



CENTER FOR POPULAR MUSIC

by Paul F. Wells

Materials in the center's archive and library include extensive holdings of the various types of media in which music has been fixed and sold as a commodity: print materials such as sheet music, song books, song broadsides, and songsters as well as recordings in formats ranging from cylinders to compact discs. (Songsters shown here are from the center's Goldstein Collection)

Popular music is one of Tennessee's most important cultural exports and a vital part of the state's identity. Tennessee figured prominently in the evolution of most forms of 20th century popular music: country, blues, rhythm and blues, bluegrass, rock and roll, gospel (white and black traditions), jazz, and ragtime. Tennessee radio stations played a key role in spreading the sounds of country, R&B, rock, and gospel to listeners far outside the region. Recording studios and record labels in Nashville and Memphis have produced music that has changed the world. Musical instruments serve as icons for the state on the new quarter and the most recent U.S. postage stamp commemorating Tennessee. The Tennessee legislature has designated the stretch of Interstate 40 between Nashville and Memphis as "Music Highway" and has named rest areas in honor of Roy Acuff, George Jones, B. B. King, Tina Turner, Carl Perkins, and numerous other artists. Indeed, for many, particularly those who live outside the region or the United States, music is one of the things most strongly associated with Tennessee.

Because popular music is such a significant part of Tennessee's culture and economy, it is fitting that a public university should play an active role in documenting and studying it. The Center for Popular Music, an archive and research center established at Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) in 1985, is devoted to research and scholarship in American popular music and to the promotion of awareness and appreciation for America's diverse musical culture. To carry out this mission, the center:

- maintains a library and archive serving as a research resource not only for MTSU students and faculty but for the region, nation, and world as well;
- disseminates scholarship in popular music via publications, lectures, conferences, and symposia; and
- produces concerts, exhibitions, and media presentations that introduce and interpret various aspects of American vernacular music for the general public.

Over the course of the past 17 years, the center has developed one of the largest and best popular music research collections in the country. The key principle underlying the development of the collection is that in order to fully understand any type of popular music one must study it through



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time, in context with other forms of music with which it coexists, in the context of the society and culture in which it thrives, and in relation to the commercial and technological factors shaping its growth and identity. This intellectual foundation draws on several related academic disciplines: folklore, ethnomusicology, historical musicology, social and cultural history, and communications.

This broad conceptual basis is reflected in the types of materials the center holds. Rather than focus on any single genre, the center advocates and supports an integrated approach to the study of popular music, and its collection includes music from a broad range of styles. It is strongest in its holdings of materials relating to rock and roll and its roots and to various types of “vernacular religious music”—music with a religious theme that typically is performed for entertainment rather than worship, and that borrows musical language from contemporary secular popular music. Blues, jazz, country, ragtime, and the music of various ethnic groups are represented as well.

The center’s collection also has a great deal of historical depth, with the oldest items dating from the 1740s. We take as our theoretical starting point the introduction of European and African peoples to North America. The printing, publishing, and selling of music began in America in the 18th century; prior to that time colonists imported and sold music from Britain.

African slaves often were drafted into service as musicians, playing music that suited their owners’ tastes. This could be seen as the beginning of the process of melding African and European musical traditions, a process that underlies virtually all of the subsequent history of American popular music.

Because of its location in Tennessee, and because so much American popular music has southern roots, the center particularly focuses on the music and music business of the Southeast—especially Tennessee. Commerce in music has been conducted in Tennessee since the early 19th century, in operations ranging from cottage industries to multinational media conglomerates. Although much of this business is centered in Nashville and Memphis, music entrepreneurs have always plied their trade in virtually every corner of the state. In addition to high-profile recording and broadcasting activities, Tennessee has been an important location for the publishing of gospel songbooks, church hymnals, and secular sheet music since the middle of the 19th century. The output of Tennessee-based music publishers and record companies is well represented in the center’s collection.

