

Honor Thy Music: My Experience at the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum

The Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum (CMHFM) in Nashville, Tennessee always has been a feature in the backdrop of my life. Being a native Nashvillian, I visited its original location as part of a school field trip—and remembered seeing Elvis Presley’s “solid gold Cadillac” (which is actually white, with paint made with crushed pearls) for years to come. Sometime in the last twelve years, once the CMHFM moved to its new location in the heart of downtown Nashville, I visited a handful of times with family members or to see newly opened exhibits. Now after having interned with the CMHFM for ten weeks, I can honestly say that I have never worked at a place that I have liked more, museum or not. The people I met and worked with were all helpful and friendly, the work I did was educational and meaningful, and the overall experience completely exceeded my expectations. This does not mean that I lacked frustration and challenge, or that everything always went smoothly. There were difficulties I had to overcome, and the most important lesson that I had to learn was that some of these difficulties were actually inside my own head. However I look at it, though, I will never consider my experience with the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum to be anything but unforgettable.

At the beginning of the internship, I was unsure of exactly what to expect. I knew that I would be working with Kelli Hix, the Curator of Moving Images who I had met in December. However, I had no idea what I would actually be doing. My biggest worry was that whatever project I would work on would be pure grunt work, like stuffing envelopes or licking stamps. Although my phone interview with Kelli reassured me that this would not be the case, and we discussed a number of projects that she had available

for me to work on, sometimes that type of worry remains present until it is actually disproven in person.

It did not take me long to realize that my situation was very different from that of the other interns. Most notably, I was the only graduate intern; the rest were undergraduate students, mainly rising sophomores or juniors. Only Caroline Voisine and I, Kelli and Tim's two interns, had backgrounds in museum studies. Most of the others said in their summary presentations on July 26 that they had never worked with museums or even non-profits before coming to the CMHFM. I was rather surprised by that, although I also considered it a positive sign that the museum attracted even people from outside the field. I felt very lucky as far as tasks were concerned, because the other summer interns mentioned in their presentations that they were placed together in the mailroom doing mailings, social media, and research predominantly for marketing purposes that would not have helped me in my pursuit of earning my Masters degree. In fact, they were tasks that the department specifically instructed me to avoid. There were probably at least twelve interns, and of them, only Caroline and I were not stuck up on the fourth floor with them in the mailroom. We were sort of the renegades, fortunate enough to work in another area with much more space and probably more independence on tasks that were helpful to the museum's collection.

As I began working in the Moving Image Archive, or the third floor, as I often thought of it, I was excited to see all of the different kinds of media in their collection. I had only ever heard of many of the formats during my graduate assistantship at Baylor, and even then I had never seen or interacted with them. The only moving image formats that I was actually familiar with were VHS and DVD, honestly, because those were the

only ones I had used at home or school. I knew bits and pieces about film, probably enough to get in trouble, but I had never handled film reels, just negatives from rolls of film I had taken on family vacations. I had been expecting, or hoping really, to work with the other museum artifacts, and I had been told that I would, but that ended up not being part of my internship.

Ultimately I had two main projects during my time at the CMHFM. The one on which I spent the majority of my time was the VHS project with Kelli, a project that had already been in progress for some time. The aim of the project was to label each tape in the collection with its own location number, as well as its specific object ID. The object ID was basically the accession number that was to be written on the tape itself and the front of the case, and the location number was written on the end of the case and used to organize the tapes once they were on the shelves. Since the archives will be moving soon when the museum expansion is completed, sometime within the next year, it will be important to have a system to quickly return them to the shelves regardless of how they are packed. The location numbers are also more straightforward in their formatting (like VHS01090, for example) than the object ID's (which can look like FV.VHS.1903 or FV.2013.1573) and make for faster location of one tape in a collection of over five thousand. I was very impressed to see how quickly tapes could be found using their location numbers when pulling tapes for Kelli to use to compile DVDs for programming purposes.

I actually completed the initial VHS project—with help from Caroline, but it was primarily my project—and we moved into another phase that involved adding Edward Morris's large donation of tapes into the main VHS collection. Edward Morris, who was

a reviewer and writer for *Rolling Stone* magazine, gave numerous boxes, perhaps thirteen in total, of music videos and electronic press kits on VHS tapes to the CMHFM. The Morris collection had never been processed, so I first searched through the Past Perfect records to see if we already had a copy of that particular video. If we did, I set it aside and compared the duplicate to the one in the collection and kept the one in better condition or with better viewing quality. If we did not already have one, I entered a new record in Past Perfect and then processed them like I did the other tapes.

