LET ME HEAR AN AMEN: GOSPEL MUSIC AND ORAL HISTORY

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ABSTRACT: In the last decade a substantial number of articles have appeared urging archivists to become activists in creating records to capture historical and cultural experiences that do not generate traditional written records, and to employ new techniques to insure adequacy of documentation.[1] The difficulties and successes which the Center for Popular Music has experienced in developing its resources for gospel music research demonstrate the utility of one such tool—oral history—in capturing critical information needed to understand such ephemeral phenomena, and support the view that archivists should develop a multi-dimensional approach to collection development.

Founded in 1985, the Center for Popular Music at Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU), located within 100 miles of three of the seven chapters of the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences, is one of twenty-three centers of excellence located on six Tennessee Board of Regents campuses. The mission of these centers is to improve the quality and enhance the reputation of public higher education in the state. Through the Centers of Excellence initiative the legislature provided supplementary funds to programs that had already achieved substantial success in a given field in order to enable them to reach their full potential.

The recognition that MTSU had already won in popular music scholarship easily met the legislature's criteria. In 1982 one of the eight albums documenting Tennessee's musical heritage produced by the university-based Tennessee Folklore Society had been nominated for a Grammy award. The work of English professor Charles Wolfe on such varied topics as the history of the Ryman Auditorium and the development of Appalachian ballads had appeared in both scholarly and popular journals. And *Billboard* magazine had praised the university's recording industry management program, one of the few such four-year programs in the country.

Building on these earlier achievements the Center for Popular Music's five-person staff has developed complementary programs in three areas. First, the center has sponsored publications ranging from a directory of music collections in Tennessee and a microfilm edition of the magazine issued by a major gospel song book publisher from 1915 to 1986, to a scholarly journal, the *JEMF Quarterly* (soon to be renamed *American Vernacular Music*). Public programming—the center's second arm—has included such diverse activities as a symposium on women in American musical life which brought together schol-

ars, performers, and industry executives to share their experiences; costumed performances of Civil War music by center staff at an area national park; and a National Public Radio program on Tennessee black music scholar and collector John Work, III.

Third, the center has established an archive and research library that now holds nearly 7,000 monographs, over 35,000 pieces of sheet music; 274 serial titles; over 36,000 sound recordings; more than 3,000 photographs; 34 linear feet of vertical files; and 30 linear feet of manuscript collections, including holograph music of Johnny Mercer, scrapbooks, photographs and other papers of Ferdinand Grofé, the black music collection of rare record dealer Ray Avery, and center-generated audio and video tapes of the Tennessee Banjo Institute, the Dove (gospel music) Award ceremonies, the Memphis Blues Celebration, local rock bands, Gospel Arts Day at Fisk University, Uncle Dave Macon Days, and other regional music events. Since opening in February 1987 this collection has served more than 2,800 individuals from thirty states and five foreign countries.

Establishing a collecting focus for its research holdings quickly became a priority. Clearly the center could not realistically hope to acquire, catalog, and service all the materials in the universe of popular music. As a first step the staff concentrated on assembling for campus use a core collection with a representative sample of all musical genres (folk, jazz, rock, country, religious, ethnic, show) in a variety of formats (sheet music, discs, video and audio tapes) and spanning two centuries of American musical life. Then the center concentrated its research resources on topics and genres not collected by other repositories.

A survey of bibliographies like D.W. Krummel's *Resources of American Music History* plus the center director's own knowledge from his years of scholarly and professional experience in the field quickly pinpointed repositories that concentrated on several genres of American music: country music (Country Music Foundation), jazz (Rutgers and Tulane), blues (University of Mississippi and the Center for Southern Folklore), and show music (the New York Public Library and UCLA). At the same time the survey revealed significant gaps in documenting rock and roll and vernacular religious music, from 17th century New England hymns to contemporary "Jesus metal."

The Center for Popular Music therefore decided to make such documentation a priority in its collecting efforts. In selecting vernacular religious music, especially gospel, as one collecting focus the center was inevitably committing itself to acquiring oral history materials for reasons that can best be explained by a quick side trip through the history of southern gospel music.

