The Morris E. Dry Collection of American Popular Music: A Personal Recollection

The Morris E. Dry Collection became the property of the American Music Research Center (AMRC) in 1991, a gift from his daughters, Nancy Dry Sumner of Scottsdale, Arizona, and Susan Dry Boynton of Pottersville, New Jersey. The gift was made following Mr. Dry's death in 1990 at the age of 94. It was his intention that his Collection be placed in a facility where it could be used for research and study; with its emphasis on all types of American music, the AMRC has proven to be an ideal repository in which the Collection is being used according to Mr. Dry's wishes. He wanted it to be available to students of all sorts—graduates, undergraduates and the public at large—under suitable protection and with assurances that it would be kept intact. These were forthcoming, and the gift was duly made. This year marks the fifth anniversary of this donation, and the Dry Collection has proven to be one of the most frequently used of the several musical collections in the AMRC. This article will describe some of the interesting aspects of the Collection and will explore its origin and development into an accumulation of important popular sheet music covering some two hundred years of American history.

The Collection contains over twenty thousand pieces of sheet music: mostly popular songs, but including several hundred popular instrumental pieces. The songs range in date from approximately 1750 to 1950 and are, by and large, in very good condition. If a song were considered popular in its day, it is likely to be found in the Collection.

The Dry Collection is housed in an area of the University of Colorado Music Library at Boulder that is shared by several other donations. The songs and instrumental pieces in the Dry Collection are arranged alphabetically by title, placed in folders with four or five dozen songs to a folder. The folders are housed in sixty-four protective boxes arranged on approximately one hundred feet of special shelving, which allows the individual boxes to be safely and accessibly stored. The boxes are plainly labeled with the name of the collection and alphabetical references to the song titles in each box. They are very easy to use.

Besides being a good historical representation of popular music, the Dry Collection has other attractive features. Many first editions of songs are included, by composers such as Stephen Foster, whose work often went to more
than one printing. Nearly six hundred of Irving Berlin's songs are there. Irving Berlin himself once remarked to Mr. Dry that the Dry Collection had more examples of his work than even he, the composer, did. Rare old sheets are also in the Collection, including early editions of "Yankee Doodle" and "The Star-Spangled Banner," with markings in Mr. Dry's handwriting noting other pertinent details of its publication.¹

Morris Dry grew up in the small town of Mexico, Missouri around the turn of the century. By his own admission, his early musical experience consisted almost exclusively of hearing relatives and neighbors singing the hymns and popular songs of the day (1905 to 1912).² As he grew older, he too sang these songs, at home and school as well as at community shows, parties, and picnics. He also took up the trombone, which he played with some skill in his high school band and with pickup groups at the University of Missouri.

Concerts were few and radio broadcasts nonexistent in rural Missouri in the early 1900s. Classical music simply wasn't heard out there in the country. Mr. Dry loved music, but his repertory in those days was restricted to the hymns of his childhood and the popular songs of the day by composers such as Westendorf, Harris, Dresser, Shields & Evans, and the Von Tilzers.

Mr. Dry graduated from the University of Missouri Phi Beta Kappa in 1917 and was president of his class. He enlisted in the Navy and spent World War I at Pensacola Naval Air Station teaching cadets to fly and navigate those rickety old seaplanes that we marvel at in museums today. He received his degree from Harvard Law School in 1923 and became an associate at the New York firm of Cadwallader, Wickersham and Taft. After a few years he left to form his own law firm, Arthur, Dry and Dole. The firm specialized in corporate law, which gave Mr. Dry plenty of work to do in the turbulent twenties and thirties. Later he made his own specialty in what he called "the mysterious and arbitrary world of antitrust law," and he was associated with many landmark antitrust cases when this body of law was being interpreted in the courts during the 1950s.³ He was appointed General Counsel of the U. S. Rubber Company (later Uniroyal) and served in that capacity until his retirement in 1961.

In 1934 Mr. Dry married Barbara Lee Johnson from his hometown of Mexico, Missouri. An individual of some achievement herself, she had graduated from Smith College and found employment briefly in Europe. While there, she earned a diploma from the Ecole de Cuisine du "Cordon Bleu" in Paris. Several years in New York followed where she and Mr. Dry became reacquainted and finally married. These were not ignorant country folk by any means. They were fully familiar with the cultural opportunities afforded by living in New York. Two daughters were born during the next six years, and Mr. and Mrs. Dry made sure that Nancy and Susan were provided with instruction in the arts along with their regular schooling.

