**Missing The Music**

**By Frances Barrett, Keerthi Chandrashekar & Hooper Schultz**

**Introduction**

On the Oxford Visitor Center’s website, Oxford is described as the “Cultural Mecca of the South.” [[1]](#footnote-1) Visitoxfordms.com, the tourism board’s entrance page, has an entire standalone “Music Scene” section. This page carries the buoyant first sentence: “Oxford culture is entwined with music and it is difficult to find a day of the week, bar Sunday, where live music is not being performed on the square or nearby. Whether it’s one of the many varied local acts performing, a band coming through on tour or an artist in residence while they record at the famed Sweet Tea Records, the eclectic sounds of Oxford’s Music Scene are sure to draw you in.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Clearly, Oxford, as a town, finds economic value in its perception as a cultural lynchpin of the region. The self-professed mystique of Oxford’s famed artistic and musical community remains a draw today for tourists and students alike who throng to the town from across the Southeast and the nation.

Unfortunately, this optimistic outlook on the musical environs of the home of the University of Mississippi may obscure a more complicated reality. If a vibrant music scene of live shows and active musicians exists in Oxford, it is not easy to locate. Currently, there are regularly scheduled musical acts at two venues in Oxford’s downtown, Proud Larry’s and The Lyric. On nights when those venues are not hosting traveling bands or local musicians, there is no live music is to be had. Gone are the Hoka and the Jubilee of the past. The Oxford landscape shows newly erected apartment buildings and condominiums rather than new stages.

The Sweet Tea Records mentioned in the blurb from Oxford’s tourist site moved to Los Angeles around 2013. It has since rebranded itself as dtla records.[[3]](#footnote-3) Despite this, Sweet Tea and another recording studio, The Lip, remain vital to the branding of Oxford as a music-centered town. The city once boasted a variety of music venues and had a vibrant scene as described by multiple residents. Historical markers such as the Mississippi Blues Trail weave through the county, pointing to a storied tradition of Hill Country Blues. Several recording studios have moved to cheaper locales such as Water Valley as property values have continued to climb in Oxford. Other underground spaces such as the Cats Purring Dude Ranch have also shuttered, leaving less opportunities for the local bands.

Throughout this project, we sought to understand the dissonance between the musicality promoted by the official Oxford brand and the dearth of music being performed in the various bars and restaurants that now line the Square around Oxford’s courthouse. While there were once a greater number of active music venues in the area, the number has slowly attrified. Individuals such as booking agent Lee Morgan actually moved to the area specifically for what was a vibrant music scene.[[4]](#footnote-4) However, this does not resonate with our research on the shape of the scene today. What are the economic and cultural forces that have shifted musicians away from the still-popular downtown, and where are they now performing, if at all?

**Methods**

For this project, we initially set out to explore the recent history of music venues in Oxford. The impetus behind the investigation was the question: where did all the music venues in Oxford go? All three of us, to varying degrees, had noticed that the live music offerings in town were far scarcer than media articles had led us to believe. Where was all the advertised live music? Why didn’t bands stop in Oxford on their tours? This led to the observation that there simply aren’t many spaces in Oxford catering to live music. We knew Oxford had been home to notable venue spaces like the Hoka, the Gin, and Cats Purring Dude Ranch, but those particular music-centric spaces were of the past. Our goal was to elicit the reasons for—what we perceived to be—the decline of Oxford’s public music scene.

For the purposes of this paper, we chose to define a music scene as all the factors related to the production and consumption of music in public secular spaces. A music scene, by this definition, includes the musicians themselves, audiences, the spaces where music is performed and heard, and related factors such as local policies that might encourage or discourage the utilization of visible public spaces for musical performances. In a town like Oxford, policies from both the city and the university become important given the intertwined relationship between Oxford and the University of Mississippi. We also chose to distinguish between public music venues such as restaurants and bars and private music venues such as DIY home venue spaces and fraternity house parties, as we felt lumping them together would be ignoring their dialectic relationship.

