Field School for cultural Documentation
For the American Music Archives

Researcher’s name: Miranda Cully
Event: interview with Barry McCain
Place: his house, Oxford, Lafayette County, Mississippi
Date: May 22, 2007
Co-workers present: Mark Coltrain, sound engineer; Justin Wallace, observer

This tape log consists of material from the interview with Barry McCain at his house, which is out of Oxford toward New Albany. Mr. Barry McCain has been a musician since about his early thirties, and he was interviewed for a project between the Library of Congress’ Field School, the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi, and also the American Music Archive, which will also be housed at the university. Most of the information concerns Mr. McCain’s musical experience over the course of his life and also his experience with the Oxford music scene and his sons Donovan and Conor.

(Side one of tape 1)
Barry “Barra” McCain was born in St. Joseph’s hospital in Jackson, MS in 1951. His family lived in Mississippi for two years until his father got a job with a natural gas company in north Louisiana. The family moved back to Mississippi when Barry was around age 16. All of his summers were spent on his grandparents’ farm in Mississippi. He grew up half in north Louisiana and half on farms. Both of McCain’s kids were born in Mississippi.

McCain launched into discussing the musical aptitude in his family. His grandmother’s last name was Tweedy and she was from the Illinois Ozarks where her family was fiddle players/makers. His Grandmother Tweedy was born in 1883, and he remembers how distinctly Victorian she was. Her home had kerosene lamps and the distinct smell of older home. McCain attributes his interest in music to her influence. He recalls that she died during a blizzard in 1960s.

We then discussed Barry McCain’s early education. He claims that “all Southern kids of my group grow up with one foot in country and in suburbia.” They spent summers riding horseback, hunting, and fishing. He recalls that at night they’d listen to the radio which would play the national anthem and then Dixie, as according to McCain, “We were still part of the Confederacy.”

McCain then relates his Jr. High experience and the first time that he heard the Beatles. He attended West Ouachita Parish Jr. High. He heard the Beatle’s “Love me Do” out of a black transistor radio.
In high school, McCain's father transferred back to Jackson, so he graduated in Forest
Hill High School in Jackson, MS. He relates the hard time he had there, being a hippie
with long hair there. He was threatened daily, with any physical thing he owned trashed.
Cars would pull up and want him to come out for fights. He maintains his distinction as a
"Southern hippie", which still retained connection with past.

(Ten minutes elapsed)

McCain then told me about his college experience. He went to college for a month at
Northeast College in Monroe, LA. However, he was disgusted that there were "too many
straight people...like being at a funeral." He dropped out and headed to Taos, New
Mexico, where he went to the Llama Foundation, a commune north of Taos. He led a
hippie existence from 1970-1975 wearing long hair, driving a Volkswagen van, and
raising turnips. There, he started playing guitar more in public. He was a drummer in
rock band in 1969.

In 1975 he met his wife and "things changed because I liked her". He met her through
calling about an ad she placed on the radio, wanting to meet someone who could play
bagpipes and knew Gaelic. They married in 1981. They traveled together and he
incorporated her into hippie life.

A distinct experience in McCain's life occurred when he first traveled to Ireland in 1978.
He got there with no money; the airlines only let them fly because McCain's wife had a
credit card. They arrived in Gatwick, where he immediately got a Guinness. He had
been told that Gaelic lifestyle and language was dead, no longer viable in Ireland. After
traipsing around the country, he found out that the opposite was true, and that's where
cool stuff was happening, music, writing scene. He and his wife hitchhiked everywhere
they went and always carried Confederate battle flag with them. When they would
display it, a "race of cars" wanted to pick up these authentic Southern people.

McCain then describes his love for the Welsh people and their language, which sounds
like Elves to him.

People were fascinated that McCain was from Mississippi. An Irish friend took them to
hear the real Irish language. He relates the story of going to an authentic Irish pub, with a
peephole on the door and all. In that bar he only heard conversations in Gaelic and
realized that this was exactly what he had come to see and hear. This was where his
people and his music came from. He remained in Ireland for two and a half months when
he decided to go home and get a college degree.

McCain attended Hinds Community College, where he achieved a 4.0. He came up to
Ole Miss for degree in History and graduated cum laude as an adult student. He gives his
opinion on the closed-mindedness of American academia and relates why he decided to
live on the family farm until about 1991. He took some grad level courses in
Independent Studies in the mid-90s. Ole Miss allowed him to write own course study on
Celtic migration to Southern uplands. He lately has been accepted as independent scholar
and has spoken at the Ulster-American History program and was the only non-Ph.D. to do so. McCain discussed his website and current activity of tracing Ulster heritage through DNA. The money-making site is www.ulsterheritage.com. He discusses the politics of tracing DNA like that.

(Ten minutes elapsed)

We then discussed McCain's musical background. He says that his father sang all the time, especially songs from 30s and 40s. His mother played some piano. Family gatherings always had guitars, pianos, people singing traditional music. He wasn't like a typical Southern kid who is heavily influenced by church music. He instead found inspiration in old-time music.

McCain explains his religious beginnings. He got baptized at 38 because he didn't want Donovan to be heathen. He knew an Irish priest in Crystal Springs who got him to go to church and get baptized.

