How many Jeeps did you say you had?

**DE** I am now working on my 21<sup>st</sup> Jeep. It's a far cry from my very first Jeep, though. My very first Jeep was a 1947 CJ2A Army surplus Jeep. It was a great little Jeep, but it was a piece of machinery and that was about all there was to it. Whereas the Jeeps today are so comfortable and wonderful, I drove the CJ5s, CJ7s, the Wranglers, the Jeep Jeeps, the square headlights Jeeps, for years and years and years. And then as I got older, I went into the Grand Cherokees, and I been driving Grand Cherokees for many years now.

**NJC** What was your motivation to get out and explore Arizona? Was it just that you liked to hike?

**DE** No, the desert, particularly the desert. I mean, I love the mountains and I love the pine country. And many people are unaware that Arizona is one-third pine country. The Mogollon Rim covers about a third of our state and we have the largest stand of Ponderosa Pine in the world right here in our state. Most people just think of us as rocks and rattlesnakes and hot weather and, you know. But I love the desert. And I love the saguaros; I really relate to them, and they speak to me. The desert is my church. That's where I find my connection to the Universe. I think that my music demonstrates some I've written about Arizona. It's a very special place, you know? Great philosophers have been going to the desert for thousands of years and, there's something very special about the solitude of the desert. I think it has a lot of the same qualities that the ocean has, where it causes one's mind to roll and to think about things.

**NJC** That's a wonderful way to express that.

**DE** Yeah.

**NJC** Have you ever hiked the canyon? The Grand Canyon?

**DE** No. I never have. I've never been to the bottom of the Grand Canyon. You know, that's an interesting question because people used to say, "Well Dolan, have you written a song about a saguaro?" I'd say, "No I haven't written about saguaros." "Have you been to the Grand Canyon?" "No, I haven't been to the Grand Canyon." As I was trying to establish myself as a singer/songwriter of Arizona and an "experiencer" of Arizona, remote places, and that sort of thing, I've tried very hard not to be trite. You know, to sing and write a song about a saguaro, I'd rather write a song about an old desert codger. You know, there is more fiber to it. And I wanted to be very careful not to write kind of trite songs in my very beginning because I was building a reputation. I wanted my reputation to be deeper than that. So, I chose to stay away from those more popular things in the very beginning and write about things that people don't know about.

Since then, it has become kind of a habit; because now I feel that my music is kind of a teaching tool. When I was first singing my songs for people, people would come in because they loved the same things that I love, and they had been the same places that I had been. They'd bring their people in, visitors from out of town. They'd bring Aunt Minnie from Iowa, you know, to see my show. And I'd do a song and pictures about Sheep Bridge (on the Verde River), or a box canyon or maybe the old beehive ovens along the Gila River. And they'd tell their Aunt Minnie, "Oh I've been there. I know that." That all changed. Now my people come into see my shows or did before I retired, and they would come in and their reaction to my music would be, "I didn't know that. Well wow, that's interesting." So, I have changed my attitude. I think that my music is teaching. It's a teaching tool. And I feel a responsibility in that department.

**NJC** So although you love the desert, you mentioned Sheep's Bridge. You have hiked all over Arizona?

**DE** I'm more of a four-wheeler than a hiker, but yes, I've done a lot of hiking, too. But I have not said I'm gonna take this hiking trail today or I'm gonna take that hiking trail. I would say, I'm gonna take this Jeep trail today. I'm gonna take that Jeep trail tomorrow. And then when I was out there, I would get out of my Jeep, and I would hike where you can't take a Jeep. But I wouldn't call myself a real hiker, the way some people do. You know, some people they don't even own a Jeep. They just go out and take hiking trails. And that's not been what I did. Mine was more make it up as I go along. In fact, a lot of my hiking was not even on trails. They were just in sand washes.

**NJC** You mentioned that your music you feel is also a teaching tool. And I know you've taught or sung for school children. I have a quote here that says you tried to do good with music. Could you tell us about your experiences with playing for school children?