Given that we had only one semester to explore Oxford’s music scene and come up with a final product, we chose the following sources for our research based on availability and accessibility: local newspaper and magazine articles talking about Oxford’s music scene as a whole, and specific venues and archived interviews from the Field School for Cultural Documentation—North Mississippi Music Project. We also conducted in-depth interviews with Darren Grem, a history professor at the University of Mississippi who also writes and performs music locally; Scott Barretta, a sociology professor at the University of Mississippi and former editor of *Living Blues* magazine; and Ron Shapiro, an Oxonian businessman and music aficionado since the 1970s who has owned various establishments and venues through the years, including the Hoka from 1976 to 1996,. Scott Barretta and Ron Shapiro were interviewed together in one session as they both traded stories about the last 40 years in Oxford.

**Limitations**

A recurring theme that emerged in the interviews we conducted and the archived interviews we listened to was an overall sense of negative changes over time. We began to question whether Oxford’s music scene was “better” in the past or whether this is a perception shaped by the human instinct to view the past with an attitude of sentimentality. Throughout this project we have grappled with the question of how to account for nostalgia when creating academic work based on oral histories and first person accounts of lived experience.

Each of the three interviews we conducted provided a valuable, distinct perspective and memory of the Oxford music scene. However, our collection of interviews was a small sample size, too small to capture the multiplicity of experiences that undoubtedly exist within Oxford’s music scene. All of our interview subjects are white men who were born outside of the Oxford area. While each interview provided new perspectives and new stories, our small sample size of interview subjects were, by no fault of their own,unable to represent the complex story of the Oxford music scene that accounts for the inherent variety of experiences of any place, especially considering the ways in which all places are “uniquely situated in networks of global relations and cultural flows as well as embedded in accumulated local history and culture.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

Two of the three individuals we interviewed, Darren Grem and Scott Barretta, are professionally affiliated with the University of Mississippi. In fact, we knew both Darren and Scott through our shared connections to the university, reflecting our shared standpoint as University of Mississippi community members. This standpoint informed our entries into this academic work on and informal conversations about Oxford’s music scene. Similarly, it shapes our own experiences with the music scene as concert-goers and consumers of local music. Our affiliation with the university affects the ways that we interact with and understand the town of Oxford. One consequence of interviewing individuals who dedicate much of their time to academic thinking and scholarship is that their insights reflect their background knowledge of theory, history/southern studies, and scholarly thought. Their analytical perspectives were only further emphasized by these individuals’ personal and professional interests in music, history, and culture. Thus, these conversations were characterized by an analytical framework.

While our graduate student status at the university may have led us naturally to community members affiliated with the university, this same status may have created invisible barriers between us and community members of color and marginalized community members whose experiences would have provided new insights to our understanding of Oxford’s music scene. In particular, the university has a long, fraught relationship with race. From its diminutive ‘Ole Miss’ which harks back to antebellum times to its violent integration in 1962, the university has emerged in the national media because of the institution’s interconnectedness with white supremacy and investment in “Lost Cause” ideology. Thus, Oxford’s black community members (and the broader community of black Mississippians) have long held suspicion and caution of initiatives and people affiliated with the university.

The research we collected over the course of this semester was gendered; the interviews we conducted were with men. Thus, the image of the Oxford music scene we gathered through our interviews is from a male perspective. The stories we heard also centered largely around male musicians, business leaders, and community members. While we listened to an interview from the archives with former University of Mississippi student, Zoey McDonald, her voice is the only female perspective we directly called upon to this point. As she is the only woman whose voice we heard, we want to avoid tokenizing her experience as representative of all women’s experiences. The Field School for Cultural Documentary’s North Mississippi Project which is housed in UM’s digital archives has a more extensive collection of interviews of musicians in the area, however, there collection is still dominated by the voices of men. Out of the interviews collected for the Field School for Cultural Documentary’s North Mississippi Music Project, 14 out of 53 were women’s stories. At this point, we do not have enough information to deduce whether the gendered nature of these interviews reflects a broader reality of Oxford’s music scene.