All leisure time was not spent with beaux-arts and belles-lettres, however. Often Mr. and Mrs. Dry would recall the music of their early days,
Figure 1. Morris Dry relaxing at home, c. 1955.
fondly singing the good old songs together. But, as he put it, "memory gaps" appeared in their recollection of the words, and he set out to remedy these gaps by acquiring copies of sheet music to the old songs.

During the mid-thirties, the worst years of the Great Depression, families were selling valuable and antiques for whatever they would bring. Sheet music from past generations found its way into secondhand book shops, perhaps nowhere in such profusion as in New York City. When Mr. Dry first went looking for the old songs, he found a treasure trove; not only the songs he was seeking, but others from long ago were available for sale. Many of these song sheets had been privately bound in homemade anthologies. These volumes were broken up for ease of sale of the individual songs, and the sheets were in remarkably good condition.4 Mr. Dry saw an opportunity here, not simply to locate a few missing lyrics to familiar songs, but to acquire good quality sheet music scores of many well-known American songs. He began to assemble a "Five Foot Shelf of American Popular Songs" which actually was about all the room he could spare in his New York apartment. (He tried to store some duplicate copies of sheet music in a barn loft on his New Jersey farm, but mice soon made short work of it. Eventually he and his family moved into a much more spacious apartment.)

Several circumstances led to the idea of developing a comprehensive collection of popular sheet music, but perhaps most important was his wide circle of friends among sheet-music dealers and secondhand-book sellers. Through these contacts Mr. Dry began to accumulate what he considered the best songs. The dealer he worked with most often, W. Lloyd Keepers of New York, had been collecting popular sheet music for many years, and also sold old sheets to other collectors. (He also repaired damaged sheet music, and many of the sheets in the Dry Collection show evidence of his meticulous work.) Mr. Dry became good friends with Keeper, and showed him many kindnesses, both personal and professional, over the years.5 Among the sheet music collectors who lived and worked in the New York City area at this time, James Fuld, Lester Levy, Elliott Shapiro, and Harry Dichter are well known for the books and articles they wrote about their avocation. Other collectors known to Mr. Dry included Richard Townsend, Malcolm Stone, Abbe Niles, Fletcher Hodges, and Alden Condict. This group made up an informal confraternity of sheet music collectors and regularly met at members' homes or apartments to swap sheets and talk about the business.6

Sheet music collectors pursued different goals. Some of them amassed large quantities of songs; others sought only rare editions or good examples of very old music from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Since space was limited, Mr. Dry had to be selective and discriminating in choosing music for his Collection. Over the years his objective remained the same: to seek out sheets in good condition of songs that had been popular in their day or were "standards," having remained in the public consciousness over the years.
Figure 2. Part of "The Anacreontic Song" (c. 1780), a tune that was eventually matched to Francis Scott Key's poem, "The Star-Spangled Banner." This is one of the rarest items in the Dry Collection.
He was also drawn to good examples of the songwriter’s art: well-crafted songs with memorable melodies and lyrics which deftly described a story or situation without undue emotional involvement, yet which preserved and intensified feelings universally felt by the song’s audience. By the late 1930s, Mr. Dry had brought the developing conception of his music collection into focus. The main purpose of the collection, he said, “was to provide a broad sampling of the music that had been the most popular and enduring, and to demonstrate the ways in which these songs reflect the attitudes, views, and spirit of our society over the years.”

This ambition signaled a giant step forward. No longer confined to his original purposes of finding the words to familiar old songs or collecting good examples of songs that were well known in their day and age, Mr. Dry now saw his collection as a means of interpreting American manners and mores over the years. It occurred to him that the songs of a country were probably a reliable indicator of its basic nature. “Tell me what a country sings,” he suggested, “and I can tell you what it is like,” echoing a sentiment that goes back at least to the ancient Greeks. He became increasingly fascinated by the often subtle ways in which popular songs reflect the spirit of their times.

