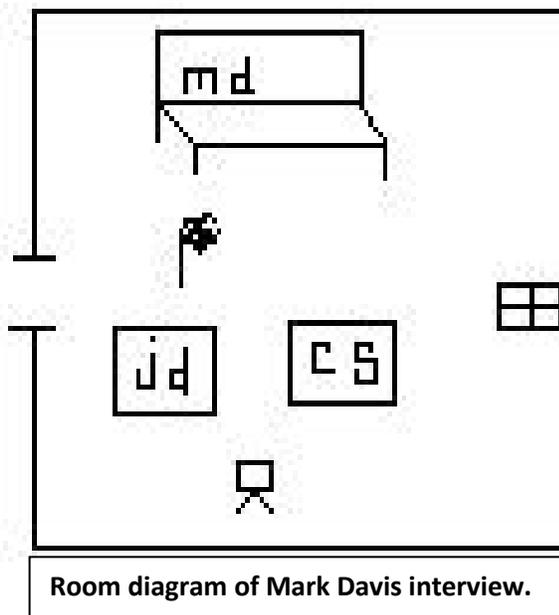


University of Mississippi
American Music Archives

Document Type: Field notes
Field Worker: Cathryn Stout
Coworkers: Jonathan Dial
Location: 427 Clubhouse Dr., Pearl, Miss
Begin Date: Wednesday, May 19, 2010
End Date: Wednesday, May 19, 2010
Elapsed Time: 1 hour and 47 minutes

Directly across from Mark Davis' front yard is a practice green and clubhouse. His backyard overlooks the 9th hole at Franklin Park Golf Course, but inside his slice of suburbia Davis works to preserve a more than 200-year old tradition with strong ties in the rural South. Davis is the chairman of the National Sacred Harp Convention held annually in Birmingham. On Wednesday, May 19, 2010, my colleague Jonathan Dial and I met Davis at his home at 427 Clubhouse Dr. in Pearl, Miss. to learn more about the business and background of sacred harp singing. Dial was the interviewer and I served as recordist on the oral history project. Our interview started at 4:59 p.m., 31 minutes after Dial and I arrived at the Davis home. Davis pulled up about five minutes tardy to the 4:30 p.m. interview, but Davis proved to be a considerate host. He introduced us to his wife Lisa, 11-year-old daughter Natalie, sheltie named Katie and tabby cat named Willie. His son Kurt, who was just a few days away from graduating from high school, was not present at the time. After Davis showed us around the house and served us Propel vitamin water, he directed us to a room off of a side hallway to set up our equipment.

The room was quaint, approximately six feet long by seven feet wide and possibly served as a bedroom or extra den or both. The room had a futon that was covered with cotton Mickey Mouse sheets with a red, white and black design. The futon was originally stretched out, but Davis converted it into a couch for the interview and sat on the futon. Dial setup the microphone on an instrument case in front of Davis and sat across from him in a chair. I sat to the right of Dial in another chair. Across from the futon was a tube television with an approximately 16-inch wide screen. It was attached to a cable box



and DVD player. Lisa Davis' accolades decorated the butter cookie brown walls including a collage from her experience running the Chicago Marathon and her diploma documenting her Bachelor's of arts degree in Music from Florida State University. The room had hardwood floors that made for good acoustics, but also amplified every foot tap or chair creek that occurred during the recording.

Davis' enthusiasm for sacred harp music was evident from the first moment of the interview because he jumped right into the session by recounting how on April 1, 1972, he got "hooked on sacred harp." He was a preteen at the time of his first memorable singing at a rural Mississippi church and has followed the tradition ever since. Several times throughout the interview he said, "I have a family connection and a spiritual connection to sacred harp." Two of his grandfathers were sacred harp singers and for Davis, the music undergirds his Christian faith. Although he insisted that sacred harp is a community that welcomes all, he pointed out that many of the songs reference Jesus and are rooted in Christianity. He also contradicted this supposed universal appeal by admitting that the singers are overwhelming white and disproportionately passed retirement age.