The primary reason that processing the Morris collection became important was because there was a large gap in the numbering of the tapes. The initial VHS project had proceeded by numbering the tapes backward rather than forward for some bizarre reason. Kelli had tried to number from the beginning when she tried to tackle the project herself, but she soon realized it would be futile. However, she still had processed about forty tapes going in the opposite direction. When I finished giving location numbers to the primary collection, I stopped somewhere around VHS01027. The gap between VHS00041 and VHS01027 was sizeable. By the end of my internship, the moveable shelves were filled, ranging from VHS00650 to VHS06357 or so, and at least two hundred more tapes had been completed when counting from the beginning and stored in boxes temporarily. Altogether, the gap probably only numbers about four hundred now, and I believe there will be enough tapes in the Morris collection, even after the removal of unnecessary duplicates, to fill the void.

The other project that I worked on during my internship was with Tim Davis, the photographs curator on the second floor. When Kelli and I first discussed my internship, we had talked about my working on two projects, but I expected to be helping Elek, the

registrar, take photographs of objects or to be working with the poster collection. Instead, I worked with Tim two days a week, Thursdays and Fridays, and while I did some filing in the stacks, I primarily scanned negatives into the computer as part of work on a National Endowment for the Humanities preservation grant. I really enjoyed working with the negatives, trying to figure out who was actually in the pictures, and seeing fifty year old negatives that were generally in excellent condition. I also appreciated that I was able to employ and expand on the scanning skills I developed in my graduate assistantship at Baylor's Ray I. Riley Digitization Center in Moody Library. If I had not had those skills, I would probably have been lost. I only wish I had had more time to do more quality control and make sure the images looked as crisp as possible, but there were so many negatives to scan that that was not my priority. I did try to pre-emptively crop the photos as best I could before they were scanned so unnecessary black areas around the edges did not appear in the final scans.

Kelli and I sat down together after I had gotten started on my internship and together we set some goals, based on the skills she knew I would develop and the aims I had going into the internship that we had included in our preliminary letter to the museum studies department. First, I wanted to gain experience in basic cataloging, processing, and organization of audio-visual materials. Honestly, I wanted to learn how to catalog virtually anything, and combining the hands-on work with the knowledge from my coursework and the opportunity to work with previously unfamiliar media formats ended up creating a much richer experience. Secondly, I wanted to gain experience in working with the Past Perfect software. I had a little experience navigating the program at Baylor during my collections classes, but I had not used it extensively. After using it

on a daily basis, I learned that while it does have its foibles, it is actually not a very complicated system to use, but it did not always lend itself too well to moving image media. Thirdly, I wanted to learn to identify a wide range of audio and moving image formats, as well as their unique conservation needs. I believe that I was successful in this as far as the moving image formats were concerned; I think I could identify virtually any of the common video formats now, such as U-Matic, Beta, DigiBeta, VHS, 16 and 35mm film, MiniDV, and perhaps several others. However, one thing that I would change if I could go back in time would be to work with Alan Stoker, the curator of recorded sound, a little more and have him teach me about the audio formats. Kelli and I also had several days where we discussed and observed examples of preservation and conservation practices for video. I also talked with Neale Stokes, who was at the CMHFM as part of an IMLS grant to work on the U-Matic collection, about that particular type of tape and its preservation needs. Finally, I wanted to become more familiar with scanning photographs, negatives, and other documents. I gained a great deal of experience scanning mostly black and white negatives at high resolutions on the Epson 4700 photo scanner, and I did scan a few photographs at a lower resolution on the Canon copier for use as thumbnails, but we ran out of time for me to scan any other paper products, even though I found a note from Steve Gatlin tucked in one of the VHS tapes. It has been set aside to scan, and hopefully they will be able to scan it in my absence.

Even though I was not able to work with the artifacts collection myself, I was practically surrounded by it on Thursdays and Fridays. The photograph archive was on the second floor with the rest of the artifact collection, and there would be no telling what I would see when I would come in for the day. The CMHFM has a new exhibit opening

on Reba McEntire, one of my all time favorite artists, on August 9, and so it has been amazing to see the exhibit come together from a number of different angles. Kelli worked on editing and compiling the video that will run looped in the gallery space, with a number of challenges to face including making sure that she had the approval from Reba's staff and Reba herself. However, it was watching the artifacts come to life, including the formation of what we all called "the Army of Rebas," the mannequins that would display dozens of Reba's dresses and costumes in the exhibit gallery. One of the most exciting experiences of my life was getting up close to Reba's famous red dress, the one that got huge amounts of publicity for being very daring and risqué after she wore it at the 1993 Country Music Association (CMA) Awards. I remember this particular garment and the controversy it created. It has become infamous to country music fans; Reba is still asked about it in interviews, and it is so famous that it is referred to as "the" red dress, as though no other exists. Being so close to artifacts so intrinsically related to Reba helped me realize a dream, and it was one excellent side perk to my internship.