He saw in each song a specific subject of some kind: automobiles, baseball games, money, Indians, or big cities were among the more concrete. Songs might portray famous individuals or describe noteworthy events. Frequently a song concerned itself with love or other aspects of human behavior. From these observations, Mr. Dry developed a scheme of categorizing songs so that they could be grouped with others having similar subjects, not an original idea but one he carried through with admirable thoroughness. He began by developing a small list of 150 song subjects, but soon realized that the task of establishing all the possible subject subcategories and listing the songs under them was enormous compared to completing the simple card title index he had been using. In the summer of 1988 he sought my help.

I had become acquainted with Mr. Dry some thirty years earlier. His daughter Nancy had studied piano with my father at Smith College, and she and I frequently played two-piano music. We used to take this music to the Dry farm in New Jersey where the family gathered on weekends, and doubled up on the old upright piano. Mr. Dry loved nothing better than to pull songs out of his Collection for us to play. Seizing his trombone, he would lead us in extra choruses to the applause of the family perched on the stairs in the front hall next to the piano. After being apart for many years, he and I became reacquainted through Nancy’s persistent efforts, and having lost none of its warmth and cordiality, our association took up right from where it had left off.

Mrs. Dry had died in 1968, and Mr. Dry, who was already retired, moved out of the New York apartment to reside permanently at the farm in Blairstown, New Jersey. He moved his Collection in its entirety to the farm, doing some remodeling of the old farmhouse to accommodate his study and a
storage area for the Collection. He married Marion Cox, an old family friend, in 1969 and remained at the farm for the rest of his life.

When Mr. Dry wrote to me in June 1988 about cataloging the songs, he hadn’t completely envisioned the extent of the project, as is evident from the wording of his request:

Please tell me—yes or no—whether or not you have the time and machinery and access to the materials necessary for setting up the forms on which to record the names of the songs under separate categories. I do not have these things for the best results.

We developed a catalog to include some six hundred subject categories, a number which neither of us could have foreseen from these humble beginnings.

The songs were stored in the large manila folders in which they are found today, and were kept in a closet near Mr. Dry’s study. I would pull a folder from the closet shelf and place it in front of him while he sat at his large desk. He would gaze fondly at the first song’s cover and open it. I read the lyrics over his shoulder out loud because his eyesight was poor, usually just the first verse and the chorus. If a song were telling a story, I would read the other verses, especially if it had a surprise ending. He would then think for a moment and tell me what the applicable categories were. He did this with remarkable mental agility, only rarely missing a category in which the song belonged. For instance, the song “Wait Till the Sun Shines, Nellie” (Sterling and Von Tilzer, 1905) belongs in the following subject categories: Weather, Patience, Girls’ Names, Cheerful Songs, Songs about Happiness, Love by Ourselves Alone, and Old-Fashioned Love. I would enter the song under each of the selected subject categories in the looseleaf notebooks while Mr. Dry turned to the next song in the folder. Every now and then he would have me play a familiar song on the piano, but by and large he was interested chiefly in the song’s lyrics and their meaning.

Some of the earlier songs in the Collection have an opacity which makes them difficult to categorize into the subjects that we had developed principally by reference to later songs. Their incomprehensibility lies more in their complex rhetoric than in their humor. The following lyric is an example:

When shall thy dawn sweet peace return
The milder passions leading
And love and duty cease to mourn
The rights of virtue pleading.
Oh happy, happy days advance
The ills of life beguiling;
Awake the rural song and dance
While sunny hills look smiling.

“When Shall Thy Dawn Sweet Peace Return” (Gulfert, 1814)
Even as we proceeded to work our way through the later songs, however, once in a while we encountered a lyric the meaning of which was obscure. Several meanings occurred to us, but no single clear one stood out. A nonsense song which placed poetic devices, such as alliteration and internal rhyming, over meaning or in which many of the lines were non sequiturs were finally placed in the category, “Incomprehensible Lyrics.”

Almost every other song in the Collection appeared to be about love. Since no two love songs are exactly the same, we proceeded to put them into categories also. The love categories eventually expanded to nearly two hundred (see Table B). Establishing the distinctions among various kinds of love required deliberation and discussion. I often smile at the picture of the two of us earnestly talking over aspects of romantic love, like two gray-haired Renaissance poets.

