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Preserving the Past: Archiving Southern Illinois' Rich Musical Heritage

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Preserving the past

Archiving southern Illinois' rich musical heritage

By Matt Gorzalski

[Author's note: The majority of this article is derived from email exchanges with Alex Kirt, assistant professor at Northwest Missouri State University and creator of the Southern Illinois Music Archive.]

The Southern Illinois Music Archive embodies the diverse heritage of southern Illinois itself, a border region of converging natural, cultural, and historical influences. It was acquired in 2017 by the Special Collections Research Center (SCRC) in Morris Library at Southern Illinois University Carbondale (SIUC). The collection consists of recordings from more than 150 bands and solo musicians from southern Illinois, as well as the Marion High School jazz band and SIUC's Marching Salukis, Wind Ensemble, and Pep Band.

The recordings date from 1949 to the 2010s, with emphasis on the 1980s to present. The vinyl records, audiotapes, and born-digital recordings were compiled and digitized by Alex Kirt, a member of local alt-country favorites The Woodbox Gang and veteran of the southern Illinois music scene.

Kirt began the archive in 2012 while a graduate student at SIUC. A fondness for older styles of music and the example of legendary ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax led him to question whether anyone had collected historic recordings showcasing musicians and bands from southern Illinois. He was aware of personal collections kept by fellow local musi-

Marjorie Lawrence as Brunhilde in Richard Wagner's *Die Walküre*.

Courtesy Special Collections Research Center, Southern Illinois University Carbondale.



Will Gay Bottje in his electronic music studio, February 24, 1964.

Courtesy Special Collections Research Center, Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

cians. Many of the recordings were in danger of being lost due to natural degradation of aging audio media, exacerbated by poor storage conditions. Seeing that there was no centralized collection and aware of the preservation risks to the recordings, Kirt embarked on a journey to save this rich resource of southern Illinois culture.

Through his work, Kirt assumed the role of what professional archivists term "citizen archivist." A citizen archivist is a person who performs quasi-professional archival work often focused on collecting, preserving, and providing access to records of a specific topic or theme, but without formal archival education and independent from any archival institution. Kirt acquired recordings from the many

southern Illinois musicians he has known throughout his years as a musician and recording artist in the region. He also received material from local recording studios such as Noteworthy Studio, and record stores such as Plaza Wuxtry (both businesses based in Carbondale.) And he used social media to reach a larger audience. The response was positive and the music community was happy to donate recordings to support the project.

The vinyl records and audiotapes were converted to digital audio in accordance with the Association for Record Sound Collections guidelines. Kirt took great care in preparing the materials for digitization. The information on labels and boxes was recorded and photographed. Tapes were incubated at 130°F for 24 hours, and then cleaned using an Otari reel-to-reel deck outfitted with a cleaning mechanism that removed mold and debris. A Revox quarter-inch reel-to-reel tape deck and an Audio-Technica LP120 turntable sent the tape and vinyl signals



Egyptian Combo performing at Teen-a-Go-Go, Du Quoin State Fair, August 31, 1969. Courtesy Special Collections Research Center, Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

to a computer using the Focusrite Saffire Pro digital audio interface. Kirt then used the Pro Tools software to record and edit the digital surrogates, captured at a 48kHz sample rate and 24 bit depth WAV files. Kirt also collected recordings in digital audio file formats such as FLAC, MP3, SDII, and AIFF, and simply transferred them via hard drive. These file formats present digital preservation challenges requiring future attention.

from classical to death metal here. There's hip-hop, rap, electronic dance music, bluegrass, country, folk, jazz, blues, protest music, environmentalist music, labor union songs, coal mining songs, classic rock, reggae, ska, jam bands, big band swing, rockabilly, pirate swing, Americana, gospel music of all kinds, string bands, jug bands, West African drum ensembles, cabaret shows, math rock, emo,

The Southern Illinois Music Archive showcases the diversity of musical genres found in the region. As Kirt noted, "Southern Illinois isn't entirely different than other, largely rural areas in the Midwest, but for some reason, we seem to be fortunate enough to have a musical community that is larger and more talented than just about any other similar-sized Midwestern city that I've visited." Listeners can enjoy music from the likes of Dixie Diesels, The Woodbox Gang, The Bottletones, Jenny Johnson, Jungle Dogs, Swamp Tigers, Giant City Slickers, Katie Kerkhover, Whistle Pigs, and numerous others.