While interning at the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum was probably one of the most richly rewarding experiences of my life, it did at times have its drawbacks. The most significant of these was certainly the level of access that interns had, or actually did *not* have, to their own workstations. All staff members and interns have a badge with their photos made soon after beginning, and ideally they have a sleeve with a clip or lanyard so that they are visible. I, however, never got a badge holder as they were out, so mine had to live in my back pocket. Staff members use these badges to swipe against sensors to access the elevator, the archives, and some doors, depending on their level of access. Not all staff can enter the archives, as I originally thought; even the

security guards cannot access those two secured areas. So I suppose it does not come as a great surprise that interns cannot either. What was mindboggling to me was that interns could not even operate the elevator. A staff member must swipe his or her badge to operate it, and, depending on their access, then allow the intern inside on the second, third, or fourth (administrative) floor. Even the interns who worked on the fourth floor could not access it, to my knowledge. I was informed that this was the case on the very first day and that I would need to text people for them to let me back upstairs. This was the case when I arrived, when I returned from lunch breaks, and even if I had to use the restroom.

After only one day of this—honestly, maybe after a couple of hours—I grew extremely frustrated, and initially I was rather insulted. If I had permission to be in this position, why was the administration handicapping me immediately? Here I was, on track to receive my Master of Arts in just a few short months, and I had to ask permission to go virtually anywhere? I was a bit appalled, I will admit. To make matters worse, interns were not allowed to be on the second or third floors without a staff member present, so if I looked up from my work and found myself alone, I would have to drop what I was doing and leave. Thankfully, this never happened to me, although I came close a few times. This struck me as being the most inconvenient, inconsistent, and inefficient system I had ever heard of anyone using, and I was unhappy. It took me about a week, honestly, but I finally came to the realization that the regulations were not personal. Even though I fully understood from the first explanation of the rules just *why* the rules were in place and came to terms with the reality of having to work within the constrictions, I still found them difficult to stomach up until the end of my internship.

Since the CMHFM has a number of objects considered very valuable because of their connection to very famous artists, and the fact that some of these artists have fans that are willing to go to great lengths to have something belonging to their favorite celebrity, the museum cannot be too careful. Truly, I have no quarrel with them over this and agree that they should do anything possible to protect their artifacts. However, this makes the act of having a background check seem basically moot. I had a background check done twice—the first was lost and I am honestly not sure that the second ever really came through—but that did nothing to slow down my ability to work at the CMHFM. This double standard could be rectified if the background checks were processed in a timely manner. Perhaps a trial period could be part of it, and once the intern proves himself or herself, more responsibilities and trust could become part of the internship? Obviously any plan like this could have pitfalls and be abused, but there must be a less demeaning, embarrassing way of going about this process.

The heightened security also really slowed down my ability to work, not to mention that it tore my supervisors away from their work to have to come down and let me back upstairs. I began actively trying to leave as little as possible to prevent this, and toward the end of the internship, I just loitered by the elevator until someone I knew had access to the second or third floor arrived to go upstairs and I just tagged along with them. I felt better about shameless begging than having to summon people to come rescue me. To everyone's credit, everyone seemed happy to help me, always. I just felt bad when I had called someone in to help me and then ran into someone who could take me upstairs. Then I missed the first person and had to apologize for their unnecessary rescue mission. Sometimes I would have to wait in the break room for half an hour or

even a full hour for my supervisor to arrive for the day or to return from lunch. Even though I understand the importance of keeping everything appropriately secure, the procedure as enacted leads to reduced productivity and wasted time. In a profession where there is never enough time to get everything done, especially when it comes to collections, this seems to be an area that needs a great deal of help.

The access issues I faced were among the greatest challenges I had to handle, and the source of great frustration. However, when I took the time to stop and think, I realized that my internship was not a *job* but a chance to make what I could of a great opportunity. I was not being paid, and perhaps they did not expect loyalty from me. I was also not being disrespected, although that was hard to remember sometimes. I believe my issues came from a combination of considering myself to already be a “museum professional” and from previous internships that felt like jobs except for the lack of pay. I was not being unfairly targeted necessarily, and the issues would not be the same were I a paid archives staff member. Ultimately, I was a glorified volunteer, and there was not really a trust relationship in place. I hope that my initial thoughts were not immature, but eventually I did have some humble pie and allowed myself to really enjoy the experience rather than dwell on the negatives, no matter how difficult they could be to ignore.