**DE** Yeah, I've sung for a lot of school kids; hundreds of thousands, I'm sure over the years. Arizona used to have the Arizona Commission on the Arts. They had funding – it wasn't big funding- but it was enough to pay for your gas, lodging and come home with a few bucks in your pocket

because, you know, we who make music have bills just like everybody else does. And that's gotta be part of it. If you want to stay to be a full-time musician, you gotta make some money. If not, you're gonna have a day job and you're going to do music part-time. I've never had what I my mother would call a real job except my first television job, the only real job I've ever had in my life. So, you have to be a little bit of a businessman to go with it. And that doesn't demean the sincerity of what a person is doing, or the intensity about what I'm doing. It just means that you got to pay attention to business as well. So back in those years, these school concerts were funded. And so, I sang all over the state. I would do residencies in schools from the Reservations. I did on the Reservations, off the Reservations, small towns, ranching towns. I even did a residency at Crown King one time. They had a one-room schoolhouse and that was a great experience. And then that all dried up; that funding dried up. And that's really sad, because our kids are not getting the kind of teaching about Arizona that they used to get.

**NJC** That is too bad. What are some of your favorite areas besides the desert of Arizona--some of the favorite areas that you've encountered in your travels.

**DE** Well, it kind of depends on the season of the year and what I'm out to look for, out to see. I do, I love the desert, especially the Sonoran Desert. And I love saguaros and I love to camp around saguaros. Saguaros just speak to me. To me, saguaros are like people that don't speak. You know? They're just a very spiritual thing. They even have almost a cross when you stop and think about how the arms of a saguaro are. So, I find them a very comforting plant to be around. And they're such a unique plant as it is that they survive in such a dry land and able to store the water that they do.

**NJC** Have you ever picked the fruit?

**DE** Sure. Oh yeah. In fact, as I learned the hard way as I was picking saguaro fruit. You take dead saguaro ribs which are long pieces of soft wood, and you knock the fruit off with the stick and they fall down. I'd have gloves on and pick 'em up and I'd wear a straw hat. I'd take my hat off and I used it as a basket, you know, to put 'em in. And then I put 'em into the back of my Jeep or something like that. And I went to put my hat back on. *[laughs]* And my hat was full of these microscopic stickers that you can't really see, and it was a learning experience. I'll put it that way. *[laughs]*

**NJC** Could you tell us about some of the people you met? Some of the old codgers that you met that stick in your mind.

**DE** Oh yeah. I've written about a lot of these people. I learned a lot from these old guys, and I found them very interesting people. Most of the time they were there because they didn't want to live the lifestyle in the city or in the town. So, I understood what was running through them. I didn't want to be one of them because I think that life has more to offer than to live in a little shack

someplace in the desert. But I admired them for their decisions to do that, the intensity of their philosophy that they would decide to do these things. I met an old guy out in the San Tan Mountains who was a kind of a miner sort of a fellow. I'm not sure how much he mined, or whether his mining claim was just kind of a place where he could live.

I know another guy that was kind of a cowboy artist. He didn't know he was very creative and had a creative soul. He built his house out of whatever he could find at the dump. The railing around his front porch was all bowling pins. And his front door was a freezer door. He had a steam iron toenailed onto this big freezer door that would swing on a wagon axle. His whole house was just this one creative thing that he'd put together.

