

University of Mississippi  
American Music Archive Field School

Document Type: Field Notes  
Field Worker: Jonathan Dial  
Coworker: Cathryn Stout  
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

Catherine Stout and I arrived at Mark Davis's home in Pearl, Ms after being lost for about 15-20 minutes. Luckily, we had left Oxford much earlier in the day to ensure that we would have plenty of time to find the place. The drive from Oxford to Pearl takes a little over two-and-a-half hours. The house is located in a neighborhood a couple of miles away from a prison and a mental institution. The neighborhood, Patrick Farms, is surrounded by an 18-hole golf course and has a club house, a community pool, and a pool house. Mark's house was directly across the street from a driving range and a practice putting-green. We were at the house about 2 minutes before Mark arrived, but his wife and daughter were already home. Catherine and I waited outside until he pulled up in a tan Toyota Corolla. I felt that this was an appropriate vehicle for someone that has the low salary of a high school band director.

I knew Mark from long ago. He was my band director while I was in middle school. We had a good relationship back then even if we were limited to teacher/student roles. I ran into him again for the first time in about ten years at a Sacred Harp performance in Calhoun County at the church in which he was raised. We immediately hit it off again and began talking at the event. I asked him if he would be willing to participate in our project for the American Music Archive and set up an appointment to interview him later in the week. When I saw him again at his home, it felt surprisingly nice to see him again.

He is a very energetic 50-year-old White man with a slightly balding head of hair. He began talking at a rapid pace as soon as he stepped out of his car and did not really stop for the next two-and-a-half hours. He led us into his home which he said was about 15 years old. Inside, he introduced us to his daughter (11), who was one of the performers at the Sacred Harp singing, and his wife. The home was nice and had furniture and decorations typical of many middle-class southern families: sofa, love seat, flat-screen TV, video games, dining table, pictures hanging on walls, etc... The floor was apparently stone but was largely covered with rugs. There was a little bit of clutter around, but the home was generally neat and organized.

Mark seemed excited to have visitors and took the opportunity to show off some roses and other plants that he had growing in his backyard. The backyard led into a large pond which separated his yard from the ninth hole of the golf course. He told us that although he did not play golf, he was happy to see his neighbors paying their club fees because it drove up the value of his property. He also had a CB radio and a ham radio which he said he liked to play with. Finally, he showed us to a small room containing a futon, TV, and an ironing board which he said he had used for a previous interview. Catherine and I set up our recording equipment while Mark did something in another room.

Once he was ready, we (Mark, Cathryn, and I) all sat down in the room with the equipment. Before I had an opportunity to explain our project, Mark told us that he had already interviewed with someone from Ole Miss about Sacred Harp. I was aware of this and explained that the interview he had

done had no relation to our project. I expressed to him that he need not be afraid of repeating anything from the first interview. This seemed to calm him a little. He began talking about his experiences and flipping through two hymnals which he had brought into the room with him before I had a chance to correctly start the recording, so I had to ask him to wait while I did so. Once we started, I asked an opening question about his background. I believe that I might have only asked one other question in the subsequent thirty minutes because he was talking steadily the whole time. I wasn't sure if he was talking so much because he was nervous or because it was a topic which he cared for deeply.

Around twenty-five minutes into the interview, he received a text message on his cell phone from his wife. She had ordered pizza and was offering some to us. We thanked them for the offer but declined. My recordist, Cathryn, accidentally hit the stop button rather than the pause button during this interruption; therefore, the interview is on two separate digital files. I have labeled them as Part 1 and Part 2. Furthermore, unbeknownst to me, about 15 minutes before the end of the interview, the memory card in our recording device reached maximum capacity. The recorder simply stopped recording. However, Cathryn later assured me that she took meticulous notes during that final portion of the interview.