Though the security procedures seem to do a decent job of deterring breaches, I certainly noticed several ways in which they could be thwarted during my time as an insider. First of all, though it is difficult to gain access to the archives floors, the doors are the extent of the security on those floors. Security does not have a post nearby, and even though the archives are surrounded by glass to make everything transparent to

visitors and staff alike, there is no procedure to check bags. Most staff members have lockers on the first floor where they keep personal items, but the women working in the archives all have purses and/or bags that they bring with them. Never once did security check any of these bags. When I worked retail, my bags were checked every time I left the store at several of my jobs. I know that this could be flirting with privacy issues, but I do not consider it to be unreasonable. Bags should either be checked or people should leave large bags in lockers to prevent someone pilfering something of value. The vetting process, as I mentioned before, should also be more efficient, or at least carry some weight if bag checks are not employed. The administration seems to be sending mixed messages sometimes, but I suppose that if they have not had reason to implement any measures similar to these, then perhaps the threat is not as great as I might imagine.

I learned a number of lessons during my internship with the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, several more than I anticipated. Most of them were small lessons, like the way an accreditation from the American Alliance of Museums does not mean that a museum lacks storage problems. I also learned that sometimes you actually want to come in to work on your project and get something accomplished, but you cannot because that day is a staff holiday and there is no one around to supervise. However, the most significant lesson I learned is the importance of having a supervisor willing to act as an intern's advocate, as he or she should do. I found myself in an unmanageable situation that started because I wanted to help out and go the extra mile, which turned out to be a mistake.

The problems began when I contacted Sandy Conatser, the volunteer coordinator, and asked her how I could volunteer to get some extra time toward my internship. She,

rather than referring me to guest services as I expected, put me in contact with one of the programming staff members. I asked her by email how I could possibly help her in some way on the weekends, trying to get information. She pitched several ideas to me, and I asked her to tell me more. Unfortunately, she took a very long time to respond to me, and when she did, she said something about me editing footage for videos for her, which is not something I actually know how to do. I think that because I was interning for Kelli, she assumed that was what I was doing. I was very confused, but before I had a chance to respond to that, she was asking me to do something different, to write introductions for some film clips, which I believe Kelli suggested to her because I could work on it at home. I thought that might be a good idea, but after I again asked for clarification and more information as to what she actually wanted, she sent me all these emails with examples and a request for a draft by Thursday when it was already Monday and I had not actually given my consent. As I wrote in my journal, "I was just trying to gather information and options, and all of a sudden I [had] an assignment?" I never said I would actually want to do anything! I admit that I had a meltdown at work brought on by the stress of not knowing what to do, on top of having a paper to write and working on moving into a new house. Kelli noticed that something was wrong and I ended up blurting out everything in her office. She was wonderful, though, and talked me down and assured me that I had not done anything wrong in the situation. She also expressed concern that Abi seemed to be trying to pawn work off onto me, which was out of character for her. Regardless, I washed my hands of the entire thing and Kelli told me that she would handle it, for which I was very grateful. This experience taught me that sometimes other staff members can misunderstand what interns' skills and duties are, and

perhaps can take advantage of them. Thankfully, Kelli was a great advocate who really cared about my experience and she was very willing to help me.

Not everyone who works at the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum is a huge country music fan, nor do they know all of the stars; Kayla, an assistant curator, could not even identify June Carter in a group photograph. I loved country music as a little girl, but over the years, as the music grew more commercial, I found myself straying away from it. Apparently I am a proponent of the “neotraditional” country music movement, exemplified by artists like Clint Black, Reba McEntire, George Strait, Alan Jackson, and Patty Loveless, among others. Who knew my taste was actually an entire movement? One great side effect of my internship, watching tapes of music videos and being immersed in country music history, has been the rekindling of my love for the music I grew up with, and now I have made a concerted effort to obtain and listen to that music regularly once more. The tagline on the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum medallion logo is “Honor Thy Music,” and that is exactly what I have begun doing again thanks to my experiences as an intern.

My internship was overall an absolute pleasure and I am so glad that I was able to have this opportunity. I hope others in the Baylor museum studies graduate program might consider an internship with them in the future, because the museum really values the interns and the work they do. Interns are also often fortunate to find other opportunities with the museum as far as employment goes; I have been hired full-time at the museum store with offers of future advancement, and I am not the only intern to be hired. The CMHFM feels like a family, and they seem to want to keep the family

members together and working as long as they can. I cannot wait to start a new chapter with them, and I cannot remember a more productive summer.