The origins of popular religious music lie in the participatory singing tradition of American churches, especially those in denominations that emphasize individual conversion experience, a personal relationship with the deity, Bible-based theology and worship, and lay rather than clerical leadership. Congregational hymn-singing has always been an integral part of worship services in most Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Campbellite churches, and numerous sacred and secular publishers have supplied the needs of these congregations since the 1700s.

Later singing schools developed as entities separate from worship services. Such schools played an important role in the religious and social life of rural

and frontier communities without full-time clergy. Talented amateur musicians also found in singing schools and, later, community singing conventions an opportunity to display their skills at sight reading and choral direction as well as singing. These all-day events often saw friendly rivalries between local virtuosos, and at many singing conventions local vocal groups began providing special music during intermissions.

In the early twentieth century a new type of publication developed to meet the needs of these singing conventions. To sustain interest in the gatherings, companies like J.D. Vaughan and Stamps-Baxter each year produced numerous convention song books which included hundreds of new compositions. Some were written by the staff of Vaughan, Stamps-Baxter, and their many smaller counterparts, but local musicians penned hundreds of others. In return for their songs, contributors received multiple free or discount copies of the song books which they themselves sold at local singings. Rival publishers also began sponsoring tours and convention performances by popular local groups as a way of promoting the company's song books. Thus the early era of commercial gospel music (ca. 1910-1945) was dominated by music publishers.

Shortly after World War II song book publishers' influence in commercial gospel music began to wane as technology changed music production and distribution methods, and increased urbanization permeated religious as well as secular music. Gospel groups no longer depended on publishers for support. Instead they reached audiences through and generated substantial revenues from radio broadcasting, albums produced by the growing number of small independent record companies, sale of their own folios and song books, and appearances at gospel concerts promoted by entrepreneurs like Wally Fowler. As the gospel music business thus became professional as well as commercial, developments in secular popular music also affected the music itself.

The growing power of the gospel performers and the impact of popular musical and performance styles, as well as the changing social and moral values that these trends reflected, created tensions and disputes within the gospel music community. The inclusion of new up-tempo songs with sentimental, optimistic lyrics frequently led to declining sales of a publisher's song books in conservative areas. Popular gospel quartets that appeared at singing conventions often disappointed fans, who found that the embarrassed performers could neither follow traditional shape-note music nor lead familiar hymns.

This same type of schism recurred in the 1960s as performers of rock-influenced contemporary Christian music challenged the supremacy of what by then had become traditional gospel quartets. The largest selling performer of quartet-style gospel music, for example, devoted an entire volume as well as numerous interviews and sermons to condemning "Satan-inspired" Jesus-metal groups like Stryper, and his son served as narrator for the anti-rock segments of a video that became popular with many ministers as the catalyst for youth discussion groups on contemporary Christian music.[2]

Acquiring the hymnals, sound recordings, song books, serials, videos, and other products of this evolution in vernacular religious music proved relatively easy for the center, especially since many are available in microform. However, documenting the process by which these changes occurred proved more difficult. Gospel music has been too image-conscious for much of the "story behind the story" to appear in print. Understanding the rivalries among song book pub-

lishers, the transition from community to commercial music, or the recent controversy over "pop gospel" requires information and insights locked in the memories of the participants. Only through the reminiscences of Don Butler (now executive director of the Gospel Music Association) for example, can one learn of his dismay on discovering that sales representatives of one convention song book publisher once surreptitiously destroyed volumes produced by another in order to prevent their use at the Tennessee state singing convention.[3]

Fortunately many men and women with similar recollections are still alive and able to tell their stories, making oral history an obvious and important collection development tool for the center. It was equally fortunate that the center could enlist the help of two Middle Tennessee State faculty members already well-respected and knowledgeable in the world of gospel music: Charles Wolfe, professor of English and author of the *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* article on gospel music, and Don Cusic, faculty member in the university's recording industry management program and former gospel music editor of *Record World.*

In his seminal article on the role of oral history in documenting the twentieth-century James E. Fogerty argued that the researcher/scholar is an "unfortunate " choice for creating oral history interviews and maintained that "worthwhile oral history" requires a "well-structured oral history project" conducted by trained interviewers.[4] Although the documentary resources created by these two men does not meet these criteria, an analysis of their work will illustrate its unique contribution to the center and the value of oral history to the center's goal of documenting the evolution of vernacular religious music in spite of the problems of working with the researcher/interviewer which Fogerty accurately describes.