Kirt summarized the local music landscape thusly:

"Carbondale has a very healthy punk scene. There's everything

goth, hair metal, sludge, stoner rock, doom metal, Hindi folk, goth, just look around and you'll probably find someone playing just about any style or singing about any topic that you can think of. What other small, Midwestern city has that?"

The Southern Illinois Music Archive collection also includes correspondence, photographs, certificates, and newspaper clippings documenting the business of WCIL AM/FM radio station, from 1950-1987. Under the company Southern Illinois Broadcasting Partnership, WCIL was originally located at 219 W. Main St. in Carbondale and went on the air in October 1946. The station was eventually sold in 2004 to Mississippi River Radio. Letters from individuals and organizations thanking WCIL for promoting and covering events convey the connection between the station and community. The photographs depict station employees and radio personalities, and the newspaper clippings document WCIL programs and activities.

This one-of-a-kind collection on the SIUC campus promotes the region's music, a "hidden gem" that "nobody seems to know about unless they've lived here," said Kirt. Lyric and song are an engaging primary source



Katherine Dunham and her company performing "Cabin in the Sky", circa 1940. Courtesy Special Collections Research Center, Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

that expresses the history and culture of a region, people, place, and time. Kirt stated, “The music of this place carries the stories of its cultural heritage in its lyrics, melodies, and rhythms. You can also learn a lot about the social attitudes of the locals through the music that they play. If you want to know about the history of this area, you can find songs that tell about nearly every event, often from a first-hand perspective. To me, that’s special because it is the voices of the people telling the tales, passing down history, and teaching the local heritage to the next generation.”

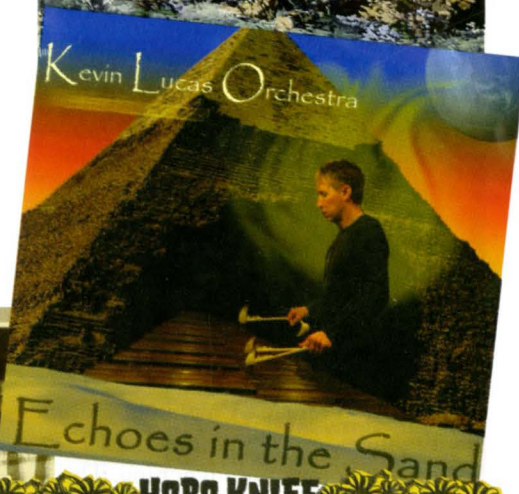
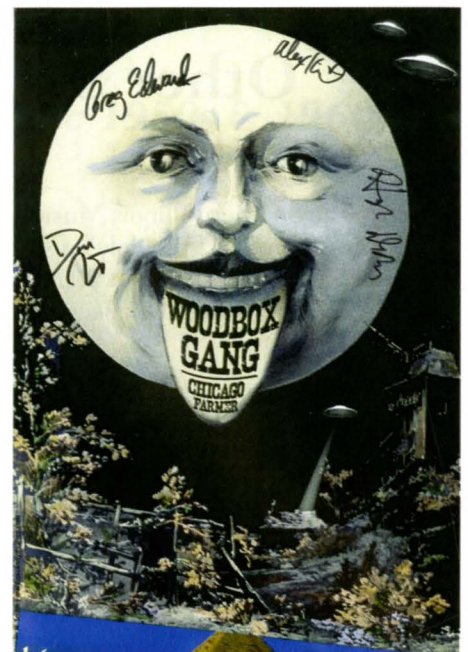
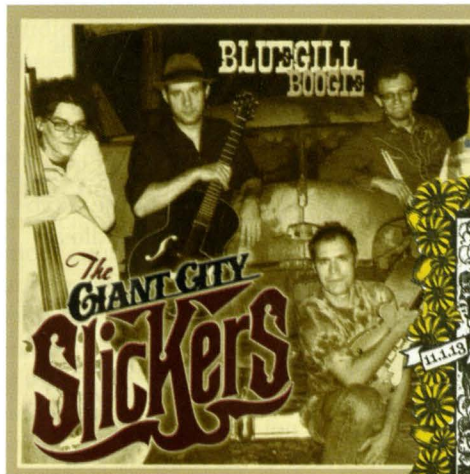
The collection possesses value beyond scholarship. The most common use will likely be people listening for enjoyment and curiosity. Musicians and fans who participated in the regional music scene in the past can relive songs of the bands they once played in or followed. Children can discover the music of their mother’s or father’s bands. Kirt added, “I’ve also had some older musicians tell me that they’ve found recordings of themselves in the archive that they’d never heard before, which I thought was really great.”