Then I wrote a song about a black cowboy that had a little ranch down in southern Arizona. I wrote a song about a fellow that was the conductor on a caboose of a train. It was an industrial train that went from Ajo to Gila Bend and back again. It would carry mining for the mining operations down there and that sort of thing. But, because of government law, they had to supply passenger service. So, to meet that law, they hooked on this little old caboose behind this otherwise industrial train. It was an old caboose with wooden seats in it and a pot belly stove in it. He'd go out there, hired to be the conductor. So, he'd have on his little conductor outfit. Had a little blue hat, you know, his conductor hat. He had his punch. Had a little step stool he'd put down. And he'd say, "All aboard." But nobody ever rode the train. *[laughs]*

**NJC** *[laughs]* No passengers.

**DE** I've written a lot of songs about a lot of really interesting folks.

**NJC** So as you made these adventures in your dusty old Jeep, you also took a lot of photographs?

**DE** Yes.

**NJC** And were you making documentaries?

**DE** Yes. I was doing television specials; not sure I would call them documentaries. They were television specials that were entertaining. I would travel around the state, and I had a partner who was a cinematographer. This was before tape came in, TV, and all of that. I mean, it was there, but we were still using 16 mm to do remote location stuff. We went all around the state, and I would sing songs about different places on location. Then we would put them together into television specials, half hour television specials that were sponsored by Western Savings & Loan. Western Savings & Loan was owned by the Driggs family. And they hired me to be their television spokesman. I was with them for many years, doing television commercials for them, kind of tied it to Arizona. They were using my persona to kind of marry them to the earth. To

marry them to Arizona. The Driggs family was a major family in this area, and they wanted to tie their business to Arizona. And looking back, had the Driggs' not done that, I don't think I could've ever accomplished what I've accomplished with my music. I was very fortunate because they sponsored television specials, and they sponsored my travelogues. It took money to do that.

**NJC** So you were marrying your business needs to your music so that you could further your music.

**DE** There's a message there that I'd like to just touch on if I may. And that is that creative people need the power of the wealthy people of a community to support them in order for their art to raise up. An artist cannot raise himself up. It must be done by someone else. And that's why what you folks are doing with this Historymaker program is so important because it raises up the good works that other people do. That's what the Driggs did for me. They raised up my work and made it visible. And it helped me to become successful.

**NJC** That speaks to the conversation earlier when you were talking about the people on the West Coast that were good musicians, but they didn't have any breaks.

**DE** That's right.

**NJC** It's the same idea.

**DE** You have to have the support of the wealthy community or somebody that's a mover/shaker to be able to get your art noticed. I'm just so pleased to be a part of this and I thank you all a great deal for it.

**NJC** Thank you, we appreciate that. So somewhere along the line, you moved from Scottsdale. Did you move to Ramsey Canyon?

**DE** Yes. I went from Scottsdale to Ramsey Canyon.

**NJC** That's quite a move.

**DE** It was quite a move. I was looking for a spot to open a folklore center. I got to looking around and went to the Scottsdale library to the Southwestern room. This was back a long time ago. I went to look for Arizona folklore and folk music. And on the shelf, it was about this wide, like two or three little books. One was Yaqui Indian Dances. Another was a book of Burl Ives sea shanties. Go figure. *[laughs]* There just wasn't anything there. At the time, I must've known at least a hundred people that were spending a good portion of their lives, if not professionally, maybe as a hobby, singing Arizona folk songs, cowboy songs, and all that sort of thing. And it

just wasn't on the shelf. By this time, I'm getting older. There are little alarm clocks, I think, that go off in your head and I was getting to that age where I wanted to do something more than just to do another show. I thought, well maybe I'm the guy to establish a folklore center. So, I started looking around and found some property out by Saguaro Lake where I thought I was gonna put it. I even built a house out there. After I got the home built, I realized that it was going to be an area of homes. And that if I tried to build a folklore center out there, I would have nothing but grief from the neighbors and such. And rightly so. So, I sold that and went to southern Arizona and found this property down in Ramsey Canyon. And that's where I established the Arizona Folklore Preserve.