Materials in the center’s archive and library fall into three broad categories. First are extensive holdings of the various types of media in which music has been fixed and sold as a commodity. These include print materials such as sheet music, song books, song broadsides, and songsters as well as sound recordings in formats

ranging from cylinders to compact discs. The center's sound archive is one of the largest in the country, including approximately 140,000 commercial sound recordings and many hours of unique, unpublished recordings of music and interviews. The center's sheet music collection of approximately 65,000 items is the largest in the Southeast, and its holding of gospel songbooks is one of the most extensive of any repository not associated with a religious organization. One jewel in the center's print holdings is the Kenneth S. Goldstein Collection of American Songsters and Song Broad­sides. Songsters and song broadsides were cheaply printed, ephemeral means by which popular songs were disseminated to people too low on the economic scale to afford expensive sheet music or to own a piano on which to play printed music. They provide a glimpse of the tastes of an important segment of society. Because of their fragility and ephemeral nature, broadsides and songsters—most dating from the 19th century—are extremely rare today, and the Goldstein collection is one of the largest in the country.

Second are various materials needed to study popular music in all its musical, cultural, historical, technological, and commercial contexts. In this category are items such as photographs, posters, playbills, concert programs, trade catalogs (of music publishers, record companies, and musical instrument manufacturers and retailers), news clippings, and personal papers of musicians, songwriters, and business people.

Third are books, periodicals, and other reference materials about popular music. The center has probably the largest and most comprehensive library in one location of any repository in the country, apart from perhaps such major libraries as the New York Public Library or the Library of Congress. These materials are among the items researchers at the center use most heavily. Periodicals range from academic journals to music business magazines and fan magazines in various popular music genres.

Materials in the center's collection do not circulate but are available to anyone doing research on American popular music.

Who studies popular music, and why? It is a subject area that interests scholars in many disciplines: folklorists, ethnomusicologists, historians, sociologists, historical musicologists, and people in mass communications.

Unlike the conventional approach to the academic study of music that considers music only as fine art and is based on value judgments about what is worthy of study, people involved in studying popular music recognize its importance as an aspect of culture and history. The traditional focus of academic musicology has been on the European art music tradition, to the exclusion



Center director Paul Wells

of the vast majority of the world's music. This perspective has shifted rapidly in the past few years to a more inclusive approach proceeding from a belief that scholars should study the world as they find it, without relying on subjective judgments of taste and quality.

Scholars in different disciplines study popular music for different reasons. Folklorists, for example, have long realized there is constant, two-way interplay between community-based oral traditions and mass-marketed commercial music. Singers and instrumentalists in a folk tradition are as apt to perform material learned from older print sources or from recordings as they are songs and tunes learned from other musicians in their communities. Country music, ragtime, blues, jazz, bluegrass, gospel, and even rock and roll had origins in community-based oral traditions but have been transformed into important,

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mass-marketed segments of the music industry.

One cannot fully understand the world of traditional folk music without also understanding something about popular culture, and vice versa.

Popular music of one form or another has always occupied a significant place in American cultural history, and social and cultural historians appreciate the need to understand popular music in the context of society. Popular music can serve as a unique window through which to view events, fashions, mores, and attitudes of the time and place in which it was created. Wars, political campaigns, major inventions, tragedies and disasters, and social movements have all been sung about since Colonial times, and there have always been entrepreneurs eager to turn such songs into commodities for the marketplace.

MTSU students and faculty make extensive use of the center's resources. Persons from the recording industry department form the largest group of users, but those in music, history, journalism, electronic media communications, and other departments do research at the center as well. In keeping with one aim of the Centers of Excellence program, the center serves as a research resource for people far beyond the bounds of the university. The center has fielded research queries from every state in the union and many countries, representing every conti-

nent except Antarctica. Authors, journalists, media producers, performers, and doctoral students have made use of the center's archive and library. While many researchers have visited the center's reading room, others have received assistance via mail, telephone, or the Internet. Acknowledgements to the center, its collections, and its staff routinely appear in books, articles, and liner notes for sound recordings.

In addition to building and maintaining its research collection, the center has produced public programs, seminars, conferences, publications, exhibitions, and media presentations to disseminate information. The staff has maintained a high degree of regional and national professional involvement in groups such as the Society for American Music, the Music Library Association, Tennessee Archivists, and the Association for Recorded Sound Collections. In recent years MTSU has attracted a remarkable community of popular music scholars as faculty in the recording industry, music, English, and history departments. All of these factors have worked together to give MTSU a unique reputation as a locus of popular music research and scholarship. ■

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