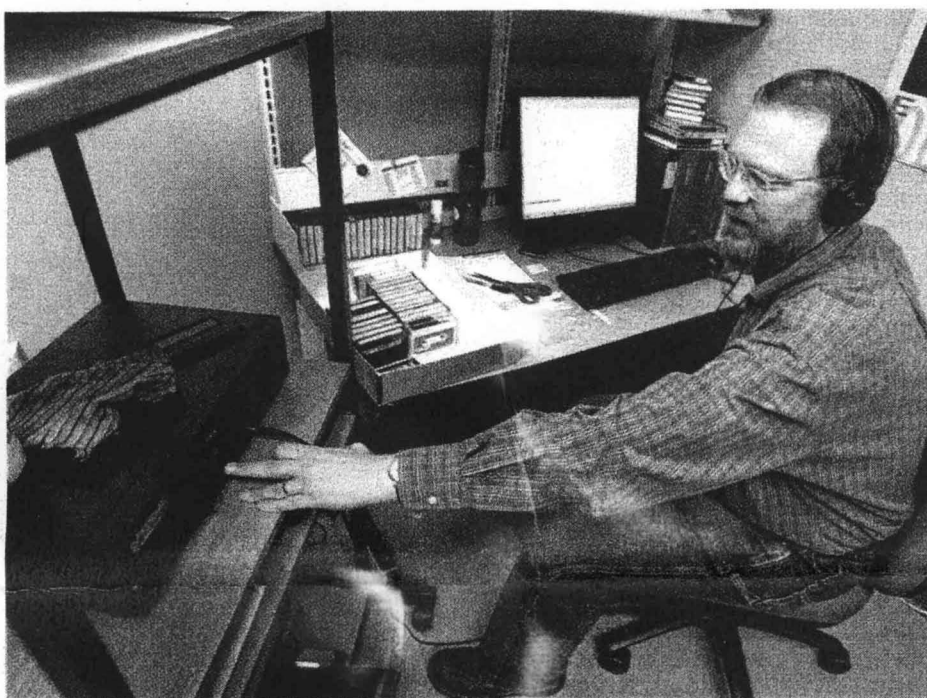


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MIDDLE TENNESSEE STATE UNIVERSITY

SAVING MUSIC



Grants have allowed MTSU's Center for Popular Music to hire John Fabke to organize the tape collection of the late MTSU folklorist Charles Wolfe. JOHN A. GILLIS/DNJ

Center for Popular Music attempts to show sensibilities from nation's past

By Amanda Haggard
The Daily News Journal

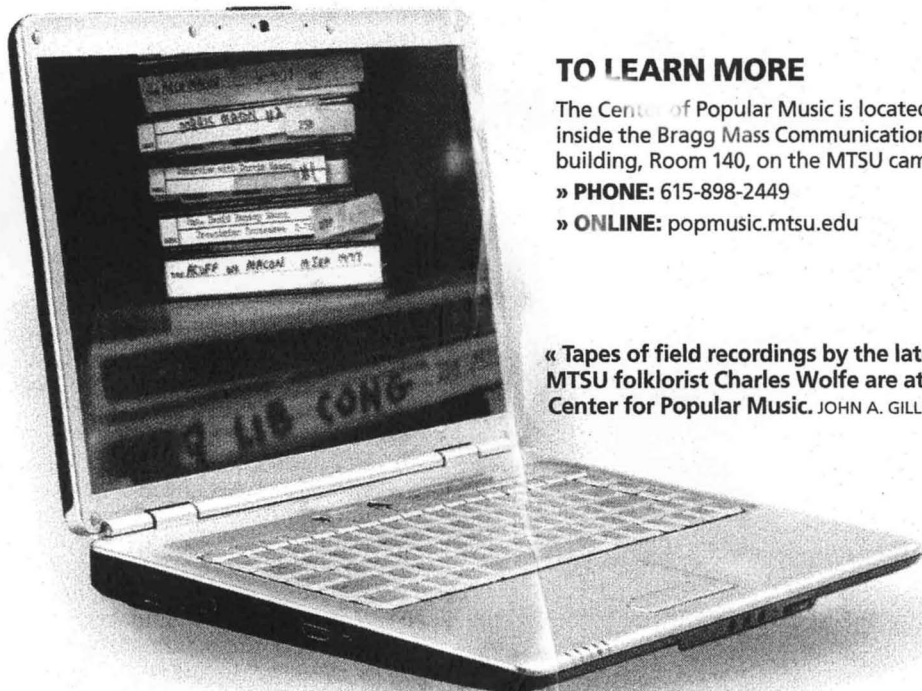
MURFREESBORO — The director of the Center for Popular Music at Middle Tennessee State University wants more people to have access to some of the richest musical history in the archive — and with two grants totaling nearly \$150,000, the Center is working to make that a reality.