We worked for a period of two-and-a-half years, getting together almost every weekend at “the shirt factory” (Mr. Dry’s humorous name for the catalog project suggesting the pleasant drudgery and the long hours we spent at it). We’d work right through the day and often into the evening. Holidays were special because they gave us an extra day or two. We made very good progress, although we never established any kind of deadline for the completion of the project.

Mr. Dry’s family wholeheartedly supported the endeavor. They could see that it was important for him to have a long-range purpose during his advanced years. They were accustomed to his single-minded devotion to the job at hand, having seen it before during years of law practice and as he applied himself to various projects around his beloved farm. Often his daughters and their families gathered there—Nancy during visits from California and Susan from her own farm just an hour away—to produce festive dinners. Mr. Dry loved these occasions with his daughters, their husbands and his grandchildren, and would regale us with stories and humorous verse. If his doctor allowed it, he’d even celebrate with a glass of wine.

The song subject catalog was Mr. Dry’s last project. It concluded a plan in which he had concerned himself with meanings and categories of these meanings. It was almost finished when he died suddenly a few days before Christmas 1990. Nancy and I completed it, using the same criteria that he had established, so that its continuity remains unbroken. The catalog fills three large looseleaf notebooks with a total of some fifteen hundred pages. The first appendix to this article (Table A) is a listing of the six hundred odd subject categories, the fruit of this last effort.

Mr. Dry’s memory remained sharp until the very end. In addition to his prowess at reciting lengthy sections of poetry, he often recalled events from long ago. One particular boyhood memory was vivid. In 1911 a certain Cal Rodgers accepted a challenge from the Hearst newspaper chain to fly across the country in less than thirty days. He made the trip, although not within the deadline, but much interest was generated in the flight nonetheless. The sponsors
Figure 3. A cover sheet for one of the hundreds of humorous Tin Pan Alley songs in the Dry Collection, "If You Talk in Your Sleep. Don't Mention My Name" (1919).
of the flight painted the name of their product, a drink concoction called "Vin Fiz," on Rodgers' plane, and in due course it landed in Mexico, Missouri, where the fifteen-year-old Morris watched and marveled. Almost fourscore years later, Mr. Dry still sharply remembered every detail. On another occasion, a dozen years before his marriage, he told of taking young ladies from out of town to a very popular and sentimental musical show in New York called "Maytime." He reminisced with great humor about running menial errands for the senior law partners while he was a young associate, wondering all the while if this activity were the intended use for a hard-earned degree from Harvard Law School.

Mr. Dry was always jolly and outgoing with everybody. His sense of humor was understated, although he could make us laugh at any time. I never heard him curse or speak a mean word. When going from one room to another, he always stood back, guiding me or his other guests into the room first, before entering it himself. His failing eyesight did not alter his courteous demeanor and his eyes still sparkled with good humor and genuine interest in the rest of us. He was a courtly gentleman who not only saw to the comfort of his guests, but made them feel important. Even while doing an occasional chore around the farm, I always felt that I was his guest and he was thinking about my welfare. His was an old-fashioned Midwestern hospitality writ large, and all of us—family and friends—enjoyed every minute of it.

Mr. Dry thought a great deal about finding a home for his Collection after his death. A member of the Sonneck Society for American music, he read in its bulletin an article about the newly established American Music Research Center at the University of Colorado, Boulder. Mr. Dry was impressed by the aims of the AMRC and he wrote to its director, William Kearns, asking him about the possibility of placing his Collection there for the Center's use in research and study. Their correspondence on the subject began during the early fall of 1990. Soon after, Mr. Dry traveled to California for medical reasons, staying at the home of his daughter Nancy in San Mateo. While there he met Nancy's friend and associate, Judy Waterman, a University of Colorado alumna and enthusiastic supporter of the College of Music.° Judy told him all about the College and her musical experience there. She knew Dr. Kearns and was able to answer Mr. Dry's questions about the AMRC and put his mind at ease. He had not yet met Kearns or any University officials, nor had he visited the school. Sadly, his death a few weeks later precluded his ever doing so. Thus Judy Waterman's support at this time was an influential factor in Mr. Dry's desire to make the University of Colorado the repository of his music.