During the interview, Mark covered a very wide range of information. One very surprising fact was that Mark is the current chairman of the committee of the national convention of Sacred Harp singing in the United States. He also told us that although there is some communicative system between Sacred Harp singers and organizations, there is no governing body. Thus, I got the impression that Mark is the de facto leader of Sacred Harp in the United States. Since, as he told us, there is little Sacred Harp singing found in the rest of the world (there are small groups in Canada and the United Kingdom), Mark could also possibly be thought of as occupying the top position of Sacred Harp organizations in the entire world. Throughout the interview, his intimate knowledge of all the different regions and styles involved with Sacred Harp was readily apparent. He told many stories about his experiences in several of those regions.

He gave us a history of Sacred Harp which he described as a *singers'* music rather than a *listeners'* music. He claimed that it originated in New England and rapidly moved into rural areas. He said that there were individuals that made it their purpose to bring the music to new areas of the nation. He also gave us an in-depth description of the history of the church in Calhoun County in which he had met earlier in the week. He told us that his first experience participating in Sacred Harp had been over twenty years ago and that he had been "hooked" ever since. Mark explained that Sacred Harp is done differently in Mississippi than anywhere else. He credits this to a single man who created a seven shape-note system which differs from the four shape-note system. Mark opened one of the hymnals that he had sitting on his lap to a page which showed how to read shape-notes and pointed to it as he explained in detail how the system operates. At one point, speaking about the confusion and arguments that have arisen from having two systems, he said something along the lines of "If you have seven children, you wouldn't only name four of them". I found this very humorous and rational.

I didn't fully grasp the concept, but I felt a bit nostalgic at the fact that I was getting an unexpected music lesson from my one-time band director. In fact, at one point during all of this, Mark mentioned that he had taught me how to read music before. He also mentioned that I likely never would have known about this (Sacred Harp) aspect of him had I not decided to participate in the oral histories field school at Ole Miss which brought me to his childhood church. I kind of got the impression that he was happy that we were becoming reacquainted and that he might like to maintain a personal friendship.

Mark spent most of the interview talking specifically about performing Sacred Harp music, but he also spent a fair amount of time discussing the food at the singings. He described differences between the foods served in differing regions around the country. This aspect of the gatherings seemed to be important to him. In fact, he said that the three main draws for him to Sacred Harp are singing,

food, and fellowship (not necessarily in that order). He described many dishes which he enjoys seeing at the singings. His least favorite food was a vegetarian soup that was served as the main course at a Quaker singing. He also told us a story about a woman would make a particularly complicated and tasty dish for one singing every year. After the woman died, the dish was still on the serving table. Apparently, the woman's husband had recreated the cake with the assistance of three women that were friends with his wife. Mark seemed to get emotional as he told us this story.

At the end of the interview, in the section that did not get recorded, Mark read us the lyrics to a particular song from one of his hymnals. Cathryn recorded the title of the book and song. As he approached the end of the song, he started to cry. It was a very touching moment, and I am very disappointed that it was not recorded. He explained that he used this song, often just reading the lyrics, to help him get through difficult times. He said that is how he uses all of Sacred Harp music.

Afterwards, we went out into the living room and talked with Mark and his family for another 20 minutes or so. Like me, he and his wife are marathoners, so we talked about running for a while. He also showed me a print of a stitching which he had framed and hanging on a wall. It was done by a woman, Ethel Wright Mohamed, in 1847. Mark told me the name of a website where all of her works can be seen: [mamasdreamworld.com](http://mamasdreamworld.com). The print showed her memory of Sacred Harp singing that she had attended as a child. There were people arranged in a square in a church singing. The scene looked very much like the one I had witnessed earlier in the week. This helped me to understand just how old and intact Sacred Harp really is. He also gave me a copy of the "Minutes of the Eighty-first Annual Session of the Mississippi Stated Sacred Harp Singing Convention" and a book which contains a list of the Sacred Harp singings for 2009-10, all of the minutes for 2009, a 2010 directory, and the names and addresses of all of the registered Sacred Harp Singers including Canada and the U.K. I will turn these materials in to the Archive along with the interview itself. Finally, after long goodbyes and promises to keep in touch, Cathryn and I left for Oxford.