Copyright presents a significant barrier to providing online access to the collection.

Although archivists at SIUC envision creating an online searchable collection of streaming audio, neither SIUC nor Kirt obtained the intellectual property rights to the recordings during the digitization and transfer of the files to SCRC. To stream the collection, SCRC would have to contact each band or solo artist and obtain permission to publish their work online. Certainly legal action is unlikely, given the already positive response from the southern Illinois music community; the fact that SIUC would not monetarily profit from the Southern Illinois Music Archive; and the additional fact that you can already find music and concert footage of some of the contemporary groups on platforms such as YouTube. However, archives remain cautious about publishing materials for which they either do not own the intellectual property or have not obtained the proper permissions.

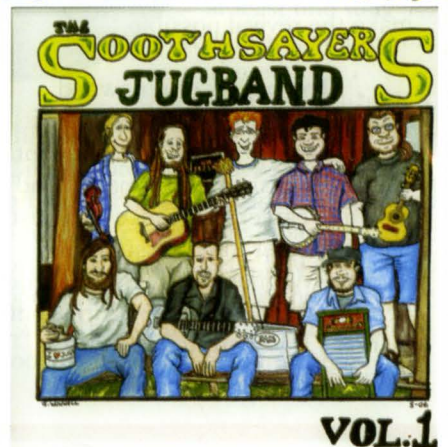
The existence of a music archive of this quality representing a rural region is remarkable and undermines outsiders’ notions of cultural and technological limitations in rural America. It is a testimony to the talent and pride of southern Illinois musicians and the foresight of those who collected and saved the recordings over the years. Although now a professor at Northwest Missouri State University, Kirt plans to continue developing the collection and to add to what he has donated to Morris Library.

Friends and colleagues continue to donate music to Kirt. From one individual, Kirt is in line to receive a large cache of tapes of recorded live performances originally broadcast from a Mount Vernon radio station; recordings of jazz musicians at what was the Purple Crackle in East Cape Girardeau; and a few 78 rpm records from the former ACE Recording Studio, also in Mount Vernon. Kirt also hopes to add more recordings of performances by SIU School of Music students and faculty. He is also working on experi-



mental virtual reality recordings of live performances, in which listeners can experience a recorded concert in 360° surround video and audio. These too will be added to the collection. 

Matt Gorzalski is the University Archivist at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, where he is responsible for all university records of historic value, as well as the papers of noteworthy faculty. He was named interim director of the Special Collections Research Center in 2019.



Other SIUC music collections of note

By Matt Gorzalski

The Southern Illinois Music Archive isn't the only music-centric collection in SIUC's Morris Library Special Collections Research Center (SCRC).

♪ The **Katherine Dunham** papers at SCRC are consistently used by researchers around the world. A dancer, choreographer, anthropologist, and activist, Dunham (1909-2006) led one of the most prominent African-American touring dance companies in the mid-twentieth century. She then taught at Southern Illinois University from 1964 to 1982 at the Performing Arts Training Center in East St. Louis.