The University got more than it bargained for when it received the Morris E. Dry Collection of American Popular Music. Both daughters, Nancy and Susan, felt that the occasion called for something more lively than a mere academic exercise. They conceived a musical show in honor of their father with music from the Collection performed by a troupe of players. Enlisting Bill
Kearns’s enthusiastic support, Nancy put together a two-hour show entitled “Say It With Music.” She pored over her father’s Collection which had recently been installed in Boulder, selecting about seventy songs that found their way into the show, some in their entirety, others as bits and pieces in a number of medleys. Susan prepared the artwork for the show’s printed program. Their cousin Marion Dry, a contralto renowned for her operatic performances, agreed to sing with the troupe proving equally adept at performing popular songs. Finally, Nancy enlisted Judy Waterman, an experienced singer and dancer, to return to the University of Colorado and help put on the show. With myself as narrator, the program took place at Old Main Chapel on March 13, 1992. The performance was so well received that Nancy, Susan, Judy, and Marion, and yet another musical cousin, Greg Farrell, staged two more similar shows in Burlingame, California, later in 1992 and 1994. Nancy wrote all the arrangements and medleys, playing them expertly on the piano as accompaniment to Marion, Judy, and Greg’s fine singing.

Figure 4. Program cover for “Say It With Music” designed by Susan Dry Boynton
Mr. Dry’s musical legacy seems to become more extensive and far-reaching as each year passes. The influence of his memory animates all of us who knew him, both personally and by reputation. His love for American popular songs embraces the differences among the more modern forms of popular music and those of Tin Pan Alley, to the extent that we feel encouraged to study them all without any particular prejudice in favor of one or the other. Careful scrutiny of the wide variety of songs in the Collection helps us to understand how the evolution of later forms of popular music came about, and to observe the wholeness of the American popular music enterprise. The assembly of a collection so painstakingly selected for the quality and durability of its songs, and so thoroughly catalogued and cross-referenced, required a major portion of Mr. Dry’s life and thought, and deserves our recognition for the excellent piece of work that it is.

NOTES

1 The information on editions and printings came from the sales prospectus of the dealer who sold the sheet to Mr. Dry. Other prospectuses are found in the Collection most often next to the older sheets.

2 Noted journalist of this period, Mark Sullivan, has commented on such musical activities: “The musical experience of the average American between 1900 and the Great War was limited almost exclusively to popular songs together with hymns which . . . were as familiar as secular airs. As late as the 1890s, hymns were frequently sung under circumstances having no especial religious connotation and with no religious intention—merely as the vocal expression that came first to the mind of a person or a group when in one of several moods. An ordinary social gathering or a picnic, or young folks on a moonlight straw-ride, would sing familiar hymns as readily as ‘Oh Don’t You Remember Sweet Alice,’ ‘Ben Bolt’ or ‘Annie Laurie.’ . . . A farmer in the fields or a woman in the kitchen or at the sewing machine would express a mood of contentment or of busyness having no religious connection with ‘Rock of Ages’ or ‘Nearer My God To Thee’ or ‘Bringing in the Sheaves’ or ‘Work for the Night is Coming.’” After about 1900, hymn singing, while still an important and beloved part of the musical life of the people, came more and more to be confined to churches and religious gatherings.” Our Times: The United States 1900-1925, vol. 3, Pre-War America (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1930), 346, n. 15.

3 The firm was deeply involved in the DuPont-General Motors antitrust case during the late 1950s, which tested the extent to which ownership of other companies’ securities by a corporation affects its business decisions. Mr. Dry spent several years on this case.

4 According to D. W. Krummel, “The practice of recent collectors and librarians of disbinding has destroyed much of the evidence of provenance and of tastes in collecting and in music, but the sewing holes and binder’s glue on the vast majority of the extant copies of early sheet music remind us of a practice that has assured the survival of copies that otherwise today would likely have been lost.” Bibliographical Handbook of American Music (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 161.

5 Krummel lists Keepers among “prominent early sheet music aficionados.” Ibid., 162.

6 The AMRC files on Morris Dry contain an invitation card to such a meeting at Mr. Dry’s apartment on 10 April 1960. It is autographed by Sigmund Spaeth, Jim Fuld, R. E. Townsend, A. S. Condict, Sy Seidman, W. L. Keepers, Frank Gettys, Gerard McDonald, Harry Richter, Fletcher Hodges Jr., Saul Starr, and Morris Dry.