To reiterate, the interview subjects of the interviews we conducted do not embody diverse lived experiences. All three are white men. If we continued our research on this subject, we would intentionally seek out voices of women and people of color whose perspectives are missing from our current data.

During this project, we were not able to bridge the gap between our connections to the town through the university and the community beyond the university. While to some extent, this reflects the reality of the complex, dynamic relationship between Oxford and UM, it is also a reflection of the project’s limited scope. The finite time, resources, and scale of our work for this course meant that we were not able to collect the diversity of thought, experience, and embodied identity in the interviews we conducted for this project as we would have liked. As a result, we hope that our work can serve as a starting point for future scholars, rather than a finished history or archivalization of Oxford’s music scene. As we acknowledge our project’s limitations, we become increasingly aware of gaps in the archival information about Oxford’s music scene which point the way to rich avenues of study for future researchers.

**Future Research Avenues**

After a semester of exploratory research on Oxford’s music scene, we uncovered both a wealth of recollected information of its recent history as well as a lack of documentation of these stories. One future avenue of research that could (and should) be explored is the economic relationship between the real estate market on the Square and the attrition of music venues, as pointed out by both Scott Berretta and Darren Grem. Venues such as the Hoka and the Gin have been torn down and replaced by mixed-use apartment buildings that are less likely to have music venues that are louder late at night, due to the interests of the tenants in the apartments above them. “In terms of just condo-ification [and] all the attendant businesses that typically get tapped into... condo and condo culture that... doesn’t leave a whole lot of room for places to start up,” as late night noise has become less desirable. “I think the rental situation particularly on the Square has gone through the roof and I think it’s hard to kind of set up spaces for music,” said Grem. He posits that the market lends itself to outside investors who can “set up a space and sell overpriced dresses ‘til kingdom come.”

As the cost of running a business in downtown Oxford rises, the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP) licensing fees may be one of the only expendable business expenses for small venues that are struggling to survive. Venues that offer live music are required to pay an annual fee to secure the required ASCAP license.[[6]](#footnote-6) The diminishing number of stages in Oxford that Darren Grem, Ron Shapiro, and Scott Barretta all describe may be, in part, a result of venues’ decisions to cut this additional cost.

Mississippi state alcohol laws and University of Mississippi’s policies related to alcohol and noise have significant effects on Oxford’s evolving music venue environment. For example, the Oxford music scene has shifted largely from campus to town. According to Scott Barretta, historically colleges were “a big part of the touring market.” In particular, “bands would get booked on campus as fraternity parties.” Changing campus attitudes towards party culture and alcohol consumption likely contributed to this shift. Ron Shapiro reflects, “The university cracked down on the frat parties on campus… In the ‘80s sometime. So, because of that, all the kids came to the Square.” We are interested in further exploration on how fraternity and sorority choices to protect members from alcohol law enforcement has led to more private, large parties on campus. Interviews with Greek Life members are difficult to collect because of the concerns the University has in terms of reputation as well as the private-public nature of the campus-affiliated greek organizations.

Additionally, we suspect that ongoing racial segregation through separate social spheres keeps African-American Oxonians and other people of color from the Square in larger groups. Although African-Americans make up almost 20% of the population in the City of Oxford and almost 40% of the population of the state, they are underrepresented as an observable group on the Square.[[7]](#footnote-7) A directed survey on African American University of Mississippi students or on townspeople may be able to shed light on what spaces they’re utilizing for music. Where are their music performance and consumption spaces? Equally as important is understanding the reasons that they do not go to the Square. What draws them elsewhere and what combination of pressures creates that decision-making process?

It is important to gather a broader history of music in Oxford and Lafayette county to understand what genres were being performed and which bands were coming out of Oxford in more prolific eras of the music scene. Lee Morgan mentions blues being a primarily black musical style, and pointedly asserts that blues was not always associated with towns such as Oxford.[[8]](#footnote-8) Alternative rock and country seem to be popular musical attractions currently, but were they always? Understanding the major players and reconstructing a timeline of venue openings and closings will contextualize individual moments throughout the history of Oxford’s music scene, and shed light on the larger ebbs and flows. Examining the booking records of the still-active venues and recording studios, may help to identify the individual bands that have also been big players in the scene.