Neither Wolfe nor Cusic considers himself an oral historian[5] and both men seem to be well aware that there are differences between their own interest in and approach to oral documentation and a formal oral history program as described by Fogerty.[6] Neither attempts to select interview subjects in order to provide systematic documentation of a subject, and to some extent neither plans an interview to cover specific topics.

Don Cusic focuses on interviewees and subjects in demand by the popular music publications for which he writes; interviews are not, for him, an end in themselves or a way to create an historical record but source material for his writing.[7] He has found his journalism credentials are an asset in obtaining interviews since his articles provide a ready answer when an interviewee asks "What's in this for me?"

Academically trained in English at the University of Kansas, Charles Wolfe describes himself as "a cultural historian" and regards oral history as one among several tools he uses to obtain material for his own scholarly publications. When possible he looks to oral interviews to fill the "information gaps" in his research and to provide the "key anecdote" to illuminate and enliven the articles that he produces.

Like Cusic, Wolfe has relied on his own curiosity and on discovering what he calls "targets of opportunity" in selecting interview subjects, and he acknowledges differences in intent and methodology between oral history and his own work. The oral historian, in his view, "has more of a game plan," "structures an interview," and "seeks to have people cross-check themselves."

Because both men conduct interviews to meet their own short-term research needs rather than to fill gaps in the documentary record neither has ever obtained release forms from interviewees. When questioned about the ethical issues involved in depositing these interviews in the center and thus making them available to the public Don Cusic responded that "most interviewees would be honored" since they viewed the interview as "a kind of immortality." Charles Wolfe, after remarking that he had never considered the question before, finally concluded that since all of his interviews had been viewed by his subjects as "public statements"—in fact some asked him to turn off the tape when discussing sensitive subjects—and he had always identified himself to interviewees as an MTSU professor, archival deposit would not pose ethical problems.

The lack of release forms is troublesome but not catastrophic for the center. Much written documentation arrives in all repositories without release forms from all those involved in its creation; in many cases the creators of the documents, like Wolfe and Cusic's interview subjects, are unaware that the material is in the center. The center therefore handles these interviews like such written documentation; researchers are allowed access to and may make copies of such material as long as their objective is research. But the center's researcher registration form makes clear the expectation that any other use of the interviews, including publication, must be approved by the document's creator. Nor would the center itself use the interviews in public programs or publications without attempting to get clearance from the interviewee.[8]

Thus in many ways the Wolfe and Cusic interviews fall short of an oral history program which meets the standards set by Fogerty. But Charles Wolfe and Don Cusic have preserved invaluable documentation of American vernacular religious music that would otherwise have been lost. Both have brought to their interviews an intimate knowledge of the people and problems at the heart of gospel music that could not have been obtained solely by the extensive pre-interview research that Fogerty recommends[9], and both have overcome the primary problem of gospel music oral history.

Decades of research and interviews have taught Charles Wolfe that "there is no way you can keep yourself distant from your interviewees." It can be, in his words, "messy." Gospel musicians, today as in the 1700s, do not regard themselves as businessmen or performers or entertainers but as ministers called to spread the gospel through music. The history of gospel music, and even the music itself, is secondary to this ministry, and an interviewer must be prepared not only to listen but to respond to extended religious and theological discussions. Wolfe, a Southern Baptist and the grandson of gospel performers, has no difficulty working in this environment. Over the years he has learned the "rhythm" of a gospel interview:

> You talk a while, sing a little, talk some more.
> About ten the cobbler and coffee come out.
> And then talking seriously (i.e. theology) begins.
> Usually I can leave by 11:00.

