

Spotlight on Music Collections: Lowell Lybarger

Lowell Lybarger, PhD is Media Librarian at Arkansas Tech University in Russellville, Arkansas. He coordinates the on-campus Media Lab, teaches courses on production, and has devoted years to archiving historical recordings from the Arkansas Tech University Music Department. Dr. Lybarger is also an active electronic music creator. In June 2025, he sat down with Phoebe Robertson, reviews editor for CAML Review and Assistant Professor of Music at Arkansas Tech University, for this interview. Their conversation took place in ATU's Ross Pendergraft Library & Technology Center.

Spotlight on Music Collections aims to profile interesting or unique music collections and archives in Canada through the voices of those who work with them. If you have a suggestion for a collection or individual to be featured in a future edition of this column, please email: camlreview@caml-acbm.org.

PR: Thank you so much for taking the time to share your experiences, Lowell. Could you begin by speaking about your early musical and personal influences -- some of the pivotal moments in your life?

LL: My parents were Presbyterian missionaries in Lahore, Pakistan, where I was born. The Presbyterian Church at the time was starting to realize the long-term colonial impact of that work, and that already started giving me an international consciousness. When I was five, my parents moved back to the United States and they intentionally wanted to live in an integrated neighbourhood. And so we lived in a predominantly black American neighbourhood in the 1970s. I ended up living in a number of places throughout the United States, and I didn't have a geographic identity where I felt like, "here's home." Ohio would be the closest thing because of my ancestors.

I went to Baldwin Wallace Music Conservatory, and I majored in music so I wouldn't have to write a research paper [laughs]. My brother and sister went to a really cool liberal arts place called Earlham College in Indiana, and they would talk about all this great stuff in family conversations, and that really made me want to get more of a liberal arts education. I eventually went to Rutgers University and majored in anthropology, but I almost had a music major as well, from all the previous coursework. I learned from some great people there, including William K. Powers, who was an anthropologist of music at Rutgers University specializing in Native American music, especially that of the Lakota Sioux Pine Ridge Reservation, and I got all kinds of other courses that were taught in different departments at that very large university. I took courses in country music, Jewish music—



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everything I could possibly find. We had Amiri Baraka at that time, who was a super famous writer who wrote *Blues People*. And then I knew I just wanted to become an ethnomusicologist. And so I went to the University of Washington and got into the ethnomusicology program there, which was very anthropologically oriented. Ethnomusicology has two main roots: traditional musicology and anthropology. And so this was very anthropologically focused and some of the theory I got was critical theory. And we're talking about 30 years ago. I can't believe it.

So then I thought, okay, that's going to be it. I'm going to go to library school. Then I got in touch with this scholar who was a specialist in the musical instrument that I was studying, called the tabla. And he told me: "You've done all this research from Pakistan, you've got to do something with it." And that had an influence on me. And so I went off and did a PhD. I applied to three PhD programs. They were all in Canada because I was like, "I want to experience Canada." Then I was in this incredible city, Toronto. It just looked awesome.

PR: I was born in Toronto, not raised there for very long, but both my parents are native Torontonians. For you, as someone who had all of these influences growing up that were so fascinating—being born in Pakistan, having that integrated classroom—what was your experience of what we would call in Canada the cultural mosaic, as opposed to the American metaphor of the "melting pot"?

LL: Well, I thrived in it. The whole world was there. It was just a massive playground for experiencing different cultures. I was mainly focused on the South Asian cultures there, and Toronto was even large enough to have multiple tabla players who were really good. And so, you know, outside of South Asia, India, Pakistan, mainly India, but the standards of tabla playing could perhaps only be matched in New York City or the Bay Area. The whole melting pot thing is so important because I feel like Canada does a better job trying to deal with its colonial past.



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I had a really good experience at the University of Toronto. The ethnomusicology program wasn't as developed as it is now; it was just getting started, and I was one of the first students. My advisor, James Kippen, was just amazing. The city of Toronto was this great laboratory for the music that I was studying, so one of the areas of my ethnographic research was Toronto itself, because you already had such a giant music scene for Indian classical music.

PR: How did you transition into librarianship after your PhD in your current role as a media librarian at Arkansas Tech University?

LL: After I got my degree, which took so much effort because of my neurodivergence with dyslexia, I kind of burned out. And so I was approached by my connections in Lahore because someone asked me if I would come to the National College of Arts while they were setting up a musicology

program. And so I decided, “Yeah, why not? I’ll work in Pakistan and teach ethnomusicology, to some extent.” They don’t like the word ethnomusicology. They ask, “Why isn’t our ethnomusicology just a musicology?” I taught some classes, including sort of library stuff there. I wasn’t sure whether I wanted to stay in Pakistan due to political instability. I have a very good friend who’s Canadian of Pakistani background, and we did a lot of wedding gigs on sitar and tabla together. He told me: “Lowell, you may not want to stay in Pakistan. You got to get out.”

I had been thinking about a career shift from life as an ethnomusicologist. I knew I wanted to become a librarian to work in the practical rather than the theoretical. I went back to library school at the Kent State School of Library and Information Science in Columbus, Ohio. Near Columbus is the city of Dublin, and the librarians will know that OCLC is located in Dublin. I got to tour the OCLC facilities, and I even got some classes with some of the people who worked there, including the metadata librarian Marcia Zeng. I thought it was pretty incredible. I started putting in applications for library jobs, including the job at Arkansas Tech University. I was offered the position at Tech before I had reached home in Columbus, Ohio after the interview.

PR: I want to pick up on what you said about your colleagues at the National College of Arts in Pakistan and their feelings about the word “ethnomusicology.” As someone who has close ties to South Asian culture, what are the limitations you feel that term creates?