As we mentioned, we did not come across many women who were significantly involved in the Oxford music scene. Darren Grem mentioned Kate Teague as a potential lead; however, our second interview did not identify many women community members by name. Likewise, the news articles we found about various changes to Oxford’s music scene did not interview women within the community. This left us with the question, where are the women within the Oxford music scene? Are women participating in music-making in Oxford? Or, if they are not taking on these roles, why not? We hope that future scholars of Oxford’s music scene will take on an analytical lens that considers how gender affects opportunities for musicians, venue successes and failures, and the town’s, possibly, male-centered music culture.

Subcultures and, sometimes, countercultures, are often progenitors of local music scenes. Our precursory historiography indicates that Oxford was, at times, a generous host to such cultures. Venues such as the Hoka, which pushed foreign films and the occasional pornographic tape, and Cats Purring Dude Ranch, a large communal living space/venue still hold notoriety in Oxford’s lore, highlighting their impacts on the music scene. Both places are fondly remembered as places where one could go be one’s self and catch a live show (it is important to note we did come across instances hinting at gender discrimination at the Dude Ranch, potentially creating its own vortex to be explored, as these characteristics of a subculture would inevitably seep into the music scene it promotes). With the shuttering of the Dude Ranch in 2016, Oxford is currently left without a go-to countercultural music space.

“Just being there and knowing ‘This isn’t going to be here.’ Just kind of soaking it in and thinking about the history. I don’t know, just the enormous amount of bands that had come through, or artists that had come through … It’s just a really unique experience,” McDonald recollected about one of her last visits to the Dude Ranch before it closed.

There has been a slight rise in Do-It-Yourself venues, such as the Rose Room, which are homes converted on one night into a performance and party space. However, the scope of Oxford’s current underground scene seems not only smaller, but more out-of-sight and less impactful on the surrounding community.

“...that kind of indie/underground scene, I can’t speak to in terms of direct experience, but ...individuals in town that you can talk to that have been in town for 30 and 40 years have noted that there’ve been ebbs and flows to that kind of scene...but I’ve heard from them that they haven’t seen it this bad. In the sense that, it’s really different than it maybe was 10 or 20 years ago,” says Grem. “And that’s unfortunate because I think underground scenes really matter for creating kind of cultural vibrancy and richness of a town and a cultural critique of how a town likes to see itself which Oxford is definitely a town that is ridiculously full of itself [laughs] like ridiculously - really full of itself. And that runs counter to it. And if you don’t have that, then that’s a real problem...that has happened really quickly just in the past two, two and a half years ago.”

If, indeed, a healthy underground culture is a vital ingredient to a music scene, then we must ask if the current dearth is due to a confluence of social forces, economic forces, and political forces which would, in turn, have a direct impact on Oxford’s reputation and reality as a music-friendly city.

There may also be larger trends at work that are not specific to Oxford or North Mississippi. Social norms have changed over the years, with technology making social contact and connection more readily accessible than before. Social media and other forms of curated content such as Netflix may have simply diminished the average American’s desire to venture outside on week-or-weekend nights. “If you think about it, sociologically speaking, people only have so much free time and disposable income and if they’re involved in other activities like fooling around on Facebook or binge watching Netflix – it used to be that if you didn’t like the shows that were on a Thursday, it was like ‘I’m going to go out to a bar because I don’t like this program,” Barretta mused. It is possible that these changing attitudes could have a rippling effect on local economies, forcing businesses that previously hosted live music to reinvent themselves in order to stay profitable and survive. It is necessary consider the changing needs of the audience in this discussion about local live music.