**NJC** How did you go about marketing that because it's so remote?

**DE** Interesting question. I went down there and thought, I will use my notoriety to draw people in and bring the center success. I got down there, bought the land, now I'm committed, okay? And I suddenly realized nobody in southern Arizona knew who I was. Nobody. I mean, it was a real shocker. The reason being is Phoenix television does not reach down in that corner of the state. That's Tucson's beaming area, down in there. And I didn't realize that. So, there I am, ready to draw the people in and nobody's ever heard of me. I had to kind of revert to back the way it was in the very beginning. I shined up my boots, got my best hat on, and started going around to all the merchants, giving them my cards, and telling them about what I'm doing and inviting them to be my guests. I'd go to the Rotary Clubs, and I'd sing, tell them about the folklore center. I'd go to the Lions Club and that's how we started grassroots. That's how we established it.

I did shows in the first folklore center. There's been two - a little old 1929 house that we were in beginning. I set up a non-profit 501C3 and I didn't charge anything for my shows. So, every week all that money went into the bank from the local people, so we built a really nice bank account. With that I started the new folklore center, and it's a beautiful place today. I got all the plumbing and ran out of money. I don't know how I did it, but we got the attention of the University of Arizona. Dr. Randy Groth was the Dean of the Campus there in Sierra Vista. We got him interested in it and he in turn got the university interested in it. And then we cut a deal with the university where if they came in and helped us to finish the building, then the property, the building, the non-profit and everything would be transferred to the university after it was completed and paid off. That has all occurred and the Arizona Folklore Preserve is now owned by the State of Arizona and the University of Arizona. It's run by a board of directors of which I'm not the president, but I sit on the board.

**NJC** And do they only have music? Or do they have other programs going on?

**DE** No, it's acoustic music. We try to keep it as Arizona as possible, you know? But we do lap over into Texas, New Mexico, a little bit of Colorado, and Mexico, but it's all folk style music.

**NJC** So was your intended audience originally the folklore center for the state of Arizona? Or were you aiming this as a tourist attraction? What was your early target audience?

**DE** Yeah, I think a lot of winter visitors are part of our audience. A lot of local people, too. A lot of Arizona people like to come to the Arizona Folklore Preserve because it's such a beautiful canyon and it's such a beautiful experience. It's so much more than just seeing a show when you come to the Arizona Folklore Preserve which is, by the way, just below Sierra Vista in Ramsey Canyon. It's six miles off the highway, but it's paved the entire direct way and in this beautiful facility we've put together a state-of-the-art sound systems and lights in it. It's air conditioned. It's climate controlled. It's a beautiful facility and, it's comfortable. You're not sitting on benches or anything like that at the Arizona Folklore Preserve.

**NJC** So if one wanted to go there, the closest lodging would be in Sierra Vista?

**DE** There is a really charming bed and breakfast within walking distance of the Folklore Center. It's just about a quarter of a mile up the canyon. The road dead ends at the Nature Conservancy's hummingbird place up there, which is another reason to come. It's not just our show. And then the Nature Conservancy has this wonderful nature center up there, and there's hiking trails that you can hike for 10 minutes or 10 hours. It's really a destination area there that is probably one of the best kept secrets in Arizona.

**NJC** It's also close to Fort Huachuca and all of their museums.

**DE** Yes, Fort Huachuca is there, of course, with all its military history. Ramsey Canyon is 5300 feet elevation--the same elevation as Payson. So, in the summertime, it's cool up there.

**NJC** I'd like to shift now to your website. How long have you had your website?

**DE** I think I was the first musician to have a website and a domain in the State of Arizona. I captured the Arizona Folklore Preserve domain in about 1989, I think, because once a domain is captured, nobody else can have it. I wanted Arizona folk music or folklore, and those were already captured by somebody else. So, I got those very early, and got the websites built very, very early. I felt it was really necessary to learn how to run a computer and that sort of thing. I felt it was the future. So, as you know, we're lucky to have those.

**NJC** You started it after Scottsdale?

**DE** Yes, after Scottsdale. It was when I went down there. I can't quite remember the exact timing on that.

**NJC** For people who might be interested in your website, what would they find on it?

**DE** Well, my website is under my name, [www.DolanEllis.com](http://www.DolanEllis.com) and they'll find some of my songs. I have quite a variety of Arizona music that they can listen to. There's no charge for it or anything. You can go and enjoy it. I also have a page where I have my recordings, my videos and that sort of thing if people would like to buy it. You can buy it right on my website through PayPal and it's very easy to do. They will find a comment page. It's been a while since I've looked at it, so I don't quite remember what's on it, but it's a nice website.

