

Heartaches by the Number: Cataloging Country Music

by Linda Gross

The Country Music Foundation (CMF) is probably best known to the public as the organization that runs the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum in Nashville, Tennessee. More than 300,000 visitors tour the popular museum each year, but few tourists realize the wealth of research materials tucked away beneath them in the museum's basement.

The Country Music Foundation Library and Media Center is a dream come true for fans, journalists, and music scholars who want to research nearly any aspect of country music, past or present. It is managed by the CMF's Research and Collection Division, which is also responsible for all of the instruments, costumes, artwork, and memorabilia on display in the museum. The library houses the largest collection of country music recordings in the world—over 150,000 items—documenting a wide range of popular music styles related to country music and its antecedents, including ballads, bluegrass, blues, Cajun, cowboy, fiddle tunes, gospel, hillbilly, honkytonk, and rockabilly music. The CMF also maintains a comprehensive print collection containing thousands of books, periodicals, songbooks, sheet music, films, and videos, as well as a vertical file of newspaper and magazine clippings, artist biographies, and publicity materials on 1,200 subjects. In addition to these commercially produced items, the CMF also has a large body of unpublished materials including correspondence, scrapbooks, and recording contracts. This article will focus on the published materials, which make up the largest part of the CMF collection, and which are also more likely to be found in other libraries.

The library is a non-circulating research collection, open four days a week to anyone by appointment. A reference librarian is available to assist researchers by providing access to materials which are housed in closed stacks. In 1991 the library served more than eight hundred readers, responded

to twenty-four hundred reference calls, and answered some four hundred pieces of correspondence. In addition, the CMF staff uses the collection for various commercial projects such as the *Journal of Country Music*; the pictorial history, *Country: The Music and the Musicians*, compiled by the Foundation; and numerous recording projects for record labels such as RCA, MCA, and the Foundation's own reissue label, CMF Records.

Providing Access

How does the library staff locate materials in this extensive collection? Many phone callers apparently assume that librarians just punch requests into a massive computer system and that the answers magically appear in a matter of moments. This is not the case. Instead, the three librarians on the staff rely on their own skills and knowledge. The rest of the Research and Collections staff, which includes the Deputy Director (a trained folklorist), an audio-visual engineer, an oral historian, a curator of artifacts, and a researcher who also acquires rare materials for the library, are consulted when additional expertise is needed. As in most libraries, the staff's own knowledge is supplemented by various indexes, catalogs, and arrangement schemes that provide access to the collection.

Sheet Music and Photographs

Access to the sheet music collection is provided in a straightforward manner—it is simply filed alphabetically by song title in four vertical file cabinets. To save wear on the music pages, some of which are fragile, the staff maintains card files, with entries by song title and by composer. Patrons are asked to consult the card files rather than browse the file cabinets. Another card file indexes illustrations that appear on the covers of the sheet music. Both persons and subjects are noted. This index can be useful in locating a rare image of an obscure artist or composer. Occasionally the library receives unpublished song manuscripts; these are

interfiled with the published sheets unless they belong to a special collection that will be kept together.

The library's collection of over thirty thousand photographs is also kept in vertical files, arranged alphabetically by the name of the person featured in the photograph. There is no accompanying index for photographs. In some cases, photocopies of photographs are made to place in more than one file folder. In most cases, however, the original photographs are in the file and these may be consulted by patrons only in the presence of library staff. In an attempt to limit the handling of original photographs and to create subject access, the CMF explored the possibility of scanning the photographic images into a computer for storage on compact disc. The scanned images could be given one or more subject headings, and library patrons and museum visitors would be able to view the images on a computer instead of handling the photographs. The staff then would pull an original photograph only when necessary to make a copy for research or for publication, thus preserving the originals. The Foundation hopes to have this technological ability within the next few years.

Film and Video

A more complex method is used to locate materials in the CMF film and video collection. This collection includes short country music videos, documentaries, full-length feature films, videos of televised country music specials and awards shows, and other television shows on film. This collection is growing rapidly and access methods have not kept pace with acquisitions. The CMF employs a full-time audio/video engineer to restore and remaster old sound recordings for the library and the CMF record label. In addition, this person is responsible for overseeing the film and video holdings in the collection. For many years, he relied on his memory, supplemented by an accession log, to retrieve footage requested by researchers. In 1989,

a first attempt was made to improve access to this collection by entering the information from the handwritten log into a computer file, using Dbase. For each recording the following information was entered: title (of program), format (VHS, 1/2 inch, 16mm, etc.), source (raw footage, taped from film, etc.), and genre (movie, award show, documentary, television series). A summary with additional information, such as date, performers, or source of the footage, was also entered. This index is not complete for research needs, but it serves as a skeletal description of materials available. The CMF occasionally employs interns to view films and fill out forms that list information such as the performers, songs, directors, and producers of each film. Future plans include assigning each film or video an accession number and indexing by title of the work, performers, and song titles.