The Center and the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, Mass., are collaborating on a project to digitize, catalog and provide online access to American vernacular music manuscripts, which is possible through a \$127,956 grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

"The problem with these cataloging manuscripts like this is that they're unique," said Dale Cockrell, director of the Center for Popular Music. "It's not Bach, Brahms or Beethoven, so people go, 'Oh, well that's just common people music. How important are they?' Librarians and archivists tend to push them in the corner and say they'd like do something with them one day, but the logistics of taking the time to do are often difficult."

Cockrell added that it was common in 18th and 19th century to make handwritten music books.

"Instead of buying books, they would keep books they made themselves around, then they would write the book, so



TO LEARN MORE

The Center of Popular Music is located inside the Bragg Mass Communication building, Room 140, on the MTSU campus.

» **PHONE:** 615-898-2449

» **ONLINE:** popmusic.mtsu.edu

« Tapes of field recordings by the late MTSU folklorist Charles Wolfe are at the Center for Popular Music. JOHN A. GILLIS/DNJ

See MUSIC, Page A2

Music

Continued from Page A1

they could keep it to play time and time again," Cockrell said. "These are kind of like a play list on your iPod. They wouldn't have spent so much time writing the songs down if it wasn't music that mattered to them."

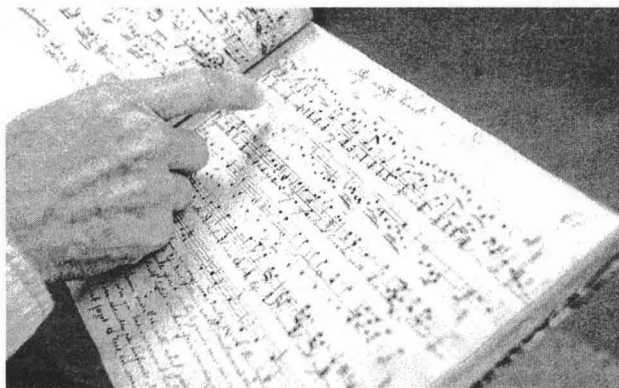
The center has one of the largest collections of American vernacular music in the country, and its archive of musical collections in general is one of the largest in the world.

"By archiving these on the Web for public access," Cockrell said, "our hope and expectation is that other librarians and archives will follow suit. It's a way to get into the music sensibility of a person directly, and we can start to get a profile of what popular music was in a time where many of us think there was no popular music."

The nearly 9,000 manuscripts date back to as early as 1775 and go as far as into the 1960s and 70s, according to Cockrell, and they include anything from fiddle tunes and parlor songs to marching band tunes.

"We're really interested in up until about 1910," Cockrell said. "After that, publication becomes so common that people stopped recording things like this in this fashion."

Lindsay Million, cataloging librarian at the



One of the handwritten music books from the 1800s is part of the collection at MTSU's Center for Popular Music. JOHN

A. GILLIS/DNJ

center, will take on the task of getting the records into an online archive.

"A lot of the items have been kind of tucked away in Dale's office — the music manuscripts anyhow," Million said. "They're going to be put into new covers to keep them from getting any worse. Once we do that, I'll be scanning each item and getting high-quality images, uploading those to archive.org and also to our server, so we'll have a backup here. From there, I'm going to be cataloging the items from the images that we take. It's a big task."

The physical items will remain at the center, but the web cataloging allows researchers to look into the manuscripts from wherever they may be, but there are challenges to digitally archiving materials that have been around since 1775.

"Sometimes the ink bleeds through pages

over time," Million said. "Or some of it is so old that I may have a terrible time reading it. I'll, of course, scan that material into our database; it just really limits what information I can include as part of the cataloging process. And a lot of these are written in beautiful handwriting — that I can't read. It's this beautiful, old scroll-style writing. It's crazy, beautiful handwriting, so we may have to get some assistance for that."

A second grant the center received from the GRAMMY Foundation for \$19,993 will allow the team to catalog more than 4,000 tapes handed down from Charles K. Wolfe, a well-known country music scholar based at MTSU who died in 2006.

"Most of the work that I'm doing is relating to trying to identify and organize the things that are within the collection," said John Fabke, a historian and musician working

under the grant. "Charles Wolfe was an excellent historian, but the organization just isn't the best. He did keep some records identifying some of the information on the tapes — songs, performers and details like that."

Fabke's work involves listening to the tapes and gauging the importance of the material on the audio track.

"Probably the most important thing to me are the interviews," Fabke said. "And Charles did lots of interviews with pioneering country musicians. A lot of these were done between 1970 and 2000 — a lot of the stuff that I'm looking at right now is the mid 1970s. He started doing a lot of these in a period of time when a lot of musicians were still alive; people who made commercial recordings in the '20s and '30s, that's sort of the greater majority of the things here."

Many of the tapes include material that relates to Uncle Dave Macon and Sam and Kirk McGee, who are legendary local old-time musicians.

"When it's up and available, it really will be one of the most significant collections of interviews and music relating to Southern commercially recorded country music," Fabke said. "It's incredible stuff."

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