In addition, music industry changes may contribute to declining live performances. It could be the musicians’ reticence to tour that affects the number of music venues, rather than the other way around. It is noted, by both Shapiro and Barretta, that Oxford’s music heyday in the 1970s through the 1990s coincided with an increase in touring musicians. Oxford, located around 80 miles south of Memphis and on the way to New Orleans, sits at an ideal junction for musicians touring through the South, at least it would seem. Shapiro and Barretta both asserted that, despite its rich musical history, Memphis is currently not a desirable touring destination, even pointing to Memphis’ current reputation as a place where “musicians go to die.” This, along with music industry practices that have had to evolve through the rise of digital formats, streaming, and other forms of content providers that have forced musicians back on the road, means that looking at Oxford’s music scene over time requires an acknowledgement and further study of industry economic forces and regional roleplayers (such as Memphis) and their connections to the city of Oxford.

The flow of musicians would then have a further effect on infrastructure required for a healthy musical community, including recording studios, as we touched upon in the introduction via Sweet Tea. “It’s really important to talk to [folks who work in recording studios] because that’s part of the musical infrastructure of any given community is to have a place to get your stuff recorded and recorded well, you know, recorded by someone who really knows what they’re doing,” Grem told us. It would be shortsighted to encapsulate Oxford and its music scene without also elaborating on the city’s ability (or, increasingly inability) to provide services and external factors.

This article is one outcome of this semester-long research endeavor. Another outcome is the establishment of an archive on Oxford’s music history to be housed under the Blues Archives at UM. The new archive will house the interviews we conducted with Ron Shapiro, Darren Grem, and Scott Barretta. Hopefully, it will serve as an impetus for future scholars at the University of Mississippi to conduct research on this topic, collecting oral histories, analyzing historical documents and news articles, and creating a comprehensive history and historiography of Oxford’s changing music scene over time.

**Conclusion**

We think it is important that the history of Oxford’s music scene be examined by contemporary scholars in the area. For one, the existing portrayal of Oxford’s music scene is not multiplicitous and does not reflect the diverse experiences that undoubtedly exist within the town. One lasting legacy of racism, sexism, and homophobia is that the experiences of marginalized communities are excluded from history. These missing voices are essential for scholars who seek to create of a full history of any place and properly contextualize its artistic output. Thus, for a complete history of Oxford’s music scene, scholars should seek out diverse voices by asking the question, “Whose story is not told?” The persistence of these silences through today suggests ongoing social segregation and gender discrimination within the Oxford music scene and broader community. It is also important to make sure we have an awareness of how economic processes are affecting the arts and culture of the town as well as the potential adverse effects of university decisions on non-university affiliated Oxonians. The university does not exist in a vacuum, and we have a responsibility as an institution to pay close attention to the social and economic realities of the community of which we are a part. Extra-regional factors must also be considered, such as social, music industry, and regional trends. Oxford’s music scene, while a distinctly concentrated phenomenon even within the hills of North Mississippi, is shaped by a confluence of complex personal, hyperlocal, local, communal, regional, national, and global forces.

1. <http://visitoxfordms.com> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “Music Scene” *Visit Oxford. http://visitoxfordms.com/arts-entertainment/music-scene/*  [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “Several Houses on “Soundman Row” are up for Auction, Including the building that Once Housed The Lip Studio” *The Local Voice*. <http://www.thelocalvoice.net/oxford/several-houses-on-soundman-row-are-up-for-auction-including-the-building-that-once-housed-the-lip-studio/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Miller, Mary Margaret. Interview with Lee Morgan. May 21, 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Rushing, Wanda. *Memphis and The Paradox of Place: Globalization in the American South.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009, 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. "Why ASCAP Licenses Bars, Restaurants and Music Venues." www.ascap.com. Accessed April 25, 2018. https://www.ascap.com/help/ascap-licensing/why-ascap-licenses-bars-restaurants-music-venues. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. https://statisticalatlas.com/place/Mississippi/Oxford/Race-and-Ethnicity [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Miller, Mary Margaret. Interview with Lee Morgan. May 21, 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)