**NJC** It has a lot of photography on it, too.

**DE** Yes, it does have as a lot of photography on it.

**NJC** Are you surprised at the amount of traffic on your website? Do you get a lot of traffic?

**DE** I don't get the traffic I used to. I used to get a lot more traffic. But that's probably my fault because to get a lot of traffic on a website, you have to work at it. You have to get what they call keywords behind the screen that people can't see. So, if they're looking for Arizona, it goes to my website. If they're looking for history, it goes to my website. If they're looking for music, it goes to my website. And you have to keep that stuff fresh. As the years have gone by and I don't perform my shows anymore, I've kind of used it more of a place to park my music than anything else. I don't work at it the way I used to.

**NJC** But it's still there as a legacy of yours, isn't it?

**DE** Oh yes. Yeah I'm using that as kind of my storehouse. It's just kind of a place to put things. And it's a place where people can buy my music and my videos.

**NJC** I know you're not touring now, but I know that you still have your guitar. When you're playing music just for yourself, do you play folk music?

**DE** Oh yes.

**NJC** Do you play jazz?

**DE** Oh yes. I play and sing every day. Maybe I should speak to why I'm not touring anymore. What do you think?

**NJC** That's fine. People would wonder.

**DE** Well, I play every day. Every morning. I have a little rehearsal guitar I keep right at the breakfast table, and I play and sing, oh probably for 20 minutes every morning. But the reason I'm not touring and doing concerts is that I've had severe hearing loss. I've been wearing hearing aids for probably 15 years at least. But this is different. I've kind of gone tone deaf. And when my ears get bombarded with other sounds, it takes away my ability to be able to hear what key I'm singing in. I've had it happen when I'm on stage so that's why I retired. I go on stage and my ears get tired. All of a sudden I start singing in a completely different key than I'm playing in. And it's awful, *[laugh]* 'cause I don't know that I'm doing it. So, it was time to retire. I still have the ability to hear my guitar and be able to sing to it for very short periods of time in very quiet places. But that doesn't include doing concerts, unfortunately.

**NJC** Do you listen to your own music? Do you ever listen to it on CDs or...

**DE** Well sometimes. Just to kind of go back and reminisce a little bit. But I'm a forward thinker. I'm always writing and I'm always thinking. I mentioned to someone earlier today that I'm always with my music. I'm never without music in my head. Even when I'm sleeping. I'm never without music or related subjects in my head. And so, I continue to write all the time. And that's kind of uncontrollable. It's kind of like a regurgitation. And so, I continue to write all the time.

**NJC** Do you ever send your music to any other singers?

**DE** No. I've never really worked very hard at marketing my music. I think I should have because I do believe that I have some things that deserve that. You know? But I've never done that. I write them for me and for the people that I sing for. And that's good enough.

**NJC** That's important.

**DE** Yeah.

**NJC** So at this stage of your life, you've lived a very wonderful life...

**DE** Yes, I have.

**NJC** What advice would you give to an 18-year-old Dolan?

**DE** An 18-year-old wanting to go into the music business? Well, in the first place, it's very hard work. If you're going into the music business just to I don't know, learn a few songs and, find a pretty woman, that's one thing. There's a whole lot more to it than that if you want to make a good living. It's very hard work. I think that my advice would be to an 18-year-old, think of your

work as being a service to other people. Think of your work as helping other people. I think a person can guide their life by their own concept of who they pretend to be, you know? I mean, I think a person can guide their life by pretending who they want to be. Nobody is born a singer/songwriter. You decide to be that. And I think that if a person wants to be successful with their music, it has to be meaningful to other people. Hit songs are wonderful because they mean something to other people. But they only mean something to other people for the most part because they're love songs, or they're songs that have a catchy something to them. I don't think my music is that. I think my music has a depth to it. I hope it does. The reason it has been successful is because it has something to say to other people. I think people that sit in the audience in my shows will enjoy the jokes, and they will enjoy the energy in the performance. And then there will be other people who enjoy the show on a completely different level. They'll hear the message of the song. And that will bring them back again. So, I guess to an 18-year-old, I would say, try to have as much fiber in your music as possible, so that people can listen to it on many levels. Does that make any sense?