McCain lists several childhood influences like Governor Jimmy Davis, who he saw several times in Louisiana, and Louisiana Hay Ride. He had friends in West Monroe who lived beside a venue where Elvis and guys would play in 50s. He and his friends would sneak in and hear them for free. He loved Fred Astaire, things from the 30s, and old time, typical, pre-bluegrass, Southern roots music. The Beatles were a major influence as well. He then talks about his commonalties with the class and ethnic backgrounds of the Beatles.

(Five minutes lapsed)

We discussed the history of his instrument playing. He was a drummer from ages 13-18. He got a guitar around age 18, and is now only a rhythm guitarist, as he believes his late start kept him from being as quick as his own boys are. He found out that percussion learning paid off when playing the rhythm guitar. He also plays recorders, tinwhistle, percussion, and bahran (Irish drum), and bass guitar. McCain first got paid to perform in 1967, as a fill-in drummer for Wall of Sound, with whom he played until 1970-71. By then could play guitar, and could play and sing and did so in the UK.

McCain began a second phase of professional performance when Donovan got good enough that he needed accompanist. He started at age 12, played all over at festivals and parties. Money began to get good for them.

(Five minutes lapsed)

We talked about the McCains' family music performances. Donovan worked a lot as a young boy, down at Taylor's three times a month, and also at parties, festivals, and special events. He got contracted to do concerts for National Park Servic when forest rangers heard them at club at Taylor's asked if they would work for them. McCain responded, "If Mr. Green is there, we'll be there...and the money was there." Their one
proviso was not to play anything past 1830 and always plan an acoustic set. They knew 500 tunes written before 1830, all traditionally Southern, like Wayfaring Stranger. They did this for nearly three years.

McCain discusses a list of folk tunes found on that was written by a man traveling the Natchez Trace in 1801, and the McCains know everyone of those songs. He discussed the song “the Wounded Hussar” and how it is really “Captain O’Kane”, a traditional Irish song.

While Donovan was still young, the family worked often, easily doing 8-10 venues a month, paychecks being a pretty good amount. They would work at festivals, weddings, historical societies, etc.

(Five minutes lapsed)

We discuss where the family plays now, which is in Tennessee, Mississippi, and all over the Mid-South. They have also played in Ireland. They discuss how different it is to play in Ireland, in “cozy little places” like pubs. They are also frequently invited to play at bluegrass festivals, and even though they don’t play bluegrass, they still go for the money. Donovan explains during this time that they do the same kind of thing that popular band Nickel Creek does; that as “newgrass” they incorporate folk and pop influences. The McCains play some songs all acoustic, work on Jimi Hendrix tunes, etc.

At festivals average audience small like 800 or 5000. They again reiterate that the best audiences are the Irish who are willing to listen to soft music.

McCain tells the story of how Bobby Whitlock gave Donovan a black Danelectro guitar at a guitar shop in Oxford, Mississippi run by George McConnell. Whitlock did this because he was so impressed by Donovan’s excellent skills.

(15 minutes elapsed)

(side two of tape 1)

NOTE: The beginning of this side contains the remnants of a conversation we were having about the Ozark Mountains and the folk music there which was going on during our break.

Mr. McCain explains their group’s different names, originally being the Bush River Band. When asked to open for the Oak Ridge Boys, they finally came together under one name, the McCains.

Discuss how Donovan and Conor will be playing on the Square these next few months, with Jesse Pinion, a guitar player about Donovan’s age.

(ten minutes lapsed)
Mr. McCain explains that a professional career in music necessarily means that you have to “learn to look people in the eye and tell them how much you want and what you’re gonna do for that money.” He is going to hand the business side of the music to Donovan soon. He is thankful for the good experiences they’ve always had, getting paid right away and sometimes getting more than they asked. He explains that acoustic venues are always pleasant, with people in good moods and outdoors

*(can hear Donovan playing mandolin in the background)*

The McCains talk about some musical acts around town that they like. Barry says he’d go see Jesse Pinion pick. He also likes Susan Marchant, who plays medieval music with the university. Donovan discusses his wish for a good acoustic setting, like a coffee shop, somewhere in Oxford. McCain tells us that they are fortunate to get asked to play at private events like weddings that pay well.

McCain discusses his interest in DNA research and how there is a cultural aspect to things. His father initiated his interest when he told him he was Irish. Learning Gaelic and remaining involved in heritage also helped. He learned about DNA as a history research tool, and when an email from an Irish-born McCain came to him, they became the first two people to test and were a DNA match. He discusses the negatives of DNA testing.

*(ten minutes lapsed)*

Justin asks about how culture, music, and DNA intertwine as his drive. He says “You’re born on this earth and you are what you are, you know, and for some reason I am this person of Gaelic ancestry living in Mississippi. You can only question the why so long. At some point, there has to be a surrender. That’s the one thing that age teaches you, and for the longest time, especially people of my generation, we wanted to know.” The journey is a spiritual experience for him.

Movement in Ireland for young people to speak Gaelic. Language death almost happened. American Indians learning. Asks if little boys can speak…barely.

*(five minutes lapsed)*

Talk about Gaelic music scene in USA and worldwide revival.

*(end of interview)*