Recommended MLA Oral History Interview Questions

Version 2.0 / Rob DeLand (created 5-05-2015)

The goal of an oral history interview is to get the interviewee talking, telling great stories that haven’t been captured before, and to stay out of it as much as possible! If you’re lucky, you’ll have a talkative interviewee who is relaxed, easy to understand, and easy to get stories from, without a lot of probing on your part. In my experience people are flattered to be asked, and happy to share their stories.

By doing a little homework you will know enough about the interviewee and his/her accomplishments and you will have a good idea of what you will want him/her to tell you. You might even want to ask them up front if they have any particularly great stories that you will want to capture in your interview. You will need to listen carefully, take notes, and be ready to ask questions to keep the conversation on topic and to clarify any points you feel need a little more information.

The following outline should be a good starting point for most MLA interviews, but you will certainly want to fine-tune the list of questions to the person being interviewed.

Outline of MLA interview questions

1) Background prior to music / library school, including where / when born and early childhood.
2) Inspiration for and details of choosing the music / library fields.
3) Career since graduating from school (this will no doubt open into a wide variety of questions, and will depend on the interviewee: where was their first job, what were they hired for, what circumstances they started with, how they came to specialize in something, people they were involved with, how responsibilities grew, how they took a major step forward in their career, and so on).
4) MLA activities and involvement (again, this will open into a wide variety of questions, depending on the interviewee: when and how they first got involved in MLA, various positions they held, people they worked with, problems and successes they experienced, chapter involvement, and so on).
5) Philosophical questions. When I conducted my first MLA interview, I wasn’t really sold on this subject area. Right away I found it led to some very interesting observations and opinions, so I encourage the interviewer to include some questions along these lines. For specific examples, see the 2012 questionnaire below, especially section IV-A-(#3 through #6).
6) Highlights and wrap-up. After talking about everything else, it’s nice to ask the interviewee to reflect on all their experiences and accomplishments, pick some favorite highlights, experiences or friends made along the way, and so on.
7) “Thank you for the interview!”

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When you conduct an interview, be careful not to interrupt the interviewee, or speak or make sounds (like “hm” and “uh-uh” as well as coughing and throat-clearing) while the interviewee is speaking. Try to use as few audible cues as possible – instead, try to nod or otherwise keep the conversation going without having to interject too many of your own comments. This will help yield a more polished finished product that can be easily excerpted for other purposes later on.

The remainder of this paper comprises an MLA oral history questionnaire which was created in 1994 by Carol June Bradley and updated in 2012 by Therese Dickman for use by the Midwest Chapter MLA. You are encouraged to build your own preferred set of questions based on either the outline above, the more structured list below, or through your own brainstorming – whatever works best for you.

Thank you for considering this work, and please let the MLA Oral History committee know if we can answer any questions or do anything more to help you conduct an MLA Oral History interview.

Good luck!

1994 MLA Questionnaire, 2012 Revision

Biographical Information:

I. Events of the person’s life
   A. Vital Statistics
   B. Education
   C. Employment
      1. Description of primary responsibilities and activities as a music librarian/musicologist/information specialist
      2. Changes in those as the individual advanced in his or her career
   D. Professional activities
   E. Honors

II. Bibliography of writings about the person

III. Bibliography of the person’s writings, including papers read at meetings but not published; copy of most recent vita.
IV. Philosophical questions: The source of vision and devotion to one’s life work

A. The profession
1. What was the source of inspiration or were the circumstances that led the individual to become a music librarian?
2. How did the person define the profession?
3. Did he or she consider him/herself a librarian, musicologist, or an information specialist?
4. What was his or her philosophy of librarianship?
5. What did the individual believe were the ideal qualifications for music librarianship?
6. What did/does the individual envision as the future of music librarianship?

B. The career
1. What was the person’s concept of his or her role in American musicology, music librarianship, and information science?
2. What were his or her personal goals?
3. How did technological developments—i.e. compact discs, OCLC, MLA-L, databases, the Internet, Google, wireless, i-Pods, Twitter, Facebook, social networks, virtual reference, mobile technologies, FLAC, etc. — impact the profession and the individual’s life as a music librarian?

**C. THE MUSIC LIBRARY ASSOCIATION, MIDWEST CHAPTER
1. What was the source of inspiration or were the circumstances that led the individual to become a member of the MLA, Midwest Chapter?
2. What was the person’s involvement in the chapter?
3. What offices did the individual hold in the chapter?
4. What did the individual accomplish while serving as an officer of the Midwest Chapter?
5. With whom did the individual work to achieve goals to further the chapter?
6. What was the person’s concept of the role of the Music Library Association, Midwest Chapter?
7. What was distinctive about the Midwest Chapter as compared to other chapters of the Music Library Association?
8. What involvement was there with the national Music Library Association?
   • Which chapter projects were sponsored by the national organization?
   • How did MLA help to develop the MLA Midwest Chapter?
9. What description can the individual provide of:
   • chapter meetings held while an officer?
   • other chapter meetings as a member?
   • national MLA meetings?
10. Do any stories or recollections stand out from the time when a member
    • of the MLA Midwest Chapter?
    • of the national MLA?
11. Who else was significantly involved in MLA Midwest Chapter activities?
    • How were they involved?
    • Can those persons be contacted to be interviewed?
    • Where do they live?
    • Are address and/or telephone numbers known for those individuals named?
12. What does the person recall about the other MLA Midwest Chapter officers and members cited on the project interviewee list?
13. Does the individual have any photographs, programs, handouts, minutes of meetings or other documentation that he or she is willing to donate to the MLA Archives or have copied for the archives? (Original sources are preferred, but copies are acceptable.)

V. Specifics of the person's career
1. What is the individual most proud of achieving
   • While a music librarian?
   • As an MLA officer or member?

2. What would the individual liked to have achieved professionally if given more time in the position of music librarian?
3. In what professionally-related activities has the individual been engaged since retirement?
   - Is the person still a member of the MLA Midwest Chapter?
   - If so, how long has the individual been a member?

VI. Location of sources
1. Papers and memorabilia of the individual
2. People who might have knowledge of the person's professional life, papers, and accomplishments.

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