7 Prospectus, Morris Dry file, AMRC.

8 Letter from Mr. Dry to the writer, 30 March 1990. In it he describes his initial meeting with Judy Waterman, how pleasant she was, and how she described the School and Dr. Kearns’s involvement as “head of the popular music department [sic].”
TABLE A
GENERAL SUBJECT CATEGORIES IN THE
MORRIS E. DRY COLLECTION

The current Dry catalog also includes a number of composer, performer and lyricist headings as well as a handful of single-item and cross-reference categories, which are not listed below.

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COUNTRY & WESTERN
COURAGE
CULTURAL URBANIZATION
CYNICISM & SKEPTICISM
DADDY SONGS
DANCES
DANCING
DANDIES & SWELLS
DAYDREAMING
DAYS OF THE WEEK
DEATHBED SONGS
DECEPTION
DEEP BASS SONGS
DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS
DEPARTING SOLDIERS
DEPRESSION, THE GREAT
DEsertION
DESPAIR & SORROW
DIRGES
DISAPPOINTMENT
DIXIE & THE SOUTH
DOWN TO EARTH
DREAM & REVERIES
DRINKERS, TIPPLERS
DRINKING SONGS
DRINKING TO EXCESS
DRUGS
DUPED & CONNED
DUTY & COUNTRY
ELEGIES & LAMENTATIONS
ENGLISH MUSIC HALL SONGS
ENTERTAINMENT
ESCAPE FROM NEW YORK/WORK
ETHNIC SONGS
EXTRAVAGANCE
FACIAL EXPRESSION
FADS & CRAZES
FAIRY TALES
FAIRS & EXPOSITIONS
FAKES & FAKERY
FALLEN & DISGRACED
FAMILY SINGERS
FAMILY TIES & AFFECTION
FAMOUS NAMES
FAMOUS & FAMILIAR PLACES
FANCY & MAKE BELIEVE
FANTASIES & APPARITIONS
FEAR
FEMINISM & WOMEN’S RIGHTS
FESTIVE EVENTS
FLAPPER SONGS
FLOWERS & FRUIT
FOLK SONGS
FOOD & DRINK
FOREBODING
FOREIGN LANGUAGES
FOREIGN PLACES
FOUR-FLUSHERS
FRATERNAL SOCIETIES
FRIENDSHIP
FRONTIERSMEN
FRUSTRATION & FUTILITY
FURNITURE
GAIETY & JOVIALITY
GAMBLING
GAMES AND PASTIMES
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HAPPINESS
HAPPINESS THROUGH WORK
HARLEM LIFE
HAUNTING TUNES
HAWAIIAN SONGS
HIGH SOCIETY
HILLBILLY SONGS
HISTORIC EVENTS
HISTORIC PLACES
HOBO SONGS
HOLIDAY SONGS
HOME: PLEASURES
& COMFORTS
HOMEBODY
HOME & COMMUNITY
HOME FURNISHINGS
HOME, KEEPING WARM FOR
ABSENT ONE
HOME & PLANTATION
HOME: ROOTS & NOSTALGIA
HOMETOWN SONGS
HORSE RACING
HUMOR & SATIRE
HUNTING SONGS
IGNORED
IMMIGRANT SONGS
INDIFFERENCE OF OTHERS
INFANTS
INSECTS
INVENTIONS
IRISH ETHNIC
ITALIAN ETHNIC
JAILBIRDS
JAPANESE ETHNIC
JAZZ
JEWELRY
JEWISH ETHNIC
JUNGLE & AFRICAN SONGS
KLEPTOMANIA
KISSING & ITS EFFECTS
KOREAN WAR
LACK OF SELF-ESTEEM
LADIES OF THE EVENING
LANDLORD & TENANT
LANGUAGE & SLANG
LAVISH LIVING
LAW ENFORCEMENT
LAZINESS
LETTERS
LIFE, ITS RIGOR
AND PLEASURES
LIFE STYLE
LIFE UPON THE STAGE
LIGHT-HEARTED
LIGHT HOUSES
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