**NJC** Yes, it does.

**DE** Okay.

**NJC** Especially comparing to some of today's music. *[laughs]*

**DE** Yeah.

**NJC** Or what passes for music. What do you see as the future for the Folklore Center itself? Do you see it lasting?

**DE** The future of the Arizona Folklore Preserve? Boy that's a big question. I have no idea. You know, when I created that, that was my property. I didn't have to let go of it. I could've kept it for myself. But I didn't want to do that because I wanted it to go on beyond me. And I wanted to create something for the State of Arizona. I didn't want a place to just sing my songs. If I'd have kept it, that's what it would've been. So nearly 30 years ago, I released the Arizona Folklore Preserve into the hands of the university, into the hands of a board of directors, and that's really up to them. You know? It's kind of like with your children, you release them. And you hope that they do well. You hope that they will go on and be successful. But that's just kind of out of our hands. And that's the way I feel about the Arizona Folklore Preserve. I have released it. And, if it's going to be successful in the future, it's going to be up to those people who are in charge of it now. If it's not successful in the future, it certainly was when I had it and I feel good about my participation. So, if it's not successful after me, that's none of my doing. That belongs to them.

**NJC** Then you left Ramsey Canyon, and moved back to Scottsdale?

**DE** Let me think. After Ramsey Canyon, yes, I moved back to Scottsdale.

**NJC** Back to the big city?

**DE** Back to the big city. Yes, because this is the flagpole. Phoenix is the flagpole. And if you still got your foot on the accelerator, you want to be close to the flagpole. And I'd been away for a number of years and it was time to come back and recharge the batteries. I had reached the point where Phoenix had increased by several million people since I was gone, and I was losing my notoriety. So, I needed to come back and do that. And I did. And I came back and worked the Phoenix area for another almost 20 years. Now I'm gone again, you know, because I'm now retired and I no longer really have my foot on the accelerator anymore. I wish I did, really. But it is what it is.

**NJC** So you've moved back to southern Arizona.

**DE** *[laughs]* Yeah. I'm enjoying it though. Southern Arizona is a beautiful place and it's a very interesting place. It's much different than the other cultures around the state. The Tubac area is impregnated with Spanish, and not only Mexico Hispanic, but Spain, Spanish history. And it's something that even though I've been aware of, I haven't really dug into it before and I'm doing that now. I really am enjoying learning more about Spain's influence upon the Southwest. And I'm writing music about that. I've written a couple of things already and hopefully I'll get them recorded. We'll see.

**NJC** It's a good place to be retired.

**DE** Yep.

**NJC** So thinking now about Arizona as a whole, what do you see as the future of Arizona?

**DE** Well, I don't see any sign of our growth stopping. I'm not seeing any brakes being put on that. So, I think that Phoenix is going to get bigger and bigger, which I wonder about sometimes. But I think Phoenix is continuing to change – that Arizona is continuing to change its culture. It's changed certainly since I came here in 1959. This is not the same Arizona that I moved to in 1959. So, there's no reason to believe that it's going to be the same you know, in 2300 or something like that. It's going to be different. That's the way it is. I mean, the world keeps turning doesn't it?

**NJC** It does. And thank you very much for this interview, Dolan. And I would urge any of you reading this to check out Dolan's website. It's truly a beautiful website.

**DE** Thank you very much and thanks for having me.

[END OF RECORDING]