LL: Going back to my days at University of Washington, I studied all this post-colonial theory because I was doing South Asian studies. Some of them called it Subaltern Theory. We already had an awareness that the term “world music” is an absurd term. It’s just so ridiculous when you begin to think about it, even in a purely textual sense outside of context. So think of its binary opposition in a Derridean sense. Binaries are not neutral, there’s usually hierarchy involved, between “metropole music” and the periphery: “world music.” And so I wrote in this paper I started working on that perhaps one opposite would be “unworldly music,” which could resemble “the transcendent ideals often associated with absolute music: that is, music perceived as existing beyond historical, social, or cultural context, a notion that denies the humanly organized contextual nature of sound.” So I define world music from the concept of the perspective of the colonial gaze. There’s a brilliant article called “A Sweet Lullaby for World Music” that I read when I was in Toronto and I followed the renowned scholar, Stephen Feld, who worked among the Kaluli in Papua New Guinea. He wrote a book called *Sound and Sentiment* and was deeply influenced by R. Murray Schafer. He talks about “world music” in that, and that’s where I got some of my concepts. Some of the commercial labels for music just stop making sense because of globalized information flows. That’s why this article is so important; he wrote this 25 years ago and it’s still relevant today in terms of the way he talks about globalization and social identities and informationscapes. That’s why I think we need to have an integrated holistic musicology.

PR: Can we talk about your experience in archival work and how you feel it supports some of the ideas that you’ve talked about and the different moments in your musical path?

LL: Sure. I had been working on helping to digitize a collection when I was in Toronto, and I didn't really have formal training. And at that time, the professional archivists hadn't even come up with the standards they have now, but they were in the process of really creating them. And so, obviously, I would have done things differently had I gotten formal training, but that sort of started my interest in and experience with digital audio and converting things from analogue to digital. That work was on a collection of Hindustani art music in Toronto with a private patron, not at the university, but I then got interested in that kind of thing and I went back to library school after I had graduated. I worked on that collection while I was still a doctoral student at U of T, and then graduated, went to Pakistan for a year, and I helped set up their studio there, to some extent.

My former MA advisor, who was a specialist in the music of Afghanistan—Hiromi Lorraine Sakata—approached me to be the technician to set up the digitization program at Radio Television Afghanistan in Kabul. Before I had done that, I had gotten formal training as part of my internship practicum in librarianship. So I had to teach people there; I even taught some people how to use a computer in addition to what would be the digitization process. And so that's when I really got into digital audio, and audio archiving, and that sort of thing. And then I came here in 2007, and the previous music librarian had been from Canada, also from the University of Toronto.

PR: A little Canadian pipeline [laughs].

LL: It's so strange, yeah! There were a bunch of reel-to-reel recordings, and I asked her, “What is this?” She said, “Well, we haven't gotten around to it, but these are some of the music department's recordings.” It's almost like that found me. After initially digitizing a few recordings, I waited until Tech could fund equipment to meet the audio standards for archival digitization and preservation. Fast-forward to the beginning of the pandemic in 2020, and the ATU Music Department Digitization Project commenced. We completed the entire project within two to three years, and the technology was much more accessible by that point than when I first arrived here in 2007. I had three outstanding music majors who were so incredible, but there was a lot of metadata not available, so we just had to figure that stuff out. I looked at it as a way I could serve the university. I came to appreciate what the wind ensemble tradition brings at this institution where it's a really long and quite fascinating history of a “who's who” of the major players who all came here. And then outside of the wind ensemble, we even had others, like Stravinsky's son came and did a piano recital here. And more recently, there's a lot of emphasis here in terms of new works by living composers being performed here. And there's something beautiful about that.

PR: You mentioned how helpful that group of music majors were in digitizing recordings. Could you tell us a little bit about the suite of rooms you and I are currently sitting in, and what you are able to offer the students at our institution in this suite?

LL: In 1999 when this library was built, they created this music lab with synthesizers, electronic music creation software, and video creation software. But it was really clear in the mid-2010s that one of the biggest things that people wanted to do was record their voice. A library is agnostic; we

are available to everyone. We are “access to information,” and now we're “access to tools for creating information” (in this case, “information” would be digital music or a podcast). A lot of people in the libraries know that this shift is what's happening now.

We have the VR video lab, which is a green screen room—very modest, but it's available to everyone. If you want to learn how to use a green screen, you have the chroma keying. That's what I feel a library is: we are a meeting place for so many different ideas and access to information.

There's a definite Canadian mark on sound studies, and it's huge. I got to meet Paul Th  berge when I was a graduate student in Toronto, and it's incredible because 22 years ago he talked about this whole revolution of the “bedroom producer.” And we now have platforms where you can just instantly publish music. And so this is where we're at now in a huge way.

PR: Thank you so much for sharing your time so generously. Any concluding thoughts?

LL: Ultimately, we're entering not an ‘identity-less’ world, but one of ‘multiple identities.’ And so in terms of the age we're living in now, the informationscapes and mediascapes are just... it's so hard to wrap your head around. But as a former ethnomusicologist who became a librarian, I've always had that critical concept of the marginality of the stuff that I have done. Working with these archival collections, getting back into Western art music, I've begun to remember the music I was deeply involved in when I was in my teens and when I initially went to music conservatory before I discovered the music of South Asia. That's a deep part of who I am and it kind of healed me in a way. I just came to appreciate how much I build my identity on the thing that I'm opposed to. That whole binary dynamic is the entire political landscape right now. That's why you need to channel Hildegard von Bingen the mystic.