Songbooks and Periodicals

The CMF's collection of approximately five thousand songbooks is accessioned by assigning a songbook number, or "SB," to each book, and then creating catalog cards for two categories: songbook title and artist. Songbooks are no longer bound but are stored in acid-free pressboard folders, which protect the volumes and allow easier photographing of illustrations. A simple index was created for the songbooks by photocopying the table of contents from each book, indicating the "SB" number on the photocopy, and filing the sheets by artist name in three large notebooks. The Foundation plans eventually to have an index for each song in every songbook.

Another future project is to index articles in the Foundation's extensive collection of popular music periodicals. The Foundation currently subscribes to over 450 titles and has over 2,000 bound periodical volumes covering a wide variety of popular music genres. Aside from the most general music periodicals which are indexed in *Music Index* or the *Popular Music Periodicals Index* and a few periodicals that have their own indexes for in-house use such as *Goldmine* or *Bluegrass Unlimited*, most of the Foundation's unique periodical titles are not indexed. The latest issues of twenty-five of the most-consulted titles are displayed in the library reading room. While staff members occasionally have to rely on their memories to recall which artist may have been featured in which of those magazines, a better system was developed at CMF some years ago for the publication *Country Song Roundup*. Beginning with the first issue in 1949, and continuing until 1980, the reference librarian kept a card file indexing feature articles that appeared in each magazine. This practice was discontinued because of

other demands on staff time, but an index of this type is a worthwhile project for frequently used, unindexed periodicals.

Monographs

The collection of approximately seven thousand books is cataloged conventionally using a modified Dewey Decimal System and Library of Congress subject headings. Catalogers keep a notebook of Library of Congress headings that have been used. The Head of Technical Services uses a Macintosh SE/30 computer and the software program called MacCards (produced by Caspr) to create catalog cards. Because of the small staff and the large backlog of books to be cataloged, the CMF uses a basic level of

cataloging which does not include the physical description of the book or notes. Only a few subject headings are assigned. Unlike many research or academic libraries, the CMF keeps book jackets, protected with polyester plastic covers, on the books to preserve any photographs or illustrations that may be useful to researchers.

Newspaper Clippings

Another unique, valuable research tool is the library's vertical file of newspaper clippings and publicity releases. For many years the library subscribed to a newspaper clipping service. For a fee, the service scanned thousands of newspapers nationwide for items related to country music and



Exterior of the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum: "both tourist attraction and home to a large and diverse research collection on country music."

sent relevant articles to the CMF. These articles were sorted and put into vertical files by library staff. When the files were full, and the budget allowed, the articles were sorted by date and filmed on microfiche. In 1990, when the cost of the subscription, staff time, and microfilming became too great, the Foundation reduced the number of papers that the clipping service scanned and instead began subscribing to several full-text newspapers via online databases. DATATIMES, VU/TEXT, and DIALOG now provide staff and patrons access to current information about musicians and music trends from many newspapers, and the list of papers that the clipping service reads has been narrowed to a select few. Biographical information and publicity materials about various artists are still collected and interfiled with the newspaper clippings in the vertical files. There is a computer printout of subject headings used in the files. Before the literature on an entertainer or group is prolific enough to merit a separate file, it is assigned to a miscellaneous file, roughly sorted only by letter of the alphabet.

Sound Recordings

The largest body of materials in the CMF collection, and among the most consulted, is the collection of 150,000 sound recordings. The collection includes a variety of media from wax cylinders to compact discs; all items are stored in a large room filled with custom-built cabinets. The current method of access to the sound recordings is the most complex and unique feature of the CMF library. The manual method of access to the sound recordings is being replaced by an automated song title index that will provide in-depth information about the collection.

In both manual and automated systems, each sound recording is assigned a "recorded disc number," or "RD" number, as it is added to the collection. For LPs, the RD number would be, for example, RD-33-12-24476; the number 33 for rpm speed, and 12 to indicate twelve inches diameter (45s are "RD-45-7" and 78s are "RD-78-10.") Compact discs have been assigned "CD" numbers, and cassettes, "CS" numbers.

As they are acquired, the LPs and 45s are temporarily filed in alphabetical order by record label name and issue number. At the end of each year, sequential RD numbers are assigned to this order. A computer-generated label with the RD number on it is placed on the record jacket for LPs; for 45s the RD number is printed directly on acid-free sleeves. The sleeve for each 45 also includes the record label name and issue number.

