

University of Mississippi
American Music Archive Field School

Document Type: Tape Log
Field Worker: Jonathan Dial
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Location: 427 Clubhouse Drive, Pearl, Ms 39047
Begin Date: 5:00 pm May 19, 2010
End Date: 7:30 pm May 19, 2010
Event: Interview with Mark Davis
Duration: 2 hours and 30 minutes

Part I

- 0:00 MD was born in Bruce, Mississippi in 1960. He grew up on a farm. His dad worked in the gasoline and oil business. His first musical experience was in a school band in the fifth grade. His first memories of Sacred Harp were at church in Bruce with his grandmother. He learned to play the coronet, baritone, and tuba in high school band. He knew that he wanted to go to college for music.
- 3:10 MD drove a fuel truck for his father's gas business. He says this experience led to him driving school buses as extra work today.
- 4:00 MD claims that although his high school was small, the band was very good.
- 4:18 MD grew up in Sherman Baptist Church between Bruce, Ms and Water Valley, Ms. He tells a story about being eleven years old at a band festival in Jackson. His parents took him to a Sacred Harp singing at Bethel Primitive Baptist Church. He participated in his first singing and was "hooked". His mother bought him his first Sacred Harp book there.
- 8:24 In May of 1972, MD attended a singing at Concord Baptist Church in Calhoun County. There were lots of people and cars. He gives a description of the church and the surrounding area. After that singing he decided that he would go to every Sacred Harp singing that he "could ever possibly get to".
- 10:00 MD has two main connections with Sacred Harp. The first is a long history of family participation in the singing tradition. The other connection is through his religious faith.
- 12:00 MD claims that although most Sacred Harp singers are Christian, there are some Jewish and agnostic singers as well. He claims that perhaps it is the sound of the music that draws religiously-varied people to it.
- 13:40 MD tells a story about attending the Midwest Sacred Harp Singing in 2008. A Jewish woman criticized him for mentioning Jesus in prayer at the singing. She claimed that Sacred Harp is for everyone, not just Christians. "And the very first words we sang in the next song is 'I would see Jesus when the flowers of joy are going my way, when sunshine and hope surrounds my path from day to day.' And so I thought 'I'm glad I didn't say anything to that lady because this was my answer right here.'"

- 18:00 MD tells a humorous story about a man announcing a singing. Mark claims that he had many interesting experiences in Sacred Harp.
- 21:00 MD claims that he never dreamed as a kid that he would have all of the experiences and travels which he has gotten from Sacred Harp. He enjoys being able to sing with old friends.
- 22:20 MD was elected as the chairman of the Mississippi State Sacred Harp Convention in 1984. He still holds the position. The singing is usually near Forest, Ms.
- 23:25 MD starts to go into a history of Sacred Harp. He suggests Dr. Warren Steele at Ole Miss as a better source of information. Mark claims that Sacred Harp originated in New England and spread into rural areas through "singing masters" that would teach singing schools. They taught shape note singing and Sacred Harp.

Part 2

- 0:00 Shape note music drifted South into churches and county court houses. In Mississippi, it was generally found in Baptist and Primitive Baptist churches.
- 1:00 MD goes into a description of Primitive Baptist churches as more conservative than Baptists. They don't use musical instruments. They don't have Sunday school, do mission work, or invite people to come to their church. He calls it an early version of Calvinism.
- 3:00 MD lists Primitive Baptist churches in Mississippi that have singings. He also lists singings in places all around the country.
- 4:30 MD tells about some singers that refused to participate in singings at a Unitarian church because the churches beliefs were not rigid enough for them.
- 5:15 MD is the chairman of the National Convention of Sacred Harp. Before that, he was vice-president. He goes on to describe the committee and the convention.
- 7:20 MD suggests looking at Dr. Warren Steele's website as a more complete reference on the history of Sacred Harp.
- 8:20 Using a hymnal as a guide, MD goes into the details of seven shape note singing which is unique to Mississippi. He says that it can be traced back to William Walker, the brother-in-law of Benjamin Franklin White, the man that published the first Sacred Harp book.
- 12:30 MD has taught several singing schools around the country and in Mississippi.
- 14:00 MD continues an in-depth description of seven shape note singing. He says that shape notes first appeared in Europe and then found its way to America.
- 15:20 MD says that perhaps shape note singing was part of the trend in the early U.S. to try to find art forms that were distinct from European traditions. "The argument is: if you had seven sons, would you only give them four names?"

