Putting the “Folk” Back into Houston’s Music History

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While Austin enjoys international acclaim for its live music scene, Houston has long had one of the richest and most diverse musical histories of any city in Texas. Although not always adequately recognized for its contributions to the state’s songwriting traditions, Houston had a thriving folk music scene from the 1960s to the 1980s, helping launch the careers of numerous singer-songwriters.

Founded in January 2016, the Houston Folk Music Archive at the Woodson Research Center, which is part of Rice University’s Fondren Library, seeks to preserve and celebrate Houston’s folk music history, including its artists, venue owners, promoters, producers, and others.

During the process of digitizing 2-track radio reels from Rice University’s student-run radio station, KTRU, I discovered a large number of folk music recordings, including live shows, interviews, and in-studio performances. Among these were such radio programs as Arbuckle Flat and Chicken Skin Music, which feature interviews and performances by Eric Taylor, Nanci Griffith, Lucinda Williams, Vince Bell, and others. The musicians tell stories about how they ended up in Houston and became part of the thriving folk community centered in the Montrose neighborhood.

Not having grown up in the area, I was unaware that the local scene was so vibrant that several artists, including Lucinda Williams, had left Austin to join Houston’s tight-knit folk community. I decided to dig deeper and discovered that, throughout the 1960s and into the 1980s, Houston was home to a dynamic folk scene, which included Guy Clark, Townes Van Zandt, Don Sanders, Lynn Langham, Richard J. Dobson, K.T. Oslin, Lyle Lovett, Robert Earl Keen, and many others. I was convinced that it was time to reach out to the Houston community and begin building an archive dedicated to the area’s remarkable folk music history.

My first contact was with Craig Calvert of the band Wheatfield, later known as St. Elmo’s Fire. In the mid-to-late-1970s, Wheatfield/St. Elmo’s Fire was an Americana band that played prominent Texas venues such as the Armadillo World Headquarters, Liberty Hall, and the...
Texas Opry House, as well as composing and performing what is arguably the first rock ballet, *Caliban*. The group also appeared on the acclaimed PBS television series *Austin City Limits*. Holding out for a major label record deal that never materialized, the band broke up in 1979.

Because the group was so popular at Rice and other university campuses, KTRU had many recordings of Wheatfield’s live shows and interviews. After speaking with Craig Calvert about our wish to build an archival collection on the band, he enthusiastically donated scrapbooks, photographs, posters, and ephemera to go along with the recordings already in our possession. Curated by Calvert’s mother, the scrapbooks document a wide range of items, including music venue calendars, matchbooks, and photographs of Wheatfield performing. Our efforts at acquiring archival materials related to Wheatfield were so successful that I began contacting other musicians.

Over the past year and a half, the Houston Folk Music Archive has received collections from such artists as Don Sanders, Richard J. Dobson, Vince Bell, George Ensle, The Banded Geckos, David Rodriguez, Jack Saunders, Lucille Borella of the duo Bill and Lucille Cade, Linda Lowe, and Danny Everitt. While these musicians may not be household names, they are an important part of the Houston-area folk music community. Don Sanders, who started performing in the mid-1960s, was an early influence on Lyle Lovett. Jack Saunders, who founded White Cat Studios, has performed with such popular songwriters as Shake Russell and Willis Alan Ramsey. These musicians, along with many others, helped keep Houston’s folk music scene alive and active in small clubs throughout the city, especially in the Montrose area.

One of the archive’s more notable collections came from Richard J. Dobson, whose songs have been recorded by the Carter Family, Nanci Griffith, Guy Clark, and Johnny Cash. Along with Guy and Susanna Clark, Dobson co-wrote the song “Old Friends,” from Clark’s album of the same name. Dobson’s collection includes notebooks chronicling his 1974-1975 Rocky Mountain tour with Townes Van Zandt and the Hemmer Ridge Mountain Boys. Dobson recorded many of the performances on that tour, along with conversations involving other performers. Although the original tapes have been lost, he transcribed some of the recordings, which detail drunken escapades and the humorous interactions among the musicians and others involved in the tour. Dobson’s correspondence and related business records also highlight his experiences as an early “independent” artist.

