Field Notes for Greg Johnson Interview for L.O.C. Field Class
Interviewer: Mark Coltrain
Narrator: Greg Johnson, assistant professor and curator of the Blues Archive at Ole Miss
Recording Engineer: Justin Wallace
Observer: Miranda Cully
Recorded on May 21, 2007 from 2:30 pm – 3:30 pm
Location: Greg Johnson’s office in Archives and Special Collections, J.D. Williams
Library at The University of Mississippi

It was a warm, sunny May day as I found a place to park on campus and walked towards J.D. Williams Library for our first interview for the Fieldwork Class. I met Miranda and Justin at about 2:20 on Monday afternoon out in front of the Archives on the third floor of the library. They were seated on long wooden benches that line the back wall behind the display cases between the men’s and women’s restrooms. We all entered the archive together. There were several researchers doing work but otherwise things were pretty quiet. Greg came out and greeted us and briefly excused himself to the restroom before the interview began. As we waited for him to return, we milled around looking at some of the brochures and other literature the Archive has on display.

The Archive at Ole Miss is a very interesting place: there are two large rooms adjoining the study area—one houses William Faulkner’s Nobel Prize medal and speech along with other Faulkner ephemera. A collection is also on display in this room’s many large display cases featuring the history of film in Mississippi. The other room is a tribute to a literature publisher who donated a large sum of money to Ole Miss and wanted a monument dedicated in his honor. In this room, there are copies of books he published over the years in various display cases that line the walls. The common study area has a couple of large wooden tables on which to conduct research and a small adjoining room containing two listening stations for CDs, LPs, and cassettes, a photocopy machine, and two computers for Internet research.

Greg came back refreshed from the restroom and led us into his office, amongst several of the Archive’s staff, back behind the common study area. Greg’s office is of considerable size containing several filing cabinets along a back wall with medium sized cardboard boxes stacked on top and a few on the floor surrounding. There is a small, brown refrigerator in between the filing cabinets and shelves full of various archival tools and collection ephemera directly behind Greg’s desk. He had been doing some digitization of LPs and 78 rpms before we arrived and had to roll the sound equipment out of our way. There are also two tables next to Greg’s desk that contain other various archival and collection ephemera including a portable wax cylinder-playing Victrola which he demonstrated to us before we left at the end.

As Justin began to set up, Greg sat at his desk, unplugged his telephone to prevent interruption and swiveled his chair towards me. I sat across a the corner of a table from Greg, the microphone sat on the corner between us, Justin sat behind and to the right of me, and Miranda sat behind us both. Once we got the equipment set up and did a sound check, we began the interview.

I started out by asking Greg about basic biographical information, then the interview moved into more music related territory. We talked about his beginnings in music, his interests, tastes, and how he began to evolve as a musician and a listener of
music. As we moved into his later years and up to present day, we discussed his interests in performing Celtic music around LaFayette County and the Mid-South. I also asked Greg about his continuing performance of classical music, jazz, and early music (by that I mean Medieval and Renaissance musics). We also got into his theories about music and music culture and about his job as Blues Archivist at the University of Mississippi.

I got the impression that Greg is an avid music enthusiast of all kinds and is very open and eager to defying the concept of genre in music as critic, scholar, and artist. I got the sense that Greg is musically adventurous and quite liberal in his musical decisions and approach.

As the interview started to wind down, I asked Justin and Miranda if they had any questions. Justin only had one: he asked Greg to list all the instruments he plays with correct spelling. It turns out Greg plays 13 instruments. I was mighty impressed, as were we all. Miranda had no questions. I asked Greg if there was anything else he wanted to add and he had nothing else to say...he seemed to be a bit tired of talking at that point. He'd been doing most of the talking for an hour long without a break. He also made the comment that he enjoyed the interview and that it made him remember some things he'd forgotten long ago. That made me happy.

Justin broke the equipment down and packed up and we all chatted about our class, the interview and compared an experience or two. As we shook hands, exchanged pleasantries and started to leave, Justin mentioned the portable Victrola at which point Greg demonstrated its function to the tune of an old waltz. Mighty groovy indeed, I must say.

That was that. We all left and said goodbye. Greg followed us out for a drink of water at the fountain nearby. I felt good about the experience especially because I got to learn a lot more about someone I thought I already knew pretty well.