Dunham was active in political causes, in particular the struggles of her adopted country of Haiti. Her papers include correspondence, photographs, manuscripts, and an extensive collection of sheet music both from her performances as well as her collected music. A highlight includes the music from *Southland*, a 1951 production about a lynching. This work proved controversial, so much so that the U.S. Department of State refused to subsidize the international goodwill travels of Dunham's performance company. After its debut in Santiago, Chile, and a short run in Paris in 1953, *Southland* was not performed again until 2012, when it was revived by the Cleo Parker Robinson Dance Ensemble. SCRC provided the original score to make the revival possible.

♪ The papers of renowned Australian soprano **Marjorie Lawrence** (1907-1979) document her distinguished performance and teaching career. Lawrence was best known for her interpretations of Richard Wagner's operas. She made her operatic debut in 1932 in Monte Carlo as Elisabeth in Wagner's *Tannhäuser*, and made her first

appearance at Opera Garnier in Paris the following year playing Ortrud in *Lohengrin*. Lawrence was struck with polio in 1941 but continued to perform seated. In 1960 she joined the faculty in the SIUC School of Music where she taught voice and directed operas and other productions until 1973. She also taught summer workshops at her home Harmon Hills near Hot Springs, Arkansas. The collection consists of correspondence, photographs, programs, and publicity material, scrapbooks, manuscripts of her autobiography *Interrupted Melody*, inscribed and annotated musical scores, and papers from her opera productions and teaching at SIUC. Of particular importance are numerous recordings of her singing in the 1940s and 1950s, as well as the opera workshops she led in the 1960s and 1970s.

♪ Flutist and electronic music pioneer **Will Gay Bottje** (1925-2018) was a member of the SIUC School of Music faculty from 1957 to 1981. Among the first in the U.S. to own a Moog synthesizer, Bottje established an electronic music studio at SIUC in 1965 where he experimented with the new genre. He composed several orchestral, choral, and chamber music pieces beginning in the 1950s and to the 1980s. While SCRC does not possess Bottje's papers, traces of his work are scattered across several collections. The SIUC general photograph collection and the Ron Gould photograph collection contain images of Bottje and his Moog synthesizer and electronic studio. Audio materials include compositions "What is Man" (circa 1966) and "Works for Solo Voices," as well as a 1966 interview on Don Michel's "Insight" radio program in which Bottje discusses his work in electronic music. SCRC also holds 16mm film of Bottje and the libretto of his 1969 opera *Alteld*.

♪ The **Marianne Webb** papers document a long career of performance and teaching in the SIUC School of Music. Webb (1936-2013) was a nationally recognized concert organist and a leader in the American Guild of Organists (AGO). In 1970, she designed and directed the installation of the Reuter pipe organ in SIUC's Shryock Auditorium. The organ is now named in her honor. In 1990, Webb established the endowment that supports the Distinguish Organ Recital Series (DORS) held annually in the auditorium. She was recognized for her extensive national and international recital touring as well as mentorship of her students, relationships which lasted beyond graduation. Her papers include one of the largest private collections of sacred music in the world, with emphasis on pipe organ. Also included are records pertaining to her teaching career, recitals, DORS, and the national and southern Illinois chapters of AGO.

♪ SCRC also holds the papers and music of composer **Wilson W. Coker**. Born locally in Pinckneyville in 1928, Coker earned his doctorate in 1965 from the University of Illinois and taught and composed at various colleges and universities before he joined the School of Music faculty at SIUC in 1975. Coker had previously served as Administrative Associate and Assistant to the President at the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts from 1962 to 1964. Coker's compositions include pieces for strings, woodwinds, brass, and piano written in the 1950s to 1970s. His 1959 piece *Concertino for Bassoon and String Trio* won the Koussevitzky Prize, and his *Overture Giocoso* was commissioned and performed by the Philadelphia Orchestra in 1962.