Both men have also overcome the second obstacle to collecting the oral history of gospel music: the suspicion and hostility (verging, Wolfe says, "on mild paranoia") of men and women who are unaccustomed to being interviewed;

who too often have been exploited or patronized by outsiders purporting to seek information; and who, because of their Bible-based religious orientation, are what Cusic describes as "remarkably ahistorical."

Wolfe has found that the key to interviewing in this milieu is "to give them the dignity of taking what they have to say seriously." An intern who accompanied Wolfe on one interview but who ignored Wolfe's advice fared less well. The intern's announcement, shortly after finishing his cobbler, that he found his host's religious views incomprehensible was, Wolfe recalls "like waving a red flag at a bull." The interviewee immediately launched into an effort not only to enlighten but also to convert the intern, which ended at 3:00 a.m. with all parties exhausted and the purpose of the interview completely forgotten.[10]

Because they combine the tact and respect that this intern so obviously lacked with vast knowledge of secondary sources and a rapport with the gospel music community, Charles Wolfe and Don Cusic have helped the Center for Popular Music move toward its goal of documenting the development of this significant genre of American vernacular music.[11] And in spite of occasional administrative difficulties, this partnership between an archive and these researcher/interviewers has demonstrated the validity of Fogerty's argument[12] that oral history can help create "a total fabric that brings the records to life and reveals...a collection of real people" whose "aspirations, motives, ideals and beliefs" contributed to the development of this music's structure and identity.

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NOTES

1. See for example F. Gerald Ham, "The Archival Edge," *American Archivist* 38 (January 1975): 5-13; Linda Henry, "Collecting Policies of Special Subject Repositories," *American Archivist* 43 (Winter 1980): 57-63; F. Gerald Ham, "Archival Strategies for the Post-Custodial Era," *American Archivist* 44 (Summer 1981): 207-216; special issue of *American Archivist* 50 (Fall 1987), devoted to documentation strategy in New England; Helen Samuels, "Who Controls the Past?", *American Archivist* 49 (Spring 1986): 109-124; and Larry Hackman and Joan Warnow-Blewett, "The Documentation Strategy Process: A Model and A Case Study," *American Archivist* 50 (Winter 1987): 12-28.
2. Jimmy Swaggart, *Religious Rock 'n' Roll: A Wolf in Sheep's Clothing* (Baton Rouge, La.: Jimmy Swaggart Ministries, 1987).
3. Interview with Don Butler, Murfreesboro, Tennessee, 8 October 1987. RIM 427 Records, Center for Popular Music, Middle Tennessee State University.
4. James E. Fogerty, "Filling the Gap: Oral History in Archives," *American Archivist* 46 (1983): 156.
5. All references hereafter to and about Drs. Wolfe and Cusic are based on interviews with Dr. Don Cusic, 30 September 1987, and Dr. Charles Wolfe, 1 October 1987.

6. Don Cusic in fact started an interview conducted for this article by saying "Now remember, I don't do oral history; I'm a journalist who keeps his tapes."
7. In spite of his disclaimers Cusic has preserved and deposited in the center several hundred interviews drawn from more than a decade of work.
8. This is an admittedly less than ideal solution but seems to be the best that can be done with existing interviews, some conducted more than a decade ago. The center has now developed its own release form which both men will use in the future.
9. Fogerty, "Filling the Gap," 154.
10. It should be noted that the writings of oral historians themselves, including the article by Fogerty cited above, also stress the need for interviewers to treat subjects with both tact and respect.
11. Both Wolfe and Cusic have also helped the center obtain documentary materials other than their own interviews. Don Cusic, for example, arranged for deposit in the center of video tapes of the 1987 and 1988 Dove Award shows, and Charles Wolfe frequently collaborates with the center in locating and purchasing gospel sound recordings and rare convention song books.
12. Fogerty, "Filling the Gap," p. 153.