In a different vein, Vince Bell’s collection shows how his burgeoning musical career was temporarily sidetracked by a car accident that left him with a traumatic brain injury. His materials reveal how he re-taught himself to play and eventually go on to record critically-acclaimed albums. There is an impressive breadth to the collection, which includes early
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While performers are an integral part of any music scene, they would not exist without venues in which they can showcase their art and earn a living. Especially during the 1970s and early 1980s, Houston had a variety of such venues that were essential to the flourishing folk music scene. Liberty Hall, near downtown, and Rockefeller’s, on Washington Avenue, were important local music clubs, although neither was exclusively folk. The Liberty Hall Collection includes posters and a scrapbook tracing the venue’s first two years. Rockefeller’s archival materials include such business records as booking sheets, contracts, monthly calendars, and photographs. The Houston Folk Music Archive also has a poster collection from the short-lived downtown venue, The Sweetheart of Texas Concert Hall and Saloon, which featured shows with such artists as Townes Van Zandt and Lucinda Williams. Building on the materials we already have collected from Houston-area music locales, we have begun developing a list of 50 additional venues, including restaurants, clubs, and any location where folk musicians have played. Our goal is to eventually create a GIS (Geographic Information System) enhanced map to document these venues.

Other organizations and entities that have been crucial to the success of Houston’s folk scene include the Houston Folklore and Folk Music Society. Originally the Houston Folklore Society, this was an early home and training ground for the Houston Folklore and Music Society, the Houston Folklore Bulletin, and the Houston Folklore Society. In the cover article, John A. Lomax, Jr. explains his tendency to sing without accompaniment.

Cover page of the Houston Folklore Bulletin from the Houston Folklore Society, April 1967. In the cover article, John A. Lomax, Jr. explains his tendency to sing without accompaniment. Courtesy of the Houston Folklore and Music Society records, Woodson Research Center, Fondren Library, Rice University.
for Guy Clark and Townes Van Zandt, among others. John A. Lomax, Jr., a founding member of the Society, organized concerts with Lightnin' Hopkins at the local Jewish Community Center. These proved to be very important in the early development of the local folk music scene. Recently, the Houston Folk Music Archive acquired the Society's newsletters chronicling the history of the still active organization. The first newsletter even features Guy Clark and Susan Spaw's wedding announcement.

In addition, the archive has a growing collection from John Lomax III, son of John A. Lomax, Jr., a music writer who managed Townes Van Zandt and Steve Earle. Sound engineer Danny McVey also has donated his materials. These collections from non-musicians provide valuable insight into those people who were not performers but were still a vital part of the area's folk music scene.

Oral interviews are another important component in preserving and documenting history. The Houston Folk Music Archive currently has oral interviews with thirteen musicians and others involved in the local folk music community. These include Liberty Hall co-founders Lynda Herrera and Ryan Trimble, along with musicians Vince Bell, Richard J. Dobson, Judy Clements, Dana Cooper, George Ensle, Lynn Langham, Jack Saunders, Don Sanders, and Isabelle Ganz, as well as sound engineer Danny McVey and former KTRU DJ, David John Scribner, host of the show Chicken Skin Music. These interviews are available online at: www.scholarship.rice.edu

One of the Houston Folk Music Archive’s newest projects involves creating an online exhibit to showcase our collections and provide additional information about the Houston folk scene. The oral histories will employ the University of Kentucky’s Oral History Metadata Synchronizer (OHMS), which synchronizes the video’s audio with the transcript, thereby allowing users to watch what parts interest them most. These oral histories will then be supported by photographs, fliers, and other graphic materials that help bring the Houston scene to life. The Liberty Hall online exhibit, which includes oral histories, posters, photographs, and ephemera, is currently live and available online at: http://digitalprojects.rice.edu/liberty-hall/

Although the Houston Folk Music Archive has only been in existence for a short time, it has become an important resource for documenting the local folk music scene. To learn more about our collections, please visit www.archives.library.rice.edu or follow the Houston Folk Music Archive on Facebook.
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