Davis works as a music teacher in a rural town outside of Jackson, Miss. He said that from his classroom door he can see a group of donkeys grazing on a nearby field. On challenging days he contemplates walking over to that field and joining the other jackasses, he joked. Throughout the interview that evening, Davis delivered punch lines with an unassuming subtlety that heightened their humor. Davis had Woody Boyd's humility fused with Frasier Crane's mental prowess. Merging history, anecdotes, explanations and jokes, his responses often stretched on for 15 minutes or more. For example, when describing the potluck meals that precede afternoon sacred harp singings he talked about the tradition on several levels. First, he noted how diners use to sit outside on the church grounds because fellowship halls were uncommon sights before the 20th century. Then he shared that the meals are important because they provide a sense of community and over the years certain regions or singers become associated with certain foods. Singers have come to expect brisket in Texas, seafood in Florida, pasta in New England and soul food in the South. One particular singing, in Mississippi I believe, was known for a delicious fresh fruit apple cake that an elderly woman brought to the annual singing. When she died, the singer's widow kept his wife's tradition alive by learning how to make the cake and bringing it to the yearly event. To Davis, the food and fellowship are just as integral to sacred harp events as the singing. He joked that over the years he learned to back away from the food table and focus on the fellowship.

"There are all sorts of good stories and memories from the lunch table," he added.

Davis had a toned physique with the exception of a slightly round belly. He stood being 5 feet 7 inches and 5 feet 11 inches tall and appeared to weight between 175 to 200 pounds. Before the interview started, he and Dial compared their running regiments. On that Wednesday, Davis wore a lemon yellow athletic shirt from the "Leonard E. Warren Memorial Run from the Sun

5K,” khaki shorts, crew socks, and navy blue and yellow New Balance sneakers. His arms were considerably more tan than his legs which were pasty like bread dough. He had a full head of straight, brown hair that was receding slightly in the front and graying around the sideburns. His mustache also sported strands of gray. His cheeks were flush red with some varicose veins. His eyes were deep gray and framed with wire-rim glasses that he took on and off throughout the interview. He wore only three pieces of jewelry—a silver, large face pocket watch clipped to his belt buckle, a gold wedding band and a blue and beige rubber bracelet that read “John 3:16.”

During the interview, Davis appeared at ease and mentioned that he had been interviewed on sacred harp before. The high school teacher came armed with teaching aids—three songbooks, and a stack of baby blue pamphlets labeled “The Minutes of the Eighty First Annual Session of Mississippi Sacred Harp Singing Convention.” In a conversation not captured on the recording he explained that the minute books and other literature are paid for by donations collected from singers. Groups pay about \$40 to have their minutes recorded in the annual state guide and singers “pass the hat” during sessions to collect informal donations to send to the state and national convention. Davis often referred to different pages in the various hymnals during the two-hour interview. Early on, he opened up to the front of *The Sacred Harp*, the 1991 revision, for an impromptu session on shape note singing. Later he referred back to this same section to point out how the North Mississippi style of practicing with seven syllabus (do-re-mi-fa-sol-la-ti-do) on the seven note scale differs the established tradition of practicing with four syllabus (fa-sol-la-fa-sol-la-mi-fa) on the seven note scale. In the interview, Davis offered some historical context for this regional variation.

At the 23-minute mark of interview session A, he discussed the sacred harp tradition in the Southern Baptist denomination. In the middle of that explanation he grabbed his cell phone that quietly vibrated beside him and then put his hands up in the shape of a capital “T” like a basketball coach signaling a timeout. I pressed stop on the recorder and Davis asked Dial and me if we would like to join the family for a pizza dinner after the interview. We declined the invitation, he texted our reply back to his wife, I believe, and we continued the interview. At this point, a new file started on the digital tape recorder which I will refer to as interview session B.