- 17:30 MD sings a demonstration of the difference between scales in the 4-note and 7-note traditions.
- 18:40 MD claims that Mississippi singers have an easier time of shifting to 4-note singing than vice-versa.
- 19:15 MD says that there are some singing groups in Canada, Spain, and many groups in the United Kingdom.
- 20:00 MD says that Sacred Harp came to England through West Gallery music. He did not know anything about this style. He goes on to talk about some acquaintances he has made with British people.
- 22:00 There is no governing body for Sacred Harp musicians. Instead, there are local contact people in the Sacred Harp directory that can be contacted about events.
- 24:30 MD says that you don't have to be a good singer to be a Sacred Harp singer. That is what appeals to him and others. He says that you can tell when a trained singer comes to a Sacred Harp singing.
- 25:46 "The three big draws are singing, food, and fellowship."
- 26:20 MD says that there are some informal rules at the singings, especially when there is a large group of singers. You should offer the front row seats to someone in the back after you've been there for a while. Traditionally, a tenor keys the songs. Hugh Bill Maguire does most of the keying at Mississippi singings. Mark discusses in detail the intricacies of keying a song.
- 28:00 MD returns to the topic of food at singings. He tells about the Pleasant Ridge Baptist Church singing. Each family would cook and bring an entire meal to bring to the singing. At the event, everyone would walk around the tables and sample the meals. He says that is not the way it is today. He also says, "the larger the singing, the larger the food".
- 31:00 MD talks about different styles of foods at singings in different regions of the country. Mostly in the South, there are fried foods. In the North, there are casseroles and pasta dishes.
- 32:00 MD talks specifically about the food at the National Convention in Birmingham. He has a family that caters the convention every year with Southern food and singers bring varying side dishes and drinks.
- 35:20 MD discusses the tradition of the "unwritten rule" of stopping singings at 3:00 pm. He says that this allows all the leaders a chance to get to call the songs they wanted. He says that it is also done in consideration for people that travel a far distance to the singing. They need to get the opportunity to pick the songs they like and still have a reasonable amount of time to drive home. Another reason is to accommodate children.
- 39:30 MD talks about his son's experiences with Sacred Harp. His son, a musician, used to participate in the singings. MD speculates that he stopped because it may be "un-cool." Mark says that he wants his children to appreciate the tradition, but he does not force it upon them.

- 41:00 MD talks about attending a Quaker singing and the food there. He did not appreciate the fact that none of the dishes had any meat in them.
- 44:15 MD tells a story about a singing in Fulton, Ms. There was a woman that would make a particular cake every year. When she died the community kept her cake tradition alive.
- 45:30 MD tells a story about his youth at church involving a 55-gallon tank of water in which they would keep ice water. At that time, there was no running water.
- 48:00 Sacred Harp “is a living breathing art form”.
- 49:00 MD He tells us about a committee which he is on that is revising a Sacred Harp book. He moves on to a discussion of songs picked for the new revision.
- 52:00 One of his favorite songs is “Wondrous Love” (circa 1840).
- 53:00 One of the oldest songs is “Old Hundred” (circa 1551).
- 55:00 MD has never attempted to write a song of his own.
- 55:45 MD says that there are “politics” involved with Sacred Harp, and he attempts to avoid it. Sacred Harp is his “vice”.
- 56:30 Sacred Harp is a singers’ music. There aren’t many listeners; everyone participates.
- 57:20 MD describes the age makeup of the Sacred Harp community as “older”. “The average age of singers is senior citizens.”
- 59:00 MD mentions the “Young People’s Convention” which is intended to attract younger people to Sacred Harp.
- 1:01:20 MD says that the racial makeup of Sacred Harp singers is typically White. He does, however, go on to name specific Black singers and groups that he knows.
- 1:04:00 MD tells a story about a Black lady that was probably the first Black person to come into the Primitive Baptist Church which hosted a singing. He claims that she was warmly welcomed to the singing. He claims that he would welcome anyone to participate regardless of racial category. He would just be happy to have people interested in Sacred Harp.
- 1:08:30 MD goes into a discussion of the involvement of the internet with Sacred Harp. He says that he is involved with Fasolla-singings on the internet. It is used for singings announcements. He also discusses Fasolla-discussions which is more about the theoretical aspect of Sacred Harp. Mark does not participate in those discussions.
- 1:13:32 End of recording (Memory Card Full)