The collection of 78s is also arranged by label and issue number. These, too, have been assigned RD numbers and are housed in acid-free sleeves with the RD number printed directly on them. The collection is nearly complete; the few additions each year are simply assigned a sequential RD number.

The method for gaining access to each of these formats differs. For LPs, there are catalog card files arranged first by artist, then by record label and issue number. The information on the cards includes the album name and the corresponding RD number. For those LPs with various artists (for example, the *Fifty Year History of Country Music*), there is also a card file arranged by title. Cassettes and compact discs are treated the same way as LPs. There is a card file for each format, organized by artist or title of the release.

Currently there is no access to individual song titles in the LP or 45 collections and, for 45s, no artist index. Instead, the staff rely on a wide range of discographic sources from periodicals, record catalogs, and books to link a song title with a specific record label and issue number.¹ After finding the label information, the next step is to consult twenty-one large notebooks maintained and continually updated by the Head of Non-Print Cataloging. These notebooks contain label names and the whole range of issue numbers for the 45s released by each label. Next to the issue number of recordings owned by the library is the CMF's corresponding RD number. As new 45s are accessioned, new RD numbers are assigned and entered into the correct notebook. Some

small independent labels may have only three or four releases, while a large label like RCA, which has been producing 45s for many years, has its own notebook. There is a similar set of six notebooks for 78s. Again, discographic sources must be consulted in order to find the recordings of a particular song or artist.

This system works well for researchers who have done preliminary discographic research, but it can prove frustrating to the casual reference caller who wants to know who sang an obscure song and whether it is available on a recording. It is even more frustrating that there is little access to other recorded items in the CMF collection, such as radio transcriptions, non-commercial reel-to-reel tapes, and rarer formats such as cylinders and wire recordings.

For many years, the Foundation planned a computer index to all of its sound recordings. It also considered joining OCLC for cataloging the sound recordings. Instead, because of the amount of unique material in the CMF collection, and in order to have better control over data fields, the Foundation decided to create its own in-house database.² An application to the National Endowment for the Humanities for a grant to pay for an outside firm to design this database, and to pay workers to input the information, was not funded, in large part because the Foundation decided not to join a national network. Following this rejection, the Foundation decided to undertake the project on its own. The Head of Information Management, who assists with all computer projects at the CMF, consulted librarians and other staff and developed a song title index using the Foxbase program and a Macintosh II CX computer. Foxbase is a relational database program that allows each song title to be connected with the performers on each track of a sound recording. The fields include artist, song title, album name, record label, issue number, date of release, a code that indicates format, and "RD" number. The Head of Non-Print Cataloging entered codes for over ten thousand record labels and full database records for nearly two thousand compact discs and over a thousand 45s.

The CMF is now evaluating this database. Initial results indicate disappointment with the speed of retrieval, and the Foundation is considering whether a faster computer, or even a non-relational database, might solve this problem. Staff still expect this database to become the focal point of the entire collection and dream that one day patrons will be able to search the database for any country musician, find a list of books and magazine articles about the artist, sound recordings (s)he has made, and photographs, film, or video clips. Until that goal is reached, staff continue to sort, file, catalog, index, and remember. They feel fortunate to be able to work with such a fascinating collection of music materials.

References

¹ Some examples of discographic sources are *Joel Whitburn's Top Country Singles, 1944-1988* by Joel Whitburn (Menomonee Falls, WI: Record Research, 1989); *Music Master* by Paul Mawhinney (Pittsburgh, PA: Record-Rama Sound Archives, 1983), and *Blues and Gospel Records, 1902-1943* by Robert M. W. Dixon and John Godrich (Chigwell, England: Storyville, 1982).

² Other libraries may choose to catalog their sound recordings and other audiovisuals through OCLC or another online cataloging system. Those who make that choice will find the following titles useful: Sanford Berman, ed., *Cataloging Special Materials: Critiques and Innovations* (Phoenix, Ariz: Oryx Press, 1986); Carolyn O. Frost, *Media Access and Organization: A Cataloging and References Sources Guide for Nonbook Material* (Englewood, Colo.: Libraries Unlimited, 1989); Deanne Holzberlein, *Cataloging Sound Recordings: A Manual with Examples* (New York: Haworth Press, 1988); and JoAnn V. Rogers with Jerry D. Saye, *Nonprint Cataloging for Multimedia Collections: A Guide Based on AACR2*, 2d ed. (Littleton, Colo.: Libraries Unlimited, 1987).