At the five-minute mark of interview session B, Davis launched into a lengthy and rich explanation about the locations of sacred harp events. Previously, he attended a singing hosted by a Universal Unitarian church and some singers protested because the church was out of line with their “conservative” values. Although Davis did not elaborate on these values, the Universal Unitarian church is known for its multicultural worship services, promoting females in ministry and supporting civil rights for gay and lesbian individuals. This uproar over using the Universal Unitarian church seems inconsistent with Davis’ earlier claims that sacred harp is a tradition that welcomes all participants and belief systems.

Davis explained that sacred harp singings are commonly held at Primitive Baptist churches or old churches like “where you were Sunday in Calhoun City.” This statement referred to a singing

that Davis, Dial and I attended at Concord Baptist Church at 13 County Road 235 in Bruce, Miss. on Sunday, May 16, 2010. This is where I first met Davis and where Dial reestablished contact with Davis who taught his high school band class about a decade ago. Although singings usually take place at churches, Davis said that courthouses, libraries, museums and folk art centers also host singings. This seems to indicate that sacred harp singers embrace buildings with historic architecture.

Davis also listed shared sacred harp etiquette:

- It is impolite to tell a singer that he or she is off key.
- It is common to rotate seating on the front row of large singings during the session so that others can have the chance to hear the sound and see the view from the front.
- A respected member of the tenor section does the keying before each song.
- Half day singings last two hours and full day singings last four, not including meals.
- Children and guests who travelled far are traditionally invited to “call” or lead a song during the first half of the session out of courtesy.
- Singings usually conclude around 3 p.m. to give guest a chance to travel home before too late in the evening.

These are all customs that he works to promote and preserve as chairman of the National Sacred Harp Convention. The recorded section of the interview ended with Davis explaining how the Internet aided him in his role as chairman. Just as he was saying that it would be impossible to keep up with the progress of the committee members without the Internet the recorder’s memory card ran out of space. The recorded session of the interview lasted 1 hour and 47 minutes. Knowing that the interview was nearing the end, I did not have the heart to tell our passionate interviewee that the recorder was now off. At this point, I relied on my training as a reporter and took vigorous notes and I offer the following statements for the record as direct quotes from Davis.

When discussing how the Internet has changed the business of sacred harp, Davis recapped a thank you speech he made at previous convention. He said, “The first person I want to thank is whoever invented the Internet. We had a politician (Vice President Al Gore) a few years ago who said he invented the Internet, but I have my doubts about that.”

To “sum it up,” he said his feelings on sacred harp singing are best described in the words of a song that he turns to during challenging times. “I don’t even sing it, I just read the words to myself to remind me that everything is going to smooth out and be okay,” he said. The tune is “All Is Well,” hymn no. 122 in the 1991 revision of *The Sacred Harp*. While reading the lyrics, tears filled his eyes and he choked up on the line that says, “My glitt’ring crown appears in view.” The interview ended at 6:55 p.m. and, like Davis, I close by offering the lyrics to the song in their entirety:

“What’s this that steals, that steals upon my frame?
Is it death, is it death?”

That soon will quench, will quench this mortal flame,
Is it death? Is it death?
If this be death, I soon shall be
From ev'ry pain and sorrow free.
I shall the King of glory see,
All is well, all is well!

Weep not, my friends, my friends weep not for me,
All is well, all is well!
My sins forgiv'n, forgiv'n and I am free,
All is well, all is well!
There's not a cloud that doth arise,
To hide my Jesus from my eyes,
I soon shall mount the upper skies,
All is well, all is well!

Hark! Hark! My Lord, my Lord and Master's voice
Calls away, calls away!
I soon shall see -- enjoy my happy choice,
Why delay, why delay?
Farewell, my friends, adieu, adieu,
I can no longer stay with you.
My glitt'ring crown appears in view,
All is well, all is well!"